

Book Review:
Angeliki Sioli & Yoonchun Jung (eds).
*Reading Architecture: Literary Imagination
and Architectural Experience*
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Upon the encounter with *Reading Architecture: Literary Imagination and Architectural Experience*, edited by Angeliki Sioli and Yoonchun Jung, one is left to wonder about which is more real—the fiction that is reality, or the reality of fiction? No doubt the insightful contributions that arise in the contemplation of this ambiguous condition originating from literary and architectural representation make their stand on this question, analyzing architecture from the view point of a visitor who is also a narrator, and a reader of architecture and the city, but is not quite an architect *per se*. While the centrality of fiction and narrative in architecture has long been discussed and acknowledged in scholarly writings, the editors of this work take a unique stand to look at literary writings by poets and authors that may have come to inspire city dwellers, but also significantly, the architect's own literary imagination. Referencing Paul Ricoeur's notion of hermeneutic phenomenology, the editors relate this mode of imagining to his claim that language may lead not just to form, but importantly to inform meaningful images.¹

As the editors poignantly note in the introduction, the central motivation for this collection of essays comes from the belief that a literary reading of the city from the viewpoint of the allied literary arts offers an insightful introspective into the subjective view, that is the real virtual dimension of the city, which becomes a factual part of the collective imagination of its inhabitants. As the editors fittingly argue, the imaginative literary lenses possibly offer a more factual reading than the one provided by the so-called scientific production of knowledge aimed at the transformation of cities by the insights of sociologists or scientists. The edited book by Sioli and Jung is accompanied by an insightful foreword by Alberto Pérez-Gómez, and a preface by Elias Constantopoulos, both of which orient the reader to the wider historical context of what it means to read architecture.

This collection of timely writings developed after the gathering of the contributors in June 2015 at the Benaki Museum in Athens, Greece, where a Symposium on the topic of *Reading Architecture* was organized by the book editors, with the support of the History and Theory Program at McGill University, School of Architecture.² Through four well articulated sections devoted to the ‘Readings on (Un)Familiar Places’, ‘Readings on Architectural Research’, ‘Readings on Architectural Design and Pedagogy’, ‘Readings on Contemporary Architectural Reality and Practice’, this book asserts the primacy of the oral condition in architecture, and affirms the centrality of the stories that are firstly and foremost listened to, even before being written, or drawn.

The narrative fictions analyzed by the four contributors Christian Parreno, Angeliki Sioli, Mathilde Simonsen Dahl, and Yoonchun Jung in the first section of the book, recover meaning in four distinct metropolises. Christian Parreno unravels boredom in the Algerian city of Oran, where so-called “centers of waiting” place time at a standstill. The erotic nocturnal landscape of Paris emerges vividly in Angeliki Sioli’s reading of the literary writings of the surrealist poet Philippe Soupault (1897-1990), who created through a technique of metaphoric transfer the literary distance needed to perceive the sadness of the rue de Medicis. Hunger Mathilde Simonsen Dahl discusses the role of a nameless protagonist who crosses the city of Oslo “by foot and by thought” to find within it the traces of Kristiania, in Knut Hamsun’s novel *Hunger* (1890). Lastly, in this section of the book, an impersonal and detached city of Seoul emerges in Yoonchun Jung’s analysis of the stories emerging from apartment buildings.

The second section of the book will inspire architects and scholars to reconsider the methods of their architectural research and renew their language through exploring poetic alternatives that are beyond the dominant modes of scholarly production. Mari Lending’s cautionary tale on the fabrics of reality unveils the fact that literature may supersede reality, and it questions the possible limits of traditional scholarly discourses. Klaske Havik considers how rational modes of thinking are limited in comparison to poetic writings and poetic images, placing perception at the center of a reading of reality that precedes reflection. Rumiko Handa argues the role of architecture as a memento allowing for a Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” between the past and the present that shapes identity. Lisa Landrum opens up a reading into the literary

imagination of Edgar Allan Poe, so as to liberate and revive wonder, while also reminding readers about the limits of unlimited imagination. The closing essay in this section of the book, by Panos Leventis, moves back and forth between fiction and historiography in a narrative reading of the city of Montréal, exposing the methods of an objectifying history and the immediacy of a story(telling).

In the third section the contributors offer insightful reflections to reorient architectural pedagogy and design strategies by defining the role of literary language as a design tool. Jason Crow describes the nesting of words and images in narrative through an analysis of the imagery in Saint-Exupéry's novel, *The Little Prince* (1943), and warns educators about the perils of reducing drawings to illustrations of reality. Anca Matyiku reflects on the fictional space of the imagination that builds future reality, as it is manifested in the poetic constructs of drawing, and before drawing in the literary imagination. She couples this reading with a discussion of Paul Ricoeur's *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975). Sevil Enginsoy Ekinici speaks of an ambiguous story by Paul Scheerbart, *The Perpetual Motion Machine* (1910), which is a literary fiction about invention. As the contributor tellingly explains, this fiction has been interpreted by scholars as either an actual architectural design or a storytelling. This fruitful ambiguity sets the tale in motion, making apparent that perhaps both readings are justified. In his concluding remarks the author of the chapter suggests extending this ambiguous mode of reading and writing to other stories, or tales. With Marc Neveu's close-up reading of Douglas Darden's drawings inspired by Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), we find out about how a veritable novel can become an architectural site for bringing construction and meaning together in such a way that the "siting/setting", and the "building/thinking" are drawn together through "plot/lines". Writing the last chapter in this section, Paul Holmquist examines his experiences, when teaching a graduate-level theory seminar at McGill University School of Architecture. He discusses the role of self-reflective theory that is born from architectural concerns in tandem with architectural experience, arguing that both can be brought into question through literary and philosophical readings.

In the fourth and concluding section of the book the contributors address action and participation in architecture practice. Caroline Dionne takes on the question of spatial agency and its construction through actions and words, basing her interpretation of the role of the users in space-making on Ricoeur's concept of recognition, which she uses to explain the co-dependant relations between literary imagination and participation through action. David Spurr counters the branded architecture produced by market forces with the architecture that survives in literary representation, which arguably offers a form of critical resistance to the reduction of architectural phenomena to image production in "junkspace".³ Lily Chi argues for the use of the tactical craft of storytelling as a re-imagining strategy for architects involved in the urban dimension of architecture. The concluding chapter in this section and in the book by Susana Oliveira makes readers reflect on the role of envisioning possible fictional futures, focusing on E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909), and the possible consequences of reducing architecture to shelter, to imagine other possible futures that reconnect us with nature and each other.

The authors of this carefully edited and timely book unravel the threads of stories that have been alive in places through time, and that have come to capture the unique atmospheres and moods that run through the fabric of actual places and cities, and the lives of their inhabitants, to the point of coming to define, together with the places that they describe, an identity that may not be seen but is lived. It may well indeed be the case that in an age dominated by rational and functional architectural thinking, using Neveu's technique of close-up underlined readings by a readership of architecture students, scholars and architects, may place narrative at the center of architectural design, teaching and creativity as the proper antidote to imagine other possible futures for the urban condition. Our understanding of the reality of urban centers and metropolises becomes sharper through a reading of the fictions and narratives addressed in this book, underlying in turn the capacity of story(telling) and of narrators to infuse architectural imagination with what lies at its core, a literary imagination.

Notes

- 1 Paul Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," *Man and World* 12, 2, 1997: 127.
- 2 <http://www.readingarchitecture.org>, accessed September 7, 2018.
- 3 Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace", *October* 100, 2002: 175-190.

About the author

Federica Goffi is Associate Professor (2007-present), and Co-Chair of the PhD program at Carleton University. She teaches drawing, studio, and a PhD colloquium, and she holds a PhD from WAAC, Virginia Tech. She published articles on the notion of built conservation (OBL/QUE, Scroope, AD, ARQ, In.Form, Interstices, Int.AR). Her 2013 book with Routledge is titled *Time Matter[s]: Invention and Re-imagination in Built Conservation. The Unfinished Drawing and Building of St. Peter's in the Vatican*. She edited *Marco Frascari's Dream House: A Theory of Imagination*, Routledge, 2017. She holds a 'Dottore in Architettura', University of Genoa and is a licensed architect in Italy.

