George Barnett Johnston's recent book, *Assembling the Architect: The History and Theory of Professional Practice* (2019), is a careful reconstruction of American architecture in the 1900s. Johnston's ambition is to place issues surrounding the running of the architectural office back into their historical trajectory. Rather than a standard work of archival historiography, the book is embedded in a sociological approach that privileges 'the situated actions of individual agents joined together in constructive practices' (183). In a sense, this history runs against the grain, shunning the architectural canon, and focusing on the everyday architectural practice at the expense of the Louis Sullivans and Frank Lloyd Wrights.

Assembling the Architect highlights the concerns of architects in that era: the relationships with clients, contractors and engineers, developing standardized contracts to manage these relations, office administration and layout, competitions, fees. The book describes the efforts made by architects to develop pragmatic and suitable responses to changes in the building industry, and to balance efficiency and quality, profit and respectability, while operating in a transforming, uneven terrain. Johnston's detailed and colourful vignettes are a rigorous work of reconstruction, drawing upon architects' letters, industry journal articles, architecture school yearbooks, exhibition catalogues and more.

The book is populated by diverse protagonists, ranging from builder William Sayward to Frank Miles Day's *Handbook of Architectural Practice* (1920–). It drifts seamlessly from discussing the satirical publication *Architec-tonics: The Tales of Tom Thumtack*, to a study of the career of its author, architect Frederick Squires, to a review of its illustrator (and Squires' ex-classmate) Rockwell Kent, to an examination of the latter's employer and collaborator, the architect, author and critic George Chappell. When one protagonist moves to the fore, others take a step back. The return to protagonists from the early chapters later in the book provides cohesion and narrative continuity. The easiness in which the text glides from one protagonist to another (think of Richard Linklater's 1990 film Slacker) provides a rewarding reading experience. This 'drift' is enabled by the web of relations that existed among the New York architects of that era.

The book's overall framework is not discussed in much detail. Johnston stresses the specificity of American architecture (xvii, 119) and argues that its development was mostly independent of European academic architecture. The American architect emerged, he asserts, from the interstices separating craftspeople and clients around the mid-nineteenth century. 'Early membership in the architecture profession in this nation was drawn from the ranks of both owners and builders, not from pre-formed vocation […]' (145). This process of professionalization and elevation of architecture from the crafts, it is suggested, took place in the period in question, 1870-1920.

These arguments conveniently overlook the parallels in disciplinary development between Europe and the United States: the dominance of craftspeople and absence of architects in the terrain of housing, until the exponential growth of commissions around the mid-nineteenth century; the related scaling up of developers and the economy of housing; and the novel involvement of architects in such housing projects. These American and European processes appear well-synchronized, as the pressures then faced by architects -- economic, social, technological, and technocratic -- would have been similar in form in New York, Manchester or Paris around the 1850s, even if different in their specific

manifestations. The British periodical *The Builder*, first published in late 1842, demonstrates the similarities in interests and concerns of the British building industry.

Assembling the Architect also disregards the early emergence of a modern discipline of architecture in the centuries since the Renaissance, a process in which architecture was severed from the crafts, systematic drawings codes were developed, and academies were formed. It was, in effect, a process of professionalization that shaped the conditions of architectural practice in the nineteenth century. The existence of a professional elite before the era in question is presumed by Johnston to be irrelevant to the processes he describes (145, 183, 209). Yet such an elite, feeble as it was in the United States, necessarily steered the development of architectural practice, even if from afar, by articulating a trajectory to social respectability and by providing a horizon towards which the professionals involved in home building should progress. A key source for Johnston's argument, an article by David Brain (1991), does not ignore this. Indeed, Johnston admits that by the 1900s:

> the ambiguities of architects' social and vocational origins had been largely forgotten or elided. Instead of rising out of the building crafts […], 'real architects' of recent memory were assumed to have all been artists, dilettantes, and gentlemen steeped in their discipline but aloof from both the messy practicality of building and the ethical morass of business (13).

The American architects of the early twentieth century described by Johnston appear to be related to European academic architecture, whether this be in their education (Chappell had attended the Beaux-Arts), their everyday practice, or in their social standing. The process in which 'architecture' annexed a vast territory of 'housing', in which an area that was previously the domain of craftspeople came to fall under the control of the architect, is a fascinating and important one that requires more study and elaboration.

The book aims to construct a 'macro-history' via a series of interrelated 'micro-histories'. As such, Johnston's framing is neither the book's main interest nor its major contribution. Instead, his book provides a portal into the world of American architects a century ago, a very different era than the present day, yet one occupied by many of the same concerns that continue to animate architects. The book contributes to a growing body of work that escapes the iron grip of dominant narratives foregrounding architectural movements, design, and key architects. Instead, this emerging body of scholarship focuses on the institution of architecture, 'infrastructures' and bureaucracies: the implicit systems, processes and tools that shape the discipline 'under the radar' (see, for example, Cupers 2013; Easterling 2014; Lloyd Thomas 2016; Moravánsky and Kegler 2017). *Assembling the Architect* describes the relations of production within the building industry and suggests that agency exists in the forms in which these relations materialize. It thus provides an in-depth look at an era in which many of the institutional apparatuses that determine American architecture today came into being.

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