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Book Review: The Prefabricated Home by Colin Davies (London: Reaktion Books, 2005)

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Abstract

In this easy-to-read and provocative little book, architecture professor Colin Davies sets out to do no less than “shed light on the true nature of modern architecture” (7) by placing the prefabricated house at the center of a reconceptualized history of twentieth-century architectural production. Borrowing the term “field” from Pierre Bourdieu, Davies describes the architecture field as “broader and vaguer” than just “the design of buildings” (7), but narrow in its reliance on star personalities, professional jargon, excessive publicity, and the mythologization of its own history. Davies argues that adherence to this position has left the profession unable to assimilate popular notions about architecture and types such as the single-family house; most which, he reminds us, are now designed by non-architects in styles that architects find unappealing. He proposes that the “key to the reform” is an understanding and appreciation of the “non-architectural history of the prefabricated house” (7). This book represents Davies’s attempt to provide this history and to begin bridging the gap between architecture and the consumer-driven home building market.

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Architecture

Comments

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The Prefabricated Home by Colin Davies
(London: Reaktion Books, 2005) ISBN 1861892438, 223 pages, \$29.00, paperback.

In this easy-to-read and provocative little book, architecture professor Colin Davies sets out to do no less than “shed light on the true nature of modern architecture” (7) by placing the prefabricated house at the center of a reconceptualized history of twentieth-century architectural production. Borrowing the term “field” from Pierre Bourdieu, Davies describes the architecture field as “broader and vaguer” than just “the design of buildings” (7), but narrow in its reliance on star personalities, professional jargon, excessive publicity, and the mythologization of its own history. Davies argues that adherence to this position has left the profession unable to assimilate popular notions about architecture and types such as the single-family house; most which, he reminds us, are now designed by non-architects in styles that architects find unappealing. He proposes that the “key to the reform” is an understanding and appreciation of the “non-architectural history of the prefabricated house” (7). This book represents Davies’s attempt to provide this history and to begin bridging the gap between architecture and the consumer-driven home building market.

The Prefabricated Home will be valuable to a wide and diverse audience of general readers, design students, practitioners, and academics. Although it is not intended as a definitive source for scholars looking for archival or primary-source research, even expert readers will find the narrative satisfying as it combines typical projects with less well-known examples. Davies achieves such broad appeal by cleverly packaging two narratives into one book. His polemic on modern architecture is embedded inside of a competent short history of western architects’ experimentations with prefabricated single-family homes. He introduces prefabrication as a historical mode of architectural production and weaves together a discussion of early interest in architectural standardization with analysis of current trends such as lean production and mass customization.

As a polemic, the book is, at times, less compelling. Intertwined with the historical survey is an argument that attempts to separate “proper” architecture from the building that goes on in the absence of a professional designer. Davies suggests with his choice of examples and occasional digressions that it was the inflated egos of architects themselves that caused most prefabrication experiments to fail. He traces this, in part, to the academic establishment that teaches students that most buildings are designed by architects and that as professionals they will have control over all aspects of the design process. To remedy these problems, Davies hopes

that architects will give up the desire for sole authorship; stop rejecting popular taste as vulgar; and find ways to embrace lean production in order to balance a desire for individuality with the economics and methods of the building industry.

The Prefabricated Home is divided into nine dense but discrete chapters, presented under three themes—“histories,” “theories,” “practices.” The first two chapters act as a pair, relating the “architectural” and “non-architectural” history of the prefabricated single-family home. The architectural chapter recounts failed projects such as Le Corbusier’s Maison Citrohan, Wachsmann and Gropius’s Packaged House and Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion House. He scolds historians for choosing to “canonize and celebrate” projects by famous architects that were “complete failures by any objective, non-architectural measure” (29). Davies responds to his own critique in chapter two by chronicling the “non-architectural” history of successful prefabrication technologies and construction methods. These include balloon-frame construction, Sears & Roebuck catalogue houses and postwar British pre-cast concrete systems. The third chapter in the “histories” section considers the mobile or “manufactured” home. Here Davies looks at retirement communities, trailer parks and manufactured subdivisions, as well as government legislation that has helped determine the scale of the industry by regulating transportation of the houses on highways. The discussion shows the relevance of these building types and why architects need to learn more about non-architect designed homes—not the other way around. In particular, Davies argues that the size, scale, and success of the current manufactured home sector should make every architect question why the profession has not embraced its logic or business model.

Under the heading of “theories,” Davies analyzes the structural resistance to prefabrication from within the profession and deconstructs some of the fundamental assumptions that have precluded its acceptance in mainstream architectural culture. In chapter four, Davies returns to Barthes and his 1968 essay, “The Death of the Author,” to argue that architects have shunned the typical single-family American house because they are unable to claim authorship for projects that use an established vocabulary of conventional parts. In chapter five, one of the book’s best, Davies considers the pattern book. He begins with Ruskin and the supposition that “a morally good building” is “permanent, fixed in one place, architect-designed and unique” (110). Since prefabricated homes often do not fit any of these parameters, they are labeled as undesirable. Historically, however, pattern books were a standard part of practice going back to the Renaissance. In one of his most radical critiques, Davies implores today’s architects to stop entering competitions and start producing pattern books. A one-off competition is a specific project for a specific

Christopher Alexander: A Review Essay

site; a pattern book is speculative, flexible and potentially income-producing. Davies seeks to undo another myth in chapter six when he examines the concept of modular coordination. He argues that since the early twentieth century, architects have confused “the productive and aesthetic aims” of standardization (133). This led to a misunderstanding between architects, who were looking for an abstract system for designing, and the building industry, which wanted to use technology to save time, money, and materials.

The final and shortest of the three parts is “practices,” which offers examples of contemporary prefabricated homes from around the world. In Davies’s terms, this is a “non-architectural history” that exemplifies everything that is wrong with the architectural profession. Chapter seven focuses on the phenomenon of the small “ideal” house and European pattern books, housing expos and corporations that specialize in the mass production of modest, traditionally-styled family homes. Davies stresses the dichotomy between “the appearance of private housing estates ... and the way they are built” (167). Chapter eight considers how the box can be the primary unit of prefabrication; examples include shipping container architecture, bathroom pods, and stackable modular apartment units. The final chapter discusses the massive Japanese manufactured housing market and the popularity of retail shops and show villages designed to help consumers choose the features they want in a new home. Davies links Japan’s widespread acceptance of manufactured houses to the traditions of the Japanese house such as tatami mats, shoji screens, and modular wood construction methods.

The Prefabricated Home also has some limitations worth noting. This is a synthetic text that relies primarily on English-language secondary sources. Accordingly the selected bibliography runs less than two pages and the footnotes are sparse and unremarkable. Most of the examples are drawn from America, Western Europe and Japan; colonial examples and projects from the developing world are largely missing. For instance, Jean Prouvé’s work in France is discussed briefly, but there are no references to his projects in Africa. Finally, readers may question the fundamental premise of the book—that some homes qualify as “architecture” and others as “non-architecture.” If, according to Davies, architecture will benefit from broader knowledge of the history of the prefabricated house, it only makes sense that the “field” of architecture cannot be defined in such narrow terms, but must be expanded to include the range of practices examined in *The Prefabricated Home*.

The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe, v. 1: The Phenomenon of Life by Christopher Alexander

(Berkeley, CA: Center for Environmental Structure, 2002) ISBN 0972652914 (volume), ISBN 0972652906 (set), 476 pages, illustrated, \$75.00 hardcover.

The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe, v. 2: The Process of Creating Life by Christopher Alexander

(Berkeley, CA: Center for Environmental Structure, 2002) ISBN 0972652922 (volume), ISBN 0972652906 (set), 636 pages; illustrated, \$75.00 hardcover.

Christopher Alexander, a professor emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley is most renowned for his architectural oeuvre which comprises twelve books and a range of building projects. The fundamental thesis at the core of Alexander’s work is that “there is an underlying structural correspondence between the pattern of a problem and the process of designing physical form which answers that problem.”¹ In searching for this correspondence, Alexander’s work demonstrates a quest for a rational methodology that could be a useful tool in generating built environments. In this essay, we have reviewed *The Phenomenon of Life*² and *The Process of Creating Life*,³ the first two volumes of Alexander’s recent four-volume collection, *The Nature of Order* (2002). We have attempted to place these volumes in the context of his important writings which have been published over the last thirty years. In doing so, we hope to critically synthesize the major strands of arguments that his work represents.

Alexander was born in Vienna and studied architecture, mathematics, and physics at Cambridge University. In 1958 he began doctoral studies in architecture at Harvard University while simultaneously pursuing research at Harvard’s Center for Cognitive Studies. His dissertation, published in 1964 as “Notes on the Synthesis of Form,” used empirical observation and survey data to analyze social patterns in villages in India which were presented in the form of hierarchical “stem” diagrams. Aiming to give an objective and unified description of formal phenomena, these studies received widespread attention at the time. However, in his own explorations he soon realized that his stem and tree diagrams contained the same flaw as traditional methodologies in that they could not account for accident, overlap and continuity. He reasoned that no matter how specific and multiple the parameters may be, such diagrams would always have an arbitrary component. This realization led