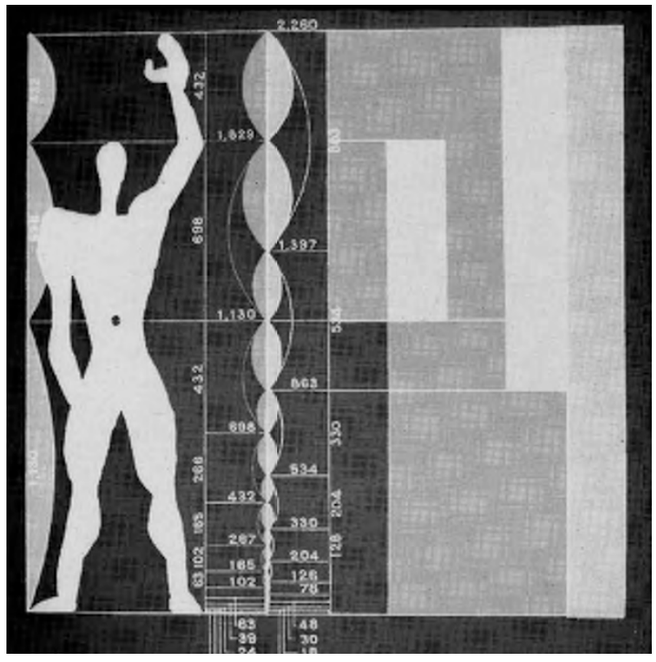
CONTESTED CONTINUITIES

Architectural Principles in the Age of Cybernetics
(Christopher Hight*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 248 pp., illus., $170.)

by Michael Leighton Beaman



Le Corbusier developed the Modulor in the tradition of Vitruvian Man to discover mathematical proportions in the human body in order to improve architecture.

DEPARTING FROM RESEARCH ON THE BAROQUE, Rudolf Wittkower in 1949 published what became for architects his most defining work: *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. What established this particular book as influential for architectural production was less the analysis of proportioning in Renaissance villas, but more his use of the diagram as a method of analysis. Ultimately, Wittkower rendered architecture's intellectual content a product of an analytical system that utilized the diagram. It was not long before this concept of analysis in architecture evolved into a method for producing architecture. The diagram as a generative model for architectural production was codified by Wittkower's protégé Colin Rowe in his essay, "Mathematics of the Ideal Villa," that pre-dated the publication of *Architectural Principles*, but nevertheless, was a derivative of Wittkower's methodology.

Rowe used the diagram—now separated from the analysis—to conjecture a conceptual link in the proportional order between Renaissance and Modern architecture. He accomplished this through a diagrammatic comparison between Le Corbusier's Villa Stein and Andrea Palladio's Villa Malcontenta. Although separated by 368 years of cultural definitions and technological progression, "Mathematics" posited that both villas embody the same system of spatial and proportional ordering, in effect producing a transcendent reading of architecture's techniques and effects. More important than the validity of the diagrammatic comparison of these two works was the formation of a mechanism for constructing architecture as a "body of knowledge" through time and across epitomes.

Implied in Rowe's mechanism is a delineation of what "belongs" to architecture and is one of what Christopher Hight in his book *Architecture in the Age of Cybernetics* terms "histories of continuity." Though only one of many ideas recounted in the book, the Wittkower / Rowe continuity is emblematic of a larger examination that Hight pursues through the vehicle of the human body's relationships to architecture—as subject, as metaphor, and as model. Unencumbered by the need to project a methodology of architectural production of his own, Hight addresses the correlations between present day architecture and its own constructed history, its quest for autonomy, and its continuing relevance to society.

Despite the play on Wittkower's title, Hight concentrates much of his effort into re-working the recent past, rather than examining the present or constructing the possible future. This reworked past is necessary in order to articulate both deliberate and unwitting contributions to the creation and embedding of Vitruvius' proportioned body as a classical model for architectural production. The book begins by dissecting claims of a departure from the classical model by the Modernist and the architectural philosophies this claim generated throughout the twentieth century.

He writes, "My primary site of examination is the sudden, heretofore unexplained, re-appearance of the human figure in mid-twentieth-century architecture and its relationship to recent interest in the body reference to issues of post-humanism, digital technology, globalization and science."

In unwinding the history of the classical model in modern architectural production, Hight produces clearly written accounts of this incredibly dense terrain, valuable for its rarity alone. This begins with a careful navigation of the arguments of phenomenologist Joseph Rykwert and Alberto Perez-Gomez who champion architecture's formation as an experiential art with those of the post-structuralist—Diana Agrest, Peter Eisenman, and Greg Lynn—who seek to find underlying social and technical systems at play in architecture production. This navigation establishes a focus on the formation of a classical architectural assemblage and sets an investigative tone for the book. Chapters on Le Corbusier's *Le Modular* and Siegfried Gideon's *Mechanization Takes Command* further expand on the human figure's breadth of entrenchment in modern architectural knowledge.

Through a number of studies into these histories the book's central thesis of tenuous solidity of any consistent humanist architectural foundation emerges. Hight notes that assemblages arise from differences in the organization of "discourses, institutions, practices, patronage, objects and representations" and that these assemblages constitute a "historical contingency" which should not be so easily overlooked nor claims of continuity taken at a face value.

Among the humanist tentacles examined none are more satisfying to read than the chapters: "Measured Response" and "Reflections on the Modular." Here the emergence of the mediated body in the form of statistically driven definitions, and extensions of the body's natural borders through technology integration, take shape as precursors to the cybernetic body. Hight builds this characterization of cybernetics as not a new, or even a yet-to-be-created human form, but as a "techno-social hybrid" that emerged mid-twentieth-century. Alluding to the possibility of this decidedly non-Vitruvian human as a site for further exploration, Hight contends that architecture has yet to fully address this redefinition. Though the book forwards a more transformative agenda for the future architect, one that eludes being a "super-specialized designer of form" or a "manager of extra architectural forces," it leaves one eager to find their own paths to achieve this transformation.

While much of the text requires a working knowledge of the actors in the texts and debates discussed, Hight provides a concise context for each, avoiding hyperbolic characterizations and presenting a thoughtfully, well-researched argument. With the prevailing trend to downplay critical discourse in favor of formal, technological, and theoretical expeditions, it is refreshing to see engagement in the philosophical underpinnings and future trajectories of these endeavors—all without merely dismissing them as products of a contested continuity.

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