shorthand for regional planning and land-use schemes that envision the grand ensemble from a great abstracting distance and translate each one of its aspects (number of units, speed of construction, costs, etc.) into data.

While the logics of the “object” and the “territory” subsist in tension and often in direct antagonism, the book succeeds in giving voice to both simultaneously: Parvu’s grand ensemble is at once a collection of singular objects and an abstract territory, and her account of the four projects constantly weaves between the two extremes—what the author refers to as working at all scales at once, from 1/20 (the “object”) to 1/20,000 (the “territory”). In so doing, she reveals, better than any other source I can think of, the extent to which the idea of mass housing was caught between the dual imperative of the small and the large, the singular and the general, and how, as a result, a critical account of its history is bound to attend at once to the registers of the expert and the experiential.

Parvu does not take sides in the current, largely negative assessment of the solution that was the grand ensemble—that would be too simplistic an approach for a book so sensitive to nuance. Instead, the text fruitfully redirects the narrative about the grand ensemble from banlieue à problèmes (problematic suburb) to that of a terrain ripe for radical new and sustaining of family values, self-sufficient and engendering 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.

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Note

Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative
Governing by Design: Architecture, Economy, and Politics in the Twentieth Century

The New Functionals
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 Metropolisarchitecture of 1927. As we build, so do 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. Ijil 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 provocation emerges from Arindam Dutta’s “Marginality and...
Metaengineering: Keynes and Arup” as he investigates how Western architecture became a luxury good with specific economic goals by the mid-twentieth century, a by-product of New Deal Keynesian economics in the first instance (from the 1930s), and of supply-side Thatcherism in the second (from the 1970s, roughly). Architecture lost relevance and agency in public life as critical decisions about building form and materialization increasingly devolved onto engineers rather than architects. Where the demand for architecture as a social asset was cultivated—even manufactured—in the earlier period, iconic buildings increasingly became purely formal brand-marks in the latter. Long-standing formal and aesthetic distinctions between “building” and “Architecture” were thus reinscribed in the mid-twentieth century.1 By locating this midcentury reinscription in macroeconomics—specifically in the need to establish design within an economic system that would monetize the ineffable work of the designer of buildings, even as their market share shrank—Dutta reprises Frederic Schwartz’s analysis of the 1914 Werkbund debate pitting standardization against artistic signature. His essay signals, but does not explicitly call out, the fatuous antics of architectural academics and theorists who potentially stimulate the contraction of architecture’s ever-small sphere of action.

There may be other explanations, however, less tied up with subterranean market forces and more closely linked to the surface of daily life in the postwar metropolis. One might, for example, also attribute postwar architecture’s increasing treatment of external form as image to changes in the profession—specifically, the radical increase in the circulation of images of architecture overall that coincided with decreasing physical accessibility along certain key routes or for particular populations—a decrease of access caused by the events surrounding World War II and the Cold War, and that lasted roughly from the 1930s to the 1980s. This historical condition enhanced the value of images of buildings as architectural currency in an increasingly commercial society. Perhaps both views are correct; whether larger systemic forces really influence the built environment more than all the errors, accidents, and self-induced catastrophes that characterized life under capitalism in the twentieth century is not the critical point here. Rather, this book demonstrates how architectural study benefits from closer engagement with adjacent practices—engineering, residential contracting, mortgage lending, infrastructure design—to open up such questions, not shut them down.

The essays in Governing by Design explore developments seemingly unrelated to the dominant discourse fostered by architectural schools and the architectural press. Michael Osman’s fascinating analysis of cold storage warehouses in Louis Sullivan’s Chicago does engage buildings associated with a “canonical” Western architect, but Sullivan is a sideline to Osman’s analysis, as is Jørn Utzon’s contribution to the Sydney Opera House to Dutta’s. Some argue that form-giving is all that architects can and should do. But these essays draw our attention rather to Henry-Russell Hitchcock’s “architecture of bureaucracy.” These buildings or planning proposals overwhelmingly involve architects who work closely with clients, builders, and governments to achieve results that may be compromised. By refusing to focus their attention on the auteurs of the architectural canon, Aggregate raises and then eliminates any firm distinction between architecture and the built environment. Architects the world over work on prosaic building projects that receive little press; only within the reified environment of certain schools, journals, and events do other impressions prevail. Those who remain focused on new technologies, on maximizing the potential of robots and digital fabrication, on updating the mechanics of form-giving, may mistake the problem. We are not here to reinstate the lost dreams of the twentieth century but rather to turn our minds to modes of distribution, dissemination, dilution, and delegation, and to a phase of modernity no longer predicated on forward motion or techno-utopia. Or so these new function-alists suggest.

If Governing by Design expands the definition of architecture outward from the thing itself—the material artifact—to the various infrastructures that set up the production of buildings, the administrative and political infrastructures that determine production itself, the book nevertheless makes a case for architecture. This is not planning history, legal history, or business history. It self-presents as architectural history. If the reader frequently encounters terms that have figured infrequently in architectural criticism (if not history), such as “sumptuary laws” and “actuarial tables,” then so much the better. More problematic is the connection between the large-scale infrastructures studied here and the ways in which architects may or may not be influential in their alteration. A nagging doubt: Can we write activist architectural history effectively, as the design of infrastructures that lie beyond the control of those who dedicate themselves to the production of the built environment today? Does Aggregate offer us a new template for thought or action? Or, by implicitly describing how architecture is controlled by forces beyond reach and therefore beyond our agency as architects, does the group offer a familiar narcotic, propagating somnambulance?

Rather than expecting architects or architectural historians to transform themselves into real estate developers, the book seems predicated on the notion that “if we build it, they will come.” By articulating the degree to which architecture is connected to (and by implication, controlled by) sumptuary laws and actuarial tables, we also articulate a new set of tasks for architect-crusaders of the present and future. Here the book demonstrates the use of theory to illuminate future trajectories. If the members of Aggregate theorize new boundaries for the field, reintegrating architecture with the daily lives of people using buildings (not contemplating them), then architects in future may expand their ambitions, seeing the “architectures of architecture” as part of their purview. Such is the charge of this activist history, which the reader may accept, reject, or question. If we are to leave behind the utopias of twentieth-century modernism, then we find a new set of hopes here that return us yet again to the persistent idea that architecture, somehow, should be part of life; that the collective awaits it. In the
self-presentation of this group, we find shades of Team 10, with historians taking the role that practicing architects played there—food for thought in and of itself, and in timely counterpoint to at least one young architect’s recent anxieties.4

This is a wonderful book whose minor flaws reflect on the publisher as much as on the authors. Some of the essays seem compacted, while others could stand fuller elaboration. See the sentence that begins “Keynes compares the land rentier to the ‘oppressive power of the capitalist’” (246–47) for a prose style rivaling Manfredo Tafuri in translation. More prosaically, typographical errors and grammatical infelicities mar an otherwise fascinating collection of new work. Such problems, one imagines, will be resolved in future publications, particularly with editorial support. Aggregate may now speak in part to itself, densely, but this group will no doubt learn to speak more clearly to the rest of us—for they raise questions that lead us into the future.

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Notes
1. Despite the extensive negative press it has received, the term functionalism is not negatively invoked by this reviewer. See also Claire Zimmerman, “The Old Functionalist,” review of Ludwig Hilberseimer, Metropolitan Architecture and Selected Essays, JSAH 73, no. 1 (Mar. 2014), 165–67.
3. Nikolaus Pevsner’s 1943 distinction between Lincoln Cathedral and a bicycle shed, and Henry-Russell Hitchcock’s “architecture of bureaucracy” of 1947 both addressed the diminishing distinction between Architecture and “mere building” in the industrialized West. Pevsner sought to create the distinction anew; Hitchcock found a repository for all the buildings that were demonstrably more than building, but still, in his view, less than Architecture. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, “The Architecture of Genius and the Architecture of Bureaucracy,” Architectural Review 101 (Jan. 1947) [fiftieth anniversary issue], 3–6.

Iain Borden
Drive: Journeys through Film, Cities and Landscapes

Wim de Wit and Christopher James Alexander, eds.
Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013, 320 pp., 112 color and 102 b/w illus. $59.95, ISBN 9781606061282

Christopher W. Wells
Car Country: An Environmental History

In July 2013, a New York Times headline proclaimed “the end of car culture.” Though the summer driving season offered plenty of evidence to the contrary, recent data indicate that fewer Americans are driving fewer miles in fewer cars, and even forgoing the adolescent ritual of getting a driver’s license upon turning sixteen. Thus, the Times felt confident in declaring that the country’s century-old love affair with the automobile was finally, inevitably, running out of gas. But if the romance with the car is cooling down, studying its fraught legacy is still plenty hot, as a spate of recent publications makes clear. In fact, in the hundred years since the first Model T’s rolled off the assembly line at Highland Park, Michigan, the car and its social, spatial, and economic impact have been under almost continual scrutiny, producing triumphant Fordist narratives and muckraking antisprawl screeds in almost equal measure. More nuanced, scholarly studies emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century with The Automobile and American Culture (1980; David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein, eds.), a notable early example that attempted a comprehen- sive analysis of what its editors called the “auto-consciousness” of the United States.

The continued evolution of that consciousness is fully evident in the three books under review here, each of which tackles a distinct aspect of the culture of automobility. In Car Country, Christopher W. Wells tracks its environmental evolution; in Drive, Iain Borden scrutinizes its experiential representation; in Overdrive, seventeen contributors examine its urban and architectural influence in Los Angeles, the world’s original autopia. Unsurprisingly, all three books deal principally with twentieth-century developments in the United States, though each pushes these parameters in important ways. Car Country begins with the infrastructural consequences of streetcars and railways in the 1880s. Overdrive, which probes Los Angeles’s “deep historical morphology,” commences even earlier, with Uto-Aztecan settlements and Spanish-Mexican land grants in the 1780s, and extends its geographic scope to cultural exchanges between Angelinos and Latin America and East Asia. Drive considers films not only from the United States but also from the United Kingdom and Europe, including a number made after 2000. This does not mean, however, that Drive has the most contemporary outlook. Though Car Country and Overdrive are both assuredly historical accounts, their perspectives are temporally expansive: Car Country looks at the past to help us understand how we arrived at the present; Overdrive analyzes one city’s history to provoke speculations on global urban futures.

While the car is central to each book, only Borden’s remains firmly behind the wheel, in motion, with eyes on the road—literally, since driving as performance and experience is the book’s subject and object. Drive is a clear continuation of Borden’s long-standing scholarly interest in pushing architectural history’s disciplinary limits into the realm of the lived city, examining the intersection of architecture and urbanism across diverse media. As such, Drive stands as a logical, if high-octane, sequel to his 2001 study of skateboardings as a transgressive and transformative urban practice. Here, however, it is not the car’s endlessly proliferating subcultures (racing clubs, enthusiast magazines, etc.) that Borden considers, but its cinematic representations in films ranging from classic (Grapes of Wrath, 1940) to popular (The Italian Job, 1969 and 2003), from art house (Breathless, 1960) to underground (C’était un rendez-vous, 1976).