Minor has avoided Piranesi’s own flaw: she has sidestepped the hazards of redundancy by discussing texts largely ignored by scholarship. But as a writer, she holds considerably more promise than Piranesi ever did, and this reader at least could not help but wish she had been willing to tread again on well-trodden ground so as to paint the whole picture of the whole Piranesi. The good news is that unlike Piranesi, whose sheer volume of prose is likely to leave a reader exhausted, Minor leaves us wanting more.

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Note

Mari Hvattum and Anne Hultzsch, eds.
The Printed and the Built: Architecture, Print Culture and Public Debate in the Nineteenth Century

Mari Lending
Plaster Monuments: Architecture and the Power of Reproduction
Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018, 284 pp., 48 color and 73 b/w illus. $49.95/£40 (cloth), ISBN 9780691177144

“For better or worse, all my figures are men and all my texts are canonical, but the men do not look so triumphant in retrospect, and today the canon appears less a barricade to storm than a ruin to pick through.” These lines, written by Hal Foster, appear in his 2002 article “Archives of Modern Art,” which traces major shifts in the memory structure of European art between 1850 and 1950. Rereading this history through a series of oppositions (Baudelaire/Manet, Valéry/Proust, Panofsky/Benjamin), Foster examines the “institutional relay” between the artist’s studio and the space of the museum. Art in the nineteenth century was a “mnemonic elaboration” of earlier work. Yet this relation between the atelier and the museum was hardly a one-way street: Baudelaire’s idea of artistic practice, for instance, “already presumes the space of the museum as the structure of its mnemonic effects.” Each theorist’s position is reread through a “dialect of reification and reanimation”—that is, the shifting relation between art museum and art studio could reanimate European art, reify it into a spectacle, or both. Foster ends by asking how our own archival moment, the age of digital reproducibility, is transforming art’s memory structure. His answer is compelling: “If the old museum, as imagined from Baudelaire through Proust and beyond, was the site for the mnemonic reanimation of visual art, the new museum tends to split the mnemonic experience from the visual one.” Decoupled from its archival/mnemonic function, the new museum highlights the exhibition and exchange value of art in unprecedented ways.

The two volumes under review here offer insight into the now-lost memory structure of the nineteenth century by rethinking architecture’s relation with technical reproductions—printed images and plaster casts. Meticulously researched and produced, these two books reveal a curatorial approach to architectural history, one that foregrounds the exhibition value of its documents. Prints and plaster casts are not understood as copies after originals, but rather as collectible objects with their own specific and material histories.

The Printed and the Built: Architecture, Print Culture and Public Debate in the Nineteenth Century begins with an introduction by editors Mari Hvattum and Anne Hultzsch that retraces a well-traveled history: how the manifold increase in the circulation of printed images, beginning in the 1830s, expanded architecture’s publics. Technically, this was in large part due to the mechanization of xylography (woodcuts or wood engraving), which was far more consequential than high-end imaging techniques such as copperplate engraving or lithography. As Iver Tangen Stensrud shows in a brief chapter, although xylography, too, was a labor-intensive process—skilled engravers cut images and text into the end grain of hardwood blocks—copies of the woodblocks were cast in metal stereotypes, which allowed multiple printing presses to run simultaneously (295–99). The first illustrated weekly, the Penny Magazine, appearing in 1832, reached a circulation of two hundred thousand in its first year (32). Printed images thus became available to an expanding middle class.

This story has been narrated in the past as a tale of two cities—London and Paris—with the common themes being the diffusion of technology, the rise of a public sphere, and the dissemination of a professional discourse from the center to the periphery. One outcome of the circulation of cheaply printed images was the rise of professional publications, including illustrated architecture journals, pattern books, and architectural history handbooks. Yet, after duly summarizing the dominant historical narrative, the editors move away from it. Technology does not always drive history. Nor is a canonical modernism the telos of nineteenth-century architecture. In fact, at times a teleological history is altogether omitted. What follows is a surprising collection, revolving around the reciprocity of the printed and the built.

Hvattum and Hultzsch’s introduction is a case in point. It opens with a picture of “Mr. Applethorpe’s Printing Machine” originally published on 31 May 1851 in the Illustrated London News. Here the relation between building and printed page is mind-bogglingly circular. The Illustrated London News featured, in a supplement dedicated to the Crystal Palace, an illustration of the printing press that produced the magazine inside the walls of the Crystal Palace. As Hvattum and Hultzsch explain: “The astounded public could see the magazine materialize from the midst of its own content” (2). According to the editors, neither architecture nor print culture was in a supporting role. “The printing press and the building produce each other’s image” (2).

The reciprocity of architecture and printing press returns in Maarten Delbeke’s fascinating contribution, “Architecture’s Print Complex: Palloy’s Bastille and the Death of Architecture.” The chapter begins with another historical tableau: a printing press installed on 17 July 1792 on the ruins of the Bastille in Paris. After printing a copy of the Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme where the Bastille once stood, the printing press was carried...
away to other sites commemorating the French Revolution. Architecture emerges as a medium that registers public memory—in the case of the Bastille, the memory of tyranny and oppression—and is contrasted to the printing machine, which both supersedes that memory and stands for press freedom.

“Ceci tuera cela” (This will be the end of that), Victor Hugo’s famous line from the 1832 edition of Notre-Dame de Paris, is evoked throughout this volume. In “The Public Square of the Modern Age,” Architecture and the Rise of the Illustrated Press in the Early Nineteenth Century,” Barry Bergdoll argues that the common reading of the phrase as a struggle of succession between architecture and printing press is a historical misunderstanding: “Architecture, public space and the printing press were here brought into a powerful alliance.” (31).

The relation between architecture and press freedom is reversed in Richard Wittman’s “Imprinting Patriotism: Etruria and Egypt in Papal Rome (1834–41)” Wittman asks how the heritage of ancient Etruria and Egypt could be featured in the heavily censored press of Rome under the Papal States, even though both historical cultures could incite patriotic, liberal, and revolutionary ideologies that the church feared and condemned. Etruria stood for press freedom. Yet he uncharacteristically concludes that in Britain, unlike in France, there was no clear historical evolution of the technique toward “reality effects,” and “it is less appropriate to regard it from a telological point of view.” (52).

In light of the distinction between handmade and indexical reproductions, it is remarkable that the history of photography—the other imaging and reproduction technology of the nineteenth century—is conspicuously absent from this volume, with the notable exception of Beatriz Colomina’s chapter. In “X-Screens: Röntgen Architecture,” Colomina provides a short history of X-rays—both the technique and the metaphor—from the experiments of Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen in 1895 to László Moholy-Nagy’s new vision photography of the 1920s to Dr. Edith Farnsworth’s criticism of the X-ray-like transparency of the weekend house designed for her by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

This is a surprising book. Part 1, which duly affords Bergdoll, Bann, Delbeke, Wittman, and Colomina space for well-executed and substantive historical narratives, is a prelude to part 2, which promises nothing short of an altogether different way of storing and presenting knowledge. (18). Here we come across twenty-five “mini-chapters,” also written by eminent architectural historians—only here the authors need to make their points in just four to five pages each, including illustrations. Ordered alphabetically, these mini-chapters are titled “Bibliotopography,” “Cablegram,” “Cartoon,” “Colour,” “Column,” “Criticism,” “Description,” “Encyclopedia,” “Exhibition,” “Feuilleton,” “Fiction,” “Handbook,” “Libel,” “Masthead,” “Movables,” “Murder,” “Pamphlet,” “Paratexts,” “Past,” “Review,” “Sex,” “Silhouette,” “Street Views,” “Tidings,” and “Xylography.”

Some of these read as though they were entries in a dictionnaire raisonné (“Feuilleton,” “Pamphlet,” “Xylography”). Synecdoche is the most common rhetorical technique (“Libel,” “MURDER,” “Sex”). At times, the case is so brilliantly selected that the part does not simply represent the whole—this is the case with Michela Rossò’s “Cartoon,” which interprets William Hogarth’s 1761 essay “The Five Orders of Periwigs” as a satire of eccentric eighteenth-century wigs and, at the same time, as a way of lampooning the much-anticipated volumes of The Antiquities of Athens.

Wallis Miller’s “Review” offers a glimpse of her in-depth research on Ludwig Hoffmann, who served as Berlin’s building commissioner from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Here the argument—the rise of architectural criticism in the popular press in Berlin around 1901—is part of a larger project of rewriting the history of German modernism through its architectural exhibitions. Thus, part 2 presents far more than a glossary of nineteenth-century architecture and print culture. In fact, not all the entries are about the nineteenth century. The texts discussed range from Renaissance-era books to the “delirious prose with pauses and rhythm” that one might find in the tweets of Donald J. Trump (155). In contrast, the geography covered is limited to a handful of cities, mostly Western European. The politics of inclusion in “nineteenth-century architecture” is playfully sidetracked by the book’s additive, open-ended, and paratactical index. What genre of writing these mini-chapters add up to is hard to pin down—they vary from encyclopedic to aphoristic to allegorical.

We have evidently come a long way since the poststructuralist readings of nineteenth-century architecture of, for instance, Stephen Bann, who, in his 1984 book The Clothing of Clio, ordered words and things into “syntagmatic chains” and “epistemic totalities.” Now all totalities have melted into the air. What are the historiographic implications of this editorial experiment, a new collection of words and things?

The contributors to The Printed and the Built and the previous research spearheaded by the “Oslo group” present a rich array of intellectual positions. It may be an oversimplification to tease out a shared approach to historiography. Mari Lending
came close to offering a programmatic statement in 2014:

If architectural culture is recovering from a slight hangover caused by decades of theoretical excess, it is however a very specific theoretical backdrop that enables the current reassessment of things and spaces. The fundamental destabilization of the original/copy dichotomy inherited from philosophical deconstruction has slowly meandered from the realm of texts to a wide territory of objects. In lieu of nostalgia, ideas of permanence, origins, and authenticity, maybe also of chronology and genealogies, we are witnessing a stark preoccupation with how objects behave, change, move, work, and fluctuate, with how they circulate in time and space.1

“Objects invite agency,” states architectural historian Alina Payne, and it is to Payne’s 2012 book From Ornament to Object that Lending has turned on multiple occasions. Payne defines the object “as that class of man-made products that are (potentially) mobile, even portable, hence of a scale and physical integrity that permits circulation and removal from a specific site.” For Payne, objects are collected, circulated, unrooted, transient things, thus “they represent an antithesis of architecture.” For Lending, in contrast, architecture travels, and not only through its mediations. The research rubrics of the “Oslo group” often address the antinomies of architecture and circulating, portable, collectible objects.

Similarly, Mari Lending’s recent monograph Plaster Monuments: Architecture and the Power of Reproduction engages the medium of portable architecture par excellence. Lending’s journey into these forgotten collections of the nineteenth century has led to an unusual book, in which her elegant narrative meanders through objects and texts. Like the narrator of Marcel Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu, who rearranges the furniture of his bedroom in a moment of awakening, Lending weaves a vast scholarship around the objects at hand. The objects of a collection help reconstruct past moments, as in the remembrance of a dream. To use Proust’s terminology, “The past was made to encroach upon the present” (Faire empiéter le passé sur le présent).2

Plaster Monuments revolves around Proust’s descriptions of an imaginary medieval church. Proust’s narrator, Marcel, encounters a plaster copy of a portal in Paris’s Trocadéro Museum (Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc’s Musée de Sculpture Comparée); as Lending quotes: “The church at Balbec, built in the twelfth and thirteenth century, still half Romanesque, is perhaps the most curious example of our Norman Gothic, and so singular! It is almost Persian in style!” (70). Later, as Lending describes, when Marcel travels to the fictional seaside town of Balbec in Normandy, he is overtaken by a “profound disappointment” (70). “For, finally in front of the church, in the long-awaited moment, Marcel unexpectedly finds himself yearning for the museum in Paris. He immediately realizes that the original does not measure up to the copy” (73). Whereas the plaster cast copy in the museum displays a “universal” and “inaccessible beauty,” Lending notes, quoting Proust, the church itself—the “real thing”—is “nothing but its own shape in stone” (73). The church is surrounded by a tedious town, which is also a product of Proust’s imagination.

Lending interprets this scene as a deliberate reversal of the standard hierarchy between originals and reproductions: the plaster cast in the museum possesses an aura that the original lacks. The plaster cast reveals the universal beauty of form within controlled and ideal viewing conditions, whereas the original monument subjects the viewer to—in Proust’s words—“the tyranny of the particular” (4). The reproduction sets art free by elevating it to an abstract universe and overcomes the arbitrary particularity of the original. Lending contends that Proust understood an aspect of what his German translator Walter Benjamin called the aura, which Benjamin himself overlooked.

Many of this book’s chapters open with descriptions of found spaces or objects. Lending strolls through nineteenth-century museums, reveling in their obscurity:

In Brussels, a lofty room finished with simple wooden shelves from floor to ceiling is completely filled with broken fragments. All kinds of associations spring to mind, from natural disasters and phantasmagoric ruins to large-scale contemporary art installations with archival inclinations. In the somber daylight falling from a strip of windows high up on a wall one slowly recognizes familiar forms amid the rubble: torsos, a bodiless leg tucked behind an ornamental panel, a tender medieval face buried in building debris, fluted drums, broken columns, capitals, cornices, freezes and bas-reliefs, mutilated doors and portals, remains of balustrades, mantelpieces, pulpits, sarcophagi, and miscellanea of all sorts. (106)

These ruins are then matched with the museum’s archives. The transition from today’s chaotic abandonment in storage to the nineteenth-century taxonomies that ordered these objects into aesthetic or historical series is superbly examined. Yet the author’s poetic description of these found objects and fragments as ruins means that they are often already detached from their social and discursive contexts by the time they are called to activate new histories. Since Lending writes through Proustian correspondences, it is a challenge to follow a historical progression: the past here is woven in installments around the objects themselves.

All of this leaves the reader curious about the social contexts through which these casts were received and consumed. In an intriguing chapter titled “Cablegrams and Monuments,” Lending shows that the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh ordered most of its architectural casts from European sales catalogues in a series of cablegrams sent through transcontinental telegraph lines. They read: “Ship all casts quickly, fast steamer” or “Hurry Trocadero casts” (152). The point is well-taken: architecture circulated as portable monuments throughout the modern era. Yet museum archives privilege either curatorial programs or provenance. They fall silent about how installations and period rooms interacted with American interiors at the end of the nineteenth century, or about the social constructions of taste and distinction.

Lending’s Plaster Monuments must be read cover to cover lest the reader risk missing brilliant insights offered in the most unexpected places. The chapter titled “The Yale Battle of the Casts: Albers vs. Rudolph” is one such place. Bringing
Josef Albers dismissed the university’s extensive plaster cast collection as the remains of an obsolete Beaux-Arts system. The casts escaped the iconoclasm of the modernist designer only when his department moved to the newly completed Yale University Art Gallery and Design Center in 1953 (192). In contrast, retrieving the casts from the basement, Paul Rudolph chose to insert them into his new Art and Architecture building (1963). The casts became “ornaments” that lent human scale to Rudolph’s Brutalist concrete masses. Lending shows that by incorporating the casts, Rudolph neutralized them far more effectively than did Albers, who wished simply to throw them away.

The afterlife of Yale’s casts as material fragments is equally fascinating: they became “modern ruins,” as Lending calls them (184). Subjected to student vandalism, and having survived a fire, they were restored to an approximation of Rudolph’s original and rather arbitrary installation. Lending’s comments on the “precarious material history” of the casts and on the accidents that “twisted their indexicality” (meaning they became both ruins and reproductions without originals) toward the end of this chapter are among her most profound observations on architecture’s reproducibility (207). This is a wonderfully told story of how fragments of the European canon became ornaments in a building obvious to what they signified, a building that responded only to their formal and material qualities. Picking through the ruins of a lost canon is an apt analogy to describe this history.

The last monument that Lending discusses is a contemporary installation by the New York–based artist, architect, and preservationist Jorge Otero-Pailos, from his series The Ethics of Dust:

Today, we might take more joy in acknowledging the historicity of the casts themselves than in seeing them as vehicles capable of evoking the imagined pristine state of their originals. The casts convey their own history of making and building. Otero-Pailos’s latex cast of the interior of the upper half of a cast of Trajan’s Column, hung from the ceiling next to the original at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2015, did not depict traces of the spiraling frieze of this Roman war monument. Rather, it displayed quantities of perfectly preserved dust and dirt accumulated from the 1860s, gathered in the relief of its cylindrical brick core. Thus this cast from a cast—displaying yet another odyssey in materiality—revealed in its captivating flimsiness the very concrete conditions of its construction, while adding to the biography of this moving monument. (235–37)

Lending’s book may be read to show that the decoupling of the museum’s mnemonic function from its exhibition value has increased contemporary audiences’ demands for materiality. In fact, historic preservation’s obsession with the material object reached such a stage that Otero-Pailos’s intervention is able to turn “dirt and dust” into a unique work of art. Cleaning of the monument, in its fetichistic indexicality, has turned dust into an authored neo-avant-garde, just as memory retreats and the past is inscribed to a latex skin as a natural history. Perhaps Otero-Pailos’s installation is a synecdoche of our own archival moment. It is not a print, but an inimitable reproduction. The work of art in the age of digital reproducibility reveals what Proust once called the “tyranny of the particular.”

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Notes
4. See Thordis Arhenius, Mari Lending, Wálfrír Miller, and Jérémie Michael McGowan, eds., Place and Displacement: Exhibiting Architecture (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2014). Barry Bergdoll, who contributed to both this volume and the one under review, refers to this network of architectural historians as “the Oslo group” in The Printed and the Built, 29.
5. Mari Lending, introduction to the section “Circulation,” in Arhenius et al., Place and Displacement, 168.

Edward Eigen
On Accident: Episodes in Architecture and Landscape
Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018, 408 pp., 65 b/w illus., $26.95 (paper), ISBN 9780262534840

At face value, On Accident, an extraordinary book of historiographic essays by Edward Eigen, offers, as the subtitle contends, twelve “episodes in architecture and landscape.” An assessment might therefore be expected to follow the usual route and evaluate the content of each case study while pausing occasionally to quibble with a fact here, an interpretation there. The modest subtitle, however, obscures a larger ambition that emerges from the composition as a whole. Through a facility with language and a delightful command of detail, Eigen stages a dozen scenarios that demonstrate how we come to understand what it is we think we know. The discussion might engage the periodicity of the weather or the appropriate wood for use in rafters, yet each essay asks the reader to reflect on the limits of knowledge. In an era when access to information and its demonstrable utility are often mistaken for erudition, this statement of epistemological complexity is particularly redolent.

The accidental at multiple levels is the theme at work in each of the tales recounted in this book, but the choice of methodology deliberately makes of this compilation something other than a bundle of articles—though that practice, once more commonplace, has produced some remarkable books. The essay, when exercised as a literary form, is not to be mistaken for an indicator of length. Rather, it is an instrument for storytelling that has a history in both structure and content. When Eigen reflects on the digestive system in relation to the famous conflation of the state with the body of its king, for example, one hears the echoes of Michel de Montaigne, whose gastric and other bodily complaints occupied the pioneering Essais (1580) to the point where he declared,