Book Review

Andrew Ballantyne, Deleuze and Guattari for Architects, London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2007

REVIEWED BY PAUL HOHNEN

The engagement of architects with philosophy has, often times, been an uncomfortable one. In the early days of my architectural training I struck up a conversation with one of my teachers, who was pondering aloud why is was that so many philosophers were coming to architecture. His thesis was that architecture and philosophy share the same foundational question, namely, “How are we to live?” Whether this is the reason for the proliferation of architects referring to philosophy and philosophers thinking about architecture, it is now the case that in many architectural publications, lectures, seminars and presentations one is very likely to hear references to exotic sounding names and theories as, variously, the inspiration, justification, ground or milieu operating in the background of the physical or theoretical architectural product.

Architects invariably seek something from which they can derive inspiration, new ways of thinking and/or seeing—something useful. The work of philosophers can seem abstract and removed from the day-to-day functional requirements of the design studio. Against this background, Routledge have produced a new series of texts entitled Thinkers for Architects. The first in this series is Deleuze and Guattari for Architects by Andrew Ballantyne. This short overview attempts to bring the work of Deleuze and Guattari within the purview of an architectural mindset by structuring the introduction of ideas in a way which will be coherent and relevant for the audience, and by illuminating concepts with reference points which will help to orient the reader on the journey into this vast universe. Ballantyne dissects the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari into a series of chapters reflecting increasing scales of conceptual strata—from the microcosm to the macrocosm. After spending the first two chapters outlining the conception of Identity, and its production, Ballantyne takes us on a journey through “House,” “Façade and Landscape” and finally to “City and Environment.” Each level offers a new way of seeing productive mechanisms at work through increasing scales of meaning.

The explication concentrates mostly on the collaborative work of Deleuze and Guattari, and specifically on the two major texts which form the Capitalism and Schizophrenia couplet: Anti-Oedipus (Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1: Anti-Oedipus) and A Thousand Plateaus (Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2: Mille Plateaux). These swirling, expansive and encompassing texts have the potential to leave the casual reader lost and disoriented, and indeed this is partly the point. Near the beginning of
his explication, Ballantyne quotes from Malamud’s novel *The Fixer* a character describing his experience of reading the *Ethics* of Spinoza, Deleuze’s philosophical hero: “I read through a few pages and kept on going as though there were a whirlwind at my back. As I say, I didn’t understand every word but when you’re dealing with such ideas you feel as though you were taking a witches’ ride. After that I wasn’t the same man.”

One can often have this feeling reading through work such as this. However, it is precisely this kind of experience of chaos which is at the centre of Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of identity and subsequently of creativity and productivity.

Ballantyne uses the metaphor of the “witches’ ride” to describe the disorientating—or, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, “detrimentalising”—effect that their thought can have. At the heart of this detrimentalising, and indeed at the heart of the thought of Deleuze and Guattari, is the putting into question of the notion of identity. In his earlier, more traditional philosophical texts, Deleuze’s main point was to question the ontological priority of identity. Difference, rather than identity is, for Deleuze, the primary ontological consideration. Deleuze’s analysis of the history of western thought contends that there is a primary dualist assumption resulting from the assumption of a subjective identity as primary, because assuming that there is first an I, necessarily means that there is subsequently a non-I, leading to transcendentalist and metaphysical results.

The contesting of identity throws us into an experience of chaos: “If I miss my usual train, then I feel disappointed and inconvenienced . . . but I don’t feel that chaos is upon us. But when, on the way to the station, I start to feel my body changing into a wolf’s . . . then I experience something more like chaos” (p. 50).

Chaos is not so much the experience of disorder as the experience of “an infinite speed of birth and disappearance” (p. 50) wherein, just as things take shape so they dissipate. It is pre-conceptual, pre-formal, pre-identity. Should order, form, or identity appear out of this chaos it will be as an emergent phenomenon in which one of these briefly appearing forms is captured, stabilised, and developed in the way a melody, a “motif,” may arise from within other sounds, themes or melodies. The melodic motif becomes the refrain, a *ritournelle*, which we return to from the explorations of the symphony. It provides a musical home, a reference point, a *territory* of domesticity and comfort. Grasping and creating this order is essential for the day-to-day functioning of our lives. “We require . . . ,” Deleuze and Guattari tell us, “just a little order to protect us from chaos” (p. 49).

For Deleuze and Guattari disorder and confusion, not order and form, are the primordial preconditions for creativity. However, creativity emerges out of the recognition of patterns within the chaos. The recognition of a melody that emerges briefly and then disappears can be captured, memorised and repeated. This capturing is the beginning of the construction of the ordered world. The melody becomes a familiar, recognisable home, to which we can return as a reassuring bulwark against the swirling chaos of noise. The song then is a construction which provides a secure base for exploration of the world.
outside. Architecture, like music, emerges out of the chaos of creativity, but this deterritorialised state is not a way most of us could live comfortably, and hence the construction of a building provides us with the protective “little order.”

Buildings, like songs, generate territories. They may be functional, that is, designed towards a particular end—to sell more units, to maximise lettable area and the like. These territories are pragmatic and useful in an everyday fashion. Commercial shopping centres know well the importance of creating the right environment, both physical and audible, to catalyse commerce. Pragmatic spaces are the stuff of our everyday world and they are essential, but they are an architecture of small horizons. A larger architecture, which at the important moments of our lives would make us feel fully alive and cause us to “pay attention to the deep resonance that the earth asserts everywhere” (p. 60) is possible. Such an architecture would open us to possibilities such as “the great ‘song of the earth’ which resonates through everything” and the “architecture of trajectories, where buildings seem to dissolve away with the dissolution of territories that become unnecessary to the all-pervading Dionysus” (p. 60). Deleuze and Guattari’s thought “is a challenge for any architects who choose to engage with it, as its volatility is at odds with the tradition’s traditional preoccupation with form.” (p. 97).

The work of this pair is expansive and encompassing. From the atomistic and cellular level, through organs, identity, houses, terrains and environments, Ballantyne takes us on a fractal-like journey through scales of meaning and significance. At each shift in scale we encounter new intersections and constellations of concepts which are illuminated via recognisable reference points. Along the way we encounter Thelma and Louise, Damien Hirst, Kafka, Alberti’s Rucellai Palace, Dangerous Liaisons, Mahler’s Das Lied von der Erde, Marie-Antoinette’s kitschy cottages in the Versailles gardens, and the life-world of a tick, to name but a few of the reference points employed by Ballantyne.

Ballantyne’s brief, readable introduction provides a fascinating, accessible and entertaining overview of the work of these two thinkers. The effort that Ballantyne has made to structure the work to an architectural way of thinking, coupled with the various excursuses into popular culture, biology and urban planning, result in a very satisfying and enlightening introduction to the profound and often exhilarating scale of the concepts of these important thinkers.