

Excavating 2020

Review of *Remote Practices: Architecture at a Distance*, eds. Matthew Mindrup and Lilian Chee, London: Lund Humphries, 2022, 176 pp, ISBN: 978-18-48225-31-2

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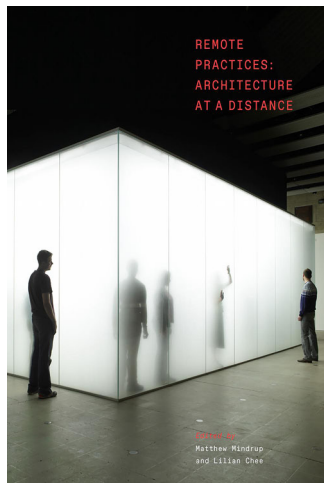
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BOOK REVIEW

Excavating 2020

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As an unfortunate individual who started her doctoral research just a few weeks before the Covid-19 pandemic corroded all aspects of society and fundamentally unsettled our known ways of living, revisiting the year 2020 prompts a distinct reaction. From the more light-hearted memories of lockdown entertainment that kept the clock ticking over—watching *Tiger King* on Netflix, DIY attempts at sourdough and kimchi experiments wafting through my small apartment—to the lingering anxiety and utter despair in the face of a ubiquitous deadly virus, the historical research I set out to do was often furthest from my mind. In a frenzied standstill, the months—suddenly years—of research funding rushed by as panic and frustration grew exponentially.

What began as an exercise in staying alive, staying sane and staying alert ultimately grew into the hazy days of pandemic fatigue: the “expected and natural

response to a prolonged public health crisis,” as the World Health Organization had defined it by year’s end. Zoom *jour fixes*, Zoom seminars, Zoom office hours, Zoom conferences, Zoom roundtables, Zoom advisor feedback, Zoom coffees, Zoom screenings, Zoom workouts, Zoom therapy. The pandemic changed the way we taught, worked, socialized, and cared for each other from the ground up. In so doing, it also shed particular light on the fragile infrastructures of institutionally supported research when confronted by a global crisis. Enter *Remote Practices*.

Although the volume, edited by architectural historian Matthew Mindrup and architectural theorist Lilian Chee, is not introduced as a take on the pandemic experience understood through the lens of architectural practice, history, theory, and education, it thoroughly is. Based on the contributions made at a joint conference of the same title at the University of Sydney and the National University of Singapore in October 2020, the book, published almost two years later, testifies to this very specific moment in time. Set out to “reflect upon the challenges and opportunities which architecture as a remote practice entails” (13), *Remote Practices* presents sixteen essays organized into two parts: “Practice and Pedagogy,” and “Critique and Performativity.”

Torn between the two modes of engaging the subject at large and existing in the all-encompassing reality of the pandemic, the essays span a particularly wide range of topics and methods: from historical case studies of designing at a distance to analyses of dispersed means of architectural production, to theoretical considerations of affect and care in architecture, to numerous accounts of the digital practices the pandemic forced upon the discipline (among many others). Throughout, the dominance of the pandemic as the

book's pervasive theme increases linearly from beginning to end. While Mindrup's introduction explores the tradition of travel—the lived experience of the remote—as “a staple of an architect's education [...] to encounter the different ways a group of people have organized the local climate and building materials into places for habitation” (12), Chee and Samuel's “tentative” conclusion revisits the virtual roundtable of the 2020 conference and “meanders” between the discussions and musings of its participants about the “now universal condition of distance” (150).

Spanning architectural histories of Leon Battista Alberti's praise of interpretive distance as a means of “taking a reflective step back” (53, Lisa Landrum), the effect of Frank Lloyd Wright's 1916 lengthy travels between Tokyo and Chicago for his Imperial Hotel (Paul Emmons), the Bauhaus exiles' pedagogy of reviewing “primitive” material mechanics with “fresh eyes” at Harvard University in the 1930s (Matthew Mindrup and Jodi LaCoe), Ivan Sutherland's dislocated gestures in his 1963 *Sketchpad* (Jason Crow), and Eisenman/Robertson Architects' practices of overnight FedExing in the 1980s in order to access a supercomputer in Ohio (Noémie Despland-Lichtert and Brendan Sullivan Shea), the essays included in *Remote Practices* observe with great precision aspects of the inherently remote relationships at play in architecture. Foregrounding the fundamental experiences of such remoteness, like encounters with “foreign” building sites and cultures, or the various tools used to produce built reality, such as (digital) drawing, the exigencies of architectural production are variously explored as conditions of remoteness. As the late Robin Evans argued, the practice of architecture is ultimately detached from its results, it is but “the translation between drawing and building,” a definition picked up by Despland-Lichtert and Shea to grasp architecture “through a series of long distance transactions” that emerge precisely from this “gap” (60–61). This demonstrates the book's productive approach and highlights a facet of architectural practice, history, and theory that is often overlooked in times of (seemingly) immediate access through globalization and digitalization.

However, many of the other essays in *Remote Practices* fall into the trap of logging and theorizing a past “now,” which in the reality of early 2023 or even mid-2022, when the book was published, appear further away than intended (not to say *remote* in a very unfortunate sense). Rooted in the present of 2020, the majority of essays set out to examine how online working modes, social distancing, or the pandemic in general offer a reevaluation of architectural practice and pedagogy. Being immersed in a “current” situation (116), meditations on online dancing and drawing (Belinda Mitchell), sharing a digital dinner in front of a laptop over several continents (Gabriela Aquije Zegarra), or curated online film platforms (Film Place Collective) are so evocative of the first era of Covid-19—pre-fatigue—that they risk merely reproducing the sentiments of the countless op-eds flooding our newspapers, magazines, and browsers when the world seemingly revolved around the pandemic alone. Naomi Stead's take, deliberately written in first person, is also reminiscent of such pandemic reflections, journaling the author's reality as both head of an architecture school and caregiver, culminating in “compassion fatigue, decision fatigue, crisis fatigue, simple physical exhaustion” (73). While Stead's perspective must ring true with many readers in breaking down outdated demands for detached professionalism, it is nevertheless a perspective offered by a tenured academic in a leadership role, offered from a position of privilege enjoyed by a small minority within academia irrespective of a global pandemic. Stead's experience is relatable albeit perhaps somewhat provocative for the many forced to abandon their careers in research once financial and institutional opportunities disappeared.

Admittedly, no one could have known how long the pandemic would drag on and we are fortunate that it no longer exists to the same extent. Nevertheless, *Remote Practices* remains buried in a moment before lockdowns were lifted in many places, students returned to their campuses and the academic world started to mingle again at conferences and research events. This then raises a question often posed by a curator colleague when evaluating the viability of ideas and their translation between media: is this an exhibition, or a book? Did *Remote Practices* the conference—so fitting and timely in its moment—have to become *Remote Practices* the book; perhaps the most permanent, lengthiest, and most arduous medium of all? *Remote Practices* is an involuntary monument not only to architecture's remoteness but also that of academia at large. Its weak point lies not in its claims, but in choosing to articulate them through traditional, institutionalized forms of "visibility" while at the same time highlighting the experimental possibilities of circumventing those forms in the very domains it originally set out to interrogate.

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