

Materiality, Humanity and Otherness: A New Perspective on Architecture? Reviews Summer 2021

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REVIEW

## Reviews Summer 2021

Sofia Nannini, Don Choi, Cosmin Ungureanu, Scott Redford and Miriam Volmert

Nannini, S. A review of Antoine Picon, *The Materiality of Architecture*. Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 2020.

Choi, D. A review of Neil Jackson, *Japan and the West: An Architectural Dialogue*. London: Lund Humphries, 2019.

Ungureanu, C. A review of Natsumi Nonaka, *Renaissance Porticoes and Painted Pergolas: Nature and Culture in Early Modern Italy*. London & New York: Routledge, 2019 (2017).

Redford, S. A review of D. Fairchild Ruggles *Tree of Pearls: The Extraordinary Architectural Patronage of the 13th-Century Egyptian Slave-Queen Shajar al-Durr*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Volmert, M. A review of Susan Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2020.

### Materiality, Humanity and Otherness: A New Perspective on Architecture?

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Antoine Picon, *The Materiality of Architecture*. Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 2020, 192 pages, ISBN 9781517909482

Architecture is a human artifact created from natural or man-made building materials. Its tangible nature cannot be ignored; the building derives from a distinct environmental and social context and comes to embody countless cultural meanings. Building materials and their varied historical connotations have been the subject of numerous material and construction histories that focus on either the development of specific materials in a given temporal epoch or building knowledge shared within a particular territory. Recent studies on building materials include Adrian Forty's *Concrete and Culture*, Roberto Gargiani's *Concrete: from Archeology to Invention 1700–1769*, and Valérie Nègre's *L'Art et la matière* (Forty 2012; Gargiani 2013; Nègre 2016). Antoine Picon's new book, *The Materiality of Architecture* (Figure 1), expands our perspective on building materials and their use throughout the centuries. The aim of this ambitious study is to offer readers, through the concept of materiality, a new lens through which to examine architectural history and theory. According to Picon, materiality is the way we as humans relate to matter and materials. However, throughout the book this notion becomes broader and broader, requiring several



Figure 1: Cover of *The Materiality of Architecture*. Photo credit: Minnesota University Press.

definitions that overlap and blur its boundaries. The book consists of the English translation of the previously published *La Matérialité de l'architecture* (Picon 2018), as well as an updated introduction and conclusion.

A recurring topic throughout the book is Picon's fascination — one might even say obsession — with the enigmatic opaqueness of matter, which restrains human desire to animate it and to communicate through architecture. He argues that 'architecture is difficult to fathom' mainly because of 'the role that matter plays in its configuration' (2). He underscores the role that materials have in the expressive potential of the discipline and its political aspirations. Picon opens with an introduction that defines the main topics of the text: matter, materials, and, above all else, materiality. Materiality, he explains, is 'the material dimension of a phenomenon, a thing, an object, or a system *in relation* to human thought and practice' (10). Picon's interest is not simply in the materials of architecture, but in the relationship that we, as humans, have with the nonhuman entities that surround us. Materiality also relates to time and space, varying over the centuries and across different societies. Drawing upon François Hartog's definition of 'regimes of historicity' (Hartog 2015), Picon introduces the new concept of 'regimes of materiality': historical epochs that are defined by the approach to materiality within a specific society at a given moment in history. Architecture is the physical proof of these regimes. Presenting 'regimes of materiality' as an alternative lens through which to read architecture, Picon aims to merge traditional approaches to architectural history and theory, which place emphasis on architecture's intellectual dimensions, with a more recent interest in the technical and social dimensions of design, as highlighted by promoters of the actor-network theory (Yaneva 2009; Yaneva 2012). Through the idea of material regimes, it is possible to identify decisive shifts in Western architectural history born from the development and use of materials. Perhaps the most obvious example is found in the modern movement, with the proliferation of reinforced concrete and steel, which gave way to new structural possibilities and the search for higher hygienic standards within architecture. Analogous developments are identified in earlier historical epochs. For example, the establishment of new spatial orders in the Renaissance came to affect both urban environments and construction techniques, resulting in the total refusal of audacious Gothic architecture and instead moving toward an ideal of moderation (82). In the mid-17th century, scientific discoveries merged with technological optimism and structural calculations to produce innovative approaches to the building practice: materials such as reinforced stone, plaster, and mortar were extensively experimented with. Most of all, the rise of cast iron architecture was an absolute novelty that 'marked the true end of the Vitruvian tradition' (88).

Picon opens *The Materiality of Architecture* with a prolonged examination of the linguistic function of architecture. The book's first chapter discusses the link between the production of architecture — or more fundamentally, the ordering of matter — and its expression and ability to communicate. The architect's choice of specific

proportions and building materials, and even more, her understanding of tectonics, comes to constitute the principle expression of the structure. Still, Picon is clear that there exists a fundamental tension between architecture and speech. Language, he argues, is architecture's 'constant temptation': an upper limit never to be attained by the silent otherness of matter, despite the architect's attempts to make the building speak (38). It is the expression of form that gives architects the greatest canvas to experiment. Adopting a historical perspective, the author claims that all forms of architectural expression are tied to a specific moment in time and space, and must be understood through the lens of the history of materiality.

The book tackles a major goal of the architectural discipline: the animation of matter. In Picon's opinion, animating matter through architecture means connecting the realm of opaque objects and building materials to the realm of humans, creating 'an arena in which human actions are privileged and thus acquire great significance' (57). The author expands his definition of materiality and retraces its development throughout history with examples drawn from antiquity to the present. He arrives at two main conclusions: first, that materiality is characterized by contradictions and controversies, although architecture tends to follow the 'dominant approach' of a given society (11), and second, that our relationship to matter is pivotal to understanding our own subjectivity. However, as the definitions of the term multiply throughout the book, especially in the third chapter, the reader is at times disoriented by what seems like an almost boundless concept. Is materiality comparable to a 'field' of potential contrasts and interpretations, or is it a Heideggerian 'mode of being in the world' that regulates the relationship between human and nonhuman spheres? Or is it a 'ballet' simultaneously created by matter and humanity? Furthermore, the wide range of case studies from Western architectural history gives the reader the impression that some examples have been specifically and almost retrospectively selected to match the author's theoretical definition of materiality (see chapters 3 and 4). The inclusion of non-Western architectural cultures would do much to support the author's scope and ability to apply his view to a global perspective.

In the fifth chapter, Picon explores materiality in the contemporary world and the digital era. The author explains that the relatively abrupt emergence of digital media has transformed our notion of materiality. Our senses are changed by technological tools, which influence how we experience the world, and these transformations also impact architecture. In contrast to the heroic vision of twentieth-century modernity, there are new configurations of materiality characterized by the crisis of traditional tectonics, the search for the 'lost unity' (120) between discrete information and continuous matter, and the challenge of environmental sustainability. Reviewing current trends of the digital avant-garde, Picon comments on 'dangerous tendencies' (133) in contemporary (star) architecture — such as the rejection of symbolism or the naive use of ornament. While this critical approach has merit, it could be addressed from different perspectives.

Picon's view could foster an expansion of the notion of materiality to address pressing topics in the architectural discipline and contemporary discourses. How do we understand materiality within the contemporary phenomena of global extractivism and the relentless plundering of natural resources? How can we analyze the clashes between the different regimes of materiality of hegemonic and oppressed societies? Can we extend the concept of materiality to expand our view from a human-centered to a multispecies perspective? (see, for example, the section *Among Diverse Beings* at la Biennale Architettura 2021 – *How Will We Live Together?*) Perhaps in the coming years we will acknowledge that architecture belongs to a realm that is much bigger than our own needs for expression and meaning, one that encompasses current social challenges, global emergencies, and natural crises.

In the conclusion, Picon casts light on the political nature of architecture, which he sees as being strongly linked to the changing regimes of materiality. The author defines the 'true political agency of architecture' (143), which can be perceived through sensations and ornamental systems. The discipline of architecture has the power to give order to matter and, consequently, to generate potential situations for those who inhabit the building. Through case studies, he underscores the relationship between the changes in regimes of materiality and the political sphere. A convincing though briefly discussed example is Albert Speer's use of materials to reach the specific scope of 'dwarfing the human body' and convey the absolute power of a totalitarian regime (155).

Picon's theory of materiality is complex yet intriguing, and so is this book: a not-so-easy yet enlightening and engaging read, which offers a fascinating view on the practice of architecture and its historical developments. With this new English edition, Picon's theory will reach a greater audience, inspiring new interpretations of architectural history and serving as a powerful tool for contemporary architectural theory.

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