

***Architecture and Modernity.* Hilde Heynen. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999. Pp. 259. \$40.00.**

Reviewed by Anthony Raynsford, University of Chicago

Hilde Heynen's ambitious sounding book *Architecture and Modernity* might more precisely be titled, "An Examination of Key Ideas Surrounding Architecture and Modernity." At its most compelling, the book presents a useful commentary on major writings that expound or illuminate these key ideas. Drawing together major figures both from architectural writings and from a wider field of critical theory, Heynen examines the points at which the works touch on a perplexing intellectual question: what relations exist or ought to exist between architecture and modernity? To this end, she compares and contrasts the intellectual merits and weaknesses of various discourses. Significant terms, such as dwelling and modernity, are tracked in their different conceptual relations to architecture, and architectural examples serve, more or less, to illustrate these relations. As the title suggests, however, the author has a much higher ambition than merely writing a critical commentary; she also intends to produce a new theoretical formulation. Heynen describes the structure of the argument in quasi-Hegelian terms as a "synthesis" overcoming the thesis of architectural modernism and the antithesis of critical theory. The aim of this synthesis is "a provisional formulation of a complex and multilayered understanding of that intricate relationship" between architecture and modernity (4). The success of this second, theory-producing aspect of the book proves more doubtful.

As a critical commentary, Heynen's book is exemplary for the breadth of its treatment of divergent texts and for the persistence with which it traces key issues. Significantly, the book brings together two strands of thought that have all too often been separated: discourses emerging from the modern movement in architecture and discourses of general modernity in critical theory. By juxtaposing architectural writers and cultural theorists, Heynen demonstrates the extent to which the architectural modernism of such figures as Siegfried Giedion predicated itself on a naïve, pastoralizing view of modernity not easily reconcilable with the far more so-

phisticated formulations of the Frankfurt School. On the other hand, Frankfurt School writers dealt only sporadically with the problem of architecture, and Heynen attempts to supplement these few texts with architectural examples and applications. Some of the authors examined by Heynen, namely Adolf Loos and Manfredo Tafuri, seem to straddle the divide between architectural insiders and critical theorists. By laying out these divergent writings on the theme of architecture and modernity, Heynen points out a number of contradictory impulses. For example, the term modernity takes on a very different meaning and agency depending on whether it is “programmatically” or “transitory,” whether it describes a self-conscious project, as in the modern movement, or else a condition of continuous upheaval brought about through the social processes of modernization. Clearly the relations between architecture and modernity depend quite heavily on the type of modernity being conceptualized. Another contradictory impulse tracked by Heynen is the place of “dwelling” in modernity. The antimodern implications of this Heideggerian term are shown as only one possible interpretation. Roundly criticized are those architectural theorists, such as Christopher Alexander and Christian Norberg-Schulz, who reject modernity in favor of authentic dwelling, thus setting the two in simplified opposition. Critics, such as Massimo Cacciari and Francesco Dal Co, who find ways to speak of dwelling-in-modernity as a condition of permanent homelessness, are given more weight here. As a critical commentary, Heynen’s book adeptly tracks some of the finer distinctions within a highly abstract set of terms, and it also serves as a good resource for those wishing to familiarize themselves with some of the more important architectural texts.

As a theory-producing text, however, the book is considerably more problematic. Most of the book is given over to the explication and interpretation of other discourses, and much of the remainder examines avant-garde architectural projects according to the architects’ reactions to modernity. The order and sequence of these discourses and projects is presumably meant to guide the reader towards an increasingly sophisticated understanding of architecture and modernity, culminating in something close to the position of Adorno—with architectural content added to his aesthetic theory. This structural organization does not amount to a unitary argument, however, as the differing and contradictory discourses are rarely rejected or refuted outright. While Heynen does point out the contradictions among various discourses, she rarely resolves them. Instead, she draws out certain key terms, such as mimesis, that are given increasing weight and explanatory power. Nevertheless, these terms often remain difficult to pin down across discourses. Mimesis, in particular, slips from one meaning to another, from Benjamin to Adorno, from aesthetic theory to architectural examples. For example, when Heynen attempts to map Adorno’s concept of mimesis on to Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum, the result is baffling. In one passage she asserts, “According to Adorno, the mimetic impulse is rooted in a gesture of negativity that does not have any positive goal” (208). In the same passage, she claims that this notion accounts for Libeskind’s museum, in which “The broken lines of the design testify to a broken reality” (208). Unlike Adorno’s mimesis, this testimony, referring specifically to German-Jewish history, seems to have the clearly positive goal of representing a reality, albeit a gloomy one. Why should the issue here be mimesis and not representation, or perhaps ambiguous allusion? Her criticism of actual architectural projects often seems to boil down to a preference for buildings that are complex and contradictory because they best represent a modernity that is complex and contradictory, a position closely aligned in the end with that of Robert Venturi. Finally, while her brief conclusion is thought provoking, it does not synthesize all the ideas presented nor does it present a theoretical position beyond her earlier commentary.

The relationships between architecture and modernity continually shift according to definitions of what each is or should be. Heynen clearly advocates an architecture that expresses ruptures within the everydayness of modernity: “Like art and literature, architecture *is* capable of suspending the continuity of the normal and generating a moment of intensity that subverts what is self-evident” (224). This assessment, however, demonstrates only one particular manner

MODERNISM / *modernity*

524 in which architecture might engage modernity. The broader questions as to how modernity ought to be defined and how architectural practices are or are not, in fact, shaped by modernity are left open. Despite this limitation, the book will remain useful as a reference tool and interpretive essay. It should prove particularly useful to architecture students and architectural historians who desire a broad introduction to modernity as a critical problem for architecture. It should prove equally useful to scholars of modernity who wish to understand broad, cultural issues in relation to architecture as a medium.