

La Città Palinsesto

The City as Palimpsest

**Tracce, sguardi e narrazioni
sulla complessità dei contesti urbani storici**

Tracks, views and narrations
on the complexity of historical urban contexts



Tomo primo
Memorie, storie, immagini
Memories, stories, images

a cura di
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e-book edito da
Federico II University Press
con
CIRICE - Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sull'Iconografia della Città Europea

Collana

Storia e iconografia dell'architettura, delle città e dei siti europei, 6/I

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Tomo I - *Memorie, storie, immagini*

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ISBN 978-88-99930-06-6

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Organic versus Geometric: The Impact of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake

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Abstract

In the last two decades, with the increase in the offer and accessibility of low-cost travelling, we have witnessed in Europe a radical transformation and de-characterisation of many cities that have become places and shop windows expressly designed for tourism in which services, stores, housing, institutions and daily habits are constantly changing. This very rapid metamorphosis in historical centres of European cities, seems only to have had a parallel in the past, when cities were suddenly devastated by bombings or natural cataclysms. The present case study analyses the paradigmatic change in the design of road arteries and the architectural layout of downtown Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake, which left most of the city completely destroyed. If for centuries, the configuration and formal evolution of the city was carried out very slowly in an organic way, with the post-earthquake design we witness a totally new geometric option imposed from the outside to the inside of the city.

Keywords

City, earthquake, palimpsest, reconstruction, reconfiguration.

1. In the last two decades, with globalisation, with the increase in the offer and accessibility of low-cost travelling and the proliferation of local accommodation units, we have been witnessing a transformation and de-characterisation of many European cities which have become shop windows expressly designed for tourism. If, on the one hand, after the global economic crisis of 2009, this pro-tourism tendency allowed many citizens to find an alternative form of subsistence, on the other, unfortunately, the economic activity and aggressiveness of major economic lobbies destroyed what was the essence of the historical city centres, the habits of citizens and urban daily life through the radical transformation of housing areas, ancient neighbourhoods, traditional family shops and institutions closely linked to the city life. This fast metamorphosis of the historic centres of European cities seems to have had a parallel in the past, only when cities were devastated by wars, with occupations and bombings, or by natural cataclysms and, therefore, likely to be compared with what happens today in Lisbon and what happened in this city in the 18th century in terms of its reorganisation after the 1755 earthquake, which left much of the city completely destroyed (fig. 1).

2. In the next page (fig. 2), a small detail of The Lisbon Panorama (*A Grande Vista de Lisboa*) is shown, which is perhaps one of the largest urban panoramas in the world. It consists of 16 tile panels with a total of 1.12 meters in height by 22.46 meters in length, where one can guess how the city was organised geographically, architecturally and also socially. Having previously belonged to the Palace of the Counts of Ferreira and Tentugal, it is currently mounted and permanently on display at the Lisbon Tile Museum.



1: Anonymus. *The Lisbon Earthquake and Tsunami, 1755*, Museu da Cidade, Lisboa (image courtesy of Museu da Cidade).



2: Gabriel del Barco. *The Lisbon Panorama (detail)*, c. 1700. Museu do Azulejo de Lisboa (image courtesy of Museu do Azulejo de Lisboa).

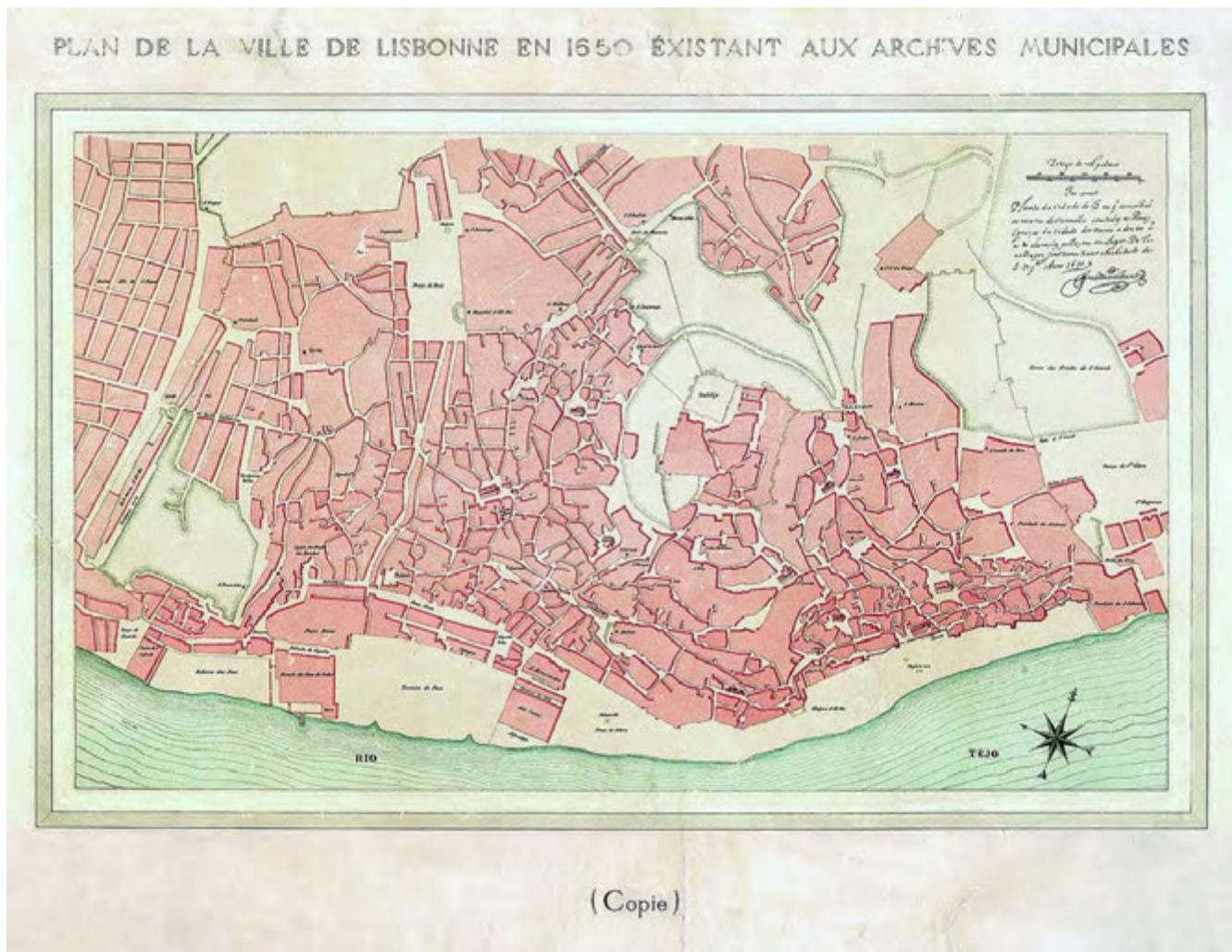
The panel is attributed to Gabriel del Barco (1649-c.1703) and depicts a view of the early 18th century Lisbon from Algés to Xabregas in an extension of 13 kilometres, just a few decades before the 1755 earthquake. Being considered an iconic work of great value, very little is known about the project of the panel, the context in which it was made and, above all, the technical procedures adopted in its design. However, by observing any of the sixteen different panels that define the panorama, we can get a closer look in to the city in the end of the 17th century: palaces and fortresses are represented, churches and convents, markets and fountains, water mills, pillories and other Christian symbols and numerous characters and animals engaged in different tasks that allow us to somehow perceive the movement and life of the city of Lisbon at that time [Maia 2019]. One interesting feature that somehow illustrates how Lisbon looked like just before the 1755 earthquake is the way the layout and buildings of the city seem to adapt to the geographical characteristics of the territory. However, churches, convents, noble palaces and other important buildings occupy privileged or the high locations, while the rest of the houses gather around the latter, adapting and fitting as they can, sometimes even defying the laws of gravity. We also find empty and architecturally untouched areas on steep hills, around farms and fields and by the river bank, where different social and trading activities seem to take place.

These geographical features of the city, as well as the strategy to build around and according to them in an organic and natural manner, seem to be also quite visible if we observe a map of Lisbon from 1650, considered the earliest reliable representation of how the city grew, was thought, structured and organised (fig. 3). Lisbon, known in Portugal as the city of the Seven Hills [Oliveira 1989], grew and developed over many centuries before the 1755 earthquake, according to these organic geographical features intimately articulated with its human activities and daily life. Simultaneously, some centuries before the earthquake, Portugal had become one of Europe's main doors to the East, to the West and to the South through Africa's entire coast line as a major route of trading. Therefore, Lisbon, the capital, became a cosmopolitan crossroad of cultures hosting in different areas Moorish, Jesuit, Jewish, Asian and African city communities. Through time, slowly, arteries and roads, plazas and buildings across the city have mingled their way through centuries and many generations and, naturally, over time, ended up defining a pattern, an overlapping palimpsest. Like in many other cities in Europe, this is basically a result of the intertwining of human activities and the cities natural geographical barriers.

*Ô malheureux mortels ! ô terre déplorable!
Ô de tous les mortels assemblage effroyable!
D'inutiles douleurs, éternel entretien!
Philosophes trompés qui criez: Tout est bien.
[Voltaire 1756, 470].*

According to different reliable sources, at 9.30 am, on the 1st of November 1755, many strong tremors were felt in Lisbon for about two hours, along with a tsunami that invaded the river margins and countless fires that lit around the city. This violent, sudden and unexpected cataclysm, curiously on Hallowmas day, resulted in the death of over ten thousand people, in the destruction of practically all of the city buildings and in the loss of many centuries of history and habits.

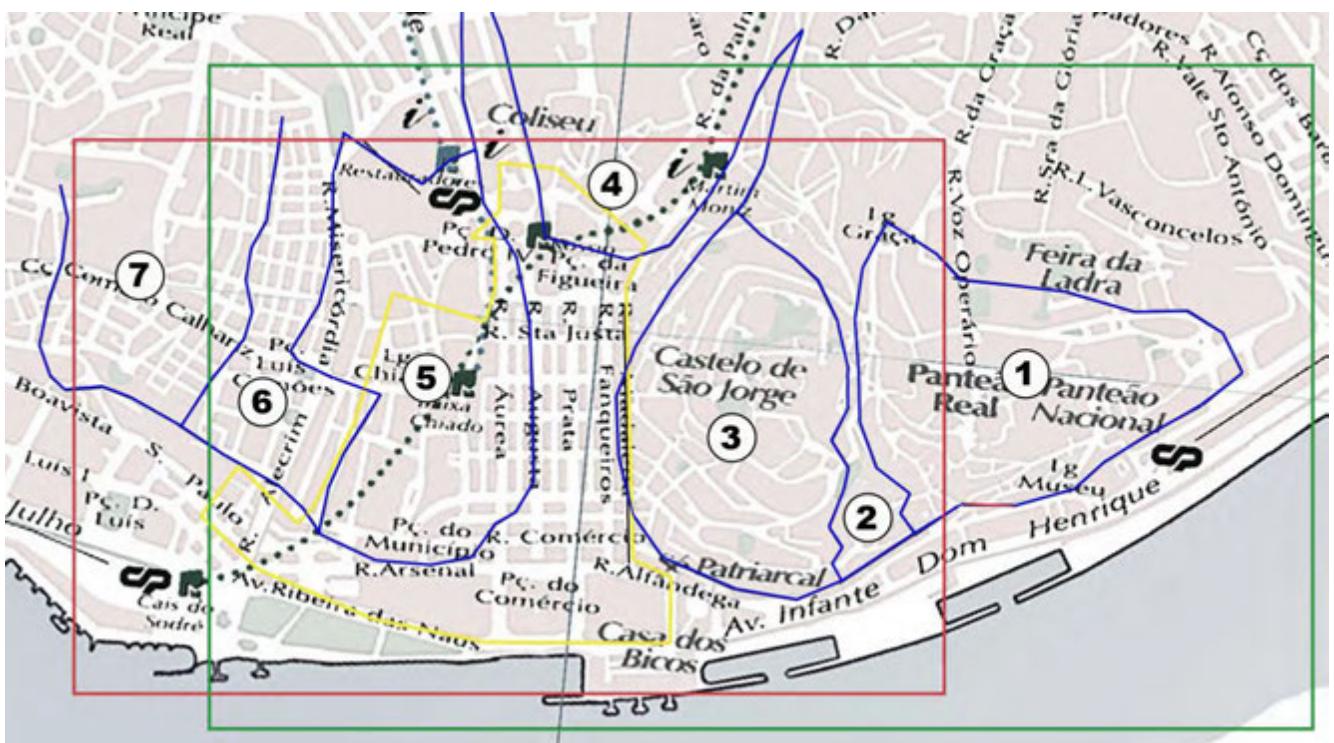
After the cataclysm, before a city totally destroyed, King José the 1st rapidly nominated Marquis of Pombal (Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, 1699-1782), one of his most



3: João Nunes Tinoco. 19th century copy of a 1650 map of Lisbon, 1850. Museu de Lisboa (image courtesy of Museu de Lisboa).

prominent ministers and a staunch follower of the Enlightenment ideals, to govern the city and to coordinate its reconstruction [França 1989, 14]. The first project was assigned originally by Pombal to General Manuel da Maia (1677-1768), who brought together a team of architects and military engineers coordinated by Captain Eugénio dos Santos (1711-1760) and Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Mardel (1695-1763). If, for centuries, the configuration and formal evolution of the city was carried out very slowly in a progressive and organic manner, with the post-earthquake pragmatic design, we will witness a totally new geometric proposal imposed from the outside to the inside of the city, somewhat like a criss-cross between a city built on an empty land and an enormous military headquarter and orderly barracks [Maia 1756] (fig. 5).

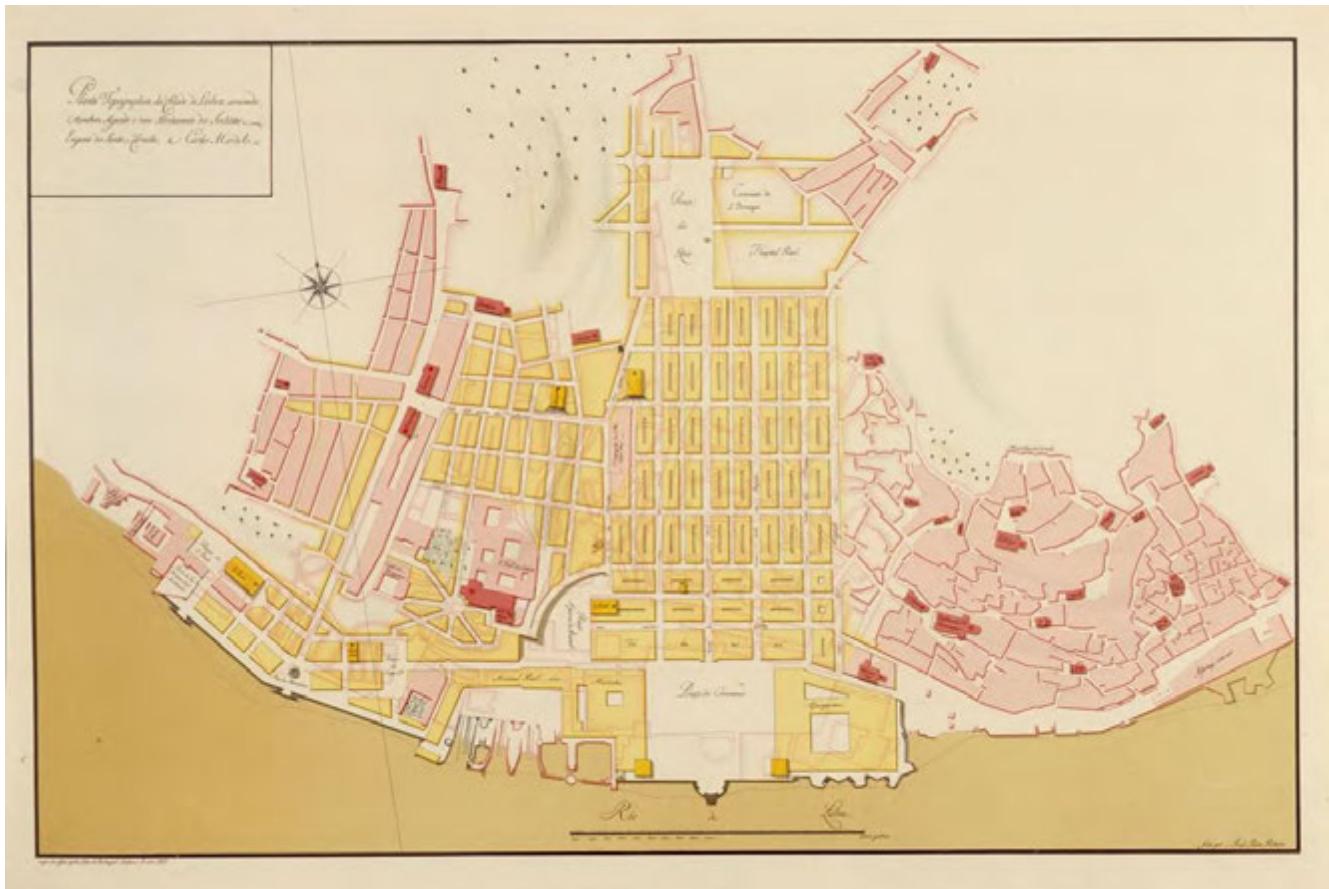
The reconstruction plan, especially aimed at the low part of the city between Castelo and São Roque (areas 5 and 3, fig. 4), envisioned the complete destruction of the remaining ruins caused by the earthquake and the creation of a concept of a totally new city (fig. 5). For this area, by the river margin, the famous and emblematic Terreiro do Paço (or Praça do Comércio), in relation to which we can find countless birds eye view representations



4: Contemporary map of Lisbon city. City centre identifying in blue the famous Seven Hills of the city (1. São Vicente, 2. Santo André, 3. Castelo, 4. Sant'Ana, 5. São Roque, 6. Chagas, 7. Santa Catarina); in green the section showed in the previous map (fig. 3); in red the area of the city visualized in fig. 5; and in yellow the area of Lisbon totally transformed after the earthquake of 1755 (author's image).

and paintings of the city from the 15th century on; Manuel da Maia conceives a welcoming majestic arch and adjacent civil buildings that still today are considered one of the city's ex libris.

This arch, inspired on Charles Le Brun's famous Arc de Triomphe [França 1989, 35], as well as the completion of the plaza's second lateral right tower, will define a symmetry to set the tone and the example for the development of the rest of the reconstruction effort, not only in the lower part of the city. On the other hand, the proportion of the buildings and their geometric typology, finetuned with the new urban plan for the low part, will determine the development and conception of the majority of the remaining public and civil buildings that were erected from the river up to the northern part of the area one can see on the map (fig. 5), where the previous Lisbon totally vanishes. However, in many other areas of the city, where the earthquake also destroyed most of the buildings, the new geometric concept and urban planning will be thought and somehow adapt to pre-existing religious and civil buildings; this left memories and testimonies that still today give us an impression of the city's development after the middle ages. But not only the new city centre plan followed some kind of an organised military grid. Also the planning of the buildings wooden structures was designed to be resistant to future earthquakes. In addition, lengths, heights and symmetries of windows, arches and doors were conceived on the basis of a standard unit thought to be the most practical in what concerns construction, production and transportation from the general construction site, strategically located in the city [França 1989, 57].



5: Carlos Mardel, Eugénio dos Santos de Carvalho. Map of Lisbon showing (in yellow) the re-construction proposal after the 1755 earthquake, 1758. Museu de Lisboa (image courtesy of Museu de Lisboa).

In this new Lisbon's downtown plan, also the heights of administrative buildings, services and housing was regulated, thus imposing a discipline to the previous unorganised and chaotic city, where also a modern sewer system was entirely conceived to rid the city of dirt and smell. Obviously, in Gabriel del Barco's Lisbon Panorama (fig. 2) prior to the earthquake, many aspects of Lisbon's seventeenth century daily life are not at all visible, neither is the way the city grew along centuries in a considerably organic, chaotic and unorganised manner – a period of social and political decadence following the golden age of the Portuguese fifteenth century discoveries.

3. In a relatively short period after the earthquake, the new, enlightened, organised and disciplined Lisbon offers a totally new paradigm. In a matter of a few decades, the geometric concept for the low part of the city ends up by spreading gradually to the upper parts and contaminating other new neighbourhoods connected to the centre by large arteries and straight avenues. Cleansing and discipline are discretely imposed by Lisbon's illuminated despot, Marquis de Pombal, along with his crew of military architects and engineers, that easily create a new order in the low part of the city. Thanks to the magnitude, violence and calamity of the earthquake, this is a completely new geometric design that fully disposes of the previous city; around this area, a contamination of these principles will confront, adapt

and transform according to the previous and reconstructed ancient religious and civil buildings, throughout the city.

Curiously, if Lisbon's city centre and general urban concept after the earthquake changed radically, creating a completely new design and urban grid, the changes it might have had caused in the cities daily habits and inhabitants seem to be not so significant, if one compares them to what happened very recently in this city, in just a few years. In fact, the same city urban planning and buildings conceived for a specific purpose seem to adapt to a completely different use and life style, a totally new paradigm. Today, tourists from all over the world 'invade' the city and local neighbourhood inhabitants from Lisbon's Seven Hills and other central areas have been expelled by landlords from their houses to the outskirts and to uncharacteristic neighbourhoods. Ugly shops with useless and superficial items have opened everywhere. Emigrants, generally from undeveloped countries that try to thrive and make a living in a new world, have legitimately taken over old traditional shops in many areas of the city. Portuguese traditional products are re-decorated and sold at exorbitant prices and restaurants and cafes are transformed to receive tourists and richer customers, while Starbucks and other superfluous multinational companies and lobbies gradually thrive. The whole city is invaded by ridiculous coloured tuk tuks and ugly and polluting fake childish trains. The traditional Portuguese trams are covered with advertisements and converted for sightseeing, no longer serving the local citizens. English type double decker yellow, blue and red buses, packed with tourists, manage to jam traffic at all hours, thus creating a confusion all around the city. The city becomes unbearable and its arteries, pavements, boulevards and traditional neighbourhoods are impossible to walk in due to the many tourists, constantly sightseeing and taking photographs. Lisbon becomes uncharacteristic, strange and some kind of shop window designed for foreigners, similar to many other capital and cities in Europe. Lisbon witnesses a radical change, loses its daily habits and no longer seems fit to live in. The old secular city or the more recent geometrical 18th century grid, are superficially decorated and disguised, leaving the urban grid and configuration untouched, but the daily life and inhabitants, that ultimately can define what a city is, was drastically changed and destroyed. Most interestingly, this phenomena seems clearly magnified today with the governmental recent measures of non-circulation of people and tourists associated with Covid 19 epidemic. Suddenly, from one moment to another, these new fake touristic cities have become empty, looking like having become useless, to have lost their purpose, showing us clearly the fragility and unsustainability of this growing touristic era.

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Oggetto del volume è l'articolato patrimonio culturale di tracce, immagini e narrazioni che costruisce la città contemporanea. Gli autori dei numerosi contributi scientifici rileggono e raccontano per parti, per strati e a ritroso diverse realtà urbane per restituire i diversi elementi della città storica ancora presenti in situ, ma nascosti, modificati, distratti, frammentati, malcelati e nascosti in quell'intricato groviglio di sovrapposizioni che si è formato nel corso del tempo.

The subject of the book is the articulated cultural heritage of traces, images and narratives that builds the contemporary city. The authors of the numerous scientific contributions reread and recount different urban realities by parts, by layers and backwards to return the different elements of the historical city still present in situ, but hidden, modified, distracted, fragmented, ill-concealed and hidden in that intricate tangle of overlaps that has formed over time.