

## Monographs in Disguise

**In Situ: George Ranalli Works & Projects**, by George Ranalli. Oscar Riera Ojeda Publishers, September 2014, 496 pages, \$75.

**Public Natures: Evolutionary Infrastructures**, by Weiss/Manfredi. Princeton Architectural Press, September 2015, 376 pages, \$50.

**Learning Through Practice**, by Rob Rogers. ORO Editions, February 2015, 220 pages, \$40.

**Reveal, Filter, Evolve, Effect (Core)**, by FXFOWLE and Liz Campbell Kelly. ORO Editions, September 2014, 320 pages, \$40.

**Improvisations on the Land: Houses of Fernau + Hartman**, by Richard Fernau, Laura Hartman, Thomas Fisher, and Daniel Gregory. Monacelli Press, October 2015, 182 pages, \$46.

By Alexander Gorlin, FAIA

AT A TIME when bookstores are a nostalgic throwback to the past, and Rizzoli, known so well for its architectural monographs, has just published *Kim Kardashian West: Selfish*, these six serious tomes present a brave face to the future. Nevertheless, architects seem to resist letting go of the monograph, the encapsulation of their careers that distills the best of their work. The great models are Palladio's *Quatri Libri*, Schinkel's *Sammlung Architektonischer Entwurf*, Aalto's *Complete Works*, and, of course, Le Corbusier's magisterial eight-volume *Oeuvre Complete*.

In recent years, monographs have become the Birkin bags of architecture—a “must have” accessory for every ambitious practitioner and a valuable marketing tool that can cost as much as \$100,000 for the architect to produce. The subject of the monograph must pay for photography or rights to publish photographs, the cost of writers to create the essays, and also commit to purchasing a certain number of

books in advance, not to mention forking over money to interns who redraw the plans, build models, and produce renderings. But websites are challenging books as efficient marketing tools, and publishers are finding that monographs don't make much money. Hence we see the growth of a new breed: the camouflaged monograph—which seems at first glance to be about larger questions facing architecture culture rather than strictly a survey of a particular architect. Whereas titles used to be simple—the multivolume *Richard Meier Architect*, for example—they now arrive with a theoretical promise.

Still, the five architectural firms behind the books here have



produced beautiful artifacts for the public, friends, clients, and admirers, each completely different in its approach and presentation. By far the most lavish and precious is *In Situ: George Ranalli Works & Projects*, which comes in a heavy slipcase. Drenched in deep-red, sensually slippery paper, the box opens to reveal, like a medieval illuminated manuscript, the totality of Ranalli's dedication to detail and materiality, a *gesamtkunstwerk*-type of career that ranges from hardware to master plans. Among my favorites are the extraordinary Saratoga Avenue Community Center in Brooklyn (2008) and the Atelier International Table Design (1993). Too bad more of Ranalli's work has not been built.

The title of Weiss/Manfredi's monograph, *Public Natures*: