Esen Gökçe Özdamar

Book Review: What It Feels Like to Be a Building

Title: What It Feels Like to Be a Building
Author: Forrest Wilson
Publisher: The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Landmark Reprint Series Washington, 1988
Original edition: Doubleday & Company Garden City, NY, 1969
ISBN: 0891331425 (printed)
Category: Juvenile book
78 unnumbered pages

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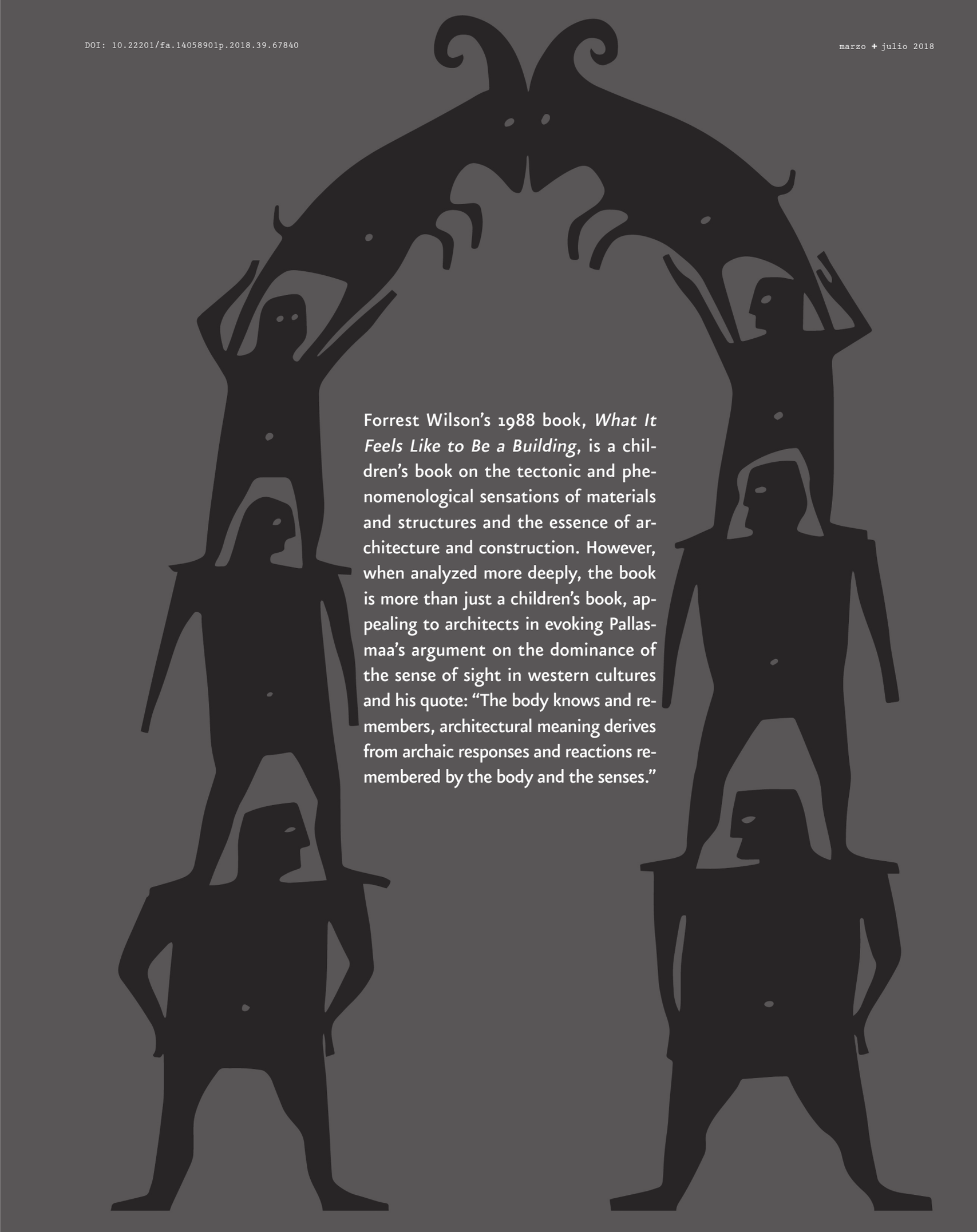

Forrest Wilson's 1988 book, *What It Feels Like to Be a Building*, is a children's book on the tectonic and phenomenological sensations of materials and structures and the essence of architecture and construction. However, when analyzed more deeply, the book is more than just a children's book, appealing to architects in evoking Pallasmaa's argument on the dominance of the sense of sight in western cultures and his quote: "The body knows and remembers, architectural meaning derives from archaic responses and reactions remembered by the body and the senses."

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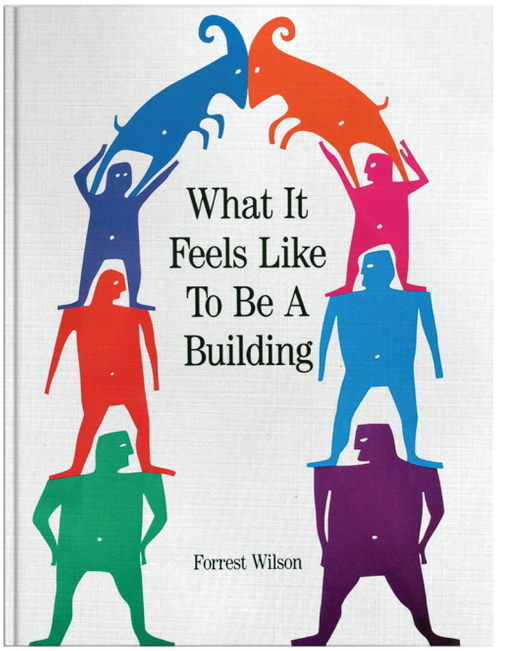
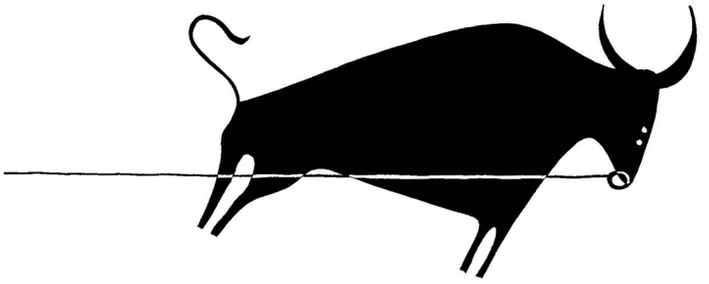
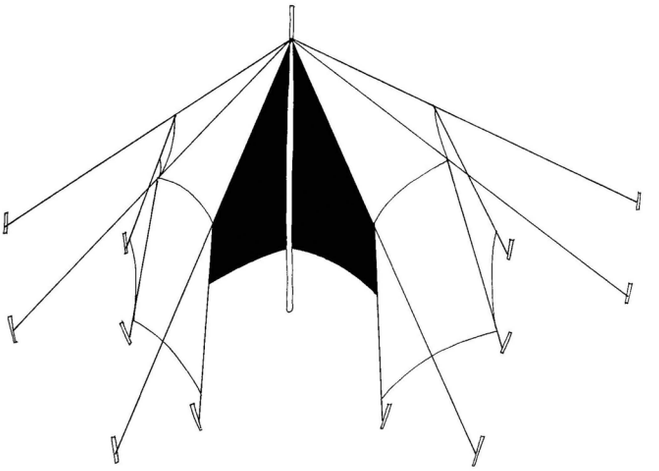
The book is for children over 6 years of age and the illustrations in the book appeal to children from preschool to the second grade, who should be able to comprehend the general architectural principles mentioned in the book.[1] However, when analyzed more deeply, the book is more than just a children's book, appealing to architects by evoking Pallasmaa's argument on the dominance of the sense of sight in western cultures and his quote: "The body knows and remembers, architectural meaning derives from archaic responses and reactions remembered by the body and the senses."[2]

This book was first published in 1969 as a children's book.[3] In the 1988 edition, it is 78 pages in black and white, with illustrations by the author. The book differs from other architectural books written for children, such as Brunelleschi,[4] Gaudi[5] and Frank Lloyd Wright,[6] and other architectural books that illustrate the life stories of architects or teach construction techniques to raise awareness about the sensory aspects of architecture. The author was an architectural historian and professor at the Catholic University of America and wrote several other children's books and other books on building technology, history, materials analysis and tools.[7]

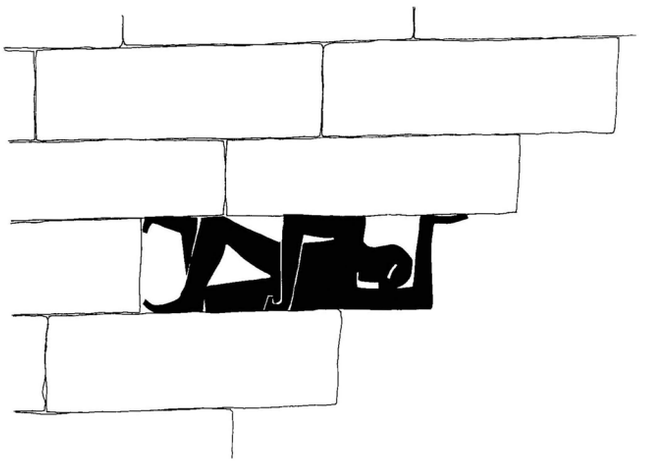




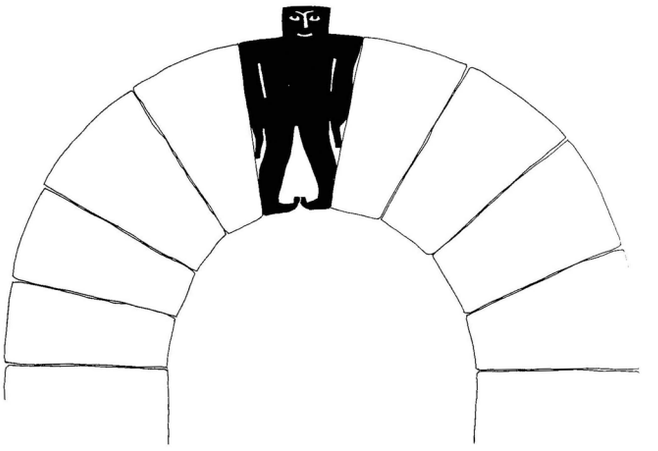
but when you see the pull of tension,



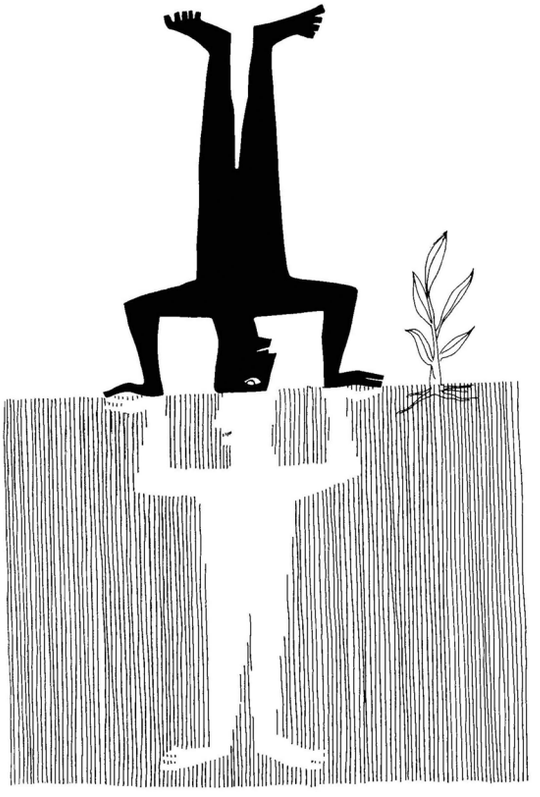
you know that cables are working.



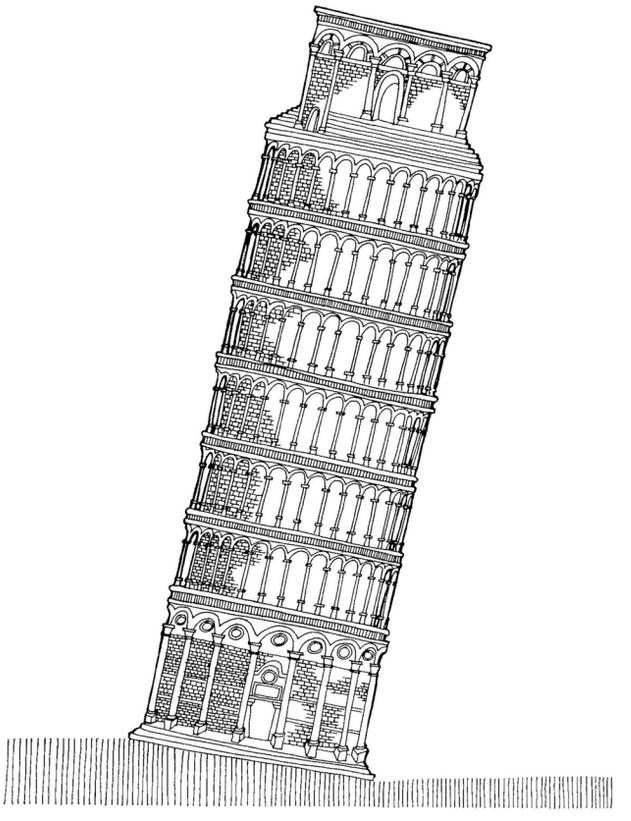
Corbels drowse.



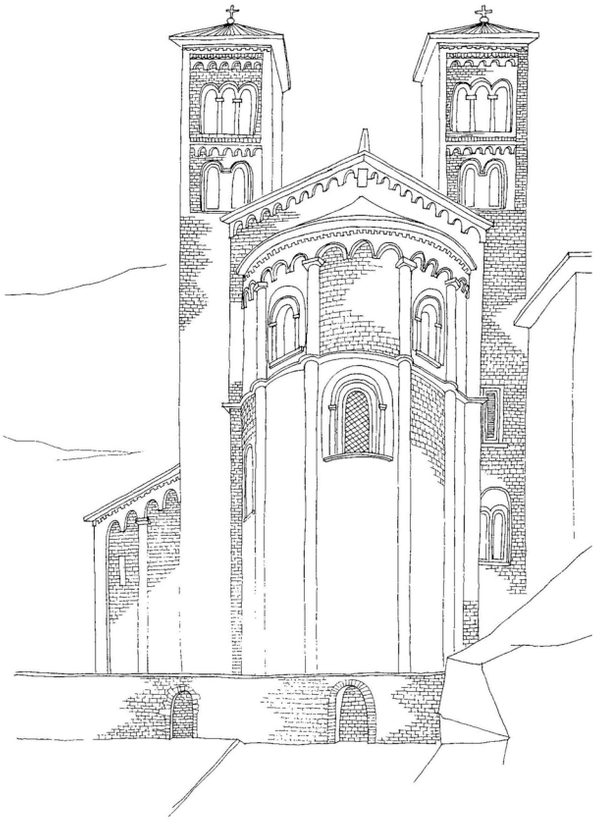
But the arch never sleeps.



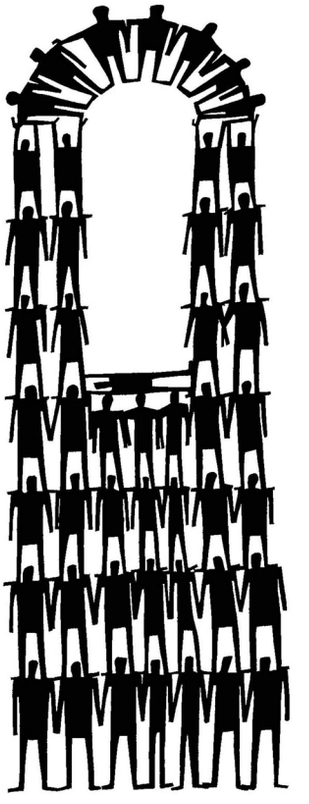
The ground must push up as hard as columns and walls push down,



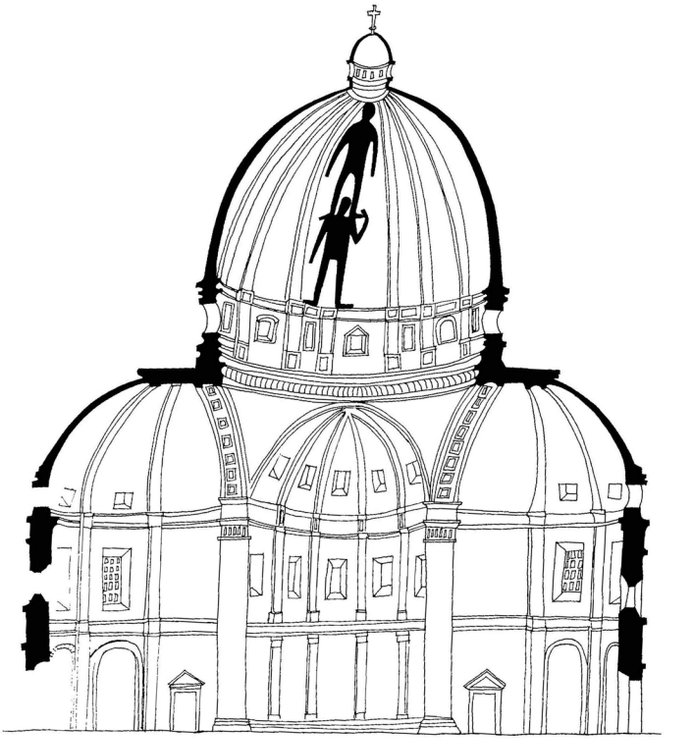
although sometimes columns and walls push harder.



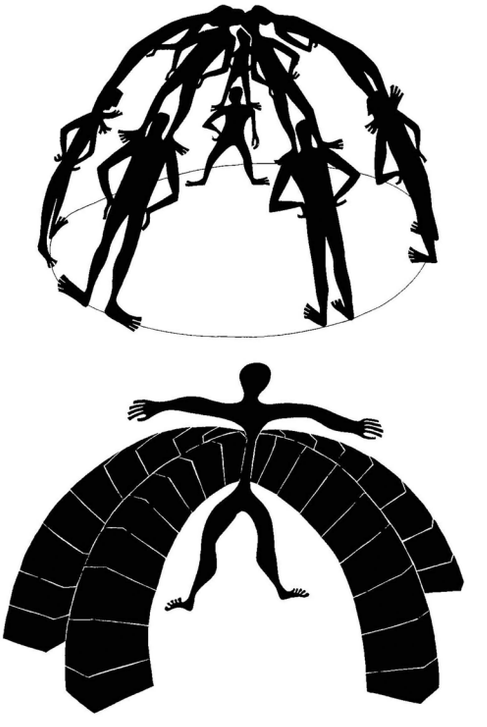
Arches squeeze around these windows in a tower,
which stands straight up while being pulled straight down.



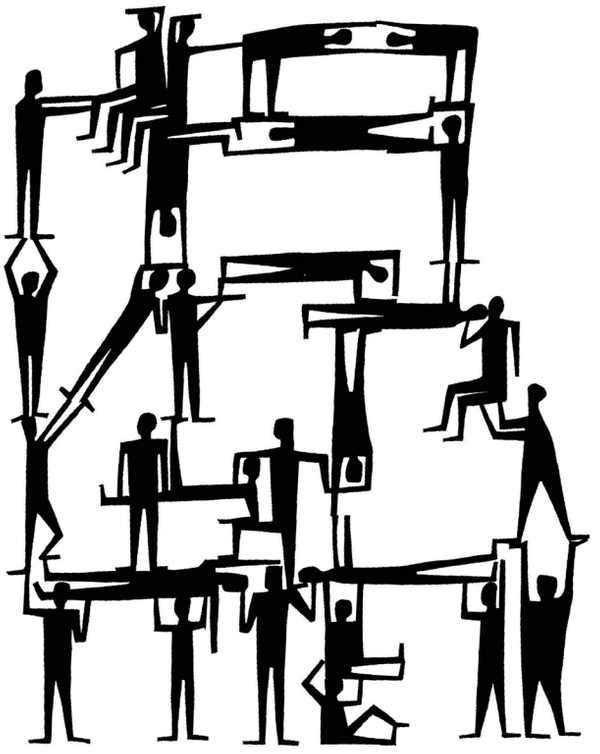
This is how an arched window in a tower feels.



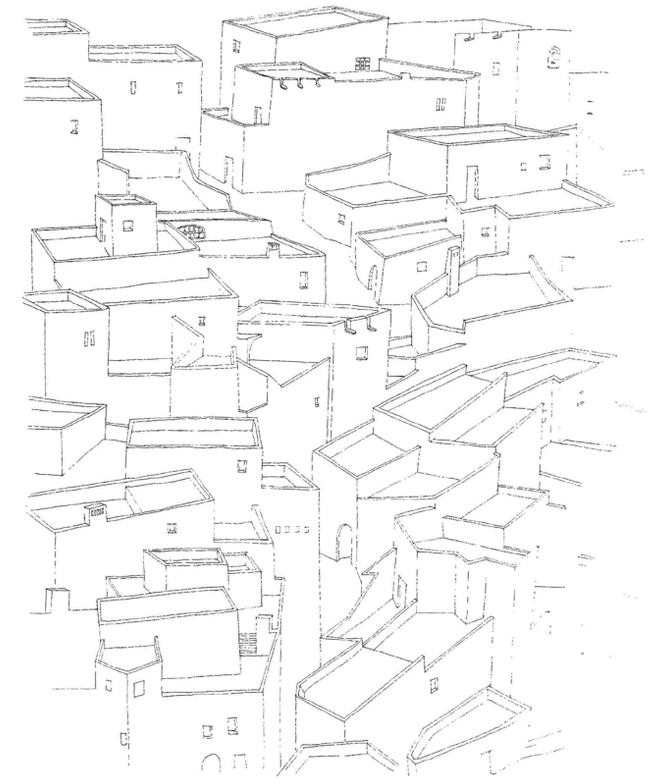
Domes, like a circle of arches,



feel like multiple SQUEEZE because they push in all directions.



But beams cannot bend too much because they would split in the middle.



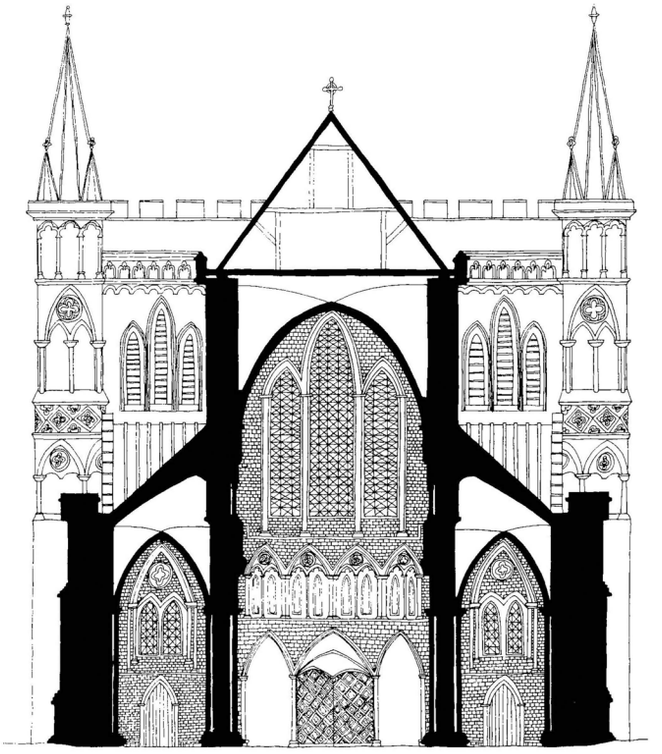
This is why roofs supported by beams are flat.

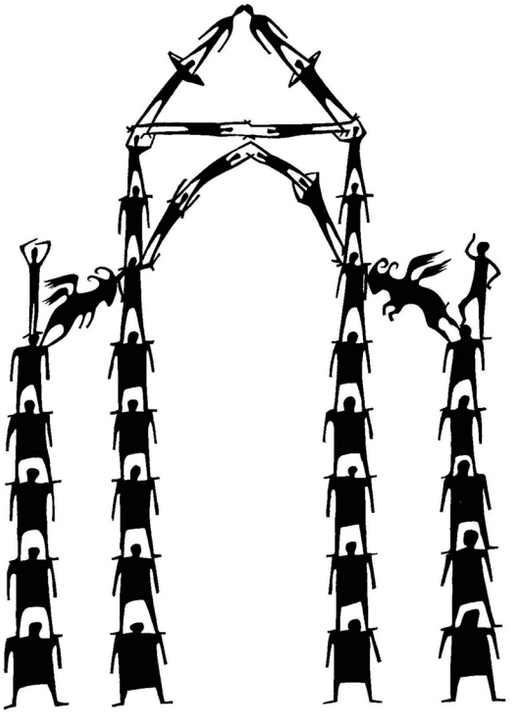
A flying buttress is the arch's cousin.

This book, which does not contain much textual information, reveals how tectonic and kinaesthetic perceptions of different architectural elements, such as columns, walls, beams and buttresses, function under gravity, weight and stress in relation to the human body. As Pallasmaa has pointed out in his observations on the interaction between the body and architecture deriving on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy on the human body as the center of the experiential world:

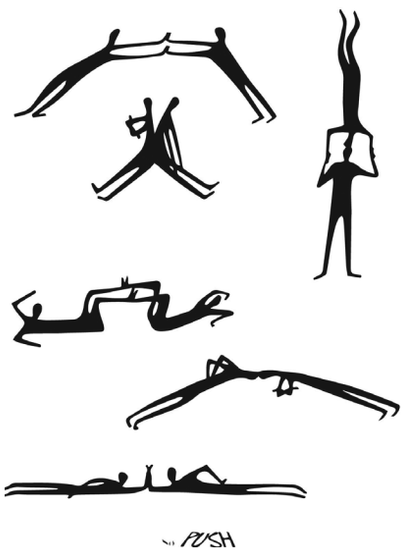
> I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; my gaze unconsciously projects my body onto the facade of the cathedral, where it roams over the mouldings and contours, sensing the size of recesses and projections; my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void behind. I experience myself in the city and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me.[8]

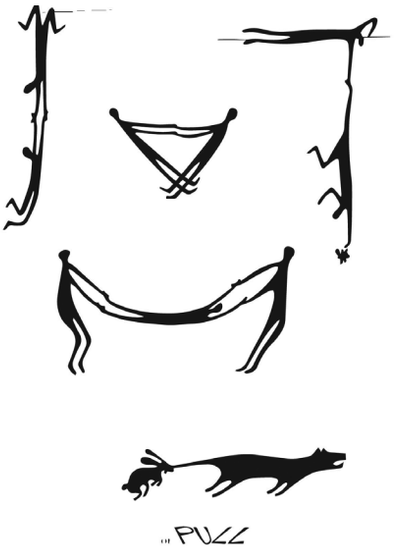
Similarly to this explanation, the book visualizes "the tectonics of a building", which is "understood through human scale and how different forces take place in constructing space; a column, a brick wall or a cathedral."[9] Here, along with kinaesthetic and cognitive perceptions, the body is an interface and an anthropomorphic metaphor for the creation of space. In this context, "Everyone can understand buildings. You feel gravity, wind, sun and rain. Buildings feel the same stresses and strains that people do. For this reason, you can put yourself in a building's place. When you feel what it feels like to be a building, you can talk to buildings and they will talk to you in building body language."[10]

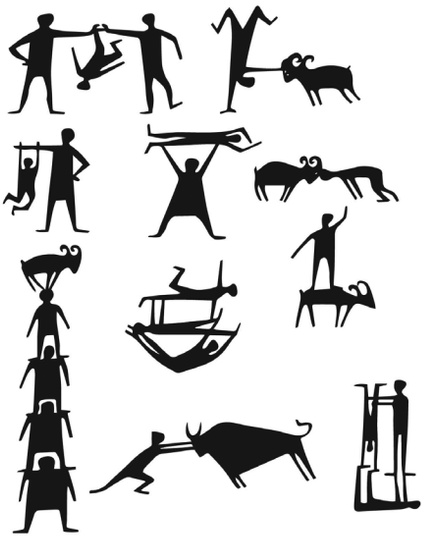




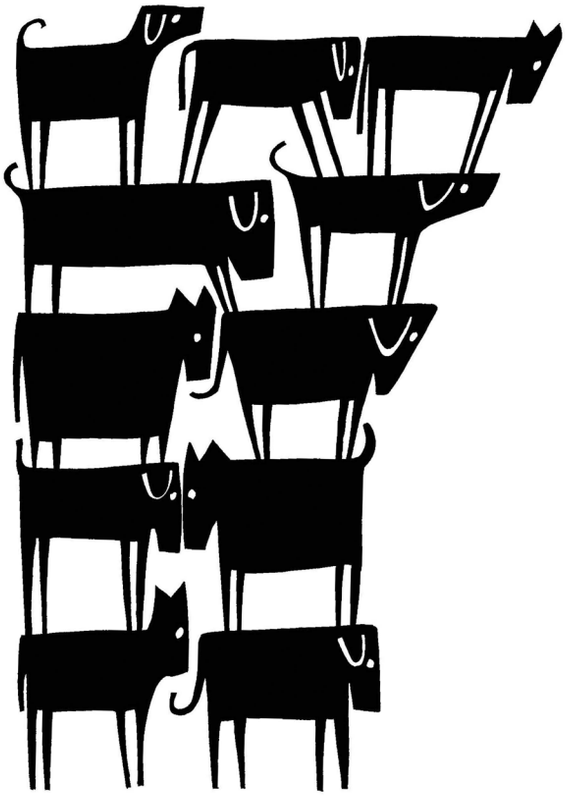
This is how it feels to be a cathedral with walls that stand up while they push straight down, topped by butting beams that push out and flying buttresses that take to the air to push them back again.



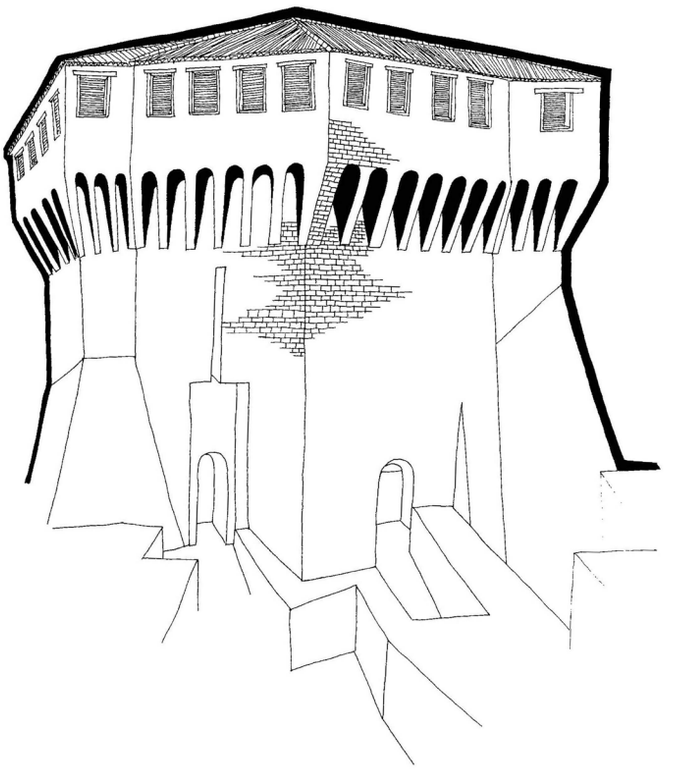




The book may also play a role in raising awareness of the synectics approach to problem-solving methodologies developed by Gordon in the 1960s. For example, a designer tries to perceive a product's sensation of storage and puts themselves in the position of the product, trying to feel how it exists in that space when designing a storage room in a factory. Understanding the psychological process in this way leads to more productive designs.[11]



A corbel is dogged.



Corbels stubbornly push out, bit by bit,
in little upside-down steps,
as they carry the load back to a building's walls.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is the "general instrument" of "comprehension."[12] In experiencing a structure, its configuration is imitated with our bones and muscles. The virtual animation of a building is again imitated in the body, performing like a column or a vault.[13] Similarly, the readers of this children's book can grasp the relationship between the body and the building and the essentials of its construction through kinaesthetic perception. Squeezing, drooping, squashing, bending, tugging and bracing are some of the actions performed by the squeezed human figures, accompanied by goats (or rams), dogs and bulls, to visualize forces of tension and compression. The flying buttress, for example, is accompanied by a flying winged goat or ram and, in another illustration, an arch is formed by the force between head-butting goats or rams. The tectonics of the architectural elements in this book trigger a sensory experience that can be felt through the muscles and senses of the human body. When considered in a broader context, this perception of the book can create an empathic bridge between the subject and the object.

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Notas

1. Florence S. Mitchell, "Introducing Art History Through Children's Literature," *Language Arts 67* (8) (December 1990), 844.
2. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 60.
3. Forrest Wilson, *What It Feels Like to Be a Building* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday & Company, 1969).
4. Tracey E. Fern, illustrated by Pau Estrada, *Pippo the Fool* (Watertown: Charlesbridge, 2011).
5. Rachel Victoria Rodríguez, illustrated by Julie Paschkis, *Building on Nature: The Life of Antoni Gaudí* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009).
6. Kathleen Thorne-Thomsen, illustrated by James Spence, *Frank Lloyd Wright for Kids: His Life and Ideas* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014).
7. Forrest Wilson has been a ship carpenter, construction superintendent, professor of architectural design and construction and director of the School of Architecture, Design and Planning at Ohio University. He has written 16 books on architecture and another illustrated children's book.
8. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*, 40.
9. Esen Gökçe Özdamar, "An Experience of the Soil: Modeling Intervention," *A+ArchDesign*, 2(2) (2016), 6.
10. Forrest Wilson, *What It Feels Like to Be a Building* (Washington: The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Landmark Reprint Series, 1988).
11. William J. J. Gordon, *Synectics: The Development of Creative Capacity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 6.
12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 273.
13. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*, 67.