

# Contexturing the City: The *Bricoleur* and the Weaver

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“To present men ‘*as acting*’ and all things ‘*as in act*’ - such could well be the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse, in which every dormant potentiality of existence appears as blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action as actualized.”

- Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*<sup>1</sup>

What is a city? What terms can serve to describe the complex and layered manifestations of urban form? Ordinary descriptive language does little to help us understand “the kind of problem a city is”.<sup>2</sup> The figurative operation of metaphor has been used to represent the city in many vivid ways since urbanity became a condition of conscious scrutiny. These metaphors offer a way of imagining the abstract web of physical, political, economic, social and technical concerns that characterize urban phenomena as something concrete and knowable. The city is transformed from an economic and political settlement into a plant, an animal or even a machine. In his definition of poetic and rhetorical metaphor, Aristotle observed how the metaphor, in “giving the thing a name that belongs to something else”<sup>3</sup> allows the introduction of an “alien” into discourse. This article will discuss the potential impact of two of these aliens on urbanism: one a *bricoleur* and the other a weaver.

Descriptive metaphors of the twentieth century city have not been categorized by order or equilibrium. Images of chaos dominate the rhetoric: the runaway locomotive, the fury of a storm, the cancerous body, the garden gone to seed. Inevitably the metaphorical associations extend beyond the city itself to describe an even more elusive notion: urban design. The urban designer, in attempting to control these forces and avert the approaching disaster, would seem to require an heroic persona. The surgeon or scientist, in their god-like guise, have been most frequently cast in this role. Once in place these characters are not likely to remain passive: they seize control of the scene with their terminology and their tools. These conceptual leaps into the territory of other disciplines require scrutiny. The power of language and its influence on thinking and action has been a focus of research in other disciplines.<sup>4</sup> Metaphorical concepts are not

merely ornamental: they go beyond naming when the alien begins to act. The abstract nature of urban design as a discipline would seem to make both its processes and its products particularly susceptible to the imprints of these figures of speech.

The literature of urbanism from the early part of the twentieth century offers a wide range of metaphorical allusions, from the romantic machinery of Marinetti’s prose to the more clinical biology described by Le Corbusier. Reappraisals of modernist city planning have focused on the formal and social issues while remaining largely indifferent to the implications of these rhetorical figures. *Collage City*, by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, is a notable exception to this pattern. This text, published in 1978, presents the theoretical foundations for the influential academy of urban design that Rowe headed at Cornell University from 1963 until the mid 1980’s. Often misunderstood, *Collage City* has been interpreted as an argument for the stylistic and scalar contextualism that became a standard approach to urban development during the last decade. Opposed to such a simplistic interpretation of the city, the book offers a philosophical justification for an urban design method that is difficult to equate with the complacent reaction to the exigencies of context. It is a method which is based on a metaphorical construct: a construct that imagines the city as a two dimensional collage and the urban designer as the “*bricoleur*” who assembles this collage from a diverse kit of fragmentary found objects that architectural and urban history have left behind.

Recognition of the impulse to personify the elusive task of urban form making is a frequent theme of *Collage City*. It is presented as the inevitable extension of the biological conceptualization of the city.

“And, if the idea of society as organism is ultimately of classical derivation, ... and if it may, sometimes, constitute a convenient metaphor, its literal interpretations still evidently involve we and they. For the animal is presumably to be fed and the plant is to be watered...”<sup>5</sup>

This caregiver for the urban organism does not assume a background role. In discussing the troubling political implications of total design guided by a “single central vision,”<sup>6</sup> Rowe and Koetter comment on the tendency of the architect/urban designer to assume the heroic and god-like personae of “both messiah and scientist, both Moses and Newton”<sup>7</sup>. Inevitably these characterizations show how the city and its design is conceived. When it is seen as a technical problem, the scientist or engineer is cast, an organic problem requires the skills of the physician and the artist is brought on stage when the city is understood as an aesthetic problem requiring a scenographic solution. In reviewing these attitudes toward planning, Rowe outlines the dangers and limitations of each. A particular bias is articulated against the strains of aesthetic urbanism that gravitate toward the picturesque. The designers of “townscape” and “neo-futurist cities” are given less dictatorial personifications than their modernist predecessors. We are led to imagine both as painters of urban scenery - one specializing in nostalgic street-views and the other in technologically exuberant science fiction film backdrops.

The *bricoleur* is introduced as a counterpoint to the extremist tendencies of these other characters and approaches. This French word, the original meaning of which evokes the movement of a rebounding shot in billiards, is a concept that is elaborated by Claude Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*. In this text he explores the idea of “prior” science and how it structured primitive man’s experience of the world based on a logic of concrete phenomena. This was contrasted with the more abstract methods of modern science. The *bricoleur* is offered as a contemporary analog to this early scientific process. While the modern engineer employs scientific methods and standardized materials, the *bricoleur* is inventive with whatever is at hand and with somewhat unpredictable results. This complex character seems to reconcile the potentially conflicting attributes of the engineer, the craftsman, and the artist while harboring the particular talents of each. When transposed into the realm of urban design the implications seem useful. The *bricoleur* uses the resourcefulness of the engineer tempered by the aesthetic sensibilities of the artist to reassemble the building blocks inherited from both the traditional city and the modern one as necessary to solve the problem.

The *bricoleur*, now cast in the role of urban designer, requires a set of tools and techniques for assembling this found material. Both the quantitative methods of scientific urbanism and the picturesque approaches of most forms of aesthetic urbanism had been previously scrutinized and rejected. Levi Strauss again provides the clue when, in *The Savage Mind*, he refers to a potential relationship between collage and *bricolage*. This crucial step in the *Collage City* argument is illustrated with two works by Picasso, the *Bull’s Head* of 1944 and the *Still Life with Chair Caning* of 1911. The first, a kind of ready-made, combines the familiar forms of a bicycle seat and handlebars transforming them into a representation of a bull. This reuse of found materials to form something unexpected, provides a compelling illustration of

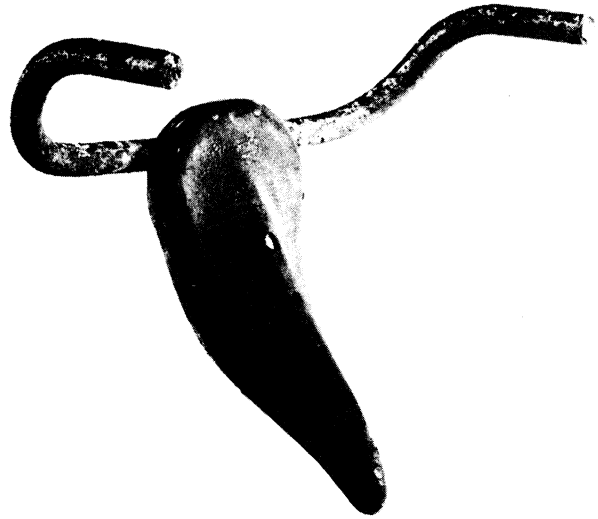


Fig. 1. *Head of a Bull*, Picasso, 1943. Musee Picasso, Paris.

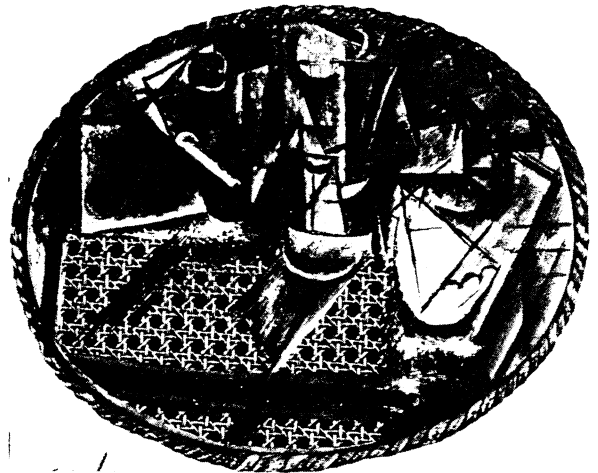


Fig. 2. *Still Life with Chair Caning*, Picasso, 1912. Musee Picasso, Paris.

both the technique and the creativity of the *bricoleur*. The *Still Life*, however, seems to display a somewhat different approach. This early collage introduces a fragment of printed oilcloth “caning” into a cubist painting in order to challenge more traditional means of painted representation. This act of ironic simulation seems very different from the *Bull’s Head* assemblage. Though it is acknowledged by Rowe to be lacking in sincerity, it becomes in the end the model for his design method.

“Because collage is a method that derives its virtue from its irony, because it seems to be a technique for using things and simultaneously disbelieving in them, it is also a strategy which can allow utopia to be dealt with as image, to be dealt with in fragments without our having to accept it in toto.”<sup>8</sup>

At this juncture, the *bricoleur's* talents as a crafty engineer seem lost in the shift to the aesthetic realm of the artist. Given Rowe and Koetter's clear rejection of urbanism based on any singular controlling vision, it is ironic that the urbanist is once again cast as an individual heroic figure: this time the architect/urbanist is conceived as a modern artist, creating personal visions in the isolation of the studio. The notion of urban design as an aesthetic activity is a Renaissance legacy that was reinvigorated during the nineteenth century through Camillo Sitte's efforts to derive principles from the picturesque qualities of pre-industrial European cities. Rowe and Koetter are not interested in the street view, however rationally derived, but in the city as a *gestalt*. Collage is an effective technique for several reasons: it avoids the picturesque and as an ironic modern art strategy, it neatly sidesteps the potential naiveté of historic eclecticism. Collage in fact facilitates the direct appropriation of past urban buildings and textures while allowing the problematic issues of function and historical moment to be artfully avoided.

The two dimensional field of Picasso's canvas and the simulated chair caning, become the basis for the design methodology for generating the urbanistic collages advocated by Rowe and Koetter. Existing urban forms are transported to this two dimensional field through one of the most abstract of representational tools: the figure-ground. With its high contrast depiction of space (exclusively through solid

and void), figure-ground neglects the more subtle connective tissue that constitutes the modern American city in particular. Following a rigorous formal analysis of this urban *gestalt*, fragments of other urban buildings and textures are imported to resolve or to activate the field. This emphasis on the city as understood through *gestalt* pattern was proposed as a technique to avoid the pitfalls of picturesque "townscape". Yet the aesthetic issues of city design are severely limited by the almost exclusive reliance on the abstraction of the two dimensional figure-ground.

The problem of abstraction is even more intensely revealed in the scientifically inspired theories which reduce the phenomenon of urbanity to a series of numerical models and analyses. Yet it was in opposition to these methods that the *bricolage* was introduced. Collage seemed to provide a remarkably compelling device precisely because it is a technique based on the concrete aspects of making. The *bricoleur*, part craftsman and part alchemist, creates urbanity through an unexpected combination of residual material, something which more scientific approaches had so clearly failed to do. The reliance on the abstraction of figure/ground seems to deny the *bricoleur's* essential nature.

Because the role of metaphor is to help us make sense of the world by transforming abstract concepts into concrete things, they seem to be a necessary device in our thinking about cities. Although the organic, technological and aesthetic metaphors previously described seem to harbor the destructive residue of both an overly heroic and abstract vision there may in fact be other figures whose imprint might instead prove to be therapeutic. One such metaphor is embedded in a term frequently used to describe the physical form of the city: the idea of the city as a fabric. If the city as organism required feeding, the city as fabric presumably came to be through the hands of the weaver. The characterization of the architect/urbanist as weaver in fact recalls the origins of the word text and the related terms texture and contexture.

Textus: A woven fabric

Texture: the characteristic disposition of interwoven or intertwined threads, strands or the like that make up a textile fabric.

Contexture: the act or process of weaving into a connected structure

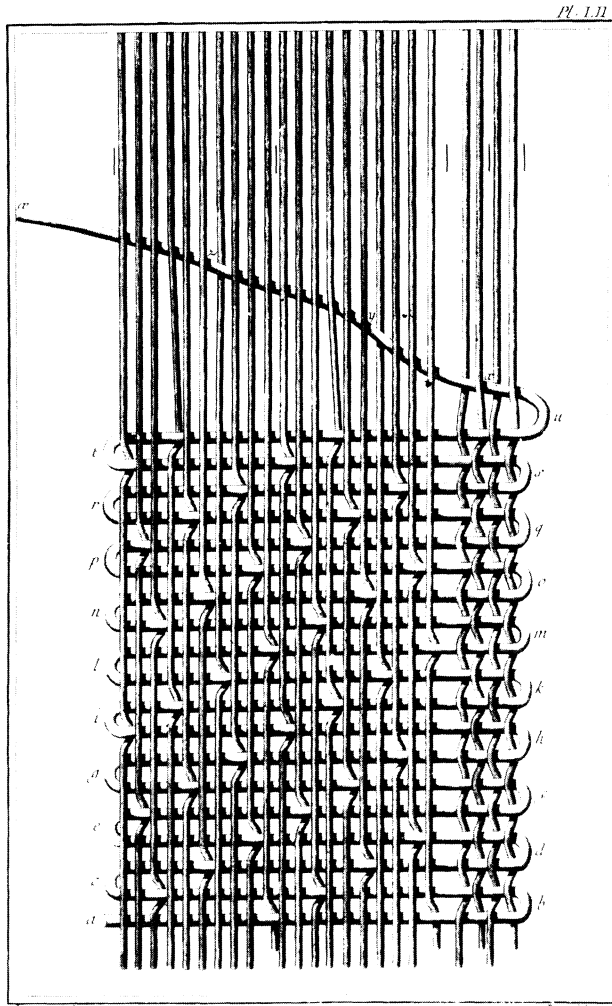
Weaving is one of the most ancient human arts, predating building as a cornerstone of civilization. The relationship between the craft of weaving and the art of building was elaborated by Gottfried Semper in both *The Four Elements of Architecture* and *The Textile Art*.

"A primordial art as it were. It alone generates its types from itself or from analogies in nature; all other arts, including architecture, borrow types from this art...."<sup>9</sup>

Semper sees two distinct aspects in the relationship between textiles and architecture: one spatial and the other tectonic. He asserts that the definition and enclosure of space



Fig. 3. Figure-ground of Wiesbaden, Germany. Wayne Copper.



SOUFFLE, Filée en Plein, sans le Jus d'oeuf, de la soie, et de la laine.

Fig. 4. Detail of a woven silk fabric from Diderot and D'Alembert, *L'Encyclopedie ou Dictionnaire Raisonne des Sciences, Des Arts et des Metiers*.

by walls can be traced to the use of fabrics attached to a frame in primitive shelters, while the link between techniques of connection employed in textiles and weaving and the material connections of buildings was even more influential in the development of the architectural styles.

"The knot is perhaps the oldest technical symbol and...the expression for the earliest cosmogonic ideas that arose among nations."<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the city as organism, the idea of the city as fabric acknowledges its origins as a human construction, generated through evolved technologies and traditions. Two characteristics are essential to a woven fabric: the three-dimensional nature of its structure and the importance of tactility and texture in both the individual thread and the final cloth. The weaver's art begins with the warp threads that are stretched over a loom. Figures and patterns can be made on this "ground" with the weft threads, yet they remain linked to the



Fig. 5. Drawing of a knot from Semper, *The Textile Art*.

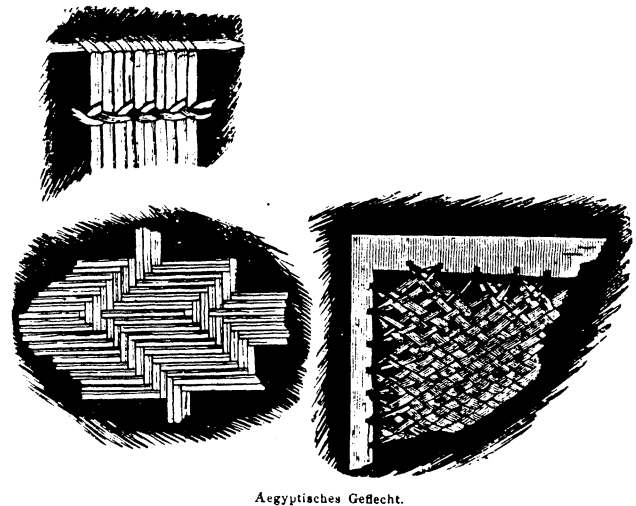


Fig. 6. Egyptian Caning from Semper, *The Textile Art*.

warp. This interdependence of two systems and the implication of sectional depth can be seen in contrast to the two dimensional solid/void polarizations of figure-ground and the technique of collage. Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning*, when seen as a strategy of representation by ironic simulation, stands in sharp contrast to the more authentic craft activity of weaving the actual cane into a structure with very specific tactile qualities and strength.

"All operations in the textile arts seek to transform raw materials with the appropriate properties into products whose common features are great pliancy and considerable absolute strength, sometimes serving ... as binding and fastening, sometimes as pliant surfaces to cover, to hold, to dress, to enclose."<sup>11</sup>

Philosophers as chronologically and ideologically remote as Plato and Gilles Deleuze have employed analogies based on the weaving of fabric. Plato uses the idea of weaving to describe the science of governing, while more recently Deleuze and Guattari elaborate the specific characteristics of woven fabric, pressed felt and patchwork quilting to describe

their contrasting spatial paradigms of “the smooth and the striated”. Woven fabric is seen to represent a space that is striated and etched with institutional patterns that limit freedom while the collage-like quilt offers a closer approximation of the “smooth” space of the nomad.<sup>12</sup> The hierarchies and patterns of fabric that for Deleuze provide an impediment to the free movement of thoughts are the same structures that might be seen to promote physical connection within the city as fabric while the ruptures and discontinuities of the quilt would seem to recall the idea of the city as collage. The appropriation of any metaphor in the end requires an interpretation of the fundamental nature of the condition described. This returns us to Semper for whom the various forms of textile served as a way of demonstrating his theory regarding the relationship between materials and their assembly.

“Every material conditions its own particular manner of formation by the properties that distinguish it from other materials and that demand a technical treatment appropriate to it.”<sup>13</sup>

Urban design is fundamentally the task of connecting diverse elements into a three-dimensional network. As a structure formed of diverse threads that are not limited to patterns of solid and void, this fabric may become inclusive of the spatial, social and technical systems that form a city. Is the task of urban design best served by the appropriation of the ironic modern art strategy of collage or by a less specific alliance with ancient craft procedure? In rejecting collage in favor of weaving, one discovers a potentially therapeutic metaphor that prescribes no specific formal or spatial strategies beyond the notion of the city as a connected structure - a man-made network of individual threads that gain strength through their interconnection and which encourages the expression of their visual and tactile qualities. Such a conceptual model might encourage the development of analytical methods and urban design sensibilities promoting the creation of a city structure that is not rigid and brittle, but has the supple strength of woven fabric. In this way the logic of context might expand beyond a recognition of the given conditions of adjacency to become the *activity* of constructing within the city. The architect/urbanist might then be conceived not as the autocratic scientist, surgeon, or artist, but instead as a skilled craftsman - a weaver carefully contexturing the fabric of the city.

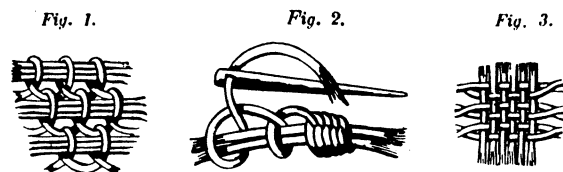
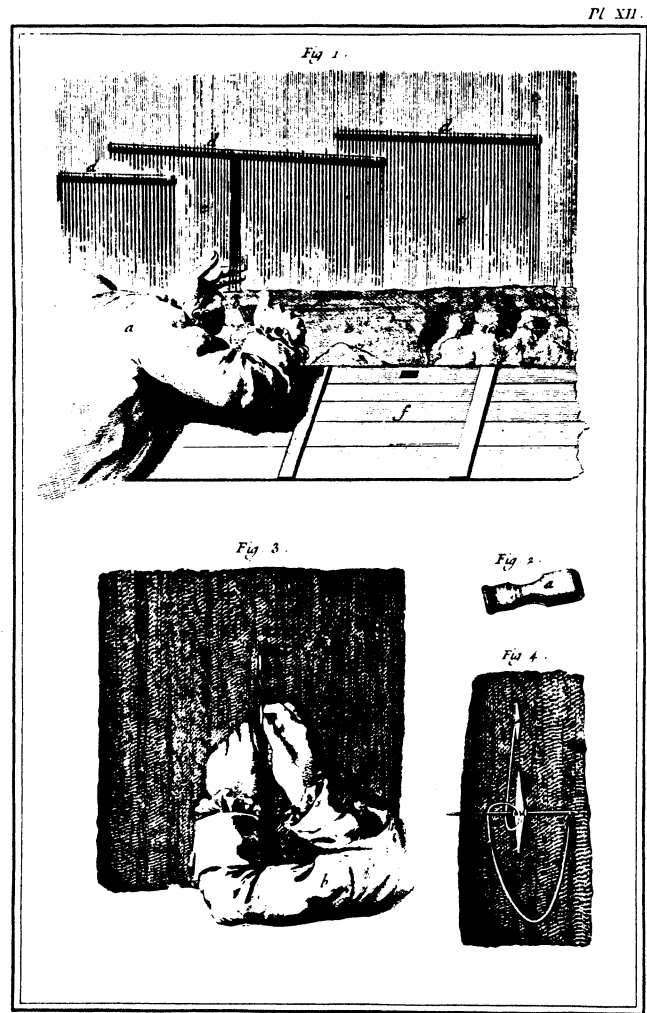


Fig. 7. Stitching Details from Semper, *The Textile Art.*



*Pl. XII*  
*Tapissierie de Haute Lisse des Gobelins, Service de la Piece et de l'Equille.*

Fig. 8. The hands of the weaver illustrating the use of various tools of connection. from Diderot and D'Alembert, *L'Encyclopedie ou Dictionnaire Raisonne des Sciences, Des Arts et des Metiers.*



Fig. 9. The hand of Le Corbusier pointing at the model in the *Ville Radieuse.*

“For, surely, the job is that of making safe the city (and hence democracy) by large infusions of metaphor, analogical thinking, ambiguity; and, in the face of a prevailing scientism and conspicuous *laissez-aller*, it is just possible that these activities could provide the true *Survival Through Design*.”<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 1977, *The Rule of Metaphor*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 43.
- <sup>2</sup> Jane Jacobs, 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 429. This is the title of the last chapter of the book in which Jacobs reveals a reliance on the organism/scientist metaphorical concept.
- <sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *The Poetics*.

- <sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* and Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.
- <sup>5</sup> Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, 1978, *Collage City*, Cambridge, MA:MIT Press, p. 99.
- <sup>6</sup> *Collage City*, p. 92. Rowe and Koetter are quoting from Isaiah Berlin, “The Hedgehog and the Fox”.
- <sup>7</sup> *Collage City*, p. 102.
- <sup>8</sup> *Collage City*, p. 149.
- <sup>9</sup> Gottfried Semper, “The Textile Art”, *The Four Elements of Architecture and other Writings*. Cambridge England, 1989.
- <sup>10</sup> Semper, “The Textile Art”, p. 217.
- <sup>11</sup> Gottfried Semper, “The Textile Art”, p. 215.
- <sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 1987, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.474-477.
- <sup>13</sup> Semper, p. 258.
- <sup>14</sup> *Collage City*, p. 117.