

Matteo Pericoli. Windows in architecture and literature

Abstract

This brief piece deals with my observations concerning architect Matteo Pericoli while I was in his birth-place, Milan, Italy. It centers on questions of space, mainly windows, and the oppositions between inside and outside; between space and place. The article then uses examples from Spanish medieval and early modern literature (Don Juan Manuel and Cervantes) to see how these ideas can be applied. It concludes that windows are a liminal site, which highlight the senses and have differing purposes in literature.

Keywords: Matteo Pericoli, Yi-Fu Tuan, architecture, Cervantes, Don Juan Manuel, space, windows

Volume 8 Issue 1 - 2026

Frederick A De Armas

Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, University of Chicago, USA

Correspondence: Frederick A De Armas, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, University of Chicago, USA

Received: April 04, 2026 | **Published:** April 15, 2026

Introduction

As I prepared a lecture on Spanish literature to be delivered at the Università degli Studi di Milano on Wednesday, April 1, 2026, I came to realize that this was the birthplace of Matteo Pericoli (1968), a prominent architect, illustrator, author, journalist and teacher who studied in his hometown, and obtained a degree in architecture from the Polytechnic School. Since this architect and illustrator was keenly interested in windows, this piece seeks to understand why they were so important to him and also why they are also important in literary works.

A few words about his career may help us to locate his work. After studying in Milan, he moved to New York in 1995, where he became interested, not in the past, but in living architecture. He soon became famous for his many books and his articles in leading newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* magazine. Most inhabitants of the Big Apple came to know him for his immense mural depicting the city, which he displayed at the American Airlines terminal at JFK in 2009. Nevertheless, to me, he became a most insightful writer as he sought to combine architecture and literature: “Great architects build structures that can make us feel enclosed, liberated or suspended. They lead us through space, make us slow down, speed up or stop to contemplate. Great writers, in devising their literary structures, do exactly the same” (2013).

Indeed, in a course entitled “Laboratory of Literary Architecture,” Matteo Pericoli creates a most inventive and interdisciplinary way of looking at writing:

“Once the creative writing students have an idea for their structures, they team up with architecture students to construct 3-D models. This moment always has an element of magic: two students from very different disciplines coming together, now sharing a common language, knowing exactly where to meet, and why. They discuss spatial relationships, repetition, reflection, sequence, transparency, tension, pacing, chronology and so forth. Any architectural question is answered from a literary point of view; any literary issue is addressed by a spatial idea. There is no room for arbitrary moves” (2013).

More recently, his ideas have been further explained thusly:

“Well, I firmly believe that once we embrace the idea that a story is like a house, a house to explore, to inhabit, from whose windows we can see a changed world, one that changes as

we change with each new visit, and which is therefore something “real”—as real as our experience of architecture, space, movement, proportions, changes in level, ascents, descents, openings, darkness, clarity, and so on—then we are ready to understand how narrative permeates everything, is everywhere, and is a fundamental part of the **architectural space** we read and perceive daily,¹ just as we store in our minds the functioning of a story or a literary text in general.¹

Pericoli’s approach is truly unique, but it has led me to something perhaps less imposing, but that allows me to see in new ways. I have come to believe that we can simply study buildings within a narrative, and how they have an effect on characters and readers alike.² Authors like Don Juan Manuel and Cervantes, it seems to me, can indeed be envisioned through literary architecture as found in the work’s literary structures. I have found that it is equally important to examine how readers and characters react when encountering buildings within the fictional world. These edifices made by words are carefully crafted to augment the feel created by architects, as pointed out by Pericoli. They can slow down the character or reader; they can make them speed up; feel ecstatic or terrified. Each writer can even present the same edifice and elicit different emotions given the characters’ actions. I will give two examples.

For example, as I turned to a medieval Spanish work, *Count Lucanor* (*El conde Lucanor*), looking at both the literary architecture and the architectures within the work. Turning to literary architectures, we find that all 51 brief moral examples follow the same literary architecture, that is, each of the tales is divided into five sections. First, each one has a frame where the Count encounters a problem and expresses his bafflement to his councilor, Patronio. Secondly, Patronio responds to his master’s doubts with a “delectable” example, a short tale that, although very different from the problem and its solution, shows both in an analogical manner. Thirdly, we have the application of this tale, which begins with a variation of a statement that begins “Et vos señor conde...” (And you, my Count Lucanor...) (1969, 59, 66, 74, 77), which calms the Count’s doubts. Fourth, the Count approves of Patronio’s example. Fifth, two lines in verse summarize the lesson to be learned. While Pericoli and his students would have transformed each of the sections in an architectural form like rooms, hallways, entryways, etc., they would also have searched for the emotions they arouse. We could say that the first part arouses curiosity. Each of these

¹ Here I am using Google translate and to render the text from Italian to English. The Italian text can be found in the webpage.

five components elicit different emotions, as Pericoli had warned us. The readers may be baffled with the first section; they may be expectant with the second; settle down to a slow-down to enjoy a delectable tale. They may be filled with a mild curiosity in the third, a speed up to find the lesson in the fourth, and a final “slow-down” to consider the two verses as mnemonic markers.

However, this is not the kind of architecture that I am concerned with in the talk I will give. I look for actual architectures within the tale, usually found in the fourth part. If we take the third section of the fourth example in *Count Lucanor*, we find a rich Genoese merchant talking to his soul. He is very ill and the soul wants to depart to another realm. The merchant tries to persuade her to stay. The description of his goods being essential, since the merchant equates happiness with the accumulation of riches. His look turns this way and that, as he points to his soul the many jewels and tapestries that surround him; even the ships and galley in the port. Here, architectural features are missing, as the tale reveals a sense of fluidity in space, which includes the nearby jewels and the faraway ships – all of which are in the same place. Indeed, turning to the ship he affirms “veeslas aquí” (here they are) (1969, 76). He does not separate palace holdings and exterior possessions. All bring him joy, as readers marvel at all he has and all he thinks will be lost. Yet, in the midst of this undifferentiated space, he points to “muchas heredades et huertas, et muy hermosas et muy delectosas, véeslas ó paresçen destas finiestras” (many lands and orchards, very beautiful and delectable; see them through these windows) (1969, 76). The sudden presence of an architectural feature, windows, one that seldom appears in his work, makes us stop and ponder why they are there. This element, then, brings the reader to a stop to ask a question. Soon, there will be another stop, the end of the merchant’s life. The window may point to a place of joy beyond.

Examples from Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* can also help to understand the importance of literary architectures and architecture within the work. In terms of literary architecture, the 1605 *Don Quixote*, can easily be divided into three sections. In the first, Alonso Quijano, mad after reading books of chivalry day and night, decides to become a knight even though he is too old for this pursuit and lives in a remote and rustic part of Spain at a time when knights have become obsolete. The first of the three sections portrays him, accompanied by his squire Sancho,² as inventing chivalric adventures where there are none: he sees giants where there are only windmills and encounters the famed magical helmet of Mambrino where there is only a barber’s basin. The constant structural repetition of these adventures, where he mostly loses to imagined opponents, creates a pattern of laughter and recurrence where the reader travels with the knight at a leisurely pace, enjoying all the misadventures. At the same time, some readers take a “romantic” approach and consider that the knight’s determined stance makes him a true hero who opposes the wrongs of the world.³ The second part begins after Don Quixote frees the galley slaves, an event that makes him a “fugitive from justice”.³ He claims he must go into the mountains to do penance for his beloved Dulcinea. Once

² Sancho does not appear in the first few chapters, which constitute the first sally. Only after an innkeeper, whom he takes for a castle keeper, tells him he must have a squire or companion, does he return home and ask Sancho to accompany him.

³According to Anthony Close, the romantic approach includes some of the following notions: 1. The idealization of the hero and of his lady Dulcinea; 2. The denial of the novel’s satiric purpose; 3. The belief that the novel is symbolic and that through this symbolism it expresses ideas about the human spirit’s relation to reality or about the nature of Spanish history (1978, 214-217). More recently, Clark Colahan (2023) has shown that the romantic approach preceded the romantic era in France.

there, he loses his voice and the novel is taken over by a series of amorous interpolated tales.⁴ These tales break the leisurely pace of reading as they jolt and even disorient the readers, taking them in different directions. In a final section, Don Quixote’s “friends” decide to take him home in a “magical” contraption, in order to cure him from his madness.

Curiously, the middle section has more descriptions of architectural spaces than the first and the third.⁵ We would have expected the first one to be filled with imposing structures since the romances of chivalry included numerous marvelous structures.⁴ However, this is not the case. Even windows, a recurring feature in the second section devoted mostly to interpolated tales, are almost absent from the first, where only two windows stand out. The first, is a window in Don Quixote’s library, where his “friends” led by the priest and the barber, throw his books to the ground below so they can burn them and thus cure him from reading and the madness it causes. The second window appears when the knight tells Sancho a mini-chivalric tale where a king, in his castle, looks out the window. “... the king of that country shall appear at the windows of his royal palace; and, as soon as he spies the knight, knowing him by his armour, or by the device on his shield, he must necessarily say: ‘Ho there, go forth, my knights, all that are at court, to receive the flower of chivalry who is coming yonder’” (1998, 158). The windows, in this case, might be considered symbolically, as windows into Don Quixote’s desires. He wishes to be honored like knights of old.

If the 1605 novel was mostly lacking in chivalric structures, this is not the case in the second part of the novel published in 1615. For example, the knight describes the Pantheon in Rome in ways that at first appear to slow down the reader, to create awe, to allow the reader to admire a cosmic architecture; but at the same time, an anecdote terrifies as if the cosmos is no longer ordered. Here, a Roman gentleman, explains to Emperor Charles V the intricacies of the building. As they climb up, he confesses to the emperor that he has thought many times of grabbing him and taking him down to their deaths through the *occulus* of the building. Sometimes, then, a character’s purpose or action overwhelms the feeling of an architecture.^{5,2} If the *occulus* is a window to the cosmos, then the Roman gentleman is like a comet that disrupts the harmony of the heavens.

After providing a couple of examples of what I would talk about, it is time to return to the architect that allowed us ponder on architectures in literature, and to also bring up a second theorist on space. Matteo Pericoli was so obsessed with the view from New York’s skyscrapers, that he dedicated a whole book to a collection of drawings from different windows. *The City Out My Window* shows us a series of “private” New Yorks, as seen by Tom Wolfe and Tony Kushner (2009). They see, but are not seen. This obsession with buildings, spaces and windows, connects the writings of Pericoli to those of Yi-Fu Tuan. In his farewell lecture at the University of

⁴The first to discuss in detail the seven interpolated tales was Raymond Immerwahr (1958). Among the more recent approaches, see Brian Brewer (2022). For a detailed study of the windows in the tales, see Frederick De Armas (2022).

⁵Perhaps the most astounding moment centering on a window takes place in the tale of Cardenio and Luscinda. Here, Fernando, whom Cardenio mistakenly thinks is his best friend, shows him the beauty of his beloved Luscinda through an open window at night. Thus, they both become voyeurs, while the friend falls for Cardenio’s beloved. “...and showed her to him one night by the light of a taper at a window, where we two used to converse together. She appeared to him, though in an undress, so charming, as to blot out of his memory all the beauties he had seen before” (1998, 189). On the subject see De Armas 2022.

Wisconsin on April 4, 2014, this geographer quotes from one of his previous lectures, this one given at a Middle School, where he asks the students: “Look out of the window and you will see open space. Open space suggests adventure, but it also entails risk.” (2014). This statement goes to the core of his theories: “Place is security, space is freedom; we are attached to the one and long for the other” (1977, 3). Place is often constructed as a home, church, school or villa, while the spaces that surround these structures of safety, be they cityscapes, forests or marine environments, are sites of freedom with its concomitant dangers. It is curious, then, that leaving aside the words just cited, Yi-Fu Tuan does not often talk about windows, architectural elements that allow those inside to gaze at what may be found beyond. They offer new vistas of adventure and offer solace to those who feel constricted. Such is the case of the king and his courtiers in Cervantes. Windows may also allow those outside, unless it is covered, to peek inside. This second mode could invite outside dangers as in the interpolated tale of Cardenio and Luscinda in Cervantes (see note 4). Windows are then liminal sites that are between place and space. Shutters, lattices, grilles, glass or curtains have been used to attenuate the opposing qualities of inside and outside, place and space. In *Count Lucanor*, a single window stops the narrative, stops our reading; while in Cervantes, the *occulus* in the Pantheon in Rome, can move us from the ecstatic to the terrified.

As I finish my lecture here in Milan, thank Professor Alessandro Cassol and all those present. But in my mind, I return to Matteo Pericoli. Some years back, he sought to sketch the city of Milan in an autobiographical manner, including the apartment where he grew up, where he went to school, and where he went to university. Other representative buildings fill out the drawing (2016), which is now part of a book (2021). While the buildings are set back, the foreground seems empty, as if his youth had been transformed into a faraway space that was no longer fully accessible. To use Yi-Fu Tuan terms, it was no longer a “place” but had become a “space.” The buildings, with a myriad windows, look at him, look at us – and yet there is no one inside, there seems to be no human inhabitants. In the time between 2016 and 2021, did he fill the spaces with emotions from his youth? While in New York, he and many others sought to look out the window and present us with an astounding vision of the city and its many sites, now we see hundreds of windows that seem to look at us. Has Matteo Pericoli, no matter how he wishes to write an encomium of his native city as a progressive space, changed his perception?⁶ Does he see things differently? Can we at time assert that the feel and pace of architecture as much a result of our inner emotions? Alternatively, are edifices and other structures still influencing us as we move through life, as we move through a text?

While the two theorists of space and architecture can open a window upon edifices and their windows; two writers can serve as examples as to how to apply their theories. Matteo Pericoli begins by looking through windows and ends up looking at windows (and their edifices). Yi-Fu Tuan turns to space and place, but seldom reflects on how windows unite them and keep them apart. Windows and edifices transform our perception and our reading, be they in the world or in

⁶ The windows of his hometown become even more complex as we view him through his page on Facebook (2016) The drawing thus appears within an electronic canvas, one that further turns into a brief video. Now it has turned into a book (2021).

writing. We must then stop, even when the architecture leads us on, in order to feel the emotions they arouse. We must pause to envision their, structure and their function; and while we seek to understand these architectures, we should seek to understand ourselves as we look with eyes, windows of the soul.⁶⁻¹⁶

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Funding

None.

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