

Book Review: The Dissolution of Place: Architecture, Identity and the Body

by Blog Admin

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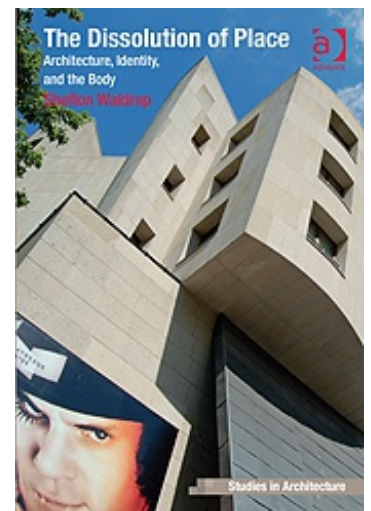
The Dissolution of Place investigates architecture on the margins of postmodernism: those places where both architecture and postmodernism begin to break down and to reveal new forms and new relationships. The book examines in detail not only a wide range of architectural phenomena such as theme parks, casinos, specific modernist and postmodernist buildings, but also interrogates architecture in relation to identity, specifically Native American and gay male identities, as they are reflected in new notions of the built environment. Reviewed by **Andrew Molloy**.



The Dissolution of Place: Architecture, Identity and the Body. Shelton Waldrep. Ashgate. December 2012.

Find this book:

The definition of 'place' has become a complicated thing in the past century. The invention, and stratospheric rise in popularity, of the motorcar and the aeroplane has had profound effects on society, although not in entirely the fashion as predicted by Le Corbusier in the modernist Bible that is *Toward an Architecture*. It was these unexpected effects (pollution, culture clashes, wars, industrial dystopias, etc) which lead to the eventual 'failure' of modernism as an ideology and the rise of postmodernism, which attempted to reinstate a lot of what modernism had removed. This, however, led to a further muddying of the word 'place,' leading to the fascinating yet frustrating observations made by thinkers in postmodernism's considerable wake; such as Marc Auge and his *Non-places*, and Rem Koolhaas and his *Junkspace* (as discussed in *Content*).



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This is the difficult terrain which [Shelton Waldrep](#) navigates in *The Dissolution of Place*. Waldrep takes the stance that place is strongly linked to social identity, whereas space "is malleable, a fabric of continually shifting sites and boundaries" (p.3). Modernism's rejection of the past appears to have doomed us to only be able to design spaces (as opposed to places), and postmodernism's attempt to reverse this appears to have simply driven us even further away from place, despite its apparent desperation to reconnect us with identity. Place's connection to identity, and our postmodern quest to rediscover it, allows Waldrep to cover some strange topics which offer startling revelations with regards to who we think we are, and why.

The first chapter succinctly sums up Waldrep's stance on the movement from modernism to postmodernism, describing how "architecture and setting become linked to inside and outside, madness and reason, and to the vicissitudes of reading space and time" (p. 25). Where modernism sought to distance us from nature and context, postmodernism appears to be about reconnecting us to temporal context, both social and physical. The second chapter looks at the evolution of the Disney theme-parks as the apotheosis of postmodern design. Disney's theme-parks originally referenced the company's films and cartoons, but as the parks have risen in popularity to the point where they are as synonymous of Disney as it's media output, it's films have now started to reference the parks (Pirates of the Caribbean, for example). Combine this with the dictatorial control of the visitor's and even the staff's "sensory experiences and...memories" (p. 47) and the parks become self-contained, self-referencing "...chilling... combination[s] of image, manipulation, and strategy formed on a gigantic scale" (p. 46). For Waldrep, this sums up postmodern identity. Referencing Don DeLillo's [White Noise](#), he describes PoMo lifestyles as stereotyped representations of Platonic lifestyles presented to us through media and technology; lifestyles that never existed in the first place.

Waldrep moves on to reconsider the architecture of Las Vegas, the subject of Venturi and Scott-Brown's iconic postmodern text [Learning From Las Vegas](#), describing the city as a more edgy Disneyfied environment, where architecture, sign and signified all merge into one. This leads on to a fascinating assessment of Foxwoods casino, run by the native American Pequot tribe, describing a building which address the unique problem of theming native American culture for euro-americans who have come to simply gamble.

Another strong theme of the book is the development of gay male culture over the late and post modern periods. In an insightful and entertaining chapter called 'In Her Majesty's Secret Closet,' the politics of James Bond are investigated. The infamously misogynistic and homophobic 'Diamonds Are Forever' is dissected alongside Bond's contemporary rebirth in 'Casino Royale' which, while it may seem a bit left-field, sits perfectly within the text as it tracks the progress of male identity and masculinity throughout the period in question.

This leads to a fascinating discussion of the architect Phillip Johnson's Glass House and surrounding estate. It really feels like the previous chapters have been centered upon setting the scene for a critique of Johnson's life and work as a gay male modernist architect. Having trained as an architect myself, I was acutely aware of Johnson's architecture, particularly his skyscrapers, and of his involvement with pop artists and late 1960s celebrity culture, but I was not aware of his sexuality. Waldrep's critique of his work, and particularly the Glass House explains this gap in my knowledge, as Johnson was practicing in a particularly masculine profession in a time when homosexuality was shameful. He was not actually openly gay until the end of his life, despite being in a committed relationship for over 30 years. His Miesian Glass House, Waldrep explains, is counterpointed against the heavy brick neighboring Guest House. Waldrep compares this to Oscar Wilde's [Picture of Dorian Gray](#), with the Glass House representing Johnson's brash and open celebrity image, while the guest represents the need for privacy and lack of disclosure; the literal closet in which Dorian Gray kept his portrait.

My initial impressions of the book were that its subject matter felt rather muddled. It seemed to jump from architecture, to Disney, to Las Vegas, to film and back to architecture; but as one reads further the strands become clear. The strongest theme in the book appears to be social identity and its connection to space and time. Postmodernism appears to act as a mirror for culture and lifestyle, but this appears to be, in reality, dramatically reversed in that people end up subsuming an identity from a representation of a lifestyle that never existed in the first place. For me, this is a revelation, and the warnings Waldrep issues from his discussions of Disney, Las Vegas and James Bond to the suggestion of a remedy contained within his discourse on Phillip Johnson and Stanley Kubrick are rich with insight and profundity.

The uninitiated may struggle with some of the discussions within 'The Dissolution of Place' as a lot of extant theoreticians are referenced and not expanded upon within the text, but those with an acquaintance with the canon of modernist and postmodernist literature will find this an insightful and rewarding read.

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.](#)