Digitally cultivating the accident in urban analysis

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Abstract

Through the explication of digitally enabled analytical strategies, this paper sets forth the possibility of using deliberately cultivated accidents as a means of analyzing existing urban form.

Accident

“Accident” - the word suggests a failure or breakage, an unfortunate distraction. But accidents also have the capability to open up new ways of seeing the familiar. To consider that accidents might be a desirable part of a design process (Hayles and Mulder 1998, 210-212; McLachlan and Coyne 2001) raises the possibility that architects could deliberately set up conditions increasing the likelihood of accidents as productive provocations. I propose the term cultivated accident to describe an accident which arises from just such deliberately set conditions. To cultivate accidents in a design process is to prepare oneself for seeing things which aren’t expected. Montage, or the juxtaposition of disassociated image fragments, is a simple technique for cultivating accidents, even in situations when the source material is taken from a single image (Fig. 1).

However, the value of accident to conducting urban or architectural analysis, as distinct from design, is not obvious. Analysis proposes to find order, not to break it; it seeks to resolve, not to blur. To admit accident as a legitimate tactic in urban analysis is to assume a degree of tactical identity between analysis and design. However, the cultivated accident as a component of urban analysis should not be seen as an object of art or a form-generative exercise (Fig. 2); instead, it

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