Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race
CRAIG EVAN BARTON, editor (preface by DELL UPTON)
Princeton Architectural Press, 2001
208 pages, 120 illustrations
$24.95 (paper)

Sites of Memory takes the reader on a diverse journey that traverses space, place, and time. This edited volume challenges the reader to reassess the location of race within studies of the built environment; understand the multiple ways in which historic landscapes shape, construct, and influence racial identification; and question the ways in which monuments represent historical memory. Barton et al. do not address the substantial task of making links between every racially marginalized group and architecture, but instead focus specifically on African Americans. For their purposes, African American experiences provide a vibrant site from which to address the concept of memory within an American context. Moreover, these authors provide an important beginning to necessary (and much needed) interdisciplinary work between architecture and African American studies, two areas of research that are rarely put into conversation with each other.

The American urban landscape often rendered African Americans invisible by removing them from the public sphere. Craig Barton, in his chapter about Selma, Alabama, documents the city’s dual racial landscape. He argues that the city developed a civic core that isolated African Americans from the political and cultural activities of the city. Similarly, Felicia Davis uses a tour of black Manhattan to uncover lost African American pasts. Nathaniel Q. Belcher examines the invisibility of African Americans in Miami, Florida’s Overtown. He provides critical commentary on the effects of I-95 and how romanticized memories of Overtown’s past problematically inform efforts to revitalize this area, rich with local black culture.

Other essays consider efforts to reconstruct or memorialize African American pasts. Mabel O. Wilson argues that the effort to memorialize the civil rights movement with the creation of a national civil rights museum, on and around the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, produces a “static interpretation of African American history” (p. 17). In an effort to understand the ways in which public facilities mediate memories, Amy Weisser describes how school buildings, like those associated with Brown v. Board (of Education), physically mark racial discrimination and violence. La Barbara James Wigfall charts the reclamation process of Nicodemus, Kansas, and the new meanings ascribed to this location as a national park. These essays acknowledge how interested parties negotiate the multiple ways in which African American pasts are reconstructed.

In their effort to reevaluate the relationships between African Americans and the built environment, another series of the essays reveal new locations to perform this work. The landscape of historically black colleges and universities, as described in the essay by Kendrick Ian Grandison, are records of the social and cultural politics among cities, administrators, and architects, and these landscapes clearly represent various institutional ideological agendas. In writing about black college campuses, Brandford Grant contends that African Americans have always been involved in processes of architectural resistance and appropriation, and David P. Brown explores the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians as a location from which to investigate how urban landscapes support improvisational and ensemble relationships. By embracing the yards and streets of Macon, Georgia, as archival resources, Walter J. Hood Jr. and Mellissa Erickson reveal how these spaces convey multiple meanings about African American experiences. A group of abandoned shotgun homes, provided Project Row House in Houston, Texas, an environment for African American artists to develop. Sheryl Tucker De Vazquez maintains that this project has produced a location that supports “a distinctive African American way of being in the world” (p. 159).

Although the essays collected in Site of Memory are a welcome contribution, the selections present a narrow understanding of the African American experience. The wonderfully self-reflexive chapter by Lesley Naa Norle Lokko inherently turns the critical lens back onto the book itself by stating that museums and memorials “are not the only available architectural explorations of ‘race’ — and never have been” (p. 134). Unfortunately, these essays present the perspective that the Southern black experience is the primary location from which to study the myriad connections between race and architecture. The set of essays is limited in conceptualizing the various African American experiences in the north and west. Moreover, the editor does not address how the highly nuanced approaches presented can be translated into studying other racially marginalized peoples in the United States and abroad. Nevertheless, the volume is long overdue, and hopefully it will encourage others to begin exploring the complex relationships between architectural landscapes and racial identification.

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White Papers, Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture
LESLEY NAA NORLE LOKKO, editor
University of Minnesota Press, 2000
384 pages, 121 illustrations
$62.95 (cloth)

The title White Papers, Black Marks sends this reader into an uneasy quandary. Is the title intentionally opposing the relationship of what has been termed the Black Race (people of African descent) to that of the white race, here in the context of black people operating within a white field? Is the editor subconsciously conceding that all of the work done in this collection will never find its own space in a larger architectural discourse? Or is the title acknowledging and then reversing the reference point of the white field to the active black figures? Whatever the intention, as a title, White Papers, Black Marks, is too weak to define the spirit of the task the book presents: it introduces the text from a position of European colonization, not one embedded in the cultural resistance of its contributors who struggle against this type of binary conceptualization. Indeed, the substance of the book clears any confusion as to the intention, and it is truly a harbinger of great things to come.

Lesley Naa Norle Lokko organized the essays into three sections “1:125,000,” “1:1,250,” and “1:1,” a scalar format intended to simulate a magnifying effect moving from the urban plan to the building. Similarly, the topics range from addressing complex philosophical issues to specific case studies. Part one, “1:125,000: Urban Angles,” begins with the three chapters — “The Colonial Face of Education” by Dr. N. Ola Uduku, “Apartheid Urban Development” by Malindi Neluheni, and “Lively Hazardous Places” by Kwasi Boaeng and Chris Nash — that straddle the line between planning and urban design and move across the African continent from Nigeria to Ghana and Camaroon to South Africa. These articles illuminate the residual effects of European colonization and apartheid on education, planning practices, and academic discourse. With the next two chapters — “The Rack and The Web: The Other City” by Michael Stanton and “Tango: A Choreography of Urban Displacement” by Ana Betancour and Peter Hasdell — the focus turns to the Americas. Stanton discusses the cultural implications of the average American’s aversion to the city, and, using the mythos of the Tango to frame the discussion, Betancour and Hasdell explore the cultural politics that form the racial/spatial relationships that shape the city in Buenos Aires.

“1:1,250; Displacements/Diaspora” addresses the discomfort and anxiety that surrounds the issue of race. In “Intensive Continuity,” Edward Ih ejirika presents the unease felt by “black” architects and academicians in their struggle to shape and articulate a “black” identity in architectural praxis. Chapter 7, “Black Bodies, Black Space: A waiting spectacle” by J. Yolande Daniels, utilizes the film King Kong and the sideshow attraction of “the Hottentot Venus” to explore a mythology that equates “blackness” to beastliness. In “Authorizing Aboriginality in Architecture,” Jane Jacobs, Kim Dovey, and Mathilde Lochert explore authority and authorship in three projects that, although inspired and tentatively sanctioned by Aboriginals, veered dangerously close to cultural misappropriation and misrepresentation. The closing chapter of this section, “The Unsounding Space” by Arya Asgedom, explores conceptual devices such as “rhythm,” “improvisation,” and “contamination” to philosophically configure African insights within creative processes.

The final section, “1:1; One on One,” offers a sampling of projects that use the term race and its reverberations as a lens to focus architectonic investigations. The projects are diverse in their approach to race. They tease and leave the reader with the desire for more. In “Paris Done Burnt,” Mitchell Squire attempts to show the ambivalent, interdependent relationship of blackness/whiteness in multimedia, drawing/word/collages. “Anything Red Doesn’t Come to the House” by Imogen Ward Kouao engages the sensorial aspects of material, composition, and recording in a visual diary of his visit to northern Ghana. “(un)Covering/(re)Covering” by Felicia Davis explores the constructive power of signifying terms like the X as used by Malcolm X. Davis frames the terms within the “site” of shunned and forgotten history. White Papers, Black Marks moves across its topics like a well-formed skipping stone: it only just skims the surface of many important issues. One wishes the book was longer. However, its brevity is mitigated by the inclusion of so many strong critical thinkers in one compilation. This text opens a door to ways of thinking that leaves you hungry to read more in-depth expositions by its authors and editor. I wait with great anticipation to hear more from this emerging area of speculation and thought in architecture.

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Social and Cultural Lenses on Technology

The Rational Factory: Architecture, Technology, and Work in America’s Age of Mass Production
LINDY BIGGS
Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996
202 pp.
$42.95 (cloth)

Air-Conditioning America
GAIL COOPER
Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998
227 pp.
$37.95 (cloth)

On Line and on Paper: Visual Representations, Visual Culture, and Computer Graphics in Design Engineering
KATHRYN HENDERSON
The MIT Press, 1999
237 pp.
$34.95 (cloth)

Technology and Place: Sustainable Architecture and Blueprint Farm
STEVEN A. MOORE
University of Texas Press, 2001
260 pp.
$19.95 (paper)

These four books bridge architectural and technology studies and describe systems in which the social and the technical, and the aesthetic and the functional, are intimately intertwined. The concept of the “technological frame” will be useful in understanding them. A term coined by W. Bijker in Of Bicycles, Bakelites and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change (1995), the frame is a technological equivalent of Kuhn’s paradigm. It encompasses the practitioner’s “goals, key problems, problem-solving strategies (heuristics), requirements to be met by problem solutions, current theories, tacit knowledge, testing procedures, and design methods and criteria” (Bijker, p. 123). Technological frames can be shared among members of a network at varying levels of inclusion: some members of the network will embody more of the frame than will others.

According to Steven Moore, “the term technological network describes not just the sets of common interests that bind humans together, but also the unconscious relationships between human interest groups and resources, or the relationship of subjects and objects in a place” (Moore, p. 92). In his book, Technology and Place: Sustainable Architecture and Blueprint Farm, Moore focuses on the Blueprint Demonstration Farm, in Laredo, Texas. The project involves a possible convergence of five networks. First, a network established by Jim Hightower, the Texas Secretary of Agriculture from 1980 to 1990. His goal was to “stimulate the economic vitality of small landowners” (Moore, p. 93). Hightower saw the Blueprint Farm as an opportunity to experiment with technologies that might help small farmers, and also add the Jewish community to his network. Then came an Israeli network that included both kibbutz farmers trying to export their technology to Texas and also the local Jewish community seeking to cement ties with Israel; a network of local experts purportedly representing local farmers; a land grant network that combined land grant universities and a variety of corporate interests; and, finally, a network of ecologists, including the architect Pliny Fisk, organic gardeners, and advocates of environmentally sustainable technologies.

Each of these five networks had a different technological frame, and these frames were often incompatible. Hightower wanted to provide new opportunities for small landowners and bring in Israeli expertise that could potentially open new markets through the introduction of new techniques. The Israelis wanted to export a drip irrigation technology that required fertilizers and pesticides. The ecology network wanted to avoid these and introduce environmentally benign technologies such as windmills. Finally, the land grant network wanted to continue the existing agricultural complex, and saw Israelis, ecologists, and Hightower as threats. Although the project was supposed to benefit local farmers, the experts often did not consult them. Moore analyzes this history by applying an eclectic set of theoretical constructs—derived from Heidigger, Marx, Latour, Frampton, and others—to see which are most useful. I wish he had provided a chronological overview of the Blueprint Farm project. At the end, I am still not sure why the five different technological frames were unable to create a trading zone around the farm to develop creoles to communicate with one another; Moore’s account implies that they never had an interest in working together. I would like to know more about the details of the interaction among the groups, which is the kind of detail supplied by the other books reviewed in this essay. Still, Moore’s book is very provocative, and concludes with normative prescriptions for the future of regenerative architecture.

Kathryn Henderson’s On Line and on Paper: Visual Representations, Visual Culture, and Computer Graphics in Design Engineering makes the strongest links to the literature on science-technology studies, to which she has been a major contributor over the years. Her introduction to this literature is concise and lucid in an account that emphasizes the role of tacit knowledge: “knowledge that is not verbalized, sometimes because it is taken for granted but often because it is not ‘verbalizable’ has become another focal point as STS (science and technology studies) researchers have questioned how scientists and engineers know what they know” (Henderson, p. 6). This tacit knowledge is often visual and kinesthetic and is learned through experience and apprenticeship. Her book focuses on two case studies: one involving the creation of a new prototype for a turbine engine, and the other the
development of a new surgical instrument. Her method was participant observation, supplemented by interviews. For example, she discusses computer-aided design (CAD), which “is supposed to codify tacit knowledge and therefore eliminate the need for it” (Henderson, p. 186). However, Henderson demonstrates that tacit knowledge plays a critical role in design work; indeed, CAD depends on tacit knowledge. This kind of inarticulable knowledge is an important part of a technological frame and complicates communications. Henderson noted that “engineers who were designing a new turbine engine package were embarrassed that I was seeing the messiness of the process, the sketches in the margins, the further corrections to the drawings as the machines got built and sometimes dismantled and rebuilt. They were embarrassed because I was seeing the contrast between actual practice and the myth of technological development, which is supposed to occur in a smooth outgrown from clear scientific formula applied to human needs" (Henderson, p. 205). She emphasizes the importance of this interactive, sketching communication in design.

The next two books reviewed in this essay are histories of technology and cover an extended time period. Gail Cooper’s *Air-Conditioning America* presents the history of air conditioning from the turn of the century to the early 1980s. She chronicles the debate among engineering designers, who thought of air conditioning as a kind of human-made weather, and various interest groups, such as the advocates for natural air. Cooper’s book opposes competing technological frames — the human-made weather identified with the engineering design community with those of other networks. The engineering network that promoted the human-made weather believed in total climate control and viewed air conditioning as an art, depending heavily on the tacit knowledge of the practitioner. Early installations were custom designs, suited for the particular environment (first factories and businesses, then movie houses). “Such was the power of the designer in custom-designed systems that one member of the industry called these installations ‘engineering ecstasy jobs’” (Cooper, p. 183). This technological frame favored a central air conditioning system, preferably built into the building from the beginning. Engineers would determine the optimal interior weather for users. One of the major alternatives to central air was window air conditioners that cooled a single room. The shift to window units not only substituted local cooling for overall climate control, it also moved air conditioning in the direction of mass production, in this case of relatively inexpensive mobile units that were not linked to the dwelling. Air conditioners became like radios and refrigerators, plugging into an existing sales market. After the depression, this new market led to a proliferation of different system designs and forced the engineering companies like Carrier to band together to create standards, turning what had been an art into a set of procedures and standards that supported mass production.

Lindy Biggs’s *The Rational Factory: Architecture, Technology, and Work in America’s Age of Mass Production* is a history of factory design from Oliver Evans’s automatic flour mill to Henry Ford’s massive River Rouge plant. She uses the term *rational* “to describe the engineer’s vision of a factory that could run like a great machine” (Biggs, p. 6) and chronicles how factories gradually converted manufacturing from an art pursued by craftsmen into an automatic, machine-like process performed largely by unskilled labor. The story of Ford and the growth of the automobile industry is central to the book. In 1903, automobiles were built “by small groups of skilled machinists working together to build one car at a time” (Biggs, p. 89). By 1910, Ford’s new Highland Park factory “contained sophisticated, highly specialized machines designed to do one operation over and over” (Biggs, p. 105). According to Biggs, “reducing reliance on human know-how was part of the intent of the rational factory” (Biggs, p. 106). Early automobiles, like early central air systems, were custom jobs that depended heavily on “know-how,” a practitioner’s term for tacit expertise. The goal of the rational factory was to replace this know-how with machines. Human beings in rational factories were integrated into the machine, and there was a premium on reducing their number. In contrast, Biggs’s discussion of industrial engineers describes workers who became engineers of men, experts who fitted people into their proper roles as cogs in a machine. Thus, engineering expertise moved from creating the artifact to creating the system. Toward the end of the book, Biggs illustrates how this factory-as-machine, another instance of a technological frame, gets translated into art and architecture, with examples such as the Dessau Bauhaus and the River Rouge plant, lauded as objects and, in the case of the latter, efficient and largely devoid of human beings.

Each of these four books is worth reading. Moore will interest architects and students who are concerned with the role of theory in providing direction for their work, although it is not an easy read and one is left with a fragmented view of the evolution of the Blueprint Farm. Henderson’s book highlights the STS literature and the importance of visualization in negotiating design decisions. Although Henderson studies engineering and not architecture, her material relates to any profession that relies on forms of visual representation. Both Cooper and Biggs provide excellent historical narratives that highlight the ways in which metaphors like “man-made nature” and “factories are machines” are central themes in technological frames.

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Kurt Schwitters’ World

Kurt Schwitters’ Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery
ELIZABETH BURNS GAMARD
Princeton Architectural Press, 2000
196 pp., 47 b/w illustrations
$19.95 (paper)

Kurt Schwitters: I is Style (Ich ist Stil; Ik is Stijl)
NAI Publishers, 2000
219 pp., 95 illustrations
80 in color

In the Beginning There Was Merz: From Kurt Schwitters to the Present Day
SUSANNE MEYER-BUSER AND KARIN ORCHARD
Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000
348 pp., 422 illustrations, 366 in color
$65.00 (cloth)

Best known as the maker of collage and constructions, Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) was also active in the fields of experimental poetry and prose, graphics, theater, performance art, and criticism. By engaging various art forms, Schwitters attempted to achieve the German dream of the overarching synthetic masterpiece: the Gesamtkunstwerk, the total work of art. Through this radical synthesis, Schwitters hoped to create not just a work of art, but a transcendent and joyful way of life through art, which he designated Merz. Schwitters’ search for the Merzkunstwerk removed him from the artistic mainstream and led to his rejection by the various artistic movements that held sway in the early to mid-twentieth century: dadaism, constructivism, surrealism, and expressionism. He stood alone, yet from his isolated position became among the most influential artists of the twentieth century.

These three recent books, in viewing Schwitters’ creative life from different vantage points, provide a kind of parallax that gives us some understanding of this complex artist. This current interest in Schwitters is partly the result of a major exhibit in Berlin, part of Expo 2000, that featured the work of Schwitters and artists influenced by him. The exhibit sought to renovate the reputation of an artist who was seen by many as little more than an amusing footnote to modern art history. His work was always slow to achieve recognition; it seems that only now are art historians coming to a fuller appreciation of Schwitters’ oeuvre. As the exhibition amply demonstrated, few other artists’ work can be shown to have reverberated across as many late-twentieth-century genres as that of Schwitters.

Elizabeth Gamard’s Kurt Schwitters’ Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery focuses on the artist’s best-known piece, the architectural construction known as the Merzbau. Schwitters studied architecture as a youth, and the legacy of his desire to create objects and address the issue of space is apparent in the Merzbau. Kurt Schwitters: I is Style (Ich ist Stil; Ik is Stijl) gives us illustrations of many Schwitters’ paintings and collages, as well as his poetry and prose. The book also includes critical evaluations of specific aspects of the artist, as well as short, engaging pieces by some of his contemporaries. Susanne Meyer-Buser and Karin Orchard’s In the Beginning There Was Merz: From Kurt Schwitters to the Present Day was published in conjunction with the Berlin exhibit. The book contains illustrations of the work in the exhibit as well as critical essays by art historians who examine Schwitters’ influence on different strains of modern art. This is the most academic of the books and the least evocative of the artist’s nature, but it provides a useful counterpoint to the more specific focus of the Merzbau book and the personal portrait in Ich ist Stil.

Kurt Schwitters is of interest to the design professions because his artistic sensibility was a constructivist, architectural one, demonstrated in the Merzbau as well as the Merzbilder (smaller constructions). Gamard focuses on these works and gives a good overview of the artist’s developing ethos. Built between 1919 and 1943 in Schwitters’ unremarkable bourgeois apartment in Hanover, the Merzbau illuminated the artist’s obsessions and fetishes. The title “Die Kathedrale des Ertischen Elends” (“The Cathedral of Erotic Misery”) hints at the troubling erotic preoccupations that Schwitters brought to his work: elements of the intuitive, irrational, fetishistic, and subjective. The Merzbau incorporated ashes, urine, wax, and tears; it embodied decay and degeneration within the creative work itself. Schwitters started the work in 1922, the legendary annus mirabilis of modernist art that also saw the creation of Joyce’s Ulysses and Eliot’s The Waste Land.” Like “The Waste Land,” the Merzbau critiqued the alienating conditions of modern technological culture; it also provided a haven from the chaos of the outside world. Unlike Eliot, though, who was analytical and intellectual, Schwitters took a constructive approach to overcome postwar anomic. As he stated it, “everything had broken down and new things had to be made out of fragments: and this is Merz” (Meyer-Buser, p. 26).

The creation of the Merzbau paralleled Schwitters’ idea of Merz as a way of life. The work began with Schwitters’ perception of the connection between the paintings hanging on his studio wall; he began to physically connect them with string, then plaster of paris, then added pieces of detritus and finally built whole grottoes and rooms. As it developed, the Merzbau took on an organic, almost vegetal pattern of growth that engulfed his home and life. Over time, he worked through various styles of expressionism, dadaism, and constructivism; the Merzbau embodied themes of mysticism, sexuality, and autobiography. The work revealed an inherently Post-Platonic, anti-representational philosophical approach: Schwitters aimed for plurality and particularity rather than singularity and universality. He tried to represent nothing; the work of art in itself was the redemptive force.

The Merzbau was destroyed in the Allied bombing of 1943 and today is known only through photographs taken in its last stages of develop-
ment, at which time it appears as a constructivist interior with smooth, painted, white planes connected to each other. The viewer knows, however, that a multitude of elements are buried inside. The power that the work has exerted over later generations of artists and critics may have something to do with the sense of mystery that surrounds the Merzbau — the impossibility of ever fully knowing what was buried within it because the piece exists only in the shattered past.

The particularity of the artist’s character comes through in *Ich ist Stil*. Many of Schwitters' lesser-known works are charming: whimsical and verging on the surreal, but without the lofty sense of mission that burdens most surrealist pieces. Schwitters was in many ways an odd character, with symptoms of dadaism, constructivism, romanticism, surrealism, expressionism, and artistic hermeticism running through him. His seriousness about Merz—ing the world can seem sometimes hilarious, and at other times the most important project possible. The four short critical essays that open the collection situate Schwitters relative to other artists and movements of his time in an adequate if mundane way. Most interesting is Dorothea Dietrich's description of the evolution of Schwitters' collage style and his methods of artistic production. However, the real interest of the book lies in the works themselves. The visual work is beautifully reproduced, mostly in color. Even more exciting are the poetry and short prose pieces. The poem “Eve Blossom Has Wheels: Merz Poem I” is purely delightful; its play on language, perception, and erotic attraction is wholly different from that of other modernist writers. Others short pieces like “My New Hat” and “Truth” are sketchy, whimsical, and surreal. These examples make the reader wish for much more; a full collection of Schwitters' written works would be a welcome addition to the library of Schwitters studies. The book is rounded out with a selection of personal essays about encounters with the artist and his work: stories of initial encounters with the Merzbau, of a crazy evening during which Schwitters gave a public performance of his Usonate to much public bemusement, and of an acquaintance being asked by Schwitters if he would like to Merz with him — all offer insight that is not obtainable through critical exegesis.

*In the Beginning There Was Merz: From Kurt Schwitters to the Present Day* examines Schwitters' influence on late-twentieth-century visual and literary artists. The book comprises a series of art historical essays that elucidate Schwitters' influence on contemporary art, including walk-in collages, happenings, pop, nouveau realisme, action art, and avant-garde poetry. An amazing range of artists has claimed Schwitters as a creative forbear. In addition to visual artists, the list includes rock star David Bowie, composer György Ligeti, and writer Ernst Jandl. The many color illustrations are an exceptionally strong component of the book, and give a good overview not just of Schwitters' work, but of a later generations of artists including Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Nevelson, Cy Twombly, Daniel Spoerri, Dieter Roth, and Joseph Beuys. Taken together, the three books will introduce (or reintroduce) readers to an anomalous and remarkable artist whose visual and literary production deserves greater attention.

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