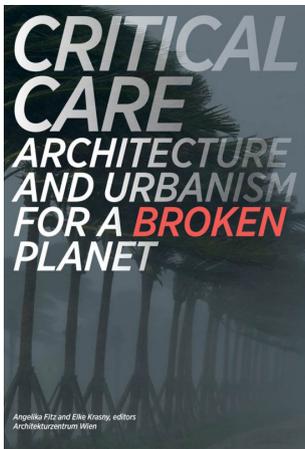


review / SANDRA KAJI-O'GRADY

Angelika Fitz & Elke Krasny (Eds.) *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*

The MIT Press, 2019

INTERSTICES 20



Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet accompanied the exhibition by the same name in Vienna between 24 April and 9 September 2019. Curated by the book's editors, Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny, the exhibition showcased twenty-one projects that, "prove that architecture and urban development do not have to be subservient to the dictates of capital and the exploitation of resources and labour".¹ The exhibition was designed by the next ENTERprise architect with graphics by Alexander Ach Schuh and employed large format photographs, posters of didactic text, and architectural models. The exhibition and the book were the culmination of a longer research project and were clearly conceived together, with half the book made up of the exhibited material.

The visually attractive book is not, however, simply an archival record or exhibition catalogue. Its first half comprises twelve essays by practitioners and scholars from architecture, geography, anthropology, the visual arts, feminist studies, and environmental science. The editors helpfully detail their ambitions for the exhibition and, more polemically, their hopes for wholesale culture change towards what they are calling an architecture of "critical care". The terminology is borrowed from feminist and critical theory, and is called forth by ecological catastrophe and economic inequality. With petrocapiatalism, identified as "the force that has led to the Anthropocene-Capitalocene predicament" (14), Fitz and Krasny invited authors to explore and connect histories of resisting capitalism and its power.

The responses are organised in four sections according to their relative focus on questions of care, labour, ecology, and economy. Tronto delivers a strong theoretical framework and Krasny sketches the historical ideological underpinnings of architecture that see the profession in the service of power and its disciplinary forces. Other essays are extended meditations on specific projects or problematic sites, although none of these overlap with the exhibition's case studies. Gibson's "Speculations on Architecting Care Beyond the Anthropocene" is exemplary in its use of a single example to develop and illustrate broader arguments. She describes how the construction of a permanent concrete bridge over the Mekong River in Cambodia has displaced the traditional annual building of a bamboo bridge. What appears to be pragmatic infrastructure improvement enabling efficient year-round access not only masks the political motivations of

its Chinese investors and realtors, as Gibson points out, it comes at the cost of local workers who made, managed, used, and unmade the bamboo bridge each year. Unfortunately, the example is one where an architecture of care has been replaced by one of development.

Where Gibson asks us to look beyond the appearance of the artefact, Graziano and Trogal challenge us to look behind what appears to be worthy community activity. In “Handling Replacement: Tending to a Local Library and Repair Centre”, they examine the seemingly valuable community engagement found in an English library that has been turned over to the repair and recycling of broken household goods by volunteers. They conclude that it veils the withdrawal of the state from the democratisation of knowledge. It is a pertinent warning because the case studies that follow are, like the social enterprise in the former library, routinely enabled by unpaid labour. Those “giving care”, be it architects, artists, aid workers, or NGOs, do so without adequate compensation. It would be far better if the wealthy one per cent paid taxes and global corporations were held accountable for the environmental damage they have inflicted, than the current situation in which a small fraction of ill-gotten profits are ostentatiously “gifted” to the kinds of projects celebrated in this book (indeed, for the Architekturzentrum Wien itself). This brings us to the book’s core dilemma. Capitalism sponsors alternative practices that mediate and distract from its more insidious consequences. The forces of capitalism and neoliberalism that this book critiques are so pervasive that every architectural project is soiled by them to some degree.

I’ll look at one of these case studies in closer detail. Two weeks before receiving the book for review, I had the privilege of visiting the Psychiatric Center Caritas. The Caritas psychiatric hospital in Melle, Belgium, was established in 1908, and comprised several two-storey buildings with mansard roofs and banded brickwork in a garden setting. By the 1990s, the original buildings had become obsolete and all but two were demolished. One was in the process of demolition when asbestos was discovered. During this stay of execution, the management of the centre changed and the new director sought design ideas for a “public square” for the campus. dVVT architects proposed a solution in which the half-ruined building serves the new campus vision. They stabilised its structure, added new stairs and chain-link fences for safe access, and inserted three glass-houses in its stripped rooms for social and therapeutic activities.

PC Caritas was completed in 2016 and published in Archdaily in May 2017, with beautiful photographs by Filip Dujardin. dVVT’s Venice Biennale *Freespace* exhibition primarily featured the Caritas project, for which they won Silver Lion, and it was the subject of a review by Douglas Murphy in *Architectural Review* in September 2018. Murphy (2018) noted that dVVT’s use of contrasting materials to arrest the building’s decline resembles the ad hoc “outsiderish” repairs that, ironically, give architects “great aesthetic pleasure”.² In fact, as I’d seen at the Veterinary Clinic at nearby Malpertuus, designed ten years earlier, dVVT have an abiding interest in the juxtaposition of everyday materials, such as bricks and concrete blocks, and exploit the awkwardness of their intersection. They also like to insert moments of bright contrast—a bright yellow steel stair at the vet clinic, green steel girders at PC Caritas. Given the context of the group exhibition, PC Caritas is recast as an example of caring architecture selected because it preserved an old building.

If we follow the counsel of the book's editors and contributors, however, we must also ask who funded the project, how workers were engaged, how the process of design unfolded. We must ask about its economic and political underpinnings. In this case, the building is funded and operated by the Vatican-based Caritas Internationalis, the so-called "care" arm of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is implicated in the problems concerning this book, including overpopulation in developing countries and the political conflicts that are the aftereffects of colonisation. Overshadowing the PC Caritas was the live scandal of Father Luk Delft, a Belgian priest convicted in 2012 of child abuse and possession of child pornography. The church sent Delft—whilst on an 18-month suspended jail sentence—to work for Caritas in the Central African Republic (CAR), where he rose to national director. After credible allegations of child abuse in Africa emerged in June 2019, United Nations aid groups suspended cooperation with Caritas in Africa. The church's response has been characteristically defensive and evasive.³ The editors claim that the project shows care in the way it serves "new healthcare concepts". If the centre is consistent with mental healthcare globally—which it likely is—then this means that the original carceral asylum concept has been replaced by one that couples a pharmaceutical regime with reflexive self-fashioning through individual and group counselling. In this context, the restoration of the building as a "public square" for the institution is an integral part of a therapeutic ecosystem of medication and socialisation. This ecosystem is ultimately aimed at restoring the patient to a normative model of subjectivity in which he or she is an active consumer and producer, for what is illness in capitalism but the inability to work?

This is not to say that the architects of PC Caritas are in any way compromised by the Catholic Church's behaviour or questionable mental health regimes. But other projects in the book are put forward *because* of the caring values held by their clients or the programmes they facilitate. My point is not to single this project out for criticism, it is mere coincidence that it is the only one I have visited. When I did, I appreciated its tectonic subtlety and atmospheric decay. Things get wobbly only when it is held up as an example of resistance to capitalism and critical care. No project can embody each of the criteria of care listed in the book. Undoubtedly the editors understand this. Their purpose is not to propose this set of projects as beyond reproach. Nor are they arguing that these twenty-one alone can repair our broken planet. The examples are too modest, dispersed, and compromised to bring about the system change necessary to heal the planet. Only by inspiring thousands of other projects that address questions of ecology, community, and labour can any tangible impact be realised. The book is, thus, more manifesto and provocation than it is scholarly anthology or conclusive review. In this spirit it is audaciously optimistic. That readers might think of better examples to demonstrate their arguments should only be cause for celebration.

ENDNOTES

1 Architekturzentrum Wien (n.d.). *Exhibition precis*. Retrieved from: <https://www.azw.at/en/event/critical-care-architektur-und-urbanismus-fuer-einen-planeten-in-der-krise/>

2 Murphy, D. (2018). Frame of mind: de Vylder Vinck Taillieu's Caritas Psychiatric Centre, *Architectural Review*, 17. Retrieved from: <https://www.architectural-review.com/buildings/frame-of-mind-de-vylder-vinck-taillieu-caritas-psychiatric-centre/10035199>. article

3 Luxmoore, J. (2019, November 28). Belgian salesians defend decision to send convicted paedophile to Africa. 28 November 2019, *Catholic Herald*. Retrieved from: <https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2019/11/28/belgian-salesians-defend-decision-to-send-convicted-paedophile-to-africa/>