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Review: Textile in Architecture: From the Middle Ages to Modernism

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Books

Didem Ekici, Patricia Blessing, and Basile Baudez, eds.

Textile in Architecture: From the Middle Ages to Modernism

London: Routledge, 2023, 240 pp., 89 b/w illus. \$170 (cloth), 9781032250441; \$48.95 (paper), ISBN 9781032250427

Textile in Architecture: From the Middle Ages to Modernism provides an incisive and wide-ranging exploration of the relationship between the textile medium and architecture. As Didem Ekici, Patricia Blessing, and Basile Baudez write in their editors' introduction, the book is intended to "generate dialogue across diverse periods and geographies" (4). The eleven essays indeed illuminate unexpected continuities in the ways textiles have enhanced and unsettled architectural spaces, and they open exciting possibilities for how insights from one context might contribute to a better understanding of architecture and textiles in other settings.

The book is organized into three sections: "Ritual Spaces" addresses the use of textiles in the spatial configuration of "socio-political, religious, and civic rituals" (4–5); "Public and Private Interiors" highlights textiles as agents of and inspiration for aesthetic, cultural, and material change; and "Materiality and Material Translations," "considers textile as metaphor and model in the materiality of the built environment" (5). Broadly, the

sections move from textiles in public and communal spaces to those used in private domestic spaces, hotels, and commercial establishments, concluding with essays that consider the material, poetic, and aesthetic "reverberations" between textiles and architecture (127). The absence of color illustrations limits the reader's ability to identify details in the book's images, but the authors' vivid writing does much to bring out these subtleties. Throughout, the essays challenge the idea of textiles as inert or supplemental, showing instead how cloth has worked in conjunction with architecture. Beyond the topic groupings of each section, the various essays share thematic concerns, including questions of temporality, liminality, and ambivalence, and a rethinking of "fine" and "mechanical" arts.

Temporality emerges as a productive theme for understanding the rhythms of the historical past. Inherent to the relationship between relatively delicate textiles and solid architecture is the difference in their duration, and many of the authors evoke textiles that no longer exist within architectural spaces. To recover the meaning and uses of a lost grand tent (*qubba*) erected in twelfth-century Almohad Marrakech, Abbey Stockstill successfully draws together textual histories, philological clues from medieval Arabic- and Syriac-language sources, a singular extant thirteenth-century textile, illustrated manuscripts from Christian Spain, and extant architectural structures. The absence of actual textiles that inspired the floors, façades, and walls of the eighth-century sites of Khirbat al-Mafjar, Mshatta, and Qusayr 'Amra ultimately enhances Theodore Van Loan's argument for the "dynamic and interactive role" of the textile representations that appeared in mosaics, paintings, and

stone (124). Olga Bush builds on her previous work on the poetry, architecture, and representations of textiles at the Alhambra to argue that the site does not just evoke long-lost textiles in its patterns but also embodies Victoria Mitchell's concept of "textility," which, as elaborated by Tim Ingold, emphasizes the perpetual state of tactile making. In this illuminating essay, Bush shifts the focus beyond a static, final "architectonic" product to render the Alhambra as a "textilic" site and a dynamic, "living environment" that exists as a "gathering of forces and matter" (141). Vital qualities of movement remain in the site or can be imagined, including flapping tent panels, the movement of water through fountains, and the passage of filtered light through pierced screens.

The essays also identify an active, mediating role for textiles within novel forms of architecture. Abigail McGowan recovers visual and textual evidence for how curtains, fans (called "punkahs" by the British), and woven grass screens brought privacy and coolness to the newly fashioned bungalows and multiunit residences of late colonial British Indian households. McGowan notes the paucity of sources describing these textiles, observing that "their ubiquity in certain households, in some ways, rendered them invisible" (94). She also brings visibility to the numerous servants who labored to open curtains, lift heavy punkahs, and constantly wet down the fragrant grass screens (95).

While textiles brought comfort to new homes, Emily M. Orr argues that in 1930s London textiles drove aesthetic change in older spaces. In Orr's account of early twentieth-century British design, textiles emerge as the pioneering medium for the modernist aesthetic because "abstract curtains, tapestries, upholstery,

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rugs, and fabrics by the yard” could serve as “present-day inserts” into Georgian townhomes and other architectural sites (101). If textiles thrust British aesthetics into modernity, Ashley Dimmig demonstrates how the evocative memory of textile tents in Ottoman architecture provided continuity with the past. In her layered essay, she identifies an “aesthetic dialogue between fabric furnishings, tents, and imperial architecture” (201). Dimmig draws upon trompe l’oeil ceiling paintings of canopies, tent panels that contain imagery of illusionistic curtains, and imperial architecture in the Ottoman baroque style, all of which led to an “ambiguation of fabric and architecture” (196).

Many of the authors also connect the temporality of fabrics in architecture to what Stockstill calls their “liminality” (17). Clare Frances Kemmerer crafts an original approach to late medieval Lenten veils in German-speaking regions by emphasizing how the diaphanous white embroidered cloths never entirely blocked the view of the altar during Lent but rather existed as “permeable, temporary supplements” that guided supplicants toward careful looking and reflection on the “luminous” altar (27, 37). Anne E. Guernsey Allen engages with more contemporary Samoan textile practices to analyze how presentation cloths, known as *‘ie toga* (literally “fine mats,” historically made from plaited pandanus fibers), traverse distance or open space (*vā*). Her essay features photographs of ceremonial activities, including funerals and honorific presentations, in which individuals walk holding the vast *‘ie toga* cloths, a reminder that textiles not only stand at the boundaries of distinctive spaces but also have the capability of physically connecting those spaces and binding communities together. In an essay focusing on a recently discovered crypt of the first three generations of the Crimean Khanate (ca. 1466–1550), Nicole Kançal-Ferrari proposes that the crypt and the well-preserved textiles held within it bridged the secular and the sacred. Looking to the resonances between the mausoleum’s exterior, with its “textile-like” decorations, and the interior crypt’s “soft architecture” of textiles (shrouds, clothes, and coffin covers) that formed part of a shared Turco-Islamic funerary culture, she suggests that the decorative program references the ruler’s afterlife, “effectively ‘resurrecting’ him

through the symbols, motifs, and patterns employed on the edifice and the textiles” (173).

Mei Mei Rado’s contribution engages with the spatial, temporal, and sensory role of interior draperies in eighteenth-century France, when curtains began to fill the rooms of wealthy households. In this interdisciplinary essay, Rado draws together a wide range of sources, including guidebooks for decorators, sentimental literature, and prints, and shows that draperies brought a sense of indeterminacy to the French interior, particularly to the space of the boudoir. Textiles served as threshold and enclosure, and because they did not “block comprehensively,” they emerged as an “essential prop for voyeurism or eavesdropping” (74). References to textiles and sound recur as a theme across the essays, where Van Loan describes the voice of the ruler behind the curtain; McGowan, the din of the outdoors; and Rado, the murmurings of an amorous couple.

The issue of the relative status of architecture and textiles is first raised in the book’s introduction, where the editors examine the emergence of European aesthetic hierarchies from the eighteenth century onward, noting that “textiles’ association with women’s work . . . and their lower status in relation to the fine arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture banished them to the margins of art history” (4). They go on to discuss the centrality of textiles and carpets within histories of art from outside Europe and the recent interest in textiles as both inspiration for architectural structures and the subject of art historical and theoretical analysis.

In this latter regard, Andrew James Hamilton’s essay, titled “The Textile Foundations of Ancient Andean Architecture,” is a prime example. Hamilton departs from Gottfried Semper’s claim that architecture moved beyond its textile origins, arguing that the intricate and sophisticated structures of Andean weaving served as a “means of problem-solving” and a “powerful technology that could be lobbied to build edifices that have stood for 5,000 years” (158). Upending traditional approaches that cast architecture as structural and textiles as ornamental, Hamilton points to the site of Caral, settled around 3000 BCE, where builders constructed

monumental pyramids by “amassing fieldstones inside thick net bags, which archaeologists call *shicras*.” The result was architecture “comprised of textiles,” where the textiles were “structural rather than decorative” (157).

Tim Ingold traced the shift in the role of the textile and the “textility of making” to the European Renaissance, when the tactile experience of making gave way to “architectonic” rendering (see Bush’s essay, 139–40). In the centuries since, what Victoria Mitchell posited as the architectural line’s origins in linear thread have been left out of architectural history. The essays in *Textile in Architecture* lay the groundwork for a restoration of what Mitchell called this “absent textile trajectory” (149). While acknowledging past approaches, the authors advance innovative perspectives that show textiles and architecture working in concert.

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Alice Isabella Sullivan and Kyle G. Sweeney, eds.

Lateness and Modernity in Medieval Architecture

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In a time when the more inclusive label “early modern” has largely come to substitute for the more stylistically determined and Eurocentric “Renaissance,” *Lateness and Modernity in Medieval Architecture* scrutinizes the new, fine line between late medieval and early modern architecture. Complicating matters is the fact that the key twelfth-century interlocutors Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis and Gervase of Canterbury described early instances of Gothic architecture in the kingdoms of France and England as “modern.”¹ Editors Alice Isabella Sullivan and Kyle G. Sweeney emphasize this point in their introduction, and Flaminia Bardati demonstrates through a case study later on that the meaning of the word “modern” has shifted gradually in tandem with changing tastes (171–73). As the volume makes clear, it has, at times, been synonymous with “new,” “contemporary,” or “avant-garde,” and in some cases it seems to have meant something closer to “fresh,” or even “good.”