Use matters: an alternative history of architecture
Edited by Kenny Cupers

This collection identifies a central yet rarely acknowledged actor in architecture, the user. Its cutting-edge scholarship reveals an unexpectedly complex role that is usually depicted as generic. With users no longer hidden in plain sight, Use Matters opens up a fascinating new arena of investigation and research.

Margaret Crawford, University of California, Berkeley

Buildings are not static objects, and yet how do we access their dynamic position in culture? This collection answers that question by historicizing and theorizing use in a wide range of areas, from modernist planning and systems theory to ergonomics and even philosophy. In the process, it generates an exciting and new perspective on modern architecture.

Mark Jarzombek, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

To a century during which much of the widely admired architecture is self-referential, Use Matters offers an urgently needed reminder. From the early-twentieth-century housethere to the postwar champions of social science, modern architecture was shaped by a sustained—if often flawed—engagement with the nature and demands of its clientele. Use does indeed matter, as the essays demonstrate so elegantly.

Dell Upton, University of California, Los Angeles

From participatory architecture to interaction design, the question of how design accommodates use is driving inquiry in many creative fields. Expanding utility to embrace people’s everyday experience brings new promises for the social role of design. But this is nothing new. As the essays assembled in this collection show, interest in the elusive realm of the user was an essential part of architecture and design throughout the twentieth century. Use Matters is the first to assemble this alternative history, from the bathroom to the city, from ergonomics to cybernetics, and from Algeria to East Germany. It argues that the user is not a universal but a historically constructed category of twentieth-century modernity that continues to inform architectural practice and thinking in often unacknowledged ways.

Kenny Cupers is Assistant Professor of Architectural History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
# Subjectivity and Knowledge

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# Participation

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This collection of essays examines how architecture has dealt with the question of use and how use, in turn, has shaped architectural thinking and practice over the past century. Utility is central to what architects do in practice as they deal with clients, norms, and building regulations. It is also a category of architectural theory, too often glossed over as that one part of the Vitruvian triad distinguishing architecture most clearly from art. Whether through the register of type, function, program, experience, event, or performance, the production of architecture relies on both concrete knowledge and latent imagination of how it is used. But utility also governs an unknowable universe of everyday experience that remains outside of the designer’s direct control. If a lot of architecture’s meaning is made not on the drafting board but in the complex lifeworld of how it is inhabited, consumed, used, lived or neglected, that world is at once central and peculiarly under-explored.

In recent years, this blind spot of architecture has become particularly pertinent to practitioners. From the resurgence of activism and social engagement in architecture to the development of new spaces of interaction using the latest technologies, the interest in the agency of the user across many creative disciplines today delivers new promises for the social role of design. Against the view—still widely held—that such an agenda undermines architecture’s autonomy or its formal potentials, this volume explores instead how use has been a critical motor of architectural invention. Accepted wisdom has it that the extent to which architecture takes into account those who use it is a matter of the designer’s personal ethics, dividing the discipline into a formalist and a user-friendly camp. No matter how clear this front line may seem to contemporary observers, it is hardly an unchanging fact that transcends shared preconceptions or historical change. As this collection of essays shows, the user
is neither a timeless humanist category nor a simple externality of design. It has a history of its own, both within and beyond architecture.

What does it mean to talk about users rather than subjects, people, clients, inhabitants, consumers, or citizens? How do we situate “the user” vis-à-vis the realms of domesticity, the market, or government? How do those we identify as using, experiencing, or inhabiting it actually use, experience, or inhabit architecture? And how does knowledge of this trickle back into the conception and production of architecture? If use cannot be understood as a simple consequence of planning or design, it is far from clear in what ways it constitutes architecture—as a practice, a discipline, and as built space.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume argue that the user is not a universal, but a historically constructed category of twentieth-century modernity that continues to inform architectural practice and thinking in often unacknowledged ways. Over the course of the past century, architecture has laid claims to the organization of life through unprecedented experimentation with new technologies, mass production, consumption, and planned urbanization. The category of the user became central to these claims because it allowed architects to address both what informs and what follows the controllable process of design. Functionalism was but one of the manifestations of architecture’s social ambitions, albeit a particularly successful one in ideological and discursive terms. Over subsequent decades, the notion of the user transformed to give rise to a number of emerging paradigms—from programming and participatory planning to architectural populism and interaction design. Its emergence and transformation was not just the result of a single discipline, but of changing market forces, government interventions, new technologies, different fields of knowledge and expertise, and unexpected social or cultural dynamics. The user is not the product of architecture alone; nor does it transparently denote the actual or imaginary people that populate it. The user is both a historical construct and an agent of change, too often relegated to the margins of architectural history.

The chapters in this collection thus explore the changing stakes for architecture presented by the user across the modern, the postmodern, and the contemporary condition. In doing so, they make up an alternative history of architecture. Against the dominant periodization of twentieth-century architecture based on authorship, form, or discourse, the contributors provide a more relational history of architecture that connects the accounts of architects, projects, and ideas with a larger social, spatial, and material history. Their primary geographies are European and American—speaking perhaps less of the state of scholarly
knowledge than the dynamics out of which the user emerged as a particular register of discourse and intervention.

What is known and cultivated as architectural invention shows clear bias towards a relatively small set of authored works—often by a self-proclaimed avant-garde. When use was addressed in this rarified discursive context, its complexity tended to be both reduced and romanticized. From Rudofsky’s “architecture without architects” to Jencks’ and Silver’s “adhocism,” architects have tended to interpret architectural phenomena located outside their professional purview as nothing but anonymous improvisation—a simple reversal of the cherished distinctions of authorship and intention. A more lucid view was offered from the outside. In How Buildings Learn, Stewart Brand provided a rare and brilliant reading of the history of buildings through their changing uses over time, but its influence in architectural discourse remained limited. Another much-needed study came from the architect Jonathan Hill, whose theoretical examination was more successful in linking architects’ intentions with users’ creativity but relied heavily on linguistic analogy, following in the footsteps of postmodern architectural theory.

A history of the relationship between architecture and use requires paying attention to a more diverse set of actions and actors and to the many determinants of both marginal and mainstream architectural production. Covering a wide range of practices, the contributors to this volume thus explore how various fields of knowledge and design have worked to define and shape specific uses and users, from the smallest room in the house to the problems of urban life at large. They examine the ways in which architectural knowledge has developed in relationship to other disciplines, from social science and ergonomics to industrial design, landscape architecture, and urban planning. They explore reciprocities and contradictions between intention and practice. And they reverse the dominant view that places architecture and everyday use in opposing realms of reality, experience, and action. Finally, the combination of contributions by both scholars and contemporary practitioners brings historical arguments into dialogue with contemporary debates in architecture.

At least four different disciplinary lenses can be trained on the notions of use and the user. Anthropological approaches to material culture have long focused on the relationship of objects to their makers and their users, but its transposition to architecture can imply reading environments as objects. Phenomenological approaches in architecture have approached use in as much as they replaced function with sensory experience, but did so by reducing it to a transhistorical intention of architecture. The work of Henri Lefebvre and the generation of

6 For instance Dell Upton, “Form and User: Style, Mode, Fashion and the Artifact,” in Living in a Material World: Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture (St. John’s, NF: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991).
7 Jorge Otero-Pailos, Architecture’s Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
Anglo-American studies following in its wake undoubtedly provide the most robust theoretical framework for approaching use in architecture. Their shift in focus from architectural concepts and experiences to the production of space has inspired both architectural history and contemporary discourse. And last, more recent developments in social studies of science and technology, in which the notion of the user has become a growing domain of inquiry, promise a fresh, more pragmatic look at architecture. Some of their theoretical arguments, which revolve around the mutual shaping of design and use and emphasize the active role of users, remain limited, however, by the reduction of architecture to a social technology.

While this collection selectively takes up some of these lenses, its overall contribution lies not in bringing them together but in historicizing some of the concepts and categories they are based on. If history is the analysis of the forces from the past that together make up the present, this book traces three such genealogies. The first part begins with the construction of the modern subject in the first decades of the twentieth century, the second with the changing role of the state and the market at mid-century, and the third with the advent of participation in the 1960s and 1970s. These constitute the three major historical forces without which today’s discussion of the user in architecture cannot be understood. The parts are chronologically organized and run up to the present, ending with a contribution by a contemporary practitioner or theorist who takes up a more explicit position with regards to the theme of each part.

I

The first part, “Subjectivity and Knowledge,” explores how attention to the user emerged in architectural modernism during the interwar period and spawned new types of knowledge to support the production of architecture up to the present. The chapters depart from dominant accounts of architecture’s role in the construction of modern subjectivity by shifting the focus of analysis from avant-garde representations of subjectivity to its actual production through architectural and spatial practice. The import and popularity of literary criticism in architecture over past decades allowed scholars to speak of architecture as constructing a subject in the same way a text could construct a reader. In the worst case, that meant that it sufficed to describe the formal attributes of a single architectural object to present sweeping claims about modern or postmodern subjectivity. The chapters in this part analyze how such discursively and formally constructed representations of subjectivity are both shaped by and affect the


realities of architectural production and experience. In doing so, they reveal how knowledge has shaped the relationship between architecture and use, from the emergence of new types of architectural knowledge in the interwar period, to their transformation in the research economies of the postwar decades, and their role in the contemporary developer-led production of architecture.

The figure of the user is directly tied to the historical emergence of the mass subject in late industrial capitalism. While the origins of this type of subjectivity can be traced well into the nineteenth century, its repercussions were most directly interrogated by the modernist avant-garde. Mass production, rapid urbanization, the development of mass culture, and the proliferation of new technologies in everyday life exacerbated interest in the unknowable universe of architecture’s consumption and use. Scholars have located the construction of a new, modernist subjectivity in the artistic import of such regimes of production and experience. Its architectural exemplars include Hannes Meyer’s Coop-Zimmer—a stage set for a new, modernist, and anti-bourgeois subject—and Grete Lihotzky’s Frankfurt Kitchen—in which Taylorist analyses of bodily movement were mobilized to construct the modern kitchen and with it, the new housewife.\textsuperscript{11} Here, the notion of use in architectural modernism appears to be interchangeable with that of function and is predominantly carried by the application of scientific management principles to architecture. Yet, if the metaphor of the human subject as machine is indeed located at the basis of the idea of the user in architecture, its contemporary legacy lies not so much in the way it inspired architectural form but in the underlying systemization of architectural knowledge.\textsuperscript{12} Not Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, or Le Corbusier, but much less heroic figures like Ernst Neufert helped shape that legacy. His \textit{Architects’ Data}, first published as \textit{Bauentwurfslehre} in 1936, has become a universal reference and can be found on almost every architect’s desk across the globe. It bases architectural design directly on norms and standards of human inhabitation and use.

The standardization of use may have been at the basis of architectural modernism, but its goals and methods were fundamentally contested. Departing from the dominant narrative of functionalism, in Chapter 1 Eve Blau examines architectural approaches based on radically different concepts of use and thus alternative constructions of the modern subject in architecture. Shifting the focus from Germany to Austria, Blau demonstrates how Josef Frank and Otto Neurath, in their engagement with municipal socialism in Red Vienna, advanced a modern project that served rather than dictated use and informed new strategies for the circulation of knowledge among citizens.


\textsuperscript{12} The notion of systemization of architectural knowledge is borrowed from a forthcoming book by Gernot Weckherlin about Ernst Neufert. See Walter Prigge and Wolfgang Voigt, eds., \textit{Ernst Neufert: Normierte Baukultur im 20. Jahrhundert} (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1999).
In mainstream practice, however, such strategies would often take a different turn. Through their examination of the modern architectural handbooks appearing during the 1930s, Paul Emmons and Andreea Mihalache argue in Chapter 2 that representations of the user as universal and the human body as constant fostered not only standardization in architectural practice and design but also a particular register of experience. They demonstrate how architectural handbooks like American Graphic Standards were fundamentally inspired by scientific management and by the social ambition to create an enlightened technocracy for the common good. Once this particular notion of the user was disseminated in architectural practice it fostered a normalization of architectural experience.

Until well into the 1960s, the standardization of use promoted in various strands of architectural modernism was not generally perceived as limiting the freedom of the individual subject. On the contrary, standardization and freedom were often seen as part of the same coin. In Chapter 3, William J. Rankin focuses on this conjunction in his analysis of the corporate laboratory and its role in mid-twentieth-century knowledge capitalism. Architects and science administrators rendered modularity a logical part of both liberal capitalism and scientific knowledge production. The modern laboratory, as it facilitated the corporate management of science, blurred the distinctions between control and freedom of the user.

Architecture, as a discipline and a profession, also participated enthusiastically in the emerging economies of scientific research during the postwar decades in the United States. In Chapter 4, Avigail Sachs demonstrates how user-oriented research and design emerged as part of this process. By subjecting the uses of space to social scientific inquiry under the labels of environment–behavior research, human factors research, or environmental design research, professionals and experts brought the user to the center of their field during the 1960s and 1970s. Focusing on the development of architectural expertise, Sachs reveals the politics of knowledge involved in such attempts to bring users into the realm of design.

Since then, the backlash of postmodernist architects against what they dismissed as crudely positivistic and obstructive to artistic freedom has divorced such research from architectural discourse. Meanwhile user-oriented research has been selectively but enthusiastically adopted in the production of commercial and developer architecture, as Brian Lonsway shows in Chapter 5. Placing the notion of the user in the context of the contemporary “experience economy,” he shows how salient concepts from architectural discourse—from Kevin Lynch’s cognitive mapping to Christian Norberg-Schulz’s architectural phenomenology—have
been harnessed by a range of professionals in the production of commercial environments. Treating users as first and foremost consumers, large-scale real estate development has successfully scientized and then commercialized architectural experience. Rather than shying away from it, critical architects would do well to address such applications as an essential part of their field today, he concludes.

II

The second part, “Collectivity, Welfare, Consumption,” explores the relationship between architecture and use in definitions of collectivity, welfare regimes, and the realms of collective and private consumption. Its argument is that the notion of the user in architecture is contingent upon the ambiguity between citizenship and consumerism—a condition that became especially paradigmatic in the economies of the postwar decades in Europe and North America. In this context, the rise of the user as a central, often bureaucratic concern was triggered by the development of large-scale programs of mass housing and public services. Despite accepted wisdom that such building production was a direct expression of interwar modernist dogma, the collected chapters argue that they were in fact shaped by a complex encounter between architectural, economic, and social principles in postwar capitalism. From mass-produced housing and urban renewal programs to the construction of New Towns, architects, planners, scientists, developers, and policy makers were now more than ever engaged in the large-scale re-organization of everyday life. The upshift was not just quantitative; it also had qualitative consequences. Initially, the problem of use could be reduced to a matter of norms, standards, and statistics. But in the context of growing economic prosperity, the notion of users tended to shift from standard, passive beneficiaries of services to active participants with diversified consumer lifestyles.13 While the notion of the user initially emerged in the context of industrialized production, mass consumption, and large-scale government intervention, it evolved to contest exactly those basic qualities of mass, scale, and uniformity.

Scholars have explored how architectural approaches to use changed as a result of the development of capitalism from Fordism to post-Fordism during the postwar decades. On the one hand, this seemed to imply the demise of the notion of function—based on ideas of standardization, homogeneity, and productivity—and the emergence of new architectural strategies such as flexibility, programming, and polyvalence.14 Their premise was to diversify architecture by giving more autonomy to use.


On the other hand, they also appear to remain in line with some basic principles of interwar modernism. While architectural flexibility was hailed as a way to redeem functionalism from the physical rigidity in which it often resulted, Adrian Forty has shown that proponents of flexibility still shared similar convictions about architecture’s functional determination. An unstated assumption was that the arrival of architectural postmodernism and its embrace of architectural meaning constituted the real break in attitudes towards the user.

The chapters in this part examine how these architectural approaches to the user were in fact fundamentally shaped by larger forces of political economy, colonialism, migration, consumerism, and the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. If the conditions of use are caught somewhere in between citizenship and consumption, the chapters examine the divergent politics of that uncertain position. They look at the history of architecture’s relationship with the user through the tension between state and market, public and private, universality and individuality, standardization and uniqueness.

While the turn to the user may appear in some ways to be an effect of the welfare state, its development was fundamentally shaped by the politics of colonialism. In Chapter 6, Sheila Crane focuses on the analysis of everyday dwelling practices in the shantytown in Algiers to demonstrate how the notion of the user was defined less by internal critiques in the architectural modernism of the postwar CIAM (International Congresses of Modern Architecture) than by the policies of the French colonial regime. The interest of architects and sociologists in the everyday cultures of Algerian dwelling then appears as a colonization of use more than an attempt to emancipate inhabitants.

Even at the heart of the postwar European welfare state, political and architectural intentions rarely matched their consequences. Jennifer S. Mack, in Chapter 7, focuses on how middle-eastern immigrants transformed one of Sweden’s well-known New Towns over decades of residential mobility and incremental appropriation. As with New Towns elsewhere in Europe, its design was meant to foster a sense of collectivity through national belonging, defined as membership in the welfare state. Mack shows how the immigrants built a new community within the original confines of the town center, thereby unexpectedly reaffirming the designers’ intention to create a community space for all Swedish citizens.

State bureaucracies and the architects they employed were neither unaware of the consequences nor unwilling to rethink the premises of their interventions. In France, social critiques of state-sanctioned modernist urbanism were continually recuperated by the same state bureaucracy responsible for those
developments. In Chapter 8, Łukasz Stanek focuses on the urban sociology and theoretical concepts of Henri Lefebvre to assess the pitfalls and potentials of this kind of institutionalization of critique. Because it was a process to which he himself was a witness, Lefebvre approached the notion of the user ambivalently, seeing it as both an instrument of control and as a vehicle for the creation of a revolutionary, political form of collectivity.

Not only in the realm of public welfare or collective consumption, but also in the most private domains of consumption did the politics of design and use surface at this time. Focusing on Alexander Kira’s attempts to radically redesign the bathroom, Barbara Penner in Chapter 9 reveals how his ergonomic design philosophy, akin to Ralph Nader’s advocacy for safety design in the automotive industry, was meant to accommodate for a greater variety of bathroom uses and users’ bodily differences. The call for government to regulate industry where it concerned matters of safety in private use and consumption, however, was not easily transposed to bathroom design, and certainly not to architecture more generally.

In both Western and Eastern Europe, architectural approaches to the user intersected with political ideologies in often unexpected ways. Max Hirsh explores this encounter in the postmodern experiments of late-socialist urbanism in Chapter 10. Focusing on a series of mixed-use redevelopment projects during the 1980s, he demonstrates how the identification of a distinct category of users triggered architectural experiments combining heavy prefabrication with postmodern form. Such an architecture was explicitly meant to attract skilled professionals in a political system whose official ideology of social equality ruled out catering for their specialized needs.

Even with the reigning mythology of individualistic consumption in global capitalism today, such questions of collectivity have not disappeared. As governments now face the physical remnants of a past welfare regime—an often neglected stock of mass housing and public infrastructure—architecture could play an active role in efforts to forge new forms of collectivity. That is what Michelle Provoost of Crimson Architectural Historians argues in Chapter 11 in her account of an almost decade-long engagement with the renewal of Hoogyliet, a Dutch postwar New Town. Working with an extraordinary diversity of users over the past decade has led the architects to develop a diverse set of architectural projects that reinvigorate some of the town’s initial ambitions of openness, community, and emancipation.
The third part, “Participation,” explores architectural experiments aimed at user participation. Its argument is that such projects do not in any way entail a straightforward course of empowerment for those involved, but instead operate in the tension between control and freedom. That tension has been constitutive of the emergence of participation as a discursive and operational paradigm during the 1960s and in contemporary design.

To contemporary advocates in architecture and urban design, participation generally appears as part of a social or political project of empowering the disenfranchised. More than the notion of function or program, use in this sense marks architecture’s external relevance and tends to position the architect in an ethical realm of action, in direct relation to society at large. In their excavations of the utopian and participatory projects by architects and artists in the 1960s and 1970s—from Yona Friedman’s “spatial urbanism” to Ant Farm’s anti-architectural inflatables—scholars and critics have tended to reinforce this interpretation. Consequently, contemporary observers tend to take the protagonists’ rhetoric at face value, avoiding the murky politics that only appear when such practices are examined in a larger social and political context. Focusing on cultural products rather than social processes helps sustain the dominant perception that participation was ever only a resolutely radical and fundamentally progressive project in architecture.

At the same time, just as the term “user” can easily be faulted for its monolithic nature and negation of difference, so is “participation” today increasingly criticized for its depoliticizing effects and its tyranny of political consensus. The employment of the word “users” instead of simply “people” can be a legitimization of expertise rather than a threat to it. Users and experts are in many ways codependent constructs. Most importantly, the very notion of the user tends to assume a system. It can therefore entail a shift away from conceiving of people as independent human subjects and towards treating them as mere elements of the complex technological and social systems of which they have become a part. The chapters in this part explore how architectural experiments with participation are shaped by such historically constructed qualities. That requires taking into account not only the calls for direct democracy and the impact of civil rights and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, but also the structures of governance and the influence of novel forms of expertise—both architectural and social.

The tension between control and emancipation was often immediately clear to those faced with the political complexity of urban intervention at this time. In Chapter 12, Mariana Mogilevich

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examines how landscape architects in New York City during the late 1960s and early 1970s used open space to foster a participatory citizenry. In the context of this multicultural city in economic decline, forging new relationships between citizens and the city was at the heart of participatory design. While they served in no way as a direct tool for the empowerment of citizens, these new design approaches fostered creative agency and group identification in ways that have since been abandoned.

The work floor too, saw its share of experimentation. In Chapter 13, in his analysis of a radical experiment in participatory democracy aboard a merchant vessel during the 1970s, Javier Lezaun reveals the politics of designing democracy into the physical layout of a space. What he calls a “sociotechnical experiment” was successful in bringing designers and social scientists together but failed as a miniaturized demonstration for a more democratic organization of labor and production.

In the following decade, experiments in participation did not disappear but transformed to become conveniently aligned with architectural postmodernism. In Chapter 14, Isabelle Doucet focuses on the role of the counter-project in the emergence of Brussels’ postmodern urbanism, in order to examine the multiple situations in which users were enrolled in the practices and processes of design. Her analysis demonstrates that the multiplicity of the user as a discursive and practical agent was in fact at the very heart of architecture’s blending of politics and aesthetics during the heyday of postmodernism, and has been ever since.

In Chapter 15, Tatjana Schneider explores the contemporary relevance of user participation in architecture. Invested in, but also critical of, the recent embrace of social engagement in contemporary architectural discourse, she argues that what many such practices often lack is immersion and a real engagement with the complexities of use. To avoid reducing architecture to “just doing good,” she contends, architects need to develop strategies for a veritably collective production of space.

In its entirety, this collection of chapters attests to the necessity for any such recommendations to be confronted with the historical forces that continue to shape them. It should not leave us powerless to those forces, but rather help avoid the dual impasse of naivety and apathy to which much of contemporary architectural practice continues to be delivered. As many architects and creative practitioners today seek to transcend conventional disciplinary concerns and to more directly address the problems of our contemporary built environment, we need not only new strategies but also new histories. These should enable the architectural imagination by expanding the disciplinary lens to a world in which not only objects are built but also
where people live. If the chapters collected in this volume make us realize that the notion of the user in architecture is anything but a neutral or universal given, they should have succeeded in providing a perspective for positive change. Ultimately, the awareness that something is constructed a certain way is a prerequisite to any endeavors that seek alternative means of seeing and making. It is our hope that the alternative architectural history proposed in this volume may contribute, if only modestly, to such intellectual work.