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Guest-curated by Albena Yaneva

Rosenberg & Sellier

Florenzia Andreola, Mauro Sullam, Riccardo M. Villa (eds), *Backstage. L'architettura come lavoro concreto*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 207 pp. - 2016
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- ISBN 978-8-8917-4748-8



Architecture periodically casts a glance at itself, reflected in the mirror. It doesn't happen to architects only; for sure it has happened to many of us, in some slow-down phase of some apparently stable and long-lasting relationship, showing signs of a weakening we chose to ignore for too long. Changes, stretch marks, some nevertheless fascinating flaws we can be proud of in the end. And again, we question certain choices, reactions, situations we sought or tolerated for convenience; maybe not everything will come to the surface the same easy and sincere way. And, oh, places: it becomes necessary to spend a moment thinking of where everything happened, of those spaces and

Nisa Ari, Christianna Bonin (eds), *Workspace, "Thresholds – Journal of the MIT Department of Architecture"* monographic issue, n. 44, Cambridge, SA+P Press, 205 pp. - 2016
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perceptions produced by all the things happened and happening. A beach body testing, a *prova costume* as Italians would call it, where *costume* is both a swimsuit and the contemporary *coûtume*¹ with which architects always strive to comply. The word 'periodically', then, does not fit adequately architecture, the production of self-critical and meta-professional reflection in architecture being almost equal to its output in terms of built volumes: it is nonetheless important, year after year, beach body test after test, to evaluate how relevant the cultural and geographic context, as well as the wavy historical changes, can get on such reflections. In times when the hiatus

between Italian and international situation is once again an issue – despite the global framework of architecture being characterized by a major crisis in both epistemology and market – books like *Backstage* are powerful indicators of how architects look at themselves, Italian architects in particular; an enlightening role, mostly if put in comparison with some specific cultural 'reagents' such as the monographic issue of "Threshold" dedicated to the *Workspace*. The editorial team at Gizmo gives voice to different actors operating between research, theory and practice, and outlines through *Backstage* an articulate picture of current epistemological and professional status of architecture. Foundations of this research are firmly laid in the Italian context, and some regard is kept for a global contextualization as well. It is not the first time this typology of essay seduces those who sail the seas of disciplinary critique – just think of Guy Tapie's *Les Architectes: Mutation d'une profession* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000), quoted by some contributors. Still *Backstage* appears at the end of a fierce decade for all those disciplines of the in-between, participated by humanities, technique and (despite the angry opposition shown by some contributions, but also with the support of some others) art. Little room is left, after such deep-striking crisis and fairy-tale, Godot-like recovery, for any Modernist call to arms, Tafuri-flavoured intellectual withdrawal, or even medical dissections of the profession, like Tapie did, back

in 2003. *Backstage* resounds of the voice of a confused discipline, torn between concrete issues – complicating its productive process and denying architects any chance of an appropriation of their work – and more radical and apparently theoretical issues, where probably the foundations of the concrete ones are rooted. Featuring stories about (shrinking) amounts of production – is this still a properly architectural issue? –, *brand-making*, average impoverishment and theory / practice clashes re-plunging Italy into the roaring 80s, the work generates, at least in the author of this review, a powerful lust for some extreme action.

Of course the extreme action we long for is a radical shift in the point of view, helping us to reframe all those issues that make it so complicated to be an architect nowadays; it may give the impression of a parting from contemporary and from reality. Yet, it is by taking such a risk that a change in current mindset can be generated, a chance to rewrite the framing of an identity, as the crisis is more than 10 years away and it can no longer be blamed as the only cause of contemporary dead ends (not to mention the nostalgic persistence of a Marxist critique of the Capital, still popping up as a theoretical foundation in many sections of the book).

The eclipse of the Client – an actual tragedy in terms of creativity and interaction – the twilight of the Authorship in architectural design processes, are established notions that have been accepted globally for decades. Today, they

can suggest a redefinition of the architect's position in terms of an opening to a complex networked scenario, where the survival for such multifaceted professionals can be only granted by an actual and non-nostalgic awareness of their practice and knowledge. Here is why a simultaneous reading of *Workspace*, a curatorial, cultural trip through the spatiality of contemporary practice(-s), can be of the highest interest. In a global context where production and art often swap costumes – where China creates entire villages devoted to the production of paintings; where production and distribution of sex toys are awarded a scholarly research and a proper critical *studio visit* – the *space* where all these practices are performed, the way space and practices shape one another, regain a meaning. While some first reactions could oppose a blunt rejection of an allegedly *culturaliste* approach (“Why should we care about sex toys production or artists’ residencies in Wyoming, when Italy struggles with a 1architect / 1000citizens ratio?!”) – such studies offer a real opportunity to identify a territory where architects can spend their intellectual and practical uniqueness: the definition of space. This opens up, moreover, to a chance of reconnection with different fields such as the arts, and the space-related production of culture, that had been cut off the architectural debate by the recent winds of crisis. Architects can be a little less scared by the idea of considering the deconstruction of “creative genius rhetoric”, a great

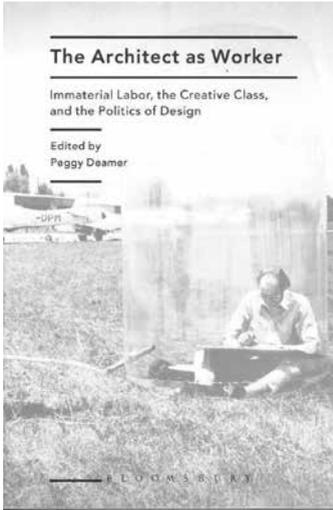
Leitmotiv from the 2000s, as they can live it as conscious and effective actors. Instead of playing the victim in terms of image, they can invest creative capacity in framing their relationship with other disciplinary and intellectual worlds.

The reading of both these choral works – in a strictly simultaneous and comparative way – is strongly recommended for a satisfactory architects’ beach body test (and for any forthcoming reflective holiday). It can be a chance – a rare chance nowadays – to give the mirror a little rotation, stop concentrating always on the same stretch mark, and consider a change in the usual beach outfit.

1 - Coûtume must be considered in its French archaic meaning, as that component of current Law coming from practices and habits.

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Peggy Deamer, *The Architect as Worker. Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015
Paperback: £ 17.99 - ISBN 978-1-4725-7049-9 / e-book: £ 17.99
- ISBN 978-1-4725-7052-9



An anthology of essays that revolve around a cloud of topics concerning the architectural profession – from the notions of immaterial production and creative work at large to the ethics of the profession and the labour conditions in architectural practice – *The Architect as a Worker* includes contributions from practitioners, scholars, theorists and sociologists outside of the architectural *milieu*, critics and activists. The wide *spectrum* of themes raised and the many ways they are approached makes the task of providing an exhaustive review particularly difficult, if not impossible. The overall point of departure is the fundamental division of work that lays the foundations

of the birth of architecture as an ‘immaterial practice’: the divide instituted by the Renaissance masters in the 15th century, when the architect stopped being just a master builder and ‘rose’ from the building site as a professional figure, distinguishing himself from the other workers by virtue of his specific knowledge – *design*.

If on the one hand such a shift is acknowledged through the classification of architectural practice as belonging to the domain of immaterial labour, the boundary between the two fields is often left unspoken throughout the volume, sometimes even deliberately removed in favour of an overall conception of construction practice as a ‘network’. This goes hand in hand with the revindication of rights and the condemnation of abuses, to be sought as much in the office as on the building site.

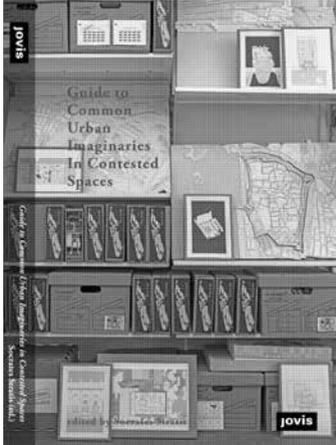
Such a ‘communion’ between *architect* and *worker* – creating a collective exploited subject – and the sudden shifts in themes and registers between contributions are explained and counterbalanced by a *fil rouge* of Marxist criticism, evidenced by recurring quotes from the *Capital* and by an abundance of references to the theories of intellectuals working in the wake of such thought. The critical approach, as well as the collective nature of the volume, sets it in line with other works belonging to this extremely important call to arms made by Peggy Deamer, the editor of the book. *The Architect as a Worker* is possibly one chapter of a larger *œuvre*, alongside titles such as

Building (in) the Future: Recasting Labor in Architecture (Princeton, 2010), *Architecture and Capitalism: 1845 to the Present* (Routledge, 2013), and *Asymmetric Labors: The Economy of Architecture in Theory and Practice* (The Architecture Lobby, 2016). Most of the themes dealt with in the book also explicitly feature in the manifesto of “The Architecture Lobby”, an organization of ‘architectural workers’ that confronts the precariousness of the profession by seeking enforcement of labour laws, a change in the system of remuneration in the practice and the de-mystification of the architect as a lone architectural genius.

The effort made by Deamer and by the impressive collection of minds she has mobilized could be seen as a follow-up to Tafuri’s call, issued almost half a century ago, on the ‘political backwardness’ of the architectural profession. Seen in such a light, the volume is without doubt an important investigation into the issues that stand at the very core of the contemporary condition and the so-called ‘creative class’, which – especially with regard to architecture – seem to stand as a seismograph at the forefront of any contemporary mutation involving the market economy and labour in general. After awareness has been raised again, what now? What the ‘counterplan’, what the *project*? A comprehensive answer to such questions seems as yet quite far from being drawn up.

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**Socrates Stratis, *Guide to Common Urban Imaginaries in Contested Spaces*, Berlin, Jovis, 272 pp. - 2016
Paperback: € 29.95 - ISBN 978-3-86859-420-1**



The urban designer works in a continuum. Projects might have start dates, but the city is an open ended system, driven by history and memories. The city is also inherently messy. It has multiple clients, often with differing needs and objectives. When architecture engages with the city there are rarely any clear boundaries or agreed agendas. Consequently the practitioner has to be constantly aware of the possible consequences of his/her actions. This inevitably takes the architect into an arena that is overtly political in nature; one in which choices and therefore value judgements have to be made. There are rarely simple routes to implementation. Political and financial externalities exert a critical influence, turning the architect into a broker, a choreographer, an impresario and a diplomat.

All cities have their internal barriers, rich and poor areas business zones and disruptive infrastructure. In extreme cases these become enclaves and gated communities, ghettos, 'townships' and no go areas are created. Armed conflict, however, adds another dimension altogether. Recently cities such as Mostar and Aleppo have been torn apart by war. But it is the 'peace' process, in effect a period of protracted low intensity conflict that entrenches the political divide into urban stalemates as witnessed in cities like Berlin, Beirut and Belfast.

The political schisms of divided cities are manifested spatially. The Berlin Wall, the Green Lines in Beirut and Belfast were urban voids, no mans lands. The purpose of these *intentional* voids, unoccupied buffer spaces, is *non occupancy*. But these spaces are not actually empty. They are inhabited by memories, trauma and hatreds. Eventually in these city spaces memory is erased, a condition explored in Wim Wenders' 1987 film *Wings of Desire*, where an old man walks through the no mans land by the Berlin Wall, confused, and recalling the lines of shops and tram stops that were once Potsdamer Platz.

I first visited Nicosia in 2010 and observed the 'Green Line' and the ugly violence of a city divided in two by war and an intractable peace process. An architect whom I met offered to take me to Kyrenia for the day, later admitting he had not crossed over the ceasefire line for 25 years. Later that evening on our way back we got lost in Nicosia and it took us

three hours to find the crossing point. What struck me forcibly was that he had absolutely no mental geography of the northern part of his own city. Furthermore, the numerous people who we asked for directions similarly had no idea where the crossing point was either. For them the southern part of their city had been forgotten. I had spent time in Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s and had visited Beirut and Belfast. What was different in Cyprus was that the divide had, like a mental trauma, become deeply embedded in the psychology of the city. Nicosia was suffering from a form of collective amnesia. The Berlin, Beirut and Belfast peace processes had been driven in part at least by a collective memory of the pre-divided city. Where would a peace process start in Cyprus?

There is a growing body of work examining peace building from a bottom up perspective. This challenges the top-down paradigm of international interventions by third-party actors. The book "Guide to Common Urban Imaginaries in Contested Spaces" documents an initiative in Famagusta and uses this to develop a guide to spatial interventions that can operate in the contested spaces where conflict has been suspended but peace has yet to be achieved. These architectural interventions act to create a stage for local initiatives, shared spaces for chance encounters where tentative conversations may begin. This approach challenges the conventional liberal market led models of city reconstruction such as Potsdamer Platz and Solidere.

There are parallels for this work in the genesis of the peace process in Belfast, the Mothers of the Plaza di Mayo in Argentina and in the locally negotiated ceasefire points in Aleppo. These are citizen led initiatives that can become the building blocks of peace or reconciliation. The interest in the *Hands on Fama-gusta* project is that architecture is used as a medium for this dialogue.

In his work Socrates Stratis and his colleagues develop architecture as urban practice, a means to construct places and dialogues between communities, across the void. These common urban imaginaries are both beacons of hope and prototype spaces for a future that becomes imaginable. They are creating transformative spaces, turning the ceasefire zones from dangerous places into safe havens. This is subversive architecture that invites citizens to challenge the military status quo and not just imagine, but enact alternative futures. This is about re colonization of military space for civic purpose with architecture acting as the medium for local accommodations. Significantly their work challenges divisive narratives and offers alternative approaches upon which long term, stable political settlements might be built. The book contains seven stories each a form of transferable methodology. In one counter mapping techniques are explored in order to construct alternative representations of space. In another a digital archive is constructed. All of these are tangential examinations of boundaries and thresholds that

suggest that these self-imposed borders are in fact porous, urban commons where social forms of exchange can recommence. This work is important as it takes architecture out of the studio and into highly contested arenas, places where it can be relevant and potentially transformative. In a world where conflict is spreading and divisions are deepening architecture can, if it chooses, play a key role in bridging the divide.

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