

# Montreal Architectural Review

## Book Review 4: Lewis, Philippa. *Stories from Architecture: Behind the Lines at Drawing Matter* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021

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*Stories from Architecture* is a collection of 25 stories that share a common point of origin: each short piece of literary fiction has been written in relation to a drawing, or set of drawings, that Philippa Lewis uncovered through her explorations of the Drawing Matter archive in Somerset, UK. Lavishly reproduced in color and displayed on a separate page or spread, each drawing is inserted in its corresponding story. The *Notes* section at the end of the book provides material, historical, and biographical accounts for each figure.

At first glance, as one flips through the pages, the author's selection of drawings feels accidental, almost whimsical. It is as if, embracing the vagaries of archival research, Lewis had given in to the attractive power or potential for intrigue embedded in these images. The unattributed drawing of a house in "Islamic Style" from the 1870s sits comfortably beside the plan of Richard Neutra's residence for Josef von Stenberg, followed by a peepshow of Marc Brunel's Thames Tunnel from the 1830s. The freedom that emanates from her choices reminds the reader that scholarly research is a labor of love, the outcome of which is always fleeting and uncertain. There is joy, and privilege, in spending time at a library, opening

up large folios dug up from secured vaults, and browsing through carefully preserved artefacts. By virtue of having been assembled into collections, these artefacts share an artificial proximity; research findings rely, to a large extent, on coincidence. The drawings featured in Lewis's book do not cohere under the umbrella of a specific architectural or urban type. They are not arranged chronologically. They differ radically in terms of media, size and scale. The images show a wide range of architectural elements, from the shaded sketch of an ornamental detail produced by Antonio Asprucci during the transformation of Villa Borghese in Rome (1775-1780), to the flashy interior of an "intelligent" bachelor's pad — the "Playboy Duplex Penthouse" — published in a 1970 issue of *Playboy Magazine*, including a bird's eye view perspective of a 1907 real-estate development project called Selsey-on-Sea Limited.

The images assembled in this book function as enigmas, or riddles, inviting us to engage with the stories as we look for answers. However, readers expecting to find information based on factual evidence will soon be disappointed. As Adrian Forty writes in his foreword to the book, "part of the pleasure of reading *Stories from Architecture* comes from the uncertainty as to what is fact, and what is fiction." Although some of the stories are based on factual evidence like, for instance, the one featuring a correspondence between Edith Carlson and Frank Lloyd Wright, where the client persistently enquires about her house, a project that was never realized, most of the stories assembled in the book are fabricated. And yet, Forty remarks, historians are increasingly aware of "the fragile certainty of 'facts.'" Lewis's book shows the productive potential of looking at archival documents differently; in their open-endedness and ambiguities, her stories bring the reader to engage in a timely line of questioning on the historiography of architecture.

*Stories from Architecture* invites us to rethink the way we look at drawings beyond the traditional methodologies deployed by historians. To produce her stories, Lewis ventured "behind the lines" into the images' societal contexts. The book thus challenges the conventions that govern the writing of architectural history by interrogating the status of the architectural drawing in the context of the everyday. Approached under this light, drawings acquire a life of their own, separate from their relationship to an architecture — imagined, projected, or built. Lewis mobilizes the potential of literary narratives so as to blur the line between fact and fiction. In so doing, she not only urges us to reflect on the material conditions that coalesce in the production of social space, but also models another way of writing histories in which architecture is desacralized. By carefully looking at drawings as "things made" in a specific social context, we can shed light onto the relationships between people and places.

At the heart of her stories, we find the quotidian, at times absurd, and often comical interactions, conversations, and conflicts between protagonists as they engage with architecture and the built environment. Shifting focus away from the instrumental character of a drawing and the authorship of the architect, Lewis's satirical stories recount the down-to-earth, harsh reality of collectively making place. For one of her protagonists, a draftsman, the drawing is a testament to his limited talent. Drawing is a practice, and some drawings fail. In another story, George Cook's drawing of the wall and trees of the London Smallpox Hospital becomes an occasion to explore the frailty of human life, and how processes of grief and acts of

memorialization are inevitably caught in the social pressure for marriage and the pragmatics of finding a prospect. For Cook, the draftsman grieving his lost lover who died behind the wall, the act of drawing becomes an elegy. For the young woman passing by who witnesses the scene and strikes a conversation, the situation opens up exciting possibilities for romance. While acknowledging the solemnity with which we can approach drawings, Lewis also reminds us, with humor, of the economies of affect and need that drive our actions.

In *Stories from Architecture*, drawings serve as pretexts: each image initiates a literary exploration into the social conditions that simultaneously frame and foster collective acts of designing. Lewis shows how acts of placemaking (drawing, planning, building, and dwelling) take place in the context of everyday life where financial concerns abound, where labor conditions can be dire, and where relationships between architects and their employees, competitors, patrons, or clients are, more often than not, sites of conflict marked by power imbalances, especially of class and gender. Amongst Lewis's protagonists are draftsmen, architects, interns, patrons and clients, secretaries and aides, craftsmen, construction workers, sons and daughters, wives and mothers. Each story highlights a relationship — artistic, emotional, familial, erotic, mercantile — between people and designed things, from furniture to interiors, from private buildings and estates to shared urban spaces. Reading the stories, we are reminded of the lineage of social changes in values and beliefs, as much as the persistence of the past into our present. Lewis's stories cover a crucial moment in our Western history, from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s. The stories are mostly geographically set in the UK, Europe, and the United States. A few recurring themes emerge: tensions between the bourgeoisie and a declining class of aristocrats; the failed investments and exploitative practices of capitalists in their pursuit of profit; workers' struggles in the context of the industrial revolution; the crystallization of patriarchal views. Changes in architectural discourses and practices, along with their impacts on building trades, also permeate the stories.

The force of *Stories from Architecture* lies in the subtle satire embedded in Lewis's narratives, which latter manifests in the wit of her prose. As she pokes fun at the contriving rules governing bourgeois life, she unveils 19<sup>th</sup> century social anxieties about taste, fashion, and style. Her satire also targets the colonial and imperialist views behind clients' requests for "orientalisms," the unwavering belief in progress that supported the industrial revolution, and the male-centric canons have shaped our fields. How much of these rules, values, and beliefs still condition our daily interactions and shape our understanding of the built environment? Reading *Stories from Architecture* prompts such critical questions, inviting us to write other histories of architecture. By tapping into the power of the comical, Lewis reminds us, as Bergson writes in *Laughter*, of the need to stay alert in the face of social conventions, and to keep our minds and hearts open and elastic.

## About the Author

Caroline Dionne is Assistant Professor of History and Theory of Design Practice and Curatorial Studies at Parsons School of Design, The New School. Trained in the history and theory of architecture, she pursues interdisciplinary research at the intersection of architecture, literature, philosophy, and social theory. Her scholarship and teaching are concerned with the social and political implications of design, with a focus on the relationship between language and space and between speech acts and collective processes of placemaking. She is currently completing a book that investigates spatial theories of the emergent based on a close reading of the complete works of nineteenth-century writer and mathematician Lewis Carroll.