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The Voices of the Model

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A review of Matthew Wells, *Modelling the Metropolis: The Architectural Model in Victorian London*, Zurich: gta Verlag, 2023, 188 pages, 84 illus. ISBN 9783856764357. Wells offers a layered reading of the private and public dimensions of the architectural model's life in Victorian London, exploring the spaces and the ways in which models were manufactured, displayed, and perceived from the courtroom to the university and from the museum to the workshop. Through vast archival research, *Modelling the Metropolis* suggests an alternative reading of London's built environment, constituencies, and authorships.

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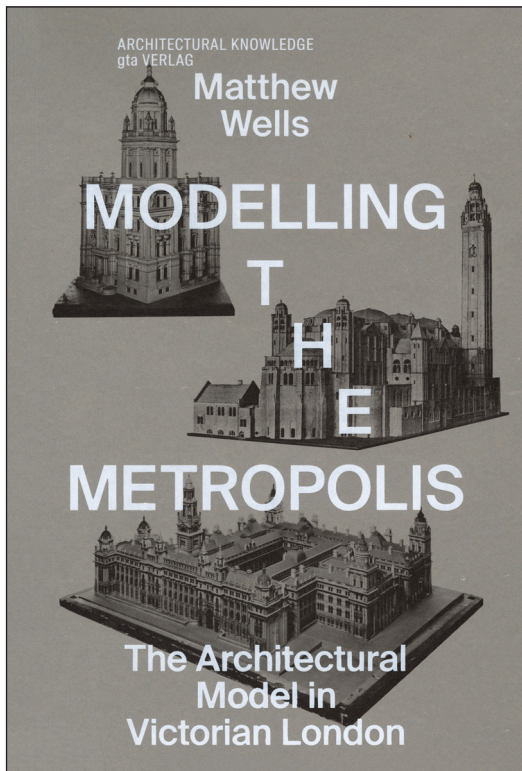
As John Summerson famously puts it, London was "more excavated, more cut about, more rebuilt and more extended" during the second half of the nineteenth century "than at any time in its previous history" (1990, 177). This is the overarching premise of Matthew Well's *Modelling the Metropolis*: *The Architectural Model in Victorian London*. The book seeks, above all, to shed light on the urban dimensions of the architectural model at a time when London was becoming the financial and political capital of the British Empire. As the city grew and changed, its institutions battled to find new ways to interact with their citizenry, while architects sought professional legitimisation from other professions, clients, and the public. In this context, the architectural model became a fundamental yet overlooked mediator of the "social and politico-economic interactions" of the modern city and its growing public franchise (18).

The variety of scales, materials, and types of architectural models produced in 19th-century London is hard to pin down. *Modelling the Metropolis* is less interested in categorising these models as objects and more interested in exploring their role in in the construction of a public dimension of architecture and in the evolution of its professionalism vis-à-vis new forms of metropolitan life. Through in-depth case studies, including an examination of the construction and relocation of the Royal Architectural Museum's collection and a look into the educational uses of models at the young Architectural Association, the book documents in a way that has not been done before the heterogeneous spatial settings in which the architectural model operated. Each chapter examines a different ways the model functioned in the metropolis from educational devices designed to teach visualisation and bestow "technical authority" on architecture as a field of study in universities to ethnographical and historiographical instruments in the museum and "rhetorical aids ... at both an urban and a socio-political scale" in the courtroom (65). Initial chapters on the public sphere and the commons provide a general view of the model as a powerful trigger of public perceptions on

city making, as suggested by the celebrated case of the law courts competition, where models acted as "means to contest political realities in society" (47).

The result is an original study that foregrounds the architectural model's manufacturing, deployment, and perception as key elements to understanding the city's physical, political, and social formations. While architectural models and replicas have been the object of recent historical studies (Lending 2018; Mindrup 2019; Fankhanel 2021; Lund 2023), their urban dimension has rarely been at the centre of attention. By shifting between the compact scales of the architectural model and the metropolitan scale of Victorian London, Wells tells an alternative history of both. We learn that models became instrumental in both lobbying for public consensus and constructing legislation for private development. Through the architectural model, we find out about the tensions between London, the rest of the country and other European capitals, like Paris and Vienna, on matters of reputation and representation. By stepping into the model makers' workshop, we see how, while working with increasingly uniform systems of technical representation, manufacturers often embraced the plastic potentials of models for more expressive and emotive purposes, like in the case of Edward Schoeder Prior (85−91). With models, we discover lesser-known dimensions of architectural professionalism in tension with its standardisation, a growing public presence, and transforming agencies. In these and other instances, the model acts as a pivot around which the preoccupations of urban actors can be examined anew.

Modelling the Metropolis thus suggests a new way of reading the built environment, its protagonists, products, and relationships. The authorship of the architect and its role in the city and policymaking in particular can be revisited. The case of Dorchester House, designed by architect Lewis Vulliamy and built between 1849 and 1857, offers a case in point. Three large models, built during the time of construction by carver and later model maker Richard Day Jr., provide us with an alternative history of the building, its design, its costs and accounting, and the labour involved (93-101). The model in this account serves as a fundamental way to explore the private and public spheres of architecture, both as a system connecting buildings and their authorships and as an industry in its own right. It becomes clear that the production of models, especially as objects of public discourse, was more often than not a contested territory. Especially at first, models were seen as too direct and, therefore, vulnerable to misunderstandings by the untrained eye. Models threatened the authority architects had been trying to establish with the general public (Crook 1969). As a result, the model offers a view of London as a metropolis moderated and negotiated through an increasingly complex social landscape. The places where models appear, from universities to private houses,

from courtrooms to the myriad of public displays and exhibition spaces, shed light on these otherwise invisible urban dynamics.

The book also proves that while ubiquitous in the public discourse, the architectural model can be an elusive object to research. Some display models meant for museums have survived, like the unique collection of John Soane, but in many other instances, we only have written records or photographs. In order to unearth the untold histories of these lost models, Wells has conducted in-depth archival work, interpreting and connecting primary sources that have been overlooked in previous accounts of Victorian London: private advertisements, articles and opinion pieces in journals like the *Builder*, the *Literary Gazette*, and *Building News*; correspondence between architects, model makers and clients; parliamentary records, exhibition catalogues, books, and pamphlets; account books, university memos, and minutes of meetings (176–78). *Modelling the Metropolis* is an ambitious book that deploys the architectural model to demonstrate how architectural authorship and city making in Victorian London was a layered system composed of multiple promoters. Their entangled interests, often complicated to unravel, become visible with surprising clarity in plaster, cardboard, mica, and softwood.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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