PIRANESI OVER TIME

Giovanni Battista Piranesi is one of this great architects, who drew all his life. During last two centuries many artists – architects, painters, writers were inspired by the works of Piranesi. His etchings still have impact and a power to continue over time.

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Assuming that architecture, as a part of culture, is a broader notion than a description of implemented buildings, we should consider the durability and fleetingness of various shapes of architectural culture separately. Real edifices die differently, architectonic drawings grow old differently, ideas elapse differently. Ideas seem the most vital owing to diverse carriers as well as their ability to duplicate themselves and adopt to new conditions. It may be exemplified by some motifs of classical architecture which were revived in the period of postmodernist architecture. Richard Dawkins suggested the concept of replicators, so-called mems – units of a cultural message transmitted in social contacts like genes in biological reproduction [1]. Such a theoretical concept makes it possible to evaluate the durability of significant works and the architectural output of celebrated personalities.

One of the most important figures in the history of architecture, who imbued the imagination of many creators in later generations with his ideas and images of architecture, was Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778). The question of durability and fleetingness is related to this outstanding author in a special manner because it concerns his legacy as well as the content of his works.

Piranesi spent almost all of his adult life in Rome. As an architect, he implemented only one design but he earned a name as a great graphic artist, a visionary and a researcher of ancient Rome. He learnt artistic techniques from some skillful engravers and skilled painters (e.g. the Bibiena brothers or Giambattista Tiepolo) paying special attention to the ability to produce vedute – fashionable urban landscapes. Piranesi always emphasized his being an architect by autographing architetto veneziano [2]. However, he treated his profession not as the art of good construction (which may be practised by a master builder) but as a discipline which should be dominated by intellectual qualities: an architect’s place is not a construction site – his assignments are theoretical reflections and ideas [3].

Piranesi’s graphic portfolio can be divided into several thematic groups: vedute – landscapes of Rome and the remains of its former grandness: edifice ruins, architectural details, devices etc., attempts to reconstruct old objects, architectural compositions, e.g. designs of mantelpieces, and architectural fantasies – the most famous of them form a cycle entitled Carceri (Prisons) [4].

The life and creative activity of Piranesi is described in numerous publications. John Wilton-Ely
Leszek Maluga, *I love Piranesi too* (2011)
and Luigi Ficacci are the authors of two complete catalogues of Piranesi’s works. Numerous art historians, e.g. Rudolf Wittkower or Jonathan Scott, have dealt with his creations. Manfredo Tafuri begins his work on the history of recent centuries of architecture with a chapter devoted to Piranesi’s output [5]. The Belgian author Marguerite Yourcenar wrote an interesting essay entitled The Black Brain of Piranesi [6]. This fragmentary list of authors dealing with Piranesi’s work shows his contemporary rank and confirms his place in history.

Piranesi’s early creative activity was based upon the then standards and artistic achievements: he applied various graphic techniques, mainly etching, prepared urban landscapes, referred to the Bibienas’ solution of perspective view for theatrical set design scena per angolo [7]. However, he worked out his own artistic standards and was in a class by himself.

Piranesi’s works – achievements of Baroque architecture and art adopted and multiplied by his talent and imagination – became a collection of ideas sent into the future. Even in the 18th century, his creations met with keen interest. Researchers indicate the role of Piranesi’s works in the formation of Neoclassicism and Romanticism. His architectural ideas and painting visions influenced various areas of creation: literature, fine arts, cinematography.

Many writers – for instance Horace Walpole, Thomas De Quincey or Victor Hugo – referred to Piranesi [8]. In some books by 20th-century authors, one can also find the atmosphere of the murky architectural spaces of Prisons, e.g. in the short story Babel Library by Jorge Luis Borges or in the novel The Name of the Rose by Umberto Eco.

Inspirations from Piranesi’s works in fine arts are less obvious. Formal references to Piranesi’s interiors can be found in M.C. Escher’s lithographs. Such works as The House of Stairs or Convex and Concave show staircases whose flights in various directions, on different planes and levels form a complex structure resembling Prisons [9]. In 1991, Ian Hamilton Finlay created a lithograph entitled After Piranesi being a copy of the title page from the second edition of Prisons. He only replaced the original title of the famous cycle in the centre of his picture with this sentence: When the world took to tolerance it took to crime [10].

In numerous contemporary products of mass culture – comics, computer games – we can find some echoes of the poetics and plasticity, if not direct inspiration, of the interiors of Prisons, an archetype of a monumental architectural space – multilevel, multiplan, dangerous, murky, closed and endless at the same time. Strong fascination in this cycle can be noticed in the works of the Belgian comic artist François Schuiten. In La Tour, he creates visions of interiors clearly inspired by Piranesi’s output [11].

Filmmakers have been using Piranesi’s spatial visions and the structure of his etchings since Fritz Lang’s Metropolis or Sergey Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin [12]. The murky aura of Prisons appears in many science fiction films, e.g. Terry Gilliam’s Brazil. Interiors resembling Baroque edifices from Piranesi’s pictures were designed by the set designer Holger Gross for the production of The Riddick Chronicles.

However, his impact on architectural culture is essential. Marguerite Yourcenar wrote, It is highly probable that, starting from the late 18th century, every novice architect remained under the direct or indirect influence of Piranesi’s albums. [13] Clear inspiration from these paintings may be exemplified by the Swiss architect Carl Zehnder (1859–1938) whose entire life was a quest for ideal beauty in architecture [14]. His drawings were dominated by monumentality, while their themes were often vast multilevel halls with the extended spatial structure of stairs, arcades and colonnades.
There are also lots of examples of contemporary inspirations or references to Piranesi’s works. Leon Krier prepared his works for the exhibition *Roma Interrotta* in 1978 as collages of Piranesi’s design drawings and etching fragments with some Roman landscapes [15]. Stan Allen experimented with urban layouts referring to Piranesi’s reconstruction of Mars Field [16].

In the previous decades, there were three German exhibitions which confronted Piranesi’s portfolio with contemporary architecture – in Hanover (1981/82) – *Inventionen. Piranesi und Architecturphantasien in der Gegenwart*, in Stuttgart (1999) – *Giovanni Battista Piranesi – Die poetische Wahrheit*, and in Ulm (2002) – *Vision Piranesi* (Hans Dieter Schaal, the Coop Himmelb(l)au group, Lebbeus Woods and Daniel Libeskind took part in it) [17]. The peculiar climate of Piranesi’s interiors can be found in some works of Woods. His project *Underground Berlin* (1988) proposed a network of freely excavated canals under the politically divided Berlin [18]. In this case, Woods’ technique attracts attention, too – the mode of his drawings resembles the graphic texture of Piranesi’s etchings.

Taking Piranesi’s achievements and his contemporary perception into consideration, we can indicate several reasons for his unique and timeless position in architecture and, more broadly, in culture.

Most of Piranesi’s works concern monumentality – a value wanted by creators and desired by clients. Piranesi documented the grandness of Rome. Most of his paintings present monumental edifices: the Pantheon, the Coliseum, temples, tombs, triumphal arches. Monumentality is a feature which seems to guarantee the eternal durability of objects. But Piranesi showed the architecture of the *eternal city* in the delicateness of its material. In his pictures, the monumentality of architecture is usually shown as traces of triumph in ruins. They make an extraordinar-

ily articulate contrast between the proofs of the power of civilization and the unstoppable lapse of time. Owing to this, durability and fleetingness assumed a monumental dimension in Piranesi’s works, too.

The quality and themes of Piranesi’s works reveal this architect and artist’s unusual imagination. He engraved architectonic capriccios and *grotteschi* with extreme lightness. He created imaginary pictures of ancient edifices and reconstructions of Roman monuments. In the *Carceri* cycle, he presented the mastership of sophisticated plasticity and poetics in picturing mysterious architectural interiors. Even while documenting real edifices in ruins, he framed them with expressive nature and genre scenes. Imagination and sensitivity, always present in his creations, shaped the pre-romantic outlook on reality [19].

Piranesi’s architectonic pictures vaulted into prominence in the culture of the 19th and 20th centuries. Not so much his architectural and constructional implementations as his drawings fascinated and inspired creators in many disciplines of art. Piranesi dealt with architectural ideas. Printing paper may turn yellow, ideas may become obsolescent but they do not disappear as long as they last in some forms of record. This fact gives an autonomous value to Piranesi’s prints.

The figure of Piranesi – a man endowed with unlimited imagination and creativity – gains a lot of recognition as well. He thought of himself as an architect, he loved architecture and fully dedicated himself to it putting special emphasis on researching and documenting the ancient architectural greatness of Rome. With equal pietism, he documented single Capitol stones as well as constructed visionary interiors. He was an artist and a theoretician involved in a struggle for his opinions, a man overwhelmed by passion. He said, *I need big ideas and I think that if I were told to design this world anew, I would have the mad courage to make such a commitment* [20].
Piranesi went down in history owing to his pictures. As I demonstrated above, they still have the power of influencing and inspiring people – they endure. Their paper delicacy turned out to be as durable as the marble of edifices. Or perhaps the ideas inside them get through to the consciousness of generations even more strongly because they concern a significant truth about architecture.

Umberto Eco claims that only literature contains the truth because all that is written, that characters do and say, can be checked in a text [21]. Can we say the same about architectural drawing? Daniel Libeskind says that the significance of Piranesi’s works lies in the fact that he never used architecture for non-architectural purposes, that he was wild about its own truth [22]. We can try to paraphrase Eco’s statement: Piranesi’s paintings include a truth about architecture because all that the author wanted to say is in a drawing. This intensive narration is magnetic. That is why it attracts and inspires creators’ imagination. Just like a time machine, Piranesi’s prints transfer ideas and visions, while mems carry them from one mind to another. And so they last beyond time.

**ENDNOTES**


[4] This cycle of prints was prepared in two versions: *Invenzioni Capricciose di Carceri* (1749) and *Carceri d’Invenzione* (1761); cf.: L. Ficacci, *op.cit.*, p. 128.


