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Book Review

Sylvie Duvernoy

Elementi di disegno, 12 lezioni di disegno dell'architettura

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Drawing is designing. All drawing, whether executed by hand or digitally rendered, helps architects and designers to explore their ideas and assists in bringing their concepts closer to reality. Sketches help describe and clarify ideas, and the choice of method to use could be crucial to the understanding of a project. By studying the principles and history of architectural representation, designers may manipulate any drawing format to communicate precisely what they desire.

Sylvie Duvernoy's work is the culmination of her ten years of teaching architectural drawing at both Italian and American universities. The five-part manual breaks down the basics into introductory concepts, the geometry of drawings, the geometry of architectural design, rendering techniques, and territorial representation. It is further divided into a format of twelve independent lessons which can be used either sequentially or "zapped" in a random order. This book is the intellectual base upon which practical exercises may be added to complement the teaching experience. Each of the theory lessons is written concisely in Italian with an English summary, and the book's 8 x 8 inches (20 x 20 cm) format renders the often complex and intellectual content very intimate and approachable.

Duvernoy's point of view is that there are primarily two kinds of drawings by which an architect may externalize their ideas: one is a concept sketch, executed early on by creators and the second is a presentation drawing. The first kind is used to explore internal design ideas and is therefore emotional, while the second must communicate these ideas to others and is therefore more informational and factual in manner.

Duvernoy sets out to explain in each chapter the general rules and the "whys" of various techniques. She believes that without this knowledge, a student will be unable to properly translate their ideas effectively. Just as important as the "how" of architectural drawing however, Duvernoy methodically and seductively inserts a historical perspective for each argument. This balance between theory, history and practical applications is a helpful tool for the student. The intertwining and cross-pollination of the past becomes an important lesson for understanding the design thought-process and visual development through the ages. Compared to an architectural classic such as Rendow Yee's *Architectural Drawing: A Visual Compendium of Types and Methods* (Wiley, 4th ed., 2012), this volume gives depth and breadth to the subject.

An interesting aspect of the book is Duvernoy's choice of visual material. Over 500 illustrations range widely in types and techniques. They cover the rich gamut of historical and contemporary possibilities, and there are as many freehand designs as there are technical drawings. From pen and ink sketches on vellum to felt-tip marker renderings, one gets the sensation that by starting with hand-executed exercises, a person may begin to experiment with what will eventually become their signature technique. However, the amazingly wide range of drawings includes relatively few works of contemporary "star" architects.

Students are encouraged to freely develop individually and not be tempted by the "copy-and-paste" mentality of today's computer-enhanced reality. Instead there is the mature suggestion that each of a well known architect's drawing is the result of years of personal evolution and artistic development.

Cesar Pelli once told his students that his Argentinean hometown was locally famous for its honey. There were two kinds of honey, however, one far superior to the other. The higher quality honey resulted from bees that gathered pollen naturally from flowers and trees in the surrounding hills. The inferior quality product was made by bees that had continual access to an already elaborated sugar source, molasses. By not seeking out an authentic, raw source and by consuming a processed substance, the second bees' product was not as unique, memorable or sweet. The analogy was clear to his students: seek authentic, original sources and elaborate them until they become your own signature.

This volume is exactly the authentic, formative source to which Pelli was referring. It is a gem of a research tool, and one would want to see a complete English translation, more colour illustrations and an index citing key topics, but it is still well worth the modest price (about €30.00) in its existing format.

The choice of chapters is also complete in content and range, and stimulates the reader's fantasy and curiosity. The section on orthographic and perspective techniques deals not only with the history and guiding rules but also with how architecture is "seen" conceptually. These intellectual tools are as important as the pragmatic ones.



Fig. 1. The anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. On the left, the anamorphosis as it appears in the painting; on the right, the skull seen from an oblique angle. From *Elementi di Disegno*, p. 110

Another section, not usually included in a standard drawing technique manual, is the chapter on anamorphosis. Anamorphosis is a type of drawing which presents a distorted image that appears natural only under certain conditions, such as a trompe l'oeil. Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *The Ambassador*, makes the viewer want to

pursue further research into the historical reasons behind such a disruptive abstract insertion of an anamorphosis image centrally located in an otherwise precise and self contained work.

The skull inserted by Holbein, which is recomposed only when seen from an oblique angle (fig. 1), most surely took many hours to construct. However, today a computer could generate the same image in no time. Would a contemporary designer have the wherewithal and the command of the available tools to include such an eye-catcher to illustrate a relevant point? Or would the lack of knowledge and the desire to conform to a common “look” preclude any visual experimentation?

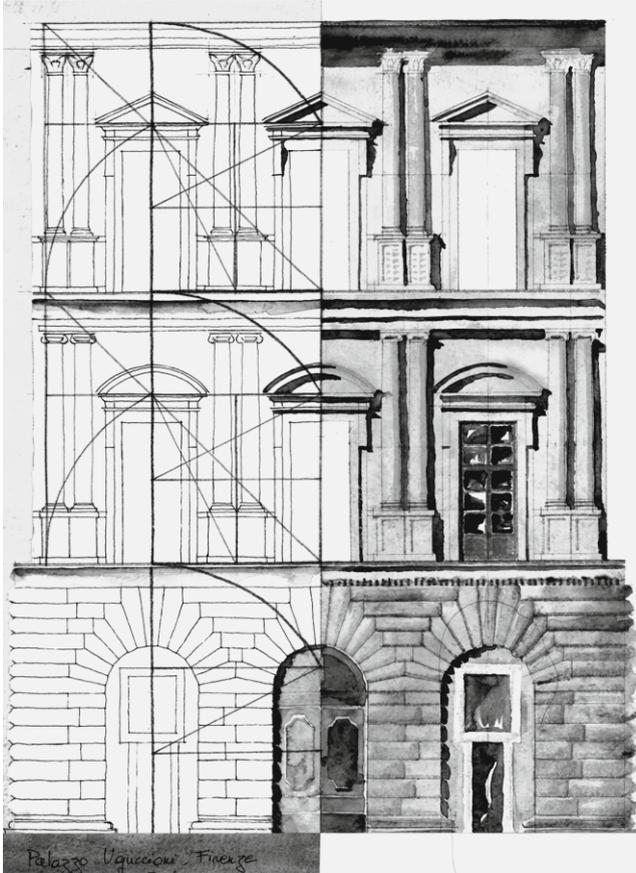


Fig. 2. Palazzo Uguccioni, Firenze. Watercolor by Sylvie Duvernoy.
From *Elementi di Disegno*, p. 175

Today’s current debate surrounding the use of digital technology in architectural representations is relevant in light of this book. The global unification of drawing styles and presentations has removed any sense of individual personality of the designer. It eliminates any trace of the architect himself and the “hand of the maestro” has vanished. Another aspect of this ease of creating perfect, robotic two-dimensional virtual realities, is the confusion it generates: am I looking at a photograph of a finished building, or is it a

digital rendering? The lack of personality and emotion renders the architect anonymous and the presentation dry.

Technology has even provided a possible solution to such indifferent representations. Any digital photo, diagram or drawing maybe re-rendered to look as if it has been hand sketched. This misuse of technology in the quest to mimic manually drawn images is convoluted. Computers often betray the architect due to technical crashes, software inadequacies or simply lack of electricity. In comparison, the use of one's draftsmanship to develop ideas and transmit authentic notions is fundamental, true and reliable.

In the end, the categorization of the pre, post, and present digital eras is not central in helping designers explore their ideas with an increased clarity. This is not an "either-or" scenario but rather an overlapping of techniques that is now an evolving future. The underrated power of manual craftsmanship and originality in presentation drawings is what Duvernoy's book addresses. She does not rally against the digital predominance but rather illustrates basics which will liberate any designer, no matter what their level, to rethink the vast diversities of tools available to them.

About the reviewer

Born in Santa Monica, California, Terry Dwan was educated in structural engineering and architecture at Rice University in Houston and fine arts at SACI in Florence before receiving her Master of Architecture in 1984 from Yale University. She is a licensed architect in both the United States and Italy. Following a Fulbright Scholarship in Rome, in 1986 Dwan became partner in Studio Citterio Dwan and in 1991 opened her own office in Milan. She has designed buildings in Switzerland, Japan, Germany and Italy and has participated in exhibitions in venues including Bordeaux, Tokyo, Milan and Osaka. She taught architecture at Studio Art Centers International from 1997 to 2004, and has lectured extensively from New Haven to Bogotá. The practice has won international awards and competitions for architectural design. In 1996 she began work as a product designer, collaborating with companies such as Sawaya and Moroni, Electrolux and San Lorenzo. Since 2004 she has led the art direction for the environmentally focused firm 1920 Riva. Some of her works are on display in the permanent collection of the Design Museum at the Triennale in Milan.