

REVIEW

## A Proposal for the Present: A Review of *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*

*The Sage Handbook of Architectural Theory*, C. Greig Crysler, Stephen Cairns and Hilde Heynen (eds.), SAGE Publications, 753 pages, London 2012, ISBN: 9781412946131

Mary Lou Lobsinger\*

At 753 pages, *The Sage Handbook of Architectural Theory* is in size and ambition a weighty book. The book's editors, C. Greig Crysler, Stephen Cairns and Hilde Heynen, describe their pedagogical intent as to seek out alternative lines within architectural theory, 'to scrutinize, extend and in some cases rehearse the major debates over the last decades' (p. 24). To achieve this end the *Handbook* departs radically from what readers have come to expect from a collection of essays on architectural theory. The reader does not confront yet another sampling of editor-curated texts that implicitly or explicitly demarcate centers about which the peripheries of practice and theory align. Nor does the *Handbook* merely extend the assumptions of existing paradigms with polite additions from novel philosophical (extra-disciplinary) sources or by dutifully acknowledging the most current issues effecting architectural practice. In other words, the *Handbook* does more than present a reshuffled deck or reorganized priorities; rather, this collection of originally authored essays was conceived and is structured in a way that puts 'the critical sensitivities, the pluralist sensibility, the self-reflexivity and speculative ambitions that post-structuralism inculcated in the discipline into contact with a wider set of world conditions' (p. 6). The originality of the editors' ambition is realized through the book's contents in tandem with its organization, both of which enlist the reader as user in order to think differently about architectural theory now. As a result the *Handbook* offers an intense scholarly experience in its comprehensiveness, its variety of voices and its formal organization.

The *Handbook* has two introductions and is organized into eight thematically focused chapter sections. Each chapter section, identified by three keywords, such as 'Power/Difference/Embodiment' or 'Nation/World/Spectacle', is prefaced by a substantive introduction, includes three essays and is bookended by a state of the literature bibliography. An originally researched project essay with a one-word title, such as 'Culture', 'Citizenship', 'Landscape', or 'Heritage', stands between the end of one chapter section and beginning of the next. This adds up to

forty originally authored essays. The first introduction to the *Handbook* is a *tour de force* in which editors Crysler, Cairns and Heynen argue their purpose and situate the challenges they confronted in pursuing a 'cross-cultural and interdisciplinary' approach to contemporary architectural theory. In a second introduction, aptly titled 'Reading the Handbook', the editors follow up dutiful summaries of the eight thematic chapter sections with four examples of alternative reading itineraries. They employ the words 'itinerary' and 'activate' to describe how a user might pursue a topic-driven or theoretically motivated alternate route through the book (p. 27). For example, the suggested reading itinerary for sustainability should, according to the editors, activate competing definitions, as the term appears in different ways throughout the collection. They propose an itinerary that includes chapters from the 'Nature/Ecology/Sustainability' section along with essays found in thematic areas such as 'Science/Technology/Virtuality', in 'City/Metropolis/Territory' and the project chapter on consumption that sits between the 'Aesthetics/Pleasure/Excess' and 'Nation/World/Spectacle' sections. The itineraries encourage the reader to take an active role in exploring the potential for a theoretical problem and, as a consequence, to enlarge their understanding of contemporary theory through unexpected connections made across the contents of the *Handbook*.

The most challenging aspect of the *Handbook* is not assessing what is included or excluded, the privileging of this or that debate, as might be the case more typical for anthologies of architectural theory. Although from this short description the anthology may seem overly complicated, perhaps over-wrought, the editors took a risk, experimented and have delivered a much-needed resource that upends the status quo. Among their achievements is a view of theory that attends to global shifts in architectural practice. This view remains committed to the medium for architecture theory as architecture and its intellectual and material environments. The collection includes essays written by scholars well established in their area of expertise as well as emerging scholars researching in areas where architectural theory has yet to find solid ground. Certainly some of these essays will stand the test of time better than others. And as to be expected of a collection of essays speaking to the present state of theory, the quality

\* University of Toronto, Canada  
[marylou.lobsinger@daniels.utoronto.ca](mailto:marylou.lobsinger@daniels.utoronto.ca)

of research varies in depth and polish. If there is a theoretical coherence to be detected among the essays, it lays with a relational perspective, with reference to the social context of architecture and, in specific places, to Bruno Latour. Certainly, the thematic bibliographies will be a lasting contribution. The editors envision the *Handbook*

with a long-term goal in mind, writing that, 'it will make a contribution to the longer, slower and oscillating history of architectural theory' (p. 5). The editors should be congratulated as the *Handbook* makes a significant contribution, importantly by opening architectural theory into new directions.

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