

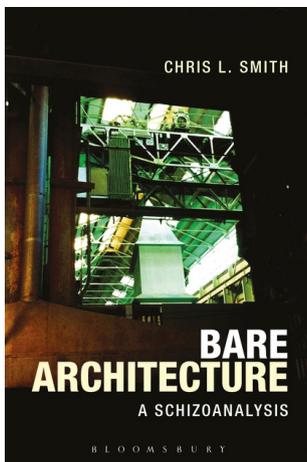
review / PAUL JAMES

INTERSTICES SPINOZA

Chris L. Smith

Bare Architecture: A Schizoanalysis

Bloomsbury Academic, 2017



Bare Architecture: A Schizoanalysis by University of Sydney academic Dr. Chris L. Smith will be of particular interest to those engaged with connections between Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophy and architecture. Smith's study opens up ways of thinking about architecture as both a profession and as a subject within humanistic research. He places emphasis on the way that architecture engages with the communicative space of culture, drawing out its links to philosophy, art, literature, and medicine. During a period marked by increasing pragmatism in research generated within the discipline of architecture, this book is noteworthy for resisting any simple-minded utility. The key contributions of the book will probably prove to be Smith's formulation of the category of "Bare Architecture," and his impressive commentary on symptomatology.

In his foreword Smith states that the book is a work of schizoanalysis. While he does provide a brief description of what schizoanalysis is, it is too succinct to be useful for readers less familiar with Deleuze and Guattari's theory. Familiarity with the processes and objectives of schizoanalysis is necessary to discern the logic governing both Smith's mode of writing, and the organisation of the book. The inclusion of stream-of-consciousness writing and highly fragmented arguments in the early stages of the book may baffle readers without this knowledge. Architectural students, in particular, will find Smith's book more accessible if they consult an explicative account of schizoanalysis prior to trying to process his text. *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature* by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan (2015) would serve this role admirably.

The research approach of the book will divide readers. Readers familiar with schizoanalysis will likely gain pleasure from Smith's strategic combination of stream-of-consciousness prose, authoritative descriptions of Deleuzian arguments, and sensitive descriptions of case studies, due to the novel insights into the transcendental consciousness that they provide. Readers less familiar with Deleuze, who are looking for an explicative academic text that explicitly states the utility of Deleuzian concepts to those engaged with the production of architecture may be alienated by the post-modern mode of writing. I encourage readers in the latter group to persist with the book as the highly stylised writing of the early book is toned down as the text progresses. The majority of the text is written in a relatively conventional academic manner with linear arguments

explicated through the examination of architectural case studies.

The book doesn't seek to provide a tool kit for applying Deleuzian concepts to generate architectural designs. For those whose primary interest is architecture, the value of the book may lay in the shifts it forms in their understanding of architectural case studies. For those primarily interested in philosophy, the application of architecture as a lens may activate insights into the political and social potential of Deleuze's thought, which may be less evident when considered in relationship to other areas of culture. Smith's interpretation of Deleuze's analysis of medicine, through the lens of the praxis of architecture, provides a key example of this productive contribution of the book. Smith's engagement with philosophy isn't limited to Deleuze; with agility he threads his arguments amongst the networks of thinkers associated with post-structuralist, post-modern and psychoanalytical theory.

A key contribution of Smith's study is the development of his concept of "Bare Architecture". This concept is elaborated in nuanced ways through intricate interpretations of examples. Gathering his obscure definitions together provides the category of "Bare Architecture" with an amorphous form, without over-determining it. Smith acknowledges the origin of his concept of Bare Architecture, stating that it was derived from Giorgio Agamben's expression "bare life" (xvi). For Smith "Bare Architecture" occurs during the raw experience of how architecture locates us within a place and a position, and simultaneously generates an experience of losing and destabilising of our sense of self (5). Later in the book he declares:

What is at stake in the project of *bare architecture* is the passing of the subject as we know it and a resuscitation of the forces of the asubjective impersonal. Of making our literature, art and architecture itself breathe, eat, speak, shit and fuck, spit, sing, stammer, stutter and spasm. Making it, itself, intensive. Alive and incorporeal. A prosthesis-heart that throbs. (61).

Smith's engagement with terms associated with the erotic and the scatological are mobilised within his critique of what he views as the sanitised accounts, of the architectural phenomenologists. The polemical force of Smith's "Bare Architecture" is illustrated through a series of case studies that emphasise the erotic in predictable and less predictable places. Case studies enlisted to illustrate the erotic are: Göteborg sauna and Zumthor's Serpentine pavilion. The corporeal is related to Darden's Oxygen house, while the Mémorial des Martyrs de la Deportation is aligned with the impersonal. Smith generously builds bridges for his readers. Strategically he includes a summary of Deleuze's interpretation of Bacon's paintings, to draw a pathway for the reader to follow his extension of Deleuze's arguments to include architectural examples. Smith embraces Zumthor (the golden light of architectural phenomenology) to parasitically insert a Deleuzian sensibility into the discursive ground formed by architectural phenomenologists' ruminations on affect.

As a researcher engaged with the philosophy of phenomenology, I find Smith's critique of the architectural phenomenologists the least convincing part of his otherwise excellent study. His critique seems glib at times: "Their accounts can have us thinking that the world is a very genteel place indeed. That our most intense pleasure come from handrails or door-handles (53)." Additionally Smith notes; "The body parts the architectural phenomenologist's focus is upon too, are

as quaint as the architectural intensities to which they respond (53).” While Smith does bring to presence the latent sexual dimensions within his experience of case studies he is not immune from the charms of handrails; “We swim to the tower because it is empty without us. A ladder always yearns to be climbed. A handrail always desires to be held (xv).” The relationship between architectural phenomenology and post-modern theory, including Smith’s own, is more ambiguous and complex than he acknowledges. He also needed to be more self-reflexive of the marked resemblance between his detailed descriptions of his haptic experiences of case studies and the interpretive tropes of the architectural phenomenologists.

Smith appears to have lapsed into the intellectual fashion for trivialising the political objectives of the phenomenologists. There is a tendency to characterise the tradition as fuzzy apolitical commentary on spatial affects rather than a means to challenge reductive representations of complex reality. I have in mind here Edmund Husserl’s critique of the mathematisation of reality and the way that phenomenology was framed by Jan Patočka to guide political dissidents resisting totalitarianism within the Communist Bloc. Smith’s critique of the architectural phenomenologists would have been strengthened had he acknowledged both the gaps and continuities between the arguments of the philosophers associated with phenomenology and their translation by key architectural phenomenologists. Dalibor Vesely, for example, was attentive to the political significance of Patočka’s philosophy, when he adapted it to issues associated with architecture. Acknowledging the political significance of phenomenology (particularly in France and Eastern Europe) would have exposed a less polite, more politically charged legacy of phenomenology that has a closer relationship to the political investment in the erotic and the scatological of Smith’s “Bare Architecture” than he admits.

Unsurprisingly given Smith’s ongoing research interest in the relationship between architecture and biomedicine the chapter titled “Symptomatology” is one of the most convincing in the book. Within this section he draws out the nuanced relationship between architecture and medicine. For Deleuzian academics I imagine that Smith’s unfolding of the significance of symptomatology to architecture will prove to have the most impact. This chapter may also prove to be of most interest to postgraduate students engaged in design research, as the utility of Deleuze’s arguments become most evident in this section. Smith’s critique of the value of pragmatism underpinning architectural research was also most clearly stated in this chapter.

Smith draws on symptomatology to challenge the diagnostic tendency deployed in the training of architects: he problematised the normative assumption that it is the architects’ role to locate and anticipate problems, and subsequently to design solutions for them. Symptomatology, he contends, prioritises the interpretation of signs over causal thinking (107). This constitutes a challenge to the ethical role often associated with architecture and awards additional resonance to the political significance of the “a subjective impersonal” that he attributes to his category of “Bare Architecture”. The utility of Deleuze’s theory to architecture was most clearly expressed in relationship to symptomatology:

An architecture posited as symptomatology might engage with immediacy of the present by exploring and experimenting within the world and its ‘symptoms’. This architecture would express new ways of thinking about life and experiment

with novel ways of living. Such an architecture might operate not as a backdrop or stage-set to life but rather would be *implicated* in life itself (108, abridged).

Bare Architecture: A Schizoanalysis makes a valuable contribution to architectural theory and Deleuzian studies. Smith has provided useful tools for reflecting on the limitations of pragmatism and the naturalised ethical values that underpin diagnostic approaches to architecture.