

## 28 Books and Book Covers in Architectural Theory

REGIN SCHWAEN

North Dakota State University

This project puts architectural theory into practice by asking second year architecture students to make a book cover for a contemporary theory book. The idea is to visualize written essays and architectural thought by having architecture students design, plan and build a book cover selected from a list of sixty books. From a pedagogical point of view it was important to create a seminar where each student has the opportunity to explore, express, and conclude by physical means while reading and learning. Connecting reason and knowledge with formal expression is the fundamental challenge for this assignment.

Reading an architectural theory and making a book cover that reflects on the content of the book engages and inspires architecture students that often become a passive listener or observer in theory seminars. The instructor gave only ten lectures throughout the semester. This allows more time for other assignments, such as the book cover project, making it possible to foster a deeper exploration of knowledge and critical thinking for the emerging architect.

More than a decade ago I discovered a book cover assignment created by associate professor Margarita McGrath. She developed this idea while teaching a professional practice seminar at the School of Architecture + Design, Virginia Tech. In the last four years I have slightly altered the pedagogical principles of her concept. The assignment was in part influenced by three books reflecting on a similar didactic approach. In the book 'The Thinking Hand' Juhani Pallasmaa has written extensively about haptic and tactile properties. Those are the primary pedagogical objectives for the book cover assignment, but the assignment was also influenced by questioning how to visualize fundamental observations in science such as the theory of quantum mechanics as discussed by Tor Nørretranders in the book 'Indivisibility'. Furthermore, I was inspired by Marco Frascari referencing Robin Evans and his observation that "architects do not build, but merely draw" in the book 'Eleven Exercises in the art of architectural drawing' with the excellent subtitle 'Slow food for the architect's imagination'.

The field of architectural theory is challenged by new emerging technologies and research itself has shifted. Libraries are physical rooms with knowledge being accessible horizontally. Books are ordered by categories and therefore presented in a certain order. When doing research online, architecture students embrace a world that is vertical. The order of knowledge is by subject and accessible one at a time, presented similar to a deck of cards or to stacked newspapers. There is no taxonomy. This limits research when one seeks to compare knowledge. From a scholarly point of view the online knowledge can be extremely powerful when one knows what subject to seek out, but how does the 2nd year architecture students navigate this approach? It would be interesting to completely redevelop a seminar like architectural theory and embrace the horizontal and vertical approach at the same time. The book cover assignment could be developed towards a more virtual approach if technology could make computers more haptic. We need architects that are integrative thinkers when designing - that embrace knowledge, skills, and craftsmanship at the same time.

### NOTES

1. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand*, Wiley, 2009.
2. Tor Nørretranders, *Indivisibility*, Gyldendal, 1985.
3. Marco Frascari, *Eleven Exercises*, Routledge, 2011.

