1. Urban collage and contact zones

If pavements are landscapes, that means they are not made of one single thing. Let’s learn to read them as urban collages.

Go to the street, wherever you might be. Start looking down. No, harder! Take at least half an hour to look in front of your feet.

Follow the patterns on the ground, pay attention to compositions and the contact zones between materials, the overlaps and the interpenetrations, but also the separations.

Draw or take pictures and compare. Can you distinguish their materials? What are these compositions on the ground telling us?

Perhaps like this we could understand the architectural dreams of order and how they clash with little glitches or cracks: sometimes violent, like in an Earthquake; sometimes hopeful, like a weed searching to prosper in the asphalt.

2. Layered palimpsests

If pavements are landscapes, its composition runs much deeper than the surface, the street’s crust that holds us or provokes us to fall.

It’s important to train ourselves to look at the surfaces. But another important exercise is to look below the surface level. What’s beneath, what’s below, what’s underneath?

We know very little. Part of the problem has to do with the fact that in Euro-American forms of urbanisation we’re regularly forbidden to meddle with the guts of our cities. That’s something only experts or maintenance technicians do. Their knowledge, hands-on manipulation and expertise is what governs life deep below.

Go to a street of your choice and look down, again. But this time try to look beyond the surface. For this, you’ll need to speculate and draw.

Again and again, ask yourself: What’s beneath your feet? It might be just random land, granite, concrete, asphalt. But can you know more? Is there any way for you to understand its underground life, its beings and materials?

In the midst of the Cold War, the USA and the USSR competed to see who could dig deeper into the Earth. The attempt was to find out more about the hidden subsoil As a result, the main opening into the Earth to date remains the Kola Superdeep Borehole, a 12.2 km small opening in Murmansk Oblast, Russia. But our urban arenas are full of smaller kin of this big holes! Perhaps you could attempt to do one yourself?

If not feeling too adventurous, perhaps you need to go to a place where pavement is cracked because of an incident or being under renovation… Our cities are packed with holes on the ground enabling an entry-point to another life underground: works, cracks, openings, some intentional, many unintentional, revealing the layered palimpsests that our pavements are.

And yet, we don’t even know how it got there, do we? Who could you ask? Perhaps a worker, another bystander? Think together, and take notes of your encounter.

Once we’ve done all of this: What other exercises could we imagine to enter into alternative urban configurations with these liberated pavements?
**Nonmodern planners**

Euro-American modernist dwellers have been trained to see plants and trees as ‘green infrastructure.’

Placed in an orderly fashion, one tree hole every 2 metres, weeded out when unwanted or allowed to grow to provide ‘ecosystem services’, when summoned to act as ‘nature-based solutions’ for shade and comfort.

But listen carefully:

*Allow us to share a different proposal for this place.

In Spain, watching urban works is derogatorily regarded as a pensioner’s activity.

I also do, and am regularly laughed at, because it feels like a strange form of fetish. To calm my interlocutors, I often joke or change topics.

But I can’t anymore. I’m coming out of the closet. We have so much to learn from those who watch the works. They take time!

In fact, open-air urban works are one of the few ways in which we can see the urban as it is…

- an interpenetrated landscape of plastic and sands.
- a vertical layering of strata.
- a world of underground metal mountains.
- a mixed ensemble of extracted, anonymous, anomic rocks and sands.
- a geo-political project in perpetual remaking!

**Cracks**

Pavements are deeply anarchist projects.

Their contact zone is a hive mind of constant unruly transformations. Even the sturdiest stone, the most stainless steel won’t be able to make it as is.

Moving earths in the subsoil, the brutal sunlight of the sun, weeds, atmospheric saltpetre from the sea not so far away are true nonhuman kin of Buenaventura Durruti.

Erosion and cracking, not just sabotage, is their struggle.

And indeed, they carry a new urban world in their hearts!

**A story on the ground**

Accessible city-making is a project of permanently making urban surfaces standard and legible, creating safe walkable crossing paths.

Dots mean danger. A corduroy line suggests a path.

Rendering the street legible requires hard work and training, because it just takes a minor hiccup, a minor reordering of the street, and this delicate system of patterns enabling a walkable sequence is lost forever.

- Blind people are regularly trained to detect these patterns and their activism is a lot about exploring their breakdowns.
- Not having a cane, and with hard-sole shoes, all I can sadly do is watch. Perhaps I should try barefoot?