

Sylvia Lavin, *Form Follows Libido: Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2004, 182 pp., 36 black-and-white illus., \$37.50 Cdn.

Keith Bresnahan

Volume 30, Number 1-2, 2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069669ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069669ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bresnahan, K. (2005). Review of [Sylvia Lavin, *Form Follows Libido: Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2004, 182 pp., 36 black-and-white illus., \$37.50 Cdn.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 30(1-2), 128–130.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1069669ar>

sustained inquiry into considered questions. It had to show that he was not a photographer jumping on the bandwagon of large prints or landscape photography. The book succeeds in this respect. It clearly demonstrates that Burtynsky is committed to his exploration of altered landscapes. However the book also leaves the impression that the photographer is preoccupied with his own place in art history. Perhaps this is understandable, given the difficulties faced by Canadian artists attempting to gain international recognition. This irritation aside, the cata-

logue is an engaging investigation of Burtynsky's world of *Manufactured Landscapes*.

SARAH BASSNETT
University of Western Ontario

Note

- 1 Gary Michael Dault, "The Eleventh Hour in Photography," *Canadian Art* 20, no.1 (Spring 2003), 58, 61.

Sylvia Lavin, *Form Follows Libido: Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2004, 182 pp., 36 black-and-white illus., \$37.50 Cdn.

Affect, moodiness, neurosis, and libido are not typically associated with the smooth surfaces and minimal spaces of mid-century modernist architecture (if with architecture at all). Indeed, a central tenet of architectural historiography posits that modernist design suppressed the vitality of the expressive subject in favour of rationalized and objective form. Eames chairs, George Nelson clocks, Mies's Farnsworth house, or any of Richard Neutra's postwar homes appear in this narrative as paradigms of an anaesthetic "cool," particularly when measured against "hot" contemporary Abstract Expressionist painting. This narrative is challenged by Sylvia Lavin in her new study of Neutra, *Form Follows Libido*, a book which is sure to garner both praise and condemnation for its theoretical positions as well as its infection of modernist purity with the unruliness of the neurotic subject. In this insightful and important work, Lavin – Professor and Chair of the Architecture Department at UCLA – focuses on the complex engagement of American postwar architecture with the burgeoning culture of psychoanalysis.

This engagement is, she argues, nowhere more evident than in the work of Richard Neutra, and particularly in a number of suburban homes he designed for private clients in California between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. These houses, as well as the drive-in church Neutra designed for the Reverend Robert Schuller between 1959 and 1966, form the basis of Lavin's discussion of affect and mood in modern and contemporary architecture. The argument for Neutra as a "contemporary" architect is set out by Lavin early on here, seeing Neutra's production of affective environments establishing him as an important precursor of later environmental design.

Before I go on to outline Lavin's argument in greater detail, I want to be clear: *Form Follows Libido* is a singular achievement in architectural history, remarkable for its seductive and adventurous prose as much as the revelatory force of its arguments. It provides the clearest, and most stimulating, recent example I

know of architectural history as intellectual and cultural history, and should provide scholars in all areas of the discipline with an exemplary model of how to write the history of architecture today.

This history is an explicit concern of Lavin's; her first chapter situates her outlook in a transformation in historical writing she calls "history by choice," following Reyner Banham's "design by choice." Banham used this term to describe the changing role of the architect at mid-century. No longer the master creator of total designs, the architect had become a master selector of objects designed by others. Lavin's "history by choice" reflects the inadequacy today of looking at the past solely in order to find "a truer or more accurate modernism, a more masterful or comprehensive historical narrative, or other normative goals of historical scholarship" (p. 6). The architectural historian today must rather allow herself to be guided by selective arrangements and speculative concerns, to "produce" a specific image of one's object (one nonetheless based in scholarly rigour) rather than "reveal" a comprehensive or readily recognizable history. That such an approach may seem scandalous to any of her readers, speaks not so much to the radical nature of Lavin's project as to the lateness with which art and architectural history have taken stock of theoretical developments that have over the past few decades put to rest the idea of history as an objective truth to be discovered, rather than discursively produced.

Form Follows Libido contributes to a growing body of research into the relationship between architecture and psychoanalysis, research that has gone some way to establishing the centrality of the psychologized and affective subject in the development of modernist conceptions of form.¹ Much of this work partakes of a renewal of interest in the psychology of form as it developed in the work of Heinrich Wölfflin, Theodor Lipps, August Schmarsow, and Wilhelm Wundt in the last decades of the nineteenth century.² Lavin likewise discusses this work, and particularly the development and later vicissitudes of the concept of empathy (*Einfühlung*), as a significant precursor of twentieth-century notions of affective form.

It may be significant to note that like Anthony Vidler, the best-known figure in this recent development of psychoanalytically-informed work on architecture and urban space, Lavin began her career as a historian of French Enlightenment architectural theory. Her previous book, *Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture* (based on her dissertation at Columbia University), was a closely argued study of the early nineteenth-century theorist.³ However, like Vidler, Lavin positions her discussion of affective space in twentieth-century modernism, foreclosing on the intriguing possibility of drawing connections between this milieu and earlier theories of psychologized form. While Lavin acknowledges eighteenth-century theories of the picturesque as “an important antecedent” (p. 145, n. 3) to Neutra’s psychoanalytically-informed architecture, she also claims at the outset that the “architecture of affective environment was not a return to previous sentimentalities, architectures of sensation or association” (p. 4). This acknowledgment-as-disavowal seems to reject somewhat too hastily possible connections to be drawn between eighteenth-century theories of sensational form and the psychologized observer, and modernist psychically-charged spaces. It would have been interesting to see Lavin bring these two aspects of her work into conversation here, but it does not happen.

Instead, Lavin situates Neutra’s (and modern architecture’s) interest in the production of affective *mises-en-scène* in empathy theory and in Neutra’s own formative years in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. His early admiration for Otto Wagner links him to a key line of development in modern architecture, but it is the influence on Neutra of the other great contribution of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, namely Freudian psychoanalysis, with which this book is largely concerned. Lavin traces Neutra’s relationship to psychoanalysis along two distinct but convergent lines. Firstly, she situates the young Neutra in Freud’s immediate milieu, showing his exposure to Freudian ideas – and to Freud himself – through his friendship with Freud’s son Ernst (who was also to become an architect) and subsequent visits to the Freud home-cum-analytic office. More importantly, she makes the case for Neutra’s deep and abiding professional interest in psychoanalysis in both his built work and his voluminous writings.

We learn from these writings that Neutra was obsessed with design as therapy, claiming to use affective form as a means of defending the normal psyche from the pathological effects of bad design. His effort to achieve such forms places him, according to Lavin, at the forefront of a largely unwritten history of postwar modernism. She writes: “By the mid-twentieth century, the architectural object was cathected with a vast quantity and range of psychological significance through varying processes of projection. The architectural object, in turn, responded with an array of strategies that both revealed and concealed the psyche and its manipulation (p. 39).” In telling the story of this devel-

opment, Lavin is also narrating the tumultuous history of psychoanalysis as it came to be entrenched in postwar American culture, a narrative in which Freud’s wayward disciples Otto Rank and Wilhelm Reich play larger parts than does Freud himself.

While roughly the first half of the book sets out Lavin’s basic argument and theoretical positions, the second half consists of case studies of a number of Neutra’s projects from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s. It is in these chapters that Lavin’s analysis shines, as she deftly combines spot-on analyses of formal elements in Neutra’s work with the often strange psychoanalytic pronouncements found in his writing and with the vicissitudes of psychoanalytic culture in postwar America. Thus, the hallmarks of Neutra’s mature work – the mitered glass corner, “spider leg” outriggings, indeterminacy of interior and exterior – are brought into conversation with Otto Rank’s theory of the birth trauma (in which the original moment of separation from the mother’s womb becomes the primary source of adult neuroses) and Wilhelm Reich’s theories of libidinal “orgone” energy.

If such connections remained at the level of heuristic analogy, as is often the case in psychoanalytic readings of architecture, their applicability to Neutra or any other architect might be seriously questioned. After all, one could imagine other equally plausible readings. But *Form Follows Libido* is not a psychoanalytic reading of Neutra’s work, as much as it is a study of the already-present preoccupations of his work with a pervasive culture of psychoanalysis. On the basis of archival research into Neutra’s (largely unpublished) writings, the connections between these houses and the theories of Freud, Rank, and Reich come to take on the shape of historical fact rather than vague analogy. This is not to say that Lavin’s writing is entirely free of such analogy; more than one reader will find tenuous such assertions as “the spider legs [of the 1949 Rourke house] create ... a kind of birth canal that mediates the passage from inside to outside” (p. 63). For the most part, however, her readings of these houses follow convincingly from the evidence she mounts toward situating Neutra as the most psychoanalytically informed of modern architects.

For Neutra, who “deliberately modeled his role as an architect for residential clients on the analyst working with neurotic patients” (p. 47), these theories of maternal separation and libidinal energies were more than convenient props for expressing his design intentions. They appear to have been prior to, and instrumental in, the development and meaning of these designs. In the case of Rank, his theory of the function of analysis as enabling the patient to master the trauma of birth was clearly influential on Neutra’s conception both of domestic space and the role of the architect. Neutra writes, “Survival starts before birth. There, in the womb, it is best insured. After

the 'birth trauma,' the shock to get into our outer unassorted scene ... we all slip right into the hands of the architect" (p. 55). It is Rank's understanding of the house as the independent subject's material defense against the fear of detachment that is at work here, rather than Freud's notion of the house as enabling a surrogate return to the womb. If architecture, for Neutra, constitutes a site in which the traumatized subject can express a desire for self-negation and the loss of identity through regression into the spatial environment, the proper role of the architect is thus understood to lie in the production of spaces that offer protection against this unconscious wish. The house (and, more often than not, the architect) becomes a transference object with which the client can identify and fall in love.

Reich's theories of "orgone" energy (the unreleased tension of which is the source of neurosis) and the boxes he built to accumulate these energies, had a popular appeal in the new wave of "bohemian" counterculture in 1940s and '50s America. That these bohemians were among Neutra's clients in this period, and that "his work shared with Reich's not only the same ambition – to provide climate control, better sex, improved health, and happiness itself – but the same cultural milieu" (p. 75), allows Lavin to draw parallels between the former's houses and the latter's ideas of libidinal energy. Neutra's Chuey house of 1956, for example, is described by the architect as a space of "vibrating life" arousing the sensory apparatus of its inhabitants and resulting in "energy transactions" (p. 79). The layering of materials within these houses (corresponding to a similar layering in Reich's orgone boxes), and the production of indefinite environments within and without (through sliding window walls, glass corners, interpenetration of interior and exterior spaces), point for Lavin to a concern with directing and harnessing different forms of psychic and atmospheric energy. In turn, the tangible concern with energy links the design with a contemporary current of interest in psychic stimulation and altered states of consciousness.⁴

Lavin's account moves Neutra from the margins of architectural modernism to the atmospheric and energetic centre of contemporary environmental design. In doing so, it also attempts to shift architectural history away from its drive toward a comprehensive narrative of modernism, a drive evidenced by increasingly localized studies that do not significantly depart

from received ideas. In place of this, Lavin points toward a mode of history that pays "as much attention to what might have been as to what happened" (p. 139), and to the other histories of modernism (such as that of psychoanalysis) to which architecture belongs. This new history is as compelling as it is timely. It follows on decades in which many architects and architectural historians fulfilled in the present the image of neutral and passionless design they projected onto the past. Or, as Lavin argues on the last page of this book, "Neutra's architecture does not dull the mind but instead generates mood. And that's why we like it now" (p. 144).

KEITH BRESNAHAN
York University

Notes

- 1 A short list of recent works dealing with affect and subjectivity in modern architecture would have to include Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992) and *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Kathleen James-Chakraborty, *German Architecture for a Mass Audience* (London, 2000); Mark Jarzombek, *The Psychologizing of Modernity: Art, Architecture, and History* (Cambridge, 2000); Jeffrey Kipnis, ed., *Mood River*, exh. cat., Columbus, Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, 2002). Recent conferences on Architecture and Psychoanalysis organized by Mark Cousins at the Architectural Association in London in 2000 and by Peggy Deamer at Yale in 2003 attest to ongoing work in the field.
- 2 The key reference here is the important collection of primary sources *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, eds Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou (Santa Monica, 1994). Also valuable is Mitchell Schwarzer, *German Architectural Theory and the Search for Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1995), and Jarzombek, *The Psychologizing of Modernity*.
- 3 Sylvia Lavin, *Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).
- 4 That the Chueys were followers of Reich and the guru Krishnamurti, who opened their house to groups engaging in orgone box use and early experiments with LSD, makes the energetic atmosphere of their house as envisioned by Neutra appear a potent contributor to this current.

Heather Dawkins, *The Nude in French Art and Culture, 1870–1910*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 231 pp., 60 black-and-white illus., \$107 Cdn.

In 1956 Kenneth Clark outlined what he saw as important distinctions between the naked and the nude by concluding that:

To be Naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word "nude", on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenceless body, but a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed.¹