



Okay, Vitruvius

Andrew Leach, University of Sydney, Australia, andrew.leach@sydney.edu.au

Review of André Tavares, *Vitruvius without Text: The Biography of a Book*, Zurich: gta, 2022, 276 pages, 61 b&w illus. ISBN: 9783856764227. Print and open-access PDF. *Vitruvius without Text* presents a history of editions of *De architectura* from the Renaissance to the very recent past. It explores how decisions in the making of these editions as books has affected both their import in various periods and their legacies as vehicles for the diffusion of Vitruvius as an authority. This review reflects on Tavares' project and also considers the implications of his analysis of the uptake of an obscure passage from *De architectura*.

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Permit me, first, a brief anecdote. A few weeks ago, my teenage daughter responded to something I'd said with 'okay, Vitruvius' (in exactly the tone you imagine). 'You know, like Vitruvius from *The Lego Movie*?' She immediately sensed that she'd started something, and within the minute was regretting her word choice. Put it down to poor parenting that her Vitruvius does not have the voice of Morris Hickey Morgan but of Morgan Freeman. Now, she knows.

That exchange played on my mind while reading André Tavares' dense, engaging, and evocative *Vitruvius without Text* (2022). This book offers a self-described 'foggy picture' (226) of one of Western architecture's founding authorities—an analysis moving between the production of editions since the fifteenth century, the possibilities

and limitations of book production itself, and the process of reinvention to which each fresh presentation of Vitruvius is inevitably subject. In addition, drawing on just a few lines describing the tetrastyle *cavaedium* structure, Tavares shows how an idea moves between text, image, and building in the reception and re-inscription of a classic.

Over the course of more than 200 pages, Tavares undermines Vitruvius' monumentality. Anyone who has rifled through them will now always wonder which Vitruvius is meant when someone mentions him. Tavares does a fine job of pairing the question of 'which Vitruvius?' with the enduring spectre of the monumental, original text both embedded in and changed by the countless editions through which the Roman's ideas have been presented afresh to a contemporary public. Impressively, though, he goes a long way to avoid endorsing any specific reception as especially faithful.

Vitruvius without Text is divided into two parts. The first section presents an historical account of the publishing history of *De architectura* since the fifteenth century. It is a history of the book as a book, which is to say, as something edited, composed, set, and printed. We are asked to think about ink on pages made of linen, vellum, and paper. Vitruvius thus becomes a matter of type, paper stock, and scale; legibility and mobility;

VITRUVIUS WITHOUT TEXT

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A BOOK

Vitruvius's *De architectura*, written in the first century BCE, is revered as the first treatise on architectural theory. Since its resurrection during the Renaissance, this enigmatic text has been adjusted, refined, and redefined in its subsequent iterations. The book at hand bypasses exegeses of the text to focus on the material history of the printed editions disseminated throughout Europe. It surveys over a hundred editions of Vitruvius, from 1486 to the present, tracing the power of the printed page in establishing the Roman author as an authority. Focusing on the impact of the physical objects that embody the Vitruvian canon highlights how book history and architectural history cross paths and how a symbiotic relationship between the printed and the built emerged. The resulting picture is that of a zigzagging thread between practice and theory—an elusive network of fruitful insouciance in architecture.

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and the technology of illustration. Tavares describes editions of this work with which he has spent time, narrating accounts of them as objects that can be held in the hand. (It is hardly surprising to learn that Tavares himself makes books.) In the span of nearly 120 pages, he works through a library that runs from Sulpizio's 1486 edition to 'the postmodern Vitruvius' of Thomas Gordon Smith (139–40) and that includes older editions made freshly available through Project Gutenberg and the digital publishing projects at the university presses of Cambridge and Harvard.

If inserting Vitruvius into the history of the book is one ambition of this study, the other is to understand something of the traffic of this work with the Vitruvian audience, knowing and otherwise. It is telling that the most persistent iconography of *Vitruvius without Text* is of books—the very editions, old and new, under discussion—being held by hand, reminding us of how they have been consumed. Tavares offers both narrative and visual accounts of how the book spread and the way specific editions shaped the map of its diffusion.

The second section is, in effect, a series of interlocking essays in conversation with part 1 of the book that ponders how a brief description by Vitruvius of the *cavaedium* made its way into architecture's own formal and compositional vocabulary. Tavares shows how architects both attentive to one or more editions of *De architectura* and alert to the work of architects who also read the book picked up on and explored an idea that, until the excavation of Pompeii, had survived from antiquity only on the page. This idea yielded a series of productive interpretations of Vitruvius' imagery, and Tavares' documentation of them provides an architectural analogue to the account in part 1. The concept of the *cavaedium*, according to Tavares, has precise origins, is philologically recoverable, and has no need of its classical pedigree to exist in the world.

This example connects to another of his arguments that he reiterates numerous times, namely that there is no single readership for Vitruvius and no single reason why one might read him, which is most clearly evidenced by the proliferation of editions in the 19th and 20th centuries intended for architects, classical philologists, linguists, and historians of art and architecture, reflecting a development in the history of the book in which industrialisation of printing and the production paper made it possible to readily feed both mass and niche markets.

Among these editions, I am compelled to return to the 1987 critical edition of the Barbaro Vitruvius framed by Manfredo Tafuri and Manuela Moressi, the 1938 Stürzenacker edition that features contemporary photography along with a difficult foreword, and Choisy's 1909 edition, which insists on slow reading and the search for accuracy. (All dates checked against the very handy section 'Vitruvuiana 1486–2016'.)

This compact book—it has travelled in my pocket but required time to consume, page by page—is alive with the author’s erudition; it stands with a number of tomes in the grand library of works on Vitruvius and builds upon others. A robust set of notes and extensive bibliography track Tavares’ interaction with generations of studies on his subject, all the while making clear his contribution. Chapter breaks come regularly enough to let the detail sink in and line up with pauses in the history itself. Care has been taken in the design and composition of the edition, and the narrative itself also rewards the book fetishist (I can confirm) but in an accessible language that is bound to convince readers to share their view of the library. It is augmented with a double-page spread of diagrams describing the relation of scale to page layout to image treatment (232–22) in those signal editions that shaped the course of Vitruvius’ longevity.

The strength of this book is precisely that it does not trade in the analysis of Vitruvius’ own writing. Tavares’ work is not that of interpreting *De architectura* or its passages. Nor is it preoccupied with how others have gone about the task of explaining the Vitruvian triad or the architect’s education or how architecture conveys meaning. He acknowledges, of course, how editions and translations were initiated and realised, but almost exclusively as a history of the book. What determined the layout, illustrations, typography, and printing of each? How did this determine their readership and reach?

This book should be read by anyone who has ever invoked Vitruvius in the abstract. It should be prescribed to any student who does the same. (Though the print edition is itself easy to read and ready for the road, gta also offers it free as a pdf on its website.) Tavares’ *Vitruvius* may be ‘without text,’ but it is replete with a texture that brings the history of *De architectura* and the authority that has been claimed on his behalf in the twenty-odd centuries since Vitruvius first presented it to his emperor into the present. And it does so without demanding the erudition that Tavares evidently brings to his project or that of the many experts whose work is carefully woven into this story.

The attentive reader will learn which editions they might value, which voices they might take seriously, and the many reasons someone might pick up an edition of Vitruvius in the first place.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

