
Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture by Indra Kagis McEwen
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. Pp. xiv + 493. ISBN 0-262-13415-
20. Cloth \$39.95

Reviewed by
Lee Ann Riccardi
The College of New Jersey
riccardi@tcnj.edu

Vitruvius is one of the few ancient authors whose major work has survived virtually intact. Although sources tell us about other books on architectural or proportional theory that were written in classical antiquity, such as Iktinos' treatise on the Parthenon or Polykleitos' *Canon*, it is only Vitruvius' *De architectura* (or *Ten Books on Architecture*, as we call it in English), written for the Roman Emperor Augustus, that is still extant and virtually complete. It is surprising then, that although art and architectural historians have been vitally interested in Vitruvius' ideas, little of the secondary scholarship on him is by classicists and ancient historians. Although numerous translations of Vitruvius' text exist, few have attempted to study it as a work of literature or, through what is perhaps an even more intriguing lens, as a work of Augustan propaganda.

Augustan propaganda has been a hot topic in the last two decades. Particularly since the publication of Paul Zanker's Jerome lectures at the University of Michigan in 1987 [Zanker 1987], and the English translation a year later [Zanker 1988], numerous scholars have turned their attention to this fascinating exploration; and a plethora of books, articles, and even museum exhibitions, have focused on decoding the propaganda of the first emperor. His patronage of the arts, building programs, numismatic choices, legislation, portraiture, and his final document, the *Res gestae divi Augustae*, have all been analyzed for their contributions to his program of propaganda and as ways to promote himself, his legacy, and his dynasty.¹

¹ A small sampling includes Bartman 1999, Eck 2003, Galinsky 1996, Kienast 1999, Renucci 2003, and Wallace 2000.

The major Augustan poets such as Vergil, Horace, and Ovid, who also wrote and dedicated their texts to Augustus, have been thoroughly examined in this light [see Barchiesi 1997, Kiernan 1999, Nappa 2005, Powell 1992, among others]. But perhaps because Vitruvius is not traditionally thought to have written a proper work of literature but rather a handbook of sorts for architects, his contributions as a writer and shaper of the themes of Augustan propaganda have thus far been overlooked. He has also often been regarded as a staid conservative focused on tradition and the past, and as out of touch with the revolution in Roman architecture made possible by concrete and vaulted forms.

In *Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture*, Indra McEwen focuses on Vitruvius' own statement, repeated several times, that he is 'writing the body of architecture'; and she therefore presents Vitruvius as an author with a mission and message very much in tune with his own times. She shows that Vitruvius is concerned with far more than buildings, materials, or engineering. In her view, he presents nothing less than a thorough guide for the development and spread of Roman civilization; and he provides for his emperor advice on how architecture was and could be used to establish Roman *imperium*. In Vitruvius' mind, architecture was both the vehicle through which Roman domination was disseminated and the result of that domination. The development of the discipline of architecture is therefore 'co-dependent on the Roman project of world domination' [12].

McEwen shows that Vitruvius drew a constant parallel between architecture and the human body, specifically the body of Augustus. The word 'corpus', she notes, meaning 'body of work' postdates Augustus; and thus as Vitruvius uses it, he is inventing a new way of discussing architecture as a coherent and unified body of material assimilated to the body of the emperor [8–9]. McEwen's chapters, 'The Angelic Body', 'The Herculean Body', 'The Body Beautiful', and 'The Body of the King', are each further subdivided into sections designed to explore the overall concept of the particular chapter. One of the advantages of McEwen's organization is that most of these sections are chock full of densely articulated ideas and most could stand alone, even as they jointly contribute to her overall argument. The evidence she brings to bear in each of these sections is far-ranging in scope, and includes not only the evidence of specific works of architecture, city-planning, and engineering, but also

evidence gathered from myth and literature, religious ritual, inscriptions, coins, and statues from Rome and the provinces. McEwen is comprehensive in her examination of the evidence used to develop her theory, meticulous in her referencing and widely read in her use of sources. With only a few missteps, she skillfully engages material disparate in media and in geographical origin in service to her theme.

McEwen examines the purpose, structure, and audience for Vitruvius' *De architectura*. Her interpretation is original. She begins by noting that in Vitruvius' time, in order for something to be known, it had to be written [16], and that Vitruvius therefore wrote this commentary on architecture so that it could be known and remembered. This was at the very time when Augustus was publicly and emphatically restoring temples all over Rome. Vitruvius thought that this project, and architecture in general, would enhance and record Roman greatness worldwide; and his *De architectura* was intended to reveal how and why [38]. Public buildings provided visible *auctoritas* to power. Although he believed that architecture consisted naturally of three parts (buildings, *gnomonice* or the construction of clocks, and mechanics), he chose to write his commentary on 10 scrolls (now published as 10 books); and, as McEwen demonstrates, he arrived at this number by manipulating his subject, rather than because it was a logical division. To get to 10, he had to divide the section on temples into two books and to add another on water and aqueducts, a subject not part of his original tripartite scheme. But 10 was an important and perfect number, one believed to reveal universal order. Vitruvius understood architecture as coherent and unified [57], and 10 was the number required to show that. McEwen also addresses the issue of Vitruvius' audience. She believes that he wrote specifically for Augustus, and that the *De architectura* was meant as both a gift and advice [69] so that the emperor might have access to orderly principles of architecture for his building programs [86–87]. Architecture and the *De architectura* were, therefore, a plan for and a record of Augustus' achievements preserved for posterity.

One of the major themes of McEwen's book is the symbolic meaning of the Roman gods, and none are more central to her discussion than Hercules. In fact, chapter 2 ('The Herculean Body') begins with an anecdote about Alexander and his architect, Dinocrates, that Vitruvius relates in his preface to book 2 on building materials. The reason he includes this story, she suggests, is to draw a parallel

between the relation of Alexander and Dinocrates and of Augustus and himself, and to use Hercules as a link between them all. In Vitruvius' version of the story, Dinocrates is dressed as Hercules, a god also often chosen by Alexander as a model. Hercules was associated with brute strength but was regularly paired with Mercury, the god of communication (literally 'running between') and together they symbolized a common theme regarding the dual aspects of Roman power: force and speech, or strength tempered by reason [109]. In the anecdote, Dinocrates (and Vitruvius by extension) becomes the equivalent of Hercules, with the added knowledge of architecture. Alexander equals Augustus, and they all can be personified by Hercules. McEwen then introduces a story related by Dionysius of Halicarnassus [130], who wrote in the Augustan era. Dionysius told how Hercules civilized the world, mingling Greeks and barbarians as Alexander had. To do this Hercules needed architecture in the form of city-planning, heavy machinery to build roads and redirect rivers, and buildings. In this story, Hercules is Alexander and Augustus too, who, through architecture, brought culture to the uncultured, and thus benefited the whole world (or at least the world ruled by them). The cities they created were the seat of *humanitas*, where architecture brings together education and the circle of the world. And in the *De architectura*, Vitruvius makes clear that Rome is *the* city where civilization (and architecture) began [150].

Venus and the idea of beauty are also crucial to McEwen's interpretation of Vitruvius' aims. In chapter 3 ('The Body Beautiful'), she explores the importance of beauty as revealed through geometry and proportion, particularly in regard to the foundation of cities and temples. It is this section, however, which is the most problematic, since she stretches her evidence farther than is reasonable. Although Vitruvius does not mention divination or augury in his discussion of how to found a city, McEwen insists that in both books 1 and 9 it is implicit. Her long section on the practices of augury and how it relates to geometry, symmetry, and proportion is fascinating; but it is not clear from the *De architectura* that Vitruvius actually took all this into account as he wrote his text. In regard to geometry, Vitruvius discusses the geometry of an ideal man, but he did not produce a drawing (as Leonardo finally did in the 15th century). He saw man as the source for geometry, not as a product of it [157]. Both a circle and a square can be traced around a man lying on his back. But

in arguing that the true importance of these shapes rests in augury and how they were used by augurs to determine proper placement for cities, military camps, and temples, McEwen pushes Vitruvius' intentions beyond what his words actually allow.

Yet this chapter also contains one of her most intriguing sections, on the origins and meaning of the Corinthian order, the primary architectural style used by Augustus. In order to guarantee proper relations with the gods and fix political chaos in the aftermath of the civil war that brought him to power, Augustus had to demonstrate proper piety. This he did by the extensive and expensive project of restoring the crumbling temples in Rome. He made them whole and beautiful, and in doing so made extensive use of the Corinthian order. McEwen argues effectively that for Vitruvius (and probably Augustus too), its use is really about Rome and her civilizing mission [220]. For art historians who have long pondered the Roman preference for the previously little used Corinthian order, this is a particularly enlightening explanation.

In chapter 4 ('The Body of the King'), McEwen again introduces an argument based on assumptions that may not be valid and reveals that, despite the overall breadth of her knowledge, some issues are beyond her, in this case, those concerning Roman copies. The statue of Augustus from Primaporta postdates Vitruvius; and while it probably reflects an earlier version in bronze, the similarity of its appearance to the original is unknown. Romans were capable of making nearly exact versions of sculptures, but it was time-consuming and difficult to take so many precise measurements; and if they did, it was with the expectation that they could make multiple versions of the statue for maximum profit. But the Primaporta is unique. It is, therefore, highly unlikely that it closely reflected the original. Yet McEwen assumes that it did; and she uses the statue as the culminating demonstration of the principles of the *De architectura*, an impossibility for Vitruvius since the statue came after his text.

Despite the occasional misstep, however, McEwen has still managed a remarkable feat of scholarship. She has presented a highly informative, comprehensive, fascinating, and original interpretation of a well-known text; and in doing so, she has demonstrated how much richer it is than classicists and ancient historians had realized. No one who reads *Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture* will ever again

think that the *De architectura* was simply a manual for architects or a chronicle of the history of architecture. It can no longer be doubted that Vitruvius' purpose was much more grandiose, and was no less than to link forever Augustus, Rome, civilization, and architecture and to provide a guide for the establishment of Roman *imperium*. Vitruvius, like the major Augustan poets, contributed to the overall shaping of the image and message of the first emperor of Rome.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barchiesi, A. 1997. *Poeta e il principe: Ovid and Augustan Discourse*. Berkeley, CA.
- Bartman, E. 1999. *Portraits of Livia: Imaging the Imperial Woman in Augustan Rome*. Cambridge.
- Eck, W. 2003. *Augustus und seine Zeit*. Malden, MA.
- Galinsky, K. 1996. *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction*. Princeton, NJ.
- Kienast, D. 1999. *Augustus. Prinzeps und Monarch*. Darmstadt.
- Kiernan, V. G. 1999. *Horace: Poetics and Politics*. New York.
- Nappa, C. 2005. *Reading after Actium: Vergil's Georgics, Octavian, and Rome*. Ann Arbor, MI.
- Powell, A. 1992. ed. *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus*. London.
- Renucci, P. 2003. *Auguste le révolutionnaire*. Paris.
- Wallace, R. 2000. ed. *Augustus, Emperor of Rome, 63 B.C.–14 A.D., Res gestae divi Augusti as Recorded in the Monumentum Ancyranum and the Monumentum Antiochenum*. Wauconda, IL.
- Zanker, P. 1987. *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*. Munich.
- 1988. *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. A. Shapiro trans. Ann Arbor, MI.