proves again and again. His essay “Archetype and Order in Recent American Architecture” (1954) was one of the first to see Kahn as a crucial figure in the reinvention of modernism, although he had scarcely anything at the time to show for himself other than the Yale Art Gallery. Nonetheless, Scully perceived “a desire for intrinsic order in which Kahn is transposing the researches of engineers like Samuely, Le Ricolais, and Buckminster Fuller into the terms of human experience which makes architecture” (70). This is a wonderfully succinct formulation of the central theme in Kahn’s career, although the belief in “intrinsic order” would not be fully consummated until Kahn shed his belief in what Scully termed the “reproductive principle inherent in the structural unit.”

Only occasionally does Scully slip up, as in one example of pardonable wishful thinking. A poignant Kahn drawing of 1951 is identified as Mussolini’s Foro Italico in Rome, as reconfigured by the architect who added “a building to the right to cast an ominous shadow” (302). In fact, that building was “added” not by Kahn but by Gianlorenzo Bernini, for it is nothing less than the piazza of St. Peter’s, as Eugene Johnson has shown (Drawn from the Source: The Travel Drawings of Louis I. Kahn [Cambridge, Mass., 1996], 70–71).

In the end, it is fitting that Modern Architecture and Other Essays stresses Scully the critic rather than the historian, for it seems certain that his most enduring accomplishment has been to inculcate in several generations of architects an awareness of the humanist dimension of their discipline, and to do so when the humanist component of architecture had been virtually extinguished. For relighting this flame, Scully deserves our gratitude, as does Levine for his role in assembling this volume.

The undertaking of such a project, commemorating the work of a colleague, is an act of considerable selflessness, and a rare one at that.

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History and Theory

David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi

Surface Architecture


The authors of Surface Architecture, who also coauthored On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), are academician-architects rather than historians, their books works of theory and criticism rather than history. Yet although this volume is primarily addressed to practitioners, it has implications for the writing of the history of twentieth-century architecture. David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi aim to theorize “a manner of building in which the claims of appearance would be met by the opportunities of production—exactly what had been proposed, although never realized, in modernism” (129). To make good modernism’s promise to represent production, the book’s six main chapters investigate the modern architectural surface as a “site of contest” between structure and skin, modernity and tradition, business and art, and technology and representation. The authors review, through exemplary cases from the late nineteenth century to the present, innovative façade treatments of cladding and material, windows and framing, texture and scale, prefabrication and prototypes, pattern and image, and site and structure. Close formal readings of a series of landmarks, from Adolf Loos’s Goldman & Salatch store in Vienna (1911) to Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron’s Senior Technical School library in Eberswalde, Germany (1996), lead the reader to appreciate an architecture in which “the processes and procedures of production become the key components of a work’s imagibility” (211). The slim, square volume’s most trenchant, quotable passages for a readership of practitioners are its definitions of “construction . . . as a struggle to integrate and to reconcile materials of different origins” (175), and of architecture as “an artifice whose phenomenal attributes are its primary means of engaging and activating its connections with its users” (209).

Considered as a historical work, Surface Architecture has limitations. A conventional starting point (the Chicago frame) leads to a litany of heroic great names (Gerrit Rietveld, Loos, Gottfried Semper, Hendrik Berlage, Richard Neutra, Jean Prouvé, Alison and Peter Smithson, James Stirling, Herzog and de Meuron). The absence of a theory of history explaining change, and a fetishized idea of “the real that mere representations neglect” (185) are not compensated for by the superfluous philosophical postscript invoking Martin Heidegger, Plato, and Prometheus. Several examples discussed extensivel in the text are, jarringly, unillustrated (Henri Matisse’s Red Interior: Still Life on a Blue Table, Neutra’s Rush City Reformed project, the Smithson’s Hunstanton School corner detail), somewhat undermining the persuasiveness of the authors’ argument.

Yet Surface Architecture has some value for architectural historians, particularly those looking to connect architecture to culture. Chapter three, “Window/Wall,” offers a persuasive critique of Le Corbusier’s antiurban, denaturalized, frontal fenestration. The authors favor instead Rietveld’s Schröder House in Utrecht (1924), where the window “serves as the prop for discovering new and unexpected relationships between the inside and outsides” (56). Outward-swinging windows negate the living room’s corner, offer oblique outlooks onto the landscape, and, by virtue of opening perpendicular to the façade, suggest “sectional views, extending and destabilizing the virtual limits of the house.” The authors theorize with feeling the window’s “situational performance” as an instrument of adjustment: not only an ‘eye’ but a ‘hand’ altering “lighting, temperature, noise, and other qualities that characterize and define the setting” (62). “The performance of a window wall has as its most basic task the
orchestration of human events, those it encloses and reveals” (78). Ultimately, the authors believe, architecture’s surface—here the stock window—“can be replaced/misplaced into new spatial situations that allow it to ‘adjust’ or construct alternative frameworks for contemporary social practice” (62). While silent on the details of this new praxis, Surface Architecture offers architectural historians a powerful set of tools for formal analysis, not only in reference to windows but more generally in understanding the architectural surface as “sectional solution.” The authors describe, for example, the “image” of Alejandro de la Sota’s Maravillas Gymnasium in Madrid (1962) as a product of material and technological fabrication inflected sectionally, inward and outward, to unique “programmatic, sociological, economic, material, and technological circumstances” (183).

While offering new readings of canonical work, the publication’s focus on the image and the “project of representation” (1) suggests a lineage from the roots of modernist historiography: namely the tradition of art historically trained architectural historians as epitomized by Sigfried Giedion and Nikolaus Pevsner. Like these authors, Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi measure and to some degree validate architecture’s effects and progress relative to the history of art, sprinkling the early sections of Surface Architecture with references to Edward Hopper and Albrecht Dürer, Impressionism and Minimalism, and Erwin Panofsky and Rosalind Krauss. The authors set up their central argument about the “situation” window through a close reading of paintings by Raoul Dufy and Matisse. This tradition of linking art and architectural history seems in abeyance these days, perhaps because proportionally fewer architectural historians are trained in art history departments. Surface Architecture stakes a claim for this method’s continued validity, for the primacy of the image as the subject of architectural critique, and in so doing its authors are not altogether alone.

Recently, the historian-critic Anthony Vidler has sought to link a “new sensibility to the architectural program” (exemplified by Diller + Scofidio) to the writings of the late 1950s by Reyner Banham and John Summerson, particularly the concept of the image that Banham derived from his critique of Archigram.1 Vidler identifies the “contemporary sense of program” as a kind of “new environmentalism,” engaging with “the ethical and environmental conditions of specific sites” and “manifested in the exploration of the potential of digital analysis and synthesis, in the increasing interest in the formal and spatial potential of new materials and structures, and above all in . . . the exploration of social and cultural forms” (59–60). Vidler’s call for an architecture that is “flexible and adaptive, inventive and mobile in its response to environmental conditions and technological possibilities” (60) echoes Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi’s call for a “situational” architecture to “accept all materials that are available within the limits of a given social, economic, and cultural condition” (175). And like Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi, Vidler, following Banham on Archigram, identifies the image as a “confirmation of synthetic experience” (72) and the aesthetic as a possible way forward “that occludes the fatal modernist gap between form and function and incorporates environmental concerns, technology, and formal invention as integral to a single discourse” (74).

What appears to be taking shape in Surface Architecture and in Vidler’s writing is a glimpse of a possible new history of twentieth-century architecture, which seeks justification for a new century’s architecture in rereadings of past modernist masters based on architecture’s visual image. There is a distinguished pedigree for this project in the polemical histories of modern architecture reliant on aesthetic interpretation. There is opportunity here, too, for architectural historians to refocus on the visual and to fill out a story only sketched in Surface Architecture.

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Note