

Architecture Depends

Jeremy Till

MIT Press, 2009

Reviewed by Marie S.A. Sorensen AIA

I sit on the roof deck of a tall building north of Boston. I am on the deck for the view as much as for the sun—and for the opportunity to measure Jeremy Till’s words against the multiples before me: cars, bridges, buildings, smokestacks, trains, trash piles, and repair materials expediently affixed; many, many “messy” contexts. Through the lens of Le Corbusier, or the German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher, I see a coherence of taut edges and landmark spires framing the Merrimack River. I return a phone call and give a quote for architectural services (a referral from a local hardware store): \$5,000. The quantity is misunderstood. How much can you pay? Five hundred.

Is the view from the street more reliable than the view from the tower? Till’s mission in *Architecture Depends* is to pull apart the certainty with which most architects approach their work. A coach who can see the bigger game, fiercely loyal but pushing for improvement, Till coaxes and prods toward relevance. He looks to anthropology, spatial geography, community planning, and literature to tease out the “situatedness” of buildings, an issue that only he and a few others have defined with such attention.

Mess—Till’s central concept—is both at

odds and at one with architectural practice. Mess is the unpredictability of interactions with buildings resulting in alteration, and mess is fragility: the “reality that [buildings] always enter the social realm as transient objects....” Coach Till would like us to appreciate weathering and other changes in buildings’ appearance because of natural causes, either harnessing them or marking milestones of “positive transformation toward completion” as David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi have done in *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time*.

Debunking Modern and Beaux Arts pedagogies alike, Till does not reject design-ordering principles altogether; rather he refutes the certainty of holding onto one set of principles as opposed to “remaining open.” How, then, does Till decide what things look like? What does he consider enlightened practice?

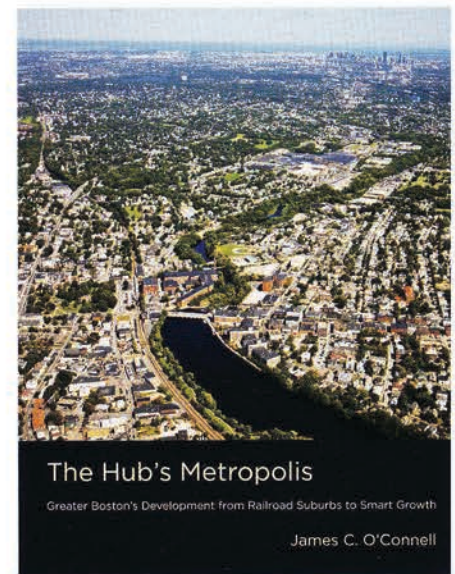
Till holds that progress is false, but he is an inventor of methods, his favorite two being technological hybrids (“lo-fi”) and narrative. Till’s “lo-fi” architecture rejects the wasteful fetishism of high-maintenance design: curtainwalls of clear shiny glass, for example, cleaned acrobatically at great expense. Till enjoys provocative jokes. At Interbuild, a high-profile British building materials tradeshow, he and Sarah Wigglesworth (architect, his wife) make a compressed hay bale wall sheathed in polycarbonate that instigates shouting into a mobile phone from one onlooker: “I am standing in front of a *fooking* haystack, and they are calling it the future!”

Narrative as an ordering principle—memory-images cast as words, then as buildings—is also fruitful for Till. He explains how the design of his home was negotiated with Wigglesworth over several weeks as they told stories of spatial memories to each other while walking through the back streets of London. Later, he cites a ribbon-cutting ceremony in which Frank Gehry allows that his inspiration for the Guggenheim Bilbao was his grandmother’s carp pond, experienced as a child; Till stands by, willing “Frank” (whom he presumably knows) not to lead us to the conclusion that he has made “fishy space.”

In *Architecture Depends*, Till has both whet our appetite for more provocative hybrids and “word-buildings,” and set the stage for an

extensive project that bridges anthropology and psychology: a longitudinal ethnography of the occupants of a building or district; complementing this, a study of people’s visual habits and spatial memories. While arguing for the view from the street, Coach Till, now head of Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design in London, is an inducted member of the tower tribe.

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The Hub's Metropolis: Greater Boston's Development from Railroad Suburbs to Smart Growth

James C. O'Connell

MIT Press, 2013

Reviewed by David Luberoff

Preparing to move to Boston in 2000, James O'Connell went “scouting for a home to buy in Milton near the Blue Hills Parkway. As a urban and cultural historian, he recognized that the road and nearby neighborhoods were typical of Boston’s inner-core suburbs and thought it would be interesting to learn more about how they were built. Thus began a more than decade-long exploration that culminates with *The Hub's Metropolis*.

O'Connell, a community planner for the National Park Service in Boston, fills