

## Borges and Piranesi

Reinhold Martin

This study is lodged, somewhat awkwardly perhaps, between description and prescription. "Description" is used, in that it aims to represent a particular conceptual relation between Jorge Luis Borges's "Library of Babel" short story,<sup>1</sup> and the final edition, from about 1760, of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* series of engravings. "Prescription" is used, since in the present context one is obliged to consider whether its observations are generalizable as observations impacting one or another form of architectural production, or whether, even, they share the same premises.

This position is directed toward questions of relevance. It should be familiar to anyone concerned with the legitimation crises undergone by most forms of cultural production as the premises of modernism are re-assessed.<sup>2</sup> In our case, whether or not something is named "architectural," or invited into the disciplinary preserve of "architecture," it must ultimately be considered, not with regard to docile compliance with the rules of the discipline, but rather, with regard to insights offered into "architecture's" own relevance to the production and distribution of value.

One might begin with the identification of a general problematic—a set of issues which makes "architecture" itself relevant to other worlds of discourse and experience. In this case, the problematic in question is that of the "inside" and the "outside"—a way of organizing the

world which clearly bears on conventional architectural practice. One might even note the particularly significant role played by the extension of these experiences into one another in certain strains of modernism. Of course, this arrangement translates more or less directly into that of "inclusion" and "exclusion"—a problematic which itself is curiously familiar, for it reiterates the structure of the question: Should a certain practice be named "architecture" (Should it be included or excluded)? These questions demand identity—the identification of categories—Foucault's Same and Other (inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion). They also demand a common locus, a "table" and a "space" on and in which they may be placed and identified and ordered.<sup>3</sup> Here is Foucault's warning, that Foucault who is always concerned with the possibilities of "thinking otherwise":

*"No, no, I'm not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you."*

*What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes*

*that I would never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write."<sup>4</sup>*

The insight offered by a close look at Borges's essay and Piranesi's engravings is straightforward: this particular conjunction of a story and some engravings, themselves separated by two centuries and an ocean, articulates the virtual irrelevance of attempting to include their production as "architecture." This, since the problematic on which they operate itself challenges conventional structures of inclusion and exclusion—the putting of architecture's papers in order.

Also to be abandoned immediately is the temptation to link the writer Borges and the engraver-architect Piranesi within a common preoccupation with labyrinthine excess, figured also in the citation from Foucault. If pursued, such a link would eagerly convert itself into a hymn to things beyond, out of reach, "out there." Indeed (and schematically), Borges's story quite deliberately withholds the possibility of objectivity, associated with a position ultimately outside of the story. Likewise, Piranesi's prisons somewhat less obviously withhold the condition of subjectivity, the inside. Yet, the path between these two historically disjunct works discloses pointedly that neither is able to serve as

a script or a window for interpreting the other, since in many ways their relation to each other remains discursive, specifically dependent of the vagaries of the inside/outside problematic.

In his story, Borges describes a library which contains all of written language. This library is the universe, and it is "composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries," each with four sides covered by five shelves. The books are uniform in format—four hundred and ten pages, each page forty lines, each line, some eighty letters—and together they comprise every possible combination of twenty-two letters, the comma, the period, and the space (twenty-five characters in all). There are no two identical books, though any single book is repeated elsewhere with only an infinitesimal variation. Endless differentiation, but all together, the books lie, there, on the shelves, in the library. The galleries are linked by hallways each containing a spiral stair, which "sinks abysmally and soars upwards to remote distances."

The humanity which populates the hexagons is at times aimless, at times obsessed. One can imagine the possibilities of such a library, of language, which contains all histories as well as variations and distortions thereof, including "the true story of your death," but, because of its reflexivity, not a speck of nonsense. Borges describes the superstition of the "Man of the Book":

*On some shelf in some hexagon (men reasoned) there must exist a book*

*which is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest: some librarian has gone through it and he is analogous to a god.*

He also describes a linear procedure devised for locating this book:

*To locate book A, consult first a book B which indicates A's position; to locate book B consult first a book C, and so on to infinity... In adventures such as these I have squandered and wasted my years.*

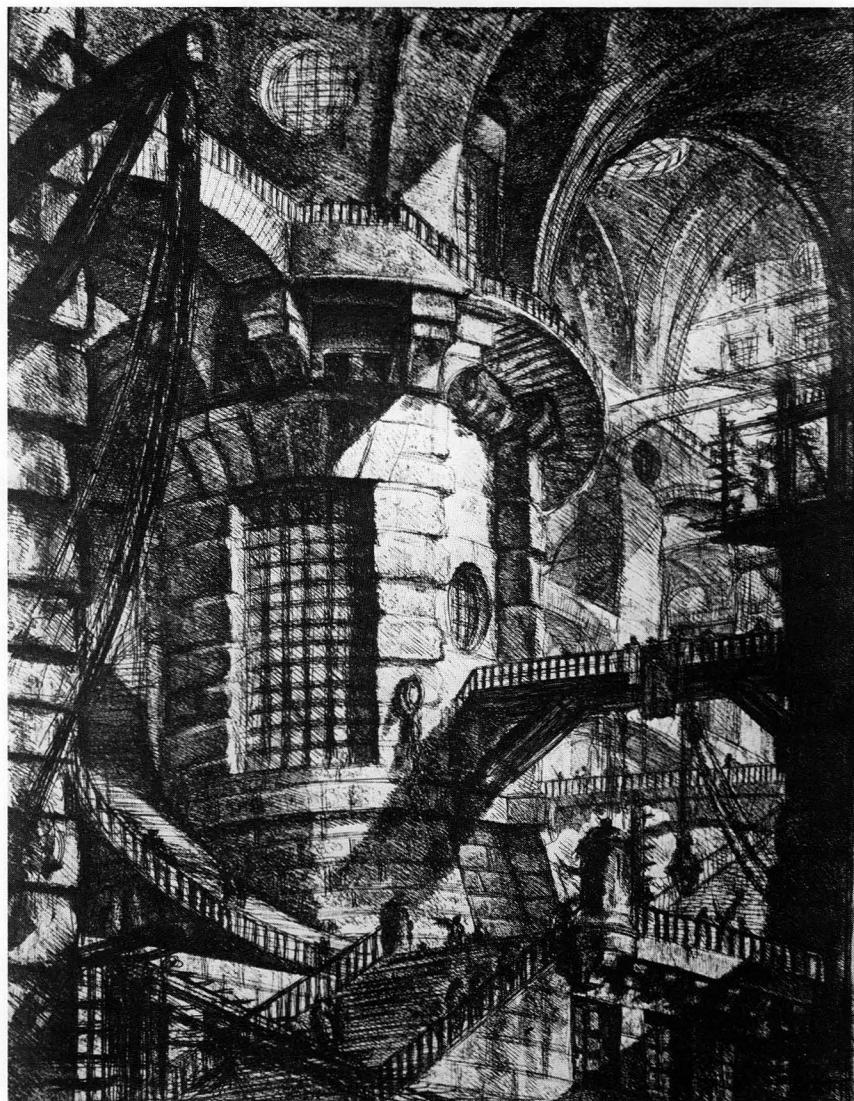
In the face of vain efforts to unlock its secrets, and in the face of the library's ability to outlive its humanity, —“illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret,”—Borges proposes that it be understood as unlimited and cyclical. This “elegant hope,” as he calls it, accounts at once for the infinity and limits of language.

Though it may be possible to allegorize Piranesi's etchings by overlaying the implications of Borges's story on

the limitlessness of the prisons, one might begin more strictly on the terms of the images themselves. In any case, as a matter of method, a too easy transfer of narrative into graphic representation would ultimately inhibit our understanding the architecture implicit in the whole affair. The prisons certainly do press on interminably, and their parallax<sup>5</sup> indubitably frustrates the desire to arrive at “truthful” representations. Where do the stairways lead? A bridge is sensible as such until in dead-ends into a pier. Half of a draw-

bridge may connect to its other half or to a descending spiral. The gaping archway, an entrance for the shadowy figures, promises, via the oblique view offered the spectator, nothing more than endless, futile pursuit of continuity, even the continuity of a simple, stable prison. The demand that things hold together, that a “world,” a prison even, be constructed around the spectator/inhabitant, goes unheeded.

In that sense the Carceri are not far from the despair which nevertheless



*Piranesi's Carceri d'Invenzione, Plate III*



*Plate VIII*

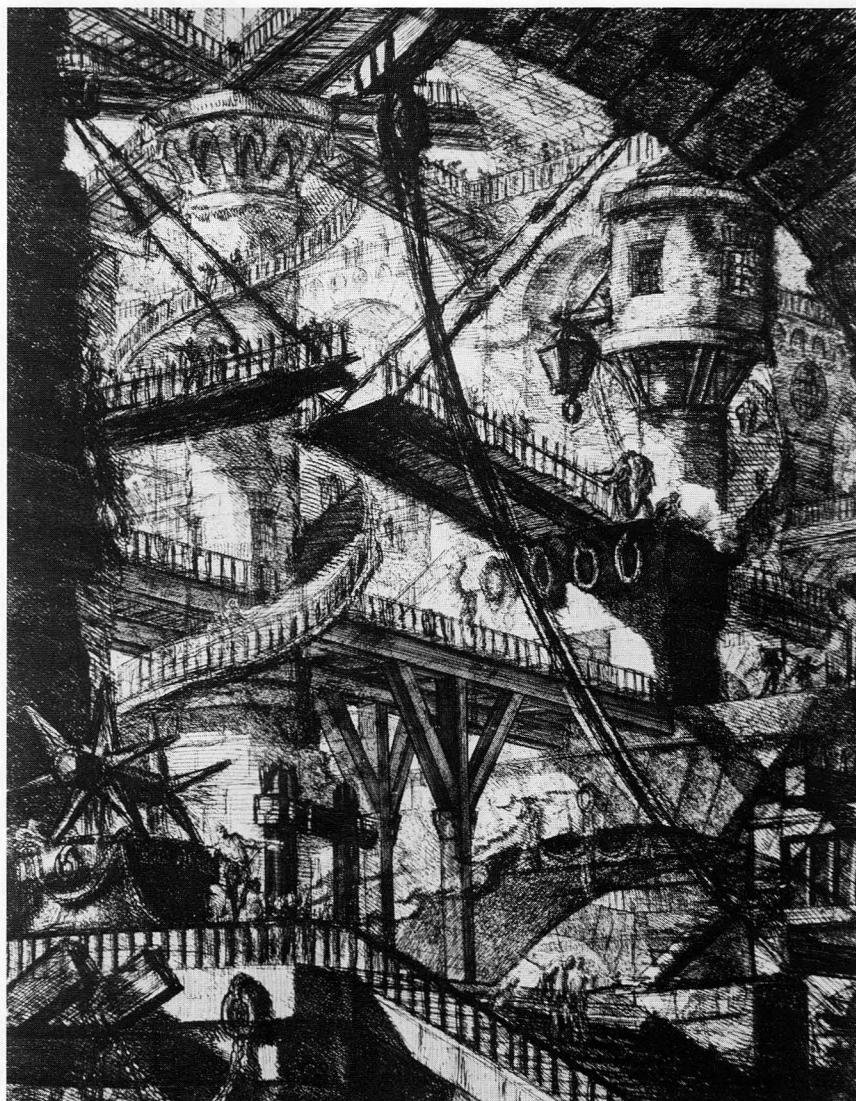
allows Borges to invest his own linguistic prison, which promises truth but rarely delivers, with his “elegant hope.” But what are we looking at here? By extending observations made by Manfredo Tafuri only slightly,<sup>6</sup> we see that Piranesi’s use of the multiple axes of the *scena per angolo* is less an indulgence of the viewer in a more complex, more labyrinthine, more engaging space (remembering the device’s ties to 18th century stage design). It is rather, an expulsion of the viewer from that space, from the labyrinth, from the

library so equivocally reconstructed elsewhere by Piranesi in the *Vedute and the Campo Marzio* series—from history. This is an occultation of the spectator from the labyrinthine prison figured by Borges’s library. The pictorial devices used in the *Carceri*, inasmuch as they work to extend and disperse the apparent space of the prisons, also repeatedly collapse that space, reluctant to allow us to enter it.

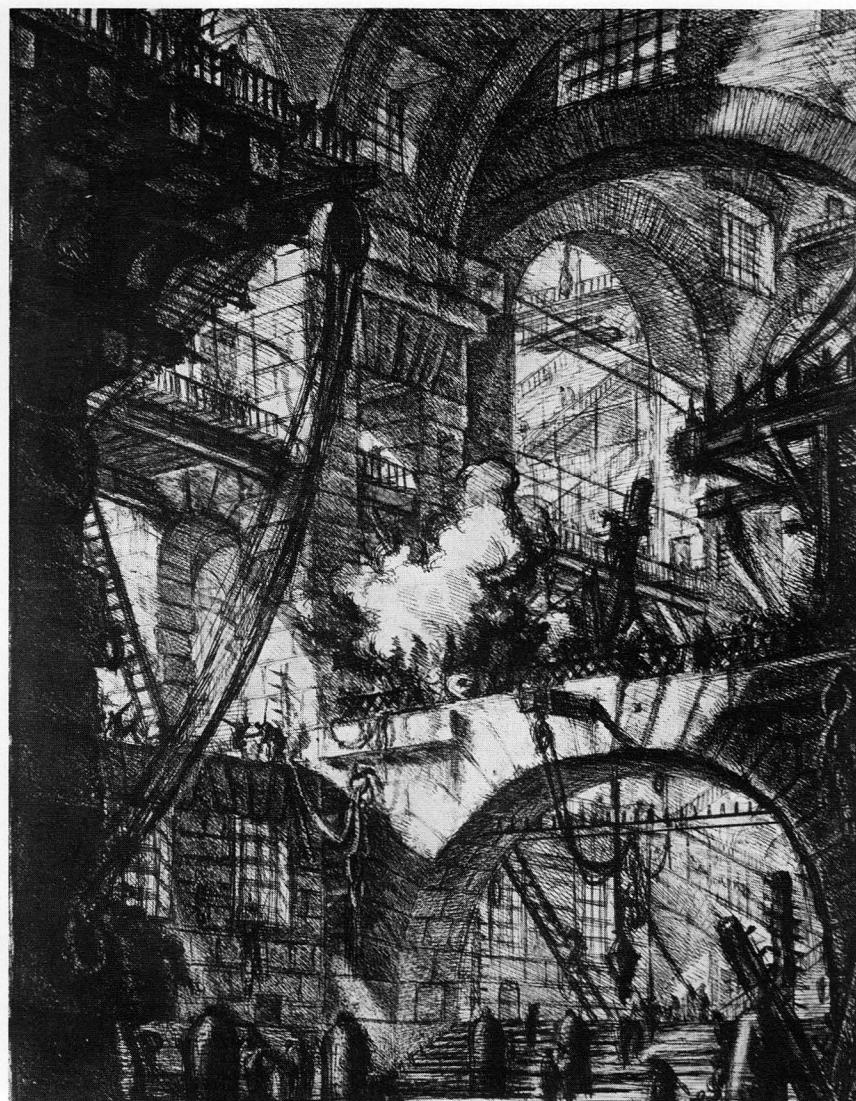
What is suggested by the presence of such a possibility, and hence by the pris-

ons, within Piranesi’s overall project? Rudolf Wittkower has attributed the *Carceri* to an “unparalleled” paroxysm of creativity,” and others (more dubiously) to the effects of opium. Though the first series predates Piranesi’s more properly “archaeological” work, in the form of the *Antichita Romane* for example, they are not devoid of the spell of history even as they anticipate the modern future. Likewise, this appearance of the first edition of the *Carceri* at the threshold of Piranesi’s archaeological activity has led some historians to oppose their

“creativity” to the disciplined measuring and recording of the Roman ruins, and led others to understand them as an initial step in an attempt to synthesize a new language out of the ongoing Greco-Roman debate, developed in fits and starts in later folios.<sup>7</sup> But one can imagine the delight of this “wicked architect” (as Tafuri calls him) in toying with the anxiety of the rest of Europe, on their grand tours and in their academies, to gain access to a classical past, the origins of which were teetering at that time between Greece and Rome. Likewise,



12 *Plate VII*



*Plate VI*

one can imagine the Venetian's increasing devotion to his Rome, the Rome he so patiently and methodically investigated and measured. For Piranesi, the possibility of a history, an architectural library, Rome, becomes entangled with the density of an experience whose pictures elude penetration. So, even as the Carceri extend the developing pictorial tradition of capricci produced largely for the consumption of foreign travellers, they also deflect historical fantasy, or rather disperse it, in a kind of sly comment on the vanity of reconstructing a historical catalogue of form (this also occurs later in the Campo Marzio plan).

What appears to be an intensely creative and personal act on Piranesi's part is actually quite the opposite. These prisons are rather more an expulsion from the reassuring order of a classical age from which to extract an architectural language, as well as an ode to the fallibility of freezing this past as a preparation of the ground for a seemingly creative, almost modern, force. To that extent, they also represent a crisis in advance for that modernity whose identity depends on the identification and absorption of that classical age.

This aspect of the Carceri may be further characterized in terms of a withholding of the architectural prison in favor of an imprisonment within the demand for access to insides—the inside of history, a reserve from which to extract legitimacy, or the inside of the rational subject, a mind within a body, a body within a world. Translated (and not without some reductions) into slightly different terms, the spectator is denied the experience of being caught in the more straightforward problematic of a linguistic, historical or perceptual prison—even one without a stable center or frame. Instead, such a world's volatile possible existence is somewhat voyeuristically apprehended from the perverbial outside. The accompanying “loss of center,” which Tafuri characterizes in terms of domination, is more denial than loss—a duplicitous invitation into the

prisons which simultaneously withholds the position from which to receive the oddly reassuring torture of a “negative utopia.” Piranesi populated the final edition of the Carceri with hermetic objects and heightened displays of physical torture, a condition which prompts Tafuri to link the project's machine-metaphor to the dark side of emerging modernity. But the heightening of discomfort for the spectator—less from compassion than from the anxiety of powerlessness in the face of this giant machine's opacity—suggests a displacement of the experience of imprisonment from enclosure within an architectural space, onto the demand that, that space cohere, that we may know its inside.

Returning to Borges momentarily, we may take one more cue from the Argentine author's progressive blindness, mentioned in his story and advancing as he directed the National Library in Buenos Aires, for which the library of Babel is likely a metaphor. Elsewhere, Borges has described his affliction as also helping him to see other things.<sup>8</sup> While this comment refers essentially to increased access to knowledge not dependent on sight, the possibility of sight lingers. Strangely, it is the library's relentless clarity and precision, its transparency and repetition, which entices the reader further to climb to even more remote hexagons in search of insight: For “the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatical volumes, of inexhaustible stairways for the traveler and latrines for the seated librarian, can only be the work of a god.”

This last gasp of some kind of order converges with the opacity of Piranesi's prisons within the more recent critical concept of heterotopia. Tafuri (and here we are again in the Sphere and the Labyrinth volume) emphatically invokes the concept, which he borrows from Foucault, to characterize Piranesi's seeming playfulness. For Foucault, heterotopia is concerned with a dispersion of place, the divergence of one topology from another. In the preface to *The*

*Order of Things*, from which Tafuri quotes, Foucault describes the table and the space on and in which differentiations, categories (and thus language) are made and ordered. At issue is not a particular type of order, or language (Foucault is concerned specifically here with the production of categories, classes and hierarchies in the interests of evolving knowledge), but the possibility of order.<sup>9</sup> This table and this space are the primary evidence of the god who created Borges's library, and they are exactly what comes under assault—in the form of language and history in the story and in Piranesi's etchings.

Foucault begins his preface by pointing out this own book's debt to the laughter produced by a passage in another Borges story, concerning a “certain Chinese encyclopaedia,” whose taxonomy demonstrates the impossibility of thinking its own series, its own conjunction of this with that. This removal of the common ground, of the table and of the space on and in which such a conjunction would occur, is at the heart of Foucault's heterotopia notion. Characterized by Foucault in terms of an abolition of the site, it would also bear some comparison with the Piranesian “loss of center,” particularly if that is understood as primarily a withholding of the spatial conditions in which even a “negative utopia” can occur.

In this sense, Borges's library may itself be understood as a meditation on the promise of meaning offered by the transparency of the space in which language is apprehended—figured by the compulsive repetition of what is the same which constitutes the library's order. The homogeneity of the hexagons suggests the possibility of a linear, narrative path to “the book of books”—that text which describes the library's other order, the order which itself would account for the hexagons and the path. Borges exclaims: “Let me be outraged and annihilated, but for one instant, in one being, let Your enormous Library

be justified.” Simultaneously, he refutes the possibility of nonsense by pointing out that one cannot devise any combination of characters which the library has not foreseen: “To speak is to fall into tautology.” Such a refutation is critical, since nonsense would offer the reassurance that sense also existed—in the library, nonsense would also comprise a form of “negative utopia,” despite the author's own comment that he had always imagined Paradise as a kind of library. And of course, for the “archaeologist” Foucault:

*Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region for them to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that.<sup>10</sup>*

The “chimerical” path from books C to B to A, the story—history—which would make it possible to name this and that—from which we could identify a tolerable casuistry, and which would promise origins and even provisional conclusions—is precisely what is at issue in Borges's own story. His hope lies instead in its circularity.

Confronted with Borges's ellipsis and with Piranesi's own brand of equivocation, it is necessary to make a distinction. An indulgence from this point in the regression of games of inclusion and exclusion which might issue forth based on such conclusions, would be quite simply to convert these into an inert resource from which to extract an “architectural” paradigm. The works under consideration would acquire the status of a historical and discursive reserve, now, by virtue of our analysis, included as relevant to “architecture.” But how did we manage to extract ourselves from Borges's story, or enter into Piranesi's

prisons, in order to make use of them? And what insights into “architecture” has this really offered? One began with the identification of the inside/outside problematic as “architectural.” This assumption passively accepts architecture’s assignment to distinguish between “inside” and “outside”—to include and to exclude. As, however, questions of relevance (Relevant to what? To whom? In what capacity?) are joined with Foucault’s heterotopia notion, it becomes evident that the terms on which relevance is constructed—the “table” and the “space” onto and into which relevance arrives—ought also to attract the attention of architecture.

It is conceivable that architecture here be understood as participating in the production of relevance, of joining and distinguishing things, interests and concerns. The production of space itself (literally and metaphorically), and the production of problematics such as that of

inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, is already “architectural.” The existence, intricacies and ambiguities of such arrangements therefore need not function solely as a reserve to legitimize their own architectural presentation (or representation). More significantly, they oblige architecture to come to terms with the complexities of its own legitimacy—indeed, to make a case for its legitimacy based on the role it plays in the production of the “table” and the “space” on which relevance depends. Lest this architecture render itself as a kind of orthodoxy via, for example, the presentation of its own legitimizing historical or discursive reserve, Foucault’s heterotopia concept serves as a reminder: one’s own history, a “world,” “reality,” depends on the stability of a locus shared with all of that which is “other.”

So, as Borges dangles the carrot of objectivity, and Piranesi, that of subjectivity, their bearing on architecture may linger

at the moment between the two, anticipating that common locus. But oddly enough, since the carrots remain dangling and the space for the identification of things same and other—inside and outside, tends to collapse or to extend beyond boundaries back into itself—that locus, which may even be “architecture,” remains somewhat undetermined. Architecture as a category (as well as any particular form it might take) relies structurally on that moment for its identity as such. But for its legitimacy in this case, it relies on the capacity of its specific characteristics to join and to distinguish one experience from another, thereby describing configurations of relevance. In describing one such configuration, that of joining Borges’s library and Piranesi’s prisons (represented in a text and a series of engravings), these pages themselves automatically level a wide range of historical and disciplinary differences separating the two. Thus the “table” and the “space” of their con-

junction rely for their own legitimacy on the potential relevance of such a disclosure to determinations of value in architectural discourse. In preferring not to be distracted by the anxiety to include or exclude certain preoccupations in the interests of resolving a disciplinary identity crisis, one observes that questions of relevance (To what? To whom? In what capacity?) presume that something remains at stake in preparing a response. Each response, “architectural” or otherwise, requires and prefigures a world, at the expense of possible others.

Inasmuch as Foucault’s laughter issues from such a moment—a moment which evidences the possibilities of “thinking otherwise”—the conjunction of a particular text with a particular series of engravings may also provide evidence of the possibility of a world, new or otherwise.

#### Notes

1. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel,” in *Labyrinths*, ed. D. Yates and J. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 51-58.

2. Jean-Francois Lyotard elaborates a distinction between denotative and prescriptive language games (following Wittgenstein): “I am struck by the fact that prescriptions, taken seriously, are never grounded: one can never reach the just from a conclusion. And particularly, that which ought to be cannot be concluded from that which is.”—Lyotard in *Just Gaming*, with Jean-Loup Thebaud, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 16. See also Lyotard, “The Sign of History,” in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. D. Attridge, G. Bennington and R. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 162-180, as well as his discussion of “paganism” in *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

3. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London:

Tavistock, 1970). These concerns are laid out in the book’s preface and are developed throughout the work, as well as in a number of Foucault’s other writings.

4. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1972), 17. This passage is cited by Michel de Certeau in “The Laugh of Michel Foucault,” in *Heterologies. Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 193. De Certeau continues: “To be classified the prisoner of a place and of qualifications, to wear the stripes of authority which procure for the faithful their official entry into a discipline, to be pigeonholed within a hierarchy of domains of knowledge and of positions, thus finally to be ‘established’—that, for Foucault, was the figure of death. ‘No, no.’ Identity freezes the gesture of thinking. It pays homage to an order. To think, on the contrary, is to pass through; it is to question that order, to marvel that it exists, to wonder what made it possible, to seek, in passing over its landscape, traces of the movement that formed it, to dis-

cover in these histories supposedly laid to rest ‘how and to what extent it would be possible to think otherwise.’” *Heterologies*, 194.

5. For a discussion of parallax and Piranesi, see Yves-Alain Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll Around Clara-Clara,” *October* No. 29, 1984, as reprinted in *October. The First Decade*, ed. A. Michelson et al (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 342-372, esp. 354-363.

6. Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), Chapter 1, “The Wicked Architect: G.B. Piranesi, Heterotopia and the Voyage,” 25-54.

7. See Rudolf Wittkower, “Piranesi as Architect,” in *Studies in the Italian Baroque* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 247-258, and John Wilton-Ely, *The Mind and Art of Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 81-91. See also Wilton-Ely, “Piranesi’s ‘Fantasia’ and the Greco-

Roman Controversy,” in *Piranesi et les Français* (Rome: Editions dell’ Elephante, 1978), 529-557.

8. Borges, *Seven Nights* (New York: New Directions, 1984), 107-117.

9. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xv-xxiv.

10. *ibid.*, xvii.

#### Illustrations

Figures 1-6: G. B. Piranesi, Carceri d’ Invenzione, Plates I, III, VI, VII, VIII, XIV, c.1760. As reproduced in John Wilton-Ely, *The Mind and Art of Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978).