
Ruth Slavid, editor for British magazine The Architect’s Journal, sees opportunity in the midst of challenges. That is the premise of Extreme Architecture: Building for Challenging Environments, which puts forth the hypothesis that architectural innovation is born in the world’s harshest climates and conditions. Bringing together forty-five examples of architecture designed for extreme environments, Slavid presents a body of evidence that proves without a doubt that “necessity is the mother of invention.”

The book is organized by environmental concern. There are five sections: hot, cold, high, wet, and space. Each features multiple case studies which highlight the ways in which the architecture responds to environmental conditions. Each example begins with a large photograph of the structure in situ. The height above sea level, average annual rainfall, and average temperatures of each site are presented on a clear table, providing insight into the challenges each architect or firm faced in their design. Multiple illustrations accompany each project, including exterior and interior photographs and site plans.

Slavid’s writing is clear and engaging. She makes a point of balancing her descriptions of technological innovations with a discussion of how the architecture succeeds in heightening the emotional experience of place for the visitor or inhabitant. The range of projects covers nearly every region of the world, and includes such fascinating examples as an ice bar in Sweden, a floating house from the Netherlands, a research station at the North Pole, a moon base, and (perhaps most intriguing) the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway, ensuring that the world’s seeds survive in the event of apocalyptic events or simple human mismanagement of the earth.

The book is generally well organized, though not always easy to navigate. The table of contents lists the case studies in each section but does not provide page numbers. The index, however, lists projects by name, architect or firm, and by country. The end matter also includes both image credits and project credits. The latter of these serves as a quick reference to the architect, project team, and collaborators involved in each project, including agencies that worked on individual elements of the structure (doors, acoustics, lighting, artwork, etc.).

While other books have investigated architecture in harsh conditions, the range of projects selected for inclusion in Extreme Architecture is impressive. By not focusing on a single environmental challenge, the book succeeds in asking the broader question: In a world where our population is growing and our environment is changing, what can we learn from these extreme examples that will inform the architecture of the future? Both undergraduate and graduate students of architectural design will find this book to be valuable in exploring that question.

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