

Indra Kagis McEwen, *Vitruvius. Writing the Body of Architecture*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2003, 493 pp., 56 black-and-white illus., \$39.95 U.S., ISBN 0-262-3415-2

Barbara Arciszewska

Volume 31, Number 1-2, 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069627ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069627ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Arciszewska, B. (2006). Review of [Indra Kagis McEwen, *Vitruvius. Writing the Body of Architecture*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2003, 493 pp., 56 black-and-white illus., \$39.95 U.S., ISBN 0-262-3415-2]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 31(1-2), 100-103.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1069627ar>

Book Reviews

Comptes-rendus de livres

Indra Kagis McEwen, *Vitruvius. Writing the Body of Architecture*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2003, 493 pp., 56 black-and-white illus., \$39.95 U.S., ISBN 0-262-3415-2.

It is a bold venture to take on Vitruvius, the author claims in the opening lines, and it is impossible to disagree with such a statement. For centuries, the ten books written by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio around 25 B.C. formed the backbone of architectural theory and practice, sealing with the authority of the ancients the polarity between *ratiocinatio* and *fabrica*, or *ars* and *scientia*, that underpinned the classicist understanding of architecture. *De Architectura Libri Decem*, the only treatise of its kind to survive from antiquity, was a revered text. It was repeatedly translated and interpreted, its often-impenetrable text subjected to continued exegesis and never-ending commentaries. It inspired a host of emulators and propelled a book trade that thrived on the popularization of principles that were once transmitted only among the initiated. More importantly, Vitruvian classicism, as the key paradigm in the deeply rooted system of stylistic hierarchies, continues to deflect our views on architecture and its history. To Vitruvius and his progeny we owe the concept of architecture as a representational protocol governed by rules of theory, and a practice controlled by the architect, whose role is to apply those principles. The common understanding of architecture as a high-art form, distinct from vernacular building, is therefore dependent on this Vitruvian legacy, as is the formidable substructure of prepossessing classicism in all the arts, whose continued presence in much of today's discourses of art theory and history is too often overlooked and forgotten.

One has to admire and appreciate, therefore, McEwen's efforts to reread Vitruvius yet again, in an attempt that is certain to enrich the scholarly debate. The book joins numerous publications on Vitruvius, and on early modern architectural theory, where the ramifications of Vitruvian thought were most strongly felt.¹ Among the English-speaking authors, Joseph Rykwert and George Hersey have already tried to reconceptualize the dogma of Vitruvian *architectura* by concentrating on one of its critical terms, "the body."² McEwen's work, however, is the first one to choose this concept as the crux of the entire argument.

The anthropomorphic dimension of Vitruvius's understanding of architecture has been so comprehensively discussed from a variety of methodological positions that one has the right to question whether the "body" of evidence gathered in this book adds up to anything more than the ideas previously rehearsed in architectural history. McEwen's work certainly does not disappoint in this regard. It is a highly enlightening work, skilfully probing the boundaries of previous Vitruvian scholarship, dominated, as it was, by the often-subconscious agendas reflecting the concerns of the early modern theoreticians. To make it quite

clear to those readers who are first attracted by the title, the "body," that key term of postmodern theories, is not the notion that lies at the centre of this inquiry. The methodological premises of the work are, in fact, only summarily sketched at the outset, and the book's explicit aim, "to discover the true sense of the text," seems a rather daring objective in an age appreciating the merits of polysemy and intertextuality. It is obvious from the start that the author is not interested in that corporeality, which entails a discourse of difference. She instead consciously adopts a reductive interpretation of the "body" as that of a coherent natural entity, a totality, a notion largely derived from the Stoic philosophy, which the author sees as the intellectual matrix of the Vitruvian text. By refocusing on issues contemporary to Vitruvius, rather than those of his followers, McEwen discusses the work in the context of late Republican and early Imperial Rome. With this objective in mind, she revisits passages from Vitruvius's text too often dismissed as commonplaces, to shed new light on old problems with evidence culled from diverse disciplines, such as philosophy, classical literature, and archaeology, in addition to traditional architectural history. She offers in the process some exemplary analyses of individual works of art as well as insightful syntheses resulting from digesting a vast amount of information.

Taking as her point of departure the contention that the idea of a *corpus* of knowledge, as construed by Vitruvius, was a novel one, McEwen sets out to demonstrate that the body of *De architectura* made architecture "the benchmark of civilization, the means of conquest and the measurable index of Roman world domination." To be effective as an instrument of power and persuasion, the treatise was constructed as a *corpus* whose *sine qua non* (as that of all natural bodies according to the Stoics) was coherence and order. Thus conceived, the *corpus* of knowledge was, according to McEwen, a framework for understanding the newly formed body of the Roman Empire, personified in the body of Emperor Augustus, the book's dedicatee and its cardinal point of reference. In short, Vitruvius's architectural *corpus* was a way of conceptualizing the body of the Roman Empire and that of its ruler. The significance of such a conclusion is hard to overestimate – in light of McEwen's findings *De architectura* is not an architectural manual of classical design, as misconstrued by the early modern theoreticians and their followers, but a profound philosophical statement, sharing much of its intellectual substructure with the works of other Roman writers, such as Cicero or Lucretius. The "body" of architecture was, therefore, not an aesthetic metaphor underpinning the set of design principles, but was intended as a literal, bodily manifestation of the new world order under Augustus.

To present her argument McEwen weaves her narrative

along various “embodiments” of the Vitruvian *corpus*. The first chapter, entitled “The Angelic Body,” deals with the “book as a book,” that is, with its materiality, as well as with the concept of coherence that makes the Vitruvian *summa* of knowledge a body. Here the discussion of the original, scroll-form of the treatise is a welcome reminder of a quite different materiality of the original text as compared with the ten codex-like “books” that most of us have in mind when we think of Vitruvius. The examination of associations between the ideal, body-derived numbers 10 and 6, and their spatial representation (both were triangular numbers, or tripartite wholes) expands our knowledge of the intricate intermeshing between nature, ancient science, and spatial order underlying architecture. The sculptural model of the ten scrolls arranged in a triangular “tetractys,” provided by the author, is a much-appreciated illustration of this point. Although the connections of the Vitruvian concept of architecture to nature and universal order have been discussed before, McEwen probes that link at a greater depth, with an impressive discussion of relationships between Vitruvian *corpus* and various aspects of Stoic and Pythagorean thought. These ideas are shown to intersect with contemporary thinking on language, meaning, and learning, revealing in the process how the Vitruvian project fits into the Roman genre of commentaries, or written records seen not just as mnemonic aids, but as constituents of the true, systematized knowledge of the world and a basis of one’s identity and self-awareness. Most importantly, the Vitruvian text is redefined here as one of the ideological apparatuses used at a specific historic moment (the transition from the Republic to authoritarian rule) and the framework for constructing the body of the new Empire.

More evidence for the synergy between *De architectura* and the imperial project is offered in chapter two (“The Herculean Body”), which examines the book’s and Vitruvius’s complex relation to Emperor Augustus. The argument commences with the myth of Dinocrates, Alexander the Great’s architect, whose demiurge-like powers were associated by Vitruvius with those of Hercules. This narrative, which had been used by Vitruvius to frame his own enterprise, is examined by McEwen to suggest a parallel between the figure of Hercules, his mythical role as an agent of civilization, and the position of the supreme ruler in the newly established Roman Empire. The author enters here into a debate about the primary motors of civilization and humanization (architecture versus speech), which occupied the ancients. For Vitruvius, *humanitas* started with building, and *De architectura* was its summation. By the same token, the primitive hut was the first step towards the magnificence of Imperial Rome under Augustus. McEwen rightly anchors this debate around the Roman concept of *humanitas*, quite distinct from the Renaissance *humanism* whose concerns have tended to dominate discussion of Vitruvius’s treatise heretofore.

Chapter three (“The Body Beautiful”) centres on the role of the human body as a proportional model for Roman temple architecture and on the function of beauty as an instrument for structuring the body of the Empire. McEwen’s perceptive analysis of the key paradigm, the Vitruvian man, is expanded by a welcome discussion of Polykleitos’s canon of ideal male beauty, both underwriting the principles of architecture until today. This is followed by a fascinating discussion of the role of beauty in Julian dynastic politics. Beauty, understood broadly as visible coherence of parts achieved through a judicious use of proportions, was called by Vitruvius *venustas* rather than *pulchritudo*, in an implicit reference to the etymological root of the term – Venus – the mythical *genetrix Romanorum*. Venus was also recognized as ancestress of Julius Caesar and Augustus, hence a divine source of their power. McEwen then casts this politicized concept of *venustas* against the Stoic formulation of beauty, seen as the root of pleasure, leading through love and civic concord, to urbanization. The appearance of beauty, McEwen thus demonstrates, was the all-important sign of virtue and community, an association revealing an important source of Vitruvian analogy between material and social structures, architecture and Empire.

Chapter four (“The Body of the King”) explores Augustus’s building programme and the role of the Vitruvian text in a colonization campaign commenced by the Emperor. The author refers here to a well-known essay by Ernst Kantorowicz on the dual nature of the King’s image,³ to propose that Vitruvius was writing the eternal body of the King/Emperor Augustus, ageless through the cyclical renewal in time. McEwen turns here to the section in Vitruvius’s text devoted to *gnomonice*, suggesting that the sundial transformed the temporal order into a spatial one of the *analemma* (the dial), thus securing the transformation of the cosmic order into a worldly reality. The author further illuminates intersections between the celestial order and imperial narratives by focusing on the Prima Porta statue of Augustus, especially on the complex decorative programme of the Emperor’s cuirass. Analogically to the body of Vitruvius’s treatise (and architecture), the body of the Emperor is shown here as a coherent entity, demonstrating the perfect application of *rationes*. The subsequent discussion of the term *imperium* is a linchpin of McEwen’s argument, as it constructs the idea of spatialization of the Empire. The author points to a fact that *imperium* was initially a temporal term, referring to power held for a specific time, but changed under Augustus into a spatial term – a territory, a body. With Augustus, who was the first to hold “*imperium*” permanently, *imperium* became synonymous with the body of the Emperor; it was spatialized. For Vitruvius, argues McEwen, architecture was a privileged means of spatializing *imperium*. The chapter concludes with another important redefinition of the role played by the Vitruvian text in the context of contemporary culture. Whereas *De architectura*

was usually seen as marginal to ancient building practice, McEwen demonstrates instead (based largely on results of the massive archaeological work conducted by Pierre Gros), that the treatise was the key foundation of the imperial building project. It was the ideological underpinning of the Roman colonization project, responsible just as much for the new settlements in the Western provinces as it was for the revival of the old Greek towns in the East of the Empire. McEwen thus shows that even if Vitruvius's detailed precepts were not followed by practitioners of architecture in his own age, the basic principles accompanying city building in the Roman Empire (enclosure/limit, axiality/squaring, hierarchization of spaces) were precisely those provided by the body of the treatise.

Throughout, McEwen's engaging prose contains some truly revealing, informative, and thought-provoking ideas and observations. The sophisticated discussion of the cuirass from the Prima Porta statue of Augustus is an exemplary piece of art history writing, an inspired analysis demonstrating the author's skills in exploring meticulously the object at hand. Equally stimulating are some analytical sections, such as the one tracing the politicization of the Corinthian order. The hypothesis that this order was construed by Vitruvius as a sign of a civilizing renewal brought about by imperial rule and a carrier of Roman values is very convincingly argued and provides a welcome elaboration of often-made, but thus far thinly substantiated claims about the political nature of the Corinthian. Given the author's principal agenda, which is to reposition Vitruvius in the culture and politics of his time, frequent references in the text to the topography of ancient Rome, thus situating the treatise in its material (urban and architectural) context, are very useful. The network of important sites in Augustan Rome brought into the discussion forms a very useful matrix for expanding the limits of interpretation – phenomena depicted by Vitruvius find here their visible parallel. In line with McEwen's contention that *De architectura* was not an architectural design manual but rather a guide to empire-building, the emphasis of the book rests more on the exploration of urban planning than on architecture *per se*, with the excellent analysis of sculpture regrettably not matched by equally wide-ranging discussion of a single edifice.

The perfect picture of the body-like coherence of the Roman Empire, constructed by Vitruvius in his treatise, has its flaws. This coherence was forced (not unlike the body metaphor) and McEwen seems to be well aware of this. The image of Roman society generated in McEwen's book – of all civilized peoples ruled by Rome in the expanding, well-structured Empire under Augustus – is just a reflection of Vitruvius's ideological imperatives. Perhaps it is enough to acknowledge the existence of a different reality outside this ideal, as McEwen does, but probing that "reality" would have been a very rewarding task indeed. McEwen's argument stays consistently within the pe-

rimeters of intellectual discourse contemporary to Vitruvius but, given the tremendous potential of the material presented in this book, the reader often cannot help wishing for a broader approach, allowing for interpretations contingent on the post-modern constructions of "the body." The author does acknowledge those doubts, implicitly pointing to the fascinating areas of study left unexamined in her work. While probing the Vitruvian body of architecture as the index of Roman conquests, for instance, it is perhaps regrettable that the author did not introduce a discussion of the war machines. They were not only important to Vitruvius's interests and formed a part of his tripartite construction of the body of architecture, alongside buildings and *gnomonice*, but such an omission leaves unexplored a potentially stimulating avenue of inquiry, focusing on the dichotomy between the "body" and the "machine," its artificial other. The material discussed in chapter three, focusing on beauty and its bodily ideal, is a gender-troped concept *par excellence*, which calls for further elaboration, as it inevitably opens up the question of the politicization of the body, the domination of the male-gendered taxonomies and gender-coding in Vitruvian narratives. These issues, already attracting some scholarly attention, will have to be explored elsewhere, hopefully with the incisiveness demonstrated by McEwen in her work. Similarly, the issues of colonization / Roman imperialism brought up in Vitruvius's treatise (coinciding with the first and only period in Roman history that saw the state involved in settlement of citizens outside Italy) could have been discussed more fully in terms of colonial tensions and racial differences, inherent in the orders themselves, as shown by Hersey. The Vitruvian *corpus* as a schema for understanding the spatial reality of the Empire excluded those that did not fit into the dominant paradigm. McEwen recognizes the existence of those "other" bodies, barred from the perfect, male-formed corpus of the Augustan Empire, only at the very end of her work, but just by doing that she is pointing to possible future trajectories of inquiry. For this, and for laying a sound basis for such future research, we owe her a major debt of gratitude.

Unlike many editions and interpretations of Vitruvius's *magnum opus*, this book is a rather small volume, good for slow perusal and easy to handle. It is a handsomely produced publication, though not without some pesky problems. For a scholarly work, intended for a specialist audience and relying on a copious number of quotations from a variety of original texts, the relegating of footnotes to the end of the book made checking references a very tedious and irritating task. There are no references to the illustrations used, perhaps because some pictures seem rather loosely related to the argument at hand. Some of these images, like the fragment of Vittorio Emanuele's Monument or Betty Goodwin's evocative *Pieces of Time IX*, seem intended as a vague visual gloss to the text of a rather distant

metaphoric value. In those instances, however, where the illustrations are needed as a direct point of reference, their nearly random scattering is tiresome. Last, but not least, the quality of the black-and-white illustrations is very uneven, with some amateurishly unfocused and poorly cropped images placed alongside more professionally produced photographs.

The quality of McEwen's writing and scholarship, however, more than make up for the occasional deficiencies of production. This certainly is a thought-provoking book, whose multifarious, intermeshing lines of argumentation will bear repeated rereading. McEwen opens up a space for radical reflection on long held assumptions, and shifts some of the well-entrenched paradigms underwriting much of today's architectural history. This inspiring text is a must for all those who think they know Vitruvius, just to find out how much more there is to learn.

BARBARA ARCISZEWSKA
Warsaw University, Poland

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, V. Hart (with P. Hicks), eds, *Paper Palaces: The Rise of the Renaissance Architectural Treatise* (New Haven, 1998); A. Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance: Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literary Culture* (Cambridge, 1999); R. Smick et al., eds, *Antiquity and Its Interpreters* (Cambridge, 2000); G. Ciotta et al., eds, *Vitruvio nella cultura architettonica antica, medievale e moderna: atti del convegno internazionale di Genova, 5–8 novembre 2001* (Geneva, 2003).
- 2 J. Rykwert, *The Dancing Column: On the Orders of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); G. Hersey, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture: Speculations on Ornament from Vitruvius to Venturi* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).
- 3 Kantorowicz explored medieval ideology of kingship, demonstrating that it juxtaposed the visible body of the King (which was subject to age and imperfection) with the King's invisible body (which was eternal and perfect). See E. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957).

Louis Kaplan, *American Exposures*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 248 pp., 61 halftones, 11 colour photographs, \$26.00 U.S. paperback, \$78.00 U.S. cloth.

Martha Langford, ed., *Image and Imagination*. Montréal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005, 336 pp., 125 colour photographs, \$39.95.

The concept of the index has been an important element in photographic theory. In Perceian terms, the photograph is an index because it results from the action of reflected light on the negative. Indexicality has been used to describe the photograph's connection to the world and to ground claims for photography's authenticity. For example, Roland Barthes used the concept to ground his argument for the photograph's assertion of a this-has-been.¹ However, the usefulness of this concept to photography has been under question in recent scholarship. In this review, I examine two recent volumes that attempt to think photography beyond the index. The first, Louis Kaplan's *American Exposures*, uses the work of Jean-Luc Nancy to rethink American photography's deployment of community. Kaplan argues that his "expository approach to photography ... contributes to the critique of the index by calling into question its logic of identity, identification, and representation" (p. xxiii). The second, Martha Langford's edited volume *Image and Imagination*, seeks to focus scholarly attention on the viewer's imaginative relation to the photograph. Langford argues that the attempt to move from a theory of photographic representation to one of spectatorial experience has been hampered by photographic

theory's acceptance "of its [photography's] indexicality – its causal connection to the real – as settled" (p. 5). While both writers pursue the analysis of photography outside the confines of the index, their exploration of the space beyond the index takes them in very different directions.

Kaplan's book examines twentieth-century American photography through a series of case studies of what he calls community-exposed photography. It begins with an analysis of Arthur Mole's early-twentieth-century elevated photographs of crowds and finishes by examining Nikki S. Lee's photographs documenting her performances of subcultural identities. In between it examines Archibald Macleish's use of Farm Security Administration photographs in his *Land of the Free*, Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* exhibition, Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependancy*, Romaine Bearden's photomontage *projections*, Frédéric Brenner's *jews/americala representation*, and Pedro Meyer's digital images of Chicano culture. Although Kaplan begins at the opening of the century and ends at the close, his approach is not strictly chronological. In reading these practices, *American Exposures* draws on Nancy's philosophy, focusing particularly on *The Inoperative Community*, to expose photography to the thinking of community. Nancy's version of post-Heideggerian continental philosophy thinks "being" as always "already being-with" or "being-in-common." This leads to thinking "individuality" as being singular plural. Thus, for Nancy, community is not a fusal experience of unity but is only exposed in our encounter with finitude. We are exposed to community through our shared experience of limit in the encounter with the death of the other. Kaplan draws on Nancy to