

Book Review

Noise Orders: Jazz, Improvisation, and Architecture

David P. Brown
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David P. Brown's *Noise Orders* is an intriguing, but ultimately frustrating work. Although the book provides an interesting analysis of jazz and improvisational strategies, it remains at the propositional stage in terms of taking this analysis into architecture and urban design discourse. This is a shame because the author is clearly impassioned about the music, and the idea of cross-fertilizing the architectural discipline with improvisational insight is ripe territory indeed.

Architectural discourse has already co-opted the language of improvisational theory—buildings are often described as abstract compositions of gesture, incident, and dissonance. However, Brown is not after the superficial; he is after the deeply structural. In his preface, Brown cogently outlines the potential of relating improvisational considerations to our built environment by suggesting that beyond conventional practice, “the architect may take on the role of improviser as well as other roles involved in the making of improvised music, including those of composer, soloist, provider of rhythmic support and listener” (xvi). As someone who has worked in architecture and experienced the fluidity of architectural projects, I find these to be tantalizing ideas. Unfortunately, these ideas are not developed in the subsequent chapters of the book. Instead, *Noise Orders* charts the rise and evolution of jazz, using well known figures in the history of the music (Louis Armstrong, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, the AACM), in juxtaposition with major figures of early modern architecture and modern composition (Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, John Cage, etc.). Each of these chapters leads to a proposition of architectural potential such as: strive for transcendence; objects should challenge; provide openness; develop flexible strategies; etc.

These dialectic pairings and resulting propositions are the main weaknesses of the book. Pairing European modernists, like Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, with jazz pioneers working out of vernacular traditions is fundamentally misleading for Brown fails to critically examine the cultural politics of difference that these comparisons entail. Instead, he offers a series of facile propositions that ultimately tells little about the architecture represented, jazz, improvisation or the relations between them.

Noise Orders ends by suggesting that architects ought to look to jazz improvisation as a method of living in a state of “constant preparation” (127). That is, just as improvising musicians use their finely honed talent to create compelling work in the present, so too the architect should strive to bring this consciousness to practice in an effort to more fully engage the dynamic systems at play on a given site.

While it is true that architectural projects are full of uncertainty and flux, the trained professional's job is to provide structure and a way of approaching a work that instills a sense of order. In conventional terms, the better the architect, the better they are able to predict the outcome of the project ahead of time—from the basics of time and budget, up to the highest artistic pursuit. This requires an enormous amount of energy and a quite-often tyrannical dedication to a script. Most buildings, no matter what their stylization, are designed and constructed in a manner directly opposite to the propositions developed through *Noise Orders*. But this is Brown's point. His book is essentially a dense cataloguing of musical improvisation technique that lightly re-imagines the possibilities of architectural practice without actually examining the ramifications or feasibility of those possibilities in any detail. This is unfortunate because some of the techniques Mr. Brown touches on are happening already.

In recent years, architecture has had to deal with a myriad of challenges to its traditional approach and to the myth of the “master builder.” These include alternative formats of “project delivery” which relegate the architect to third party status, individuals in the project management profession being named as project leads instead of the designers, professional facilitators who intervene between the architect and the public,

etc. The changes have challenged architecture's traditional sense of its central role, nudging the profession closer to the kind of improvisative interplay that Brown advocates. In the face of these challenges, many practitioners are far more open to public involvement and multi-disciplinary collaboration, and do not feel threatened that the sanctity of the designer (or the composition) would be violated with such involvement. There is a growing recognition that the architectural project is far larger than the building itself and that designers who are not able to move in this enlarged scope do so at their professional peril.

Unfortunately, none of this "on the ground" experience makes it into *Noise Orders* in any depth. Perhaps strategically, or perhaps from a fear of appearing prescriptive, *Noise Orders* provides the springboard, but does not take the actual leap towards a new improvised architectural project.