

Materiality, Humanity and Otherness: A New Perspective on Architecture? Reviews Summer 2021

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REVIEW

Reviews Summer 2021

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Materiality, Humanity and Otherness: A New Perspective on Architecture?

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Antoine Picon, *The Materiality of Architecture*. Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 2020, 192 pages, ISBN 9781517909482

Architecture is a human artifact created from natural or man-made building materials. Its tangible nature cannot be ignored; the building derives from a distinct environmental and social context and comes to embody countless cultural meanings. Building materials and their varied historical connotations have been the subject of numerous material and construction histories that focus on either the development of specific materials in a given temporal epoch or building knowledge shared within a particular territory. Recent studies on building materials include Adrian Forty's *Concrete and Culture*, Roberto Gargiani's *Concrete: from Archeology to Invention 1700–1769*, and Valérie Nègre's *L'Art et la matière* (Forty 2012; Gargiani 2013; Nègre 2016). Antoine Picon's new book, *The Materiality of Architecture* (Figure 1), expands our perspective on building materials and their use throughout the centuries. The aim of this ambitious study is to offer readers, through the concept of materiality, a new lens through which to examine architectural history and theory. According to Picon, materiality is the way we as humans relate to matter and materials. However, throughout the book this notion becomes broader and broader, requiring several



Figure 1: Cover of *The Materiality of Architecture*. Photo credit: Minnesota University Press.

definitions that overlap and blur its boundaries. The book consists of the English translation of the previously published *La Matérialité de l'architecture* (Picon 2018), as well as an updated introduction and conclusion.

A recurring topic throughout the book is Picon's fascination – one might even say obsession – with the enigmatic opaqueness of matter, which restrains human desire to animate it and to communicate through architecture. He argues that 'architecture is difficult to fathom' mainly because of 'the role that matter plays in its configuration' (2). He underscores the role that materials have in the expressive potential of the discipline and its political aspirations. Picon opens with an introduction that defines the main topics of the text: matter, materials, and, above all else, materiality. Materiality, he explains, is 'the material dimension of a phenomenon, a thing, an object, or a system *in relation* to human thought and practice' (10). Picon's interest is not simply in the materials of architecture, but in the relationship that we, as humans, have with the nonhuman entities that surround us. Materiality also relates to time and space, varying over the centuries and across different societies. Drawing upon François Hartog's definition of 'regimes of historicity' (Hartog 2015), Picon introduces the new concept of 'regimes of materiality': historical epochs that are defined by the approach to materiality within a specific society at a given moment in history. Architecture is the physical proof of these regimes. Presenting 'regimes of materiality' as an alternative lens through which to read architecture, Picon aims to merge traditional approaches to architectural history and theory, which place emphasis on architecture's intellectual dimensions, with a more recent interest in the technical and social dimensions of design, as highlighted by promoters of the actor-network theory (Yaneva 2009; Yaneva 2012). Through the idea of material regimes, it is possible to identify decisive shifts in Western architectural history born from the development and use of materials. Perhaps the most obvious example is found in the modern movement, with the proliferation of reinforced concrete and steel, which gave way to new structural possibilities and the search for higher hygienic standards within architecture. Analogous developments are identified in earlier historical epochs. For example, the establishment of new spatial orders in the Renaissance came to affect both urban environments and construction techniques, resulting in the total refusal of audacious Gothic architecture and instead moving toward an ideal of moderation (82). In the mid-17th century, scientific discoveries merged with technological optimism and structural calculations to produce innovative approaches to the building practice: materials such as reinforced stone, plaster, and mortar were extensively experimented with. Most of all, the rise of cast iron architecture was an absolute novelty that 'marked the true end of the Vitruvian tradition' (88).

Picon opens *The Materiality of Architecture* with a prolonged examination of the linguistic function of architecture. The book's first chapter discusses the link between the production of architecture – or more fundamentally, the ordering of matter – and its expression and ability to communicate. The architect's choice of specific

proportions and building materials, and even more, her understanding of tectonics, comes to constitute the principle expression of the structure. Still, Picon is clear that there exists a fundamental tension between architecture and speech. Language, he argues, is architecture's 'constant temptation': an upper limit never to be attained by the silent otherness of matter, despite the architect's attempts to make the building speak (38). It is the expression of form that gives architects the greatest canvas to experiment. Adopting a historical perspective, the author claims that all forms of architectural expression are tied to a specific moment in time and space, and must be understood through the lens of the history of materiality.

The book tackles a major goal of the architectural discipline: the animation of matter. In Picon's opinion, animating matter through architecture means connecting the realm of opaque objects and building materials to the realm of humans, creating 'an arena in which human actions are privileged and thus acquire great significance' (57). The author expands his definition of materiality and retraces its development throughout history with examples drawn from antiquity to the present. He arrives at two main conclusions: first, that materiality is characterized by contradictions and controversies, although architecture tends to follow the 'dominant approach' of a given society (11), and second, that our relationship to matter is pivotal to understanding our own subjectivity. However, as the definitions of the term multiply throughout the book, especially in the third chapter, the reader is at times disoriented by what seems like an almost boundless concept. Is materiality comparable to a 'field' of potential contrasts and interpretations, or is it a Heideggerian 'mode of being in the world' that regulates the relationship between human and nonhuman spheres? Or is it a 'ballet' simultaneously created by matter and humanity? Furthermore, the wide range of case studies from Western architectural history gives the reader the impression that some examples have been specifically and almost retrospectively selected to match the author's theoretical definition of materiality (see chapters 3 and 4). The inclusion of non-Western architectural cultures would do much to support the author's scope and ability to apply his view to a global perspective.

In the fifth chapter, Picon explores materiality in the contemporary world and the digital era. The author explains that the relatively abrupt emergence of digital media has transformed our notion of materiality. Our senses are changed by technological tools, which influence how we experience the world, and these transformations also impact architecture. In contrast to the heroic vision of twentieth-century modernity, there are new configurations of materiality characterized by the crisis of traditional tectonics, the search for the 'lost unity' (120) between discrete information and continuous matter, and the challenge of environmental sustainability. Reviewing current trends of the digital avant-garde, Picon comments on 'dangerous tendencies' (133) in contemporary (star) architecture – such as the rejection of symbolism or the naive use of ornament. While this critical approach has merit, it could be addressed from different perspectives.

Picon's view could foster an expansion of the notion of materiality to address pressing topics in the architectural discipline and contemporary discourses. How do we understand materiality within the contemporary phenomena of global extractivism and the relentless plundering of natural resources? How can we analyze the clashes between the different regimes of materiality of hegemonic and oppressed societies? Can we extend the concept of materiality to expand our view from a human-centered to a multispecies perspective? (see, for example, the section *Among Diverse Beings* at la Biennale Architettura 2021 – *How Will We Live Together?*) Perhaps in the coming years we will acknowledge that architecture belongs to a realm that is much bigger than our own needs for expression and meaning, one that encompasses current social challenges, global emergencies, and natural crises.

In the conclusion, Picon casts light on the political nature of architecture, which he sees as being strongly linked to the changing regimes of materiality. The author defines the 'true political agency of architecture' (143), which can be perceived through sensations and ornamental systems. The discipline of architecture has the power to give order to matter and, consequently, to generate potential situations for those who inhabit the building. Through case studies, he underscores the relationship between the changes in regimes of materiality and the political sphere. A convincing though briefly discussed example is Albert Speer's use of materials to reach the specific scope of 'dwarfing the human body' and convey the absolute power of a totalitarian regime (155).

Picon's theory of materiality is complex yet intriguing, and so is this book: a not-so-easy yet enlightening and engaging read, which offers a fascinating view on the practice of architecture and its historical developments. With this new English edition, Picon's theory will reach a greater audience, inspiring new interpretations of architectural history and serving as a powerful tool for contemporary architectural theory.

Reciprocal Histories: Japan and the West in Architecture

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Neil Jackson, *Japan and the West: An Architectural Dialogue*. London: Lund Humphries, 2019, 472 pages, ISBN 9781848222960

In the 1800s, designers all over the world looked to Europe for inspiration, but what distinguishes the Japanese case is the reciprocity of the gaze: over the past century and a half, architects, artists, and writers from the West have continually found inspiration in Japan. Although other authors have examined aspects of these relationships, Neil Jackson's *Japan and the West: An Architectural Dialogue* provides by far the most comprehensive, detailed account (Figure 2). With its focus on architecture, *Japan and the West* is an invaluable addition to the literature on

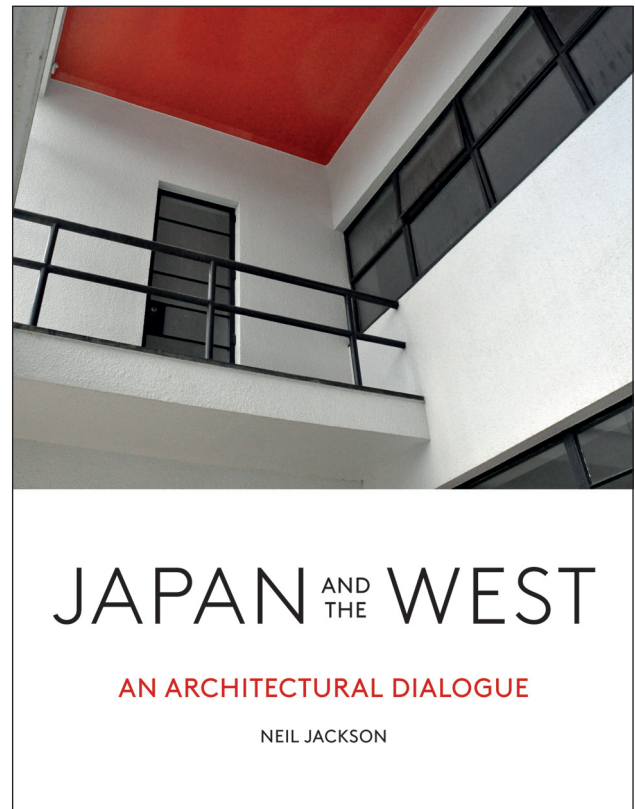


Figure 2: Cover of *Japan and the West: An Architectural Dialogue*. Photo credit: Lund Humphries.

Japanese influences on Western art. At 472 pages, including 45 pages of notes, this volume is a work of encyclopedic breadth and remarkable detail that should serve as a permanent reference work for the subject.

One distinguishing feature of *Japan and the West* is its chronological scope, beginning with the first Japanese-Western architectural relationships in the 1500s and continuing to the present. Jackson describes the powerful impression Oda Nobunaga's magnificent Azuchi Castle made on Father Luis Fróis, a Jesuit, in 1581, as well as the 1585 visit to Palladio's Teatro Olimpico by the first Japanese to visit Europe. The bulk of this volume, though, addresses the period since the 1860s, when the gunboat diplomacy of the Western powers forced the waning Tokugawa government to open its borders. Jackson examines the perceptions of 19th-century foreigners in Japan, paying special attention to their impressions of Japanese houses. Residential architecture, after all, would prove in later decades to be the most influential of Japanese building types in the West. Outside Japan, the Japanese exhibits at world's fairs and other exhibitions provided some of the most fruitful encounters between Western architects and Japan. Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles and Henry Greene, and Marion Mahony, for instance, first encountered Japanese architecture in person at the Hōōden of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Clay Lancaster's *The Japanese Influence in America* was a pioneering work on its topic, but unsurprisingly Jackson offers considerably more detailed and sophisticated analyses (Lancaster 1963). He also covers a much wider range of material, both within the United States and elsewhere; for instance,

in addition to looking at buildings by trained architects, he examines commercial projects such as the Japanese Native Village, created in 1885 in London by the merchant Tannaker Buhicosan.

Perhaps the most compelling section of the book is the chapter on the 'art-architects' of late 19th-century England. Jackson's exceptional knowledge of British architecture provides the basis for finely detailed analyses of the roles of Japanese design in the work of Richard Norman Shaw, William Eden Nesfield, Edward William Godwin, and many others, making a convincing case for the pervasiveness of the Japanese influence. The material on William Burges is particularly important, since Burges, in addition to his deep engagement with Japanese culture, also played a vital, if indirect, role in the development of architecture in modern Japan. On his recommendation, his young employee Josiah Conder was hired by the Japanese government as professor of architecture at the Imperial College of Engineering. Arriving in Tokyo in 1877, Conder educated the students who became the most influential architects in 19th- and early-20th-century Japan: Tatsuno Kingo, Katayama Tōkuma, Itō Chūta, and many more. Conder's disciples in turn educated later generations, and his importance was such that the architect and historian Fujimori Terunobu has called him the 'mother of the Japanese architectural world'.

When Jackson turns to the Japanese projects of the Meiji period (1868–1912) in the book's central chapters, his treatment is useful and insightful, but less complete as he cannot take full advantage of the rich and growing body of Japanese-language scholarship. As Jackson notes in the introduction, his book is about 'architectural and spatial differences' and 'inevitably, for a Western author, written from a Western perspective, but as a journey of discovery it allows Japan to take the lead' (4). In focusing on specific 'architectural and spatial' issues, he provides concrete, detailed information and intentionally leaves many broader questions to others. For example, historians of modern Japan might wish to build on Jackson's architectural analyses of Japan's foreign exhibition buildings by evaluating Japan's overseas exhibits in the context of government policies to promote trade and industry, perhaps by examining them alongside the Naikoku kangyō hakurankai, or National Industrial Exhibitions. These were corollaries of the Japanese exhibits at foreign exhibitions, mounted for a domestic audience by the Japanese government from 1877 to 1903.

This said, Jackson's presentation of certain designers (both Japanese and foreign) and buildings during the Meiji period is as complete as any English-language account, although readers looking for more historical (as opposed to architectural) detail may wish to refer also to Dallas Finn's *Meiji Revisited: The Sites of Victorian Japan* (Finn 1995). Many buildings featured in relation to Meiji Japan will pique the interest of scholars outside the realm of architectural history. For example, it is easy to imagine that a historian of education could expand on Jackson's treatment of the quixotic, flamboyant Kaichi School (1876) by evaluating it as a material component of the Japanese government's early mandate for primary education, as

outlined in the 1872 Gakusei, the First National Plan for Education. Jackson is clear and consistent in foregrounding issues of space and form and possesses an admirable eye and vast knowledge that allow him to connect buildings and infer influences. On occasion, though, his exemplary analysis of exterior style overshadows other aspects of buildings. For instance, he offers a close reading of the streets and facades of the London-inspired Ginza 'bricktown' but perhaps overstates their Western qualities by not investigating their interior planning, which in fact replicated that of conventional Japanese shops.

Certainly, Jackson's interpretations of the roles of Japanese architecture in the work of Bernard Maybeck in California and Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Glasgow are admirably thorough, ranging from architectural details to overall conceptions. He also examines Frank Lloyd Wright, whose connections with Japan have been treated at length in works such as Kevin Nute's *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan* (Nute 1993). Jackson succeeds in showing the striking range of ways in which Japanese architecture intersected with modernist designers Richard Neutra, Bruno Taut, and Charlotte Perriand, among others. His analyses provide an excellent complement to Ken Oshima's *International Architecture in Interwar Japan: Constructing Kokusai Kenchiku*, which concentrates on the Japanese context (Oshima 2009).

Befitting the Swiss-French architect's status as the modernist who most directly influenced Japan, chapter 13, 'The Presence of Le Corbusier', is the book's longest chapter. Jackson outlines the close ties between Le Corbusier and several major Japanese designers, including Maekawa Kunio and Sakakura Junzō, who both worked in Le Corbusier's Paris atelier. He also describes how the Swiss-French master strongly influenced other major figures, such as Tange Kenzō. As Jackson points out, the Corbusian influence continues in architects working today, such as Andō Tadao, who found himself awestruck when visiting Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, the Convent of La Tourette, and other works in concrete. No other scholar writing in English has so persuasively made the case for the breadth of Le Corbusier's importance in Japan.

Chronologically and conceptually, the architecture of the last few decades serves as an appropriate conclusion for *Japan and the West*. Jackson covers prominent Japanese architects working today, including Sejima Kazuyo and Nishizawa Ryūe of SANAA, Ban Shigeru, and Kuma Kengo. It bears notice that these and other designers now in the prime of their careers were born after World War II and occupy a globalized Japan completely different from the insular nation of their 19th-century predecessors. In fact, Isozaki Arata, born a generation before Sejima, Ban, and Kuma, asserted in a 1995 lecture that 'that despite being Japanese ourselves, today we see Japan with the eyes of a foreigner. Indeed, having gone beyond the process of modernisation, we see Japan from a viewpoint similar to that of Westerners' (8). Today, the distinction between Japan and the West, once so seemingly obvious, has become ambiguous. Kuma, for instance, has taught extensively in the United States, maintains an office in Paris as well as

in Tokyo, and designs projects around the world. In an age when there are no borders to architectural knowledge, it has become ever more difficult to parse a project's origins. For instance, Jackson says of the combination of enclosed boxes and open spaces of SANAA's Twenty-first Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, 'pavilion and route, solid and void, this is a very Japanese experience' (395). But one could also argue that SANAA's strategy combines the clearly defined volumes of masonry buildings (including those built in Japan) with the free-flowing spaces of modernism. This observation is intended not as a criticism of Jackson's points, but simply as an example of how complex the question of Japan and the West has become, and of how thoroughly Japanese designers have created their own architectural culture that combines, refracts, and problematizes these terms. Jackson surely has it right when he concludes his compelling account by arguing that the freedom with which Japan has interpreted the West has allowed Japanese architecture to establish 'itself on the world stage in a way that Western architecture, often hamstrung by its own internal debates, has not quite managed to do' (398). Given the meticulous and comprehensive nature of *Japan and the West* and the diminishing distinction between the two, it seems likely that Jackson's work will remain a standard work well into the future.

Picturing Nature: Painted Pergolas in Early Modern Italy

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Natsumi Nonaka, *Renaissance Porticoes and Painted Pergolas: Nature and Culture in Early Modern Italy*. London & New York: Routledge, 2019 (2017), 226 pages, ISBN 978-0-367-33413-0

Among its countless feats, the Italian Renaissance elevated the refinement of the dwelling *all'antica* to unprecedented heights. This sort of residence was materialized in villas and palaces built in a classical style, marvelously frescoed, adorned with exquisite gardens, and bestowing awe-inspiring vistas. Their porticoed halls achieved a subtle symbiosis between culture and nature, interior and exterior. Until recently, this symbiosis of design was investigated by different fields of scholarship, corresponding to each of the components involved: architecture, painting, garden culture, and natural history. Natsumi Nonaka's book, *Renaissance Porticoes and Painted Pergolas: Nature and Culture in Early Modern Italy*, provides us with the first attempt to reunify these separated domains. The result is an impressive interdisciplinary study, rigorously structured, abundantly illustrated and detailed, and written in a concise form. The book derives from the author's PhD thesis, submitted in 2012 at the University of Texas, Austin, which was entitled *The Illusionistic Pergola in Italian Renaissance Architecture: Painting and Culture in Early Modern Italy 1500–1620*. In developing upon this study,

the author benefited from numerous sojourns in Rome and environs, where she was able to directly confront the objects of her inquiry, including architectural sites, collections, and archives.

Nonaka's book focuses on the liminal space of the portico and its decorative program in 16th and 17th century Italy. Having gradually incorporated the imagery of the garden trelliswork into an intricate form of the painted (and thus fictive) pergola, the portico developed into a singular cultural phenomenon, 'a nexus of complex interrelationships between architecture, the pictorial arts, garden culture, and nature' (2). In the course of her rigorous research, the author identifies a three-step evolution of the portico to pergola, every phase of which corresponds to a specific period and formula. The first stage, temporally linked to the early 16th century, was marked by the absorption of verdant architectural elements in classical-mythological narratives (as seen in the Villa Farnesina), followed, from 1550 onwards, by the expansion of foliage-trelliswork in complex and *trompe l'oeil* pergolas. This second stage reached the climax of this evolution in complex multi-sensorial mechanisms of representation that intertwined the real structure of the pergola with its painted representation. Exemplified in the pictorial design of Villa Giulia in Rome and Villa Farnese in Caprarola, this iteration features plant species and birds, connecting the iconographic program of the painted gallery with the experiential sense of moving through the trelliswork-tunnels in a garden (**Figure 3**). Finally, in the last decade of the 16th century, the illusionism of the pergola was reduced, and in its place there developed a more abstract and reduced decorative trelliswork (for example in the Villa Lante at Bagnaia).

The main objectives of Nonaka's research, as presented in the introduction, were to document the development of the pergola as an artistic motif, to define its iconographical properties, and to understand how the motif operated within distinct spaces. The case studies she presents are set within three investigative frameworks: the classical tradition, implying emulation in early modern art of ancient patterns and models; natural history, in relation with both the geographical expansion and the emergence of modern sciences; and the social identity of patrons, who in their display of identity and power were the definitive forces in the creation of antiquarian culture, collecting practices, and aesthetic taste. Pursuing her threefold objectives within the context of the three investigative frameworks, Nonaka assembles an impressive body of material, consisting of paintings, frescoes, engravings, maps, architectural drawings, prints, and woodcuts, which is thoroughly scrutinized, interrelated, and shaped within a captivating narrative.

Structured in six chapters, each addressing a specific part of the historical survey, *Renaissance Porticoes and Painted Pergolas* opens with an introduction to the portico, loggia, and pergola, tracing the origin and evolution of these spaces from antiquity through the early modern period. As Nonaka explains, loggias, porches, and colonnaded spaces are somewhat ambivalent derivations of porticoes. She clarifies key terms and peculiarities (*porticus*, *ambulatio*, and *gestatio*), while explaining the relevant



Figure 3: Villa Giulia, Rome, frescoed arcades by Pietro Venale and others. Photo credit: Sailko, 2017. Wikimedia Commons <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Villa_giulia,_portici_con_affreschi_di_pietro_venale_e_altri,_03.jpg>.

etymological roots of *laubja*, *lauba*, and *logium*, among others. The architectural ‘loggia’ is etymologically embedded in garden culture, deriving from *Laubja* (Germ.), meaning bower, arbor, or pergola, and ultimately from *Laub*, meaning foliage. Ancient literary references, as well as ancient pictorial examples (the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, the Nile Mosaic from Palestrina) document the earliest occurrences of pergolas and garden trelliswork, intended purely for outdoor enjoyment. The author further identifies similar visual recordings of verdant architecture from the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, which appear as rather isolated, minor inserts in miniatures, book illustrations, and paintings. Notable, however, are the erotic connotations associated with the trelliswork, carried over from the medieval *Hortus conclusus*, traceable in Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, in 1499. By that time, the pergola, mainly in tunnel shape, was already a constant presence in Venetian gardens, as one can observe in the *Map of Venice* engraved

by Jacopo de’ Barbari in 1514. It was this artistic context in northern Italy, completed by forms in which porticoes and loggias gradually developed in central Italy, that a new sensibility towards the natural world developed, which engendered the painted pergolas.

The rise of this new type of painted space is explored in chapters 2 and 3, in which the author draws on iconic case studies from Renaissance Rome and Florence. Her exploration of the ‘classical tradition and vernacular culture’ is rooted in the pergolas of Villa Farnesina and the Loggia of Leo X in the Vatican. In both places, we see the hand of Giovanni da Udine, the first Renaissance artist to have painted illusionist pergolas on a monumental scale, and the first to specialize in the portrayal of botanical specimens. The Loggia of Cupid and Psyche in Villa Farnesina, frescoed in 1517 by Giovanni da Udine and other pupils of Raphael, was the first monumental pergola of the Renaissance, assembled with countless festoons and filled with over 165 botanical species. Replete with mythological scenes and ancient gods, the space is interpreted as an expression of fertility and prosperity, following the marriage of Agostino Chigi and Francesca Ordeaschi. Two years later, in the Loggia of Leo X, this allegorical approach was abandoned in favor of pure decoration. Eight of the thirteen bays frescoed by Giovanni da Udine feature an array of trelliswork, probably inspired by imagery from the ancient Roman catacombs. This novel design, which combined antique references and vernacular culture, marked the start of the tradition of the illusionistic pergola, which becomes the focus of the book’s third chapter, ‘Visual Encyclopedia and Trellised Walkways’. Here, the focus turns to central and northern Italy, where the practice was disseminated by Raphael’s pupils. Notable examples in Florence include spaces commissioned by the Medici family in Palazzo Vecchio around 1550, including the decorations of the *Scrittoio* of Cosimo I, the hall of Leo X, and the grand staircase. The pergolas painted in these spaces, virtual visual encyclopedias of zoology, ornithology, and botany, reflected the Medici’s strong interest in collecting and natural history. The transition to the second stage of the pergola’s development after 1550 is then explored through both painted and real pergolas in the Villa Medici in Rome and Villa d’Este in Tivoli. Marking the convergence of Florentine and Roman traditions, artists like Mathijs Bril and Antonio Tempesta depicted exotic species of plants and birds that would evoke the territorial expansion of Christianity. While illustrating a propensity towards exuberance, the decoration of Villa d’Este at Tivoli, in conjunction with its magnificent garden, provides the first example of a sensuous spatial experience, which, according to Nonaka, ‘not only engaged the visual sense but also the aural, olfactory, and haptic senses as well, enhancing a sensuous garden experience’ (94).

In the book’s final chapters, Nonaka casts light on the symbolic and cultural connotations of the illusionistic spaces. Touring the semicircular portico of the Villa Giulia – arguably among the most spectacular examples of painted pergolas – the author explores the refined intellectual experience of the space, imbued through the insertion of pagan cupids in the openings of the trelliswork.

The pictorial decoration of Villa Farnese in Caprarola, in turn, assembles – in no fewer than three pergolas – various components of a *trompe l'oeil* garden, including trelliswork, bower, and grotesques, merged with historical, geographical, and mythological imagery in a complex perceptive hierarchy. Such veritable ‘*Wunderkammern*’ reached their apex in Rome in the last decade of the sixteenth century. Nonaka investigates two principal monuments of this type: the Palazzo Altemps and the Loggia of Cardinal Borghese, lavishly decorated in 1592 and 1610–16, respectively. These spaces are characterized by the introduction of new figurative elements – flowers in antique vases, for instance – as well as by intricate associations between the painted pergolas and other decorative components, like statues or fake grottoes. A sort of disintegration of the sensorial complex of continuous pergolas follows in the 17th century, when the verdant trelliswork is often replaced by a more abstract decoration. The ‘visual encyclopedia’, in exchange, is channeled into botanical publications. This displacement is investigated in chapter 6, ‘Collecting Nature’, which provides a captivating insight into the world of scientific research, early modern collections, and allegorical figuration.

Overall, Nonaka’s book accomplishes even more than it promises. It refers to garden culture, architecture, painting, and natural history in ways that constantly invite the reader into a splendid *Glasperlenspiel*. Although rigorously scientific, the discourse provides a rare sort of delectation, revealing a fascinating realm for further investigation.

The Only Female Sultan of Egypt

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D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Tree of Pearls: The Extraordinary Architectural Patronage of the 13th-Century Egyptian Slave-Queen Shajar al-Durr*. New York: Oxford University Press, 188 pages, 2020, ISBN 978-0-19-087320-2

D. Fairchild Ruggles is an Islamic art historian with three overlapping scholarly specializations: Islamic Spain and North Africa, Islamic gardens and landscapes, and women as architectural patrons in medieval and early modern Islamic societies. Her previous monograph, the award-winning *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, provided an up-to-date and insightful survey of the field of Islamic gardens and landscape studies (Ruggles 2008). It is the last specialization, gender studies, that has led her to this study. Ruggles was previously best known in this area as the editor of *Women, Patronage and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies* (Ruggles 2000). The compelling story of a Kipchak slave from the steppes north of the Black Sea who rose to prominence as the concubine and wife of a 13th-century sultan and, after his death, reigned herself (as sultan no less) for three months, continued thereafter to run the state behind the scenes, and, before a bloody end, sponsored the completion of one and the building of another architectural complex, has brought Ruggles back

to the topic of female patrons of architecture in medieval Islam (Figure 4).

As the reader might imagine, the decision to write a book about a medieval Islamic woman, however much prominence and notoriety she gained during her brief reign, must have been a difficult one. Contemporaneous written sources are few and brief, and of the architectural patronage of Shajar al-Durr (the title of the book is a translation of her fanciful slave name), only two tombs – one of her husband, Ayyubid sultan Salih Najm al-Din (r. 1240–49) – and her own remain. Nothing remains of the large complex that, in addition to her tomb, originally consisted of a mosque, madrasa (school of Islamic theology and law), palace, and gardens. A 19th-century engraving by the French architect Pascal Coste depicts a by then ruined monumental *iwan* (vaulted hall) and an imposing, elaborate minaret of slightly squat proportions.

Luckily, Ruggles can and does draw on the work of two remarkable Egyptian restoration architects and engineers, both women: May al-Ibrashy and Nairy Hampikian, who have separately worked on the painstaking restoration of both tombs, Hampikian on al-Salih’s (as part of a larger project on the madrasa as a whole), and al-Ibrashy on Shajar al-Durr’s. Their careful work resulted in the discovery and

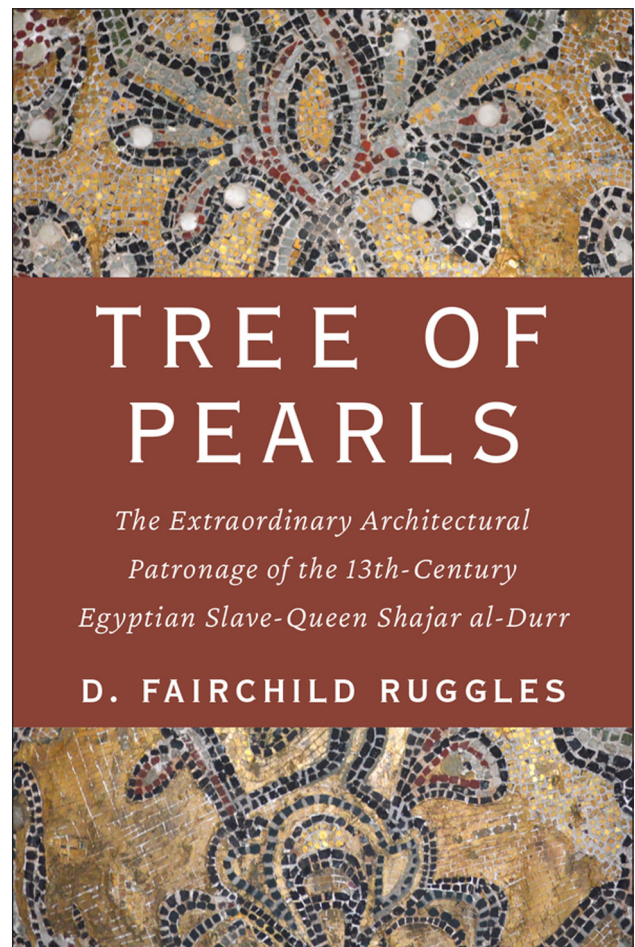


Figure 4: Cover of *Tree of Pearls: The Extraordinary Architectural Patronage of the 13th-Century Egyptian Slave-Queen Shajar al-Durr*. Photo credit: Oxford University Press.

preservation of painted curvilinear vegetal decoration on the interior of both tombs, thereby more closely linking the two, and providing insight (about which more later in this review) into Shajar al-Durr's patronage and self-image.

Ruggles decided to make her subject accessible to the general reader through chapters that contain mini-disquisitions on aspects of large and complicated topics relevant to Shajar al-Durr. These include but are not limited to such matters as Islamic legal endowments (*waqf*), the development of medieval Cairo, slaves in medieval Islam, the Ayyubid dynasty, and the eastern Mediterranean in the time of the Crusades. The reader is also informed of Shajar al-Durr's place in 20th-century Egyptian literature and cinema and given the recipe for a sweet Egyptian bread pudding popularly associated with her. Indeed, the book has already won the Nancy Lapp Popular Book Award from the American Society for Overseas Research. Oxford University Press has enhanced the accessibility and attractiveness of the book through the inclusion of extensive colour photographs and clear architectural and urban plans, mostly drawn or redrawn by the author and her student assistants. (Unfortunately, OUP has marred the book through careless copy editing, including several eccentric word breaks at the ends of lines.)

Nevertheless, more than any of these topics, it is the 'extraordinary' nature of Shajar al-Durr's architectural patronage that makes it (along with the words 'slave' and 'queen') into the book's title. In a brief final chapter entitled 'Matronage', the author summarizes the place of female (vs. male) patrons in the Islamic world, and the problems and pitfalls of making the case for female representation at a time and in a place when the very presence of high-status women in public was frowned on. In such circumstances, how could female power be represented?

On the face of it, of the remaining architecture (the tombs Shajar al-Durr had built for herself and her husband), there is little that is exceptional. The practice of a widow adding her late husband's tomb to his madrasa in a prominent location in order to associate herself with him and the legitimacy of his office and lineage is canny but not exceptional, as is modeling her complex (as the surviving evidence seems to indicate took place) on his. What is exceptional, to both the author and this reviewer, is the mosaic located on the hood of the tomb's mihrab niche. Not only was mosaic decoration unusual at this time, so also was the subject matter of the mosaic in that most prominent and sacred of locations inside the tomb chamber. Surely it must have been, as Ruggles argues, the decision of the patron herself that led to the creation of a mosaic with abstract vegetal decoration dotted with circles of white lustrous shell. This is a rebus of Shajar al-Durr's name, Tree of Pearls. What must have been the patron's commissioning of this mosaic was certainly an extraordinary act of self-representation, especially given the mosaic's location.

I would like to take this one step further than the author does and draw attention to the central element of the mosaic decoration. While the vegetal ornament spirals asymmetrically to either side, the central element of the mosaic's design is a lozenge containing a bilaterally

symmetrical split palmette, a design associated with rulers and rule in the central and eastern Islamic world at the time. In fact, the painted decoration of both tombs consists of such split palmettes. In the mosaic, then, the abstract representation of the slave/queen/sultan's name combines with an emblem of sovereignty, with the whole located at the top of the mihrab. Extraordinary indeed.

In western medieval heraldry, these are *armes parlantes*. It's no coincidence, I think, that another Kipchak slave at the time, one known to Shajar al-Durr, when he rose to become sultan, used a rebus of his name as his coat of arms. This was Sultan Baybars (r. 1260–77) great foe of the Crusaders and Mongols, whose name means Male Panther. His building works, in addition to an inscription, also bear a relief carving of a feline. Where else would he have learned this practice?

Fascination with the Fallen: Thinking Ruins in Western Culture

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Susan Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020, 368 pages, ISBN 978-0226632612

In her 1789 travelogue, the British author Hester Lynch Piozzi describes her ambivalence at the sight of the Roman Colosseum. At first, she is reminded of the original function of the building as a venue for cruel gladiator games. At the same time, however, the monument's ruinous state makes her aware of the extensive architectural destruction it has endured. She is likewise struck by the picturesque appearance of its irregular remains. The ruin, she observes, is 'gloriously beautiful; possibly more beautiful than when it was quite whole; there is enough left now for Truth to repose upon, and a perch for Fancy beside, to fly out from, and fetch in more' (Lynch Piozzi 1789: 389).

The ways in which ruins have been represented in Western culture over the centuries, how they were discovered as historical sites and as picturesque landscape motifs, and how they were associated with transience, nostalgia, pleasure, and beauty have been discussed from various points of view in cultural history, art history, and literature studies. Susan Stewart's 2020 book, *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture*, presents an enriching contribution to this field in its reconsideration of the question of the meaning of ruins from a broader perspective and as part of a long history of Western cultural memory formation and self-understanding (Figure 5). The exploration of ruins in the context of 18th-century travel culture is but one of many topics discussed in this beautifully written study, which addresses scholars from a range of fields as well as interested readers. Examining why ruins, as 'damaged and disappearing vestiges of the built environment, became so significant in Western art and literature' (1), Stewart's study centers on exploring the complex intermedial development,

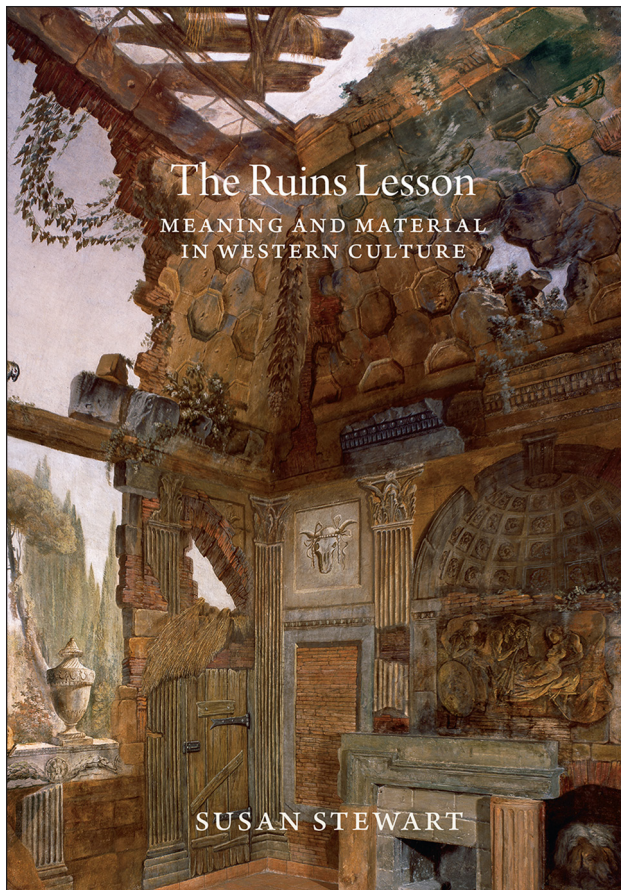


Figure 5: Cover of *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture*. Photo credit: University of Chicago Press.

changes, and afterlives of semantic fields, cultural ideas, images, and metaphors.

At the very outset, Stewart highlights two basic meanings of 'ruin'. As a noun, 'ruin' refers to 'a fabric or being that is meant to be upright but has fallen, often headlong, to the ground. What should be vertical and enduring has become horizontal and broken'. The verb 'ruin', on the other hand, means 'to overthrow, to destroy or ... to dishonor' (1) – processes that can be associated with both things and persons, as explored later in the book. Stewart takes this broad semantic field of reference as a starting point to examine cultural ideas of 'ruins' and categories of the 'ruinous' with the support of an impressive variety of sources from ancient history to the 21st century – from Hebrew scriptures and ancient Egyptian inscriptions to early modern art and poetry to contemporary memorials.

The chapters are structured in a roughly chronological order, yet each offers many cross-references to other times and places. Stewart combines in-depth analyses of artistic and literary representations of ruins with overarching perspectives on cultural projections and metaphors that center around the fragmented, the unfinished, and the destroyed and often relate to political, religious, and aesthetic categories of ruin. One of the central themes of the book is that ruins 'call for the supplement of further reading' (2) and stimulate the imagination of their viewers specifically by their fragmented state. In this context,

a particular thematic focus is on Rome's ruins, which Stewart examines from several perspectives in their significant role as cultural anchor point and point of departure for the unfolding and exploiting of meaning and materials. Also of key concern to the study are the cultural topoi of the 'memory paragon' between the (transient) power of architectural monuments and the (everlasting) power of literature and language.

In the first chapter, Stewart introduces her topic by exploring elemental qualities and categories of (intentionally constructed) monumental forms, reflecting on the field of tension between permanence and transience and on the cultural meaning of matter and materials in time. Elaborating on how, in the Judeo-Christian tradition until the early modern period, mountains were seen as relics of the traumatic event of the Fall, Stewart also takes the opportunity to explore a rich field of semantic interrelations between ruins and mountains. Chapter 2 focuses on the relationships between a building as a whole and its individual parts. Stewart offers a fruitful starting point for examining cultural encodings of time and memory in relation to processes of material and medial transfer. The chapter investigates various forms of *memoria* and *damnatio memoriae*, as they were inscribed on individual buildings through inserted (or removed) inscriptions or through *spolia*. Stewart also discusses the shifting attitudes towards the use of *spolia* against the background of the reevaluation of the historicity of classical ruins in humanist and Renaissance cultural discourses. Here, the author lays the groundwork for one of her core topics: the significance of Roman ruins in Western culture as collective memory sites that were shaped and reshaped throughout the centuries.

The third chapter investigates a specific semantic field around cultural projections of 'ruined bodies'. In an illuminating way, Stewart explores the multi-layered relationship between metaphors of ruination versus integrity and cultural concepts of the 'purity' and 'impurity' of women and the female body. Through a discussion of numerous literary sources from the Hebrew scriptures, ancient mythology, and Elizabethan poetry, she reveals how polarizing projections of the female body were connoted to allegorical images of the protected versus the conquered city or nation. As Stewart lucidly demonstrates in her analysis of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), the cultural reevaluation of classical antiquity in the early modern period also saw the rise of new, interrelated modes of describing female bodies and the 'bodies' of ancient ruins as objects of desire. It would have been interesting to explore facets of this tradition that continued into the 18th century in such contexts as the male-coded gaze in discourses of connoisseurship in the culture of the Grand Tour.

The following chapters focus on the artistic exploitation and cultural appropriation of Roman ruins between the 16th and 18th centuries. Discussing the representation of ruins in print cultures of the 16th century, with a focus on works from the north and south of the Alps, chapter 4 examines the different facets of a growing interest in displaying ancient ruins and inviting learned viewers to complete them in their imagination. These interests were

couched in humanist practices of reconstructing the architecture of classical Rome, demonstrating artistic *inventio* in imaginary settings, and conveying moralizing narratives in the political and religious framework of the Eighty Years' War. Focusing on 18th-century contexts of European antiquarianism, chapter 5 offers a rich discussion of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *vedute* and *capricci*. Analyzing Piranesi's range of strategies in evoking nuanced precision on the one hand and suggesting subjective visual experiences on the other, Stewart highlights his role in creating new ways of perceiving ruins and pre-shaping the images of Rome in the connoisseur's mind, as well as his interests in promoting the superiority of Roman antiquity over Greek antiquity.

Chapter 6 sheds further light on cultural discourses of objectifying and autonomizing ruins against the background of aesthetic theories and practices of exploring sites of antiquity in the late 18th century. In addition to a discussion of the modes of displaying (selective) accuracy in archaeological publications, the chapter includes analyses of various *vedute* and *capricci*, which reveal that ruins 'become an allusion to themselves' (210). At this point – and especially given that Stewart has previously explored the cultural meaning of souvenirs (Stewart 1993) – the study might have been enriched by a discussion of the impact of ruin souvenirs beyond *vedute* from around 1800. It would be relevant, for example, to examine the form of small micro-mosaics and, later on, photographs, which against the background of a changing travel culture contributed to shaping the idea of classical antiquity as a collective repertoire. Stewart widens the scope of inquiry with the example of Hubert Robert's futuristic vision of the Louvre as ruin, inviting readers to reflect on the changing paradigms in the culture of ruins around 1800. She casts particular attention on the development of the ruin as a key figure of thought in projections of cultural and national heritage. However, the study does not take the opportunity to elaborate on the consequences of this process in relation to practices of collecting antiquities and colonial appropriation.

With discussions of William Wordsworth's ruin poetry and T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', the short closing chapters direct the gaze toward modern modes of thinking and representation. Stewart readdresses essential aesthetic qualities of ruins outlined throughout the book to reflect on the fragmented as an underlying figure of thought in modern aesthetic representation. In a brief section on war ruins and memorials, she points out the topicality of these figures of thought in contemporary Western thinking. Against this background, Stewart closes by shifting the focus to our own 'ruinous' attitude toward planet Earth. Analyzing modes of appropriation, oppression, and destruction of 'nature' using the figures of thought pertaining to 'ruinous' and 'ruin' might, Stewart seems to suggest, help us change our thinking: 'The environmental catastrophe we think of as the ruin of nature is in fact the ruin of human nature, the end of our sustainable life on earth' (271).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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