

Review

Nathaniel Coleman. *Lefebvre for Architects*. London and New York, Routledge, 2015. 136 pp. Paperback.

Henri Lefebvre was a philosopher and sociologist with roots in the Pyrenees and an intellectual life in Paris that spanned almost exactly 90% of the twentieth century - he was born in 1901 and died in 1991. His work was a major factor in defining the study of everyday life and his engagements with theory, culture, space and place reached from Surrealism and Dada to a turbulent (and anti-Stalinist) relationship with the Communist party, the equally turbulent Situationist International, and with the visionary architects of COBRA. His influential book *The Right to the City (Le Droit à la Ville)* is often cited as a major influence in the May 1968 student uprising. Lefebvre's significance for architecture, landscape architecture, and planning arises from his explicit engagement with and observation of the spaces of contemporary life, famously in cities and buildings, and importantly in rural and periurban landscapes.¹

In Nathaniel Coleman's introduction to *Lefebvre for Architects*, he expresses a commitment to providing a concise account of Henri Lefebvre's writing - in the context of architecture - that does not underplay the centrality of utopian and romantic strains to his work, or of Marx's centrality to his thinking. Architecture, while embracing Lefebvre's work since its relatively recent entry into the Anglosphere, in particular his monumental *The Production of Space*, translated into English the year he died, have tended to suppress this content. Coleman references the Thatcherite mantra of TINA - 'There Is No Alternative' - as the neoliberal kernel ingested by architecture that is much to

¹ For an meticulous and illuminating overview of Lefebvre's influence, see Elden, Stuart. *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible*. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.

blame for this resistance, but also he writes, “Lefebvre’s work holds out for renewed practices even at a time of neoliberal consensus.”²

Architecture, Coleman writes, “has great difficulty *thinking its own thoughts*,”³ or perhaps it has come to this impasse after some decades now of servitude to neoliberal practices, and he recruits Lefebvre’s work because his keen view from outside the discipline to help provide a contextual structure for architectural thought. If there is no alternative there is little reason to worry about context. “My aim in this book is to make Lefebvre *speak to architects* by showing how he *speaks like an architect*, or at least like a reconstituted thinker of architecture able to think his own thoughts; able to think beyond the crisis of architecture foisted upon it by capitalism, which the general lack of disciplinary self-confidence—which is a symptom—exacerbates.”⁴

Coleman’s method employs hermeneutics, phenomenology, and pragmatism and “links theory to practice, space to time and form to content, in identifying how the imagination and production of concrete alternatives are, as Lefebvre believed, hiding out in the plain sight of the everyday.”⁵ This method clearly parallels the palimpsestic method of Lefebvre himself while also rather highlighting, counter to his statement above, intellectual methods that are not necessarily germane to contemporary architectural thought. Lefebvre actually speaks to architects by showing how they *ought to speak*. This is far from problematic for Coleman’s interpretation however, as the positive futurity contained in the *ought* here simply underscores Lefebvre’s utopian message.

Coleman also emphasizes the fundamental interconnection of theory and spatial practice that is explicit in Lefebvre’s work. “A further aim of this book is to translate Lefebvre’s ideas into

² Coleman, Nathaniel. *Lefebvre for Architects*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015. p2

³ *Ibid.* p15

⁴ *Ibid.* p16

⁵ *Ibid.* p4

potentialities for action (which I believe he would have approved of). The dual challenge of such a project is to render intelligible Lefebvre's thought for architects, while also demonstrating how it might be *enacted*, that is, to show how Lefebvre's theories can inform practices."⁶ The enactment of Lefebvre's thought requires a conception of the work of architecture that is at once quite foreign to contemporary practice and quite crucial to it: that the city and the countryside together comprise a work - an *oeuvre* - that is collective, cumulative, and often beautiful. This militates against the conceit, dear to the heart of contemporary architecture that buildings (or landscapes) might primarily operate as sculpture, which has the effect of devaluing the work of creating everyday spaces and places. The result of this is the creation of built spaces that, if they are not showstopping spectacles, must necessarily be either bland or thoughtless or both. Lefebvre shows the way with his insistence upon the particular as well as the universal and upon the past as the container of myriad hopes - the past and the particular as key components of *oeuvre* - that continuity, context, and comprehensiveness as keys to beauty and keys to utopia.

This little volume has a purpose and a potential impact far beyond what its size might indicate. The reason is twofold: first that Henri Lefebvre's insistent utopianism, which has been not just ignored but actively suppressed in architectural scholarship is here allowed full and joyful rein; and second that Lefebvre's liberatory and transformative utopianism is of an entirely different order from that which is ordinarily encountered in architecture. Architecture's prevailing and poisonous current of anti-utopianism springs from the abandoned hope of generations of embittered architects, frustrated in their quest to produce total and certain utopias. Lefebvre's utopia is not one of form as much as it is one of method. Nathaniel Coleman here helps us to understand how the work of utopia is provisional, dialogic, and not a product but a participatory work that can be incorporated into both philosophical and design processes. For a generation seeking to build a better future in which people and planet may flourish, Lefebvre's thought offers hope as a method of making and of resistance to the forces and forms of neoliberalism.

⁶ *Ibid.* p4

Nathaniel Coleman's firm, fluent style will help readers navigate the complexities of Lefebvre's thought with confidence. He also accomplishes a unique feat in the structure of the book. Rather than pulling Lefebvre's densely layered mode of working apart into easily digested, bulleted rules, he shows, rather than tells, how Lefebvre thinks like an architect (ought to), working through scenarios and going back to the drawing board again and again. Henri Lefebvre wasn't concerned with getting things 'right' so much as he was intent upon making good ideas work; good ideas that value history, allow flourishing in the present, and are adaptable, building for the future. Lefebvre helps reclaim the human mission of architecture as a process of becoming in which all people, architects included, play a part.