

Traces, Fragments, Borders, Zones: On a Quest through the Labyrinth—a Palimpsest of Sources

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During a guest professorship at the Technical University of Graz in 1996, the architect Daniel Libeskind formulated a series of exercises intended to challenge students to develop personal processes of design through a series of encounters with unorthodox sources and methods. These exercises provided insight into the way Libeskind formulates design ideas through a labyrinthine path of random connections.

"Is there a red herring in this story?" Daniel Libeskind asked the students in his studio as they struggled through a maze of historical readings. The path to interpretation was left to the individual student's awareness, as each window opened a new perspective on the cyclical and interrelated nature of all the sources. Many students embarked on personal quests of discovery that took them to distant cities. One student made a pilgrimage from Austria to the Library of the British Museum to view the original ancient engravings of Piranesi's Campo Marzio hermetically preserved, with a sense of personal significance resulting from the act of viewing itself. Other students discovered that the *genius loci* of a place could inspire and be transferred. One student conceived her project in the deep *Stollen* or abandoned shafts of the Schloßberg (a castle mountain in the center of the old city perforated with cavern-like spaces). During a blazing summer she found her architectural grounding while working in the cold and damp, by dimness of candlelight composing an installation piece. The insight she discovered revealed a parallel universe discovered while she was busy impressing doctored sculptural fragments with anthropomorphic qualities.

As the year progressed our quest for awareness began to resemble an initiation. Our historical investigation revealed new and unexpected elements of meaning. Like lantern glass slides in a *camera obscura* clouded by "apparitions", our investigations initiated us into a process of *aletheia* - the unveiling of truth. Through the texts and films we explored larger concepts which became evident, and these came to fruition through the completed projects. These sources, some arcane, some commonplace, served as guidebooks and maps, in our search to find the way through our own personal labyrinth of discovery.

ELEGIAC ANGELS OF DUINO

The *leitmotif* of the Libeskind design seminar was the angel of Rainer Maria Rilke's Duinesian Elegies. The Elegies, a series of lyric poems written by Rilke are some of the most exquisite poetic works of the twentieth century. They speak eloquently of humankind's spiritual relation to the absolute. In the first creative discourse Libeskind invoked

the angel of the Elegies as an illuminating figure. In search of one's own angel, the creative spark, the posing of poignant questions concerning life and "the universe, the absolute, and man's relationship to all of them"[1] began. To elucidate Rilke's angel, it may be seen more as a single metaphor for all things infinite than the winged depiction of classical religions' iconography. Rilke himself, explained them in this manner: "The angel of the *Elegies* is that creation in which the transformation of the visible world into invisibility, which we carry out, appears already completed. For the angel all earlier towers and bridges are existing, *because* they long have been invisible, and the still standing towers and bridges of our existence are *already* invisible, although (for us) still physically present. The angel is that being which stands for the idea of recognizing a higher order of invisibility."^[2]

In interpreting Rilke Elaine Boney comments "The human and the angel worlds are separated by an abyss which cannot be bridged directly."^[3] This abyss is human consciousness - man's presumption of himself as unique in nature, as separated from other animals of the world as is from angels. Such consciousness removes the creative act from the realm of angelic vision and places it firmly in the world of humankind. Through awareness of the passage of time — of one's own limitations and the desire to make one's existence felt, — the act of making architecture is engaged.

Rilke's treatment of angels is consistent with Wim Wenders' personification of them in his film *Wings of Desire* (1987)^[4]. Wenders describes the angels as existing only in shadowy gray, they seem to inhabit the Golem's anthracite world, without emotion, colors, fragrances or the life provided by sensual cues. They are immortal and are obliged to observe and record. This liquid mnemonic collection is the portrayal of the record of all that has occurred since the beginning of time. By keeping detailed journals of their experiences the students paid homage to Wenders' angelic recorders of human events.

In the referenced Apocalypse, the angel of the eleventh revelation descends from heaven on legs of fire to present John the Evangelist (whose icon is "the word") with a book which he is commanded to eat. John's digestion of the book whole is a metaphor for the wholesale gulping of time. This absorption of the text points towards Libeskind's critical direction to immerse one's self in language. Like St. John, the angels of Wim Wenders digest texts, although his Angels of Desire do so by recording the thoughts of men. The angels of Daniel Libeskind's texts are wraithlike spirits who heighten one's awareness and access to greater knowledge.

THE HYPNEROTOMACHIA

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is an allegorical Renaissance narrative published in 1499 and attributed to Venetian Francesco Colonna. Its title can be translated to as: The Strife of Love in a Dream. It is the tale of a man named Polyphilo searching through a dark forest to find his love, Polia. In assigning the *Hypnerotomachia*, Libeskind subverts the rational, normative tendency of European architectural discourse since the sixteenth century and forcefully redirects students to delve into the irrational subconscious mind in search of inner desires. In his "Observation on Education of Architects" he states, "It is important for students to express some more fundamental questions about the existence of Architecture in the 21st Century and to get out of this sleep into which the world of Architecture seems to have fallen somewhere in the 18th Century"[5]. The "sleep" that he refers to is the stupor caused by theories of architecture put forth since Palladio and his *Cinquecento contemporaries*. These treatises were meant to form the foundation of a school of architecture based in the observable and quantitative, from which a scientific basis for architecture would rise. Although rich with powerful meanings they were eventually distilled, reduced to rational, functional, at times mechanical modernism. "The *Hypnerotomachia* was the first narrative architectural process at the inception of the modern age." [6] The sleep one should wake from is the sleep of meaninglessness. The struggle to awake infuses the architectural process with meaning.

The value of the *Hypnerotomachia* is that it prompts architects to rely on their instincts and to produce architecture from emotion rather than from calculation: that is to perform an act of *poesis*. The *Hypnerotomachia* has the capacity to teach architects to channel desire into the creation of architecture. In many ways the creative act with its cycle of arousal and fulfillment, can be compared to sexual tension. As Alberto Perez-Gomez writes: "Architecture originates in the erotic impulse itself"[7]. This sexual energy carries with it the vital energy of a life force and the factor of continuance. The lesson of the *Hypnerotomachia* is that passion, sensuousness, and desire are necessary for making architecture in counterpoint to the ethereal, intellectual and spiritual inspiration of the angels of the Duinesian Elegies.

The prescription of the *Hypnerotomachia* is the solution to the ills of a society whose architecture has become silent and empty. Rather than a hollow shell of technology governed by economics, the new architecture must "blaze forth"[8] as Coop Himmelb(l)au's manifesto reads - from a dreamlike inspiration. It is born of the desire to infuse architecture with meaning. The *Hypnerotomachia* speaks of a struggle, desire and a dream. The "embodied imagining self" is the center of this new architectural universe, bursting forth with life through meaning. The dream of Polyphilo is the direction to turn inward, as Freud and Jung did, to examine the meaning found in the workings of their subconscious. The cue is to return to the source, one's self, and a relationship to the environment, a "network of intentionality, the intertwining of self and world"[9].

In the *Hypnerotomachia*, Polyphilo, the protagonist as architect, is given a choice of three doors, behind one of which awaits his beloved. Although his guides attempt to convince him to either pass through the portal to a life of religious contemplation or the portal of human activities, he chooses to walk through the portal of desire behind which he finds his love Polia (the city).



Sopra qual'quor delle quade di ch'arrete l'osino. R. osino. H'ebro-
Arabo, iust'el n'alto che la D'iva R. ogni E'beu'ed'ya haum'ni pradi-
do & pronoficaco, che lo ritroveni. La porta destra hauea sul'pa que-
to parola. THEODOXIA. Sopra della sinistra d'ho d'ito. COSMO-

Fig. 1. Polyphilo's Three Portals

Over this threshold of desire - to contemplate but never be fully fulfilled - to be aware "of the wholeness and appropriateness" of architecture while ever yearning towards perfection, is a noble goal for an architect attempting to create an "ethical practice"[10]. These three doors reiterate the significance of the *Hypnerotomachia* for students as future architects to dream, to struggle in life, but never to give up the desire for the energy of the future.

THE CAMPO MARZIO OR PRIMING THE IMAGINATION MACHINE

The imagination machine of the *Campo Marzio* and Piranesi's allegorical illustrations demonstrate that the power of the imagination latent in a drawing is never quite fulfilled in the frozen potential of a building. The completed exists as a pale shadow of the original idea. Libeskind hints at this by stating: "In its raw and latent state architecture is a source of sense that is mightier and longer lasting than its "ideal", because these drawings never cease to amaze us." [11]

Piranesi created the *Campo Marzio* engravings as a radical departure from the accepted architectural norm of his time, deconstructing them so subtly that his act went virtually unnoticed. The drawings were anarchical at a philosophical level for the eighteenth century. As Tafuri states, "it was a utopia so dangerous it could only be manifested through allusions." [12] The *Campo Marzio* engravings not only introduce an unusual point of view through a seeming collage of mapped artifacts and fragments, but subversively introduce the idea of a break in the norm. Is there a subtle message to reaffirm the goal of waking from one's sleep? It begins with the eye and observing. The power of the engravings and their unusual spatial practices draw in the observers and submerge them in an imaginary realm juxtaposed to the standards of the time. In "The Wicked Architect" Tafuri comments that the deconstruction or disarray Piranesi created was both the "systematic criticism of the concept of place", and the instigation of "a critical examination of space" beginning with the center. This center could be the observer inserted into the picture plane. It is the seat of the point of view, the "eye" conspicuous in Piranesi's earlier series the *Carceri* [13]. Hidden in this classical study is a Utopian reaction to the strict geometrical norms of its time. Jennifer Bloomer states, "Piranesi looked about and found, to his horror, the impassive cage of the Cartesian-Newtonian universe descending onto his world." [14] Through this reference Libeskind is points towards a departure from the architectural pedagogy of the twentieth century in favor of a new system.

The *Campo Marzio* plans and their perspective precursors in the *Carceri*, serve as paradigms: they are the first drawings to break from a symbol laden geometry to a free concept of space associated with modern thinking. What appears to be subtle and enigmatic today — the break from the classical past into a system that seemingly made no sense, “a formless heap of fragments colliding with one another”[15], was the first step in the construction of a new order. By presenting an architecture that appears to be reduced to meaningless mechanical geometry, Piranesi constructs a contrast between what Tafuri calls the “visual noise” of the *Campo Marzio* and nature.[16]. The breakdown of the entire architectural system of buildings in harmony with their sites, their places. It is the exposure of the “destruction of the organicity of space”[17]. This crack rapidly becomes a crevice into which architectural theory pitches, landing finally in the present.

Piranesi’s maverick vision presages the building-as-machine as well as the obsession with technology characteristic of modern times. His machine-like mechanisms are evident in planimetric arrangements that resemble cogwheels and gearworks. Tafuri says: “The whole organism of the *Campo Marzio* seems to be a type of clockwork mechanism”[18]. In “Il Campo Marzio: La Region ou s’erige le desir sans contrainte” Jennifer Bloomer locates another mechanical object in the *Campo Marzio* drawings, the “Seasonal Clock”, made of arcing lines emanating from the sun’s path across the earth that form the image of a concave lens[19]. The introduction of this symbolic object, the sundial, refers to the temporal dimension, which parallels a facet of Libeskind’s philosophy. As a mimetic device that represents the temporal, timepieces and clockwork mechanisms are mesmeric instruments precisely because they attempt to harness time in the same measured way that the Cartesian grid aspires to capture space. The reference to the sundial in the *Campo Marzio* also marks the end not only of an allegorical interpretation of space but of time as well, culminating in the precision of our present day “atomic” clock.

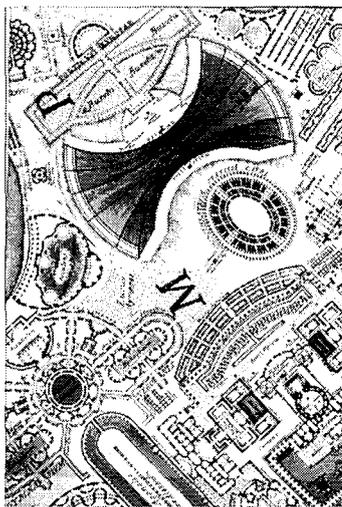


Fig. 2. *Campo Marzio*

The African architect Mackombo Omoile in his “City Clock for the Ideal City of Palmanova” speaks of the modern integration of machines and technology - and of a marriage of convenience which at times seems empty and soulless[20]. At its heart Omoile’s clock seems desirous of reinserting meaning into modernity. “The universe of pure power, of the absolute alienation of the subject, is not by chance a mechanical universe.”[21] The machine world Tafuri describes, the world Omoile’s clock responds to attempting to speak faithfully to its time, and the related cogwheel-like mechanism of the “Reading Machine” of Daniel Libeskind seem to be pulled directly from the *Campo Marzio*, “a hermetic machine - an enormous wheel with differentiated spokes”[22]. The *Campo Marzio* is the precursor to Libeskind’s “Reading Machine”, a

machine that “represents the triumph of the spirit over matter”[23]. Constructed according to “medieval” methods, it is manually cranked and therefore its power of human movements triumphs over the machine.

Piranesi was a visionary architect who elucidated the role of the imagination as an instrument of scientific progress. “The conceptual heir to the great critical line of modern architecture”[24]. He saw architecture split from meaning, an architecture made for the sake of itself., Tafuri states-“Piranesi exalted the capacity of the mind to create models.”[25] He imbues the viewer with the feeling of omnipotence provided by “super-real” perspectives built on multiple sight lines. By Piranesi’s example what we must not take for granted, in an age of computer modeling, is the mind’s own superior ability to conceive of and visualize space taken to an infinite degree.

The *Campo Marzio* drawings provide the students who decode them with enhanced visualization skills and an awareness of Renaissance architecture theory, at the conceptual emergence of the modern age. They also serve as a warning of the limit of the Cartesian grid in which we live, and a challenge to break out of the web and reclaim a complete vision of the world.

THE ZONE OF THE STALKER

Andrey Tarkovsky’s *The Stalker* (1979), a simply staged yet deeply poetic film about personal faith elaborates the theme of self-worth[26]. The plot of “The Stalker” revolves around three men, a scientist, a writer and “the Stalker”, a guide who offers to lead the other two into a land of redemption called the Zone. These figures allude to a trinity representing the pragmatic, the irrational and the messianic. In the Zone one’s most fervent wish will be granted, but the Zone is no Aladdin’s lamp. Instead it proves to be a deep yet elusive test of one’s innermost beliefs and desires. The Zone that Libeskind speaks of is emblematic of a transitional experience. It may be seen as a metaphor for a psychological stumble or a crisis of faith. The Zone attempts to show how, despite great difficulties, one can summon the courage to break through. The Zone is a state of mind. Tarkovsky explains: The Zone is a zone — it’s life — as one makes his way across it he may break down or he may come through — this depends on self-respect and distinguishing between what matters and what is passing.”[27] The Zone is the ultimate initiation. Libeskind himself also speaks of it as part of life, and it may have been suggested to point the way towards the maturation process that architects require - a spiritual enlightenment leading to a stronger inner resolve. In the film the Zone is shown to bestow in accordance with the contribution made due to one’s degree of faith. It is a valid lesson in showing one’s own dignity and self-respect are acquired through practicing responsibility toward one’s self and others. One’s initiation is to wisdom.



Fig. 3. Pool in the Zone of the Stalker

In being drawn into the world of the Zone one experiences “real time”. Tarkovsky deliberately shot *The Stalker* with no time lapse and a simplification of plot and geography to express the unity of time, space, and action. One effect is to reiterate the importance of time in the perception of architecture. Libeskind impresses upon the viewers that Tarkovsky’s goal of time’s passing is felt realistically, and makes sense of the temporal and spatial continuity viewers feel. The unification of space and time combined with human endeavor is what architecture is all about. It exists in time and space and therefore is constantly changing, even as it appears to be the same. It is simply experienced differently through the action of human perception. With respect to architectural education the Zone represents the auto-didacticism in the process of self awareness.

SYNCHRONICITY AND DERIVE

To the students in Libeskind’s seminar, the notion of urban drifting — of life as a *flaneur* — is an ingrained concept. This became evident as students captured space on the “City Joker Tour”. Based on the *derive* theory of Guy Debord the tour is about the “fugitive encounter of various atmospheres while aimlessly drifting in a city”[28]. Those who participated in the City Joker Tour departed from the central location of the Schloßberg in the old city center of Graz, then struck out along a path that was arrow straight drawn across a map of the city. Their goal was to undertake an intimate investigation of the city, without deviating more than three meters from the line of demarcation. As in other exercises in urban roaming this journey was recorded, and it is the documents of this excursion that form the verification of the *derive*. “As art locates itself in real time and real space it can only be documented through traces, such as texts, photos and maps.”[29] Systematic drifting through the urban space of Graz — under a mountain, through apartments, over rooftops and through alleys and gardens — created many unexpected situations, adding to the *derive*’s veracity. Once, when entry to a shop was denied, accommodating brothel inhabitants early one morning allowed passage through their establishment. When another path was blocked through one prearranged apartment, an elderly woman motioned from a balcony to climb up and go through hers, offering tea and tales of her late husband’s ghost before the journey was reassumed. Through this experience of the life of the city, its chance encounters, unconscious irrational drives and attractions, perplexing situations and elusive atmospheres finding a specific expression in the “stochastic experience of city life”[30], students formed a cognitive mapping base with which to approach their sites and infuse their “city” with meaning.

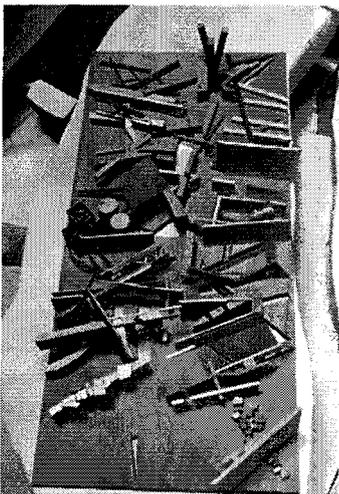


Fig. 4. City Fragments

PROCESS AND PRODUCT

In the first project, the “joint of the wing”, students were asked to depict in model form the connection between the human corpus and the “wing” of the supernatural, embodying the bridge between the phenomenal reality of the living world and the abstract perfection of the infinite. The “joint of the wing” is the connective tissue between the purity of the angel’s flight and the blood of animal existence, the synapses where the flesh meets the spirit. Traditional model paper and cardboard were rejected in favor of more unorthodox materials sought for sensual or textural aspects. Wood and bone, leather, parchment and silk appeared along with precious metals, iron and glass to begin to shape the unseen, the indiscernible.



Fig. 5. Joint of the Wing

In the second project the task was to alter an anthropomorphically dimensioned steel plate, to reflect one’s own soul. Each plate mirrored the student’s body with some plates long and slender, others wide and massive, some masculine and some feminine. They provided the ground upon which to etch, pierce weld or stamp a drawing of an angel. It was this scratching into the steel, much like carving into or chipping away from stone, which solidified and from which a record remained.



Fig. 6. Inscribing Steel Plates

Armed with their *derive* background, students approach their sites, sites chosen through a Dadaesque technique based on randomness. Libeskind selected a breakfast saucer and unexpectedly shattered it, playing on Debord's idea that a lack of planning in an event does not necessarily cause negative consequences. The element of chance is less a determinant than one might think: from the *derivé* point of view cities have "fixed points and vortices which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones"[31]. From these zones, shards of porcelain in hand, students imaginatively entered their sites. Each student was given a shard of the shattered saucer to become their building site reconstructed at a larger scale. With accurate cross-sectional relationships, the saucer shape reemerged true to plan in the large finished reinforced concrete site model.

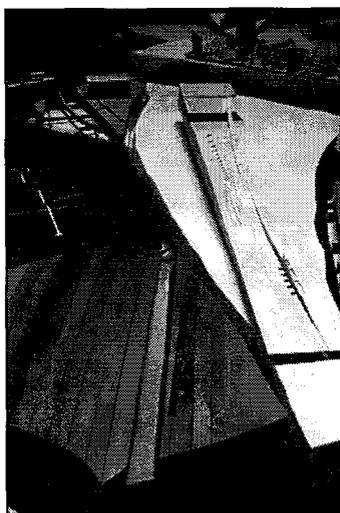


Fig.7. Models on Shards

To reach their site the students took their journals recording the "Quintessential City" and began to traverse the landscape of their own imagination. Disc-like, arcing, a suggestive slice of a global whole—the fragmented saucer and its reconstitution required exercises in the alignment of borders, permission to transgress boundaries, and negotiations to establish links, bridges and zones of agreement. The fifteen student participants began to learn to govern their "polis". By creating models of their ideal city, they became intimately involved in the curving sensuousness of this collective topography of mind and saucer.

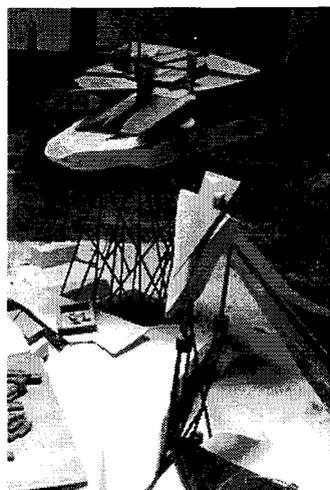


Fig.8. The Saucer Site Re-emerges

By beginning with a variety of esoteric texts, Daniel Libeskind led students to extract lessons from the teaching of design process. Combining intellectual vision with emotive experience, these lessons demonstrated how the factors of time, place and the city converge to provide the basis for the creation of architecture. In the mirror-like drawings on steel plates the self-revelation began, the "joint of the wing" became the metaphor for the awareness of the creative urge, and architectural models of images of the city on fragmentary porcelain shards completed the realization of the underlying pedagogical project: the discovery and mapping of the architect's process of design.

NOTES

¹Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duinesian Elegies of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Elaine E. Boney (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1975.): p. 68.

²Ibid. p. 72.

³Ibid. p. 77.

⁴*Wings of Desire* [Der Himmel ueber Berlin], dir. Wim Wenders, WGer/Fr, 1987, color, b/w, 128 min. VHS, Orion, 1988.

⁵Martin Pearce and Maggie Toy, ed., *Educating Architects* (London: Academy Editions, 1995.): p. 89.

⁶Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Polyphilo or the Dark Forest Revisited - An Erotic Epiphany of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1992.): p. xiv.

⁷Ibid. p. xv.

⁸Himmelblau Group, *Architecture is Now* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983.): p. 90.

⁹Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Polyphilo or the Dark Forest Revisited - An Erotic Epiphany of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1992.): p. xiv.

¹⁰Ibid. p. xvii.

¹¹Daniel Libeskind, "Piranesi and my work", *Kein Ort an seiner Stelle*, pub. Angelika Stepken (Dresden: Verlag der Kuenste, 1995.) .

¹²Manfredo Tafuri, "The Wicked Architect": G. B. Piranesi, Heterotopia and the Voyage", *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Boston, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1980, English 1987.): p. 33.

¹³Ibid. p. 27.

¹⁴Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The S(crypts) of Joyce and Piranesi* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993.)

¹⁵Manfredo Tafuri: p. 34.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 35.

¹⁷Ibid. p. 50.

¹⁸Ibid. p. 35.

¹⁹Jennifer Bloomer: pp. 84-85.

²⁰Mark Schneider, Ben Nicholson, and Dalibor Veseley, and Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Journal of Architectural History and Theory* (Houston: Univ. of Houston Press, 1985.): p. 35.

²¹Manfredo Tafuri: p. 32.

²²Ibid. p. 35.

²³Daniel Libeskind, *Radix Matrix* (Munich: Prestel, 1997.): p. 64.

²⁴Manfredo Tafuri: p.

²⁵Ibid. p. 29.

²⁶*Stalker*, dir. Andrey Tarkovsky, USSR, 1979, color, b/w, 161 min, VHS, Fox Lorber, 1993.

²⁷*Andrey Tarkovsky, Sculpting in Time* (New York: Knopf, 1987.)

²⁸Christel Hollevoet, "Wandering in the City, Flanerie to Derive and After", *The Power of the City, the City of Power* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, ISP Papers): p. 32.

²⁹Ibid. p. 30.

³⁰Ibid. p. 27.

³¹Christel Hollevoet: p.40.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1.: Colonna, Francesco, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (New York & London: Garland Pub. Inc., 1976.)

Fig 2: Gian Battista Piranesi, *Campus Martius Antiquae Urbis* (Bergamo; Grafica Gutenberg 1975.)

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