

Abstract

Discourses and their imaginary towers

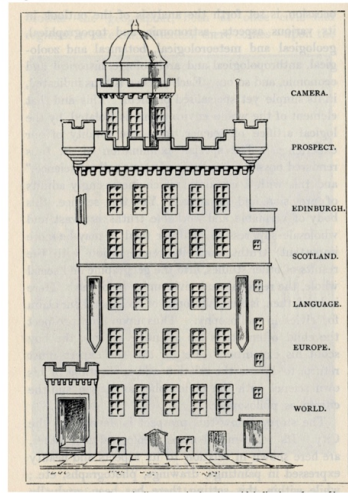
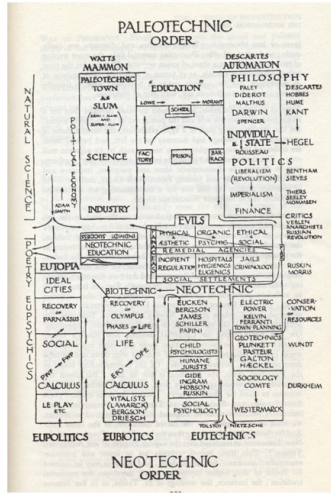


Diagram of Geddes' Outlook Tower exhibition

Diagram of Geddes' Outlook Tower, Edinburgh

A machine for organising subjects and information into a discourse so that it appears as knowledge about the self appearing retroactively in the built environment.

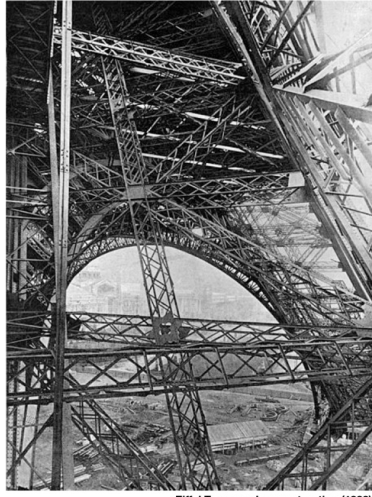
Discourses and their imaginary towers

Geddes' Outlook Tower, the modernist grid, the architectural imagination

Lacan, 'The unconscious is the discourse of the Other.'

What Geddes was endeavouring to do with the Outlook Tower (1892) was to give architectural form to the problem of how to organise information about the environment so that it could enter architectural discourse as knowledge. This was a discourse between the subjects that was went through or was mediated by the surface of the earth. Geddes argued that the city was above all else a noetic environment in which subjects learned about themselves through a close reading of their environment. It was a noetic environment before it was a market environment (although the subject might learn something about markets by reading the city). In order for the discourse to work, Geddes had to be able to organise information and people. He had to organise them spatially and temporally. It had an interesting temporality. It involved a form of retroaction. Information would appear to the informed subject of the city as having always already been there. The Tower was for Geddes part of an organisational strategy. Of course, Geddes failed. The problem was too complex. He spent his whole life trying and his whole life failing. This failed project raised interesting questions about the nature of discourse. What sort of discourse is it that appears in the environment – in the walls windows doorways skylines, stone walls and field furrows, shadows falling across doorways – and how does it appear retroactively? The fact that he chose the tower as the form of this knowledge of the self, raises all sorts of questions about the architectural imagination, the spatial and temporal form its takes. The Outlook Tower was a biblical tower built off a modernist grid of information that he called thinking machines, in a cyclical (double helical?) form of recurring engagement. It raises the question of what Freud called *psychical locality*, of where the subject is and how it is constituted in discourse by the city. We define discourse as thinking through others. Referring to Lacan's structure for discourse, if the Outlook Tower is the master signifier that represents a subject to another signifier, and the city is the field of signifiers, the Tower underscores the compelling power of the imaginary to intrude into that most symbolic of structures – the grid of discourse – to rupture it and make it visible.

Keywords: The architectural imagination. The structure of discourse. The modernist grid, everywhere. Lorens



Eiffel Tower under construction (1888)



the Tower of Babel (Athanasius Kircher, 1679)

Two objects in a narrative of globalisation

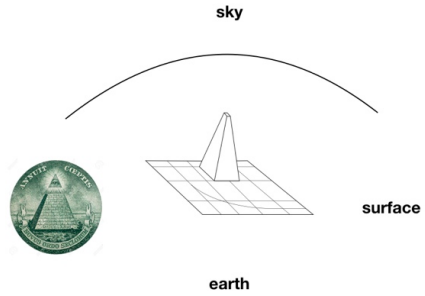
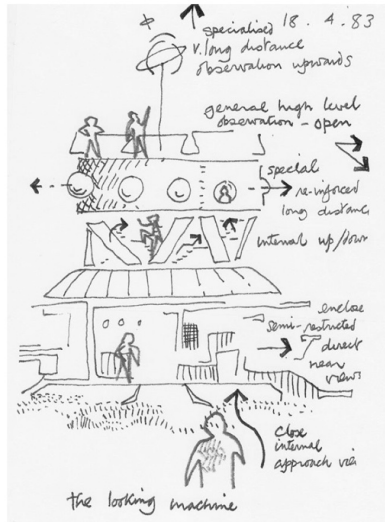


Vladimir Tatlin's project for a Monument to the Third International (1920)



The Paris Commune (1871) prototyping an early version of the Outlook Tower

Two objects in a narrative of self-determination



The subject of the city, produced between the surface of the earth and the surface of the sky (not to scale)

Cedric Price's Looking Machine, from lawn to alethosphere (1983)

Two subjects of the built environment

Lorens Holm, 10 June 2021