

BOOK REVIEW

PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURE,

BY CHRISTIAN ILLIES & NICHOLAS RAY

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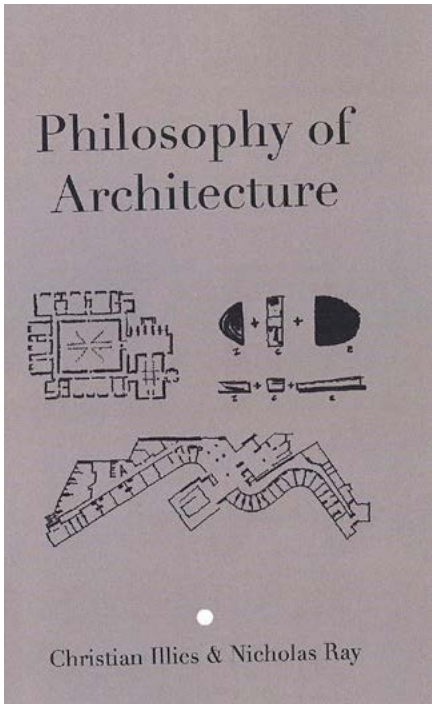
REVIEWED BY STEFAN KOLLER & TOM SPECTOR

Most readers of this journal have probably experienced skeptical responses when trying to explain their interest in the philosophy of architecture. What could such a field

consist in? Why does architecture need philosophy? Why does philosophy need architecture? What are the field's main topics? If only a brief overview of the field existed (is it a field yet?), then we could hand our interlocutors the book secure in the knowledge that, yes architecture philosophy *is* a field, it has definable boundaries, and contains distinct subject matter.

While we would be justified in doubting whether an overview of the subject is achievable, particularly one that confronts outsiders' skepticism head on, Christian Illies and Nicholas Ray have assembled, in their words, a "little handbook." The primary task of such a project is always to balance the need for brevity while still doing justice to the subject matter. It is a balancing act Illies and Ray have accomplished with considerable elegance.

Philosophy of Architecture weighs-in at a right-sized 161 pages (including bibliography) for a handbook. It consists of four chapters plus a lengthy introduction that is divided into three overarching sections: an introductory section surveys the ways in which architecture theory has appropriated "Philosophical Ideas and World Views," the central section discusses how applied ethics and aesthetics have been harnessed to explicate architectural topics, and the final section delineates "Philosophical Positions Illustrated in Architectural Practice." While this last section may be of use to philosophers seeking to better understand how to engage architecture to their areas of



interest, it is fair to say that the bulk of the book is aimed at delineating philosophical positions to an architectural audience.

The first chapter begins with Plato's theory of forms and its influence on Renaissance thinking. This focus on absolutes gives way in the eighteenth century to a more historically-aware philosophy informed by Kant and Hegel which in turn opens the door for the relativism of Nietzsche. On the heels of Nietzsche, Heidegger's influence on such late-modern thinkers as Christian Norberg-Schulz, Karsten Harries, and Juhani Pallasmaa is traced up to the start of the "post-metaphysical age" exemplified in the cultivation of irony found in architectural post-modernism. The second chapter, on ethics, usefully categorizes and discusses six distinct ways in which the study of ethics and architecture is approached: as professional ethics, as a response to a building's function, its impact on the natural environment, its impact on humans' physical well-being and on their psychological flourishing, and architecture's symbolic or cultural role. In the third chapter, the classic problems of aesthetics—beauty's subjective nature, problems of judgment, questions of artworks' cognitive content—are discussed in relation to the aesthetic appreciation of architecture. Topics of crucial import for architects concerning the implicit conflicts between aesthetics and function and between aesthetics and ethics are introduced so that the novice can grasp the essence of these complex issues. The chapter concludes in a well-rounded discussion of modernism's ambivalence towards the goal of beauty. In the final chapter, the philosophical commitments of architects Louis Kahn, Rem Koolhaas, and Alvar Aalto are discussed to introduce the more general idea that philosophical positions can have both implicit and explicit components relevant to architectural practice.

While the philosophical areas Illies and Ray's book most heavily focuses on—ethics and aesthetics—are certainly two bedrock (and intertwining) fields of interest for architecture, the liability of balancing brevity and comprehensiveness is such that, inevitably, some philosophical fields of interest to architects will be left out. We could ask, for example, what of phenomenology? Sure it has been in retreat lately, but it has certainly been a subject of some interest. Environmental ethics has been such a richly developing area in recent decades that, especially considering the urgency of the situation, it probably merits more than a page and a half. Feminism gets no mention at all. Philosophy of media is similarly absent.

Even within analytic philosophy (the authors' allegiance likely falls here) core areas—like metaphysics and epistemology—with some relevance to architectural questions are left for others to address. In this sense, the book serves as a perfect complement to Saul Fisher's recent overview to analytic philosophy of architecture in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: Fisher shines in areas where the book is terse, and vice versa. Between the two,

neophytes to analytic philosophy of architecture could hardly wish for easier initiation.

Hence, for an overview of the more longstanding areas of philosophical interest, as well as some introduction to recent events in those areas, *Philosophy of Architecture* does what a good “little handbook” should do: it presents the fields in such a way that a reader with a budding interest in these matters can delve into them further with the confidence that there is, in fact, a field to delve into.

The book avoids idiosyncratic readings of historical key figures and unsubstantiated claims of where contemporary philosophy is, and where it ought to be heading—factors that occasionally tempered the credibility and neutrality of a comparable title, Branko Mitrovic’s *Philosophy for Architects* (Princeton 2011). Given the introductory nature of both books, all three authors feel compelled to largely privilege the (historical) *exposition* of philosophical views over these views’ philosophical *examination*. While natural, this choice rings odd when both books proclaim that examination of arguments (pro and contra) for given views characterizes contemporary philosophical *practice* at its very best. In fairness, initiating an architectural audience into philosophical practice—or indeed a philosophical one to architectural practice—might well be an unrealistic expectation for a 160-page “handbook”. Still, as these books have set our expectations otherwise, a sense of lost opportunity lingers.

For all its commendable neutrality, a book such as Illies and Ray’s cannot completely eschew a philosophical stance—and it is here that the book would have most benefited from some real argumentation. Towards the end of the book, the authors propose a view that philosophical puzzles on architecture—especially puzzles arising from conflicting theoretic demands leveled at architecture—must come to an end: only the architectural design can effectively ‘synthesize’ and (to varying degrees of success) integrate or harmonize such theoretic tensions. While it may

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seem plausible to posit that architecture is uniquely positioned to render moot philosophical puzzles *about architecture*, the authors' suggestion is actually stronger than this. With design positioned as "the core human discipline, being the only activity that properly involves the imaginative conception of ideas, leading to artifacts that are realized as actual construction in the world" (145) the authors want to claim the further step that architecture can help resolve philosophical problems in general.

One is reminded of Wittgenstein's saying that "Explanations come to an end somewhere."¹ However, where Wittgenstein envisaged mystical silence or therapeutic expulsion of cravings for explanation, Illies and Ray intend for design solutions to fill this gap. This is a tall order for architecture to fill—can it deliver? The authors appear confident on this point; indeed, they herald their book's achievements in exactly those colors on the back cover.

Such a proposal raises a host of issues, some of which are broached in their new paper in this issue. One, for this provocative reversal of the age old thesis of philosophy as 'first science' (Aristotle) or 'handmaiden' to the theoretic and applied sciences (Locke) to attain credibility, readers will eventually want to see an illustration of the thesis, in a concrete building project from commission to execution. How exactly does such a project, especially at execution stage, synthesize and solve philosophical conundrums? What is more, can such a solution receive articulation in anything other than built form (say, in an architect's report about her building's achievements to an absentee client)? If it cannot, and especially cannot receive articulation in verbal form (written or spoken), how can we ascertain that a solution has been found? How, in other words, does the authors' cryptic proposal at this point *not* collapse into Wittgenstein's early view on 'the aesthetic' as being something that cannot be (meaningfully, determinately) spoken of, but rather demands that philosophy instead become the silent one? If the view does so collapse, how do synthesis and silence coincide? What would constitute acceptable evidence that they do coincide?²

The book, then, ends on a highly intriguing note ripe for future investigation. Its final proposal allocates to architecture a much greater role in framing and deciding philosophical questions than any (certainly recent) philosophers have been willing to accord it. Architects will likely welcome this recognition of their discipline's contribution to philosophical dialogue. Indeed, it can be reasonably hoped that architects, not philosophers, will develop and substantiate the book's conclusion towards a more satisfactory and compelling stage. *Philosophy of Architecture* thus illustrates, rather than anticipates the end of, the many surprising turns philosophy can take: that even in a "little handbook," fresh questions emerge; questions liable to stimulate future discussion for quite some time.

ENDNOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by Elizabeth Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 1953), §1.
2. Such questions were raised, and debated in considerable depth, at the 2015 ISPA symposium at the Wittgenstein house – though not in response to Illies and Ray’s work, but in relation to Wittgenstein’s own purported ‘quietism’ with respect to the aesthetics of, but not only of, architecture. Readers interested in, or finding themselves at the receiving end of, such questions 87 are invited to peruse a selection of that symposium’s contributions in the next issue of *Architecture Philosophy*, edited by Carolyn Fahey.