



Why We Build

Rowan Moore

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In an era of brash, expensive, provocative new buildings, a prominent critic argues that emotions-such as hope, power, sex, and our changing relationship to the idea of home-are the most powerful force behind architecture, yesterday and (especially) today

We are living in the most dramatic period in architectural history in more than half a century: a time when cityscapes are being redrawn on a yearly basis, architects are testing the very idea of what a building is, and whole cities are being invented overnight in exotic locales or here in the United States.

Now, in a bold and wide-ranging new work, Rowan Moore-former director of the Architecture Foundation, now the architecture critic for The Observer-explores the reasons behind these changes in our built environment, and how they in turn are changing the way we live in the world. Taking as his starting point dramatic examples such as the High Line in New York City and the outrageous island experiment of Dubai, Moore then reaches far and wide: back in time to explore the Covent Garden brothels of eighteenth-century London and the fetishistic minimalism of Adolf Loos; across the world to assess a software magnate's grandiose mansion in Atlanta and Daniel Libeskind's failed design for the World Trade Center site; and finally to the deeply naturalistic work of Lina Bo Bardi, whom he celebrates as the most underrated architect of the modern era.

Just published in the UK, Why We Build is already being hailed as a vibrant new classic:

"Moore's writing is lively and engaging, his language straightforward, his case studies unpredictable and instructive. . . . Moore certainly knows how to make these sacred monsters come alive on the page."

-The Evening Standard (London)

"Mischievous . . . [Moore] has a lot to offer those who like verbal flexibility and thought-provoking aphorisms. . . . Elegant and witty, with a sometimes eighteenth-century sensuality, this is a hard-hitting book with great panache." -The Daily Telegraph

"Elegantly written. . . . What Moore explores with insight and wit [is] the DESIRE to build. The emotions carrying it. The drive for beauty, monumentality, display, a kind of immortality." -The New Humanist

"[A] fresh analytic approach [that is] engaging, outrageous, wise, very probably true and rather important ." - Country Life

Readers will never look at architecture the same way again.

Why We Build Details

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Paul says

I read Moore's articles in the Observer sometimes and he normally has an interesting point of view on the latest architecture, so i was looking forward to this.

He writes about a variety of architectural subject, from the wandering home, the erotic in architecture and the building of financial power houses, and so on. The book is liberally scattered with B&W images of the buildings that he is discussing, which do enhance the text.

However, It was a little disappointing in the end. A lot of the book is quite abstract, and it almost felt like I was reading about the philosophy of architecture rather than a rational explanation of why we fell the need and desire to build magnificent places.

Ian says

"Building 20 was eventually demolished in 1998, decades later than first planned, having become, according to one user, the 'best experimental building ever built'. Also called the 'plywood palace' or the 'magical incubator', it housed some of MIT's greatest achievements, in communications, linguistics, nuclear science, cosmic rays, acoustics, food technology, stroboscopic photography, and computing. Its users said its secret was that it was 'a very matter-of-fact building' where 'one never needs to worry about injuring the architectural or artistic value of the environment'. Researchers could move partitions, knock holes in walls, nail things to the structure, and open windows when they wanted. They could adapt it to their practical needs, and make their corner of it personal. Building 20's other great asset was its spreading, horizontal layout, which encouraged chance meetings and impromptu collaborations" (Moore, pg. 71).

KimNica says

Overall this is a very good read.

Moore is a bit wordy at times and I think he could have said what he had to say in a hundred words less, but this is still an enlightening and enjoyable work. The way Moore refers to specific cases and buildings to draw out the different aspects that influence building/creating architecture makes it very engaging. Personally I now feel inspired to read more about the topic!

Rory Hyde says

I'm usually suspicious of these architecture books pitched at a general audience, but this is definitely more than that. Moore puts forward a subtle and complex case for the importance of buildings that expand our social and public experience of the city. I've filled my copy with post-its. Terrific stuff.

Stuart says

In often beautiful prose, Moore here writes to justify his life pursuing responses to the big questions pertaining to architecture. 'Why we build?' as a question, is answered in many ways and in well-organised digestible chapters, the most affecting of which stem from building as response to feeling.

Take, for instance, the reconstruction of South Manhattan after 9/11, about which Moore is able to craft such an engaging narrative of its bureaucratic planning twists and turns that the area known as Ground Zero will now to me adopt a far shadier hue than its shiny skyward-penetrative logos might aspire to. The transference of national grief and anger into physical object, and similar emotional transferences charted in the house of John Soane and Larry Dean's commercially ill-fated Dean Gardens, is presented in a way which awakened me to the consequences of emotion on a built environment - on the physical.

Moore focuses mostly on the key figures of Modernist and Postmodern architecture; Van der Rohe, Rogers, a personal encounter with the late Zaha Hadid, but brings into the mainstream apparently his own idol, the Italian/Brazilian Lina Bo Bardi whose work he considers emblematic of what ought to be architecture's ambition - to exist in time - when they were built, and as they continue to provide and function.

I have since explored some of his articles on The Guardian for which he writes as the Architecture Critic. He is able to write in an absolutely stunning way about our surroundings that can influence the reader into experiencing space in a sympathetic, educated way. His descriptions are never too technical for those without architectural training, in spite of his rich background as a practising architect and Director of the Architecture Foundation.

Ragheb Aljaoor says

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Sandy says

Frank Lloyd Wright's clients often complained about the furniture he designed for the homes and offices he built for them. Why? It was often ill-suited for the uses to which it was supposed to be put, out of scale or proportion to the users, or had some other defect that suggested he wasn't actually thinking about the people who would use them.

After reading this book, you may well conclude that most Brand Name Architects don't do that. Rowan

Moore writes about architecture as if people mattered: this book is stuffed full of ego, sex, money and power, things usually not found in writing about architecture but things that all factor into what gets built and why.

This is actually a morality tale of sorts, and it has a hero: Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi, who he considers the most underrated modern architect of the 20th century. He makes a compelling argument for that view by contrasting her buildings, and more importantly how she arrived at them, to the other structures thrown up over history assessed in this book.

At the end, you may not agree with his critique of architectural thinking, but you can't finish this book and not have your thinking on the subject changed, at least a little bit.

Paul says

This book rates highly because it has changed the way I think about buildings, and I like books that make a change. Its loose central premise is that buildings are, and have always been, attempts at refining various concepts and desires. Note 'attempts' - all too often, edifices act only as illusions of concrete ideas, as you can never perfectly turn your ideas into something solid. I think this is partly due to the imperfection of art, and partly due to the elasticity of buildings. This last part is what I found most interesting, as I had never stopped to consider how and why buildings 'fail' and end up being used for purposes that completely differ from the original intent: gothic cathedrals become tourist traps, functional warehouses become luxury flats, aristocratic terraces become ghettos. Moore seems to have a grasp on the poetry of this failure, which for me is this book's main point of interest.

A few minor annoyances, mainly: stop telling us about the apparent conspiracy against Zaha Hadid! Although some might be interested in the case study, it did come across as a chapter-long vindication of one of Moore's mates. Apart from that, give the book a read.

Martin Dubeci says

Ve?mi pekne napísané, relaxa?né. Namiesto klasickej história architektúry autor rozmýšla nad stavbami skrz motivácie, ktoré nás k ich postaveniu ženú. Ak téma zaujíma, stojí za pre?ítanie.

Danny says

The chapter about how/why the new World Trade Center was built was so good, but the chapter about "architecture and sexuality" was so bizarre and pointless that I can't believe they were in the same book.

Sasha Martinez says

A building is not a sentence, which in principle has the ability to match and express a thought closely. It is not linear, like language. Compared to the fluidity of words, a building is atrociously clumsy, but it can be lived and inhabited as books cannot be.

This is what I've been doing for more than five years: Consciously cultivating a shared language with P., and actively searching for the books (because how else can I do this) to help me do so. "I am interested in this because this interests you" signals how contrived this kind of reading is, but over time my own curiosity grew, and I came to these books—"his" books, I first figured—willingly, and on my own. [Note: P. is an architect, though (before he met me) he quit his job at a firm to paint fulltime—a decision I've too-often envied, not least because I know I can't do that for my own writing-reading. Lately, he's been building houses for the mother of the fiancée of one of his friends (*how else can we get jobs but through these convolutions?*); sometimes, the state university in his hometown invites him to teach graduating students, sometimes the students go to him and ask him to be a thesis consultant.]

There remains a tiny whisper, though, that this a secondhand fascination. I can't shake off the feeling that I'm impinging onto someone else's territory. [*You are literature, Sasha; they are everything else.*] I bought *Why We Build* after P. and I had broken up, though it first came to my attention in the weeks prior acknowledgement of the erosion. I read Rowan Moore because I wanted to, and because I felt that I had no go-to books for a comprehensive discourse on architecture, save Gaston Bachelard and Alain de Botton's takedown of Le Corbusier. And an "architecture critic," Rowan Moore is describe—has there ever been a more ludicrously conspicuous label? I read Rowan Moore because it interested me, and it would have interested someone I loved.

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Moore's book rests on a simply-stated premise: Architecture is a fluid concept, founded on and forged by not only material but of emotion and ambition—and (to the oversight of many a builder) one that *evolves through* the two as well, and over time. A building is structure, symbol, dwelling, art form. It is practical, and yet it stands for something bigger than the physical—because it was created much the same way. And its successes and failures are all hinged on human desires, follies.

The most obvious facts about architecture are the most misleading ones—that it is solid, fixed, permanent, that it is about the creation of single and singular objects, that it is visual. These are at best half-truths. | To build requires determination, conviction, and finality. A building makes a proposition about the future, which will never exactly match what actually happens. It therefore has to combine its decisiveness with openness to events. | For these reasons architecture is slippery. It is prone to tricks of perception and * of value. For all the labors of architecture, its effects are unstable, its benefits elusive, its risks high. But plays of substance and appearance, and of masonry and life, are also part of its fascination.

In hindsight, a lot of the rhetoric Rowan Moore provides I obvious, albeit lyrical (and thus rarely heard). Or, well, perhaps it's obvious in a way that they fulfill a need in the discourse: Someone has to say these things, and in this manner precisely.

*

Hearing other people's dreams is usually boring; living inside them is more so, and imposing them is a notorious vice of architects.

[Curious that the passage above would be in *Why We Build*; the wayward architect that is P. liked to bombard me with what he had been dreaming of upon my waking. There's a certain oppression, I see now, to making way for someone else's dream when you are thick in the dregs of your own. I told him so, once, and it felt like the wrong thing.]

That said: Despite that grandeur and the immense, tactile satisfaction an architect must glean from a completed structure, the process is so enslaved to other people. The people who pay, who commission, who dwell. A writer's work seems the same: Your work is you—once it's done, you set it out there, at the mercy of its readers. *Seems*. It makes me bitter to say this, but architecture is of a different kind of permanence, and a different kind of constant-continuous-evolution:

Of course, all buildings exist in time. The word "building" suggests an action that is ongoing, rather than a finished thing. We don't talk about "builts." The question is whether time is used to emancipate architecture, or if architecture is used to suppress time.

*

Among Rowan Moore's definitions of architecture: One, "Architecture is shaped by human emotions and desires, and then becomes a setting for further emotions and desires. It goes from the animate and inanimate and back again. For this reason it is always incomplete, or rather is only completed by the lives in and around it. It is background." And, "Architecture is not the design of buildings, but the spaces inside and out which might be formed or changed, more or less gently or drastically, by the construction or adaptation of a building."

I feel like I'm doing this book a disservice by quoting only rhetoric—not to mention by padding this post about the origins of my interest in architecture. Because *Why We Build*, much like the architecture it describes, works best in context: When it draws up examples, when it details a structure, explains the motivations behind its building, speculates on its future, pinpoints the effects of human folly on it. Why something fails, why something withstands time by either willfully snubbing it or allowing it to be consumed. And why, always, why we—human being and our petty desires and our vast ambitions—build. I should have taken a page from Rowan Moore's book and focused on the tactile, instead of the abstract—the rhetoric that, despite the lyricism that just hits you at the right places, seems silly when held up against nothing too real.

Or—well, then, reading this again before pressing 'Publish'—maybe I already have. [Human folly, was it, Mr. Moore? Here we go.]

Angela Natividad says

I cite this book all the time. Since reading it, buildings breathe for me; they're filled with intention.

Ninakix says

“Architecture functions as both symbol and instrument. It can do one thing, and look as if it is doing something else. In this receptiveness lies the potential for catastrophe, as when the physical substance of Dubai's towers concealed an absence of financial support, but the instability of architecture is also its grace.”
— pg 360

The central thesis of this book seems to be, as described above, this question of the double sided meaning of architecture. While many architects focus on the aesthetics of building, Moore makes the point that ultimately architecture is completed by the people that inhabit them and how they do so. He goes through many examples wherein architects build with one intention, but their buildings achieve a different effect. The thesis isn't incorrect, it's just incomplete. My biggest problem is that there doesn't seem to be any insight into how architecture can go about incorporating people into its thinking, nor much nuance in thinking about the way they behave. For me, many of the examples are further burdened by the fact that I can't be sure if any of these architects or projects should be as vilified as Moore makes them: these seem like projects that looked at from a different angle could be evaluated differently, why one project is controlling and another is freeing isn't always clear in retrospect.

Howard Mansfield says

Rowan Moore argues for openness and improvisation in architecture. He prizes buildings that leave a space for chance and life. Moore wants architecture that's “decisive” but not all-inclusive. He doesn't like “one-line architecture” – buildings in the shape of tulips, a sail, a donut – and he doesn't like the complete design, where the architect has designed everything down to the salt shakers. In his view Modern interiors, Art Nouveau, and others exist as if the inhabitant were a sloppy, rude disrupter of the perfect object.

Moore's summons many surprising examples, such as the Sao Paulo architect Lina Bo Bardi and the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto. The book's strength is these unexpected visits. When Moore shows up at the expected places, such as London during a real estate boom or at the rebuilding of the World Trade Center, he says the expected things about finance driving overdevelopment and bad design.

Marie says

I read a beautifully poetic and resonant feature piece written by Rowan Moore in the Guardian not too long ago, about a work of architecture in London that I wasn't entirely sure about, but that Moore managed, through sheer beauty of language, to get me excited about. So I had rather high hopes for this book, to say the least. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that I was expecting another "Poetics of Space," or something as close to it as one could hope for. Sadly, however, this expectation wasn't fulfilled. That's not to say that there weren't passages that made me reach for my pencil to mark them for future enjoyment, or that I didn't come away from the book having had my eyes opened to architects I wasn't familiar with before (Lina Bo Bardi, e.g., who seems to be Moore's particular favourite judging by the

number of times she and her work – and her sharp-featured face! – are mentioned), and to buildings, places and spaces whose acquaintance I was delighted to make (such as Katsura Imperial Villa on the outskirts of Kyoto and the 9th-century mosque in Kairouan, to name but two).

But I think this book suffers from the same problem that I have found other books in the domains of architecture appreciation and architecture criticism to suffer from (Pater's book on the Renaissance comes to mind), namely that the chapters have, rather too evidently, had a prior life as feature articles or essays. As an editor I would give the following advice to anyone who toys with the idea of pasting together a selection of past writings into some sort of book: don't. What may work most excellently for an essay or an article does not necessarily work equally well for a chapter in a monograph. The pieces will suddenly rub up awkwardly against one another, each propped up to stand on its own rather than composed to flow naturally and smoothly from what precedes to what follows, forming an organic whole. A bit like a street actually where each building is designed by a starchitect focussed mainly on making his or her building stand out rather than on making a cohesive and livable space. This is something Moore himself writes about, which makes it all the more disappointing and surprising to note that he hasn't applied the sensibility and knowledge he clearly possesses where architecture is concerned to his own writing.

So, while I shall look forward to Moore's next article on architecture in the *Guardian*, and while I shall enjoy leafing through the book again to reread the beautiful phrases I have underlined in pencil, I can't in good conscience give the book more than 3 stars. Ironically, each chapter/essay on its own would actually have received a significantly higher mark from me. This is in other words a case of the sum not being greater than the parts.
