Superficies and Surfaces

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FOR MICHEL DE CERTEAU, the strangeness of the everyday does not surface to the upper limits of network layers that organise the city, or maybe the surface itself is the upper limit, outlining itself against the visible.[1]

Although he is referring to a physical configuration of the city (Manhattan seen from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre) the impossibility of emergence is analogue to the figure-ground portrayal of the urban fabric. While figure-ground organises the configuration of spaces or solids,[2] it does not refer to the spatial and temporal context of streets and buildings. In order to understand the complex texture of activities generated between solids and voids we need to shift from the perception of them as objects to the spatial and temporal examination of figure-ground as an index of infinite interrelations. This shifting from superficies to surfaces challenges conventional typological representations where it would be impossible either to represent or understand most of the transformations that define the city as an event.

The essential framework for understanding the configuration of space in cities is based on the physical relation between buildings and open spaces: the constitution of the city is the result of a basic state of solids and voids : city space is defined according to the accumulation of objects or their absence.[3] The product of this binary relationship is the figure-ground plan, where the object differentiation is inscribed by contrast: black-white, solid-space and public-private. The emphasis of these dual elements lies in the rational materialisation of the object (or its absence). The structure of spaces and solids defines certain material relationships between them: the types of accumulation of solids are legible not only in terms of proximity, identity, common structure, density, etc, but also as a result of historical, political and social conditions.[4] When these configurations are conceived operationally they suggest certain functions that create qualities in a context: the capacity to accommodate several functions, to provide differentiated open and closed space, the appreciation or perception of the buildings as an ensemble, etc.

The strength and weakness of figure-ground are based on the physical relations between building and space. The typological image reduces the street to an object that can be understood in a physical or economic analysis, for example. Peter Eisenman affirms that figure-ground defines a contextualism based on the static conditions of the object (solid and void), and a determinism that is thought to explain the totality of urbanism.[5] The figure-ground reading is only a partial view in the index of numerous interrelations of these urban spaces. Some of these interrelations – neglected within the figure-ground scope – are the intersecting of public and private, individual and society, movement and place, built and unbuilt and architecture and planning.[6] The relationships originating in the gestalt figure-ground image are a fruitful field for ambiguity definition of temporal conditions and ephemeral effects. Figure-ground attributes consider the stable physical characteristics of built form, or the object. Although built form has the ability to generate and sustain activity settings, these impermanent attributes are not visible in the bicoloured image: it only reveals the invariable material structure with a consequential setting of public and private use boundaries. Figure-ground is based on the object and on its static conditions. Colin Rowe argues that modern architecture's concern is the object fixation [...] only in so far as it involves the city.

The interrelations that take place in urban spaces (for example, the intersecting of public and private) are assumed based on the rational materialisation of solids. For example, the division between public space and private space is usually characterised by a wall, or a kerb, or any other evident physical form. It is assumed that this boundary overlies the building

View from the 86th Floor Observation Deck of the Empire State Building, New York, image: Andy Miller

edges; public and private are defined and separated by physical edges. However, in reality it becomes evident that public space boundaries do not always traverse/ parallel the walkway, but sometimes they extend beyond as in commercial frontages (like cafés or shops). In his study of American residential, commercial and mixed use streets, Victor Caliandro develops mapping techniques capable of identifying certain social interaction, and revealing the social space of the street environment. Although his interest is to propose alternative strategies for reformulating and restructuring street environments, his mappings identify transition zones between the public and private realms.

Figure-ground represents the superficial: the physicality of the city, the permanency of the object, or of its absence; conditions that are only the external limit of the vast network layers that organise the city. These conditions are far below the thresholds at which visibility begins, just like Manhattan is hidden for de Certeau when looking from a 110th floor. The binary image depicts the outer skin, the superficial area of the urban fabric: the superficies of the city, the outside of it, the outward appearance, which is what figure-ground leaves after immobilising the city as an ensemble of solids and voids. The inner nature of the urban fabric is opaqued by the object.

What is necessary is a shifting from superficies to surfaces. It may seem that these two concepts are interchangeable, nevertheless a superficies involves a static condition of state, immutable and permanent, as the term is a noun. On the other hand a surface comprises the outside of a thing as well, but it also deals with the morphogenetic processes that defined that outer face, the internal transformations and fluctuations that define the emergence of an upper layer. As a verb, the term means to rise to the surface , it does not simply consider the external layer but it includes processes that defined that layer. Consequently when the verb surface is applied to the urban fabric, it contains the variations within the network layers that organise the city, giving it a particular configuration.

Stan Allen has already emphasised the importance of surfaces when considering landscape as model for urbanism: the city as a topological surface has material and performative characteristics. It is evident that figure-ground is unable to explain the true complexity of phenomena; the conditions that have been immanent or repressed in the urban fabric.[7] These conditions, or the performative characteristics of the city, need to be addressed in surfaces.[8]

If a surface would comprise the transformations and fluctuations of the city network layers, it is necessary to understand the urban fabric not as a static entity but as changing over time; consequently what becomes important are the transformations that it undergoes.[9] A surface with topological characteristics is capable of adapting and adjusting in response to its internal stimuli; the inner fluctuations would manifest through distortion and stretching and it will always be the same surface. Kwinter affirms that a field contains no matter or material points, rather functions, vectors and speeds.[10] A surface approaches the urban complexity from the same perspective as a field, and needs to be defined by vectors which incorporate direction and magnitude. By doing these the surface is able to absorb fluctuations and changes: its behaviour does not pay attention to specific instants or snapshots (which would allow information to be lost in the interstices between them) but the transformations themselves as a continuum.[11]

Figure-ground as a topological surface offers the possibility of addressing the ecological wholeness of streets – the spatial and temporal context within which complex events occur.[12] This surface is not constituted by the superficial layer of the city network layers, but defined by the fluctuations and transformations between them. It questions the strict binary intersecting of public and private, individual and society, movement and place, built and unbuilt and architecture and planning ■

[1] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, California: University of California Press, 1984, 91.

[2] William C Ellis defines two types of organisations based on the definition of the building pattern, being interpreted as structure of spaces (the physical configuration of the city as if streets and open spaces would have been carved out of what was once a solid mass) and structure of solids (if the city appears to be open land into which buildings have been introduced as objects sitting on a plane). William C Ellis, The spatial structure of streets , in Stanford Anderson (ed), *On Streets*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1978, 115.

[3] Berhard Hoesli affirms that architectural space is defined when man has to interfere in mathematical-physical space in order to claim, stake out or mark a particular part of it . Bernhard Hoesli, Commentary in Colin Rowe, *Transparency*, Berlin: Birkhauser, 1997, 90.

[4] Rowe notes how the figure-ground schema responds to the functional behaviours of the city as a solid and continuous matrix: squares and streets act as public relief valves , at the same time that they provide a legible structure for the matrix. Colin Rowe, *Collage City*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978, 62.

[5] Peter Eisenman, Folding in time: The singularity of rebstock , in *Blurred Zones: Investigations of the Interstitial*, New York: Monacelli Press, 2003, 130.

[6] Stanford Anderson, The urban ecology of streets , in Stanford Anderson (ed), *On Streets*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1978, 1.

[7] Peter Eisenman, 2003, 130.

[8] Allen also affirms that the open-ended networks that link the infrastructural elements of the city are an example of field conditions: these are characterised by shifting from object to field, reflecting the complex and dynamic behaviours of architecture users and [speculating] on new methodologies to model programme and space. Stan Allen, Mat urbanism: The thick 2-D , in *CASE: Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital and the Mat Building Revival*, Munich: New York Prestel, 2001, 124, and Stan Allen, *Points + Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, 92.

[9] For the moment a system is understood as evolving over time, what becomes important are the transformations that the system undergoes, and all transformations in a system is the result of energy – or information – moving through it. Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001, 23.

[10] Sanford Kwinter, La Citta nuova: modernity and continuity , in K Michael Hays (ed), *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998, 591.

[11] This approach is analogous to Henri Bergson s understanding of movement, where it cannot be reconstituted from a succession of immobilities. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, London: Macmillan, 1912, 305-06, 08.

[12] Stanford Anderson, idem.