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Architecture as Cultural and Political Discourse: Case Studies of Conceptual Norms and Aesthetic Practices

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Architecture as Cultural and Political Discourse: Case Studies of Conceptual Norms and Aesthetic Practices, by Daniel Grincer, Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 2016, 212 p, £29.59 (paperback), £92.00 (hardback), \$33.29 (ebook) ISBN 9781138916807

In an world where understanding the applications, implications and parameters to do with discipline is becoming ever-more important, there are very few books dedicated to scrutinizing the relations between governing and space through a case by case study of architecture. Daniel Grincer's *Architecture as Cultural and Political Discourse: Case Studies of Conceptual Norms and Aesthetic Practices* is a text that precisely does that. The thematic of this monograph was grounded in his PhD dissertation from the University of Western Australia; in eight chapters he maps the assertions and consequences of power and violence across well-known and recognised buildings such as Notre Dame de Paris to those less visible spaces, such as detention centres in Australia. The analysed case studies are thematic and chronological, demonstrating the ways in which particular ways of constructed thinking and knowledge accommodate not only the possibility, but also the permissibility of using architecture to regulate interpretations, meaning and advertently, people.

For the practising architect Grincer, architectural form does not have an inherent meaning; instead meaning is created and imparted via the political motivations specific for that time. The underlying position being that power and discipline are not fixed; instead they are in flux, open to change and appropriation. Having said this, the book does not position architecture on a throne of innocence, and naivety; rather, it is a cautionary tale for architects to be aware of the complexities of discipline and power present globally, as well as to take responsibility for every commission taken despite of and because of the (potential) dry spells in the construction industry. This agenda is particularly prominent in the very last chapter, where the Queensland based architectural practise Philips Smith Conwell Architects facilitated the prison-inspired design of the detention centre on the Christmas Island. That the practice was awarded the contract for the 2008 completed 'Australian Guantanamo' is not odd considering its extensive experience in designing correctional and detention centres.

The credibility of *Architecture as Cultural and Political Discourse*, though, is most present in the way in which theory is used to analyse and comprehend the built environment; the thinking of Michel Foucault is most prominent, particularly the concepts articulated in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1996). The method accommodating the pulling apart of taken-for granted knowledge of architecture to implicate that knowledge is not universally given, it has a history. Similarly, that terms such as “culture” and “politics” are being used too readily in architecture, and not critically enough; without the awareness that power is not only created but that it is also transferred through each terminological discourse. From this position, the text projects beyond the common interpretations and applications of Foucauldian thinking in architecture. Often power is correlated to the Panopticon and used to articulate either the way in which space is used as means of governing or the way in which each member of the society is performing supervision of oneself and upon other members of the society. The first two chapters of the book are used to set up and navigate through the projections about culture and politics, and over the course of the book pull apart those very same projections in relation to architecture. The argument is that architecture is used as a representational object to accommodate the placement of discursive knowledge, as well as values. Both of which are deployed for purposes of constructing a common culture; commonalities upon which identities are formed and understood. These ideas are analysed through the symbolism found in the Notre Dame de Paris, to the designs of Eugene Viollet-le-Duc. The argument being that for architecture to be comprehensible to a group of people, that meaning needs to be produced across a number of regulatory historical and social processes. For Daniel Libeskind, meaning is generated by the need for architecture to provoke the history and present of our times. However, for Grincer, this thinking is architecturally communicated in reductive terms and through simplistic relations as seen in the height of the World Trade Centre (1,776 feet) correlating to the year of the US Declaration of Independence.

Chapters three to five are tied through thematic context, addressing reconstruction in terms of identity, history, and heritage, and inclusive of case studies such as CIAM’s urban proposals to the ruins of

Dresden. For Grincer, heritage is constructed in two ways; how meaning is imparted in the present, and how affixing memory to a universal seeing of the past is underscored by the drive to eliminate counter discourses. Hence, architectural heritage and preservation are not just a question of time, but how architecture is used as a discursive tool. Through critical dissemination, Grincer's proposition is that authentic meaning of architecture across time is not possible; it is a clear indicator of history and information legitimised through governing.

The normalisation of governing is particularly severe when it is appropriated, defined and (mis)used in the name of civil duties. Utilising Arendt's thinking, the practice of evil was not only normalised during the Third Reich, but also appropriated as a civil norm. In this fourth chapter, the spatialisation of the legal apparatus is significant. When Adolf Eichmann defended himself in court, the overriding rhetoric was that he did not organise the Holocaust. Instead, he was simply following orders as a law abiding citizen of the Third Reich. When Albert Speer defended himself by refusing to address the socio-political implications of his designs; his defence was that architecture is art and that he was merely an artist. The effects of National Socialism were also addressed in chapter five, though largely in terms of territory. The position put forward is that territory is a signifier of possessing and exercising exclusion for purposes of discriminating against all those who are not inside the state; as well as justifying exclusion or extinction of Other due to lack of connection and claim between ancestry, land and language.

Chapters six to eight are primarily focused on the Australian context, addressing encounters as far ranging as riots to detention centres. All the case studies are tied to enforcement of borders and extension of racism; these (il)legitimate deployments of violence and power are not exceptional to, but coextensive with the very form of violence and power they claim to be conquering. With the 2005 Cronulla riots, Grincer not only addressed the socio-economic and ethically-driven urban sprawl of Sydney and the immediate surroundings, but also the way in which the riots brought to the foreground the quintessential and undying presence of xenophobia. The fear of Other was also present in the gentrification of Redfern – an inner-western suburb of Sydney – where through removal of indigenous

Aboriginal Australians, the Sydney's city centre has become racially purified. Australia's detention centres, such as Woomera and Christmas Island are examples of zones that are both inside, and outside the law. In this "limbo" space, power can be exercised to the extreme; the camps are used not only to enforce a disciplinary order on the body of Other, but also to reduce the Other into a non-speaking subject. Within this context, architecture – Grincerì argues – is used as a tool to fabricate the construct of Australia as a democratic and non-racist country.

Largely, *Architecture as Cultural and Political Discourse* is a strong book that challenges the status quo of politics and culture in architecture. Where the book momentarily falters is in its actual structure; the first and introductory chapter does not disclose the case studies covered, or thematics that tie together these case studies. The other structural aspect is more theoretical. While the book draws attention to the socio-political and cultural structures present within architecture, no alternatives are offered. Though, this may be due to the mishap present in Foucault's thinking; there is no possibility to resist or to create an alternative reality since the operational mode of power is circular and complete; there is no outside to the structures prescribed. As an aside, it is curious that on the very first page of the very first chapter Daniel Grincerì draws attention, via the thinking of Aaron Betsky, to Rem Koolhaas' architecture to suggest that it plays a notable role in the manipulation of architectural meanings and symbols. Yet, Grincerì does not take this thinking further through a detailed and critical analysis of at least one building designed by Koolhaas. After all, the subtitle of the book is *Case Studies of Conceptual Norms and Aesthetic Practices*. To compliment the case studies analysed, it would have been worthwhile for Grincerì to include more images as a way not only to visually situate the architecture, but also to extend the theoretical argument.

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