

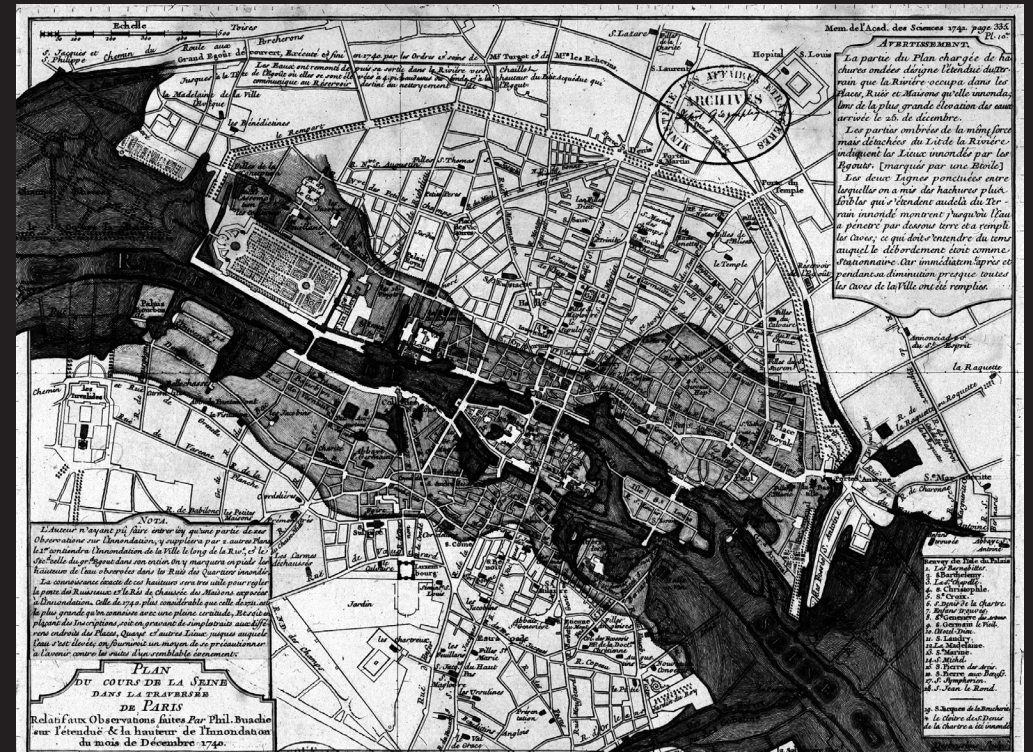
# ARCHITECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION OF GEOGRAPHY

David Gissen

Terms such as “research,” “organization,” “landscape,” and “infrastructure” define many of the activities of contemporary architects seeking to find a new framework for architectural processes and design. But we might more adequately argue that a geographical character best describes the mental and material structure of this architecture. This involves not only a turn toward specific geographical concepts and theories, but toward material and representational transformations as well. We can see this in various contemporary works that advance the territory of maps over plans, the flow of matter over subjects, and the concept of environment over that of space-time. It’s as if architects have simultaneously leaped over the city as the perceptual scale within which architecture might operate and rejected the Anglo-American concept of region as architecture’s ultimate physical and analogical correlate. Today, a select number of architects attempt to rebuild geography with architecture—a project in which buildings bring their own territorial concerns into focus.

The geographical project of architecture is symptomatic of a shake-up concerning the very realms that architectural design negotiates. Design, as it was conceptualized in both the interwar and postwar periods of the twentieth century, was a practice positioned at the intersection of labor, governance, and industry. Space-time, as it emerged within the rise of industrializing states, was the

very thing shaped by design. In many ways, design contained a utopian notion—a force that could negotiate the space-time tissues of experience and an idea that could bring its agents (proletariat, state, and bourgeoisie) into unity. It’s clear to virtually all who are surveying the contemporary situation that the relation between these agents are falling apart. Labor neither constitutes an autonomous, isolated force (i.e., “the masses”) nor a sole class—it has become something more amorphous. Sadly, states are suspect on the right and left, and industry has so atomized itself that it cannot be located with any precision. Governance, production, and management are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, or, to put it another way, they occupy spaces outside the perceptual space-time of an individual subject. Those who adhere to design in its early-twentieth-century incarnation have the fascinating role of devotees to a form of modern antiquity, even as they search for the new. At its most extreme, we have contemporary architects who find heroism within the movements of space itself and the computerized, multi-axial routers that form it. This extends architects’ emotional and intellectual investment in the forms of production driven by modernity, but with zero transformative potential on the constituent actors. More convincing are those architects who attempt to reduce the amorphous quality of contemporary experience into a more intelligible urban and political whole. But such work often operates at the scales of the

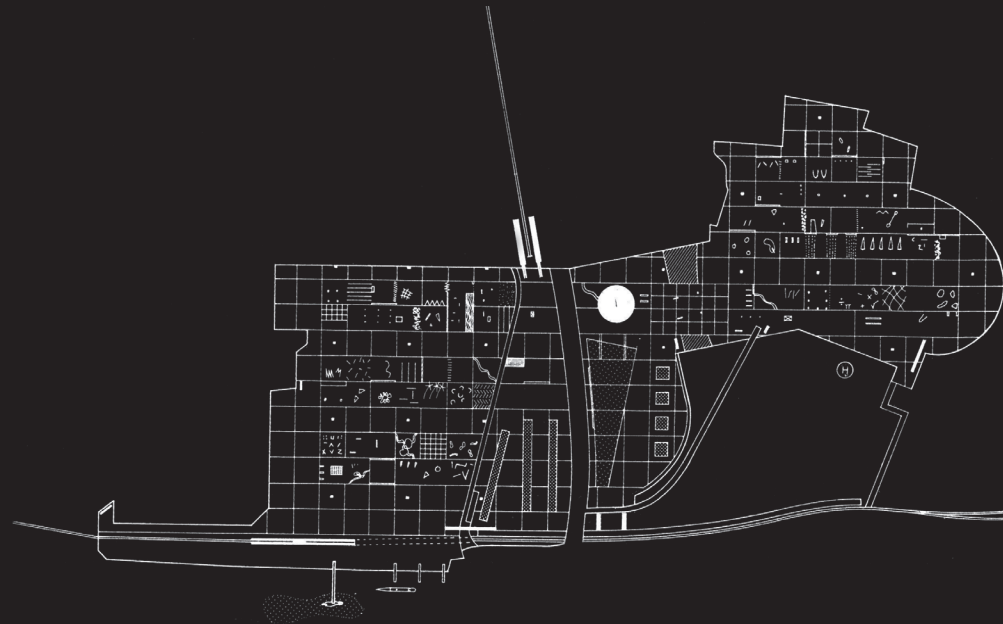


**Flood of the Seine, Philippe Buache, 1740:** The early tensions between architectural and geographical projects for the city can be seen in this map of the Paris flood of 1740. Buache was trained as an architect, but ultimately turned to geography to articulate his particular intellectual interests.

industrial city—room, courtyard, region—without the necessary constituent actors.

As for the geographic experiment within contemporary architecture, its architects do not simply reject the ideology of design. Rather, at its most incisive, geography takes on more of a meta role—as part of a technique that articulates and distributes the potential of architectural authorship within an intellectual territory. For example, maps illustrate givens for many contemporary architects (in the weak literalness of so-called reality mapping exercises), but much more powerful are maps that illustrate the search for an arena for the architect. In this instance, maps not only show

facts (the locations of towns, rivers, and other socio-natural features), they also provide commentary on where architectural ideas will appear and when. Within a large area, they articulate where the architect’s thoughts will be felt and where not. These maps represent the crisis of authorship that defines the contemporary field, while still demonstrating the capacity of human beings to shape large arenas. And though maps figure prominently in geographical work, geographically oriented architects do not necessarily design buildings at the literal scale of the map; their work can be as small as a street lamp. Nevertheless, whether they author a massive bridge proposal



**Paris Expo Plan, OMA, 1985:** This important and early carto-organizational project, which extends the ideas of nineteenth-century urbanist Ildefonso Cerda and late-modern experimentalists Archizoom, continues to influence geo-architectural works. The design of a precinct's plan is reduced to a geographical system of longitude and latitude. The squares denote areas of potential architectural authorship.

or the tiniest piece of street furniture, their aim is similar: to bring designed objects into cartographic narratives. Such work searches for a theory of architecture relative to geography, similar to architects' search for a theory of architecture relative to the city. Similarly, drawn sections articulate the flows of social and natural matter relative to the project, versus the psychological sense of space within a building. Such sections emphasize the articulation of material through a territory or on a person, rather than the specific experience of individuals. Significantly, the entire connective tissue of the geographical within architecture is the redesign of "environment." Geographically oriented work is not simply anti-spatial; environment is spatial and temporal, but relations between space and time are beholden to the constituent features of the environment. In turn, these redesigned environments create new forms and ideas about the geographical.

The above descriptions should not be taken as blanket endorsements of these particular

practices. The new geographical architecture contains many frustrating tendencies. If architects choose to work at the limit of geography versus the limit of the city, then the best of these new geo-architects might begin a more self-reflective phase—interrogating the aesthetic and historical implications of maps, vectors, and environments. Unlike plans, sections, and spaces, geographical forms of representation tend to take on the mask of natural reality versus representational forms. And in some hands, geography can be turned into a frightening tool to make architectural interventions appear as works of nature, rather than acting as another system for architects to use to tinker with reality. Design and design pedagogy contain forceful and articulate relationships to history, within notions of "parti," "precedent," and "referent." These historically driven terms would sound absurd within most of the geographically oriented architecture of today. Geographical concepts are notoriously ahistorical, and geographers often use this to challenge the primacy of



**Air Map of Paris, Philippe Rahm, 2007:** Rahm's project proposes condensing the historic path of air movement from Le Havre to Paris into a single mechanical system for a Parisian office building. Here geo-architecture engages cartography, matter, and environment, but, ultimately is disentangled from the literal space of the map, and takes on a representational and historical dimension.

history within a society's established forms of self-understanding. But the ahistoricity of geography generally, and geographical imagery within architecture more specifically, needs to be questioned and interrogated. When architects bring aesthetics and history into geographical concepts, they transform an environment into something more unfamiliar and monumental. The flows of matter will slow down, and the environment will begin to appear as an object, even as we find ourselves immersed within it. Through such work, architecture will begin to show how environments are historical constructions versus natural ones. In turn, this work might reveal the geographical chain that moves through all of architecture and the architecture of our future geography.

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