[Introduction]
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Technology and Place

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The articles collected in this theme issue of JAE share a key assumption even if their authors view the world from very different perspectives. The shared assumption is that the emergence of technologies and places are related phenomenon. Understanding the nature of the relationship between these concepts is our common interest. Among the eight contributions to this investigation you will find considerable diversity in research methodologies, the nature of the evidence collected, as well as the hypotheses ventured. Each contribution, however, seeks to better understand how the technologies that architects employ influence the places we construct, and conversely, how the places in which we find ourselves influence how we build.

JAE has twice previously investigated the relationship between technology and the discipline of architecture. In the September 1997 issue (Vol. 51/1), editor Barbara Allen and five contributors examined technology as something other than the instrumental means by which the visual intentions of architects are realized. Those authors, it seems, agreed that the technological systems employed to create buildings and cities are highly complex social and political constructions that are too frequently misunderstood as the products of a single architect’s intention. In this sociological or anthropological view, they argued, choosing a technology is choosing a way of life. Editor G. Goetz Schierle collected a second group of articles in November 1997 (Vol. 51/2) that investigated the pedagogy of architectural technology.

As JAE has previously investigated technology, it has also previously investigated the concept of place. Between 1988 and 1997 the journal published twelve articles that explicitly investigated such topics as gendered places, frontier places, urban places, the relation between thought and place, as well as the relationship between geography and ideology. Other journals have, of course, examined and promoted the concept of place almost to exhaustion. The term has, for some, become associated with a highly romantic view of architectural production. This association may have contributed to the fact that while JAE has published several investigations of particular places in the past three years, it has not published any research on the topic of place making in that same period. The editors of this issue find value in returning to this topic, but with a decidedly unromantic pair of lenses. By linking our investigation of place making to the conditions of technological change, it is our intention to develop critical rather than romantic associations.

Where Kenneth Frampton’s investigation is primarily historical, Steven Moore’s investigation depends upon methods borrowed from cultural geography, sociology, and philosophy. Paradoxically, where one of us continues to distance himself from his own particular slant on the regionalist endeavor, the other seeks to renovate the idea of critical regionalism by repositioning it as a nonmodern response to contemporary conditions. Where one of us stresses the way in which architecture is inseparable from the emerging crisis of liberal democracy, the other turns toward the ethical and pragmatic challenge posed by ecology, which in the last analysis, is our common ground. That common ground has gained considerable depth through our reading of the essays contributed by the eight remaining authors published in this issue.

Simon Guy and Graham Farmer employ the research methods of social constructivism to investigate the complex and conflicted values of ecological architecture. By conducting an exhaustive search of the literature, and laboriously categorizing the explicit proposals and implicit assumptions of these authors, Guy and Farmer conclude that sustainability is far from a single coherent ideology. Rather, it is constituted of six competing “logics” that can be alternatively characterized as high-tech or low-tech, romantic or rational, New Age or old guard, Right or Left and several shades in between. The very diversity of these competing logics gives rise to unexpected opportunities for cooperation in the social construction of technologies and places.

North Americans attracted to the concept of sustainability, or ecological architecture, are typically surprised at the seemingly sudden appearance of so many technologically sophisticated “green” projects in Northern Europe and Britain, exemplified in the recent works realized by such architects as Thomas Herzog, Norman Foster, Renzo Piano, and Webler + Geisler. Because so many North Americans associate environmentalism with romantic, low-tech, back-to-the-land practices, they have inadvertently suppressed the rich history of the rational-ecological landscape in Europe. David Haney’s contribution will help all readers to better understand how Germans in general, and the Weimar-era landscape architect Leberecht Migge in particular, constructed a historical continuum of ecological architecture that is very distant from the romantic, reactionary “blood and soil” rhetoric of National Socialism. Haney’s historical account of Weimar Germany only lends credibility to Guy and Farmer’s sociological account of ideological diversity within the green movement.

In his analysis of the social construction of Cullinan Hall—Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s 1954–1958 addition to the Houston Museum of Art—Stephen Fox reconstructs a complex and sometimes contradictory “modernist narrative of emancipation.” Just as Leberecht Migge’s gardens were narratives of post–World War I
emancipation in Germany, Cullinan Hall might be understood as a post–World War II narrative of emancipation in Houston. Fox argues that the technological choices made by Mies—the exposed steel frame, air conditioning, and large expanses of space and glass—galvanized the cultural identity and emergence to power of the small, progressive cultural elite who sponsored Mies’s project. Subsequent reproductions of this symbolic vocabulary by other architects transformed the cultural landscape of Houston in the 1950s and 1960s. Fox has, then, documented the technological transcription of power relations in a very particular place.

Where Fox has analyzed a successful reception of the modernist technological narrative, Robert Weddle has analyzed a case in which that narrative was soundly rejected. The Cité de la Muette, constructed just outside Paris in 1930–1934, was intended by its sponsors to be emblematic of the national economic reform project. The design, by Eugene Beaudouin and Marcel Lods, employed highly rationalized “dry” concrete techniques that derived from the collaborators’ absolute faith in technologically determined social change. After the crash of Wall Street, however, technological modernization based upon the American model of production was successfully challenged by those French conservatives who understood the purpose of social housing as, not emancipation, but the promotion of traditional bourgeois domestic values. Before the Cité de la Muette was finally demolished it was relegated to the housing of soldiers and prisoners because it was understood as “the inappropriate application, on French soil, of ‘American’ rationalist approaches.” Weddle argues convincingly that the failure in this case was not the technologies themselves, but the inability of the project’s sponsors to articulate a particularly French narrative that linked technological innovation to a better life.

It is no accident that the final article in this theme issue also examines the development of twentieth-century French concrete technology. Karla Britton, in a very inventive interpretation of primary sources, argues that the architect-builder Auguste Perret consciously suppressed the plastic qualities of this new material in order to take his place in a particularly French classical lineage. Where the architects of Cité de la Muette saw in concrete technology the opportunity to rationalize production and domestic life, Perret saw in the same material an opportunity to reaffirm a sacrosanct classical building tradition that he found embodied in the “soil of France.” For Perret, technological innovation was not a means of leaving place-bound conditions, but a means of reinforcing the myth of cultural origin as this had been repeatedly embodied across time in local tectonic practices.

Just as Robert Weddle and Karla Britton investigate by implication the contested significance of new technology in se, Peter Goin and Elizabeth Raymond have contributed an Op Arch column to this issue that examines the contested significance of place. Through text and photography, Goin and Raymond examine the various descriptions by those competing interests who seek to redescribe and inscribe Eagle Mountain, California as a “postmining landscape.” In the authors’ account, environmentalists see wilderness, technocrats see a hole waiting to be filled with garbage, and former residents of the town see unrequited ghosts. In each case, the past and future places envisioned by the contestants at Eagle Mountain is dependent upon the deployment or eradication of technology.

The mutual argument made in these essays is that technologies cannot be simply understood as the synergistic application of universal instruments, just as places cannot be adequately interpreted as purely local phenomena. Rather, technologies and places manifest themselves and are experienced through a complex matrix of interaction. Choosing to build a wall of 2-by-4s sheathed in oriented strand board (OSB), or of metal curtain wall, or of rammed earth has powerful implications, not only for the quality of the space enclosed, but also for the places of origin of these materials and methods and the people who may inhabit them. However, the selection of one material or another is far from being the “value free” choice that it at times may appear to be. Instead the choice amounts to a literal framing of work at hand, which must of necessity have wide-ranging cultural, political, ethical, and ecological implications.