

A natural progression towards architecture

Anonymous . Building Design ; Tonbridge (Aug 29, 2008): 17.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

No architect today will read a book about Michelangelo as a crib, as John Belcher or Beresford Pite might have done only 100 years ago. But certain ideas will resonate in the modern world.

FULL TEXT

Note: Michelangelo Drawing and the Invention of Architecture book

Michelangelo's painting and sculpture provide a key to understanding his later architectural work says this new book. Tony McIntyre is impressed

BOOK

MICHELANGELO, DRAWING & THE INVENTION OF ARCHITECTURE

Cammy Brothers

Yale University Press, HB, pounds 35

Michelangelo's sculpture, painting and architecture have had a magnetic fascination since his contemporaries prefixed his name with the adjective "divino". There seems to be something about his work that is always beyond reach, an elusive quality that art historians can't help trying to put their finger on. And they may never quite succeed, but when the pursuit is as deep, elegant and satisfying as this search by Cammy Brothers for "the mechanics of inspiration", we have to hope they keep trying.

Michelangelo kept himself to himself, seldom collaborated with his fellow artists, and went to some lengths to cultivate the image of self-taught genius whose ideas were sparks from heaven. He came to architecture late, and perhaps reluctantly. His tomb for Julius II, a commission that took decades, may ultimately be unsuccessful, but it shows Michelangelo's earliest attempts to give architecture the same dynamic existence as the human form.

When he came to design the Medici Chapel at San Lorenzo in Florence, he knew he had some studying to do. Always a busy man, he saw no need to spend time in Rome rambling among antique ruins, as was the fashion. He turned instead to an unpublished book of measured drawings, the Codex Corner of 1514, and made his own notebook from it using red chalk rather than pen and ink, omitting measurements and leaving out all reference to the buildings from which the cherry-picked fragments came. The result is a sourcebook of the abstracted elements that were to form the core of his architectural development.

Key to Michelangelo's working method in sculpture and painting was drawing: one pose could be repeated across the page with subtle variations, or flipped and rotated to produce different but harmonious groups of figures. The method can be clearly seen applied in the famous ignudi, the naked decorative figures of the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

What is less well known is that behind this working method stood an economic and technical advance: the cheap and ready supply of paper in early 16th century Italy. This freed artists from drawing repeatedly in wax tablets and reserving paper only for final drawings. Sketching and repetition could be a method not only of finished expression but also of thought and development. Leonardo had "seen clouds and stains on walls which have given rise to beautiful inventions of different things", and now artists could sketch and use their own studies as a source of inspiration. Michelangelo extended this technique of developmental and exploratory drawing to his architectural work.

The artist's career took him from the statue-armature of the Julian tomb to the sculpture-free vestibule of the Laurentian Library, the point where this book ends. As the human form is an ordered series of elements, portrayed by sculpture in various formal ways, so here architecture has reached a similar level of independence and formal dynamic. By almost eliminating the wall surface as a significant architectural element - as he had so often eliminated the ground in painting and frieze sculpture - Michelangelo creates a collage-like room of abstract architecture.

No architect today will read a book about Michelangelo as a crib, as John Belcher or Beresford Pite might have done only 100 years ago. But certain ideas will resonate in the modern world. Brothers' reference to Michelangelo's architecture as being made of a "kit of parts" switches on a light in the modern consciousness, one that illuminates the mid-20th century work of architects like Charles and Ray Eames, where the predicted uses of rational parts are subverted by unconventional minds. His drawing method, where a base drawing is often worked over and over to the point of near incomprehensibility, is reminiscent of that of Carlo Scarpa.

Brothers is wise enough to leave these speculative connections to the reader, satisfying herself with a painstaking but utterly clear and readable account of Michelangelo's architectural formation. His ambition and ultimate achievement was an integration of painting, sculpture and architecture, but historians have spent many lifetimes separating the threads he spent so much effort in weaving together. Brothers looks at the integrated whole.

The book is beautifully produced, with nearly 300 illustrations, all of which are to the point. Brothers's ruthless interrogation of the drawings, coupled with a happy ability to sum up complex political and social situations with economy and accuracy, make this book a delight and a triumph.

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DETAILS

Publication title:	Building Design; Tonbridge
First page:	17
Publication year:	2008

Publication date:	Aug 29, 2008
Dateline:	IT Italy, EU
Publisher:	CMP Information Ltd.
Place of publication:	Tonbridge
Country of publication:	United Kingdom, Tonbridge
Publication subject:	Architecture, Building And Construction
ISSN:	00073423
Source type:	Trade Journals
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	274494375
Document URL:	http://ezproxy.neu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/274494375?accountid=12826
Copyright:	(Copyright : 2008 CMP Information Ltd.)
Last updated:	2017-11-09
Database:	Art, Design &Architecture Collection

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