

# Reviews

**Giovanna Borasi (Ed.), *A Section of Now: Social Norms and Rituals as Sites for Architectural Intervention*, Leipzig, CCA/Spector Books, 368 pp. – 2022. Softcover: € 35,00 – ISBN 3959055072**



The exhibition *A Section of Now: Social Norms and Rituals as Sites for Architectural Intervention*, conceived as part of the CCA's one-year investigation *Catching Up with Life*, took place at the Main Galleries of the *Canadian Centre for Architecture* in Montreal between November 2021 and May 2022, and was then followed by a co-publication by the CCA and Spector Books. Giovanna Borasi, architect and curator, entitles the introduction to the catalogue *Attention to New Sites for Architecture*, explaining: "the relation between society and architecture has always existed. Societal transformations have inspired architectural interventions to house our rituals, norms, and cultural patterns, architecture mirrors our collective values" (pp. 7). Starting consideration of

the volume is that portions of contemporary life are misaligned with the spaces they occupy. The book stresses that artificial landscape conditions our lives, inducing everyone to witness how society moves on constantly. For instance, radical changes in society, economy, environment, and technology introduce new forms of living and aggregation and "constitute a call from society to architects and designers to devise spatial arrangements and strategies that could support these new and diverse conceptions of living". The influence of growing individualism and the increasing number of one-person households continues to rise, while the housing environment of the western world cities is characterized by large scale apartments, a recurring pattern conceived to respond to large family demands of the past. Even though the structural response of architecture is, in most cases, deferred over time, creative responses by the dwellers can act as a medium between the designers' gaps. Purpose of the exhibition is precisely to show possibilities to fill these gaps: throughout six main issues each of them subdivided in several examples, the catalogue explores how the built environment conditions emerging forms of contemporary living.

For instance, the unaffordability of housing, the cost of living in large urban areas, and the widespread inability to build equally through real estate have created non-traditional forms of cohabitation such as *Nesterly* (pp. 332), a tool that uses an algorithm, like the ones used by dating apps, to help initiate living arrangements across

generations. Design and social transformations foster the collaborative use and management of space by non-nuclear groups such as *Yoshino Cedar House* (pp. 28), designed by the Japanese architect Go Hasegawa in partnership with Airbnb; the project is a hybrid community space and homestay, planned to be a shared experience for guests and residents alike, where "the village is the host." Likewise, in Los Angeles, *PodShare* creates a connection with the backpacker lifestyle, providing bunk beds, branded as a capsule, in an open environment, "designed to maximize social collision" (pp. 219). Several minds are trying to solve this issue by creating more inclusive environments and typologies. In Basel, for instance, Jack Self aims to promote democracy, inclusion, and space equality with alternative ownership models. In his project *Ingot* (pp. 222), the tower, often seen as a symbol of western capitalism, becomes a tool conceived to house low-income workers. The project imagines a long-term bond financing structure and, it would allow the developer to charge tenants extraordinarily reduced rent, thereby offering them a highly secure home. On the same line *La hauteur pour tous* (pp. 220), where the apartments in the tower are made by different rooms "vertically dispersed through the building" (one at the lower level coupled with a terrace at the top) to reach new equality of light and views between tenants. Architectural practice Dogma states that the task of architects is to answer in a strategic manner to alternative forms of ownership with new arrangements to

reinforce confidence and solidarity between the inhabitants. Furthermore, projects such as *Promised Land* (pp. 224), use various sites (London, Brussels, and Helsinki) and the unique opportunities each context and governance offers to bring about a different housing model. The project *Naked House*, (pp. 20) designed by the architecture office OMMX in 2017, is an example of an effort to create a new housing type that provides a financially accessible threshold to home ownership. Another interesting example is Heinrich Degelo's and his *Homebase Cooperative's Artists' Studios* (pp. 21) in Basel, where people can rent square meters for 10 CHF/month, depending on their needs without contributing to what could be called consumerist bulimia of space. The Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012), thrilled with the social media platform *TikTok*, has spurred the latest iteration of content houses, the most notable of which being *Hype House*, a McMansion home (once a middle-class house of the suburbs) where some of the platform's most prominent young stars have formed a cohabitation group (pp. 118). "Technologies can change our set of values, values are frequently articulated through rituals, and rituals have a way of finding support in specific architectural form" (pp. 270). This interrelationship is evident in the *Crematorium* by Office KGDVS (pp. 270): a redesign of the conventional ritual space with the *treatment* in the most climactic point in the architecture. In addition, the intervention *Constellation Park* (pp. 272), designed by DeathLAB, creates a network of suspended memorial

shrines composed of illuminated vessels that use the biomass of the deceased to generate light. With music streaming services, auto-sharing, and other new models of access, we are already moving past the idea of owning many of the things that we use and enjoy daily. "Might we not own a house, but instead subscribe to one?" asks the curator herself. The sociological remarks impacting society should guide architectural design. We live in an increasingly subscription-based society, in which the concept of individual property has been erased: centuries of struggle for affordable public housing might be swept away like ashes through the click of a subscription. "When housing becomes a commodity, constructed for profit rather than community, it is urgent for architects to contribute not only to the building of houses but also to the conception of new forms of ownership" states Giovanna Borasi. The volume can be considered as a compendium of strategies belonging to different areas united by a high rate of innovation. The take-home message emerging from the emotional photo reportages and from the selected projects is that architecture has lost the foresight necessary to provide the world with spaces in step with the times conducted. New doesn't always mean up to date: architecture should serve as a medium for transforming theoretical thinking into designed spaces for humans.

Eugenio Lux

Alta Scuola Politecnica  
Politecnico di Milano

**Ecology & Aesthetics**, “OASE. Journal for architecture”, Issue 112, 128 pp. – April 2022. Paperback: € 22,95 – ISBN 9789462086838

**Energy**, “The Architectural Review”, n. 1495, 110 pp. – October 2022. Paperback: € 22,95 – ISSN 0003861X



This review contributes to the collective discussion on the keywords *beautiful, sustainable, together* by examining two very different recently published works: issue n. 112 of “OASE,” published in April 2022, entitled *Ecology & Aesthetics*, and issue n. 1495 of “The Architectural Review,” published a few months later, entitled *Energy*.

Both journals place projects, either speculative or built, alongside critical discourse. By doing so, both journals propose lenses of inquiry to discuss the different relationships between the proposed keywords and exemplar projects. The international Dutch-based architectural journal OASE, in its English and Dutch editions, provides an overview of the complex intersection between ecology and aesthetics in architecture, as the title suggests from the outset. This relationship is articulated in the opening text by Bart Decroos, Kornelia Dimitrova, Sereh Mandias, and Elsbeth Ronner, the editors of this issue (pp. 2-10). They recollect that initial reactions to the proposed combo were such as: “Ecology and aesthetics might have nothing to say to each other.” Therefore they embarked on further investigations into the topic, highlighting some clear points about the common perception of the two words: *ecology* is generally associated with the concept of relations, while *aesthetics* recalls the concept of form; both words operate as *container terms*. Afterwards, the editors introduce three key concepts for reading the issue. First: “*The rather recent discourse on ecology in architecture – in its widest sense perhaps best described as the realisation that our actions here have an impact elsewhere – can no longer be seen as unrelated to perhaps one of the oldest questions in architecture – how to give form to a complex set of often contradicting questions and expectations.*”

Second: tackling environmental problems means rethinking our relationship with the environment and the practices and values on which an ecological culture is built,

not limited to solving problems and finding technological solutions. Third: ecological thinking invites us to think about the relationships between things rather than seeing the world in terms of separate categories, pointing out that “the distinction between form and relations, between ‘how things look’ and ‘how things work,’ is difficult to draw.”

Each author interprets these statements within the issue using their own key, but always with a concrete example. Some propose reinterpretations of twentieth-century projects, such as the MIT Solar I and the Solar-Do-Nothing Machine in the contribution by Nives Mestre and Eduardo Roig (pp. 11-23); Françoise Fromonot reasons on the paradoxical legacy of Mies’s Farnsworth House in Plano in the contemporary debate on the aesthetics of *ecological* architecture (pp. 24-44); Osamu Ishiyama’s Farmer’s House is discussed by Alice Paris (pp. 45-57); finally, Oswald Mathias Ungers’s projects for solar housing are illustrated in the essay by Cornelia Escher and Lars Fischer (pp. 58-73).

The second part focuses on more recent research, among which those by Rodrigo Delso Gutiérrez and Antonio Giráldez López (pp. 94-112), and the one by Eliza Culea-Hong (pp. 74-93), examine case studies in which a new aesthetics of sustainability (presenting *green* as always beautiful and good) masks controversial interventions from an environmental and social point of view, in which a variety of concepts are addressed such as the aesthetic notion of authenticity, the idealisation of what is authentic, the aesthetic conflict of new forms of energy, the aesthetic fiction of the autochthonous, and

the glitch as an element of aesthetic critique.

The third and final part of the magazine is dedicated to hairy materials and green walls, with articles by Pauline Lefebvre (pp. 113-126) and Beatriz Van Houtte Alonso (pp. 127-139). With materials and construction techniques at the core of the debate through two specific foci, a broader reflection opens on the integration of *beautiful, sustainable, and together*.

On the other hand, the issue of "The Architectural Review" is entirely devoted to the topic of energy. Its three assumptions are explained in the editorial and the keynote by Barnabas Calder (pp. 6-14): first, "energy takes up space;" second, "architecture is made of fuel – and our current reserves are running dry;" third, "re-examining the history of architecture through the lens of energy changes our reading of buildings and helps us imagine alternative futures." The issue offers a selection of essays, architectural projects, and biographical reviews, all of which seek to "make visible the often-obscured links between buildings and the energy sources they are built from, and around" as announced in the abstract on the website.

The first assumption is well expressed in the essays by Sahar Shah (pp. 26-30) and Marina Otero Verzier (pp. 88-93). Shah writes about Canadian pipelines and railways, described as the tangible traces of settler-imposed transformations. The transit and construction of these two infrastructures, which now seem indispensable and fully integrated into the landscape, have faced fierce resistance from the indigenous peoples of the Alberta tar

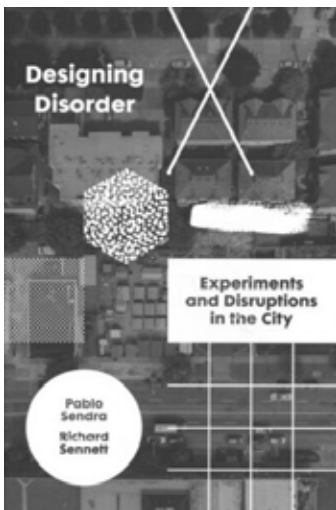
sands. Shah clarifies that "in the architecture of the pipeline, materiality becomes subordinated to the 'idea,' the image, the blueprint, the plan, the end, but the bloody process of constructing things – the means – matters." Otero Verzier, on the other hand, writes about the environmental impact of battery production and the construction of a data centre, presented as both a site of investment and controversy. The essay discusses the gap between the intention to reduce the impact – and make these highly energy-intensive constructions sustainable – and the fact that ever larger and more powerful constructions are needed to guarantee the desired technological progress in all latitudes. The author highlights in concluding her essay the paradox of needing more energy and new remedies, despite the evidence of climate catastrophe, rather than experimenting with new forms of life. Sustainability, inclusivity, and aesthetics take on an impressive weight in these contexts. What emerges from reading this issue, with all articles focusing on buildings, is that the tension of contemporary design lies not only in the reciprocal relationship, balancing these three keywords, but above all in the correlation between them and other instances that have become essential: technological progress, tourism development (see the article by Holger Dahl, pp. 98-106), waste reduction and nuclear waste facility (see articles by Danielle Demetriou and by Anna Winston, at pp. 58-67 and pp. 16-24), integration of energy production and the dynamics of the city (see articles by Tom Wilkinson and by Ellen Peirson, at pp. 32-39 and pp. 72-82), to mention but a few.

Across the collected essays and project reviews, the Energy issue of "The Architectural Review" proposes an unusual and peculiar reading of a sand golf course. In "Oil in one" (pp. 94-97), Ali Karimi tells us about the valuable lesson of a sand course, a virtuous ancestor of the unrealistic grass courses built, for example, in the desert in Qatar and Bahrain. In this case, the difficult conditions at the outset – in particular water scarcity – changed the expected outcome of the project: setting up the court using sand mixed with oil, instead of grass, preserves the desert landscape and draws a cheap and easy-to-maintain alternative. "The imaginary of golf had to change, not the landscape," as the author points out. Even if sand greens are not entirely sustainable, the Awali Golf Club "demonstrates attitudes to landscape that the region would do well to adopt." Working with what is there, turning even a seemingly hostile context into a challenge and an opportunity is an approach expressed by many contemporary landscape projects: when faced with the transition from risk scenarios to uncertainty scenarios, they turn risk factors into opportunities to develop brilliant new design solutions and embrace uncertainty as a design theme. Today's beautiful, sustainable, and inclusive project should perhaps be uncertain or open. Open to unforeseen outcomes, unexpected disruptions, and unpredictable transformations.

Giulia Marino  
Sapienza Università di Roma

Rodrigo Nunes, *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal. A Theory of Political Organisation*, London, Verso Books, 320 pp. – 2021. Paperback: € 23,55 - ISBN 9781788733830

Pablo Sendra, Richard Sennett, *Designing Disorder. Experiments and Disruptions in the City*, London, Verso Books, 160 pp. – 2022. Paperback: € 11,83 – ISBN 9781788737838



The precise observation of the contemporary impasse is the starting point for both the authors and activists of *Neither vertical nor horizontal: A theory of political organisation* and *Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City*. The former is an intense and meticulous investigation by the Brazilian philosopher Rodrigo Nunes, the latter is a two-handed book where the architect Pablo Sendra reflects on the masterpiece *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* together with its writer. The volume was published by Richard Sennett in 1970 and soon became a significant essay on the dangers inherent in the rationality through which modern metropolises have been built and governed.

Rodrigo Nunes' approach is mainly theoretical, and, as the subtitle suggests, it is not a book on how to organise but on how to think about organisation. Thus, its purpose is not to find the correct answer, but rather to ask the right questions. According to the author, recent movements show an extraordinary strength of initial action but, at the same time, seem to be incapable of evolving into long-term forms. However, instead of blaming the different types of organisations, Nunes suggests reframing the ways of thinking about it. He does not try to identify the best form of organisation but investigates what an organisation is in its broadest sense. As the title emblematically announces, the book develops through the philosophical-political deconstruction of a long series of binarism as centralised/dispersed, leaders/participants,

collective/aggregate, local/global, party/movement, organisation/spontaneity, hegemony/autonomy, and mostly vertical/horizontal. As stated by the author, these have paralysed the practical potential of recent movements. Specifically, the book is a response to the social movements that characterised 2011, a year that remains a vivid memory of the insurrectional force. The author proposes a view whereby the 2011 protests are the 1989 counterpart to the 1960s protests. The destruction of the Berlin wall highlighted the impossibility of enduring the contemporary situation, just as 2011 was a long response to the 2007 economic and political crisis. That was the year of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa and the Occupy movement in the United States and some European countries. While it brought great hope, it also stressed the internal limits of demonstrations. The author contends that movements are abandoning horizontalism because of their lack of roots, inconstancy, and inability to sustain themselves. He, therefore, commits to reviewing the facts, forms, and forces that have limited horizontalism. He does so, by exploring the theme of organisation trauma, which is interconnected with what is called "two melancholias" in chapter 2. This term refers to two decisive historical moments in the leftist struggle: the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the student and workers' struggles of 1968. The two moments have been as powerful as their consequences over time have been disappointing.

According to the author, the indecipherability of causes and errors led the left to a loss of confidence and to a totalizing “self-torturing,” which contributed even more to the weakening of the concept of revolution.

In chapter 3, he tries to understand why people once seemed to believe more. Starting from its earliest deterministic and theological meaning, he deals with this change in perception of revolution and the consequential progressive evasion of the organisation dimension. Revolution was originally linked to the motion of the planets and a cyclical interpretation of history. However, the advent of the modern era and a rising conception of the future changed its meaning. In the nineteenth century, people believed they were living on the edge of great events and had total confidence in progress. Nevertheless, the publication of the second law of thermodynamics, which guaranteed the inevitable decay of all forms of energy, along with the events of World War II and fascism, severely influenced revolution theory.

Reading this historical description and how it led to the crisis of certainties offers several similarities in the field of the discipline of architecture in which, however, the process of mystification has been much slower and much more difficult to disguise.

A key observation of the consequences of modernity on contemporary cities is the basis for Richard Sennet’s and Pablo Sendra’s book. The book is divided into three parts. The first, by the American sociologist,

takes up the basic concepts of his thinking about the city. The second is edited by the architect Sendra and is an attempt to put into practice the instances presented above. The third is a three-way dialogue in which the two authors are questioned on some fundamental themes, such as the meaning of the hybrid figures of the sociologist-activist and the architect-activist.

In the first part, Sennet adds evidence to his long-standing thesis picking up on concepts he wrote when he was 25 years old. As a Harvard student, he was taught to have complete faith in the rationality of modern architecture. However, at the same time, he witnessed the long season of student protests at universities. He looks at urban dynamics dictated by the real estate industry, the anti-democratic use of space, privatisations, and formal strategies to control and exclude. He defines them as obvious symptoms of a rigid and predetermined design that stifles the modern city and represses people’s freedom of action. For Sennet, the city is both a *ville* and a *cit  *. The former term indicates the physical form and the latter the way of inhabiting and experiencing urban space. The two elements are closely related and influence each other. By presenting various examples, from Le Corbusier’s plan Voisin to the contemporary Hudson Yard, a New York example, he demonstrates the adverse consequences of modern planning on people’s lives. Additionally, he shows their counterparts, such as the bustling Garment District, near

Hudson Yard, as positive models of how cities should be. He analyses these examples to show how “disruptions” can counteract hyper-determination, both formal and social, and turning to architects and urban planners, he proposes to “design disorder”. The first chapter of the first part is a historical reading of the relationship between order and society in recent centuries. It begins with the first modern work of social engineering, namely Napoleon’s Civil Code of 1804, and proceeds by introducing the twentieth-century concept of the “open city.” This concept, theorised by the urban planner Jane Jacobs, incites the production of extravagant urban expansions and adaptations, such as putting a hospital for HIV patients in the centre of a shopping street. Although Sennet admires Jacobs’ strategy, he sees in it a somewhat overly romantic revival of neighbourhood life of the past and he denounces its impossibility in the contemporary city. The sociologist asserts that, as John Locke stated, democracy can be anywhere, not just in the size of the neighbourhood or village. However, the perception of democracy in recent times is much closer to Thomas Jefferson’s position, which argues that democracy is possible only in reduced fields. According to the author, if we still think of the Greek theatre as a space of democracy, we will not be able to accept and understand today’s complex and fast-paced spatiality. Somewhat like Nunes critiques the renunciation of the growth of horizontal movements, Sennet recriminates the disillusionment with which

urban planners and architects view the contemporary city as a space of democracy and hypothesises some physical concepts that might convey democracy. In the second part, Pablo Sendra starts referring to the same 2011 protests from which Nunes' book stems and adds some others, such as the M15 movement in Spain or the long tradition of English squatters. He argues that it is necessary to take note of both the forms of imposed order as well as of how they are contested by people. Protests spontaneously modify the physical space and create variations able to host democracy. Therefore, talking about protest movements becomes an opportunity to reflect on how to design disorder. He illustrates first some spontaneous design episodes, such as the case of the claiming of spaces under the West Way in North Kensington in London, then annotates a series of design examples, such as Santiago Cirugeda's Recetas Urbanas project, Stortorget Square in Norway by Ecosistema Urbano, or Office for Political Innovation research. The cases show different attempts to use architecture as a tool to design disorder instead of order. Based on their reading, the author presents his own proposal. For Sendra, infrastructure should be a long-lasting tool for interacting with public space. Infrastructure provides a basic structure that contains and systematises and, at the same time, allows episodes of spontaneity. Even more detailed examples can be found in the sections "Below," "Above," and "Disorder in Section." He describes, with words and drawings, technical floors, terminals, modu-

lar surfaces, and vertical connecting elements, all different types of infrastructure. These technical examples help him to define the system necessary to design disorder as a sum of components to which one does not attribute a specific function but functional capabilities, which are different possibilities of co-functioning dependent on interaction with other components. Pablo Sendra refers to these links as assemblages, whereas Rodrigo Nunes could call them ecosystems. Just as *Designing disorder* is divided into a more reflective part and a more propositional part, the second part of *Neither vertical, nor horizontal* identifies what is called "organised ecology" as an effective framework for organisation theory. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the different elements of ecology, such as distributed leadership, organising cores, vanguard-function, diffuse control, platforms, diversity of strategies, and parties. Thinking about organising as an ecology means thinking about the relationships between different levels and forms of action. It means referring not to individual movements but to the ecology in which they cooperate. Throughout ecology, there is no competition, but clashes create richness and are essential for life. Within an ecology, the richness of one cluster is available to the whole ecology, and each component can indirectly shape the field of possibility of the others. To understand ecology, one must think of organisation as a vector of force. Kant's principle that two terms can be opposite but not necessarily contradictory helps us to understand ecology in an innovative way. In the *Critique*

of *Pure Reason*, in the late 18th century, Kant explains that an object, on which two different but counterbalancing vector forces act, remains static but without denying the existence of motion. So, ecology is a set of vectors that come in various sizes, directions, shapes, and degrees, with different capacities to gather support and produce change and that, when combined, produce mediated motion. Even though the two books address different areas, they both aim to find a reliable solution to complex situations and time constraints. The solution is not meant as an oriented result but rather as a dynamic application of a concept, thus as an ever-changing interpretation of the tools. While we have on the one hand, a more philosophical thesis and on the other, a dissertation that seeks to give a practical spin to anthropological theories, both capture the same spirit toward a future that can be reshaped through an interpretation of political association and to a political interpretation of space. It could be said that urban planners and architects would find in reading *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal* suggestions for thinking about physical forms and how they are linked to political forms. There is a point of contact between political theory and design that *Designing Disorder* starts to investigate but that should still be explored today and probably the most inspiring feature of the two works is their attitude towards reasoning about overall power. This is in the conviction that the future must be faced together.

Martina Dussin  
Università IUAV di Venezia

**Max Ajl, *A People's Green New Deal*, London, Pluto Press, 224 pp. – 2021. Paperback: € 19,75 - ISBN 9780745341750**



Max Ajl's *A People's Green New Deal* questions the language, keywords and agendas of Green New Deals (GNDs). Rather than simply offering technical solutions, Ajl argues, they are tools for governing – they are political. Refusing to smother democratic debate about the distribution of wealth under the “blanket of emergency,” Ajl sets out to investigate different GNDs and transition agendas while broaching the vexed question: “are these agendas for governing capitalism, or for destroying it?”

The first part of the book offers a dense critique of several GNDs and projects of “Great Transition” (chapter 1). Following Ajl, “Great Transition” agendas rely on a “Green Social Control” that “aims to preserve the essence of capitalism while shifting to a greener model in order to sidestep the

worst consequences of the climate crisis” (pp. 34). Ajl convincingly reveals how specific plans for “Great Transition” simply create “new kinds of [capitalistic] investment vehicles” grounded on a rhetoric of emergency and a misleading Malthusian model, which pass “vegan diets” and “biofuels” off as possible green solutions.

According to Ajl, this is also due to a “technological genie” that produces an unwavering faith in technology (chapter 2). Focusing on the history and theory of “eco-modernism,” Ajl notes how faith in technology reduces central political questions to issues of technological advance. This faith is grounded in two underlying assumptions: “capitalism is not inherently polarizing and exclusionary” and “technologies are socially innocent” (pp. 72). With a focus on dependency theory, Ajl challenges these premises showing the obstacles within capitalism to a possible decoupling of growth from environmental impact. Along these lines, Ajl then addresses the unavoidable question of energy use (chapter 3). Instead of Keynesian progressive GNDs or “strawman degrowth” models, Ajl proposes a model of “energy use” that, while calling for a reduction of energy use in the North, would by no means prescribe austerity.

A focus on inequalities between North and South is also what allows Ajl to argue that the Alexandra Ocasio Cortez 2019 Green New Deal (AOC-GND) “displaced and erased” demands and necessities coming from the Global South (chapter 4). Ajl reads this

GND model in continuity with 20th century social democracy and what Ajl sees as its distinctive traits: “class compromise,” “constant growth,” “value extraction from the periphery” and “anti-communism:” flaws that lead green social democracy to “ecological imperialism and environmentally uneven exchange.” Ajl continues by listing what he sees as four major shortcomings to green social democracy projects, even those to the left of AOC's GND: they are not “achievable through current strategies,” they are “imperialist,” “marketed as eco-socialism” even though they are not, and limit “our political imaginations.”

Part two's four chapters expand on these claims and complement the book with an imaginative, yet solution-based roadmap to eco-socialism – or, “a set of analytical notes” to a People's Green New Deal. The main premises for this are that eco-socialist “civilization” cannot rely on the voting system of social democracy in the “short-to-medium term, and in the North” and that socialist “utopia” must overcome the anti-rural prejudices of Western Marxism and its Eurocentric gaze. If social democratic green programmes preserve capital, a People's Green New Deal, on the contrary, “is about building eco-socialism.” Ajl thus delineates some radical changes needed to “build autonomy and decentralized power in the transition” in key sectors such as labour, industrialization, agriculture, transport, architecture and urban planning (chapter 5): controlling rather than dismantling industry; Ivan Illich's technol-

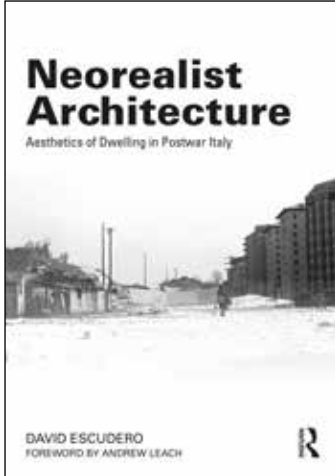
ogies of conviviality rather than productivity; planned longevity rather than obsolescence. The following chapter delves into the advantages of planning a socialist agriculture that “soak[s] the countryside in culture,” through land restorations, agroecology, and pasturing. Ajl stresses the importance of an eco-socialist agriculture that ousts the most basic element in production – land – as grounds for jettisoning the structures of major monopolies, the imperial and racial division of labour, as well as the production of waste inherent to industrial agriculture. Food and seed sovereignty in the periphery, according to Ajl, are fundamental tenets of this agricultural anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist structural change which benefit both “the South” and “the North”. This cannot be achieved without economic and political self-determination – specifically, the respect of state-sovereignty (chapter 7). Following the internationalism of Third World Marxism, Ajl claims that national sovereignty in the South through decolonization and demilitarization must be achieved immediately, above all to allow for climate and ecological debt reparations. In closing, Ajl renews the stakes of an anti-capitalist planetary People’s Green New Deal to critique the Left in the West of having abandoned the rubric of anti-imperialism and internationalism, failing to “forge the necessary alliances and social bases for a mass-based internationalist project of permanent social change” (pp. 204).

Ajl admirably highlights the fact that GNDs, while appearing as depoliticised governance tools, hide precise political agendas. Implicit to his claims is how a particular use of language in GNDs preserves capitalistic modes of production by suffocating democratic debate and allowing for the perpetuation of its exclusionary political mechanisms. Crucially for architecture, these hidden political agendas of GNDs pass planning and construction off as mere tools for technological solutionism in the context of environmental urgency. Yet, if such a political critique of GNDs is timely and laudable, some of the claims Ajl puts forward in his eco-socialist project deserve further unpacking. Although the State has already shown its deficiencies in attending to a project of revolution, Ajl’s eco-socialism insistently harks back to a revolutionary horizon that preserves state-sovereignty. Ajl assumes the unity of state-sovereignty in contemporary capitalism and glosses over how it might be disentangled from its role as a regulator of capital and war (a role underlined by authors as diverse as Bob Jessop and Maurizio Lazzarato) or, it could be added, from the very power and violence which Saul Newman, among others, maintains undergird it. Given this ambiguity one might ask: is reaffirming a predilection for state-sovereign politics not at odds with an actually demilitarised and decolonial anti-capitalist project? This understanding of sovereignty is tied to a form of traditional

Marxism primarily focused on class relations of domination. What seems at stake in Ajl’s project is the ownership of the means of production that, from the individualized ownership of the “ruling class”, must pass into the hands of a universalized “people of the planet” (Ajl, pp. 46). Yet, this humanistic reading of Marxian theory – which, as Moishe Postone observed, does not address the system of abstract domination structuring capital beyond individual will – risks reproducing the shortcomings of twentieth century socialism. In this context, doesn’t a humanist critique run the risk of leaving unaddressed crucial mechanisms of capital that might get in the way of an anti-capitalist, green project? Overall, while exposing the un-said and its political implications in several GNDs, Ajl seems to leave unattended the un-said of his own central concepts – one might dare to say the keywords – sovereignty and people.

Igor Fardin, Richard Lee Peragine  
Politecnico di Torino

**David Escudero, *Neorealist Architecture: Aesthetics of Dwelling in Postwar Italy*, New York, Routledge, 236 pp. – 2022. Paperback: € 45.49 – ISBN 9781032235042**



By the end of the Second World War, Italy was in ruins. This particular condition, both physical and moral, provoked incoherent reactions that converged in an optimistic acceptance of everyday life interpreted and canonized under the rubric of *Neorealismo*. The vital need for sincere art to expose the reality of Italian *dopoguerra* (postwar) was fulfilled by local photographers and filmmakers who documented the extreme difficulties of everyday life while also communicating the country's sense of vitality and hopes for the future. In truth, as argued by erudite scholars such as Maristella Casciato, the previous tradition of neorealist literature – which began in the early-1930s – provided solid foundations for the tremendous production of images, documentaries, and films

that soon became the emblem of the liberated and democratic Italy. A meticulous investigation of this precarious imagery and its underexplored connections with architecture is the core of David Escudero's book "Neorealist Architecture. Aesthetic of Dwelling in Postwar Italy," published with the support of the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in Fine Arts (Chicago) as a result of the author's doctoral dissertation.

From the very first pages, making reference to a well-composed sequence of citations from both direct participants and distant commentators about this "collective state of mind," Escudero portrays Neorealism as a "cultural environment." Difficult to grasp, of course, "incoherent and contradictory," as asserted by Charles L. Leavitt, author of *Italian Neorealism: A Cultural History* (2020). However, for this very reason Neorealism can and should be ascribed to a complex cultural phenomenon that reached into other spheres of artistic production beyond the well-known cinematic tendency. Escudero's main argument is that, among these spheres of artistic production, architecture holds a place that is anything but marginal. Drawing from some key episodes that characterized architectural and urban experiments of mid-century *ricostruzione* in Italy, the author repositions the role of architecture as a relevant voice acting not in parallel, but within the artistic and cultural scene revitalized by neorealist impulses protracted for an indefinite period. In other

words, "Neorealist Architecture" reflects the author's invitation to scrutinize the various forms in which neorealist imagery manifested itself in architecture. At the same time, the civic commitment of Italian architects and urban planners who consolidated "a long experience of trust in the values of spontaneous architecture" provided a significant injection of visual capital, that is, additional images enriching the neorealist "atmosphere" and the correlated cultural environment. This circular trajectory, focused on mid-century Italian architecture and its capacity to absorb, produce, and disseminate familiar images of everyday life, is clearly reflected in the book's three-part structure and is brilliantly articulated through Escudero's commendable job of tying together developments in neorealist trend with the specifics of housing design as they manifested in his chosen cases. In Part I, "Towards a Concept: Neorealist Architecture," the author unpacks the cultural environment in which Neorealism and architecture coexisted. With the aim of "introducing the linkages that will continue to be unveiled throughout the book," this section looks at seven collective housing projects from the early-1950s that include, but are not limited to, the quintessential examples of the time – Quartiere Tiburtino (Rome), Villaggio La Martella (Matera), Viale Etiopia Towers (Rome) – with a particular focus on their reception. The second section, "A Neorealist Making in Architecture," delves deeper into the INA-CASA building

program as the most extensive and ambitious state initiative in postwar Italy, aimed at solving the shortage and the poor quality of housing by providing a wide range of alternatives in terms of land subdivision, typologies, and construction methods – an elaboration Escudero first piloted in the pages of *Architectural Theory Review* (Vol 24, 2020).

In Part III, “Neorealist Images of Architecture,” the concept of “architectural imagery” comes to the fore revealing why and how the selected projects – and their representation – “can be associated with an aesthetic shared with neorealism.”

The book is elegantly illustrated with more than 100 black-and-white images. In fact, its added value is the constant presence of archival materials. As Hal Foster and other critics have argued, the “archival impulse” animated modern culture since the invention of photography, and that is when photographic documents started operating as a replacement for a past event rather than a mere record of it. In this sense, all the images carefully selected by the author during his long stays in Italy dedicated to archival research (Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, CSAC Parma, Fondazione MAXXI) serve the book’s narrative well beyond a simple accompanying tool. Images constitute the essence of Escudero’s work as they mobilize archive objects of various natures – some unpublished – and then provide the basis for exhibiting his clear argument. Against this backdrop, it is well evident the author’s effort to balance the

eye-catching and somehow canonized neorealist iconographic repertoire of photographs and still frames with the dense architectural landscape of drawings, plans, design notations, and technical documents to show mutual infiltrations. Although they are not unpublished projects in architectural historiography, the simple move of reconsidering Tiburtino, La Martella, and other contemporary episodes under the neorealist cultural aura raises new questions about educated and self-proclaimed modern architects – Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi out of all – who felt the need to “stage” architecture in this particular atmosphere, charging the spontaneous aesthetic of the everyday, the trivial, and the vernacular.

What we learn from Escudero’s book is, in the first instance, to interpret architecture not only as a cultural phenomenon *per se* but as a site of intense encounters where both ideas and tools for artistic production are selectively borrowed, partially adapted or rejected – even by the same authors when Italian architectural debate moved beyond the urgencies of the mid-1940s. As noted by Joan Ockman, invited as a discussant at the recent book presentation hosted by NYU’s Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò in New York, Neorealism represented a local and specific trend as we were entering a global image-saturated culture in support of the “new humanism” currents in architecture. Back to Italy, and back to the mid-1930s, Giuseppe Pagano’s arduous search for a modern tradition comes to mind

since he was, perhaps, the first “hunter of images” (*cacciatore di immagini*) portraying spontaneous atmosphere throughout the Italian peninsula displayed in “Architettura Rurale Italiana” (1936).

In the end, “Neorealist Architecture” is also a book that challenges the reader in the complicated operation of filtering architecture from powerful imagery. Accepting its heroic impulses and failures appears to be a good exercise, not only in approaching historical facts and events, but also in our contemporary times where filtering architecture from images – and imageries – is anything but a common practice.

Marco Moro  
Università degli Studi di Cagliari