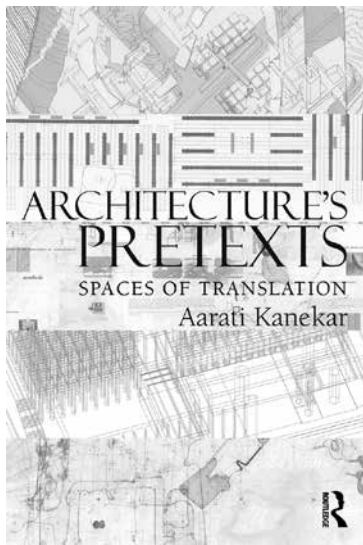


‘...architectural design is not fully dependent on its technological medium.’

## Architecture’s Pretexts: Spaces of Translation



### Architecture’s Pretexts: Spaces of Translation

By Aarati Kanekar  
Routledge, 2015  
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Reviewed by Joseph L. Clarke

Faced with a rapidly expanding array of technical and conceptual methods, contemporary architects might well question whether there are still certain characteristic forms of design cognition that are registered in legible ways. In other words, whether the phrase ‘architectural thinking’ continues to designate anything. Recent years have seen the rise of parametric and performative techniques which purport to apply equally to all scales of design activity and to bypass the problem of architectural meaning in a universe of forces and flows. At the

same time, renewed interest in interdisciplinary and intermedial practices threatens to reframe architecture as a generalised design of environment, relinquishing much of its distinctive disciplinary history and character.

The time is therefore ripe for Aarati Kanekar’s *Architecture’s Pretexts: Space of Translation*, which endeavours to reconcile architecture’s particular identity as a means of formal expression with the drive to engage other discourses. By analysing a number of important recent projects, Kanekar argues that the specificity of architecture is worked out at the discipline’s boundaries, at precisely the moments when extra-architectural artistic ideas become starting points for creative architectural thinking. Such occasions illuminate, for her, what makes a work truly architectural – and what makes architecture meaningful – even as they often underwrite a reflexive questioning of accepted architectural relationships and thereby challenge the discipline to theorise itself anew.

Raising the question of meaning in architecture might seem a throwback to the heyday of postmodern design, a period that can safely be said to be over now that a growing number of historians are turning their attention to it. In fact, Kanekar’s work is largely in sympathy with the late avant-garde attack on architectural postmodernism for relying on superficial semantic codes.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, her book builds on certain parallel developments in architectural epistemology, particularly the

British discourse of scientifically calculated form that yielded conceptual frameworks such as the ‘space syntax’ method elaborated by Bill Hillier at University College London.<sup>2</sup> From the work of Hillier and his contemporaries, Kanekar inherits an understanding of design as a process of encoding a particular kind of logic into a formal structure, a logic whose meanings are not reducible to a fixed vocabulary of architectural symbols.

*Architecture’s Pretexts* is rooted equally in the high modernism of the 1920s, a period when the Soviet Constructivists enthusiastically exchanged ideas across artistic disciplines, and when thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Ernst Cassirer penned seminal critiques of form and meaning. The book’s searching introduction draws on Benjamin’s 1923 essay ‘The Task of the Translator’ to show how architecture’s encounters with other arts can cause meaning to be refracted and compounded in ever more intricate formal structures. Kanekar carefully defines tricky terms such as ‘form’, ‘autonomy’, and ‘medium’, and shows how architecture challenges basic modernist assumptions, inherited from eighteenth-century aesthetics, about the distinction between simultaneous and time-based forms of expression.

After laying out these premises, the book analyses a series of architectural works that progressively depart from formal translation as such to consider broader questions of syntactic and analogical relationships, generative notations, and

intermedial formal syntheses. The ensuing chapters are thus not simply case studies of a pre-established method, but challenge the concept of translation itself to evolve and grow. Almost none of the projects Kanekar discusses is a building with a traditional functional program. Most represent extreme conditions of architecture in which the absence of programmatic concerns allows for heightened attention to issues of form, experience, and meaning.

The first analysis examines the Danteum project designed by Giuseppe Terragni (with Pietro Lingeri) for the 1942 Exposition in Rome as a monument to the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri. Kanekar argues that the structure and imagery of Dante's epic *Divine Comedy* was itself informed by the Byzantine-style church architecture that the poet encountered during his time in Ravenna and Venice, with its implied patterns of ritual and narrative movement. Subsequently, in a second act of translation, Terragni borrowed the poem's most significant numerical structures and geometric references as the basis for a sophisticated and varied staging of the column as space-defining

element and a stand-in for the human body.

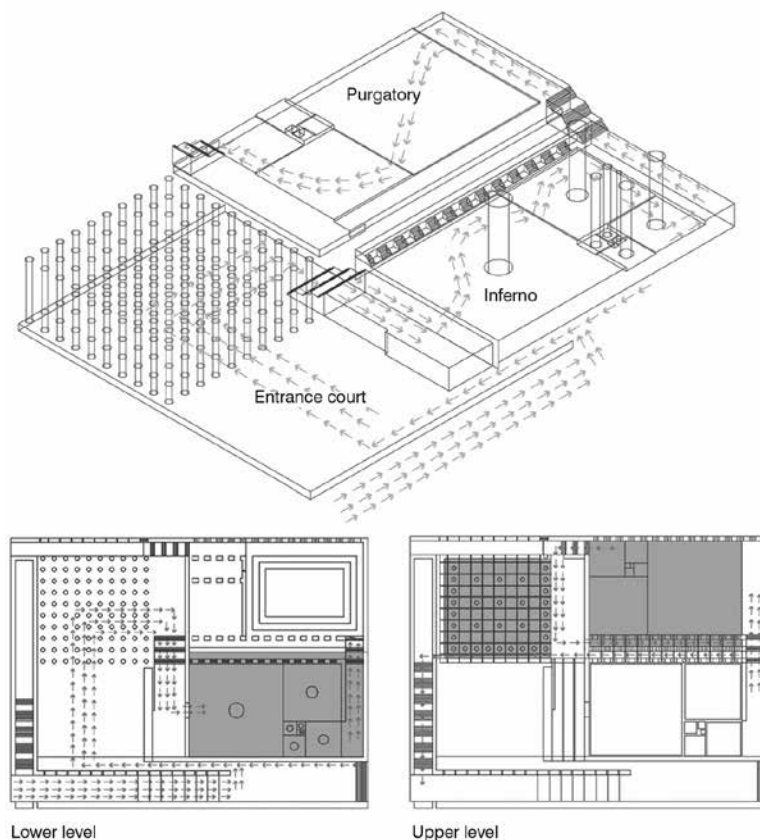
The next chapter examines Peter Eisenman's project 'Moving Arrows, Eros, and Other Arrows', an installation for the 1985 Venice Biennale based on *Romeo and Juliet*, later published as a set of printed transparent sheets by the Architectural Association. Kanekar analyses how the intricate structure of narrative, thematic, and spatial symmetries in Shakespeare's play and the other surviving versions of the story are reflected in Eisenman's creative and rigorous architectural interpretation. His compositions of architectural and topographic elements from Verona, rescaled according to specific structural oppositions, intensify the effects of misinterpretation and error that lie (in his reading) at the story's thematic core. Kanekar underscores in particular how the narrative's framing of civic space as the locus of love and death is channelled by Eisenman into an urban exploration informed by the work of Giambattista Piranesi and Aldo Rossi.

One of Kanekar's most interesting chapters considers the various ways in which territory is 'translated' into formal architectural thought through

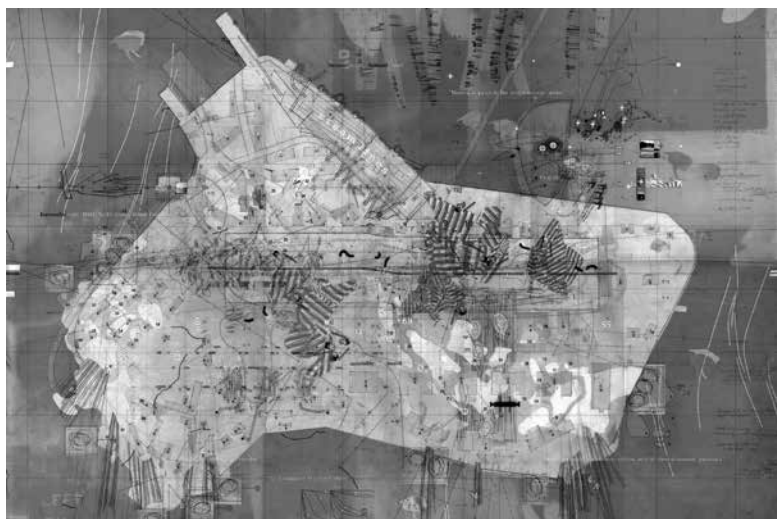
various mapping processes. Instead of focusing on a single work, she puts several distinct but related practices into dialogue. At the heart of the chapter are careful readings of Perry Kulper's richly layered maps, which delineate new relational meanings between a site's history, mythological significance, and migratory populations, and of landscape interventions by Smout Allen such as their Dunstable Downs Kite Farm, in which an array of kinetic vertical markers articulates otherwise invisible natural forces to reveal the site's hidden flux. Kanekar shows how Kulper's works subverts the expectation that maps should be abstractions composed of stable notations, and how Smout Allen's work, conversely, inscribes notations onto the landscape itself. In this case, she argues, architectural representation becomes coextensive with the territory it describes, like the full-scale maps once imagined by Lewis Carroll and Jorge Luis Borges.

Finally, two additional chapters consider how the time-based artistic forms of music and film have catalysed architectural invention. The problem of 'translating' between music and architecture is notoriously elusive, and translation is not really the framework Kanekar uses here (which is ironic, since Benjamin's characterisation of a translation as an 'echo' of an original work lies at the heart of her larger thesis). Instead, she examines how, in Peter Zumthor's Swiss Pavilion for Expo 2000 in Hanover, built form interacts in the visitor's experience with choreographed sonic, luminous, and other components to yield an intricate structure of spatial effects. The book's concluding chapter adopts Sergei Eisenstein's theory of cinematic montage as a critical framework for synthesising a multiplicity of references and allusions in a time-based experience. The Rotterdam Kunsthal project of Rem Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture – presented in the architect's book *S, M, L, XL* as a 'filmic' sequence – is the touchstone for an exploration which also considers Viktor Khlebnikov's Futurist drama *Zangezi* and its 1923 production by Vladimir Tatlin.

Absent from *Architecture's Pretexts* is an analysis of a computation-based project, along with



1 Aarati Kanekar, axonometric and plan drawings of the Danteum showing path of travel through the structure.



2 Perry Kulper, David's Island Competition project, Strategic Plot and Site Drawing, 1996–97. Courtesy Perry Kulper.

any explicit discussion of the impact of digital tools on design formulation. This is a serious omission if, as Mario Carpo has recently suggested, architectural thought follows patterns largely determined by its technological infrastructure. In Carpo's account, the rise of digital tools heralds the end of the expectation that a constructed building should be the faithful materialisation of a design drawing as encoded through a stable set of notational conventions. He advises that this space between design and building is vanishing as digital techniques enable designers to operate without the mediation of drawing, as though shaping the building directly.<sup>3</sup>

Kanekar, however, takes the more idealist position that architectural design is not fully dependent on its technological medium. The process of 'externalization' through which an abstract intention becomes a design involves not just the material substrate of the work's production, she maintains, but more importantly, 'form, rhythms, patterns, lines, shapes, in other words, the conceptual logic, or the manner in which a composition is put together – its constructional logic'.<sup>4</sup> Kanekar thus joins a number of architects and critics who have claimed, for architecture, a certain intrinsic form of thought.<sup>5</sup> This has often been summed up in the idea of *autonomy* – the premise, rooted in eighteenth-century aesthetic thought, that a cultural practice such as architecture has an immanent set of concerns setting it apart from the contingent social

circumstances attending any particular work.

It has seemed difficult at times to apply this principle to a field as closely tied to practical necessity as architecture, and in various attempts to frame the discipline as autonomous, architecture has sometimes come off as closed and inward-looking.<sup>6</sup> The great virtue of *Architecture's Pretexts* is in showing that architecture need not be so hermetic, but is in dialogue with other cultural forms. The book's prose is difficult at times, and rewards careful reading and patient retracing of the analyses while looking at the projects. Such difficulty is, of course, not unbecoming a book whose central argument is that architecture itself is complex and demands to be read closely. For, in Kanekar's telling, it is precisely through such careful reading that architecture is seen to join poetry, painting, and other expressive modes as a means by which sophisticated thoughts can be given form.

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#### Notes

1. K. Michael Hays proposes the term 'late avant-garde' in his *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 11–12. Other important recent accounts of postmodernism include Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism*,

*Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Emmanuel Petit, *Irony, or, The Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

2. For a general overview of British architectural research during this period, see Sean Keller, 'Fenland Tech: Architectural Science in Postwar Cambridge', in: *Grey Room*, 23 (Spring 2006), pp. 41–65.
3. Mario Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 22–3, 35.
4. Aarati Kanekar, *Architecture's Pretexts: Spaces of Translation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), p. 4.
5. For another example, Peter Eisenman defines the architectural 'canon' in terms of a critical approach toward 'the persistencies of architecture: subject/object, figure/ground, solid/void, and part-to-whole relationships'. Peter Eisenman, *Ten Canonical Buildings, 1950–2000* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), p. 16.
6. In Hays's telling, late avant-garde architectural discourse 'self-consciously closes in on its own limits rather than opens outward'. Hays, *Architecture's Desire*, p. 12.

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