

**Polly Gould reviews Paulette Singley's *How to Read Architecture* (Routledge, 2019).**

Imagine you are standing in front of a building you previously have not seen. Without the aid of a guide book or other supplemental information, but equipped with your native ability to reason and a basic knowledge of the culture with which you are engaging, how would you begin to interpret, that is to say 'read,' this work of architecture?<sup>1</sup>

Paulette Singley's *How to Read Architecture* is an elegant guide to those *without* a guide book. It raises the use of the prepositions of 'within', 'without', and 'with' to an organising principle that promotes the relational aspect of architecture and its situatedness.

#### INTERPRETION

Its subtitle – 'An Introduction to Interpreting the Built Environment,' puts the issue of interpretation front and centre. For me, Singley *interprets* in a number of ways. This book undoubtedly impresses with its erudition and Singley has evident stature as an educator and explainer, but there is also interpretation at work in the sense of a player of musical scores: she interprets as a musician interprets the music of another. Singley does two things here – she gives me, her reader, wide-ranging overviews with historical sweeps that carry me from one time and place to another, and she also impresses me with her individual perspective. She achieves a combination of engaging the canonical and but also skips lightly across these references to generate a narrative line with her own distinctive perspective.

## OBSERVATION

Standing outside architecture, in the most basic sense of where the rain falls or wind blows, is the position from which we observe a building before entering it.<sup>2</sup>

Beside *interpretation* – and although not featured in the title – another central focus is that of observation. In this book observation matters. And the question is ‘How to observe architecture?’ Notice is taken of the objects under consideration, and observations are made from primary sources that take the reader into the field of the built environment. It is as if the text says to the reader ‘Look’, and then asks ‘Do you see this?’ Reading this book can feel like we are on a Grand Tour, a reworking of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cultural excursion, even though sometimes the places visited are archival, or constructed through the words of philosophers.

## HOW-TO MANUAL

And then the book shows *how* to see this or that building or architectural example – how to observe. And the ‘how’ matters. In a way this book is an instruction manual to finding a method. The structure of the book is in four parts that each propose a method for reading architecture. The sequence suggests a spatialized relation to this reading of architecture: the first part proposes ‘Reading Between the Lines,’ followed by ‘Reading Outside-In Architecture,’ ‘Inside-Out Architecture,’ and ‘Out-and-Out Architecture.’ ‘Outside-In Architecture’ considers architecture as it is approached through its situatedness in its context; ‘Inside-Out Architecture’ approaches architecture as it is understood in the performance of the habitation that it enables; ‘Out-and-Out Architecture’ approaches architecture through its formal aesthetic geometries.

The first part ‘Reading Between the Lines’ is considerably shorter than the subsequent three. It acts as a portico entrance hall to a further sequence of ‘rooms’ and it proposes that architecture can be read through the written word by seeking out inscriptions on the surface of buildings. It also proposes that architecture can be read in the narratives that circulate around buildings, and that architecture has been intimately connected to the book since the invention of the printing press,

through engraved architectural illustrations and descriptions in printed matter. This first part offers the first answer as to 'how to read architecture': read architecture by reading *about* architecture: we enter architecture through the book. I start here, by reading *this* book about architecture.

## HOW I READ

Standing outside architecture, in the most basic sense of where the rain falls or wind blows, is the position from which we observe a building before entering it.<sup>3</sup>

I repeat the above quote in order to follow Singley's 'how-to' for reading architecture but apply it to reading Singley's own book. Standing outside the book, in the basic sense of where I am before I read, where 'the rain falls or wind blows', is the position from which I observe a book before opening it. Reading 'Outside-In,' I begin seated at my desk or lying on my bed, I read the blurb on the back cover, I look at the pictures – and I read the acknowledgements – I like to know where the book has come from – the context of its author's life – and then I look at the index and consider it like a map of the key terms, the names noted, the topics that recur with strings of numbers pointing to the pages where the references are to be found. For me this is the orientation stage before embarking on the actual reading. This approach from 'Outside-In' recognises the terrain that this book shares with its neighbours, the way it sits upon the ground that informs it, the particular flavours that its territory imbues it with, and its critical context. I make a brief survey of the landmarks that I might recognise, beginning with the already familiar, in order to map them mentally and place myself in relation to them. Once I have begun to read and I am in the process of following the lines, and turning the pages, one after another, I am reading 'Inside-Out.' I get a sense of the atmosphere of the writing, the kind of thinkable things that are catered for through the writing. I get a feel for the optimum habitable conditions enabled by the style of writing. Who is it for? Can I feel at home here, for example? Or does this book belong to some other subjectivity than mine – am I just a temporary guest, or – a more extreme possibility – a trespasser? Reading 'Out-and-Out' to discover the formality of the book: its type, its form, its shape and structure – the organisation as academic apparatus and then also the visual argument.



Polly Gould, 'Montage of illustrations from *Antarctica, Art and Archive*' by Polly Gould and *How to Read Architecture: An Introduction to Interpreting the Built Environment* by Paulette Singley

Singley's book has over 300 illustrations printed in black and white throughout the text, generating formal patterns of imagery. I recognised a surprising number of image references that Singley and I share between our two books. The images that jump out at me include the following: The Musée du Quai Branley-Jacques Chirac<sup>4</sup> that Singley considers for its use of a living wall planted with greenery and the anthropology collection inside – nature and artifice divisions blurred. 'Outside-In' architecture explores the effect of architecture upon sites or how the site informs the architecture but also the outsider status of some marginal actors in exclusionary architectural practices. Singley proposes Peter Zumthor<sup>5</sup> and his design for Thermal Vals, Switzerland to understand the way architecture can create proximity with natural forces. This work gives rise to a discussion of shared water sources, outdoor communal wash sites of the everyday, and the etymology of the word banal in French that leads us from the shared laundry bath facility to the meaning of the commons. Ernst Haeckel's radiolarians, in *Kunstformen der Nature* (1904)<sup>6</sup> are connected by formal similarity with the René Binet's Triumphal Gateway, Exposition Universelle Paris (1900)<sup>7</sup> recognising nature's forms in architecture. Discussion of hothouses and artificial atmospheres are drawn out of references to Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace in London for the Great Exhibition of 1851<sup>8</sup> with an image of the Elm

tree encased in the crystal palace. This then leads to a discussion of air conditioning with the greenhouse domes by Nicholas Grimshaw, the Eden Project in Cornwall, England 2001<sup>9</sup> and the geodesic domes and the unrealised proposal by of Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao, 'Dome Over Manhattan,' (1960).<sup>10</sup> 'Construction of the concrete roof of the Palazetto dello Sport in Rome Italy for 1960 Summer Olympics,' by architect Annibale Vitellozzo and engineer Pier Luigi Nervi<sup>11</sup> is referenced to point to a genealogy of complex curves in architecture. Then organic structures are noted in Georges Cuvier, skeletal comparisons of animals from *Tableau élémentaires de l'histoire naturelle des Animaux* (1798) to discuss biomorphism.<sup>12</sup> The domes of Camillo Guarino Guarini's *Cappella della Sacra Sindone* (Chapel of the Holy Shroud) in Turin, Italy (1688–1694) are given as examples of geometric intricacies.<sup>13</sup> Under the section on geometry of form, Berthold Lubetkin's Penguin Pool at London Zoo (1934)<sup>14</sup> is used as an illustration of precursors for complex geometries and the curvature of parametricism, and D'Arcy Thompson's 'stretched morphologies',<sup>15</sup> for their usefulness in the tracing of histories of words such as 'fold' and complex transformations.

I navigate through my reading of Singley's book with an initial attachment to the familiar elements, the points of recognition, as with the images that I feel I know already, and have those that we share as references between our two books. Singley's third section 'Out-and-Out Architecture' approaches architecture through its aesthetic geometries, and the previous list of shared visual references takes a formal point of similarity but acknowledges the divergent interpretive foci which have been applied. Through Singley's narrative perspective I have my own understanding expanded beyond what I thought I already knew. The similarities and differences triangulate into a new orientations. The act of a reading, of interpreting architecture applies a 'stretched morphology' upon the objects under observation. How to Read Architecture? I enter architecture by reading *this* book about architecture, and after reading I am returned with my understanding transformed, better equipped to proceed without a guide book.

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<sup>1</sup> p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> p. 155.

<sup>7</sup> p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> p. 170.

<sup>10</sup> p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> p. 286.

<sup>13</sup> p. 325.

<sup>14</sup> p. 319.

<sup>15</sup> p. 331.