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A magazine on the power of the project

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The Property Issue. Ground Control and the Commons | Power and Justice

“ARCH+ Journal for Architecture and Urbanism”, 232 pp. - Spring 2018 |
“The Architectural Review”, vol. 244, Issue 1452, 113 pp. - June 2018

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REFERENCES

The Property Issue. Ground Control and the Commons (2018), “ARCH+ Journal for Architecture and Urbanism”, 232 pp. - Spring 2018. Paperback: € 22,00 - ISBN: 978-3-93143-546-2. *Power and Justice* (2018), “The Architectural Review”, vol. 244, Issue 1452, 113 pp. - June 2018. Paperback: £ 15,99 - ISSN: 0003-861X

1 Recent editions of the German journal *ARCH+ Journal for Architecture and Urbanism* (2018) and the UK based *The Architectural Review* (June 2018) set their sights on the complex imbroglio of architecture and property, taking up themes of power, justice and the law, and asking: Who owns the land upon which our built edifices resolutely stand? Who can lay claim to such territorial power?



- 2 The cover of *The Architectural Review* shows us the personification of justice, her eyes blinded. Colour, race, gender should be of no consequence, all should be judged equally before the law. And yet, we know too well this is rarely the case, and unconscious bias swerves our sympathies. As the editor Paul Finch remarks, when set adrift, detached from each other's purview the key concepts of power and justice become either violent (power without justice) or else useless (justice without power). Recalling an argument by Michael Sorkin, one of the collected authors Mimi Zeiger blandly states that all architecture is political (Zeiger, 2018: 38). No gesture is innocent, every design decision, despite the best of intentions, can resolve itself into a device of territorial capture. Furthermore, architecture has become complicit with the militarisation of cities, defence systems, surveillance networks, and a hardened urban life set against the perceived stranger (38). Our contemporary control society has become the 'new normal'.
- 3 At the same time, we must pause to ask, when an architectural edifice is emptied of its representative affiliation with a given sovereign power, when its tyrannical occupants go on vacation, are we apprehending the same building? A bunker becomes a nightclub, parliament buildings are emptied for renovations, power plants become museums, we know how such complex assemblages work, but do we know how to ethically work with them?
- 4 *The Architectural Review* is darkly edited in such a way to take us from the courthouse to the prison, following the path of the accused. What can be called 'Daedelus's dilemma' is elegantly performed: two articles critiquing the prison type, "penal architecture is essentially cruel" (Wilkinson, 92; Lambert) sandwich a review of a humane prison designed by CF Møller in Denmark. The architectural *aporia*, to build or not to build, is presented as the architect murmurs to herself: If I don't take the commission to design and build the prison, then a lesser architect will be given the job and the inmates thereby disadvantaged.
- 5 Where the wall does not contain us within the confines of a cell, however humane or inhumane, it is to be found winding its way like a venomous creeper across vast swathes of the earth, carrying its colonising gesture even into the exploration of outer space: the Moon, where the Chinese have recently attempted to grow the seed of a cotton plant; Mars, where intrepid exploration is ongoing. Danae Stratou and Yanis Varoufakis argue that the very concept of the individual emerges out of the necessity of cordoning off a well-defined and exclusive space using the wall as infrastructural instrument. Any discussion of justice and power in relation to architecture, as Nabil Ahmed elegantly demonstrates, leads us promptly to the question of property, which depends on this technology of the wall.

- 6 Composing the cover of the *Arch+*, *The Property Issue: Ground Control and the Commons*, a long diaphanous yet insistent fence passes across a deserted landscape. The artist Anina Brisolla takes images appropriated from NASA space exploration and superimposes walls across depictions of these off-world territories. How much strife do we produce, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau once lamented, with that first gesture of cordoning off a patch of the earth and enunciating the infantile exclamation: this is mine! Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's refrain "Property is theft" is a notable epigraph on Florian Herwerk's discussion of Hans-Jochen Vogel's aim to reform ownership of urban land from the simple yet radical premise that property is a common good, like water and air, not a tradeable commodity (Herwerk, 2018: 46). To locate us squarely in the issue, *Arch+* opens with a brief history of property and land reform from Antiquity, through the Middle Ages, to the Modern era, drawing our attention to the deceptively simple question: Who owns the land?
- 7 This special issue, in English and German editions, includes an overview of land policy relevant to the German context, and examines policy reforms that could have made a difference when it comes to spatial justice in urban contexts. Today, individuals unleashed by processes of privatization, the indebted men, women and others we have become, are much like the landless peasants of the 18th Century whose access to the commons was thwarted when the commons came to be enclosed (Harald Trapp, 2018: 34-39).
- 8 The challenge that the editors Arno Brandlhuber and Olaf Grawart extend is that, much like Finch's take on power and justice, critical interpretation and creative transformation should not be hewn apart when it comes to our practical and theoretical work as architects. It's a lesson they take from Marx, and it is to Marx that Doug Spencer author of *The Architecture of Neoliberalism*, whom the editors interview, suggests we all need to return. The whole of this issue of *Arch+* can be read as something of a primer, one that should no doubt be on the mandatory reading lists of all architects and students of architecture: Think land first, don't assume you can raise edifices outside of its rules and regulations and complex networks of ownership. Think the land as a common good. Think property as a verb, Maria Marić goes so far as to suggest, "Always in motion, it travels from noun to noun, land to building, city to region, state to the world, making stories of privatization, gentrification, appropriation" (Marić, 2018: 70).
- 9 The contents of *Arch+* are pedagogically organised around 'Ownership and Access', 'Production and Reproduction', 'Right and Solidarity'. Crucially, the second category returns to the influential work of Dolores Hayden and Silvia Federici, locating the question of reproductive labour at the heart of the journal. The grand domestic revolution is the one that asks us to acknowledge the economic value of erstwhile unpaid domestic labour, "cooking food, caring for children, and cleaning house" (Hayden, 2018: 132). In fact, when we follow Hayden's argument, we see how the material practices of housework lend themselves to the rethinking of the infrastructures of a city.
- 10 Importantly, both journals place projects, speculative and built, alongside critical discourse. The conundrum embedded in the heart of *The Architectural Review* are its advertising pages, an economic claim for page space that seems to belie the journal's political message. It's hard to read a critical appraisal of architecture alongside glossy images of building products. Still, the 'power of the project', to play on the subtitle that

names this journal, *Ardeth*, is something that should not be underestimated. An architect who does not consider the question of property is a naive one, an architect who does not recognise her or his role amidst power relations risks abusing their power. The lessons delivered across the collected essays and project reviews in both journals, fortuitously and urgently, call out that no architect should believe that they are outside a politics of spatialized power relations. Architecture's fundamental question, Nabil insists, must be: 'How do we live together?' (Nabil, 2018: 10)

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