

THOSE WHO CANNOT FEEL MUST READ

READING BOOKS IS NOT GOOD FOR ALL ARCHITECTS, SAYS MANUELLE GAUTRAND

Text Rahel Willhardt / Photos Cyrille Weiner and Audrey Cerdan





‘WHEN READING TAKES THE PLACE OF ONE’S OWN EXPERIENCE, IT IS AN INTUITION KILLER’

Manuelle Gautrand is one of the few women in charge of an internationally renowned architecture firm. She earned her degree from the University of Paris 23 years ago, and 17 years ago she opened her own office in the French capital, an office that today numbers roughly 30 associates and is active worldwide.

When she speaks, Gautrand – a woman in her mid-forties with an uncommonly alert gaze – seems to do so with her whole body. When she talks about hideous architectonic monotony or instead about the beauty of bustling cities, it is as though she were entirely consumed by her examples. Her projects are also seldom ‘quiet’: the double chevron of the Citroën logo grows into a complete façade over the showroom on the Champs-Élysées in Paris (see *Mark #9*) and Copenhagen is set to get a four-star hotel concealed behind towering ‘glass curtains’.

She absorbs impressions from the setting ‘like a sponge’ and she considers it important to express herself about her work in words and images – but she has mixed feelings about reading books. For when reading takes the place of one’s own experience, it is an intuition killer; when clinging to the theoretical dominates, the building challenges that arise remain unresolved – and in both instances this leads to architectonic monotony. To Gautrand, intuition is the architect’s most valuable asset.

You once said in an interview: ‘I claim a form of liberty, and I do not feel at all circumscribed by the dictates of any school.’

Manuelle Gautrand: Yes that’s right. And maybe that’s why I was hesitant when you asked for an interview about books. I think my inspiration, in life and in architecture, is hardly just connected to books. It’s mainly connected to visual arts or to experiencing locations and the countries I visit. To me, inspiration mainly comes from feeling a city or a landscape, from walking in it. It is about using the senses.

Reading books can be an obstacle to the design of good architecture?

Yes, in a way it is! When I taught architecture theory at the university in Paris, I found out

that it’s just not good for everyone. Some theories are like closed systems. Some teachers emphasize their own way of seeing architecture too much. Theory then becomes a prison that shuts away your own thoughts. In my point of view architecture should be very personal. It’s not just science but it asks students to adjust their goals and feelings to a main structure – it’s this main structure that theory can sow. With every new project one’s own approach gets richer and more detailed. You might change your mind from time to time. And over the years you write your own history. Then you can adapt your work to your own theory. Theory helps to structure your thoughts. It provides a frame to later fill with emotion and intuition.

But to become a good architect it’s more important, I would say, to move about and see plenty of buildings, no matter if they are contemporary or old. It’s important to see these old monumental churches, and feel their very deep construction, or to see the pavilion that François Seigneur, Jean-Paul Viguier and Jean François Jodry built for the 1992 World Exhibition in Seville and feel how it’s freely suspended roof envelops you in a quite different way, abolishing the idea of inside and outside. Such encounters are important in the formation of an architect.

I’m also very inspired by strong infrastructure made by engineers, such as the huge concrete barrages at Lake Powell in Arizona, in the USA. It may not exactly be architecture, but it is very impressive. The scale is monumental and strongly linked to the landscape, making you feel small. Cities are also a major source of inspiration to me, like Hong Kong, with its very dense skyscrapers. It’s Norman Foster’s tower for HSBC – the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation – that I like best. I like this sort of high-tech architecture of the 1980s, set-up in a very pure way. It’s through travelling and experiencing such buildings that I learnt to feel the architecture from inside, to live and experiment with it.

What were your own seed-spending books, back in university?

Books on architects, on cities, on political goals, such as *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch, *La poétique de l’espace* (translated as *The Poetics of Space*) by Gaston Bachelard and maybe also *Genius Loci* by Christian Norberg-Schulz. But I like to be an architect who is in the middle of society. So I prefer reading newspapers such as *Le Monde* rather than books. It’s a simple way to come to understand our common world. You have all of these small visions of different people with shallow and deep feelings. I enjoy reading about what they are doing and how they see the world.

Did books help you to understand what you don’t want?

Yes, they did. For example those of Le Corbusier. Of course he is very important and interesting, but when I read his books I felt: ‘No, that is not my way.’ Don’t get me wrong – I like to read, but I feel that this is not my source of inspiration. I just don’t connect books to architecture. . .

What sort of books are on your bookshelf at home?

Contemporary art books, like the one on Richard Serra’s steel sculptures that were on show in the Grand Palais in Paris this summer, or Victor Vasarely’s 1973 *Planetary Folklore*. Artists have a very specific feeling of our world and an inspirational way of creating a view on our environment. But I also keep some books on architects, such as Herzog & de Meuron. And just a week ago, I bought Olafur Eliasson’s huge *Encyclopedia*. I’m trying to enter his world and it feels very inspiring.

Can you remember having read something that changed your view on a subject?

Certainly! Reading is complementary to the emotional access. If you look at a city for the first time on your own, there are so many things you don’t understand. Reading about it afterward adds a sort of intellectual explanation to the feelings you had while walking through the town. »

BOOKS THAT WERE USEFUL TO MANUELLE GAUTRAND

Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960)

Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l’espace* (Paris: PUF, 1961), translated as *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969)

Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980)

Alfred Pacquement, *Monumenta 2008 / Richard Serra: Promenade* (Paris: Coédition Cnap

/ Centre Pompidou, 2008)

Victor Vasarely, *Planetary Folklore* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1973)

Anna Engberg-Pedersen, Studio Olafur Eliasson Olafur Eliasson (eds.), *Studio Olafur Eliasson: An Encyclopedia* (Cologne: Taschen, 2008)

Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006)

Josep M. Carandell, *Park Guell: Gaudi’s Utopia* (Barcelona: Triangle Postals, 1998)

'I JUST DON'T CONNECT BOOKS TO ARCHITECTURE'

Or take Mike Davis's essay 'Fear and Money in Dubai' – it's a short text, with a strong impact, which I just read a few months ago. It's an incredible article about Dubai and the way they make architecture, skyscrapers, master plans – in a very speedy way. After you finished, you feel a little bit sad about our world. This building politics is not sustainable at all, the city is not made for people, it is not congruent with the environment – it's nothing . . .

So books are important to understand the world, but for inspiration it is much more important to feel. When you start a project it is very important to be inspired by the site. The site has to be felt deeply, because each type of project has to connect strongly to the context. That does not mean that you cannot pursue contrast, but first of all you have to understand what is there, get your own perception clear and play with it. Only then will you be able to add a personal dimension. This is how a futuristic and innovative architecture can be achieved.

And then there are the users. I sometimes have the feeling that architects talk a lot about theory and the context, but forget to speak about the users. Or, to put in terms of functionality, I get the feeling that they talk about forms and shapes, but forget to add new spaces that are directly connected to the programme. In my opinion that is one of the most important dimensions of architecture, to invent specific spaces for each type of programme, to emphasize a programme, to adapt it to our way of life. People need the opportunity to discover new kinds of spaces. The users have to be impressed and astonished. They must have the feeling that they've discovered something they never felt before and for that we have to think very deeply about the functionalities, the way to create a specific envelope for specific needs.

You also like the idea of not being specialized. Where do you find the necessary knowledge to build, let's say, a hotel for the very first time, or to build in a foreign culture?

Of course I do research and I do read books about that foreign country – about its politics, culture, the landscape . . . And I also look at

important authors and literature. But if I work in Thailand or Vietnam, I first sit down and listen to the people I am dealing with. The client is the first to explain his country to you. It's very important to listen carefully to these explanations. The personal exchange gives you a deeper understanding than readings can. It's interesting to enter a country with different types of keys – discussing, reading, but also the discovering you do on your own – your own understanding and intuition.

How about writing, does it pave the way to your own understanding?

In fact I write a lot. At the start of a project, as I said before, I follow two parallel approaches. One is to do many handcrafted models and sketches, which is the most efficient way to make sure that your idea is good. The other is to write. It's a good way to dig deep in your thoughts, to structure them and to get yourself prepared to communicate them.

An architect has to do a lot of explanation work on a project. Words provide a way to express one's architecture, in a different way than images do, a sort of literary way. To look at buildings and enter them is very important, but it's also important to read explanations, because that's a way to complete our architectural experiences. Peter Zumthor's book *Atmospheres* is a good example of how to go deeper in the thermal baths in Vals, Switzerland, by words, and so is Josep Carandell's *Park Guell* about Gaudi.

A retrospective on your work would be in the form of a . . . ?

Haha, it's a paradox, but it would be a book. A book is a back-peddling, a sort of review of what you have done so far, and where you stand now. I'm just about to publish a new monograph entitled *Re-Enchant the City: Manuelle Gautrand's Architecture*. (English, French and Chinese). The interview with my French-Chinese editors caused me to reflect on my own work. Within the high workloads those kinds of stops are necessary from time to time. «

