

The Pen is Mightier than the Mouse

Book Review: *Architects' Sketchbook*

In this review, *Gwen Lee* examines the humble sketch and its vital role in the development of architecture.

Text by *Gwen Lee*
Images courtesy of *Thames & Hudson*



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Book cover.

Drawing is often described as a language, with its spectrum of accents, cadences, and structures a window into the architect's soul. However, in an industry where being monolingual is no longer enough, where the sleek and exact world of computer drawings and animations rule the day, where then does the imprecise art of sketching stand? Narinder Sagoo, Partner at Foster + Partners and trustee of the Campaign for Drawing, observes as much when he writes: "The humble drawing runs the risk of being overlooked, as a mere stepping stone between idea and computer realisation, or a minor contribution to the early shaping of a building; and it is often technology that then gets the glory."

But perhaps, it is the impreciseness of hand sketching that makes it a most invaluable tool to architects. In computer modelling, especially in Building Information Modelling softwares like Revit, the architect is bogged down by numerical data—how thick the walls are, what they are built out of, how high they rise—and his mind is often constrained by a range of tools the programme offers. No doubt that fantastical forms have been gestated from the cold flicker of the computer screen and complex structures built through the sheer computing power of the microchip, still, one cannot help but tire of these perfect but soulless creations. The industry today is saturated with blobs and smooth-skinned monstrosities that are the permutations of computer

algorithms. Architecture students no longer know how to draw to scale or render shade and light unaided by the "Shadow" button onscreen. Some claim they cannot "think" without their CAD models. The pencil is as foreign as the sword. When a blank piece of paper becomes a terrifying object to the creative mind, is this the beginning of the end?

Enter the *Architects' Sketchbooks*, a 352-page collection of over 750 illustrations by 85 architects from around the world. Featuring rising talents alongside "starchitects" like Norman Foster, Shigeru Ban, and Will Alsop, the book reaffirms the importance of sketching and its role in the practice of architecture. Rendered in a variety of mediums such as charcoal and watercolour, the illustrations are accompanied by short write-ups that reveal the architects' thinking and working processes.

Ranging from the simplistic to the intricate, the sketches capture the architects' minds at different stages of the design process. In some sketches, the concept is clearly captured at the onset. Shigeru Ban's hand drawings are, for example, instructive and minimal to the point of almost being diagrammatic. While they may lack the artistic flair of say, Peter Clash's colourful, perspectival scenes, Ban's sketches reveal his ability to convey details such as circulation, sun path, and structural loading with a few simple strokes of the pen.

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On the other end of the spectrum is Ban's countryman, Junya Ishigami, who attempts to create a new kind of space with indistinct borderlines. “I try to avoid the abstraction that is characteristic of diagrams; a diagram compresses and abbreviates information,” he says. “Rather than distilling the information, I try to keep it all present. What I would like to do is to grasp the ambiguity of this variety, and develop abstractions from that.” In his drawings, plants take the centre stage while manmade structures recede into the background; the result is at once surreal and urban. But Ishigami's talent lies not only in the delicate and ethereal drawings he is famous for, but his ability to manifest their otherworldliness so completely in his built works, such as the facility at the Kanagawa Institute of Technology.

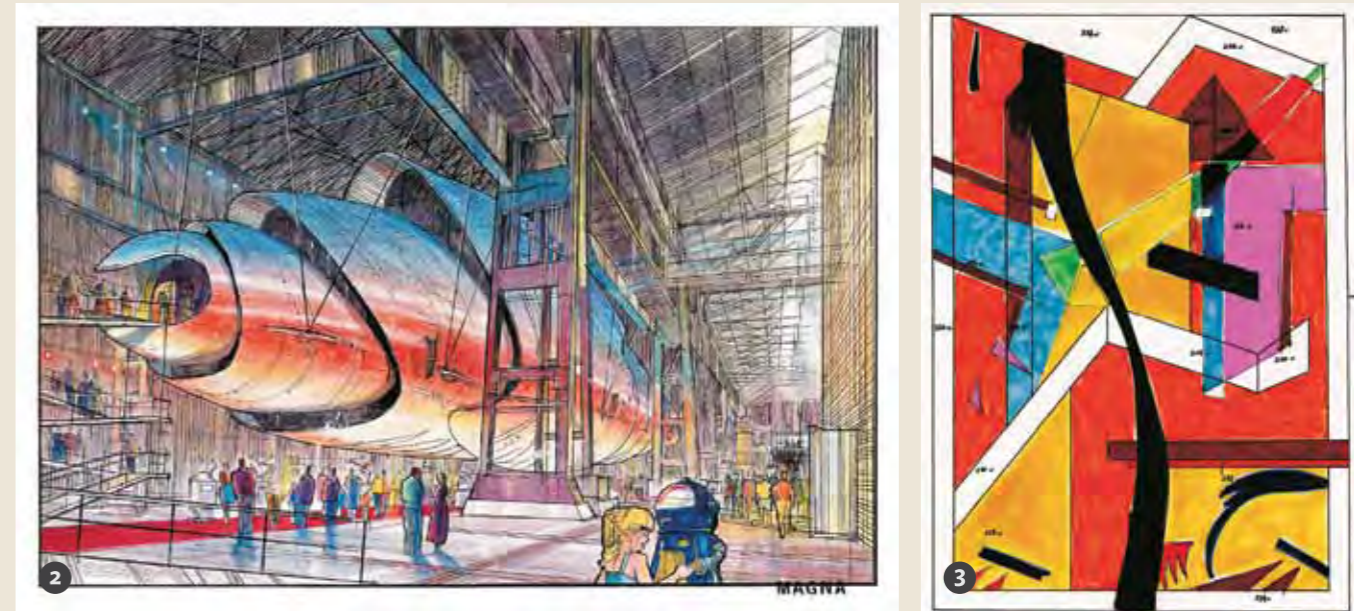
A few pages away, the exuberant paintings of Will Alsop captivate the eye with their explosion of colours and brush strokes. An accomplished artist—he was a tutor of sculpture at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London for several years—Alsop describes painting as a way of exploring architecture. “I can sit in my studio, creating something on a piece of paper and the feeling that you get is almost as good as having finished a building,” he says. “It's not about designing something, it's about discovering what something could be and I think that's a very important distinction.”

Like Alsop, Rafael Vinöly draws constantly simply because he enjoys it. His sketches are large—“Small sketches are exercises in self-indulgence.”—and he

employs a combination of different mediums, from pencils, thick pens, charcoal, to watercolour. Apart from the sheer pleasure of drawing, the process also appears to be a means of unearthing new ideas buried in his subconscious. Vinöly does not believe that one can start a sketch from preconceived notions. He talks about being troubled by the “cut-and-paste mentality” of young architects where ideas are borrowed and collaged together without originality. “Most of my buildings look like the original sketch,” he says. “This is because they are born of a clear concept, an idea that has come from thinking and listening to what my mind, memories and sketch pad are telling me.”

Eva Jiricna too, views sketching as a tool to help her think. Her sketches range from doodles containing a nascent idea to three-dimensional details suggesting how things might be put together. “I can't put a percentage on the number of original sketches that get carried through to the completed design. I will say that it does happen but it is very rare that the first sketch would be the final solution. But it does happen occasionally and it is great when you can refer to the sketch at the end of the project and see that it was the right solution, which survived all the subsequent tests.”

Sketches, because of their exploratory function, are often used in architect-client interactions. M15 Arquitectos uses comic strips to give their clients a chance to “redescribe themselves from a make-believe standpoint, a process that we call ‘social-fantasy.’” The practice does not follow the conventional design process, but rather an image-based trial and error



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Sketch by Peter Clash.

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Sketch by Alessandro Mendini.

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Sketch by 3deluxe.

where sketches are generated quickly and in large quantities. “What we reject completely is the idea of growth from a single sketch that then becomes a model and then, like a mannequin, receives the evening gown. Architecture is more unique and intricate than that.”

The British architect Prue Chiles operates with a similar philosophy, using 2D and 3D images simultaneously to allow a quick dialogue to develop both within her team and with the client. Not precious about her work, she even encourages her clients and builders draw over her sketches.

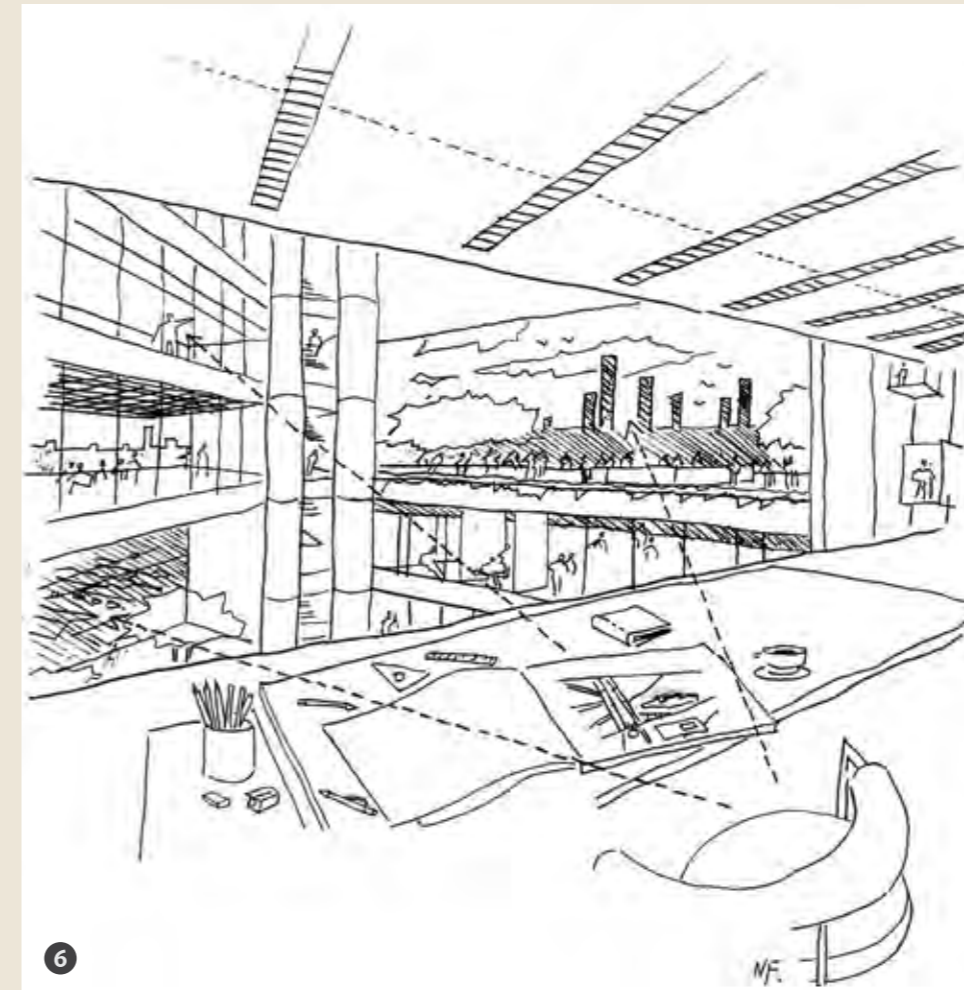
What *Architects' Sketchbooks* illustrates is the function of the sketch as a ready conduit for the imagination. It is inherently quick, cheap to produce (on napkins even!), and conjures little heartache when discarded or lost. As the Australian architect Sean Godsell notes, “Architecture is ultimately a built thing; a sketch is everything and then nothing. But the ability to imbue a simple sketch with complexity, to instil the nuances of a resolved plan into a simple diagram, this is where architecture begins and a sketch captures that moment forever.”

Dear reader: before that moment passes, why not put down your mouse for an hour and dig out that blunt wooden pencil from the bottom of the drawer? Sketch; if not for beauty, then for inspiration. ▀

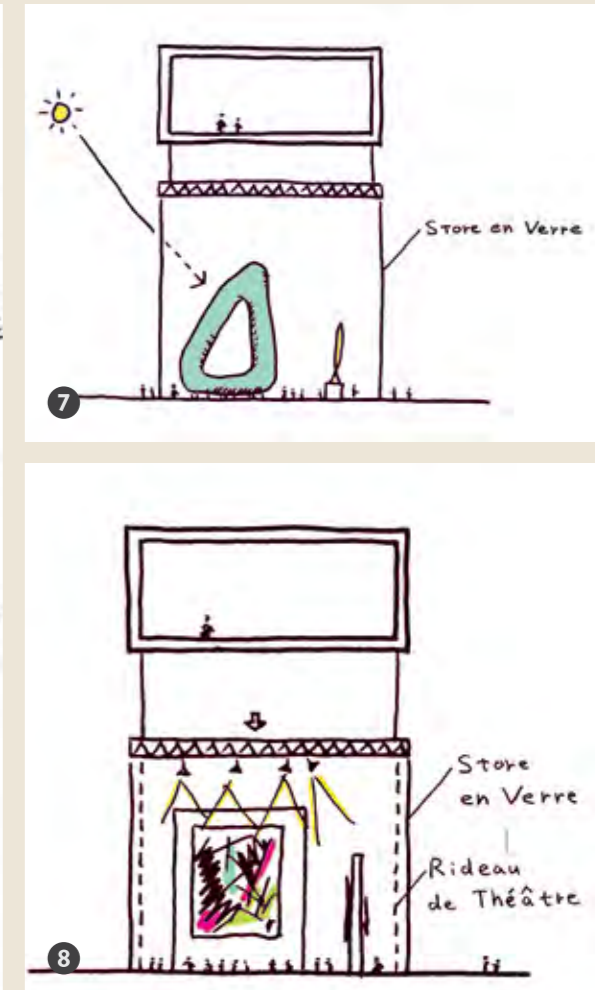
Architects' Sketchbooks, edited by Will Jones and published by Thames & Hudson, is available in all good bookstores.



5
Sketch of Kimmel Center
for the Performing Arts
by Rafael Vinöly.



6
Sketch by Norman Foster.



7 8
Sketches by Shigeru Ban.