

**Review: Non-Design: Architecture, Liberalism, and the Market and Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin: Architecture and Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century**

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4. “Our Mission,” Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation, <https://bwaf.org/mission> (accessed 14 Jan. 2023).

Anthony Fontenot

**Non-Design: Architecture, Liberalism, and the Market**

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 376 pp., 65 b/w illus. \$50 (cloth), ISBN 9780226686066

Matthew Soules

**Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin: Architecture and Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century**

New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2021, 240 pp., 198 b/w illus. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 9781616899462

In the years since the global financial crash of 2008, the built environment’s complicity in the neoliberal political economy has come under increased scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> Real estate, the financialization of architectural production and aesthetics, and the often-complex realities of neoliberalism “on the ground” in cities and buildings are just some of the topics that have been addressed by architectural historians seeking to reframe long-standing narratives about the role of architecture in society and its relation to capitalism. Two recent books expand and deepen this inquiry with divergent yet complementary perspectives. In *Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin: Architecture and Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century*, Matthew Soules explores both the theoretical and the actual ways in which architecture has adapted to service, and enable, the machinations of finance capitalism in recent decades. Anthony Fontenot takes a longer historical perspective in *Non-Design: Architecture, Liberalism, and the Market*, offering an impressive and highly original reevaluation of the canon of postwar design theory, especially as deeply enmeshed within the philosophy of economic liberalism. Both authors aim to enhance readers’ understanding of the theoretical and historical underpinnings of late capitalism and architecture’s relationship to it, but where Soules provides a guide to interpreting the present architectural paradigm, Fontenot offers a historical analysis that reveals its unlikely origins in the postwar architectural avant-garde of England and America.

Fontenot’s book situates architectural discourse after World War II within the wider contemporaneous philosophical debates on liberalism, the decentralization of the state, and the role of the market as a tool of governance. Specifically, the narrative focuses on the writing and activities of the theorists of the Austrian school of economic thought, including Friedrich August Hayek, Karl Popper, and Ludwig von Mises, and their influence on a vast number of architects and architectural writers, ranging from Nikolaus Pevsner, Gordon Cullen, Reyner Banham, and the Independent Group in Britain to Jane Jacobs, Melvin Webber, Robert Venturi, and Denise Scott Brown in the United States, just to name a few. Emerging in the intellectual milieu of interwar Vienna, in the wake of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the failure of liberalism, and the rise of socialism, the Austrian school’s theorists were united by a commitment to free and spontaneous societal systems and opposition to centralized ones, including state socialism and communism. After the atrocities of the war, their critique held more potent political meaning. In his 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek argued that all forms of centralized state collectivism would lead to totalitarianism, whether on the left or the right.<sup>2</sup> More generally, the theorists rallied against centralized planning, which they characterized as a method of population control; they posited that societies should instead be governed by the market, as a value-free, neutral framework that would promote democratic communities through the decentralization of knowledge and wealth. Such a competitive market-based system would be spontaneous and reactive, enabling the freedom of the individual and limiting the state’s capacity to coerce and oppress. As these theorists dispersed to sympathetic institutions in England and the United States, their ideas gained traction and, according to Fontenot, infused arts and culture just as much as they influenced economists and politicians.

Fontenot makes two main claims that inform his book’s narrative. First, he argues that at the same time these well-known debates around the merits of central planning as a form of societal control were taking place in political and economic disciplines, they were also occurring in the fields of architecture and urban

planning. Designers embraced terms like *organicism*, *complexity*, *indeterminacy*, and *self-organization* not simply for their aesthetic and structural meanings but also for their evocations of escape from the power of top-down control characteristic of prewar modernism. Second, Fontenot argues that a strong, central idea unified this seemingly disparate, yet overlapping, collection of architects and architectural scholars: non-design. He explains that non-design was just one of a list of theories defined by a negative prefix during this period, such as “*non-plan*, *un-planned*, *anti-art*, *anti-architecture*, *anti-design*, . . . *non-Left* and *non-Marxist*,” and although the emphasis on the negative seems to tell us little about what these movements hoped to affirm, we still lack “a sufficient body of theory to fully appreciate the significance of the negative for the history of modern architecture” (23). *Non-Design* interrogates this negative, framing it as a byword for the rejection of centralized top-down planning and the adoption of a liberal market-led framework that valued society “as found” and facilitated complex, spontaneous communities and environments. Through this, the author suggests a third critical assertion: for all their rejection of ideology, these postwar architectural protagonists were in fact ideological.

The book focuses on two geographical contexts, Britain and the United States, following both the physical movements of the Austrian school theorists and the parallel architectural movements within and between the two countries. The first two chapters examine the infusion of liberal critique into design theories in the heyday of the British welfare state. Fontenot notes how economists and town planners alike made indiscriminate use of the term *planning* in the postwar period, thus developing a core concept that a small group of architects began to turn against. He analyzes the townscape movement—an urban planning approach conceived by Hubert de Cronin Hastings, editor of the *Architectural Review*, with Gordon Cullen and Nikolaus Pevsner, among others—as a kind of proto-non-design strategy. Fontenot claims that in embracing the English picturesque as a guiding principle, townscape explicitly drew upon a political tradition of English liberalism. In such a context, tolerance of human behavior, visual variety, spontaneity, and the

combination of planned and unplanned elements stood counter to the tyranny of French rationalist thought (and garden design).

The book then considers the rise of New Brutalism, a non-Marxist design movement that emerged in the 1950s as an aesthetic and ethical challenge to the (socialist) modernist dogma characterizing earlier movements in Britain, including the Scandinavian-inspired “soft” modernist approach, or “new humanism,” adopted by the architects of the London County Council. Through close scrutiny of the writings of the architectural historian Reyner Banham (one of the book’s key protagonists) and the work of the Independent Group, centered on London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, Fontenot evaluates the emergence of New Brutalism as a movement that embraced liberal notions of complexity, appreciation of the city “as found,” and the use of everyday social experiences and interactions as a basis for design. In particular, he shows how the Independent Group embraced the Austrian school’s writings against historicism, promoting instead a determinist, materialist approach to history. In response to publications such as Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), Fontenot argues, Banham and architects like Alison and Peter Smithson developed a “non-teleological” aesthetic. Rejecting modernist interest in classical geometries, they instead embraced a responsive approach based on trial and error as well as adaptation inspired by biological phenomena, such as those described in D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson’s study of morphology in nature, *On Growth and Form* (1917).<sup>3</sup>

In the next three chapters Fontenot explores the manifestation of these ideas in the American context. Beginning with the so-called Borax debates, he examines how the commercially driven aesthetics of the streamline style from the 1930s inspired postwar architects and theorists, particularly Banham, and how the brand name Borax came to be used pejoratively to signal commercial pervasiveness and meaninglessness. He then explores the impact of market-based ideology on the work of the urbanist Jane Jacobs. He also considers the legacy of decentralized urbanism in U.S. cities such as Los Angeles and examines its relationship to architectural design theory in Britain,

most famously addressed in Banham’s *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971).<sup>4</sup> Fontenot offers a new reading of Jacobs through the lens of liberalism, arguing that her theories emerged alongside and were affected by a wider range of influences than are usually recognized, including the Austrian school theories of spontaneous order and the townscape and New Brutalism movements in Britain, and particularly the work of the Smithsons.

Perhaps one of the most original and vital aspects of *Non-Design* is the way Fontenot positions the economic theorists as interlocutors with architectural actors: Hayek, Popper, and Ernst Gombrich, an art historian affiliated with the Austrian school, all taught at University College London at the time Banham was pursuing his doctoral degree there under Pevsner. Fontenot shows how the 1950s immigration of Hayek and his contemporaries to New York and Chicago—where they exerted the most powerful influence of their careers—instituted a fundamental shift in the nature of architectural and urban critique, as shown by the work of writers such as Jacobs, William H. Whyte, Scott Brown, and Venturi, some of whom were in direct communication with one another. Fontenot also chronicles the intellectual milieu surrounding the Architectural Association in London in the 1960s, highlighting an intriguing correspondence between Royston Landau, an architect teaching at the AA, and Karl Popper. This in turn instigated a series of important events and communications publicizing Popper’s advocacy of an open society and ideas of indeterminacy among the architectural avant-garde in Britain and the United States.

*Non-Design* is an important contribution to the history of postwar architecture that in many ways fundamentally disrupts existing architectural historical narratives. Such ambition inevitably also has its pitfalls. The author’s attempt to link this breadth of political economic theory to an even wider range of architects occasionally results in repetition. At times, the book feels as if it were intended to be read as a collection of articles, with each chapter reintroducing different aspects of liberal theory; this results in content overlap and even the occasional repetition of quotations. Likewise, in the discussion of the reciprocal influence of design theories across the Atlantic, movements such

as townscape are introduced several times, and figures like Pevsner appear as both socialists and non-design practitioners in different chapters, leading to complicated characterizations that are difficult to follow. That said, the book is bold in scope and, for the most part, detailed and careful in its execution, drawing on a huge range of archival as well as contemporary theoretical material. Fontenot’s book is a historical critique of the current (non-) planning paradigm, which he argues originated largely from the postwar interactions between the architectural profession and liberal economic theory. It is ominous to read this critique in light of the current environmental crisis and the ravages of uncontrolled market-led urbanism across the globe.

Matthew Soules’s *Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin* takes our present situation, or at least a more recent historical moment, as its starting point. In the prologue, the author explains that the book came out of the 2008 financial crisis. He argues that although architecture played a leading role in the crash, in terms of both housing and the subprime mortgage scandal, the architectural profession remained quiet on the issue. This book stands as a corrective to that unwillingness to engage. Taking the writings of Fredric Jameson and Reinhold Martin as his cue, Soules aims to show how architecture is not simply a product of finance capitalism but a fundamental element in that system. Yet where Jameson emphasizes the aesthetics of architecture and abstract qualities of late capitalism, Soules sees finance capitalist investment as a process with tangible results and real urban consequences. Where Martin describes architecture’s symbolic role in producing cultural meaning (by representing finance), Soules argues that architecture and urbanism have in fact mutated into a form of finance capitalist investment, changing how buildings are designed to be occupied and managed. In this engaging critique of the relationship of architecture and finance capitalism, Soules focuses on housing, using mostly European and American examples, and examines formal, aesthetic, programmatic, maintenance, and use practices, arguing that this is the “primary medium” through which finance “actualizes itself” (15).

*Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin* is important not only because it reevaluates

our current paradigm but also because it offers helpful and lucid explanations of complex financial processes. A large part of the book is dedicated to explaining and dissecting the very notion of financialization, a word now used rather generally to describe late capitalism. Soules understands the term as both a historical phase and an ongoing transhistorical practice: historical because the credit and finance modes of operation have always played an important and necessary role in capitalism, and ongoing because finance arguably serves as the defining concept of the present era, where we seek to profit through financial transactions. Borrowing from sociologist Greta R. Krippner, Soules explains that financialization describes “a pattern of accumulation in which profits accrue primarily through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production. ‘Financial’ here refers to activities relating to the provision (or transfer) of liquid capital in expectation of future interest, dividends, or capital gain” (21–22). Echoing cultural theorist Max Haiven, Soules argues that as financialization forms the basis of our economic and political system, it necessarily affects all aspects of daily life, from large-scale industrial production to the way we work, what we watch on television, and what gets built.<sup>5</sup> Following an overview of theories—including those of Karl Marx, Rudolf Hilferding, Vladimir Lenin, and Costas Lapavistas—Soules concludes that finance capitalism has had a powerful effect on architecture not just because it is the dominant economic mode but also because “real estate is one of the primary mediums through which finance capitalism operates.” Consequently, “architecture is not the result of finance capitalism but rather *is* finance capitalism” (31).

The remainder of the book explains exactly how architecture, and specifically housing, has adapted to become part of this system. Soules examines first the ways that housing is financialized: through the securitization of mortgage loans, subprime lending, and household mortgage debt; the entry of private equity firms, hedge funds, and real estate firms into rental markets; and the reliance of housing providers on bonds and financial derivatives. In this economic transformation architecture has had to transform physically to make itself investable and productive, but also to make those

using the housing productive through the inclusion of commercial and leisure spaces within residential complexes. In an attempt to taxonomize architecture’s response to this imperative, Soules defines five main characteristics of financialized architecture: (1) it is inherently unstable and creates spaces of crisis; (2) it functions as speculative wealth storage; (3) it becomes a means of uneven development and inequality; (4) it has a simultaneous propensity for iconic and standardized spaces; and (5) it increases liquidity. These characteristics lay the groundwork for the chapters that follow, which address a series of phenomena Soules attributes to financialization. “Zombie urbanism,” for example, is the now well-known phenomenon of the existence of numerous owned but empty housing units. Investors and wealthy individuals buy up property in dense urban centers but do not live there, thus lowering levels of urban vitality. As Soules quips, these urban areas become zombies because “they are not dead, but they are also not quite alive” (51). In contrast, “ghost urbanism” has higher vacancy rates and the perception of failure, taking the form of high numbers of unsold or incomplete housing units, usually built during a boom period, that may now be in a state of decay. Taking Ireland 1995–2007 as a case study, Soules shows how overbuilding (amounting to 40 percent of housing stock) in combination with soaring house prices led to a crisis, with 294,000 vacant units in 2011.

Soules argues that finance capitalism produces “accelerations and mutations” of architectural forms, shifting from wealth accumulation through production to wealth accumulation through financial speculation. Using jargon that buys into the complex nomenclature of finance itself, Soules describes these mutations as “icebergs” (ludicrously large basement extensions built to store wealth in heritage areas in London), “exurban investment mats” (housing estates, gridded, spreading far and wide), “superpodiums” (tower bases that provide leisure and consumption facilities), “ultra-thin pencil towers” (high-rises with one apartment per floor and penthouses on top), and “financial icons” (drawing on the so-called Bilbao Effect). In what is perhaps the most interesting argument in the book, Soules claims that these forms are

the result of the simultaneous simplification and complication of space required for real estate to behave as a liquid asset. Due to its immovable and complex (situated) nature, real estate is typically highly illiquid, and thus must be simplified (i.e., standardized, universalized) to maximize assets and facilitate remote ownership. But to make such spaces desirable, a compensatory complexity must be added through the creation of abstract, localized distinctions that provide a semblance of specificity. “Jane Jacobs–influenced podiums mask standardized condo towers rising above, and nostalgic, materially diverse skins conceal spatial homogeneity,” writes Soules (141), as if to confirm Fontenot’s thesis about how a competition-based society can accommodate Jacobs’s criticism.

*Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin* represents a much-needed addition to the literature on capitalism and architecture, both for its analysis and for its explanations. Its relentless taxonomizing and listing of qualities and criteria are perhaps necessary for a guide of this kind. However, in the same way that financial jargon often obscures more than it reveals, this approach can be exhausting for the reader. One could argue that this is one of the perils of dealing with finance as a topic. Another might be the tendency to focus too closely on the structural causes and effects of financialization while not paying enough attention to the human systems required to make them. Whereas the brilliance of Fontenot’s *Non-Design* rests on an intimate understanding of the network of people, ideas, and events that triggered a new paradigm, Soules’s book remains at the level of systemic analysis. It intentionally ignores, for example, the role of developers, who I would argue have played not merely a facilitating role in finance capital but also a critical role in implementing new investment mechanisms. Likewise, we are left wondering about the role of the architect in all of this. How is the profession complicit? Soules remarks that its silence after 2008 triggered the writing of his book, but architectural voices remain mostly mute in the context of his own probing analysis. That said, Soules was not writing a granular historical account, but rather a contemporary observation of what exists and how it came into being. Both Fontenot’s and Soules’s books have their place in the

current conversation surrounding architecture and the neoliberal context, and both are highly valuable and informative additions to the field.

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## Notes

1. Reinhold Martin, "Financial Imaginaries: Toward a Philosophy of the City," *Grey Room*, no. 42 (Winter 2011), 60–79; Peggy Deamer,

ed., *Architecture and Capitalism: 1845 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Sara Stevens, *Developing Expertise: Architecture and Real Estate in Metropolitan America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016); Kenny Cupers, Catharina Gabriëlsso, and Helena Mattsson, eds., *Neoliberalism on the Ground: Architecture and Transformation from the 1960s to the Present* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020); Douglas Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Claire

Zimmerman, ed., "The Costs of Architecture," special issue, *Grey Room*, no. 71 (Spring 2018).

2. F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944).

3. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945); D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *On Growth and Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917).

4. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

5. Max Haiven, *Cultures of Financialization: Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).