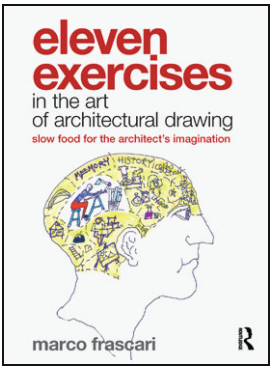

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Book Review

Marco Frascari

Eleven Exercises in the Art of Architectural Drawing: Slow Food for the Architect's Imagination

Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2011

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In the process of architectural design, the drawings that are intended to represent the ideas stemming from the designer's imagination fall into two main categories: conceptual sketches, related mainly to the early research phases; and communication drawings, related to the phase of divulgation of the results of the research. Conceptual sketches relate emotions, while communication drawings mostly report information. The communication drawing, in order to be efficient, must adhere to the standard codes of two- and three-dimensional representation, and therefore takes the familiar forms of plan, section, elevation, perspective, digital rendering, and so forth. It can be done by assistants or collaborators. Marco Frascari calls this kind of drawing "trivial drawing". On the other hand, the "non-trivial drawing", which describes the idea rather than the form, may take any graphic form whatsoever, and may be done with any kind of graphic tool. The quality of the conceptual sketch, done by no one other than the designers themselves, depends heavily on their ability to express their feelings on paper with pencils, markers, colors, and all sorts of graphic techniques.

Marco Frascari, of Italian origin, has been teaching architectural design for many years in the United States and Canada. This new book is totally dedicated to the "non-trivial drawing", inquiring into the relationship between drawing and designing, or better, between drawing and thinking. Although the title of the volume is *Eleven Exercises in the Art of Architectural Drawing*, the book is not meant only for students but also for colleagues engaged in teaching drawing and/or working in design studios, and of course, for anyone interested in the meaning of drawing. More than a textbook, it is an essay. The subtitle gives us the key to understanding the author's thesis and the purpose of the eleven exercises: "slow food for the architect's imagination".

The arguments that Frascari discusses in his essay are so many and so diverse that it is impossible to comment on them all. Among them, three main themes that recur in the various chapters of the book have caught my attention: the question of slow vs. fast, the opposition between digital and non-digital, and – last but not least – the relationship between design and drawing tools.

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slow/fast

When I started teaching architectural drawing in Italy more than ten years ago, the first-year drawing class lasted for the full year: two semesters. Today, in nearly all Italian universities, the drawing class lasts only one semester: from September to January, sometimes from September to December. It must also encompass descriptive geometry, which used to be a separate course before the "reform" of the curricula. Is it really surprising that the colleagues teaching the second-semester design studios complain that the students enrolled in their classes are not able to express their ideas on paper? Are the drawing teachers to blame, or the pace at which we are supposed to train them? The students have no time to digest all the information with which we feed them. Fast, fat food … no assimilation time. I really wish I was still given another semester in order to contribute more to the progress of their drawing skills, which goes along with the growth of their maturity and … which takes time. Maybe one would argue that it is not positive to separate drawing from designing, and that the drawing class should not be so strongly oriented toward the "trivial drawing". I could even agree to some extent. France has a different approach to these didactic problems, but speed is a feature common to all architecture curricula.

First-year students however do not complain. The quicker the hand-drawing course is over, the quicker they switch to digital drawing, which thrills them much more because they feel more professional as soon as they approach computer technology.

digital/non-digital

I still do not understand why digital drawing is sometimes referred to – in Italian – as *disegno automatico*, and why it is considered to be quicker than hand drawing. There is nothing automatic in digital drawing. The computer only does what the operator tells it to do: if the input is lousy, the output is lousy. No increase in intellectual or artistic value is to be expected from a machine that was not handled by a highly skilled (and long trained) operator. But sophisms die hard. My students are still convinced that the computer is going to produce a perspective view better and quicker than what they could do by hand. This is why I get, after weeks of efforts, awkward black and white 3D views, printed on shiny white paper, that are a caricature of the architectural object that they had in mind. It is much harder to embed pathos in a digital drawing than in a hand drawing.

Among the eleven exercises suggested by Marco Frascari, I particularly enjoy the first one:

> Instead of dipping your nibs or your brushes in store-bought inks and paints, use exclusively liquids, pastes, juices or powders that you normally eat, drink or use to spice and flavour your food.

I enjoy it when the act of drawing involves sensations that go beyond the mere sight. I enjoy touching the many kinds of paper, I have fun getting my hands and clothes dirty. I enjoy the smell of some media. Even taste… I remember a fellow student drawing watercolours by licking constantly her brush to wet it (true watercolour pastes are made from honey and are not toxic!). Hand drawing can be very fast: it does not take much time to spread color on paper. And since the procedure is fast, in case the first result is not satisfactory, the idea of starting over and trying again is much less discouraging.

In the late eighties and early nineties of the past century, when CAD first appeared in professional practice, and simultaneously started to be taught in architecture schools, students and newly-graduated architects were hired by big firms because of their familiarity with the modern computer technology that the senior architects of that time had not mastered. The salary would be directly proportional to the juniors' ability to use the CAD programs that were spreading throughout the business world. Now that CAD has become the most widespread drafting tool, both at school and at work, I hope to witness the reverse tendency someday: students and junior architects will be hired for their ability to sketch and draw by hand, a skill that seniors will have lost because the excitement about computer technology was paramount in their youth.

design/drawing tools

Among Marco Frascari's eleven exercises, three are about the importance and influence of the drawing tools and representation techniques on the design process and result. This is an argument that has been discussed at length – and still will be – in the pages of the *Nexus Network Journal*: how and how much do the means of drawing (hands, 2D, 3D, CAD…) influence the shape and form of architecture? Frascari suggests trying to draw with crooked rulers, non-straightedges, bent squares, etc. Build new tools to find new forms. Play with the representation techniques: imagine, for example, that a reverse perspective is the natural view of a true space.

We would like to think that new tools are constructed only when the need for them arises, technology thus being a mere consequence of imagination, the necessary step to make desire come true. This theory is pleasant because it puts mind above hands, ideas above mechanics. But only geniuses have a totally inventive imagination. Most of us are subject to the technical possibilities that are offered to us: the instruments acting as a motor for inspiration. This is why experimenting freely with available tools can suggest gracious results. When the tool is eventually modified according to chosen rules, then a two-way relationship is settled between drawing and design.

The ancient Greek mathematicians had defined three basic right-angled triangles that sufficed to build the Platonic solids representing the beauty of the elemental world: the half square, the half equilateral triangle, and the triangle of golden proportion. What if we could buy today in any nearby stationery shop all three different little plastic squares (one of angles 45°-45°-90°, one of -30°-60°-90° and one of angles -33°-57°-90°) instead of the only first two being available? We surely would have many more monuments with golden proportions.

Few books on architectural drawing approach the question from such a "non-trivial" standpoint. Frascari's essay is full of suggestions for architects and professors in architecture schools. Each reader is going to be interested in some precise point and focus on some peculiar issue that will trigger his or her own curiosity or suggest some controversy. Reading Frascari's words forces the readers to define and justify their own opinions on the subject. Which is a sufficient reason to read the book.

About the reviewer

Sylvie Duvernoy is the book editor of the *Nexus Network Journal*, and the author of the recently published book on "trivial" drawing *Elementi di disegno. 12 lezioni di disegno dell'architettura* – with English text (Florence: Le Lettere, 2011).