thinking with characteristically modernist works of art” (xiv).

Masheck’s book is a series of nine loosely connected essays, each bearing on the issue of Loos’s artistic intentions and achievements. The chapter titles give something of their flavor: “Loos and Fine Art,” “Loosian Vernacular,” “Architecture and Ornament in Fact,” “Loos and Minimalism”—to cite only some examples. Though they deal with different buildings and projects or different moments in Loos’s career, all are clustered around the issue of Loos’s objectives and what his works “say” in aesthetic terms. Masheck’s own description of one of the chapters from the preface offers a good sense of his aims and methods:

The possibility of a willful “architecturelessness” is raised in chapter 7 as a way of coming to terms with Loos’s problematic theoretical denial that houses, at least, are or should be works of art, and that most buildings designed by people identified as architects (at least in his historical moment) amount to architecture at all. If in 1910 Picasso had written that because most paintings are not works of art and hence he was not going to consider himself a painter, would that have been taken at face value for the next fifty years? While it is possible that Loos drew on the Bunker Hill monument for creative stimulus (Eduard Sekler and Ludwig Münz, two very astute observers of Loos, both suggested as much), the connection to Greenough is quite speculative. Later, Masheck writes of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideas of the column and “modernist aesthetic autonomy,” not quite drawing any specific linkage (160). But there is not a shred of evidence that Loos was even aware of Greenough or Emerson, much less that he had read their works. Loos was not a particularly diligent intellectual, and he was not notably widely read. He could be remarkably clever at times, drawing subtle and powerful inferences and conclusions, but his knowledge of letters and history was, to be sure, spotty.

A few pages later, Masheck again engages in similar speculation: noting that Loos’s design for the Tribune competition was “historically embedded,” he writes:

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rationalist orthodoxy. Instead, variations, debates, revisions, and open criticism accompanied the design and construction of housing on a large scale from the beginning; the process also involved a wide range of professional and political actors—from architects to mayors to state bureaucrats—who pursued different and at times opposing agendas and visions. And if the visual effect could be at times monotonous, the story of the rise and fall of the grand ensemble as a planning model was not. This, at least, is the sense one gets from reading Parvu’s *Journal de bord,* an account of four high-modernist housing projects in postwar France: Briey-en-Forêt, Bagnols-sur-Cèze, Les Ulis, and La Courneuve.

The construction of grands ensembles in France barely spans two decades, from 1954 to 1973. But those were years of great economic confidence and expansion, part of the Trente glorieuses, and the volume of construction was by all measures impressive, with an official number of housing units somewhere around six million. Two government decisions bracketed the construction campaigns, the first one mandating the rapid and low-cost construction of housing, and the second one, in 1973, prohibiting housing projects of more than five hundred units. The fact that the grand ensemble began and ended by decree shows that its presence on the French landscape was a deeply political act with causes and implications that went well beyond the architectural realm.

The marginality of architecture and the architect in shaping housing solutions is one of the important though disquieting revelations of Parvu’s book, and each chapter is something of an elegy to an architectural vision thwarted by external constraints: Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation truncated of its collective functions at Briey; Georges Candilis’s sensitive designs homogenized by government-imposed norms at Bagnols; the collapse of the public street under the pressure of the shopping mall at Les Ulis; and landscape architect Jacques Sgard’s powerlessness in implementing a more sensitive approach to the site of La Courneuve. If the book downplays the architect’s role, it also chips away at the notion of a monolithic state transparently expressing its power through the grand ensemble. Parvu dissolves any direct, heroic correspondence between large-scale planning and the authority of the state in favor of a mosaic of administrative and financial agencies that produced contradictory reports and recommendations, ambivalent public consultations, restrictive standards and norms, and half-finished projects.

Through the grand ensemble, Parvu chronicles the poignant mixture of idealism and pragmatism that characterized postwar modern architecture, its aspirations, and its limited success in materializing a vision for the collective good. In different ways, each of the four projects sought to provide its inhabitants not only with decent modern housing but also with all the elements of a good urban life: collective services and facilities, shared open spaces for leisure and civic functions, and opportunities for various levels of social interaction. Over the two decades, as the size and the degree of autonomy of the grand ensemble rapidly increased (Briey offered 340 logements; La Courneuve, 4,000), nonresidential spaces became more generous and complex. Thus, whereas in 1954, Le Corbusier had concentrated a limited range of collective functions within the structure of the Unité, by the early 1960s, the open spaces between buildings received increasing attention, as illustrated by the work of Sgard, who proposed for La Courneuve (albeit with limited success) a whole series of parks, promenades, and recreation spaces at various scales and for various age groups. Parvu adroitly summarizes this shift as going from the Unité d’Habitation to the unité de voisinage—from housing unit to neighborhood unit.

The whole book is in fact a gripping investigation of what begins where the buildings end. To capture the qualities of the emptiness, Parvu documents at once the inhabitants’ perceptions and patterns of use and the methods designers and planners employed to represent and shape it, two superimposed realities that are typically addressed separately. For instance, in the case of Les Ulis, the author invokes the shopping carts abandoned and strewn about the ensemble to reveal the misalignments between architectural plan, users’ experiences, and private developers’ interests. While the architects were trying in earnest to provide the new settlement with a functional and civic center, the developers were building a shopping mall that turned its back to the settlement and favored instead access from the highway, directly undermining the cohesion and internal organization of the nearby ensemble. Between these two competing territorial entities, the inhabitants pushed shopping carts, repeatedly and painstakingly attempting to create a spatial and functional continuity that haphazard planning had failed to provide.

The book contains other similarly rich readings of elements that seem at first anecdotal (the choice of colors at Bagnols, or a squabble over the location of a kindergarten at Briey) but that help expose the largely foreign universes of different actors that intersect in the grand ensemble. Planning intentions and the reality on the ground are not always discrepant, however, and Parvu also discovers instances in which the two are felicitously aligned. In the planning of La Courneuve, for instance, architects made extensive use of abstract sun-path charts to orient buildings and to dimension the spaces between them. Rather than result in alien proportions, this time, and through an almost poetic correspondence, the abstract halo of shadows diagrammed on the drafting tables came to match what the inhabitants intuitively perceived as each building’s area of influence, where children, for instance, could play safely within visual reach.

In Parvu’s book, the grand ensemble sits uncomfortably but productively between the two poles of concrete experience and the remote logic of planning technique. She refers to these two poles as “object” and “territory.” The difference between the two is more than a matter of scale, and the author gathers around each pole a constellation of approaches and disciplinary positions: “object” implies, of course, tectonic and plastic concerns (as in Candilis’s carefully orchestrated polychromy at Bagnols), or attempts to activate or restore the topography of the site (see, for instance, Sgard’s recourse, at La Courneuve, to artificial hills, or to tree canopies to shelter pedestrrians from the oppressive scale of the façades). On the other hand, “territory” is
radically new and sustaining of family values, self-sufficient and engaging a community spirit. By pointing to this impossible agenda at the heart of mass housing, Parvu reframes the forlorn postwar grand ensemble from a simply failed project into a key space of an unfinished modernity where the most pressing concerns and promises of modern architecture came not to die but to confront each other.

JULIANA MAXIM
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Note

Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative

Governing by Design: Architecture, Economy, and Politics in the Twentieth Century

The New Functionalists
In a series of fascinating essays, ten of the thirteen directors of the Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative pry the lid off a Pandora’s box of intractable questions about architecture and building production—and their histories—today. These authors examine things explicitly outside the “properly architectural,” according to conventions of architectural history and theory (particularly within the professional school). But if (some of) these essays are not about architecture per se, then what are they about? Do they glance off “Architecture” for the sake of revealing its contours with greater clarity? Aggregate promises to illuminate critical aspects of its subject precisely by encircling building culture with a set of well-aimed spotlights.

Daniel Abramson, Arindam Dutta, Timothy Hyde, and Jonathan Massey write for the group in their introduction: “What links this book’s contributions together is the idea of architecture governing conduct” (vii). The phrase recalls the recently translated Ludwig Hilberseimer’s Metropolisarchitektur of 1927. As we build, do so we self-organize; as we self-organize, so do we build (and impose our buildings on others). A feedback system modulated by power relations appears beneath the surface of Governing by Design. Three sections move outward from the individual (“Food, Shelter, and the Body”) to the collective (“Global States and Citizens”) to large-scale initiatives (“Engineering and Culture”). Some of the essays are brilliant; all merit reading. Speculating on building today, the authors conjure an inefficacious professional cadre of skin and envelope designers capable of couture design, but less able to manage prêt-à-porter—and apparently indifferent to no-name producers such as Target, Walmart, or Muji.

This is a collective effort, and the texts might be taken as a methodological whole that posits architectural history as broadly social and political history. Among the individual analyses are Lucia Allais, who, in writing on Egyptian temple conservation and foreign policy, reflects on the complex interconnection of heritage and global politics in an essay that is as elegantly argued as it is beautifully illustrated. Pamela Karimi underscores the effects of rapid modernization on domestic living patterns in Iran, tracing colonialist cultural destruction carried out in the name of mythical “quality of life” improvements. Ijlal Muzaffar discusses the remarkable intersection of culture and function in Karachi and is equally enlightening on Ecochard/ATBAT, Constantine Doxiadis, and the new urbanization of Pakistan after partition. John Harwood analyzes the wide-ranging influence of Lewis Mumford on midcentury architecture and planning and the highly consequential yet understudied, standardizing work of Ernst Neufert and Henry Dreyfuss. Jonathan Massey decodes the relationship between massive suburban development and the increasingly complex financial instruments that made them possible. Other essays by Timothy Hyde, Meredith TenHoor, and Daniel Abramson are similarly rich.

An important eruption emerges from Arindam Dutta’s “Marginality and...