

## Reviews

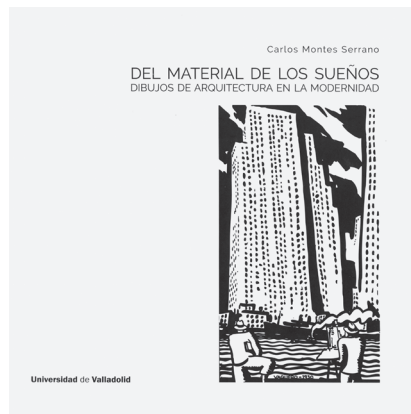
Carlos Montes Serrano

***Del material de los sueños.  
Dibujos de arquitectura en la  
modernidad***

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In the Preface of his latest book: *Del material de los sueños. Dibujos de arquitectura en la modernidad*, Carlos Montes begins by stating, “The history of architectural drawing of the last century is still to be written”. Having specified that he does not pretend to fill this void, but only to make a contribution in this sense, Montes offers us a significant insight into the drawing of architecture and of the city in the last century. There is thus a sort of return to a strict disciplinary specific, after the learned digression he indulged in his previous book *Cicerón y la cultura artística del Renacimiento* (2006), which analyses—within the more general theme of the diffusion of ideas and their migration in different cultural contexts—several aspects of the impact of Cicero’s rhetorical work in the visual arts, in particular painting and architecture.

This new book—whose striking title is taken from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*—is composed of nine chapters which, according to the author, can be understood as “partial episodes of a possible history of architectural drawing in Modernity”. They are all richly illustrated with highly relevant and significant photographs and drawings, although the latter are often of small size. The various essays have all originated in conferences, *ponencias*, reports given in seminars and conferences in the area, generally in Italy and Spain, then published (starting in 2005, but especially in recent years) in articles for journals, conferences, collective volumes; these original publications have almost

all been expanded, integrated, enriched with images and provided with a more consistent bibliography.

I would like to point out that Montes underlines the fact of “having tried, in any case, to not lose the original didactic approach” because his “intention has always been to explain with the greatest possible simplicity” those themes that attract his interest. It is no coincidence that the clarity of exposition, entrusted to a rigorous but comprehensible language, characterizes all his books (at least from *Representación y análisis formal*, of 1992) and his writings.

In short, the first chapter—*Un canon de dibujos de la Modernidad*—deals with “the idea of the canon applied to architectural drawings of the twentieth century”. It begins with an analysis of the role of the lists of the best works—in photography, painting, private dwellings, Spanish buildings—and notes their great usefulness in teaching, as “they serve to help first year students to develop an initial map of fundamental knowledge about the world of art and architecture, as well as to arouse the necessary critical spirit in them”. Montes then demonstrates that it is possible to select the 10 architectural drawings (one for each architect) that are “the best known in modern times”, in the sense of being the ones most frequently reproduced in publications dedicated to modern architecture, which “would become part of an imaginary museum of the architectural drawings best known by the majority of us”.

Some of these may have “a great graphic quality, others be truly original for their expressiveness, for the wealth of information they provide or for having discovered new ways of understanding or using architectural drawing”. All are “intimately linked to their authors. This means that the best known architectural drawings will inevitably belong to the great masters of modernity”.

It follows that among the 10 selected drawings there are ones by those who Montes considers the 4 major architects of the century: the structural scheme of the Dom-ino house by Le Corbusier; perhaps the most reproduced drawing of the last century; the plan and the elevation of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie house; the sketches for the church of Vouksensiska, by Alvar Aalto; the freehand sketch of the Seagram Building plaza, by Mies van der Rohe (whose most reproduced drawing is, in any case, the plan of the Barcelona pavilion). The other 6 selected drawings are: the plan and the section of the chapel in the Woods in the Stockholm cemetery, by Gunnar Asplund; the sketches for the Einstein tower in Potsdam, by Erich Mendelsohn, a canonical work of German Expressionism; the spatial Diagram for a house, by Theo van Doesburg, an axonometric projection: a method of representation more suited to the twentieth century avant-gardes; the roof plan of the Yale University Art Gallery, by Luis Kahn; the design for the Sidney Opera competition, by Jørn Utzon and, to include a Spanish architect, the section of the *Gimnasio del colegio Maravillas de Madrid*, by Alejandro de la Sota: the most reproduced drawing of 20th-century Spanish architecture. Of Aalto, Kahn and Le Corbusier, Montes also reproduces several travel drawings, underlining the influence that the architectural works visited had on their

works: in spite of the *tabula rasa* which has been so erroneously spoken of in regard to the Modern Movement.

Chapter 2, for example, is entirely dedicated to Le Corbusier’s *Voyage d’Orient*: decisive in his long self-taught training, during which he came to “understand the ultimate meaning that drawing would have for him” and that, in particular, produced a gradual change in his way of drawing, culminating in the rapid and schematic sketches realized in Italy with which he began to capture the permanent values of popular architecture, classicism or the ruins of Roman antiquities. For Montes, moreover, the drawings presented in the *Voyage* constitute a real revolution in the context of architectural drawing.

Chapter 4, instead, is strongly focused on Kahn’s travel drawings realized in Italy, although it is dedicated to the influence and common interests between the Kahn’s drawings and those of Louis Lozowick: a great draftsman and lithographer, famous for his images of New York City. Both practiced real life drawing, but their works—as on the other hand has always been true, for almost all urban sketchers—are usually the result of successive elaborations, starting from sketches made *in situ* and photographs. Kahn even used illustrated postcards, to the point that his visions were mediated by the more picturesque sights offered by travel guides and postcards.

The last chapter—*Españoles dibujando en Nueva York, 1930*—also deals with travel drawings: those made by the Spanish architects Luis Moya Blanco and Joaquín Vaquero, the author of the cover and illustrations of the book by Paul Morand (the cultured, cosmopolitan French diplomat and traveler) on the city of skyscrapers. In particular, in the black and white drawings, executed in Indian ink with pen and brush, in which

Vaquero tries to reflect the soul of the city, the influence of *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, the very successful publication by Hugh Ferriss of the previous year mentioned several times in Montes’ book, is evident.

The works of Ferriss are at the center of the especially interesting Chapter 3—*Una ecología de las imágenes*—dedicated to the reciprocal influences and contaminations between photography, engravings and architectural drawing, analyzed on the basis of the work of a few artists active in New York during the 1920s and 1930s. In it the author notes how, for example, from black and white photography and engravings came the use of charcoal and white pencil, which spread out Europe from America, imposing itself as one of the characteristics of the representation of architecture in the years between the two World Wars, which is perhaps the most investigated period in the book.

Montes returns to drawing with charcoal and grease pencil in Chapter 5, specifically dedicated to architectural drawing between the two World Wars, in which he notes how although the avant-gardes and the architects of the rationalist current had chosen as their method of representation and planning, above all, axonometric projection—in particular, the military one—there were also those who, starting with Mies, mostly adopted perspective, often drawn with charcoal, which allowed leaving out the ornamental details and concentrating all creative effort in the plastic play of volumes and textures.

In this book, the architect of whom Montes publishes the greatest number of drawings is undoubtedly Gordon Cullen. We meet him for the first time in the extensive Chapter 6, dedicated to the *New Architecture Exhibition of the Elements of Modern Architecture*, which

was held in London in January 1938—organized by the *Modern Architecture Research Group* and initially designed by Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy and Maxwell Fry—with whom a very young Cullen collaborated, realizing various graphic works. Illustrated almost exclusively with Cullen's drawings, instead, are the two following chapters. Chapter 7—*Gordon Cullen: dibujando el Townscape*—is dedicated to the articles he wrote for *The Architectural Review*, published together in 1961 in his book *Townscape*, which Montes defines as a true classic of architectural literature, which “educates the eye and teaches us to see”. Chapter 8 deals with the lesser known monographic issues *Outrage* and

*Counter-Attack against subtopia*, which the magazine published in 1955 and 1956, with articles by the young writer Ian Nairn and drawings by Cullen. In all these publications the novelty and the real style are determined by Cullen's illustrations: always original drawings, executed with different techniques, simple but able to condense and express many ideas, which together delineate an effective and simple use of graphic works for the analysis of urban complexity and interventions in the city. With his drawings Cullen illustrates and disseminates ideas, not revolutionary, but only the result of a good civic sense and respect for sedimented architectural and urban values which, however, proved to

be avant-garde, considering that some of them were established with a few decades of delay and today characterize the widely shared approach to the problems of the city, while others are unfortunately still unrealized.

Ultimately, we are in the presence of a book that is read—and is seen—with pleasure and interest, which shows the author's absolute mastery of the topics covered, at times his active involvement, albeit in the context of a strict critical analysis, and which testifies to the vast culture, not only architectural and never flaunted, of its author, which affords him a truly transdisciplinary approach and style.

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