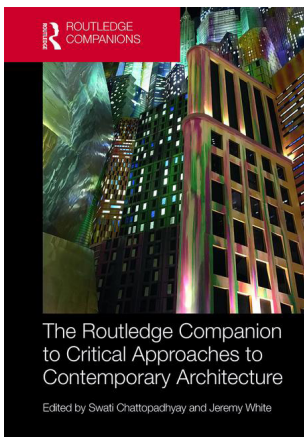review / STEPHEN WALKER

Swati Chattopadhyay & Jeremy White (Eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture*
Routledge, 2019

The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture is a big book—464 pages. It contains essays, split across six sections: design, materiality, alterity, technologies, cityscapes, and practice. The contributing authors hail from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, but the majority have found some sort of home in, or associated with, schools of architecture. The essays brought together here do not amount to an account of "global architecture" so much as a collection of examples from various locations around the globe that can support discussions of the complexity and flexibility of architecture.

There is far too much in here to name check all the authors, or to outline the numerous responses to specific socio-cultural and environmental situations and differences, but it is important to give at least some indication of the flavour of contents and the breadth of interest and examples. Essays address architecture as this relates to buildings, but also explore architecture and architectural questions in a wide range of other situations that expand conventional definitions of what architecture might be, where it might be found, what architects might do, and who they might be.

Examples range from: one-off Architect- (capital A) designed homes (Alice T. Friedman, "Public Face and Private Space in the Design of Contemporary Houses") to humanitarian architecture (Andrew Herscher, "Designs on Disaster"); refugee and transit camps (Charlie Hailey, "Camps: Contemporary Environments of Autonomy, Necessity, and Control"); films (Aron Vinegar, "Habit's Remainder"); exhibitions and installations (Rohan Shivkumar, "A Eulogy for the Present", or Joshua Neves, "Watching the City: A Genealogy of Media Urbanism"); border politics and barriers, temporary festivals, alternate currencies (Andrew Herscher again), gun control, opportunistic developments in the shadow of megaprojects (Max Hirsh and Dorthy Tang, "When the Megaproject Meets the Village: Formal and Informal Urbanization in Southern China"; polyethylene balls covering Ivanhoe Reservoir (Heather Davis, "Life and Death in the Anthropocene"); disability legislation (Jeremy White, "Edges: Body, Space, and Design"); ruined vanity projects in Monrovia, Liberia (Danny Hoffman); diasporic supermarkets, computer modelling and material/sub-particle engineering (Ljiljana Fruk and Veljko Armano Linta, "Future Architecture: Biohybrid Structures and Intelligent Materials", or T. F. Tierney, "Networked Urbanism: Definition, Scholarship,

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Directions"); storytelling (Craig Wilkins, "Bi-Space"); infrastructure and public facilities/services, the media, hedgehogs (Laura McLauchlan, "Urchins in the Infrastructure: Building with Hedgehogs in the Multispecies City"); alternate forms of practice… and much more.

Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture thus feels fairly encyclopaedic in its scope and ambition, and this started to raise unfair questions in my mind concerning what is left out. One debate that does seem to be conspicuous by its absence is (architectural) education. It is raised tangentially as an issue—arguably THE issue—in the Introduction, and is touched on in passing by a couple of essays in the "Practice" section, such as Despina Stratigakos' sobering essay, "Is It Really that Bad? The Status of Women in Architecture and the Gender Equity Movement". Certainly the focus of this essay is on the continuing, abysmal underrepresentation of women in practice, architectural education, and the organisation and culture of architectural schools. Expanding away from formal educational settings in their essay, "Collaboration: Unresolved Forms of Working Together in Contemporary Architectural Practice", Sony Devabhaktuni and Min Kyung Lee argue for the importance of agonism, understood not as continuous conflict but as a process that should encourage us (whoever we are) "to value the struggles that emerge in any creative process of learning, for it is these necessarily unresolved interstices of a friendly relation that yet unimagined acts can materialise" (402).

While the editors' introduction dwells on what it means to be contemporary, the issue of *Critical Approaches* as signaled by the title is more present elsewhere, touching on many critical projects (and critical spatial practices) as well as describing one of the broader editorial strategies at play. This strategy explicitly positions the collection as a counter to the "architect-centric lavishly illustrated volumes" that have dominated architectural publishing over the past two decades (1). While this is something of a straw man, the breadth and richness of the architectures, and of architectural thinking set out here, is invigorating. Side-stepping an inquiry into how much this observation about architectural publishing is borne out in practice, or on the bookshelves, the collection as a whole mounts its challenge by practising a certain mode of critique, addressed to the still-dominant model of architectural criticism and associated homogeneity of framing and output, with its associated hierarchies of practices, territories, and training. Instead, architecture as it is presented here in specific examples, and as it emerges from the collection as a whole, is a wide-ranging and complex practice: networked, extended, temporary, ongoing, heterodox, contingent, and operating across a wide variety of scales. Swati Chattopadhyay's own essay ("Ephemeral Architecture: Toward Radical Contingency"), for example, follows the annual Hindu festival of *Durgpuja* in Kolkata. Although the festival only lasts for five days, preparations occur all year around, and Chattopadhyay draws attention to the huge complexity and sophistication of the temporary pavilions (or *pandals*), which "can put any architectural biennale to shame" (141). Redeploying the vocabulary of traditional architectural and urban design practice, she unpacks the multifaceted material, social, and economic import and impact of the festival.

Similarly, Mechtild Widrich's "After the Counter-monument" brings together traditional approaches and products of commemorative architecture and sculpture with recent examples of counter-monuments, holding these together in ways

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that amplify the motivations of the latter while also developing a wider critical discourse that bears on the former, and the complex debates concerning cultural specificity and memory that are often elided by them. The criticality of the collection is enacted and sustained by its heterogeneity, and it sets out to pass on something of this architectural complexity, to share some thinking, to generate and sustain arguments and counter arguments. There is no answer, no easy take-away. There is no clear party line, and it is all the better for this.

Criticality is also an ingredient or motivation in some of the projects and practices that are discussed, as well as other contributions that discuss critically various examples that were in themselves uncritical. Examples of the former include George F. Flaherty's "Borderlands Architecture: Territories, Commons, and Breathing-Spaces", which introduces a number of artistic and critical-architectural responses to complex (mostly national) border conditions. Examples of the latter include Karen Piper's "The Architecture of Water", which examines how the control or colonisation of territories in California and India was (and continues to be) enacted through the apparently benevolent projects to supply fresh water; or Rachel Hall's "Architectures of Risk and Resiliency: 'Embedded Security' in the Redesign of Sandy Hook Elementary School" which offers a close, critical reading of the unintended consequences of gun control legislation on a politically charged example of recent school (re)design.

There are other approaches still that enact this critical dynamic more implicitly, reading apparently straightforward, everyday situations against the grain: Max Hirsh and Dorothy Tang's "When the Megaproject Meets the Village: Formal and Informal Urbanization in Southern China", or Arijit Sen's "Recasting the Ethnic Retail Street: Analyzing Contemporary Immigrant Architecture in the United States". In these essays, the authors examine very different examples that nevertheless reveal certain inventive, informal or opportunistic characteristics in common: how various creative, unplanned facilities have sprung up around and across Guangzhou's University Town/Higher Education Mega-Centre's imprecise border with existing "village" architectures. These facilities are more nimble, attentive, and responsive to the actual needs of users than those anticipated by "official" architects, planners, bureaucrats, and politicians. Or how the given architectures of "Main Street" have been repurposed over time to serve the economic and cultural needs of different diasporic populations in the USA.

Implicitly, the collection addresses issues of knowledge production and circulation, as much as it does direct approaches to contemporary architecture. It is more or less book-ended by essays that touch on these themes. The challenges of and to the project of historicism, and the role of history, in contemporary practice and education are opened up by Alice T. Friedman, whose essay, "Public Face and Private Space in House Design", opens the section on design. Friedman explicitly situates her consideration of physical and digital boundaries, privacy, sexuality and household composition, community, surveillance, and so on, within and against the "standard" trajectory of architectural history and the motif of the primitive hut, from Vitruvius through to Le Corbusier. Rohan Shivkumar ("A Eulogy for the Present") analyses the exponential growth of architectural practice and education in India, with more explicit reference to the locations of knowledge production, conferences, and journals (437). Few other essays are quite so explicit in situating their concerns against the context of existing or accepted architectural history. It would have been interesting to follow

up with a more direct address to the complex ways in which critical approaches to contemporary architecture can (indeed, have to) extend into the production of theory, writing, and publishing. Many of the accepted, traditional practices of architecture that are implicitly or directly criticised here are underpinned and maintained by an extensive, institutionalised network of publications, events, museums, and archives that controls the message and keeps it circulating. The extension of the political work represented in the essays and undertaken by the editors would bring about significant changes and challenges to them. This is enacted by the collection, but more explicit, extended reflection on it would have made me happy. In this respect, as with many of its other ramifications, the book is left to do this work without any extensive or laboured editorial signposting. The introduction is short and fairly enigmatic (on the *contemporary*, as already mentioned), and there is no conclusion or epilogue; inevitably, some contributions more than others drew my attention, my interests. My thinking was best stimulated where essays operated to extend and to challenge, to suggest *what if* and to solicit counter readings. The work of the editors is done very quietly— there are no instructions for use, and no attempts to "guide" the reader through particular connections or to suggest particular conclusions.

I was probably an unusual reader in that I read the book as a heavy hardcopy and from start to finish. Its very small print testifies to the editors' stated intentions that this is aimed at younger eyes than mine—"primarily at undergraduate students, and secondarily at graduate students and faculty" (4). The audience is clearly going to be different from the book's intended market. With a list price of £190, or $NZ390 (currently on offer at £152 or $NZ312), it is only going to be consumed via institutional libraries, probably read on screen, and at this length it is probably only going to be consumed partially, and in ways that are mediated or guided by faculty. So here we are back to the blind-spot of education. I have already pointed several of my own students, in different contexts and at different stages of their education, towards several different essays, so it is proving a useful and invigorating resource, and will continue to be so.

Indeed, I am writing this at the bottom of my garden. The sun is out, and I am in Covid-19 lockdown. This has given me pause to reflect on the role of this kind of *companionship*, something we are all going to be seeking out, whoever and wherever we are. In addition to daily news reports full of scientific experts, graphs, and numbers, we are starting to hear more in the media here about how we are not going to be going back to the old "normal" (if, or of course, it was ever "normal"). The companionship offered by this collection feels appropriate and timely: it adds its voice to others countering the comfortable platitudes that still circulate in our discipline and profession—the architect as sole author/genius, the building as a solo, self-contained object, and so on. It poses a whole range of questions and provides few answers, but does this in ways that demonstrate and articulate the importance of this kind of reflective, wide-ranging, rigorous, and creative questioning. By doing so, it will help its readers, future architects, to imagine how they might become very different practitioners.