

A Discursive Reading of the City

Based on Infrastructure

Msc3 The Public Building Studio in Genoa

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I INTRODUCTION

When the architects were independent from craftsman in constructing space(buildings), their hands had never directly or totally touched the things they conceived. What they do are not and will never be the space itself, but only the representation of the space. In this sense, the architects are only the media of translation from the idea to the space. Research and methods are necessary to be done in order to serve the translation, not only to analyse the objective existing, but also to discover the very subjective perspectives by which the architects look into architecture. As Ray Lucas writes, 'Research is the process by which you understand the world in a verifiable and consistent manner.'¹ He argues research should say more than simply tracing the data. Hence the way of doing research, the methods are crucial to address the collected data and make the new translations from the site to the programme.

There are two main points which inspired me from the Lecture Series Research Methods. One is the various methodologies introduced by different professors. Even for materiality and typologies which I am familiar with, my previous cognition is questioned. Heuristic, by its own meaning the teaching or education encourages one to learn by discovering things for oneself, is the most inspirational one. It is somehow anti-conventional by challenging preconceptions. It also distinguish design from previous culture systems. Design as a third culture (the other two are sciences and arts/humanities) is introduced by the Royal College of Art that "The 'third culture' is not so easily recognised, simply because it has been neglected, and has not been adequately named or articulated"² Compared with the other two, Design or research is neither only scientific nor artistic, but has its own distinct 'things to know, ways of knowing them, and ways of finding out about them.' The other one is the presentations by the students. Which introduced many new methodologies and new ways of looking at architecture. In the case of a Syrian Torture Prison, the group Forensic Architecture used novel research methods to undertake a series of investigations like reconstructing the model of the



A bridge without water



The Lost Horizon behind the Embankment

¹ Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 9.

² Nigel Cross, *Designing Ways of Knowing* (Springer London Ltd., 2010), 17.

prison by recollecting the memory of sound from the survivors. They cooperate with the courts and took a new position of architecture to support human rights abuses.

The Public Building Studio in Genoa address the new public realm in the city as a space of accumulation. Each individual had to choose a topic by reading the city in his or her own way and find own interests for a potential project. The research should be done from marco-scale to micro-scale in order to state a clear position, which will later on turn to a strategy and finally translate into an architectural project. My thesis topic is about a discursive reading of the contemporary city based on infrastructure in Genoa. It starts with the documentations of infrastructure like dissolved city wall in the residential complex, bridge without river, the lost horizon behind the embankment, etc. For their current identity is contradictory with their established identity, the research question is how can their contemporary identity be and what is the potential.

II A Discursive Reading

Infrastructure, which is mostly designed and constructed by engineers functionally, economically and efficiently, have their very clear identity and power in order to facilitate the city. Either it is a road or a bridge, it is easy to know them by type. Hence typology was the first method used to document and analyse. But in some cases, the ambiguous differentiation between different types makes it hard to address the features. For instance, the extension of the new harbour makes the old embankment no different to the retaining wall as there is no water in front of the embankment. Another is a part of a dissolved city wall in a residential complex, it does not demarcate the inside and the outside of the city any more, which also makes it no different to a retaining wall. If there is a name for a certain type of infrastructure, it stands and only stands for its identity when it was built. When an infrastructure was built, it has more or less an overwhelming power over the city in order to facilitate the totality as it was defined. But it is never only defined by itself. Under the transformation of the city, the old infrastructure were always partly denied and became powerless. Few were eliminated, most of them found a passive way to survive. This process gives birth to the city and the new identity of old infrastructure, which might be considered discursive if the name is given. All of a sudden, the limitation of name reveals its temporality. Still, typology works in another way. By showing the limitation, I turned to categorise them not by name, but the effects which are passage, barrier, and bridge.

So, what is type? Rafael Moneo states in *On Typologies* that it is to interpret things which share the same structure. 'It is fundamentally based on the possibility of grouping objects by certain inherent structural



Previous Embankment



A Residential Complex in the City Wall

similarities. It might even be said that type means the act of thinking in groups.³ It was the ignorance of the inherent structural similarities that made me categorise in a wrong way in the first place.

But the inherent structural relation never stays in infrastructure itself, as infrastructure, architecture, landscape always develop within their own frame to some extent but can never be independent to each other. This gives birth to various hybrids, and study the morphology of these hybrids reveals how they are formulated and what is the potential for them. Marc Angelil and Anna Klingmann states that 'Infrastructure, architecture, and landscape amalgamate to become one complex. Instead of accentuating their differences and treating them as separate entities, the possibility of their convergence is proposed.'⁴ Land is always there in the first place, while infrastructure, in most cases, were constructed after architecture. As infrastructure has its very strong power to facilitate the city, which shows its conflicts with architecture, the hybrids were born under these contradictory forces. In the case of the harbour, where there are thresholds like the embankment, river bank, highway and even an invisible political line between the municipality of the city and the municipality of the harbour, everything has to translate from the sea to the land. Here, the desire of people to see and to reach the sea is blocked by so many forces that even for a harbour city, the horizon can not be seen. The infrastructure connects the city with the rest of the world but disconnect people from the sea. In these hybrids, the identity of infrastructure become discursive that more than its functional identity have to be dealt with.

What makes things become discursive? Michel Foucault explains in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that 'discontinuity is characteristic of every discursive statement... A discursive formation is thus a system of dispersion.'⁵ To look at the infrastructure in a systematic way, the mapping method is applied to the macro-scale. Mapping is, by James Corner, a collective enabling enterprise, a project that both reveals and realizes hidden potential.⁶ Mapping is not to represent the reality but to intentionally select and edit out information. Corner believes that mapping includes also the various hidden forces like events, local stories, economic and legislative conditions, and political interests. Thus it allows for an understanding of terrain as the surface expression of a complex and dynamic imbroglio of social and natural processes. In mapping Genoa, by choosing related elements and finding the hidden plan, discontinuity and dispersion is easily found in the large system of infrastructure.

My methodology is not and should not be confined to a certain way. A discursive reading combine different methods like typology, hybrid morphology, mapping, etc. is introduced here to read the dynamic system of the city. They all have their own perspective and limitation. But, like the essence of mapping, it is also not necessary to 'trace' everything, instead, it is to choose methods which complement each other in a system of statement.

III Less than Mirror Reality

James Corner argues mapping is less than mirror reality, while it is also more than the reality as it reveals the various hidden forces which do not exist in the physical world. In my opinion, his strategy already goes beyond the mapping, but more like a discursive reading which is not fixed. Mapping which is different from map was developed mostly after the issue of urbanism. It questioned the traditional map as a guide to 'know' the land and offers possible ways to see the city by architectural language.

³ K. Michael. Hays, *Oppositions reader* (The MIT Press, 1973-1984), 23.

⁴ M. Angelil and A. Klingmann, *Hybrid Morphologies*, Daidalos (Berlin : Bertelsmann, 1999), 20.

⁵ M. Foucault, *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (GALLIMARD, 2000), 49.

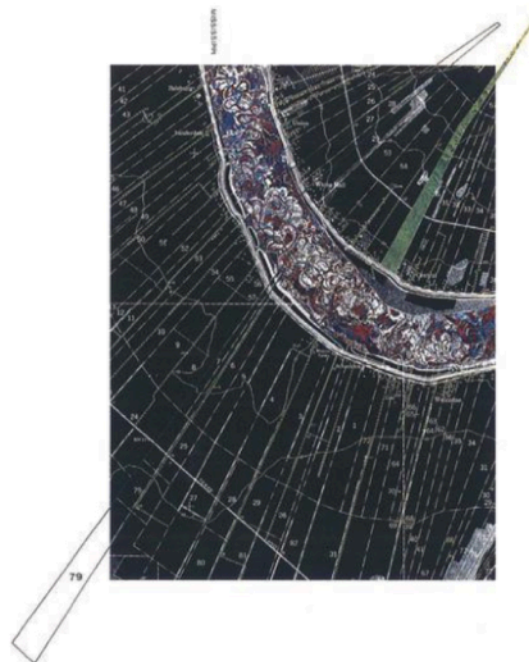
⁶ J. Corner, *The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention* (Mapping, London, Reaktion Books Ltd., 1999), 213.

“ Today, many symptoms reveal that we are in the midst of a transitional period in the disciplines of architecture and urbanism. Most of these symptoms are linguistic, as the weakness of our architectural vocabulary confronts the complexity of contemporary urban spaces: we still use generic, vague words, to name spatial issues; words that ‘slip’ off easily, unable to catch the real meaning of the new places which surround us. But we need more than a new vocabulary.”⁷

Boeri propose different ways of mapping the city, by which he addresses the physical change in its contemporary action. Maps are programmatically incomplete and eclectic because they seek to accommodate a multiple interpretation of the contemporary city. In Corner’s collage, there is always a clear nature and a measurement of human. Unlike the real satellite image in which nature and human intervention are ambiguously intertwined, there is always a gap in-between for Corner. But this gap shows how people control the land. The imposition of rationalized metrics on the ground gives humans some sense of control over the vast landscape. For these mappers, the mapping shows something less than reality but more invisible relations.



James Corner, Hoover Dam and the Colorado River (1996)



James Corner, Long Lots along the Mississippi River (1996)

As mentioned before, in the case of four thresholds between the sea and the land, mappings helps to reveal how infrastructure translate the sea to the land discursively. The water following the river will be involved in the Mediterranean ocean current when flows through the river bank. The accessibility is blocked by the line between the municipality of the harbour and the municipality of the city. The highway stands as a visual filter for people to look at the sea. Still, these discursive parts are discontinuous and dispersed. Some of them are overlapped and some are independent. They together turn the harbour to one complex threshold standing between the sea and the land. It is difficult to read the reality of the harbour from the unfolded threshold but easier to address the relations. And this is easier to turn to a design strategy and project by architectural vocabulary.

⁷ S. Boeri, *Eclectic atlases: four possible ways of seeing the city*, Daidalos (Berlin : Bertelsmann, 1999), 103.



A discursive reading is a discontinuous way of seeing. It is anti-conventional and anti-historical. As continuity always resides in history and convention. While mutation should not be ignored. But it is not denying the convention and the history. Instead, taking them as self-independent components like the others and looking for their current and changing relation with the others. They should always be challenged rather than being preserved, not to destroy them but to find a new position for them in contemporary city.

Angelil and Klingmann give an open interpretation for the transformation of the traditional city. For them, the formal principles lost the original direction, but in another way open new relations to other structural systems. To reach a discontinuous view, one single perspective is not sufficient. And it is not necessary to shift the perspectives in a continuous way. All the dispersed elements have internal relations to be found.

⁸ M. Angelil and A. Klingmann, *Hybrid Morphologies*, Daidalos (Berlin : Bertelsmann, 1999), 23.

The contemporary city is featured by fluid conditions and the changing is so dynamic that there is no single linearity and continuity. A system in motion is formed inside the city, within which it is not autonomous for infrastructure, landscape and architecture anymore. Their previous identity are uncovered and unprotected to the mutated system. Their identity can only be temporarily determined and is left unpredictable even for the near future. A discursive reading is necessary to address the motion and mutation rather than tracing the static reality. While the pre-defined types were dissolved, an undertermined state is obtained, which denies the fixed configuration in the city.

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