

The background of the cover is a solid blue color. Overlaid on this are several architectural line drawings in a reddish-brown hue. At the top, there are several classical columns with different capitals (Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian). Below these, there are more columns and a large dome structure on the left side, which appears to be a cross-section or elevation of a building. The overall style is that of a technical or architectural drawing.

Architectural Design and Regulation

Rob Imrie and Emma Street

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Rob Imrie and Emma Street

Department of Geography
King's College London



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Architectural Design and Regulation

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Foreword

Rob Imrie and Emma Street's book brought to mind a suppressed (and now embarrassing) memory. As the design principal of a young and growing firm I reacted instantly, if thoughtlessly, when the principal of a rival firm down the street penned a letter to the editor of the local newspaper wherein he argued that the sole reason for our profession to exist was to serve the 'health, safety and welfare' of fellow citizens. In the name of Art I was outraged! In response to this philistine grovelling I beat my fists on the table loud enough to disturb the work of my colleagues across the old mill space in which we worked. If such utilitarian interests were to limit the spiritual aspirations of society so fundamentally, I raged, we had descended to a sorry state indeed. Twenty-five years later I now understand that it took me much longer than it might have done to bring to consciousness, and thus to purge, the tacit values of my education.

Fortunately for today's young architects, engineers, public policy-makers and others, Imrie and Street provide, in this significant text, not only a useful critique of what they refer to as the 'Palladian model' of architectural production, but also the exhaustive empirical evidence to get beyond it. That evidence comes in the form of interviews with practitioners from many disciplines related to the construction industry, from focus groups, surveys and a remarkably thorough review of the literatures. I use the plural form of 'literature' here because *Architectural Design and Regulation* is a thoroughly interdisciplinary book. First, the authors are geographers writing about architecture and urban design. Second, their bibliography derives as much from the social sciences, philosophy and engineering as from architecture or geography. And third, they challenge, from the outside, the deeply held assumptions of a discipline not their own – thus the need for empirical rigour.

In the 1970s, Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman developed what we now refer to as 'frame analysis'. In coining this term Goffman held that various social groups understand what goes on in the world from inside distinct *frames of interpretation*. Insurance brokers, for example, interpret the concept of risk very differently from high-wire acrobats or

equestrians. The same observation can be made about the manner in which architects and carpenters interpret the act of building. An important, if ironic, dimension of this interpretive dynamic is that it is only those who exist entirely within a single frame – as do most famous architects – who are perceived to have the necessary authority amongst their peers to alter it. These same famous architects, however, lack the capacity to imagine change in the system of which they are an essential part because the achievement of high status *within* the group depends on perpetuating the tacit values and hierarchies of the group. Conversely, *code-switchers* – or those who have the intellectual capacity to inhabit several frames of interpretation simultaneously – generally have little authority in the eyes of professional elites. After all, elites reason, they are neither qualified nor ‘one of us’, so how can they see the world correctly (as we do)?

This is precisely the problem now faced by Imrie and Street. To successfully challenge the ‘Palladian’ frame of architectural production they ask architects to step outside a frame of interpretation that has held itself to be autonomous from, and superior to, the concerns of everyday life – from the common act of building. For many architects this will be very difficult indeed. The good news is, however, that it is architects themselves who have the most to gain in accepting Imrie and Street’s invitation.

To characterise this book as only a ‘critique’ of architecture-as-art is, however, overly limiting. In my own view this critique is much needed, but far more important is that the authors redirect our attention away from the dysfunction of contemporary architectural practice, to under-appreciated intellectual territory that is of value not only to scholars, but to designers too. This is no small achievement. Their investigation, then, is not one that is predetermined to delegitimise art as a cultural practice, but one that reconstructs what I will call the *co-evolution* of three related phenomena: the profession, technology and the ‘organisational governance’ of both.

Imrie and Street provide compelling evidence that, from the perspective of architects themselves, the nature of practice is changing. Some refer to the change as the ‘crisis of regulation’, others as the problem of ‘calculative thinking’, and still others as ‘the burden of management’. What all these characterisations have in common is that they describe new and paradoxical conditions. Some architects welcome the new technologies of computer aided design (CAD), and more recently building information systems (BIM), because they seem to empower the discipline. Increased productivity will allow, we imagine, more creative time to fashion beautiful objects. But other architects hold that these technologies shift the responsibilities and time commitments of architects away from aesthetic considerations toward

managerial ones. It is, of course, no accident that such technologies have emerged at the same time that the nature of regulation itself is 'fragmenting'. Increasingly it is not the state that regulates how we build, but insurance companies, building managers, corporate utilities and banks. It is the 'decentring' of regulating authority, as the authors describe it, that has transformed the 'organisational governance' of the building industry as a whole. This is to say that building regulations do not emerge in isolation, or at the hands of distant bureaucrats. Rather, the profession, our technologies, the environment, new contractual formats and modes of governance all co-evolve as a large complex system. The only thing truly surprising about all of this is that we architects are oddly isolated from it by our own romantic traditions of artistic autonomy.

Some of the authors' respondents quoted in the text have radicalised this observation by dramatically announcing 'the end of the architect'. Fortunately, Imrie and Street take a more nuanced, hopeful and supportive view of our discipline's promise. Rather than gloat over the fate of increasingly irrelevant, romantic aesthetes clinging to the sinking ship of tasteful power, the authors recognise not disciplinary collapse, but an opportunity. In their view, architects have always participated, even if unconsciously, in the regulation and coding of the life-world. The question this book asks is whether we will choose to participate mindfully, and in the process find new opportunities for creative problem-solving *in addition to* those that are visual.

In this book, our discipline has received a gift from outside the tacit values embodied in what we architects refer to as 'studio culture'. We can, of course, dismiss the critique and ignore the opportunity presented by the authors if we so choose. But if the entrenched architects of my generation do, I am confident that the next generation of city-makers will not – because, like Imrie and Street, they already glimpse the creative potential of interdisciplinary invention.

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Preface

The design and development of the built environment is influenced by a complexity of socio-political and institutional processes, including the application of rules and regulations relating to the form and performance of buildings. From the earliest periods of architecture and building, architects' actions have been conditioned by a plethora of rules, regulations, standards, and governance practices, ranging from socio-cultural and religious codes seeking to influence the formal structure of settlement patterns, to prescriptive building regulations specifying detailed elements of design in relation to the safety of building structures. In the book, we develop the argument that the rule and regulatory basis of architecture is part of a broader field of socio-institutional and political interventions in the design and development process that serve to delimit, and define, the scope of the activities and actions of architects. In so doing, we suggest that the rules and regulations relating to building form and performance ought to be understood not as external to creative processes and practices, but as integral to them.

This understanding of the interrelationships between architecture and its regulation is part of a contribution to an emergent field of scholarly work that seeks to challenge the powerful discourse of the autonomy of architecture. This discourse asserts that architecture is the creation of beautiful buildings that reflect the artistic talents of architects. The aesthetic activities of the architect are distinctive to the prosaic matters of building carried out by others, such as builders, who remain distinctive to, and outside the purview of, the specialist field of architecture. This distinction, between architecture and building, and creativity and craft, is one whereby whole domains of practice, such as the legal regulation of design, are conceived as external to the actions of architects, and therefore unimportant to the task of artful and artistic creation. At best, the intersection of regulations with creative practice is a guarantor of the safety of buildings, and provides legal protection for architects. At worst, it is a restraint on creative freedom with the potential to diminish the aesthetic qualities of the built environment.

Drawing on surveys of, and interviews with, architects, and other development professionals, the book highlights the contradictions and tensions contained in such understandings of the interrelationships between regulation and the actions of architects. In particular, we explore how the activities of architects, whatever the discourse of autonomy may claim, are deeply embedded in complex systems of rules and regulations, covering everything from the legal requirement to provide safe exit routes from buildings, to the clients' wishes, contractually specified, to ensure a risk free procurement process. The data show that creative actions are not independent of the socio-regulatory parameters of the design and development process, but are constituted by, and constitutive of, them. We illustrate this point by referring, first and foremost, to the building regulations, but also to the emergence of design codes, and the proliferation of rules relating to risk management in projects, including the co-ordination and organisation of work across fragmented design and development teams.

In bringing the book to publication we are indebted to a number of people and organisations. We would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for funding the research that much of this book is based upon. We are grateful to the participants in the research for giving up their valuable time to share their experiences with us. These include Robert Adam, David Eisenberg, Roger Evans, George Ferguson, Anthony Floyd, Stuart Hersh, Derek Horn, Judy Knox, Rosanna Law, John Moen, Michael Montgomery, Andy Mytom, Mriganka Saxena, Charles Thompson, numerous architects, and participants in a focus group in December 2009. We would particularly like to thank David Morley of David Morley Architects (DMA) and John Robertson of John Robertson Architects (JRA) for providing us with access to their organisations, and permitting us to spend time talking to, and interacting with, various staff members, and attending meetings and visiting project sites. An important source of support was Chris Roberts of DMA who, at various times over the last few years, has commented on the changing nature of architectural practice, and provided challenging feedback to us about what we were doing.

We are grateful to a number of individuals who supported our work by commenting on various versions of questionnaires, advising on different stages of the research process, and reading some of the draft chapters of the book. These people include Steven Moore from the University of Texas, Paul Jones based at the University of Liverpool, Paul Finch, Chair of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, and anonymous readers of chapters 4 and 8. Our research design was also improved, significantly, by the comments of anonymous referees of the AHRC application, and their suggestions were subsequently incorporated into a readjustment of the

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