READING
PLEASURES

NON-FICTIONAL

NARRATIVES: DENTON CORKER MARSHALL


Non-fictional Narratives surveys Denton Corker Marshall’s recent work in Melbourne, as well as describing several specific projects, treated photographically at some length, in the Yarra Valley, Manchester (the “twinned city” of Leon van Schaik’s introductory essay), Brisbane, China and Jakarta. Van Schaik’s often distanced introduction makes big claims on the firm’s behalf, stating it awkwardly at an international table, but he stubs the essay with paragraphs regarding intelligently and clearly for the architectural works selected for the book.

Non-fictional Narratives presents a number of discrete architectural works solely through a short series of representative plans and a folio of photographs: Brisbane Square, the Australian War Memorial (both documented by John Gollings) and Wilson House in the Yarra Valley (photographed by Shannon McGough). Information is sparse, and one relies heavily on van Schaik’s prose to position the work. The book’s structure strongly implies that the reader ought to already know the work – most likely the case for its Australian audience, but not necessarily so further afield.

Two other projects enjoy extended commentary: Nikos Papastergiadis writes on Webb Bridge in Melbourne, although this short piece doesn’t serve to fill in many blanks; Deyan Sudjic’s piece, the smartest writing of the volume, matched to the best building, offers a sharp commentary on the Manchester Civil Justice Centre. In addition, Jianwei Zhu sets up the section Denton Corker Marshall in China, locating the work there historically and culturally.

The slicker dossier of photographs by Gollings, McGrath, Tim Griffith and others are conventional enough, and appropriate to a coffee table book, a genre to which this volume appears, in part, to aspire. Gollings’ engaged survey of Denton Corker Marshall’s recent Melbourne work offers a visual homage to the radical tone of 5, 6, 11, while intermittent text blocks convey something of the firm’s attitude to practice in Melbourne’s architectural culture.

What seems a plausible documentary treatment for Melbourne comes unstuck in China, as the reality gets grittier and the work less interesting. Graphic designer enerystudio should have rethought the horizontal interference pattern modulating the images of Chinese projects, a device carried forward to documentation of Denton Corker Marshall’s work in Jakarta. Stript photographs signal Asia, it seems, although I don’t get the connection.

Setting aside the tricks and ballast, Non-fictional Narratives is a curious object and a useful visual record of the recent work of one of Australia’s most prominent international practices.

Andrew Leach