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From Piranesi to the Atmosphere of a Place, and Back Again

Written by: Lieke Robben
For over 200 years people have been enthusiastic about Giambattista Piranesi’s Vedute of Rome. Ever since the time they were made, up until this day, Piranesi’s extraordinary etchings have been known throughout the world. Not only did Piranesi provide us with beautiful images of Rome, with his vedute he also spread out knowledge of the ancient Roman culture and advertised the city he adored so dearly. However what you would never expect the first time you look at these amazingly detailed images, is how much effort Piranesi put into manipulating them so that they would portray the image he wanted us to see. If only men had invented Photoshop a little earlier, that would have been a match made in heaven.

Our assignment for this seminar was investigating Piranesi’s vedute, in order to get an impression of the relevance of city imagery in relation to the landscape-turn of the 1990’s as a countermovement of the modernists tabula rasa planning. I will try to link this to a new urbanistic approach, proposed by Mirko Zardini, in which we use all of our senses instead of just our eyes and pay attention to the character of a place. The outcome of this investigation will be used to design a city image of Eindhoven.

Why are Piranesi’s vedute so interesting?

Piranesi’s etchings of Rome deal with many themes which are still relevant to us today, even though they were made in the 18th century.

First of all they show the city as a landscape, with buildings placed in it. Piranesi etched the buildings of Rome placed in their environment, together with the people who lived there and made use of this environment. A beautiful example of this attention to the environment is one of the vedute of the Trevi fountain (fig 1). Here we see the Palazzo Poli, together with the Trevi fountain and the public space surrounding it. Piranesi makes our eyes move through the picture instead of just focusing on the building. The way he pays attention to the environment of buildings is actually very closely related to the landscape-turn of the 1990’s, in which designers started to think of a city as a landscape.
Secondly, the vedute open our eyes to some of the different layers a city exists of. In his etchings we see Rome as the baroque city it was when he lived there, but Piranesi also shows us the exiting parts of ancient Rome and its ruins. Just look at all the old fragments he etched next to the Trevi fountain. Paying attention to the history of a city, or looking at the genius loci, is also closely related to the landscape-turn. A lack of doing so was one of the critiques expressed on the tabula rasa planning of modernists.

Thirdly, these images of Rome can be seen as a certain escape from our daily lives. (Wallis de Vries, 2010). Produced in a time where romanticism started to bloom as a reaction to the rational era of industrialization, the images have a certain dreamy aspect in them. Not only that, they also make you long for the places they show you and can even make you aware of the beauty of your own environment.

Finally, I would like to mention here that the vedute, together with for example the vases Piranesi made from old fragments he found, are a way of thinking about and showing how the ancient times can be an inspiration for designing something new. Even though Piranesi loved the ancient parts of Rome, he was also interested in progress and for example themes like infrastructure and constructive works.

The fact that the vedute of Rome concern so many themes which are still relevant today, makes them interesting for architecture and urban design these days. Since we have come to realize that it is indeed important to look at the history of a place and it is indeed important to look at the environment when you build something new and that we must think carefully about how we deal with for example industrial heritage, we can use city-images like the ones Piranesi made in our design process. We can use them to capture or design and show to others those elements we find important in our cities.

**Piranesi’s method**

Illustrated by the Vedute of the Ponte Salario as an example (fig. 1), I would like to discuss some of the means Piranesi used to create his images of Rome. Looking at the vedute of the Ponte Salario, the first thought that popped into my mind was something like: “wow, this bridge is really huge.” And I mean this in a way that, besides the fact that the drawing looks impressively well made, the bridge itself looks really big. Several decisions Piranesi made while creating this image helped to cause this effect. Most importantly is the perspective and viewpoint Piranesi chose to show this bridge. By letting his viewers stand on the side of the bridge and underneath it, he makes sure we look up to it and that we can see the full length of it as well.
Another important technique Piranesi used to portray an image of a 'big' bridge is the way he made use of light and shadow. By placing the sun on one side of the bridge and the viewers on the other, we see a large part of the bridge covered in shadow. This makes the bridge look very dark and that's why it comes towards you. Besides using perspective and light or shadow to make the bridge look huge, Piranesi uses some small tricks as well to exaggerate the effect. The way the bridge just slightly pops out of the top of the frame of the image, makes it come towards you and the way the clouds are folded around the bridge makes it look bigger as well. And look at how small those people are…

By looking at an example of another artist who made an image of the Ponte Salario, we can see even better what a big impact the way Piranesi made his image has on the way we perceive the bridge. Filippo Maria Giuntotardi made his painting (fig 3) a few decades after Piranesi made his etch. If you were to ask me, the two bridges do not portray the same image at all. The decisions both artists made, influence the way we see the bridge.

In general I would like to say that, looking at the way Piranesi made his images of Rome, the most interesting aspect in my opinion is the following. On the one hand Piranesi is very accurate in the numerous details he shows, but on the other hand he gives himself lots of artistic freedom when it comes to for example using perspective and light.

When looking at the vedute, especially when you have the luxury of seeing them in the actual size they were made, you are immediately amazed by the amount of details put into these images. From the few studies and sketchbooks that have been preserved from Piranesi, we know that he spent lots of time studying the details of the buildings and public spaces he etched. He did this in a scientific, archeological way. This makes his images so valuable for studying the ancient Rome.
However, after studying the vedute more carefully, as a group we noticed that many of the aspects we saw in these images, besides the former mentioned details, were not accurate at all. The example of the Ponte Salario showed that the size of this bridge was probably exaggerated. Some of the examples of other students in our group are even clearer. The vedute of the St. Peter for instance, shows beams of sunlight creating a beautiful pattern of shadows on the interior of the church floor. But after looking at a map of Rome, you will find that in order to create these shadows, the sunlight must have came from the north. Even more remarkable: often when we see people in the vedute, enlivening the street, demonstrating the life of men in Piranesi’s age, they are drawn smaller than they would have been realistically. Piranesi also makes drawings from viewpoints he could never have seen himself. This is shown by people who have their heads below the horizon, so Piranesi must have flown in the air when he drew them.

Given the amazing talent Piranesi obviously possessed for making images, the inaccuracies in his vedute surely were no mistake. Apparently, he must have felt the need to make these differences in between what he saw around him and what he created in his images. He was trying to portray a certain image of the city, showing us Rome in a certain way. I think he wanted to show us the city the way he, as a son of Rome, saw it. This is what makes the difference between making a real city image and just making any picture of a city.

**The atmosphere of a place**

If Piranesi was trying to show us Rome the way he saw it in his mind, perhaps he thought about capturing the atmosphere of a place in his images. Unfortunately we can’t ask him, but I think it is very plausible that one of the reasons he consciously manipulated his images, is that he wanted to show his viewers how he felt when he walked through Rome.

This shows again how relevant Piranesi’s images still are these days. In fact, being aware of the atmosphere or character of a place, and designing with this in mind, is gaining more and more interest. Mirko Zardini writes about this in his book Sense of the City (2005). In this book, several essays from different writers are put together to illustrate Zardini’s proposal for an alternate approach to urbanism, a multisensory approach in which we make use of all our senses instead of just our eyes. The reason for this is that we need to develop a specific expertise with which we can define the character and atmosphere of a place. In order to achieve this, we must avoid a method once again solely based on vision. Because according to Zardini, city planning has long privileged qualities of urban space based exclusively on
visual perception. Smells and noises are being eliminated out the city for hygienic reasons. While in other fields people have started to pay more attention to the other senses. Like the field of the human sciences, which has undergone a 'sensorial revolution' and the field of marketing. This revolution has been matched in the field of architecture by a renewed appreciation for the element of character and atmosphere, and urbanism should follow.

Given the close relation ‘capturing the atmosphere of a place’ has to Piranesi, I would like to take this with me when making my own image of Eindhoven.

**Light as an angle**

When making a city-image of Eindhoven, light just might be the perfect angle. Whereas Piranesi lived in a time in which street lighting, as we know it, did not yet exist and people had to carry around torches to identify themselves, we now have lots of public lighting. This changes the way we perceive cities at night, as Gyorgy Kepes (1965) beautifully describes:

“In all major cities of the world, the ebbing of the day brings a second world of light. This world is not the world of daylight, the world of a single light source, clear, friendly and legible. But neither is it the world of darkness –shadowed, mysterious, terrifying – loosened by the sunset upon men in the natural state. It is the world of man-made light sources, the glittering dynamic glow of artificial illumination of the twentieth-century metropolis.”

The world as we perceive it at night, can be completely different as we see it in daytime. This makes me wonder, what would Piranesi have done if the option of using artificial lighting to create an image of nocturnal-Rome would have been available to him? Again, he’s not here to answer our questions, but it is clear to me that making an image of Eindhoven by night can be interesting. Besides, what better theme than light can there be to show an image of Eindhoven, a city being know as the City of Light (or Lampegat, as we call it during the annual carnival festivities). This realization made the decision for choosing al location easy: what better symbol of Eindhoven as the City of Light can there be than the Lichttoren (tower of light), the tower in which Philips used to test their light bulbs?

**Creating the image**

So there I went, approaching the Lichttoren and the area surrounding it as my prey. In the back of my mind asking the question: what is the character of this place and how can I capture it in an image? My first impression was about busses, cars and bicycles, all trying to run
me over. But then again, it was rush hour. After finding a quiet and safe place for making the image, and having sat there for a while, I noticed that when you look at the Lichttoren, as a solid rock projecting its presence, it brings a certain calmness. And as it became dark, more and more lights appeared until the entire place was lit. When it comes to artificial lighting, the Lichttoren and the area around it has it all. Whereas public lighting was used for safety, in the way of identifying yourself, nowadays it is used for so much more. We use lights for safety in the streets and for safety in traffic, but we also use lights for commercial purposes and to create an attractive atmosphere in our cities. All of this is shown around the Lichttoren: there is the traffic together with the lights in the streets, there is the Mediamarkt with its red-lit advertisement letters and there is the Lichttoren itself, lit by leds (fig 4). I decided to translate these impressions by making an image from a very low standing point and,

Conclusion

Isn’t it amazing how it all connects: Piranesi’s vedute of Rome made a long time ago, the landscape-turn of the 1990’s and the renewed appreciation for the element of the character of a place? In a way these are just different terms for the same content. Trying to capture the atmosphere of a place, for making a good city-image of Eindhoven, felt like the right thing to do. Now I am no Piranesi, but I hope you can appreciate my attempt to make my version of a city image.

Figure 4.
Advertisement of the Mediamarkt reflected in a city bus
Figure 5. A city image of Eindhoven
Bibliography

Pictures
(Fig. 1) Giambattista Piranesi. 1756-1757. Ponte Salario. [etching].
(Fig. 2) Giambattista Piranesi. 1746-1748. Veduta of the Trevi fountain. [etching].
(Fig 3) Filippo Maria Giuntotardi. 19th century. Painting of the Ponte Salario. [painting].
(Fig 4) Lieke Robben. 2012. Advertisement of the Mediamarkt reflected in a city bus. [picture].
(Fig 5) Lieke Robben. 2012. A city image of Eindhoven. [picture].

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