BOOK REVIEWS

Mélanie van der Hoorn. ***Indispensable Eyesores: An Anthropology of Undesired Buildings.*** New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. Pp. 272. ISBN 978-1-84545-530-9 (hardback).

Indispensable Eyesores is not an ethnography in the conventional sense, but like many ethnographies, it seeks to make understandable behaviour that initially looks irrational: people's compulsive interest in built structures they say they detest. "How", van der Hoorn asks, "do people affect undesired architecture, and how does undesired architecture affect them?"

Architecture—or "starchitecture"—has risen to eye-catching prominence as the diva of urban politics in recent decades, and anthropologists are gradually beginning to engage with the implications of this. On the other hand, the case for investigating architecture (or more broadly, urban form) from an anthropological perspective is neither new nor in any way surprising. Buildings shape everyday lives, they concretise ideals and ideas, they carry memories and galvanise collective feelings and, as van der Hoorn emphasises, they provoke polemic.

In striking contrast to anthropology, architectural writing has a tendency to concentrate on big names and to fuel elitism. Yet there are signs in the literature of a burgeoning quasi-anthropological interest in everyday and ordinary architecture as well as in the deeply political dimensions of designing and constructing large buildings (see Till 2009). The references in van der Hoorn's book reflect such concerns, but her discussion of the emerging conversation between architects and anthropologists is short, a fair reflection, probably, of the paucity of influential work in this area.

Typically the products of architecture are materially and symbolically persistent, but their power rests on their agency, for example in prompting memory or forgetting. Furthermore, buildings are interesting to anthropologists in the way they combine representational and embodied or functional power. Van der Hoorn wants to draw our attention to how even an ugly or malfunctioning building can become cherished by those who use it or know it, to how buildings that stand empty and unused inspire passions and to how in their materiality they give rise to questions about the meanings of neglect and decay.

A sympathetic reading of the book suggests that creative anthropological analyses of materiality do have a bright future, whether as material culture studies or across the discipline generally. If one reflects on anthropology's engagements with science and technology in recent years—substantially inspired by the path-breaking work of Bruno Latour which van der Hoorn mentions—one appreciates how productive they have been. As material, virtual, technical and cultural phenomena are churned about, creating novel situations and new objects (or assemblages), anthropologists have not only been fascinated, but have produced analyses that begin to encroach on territory formerly monopolised by self-described 'technical' experts. In other words, new combinations of technology and culture give anthropologists fresh opportunities to demonstrate the value of their particular expertise. Perhaps something similar is emerging in relation to architecture.

Spectacular architectural transformations are going on in many of the places where anthropologists typically work, leaving the populations they study struggling to come to terms with and even to survive these changes. In addition, recent history has produced a tragic catalogue of empirical case-studies of violent destruction of edifices and monuments and even 'urbicide'—intentional destruction of an urban environment. Furthermore, as *Indispensable Eyesores* so clearly demonstrates, Europe's own legacy of concretising megalomania and totalitarianism in stone continues to play a significant social role.

Rather than trying to tackle this enormous field as a whole, van der Hoorn's focus is rather specific: the conflicting and always inherently indeterminate meanings embodied by unwanted buildings, meanings that sometimes persist even after their demolition. Her case-studies seem very diverse, but she argues that despite their differences they all demonstrate the power of what she calls architecture's thing-ly agency.

Over eleven chapters and an epilogue, with six examples from central Europe, the book ventures into and out of places with unwanted edifices, making frequent detours into theory. It starts with a slowly progressing theoretical excursus, as one would expect of the outcome of a doctoral thesis, but even the chapters sometimes struggle to convey the visceral excitement to which van der Hoorn so often refers. It is as if she does not trust these amazing stories of architectural weirdness to be strong enough in themselves to convey the message. In the end, the lack of sustained empirical attention is a shortcoming.

We read of the demolition of the Kaiserbau, a completed but never used, high-rise hotel in West Germany's Troisdorf, an event that took only a few seconds yet was watched by over 20,000 eager spectators. The demolition was an intensely sensory and thrilling experience, as van der Hoorn notes. The chapter, however, dwells at considerable length on what it might mean politically and culturally, and on the relevance of Hubert and Mauss's work on sacrifice.

The methodological premise of the work meanwhile is barely touched on—ethnography here seems simply to mean interviews with local people. Where these are complemented by local written sources or art work, the sense of ethnographic depth is considerably enhanced. This is particularly evident in the book's second example: urbicide in Sarajevo. The account of the tragedy of its library and the fate of the headquarters of the one independent newspaper is rich and compelling for being informed by the intense efforts of those affected by these calamities to make sense of them.

The agency of buildings is shown to be a mediated agency: they do not speak, people speak for them. In the chapter on the Kalkar nuclear power-plant for instance, we encounter one of those types of construction that are routinely shrouded in mystery and thus easily give rise to myth-making. In an added twist, the facility was never in use as a power plant—it was later transformed into an amusement park. Myth-making and contrasting historical understanding are also at stake in the case-study of East Berlin's high-rise blocks, made available for new residents and new cultural appropriations after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The architectural legacy of totalitarianism, this time built by the Nazis, is the topic of the chapter on Vienna's surreal reinforced concrete towers, the Flaktürme, giant, ugly inspiration for over sixty years' worth of myths and projects for demolition or alteration. They are clear illustrations of a key argument of the book, namely that architectural eyesores are indispensable. Despite their patent uselessness and ugliness, the Flaktürme seem impossible to eliminate.

The case-studies of the Kulturhaus of Zinnowitz and the giant residential blocks of Prora, also in Germany, are rich with ideas of the material life of political and cultural commitments, yet but fleetingly described. Nevertheless, they indicate that the material legacy of central Europe's political fortunes abounds with unanswered as well as unasked questions.

These are all illuminating case-studies, but the writing technique, hinting at excitement and quickly moving into abstruse theoretical discursions, does not make for a page-turner. Certainly van der Hoorn's exploration of buildings that arouse strong negative passions is a bold effort to beat a novel path both in anthropology and in the study of architecture. Yet it may not set the benchmark for a new kind of anthropological exercise because its eclecticism and its fleeting description frustrate even as they illuminate.

The book does, however, underline the rich potential for anthropological engagements with architecture and urbanism. As the Sarajevo case in particular demonstrates, the logics of stereotyping and clichés fuel fierce debate and conflict even as they help shape the physical environment. Even where spectacular violence or political repression is *not* at issue talk about buildings is never innocent. Certain buildings and built places, the book shows, generate intense controversy and myth-making of a kind that anthropology should not ignore.

REFERENCES

Till, Jeremy (2009). *Architecture Depends.* Boston, Mass: MIT Press.

EEVA BERGLUND
INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER
LONDON
eeva@eeva.co.uk