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Title

Book Review: Peggy Deamer's "The Architect as Worker"

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9xw7702k>

Journal

Room One Thousand, 4(4)

ISSN

2328-4161

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Publication Date

2016

Copyright Information

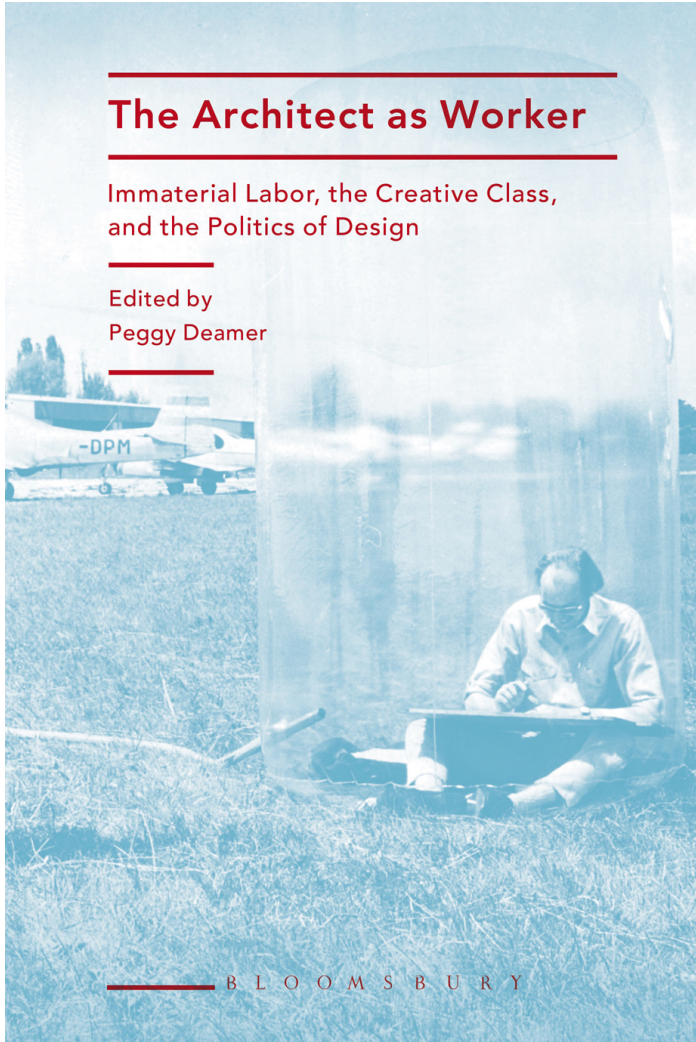
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The Architect as Worker

Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class,
and the Politics of Design

Edited by
Peggy Deamer



B L O O M S B U R Y

The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, The Creative Class, and The Politics of Design

Peggy Geamer, Ed., (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015)

Sharóne L. Tomer

The recent ‘Great’ recession was disastrous for practicing architects. National unemployment rates for recent graduates reached 13.9%, the highest of any academic major.¹ Rumors circulated that the local unemployment rate in the San Francisco Bay Area was closer to 50%, an assumedly inflated figure but one that seemed believable by anyone in or with close ties to the profession. Although the so-called end of the recession² has brought the return of jobs for architects, the angst of mass unemployment lives on, as a specter in the conscience and consciousness of architects, architectural scholars and students.

It is in this context that the collection *The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design*, edited by Peggy Geamer, is particularly timely. The book is a dialogue between how architects conceptualize their endeavors and how architectural ‘labor’ gets institutionally and discursively framed. It poignantly speaks to our contemporary moment with the argument, running throughout the collection, that architectural labor is undervalued, both by architects themselves and society as a whole. Through an assemblage of case studies, narratives and polemical arguments, the essays in the collection provide overlapping historical and theoretical explanations of this

1 Annalyn Censky, “Unemployment Soars for Architects,” *CNNMoney*, accessed October 28, 2015, http://money.cnn.com/2012/01/04/news/economy/unemployment_college_major/index.htm.

2 As has been well documented, the 2008 ‘Great Recession’ came to a close after eighteen months, when measured by indicators such as “gross domestic product, income, employment, industrial production and wholesale-retail sales”; see Catherine Rampell, “The Recession Has (Officially) Ended,” *Economix Blog*, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/the-recession-has-officially-ended/>. Yet, in addition to the fact that low unemployment figures reflect a large number of workers that have stopped looking for employment, those that are employed have seen wages remain stagnant, and conditions such as a general reduction in capital and infrastructure investments indicate long term negative effects of the recession; see “Recession’s Lasting Effects,” *Economix Blog*, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/23/recessions-lasting-effects/>.

condition. While architects and architecture students have for decades expressed concern for the exploitative and underappreciated conditions under which they work, this collection represents an innovative and refreshing approach to unpacking and reshaping how architectural work is defined and regulated.

A key argument running through many of the essays is that architectural labor needs to be re-conceptualized as 'work.' Deamer herself perhaps most directly states this, in her succinctly titled essay, "Work." She begins by drawing attention to the commonly circulated notions undercutting the recognition of architecture as work. This includes the myth that architecture is "not a career," but a "calling," which will ring familiar to anyone that has gone through architecture school. Deamer argues that such frameworks fabricate a false binary between the 'art' that architects do and the work done by others – such as by those in the building trades and other professions. She expresses concern that refusing to recognize architecture as work "keeps architecture from not only achieving ... financial and monetary rewards, but also social relevance and personal satisfaction." Architects who separate themselves from broader categories of workers "don't relate," as Deamer states, to minimum wage discussions, labor strikes, or the entire problematic practice of "producing designs that are built by indentured labor in Asia and the Middle East."³ Denying that architecture is work limits an architect's individual professional experience and her connection to broader, societal struggles around the conditions of labor.

The latter point is one of the dominant contemporary issues that foregrounds the book. Multiple authors in the collection express and unpack concern for construction work. Many of these are couched in reference to the now-infamous quip by Zaha Hadid that "I have nothing

3 Peggy Deamer, "Work," in *The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design*, ed. Peggy Deamer (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 62.

4 This exchange has been circulated widely. See in particular Paul Goldberger, "Zaha Hadid Is Still Wrong About Construction Worker Conditions," *Vanity Fair*, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/architecture/2014/08/zaha-hadid-worker-conditions-lawsuit>; James Riach, "Zaha Hadid Defends Qatar World Cup Role Following Migrant Worker Deaths," *The Guardian*, February 25, 2014, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/25/zaha-hadid-qatar-world-cup-migrant-worker-deaths>; "Zaha Hadid on Worker Deaths in Qatar: 'It's Not My Duty As an Architect,'" *ArchDaily*, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.archdaily.com/480990/zaha-hadid-on-worker-deaths-in-qatar-it-s-not-my-duty-as-an-architect/>.

to do with the workers”⁴ on the construction sites of her designs. Hadid’s position, regarding migrant labor deaths in nations that lack labor protections, serves in the collection as a signifier: a call for the architectural profession to reconceptualize its relations to other types of labor and to develop an ethics of architectural practice, particularly at the global level.

The concern for the labor involved in building architecture sits amidst a tension in the collection, between two overlapping but distinct projects of the authors: tackling the labor conditions faced directly by architects, and addressing larger struggles around labor and ‘late-capitalism’ (otherwise known as neoliberalism). The former is framed in regards to how the profession internally constructs labor relations, and how society at large values, compensates and regulates architecture as a profession and service. The latter concern is a broader one, which recognizes architecture as a particular assemblage of contradictory impulses reflective of the ‘creative economy,’ which in itself gets unpacked. The significance of this tension, which the essays together illustrate, is the interconnectivity of issues internal and external to the architectural profession. The essays in the collection question and critique how architectural service is valued and monetarily measured, how the conditions under which architects work is regulated (or rather is not yet regulated), and how status and hierarchy amongst architects is produced and affects the profession. The essays also look outside the profession, locating these questions in history and other professional sectors, illustrating the pervasive challenge to adequately acknowledge creative work.

In order to address the problem of under-valuing architectural ‘services,’⁵ multiple essays argue for restructuring and reconceptualizing architectural fees. The issue of monetary measurement raises questions about whether architects produce services, products, or innovations – and which definition of architecture is most valued by society-at-large. The concern for society’s lack of understanding and respect for the work involved in producing architecture is not a new subject. Architects for decades – and likely much longer – have bemoaned how society in the abstract glorifies

5 The upcoming issue IV of *Dialectic*, the Journal of the University of Utah School of Architecture, will be devoted to the theme of ‘Architecture at Service’. See <http://dialectic.cap.utah.edu>.

architects (think of the number of characters in film and television that are idealized architects), yet in actuality is so unwillingly to pay for architectural services. What this collection adds to the discussion are innovative ways of understanding the methods and effects of under-appreciation. For example, Paolo Tombesi's essay uses quantitative methods to measure and visually represent the effects of demands of 'more for less' on architects. Other essays supplement the under-appreciation narrative with the insight that it gets reproduced internally within the profession. Such reproduction operates through labor relations between employees and employers, and in intertwining ways through the cult of 'starchitecture' and other methods of constructing hierarchies amongst architects.

To address the long hours and low pay experienced by architects, numerous authors - Deamer, Thomas Fisher, Michael Sorkin - either call for unionization or explore whether unions are appropriate to architecture. The desire to regulate architect's labor conditions is not new; what this collection offers, innovatively, is multifaceted analysis of the conditions of architectural labor. For example, authors in the collection such as Deamer and Manuel Shvartzberg point to the ways in which contemporary methods of architectural design 'discipline' architectural labor. Both argue that technologically driven tools such as parametric design and BIM contribute to systems in which 'talent' and 'creativity' cultivate status within the profession. Again, attention to status is not new: almost two decades ago Garry Stevens published his seminal text *The Favored Circle*⁶, which argued that success in architecture is a product of the social connections developed early in architectural careers. However, while Stevens identified the role of social relations amongst students, architects and clients as a method of cultivating status, the recognition of technology's role in constructing metrics for 'talent' is new and relevant to contemporary modes of architectural design.

These new technologies also relate to and represent architectural manifestations of the contemporary, neoliberal moment. In the collection, concerns for the broader implications of late capitalism fall generally into two categories: how ethics and globalization come together at the

⁶ Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 1998).

site of architectural practice, and how architectural practice is impacted by the creative economy. The essay by members of the coalition *Who Builds Your Architecture (WBYA?)*⁷ most directly addresses the ethical dimension of global architectural practices. In their essay and through *WBYA?*, Mabel O. Wilson, Jordan Carver and Kadambari Baxi bring to light often unseen connections between labor violations and the global ambitions of states, institutions and architects. They point out the human costs of the connected globalization of capital, culture and labor – in which architecture’s participation is central. This essay is not an isolated recognition of this condition; it sits amongst a network of activist organizations. These include the Architecture Lobby, with which Deamer has been centrally involved and which focuses on the value of architectural labor, operating in architecture schools and in public engagement at events like the recent Architecture Biennale in Chicago. *WBYA?* runs workshops and produces installations, such as at the Second Design Biennale in Istanbul. These, together with the work of organizations such as the Gulf Labor Artist Coalition, illuminate the contradictions that underpin the global ambitions of cultural institutions and mega-events, particularly when they manifest in building projects in nations without labor protections. These issues have increasingly come to light, as institutions such as the Guggenheim and Louvre construct global outposts in location such as Abu Dhabi, using migrant labor that is reportedly subject to atrocious human rights violations.

The collection is arguably most innovative in framing of architecture as subject to the problematic demands of the creative economy, tracing how architecture as a form of labor is conceptualized and disciplined. Some essays do this through historical analysis, others by turning attention to governmentality’s expression within the architectural profession. As an example of the former, Richard Biernacki, a scholar of comparative labor histories, provides a historical analysis of how ‘creative’ work gets regulated. He illustrates that the ‘piecemeal’ system forced upon eighteenth century fiction writers in Germany shares connections with struggles to conceptualize how to compensate the creative labor in which architects engage. In regards to the latter, a number of other authors note that the conditions disciplining contemporary architectural labor are directly related to neoliberal forms of governmentality. Manuel Shvartzberg elaborates that there is an intention by capitalists and political leaders,

⁷ See their website, <http://whobuilds.org>.

most notably beginning with Reagan and Thatcher, “for the market to become the form of society.” Shvartzberg insightfully links neoliberal subject production to the privileging of ‘creativity’ in architecture – and, I would argue, to numerous other fields in our current economy:

This kind of creativity [of a neoliberal, post-Fordist work environment] rewards competition-induced nervous breakdowns and narcissistic pathologies. In most architecture offices, creativity is defined by the necessary over-production of senseless images and models for the feeding of the offices’ media spectacle machines.⁸ (190)

Although he does not explicitly discuss the studio (other essays do, however), one could easily add that a similar ethos also rules architecture schools.

Biernacki and Shvartzberg’s attention to the creative economy is one that runs throughout the book. The complex and often contradictory relationship between creativity and professional architectural practice is not necessarily a new topic: Magali Sarfatti Larson framed architectural practice as the contradiction between the autonomy of an architect’s creative impulses – which are internally validated by other architects – and the need to produce ‘built exemplars,’ which requires dependence on clients and other building professionals.⁹ Dana Cuff, in her study of architectural practice, similarly notes the disjoint between the creativity fostered and prioritized in architectural education, particularly in the design studio, and the realities that impede creative expression in professional practice.¹⁰ The address of creativity in this collection moves the discussion forward by addressing the contemporary ‘creative economy.’ As noted multiple times through the book, the creative economy is a manifestation of late capitalism, and its liminal condition as part of the ‘knowledge economy’ makes it particularly difficult to both measure the value of creative work and contest the resultant ‘cult of creativity.’ Yet,

8 Manuel Shvartzberg, “Foucault’s ‘Environmental’ Power: Architecture and Neoliberal Subjectivization,” in *The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design*, ed. Peggy Deamer (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 190.

9 Magali Sarfatti Larson, *Behind the Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

10 Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

it is insightfully noted in the collection that interlocking valorizations of creativity and the entrepreneurial self are also historic phenomena. This is seen in Andreas Rumpfhuber's fascinating analysis of Hans Hollein's 1969 performative representations of architectural labor and identity, which idealizes the architectural 'self' as both creative and enterprising.

One of the key features of the book, which enables the authors to link the travails of architecture to labor conditions, is the grounding in Marxist frameworks. Joan Ockman sets the tone for this in her Foreword to the collection, in which she immediately launches into Marxist questions of architecture as labor, through which traditional distinctions between [physical] labor and knowledge-based work are collapsed. As Ockman argues, and is picked up throughout the collection, such confluences are common in our current regime of 'cognitive capitalism' and contribute towards the lack of recognition of architecture as 'work.'¹¹ Yet, critiques of exploitation are not uniform across the book. Thomas Fisher, for instance states "we escape the trap of low-paid labor to become higher-paid talent not by complaining about our plight, or claiming that we deserve it, or even by collaborating to join or form a union...In the new economy, talent arises out of meaningful innovation."¹²

Fisher's outright valorization of talent may be an outlier in the collection. Yet, while the argument for recognizing architectural labor is central to the collection, what makes the book multi-dimensional is that a number of essays simply leave aside questions of exploitation, and focus on bringing attention to often unseen moments or practices in the architectural profession. These include Katie Lloyd Thomas and Tilo Amhoff's essay on the not-insignificant work undertaken in writing specifications, or Neil Leach's use of accreditation to call for new educational models. Such essays broaden the discussion of what is involved in architectural 'work' and serve as calls for reconceptualizing the scope and content of architecture. These essays, alongside those that seek to overtly address inequities in architectural and broader labor relations, make this book a provocative meditation on the state of the architectural profession. It is an important read, for architectural students, practitioners and scholars.

11 Joan Ockman, "Foreword," in *The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design*, ed. Peggy Deamer (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), xxi.

12 Thomas Fisher, "Labor and Talent in Architecture," in *The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design*, ed. Peggy Deamer (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 226.