Building Power, with its deliciously ambiguous title, addresses readers interested in both architecture and surveillance. It responds to a felt need for more historically informed treatments of the latter, for, as noted in the preface (xiii), everyday life today, especially since 9/11, is suffused with surveillance of all kinds. Some even speak of the emergence of surveillance societies within modern liberal democracies. Yet far from forcing her material onto a procrustean bed of Foucauldian or Marxian theory, she skillfully marshals evidence from multiple sources that document the varieties of surveillance, whose diverse purposes she calls “ideologies.” While not for a moment denying the significance of the disciplinary gaze, this book takes us beyond the prison and factory to investigate other spatially structured architectural environments. The spaces of surveillance vary from the predictable discipline of the penitentiary to the workplace, the home, and “Holiness” campgrounds.

The narrative begins with prisons and an acknowledgment of the central role of surveillance discipline, at least in their physical layout. But Foucault’s conclusions are queried: how well did prison surveillance really work? Andrzejewski’s argument, based on examples from Stillwater, Minnesota (1835), and Auburn, New York (1909), is that prison guards often resorted to tactics other than surveillance to keep order. However, she suggests, intriguingly, that the ordered spaces themselves, organized for maximum visibility in a spoke-and-wheel or even “telephone pole” fashion, were intended to give the impression of appropriate discipline and order. She argues that “surveillance measures in prisons became markers of cultural order and cultural unity,” confirming American confidence in the justice system and American society itself.

Such re-reading of surveillance continues in Andrzejewski’s analysis of factories and post offices as places of work discipline. Whereas prison surveillance was supposed to maintain spatial discipline, controlling the movement of prisoners’ bodies, the workplace prized efficiency, and so considerations of time as well as space came to the fore. While in prison the concealed gaze was important (à la Foucault), in late nineteenth-century post offices and factories the gaze was very much embodied in the figure of the manager or supervisor. She or, more usually, he, was often intended to be visible, and this is reflected in architectural plans. But the effect was sometimes to invite resistance, which both—paradoxically—threatened efficient production and challenged worker-management hierarchies.

This hierarchy-challenging effect was also present, says Andrzejewski, in the domestic environment of middle-class homes with servants. Here, too, she finds many examples of architectural efforts to facilitate surveillance, as well as “everyday resistance” to it. Anxieties about surveillance were magnified in such settings, and gender relations also affected them in new ways. Separate zones within houses were prescribed for householders and servants, with the access points between mistress and servant being places of potential tension. Here again, not merely discipline and control, but surveillance for the maintenance of “proper” hierarchy is in focus.

If in some homes, bonds were forged between mistress and maid as a result of surveillance, this was much more so in Andrzejewski’s final case, Holiness campgrounds. Here, the gazes were much more mutual, and the physical settings of tents and buildings was intended to promote not division or hierarchy but fellowship. Of course, some divisive surveillance...
occurred, for example to distinguish serious attendees from those who might act in a disorderly manner. But from the evidence presented, positively sanctioned mutual surveillance was intended to bring people together.

The upshot is to place surveillance well beyond the realm of the sinister and foreboding, the constraining and controlling—a view to which we all too easily succumb in the early twenty-first century. While this historical treatment of Victorian America offers many insights into surveillance as discipline and control, it also shows how it may be viewed differently. Andrzejewski helpfully defines surveillance as “any purposeful act in which information about others is collected for all kinds of transformative purposes” (5). Clearly, the contexts in which she explores various gazes illustrate how those transformative purposes vary considerably.

Andrzejewski definitely sees surveillance as a prominent feature of the spatial organization of modernity. But she refuses monocausal explanations and discipline-obsessed analyses even as she acknowledges how the generation of knowledge about others is shaped by power relations. In the end, she offers a set of subtle and compelling vignettes that allow one to reconsider, query, and modify the surveillance issues raised so provocatively by Foucault. More than this, she situates surveillance as a flexible cultural resource for engaging modernity. She explains, “Surveillance was one means among many through which many Americans sought to affirm and define their relationship to others in the face of a rapidly modernizing society that threatened to tear apart dichotomies that the middle-class wanted to preserve” (7).

Modern architecture, in Andrzejewski’s examples, is persuasively interpreted in terms of its sometimes dominant and always defining surveillant aspects. This nuanced historical study opens a window to new ways of thinking, not only about the past and its architectural cultures, but also about present surveillance environments and the buildings and cultures that inform and are informed by them.

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Notes
2. The telephone-pole design appeared in early twentieth-century prisons and had central corridors with parallel branches off to the sides rather than the more centralized panopticon.