

Imagination: Tools for Describing and Imagining the Contemporary City

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Abstract

The continuous changes in the city imply a necessary rethinking of the tools –in the field of drawing and representation– to read, interpret and describe urban changes and contingent conditions in order to imagine possible futures. The drawing of projective geometry, as well as the hyper-realist tendency of representation, do not turn out to be suitable to return the ‘materials’ of the complex urban assemblage. Therefore, the present contribution aims to investigate the potential of two precise tools, the diagram and the collage. They are well established tools in the disciplinary sphere because they are elastic devices of knowledge and imagination. A theoretical-practical exploration is proposed that traces the origins, evolutions and drifts to contemporary experiments that, while fixing a precise image, refer to forms of imagination, demonstrating the different potentials of these tools.

The diagram reducing and the collage assembling, have been protagonists of radical imaginaries and investigations of reality; it is no coincidence that the members of Team X, as well as the Radicals have used both tools producing a legacy of thought picked up by the architect of complexity, Koolhaas (and the generation of his students). A matrix that breaks into the age of figurative realism today and that, with digital tools, opens up a possible new phase of thinking to build complex maps and eclectic looks.

Keywords: complexity, imagery, collage, diagram, representation.

Introduction

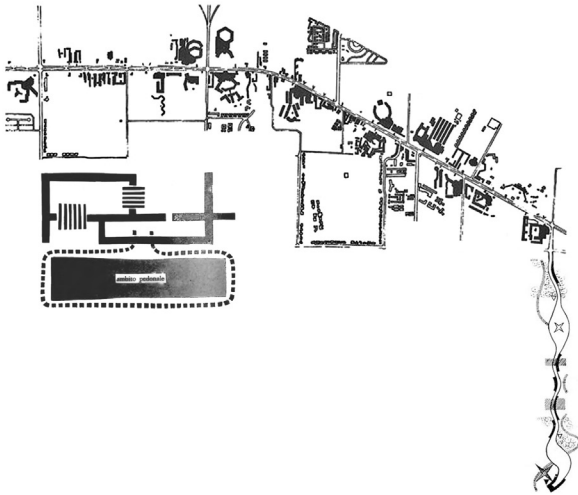
The contemporary city is an entity of plural and difficult unambiguous definition. Composed, as Koolhaas describes in the text *La (non più) città*, of an elusive urban substance that is entirely new. Its characters seem to be, among others, mutability and instability; two terms certainly not unheard of in the urban lexicon and with respect to which we still wonder about the tools-as well as the methods-of reading, description, interpretation and imagination. Urban as well as human changes, conditions that are constantly changing and multiplying, make us read the urban landscape as an assemblage of heterogeneous and contradictory materials, visible as much as invisible, global as much as local, formal as much as informal, etc. Looking at cities as figures of complexity, in their spatial dimension as much as

in their human dimension, poses some of the challenges to which urban disciplines are called to respond; these inevitably invest the irreplaceable tool of drawing and representation, with which images and imaginaries, the foundational elements of architectural discourse, are articulated.

Ways of representing, as well as designing, are areas of possible critical interpretation of the space of living and, the interrelation between images and design (as a tool of knowledge) was already clear in Camillo Boito's statement that architecture is, of all the arts, the most boring to hear about. Operant observation and description of contexts always return the translation of what is observed; thus passing through the “ability of the designer to select, read and interpret the traces of the context” [Scala 2022, p. 99].

A quest, this, which in contemporary times found experimentation in the season of the *Eclectic Atlases* during which, complex description was identified as a means to delineate the field of investigation and the point of view. Moreover, those same years witnessed a 'denunciation' about the weakness of the 'tools', as well as the categories, with which mutations and new parts of the city, which were absolutely unpredictable, were looked at. Photographs, diagrams and montages are scattered throughout the publications to recount the materials with which one was confronted and which still interrogate the experimentation or rediscovery of tools for: knowing, understanding, interpreting, describing and imagining possible futures. (Re)drawing, like naming, are the operations through which to know emerging, uncoded issues for which, however, drawing projective geometry alone does not prove to be sufficient. In fact, the representation "shows itself as a critical tool, of interpretation, of discretization, of arbitrary but conscious reduction of complexity, in the elements of a visual synthesis that is in itself a design act, whose existence is first of all to decode the syntax of the elements of the existing, sometimes to prospect a new one that is capable of taking into account the reasons and tensions of an urban space understood as a space of

Fig. 1. Crase, *Learning from images of cities and relationships* (graphic elaboration by the author).



life in which to design new attributions of meaning" [Cirafo 2020, p. 3105]. Thus, the drawn image has as much prefigurative as documentary value and the evident current urban condition suggests the necessary re-discovery of some tools capable of holding together heterogeneous aspects, unstable characters and, often, conditions not present in official representations.

Within the scope of this contribution, we aim to (di)show the potential of diagrams and collages –cyclically rediscovered and debated 'tools'– in transforming images into imaginaries, unraveling latent urban conditions, subverting viewpoints, provoking critical thinking, and bringing forth new research and design questions that are grafted onto reality. Both are also used for the construction of the iconographic apparatus with the aim of building the theoretical-critical associations of reference based on images and imaginaries. The following paragraphs are constructed as critical maps through the manipulated images, the result of selecting and juxtaposing segments of the state of the art united by the goal of searching for a new way of looking at things. The assemblage between different authors –the collage of collages, the assemblage of different representations– is intended to make explicit the common tendencies and cross-references between different authors, so as to identify specific pieces of research that break the codified systems concerning reading, interpretation and representation.

Useful tools

The signs of the diagram as much as the mechanism of the collage challenge standardized representations by offering new opportunities for thinking; their combination in reading contexts as much as in the design narrative, producing dense images, manages to hold together more or less (in) disciplined aspects. Drawing is a tool that stimulates and directs the imagination of the author and the viewer; the kind of communication that diagrams and collages return could be called open [1], with a wide range of possibilities. Despite the differences between the two representational techniques, one can recognize in both a diagrammatic attitude if one considers Deleuze's definition of it as an abstract machine and conceptual device.

Concerning the diagram, it can be understood as "a device capable of absorbing the potentialities of the place, introducing new realities and at the same time leaving open the

definition of the final configuration of the project [...] the diagram tells with little information. [...] it unites the two powerful regimes of space (the visible) and language (the invisible but omnipresent system)" [Marini 2010, p. 38].

Thus, it fixes the relationships between the parts and brings out the invisible structures; in fact, this representation has been used even before architects, by lawyers, philosophers and theorists to describe different forms of organization according to spatial relationships.

Collage, on the other hand, acquires different meanings and is structured in infinite combinations; it can be used to relate together a series of fragments that belong to us or that are extracted from reality in order to combine them together and define new images. The collage in architecture, in particular, appears to us as a representation –with obvious symbolic value– of the presence of incongruous elements that are held together. This character of his is showcased at Moma in 2013 with *Cut'n'past*, a review of paradigmatic experiments that punctuated its use, potential and perspectives. These two tools, because of the immediately communicative image they produce, can be used to manifest interests and lateral looks. The potential of manipulated images –whether in the translation into lines, dots and surfaces of diagrams or in the assemblage of fragments of images in collages– lies in relating different times and spaces. As Corbellini [2] writes, they are tools of reading and design because, in fact, they are tools of design as they are of reading, capable of weaving meaningful relationships between reality, its interpretations and the directions of its transformation [Corbellini 2006, p. 88]. They allow us to arrive at an interpretive reading that selects materials to be returned, pertaining to different domains and with a strongly interdisciplinary and relational nature. Both have marked the production of the design disciplines with ever-changing objectives, and with respect to the very dense apparatus of possible references [3], which we do not have the space to report here, we recognize precise segments of the state of the art in which the link between the use of these 'tools' and the overcoming of established codes or the introduction of new points of view is evident.

The selection of the periods between the 1950s and 1970s and the season of the 2000s is a function of the recognition of the paradigmatic use of these tools, with reference to the shifts from analysis to urban reading, from purely compositional researches to those about the project as a device.

A practical state of art: subverting point of view

The 1960s and 1970s are marked by the publication of texts in which the graphic component is renewed to address unprecedented urban facts and new research questions based on the desire to understand the complexity of reality while avoiding too many simplifications. There is a break that is as much conceptual as graphic showing the strong interrelationship between thought and drawing. From the American scene, Kevin Lynch initiates a season of urban studies with a marked diagrammatic dimension with which the author constructs new *Images of cities*. He does so by reducing the graphic signs of urban elements and experimenting with a communication that shifts attention from purely spatial aspects to interpretive/perceptual aspects and the temporal dimension. The construction and recognizability of the urban landscape is entrusted to images that are the result of a "reciprocal process between observer and thing observed" [Lynch 1964, p. 140]. Precisely through the tool of the diagram that reduces and selects, Lynch manages to eliminate the superfluous elements of the narrative by making it an immediate mental

Fig. 2. Text and images extracted from the text *La modernité critique* (graphic elaboration by the author).

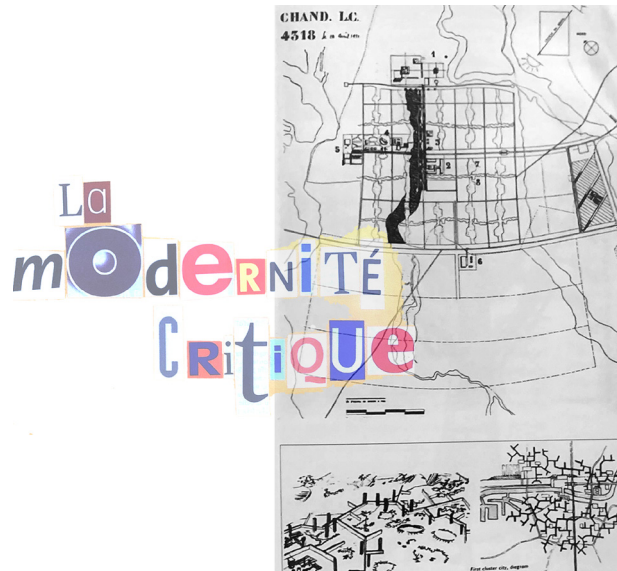
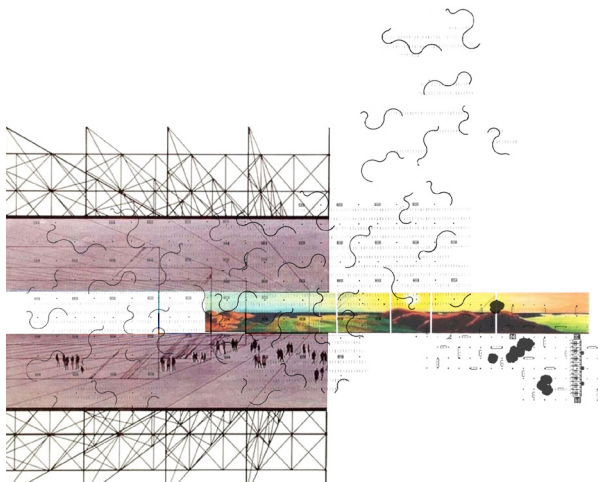


image. These are also the years of *Learning from Las Vegas*, in which R. Venturi, D. S. Brown and S. Izenour are confronted with the observation of a piece of the city with an ordinary and unexplored character. In fact, they proposed a method of looking at and learning from the existing and, at the same time, they also confronted with the tools of understanding and restitution of the piece of the city; a research that flowed into the use of photographic fragments and diagrammatic restitution that make up the strip reading. Two experiments that represented a break from previous urban codes and marked a line of research that finds, at the same time, another path in the authors Chermayeff and Alexander; these represent a significant node for the use of the diagram as a tool to counteract the predisposition of typological forms and stereotypes. The critical categories introduced in the considerations of those years did, in fact, challenge representation and entail a necessary reinterpretation of the related iconographic apparatus. These first three experiences –held together in the synthesis image (fig. 1)– delineate the obsolescence of the beaux-art representation or projective geometry, in rendering the complexity of the new fields of inquiry. In

Fig. 3. Use of collage and diagram in the no stop city (graphic elaboration by the author).



the composition of a single image, the common features of the representation become more explanatory and configure a first experimental piece of urban reading.

Relationships, reductions and subversions...also accompany the production of diagrams and collages that can be traced back to a more European season, marked by a gradual rapprochement of the project to reality and the overcoming of the dictates of the Modern. This is what happens, albeit in a different way, with the provocative collages or city-diagrams of the Radicals and, within CIAM, with the production of Team X, examples of which are given. It is with this season that the tools of drawing and representation explicitly become devices of knowledge, critical thinking and imagination. If one browses through the CIAM IX volume, *La modernité critique* one can see how very heterogeneous images follow one another. Drawings of descriptive geometry, perspectives and even bird's eye images are interposed with diagrams as much as collages, as well as posters with a strong communicative impact. Page 37 features Le Corbusier's drawing for *The Chandigarh City Plan* and the Smithsons' *Cluster city*, a duo that compares two generations and their representations (fig. 2). Within Team X [4], the Smithsons used diagrams and photomontages with different objectives. As shown in the image, for *Cluster city*, the diagram becomes the means of explicating the infrastructure of thought rather than formal outcomes; proposing a new way of thinking about the city according to cluster principles which find in the diagram the possibility of being represented. Photomontages, on the other hand, are used –as in the case of Golden Lane– to provoke new imagery with the juxtaposition of alienating elements. Improbable juxtapositions that produce radical imagery can be found in the images of rupture produced by the Radicals. The 1950s, 1960s and 1970s are marked by the production of elaborations that oscillated between utopian futures and provocative realities. It returned a completely new way of looking at the present and bringing out questions of design, as well as defining a critique of contemporary conditions and those that were foreshadowed. A cultural front that elaborated hypotheses for a profound renewal of the project and its value as a tool of knowledge, entrusting the restitution to complex graphic elaborations. The series of images describing Archizoom's *No-stop city* is emblematic; also a critical (ironic?) critique of Modern principles, is thought of and told through both diagrammatic images of cities and collages constructed of recognizable physical elements and ideas of possible futures –held together in

an unprecedented way in the image— while dematerializing the more figurative aspect of architectural representations to which we were accustomed (fig. 3).

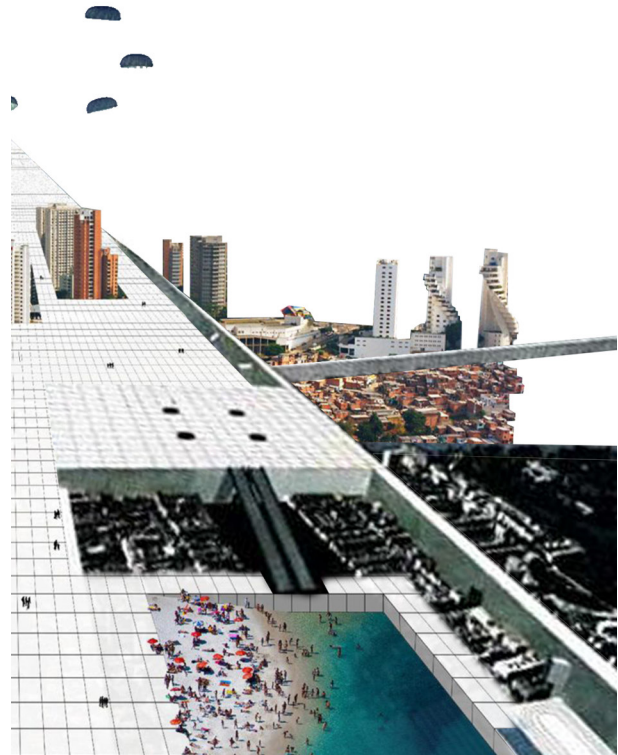
As part of the Radicals, Y. Friedman, with the decades-long graphic production that accompanied his theoretical positions, demonstrated the potential of using graphs and collages as tools of knowledge and simultaneously of thought and communication. In the continuous overlapping of these types of representation, he constructed his knowledge device of which the iconographic apparatus of the *Ville spatiale* is emblematic. Friedman invents his language in line with his democratic utopian thinking [Tucci 2021, p. 199] by relying on simple images. A series of collages in which the unexpected, the unstable, the idea of infrastructure for living is materialized by evoking its deeper meanings.

Contemporary imagery

The images and imagery recounted have, in fact, challenged the interfacing of disciplinary tools with aspects of complexity and contemporaneity, seeking ever new ways that adhere to the character of the phenomena under investigation. A legacy that has been scattered across the disciplinary landscape 'exploding' in various directions and has since been absorbed by the architect of complexity, Rem Koolhaas, a figure who ferries the 'discourse' to contemporaneity. He has always accompanied his theoretical production with a dense iconographic apparatus made up of various experiments from the point of view of representation, used as a tool for knowledge and argumentation of the critical and cultural positions expressed. In fact, while in the 1970s Rowe and Cotter "proposed an urbanism based [...] on the tool of collage for a seemingly anti-utopian and hermeneutic practice" [Madraccio, Porcile 2021, p. 24], OMA used collage as a renewing tool towards architecture. In *Exodus, The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture-the Allotments*, we see "drawings that, juxtaposed with newspaper images and photographs, constitute a pictographic storyboard of the project idea" [Valentine 2022, p. 195]. In the early part of his production, the absorption of the Radicals' solicitations is evident, as seen in the montage of *Continuous Monument* and *Exodus* (fig. 4).

Instead, moving a bit further in time, references become less explicit and more reabsorbed in images, which change as research paradigms shift. Especially with the studies that flowed into *Multiplicity*, diagrams are reaffirmed as tools

Fig. 4. *Continuous exodus* (graphic elaboration by the author).



for understanding the emerging realities that were being investigated, whether shopping malls or the informal production of space in the contemporary city. In fact, in the section on Lagos, diagrammatic representations are used, accompanied by photographic campaigns, to understand and render the characters and elements of the megalopolis. Similarly, in the USE research [5], thus returning to the Italian scene, one finds photographs associated with diagrams, necessary tools for the investigation of the not certain, understood as a permeating character of contemporaneity. In the image, the superimposition of two different studies, belonging to the same season of studies, makes evident the necessary character of the restitution of unpublished pieces of the city for urban studies; few selected elements that seem to recall those experiments proposed in the first montage and that, clearly identify the objects of study (fig. 5). From themes made explicit with collages to those requiring diagrammatic representations, there is a record of using these devices to reduce the disconnect between research, design and urban reality made up of

phenomena as complex as they are unstable. The generation of Koolhaas' students –traceable in MVRDV and BIG, among others– have pushed hard on the communicative and design dimensions of these two tools.

Perspectives

In the meantime, another season of contemporary studies opens to research perspectives that investigate the need for forms of description and investigation of contemporary phenomena referable to the issues also addressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development –such as, for example, the reduction of inequality and the construction of the city and sensitive communities– but also to the multicultural character of cities, the spatial effects of migration and the right to the city, the proliferation of slums...all phenomena that invest the relationship between image, reality and change. In the context of the 'new urban crisis', of the problematic dimension of living and the idea of an open and inclusive city,

Fig. 5. Diagrams from Mutations: the experimentation of the Eclectic Atlas season. On the left a page from USE research and on the right a diagram on Lagos studies (graphic elaboration by the author).

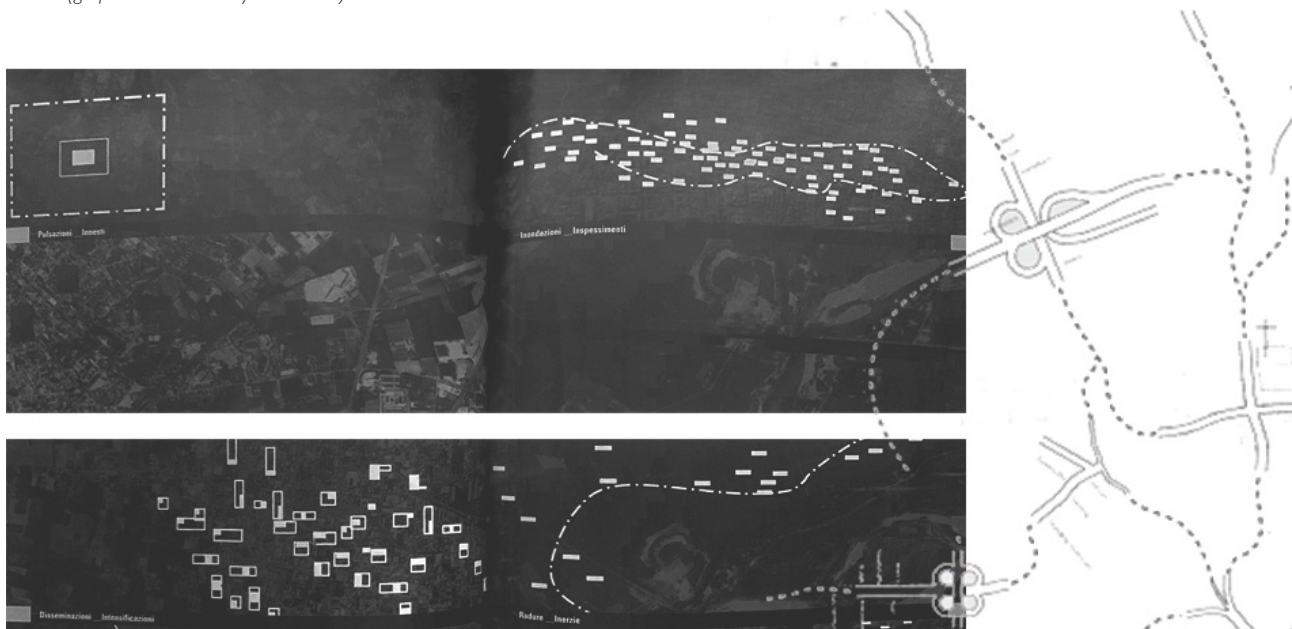


Fig. 6. Learning from Jan Gehl (graphic elaboration by the author).



the power of images in introducing renewed and subversive points of views, finds an experimentation founded again on collages and diagrams. These, understood as supporting devices in the broader methodological processes of knowing and imagining possible futures. In his study of public space and to return the human dimension in his studies, Jan Gehl, especially in his research *How to study public life* uses collages, montages, and diagrams as tools to return observations of city life, uses, and interactions between people and spaces. A reading of the existing material and immaterial that flows into the design questions with which we ask how we can indulge and reinterpret what is already happening in the spaces of the city. Collages are used as the opening image of the survey section whereby, on the one hand, the synthesis of the image returns a clear message and, on the other, individual elements are identified and held together. The diagrams, on the other hand, are given the task of returning the specific investigations and the qualitative aspects of them; point and linear elements follow one another, reconstructing the complexity of the public space and the conditions that, selected, observed and understood, represent the reference from which the design process is triggered (fig. 6).

At a different scale and in a more conflicted context, Cruz + Forman studio to investigate and then communicate the research themes that insist on the Tijuana/San Diego border as a global laboratory uses diagrams, collages, and montages.

Fig. 7. *Naked San Diego/Tijuana* (graphic elaboration by the author).



The same tools are used to represent and bring to attention the creative intelligence of the most disadvantaged communities, the relationship between the formal and the informal city, and the research theme of the wall and the border with its subversion; a theme that traces the Koolhaasian matrix and reworks it by becoming a manifesto of an idea of public and complex infrastructure architecture. To restore the character of the border and its interpretation in design elaborations, Cruz + Forman construct an 'analogous' representation by mounting significant frames along this line. A line theorized as the *Political Equator* that is also a complex representation project that problematizes the global-local pair. The studio works with elaborations that hold collages and diagrams together and critically return a reading of the existing but also processual and imaginative mechanisms. In the experiments described it seems that the images are constructed precisely by looking at that state of the art presented in the previous paragraph, with accents on certain references such as the production of the Situationist International [6]. Emblematic in this sense is *Access all areas: the porosity of a hostile border*, which, in its being a contemporary image, reinterprets the principles but also the representation of the *Naked City*, proposing a new image of urban drifts; a perfect theoretical as much as graphic overlap as shown by the image's crisis (fig. 7).

Precisely in reference to the latter, which are often associated in literature with informal pieces of cities, the experimentation from the point of view of representation proposed by Dioniso Gonzales [7] is interesting. He uses collage not so much to return a precise area of the world, for which a photographic reportage would suffice, but to communicate that an alternative to the demolition of pieces of cities, often looked at without questioning the underlying logic, is possible. A search for and with images that aims to suggest a different way of approaching a 'fact' of otherwise difficult representation.

Conclusions. Complex images

This critical reconstruction traces the matrix and lines of contemporary research that see in collage and diagram an imperfect representation. An imperfection that proposes another posture than hyper-realism, more open to degrees of imagination, in that it requires the viewer to acquire renewed meaning. With the operations of redrawing, editing, selecting, scaling etc., enunciative visions are constructed, condensing



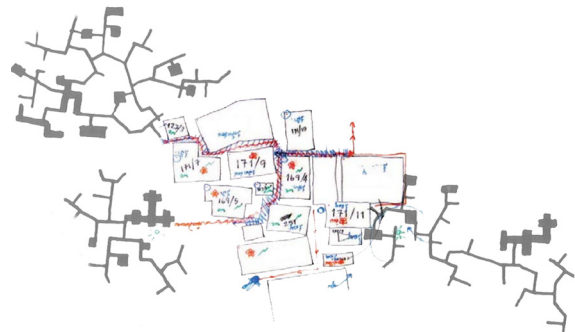
messages and solicitations as much theoretical as practical. The juxtaposition of an Italian informal settlement with one from Latin America, to which is added a diagrammatic representation, defines a map that unveils a less visible condition than the one already established and known (fig. 8); just as the collage between the basic diagram of the cluster city and the diagrammatic representation of a piece of a slum expresses a theory, a thought to investigate the informal city and its underlying rules (fig. 9).

What seems useful to bring to attention is the possibility of constructing complex images precisely in reference to investigations of emerging aspects of contemporaneity. Species of images, one might call them, that can be found in the recent text *Italian collage*, on some instagram pages –such as *actof-mapping, conforming*– but also in the catalogs of the last Venice Architecture Biennials. Browsing through *How we can live together*, from the reinterpretation of Bosch paintings with collage to diagrams for the definition of an infinite house, to those that tension local elements and forces of global homogenization, there is a ‘rediscovery’ of the potential of these two tools.

It should also be emphasized that the use of digital tools and the almost infinite number of images that can be drawn upon thanks to the Internet have opened up ever new experimentation and a new dimension of sharing that triggers and catalyzes new lines of research. The overlap between reading and knowledge of cities finds in these tools a possibility of representation, as in Luca Galofaro’s collages that have a strong critical charge and at the same time represent a push to imagination. In conclusion, opening to

Fig. 8. Glocal. Top image of a favela and bottom image of an informal settlement with its representation by diagram (graphic elaboration by the author).

Fig. 9. Informal cluster city (graphic elaboration by the author).



new explorations, a question is proposed: What if we used collages and diagrams together? The synchronic use, as seen especially in the last two examples, part of a personal research, seems to open to the construction of complex maps, useful to return those imperfect and latent phenomena, to hold together different points of view and contradictory aspects

Notes

[1] We refer to Le Corbusier's diagrams or Mies's collages for design narrative, via Gropius's bubble diagrams as a method based on topological links before formal determination, and the utopian collages that have characterized an entire season of scholarship by grafting itself onto the uncomfortable reality and imagining it. All the way to the collage architecture that invested postmodern thought and production, and to the contemporary era with the experiments of OMA-AMO and, among others, MVRDV, BIG and SANAA's architecture-diagram, defined as such for its use of the diagram as a design device.

[2] The adjective 'open' refers to Umberto Eco's *Teoria dell'opera aperta* for which please refer to the text: Eco 1962.

[3] The author, in the text, refers only to the diagrams. The association to

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of reality. A reality that is constantly changing and that we should always be able to observe, once again, in order to understand and imagine; after all, the construction of a map is itself a device of knowledge and knowing.

As Barthes suggest, one always passes an image... and isn't that the role of our representing?

the collages is by the author.

[4] Within the production of Team X should be counted the diagrammatic representations of Aldo Van Eyck including, the diagram Otterlo Circles, an expression of his way of reading the world.

[5] We refer to the research carried out by Stefano Boeri, *USE: Uncertain States of Europe* [Boeri 2007, pp. 262-321].

[6] The situationist movement emerged as a critique of capitalism in 1957 and played a key role in the May 1968 revolt in Paris.

[7] Refer to the link: <https://www.dionisiogonzalez.es/Cartografias.html> (accessed 30 July 2023).

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