

***The Property Issue. Ground Control and the Commons* (2018), "ARCH+ Journal for Architecture and Urbanism", 232 pp. - Spring 2018.**

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***Power and Justice* (2018), "The Architectural Review", vol. 244, Issue 1452, 113 pp. - June 2018.**

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Recent editions of the German journal *ARCH+ Journal for Architecture and Urbanism* (2018) and the UK based *The Architectural Review* (June 2018) set their sights on the complex imbroglgio of architecture and property, taking up themes of power, justice and the law, and asking: Who owns the land upon which our built edifices resolutely stand? Who can lay claim to such territorial power?

The cover of *The Architectural Review* shows us the personification of justice, her eyes blinded. Colour, race, gender should be of no consequence, all should be judged equally before the law. And yet, we know too well this is rarely the case, and unconscious bias swerves our sympathies. As the editor Paul Finch remarks, when set adrift, detached from each other's purview the key concepts of power and justice become either violent (power without justice) or else useless (justice without power). Recalling an argument by Michael Sorkin, one of the collected authors Mimi Zeiger blandly states that all architecture is political (Zeiger, 2018: 38). No gesture is innocent, every design decision, despite the best of intentions, can resolve itself into a device of territorial capture. Furthermore, architecture has become complicit with the militarisation of cities, defence systems, surveillance networks, and a hardened urban life set against the perceived stranger (38). Our contemporary control society has become the 'new normal'.

At the same time, we must pause to ask, when an architectural edifice is emptied of its representative affiliation with a given sov-

ereign power, when its tyrannical occupants go on vacation, are we apprehending the same building? A bunker becomes a nightclub, parliament buildings are emptied for renovations, power plants become museums, we know how such complex assemblages work, but do we know how to ethically work with them?

*The Architectural Review* is darkly edited in such a way to take us from the courthouse to the prison, following the path of the accused. What can be called 'Daedelus's dilemma' is elegantly performed: two articles critiquing the prison type, "penal architecture is essentially cruel" (Wilkinson, 92; Lambert) sandwich a review of a humane prison designed by CF Møller in Denmark. The architectural *aporia*, to build or not to build, is presented as the architect murmurs to herself: If I don't take the commission to design and build the prison, then a lesser architect will be given the job and the inmates thereby disadvantaged.

Where the wall does not contain us within the confines of a cell, however humane or inhumane, it is to be found winding its way like a venomous creeper across vast swathes of the earth, carrying its colonising gesture even into the exploration of outer space: the Moon, where the Chinese have recently attempted to grow the seed of a cotton plant; Mars, where intrepid exploration is ongoing. Danae Stratou and Yanis Varoufakis argue that the very concept of the individual emerges out of the necessity of cordoning off a well-defined and exclusive space using the wall as infrastructural instrument. Any

discussion of justice and power in relation to architecture, as Nabil Ahmed elegantly demonstrates, leads us promptly to the question of property, which depends on this technology of the wall. Composing the cover of the *Arch+*, *The Property Issue: Ground Control and the Commons*, a long diaphanous yet insistent fence passes across a deserted landscape. The artist Anina Brisolla takes images appropriated from NASA space exploration and superimposes walls across depictions of these off-world territories. How much strife do we produce, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau once lamented, with that first gesture of cordoning off a patch of the earth and enunciating the infantile exclamation: this is mine! Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's refrain "Property is theft" is a notable epigraph on Florian Herwerk's discussion of Hans-Jochen Vogel's aim to reform ownership of urban land from the simple yet radical premise that property is a common good, like water and air, not a tradeable commodity (Herwerk, 2018: 46). To locate us squarely in the issue, *Arch+* opens with a brief history of property and land reform from Antiquity, through the Middle Ages, to the Modern era, drawing our attention to the deceptively simple question: Who owns the land? This special issue, in English and German editions, includes an overview of land policy relevant to the German context, and examines policy reforms that could have made a difference when it comes to spatial justice in urban contexts. Today, individuals un-

leashed by processes of privatization, the indebted men, women and others we have become, are much like the landless peasants of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century whose access to the commons was thwarted when the commons came to be enclosed (Harald Trapp, 2018: 34-39).

The challenge that the editors Arno Brandhuber and Olaf Grawart extend is that, much like Finch's take on power and justice, critical interpretation and creative transformation should not be hewn apart when it comes to our practical and theoretical work as architects. It's a lesson they take from Marx, and it is to Marx that Doug Spencer author of *The Architecture of Neoliberalism*, whom the editors interview, suggests we all need to return. The whole of this issue of *Arch+* can be read as something of a primer, one that should no doubt be on the mandatory reading lists of all architects and students of architecture: Think land first, don't assume you can raise edifices outside of its rules and regulations and complex networks of ownership. Think the land as a common good. Think property as a verb, Maria Marić goes so far as to suggest, "Always in motion, it travels from noun to noun, land to building, city to region, state to the world, making stories of privatization, gentrification, appropriation" (Marić, 2018: 70). The contents of *Arch+* are pedagogically organised around 'Ownership and Access', 'Production and Reproduction', 'Right and Solidarity'. Crucially, the second category returns to the influential work of Dolores Hayden

and Silvia Federici, locating the question of reproductive labour at the heart of the journal. The grand domestic revolution is the one that asks us to acknowledge the economic value of erstwhile unpaid domestic labour, "cooking food, caring for children, and cleaning house" (Hayden, 2018: 132). In fact, when we follow Hayden's argument, we see how the material practices of housework lend themselves to the rethinking of the infrastructures of a city. Importantly, both journals place projects, speculative and built, alongside critical discourse. The conundrum embedded in the heart of *The Architectural Review* are its advertising pages, an economic claim for page space that seems to belie the journal's political message. It's hard to read a critical appraisal of architecture alongside glossy images of building products. Still, the 'power of the project', to play on the subtitle that names this journal, *Ardeth*, is something that should not be underestimated. An architect who does not consider the question of property is a naive one, an architect who does not recognise her or his role amidst power relations risks abusing their power. The lessons delivered across the collected essays and project reviews in both journals, fortuitously and urgently, call out that no architect should believe that they are outside a politics of spatialized power relations. Architecture's fundamental question, Nabil insists, must be: 'How do we live together?' (Nabil, 2018: 10)

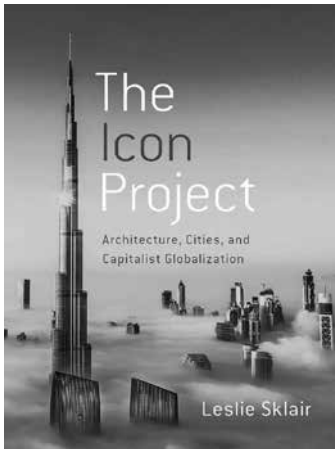
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**Leslie Sklair, *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization*, New York, Oxford University Press, 329 pp. - 2017**

**Hardback: \$ 34.95 - ISBN 9780190464189 / e-book: \$ 23.99 - ISBN 9780190464202**

**Davide Ponzini and Michele Nastasi, *Starchitecture. Scenes, Actors, and Spectacles in Contemporary Cities*, New York, The Monacelli Press, 216 pp. - 2016**

**Hardback: \$ 40.00 - ISBN 9781580934688**



In the last fifteen years the debate on star-architects and their iconic productions has occupied thousands of pages, a multitude of publications with significant differences in contents and scopes: from glossy catalogues displaying trendy architectural images, to harsh criticism of star-architects and their works, up to critical thoughts on the success of star-architecture. The books recently published by Leslie Sklair, “The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization” and Davide Ponzini, with the contribution of the photographer Michele Nastasi, “Starchitecture. Scenes, Actors, and Spectacles in Contemporary Cities” clearly belong to the last category: they both rigorously elaborate on the reasons for star-architects and their iconic and spectacularized products to be so prominent in contemporary cities.

Sklair investigates iconic architecture building on an explicit ideological position, rooted in a Marxist critique to the society and urban phenomena. The book’s title “The Icon Project” emphasizes the struggle, or the inherent “project” more precisely, by which the transnational capitalist class (TCC), a recurrent topic in Sklair’s work, affirms the hegemony in the global urban world by means of iconic architectural and urban products, a condition epitomized by the author visiting the Peak Tower in Hong Kong. Therefore, the declared objective of the work is documenting how this process unfolds, following Ernst Gombrich’s statement quoted in the book (p. 23) that: “iconology

must start with a study of institutions rather than with a study of symbols”. Sklair’s study of “institutions”, or rather of the TCC and its Icon Project, is carried out through detailed analysis supported by interviews and media analysis, besides references to a considerable literature. After having defined the expression “Icon Project”, the book explains how architecture agencies and mass media collectively mobilize for it. A sociological analysis of the architecture industry follows, investigating the four top architectural firms founded by Gehry, Foster, Koolhaas and Hadid. The second part of the book focuses on different architectural and urban iconic projects, dedicating a chapter to each faction of what Sklair calls TCC, namely corporate, political, professional and consumerist classes. The book concludes with a call to architects to creatively work for an alternative non-capitalist globalization. While Sklair builds on the Icon Project stance, Ponzini moves instead from a set of questions: why do cities desire signature architectures? Are there specific expectations by different actors toward famous architects? Which is the role of star architects in the public arena? Does it change in different contexts and how? The objective here is investigating the function of “star-architecture” and the role of its designers in processes of urban transformation, looking at *Scenes, Actors and Spectacles in Contemporary Cities* as the introductory chapter’s title announces. Images by Nastasi are admittedly intended to provide an auto-

mous apparatus coherent and complementary to the text. After an introductory part, where the author states his positioning and aims, a prologue to the entire work critically deconstructs the so-called Bilbao-effect as the dominant narrative to sum up the role of star architecture in urban regeneration. The next chapters, through the observation of a number of remarkable projects, empirically detect the role of works by celebrated star-architects in three different global cities: Abu Dhabi (oligarchic city), Paris (élite city) and New York (plural city), with the addition of the Vitra Campus without a proper city environment. The conclusion remarks that the symbolic and semiotic dimension of the urban environment has nowadays a primary interest. While in Sklair the idea of the TCC dominates, imposing its consumerist-ideological hegemony to local dimension, Ponzini's investigation points out that star-architectures are grounded in the different local conditions where they are built, where actors and economic conditions also differ profoundly.

In both cases, the works account for a two-decade debate, fostered by the publication in 2005 of Charles Jencks's "The Iconic Building - The Power of Enigma", as well as previous contributions on the topic by the authors. They share some common traits: an analysis and critique of star-architecture considering decision-making processes, more directed toward the different TCC segments in Sklair.

Yet, the two authors also emphasize their different approaches to the issue, reflecting both their own entry points and the transdisciplinary debate on the topic. As a milestone in the debate on the architectural turns toward iconic and sensationalized architecture in cities transformation, for instance, the 2006 special issue of "City" on the theme (vol. 10, no. 1) gathered a comprehensive collection of disciplines at stake, which included articles from architects Thielen and Jencks, geographers Kaika and McNeill; urbanists Hein and Ho, and Sklair himself. Sklair, a British sociologist based at the London School of Economics, aims at exploring and criticizing the whole capitalist global society and its culture-ideology of consumerism through the case of iconic architecture. Based on the same iconic architectures, the Italian urbanist Ponzini, working at Politecnico di Milano, engages instead with more disciplinary questions regarding the current architect's and planner's role in decision-making processes and the transformation of cities. Concerning the reader's experience, both books provide two rigorously argued views of the societal role of star architects, their products and their ways of working. Yet, the value added when reading them in parallel is that such views do not overlap precisely, which best furnishes the ongoing debate on the globalized scopes of architectural work shaping contemporary cities, from Paris and New York to Shenzhen and Abu Dhabi, as well as on the tight knots between architects' role and society.

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**Roberto Secchi, *L'architettura: dal principio verità al principio responsabilità*, Roma, Officina Edizioni, 143 pp. – 2017**  
**Paperback: € 20,00 – ISBN 978-8-86049-285-2**



Il libro propone un'interpretazione storiografica dell'architettura del Novecento fondata sul passaggio dal principio verità al principio responsabilità. Sul passaggio, cioè, dalla ricerca di un'autenticità dello spirito dell'epoca ad una sua evoluzione in termini di declinazione spazio-temporale dei principi etici tradizionali. La tesi dell'autore è che il metro di giudizio dell'azione progettuale debba essere un'etica fondata sui diritti dell'uomo e capace di orientarsi al futuro. Il libro, quindi, non si confronta con il diritto dal punto di vista del potere che dà o toglie alla professione architettonica, ma sul piano della responsabilità, civile e morale, quale prodotto di un sistema di norme e regole che necessita di essere ricalibrato sul concetto di umanità.

Anche se talvolta fine a sé stessa, un'attenta e colta ricostruzione dei fenomeni artistico-culturali del secolo scorso permette all'autore di identificare una variazione di sensibilità nei confronti del reale. Le radici epistemiche di tale variazione affondano in un mondo caratterizzato dall'interpretazione, ma innegabilmente dotato di un'irriducibilità fisica. Questa irriducibilità produce negli oggetti un'agentività, cioè la capacità di condizionare l'azione degli uomini e, quindi, il compimento dei loro diritti. Attraverso l'agentività delle sue architetture, l'architetto avrebbe dunque una missione civile: ha responsabilità nei confronti del genere umano. E anche della Terra: partendo da concetti di Günther Anders e Hans Jonas, l'autore definisce la responsabilità come la percezione di dover prendersi cura di chi abiterà la Terra dopo di noi. Così, nella prospettiva delle future generazioni, il tema dell'architettura si lega a quello dei diritti anche attraverso l'urgenza di

sostenibilità ambientale per le azioni di progetto.

Il risultato è la necessità di una progettazione in accordo con il principio responsabilità, prodotta dalle intenzioni iniziali dell'architetto e filtrata attraverso la sua poetica individuale. Tuttavia, diventa difficile capire dove l'autore collochi la soglia di responsabilità: quando è lecito perdonare l'insuccesso di un progetto e quando è invece necessario imputargli il fallimento? Sono le intenzioni iniziali a fare da discriminante?

Attraverso la capacità di condizionarsi a vicenda, oggetti e soggetti sono posizionati dall'autore sullo stesso piano ontologico. Aiutato anche da un ricco sistema di riferimenti bibliografici contemporanei, l'autore può così proporre un approccio "*relazionale*" alla concezione del progetto di architettura, in opposizione ad uno di tipo "*oggettuale*", cioè fondato su ragioni compositive e di astrazione. Sebbene il lettore troverà sicuramente importante

lo spunto di riflessione proposto, il libro non spiega chiaramente come sia possibile mantenere parità ontologica tra entità orientate da finalità dichiaratamente antropocentriche come il compimento dei diritti dell'uomo. Dopo una prima parte più teorica, il libro si articola in una serie di approfondimenti dei diritti enunciati da due documenti presi a riferimento e riportati in calce: la Dichiarazione Universale dei Diritti dell'Uomo e la Carta Europea dei diritti fondamentali. I principali diritti vengono analizzati e si valutano le scelte progettuali capaci di determinarne, o meno, il rispetto. Questa parte perde i connotati del saggio e, sebbene con alcuni slanci moralizzanti su società e professione, ha il pregio di innescare potenzialmente una riflessione con professionisti, giovani e non, su un piano non artistico-autoriale su cui invece talvolta ricade la parte precedente del libro.

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