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### Review of Costanza Beltrami, *Building a Crossing Tower: A Design for Rouen Cathedral of 1516* (London: Sam Fogg/Paul Holberton Publishing, 2016)

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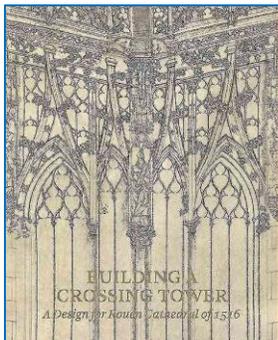
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# PEREGRINATIONS

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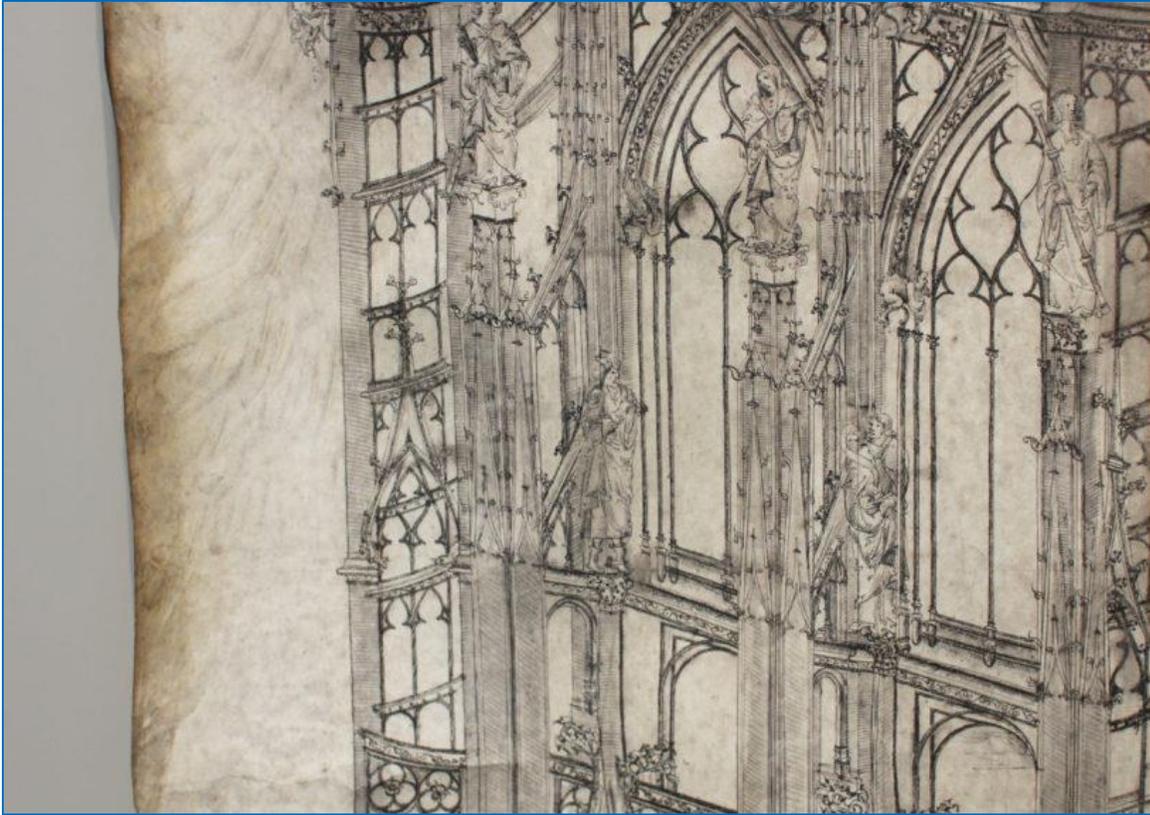


Book Review: Costanza Beltrami, *Building a Crossing Tower: A Design for Rouen Cathedral of 1516* (London: Sam Fogg/Paul Holberton Publishing, 2016), 136 pages, 100 color illustrations, \$40.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-907372-93-3

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In *Building a Crossing Tower* Costanza Beltrami presents a monographic treatment of a single object, a recently rediscovered monumental drawing of a gothic tower and spire three and a half meters long and over half a meter wide. The previously unpublished drawing had been held in a private collection in France until 2014 and currently belongs to the Sam Fogg Gallery in London. The central assertion of Beltrami's text is that Roulland le Roux made the 'Rouen Tower Drawing' in the first decades of the sixteenth century as part of complex negotiations for the erection of a monumental tower for Rouen Cathedral.

The format of this volume resembles an extended museum catalogue for a single artifact, placing the object at the fore. Thirteen full color plates at the beginning of the volume put the drawing in front of the reader framing it with the essentials of her argument in the form a label recording author, date, location, materials, and provenience history. The following chapters position this impressive artifact in the corpus of gothic architectural drawings and argue for



this drawing's particular role in the history of building at Rouen Cathedral. In doing so, Beltrami situates the tower drawing in terms of gothic design practice (following Robert Bork)<sup>1</sup> and stylistic signification (following Ethan Kavalier).<sup>2</sup>

In chapter one Beltrami describes the materials, dimension, and size of the drawing while highlighting aspects of the artistic production that she believes distinguishes this drawing from drawings that appear intended to record information necessary for the actual construction of a piece of architecture. The artist composed this drawing from an angled perspective, suggesting a vantage point from a diagonal corner and looking up as one might at an actual tower. Beltrami contrasts this with many drawings of similar type that are strictly

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<sup>1</sup> Bork, Robert Odell. *The Geometry of Creation: Architectural Drawing and the Dynamics of Gothic Design*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Kavalier, Ethan Matt. *Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470-1540*. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2012.

orthogonal. She also points to shading and the overlay of figural decoration representing a sculptural program to argue that the intended audience for this image was not the artisans and crafts people actually building a tower, but the patrons of a building project. Orthogonal drawings she argues really belong to the visual language of the master mason/architect, while a more accessible visual presentation was necessary to evoke the master mason's ideas in the minds of patrons.

Chapter two tackles the question to what actual building or building project this drawing might be connected. Beltrami first narrows the search by tracing the provenience history as far back as the Rouen region in the eighteenth century. She then uses stylistic comparison to French Flamboyant architecture to confirm Rouen as the right general area and push the likely date back to the last decades of the fifteenth century and first decades of the sixteenth century. Finding no direct correlates in surviving buildings she turns to unrealized or destroyed projects. She offers us three possibilities from Rouen for our consideration: a no-longer surviving metal sacrament house from Saint-Laurent, a destroyed façade tower at Saint-Omer, and a projected crossing tower at Rouen cathedral. Of these three possibilities, Beltrami argues the tower drawing bears the closest formal similarities to the work of Roulland le Roux for Rouen cathedral at the beginning of the sixteenth century. While her attributions of time and place are compelling, a reader might have benefited from a more comprehensive survey of monuments that she first considered and then rejected in favor of her three primary suspects.

Chapter three builds on the conclusion that Roland le Roux created the drawing for the projected central tower at Rouen cathedral. The impetus for the dramatic three-meter drawing, Beltrami argues, survive in the fiscal records of



the Chapter of Rouen cathedral. Among other things, those documents record a moment of conflict between the Chapter and Roland in the three years that followed the destruction by fire of the medieval crossing tower in 1514. In particular, there seems to have been a disagreement about whether the tower should be constructed in timber on top of one or more stone stories or built entirely of stone.

The deliberations refer to a painted (*cum pictura*) image that Beltrami argues in chapter four includes the type of cross hatching and perspectival concerns evident in the tower drawing. This chapter provides a useful survey of the ranges of words used to talk about representations. The lack of an easily recognizable technical language for such images allows Beltrami to

construct a genre from documented use and surviving objects.

Chapter five argues that the purpose of perspective in drawings such as this is rhetorical rather than documentary. In other words, the tactile three-dimensionality of the drawing is not intended as a record of the physical world so much as a compelling representation of its possibilities. It is easy to see how the use of perspective coupled with a visual flood of detail and the imposing size of the drawing functioned as what Alfred Gell might have called a technology of enchantment. Yet the mechanisms by which such technologies operate appear to be historically specific and generally diffuse in a given cultural context. This raises question for the reader about how perspective works in the wider visual culture of Rouen at the time.

Beltrami makes a strong case that this tower drawing represents a genre of drawing associated with a specific moment in the design process of a major Gothic building – a genre of rhetorical persuasion on the part of an architect. In her introduction Beltrami contrasts a napkin sketch by Renzo Piano with the blueprints used for the actual construction of the building to illustrate this



dichotomy between a presentation drawing on the one hand and a working drawing on the other. A presentation drawing, she argues, is not a blue print or basis for actually constructing the building. Rather it is meant to represent reality, or at least a potential reality, to an audience of patrons.

Yet her choice of illustration also suggests additional functions for this drawing. Renzo Piano himself explains such sketches in very specific terms.<sup>3</sup> For him they help overcome the tendency for technologically driven practice to over determine the design. The sketches reconnect the hand and the mind. They reintegrate the mental design with the material act of making and in doing so,

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the interview with Renzo Piano presented in Edward Robbins, *Why Architects Draw*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1994), pp. 125-150.

are an ongoing and reciprocal part of the design and building process. In the case of the tower drawing, this particular model of modern architectural practice and drawing suggests that, while it may well have been a presentation drawing, it may nevertheless have remained an integral part of the design and building process. 🐼