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experimental geographies

Posted on [September 18, 2010](#)

In landscape architecture, representation is problematic in that the designer typically does not create the landscape. Rather, she or he creates a set of drawings, which are then conveyed to contractor who constructs the constructs and plants the plants. But even then, the landscape isn't "done" – weather and seasons change, things grow and die. So what what exactly are we representing in our drawings?

I have been wondering about the role of graphic representation in urban renewal: how did conventions of geography and cartography contribute to the policies of removal and erasure, and what alternatives exist as we move forward? I've been exploring this idea through readings on "experimental geography" and "radical cartography". Trevor Paglen provides a great set of definitions in his essay "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space" ([Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography and Urbanism](#) New York: Independent Curators International, 2008):

*"Geography's second overarching axiom has to do with what we generally call "the production of space." Although the idea of the "production of space" is usually attributed to the geographer-philosopher Henri Lefebvre, whose 1974 book *La Production de l' Espace* introduced the term to large numbers of people, the ideas animating Lefebvre's work have a much longer history. Like materialism, the production of space is a relatively easy, even obvious, idea, but is has profound implications. In a nutshell the production of space says that humans create the world around them and that humans are, in turn, created by the world around them. In other words, the human condition is characterized by a feedback loop between human activity and our material surroundings. In this view, space is not a container for human activities to take place within, but is actively "produced" through human activity. The spaces humans produce, in turn, set powerful constraints upon subsequent activity."* (29)

...

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“Experimental geography means practices that take on the production of space in a self-reflexive way, practices that recognize that cultural production and the production of space cannot be separated from each another, and that cultural and intellectual production is a spatial practice. Moreover, experimental geography means not only seeing the production of space as an ontological condition, but actively experimenting with the production of space as an integral part of one’s own practice. If human activities are inextricably spatial, then new forms of freedom and democracy can only emerge in dialectical relation to the production of new spaces. I deliberately use one of modernism’s keywords, “experimental,” for two reasons. First is to acknowledge and affirm the modernist notion that things can be better, that humans are capable of improving their own conditions, to keep cynicism and defeatism at arm’s length. Moreover, experimentation means production without guarantees, and producing new forms of space certainly comes without guarantees. Space is not deterministic, and the production of new spaces isn’t easy.” (31)

...

“The task of experimental geography, then, is to seize the opportunities that present themselves in the spatial practices of culture. To move beyond critical reflection, critique alone, and political “attitudes,” into the realm of practice. To experiment with creating new spaces, new ways of being.”(33)

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A few methods of mapping time and space that I am interested in exploring in my own work:

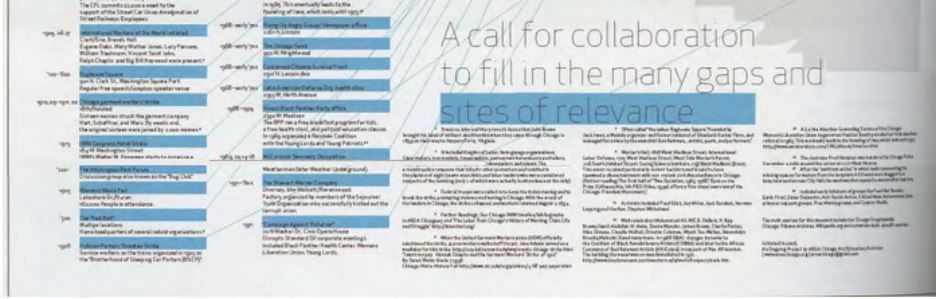
Calling all mapmakers, historians, informal researchers and citizens with good memory [Help to complete this map](#)

Chicago is a place where people move through and people arrive. Despite working, living and playing here – especially those involved in public and social struggles – we’ve a great deal of difficulty to other places for and with for inspiration they have provided for the people they have brought to the city in the past. We as residents of Chicago have collected a deep tradition of urban and social movement knowledge through plans and theories on ethics. Combining these struggles with their ongoing battles in individual rights. What if there was a map of the city of Chicago that told the stories of locally based modes of interaction, assembly and social movement through time?

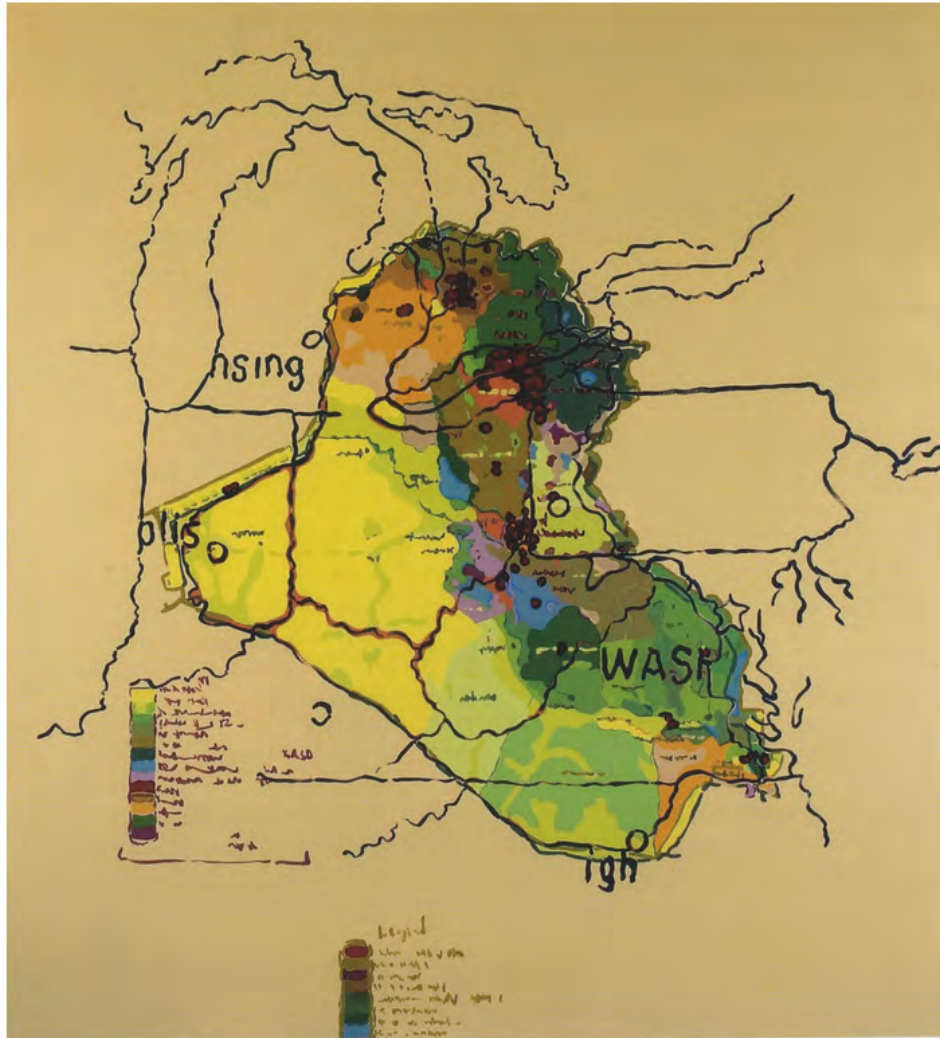
Over the next few years ARRS will be working with researchers and local institutions (like public libraries) to create maps based on Chicagoans’ connections to important struggles and local histories of social movements. They’re used to being only influenced by more specific time periods, great history of our neighborhoods or general daily lives. The history that inspire you. Help others not forget.

Download your own blank map at <https://www.wikiLou.org/>

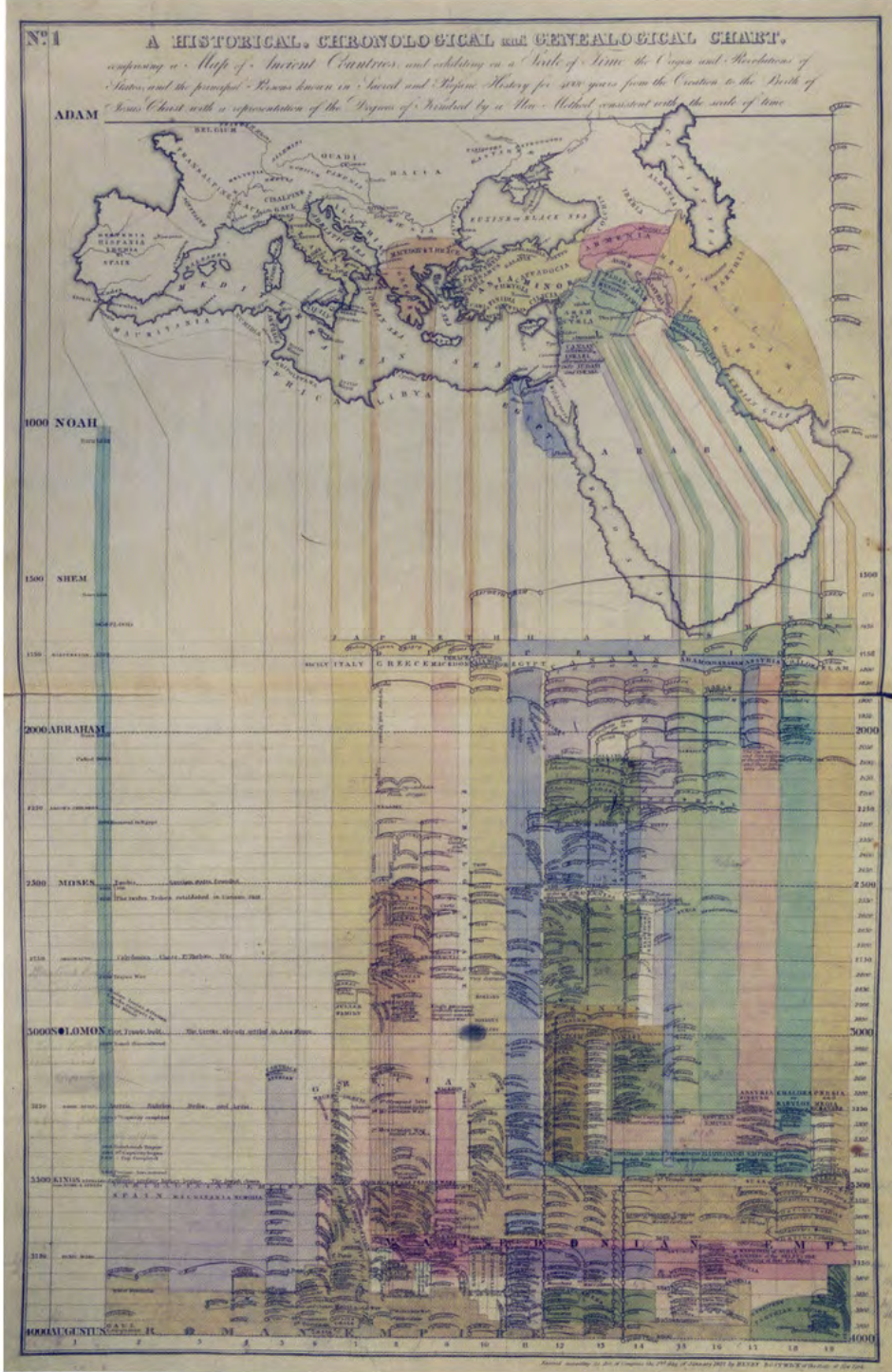
Notes for a People's Atlas of Chicago



“Solidarity Map” AREA Chicago 2006 - methodology: the power of naming places

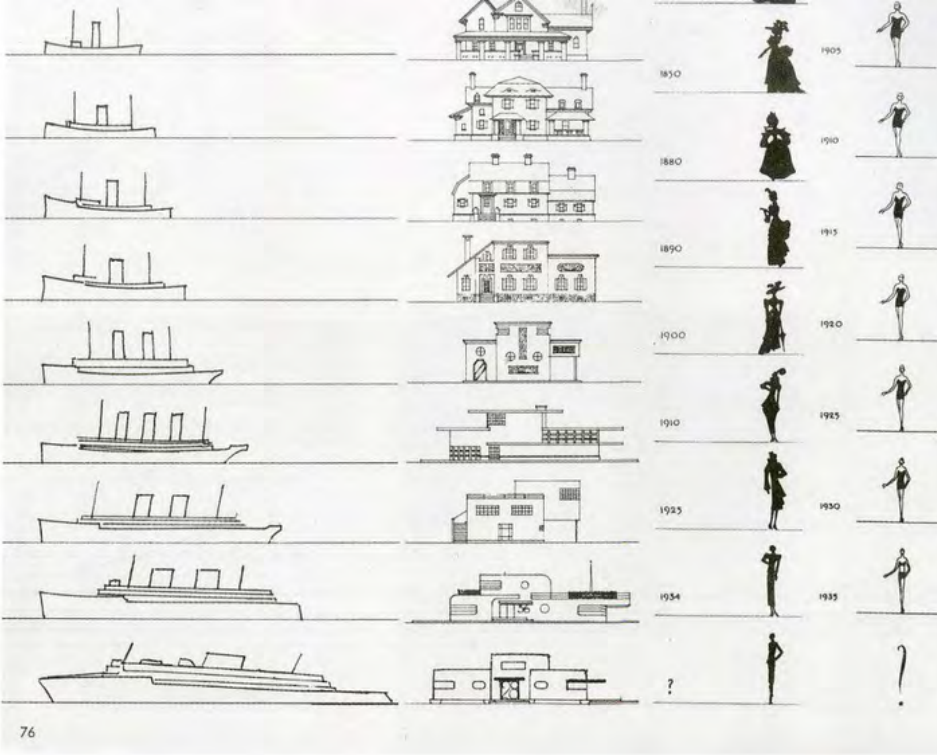


“Superimpositions” Dan Mills 2007 method: scale comparison of Iraq and United States – this also reminds me of the power of the [If It Were My Home Oil Spill Map](#).



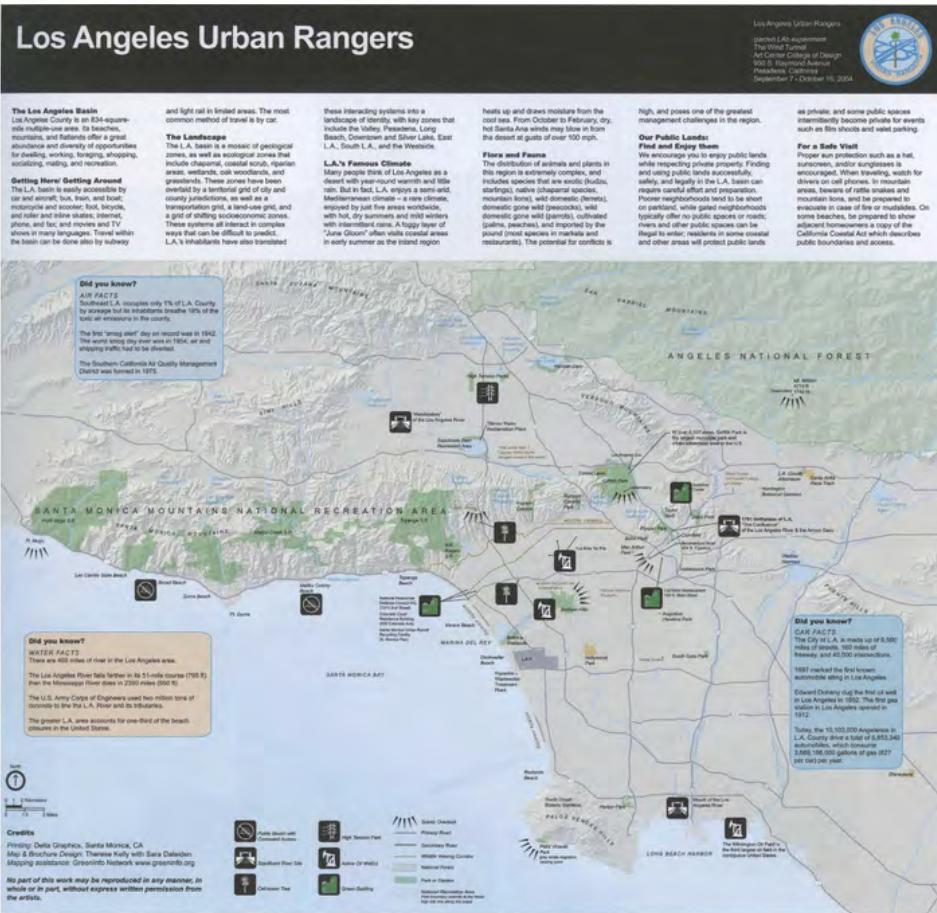
“A Historical, Chronological and Genealogical Chart” Bostwick method: mapping geographical location with change over time.



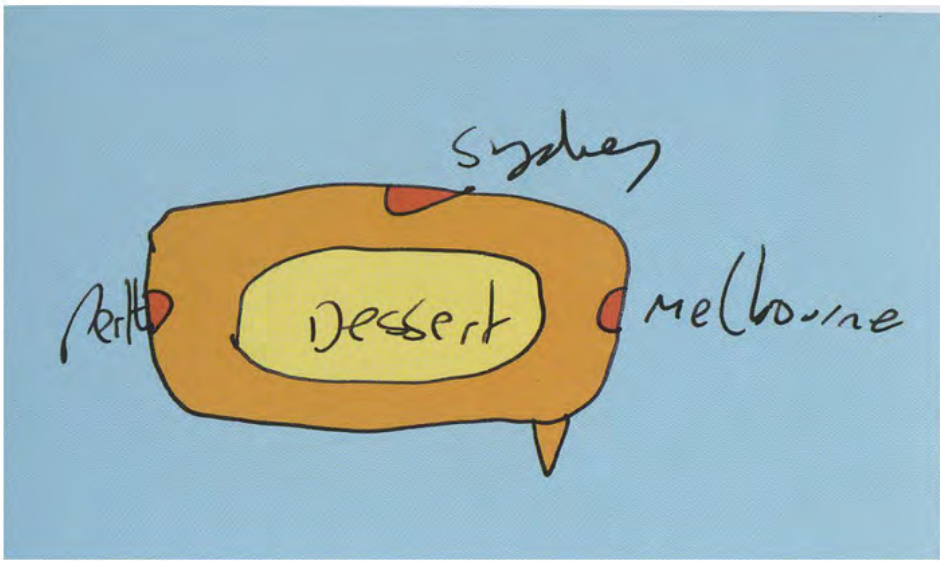


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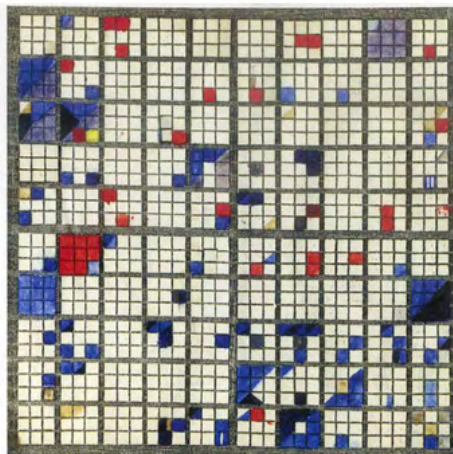
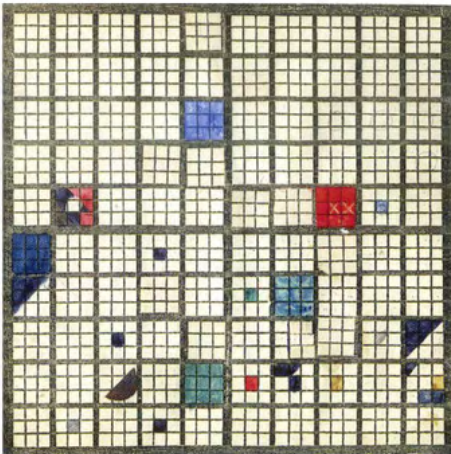
“Evolution Charts” Loewy 1933 method: mapping change in forms over time.



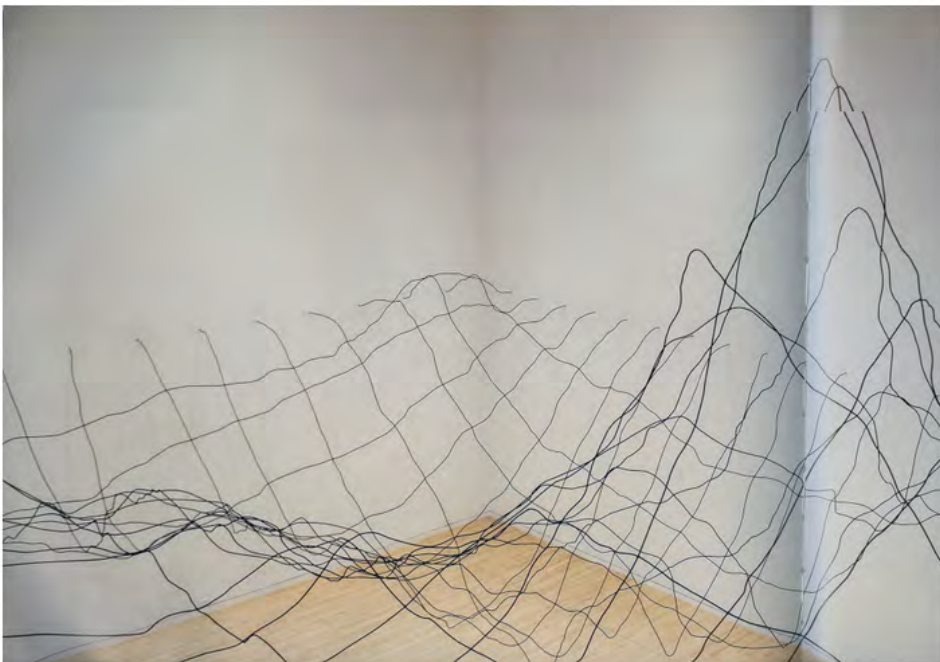
“Los Angeles Urban Rangers Official Map and Guide” LA Urban Rangers 2004 method: subverting conventional NPS map symbology



"Memory Map" Ellis Nadler 2007 method: drawing things as we remember or imagine them – which reminds me that I need to add Kevin Lynch to my reading list.



"Polish American System of Chronology" Elizabeth Palmer Peabody 1850 method: total geometric abstraction of time.



Experimental geographies, especially the last image from Maya Lin, reminds me of some of Garret Eckbo's writing on representation in "Space for Living – People on the Land":

"The relation of line on paper to form on the ground requires discussion. There is a remarkable amount of confusion on this simple matter. The fairy tale about geometric lines being rigid, arbitrary, and 'formal,' whereas the free curve is the line of beauty, nature, and 'informality,' is only the most common manifestation.

"We must first understand the relation between lines on paper and lines in the actual building or garden. Any sharp edge gives a visual line. Any form silhouetted against a contrasting background is expressed in line. Beyond that, in a structure actual line appears as the joint between two kinds of surface material on a flat plane, or as a corner where two planes come together. This line is the result of a processing of materials which makes possible smoothness of finish and consequent continuity of edge. Such sharply refined lines, with continuity in one direction (straight) or in one changing direction (arcs) seldom occur in the natural materials of landscape work, at the scale at which we work with them. Rocks and tight shrubs may have sharp silhouettes, but even they are lines of constantly changing direction, and we are more apt to sense the rock as a mass and the shrub as a structure in space than to be conscious of their lines. Line can be given to natural materials by human processing: thus the tooling of rock in masonry is a process of giving it more precise form; trimmed grass and hedges can have relatively precise edges and corners, if the trimming is repeated often enough to control the natural growth. Scale is important: irregularity accumulating continuously in the same direction can have cumulative organizing force of line.

"In order to design in line we must have developed a language on paper so that we know whether a line means and actual precise edge on the job, or merely a relation of elements such as plants. Then the question of the complexity or simplicity of geometric relations in our lines and forms becomes the key to our problem." (67)

...

"The plan is the paper projection of actual and proposed space relations on the site, at the handy scale of the drawing board. Working in plan without detailed experience of the site or allowance for adaptation and improvisation during installation is the sterile conclusion of the mechanical and arbitrary Beaux Arts approach. But working on the ground without the overall scope of the plan is the concentration non little things, the clever detail, the pictorial arrangement, the decorative, arty, romantic, subjective, irrational emphasis. Plans and sections give the overall control, the combination of bird's eye view and precise detailed information, which are basic to the fullest, richest, clearest, warmest spatially symphonic concept within the limits of the site. Within the broad and tolerant framework of such conceptions there will be ample room for detailed improvisation during installation on the site, for elements of romanticism, fantasy, subjectivity, and apparent irrationality, disorder, or accident, and for the creative participation of those resident in or passing through the space, in terms of actual flexibility, mobility, and rearrangeability of the detailed elements." (72)