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Nerea Calvillo, *Aeropolis. Queering Air in Toxic polluted Worlds*

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REFERENCES

Nerea Calvillo, *Aeropolis. Queering Air in Toxic polluted Worlds*, Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2023, 240 pp. Paperback € 21,00 - ISBN 9781941332788

- 1 How to know, visualise, and design with something as elusive as air? Nerea Calvillo addresses these challenges in *Aeropolis Queering Air in Toxicpolluted Worlds*. Combining conceptual work, design, and aesthetic production, she presents us with the plurality of urban air.
- 2 *Aeropolis* begins with an image that effectively summarises the book's ideas. "Intuitively, urban air is the negative of the city in three dimensions. [...] But the air is the city" (p. 15). Although simple, the movement towards the negative of the built environment is a straightforward image to start noticing the non-visible. Starting from this new perspective, Calvillo begins to reflect on the *city as air*. She states that the book aims to de-invisibilize air, not to find a solution for airborne problems, but to make these latter sensible and to "learn to care better for the air that holds us" (p. 7). However, this book also reflects on what it means to build and design with air *physically*.
- 3 The first two chapters lay the conceptual ground for the second part. However, rather than proposing a new theory, Calvillo contributes some conceptual images helpful in understanding her way of thinking and designing with the air.
- 4 First, she pluralises air into *airs*: "Air is sound, radiation, wind, pressure, temperature... it is smell, vision, erosion, communication..." (p. 22). She points out that *airs* across the world are not all the same. The *airs* are ephemeral archives of anthropogenic activities of all sorts: *airs* not only carry pollutants but also traces of cocaine or DNA of zoo

animals. Airs points to the multiplicity of the aerial conditions and, at the same time, calls for specificity.

- 5 Among airs, it is the city's airs that matter most to Calvillo. Therefore, she introduces the term *Aeropolis*. As a conceptual and heuristic tool, *Aeropolis* does many things:
- 6 First, with the help of Science and Technology Studies (STS), Calvillo underlines how in *Aeropolis*, airs are natural-socio-technical urban assemblages, meaning that airs are not bounded objects but rather a multiplicity of processes. Airs are multiple, always becoming and brought into being by overlapping natural-socio-technical systems.
- 7 Secondly, *Aeropolis* proposes that we think about air's complexity and its *toxicpolluted* character by bringing queer-feminist theory and urban political ecology together. Breathing and sensing toxicpolluted airs are always situated in the specificity of the substance, the materiality and histories of bodies. This highlights how toxicity and pollution practices "are uneven in geographical and historical substance-body relations and how this unevenness reinforces inequality and poverty" (p. 91).
- 8 To better grasp this, she plays with visualising the world of air: she states that *Aeropolis* is inhabited, literally the *polis* of air. Some inhabitants are organic, like pollen and viruses; others are inorganic, like pollutants and toxic particles. Larger entities that transform or exchange air are instead called metabolisers. This image helps readers account for the air's composition and visualise it
- 9 Finally, *Aeropolis* is also deployed as a tool to pay attention to how to design and build with air. Accordingly, the last four chapters address a series of Calvillo's spatial design projects that focus on what a visualisation, a construction, and an infrastructuration of air can be.
- 10 Chapter *seeing molecules, affective atmographies* is preoccupied with sensing, measuring and portraying toxicpolluted air. The chapter is based on the project "In the Air", which challenges ways of visualising data about pollution. Calvillo proposes to call these new displays *atmographies*, moving from knowing airs to sensing them as affect. The project, as opposed to graphs and charts, redescribes pollutants through a topographical, geo-referenced mesh, allowing for real-time navigation and making the process of sensing air pollution data more intuitive and embodied.
- 11 Chapter *touching particulate matter, atmospheric infrastructures* contextualises an installation called *Yellow Dust*, centred around infrastructures of air pollution, consisting of a mist canopy illuminated by yellow lights. The challenge again was visualisation: precipitation and air particles are mostly described in graphs, and the actual material properties of these elements are never represented. Calvillo and her collaborators aimed to make air visible and sensible, to determine if this "feeling" would elicit responses and affects (p. 169). Data gathered around pollution was turned into a mist of yellow humidity, tickling the skin of visitors. While it was conceived as a means to address the toxic air, it didn't aim to find a solution to it. Instead, it sought to explore other forms of engaging and sensing it, "physically, emotionally, culturally and poetically" (p. 168).
- 12 The chapter *holding helium and nitrogen, air design*, firstly expands the notion of air design. Gas attacks, wildfires, and toxic smokes are the result of a precise design intent, as the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk reminds us. In this light, questions of accountability arise. Then, the author focuses on the physical act of designing with air, as seen through two architectural installations for the SOS 4.8 art and music festival. She and

her team were tasked with designing an indoor exhibition space that would not alter the existing built environment. They then experimented with air design in two ways: they learned to create space with helium harnessed in silver balloons, and they experimented with smoke as a form of ephemeral architecture.

- 13 In the conclusions, she proposes that designing with air (air as a construction material) or designing air (air as an object of design) through environmental mediations opens up other types of affects with material entities. The intimate process of physically working with air reveals that bodies and spaces co-construct each other, and how architecture can engage with more-than-human entities in processes of mutual training and learning. She demonstrates how the agency of air shifted the way she and her team designed, built, and interacted in space and with one another during the process of designing and building installations.
- 14 While the book lacks major new theoretical propositions, the concepts and practices converge on one central point: the city's air is not a single, bounded object; rather, it is a complex, dynamic process. While these are conclusions reached by many scholars on whom Calvillo relies, the interesting step forward is linking such reflections to design practices. The air, conceptualised and put to work as an active subject, can be seen as an integral part of the design process: Calvillo shows how any design cannot forgo the active presence of air. However, rather than an argument, the book works towards a new sensitivity, as Timothy K. Choy states in the postface (p. 276). The reader becomes more attentive to the "thickness" of air, following the research and design examples of Calvillo.
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