The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction

Garry Stevens
MIT Press, 1998
253 pp., 45 illustrations
$35 (cloth)

The Favored Circle offers profound insights into the world of architectural practice and education. Garry Stevens lucidly reveals the inequitable social structure and elitist culture endemic to the field. The author argues that architects have been reduced to cultural commodities and they help to reproduce their socioeconomic status.

The book carries the reader from this theoretical foundation to observations within the profession and architectural education. Stevens discusses past sociological studies on these subjects and relates architecture to a theoretical discussion on cultural capital. He then investigates how the architectural profession has historically evolved as an institutional structure that produces architects and gives them social status. Finally, he illustrates how architectural education has played a role in the reproduction and furtherance of social class in the profession.

Stevens attacks the notion of absolute aesthetics: Beauty is relative, a proposition that philosophers and other disciplines concluded long ago. But if aesthetic principles are relative, the relative fame of architects must reside on grounds other than individual genius. Stevens demonstrates that, while architectural culture purports to be based on professional expertise, what we have actually is a field of power relationships that have social, cultural, and economic consequences.

Stevens’s analysis relies heavily on the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu, who is best known for his work on symbolic capital. Stevens relates four facets of this concept to the architectural profession. Institutionalized cultural capital is the educational attainments and academic qualifications. Objectified capital is the buildings they create. Social capital involves the durable networks of people on whom they can rely for support. Finally, embodied capital “. . . exists within individuals, as attitudes, tastes, preferences, and behaviors” (p. 63). These forms of symbolic capital differ from economic capital. Architects may be relatively poor in economic capital, but they can sustain their class status through symbolic capital.

Stevens studies architecture as a field, avoiding the conception of architecture as an art, science, or a profession. This conceptual shift enables him to situate architecture in a broader social system of analysis and to demonstrate how the field creates and reproduces a class system through symbolic capital. One cleavage is between those who are associated with the consecrated elite and those who produce the remaining but substantial bulk of built work. The elite are important, because “. . . the field of architecture is responsible for producing those parts of the built environment that the dominant classes use to justify their domination of the social order” (p. 85). Thus, the field of architecture helps to construct and to perpetuate a social class system within and external to its existence.

With this theoretical structure Stevens illustrates how the field of architecture has created a class system within practice and educational institutions. The fame or a designer or academic, along with the coterie of apprentices, is a kind of social power that boosts symbolic capital. Likewise, students, who come from upper-class families, are well traveled, and have elite tastes, are more likely to succeed than those who do not. This student elite prefers courses that reinforce their personal status and acquired tastes. Stevens notes (p. 197): “When students protest that courses are not relevant, quite often they are simply protesting courses whose examination prevents them from displaying their cultivation. . . . If we were to construct a hierarchy of curricular prestige it would correspond more or less to the degree to which the course can utilize the student’s cultural capital. Design, history, and theory would be at the top, and environmental science, structures, and building services at the bottom.”

Stevens then analyzes the historic patterns of how an architectural elite is produced relative to the institutional frameworks that support it. Relying on the MacMillan Encyclopedia of Architects, he constructs a four-tier scale of importance and uses it to quantify professional fame. He finds that the number of eminent architects remains small. In general, there is only so much fame to go around. When one captures the public’s attention, others have difficulty competing for the fixed allotment of assigned fame. Yet, change occurs. New movements emerge, and a new coterie captures the fame previously retained by an older generation.

With the decline of apprenticeships, universities have come to play a key role in producing architects. Stevens observes that the marketplace has traditionally controlled supply and demand, but schools of architecture now produce potential architects independent of market needs in order to sustain themselves as institutions. Stevens maintains that these schools filter out socially disadvantaged students, rewarding instead those who have higher levels of sym-
bolic capital. Even with this filtering, graduation rates are higher than in the past, but the number of eminent architects has not increased. As a result, an increasing number are competing for a constant level of symbolic capital related to fame. Stevens argues bluntly that this growing subordinate class supports and abets the perpetuation of the elite.

Stevens’s critique is revealing. All architectural educators should read The Favored Circle to understand how they are part of an institutional structure that produces social class. Ultimately, social class is unavoidable, but Stevens will make readers question how they can possibly avoid educational strategies that create inequitable conditions.

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Note

1. Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

Architecture Theory since 1968
Edited by K. Michael Hays
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824 pp., 70 illustrations
$35.00

The past few years have seen the publication of a spate of anthologies on architectural theory, including Joan Ockman’s Architecture Culture 1943–1968, Kate Nesbitt’s Theorizing A New Agenda for Architecture, and my own Rethinking Architecture. Michael Hays has now made a significant contribution to this collection with a selection of forty-seven articles, six of which are reworked or translated into English for the first time. What is remarkable about all these anthologies is the fact that there is very little overlap between them. By definition this new collection contains nothing included in Ockman’s collection, and in total there are only eight articles that can also be found in the two other volumes. Indeed, the collections appear to compliment each other. What results, then, is a form of dialogue, in which each volume sets up its own internal tensions, but so too a series of debates with the other volumes. Hays’s book occupies a middle ground between Nesbitt’s and my own, incorporating articles from a range of thinkers from both inside and outside the discipline of architecture, but, like Ockman’s, it is distinctly left-wing in terms of its political trajectory.

Architecture Theory since 1968 is a follow-up to Ockman’s earlier volume and belongs to the same series of Columbia Documents in Architecture. Like Ockman, Hays arranges the articles in strict chronological order. And, so too, he gives the volume a strong political bias. But that is where the similarities end. As the title suggests, the volume is unashamedly theoretical. Architectural theory, according to Hays, “has all but subsumed architecture culture. Since 1968 architecture has been subjected to self-conscious theoretical procedures such that traditional criticism and historiography have been eclipsed by theory.” Hays charts the continued rise of theory, its successes and failures, as part of the history of architecture itself. And as one might expect, Hays’s own introductions to the individual articles are decidedly dense pieces of theoretical writing. With Hays, theory is never easy.

Hays does a great service in bringing to light a number of hitherto less well-known articles, including not only those translated here for the first time, such as one particularly sparkling essay by Bernard Huet, but previously inaccessible ones such as Kenneth Frampton’s essay on Hannah Arendt, originally published in a specialist volume on her work. But it is the political edge to many of the pieces that gives the volume its force. In an often complacent architectural culture, the volume attempts to reignite a sense of political awareness. Particularly enjoyable is the platform that Hays gives to the Venetian School of Manfredo Tafuri, Massimo Cacciari, and others. Indeed it is the European pieces included in the collection that often prove the most stimulating and politically engaged.

This is not a book for the faint-hearted. None of the contents could be described as lightweight. It is a true theorist’s volume on architectural theory, with a real sense of gravitas. The result is an extremely useful collection of essays. This is not to say that the volume is without fault. Indeed some may question the opaqueness of Hays’s introductions, or the restrictive range of the articles that seems to operate almost exclusively within an East Coast–European axis. And some may challenge the decision to arrange the articles in straightforward chronological fashion, rather than according to their respective intellectual traditions. But such criticisms do not detract from the essential value of the work. In assembling this material, Hays has made a major contribution to architectural scholarship. Architecture Theory since 1968 is, in short, essential reading for any self-respecting theorist of architecture.

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