The Exposed City: A Brief History of Mapping the Urban Invisibles
by Maria Popova

From Ptolemy to MIT, or what Edward Tufte has to do with Google Earth and the future of understanding cities.

Cities, maps and data visualization are frequent obsessions around here, and the intersection of the three hits a sweet spot of the finest kind. But how did urbanism, cartography and information visualization first come together, and where are they going as bedfellows? That’s exactly what Nadia Amoroso explores in The Exposed City: Mapping the Urban Invisibles — an ambitious study of the invisible elements of the city, from demographics to traffic patterns to crime rate to environment, through “map-landscapes.” With a foreword by iconic information architect and TED founder Richard Saul Wurman, the book traces the work of pioneers across cartography, information design, urban planning and other disciplines that have historically shaped our understanding of place and spatial relations, alongside bleeding-edge projects from contemporary innovators across data visualization, open-source mapping and other facets of technology-empowered urbanism.

It’s Man’s Ability to Perceive, it’s the MAP. It’s also the map through time with the ease of quick time and computer graphics and morphing, changing one pattern with another. Time telling a story through a day, a week or a year. Time showing change, it’s the transparency of information combined with other information creating a third piece of information.” — Richard Saul Wurman

(Sound familiar?)

From the ancient maps of Ptolemy, to the seminal work of legends like information design pioneer Edward Tufte, cognitive mapping trailblazer Kevin Lynch and father-of-pictograms Otto Neurath (remember him?), to the latest insights from MIT’s SENSEable City Lab and Google Earth co-founder Mark Aubin, Ambroso covers an incredible spectrum of chronology, subject
matter and techniques, appropriate for the interconnected, dimensional complexity of cities as living organisms.

One particularly interesting pioneer examined is artist and architect Hugh Ferriss (1889-1962) and his depiction of New York City zoning laws, touching on the potential of drawings to explore and reveal the “invisible” dimensions of cities — something we’ve previously considered in the Invisible Cities transmedia mapping project, which uses social networking data in 2011 to do what Ferriss did with paint, paper and imagination in 1916.
Not only did his drawings become expressive vistas into the future of Manhattan’s architectural and urban design conditions, as legacies of one of the most talented artists of the period, Ferriss’s depictions also synthesize the positivist and progressive spirit of their era. These drawings foreshadowed a city which, due to its threatening qualities, was destined to remain as only pictorial.” ~ Nadia Ambroso
What made Ferriss’s drawings so successful, Amoroso notes, is that they were able to garner the attention of a wide and cross-disciplinary audience — artists, architects, urban planners, developers and city officials alike — which raises an interesting question about the nature of contemporary urban innovation and the need for cross-disciplinary engagement.

This month, Amoroso launched DataAppeal, a web-based visualization tool for creating 3D and 4D data maps and animations, based on concepts from The Exposed City.