Book review:

Is There an Object Oriented Architecture? Engaging Graham Harman
edited by Joseph Bedford
Bloomsbury Academic, 2020
194 pages, Hardcover $103.50

reviewed by Tom Spector

The application of Graham Harman's theory of things in the world, given the moniker Object Oriented Ontology (or OOO), is in its nascent period in architecture. Is it nascent because people don't yet know what to do with it, or is the inability to make use of it what keeps it nascent? This is a fundamental question that editor Joseph Bedford seeks to shed light on with contributions by Harman himself, and authors Adam Sharr, Lorens Holm, Jonathan Hale, Peg Rawes, Patrick Lynch and Peter Carl. The authors came together at the Swedenborg Society event devoted to discussing OOO in 2013. Towards this end, much credit must go to the book's editing and organization which allows for essays interspersed with responses by Harman and further give-and-take discussion that does much to clarify what OOO entails and points to how it could be applied. This admirable organization gives the book a pleasant variety and rhythm often lacking in such compilations.

Harman's premise is that objects have existences that always exceed our ability to quantify, narrate, use or otherwise apprehend them. This recognition of an existence that always "withdraws" therefore, from human understanding, is supposed to promote

a certain attitude, a certain humility, towards objects. This humility is born of, he asserts, a rejection of Heidegger's (and his inheritors') idealism towards the primacy of the human, as opposed to Harman's "realism" which "by contrast, promises to shift the balance between humans and non-humans towards an equitable centre ground, in which philosophy addresses all things in the universe with equal weight and promises a new ethical accounting as a result." (5) –a pretty tall order. This important realist feature of Harman's outlook also makes it at least somewhat hostile to traditional phenomenology, which may start out from an equally humble wish to take in the world as it presents itself, but tends then to privilege those elements which present themselves to *us* while neglecting the properties of objects, and their interactions with one another, that are proper to them. Harman's insight regarding objecthood which escapes our human schema is well-placed as a corrective to theories, such as Latour's Actor-Network Theory, which tend to collapse things into effects and relationships. He wants us mindful that the thing has an existence which exceeds effects on other things.

This is fine as a critique of philosophy and possibly social theory, but does it promise anything for architecture? While architects will tend to want to try out these ideas on the objects of their infatuation, namely, buildings, Harman is quick to emphasize that the concept of an object can span a wide gamut, from buildings, to be sure, to works of fiction, to characters within those works of fiction, to interpretations of those characters within those fictional works, to criticism of those interpretations, and so on, in what clearly risks vertigo of objecthood.

To go a bit deeper into Harman's critique and his assertions about OOO, Harman thinks that much modern thought makes the mistake of either undermining objects by dissembling them into their most fundamental constituent parts—to the point where they cease to be recognizable, or else they tend to "overmine" them by relegating them to their effects as events, or networks, or power relations. (or sometimes both at the same time.) An object, he concludes, "is simply that which cannot be reduced downward to its pieces or upward to its effects."(79) These rejections, then, (and a penchant for list-making) form the basis for holding that non-human objects always have a degree of existence that is immune from analysis either as a form of *withdrawal* from our ability to ensnare them in conceptual schemas or else as a degree of internal, inaccessible *finitude*. This recognition should be reason enough to strive to overcome anthropocentrism in our relations to objects.

Anthropocentrism has certainly been a favorite target from a

variety of philosophical disciplines for some time. Environmental philosophers credit it with leading to an instrumentalist attitude towards nature that gives rise to such aporia as global warming. Nietzsche liked to emphasize it as the end of ethical certainty. And Graham Harman has made its rejection a tent-pole of OOO by insisting that the human perception of things not only provides no direct correlation to understanding them but also is only one legitimate perspective among many. But living without some mild form of anthropocentrism is tough, and it's often worth questioning whether the alternatives aren't worse than the problem. This is true of Nietzsche's gleeful insistence that humanism provides no moral touchstones or the tendency of anti-anthropocentric environmentalism to lead into a conceptual thicket. In any event, there is a massive difference between normative anthropocentrism which insists that only humans convey value on the world and epistemic anthropocentrism which holds that adopting the point of view of non-humans is at best a guess. How we could know that objects have their own finitude without projecting some good ol' anthro- on them remains unclear. Because if we assert that we know, or can observe their independent existence, then BANG!-an anthropocentrist-generated concept has just been launched. A more thoroughgoing anti-anthropocentrism would seem to require us to hold that objects may or may not have such finitude, but we can never know for sure. The anthropocentric starting point for knowing things is far from foolproof, far from being able to exhaust the existence of things, and certainly subject to bias, but despite these handicaps is, as best as we can tell, more reliable and less speculative than other starting points. Harman sees this as a battle between anthropocentric idealism and object-oriented realism. OOO tends to treat its realism as a hard-won achievement.[1]

Harman believes he has charted a way out of anthropocentric idealism. He thinks that there

> "HARMAN IS QUICK TO EMPHASIZE THAT THE CONCEPT OF AN OBJECT CAN SPAN A WIDE GAMUT, FROM BUILDINGS, TO BE SURE, TO WORKS OF FICTION, TO CHARACTERS WITHIN THOSE WORKS OF FICTION, TO INTERPRETATIONS OF THOSE CHARACTERS WITHIN THOSE FICTIONAL WORKS, TO CRITICISM OF THOSE INTERPRETATIONS, AND SO ON, IN WHAT CLEARLY RISKS VERTIGO OF OBJECTHOOD."

must be more to objects than their constituent parts or their effects, a third way of conceiving them that allows them their own independent, and only partially or indirectly knowable, existence. Now, here's where Harman's theory for some jumps the shark from a reasoned critique of 19th and 20th century philosophy to a normative theory of how we should behave towards things. From the recognition that things have an independent, though largely unknowable existence, he writes, "*I think we need to place the human-world relation on the same level as the world-world or object-object relation.*" (emphasis his, 20) and by this he doesn't mean epistemologically only, but also morally. This idea has been attractive to environmentalists, who struggle to overcome anthropocentric instrumentalist views towards nature and want us to value nature on its own terms. One can also see the immediate attraction to architects of such an idea, for now they can assert moral standing to their products independent of those products' utilitarian benefits for humankind. (The moral standing of artworks, of course, has long been an interesting seam of study between ethics and aesthetics.) But more than that, as Adam Sharr asserts in his chapter, "The Circus, the Canon and the House with One Wall," OOO is attractive because its decentering of the human "offers a series of productive fables that allow us to imagine our surroundings differently. This is exactly the kind of storytelling – the production of imaginative worlds – to which architects devote their work lives." (40) Sharr recognizes, however, that "while architects, who deal in the design of things, might be comfortable with a world where objecthood is paramount, this is where Harman's cosmos seems most challenging to many academics," (44) precisely because of the flattening of ontological and moral distinctions between the human and other objects. Nevertheless, Sharr applauds the ability of OOO to spark the imagination and enable a "heightened reality." He writes, if OOO "can help us to sharpen our appreciation of those objects and their effects, then it is certainly worthy of architects' attention." (55)

Lorens Holm's chapter "Architecture and Its Objects" brings up the topic of space as a thing. This topic is certainly well-placed and in need of further explanation in OOO because we architects can think of and employ space in so many different ways: as the absence of things, as the distance between things, as figure-ground, as an axis, as perspective space, as a picture plane within a perspective, or as a thing in itself. But conceiving it as a thing that can withdraw into itself, even under the generous terms Harman grants things' existence, is dilemmatic. Did it become a thing when we thought it into existence? Did the "thingness" of space exist before a human recognized it? Does this way of thinking help us, as Sharr would ask, to tell stories around it? Perhaps, we might hope, the questioning it generates

is service enough. But we should resist the urge to assert that, since architecture is vitally interested in space, and Harman extensively employs spatial metaphors, we therefore have correspondence and ultimately relevance. Ultimately, Holm finds OOO at least potentially useful "because if you could understand your allegiance to objects, the ones you are designing for and the ones you are making, and find the integrity of your work in the contemplation of the object as opposed to always having to outside the object, looking over your shoulder to the user, we would probably have a more beautiful world, and more importantly, one that works better for users." (86)—thus constructing an indirect utilitarian argument for taking OOO seriously.

> "THE POINT IS TO SEE THAT ARCHITECTS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DEALING WITH OBJECTS MORE URGENTLY THAN PHILOSOPHERS HAVE."

Jonathan Hale's "Buildings as Objects and Buildings as 'Tool-Beings'" takes a more directly critical approach. He thinks that Harman misses something important to architecture in its binary lack of appreciation of the transitions between pure utility or pure sensory qualities on the one hand and the object's mysterious core on the other. Hale thinks much of architecture is appropriately concerned with cultivation of that transitional strangeness—not entirely withdrawn objects, but not entirely reduced to smooth facilitators of utility either. Hale doesn't worry much about the intrusion of usefulness into consideration of objects because, he reasonably proposes, "Perhaps this is the closest we can ever get to understanding objects as they are in themselves – by using them and re-using them we continue to explore their inexhaustible depths." (96) Hale also worries that, at least in instances, OOO requires privileging non-human agency over human agency. Harman thinks this a non-problem. It only requires "treating them both in the same way ontologically, not politically." (99) and therefore substantive value judgments have been avoided. But have they? Isn't asserting ontological parity itself a value judgment? Can you simply point out

that things have extra-human existence and then make it a mere factual observation that makes them ontologically on par? For many, deciding to place things on par with humans is itself a value proposition. It is easy to see how this would be so for architects. For many, this question is something worth arguing over. Defining it out of existence will seem high-handed.

The final three sections, each in their own way, make little effort to directly engage Harman's theory. Peg Rawes' "Non-Human Architectural Ecologies" opts instead for a feminist outflanking of his approach as lacking the kinds of differentiations feminists bring to the discussion. She cautions that while we may be inclined to think that OOO opens up a multiplicity of voices by allowing all kinds of things their own agency, there may be both good and bad agency. The bad perpetuates universalist assumptions about objects that all too often serve to silence other voices. She thinks we need a triple-O that welcomes and unlocks those other perspectives and notes that "object-oriented practices already" exist in architecture and they are not always forces for emancipation. "As it stands, much environmental architectural discourse, especially, technological, biological and computational forms, perpetuates" the repression of difference. (113) From this essay, it's not clear that she has actually done much reading of Harman, which is a hazard of invited panels. Sometimes the panel member is too keen to discuss his or her favorite topics to spend much time on the subject at hand. When Rawes observes that the aims and objectives of architecture and philosophy "should not just be mapped onto each other." (129) the reader may wonder who actually thinks this. Harman tries to defuse the argument by replying that "the point is not for a philosopher of objects to force architects to think about objects against their will. The point is to see that architects have always been dealing with objects more urgently than philosophers have. On this point philosophy is the student and architecture the teacher." Gratifying to architects, but to what result? Surely it's a demonstration project with mixed results. Both Patrick Lynch and Peter Carl in their sections prefer to critique Harman's interpretation of Heidegger than directly engage his original thought. Lynch objects to conclusions Harman draws from *Being and Time,* while Carl argues that Harman's unique interpretation doesn't do justice to the thought of such Heidgger inheritors as Latour. Since Harman has a large intellectual debt to Heidegger, there is some common ground for discussion even though not much opportunity for productive dialogue. In a symposium about Harman's thinking, one wonders why a contributor doesn't at least try to link his or her prior interests to the topic at hand. It's perplexing, but this sort of thing does happen at academic conferences. Unsurprisingly, neither exchange takes us close to architecture.

Happily, Harman gets the last word, actually an "Afterword," that attempts to draw out a few lessons that OOO may hold for architects. Works of architecture have depths and connections that cannot be reduced to performance measures nor to relationships because there is always something important remaining after all the relationships have been unearthed and performance measures analyzed. For these reasons, architectural works make paradigm examples of object oriented ontology. Further, he thinks that architecture and OOO share an orientation to the renunciation of the distinction between pure thought and material works—there is no priority nor superiority to thought. This may all be both true and interesting. But is this sympathetic orientation enough to generate an architectural difference? I'm not hopeful on this point, but that is the question to be worked out over time. It remains to be seen whether Harman successfully "makes the petition for OOO as a practical philosophy and social theory that may provide novel avenues for the ails of our times."[2]

ENDNOTES

1. Harman calls his position "ardently realist" in Manuel Delanda and Graham Harman, *The Rise of Realism. Polity* Press, 2017, 3.

2. Steven Umbrello, "A Theory of Everything?" *Cultural Studies Review* v24 n 2, 2018, 184-86. 186.