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GAM book review

Cameron McEwan

24 August 2021

### **Illustration**

Please see attached image of book cover

### **Title of the review**

Abstraction and Realism

### **Bibliographical information**

*Situated Objects: Buildings and Projects by Stan Allen*

Stan Allen. With contributions by Helen Thomas and Jesús Vassallo. Photographs by Scott Benedict.

Zürich: Park Books, 2020

Text in English

256 pages, 110 duotone illustrations and 118 drawings

Hardback 20.5 x 25.5 cm

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## Review

*Situated Objects* documents drawings, buildings, and projects realized by Stan Allen since 2012. The book focuses on eight small buildings in landscape settings, incorporating houses, studios, and temporary constructions. It is organised into three sections dealing with “Outbuildings,” “Material Histories,” and “New Natures.” Each section opens with concise reflections by Allen on the respective theme and introduces the buildings under that theme. A series of essays by Allen, Jesús Vassallo, and Helen Thomas contextualise the work. The texts and Allen’s drawings are in dialogue with a suite of photographs by Scott Benedict, which are threaded throughout. The book is beautifully crafted; exclusively made up of line drawings and monochrome photographs.

Allen is a compelling figure in architecture and critical discourse. His work operates across architecture and urbanism; practice, theory, and education. Having worked for Richard Meier and Rafael Moneo in the 1980s, Allen set up Stan Allen Architects in 1991 and was projects editor at the important journal *Assemblage* until its final issue in 2000. Allen was Dean of Princeton School of Architecture from 2002 to 2012 and continues to serve as a professor. He is perhaps best known for the essay “Field Conditions,” which reflected on the shift in understanding architecture and the city as a unified, dense, and punctual object; towards architecture as part of a dispersed and dynamic field of material and immaterial forces.<sup>1</sup> It was part of a wider project that engaged ideas around critical practice, landscape urbanism, and urban theory.

In *Situated Objects* Allen’s interest in the contingency of forces at stake in architecture is extended. Allen argues that architecture operates under a series of paradoxes, which he describes in the introduction under the term “situated objects.” As Allen writes: “Buildings are ‘situated’ objects: object-like, in that they have fixed limits and stand free; situated, in that buildings always exist in an intricate relationship with a larger context.” (p. 13) For Allen, buildings, landscapes, and cities are “situated in the world and bound to a place” (p. 9); yet the architect usually works at a distance from the building site using “abstract working tools” such as drawings, diagrams, and computer models. Allen reflects on the parallel disciplinary debate between architecture as constructed reality and architecture as abstract representational system. Yet architecture may or may not have its expression in the form of a building. Architecture is a discursive practice where issues of representation have always been embedded in the history of the discipline; and today architecture is part of the

image industry of capitalism. Allen argues that “drawing allows the architect to operate effectively between the abstract and the real” (p. 10). Consequently, *Situated Objects* addresses ideas about abstraction and realism, tectonics and representation, nature and the vernacular, architecture as cultural practice and the reality of building on site. Allen shows how architecture is “object-like” but always situated in the field of social relations, whether local histories or global urbanism, cultural norms, and varying ideological forces including the architects own authorial pursuit.

The essay “Design Rules” opens the section on outbuildings and introduces a suite of three buildings: M/M House & Studio, E/V House & Studio, and L/B Studio. Although Allen discusses the design strategies specifically in relation to these buildings, the “rules” reverberate across the projects in the book more generally. Allen defines three design strategies. The first is a formal language based on ordinary materials. Allen argues that building today is largely concerned with assembling pre-made standardised elements on site. Most projects in the book follow simple readily available technologies: lightweight timber frame, timber or cement panel siding, metal roofs, standard windows and doors. It leads to a language of compact and taught objects rather than complicated assemblages. The second strategy is the figural roof. All but one project—the cubic J/S House—work with variations on a pitched roof. There is the folded and stretched roof (M/M House, W/H House), the misaligned roof (E/V Studio), the double pitched roof (L/B Studio, Ghost Shed), and the repeated or extruded gable (Lyceum, Olana Orchard Studio). The third strategy concerns working in series. Allen moves away from notions of novelty and uniqueness towards coherence, serial repetition, and critical transformation. The result of these design rules is both a situated object and also an “uncanny object” (p. 120), somewhere between abstraction and realism in the register of the “strangely familiar.”

Vassallo’s essay, “The Value of Being There,” situates Allen’s work against a concise genealogy of American vernacular abstraction. Vassallo reflects on Venturi and Rauch’s Trubeck and Wislocki Houses (1972) and draws a lineage to Steven Holl’s studies of rural and urban house types in *Pamphlet Architecture* (1983) and Vincent Scully’s reflections in *The Shingle Style Today* (1974), to the photography of Charles Sheeler who in the 1910s and 20s documented the landscape and humble buildings of Bucks County in rural Philadelphia. Vassallo argues that Allen’s critical architectural practice oscillates “between the poles of the avant-garde and the vernacular, between the conceptual and the improvisatory” (p. 104). Thomas’ essay, “One Step Removed,” reflects on Allen’s drawings and focuses on his

“collaged techniques.” Thomas is interested in the way that drawings are already “one step away from the reality of a building, an intellectual pursuit carried out remotely from the site of construction” (p. 171). One example is the highly seductive drawing of Olana Orchard Studio—an homage to Stanley Tigerman’s Hot Dog House—in which the trees at the forest edge are drawn in plan and overlaid with a grey tone; the building is drawn in 90-degree axonometric, its surface toned in black; and a grid of identical trees constituting the orchard are drawn in elevation. Plan, axonometric, and elevation are superimposed. A reflection on the site, the programme, and the history of the avant-garde is presented. The drawing constitutes a site of inquiry.

*Situated Objects* concludes with Allen’s essay entitled “Explaining by Drawing: In Axonometric.” It extends Allen’s reflections on drawing and representation put forward in his introduction. Allen reflects on his studies at Cooper Union in Manhattan under John Hejduk, who many consider as the originator of the 90-degree axonometric, where the plan is square to the plane of projection. What interests Allen in this type of drawing is that it combines the measurability of orthographic projection—plan and elevation are undistorted—with a pictorial form of representation. For Allen: “it calls attention to the drawing as artifice” (p. 240). Each project compiled in this book opens with a 90-degree axonometric drawing, followed by plans, sections, elevations, line drawn perspectives, and variations on the axonometric. It is a rhythmic structure and produces a series of repetitions with minor modifications. Allen concludes that the axonometric studies are part of a design process—a series—as “a powerful explanatory tool, and as independent artifacts” (p. 244).

In more general terms, the axonometric drawing and the more pictorial representational element of architectural drawing is today regaining a critical purchase against the “rendered” image produced for marketing purposes. At a time when we are saturated by an image culture and where desires for self-expression continue to abound in architecture, Allen’s conviction that the architect works on the “horizon of imagination” to construct new subjectivities and ways of being in the world, is a welcome critical attitude; exemplified by the drawings, writings, and photographs collected here.

**Reviewed by Cameron McEwan**

## Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> Stan Allen, “From Object to Field: Field Conditions in Architecture and Urbanism” [1996], in *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 216–43. The essay was originally published as “Field Conditions in Architecture and Urbanism” in *The Berlage Papers* No. 17, January 1996, and was subsequently reworked several times. Also see Stan Allen, *Points+Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City* [1999] (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012).