Beatriz Colomina
X-RAY Architecture

Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019, 200 pages, 277 illustrations,
ISBN 978-3-03778-443-3

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Few books on architectural history have the quality of being ahead of their times. They are, at best, explanatory or urgent. The publication of Professor Beatriz Colomina's latest book *X-Ray Architecture* has been foretokening in this respect. It appeared just a few months prior to the burst of a global pandemic that, during the course of 2020, has changed the lives of many, reshaped cities and states, altering the ways we live, work and socialize. The relevance of a book that discusses the linkages between modern pathologies and the built environment in such a context makes it a must-read for anyone interested in making sense of our present condition.

First, a word about the exceptional layout and graphic qualities of the book. It is a great pleasure to be able to drift through the pages of such a beautifully designed volume. The author herself, who has a reputation as a sophisticated reader and scholar of images, speaks of the publisher Lars Müller as the "last book maker," and it is a well-deserved praise for this remarkable design, at the same time clear and elegant, carefully illustrated, and bounded with a smart double-layered cover that echoes the title.

Divided into five chapters that retrace the historical premises of the intimate bond between architecture and illness (or rather, medicine and the advancements of medical technologies), the book offers, as announced by the title, an alternate history of modern architecture as it has been shaped by this bond.

As the author declares from the introduction, the topic was inspired by Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, published at the end of the 1970s, a few years before Colomina's arrival as a visiting fellow at the New York Institute for Humanities. Her affinity with Sontag is evident not only in the text, but also in the beautiful photograph of the writer that opens the book (courtesy of Getty Images).

As Colomina implies from the very beginning, the book challenges the usual understanding of modern architecture in advancing the hypothesis that "modern architecture was shaped by the dominant medical obsession of its time – tuberculosis – and the technology that became associated with x-rays."[1] As the text advances, it tries to demonstrate that the motor for modern architecture was not the heroic image of a functional, and yes – beautiful – machine, but rather the intimate, fragile and romantic relationship between the medical image (saving the fragile body) and a new kind architecture.

The first chapter, "Health and Architecture: From Vitruvius to Sick Building Syndrome," revisits the longer history of the relationship between medicine as a science of the body (and its implicit systematic attempts at understanding the disease) and architecture, understood both as representation and design. Just as the dissected body would become the instrument for teaching medicine, architecture itself would be taught and analyzed through fragments, in a methodological operation similar to anatomical dissection. The long-lasting metaphor (since the Renaissance) that associates architecture and the body is read here by Colomina less in

1 Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 10.


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terms of eloquence and character (as in classical theory) but rather in terms of mechanisms and equipment fit to care and enhance a strong body, itself seen as a vessel for a sound spirit. This metaphor is protracted through modern architects' concern for social order and the belief that a new, healthy environment would cure not only disease (perpetuated by insalubrious living conditions) but also society at large.

This conviction is explored through some episodes from the lives of the heroes of modern architecture, such as Le Corbusier or Adolf Loos (a duo that Colomina has already chosen as protagonists for her earlier and critically acclaimed *Privacy and Publicity*).[2]

An important place throughout the book is given to the modern science of psychoanalysis and to the need for architecture to shelter not just a sick body but also a "fragile psyche, traumatized by exposure to war, loss of stable borders, and the new rhythms and speeds of modern industrialized technology."[3]

A special place is given to the peculiar figure of Friedrich Kiesler and his concept of psycho-function, that stressed the psychological effects of building materials, and the materialization of Kiesler's theories about the body and the need for sensual qualities of its environment in the experiment of the *Endless House*.[4]

Chapter 2, "Tuberculosis" is dedicated to an extensive discussion about modern sanatoriums and their role as "laboratories for incubating new attitudes toward form, spatial organization [...] and construction methods."[5] The construction of sanatoriums destined to heal what was considered the disease of the century, tuberculosis, has been directly influenced by medical science (before the discovery of antibiotics), who strongly believed that curative spaces had to be flooded with sunlight, had to be clean, white and transparent, so as to fight microbes. "Microbes were both the literal and metaphorical basis of a new architecture and urbanism."[6] So the architecture of these spaces had to represent these new principles of hygiene, and the sanatorium was, as advanced by Colomina, a sort of testing ground for such principles. As she suggests, it is not just the number of sanatoriums built in the first half of the 20th century, but mostly the new design principles that they tested that challenged modern architecture: "in fact, the sanatorium modernized architecture"[7] – and, of course, architects themselves. Not just spaces for cure, but also spaces for prevention, two emblematic figures organize modern architecture: "the fragile tuberculosis patient seeking a cure and the athletic figure seeking prevention from the diseases of modernity."[8] Modern architecture becomes also a machine for health.

In chapter 3, "X-Ray Intimacy," Colomina explores the technologies of image production, paralleling the development of the X-ray with modern architecture's obsession with transparency. The formal similarity of modern buildings and medical images that allow total exposure is a recurrent topic especially in the work of avant-garde architects (the most notable example being Mies van der Rohe). Just like the invisible interior of the body became readable on the X-rays, the metaphor of visibility and transparency and a new paradigm of the inside/outside relationship had soon become a condition of modern architecture – all that had been private would now be "subjected to the public scrutiny."[9]

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2 Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass-Media* (Cambridge, Massachussets: The MIT Press, 1994).

3 Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture*, 37.

4 Experimental models encapsulating Kiesler's theories about interconnectivity and the understanding of the house as an extension of the body. The model and drawings of the *Endless House* are since 2017 in the permanent collection of the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Vienna (mumok).

5 Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture*, 78.

6 Ibid., 73.

7 Ibid., 74.

8 Ibid., 108.

9 Ibid., 147.

The subject of exposure and transparency is continued in chapter 4, "Blurred Visions." The ambiguity of transparency as defined by the (already canonical) work of Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky as literal and phenomenal[10] is discussed in the context of contemporary projects such as those of SANAA (seen as both in the lineage of Miesian radical transparency and as blurred by plays of reflexive and opaque layers and materialities).

The final chapter, "Hyperpublic: An Afterword," is a conclusion that reiterates the relationship between modern (contemporary) medical technologies and the production of architecture. But medical diagnosis instruments have also rapidly evolved into technologies of control. New instruments for looking, new forms of surveillance have reshaped entirely our modes of vision, as they have redefined the paradigms of transparency and of exposure. Our bodies have become carriers of information and providers of data – and so have become their shelters. As the diseases of the twenty-first century mutate and reshape, the question that lingers is "what is the architecture of these afflictions?" And Colomina concludes in returning at one of the subjects announced from the beginning: the sick building syndrome, a condition of the contemporary buildings that have turned on their occupants, "rendering them unhealthy."[11]

One of the points that have been criticized in Colomina's approach is that she is focusing on the same heroic figures that have shaped the canonical history of (Western) modern architecture (Le Corbusier, Loos, Eames, Mies van der Rohe, etc.), thus reinforcing the canon instead of challenging it. Yet the author insists in looking at these figures from a different perspective, a method that she defines as the "intra-canonical outlook," that is "attentive to the unexpected within the canon itself. And in this case, the unexpected is the disease."[12] Yet, there is a double layer of lesser-known figures that she refers to permanently, "these weirdos that you have never heard about, these 'side-men' and 'side-women' that have never seen the light in architectural history."[13] And so the book would be, as she suggests, both canon and anti-canon.

Another observation that can be made refers to a certain distance, in the final chapters of the book, from the topic of illness that is central in the first three chapters. I would argue that the last chapter at least reconnects with other topics that Colomina has developed during the last decade, especially the question of an intensified control that dominates our daily lives. And it can be argued that the illnesses of today have also expanded into a different realm, where environment, inside/outside, control of the body have migrated towards networks of information and manipulation of data. The boundaries between technologies of control and the technologies of medicine have become blurred.

In 2014, Beatriz Colomina was asked to suggest a topic for an exhibition project that reunited 22 art galleries in Vienna (curated by_vienna) under a common theme. She then proposed the *Century of the Bed*, and the introduction she wrote for the catalogue indicated once again some important shifts in the ways of socializing and in the work culture around the world. One that has become the only reality lived globally in 2020.

> "What is the architecture of this prison in which night and day, work and play, are no longer differentiated and we are permanently under surveillance, even as we sleep in the control booth? New media turns us all into inmates, constantly under surveillance, even as we celebrate endless connectivity. We have all become 'contemporary recluse(s)' as Hefner put it half a century ago."[14]

10 Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," *Perspecta* 8 (1963).

11 Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture*, 183.

12 Ibid., 9.

13 Evangelos Kotsioris, "'The Queering of Architecture History Has Yet to Happen': The Intra-Canonical Outlook of Beatriz Colomina," *Architectural Histories* 8, 1 (2020): 22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/ah.547 , published December 10, 2020, accessed December 11, 2020.

14 Beatriz Colomina, "The Century of the Bed," in *The Century of the Bed*, ed. curated by_vienna (Vienna: Verlag fur Moderne Kunst, 2014), 22.

In 2020, just after the outbreak of the pandemic, Colomina started to curate, together with Iván López Munuera, Nick Axel and Nikolaus Hirsch, a series of critical articles about architecture and the pandemic, hosted by e-flux architecture.[15]

I will cite just a short fragment from Colomina's own *Diary of a Disease*[16]

> "April 12, 2020
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> Beds in the street, transporting the sick, have become a common and frightening sight in the streets of New York and in the media, with medical professionals completely wrapped in protective gear, like terrestrial astronauts, complete with oxygen tanks. They are like portable rooms, some encased in a plastic bubble, reminiscent of 1960s sci-fi architecture. These portable beds act as the link between the domestic bed and the hospital bed—a vast ecology of beds, then, a whole landscape.
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> April 17, 2020
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> Now we are told to assume that we are all sick, to act as if we were sick, contagious, self-confined to our apartments, to our beds. The real epicenter of the pandemic is not New York but the bed."[17]

Not just prisoners of the media but also globally quarantined under suspicion and danger of infection, making us all, again, in a Koolhaasian turn of the phrase: involuntary prisoners of architecture.

15 https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/sick-architecture, accessed December 11, 2020.

16 https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/sick-architecture/364166/diary-of-a-disease/, accessed December 11, 2020.

17 Ibid.