

Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development

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Translated from the Italian by
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Preface

This volume is the result of a reworking and sizeable enlargement of my essay, "Per una critica dell'ideologia architettonica," published in the periodical *Contropiano* (1969, no. 1).

Immediately after the publication of that essay many more or less violent stands were taken in regard to its theses. To these I have always avoided responding directly, not so much out of a lack of respect for my critics, as for reasons which must now of necessity be clarified once and for all. The essay published in *Contropiano*—in a deliberately summary and sketchy form—carried to their extreme consequences those hypotheses already expressed in my *Leorie e storia dell'architettura*. Rereading the history of modern architecture in the light of methods offered by an ideological criticism, understood in the strictest Marxist acceptance of the term, could, six years ago, furnish only a frame of reference for further examination, and only a partial and circumstantial analysis of individual problems. The journal that published this essay (and others by myself and by colleagues working along the same lines) was so clearly defined in its political history and particular line of thought and interests, that one would have supposed that many equivocal interpretations might a priori have been avoided.

This was not the case. By isolating the architectural problems treated from the theoretical context of the journal, the way was found to consider my essay an apocalyptic prophecy, "the expression of renunciation, the ultimate pronouncement of the "death of architecture.

And yet, what in 1968–1969 was only a working hypothesis became—especially with the research carried on at the Historical Institute of the Institute of Architecture of the University of Venice—something specific, enriched, and defined in many of its basic principles. The relationship between the historical avant-garde movements and the metropolis, the relationships between intellectual work and capitalist development, researches on German sociology of the early twentieth century, on ideology and the planning practices of the Soviet Union, on the social-democratic administration of the city, on architecture and American cities, and on the building cycle, have been the object of a collaborative program of study, and one very far indeed from pretending to have arrived at any firm and dogmatic conclusions.

Publishing now in 1975 the English edition of the book* based on my essay of 1969, I more than anyone realize the ground since covered, the changes of judgment made necessary by more accurate investigation, and the weaknesses of those first hypotheses. It seems to me, however, that on the whole those hypotheses have stood up, and that the argument can now be

* The original edition of this book, entitled *Progetto e Utopia*, was published in January 1973 by Laterza, Bari.

developed on the basis of analysis and documentation, and not merely on the basis of principles

In order to discuss these principles, however, it is necessary to enter into the field of political theory as this has been developed by the most advanced studies of Marxist thought from 1960 to the present. Ideological criticism cannot be separated from this context. It is an integral part of it, and all the more so when it is conscious of its own limits and its own sphere of action.

It should be stated immediately that the critical analysis of the basic principles of contemporary architectural ideology does not pretend to have any "revolutionary" aim. What is of interest here is the precise identification of those tasks which capitalist development has taken away from architecture. That is to say, what it has taken away in general from ideological prefiguration. With this, one is led almost automatically to the discovery of what may well be the "drama" of architecture today: that is, to see architecture obliged to return to *pure architecture*, to form without utopia; in the best cases, to sublime uselessness. To the deceptive attempts to give architecture an ideological dress, I shall always prefer the sincerity of those who have the courage to speak of that silent and outdated "purity" even if this, too, still harbors an ideological inspiration, pathetic in its anachronism.

Paradoxically, the new tasks given to architecture are something besides or beyond architecture. In recognizing this situation, which I mean to corroborate historically, I am expressing no regret, but neither am I making an apocalyptic prophecy. No regret, because when the role of a discipline ceases to exist, to try to stop the

course of things is only regressive utopia, and of the worst kind. No prophecy, because the process is actually taking place daily before our eyes. And for those wishing striking proof, it is enough to observe the percentage of architectural graduates really exercising that profession.

Also, there is the fact that this decline within the profession proper has not yet resulted in a corresponding institutionally defined role for the technicians charged with building activity. For this reason one is left to navigate in empty space, in which anything can happen but nothing is decisive.

This does not mean that a lucid awareness of the present situation is not necessary. But the objective of finding this institutionally defined role cannot be achieved by presenting illusory hopes. And note that it is an objective which is still ambiguous in itself. Doing away with outdated myths, one certainly does not see on the architectural horizon any ray of an alternative, of a technology "of the working class."

Ideology is useless to capitalist development, just as it is damaging from the working-class point of view. After the studies of Fortini in *Verifica dei poteri*, and those of Tronti, Asor Rosa, and Cacciari, I feel it superfluous to turn again to *German Ideology* to demonstrate this fact. Of course, once the work of ideological criticism has been completed, there remains the problem of deciding what instruments of knowledge might be immediately useful to the political struggle. It is precisely here that my discourse must end, but certainly not by choice.

From the criticism of ideology it is necessary to pass on to the analysis of the techniques of programming and of the ways in which these techniques actually affect the vital relationships of production. That is to say, we must proceed to analyses that, in the field of building activities, are only today being attempted with the necessary precision and coherence. For those anxiously seeking an operative criticism, I can only respond with an invitation to transform themselves into analysts of some precisely defined economic sector, each with an eye fixed on bringing together capitalist development and the processes of reorganization and consolidation of the working class.

In respect to such tasks this book is only a prologue. And given the summary way in which the problems are deliberately treated, it is but a historical outline that has been worked over and verified in only some of its parts. It will be necessary to go beyond this, but in the mean time I feel it not wholly useless to present this framework of a hypothesis, which if nothing else offers its own formal completeness. And it would already be a result, if such a hypothesis were to contribute to rendering agreements and disagreements more conscious and radical.

1 Reason's Adventures: Naturalism and the City in the Century of the Enlightenment

To ward off anguish by understanding and absorbing its causes would seem to be one of the principal ethical exigencies of bourgeois art. It matters little if the conflicts, contradictions, and lacerations that generate this anguish are temporarily reconciled by means of a complex mechanism, or if, through contemplative sublimation, catharsis is achieved.

The whole phenomenology of bourgeois anguish lies in the "free" contemplation of destiny. It is impossible not to be confronted continually with the perspectives opened up by that freedom. In this tragic confrontation it is impossible not to perpetuate the experience of shock. The shock derived from the experience of the metropolis, which I shall try to analyze in this book, is in itself a way of rendering anguish "active." Munch's *Scream* already expressed the necessity of a bridge between the absolute "emptiness" of the individual, capable of expressing himself only by a contracted plume, and the passivity of collective behavior.

It is not just by chance that the metropolis, the place of absolute alienation, is at the very center of concern of the avant-garde.

From the time the capitalist system first needed to represent its own anguish—in order to continue to func-

tion, reassuring itself with that "virile objectivity" discussed by Max Weber—ideology was able to bridge the gap between the exigencies of the bourgeois ethic and the universe of Necessity.

In this book I will also try to outline the stages by which compensation in the heavens of ideology ceased to be of use.

The bourgeois intellectual's obligation to exist can be seen in the imperativeness his function assumes as a "social" mission. Among the members of the intellectual "avant-garde" there exists a sort of tacit understanding concerning their position, and the mere attempt to expose it arouses a chorus of indignant protests. Indeed, culture has identified its own function as mediator in such ideological terms that—all individual good faith aside—its running has reached the point where it imposes the forms of disputation and protest upon its own products. The higher the sublimation of the conflicts on a formal plane, the more hidden the cultural and social structures actually expressed by that sublimation.

Attacking the subject of architectural ideology from this point of view means trying to explain why the apparently most functional proposals for the reorganization of this sector of capitalist development have had to suffer the most humiliating frustrations—why they can be presented even today as purely objective proposals devoid of any class connotation, or as mere "alternatives," or even as points of direct clash between intellectuals and capital.

It should be stated immediately that I do not believe it to be by mere chance that many of the new and recent

ideas on architecture have been gleaned from an accurate reexamination of the origins of the historical avant-garde movements. Going back to these origins, situated precisely in that period when bourgeois ideology and intellectual anticipation were intimately connected, the entire cycle of modern architecture can be viewed as a unitary development. This makes it possible to consider globally the formation of architectural ideologies and, in particular, their implications for the city.

But it will be necessary to recognize also the unitary character of the cycle undergone by bourgeois culture. In other words, it will be necessary to continually bear in mind the entire picture of its development.

It is significant that systematic research on Enlightenment architecture has been able to identify, on a purely ideological level, a great many of the contradictions that in diverse forms accompany the course of contemporary art.

The formation of the architect as an ideologist of society; the individualization of the areas of intervention proper to city planning; the persuasive role of form in regard to the public and the self-critical role of form in regard to its own problems and development, the interrelationship and opposition—at the level of formal research—between architectural “object” and urban organization: these are the constantly recurrent themes of the “Enlightenment dialectic” on architecture.

When in 1753 Laugier enunciated his theories of urban design, officially initiating Enlightenment architectural theory, his words revealed a twofold inspiration. On the one hand, that of reducing the city itself to

a natural phenomenon. On the other, that of going beyond any *a priori* idea of urban organization by applying to the city the formal dimensions of the aesthetic of the picturesque. Laugier declared:

Whoever knows how to design a park well will have no difficulty in tracing the plan for the building of a city according to its given area and situation. There must be squares, crossroads, and streets. There must be regularity and fantasy, relationships and oppositions, and casual, unexpected elements that vary the scene: great order in the details, confusion, uproar, and tumult in the whole.

Laugier's words are a penetrating summary of the formal reality of the eighteenth-century city. No longer archetypal schemes of order, but instead the acceptance of the antiperspective character of the urban space. And even his reference to the park has new significance: in its variety, the nature that is now called upon to form part of the urban structure does away with that comforting rhetorical and didactic naturalism that had dominated the episodic continuity of Baroque layouts from the seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century.

Thus Laugier's call to naturalism is an appeal to the

[M. A. Laugier, *Observations on Architecture*, The Hague 1765, pp. 212–213. Note, however, that the text cited takes up ideas Laugier had advanced earlier in his *Essai sur l'Architecture*, Paris 1752 (pp. 258–265). On Laugier, see W. Hermann, *Laugier and Eighteenth Century French Theory*, Zwettmer, London 1902. The comparison between Laugier's urban-planning theories and the projects of Gwynn and George Dance, Jr., for London is very interesting. On this see J. Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved, with the Discourse on Publick Magnificence*, London 1766; M. Hugg-Brunt, "George Dance Co Younger, ca. James Plannet (1768–1814)," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, XIV, 1953, no. 4 (with many inaccuracies); and D. Stroud, *George Dance Architect, 1724–1815*, Faber & Faber, London 1971. The best contribution to the subject is the volume by G. Tegoni, *Giardini e ville illuministiche inglesi: George Dance il giovane*, Officina Ediziana, Roma 1974.

original purity of the act of designing the environment, and at the same time it shows an understanding of the preeminently *antiforgaria* quality of the city. But there is still more. The reducing of the city to a natural phenomenon is a response to the aesthetic of the picturesque, which English empiricism had introduced as early as the first decades of the eighteenth century, and which in 1759 was given an extremely elaborate and coherent theoretical foundation by the English painter, Alexander Cozens.

To what extent Laugier's ideas on the city could have influenced Cozens' theory of landscape painting, or Robert Castell's considerations in *The Villas of the Ancients*, is not known. What is certain is that the urban invention of the French abbé and the theories of the English painter have in common a basic method, in which the tool for a critical intervention in "natural" reality is selection.²

We see that for the eighteenth-century theorists there was no question that the city falls within the same formal area as painting. Selectivity and criticism therefore signified the introduction into urban planning of a

2. A. Cozens, *A New Method of Assisting the Invention Drawing Original Compositions of Landscapes*, London 1766. Note the significant assumption by Pope's words cited at the beginning of Cozens' treatise: "These rules were, we discovered, as, described, and Nature still, Lo, Nature methodized / Nature like Monarchy is but restrained / by the same Law with fire herself ordained" (See G. C. Argan, *La natura dell'illuminismo in ingegneria da Bagnone a Canobbio*, Bulzoni, Rome 1968, p. 183 ff.) The civil value attributed to Nature — subject and object of ethical-pedagogical action — here becomes the substitute for the traditional principles of authority that rationalism and empiricism were destroying. See also R. Castell, *The Villas of the Ancients*, London 1728, dedicated to Lord Burlington. On the significance of the treatise of Laugier and Chambers (W. Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, London 1727) see the fundamental essay by R. Wittkower, "English Neo-Palladianism: the Landscape Garden, China, and the Enlightenment," *PAJ*, 1969, no. 6, pp. 20-37.

fragmentation that places on the same level, not only Nature and Reason, but also natural fragment and urban fragment.

The city, inasmuch as it is a work of man, tends to a natural condition. Thus, like the landscape painted by the artist, through critical selection the city, too, must be given the stamp of a social morality.

And it is significant that, while Laugier, like the English Enlightenment theorists, had an acute grasp of the artificial character of the urban language, neither Ledoux nor Boullée, in their works much greater innovators, ever really gave up a mythical and abstract idea of nature. Boullée's controversy with Perrault's acute anticipations of the artificiality of the architectural language is highly indicative in this regard.³

It is possible, but not certain, that Laugier's *city like a forest* had no other model than the varied sequence of spaces that appear on the plan of Paris drawn up by Patte, who brought together in a whole the projects for the new royal square. It is, however, certain that these conceptions were referred to by George Dance, Jr., in his project for London, a project that for eighteenth-century Europe was surely very advanced.⁴ I shall therefore limit myself to registering the theoretical intuitions contained in Laugier's words, which one can see as all the more pertinent when one recalls that Le

3 On the significance of Perrault's theories (set forth individually in *L'Architecture des six Livres d'Architecture de Vitruve etc.*, Paris 1673) see M. Tafel, *Architectura Artificialis*, Claude Perrault, Sir Christopher Wren e il dibattito

sul "linguaggio architettonico", *Atti del Congresso Internazionale sul Rinascimento*, Lecce 1971, pp. 373-398. On the controversy with Boullée, see H. Rosenthal, *Boullée's Treatise on Architecture*, London 1952 (comments and notes).

4 On the activity of Dance, Jr., as city planner see the bibliography cited in note 1.

Corbusier was to rely on them in delineating the theoretical principles of his *villes radieuses*.³

What, on the ideological plane, does reducing the city to a natural phenomenon signify?

On the one hand, such an enterprise involves a sublimation of physiocratic theories: the city is no longer seen as a structure that, by means of its own accumulatory mechanisms, determines and transforms the processes of the exploitation of the soil and agricultural production. Inasmuch as the reduction is a "natural" process, ahistorical because universal, the city is freed of any considerations of a structural nature. At first, formal naturalism was used to make convincing the objective necessity of the processes put in motion by the pre-Revolutionary bourgeoisie. A bit later, it was used to consolidate and protect these achievements from any further transformation.

On the other hand, this naturalism has a function of its own, which is that of assuring to artistic activity an ideological role in the strictest sense of the term. And here it is significant that, in exactly the moment when bourgeois economy began to discover and invent its own categories of action and judgment, giving to "values" contents directly commensurable with the dictates of new methods of production and exchange, the crisis of the old system of values was immediately hidden by recourse to new sublimations, rendered artificially objective by means of the call to the universality of Nature.

3. Le Corbusier, "Hébergement," *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris 1924 (Eng. trans. in *The City of Tomorrow*, 1928, *Transl. & ed. by* MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1991).

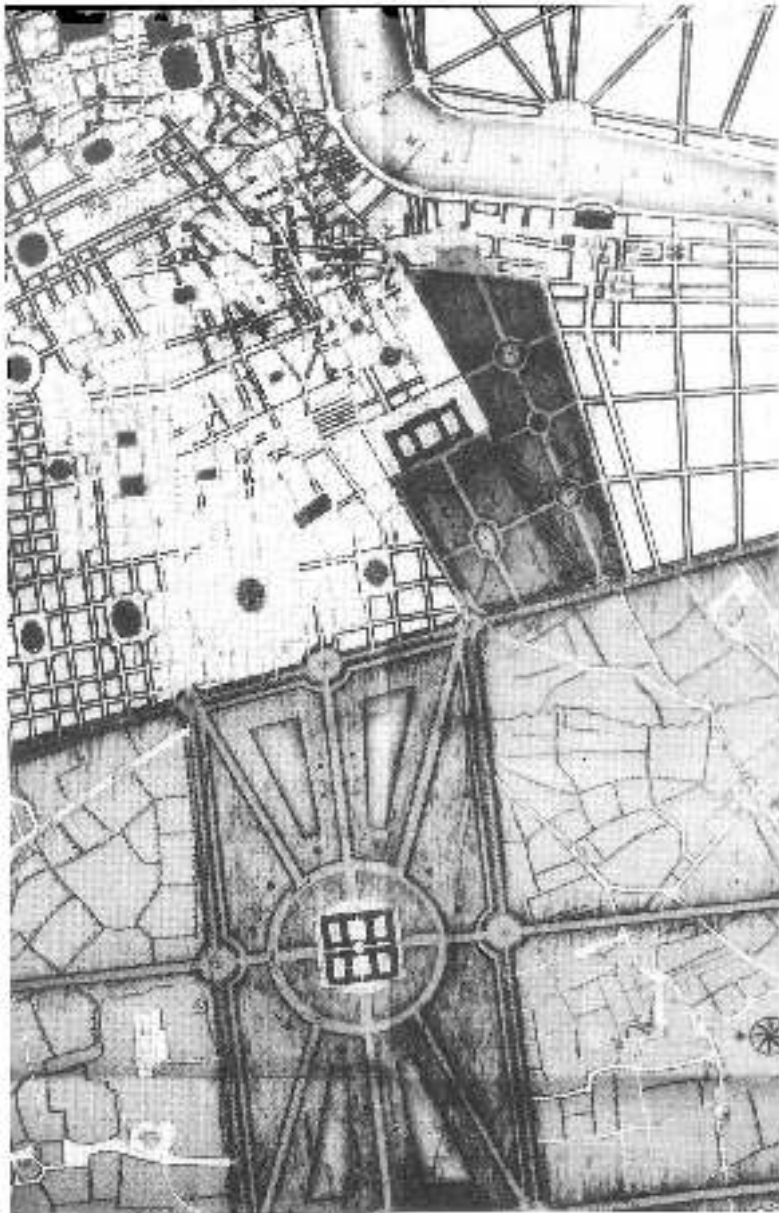
Thus Reason and Nature now had to be unified. Enlightenment rationalism could not assume the entire responsibility for the operations that were being carried out, and its practitioners felt the necessity of avoiding a direct confrontation with their own premises.

It is clear that, throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such an ideological cover was encouraged by the contradictions of the *ancien régime*. Incipient urban capitalism was already clashing with those economic structures based on precapitalist exploitation of the soil. It is indicative that the urban theorists did not make this contradiction evident, but rather covered it up, or, better, endeavored to resolve it by relegating the city to the great sea of nature, concentrating all their attention upon the suprastructural aspects of the city.

Urban naturalism, the insertion of the picturesque into the city and into architecture, as the increased importance given to landscape in artistic ideology all tended to negate the now obvious dichotomy between urban reality and the reality of the countryside. They served to prove that there was no disparity between the value accredited to nature and the value accredited to the city as a productive mechanism of new forms of economic accumulation.

The rhetorical and Arcadian naturalism of the seventeenth century was now replaced by a widely persuasive naturalism.

It is, however, important to underline that the deliberate abstraction of Enlightenment theories of the city served only at first to destroy Baroque schemes of city planning and development. At a later date, it served to



1 John Gwynn, plate from *London and Westminster Improved*, 1776

discourage, rather than condition, the formation of global models of development. It is therefore not surprising that such a gigantic and avant-garde operation as the reconstruction of Lisbon after the earthquake of 1755 was carried out, under the guidance of the Marquis de Pombal, in a completely empirical spirit, devoid of theoretical abstractions.⁶

Thus, deviating decidedly from Enlightenment criticism in general, architectural thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries played a mostly destructive role. Not having at its disposal a mature substratum of production techniques adequate to the new conditions of bourgeois ideology and economic liberalism, architecture was obliged to restrict its self-criticism to two areas.

1. The polemical reasons architecture exalted every thing that could assume an anti-European significance. Piranesi's fragmentation is the consequence of the discovery of that new bourgeois science, historical criticism, but it is also, paradoxically, *criticism of criticism*. The whole fashion of evocations of Gothic, Chinese, and Hindu architecture, and the romantic naturalism of the garden landscape, in which were immersed the jests—devoid of irony—of exotic pavilions and false ruins, are related ideally to the atmosphere of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, Voltaire's *Ingénu* and Leibniz' caustic antioccidentalism. In order to integrate rationalism and criticism, the Europeans confronted their myths with all that which could, by contesting them, confirm their validity. In the romantic English

⁶ See J.-A. França, *Une ville de lumière: le Lisbonne de Pombal*, C.N.R.S., Paris 1965.

garden the time-honored perspective view was nullified. The aggregation of little temple structures, pavilions, and grottoes, which seem the meeting places of the most disparate testimonies of human history, signified something other than mere evasion in the fabulous. Rather, the "picturesque" of Brown, Kent, and the Woods, or the "horrid" of Lequeu, made an appeal. By means of an architecture that had already renounced the formation of "objects" to become a *technique of organization of preformed materials*, they asked for an authentication from *outside architecture*. With all the detachment typical of the great critics of the Enlightenment, those architects initiated a systematic and fatal autopsy of architecture and all its conventions.

2. Even though its properly formal role had been placed in parentheses by the city, architecture still offered an alternative to the nihilist outlook apparent behind the hallucinating fantasies of Lequeu, Belanger, or Piranesi. By renouncing a symbolic role, at least in the traditional sense, architecture—in order to avoid destroying itself—discovered its own scientific calling. On one hand, it could become the instrument of social equilibrium, and in this case it was to have to face in full the question of building types—something that was to be done by Durand and Dubut. On the other hand, it could become a science of sensations. This was to be the road pursued by Ledoux, and in a much more systematic way by Camus de Mézières. The alternatives were thus either the study of the forms assumed by different building types, or *architecture parlante*: the same two concepts brought into erupting contrast by Piranesi. But, instead of leading to a solution, these can

cepts were to accentuate architecture's internal crisis throughout the nineteenth century.

Architecture now undertook the task of rendering its work "political." As a political agent the architect had to assume the task of continual invention of advanced solutions, at the most generally applicable level. In the acceptance of this task, the architect's role as idealist became prominent.

The real significance of that utopianism which modern historical study has recognized in Enlightenment architecture is thus laid bare. The truth is that the architectural proposals of eighteenth-century Europe have nothing unrealizable about them. Nor is it accidental that all the vast theorization of the *philosophes* of architecture contains no social utopia to support the urban reformism proclaimed at a purely formal level.

The introduction to the entry on "architecture" written by Quatremère de Quincy for the *Encyclopédie méthodique* is, in fact, a masterpiece of realism, even in the abstract terms in which it is expressed:

Among all the arts, those children of pleasure and necessity, with which man has formed a partnership in order to help him bear the pains of life and transmit his memory to future generations, it can certainly not be denied that *architecture* holds a most outstanding place. Considering it only from the point of view of utility, it surpasses all the arts. It provides for the salubrity of cities, guards the health of men, protects their property, and works only for the safety, repose, and good order of civil life.⁷

Enlightenment realism is, in fact, not even disproved

⁷ M. Quatremère de Quincy, entry for "architecture," in *Encyclopédie méthodique etc.*, Paris 1772, vol. I, p. 139.

by the gigantic architectural dreams of Boullée or of the pensioners of the *Académie*. The exaltation of scale, the geometric purification, and the ostentatious primitivism—the constant characteristics of these projects—assume concrete significance when read in the light of what the projects really were intended to be: not so much unrealizable dreams, as experimental models of a new method of architectural creation.

From the excessive symbolism of Ledoux or Lequeu to the geometric silence of Durand's formally codified building types, the process followed by Enlightenment architecture is consistent with the new ideological role it had assumed. In order to become part of the structure of the bourgeois city, architecture had to redimension itself, dissolving into the uniformity ensured by pre-constituted formal systems.

But this dissolution was not without consequences. It was Piranesi who carried Laugier's theoretical intuitions to their extreme conclusions. His ambiguous evocation of the *Campo Marzio* is the graphic monument of that tentative opening of late Baroque culture to revolutionary ideologies. Just as his *Parere sull'architettura* is its most sensitive literary testimony.⁸

8. See G. B. Piranesi, *Il Campo Marzio dell'antica Roma* (zib. Roma 1788—1792);idem, *Parere su l'architettura*, appended to *Quarantadue tavole* (Roma 1784, W. Knitt), "G. B. Piranesi als publizistischer Architekt," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, L. 1933; R. Wittkower, "Piranesi's *Parere* on Architecture," *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, L. 1938—1939, pp. 137—155; C. Vogel-Göbel, *Gedanken des Künstlers Piranesi's "Campo Marzio"* (Crigo Verlag, Zurich 1936); M. Sekler, "G. B. Piranesi's Career: Etchings and Related Drawings," *The Art Quarterly*, XXV, 1962, pp. 357—363; M. Caruso, introduction to the new edition of H. Eschler, *Piranesi*, Alba, Bologna 1967; J. Harris, "La Grotta, Piranesi and the International Neo-Classicism in Rome, 1749—1760," in *Essays in the History of Architecture*, presented to Nikolaus Wittkower, Zwilger Press, London 1967, pp. 129—136; M. G. Massimo, "Tavole dell'architettura in G. B. Piranesi," *Centrosazio*, 1970, no. 5/2, pp. 6—10 and 1971, no. 6, pp. 26—28; M. Tassi,

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