



**SITE MATTERS: STRATEGIES
FOR UNCERTAINTY THROUGH
PLANNING AND DESIGN**

Andrea Kahn and Carol J. Burns, eds.
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BOOK REVIEW: TRUTH, CHANGE, KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

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1. The claim that "... design discourse has suffered from contention born of hardening the line between theorizing and practicing" is followed with the argument that 'separation of theory and practice may also be accompanied by classism, even if perhaps unconscious" and backed by Marx's "Theses of Feuerbach" (Kahn and Burns, 2021, 2). Marx is also cited directly to provide a goal for "concrete theory" which must 'arrive at the reproduction of the concrete by way of thought', cited from Marx's *Grundrisse* (Kahn and Burns, 2021, 3). Finally, the idea that theory and design are one and the same is made inseparable from politics. "We agree with Antonio Gramsci," the editors say, 'that the philosophy of each person "is contained in its entirety in [her] political action", a quote from his *Prison Notebooks* (Kahn and Burns, 2021, 3).

2. "Criteria for selecting and commissioning authors for this volume were various," is the sole explanation offered, followed by considerations regarding the first edition, without mention of how articles were collected then, either (Kahn, 2021a, x).

In his 2016 Hayek Lecture at Duke University, the psychologist Jonathan Haidt described a schism in contemporary American universities, torn between two discrepant *teloi*. While some scholars and some institutions strive for truth – he argued – others strive for change (Haidt, 2016). As part of this schism, the reader *Site Matters'* position is manifest in its subtitle. Rather than *epistēmē*, understood as certain, testable knowledge of reality, the collection offers 'strategies for uncertainty' with two radical goals in mind. On the one hand, it claims to challenge the distinction between the theory and practice of planning and design, and on the other it intends to reproduce reality by way of thought, which is made inseparable from political action (1).

I read the second edition of the book, published by Routledge this year. The first dates back to 2005, and was updated by replacing some articles with

new ones, while appending others. The subtitle also changed. In the first print it referred to "design concepts, histories, strategies," not yet to uncertainty. This version collects seventeen articles, plus a preface and a few "afterwords" in the form of very short texts by another nine contributors. No explanation is offered as to how the articles were collected, or what specific criteria were used to select them for print (2).

Interchangeably, three categories (concepts, historiography, and critical theory), three "vantage points" (sites as areas of alleged control, assumed influence, and projected effect), and three "clusters" (groundwork, site as state of change, and site stories) are announced as guidelines for the book. None of them is really obvious in the reader's structure, and yet the book remains coherent overall: one can figure out what it is about. Most articles share a common concern with perceived or desired changes in our planet's climate,

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3. Refers to Burns (1991).

4. My emphasis. Interestingly, further on one of the editors sentences: "Context is what the site is not." (Kahn, 2021b, 199)

5. It is interesting to note that the first edition of the book is referred to as multidisciplinary. (Kahn, 2021a, ix)

the natural environment, and human society. Most articles suggest that the way we understand the acts of building and inhabiting the earth's surface are inseparable from those changes, and recognize that relations between ourselves, the objects we produce, and the world we live in, are incredibly complex.

Despite the editors' claims to the contrary, research on these matters is certainly not original, nor has been lacking in recent scholarship. Late 19th and early 20th century theories of art and architecture have pondered extensively on the fundamental human tendencies to assume ourselves as integral to or separate from nature. More recent investigations have studied these two tendencies at work, and explained how the configuration of some of the objects we produce allows them to perform with a higher degree of complexity (e.g. by responding to a larger number or variables) than those configured otherwise. Architectures of different times and places have been explored and evaluated as strategies of proliferation, heteronomy, openness, poly-technicity and dislocation; establishing themselves in relation to their context as systems, fields, ecologies, folds, and research programs, rather than as fixed, univocal, or autonomous objects. By constantly alluding to ambiguity, indeterminacy, multivalence, and transformation, and by swaying between rational knowledge and perceptual experience in the face of complexity, it is clear that these articles operate within well-known architectural traditions.

Site Matters' ability to contribute to those unsung traditions, though, is hampered by the continuous use of diversionary language. Expressly, it is not in the editors' interest to "attach fixed meanings to words" (Kahn and Burns, 2021, 10). Therefore, while it seems rather clear what the book is about, how its objective is developed is not. The word *site*, for example – the single most important term in the book, one would think – remains nebulous throughout the book. At one point, the editors tell us that "in common parlance, (site) refers to the ground chosen for something and to the location of some set of activities or practices," but they also tell us that "place, property, ground, setting, context, situation, landscape: the idea of site

might embrace each of these. Though often used interchangeably, none of them are exactly equivalent" (Kahn and Burns, 2021, 2, 5) (3).

It does not seem relevant that the origin of the word (the Latin *situs*) is much more indicative of fixity (to leave alone, settle, be inactive) than of the fluidity and the multivalence authors and editors insistently attribute it. The apparently more accurate term *context*, on the other hand, understood as the many interwoven strains (*con*, within + *texere*, to weave) that constitute a particular reality, is only studied in depth in one of the articles, and momentarily considered in the introduction, where we are told that the term *site's* "abundant associative meanings (...) remain tightly *interwoven*" (Komez Daglioglu, 2021; Kahn and Burns, 2021, 5) (4).

Unlike *site*, other terms are used with more consistency, and in abundance. Far from the uncertainty we've been promised, many articles take it for certain that we are all living in the *Anthropocene*: an epoch (an instrument to measure and appraise time) in which the nature and performance of all the objects and beings that exist in this planet can only be understood in relation to human actions, especially in their radically negative effects. Conditions in this epoch are such – we are told – that nothing can or should be grasped with any degree of epistemic stability or certainty. "There is no solution to the climate emergency," the architect Jeremy Till warns us, "it is not a problem to be solved but a predicament to make sense of, and that starts with meaningful engagement with *site* as the locus for the ravages the future world might inflict on us" (Till, 2021, 275). Thus, reality is often described as something *thick* or *wicked*, which can only be addressed or engaged (rather than analyzed, in order to be known) trans-disciplinarily, meaning dispersedly (5).

Against this dispersion, for ages human beings have benefitted from demarcating fields of study and from organizing their ideas into professions, trades, arts, crafts or disciplines. Artistic and spiritual disciplines have been developed as instruments for understanding, meaning non-conceptual, direct awareness, or

immediate experience of reality (Huxley, 1956). It is through these disciplines that we can empathetically approach broad or complex matters – such as those “ecologies stretching from the microbe to the planetary” which Neil Brenner (2021) describes in his afterword. Their focus on understanding explains why oftentimes artistic and spiritual disciplines deliberately avoid conceptualization, rationality, and other forms of mediation, and instead favor holistic thinking, moral judgment, interpretation, reliance on perception and feeling, or faith. “Site is the mysterious magical seed for my art,” claims Janeth Echelman (2021) in her afterword.

On the contrary, abstract approaches dissect broad or complex matters and analyze them in order to cater to human knowledge, understood as our ability to fit new experiences and thoughts within the existing system of our previous experiences and thoughts (Huxley, 1956). Scientific and technical disciplines are basically instruments for knowledge.

This distinction is tacitly developed by Robert A. Beauregard (2021), whose article *From Place to Site* stands out in its effort to define what the term site actually means. For him the difference between a place and a site is that, while the first is heterogeneous and therefore approachable via empathy and understanding, the second has been abstracted into homogeneity. Richard Nixon’s *Operation Breakthrough* housing program, for example, shows how a place turns into a site, via radical simplification and systematization; while Juscelino Kubitschek’s and Lucio Costa’s Brasilia goes a step further, and shows how a place (the natural and cultural context of the Brazilian Cerrado) can turn into a site (tabula rasa) and then into a place again, as the nation’s new capital, with all its concomitant meanings (6).

Claiming the Site, by Harvey M. Jacobs (2021), and *Neighborhoods Apart*, by Paul M. Hess (2021) develop similar evidence-based studies on the nature, history, and possibilities of notions of property over the territory, and of the different architectures derived from those notions. Reading both articles one learns about the legal figures that have been used to project ownership on, above and below the land; and discovers

that hidden in plain sight are forms of the American suburb that hardly resemble the commonplace image of Levittown.

From Gerrymandering to Co-Mandering, by Peter Marcuse (2021) deserves special mention, as it seems to sum up most of the book’s ambitions in notably unambiguous terms: key concepts are clearly defined, explained and exemplified, a concrete condition is evaluated quantitatively and qualitatively, a hypothesis is advanced to counter specific aspects of that condition, and an expected outcome is proposed. The article argues for a desired change in human society, explains the specific ways in which that change is related to how we understand and act upon the earth’s surface, and acknowledges the complexity of that relation. But rather than assuming that complexity as a “predicament to be made sense of... via meaningful engagement,” (Till, 2021, 275) Marcuse claims that “the tools with which it could be undertaken are known, and there are well-established professions that have extensive experience with them” (Marcuse, 2021, 256).

In his view, the disciplines of architecture, structural engineering, economy, and the different natural and social sciences could bring “together the multiple goals and potentials (of the desired change) in various combinations through the well-developed processes of planning, already existing at multiple scales...” (Marcuse, 2021, 265). In other words, rather than strategies for uncertainty, Marcuse suggests that the disciplines that utilize planning and design as their methods can offer us the exact opposite: *certainty*. Co-mandering is the transformation of a known situation into something different, which can also be known. Change relies on the lore of several disciplines, which is not only recognized and valued, but also made operative by addition or interaction (multi- or inter-disciplinarily), rather than holistically (trans-disciplinarily) (Choi and Pak, 2006).

The fact that other articles collected in the reader approach their topics without Marcuse’s accuracy and rigor, and instead develop them on the basis of moral judgment, interpretation, reliance on perception and feeling, or faith;

6. Unfortunately misspelled throughout the whole article, the president Juscelino Kubitschek is referred to as Juscelio, while Costa is repeatedly called Costas. Image captions in page 194 are inverted, and mention of John Ruskin in the first paragraph of page 41 might mislead to presume that he was American.

suggests that this second edition of *Site Matters* remains an honest yet unfulfilled effort to accomplish a difficult balance: between abstract and empathic approaches to its subject matter, or – returning to Jonathan Haidt’s diagnosis of American academia – between the quest for truth and activism for change.

Favoring a potential quest for truth are the book’s foundations, firmly grounded on efficient hierarchies and powerful institutions, as one can infer from the resumes of all contributors. Despite the editors’ efforts to ‘position writers who hew close to long-established standards for academic paper writing alongside scholars who adopt more activist (less neutral) tones’ in order to acknowledge “broadening views regarding what counts as scholarly writing;” (Kahn, 2021a, xi) without exception these remain the voices of authority. Authors and editors are all appointed, award winning, celebrated, published, funded, and distinguished professors at elite universities, firm principals, museum curators and reputed international experts; most of whom express themselves in the conventional essay form, back their claims with bona fide sources, and use highly specialized forms of the English language.

True agency for change, on the other hand, would suggest the need for something radically different, perhaps more akin to art or spirituality; something ineffable, which does not come from authority but from the “standpoint of those excluded from ruling relations of power;” (Kahn and Burns, 2021, 6) something originated elsewhere, poles apart from a book published in Oxford and New York by a powerful global corporation established in the Victorian era.

Whether *Site Matters* continues evolving towards science or towards superstition, or whether it achieves the complicated syncretism it appears to aim for, genuinely discovering new and better ways to simultaneously know and understand ourselves and the world we live in via planning and design, only time (or perhaps a third edition) will tell.

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