



Kenneth Caldwell

Photo: Paul Crabtree

Further Readings, or Everyday 101

By Kenneth Caldwell

When the LINE editorial board started talking about the architecture of everyday, we couldn't really agree on what that meant. So we did what most architects and writers do: we bought books that we may never finish reading. These are some of the books we looked at.

Architecture of the Everyday, edited by Steven Harris and Deborah Berke. Princeton Architectural Press, 1997, 229 pages, \$17.95.

This is the place to start if you are trying to find a thoughtful dialog on the topic. Despite the intellectual jargon (the word "hegemony" early in an essay is always a warning sign), Harris's essay seems perfectly clear, at least compared to a Peter Eisenman lecture. Harris is interested in resisting all the recent trends, what he calls "a distrust of the heroic and formally fashionable, a deep suspicion of the architectural object as a marketable commodity."

At the center of the book are the ideas of social theorist Henri Lefebvre. The book reprints Lefebvre's relatively short essay "The Everyday and Everydayness," originally published more than 30 years ago. Mary McLeod provides an introduction to Lefebvre's thinking, noting that he "believed that revolutionary change was a slower, more comprehensive process, less theatrical and individualistic, necessitating a more grounded engagement with everyday life." The radicalism of modernism or another avant-garde was not going to do the trick. But as McLeod points out, the celebration of the ordinary has often focused only on the aesthetic dimension, not the larger social issues that Lefebvre tried to address. He wanted to "reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary." The other essays in this volume cover a wide range of topics, in some cases intimate and in others broad, as in Joan Ockman's essay on how socially progressive modernism from the 1920s was appropriated by American corporate interests in the middle of the century. It happened, in part, because Mies and Gropius endorsed it. For those of us who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, Ernest Pascucci's essay, "Intimate (Tele)Visions," will be the most fun. He describes the power of the architecture depicted on sitcoms, complete with floor plans! These everyday architectural interpretations became as significant as our own homes. In the concluding essay, coeditor Deborah Berke tries to tie the threads together with ten key ideas for creating an architecture of the everyday. The tone of the essays varies from incredibly dense to relatively clear. It's worth a go.

Small Things Considered: Why There Is No Perfect Design, by Henry Petroski. Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, 288 pages, \$25.00.

Petroski isn't trying to come up with a design method, or to break down the process by which we acquire designed objects. He tells the story of why perfect design eludes us. The plastic device that keeps a pizza from touching its box is also a great egg holder, but it has been refined, as most things are. Just because perfection is out of reach does not mean we won't keep trying to make things better. It's an optimistic idea, and applies to the design of buildings and objects--to all things everyday.

Emotional Design: Why We Love (Or Hate) Everyday Things, by Donald A. Norman. Basic Books, 2004, 257 pages, \$26.00.

The Design of Everyday Things, by Donald A. Norman. Basic Books, 2002, 272 pages, \$16.75.

Recently reissued, Donald Norman's landmark 1990 book, *The Design of Everyday Things*, is standard reading for anybody interested in the idea that the everyday matters. His ideas about usability and principles of design have been mined for all kinds of things, including the Web, which barely existed when the book was first published.

His recent book, *Emotional Design*, explores how emotional connections influence our consumer decisions. He describes three types of connections: "visceral," "behavioral," and "reflective." Visceral connections arise from the way an object looks, while behavioral connections refer to how effective and enjoyable it is to use. Reflective connections are more about the narrative. Why do we buy interesting objects when traveling? To remind us of our story of the experience. These three bring together the emotional and cognitive. Norman argues that the practical aspects of design are not enough, and perhaps not as important as the emotional. His writing is not pedantic, but accessible.

The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness, by Virginia Postrel. Harper Collins, 2003, 237 pages, \$24.95.

Postrel writes an economics column for the *New York Times* and has written a book that seems to suggest that style is a basic human trait. She is known for her libertarian views, warning us against the centralizing powers of the state. What is odd is that she does not seem so concerned about the centralizing power of globalization that has given rise to our obsession with style, and to the near-slave labor that seems to be producing it all. For example: "To a peasant in a subsistence economy, significantly better housing or faster transportation might require more than a lifetime's income, while a bit of decorative carving or an elaborately braided hairstyle takes only time, skill, and minimal expense. In this instance someone will choose aesthetics over more 'basic' goods." Choose? This is a choice? Despite the hype this dull and offensive book has received, we have the luxury of recommending that you avoid it.

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