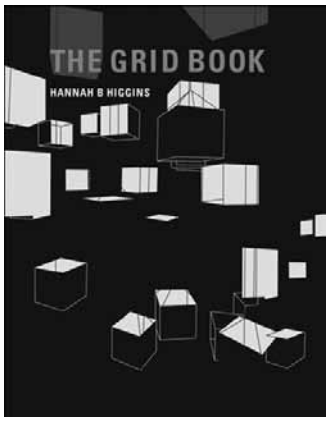
Bhabha translated, Elizabethan prodigies

Grids, density and soft power



Bhabha for Architects
By Felipe Hernández
Routledge
London and New York, 2010
160 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-415-47746-8
£14.39 (pb)

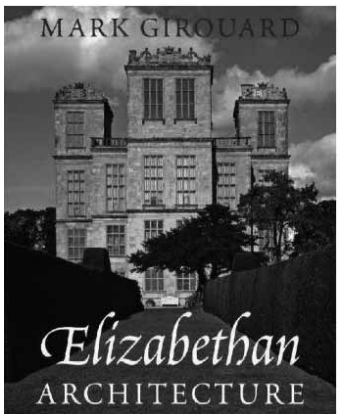
Hernández succeeds in showing how Bhabha's thought, developed first in relation to literature, can be used to illuminate contemporary architectures. The dominant theme is a postcolonial critique of Eurocentric architectural criticism and historiography. Hernández argues that if this hegemony is to be meaningfully challenged – which it must be by cultures which it marginalises and oppresses – it is not enough merely to widen the frame to include 'unusual' examples from outside the canon. Instead, entirely different points of view must be adopted, 'hybrid' visions must be recognised as authentic and cultural 'translations' seen as possessing an integral value. The book is a refreshing read, if you are unclear about 'Translation', 'Ambivalence', 'Hybridity', 'The Third Space' and 'Performativity', read it. It is pocket sized and only one hundred and thirty pages.
JAO



The Grid Book
By Hannah B. Higgins
MIT Press
Cambridge MA, 2009
312 pp.
ISBN 978-0-262-51240-4
£18.95 (pb)

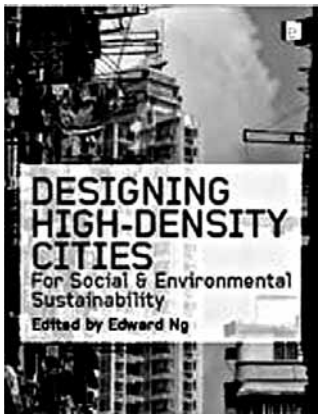
The most powerful visual encapsulation of the idea of the grid is, arguably, Superstudio's famous 1972 collage *Life/Surface* in which a family group sits as though stranded on an endless white ground plane marked with a relentless square grid. This image seems to oppose the freedoms of everyday life and emotion on one hand with the controlling monotony of Cartesian coordinates on the other. The grid, here, is portrayed as the culmination of modernity, symbolising the encroaching domination of technology. Superstudio's collage does not appear in Hannah Higgins' delightful *Grid Book*, which casts this particular conception of the grid in a longer and cooler light. She traces the idea from the first brick (9000 BCE), to cuneiform tablets (3000 BCE), to the gridiron plan (Heirakonopolis, Egypt, 2160 BCE; Miletus, 479 BCE), to papyrus and the map, to musical notation, to the ledger, to the screen and the emergence of perspective, to printing and typography, to boxes and containers, to – finally – images of nets and networks. Higgins' sources are remarkably wide-ranging and she makes intriguing connections. The story is engaging and well written, challenging commonplace assumptions, going off-grid as much as it stays on-grid. For all that the idea of the grid portrayed in Superstudio's collage may be simplistic, its continued power as a device for organisation (and domination) across millennia remains striking.
AS

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135510000795 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall, 1540–1640
By Mark Girouard
Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art
Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2009
516 pp.
ISBN 978-0-300-09386-5
£45.00 (hb)

Modern architects readily admire Elizabethan architecture, especially Hardwick Hall with its great unornamented grids of glass, and the thrilling place-making of the staircase as it cranks its way up the building to Bess of Hardwick's Presence Chamber. Adam Caruso and Peter St John acknowledge the building as an influence on Walsall Art Gallery, and at the end of his magisterial study Mark Girouard writes of 'James Stirling's delicate piled-up fantasies in glass and glazed brick, reminiscent of Elizabethan prodigies as brilliant and impractical as they were'. In both these oeuvres there is that peculiarly British fusion of the rational and romantic, the pragmatic and mystical. The epithet 'magisterial' is not used loosely, for this weighty 4.5 cm thick volume is itself a kind of prodigy in which the leading historian of Elizabethan and Jacobean architecture summates some four decades of work subsequent to his first book on Robert Smythson. It is also a handsome book with over 600 figures and plates supporting an authoritative text.
SK

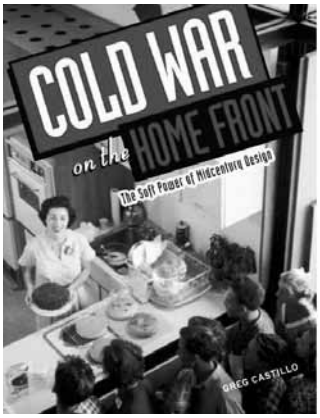


Designing High-Density Cities: For Social & Environmental Sustainability
By Edward Ng (ed.)
Earthscan
London, 2008
264 pp.
ISBN: 9-781-84407-4600
£65.00 (hb)

This work results from long-standing research in the area of urban sustainability by internationally acclaimed researchers. As such it enables a move towards evidence based sustainable design for architects, urban designers, planners and practitioners at an urban scale.

Initially, a critical context for an understanding of the meaning of high-density urban design within the context of sustainability is provided. This includes consideration by Robert and Brenda Vale of high-density living in the context of resource depletion, food and the ever present factor of peak oil, while Sue Roaf questions whether we should strive for high density at all, with appropriate density being perhaps a more suitable ambition. Following this, valuable guidance and case studies are provided answering the need for urban design and urban buildings to respond to the environmental challenges provided by their high-density locations including: the urban microclimate, human comfort, natural lighting, ventilation, acoustics, sound and noise. These factors are balanced by consideration of the social sustainability of communities and human life in a high-density sustainable city.

This book is likely to appeal and to provide reference for those involved in delivering a practical response to the widespread call from policy and academia alike for higher density urban development.
JG



Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design
By Greg Castillo
University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis, 2010
278 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-8166-4961-3
£15.50 (pb)

Greg Castillo opens his book by quoting from a 1951 satire which, he argues, proved prescient: 'Operation Abundance "was both violently anti-Soviet and pro-peace" [...] Successive waves of air-dropped free samples were said to throw socialist society into disarray "as Soviet housewives saw for their own eyes American stoves, refrigerators, clothing and toys"'. The Cold War, this book argues, was fought with fridges. Meticulously researched and well told, the story explores the tropes that East and West employed to characterise each other, moving back-and-fore between poles, from 1945 to 1989. Nixon and Khrushchev admire a kitchen together, Walter Ulbricht intervenes in an interior design exhibition, and prototype houses are (metaphorically, at least) parachuted behind enemy lines. This is an engaging read, where architecture, furniture, domesticity and consumerism together become a significant locus of power. Castillo's voice is clear, subtle and nuanced. In the end, however, one senses that he is with the white goods.
AS

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135510000795 Published online by Cambridge University Press