

Elements of the City and Technical Challenges for the Guerrilla



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Elements of the City and Technical Challenges for the Guerrilla

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Elementos de la ciudad y desafíos técnicos de la guerrilla

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Nowadays urban operations are usually impacted by many more factors than in any other period in the history of guerrilla action. This more complex situation requires us to rethink our ideas and make changes by doing anything from reading and reproducing old manuals to working out for ourselves and for unknown others how, with whom, and when we want to fight the enemy.

One good way to begin is by becoming familiar with the morphology of cities and how spaces are arranged. To do that, it is important to engage not only with intellectual theories, but also with the intentions of politicians, the police, and prosecutors regarding how they control and try to restrain violent action.

The new urban guerrilla should be able to plan and continually evaluate the “field of battle,” and to know “how to think about space in order to know how to organize within it, how to fight within it.”¹ A few technical considerations with direct implications for studying and reflection need to be shared so that the tasks involved in a subversive attack can be executed effectively.

¹Yves Lacoste, *La Géographie ça sert d'abord à faire la guerre*.

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Urban Morphology

It is estimated that between half and three quarters of the global population lives in cities. This process of urbanization has been accompanied by the appearance not only of demographic and quantitative processes, but also cultural, technological, and socioeconomic ones. This makes the study of cities more complex.

The most important landmark in the functional study of cities was set by German geographer Walter Christaller, who used economic laws to explain urban localization and laid the foundation for defining a system of cities based on a hexagonal pattern and ruled by a hierarchy of urban centers determined by the distinct functions that each city offered.

From there, studying cities geographically was organized into two separate camps: “the study of cities” and “the study of the city.” The study of the city focused on *morphological* issues, meaning cities' internal and external shape, which is influenced by their physical location and the urban entity's position relative to its immediate environment (other cities and villages, communication channels, etc.)

The main elements that make up urban morphology are:

1. The layout of the streets or the road network, which may be orthogonal, radiocentric, or irregular.²
2. The prevalent building or construction types. Visualizing them directly, which makes it possible to determine their footprint and constructive elements, among other things, is the best way of doing analysis.
3. The functions of the streets and buildings, which are closely connected to their forms.

²In *Apuntes de geografía humana*, Isaac Buzo Sánchez writes: “An *orthogonal*, or right-angled, plan is when a city is laid out in a grid formation with streets that cross one another at right angles. *Radiocentric* is when multiple streets start from the center of the city and radiate outward in all directions like spokes, while others cut them off and encircle them completely. Finally, a city is *irregular* when it has narrow and winding streets, often terminating in dead ends, due to the lack of a plan prior to construction.”

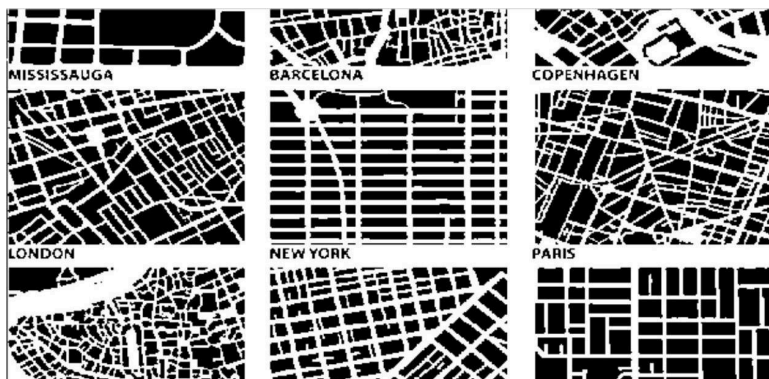


Fig. 1: Metropolitan areas.

To better understand these main elements, let's keep a concept of structure in mind that, in geography as in other disciplines, “assumes that space is governed by a certain order and that this constitutes the essential organization that governs it.”³

There have been several different models of internal urban structure. The most important are the following:

1. Burgess' concentric zone model, which assumes that the city expands and uses land in a homogeneous and circular way.
2. Hoyt's sectoral model, which identifies sector-based zones, rather than circular ones, due to the residential behavior of the upper social classes.
3. Harris and Ullman's multiple nuclei model, in which the city's structure is not based on a single, central nucleus, but rather multiple nuclei in accordance with the activities that take place in each of them.

The plans depicted in Fig. 1 show the road networks of different cities. This visualization allows us to substantiate part of the structure that each city is based on. For example, we can apply one of the three models mentioned here in each case, but we can also see that it is impossible to replicate any single model by itself because mixtures can exist, including elements that are not yet structurally envisaged in each city's constant process of

³Percy C. Acuña Vigil, *Qué se entiende por estructura urbana*.

formation. We will rely on field knowledge to systematize these known and unknown elements. In addition to everyday sensory examination, elaborated and revised maps are recommended.

Guerrilla Cartography

Cartographic tools are essential for guerrilla strategies. There are platforms that do not require users to be expert programmers in order to maintain an online map. The uMap⁴ project lets anyone draw up maps with highlighted locations. This platform uses the map from the OpenStreetMap⁵ project, which is an autonomous, open access, global map initiative.

The *Cooperativa Geográfica Cambalache* has used these same tools to create a guide called “Mapea tu Causa”⁶ [in Spanish], which gives a step-by-step explanation for creating a map on uMap. The work of the group *Evade la Vigilancia* offers one noteworthy example of radical maps drawn up in uMap. They maintain and update a map of surveillance cameras in Chile and other countries.⁷

Along those lines, one task for the strategic development of urban guerrillas is contributing to the creation of hypothetical operational scenarios, represented by local maps that address the morphologies and technologies of the space. These scenarios can be constructed based on:

1. Blind spots or routes
2. Cooling-off areas
3. Escape or breakup points
4. White or red sectors indicating dangers arising from police, military, or civilian (such as organized crime or gangs) threats
5. Sites from which our enemies operate (houses, institutions, police stations, parking lots, laboratories, etc.)

⁴<https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/en>

⁵<https://openstreetmap.org>

⁶https://web.archive.org/web/20221005220255/http://cajondeherramientas.com.ar/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/mapea_tu_causa.pdf

⁷*No Trace Project note*: As of 2025, this map no longer exists. Surveillance under Surveillance⁸ is one alternative.

⁸<https://sunders.uber.space/?lat=-39.1&lon=-60.2&zooom=4>

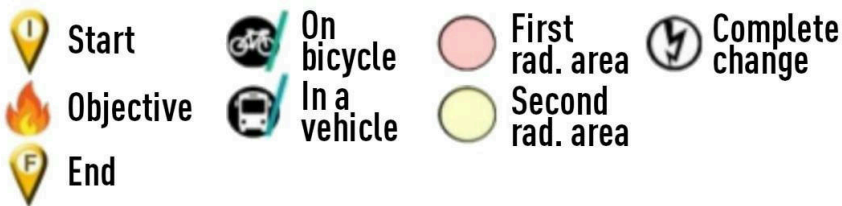
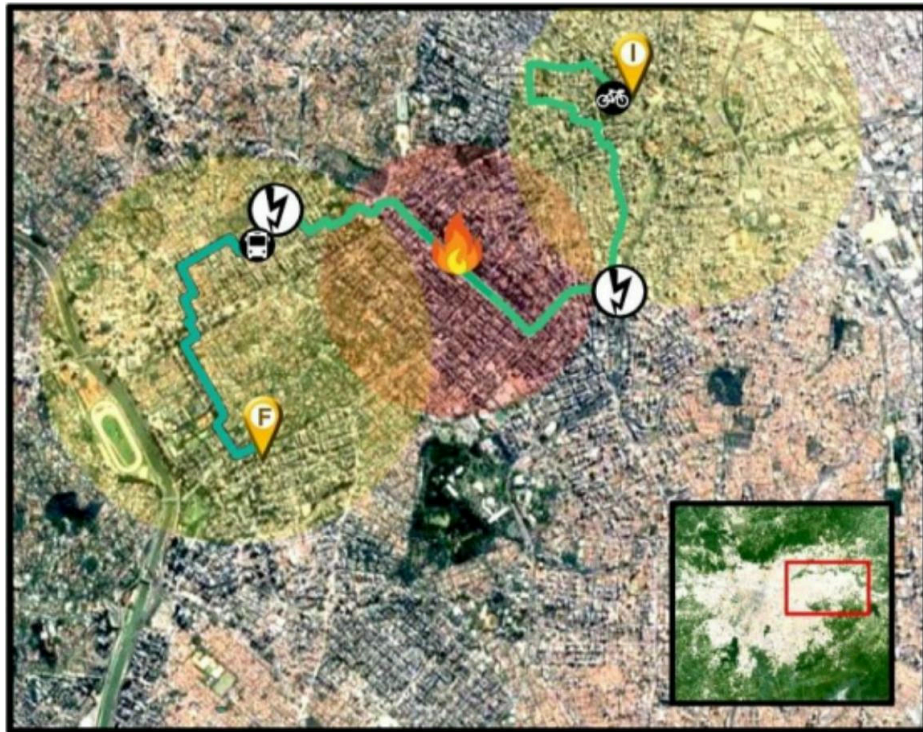
6. International crossings (assuming clandestinity)
7. Quick access routes and exits from crowded areas (assuming pursuit)

By Way of an Example

To get a clearer idea, let's look at the practical application of a mapped plan based on two hypothetical operations. Both are focused on a single objective in an area of São Paulo, but they use different planning logic and deployment. Hereinafter, we will focus on space, using a plan with the geometric basics: points, lines, and polygons, a description, and finally an analysis to complement that process.

The two cases here represent the route and actions of a single person, but in a real operation, this same exercise should be undertaken by each participant.

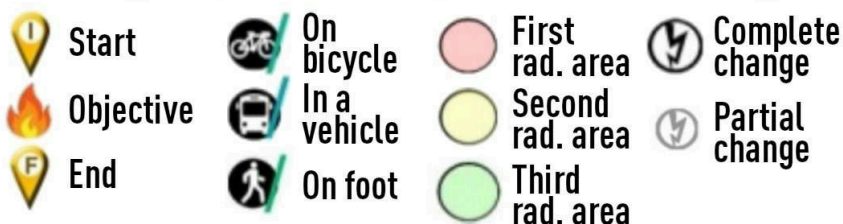
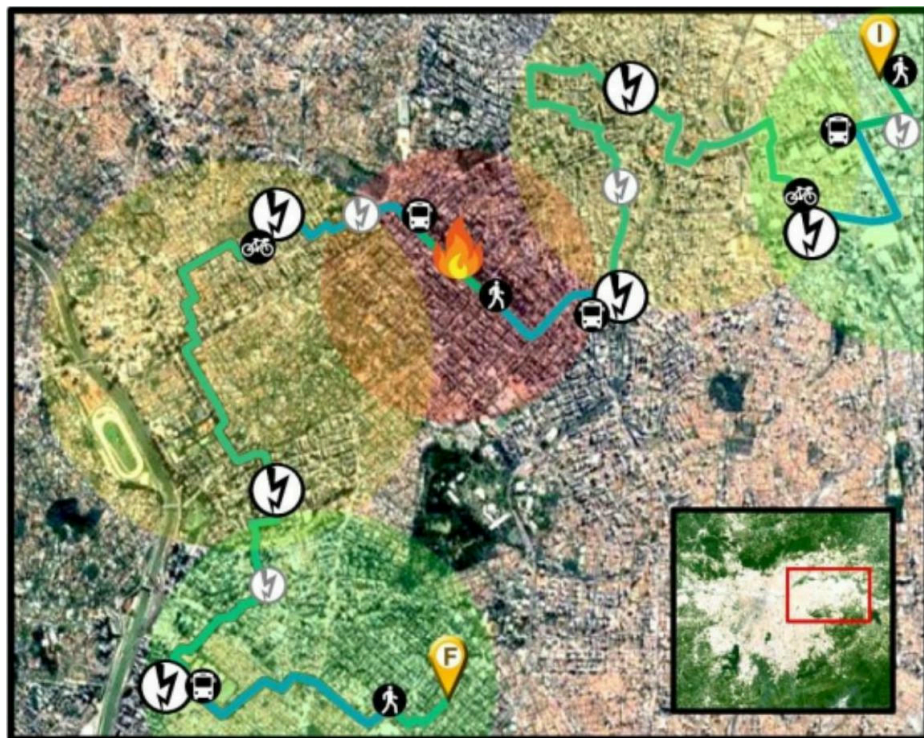
Map 1



Simple operation, São Paulo, Brazil.

Broadly, there are points marked *Start*, *Objective*, and *End*, which are connected by a long route that intersects with them. We can also see primary and secondary radial areas, which are large areas representing certain levels of risk due to their respective proximity to or distance from the objective. Additionally, there is a point labeled *Complete change* on the route going toward the *Objective* and another *Complete change* point along the return route, during withdrawal.

Map 2



Complex operation, São Paulo, Brazil.

In this case, obviously, we also see points labeled *Start*, *Objective*, and *End* connected along a lengthy route. However, the increased complexity of the operation suggests something. On the one hand, the route is longer both coming and going. Unlike the previous case, this establishes a third, more distant, more secure radial area. On the other hand, even beyond the larger scale of the operation in spatial terms, there is also more complexity in the number and diversity of changing points. In this case, there are points of

Complete change, but also points of *Partial change* and more extensive use of modes of transportation.

Cartographic Analysis

The exercise presented here is *one* of many aspects of operational security, namely the use of maps to show both simple and complex deployment plans and movement within an urban territory, making it harder, ideally, for police investigators to reconstruct the routes of operation participants.

It should be noted that the areas are supposed to be completely monitored, secured, and surveilled, however they do offer the urban guerrilla multiple opportunities nonetheless. Density and the chaos of cities and crowds always help mask the group's trail, when appropriate measures are taken.

First, it must be assumed from the outset that there will be cameras during operations that we cannot avoid and that will record our actions. Action does not require an absence of cameras, but rather cameras' failure to ever capture our identities (faces, tattoos, etc.) We start from an assumption that we will be recorded in the primary radial area, given that police investigations operate the other way around: tracing the people responsible will start from the recordings at the very point of the *Objective*, and the attackers' route will be reconstructed from there: where did the subject come from? Where did they go?

For that reason, what is actually important is to closely study the location of the cameras in the radial areas in advance, to know where they will catch us and where they will not in order to know how to mess with them and create effective ruptures. As a result, the police will clearly identify a subject who attacked the objective, but as they proceed to reconstruct the route using cameras, the trail will be lost due to the gaps in surveillance that are exploited through *Partial* or *Complete changes* and segments of the route that have few cameras (blind routes). From that point on, what the investigation will find is a range of suspects due to the fact that the participants are camouflaged among casual passers-by in those blind spots or routes. And as the person adds *Partial* or *Complete change* points and blind routes, the number of suspects multiplies, there is more confusion,

and the police lose more of the trail. In short, it exponentially increases the amount of resources and time that the police will need to investigate.

If we look at the two cases discussed above through this lens, we see that the first case (Map 1) is less safe than the second (Map 2). That is because, when tracing the attackers in the first case, what the police have to do is overcome the first change point and determine that the person observed in the first radial area is the same as the person observed later in the second radial area. And with that assumption, they can reconstruct the route to the destination and, on that basis, link the person to their residence and review their movements using, for example, cell phone geo-location on the day and time of the operation.

Looking at the second case, we see that it is quite a bit safer with respect to the number of ruptures created in the line of investigation. That is because, upon arrival at the objective, there is *one* person, but between that point and the final destination there are a total of three other distinct people and two more who are partially distinct using four different modes of transportation and largely using blind routes. The same applies to the reconstruction of the path between the objective point and the start point, that is, the person's point of origin. This second plan significantly complicates successful reconstruction in the course of a police investigation.

Walking the Space

Without going any further, the extent of the planning shown here basically offers a watered down outline of the need to “think about space in order to know how to organize within it.” But it must be emphasized that any cartographic planning requires walking through it, which is to say experiencing the multiplicity of aspects in advance and at the very moment of execution, which are not addressed here.

Nowadays urban operations are usually impacted by many more factors than in any other period in the history of guerrilla action. This more complex situation requires us to rethink our ideas and make changes by doing anything from reading and reproducing old manuals to working out for ourselves and for unknown others how, with whom, and when we want to fight the enemy. One good way to begin is by becoming familiar with the morphology of cities and how spaces are arranged.



No Trace Project / No trace, no case. A collection of tools to help anarchists and other rebels **understand** the capabilities of their enemies, **undermine** surveillance efforts, and ultimately **act** without getting caught.

Depending on your context, possession of certain documents may be criminalized or attract unwanted attention. Be careful about what zines you print and where you store them.