



BOOK REVIEW: Gimme Shelter: The Phaidon Atlas of 21st Century World Architecture

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by James Croak

I have a weakness for large books, I don't mean a Janson *History of Art* or Webster's *Third International*, I mean the real bad boys, Taschen's *GOAT*, or MIT's hut-size *Bhutan*, these new bruisees, shelf smashers, the one's that arrive on refrigerator dollies and demand their own stand, their utter size defies the internet by creating a private museum experience of information.

When I hoisted the 15 lb. *The Phaidon Atlas of 21st Century World Architecture* and its Jetsons carrying case out of the crate my first thought was that I had misread the title, 21st Century? We're on the front end of this thing, the locomotive just passed and we won't see the caboose for another 91 years, why a history of something that just started, just eight percent out of view and Phaidon has a survey? Certainly though with some cause: the dramatic expansion of commercial and residential buildings since 2000 does warrant its own "Atlas," indeed if for no other reason than to reminisce about how good the boom was while it lasted, one can imagine that the Phaidon update of 2012 will be a Pamphlet of Room Additions, or Flyer of Carpet Replacement.



As it is this beautiful compendium of current architecture, an update of their 1994 *Atlas of Contemporary World Architecture*, is organized similar to a set of architectural plans: Big to small, geography to detail.

First are the continent divisions that are cleverly edge-printed with a color-coding making it easy to move about the 800 page book. These areas are further divided into regions, then cities, and then individual buildings. Further divided into plan drawings (looking down) elevations (viewing sideways) and sections (a slice). Thus one can review the foundation sections on new buildings in Oceania and then compare it quickly with the latest offering from Riyadh.

Each of 1,057 featured buildings is published with its latitude and longitude, fun for looking up on Google Earth, and soon to be much more fun when Phaidon completes its mobile phone application and your iPhone can walk you to the nearest included building.

According to their method, Phaidon began with over 10,000 new constructions and then a "jury of international experts" sifted them down to a thousand or so of the "best buildings." When I hear the word "best," I get nervous, and as I worked my way through the *Atlas* my worry increased; Michael Phelps is the "best" because he can outrun the Coast Guard, Muhammad Ali is the "best" because

the other guy falls down, but what makes something a “best” building? To function or not to function, that is the question.

Although Vitruvian functionalism, the antecedent of Louis Kahn’s form-shall-follow-function maxim that dominated twentieth century architecture, has receded as the *modus operandi* in new building design, for this jury the resultant style of formalism and minimalism that executed Kahn’s idea remains the yardstick, and fills this book, I mean most of it. Kahn’s buildings were purpose-driven and ornament cleaved to a bare minimum, a world-view that ultimately led to the International Style of Gropius, Le Corbusier, and van der Rohe and influenced generations of architects.

Why bare buildings were more useful was never fully reasoned; presently we are undergoing a tidal shift and the consensus is that the use of a building will change over time and purpose is best left to the furniture and tenants. Today’s architecture is to be a human stage, a platform upon which the poor owner struts and frets his five year lease and is gone and.... well you get the idea. But that acknowledged, why do we still need a minimalist formalist stage?

The large share of “best” buildings for this jury are in Europe: 348 pages dedicated to recent buildings in the European Union and 66 pages for those in the much larger American Union, a ratio of 44% vs. 8%. In the European half of the book I found mostly the afore-mentioned style bias making the outliers the real standouts: the perfectly sculpted Turning Torso Tower in Malmo by Santiago Calatrava is a stunner as is the cigar-shaped 30 St. Mary Axe by Foster & Partners. Lucky the architect who has an adventurous client who will finance these masterworks.

My favorite European architectural creation is not a building at all but a bridge, which Phaidon smartly includes, the one and a half mile long Millau Viaduct over the River Tarn also by Mr. Foster, is a structure in a class by itself, at 984’ above the ground the roadway is the height of the flight pattern at American airports.

Mostly the concrete and glass fetish fatigued and I longed for the wild decoration of a new Casa Batllós from a 21st century Gaudi or an Einsteinturm by a new Mendelsohn, instead I found the erased personality of lingering modernism flattening the scenery, the smaller buildings are so anonymous they could be swapped in the night and no one would be the wiser. I felt like Yale Prof. Vince-where’s-the-sidewalks-Scully flipping page after page of helicopter shots of shiny curtain walls.

The book works well as a travelogue containing charming structures in rural areas that I had not been to and made me want to visit, The Lourierpark Community center in South Africa, is a refreshing pergola hodge-podge of DayGlo colors that can be seen across the savanna for miles, built for a “placeless community” it houses everything from a library to a clinic. In Yemen the Khaylah Palace is a painter’s canvas, bright pastels against a brown cliff, an irresistible relief against a colorless desert.

The two American chapterettes, named West and East, continued the work anchored in modernism, some good, some dull, little on the short list of the best buildings. There are glaring omissions: Michael Graves, an architect of at least fourteen major buildings since 2000 is not included at all.

Hundreds of Shingle Style homes were built in the Hamptons on Long Island during the time frame

of this book, these are among the largest and most expensive homes on the planet, but none are here. This potpourri of Queen Anne on the seashore drove 1890's vacation architecture and then disappeared with the advance of Modernism, but suddenly repopulate the long green pastures of Sagaponack and Nantucket with lapping cedar shingles, chord windows, Palladian fan lights, crossing gables, and, quelle horreur, porches! But *Atlas* shrugged, the only entry for Sagaponack is a slatty Lean-to that will be dragged off as soon as the neighbors get up.

The portion of the book on China is thrilling, a 5,000-year-old country having little in common with the Western conversation, and with the twin motors of the newest capitalist economy and the Summer Olympics they created the most exciting architecture in this *Atlas*. The Olympic National Stadium by the Swiss team Herzog & de Meuron is the hands down favorite in this book. After winning the Pritzker Prize in architecture H&DM designed the Allianz Arena in Munich (included in the German section), which is built of hundreds of inflated foil panels held down by cables in neat Teutonic rows, slightly reminding me of something that happened to the Reichstag recently.

It's only when they get to Beijing do they go the full Christo with helter skelter steel beams wrapping this massive space. The building was nicknamed "bird's nest" by the Chinese and presented the perfect stage for the Olympic drama, so popular was the H&DM levity that homegrown copies of it sprang up in villages around China.

One can differ on esthetic preference—they are not facts—and, well, to each his own. Where the book gets odd is when it starts fortune-telling: colorful geographic tables preface each section predicting future population levels, unfortunately they are a mess, an oddity for Phaidon, error-ridden, incomprehensible and fabulist.

The editors admitted that, yes, they had understated the current population of China by 90% but pointed out that they also understated the present population of India by 90% so "they were in proportion to each other." (Yeah, that'll get you to the tenth grade.) The future population tables either showed a single country as doubling, reducing, or growing depending upon how one interprets the charts and I gave up trying to guess.

The carbon dioxide emissions by geography maps, a graphic of who is ejecting this molecule into the atmosphere are instructive, an interesting inclusion in an architectural book, and rightly so as the operative word in architecture today is "sustainability." Fortunately in the text they describe anthropogenic emissions as a "contributing factor," a smart hedge as the carbon prediction models have proven slightly less accurate than the Farmer's Almanac.

The modernist esthetic dominates this large survey, certainly desirable for those who lean that way but slightly annoying for those who don't. Personally I would have liked to rummage through the other 9,000 creations that hit the cutting room floor looking for a warmer eccentricity in our quest for shelter. It's Eurocentric but contains lots of entries from out of the way places that kept my household turning pages late into the night. All surveys are a narrative created by exclusion as much as inclusion, a difficult necessity that is used to sort the world, and with architecture what a world that is.

BASIC FACTS: *The Phaidon Atlas of 21st Century World Architecture* was conceived and edited by

Phaidon editors. Published by Phaidon. 800 pages. www.phaidon.com.

HAMPTONS INSIDER: [Herzon & de Meuron](#), the architectural firm who designed Beijing's [National Stadium](#) for the 2008 Summer Olympics discussed in the book, designed the [Parrish Art Museum's](#) new museum in Water Mill, NY. The design just won a design award by Travel + Leisure.

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