Book review of Anna Andrzejewski, Building Power: Architecture and Surveillance in Victorian America

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Building Power: Architecture and Surveillance in Victorian America
Anna Vemer Andrzejewski
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The act or concept of surveillance might initially seem an ephemeral or immaterial phenomenon, but it does have direct material consequences. In her book *Building Power: Architecture and Surveillance in Victorian America*, art and architectural historian Anna Vemer Andrzejewski presents a keen study of surveillance and its material correlates, or in her words, “the architecture of surveillance” (p. xiii), in late-19th- and early-20th-century America.

Organized into four thematic, tightly argued sections: “Discipline,” “Efficiency,” “Hierarchy,” and “Fellowship,” *Building Power* is perhaps most simply described as an appreciative critique and extension of Michel Foucault’s famous discussion of modern institutional surveillance. Andrzejewski’s two-part thesis posits that (1) discourses of surveillance are more complex than previously acknowledged, and in Victorian America these discourses informed the design and construction of not only “institutional buildings,” but “all kinds of everyday environments” (p. 3), and (2) in an argument that follows Foucault and others, that the importance of surveillance in the organization of space in Victorian America is directly connected with the rise of Western modernity. Andrzejewski’s work extends Foucault’s seminal conclusion though, by demonstrating how the *disciplinary* manifestation of surveillance he describes is only one facet of the intricate relationship between surveillance and modernity. The book is germane to historical archaeologists and particularly to those working on late-19th- and early-20th-century institutions and households, and in industrial and religious settings.

In chapter 1, “Discipline,” Andrzejewski interprets the architecture of surveillance in the context of the classic disciplinary institution of the prison. Andrzejewski’s contribution to this topic is in her specific focus on Victorian American prisons, and in her findings which suggest that most of these prisons in fact made little use of that icon of anonymous surveillance, the panopticon. The design of Victorian American prisons, though informed by philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s ideas, incorporated surveillance in other, perhaps less persistent or pervasive ways. The radial prison layout in which a circle of cell blocks converges on a center point, is one example of a design descendant of, but distinct from the panopticon.

That the actualization of total surveillance through prison design had severe limitations, Andrzejewski argues, is demonstrated by the fact that prison design changed over time in repeated attempts to solve surveillance shortcomings. Though Foucault essentially argues that on the part of the prisoner, “resistance [is] futile” (p. 30), Andrzejewski shows how the prisoners were able to defy: they broke solitary confinement rules by surreptitiously talking amongst themselves; and in the imperfect, quasipanoptic prisons that were built, they even returned the gaze of the ostensibly invisible surveilling guard.

The next three chapters take Andrzejewski’s refined conception of Foucauldian surveillance out of the archetypal institution of the prison, and extend it to other built environments and landscapes of turn-of-the-century America. A central point is the fact that in Victorian America, surveillance (and specifically, the gaze of the surveillant) was not only a mechanism of discipline, but also served other, oftentimes less-sinister, social and economic goals.

In chapter 2, “Efficiency,” Andrzejewski explains how surveillance was intimately integrated into workplaces (factories, machine shops, and typists’ rooms, for example) as a strategy to increase effectiveness and production output, and to reduce all forms of slacking off and stealing. A high point of the book is the author’s detailed and astute exposition of the secret rooms, hallways, and peepholes that permeated Victorian-era post offices. In its focus on workplace efficiency, this chapter reveals how surveillance can have both spatial and temporal components.
Surveillance also has the potential to shape hierarchical relationships between and among individuals and groups. In chapter 3, “Hierarchy,” Andrzejewski analyzes architectural plans as well as the prescriptive literature of home economics (directed at middle-class women), to show how home-managing women seized on surveillance as a means of supervising live-in female servants. While architects were designing homes so that servant spaces were organized to provide employers with visual control over staff, advice writers were reinforcing the rightness of hierarchical social relationships by teaching mistresses to distrust and monitor, and benevolently instruct their hired help. The author’s lament that “the lack of surviving documentation makes getting at servants’ voices difficult, if not impossible, since many ... servants were illiterate” (p. 96), will of course jump off the page for many readers of this journal. As the founders of historical archaeology first suggested half a century ago, it is precisely in this between-the-lines gap that historical archaeologists are often most comfortable.

In the book’s most novel section, chapter 4, “Fellowship,” Andrzejewski extends her perspective on surveillance to Victorian-era Christian wilderness camp meetings. As she suggests, hierarchies were also most certainly at stake in these religious settings. At camp meetings there existed laddered relationships between nonbelievers and believers; between the congregation and the physically elevated, pulpitized minister; and between everyone present and God. Within the confines of camp meetings, where tents and cabins were erected in extremely close proximity to each other and usually configured around a central covered tabernacle or an elevated outdoor preaching stand, everyone watched everyone. This surveillance was not only tolerated; it was invited. “Multiple” and “reciprocal” gazing (p. 155) operated as a means to help strengthen social and spiritual bonds. Thus Andrzejewski’s interpretation of Victorian fellowship illustrates the shift from top-down to self-discipline described by Foucault, but also shows how surveillance in this context was for the most part an affirmative experience, however.

Andrzejewski suggests that though the means by which surveillance is implemented have changed over the last century, the motivations have not (p. xiv). Contemporary Americans live in the age of the Patriot Act and an already massive yet still expanding prison-industrial complex. Today, modes of surveillance are deeply intermeshed with the practices of policing, prisons, parole and probation, and militarized borders and immigration, to name just a few of the more sinister examples. Following Andrzejewski, researchers might also highlight other, less-explicitly disciplinary surveillances in 21st-century America, such as the public’s (including archaeologists’) increasing use of Google Earth for pleasure, profit, and knowledge production, or the now taken-for-granted ability to track (or gaze at) others digitally by monitoring Twitter posts, Facebook status updates, and iPhone GPS apps.

Built on strong and convincing case studies, and containing many instructive and at times entertaining historical architectural drawings, advertisements, photographs, cartoons, and illustrations, Building Power is very readable. It is timely and relevant, both as stand-alone historical information and perspective, and as research that clearly informs archaeologists’ understanding of present-day practices and institutional structures. While Building Power will be of interest to all historical archaeologists, chapter 1 is particularly pertinent for archaeologists working on institutions, chapter 2 for industrial archaeologists, chapter 3 for archaeologists researching and excavating households, and chapter 4 for those working on religious communities. Perhaps most importantly, the book serves as another reminder that all historians, whether affiliated with history per se, art history, geography, archaeology, or otherwise, can and must continue to seek out the historical roots of often injurious phenomena of the present day.

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