



# Disfiguring the Urban

## Reading the spatial mechanism and the new city

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### Abstract

Territorial representations have become a question at large. Previous understandings, classifications and analysis of the built environment, were based on distanced observational practices and composition models, in which the built fabric was 'deconstructed' and understood on pure typological and or singular architectural notions. In turn, this 'distanced' approach generated models of settlement and functional processes that reflected an overly 'objectivist' 'zenith viewed' reality, neglecting the explanations of 'process' within itself.

Thus; Explanatory (and representational) difficulties arise where 'urban process' meets 'urban space', 'street space' and 'public realm', as manifested in the physical body or character of the environment. Spatial processes appear chaotic and not amenable to analysis with relation to the morphology. On the other hand a view founded in everyday urban process may offer a constructive framework for understanding the emergence of new higher scale urban orders. This may be a simple matter of unitary moves at the lower level (street scale) forming emergent structures at a higher level or, it could also be a two stage process where unitary moves at the lower level meet already existent systems of physical (city), conceptual and institutional ordering at a higher level(s), composing themselves into familiar, hybrid or new forms and structures, at other various levels. (Read)

Only by moving away from the 'zenith view', is a new observational field possible to understand the processes responsible for transformations, bypassing centre- peripheral notions.

Guided by the Foucauldian notion of Archaeology, patterns and composition- al structures are exposed as surveying, notation, diagramming and 'relation- al drawings' to establish the topological relationships that constitute structural realities produced by the material practice of individuals and society.

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An empirical survey (GIS, CAD, Aerial surveillance) on urban morphological form is set up to establish the formal aspects of the city at first (object, networks, used urban plots). Followed by an inquiry into the processes (Images, Interviews) to propose mechanisms that effect the ways / degree in which urban elements relate (e.g.: scalar, streetscapes, individual actions and cross connections). New frameworks are hypothesised, and effects researched in relation to these frameworks to establish the nature or character of the urban 'productive space' (Read) and to comprehend the driving force of urban transformations.

The project considers 'European' urban fields in relation to this hypothesis and relates the samples back to this framework. This method of 'reading' the environment (analysis, visualization and representation) could then it is proposed be applied to the configurative analysis of other urban samples as a testing procedure. It is intended to compile the sets of knowledge into an atlas explaining the processes, representing the differences in spatiality, within different environments.

### **1. The old and new figures of the city:**

*'The essence of what we insist on calling urbanism is composed / decomposed by these transfer, transit and transmission systems, these transport and transmigration networks whose immaterial configurations reiterates the cadastral organizations and the buildings of monuments'*

(Paul Virilio. Cited in Cosgrove, D. 1999, J, the Agency of Mapping)

With a 'new' European geographical geometry in place, political and physical borders, are being redrawn, trade and work agreements renegotiated, and new economical alliances made. Cities, nodes of control, and economic corridors have become the spatial devices in the landscape, nodes and edges that define, mark and highlight the part of cities, or buildings for that matter in the new order. Indicative of a more 'unified' European state, these spatial descriptions link or divide activities powers and relations, affected in all scales of the landscape or territorial fabrics. From scale variations ranging between the very high infrastructures of the multi national, global markets forces, to levels that include individualised movement on the street, the results are of a spatial nature. A new territorial spatial configuration, or sprawling city (Boeri, 2003), detached from historical models or constraints, opens the view for a new landscape of possibilities and positions for new architectures, morphologies, and infrastructures.

Irrespective of cultural context, whether Western, Eastern or African, it seems that these new spatialities / urban formations are emerging across the globe as part of other similar urban configurations; including political orders and mobilities. Whether we focus on the new Europe, or the Pearl River Deltas, the issue remains as is, that current urban territorial configurations and it's representation, has become both, questions at large. This contribution is intended to describe and explore some of the implications and the possibilities of ways of modelling

and representing which are guiding our research thinking on the city. Previous conceptual frameworks, classifications and analysis of the built environment— or what I shall term as the ‘new’ landscape (Krier, Lynch and Koolhaas), have in most cases been established upon distanced observational practices for both the compositional and process levels of questioning. To confuse matters more, terminology like, ‘milieu’, territory, or urban field, remains vague in really assessing in what the real ‘object’ is under scrutiny? Various other discourses are, ever more so, contributing to the views and questioning of the city as part of an eclectic dialogue of anthropology, philosophy, economy, art and architecture (Corner, 1999. p227), armed with sets of motives or questions, ranging from the current state of the city, total ‘formal’ (built) territorial geometries (Boeri, 1992a, 1993b), and relating to processes of change to that of the spatial investigations. Irrespective of where the origins of these questions lie, a great majority of time and energy is spent in seeking clarifications for the landscape or city, that end up dealing with what I call ‘knowledge-relations’, as sets of relations that allow us to understand change or to intervene with purpose in the landscape.

*Disfiguring*<sup>1)</sup> the Urban is an attempt to do just this. A way of unravelling certain ‘chaotic’ activities and laws of daily life, as reflected in the landscape (Bacconi, 2003, p21), as well as seeking the relations between the formal and spatial mechanisms detached from pre-established ideas and or pre-formulated frameworks. Disfiguring is different from that of the disfigured City, a classical terminology of Boyer<sup>2)</sup>, (Graham, 2001), as it takes into account both the planned and unplanned city, but attempts to move beyond these constraints, into a processes framework supported by a movement theory of the city. This theory addresses the integrating power of movement and activities, at particular scales for particular activities, and draws actors, movement and their scales into a common framework. It considers formation (formal figures - morphological) and ‘deformation’ as being spatial (figures of actions and movements), giving ‘relations to forms’ and consequently, ‘forms to relations’ (Healy, 2004)

## **2. Disfiguring the figure.**

*‘The city has no fixedness, no centre, no fixed parts and is an amalgam of often-disjointed process and social heterogeneity’.* (Amin & Thrift, 2002 , p8)

A crisis occurs, at moments in which we question the city through our traditional way of looking at the city in its totality and its parts, especially when considering investigations of urban transformations as process, and its effects. Our understanding of the landscape as being ‘chaotic’ highlights an inadequacy of our analytical tools; their inability to relate orders of urban morphologies to those of societies expressed as activities, practices of inhabitation, regulatory traditions, self governing cultures (Boeri, 2003, p22). Our distorted views are a direct result of, what Corner (1999) and others, term the ‘zenith-paradigm’; viewing the ‘city-form-above-and-not-from-within’ (Boeri, 2003) maintaining the enlightenment and modernism paradigm, of master-planning.

The prevailing view of the city, seen as thing, is problematic, due to certain assumption made towards the landscape. Our understanding of the city is dictated by a concept of the city as a singular object or thing (Read, 2004). This 'thing' (composed of bigger and smaller parts) is spread out evenly onto a flat Cartesian surface. The assumptions formulated from this is that; the city is bound, with defined borders, edges, with inside and outsides, establishing the centre-periphery / city-countryside analytical model. What is proposed here is not to prove or falsify this way of thinking, as it's application might be valid for some levels of the city, the question remain more an issue of seeking a new spatial framework as a means towards, what Read (2004) calls, *effective urbanism* - as being an adequate reference point to establishing link(s) between the city of the past and present, whilst placing current urban transformations within a broader narrative.

The problematic of these centre-peripheral urban models, as frameworks, is a direct result of a continuous hold on the 'city as object' or fixed space paradigm (Corner, 1999, p228). If one conceives the city itself as a 'thing', then it becomes a simple matter that the development or change of this 'thing' is also a matter of self-evident changes in self-evident distributions. It implies a suspended frozen spatial view in a non-active spatiality, (Amin, 2002) a 'master-planner-from-atop view', removed from events at the lower levels, or rather, a 'game board' like notion in which neutral space is arranged passively on a flat surface and the controller, or planner, assembles and re-assembles forces at his disposal.

It is at the urban process level, of actions and effects, at which I would like to establish an alternative view, as an hypothesis: that urban space, and place, be seen as matters of movement. The urban spatial order consists of movement; as active and productive flows of space, diverting us from a Cartesian plan space (Ibid). Products of these movements, include the reassuring solidity and stability of the place experience, (i.e. the actual and particular condition of the city we encounter in experience). Urban solidity is a by-product or effect of movement through vectors, forces, concentrations, and not visa versa. Active space would deal with the city as a body of effects, an urban landscape of circuits and, movement matrixes (Boeri, 1992a , 1993b) rather than a 'thing', bound and constrained.

The proposal is for a new urbanism, as a dispersed, or Sprawl urbanism (De Geyter / Koolhaas / Boeri), an urbanism of flows, productive of the urbanism of fixtures and place, founded in topological positioning in the landscape. Centres and peripheries, all stand as products of the web-like mobility networks, which function as a unifying grid, delivering people and goods across the landscape as a whole. These webs or grids of movement have in fact, already undermined the traditional boundaries and the centre-periphery models of the medieval and 19<sup>th</sup> century city alike, blurring the landscape of places and leaving the master-planner in confusion. The landscape of old, as that of architecture, is inverted into a new landscape of relations, or new

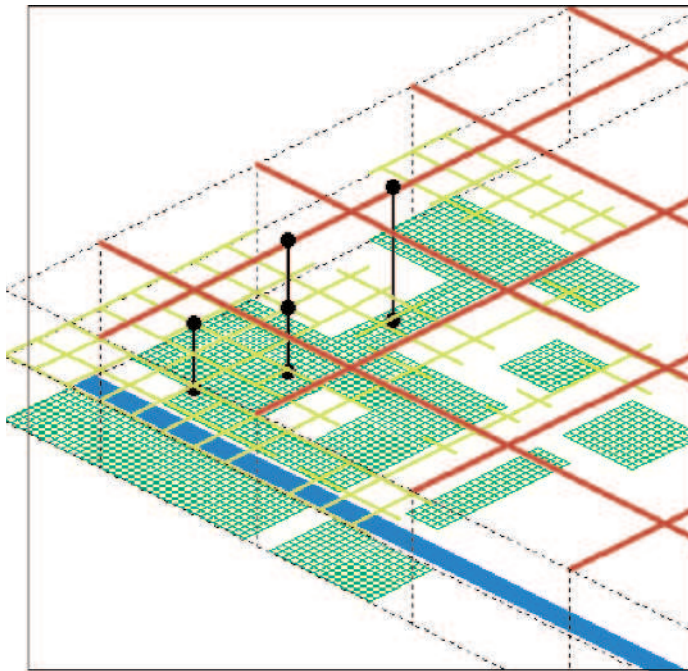
'topo-rationalities'. Through the concentration of these fields, forces, frequencies and intensities, produced by overlays of mobility structures, public space is produced or reprogrammed to accommodate shifts between mobility and functional activities, on local or global levels. It is here that the different interfaces occur; as activities, exchanges, etc, which effects the spatial programme in a particular way, in turn, exerting pressures on the architectures, inducing the transformations of the landscapes.

### **3. The model hypothesis.**

Our research has suggested (Read, 2004) that physical networks mediate the mobile social space of the city so that physical urban space is not simply the container of myriad social details of the city, it is also an organiser and locator of those details - ordering them, and indexing them to a simple order founded in movement. We propose that differently scaled movement webs overlap to produce interfaces between mobile populations, differentiated by speed and scale. Social (and economic) effects are set up at those points and lines of overlap, and in this way, very simple and generic social-spatial orderings are constructed around simple spatial patterns. The first principle of diversity in urban fabric is therefore, we would contend, a diversity of speeds and scales, each within their own coherent but overlapping networks. Within a fabric of distinctive movement layers, interfaces may be set up between distinct and different but as yet unspecified populations, these populations themselves being potentially different in different places and different historical times, but producing effects in generic ways.

A very simple analysis of intensities of movement and activity within the central fabric of many European cities shows that there is a clear binary structure operating. In any local area one will typically find a few streets which carry very significantly higher traffic than the other more typical streets around them. Zooming out it will be seen that these locally highly trafficked streets will then tend to connect up into a network which, it is then very clear to see, is the primary means people use for getting around the central city as a whole. This network, in many places highly spatially integrated with the more typical fabric around and between it, stands out as a specialized part of the fabric, a network within a network, whose significance as a coordinating and orientating structure within the fabric, we are already very familiar with from our everyday use of it.

Add to this two-layer system of movement grids, the layer of the new high-speed mobility crossing the old periphery and we have the basis for an idealized three layer continuous model of the urban field. The respective layers are called the local, the middle and the regional-scaled grids or networks.



**Figure 1**  
The three-level model  
of urban centrality  
(Source: Read 2004)

What is the status of the layered network device? It is not a distribution of simple objects or arrangement of bounded zones, the way centres and places appear in the centre-periphery image. It is more a framework for understanding the distribution of effects arising out of the superposition of layered distributed intensities, when these layers are brought into contact with each other. It is a framework for very simply understanding the effects of the superimposition of multiple layers of speeds of movement, multiple continuous and distributed space-times, out of which we may be able to picture the places we know from our experience of the city emerging. It is an emergence framework for the city, a material frame for organising vectors, forces, and their emergent effects. It is a framework for understanding effects which we would otherwise only be able to see as things.

If we look to the example of the traditional high-street as it is known in a city like London or a boulevard in Paris: we understand it at present as a local intensity which we then immediately and arbitrarily outline and turn into a thing. The high-street is actually an effect of the overlap of the distributed intensity carried by the local street grid with that of the superimposed 'middle-scaled network' of urban distributive routes (the boulevard network in Paris for example) - with metropolitan effects thrown in where these are carried by their respective infrastructures into the central grid. The local movement circuits of the area around the high-street meet the movement circuits of the network at a scale and speed of movement higher, on which the high-street sits. Our customary outlining of the high-street as thing incorporates no deep reflection of the formational logic of the thing. In fact the problematic nature

of this demarcation and delimitation is here illustrated perfectly as the limits imposed cut up the field which is the very condition of the high-street's becoming.

The important conceptual advantage of this spatial division of the city is that the analytical dividing knife is wielded horizontally, so there are no vertical slices, which arbitrarily divide adjacencies from each other. Limits to the horizontal distribution of intensities are imposed by the limits of the respective infrastructures, which carry them. At the same time the grain of the 'space of flows' idea is made finer, and its resolution and penetration is improved through a sequential application of the same idea at ever finer grain. Material infrastructures and their effects are analysed sequentially all the way down to the local, revealing in the process the conduits and the translating spatial interfaces through which the urban, the metropolitan and the global invade our lives. It makes explicit the continuous pathways and the branch lines, the spatial switching-points and transmission stations which lead us from the local through the urban to the metropolitan and global.

At the same time it provides a device for understanding the highs and lows and the gradients of intensity and centrality effects in the surface of a complex fabric, rescuing that fabric from its fate, in our present-day understanding of complex fabrics, as a node or distribution of nodes.

The middle scale network, as part of a three scaled network systems, seems to be the most powerful integrator in the urban field. Within this space of the middle scale, urban cultures are remobilised or reconfigured, as part of a constant 'disfiguring' of city, in relation to the functional morphologies.

At the higher scales we see huge flows of material, as the new European territorial redefinitions, allow for increase in capacity of flow of movements. Human migration routes are widening, disfiguring national borders, widening settlement patterns, even allowing for transmigrations between various international scales and systems, and it's all urban. This in turn is what Boeri (2003. p22) refers to as the emergence of the landscape of a polyarchic model; as models in which various actors are able to exert spatial manipulation, on the formal and informal levels, as forms of competitiveness or power relations. The concentrations of certain of the forces are no longer classic examples of a modern geometrically determined mobility grid, establishing social hierarchy, or even social apartheid (Le Roux, 1998) as fixing political, or economic orders, but have become a free range of movement and relations to other functions within territories or landscapes.

The view of the city as effects can be confirmed by looking at some views on space, in related discourses. In general, there is a tendency for notions of space to move away from physical objects, towards greater attention to processes and flows (Amin and Thrift, 2002). From an economical- geographical view, this is indeed the case, as there is a shift away from an approach through static-object space, towards a spatial thinking of process and effects, or time-space. It is what Harvey (give the reference to Harvey)

terms the 'utopian schematic' in which new urban and regional 'futures' should be drawn from the 'utopia of process', rather than the 'utopia of forms'. Traditional urban morphologists are turning away from the object city to allow a more eclectic discussion on the multitudes of activities and potentials, in the city of today, rather than that of the singular architectural compositional types. For Stefano Boeri, (2003, p20) the actions in-between the architectures, either habitational or 'small tremors' like nodes of transaction, are principle reasons responsible for the changes in the territory, at specific to certain points, and yet similar to other places within Europe.

#### **4. Mapping, tracings and disfiguring; beyond the formal city and its representations.**

On a more practical level of representation, we question what is required to be mapped in order to give account of the city as effects and actions, especially within a context that is borderless and relational.

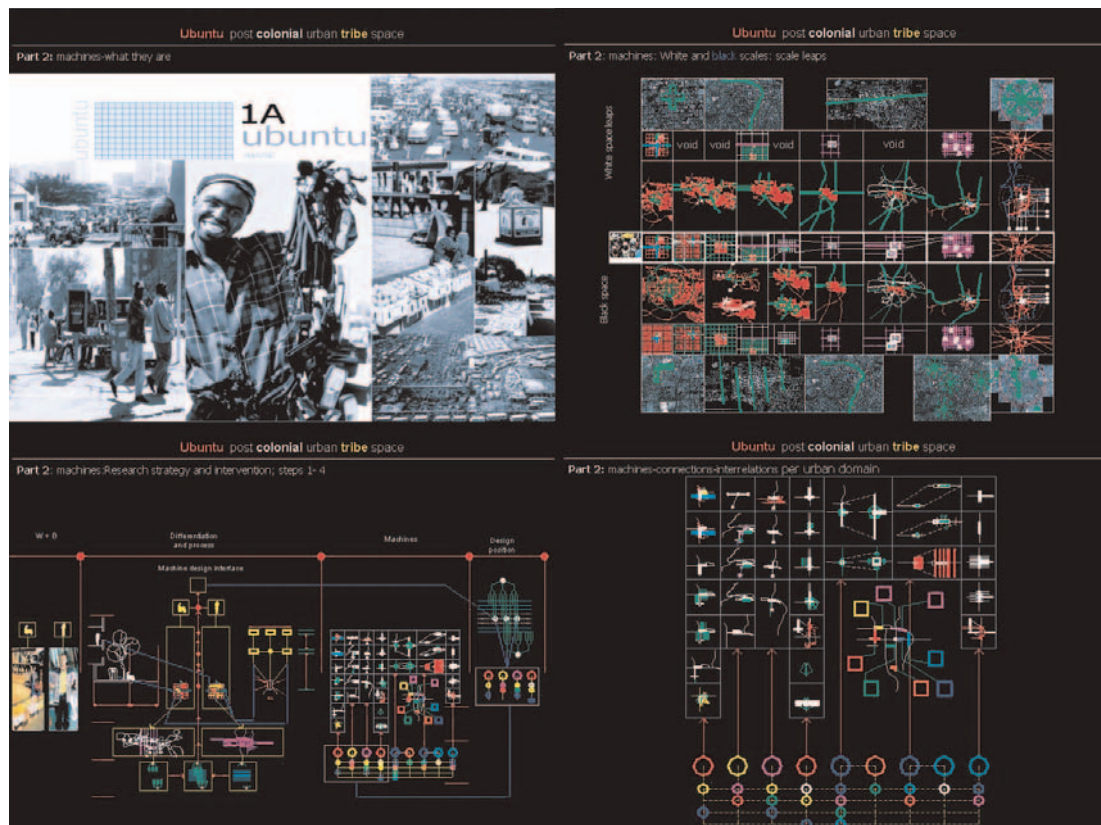
We can question, if what is mapped, actually is representative of our proposed framework of thinking about the city, as a move beyond the formal territorial morphological, and compositional descriptions?

An increasing production of maps and atlases are seeing the light, by defining all types of new spaces of the city. These range from density atlases, life expectancy atlases, political spaces in the Americas, and world globalisation spaces of economies (Koolhaas, 2003).

I wish to highlight, very briefly, ways of seeking and making this urban framework applicable, visually and conceptually, through the tracings or mappings themselves, underpinned by the urban archaeological survey work, as understood through the term of the 'dispositif'<sup>3)</sup>, by Stefano Boeri, (2001).

Basic techniques of representation in practices today, hardly distinguish between tracings and mapping. Tracings are defined as activities that survey and reproduce. In contrast, the activity of mapping describes a technique that establishes, and possesses possibilities of creative 'archaeology'; opening and unlocking potentialities within a body of research, seeking new and creative relations to clarify what is under question, and to draw from external discourses to assist in these processes of research.

Mappings bring to the front both the spatial frameworks and the unseen, of the 'discursive'. Actions and effects take priority over meanings and representations in comparison to tracings. (Corner, 1999), To 'dis-mantle' the formal urban figure, beyond the city as object (meaning a departure from seeing and tracing the city and its morphologies alone), we would rather map than trace the morphologies in relation to temporal actions and activates, so that the constructed city emerges in qualifiable stages. The object as we know it, disappears and re-emerges as a new conceptual formation, or urban formation out of processes. (Amin and Thrift, 2002).



**Figure 2** Urban figures as mappings for the context of Pretoria, South Africa, (left to right, top to bottom), the figure of economic activities, the movement figure of the city, and mapping both figures into one narrative of movement, interfaces, exchange and morphologies. (source: Author, TUD)

In some cases the tools of GIS or aerial surveillances techniques, photography and satellite images can be useful in establishing an overall picture. However, the information at this level, falls short of establishing the possibilities of the urban rhizomes, as sought by mapping itself. Maps are not plans, and therefore achieve a new instrumental significance, beyond that of tracings. By taking the information of the tracings, beyond a neutral position, they allow the spatial device of the city to emerge, as graphic and geometrical decompositions.

Graphic decomposition is the technique in which the urban compositional structures are analysed and broken down into various scales. The functions and mobilities are brought together in order to establish the links between the infrastructures and current activities on ground level. Graphic diagramming assists urban thinkers in clarifying issues of space at an abstract level. In most cases selected scenarios are diagrammed, to produce abstractions of information, readable within various formats of representations. Street level activities, might seem insignificant in the local scale, but form a powerful link to a mechanism at one or two scale levels above. What remains a singular aspect, on one level, has in combination with other similar elements, significant effects, even at regional or national scales. Examples such as in the flower industry can be given, where small flower stalls situated at a point

where middle and local scale order meets, exist within a specific 'topo-rational' relation to the green-houses of Aalsmeer, mass transactional activities of the international flower markets, and the proximity of Schiphol airport as global connector. Once this is diagrammed, a power relation is set into place, and a process 'enframed' and a method established to assess the way the city configures and disfigures. Diagramming is becoming far more a spatially supportive device, while tracings are representational, focussing on the formal layout of the landscape. (Corner), This setting of links is known as the dispositif, requiring both levels of abstraction and representation to be accounted for. Elden (2001) elaborates in detail on this, yet another, Foucauldian term that is overtly spatial in nature, which includes terminology such as thresholds, edges, border, and breaks, as parts of the spatial. This device, sets the basis of an 'archaeology' for the landscape, not in the traditional sense, rather, in an approach of unpacking relations to different 'facts', and to a 'spatial figures', a figure of disfiguring.

It is at the point of disfiguring that the old models of the constructive logic of the city are not helping us anymore. From a situation not so long ago where the ideologies and operations underlying historically specific planning practices were used to define types of morphology and layout, and the city was seen as an historical construction, planned in concentric layers according to the practices of the time, we have arrived at a point where historical categories of settlement forms and layout seem to play no clear constructive role in contemporary metropolitan urbanization processes. We seek a way to define urban form, represent urban forms and clarify that which produces it, attempt to move beyond the formal, towards the spatial,

The way to the city of the future is to grasp it - to take hold of it first in our minds and in new disciplinary preconceptions, and then to find the instruments to intervene in the interests of making a sustaining environment. We need to work within the laws of the city's own moving equilibrium and learn to build enriching places in the frame of what, in a complex, forceful and dynamic urban world, is necessarily so. This is as much a political as a technical task of course, but our purpose is to –build a starting point for thinking about what the city is, how much we may draw from past thinking, and what we may still have to invent when thinking, researching and designing the city of the future.

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1) Taylor, M.C., A deconstructive term to access the meanings behind textual discourse.

2) Disfigured City: A Term used by Boyer to term (1995) to describe the space of the city that falls out of the 'designed' space of the city, more referential to the space of decay and neglect. (Graham. 2001)

3) The French word Dispositif (*Dispositivo* – Italian) translated as the mechanism, apparatus or deployment. None of these capture the 'Foucauldian' meaning of a historically instituted process that lends build form to social relations. The English language has to accept this term as being one of it's kind (Boeri, S. *Mutations*, Actar, 2001. p360)