

Architecture Students Explore the Book Arts

At Carleton University, LARRY THOMPSON witnesses the parallels between books and architecture inspire two creative instructors and second-year architecture students.

IT BEGAN WITH A PHONE CALL and ended with an imaginative exhibition of art inspired by, or based on, society's understanding of the book. On Monday, February 8, I took a call from Manuel Báez at Carleton University's Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism in Ottawa, Ontario.

He explained that he had designed a course for the second-year class that would have each student designing a (purely speculative) Centre for the Book Arts in Ottawa as their final assignment. As a prelude to this, every student would be required to create a book art object—one that would embody their “ideas, thoughts, expressions, sensations, and/or attitudes regarding the book....” Could my partner, Holly Dean, and I introduce a class of 71 architecture students to the book arts, on the following Friday?

Book arts and architecture? How could I refuse? I dropped jobs unceremoniously and turned my attention to what I would say, while Holly scoured the Web for images of book art.

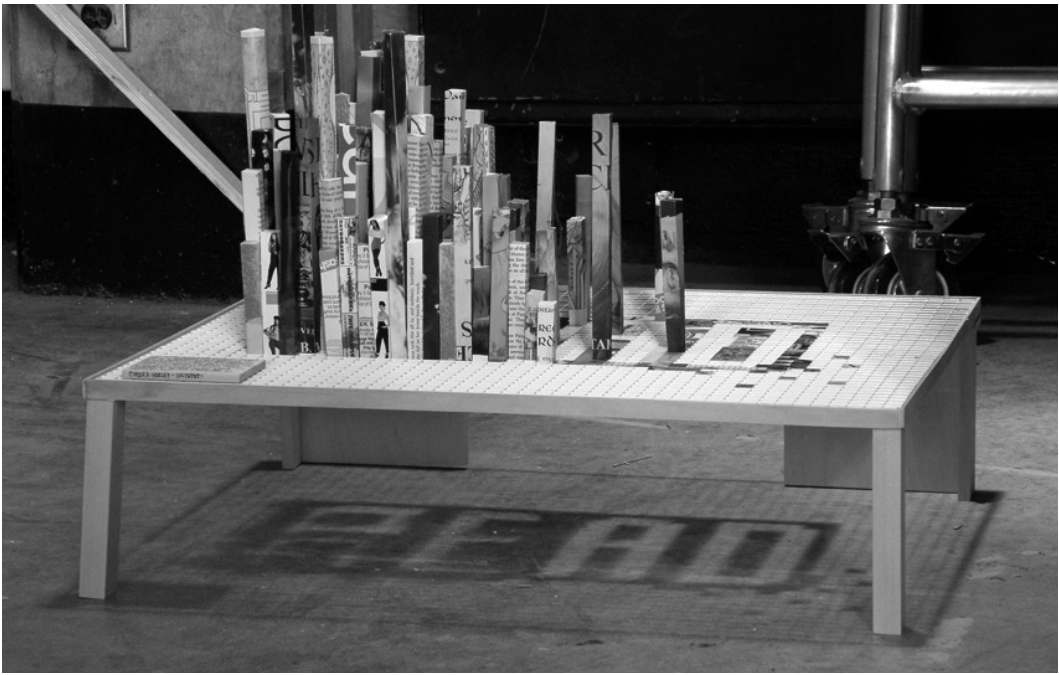
While gathering sources about the history of the book, I began to find interesting parallels between books and architecture. Both fields are a marriage of arts and trades; both are a compromise between form and function; and both began as sacred vessels and transformed into secular or even popular vehicles over time. I wondered if there might be a correlation between the technological challenges to the traditional codex and the growing popularity of the book arts. Would the book, like the scroll before it, make a slow, gradual ascendance to a sacred or ceremonial role?

In researching the book as art, I discovered that the fine art world has a very different view of book art than the more all-encompassing and liberal definition I tend to understand. What I would speak to would be my own understanding of book arts, which to me is a catch-all for work done by binders, printers, print makers, illustrators, calligraphers, typographers, wood engravers, woodcut artists, and paper makers, amongst others.

We arrived at Carleton with our presentation and several boxes, having emptied our library of artists' books and some of Holly's altered book structures.

We flipped through about 5,000 years of book history in the first few minutes, from oral tradition up to the familiar codex form. I suggested books as metaphors for buildings. With its heavy, leather-clad boards, book boxes and slipcases, the book is structured for defence against a rather hostile natural environment that includes everything from humidity, moisture, temperature extremes, hungry insects and the passing of time to those charlatans who would crack a book's spine. We build structures to protect the contents of books just as we build homes to protect ourselves. In that respect, the book could be a metaphor that could act as a container for metaphors, and much more.

Ancient books inform the art of current work. The medieval book of hours was an aid to meditation and prayer, and, by way of example, George Walker's *Book of Hours* is, likewise, a meditation in 99 wood engravings of the hours in the lives of ordinary New Yorkers just prior



In this “scroll scape,” Carleton architecture student Chelsea Horley used light shining from above to make her statement.

to the attack on the World Trade Center. Books are visceral; whether we are educated or illiterate, they are in our guts. They are emotional, intellectual and spiritual in the broadest sense. We revere them, and sometimes fear and hate them even to the point of willful destruction.

When we make, design or alter a book, it feels to me that we are tinkering with a complex and powerful piece of machinery. I sense something similar at times when I pull a satisfactory proof off the press and feel a little rush or spark of power, which I fancy is a remnant of a time when printing was truly powerful and sometimes dangerous.

Using slides of artists’ books, Holly illustrated how the tactile experience of a book could stimulate emotions and senses at many levels: visual, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical in touch and even smell. So many triggers, and that is just the book itself, without even considering the power of the content. In closing, I quoted the esteemed scholar, poet and typographer Robert Bringhurst: “Books—not writing and printing, but books in the deeper sense—may be part of our basic identity as a species. As basic as nests to birds.”

Three weeks later, Holly and I were invited back to Carleton to view the results of the students’ efforts to create their own book art, and we were impressed. They brought their work together on a Monday afternoon in “The Pit,” a large amphitheatre on the main floor of the architecture school. The instructors discouraged students from producing architectural models of books. Rather, they wanted the students to free up their creative and expressive side, using video, literature and personal interests as inspiration. As a result, the work showed range, diversity and creativity—an exercise that should inform the building they must design for their final project.

Thanks to Mary McIntyre of the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild, Ottawa Valley Chapter, for referring us to Manuel, and to the instructors at Carleton—Manuel Báez (coordinator), Honorata Pien’kowska, Mariana Esponda, Marjan Ghannad, Titania Truesdale and Jenn Bielaskie—for giving us this opportunity. ♪

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