

**John Potvin, Marie-Ève Marchand, eds., *Design and Agency: Critical Perspectives on Identities, Histories, and Practices*, London/New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020, 328 pp. 40 b/w illus. \$ 115.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781350063792**

**Colin Ripley**

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**Approaching Home: New Perspectives on the Domestic Interior**  
Vers la maison : nouvelles perspectives sur l'intérieur domestique

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Chapter three directs the author's gaze to American architect Mark Robbins' project *Households* (2003–06), which sets out to challenge the trite and glossy images of same-sex couples that appear with increased frequency in design periodicals like *Architectural Digest* and *House & Gardens*. For its part, chapter four provides a much lengthier analysis of various works by artist duo Michael Elmgreen (Denmark) and Ingar Dragset (Norway). Specifically, Vallerand examines the fictional, exploratory domestic worlds the duo conjured both in their work *The Collectors* for the Danish and Nordic Pavilions of the 2009 Venice Biennale, and in the much-talked-about *Tomorrow*, a 2013 takeover of various gallery spaces at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Both projects were comprehensive (fictional) queer reimaginations of domestic interiors which set out to challenge the steadfast institutional praxis that continues to limit queer involvement and interventions. Finally, chapter five undertakes an exploration of how queers have sought to reimagine architectural space and the built environment, first by turning the gaze to inclusive retirement communities designed by BOOM, and then to Spanish architect Andrés Jaque's transdisciplinary Office of Political Innovation (founded in 2003) and its *IKEA Disobedients*, ending with Swedish project MYCKET, a queer feminist initiative begun in 2012.

By his own admission, Vallerand purposefully avoids “analyzing specific domestic spaces in this project in an attempt to circumvent the limitations of basing observations on only a few spaces, accessible for analysis and thus already detached from ordinary domestic spaces” (10). Rather, the emphasis is placed on theories, critiques, museum and gallery exhibitions, and activist projects, to better understand “how the assumed public/private dichotomy is performed and challenged.” As the subtitle clearly stipulates, the object of analysis is in fact domestic space. With this clear

expectation in mind, it seemed decidedly at odds with this mission that space, architecture, the built environment, and domesticity are conflated throughout the book, with space largely standing in as a catchall, as if domesticity is not an idea(l) and an ideological framework in itself with its own unique traditions, scholarship and baggage. I would go so far as to claim that the domestic is the spectre that haunts both architecture in general and this book in particular.

Additionally, the various case studies and the analyses of them exist as if in a form of transhistorical and transcultural bubble. In chapter five, for example, no broader context or sociopolitical background is provided for the analysis of the feminist queer initiative MYCKET. The unique and much vaunted gender and queer politics of Sweden, as much as the deep-seated concept of the *folkhemmet* (literally referring to Sweden as the People's Home), to cite only two issues, are absent from a discussion of a project that surely speaks to current as much as past issues that plague Swedish society, domesticity, architectural praxis and gender politics. Are we to assume that the term queer, if in use in the countries where these creative projects took place, means the same thing? Likewise, are we to conclude that the assumptions around the traditions that dominate and the terminology used to talk about or critique the domestic are the same or even similar between countries? Among the many challenges of globalization is the assumption of a level playing field and a lack of a recognition of national specificity. Unfortunately, the American-centric understanding of queer sexuality undergirds a universalizing transnational approach that overshadows the uniqueness of each of the creative projects under review in the book. Even the theoretical material—by the author's own admission—focuses on American scholarship of the domestic which has been dominated by the “spectre of the separate spheres theory”

(13) separating the male-dominated world of the public sphere from the woman-driven domestic realm. Given how this notion of the separate spheres continues to dominate scholarship well beyond one single geopolitical entity, this reviewer was struck by the American-centricism of the approach, one that I would contend plagues the methodological framework of the book as a whole.

*Unplanned Visitors* is one of those rare instances of an attempt to insert queer studies into the study of architecture, a discipline staunchly reticent to tackle such a—by now tried and tested—theoretical and political agenda. For this reason, Vallerand must be commended. Indeed, while other writings on architectural space, queer theory and sexuality more broadly have come before (the work of Aaron Betsky comes to mind here), many of these have been short, incomplete, or plagued by profound limitations. Despite its methodological missteps, what makes this book unique and worthy of attention is its sustained approach toward queering recent architectural critique. ¶

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Agency, as David Fortin points out in his contribution to John Potvin and Marie-Ève Marchand's new book *Design and Agency: Critical Perspectives on Identities, Histories, and Practices*, is



a deeply complex and troubled concept. While we have become used to thinking, for example, of a socially engaged actor in contemporary society as having agency, as having the ability to effect change, the very organizations that these actors struggle against are also, literally, agencies, acting on behalf of power. Agency can be explicit or implicit, hidden or overt, recognized or denied, conscious or not. One can have and apply agency intentionally, unintentionally, or, indeed, against one's will. One need not even have will: a consciousness is not required in order to exert agency (think, for example, of a catalytic agent in chemistry). Agency always implies a remove, an action at a distance, as one is an agent for someone or something else, something other than that which is doing the acting. Agency as a result creates chains and networks, with any particular moment of agency devolved immediately into multiple connective agencies. Agency always raises questions of privilege: what actors are allowed agency, and to whom is it denied?

In *Design and Agency*, no fewer than nineteen authors have produced contributions that seek to explore, interrogate, and perhaps clarify the relationships between agency and design. This is no small task. After all, the term *design* is hardly less complex or ambiguous than *agency*. Are

we concerned here with design as an activity, with the institution, the industry, with design drawings, with designed objects, with all of the above and more? In addition, of course, design is explicitly bound up with the concept of agency: just try an internet search for “design and agency” and see what comes up. Designer's firms are literally agencies, working on behalf of clients. More than that though, design as an activity always involves multiple overlapping and conflicting agencies: the designer works as an agent for herself, for her client, for design as an independent discipline, for her firm, for her social and political ideals, and so on. The same can be said of the products of design; whether institutions (like a police force) or objects (like a table) or, indeed, subjectivities (like a designer), they possess both acknowledged and unacknowledged agency in relation to multiple other entities.

The book brings together, and to a certain extent struggles with, two parallel lines of thought around the two concepts in the title. On the one hand, there is a growing body of literature around agency in design, largely within the discipline of architecture, in which agency is construed as a matter of activism on the part of designers. Key to this strand of thought are the works of Marcus Miessen, such as *Did Someone Say Participate* (MIT Press, 2006), with Shumon Basar; *Design Like You Give a Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises* (Thames & Hudson, 2006), edited by Architecture for Humanity; *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism* (Metropolis Books, 2008), edited by Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford; and Nishat Awan, Jeremy Till, and Tatjana Schneider's *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (Routledge, 2011). Arguably, this stream of thought finds its apotheosis in the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, *Reporting from the Front* (directed by Alejandro Aravena), which presented both the power and the inherent limits of this approach. More recently, activist

work in architecture has moved away from humanitarian issues and response to crises to engage more fully in the political, as in works such as Eyal Weizman and Forensic Architects's *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Zone Books, 2017), Nadir Z. Lahijji's *Can Architecture be an Emancipatory Project: Dialogues on the Left* (zero books, 2016), and Albená Yaneva's *Five Ways to make Architecture Political: An Introduction to the Politics of Design Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2017), among others. On the other hand, the work presented in the book, or at least much of it, is indebted to a broader line of recent philosophical thought around the nature of agency in general, most notably in the form of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory and Karen Barad's Agential Realism. These ideas look to position agency as a fundamental aspect of all interaction, human or otherwise.

Potvin and Marchand clearly recognize the resulting complexity of the relationship between design and agency. In his introductory essay, Potvin makes it clear that the goal of the volume, and of the 2018 symposium at Concordia University that gave birth to it, is simply to investigate the breadth of questions that arise from considering agency. As Potvin puts it:

... a sustained examination of agency and design must certainly also take into consideration institutional representatives that stand in for, on behalf of professionals, students, citizens, users, creators, sellers, or consumers, to list only a few. Not exhaustive by any means, the eighteen chapters that comprise *Design and Agency* set out to explore very different currents of power, culture, purpose and ambition. However, at the core of these intersections and what binds these chapters neatly together is a concern for how design is an agent of and for action, how a person(s), institution(s), or object(s) exert power, and a will to change a perceived or real state or condition through design. (6)

While the volume achieves this goal pretty well, it must be said that as a binding element, this concern is rather broad, leaving the book as a whole feeling rather disjunctive.

Each of the authors constructs and presents a particular position in relation to this nexus between design and agency, for the most part in relation to one or more particular processes or objects of design, or one or more particular participants in a design. For example, Amélie Elizabeth Pelly, in “Beyond the Couch: Anna Freud and the Analytic Environment,” discusses how the design of Anna Freud’s apartment and consulting rooms allowed her to both connect and simultaneously distinguish her practice from that of her famous father; Annmarie Adams, in “Agency and Architecture in Medical Murals by Mary Filer and Marian Dale Scott,” explores the conflicted agency of these two female artists working within the male-dominated world of early twentieth-century medicine; Sara Nicole England, in “National Cash Register Company’s Boys’ Garden: Shaping Working-Class Childhoods and Future Workers, 1897–1913,” addresses the ability of a major manufacturing concern to affect societal change, arguably for its own benefit, outside the particular realm of its manufacturing operations. Some articles, such as Marie-Ève Marchand’s “Period Décor and the Negotiation of Identity in the Home” or Sabine Wieber’s “Designs on Modernity: Gertrud Loew’s Vienna Apartment and Situated Agency” are concerned with the ways in which clients, in particular clients of means, make use of design to establish and express an identity in relation to the society in which they move or aspire to move. Wieber’s paper, read in conjunction with those of Marchand and Pelly, and perhaps that by Campbell (see below), also offer some notions for how we might reframe a study of the domestic interior in terms of agency. Others, such as Lynn Chalmers’ “Women as Agents of Change in the Design of the Workplace” or Rachel Gottlieb’s “Agent Bruce Mau and the Audacity of Design” investigate the agency that individuals or groups can have on larger movements of design. The discussion

of agency remains relatively latent in some of the articles, including some that, for me, were among the most interesting in the book: Erin J. Campbell’s “*Mulum in Parvo*: Scale and Agency in the Thorne Miniature Rooms”; Cammie McAtee’s “Dueling over Domes: Jeffrey Lindsay and Buckminster Fuller Cross Struts and Sprits in the US Patent Office”; Mark Taylor’s “Desperately Seeking Sunlight: Le Corbusier’s Casa Curutchet and *The Man Next Door*”; and Anca I. Lasc’s “*The Dry Goods Economist* and the Role of Mass Media in the Creation of a Global Window Design Aesthetic at the End of the Nineteenth Century.” On the other hand, several articles at the end of the book take a decidedly more theoretical position in relation to agency: David T. Fortin’s “From *Indian to Indigenous Agency*: Opportunities and Challenges for Architectural Design”; Anne Massey’s “Design History and Dyslexia”; Jessica Hemmings’ “Textual Agency: Pitfalls and Potentials”; and Ece Canli’s “Design’s Performative Agency: Thoughts on New Directions for Materiality, Ontology, and Identity-Making.”

Most of the chapters provide compelling and interesting narratives and introduce the reader to fascinating if little-known episodes in the history of design (few of the chapters involve canonical designers or canonical works). Different readers will, of course, find that different chapters carry a particular appeal; my intuition is that there is something here for just about every reader who is interested in design. Although the editors have done a good job in terms of evening out the style, the chapters are, to my mind, of uneven quality in terms of the core discussion of agency promised by the book’s title; the brevity of the format, in particular, means that many authors fill most of their pages with straightforward descriptions of the works in question or histories of their production or exhibition, leaving relatively little territory for an in-depth or nuanced discussion of agency. While a few chapters (most

notably, for me, the piece by Annmarie Adams), did an admirable job of developing a complex discussion of agency, others presented agency in a simplistic manner, reducing it for example to the explicit goals of the designer or the client; the agency (or lack thereof) of other actors in the system, as well as the effects of unexpected agents, were missing, sometimes glaringly so. In other chapters, agency seemed almost an aside; rather than discussing a design event that clearly illustrated ideas around agency, I got the impression that agency was “tacked on” to an already familiar and already well researched (though admittedly interesting) design question. In most of the papers, aside from those at the end of the book (these surely should have been at the beginning) that took a theoretical position, agency was heavily under-theorized, and often the authors took no particular positions in this regard.

In the end, I find myself, unfairly, wishing that this were a completely different book. I want to be clear that this is not an indictment of what has been produced. Each chapter in this book presented something of interest, each was well written, and a number were really gripping. All deserve to be published and to be read with pleasure; indeed, several of them really deserve to be expanded into longer works that can provide space to develop the richness of arguments that are only sketched here. In particular, it seems to me that the chapters by Lynn Chalmers, David Fortin, and Ece Canli each have the potential to be expanded into monograph-length works that would contribute strongly to the discourse. The chapters don’t, however, hold together; there is no clear flow of ideas, no connectivity of concept or subject matter. The problem, for me, is that the book as a whole doesn’t really do much to elucidate the complex relations between design and agency—it doesn’t live up to the promise of its title. My intuition is that the difficulty is not so much with the content of the book as with its structure. Perhaps a

book with fewer, longer, more carefully organized chapters, a more considered theoretical foundation, and fewer and more thoughtfully chosen examples would do a better job of developing an understanding of design and agency.

I'm not suggesting here that there is any shortcoming on the part of the authors, as I have mentioned above, or with the editors, who have done a creditable job of organizing very diverse contributions, nor indeed with the publishers who have produced a fine product. In order to come to grips with the book in its actual state we would need to understand and analyze the various agendas that come into play in its development—personal, financial, cultural, institutional. Which agendas find themselves reified in the book's ultimate form, organization, structure, and content, either explicitly or latently? How is the book as it exists able to support some agendas, including hitherto submerged agendas, while helping to trouble or question others? This analysis is beyond the scope of this review, which is really a shame, because according to the editors of this book it is exactly how we should proceed in order to review it: this is, in short, a question of *design and agency*. ¶

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Francesco Garutti, dir.

**Nos jours heureux: architecture et bien-être à l'ère du capitalisme émotionnel**

Montréal/Berlin, Centre canadien d'architecture et Sternberg Press, 2019  
328 p. illustrations en couleur  
40 \$ (papier) ISBN 9783956795022  
Aussi publié en anglais sous le titre *Our Happy Life: Architecture and Well-Being in the Age of Emotional Capitalism*, ISBN 9783956794865

Olivier Vallerand

Depuis l'arrivée en 2005 de Mirko Zardini à la direction du Centre canadien d'architecture et de Giovanna Borasi comme conservatrice de l'architecture contemporaine (et directrice depuis le départ de Zardini en 2019), l'institution a présenté une série d'expositions sur la relation entre l'environnement bâti et les questions politiques et sociales, dont *En imparfaite santé: la médicalisation de l'architecture* (2011–2012), *Trajets: comment la mobilité des fruits, des idées et des architectures recompose notre environnement* (2010–2011), *Actions: comment s'approprier la ville* (2008–2009) et *Sensations urbaines: une approche différente à l'urbanisme* (2005–2006), toutes organisées par Zardini ou Borasi. Avec *Nos jours heureux: architecture et bien-être à l'ère du capitalisme émotionnel*, catalogue d'une exposition organisée en 2019, le commissaire Francesco Garutti continue cette exploration en s'intéressant à l'utilisation du bonheur comme critère pour évaluer les sociétés et, par extension, la production de ces sociétés, dont l'architecture et la ville. Plus de dix ans après la crise économique de 2008, *Nos jours heureux* en est en grande partie le résultat, comme le note Garutti en soulignant l'émergence dans la dernière décennie d'un «nombre impressionnant de listes d'indicateurs de bien-être, d'indices de bonheur et autres classifications du bien-être dit psychophysique commandés et produits par des institutions tant privées que publiques [ayant] transformé la palette d'outils dont disposent les décideurs pour planifier et façonner la

ville» (p. 30). Pour le commissaire, ces indices, tels l'économie, la longévité ou l'alphabétisation, qui représentent un nouveau système de valeurs ayant pris le dessus sur les critères précédents, permettent de mesurer le progrès des sociétés en réaction à une crise tant économique qu'idéologique. Garutti et ses collaborateurs s'appuient sur une présentation parfois étourdissante de ces multiples indices plutôt que de définir de façon claire le concept de bonheur ou les façons de le quantifier, en semblant prendre pour acquis que les visiteurs et lecteurs ont une définition personnelle du bien-être et de la qualité de vie, mais aussi que cette diversité de visions de ce qu'est le bonheur représente en soi un matériau riche pour la réflexion.

Tant l'exposition que le catalogue reposent en grande partie sur la représentation visuelle du bonheur (ou de l'absence de bonheur) par le biais, entre autres, d'une critique de l'importance des médias traditionnels et des médias sociaux, mais ils tombent parfois aussi dans le piège d'exposer un visuel qui a le potentiel d'être rediffusé avec force à travers des réseaux tels qu'Instagram. La majeure partie du catalogue reprend ainsi vingt-deux essais photos issus de l'exposition, chacun complété d'un court texte d'une ou deux pages décrivant certains enjeux représentés par les images. Ces essais photos, décrits par Garutti comme étant des «récits sobres, narratifs et précis» (p. 58), sont séparés les uns des autres par des questions reprises de l'exposition, telles que «Où se situent les limites de votre maison? Sont-elles matérialisées par les murs ou s'étendent-elles aussi loin que le peut votre réseau domestique?», «Comment l'accès au haut débit a-t-il transformé votre sentiment d'appartenance à la communauté?», «Avez-vous besoin d'une maison?» ou «Votre maison est-elle un lieu de rassemblement familial ou un investissement pour votre avenir? Pouvez-vous la considérer comme un