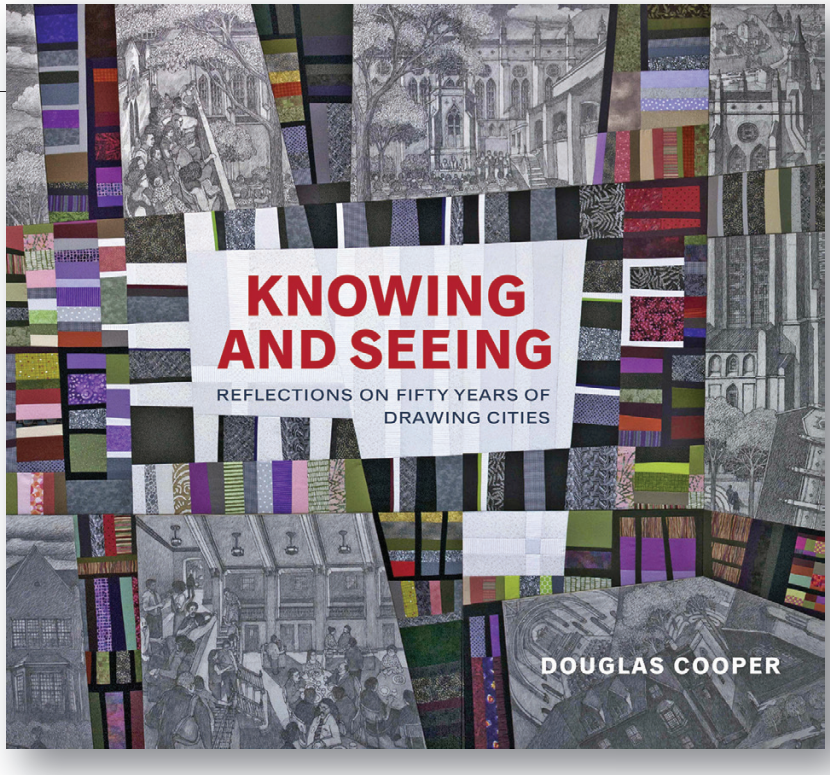
Book Reviews



Knowing and Seeing: Reflections on Fifty Years of Drawing Cities

By Douglas Cooper
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019
248 pages, cloth, $75
Reviewed by Eric Lidji, Director of Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives

Douglas Cooper makes exceptionally faithful, physically impossible drawings of cities, primarily his hometown of Pittsburgh. His epic cityscapes contain far more city than the eye can actually see from any one spot in the real world, a feat he accomplishes by contorting reality. Houses are warped. Topography is tilted. Demolished structures return from the past. The results, magically, seem more correct than a straightforward rendering, especially if you know the setting well. What is wrong to the eye feels right to the heart.

In the seven essays in *Knowing and Seeing: Reflections on Fifty Years of Drawing Cities*, Cooper reveals the techniques and philosophy underpinning his approach. Cooper teaches drawing at the Carnegie Mellon University School of Architecture, where he studied in the 1960s. Initially bound for architecture, he veered into illustration following a paradoxical class assignment in 1965. The sculptor Kent Bloomer told his students to make a drawing showing both the inside of their studio and the space outside it as well.

Some of Cooper's drawings literally depict interiors and exteriors of the same structure, such as his rendering of East Liberty Presbyterian Church opened like a dollhouse to reveal calm rows of pews. More often he proceeds metaphorically, channeling real places in the "outside" world (seeing) through his subjective "inside" experiences (knowing). He devotes one essay to maps, which might initially seem like impartial, omnipotent renderings of a given place but often convey deeply personal memories and priorities.

Playing with perspective and scale allows him to fit a three-dimensional place onto a single two-dimensional space. He "nests" an intimate neighborhood scene into the hubbub of the surrounding city, or "layers" city blocks against a river in the middle ground, and hills deep into the background. Although he has completed commissions all over the world, Pittsburgh is clearly the muse for this method. The topography, views, industry, and neighborhoods accommodate his approach in a way flat sprawl could not.

Cooper is increasingly in demand as a muralist. Here he insists on collaboration, seeing the form as demanding a communal point of view. He frequently involves other artists but just as often enlists local amateurs. His epic mural *The Visible City*, hanging across four floors of the Heinz History Center, was produced in partnership with residents at the Vintage senior living center in East Liberty. Cooper derived his all-encompassing depiction of Pittsburgh on the stories they told him. He even went so far as to make collages using the sketches they made to illustrate certain points about the city.

The design of *Knowing and Seeing* is impressive. Drawings intended to overwhelm with their grand scale somehow work within the confines of a small page, thanks in part to generous foldout images. Art books as lovely and generous as this one often overpower their accompanying prose, but even those who have no interest in understanding the mechanisms behind Cooper's drawings would be advised to read his essays. He writes with the clarity of someone who has been thinking about his craft for decades. Some of the essays have the calm, revelatory quality of a great college course. Others have the casual intimacy of dinner table talk. Sprinkled throughout his dissection of his craft are enough surprising and profound personal anecdotes to make this book almost a memoir.

Also look for the History Center's newest online exclusive book:

Radium City, A History of America's First Nuclear Industry

By Ed Landa and Joel Lubenau

Radium City tells the story of two brothers, James J. and Joseph M. Flannery, undertakers-turned-industrialists who twice succeeded in making once-rare metals, vanadium and radium, in commercially available quantities.

Vanadium steel made Ford's Model T possible, and the medical applications of radium paved the way for today's use of radioactive materials in medicine. In 2018, a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker at the University of Pittsburgh's Allen Hall was dedicated to mark the Flannery brothers' radium enterprise and Marie Curie's 1921 visit to the company's laboratory in Pittsburgh. The authors' stories behind their interest is interesting as well.

Joel Lubenau's introduction to the Pittsburgh-based company that produced radium occurred in July 1963 when, as a green U.S. Public Health Service officer detailed to the Pennsylvania radiation control program, he was sent to Pittsburgh to investigate a report of radioactive property found at an auction house. It came from the estate of a gentleman who lived in Dormont—Arthur L. Miller, once employed by the radium production company Standard Chemical Company (SCC). His house was, no surprise, contaminated by radium that had to be remediated. He would encounter Miller's name and that of the SCC again and again. Lubenau's articles on the history of the use of radiation and radioactive materials and their impact upon popular culture have appeared in scientific journals as well as popular journals such as *Pennsylvania Heritage* and *Western Pennsylvania History*.

After receiving his Ph.D. in soil science, Edward (Ed) R. Landa joined the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). He was assigned to Denver, Colorado, where the USGS was assisting the state in assessing former radium mining and production sites. To better understand what went on in that era Ed became a miner himself by digging into newspapers, technical journals, congressional records, and other sources to reconstruct the story of America's "First Nuclear Industry." The wealth of information he uncovered became the basis for *Buried Treasure to Buried Waste: The Rise and Fall of the Radium Industry*, published in 1987 by the Colorado School of Mines. Ed's monograph became and remains the primary reference on American radium production. SCC, of course, was a prominent part of his monograph.

Radium City is available online for free in PDF format. The 186 pages of text includes 11 chapters, a foreword by radiation and nuclear power safety historian J. Samuel Walker, 33 pages of notes, and a 14-page bibliography. The 149 illustrations (both B&W and color) include many historical photos. Start reading today at: **https://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/magazine/Radium-City.pdf**

Vanadium stained glass window in the History Center's *Special Collections Gallery*.
HHC Collections, gift of Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2000.85.1. Photo by Brian Butko.