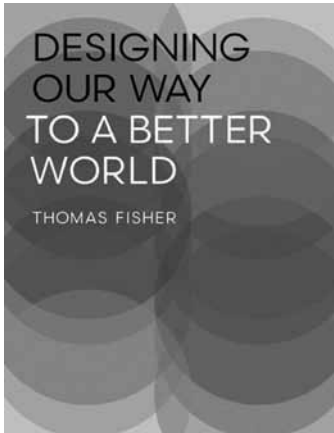


**Thomas Fisher, *Designing Our Way to a Better World*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 256 pp. - May 2016
Hardback: \$105.00 - ISBN 978-0-8166-9887-5 / Paperback: \$29.95 - ISBN 978-0-8166-9888-2**



We usually consider that an object like design and a person like the designer have to deal with a very precise set of things: building, skyscraper, square, landscape, furniture and artifacts in general. In this book Thomas Fisher, Professor and Dayton Chair in Urban Design and Director of Metropolitan Design Center at Minnesota University, proposes a thesis which is contrary to the commonsense: design – and with it the work and way of thinking of designers – can apply not only to the “visible systems”, those structures which are actually tangible, as buildings and streets, but also the “invisible systems” can be subjects

to the process of designing. The “invisibles” are the economic system, the political one, the educational, the information system and the health service. Fisher asserts that all of those systems are designed like the “visible” ones. He is telling us that a substantial part of our institutional reality (Searle, 1995; Ferraris, 2012) is designed, it has been put in place through a design: it exists because of a design. Thomas Fisher is not new to this kind of argumentations: in his previous book, *Designing to Avoid Disaster: The Nature of Fracture-Critical Design* (London, Routledge, 2013), the urbanist already showed the high degree of interconnections between structures and systems and the potentiality held by design in avoiding, literally, disasters which our commonsense makes us feel as “natural” or “unavoidable”. It is the case, for instance, of the episode of the Fukushima nuclear power plant in 2011, where the disaster has been caused by a violent tsunami. Here Fisher argues that it would be completely avoidable if and only if the system “nuclear power plant” had been designed by considering also exogenous factors, as the tsunami. The problem presented by Fisher in *Designing Our Way to a Better World* is that «too many systems have the same hierarchical rigidity and organizational inflexibility,

and too many people suffer» (p. XI), and rigidity and inflexibility make the systems unable to adapt to changes, and this increases the suffering. For instance, the economic crisis a few years ago: a system, the economic one, had damaged millions of people and institution linked to it, and even today the effect of this collapse is still visible as well.

In this field design can, for Fisher, intervene. Given the fact that those systems are designed, they can be also subjects to re-design. Here we can find the power of the design in the construction of what surround us: through this instrument, Fisher argues, we can create our own way to a better world.

The book presents those arguments non only from a theoretical perspective – Introduction and Part I are devoted to this purpose – but, from the second to the seventh part, Fisher applies what he sustained theoretically to the practice. For instance, in Part II, which is dedicated to the educational system, Thomas Fisher shows that in school there are not sufficient – or not at all – rooms for design thinking and there is a missing link between the school, as institution whose main purpose is to educate people, and the community, the group whose citizens are part of and constitute it. The solution – or better, one possible solution – is to renew

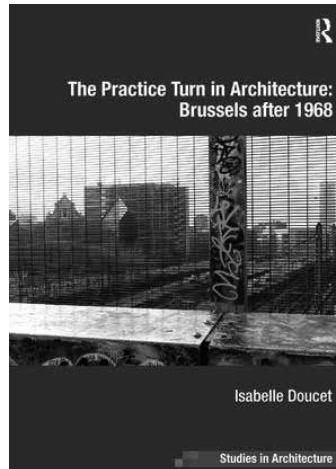
ties right through the design: schools, if they adopt specific educational program in design, could be the bearers of an added value which can be used within the community – within the same people who learn design thinking. Final remarks. Fisher's book has two fundamental positive aspects. The first one relies on his writing, easy and far away from academia mainstream, the book – besides the fact that it could become a manual for policy-makers – is a collection of articles appeared in different editorial places and revisited for the publication in a single volume; the second great merit is the (successful) attempt to go from theory to practice. *Designing Our Way to a Better World* demonstrates and shows the importance and social utility hold by design. In fact, Fisher argues, only designing a better future would make this very future a real thing.

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**Isabelle Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture: Brussels after 1968*, London, Routledge, 244 pp. - July 2015
 Paperback: £14 - ISBN 978-1-4724-3735-8 / Hardback: £56 - ISBN 978-1-3153-0875-3**



The Practice Turn in Architecture: Brussels after 1968 is a book about architectural theory and its critical theory legacy. It addresses the transformations and hopes for criticality under recent debates in architectural theory that we can call «practice turn in architecture». The case study in this sense is Brussels and its critical practices; the guide-question of the book is «how to find a point of entry to this complex city?». Isabelle Doucet decided to study this kind of critical practices in Brussels after a symbolic date, not only for the city but for the Europe in general, “the 1968”.

The connection between politics and architectural theory is clear: how we can try to understand the semantic of “participation” or “access” after the revolution of 1968? The starting point is the crises of the criticality in recent architectural theory and the author, in this sense, would like to unpack the methodological relevance and challenges of pragmatism perspectives for architectural theory. Only after this premise, that is of course a sort of philosophical premise, it's possible for Doucet the argumentation about a strong relationship between Brussels (as a model), architectural theory and pragmatism. This is the reason of the transformation of this book: from an academic book to a journey. Navigating between Brussels' two official faces is not an easy matter: politics and underground culture, Dutch and French, Europe and Anti-Europe... Based on this strange double-soul of the city Isabelle Doucet used the interview as a favorite instrument for critical theory legacy in architecture. The City, this is the argument of the author, is a practice (a sort of architectural equivalent of “form of life” in Wittgenstein philosophy): «cities are fabricated through landmark buildings, but they are equally enacted by citizens, users, mind-sets, words, and all sorts of

mundane infrastructure and practices». The city as a natural object, the idea of “city” a sort of aggregate of architectural structure, is completely different from the idea of “city” as a social object: the practices and performance makes a city, this is the point (city without performance is engineering, not architecture). After a brief introduction to architectural culture in Brussels Doucet, indeed, dedicated its analysis to the practical turn in architecture in urban planning. Since the mid-Nineties a new generation of theorist started to challenge a critical theory that had become only intellectualized and whose contribution to design practice had been limited to abstract and formal experimentations (this is the begin of the division between “old” and “new” theorising). The new generation of architects, after 1968, are the authors of the transformation of architecture in a practice of life: a several socio-technological and economic changes are now a strong ingredient of the assumptions in architecture. Brussels in this sense was a privilege theater: the practice turn in this city coincided with significant changes in the architectural profession and architects were mobilized in a global market economy through their landmark buildings or stararchitect status. This

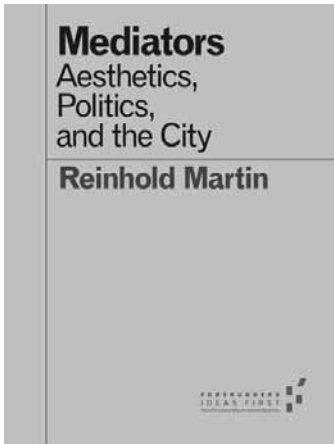
is the begin also of a “new pragmatism”: «confronted with a post-political city informing an appeased architectural practice, architectural theorist did not just search for new modes of theorising architecture through practice, but also for modes to theories critical engagement thorough practice». Isabelle Doucet traces the history of this movement until the rising of the Interstitial Activism: an epochal campaign in the heart of Brussels by squatting in a vacant housing block threatened by demolition; this action involved artist, activist, intellectuals and civil society. The rhetoric of participation became reality: is the transition from the institutional project to the practice from the bottom. The Interstitial Activism was a space of encounter, an interstices (Heidegger) of refusal of dominant orders. Based on this part of the history of Brussels Isabelle Doucet argue that not only architecture, but also life in general, emerges from interstices (a space of encounter between body, design and environment).

In general the book is characterized as a sort of detailed agenda for architecture after the critical reappraisal of architectural debates from the Sixties through to the Nineties. Brussels, despite the masterful guide of Doucet to

the city, is an excuse to explore the radical connection between philosophy, architecture and social progress.

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**Reinhold Martin, *Mediators: Aesthetics, Politics and the City*, Minneapolis - London, University of Minnesota Press, 60 pp. - November 2014
Paperback: \$7.95 - ISBN 978-0-8166-9687-1 / e-book: \$4.95 - ISBN 978-1-4529-4455-5**



What is a city, today? The answer to this question is both the main issue and the main target of Reinhold Martin's book. The complexity of the subject is clear, as well as the many concerns raised by the literature. Nevertheless, the author declared interest moves from the recognition of an *aesthetized confusion* linked to the very definition of the city (undetermined, indeed, by its nature). Consequently, the focus is placed on the usually underestimated connection between aesthetic and political economy, crucial to the comprehension of the contemporary globalized

city. Through the adoption of this particular approach, the reader is asked to step back, taking into account the rules rather than the contents. The book is structured in an introduction and five *public and pedagogical* essays, many of whom previously published. Public because of the subject, namely the city as a topic to be investigated. Pedagogical because of the origin and the form of the reflections. In fact, the original setting of the thinking developed in the book is the seminar *Philosophies of the City* held by Martin at Columbia University. As a result, the published essays intentionally maintain the form of shared discussion about cities. The vocabulary employed by the author is the one of media theory, political theory and aesthetics. And, together with the heterogeneity of the sources employed, it underlines the preferred interdisciplinary and theoretical approach. The common thread running through the chapters are the mediators. Martin's mediators are not merely *media*, in the sense of technological instruments or systems, neither *mediations* reducible to the logic of capital. They take a multiplicity of forms, in each essay specific: «statistical reports, urban-rural transactions, slum relocation schemes, iconic buildings, iron cages and steel shells,

social housing, ruined libraries, satellites, or the rough, reddish landscape of Mars». According to this view, the mediators in the book are both concrete technical, infrastructural and social systems and the framework delimiting the possibilities of action and understanding. In short, they are the principle vehicle of the massive cracks (and the consequent fissures and bridges) of today's cities. The first chapter, entitled 'City, Country, World', moves from the UN-habitat warning about the increasing percentage of urban dwellers. Starting from the official quantitative data, Martin puts forward a critic reflection, challenging the common concepts of limits and numbers. Thus, assuming that cities are not defined anymore by boundaries and enclosures, he argues that the faith in numerical imaginaries is supposed to be put in perspective, accordingly to the fluidity and complexity of the limits within which counting. UN-Habitat reports process data provided by national states, each of which sets its own benchmarks to the counting. Taking his cue from this and other contradictions, Martin suggests not only questioning the *theological* value of maths, but he also warns of the (artificial) imaginaries that it is able to generate. Carrying on with the analysis, a number of

related concepts that are usually taken for granted are tackled: the reciprocal identities rural-urban and the consequent evolution of the figure of the rural-urban poor; the legitimacy of the sovereign as the responsible of counting; the production of data held by new disciplines like urban planning and sociology. Enumeration is the framework common to all of them. And mediators are the instruments to make it effective.

'Financial Imaginaries' gets to the hearth of the book subject by analysing the relationship between aesthetics and finance. *Abstraction* is the key concept of the chapter. On the one hand, it is the mental process, which links the representation of economy into financial (and social) imaginaries. On the other, it is the way to establish and guarantee the religiosity needed by the mechanism of the market, namely faith (indispensable to the credit system) and money. Precisely money draws the link between abstraction and objectification. Moreover, according to the author, architecture shares with money a unique property: they both present a structural absence of meanings, compensated by the promise of it. It is precisely in this promise of a perpetual enchantment made visible through artefacts, that money and architecture

become mediators of the socio-aesthetic life of cities. It is no coincidence that developers and architectural signatures have born and risen together, since they are both indispensable elements in a network of cultural practices that works by means of abstraction and faith. 'The Thing about Cities' develops in a precise setting. The essay puts forward ontological considerations about the city by following the modern history of Berlin in its gradual transition from the *iron cage* of the Cold War to the *soft steel shell*. Two main references are taken into account to question the ontological nature of the city as a *thing*. First, Bruno Latour and his studying about the *Berlin Key*, an exemplary thing of the city because of its peculiarity of being both a door lock and an information processor. Then, Friedrich Kittler, according to whom the city itself is a medium, a machine for processing, storing and transmitting information. For both scholars the city of Berlin represents the hardware. Nevertheless, while Latour speaks of hybrid networks of humans and non-humans, Kittler's media mediates without commandants. However, neither one nor the other explains the softening of the architectural city's hard shell. By contrast, Martin gives a place to these and other mediators in the

historical evolution of contemporary Berlin, underlying their capability to act towards the establishment of the real estate development and the soft shell of neo-liberal humanist capital. In 'Public and Common(s)' the analysis starts again from a linguistic point of view. *Private, public, common*, they all deal with a set of concepts concerning the more general *social*. To develop the concept Martin offers an excursus of selected significant opinions. The starting point is Hanna Arendt's view about the gradual fading of the distinction between public and private life into the amalgam of mass society. Then, it is mentioned Jürgen Habermas's *public sphere* and its natural representations (cafés, press, media...) and the antithetical *subaltern counter publics* of Nancy Fraser. Finally, the voice is given to the *Empire* of Hardt and Negri and their *collective subjectivities*, entrusted of looking beyond the classical public and private definition. Martin directs the arguments to his personal conclusions: whatever they will be, future networks would necessarily include the legacy of the public realm, as a medium and as a message. The last essay, 'Horizons of Thought', is the most metaphorical and compromising. The satellite Voyager 1 (launched in 1977) left in

2012 the Solar System. This gives us a first impression of the horizon the author is dealing with, which correlates the human measure with untimely thoughts. Martin goes deeper into the concept through an analysis of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* and Fredric Jameson's review. The science-fiction book series tells the story of the *terraforming* process consequent to the colonisation of Mars in 2026. Both on earth and on Mars, the grounders are facing with social and ethical problems closely tied to the actual reality: the recognition of the limits of science, the eventual abolition of money, politics of socio-economic apartheid, the housing question, the ecological issue, the relative value of a colonial frontier, and so on. Two are the messages delivered in the end by Martin. Firstly, the vocation of Utopia in revealing its *unthinkability* under present condition (moving the question to what we should do to make it thinkable). Secondly, the necessity of awaken planetary consciousness about the current issue of *Anthropocene*. To sum up, we have to focus where is the horizon to be able to look at it.

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