

INSIDE OUTSIDE

Petra Blaisse



In the opening sequences of the film *Ratcatcher* by Lynne Ramsay we watch the central character (James) wrap himself in a curtain and spin round and round, gazing at us from within his lace web. It is a magical and transformative moment when this small boy conjures away the difficult realities that surround him with this simple act. It awakens in us our own memory of that wonderful same encounter with a curtain: those long swathes of fabric that separate day and night and temporarily map the contours of our childhood imagination.

The work of Petra Blaisse is associated with the creation of some of the most extraordinary curtains that have been designed in the last few years. She has restored and awakened a deep sense of pleasure and purpose to the art of the curtain and given it a definitive role in contemporary architecture. But her work is about much more than just this, and she is known also for her landscape work, interiors and exhibition designs. Her aptly named atelier, 'Inside Outside' captures the wide panorama and range of her abilities.

Numerous magazine articles and a small and beautiful book (also designed by Irma Boom) called 'Movements 25%' was all that was available to illustrate her work up to now. Showing mainly work in progress 'Movements 25%' revealed a wonderful playfulness of ideas that gave a snapshot of what was to come.

Her work has often gone relatively unrecognized amidst the array of famous architects and collaborators that she has worked with. While

known for her long collaboration specifically with OMA she has worked with UN Studio, SANAA/Kazuyo Sejima, Macken & Macken, Michael Maltzan, Tim Ronalds and Jean Nouvel to name a few.

This new extensive book is long overdue, and shows the full range of Petra Blaisse's work for the first time. The words are all mainly by Blaisse herself with short essays and thoughts by Chris Dercon, Tim Ronalds, Cecil Balmond, Sanford Kwinter and others. Irma Boom's hand as the designer of the book is unmistakable. She creates a rich dialogue and empathy with Blaisse's work and approach in both how the book has been graphically conceived and physically produced.

An open introduction begins on the cover and appears as stitched words into the fabric of the book. We are led

with these words into a picture essay of textures, thoughts, flowers and colours, and the first page throws back like one of Blaisse's curtains. It is an appropriate way to begin our discovery of the projects, the dilemmas, ideas, personalities and locations that make up Blaisse's world.

When you see her work, you realize the implicit difficulty in representing it in book form. The hand needs to touch; light fall through the material and trees move in the wind. But the subtle balance between word, image and sequence is carefully interlaced in the design of the book, to hint at the crafted materiality and evolution of her designs.

Images of her Amsterdam studio appear throughout the book, full of colourful samples, textures, models, images and people. This is not a book about theorizing polished product - ▶



▶ stunning though it is- but a mixture of diary, photo album and scrapbook that tells her own story of how she works and what she creates.

Most architects will be familiar with the 'sound curtain' at the Kunsthal in Rotterdam: a huge spatial robe that has a field of small speakers stitched into the fabric. But the curtain for the Hackney Empire, The park for the Giardini di Porta Nuova in Milan, the landscaping and interiors for the Seattle Library and the vast net like swathes for the Casa da Musica in Porto, are all shown in considerable detail for the first time.

At Hackney her work with Tim Ronalds -a long and persistent engagement (6 years) battling with costs, timescales and clients resistant to change- placed demands on her that she describes as: " Don't even ask how often we secretly wanted to give up...and how happy we were that we didn't...a never ending story about diplomacy, calculation, logic, labour, patience and modesty." But as with most projects, while the labour pains are difficult, the results astonishing. Her curtain at Hackney a rich red pleated curtain that forms a sort of 3D smock, which she says she imagined in a dream.

At the State Detention Centre in Nieuwegein in the Netherlands, she has created an abstract series of spaces and gardens to allow exercise and a sense of humanity for a difficult and overpowering institution. In the text she records here dismay at the changes she has witnessed in



revisiting years after completion -not in the project as such but in the reality of the prison situation. The project itself a sort of wild ivy of paths and gardens that grows free against the institutional plan. Its materials: white shells, blue mussels, fragrant shrubs, broken terracotta surfaces and trees, all call from the beauty of the world beyond the high fences.

Each project reveals her immersion in different contexts and programmes and shows her ability to create extraordinary things from the ordinary -that are particular to each culture and situation.

Pictures of butterfly gardens, shadow patterns, water islands for Dubai, reflections on glass, floors being poured, fabrics and people making and shaping, provide a visual kaleidoscope in parallel with her words. There are drawings, images and descriptions that cover each project in detail, but it is Blaisse's words which reveal so much more: "



In the architecture and design world, we tend to get obsessed with intellectual reasoning and aesthetics, and we become total control freaks...but if you step back and forget about your so-called 'originality', it could be just as fascinating to accomplish something that goes against your basic, ingrained instincts."

The zoomed in shots of the test curtains for the Toledo Glass pavilion reveal her interest in new materials, processes and techniques. They demonstrate also a careful architectural play with light and transparency, while these curtains also act as 'eco membranes' in an almost biological way with the building skin, climate and space.

Be it a small sun curtain for a well known bookshop in Amsterdam, installations for the Venice Biennale or the vast interior spaces of the Seattle library, Petra Blaisse's work reveals a childlike pleasure in discovering the riches of our natural and material world: touch, colour, pattern and above all her dialogue with the garden as metaphor.

This is an inspiring book that is absorbing and densely visual. As with her curtains you just want to wrap yourself up in it, and imagine what is possible. ●

Paul Clarke

Inside Outside
Petra Blaisse
Edited by Kayoko Ota
NAI Publishers Hb pp 504 €42
www.naipublishers.nl