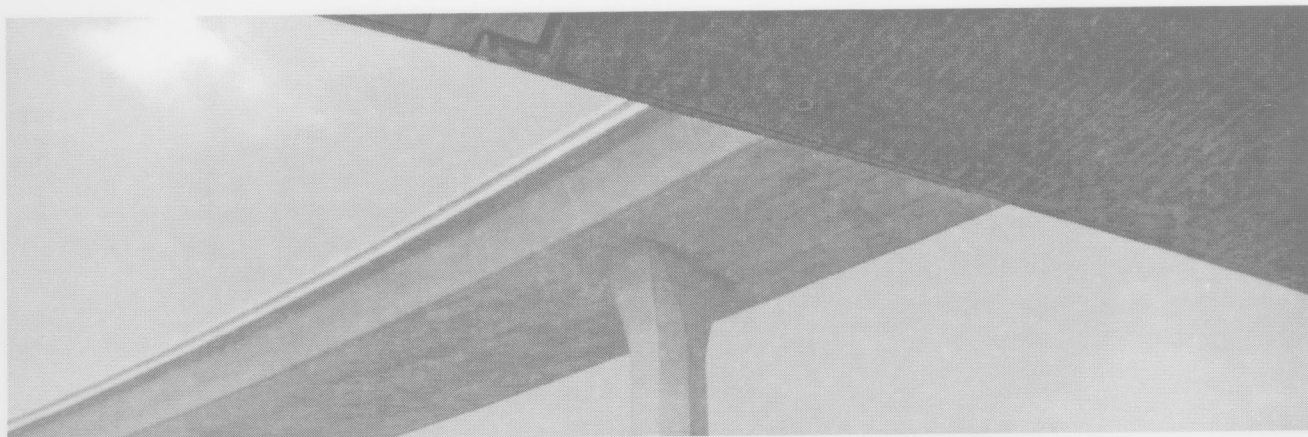# surfacing urbanisms
recent approaches to metropolitan design

Catherine Opie "Untitled #2" from "Freeway" series (1994) Courtesy of Regen Projects

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After Mapping: Urbanism and 'What is Out There'

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For more than a decade, architecture and urbanism have been mapping realities. With an attempt to analyze and understand our complex urban condition, an abundance of retroactive manifestos has shown us the ungraspable however valid evidences and scales of political and technological imagination. As the contemporary city began to be seen as the expose—i.e., the physical and symbolic manifestation—of historical processes, infrastructural and trans-national networks, and as the operative surface of field conditions, it became obvious that the city had to be mapped more than it had been previously. The "research" on the contemporary city became more urgent and vital than ever as the Bigness—or 'what is out there' (WiOT)—and its relation to our disciplinary regimes had to be exposed, as it was "a condition without thinkers."(1)   The exteriorities had to be mapped in order to understand and incorporate; to interrogate the landscapes of architecture and urbanism within wider systems in which they were embedded. Inspired by the expansion of limits as well as global networks and "-scapes," research on the contemporary city—or the manifesto for Bigness—thickened with layers of facts and information and expanded the limits and beyonds of architecture and urbanism. In this paper I will try to highlight the urgency in architecture and urbanism to go beyond mappings and collections of facts from our built environment/social fold and critically investigate the question of vision and what really matters within a disciplinary context.

Contemporary "What is Out There"

Le Corbusier's Aquitania collage in Vers Une Architecture may be thought of as a preliminary expression of WiOT as it relates to architecture and urbanism. However, although echoing the same rhetoric, contemporary WiOT has obviously differed from that of the Aquitania collage, which merely connoted a literal dimensionality of technological scale in relation to monuments, and buildings etc. In addition to scale, contemporary WiOT included vast organizational and political formatting systems that move beyond buildings towards networks, connections, territories and geographies.

Although developing and flourishing, from Reyner Banham's Los Angeles (1971), Venturi's Learning from Las Vegas (1972) to Koolhaas' Delirious New York (1978), contemporary research on the city and WiOT has taken a different form and apparently has required different disciplinary techniques and attributes for analysis. Accordingly, it has been announced that while our "contemporary language for talking about the city is lacking where it comes to naming and interpreting its mutations" and that "[o]ur profession is severely handicapped and hampered in its potential action and operations simply by the fact that we have not developed a repertoire of concepts and understanding that can deal with the city as it emerges."(2)   As the city expanded, we mapped; realities emerged, we researched, observed, and expressed, named and interpreted. Mostly fascinated with realities' inventive and clever manoeuvres, we tried to figure out what could architecture and urbanism learn from their latent ingenuity.
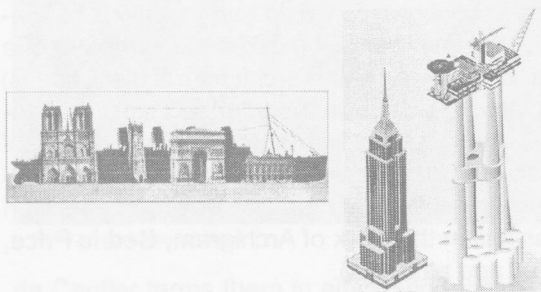

Figure 1. Bigness now and then. (left) Le Corbusier's Aquitania collage, Vers Une

Architecture (right) Empire State Building next to an oil drilling platform on the North

Sea

At this juncture, however, the crucial point seems to be the following question: what if, along with our naming, interpreting and mapping repertoires and capacities, we should develop agendas and positions that can affect WiOT? We may have advanced in representing and expressing uncertainties and instabilities of the contemporary urban condition—which itself dwells on the procedural instances of global and political mobilities and their institutional fixation—and developing minor strategies for

possible interrelations. Within this context, however, equal with, or maybe greater than, the necessity of understanding 'WiOT' properly, one cannot help but proclaim the urgent necessity for valid outlooks and attitudes for it. Where layers of information thicken with mappings and research of the contemporary city, the challenge that contemporary architecture and urbanism faces is to re-evaluate our fascinations with retroactive mappings and to think critically about their significance using proper visions, theories, concerns and actions.

If our main reason to map the city derived from our incapacity of comprehending it in the first place, now is the time to develop strategies to deal with realities rather than have our daily thickening archives stuffed with facts. The question of a political agenda seems to be crucial; one that goes beyond mere fascinations, retroactive mappings of facts but invents conditions and situations—an agenda that critically investigates urgent and significant issues of our time and projects on what really matters in an intellectual and professional context—while improvising and instigating projects, and experimentations that would affect the very processes that dictate our built environment and social fold. I use the term "political" to suggest a possibility of an outlook and attitude that is realistic, sceptical, yet simultaneously visionary in terms of its observations and action. (3)
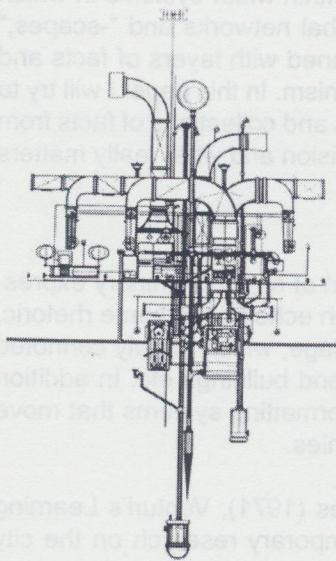
Similar to Reyner Banham's "unhouse" concept in which the mechanical services would dictate and constitute the form of the building, most current disciplinary positions seem to fail to venture beyond an "unhouse" attitude. That is, exteriorities, i.e., visible and invisible infrastructures and networks etc., are either subsumed or expressed, and buildings mutate into atmospheres, extensions, intensities and loops of urban data, resulting from their symbiotic relationships. Some even argue that it is impossible to describe the world systems as exteriorities because there is no boundary to differentiate what is interior or exterior in relation to architecture and urbanism; that networks, systems, indeed everything acts as one organic global entity.

We are all aware that the conundrum of acknowledging wider networks and systems while simultaneously integrating that knowledge into the discipline is nothing new. The strange appearance of the concept of "environment" in architecture and urbanism during the time period beginning in the late 1950s and running through 1970s could be seen as an attempt to acknowledge this. .

Figure 2:

Banham's "Unhouse"

Reviewing this history gives hints as to the possible revisions, attitudes, and approaches that could be meaningful in our disciplinary context where there is an urgent need to re-conceptualize the "environment" and the issue of vision.

Environment'
Throughout the late-1950s and '60s, architecture embraced the "environment." Evidenced by the names of university architectural departments in the US where the school names would carry subtitles of "Environmental Design," or "the Built Environment," the concept of environment marked the symptom of a wider post-war engagement with and intent to broaden the boundaries of the architectural discipline.(4) Coinciding with the social and political unrests of the '60s, as well as a more popularized "environmentalism" of the 1970s, the concept, although stood unstable and diverse, was a deliberate depiction of the discipline's ambitions and responsibilities in relation to wider urban systems and networks. An "unhouse" attitude remained vital with the expression of networks and creating micro-environments with plug-in points within expanded forms of infrastructures (as it is in the work of Archigram, Cedric Price, Archizoom, Superstudio—although with different modalities and attitudes).

paradoxical for the 'environment': depicting the line between a total design approach and small components. The contradiction was evidenced in the discussion by the introduction of the phrase community as a way to tackle the "complicated problem of the larger cities" with small self-contained units.(5) Given holistic connotations of Doxiades' "science of ekistics," Gropius's "total architecture"(1949); Fuller's "comprehensive design strategies"; the Smithson's "total complexes," the concept of 'community' seemed to provide the emphasis for practical values and implementation of plans.(6) One thinks of Chermayeff's "environmental design" approach as outlined in Community and Privacy and in his teachings and writings.(7) Although sounded holistic, Chermayeff's 'total architecture' was an attempt to acknowledge the invisible forces at work in a city through smaller components, units and communities. A letter written by Chermayeff to Marshall McLuhan hints the approach: "You suggest that architectural form might become especially expressive of new forces at work. I suspect that the opposite would be advantageous. I retreat from continuing pressures of communication into undated solitude and simplicity."(8) In a lecture presented in 1964, Chermayeff's emphasis on "protection" and "solitude" is evident:

In 'Community and Privacy,' a book written by me, together with Christopher Alexander, there is an attempt to recognize the pressures of mobility and electronic information as these affect individual urban dwellings and their clusters. The basis of the plat-forms resulting from a simple analysis of a typical situation, suggests that a vital New Building Block is the junction between realms (places) possessing integrity of function and character, which require protection from interference. (9)

Another example to depict the contradiction between a total design approach and a focus on community would be the work of Yona Friedman, maybe best illustrated in a journal-booklet, Supervision: Series on the Environmental Avant-garde.(10) To tackle the problem of distribution and communication in a large organization, Friedman would propose "special agencies," communities that would stand between center and sub-center.(11) While architects like Chermayeff and Friedman tried to tackle the notion of "environment" in relation networks with a theory and vision on the issue of community; currently, the relationship between the visionary and the community has still remained vital; however, explored merely by the statu quo (e.g. the New Urbanist, the political or military imagination, the Neo-liberal fantasies). With their tremendously rapid multiplication, they have become sole epitomizers and the wildest expressions of our current urban condition and contemporary 'what is out there.'

Parklife: 'You are invited to find your very place in the world'
"It began with the most intriguing invitation. An invitation that requested my presence in Tokyo, Cairo, Paris, New York and Rio De Janeiro…An invitation to dream bigger than I ever thought would be possible: it was an invitation to the World…Choose your island, choose your opportunity. The world is diverse as the Earth itself offering a variety of island sizes. Build anything you desire…The only limit is the imagination…You are invited to find your very own place in the World."

Figure 3: "World Islands," Dubai

It has been announced by some theorists that in the face of the pervasion of informational technologies, flows, and networks, there is a parallel enfolding tendency towards capsules, enclaves or islands, i.e., various forms enclosures in the environment: theme parks, shopping malls, gated communities, free trade zones, corporation/commercial developments, terminal cities, IT campuses, retail chains, offshore outsourcing centers, atrium hotels. These are variously labelled (1) "capsular civilizations," as Lieven

de Cautier terms them in elucidating different forms of suburban enclosures in the contemporary city, and, (2) the spatio-political enclaves or the "critical materialization of digital capitalism" as Keller East

erling calls them. (12) Having different attributes and characteristics, these environmental enclosures are argued to be the paradoxical utopias or spaces of phantasmagoria where—through their "visionary" architectures—the link between reality and fantasy is blurred. (13)

Accordingly, with the announcement of the 'end of public space' in the cities, contemporary urban thought tends to retroactively manifest these 'non-places,' 'capsules' or spaces of phantasmagoria as the manifestation of social imagination and fantasy, as places of seclusion, detachment or security, as illustrations of various forms of parklifes.(14) The fragmentation of the city is argued to be a twentieth century phenomenon, but what seems to make these enclosures special is their level of autonomy compared to the vast amount of infrastructural and global networks into which they are embedded. If the paradox between control and enclosure never stopped haunting architecture and urbanism, maybe expressed best with Elia Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas's Exodus project of the 1960s in which the visionary was illustrated as not innocent, with its franchised and customized enclosures and communities, the status quo markets the visionary as innocent. What if we deal with the enclosed?

IstanPOOL(15) : Enclosures and Temporary Injections

As social norms, i.e. regulative rules, weaken, we must increasingly become…reflexive. We must become as if algorithmic. We must find our own rules and use them generatively. That is we must give the rule to ourselves. We are less rule followers than rule finders.
- Scott Lash

IstanPOOL takes contemporary enclosure as an architectural problem. While zooming on various forms of enclosure sites in Istanbul, the project elaborates the swimming pools of parklifes, be it the pools of clubs, office areas, suburban villas or gated communities. By discussing urban enclosures, a conceptual model or even a humorous urban project is proposed for the contemporary public space where the pools are acknowledged as potential urban voids that are empty and useless while not being used between October and April. Here, the notion of "void" in relation to the empty pools is emphasized through an "IstanPOOL CODE," a pixilated diagram where the volumetric space value of the pools is mapped two dimensionally and the colour tones become significations for numerical data.

In short, IstanPOOL concerns itself with: mapping the pools of the city to project/inject urban scenarios for surrounding enclosed sites for the accommodation of various functions within designated months. While the project plays with the boundaries of the public, private and temporary, the exclusion and enclosing extravaganza turns into a serious urban efficiency and script.

Figure 4: IstanPOOL

Inspired by the tactics that corporation activists use, where the line between humour and seriousness blurs yet collide for a purpose, IstanPOOL flips the ridicule seriousness embedded in contemporary enclosures and their astounding inventiveness, and creates a humorous urban project of absolute seriousness. If irony and exploration (rather than realization) are the mainstream tools for a project, Istan-POOL is interested in irony in the limit it can affect realization. Main premise is to pinpoint and theorize the problem of enclosure and use a project to hijack its reality.

Being a reinforcing component for the project, IstanPOOL video is an exploration or investigation towards the concepts of subjectivity and urbanism in contemporary enclosures. In the video, we follow a character occupying different (and empty) pools in an unspecified city in the winter time with an attempt to define unconventional public spaces inside the pools. As the character occupies pools temporarily, we see his attempt to comprehend his own relation to the city. The video stretches familiar notions of everyday life in the city by unpacking and stretching the meaning of urban void.

1Rem Koolhaas, "Bigness or the Problem of the Large," Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large: Office for Metropolitan Architecture, ed. by Jennifer Sigler, (Rotterdam, Netherlands: 010 Publishers ; New York, N.Y.: Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 499. Rem Koolhaas also begins his retroactive manifesto for Manhattan by writing that "fatal weakness of the manifestoes is their lack of evidence." Rem Koolhaas, Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan, (New York: Oxford Univesity Press, 1978), p. 6. For the reading of landscape and urbanism as an operative surface, see Alex Wall, "Programming the Urban Surface", Recovering Landscape, ed. by James Corner, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), pp.232-249; for seeing the city as the physical manifestation of historical processes see Sanford Kwinter's "Politics and Pastoralism," where Kwinter argues that "[t]he modern city, indeed, may be defined as the place...where matter is shaped by history in a way that is accelerated to the threshold of visibility." Sanford Kwinter, "Politics and Pastoralism," Assemblage 27: 25-32, 1995, pp. 25-32.

2 Rem Koolhaas, in Mutations: Harvard Project on the City, eds. Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, Multiplicity, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist, (Bordeaux : Arc en rêve centre d'architecture, Barcelona : ACTAR, 2000), p. 313.

3 For sociologist Ulbrich Beck, the distinction between action and observation also depicts a disciplinary peculiarity: politics (actor) and political science (observer). Contradicting the postmodern pluralism and dissolution of boundaries through the 'networks' of Castells, 'flows' of Bauman and 'scapes' of Appadurai and 'zombie categories' of national and international, Beck calls for a 'cosmopolitan realism and vision,' a re-conceptualization of power relations (between nation-state and global business) and organizations for our contemporary condition: "'Globalization,' when taken to its logical conclusion, means that the social sciences must be grounded anew as a reality-based science of the trans-national—conceptually, theoretically, methodologically and, incidentally, organizationally as well...[Cosmopolitanism] is a perspective that opposes the abstract, historically deep-frozen concept of the state and politics embedded in assumptions about the meanings and impacts of political and economic boundaries; ...it opposes the abstract notion of global capital as something that irrevocably colonizes state-organized politics." Ulrich Beck, Power in the Global Age: A New Global Political Economy, trans. Kathleen Cross (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005): 50-51.

4. Mostly focused at Berkeley and MIT, the architectural programs started to take a "design science and methods" approach with an attempt to develop a more coherent design knowledge from systems theory, socio-behavioural studies and operations research. As a continuation and broadening of Design Methods Group of the 1960s, Environment Design Research Association (EDRA) was formed in 1968 that would play an important role incorporating knowledge from systems research, social and behavioural sciences. Attempts for a design curriculum change were already made by Buckminster outlining his proposals at the World Design Science Decade documentation at the International Union of Architects initiated first in 1963 "for adoption by world architecture schools." Fuller declared in his proposal that, the "design scientist...will no longer operate on a basis of having to be retained by a client to carry out the client' [and] will be equipped with all of the economic, legal and technological knowledge necessary." R. Buckminster Fuller, Comprehensive Design Strategy, Phase II, Document 6, (Carbondale, IL: World Resources Inventory, Southern Illinois University, 1967), 9.

5. "I strongly emphasize the small self-contained unit with its community centre because new experience here, on the smallest scale, will throw new light also on the complicated problem of the larger cities and the metropolis. It will help gigantic task of humanizing them." Walter Gropius, Scope of Total Architecture, (New York: Harper& Brothers Publishers, 1952), p. 182.

6. The negative connotation of "utopian" is interesting to note here. "Only to consider the types of solutions that we need is not enough; we must at all times consider the ways and means by which they may be implemented, for otherwise they may turn out to be utopian and no of practical value. We must, therefore, conceive an implementation programme and plan. Our whole effort may not lead anywhere, at least for quite some time, if we do not enter the implementation phase as soon as possible. That is why I present a plan for immediate action that can start at once." C. A. Doxiadis, Ecology and Ekistics, ed. by Gerald Dix, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1977), p.3-4.

7 Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander, Community and Privacy: Toward a New Architecture of Humanism, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1963).

8 Letter from Chermayeff to Marshall McLuhan, in Alan Powers, Serge Chermayeff: Designer, Architect, Teacher, (London: RIBA Publications, 2001), p.204.

9 Serge Chermayeff, "The Architectural Condition," Architectural Association Journal, (July-Aug. 1964), p.47.

10 Yona Friedman, "Self-Design," in Super Vision: Series on the Environmental Avant-garde, (Toronto: KAA, 1974), p.[3]. Friedman explored his ideas on community in his projects extensively. See Yona Friedman, Utopies réalisables, (Paris: Union générale d'éditions,) 1976.

11 "It is evident that if internal communication in large communications does not work anymore, reasonable distribution of means of survival (food, energy manufactured products) cannot function without difficulties, even if no scarcity is at hand. Distribution in large organizations is regulated by a central agency. If the central agency no longer communicates effectively with the individual outlets, then the system faces breakdown. A partial breakdown can be alleviated through the use of "special agencies" which act between the 'center' and 'sub-centers'." Yona Friedman, "Self-Design," p.[3]. Friedman explored his ideas on community in his projects extensively. See Yona Friedman, Utopies réalisables, (Paris: Union générale d'éditions,) 1976.1

12 Lieven De Cautier, "The Capsule and the Network: Preliminary Notes for a General Theory" Oase 54 (2001): 122-134; The Capsular Civilization: On the City in the Age of Fear, (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2004). Keller Easterling, Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and Its Political Masquerades, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), p.1.

13 Phantasmagoria is a name invented for an exhibition of optical illusions produced chiefly by means of the magic lantern, first exhibited in London in 1802. The word fantasy (phantasm) also comes from the same root and -agoria comes from the term agora, the ancient Greek public space at the center of Athens, which means the place of assembly. Not surprisingly, in the nineteenth century, phantasmagoria (or 'phantasm objectivity') is used as a metaphor by Karl Marx to theorize the distorting and masking effects of capitalism where the objects transformed into commodity via fetishism. And this theory is also taken up by Walter Benjamin to point out the capitalist illusion of a utopia of progress, and other theorists using different terms for the concept (of masking or illusion) such as Lukacs' reification and also Debord's spectacle. Evidently, the word phantasmagoria for contemporary enclosures exposes both connotations of the word: phantasmagoria oscillates between being a fantasy and an image of mediating relations of power and control. Deriving from the need of security or exclusion, they become spaces of legalized utopias.

14 For the announcement of the 'end of public space' see Michael Sorkin (ed.), Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space, (New York, 1992); for contemporary interpretations on the non-place, see Marc Auge, Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, trans. by John Howe. London; New York: Verso, 1995; for an analysis of various spaces of phantasmagoria see, Stephen Coates and Alex Stetter (eds.), Impossible Worlds, Basel; Boston: Birkhäuser, 2000; for the concept of parklife, see Sven Lutticken, "Parklife," New Left Review 10, July/August 2001, p.111-118.

15 An installation version of IstanPOOL will be exhibited at the 2nd International Architecture Biennale of Istanbul in 2007.