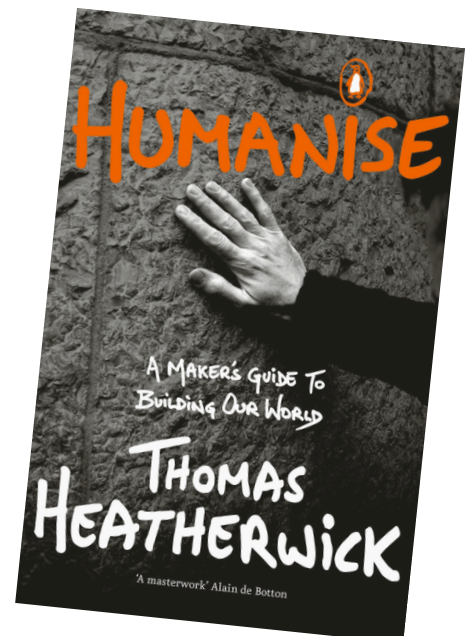


HUMANISE

A MAKER'S GUIDE TO
BUILDING OUR WORLD

**The Science of Storytelling
in Will Storr and Thomas
Heatherwick's - Humanise**



INTRODUCTION

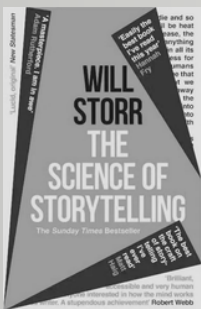
Architecture has long relied on manifestos, theoretical essays, and academic texts to explain itself. Despite being a fundamentally creative and spatial discipline, much of architecture's written output remains **DENSE, TEXT-HEAVY, & INACCESSIBLE** to those outside professional or academic circles. This raises an important question:

WHY DOES A FIELD CENTRED ON HUMAN EXPERIENCE SO OFTEN COMMUNICATE IN WAYS THAT FEEL DISENGAGING, INTIMIDATING, OR EMOTIONALLY DISTANT?

Published in 2023*, Humanise caused immediate disagreement across the architectural world. Some praised it as a necessary counterargument to a profession that had become detached from everyday human experience, while others criticised it as simplistic or unfairly dismissive of architectural intelligence. Heatherwick's language provoked strong backlash. His characterisation of architecture as a 'cult', bound by the idolisation of figures such as Le Corbusier, struck a nerve within the profession. Architects accused Heatherwick of oversimplifying complex social, economic, and political constraints and of attacking the very discipline that shaped his career.

Heatherwick's Humanise represents a radical departure from conventional architectural writing. Framed as "a maker's guide to building our world" (Humanise, cover), the book combines critique, narrative, and visual experimentation to challenge not only the built environment, but the culture of architecture itself. Yet the controversy surrounding Humanise is only part of its story. The other, less discussed but equally important aspect lies in how the book is written and designed.

Humanise does not behave like a conventional architectural text. It's tactile, image-led, emotionally driven, and deeply readable. It invites touch, curiosity, and engagement, feeling closer to an interactive picture book for adults than to an academic manifesto. This essay argues that Humanise stands out not only because of what it says about architecture, but because of how it communicates its argument.



Drawing on **Will Storr's: The Science of Storytelling**, this essay explores how Humanise uses narrative, visual rhythm, and sensory engagement to communicate architectural ideas.

By comparing Humanise with traditional architectural literature and examining it, the essay argues that Heatherwick's book exposes a deeper issue within architectural culture: the failure to design architectural writing for human beings.

ARCHITECTURE AS A CULT

and the wound of Criticism!

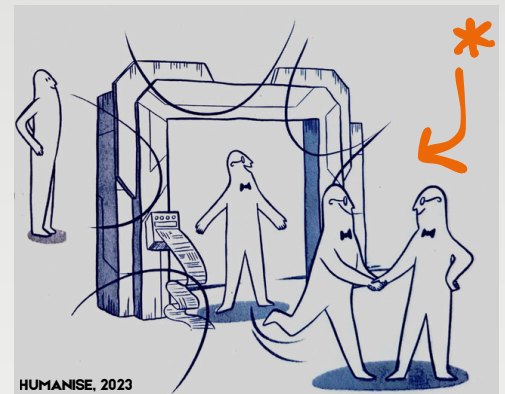


CANVA IMAGE DATABASE

Much of the backlash against Humanise stems from Heatherwick's framing of architecture as a culture. He repeatedly suggests that **architects are trained to think in narrow ways**,^{*} shared vocabulary and thinking, rewarded for conformity, and discouraged from questioning dominant values. His language is intentionally confrontational. By describing architecture as 'cult'-like, Heatherwick implies that allegiance to particular ideas, figures, and aesthetics has replaced independent thought and human empathy. Certain ways of drawing, modelling, and speaking are legitimised, while others are dismissed as naive or unsophisticated. Heatherwick argues that this creates a culture of imitation rather than invention.

Central to this critique is the figure of Le Corbusier. Heatherwick positions him not merely as an influential modernist, but as a symbolic guru whose ideas continue to dominate architectural taste, Efficient, Cheap & Simple: an easy option for developers and mass housing.

It is therefore understandable why many architects took offence. Critics argue that Humanise simplifies issues and risks blaming individual designers for failures rooted in wider political, economic, and regulatory structures. Heatherwick never received the full architecture qualification, approaching it as an outsider from a design background. Several reviews suggest that Heatherwick positions himself above the profession, benefiting from its privileges while denouncing its practices.



HUMANISE. 2023

However, the emotional intensity of the backlash reveals that Humanise touched a genuine wound. Heatherwick articulates frustrations that many architects privately experience but rarely voice publicly: the pressure to conform, the fear of appearing unserious, and the discomfort with places that feel hostile at human scale. Humanise brings these unspoken tensions into the open.

Press attention, both positive and negative, transformed Humanise into a public conversation rather than just an architectural text. This alone distinguishes it from most architectural books, within academic or professional circles. Heatherwick's critique may be uncomfortable. As an architecture student, I was told 'never to read this book'; reading it nonetheless, it became my favourite book I have ever read. It succeeds in making architecture visible and discussable to a wider audience.

ARCHITECTS AS ARTISTS

One of the stand out claims in Humanise is how architects perceive themselves. Heatherwick writes:

“ARCHITECTS SEE THEMSELVES AS ARTISTS.

TO BE CLEAR, THIS IS A GENERALISATION. SOME OF THEM DON'T. BUT MANY DO. AND EVEN THOSE WHO SAY THEY DON'T OFTEN THINK, SPEAK AND BEHAVE AS IF THEY DO.”

(HUMANISE, P183)

This statement strikes the heart of the architectural identity. Heatherwick is not dismissing creativity, but questioning the consequences of its culture. When architects prioritise internal validation over public experience, buildings risk becoming exercises in self-expression rather than civic contribution.

This critique resonates strongly with debates around architectural education. Studios often reward theoretical ambition & visual novelty. Heatherwick's description of his own education shows this:

“EVENTUALLY HE (PROFESSOR) LOOKED UP AND SAID, ‘WHAT’S THE POETRY OF YOUR IDEA?’

... ‘THIS IS NOT ARCHITECTURE.’ ”

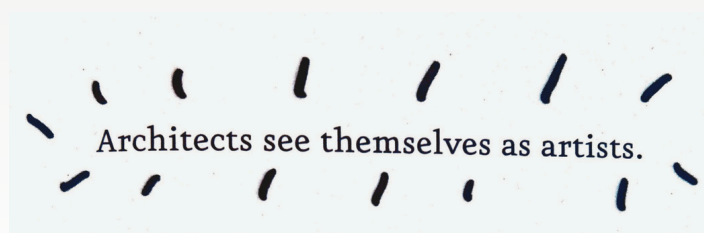
THE IMPLICATION IS CLEAR: WITHOUT METAPHORICAL JUSTIFICATION, A BUILDING DOES NOT QUALIFY AS ARCHITECTURE. Heatherwick's confusion is telling:

“IF AN ARCHITECT IS A DESIGNER OF BUILDINGS AND I'D DESIGNED A BUILDING, THEN WHY WASN'T THE BUILDING I'D DESIGNED ARCHITECTURE?

WHY DID IT REQUIRE ‘POETRY’ TO COUNT?”

(HUMANISE, P181)

This moment shows a broader institutional problem. Architecture often is framed not as something that works, or supports life, but as something that must be explained through abstract language. Humanise positions itself in opposition to this logic, arguing that lived experience should be sufficient justification.



HUMANISE, 2023

CRITICAL REACTIONS TO



Media responses from architectural critics were often sharp and dismissive. Rowan Moore, writing in *The Observer*^{*}, described Heatherwick's critique of modern architecture as "head-numbingly, soul-crushingly simplistic", arguing that it insultingly ignores contemporary architects who actively strive to design humane buildings, such as Lacaton or Vassal. If one were to read the book again, they would notice the extract on Peter Barber's McGrath Road, where Heatherwick congratulates the project for its approach.

Oliver Wainwright of *The Guardian*^{**} similarly criticised the book's tone and logic, describing its argument as "spelled out in preschool prose" and accusing Heatherwick of reducing architectural complexity to a single rule repeated over hundreds of pages.

Wainwright also highlights a perceived hypocrisy, pointing out that some of Heatherwick's own large-scale projects appear to contradict the principles he advocates. This "do as I say, not as I do" critique recurs across multiple reviews and reflects a broader discomfort with Heatherwick's position as both insider and critic.

Other critics focused on the book's presentation. Hugh Pearman^{***}, writing for *RIBA Journal*, describes *Humanise* as a "manifesto diatribe" against boring buildings, designed for quick consumption. He notes the large fonts, wide spacing, and the dominance of images over text, characterising the prose as almost "childish". Joe Lloyd, writing in *Disegno*^{****}, accused it of portraying "trained architects as both misguided rationalists and indoctrinated cult members who see the world through a warped perspective." while offering vague alternatives.

John Hill, writing for *World-Architects*,^{*****} suggests that much of *Humanise* reiterates ideas previously articulated by figures such as Christopher Alexander, Jane Jacobs, and Jan Gehl. He argues that the book's true audience is the general public "that he wants to rile up" rather than architects, describing it as easy to read but ultimately forgettable, and likely to alienate the profession it critiques.

^{*}Rowan Moore, "Review - Thomas Heatherwick's Simplistic Critique of Modern Architecture," *The Observer*, October 22, 2023, sec. Books

^{**}Oliver Wainwright, "'Dangerously Misguided': The Glaring Problem with Thomas Heatherwick's Architectural Dreamworld," *The Guardian*, October 27, 2023, sec. Art

^{***}Hugh Pearman, "High contrast: books from John Tuomey and Thomas Heatherwick" *Ribaj.com* (RIBA JOURNAL, 2025),

^{****}Joe Lloyd, "The Attention of Passersby" *Disegno Journal*, *Disegno Journal*, March 25, 2024,

^{*****}John Hill, "The Anatomy of 'Humanise' - Thomas Heatherwick's 'Humanise: A Maker's Guide to Building Our World,'" *World-Architects*, 2023

POSITIVE PUBLIC PRAISE



Despite professional criticism, Humanise received widespread praise from figures outside traditional architectural circles. Alain de Botton* described it as:

“QUIETLY FURIOUS, IMPASSIONED, RIGOROUS AND FORENSIC”

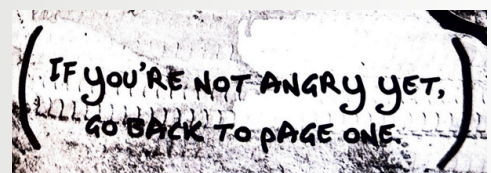
While Mariana Mazzucato emphasised its call for public value and joy, and Sir Terry Farrell welcomed it as the urgent public conversation architecture has long avoided. Simon Sinek praised its demand that buildings put people first. His first book, ‘start with why’ encouraging individual ways of thinking rather than conformity.

“Celebrities and public figures are drawn to him: Joanna Lumley, Sadiq Khan, Alain de Botton. Conran once hailed him as “the Leonardo da Vinci of our times”.”**

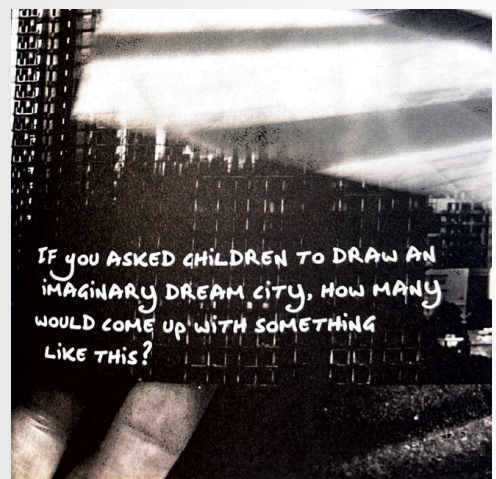
This divide between professional defensiveness and public enthusiasm is revealing. It suggests that Humanise succeeds precisely where many architectural books fail: in communicating architectural ideas to non-specialists or students, in an emotionally resonant way.



HUMANISE, 2023



HUMANISE, 2023



HUMANISE, 2023

*(Back of Book) Thomas Heatherwick, Humanise (Random House, 2023).

**Joe Lloyd, “Disegno Journal,” Disegno Journal, March 25, 2024,

WILL STORR AND THE SCIENCE OF STORYTELLING

THE INFLUENCE OF WILL STORR IS CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTANDING WHY HUMANISE FEELS SO COMPELLING.

In *The Science of Storytelling*, Storr argues that humans are neurologically wired to understand the world through narrative. Stories engage emotion, create meaning, and shape belief. Information alone rarely persuades; emotional coherence does.

Storr emphasises that effective storytelling relies on tension, curiosity, and clarity. Readers need to feel involved, not instructed. This insight is directly reflected in *Humanise*. Rather than presenting a linear, academic argument, the book unfolds through fragments, images and anecdotes. The reader is repeatedly invited to pause, reflect, and feel.

Architectural writing rarely adopts these techniques. Most texts assume a reader is willing to navigate dense paragraphs and specialist language. *Humanise* rejects this assumption. Its structure mirrors how people actually read in contemporary culture: scanning, dipping in and out, returning to images, and responding emotionally.

In *The Science of Storytelling*, he writes that “stories are how we make sense of the world,” because they mirror the way humans experience identity, conflict, and belief. Central to this is what Storr calls the flawed self: a protagonist whose internal view of the world is different, and who must confront that flaw through challenges.

Humanise adopts this logic. Heatherwick positions himself as a flawed protagonist, recounting moments of rejection, confusion, and doubt within architectural education. His story about being told “This is not architecture” functions exactly as Storr describes: a moment where an internal belief collides with institutional authority, producing emotional tension and curiosity. At the same time, architecture itself is cast as the flawed character. The misbelief lies in prioritising abstract ideology, and peer approval over human design.

Storr also emphasises that stories persuade through emotion rather than instruction: “We don’t change our minds when we’re instructed. We change when we feel.” *Humanise* follows this principle structurally. Rather than resolving conflict neatly, the book sustains tension, encouraging readers to reassess their own beliefs about what architecture is for.

The Sunday Times Bestseller

VISUAL & TACTILE DESIGN

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Humanise is its physical and visual design. The textured cover, taken from the surface of Casa Milà, immediately engages the reader's sense of touch. This transforms the book into an interactive object.



Inside, the book defies conventional layout. Full-page photographs interrupt text. Doodles and sketches appear alongside bold statements. FONT SIZES shift, key words are emphasised, and,

white space is used generously.

This visual rhythm prevents fatigue and sustains attention, reflecting the way designers often think visually rather than verbally.

In contrast, many architectural books found in university libraries are linear, restrained, and endurance-based. They demand commitment rather than curiosity. Humanise feels safe, inviting, and encouraging. It acknowledges the realities of contemporary attention spans without sacrificing seriousness.

This approach reflects broader cultural shifts. In a world saturated with digital stimuli, books must compete for attention. Heatherwick does not resist this condition; he designs for it. As a result, Humanise reaches audiences far beyond architecture students and professionals, functioning as a cultural object rather than an academic artefact.

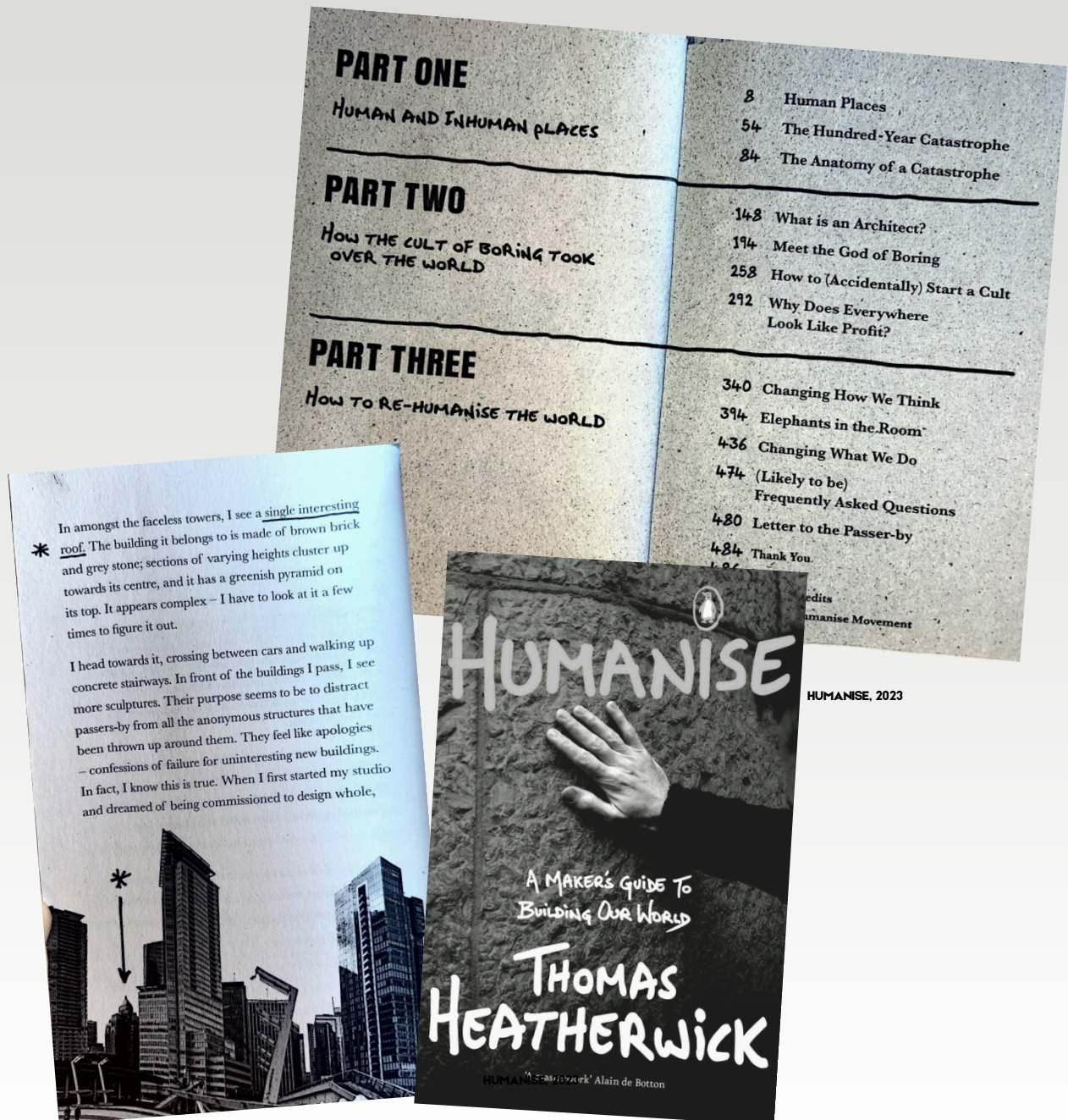
Architecture is not unfamiliar with image-led publishing. Coffee-table books, monographs, and magazines rely heavily on photography. However, these formats often prioritise aesthetics over argument. Images serve as evidence of success rather than tools for thinking, while accompanying text remains detached and explanatory.

Humanise differs because its visuals are integral to its narrative. Images do not decorate the argument; they are the argument. The book asks readers to feel before they analyse. This distinguishes it from other attempts at accessibility that remain superficial or commercially driven.

The physical design of *Humanise* is integral to its argument. Heavy paper stock, full-bleed images, diagrams, and bold typography turn the book into an object that demands interaction. This stands in contrast to conventional architectural monographs, which often prioritise documentation over experience.

Heatherwick treats the book as an extension of architectural space. The layout controls pacing, directs attention, and creates moments of pause or impact. This reflects a belief that communication itself is a design act. The visual language reinforces the core message: architecture should be felt, not decoded.

Attempts at accessible architectural publishing are not new. Books such as Rem Koolhaas' *S,M,L,XL* experimented with visual overload and non-linear structure, but remained deeply embedded in architectural theory.



NARRATIVE AS STRATEGY, NOT WEAKNESS

Unlike traditional architectural texts, Humanise is structured around stories and anecdotes, rather than linear theory. The sentence:

"IF YOU'RE NOT ANGRY YET.
Go BACK TO PAGE ONE."

(HUMANISE, P145)

is an example of this approach. The reader is not invited to passively absorb information, but to feel something. Anger, frustration, recognition. This emotional engagement is precisely what many critics found uncomfortable.

Within architectural culture, emotion can often be questioned. Rationality, analysis, and detachment are privileged. Yet cities are emotional environments. Buildings shape mood, behaviour, and memory.

By choosing narrative over jargon, Humanise aligns itself with a broader tradition of design writing aimed at the public, such as Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

Jacobs, like Heatherwick, was criticised for lacking formal credentials and for simplifying complex urban issues. Yet her impact was transformative.

The hostility Humanise encountered echoes this pattern.



HUMANISE, WEBSITE

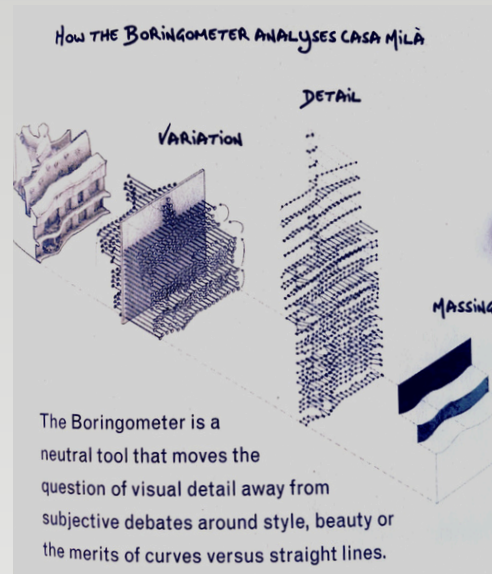
THE BORINGOMETER AND THE REJECTION OF STYLISTIC DEBATE

One of the book's most discussed tools is the Boringometer, which Heatherwick describes as a neutral method for assessing visual monotony. He applies it to Casa Milà, analysing:

“DETAIL

VARIATION

MASSING”



HUMANISE, 2023

Heatherwick explicitly states that it:

“moves the question of visual detail away from subjective debates around style, beauty or the merits of curves versus straight lines.”

(Humanise, P463)

This is a strategic move. Architectural criticism is often paralysed by styles. Modernism versus classicism, minimalism versus ornament, form versus function. The Boringometer sidesteps these binaries and reframes the discussion around perceptual engagement. Does a building offer visual richness at the scale of human movement? Does it reward attention

at:



(HUMANISE, P351)

scale.

Critics accused this tool of oversimplification, arguing that architecture cannot be reduced to a measure of “boring.” However, this criticism misses the point. The Boringometer is not a scientific instrument but a rhetorical device. It exposes how rarely architects discuss boredom as a legitimate design failure, despite its profound impact on daily life.

ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE AND THE LEGACY OF AUTHORITY

Architectural writing has historically been bound to authority. Architectural texts have often sought to define what architecture is, rather than how it feels or whom it serves.

By invoking **FIRMITAS, UTILITAS, VENUSTAS** in a contemporary context, Humanise suggests that architecture has lost sight of its own foundational values, particularly venustas as a lived experience rather than abstract or hostile experimentation.

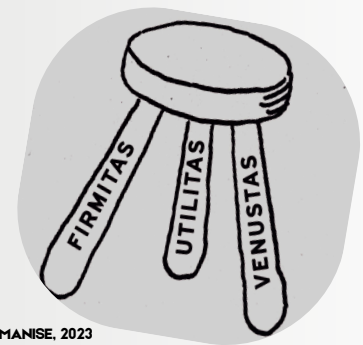
Le Corbusier's writing, particularly *Towards a New Architecture*, set a template for the architect. Buildings were framed as moral instruments, cities as machines, and architects as visionaries uniquely qualified to impose order. This tradition cemented the idea that architecture was an intellectual pursuit requiring specialised literacy. Emotional response, public opinion, and sensory pleasure were secondary to conceptual coherence.

Heatherwick's work directly confronts this inheritance. Where Le Corbusier used language to assert authority, Humanise uses language to dismantle it. The tone is conversational, sometimes confrontational, and deliberately non-academic. This stylistic shift is not accidental; it is a political move. By refusing the traditional register of architectural criticism, Heatherwick challenges the profession's mechanisms.

However, the same emotional and narrative approach that makes Humanise so engaging is also where its argument risks falling short.

By focusing on feeling and accessibility, the book sometimes reduces complex structural problems to issues of professional culture or attitude. While this simplification helps the book reach a wider audience, it can blur the political, economic, and regulatory forces that shape the built environment beyond the control of individual architects.

By framing architectural failure mainly as a cultural problem, Humanise risks overlooking planning systems, funding models, and market pressures that limit what designers can realistically change. As a result, its call to re-humanise architecture, though persuasion, can feel hopeful rather than practical, encouraging agreement without fully explaining how change might occur.



HUMANISE, 2023

FIRMITAS, UTILITAS, VENUSTAS

(HUMANISE, P161)

Firmness, Utility, and delight

DURABLE, USEFUL, & BEAUTIFUL

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING ARCHITECTURAL COMMUNICATION

Humanise is not without flaws. Its critiques can feel sweeping, its tone provocative, and its solutions idealistic. The frustration expressed by architects is valid. Yet dismissing the book entirely misses its deeper contribution.

By applying the science of storytelling and designing the book as an experiential object, Heatherwick and Storr demonstrate a new model for architectural writing: one that is accessible without being simplistic, critical without being academic, and emotional without being sentimental.

In an age of distraction, Humanise proves that seriousness does not require dryness. For creative disciplines, the form of communication matters as much as its content. As architecture grapples with questions of relevance, responsibility, and public trust, Humanise offers a compelling reminder of who architecture is ultimately for.

The book did not just challenge architectural culture; it sparked my excitement for reading and thinking through architecture, more than ever. I struggle to grasp conventional academic writing. It feels to me as if there is only one acceptable way to think, speak, or design. In a discipline that attracts many neurodiverse and creative minds, Heatherwick captures the pressure when he describes the crit as a place where students “undergo brain transplants as they learn how to think, talk, feel and act like architects” (HUMANISE, P263), a statement that strongly resonates with my own experience.

While I recognise the criticisms of Humanise and understand why some find its ideas confrontational, I choose to read the book as an invitation rather than an attack. For me, it offers permission to think, write, and operate in my own way, and in doing so, reinforces the importance of questioning not only how architecture is made, but how it is communicated. That the future, could be different, and that my intuition is enough, nurtured on its own.

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