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CONTENTS

EDITORS' NOTES.....	5
STEN GROMARK, MARIUS FISKEVOLD AND MAGNUS RÖNN	
DESIGN INTERVENTIONS – REFLECTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES FOR URBAN DESIGN RESEARCH	15
CECILIE BREINHOLM CHRISTENSEN, ELIAS MELVIN CHRISTIANSEN AND ANDREA VICTORIA HERNANDEZ BUENO	
BECOMING COSMOPOLITAN CITIZEN-ARCHITECTS: AN EDUCATOR'S REFLECTIONS ON ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION ACROSS THE NORDIC BALTIC ACADEMY OF ARCHITECTURE	49
MASSIMO SANTANICCHIA	
LOST POTENTIALS? UNPACKING THE TECTONICS OF ARCHITECTURAL COST AND VALUE	89
ESZTER SÁNTHA, MARIE FRIER HVEJSEL AND MIA KRUSE RASMUSSEN	
THE CONCEPT OF PLACE IN DISPLACEMENT MANAGEMENT	119
HÅVARD BREIVIK-KHAN	
PROUDLY REJECTED: THE CASE OF GRAND MOSQUE INITIATIVE IN HELSINKI.....	147
HOSSAM HEWIDY AND KAISA SCHMIDT-THOMÉ	
FORUM	
BOOK REVIEW: ENABLING THE CITY – INTERDISCIPLINARY AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY ENCOUNTERS IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE	177
REVIEWER: PEHR MIKAEL SÄLLSTRÖM	
BOOK REVIEW: THE NEW URBAN CONDITION: CRITICISM AND THEORY FROM ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM.....	185
REVIEWER: DR NAGHAM AL-QAYSI	
PHD REVIEW: CHOREOGRAPHING FLOW: A STUDY IN CONCRETE DEPOSITION.....	191
REVIEWER: DR. MARCELYN GOW	
PHD REVIEW: LEARNING FOR FUTURE KNOWING NOW: INVESTIGATING TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGIC PROCESSES WITHIN A DESIGN FACULTY IN A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY	195
REVIEWER: DR. ELMARIE COSTANDIUS	

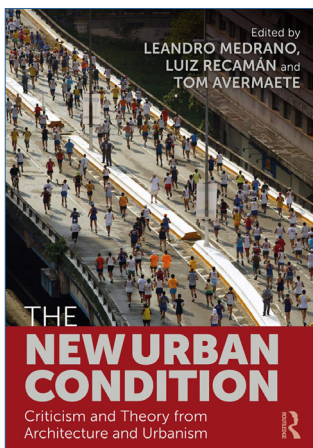
Front cover:

Modell of the Viva-housing project in Gothenburg presented by the cooperative Housing provider Riksbyggen.

Photo: Sten Gromark.

BOOK REVIEW:
LEANDRO MEDRANO, LUIZ
RECAMAN AND TOM AVERMAETE
THE NEW URBAN CONDITION:
CRITICISM AND THEORY FROM
ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM
ROUTLEDGE, 2021

REVIEWER: DR NAGHAM AL-QAYSI¹



This book delves into the urban conditions of contemporary cities while trying to anticipate their future, employing historical, practical and theoretical analyses to draw the arguments proposed. It investigates how different disciplines and schools of thought have impacted - and will continue to do - the architecture, design and methodologies of contemporary urban conditions, ranging from the effects of historical, political, social and economic theories to the challenges and urgencies developed during the current global conditions. This inquiry provides a comprehensive account of the challenges facing urban life in the current global situation. As addressed by the editors, these challenges are separated into three dimensions. The first is related to how has the exponential dissemination of the technical information medium radically affected urban space. Second, what the crisis created by the effect of the environmental collapse has on our conception of urban space as artificial and autonomous world. Third, the social segregation processes societies are increasingly facing and their effect on the spatial dimensions of urban spaces and consequentially urban life. In response to these challenges, the authors attempt to articulate critical methodologies and disciplinary instruments that they see necessary to address those challenges. When reading this book, one needs to be prepared for an extensive, thorough and a challenging read. Each article tries to explore and investigate a

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different concept, phenomena, technique, theory or a method in a certain or in different contexts, or sometimes in history. This has resulted in an extensive and inclusive overview of the current urban state of our cities.

Contributors to this book are all academics, affiliated with academic institutions from around the globe, including Brazil, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, The United States and the Netherlands. This has contributed to the diversity and breadth of the arguments proposed in this book. Their fields of operation and studies are around the area of architecture and urbanism, most of them are architects and urban planners, but there are also theorists, sociologists and geographers. The book editors include Leonardo Medrano, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo (FAUUSP), whose key work addresses the relationship between social housing and urban development. Theory of urbanism, urban sociology, urban design and economic development are some of the research fields involved in his research. The other editor is Luiz Recaman, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo (FAUUSP). His main work addresses the critique of architecture, aesthetics and modern Brazilian and contemporary architecture. He is Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Revista ARA FAUUSP* and coordinator of the research group *Critical Thinking and Contemporary City*. The third editor is Tom Avermaete, Professor of History and Theory of Urban Design at ETH Zurich, whose research focuses on the architecture of the city and the changing roles, approaches and tools of architects and urban designers from a cross-cultural perspective.

The main body of this book consists of sixteen articles that have been divided into three main themes. The first part, *Theoretical Tenets*, discusses the theoretical and methodological foundations of contemporary urban issues. The second part, *Rethinking Spatial Rhythms*, focuses on the spatial relations of urban structures and how they were accustomed by historicity, temporality and rhythms. And finally, the third part of the book, *Contemporary Spatial Forms of the City*, focuses on more practical contemporary urban realities.

Starting from part one, *Theoretical Tenets* – which consists of seven chapters – the first chapter is entitled *Remains of Architectural Reason*, by architect Luiz Recaman. This article discusses the ideological and socio-political arguments that have resulted from the new-age criticism of totalitarian modernism and how this criticism, in addition to the emergencies of contemporary socio-political conditions, has formed contemporary thinking of architectural theory. The author contrasts ideas that have contributed to the ongoing ideological debate on architecture and urbanism, ideas such as individual, social, bourgeois, liberal, new liberal,

etc. The arguments in this article are made by critically employing theoretical perspectives drawn from the works of Jürgen Habermas, Henri Lefebvre and Manfredo Tafuri.

The second chapter of part one, *On Architecture and Urban Space after the Ideological Crisis of Neoliberalism*, is by architect Leandro Medrano; it demonstrates the tremendous effects that the industrial revolution and modernism have left on the realities of cities in different contexts. It also discusses the rise of post-critical architecture in some of the urban metropolises in North America, Europe and Latin America. The article also discusses the relation between aesthetic autonomy and social engagement in the post-critical debate, advocating the need for further connection between architecture and real urban processes, both socially and spatially.

The third chapter, *Constructing the Commons: Towards Another Architectural Theory of the City*, is by architect Tom Avermaete. The article explores the concept of the “common” from historical and contemporary perspectives. The author considers this concept as one of the possibilities for overcoming the challenges created by the neoliberal development model of urban life. Expanding on this concept, the author follows the development of the concept starting from its origins in medieval times. It is then explored from three different angles: firstly, *Res Communis*: Common-Pool Resources in Architecture and Urban Design; secondly, *Lex Communis*: The Commonality of the Discipline and the Discipline of the Common Place; and thirdly, *Praxis Communis*: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation. These three angles are not mutually exclusive, they interwind and refer to some primary characteristics of the concept of the common. The article is loaded with examples that illustrate the historical and contemporary applications of the concept of the common. Based on the arguments illustrated, the author then suggests that architects should no longer be seen as solo players, but rather a commoner: an urban agent who explicitly uses their agency in relation to other urban actors.

The fourth chapter, *Erving Goffman’s Sociology of Physical Space for Architects and Urban Designers*, is by sociologist Fraya Frehse. Here, the work of Erving Goffman – a central author for the discussion on architecture and urbanism – is unfolded to investigate his approach to physical space. To do so, the author engages in a multi-dimensional, sociological conception of space that is inspiring for contemporary sociology. The main argument here is that Goffman’s work highlights a hexa-dimensional, and therefore sociologically unique, conception of space that offers two contributions to architects and urban designers. In his thesis – as does Henri Lefebvre – Goffman develops the notions of social space towards the practices of everyday life and the scale of intersubjective interactions and the “body”. He innovates the spatial debate through his

emphasis on its physical character, which had been somewhat derided by the different conceptions of “social space”. The article then concludes that Goffman’s sociology of physical space contributes to not only sociology, but also to anthropology, architecture and urban design.

In the fifth chapter, *Broken Windows, Revisited*, by architect Reinhold Martin, the author presents a new reading of the theory of “broken windows” from a socio-economic and urban-sociological approach. The chapter explains how the neoliberal cost-benefit calculations came to account for project aesthetics, along with social order as the bases for urban life.

The sixth chapter, *Architecture and the Critical Project*, is by philosopher Sven-Olov Wallenstein. The author tries to investigate the tradition of critical theory through following the seminal works of architect Manfredo Tafuri. Wallenstein explores the notion of “historical project” as the “project of a crisis”. As such, the conventional differentiations between subject and object, language and reality, are problematized in light of architecture and its form. This proposes that the apparent contradictions in the different stages of his writings is a clear reflection of the inner tensions within the very idea of critique and critical theory.

The seventh chapter, *Ruins of the Future*, by Otília Arantes, investigates the concept of “Dream World”: simply expressed, buildings that do not reflect the actual social world or the state of the masses. She perceives those utopian luxurious enclaves of urban structures as a sort of deceitful and deliberate hiding behind shimmery facades. Using examples from new Chinese cities and other enclaves in the East, the author concludes that the truth of the modernisation process exposes itself through its most extreme insight: architectural fantasies in the midst of the social ruins of the future.

Part two of the book, *Rethinking Spatial Rhythms*, contains four chapters starting at chapter eight, named *Henri Lefebvre and the Morphology of a Spatial Dialectic*, by geographer César Simoni Santos. The author explores the meaning of space in modernity and the theoretical and methodological tools used to create it. The author utilises the works of the French philosopher Lefebvre and his position toward Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche to render the ideas correlated with the concept of space and its dimensions.

The ninth chapter, *Anthropophagic Phenomenology: Encounters at Lina Bo’s SESC Pompeia’s Cultural and Leisure Centre*, is by Natalia Escobar Castrillón. The author explores the concept of anthropophagy using examples from the Brazilian experience, and especially through the works of artist Hélio Oiticica. The article investigates the conception of space

as mediated by the actions of multiple bodies within Brazilian popular culture. She portrays the act of anthropophagy as an act of social activism, a reaction to the Modernist dismissive position to local identities.

The tenth chapter, *Incremental Housing: A Short History of an Idea*, is by architect Nelson Mota. The author historically and critically analyses the concept of incremental housing and the various terms correlated with it, in addition to their wide-ranging consequences in social, cultural, environmental and urban practices. The chapter concludes that incremental housing approaches have a strong impact on social and spatial practices, labour and fluxes of people and materials. Architects and urban designers can restore incremental housing approaches to influence the urban metabolism of cities in the 21st century and create a better social life in the future.

The eleventh chapter, *The Bubble, the Arrow and the Area: Urban Design and Diagrammatic Concepts of Human Action*, by urbanist Daniel Koch, discusses the disciplinary strategies and techniques applied by urban designers to overcome modern ideologies of homogeneity. The article contends that new assumptions of urban design that incorporate social, environmental and cultural issues have failed to overcome the limits of social and ecological degradation, which, contradictorily, underpin the attempts to overcome them. He then concludes that a radical change in architectural and urban thinking and a reinvention of the city is required to overcome these schemes.

The third part of the book, *Contemporary Spatial Forms of the City*, contains five chapters, starting at chapter twelve, *The Subaltern City: Revisiting the Materialist Critique of Urban Form*, by architect Marta Caldeira. The author discusses the effects neoliberalism has on architecture and urban design, which results in designs that enforce radical social segregation in the urban world. Starting from the example of the “poor door” phenomenon – and how it is not new to the history of architecture – the article explores the social inequality rooted in the regulations and social codes throughout the history of architecture. The article concludes that a critical reflection is required to overcome this subordinate condition, caused by such unfortunate approaches.

Chapter thirteen, *The Chronicles of NEO*, by Janina Gosseye, discusses the case of the NEO, which is an urban development project in Brussels, Belgium, describing it as the Trojan horse of neoliberal development. The article focuses on this example as a representation of the neoliberal commodification of urban spaces that creates unrealistic urban enclaves in discontinuity with the existing fabric. It then concludes that it is up to architects and urban designers to take the lead and develop a strong design that resists this commodification of contemporary cities.

Chapter fourteen, *The Legitimized Reproduction of a Corporate Typology: Dispositions of Architectural Form in the LEED® Rating System*, is by architect Raphael Grazziano. This article discusses and questions the logic, purpose and spatial outcomes of the LEED rating system, and how it is contributing to the creation of the “corporate glass tower”. It also investigates the role it plays in creating a homogenized architecture, which is inconsistent with the inherent characteristics of local climates.

Chapter fifteen, *What Ever Happened to Social Housing*, by architect Sérgio Martín Blas, discusses the evolution of the concept of social housing – in Latin America in comparison with the European context – through the last century. The author recognizes two disciplinary strategies that are imposed by the neoliberal approach. The first strategy is related to market production of state-funded affordable housing, while the second is created as a result of inefficient state-funded housing programs. This strategy came – especially in Latin America – in the form of social movements that called for self-organisation and self-management with direct, democratic participation agendas. This polarization shows that critical mediation between the state infrastructural strategies and the processes and content of collective life are very much required.

Chapter sixteen, *Five Fronts for One Single Position: Critical Strategies for Contemporary Pedagogy in the Subject of Architectural Design*, by architects Carmen Espegel Alonso and Daniel Movilla Vega, elaborates an operative teaching system for the field of architecture that corresponds to some of the main contemporary questions posed to the discipline. The ideas proposed are based on practical experiences, in the field of design practice and teaching – in parallel with a recent experience of a social housing project located in Madrid – presented as a system that is open, changeable and in progress.

Finally, this book could be a particularly important reference for all interested in urban affairs, especially in an academic and research context, as well as to postgraduate students. It poses so many valid and contemporary questions, which can be an eye-opening read for those interested in urban life. It is also important on the level of urban studies that aim to understand the current state of urban affairs and that address the problems presented at decision and policy making levels. However, in a few articles of the book, authors have failed to propose practical examples for the issues discussed and have kept their focus on the theoretical level, which sometimes makes it hard to follow the arguments proposed.

This book is a reminder that we build our cities in response to our needs as humans to socialise and to coexist in a safe urban environment that serves as incubator for development and prosperity. However, the contemporary state of our cities does not seem to support this aim. How those in control respond to the challenges we are facing, will determine the future of our social and urban life.