

REGEN PROJECTS

Rose, Julian. "Julian Rose on Wolfgang Tillman's Book for Architects." *Artforum* (Summer 2015) pp. 137 – 138 [ill.]

ARTFORUM

REALIST ESTATES

Julian Rose on Wolfgang Tillmans's *Book for Architects*

ALTHOUGH WOLFGANG TILLMANS'S *Book for Architects*, 2014, offers an encyclopedic survey of the contemporary built environment, those to whom its title is addressed are likely to recognize surprisingly little of their own handiwork. Architects have never lacked ego, and we live in an age in which their trade has taken on an outside importance and unprecedented popularity as a premium product of the international culture industry—charged with all manner of place making and identity branding. But this has led to a myopic understanding of architecture as little more than a series of individual buildings as prestige projects, isolated urban interventions that remain largely discrete from the broader contexts they seek to transform. Tillmans's work, which debuted at the Venice Architecture Biennale last year and is currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, offers a far more inclusive view. The artist has a long-standing interest in architecture as both a photographic subject and a frame for experience, and *Book for Architects* is an extension of this fascination, taking the form of a kind of photo-diary of his day-to-day encounters with architecture over more than a decade. Tillmans lives and works in two global capitals, London and Berlin, and travels widely; the piece combines more than 450 still images (shot in and around dozens of cities across thirty-seven countries) into a two-channel video installation of some forty minutes. The result is an equally radical rejoinder to both the glossy coffee-table volumes and the rapid Tumblr-style blogs that play such a major role in defining architecture's cultural status today; it presents architecture not as it is conceived by its practitioners, or as it is pictured in the popular imagination, but as it actually exists in the world.

At first glance, things look grim. As the installation's dual digital projectors silently cycle through the images at an unremitting pace, the initial impression is of an oppressive sameness. Take the numerous aerial views of cities—bleak, gray, gridded, relentless. A similar uniformity is visible in many interiors, particularly spaces of transit (airports, hotels) and consumption (shopping malls, storefronts). The former tend toward the starkly generic, illuminated by the same dull fluorescent glare, occupied by the same crowds of harried travelers who are directed by the same uniformed staff. The latter are characterized by garish confusion: dazzling lights, loud colors, reflective glass, shiny metal.

This repetitiveness is not rooted in the individual photographs themselves, which have the spontaneity typical of Tillmans's work and are often stunning in the sheer visual complexity and variety with which they map architecture's dense, tangled textures across myriad scales of construction, ranging from individual rooms to entire municipalities. Rather, the consistency seems to emerge

inexorably from Tillmans's subject matter itself, almost in spite of the endlessly varied perspectives he presents (a variation reinforced by the format of the slides, where images are often paired or even layered on top of each other). In this sense, his project is a distinct departure from the long tradition of typological architectural analysis carried out by artists and architects such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, Dan Graham, Ed Ruscha, or Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, who used a standard format to emphasize uniformity in their subjects. Moreover, their projects tended to focus on a literally superficial similarity, with each structure typically presented in a frontal facade view, while Tillmans emphasizes a more fundamental similarity in the experience of space, suggesting that the physical symptoms of globalization are the same, no matter where or how you look.

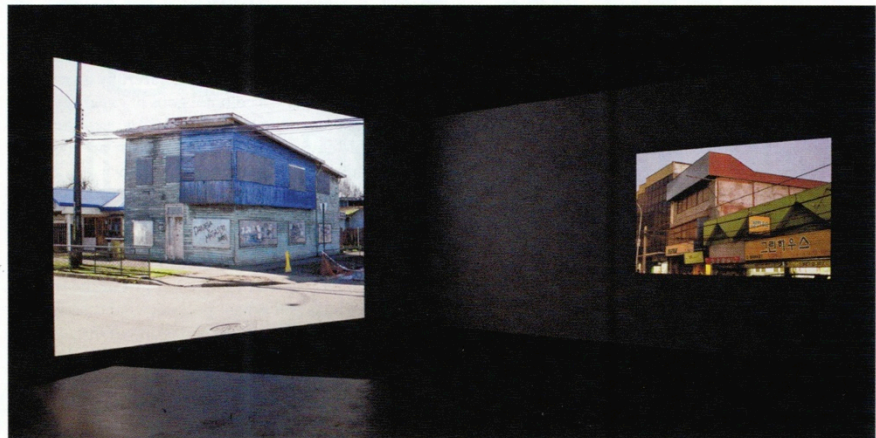
Inevitably, *Book for Architects* also includes famous buildings by well-known designers. But part of the brilliance of Tillmans's photographs lies in the way they undercut the mythology of the iconic structure, reminding us that, as actually experienced in the city, even the most ostensibly arresting landmarks frequently offer a relatively quotidian experience. Consider a pointed image: Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall (2003) in Los Angeles, glimpsed through a windshield (surely the most common view of the building in a notoriously

car-centric city), its signature swooping panels barely recognizable through layers of reflection and glare, and partially obscured by the rearview mirror. Lest we miss the point, Tillmans pairs this with an image of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's 2014 "Freedom Tower" in New York, captured from a (literally and metaphorically) pedestrian viewpoint a block or two from its base, its hallmark spire cropped out of the top of the frame, the sheen of its mirrored facade echoing that of another glass tower in the foreground.

Even more subversive are the photographs whose subjects are almost, but not quite, identifiable as famous buildings. A swath of fussily patterned curtain wall, an aggressively faceted corner, the hint of a dramatic curve—these moments suggest that the highly individualized styles of today's top architects may be more a matter of marketing than reality, ultimately reducible to a remarkably similar set of material palettes, structural systems, and formal strategies. Tellingly, too, these images collapse the distinction between individual and corporate authorship upon which so many assumptions about the cultural value of architecture are founded. Zaha Hadid? Kohn Pedersen Fox? Without a full picture, it's hard to say.

In the process of breaking down icons into fragments, Tillmans undermines not just the buildings themselves but the conventions of architectural photography. The

Tillmans sees photography as a means not of transforming architecture into images but of understanding the occupation of space.



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Book for Architects*, 2014, two-channel digital video, color, silent, approx. 40 minutes. Installation view, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2015.

REGEN PROJECTS



medium has long colluded in flattening the specificity and complexity of spatial constructions into easily consumed images, aiding in architecture's reduction to branding and speeding its transformation into commodity. Tillmans makes this point bluntly in several images of the billboards often erected at construction sites, where garish, photo-realistic renderings trumpet idealized visions of the developments to come.

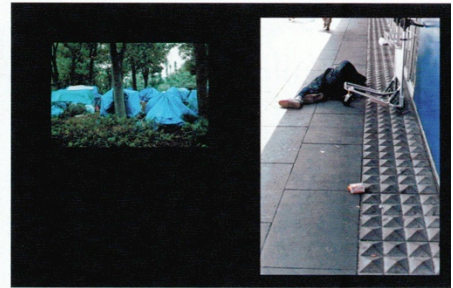
Despite all this, *Book for Architects* is not a pessimistic project; it is an ambitious recalibration of the relationship between architecture and image. Tillmans describes his fundamental goal as using his photographs to capture the physical experience of architecture, giving a vivid, sensory quality that he poetically describes as a "how-does-it-feel-ness." He sees photography, in other words, as a means not of transforming architecture into images but of understanding the occupation of space. He has achieved this effect in part through straightforward technical means, by eschewing the tilt-lenses and wide angles typical of architectural photography, and instead shooting all the project's images with a fixed-focal-length lens that he feels most faithfully represents the perspective of the human eye. And indeed, many of the images he presents have the undeniable familiarity of architecture seen in passing—incidental glances out of windows, across streets, from planes—views indicative of both the Benjaminian state of distraction in which we typically experience architecture and the degree to which it has become the background Muzak of contemporary urban life.

But many of the photographs are far more deliberate and detailed, particularly the close-ups, which suggest an intimate bodily connection to architecture, indexing the artist's inhabitation of the spaces he depicts: We sense him leaning into a corner to see how two materials meet, or crouching down on the sidewalk to study the way a drainpipe emerges from a building's foundation.

To emphasize the physicality of architecture, Tillmans seems to argue, is also to engage in photography as a physical act. This physicality is echoed in the layout of the installation, where the two video channels are projected onto perpendicular walls, presenting the images in an immersive environment. *Book for Architects* extends Tillmans's interest—present since his first major gallery show in 1993—in the spatial mechanics of exhibition design, his insistence that viewers consider not only the world he presents in his images but the way in which his photographs exist in the world.

The results of Tillmans's scrutiny are sometimes hilarious. Again and again, we see the endless contingencies through which buildings escape architects' oversight, the numerous ways in which even the most carefully considered designs are no match for the messy business of daily use, of changing needs and passing time: A mass of hoses is jammed through a wall to enable the ad hoc installation of an air conditioner; a tangle of cables running across a ceiling disrupts the carefully articulated union of a beam and a column; gobs of expanded foam insulation ooze out of the gap around a retrofitted pipe and dribble down toward the floor. These are the kinds of things that drive most architects crazy.

But at other times, the results of the artist's examination are simply heartbreaking. This is particularly true of the images of a multipart cardboard shelter constructed against the polished granite base of what appears to be an office high-rise: an example not just of the ways in which buildings and urban spaces inevitably seem to be adapted far beyond their designers' intentions, but also a reminder that often architects are so focused on aesthetic control that they lose their ability to address the broader social and economic realities in which their designs are embedded. Indeed, Tillmans's most damning statement about architects' misguided obsession with control comes from images of various "antihomless"



Two stills from Wolfgang Tillmans's *Book for Architects*, 2014, two-channel digital video, color, silent, approx. 40 minutes.

devices—physical barriers meant to fill or obstruct spaces that might otherwise become occupied by itinerants. One photograph, in particular, shows a man lying on the ground just inches beyond a field of pyramidal bumps that is clearly meant to discourage sleeping next to the adjacent wall. It's a distressing reminder that so long as buildings are understood as static materializations of an a priori design intent, exigencies of inhabitation will always trump the assertion of control.

These images draw added poignancy from the fact that Tillmans also includes several slides of the most expensive home in the world, the skyscraper built as the private residence of the Indian business tycoon Mukesh Ambani, by Perkins+Will in Mumbai, at a reported cost of more than one billion dollars. In fact, housing in its many forms—from refugee tents huddled along borders to suburban family homes to the anonymous apartment blocks that proliferate on the outskirts of cities around the globe—is a recurring theme of *Book for Architects*, and these juxtapositions offer a powerful reminder that today, economic and political difference is often expressed most directly in architectural terms. And yet, more than any other field of contemporary cultural production, architecture also approaches a universal condition. It remains grounded in certain fundamental problems and entangled with the same basic social and cultural conditions the world over, even if cultural (and economic) specificity continues to emerge in the responses posed by architects and inhabitants. Indeed, given an ever more urbanized population and continuously accelerating growth, architecture increasingly is our world; not just a backdrop but the scaffolding that sets the stage for social interactions and dictates the conditions of life itself. But architecture in this expanded sense will remain out of architects' grasp until they recognize that they must flexibly intervene in and adapt to the social, economic, and environmental systems that shape it, rather than merely declaring authority in the face of the chaos these factors seem to introduce. It is presumably to provoke this recognition that Tillmans has created his book for architects. □

Book for Architects is on view through July 5 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

JULIAN ROSE IS A SENIOR EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.