



The cult of the book

Description

Whatâ??s the use of books â?? or libraries in the information age? Libraries now offer themselves as of librarian and novelist Jorge Luis Borges: themselves before books and kiss their pages ipher a single letterâ?• (85).



I was tempted to think of books and cargo cults

as I visited the new Birmingham Public Library by Mecanoo Architects. I was there on a busy Saturday not long after the libraryâ??s official opening. Itâ??s in the heart of the cityâ??s cultural and entertainment district, and was busy with visitors ascending the tubular interiors of this lopsided zigurat to survey the city from height. Easy to miss, thereâ??s also the Shakespeare Memorial Room up there,

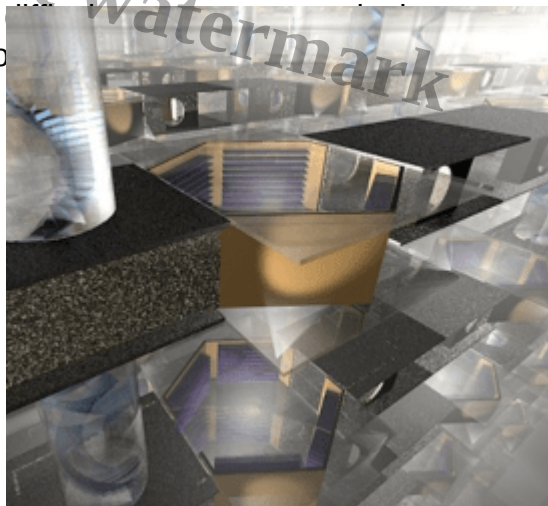
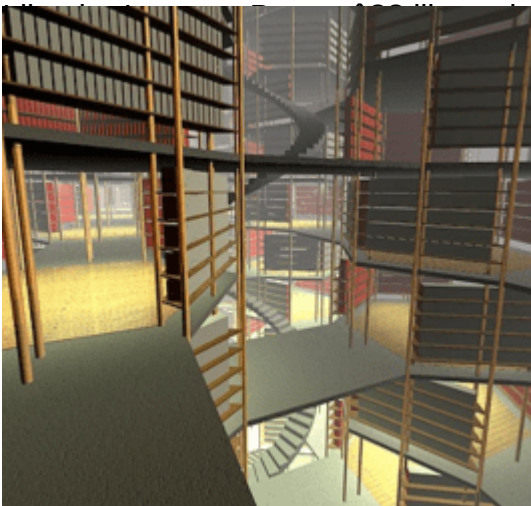
the remains of the old Victorian library inserted into the frame of the new.

The vertical references to the Tower of Babel are obvious to critics and architects, and perhaps also to visitors, readers and those seated at the many computer screens with the World Wide Web at their fingertips.

The building is also Borges's Library of Babel in microcosm.

The universe (which others call the library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. (78)

The Birmingham library conspicuously delineates circles rather than hexagons, but then Borges's library is a sphere whose exact centre is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible. (79). Circles and spheres in architecture reference the interrelation of the limited and the infinite Nicholas of Cusa's (1401-1464) paradoxical aphorism about how the machine of the world has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. (See [Circles and how to get out of them.](#))



geometrical ambiguities,
ago.

There's another series of cargo cultish representations of books in the computer game *Uru* (Cyan Worlds Inc): such as the massive rotating hexagonal fortresses for "maintainers" and writers in the Age of [Gahreesen](#), as explored indefatigably by LP expert [Sven Groot](#) of the *Guild of Let's Players*.



But then intellectual life, and reading, is a bit of a game according to Existential novelist Hermann Hesse.

The only way to learn the rules of this Game of games is to take the usual prescribed course, which requires many years, and none of the initiates could ever possibly have any interest in making these rules easier to learn. These rules, the sign language and grammar of the Game, constitute a kind of highly developed secret language drawing upon several sciences and arts, but especially mathematics and music (and/or musicology), and capable of expressing and establishing interrelationships between the content and conclusions of nearly all scholarly disciplines (14-15).

References

- Borges, Jorge Luis (1970). The library of Babel, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 78-86.
- Hesse, Hermann. 1990. *The Glass Bead Game*. Trans. R. Winston, and C. Winston. New York: Henry Holt and Company. First published in German in 1943.
- Prizeman, Oriel. 2011. Typology Quarterly: Libraries. *The Architectural Review*, (November) ([subscriber content](#)).

Notes

- I take Borges's essay *The Library of Babel* in its obvious sense as an allegory of different philosophical positions. There are the idealists, relativists, nihilists, fundamentalists, cosmologists, etc. As he suggests in a footnote it's a melancholy journey. The narrator went into the labyrinth of corridors and polished stairways without finding a single librarian (81).
- If you are an author of either of the two Library of Babel images then please let me know and I'll credit them. They are by students of the MSc in Design and Digital Media from about 8 years ago.
- The games of *Myst* and *Uru* are of course about books that link (hyperlink) you to different places, and environments that appear physically once they are described in writing, literally. The game is not all puzzles and visuals. There's a lot to read as well.
- Also see [Almost to infinity](#), and [Circles and how to get out of them](#).



Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. Birmingham
2. books
3. Borges
4. let's play
5. library
6. play
7. Uru

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