

Truth and Lies in Architecture

By Richard Francis-Jones
ORO Editions, 2022

Reviewed by Gevork Hartoonian

WITH THIS BOOK, RICHARD FRANCIS-JONES ADDS A NEW CHAPTER TO HIS SUCCESSFUL career as a distinguished Australian architect and educator. The text and the selected images reveal his sensibility towards landscape and architecture. He reflects upon these eloquently, disclosing an in-depth understanding of many issues troubling contemporary architecture. No wonder then that Kenneth Frampton, once his mentor at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University, writes a foreword to the book that not only makes the task of any reviewer difficult but also puts the reader off guard! Frampton notes that

these essays represent a level of critical awareness rarely found within the architectural profession, and one would be hard-pressed to find another comparable figure in contemporary architectural practice.

Frampton should have been confident enough in his judgment to send this reviewer a note reiterating the same statement verbatim in anticipation of the book's success and ahead of its publication!

Aside from the epilogue, a diagnostic approach to many facets of contemporary architecture is the book's central focus. The compiled chapters allow the reader to enter the author's mental life. The chosen epigraph for each entry is selected from the work of architects and thinkers relevant to the subject regardless of its length and the number of footnotes that support his critical observations. Considering the literature that the author has consulted, one wonders how he makes time to run a successful practice (fjmtstudio) and thoughtfully reflect on a range of issues discussed usually by critical historians and thinkers with phenomenological inclination. This might be why the author's poetic pen sometimes gives the reader the idea that the highly contentious positions peppering the book are part of populist observations floating around since the turn to postmodernism. This is a fair judgment regarding the generalisation implied in the universal dimension of

phenomenology, the author's ideological position detonated in the middle of the book.

On the other hand, did not Vitruvius tell us the range of issues and knowledge that an architect is required to know? Since the 1970s, the major theoretical turn aligned architecture with various literally and philosophical discourses at the expense of a postmodernist approach to architecture, a prelude to architecture's drift into the spectacle of the commodity form where lies and truths are comingled. Under the pressure of the capitalistic production and consumption systems, the author correctly highlights the challenges facing contemporary professional practice and architectural theory. He writes:

We are too overwhelmed at the sheer challenge of realizing a project with some conceptual integrity, to simultaneously critique or even properly understand the nature of what we do. (37)

The book's title, we note early on, alludes to a moment when an architect has the chance to make a distance from the work for critical reflections that, according to Francis-Jones, 'is vital to understanding the values, ethics, and meaning behind the work'. If postmodernism inaugurated a moment of 'both-and', then we are reasonably reminded of the inevitable question, what is architecture about at the time when 'truth and lies' seem to stand for another both-and analogue.

Does architecture represent itself as an autonomous object, either in abstract forms or classical typologies, as instanced in the work of Aldo Rossi, mentioned among other architects? Nevertheless, if 'truth' is a worn-out cover for architecture, the 'distortion of construction for formal purpose help us glimpse truth about the world and our place in it'. If the reader dismissed the negative dialectics implied in the text, the book might lose its critical ground until we are reminded that phenomenology could heal most evils humanity confronts today!

The most extended entry is assigned to the theme of 'slowness of architecture', a prelude to Francis-Jones's wholistic position. Drawings from the cinematic expressions of extreme violence, immediacy, and fast-track editing of fragmentary images in Quentin Tarantino's early movies, 'we accept and indulge in our isolation and separateness'. In a Heideggerian tone, we are seemingly in a state of weightlessness thanks to the separation of language from being. And also, thanks to the immediacy and speed permeating mass media communication networks operating globally. A different subjectivity is thus produced as capitalism turns to the state of digital reproducibility. Seasonally, the reader is introduced to critical thinkers such as Fredric Jameson, Hal Foster, Manfredo Tafuri and Franco Moretti. And yet, drawing from his experience as an architect, Francis-Jones highlights critical points to demonstrate the impact of parametric and 'building integrated

management' on design and the changes occurring in the construction industry, which have further expanded the already existing gap between theory and design. The gestalt of these transformations has also deteriorated the traditional two-way rapport between the profession and schools of architecture. Against the Bauhaus experience, the curriculum of most architecture schools today, I would add, is more or less aligned with the dictates of the construction industry and corporate management system. The theoretical closure experienced since the late 1990s is another point implied in the author's reflection on the state of contemporary architectural praxis. On a positive note, the entry concludes with a reference to Milan Kundera's novel *Slowness*, and with recognition of a desirable 'slowness' in such architectural examples as Australian architect Glenn Murcutt's Marika-Alderton House (1990-94) and Danish Jørn Utzon's Can Lis House (1974). We read:

... both Murcutt and Utzon are architects who have practiced outside the norm and occupy the margin. Neither could be described as efficient. They are outside of the market, resist commercial reality, and have been stung by it. They are also slow. (75)

The remaining entries of the book cover issues and themes that are architectural through and through, which in the course of history, have hardened the architect's task to the point of their 'extinction' if not 'fall' (to recall the title of another two entries). What stands between the architect and the work today is the division of labour insinuated in the historical course of modernisation and the project that capitalism stole during the late 1930s. Francis-Jones is aware of this turn of events, which is symptomatic for the present 'crisis of architecture' and for his own search for the meaning of architecture—for whether any philosophical reading can help architecture 'give life to our work, and through it to help frame, reconcile and even atone our presence in this world' (85). His tacitly phenomenological take on many issues, eloquently discussed page after page, leaves the reader in an enclosed bubble that is sensed particularly in the book's epilogue—an enclosure perhaps analogous to the eclipse of the much-needed theorisation of architecture starting with the advent of the digital technification of the field circa 1990. However, there should be something in phenomenology that drives its advocates to direct the ethical project of architectural phenomenology into a holistic vision of 'being' left behind since the loss of 'aura' (Walter Benjamin). This much is evident from the title of chapters leading to the epilogue, highlighting 'Bridges of Lebab' as an alternative to the corporate craze for vertical towers that cast long shadows on the contemporary cityscapes. We are reminded of one of the fine works of fjmtstudio, the Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand (2011), and bridges overing the Ganges River, India. Both projects are exemplary of a 'literal and phenomenological interconnection that binds' architecture to the mythologies of the site (180). In passing, it should be noted that 'Bridges of Lebab' tacitly recall's Heidegger's

notion of the bridge, which is most often associated with the thinker's idea of dwelling. Heidegger presents the bridge as a work with the potential to amalgamate technique and material with purpose. A radical reading of Heidegger's discourse on the bridge would focus on the difference, the apartness of the two banks, instead of a sense of 'nearness', a lost mythical state of experience since the advent of mechanical reproducibility. I would also like to recall Louis I. Kahn (mentioned in the book), perhaps the most misunderstood post-war American architect, in this line of consideration. Kahn's rumination on the post-war existentialist sentiments led historians and critics to dismiss the architect's modernistic interpretation of the classical notion of 'thickening the wall' (cladding) and tectonics.

Richard Francis-Jones' book can provoke a much-needed debate about the state of architectural praxis today, when a few architectural theorists already speculate about architecture in the age of Artificial Intelligence (A. I.)! While the book at hand tacitly addresses issues caused by the dissemination of digital reproducibility across the cultural realm, a return to the pre-modern state that phenomenology embraces is not foreseeable. Neither is good enough to radicalise the formal autonomy widespread in the late 1960s. Global modernisation demands expanding the scope of the self-referentiality of architecture beyond the Euro-American context. Similarly, architects should theorise their work today without reducing its purpose to the re-presentation of speculative theories or expecting architecture to solve current socio-political issues such as climate crisis, sustainability, war, and peace! Francis-Jones's book is a timely wake-up call for architects and critiques to reconsider architecture in the expanded field of contemporary everyday life.

GEVORT HARTOONIAN is Emeritus Professor of the history of architecture at the University of Canberra, Australia. He was born in Iran, 1946, and received a PhD at the University of Pennsylvania, USA. He has taught in several American universities, including Columbia University, and the Pratt Institute. He was visiting professor of architectural history at Tongji University, Shanghai, in 2013 and 2016. Hartoonian has contributed to numerous books, journal essays, conference proceedings. He is most recently the author of *Reading Kenneth Frampton: A Commentary on Modern Architecture, 1980* (Anthem Press, 2022), *Time, History and Architecture: Essays on Critical Historiography* (Routledge, 2020/2018), and *Global Perspectives on Critical Architecture* (Routledge, 2015). His forthcoming book is entitled *Towards a Critique of Architecture's Contemporaneity: 4 Essays* (Routledge, January 2023). The Korean and Thai editions of *Ontology of*

Construction (Cambridge UP, 1994) were published in 2010 and 2017 respectively.