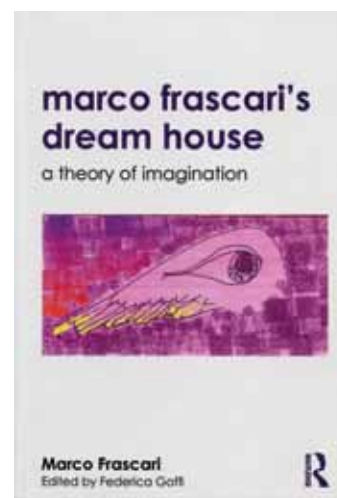


Marco Frascari's Dream House. A Theory of Imagination

BOOK REVIEW / THEORY

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**Marco Frascari's Dream House
A Theory of Imagination**
By Marco Frascari
Edited by Federica Goffi
Routledge, 2017
238 pages
\$157.92 (hardcover)



A REMEDY AGAINST MASSIVE EXPOSURE TO TRIVIALITY.
POSOLOGY

I eagerly consumed the six dishes and the sweet conclusion of the meal cooked by Marco Frascari in his book on April 7th, 2017, during a trip with my students to visit the Salone del Mobile in Milan. I read half of the book on the train to Milan and the remaining half on the way back to Florence. We all know how dangerous a day in the “seductive” and “glamorous” realm of Milanese “trivial” design can be. Using Frascari’s words:

“This is the unforgiving business-like environment in which professional architects must move today. In their search for aesthetic, anti-aesthetic or hyper aesthetic outcomes, architects design buildings that often generate discomfort or tension in the user.”¹

The book turned out as a treatment to prevent and cure that discomfort – first, a prophylaxis to prevent the disease and then a therapy. Pages flew by as bites of a delightful meal, as drops of a salvific medicine. It was like taking a “deep breath” (*largo respiro*) of fresh air in the “mephitic” atmosphere of glossy make-up. The book has managed to promote my physical and mental health on the one hand and efficiency on the other by triggering daydreaming and imagination. Addressed to both educators and professional architects, these pages offer powerful insights into a future where traditional and modern tools, digital and analogic media will serve as tools once again instead of being the goals of design. Powerful optimistic suggestions to envision a future where design (*il progetto*) will return to its exclusive role: to envision inspiring spaces that help us realize *vita beata*.

FOR THE NEXT MILLENNIUM. INDICATIONS

A sense of optimistic forecasting can be smelled throughout the book. The same is true of the presence of Venice, the “*illusion*” and the filigree of its image reflected in water, where *décor* becomes structure and lightness becomes substance.

The core of the book (six chapters and a conclusion, plus a portfolio) is forwarded by an inspiring essay by Federica Goffi and closed by an interview with Claudio Sgarbi.

Although this is a recent publication (as architects and readers we must be forever grateful to Federica Goffi for her precise and meticulous editing and, more importantly, for sharing these delightful pages with us), the main body of the book was first written by Marco Frascari in 1992 and edited for more than twenty years. It consists of a commentary (or, at least, such is the underlying pretext) on the project of a house-tower. The project was developed to answer questions posed by guest curator Daniel Friedman (currently, Dean of the School of Architecture, at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa – Ed.) in the competition brief titled “The Architect’s Dream: Houses for the Next Millennium.”

The title of both the competition and the design entry clearly echoes Italo Calvino’s influential *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Published posthumously by Harvard University Press in 1988, Calvino’s memos were still fresh and resonating in 1992.

In these pages Frascari masters the Calvinian art of subtracting weight. He is able to remove mass and monumentality from the complex plot

(*intreccio*) of stories, names, figures, relationships and signs, even if his language is far from any kind of adjective-less, neutral and referential minimalism. Overall light and smooth, Frascari's prose strikes the reader as tasty in the mouth and persistently resonates in the brain.

Can a book conceived in 1992 be still up-to-date? Is Frascari's lesson still valid and timely? In my dual role as professional architect and architectural educator, I am totally convinced that Frascari's work is today more meaningful to us than ever. In fact, it is more up-to-date than most architectural speculations put forth in the last decade. With the far-sightedness that is peculiar to a genius and with the "mantic" capabilities of a tarot reader, as early as 1993 *Maestro* Frascari foresaw the crisis of architectural imagination that we are witnessing today. He wants to free us from all kind of imaginative slavery and design addiction. To comment on his claim for freedom and its actuality I will use two *loci* (i.e., two "places" or tropes) of Frascarian imagery largely described in this book: "non-trivial drawings" and "pneumatic spaces."

"*Non-trivial drawings*," as opposed to drawings that promote an explanation of architectural events under the aegis of verisimilitude, are drawings that elicit wonder and "construe the architect's poetic understanding of human dwelling." Today's main means of architectural representation (photo-realistic renderings and B.I.M. software) cannot embody "dreams of possible constructed worlds." Writing has been reduced to calligraphy, and the mirror has been confused with the reflected image. Imagery has been replaced with static, artificially sugarcoated images. And, as we all know, sugar and sweetening agents are addictive. They create addiction and slavery. I am speaking of addiction to virtual reality and slavery to software and hardware brands. Renderings have lost their original sense of wonder. As a consequence, students start being bored of pinning up "bad smelling" drawings.

"Pneumatic spaces," instead, are spaces with a *spiritus*, rooms which "smell good."

"...by the term pneumatic - Frascari says - I do not mean inflatable architecture, but a space where a *pneuma*, or *élan*, resides. The building then becomes either a deity or a machine, a pneumatic machine, a construction with an aura".²

Today, the only scenario that allows people to pair these two words ("pneumatic" and "building") is the so-called Blower Door Test, a test performed to achieve high standards in the efficiency of an inhabitable space. This test, by the way, must be performed to get a building certified by the main certification institutes, such as LEED, Itaca and Casaclima. It consists in the creation of a "pneumatic" emptiness in a

room to assess potential air leakages and, consequently, the level of proofing and sealing. Not only a building must be sealed to make it possible for it to house a soul that would otherwise escape, but it also needs mechanical ventilation to provide acceptable indoor air quality. In other words, it is slave to a machine that keeps it alive and makes the habitation “not-so-*commodious*” and more expensive.

Architectural imagination is chained to the building industry and to real estate investments. Frascari’s imagery provides a potential escape through words and drawings.

A QUARRY OF FERTILE WORDS FOR IMAGERY. ACTIVE INGREDIENTS

Frascari adorns his scholarly prose with archaic words (Italian, Latin and Greek), quoting classics as well as authors and books that, in most cases, cannot be found on social networks or the Internet. In fact, sometimes those sources cannot be found even in the Biblioteca Marciana (an ancient library in Venice, Italy, endowed with a wealth of ancient manuscripts – Ed.).

The word “theory” (*teoria* in Italian, from the Greek θεωρέω *theoréo* “to look at, to observe”, combining θέα *thèa*, “show, performance,” and ὁράω *horào*, “I see”) usually refers to an idea derived from an hypothesis or from a speculation, mixing abstraction and reality.

However, if we look more carefully to the etymology of this word (and Frascari is a master in this art) we discover that the origin of *teoria* (Θεωρία) lies in ancient Greece. At that time, it meant the procession of a group of *teori* (Θεωρός) entrusted with a special religious mission, for they participated in a ceremony or consulted an oracle.

In the procession enacted – so to speak – by the pages of this book, the oracle is using narrative techniques to envision possibilities for the future of architecture. Fictional and non-fictional elements are mixed in an extremely engaging plot. It is incredible how Frascari’s Calvinian lightness succeeds at articulating these scholarly essays, notwithstanding their being adorned with potentially heavy rhetorical and conceptual figures.

A primer for the initiation, or the definitive guide to Frascari’s imagery, this book stands out as the synopsis of a life of theoretical production and meaningful speculations. Frascarian vocabulary, just as the author’s imagery, is rich and tasty: “*numinous*,” “*mantic*,” “*pneumatic*,” “*non-trivial*,” “*macaronic*,” “*loose way*,” “*divination*,” “*constructing and construing*,” and other such peculiar and meaningful words, dense like gems, punctuate the dissertation.

Words and drawings are used here as gates. They serve as passages to places for further speculations, open doors to fertile soils to grow proper food for imagination.

The different lines of dissection in the body of Frascari's lesson are clearly developed and distributed in the six chapters of the book. Their sole goal is stimulating an appetite for design in both young minds and educated professionals.

The drawings offered in the portfolio of the book are another vein in this rich quarry. Exercises in the art of architectural drawing, they are visual thoughts, at once both simple and sophisticated. A hundred pages of fantastic samples of non-trivial architectural drawings, where the different media and the multiple tools available for the well-tempered architect are constantly blended. Ingenuous and ingenious at the same time, Frascari's drawings are whimsical tales where fiction and reality, matter and spirit, digital and analogic, *recto* and *verso*, cross paths, thus opening possibilities and emanating energies.

DROOLING. COLLATERAL EFFECTS

We think visually and we draw ideally. Frascari teaches us that there is no difference between drawing and thinking if we keep hands and brain consciously connected.

For an architect, to draw and to think visually should be a vital necessity and an extremely compelling experience. *Nulla dies sine linea* is the Latin quote reported by Frascari in a drawing from 2007 titled *The Science Without a Name*, which is reproduced in the introduction by Federica Goffi. Literally, the motto means: "No day without a line." We find this well-known quote in Pliny the Elder (*Historia Naturalis*, Bk. 35), where it is attributed to Apelles. This ancient painter was said not to spend a single day without drawing a line and, in so doing, contributing to the research for perfection and truth.

By the end of the book, at the end of the trip, approaching the Santa Maria Novella train station in Florence, I started feeling a growing need to grab a pen and begin sketching, developing forms, tracing circles, lines, axes for potential compositions, designing a dream house. Useless sketches and innocent doodles, some might say. Architectural dreaming, I would argue.

I was drooling over drawing as a hungry person aches for food after reading the recipe of a tasty dish. A book that can trigger the need for drawing, that makes you hungry for visual thinking and craving for architecture, is indeed a great book of architecture.

Notes

1. Marco Frascari, *Marco Frascari's Dream House. A Theory of Imagination*, Federica Goffi ed. (Abingdon, Oxon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2017), 101.
2. *Ibid.*, 85.

Franco Pisani, strongly tempted by the expanded opportunities offered by the “contamination” of apparently distant themes and disciplines, includes within the profession of architecture research activities and educational experiences. He lives and works in Florence (Italy), where he runs his own professional office FRANCOPISANIARCHITETTO, practicing design at all scales, “from the spoon to the city,” and for public and private clients. He has both taught as a Visiting Professor and lectured as an invited speaker at various universities in Italy and abroad. He holds a professional degree in architecture from the Università degli Studi di Firenze, Florence (Italy).