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# SAC ZERO PIRANESI

STÄDELSCHULE ARCHITECTURE CLASS

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MICHAEL YOUNG

# THE PARADIGM OF PIRANESI'S CAMPO MARZIO ICHNOGRAPHIA

The *Ichnographia* of the *Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma*,<sup>1</sup> etched by Giovanni Battista Piranesi in 1762, is one of the most studied and written about representations in the history of urbanism. But, as popular as it is, its paradigmatic value for contemporary issues in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is often overlooked. The concept of "paradigm" is used here in a specific sense. As initially identified by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), and then further elaborated by Giorgio Agamben in the essay *What is a Paradigm?* (2008), the term is used two ways:

'Kuhn recognised that he had used the concept of "paradigm" in two different senses. The first meaning of "paradigm," ... designates the common possessions of the members of a certain scientific community, namely, the set of techniques, models, and values to which the group members more or less consciously adhere. The second meaning refers to a single element within the set, such as Isaac Newton's *Principia* or Ptolemy's *Almagest* that serves as a common example and thus replaces explicit rules and permits the formulation of a specific and coherent tradition of inquiry.'<sup>2</sup>

It is this second sense that Agamben finds the most provocative and it proves to be the root of his argument. A paradigm can be a singular thing, an example, that redistrib-

utes the understanding of sense phenomenon and conceptual ideas. This aspect sparks similarities to what Jacques Rancière would identify as 'a redistribution of the sensible';<sup>3</sup> aesthetic shifts opening new possibilities to understand the way the world can look, perform, and from this, alter how and who may speak. Paradigmatic examples are crucial for any cultural discourse. When applied to the discipline of architecture, we find that we quite often use "paradigm" in this second sense. We structure discourse through specific representations to make our points.

The following essay posits that the *Campo Marzio Ichnographia* can be considered a paradigm in this second sense identified by Agamben. It is an aesthetic proposition that makes concepts intelligible, operating analogically, not part to whole or whole to part, but part to part.<sup>4</sup> This aspect of paradigmatic examples should be emphasised. They open discursive possibilities by placing aesthetics adjacent to concepts. They do not become subsumed into a general overarching theory or set of rules, but maintain their presence as singular instances. The *Campo Marzio* is not commonly treated in this manner. Most often it is interpreted through another paradigm.

The *Campo Marzio* is typically understood as part of the paradigm established by the *Pianta Grande di Roma* by Giovanni

Battista Nolli, engraved in 1748. Known as the *Nolli Map*, the *Pianta Grande di Roma* abstracts the city into figure and ground; the spaces of roads, squares, and the quasi-public of civic-religious interiors are left blank, while the mass of the built is hatched black. The *Nolli Map* renders the city as an intelligible public ground against the solid fill of the inaccessible private interior. It is paradigmatic in its own right, informing architectural urbanism from Camillo Sitte to Rem Koolhaas. Often, when Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* is discussed, it is within the terms of the *Nolli Map* paradigm. Where Nolli establishes figure-ground divisions, the *Campo Marzio* is described in terms of figure-figure.<sup>5</sup> But, what if the *Campo Marzio* is not held within the paradigm of the *Nolli Map*, but understood to be its own paradigm, very different from the understanding of the city solely through a figure-ground dichotomy?

The *Nolli Map* visualises the private-public divide of human inhabitation through the graphic hatch of *poché*. The history of *poché* as a representational technique in architecture was initiated by Bramante's parchment plan of St. Peter's (1505). In this drawing, the abstraction of a planar cut floating above the ground coupled with the aesthetics of rendering material as graphically solid, allowed architecture to be conceived in a manner alternate to previous representations that focused on geometric diagrams, surface articulation or construction tech-

niques. In this manner, *poché* produced the visible presence of space as formed in relation to mass. The *Nolli Map* expands the imaging of *poché* from the interior space of a building towards the public space of the city. Through this, individual buildings disappear into the mass of the urban context. This imaging technique has become fundamental for urban analysis, explicating the formal order of a city as access, circulation, systems of service distribution, and the public realm. Or, put another way, even though it is architecture that provides the visible experience of the city, the *Nolli Map* makes sensible the background civic spaces that allow the city to perform.

The distinction of figure-ground, public-private makes no sense in Piranesi's representation. There is no public in this city; it is a city of architecture for architecture. More precisely, it is a city of architectural plans for architectural plans. It is a representation of distinct architectural objects arranged quasi-independent of human habitation. I agree with Lars Spuybroek that there is no ground here, at least no ground in the traditional sense.<sup>6</sup> No ground for public inhabitation. No physical, geological ground. No ground for material construction. If a ground exists, it is oddly double, abstract and literal; the abstract spatial cohesion of the interior created through *poché* and the fictional/factual archeology of the literal marble fragment represented as the *Ichnographia's* base surface. Piranesi's use of *poché* is very



different than Nolli's; it is much closer to the manner initiated by Bramante. It provides a coherency to the relation between mass and spatial interior. In this, it strengthens the figural cohesion of the singular architectural objects. But, it is here that Piranesi stops. The visual legibility of space is not extended into the urban relations between buildings as in Nolli's plan. Spatial legibility is a concern *within* the architecture, not *between* distinct architectures.

The *Campo Marzio Ichnographia* is also represented as if physically etched into the materiality of a historical marble fragment.<sup>7</sup> This meta-narrative rhetoric suggests that it is likely that Piranesi used the historical term "ichnographia" to purposefully tie the representation back to the classical Rome of Vitruvius, even though this representation is very different than the traditional understanding of the term. Ichnography was historically tied to surveying and the laying out of an organisation as a geometric diagram describing contact between the building and the ground.<sup>8</sup> Literally, it is the writing (graphy) of traces (ichno) on a ground. And, it is the ground itself that is problematised in the *Campo Marzio*. The architectural fragments run right over descriptions of hills and terrain as if they do not physically exist. There are numerous instances where a building's edges come much too close to features such as the Tiber river. The objects shuffle informal relations to each other as if slipping over a frictionless plane. There is also a plethora of columns pervading the representation. Are these porticos? Loggias? Open colonnades? Covered halls? Most likely they are all the above, but without the suggestion of a roof enclosure they are also constellations of abstract points. These architectural objects freed from the ground enter into a tense entanglement with each other across the field of the *Ichnographia*. This is where the *Campo Marzio* begins to make its own paradigm sensible.

Our modern metropolis can be thought of as the result of continuously increasing capital accumulation, expenditure of energy, transference of information, and the collision of objects. There is a sneaking suspicion that if left untended, our contemporary cities would accelerate these tendencies on their own accord, becoming denser and denser. What if the identification of the city as the loci for private domesticity and public civic life is a remnant of a different mode of inhabiting the planet: the pastoral village of an agrarian society. Modern urbanity, accelerated through industrialisation and capital flow, is the intensification, densification, and aggregation of information. If these aspects are the cause and effect of contemporary urbanity, then we are in a very different conceptual and aesthetic position as architects than what the paradigm of the *Nolli Map* suggests. The *Campo Marzio* is an alternative proposition, simultaneously the projective endgame of the Western European city and its origin myth through a counter-factual history.

Piranesi goes to great lengths throughout *Il Campo Marzio dell' Antica Roma* to legitimise his invention. Following the *Ichnographia* are 42 plates illustrating the *Campo Marzio* through

maps, historical fragments, birds-eye "axons," and perspective views. These graphic fragments are used by Piranesi as historical evidence, as elements combined together to construct his semi-plausible speculation. Alongside these representations is a lengthy textual argument that extensively deploys quotations and references from classical scholars and ancient literature.<sup>9</sup> Taken as a whole, the published book can be considered one of the first para-fictional acts of architecture. The facts are often legitimate, yet equally speculative, and when gathered they propose a counter history for the architecture of the city. This aspect is a crucial part of its paradigmatic character. Urbanity as a total vision of systematic control is a myth; no single plan can encompass the multifarious conflicts of the city. The aesthetics of Piranesi's representation is to posit urban "history" as a collection of artefacts. He seems to suggest that all of these figures came into being at once. Each one has its own qualities, typology, function, and reality; but as an accumulation, the overall effect cannot be reined in by a singular design. These artefacts combine and recombine in manners independent of human desires to wilfully order the city.

I mentioned earlier that the *Campo Marzio* is a collection of architectural plans for architectural plans. I have also referred to the individual buildings as objects. They are both.

As plans they use the conventions of Classicism, where each plan is composed of sequences of internal spaces with major and minor hierarchies, enclosed rhythmically by walls and columns. Precedents exist for many of these designs even if there is liberty taken in their idiosyncratic development. Geometrically, they establish architectural order about an axis of symmetry. Most are symmetrical about a single axis implying a front and a back. But, there is no street or public space that these "fronts" can address, instead they continually turn their heads away from each other. Furthermore, there are several plans that are symmetrical about multiple axes becoming completely independent in the round.

As objects, the architecture frees itself from contextual dependency, allowing them to enter into relationships with each other in partial, episodic manners. Great care was taken that the objects would not fuse into an overall decorative pattern, but maintain their identity and individuality through strong figural cohesion. There are some zones of alignment and shared axis as illustrated through the analysis of Peter Eisenman and others, but these are typically the central axis of the figural symmetries, not edge alignments that establish streets or other urban systems.<sup>10</sup> The *Campo Marzio Ichnographia* becomes a collection of objects, or as Manfredo Tafuri describes it, 'a formless heap of fragments colliding one against the other.'<sup>11</sup> These objects are all ordered internally, with allusions to histories outside themselves, but simultaneously never meld into a single coherent system. To this pair of terms, "plan" and "object", I will throw one more concept into the mix: "Entourage".





Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Ichnographia, Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma* (1762), re-drawn by Michael Young



The French term "entourage" typically refers to people, vegetation, furniture, and other items placed into an architectural drawing or rendering to give scale, imply use, and articulate the character of a designed space. These items also maintain their object-hood and may be moved freely within space. Entourage is open to change position against the stability of the architectural background, drifting toward more informal arrangements. The objects of the *Campo Marzio* work through the conventions of entourage, but they purposefully defamiliarise their common attributes. The objects shift scale wildly, upsetting any singular scalar recognition. They suggest interiors, but the typologies are so distorted that it is difficult to discern between civic, religious, military, and palatial. Lastly, the plans purposefully resist a defined stylistic character by maintaining a level of abstraction throughout their articulation. I intend the use of the term "entourage" as an analogy; it is urbanism behaving like entourage, it is not literally entourage. These architectural objects are informally arranged to negate an overall dominant order and purposefully attack the main attributes of urbanism as stable rational planning. As such, they spark a tense aesthetic between the objects themselves, not as a space for inhabitation, but as dynamically charged ephemeral instants. In this, we find the representation is not an "ichnographia" for organising a city inhabited by humans, but instead a speculation on architecture in relation to architecture.

A city comprised of architectural objects treated as entourage is not as far-fetched as it initially sounds. The informality of objects setting up relations between themselves as opposed to the overall structure of a unifying system is a widely used contemporary design strategy. We can see it in John Hejduk's *Victims* plan, in SANAA's *T-Museum*, in Sou Fujimoto's *Children's Center*, in MOS's *Ordos House*, in Mansilla & Tunon's *Toledo Museum* and in countless others. These organisations of independent, stable objects situated in what some call a "non-compositional" manner, sparks allusions of instability, informality, possible recombination, and organisational drift. These designs relate to a world where all objects are equal without a clear hierarchy, where relationships constantly change, where commodities are designed to be obsolete and replaced. This is the world where no single system of order can be firmly believed to structure our relationships. This is the world where the Internet has levelled access to everything all the time. This is the world where truth and fiction are both posited as "real." This is the world of the para-fictional. This is the world unleashed by the *Campo Marzio*.

There is of course something disturbing about the idea that the city is not for human occupation. It follows that this interpretation would support the fear of the dehumanising effects of many urban environments, a negative result to be resisted, regulated, or rejected. As such the *Campo Marzio* could be considered a warning or a critical statement regarding architecture and the city. I would like to suggest another possibility. Cities change people; their intensification forces us to be different. This can be understood both negatively and positive-

ly, but in its positive condition, the city provokes, shifting our sense of how reality can look and behave, and through this, it offers alternate understandings of how we can live. In order to engage this as architects, we need paradigmatic examples.

'In a society where the polar forces of homogenisation and fragmentation are embodied in the physical flows and juxtapositions of peoples and an excess of information and images circulating around the globe, the possibility of any clear and direct form of cultural representation becomes increasingly elusive. In the big cosmopolitan, postcolonial metropolises of the West, cultural value systems and religious beliefs are mediated by the prevailing creed of relativism and tolerance and become subject to the same forces of consumer choice as any other commodity. Thus the material condition of a physically destabilised and increasingly mutable architecture is paralleled by neutrality, abstraction, fundamentalism or simple incoherence in terms of its articulation of cultural ideas.'<sup>12</sup>

Claire Melhuish published this quote in 2002. Seventeen years later the situation has only accelerated. Within this quote is a sentiment of loss for what we have not experienced, a nostalgia for a missing paradigm to describe our condition. I doubt that we can establish an overarching paradigm of agreed upon values and beliefs in the general sense, but this does not mean that there are not paradigmatic examples through which we can shift our engagement with the world. Para-digm shares its prefix with para-fictional. Para-fiction places truth and the "make-believe" adjacent to each other not in order to create falsehoods, but to spark an intensity of attention and the curiosity of doubt regarding the constantly fabricated reality of our mediated world.<sup>13</sup> This mode of operating places instances next to each other; this is the "para" in both terms. Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* does not offer a general theory or a set of rules through which architecture can navigate the contemporary city. It operates analogically. When placed next to our assumed understandings, it establishes a plausible reality as an alternate set of concepts and aesthetics for the speculative past/future of the city.



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**NOTES**

- 1) The *Ichographia* comprises six of Piranesi's publication *Il Campo Marzio dell' Antica Roma's* forty-nine plates.
- 2) Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Paradigm", in *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 11.
- 3) Jacques Ranciere, "The Future of the Image" (2002), in *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2007), 11-12.
- 4) See: Giorgio Agamben, (2007), 19-20.
- 5) See: Peter Eisenman, "A Critical Analysis: Giovanni Battista Piranesi", *Feints* (Milano: Skira, 2006), 40.
- 6) See: Lars Spuybroek, "The Acrobatics of the Figure: Piranesi and Magnificence", in Gijis Wallis de Vries, *Archescape: The Piranesi Flights* (Amsterdam: 1001 Publishers, 2015), 5-11
- 7) Specifically referencing the Severan Marble Plan of Rome, ca. 205-208.
- 8) 'Ichnography is the skilful use, to scale, of compass and rule, by means of which the on-site layout of a design is achieved.' Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture* ed. by Ingrid Rowland and Thomas Noble Howe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24-25.
- 9) See: Heather Hyde Minor, *Piranesi's Lost Words* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 83-99.
- 10) See: Peter Eisenman, 2006, 40-49.
- 11) Manfredo Tafuri, "The Wicked Architect", *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 34.
- 12) Claire Melhuish, "From Dematerialisation to Depoliticisation in Architecture", in Kester Rattenbury (ed.), *This Is Not Architecture* (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 225.
- 13) See: Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility", *October* Vol. 129 (Summer 2009), 51-84.
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