

Book Review: Architect Knows Best: Environmental Determinism in Architecture Culture from 1956 to the Present

by Blog Admin

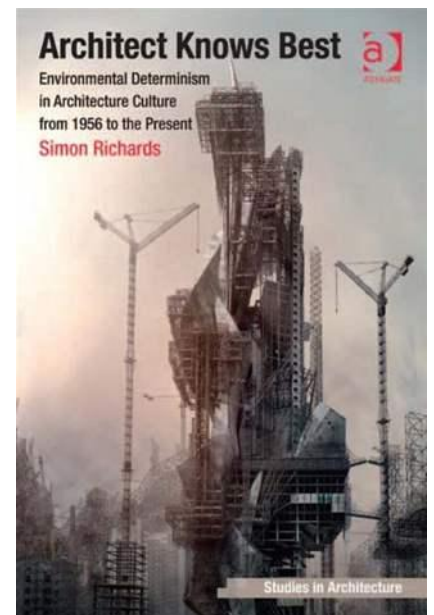
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*The idea that buildings could be used to reform human behaviour and improve society was fundamental to the 'modernist' architecture and planning of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Jose Luis Sert in the first half of the 20th century. This book argues that today many of the most prominent architect-planners continue to design with a view to improving the behaviour of individual people and of society at large. Through interviews with major figures of recent years in Britain, Europe and America, **Simon Richards** provides a rewarding read for readers new and experienced, finds **Andrew Molloy**.*



Architect Knows Best: Environmental Determinism in Architecture Culture from 1956 to the Present. Simon Richards. Ashgate. July 2012.

In his volume *Architect Knows Best*, [Simon Richards](#) has produced a concise history of the major shifts in architectural theory since the late 1950s. Starting with the 'failure' of modernism, Richards guides us carefully through the dominating architectural theories in the last half of the 20th century. It is from this point of view that the text would be useful to a student as guidance through the primary discourses which have defined contemporary design. However, the book approaches this history from a specific viewpoint, that of architecture's pre-occupation with influencing an ideal lifestyle, also referred to as 'Environmental Determinism.' This unique take on the discussion ensures the text is as relevant to those familiar with polemical architecture as it is to newcomers.



Richards' treatise, while comprised of seven chapters, has four clear conceptual movements; the shift from modernism to postmodernism (chapter 1), the rise and subsequent commercialisation of community design (chapters 2 and 3), the analogy of architecture to the human body and mind (chapters 4 and 5), and finally the ongoing application of phenomenology and linguistics to architectural theory (chapters 6 and 7).

The first section raises the idea that the move from modernism to postmodernism was not the major paradigm shift it appears to be. The postmodernists castigated their predecessors for their desire to reduce the vibrancy of life down to an objective science along with their 'messianic utopianism.' The reality, Richards explains, was that notions of society, community and the soul were still important for the modernists; consider the sensuous spirituality of modernist icon Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel. Conversely, Richards suggests that the only feature distinguishing postmodernism from its maligned forebear are its urban and architectural styles, the underlying intentions and dogmatic commitment to their claims remaining the same; a concept eloquently framed when the writer states "the idea that grand narratives must be false have become...a grand narrative in itself." (p. 11)

Section two deals exclusively with the elusive notion of 'community design' from its anarchic roots in the late 60s to its cynical commercialisation in the late 80s. Beginning with the rise of the suburbs as the market's reaction against modernism's 'streets in the sky,' Richards describes the frequently astonishing intolerance towards these 'inauthentic' places to live. Despite the small amount of illogically paranoid

arguments, it becomes clear that there still was a case against suburbia, particularly those conceived by capital hungry developers and big business. Richards deftly leads us through the wistful nostalgia of Jane Jacobs, the well meaning anarchy of Richard Sennet and the artful nihilism of the Situationiste International as reactions to the suburban 'problem.'

The third section describes the intriguing position of style as either a representation of eternal values or a medium reflecting change and continuity, concepts which are synonymous with architecture as an analogy for the human mind and body respectively. This becomes a narrative of analogous notions such as metabolic processes, evolution and growth as well as social history, individual memory and myths/archetypes. From these we arrive at 'contextualism,' an idea as used and abused as that of 'community.' On the surface 'context,' when considered in the architectural milieu, appears to be the simple matching of styles. Richards leads us through the myriad of alternative approaches to this difficult term, guiding us to the pleasing notion that context situates us in the present, with a relationship to the past and an anticipation toward the future.

The final section deals with the somewhat 'trendy' yet little understood interface of architecture with phenomenology and linguistics. Dealing with a host of unwieldy theories, these chapters certainly feel the hardest to read, especially since a lot of the concepts have implications far beyond the primary topic and the architectural thread can be difficult to hold on to. However, Richards ensures that the reader is rewarded for their perseverance, particularly when it comes to the intriguingly challenging work of the Deconstructivists who sought to disrupt existing socio-political structures through architecture, a practice primarily based on creating structures, physical and social. This obvious contradiction is eloquently answered by a quote from Jeffrey Kipnis. "Architecture in the service of an institution is...in the service of man as he wants to see himself. (This) is a denial of architecture as a, perhaps the, vehicle of becoming." (p. 147)

Architect Knows Best can sometimes read as an exhaustive list of architectural theorists of the late 20th century. Some paragraphs mention three or four different polemicists, each with divergent and contradictory opinions. This can make it hard to engage with some of the concepts, understandable given that the work is intended to be a monograph explicitly regarding environmental determinism and a balance needs to be struck between expounding the concepts to the uninitiated and 'cutting to the chase' with regards to the subject matter.

The conclusion, however, is ultimately rewarding. Here Richards' writes in a much more authorial voice as opposed to the historian of previous chapters, expressing his opinion on the tangle of contradicting concepts. Personally, I would have found the book more engaging if the clear, concise and insightful style evident in the last few pages had dominated the work. Having said this, I can understand the author's desire to collect these ideas in a single volume and it certainly is a rewarding read for newbie and old-pro alike.

Andrew Molloy is an architectural PhD student based at the University of Ulster, Belfast Northern Ireland. His research centres upon trying to create a theoretical cross-disciplinary platform based on recent paradigm shifts taking place within philosophy, sociology and neuroscience. Using urban design in Belfast as a case study, Andrew hopes to critique the numerous large scale planning decisions which have defined the contemporary city and postulate a way forward. Andrew is a frequent contributor to the PLACE blog, the architecture and built environment centre for Northern Ireland, as well as writing for RSUA Perspective magazine and arts newspaper 'The Ulster Folk.' [Read reviews by Andrew.](#)

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