

Book Review: Fit: An Architect's Manifesto

by Blog Admin

February 12, 2013

Fit: An Architect's Manifesto seeks to fundamentally change how architects and the public think about the task of design. Architect and urbanist **Robert Geddes** argues that buildings, landscapes, and cities should be designed to fit: fit the purpose, fit the place, fit future possibilities. **Andrew Molloy** finds that unfortunately Geddes never truly engages with the many ideas from philosophy and sociology which now contribute to architectural theory. An enjoyable read, but one to be read critically.

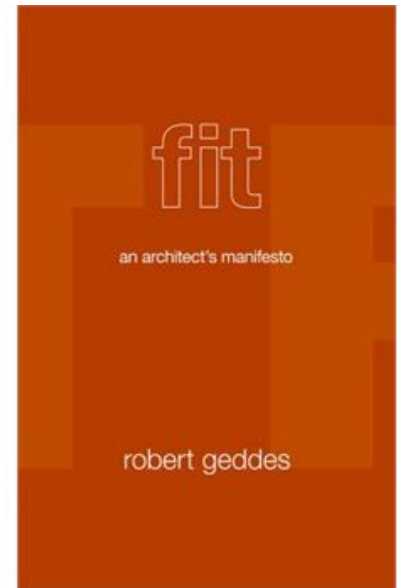


Fit: An Architect's Manifesto. Robert Geddes. Princeton University Press. October 2012.

Find this book:

The architectural manifesto has a long lineage stretching back to Vitruvius' *On Architecture* written in approximately 50BCE. More recently, Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* and Walter Gropius' *Scope of Total Architecture* have, for better or worse, had a profound effect on our contemporary built environment. More recently again, architects have expressed their personal philosophies using small, beautiful and crafted volumes which are highly regarded within the profession, but are barely noticed by those outside it (*Minimum* by John Pawson, *Architecture, Craft and Culture* by John Tuomey, and *Thinking Architecture* by Peter Zumthor are a few personal favourites). This is the context in which **Robert Geddes' Fit: An Architect's Manifesto** locates itself.

A delicate and slender volume, the book acts as a summation of Geddes' approach to architecture which has been developed over a long career both in practice and education. In his Introduction Geddes asks "...for whom do we build, and with what consequences?" (p.3) A provocative question, particularly given the fact that Geddes was educated in Modernism's heyday and practised through the Postmodern period, both of which perpetrated many architectural crimes with the greatest of intentions, leading to undesirable social consequences only obvious now in hindsight. Geddes' answer is simple yet profound. "We need a more inclusive architecture. It must fit the here and now. It must fit future possibilities. It must fit." (p.5)



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This sentence gives Geddes' manifesto a clear structure. Split into three distinct chapters – 'The Origin of Architecture is Nature,' 'The Function of Architecture is Expression' and 'The Legacy of Architecture is Form' – the driving themes of the book can be summed up as 'Past,' 'Present,' and 'Future' respectively, and indeed each of these chapters blend elements of architectural theory from the past, present and future, although, for me, not always satisfactorily.

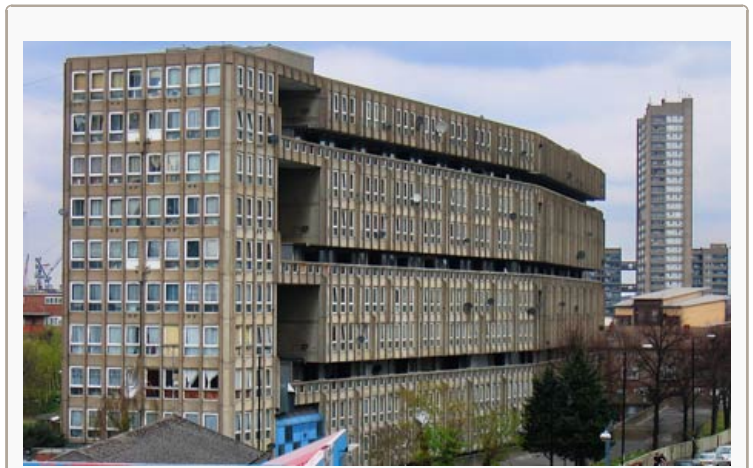
The first chapter, 'The Origin of Architecture is Nature' reads very similarly to Rasmussen's 1959 classic *Experiencing Architecture*, although much more concise and poetic, and certainly taking more heed of the findings of phenomenology, an area of study which would

have been in its infancy when Rasmussen was writing. Geddes discusses the importance of controlling and playing with light and gravity as well as our need for a connection to wild nature as balanced against our need to tame and control it. He settles on the concept of the 'forest edge' being the ideal; providing shelter and open space, protection and freedom, light and shade. Teetering on the edge of profundity, Geddes unfortunately then draws a parallel with architecture which is purely aesthetic and almost clichéd comparing trees with columns and open pastures with classical courtyards, etc.

The second chapter, 'The Function of Architecture is Expression', certainly feels like the weakest part of the book. As the reference to expression in the chapter title suggests, here Geddes addresses the fields of architectural semiotics and linguistics, although fails to state this out loud. After what was for me a long, drawn-out and unhelpful 'architecture-as-clothing' analogy, Geddes discusses architecture as the fulfiller of our needs as social animals, while also mentioning several times that architecture is an enabler rather than a prescriber of function and openly expresses his opposition to the environmental determinism that defined modernism. This is interspersed with observations which directly contradict this assertion such as "Our social behaviour in buildings is quite predictable because architecture sets the stage for our actions" (p.46) and a very telling analogy with music, where the architect is the composer and the users are the performers, perhaps suggesting that a building's functions and uses are as prescriptive as sheet music.

The final chapter, 'The Legacy of Architecture is Form', is all together more pleasing and demonstrates some fascinating insights, making the reader aware of the benefit of Geddes' years and breadth of experience. The most interesting set of paragraphs within the book concerns the ongoing definition and redefinition of 'modern architecture,' made all the more valuable knowing that the writer was practising through many of these shifts. Another revelation is the reference to the Vitruvian idiom referring to architecture as 'firmitas, utilitas, venustas' or 'firmness, commodity and delight.' Here Geddes points out the latent phenomenological application in this ancient phrase which derives from the 18th century mistranslation of the Latin for beauty (venustas) as delight. "When we experience architecture," Geddes explains, "beauty is something it may have, whereas delight is something we may have." (p.84, writer's emphasis) The primary experience of architecture occurs internally rather than 'out there.'

Throughout the book, one gets the impression of a writer who was born and raised as an architect in the modernist tradition but who is also painfully aware of its major shortcomings, particularly when it comes to social concerns. Robert Geddes strains against his modernist instincts, flirting with the philosophy and sociology, which is now invading architectural theory, but never managing to fully engage with it. Each time he approaches a profound and fresh observation he falls back on analogies and examples which betray his fixation with form and aesthetics coupled with a latent belief in environmental determinism. He appears to believe that architecture and environmental design alone can reform a society, failing to acknowledge the concept of social constructionism in the formation of culture, an idea from the social sciences which is



Robin Hood Gardens housing project in Poplar, London, designed by Alison and Peter Smithson in the late 1960s. Although Peter Smithson admitted he had been driven by a combination of urgency, practicality, and idealism, he claimed in an interview that the project had failed.

beginning to affect theoretical design.

The design of this book, combined with the concise and poetic text make it an immensely enjoyable read. I would, however, hesitate to recommend it to new students of architecture without briefing them first on the provisos outlined above. While architecture indeed can be a powerful agent in societal and cultural reform, there are many further lines of enquiry to pursue if we are to avoid the deterministic pitfalls which the architecture of late modernism fell foul of.

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.](#)