

SIZE MATTERS

125 Kilos of Books
Canadian Centre for Architecture
1920, rue Baile, Montréal
Closed April 30

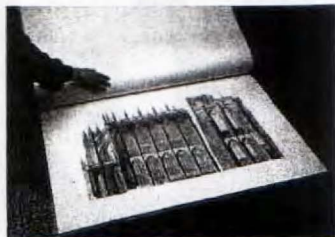
Heavy stuff. That's the big idea behind the exhibition *125 Kilos of Books* at Montreal's Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), which marked the designation of the city as UNESCO World Book Capital City for 2005–2006. The museum's octagonal gallery was a rather spartan container for the 32 books on display, all taken from the CCA's own spectacular collections. The books on view ranged from the 15th century to the present, though for this show, dates were less important than weights. The heaviest book on display, Carleton E. Watkins *Views of Thurlow Lodge* from 1874, is a hefty 26 kilograms. This tome of California photos from the Gilded Age is so big that it would take two to read it, a nifty way to make a point about architectural opulence.

This emphasis on size and weight is an innovative, almost funky approach to exhibiting books. It's the brainchild of curator Gerald Beasley, who knows the CCA book collection of nearly 200,000 volumes intimately from his tenure as head librarian, a post he held until 2004. Beasley is enchanted by the relationship of books and buildings: "Architects often use books as a kind of back door to architectural immortality, so they want the same sense of magnificence, scale, grandeur from a book as from a building project."

The anteroom outside the gallery introduces three significant types of architectural books: representation, theory, and how-to. The centerpiece is a copy of the first printed edition of Vitruvius. An engraving of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem pokes out from a big blue closed book, foreshadowing the unconventional ways books are shown in the main room. Across the entryway an extraordinary hand-colored folding tongue, formed of several sheets glued together, spills from a huge 1770s volume of plates showing Raphael's decoration of Pope Leo X's private loggias designed two centuries earlier. Buildings are bigger than books, is the message here.

The gallery features books around its perimeter, all exhibited on a minimalist white MDF tabletop whose edge boasts each book's weight. **continued on page 25**

History and Description of the Cathedral of Cologne, by Sulpiz Boisserée (1823), is considered the largest architectural book ever published in terms of size, measuring 113.2x78.3x3 centimeters. It weighs 21 kilos.



COURTESY CCA

SIZE MATTERS continued from page 22 for a show total of 125 kilos. Two peninsulas—the look is in fact quite kitchenlike—jut into the empty space in the gallery's center, allowing visitors to observe closed and open books from odd angles. The biggest architectural book ever published, a whopping monograph on Cologne cathedral by Sulpiz Boisserée, produced by Stuttgart publisher J. G. Cotta in 1823, is in the first peninsula, hoisted open by an ingenious cradle showing the book partly open, with a little help from some heavy duty fishing line.

This rigid perimeter arrangement—Beasley calls it a "landscape" of books—means visitors experience the exhibit in sequence, reinforcing a chronology of fascinating points. Some books start out big and spawn smaller copies, such as Stuart and Revett's 1762 *The Antiquities of Athens*. Small books can be powerful too. Henry Wotton's tiny *The Elements of Architecture*

was revolutionary in 1624 as a less formal approach to the architectural treatise. Informality is also one of the ideas behind the books in the second peninsula, which shows generic architecture books stacked. Beasley asks, Why do most architecture books today look alike? A peek-a-boo window into the CCA bookstore shows other stacked books for sale in the real world. Finally, the exhibition's conclusion is a scattering of photographs and drawings on the octagonal gallery's wall showing a couple of famous architectural libraries and furniture designed to accommodate books. These show visitors how books add an atmosphere of learning to a room—unlike computers, the caption quips.

125 Kilos of Books is smart, argumentative, and spatially risqué. And its small scale only adds to its main message: Size matters.

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