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Javier Fernandez Contreras, Lilet Breddels, Irma Boom

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WITHIN PAGES, BEYOND BOOKS

Irma Boom Interviewed by
Javier F. Contreras and Lilet Breddels

Javier F. Contreras:

To say Irma Boom is to say one of the best book designers of all time. People from my generation have learned about architecture with books that you have designed. From your collaborations with Petra Blaisse to those with Rem Koolhaas, you are obviously a key reference for architects and space designers at large. We are interested in understanding contemporary spaces not just as physical constructs but also as domains that are circulated through different means and media. We think that all disciplines dealing with the production of surface and image through visual sampling and editing are informing the agency of architecture in critical ways. To that extent, your books represent simultaneously the most primitive and ultimate form of 'superficial' space design. From the endless material and tactile possibilities of their pages to the cinematographic condition of their layout, they epitomize the relational condition of contemporary design practices.

Lilet Breddels:

We also interview people from the music industry, where we would call it sampling, and maybe appropriation in the art world. So, how do you work with ideas of sampling or integrating thoughts from other fields or disciplines in your work?

Irma Boom:

I went to art school to become a painter. And in my work you will find references to art, specifically abstract art and conceptualism. Since my collaboration

with Rem Koolhaas, architecture became an important part of my practice. I don't think I have a working method nor a strategy. What do I do if somebody calls me to do a project? I think, 'Let's meet?' Meeting the possible commissioner is important. The first conversation is crucial, because of the mutual exchange of thoughts which I realize now more than ever with Covid-19 and new restrictions in place, that body language is vital. For me this meeting is important because I will invest a lot of time on the project, and sometimes it takes several meetings before I actually start to make the book: I always work in a collaborative way.

JFC:

You have mentioned your formative years at the AKI Academy of Art and Design. At that time, structuralism was extremely important in art theory but also in Dutch architecture. Your practice seems to simultaneously affirm and resist that period. So, I would like to hear more about how you remember the intellectual framework in which you were educated at the end of the 70s and beginning of the 80s?

IB:

The art school I went to in Enschede was radical and liberal. The first week at school a Fluxus event was organized. It was completely free, chaotic, and for me, new. Lectures and guest teachers that emerged from the Fluxus period were coming to the school. Super exciting! I learned to think in concepts. The development of the individual and autonomous thinking was priority.

LB:

Were you influenced by music then, or now?

IB:

I love art, books, and music from the 60s like Jimmy Hendrix, The Doors, and The Rolling Stones. And of course, Bach is always somewhere in my mind. Bach's music is very structured. A student at Yale where I teach said to me: "Your works reminds me of Bach, it's so structured. It has such a rhythm. It's like music". What a compliment ... I never realized this myself.

After art school I started to work at the so-called Government Printing and Publishing Office in The Hague. I learned a lot there, in practice. At art school, as I said before, I learned conceptual thinking. The last project I made working at GPPPO was a book called, *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy*. It was a reader for a conference about the future of the world held in 1990 in the Stedelijk Museum, contemporary art museum in Amsterdam. The Dalai Lama was present, which was a wonderful experience. That project still has an influence on who I am today.

EVEN WHEN THE IMAGES ARE A GIVEN, YOU CAN STILL MAKE A STORY THROUGH THE ORDER AND SIZE IN WHICH YOU PUT THEM

JFC:

In some of the book designs from that period in The Hague you quote Malevich. I can think of other avant-garde artists whose production was predicated on the exploration of grids and distinctive geometric patterns - whether it's Agnes Martin, Mondrian, or Malevich -, but I would like to know if you also look at primitive or classic forms of art with recognizable visual structures.

IB:

I am interested in thoughts and concept. If it was only form it would be a superficial copy.

It is my deep interest in these artists and their thoughts [Malevich et al]. Yet, I live and work in the 21st century and my work is definitely made of the current time. The Middle Ages are also a huge inspiration. Books from that period look experimental and pure with 21st century eyes. The purity of the middle age portrait paintings, the strong colors, are very exciting. The first printed books after Gutenberg, the Incunables, they also have this pure and direct appearance.

LB:

Can you expand a little bit more on the Rome experience, your studies in the Vatican Library? What do you find there? What do you think is so fascinating about it? And do you see it yourself already back in your work?



De Architectura (On Architecture),
Vitruvius, written between 30 and
15 BC. 1521 Edition

IB:
In 2018, I spent five months in the Vatican Library. The Rome experience began with an invitation by the American Academy to be there as a resident. Rome is a city of libraries and that was my goal. At the Academy, the idea is that you connect to your fellow residents. There I met Peggy Brown, a lady who is 88 years young, studying as a mediaevalist at the Vatican Library. At a dinner we were talking about the Middle Ages and then at some point she said to me, after seeing my work: "You're visiting all these libraries, but you should study at the Vatican library. It's impossible to get in, but if you write a letter and if you can explain what you do and explain your research, maybe they let you in." So I did. I had an interview at the Vatican Library and they let me in. First for 10 entrances and now, it is forever.

in the history of book-making. Studying books in Rome made me feel humble. I did not know anything about books, book history. I know book design at the moment is super conservative and that is why I wanted to question 'What happened to the book?'. If I work with publishers, it's always the same story, every book would look the same. I think every book should be specific, because every book has a different subject and content. At the Vatican library, I am also studying manuscripts from 500 AD. I concluded, you don't make books for this moment, but you make books for the future. Books are edited content in a bound, unchangeable form. It's basically a container of thought. It's something that you can refer to. Internet is flux, and is changing all the time, but the book, is a bound, printed version of unchangeable content. You can say it is one of the most stable carriers of information.

At the Vatican library, I was studying the books very precisely from the perspective of an editor and designer. All elements of the book: size; typography; structure; we take for granted now. I am now studying paragraphs, for example, when did the paragraph appear for the first time? Answer: Luther made proclamations in 1517. He wanted the people to read all of the text, so he placed the writing in different text blocks, and that's the first time the idea of the paragraph came into being. These kinds of discoveries for me were super important. The idea of the page number, the footnote, and also the size and the paper of the book. So, every book I looked at, I measured and described precisely, and like Sherlock Holmes, I was looking into the typography with a magnifying glass.

I've made so many books already, maybe 350 or something. I thought all of the inventions I did were for the first time



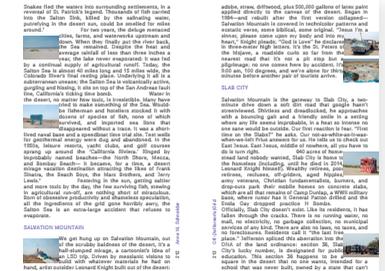
De Architectura (On Architecture), Vitruvius, written between 30 and 15 BC. 1521 Edition

I studied manuscripts, incunables, and books from the 16th century. Vitruvius' De Architectura (1521, On Architecture) is an amazing book. Vitruvius was a Roman military engineer and architect. The book is a treatise which combines the history of ancient architecture and engineering with the author's personal experience and advice on the subject. The structure of the book is defined by the content. The typography is based on content. During my stay in Rome, Richard Hutten, the industrial designer, asked me if I could make a rug for the Salone di Mobile 2019. I had many ideas but then I thought I should use my experience and findings from studying the books. I made a rug based on that structure of the Vitruvius book. The research at the Vatican library doesn't just result in design for books, but it also inspires other design elements, like a rug!

BOOKS ARE EDITED CONTENT IN A BOUND, UNCHANGEABLE FORM. IT'S BASICALLY A CONTAINER OF THOUGHT AND ONE OF THE MOST STABLE CARRIERS OF INFORMATION

The book Countryside, A Report (Rem Koolhaas, Guggenheim New York) is the best example of the inspiration from my time at the Vatican. The oldest book in the Vatican is the Virgilius Romanus, the Virgil. It's a poem on the countryside. When I found it, I immediately sent a text message to Rem and said, "We should use this." Then I found out that the first printed pocket book by Aldus Manutius was also, again, the Virgil. Countryside has exactly the same measurements as that Virgil of Manutius from 1501. It was typeset in italics because that was more economical. Our book has a hand drawn typeface made by us called, 'The Countryside'.

JFC:
In Countryside, how do you create a sense of visual narration? Some chapters have large images that colonize the entire surface of the page and, inversely, in some others the images are miniaturized, completely surrounded by text.



Countryside, 2020, AMO/Rem Koolhaas, design Irma Boom, Guggenheim/Taschen

IB:
Because we want to have the exact thickness and dimensions of the Vatican pocket book, I made hundreds and hundreds of models to get this size exactly. The first exercise I discussed with Rem was how can we make a very efficient book (like Manutius). I outlined a structure, everybody had to write a text of around 3500 words. Then, everybody would get 10 images in the same layout. So, the book would look totally full, no empty space, no waste of paper - using every page optimally.

But in the end, working on the chapters, the strict regime didn't work for all of the content. And that's why we sometimes needed a spread with larger images and sometimes images we could use small because of the content of the images. We gave the book the subtitle 'Countryside in your Pocket' to emphasize and advertise the comprehensive book. It's literally a Taschen book. Taschen also means pocket. For me, as a book maker, it is important that the book has a large print run. And because the book is so small it's not too expensive of course. When Aldus Manutius published his Virgil, it was one of the first democratic books in that time, with 300 copies or 500 copies maximum. That is also what I liked as concept for this exhibition: that the book would be the same price as the entrance tickets (for the Guggenheim). So, there's little excuse for not buying the book. It is something that you cannot resist. And that's also what happened. It's a bestseller.

JFC:

The physicality of the book in your work is inescapable. Over the last few decades you have witnessed and articulated the transition from manual to digital book design. This is different for digital natives, who sometimes are trapped within the image of the screen, surface within surface let's say. However, in your thinking process there is always a sense of depth, a 3D work reminiscent of its manual origins.

IB:

Yes, we call it AC and BC: Before Computer and After Computer (quote by Massimo Vignelli). I always work with models. For books, a screen is a dead-end story. A book is like architecture. That is why my own tiny catalogue is called *The Architecture of the Book*.

For countryside I made about 50 models. I always make models, because that is the only way to make a book. A book is a three-dimensional object. You need to see and feel the book. And size matters! On a screen you cannot see the size, paper, weight. A PDF has no size. And, InDesign goes from top to bottom; it is vertical, and a book goes horizontally. Making models are crucial to the object and the physicality, books are like sculptures. The mind and hands work together.

LB:

You have such an interesting relationship with the grid or the form, something also apparent in conceptual art, but what is often mistaken as formal or rigid, or too structured. But in a way it is almost the opposite as formal and that makes it very interesting that some people may not see that in the beginning.



SHV Think Book, 1996-1896, Irma Boom/Johan Pijnappel

IB:

Absolutely that is also when the big SHV Think Book came out. When it came out people said, "Ohh it is just a fat book", but it was not just the idea of a fat book at all. It came out of the idea that when Johan Pijnappel and I were working on the assignment in 1991, we didn't want to make a book, we wanted to make a CD-ROM, or something more progressive. We decided to make a book but one that

is completely based on the ideas of internet. It has no page numbers; it is a book you browse through.

LB:

The interesting thing there is that it is about the internet, but it is not mimicking the internet. A lot of other bookmakers were referring to the internet at that time but in a very one-to-one way.

IB:

Yes but also a lot of website makers were referring to the book. But you have to make something that is new, autonomous. That was interesting about the SHV book, we set some rules and then it basically it created itself. The book is now 25 years old and it doesn't look old at all. It could have been made today. The book is based on a strong concept.

JFC:

I am also thinking of the books that are collectively used like those in libraries, which are endlessly marked becoming deposits of accumulative information. I was wondering if overused or even damaged books become a sort of inspiration to you.

IB:

Absolutely! If I am in a bookstore I am never looking at the most pristine book. I think it is crucial that a book is used and gets marks. You see what people before me were interested in and what was underlined or marked. There is a life to the book, it is not art that you cannot touch. If it is not marked it is not used, it is not read. That also has to do with the paper quality we have now. If you look at the older books in the Vatican, the Vitruvius for instance, the paper had such a high quality, it stays

good forever. Only in the 18th and 19th century when the book becomes more democratic and the [print] numbers go up, the quality of the paper goes down.

JFC:

I always question whether it is more difficult to create images from images. I am referring to the contemporary overabundance of visual references and copy-paste practices. In your designs, however, the visual result is rather the outcome of a narrative and editing process.

IB:

I think the SHV book is an example of that. Apart from text editing there is also image editing and that is very important because that is the first thing people encounter with the book.

I learned a lot working with Rem with whom I made about 55 competition books where you have to explain a building through image sequencing. When I made the stamp books in the 80s I did the image editing which was quite exceptional for a designer in those days. You can tell a story but also disrupt a story. Even when you do a book for an artist where the images are a given, you can still make a story though the order and size in which you put them. Being a designer is a bit like a film director or a conductor for an orchestra. I do everything with enormous concentration and attention. I am super focused, and I do not compromise.

This interview was conducted on May 11, 2020.