cides, domestic equipment like lawn mowers, and bomb shelters—all advertised as being part of the great battles fought by the American people.

Chapter five, on “X-ray Architecture,” explores the metaphorical connections between x-rays, which expose the inside of the body to the public eye, and the modern house, which likewise exposes its interior. The “skin and bones” modern architecture of Mies van der Rohe can indeed be understood as a conscious search to go beyond all attempts of covering up, to reach toward the pure representation of the building skeleton and nothing else. Similarly the picture windows that pervaded the suburbs acted as two-way x-ray machines: they both turned the interiors of the houses into showcases of domesticity and, at the same time, exposed their exteriors to continuous scrutiny from an interior gaze. Colomina analyzes how Dan Graham and Philip Johnson investigated this logic in subsequent permutations of the suburban house and glass house, respectively. The connection to the war relies on both the battle against tuberculosis, initiated by the x-rays, and on the system of surveillance and control, accommodated and domesticated by the picture window.

Chapter eight, “The Underground House,” confronts us with one of the excesses of the Cold War: the proposal to go completely undercover by burying homes into the earth. The author zooms in on a project by Jay Swayze, presented at the New York’s World Fair of 1964. This model home provides all the expected spaces, including an “outdoor” patio, as parts of an underground shelter, thus completely internalizing the inside/outside distinction. According to the publicity brochure, it gives man “an island unto himself; a place where he controls his own world—a world of total ease and comfort, of security, safety, and above all, privacy” (281). This logic was reinforced by the advent of television, which allowed people to consume public events in the privacy of their homes.

In the epilogue, Colomina connects the military logics that she analyzed in the previous chapters to the uncanny experience of 11 September, which for her happened almost next door. She recognizes the role of the media as the crucial link between both histories: the role of television in the 1960s, the role of internet and cell phones in 2001. She ends with the cell phone—a last vestige of domesticity during 11 September (as in the desperate calls home from some of the victims) and at the same time a weapon that triggered the bombs on the Madrid trains on 11 March 2004, thus showing with a last telling example how pervasive the notion of “domesticity at war” can be.

Several observations and interpretations in this book offer a powerful analysis of what was at stake in the domestic architecture of the 1950s and 1960s. The lingering impact of military technologies, military logics, and military metaphors throughout this period and beyond is clearly exposed by the author. Yet one wonders if this is the whole story. What about the differences between Europe and America? Where do the debates come in about regionalism, the city, the welfare state, segregation, participation, organic architecture, kitsch, and camp? What about gender and domesticity? All these issues figure only marginally in Colomina’s narrative, but would certainly need to be addressed in a more encompassing history of postwar architecture and domesticity. Colomina’s working method, where she looks at disparate materials that are usually left unconnected, is seductive and provocative. She is capable of teasing out improbable meanings from seemingly innocent data, unraveling unexpected interconnections and exposing hidden logics. At the same time she doesn’t justify why she is looking at the things she is looking at—leaving her readers with a sense that this book, important as it is, does not provide more than just a beginning of what should become a serious scholarly study of a recent past.

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Martin Aurand
The Spectator and the Topographical City

Martin Aurand’s splendid book on Pittsburgh’s urban development is a visual feast, with 150 superb illustrations packed into two hundred pages. The book itself, as much as the city it celebrates, summons its own dedicated spectator. The issue of who this spectator is—and how she experiences the unique built environment of Pittsburgh, whether directly in the city itself or indirectly within the covers of the book—is a question that looms over Aurand’s beautiful image-text.

Aurand’s book seeks to reconnect the history of Pittsburgh’s urban development to its magnificent local terrain and thereby reestablish Pittsburgh as a “topographical city.” Once the site of some of the most intense industrial development in the world, the city seemed to have devoured its physical environment in an explosion of factories, fire, and smoke. But Aurand argues that the city’s distinctive topography of plateaus and hollows, far from being overwhelmed, has not only shaped the built environment in crucial respects but also fired the imagination of architects and patrons, and in the process inspired the city’s most significant architectural achievements. Intellectually indebted to architect William Rees Morrish’s book Civilizing Terrains: Mountains, Mounds and Mesas (1996), and to Vincent Scully before him, Aurand’s argument reasserts the primal link between cities and the earth. Aurand takes pains to demonstrate the sacred power of landforms and waterways and their controlling influence over the built environment. In this way, The Spectator and the Topographical City does not simply relate a local history but assumes a more important place alongside books such as Reyner Banham’s Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies (1971), which teach us to look at the city in a new way.

After a brief introduction, The Spectator and the Topographical City provides
three extended chapters, each on a distinctive “terrestrial room” within the city. Aurand argues that the “terrestrial room” takes its fundamental shape from its topographical conditions. Then he shows how these conditions are modified and completed by the infrastructure and architecture of urban development. Pittsburgh’s first such “room” is the so-called Golden Triangle, the striking downtown setting wedged in the lowland between the twin forks of the Ohio River and the hills rising to the east. The second “room” is the junction of two waterways, Turtle Creek and the Monongahela River (one of the Ohio’s twin forks), where the creek’s narrow “Electric Valley” met the river’s broad “Steel Valley” in a maze of factories, watercourses, railroads, and bridges at multiple elevations. The third “room” is the upland plateau of Oakland, Pittsburgh’s academic and civic center, ringed by gentle hills and crisscrossed by narrow hollows. Each of the three “rooms” affords discussion of a distinctive aspect of Pittsburgh’s development, and a particular response to a unique set of topographical conditions.

Each of the three case studies lures us into a spectacular terrain and then guides us to understand the synergy between terrain and architecture. Throughout, Aurand makes liberal use of comparisons with other cities, landscapes, and buildings in order to show how the uniqueness of Pittsburgh’s topography nevertheless evokes fundamental human yearnings for order.

In the chapter on the Golden Triangle, Aurand introduces this universalizing impulse by tracing a transcultural pattern of development on Grant’s Hill, just east of the flatland between the forks. In ancient times a Native American burial mound, the site became the plinth for H. H. Richardson’s courthouse in the 1880s followed by the U.S. Steel skyscraper in the 1970s (still the tallest building in the city). Each stage of culture and development, Aurand argues, expresses the urge for a kind of axis mundi that overlooks, and gives meaning to, the surrounding town. Similarly, the point of intersection of the three rivers Aurand likens to an omphalos, a center of creation. He shows how the “Point” witnessed an equally extraordinary series of urban transformations, from fort to factory to mini-Ville Radieuse with fountains and green space flanked by sleek skyscrapers clad in chromium steel.

The second terrestrial “room,” at the juncture of Turtle Creek and the Monongahela River, is in some ways the most interesting of the three, but also the most disruptive of Aurand’s universalizing narrative. Here the topography becomes the stage for a complex “industrial sublime” characterized by the multidirectional and multistoried circulation of workers and industrial processes (95). Aurand compares this built environment not so much to sacred impulses as to modern cinema. But in the end the chapter does issue in a work of stable, traditional monumental architecture—the immense concrete span of the Westinghouse Bridge (1932) across the junction of the two valleys.

Finally, the third case study focuses on Henry Hornbostel’s early twentieth-century campus plan for Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon) in the upland plateau of Oakland. This chapter contains the most subtle visual analysis of the book, as Aurand traces Hornbostel’s sophisticated manipulation of the vista in his collegiate Court of Honor and compares that manipulation to similar effects in French and Italian garden design.

Aurand’s treatment of each “terrestrial room” is ultimately celebratory. The chapters follow a similar narrative arc, in which topography sets the stage for some sort of transcendent monumental achievement. Not that this is unfounded: Pittsburgh’s unique topography did indeed inspire corporate giants and great architects to arrive at monumental solutions, as Aurand repeatedly demonstrates. Yet Aurand’s celebration of monumentality does sometime blunt his critical insight. “Monuments emerge from collective perception and experience,” he writes (129). This is one of the central thrusts of the book: monumentality arises not only from power and money but also from the more deep-seated spiritual yearnings of humanity and culture. The problem with this view is that the highly mediated relationship between collective experience and monumental achievement can easily be overlooked or forgotten.

Indeed this book is not about the downtrodden or even quotidian urban dweller slogging through narrow streets or deep ravines on the way to the factory or the bar. One will not find here anything like Michel de Certeau’s analysis of walking the city or Dell Upton’s insistence on the dweller’s fragmented outlook limited by class/race/gender status. This is not a criticism; Aurand’s book has a different goal. But these observations do raise a question about his own appropriation of the concept of the spectator.

Not until the end of the book does Aurand address the issue of spectatorship explicitly. Within the urban view, he claims, the spectator assumes “a viewpoint and an identity” (197). For the historical maker of the view—the architect or the patron—that identification is obvious. But what about the ordinary spectator then and now, the student traversing Hornbostel’s campus, the clerk on his way to the courthouse, or the women punching time clocks in Westinghouse’s Electric Valley? And what about the ultimate spectator, the reader of Aurand’s book, who views the city through his carefully chosen illustrations?

In the final analysis, Aurand’s spectator is an ahistorical abstraction brought to life by the conjuring act of the author’s own specular analysis. The highest compliment I can pay Aurand’s book is that it transforms us, the readers, into the ideal spectators Aurand’s topographical city deserves. Once we become that spectator we can never see Pittsburgh and its architectural history in the same way again.

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