

Interview with Peter Allen

Would you like to introduce yourself?

I grew up in the UK where I studied illustration at art school, working mainly in printmaking, making lino cuts that I hand coloured with stencils.

This led to collaborations with a number of small presses and publication of a number of books, printed with letterpress text and stencilled illustrations.

Currently I work mainly with childrens book publishers along with regular commissions for editorial work.

I also like to take part in book fairs for which I produce small runs of printed stuff; stencil prints, accordion books, stamps...

I am currently working with the Nomad Letterpress on a stencilled book edition about french birds, Oiseaux de France and on a new project with Cicada (the publisher of Amazing Architecture) about empires, their rise and fall...

How would you describe your style in three words?

detailed, colourful, whimsical

In which subject areas are you specialized in your illustrations?

Most of the time I illustrate non-fiction titles and aim to encourage both adults and children alike to view the everyday as a source of surprise and wonder.

As a result I get called to illustrate a great diversity of subject matter including energy, construction, recycling, food, germs, astronomy, egyptians...

The challenge for me always is getting interested in a subject which can sometimes involve quite a bit of researching before my imagination is caught.

Do you have a favorite building or special inspiration?

If I remember correctly the film Dead Man by Jim Jarmusch was the big inspiration for this book. There is a scene in which the main character is brought by canoe to a riverside village where he is carried into a wooden meeting house through a giant bird's beak that opens up to form a doorway. It was the inspiration for the Chief Waka's House spread.

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A lot further back I was fascinated as a kid about historical monuments and wherever we went on holiday that's what we spent much of the time doing, going round castles, stone circles, the Hadrian's roman wall between England and Scotland.

Also there was an artist, Alan Sorrell who used to live near our house who illustrated all the official guide books to these monuments, his charcoal and ink pen drawings of the ruins as they would have appeared in their time were very atmospheric and contained a wealth of imagined details of everyday activities that really brought the scenes to life.

Another inspiration was the This Is.. series of picture books by Miroslav Sasek in which he'd capture the spirit of a city in many colourful and humorous images.

I always hoped it would be my job one day to travel round the world drawing places!

Lastly, I think Richard Scarry's books, like Things That Go and What Do People Do All Day?, impressed me with how much informative detail he was able to contain within the bright, almost cartoon-like scenes.

Have you ever visited certain buildings yourself?

Only a few! Casa Battlo in Barcelona and Avebury and Brighton Pavilion back home in England.

When I research a subject to illustrate I go through a large amount of images before selecting a very small percentage to use as visual references.

Often the rest that goes unused contains many great ideas for pictures that nonetheless rarely, if ever, make it into a book.

Almost all the buildings in this book I discovered after a long time spent searching on internet for 'amazing architecture'!

I shared with Ziggy (Hanaor) of Cicada the wish to go for buildings that don't normally get included on the popular top ten lists, to better represent buildings that are less well known in places more off the beaten track.

I think not having visited these buildings and then having a strong desire to discover them through less direct means was part of the fun of making this book.

I was once commissioned to make an illustration of Tower Bridge, London and it took me a lot of hard work to find photos from all sides of the bridge and still had to improvise for many sections.

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The next time I went to London I walked across the bridge and was finally able to see the missing details. I spent ages taking photos just in case one day I got asked to do another picture of it!

Likewise for Amazing Architecture I had to understand how the building looked like in its entirety before choosing the best viewpoint to show it from. Some of the illustrations bend the rules of perspective a bit, sometimes a lot, so that as much of the building as possible could be included to fit within the limits of the double page.

What structures didn't make it into the work that you would have liked to have included?

Making pictures of buildings and working out how they have been constructed from the foundations upwards, how the inside connects to the outside, how the buildings evolve climbing up from the street to the rooftop, is both an important and satisfying part of the work involved in the making of the illustrations.

Gaudì's buildings are based on a vision that considers how every last inch of space fits his design and I would have loved to describe more of his buildings for the colours used to decorate them and the beautiful mixture of craftsmanship, ceramics, wood, glass ironwork, used in their construction.

In order to include a fairly even choice from around the world and also through the centuries we had to leave out way more than we would have liked to.

Some of the buildings that come to mind are:

The 18thc Dessau-Wörlitz Gothic house and park with rock island and erupting volcano - I have a soft spot for the neo-gothic style, the house is like a lifesized doll's house and there is a rocky island in the gardens with an exploding volcano on it, brilliant!

Sir John Soane's museum, London - A extraordinary collection of architectural artefacts from around the world housed in the 19thc architect's equally eccentric house.

Nonsuch House on London Bridge - a wooden palace perched on top of the old medieval bridge Salvador Dali's house at Port Lligat, Spain - a row of former fisherman's cottages converted into a labyrinth of rooms and gardens decorated by Gaudì in a surreal mix of traditional and popular styles.

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Two spreads that were finally left off the shortlist because we ran out of time: Choquequirao, Peru and the Einstein Tower, Berlin.

Maybe they'll one day get to kick off an Amazing Architecture part #2?!

Are there specific features to consider in making a children's book?

As i've a long experience of working on children's books there wasn't anything really that I had to adapt in the way I work.

Furthermore, children's books are a particularly good area to be imaginative as an illustrator and the subject matter gave me free rein to be creative with colour and shapes and telling stories.

I've been reading some of Günter Grass' novels recently and admire how he overlays the main narrative with passages about a particular place at different times and through the different viewpoints of the characters that live there.

This was on my mind when making the illustrations for this book as a means to tell something about the buildings rich histories within the same picture space.

Did you experience anything surprising during the project?

There was a lot to fit into the book so it was a very pleasant surprise for us to make it to the end of the book without having experienced any mishaps, big or small, it all seemed to fit together really well thanks to Ziggy's insightful planning.