CHAPTER 06

FIGURE-GROUND

A representation of space, often urban, that uses a fill or poché to show the relationship between built structure and fabric.

Figure-ground is a binary method that affords a clear and powerful spatial reading of the landscape. The separation of object from field underlies all cartographic and design drawings. While a figure can represent anything, the most fundamental figure-ground relationships in design and cartography include three oppositions: landmass versus water, landform versus flat ground, and built structure versus urban fabric. This chapter focuses on the latter, as a reductive yet revealing form of land-use division.

Devoid of lines, figure-ground depends on the perception of fills and voids as shapes. The default method for making a figure-ground drawing is to fill the figure, or built space, dark, often black, leaving the ground empty or white. The opposite—white figure and black ground—is also used. The ultimate legibility of this system depends on how recognizable the figure is to the eye. The Rubin face vase is a classic example of ambiguity in figure-ground. The choice of the two colors also affects the legibility, with black and white being easiest and blue and black significantly more difficult. With regard to urban fabric, the built form is usually legible through a simple poché, and the representational questions are ones of classification, hierarchy, and differentiation. Representation begins with the precise definition of the figure and the ground, followed by a determination as to whether the figure or ground should read more strongly or whether the opposition should be minimized, and ending with a choice whether to embed more information—time, material, structure, use—within the drawing.

A conventional figure-ground drawing has only two layers, described by solid fills and voids. However, designers and cartographers have challenged the articulation and number of layers while embracing the conceptual conceit of the figure-ground as a means of distinguishing between different types of built form. The more layers added, the less faithful the drawing is to the binary division of the figure-ground but the more capable it is of articulating gradations and nuance. The figure-ground has been used to support ideological claims, to inform the design of cities, to reframe territories, and to describe urban morphology over time.

Because of its representational simplicity and graphic boldness, the figure-ground is persuasive and adaptable. It can stand alone or be embedded with additional layers of information. The traditional black-and-white figure-ground presents a clear but limited reading of the distribution of buildings and nonbuildings within a city. It reveals density but occludes the character of the built fabric—age, height, style,

and material. It can be augmented to allow for greater differentiation. The human eye can handle more information without losing the clear articulation of building and nonbuilding. City atlases, such as the 1906 Übersichtsplan (general plan) of Berlin, are easily understood through the fundamental distinction between figure and ground. [FIG. 6.16] These atlas plates are incredibly clear, with varying shades of gray for building typologies, pale yellow for roads, pale green for parks and squares, and blue for waterways. The remaining page space is a combination of small pathways and private open spaces that read as a fragmented, rather than connective, tissue. The information is rich, but the immediacy is lessened. The masses and voids, patterns and structures, opportunities and restraints for urban design are not as immediately legible as they would be in a classic figure-ground. However, the increased quantity of information encoded in the coloring allows for a more nuanced and less reductive reading of urban form. In the technique of figure-ground and its derivatives there is a trade-off between wealth of information and clarity of intention. This chapter tests the limits and legibility of the figure-ground drawing, extending from the classic monochromatic poché to the rendered fabric while exposing critical uses of the drawing typology.

6.4

51.5063° N, 0.1271° W,
David Grahame Shane, *Field Study London*, 1971.

The work of urban designer and theoretician David Grahame Shane is dedicated to the relationship between urban form and time, to the transient nature of urban morphologies. His *Field Study London*, a drawing from his thesis work with Colin Rowe at Cornell, reveals the patterns, forms, scales, and codes behind the Georgian estates along the Thames tributary beds. The drawing uses tone and line to describe the organization of the estates relative to the river, uncovering the relationships between hydrology and urban development.

6.5

43.6667° N, 4.6167° N,
Bureau Bas Smets, *Parc des Ateliers*, 2009

Cartographic practice is central to the design methodology of Belgian landscape architect Bas Smets. His projects begin with an act of reproduction, of drawing the existing condition from a particular lens to read the territory anew and to reveal what is visible but unseen. These maps create a customized and specific base for the project. The site is interpreted through drawing and the project continues as an ongoing exchange between drawing and imagining. The two maps of the Parc des Ateliers in Arles, France, isolate the specific landscape elements—the geomorphology of the ancient Roman city, the artificial platform of the Parc des Ateliers, and the vegetation, creating a loop of trees around the site—and articulate the design potential atop the redrawn base maps.