Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media

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Through a series of close readings of two major figures of the modern movement, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, Beatriz Colomina argues that architecture only becomes modern in its engagement with the mass media, and that in so doing it radically displaces the traditional sense of space and subjectivity.Privacy and Publicity boldly questions certain ideological assumptions underlying the received view of modern architecture and reconsiders the methodology of architectural criticism itself. Where conventional criticism portrays modern architecture as a high artistic practice in opposition to mass culture, Colomina sees the emerging systems of communication that have come to define twentieth-century culture -- the mass media -- as the true site within which modern architecture was produced. She considers architectural discourse as the intersection of a number of systems of representation such as drawings, models, photographs, books, films, and advertisements. This does not mean abandoning the architectural object, the building, but rather looking at it in a different way. The building is understood here in the same way as all the media that frame it, as a mechanism of representation in its own right.With modernity, the site of architectural production literally moved from the street into photographs, films, publications, and exhibitions -- a displacement that presupposes a new sense of space, one defined by images rather than walls. This age of publicity corresponds to a transformation in the status of the private, Colomina argues; modernity is actually the publicity of the private. Modern architecture renegotiates the traditional relationship between public and private in a way that profoundly alters the experience of space. In a fascinating intellectual journey, Colomina tracks this shift through the modern incarnations of the archive, the city, fashion, war, sexuality, advertising, the window, and the museum, finally concentrating on the domestic interior that constructs the modern subject it appears merely to house.

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