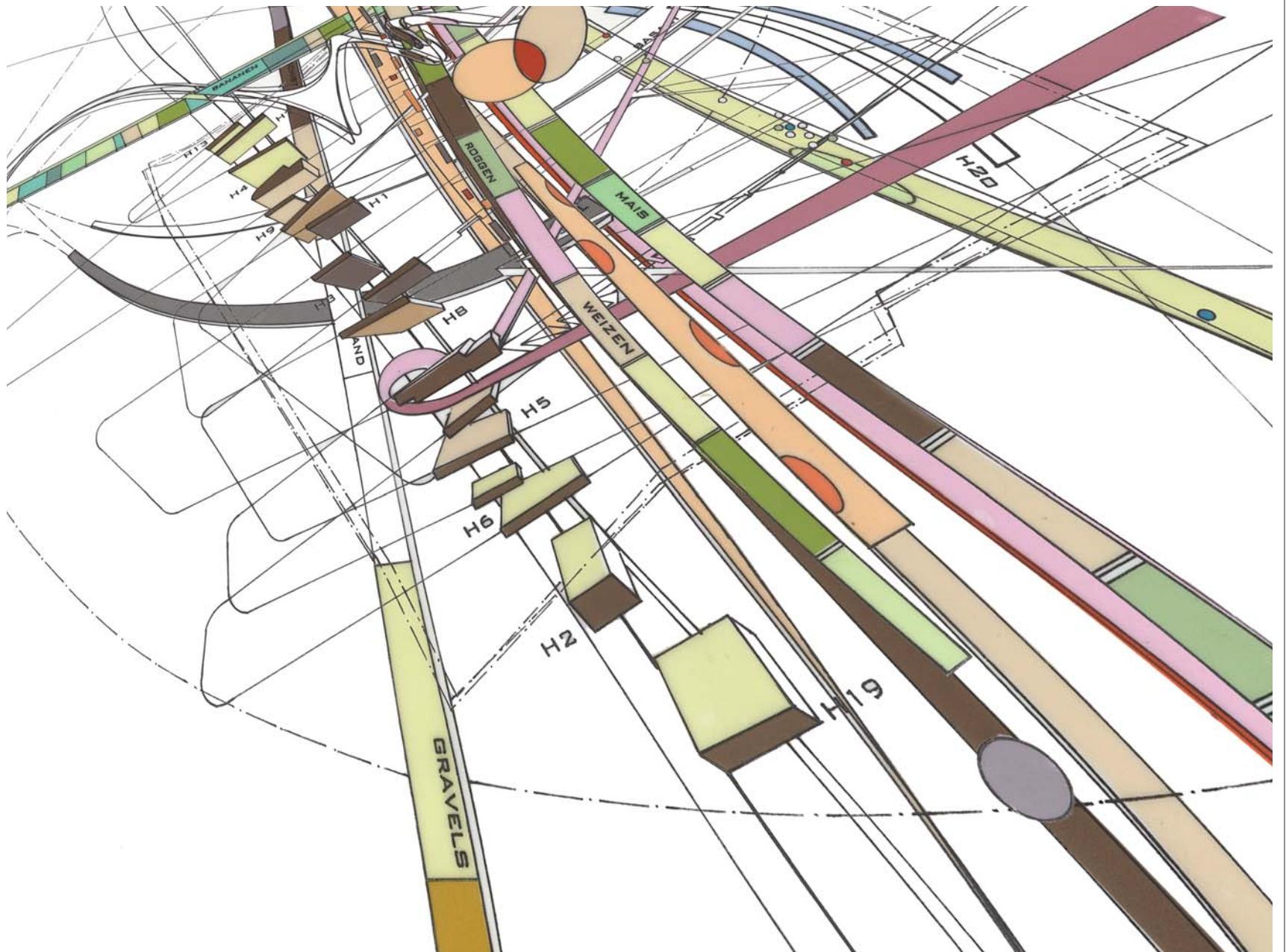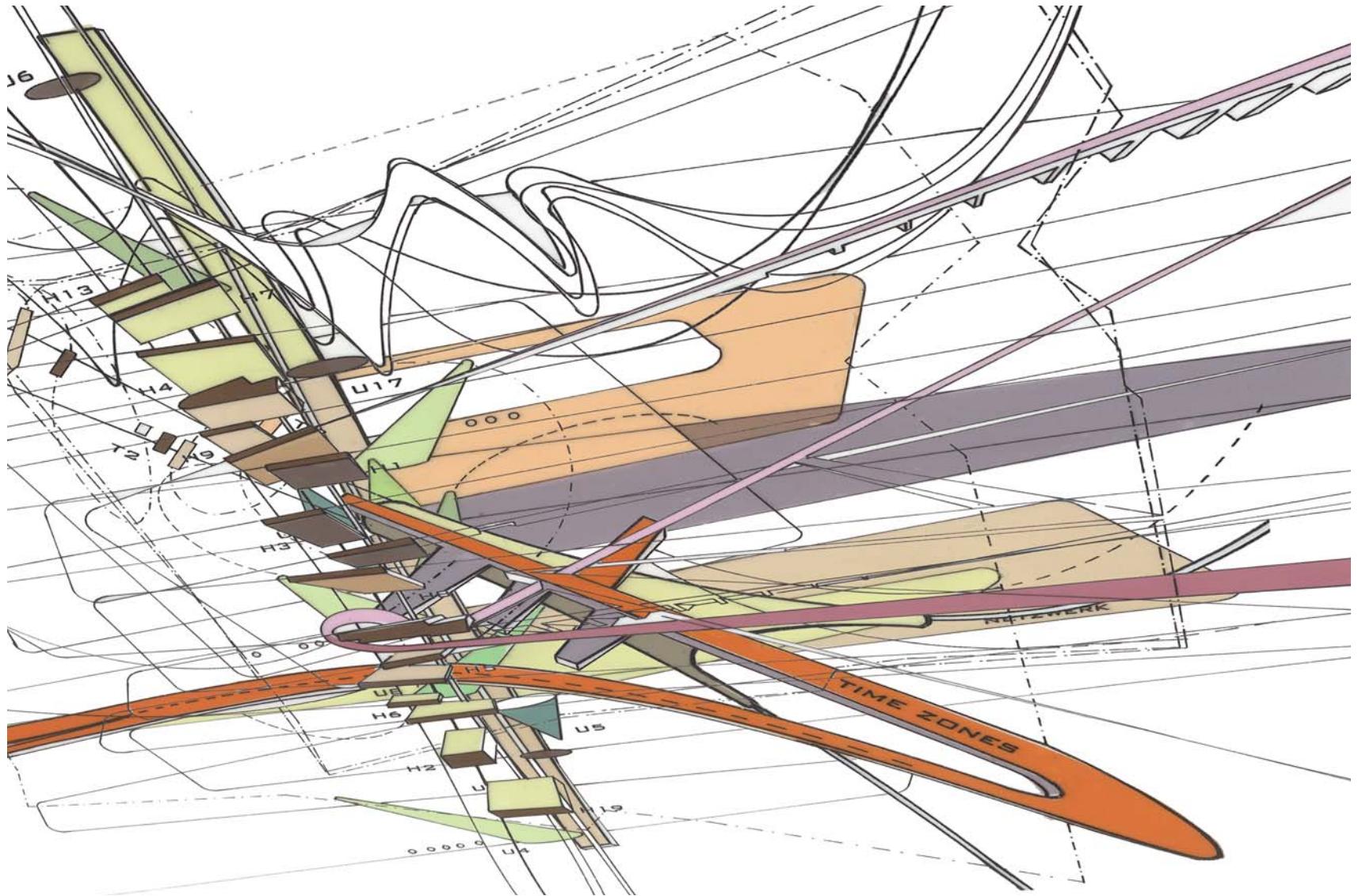# Postcards from an Urban Processor

Petra Kempf

The city can be found nowhere, anywhere and everywhere. Across the world, cities are prospering as systems of interwoven networks, ranging from infrastructural connections to never-ending lines of gossip—backed up by the technological progress and the increased mobility of a transient society.

Cities no longer represent themselves as fixed entities with clear boundaries. Instead, they can now be read as a collection of ever-shifting layers with an elaborate design of geographical, historical, economical, political and cultural sedimentations. These units of organization are reflected in an unceasing process of diversification with various realities of space and time. Within this dynamic flux of multiple perceptions of space and time individuals and collectives are able to move actively and fluidly through space. As a consequence, cities can no longer be viewed exclusively as static or centralized constructs with one single reality. In contrast to outdated theories, such as Walter Christaller's *City Systems in Southern Germany,*[1] the space of the city is dynamic and its spatial qualities consists of a multiplicity of perpetuating interrelationships. These complex relationships are better described more through vigorous processes rather than solely through formal modes of representation.

Urbanists such as Raoul Bunschoten or Kevin Lynch, designers such as Rem Koolhaas or Bernard Tschumi, theorists such as Michel de Certeau or Gilles Deleuze, and cultural activists such as Guy Debord of the Situationists International seem to concur that urban space should be described less through physical or formal objectives viewed from above—but rather through a series of open processes that allow the changing scenes of the urban theater to be experienced from within.

This point of view, in which space is liberated from its purely static existence towards a more dynamic one, has a greater potential and significance in
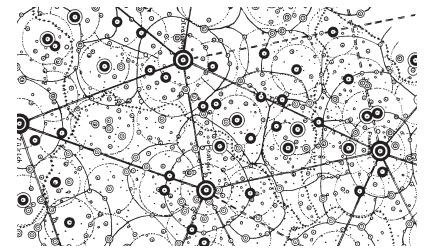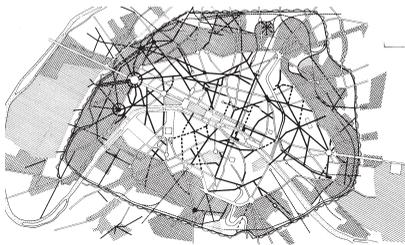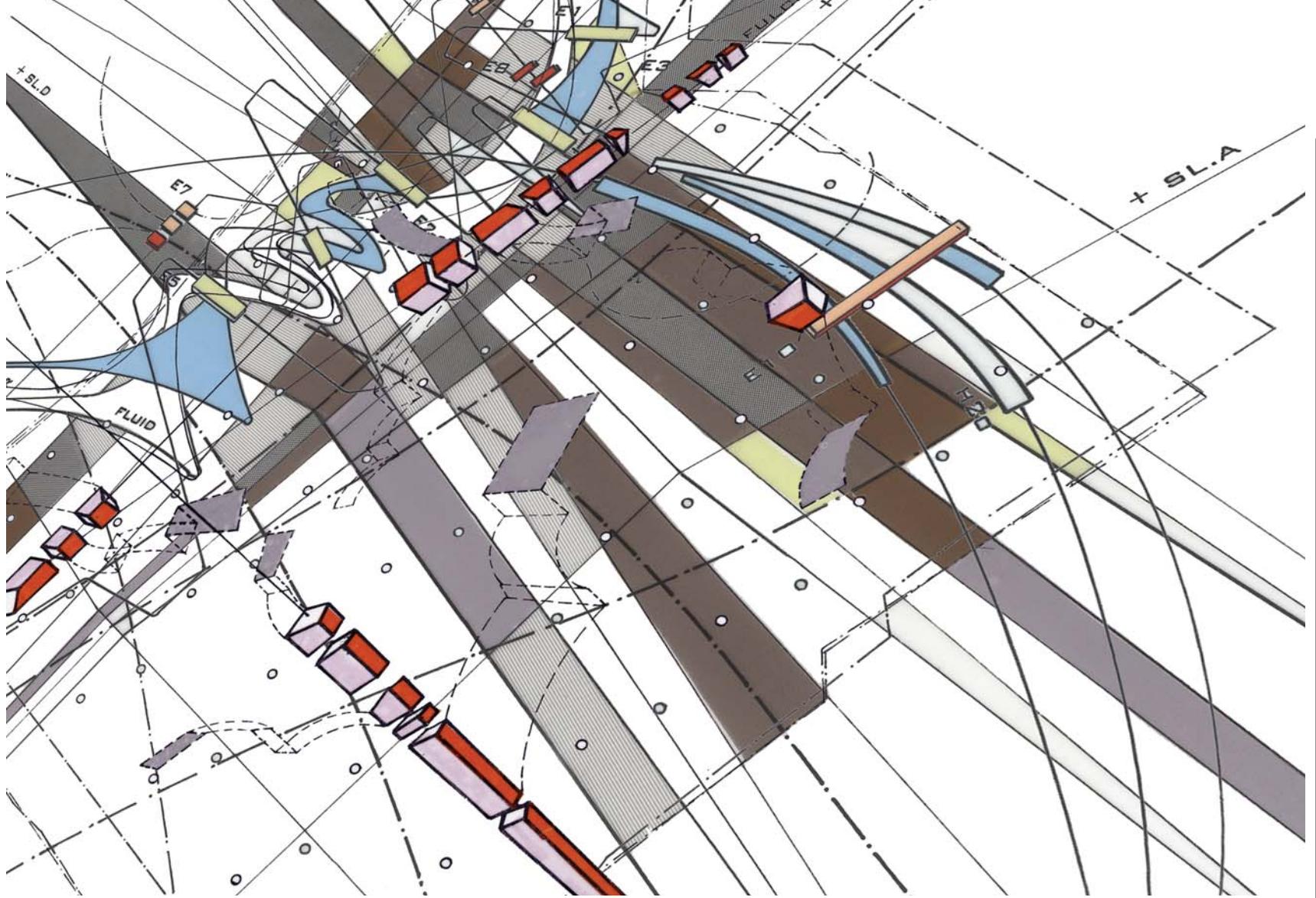

Diagram of Die Zentralen Orte in Suddeutschland by Walter Christaller, 1968.

9

Masterplan of Baron Haussmann's most important interventions. The new street system is marked in black.

approaching the urban context. After all, space has never been easily defined, but is a complex construct, filled with events and traces of life. It has always been informed by the imprints that individuals and collectives leave while passing through—stories consisting of an overlay of different journeys processed through multiple frames with numerous realities and time-sets.

Yet, current representations of space such as those of bureaucratic institutions in the sector of planning, or urban design and landscape, have not appropriated an effective method to visualize and represent the constantly-changing character of the city. Based on the tradition of form and function, these agencies are still applying the treatise of the plan as the primary mode

of representing the urban construct, allowing the happenings of everyday life to slip silently through the cracks of their routines.

Generally, mapping the city was the responsibility of the military. These cartographers, sequestered from the circus of the everyday, always represented the city from a single point of view. It was, first, in Paris where Napoleon divorced cartography and mapmaking from the military by choosing the great Baron Haussmann to design a masterplan for the rapid expansion of the French capital city. From that moment on, the act of making maps has been a civil pursuit. This change, happening in the nineteenth century, marked an important turning point in the perception of cities. With the

evolving means to understand the city fabric, it was no longer perceived as an inert whole, but as a fragmented and mobile entity that can actually transform over time. Consequentially, this development forced city planners to turn their emphasis away from the building blocks of architecture towards issues of circulation and traffic, the space of the avenues, the streets and the alleys.

Although planners did recognize the need to acknowledge the city as a constantly-changing entity, they somehow neglected to face the importance in finding adequate means to represent the emerging conditions of the city. Starting with Baron Haussmann's great plan of Paris or Le Corbusier's "La Ville Contemporaine," to name
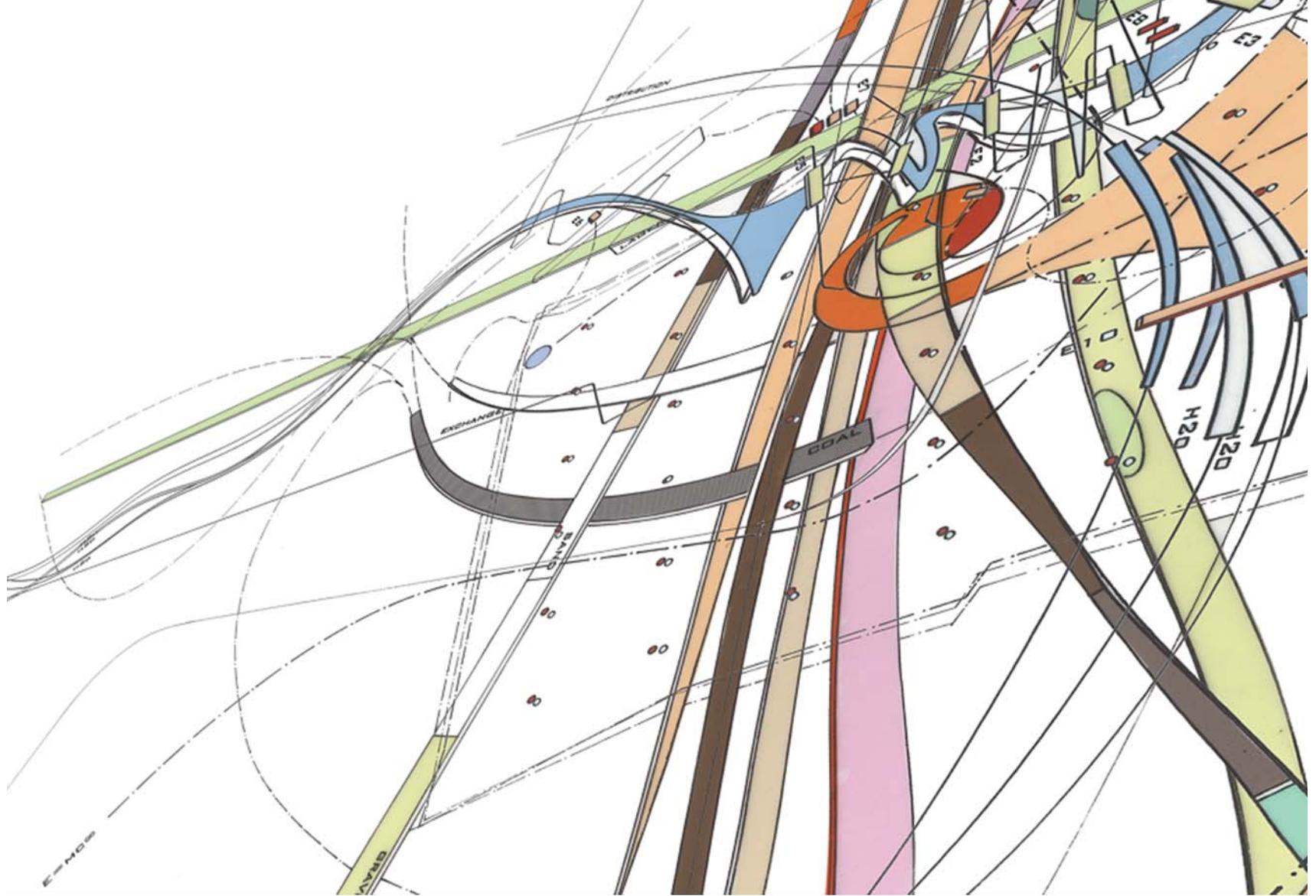
just a few, they seemed to be more infatuated with the necessity of finding solutions to control the rapidly expanding urban beast.[2] At the same time, this relentless obsession with management also embodies its predicament. The spirit of a city can by no means be mastered or restrained, or even represented from a single point of view. As mentioned earlier, the city is a constantly-shifting organism, and reveals itself through various time perceptions and multiple realties, which ultimately can never be controlled or predicted through master planning as a sole means of representation.

Concurrently, while sorting through the noise of history and being engaged with the spirit of the city, the urgency

in finding new customs of creating urban paradigms became inevitable. Looking back on the evolution of cities, one needs to not only comprehend historical facts, but also to question how one immerses oneself in the city without loosing sight of individual subjectivity. Ultimately, the task remains to represent the city and its complexities without falling into simplistic treatises.

In refining method and analytical approach it is helpful to look back in time even further. It was Aristotle who devised an approach based on breaking an argument down into its discrete parts. For him, it was vital to identify the essential traits of things by distinguishing things from other things through the mechanism of clas-

sifying schemes. This theory produces verifiable categories of analysis where, after separation, components may be brought back together to form again a unified whole. This long-practiced mode of thinking, inherent to Aristotle's method, might offer the mapmaker an alternative method in order to approach and process the urban fabric. Although we will never fully comprehend the entire complexity and spirit of the city in one single moment, we can understand the urban construct through the act of distinguishing it in its various parts. These distinct components provide the opportunity to re-unite the complex city through configurations into larger patterns. This set of pre-structured frames becomes a possible tableau for new activities and understandings.
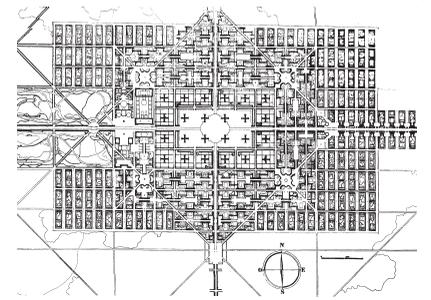
Le Corbusier. Plan of the Ville Contemporaine, 1922.
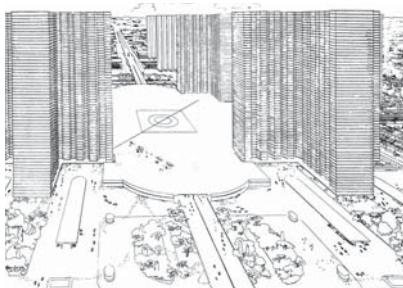
Le Corbusier. View of the Gare Centrale, Plan Voisin, 1925.

Mapping cities is an exacting activity. Architects, urban designers and planners are continually fascinated by finding new means to frame urban configurations. Unfortunately, this fascination has not been explored enough. There have been only a few exceptions where someone utilized new practices of mapping. Only then, when these professions acknowledge the urban space through multiple realities, can mapping become a possible framing device to document the urban space—abstract, yet tangible; analytic, yet didactic; descriptive, yet open programmatically. Unlike plans, maps provide multiple readings and they are connectable in all of their dimensions. Maps can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual or a social formation. Maps create a frame for many realities to co-exist simultaneously. Whether these representations are categorically maps or diagrams, they will always function provisionally. They provide the freedom to frame and organize complex configurations—always divorced from a belief in scientific reality, they encourage the mapmaker to tackle the visual and the discursive.

More so, the act of orchestrating and formulating maps is based on the process of visualizing facts, observations and ideas in which the mapmaker's particular imagination is a celebrated part of the whole procedure. As a motorcyclist becomes one with the motorcycle, the mapmaker also becomes one with the map. Through this kind of symbiosis, the author of any given map will open up new possibilities to see, discover and engage him/herself with the urban space. These maps could function as imaginative wings—without repeating Daedalus' fatal design—to transpire us into unknown territories beyond the furthest reaches of our imagination.

'Met[r]onymy I' is a mapping game based on the observation, organization and transformation of urban settings. The project was launched in 2001 as an act of cross-fertilizing my own experiences while being engaged with cities—both through words and images. As I collected maps and stories of cities, I realized the pressing need for a framework, functioning in a metonymic manner, to comprehend the constant changing character of these urban organisms. Since then, I have been engaged in an ongoing process wherein the urban fabric is being revealed and analyzed through its discrete parts.

'Met[r]onymy I' is a game that contains an expanding series of images and stories that diagram the city by translating data from different sources into a common language. By overlaying the diagrams in unanticipated combinations, the game frames "the city" through its components. This project is an urban processor at work. By isolating, overlaying, and framing individual layers, multiple perceptions and viewpoints emerge. These perceptions, ranging from an individual's to a collective's, are compressed into metaphoric postcards of the city.

The game consists of five fixed operational categories (Cosmological Ground, Passengers, Transit Zones, Margins and Formulation). Each category consists of a set of terms that change form with the diagrams. These terms come together to develop patterns and layers. Every layer operates as a stakeholder and can be related to any other layer within the parameters of the game. The five categories are:

Cosmological Ground
The geological ground articulates the stage for urban intervention. It is a surface that is not a white page, but rather holds intricate designs of historical and geographical sedimentation on which traces of life are revealed. It sets up a field for actions and pos-

sible transformations. This open stage provides the ground for dreams and desires and provides a space from which to depart and arrive.

Passengers

Multiple identities evolve and pass through the urban landscape in their various roles and existence. While passing through, they act as agents collecting and distributing words by configuring them into stories. These narrative structures produce cultural phenomena.

Transit Zones

Constantly changing formulations create a limitless configuration of emerging Transit Zones. Corridors of movement (airways, waterways, highways, and railways) are the true communal spaces of our age. These vectors of movement are the seedlings for new developments and events. Within the established network, they provide the possibility to be connected by various modes of transportation to other points in the cosmos. Mobility of communication and transport technologies reduce distances between Transit Zones and give the opportunity to migrate and spread information easily from one place to another.

Margins

Shifting forces define the perception of boundaries. These boundaries vary in their existence. Municipalities, districts or states are represented as a clear line on a map, while human boundaries are revealed through a net of cultural rituals and traditions. Boundaries are subject to constant change. They emerge and disappear according to applied forces. These forces may be of ecological, cultural, or political nature.

Formulation

An adaptable set of rules accommodates the complexity of strata in the cosmos. Political, economic, and social structures create rules for their internal and external existence. They are variable and provide a base on which individuals and collectives can interact.

The sum of the five categories represents a framework for creating new urban connections. The organization of the established overlays is based on the experience of the individual or collective playing the game. Experience derives from the German word *Erfahrung*, which means, from the old German *irfaran*, to go out, to cross or to wander. To experience the dynamic nature of

city one must be willing to wander. Wandering in the city requires curiosity and an open mind in which the stories of manifold combinations can be discovered. Walking transforms into line, line slips into form, form slips into space, space slips into place, place slips into image and image slips into diagram.

This had been my occupation beyond a hundred preoccupations: to integrate my spirit with the city at the deepest level of apperception, to organize its myriad spaces and their moments into a matrix coextensive with the fabric of my mind...
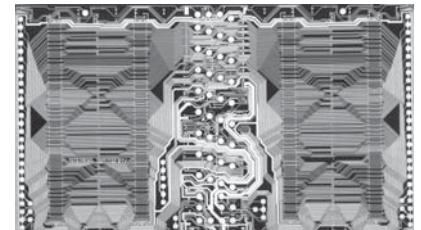
—E. Darton

Cosmological Ground
Topography from Structure and Surface, *Museum of Modern Art, 1998.*
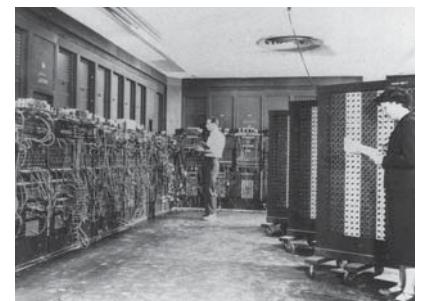

Passengers
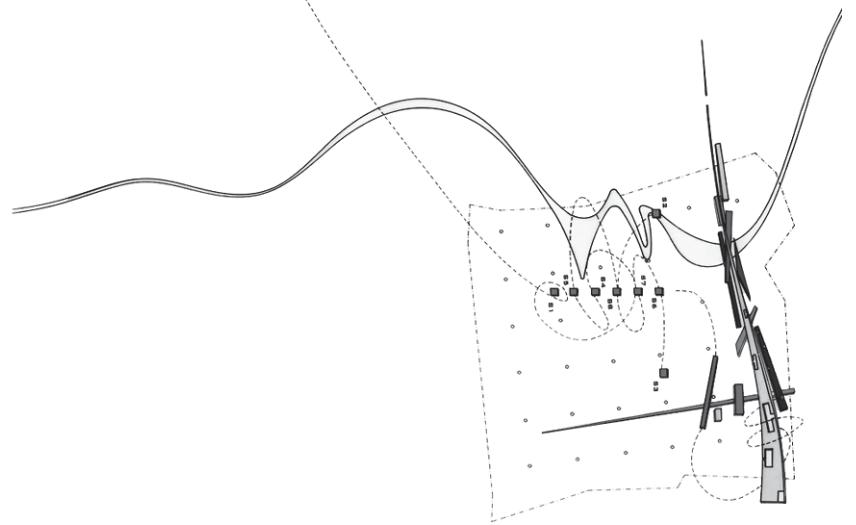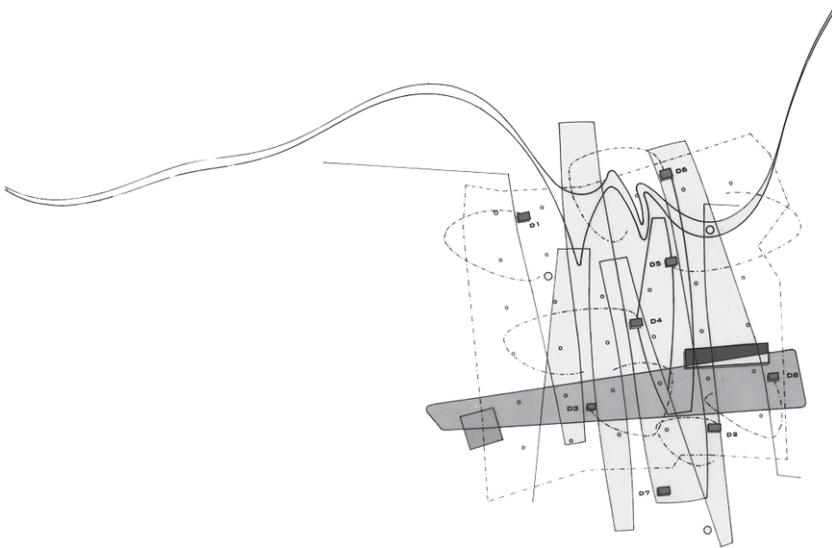*Barcelona Metapolis, Actar, 1998. Photo by Manuel Gausa de Mas, 1960.*
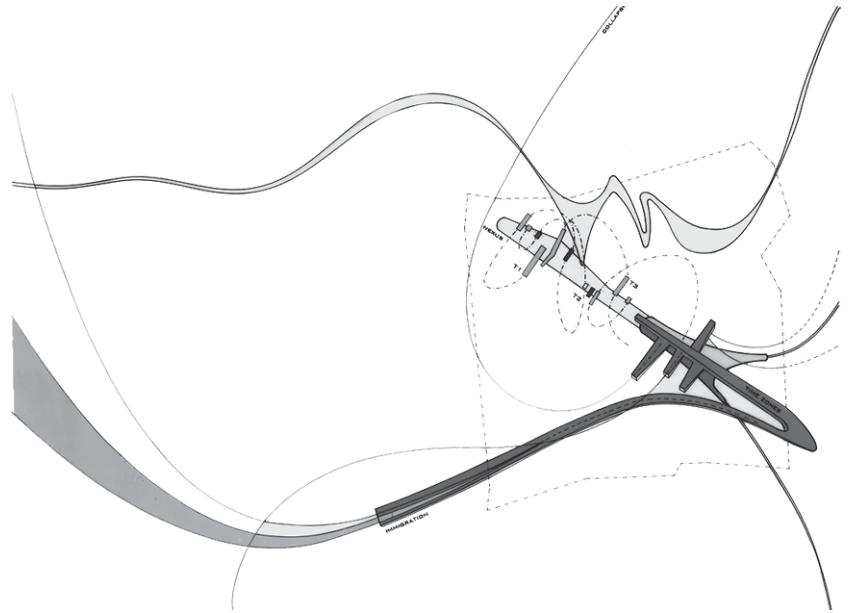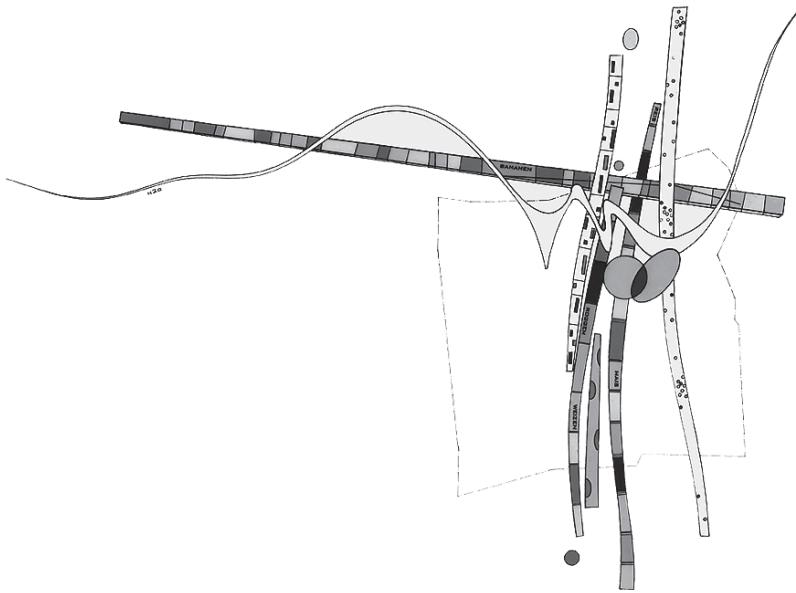

Transit Zones
Dynamic Random Access Memory Chip. The Museum of Modern Art, 1990.

Margins
Raoul Bunschoten , "Chora Manifesto" in Daidalos, Architecture, Art, Culture: *72, 1999.*

Formulation
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1990.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1]Published in 1933, German geographer Walter Christaller's theory explained how urban settlements evolve and are spaced out in relation to each other. His model is embedded in a Euclidean, isotropic plane and uses geometric shapes, such a hexagons and triangles to form links and hierarchies between different nodes. This theory was at that time considered a major breakthrough in predicting and understanding the hierarchical development of settlements.

[2]As these planners and architects kept lingering in their representational comfort zone while trying to control the urban fabric, artistic movements such the Cubists, the Surrealists or the Futurists, liberated from any kind of bureaucratic agency, experimented motion passionately through newly-formed graphic means. See: See: Moholy-Nagy, L., *Vision in Motion,* 1947; Apollonio Umbro, *Futurist Manifestos,* 1973.

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