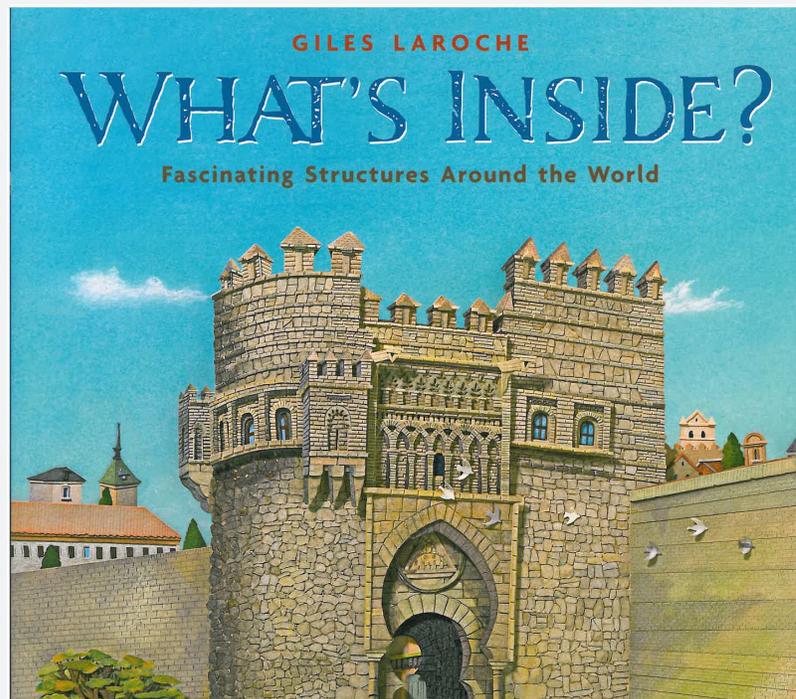


First Opinion: “What’s Inside?”...A Very Good Question

Laroche, Giles. *What’s Inside? Fascinating Structures Around the World*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2009.

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There are many good things about *What’s Inside?*, but the best thing about the book just might be the title itself. The question “What’s Inside?” invites the reader to make that all important connection between form and function.

Sometimes the form physically accommodates an item or an activity; sometimes it performs the function by providing protection, portability, or even by making a playful reference to its contents. Whatever the contribution of the outside to what is going on inside, the connection exists and is effectively illustrated. This illustration is reinforced by the regular, but not rigid, pattern throughout the book.

The element of time is also presented in a subtle manner, simply by presenting the buildings in chronological order. One can easily see how buildings can be different from

age to age, while the fundamental relationship between outside and inside still carries forth.

Finally, another invitation is presented. What have we learned? The concluding spread presents an opportunity to recognize elements presented throughout the book and to use them as cues about what the function of different buildings might entail.

Certainly, nothing about *What's Inside?* could be called heavy-handed. In fact, learning opportunities are presented and left to the individual's power of observation to discover. A young person could read this book several times over a period of years and discover new insights with each reading. The final illustration, for instance, includes a wall mounted map of the world and on it is a mark representing each building discussed in the book—yet another example of a small but valuable nugget awaiting discovery.

An adult reading this book to a youngster might become caught up in reading the supplemental information in the margins. Real information about each building is provided in a quite grown-up fashion, but nicely tucked away where it is unlikely to become a distraction to younger readers. This is an interesting approach to footnoting and very respectful of the primary audience. In a similar fashion, a glossary is provided in its usual location. Supplemented with small sketches, the glossary can answer many questions while teaching readers to use such features, usually found in more advanced books.

It is within the glossary, though, that one just might find some reasons for concern. While the body of the book does not back down from challenging the young person with a vocabulary selection beyond what might be considered typical, the presentation is still smooth, gentle, and offered in that very comforting “come and find out” fashion. The glossary, on the other hand, seems more technical and abrupt, relying on terms more likely to require additional help to comprehend. Some entries seem inconsistent in their depth and relevance to the content of the book. For instance, why is it noted that “A dome is sometimes made of glass...” (unpaged) but a pyramid is only defined as being stepped?

Any time someone puts together a compilation such as this, questions will be raised about the choice of buildings to be included. One can always ask, “Why this and not that?” I'm sure Laroche spent many agonizing days sorting through potential subjects, but in the end, it really does not matter. Any number of buildings could be used for each of the examples in the book. In fact, if any building was so unique that one was compelled to include it, then it probably would not have been an effective example of the principle to be presented. The buildings included in *What's Inside?* are diverse in every way and should be easily recognized and remembered by the reader. To that extent, it is a very appropriate selection of buildings.

The illustrations, as well, are appropriate for the audience. They are colorful and straightforward, while presenting the essence of each structure well. From the Parthenon to the Sidney Opera House, the presentation is clean and colorful. And who would have thought to include a circus tent as a building?

The final test is the most difficult. Will they read it? Perhaps the more relevant question is at what age will a typical youngster “catch on” and begin to consider the challenges of *What’s Inside?* After all, it is not really a storybook, so perhaps it is not a book for just any child. For the young mind that does open to it, however, a deceptively broad and deep array of challenges awaits...inside.

About the Author

Gene R. Hatke is the Senior Architect in the Office of the University Architect at Purdue.