

**‘You’re
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Your kid
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smart
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**Jean Poderos publishes
architecture books for children.
He’s convinced that children do
not look at architecture the same
way adults do.**

Text [Katya Tylevich](#)
Photos [Alexei Tylevich](#)

I'm in the middle of asking Jean Poderos a question when sounds of loud public demonstration waft through the windows, from the crooked streets of Paris's Marais district below. Seeing distraction flash across my face, Poderos shrugs – 'They're either celebrating or on strike. It happens all the time' – then expertly continues as if there were no loudspeakers and honking horns competing for our airspace.

Poderos knows something about keeping the attention of the easily distracted. He is the founder of Les Éditions Courtes et Longues, a French publishing house that specializes in, among other things, books on art, culture and architecture for young readers. Certainly, it is not without finesse that a publisher can make a child excited about Walter Gropius or Josef Hoffmann. But Poderos argues it's often the adults buying the books that could stand to focus more on what's in front of them. Architecture is neither too complex nor too boring for young readers, he says; in fact, children may understand the practice and its reaches quite intuitively. That's why his skin crawls when he overhears the words: 'You're too young to read about Marcel Breuer.'

Children's architecture books seem like something of a museum gift-shop novelty – how common are they?

Here in France there is one other company, called Palette, that specializes in art and sometimes architecture books for young readers, so perhaps books like this are a bit less rare here than they are worldwide. In general, there are, of course, publishers that cater to museums and specialize in matters of architecture – Editions du Moniteur, for example. A publishing house like that sometimes includes books for young readers as well. There is also Editions Imbernon, which is located in Cité Radieuse in Marseilles, but because they specialize in Le Corbusier, most of the architecture books they publish for children are about Le Corbusier, too. Occasionally a publisher unrelated to art or architecture, but specializing in young readers, might publish *one* book about architecture, but that is very different from a publishing house that continuously tries to communicate with children on the topic. In all, it actually surprises me how few publications about architecture

Jean Poderos's favourite children's books

What It Feels Like to Be a Building
Forrest Wilson
New York: John Wiley & Sons
2004
ages: 4-8

In this book, buildings are composed of little men (a few dogs and rams too!). Illustrating that architecture and people have more in common than you may previously have thought.

there are for children. On the other hand, you can find many interesting books about art for children.

Both art and architecture seem like fairly complex subjects for children; why should architecture books be so much scarcer?

Look at it this way: who goes to an architecture exhibition? Unless we're talking about a special show that is exceptionally popular and easy to understand, visitors are either architects or people who wandered in by accident – oh, I didn't mean to go through *this* door. It's a little different with art – even contemporary art, which people often claim not to understand. People can still look at art without prior knowledge of it; you don't need to know the 'codes' of art; you just need a sensibility for it. Generally speaking, though, that's not the case with architecture – people don't understand the maps, the elevations – and people are very

Qu'y a-t-il sous Paris?
[What is underneath Paris?]
Valérie Guidoux,
Jean-Michel Payet
Paris: Parigramme
1998
ages: 8 and over

This book looks at all the underground networks in the city of Paris through a series of colourful illustrations, depicting the sewers, quarries, subway, etc.

uncomfortable with what they don't understand. That said, here's the problem as I see it: most publishing houses that consider architecture books for children assume that children look at architecture the same way adults do. And that's just not the case. I find that way of thinking terribly frustrating.

How do you think children look at architecture? How should an architecture book address a child's way of thinking?

I feel that when you talk to children about architecture, you must talk about buildings themselves as design, as art, as many things mixed together, and not as an isolated topic. It's too

Round Trip (with cassette narrated by Linda Terheyden)
Ann Jonas
New York: Greenwillow Books
1990
ages: 4-8

An adventure story of perception. The book's black and white illustrations take you on a journey, which has you turning the book upside-down to get to the end.

complicated and boring to talk about 'modern architecture', for example, as if it is detached from everything else that's 'modern'. Or take Art Nouveau: you cannot tell children about architecture of that period and mention only Hector Guimard. You must also show them the different works of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, of Henry Clemens Van de Velde, and of others who did a variety of things.

For adults, architecture can be quite abstract – an abstract construction of the mind that relates to a city or an environment. In general, I don't think children think in this abstract way, and I don't think they think about *architecture* in an abstracted way either. This is why it is necessary to mix architecture into a bigger conversation. But even publishers who do this successfully – who make beautiful series of architecture books for children – won't find that their books are otherwise successful.

You mean architecture books for children don't sell?

Well, maybe only to the children of architects. That's how it is in France, anyway. I've been looking to see if things are any different in the US, and I've found very little published for children in terms of architecture, other than a few publications in the '90s. I understand. It's very hard for people to invest in a field they know isn't going to sell well. But I don't expect to get the same kind of money or the same kinds of readers that the major chains do. My concern is with giving children and their parents some weight against the pull of the mainstream.

'Worldwide, children's publishing consists of board books, flip books, and princess books'



So what does sell? What are architecture books competing with?

Every year in Bologna they hold the equivalent of the Frankfurt Book Fair, only for young readers [Bologna Children's Book Fair]. That's where you really see a global representation of what publishing for young readers is, and unfortunately you see something very monotone. Worldwide, ▶

children's publishing consists of board books, flip books, and princess books – you know, the Disney kind of stuff. I've seen exceptions from Italy, France, Germany, Japan and even the US. Some beautiful illustrations are coming out of South Korea, Poland and Iran. But the bottom line is: most publishers need to make money, and a lot of it. And what sells? Princesses, not architecture. When the focus of a publisher is turnover, he isn't going to publish books about architecture for young readers – nor do I think he should, in that case.

'My concern is with giving children and their parents some weight against the pull of the mainstream'

Why do you think it's important for children to have their own architecture books?

Because, just as we learn to read, write, and count, I believe we also learn how to read a building by Jean Nouvel or Rem Koolhaas – by Frank Gehry or Frank Lloyd Wright. And I think one of the most important questions a children's architecture book begins to answer is: how do you read an image? I want to show you something. [Poderos brings out a book his publishing house printed about Andy Warhol – *Créer avec Warhol* – and flips to a spread in which Oscar Niemeyer's United Nations Secretariat Building is opposite a Warhol 'multiple Marilyn'. Marilyn's face also appears in one window of the UNS Building.] This is a 'game' for children by artist Jiro Nakayama: of course, there are no rules or directions to this game. The purpose is to observe what is in front of you. I'm sure most children colour over these pages, and maybe some scissor-happy kids make cutouts. [Laughs.] But what do children observe in the process? A work of architecture reflecting a work of art – modern art and modern architecture become related through this image; the picture moves

to the back of a child's mind and becomes an 'intuitive' part of understanding modern architecture. No, this game doesn't give you a detailed background in architecture history, let's say, but it does allow you to 'sense' a building. And that's an important start.

In a way, do you find yourself having to camouflage architecture when communicating it to children?

Not exactly. But you have to remember: these are children who watch TV and zap through

Castle
David Macaulay
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
1977
ages: 10-14

David Macaulay – former architect and teacher, now author and illustrator – tells the story of Lord Kevin's castle, highly-detailing every tool, trade and process of its construction in pen-and-ink.

channels. It isn't fair to ask them to focus on the same subject throughout an entire book. And I don't have a problem with this. I once gave a lecture to a group of teachers and librarians at a book fair; I said that we don't have the *right* to tell children it isn't good for them to watch television and play video games and use the computer. After all, the world they're living in is the world we built for them. We can't complain when they endorse it, can we? But I do think we have to answer a question of equilibrium, of balance. Children should be aware that there are other ways of looking at images – including the images of a city and its architecture. I'm convinced that contemporary architecture is already part of a child's world. That's why I'm

Taro Gomi's Play All Day. A Really Giant Book of Punch-Out-and-Play Games, Toys, Finger Puppets, Boxes, and More!
Taro Gomi
San Francisco: Chronicle Books
2010
ages: 9-12

Exactly what it says on the box: more than 60 play things, including finger puppets, boxes, picture frames, a zoo worth of animals, and more.

asking: why talk to children about architecture as if it's an abstract, when what we're really talking to them about is their *concrete* world?

Take something like Facebook, which is not only obvious to young people but simply part of their system. In the way that it's built and operates, Facebook actually resembles architecture, doesn't it? It is not an impractical question to ask: what kind of city would Facebook be if we had to design it? What is in the mind of a 12-year-old who uses Facebook and sees it as a public link to her friends? *How* does she see it? I think that young people do have a physical representation of what Facebook looks like. I'm not so sure about adults. So you see, something as 'obvious' as Facebook is an architecture – a virtual architecture but,

Le Corbusier: in his own words
Antoine Vigne (ed.)
Illustrated by Betty Bone
Winterbourne: Papadakis
2009
ages: 10 and over

Drawings, photographs and words of Le Corbusier illustrate his theories in architecture for children of ten and over, bringing to life his own character, his work, and the world in which he lived.

nonetheless, an architecture that children understand so well that it is an inseparable part of them.

Our job – as publishers, parents, creators, teachers – is to make children look at their world in a different way, to turn their heads

a little bit more in one direction or another. I do believe that what I'm doing with this kind of publishing house is a bandage that tries to heal certain wrong behaviours.

What kinds of wrong behaviours, specifically?

Okay, so I see a lot of children pass through book fairs with their parents. I once saw a girl – five or six years old – ask her mother for a Maori art book. The girl looked very carefully through the book, flipped through the pages, looked at the images with care and attention. Her mother, on the other hand, after a quick glimpse at the cover, told her daughter: 'You're too young for that.' And I thought: You're so dumb, woman. Your kid is too smart for you!

You wouldn't believe how often I hear things like that. I've heard teachers say the same things to their pupils. I hear it from parents all the time, and it's something I just can't stand. How humiliating for that child. To tell the child that he or she is too young to understand art or architecture is to say that he or she is too stupid. It's just as bad. At least show some respect for the interest that child shows.

But, in the end, who's really your target audience? Is it the parents of these children, or is it the children themselves?

Oh, well, you've just described the drama of my life. Sometimes I make the mistake of addressing my books directly to children, while being very conscious of how important it is to get parents to read and like the books, too. I want to say that all this is not just about good marketing, but about a common effort among small publishers and the parents who buy our books to educate children about their surroundings. Of course it's easier for parents to buy princess books, because that doesn't require any work on their part. But, ultimately, parents want to educate their children and equip them with the codes to understand and perceive the world we're giving them. That's why I'm confident that companies like mine are not going to disappear, and that the kind of business I'm running is not going to be bought out. The path is hard, but I believe in what we're doing. We aren't going to sink. <