Ruskin’s insistence on natural forms as touchstones for Gothic designs—especially in foliated capitals and window traceries—raised interesting questions in relation to churches built in colonial, and especially tropical, settings: Should they reflect the local flora and fauna, or should they remain true to the northern European origins of the Gothic style? Bremner reveals that while the forms of the buildings generally remained resolutely European, decorative elements were inflected by location: Canadian maple leaves can be seen in the arcade capitals of Christ Church, Montreal (1857–59), while tigers and alligators serve as superbly dramatic gargoyles at All Saints’ Cathedral, Allahabad (1870–87).

The book’s focus on Anglican Goths does not preclude coverage of the scourge (as many of Bremner’s protagonists believed it to be) of Catholicism. Some of the finest Gothic churches in the British colonies were commissioned by Catholic congregations swollen by emigrants displaced from Ireland by the famines of the 1840s. Governor Bourke’s Church Act of 1836 allowed all dispensations to apply for government church-building subsidies in New South Wales, leaving the hapless Anglican hierarchy stripped of its established status. St. Benedict’s, Broadway, Sydney, was completed in 1836 to plans made in 1842 by A. W. N. Pugin. This masterly essay in Gothic, notable for its elegantly tapered spire echoing that of St. Giles, Cheadle, is more significant than Bremner allows. It appears here merely as a part of “the predicament facing [William Grant] Broughton” (234), the hapless bishop of Sydney, who was, as W. S. Gilbert might have put it, an ardent antipodean advocate of antidisestablishmentarianism.

Many of the earliest Gothic churches in colonies of settlement were cobbled together by enthusiastic vicars and local artisans, but the period after 1850—for Bremner the “high noon” of colonial ecclesiology—saw the emergence of skilled professional architects in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. One such, Edmund Blackett, arrived in Sydney in 1842, bringing with him expert knowledge of both medieval architecture and contemporary architectural debates. Unlike earlier colonial structures, his works—such as St. Philip’s, Church Hill, Sydney—bear comparison with the finest churches of the day in England. St. Philip’s retains its dignity even today, surrounded by skyscrapers. The outstanding colonial architect to emerge from Bremner’s extensive research is undoubtedly Benjamin Woolfield Mountfort, who arrived in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1850. His exceptional imaginative vision can be detected in an early design for Holy Trinity, Lyttelton, New Zealand, with steeply pitched roof and splendidly embellished spire. The church came to a sticky end owing to an imprecise understanding of the drying and shrinkage of local woods, and to the strain on the structure caused by the prevailing winds against the roof. Mountfort’s later works, including the Church of St. Michael and All Angels, Christchurch, with its fantastical freestanding timber belfry (1861), reveal a creative, as well as an antiquarian, intellect of distinction.

Consideration of Mountfort reveals that, in the end, the focus on church architecture alone is unduly restrictive: surely the finest of imperial Gothic is to be found in secular structures such as Mountfort’s magisterial, and now tragically ruined, civic administrative buildings in Christchurch, at the University of Bombay (designed in Venetian Gothic style from London by George Gilbert Scott), and, primus inter pares, in the great Victoria Terminus by Frederick William Stevens, epicenter of late Victorian Bombay (now Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, Mumbai). Definitive though Bremner’s remarkable book certainly is, within its already broad scope there remains the challenge of examining the significance of the Gothic Revival in the imperial project more generally. The arcane ecclesiological debates and stylistic intricacies so meticulously revealed here might pale in significance before a study of the broader implications of imperial Gothic. The Gothic Revival provided a model for the social relationships, as well as the architectural monuments, of the British Empire in ways that reverberated through the organization of pageantry, the relationship of the Crown to local aristocracies, and the notion of chivalric conduct and duty. Perhaps the most powerful manifestation of colonial Gothic was the emergence of a hard-hitting social critique structured like Pugin’s Contrasts. The argument ran that while Britain had lost contact with its medieval origins, in other parts of the empire, such as the Indian village, a world of pristine, precapitalist relationships still survived. The arts and architecture of the subaltern races that emerged from such an organic and spiritual community suddenly seemed superior to the Crystal Palace vulgarity of the colonial overlords. The comparison between a Gothic and a modern world—past and present—provided the basis for a sweeping social critique, articulated by Thomas Carlyle, Pugin, and Ruskin, that was later transposed into the colonial sphere by commentators such as George Birdwood. The Indian village, or any traditional agricultural community, could now be held up as the epitome of wholesomeness in the face of industrial degeneracy. This vision of colonial Gothic was a powerful influence on the Arts and Crafts movement and on the swadeshi movement in India; moreover, in the hands of a young Indian lawyer well versed in the works of Ruskin, Mohandas K. Gandhi, it would ultimately bring an end to the British Empire.

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Georges Teyssot
A Topology of Everyday Constellations

Georges Teyssot’s A Topology of Everyday Constellations is a genealogy of domestic space in its many guises, from the bourgeois sitting room of nineteenth-century Paris to the phenomenal Umwelten of today’s smartphone-carrying, networked subjects. The book situates itself firmly within the context of many other studies of (architectural, artistic, cultural) modernity that stress that historical period as a time of radical reversals—of object and subject, of center and periphery, of interior and exterior. Teyssot, however, does not see these binaries as being in strict opposition. Rather, he understands them as moving points along the twisting surfaces of discourses, design objects, and lived experience itself. Thus he adopts the role of what Peter Sloterdijk has described as an “intimo-topologist”—a sensitive observer of, in Teyssot’s own words,
“the means of generating regimes of cultural and social practices, the hermeneutics of the intimacy of interior spaces, the topo-analyses of the secret and the hidden, the stylistic classifications of built form, and the cartography of the connections and linkages that the body must practice in this large family of spaces” (11).

Teyssot does not embark on this ambitious project on his own, but does so accompanied, methodologically, by Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. These figures and their authoritative discourses do not, however, simply preside over the “case studies” chosen by Teyssot. They do not emerge unscathed after being run through the architectural figures the author evokes. Nor are they alone; Teyssot marshals the work of an incredible number of theoreticians, poets, anthropologists, and critics of art and architecture in his study. As he states, “The sources of such a history are extraordinarily vast and necessarily hybrid. The material is heterogeneous, concerning as it does aspects of the histories of taste, mentality, culture, technology, and ‘lifestyle,’ as well as more specific aspects related to the concerns of territory and the city, construction and architecture” (21–22).

If all this seems nebulous, it is grounded by eight chapters that treat themes directly related to the history of modern architecture: a critical introduction, the modern theory of “type,” the threshold as it developed in modern interiors, the vitalistic serpentine line of art nouveau, the anthropological interests of Team X architect Aldo van Eyck, “cyborg architecture,” architecture as prosthesis, and, finally, the figure of the window. These chapters are organized, roughly, chronologically, moving from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, from the architectural myth-making of the Enlightenment to that of late capitalism. They offer a vast range of material, but only the most inattentive reader will fail to see the profound continuities from one chapter to the next.

These continuities involve, in essence, the historical and technical vicissitudes of being human. To wit, Teyssot’s second chapter, “Figuring the Invisible,” is a wide-ranging study of the notion of “type” as it evolved in architecture and the sciences starting in the late eighteenth century. Here Teyssot builds on the seminal work of Anthony Vidler and Sylvia Lavin in this area, and the mutual filiation of linguistics and architectural theory at this time. He quickly moves beyond this material, however, tracing the notion of type into early ethnographic and historical discourses, revealing that the very conception of architectural typology was always already bound up with a “human typology” (40) based on a “dangerous mixture of history, linguistics, and archaeology” (34). Indeed, the entire myth of an Indo-European culture comprised a suite of architectural motifs, as those migrants and invaders from the East brought with them their own style of “primitive huts” and portable, textile structures. These would fascinate Gottfried Semper as they would Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, both of whom drew upon the idea of an Aryan continuity between the great civilizations of the Fertile Crescent and those of modern Europe. The physiognomic likeness of these mythic peoples and their apocryphal buildings dovetailed with phrenological measurements (and typing) of contemporary subjects. But the suturing of these ostensibly dissimilar discourses (architectural typology and human anatomical norms) was achieved not purely ideologically but aesthetically as well. So, in the case of theories of type, the structures holding together their disparate materializations (in architecture, in sociology, in criminology) are abstract geometries mapping arbitrary correspondences—tenuous connections, perhaps, but with nonetheless profound implications for the modern, urban subject.

As Teyssot demonstrates, this elision of the cultural and tectonic features of buildings and the structural essence of human faces and bodies led directly to the assertion that, in fact, humans could be designed as well as architectural objects. He contextualizes this assertion by relating it to fin de siècle design reform, art nouveau, and, subsequently, the various cults of personal hygiene, exercise, sunbathing, nudism, and hiking that would be part of the cultural mythmaking of National Socialism. In all of these, a profound reciprocity was required between the human subject and the exterior, designed environment, whether that involved clothing or buildings. At times this reciprocity was conceived as an organic outward growth from an essential center (the family unit, for instance), and at others it was figured as an external device applying real or figurative pressure to a body within.

In “Figuring the Invisible” Teyssot treats the idea of type as various related systems of observing and describing the surfaces of things; in chapter 3, “Dream House,” he takes a step into the interior (of the subject and the building). But in this text there is no such thing as a simple interior, and, through a careful reading of Benjamin, Teyssot follows the dialectical reversals of dream and reality that seemed bound up with the spectacularization of urban space in the late nineteenth century. This is much more than a Marxist reading of architectural production at that time—it is an account of how the bourgeois subject is figured by real and imaginary architectures, and the ways in which these spaces were able to draw into themselves vast worlds of energy and commodities.

I would consider chapters 2 and 3 the heart of this book; they lay out its topological structure, establish an intellectual genealogy for its concerns, and alert the reader that this is not to be a purely celebratory stroll through the great monuments of modern design. This sentiment holds true for chapter 4, “The Wave,” which, although it works around some of the great monuments of the art nouveau movement (Henry van de Velde’s Troppau poster, Peter Behrens’s early industrial design, Gustav Klimt’s murals), is more concerned with Benjamin’s ambivalence about the clearly reactionary but also liberating aspects of the style. Teyssot proceeds to trace the art nouveau wave as it swirls through sitting rooms and bathrooms and washes across and through the human body and the body politic alike, carrying with it the insidious promise of psychosexual liberation.

Chapter 5, “The Story of an Idea,” constitutes the historical break in the narrative of the book, as Teyssot moves immediately from the fin de siècle to the postwar period. Certainly, there was much that Teyssot could have done with his themes in terms of the interwar period and “heroic” modernism, but this compression (the abrupt move from ca. 1900 to ca. 1960) serves to demonstrate the strange Victorianism of postindustrialism—an uncanniness that Teyssot will insist we acknowledge in our own cultural situation as well. This chapter
addresses the particular anthropological bent of Aldo van Eyck, the Dutch architect renowned for his incredibly rigorous modernist designs and his humanist philosophy (a philosophy that would go on to be important for Brutalism writ large). Teysot focuses on Van Eyck’s fixation on the architectural emblem of the threshold, inspired largely by the philosopher Martin Buber. But this trope, as Teysot demonstrates, is fraught with the mystical underpinnings of all discourses of the archetype that seek a kind of unchanging human essence in the swirling chaos of history.

It was also just such a stable, anthropological subject that the radical architecture of the next decades would reject definitively (implicitly or explicitly). Chapter 6, “Toward a Cyborg Architecture,” is devoted to a kind of morphology of the architecture-subject interface in the speculative projects of the 1960s. Here “the egg and the crystal” (184) constitute the basic formal language of an entire world of dwellings and urban structures that would suggest ever more intimate connections between technology and the human body.

This chapter, like those that follow it, sits between technology and subject formation, connecting them to more recent explorations of the topics addressed here: digital technologies, virtuality, networks, and so on.

As the book concludes, the figure of the human subject is attenuated ever further by technologies that extend and ablate (to use Marshall McLuhan’s term), that stretch outward from the body only to fold back into it. Teysot is careful, however, not to fall into a position of naïve negation.

As Teysot does just this in his final chapter, the book wraps itself back around to the beginning, twisting itself through its center like a prose-based Klein bottle, only now historical images of windows and bodies intertwine with contemporary art and architectural projects. If there is an off note here, it is that Teysot’s selections of the latter tend ineluctably toward a kind of “Deleuze + Scofidio” literalness—interactive objects and spaces that wear their digital complexity on their sleeve.

Regardless, anyone concerned with the intellectual and morphological conditions of modernity should read A Topology of Everyday Constellations. It is some of the best art historical writing of the twenty-first century, managing to channel the spirit of classic texts such as Vidler’s The Architectural Uncanny and Beatriz Colomina’s Privacy and Publicity while connecting them to more recent explorations into technology and subject formation, such as the work of John Harwood, Spyros Papapetrou, and Felicity Scott. These elements combine to create a unique text, one that will have the reader phasing in and out of analytical and sensuous modalities and, in its best moments, experiencing both simultaneously.

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This does not mean that one should argue about the pointlessness of virtual architecture or, to be more precise, reject the use of digital tools in architecture. However, it is urgent to conceive the (human) body in relation to these new means—these new media: digital, virtual—which have become unavoidable. Perhaps one should conceptualize them as a new means of transforming our manner of seeing and conceiving the world, just as perspective was developed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. (246)

As Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby notes in her splendid book Colossal, Bartholdi’s surreal juxtaposition conjures an image, at once allegorical and lacking in subtlety, in which “modern transport means an ideal of nature and the motifs constituting that ideal—picturesque landscapes, mythical creatures from antiquity” (12).

Grigsby’s main concern in Colossal is that missing entity of scale, and, more specifically, that scale as it is understood in visual terms. Colossal outlines a new understanding of the visual experience of the built environment in the long nineteenth century and how, above all, colossi were constructed and received optically and reckoned with as objects emblematic of a new cultural and industrial epoch.

Colossal is ostensibly a book about the visual experience around the long nineteenth century’s most mammoth achievement—the Suez Canal, the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, and the Panama Canal—but in actuality it is much more. Whereas the two canals marked the novel and peculiar achievement of creating colossal absences, the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty were theoretically in dialogue with historical notions of monumentality and place making, most overwhelmingly those of ancient Egypt as it had come to be understood through Napoleon’s Description de l’Égypte. We are not allowed, however, to see the modern colossus as simply a thing of absence or presence, as the two sets of pairs would at first suggest. In Grigsby’s retelling of Ferdinand de Lesseps’s massive efforts to slice the isthmus at Suez, we learn of things with tremendous presence: dredging machines worthy of globally circulated...