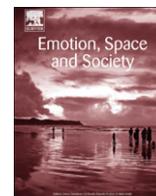


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## Emotion, Space and Society

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### Book review

**Camera Constructs: Photography, Architecture and the Modern City, Edited Andrew Higgott, Timothy Wray (Eds.), Ashgate, Farnham, England (2012). xxii and 357 pp., £65.00 cloth, ISBN: 978-1-4094-2145-0**

In an experiment dating to the 17th century, Sir Isaac Newton famously blocked all light from entering his chamber except for a small puncture in his window shutter. He then placed a prism in the resulting sunbeam, dispersing a brilliant spectrum of colours on his wall. This was the first step in an experiment revealing that what we experience as white light is constituted of a brilliant array of colours. Similarly, in *Camera Constructs*, editors Andrew Higgott and Timothy Wray have singled out a sunbeam at the intersection of photography, architecture, and design. The volume functions as a prism of sorts, dispersing that sunbeam to reveal a brilliant array of insights and perspectives.

Resulting from a conference held at the School of Architecture and Visual Arts at the University of East London in 2006, it is no surprise that the 23 chapters are written mostly by architects with positions in UK universities, though there are a few contributions from others in similar positions in the US, photographers, and an art historian. Higgott and Wray present here a collection of writings that consider the constructive, interpretive, narrative, and frequently emotive power of photography specifically with regard to representations of architecture. It is important to note that this text embraces the very broad definition of architecture, ranging from the seminal building (e.g. Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier in chapter 11, the Eames Case Study House in chapter 4) to entire cities (e.g. Havana in chapter 13 and Los Angeles in chapter 14) and even—most appreciated by readers of *Emotion, Space, and Society*—affective space like the haunted “space of our primary perception” (chapter 7) and intriguing “slow space” (chapter 17). The chapters are short and succinct, aptly illustrated with 188 black and white pictures.

Section one of four begins with chapters that illustrate straightforward and rather uninspired analyses of the constraints and impacts of photography on the reception of architecture. The authors point to creative cropping of adjacent buildings and other visual detritus, or image manipulation that may have been considered sneaky in the early days of photography but are today widely understood and—for better or worse—accepted (see [Adatto, 2008](#); [Wyly, 2010](#)). Nonetheless these chapters serve as a helpful introduction to critical visual theory for the uninitiated. For by chapter 6, the content takes a refreshing and exhilarating turn into some new and insightful work. Here, Robin Wilson shows how a well known architectural editor was able to see photographers as authors of a craft in their own right rather than re-presenters of architects' work.

The second section begins with another strong piece on deeply emotional representations in photography. Here, echoing work by

geographers (e.g. [Kraftl and Adey, 2008](#)), the book begins to consider affective impacts of architectural space. In this chapter, Timothy Wray deploys psychoanalytic theory to better understand the haunting presence of some more untraditional architectural images akin to Steve Pile's (2005) work in *Real Cities*. Further chapters play with the magical game experienced in the scale hopping of immense architecture brought to our laps and desks via computers, photographs, models, and especially mystifying photographs of models. These chapters examine the intimacy of viewing and engaging with photographs as a disruption of the distancing and apartness typically imparted by photography as a form of remote sensing.

Section three moves into analyses of entire cities as subjects, with an especially insightful piece describing the process of looking at single image. Echoing work on visual methods by geographer Gillian Rose, Ian Wiblin explores affect in narrative and historical realms in a photograph by Bernd and Hilla Becher, carefully clarifying how photography can be so much more than a snapshot.

The fourth and final section moves to explore photography as a design tool. While this might at first seem too technical for non-architects/photographers, much like the rest of the book it is rich with the subtlety and nuance of image creation and the resulting definition of space. There are two chapters on stereoscopic photography that go beyond its status as a kitsch collectable, opening up ways of looking at how architectural space is perceived and communicated in photography.

One common thread throughout the text is the contemporaneous development of the commercial use of photographs in popular and architectural media (e.g. magazines, journals, and monographs) and the modernist movement in architecture (e.g. Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe). Is this repetition a reflection of the popularity of this time period and aesthetic in contemporary architectural discourse? True as it may be, the recurring assertion of their interconnectedness feels redundant by about half way through the book. Further engagement with other time periods and architectural genres are left overshadowed, though the chapters that do, shine for it.

Readers of *Camera Constructs* who are familiar with critical visual and photographic theory will not be surprised by what is presented here, but I think will be intrigued by the authors' engagements with a wide variety of complex, esoteric topics freshly explored. Likewise, scholars familiar with critical visual, social and cultural theory will discover many familiar references but with new, insightful applications. The authors call on ideas from the Frankfurt School, especially Walter Benjamin, as well as Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, Bruno Latour, Henri Lefebvre, and Susan Sontag to name a few.

Ultimately, the Newton/prism/spectrum metaphor I opened with breaks down because this text does more than present an array of writings about architecture and photography. These

chapters reach beyond this narrow beam and despite the authors' predominant academic-architect disposition, *Camera Constructs* is impressively inter-disciplinary and all the richer for it. The writings collected here will be an asset to scholars in many disciplines whose work touches on the visual theory, visual methodologies, and affect from many different directions.

### References

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