At one end of the spectrum, space can be understood as Kantian abstraction, being treated, like time, as one of the fundamental “dimensions” of existence, and is seen, as Newtonian and Euclidean conceptions of it would suggest, as simply a means of mapping points and locating entities in the universe, in other words, as a phenomenon that underlies the everyday reality in which we live, but is basically removed from it. At the other end of the spectrum, space is seen to impinge in very practical ways on everyday life, whether that be in relation to how we move about in the course of living out our lives in places such as homes, workplaces or sites of worship, or whether it be in relation to the political context in which we live and the social and economic realities that inform our movements and locate us in specific areas, constraining our access to sites of power or confining us to particular neighborhoods or territories. These themes – the extremes of abstraction and concreteness, and the links between mental creation, on the one hand, and the concrete reality of our physical surroundings, on the other, are grist to the mill of architects and scholars of architecture, at least part of whose mission is to articulate the connections between the abstract and the concrete, between the psychological and the political, and to account for how the dynamics of these processes translate into the built environment. Borges’s stories often do this too, of course, placing a perplexed individual in a universe whose raison d’être is mysterious, and playfully exploring issues of existence and meaning, in such a way that the delight of invention and imagination combine with wistful expressions of puzzlement at the fact of location within particular places.
Sophia Psarra draws out some of the essential connections between these two very different phenomena of architectural entities and the stories of Borges, in the context of a discussion of how architectural form and narrative relate to each other. The subtitle of the book, “the formation of space and cultural meaning”, highlights its main focus, which is a concern with how the morphological characteristics of an artistic creation (be it a building, a museum collection or a story) can be linked to the cultural meanings it evokes through a focus on the concept of spatiality.

Most of the material in the book relates to architectural phenomena, buildings which are of major cultural significance, and just two of the ten chapters focus on Borges’s work. Thus, the main thrust of the book is aimed at achieving a deeper understanding of how the study of certain landmark buildings and their contents can be informed by insights into the conceptual and perceptual dimensions of architectural space, or, as the author puts it, “the need to locate the morphological analysis of buildings within the specificities of context and within historical and theoretical knowledge, in terms of conceptual, perceptual and social space” (15). To this end, Psarra begins by offering the reader a general theoretical introduction, outlining her aims and the approach adopted, which is to explore the narrative dimension of buildings but, in the course of doing this, to also analyze works (Borges’s stories) where the medium is language and where, necessarily, the content unfolds in linear sequence. Her book therefore ranges over buildings where space and form take predominance over the semantic content function (in Part 1), literary narratives where the representational content is foregrounded over formal codes (in Part 2), and museums and galleries that balance codes of space and form with those of representational narrative content (in Part 3), ending with a “Theoretical Synthesis” in Part 4.

The three buildings discussed in Part 1 are buildings “whose aesthetic value has turned them into idealized abstractions of permanent significance” (8), namely, the Parthenon, the Erechteion and Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion. The first two, located alongside each other in the Acropolis, are seen to offer two different approaches to identity in ancient Greece, and to the symbolic expression of myth, with the Parthenon celebrating superiority over the Greek cities based on democracy and empire, while the Erechteion expresses ancestral superiority founded on autochthony. In the former, myth “solidified into permanent stasis”, and its regular, formal features served to “distance democracy from the space of daily action, spiritualize its message and give it universal significance”, while the Erechteion’s informality served to “secularize tradition and raise it to the level of everyday life” (40). The author manages to convey a sense of how this may be appreciated in terms of the shape of the buildings and the experience of the observer who enters them, and develops this exploration further through her consideration of the process of observing within Mies’s iconic construction in Barcelona. While the Pavilion manages to hide geometrical axes through the use of changing perspectives and reflective materials that saturate the senses, Mies also manages to convey a sense of the wholeness of the building, “moving without philosophical distinctions between the corporeality of things and their abstraction” (63).

This concern with the distinction between physical entity and abstraction is one of the main themes in the discussion of Borges’s stories in Part 2 (that is, Chapters 3 and 4). Chapter 3 addresses the theme of narrative and architecture in Borges’s fictions by means of a discussion of the stories “Theme of the traitor and the hero”, “The Garden of Forking Paths” and “Death and the Compass”. For the author, the three key connections between architecture and the stories are, first, the use of architecture as a metaphor for navigation through the plot; second, the depiction of space that combines eye-level experience with panoramic description, and third, allusions to philosophical ideas associated with the architectural context. The author employs geometrical diagrams and figures to illustrate a range of correspondences of these types in the stories. For instance, “Theme of the traitor and the hero” is presented as a diptych with a series of correspondences between characters or between different versions of the same character (Kilpatrick as hero vs Kilpatrick as traitor; Ryan as biographer vs Ryan as instrument in Kilpatrick’s scheme, etc.). The rotations and mappings presented in this instance purport to elucidate symmetrical relations and parallels, and, it is argued, these correspondences lead to an identification between, in this instance, Borges and the character of Ryan in the story. Ultimately, this pattern is said to yield a “single generic identity” that implicates the reader himself or herself in the story, as it implicates both the Borges persona who is the narrator of the story and the character of Ryan (mistakenly referred to here, on page 69, as “the narra-
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“the pictorial plane expands to include us and that we perhaps are the mis-
tor”). Certainly, this analysis captures the sense of corresponding patterns
of behavior that span different time periods as well as the two “worlds” of
fiction and reality that characterize this story.

The geometrical patterns associated with “The Garden of Forking
Paths” are based on a series of intersecting circles, representing different
narratives, with Borges at the center as a kind of “origo” or starting point.
These circles themselves are associated with a set of triangular shapes,
yielding a trellisation that presents the fiction as a “tiled surface” which
is seen as expanding outwards, potentially indefinitely. Alluding to Lewis
Carroll and to Borges’s essay on Velázquez’s Las Meninas, as well as to
Saussure’s notions of paradigmatic and syntagmatic structurizations, Psar-
ra attempts to show how the aim of these repeated patterns is – in both
Las Meninas and “The Garden of Forking Paths”, at least – to suggest that
“the pictorial plane expands to include us and that we perhaps are the mis-
sing subjects” (77). She suggests that “[b]y pulling us into the scene, it
[Las Meninas] puzzles us with the paradox of real and fictional space mer-
ing into oneness”, and she concludes: “Borges’s narrative techniques
achieve the same effect. The multiplied personae of the author onto the
tiled surface open a window into his mind. There we see what he wants us
to see: seeing ourselves seeing” (78).

“Death and the compass” yields a similar set of symmetries ba-
sed on circles and triangles, although these are related here to the charac-
ters who appear in the story, and only minimal reference is made to the
famous issue of the locations of the murders, despite allusions to Robert
Irwin’s discussion of the importance of 3-sided and 4-sided figures.

All of Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of “The Library of Babel”.
With copious allusions to a range of possible “origins” of the concept at
the heart of the narrative, including the Cretan labyrinth and the Kaballah,
this chapter is an extensive, if at times somewhat disjointed, presentation
of ideas relating to the architectural dimension of the story. Here, the
assertion that “the origin of the Library is in the biblical story in Genesis 11”
(91), while pointing up an important aspect of the narrative, will proba-
ably strike the reader as something of an overstatement, since Genesis is
more likely to be considered the origin of the title of the story than of the
story itself, although Psarra does also set out a number of sources related
to notions of complete libraries containing all that could ever be written.

Much attention is paid here also to correspondences, loops and symme-
tries, including emphasis on the fact that the putative library in question
would necessarily contain a copy of the text of this story itself, which in
turn “contains” the Library, etc. The main thrust of the Chapter, howe-
ever, serves to argue that there exists a thematic symmetry in the text, and
Pssrra claims to detect a set of symmetrical correspondences between the
various paragraphs of the story, setting out these correspondences as she
sees them in operation over the course of the fifteen paragraphs that com-
prise it, and relating these in turn to features of the Cretan labyrinth. Para-
graph 8 she sees as standing on its own, as the paragraph around which
the others are hinged. Thus, for example, it is argued that there is a space-
time correspondence between paragraph 1 (which is based on “an abso-
lute notion of space we can grasp at once”) and paragraph 15 (centered
on “an empirical notion of space based on temporal sequence”). Presuma-
ably each individual reader will find this convincing, to a greater or lesser
degree, but certainly the upshot of the discussion is to demonstrate how
this story addresses the issue of “the relation between purposeful design
and inexplicable chaos” (103), and the chapter is ultimately convincing in
terms of demonstrating the way in which stories such as this one express
how human spatiality entails combining the sequential experience of spa-
ce – and narrative – with knowledge of a larger conceptual reality.

Part 3 of the book is the most substantial, consisting of four chapters
that examine a total of six major British and American museums and art
galleries: the house-museum of Sir John Soane and the Natural History
Museum in London; Kelvingrove and the Burrell Collection in Glasgow;
the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and the Museum of Modern Art,
New York. These are insightful and fascinating discussions of the ways
in which the collections and exhibitions in question are presented, exa-
minating the various dimensions of those presentations, ranging from
the physical locations of the buildings themselves to the morphological
characteristics of the construction of the buildings and the ways in which
layouts, views, perspectives and itineraries function within them. Soane’s
house-museum reflects its founder’s fascination with ruins and mortality,
and its link to narrative centers in particular on his preoccupation with
“the creative tension between conceptual unity and the sequential nature
of sensual experience” (135). The Natural History Museum and Kelvingro-
ve Art Gallery and Museum are exemplars of “Victorian knowledge”, the former displaying a traditional concern with hierarchical classification of knowledge while the latter offers a more fluid approach to categorization, embodied in the existence of multiple links between the spaces. While the NHM reflects a view of nature that aimed at an encyclopedic presentation of what was deemed to be divine creation, Kelvingrove presents nature as essentially a resource for trade and constitutes an informal social and educational setting rather than a “themed” space for large-scale consumption. Both the National Museum of Scotland and the Burrell Collection move away from the idea of a museum as a “well-lit warehouse” that can be dissociated from its contents and instead integrate the building itself with the contents, although each does this in a different way. While the Edinburgh museum aims to present Scotland’s “story”, displaying the country’s progress from a pre-industrial to an industrial nation, the Burrell engages with the expression of one individual’s identity – that of its creator, Sir William Burrell – and “arranges objects on a grid of spatial locations, facilitating aesthetic juxtapositions of artworks instead of an overpowering message” (163). The MoMA, meanwhile, is interpreted as reflecting the implications of modern and contemporary art in terms of the simultaneous existence of multiple, and often contradictory, narratives and interpretations; its spatial arrangements offer varied narratives that both present a chronological story and allow for unexpected interruptions and alternative readings. Psarra’s exposition of the characteristics of these museums is instructive, and allows us to appreciate the many links between the content and the contexts of the exhibitions, while alluding to the sense in which the experience of the buildings can be “read” as a series of narratives which, at least in some instances, resemble literary narratives such as the stories of Borges.

The fourth and final part of the book is entitled “Theoretical Synthesis” and consists of two chapters, one of which is a comparative discussion of the material examined earlier, the second being an exposition of a range of theoretical aspects of spatiality as it relates to architecture. Here again, there is a strong emphasis on the distinction between abstract ideas and perceptual aspects of the field, with an interesting discussion of the roots of this dichotomy in classical Western philosophy and in Kant. Other thinkers inform this discussion also, including especially the architectu-
tence such as the following: “The task of art is to establish a continuum among contradictions, like the centralized Renaissance churches which represent the universe as wholesome and ordered” (86).

The chief thread of discussion running through this book is the connection between morphological properties of buildings and narratives and the network of spatial, social, intellectual and professional practices that produce different kinds of social knowledge, as well as the requirement to transcend the duality of the conceptual realm and the reality of bodies in physical space. To the extent that such a project is central to ongoing explorations of spatial, architectural and literary production – and there are good reasons for believing that it is – the book will be of benefit to scholars with those interests, and should assist with the task at hand.

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