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Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2017

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Propriété intellectuelle

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- 1 Of the many historical subjects whose study has been stunted by disciplinary tunnel-vision, architecture surely must rank high. A practice that involves politics, economics, social relations, aesthetics, philosophy, spatial experience, and that is a constant presence in everybody's life, architecture was for decades the hostage of architectural historians and architects who approached it as an aesthetic-technical practice where the initial design conception was the principal object of interest, and the architect (and maybe the patron) was the principal figure of interest. Mercifully, architecture is increasingly liberated from these discourses by scholars who aim to treat it less as a language of form and more for the stories people weave around it. Those who are excited by this liberation will be delighted by Fabrice Moulin's rich and resonant new study, *Embellir, bâtir, demeurer*.
- 2 The book aims to reveal how central *l'imaginaire de l'architecture* was to the thought and literature of the second half of the eighteenth century, and to draw out the significance of this largely unremarked phenomena. Moulin analyzes a range of texts that scholars have only rarely considered all together: novels, poems, letters, and memoirs, alongside architectural criticism, architectural treatises, architectural journalism, and practical manuals of architecture. Few scholars could range across such a range of texts with the expertise and sensitivity required to discern not just what they said, but also

what they left unsaid, what other texts they were in dialogue with, how particular words resonated across other contemporary or historical texts, and so on. Moulin however proves capable of discussing both sets of texts with almost equal ease, and is consequently able to demonstrate how major themes and ideas passed back and forth across a broad cultural landscape. Other readers will likely find, as I did, great pleasure and instruction in following the author as he tracks ideas between a familiar literature (which for me was the theoretical and journalistic literature of architecture) and a less familiar one (the novels and other creative works studied here).

- 3 The book is organized in three sections whose names correspond to the three words of the title. The first section, *Embellir*, describes the emergence of architectural discourse from its old institutional frameworks into a topic of comparatively wide public discussion and debate starting in the 1740s, principally around the question of the *embellissement* of Paris. The first chapter introduces a variety of new figures in this public discussion – *l'élève*, *le connaisseur*, *l'amateur*, *et le promeneur* – and explores how each helped open up a more inclusive understanding of what architecture entailed, what went into its creation and use, and what it represented personally, politically, and economically. The chapter concludes with a wonderful discussion of Rétif de la Bretonne's *Les Nuits de Paris*, with its protagonist Hibou as the *promeneur par excellence*, constituting his subjective city through personal memory and physical marking, using even touch and smell to reveal narratives that lie encoded within the city's visible spaces and forms. The second chapter (« La Ville en Discussion ») concerns the emergence of public opinion and modern perspectives on society, and the role that discourse on the city specifically played in their development. The chapter explores three case studies : the *dégagement* and completion of the Colonnade du Louvre, the construction of the church of Sainte-Genève, and the debates about the construction of a *salle d'opéra*. Through these studies we learn how architectural discourse was normalized as a feature of public culture, and became available for the critical engagements of writers ranging from La Font de Saint-Yenne to Louis-Sébastien Mercier. The third chapter then considers speculative, fictional, and utopian cities. Moulin first considers how the conception of utopian cities reflected the preoccupations of the discourse on *embellissement*, and then turns to non-utopian visions of the future, or *urchronies*, as figured especially in such visions of the future as Mercier's *L'An 2440*, or Charles-Nicolas Cochin's fantasy of the archaeological excavation of eighteenth-century Paris in the year 2355.
- 4 The second section of the book, *Bâtir*, examines the significance of the act of building. Here Moulin synthesizes a rich new reflection that goes far beyond the endlessly warmed-over commentaries on Laugier's hut so dear to architects and architectural historians. For Moulin, building intersects with two major Enlightenment preoccupations : one, the origin of societies and the barrier between nature and culture, and two, the question of the affirmation of the individual as an autonomous being. The fourth chapter deals with the first of these, through a sustained reflection on the implications of Laugier's account of the primitive cabin. This finds its way quickly to landscape architecture theory, and brings together the ideas of garden theorists like Morel and Girardin with literary works like Bernis's *Les Quatre saisons* and Saint-Lambert's *Les Saisons*, exploring in each how questions of the relationship of architecture and landscape point to a larger concern with the equilibrium between man and nature. The place of landscape in the literary depiction of ethical *projets* is then explored via three case studies – the pedagogical and memorial project of Madame

de Genlis's *Adèle et Théodore*, the libertine project of Loaisel de Trégoate's *Dolbreuse*, and the therapeutic project of Louvet de Couvray's *Les Amours du chevalier de Faublas* – as well as with respect to the literary use of architectural features in the landscape, namely, the cabin, the bridge, and the ruin. The fifth chapter then considers *L'individu bâtisseur*, with the subtitle *construire et se construire* : the subject here is the parallel between the act of building and one's self-affirmation as an individual. Moulin explores this theme with reference to three sets of texts that evoke man as builder : practical manuals of architecture for proprietors ; the accounts by Voltaire of his architectural transformations at les Delices and at Ferney ; and the story of Robinson Crusoe. These discussions are situated within a Habermasian reflection on the relation of public and private spheres, and on private property as a basis for the citizen's public concern over the city and its *embellissement*. The last section of the book, *Demeurer*, examines the new prominence of domestic space – interior space in particular – as a constitutive element in the *imaginaire* of a certain kind of eighteenth-century fiction, with three chapters, each focusing on how a different kind of *projet* is inscribed in architectural space. Chapter six focuses on projects of sociability, first considering the *maison de Clarens* from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and then the Château de B from *Adèle et Théodore*. Chapter seven examines spaces that facilitate pleasure and the satisfaction of desire, starting with the *boudoir* and the *petite maison* as instruments of libertine seduction in various novels ; the most famous (for architectural historians, anyway) is Bastide's *Petite Maison*, but Moulin shows similar things occurring in other tales, and makes a convincing suggestion that literary antecedents deserve to figure more prominently in the genealogy of the sensationalist architectural theory introduced by works like Le Camus de Mézières's *Le génie de l'architecture* (1780). The eighth chapter, finally, examines the dark turn of the libertine novel. A first section considers two novels, *Les Sonnettes* by Guiard de Servigné and *Félicia* by Nerciat, in of which a libertine devises a house that facilitates the surveillance of his guests' relations. The second half of the chapter then turns to Sade, and to the Château de Silling from the *Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome*. A detailed analysis concludes that the architectural space of Sade's novel transforms this heritage in response to the transformative new scale of desire at play, as emblemized for Moulin in the superposed spaces of the château's theater and the cave beneath it.

- 5 The structure of this remarkable book is extremely elegant. The three parts in concert provide a breadth of analysis that will not soon be equaled for this subject, yet any one of the three could also be read profitably on its own, whether as a set of reflections on architecture as a discipline (*embellir*), a practice (*bâtir*), and a space (*demeurer*), or with respect to the relation of the individual to society (*embellir*), to the natural and physical world (*bâtir*), and to other individuals (*demeurer*). The texture of the analysis changes accordingly in each section : in the first chapters the traditional literature of architecture predominates, the final chapters are mostly taken up with close readings of novels, while in the middle section the two are most closely balanced. But ultimately the whole proves to be worth even more than the sum of the parts, for the real richness of this study lies in its combination of breadth and depth ; in its union of a courageously inclusive perspective with an analysis that moves constantly but always purposefully between close literary readings and a nuanced history of ideas. Scholars both of literature and architecture will learn from it to see many old things in new ways.

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