

Architecture Oriented Otherwise, David Leatherbarrow

Marc J. Neveu

California Polytechnic State University

Leatherbarrow groupies will not necessarily need this book but will certainly add it to their collection. Six of the eleven essays contained in *Architecture Oriented Otherwise* have appeared elsewhere, whereas others are adapted from public lectures by Leatherbarrow, Chair of the Graduate Group in Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. The book is organized into three rubrics—Performances, Situations, and Topographies—but each appear and reappear in many of the essays. Most readers will recognize the topics as similar to those the author explored in other texts, specifically *Uncommon Ground: Architecture, Technology, and Topography*. In this way, the book holds together as a cohesive whole that is related to the author's already impressive oeuvre.

Throughout *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, Leatherbarrow discusses an incredible range of iconic and lesser known architectural work, literally from Alberti to Zumthor. His oblique gaze into wellknown projects by Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright,

and Adolf Loos reveals that there is still much to learn by looking at this work. The real strength of the book, however, is in the parts that make up the whole. For this reason, many of the essays in this collection will certainly find their way onto graduate and undergraduate reading lists for history / theory courses as well as studio. The essays that deal with singular buildings, as in the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society (PSFS) building in Philadelphia (Practically Primitive), the Lewis Glucksman Gallery at University College in Cork (Landings and Crossings), or even a single wall, such as in the San Martin de Porres in Puerto Rico (Breathing Walls), are critical without being operative. Leatherbarrow writes as he believes an architect should act. He understands and is able to communicate the latent capacity of a work to disclose more than the work is able to do on its own. The process is not additive. It is, rather, productive.

The structure of the essays not only offers insight into built work, but also acts as a model of

an exemplary work of criticism. The author's position is certainly developed through the lens of phenomenological hermeneutics, but he avoids any reliance upon technical jargon for an understanding of the work. Rather, philosophical ideas presented by writers such as Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer are understood through the built work. As with most of Leatherbarrow's writing, the prose is elegant, thoughtful, and precise. Through a patient weaving of architectural theory, primary source material, and meticulous observation of built work, Leatherbarrow once again demonstrates that architecture matters.

Leatherbarrow's meditations are also timely, if perhaps unfashionable. In an early essay, he states a shift in focus from what the building is to what the building does. This is particularly significant in the context of architecture's recent fascination with all things performative. Writings such as Farshid Moussavi's popular *Function of Ornament* and *Function of Form* also look to the performative nature of architecture. Both *Function* books tend to reduce architecture to a collection of types similar, perhaps, to pattern books of the eighteenth century. In each, buildings are separated from their context, drawn to the same scale, and organized according to affect. Leatherbarrow's approach is the

polar opposite. Rather than a reductionist collection of indexed objects, the specific work of architecture is opened up through his interpretations to reveal a temporal and situated way of being in the world.

Leatherbarrow's study of performance is more closely aligned with the performance of a musical instrument. Architecture, similar to a musical or theatrical event, is not understood as static but rather is situated and occurs in a specific time and place.

Throughout the essays, performance unfolds into the topographic existence of the building. This is a familiar ground for those who have read *Uncommon Ground* and *Topographical Stories*. More than context and an awareness of site, Leatherbarrow refers to the building's milieu. It is a telling word choice. "Milieu," French for environment, refers, in English, to shared social surroundings. Such surroundings are not fixed but are variable and shifting. The potential for architecture, as Leatherbarrow demonstrates through his examination of volumetric relationships in the work of Loos, the existing social orientations at play in the PSFS building, or the landings at the Lewis Glucksman Gallery at University College Cork, is to accept and work with the existing milieu so that we begin to see the familiar in an unfamiliar way. The

congeniality of building and milieu trumps the popular fascination with infographics and datascaping. While recent calls for the return to the discipline of architecture have focused upon innovation, new design intelligences, and fascinating forms of fabrication, Leatherbarrow's writing reminds us that architecture may be more than novelty, a means of production, or form. Indeed, Leatherbarrow offers work that is situated, topographic, lived in, and, even if only approximately, he offers architecture that may orient us otherwise.

Marc J. Neveu