



L'Empire des lumières (1949) by René Magritte

“O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space.”

Hamlet, II:2

BORGES IN PLACE

It took 4125 pages for Marcel Proust to create a real fictive world with a complete dimension of time and space; prophetic writer Jorge Luis Borges could magically create a fictional reality in 4 pages. Borges added nested mythical elements to his “magic realism”¹ – a great gift for spatial anatomy. His stories involve spatial wanderings in libraries with hidden doors, secret rooms with mirrors, labyrinths, and so on. These cannot be reduced to mere settings; each element contributes to the Borges philosophy of time and space.

¹ Chris Baldrick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd ed. Oxford Paperback Reference. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 146.

He defines his notion of time and space as follows in one of his stories: “if space is infinite, we are anywhere, at any point in space. If time is infinite, we are at any point in time.”² This philosophy gives Borgesian time and space a mystic quality. The word mystery comes from the Greek word *μυσ* (“mys” – “to close the eyes or lips”).³ For Borges, mystical experience points to the unity of everything in the “river of history.”⁴ In this unity, his characters experience time and space in a repetitive way through mystic spatial experiences. Borgesian mysticism questions the hegemony of the scientific conception of time and space with its presupposition that only what is verifiable is real, leaving no room for the mystic and poetic side of experience.⁵ His approach to time and space is also phenomenological. He writes “Things only exist once they have been observed by the mind. It is fair to respond: Yes, but the mind only exists as a perceiver and meditator of things.”⁶ For Borges, Mind, Space, and Time amount to the intersubjective experience of perceiving something “out there.”

Time and Space have been overly demystified. Borges’ stories bring us back to their mystery, which is also vital for architectural experiences. As Juhani Pallasmaa put it, “For me, this is the highest praise for a piece of architecture: to turn lived reality and normality into something mysteriously comfortable, poetic and healing.”⁷ Borges’s stories are healing and poetic as well. He does not simply leave the reader with the sense of fear or the uncanny. He gives us hope through beauty and human poetic ability. As he wrote, “thanks to poetry, to a haiku, humanity was saved.”⁸

Poetic language has the ability to describe dense specificity and the essence of built environment as personal yet intersubjective experience. In literary works, environmental experiences are often more accurately described than in professional writings on architecture, since literature presents space as lived in, and not as reduced to geometric abstractions constructed for the scientific gaze.⁹ Encountering space in Borges’s literary works can help us to see architecture not as an uneventful functional background or a formal shell but as the lived space in which narrative can take place.

For this project you will be invited to translate one of Borges’s short stories into a spatial experience.

The First assignment will be to translate the mystic spatial experience of a Borges story of your choice into an architectural composite drawing, using the technique of collage and montage. Collage here highlights the narrative relationships between objects: it is a two-dimensional presentation of a

² Jorge Luis Borges, *Book of Sand: And, Shakespeare's Memory*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 89.

³ Jorge Luis Borges, *On Mysticism*. Edited by Kodama Maria and Suzanne Jill Levine, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), vii.

⁴ Borges, *Book of Sand*, xi.

⁵ Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics, Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 194.

⁶ Borges, *On Mysticism*, 99.

⁷ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture*. (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 32.

⁸ *Ibid*, xvi.

⁹ Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014), 29.

lived space in a Borges story – not an illustration or a visual exercise.¹⁰ The idea is to create a spatial frame or context for sensual experiences, atmospheres and activities.

The Second assignment will ask you to find a real place (site) for a Borges story to unfold, and justify this choice artistically and architecturally in a second collage. “Place” is a meaningful space, enriched with narratives and human experiences.¹¹ You should choose an applicable place to your story for this assignment, from the corner of a library to an ancient Romantic ruined landscape. You should tie the place and story together in a coherent way, using the narrative of the selected story and the spatial possibilities emerging from the chosen place.

The Third assignment is creating a labyrinth – not a literal or classic architectural labyrinth, but rather a material demonstration of the mystic quality of a Borges story. Your construction will be more than an object to become something active that reveals and hides simultaneously. In this assignment “labyrinthine” refers to more than a physical structure. It is a mystic quality which can be experienced in a three-dimensional model, an installation, a performance, and so on. The embodiment of your labyrinth should provide a space for human interaction and poetic imagination. The labyrinth should be specifically designed for your chosen place in Assignment 2.

Detailed instructions for each assignment will be provided, including readings for guidance and case studies.

List of Options – Stories by Jorge Luis Borges:

- *Parable of the Palace* (1956)
- *Ibn Hakkan Al-Bokhari - Dead in His Labyrinth* (1951)
- *The Immortal* (1949)
- *The Writing of the God* (1949)
- *The Aleph* (1945)
- *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941)
- *The Library of Babel* (1941)
- *The Wall and the Books* (1941)
- *The Circular Ruins* (1940)

¹⁰ Wim van den Bergh and Mark Proosten, “Narrative as an Educational Approach: Literary Methods in Architectural Education” in *Writing Place: Investigations in Architecture and Literature*. Edited by Klaske Havik (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2016), 118.

¹¹ Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience, a Philosophical Topography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 198.

- *The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths* (1939)

Please confirm your choice by email to ali.shahbazin@mail.mcgill.ca before January 15, 2019.

Grade distribution

Attendance	10%
Assignment 1	25%
Assignment 2	25%
Mandatory meeting with TA in preparation for Assignment 3	5%
Assignment 3	35%

Deadlines

Selection of a short story by Borges	January 15 2020
Assignment 1	January 29 2020
Assignment 2	February 19 2020
Mid-term Review	TBT
Mandatory meeting with the TA in preparation for assignment 3*	13-15 March 2020
Assignment 3	April 1 2020
Final presentation	TBT

Please be advised that you will be informed about the date for the mid-term and the final presentation in coordination with your studio deadlines.

Deadlines fall on Wednesdays, the same day as the lecture, at 12 o'clock - midnight. Please submit your work by uploading a file in a pdf format to the appropriate folder in the shared Google Drive. You will receive the link to the Google Drive folder as soon as you register for the project section. The Google Drive folder will include the pdf of the listed stories, project outline, and some additional materials for your use.

In-person meetings

For any questions concerning the course and project please contact the teaching assistant responsible for the project section – Ali Reza Shahbazin. Ali's office (PhD office, 215 F) is located in the post-professional Graduate Studio 215, second floor. He will be available in person for discussions on Wednesdays after the lecture from 11:30 am to 1:30 pm. Please contact Ali by e-mail to set up a meeting.

Late Policy

Late assignments will have 5% deducted per day, including weekends, to a maximum of 50% of their value. Penalties will be waived for documented medical or family emergencies with approval from Marry Lanni-Campoli, the Professional Program Student Advisor (mary.lanni@mcgill.ca).

** to enroll in the project section please send an e-mail to ali.shahbazin@mail.mcgill.ca including your full name and your McGill ID number.

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