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KIM FÖRSTER, *BUILDING INSTITUTION: THE INSTITUTE FOR ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN STUDIES, NEW YORK 1967–1985*, TRANSCRIPT VERLAG, BIELEFELD, 2024.

The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (1967–1985) holds a quasi-mythical place in architectural culture, in that it endures as something both incredible and seemingly intangible. The IAUS' reputation has been passed on by its Fellows, who came to occupy influential positions at prestigious East Coast academic institutions in the United States and beyond. Its legacy lives on through its plentiful publications, which redefined the methodologies and the canon of architectural history and theory. But until recently, for four decades since it closed its doors, no comprehensive retrospective study of its extraordinary history had been published. This is not to say that it was absent from academic writing, and indeed some of its output received much scholarly attention, none standing out as much as the 26 issues of the IAUS journal *Oppositions* with its iconic Super Warm Red Pantone cover and Helvetica title.¹ Just a few years after the journal's last issue came out, Joan Ockman—former associate director of the journal and fellow at the Institute²—authored a piece with the self-explanatory title *Resurrecting the Avant-Garde: The History and Program of Oppositions*—in *Architectureproduction* (1988). A decade later, highlights from several issues were reproduced in *Oppositions Reader: Selected Essays 1973-1984*, edited by K. Michael Hays—one of the editors of the journal's heir, *Assemblage* (1986–2000), published

¹ K. Förster, *Building Institution*, p. 393.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 406, 482.

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by MIT Press as were many of *Oppositions*' issues. Only in 2010 were oral histories of some of Institute's former members collected and printed, 27 of them to be exact, in IAUS, *the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies: An Insider's Memoir*, edited by Suzanne Frank.

These fragments and recollections built up the Institute's aura not just through what they said, but also by repeatedly stressing the difficulty of truly explaining what it was all about. The legendary penthouse at 8 West 40th Street in New York City, home of the IAUS for most of its existence, is described as space of design, education, lectures, exhibitions, and publications, a stage for rising scholars and architects, a meeting place for curious people from a breath of academic backgrounds, a think tank, a tastemaker, a social hotspot, a site for experimentation, a stimulating, transformative, prolific environment, unconventional and ever-shifting as its aims mutated and the people who formed it changed. It relied on fickle funding and creative management to stave off its debts, including unpaid utility bills and salaries. However, the perpetual looming threat of bankruptcy too was part of its identity, which further romanticized the IAUS as an alternative space, surviving and thriving in the breaches of the establishment. To pin down such an immense, intricate, multi-faceted, and chaotic history appears to be, like the Institute itself, "an almost impossible undertaking,"³ as Kim Förster said at the end of a book where he does just that.

Building Institution: The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, New York 1967–1985 embodies the enormity of the task it is meant to accomplish, in its sheer numbers: 584 pages with 940 footnotes and 137 figures summarize 99 novel oral histories and a list of countless bibliographical references at the end of 15 years of research that extended from ETH Zürich to the Canadian Center for Architecture and across many other libraries, museums, universities, and archives. The book is efficiently organized into 4 main chapters, each one telling the story of the IAUS through different thematic but chronologically concurrent dimensions of its primary activities: design, education, events, and publications.

The first chapter, "Project Office," documents the early design-related works realized at the Institute, such as the "Streets Project" (1970–1972), the construction of the Marcus Garvey Park Village housing project (1972–1976), and the Roosevelt Island Housing Competition (1975). The second, "Architecture School," shows the Institute's ambiguous

³ *Ibid.*, p. 528.

position as a self-professed alternative learning place which, because not accredited, was reliant on universities, colleges, and other institutions for the success of its Internship Program, High School Program, Undergraduate Program, the Evening Program, and of the short-lived IAUS Advanced Design Workshop in Architecture and Urban Form. The third chapter, “Cultural Space,” lays out the tremendous quantity and diversity of topics addressed in the “Exhibition Program” and especially in the “Architecture” lecture series, such that, at one point, the IAUS hosted well-attended events every night of the week. The fourth, “Publishing Imprint,” exposes the forces and constraints behind the production of the Institute’s notable publications, namely *Oppositions* (1973–1984), the still ongoing contemporary arts journal *October* (1976), the newspaper *Skyline* (1978–1980, 1981–1983), the popular *IAUS Exhibition Catalogs* (1979–1983), and the long-delayed *Opposition Books* (1982–1987).⁴ The “Coda” points at the generational shift that occurred at the IAUS in the ’80s, namely with the Young Architects’ Circle and their revival of socio-political concerns in architecture, through events such as the ReVision event series (1981) and the symposium on “Architecture and Ideology: Notes on Material Criticism” (1982). It also includes an overview of the Institute’s rapid decline and demise after Eisenmann’s sudden resignation as director in 1982, a comparatively brief account given that the whereabouts of the Institute’s documentation for this period remain a mystery.

A “study of the Institute qua *institution*,”⁵ Förster says of the aims and approach of the book. As its title suggests, among the architectural and urban *building* realized at the IAUS—in a figurative sense, and in one exceptional literal case too—there was also its all-important *building itself* as an institution where its intended activities could take place. However, this study by no means amounts to a mere compilation of archival documentation on the administration and operation of the Institute. *Building Institution* reveals to what extent its mode of functioning enabled, framed, and conditioned its activities, which exerted such tremendous impact in architectural history, theory, and practice to this day. The Institute’s defining lofty ideal of thinking architecture was shaped by individual interests, commitments, and the networks of its members—with Eisenman at the center—and successively reshaped by its varying means of financial survival, through grants, subscriptions, sponsorships,

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 526–527.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

philanthropy, and a great deal of free labor. The intellectual discussions it opened and the polemics it triggered were simultaneously spaces of promotion and career advancement for its Fellows and funders.

Förster parses through reams of previously unpublished material, patiently contextualizing and critically interpreting it, and knitting it into well-articulated narratives. This is nothing short of an extraordinary feat, and readers who have ever conducted similar investigations will likely see through the polished text and discern the tremendous editing process behind it. He recurrently depicts the institute as postmodern, in the sense that the penthouse and its publications gathered an abundance of distinct and even competing modes of thinking—from Frampton’s combination of phenomenology and Marxism to Agrest and Gandelsonas’ structuralism and semiotics; or Eisenman’s claims of architectural autonomy and Tafuri’s direct rebuttals of it. Förster’s close analysis of the Institute’s everyday operations also brings forth specific dynamics of the Institute, from its programmatic responses to external circumstances—such as the global recession of the mid-1970s, and the Nixon-era conservative turn of the U.S. with its consequential policy changes to welfare and economic regulation—to its stances on issues then emerging in the architectural profession—like the economization of culture, glaring gender and racial inequality, and the power dynamics behind the IAUS’ own gatekeeping and canon-making.

The result is not the kind of book one reads avidly from start to finish, and this is only in small part due to its big size. *Building Institution* is an abridged archive, to be *consulted* rather than *read*. Other than the exclusive group of scholars highly committed to or formally part of the IAUS’ history, or researchers working on the institutionality of similar organizations, the potential broader readership of the book will most likely go through its contents in a targeted way. Doing so, they will find an abundance of detailed information, rendered accessible and insightful, and carefully framed within the institution’s bigger picture. This selective mode of reading attenuates the book’s occasional repetitiveness, which seems to be the side-effect of an understandably challenging editorial process where blocks of texts were moved around and hammered in until the book took its final form. One of the most explicit examples of these disorienting recurrences is Philip Johnson. After his role at the Institute is rightly and extensively examined,⁶ Johnson is then reintroduced

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 242–246.

in the following pages, over and over again, always as if for the first time. However, in a book that one consults rather than reads, this repetition allows the target-oriented reader to land on any subchapter and find the necessary framework to grasp it.

One interest that may drive readers of *Khōrein* to the index pages of *Building Institution* is the Institute's influential relation with philosophy. Many Fellows shared the *modus operandi* of assimilating philosophical insights into their work, albeit drawing from radically different sources. The impact of publications like *Oppositions*, where many of the Fellows' most groundbreaking works appeared, not only infused these specific philosophical ideas and references into architectural culture, into the bibliographies of architectural research, and into the syllabi of emerging history and theory courses, but also normalized the architectural-philosophical exchange as such. While the Fellows' thinking and ideas *per se* and their links to philosophy were not the primary scope of the book, Förster nevertheless acknowledges them. Adorno, Arendt, Barthes, Baudrillard, Benjamin, Bloch, Cacciari, Chomsky, Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, and Jameson all play a role in the narrative, while Förster himself explicitly cites some of them as guides for his analysis, with Bourdieu as his main reference.

The most significant contribution of the book to philosophy, however, is to place it among the rest of the intellectual and cultural production of the Institute. These philosophical sources now *instituted* in architectural discourse were not comprehensive reading lists of the academic *episteme* of their time. They too were dependent on personal interests and networks, on what was or was not possible within the Institute's challenging financial conditions, and sometimes, on its potential when instrumentalized for intellectual self-legitimation and promotion. In other words, the architectural-philosophical exchange was also a production of the Institute *qua* institution. In this regard, readers ought to take several cues from *Building Institution*: to ask what other philosophers and ideas were left out of these circumstantial picks, what the biases behind these choices may denote, and what missed opportunities should be revisited; to reconsider the ways in which these architectural-philosophical conversations are conducted, as today, they generally replicate the models that came out of the particular conditions of the Institute between the 1960s and 1980s; to reassess conceptions of institutions not solely in terms of their inevitable prejudices but also of the historical singularities they may enable; and perhaps most importantly, to take these

personally-driven and circumstantially-conditioned readings of philosophy in architecture not just a crystalized history of ideas of characters—that so often turns “history and theory of architecture” into “history of theory of architecture”—but as an encouragement to embrace *our own* personal drives and conditioning circumstances in the pursuit of daring new modes of philosophically-inspired thinking in architecture, perhaps even aspiring to yield the impact that the Institute’s publications, still so carefully studied today, exerted back then.

Whichever interests may motivate readers to consult this book, they will find a massive work on the IAUS unlikely to be rivaled any time soon. *Building Institution* is an essential source for studies on the Institute’s history and its legacy, as well as a prime case-study on the formation of institutions in general. Förster’s abridged archive of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies fills a wide four-decade-old gap in university library shelves.