shakier ground because the book has not been adequately contextualized in terms of the German women’s movement. While the author correctly highlights the particularist “spiritual motherhood” discourse wielded by German bourgeois feminists, her arguments against notions of Germany’s women’s movement as conciliatory in comparison to the militant tactics of the British suffragettes lack the proper scaffolding to connect architectural developments to ideology. That a discussion of German liberalism, particularly given the liberal character of the German women’s movement and the principles of self-help embodied by the book’s buildings projects, remains absent from her arguments detracts from her ability to draw such sweeping claims.

Nevertheless, Stratigakos is to be applauded for excavating these forgotten sites of women’s building in this exemplary study drawing upon a rich arsenal of discursive, periodical, and archival materials. The field can hope that her work inspires further studies of women artists and architects in other urban centers. A groundbreaking piece of scholarship building bridges among gender studies, cultural history, and architecture, A Women’s Berlin is an essential addition to any institutional library or specialized bibliography.

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Architecture, Print Culture and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France

One of the pleasures of studying eighteenth-century French architecture is encountering the range of publications that sought to engage a popular audience in architectural criticism. Among the books that had such aspirations in the 1750s are two available today in English translation: Marc-Antoine Laugier’s Essai sur l’architecture (1753, rev. ed. 1755), with its iconic frontispiece of the primitive hut engraved by Charles Eisen, and Jean-François Baside’s tale of architecture and seduction, La Petite Maison, which first appeared in 1758 in the journal Le Nouveau Spectateur, one of the more than 115 French periodicals available at midcentury. Generations of historians have mined this literature in the course of their studies of architects, buildings, and urban design, but Richard Wittman is among the first to describe and contextualize its history. Architecture, Print Culture and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France is the culmination of research undertaken for his doctoral dissertation, completed in 2001 at Columbia University. As the title suggests, Wittman frames his study with Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the bourgeois public sphere, wherein new information networks, such as the popular press, constituted an arena in which ideas and values acquired identity and social weight as public opinion. Wittman’s objective is to discover who spoke on behalf of what public and to what purpose. His book complements Thomas Crow’s landmark study, Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris (1985), and builds on the rich, ongoing scholarship devoted to the history of the popular press in eighteenth-century France.

Architecture, Print Culture and the Public Sphere merits a place on graduate seminar reading lists as a bridge between print-based studies and visual studies. Accessible from both points of departure is the book’s central theme of the role of the press in transforming architectural meaning. Wittman describes how discussion of buildings in books and periodicals shifted the source of architectural knowledge from lived experience to abstract principles. Buildings, he argues, became placeholders for ideas shaped in the public sphere, and under such circumstances criticism depended as much on familiarity with those ideas as on firsthand acquaintance with the architecture under review. Wittman presents his case effectively. His writing is clear and concise, and vivid examples support his arguments.

Wittman has organized the book chronologically in four sections. The first examines the efforts of the French Royal Academy of Architecture, founded by Louis XIV in 1671, to fulfill its mission of determining and promulgating aesthetic and practical standards for architecture. This endeavor became a textbook demonstration of the law of unintended consequences, for as the academicians debated their options in the formulation of a universalizing doctrine, they offered a model for others outside their circle to do likewise and propose doctrines based on different conclusions. The emergent popular press facilitated the spread of such unofficial discourse beyond the confines of isolated salons to a relatively diverse audience composed of all those with access to journals and newspapers.

Among the issues the academicians faced was the difficulty of reconciling the ideal of Renaissance classicism, rooted in Greco-Roman antiquity, with the living tradition of Gothic architecture and its importance to cultural memory and civic identity. As a case in point, Wittman describes the tension between the Academy’s positions and popular appreciation of Gothic architecture in the guidebooks of Paris by Germain Brice, which were published in many editions between 1684 and 1752. Initially written for tourists, the guides soon were marketed to Parisians as well. Wittman also considers more explicit resistance to the Academy’s universalizing doctrines in the architectural treatises of Michel de Frémiet and Jean-Louis de Cordemoy, for whom meaning in architecture arose from social convention. Implicit in their arguments was a view of society as an entity with its own voice, independent of the crown. Wittman devotes the second part of his book to an examination of how writers with political agendas adopted architectural criticism to challenge royal policies without appearing to attack the king. He draws his primary examples from the many commentaries published at midcentury addressing the completion of the east façade of the Louvre and the design of the Place Louis XV (today’s Place de la Concorde). Authors who felt that the administration of Louis XV was neglecting Paris employed both projects as vehicles to urge the king to have greater engagement with the city. Some framed their position by claiming to speak for a vaguely defined public that valued such royal monuments as part of a collective heritage. Invocation of an interested public not only magnified the author’s voice, it also ascribed to the public a degree of ownership in the matter under discussion. Suggestions for the public exhibition of projects for the Place Louis XV, for example, implicitly granted
the public a role in shaping their city, a process typically limited to officials.

The crown learned to use the press and adopt the voice of the people for its own purposes, and Wittman opens part three by describing how the Marquis de Marigny, appointed director of the Bâtiments du Roi (the royal building service) in 1751, and his principal spokesman, Charles-Nicolas Cochin, reasserted the primacy of the monarch’s will in the construction of the Louvre, the Place Louis XV, and, most importantly, the church of Sainte-Geneviève (the Panthéon). Cochin countered the notion that these royal monuments somehow issued from the will of the people with the assertion that they were gifts from the sovereign to his grateful subjects. He and his supporters also sought to preempt opposition by valuing expert opinion over that of those who lacked training in the arts.

The rapid increase in the number and variety of periodicals in the second half of the eighteenth century accommodated new voices and audiences. Wittman traces the editorial policies of journals covering architecture, including the Année littéraire (1754–76), which had a close relationship with the architectural educator Jacques-François Blondel, the Journal économique (1753–72), significant for its accounts of construction materials and techniques written by men in the building trades, and L’Avant-coureur (founded as the Feuille nécessaire in 1759), which published articles by architects promoting their work. Alongside the variety of positions expressed in this literature, Wittman notes the ambition of authors (some aligned with the positions of the government, others not) to seek consensus, and he focuses on three strategies to this end: the appeal to reason, the demand for adherence to the natural laws that govern the perception of form and color, and the recognition of the potency of culture (civic or national identity and custom).

The public sphere of architectural discourse was a cacophonous place in the years before the French Revolution, and in the fourth and final section of the book, Wittman examines the breakdown of the crown’s ability to assign enduring meaning to architecture, a situation that he terms “the crisis of architectural representation.” He skillfully sketches the complex environment in which architects practiced. It was a time of increasing cynicism and skepticism toward the ability of the government to act on behalf of the public good. Developers maximized private gain and compromised the benefits of major public commissions, such as the Hall au Blé and the Théâtre Français, and segments of the public decried conspicuous displays of wealth, social rank, or political power in private commissions. Architects sought to devise new formal vocabularies with fewer negative connotations, but efforts such as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s barrières (the entrances to Paris along the Mur des Fermiers généraux, begun 1784) were regarded as unintelligible or were negated by associations outside the architect’s control.

Architectural criticism pointed fingers in all directions. Alongside pro- and anti-government positions, competing factions within the royal administration used the press to claim the endorsement of public opinion. Writers employed an arsenal of rhetorical devices familiar to the authors of political blogs today: sarcasm, straw men, ad hominem attacks, and the voice of the common man who may not know much but knows what he likes. For example, Wittman describes a series of fictive letters published in 1777 by the Journal de Paris, the city’s first daily newspaper, which had close but veiled ties with reformers in the government. Among these were contributions from a purported sailor referred to simply by his occupation, “le Marin.” With a vocabulary replete with colorful expressions and nautical imagery, he spoke his mind about buildings important to the crown, leaving no doubt that the church of Sainte-Geneviève was a wonderful building that could be faulted only by pedants and troublemakers.

Architectural, Print Culture, and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France offers a new layer of context for our understanding of architectural practice in the eighteenth century that will facilitate the ability of scholars to interpret published sources of the period critically. Moreover, it engages our present-day concerns with architecture known only through print or digital media and leads us to consider where they began.

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Notes

