

A VIEW ON HARVARD GSD: VOLUME I AND VOLUME II

Tankbooks



It sounds like a really good idea: take a famous American graduate design school and commission a fashion magazine to do a special review catalogue. Absolutely Fabulous meets the Ivy League. Now let everyone in the school get a single page in alphabetical order, no ranking, no hierarchy, just bibliographic democracy. There are no essays to ponder over or re-read; no sub headings to chart your way through; no themes or chapters; just lots and lots of pictures.

Most architecture and design schools have become acutely aware of the need to publish. Not just for that inescapable research profile, but to showcase projects and events in a seductive and collectible format that becomes a talisman of the school brand. Here the claims are big, and Mohsen Mostafavi -the Dean of the school describes the aim as: "productive juxtapositions, which we hope will provide the basis for new forms of transdisciplinary practice in the years ahead."

The cover has been dispensed with as a needless and irrelevant encrustation to the contemporary book. Instead naked pages and sticky bindings are all exposed. Shimmering silver page trims

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glimmer and reflect back at you, contrasting with the open binding behind. Put it on your shelves and you can't find it: deliberately nameless. I confess I checked to see if my copy had not been wilfully bereft of its cover in transit. No, it was a design statement. Just like the decision to print on only the right hand pages ( Volume I). Two pages together, were considered distracting and an information overload, and so the left hand pages are left blank, with only a fine grid and a Zen like silence to the left visual field. While I know Marshall McLuhan recommended that we should read only left hand pages to limit the input, and leave space to think, here it feels like a missed opportunity.

When exposed to such restricted space (one single page in Volume I) and no guiding graphic order to coherently bring everything together, the effect is kaleidoscopic and frenetic. There are some beautifully considered pages next to the

discordant, bizarre and crass. The constant deliberate juxtaposition is like watching all channels at once, becoming more endurance than enjoyment. No identification is made between student or staff, so you can judge for yourself as to the quality, never mind the politics.

If you can get beyond the 'design' approach, inside are a range of projects and ideas that show the thinking and energy taking shape in Harvard. The design school is well known internationally, and staff and students are keen to display their ideas. The school is arranged into three distinct but collaborative strands: Architecture, Landscape Design and Urban Design and Planning. Not that you would know from Volume I, but then maybe that was the point. Volume 2 carefully explains this at the start, but then goes on to locate projects again alphabetically.

Architecture as representation is played out in the images. Which in a sense is all we are offered: a ►

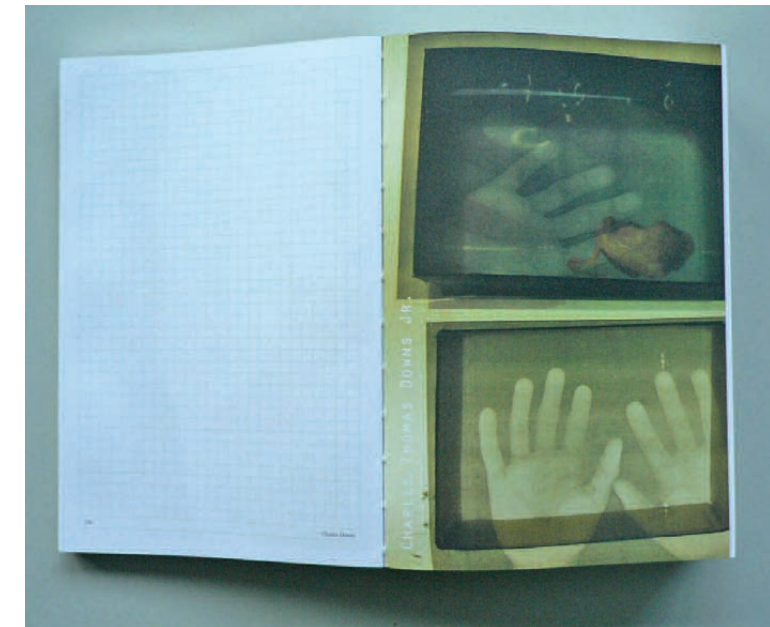


► slideshow without commentary. But how do we as architects communicate through the flatness of a page, and is it ultimately a liberating or imprisoning medium? Famous examples have shown just how architectural and spatial a book can be. The Smithsons referred to "a book as a small building." Think of any major architect and you know how seriously they take their books.

Harvard has published StudioWorks as its main catalogue for years, as well as having most of the information on line, so these Volumes are entirely a new venture. In terms of the projects, there is enough parametric shaping and distortions to give you spatial nightmares and text beyond the limits of normal eyesight. Faced with showing their abilities to the world, very few in either Volume have resisted the approach of, too much is not half enough. Single image minimalists are rare, and welcome to the tired reader. In Volume I, projects of note are by Eve Blau, Thomas Bryans, Michelle Chang, Charles Downs, Stephan Pfeiffer and Paul Merrill who all know how to handle a page.

Volume 2 has just appeared and some major lessons have been learned. Half the book is no longer blank -which is both sound visually and ecologically. The strength of the work also seems more confident and expansive and is given greater freedom over the two page spread. Still the alphabetical order and non-cover approach persist.

The mistake here is to believe an alphabetical trawl can provide an order. Books, like buildings, need space and sequence, shifts in detail, and above all a story or narrative. ►



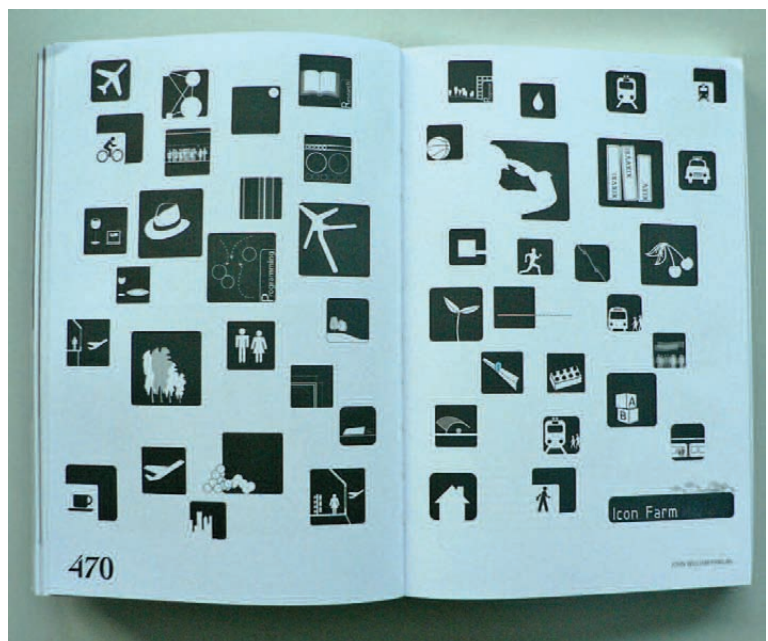
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► Mostafavi has described the publications as ‘an experiment’, which should of course be welcomed. It is just that in a design school, part of this ‘experiment’ needs to be channelled through the medium of communication.

Tank have a lot to bring to this collaboration, and have produced remarkable publications on culture and fashion over the years. Some of their first publications combined diverse material in a stunning almost cinematic way, where there was a strong emphasis on architecture and fashion in a broad cultural exploration. But



their striking visual approach has become more muted here, perhaps due to not being able to work with the source material to create a richer and more meaningful dialogue of layout and sequence. If you really want to understand something of the work that goes on in the Harvard studios then this does give some glimpses of it. But StudioWorks is still the best place to look. The strands are clear, and the studios distinctively described in it.

The age of the book is still with us and no matter how we try to disguise them by making them ever more contrived and fetishised, they can still help inform, move and entertain us. With time this project could really become something, but perhaps only by allowing Tank Fashion to move beyond the book as object, and instead invade the space of architecture, which may reveal a more unusual view of what goes on in that famous Harvard Yard. ●

**Paul Clarke**

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