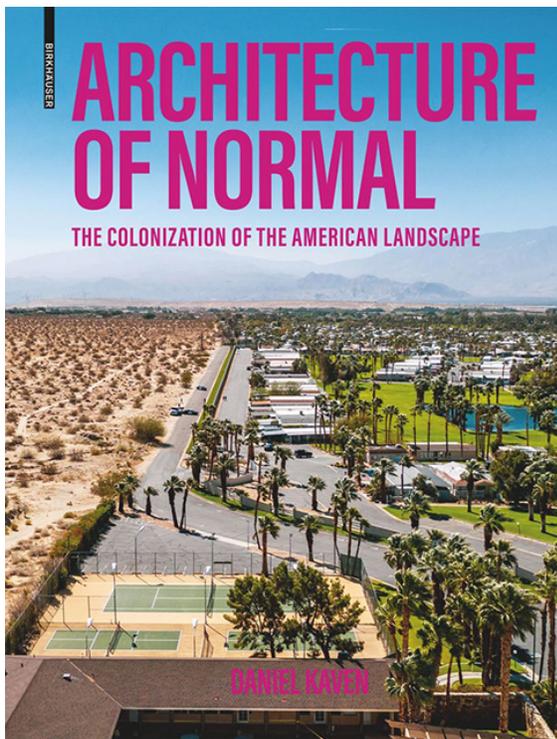# Review: Architecture of Normal: The Colonization of the American Landscape

by Daniel Kaven. Birkhäuser, February 2022. 456 p. ill. ISBN 978-3-0356-2438-0 (h/c), $69.00.

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The bland sameness that characterizes much of the American built environment is fertile ground for architectural criticism. Daniel Kaven, architect and artist, offers a new entry in this genre describing the impact on the United States of successive eras of transportation technologies in *Architecture of Normal: the Colonization of the American Landscape*.

Transportation's effects are particularly evident in the western United States, where the land was dramatically altered first by horses, then by trains, automobiles, and airplanes. Land that had been home to Native American architecture, which responded to natural conditions, was overtaken by architecture shaped by modes of transportation. Now drones, on-demand flight, and space travel are poised to further impact the land as these technologies become increasingly accessible. Kaven succinctly describes the history, defining features, and arc of each era of transportation. The text is accompanied by a wealth of illustrations, including historic photographs and the author's own mixed media artworks and photography.

In the last chapter Kaven makes his case for the future. He argues that new and better fuels and transportation technologies will not solve the problems caused by previous eras. For Kaven, the only path forward is planning that does not make individuals fuel dependent for their daily activities. He offers Venice as a model of a fuel-neutral, sustainable pattern of living.

In many ways the book reads like an update of *The Geography of Nowhere*, written nearly thirty years ago by James Howard Kunstler. Kunstler's book critiqued the planning and building practices that led to strip malls and commercial corridors that look virtually identical regardless of their location. Kaven uses the term "derivatecture" to describe this type of architecture and focuses on how transportation modes led to planning practices that created the conditions for it to grow and spread. Sadly, his update on the themes that Kunstler (and before him authors such as Lewis Mumford and others) engaged with demonstrates that the bland sameness of derivatecture persists.

Architecture of Normal's descriptive and visual story of how transportation technologies affected the American landscape makes it a great companion to related titles on architectural design, city planning, urban design, and architectural criticism. The text frequently references sources, but the absence of a bibliography is a missed opportunity to provide readers with a guide to related titles in these fields. An index is included.

Suitable for academic or general collections. A hefty volume at 458 pages, but illustrations fill at least half the pages. The visual nature of the book is also evident on the exterior: all three exposed page edges are bright pink, the title on the spine is stamped in metallic pink in orange book cloth, and the printed cover is a full-color photograph.