Eladio Dieste: Innovation in Structural Art
STANFORD ANDERSON, editor
Princeton Architectural Press, 2004
272 pages, illustrated
$60.00 (cloth)

News of Eladio Dieste’s achievements has finally reached the United States, in a collection of essays carefully edited by Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Stanford Anderson. Dieste (1917–2000) was one of the great engineers of modern times, in the same league as John Roebling (1806–1869), Gustave Eiffel (1832–1923), Robert Maillart (1872–1940), Eugène Freyssinet (1879–1962), Eduardo Torroja (1899–1961), and Felix Candela (1910–1997). Thanks to his design of a small number of sacred spaces, beginning with the Church of Atlántida in his native Uruguay in 1958, he has also come to be regarded with special reverence by Latin American and European architects.

Even though six monographs on Dieste have previously appeared in Bogotá, Buenos Aires, London, Milan, Munich, and Seville, his work has been little known in the United States. Anderson attributes this lack of attention to the fact that Dieste worked with brick rather than cutting-edge materials, but the provincialism of American architects and academicians should receive part of the blame. In recent times, the only Latin American architect whose work the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) deemed important enough to show was the Mexican Luis Barragán, in 1976. This happened thirty-three years after MoMA’s “discovery” of Oscar Niemeyer and modern Brazilian architecture in 1943, as part of a larger government interest in securing Brazil’s support during World War II. It has taken another generation since Barragán’s show for Dieste to be noticed in this country.

Apart from Anderson’s own contributions, focusing on Dieste as a humanist and an architect, most of the essays in this book make the case for his work to be considered engineering rather than architecture. Edward Allen writes of Rafael Guastavino’s and Dieste’s roles in revolutionizing masonry vaulting. John Ochsendorf examines Dieste’s work in the context of other great engineers’ innovations; Remo Pedreschi and Gonzalo Larrambarre focus on the formal and structural aspects of Dieste’s work. There is also a brief tribute by Lucio Cáceres, a former student and colleague. Other material in the book includes documentation of about thirty representative projects, appendices with theoretical essays by Dieste, a complete list of his works (with maps locating them), and an evaluation of the future of reinforced ceramics by Antonio Dieste (a structural engineer and one of Eladio’s eleven children).

Dieste invented his first reinforced ceramics structure in 1947 for the ceramic roof vaults of a summer house designed by Antonio Bonet, where Dieste wanted to eliminate the tie rods, continuous lateral supports, and heavy end arches normally required by such structures. From then on, he continued to explore the possibilities of brick, a cheap, traditional material that is widely available throughout Latin America. His major structural innovations were two types of vaults, which he called “self-carrying” and “Gaussian” (in reference to Carl Friedrich Gauss, the great German mathematician), and a type of perforated tower that required no formwork for its construction. Tour-de-force designs of the self-carrying vault structural type, like the storage sheds for Massaro Industries, with a vault cantilever of 54 feet at one end and a series of three vaults supported by a single row of central columns and cantilevers of 43 feet to either side, are well documented in this publication. He achieved the longest span of a series of Gaussian vaults with clerestories between them — 164 feet between side walls — in the replacement roof for the main warehouse in Montevideo’s docks. The tapering brick towers, used for agricultural and industrial purposes, consist of vertical ribs of reinforced brick connected through staggered, spiraling horizontal brick ribs, also reinforced. The slots left between accommodate the tapering so the vertical ribs do not change their width from top to bottom, and allow the insertion of scaffolding beams for the bricklayers’ platform, which moves up with each new course of horizontal ribs. Thus formwork and extensive scaffolding are eliminated while the perforations reduce the wind load and express the tower’s slenderness, extraordinary for brick: the Maldonado TV tower is 197-feet high and only 11.5 feet in diameter at its base. The relation between form and structure is obvious in Dieste’s work. As Pedreschi and Larrambarre state: “The roofs and walls of Dieste’s buildings are folded where they need to be folded. The long cantilevers of his roofs project because their form allows them to” (p. 138). The form is the source of stability. Ochsendorf points out that all great engineers succeeded because they were able to produce structures at a lesser cost than their competitors, and Dieste was no exception. Like Eiffel, Maillart, and Roebling, Dieste focused on a single material, mastering and
extending its construction process, directing the work on the site, and designing methods appropriate to the local conditions. Design and construction were never disconnected in their practices. However, methods and materials that rely on local expertise are always shunned by large construction companies in industrialized countries, and are not taught in engineering schools. Thus the lessons of Dieste’s work, including the considerable advantages of brick over concrete in thin shell construction he discovered, remain outside the commercial production of structures in most countries, even as he proved the economy of reinforced ceramics in large-scale projects.

In 1956 he and his engineering classmate Eugenio Montañez (1916–2001) established the firm Dieste y Montañez, S.A., which built millions of square feet of covered areas for bus stations, warehouses, and silos, many of which are awe-inspiring because of their extension and height. However Dieste is remembered by architects for two modest but extraordinary churches, the Church of Christ the Worker in the outskirts of Atlántida (1958–1960), for a congregation of poor agricultural workers, and the church of St. Peter in Durazno (1969–1971), a remodeling project that replaced the church’s nave and roof after its destruction by fire. In both cases, brick is the finish in all surfaces, and the glowing light within is a function of the material. In Atlántida, walls and roof are formed by curved surfaces that meet with extraordinary precision; in Durazno, there are no columns to support the central bay of the basilican plan, a feat made possible by treating the folded plates of walls and roof as thin (but very deep) beams spanning the entire length of the church. Yet these are serene, not dazzling, spaces, in spite of the obvious structural brilliance.

Anderson’s essay attributes this serenity to Dieste’s humanist ethics and spiritual devotion, an explanation that ignores Dieste’s vigorous advocacy of “appropriate and appropriated modernity,” a debate that was central to architectural culture in Latin America throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Anderson’s approach thus places Dieste’s work in an imagined timeless tradition, lifting it from a context where dynamic forces shape the world anew.

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Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape
MOHSEN MOSTAFAVI and CIRO NAJLE, Editors
Architectural Association, 2003
176 pages, illustrated
$59.69 (cloth)

Delta Primer: A Field Guide to the California Delta
JANE WOLFF
William Stout Publishers, 2003
195 pages, illustrated
$29.95 (paper)

Field over object, time over space, operation over composition, dynamic over static, performance over appearance, diagram over picture—everyone with the most casual interest in landscape and its associative practices will recognize these pairings as fundamental to its current sensibility. So it comes as no surprise that two recent books, Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape and Delta Primer: A Field Guide to the California Delta, despite their differences, each reiterate these pervasive concepts. Both books provide cohesive frameworks that advance calibrated arguments and diverse strategies regarding two preoccupations of the landscape field today: form making in an environment organized more by commerce than design, and the role of representation—graphic and political—in deciding landscape futures.

As a term and an emerging discipline, landscape urbanism hovers between the familiar and the opaque. Its discourse has long been a part of landscape architecture, with Frederick Law Olmsted’s work on the Back Bay Fens a comprehensive example. In this way, landscape urbanism includes work that is landscape in the traditional sense, with its medium and techniques, as well as work that is an analog to it, that grows and changes over time. At this point, the characteristics for landscape urbanism are so broad they include much of contemporary work in architecture, landscape, and urbanism, and as such, they are of questionable use.

Landscape Urbanism, edited by Mohsen
Mostafavi and Ciro Najle, offers more specific parameters that shape but still refrain from defining this emerging discipline. Engaging both landscape and architectural concerns, this book convincingly presents landscape urbanism as a mode of operation that informs design approaches and techniques (as opposed to objects) in a way that casts both design theorist Jeff Kipnis and French landscape architect Michel Desvigne as landscape urbanists. In doing so, it opens up new territories for those who may have a biased sense of landscape urbanism that associate it with both goodness and greenness.

As readers navigate the book, landscape urbanism unfolds as a spectrum of possibility through six sections: “Framework,” “Medium,” “System,” “Prototype,” “Plan,” and “Context,” which are illuminated through student work from the Architectural Association, essays, and mostly unbuilt design work. Although diverse, these essays and projects advance a design approach that is separate from an aesthetic of work, where the landscape develops as a product of its transformative processes and techniques and is concerned less with form than with its effects.

This ambition is not new, but the refreshing variety of work that it produces and is presented in Landscape Urbanism is. Landscape architect James Corner’s strategies to “put materials to work” (p. 61) in Freshkills’s successional planting strategy conceptually aligns with the preoccupations of architects Jesse Reiser and Nanako Umemoto, who characterize their work as a concern with the way that “material computes itself” (p. 106). Corner, who seems weary of what he calls “the lust for indeterminacy” (p. 59), advances landscape urbanism’s specific characteristics: horizontality, infrastructure, processes, ecology, and techniques, the last comprised of a toolbox for a project’s development. These projects, like most of those featured in the book, suggest that the avoidance of static representations — functional, typological, and historical — is the hallmark of the landscape urbanist’s ambition.

The difficulty of these ambitions is evident in the tension between the essays and the student projects. In a book that advocates landscape’s performative logics, it is surprising to see work that verges on pictures of organizations, obsessed by characteristics of the horizontal. These diagrammatic plans are programmatic and formal representations, less operative than the projective diagrams advanced by design critics Robert Somol and Stan Allen. There are too few convincing examples of the latter, and their lack in Landscape Urbanism is disappointing.

The landscape urbanist project as presented in this book is for the most part convincing. At times, though, the characteristics of this emerging discipline seem stretched too far. When, for instance, ecology serves simply as an analog for a surface strategy without also informing the detailed biological and ecological development of the landscape, one is left wondering if landscape urbanism is a Trojan horse for the advancement of new formal concerns.

If Landscape Urbanism condenses disparate urban and landscape practices, Jane Wolff’s Delta Primer: A Field Guide to the California Delta operates in the realm of representation, suggesting strategies for negotiating complex and conflicting values for the future of a contested eco-region of California — a landscape that Wolff reads as, simultaneously, a garden, a wilderness, a machine, and a toy.

The concept for the Delta Primer responds to the projection that California’s population could reach sixty million by 2040, and Wolff tells us that it is a political tool. As a means of analysis and action, it is conceived to manage the conflicting forces that shape the region — agriculture, development, environmentalism, and the demand for water — and their attendant constituencies. Wolff’s work springs from her conviction that raising consciousness is the first step toward effecting change and offers her book as a model for negotiating the politics of growth.

For Wolff, this ambition to mobilize possibilities for a future landscape is contingent on making visible the region’s complexity, and she does this by telling stories. The book is structured by photos, essays, and a glossary that are all attempts to do so, but Wolff’s “playing card map” — a map of the region scored into sixty rectangles, fifty-two of which are storyboards on one side with a map segment on the other — is the notable invention. The potential effects of conflating the system of a deck of cards with the spatial information of a map places this publication in a tradition of those concerned with the power of landscape representation.

Wolff’s juxtapositions of map segments and drawings (either side by side in the book, or front to back on the map) recall another publication that focused on the role of landscape representation for raising consciousness and prompting action. James Corner and Alex Maclean’s Taking Measures across the American Landscape (Yale University Press, 1996) juxtaposed aerial photographs with what Corner calls “map-drawings,” the latter with the intention of making visible latent information about how these
landscapes work. Although the messages of the map-drawings are often difficult to decipher, the intention is that information, which is lacking in scenic photographs, will sponsor alternative landscape strategies that challenge pictorial sensibilities and practices. In this way, seeing landscape is linked to understanding it, valuing it, and acting upon it.

To this end, Wolff’s metaphor of a card game is a strong yet problematic way to make the stories accessible and equally valued. Her playing card map, like Corner’s map-drawings, mobilizes a variety of techniques to display information about an artifact, practice, or process and its relationship to a place. Each card face is made up of a selection of plans, sections, diagrams, charts, or perspective drawings, sometimes juxtaposed at different scales, in order to depict the most information possible. We’ve seen these strategies before. The choice of freehand drawings over a variety of digital techniques may represent the stories “in ways that most people understand” (p. 44), but at times appears naive and, given each drawing’s reliance on lengthy descriptions, unnecessarily pedestrian.

Additionally, the ranking of stories in a suit where face value is based solely on scale—the bigger the story the higher its value in cards—proves problematic. Whereas moving a potato headquarters is assigned a face value of “two,” suburban appliances as indexes of water consumption is the “king.” Disassociating a king from power, or card value from the value of the tale being told, is difficult.

To this end, Wolff’s metaphor of a card game for imagining the California Delta’s future is both ingenious and contrived. It does offer readers, and potentially constituents, a way to represent, in cards and therefore politics, the seemingly trivial and topical side by side. It is a smart, optimistic, and engaging way for everyone to put their hands on the table, making visible diverse and conflicting values that need to be negotiated. But negotiation, like card playing, is about luck as well as skill, and there is always someone in these processes holding the better cards.

It is no news that the discipline of landscape has enjoyed a conceptual shoring up over the last decade. At a time when this material has become pervasive in architecture schools, in endless variation, these particular books promise to develop and refine landscape discourse, not simply restate what has already been said.

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Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living
MARY McLEOD, editor

Harry N. Abrams, in association with the Architectural League of New York, 2003
304 pages, b/w & color illustrations
$65 (cloth)

Charlotte Perriand: A Life of Creation
CHARLOTTE PERRIAND

Monacelli Press, 2003
400 pages, illustrated
$40 (cloth)

Charlotte Perriand is the young woman with her face turned away. In the iconic photo that appears in many texts on Modern Architecture she is reclined in a tubular steel and leather chaise longue, which carries her name next to that of Le Corbusier. Perriand maintained this enigmatic position until the 1980s when a general interest in feminism sparked investigation of her work. Finally, twenty years later, five years after she died at the age of ninety-five, two books on her life as a designer have reached publication. Mary McLeod offers a collection of insightful essays complemented by large and well-reproduced images, which place Perriand’s work within the larger movements of the time. In addition, a translation of Perriand’s autobiography presents her own narrative of experiences that marked her life.

McLeod was among the first to bring scholarly attention to Perriand. In this volume, Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living, her thoughtful work as editor reflects Perriand’s approach to both collaboration and design. The book presents coordinated research from a number of authors in pursuit of themes that extend well beyond a single designer’s oeuvre. McLeod notes that Perriand did not leave a huge quantity of work, but managed to place herself at the heart of critical controversies that both defined and disputed modernism. Her work offers insight into several of the major cultural phenomena of the twentieth century: the definition of a modern role for women, the influence of the communist/socialist Popular Front in France, the encounter between modern western design and traditional crafts in Japan, and a negotiation between machine age technology and a movement back to the land. Per-
Perriand contributed to each discussion in spirited works of design that articulated a clear position. Memories recorded in her autobiography, *A Life of Creation*, people the events with friends, circumstances, and details of the design tasks as she saw them. Perriand’s narrative is a good read. Many of the characters are familiar and the historical circumstances real. At times, the story is gripping. For example, she matter-of-factly tells of her harrowing escape from Indochina in 1945 with her infant daughter, hiding from looters while the American air force bombed Saigon.

Perriand’s contribution to design that remains most relevant may be her consideration of how domestic objects shape the habits of daily life. Several of the essays in McLeod’s volume trace her maturing sensibilities. McLeod’s own essay recounts Perriand’s early years in Le Corbusier’s office, where she worked with Pierre Jeanneret to develop “domestic equipment.” When she arrived, Perriand was already recognized as an independent designer, known for light-hearted, modern interiors that freed men and women from the strictures of traditional gendered spaces. Together, Perriand, Jeanneret, and Le Corbusier designed furniture to occupy modern houses as agile, even athletic figures in an expansive ground. They integrated compact kitchens into salons so a host could serve food while talking to guests, his or her movements choreographed in steel and chrome. These kitchens, however, imply that the real work of preparing food is done elsewhere, by others. In the ten years she worked for Le Corbusier, Perriand increasingly sympathized with the others, ordinary people working with objects in simple circumstances. In an essay entitled “Lessons from Objects,” Joan Ockman relates that Perriand would arrive in Le Corbusier’s atelier every day with a new photo or thing that she always called “adorable.” Her finds ranged from vernacular and handmade objects, to manufactured articles and kitsch, some of which found places in her interiors. For example, a furniture installation of 1931 included brightly colored synthetic tourist rugs with images of lions and leopards.

Her concerns, like many of her contemporaries, coalesced into support for the socialist ideals of the Popular Front political party in France. Her political stance was reinforced by two trips to Soviet Moscow in the early 1930s that she details in her autobiography. Finally in 1937, Perriand left Le Corbusier’s office no longer able to condone his single-minded goals. Working in his atelier “was like stepping into a monastery — the rules had to be obeyed” (*A Life of Creation*, p. 101). In the McLeod volume, Danilo Udovicki- Selb’s essay, “C’étais dans l’air du temps: Charlotte Perriand and the Popular Front,” offers a glimpse of how the movement catalyzed the avant-garde and redefined modern art and design toward a social purpose. Perriand and some of her colleagues expressed their sentiments in a photomontage depicting the suffering of the poor of Paris that they displayed at an annual exhibition of domestic arts. This pointed piece, next to the usual department store displays of luxury furniture evoked strong response in an already heated political atmosphere that ultimately destroyed the Popular Front.

In 1940, Perriand accepted a position in Japan as a design consultant to develop furniture for export that could maintain Japanese traditional crafts. She left Paris on the very day that German troops invaded the city. Yasushi Zenno’s essay reads the cultural tensions implicit in her task as a representative of the West in an atmosphere of rising nationalism. This analysis coupled with her autobiographical account reveals a thinly veiled contest over cultural dominance, measured in design. Who was appropriating forms from whom? Perriand’s bamboo interpretation of the chaise longue, shown on the cover of McLeod’s book, was criticized as a naive reduction of Japanese identity to a common material. At the same time, her host and colleague from Le Corbusier’s office, Junzo Sakakura, infused modern ideas into Japanese architecture toward a vital synthesis. In 1941, Perriand left Japan abruptly on the eve of its attack on Pearl Harbor.

Unable to return to an occupied Paris, she spent World War II in French Indochina, now Vietnam, married a military officer, and bore a child. On her return home after the war, Perriand increasingly spent time in the mountain provinces of France to design a series of ski lodges for vacationing families. Her work there marks a confluence of several strains from her past. The ski lodges catered to middle-class families on vacation, vacations legislated by the Popular Front. Rooms had to be small and efficient, reflecting provincial habits of simple wooden furniture made for large families at table.

Perriand’s autobiography gives us moments of her life with the people, places, and events that ren-
der them human. McLeod’s collection of essays gives us Perriand’s work, placed in a social, political, and artistic context that reveals its meaning. They are part of a broad reassessment of modern architecture that is slowly replacing the hoary heroic narrative with the open-ended decisions and compromises made by thoughtful people in challenging circumstances. Together these two books introduce us to the woman in the chaise longue, they show us the grace of her thought through design, and they allow her to speak.

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Sustainability on Campus: Stories and Strategies for Change
PEGGY BARLETT and GEOFFREY CHASE, Editors

The MIT Press, 2004
344 pages, illustrated
$23.95 (paper)

Depending on your school you may or may not be surprised to learn that during the 1990s a determined and diverse group of our colleagues, students, staff, and administrators began the slow process of bringing sustainable practices and concerns to our campuses.

Origins of such action lie within the expansion of environmental education following the energy crises of 1974. By 1989 campus activism yielded the first comprehensive campus environmental audit at the University of California, Los Angeles. The following year, university leaders adopted the Talloires Declaration, recognizing the role of universities in environmental “education, research, and policy formulation” (p. 8). Since then organizations like Second Nature, University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, Campus Ecology, and publications like Sustainability on Campus: Stories and Strategies for Change have maintained the momentum. They provide guidance, networking, seminars, and information for campus environmental action such as: curricular development, building design, community outreach, system-wide initiative, and the development of stewardship guidelines.

The sixteen narratives collected in this volume document this recent history. They are personal stories told by those engaged in environmental action “on the ground.” The editors’ purpose is twofold: first, to facilitate attempts to bring sustainable practices to academic institutions by providing detailed and personal examples of success, failure, and struggle, and second, to further position academia as a “critical leverage point for change” (p. 5).

Since most of the narratives are well written and earnest, the volume appears to achieve the first goal. Each essay includes a statement defining sustainability and an account of specific experiences from initiating campus recycling programs to the construction of “green” campus architecture. Yet, even the best accounts are hampered by the singular voice of the advocates for change. Despite the social nature of their actions we are deprived of hearing from those with competing interests or intentions who may have played a key role in the project’s success or failure. A case study approach might have avoided this result and fostered a more rigorous and vital understanding of sustainability as a social process.

The latter more ethereal goal is better served. The intimacy of the stories conspire to convince the reader of his or her own responsibility to act in one way or another as either activist or supporter. Further, they spark curiosity about what may be going on at one’s own institution. Look around; you may be surprised.

The book’s most valuable contribution, particularly for readers of JAE, emerges outside the intentions of the editors: the positioning of sustainability as a social, rather than a technological discourse. Many of the authors—like most architects—approach sustainability as the application of techniques (gray water recycling) and/or technologies (solar panels). These stories, however, reveal sustainability to be primarily a social process achieved through negotiation, participation, and the adaptation of local practices. It reinforces the idea of sustainability as a social construction, in which broadly applicable concepts are fully realized when localized.

Three prominent themes emerge from the narratives to reinforce the important issue of social process. In most, the themes of local place and direct engagement in local conditions were key. Although many of the authors intended similar improvement in the behavior and environmental quality of their uni-
versities, every process and end result was socially and physically distinct to that institution. More importantly, the specific geography of places often played a role in galvanizing action and support for protection and improvement. In Peggy Barlett’s account, the threat of road construction through the Baker Woods, a beloved local landscape, served as the catalyst for environmental action at Emory University.

Most of the activism described was initiated and sustained by individual faculty or students outside of their normal responsibilities. Even in cases where upper-level support or outside funding was forthcoming, grassroots activism and coalition building proved central to success. Debra Rowe’s excellent, almost Machiavellian narrative, gives an insider’s view of administrative political action. While Audrey Chang helpfully presents competing styles of activism: a slow, thorough, patient, and successful building of support upward through administrative levels, versus a short-lived, Greenpeace-supported, unsuccessful protest campaign.

Readers familiar with academia will not find the third theme, institutional resistance, a surprise. The impediments faced in fostering campus environmental action are identical to those faced by any agenda aimed at change: new ideas are greeted with skepticism, financial support is scarce, and bureaucratic review time-consuming. The message that emerges most clearly is that the key to success, especially with regard to adoption of sustainable concepts and practices, is attaining and sustaining the support of upper administrators—the process of education and negotiation.

Among good narratives by David Orr, Michael Edelstein, and Nan Jenks-Jay the best contribution is that the book functions like the social processes it documents. Its many voices provide inspiration. Its links, references, and examples help build a community. However, the editors’ organization and summary introduction, while helpful, break no new ground. The reliance on personal narratives remains the book’s primary strength and greatest weakness.

While these stories should challenge every reader to bring sustainability to their own campus, they remain one-sided and less helpful than intended. At the very least, though, they let you know that you are not alone.

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Ephemeral City: Cite Looks at Houston
BARRIE SCARDINO, WILLIAM F. STERN, and BRUCE C. WEBB, Editors
University of Texas Press, 2003
368 pages, illustrated
$35.00 (cloth)

In 1982, after a period of explosive, yet protracted growth, Houston was unknowingly teetering on the brink of a quick, spectacular fall. The city that counted approximately 380,000 residents in 1940 had more than quadrupled to approximately 1.6 million people in forty years—from a combination of migration, immigration, aggressive annexation by metropolitan government, and, truly, the development of affordable air conditioning—and by 1982 encompassed almost 600 square miles (p. ix). (See http://houstonhistory.com/decades/history51.htm and www.ci.houston.tx.us/departme/planning/planning_dev_web/long_range/demographics/Ann_%20Est_City.htm.) But seemingly almost overnight, as a result of the crash of the oil industry—and by extension, the real estate industry—Houston lost 160,000 jobs in fifteen months, creating a patchwork of abandoned suburban tract houses, cleared inner-city parcels, and “see-through” office towers (p. 69). (For an account of the relationship between real estate and architecture in Texas in the 1980s and the origin of the term “see-through buildings,” see Joel Warren Barna, The See-Through Years, Rice University Press, 1992.) This boom, bust, and rebuild cycle, combined with a plenitude of land, a lack of limiting geographic features, and deeply held political and economic beliefs, has shaped Houston into the constantly shifting city it is today.

On the cusp of that shift from boom to bust, the journal Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston debuted in an attempt to foster thoughtful urban and architectural criticism in and for a city that had none. That such an initiative has not only lasted, but has also thrived, is testament to the importance of such a publication about Houston, and, by extension, about places like Houston. In “The Right to the City” (in Architecture Culture, 1943–1968, edited by Joan Ockman, Rizzoli, 1993), Henri Lefebvre asks: “Why not counter the idea of the eternal city with ephemeral cities, the fixed center with multiple moving centers?” (p. 433). Just as Rome epitomizes the “eternal” qualities of the traditional city, Houston represents the “ephemeral”
qualities of the contemporary American city: it is dynamic, temporal, and mobile, unburdened by its history, and focused on its future. While some might consider Houston to be an extreme example of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American urbanism, it is hardly unusual; consider Atlanta, or Jacksonville, or Phoenix. And though conventional urban criticism may continue to deride Houston as an example of everything wrong with the contemporary city, the simple fact is that cities like Houston — and suburban areas of cities quite unlike Houston — are where increasing numbers of Americans are choosing to live; as such, they demand our critical attention. (See http://www.citymayors.com/gratis/uscities_growth.html. Nine of the top-ten fastest growing cities in the United States since 2000 are nontraditional, highly suburbanized cities.)

Ephemeral City: Cite Looks at Houston — a consistently outstanding anthology of essays from the past twenty years of Cite — opens with a disclaimer: “From the beginning, Cite has tried to present Houston more in terms of critical observations than as an object of theoretical speculation” (p. 3). Cite’s longevity is in large part due to its excellent, provocative writing and criticism on a wide range of topics, from the everyday urbanism of mobile taquerias, to Houston’s recent implementation of light rail. Equally important is its accessibility; this is a journal aimed at both the profession and the public. Accordingly, it is a body of writing that not only focuses on lucid, critical thinking, but also goes beyond a critique of the formalized architectural object, instead explicating the historical, economic, political, and cultural influences on urbanism and architecture.

Believing that “order should not precede essence” (p. x), the editors have selected essays from the past twenty years that are most representative of these themes: “Idea of the City,” “Places of the City,” and “Buildings of the City.” “Places of the City” explores unique areas both known and under-known within the city, while “Buildings of the City” makes manifest the myriad opportunities afforded architects as a result of Houston’s remarkable growth. Although these sections address more conventional urban and architectural topics — such as the buildings and urban impact of the Museum District, the influence of Mies van der Rohe in Houston, and the design of the Houston Astros’ new downtown baseball stadium — they also work to uncover the nonarchitectural forces acting on the architectural result.

It is “Idea of the City” that is the most compelling section, however, as its essays establish a cohesive, comprehensible historical and cultural framework with which to understand the ever-changing physical character of this fascinating, yet often inscrutable, city. This is where broader issues that define and shape Houston are explored, including the overwhelming lack of traditional public space, the importance of mobility and a subsequent dominance of freeways, the lack of limiting geography and the ever-expanding suburbs, and the focus on privatized planning interests and a parallel antipathy to zoning. Underlying many of the essays are the powerful political and economic currents that inform the city.

In particular, the stridently pro-business tendencies of Houston are repeatedly referenced in individual essays throughout the book. Unfortunately, neither the economic framework, nor a concurrent political structure, are ever fully explained or put into context. This would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of Houston’s unique development environment, which is not simply predicated on private property value, as one might assume from the emphasis on the economic. Its origin is in private property rights — land-ownership and self-government as expressions of Jeffersonian democracy — and a tradition of individualism and a historic distrust of government — exemplified by things like two-year terms and three-term limits for mayor.

Overall, this is an outstanding collection of essays, intelligently chosen and organized, well written and accessible, and compelling in its search for meaning in the “ephemeral” American city that Houston epitomizes so well. For urbanists and educators in particular, this anthology serves as a model of extended critical observation and analysis of potential (sub)urban strategies and points to the future of urban work in many cities.

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Zoomscape: Architecture in Motion and Media
MITCHELL SCHWARZER

Princeton Architectural Press, 2004
307 pages
$29.95 (paper)

Photographs and films of architecture rarely acknowledge the many fictions underlying their pretense to depict the built environment in its actuality. The images of pristine homes and working environments that fill the pages of books and magazines typically omit human beings. Movement and flux, intrinsic to the city and limitless in their variations, can only be hinted at by capturing a small temporal sample through still and moving images. What it means to inhabit a space, from its corporeal and tactile dimensions, to its construction flaws, commonly eludes visual representation. No less fictional is the presumption that we perceive architecture in a state of rest, when more often than not we are ambulatory, moving on foot or traveling in automobiles, trains, airplanes.

Restoring this mobility to the architectural observer constitutes a major goal of Mitchell Schwarzer’s Zoomscape: Architecture in Motion and Media. In six gracefully written chapters on the railroad, automobile, airplane, photography, film, and television, Schwarzer argues for the centrality of these technologies as mediations that have forever changed our experience of built form. He demonstrates the ubiquity of what he calls the “zoomscape,” “a largely optical mode characterized by
speed and surface” (p. 12) that he associates with mechanized transportation and the camera, a “moving or imagistic transformation of architecture from site to flow and from object to event” (p. 26). More than simply the operation of a zoom lens (an optical device that alters neither distance nor movement between the perceiver and the object), the zoomscape is a mode of perception embodied in such operations as panning, tracking, editing, and bird’s-eye views.

Schwarzer takes the everyday environment as his object of investigation and approaches it not as a formal or linguistic system but as a series of physical movements and images from which it has become practically inseparable. Paraphrasing Immanuel Kant, one might claim that for Schwarzer there is no architecture “in itself,” just architecture “for us,” as it exists in experience and always already shaped by the automobile windshield, the window from the train compartment, photographs, and motion pictures. Relentlessly descriptive and nuanced in its observations, Zoomscape takes its place in a long tradition of phenomenological investigations of architecture but replaces the disembodied transcendental subject of philosophers and an earlier generation of architectural theorists with a media savvy contemporary observer who encounters architecture driving on the freeway, seated in the multiplex, or viewing The Sopranos in a suburban living room. (For a paradigmatic work in this tradition, see Christian Norberg Schulz, Existence, Space, and Architecture, Praeger, 1971.)

To illustrate this thesis Schwarzer reveals the zoomscape in operation, explicating the impact of the railroad upon spatial perception that culminates in a brilliant reading of the decaying industrial landscapes visible through the windows of most American commuter trains and their relation to postwar modernism. In what for me was the book’s strongest chapter, the discussion of the airplane, he investigates the reception of aerial photographs by German architects and art historians of the 1920s such as Hans Schmidt and Fritz Wichert and notes how such images ushered in new urban and spatial conceptions. No less impressive is the range of literary, artistic, and cinematic references to how architecture has been depicted in the modern world. If such a profusion of citations occasionally does read like a catalog, as in the book’s final chapter on television (redeemed by a fascinating discussion of the Naked City television series), the relative independence of the six chapters allows for, perhaps even encourages, the reader to dip in and sample them out of sequence, as if Schwarzer had emulated the very perceptual discontinuity of the zoomscape as a stylistic principle.

Informing his argument is a recognition that architecture has become increasingly intertwined with visual observation. While acknowledging the “paradoxical situation” that “zoomscapes encourage optical mobility and hamper physical mobility” (p. 23), Schwarzer begs the question of the growing inextricability of the built environment from vision, the “ocularcentrism” that thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault understand as a signal tendency in the evolution of western rationality. (On this intellectual tradition, see Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought, University of California Press, 1993, and Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision, edited by David Michael Levin, University of California Press, 1993.) Concluding his book by observing that “Zoomscapes have pushed our vision toward a state of almost perpetual transformation. Zoomscapes have estranged and enlightened our understanding of architecture” (p. 305), he remains silent on the ways in which the culture of images may well have impoverished architecture. For the surveillance possibilities afforded by optical transparency and Foucault’s understanding of panopticism, if not the very presumption that architectural experience can be wholly encompassed by the sense of sight, pose challenges to Schwarzer’s largely sanguine account.

Greater treatment of digital technology (conspicuously absent in his discussion of the digitally manipulated photographs of Andreas Gursky) might have encouraged Schwarzer to reflect on the trade-offs that accompany the transformation of spatial and bodily experience into visual images. A consideration of the work by contemporary practitioners such as Peter Zumthor and Herzog & de Meuron, who value the tactility of architecture, could also have led in this direction. Not all architecture or perceptual modes have embraced the logic of the zoomscape, and a discussion of those that have resisted its pull would probably reveal a different account of modernity, less monolithic and technologically driven, than that outlined in this nonetheless rewarding book.

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