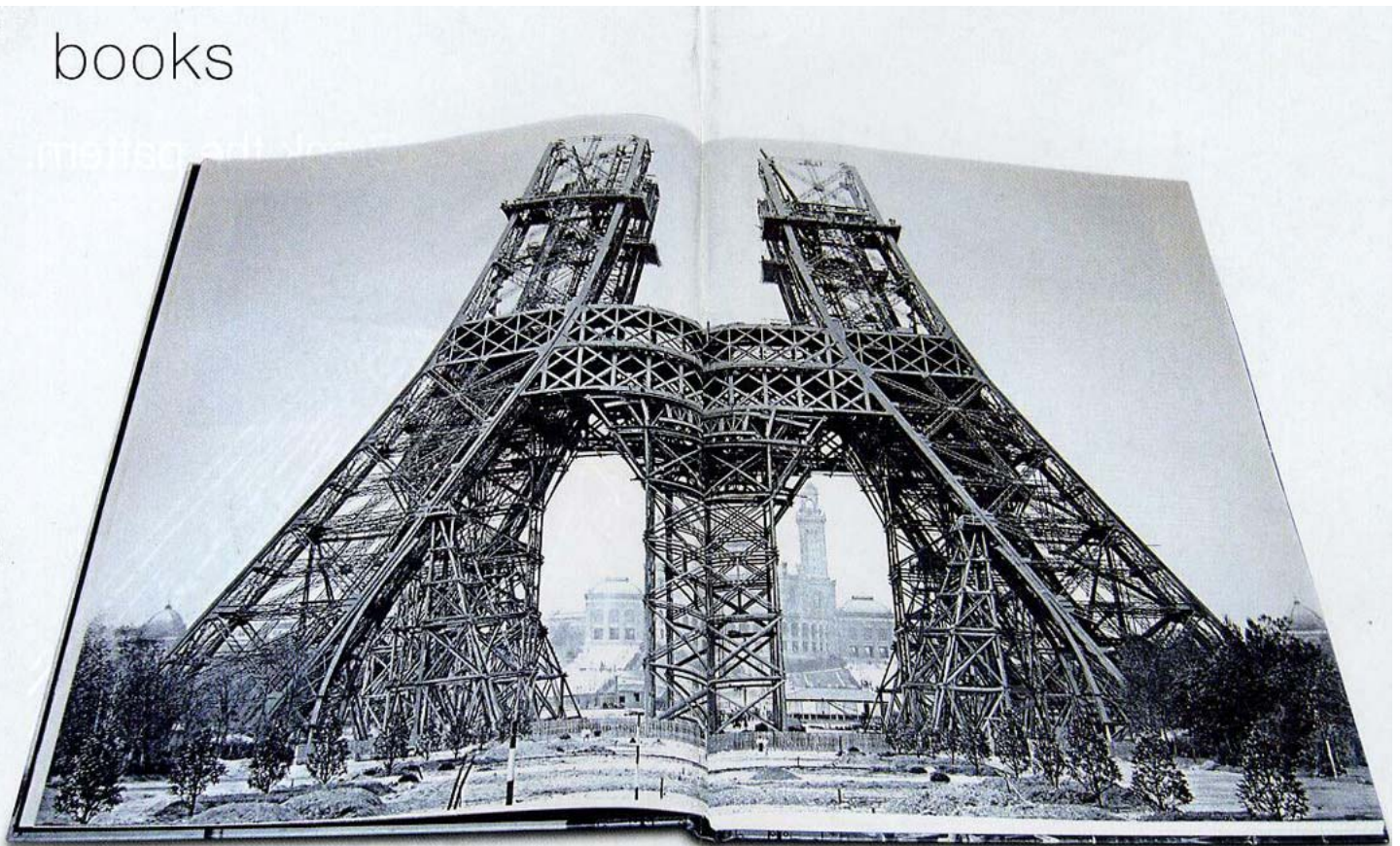


books



LA TOUR DE 300 METRES (by Gustave Eiffel; Taschen, rrp £79.99) It is now so fixed in our minds that it is hard to imagine Paris without the Eiffel Tower. Nevertheless, it is only a little over 100 years old. As the Crystal Palace formed the centrepiece of the Great Exhibition in 1851, so Gustave Eiffel's tower was the focus of the Paris World's Fair in 1889. The idea for a 300m iron tower (close enough to the significant-seeming height of 1,000ft) was first proposed in 1884 by two of Eiffel's engineers and later became embodied into the plans for the 1889 fair. Yet for years afterwards it had no real function; its height alone was the point. Hence, it was initially granted only a 20-year lifespan and was not made permanent until it was found to be handy as a radio mast.

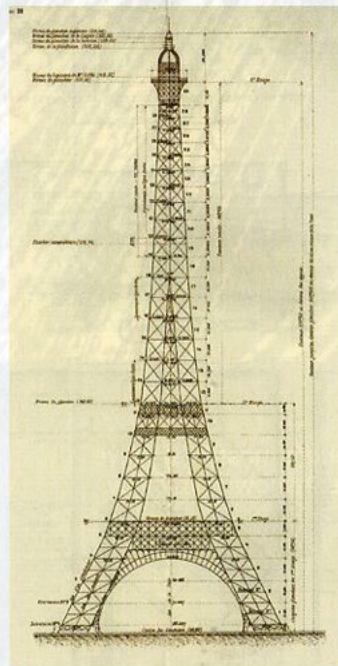
This vast book is a facsimile reprint of the folio-sized work printed privately by Eiffel in 1900 in a run of only 500 copies. In this new version there is an introduction and contemporary photos of the construction. The original was in fact in two volumes, the first containing a lengthy text, the second comprising the plates reproduced here and amounting to a total of 4,300 highly technical, scale drawings of almost every constituent element.

Soon after construction of the tower began in 1887 there were howls of objections, one signed by a group of notable artists and writers, claiming that 'for 20 years we shall see spreading across the whole city... the odious shadow of this odious column of bolted metal.'

Its largely unadorned design was at odds with the Belle Epoque aesthetic, though perfectly in step with the triumphal march of the 19th-century engineer. Eiffel responded to his critics by saying that, though primarily a feat of design and physics, engineers too are aware of beauty and that 'Moreover there is an attraction in the colossal, and a singular delight to which ordinary theories of art are scarcely applicable.' Certainly scale is the key: we'd be little impressed by a 30m tower that was otherwise identical. Something of this size seems to exceed human ability.

Looking at page after page of these meticulous, atomistic drawings has a real appeal, but again, it is the human frailty that reminds you of the achievement: unlike the computer-generated drawings of today, the lines in the drawings are not always quite pure and geometrical. After coming to the end, however, one has the misleading impression of having got to the very heart of the structure. Yet somehow the tower is absent. It is like flicking through a beautiful Renaissance book on human anatomy hoping to see a picture of the soul. Like any icon, what makes the Eiffel Tower so compelling now is not so much its physical being, but the host of associations, memories and references – its presence in paintings, poems, films and holiday snaps. Perhaps, a 300m book would get us a little closer. But for now, this will do pretty well ■

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To order *La Tour de 300 Mètres* for £71.11 (plus £10 UK p&p), ring the *World of Interiors* Bookshop on 0871 911 1747