

Architecture: Elements, Materials, Form / Francesca Prina.—(The Princeton Field Guides to Art).—Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, May 2009.—325 p. : col. ill.—ISBN 9780691141503 (pa.): \$29.95.

architecture

elements, materials, form



PRINCETON FIELD GUIDES TO ART

This is the inaugural volume of the Princeton Field Guides to Art series and as such will surely be acquired by many academic libraries. Written by independent scholar Francesca Prina, author of *One Thousand Years of World Architecture*, it features many excellent images of buildings frequently under-represented in architectural histories, but it is unsatisfactory as either a quick guide or a reference work.

Featuring a standardized format that is a cross between the popular Eyewitness Books and surveys such as D.M. Field's *The World's Greatest Architecture*, the book comprises five major sections: Tools of the Architect, including brief descriptions of the changing role of the architect, descriptive geometry, architectural drawings and models, engineering, and theory; Stability and Form, a sort of visual dictionary of major structural elements; Materials and Techniques; Architecture and Decoration; and Masterpieces Compared.

Each topic begins with a page of description or analysis followed by approximately ten related images with short comments and lines directing the reader to the relevant part of the image. The method is valuable and enlightening when the chunks of text are related to both the illustration and the topic, but when they are not, significance and meaning are lost. The quality of images is high, although sometimes they can be too small to see clearly the points being made.

In the introduction, Prina outlines her premise that architecture speaks with "a highly precise grammatical language based on structural elements, materials, and techniques that are fitted together to make up the syntax of the building. It is a highly particular aspect of architecture that this book illustrates analyzing the elements of architecture and the symbolic meanings within it." Despite Prina's frequent references to architecture's "evolution," such an approach is a useful alternative to chronologies or histories of style and could support more comparative studies of the cultural, regional, and typological nature of architecture.

Ms. Prina displays a sensitive eye across a vast range of architecture, but the writing and vocabulary can be indirect and awkward. ("Trilithic" appears several times before it is finally defined, and by then it is clear it is merely a substitution for much more common terms such as "trabeated" or "post and lintel.") The collection of material demonstrates many insights and the topics themselves are useful for highlighting the ways in which viewers can understand and evaluate a building, but the book remains less an analysis or pedagogical tool than an interesting, well-illustrated, and affordable "coffee-table book" that one can slip into a backpack.

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