Kathleen Franz is guest curator of David Macaulay: The Art of Drawing Architecture. She is assistant professor and director of public history in the Department of History at American University.

Since 1973, David Macaulay has delighted readers with his accessible and often humorous illustrated stories of architecture and engineering history. Author of more than 20 books, Macaulay has won numerous awards for his unique visual narratives, including a Caldecott Medal for Black and White (1991). In 2006, he was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship for his “exceptional creativity.”

Macaulay’s work defies simple classification, occupying the creative intersections between illustration and architecture, history and archeology, storytelling and criticism. His most recent architecture book, Mosque (2003), treats readers to unexpected and often breathtaking views of a fictional sixteenth-century landmark. Macaulay not only explains the construction of a classical Ottoman mosque, but also engages the reader through a historical narrative and stunning illustrations.

Dedicated to pen and ink, rather than computer programs, Macaulay argues that hand drawing is a tool for enhancing visual literacy, promoting careful observation, curiosity, and recognition of the complexity of everyday things. He uses drawing to deconstruct buildings and other large-scale structures, to render city streets transparent, to take readers below the surface of things, and to explain the invisible workings of the built world.

The National Building Museum’s current exhibition, David Macaulay: The Art of Drawing Architecture [on view through January 21, 2008], examines the artist’s creative process as a form of visual archeology—a metaphor for excavating past architectural practice through drawing. Featuring a substantial number of sketches, sketchbooks, and finished drawings, the exhibition explores Macaulay’s use of drawing as an integral part of his process for researching, recording, and explaining architecture.

In conjunction with the exhibition, I recently discussed Macaulay’s work with him.
Kathleen Franz: You describe yourself as an explainer of things. How so?

David Macaulay: Well, it’s what I ended up doing. I don’t think it was my intent from the beginning at all. But as I was steered into architecture books, I realized that I was making architecture—old and new—accessible through drawings. To make architecture accessible, you have to offer a fairly full explanation of how things come about, why things end up looking the way they do, why we feel the way we do about certain pieces of architecture. It meant figuring out how to [identify] those things that really needed to be explained, that were essential to understanding the process and the finished form, and then making the buildings come alive somehow. So, yes, as a teacher either in book form or in the classroom, I’m always explaining.

Franz: How were you steered into doing architecture books?

Macaulay: I realized after graduating from architecture school that I wanted to illustrate books. . . but [not] about architecture. I had a quite different direction planned—a much more playful, fantastic career of purely imaginative picture books. And the first idea that had any kind of merit was a story about gargoyles set in the Middle Ages. It looked to me like people in the children’s book world were having a good time. I thought I wanted to be part of that group, but I didn’t know much about anything other than what I had learned in architecture school. So, there was a natural tendency for me to move towards something that I felt some kind of kinship with.

Franz: So your work marries architecture to storytelling?

Macaulay: Right. In retrospect it doesn’t seem surprising. I set a story in a medieval town where a cathedral was being built so I would have these background images and it would [provide] a reason for gargoyles to be carved. So, what my editor, Walter Lorraine [at Houghton Mifflin], did was very adroitly suggest that I forget the gargoyles and concentrate on the building because what he saw in those background scenes was something that he had not seen anyone trying to do. And he thought it would be much more interesting to have a children’s story about architecture than one about gargoyles.

Franz: What drew you to architecture school in the first place?

Macaulay: When you’re a junior in high school and know almost nothing and they tell you that pretty soon you’re going to have to go somewhere else and, in theory, you should be thinking about the rest of your life, your career…. I was in Cumberland, Rhode Island, 20 minutes from the Rhode Island School of Design. So I thought, as someone who had always drawn and was curious about how things were made, it seemed sensible to study architecture. I got accepted and I went off to study architecture, [but] by my fourth year I knew I didn’t want to be an architect.

Franz: Why not?

Macaulay: Well, there was a formal apprenticeship that followed graduation; you worked in an office with a bunch of people. How frequently you actually got a chance to work on something really interesting would be the big issue. I decided I wanted to work on some-
thing more personal. So once I graduated, I did a bunch of stuff: I taught art in public school and I did some freelance illustration work and began to think more about this book idea. And then there I was, three years later in 1973, with the publication of the book *Cathedral*, coming back to architecture.

**Macaulay:** Absolutely. From the very first presentation I made, when I was sidetracked by what I knew would be a classic story of gargoyles, the first thing I did was go back and start re-reading some of my architecture books. Then I made a set of drawings on tracing paper that started with nothing—just a site. In fact, I started with a story of a town, with an old church that had burned down. Then I drew as if I was recording a process that was actually happening out my window. It's sort of like stop-motion photography. The thing that makes it interesting and engaging is that you don't always put the camera in the same place. The reader is being shown what it feels like to be part of the process of putting the building together.

**Franz:** The sketchbooks for *Mosque* seem almost interrogative; you're asking questions and then using the sketchbook to answer them.

**Macaulay:** The great thing about sketching is it forces you to really look at things, to stop and pay attention. Things aren't necessarily self-explanatory. I might see under the eave of the roof, for instance, bricks coming out at a particular angle. Now I can't tell whether they're square bricks that are set deeply into the wall with just these little triangular corner points coming out or whether they're triangular bricks made just for that purpose and so on. But I wouldn’t even have thought about that if I hadn’t sketched it, if I hadn't started to look at the details.

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**Macaulay:** The first reason for the paper models is to get the proportions down. Once you've got the model then obviously you can rotate it in front of you. You can move your eye up and down it and observe the change in perspective as you move from, let’s say, the corner of the top of the wall down to the base of the wall. The models are very simple. They’re not pretty models, but they’re very useful models.

**Franz:** Why not just use a computer?

**Macaulay:** My heart just did a little flutter there. Because I want to be in control and I don’t want someone else’s program telling me what I can and cannot do. There’s too much to be learned. In building a model, you’re learning about the proportions, you’re not thinking about how to draw a line or an edge using your mouse or your stylus.

**Franz:** How did *Great Moments in Architecture*, which melds humor and architecture, come about?

**Macaulay:** Actually it was done to provide artwork for an exhibition. It was supposed to be just a collection of drawings for a show that I was invited to have in New York [exhibiting and selling] drawings from *Cathedral, City, and Pyramid*. But I didn’t want to. So, I decided to...
create a kind of phony art history book and I drew them pompously and I did all the cross-hatching and all that sort of stuff to give them a sort of integrity, but underneath it all was just total nonsense. I really love working those two things together, make it look serious, with plate numbers, sketch numbers, notes at the back—I mean, really turn it on its head and making the images themselves undercut the seriousness of the overall appearance.

Franz: Was Great Moments a pastiche of the 18th-century draftsman Giovanni Battista Piranesi?

Macaulay: Oh yes, absolutely. The space and the volume and whatnot in Piranesi’s images is so fantastic and part of my desire in making those drawings with all the pen and ink and the cross etching was to do some of that kind of Piranesi stuff, and create some big spaces and turn relatively modest structures into imposing ruins.

Franz: A strong archeological thread runs through all of your work. Is this just fun for you, or is it also a way to critique architecture?

Macaulay: I think it’s mostly fun. [For example, the book called] Unbuilding was a way of presenting architecture that was a little different. I didn’t want to build another building from the ground up. So I thought, well, just take it apart. It’s the first of my subjects that was a real building. It’s the first time I actually did have to pay attention to people’s names and dates and things of that nature. But with the archeology, I just always thought that was really fun—discovering things, and then having to figure out what the connection is between them because there’s no one there to tell you anymore. [In Motel of the Mysteries], I just thought it would be kind of playful to take something that we could look at now, and then seeing how somebody at some distant time might misinterpret and misrepresent it.

We take all that stuff for granted and once things are presented to us in so-called history books written by scholars, we assume this must be the truth. And I think it’s always wise to be a little skeptical and be willing to ask questions. How did they know that? Why did they decide that? Why did they call it sacred?

Franz: After drawing for some 30 years are there still challenges for you?

Macaulay: Oh man, that doesn’t change. I mean the books take me longer now than ever because I think I’m more demanding—I have higher expectations. On the good side I think I’m getting better at it but I’m not getting faster. So the projects take longer and longer. It’s supposed to work the other way, isn’t it?

Franz: Your next book is on the human body. Will it be similar to the architecture books?

Macaulay: Well it is bound to be similar in certain ways. But in the end it’s about how we work. We start with cells and then move into circulation and respiration and then digestion and then into the brain, which is a long section. I started it because I felt completely ignorant of the subject. I’m getting older and things will start breaking down. I’m going to start feeling a little more pain here or there. But where is it coming from? And why? And how? So I was sort of driven by my realization of my own happy ignorance.

It has been the hardest thing I’ve ever done. The level of complexity here is way beyond anything I’ve tackled in the past. Now maybe that’s why the books are taking longer because I’m open to those kinds of things now.

Franz: Will you write a book on your own creative process?

Macaulay: I think it has to be done by somebody else if there is to be one, but every one of my books is about my creative process in a way.

Franz: But now you can rest on your laurels ….

Macaulay: I can’t find my laurels.

Franz: What about the MacArthur award?

Macaulay: Well the interesting thing about the MacArthur is that it gives you a chance to do something that you’ve always wanted to. I can’t think of anything I would rather do than what I’m doing. The MacArthur has allowed me to relax a little bit on the body book, not have to crank it out to meet some kind of artificial deadline. That’s what the MacArthur has done for me, which is an extraordinary gift.

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