

MAPPING PERIPHERIES

URBAN

ETHNOGRAPHIC MAPS

AS GRAPHIC TOOLS

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ESSAY 94/05

ETHNOGRAPHIC MAPS

PERIPHERIES

BORDER

LINE

FRAMEWORK

The crisis of the boundary line and the consequent determination of the peripheries from a geometric point of view entails a crisis in representing urban boundaries and thresholds, and therefore the peripheries themselves.

In this regard, the essay rereads some historical and recent ethnographic urban maps. Both from a graphic point of view and as artefacts and documents capable of visualising complex urban issues linked to the concept of peripheralization of fragile territories. This reinterpretation allows

us to highlight the role that these graphic artefacts have as interpretative documents of the peripheral realities of the city that open operational, epistemological and semantic perspectives in the field of graphic sciences.

The frames operated by the boundary drawing line of the urban periphery assume similar ontological meanings and epistemologies. Their re-discussion allows us to rethink their definition and operational role in the urban dimension and in the extension of the graphic tools of urban representation.

GEOMETRY IN RELATION TO CENTRE/PERIPHERY

In the field of descriptive geometry, and more generally in the graphic sciences (Cicalò, 2020), the line is identified as an essential element of representation. An abstract geometric entity that is difficult to identify in nature and tangible reality (Cardone, 2015). It serves to delineate the object to be represented. It becomes the expression of its limit (from the Latin *limes -mītis*) and its perimeter (from the Greek *περί* 'around' and *μέτρον* 'measure'). A perimeter that defines a homogeneous interior and a different exterior. On the one hand, the boundary brings with it the concept of the periphery, a word with which it shares the origin of the etymon and sanctions a progressive distance from the characteristics of homogeneity, continuity, and isotropy that the figure outlined assumes (Farinelli, 2003). On the other hand, as a threshold, the limit distinguishes two places, two territories, two areas but simultaneously communicates.

Probably, however, the term that best specifies the concept of the periphery is the one that identifies the confines in Latin *confīnium* (*cum* = together plus *finis* = limit, but also in the plural *fines* = region, territory). The Greek philosopher and mathematician Euclid (4th century BC - 3rd century BC), in the first book of the *Elements*, in the thirteenth axiom, defines "A boundary [...] that which is the extremity of anything". Making the notion more precise, Aristotle establishes the extremity of a 'thing' as that first term beyond which nothing more of the 'thing' can be found and beyond which there is the whole 'thing'. Both thinkers' definition becomes quite intuitive and can be taken as the natural starting point for any investigation of the concept of boundary and, therefore, of the notions related to centre and periphery.

The notion of boundary plays a crucial role at any level of representation and organisation of the world around us. The intuitive distinction between *de dicto* confines—characterised by their dependence on human organisational action—and *de re* confines—such as natural geographical boundaries. One

thinks of a boundary whenever one refers to a specific entity as something separate from the rest that surrounds it (Varzi, 2005). It is precisely the concept of the *de dicto* border that has characterised the perception and management of the territory in society. As David Harvey recalls in his essay *La crisi della modernità* [The condition of postmodernity] (2010), territories have been mapped, surveyed, and analytically monitored from the Enlightenment onwards, especially for fiscal, governmental, and control purposes. Space previously 'boundless' (literally without borders), even if not infinite, is now delimited by administrative, bureaucratic and political boundaries. As Massimo Cacciari (2004) argues, every structure needs boundaries to exist. A place can only be inhabited where its formal completeness enters into relation with the globality of information, denying the uprooting from the spatial dimension that communication seems to impose.

In this perspective, the tragic and recent history of Berlin should not be forgotten. The city, born from the unification of two nuclei on opposite banks of the Spree river –Cölln and Berlin– in the 13th century, was separated by an artificial border erected in 1961. This original duplicity is an integral part of its identity, originating from an archipelago of fragments (Marotta, 2007). On the night of 21-22 December 1989, that wall, which defined a border and two geopolitical peripheries, was torn down, offering the culture of design the possibility of spatially investigating its complex text. The destruction of the bombings left peripheral voids that became new centralities again once the wall was torn down (Cirafici, 2020). One immediately understands how the theme of the centre and the periphery has been undermined by political action that has effectively separated the city's historical centralities.

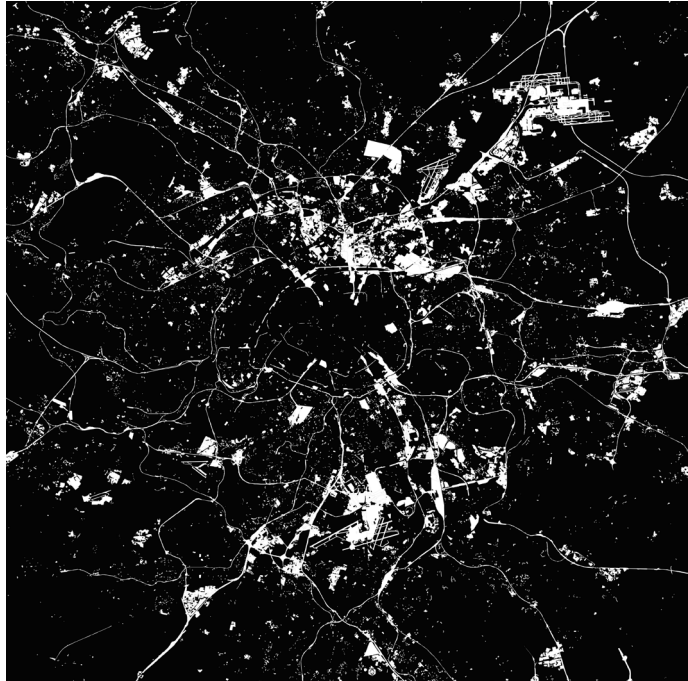
In fact, the principle of homogeneity and the related process of confinement is at the basis of the graphic realisation of maps, from territorial to urban ones. In mathematical and geometrical terms, we can say that mapping is the operation of correspondence between two systems –the real one and

the cartographic one— that allows assigning to the first a correspondence with the second one. A correspondence that often occurs through the graphic confinement of predominantly homogeneous areas. Confinement is implemented with clear lines that establish the homogeneity of a site and determine its periphery. This type of process is challenged in situations of mapping territorial and urban ethnographic realities. This *modus operandi* has characterised many processes of modernity. Through ‘mapping’, these processes have implemented on the city and the territory the principle of reduction that allows the complexity of the world to correspond to the synthesis of the map. Through mapping, the urban territory takes the form of a Euclidean extension, i.e. a surface that obeys the rules of continuity, homogeneity and isotropism (Farinelli, 2003).

At the same time, however, it is possible to say that the periphery, in the urban sense, is not a geometric and physical condition concerning the location of the parts. Today more than ever, as Mario Fumagalli states in his book *Il volto della città* [The face of the city]: “With the evolution of the city’s geography, suburbs are no longer identifiable based on the geometric concept of distance from the centre [...], as the last built fringe before the countryside”. Consequently, “there is a tendency to define them based on economic and social criteria” [my translation from Italian] (Fumagalli, 2011, p. 93).

In reality, as large urban and metropolitan realities demonstrate today, it is complicated to say where a city begins and ends. Unlike the concept of hierarchy, which is widely used in descriptive and analytical geometry, isotropy can be helpful to describe peripheral features beyond the simple spatial identification of distance from the centre. In this regard, isotropy presents itself as the organisational capacity of a body—in this case of the city—that gives rise to a given phenomenon in the same way in all directions (Secchi, 2013). This is ably illustrated by the map *Les propriétés de Lucifer* (Fig. 1) made by Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò for the *Grand Paris* project—promoted by French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008. The image high-

Fig. 1 Secchi, B., & Viganò, P. (2009), *Les propriétés de Lucifer* [Lucifer's properties]. In *Paris Métropole 2021, la construction d'une stratégie*, p. 4.



lights the limits of a Paris that identifies solely and exclusively with its Haussmannian centre. The map shows the boundaries of an image that fails to grasp the potential and opportunities offered by this vast territory, which the research reveals to be rich in significant and dispersed external locations.

In this organisation, the people who live in the places are involved, as a relationship of subordination is created between them, which is an expression of different social conditions. The concept of hierarchy is easily associated with the periphery, which presupposes a comparison between centrality and marginality and implies the definition of a system in which different parts are formed and developed. This hierarchy between the elements does not necessarily enclose a corresponding geometric organisation in the contemporary city: the centre and the periphery can be configured according to different spatialities, subverting their traditional spatial location. In this sense, the binary scheme's 'centre-periphery' relationship is deconstructed in its rigidity, favouring new perspectives.

REPRESENTING INVERSION THROUGH THE SINGULAR POINT OF VIEW

Historically, the idea of the periphery arose as a geographical counterpoint to a strong and recognised centrality. In particular, all European cities with a historical founding matrix find their identity in the oldest sediments of the historic core. This is the case of stratified cities, such as Naples, Rome, Paris, Vienna, Barcelona, etc., which have lost and found their identity in these dimensions. Intellectuals and artists have been lost and found in these dimensions, such as the philosopher Walter Benjamin, who described Naples as a “porous city” and identified the places of *passages* in historic Paris (Benjamin, 1980). Somehow, the historical city becomes recognised as a collective heritage that belongs to the inhabitants who live in it as to the people who occasionally pass through it. Unlike, the suburbs are born as marginal, homogeneous places as defined above. These places arise with specific functions in response to social, economic, and political problems. Obviously, a difference between these two types of reality is easily recognisable. Suppose the centrality of cities is recognised by all possible inhabitants. In that case, the periphery is identified only by those who live there. It is also true that the poet’s gaze can read universal values in these marginal places. Let us think of the vision that Pier Paolo Pasolini’s work offered in this direction. In the suburbs of the Roman suburbs, he found a sense of community, both rural and pre-industrial, a synthesis of a political dimension that was disappearing in Italy during the economic boom. At the same time, today, in the different peripheral sizes, we find an assortment of situations that belong to places other than the defined, and sometimes simplified and trivialised, homogeneity of urban centres. The plural dimension of the suburbs should be understood not from the formal point of view of geometry, town planning and architecture, but rather from the ethnic and social point of view. Their multiple richness allows them to disobey the overall homogeneity of the centre. Their cultural encroachment offers new possibili-

ties for social interaction, allowing the city to renew itself and nourish its centrality with new energies. We have already witnessed and continue to see gentrification processes that attract middle-class populations to what were historically peripheries. Clearly, where there are issues of the periphery with a modern matrix, this substitution of population, favouring the more affluent classes, is made more accessible. The richness offered by the sometimes conflicting diversity of the suburbs attracts new inhabitants to replace those who generated it.

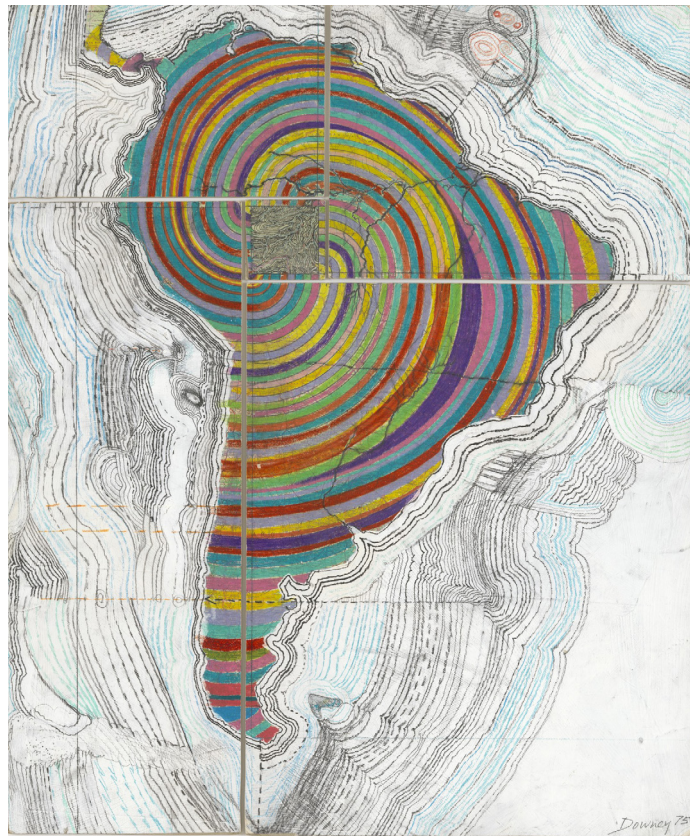
It is possible to argue that the great challenge facing the future city is precisely investigating the places on the margins, the peripheral zones. Suppose a centre is a place of symbolic and commercial representation. In that case, the periphery becomes the terminal of complex and conflicting events that identify the new scenarios to which the city may be subjected in its entirety. From these arguments, the need to invert the point and angle of observation are evident (Petrillo, 2018). While in communication, the city is crystallised as a fundamentally reassuring place to find its roots. The periphery is an environment characterised by continuous and unpredictable actions and events that make such places ramifications and not roots.

The use of the graphic device of urban ethnographic maps makes it easy, albeit simplified, to read complexities that are only detectable in the complex environments of the suburbs. This geo-graphic device makes it possible to identify the city's multiple cultural centralities, overcoming the dichotomous and conventional concept of the centre and the periphery. As the periphery, observed from different perspectives, can become a catalyst for new centralities.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CARTOGRAPHY AS A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

In this regard, ethnographic maps as thematic maps, in which the represented size goes beyond the traditional geo-

Fig. 3 Downey, J. (1975). *Map of America*. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from Moma <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/164788>>.



ripheral border area is specified, which brings the possibility of conflict. This ethnographically based territorial representation played a crucial role in defining emerging Yugoslavia during the Paris Treaties (Kent, 2019). At the same time, this map had the anticipatory ability to identify the crisis areas in which the Yugoslav wars took place and which, with much difficulty, led to the definition of the borders of the new national realities.

This methodology, which utilises *de dicto* 'confines' lines, clearly defines ethnic homogeneities that are difficult to identify, has challenged various artists. Finally, and only in terms of time, we can mention the map by the Chilean artist Juan Downey, whose *Map of America* (Fig. 2) depicts South America in a whirlwind of colours with no national or geo-

graphical boundaries. The artist created a graphic work on the occasion of an on-the-road trip from New York through Central and South America.

Despite the criticisms that can be made of this practice, it is applied to studying the ethnic multiplicities that can be identified in the city. Therefore, in the same way, in the case of the mapping of large cities, the concept of the perimeter is challenged if one does not consider its physical dimension exclusively. The mapping of urban ethnographic realities makes it possible to reinterpret structures of peripheralisation that move away from the purely geometric and dichotomous dimension between centre and periphery. The removal of the static and geometric definition of its boundary entails the crisis of homogeneity and continuity.

The double map of 1894 *The Tenement-House Committee maps* (Fig. 4) appears emblematic. On the one hand, it shows the population density of Manhattan and, on the other hand, the presence of the variety of nationalities present in the city. In the first map, the scale of the pattern determines the density. The second, the variety of textures—which has graphic assonances with Sol LeWitt's work—highlights the ethnographic variety that is difficult to confine. The double cartographic and graphic register allows us to reinterpret the condition of peripherality and the multiple centralities in the same city. The maps, presented with their report on 17 January 1895, generated considerable public interest after publication in *Harper's Weekly*. They constituted an important milestone in using new forms of graphic representation and communication by the New York reformers. A detailed reading reveals an immediate, simultaneous view of two coinciding urban characteristics thanks to the original graphical instrument. On the one hand, the exceptionally high population density in one corner of Lower Manhattan and, on the other hand, the coincidence of an ethnographically rich heart related to the presence of migrants (Vaughan, 2018).

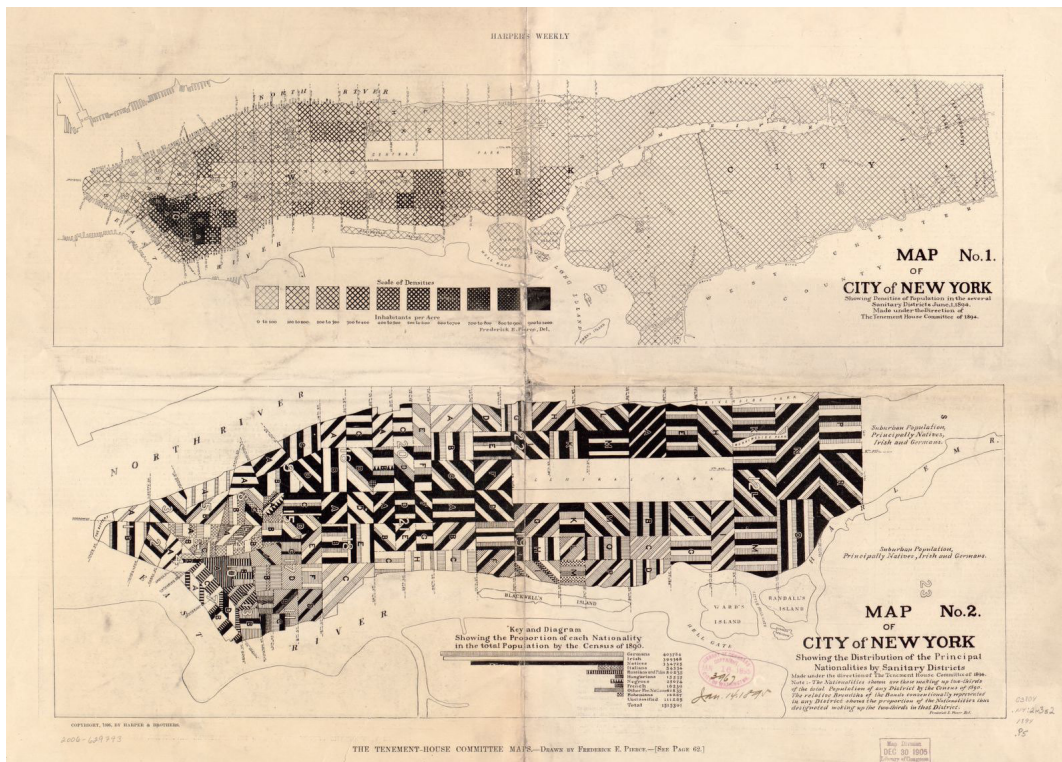


Fig. 4 Pierce, F. E. (1894) *The Tenement-House Committee maps*. [S.l.: Harper & Brothers] [Map]. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from the Library of Congress <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2006629793/>>.

Similarly, another ethnographic map of the city's West Side was produced in Chicago (Fig. 5). Although the map does not indicate the exact place of residence of the inhabitants, it shows the residents' nationality through coded colours. As can be seen from the observation of the graphic artefact, the sequence of coloured blocks indicates the occupation of the plots by nationality. The portions without fields, which make up most of the plots, designate English-speaking residents born in the United States. They are followed, in terms of numbers, by the European migrant ethnic groups: the Irish (green), the Bohemians (yellow), the Italians (blue), the Russians (red) and the Poles (red bands). The resulting image makes it easy to read the distribution of ethnic groups and their arrangement. It also shows a sort of aggregation of ethnic communities and the relative centralities created from these. At first glance, the map

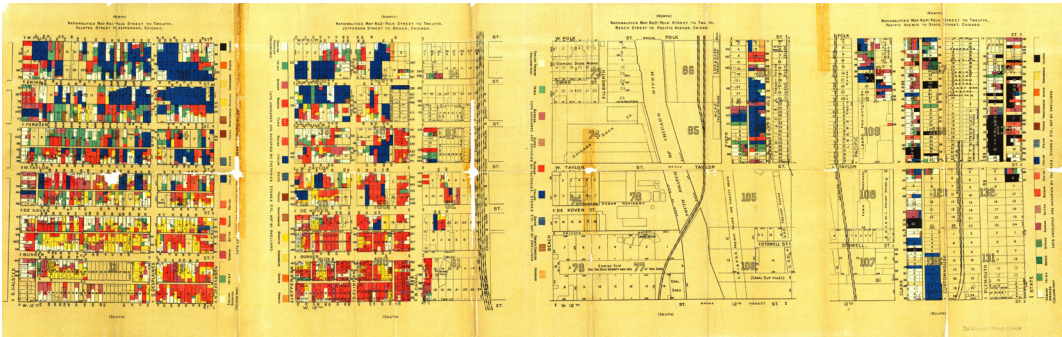


Fig. 5 Greeley, S. S. (1895). *Nationalities map no. 1[-4], Polk St. to Twelfth ... Chicago*. [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co.] [Map] Retrieved September 21, 2021, from the University of Chicago Digital Preservation Collection <<http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/8602878>>.

of nationalities looks like a tapestry of colours indicating a mixture of equally distributed ethnic groups. But equally, on closer inspection, the map reveals how foreigners lived in distinct and separate enclaves. At the same time, however, this intermingling shows how the foreigners present in Chicago's Near West Side were more or less mixed with a tendency to drift into small national colonies. As we know, this area of the city, which in the 19th century was not really central and almost peripheral to the Loop, is today considered one of the most vital and culturally active parts of the city. A process that nowadays affects other parts of the city of Chicago. For example, the South Side – which from the 1840s until the Second World War saw the migration of European populations (Irish, Italians, Poles, Lithuanians and Yugoslavs). In recent years, the area has changed due to gentrification by wealthier people moving into the district from the centre. The conflictual relationship between these populations is perfectly described in John Wells' television series *Shameless*, which, in the US adaptation of the British series, sees the already complex relationships of the multi-ethnic community clash with the new rich populations. In all these examples, the careful use of textures, tones and shapes facilitate easy reading for the viewer. Investigation of these maps, while requiring precise decoding, allows an understanding of the graphic logic made visible by the skilful use of the dimensional and chromatic variables of the visual devices (Monmonier, 2015).

3 - L'INTELLIGENZA DELLE PERIFERIE

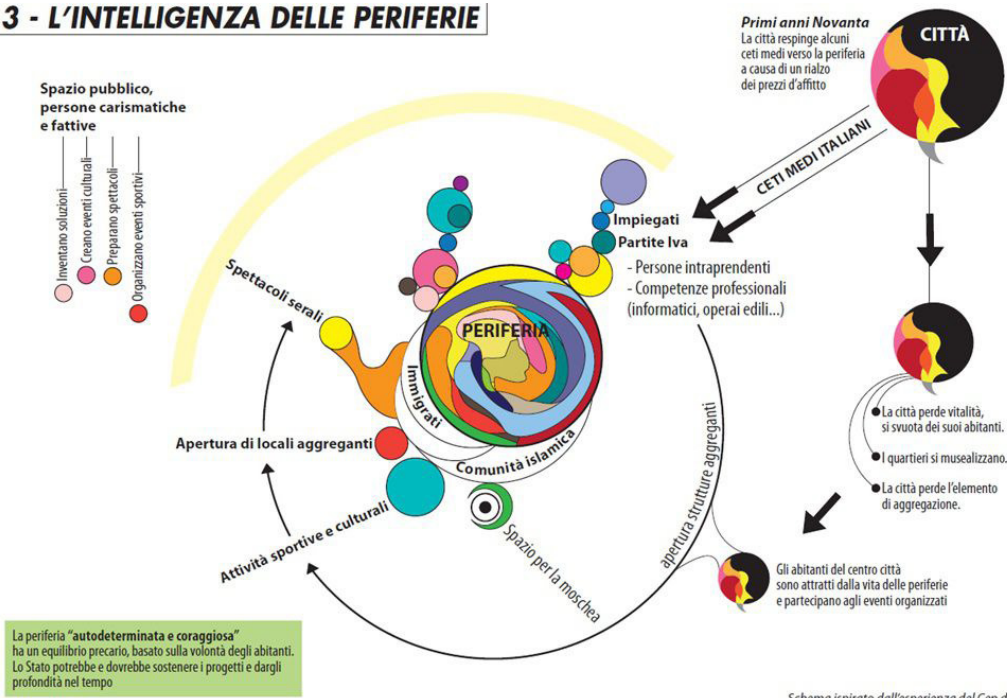


Fig. 6 Canali, L. (2016). *L'intelligenza delle periferie* [Intelligence of the peripheries]. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from *Limes Web* <<https://www.limesonline.com/lintelligenza-delle-periferie/91338>>.

Today, more than in the past, one of the most consolidated research techniques in urban anthropology is linked to ethnography, which with its holistic approach seeks to understand the dynamics that the inhabitants of a given urban context assume within their social and cultural apparatuses, with repercussions on the more purely spatial dimension of the city. The ethnographic analysis seeks to go beyond the purely quantitative reading of data and identify more qualitative approaches to determine an analytical observation of the spatial practices and everyday life of places.

As Daniel Modigliani states in the pages of *Limes*: "the term 'periphery' is so generic that it now retains only the original sense of a 'marginalised' place" [my translation from Italian?] (2016, p. 130). The author asserts that the suburbs, insofar as they are distant from economic centres and political decision-making power, become places that gen-

erate an “urban gradient” (p.135) precisely because communities without power live and survive within them. It is a population capable of exactly generating its ethnic diversity, innovative cultural phenomena, and subversive urban practices concerning established centres. Peripheral areas are increasingly becoming places where the survival strategies of vulnerable communities with solid international connections are formed. In this regard, the a-geographic map (Fig. 6) by Laura Canali published in the same issue of *Limes* is of considerable interest. The map graphically illustrates the inversion of polarity between centre and periphery in the emblematic case of the Cep di Prà in Genoa. Unlike the old centres that are emptied of activities and inhabitants in this neighbourhood and become a museum, a new public dimension is born from collective work and self-determination that feeds on the multi-ethnic populations that live there. In this case, unlike showed in previously maps, the graphic sign does not circumscribe places but illustrates the dynamics that are triggered between the centre and the outskirts of Genoa, highlighting in a visual and very intuitive way the link between the cultural and ethnographic wealth of the outskirts and the ferment that this generates.

Similarly, although with different modalities and purposes, the ethnographic maps of the *Urban Ethnography Lab* of the Humboldt-University of Berlin show the strong potential that these graphic devices have in reading urban dynamics about the forces between centre and periphery and to the dynamism of multi-ethnic peripheries. Through an interdisciplinary approach between architecture and urban anthropology, the practice of decoding the city through its mapping allows for the emergence of relevant questions regarding the multiple dimension of centralities. *Counter mappings* (Wood, 2012) highlight the visible purpose of maps to clarify for what purpose they were actually created and what information they might conceal, highlighting a remarkable effort to map against dominant power structures. The tools developed by



Fig. 7 Genz, C, 2017. (ON LEFT) *Ethnography in Urban Settings*. (ON RIGHT) *Fold-Up Mapping Booklet*. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from the Urban Ethnography Lab <<https://urban-ethnography.com/methods/mappings/>>.

the research group led by Carolin Genz (Humboldt-University of Berlin), Aylin Yildirim Tschoepe (Academy of Art and Design/ FHNW Basel) and Jessika Tremblay (University of Toronto), through collaboration with cartographic artists and architects, allow for the development and illumination of a new visual perspective in urban ethnography. Specifically, the *Fold-Up Mapping Booklet* (Fig. 7) helps collect urban ethnographic data in a creative and personal way to reach the scale of tangible visualisation of these data far from a mere quantitative dimension. The mapping that arises from the drawing of spatial observations generates maps, which, superimposed on different layers of transparent paper, make it possible to visualise the different social dynamics that unfold in urban space. A mapping technique requires the author of the map to be physically involved in the urban space and its social, cultural and political complexity.

The maps by Laura Canali and the *Urban Ethnography Lab* research group clearly show the role that graphic sciences and maps, in particular, play in decoding urban realities. Graphic maps that do not work on relying on the means of confinement, but on the contrary, provide for a ‘trespassing’ of the line and of disciplines. An undermining of the bound-

ary line and the consequent determination of peripheries from a geometric point of view implies a crisis in representing urban boundaries and thresholds, hence peripheries (Genz & Lucas-Drogan, 2018).

REVERSING THE CENTRE-PERIPHERY PRINCIPLE

As Rudolf Arnheim recalls in *Il potere del centro* [The power of the center: a study of composition in the visual arts]: “The frame makes its appearance when the work is no longer considered an integral part of the social setting, but a statement about that setting. When the work of art becomes a proposition, its changed reality status is expressed by its visible detachment – the frame – from the surroundings. Boris Uspensky relates the function of the frame to the phenomenon of estrangement” [my translation from Italian³] (2016, p. 66). suppose we transfer the theme to urban issues. In that case, it is possible to say that the process of delimitation of areas with operations like framing works of art leads to the separation of the different regions of the city. Historically, places in the city have never been separable. The contemporary situation leads to the estrangement of certain parts of the city and consequently determine processes of peripheralization. Not only that, analysing the pattern of the single area perimeter of the map and transliterating the concept of the Russian philosopher Uspensky, but the inhabitant of that specific periphery also turns out to be alienated from an idea of shared sociality. This estrangement determines a state of isolation of the subject within a view of the city.

At the same time, as Luisa Scalabroni (2008) states concerning the trespassing of the frame (fig. 8): “where the object frame helps perception to distinguish ontologically between the observer’s real space and the fictitious space of representation, the painted frame intervenes in this duality of spaces by variously relating the two spaces, sometimes transforming the ontological leap to which the pictorial imagination invites us into a continuous and unitary path-

Fig. 8 Pere Borrell del Caso, *Huyendo de la crítica* [Escaping criticism], 1874. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from the Collection Banco de España, Madrid <https://www.bde.es/bde/es/secciones/sobreelbanco/patrimonios/La_coleccion_de_pere-borrell-del-caso-huyendo-de-la-critica-733cb1315f21271.html>



way” [my translation from Italian⁴] (p. 12). In the same way, through cartographic elaborations, graphic sciences applied to anthropology and urban analysis have the role of overcoming the ontological boundary between real space and that of the observer/worker. The experiences illustrated above open up new transdisciplinary lines of research, far removed from purely quantitative readings, which cross urban analysis and the graphic sciences. If the painting frame is an object, a wall, that delimits a reality, so in the drawing of the map, the line becomes a delimiter of a homogeneous area extraneous to the context. Contrarily, the painted frame is the line drawn on the map in a blurred and indeterministic way, delimiting an edge area that is difficult to delimit.

NOTES

- 1** The Italian text of the quotation is as follows: “Con l'evolvere della geografia della città le periferie non sono più identificabili in base al concetto geometrico di distanza dal centro [...], come ultima frangia edificata prima della campagna”. Di conseguenza “si tende a definirle in base a criteri economici e sociali” (Fumagalli, 2011, p. 93).
- 2** The Italian text of the quotation is as follows: “il termine ‘periferia’ è talmente generico che mantiene ormai solo il senso originario di luogo ‘emarginato’” (2016, p. 130).
- 3** The Italian text of the quotation is as follows: “la cornice fa la sua apparizione quando l'opera pittorica non viene più considerata parte integrante dell'ambito sociale, bensì una sua asserzione. Il suo mutato stato di realtà viene espresso mediante il suo visibile distacco – la cornice – rispetto all'ambiente. Boris Uspensky mette in relazione la funzione della cornice con il fenomeno dell'estraniamento” (Arnheim, 2016, p. 66).
- 4** The Italian text of the quotation is as follows: “laddove la cornice oggetto aiuta la percezione nel distinguere ontologicamente lo spazio reale dell'osservatore da quello fittizio della rappresentazione, la cornice dipinta interviene su questa dualità di spazi mettendo variamente in relazione i due spazi, trasformando talvolta in un percorso continuo e unitario il salto ontologico cui l'immaginazione pittorica ci invita” (Scalabrioni, 2008, p. 66).

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Article available at

DOI: 10.6092/issn.2724-2463/12764

How to cite
as article

Valentino, M. (2021). Mapping Peripheries: Urban Ethnographic Maps as Graphic Tools. *img journal*, 5, 196-215.

as contribution in book

Valentino, M. (2021). Mapping Peripheries: Urban Ethnographic Maps as Graphic Tools. In T. Boos, D. Ietri & E. Mastropietro (Eds.), *img journal 05/2021 Imaging peripheries* (pp. 196-215). Alghero, IT: Publica. ISBN 9788899586232



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