

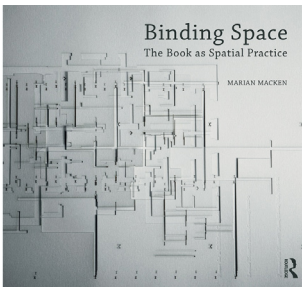
review / CARL DOUGLAS

INTERSTICES 19

Marian Macken

Binding Space: The Book as Spatial Practice

Routledge, 2018



Many of us pass our days moving from one illuminated screen to the next, channeling our creative activity through software and Wi-Fi. In this accelerated and transient state, a paper book or a pencil drawing can seem luxurious. Marian Macken, in *Binding Space: The Book as Spatial Practice* (2018), suggests such analog pleasures are more than personal extravagances. Books, she contends, are an under-exploited mode of architectural discourse: not simply bearers of writing *about* architecture, but a creative practice offering an alternative to the conventions of drawing sheets, screens, and eye-catching imagery:

Binding Space demonstrates the possibilities of book *making*: it considers how the book format reveals and facilitates certain aspects of the design process, and the repercussions of this for spatial drawing and representation (5-6)

Macken presumes that modes of representation are not innocent or neutral transmitters of information, “a uniform space through which meaning may glide without modulation” (Evans, 1997: 154); and that digital tools do not obviate the production of drawings and models as physical artefacts. Book-making, she argues, has potential to open new avenues for designers and critics of space:

The seeming conventionality of the book has the capacity to be reinvented anew, through creative practice, to take on a role of critical enquiry and to be the site of architectural innovation. (130)

Binding Space (which derives from Macken’s PhD thesis; 2012) has an interdisciplinary flavour, marrying a study of book production by artists with theories of architectural representation. It provides an extensive practice context for the production of architectural art-books; theorises the format as a space-time construction; and demonstrates some of its potential through a series of Macken’s own creative works.

The text is organised into five parts, each attending to a different spatial register of the book format. Part 1, *Field*, identifies “bookness” (25): the characteristics of books that distinguish them from, for example, screens, models, or individual drawing sheets. Central to bookness is seriality: while a single sheet of paper can be imagined as a window to look through, the page of a book is part of a sequence. We literally peel a page away from the stack of pages yet to be read, and

lay it over the pages passed. This “openable codex format”, writes Macken, “offers the element of interiority, and, hence, its opposite, exteriority” (32).

Parts 2 and 3, *Page* and *Volume*, attend to the book as a material artefact. Individual pages are a physical substrate that can be manipulated by stitching, cutting, creasing and embossing; so that the paper, “rather than receiving the drawing, is manipulated to form the drawing” (57). Books that pop up, unfold, or contain voids—such as *okoshi-ezu* from Edo-period Japan, and the Het Nieuwe Instituut’s *Vedute Collection*—overlap with models in their ability to produce or describe spatial volumes.

The time of the viewer is implicated in the way books unfold in *series*, the theme of the fourth part. The movement of the reader travelling interactively through the book, leads Macken to closely associate the book with exhibition design. This leads her to conclude in Part 5, by articulating book time as multiple: “there is a multiplicity, a plurality, of ‘times’ that should be included within architecture... not just the time of inhabiting, but also the times of making, recollecting and re-positioning” (135). This suggests a concern with a broad range of spatial agencies and narratives, rather than the telling of a single story oriented by a designer’s intentions.

At the beginning of each part, Macken describes some of her own books. These sections sit outside the main discursive line of the text (not even appearing on the contents page), but superbly exemplify her thought. For instance, her book *\$1.45¢: Houses in the Museum Garden: Biography of an Exhibition*, which heads up Part 3, demonstrates how the spatial seriality of the book can unfurl the plural times of building. It documents three demonstration houses installed in the sculpture garden of New York’s MoMA between 1949 and 1955: one by Marcel Breuer, a second by Gregory Ain, and the third a replica of a Japanese guest house by Junzō Yoshimura. Macken attends to the houses’ prefabrication, short exhibited life, maintenance, disseminating function, relocation, and re-use; presenting them through a set of 22 unfolding portfolios containing collapsible models and embossed drawings. The portfolios form intersecting time-series of the transformations of each individual house, and the changing state of the museum courtyard. Using overlays, cut-outs, pop-ups, and embossing, the portfolios describe the courtyard as a transient space, and invite cross-reading of the houses and their various careers. As conceptual probes, Macken’s books are indispensable to her project, moving *Binding Space* from being a purely abstract meditation to being a provocative model of practice.

Architectural books can be more than normative archives for completed works, or polemic texts. Instead, Macken suggests that by experimenting with the book-making as a process we might refresh our understanding of the time(s) of architecture, and experiment with sequences, narratives, and interiority in new ways. The temporal and multiple nature of books exposes the rhythms, syncopations, and sequences of architecture, making it easier to see their various states and shifts.

Macken assembles an extensive collection of invigorating examples, and makes a strong argument that book-making remains valuable in a time of screen-based presentations, without resorting to nostalgia at any point. She does not seem to feel the urge to defend physical production against the intrusion of digital techniques (her own books integrate digital fabrication, particularly laser-cutting,

with traditional techniques of paper-making, folding, and debossing). Rather, she affirms book-making as a slow “savoring” process, as equally necessary in design as rapid and efficient ways of working (Frasconi, 2011: 69).

The organisation of the book is perhaps more complex than necessary. Some discrete short essays could have been meaningfully merged into single chapters. Macken’s direct accounts of her own practice work are one of the major strengths of the work, but sit oddly between chapters (not even appearing on the contents page at all). While this reinforces creative practice as having a discrete logic and independent existence of its own, I found it a little disjointed.

For me, Macken’s research triggered thoughts of how architecture’s temporal frames are locked to particular divisions of labour. For example, the inception of the drawing set (initially through the pairing of plan and section in the Renaissance) encoded the distinction between architect and builder. Where the former had ideas and overview, instructing by means of drawing, the latter were understood to expertly follow the plans to produce a building. The richer temporality that comes into view through book production might provide a way to recognise a less stark division.

Macken extends discussions about architectural representation into an under-addressed area. It is an essential read for anyone interested in the theory and practice of architectural representation. As a representational form, the book allows us to question default settings for the presentation of architecture, opening new spatial possibilities. In particular, those who are interested in the use of craft techniques, and slow or tactile media will appreciate the book’s cogent demonstration of why such things are not mere luxuries. Because it works with a broad range of spatial practices, it has particular relevance for thinking about interiors, exhibitions, installation and critical or speculative spatial design. I am grateful to Macken for introducing me to many new artists, designers and works. Macken’s own book is a constructive provocation for experimental practitioners and teachers of architecture and related areas of spatial design.

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