

# Architecture and Anarchism

Seeing like an anarchist

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a review of

*Architecture and Anarchism: Building Without Authority* by Paul Dobraszczyk. Paul Holberton Publishing 2021

To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. To a state, every human activity looks like it needs to be pounded into the correct, pre-planned shape. State authorities always claim their social engineering schemes will raise living standards and promote the general happiness. No surprise, their plans do not always work.

The regimentation of built environments (and minds and bodies) originally deployed to make the world better, often just strengthen the state's authority with no discernible benefit to the communities affected. This, in brief, is the message of James C. Scott's 1999 *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*.

*Architecture and Anarchism* calls us to take heart—the relentless hammering by the state can be resisted. The book celebrates sixty alternative projects that have escaped improvement by planners. Paul Dobraszczyk wants to do more than catalog these encouraging phenomena. He wants them to help reconceptualize architecture as a practice that complements and amplifies the creation of self-organized communities, built without authority.

The introduction tells us how he understands anarchism and signals how he will organize his survey of anarchist architecture. His narrative will resonate favorably with most Fifth Estate readers, because it gives enough specificity (Proudhon, Bakunin, Catalonia, the Zapatistas) to establish a framework for discussion, but without any didactic urge to define the one-and-only true interpretation of the tradition. Dobraszczyk agrees with David Graeber that anarchism is more an attitude than a set of doctrines, more a set of practices and direct action than the implementation of a theoretical blueprint.

Dobraszczyk's application of anarchism to architecture unfolds in detail in the book itself. The introduction tells us that the first step is to look, in French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's words, "in the holes and chasms" of our built world for the exercise of self-determination in relation to the built environment.

Alternative economies of recycling and gift giving make for a guerrilla urbanism that challenges the dominant ways of city building. Anarchist architecture should complement and amplify social ecology, the benefits of diver-



Heidelberg Project, Detroit

sity, and mutual aid. The structures in which humans live should not predetermine that they will fight nature and each other.

Architecture is about built environments. The projects Dobraszczyk calls anarchist architecture are “built” in several senses. He traces their intentions to make some informative distinctions.

First, (in no particular order of importance) there are romantic imaginaries of escape, from isolated cabin hideaways to intentional communities. Among these are ephemeral gatherings (Burning Man) or enduring ones (the “freetown” Christiania in Copenhagen, which began as a squat in 1971 and exists today as a self-governing entity within the city).

Both these attempts at escape raise the problems inherent in the trade-off between a spontaneous urge for freedom and practical constraints. Is it a sellout for anarchistic communities to compromise with the outside world (and with their own non-directive principles) to ensure physical security, connections to the grid, and the supply of public services, food, and sanitation? To his credit, Dobraszczyk does not duck these contradictions, but raises them consistently as he describes the projects in the book. Each community reaches its own level of compromise—what it will and will not do in exchange for being left alone to evolve and thrive, or even to just survive. Dobraszczyk does not judge the choice made in any particular instance. His guiding rule of thumb is the distinction between rejection and resistance. Rejection is an all-or-nothing, one-time confrontation. Those who choose to reject totally the sterile, concrete-steel-and-glass warrens proffered by urban planners, Dobraszczyk observes, must either win or lose. The record of wins is not a happy one.

His own preference is for resistance, an ongoing process that gains ground in fits and bursts, and then defends enclaves. The goal is to avoid succumbing to the state’s blandishments or to its brute force. In this sort of resistance, winning and losing, success and failure, is not easily defined.

This is perhaps the key insight of the book. Seeing like an anarchist will not provide a blueprint for change (as, for example, Marxist theory claims to do), but it can improve our judgment about choices made to create communities for freedom and mutual aid.

Beyond romantic escapes, there are also spectacular eruptions of direct action, sticks thrust into the well-ordered anthills of urbanely-planned social life. Among Dobraszczyk’s illustrative examples are the relatively short-lived Resurrection City on the Mall in Washington, DC. and Occupy Wall Street, on the lower end of Manhattan. A longer-lasting community protesting nuclear weapons arose at the at Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp in England, 1981–2000.

Artistic whimsy is yet another motivating intention for anarchist architecture. Designers imaginatively push back against commercial commodification and against the sort of efficiency that calculates only how to jam the maximum number of occupants into the minimum cubic footage.

A vital dimension to look for in anarchistic built environments is democratic decision-making. Architecture is liberatory when it arises with the participation of those who will live and work in the environment created and when it provides a platform for their autonomous interactions to flourish.

Finally, there is construction of living spaces from necessity, as can be seen in the shanty towns of migrants and other people who find themselves dwelling precariously on the margins of urban societies.

To see the anarchist potential in Dobraszczyk’s historically, demographically, and aesthetically diverse array of projects requires a bit of squinting. Not all participants in all the book’s projects would call themselves anarchists. Yet Dobraszczyk’s ambition to find anarchist inspiration in many “holes and chasms,” and even in metropolises, lifts the spirit, because it opens the doors to new perceptions of what it means to build for free people and to free people.

This book belongs on every anarchist’s bookshelf, but it should not be content to rest there. It should be shared, discussed, argued with. The built environments, ephemeral or enduring, should be viewed through the author’s anarchist eyes, critiqued, and above all, new examples should be added.

This beautifully crafted book is a tool. Use it to pry up concrete slabs so that the light can shine on the green shoots pushing upwards from below.

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