

## **Architecture's Elusive Endeavour**

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## Architecture's Elusive Endeavour

*Architecture Is All Over*

Edited by Esther Choi and Marrikka Trotter

288 pages, 65 illustrations

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*Architecture Is All Over* edited by Esther Choi and Marrikka Trotter asks architecture to stop kidding itself: it's *over*. It is incapable of being anything; it is nowhere. And yet, it is *all over*. It is everything at the same time; it is ubiquitous. To recall the doubling used by Robert Venturi in *Complexity and Contradiction* (1966), *Architecture Is All Over* subscribes to a both/and philosophy, not, as we will see, an either/or.<sup>1</sup>

This use of what is essentially a *double entendre* is not new to the compilation's editors, who employed a similar tactic in their first book, *Architecture At The Edge of Everything Else*, published in 2010. In this book, the notion of architecture on the edge espouses both a rejection of architecture's slow and steady nature (i.e. 'the profession') and the acceptance of its contradictory status as a discipline whose autonomy has been sought in the same measure by which it has 'borrowed' from other disciplines throughout the 20th and early 21st century.<sup>2</sup> A non-exhaustive list from recent years includes concepts, definitions, and even ideologies and pedagogies from art, literature, philosophy, history, psychology, material sciences, biology, politics, industry, sociology, and economics. *Architecture At the Edge of Everything Else* proposed that architecture could emerge out of the death rattle of the 2008 crisis in the profession by 'resisting inertia'<sup>3</sup> and insisting on trans-, cross- or interdisciplinary discourse. It was through the embodiment of architecture not as

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<sup>1</sup> Venturi, Robert. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (The Museum of Modern Art: 1966), 16.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say this 'borrowing' did not happen in earlier centuries, for it did, particularly from the sciences and medicine.

<sup>3</sup> *Architecture at the Edge of Everything Else* (The MIT Press: 2010), eds. Choi, Esther; Trotter, Marrikka, xvii.

an autonomous entity but instead as an outsider, looking in, to participate in the activities of other discourses, as a means to ‘perforate disciplinary boundaries.’<sup>4</sup> It asked architecture to both position itself on the edge of other practices, whether they were art-based, sociological or archeological, and to rethink the ways in which architecture engages in its own practice—whether professional or discursive—by establishing new forms of praxis capable of establishing new territories or domains for architecture. Architecture was in a state of crisis. The texts included in *Architecture At The Edge of Everything Else* explore ways in which architecture can save it from itself.

*Architecture Is All Over* provides a polemical update to the very problem posed in Choi and Trotter’s first book. It recognises that in the seven years since *Architecture At The Edge of Everything Else* was published, crisis has become the status quo worldwide; socially, economically, politically. Whereas in previous decades had been marked by periods of a perceived relative calm, the 2010s suffered with wave after wave of intricately linked, reciprocal and contingent crises. From the Arab Spring to Hurricane Sandy to the housing crisis to Fukushima to police violence against black lives to Brexit, the 2010s have been fraught, with natural disasters brought on by human intervention in the environment, the rise of fascism and the far right, and the ongoing proliferation of neoliberal capitalism.

Using this as a backdrop, *Architecture Is All Over* acknowledges that the crisis that has beset architecture since the financial crash of 2008 cannot be a one-off condition; in fact, Choi and Trotter argue, crisis is the sustained and continued state that architecture has always been in, in a sort of italicised version of Giedion’s ‘general line(s)’, i.e. it is able to be understood as a continuity throughout history.<sup>5</sup> If we accept crisis as the status quo within architecture then we can be released from the need to ‘be dealing with emergency tactics’ each time an event occurs. This opens up architecture to instilling *within itself*, and the rules, catalysts and protagonists that come along with

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, xv.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

architecture in crisis as potentialities, rather than deterrents or limitations to its endurance. Crisis becomes a continuity, rather than an interlude.

So where does this leave architecture, then? What is architecture's potential, and where does it lie? What role can an architecture-in-crisis play in the contemporary world? How can it be defined? What has it gained? What has it lost through its contemporary relation to crisis and what can it stand to lose?

Most of the seventeen pieces in the compendium object to a completely binary interpretation of the double meaning suggested in the title. Rather, they position themselves somewhere along the spectrum in between. While it is impossible to give a precise consensus on each piece's position, in their introductory text Choi and Trotter make some suggestions as to the consequences of these questions and how they wish the texts to be framed: architecture is not *what is*, or *what exists*; architecture is not 'a condition', but 'an endeavour' which each piece has defined for itself in some way. The conception of architecture as an endeavour enables the texts in the book to

'collectively reimagine the ethical and entrepreneurial dimensions of architecture.'<sup>6</sup> This is a challenging proposition for the pieces included to respond to. The ethical rarely gets attention in architecture, but given the failures of current governments to serve the needs of their populations in the United States (for example, Flint, Michigan or Standing Rock Reservation) or United Kingdom (for example, the Southwest floods, Grenfell Tower) and in many other countries, it is important to then ask: how can architecture not fall back into its own failing tropes of the past? The ways in which failure— whether infrastructural or political— is dealt with (said 'emergency tactics') becomes in itself a body of knowledge. However they are informed by and a product of their own cultural makeup, and are often inadequate both in the present and future. This seems particularly relevant when one thinks of the power and symbolism given to the inheritance of knowledge within

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<sup>6</sup> *Architecture Is All Over* (Columbia Books on Architecture and the City: 2017), eds. Choi, Esther; Trotter, Marikka, 12.

architecture. Architecture is inevitably slow with much continuity in the ways in which we are meant to theorise, historicise, design and build. The entrepreneurial, however, seems, for Choi and Trotter, to give opportunity to expose the failures of previous and existing models and find the means through which innovation can occur. Each of these are means for architecture to resist (the banality, complexity and bureaucracy of contemporary society), and simultaneously, to persist (in novel forms of discourse).

The ways in which the included pieces explore these issues range from the explicit and provocative to the subtle and nuanced, as one may expect in a collection that consists of long essays, photographic pieces, conversations and design propositions. There are several themes which pop up again and again throughout the collection. The most obvious of which is an exploration of the nature of the urban or 'used-to-be' urban which is found in all of the design propositions. In addition, how design can find new ways of engaging with the nature of public space also is a reoccurring theme. There are other themes which find commonality across texts. In K. Michael Hays' 'Some Thoughts on the Pathology of Architecture' and 'A Taxonomy for Architects' by dpr-barcelona and Francesco Vedovato, we find the notion of architecture as an act of transgression or form of disciplinary mutation; Allen and Peñarroyo's 'Subtractive Urbanism: The Morphology/Ideology Homology' explores architecture as disruption; architecture as strategy appears in both 'Erasure Urbanism' by Patty Heyda and in 'Sponge Urbanism' by Troy Schaum and Rosalyne Shieh; architecture as performative brings Trevor Patt's 'Performance Review: In Praise of The Possible Architecture' in dialogue with 'A Plaza in a Camp: A Play in Four Acts' by Sandi Hill; and the potential of the architect's subjectivity is explored in both 'The Nebulous and the Infinitesimal' by David Gissen and in D.Graham Burnett's as well as in Olga Touloumi's piece, 'Contentious Electronics/Radical Blips'. Texts by Adrian Blackwell ('Less and More: On the Political Potential of a Virtual Architecture') and Andrew Witt ('Landscapes, Spaces, Meshes: A Cultural Narrative of Design Technics') also rethink the ways in which our either inherited or assumed ideological frameworks inform design history and design practice, particularly in relation

to techniques and tools. The strength of the book lies in the pieces which tend towards the theoretical, which includes the more traditional academic texts as well as the conversation pieces (K. Michael Hays, David Gissen and D. Graham Burnett, Adrian Blackwell, Andrew Witt). These challenge the disciplinary preconceptions around a tenuous future for the discipline in a way which, at the same time, resists negativity.

What is missing from *Architecture Is All Over* is unfortunate, given the book's dual agenda of being 'all-over' and of acknowledging contemporary crisis as *within* and not *outside of* architecture's disciplinary boundaries. The first lapse is in the cultural scope of the book. As the editors admit in the introduction, they limit themselves to a Western perspective in the formulation of the book's position. This seems a righteous proclamation: just because it is stated to be the *modus operandi* of the curation of the book itself does not explain why it would not still be a worthwhile effort to broaden its scope. Nor would this be contradictory to the book's overall intellectual efforts—given the '*all-overness*' that the editors were seeking, it is a missed opportunity to include works that engage with or emanate from non-Western perspectives. The result is an overwhelmingly North American intellectual discourse that colours the entire book. Contributions by dpr-barcelona and Vedovato as well as Marta Guerra-Pastrian and Pablo Pérez-Ramos ('Reimagining Shrinking Villages') do bring some European perspective to *Architecture Is All Over*. The latter piece, stated to be a case study, acts as a analytical prototype relevant to many North American ex-industrial or manufacturing cities, while dpr-barcelona and Vedovato, in their satirical-yet-serious taxonomy of contemporary architecture's past, present and future, succeed in ignoring North American discourse almost entirely. Interestingly, both of these texts expand the notion of 'all-over' beyond the limits set in the editorial curation, extending the book's architectural repertoire across the Atlantic. Despite these anomalies, this book is one composed for a certain audience—one informed by, attuned to and a part of a set of specialised discussions on architectural theory and history typical of North American discourse.

The second limitation of the book is an emphasis on a discussion of architecture as a process of design, leaving out an understanding architecture also as as *processes of building*. While the more historiographical pieces succeed in engaging buildings, the design proposals in particular remain strategic in their interventions, avoiding problems of tectonics and form altogether. In particular, dealing with these issues would expand the vocabulary of the book specifically in terms of how it could absorb the crisis that it claims the profession faces, transforming it into a disciplinary project that nevertheless remains committed to architecture as a process of building. This should not be mistaken as a critique concerned only with outcomes of design proceses: it is not. It is through the ways in which we engage with *all* aspects of architecture's ethical and entrepreneurial praxis—thinking, engaging, realising, practising *and* building—that will ultimately determine its future possibilities.