

Ockman, Joan. ed. *The Pragmatist Imagination: Thinking About "Things in the Making."* New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000.

Reviewed by Tom Spector, AIA, PhD, Oklahoma State University School of Architecture

The affinities between architectural design and pragmatist philosophy are manifold: both emphasize an experimental approach to making sense of the world, both place the ultimate proof of an idea in its realization, and both thrive when transgressing disciplinary boundaries. The affinities between American architectural practice—often remarked, not without pejorative by outside observers, as pragmatic in the non-philosophic sense—and philosophical pragmatism should be even more striking, and yet the May, 2000 workshop held at the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture at Columbia University is the first time architects, pragmatist philosophers, and some of their fellow travelers have ever been brought together to actually consider what they might have to offer one another. The book emerging out of these proceedings attempts a difficult task with remarkable success: it attempts to be simultaneously a documentary of the event and a creative, non-linear evocation of the wide-ranging terrain the conference ultimately covered. The actual substance of what transpired during the two-day conference, however, comes across as somewhat less satisfying for serious inquiry into the convergence of architecture and pragmatism in the 30+ essays, introductions, and graphics pieces included in this volume.

Contributors were drawn from both the philosophical and architectural camps and beyond. Richard Shusterman, John Rajchman, Chantal Mouffe and David Lapoujade lent philosophical authority to the gathering. A much larger group of architectural theorists along with a diverse group of sociologists, historians, anthropologists, and cultural critics rounded out the contributors. Even a cross disciplinary artist in the person of Paul Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid was brought in to the proceedings. That such a risky undertaking as trying to gather something coherent from these diverse disciplines was even undertaken is laudable. As editor Joan Ockman explains in her introduction, this bold move derived from a desire to bridge the now distressingly longstanding rift between architecture theory and practice. The organizers hoped that philosophical pragmatism with its (relatively) plain-spoken, American derivation might offer new sustenance for architectural theoreticians weaned on the bitter negativity of Marxism and the dense cotton-candy of French post-structuralism. The main concern with altogether too many of the essays is not so much whether they are erudite or thought-provoking—most are both—but what they have to do with pragmatism or what pragmatism has to do with them. Thus, for example, the essay “Public Space” by the always estimable culture critic Rosalyn Deutsche makes explicit references to Claude Lefort, Emmanuel Levinas, Henri Lefebvre, and Julie Kristeva but leaves it for the reader to construct the obvious connections to the theoretical resources of Dewey and Mills that ought to emerge from theorizing a “right to politics in the public sphere.” This sort of thing happens repeatedly in these essays: Chantal Mouffe, in “For an Agonistic Public Sphere” at least mentions Rorty at the end of a brief excursus on the tendency of many philosophers of liberal politics to resort to economic, moral, or judicial discourse, but appears uninterested in either exploring or drawing on his ideas. Jean-Louis Cohen’s “Urban Projects and Adjustment to the Future” tries to bring in some William James’ quotes, but they are

mostly gratuitous to the argument. And so it goes with Jonathan Crary's "Untitled Remarks," an essay about the new and more radical sense of flux in the world brought on by rapidly morphing global communications technologies; Elisabeth Grosz's "Notes on the Thing" which attempts to postulate an interactive conception of subjects and objects which could be indebted to Deweyan aesthetics, but instead draws extensively from Bergson; and Sandra Buckley's essay on rootlessness "Extraordinary Appetites: A Japan Not-At-Home-With-Itself"; the possibilities of bringing great pragmatist thought to these topics is always hovering just below the surface, waiting to put to use, but left that way. This is not to say that every essay does this: terrific pieces by Isaac Joseph, Hashim Sarkis, and David Lapoujade, to name but three, explicitly bring architecture and pragmatist philosophy to the point of engagement. But the large number of the former type is both frustrating and perplexing. Did these contributors just not deliver on promises of relevance to the topic at hand, or were they brought in by the organizers knowing that much of what they would have to say would basically stay with what they already knew?

The conclusion reached by this reader is that most of the participants from the architectural side of the fence seemed to think that foreknowledge about what pragmatist thought actually stands for was not really necessary; that if they just presented what they were doing or what they were about, they could leave it up to the philosophers to make the connections to pragmatism; or worse yet, that by some Zen-like slight of hand, what they were doing would just *be* pragmatic. Herein lies the risk of cross-disciplinary confabs. If one side is either too timid or just lazy, it leaves the other side to do all the work. The result is a book that is likely to be of real interest to architects with a philosophical bent but who are not really trying to understand the resources pragmatism has to offer them in any systematic way. It will be of much less interest for pragmatist philosophers, save for those who get something out of seeing how their discipline can be appropriated by others in wildly different worlds of endeavor.