ART AND ARCHITECTURE
A PLACE BETWEEN

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IB Tauris, 2006

£17.99

ISBN 0710011222

If ever there was a book that does what it says on the cover, this is such a book. Its aim is not simply to outline where the disciplines of art and architecture appear to intersect or converge but to explore the ways in which the procedures particular to one can influence those particular to another. Rendell attends to the task with excellent clarity, and the diligence characteristic of a historian and a critic set on grouping together phenomena and teasing out from these groupings common ground and distinctions from which new conceptual frameworks can begin to emerge. The artworks and architectural projects that are covered in the book are pulled together as ‘critical spatial practices’, a category coined by the author. These are forms of practice which set out to reassert the systems that prefigure them at the outset. For example, how can a critique of the gallery system, such as the one proposed by Smithson’s alternative sites, be applied to architecture? Or, in Rendell’s words, ‘where are the sites architects must investigate or invent for critiquing the systems within which they operate?’ Her use of Smithson’s dialectic of site/non-site leads to the notion of the architectural drawing as well as data and landscapes that arise from the collection and interpretation of statistics as potential sites from which the discipline of architecture and its corresponding institutional codes can be critiqued. Less successfully argued is the valuable proposition that the architectural model harbours similar transformative capacities when considered both as a representation of real space and as fiction. Conspicuously absent from this lineup is perhaps the architectural map, but Rendell extends such explorations later in the book to include collaborative and performative strategies used by artists to critically engage with spatial issues. Listening and walking, for example, discussed as critical spatial practices in works by artists Jane Cardif and Tim Bunn, are examined in terms of the possibilities they offer for architecture. Using these terms and strategies, Rendell presents an insightful account of architectural projects such as UN Studio’s MAMCS House in the Netherlands and the urban interventions made by Stalker, a group of Roman architects.

The book’s claim to interdisciplinarity rests certainly in its efforts to articulate practices that operate between art and architecture but also in its attempt to seek a new relationship between spatial theory and these two disciplines. Rather than take the position of applying a theory to a practice or illustrating a theory by reference to practice, her approach is to introduce a theoretical thread at the start of each section in order to set up the subsequent discussion of practice and frame it. In this way, for example, Benjamin’s study of ‘spray’ (as a mode of melancholy and retrospective contemplation imbued with the potential for political critique) is used to discuss artworks which focus on abandoned architectural spaces. One example is Stasi City (1997) by Jane and Louise Wilson, a work that deals with centres of power, now derelict, and the ruins of their spatial configurations. Through her discussion of a range of ‘critical spatial practices’ she shows that practice has the capacity to question conventional assumptions and feed these reflections back into theory. According to Rendell, there is much to add to architectural debates on theory that are specifically concerned with assessing different kinds of theories and their disciplinary origins. Furthermore, her interdisciplinarity is also employed to disrupt binary assumptions that commonly underpin the debates surrounding modernist art and architecture and principally the categories of private and public. Indeed this objective requires a move beyond disciplinary boundaries. The category of ‘critical spatial practices’ which she introduces is indicative of the ‘place between’ which the author seeks to establish instead. Thus, however, given that this new category is essentially one which not only displaces that of ‘public art’ but also attempts to situate the practices associated with it from their many shortcomings, its radical potential is limited by the much reiterated premise of it being framed in opposition to ‘gallery art’. Rather than simply adding an addition to debates on spatial configuration, this book is ultimately about considering potential for change in art as has the capacity to inform the activity of architectural design. Reconciling the problematics of the public art debate therefore still firmly outside the remit of this book. Even so, this is a concern which many of its readers might bring to it. Art and Architecture is a book that is recommended read to both professionals and students across a range of disciplines that converge on the built environment. Rendell’s argument is well structured and presented eloquently in a way that at once reframes the debate for the uninitiated reader while remaining accessible to those who are fresh to it.

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