Book Reviews

Tower and Office: From Modernist Theory to Contemporary Practice
INAKI ABALOS & JUAN HERREROS
The MIT Press, 2003
400 pages, b/w illustrations
$50.00 (cloth)

Remarkable Structures: Engineering Today’s Innovative Buildings
SUTHERLAND LYALL
Princeton Architectural Press, 2002
240 pages, color and b/w illustrations
$75.00 (cloth)

Interest in the production of buildings has dramati-
cally increased and shifted in focus over the last
decade. Possibly as a reaction to the reductive rep-
resentational and literary focus of postmodernism,
architects and educators now look to engineering,
material studies, and construction as the generator
and locus of their research and practice. One of the
first and most widely influential books published in
this arena was Kenneth Frampton’s Studies in Ten-
tonic Culture (MIT, 1995). Also widely popular and
influential has been Edward Ford’s two-volume
series, Details of Modern Architecture (MIT, 1990,
1996). More recently, we have witnessed the entry
of confirmed “architectural theorists” such as Ber-
nard Tschumi and Greg Lynn into the material world
of building and construction.

Two recently published books — Tower and Office: From Modernist Theory to Contemporary Practice and Remarkable Structures: Engineering Today’s Innovative Buildings — present views on building practices beginning with historical views of modernity to define a trajectory toward future prac-
tices. Tower and Office, by Inaki Abalos and Juan
Herrerias, offers a significant historical analysis lead-
ing to the contemporary office tower, whereas
Remarkable Structures by Sutherland Lyall highlights
the collaborative efforts of engineers and architects
with a brief introductory essay tied to a catalog of
specific projects. These seemingly different outlooks typify contemporary attention to the topic of mak-
ing buildings.

The more historically grounded of the two
titles is Tower and Office: From Modernist Theory to
Contemporary Practice, which situates itself in the
tone of a speculative manifesto by proposing structure, mechanical
systems, enclosure/envelope, and space planning
concepts as equal partners in the formal and func-
tional evolution of the building type. The book is
divided into three distinctive parts. “Part One:
High-Rise Construction and the Modern Movement”
focuses on Le Corbusier as the primary form and
theory generator of modern high-rise typology,
whereas in “Part Three: Typological and Urban Evo-
lution of the Contemporary High-Rise Building” the
authors credit Ludwig Hilberseimer’s 1924 Vertical
City speculation as prophetic of contemporary mixed-use and sectionally oriented towers. “Part Two: Technological Evolution of Contemporary
High-Rise Structures” is well supported by expert
consultation and details the development of struc-
tural, enclosure, and mechanical systems that
allowed the skyscraper to grow to its current
heights. These last, more technically oriented sec-
tions, cause one to question the initial analysis of
Le Corbusier’s skyscraper. In addition, several chap-
ters culminate in charts of buildings intended to
illustrate the authors’ arguments but provide no
explicit analysis. Ultimately, the three parts that
structure the book establish a backdrop for the
authors’ presentation of the contemporary, multi-
centered city and its buildings. The epilogue
attempts to pull the historical analysis and critique
of the modern into a vision for the future, but it
provides no clear direction other than encouraging
a thoughtful consideration of a building’s totally
relative to cultural conditions.

By comparison, Remarkable Structures: Engi-
neering Today’s Innovative Buildings offers a series
of case studies in an effort to demonstrate the con-
tinued association of engineers and architects. The
book begins with a succinct essay outlining the his-
torical connections of architecture and engineering,
beginning with Vitruvius and continuing through
the Modern movement. Although not as critically
speculative as Tower and Office, it is richly illus-
trated with large color photographs of the projects
as well as drawings and diagrams. Some projects
have particularly interesting details such as the
treatment of The Park Keeper’s flat and public lava-
tories project for the park at Shinju-cho (TIS &
Partners with Shuih Endo Architect Institute)
whereas others, such as Hall F at the Charles de
Gaulle Airport (Paul Muller with RFR and Paul
Andreu, ADP), are very reductive and not fully artic-
ulated. The design of the large-format, glossy photo
book inherently limits the amount of substantive
analysis. For the most part, projects are presented
as discrete objects with little commentary on how
they function programmatically, spatially, or urban-
istically. In addition, the book has several errors that
might call it into question as a resource. However,
the catalog of projects provides a provocative pic-
ture of the architect-engineer relationship and the
potential of contemporary technology.

Tower and Office: From Modernist Theory to
Contemporary Practice seems to be sending mixed
messages. It would most obviously fit into the cate-
gory of a textbook for a history/theory class, yet it contains a heavy technical focus. The book resists traditional categories in the same way that the authors argue for a resistance to oversimplified modern strategies of design. Nevertheless, it is also unlikely that the book has enough technical information to fit into any technology courses. Its value is in novel juxtapositions rather than original research. Remarkable Structures: Engineering Today’s Innovative Buildings appeals more as a studio resource that might inspire technically innovative designs but may be cost prohibitive as a required text. The book points to an interesting trajectory of architectural research linking architecture to engineering in increasingly provocative projects. It is a good resource for faculty members looking for a survey of technically sophisticated projects, while those looking for a depth of cultural and historical analysis will be disappointed.

These books represent the continued and growing interest in the practice of making buildings from Tower and Office’s historical overview to the more contemporary examples of Remarkable Structures. Evidence of this interest is evident throughout architectural education, from the plethora of design-build programs to the advanced-materials research being conducted by architecture faculty. Together, the books make a convincing argument for architecture’s potential to incorporate technological developments into innovative formal, cultural, and urban solutions. As the last sentence of Tower and Office states: “to go beyond the limits of one’s experience, to open one’s mind to the unthinkable: such are the challenges facing the contemporary builder and creator.”

Shigeru Ban

MATILEA McQUAID

Phaidon Press, 2003

240 pages, color and b/w illustrations
$75.00 (cloth)

“Shigeru Ban is the future.” With this statement Frei Otto sums up his foreword to Matilda McQuaid’s book on the work of Shigeru Ban. He is absolutely correct. Ban has raised the technical and ethical bars of architecture, redefining the notion of a “critical practice.” McQuaid demonstrates this as she organizes the story of Ban’s career in a volume that is as straightforward and elegant as the thirty-two projects portrayed within.

Shigeru Ban began his Tokyo-based practice in 1985 after studying at SCI-ARC and graduating from The Cooper Union. In a relatively short time, he has attained an international reputation for projects built throughout the world. The work ranges from high-end residential, commercial, and civic buildings to his well-known disaster relief projects for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Ban merges the influence of Hedjuk’s mentorship with Japanese traditions in work that is both technically rigorous and deeply poetic. The book focuses on his particular interest in using unconventional structural materials to form buildings that allow for a physical connection between inside and outside space. He maintains this relationship between technical prowess and a clear aesthetic vision whether he is working on elite houses or temporary shelters. Throughout the book, McQuaid illustrates Ban’s ethical, technical, and aesthetic goals, describing the complex process through which he analyzes and solves problems toward what seem like inevitable results.

McQuaid organizes the book into categories (paper, wood, bamboo, prefabrication, and skin) as an illustration of the way Ban considers projects. At times the primary concern is an intensive study of the material deemed most appropriate, while at other times it is a quality of light and openness that is used quite frequently, but it seems to be more of what William McDonough would refer to as downsizing. However, Ban sees his responsibilities as an architect very broadly and speaks more about working for the needs of the public at large rather than focusing solely on environmental issues. Therefore, the topic of sustainability is subsumed into the synthetic decision-making process and...
Patience and Logistics

In Kafka’s Metamorphosis, just as Gregor Samsa’s life as a “monstrous vermin” begins to come to an end, the life of his family shifts into a new phase, one requiring “the exercise of patience, nothing but patience.” This “exercise of patience” releases the Samsas from the stifled bourgeois respectability that had governed their relations prior to Gregor’s inexorable transformation. In the midst of this terrifying, irreversible process, patience (the “calm abiding of time,” a desire to give way to the world’s intensities), engenders a new family configuration—father, mother, sister, vermin—that is horrifying, familiar, comic, and fleeting.

The notion that time has a plastic, material aspect—a quality familiar to the “exercise of patience”—is the logistic that organizes Sanford Kwinter’s collection of essays, Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture. And patience, as a particularly sensuous suspension of the desire to measure and manage time, is the necessary attitude for his reader, the paradoxical effect of a book that is both difficult and appealing. Simultaneously sprawling and condensed, Architectures of Time ranges over theoretical physics and biology, ontology and epistemology, art and architectural history, and literary theory. In contrast to this broad transdisciplinary approach, Kwinter’s focus is on works produced in a relatively compressed period, beginning with a discussion of the transformation of the object produced by Einstein’s special theory of relativity of 1905, Boccioni’s 1910 writings on futurist sculpture, and Sant’Elia’s 1914 project La Città nuova. He closes the book with a discussion of the “plane of immanence” constructed between the subject and its situation in Kafka’s work, particularly in the 1915 story Metamorphosis: Bergson’s notion of the durée, which was developed between 1896 and 1921, is Kwinter’s primary philosophical reference point, although it is substantially amplified and reinterpreted through a consideration of Foucault’s ideas about techniques and practices and Deleuze’s discussion of immanence. Architectures of Time does what theory should do for practice: it moves beyond interpretation and prescription to suggest models for positively engaging the real dynamics of modernity. If Gideon sculpted craddled time in Space, Time and Architecture (1941), Kwinter carefully avoids temporalizing space. He approaches the question of time as an inquiry into the organization of knowledge and examines aesthetic production from within the pat-
Architectures of Time is an epistemological inquiry that has critical significance for the development of new heuristics for design practice, if only for its determination to avoid both a passive acceptance of the forces of modernity and the distanced position of critique. In the three years following the publication of this book, we have seen a number of practitioners and theorists take up similar projects—ranging from discussions of “market” strategies to tactics derived from event-based geometries. Kwinter’s work directs a necessary exercise of patience to the formation of these endeavors, a patience given force by the historical intelligence of his analysis. The qualities of knowledge produced by Kwinter’s modernity beg for elaboration, particularly by those design practices with ambitions to engage movement, instability, and event. There is a large gap between the immanent power of time’s arrow and current models for design practice, a gap that could be narrowed by a more discrete examination of the projective intelligences produced in design processes. Kwinter leaves us with a procedural problem, one that falls, inevitably, out of his argument. Developing experimental design practices based on an understanding of the organizations of knowledge produced by modernity requires an account of the events—the qualitative transformations—that create those practices. Otherwise, the “immanent” viewpoint that distinguishes Kwinter’s praxis of event is lost. And so we are left at an edge, with Deleuze’s vertigo of philosophy, an almost paralyzing consciousness of our shifting positions. The emphasis, then, is tactical, on the exercise, the organization and implementation of force, the logistics of our experiments, or, as Kwinter puts it, “a working out of the real in the real” (p. 128).

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Dwellings: The Vernacular House Worldwide

PAUL OLIVER
Phaidon Press, 2003
288 pages, illustrated
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Dwelling is both process and artefact: it is the experience of living at a specific location, and it is the physical expression of doing so.

The design of housing that is accessible and responsive—economically, physically, culturally—is among our most urgent imperatives. The provision of shelter for those in need, in settings both rural and urban, poses a wide array of challenges that demand resources of both purse and conscience. This requires a balance between the abstract skills of the trained professional and the intimate knowledge of the self-builder, who, in the design of dwellings, gives material expression to cultural values, sense of identity, and connection to place.

This dual necessity makes the new edition of Paul Oliver’s Dwellings particularly welcome. A thoughtful, heartfelt, personal paean to the art and craft of vernacular construction, Dwellings: The Vernacular House Worldwide updates his earlier Dwellings: The House Across the World (The Phaidon Press, 1987). Following Oliver’s Encyclopaedia of the Vernacular Architecture of the World (Cambridge University Press, 1997), this new edition has been called Oliver’s postscript to that exhaustive multi-volume work (www.arplus.com/book/reviews/apd336c.htm).

Significantly, Oliver’s book looks not at “housing” but at “dwellings.” The distinction is important, as these terms are not used interchangeably. For
Oliver, trained as an anthropologist, a dwelling encompasses far more than the receptacle in which living takes place. It is also—and perhaps more importantly—a physical expression of one's geographic and cultural place in the world as we perceive and inhabit it. It is, in his words: “the bond between themselves [sic] and the place where they live” (p. 15).

Noting that many early modernist architects looked at vernacular construction with aesthetic admiration for its formal qualities but limited discernment of the forces that generated them, Oliver argues for “a profound understanding of the environments, needs and values of diverse cultures” (p. 14). Although, in his sincere admiration for the achievement that is vernacular dwelling, more than a trace of romantic yearning is occasionally discernable, and Oliver argues for a definition of the vernacular that is neither condescending nor romanticized. His book makes a case for the rediscovery of the accumulated wisdom of traditional methods of construction and uses of materials. It demonstrates the extent to which the study of dwelling is necessarily complex: interdisciplinary, nuanced, and inclusive of more than a rudimentary (and generic) understanding of structure, enclosure, and infrastructure.

Not intended to be exhaustive in its exposition of a decidedly vast subject, the book is organized thematically: “The Shelter of Nomads,” “Settling Down,” “True to Type,” “Built from the Ground,” “Resources that Grow,” “Coping with Climate,” “Spatial Relations,” “House and Cosmos,” “Decorated Dwellings,” “Going to Town,” and “Enduring Dwellings” are the titles of his chapters. Each successive theme is developed through the use of case studies, often from disparate parts of the world. The book includes extensive notes, a useful glossary, as well as a full bibliography and index. It is copiously illustrated with photographs, with many taken by the author and his wife. Maps, diagrams, sketches, building plans, and occasional sections round out the explanatory visual materials. Through these, the book positions the dwelling with respect to landscape, climate, topography, and available materials and technologies. It is argued, not comprehensively but certainly systematically, with regard to each theme and case study.

The text progresses through what appear to be arguments for successive formal determinisms based on materials, construction techniques, climatic conditions, and physical environment. Yet, for the most part, it steers clear of simplistic claims that any one of those factors might do more than contribute to the form of the vernacular dwelling. Oliver’s arguments are more complex, more subtle: they locate the dwelling within an intricate matrix of forces that include the roles played by ritual, gender, a broad range of traditions, and an articulation of the place of the individual, not only in the community, but in the larger cosmos.

Oliver argues against the claim that vernacular traditions are static constructs, demonstrating that evidence of gradual change is clearly apparent within them. He notes that “tradition establishes a broad matrix” within which individual interpretation and modulations can meet particular needs (p. 79).

He touches upon the distinction between design as an intellectualized abstracted activity, engaged at arm’s length by trained professionals, and the conditions of simultaneous awkwardness and discovery that accompany design at full scale for the self-builder.

The tome is remarkable in the texture and breadth of its narrative detail, as well as in the number of substantive questions it raises: about the examples used to illustrate larger themes and the themes themselves. Among the most important of these, Oliver points to the changing relationship between self-builders and professionals (he proposes positioning the architect as an “enabler”); the nature and limitations of transformation within vernacular tradition; the role, character, and implications of preservation strategies applied to vernacular dwelling; possible mechanisms for responding to growing urban life and globalization; even the difficulties of structuring an interdisciplinary study of dwelling; the common language for communication among disciplines that will facilitate enabling productive exchange.

This is an engagingly written, thought-provoking volume. It is an invaluable resource for all those involved in any aspect of the design and study of dwellings.