

Representations of Urban Space as (Inter-)Disciplinary Tools

A methodology for comparatively analysing graphics in urban investigations

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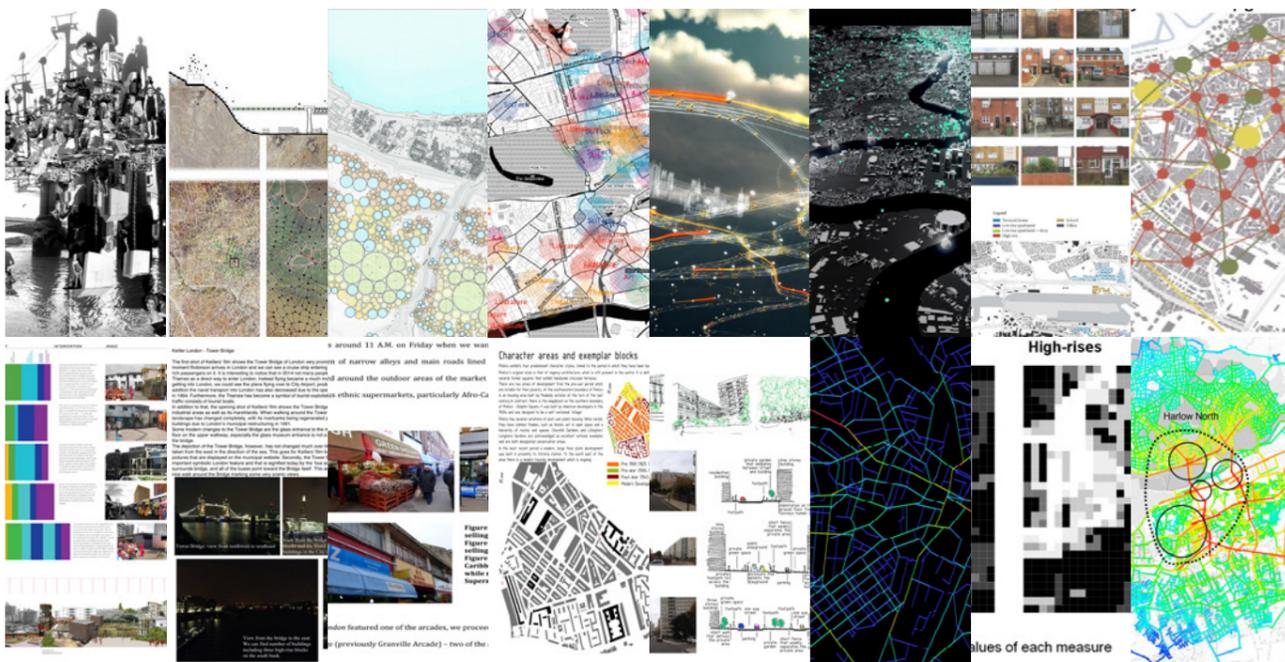
This research is about graphics: about images, maps, diagrams and any other type of visual representations of 'the urban', as employed by the range of disciplines that engage in urban analysis. Each of those disciplines has been reflecting on the use and significance of visual tools within its own traditions, the common element of those investigations being an understanding of graphics as framing and interpretative, as well as communicative, media. This project is based on that understanding but takes a comparative approach to representations of urban space: it seeks to trace the ways in which visual tools express - and possibly mediate between - disciplinary-specific knowledge.

This approach is based on the argument that it is at the level of methods and tools that disciplinary interaction effectively takes place. Urban research is almost by definition an inter- (or at least multi-) disciplinary field, but the complexity of problems in urban environment still requires a more meaningful transfer of knowledge, a better integration in other words, between the varied viewpoints involved in their analysis. In practice this often proves problematic - to understand why and to start addressing the problem, the argument goes, we can begin by examining the ways in which the methods and tools used frame those viewpoints and consequently produce different kinds of results. Therefore the representations of urban space, understood as a category of tools, become the object of analysis.

data & methodology

A database of visual material was initially compiled from student coursework produced in the different postgraduate programmes at UCL that focus on urban issues. Informed by a broad examination of this material, and following a theoretical and methodological exploration, a framework and set of methods were developed for the comparative analysis of urban representations. These consist of a typology of graphics, aimed at describing their 'visual language' rather than their content, and a two-stage coding scheme based on that typology. This scheme was then experimentally applied to a small study sample selected from the initial material, in order to explore the format of results produced and the possibilities for interpretation they allow.

Samples of the samples: slices of the images used in the sample application

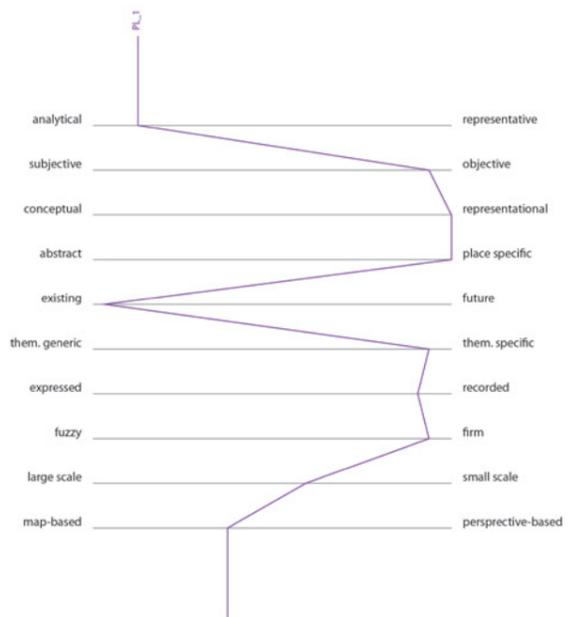


results & conclusions

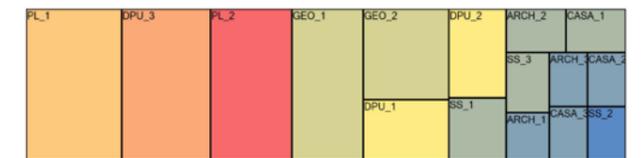
The first stage of coding provides an analytical account of the images ('layouts', for this analysis) in question: it breaks them down into their visual and textual elements, ultimately providing an index of how 'complex' a representation is. The second stage re-synthesises all of an image's elements and provides a graphic account of its affordances as a whole. The results for multiple images can then be plotted onto the same diagram, allowing for comparative queries, such as the juxtaposition of layouts from two or more disciplines or the tracing of the ways a specific type of representation is used across the database. Taking those two stages together, interpretations can be made regarding the visual language employed in an image: whether it tends to stick to strictly defined viewpoints of urban space or tries to negotiate qualities, for example.

Patterns and correlations can then be traced between visual languages and specific disciplines but, since the sample used here is not representative, this project makes no claims to concrete findings. Its contribution lies rather in the methodology itself: what is presented here is a different way of looking at graphics produced through and for urban analyses. In many ways, this project functions as a preliminary stage for larger studies, which could follow one of two general directions: the first would be to simply expand the scope of the material examined here by coding a sufficiently large database of urban space representations, while the second could utilize the coding system to investigate how those representations are interpreted by people from varied disciplinary (and non-disciplinary) backgrounds.

Coding of one of the sources (pl_1) in the first (top) and second (bottom) stages.



Coding for all 16 layouts in the first stage - layouts compared by nr. of coding references



Graphic coding for all 16 layouts in the second stage

