Book Review

Visualizing the Invisible, towards an urban space, Stephen Read and Camilo Pinilla, SpaceLab Book Series, Volume 1

URBAN DESIGN *International* (2006) 11, 213.
doi:10.1057/palgrave.udi.9000169

This book is a journey through urban projects around the world aiming to offer new intellectual approaches to urbanism as well as a fresh look at its latest physical manifestations. Design approaches in cities including Buenos Aires, Reykjavik, Hamburg, Bogotá, Beijing, Caracas, Seoul, Ubuntu, and Evora are presented through specific urban projects analyzed by a theoretical yet pragmatic reflection.

Visualizing the Invisible stands for an urbanism engaging with daily events on a local scale. The book works on the multiplicity of invisible layers of which the city is composed and examines how they can be used in actively shaping urban form. Proposing urban interaction at many scales, the projects presented in this book share an interest in exploring how to construct a healthy space at the point where the traditional city collides with the contemporary. This takes one back to books like 'Collage City', by Koetter and Rowe (1978), which proposed the collage between the traditional grid of the city and the modern one, as a means to overcome the lack of human scale of projects in modern urban environments, directly confronting the *tabula rasa* strategy of shaping the new city. In addition, *Visualizing the Invisible* not only explores the conditions of the existing city as a point of departure, but also includes global interactivity, going as far as including cyborgs. It analyzes how new patterns of communication and mediatic encounters shape our urban life by revealing their power to change urbanism in the future.

The book highlights the question of how local and global phenomena produce a two-way impact on urban form. Although a notion that has attracted numerous urbanists over the last decades, even today this continues to be a viable discourse considering to the ever-increasing need for cities to position themselves on the global map with

photogenic mega projects acting as symbols for contemporaneous development and economic growth. Rediscovering the existing local scale as the possible site for the new and the experimental, the projects in this book share not only a convincing simplicity but also even an approachable beauty.

The theoretical texts in the book are very elaborate. For the knowledgeable reader of urban theory, the book offers complex writings on diverse subjects from the dynamics of the Greek Agora to the problems of the virtual in relation to the city. It is also full of references going from Aristotle to Henri Lefebvre, Bruno Latour, and Jane Jacobs. As a theoretical frame for the book's experimental approach, this might be a useful work for academics. For a practitioner, the specifics of the presented projects will be more valuable. Unfortunately, many images are printed at a scale inhibiting access to apparently interesting information.

The projects discussed include a considerable collection of different urban conditions. In Beijing, the area of Shichahai is rapidly changing due to the accelerated growth of cultural tourism focused on the old city's conservation area. Bogotá's Corabastos, a market supply facility constructed in a peripheral location and surrounded by a wall, now faces the pressures of informal urban sprawl. In Seoul, the 1 km Electronic Shopping Mall crossing the district of Seun is being proposed for demolition. The scale and purpose of Caracas' trans-national highway fails to offer any sensible relationship to urban developments of Plaza Venezuela, a central urban area for the city.

With this first volume, the *SpaceLab* book series has laid the foundation for analyzing these problematic urban conditions by adding an experimental layer to urban environments at the interface of present and future structures.

Adriana Cobo
School of Architecture and Construction
University of Greenwich

Reference

Rowe, C. and Koetter, F. (1978) *Collage City*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.