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Book reviews

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Conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic and based on a conference that took place during the same period, *Remote Practices: Architecture at a Distance* provides a meditation on proximity and distance while also documenting a moment in time that may now feel remote to the reader. The book has been edited by Matthew Mindrup and Lilian Chee, who are based at the University of Sydney and the National University of Singapore respectively — a set of geographical circumstances that could be read in the context of academia's infamous Eurocentric inclinations. This context and the collection itself hint strongly at the realisation that architecture has always been a discipline characterised by varying degrees of remoteness. The publication examines geographical distances in the work of architects while also proposing a look at the unique circumstances of the pandemic in order to complicate the notions of distance and proximity in more than geographical terms. The book is divided into two sections, edited by Mindrup and Chee respectively. The first part, titled 'Practice and Pedagogy', is concerned with the challenges of practicing and teaching architecture at a distance. The second, 'Critique and Performativity', examines the distance between the object and the critic and the different outputs through which encounters with architecture are mediated. The collection includes a wide spread of authors and contributions, from established scholars to early-career researchers, tackling the traditional medium of a research paper as well as more creative and reflective formats. There are chapters by Joan Ockman, Naomi Stead, Philip Ursprung, Jane Rendell, Gabriela Aquije Zegarra, and Film Place Collective, as well as contributions from the editors.

In his prominent essay, 'Translations from Drawing to Building', Robin Evans makes key observations about remoteness in the practice of architecture. Comparing architecture students to other visual arts students, he notes, 'what seemed at a time the peculiar disadvantage under which architects labour, never working directly with the object of their thought, always working at it through some intervening medium, almost always the drawing, while painters

and sculptors [...] all ended up working on the thing itself'.¹ While Evans' initial observation was perceived by him as a disadvantage, he later elaborates on the 'resulting displacement of effort and indirectness of access' with the reflection that 'whether [it is] always and necessarily disadvantageous is another question'.² In part I of *Remote Practices*, the contributors deal with this inherent distance and what they see as many, if not more, opportunities as disadvantages. Paul Emmons traces the development of architectural practice, from drawing lines in sand directly on site, through the development of paper beginning in the eleventh century, which eventually transformed architecture into a remote practice, carried out away from the building site. He advocates for the importance of distance in architect's practice: 'Because of its enormous flexibility of scale, region is best seen not in person, but through drawings and the eye of the imagination — which is present at the drafting table in the scholar's study.' (p. 33) Emmons hints that remoteness does not always imply unfamiliarity, something drawn out also by Matthew Mindrup in the introduction, where he argues that remoteness is not a product of geography but rather of familiarity (or lack thereof). Mindrup's case study, of migrants who bring familiar construction methods and apply them in their new homelands, brings home the point about the complex relationship of geography, place, and familiarity. Joan Ockman, on the other hand, questions the limits of what can be grasped from the scholar's desk in her essay, 'Toward a Political Ecology of Architecture', which deals with the thorny issues of globalisation, material, and labour extraction. Pointing out the paradoxes of the present era of interconnectedness, when it should, in theory, be possible to trace materials and labour relations, she asks: 'But is it really, truly possible to grasp architecture in relation to an entire cycle of production? To pursue such a holistic vision may appear quixotic.' (p. 28)

Reflecting on and delving into architecture's critical distances, part II explores 'how it may be possible to be amidst and between' (p. 143). Here the distance between the critic and the object, as well as distances between architecture and other fields, are considered; the authors delve into disciplines such as anthropology, psychoanalysis, filmmaking, and performance. In her chapter, Lilian Chee proposes a departure from architecture's disciplinary boundaries, something that is also undertaken by other authors in this section. Chee suggests that, to encounter architecture circuitously, in this instance through the frame of affect — a concept developed by philosopher Brian Massumi that straddles philosophy, political theory, and everyday life — is to gain critical distance and to 'reveal the seams of knowledge in academe' (p. 137). In Chee's work, affect opens up architecture to the happenstance encounter, to the relational and eventful. Coupled with her critical attention to life inside buildings, this framework produces research that is vibrant and bubbling with acutely observed, granular detail. Jane Rendell's 'Seven Studies for a Holding' is an experimental and experiential piece of writing, blending a first-person account of life and teaching in the UK during the pandemic with the theoretical exploration of

a 'holding' as based on Donald Winnicott's writing. Rendell's chapter includes her watercolour drawings, dated and inscribed with the number of deaths from COVID-19 in the UK between March and May of 2020. The firm embedding in chronology and place as well as the inherent relationally of the piece give away clues of Rendell's self-developed practice of 'site-writing' — a mode of enquiry that attempts to 'write site' instead of writing 'about site', a mode of creative and situated practice of writing. Ioanna Sotiriou proposes another interpretation of place in 'Experiences, Everywhere: the Making of Informed Space'. Introducing the term of 'informed space' — 'neither virtual nor augmented' — the author explores the shift from space as a destination to the 'abstract territory of remote everywhere' (p. 107). Philip Ursprung brings forward a polemic about the state of criticism and suggests that distance and proximity, looking from afar but also going 'outside and getting wet' (p. 113), are crucial tools of a critic. Belinda Mitchell and Gabriela Aquije Zegarra explore domesticity and familiarity as tied not so much to a place but to a set of practices. Mitchell's paper explores rituals and practices as 'homing' activities (a term borrowed from Victoria Hunter) and reflects on the social body and the home body that suddenly became one and the same during the pandemic. Aquije Zegarra uses the act of eating together — commensality — as a way to be 'digitally together' during group online calls.

Where the volume gets most interesting is in the relationship of formats and subject matter between contributions. Naomi Stead's first-person narrative of pandemic struggles as head of architecture school resonates with Jane Rendell's reflective 'Seven Studies for a Holding' and Lilian Chee's careful unfolding of what it means to pay attention to the periphery via the theory of affect. These texts utilise autotheory and lived experience accounts, modes often employed in feminist scholarship, to develop theoretical as well as ethical arguments and reflections. The references and close readings made, for example, by Chee of Rendell's work provide a helpful network of connections through which the topics of proximity, positionality, and site-writing can emerge and bloom. The above texts (as well as some of the others) are also concerned with record-taking in an unprecedented time when governments had introduced national lockdowns or circuit-breakers to stem the spread of the disease. Stead's unfinished game of Monopoly provides a flashback to the time when those more fortunate found themselves bored at home. Rendell's recorded numbers of deaths from COVID-19 provide a stark reminder that pandemic boredom was indeed a privilege. Throughout the book, many such encounters with specific or minute details build a rich set of images that diligently document the pandemic. The incorporation of everyday and sometimes chance encounter chimes with Chee's advocating for the potential of affect as a way of understanding and studying architecture that does away with the more traditionally academic conceptions of distance from one's object of study: 'When we encounter architecture indirectly and circuitously through evidence lying

outside architecture's disciplinary frame, how do we account for such remote, non-disciplinary-abiding modes of knowing?' (p. 138), Chee asks, arguing that, while an affective mode of operation remains distant from architectural theory, it is close to the creative practice of architecture, with its 'emergent energy' and 'complexity of detail' (p. 143). Chee advocates, after Taussig, to 'describe, don't explain' (p. 91) as a way to approach research with more immediacy and less remoteness, and readily admits that working through affective modes of enquiry is often problematic. Some related challenges arise in the second part of *Remote Practices*, particularly in the chapters that aim to capture more visual, experiential, or affective research projects developed during the pandemic. It is here where the effort to translate such projects into self-reflective text pushes against the boundaries of the format of an edited book. Perhaps an academic publication is too rigid a form for projects with an ambition to stretch and redefine research through creative practice.

The publication suggests that, by looking closely at the gaps and distances in architectural practice, criticism, and pedagogy, one might be able to more consciously and critically employ them as tools and positions. Despite architects usually receiving criticism for being remote — away from the building site and far from people who might be using their buildings — as Robin Evans and some authors of *Remote Practices* notice, the indirectness need not always be a disadvantage. Distance allows a wider gaze; it enables mediation, criticality, and interpretation, as well as 'discerning broader concerns and extended responsibilities' (p. 56) as Lisa Landrum writes. To become familiar with the discipline's inherent distances — between the architect and site, software and material, the critic and the work — is to tame them and familiarise them. But the essays deal with distance as much as they deal with proximity and all the degrees of separation and closeness in between, sometimes advocating for more direct, experiential, or embodied encounters with objects of study. With an attention to graininess, detail, and character of architecture's various distances, *Remote Practices* is both a precious record of a very particular moment in global history and a timeless meditation on architecture as an inherently remote practice.

Notes and references

1. Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 156.
2. Ibid.