



Book, exhibition and film reviews

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The Rule of Logistics: Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfillment

By Jesse LeCavalier

Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016

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Pb, pp. 296, 112 ills, \$30.

Logistics and the architectures of the American territory

It might not be by chance that *The Rule of Logistics*, Jesse LeCavalier's brilliant analysis of the architectures of Walmart, was published in 2016. The book takes the corporation as a paradigmatic case study for its inquiry, and it might be necessary to identify this major retailer as a key agent in the transformation of the American landscapes that notoriously expressed themselves that very year, in all their breadth, with the election of former property magnate Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States. Occupying with its different platforms a surface that—as the author highlights—is bigger than Manhattan, Walmart extends throughout all fifty American states, but is characteristically absent from many of its largest cities (including New York City), which both architectural narratives and political discussions have tended to privilege. Examining a key actor shaping the logics undergirding the organisation of the American territory, LeCavalier's book is a key contribution to contemporary discourse that simultaneously displaces some of the most basic assumptions supporting decades of architectural discourse and identifies new sites of the political.

One of the clearest outcomes of that infamous election was the increased relevance of big data management in the analysis and governance of contemporary territories—all those numbers that each of us leaves behind when using credit cards, updating online profiles or just moving around the globe. As was quickly evident, the then republican presidential candidate made a much more clever use of all those numbers in defining the targets of his campaign, the results of which we are living through today. All those numbers are key, also, to the operations of Walmart, which is not only the largest global retailer but manages one of the most expansive private databases in the world, constituting close to 2.4% of the information created in the world wide web every day.¹ In LeCavalier's analysis, Walmart's architecture is inextricably related to the administration of this information. Sam Walton, founder of the company in 1962, highlighted the management of Walmart's data network as key to the company's work: 'What I like about it is the kind of information we can pull out of it on a moment's notice—all those numbers.'²

Through analysing of this company's operations, LeCavalier renders visible the logics behind a new and pervasive layer of contemporary techno-political regimes: that of logistics. With that analysis, this carefully researched volume offers both a new theoretical framework and a lexicon for the study of contemporary architecture, one particularly adequate to addressing architecture's search for performance in a world defined by the simultaneous circulation of material goods and information rather than stasis and enclosure: characteristics with which architecture has

traditionally been associated. Architecture is, in the book, 'a medium within a network of exchange', a 'valve regulating flow', a 'conduit' rather than a container and an 'interface' for merchandise and data. Through these and other terms, LeCavalier considers both the rules that shape logistic operations in search for 'control, predictability, measurement, division, and management' and, more specifically, the spatial constructs that frame those operations as well.³ In fact, architecture has to mediate the aforementioned operations within circulatory regimes with the inherent stability and enclosure of buildings, which LeCavalier considers with significant attention both in his text and in a set of carefully produced analytical drawings.

However, the scale of the building is definitely insufficient to understand architecture's operations within contemporary regimes defined by logistics and, accordingly, the book is organised around a sequence of diverse scales, from that of the body to the territory—addressing questions that go from the automation of labour processes (and the bodies that are shaped by them) to the search for locations wherein the company may operate. At all these scales, LeCavalier identifies how conventional modes of assessment of architecture's value are disturbed. These disturbances, one might argue, are not only developments of the search for efficiency in relation to an increasing industrialisation of production and the pursuit of control of expanding circulation operations. They might rather be considered as corollaries of broader (and more complex) transformations inherent to the advanced capitalist regimes in which he takes architecture to operate. If capitalism would have turned a table

'on its head'—as Karl Marx famously argued to present the disjunction between use value and exchange value—LeCavalier takes this proposition from the objects contained to the building container itself (both as an object and as a technology of territorial organisation).⁴

In fact, a key contribution to the understanding of the way in which architecture's value is equally destabilised within the operations of circulation that make possible advanced capitalist regimes is the analysis of the disjunction between the architectures of Walmart and their value as objects in the world, as well as the value they provide to their sites. Following LeCavalier's arguments, Walmart's big boxes alter the conventional relationship between container and contained as well as that between architecture and property, for these buildings in fact have no value on their own, nor can they be considered to add value to the land on which they stand, but merely perform in 'the movement of merchandise from supplier to warehouse to shelf to shopping cart'.⁵

This sequence is key to the understanding of the larger critical ambitions of this text (and the larger ambitions, one could argue, of Walmart's operations as well), which include the 'rules' governing these processes and an understanding of the forms of power emanating from them as well. As LeCavalier proposes in expanding on the book's title, '[t]o rule is also, of course, to govern and to control, even to dominate'. In fact, as he argues, 'Walmart has indeed created an *empire* of logistics'. Whilst careful in the analysis of the logics of this governmental operation, LeCavalier remains only suggestive throughout the text as to their effects

on the controlled territory. As the book has it, 'the ways in which logistics come to control are not always the most obvious, the means by which it lays down its marks are not always the most legible, and the conduits through which it governs the thoughts and habits of its subjects are often buried'.⁶ And this is an area of exploration that remains open for further research: one might want to understand, for example, who are the subjects shaped at the end of this logistical chain, and how do the routes of Walmart's omnipresent tracks expand through those of private cars to suburban houses and exurban architectures. For whomever might be interested in undertaking this critical task, the route might start in the parking areas, which, as important to Walmart super centres as they are, are not featured in the analysis provided by the book.

The relevance of this question might allow us to address how Walmart's commitment to increasingly efficient circulation of information and goods is coterminous with the increasing depoliticisation of the population and the entrenchment of conservative values away from the metropolitan areas.⁷ If the book situates Walmart's operations as 'the architecture of fulfillment', it might be necessary to regard the double meaning of this key term, which relates not only to 'the meeting of a requirement, condition, or need' (in which Walmart is perfectly tuned to excel), but also to 'the achievement of something desired, promised or predicted'—a promise that is embedded in the unrealised dream of the American suburbs and inner territories that Walmart aims to complete.⁸ Le Cavalier brilliantly appeals to the forms of 'weak citizenship' associated

with the areas prioritised for Walmart's locations in the USA, significantly offering the grounds for this analysis.⁹

The book pays particular attention to the selection of these locations and carefully considers specific controversies faced by Walmart in the territorial expansion of its logistical network. These controversies include, for example, the struggle of the retail company to settle in Vermont, where it faced local opposition concerned with increasing traffic, sprawl and the threats to local businesses, amongst others. The battle, according to LeCavalier, was fought with 'unconventional tactics' that he traces with great attention, identifying media tactics on the one side and the location of stores as a form of 'blockade' of outlets just outside the state boundaries—in both cases overcoming traditional policy negotiations and the supposedly objective logics of technical operations.¹⁰

In fact, and most significantly, these analyses show the limits of the technical determinism grounding the operations of logistics, or, more accurately, they demonstrate their articulation with other operative mechanisms when entering into friction with diverse realities outside Walmart's control. And it is in this analysis that the politics of Walmart's operations are more clearly revealed within the book and are available for scrutiny. LeCavalier situates the aim for control that characterises logistical operations in relation to other forms of governance and within specific contingent relationships more difficult to apprehend, including labour practices and consumer preferences amongst others that are rendered evident in the text. These multilayered analyses of asymmetric and complex networks of

agents clarify the idea that, if the architectures of logistics might be understood to govern, it is within 'mobile, changing and contingent assemblages' and not with the certainties that the knowledge of logistics seeks to provide.¹¹ In unveiling those complex operations, the book is at its best, offering a methodological model for architectural research that develops the necessary tools for critically reading the territories we inhabit today and, simultaneously, becomes a key tool for developing the political mechanisms that might be needed to intervene within them.

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Notes and references

1. See Jesse LeCavalier, *The Rule of Logistics. Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfillment* (Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 156.
2. *Ibid.*: Sam Walton cited, p. 12.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
4. Taking a piece of furniture as an example, Marx argued that 'in relation to all other commodities' a table no longer 'stands with its feet on the ground' but 'stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.' Karl Marx, *Capital: A critique of political economy* (New York, Penguin Books, 1992 [1867]), pp. 163–5.
5. *The Rule of Logistics*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.
7. See Gus Lubin, 'These maps show how different Red America is from Blue America', *Business Insider* (18th January, 2017) [consulted online 05/12/17]: <http://www.businessinsider.com/maps-red-america-vs-blue-america-2017-1/#red-counties-are-84-less-populous-1> The article includes the map 'People in red counties are 22% more likely to shop at Walmart.'
8. Definitions of 'Fulfillment' in the Oxford English Dictionary [consulted online 05/12/17]: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fulfilment>
9. *The Rule of Logistics*, *op. cit.*, p. 138. In LeCavalier's analysis, these areas would be chosen by Walmart if its involvement seemed less likely to encounter opposition.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
11. Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London, Sage, 1999), p. 26. Cited in Daniel M. Abramson, Arindam Dutta, Timothy Hyde, Jonathan Massey, eds, 'Introduction', *Governing by Design. Architecture, Economy, and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), p. VIII.