



## **Ardeth**

A magazine on the power of the project

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**Innovation as it happens**

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### **Marco Biraghi, *L'Architetto come intellettuale* | Thomas Yarrow, *Architects. Portraits of a Practice***

Torino, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 209 pp. - 2019 | Ithaca NY, Cornell  
University Press, 300 pp. - 2019

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REFERENCES

Marco Biraghi, *L'Architetto come intellettuale*, Torino, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 209 pp. - 2019, Paperback: - € 21,00 - ISBN: 978-8806239923 | Thomas Yarrow, *Architects. Portraits of a Practice*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 300 pp. - 2019, Paperback: - \$ 18,85 - ISBN: 978-1501738494

- 1 Both Thomas Yarrow's Architects. Portraits of a Practice and Marco Biraghi's L'Architetto come Intellettuale offer fresh evidence of how new paradigms of study are required to satisfy our needs for disciplinary introspection. Traditional accounts of the architectural profession (such as the Albertian model, a universal producer of ideas and self-sufficient maker of drawings), are no longer representative of the status of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century architect, despite having guided our self-reflection for at least half a millennium. Both Yarrow and Biraghi can be discussed here as answers to this search, in that they refer to methods of enquiry, aspects of the discipline and interpretations of its operative processes which appear so distant to each other to become almost specular.
 



- 2 Yarrow's book is an ethnographic study of the architectural practice Millar Howard Workshop (MHW), a middle-size studio based in the English village of Chalford, Gloucestershire. Yarrow proposes an anecdotal narrative of everyday life in the studio, with conversations, routine practices and protocols, as well as first-hand accounts of what members consider as the defining conditions, motivations and ultimate purposes of their profession. The book belongs to a growing stream of ethnographic studies which, from Dana Cuff to Albená Yaneva (see for example Ardeth #02 'Bottega'), seeks to investigate the more relational, social and to some extent ordinary aspects of our profession.
- 3 As such, the actors in the study discuss commonplace tropes, such as a generalised disillusionment for education, tensions between 'theoretical discourse' and 'practical making' and a nostalgia for a lost culture of craft, which also appear as the most interesting aspects of the book. In fact, such considerations ultimately reveal the intrinsic contradictions of architectural life, instances where an ideology of informality clashes with the inherent hierarchies of the office, or where a heroic claim of progressiveness is ultimately revealed as conservatism.
- 4 On the other hand, L'Architetto come Intellettuale is a critical and historical attempt to locate the generalised conditions in which architects find themselves today and to propose 'the ways of a possible overturn'. These conditions are identified as a profound (and admittedly not new) state of crisis for the architect as an 'intellectual', that is, as a subject elaborating a theoretical thought with operative intentions and political implications or, in Biraghi's own words, a 'producer'. Instead, the author recognises that today the architect is reduced to a specialised 'supplier', unable to actively interpret our reality and, as such, accessory to architecture's capitalist commoditisation.
- 5 Biraghi's argument, validated through the traditions of Benjamin, Tafuri, Cacciari and Aureli, therefore investigates instances where an architecture 'within and against' can exist. This, however, is a question to which the book doesn't seem to have a definitive answer. Examples like the unbuilt designs by Dogma, or the nearly 60-year-old Economist building in London, offer only partial answers. On the other hand, practitioners such as Anne Lacaton and Alejandro Aravena are discussed as relevant

figures for a reconsideration of our profession, but whether the attribute 'intellectual' can be applied remains unclear.

- 6 If a solution to Biraghi's question is not plainly offered, the ambition of the book suggests at least a direction of enquiry. This consists, to put it simply, in the project of architecture. It is through interactive paradigms spread across the territory of the project that the architect can find a *raison d'être*. Interestingly, Yarrow articulates his study along similar lines, making the project-as-process the most critical aspect of a contemporary architectural practice, the space where a dialog can be articulated and where solutions to our search for authenticity may be found. Undeniably, Biraghi would identify MHW as a 'supplier', in that the studio operates fully 'within' the interests of capitalism. However, there is a hopeful awareness in Yarrow's narrative which suggests a potential 'against' the crisis of values identified by Biraghi.
- 7 In this sense, both the ethnography and the essay, distinct in method, breath, geography and intention, ultimately display the same coordinates to locate the architect's problematic identity. Through these, the authors seem to propose, we can catch the blurred glimpse of a possible alternative. Such alternative, let's be clear, has entirely yet to become a reality.

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