

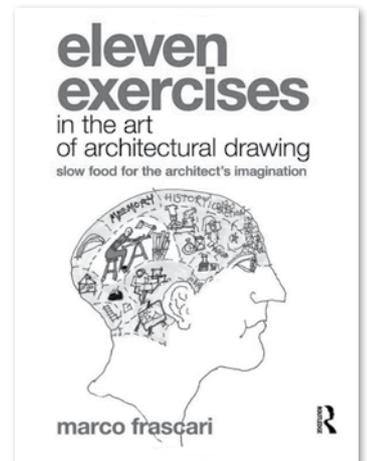
Eleven Exercises in the Art of Architectural Drawing: Slow food for the architect's imagination

by Marco Francari
Review by Maurizio Sabini

"Drawings are clearly a confused representation of architecture." (Francari 2011: 178) With such a disquieting definition, Marco Francari concludes in his postface his fascinating journey into the meanderings of architectural theory, taking drawings as a pretext. In fact, his book, which only apparently is about drawings (and indeed it also goes into the details of specific, meaningful drawing exercises), is about architectural theory. In dissecting, with Tafurian lucidity, the theoretical density around the experience of drawing, Francari demonstrates with this book what I tried to suggest in one of our past conversations, thematised by Francari himself as "Drawing as Theory": to be precise, I argued that "drawing is theory" (Sabini 2011). The oxymoron about the "clear confusion" to which Francari refers, using Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's definition of "clearly confused aesthetic concepts", reveals all the density of theory that any non-trivial architectural drawing (to use one of Francari's favorite definitions) brings with it.¹ It is a density of complex mental constructions, ambiguous meanings, mysterious relationships and layerings of signs that reflect architecture's nature as "embedded storytelling" (68).² The density of such "confusion", I would argue, may be analogous to the "thick description" elaborated by Clifford Geertz as a potent theoretical image for anthropological studies (Geertz 1973). K. Michael Hays has already discussed the potential impact on architecture ("slowing thinking down") that the assumption of such a metaphor may imply (Hays 2007). Francari's journey is in fact a "thick description" of the very processes by which architecture is imagined and experienced. As the anthropologist, following an ethnographic methodology, needs to immerse him/herself into the conversations that unfold within a given ethnic group, in order then to record and elaborate the narratives that form the group's culture (thus producing new knowledge), so the architect, according to Francari, needs to immerse him/herself synaesthetically into the simmering of tectonic ideas that, only slowly, may emerge from the exercising of non-trivial architectural drawings, which are "the very condition of architectural experience" (9).

Repeatedly using culinary metaphors (a synaesthetic experience indeed, involving all the senses) that well exemplify how, out of many elements, a new whole is formed, Francari is able to demonstrate the "formative nature" of architectural drawings as "factures". The concept of "formativity" is appropriately borrowed from the Turinese philosopher Luigi Pareyson, whose definition of the concept ("a way of making such that, while one makes, one invents the way of making") resonates particularly well within Francari's discourse.³

The 11 exercises that Francari proposes are indeed non-trivial processes of discovery, within the complexity of the architectural experience. From the use of food, liquids or powders to dip nibs or brushes; to the construction of a pantograph; the drawing of scale figures; the mosaic of boards necessary to delineate (with Alberti, through "denoting lines", as Francari convincingly argues) a building on the scale of 1:1; the drawing for a blind person; the palimpsest of the single drawing for a building; or the *recto/verso* exercise (the ultimate assertion of authority of the drawing vs. the digital representation), all Francari's exercises are meant to



Marco Francari 2011 *Eleven Exercises in the Art of Architectural Drawing: Slow Food for the Architect's Imagination*. Milton Park, England: Routledge.

1 Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and his *Meditationes* (1735) on "aesthetics", as quoted by Francari (2011: 178).

2 "To draw means literally to involve oneself in a practical experience with signs." (Francari 2011: 98)

3 Luigi Pareyson (1954), as quoted by Francari (2011: 15).

show how drawings are “sapient factures”. Precisely by means of a discussion of the theory of the making of architectural drawings he is able to infer that “architecture is not a work of art, but the art that makes the work” (11). Carlo Scarpa’s teachings (which Frascari experienced first-hand at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura in Venice – IUAV) are often recalled and embedded in his argument, along with some critical concepts by the eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico, whose famous motto (*verum ipsum factum* – only what is made is true) was borrowed by Scarpa himself as an inscription for his design of the IUAV main entrance.

The book also contains illuminating chapters and passages on the history of the theory of representation and geometry, such as Monge’s Descriptive Geometry and the Russian multi-faceted VKhUTEMAS intellectual Pavel Florensky’s “inverted perspective”, or even James Joyce’s notion of “geo-mater”, which combines “matrix, mater (mother) and meter with geo-(earth) in a pregnant metaphor making geometry a discipline of measurement, prediction and conceiving” (45). Here too, though, we are invited to follow, with Frascari, a non-trivial approach (to geometry) in a discourse that is thus able to include Filarete’s powerful metaphor for architecture, “the architectural patron is the father and the architect the mother” (46). This notion of the architect as “geomater”, and therefore of the fundamentally humane nature of architecture, with all its approximations, helps Frascari call into question the celebration of exactitude displayed by the contemporary practice of parametric design. Buildings, as constructed things, in their materiality, are “exactly approximate” (49). They are imperfect (like architectural drawings), yet “there is no easy way to add imperfections to the [computer] model [of a building] because the lines that give shape to volumes are created by strings of numbers” (49).

However, beyond the many philosophical stimulations and practical suggestions contained in the book and the new light cast on the experiential value of drawing in the digital age, the book’s main merit lies, I believe, in a broader ambition. In the midst of waves of accelerated informational and representational flows of thought, processes washing over us daily, Frascari’s “slow food for the architect’s imagination” is a refreshing reminder that the “idea of architecture is not a building, for architecture to exist in human consciousness, someone has to draft a story” (12). And by definition, a story needs time to be conceived, imagined, construed, constructed, experienced, and shared.

References

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