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Review

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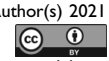
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Is architecture relevant for political theory?

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Duncan Bell and Bernardo Zacka, *Political Theory and Architecture*, Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2020; 311 pp. ISBN 978-1-350-09659-2 (hardcover)

Abstract
Is architecture relevant for political theory? That is the key question that structures this excellent collection *Political Theory and Architecture*, although a number of essays fit a broader formulated theme better, namely, concerning the political relevance of the organization and design of our built environment more generally, including architecture but also spatial planning and urban design. The collection demonstrates that our build environment is not merely a passive backdrop to a political community, but actively *shapes* aspects of our common political life. This constitutive nature of our built environment figures in many different guises throughout this volume. In this review article, I discuss some of these and conclude that concerns about the 'common good' and hence about the discipline of political theory should take reflections on urban design, planning, and architecture into account.

Keywords
architecture, built environment, spatial planning, politics, political theory, political philosophy

Introduction

At first glance, a degree of skepticism about the relevance of architecture for political theory seems called for. Is architecture not the practice of designing buildings in such a way that they meet standards of safety, functionality and beauty? Buildings first and foremost ought to be reliable as physical structures: they should not pose a danger to

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anyone that enters them or is close to them. Second, buildings should meet the purposes for which they were build. Houses, for instance, should be habitable by offering protection against the elements, by providing its inhabitants with storage space, enabling a sense of privacy and intimacy and so one. Third, our build environment should meet certain esthetic standards, especially public buildings that are highly visible.

Important as this may be, as a subject for political theoretical reflection it seems rather meagre. Political theory articulates the moral logic of concepts that have shaped our politics, such as 'justice,' 'individual rights,' 'equality,' 'liberty,' 'democracy' and so on. What such concepts have in common is that they are 'political,' that is, they involve interpretations — often very different ones — of the common good that entail how government should be organized and act. If we apply this conception of political theory to architecture, one could claim that safety *is* a public concern and *so* is the functionality and beauty of buildings. But is there anything more substantial to say about this without wandering off into other disciplines? In short, is architecture relevant for political theory?

That is the key question that structures this excellent collection *Political Theory and Architecture*, although a number of essays fit a broader formulated theme better, namely, concerning the political relevance of the organization and design of our built environment more generally, including architecture but also spatial planning and urban design. This array of essays demonstrates that our build environment is not merely a passive backdrop to a political community, but actively shapes aspects of our common political life. That is what the skepticism above glosses over. There is a tendency to deny such politics in space, to conceive of space 'as being innocent or, in other words, apolitical' (Lefebvre, 1976, 30). In that sense the collection fits what some theorists have referred to as 'the spatial turn,' that is, a growing theoretical emphasis on the specifically (and often neglected) spatial aspects of justice and politics (Warf and Arias, 2009). The editors Duncan Bell and Bernardo Zacka quote Winston Churchill in their introduction, who famously said: 'we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us' (p. 3). It is exactly this constitutive nature of the built environment that the sceptic seems to miss and that we will encounter, in many different guises, throughout this collection.

Architecture as agent and expressive medium

Antoine Picon opens his contribution 'Architecture, Materiality, and Politics' with a clarifying outline of the way that this question about the political significance of architecture has been answered until recently. A first line of argument for the thesis that architecture is indeed political is that 'buildings orient, and in several instances, even force human behavior in ways that prove clearly political' (p. 277). One infamous example is Jeremy Bentham's architectural design of the Panopticon, a prison that operates in such a way that the built structure *itself* functions as an agent that influences behavior of the inmates in a way that those in power, those that govern, deem preferable.

A second way to draw the connection between architecture and politics is by showing how 'architecture reinforces the prevailing political order by expressing its core values through means ranging from compositional elements to ornamental vocabulary'

(p. 277). Think of the grandiose monuments and buildings by Albert Speer, that aimed to display and underline the splendor and power of the Third Reich, or think of the Pantheon where republican figureheads, the *grand hommes*, are honored. While the first category can be referred to as the 'practical agency' of architecture, this second one is more 'symbolic expression.' These two ways in which architecture responds to political agendas, as Picon underlines, often coexist

Bell and Zacka in their helpful introduction — which covers a lot of ground accessibly in a couple of pages — confirm these two ways in which architecture is able to produce political effects, but add a third manner in which this is possible. Architecture is able to foster a political ethos. For example, modernist architecture often aims to promote the value of equality by rendering 'markers of class architecturally illegible', by 'concealing differences in status behind repetitive façades and standardized units' (p. 4). This is the type of architecture that, one could say, embodies and thereby cultivates a kind of recognition, in this case: respect for equality and equal moral status.

But here is where disagreements and skepticism arise. Take the example of modernist architecture in the tradition of Le Corbusier: clean geometric forms and open efficient spaces that historically set the stage for social housing blocks, thrown up in concrete in the post-war years. Did that type of architecture really express equity and individual dignity? Ronald Beiner in his contribution 'Durability and Citizenship' argues that this modernist architecture typically is the antithesis of expressing anything morally meaningful. He specifically laments the lack of cultivating a sense of citizenship. In its worst forms, modernist architecture is 'characterless and cultureless' (p. 110). Beiner draws a distinction with 'vernacular' architecture that stimulates a sense of local belonging and shared attachments. He gives some rather random examples by referring to some 'great old-European spaces' in Avignon and Dubrovnik (pp. 108–109). The quality of being vernacular needs to be embodied not just by discrete buildings but by an ensemble of buildings which thereby constitutes a particular public space. One wonders, however, if it is possible for architecture (or any human artifact for that manner) to withdraw from history and culture at all. Even in the grandiose attempt to transcend the particular by uniform and standardized design, one could argue that such modernist architecture remains an expression of a particular cultural horizon that emphasizes a set of universal, humanistic values. The fact that these universal values are interpreted in a rather dull and uniform manner does not contradict this.

So another question is to what extent such modern designs actually are *helpful* in establishing and cultivating a value like democratic equality and individual dignity. There is a certain 'looseness' between intended particular meanings that architecture is supposed to embody and the real effects that architecture has. As Mihaela Mihai puts it in her evocative contribution 'The Architecture of Political Renewal:' architecture like the renewed Flak Towers in Vienna and Hamburg serve as reminders of a dark past, but also as promises of a hopeful future by incorporating 'freespaces' like a climbing wall and a café.[1] Such architecture might be able to 'invite' certain ways of living and behaving, but we should be careful to count on the 'power of architecture' in this regard to act as we want it to act. The built environment never 'determines lives and behaviors unequivocally' and a place or style can have 'multiple meanings' without one

particular meaning becoming definitive (pp. 237, 242 ff.). This 'looseness' of the relationship between architecture and politics, means that architecture never operates like a 'text' but rather like a 'décor' against which different politics may be enacted, as Picon in his contribution argues.

Back to modernist architecture: it had perhaps the *purpose* of expressing humanistic values, but it utterly *failed* to do so, not only according to Beiner but also according to the influential critique of Jane Jacobs, as Margaret Kohn in her contribution 'Making Superstar Cities Work' argues. Kohn's essay works very well both as a clear introduction to Jacobs's immense influence on urban planning and as a reminder of Jacobs's limitations in times of gentrification. Jacobs's seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) was a scorching critique of the modernist planning principles, the so-called 'concrete slab buildings and the "tower in a park" design that was promoted by Le Corbusier and imitated all over the world' (p. 186). Jacobs had fought this kind of modernist thinking in her own city New York by organizing, at the grass roots level, efforts to protect neighborhoods against 'urban renewal,' particularly against the plans by Robert Moses to overhaul her own Greenwich Village neighborhood. Instead of the high-rise buildings and functional segregation in urban design — where the city would be hygienically segregated in uniform sections for work, leisure, residential use, and transit — she argued in favor of functional mixture, short low-rise blocks and a dense concentration of many different people. The resulting urban vitality, according to Jacobs, makes for humane cities that are safer, walkable, more diverse and user-friendly.

Illustrative for the contested nature of the politics of architecture and relatedly the question whether a type of urban design is beneficial for 'the common good' or not, is Kohn's refusal to celebrate the immense influence of Jacobs's alternative vision. For the type of neighborhoods that Jacobs argued for — low rising, mixed use, lively neighborhoods like New York City's Greenwich village — have contributed worldwide to staggering levels of gentrification, that is, to the transformation of urban space as a result of the influx of both capital and middle and upper socio-economic classes. Although Jacobs's critique of modernist planning 'had the beneficial effect of preserving historic neighborhoods,' the unintended consequence, Kohn points out, was a decrease in the supply of housing with the resulting affordable housing crisis as a result that plagues so many countries today (p. 187). If governments or powerful local communities (the 'affected') restrict new construction and keep buildings artificially low, that eventually means that housing supply cannot satisfy demand.[2] The resulting gentrification has led to displacement, exclusion and cultural and socio-economic homogenization in many contemporary cities (not to mention rising levels of homelessness). This is paradoxically the opposite of cultural and socio-economic diversity that Jacobs celebrated in her work. Just look at Greenwich Village today: one of the most gentrified areas in the world.

From democracy to balconies

What this collection does brilliantly is to provide resources for the reader's own reflections on the theme of the book. There is no particular 'agenda,' 'school,' or 'program' that authors had to fit in. It is an open examination of some possible relations between

political theory and architecture broadly conceived. The papers I have touched upon so far are just a sample of this. Although the other essays warrant separate discussions, I cannot pay attention to all of them here. Yet some of the other papers are worth discussing briefly in order to illustrate just how wide-ranging the exchange between political theory and architecture can be.

Plato's the *Laws* (contrary to the *Republic*) is one of the oldest surviving detailed discussions of a planned city that examines how built environments and inhabitants interact. In the chapter 'Plato's Magnesia and Costa's Brasilia,' Gábor Betegh compares Plato's imagined city Magnesia with modernist projects like Brasilia, Brazil's capital distinguished by white, modern architecture designed amongst others by Lúcio Costa. The thesis is that there are many parallels between Plato's vision and the modernist's, specifically with regards to the way designers of planned cities try to foster certain political and societal ideals like order and social cohesion. Both the plans of Magnesia and Brasilia are characterized by geometrical simplicity as well as religious and political symbolism. Both Plato and Costa — as well as Costa's primary inspiration, Le Corbusier — were focused on offering little room for the display of social and economic differences. Betegh however argues, that Plato's Magnesia (although never realized) is more successful in this respect than the modernist project. Whereas differences in location meant in the case of Brasilia that uniform building did nothing to prevent differences in market value "and consequently reinforced social stratification" (p. 74), because people simply want houses close to central institutions, in the case of Plato's Magnesia, differences in location are taken into account much better by the way plots of land are distributed: higher quality land comes in smaller plots to even things out. In that sense 'in designing Magnesia, the Athenian demonstrates a considerably more nuanced approach to guaranteeing equality through urban planning' (p. 74).

Betegh does not go so far as to refer to Plato as an egalitarian, but Plato's sensitivity to equality in the way that Magnesia is designed spatially is remarkable, given that in the *Republic*, his most well-known and influential account of the 'city in words,' Plato equates order and harmony with a strict *hierarchy* of 'parts' and 'virtues' not just of the city and its social classes but also of the soul. Of course the city-soul analogy in the *Republic* never meant that the highest classes should accumulate most of the wealth. In fact, it meant that reason and wisdom should rule and subordinate parts of the city and the soul ought to obey. In the *Republic*, neither rulers nor soldiers have private property to begin with. So from the point of view of possessions and wealth, the lowest classes are in fact best off. It is not entirely clear from this paper how and if these social classes still operate one way or another in the later *Laws*. Betegh does point out that 'Plato gives up on the idea of the strict separation of classes in the *Laws*' (p. 71). Yet Magnesia with its public and privately owned slaves as well as property classes based on family wealth seems far removed from a modern, egalitarian society (Morrow, 1993, 95–152). This puts the claim of Plato as a thinker that guarantees 'equality through urban planning' based on a 'more nuanced conception of fairness and equality' compared to Brasilia, that falls short of being an 'egalitarian community,' considerably into perspective (pp. 74–75). A slave in Plato's Magnesia would prefer living in Costa's Brasilia any time of the day. Nonetheless, this paper, that draws parallels

between Plato's and modernist's vision on urban design, strikes me as a well-researched piece of scholarship that deals with a rather unfamiliar part of Plato's work: urban design.

Jan-Werner Müller in his contribution 'What (if anything) is "Democratic Architecture"?' argues that architecture inevitably has a political dimension: mainly because it is deeply connected to the dynamics of association and dissociation. But in what sense is it, or could it be, specifically democratic? He examines this question both from the procedural side by asking how the *process* of building could be democratic (who is affected?) and from a more substantial side by examining how the *products* of architecture could be democratic. This distinction between process and products is clarifying, as well as the distinction Müller draws within the latter category between architecture *representing* democracy and architecture actually *facilitating* democratic processes. Müller stresses however that democracy does not need to produce a particular content; in fact, it needs to allow for uncertainty rather than overprogrammed buildings (pp. 29–30). In terms of architectural suggestions, the essay remains somewhat underdeveloped, but perhaps that is the point, given the open nature of democracy. Most minimally, according to Müller, democratic design of physical spaces should make room for democratic performance, that is, they should enable citizens to create and communicate their particular political messages. As examples he refers to squares and long wide streets that allow for large scale gatherings or movements.

In the essay 'What's in a Balcony?' Bernardo Zacka argues that balconies are valuable to support a 'reserved form of sociability on which vibrant city life depends' (p. 83). The paper draws inspiration from Iris Young's influential idea that city life should be understood as a being-together-of-strangers based on a casual side-by-side ethos.[3] It is a well-structured essay that makes a broader point than it seems to at first glance. On the face of it, the paper is about balconies as architecture that stimulates a kind of reserved contact that sociologically fits the urban ethos. The broader point, however, is that balconies are just one possible example of 'threshold places;' spaces like courtyards, lobbies, terraces, porches that 'connect various spatial and psychological registers within the city' and thereby stimulate a vital sense of urban belonging (p. 91). Zacka finds inspiration from Team 10, an eclectic group of young architects who started meeting in the early 1950s and who would become very influential in European postwar architecture. According to Zacka, what is characteristic of the Team 10 vision is three design strategies: incompleteness, residual ambiguity, and openness to contingency. In the last pages Zacka shows, successfully I think, how these characteristics apply to balconies, nicely illustrated with some telling photos.

Another article also emphasizes the crucial importance of 'weak ties' to our neighbors. Yet it is about the different question what it means to be good neighbors and more specifically, how to re-establish a sense of neighborliness in situations of conflict and mistrust Nancy Rosenblum's engaging essay. 'The Soft Power of Neighbors' takes up this challenge. One possible response to violence and mistrust would be vigilance. Especially under degraded conditions, one cannot always rely on the authorities to keep the peace and defend properties. Yet self-appointed groups of citizens driven by perceptions of danger could themselves exacerbate fear and mistrust or even become a danger. A better, more effective way to react in those difficult circumstances is to

contribute to a shared sense of mutual accommodation by gestures, words or small acts of assistance in which we acknowledge each other's standing as neighbors. Rosenblum's frequently uses the phrase 'live and let live' in this regard.

Rosenblum's defense of the moral minimalism of this ethos of 'live and let live' is quite compelling, an ethos that involves a disposition for occasional small talk and daily gestures of acknowledgment as well as a willingness to disregard divisive social categories of race, social class, ethnicity and so on. The paper is about those prosaic moments of togetherness that define our social world and that have a decisive impact on relations between people and social groups; much more than is typically acknowledged in political theory focused on the 'basic structure' (in the tradition of Rawls) or 'deep structural injustices' (in the tradition of neo-Marxism). The benign forgetfulness of group differences and the willingness to engage in modest acts of communication that express a desire to live together and to acknowledge one another as neighbors, might not satisfy theorists or activists who aim for demanding types of respect and recognition. But Rosenblum reminds us that being morally ambitious in situations where social relations have been fractured can be counterproductive, especially if it cultivates a false choice between idealistic forms of civil friendship on the one hand and complete social disintegration on the other. Architecture, however, is not Rosenblum's direct concern, although she does refer *en passant* to the limiting conditions of distance and boundaries for this ethos.

And finally, what can literary sources teach us about the relation between architecture and political concerns? This is explored in the essay 'Scripting the City' by Duncan Bell. It traces the insights in the work of English novelist and essayist James Ballard (1930–2009) on architectural shifts and their story about, and influence on, cultural and political developments. Ballard is apparently quite well-known and well-read in the discipline of architecture and, it seems to me, rightly so. Central to his work is the analysis of a broad cultural shift that Bell refers to as the shift from the 'modernist industrial' to the 'postmodern digital' infrastructure (p. 145). Whereas the former is associated with a society shaped by the industrial revolution, Fordism, an egalitarian political promise and an architectural style that celebrates public space, the latter is viewed in terms of the information society, neo-liberalism, totalitarian surveillance tendencies, and a postmodern ecumenical style that is geared towards enclosure. The chapter is a warning against the postmodern digital age, given that the defensive architectural style of gated communities and computerized surveillance systems are seen as the 'paradigmatic spatial product' (p. 152) that poses a threat to civil and political liberties. The tendency to build infrastructure in the name of total security is what will undermine vibrant communities, work against an attitude of relaxed openness to the unexpected experiences of the urban swirl, isolate individuals and communities and eventually threaten to disintegrate society.

What I found fascinating in the essay is not so much this dystopian vision of an Orwellian society, but the original light it throws on modernist structures and building styles that are seen as an 'infrastructural sublime' (p. 147). Modernist mega-structures like motorways, overpasses, high rises, airports embody a certain transcendence, a sense of our own finitude accompanied by the insight that not everything can be grasped with our cognitive abilities. Whereas the defensive-gated-community type of

building implies a longing for immanence and urban intimacy, the modernist style (or rather certain manifestations of it) is there to remind us of the typical urban sensibility that we are just one amongst many different others and that we are unable to 'take it all in.' The latter architectural style, according to Ballard, is a fertile breeding ground for tolerance of diversity and the unknown, the former is not. Despite all the qualifications Ballard formulated later in his career about modernist architecture, this vision seems rather atypical, so much so that the notion 'thought provoking' seems the best way to characterize it.[4]

Conclusion

Bell and Zacka have done a superb job as editors. It is a lively, well-structured and mostly accessible read with a diversity of perspectives and ideas that makes a collection like this so much richer than your standard monography. The collection is wide ranging enough to find essays in it that speak to particular research interests related to the theme of politics and the built environment, but focused enough to not venture out into terrains that are so far removed from it that incoherence is the result. The editors argue that this 'ecumenical' approach is chosen on purpose given the fact that this volume is less a survey of a well-developed area of research, where narrowing the scope would make sense. It is in fact 'an attempt to aid in the development of a new one.' (p. 6) The authors are mostly recruited from the political science departments, but also departments of philosophy and of architecture. They come from universities ranging from the elite schools — like MIT, Stanford, Harvard, Princeton, Cambridge — to universities that are less well known.

If I would have to sum up the relevance of this collection in a few words, I would have to return to the essay that I started this review with by Picon. Here a fundamental insight into the human condition is expressed that clarifies the relevance of our built environment for who we are and how we understand ourselves and our society:

> There is an intimate connection between the way we perceive, explore, and make sense of the physical world, and the manner in which we understand ourselves. Tangible objects and phenomena appear as exterior to us, but their perception is inseparable from the movement of constitution of subjectivity as both related to the world and distinct from it … Materiality is political since it is inseparable from a certain vision of what it means to be human (p. 290).

This insight is quite similar to what Charles Taylor expressed as the most fundamental idea of G.W.F. Hegel's influential oeuvre, namely 'the principle of necessary embodiment.' (1979: p. 18). Human thought is necessarily embodied. There can be no understanding of the world or my place in it without some external medium (language, gesture, institutions, practices, buildings) that embodies and at the same time *shapes* this thought in certain ways. This Hegelian notion of the embodied subject, that has been quite influential in continental philosophy, entails that there is no sharp opposition between the human mind and the human body, patterns of (mis)recognition, and the surrounding socio-cultural environment including the built environment. The embodied subject in that sense is not with clear contours or sharp boundaries. Embodiment

carries the meaning that one's identity should be seen rather in terms of openness or connectedness to our immediate social, cultural and physical contexts that constitute us in different ways. The fact that these contexts 'constitute' us entails that they are not separate from our identity, but in a way *part of it*. And that is precisely where concerns about the 'common good' and hence about the discipline of political theory should make contact with reflections on urban design, planning, and architecture. This collection contributes to that contact in invaluable ways.

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Notes

1. Flak Towers are massive, reinforced concrete structures used amongst others for anti-aircraft weaponry in the Second World War.
2. See also Edward Glaeser (2010) on 'Jacobs unfortunate fear of heights' in his essay: 'Taller Buildings, Cheaper Homes', *The New York Times*, May 4.
3. See chapter 8 'City Life and Difference' from Young (1990), *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.
4. A short essay by Peter Berger (1977) reminded me of this vision of urban transcendence: 'New York City 1976: A Signal of Transcendence.' For more on the Janus-faced nature of the urban experience of socio-cultural transcendence: Van Leeuwen (2008) 'On the Affective Ambivalence of Living with Cultural Diversity.'

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