

THE GEOGRAPHY OF ARCHITECTURE

Rudolf van Rensburg takes us on a world tour with the Phaidon Atlas of Contemporary

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Current debate, both local and international, positions architecture uncomfortably within peculiar assumed conflicts regarding the opposition between globalisation, the internationalisation of artistic creations and local identity and ethnic insularity. Early modernity's universalism which proposed protection from general tensions and the redefinition of context in a precise frozen identity are no longer credible. In reality the local and global are mixed, they blend and influence one another. The logic is no longer oppositional but inclusive. The publication of a contemporary atlas of architecture has topical significance within this intellectual context.

The Atlas contextualises architecture geographically in an objectively generic manner, allowing the reader to interpret universal and particular relevance independently. Maps and charts organise demographic data clearly and accessibly regarding issues such as population and urbanisation, providing perspective to what is essentially a collection of distinct pieces of architecture.

Comprehensive indexes of architects and buildings allow for directed navigation through the comprehensive coverage of 1,100 buildings in 75 countries divided into six geographic regions. Limited to work completed since 1998, it includes architecturally unfamiliar locations such as Bolivia, Ethiopia and Urubo.

Selected by a panel of 150 jurors including critics, curators, journalists, academics and practising architects, featured works include the design production of talented young architects seldom featured in mainstream English language journals. For this the publishers deserve credit with reservation, with the reliability and transparency of the selection process based on the objectivity of the jurors. The informed reader or architectural scholar will undoubtedly question the inclusion of certain architects to the exclusion of others.

The section on South Africa illustrates this concern where the selected works, though meritorious, are not necessarily a true reflection of the best contextually representative work in this country. As the title suggests, this is an ambitious publication. The scale and scope of the topic limits individual entries to half a page, the exception being major works of influential architects like Piano and F.O.A., to whom two pages are dedicated. This limitation is partly compensated for in the physical size of the book (450mm x 350mm) and the consistent and disciplined layout. The visual quality and simple typography are refreshingly free from currently fashionable design pollution. It leaves the reader with a sense of what the buildings are about but remains an overview of current world architecture. The serious scholar whose pursuit is an in-depth understanding of architectural production will find this a limited source.

The temporal classification of the Atlas presumes a panoramic view of architecture at a particular moment (1998-2003). It suggests an episodic approach and the promise of future instalments. If true, the Atlas will, over time, become an invaluable quick reference diary of universal and particular architectural concerns. 📍

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