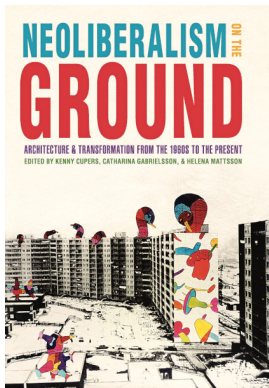


---

# Book Reviews

---

Kenny Cupers, Catharina Gabrielsson and Helena Mattsson (eds.)  
2020: *Neoliberalism on the Ground: Architecture and Transformation from the 1960s to the Present*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.



That architecture, spatial planning and urban design have been important sites of neoliberal reform is hardly a new argument. Nonetheless, *Neoliberalism on the Ground* makes a serious contribution to these already sprawling debates in terms of the truly ambitious scope and level of detail contained in this edited volume's 439 pages of architectural history. Spanning five continents, the 16 carefully excavated cases combine to produce a book far more thorough than one, or even two, special journal issues would allow.

The book's individual chapters are well written, track relevant and interesting cases, and are sure to provide fascinating new empirical details for anyone interested in historical geography or neoliberalism. It is difficult to single out just one or two key contributions, but Marie Louise Lobsinger's study of the shifting sociology of knowledge undergirding the post-68 critiques of planning is certainly worth mentioning; this chapter is particularly useful in shedding a much-needed light on some of the forgotten links between the early twentieth-century architects' debates on social statecraft and first-generation neoliberals and the Thatcher-Reagan era's railing against the 'Nanny State'.

Both Deepa Ramaswamy's and Janina Gosseye's chapters will also probably be among those which are most read, providing fresh, readable and detailed accounts of New York City's discretionary zoning regulations and the British right-to-buy programme, which are often seen as two breakthrough moments of neoliberalism. Each of the three editors' individual contributions likewise belong among the most thought-provoking chapters; Kenny Cupers' piece stands out especially, with its thorough discussion of how Oscar Newman's widely circulated notion of *defensible space* was grounded in a complex history of architectural theory which many of the proponents of place-making would do well to read their own work against.

The methodologically most interesting parts of the book are those chapters which study cases linking distinct sites, or which touch on the grounded work of making governmental practices move between places. Here, Sarah Lopez' study of the role of labour migrants' remittances in Mexican urbanization and Liam Ross' chapter on the transnational engineering corporation Arup Associates are worth highlighting, as well as Cupers' work on how far Newman's defensible space thesis has travelled.

Yet despite this sense of grounded translocal connection, and despite a partly recurring set of characters, the book's main challenge is how to link these separate stories located 'on the ground'. To a large extent this is a product of the editors' ambitious attempt to empirically cover so many facets of neoliberalization that synthesizing this work within the span of a single book becomes an impossible task. The three editors' introduction will certainly be helpful for those unfamiliar with the historical geographies of neoliberalism and the built environment, and aptly summarizes some of the important trends in recent research in order to provide some theoretical tools for navigating the wide variety of cases discussed. Reinhold Martin's interesting postscript adds another set of interpretative lenses and briefly comments on some of the findings. Nonetheless, these two more conceptual sections struggle to ground their theoretical interventions in the book's vast amount of new granular knowledge about neoliberalism and built form.

This leaves the reader wondering about the different ways the many stories told in the various chapters connect together. Is the influence of actors like Newman, associated with the neoliberal turn in architecture—which is treated in specific chapters—also visible in some of the other cases, and were they welcomed or dismissed in those instances? When were the neoliberal experiments in urbanism—such as those discussed in the chapters on New York and London—taken up as inspirational examples used to steer neoliberal reforms in other situations, and in which specific situations did they instead become cautionary tales of post-industrial downfall? Tracking these connections more explicitly would have been useful to help the reader develop a new sense of the geographies of these historical developments.

Ultimately, *Neoliberalism on the Ground* is an impressive collection of interesting and thoroughly researched studies of recent architectural history which is worth reading for anyone interested in understanding our present moment. The book will surely prove useful to many scholars researching the particular places and actors studied, as well as functioning as an introduction to architecture, urbanism and neoliberalism. The book's conceptual framings, and its specific chapters, are broadly in line with recent theoretical debates, confirming the usefulness of existing analytical concepts and narratives for architectural history. However, as a global architectural history of neoliberalism this work struggles somewhat to weave the particular studies together into a coherent narrative about how experiments and reforms on the ground are interconnected. This is arguably related to the fractured and contradictory aspects of actually existing neoliberalism; nonetheless, it is still an issue worth reflecting on as the writing of neoliberal architecture's global history continues.

**Johan Pries**, Lund University