

The Culture of Description

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Is it possible to draw a country? What would be the architectural expression of a territory? And how would one draw that image?

It has been well-known since the beginning of history that the tracing of maps is a mythic act which is only superficially testimonial. The Assyrian and Pharaonic maps and the medieval maritime charts have great documentary value but they are more than merely informational guides, outlining the location of lands and seas. They are in fact authentic ideological creations, acts of possession and knowledge. Indeed, it was probably during the Renaissance that cartography reached its most highly theoretical moment, when plans of continents and cities more than just described reality, they defined it and were capable of inventing and proposing the universe in the very act of reproducing it.

This creative component of description constitutes the great political and theoretical power of the cartographic image. Through the power of definition, history is created. There is an entire social history written in the layout of routes, in the points of crossing and interchange, in the plowing of farmland, in the construction of canals or the irrigation of cultivated land and in the shape of property ownership. It is written in the placement of industries, in the growth of cities and the occupation of their surroundings, and in the often violent and contradictory impacts of great infrastructures. Each territory is a unique mix of all these components and only through a description of these components can one begin to synthesize an alternative.

The *Laboratorio de Urbanismo de Barcelona* (Laboratory of Urban Planning of Barcelona or LUB) has contributed to this vision by producing, within its academic sphere, a group of plans of fragments of Catalonia's urban territory.¹ The plans were created by synthesizing and manipulating materials from a variety of sources. These plans, due to their scale (1:10,000) and detail, offer an image of Catalonia which is a little known expression of the territorial structure of the region. This inventorial vision and encyclopedic compilation creates a cartographic image of Catalonia that hopes to provide an understanding of the territorial composition of each settlement; such an image can become a basis for proposal. It becomes apparent that to construct an image of Catalonia in this sense is the opposite of making mechanical maps.

1. The atlas is shown in its entirety in *Quaderns Extra* 1 and 2 (1981) and selected maps are found in an article entitled, "A Cartography for the Catalan Territory," in *Lotus international* 23 (1979): p. 10.

LUB's maps seek to go beyond the conventional thematic reduction of aerial photographed maps. The analyses made from such mechanical maps often result in a simplistic vision which leads to misguided urban interventions. The scope of LUB's project, on the other hand, is to deal with maps but with the new objective of converting a map into a plan, a proposal. These plans bring together the detailed description of urban spaces, of public areas and monuments, and their connection with territorial routes, with principal geographic elements, with cities' outer boundaries, with the boundaries of neighboring towns and peripheral areas, and with the cadastral forms of agriculture. The joint description of all these territorial forms provides an enormously rich, suggestive and synthetic vision which is almost impossible to obtain with conventional information. To improve description is already to propose. The morphological description of the territory for this project was an alternative route of territorial proposal for Catalonia.

How is the problem of drawing and representation addressed in these plans?

The problem of drawing is bound to the problem of the knowledge of the territory's physical structure; in the project for Catalonia the elements which were the object of attention in the analysis of the territory were at the same time the object of the effort of drawing and representation. Care was taken not to determine a priori a common code or criteria to be used in the drawings. The problems of the drawing of each map were connected to the problems of each territory's own identity and structure. In this way, the drawings bring together the diverse analyses of various territorial structures. Certain elements are emphasized by meticulous drawing, by the density of lines or a hierarchy of line weights, or by allowing the lines to become compact and fill in an area. At other times the drawing will refer to the image of an element rather than to its literal reality, or sometimes, an element will be represented in a conventional manner depending on the criteria set by the drawing's ground rules. As different drawing criteria were developed there were those which tended towards *homogeneity*, in comparison to those which produced situations of *contrast*. Certain homogeneous plans, for example, employed lines and points exclusively, and by presenting them all with equal intensity avoided creating a hierarchy among the represented elements.

Such different approaches to the relationship between the map and the territory's morphological configuration provide distinct ways to understand a plan of an area. Some plans take a more wholistic view and attempt to offer a *synthetic* representation characterized by a general image of what a region is. In this case, emphasis is placed on those structural elements or systems that provide an immediate reading. Other plans are more concerned with the elaboration of a response for each of the precise elements which have to be represented. In these plans each component searches autonomously for its own expression, its own possible reading, and in doing so a contrast is achieved between each element. The image presented is not that precise, it is rather a group of structures that express themselves in their complexity and lack a clear hierarchical relationship. The resulting image is primarily *analytical*, and attempts to offer a detailed description in two dimensions of a very complex reality.

The project by LUB to create an atlas of Catalonia was characterized by a certain super-realist desire; a desire to glean a new interpretation and critical vision of the territory by way of the selection of and the assigning of precise value to the parts and elements that make up the territory's compound reality. To draw is to select, to select is to interpret and to interpret is to propose.

The method of descriptive calligraphy used for LUB's atlas, which draws from the eighteenth-century tradition of the French topographers (from Cassini to Buchet in Catalonia), transforms the plan into an illusion of reality – but faithful representation is the method, not the purpose. What is proposed within each theme (such as the representation of agriculture, urban forms, public works, geomorphology or cadastral property) and within each plan (as an image containing their mutual relations) is shaped by the descriptive force of elements which are recognizable by their exact form and dimension. But because these elements are placed in different contexts, they are in a sense re-invented. The plan remains above all an affirmation of a vision of the concrete, of the physical detail of construction and of the territory; the plan presents an extremely material, physiocratic vision. Today, the city's or territory's most important representation is one that embodies detailed precision; this "fiction" might effectively be its proposal.

The English military plans of the eighteenth century were primarily concerned with the country/city distinction, with the precise definition of walled enclosures as strategic elements and juridical limits. Open territories were usually the neutral base of operations, almost without real structure. On the other hand, French topographic maps which emphasized extensive description of the territory created an entire cartographic tradition in which the protagonists were roads, and topographic and hydrographic morphology. In contrast, architects, throughout the latter third of the nineteenth century, influenced by the mannerisms of baroque and neoclassic figurativeness, offered a solid and perimetrical representation of urban development, as an image of alignment and facade and as a continuous object of geometric decomposition. Only later on, in the present century does the graphic symbolism of specialization by zone and the decomposition of plans correspond to the vision of functional space – perhaps in the same way that space is treated by Braque, Léger (and in Gris at times) or by the Supremacists. Finally, the modern city demonstrates the contradiction of its disorder and the vitality of its conflicts. Univocal interpretations are no longer acceptable. Once again, a new form of enlightened description is necessary, one that can recover the name and the shape of things and perhaps allow for new elements of cultural synthesis.

An approach to proposal based on simplistic causal explanations as working guidelines must give way to the need to recapture the descriptive moment. The strength of description, a literary knowledge, replaces causal simplifications, explanatory models and diagrammatic representations. The description of a territory should be obsessive, in order to emphasize the synthetic content of conceptual proposals. These proposals, like the architectural project, should make suggestions about and remodel the forms of the historical, not so much in an attempt to recuperate them as in an attempt to support them. Descriptive calligraphy seeks to represent the territory in a way that is more than just literal; rather, it seeks to represent the territory in a way that is literary. As an alternative method of analysis, descriptive calligraphy provides a way to avoid the project's arbitrary and eclectic nature. Here analysis and projection are simultaneous. Narration and description occur at the scale of the territory allowing for an architecture of ideas, rather than one of mimeticism. This method achieves an effective separation from the ambiguous analysis/project continuum by means of a literary territory and a conceptual architecture.

This map describes the territory around the Ebre River near its mouth. Emphasis is placed on the river – a determining element in the construction of the zone – and on the urban centers, while the surrounding non-urban areas are mapped in an elementary fashion. The river supplies water for a system of canals which defines two bands of irrigated land at both sides of the river. By following the outline of the roads and the form of the

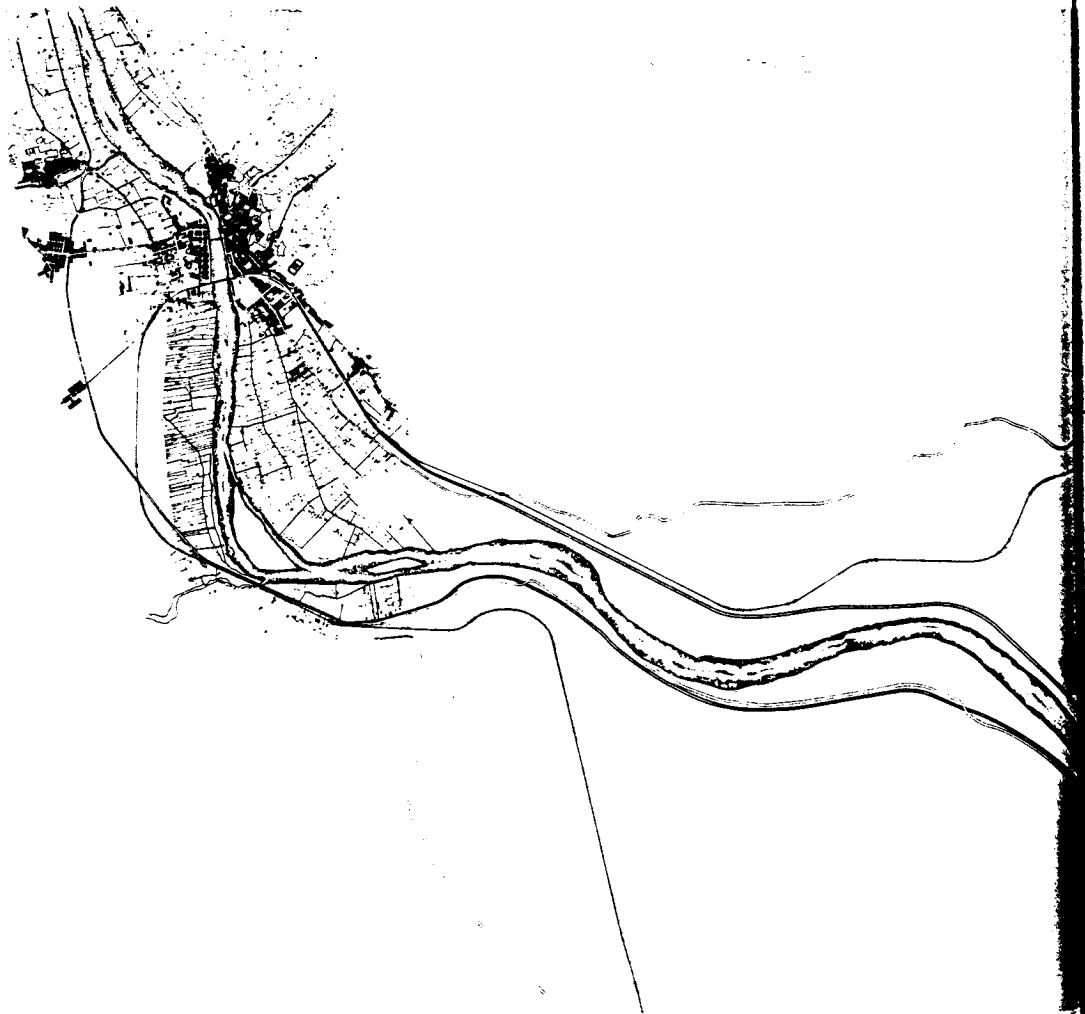
river one can read the relief of the area: a generally flat terrain that promotes agricultural use. The urban nuclei stand out in this drawing, inviting comparisons between their formation, position and character.

The city of Tortosa, to the left of the plan, is the only city with an original Arab nucleus. Tortosa is located at the historic confluence of the major roads and the railroad as they cross the great river. The path of the train became related,

historically and physically, to the nineteenth-century orthogonal network, and this system of rectangular grids still constitutes the city's center. More recently Tortosa has grown over to the other side of the river, but has only initiated the formation of disperse suburbs.

Amposta, the center city on the map, has the most momentum of the three. It developed much more recently than Tortosa and supports itself simply on the road that goes to Tortosa.

Nevertheless, Amposta has endowed itself with a powerful network which is directed towards the interior, that is, away from the river, a network which has been and continues to be a framework capable of ordering the city's growth. In Amposta this growth is of an industrial nature, as opposed to the old commercial and service center in Tortosa, and the city of agricultural roots, La Cava. The drawing of Amposta's urban extension, together with the idea of its continual occupa-



tion, helps to explain the expansive direction of this city's structure.

Lastly, in La Cava the detailed drawing of the parceling system, which is at the same time the parceling of irrigated land and of housing, explains the linear form of this rural town. The parceling system describes La Cava's very origin: it grew from the compaction of very long and narrow parcels. The roads contained between the river and the canal have respected

the structure of irrigation maintaining this primitive infrastructure. The character and limit of La Cava are described by the irrigation canal at the upper edge of the town, the river below, and the irrigated land between.

The map offers no more than an approximation of these towns but it succeeds at providing a synthetic image of the territory as a whole through the relative description of the towns and their surroundings.



CONGOST DE CAPPELLADES

Detail from map of L'Anoia: this image is approximately one-sixteenth of the original map.

This fragment presents a long narrow hillock in which the great protagonist of the visual landscape, the orography, acts as the background for the territory's form. The form of a slope or incline is expressed in a conventional code in areas of the plan where relief emphasizes the reason for a built form – for example, where a castle sits on a summit, where a roadway is located for panoramic views, or where a cliff forms the border of the city. The aim of this plan is to express the mountains' valley as a complex canal where a number of major artificial con-

structions (e.g., railroad tracks and roadways) accumulate and are resolved. On one side of the river, off by itself, the railroad is drawn in a geometric form. The drawing notes the projects, such as bridges, which have been placed to pass over washes – these washes read almost like threads in the drawing. On the other side, one can distinguish two plans: that of the riverbank, where stippling evokes agricultural use, only intervened by white areas at the large industrial warehouses, and that of the interior plain, which reads like a puzzle of irregular pieces signaling the extensive cultivation of the area. A fringe zone of varying width develops between the river valley and the plain where towns

of diverse sizes, connections and natural characteristics have evolved. This drawing provides a way to learn about each of these towns. It allows one to compare how the presence of relief influenced development in some cases, while in others, the relief instead combined with more powerful and abstract geometric layouts.

In spite of being a literal plan and rigorously faithful in its observations (it represents houses, roads, factories, suburbs, cultivated land, etc.), this is a homogeneous map in the method in which it is drawn. In this way, the drawing invites a detailed reading with neither interruptions nor contrasts before one reads the plan as a whole.



MARESEME

Detail from map of El Mareseme: this image is approximately one-sixth of the original map.

This representation of Mareseme grows from the use of an austere graphic language that presents a powerful interpretation of the territory. The topography, the cultivated land, the forests, in fact, almost everything becomes background in this plan. Only the coastline is expressed as a necessary reference. The systems of occupation of the site are represented as a band of towns along the coastline hung with smaller interior towns. One reads the division of the province, of an interior zone (with villages at higher elevations with dry

land and mountains) and a coastal strip (with villages at lower elevations with irrigated land).

The challenge presented in this plan is in understanding this territory as a musical "staff." This "staff" provides the structure upon which the development of the entire area is based. The divisions of the land are represented with varying intensity of delineation: sometimes the streets of towns are depicted as isolated events, and other times these streets are converted, almost seamlessly, into access roads to the proprietarial, exploitational or residential developments in the agricultural plain. The map describes the interweaving of street and path,

and of urban parceling and irrigation parceling. The compactness which characterizes this territory's landscape grows from a symbiosis of modest settlements and an intense agricultural land use.

The appeal of the plan results as much from this non-conventional transcription as from the depiction of certain existing territorial elements now seen without distraction. For example, one notes the alignment of peripheral areas, the parceling of land in the urban centers, the rural access roads to various constructions, the demarcation roads between different properties, and the irrigation ditches and small courses of water which mark the land.

This vision, as an abstract and synthetic statement faithful dimensionally to real space, becomes very useful in distinguishing those interventions whose type, form and scale are appropriate to the existing order from those which are foreign to that order.

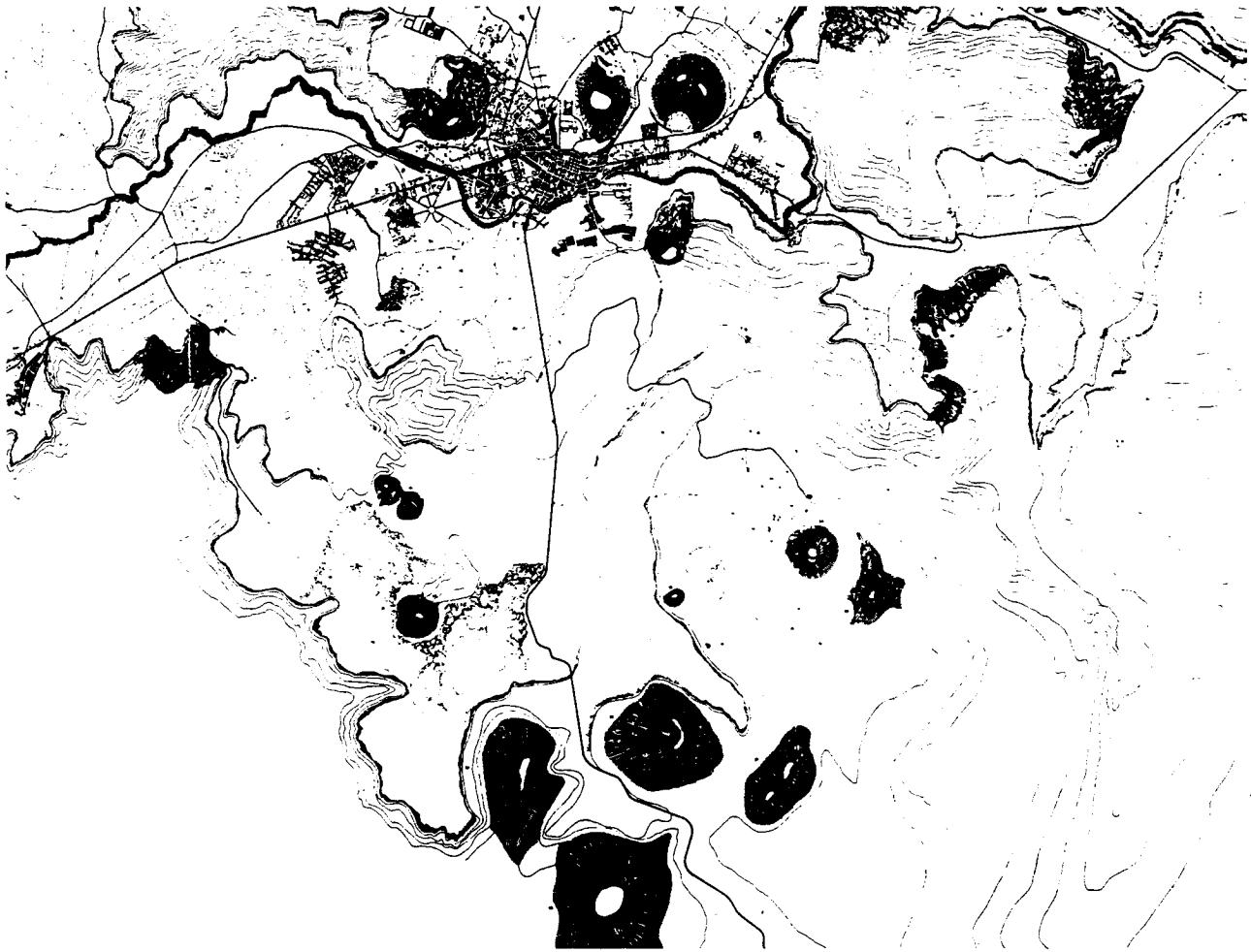
The distinction between natural and built form, which is one of the more common readings for many territories, is here perhaps less relevant. There are not powerful natural profiles, instead, in this landscape it is the artificial order and rhythm of the territory which constitutes its true relief.



OLOT

Detail from map of La Garrotxa: image on the left is approximately one-half of the original map, whereas image on the right is approximately one-sixteenth.

The drawing of the city of Olot, sited in a mountainous territory pock-marked with volcanos and cut by large forests and luxuriant riverbanks, results from the use of diverse graphic strategies that attempt to give form



and presence to each piece of the landscape. Thanks to a phenomenological description of the city's parts and to the blank areas that appear in the drawing, that is, the zones not drawn which mark the discontinuity between parts, the city's decomposition into pieces is emphasized. This decomposition is a reflection of the variety of materials which makes up the city. Such variety barely exists in other larger or more compact cities.

The map reflects a powerful reality, and includes the representation of parcels, of buildings and of grids. One can distinguish the monuments, the great porticoed plazas, parts of the seventeenth-century founding city, the suburbs built along roads, the walkway-roadways, the large city outlines and the layout of the radial city-garden. The relief of the area plays an important role in defining the identity of the city's great forms, that is, its overall disposition. These forms grow from the

presence of the relief's elements (the volcanos, slopes, riverbanks and forests) in the middle of the city and their interface with the city's artificial territory. Reading the plan as a whole, one can see that the elements of this relief, due to their repetition and their various combinations, are the pieces which give a natural unity to the entire valley.

Observing the valley in which the city of Olot is embedded, it is apparent that the natural elements which

characterize the city are very much present in the rural landscape as well. The river always has the same character, the form of its course and its riverbanks is continuous, while the volcanos remain object-like. One can see that the limit of the cultivated land with respect to the thickly forested areas results in a landscape of deep valleys, of hidden places, of closed vistas, and of small singular spaces. By analogy one can observe these characteristics in the internal disposition of the city of Olot.

