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1, 2. Max Ernst, *The Master's Bedroom*, 1920; *Kolner Lehrmittelanstalt*, detail of teaching aid sheet

Mario Gandelsonas

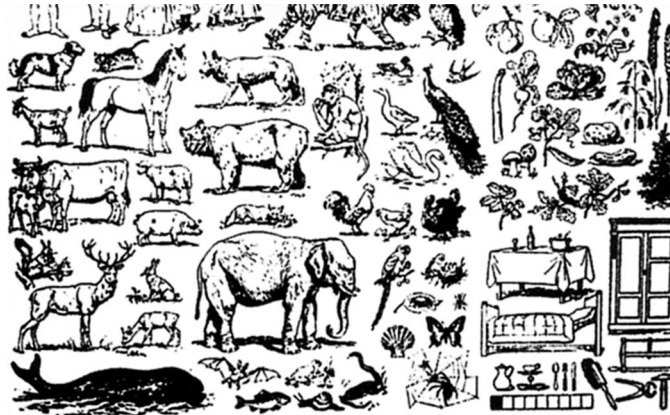
The City as the Object of Architecture

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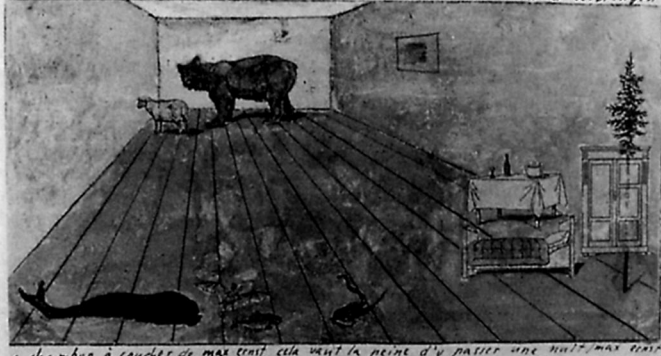
This essay will appear as a chapter in his forthcoming book *X-Urbanism: Architecture and the American City* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).

The fantasies imagined by European modernist urbanism (for example, Le Corbusier's architectural urban fantasy of a city of glass towers on a park, with wide streets on a gridded pattern, where people walk on elevated walkways) depict the impossible relation of architecture to the *object-cause* of its desire, *the city*. The object of the fantasy neither exists in the reality of the city nor can it be literally realized. Why would architects fantasize a totally different city only fifty years after the nineteenth-century rebuilding of the European cities with a totally different strategy — monumental boulevards defined by street walls cut through the medieval fabric? Because the modernist architect's desire was not for the existing city, because more in general, desire is not something given: urban fantasies construct architecture's desire itself by giving its coordinates, by locating its *subject* and specifying its *object*.¹ The construction of desire entails not just depicting a future scene and designating its elements — the garden with objects, the modernist grid, the Cartesian skyscraper — but also designating the gaze that witnesses it. In the case of Le Corbusier, a critical fantasy is directed against the classical city. The gaze comes from the conservative architects and politicians who want to preserve the old European cities as reality and model, cities that, in Le Corbusier's modernist eyes, were crushed by history, stuffed with old buildings with dark interiors and paralyzed by congested streets.

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das schlafzimmer des meisters es lohnt sich darin eine nacht zu verbringen



la chambre à coucher de max tant cela vaut la peine d'y passer une nuit max tant

The city has been the object of architectural desire from the moment architectural discourse was established with Alberti's theory: an articulation of two illegible texts, one written (Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture*) and one built (the Roman ruins).² The constitutive moment represented by Alberti takes place at a time when, in Europe, the cities as a political economic structure "come back."³ It is in this context that architecture is called into being in relation to the city as its *other*. This relationship was established on the basis of a "shared" object, the building as the object of both practices. In fact, the signifier /building/ collapses two objects—the urban building and the architectural building — as one. The building, as part of the city, is "outside" architecture;⁴ it is simply a pile of stones. Beauty and ornament can transform the stones into an architectural building, a transformation that paradoxically requires a separation of the architect from the building, from its site, from its construction.

The constitutive act establishes a difference, a distance between the architect and the builder, the urban building and the architectural building, that will result in a separation structured as a relation of subordination. From the position of domination, the architect will attempt to close the gap, to attain that which was lost in the differentiation: the building. The lack is sutured by representing what had been excluded in establishing its identity: the work of the carpenter, the construction of the building with the hands instead of the mind. The architectural discourse that becomes an integral part of the practice will register the string of exclusions as the nonmarked terms in an oppositional structure. Where the building, the builder, and the site are represented by discursive "stand-ins," this oppositional structure will split the building into opposing sites (the architect's atelier versus the construction site), the skills into opposing practices (architect versus builder), and the means of production into opposing techniques (design versus building).

Two architectural fantasies concerning the subject and the object designate the elements that could not be integrated in the symbolic structure of architecture. The first is the artistic fantasy where architecture establishes its place as an artistic practice, defining a creative subject while occupying the place of the builder: it is a doubling of architecture that wants to be in two places at the same time. The definition of architecture as the "mother" of the other arts obscures the reality of the disturbing in-between that defines architecture as a practice where the architect is neither an autonomous artist nor a carpenter building for a "client" in the context of the city. Correlated to this subject, this fantasy defines an object that also pretends to be in two places at the same time: in the design, which in this fantasy starts from scratch (devised through the architect's own mind and energy), and in the body of the building (realized by construction). The effect of the doubling of the object is the concealment of the apparatus of representation and of the drawing as the space of architectural production.

The second object-subject fantasy is the urban fantasy: architecture's desire to domesticate the wild economic and political forces that traverse the urban body to impose an order. It is the doubling of architecture that wants to be within its own boundaries and to have an effect outside. The architectural-urban fantasy — an architectural universe of buildings in which the city is the largest building — fills out a fundamental lack in architecture, the void left by the loss of the reality of the process of construction and of the building itself. The fantasy implies the reduction of the physical-spatial reality of the city to the status of the architectural building: the city as an object of architectural desire is the city as building.⁵ The moment the architectural gaze hits the city, its shapes become the focus, an opening toward a symbolic process that eclipses the actions that take place in it, that shifts the focus from the urban scene where "life" takes place to the stage itself, where real time recedes and space comes to the

foreground. But the reality of the city as a process, as an economic dynamo,⁶ a place of both physical and nonphysical exchange, has always resisted the suppression of time, of difference, of the contingent, of its reduction to the status of a building; that is, to the spatiality and totalizing nature of the object implied by the architectural urban practice. Nevertheless, while the architectural urban fantasies will never reach their object, they will make possible the triangulation among architecture, the European city, and the American city.⁷

The Object of the Urban Fantasy

The city has always eluded the architect. It has been attainable neither in space (for instance, when the Renaissance city was projected across the Atlantic) nor in time (when the Baroque city was realized in the late 1800s).⁸ A major obstacle to architecture, which has always been dependent on totalizing notions — the city as building or the city as network of monuments — is the city's resistance to the notion of a whole. The city presents to architecture an open play of differences within a potentially infinite field of shapes. Since this field resists closure, the city stands as an obstacle to the architectural efforts to domesticate this play, to impose a totalizing order. Another obstacle is presented in architecture itself: it is architecture's resistance to the temporal dimension where the urban processes take place. These processes always overflow the institutionalized framework of the practice of architecture, which, in its pursuit of the city, can approach it but never quite get there. Architecture is too slow or too fast, it rebuilds the past or projects an impossible future,⁹ but it can never insert itself into the contingency of the urban present. The movement of the choreography of desire flows from architecture to the city, from the architectural to the nonarchitectural. But desire also flows back from the city (the nonarchitectural) to architecture. It is in this space where the imaginary and symbolic constructions that architecture fantasizes in its pursuit of the city are assembled.

Despite the impossibility of architecture to force a total order upon the urban play, despite the constant failure to realize total order, since the Renaissance, architects have proposed totalizing designs in Europe. Starting with the early architectural treatises such as Antonio Averlino Filarete's *Treatise on Architecture*, these designs have depicted the configuration of entire cities, not just plans but also architectural buildings, a notion that persists until the modernist urbanistic theories. These architectural fantasies are realized in partial and fragmented ways: different degrees and kinds of architectural domestication and sometimes articulations between architecture and the city have taken place in Europe as a result of particular political conjunctures (papal Rome, royal Paris, etc.) that made it possible. While the nonarchitectural urban fantasies in America, the gridded city, the city of skyscrapers, and the suburban city have always been realized, the difficulty of imposing an architectural order beyond the plan has always been enormous.¹⁰ Yet the American context paradoxically provides the conditions for one architectural fantasy to be realized and to function as the exception: Washington, D.C., the city representing the Union.¹¹ Washington is the only American city whose identity is defined by repeatedly striving to inscribe a totalizing order. This effort, which is staged apparently as a play of distorting mirrors reflecting the European city,¹² has the role of suturing in the physical reality of the city the successive voids produced: first by the political cut effected by the Revolution and then by the division and struggle among states that culminates in the Civil War. The unique history of Washington has been determined by a double condition of "otherness": Washington, the "internal other" of the other American cities, is an uncanny refraction of its "external other," the European city.¹³

The resistance that architecture finds in the American city is correlated to the resistance within architecture to consider the American city in architectural terms. For hundreds of years,

since Alberti, architects had gone to Rome, not just to measure the buildings themselves, but to expose the subject of architecture to the gaze of the ruins, of the built text that constituted the practice. The American city, as opposed to Rome, was beyond the architectural field of vision, not just because it was considered an inferior version of the European city, but also because of what was considered the deficient configuration of its gridded plan. This resistance weakens when the European architects are subject to the gaze of the American city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; that is, the gaze of the modern city, the gaze coming from the future. The effect of this “evil eye” is ultimately devastating for the architectural status quo: a violent reaction takes place against classical architecture and a new architectural universe is invented.

While the architectural gaze produces, in some instances, urban restructurings (that ultimately never coincide with the architects’ desire), the urban gaze produces traumatic effects on architecture. In looking back at “architecture from without,” the city interpellates architecture,¹⁴ inducing sometimes pathological urban fantasies. Pope Sixtus V’s Rome, Bernini’s St. Peter’s Square, Piranesi’s readings of Rome, Ledoux’s ideal city, and Le Corbusier’s *Ville Contemporaine* are not part of the “normal” discourse of architecture, but are symptomatically excessive, out of place with respect to their discursive contexts.¹⁵ Why? Because of the constitutive role of the city in the establishment of the architectural practice and the traumatic effect of any attempt to “reintroduce it” into architecture. Because of the historical failure in this repression of the city, which has both been contained outside architecture and represented inside architecture through urban fantasies.

The traumatic effects of the radical changes that take place in the early twentieth century are overdetermined by the confrontation with new challenges due to the reversal in the direction of flows in the historical triangular relationship among architecture, the European city, and the American

city. With the opening to the American city comes the challenge for architecture proposed by the introduction of the skyscraper; a building type that deals with the extremely high density but that also questions both the traditional city of fabric, the traditional scene where architecture was always staged, and the notion of type itself, which in the nineteenth century came to occupy a prominent role in architectural theory and practice. The challenge presented to architecture by the American city provokes and produces the urban mutation introduced by the radical European modernist fantasies.

While the previous fantasies were rereadings of the Roman and Greek cities of the past — and the Baroque reaction against these readings — the new fantasies look at the scene of the future, the American city. They do not, however, see the city of skyscrapers: the urban fantasy functions now as a screen that not only hides the antagonisms in the relation between architecture and the city, but keeps the American city out of sight or located in a blind spot.

The Subject of the Urban Fantasy

Correlated to its object (the city), the urban fantasy provides the location of a subject, not very different from the “creative subject” of the artistic fantasy.¹⁶ This subject is blind to the reality of a city always already present, the result of accretion, of the overlapping of successive traces on a ground that retains them, a city that resists the notion of starting from scratch, of being constructed by architectural fantasies on a blank piece of paper as a fact that has not yet been built, a city that resists being considered an architectural building. The creative subject of the urban fantasy inhabits a scene of *production* that is almost fully occupied by a multiplicity of economic and political actors, of practices other than architecture, and fails to recognize another possible location for the construction of the urban fantasy scene: the space of *reception*.¹⁷

The displacement to the space of reception will take place at a point when the traumatic urban restructuring in postwar Europe and America produces a break, a discontinuity, in the relatively stable structures that organize the recognition of the city. The cities produced by the suburbanization of the American city and the postwar European reconstruction are illegible, an illegibility that particularly concerns the architect. The confrontation with the new city that emerges in the late 1950s and early 1960s results in a theoretical production that accomplishes a critical shift in the position of the architectural subject, from production to reception, from writing to reading.¹⁸ This displacement will produce a major break in the mid-1960s with respect to 1920s modernist architecture's failed attempt to produce a city by locating itself in the traditional site of production.

Reading the city presupposes a subject that is defined by a particular "quilting" that fixates the meaning of the multiplicity of urban signifiers.¹⁹ The illegibility of the new city raises the need to "quilt" the new and old floating signifiers, to fix their meaning, making the city legible again by introducing a *major signifier* to structure the signifying field. This quilting was attempted not just by architects but by various observers who worked in the field of the social sciences and found their object of study in the city, including behavioral scientists, sociologists, and planners; for instance, the disoriented subject and the question of legibility in Kevin Lynch, the disembodied exurbanite and the question of nonplace produced by the new electronic technology in Melvin Webber, the passive audience of a spectacular society in Guy Debord, and the prearchitectural (structuralist) urban reader in Michel de Certeau.²⁰ What these different quiltings have in common is that they ignore and/or suppress the architectural view of the city, and the questions of *form* and *visual enjoyment* of the city, the flow that relates the nonarchitectural city to architecture.

Particularly relevant to our discussion is Kevin Lynch's 1960 text *The Image of the City*, because his object of study seems

to overlap with the architectural object. The urban buildings and spaces addressed by Lynch at a point in history where urban renewal destroys the center city are "innocent" — they have not yet been *hit* by the architectural gaze, they are part of "reality," a stage where "life" and social actions take place.²¹ The question addressed by Lynch is the "clarity and legibility of the cityscape," the ease with which its parts can be recognized and organized into a coherent pattern to provide clues to orientation.²² Lynch's desire, at a time when the centered city is mutating into something else, the center erased and the suburban city "taking over" the previous city, is not to know and enjoy the form of the city, but to know how to recognize and use the form of the city.²³ Lynch's city is primarily a communicational device, a "transitive" artifact intended to provide directions, to point toward a destination.²⁴

Lynch's functionalist view constructs a city as a place of known trajectories, where the illegibility and the resulting opacity created by the restructuring of the city give way to a transparent city. Paradoxically, when the totally clear and legible city becomes a transitive and neutral vessel for conveying information, we no longer see the city, in the same way that language becomes invisible when we are using it (as opposed to the opaque language of poetry, where language itself is the focus). Architecture is also interested in making the city "visible" and has therefore introduced opacity into the city throughout history, a gesture that was magnified by modernist architecture. But this was an opacity that presupposed a legible, transparent, and therefore invisible prearchitectural city. So what is to be done when, for the first time in urban history, this "natural," prearchitectural city becomes opaque, as in the case of Europe and America in the 1960s? As opposed to the shocking "newness" of modern architecture vis-à-vis the classical city (which brings opacity to the level of *expression*), the postmodernist architects of the mid-1960s produce an "uncanny homeliness" and therefore opacity at the level of *con-*

tent.²⁵ This major restructuring of the theory and practice of architecture is produced by the displacement in architectural production from designing and “writing” a new city to reading a “ready-made” city, and by a correlated displacement of the architect from the traditional position of creative agent to the new position of architectural observer who rewrites the existing city. Aldo Rossi in Europe and Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi in America produce this displacement.²⁶

Rossi’s *Architecture of the City* presents a theory involving the persistence of form, the insistence of urban traces in the permanent process of differentiation that characterizes the historical city.²⁷ Rossi proposes a displacement in the location of the architectural subject of the architectural fantasy, switching its traditional location from the place of production to the place of reception, from writing to reading. When the city and the architectural building are seen in terms of production, “one is the product of *the public*, the other one is *for the public*” and therefore the only place available in the city for the architect is the place of the viewer.²⁸ What allows this change of location is the extension of the architectural notion of type to nonarchitectural buildings to the fabric of the city. By doing this, Rossi subverts the constitutive distinction between architectural building and urban building, which is “brought into” architecture. What allows this to happen is the notion of analogy, which in Rossi’s theory occupies a prominent place. The effect of the analogical mechanism is a displacement of forms, objects, and urban buildings that subvert the humanist notion of scale and the boundaries of architecture itself, opening its lexicon to include the city and the world of ordinary objects.²⁹ Rossi’s notion of permanence in the long duration of the constantly changing city, a reading in which he articulates the city to Ferdinand de Saussure’s notion of *langue*,³⁰ allows him metonymically to place architecture in the space of writing.

In America, Venturi and Scott Brown perform a similar operation of displacement of the architectural observer by read-

ing the urban sprawl produced by the suburban city. In a strategic move, they align themselves with the vanguard culture of the 1950s and early 1960s. Particularly, they align themselves with pop art (especially painting), subverting the boundaries of architecture, erasing the distinction between high (architecture) and low (sprawl); that is, proposing an equality and interchangeability of architectural and non-architectural shapes. In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi and Scott Brown radicalize Venturi’s position in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* by focusing on the new cityscape that results from the suburban mutation, instead of on the permanent elements of the city. While Rossi’s concept of permanence alludes to the structural resistance to urban amnesia, the Venturi/Scott Brown reading refers to the resistance of architecture to the new observer, an observer that breaks away from the traditional ambulatory subject to produce a reading in motion (from the car) of a city of signs, and to the architectural resistance to the new configurations, both lexical and syntactic, produced by urban sprawl.

With Rossi and Venturi/Scott Brown, architecture is drastically restructured and the object of architectural desire is displaced. What the architect desires in the mid-1960s is not just the repertory of configurations and shapes given by a totalizing architectural urban fantasy. The desire now is to produce the articulation of the temporal *diachronic axis of architecture* — the closed space of architectural competence that stands as a challenge to the “formal disorder” of the city, architecture as “high art” — to the *synchronic axis of the city* — the cultural dimension that includes today the “low art” of the urban building, of the developer, and of mass culture, which challenges and opens up the limits of the architectural. This desire has been present since Alberti, when he described the architect as someone who needs to master not only specific architectural knowledge but knowledge of various cultural practices. The impossibility of realizing this desire for an articulation between architecture and the other cultural prac-

tices — for a “balance” between them, because of different specificities and historical developments, and, ultimately, an antagonism between the two axes, the fact that the articulation will always, in the end, fail — sustains the city as an object of desire. The diachronic axis is the space where historical returns take place even when they appear as a break.³¹ The postmodernist articulation that takes place in the 1960s with Rossi and Venturi/Scott Brown produces a historical return that does not necessarily imply a literal repetition, but rather the establishment of the ground where “formal invention is redeployed, where social meaning is resignified, and where cultural capital is reinvested.”³² While attempting to articulate itself to the urban field, architecture produces and develops new forms, not just the known forms of its own “local” architectural forms, but also marginal forms by which dominant forms are resisted and/or subverted.³³

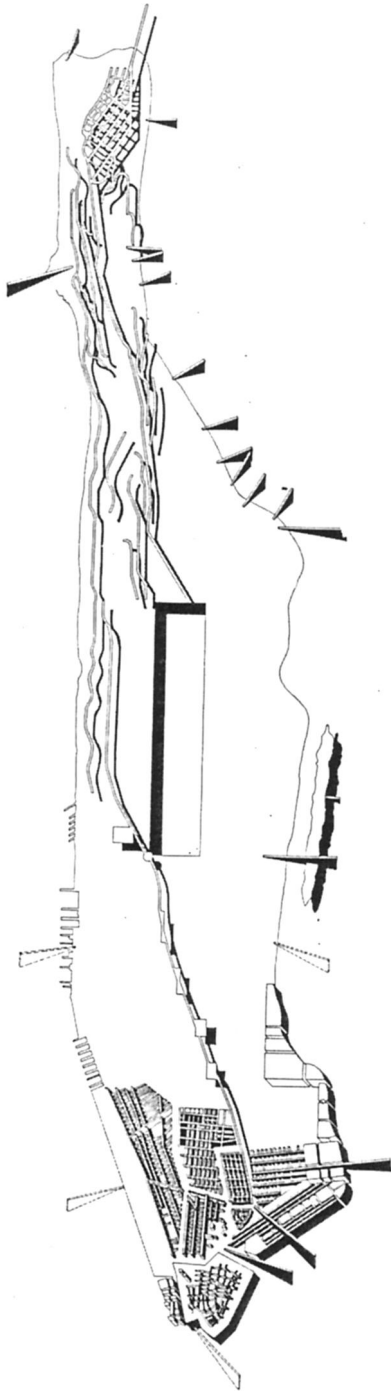
Architectural Readings of the Urban Text

The X-Urban mutation of the American city in the 1980s and 1990s presents new difficulties for the articulation of architecture and the city. But it also opens new opportunities — and not just for a relationship between the city and architecture where the city remains unchanged while architecture changes itself in an attempt to celebrate the X-Urban city, paralleling Venturi’s celebration of the suburban city. The present urban conjuncture also presents opportunities for an *articulation*; that is, for the development of a politically resistant form of urban architecture that transforms itself while it questions, and transforms, the status quo of a system committed solely to profit.

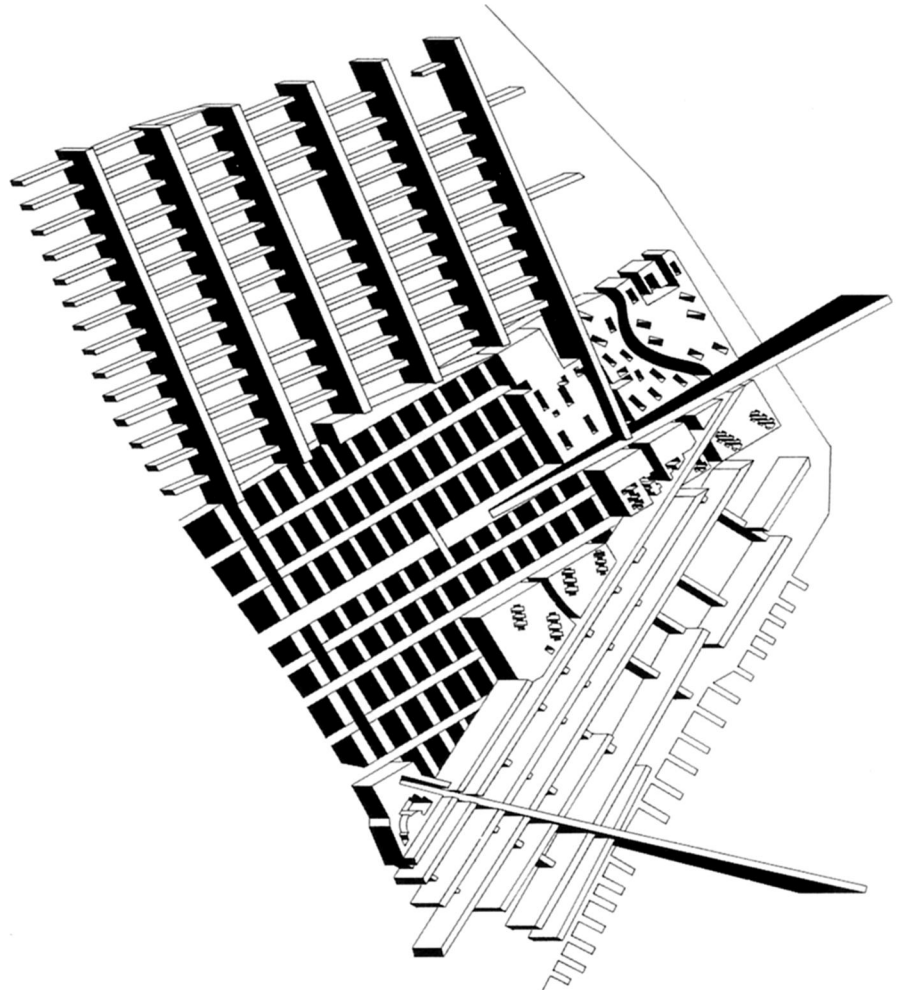
The strategy presented here points in this direction. It attempts to “radicalize” the restructuring of architecture accomplished in the 1960s, in particular, the reading of the city, not just by looking away to the nonarchitectural urban buildings but by displacing the gaze to the *plan*, by opening up a process of relative autonomy as an investigation of alternative spaces of

intervention and the production of alternative configurations. This process actively changes the way we read the city into a first moment in an effort to change the city. This is a process that opens up the play of form frozen by both the global city of capital and an architecture inhibited by the enormous weight of modernist architecture; a *play of form* where *form* is not just the perceived shape of the city’s physical configuration but a *textual construction* (visual-discursive).³⁴

The textual metaphor opens up new questions about the city, architecture, and the problematic of their articulation.³⁵ What is the *city* if it can be represented by a *text*? And what kind of text is the city? The textual metaphor opens up the question of the city as memory (of its people); that is, the city as inscription of both permanent traces and the possibility of their erasure. The city not just as another form of writing (writing itself being a supplement to memory) or as a supplement to other cultural texts, but more specifically as a *writing mechanism*, similar to the “mystical pad,” the topographic model that Freud constructed as an articulation of writing and the unconscious.³⁶ The displacement of this “topographic” model to the urban text allows us to account for the simultaneous and contradictory requirements of permanence and erasure that characterize the city. What justifies this displacement is that, at one level, we are dealing in the city with buildings and spaces that are always open to changes, with a level that has an unlimited capacity to transform. At another level, we are also dealing with the urban plan, which can be seen as the ground where the traces are inscribed and indefinitely retained while everything else changes.³⁷ But there is also a third level, one of social and cultural forces, of practices and institutions, that reconciles the other two, that makes possible the realization of the individual building on the collective ground, the transformation of time into space, of history into geography. The city as the object of architectural desire is the one that embodies the two contradictory levels and their possible reconciliation.³⁸ There is no place for



3. New York: plan minus the gridiron

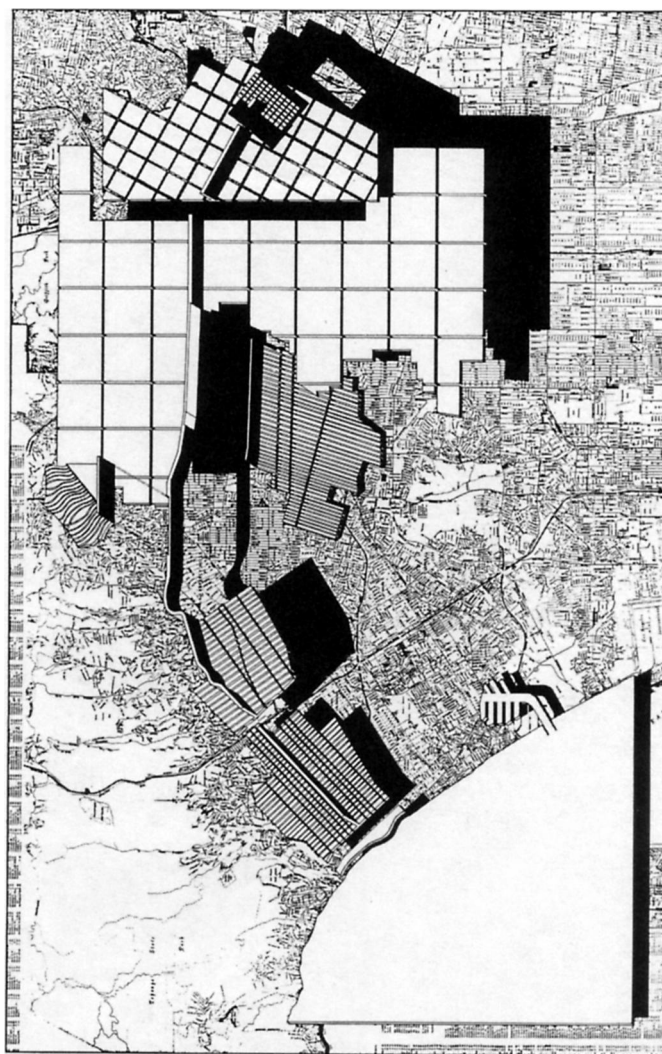


4. New York: detail of plan at Manhattan Bridge

architecture either in the city of memory (which would be a dead city, a museum, a tableau, and where articulation is impossible) or in the city of constant change (where nothing remains). In fact, these extremes designate the limits of the different conditions imposed by the “writing surfaces” of different cities: while the European city is less erasable at the level of buildings, it has undergone major changes in its plan, which is supposed to be the most resistant to change; the American city’s buildings have been deleted many times in the long duration, while its plan resists change. *It is in the space where these two levels are reconciled that architecture finds the site for its articulation with the city, the site where architecture can produce changes that inscribe permanent traces in the urban realm.*

While the city presents different layers of inscription, architecture adds levels of meaning to the city with its own reading mechanism. The urban writing mechanism offers a text where a wide range of architectural reading strategies “find” or, rather, build their object. Transcription and erasure are the two limits that determine a range of rewriting that begins with the reproduction of the text (historical preservation) and ends with its deletion (tabula rasa). These two extremes are the boundaries where a multiplicity of strategies and tactics define the reading mechanism.³⁹ This strange confrontation of *architecture’s reading* with *urban writing* generates the *space of articulation*, a space where the city resists architecture’s desire to transform it and where architecture insists on its transformation.⁴⁰ This very essay represents another iteration of this insistence.

The architectural reading mechanism is a historical construction, constantly restructured by different optical regimes. It is first described by Alberti as “standing in front of the building” as a mathematics of imaginary additions and subtractions but also transformations, which at that point in history do not distinguish between the reality of the *building* and its *representa-*



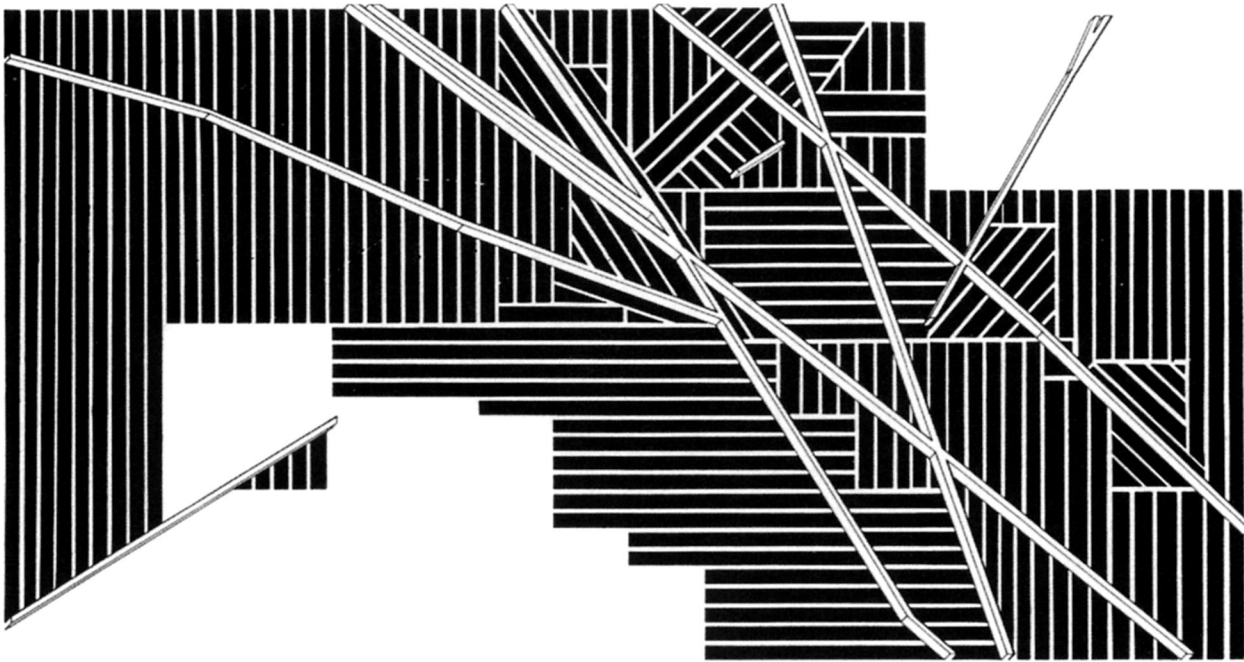
5. Los Angeles: grid puzzle

tion.⁴¹ A different notion of reading is at work in Andrea Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture*. With this publication of his designs (as opposed to the representation of the buildings), Palladio shows the effect of the optical regime instated by the camera obscura that separates the *building* and its *projection*.⁴² The same effect is evident in Giovanni Battista Piranesi's fictional drawings for the Campo Marzio, where not only the difference between drawing and building but also the *autonomy* of drawing is reaffirmed. With twentieth-century modernism, and in particular with Le Corbusier, the identification of perception and object ends and perception itself becomes the object of the reading mechanism. According to Le Corbusier, architecture should only be concerned with that which is accessible to the eye. The reading mechanism constructs its object as a systematic structure of oppositions that organizes movement in a sequence propelled by the perception of foreground versus background, shadows versus light, vertical versus horizontal, and so forth.⁴³

What is the object of the reading mechanism at work in the urban drawings presented in this text? The question of *desire*; that is, the question of the "urban unconscious" in the process of articulation of architecture and the city. The process of reading that breaks away from the modernist perceptual model, still pervasive and determinant in most contemporary readings, takes place on two levels. The first level is accessed through a differential analysis based on the plan, which is seen as part of the architectural apparatus.⁴⁴ This view of the urban plan radicalizes the timid modernist extrusion of the *urban* plan as opposed to the modernists' view of the *architectural* plan as a battlefield where the antagonism between "preexistent ideas" and the *intention motrice* is deployed and fought. The plan is approached with a multiplicity of reading strategies that range from architectural *determination* implied by the modernist notion of "the plan as generator" to the pure *contingency* embodied in the American city, where the plan plays with or against the architectural sections that rewrite it.

In this first level of reading, the plan — a two-dimensional section through the city seen as solids and voids that eliminates the familiar images of the vertical dimension and their sequential perception in time — is *framed* by the reading mechanism providing the entry into the urban text, cutting through, fracturing the unlimited perceptual surface of the X-Urban city. How is the frame established? By gravitating toward the areas of "scriptural density," the areas of the urban field that present the maximum intensity of tension between permanence and change, where two or more layers of rewriting have left indelible traces. Within this frame, the analytical drawings emphasize graphically the elements of the plan that deviate from the *neutral grid*. For instance, they fragment (New York) and delay the plan (Boston) and the fabric (New Haven) to depict the modes of coexistence or multiple gridded and nongridded configurations (Des Moines). They examine the discontinuities in the grid (Atlantic City). They reintroduce and delaminate the grid in its constituent directions (Chicago). The vertical dimension given by the buildings complements and/or supplements this analysis in the cases where it plays a significant role, for instance in the representation of the typological transformations of Wilshire Boulevard (Los Angeles).⁴⁵

The reading of the second level is guided by a *floating attention*. Here, as opposed to the first level, the reading drifts and proceeds without knowing, retroactively determining the definition of the frame.⁴⁶ This framed plan as a field of events mobilizes a "half desire" of the order of "liking" and not a "full desire" of the order of loving" mobilized by the symptom.⁴⁷ Symptoms appear as disturbances of the plan (the anomalies that disrupt the order) and the discourse (they cannot be labeled within architectural discourse, they need to be named). Whereas the construction of the first level presupposes a conscious investment in the field, the symptoms that punctuate the field rise toward us to enter our unconscious. The urban drawings result from this symptomatic reading where the



6. Chicago: diagonals destabilizing the service alleys



7. Chicago: diagonals destabilizing the grid

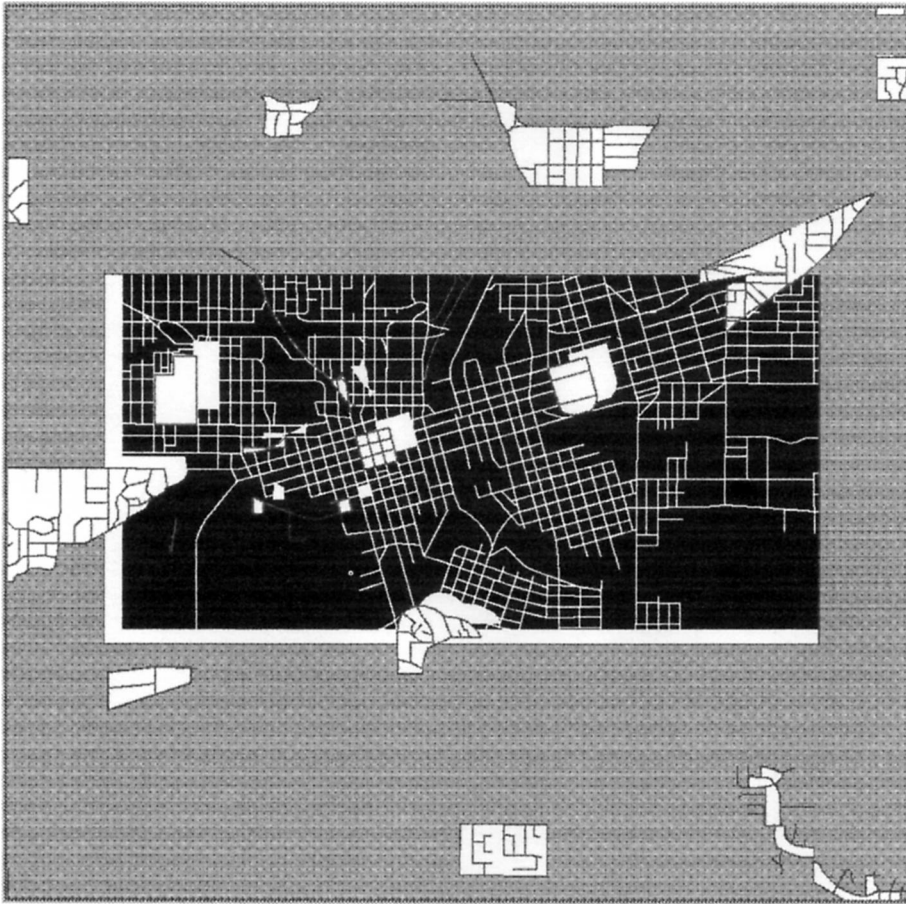
architect's gaze confronts the failures, the "lapsus" of the urban text,⁴⁸ which undermine the surface of the first level, lifting the architectural boundaries that block the access to other readings.⁴⁹ Taking the plan as a point of departure for the urban drawings as ready-made establishes a link with the operations developed by Max Ernst in what critic Rosalind Krauss calls his "overpaintings." In particular, in Ernst's *Master Bedroom*, "the mechanism of the Mystic writing pad finds its analog in the underlying sheet of the (*ready-made*) teaching aid page . . . while the top sheet appears in the perspectival covering produced by the gouache overpainting."⁵⁰ In the urban drawings the underlying sheet is the urban plan and instead of an overpainting, a process of deletion — manual or electronic, as in the Chicago and Des Moines computer drawings — "delimitates" the plan to create layers that can be overlapped in different combinations to produce sequences of drawings. The drawings are written as a dialogue between two discourses, the ready-made plan that acts as a background against which the architectural writing is inscribed. The floating attention fluctuates between depiction and rewriting (or writing subordinated to reading or reading as writing), blurring their differences. It is a process where architecture and the city occupy and switch the positions of analyst and analysed (the one who is being analyzed), an alternation where each practice traverses the "other" discursive surface, where architecture traverses the urban discourse, where the city traverses the architectural discourse.

Rewriting the City

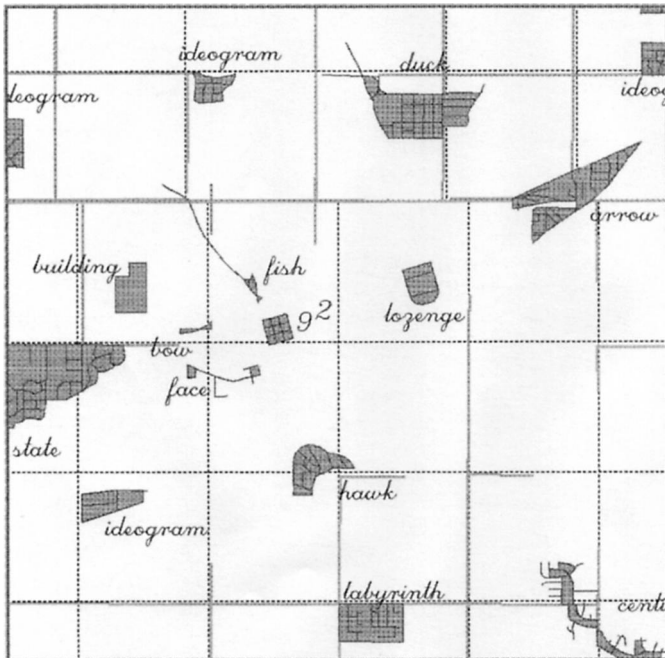
The will to rewrite the city is not the architectural desire to write the city — it is the only way out of desire.⁵¹ It is the way out of the closure defined by the historical relationship between architecture and the city, a closure represented today in the opposition between avant-gardism and traditionalism, be-

tween the apolitical architectural commitment to object-fetishism and the hopelessness of an urbanism that clings to the past as a way to obstruct the future.⁵² "It is both about freedom" (the possibility of inventing a new articulation between city and architecture) "and about duty" (the necessity of traversing the city if we are to deal with its historical suppression through architectural fantasy), and not about the affectivity of desire.⁵³

The displacement to the scene of reading as the starting moment for the process of architectural rewriting — where reading the city is not aimed at an accurate representation but at starting the process of forging a new city — opens up new questions about the scene of writing, about its historical location, about the need to build a new site. The first architectural urban site in the American city is the foundation plan, an ever-expanding reservoir of urban configurations, originally modeled by the Europeans after architectural plans for the colonial city. The second site, at the beginning of the twentieth century, is the city plan that aims to restructure and/or to regulate urban growth. In this second moment that culminates with the City Beautiful movement, from the Burnham Plan of Chicago (1908) to the New York Regional Plan (1929), the initiative comes from architecture, which aggressively attempts, and partially succeeds, to restructure the city. The third moment represents the starting point for the continuing shrinking of the site. The reaction of the planners in the 1950s against the consideration of the city as an architectural object and their emphasis on process radically alters the situation concerning the stage and the actors. In the name of "process," activities are seen as the dominant urban force that denies the relative autonomy of configuration and the possibility of an articulation architecture-city, closing the stage to architecture and opening it up to economic-political planning. The spectatorial position taken by architects (as approving or critical spectators) who abandon the active urban interventions that characterized the previous period overdetermines the lack of impact of their projects.



8. Des Moines: topographic constellation with city grid



9. Des Moines: topographic constellation with names

To build a new architectural site in the X-Urban city, a change will be necessary in the space now occupied by the master plan, the legal instrument that deals with the long-term functional and physical processes that determine the configuration of a town or a city. The master plan's role is to regulate these processes but also to fill a void, to mask the absence of architecture.⁵⁴ The shapes determined by its regulations (which are answers to social/economic/political questions), in the place of architecture, render the void invisible and obscure the fact that architectural form is absent.

From the initial moment when decisions about urban configuration take place, the displacement of the master plan opens up a space where architecture can play an active role in its engagement with the X-Urban city. The Des Moines Vision Plan, for example, represents a possible strategy for building a site in this space.⁵⁵ This "vision plan" designates a process of reading and rewriting that abandons the traditional discourse and practice of urbanism, the scale of the architectural building object, its formal and symbolic strategies, the principles of unity, continuity and homogeneity, and begins the construction of a new imaginary where the cultural/aesthetic implications of urban form are articulated to the contemporary restructuring processes of the global city.⁵⁶ Every one of the sites — the gridded foundation plan, the City Beautiful movement, the planner's notion of process as a critique and the city conceived as an object — provided new opportunities that widened the possibilities for an articulation with architecture and expanded the urban play in multiple and even conflicting directions. The site built in the scene of reading confronts a past as a source of "suggestions of how to make the future different." The reading of the city implies not preservation and protection, but rewriting as "discord to be resolved in previously unheard harmonies."⁵⁷

Notes

1. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989).
2. This has allowed for multiple re-interpretations of the original texts. See Pollio Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. Morris Hicky (New York: Dover, 1960).
3. Actually the cities have been back since the 1100s. See Leonardo Benevolo's *The History of the City*, trans. Geoffrey Culverwell (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1980).
4. Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neal Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988), 156.
5. "... for if a City, according to the Opinion of Philosophers, be no more than a great House, and, on the other Hand, a House be a little City . . ." (Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, 23).
6. Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, vol. 1 of *Civilization and Capitalism: Fifteenth–Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 479.
7. The separation of the two fantasies is a theoretical construction, since they always work in tandem. The separation makes it possible to perceive the changes in their role in the long duration. For four hundred years the artistic fantasy had a dominant role, and it is only in the last hundred years that the urban fantasy has become dominant. This change is overdetermined by the speed of urban growth, by the acceleration in the rhythm of urban mutations, and by the reversal of the flows from America to Europe during the last century.
8. In implementing some Baroque principles (albeit in a very different historical context), the nineteenth-century capitals produced a city as different from the Baroque as the images produced by photography were from Renaissance figuration — despite the relationships between the photographic mechanism and perspective. However, the opening of the new boulevards in Haussmannian Paris allowed the fiction of the urban observer of the camera obscura to remain viable, in a way paralleling photography's recreation and perpetuation of the subject of perspective.
9. See Françoise Choay, *L'Urbanisme: Utopies et réalités* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965).
10. The combination of democracy and capitalism produces an extraordinary resistance to any attempt to inscribe an architectural order.
11. Or, perhaps we should say "almost" realized since Pierre-Charles L'Enfant was fired when he refused to accommodate to various economic-political constraints. See John William Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).
12. In doing so, Washington also strove to transform an order that was initially conceived as a physical setting for autocratic forms of government.
13. This doubling repeats at every level. Washington's own history starts with a split caused by the disagreement over its location (North versus South) and the compromise that consolidated a single capital. The survey of the new district was commissioned to Andrew Ellicott, and Major L'Enfant (whose father

was a court painter in Versailles) was commissioned first to draw the ground and the plan of the city. The structure of the plan overlapped two different strategies: “a regular distribution with every street at right angles . . . and diagonal avenues to and from every principal place . . . giving them reciprocity of sight and making them thus seemingly connected” (Reps, *The Making of Urban America*, 256).

14. For this use of *interpellation*, see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: New Left Books, 1971).

15. In turn, as we have seen, these fantasies are introjected back by the city that is constantly restructured; in Baroque Rome when the entire city rather than the Church became a sacred space, in the Enlightenment when a new political-economic order was institutionalized, at the beginning of the twentieth century when the pressures of the industrial city forced the restructuring of the old urban structures, and now again with the radical restructuring brought by the global informational city.

16. Modernist architecture’s notion of *objet-type* starts to weaken the creative subject with the idea of an anonymous collective subject. But perhaps as important as that is the idea of an autonomy of architectural form, of an architectural signifier that locates the architect as its subject, as determined by it and not determining it; in other terms, the site of production becomes reduced and passive.

17. While the space of reading was always integral to the dimension of architectural competence, it has always been seen as subordinated to

writing since Alberti. The new situation produces not just a reversal of this position but also, as we will discuss, the blurring of the difference between production and reception.

18. See Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, trans. Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1982), and Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966).

19. I refer to Žižek’s idea of quilting, which states that by sewing urban configurations and meanings, the structured system of oppositions that make the city understandable and recognizable are produced (that is, streets/squares; monuments/fabric; attached structures/detached structures; low-rise buildings/high-rise buildings; public buildings/private buildings; etc.). See Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, passim.

20. See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press, 1960); Melvin M. Webber, “Urban Place and Nonplace Urban Realm,” in *Explorations into Urban Structure* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964); Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994); and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

21. Lynch’s “settlement form” is the spatial arrangement of persons doing things, the resulting spatial flows of persons, goods, and information and the physical features that modify space in some way significant to these actions. See Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 48.

22. The metaphor of the urban landscape invoked by the term “cityscape” produces the sense of an architectural connection. “A legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an overall pattern.” The problem being the construction of orientational organizations within the visual chaos of the modern city by means of the reduction of the city to the same five elements that “describe” their image: path, edge, district, node, landmark. See *ibid.*

23. The social sciences could help us recognize certain trajectories, to facilitate the flow of movement throughout the city.

24. The *Image of the City* is a pre-structuralist reading that presupposes an inherent meaning carried by signs defined by a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified.

25. These architects obviously produce opacity for the architectural reader at the level of expression since they introduce nonarchitectural configurations as if they belonged to the architectural “lexicon.” Here I am using “expression” and “content” as in Louis Hjelmslev’s model of the sign. See Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961).

26. Rossi and Scott Brown/Venturi reflect in their work what Jacques Derrida has called the “anxiety about language and the question of the sign” that characterized the 1960s. Derrida refers in particular to French structuralism and in general to “thought in all its domains.” See Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

27. We could say that, in an indirect way, *The Architecture of the City* is a radical approach to the question of the European city through a reading of the American city. The original version and its translations in Europe ignore the question; however, with his English translation, Rossi acknowledges the book as an effect of the gaze of the American city.

28. Rossi, *Architecture of the City* (emphasis mine). There is a strong connection between the reader of the architecture of the city in Rossi and the surrealist conception of the artist as an “agonized witness” (André Bréton in *Nadja of 1928* [New York: Grove Press, 1988]), and the “surprised viewer” (Giorgio de Chirico in *Meditations of a Painter of 1912*). See Hal Foster’s reading of surrealism in *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993).

29. It also cancels the notion of scale and therefore a number of rules of appropriateness.

30. The nonmotivated relationship between form and function that becomes obvious in the long duration of the “urban facts,” as opposed to architecture where the short duration provides the illusion of motivation.

31. We have to remember that a historical return was constitutive of the practice of architecture itself.

32. See Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*.

33. The articulation of Piranesi’s Campo Marzio, where the urban forces subvert architectural form, with Foley Square in Manhattan, or Le Corbusier’s linear projects for Latin American cities of the late 1920s, or Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles are examples of this strategy.

34. See Mario Gandelsonas, *The Urban Text* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991).

35. Besides opening up questions, the textual metaphor, like all metaphors, closes the discourse by orienting it and fixing the “results” of the investigation. In this case, the textual metaphor has a strategic role in our pursuit of the articulation of the city and architecture, since it leads to the question of reading and to our tactical mode of reading the city (the urban drawings).
36. Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, 199.
37. The monument, which “represents” as a building the immutability of the plan, has been traditionally the preferred site for the articulation of a writerly architecture and the city.
38. The city, as the object of architecture, is always a rewriting of a previous city.
39. This multiplicity resonates with the dimensions of permanence and change that define the urban writing mechanism.
40. The confrontation usually fails to produce an articulation. For instance, while eighteenth-century urban drawings had an important internal role in the practice of architecture, in their subversion of the language and the restructuring of the practice as a response to the new city of nineteenth-century capitalism, they did not have an immediate effect on that city. In a symmetrical way, while nineteenth-century drawings had an important role, external to the practice of architecture in the restructuring of the European capitals, they represent the conservative aspects of architecture compared to the contemporary architectural work produced not just by architects but by engineers who investigated the potential of new technologies and programs.
41. “When we face some other person’s building, we immediately look over and compare the individual dimensions, and to the best of our ability consider what might be taken away, added or altered” (Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, 4).
42. See Andrea Palladio, *Four Books of Architecture*, trans. Isaac Ware (New York: Dover, 1965). The commentaries, however, reveal that the attention of the mechanism is placed on the actors and their actions and not on the configuration of the architectural stage.
43. The description of the house of the Casa del Noce in Pompeii shows the modernist mechanism at work. Le Corbusier wrote: “Again the little vestibule which frees your mind from the street. And then you are in the atrium; four columns in the middle (four cylinders) . . . but at the far end is the brilliance of the garden seen through the peristyle which spreads out this light with a large gesture. . . . Between the two is the tablinum, contracting this vision like the lens of the camera. On the right and on the left two patches of shade. . . . You have entered the house of a Roman” (Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* [New York: Dover, 1986, reprint of the 1931 English translation of the thirteenth French edition], 169–70). The text is organized symbolically by a sequence of interrelated oppositions: small/large, private/public, horizontal/vertical, light/shadow, front/back, interior/exterior, etc.
44. The plan interpellates us, as, in a similar way, the “ready-made” was selected by attracting the artist’s attention.
45. The drawings do not always provide a “realist” representation of solids and voids. In fact, most times they represent solids as voids and voids as solids.
46. We only recognize the logic at work in the definition of the frame when we read the second level.
47. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Noonday Press, 1982), 27.
48. “How to read: watch out for the breaks in continuity, for the frontier zones. Be alert to the moment when the shapes change, . . . be on the lookout for divergences, contrasts, breaks, frontiers” (Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*, trans. Sian Reynolds, 2 vols. [London: Collins, 1988–90], 1: 51). These incidents are the expression of the residual force of the city that cannot be silenced by the geometry of the grid.
49. Where do these failures take place? In the margins, where the grids collide, and within the grid, when it encounters the force of previous inscriptions (history and geography) that cannot be completely obliterated by the grid.
50. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993), 57.
51. It is perhaps, as Derrida, “Force and Signification,” has put it, “a way out that can only be aimed at, without the certainty that it is outside the affectivity of desire.”
52. I am referring to those projects that take a cultural and formal *tabula rasa* as a “plane” of departure as well as to the “new urbanism” represented by Seaside and similar projects, including Disney’s Celebration.
53. See, again, Derrida, “Force and Signification.” This decision to rewrite the city is also different from the urban rewriting; that is, the economic-political mechanism at work in the urban processes where every city rewrites the previous one.
54. See Mario Gandelsonas, “The Master Plan as a Political Site,” *Assemblage* 27 (August 1996): 19–21.
55. See “The Des Moines Vision Plan,” in *Agrest and Gandelsonas: Works* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995).
56. Why would cities open up to architecture? At a cultural level, because of the increasing search for local urban identity (as a counterbalance to globalization); at an economic level, because the visual configuration of cities is becoming an asset in their competition to attract tourism; at a political level, because of the possibilities of consensus related to a local sense of pride. The relationship among drawings, identity construction, and tourism provides a strong argument for the restructuring of the notion of master plan, incorporating a first moment of “vision planning” that provides the formal conditions for the radical rewriting of the city.
57. See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Figure Credits

- 1, 2. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993).
- 3–9. Drawings courtesy of Agrest & Gandelsonas Architects.