

Useless Architecture

text by Ryan Stec

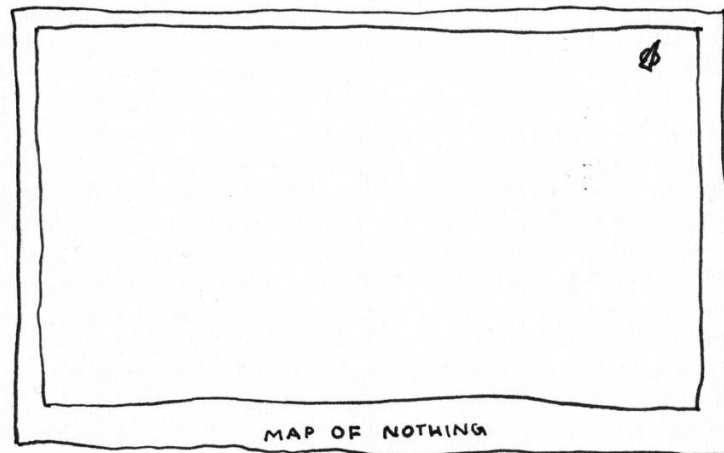
drawings by Ryan Stec and Véronique Couillard

Lewis Carroll

The Hunting of the Snark, 1876.

[From: Fit the Second. The Bellman's Speech.]

*"Other maps are such shapes,
with their islands and capes!
But we've got our brave Captain to thank,"
(so the crew would protest)
"that he's bought us the best –
a perfect and absolute blank!"*



I'm not going to give you a map for where we are headed.
If I do offer something that looks like a map, it is best not to trust it
as it is likely a useless map.
We are not going to try and get somewhere specific.
Our goal is to get lost.

Let's start with early Medieval Churches and their elegant order juxtaposed against the chaos of the city. Surrounding the original constructions was, what one might call - zones of sanctuary. This void was a manifestation of the separation between the godly nature of the church and the chaos of our world, but it was also where the beggar and the sick would come and where abandoned children would be left. In many ways the zone was a resting place for those considered useless to humanity.¹

Useless space for the useless, and so I ask where do the useless take shelter now in our cities?



The empty spaces of the city, the square, the sidewalk and street, the park, contain some of its greatest potential.

A space of appearance where we come together in our best (and also darkest) moments, together for the sake of being together, to declare our presence to each other.² This is perhaps why the empty spaces of the city are targeted, narrowed in on, closed off, controlled.

Geographer Steven Flusty's has categorized these spatial tactics of fear and control under the title "Interdictory Spaces" of a "post-public" world.³

The list is as follows:

SLIPPERY SPACE is space that cannot be reached...

STEALTHY SPACE is space that cannot be found...

CRUSTY SPACE is space that cannot be accessed...

PRICKLY SPACE is space that cannot be comfortable occupied...

JITTERY SPACE is space that cannot be utilized unobserved...⁴

One might be bamboozled into thinking that this is a list of how to make space useless, but I think the opposite is true. It seems that this is a categorization of the complete instrumentalization of space for control.⁵

A narrowing of purpose that should weigh heavy on us.

Is the useless body one of the ways we resist this hyperbolic utility?

A body that sits and rest in the flow of a city that is oriented elsewhere.

This functional city.

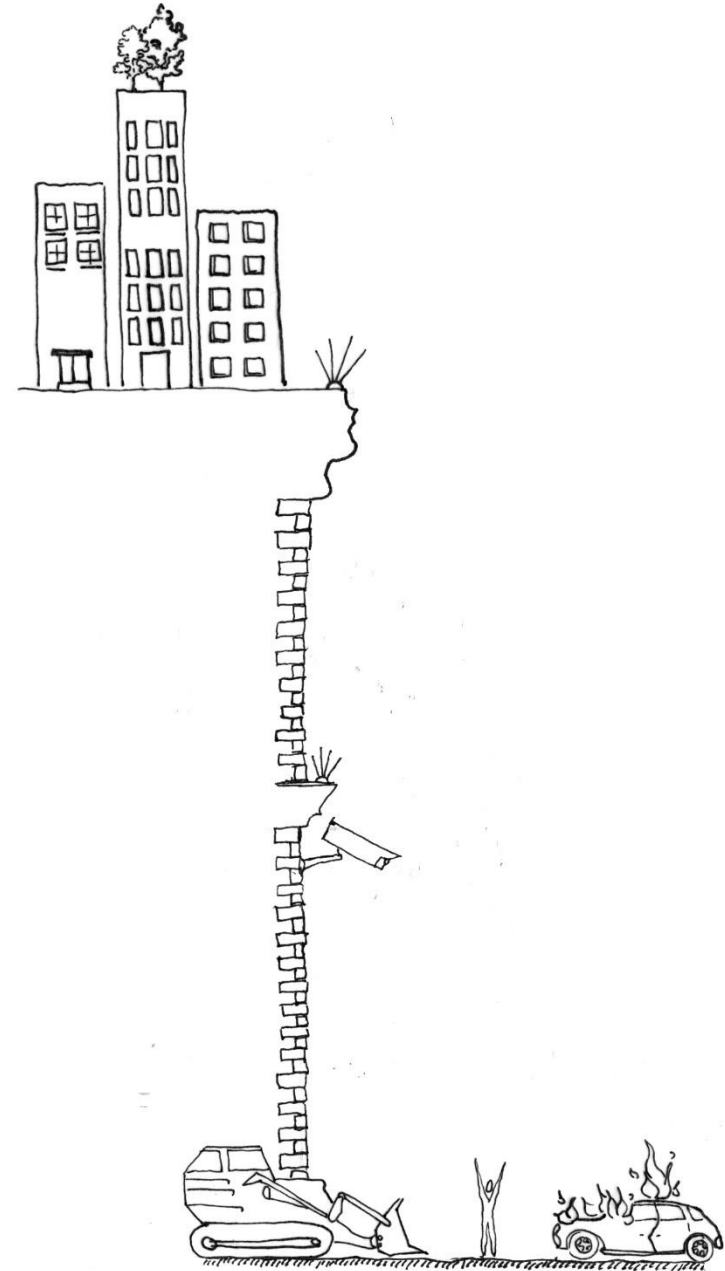
This productive city.⁶

Or a body that protests and disrupts the functional city.

Or one that we understand the least, one which has moved beyond disruption and thinks only of destruction. Senseless and without purpose.

This however, is not the purposelessness we are searching for.

We are searching for the one which transforms the user of the building to the being in the architecture, the one that opens up to the idea of dwelling in the city.

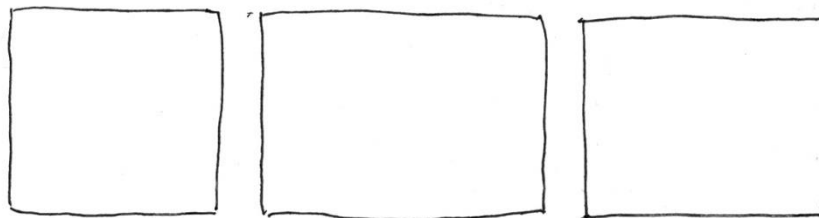


Can we find useless space in the city? What does that mean?
Is it unused space or not yet used. Is it forgotten or discarded or
already used up. How do we find useless space?



There are maps. What do the maps tell us? Do we think it is possible to find useless space with a very useful map? Is it possible to identify the useless with useful tools? Maybe if we layer the maps together. If we put them in the way of themselves, will they reveal something interesting? Is this an essential part of considering the useless, to stand in the way of utility?⁷

Artists are always standing in the way of utility.⁸ Take Armelle Caron's map of Paris.⁹ Broken apart and restructured to identify an entirely different order. Or Guy Debord's *The Naked City*, a different fragmented Paris documenting psychogeographic drifting.¹⁰ Or Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin's 'Map To Not Indicate ...'.¹¹ Ontario, James Bay, St-Lawrence River, Quebec, New Brunswick, Manitoba and so the list goes on of that which is not indicated.

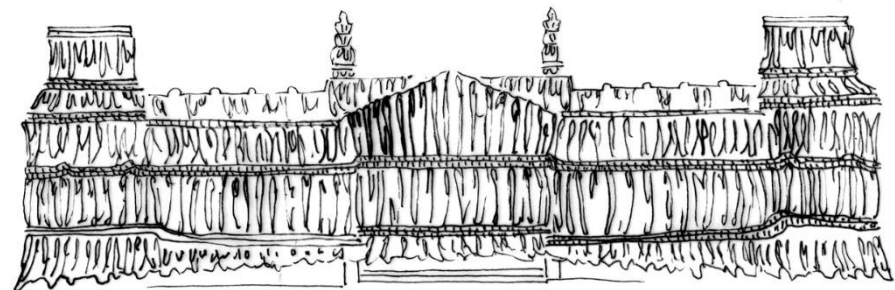


CARON, DEBORD, ATKINSON & BALDWIN'S
MAPS NOT DEPICTED...

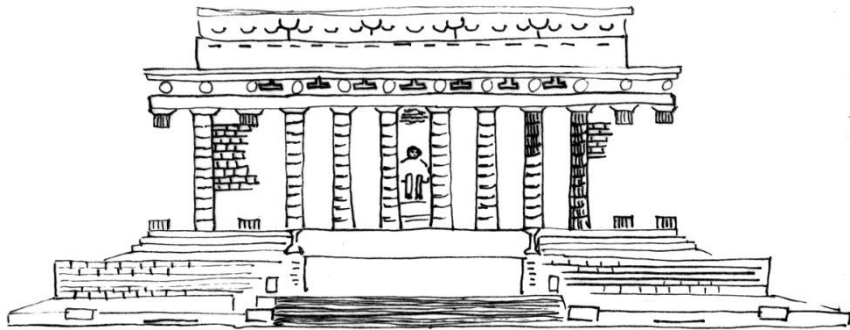
These maps will not help you find what you are looking for. Unless what you are looking for is nothing in particular. Or perhaps better said: they will help you get nowhere, as John Cage points out in his *Lecture on Nothing*¹²:

	we are getting
nowhere	and that is a pleasure
.	It is not irritating
to be where one is	.
It is	only irritating
to think one would like	to be somewhere else.

If useless representation is a creative attempt to prevent us from looking directly at the idea at hand, it is still only one component of our consideration. Let us also consider obscurity in a spatial context. Berlin-based Raumlabor produced a collection of experimental monuments for a French city including a Trojan horse with an inflatable appendage. The pneumatic expansion gave it the capacity to redefine the useful space of a shopping mall into a useless one.¹³ Or Rebar and their Park(ing) project as it denies the functional role of public parking spots and offers a tiny park, a symbolic void given back to the city.¹⁴ Or at the monumental scale Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrap the Reichstag in 1995 and render the whole building useless and for a moment the building is stripped of its function and becomes purposeless, an object of contemplation.¹⁵



If intervention in functionality can make real the useless, then architecture is not without its designed uselessness.¹⁶ Consider Washington DC and its concentration of colossal monuments, not its monumental buildings but those buildings that are in fact exclusively monuments. The Lincoln Memorial is an astounding example with its overwhelmingly excessive steps, its room for a single speech and its symbolic 38 columns for each of the states of the union at the time of Lincoln's presidency. Here, Robert Harbison has this to say of the columns, "A more truthful monument would have found a way of representing architecturally the determined effort by eleven of these to leave the building. Like many others this monument represents an interesting conflict as stasis."¹⁷

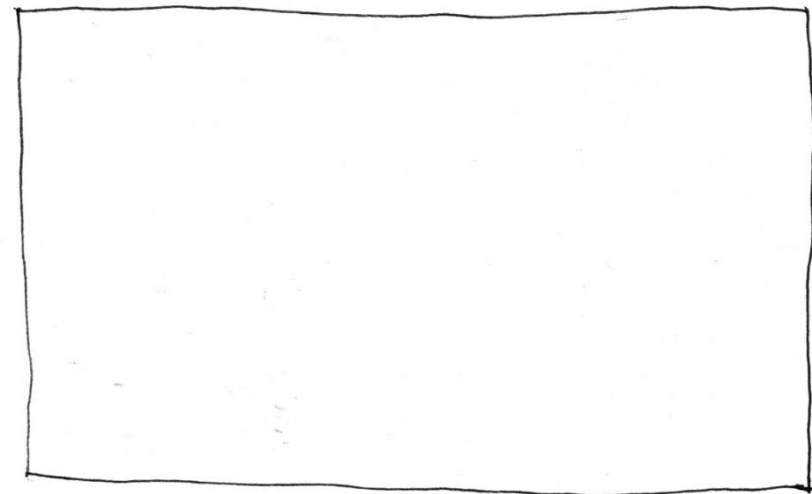


The monument attempts to instrumentalize time. It attempts to fix it, to stop it and orient your perspective somewhere specific. For you to contemplate that moment in time now solidified for your consideration. Uselessness, however, does not orient us towards the past. Uselessness does not attempt to fix time but invites us to be in this moment. If a useless thing is of the moment, then perhaps its opposite, a useful thing, is oriented towards the future. Its goal is outside of itself, even if it is the smallest of moments like a fork to food to mouth, use is in motion towards a point beyond the now. Like a staircase to nowhere, the useless interrupts the flow towards the future and attempts to unite the here and now.

The path to shedding the weight of functionality is different for the ruin. In a perpetual state of loss, the architecture dissolves bit by bit and an incredible tension is drawn between the reminders of the past and its inevitable drift into future and further decay. In this way the ruin invites a more imaginative but also more dangerous climb to nowhere. One could lose their footing in the shifting decay. The risks of true discovery could be felt in the body.¹⁸

The sculpture, the ruin and the monument – architecture that finds its place deeply opposed to utility. Can we learn from them? Can we learn to make something undefined that we still understand as architecture? Not a faux ruin or a mock chaos, but truly indeterminate. Not a mixed-use or multi-purpose space but one of complete purposelessness. Not a happen-stance of construction or an architecture without architects, but designed uselessness.

Does the possibility of going nowhere open up a world between us? Can this uselessness interrupt our attention just long enough to discover something unexpected in ourselves? In each other? Can architecture discover something for the world it was not asked to find?



¹ Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (W. W. Norton, 1992).

² Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'space of appearance', elaborated on in the *Human Condition*, continues to play an important role in how we understand the shared spaces of the city. Noted scholars such as George Baird (*The Space of Appearance* (MIT Press, 1995)) and Kenneth Frampton ("The Status of Man and the Status of His Objects: A Reading of 'The Human Condition,'" in *Hannah Arendt : The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvin A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 362.) brought her political theory into architectural discourse in the later part of the 20th century, and her ideas continue to play an influential role. The space of appearance along with the common world are essential components of the public realm for Arendt. Where the space of appearance is the conceptual space arising between us through speech and action, the common world is the constructed world of human artifice, both of things and apparatuses. There is a spatial component to the public sphere, but it is not entirely material; the space of appearance is not a physical condition, but it is connected to our togetherness, and although the common world is not exclusively a world of things, "To live together in the world means essentially a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time." Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second Edi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 52. Arendt builds her argument for the intrinsic value of speech and action on a clear opposition to utility and instrumentality in the early part of her text. Her description of *homo faber*, the maker of the world of things, is a being that must be driven by utility in order to make this world of things. What this text attempts to do is provide ground for an argument against the utility of making by questioning how problematic it is to allow the making of things to be the exclusive domain of Arendt's *homo faber*.

³ Steven Flusty, *Building Paranoia: The Proliferation of Interdictory Space and the Erosion of Spatial Justice* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design, 1994), pp. 15.

⁴ Flusty, pp. 16-18.

⁵ The provocation for a useless architecture is partially set upon the philosophical foundations of Martin Heidegger's text, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (HarperCollins, 1977). This remains one of the most important critiques of our relationship to technology, asserting that its essence lies outside the machine itself and in the 'enframing' of reality as a standing reserve. He gives us the example of how a dam on a river changes the running water from river to resource, and reasons that the essence of technology is how it transforms the earth around us into utility. In the context of this text, it would be said that it defines the world by its use, by its capacity to be employed for a purpose. Heidegger's reasoning in the essay pushes beyond the view of technology as a collection of tools and machines that are simply means to ends, suggesting instead that it is a way of thinking that instrumentalizes the world itself. If we wish to resist this thinking, to re-balance our perspective and shift away from the 'enframing' of the world as standing reserve, what relationship do we have to the material products of technological thinking? For instance, in the case offered by Heidegger of the dam and the river, is there a site of this reframing? Is it within the dam? Does it begin in the plans for the dam? The components? Its history? As architects, almost everything begins with site and so we must inquire as to where we locate this 'enframing'? And if we want to 'deinstrumentalize' the river, how and where do we begin?

⁶ The 'functional city' is used here as more than shorthand for the reductive functional ideas driving the CIAM Athens Charter of 1933 (Charles Edouard Jeanneret-Gris, *Athens Charter* (New York, Grossman, 1973). While these ideas seem like a legitimate source for many urban planning problems of the 21st century, I would surmise that this is giving architects and planners too much credit and power. The notion of the 'functional city' is more indicative of our tendency to try to reduce the city into a theoretical framework, and while many have sought to challenge the early modernist principals driving 'the functional city', often with an adjective of their own, the city itself resists. This resistance, with its dynamic and contradictory energy is what makes the city such a wonderful terrain to grow and develop theory. Each spatial theory of the city is a map with which to navigate and discover elements and dimensions of the city, sometimes, however, problems arise when the makers of the maps confuse them with the territory of the city itself.

⁷ I undertake a deeper consideration of maps, and how we might challenge the dominance of cartographies' obsession with spatial precision, in the journal article, "Organized Time: Temporal Representations and the Possibilities of the Database," *Drain* 15, no. 1 (2018), <http://drainmag.com/organized-time-temporal-representations-and-the-possibilities-of-the-database/>. Much of the important foundations for critical or counter cartography are captured in a number of Denis Wood books. The notion of a useless map and more broadly useless representation is reinforced by Wood as he reminds us that "... far from being pictures of the world maps are instruments for its creation; that is, they are not representations but systems of propositions, arguments about what the world might be." Denis Wood, *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (Guilford Press, 2010), pp. 8.

⁸ See, for instance, Sander Bax, Pascal Gielen, and Bram Leven, *Interrupting the City: Artistic Constitutions of the Public Sphere* (Valiz, 2016) or Vikram C. Bhatt, Mirko Zardini, and Giovanna Borasi, *Actions: What You Can Do with the City* (Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2008). However, perhaps many types of artistic interventions are being instrumentalized as urban design and planning professionals seek to replicate and amplify the effects of temporary artistic projects. For examples of this, see Jeroen Beekmans and Joop de Boer, *Pop-up City: City-Making in a Fluid World* (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: BIS, 2014) or Mike Lydon, Anthony Garcia, and Andres Duany, *Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Action for Long-Term Change* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2015).

⁹ Armelle Caron, *Paris/Paris Rangé*, 2008 2005, digital print on canvas, 90 cm x 120 cm, 2008 2005.

¹⁰ Guy Debord, *The Naked City*, 1957, Lithographe, ink on paper, 33.3 cm x 48.3 cm, 1957.

¹¹ Art & Language (Terry Atkinson, born 1939; Michael Baldwin, born 1945), *Map to Not Indicate.*, 1967, Linotype on paper, 50.8 cm x 62.9 cm, 1967.

¹² John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings, 50th Anniversary Edition* (Wesleyan University Press, 2011), pp. 118-119. (Adapted from the original four-column structure.)

¹³ Raumlabor, *MONUMENTS*, 2013, <http://raumlabor.net/28062013-monuments/>.

¹⁴ Rebar Group, *Park(Ing)*, 2005.

¹⁵ Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Reichstag*, 1998.

¹⁶ Many iterations of architectural uselessness have been proposed both on paper and in construction. This particular consideration of architectural uselessness is influenced by the work of John Hejduk and his explorations of the poetic dimension of architecture. His projects feel like architectural fiction constructing character buildings, spirits, people and questionable machines. In the 1993 project, *Soundings: A Work* (Random House Incorporated, 1993), Hejduk draws on and draws out a world of architecture as, what could be argued to be a useless but profound tale. Alongside the drawn lines in Hejduk's world, language, and most specifically poetry, play a key role in the unfolding of its story. The first pages of *Soundings* begin with this, "Feel my body architect, so your plans will not be so rigid..." Hejduk, pp. 29. Through the text and drawings, Hejduk draws out an opposition between rationality and romance and pulls us into an open-ended narrative, challenging us to grapple with architectural representation that so clear stands against utility.

¹⁷ Robert Harbison, *The Built, the Unbuilt, and the Unbuildable: In Pursuit of Architectural Meaning* (MIT Press, 1993), pp. 41.

¹⁸ Rose Macaulay has explored this tension deeply in her book *The Pleasure of the Ruin*. In her consideration of the new ruin, that is architecture that stands on the emerging edge of its dissolution, she describes the drama unfolding in a house recently touched by fire, "But often the ruin has put on, in its catastrophic tipsy chaos, a bizarre new charm. What was last week a drab little house has become a steep flight of stairs winding up in the open between gaily-coloured walls, tiled lavatories, interiors bright and intimate like a Dutch picture or a stage set; the stairway climbs up and up, undaunted, to the roofless summit where it meets the sky. The house has put on melodrama..." Rose Macaulay, *The Pleasure of the Ruin* (New York: Walker and Company, 1953), pp453-454. The house has made its first steps into ruin. Accelerated into uselessness through catastrophe, it begins to cultivate mystery in its collapsing structure. The old ruin has long distanced itself from its particular crisis. It sits at a safer distance in time to the source of its collapse, but the material decay nonetheless contains both the mystery of its past and the instability of its present.