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Design versus non-design

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MIT Press, 1991

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The specific relationship of architecture to ideology has been generally excluded from consideration in traditional architectural criticism. Concerned only to relate architecture formally, or internally, to itself, or at best to relate architecture externally to society in general, criticism has failed to truly incorporate the *cultural* problematic of architecture into its domain of concern. When the cultural dimension has been introduced, it has more often been as a simple explanation of architecture as “reflecting” a particular culture—the notion of style as the expression of the spirit of the age—than as a problem to be confronted independently from a consistent theoretical standpoint.

Practicing architects and critics of architecture have repeatedly emphasized the need to relate architecture to its social or cultural context. Positions have been developed around such concepts as “contextualism” and “ugly and ordinary” by writers like Colin Rowe and Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi. Rowe, for example, speaks of an architectural contextualism that situates the object of design or analysis in its physical-historical surroundings in terms of formal elements and relations; Venturi and Scott Brown speak of the need to recognize mass culture as *the* necessary cultural product of our time and as a new source of inspiration for designers. However, rather than attempting to appeal to the notion of collage—a familiar architectural strategy in periods of transition—or to the simulation of the objects of mass culture, this analysis will attempt to investigate the mechanisms of the built environment at this specific historical moment.

I wish to explore here these “external” or cultural relations of architecture—that is, between architecture and its social context—by means of a theoretical model that posits two distinct forms of cultural, or symbolic, production. The first, which I shall call *design*, is that mode by which architecture relates to cultural systems outside itself; it is a normative process and embraces not only architectural but also urban design. The second, which is more properly called *non-design*, describes the way in which different cultural systems interrelate and give form to the built world; it is not a direct product of any institutionalized design practice but rather the result of a general process of culture.

In thus examining the mechanisms which relate architecture to culture—the processes by which meaning is produced, not only within architecture or design, but also in the domain of non-design—we are, of course, analyzing ideology itself. For ideology is no more than the social production of meaning. Thus, all cultural production, such as architecture, when articulated at the economic and political levels, manifests the ways by which ideology is produced as a part of a given social structure.¹

In this sense, it is unnecessary to compare one type of architecture to any other type of architecture—as in the accepted mode of “formal,” internal criticism—or to compare it to society in general. Rather, one must oppose the notion of architecture as *design* to the notion of a radically different kind of symbolic configuration—*non-design*. This opposition allows analysis of the built environment in terms of the relationship between different cultural systems. Design and non-design, in fact, can be seen as two modes of social discourse; and to consider them in this way opens up the question of what might be called the “active relationship” between design, as one cultural system, and other cultural systems.

Design and Culture

Design, considered as both a practice and a product, is in effect a closed system—not only in relation to culture as a whole, but also in relation to other cultural systems such as literature, film, painting, philosophy, physics, geometry, etc. Properly defined, it is reductive, condensing and crystallizing general cultural notions within its own distinct parameters. Within the limits of this system, however, design constitutes a set of practices—architecture, urban design, and industrial de-

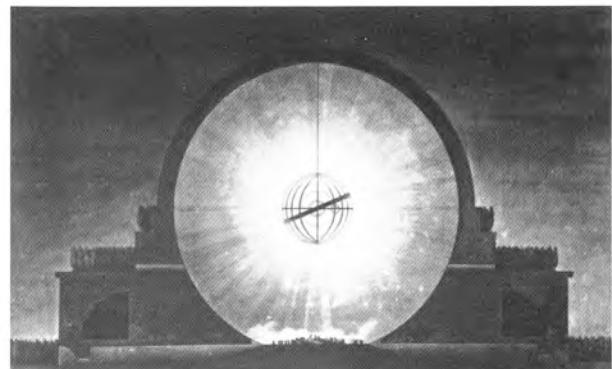
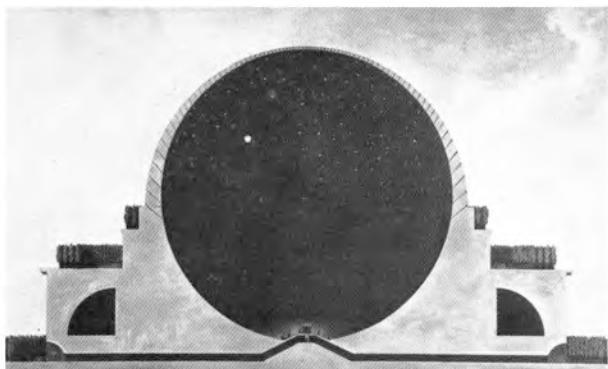
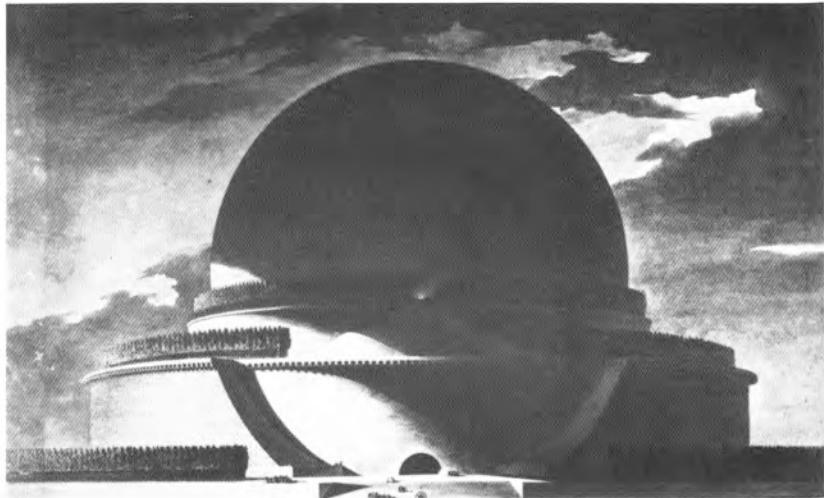
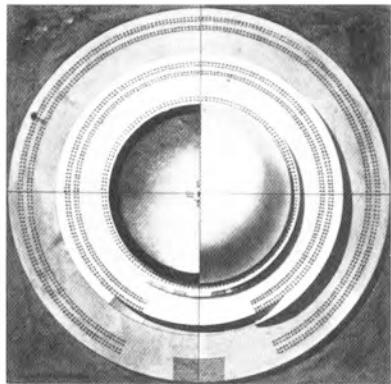
sign—unified with respect to certain normative theories. That is, it possesses specific characteristics that distinguish it from all other cultural practices and that establish a boundary between what is design and what is not. This boundary produces a kind of *closure* that acts to preserve and separate the ideological identity of design. This closure, however, does not preclude a certain level of permeability toward other cultural systems—a permeability which nevertheless is controlled and regulated in a precise way.

Culture, on the other hand, is understood to be a system of *social codes* that permit information to enter the public domain by means of appropriate signs. As a whole, culture can be seen as a hierarchy of these codes, manifested through various texts.²

The relationship between design and culture may, then, be stated as the mode by which design is articulated (as one cultural system) in relation to other cultural systems (at the level of codes). The transformations in these articulations are historically determined, and they display themselves as changes in the structures of meaning. Thus, the development of specific forms of articulation between design and other cultural systems can be seen as a dynamic process, the study of which opens up the problem of the production of meaning.

The relationship between design and other cultural systems is heightened and intensified at certain moments in this process, and its precise articulations become clearer. In architecture, this occurs when new economic, technical, functional, or symbolic problems force the production of new formal repertoires, or the expansion and transformation of existing vocabularies.

Thus, during the French Enlightenment, elementary geometrical figures (the sphere, the pyramid, the cube, etc.) were introduced as the primary constituents of a new formal vocabulary by the “revolutionary” architects Boullée and Ledoux. For Ledoux these forms expressed the new notions of the *sublime*, while for Boullée they represented the universe and its scientific explanation developed in the context of profound social and political change.³



Plan of Newton's cenotaph. Etienne Boullée, 1784. Ink and wash.

Exterior by day.

Cross-section, interior night effect.

Cross-section, interior day effect.

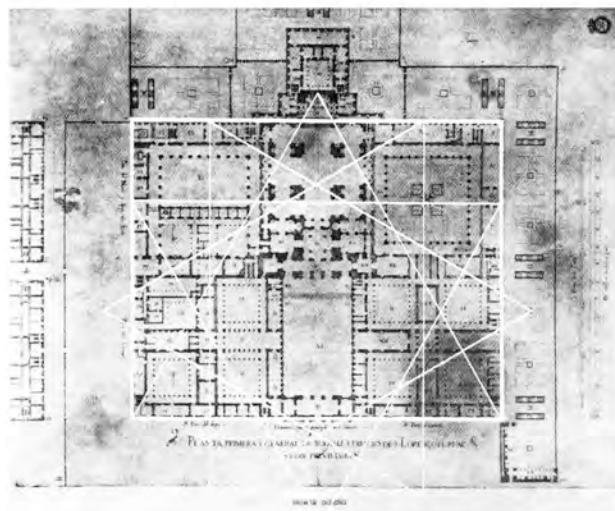
Specificity

This recognition of articulations between design and other cultural systems also implies the recognition of differences between them—differences which may be understood through the notion of *specificity*.⁴ This is a notion which permits the clarification of codes according to their relation to design or to other cultural systems.

Three types of codes regulate the interpretation and production of texts in design. First, there are those codes which may be seen as exclusive to design, such as codes establishing relationships between plans and elevations or plans and cross-sections. Second, there are those codes which are shared by various cultural systems, among which design is included (i.e., spatial, iconic). Third, there are those which, while they are crucial to one cultural system (such as rhythm to music), participate—albeit transformed—in another (such as architecture) by virtue of a shared characteristic, i.e., in the case of rhythm, the temporality of the sequence, audial in one case and visual in the other.⁵ In a decreasing order of specificity, the first type of codes are specific to design, the second have a multiple specificity, and the third are non-specific.

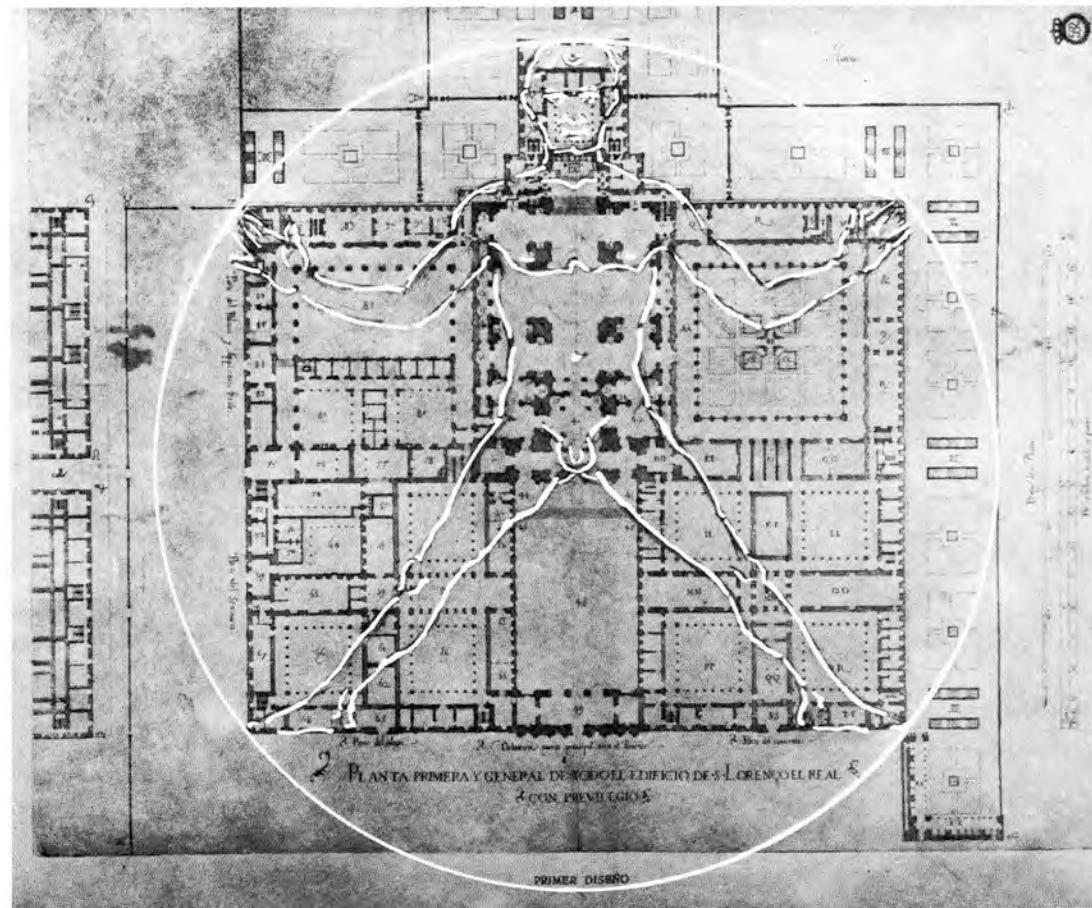
The specificity of a signifying system is not, however, defined solely by the specificity of its codes, but also by the form in which those codes are articulated; that is to say, the combination of codes may be specific, although the codes themselves may or may not be specific to the system in question.⁶ Examples of specific code articulation in architecture are found in classical theories of harmony that utilize the articulation of musical codes and arithmetical proportional series for the invention of specific *architectural* codes, which are then used to determine the proportions of and relationships between the different elements of a building.

Specificity manages to maintain the limits of architecture despite the apparent changes that occur under the pressures of history, technology, social action, or symbolic change. On the one hand, the most specific codes remain within the system of architecture; on the other hand, the less specific codes link design with other systems through the opening and closing of its limits. This mechanism allows for the articulation of design with some systems and not with others, a process which operates according to the “internal” determinations of design—that is,



The Quadro of the Escorial in relation to Vitruvius's astrological plan (René Taylor).

The cosmological man superimposed on the plan of the Escorial (René Taylor).





Astrological configuration (Julius Firmicus Maternus).

according to the rules of architectural language, to the logic of the configuration, and to the meaning proper of the “text” of design.⁷

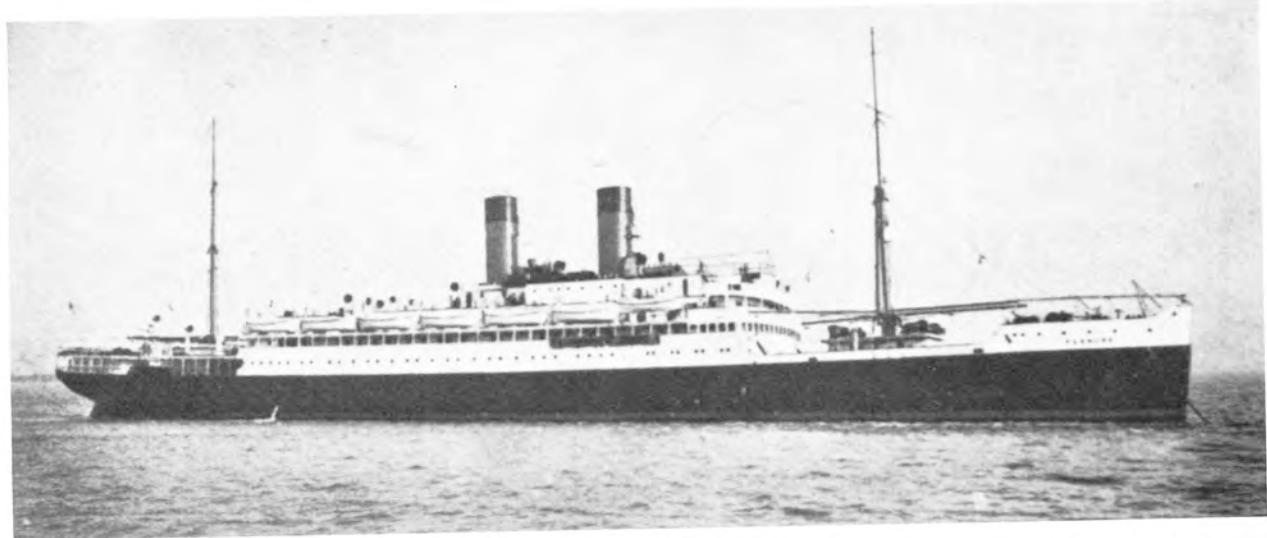
The Mannerist inversion of the established architectural rules—by which each element is used in contradiction to what should be its prevailing ideological function—is an excellent example of such internal determination, in which the inversions so weaken the limits of architecture as to allow an opening to codes external to it; thus the “painterly” architecture of the sixteenth century in Italy.⁸

This process of articulation might, however, take place according to “external” determinations—to the forces of economics, politics, or other ideologies foreign to design. The influence of hermetic thought on the design of the Escorial Palace, for example, demonstrates the role of such external factors in architecture. Both the plan and the general configuration seem to have been derived from mystical or hermetic geometric regulating lines, based partly on parallel developments in quantitative mathematics, and partly on chapters eliminated from Renaissance editions of Vitruvius,⁹ but not, as might be assumed, directly from classical architectural theory. Magic codes were thus substitutes for the Albertian geometric codes. Geometry, while represented by similar figures, was imbued with an entirely different meaning. At the same time, these geometric magic codes remained distinctly separate from other magic codes, such as those based on verbal or gestural practices which never entered in their physical-spatial implications into architecture.

Metaphoric Operations in Design

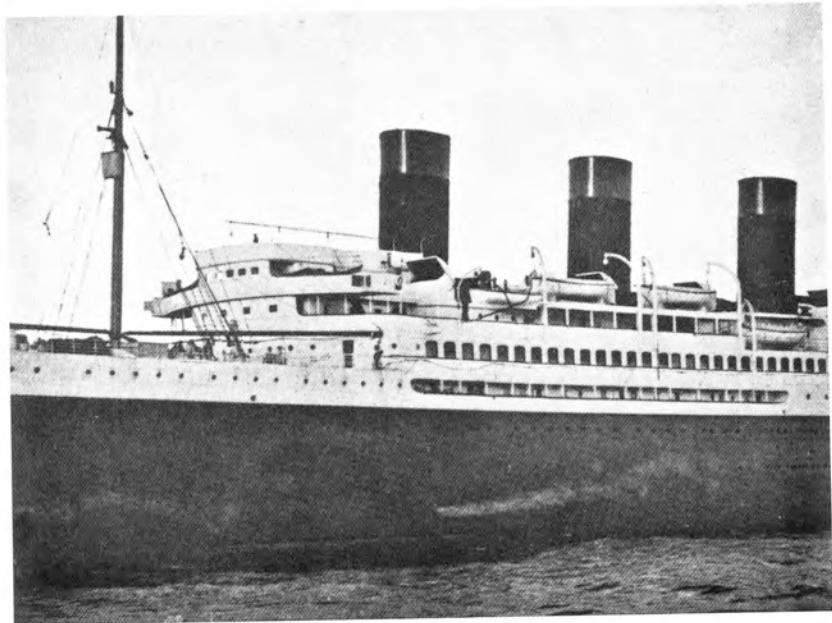
The concept of the closing and opening of limits introduces the notion of an ideological *filtering* in the production of design, which takes place by means of certain processes of symbolization. In this case an equivalence, or exchange, of sense is produced by restricting the access of certain codes and figures from other systems into architecture.

The notions of *metaphor* and *metonymy* allow for a more systematic analysis of this symbolic functioning. These should be considered as the mechanisms of opening and closure, ultimately revealing the way in which design maintains its limits in relation to culture and acts as a filter in relation to meaning.¹⁰



The liner Flandre. Le Corbusier.

The liner France. Le Corbusier.





The liner Aquitania. Le Corbusier.

The deck of the Aquitania. Le Corbusier.

Metaphor and metonymy are, of course, notions that have been used principally in the analysis of discourse and text. Since in this context we are analyzing the *production* of meaning and not its structure, the reference in general will be to metaphoric or metonymic *operations* rather than to these figures as they are applied to classical rhetoric.¹¹

These tropes or rhetorical figures represent the most condensed expression of two basic kinds of relationship in discourse: the relation of similarity, which underlies the metaphor, and the relation of contiguity, which determines the metonymy. Each may exist in the relationship between the figure and the content or in the relation between figure and figure.

The development of any discourse (not necessarily a spoken one, and in this case the architectural discourse) may develop along two semantic-syntactic lines; one theme in the expression or content may lead to another either by means of similarity or by means of contiguity.¹² The most appropriate term for the former relation is "metaphoric" while the latter might be termed "metonymic."¹³

In its relationship to other cultural systems, which is a necessary condition for the regeneration of sense, architecture takes part in a game of substitutions which, thought of in terms of metaphoric or metonymic operations, explains, at the most specific level of form, the translation from extra-architectural to intra-architectural systems in a recoding which, by means of reducing meanings, maintains the limits of architecture.

The well-known nautical metaphor in Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye exemplifies this functioning. Here, two different signifying systems are related: dwelling and ocean liner. The necessary condition for this relationship is provided by the existence of an element common to both, in this case the window. Through a metaphoric operation, a figurative substitution of the signifying element common to both systems is produced (dwelling/window—liner/window), carrying and transferring codes from one system (liner) to the other (house). The new form is thus loaded with the new meanings required to translate into figures the proposed new architectural ideology.

The operation involved may be explained by the following propositions:

Housing	<u>House</u>	:	<u>Window</u>	:	<u>Wall</u>	etc.
Code:	Inhabit		Passage		Boundary,	
			of Light		Protection, etc.	

Liner	<u>Boat</u>	:	<u>Window</u>	:	<u>Decks</u>	etc.
Code:	Sail +		Passage of		Promenade	
	Inhabit +		Light + View +			
	Movement +		Seat + Sun			
	Technology					

Meta-	<u>House</u>					
phor:	<u>Window</u>	\times	<u>Liner Window</u>	$=$	<u>House Window</u>	
	<u>Liner</u>		Light + View		Light + View +	
	<u>Window</u>		Movement +		Movement +	
			Technology + ...		Technology + ...	

The similarity of functions—in this case, both liner and house are forms of habitation—makes the metaphor possible.

To these metaphoric transpositions other metonymic operations are added—for example, the *promenade architecturale*—which also carry further meanings related to the liner.

Functionalist Metaphors

At an urban scale, where the system of architectural design co-exists with many others almost by definition, the role of the metaphor as a filtering device becomes particularly evident, especially in the functional approach to urban design.

At the moment when urbanism was constituted as an institutionalized practice in the first decade of this century, urban formal codes were developed on the basis of the prevailing architectural codification. From the set of possible systems that give meaning to form, the functional approach was emphasized almost exclusively. Le Corbusier may serve once more to exemplify the type of functionalism that is at work in a filtering operation in the substitutive relation between architecture and other systems.

In Le Corbusier's texts *Vers une Architecture* (1923) and *Urbanisme* (1925), these metaphoric operations function clearly as a mechanism for contact between different cultural systems and, on other levels, as a means to architectural recodification.¹⁴

At the building scale, Le Corbusier establishes a connection between architectural systems and other systems, such as technology, tourism, sports, and geometry. This connection is established through a metaphor based on similarity of function.¹⁵

Geometry, for example, had acted as an internal code for formal control from the classical period of Greek architecture. It had not, however, functioned as the provider of the formal vocabulary itself, geometric regulating lines being the "invisible" elements in the construction. For Le Corbusier, however, geometry became not only an instrument of formal control, but also the provider of the formal vocabulary itself in two and three dimensions. The instrument (tool) for representation, that is, drawing, became first the project itself, and then the construction, without alteration.

At the urban scale, Le Corbusier's metaphoric operation establishes a relation between geometry as a signifying system and the city by means of the common element of "order," which is manifested as a "grid"; a system of equivalences is established between the geometric grid with its connoted codes and the city grid with the set of values ascribed to it by Le Corbusier.

Thus, in *Urbanisme*, the existing city is seen as equivalent to disorder, chaos, illness, and irrationality. On the other hand, the grid, the geometric order, is seen as equivalent to order, health, beauty, reason, modernity, and progress. "Geometry is the foundation. . . . It is also the material basis on which we build those symbols which represent to us perfection and the divine. . . ."¹⁶

In the plans for the Ville Contemporaine, and later for the Ville Radieuse, Le Corbusier establishes the equivalence between those two systems by means of the common element of grid-order. The appropriate connoted codes of the geometric grid are transferred through a figurative substitution to the city plan and become the codes of the city itself.

Satellite cities, e.g.,
government buildings or
center for social studies,
etc.

The business center

Railroad station and air
terminal

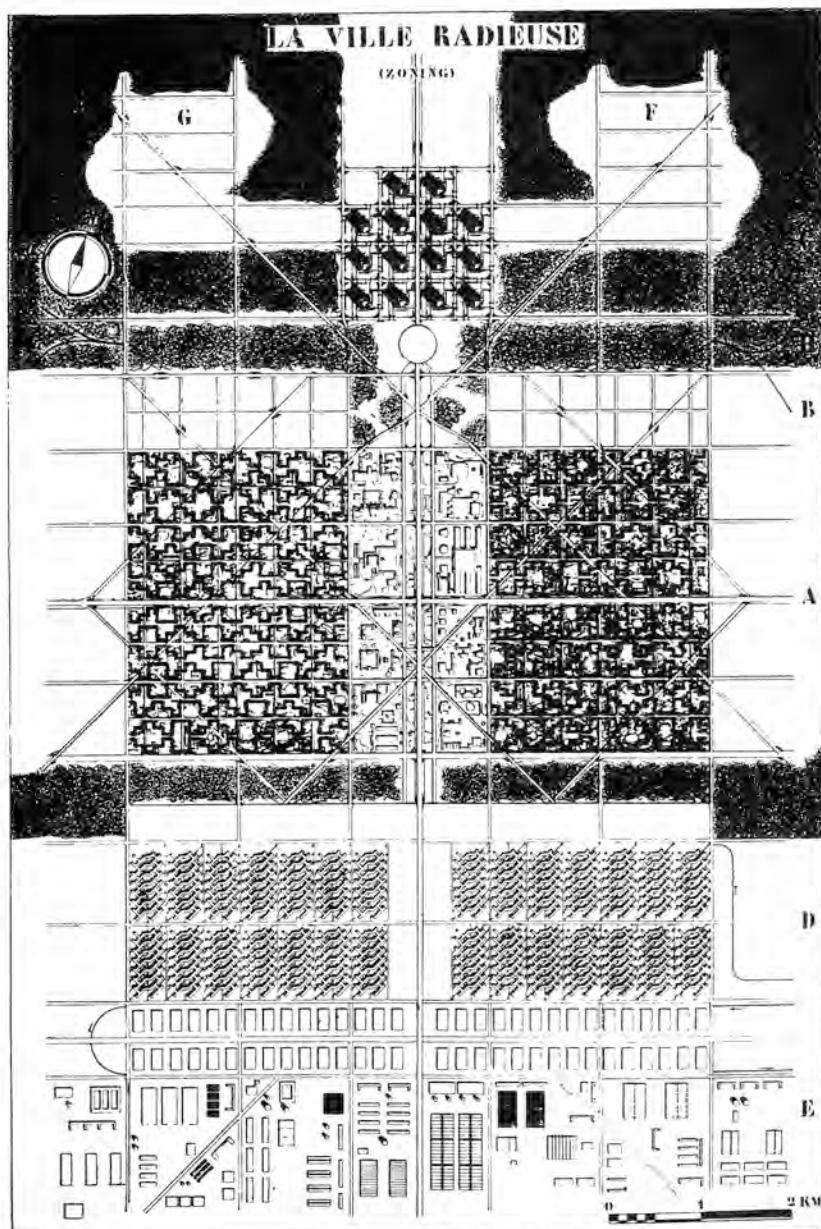
Hotels
Embassies

Housing

Factories

Warehouses

Heavy industry



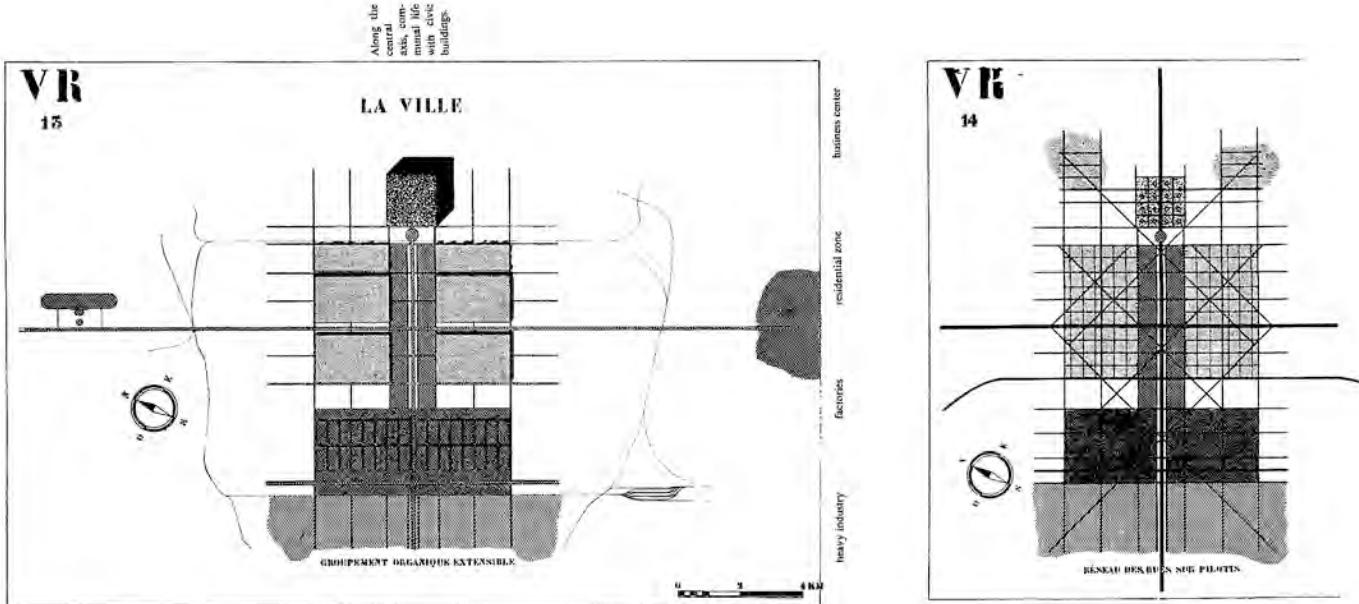
*The Radiant City. Le Corbusier, architect,
1933. Zoning diagram.*

It can be seen, in this case, that while there is an initial opening of the system, its closure is produced by means of a metaphorical equivalence by which the means of representation are imposed as ideological filters in order to develop an architectural recodification. In this substitution, meanings are limited and filtered by a system (geometry) which, while it may not be specific to architecture, will, in its recoding, become specific to urban design. This is made possible by the fact that a system such as geometry may participate in a double "game": symbolic at a formal-cultural level, and instrumental, or representative, at the level of the specific practice where physical configuration becomes the device that allows for translation and recoding.

The relationship between geometry as a symbolic system on the one hand, and as a basic organizational system on the other, is not, of course, a new problem and may be found at other points in the history of architecture. In the work of Piranesi, for example, the figurative and the geometric coexist, juxtaposed in a clear dialectical relationship. The rear of the altar of S. Maria del Priorato, for example, crudely displays the set of geometric volumes which serve as its support, while the face

Diagram implying the expansion of organic networks.

Network of street elevations.





Study for the alter of S. Basilio in S. Maria del Priorato, Rome. G. B. Piranesi, c. 1764.

presents itself as almost pure allegory. The architectural contradiction between geometry and symbolism is here critically posed.¹⁷

When Boullée and Ledoux adopted geometry in itself as a formal system, the sacred symbology was substituted for a more secular symbology—that of man. In Le Corbusier, however, there is no longer a separation between the geometric and the symbolic; rather geometry itself represents the symbolic aspect of form, and carries with it an entire set of implicit values.



*"Stem" development, Caen Herouville.
Shadrach Woods, architect, 1961. Linear organization of activities and the proposed grouping of cells around the linear center.*

The Critique of Functionalism

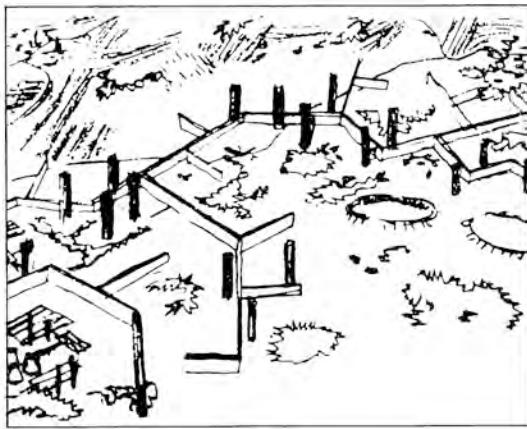
With the waning of the enthusiasm for functionalism in the late 1940s, a series of works appeared which, conscious of the cultural reductivism of the heroic period, were explicitly concerned with the cultural rather than the functional aspects of design. This cultural concern was demonstrated by an intention to make explicit the articulation between architecture and other cultural systems.¹⁸ The work of the active members of Team 10 (Alison and Peter Smithson) reintroduces culture in this sense, and again new openings and closures are produced by means of metaphoric operations: openings to incorporate "the culture"; closures to preserve the specificity of the system.

However, while in Le Corbusier the metaphor was reductive in terms of the possible inclusion of other cultural systems—a product of the exclusive nature of geometry and its concomitant modernism—the intention of Team 10 was to establish relations between architecture and other systems. "Our hierarchy of associations," they stated, "is woven into a modulated continuum representing the true complexity of human associations. . . . We must evolve an architecture from the fabric of life itself, an equivalent of the complexity of our way of thought, of our passion for the natural world and our belief in the ability of man."¹⁹

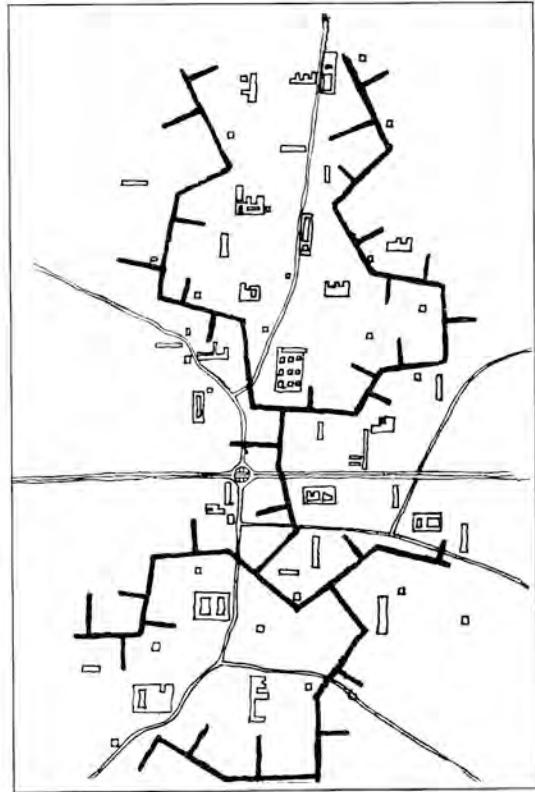
This criticism addresses itself precisely to the functionalist reductivism of the 1920s and to its elimination of cultural aspects, here described as "human associations" and "the fabric of life itself." These aspects were considered as an intrinsic aspect of architecture by Team 10.

Once more, metaphor is being used as the substitutive operation to incorporate "vital" aspects into design. Two types of metaphor are used. The one, which accounts for urban form in general, resembles Le Corbusier's use of geometry at an urban scale. The other, which accounts for the realization of ideas at a building scale, is itself conceived as a fundamental element of urban design.

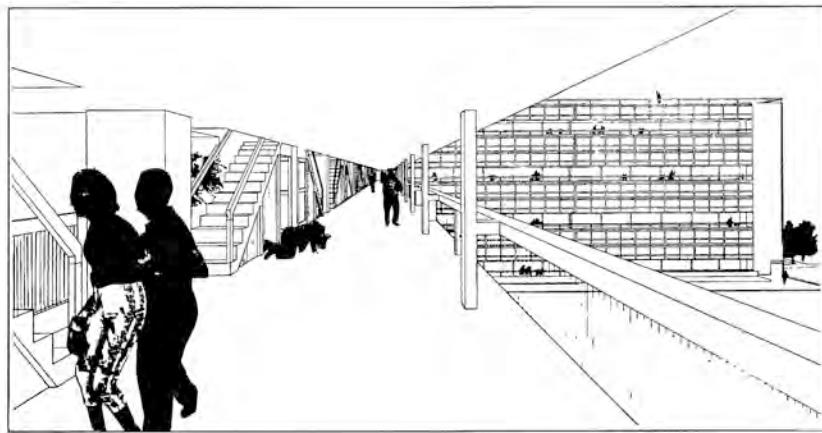
The first metaphoric operation links two systems through the common element "life," and thus relates the city to nature (a tree). Hence the plans for Golden Lane. The city is overlaid with the attributes of a tree and given qualities of growth, organicity, movement; at the level of form, the city is understood as a tree possessing a stem, branches, and leaves.



Study for Golden Lane, London. Alison and Peter Smithson, architects, 1952. Street deck complex. The street mesh slots into the vertical circulation of such complexes.



*"Urban re-identification," first diagram.
Peter Smithson, 1952.*



Street equivalents, deck, housing. Peter Smithson, 1953.

$$\frac{\text{city/life}}{\text{tree/life}} = \frac{\text{tree/life}}{\text{branches, leaves, etc.}}$$

The second type of metaphoric operation articulates the relationship between design and life at the scale of the building and operates on the basis of a common function: circulation of people (street). In the proposal for Sheffield, the corridor is transformed through substitution into a street, carrying with it the urban codes which, when transferred to the building, give it "life."

Despite the explicit intent of Team 10 to open the system of architecture to culture, however, the result does not, in the end, differ much from the reductive system they criticize. The type of substitution utilized—the recodification of architecture by means of yet another formal analogy—is fundamentally similar to that effected by Le Corbusier. The process by which the Smithsons assimilate "life" to design is described exclusively in socio-cultural terms, even though "nature" is invoked, while the form adopted is taken directly from nature, that is, from organic, physical life. The other systems to which architecture is supposed to be actively linked (in this case, life or nature) are, in this way, filtered and reduced through the metaphor of one system, that of architectural forms. Thus, there is little real difference between the street in the air and the open corridor; the symbolic functioning which would make an architecture "out of life itself" is in fact absent. We may now see that metaphoric operations, rather than functioning to open the design system beyond its limits, in fact operate as filtering mechanisms which precisely define those limits.

It is paradoxical that the metaphor which allows for the interrelation of different codes is here used as a closing mechanism. Design is once again a sieve which allows the passage of certain meanings and not others, while the metaphor, which is used as a translating device from other codes to architecture, provides a mechanism by which ideology operates through design. In the infinite field of signifying possibilities, the metaphor defines, by a complex process of selection, the field of "the possible," thus consolidating itself in different regions by means of a language or languages.

Design/Non-Design

There is, however, another possible way of stating the relationship between design and culture. Rather than seeing systems of culture from a point of view that imposes a hierarchical relationship in which architecture or design is dominant, we may posit a notion of the “non-designed” built environment—“social texts,” as it were, produced by a given culture.

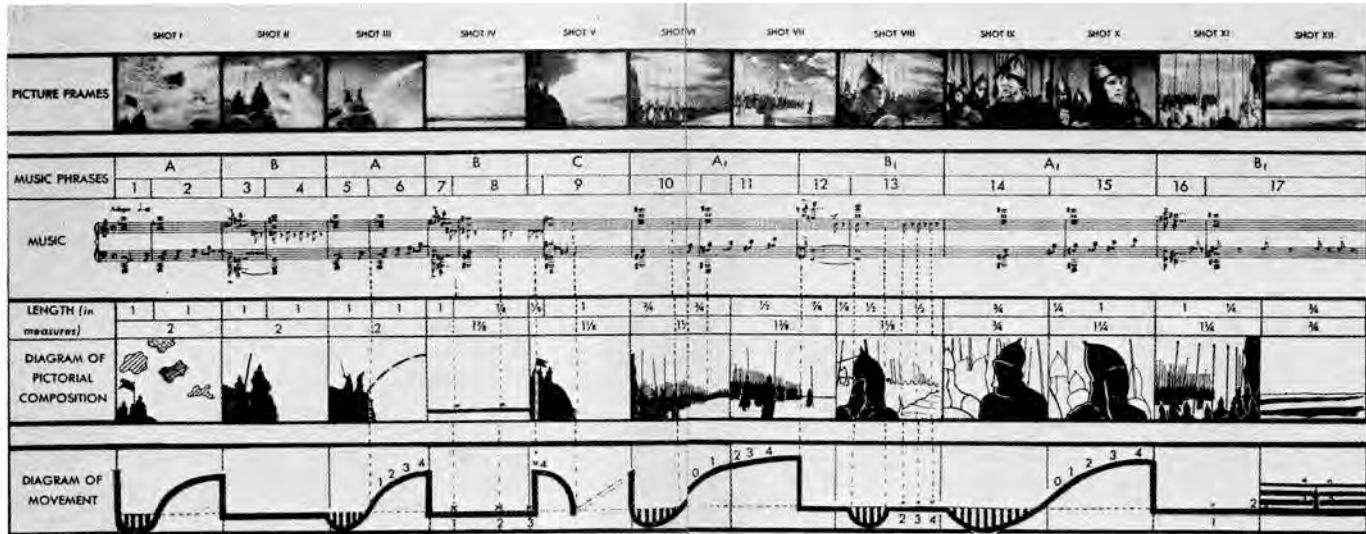
The act of placing design (that is, both architecture and urban design) in relation to the rest of the built environment—the non-designed environment—immediately changes the level at which the problem is formulated. While in the work of Team 10 the problem is stated as internal to a single cultural system (architecture or urban design)—the relating of architecture to the city in such a way that the former acquires the “life” of the latter, here the signifying function of design is considered to relate to and, in relating, to oppose the rest of the built environment. It is regarded as a problem *internal to culture*, and thus to an entire set of cultural systems.

In these terms, architecture is no longer either implicitly or explicitly seen as the dominant system, but simply *one* of many cultural systems, each of which, including architecture, may be closed or “designed.” But it is the entire set of different cultural systems configuring the built environment, which we call non-design.

In the world of non-design, that no-man’s-land of the symbolic, the scene of social struggle, an internal analysis of single systems is revealed as inadequate and impossible to apply. Here there is no unique producer, no subject, nor is there an established rhetorical system within a defined institutional framework. Instead there is a complex system of intertextual relationships.

The opposition between design and non-design is fundamentally defined by three questions: first, the problem of *institutionality*; second, the problem of *limits and specificity*; and third, the problem of the *subject*. While the first establishes the relationship between design and non-design, the second establishes their respective types of articulation within culture (ideology), and the third establishes the processes of symbolization.

Design may be defined as a social practice that functions by a set of socially sanc-



Audiovisual articulation in a sequence from the film Alexander Nevsky. S. Eisenstein.

tioned rules and norms—whether implicit or explicit—and therefore is constituted as an institution. Its institutional character is manifested in the normative writings and written texts of architecture, which fix its meaning and, therefore, its reading. These texts insure the recording of the codes of design and guarantee their performance as filters and preservers of unity. They assure the homogeneity and closure of the system and of the ideological role it plays. The absence of a normative written discourse in non-design, on the other hand, precludes defining it as an institution and makes possible the inscription of sense in a free and highly undetermined way; we are here presented with an aleatory play of meaning. Thus, while design maintains its limits and its specificity, these defining aspects are lost in the semiotically heterogeneous text of non-design.²⁰

Non-design is the articulation—as an explicit form—between different cultural systems. This phenomenon may be approached in two ways: as empirical fact—the actual existence of such systems found, for example, in the street, where architecture, painting, music, gestures, advertising, etc. coexist—and as a set of related codes. In the first instance, at the level of “texts,” each system remains closed in itself, presenting juxtaposed manifestations rather than their relationships. At the level of codes, on the other hand, it is possible to discern the mode of articulation between the various systems and, in this way, to define the cultural and ideological overdetermination of the built environment, or rather the process by which culture is woven into it.²¹ The predisposition of non-design to openness implies permeable limits and an always fluctuating or changing specificity.

Finally, if design is the production of an historically determined individual subject, which marks the work, non-design is the product of a social subject, the same subject which produces ideology. It manifests itself in the delirious, the carnivalesque, the oneiric, which are by and large excluded or repressed in design.

To study the reality of non-design and its symbolic production in relation to culture, it is necessary to perform an operation of “cutting”—“cutting” and not “deciphering,” for while deciphering operates on “secret” marks and the possibility for discovering their *full* depth of meaning, cutting operates on a space of interrelations,²² *empty* of meaning, in which codes substitute, exchange, replace, and represent each other, and in which history is seen as the form of a particular mode of symbolizing, determined by the double value of use and exchange of objects, and as a symbolic *modus operandi* which may be understood within that same logic of symbolic production and which is performed by the same social subject of ideology and the unconscious.²³

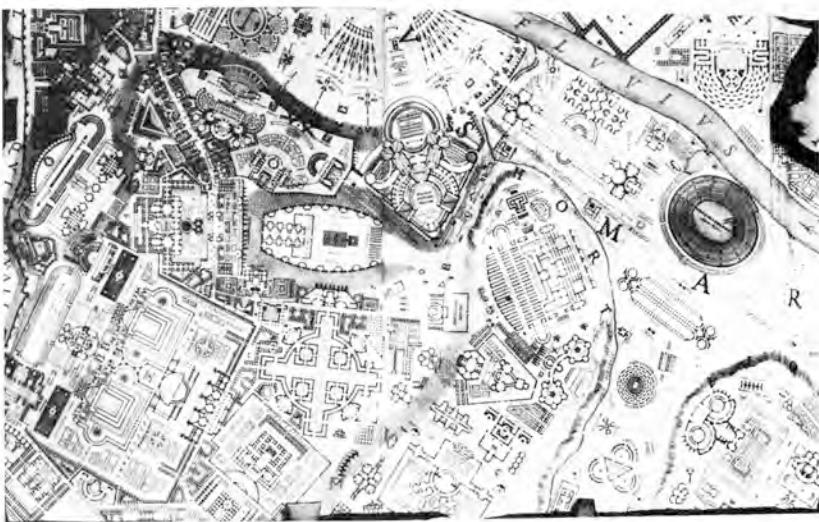
The moment one object may be substituted for another beyond its “functional” use-value, it has a value added to it which is the value of exchange, and this value is nothing but symbolic. Our world of symbolic performances is comprised of a chain of such exchanges in meaning; that is how we operate within the realm of ideology. Non-design leaves this ideology in a “free-state,” while design hides it.

The mode of analysis for these two phenomena of design and non-design (at least from the first moment that the difference between them is recognized) must therefore vary.

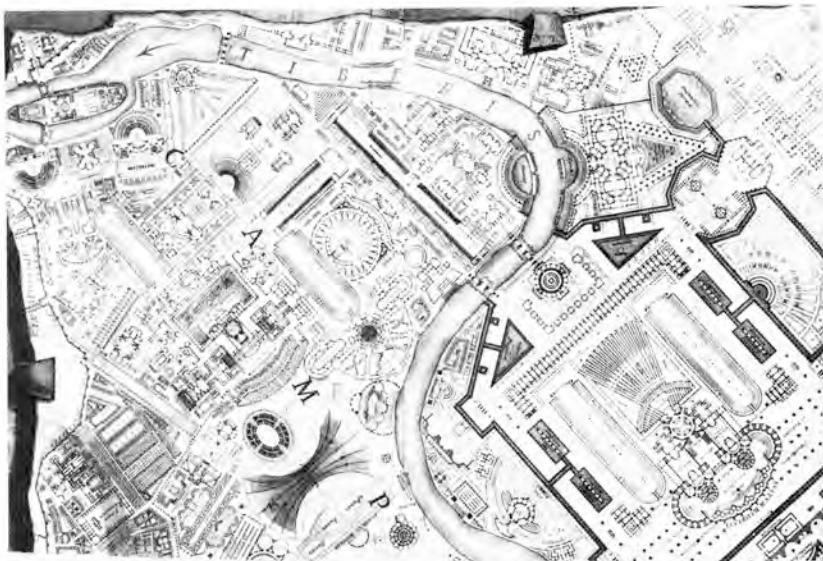
Reading. Mise-en-Séquence

As a complex social text, a semiotically heterogeneous object in which many different signifying matters and codes intervene, non-design has a disposition to be open, to a situation which we will call here a *mise-en-séquence*.

We propose here for non-design a productive reading, not as the re-production of a unique or final sense, but as a way of retracing the mechanisms by which that sense was produced.²⁴ Productive reading corresponds to the expansive potential of non-design and permits access to the functioning of meaning as an intersection of codes. The object of analysis is not the “content,” but the conditions of a con-



Plans for the Campo Marzio, Rome.
G. B. Piranesi.

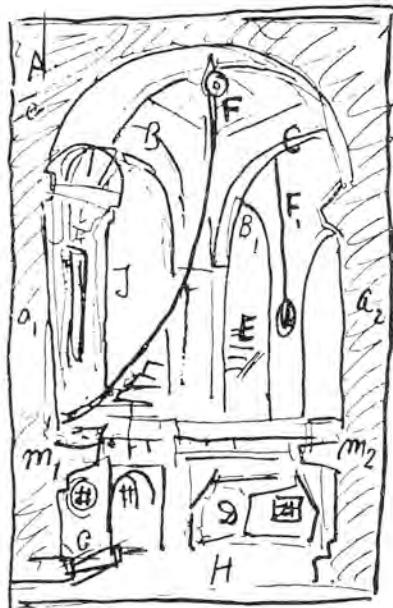


tent, not the “full” sense of design but, on the contrary, the “empty” sense which informs all works.²⁵ Instead of reading by following a previously written text, the reading starts from a “signifier of departure,” not only toward an architectural text but toward other texts in culture, putting into play a force analogous to that of the unconscious, which also has the capacity to traverse and articulate different codes.

The metaphoric operation participates asymmetrically in both readings, design and non-design. While in design the metaphor is not only the point of departure but also the final point of the reading, in non-design the metaphoric and metonymic operations function similarly to dreams, as chains which permit access to meanings that have been repressed, thus acting as expansive forces. This expansive mechanism may be seen to be a device used for the purpose of criticism in the work of Piranesi. His opposition to the typological obsession of his time is an indication of his perception of the crisis of architecture and the consequent need for change and transformation. His *Campo Marzio* is a true architectural “explosion” that anticipates the destiny of our Western cities.²⁶ Piranesi’s “explosive” vision comprises not just the architectural system per se but rather a system of relationships, of contiguity and substitution.

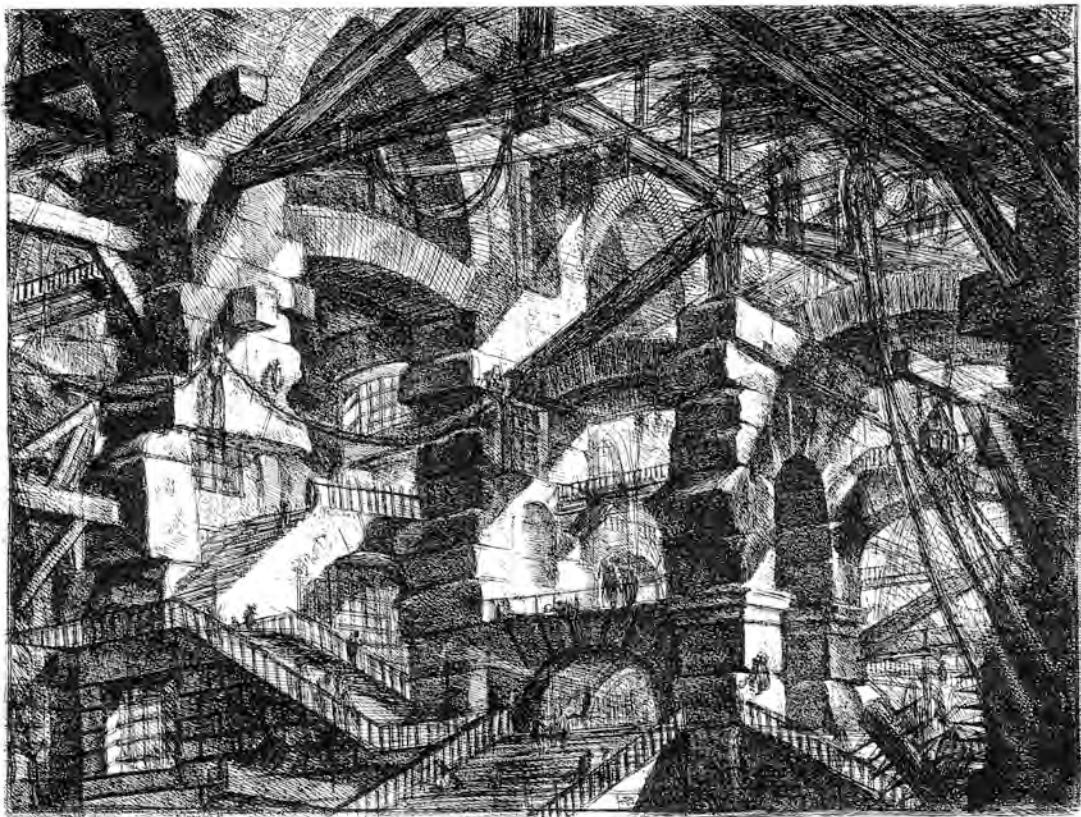
Non-design may also be seen as an explosive transformation of design. This kind of explosion implies in some way the dissolution of the limits of architecture, of the ideological limits which enclose different architectural practices.

In front of two drawings of Piranesi’s *Carceri*, one of the *Carcere Oscura* of 1743 from the series of the *Opere Varie* and the other on the *Carceri Oscure* from the *Invenzioni*, the Russian filmmaker Eisenstein makes a reading which may be considered as an example of this type of analysis. Eisenstein applies a cinematographic reading to the first prison, his reading producing displacements with respect to the limits imposed by pictorial and architectural codes, thereby making it “explode” in a kind of cinematographic sequence.²⁷ This is the starting point of a reading that travels across literary, political, musical, and historical codes, multiplying in this way perceptions which are potential in the Piranesian work. A proof of this potential lies in Eisenstein’s reading of Piranesi’s second engraving, done eighteen years later, in which Eisenstein finds that the second is actually an explo-

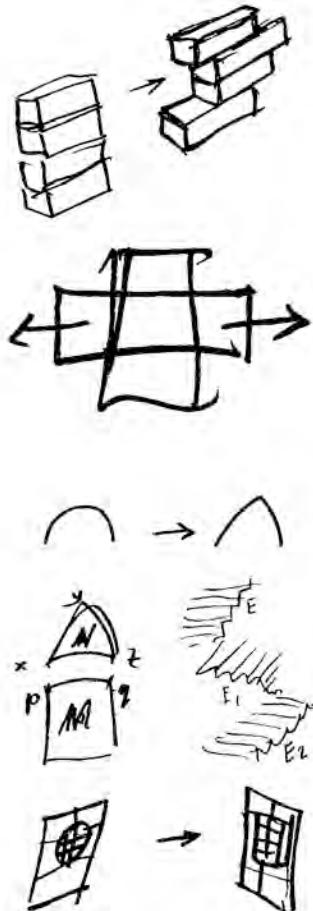


Dark Prison. G. B. Piranesi, 1743.
Engraving.

Sergei Eisenstein's schematic sketch of
Piranesi's Dark Prison.



Prison of the Invenzioni. G. B. Piranesi,
1761, Engraving.



Sergei Eisenstein's sketches for his analysis of Piranesi's Dark Prison.

sion of the first prison, done by Piranesi himself.²⁸ It should be noted that Eisenstein is here dealing with a closed cultural system, such as architecture or painting. What Eisenstein takes, however, is not just *any* closed work from these fields but rather the work of someone like Piranesi, who poses the problem of the explosion in form (or form as explosion) in his *Carceri*, or in his *Campo Marzio*, which is a delirium of typological chaining. Although this Piranesian strategy touches problems specific to architecture, it also comes very close to the problem of the explosion of sense in architecture, to the problem of meaning as signifying chaining. In creating this extreme situation, Piranesi is implicitly assessing the problem of the limits of architecture as a "language," that is, as a closed system.

Fragments of Reading

One evening, half asleep on a banquette in a bar, just for fun I tried to enumerate all the languages within earshot: music, conversations, the sounds of chairs, glasses, a whole stereophony of which a square in Tangiers (as described by Severo Sarduy) is the exemplary site. That too spoke within me, and this so-called 'interior' speech was very like the noise of the square, like that amassing of minor voices coming to me from the outside: I myself was a public square, a sook; through me passed words, tiny syntagms, bits of formulae, and no sentence formed, as though that were the law of such a language. This speech, at once very cultural and very savage, was above all lexical, sporadic; it set up in me, through its apparent flow, a definitive discontinuity: this non-sentence was in no way something that could not have acceded to the sentence, that might have been before the sentence; it was: what is eternally, splendidly, outside the sentence.²⁹

The urban environment as the object of reading is not "seen" as a closed, simple unity but as a set of *fragments*, or "units of readings." Each of these units may be replaced by others; each part may be taken for the whole. The dimension of the built environment, empirically determined, depends upon the density of meanings, the "semantic volume."

Since these fragments appear as an articulation of different texts belonging to various cultural systems—e.g., film, art, literature—it is possible to read them by starting from any of these systems, and not necessarily from design.

Certain types of configurations, like public places (streets, plazas, cafes, airports), are ideal “fragments of readings,” not only for their “semantic volume,” but also for the complexity they reveal as to the signifying mechanisms in non-design. They may be characterized as signifying “nodes,” where multiple codes and physical matter are articulated, where design and non-design overlap, and where history and the present are juxtaposed.³⁰

The reading that can be produced by these places is not a linear discourse but an infinite and spatialized text in which those levels of reading, organized along various codes, such as theater, film, fashion, politics, gesture, are combined and articulated. The reading example we choose to present below is in itself metaphorical. It is the metaphor of architecture as theater. It is not a specific detailed analysis, but rather it exemplifies the mechanisms of chains and shifters.

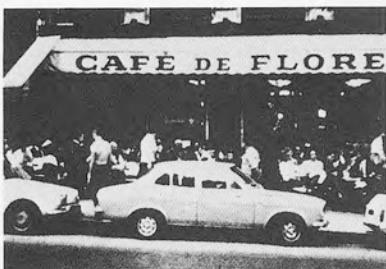
Chains:

A metaphor begins to function by articulating the referential codes in relation to other codes by means of replacing the referential codes in the signifier of departure with another code. In this way, a chain linking the codes is developed. Once the intersemiotic metaphor, such as that between architecture and theater, is produced and a possible level of reading is established, the chain of signifiers along the codes and subcodes of that cultural system is organized by “natural association”—that is metonymically.

Signifiers appear and disappear, sliding through other texts in a play that moves along the codes of, for instance, the theater (i.e., scenic, gestural, decorative, acting, textual, verbal, etc.) in an intertextual network. This play continues until some signifier becomes another departure signifier, opening the network toward new chains through what we have called the *mise-en-séquence*, thus starting other readings from other cultural systems like film, fashion, etc. These signifiers which open to other systems may be called *shifters*.³¹

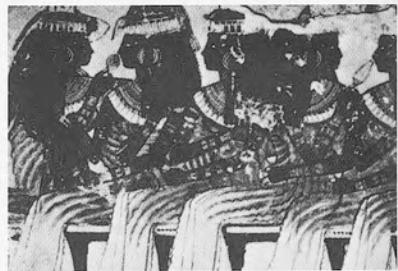
Shifters:

Such a reading presents a symbolic structure of a “decondensed” kind. Here, by decondensation we refer to an operation which is the reverse of that in the elaboration of dreams. Condensation and displacement are the two basic operations in



Theater

In front of the scene or in the scene



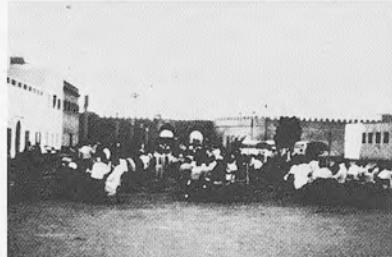
the pleasure of the gaze



decomposition



Cafe-Market



Cafe-Square



Cafe-Street



the word, any street is a scene



against the unity of representation



the scenic gesture



stage-costume-sex-transvestism



composition



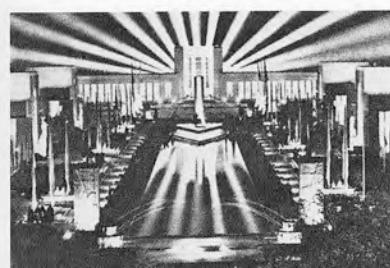
...



multiplication of the gesture



objects as actors



facades as masks



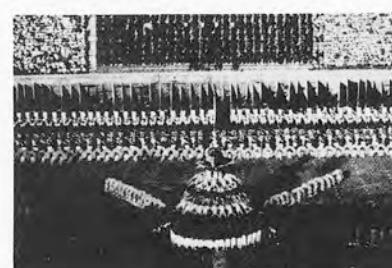
actors as objects



mask-costume-ritual



space of action



space of spectacle



people as spectacle, politics

Theater Reading

Original Layout from Oppositions 6, 1976



Film Reading

Original Layout from Oppositions 6, 1976



the work of elaboration of dreams. By them, the passage is produced from the latent level to the manifest level of the dream. These two operations of condensation and displacement are two ways of displacing meanings, or of overdetermining, or giving more than one meaning to, some elements; they are produced precisely by means of the two operations already discussed, namely metaphor and metonymy. The metaphor corresponds to condensation, and metonymy to displacement.³² In this way, it is possible to see the relationship between ideology (cultural codes) and subject (of ideology and of the unconscious) in the logic of symbolic production in the environment as determined by a particular mode of production.

Some signifier fragments function as “condensers” from which decondensation is possible through a network of meanings. These will be called “shifters.” A set of readings could be regarded as a musical staff in which various signifiers are situated in a polyphonic organization with each voice at a different level of reading. Certain of these signifiers organize several different readings and allow for the intercrossing of codes and for the shifting from one to the next. These are the shifters; they are part of a process of exchange of codes. They are the conditions of the probability of producing different readings; they are structures of transition, the organizers of symbolic space. These connective, condensing structures are the key to the understanding of the complexity of the built environment as an infinite text. They are not concerned with signification but with the linking of signifiers. They are the key to an intertext where meanings are displaced, thereby forming a network in which the subject of the reading, the laws of the unconscious, and the historico-cultural determinants are articulated. The importance of this notion of shifter is that it accounts for the process of configuration and for the dynamic aspect of a configuration, rather than for objects and functions. It accounts for the symbolic aspect of exchange. It provides an insight into the problem of the mode of operation of ideology within the built world. It allows us to enter into a mechanism of production of sense that corresponds to an ideology of exchange.

If the system of architecture and of design, even when we play with it, is always closed within a game of commentaries of language—a metalingual game—it is interesting to speculate on the outcome of a similar “game” of *non-design*, a game of the built world. For non-design is a non-language, and by comparison with a

language, it is madness since it is outside language, and thus outside society. This non-language, this non-sense constitutes an explosion of the established language in relation to a sense already established (by conventions and repressive rules). It is symbolic of the built world outside the rules of design and their internal "linguistic" games. It permits us finally to understand another logic which informs the significance of building.

The Productive Reading

The outdoor part of the "cafe-terrace" establishes the relationship cafe/street and is organized in terms of the opposition sidewalk as passage or circulation/sidewalk as cafe; another element in the sidewalk-circulation is introduced; people link the first opposition with the second one. Some people walk in the sidewalk/street; some people sit in the sidewalk/cafe. People are distributed in a field of objects that may be distinguished as objects for use and objects for background. Buildings are objects and façades; the background is a continuous façade; the façade of the cafe stands out as a mediating element which because of its transparency creates a relationship between the exterior cafe or cafe/street and the interior cafe. The interior cafe repeats the same oppositions between people/objects and background/mirrors, which themselves now become mediators between exterior and interior in a reflection in which objects, sidewalk, people, street, and interior space are superimposed. . . .

The seats, which are distributed in rows and in which people are clustered, resembles a pit. This substitution produces a point of departure, from cafe/street to cafe/pit.

$$\frac{\text{Cafe seats}}{\text{Pit seats}} \times \frac{\text{Pit seats}}{\text{Theater}}$$

$$\frac{\text{Background plane cafe}}{\text{Background plane scene}} \times \frac{\text{Background plane scene}}{\text{Theater}}$$

New readings may be produced:

The Gaze:

The gaze from the cafe as pit transforms the street into a scene and sweeps through the codes both of the cafe and the theater. Codes organize the gaze: the people

from whom and to whom they are directed—Observer/Observed; the places from where and to where they are directed—Public/Private; the desire which generates them—Voyeurism/Exhibitionism. In their interrelation, places configurate the gaze: frontal—oblique—sideview. Scene and pit are confused in a general scene where gaze and desire are structured and articulated together. The pleasure in the realization of desire is generated not only at the visual level but also at the level of language in action: that is, discourse.

Discourse within the “theater” is fragmented, dispersed among various actors and spectators, articulating itself without either dominating or subordinating, with the body in action, with the gesture.

Gesture:

Gesticulating bodies form a chain with clothes as a second skin, regulated by the gestures of fashion which play a role in the marking and disguising of sex differences. Cafe, the domain of men, is incorporated in the city as theater, articulated with fashion, the domain of women, as costume. The two together transform the visual codes, which link cafe/masculinity and fashion/femininity, thereby confounding them.

The gesture is not only that of a static pose, but the multiplied gesture of the body in movement, engaged in entries and exits from the scene.

Discourse and gesture configurate the scene; meanwhile, time and volume perforate the plane of decoration and configurate the space.

The scene in the streets:

The scene in the streets is in turn the explosion of the cafe/theater.

The street as a scene of scenes:

The street as a scene of scenes in turn projects into the cafe, opening it up to new paradigms and their codes.

The system of cafes:

Each cafe is not a cafe in itself but is part of a system of cafes, which speaks of its history, of its origins, of its transformations, thus establishing the paradigm of the cafe.

The system of the fragments of public places:

The cafe belongs to the paradigm of streets, plazas, monuments. In turn, each of these is not only physically juxtaposed but also textually juxtaposed. This transforms these places into complex entities: cafe—square, cafe—market, cafe—street. The street is transformed into a new point of departure. We are again in the street, but now the street is a scene.

Street:

A scene in movement. The street is the scene of struggle, of consumption, the scene of scenes; it is infinitely continuous, unlimited in the motion of objects, of gazes, of gestures.

It is the scene of history.

It is a scene, but it is also what is behind the scene, what is not seen, or not allowed to be seen. When what is behind the scene is shown, it produces a demystifying effect, like that of exposing the reasons for the split between individual and social, between private and public.

The façades frame the street. They function as scenery or decoration and control the demystifying effect. The decoration may or may not correspond to the content of representation. This accentuates its mask-like character.

People as decoration:

Fashion transforms people into objects, linking street and theater through one aspect of their common ritual nature.

Rituals:

People meet at corners, people promenade, defining a ritual space, participating in ceremonies, and....

Notes

1. Accordingly, architecture itself must be approached as a particular form of cultural production—as a specific kind of over-determined practice.
2. Jury Lotman, “Problèmes de la Typologie des Cultures,” *Essays in Semiotics*, Kristeva-Reydevoe, ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1972).
3. See Perouse de Montclos, *Etienne-Louis Boullée* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1974); Emil Kaufmann, *Architecture in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955).
4. See Christian Metz, *Langage et Cinéma* (Paris: Klincksiek, 1971); Emilio Garroni, *Progetto di Semiotica* (Bari: Laterza, 1973).
5. Ibid.
6. Christian Metz, “Spécificité des Codes et/ou spécificité des langages,” *Semiotica*, I, no. 4, 1969.
7. The role of specificity in maintaining the limits of architecture becomes evident, for example, in the development of the steel industry in the nineteenth century, which determined the development of its own independent techniques according to a reason and coherence of its own (exemplified in works of such architects as Eiffel and Paxton), while the world of architectural forces developed according to a logic nearly dissociated from technology. Such technical-formal developments are absorbed through symbolic mechanisms that incorporate the structural system as one of the expressive elements of the architectonic vocabulary. This prevents the fusion of architecture with engineering and its disappearance as an autonomous practice.
8. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).
9. René Taylor, “Architecture and Magic: Considerations on the Idea of the Escorial,” *Essays in the History of Architecture presented to Rudolf Wittkower*, Douglas Fraser, Howard Hibbard, and Milton J. Lewine, eds. (New York: Phaidon Publishers, Inc., 1967).
10. The notions of closing and opening would allow rethinking of certain aspects of design at the level of meaning in a manner more systematic and specific than the traditional historical analysis that looks for the explanation of the meaning of formal architectural structures in the sociocultural context in general and considers it as a problem of content.
11. Pierre Fontanier, *Les Figures du Discours* (1821) (Paris: Flammarion, 1968).
12. Roman Jakobson, *Studies on Child Language and Aphasia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).
13. This is developed by Mario Gandelsonas, “On Reading Architecture,” *Progressive Architecture*, May 1972; idem., “Linguistics and Architecture,” *Casabella*, 373, Feb. 1973.
14. I refer in this article to the Le Corbusier of *Towards a New Architecture* and *The City of Tomorrow*, although it is possible to say that there are several Le Corbusiers.
15. Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow* (London: John Rodker, 1929).
16. Ibid.
17. Manfredo Tafuri, *Giovan Battista Piranesi; L'Architettura come “Utopia negativa”* (Turin: Accademia delle Scienze, 1972).
18. This articulation has, of course, always been present in architectural treatises from the Renaissance to Le Corbusier. But it is important here, however, to posit it in this functionalist context where the conception of culture is universalist, reductivist, and imperialistic.
19. Alison Smithson, ed., *Team 10 Primer* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1968).
20. See Diana Agrest and Mario Gandelsonas, “Critical Remarks in Semiotics and Architecture,” *Semiotica*, IX, v.3, 1973.
21. Diana Agrest, “Towards a Theory of Production of Sense in the Built Environment,” (1968–1973), *On Streets*, Stanford Anderson, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1972). Here I proposed considering the street as a signifying system.
22. Roland Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972). See the following works on architectural typology: Garroni, *Progetto di Semiotica*; Giulio Argan, “Sul concetto delle tipologie architettoniche,” *Progetto e Destino*, Alberto Mondadori, ed. (1965); Aldo Rossi, *L'Architettura della Città* (Padua: Marsilio Editori, 1966); Alan Colquhoun, “Typology and Design Method,” *Meaning in Architecture*, Charles Jencks and George Baird, eds. (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1970), pp. 267–277.
23. See J. J. Goux, *Economie et Symbolique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973).

24. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970).
25. An important difference between the reading of design and non-design is the existence or non-existence of a written text. In the case of design one may reconstruct a discourse in such a way as to illuminate its meaning by a previous reading. When we read Le Corbusier, we reconstruct a reading made by him. In the case of non-design, however, we must put ourselves in the position of direct reading.
26. Tafuri, *Giovan Battista Piranesi*.
27. S. M. Eisenstein, "Piranesi e la fluidità delle forme," *Rassegna Sovietica*, 1–2, 1972.
28. Manfredo Tafuri, "Piranesi, Eisenstein e la dialettica," *Rassegna Sovietica*, 1–2, 1972.
29. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 49.
30. These nodes, thought of as referents to non-design, permit a more precise formulation of its meaning and distinguish it from the term "place" with which we designate the signifying structure.
31. Roman Jakobson, "Les Catégories verbales et le verbe Russe," *Essais de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Editions de Minuit); Roland Barthes, *Système de la Mode* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967). The shifter should not be mistaken as being in itself possessed of "double meaning," a notion which has become almost classical in architecture. It does not refer to language. Double meaning, on the contrary, refers to the issue of content, to the problem of ambiguity in relation to language and to metaphor. While the shifter accounts for the chaining of fragments, double meaning refers to a totality with different meanings. There is no chaining and no process involved in this notion.
32. Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1961); idem., *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (New York: Norton, 1966).