Urbanity of Things
Relationship Potential and Wealth of Relations as Urban Resource

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Resources enable action to be taken. They emerge if people ascribe potential to existing goods and seek to activate it. In an urban context many new opportunities for activity may arise if people and artifacts are able to enter into a productive relationship. Smart urban design can lay the strategic and spatial foundations for such a connection. Through the design of the city's physical space one can give rise to an urbanity of things, characterized by both the richness and the potential of relationships, which can bring about opportunities for action.

The Swiss architect Marcel Meili and the Liechtensteiner landscape architect Günther Vogt describe the nature of urbanity using the example of a forest.[1] A forest that is used purely for forestry is not urban. A forest that is also utilized by others and for different purposes, such as by walkers and environmentalists, as a playground or by having symbolic meaning, may have multiple functions but is not necessarily urban. The forest's relationships with different people would tie it to different social and spatial networks, such as global timber production processes, regional environmental networks, local walking trails, or national imagery, which also include other elements than the forest. Urbanity only emerges if these multiple uses also lead to relationships and thus interaction between the different users, for instance, due to encounters on the walking trails or pressing political discussions on the use of a clearing. Fig. 1 Essentially, the forest can be said to be urban if its relationships with its social and spatial networks also intertwine

1 Marcel Meili, Markus Peter Architekten / Vogt Landschaftsarchitekten

Fig. 1 Urban forest: mountain bike racing connects the forest with different social and spatial networks

with one another. This may be described as relationship wealth, and it is an aspect of urbanity that describes the properties of spatial concentration between different relationships, between humans and other living beings, and with physical things.

The thinking behind Meili and Vogt's forest resembles the approach of the American sociologist Louis Wirth, who, in his groundbreaking essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life," published in 1938, set out not only the number of people but also their density and heterogeneity as a crucial precondition for urbanity.[2] In their example, however, Meili and Vogt deal with the phenomenon of urbanity not as a lifestyle but a physical entity, the forest. As we see it, their concept alludes to the "urbanity of things," a phrase coined by the Catalan architect and urban planner Manuel de Solà-Morales.[3] This concept represents an urban design-related interpretation of a key idea of the French sociologist Bruno Latour: namely, that, in addition to people, other living beings and things have social relationships and open up spaces for action.[4] The urbanity of things is therefore based on an understanding of urbanity that differs from that of Louis Wirth, in that it concerns not only people but the density and diversity of relationships and, therefore, also includes animals, plants, and physical things. Fig. 2

2 Wirth, Louis

3 de Solà-Morales, Manuel. Many points within this article are informed by our broad interpretation of this book, *A Matter of Things*.
4 Latour, Bruno: 2005

Fig. 2 Areas of activity: people, other living beings, and objects, closely packed on this bridge in Istanbul, have multiple social relationships with one another.

The urbanity of things views the social phenomenon of urbanity from the perspective of material, physical objects: stone and glass, trees and birds, light and colour, sand and water, of all dimensions, in all forms and in many different combinations—as furniture or beaches, buildings or districts, forests or sparrows on roofs. De Solà-Morales calls all of the things that we can perceive with our senses and with which we experience the city, when taken as a whole, the "skin of the city." The example of the forest illustrates that the urbanity of things is not a clear-cut, specific spatial atmosphere; indeed, the forest can be urban without incorporating houses and streets. And we can go even further with this thought experiment: if the forest were divided up and each group of users and each use were to accommodate one part each, it would lose its urban character. Dividing users and uses into their own, largely

independent sections would lead to the privatization of the forest. This demonstrates that the concept of urbanity is closely related to the concept of public use. Yet the urbanity of things is always public; it is part of the public realm itself—more specifically, it is the part of the public realm that is directly related to the physical space. As a result, this aspect of urbanity relates most closely to the scope of urban design.

In his essay Louis Wirth stressed that urbanity should always be considered in terms of social organization, physical structure, and ideas, behaviors, and attitudes. Many urban sociologists who have come after him have devoted their attention exclusively to people's social relationships, using them to describe the essence of urbanity. In recent years this view of space has come under increasing criticism, as it sees space as a neutral vessel for the activities carried out within it. A new generation of urban sociologists countered this "container space" philosophy with the concept of "relational space." [5–8] Relational space refers to the reciprocal adaptation and conditioning of physical space and human activity. As a result, urban space comes from relationships and activities, while also shaping these relationships and activities in turn. It is therefore impossible to divorce the physical background from social activity—both aspects should instead be seen as different perspectives on a social and material whole. Fig. 3

5 Lefebvre, Henri: 1974
6 Foucault, Michel, p. 46–49
7 Giddens, Anthony
8 Massey, Doreen, p. 279–94

Fig. 3 People and things: physical space and social activities shape one another, as here in the British House of Commons.

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre also suggested three perspectives in order to understand the fundamental relationships involved with urban relational space: the perceived space, *l'espace perçu*; the lived space, *l'espace vécu*; and the imagined space, *l'espace conçu.* [9] The "perceived space," which signifies people's direct perception of the space, and the "lived space," which refers to the use of the space as a part of the everyday world, describe relationships between the space and the human being, implying the concrete physical presence of people within the physical space. The "imagined space" refers to an indirect relationship that is also possible without a concrete physical presence and encompasses the idea of the space but also such things as its planning, regulation, supervision, and fund-

9 Lefebvre, Henri: 1974

Fig. 4 Transit space: the one-sided, functionally geared original design for the lounge at Amsterdam Schiphol Airport led to relationship poverty.
Fig. 5 Relationship poverty: this residential area has few relationships and little variety between them, so things are not embedded in diverse contexts of meaning.

ing. According to our interpretation of the urbanity of things we can now describe an urban space with relationship wealth, as it features the density and interlocking of these three types of relationships between things, people, and other living beings. Relationship wealth therefore describes a state in which different and conflicting perceptions and activities by different people are embedded in a diverse and manifold context of meaning.

Relationship wealth is a state between two extremes: relationship poverty, on the one hand, means that there are very few relationships or only those of the same type, while, on the other hand, chaos means that there are too many different relationships, making it impossible to act or to make sense of them. Relationship poverty in urban space occurs in cases where there are few, similar, and exclusive types of relationships, in spaces that are geared towards functionality. The French sociologist Marc Augé described the transit areas of airports as one such example. The one-sided design of these spaces is geared solely towards optimizing strongly standardized traveling sequences and does not allow any other forms of action or interpretations by the user.[10] / Fig. 4–5 De Solà-Morales describes the opposite of this as the "congestion or confusion" of urban space, caused by a concentration of many unrelated networks and things. Fig. 6 Relationship wealth does not, therefore, refer to a fixed sizebut—depending on social norms and social behavior and the specific character of the space—rather a state in which there are a large number and wide variety of relationships.

10 Augé, Marc

Fig. 6 Chaos: "congestion or confusion" result from situations with many unconnected and contradictory relationships and things.

Relationship Wealth and Relationship Potential

The relationship wealth of things has four essential effects that provide a description of urbanity as a phenomenon. The *first* effect of relationship wealth is an increase in resource efficiency

due to the multiple use of things by different users, for different purposes. Meili and Vogt's forest serves walkers, environmentalists, forest management uses, and regional identity.

The *second* effect of relationship wealth is that it brings completely different people and groups together due to its multiple uses. This connection may occur through an actual encounter within the physical space, such as a square, a beach, or the forest of Meili and Vogt's example. These meetings lead to reciprocal perception *(perçu)* and a mutual connection to different environments *(vécu)*. According to Hannah Arendt, this type of encounter is the essence of public life. Even if people do not encounter one another directly, they may come to have an indirect relationship due to multiple uses and a shared awareness that they use the same spaces and things *(conçu)*. [11]

11 See Rieniets, Tim: "Space for Encounters," p. 181, in this book

These multiple uses and meanings lead to a *third* effect, whereby relationship wealth may cause rivalry and therefore conflict, for example, if different uses disturb one another or contradict one another in terms of their ideas about the meaning and importance of the space. Relationship wealth causes things to become more disputed. This effect has given rise to the urban culture of social interaction between people and other living beings and things in two different but closely related ways. In order to avoid or reduce unproductive conflicts, relationships within the urban area are largely structured according to regulations, modes of behavior, and social norms. According to the German sociologist Georg Simmel, the social phenomenon historically described as "urban" refers to the refined, regulated way of life in urban societies, as opposed to societies shaped by agriculture. [12] This structuring via formalization and standardization upholds high relationship density while preventing relationships from collapsing from too many conflicts. Fig. 7 Moreover, this culture means that urban societies have a lower risk when it comes to experimenting with new forms of relationships, due to their experience in preventing and reducing conflicts. This explains why cultural, technical, and social innovation happens primarily in cities and why urban societies can absorb increasing numbers of new, foreign people, things, and relationships while also fulfilling their own potential for innovation. Fig. 8

12 Simmel, Georg: 1903, p. 185–206

In urban space, relationship wealth alone is not enough to enable new and meaningful relationships between people, other

Fig. 7 Urbanity: this street in Tokyo is highly regulated through many formalized and structured relationships.
Fig. 8 Diversity: urban societies bring people from different backgrounds together, as here in Rotterdam.

13 Debord, Guy: 1971

living beings, and things. If existing relationships are rigid, extremely stable and difficult to change, people miss out on opportunities to transform, rearrange, or reconfigure their relationships according to their needs. The city cannot, therefore, adapt to new usage requirements, meanings, or relationships. The French writer, film-maker, and urban theorist Guy Debord described Paris as this type of urban area. He saw the historical inner city as a suppressive "straitjacket" that forced people to keep to specific courses of action, so they were unable to live their lives themselves but felt compelled to take part in a "spectacle." All relationships followed strict capitalist values and could not be changed by the individual. This limited their freedom and left no room for them to make their own decisions.[13] This type of city features relationship wealth but has no relationship potential and is not, therefore, urban, even though its physical form gives it an urban appearance. Debord's polemic analysis is a radical interpretation of an urban phenomenon that may be found to a certain extent within any city; stable relationships mostly also lead to stability for the things that are involved in those relationships. To stay with the example of the center of Paris, this is particularly true of the iconic façades of buildings on Haussmann's boulevards. These provide a street scene that has become symbolic of the idea of "Paris"—the Paris of the nineteenth-century, bourgeois *flâneur*. The architecture thus stabilizes not only everyday relationships such as living, shopping, or movement through the city but also the powerful and profitable tourism concept of "Paris." The façades in turn are stabilized and upheld by this idea. [Fig. 9] Mutual reinforcement takes place as a result.

Stabilization, namely the broad immutability of physical things, may come about not only due to rigid relationships but also due to associations with multiple relationships, even if every individual relationship can be easily changed. This is the *fourth* effect of relationship wealth, and it leads to certain things being given value and thus stabilized by different people, with different uses and purposes.[14] This results in multifaceted, complemen-

14 See Kiss, Daniel: "Valorization," p. 125, in this book

Fig. 9 Stability: the street façades of Haussmann's boulevards are the iconic image of nineteenth-century Paris, and have long been stabilized by this imagery.

tary, and mutually compensating actions that serve to retain the current status of things according to their respective relationships. In certain cases relationship wealth can even cause things, following their destruction, to be restored almost to their original form. In his theory of monuments the Italian architect and urban theorist Aldo Rossi cited the example of Padua's medieval town hall, the Palazzo della Ragione, which has been rebuilt many times and mostly retains its original architectural form to this day, despite many changes in use. [15 / Fig. 10] Rossi believes relationship wealth to be the reason for this stability and the significance of meanings that things such as buildings or city districts hold for many different people. Due to their multiple meanings for large numbers of people they form part of the "collective consciousness" and become stable monuments that are permanently preserved.

15 Rossi, Aldo: 1966

Fig. 10 Everyday spheres: Padua's medieval town hall is tied into many relationship networks and, while its functions have changed, has maintained its original form.

Objects that have long been stabilized, such as the Palazzo della Ragione, are important spaces within the city, but they are rare. Instead, the constant shifts in relationships may lead to higher or lower levels of stability at different points in time. In particular, urban areas with low stability feature constantly changing relationships, which gives them great importance as open spaces for new forms of relationship. An example of this type of dynamic urban space that has come to the forefront in recent years is inner city brownfield sites that have been given a new lease on life by urban pioneers, providing the venue for different, experimental relationships. Ultimately, such sites have been stabilized once again by large-scale transformation projects and integrated into existing urban relationships. [16 / Fig. 11]

16 See Baum, Martina: "Re-Use," p. 145, in this book

The Urban Project

According to de Solà-Morales, the city requires three basic characteristics in order to move from a nonurban state to the urbanity of things and thus relationship wealth and potential: "articulation," "complexity," and "differentiation." In our scheme,

Fig. 11 Experimental transformation: industrial brownfield sites on Brick Lane in London have become dynamic and experimental urban spaces.

these terms can be explained as follows. Articulation means that things are perceptible and can therefore be placed in new relationships by people. Complexity means that things are tied into multiple relationships and thus have several interpretations. Finally, differentiation means that things may be different from one another but are nonetheless interrelated. All three aspects are prerequisites for and consequences of relationship wealth. In addition, this means that relationship wealth should also be possible in the future. The city fabric therefore requires another characteristic, identified as "elasticity" [17] by Bruno Taut in his work on architecture. According to Taut, elasticity ensures usefulness in the future; he writes that "the relationships between purposes are inextricably intertwined. Apart from that, we do not know what the future will bring. We should therefore make it our duty never to obstruct future development. This means a departure from ... rigidity." [18 / Fig. 12] From the point of view of the urbanity of things, elasticity equates to relationship potential. It is apparent that relationship wealth is not an end in itself as part of a continuous process. Coupled with relationship potential and curious users, it can lead to innovation and new forms of relationship. This results in new, additional uses, relationships, and purposes that partly replace the existing relationship wealth and enrich and extend it in other areas. As such, it is not only things that are seen as resources and can be placed in relationships but also the relationships themselves, as they can be integrated into new social and spatial networks, allowing the city to become a resource in its own right. Urbanity as a way of life can be considered as an associated, precarious culture involving participants, in which relationships between people, living beings, and things are being constantly renewed in an ongoing process.

17 Taut, Bruno, p. 137

18 Taut, Bruno, p. 153

Fig. 12 Elasticity: the structures of the new architecture school in Nantes were designed to be oversized and adaptable in order to respond to future needs

Activating relationship potential is an important component of the design approach of the Dutch architect and urban design-

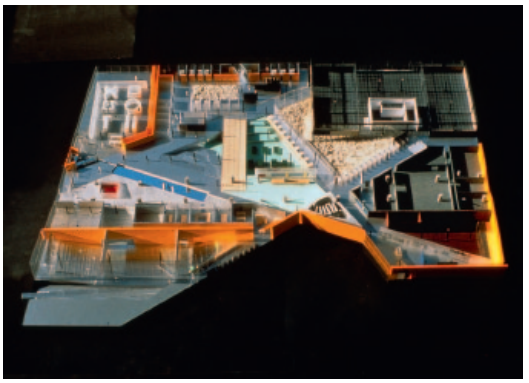

Fig. 13 Activating relationship potential: the paths through the Illinois Institute of Technology Campus Center in Chicago connect a wide range of functions and user streams

er Rem Koolhaas and his company, OMA, which often works on projects aimed at compressing and linking programs and routes. One example of this is their design for the McCormick Tribune Campus Center at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago (1997–2003). Fig. 13 The building's multifaceted programme encompasses a canteen, several cafés, and service facilities, such as printing centers and seminar rooms. The surrounding paths form a star that leads through the Campus Center. The grouping of different speeds and movement streams through an area of high use density is intended to bring about unexpected encounters and thus facilitate personal communication between the students. The building is also located directly under the metro station that provides access to the university campus, designed by Mies van der Rohe (1940–1960). Mies's urban design for the IIT Campus adheres to strict programmatic and architectural divisions. The Campus Center should be seen as a counterpoint to this design and a catalyst for interaction on the campus, which was previously lacking. It does this by encouraging much-needed chance encounters and thus innovation, creating new relationship potential by creating ingenious spatial references between different areas.

When considered as part of a relational spatial concept, not only do people structure things but human activities are structured by things, in turn. The aim of planning routes through the Campus Center was not to determine student activities but to help to structure them. In the Campus Center, activities on both sides, i.e. those resulting from both things and people, can be considered as part of a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. This makes it possible to consider urbanity as a social form defined by people, or as a lifestyle, as Louis Wirth called it, by thinking about the urbanity of things. These things—such as the walls, ceilings, floors, sills, steps, tables, chairs, coffee machines, curtains, and escalators of the Campus Center—not only form part of the relationships but also structure, enable, and influence activities. This forms the basis for de Solà-Morales's "urban project" concept. Regardless of its size and complexity, the urban project incorporates the intertwining of certain relationships—between people, other living things, and material objects—and enables new relationships that are as yet undetermined. As such,

a successful urban project always leads to relationship wealth and relationship potential, and the particular method that it uses to achieve this is of secondary importance.

The urban project does not mean the design of the material space per se, or the mere concentration of things, people, and other living beings, or formally coherent relationships. Essentially, it is a mental act, namely, thoughts, ideas, projections that place things, people, and other living beings in new and meaningful relationships. These can be considered as part of the perceived, lived, or imagined space. Relationships become meaningful if things are grouped into "episodes," as de Solà-Morales calls them. Episodes are experiences, that is, activities that take place over a restricted timeframe.[19] The farmers' markets that are held at least once a week in almost every city are an example of this, featuring concrete surfaces, wooden crates, plastic chairs, folding tables, VW minivans, vegetables, fruit, dairy products, living animals, meat, and a wide range of people, all congregating together with different levels of independence and voluntarily or involuntarily celebrating different aspects of the "marketplace" episode. Three hours later, the market is over, and the concrete expanse is hosed clean. Yet the marketplace is firmly anchored in people's minds—episodes embed themselves in their memories and thus are woven into the fabric of the city.[Fig. 14] Episodes may be planned via designs, discussions, agreements, or laws, yet other new, unpredictable episodes also take place as a result of the relationship potential with unplanned, unexpected activities, appropriations, and uses. The latter type of use requires that the planned episodes and things are considered and shaped in an elastic way. It is always worth taking this elasticity into account, as an open space that can lead to future developments that have not been set out in urban design.

19 See Kretz, Simon: "Narration," p. 103, in this book

Fig. 14 Episode: a farmers' market establishes meaningful relationships between people, other living beings, and things for a short period of time.

A wide range of methods is available for implementing the urban project. Many of them are not directly associated with the things, even though ultimately they have some influence on them. Programmatic and economic restructuring, reinterpretations through stories, and new customs or legal frameworks may

lead to urban projects. In architecture and landscape planning, urban design traditionally has the task of configuring physical things within the urban space, and within this scope are the vital urban design techniques for shaping elements that can enable episodes. Any urban project in urban design always begins with a careful observation of the current situation. According to de Solà-Morales, the "skin of the city" reveals itself through our perception of both material matter and episodes that connect people and things. This approach goes beyond existing relationships. Many people, other living beings, or things are not yet or cannot be involved in episodes. At first it may seem impossible to integrate them, but often they have a high potential for new relationships. The urban project transforms existing, unconnected people, other living beings, and things into crucial urban design resources, as manipulating them allows them to be placed in relationships and to enable new relationships. Paradoxically, in many cases it is a certain degree of division that allows productive connections, as in the example of Tompkins Square, New York City, as noted by the sociologist Arnold Reijndorp and the geographer Marten Hajer, both from the Netherlands.[20–21] Prior to intervention by urban designers, a small district square in a densely built and socially diverse neighbourhood was primarily a place of undesirable conflicts between different groups of the square's users. The solution to resolve these unproductive conflicts was to redesign the square to show more articulation. This was done by linking and dividing the square up into different areas that would appeal to particular groups—such as an area for dog-walking, a playground, and benches in the shade. As this division was principally symbolic, new contacts were made over the low fences between the now peacefully coexisting groups. These fences were designed with this dual purpose and meaning in mind, so that they not only divided groups but also served to bring them together, thus uniting a wide range of people in more fruitful relationships. As a whole, Tompkins Square was integrated into a variety of relationships and became a place of great complexity. Fig. 15

20 Hajer, Maarten / Reijndorp, Arnold
21 See Rieniets, Tim: "Space for Encounters," p. 181, in this book

Fig. 15 Productive connections: low fences in Tompkins Square, New York, allow areas with conflicting uses to coexist while encouraging new encounters.

Urban Design Connection Techniques

The precise configuration of the skin of the city can generate and enable new relationships, but it can also destroy or prevent them. According to de Solà-Morales, there are three different connection techniques that can be used to harness existing potential, depending on the prevailing situation:

1. If there is a lack of elements to connect, it is appropriate to "create a place." This can be done by generating relationship potential or "inventing things."[22] One example of this is the farmers' market, which creates relationship potential on a particular day.
2. If there is sufficient relationship potential, it is often appropriate to "overlap things" in order to achieve a "condensed form,"[23] as in the case of the Campus Center design, which brings together different movement streams and programs.
3. If there is a high level of diversity, as in the case of Tompkins Square, it is necessary to "place things in conflict" in order to produce a "heterogeneous accumulation."[24]

22 de Solà-Morales, Manuel, pp. 31–71

23 de Solà-Morales, Manuel, pp. 81–107

24 de Solà-Morales, Manuel, pp. 115–141

These three basic techniques for connecting urban elements are possible to different degrees and in various combinations. They provide a starting point for urbanity. If human activities bring about urbanity—harmonious and productive interactions in and with the physical space of things—we will see precisely why urbanity is the city's most precious resource: it opens up potential for action and meaning.

From an urban design point of view, the urban project is concerned with the social angle and thus with the power, effect, and suggestiveness of objects in their precise geometry and material nature. The skin of the city is thus an intrinsic, active part of the urban. Its characteristics determine whether urbanity is possible. One example is the design concept of the porosity of the city, as described by Richard Sennett.[25] Sennett demonstrates that spatial proximity alone is not enough to enable relationships. Porosity, or the permeable configuration of boundaries between different urban spaces, is a decisive factor. He illustrates this idea using the transition from the street to the ground floor, via transition zones. Sennett notes that various aspects of buildings make them unapproachable—they may feature smooth, opaque,

25 Sennett, Richard: 2006

or mirrored façades, as well as deterrent enclosures and green strips. Conversely, a porous design includes openings that allow visual and physical contact (readability, accessibility) or transition zones that are used (viability, usability) and maintained (controllability) and thus invite various relationships. Fig. 16 Sufficient porosity within the city is a vital physical characteristic of the urbanity of things, one that enables multiple relationships.

Fig. 16 Porosity: permeable façades, multiple crossing places, and small-scale differentiation allow interchange and variable use between public and private space along a street in Rotterdam.

A large-scale example of an urban project that incorporated a number of different urban design connection techniques is "Madrid Rio." Between 2006 and 2010 the divisive M30 ring road in Madrid, which was massively disruptive to life within the city, was relocated underground, and a 10 kilometer park on the edge of the Manzanares river was created in its place. This bold "invention," in a location that had almost no relationships and only restricted the relationship potential, "created a new place" for Madrid. Fig. 17 This was a major urban project in which a new skin was created for the city through urban design connection techniques, incorporating a wide range of measures and thus using articulation, complexity, and differentiation to facilitate new relationship wealth and potential—in other words, urbanity. A clearly articulated and thus widely comprehensible urban form, in the shape of a park, with a variety of different uses and in clear contrast to the densely packed and oppressively hot environment of the rest of Madrid's city center, unites "citizens and spaces gently and unobtrusively," according to Ginés Garrido, one of the Spanish architects responsible.[26] Every day 60,000 visitors use the new facility in a wide range of ways—lingering on the banks of the river, using the paths, playgrounds, and kiosks, watching the Manzanares flowing by, taking part in rallies, observing couples strolling, elderly people chatting, and teenagers messing around, all using the same physical space as a place to conduct their lives. The park is thus experienced, used, and perceived in different ways by its users.

Fig. 17 Connections: the new Madrid Rio park brings previously divided neighborhoods together and facilitates multiple episodes.

26 Kramer, Brigitte

Fig. 18 Experiences: perceptions, encounters, and impressions bring users together with the new "skin of the city."

Those users link their mental images and structures with values and concepts, such as "accessible," "safe," "usable," "place for falling in love," "beautiful," "my favorite park," and "good." Via these relations of each user to other users and to the physical space, the park and its material elements acquire myriad meanings that bind a wide range of social and spatial relationships together. The project has thus completely changed the significance of the Manzanares for the residents of Madrid and given the districts bordering on the river a new context. The park is not only a popular public space but also a social and physical base for the activities of a wide range of people. Urban development projects have already been started along the river, and football clubs have been founded, restaurants opened, festivals celebrated, and demonstrations organized. In the future, parts of the park will probably serve as a venue for new, unforeseen uses. All of these new episodes have come about because of the urban project; "Madrid Rio" has not generated urbanity on its own but has enabled various relationships and thus had a considerable influence on the urbanity that has ensued in the form of the relationship wealth and potential of the physical space that connects with people and other living beings along the Manzanares. Fig. 18

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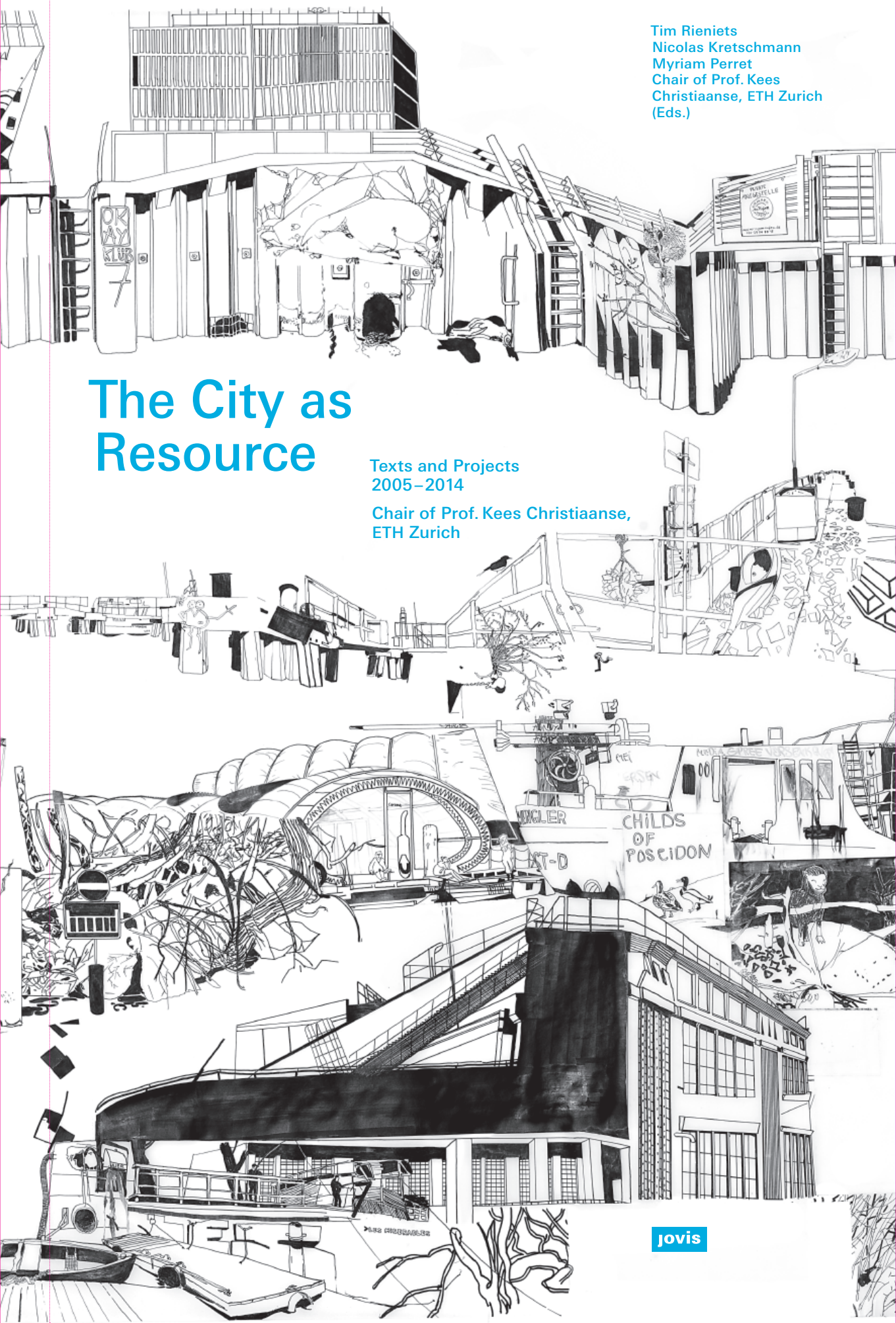

The City as Resource

Texts and Projects 2005–2014

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Contents