

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.
And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there....

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven....

And the lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech....

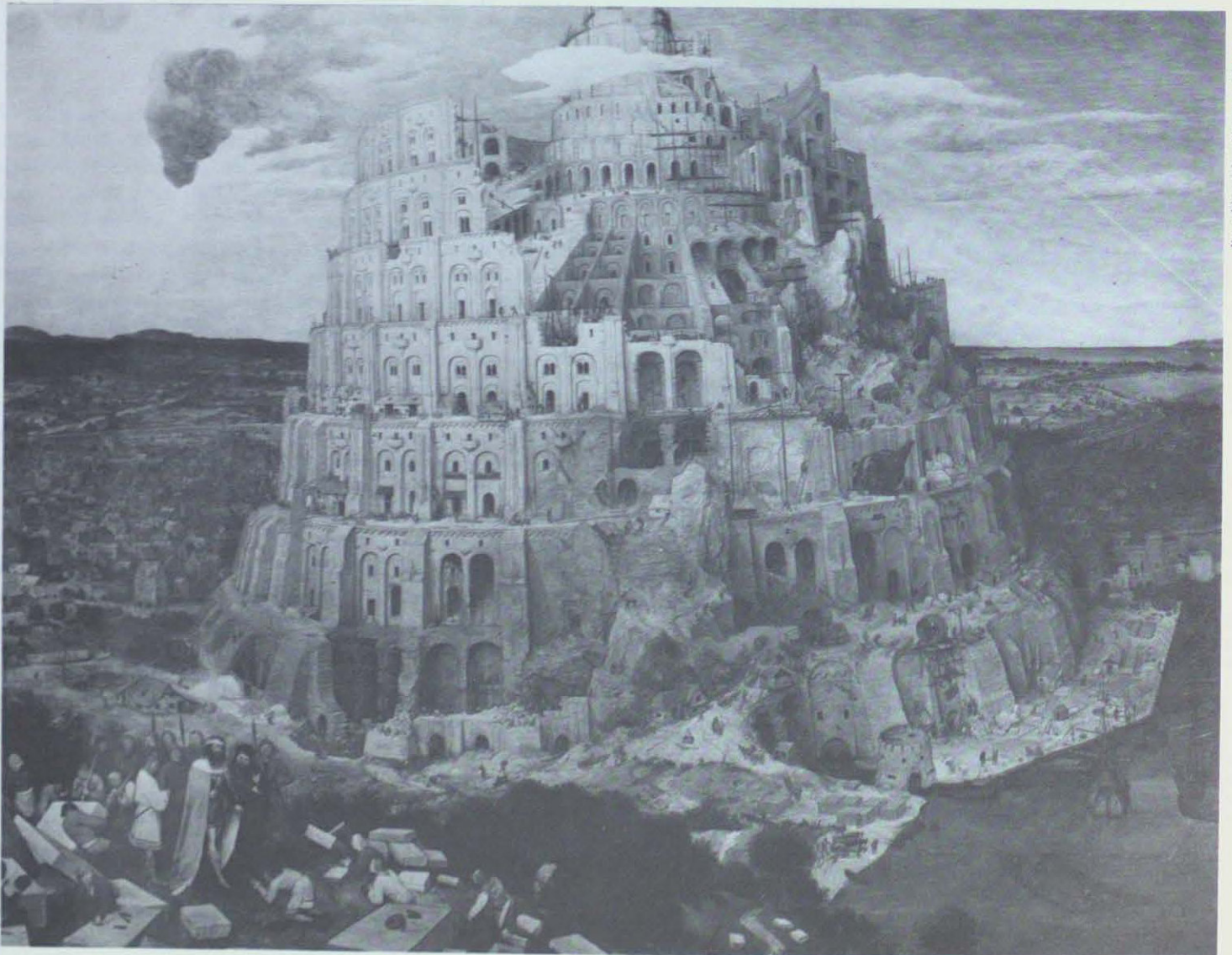
Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth....

Genesis XI: 1-9

Some Thoughts on Architectural Criticism Bruegel and Babel

by

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Layout by Steve Leckie

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel The Elder. *The Tower of Babel*, 1563.

La peinture de la Tour de Babel par Pierre Bruegel l'ancien sert de leitmotiv pour une analyse critique, laquelle utilise plusieurs niveaux de référence. À travers celle-ci la Tour de Bruegel se révèle comme un projet d'architecture. Les cadres de référence utilisés n'étant pas une doctrine mais plutôt un discours dans le domaine de l'existence physique, constituent une base de réflexion et d'action future. Ils sont finalement des outils conceptuels, et non des mécanismes à toute épreuve, pour aborder la critique architecturale.

The conflict described in the Biblical story serves to illustrate the general situation of the contemporary critical discourse in architecture. There are two levels in the myth of Babel. One deals with building intentions: to build the highest, most perfect architectural artifact, which the tower and the city represent. The other alludes to the process of communication among the builders: the critical discourse itself. It is in the latter that the conflict is manifested. It consists of the paradoxical confusion produced by the simultaneous operation of various conceptual systems which in the end hinder the materialization of the builders' dreams. Thus, despite the available technological means, the Babel builders can neither fulfill their intentions, nor can they proceed with their critical discourse.

The *Tower of Babel* has been a significant leitmotiv throughout the iconographic history of western art. Thus, the Tower was depicted in the *Grimani Breviary*, and in the *Duke of Bedford's Book of Hours* in the early 1500's (Figs. 2-3). The painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder, probably inspired by the latter two, produced two magnificent paintings and one ivory miniature (now lost) on this theme in the 1560s. In the eighteenth century, Etienne-Louis Boullée, the revolutionary French architect, executed several drawings which made a strong allusion to the Tower (Fig. 4). More recently, the Italian-American architect Paolo Soleri has referred to Babel in some of his evocative utopian projects.

It is, however, Bruegel's first painting of the Tower of Babel, realized in 1563, which interests us (Fig. 1). In this masterpiece we have a dramatic representation of a building. The painting, besides its artistic merits, can be considered as one of the first visionary architectural schemes of which there is a record. Its significance, however, derives from the fact that, unlike many of its contemporary works, it constitutes a prime example of the critical discernment of its author. Bruegel takes on the role of a painter, technician, and architect whose imagination, as pointed out by Walter S. Gibson, one of his historians, "allowed him to transform even the most banal ideas of his age into powerful and unforgettable images."² The Tower



Figure 2. *Grimani Breviary. The Tower of Babel.*

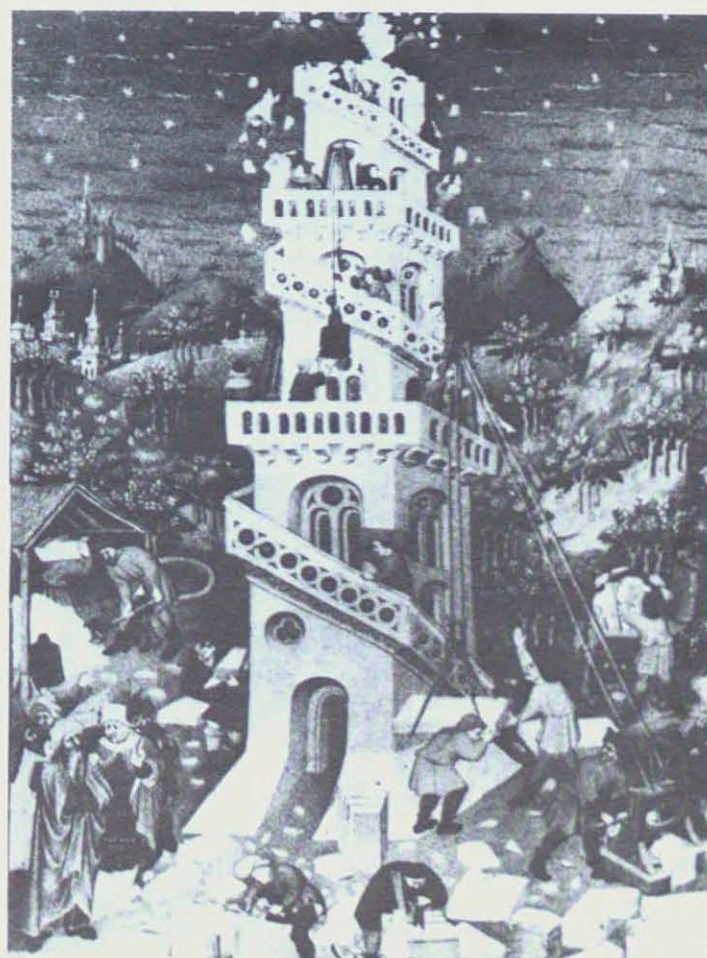


Figure 3. *Duke of Bedford's Book of Hours. The Tower of Babel.*

of Babel, in Christian thought, has served as a symbol of confusion. As explored by Bruegel it is a statement of titanic struggle.

To examine Bruegel's vision of the Tower I shall use four frames of reference. They relate to the ecological, social, operational-experiential, and perceptual levels which define any architectural object.³ In linguistic studies the state of the language at any given time is considered to be a cross-section of its development over time. The state at any one time is synchronic; in its passage overtime it is diachronic. We can place the previous frames of reference in a synchronic context. We are then permitted, with the necessary research, to place them in their diachronic, that is historical, dimension. If we can succeed, this will provide a solid foundation for the creation of a critical scenario where past and present concerns and events are selectively and comprehensively understood, defining a sound base for future actions and predictions.

Ecological

Bruegel's interpretative vision illustrates a powerful technical development. As such, the Tower emerges out of what must have been a half imaginary, half real Flemish landscape of the sixteenth century. This duality is emphasized by the fact that the building rises from the surface of earth, land and water, reaching into the skies. Babel evokes a silhouette which, in its dominant massiveness, diminishes the surrounding landscape. Its physical materiality is supplied by the rock which constitutes both base and shaft. Bruegel elicits through this apparent geological depiction the experience of hilltowns, mountaintop monasteries and Alpine landscapes acquired during his travels through Italy and France. The Tower itself can be understood as the result of the technical transformation of the plain's geology into basic construction materials: brick masonry and bonded stone veneer. De Tolnay, a well known critic of Bruegel's work, says:

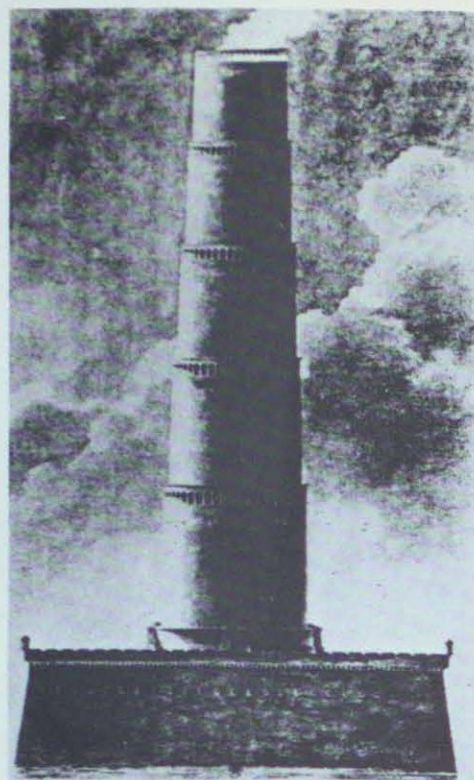
Une impression illusoire nous fait attribuer d'abord cette oeuvre à l'unique effort de l'homme, — en vérité elle n'existe que par l'appui de la nature.

He continues:

Les travaux de la tour ne sont pas arrêtés comme dans la miniature du Duc de Bedford par l'intervention du ciel sous la forme d'anges armés, c'est la nature même qu'impose ses limites à la volonté humaine, limites plus concevables encore si on replace l'édifice dans l'ensemble du paysage: la vaste plaine que l'œil prolonge à l'infini la rapetisse. Le récit biblique reçoit ainsi un sens nouveau celui de la toute puissance de la nature, qu'aucun des imitateurs de Breugel n'a comprise.⁴

Nature collaborates but sets limits. On the right side of the painting, near the horizon, we perceive the subtle juncture between sea and plain. It is enhanced by a winding road which marks the edge of the dyke, or *polder*, that technical accomplishment which has been the source of life for the people of the lowlands. Its counterpart, on the left side of the painting, at about the same level, is the aqueduct, evocative, like the rock, of other landscapes. It defines the edge of the gothic city, and like the polder is a source of life, their fundamental difference being that one drains and the other carries water.

Bruegel's scheme shows a deep understanding of natural and technological processes and their human significance. The latter even includes seafaring activities, as shown at the lower right corner of the composition. This might explain why he was commissioned to depict the canals linking Brussels to Antwerp, a project which was hindered by his premature death in September 1569. His knowledge and experience in construction matters is best expressed in his



Etienne-Louis Boulee, J.M. Proust

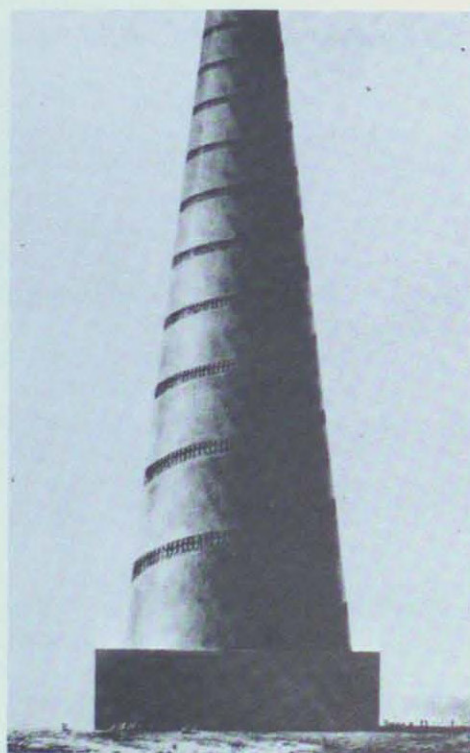


Figure 4. Etienne-Louis Boulee. Project for a Spiral Tower.

treatment of the top of the Tower, which he has left open. There, febrile construction activity aided by machines, pulleys, capstans, formwork, scaffolding, unveils a structure which resembles a Roman Colosseum but reoriented to its outer surface. Various studies on the artist have shown a solid foundation for this vision. His travels throughout Italy and France gave him a detailed knowledge of Roman construction and building technology. His Alpine experience and stay in Rome in the early 1550s must have impressed him so that one of his early commentators remarked that "travelling through the Alps, he had swallowed mountains and rocks, which upon

his return he put back unto canvasses and panels."⁵ Ultimately Bruegel's early conception of man's place in nature is an ecological view which occurred before ecology as a science existed.

Social

Bruegel was a keen observer of society and his paintings and drawings have been regarded as a kind of social commentary. His iconographic world is made up by many images of actuality. They are, as De Tolnay says, '*premiers essais de journalisme*'.⁶ Looking at the painting of the Tower this aspect seems to be less exploited. Nevertheless a closer inspection shows that on the bottom left corner of the painting a group is being lead by an imposing figure. We know it is Nimrod, who according to the expanded version of *Genesis* by Joseph Flavius in *The Jewish Antiquities*, was the instigator and supervisor of the Babel project. Nimrod's presence in the painting, besides its relation to the biblical account, is probably a commentary on the social structure of the epoch. Consider some of the stonemasons who have stopped their work to pay tribute to the monarch while others continue their activities nonchalantly. All of this happens while the construction proceeds in the background. There is no apparent conflict or tension between all these individuals. This is probably an allusion to the independence of the guilds and the craftsmen of the time.

Bruegel's scheme may be considered as a symbol of progress with positive connotations, a kind of celebration of humankind's resourcefulness and inventive urge. Bruegel's work takes place at the height of the Flemish Renaissance, when some biblical accounts like this one acquired special relevance, a time when all the modern languages and some of the ancient ones were still considered direct descendents from the builders of the Tower. As remarked by Gibson:

*This....belief must have been particularly attractive in Antwerp, where dictionaries and other books were published in many tongues, and where in 1566 Plantin began preparing the Polyglot Bible, a monumental work in six languages, including Hebrew and Chaldean. And in a time of religious strife, Bruegel's picture of the Tower of Babel probably reminded viewers of a bygone age when all men shared a common faith and purpose.*⁷

Operational/Experiential

Bruegel's Tower of Babel is an unfinished scheme. Construction has gone for a long time, so long that a town is beginning to grow at its base and is creeping into the shaft. Time and the elements have left their patina on the surface. These signs give us clues that we can read and interpret. The Tower resembles a cathedral, a symbolic structure, but it also makes us think of utilitarian buildings like bridges, aqueducts and amphitheaters. Bruegel's scheme can be considered as an example of civic monumental architecture, but one that is definitely inhabitable. Already some of the builders' cabins and huts perched on the ascending street of the tower show the act of dwelling in a primitive stage. The enormous structure is envisaged as a monumental circular Roman *insula*. Bruegel has taken the license of changing the morphology of the Roman prototype. His urge is both utopian and real. Thus, imagining the project in its planimetric dimension, the Tower has a strong resemblance to some of the ideal cities proposed by Francesco di Giorgio Martini circa 1500 (Fig. 5). It is conceivable that Bruegel knew these projects. In his scheme, the formal pattern not only determines the street layout but also governs the plan forms of the dwellings. In the Flemish landscape where land is an extremely valuable commodity, Bruegel's Tower is logical in its economical use of space. It constitutes a forerunner of the visionary architec-

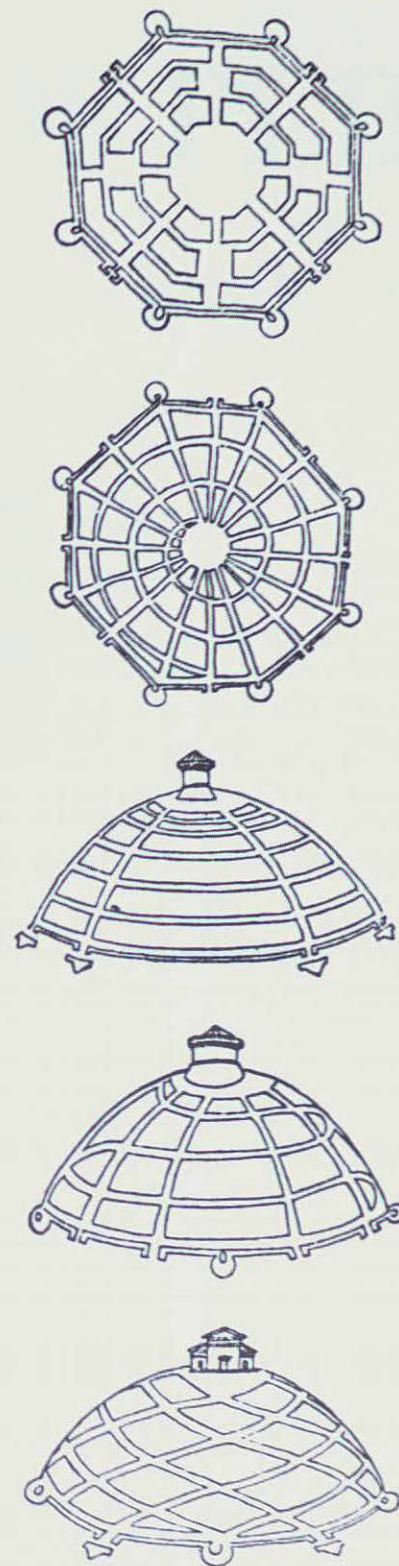
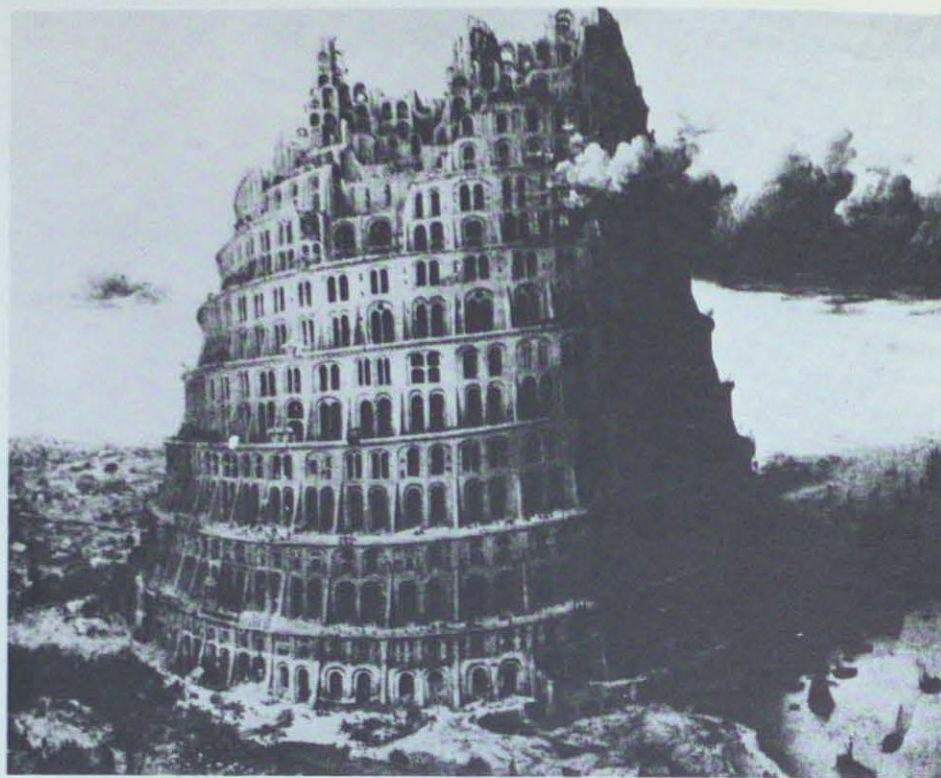


Figure 5. Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *Plans of Ideal Cities*.

tural projects as conceived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by thinkers and architects like Charles Fourier, Andre Godin, Vladimir Krinsky, Moisei Ginsburg, Le Corbusier, Paolo Soleri and Aldo Rossi.

Perceptual

The Flemish School of painting is prominent for its detailed portrayal of landscapes and everyday life. These painters were aware of how light modulated and transformed objects. This was an important event in the development of our environmental consciousness. Bruegel was part of this school. We are not surprised to find this preoccupation re-



Pierre Bruegel L'Ancien, Charles de Tolnay

fig.6 Pieter Bruegel The Elder. *The Tower of Babel*, second version

flected in his work. His treatment of the Tower of Babel was no exception. It was ultimately light that revealed the architectural artifact in its monumental scale and articulated each one of its parts. Through the use of various drawing methods, including superposition, atmospheric and linear perspective, the painter-architect was capable of conveying the vastness of the Flemish landscape from an imaginary view point. Hardly any mountain formation in such a landscape can be observed that would permit such an elevated station point.

Bruegel's portrayal of the Tower cannot be grasped at once. It is necessary to read it from side to side in the horizontal, vertical and diagonal senses. Each object, figure, and feature eventually leads to the completion of the puzzle. Item by item each element reveals an encyclopedic preoccupation with the object that will only crystallize two centuries later in the work of Diderot and in the Napoleonic Code.

This broader categorical survey reveals Bruegel's detailed vision in a fuller perspective. First of all, Bruegel's Tower of Babel can be considered as a visionary architectural project. Inquiries into his other works would eventually provide more information to support or refute this hypothesis. In 1568 Bruegel executed a second painting of the Tower of Babel (Fig. 6). New aspects are apparent in the second version which merit additional inquiries, notably the exclusion of Nimrod's cohort, the radical new treatment of the Tower and the elimination of imaginary landscape elements like the rock. His first Tower was like a painting partly developed from the landscape genre, depicting buildings and landscapes together with human activities. His new scheme resembles more of a purely architectural study in which much of the anecdotal detail has been left out. The building pierces into the clouds which appear menacing. They cast a strong shadow onto the right side of the Tower and the now scaled down harbor below. The elevated vantage point is now

more metaphysical than real. The appearance of the structure is hermetic and shut. We do not know if it is in ruin or a project in the last stages of completion. This new scheme alludes more to Romanesque sources than to the Roman influences of the first Tower. Thus, it represents a more definitive stage of Bruegel's architectural urge which borders on surrealism.

Criticism today

If one aspect must be stressed it is that any artifact is the result of many layers of action and thought. Architecture is no exception. Much of today's criticism is the result of a narrow and idiosyncratic approach which critically isolates the architectural object. Our present situation reflects the circumstances of the biblical Tower of Babel. We could improve our critical discourse by adopting a more holistic approach. The frames of reference which we used to examine Bruegel's work, not being a doctrine, but a discourse on areas of physical and other existence, constitute a point of departure and reflection for further action. They are conceptual tools and not foolproof devices for approaching the critical task.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to Professors Stuart Wilson, Pieter Sijpkens and Ms. Maureen Anderson of McGill's School of Architecture for their criticism.
2. Walter S. Gibson, *Bruegel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 7.
3. These frames of reference were proposed by Robert S. Harris in a paper entitled 'A Model for Designers', Eugene: University of Oregon, 1973. (Mimeographed.)
4. Charles De Tolnay, *Pierre Bruegel L'Ancien* (Bruxelles: Nouvelle Societe d'Editions, 1935), p. 33.
5. C. v. Mander, *Het Leven der Doorluchtighe Nederlandsche en Hoogduytsche Schilders*, ed. H. Floerke, Munich 1906 quoted in Piero Bianconi, *Bruegel* (Bologna: Capitol Editions, 1979), p. 13.
6. De Tolnay, op. cit., p. 18.
7. Gibson, op. cit., p. 97.