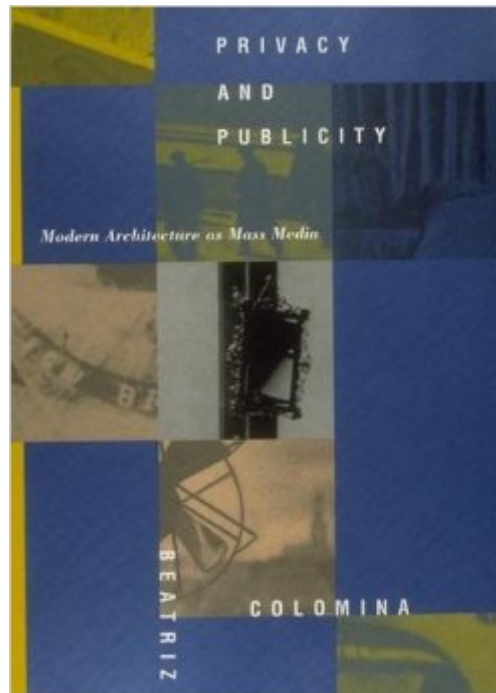


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Privacy And Publicity: Modern Architecture As Mass Media



Synopsis

Through a series of close readings of two major figures of the modern movement, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, Beatriz Colomina argues that architecture only becomes modern in its engagement with the mass media, and that in so doing it radically displaces the traditional sense of space and subjectivity. *Privacy and Publicity* boldly questions certain ideological assumptions underlying the received view of modern architecture and reconsiders the methodology of architectural criticism itself. Where conventional criticism portrays modern architecture as a high artistic practice in opposition to mass culture, Colomina sees the emerging systems of communication that have come to define twentieth-century culture -- the mass media -- as the true site within which modern architecture was produced. She considers architectural discourse as the intersection of a number of systems of representation such as drawings, models, photographs, books, films, and advertisements. This does not mean abandoning the architectural object, the building, but rather looking at it in a different way. The building is understood here in the same way as all the media that frame it, as a mechanism of representation in its own right. With modernity, the site of architectural production literally moved from the street into photographs, films, publications, and exhibitions -- a displacement that presupposes a new sense of space, one defined by images rather than walls. This age of publicity corresponds to a transformation in the status of the private, Colomina argues; modernity is actually the publicity of the private. Modern architecture renegotiates the traditional relationship between public and private in a way that profoundly alters the experience of space. In a fascinating intellectual journey, Colomina tracks this shift through the modern incarnations of the archive, the city, fashion, war, sexuality, advertising, the window, and the museum, finally concentrating on the domestic interior that constructs the modern subject it appears merely to house.

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The best way, sometimes, to talk about a larger condition is to delve into specifics. Colomina uses Loos and Corbusier to draw out comparisons about the use of information. Considering the amount of architectural monographs being churned out on a daily basis, and the creation of terms such as "information architecture," it's extremely valuable to look at how modern architecture might have started from an alliance between types of publicity and design. Both Loos and Corbusier come out, biography-wise, as extremely creepy, though shrewd in shaping how their work is perceived by the traces that they leave behind. In Corbusier's case, he leaves an archive stuffed with minutia, an overabundance of information to supplement the built work. Loos, on the other hand, leaves very little, and thus what little remains of his work requires imagination to fill gaps in his story. What a designer can gather from this is to ask the question: how does what we do effect what our work is? Colomina's work functions reflexively as well as she works from "evidence" to create representations of both architects. It is a compelling argument, passionately written, and not the least boring.

this book makes an audacious, much needed intervention into architectural history and theory: architecture is just one of many mass media that proliferated in the modern period. i find myself with this book and colomina's other writings wishing she would turn to actual rather than elite architectural mass media to prove her point, yet, other than beatriz preciado's 2011/2014 "pornotopia," this challenge has yet to be undertaken.

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