

## What if the city were an ocean, and its buildings ships?

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An exhibition of work by the artist David Lemm, at the Edinburgh Printmakers' Gallery, in the spring of 2015, entitled *Debris and Phenomena*, consisted of a number of pieces in which iconic marks were superimposed upon old nautical charts. What had intrigued Lemm was that these charts, which he had found by chance amidst piles of waste paper, had once been important tools for navigators in shaping their perception of the maritime world. Lemm had saved the charts. They showed very little. Here and there were numbers, recording depth, with occasional contour lines, and on every sheet, a graded semicircle indicating all the degree points of the compass. On each sheet, Lemm had overprinted a schematic map of a small neighbourhood of the city of Edinburgh, in the faintest of colour, which did no more than separate the spaces of open ground from blocks of buildings. This then provided the almost blank surface upon which were stamped fragmentary icons, in bold black ink. There were zigzags, hatched circles, crosses, a squiggle, an icon that looked a bit like a ladder, another that looked like a satellite aerial and yet another that resembled the outline of half a mushroom with dots.



Figure 1. *Grapple, debris and phenomena*. © David Lemm

These charts bring a number of questions to mind. Do they – or did they once – make possible a perception of the environment that we could not have had without them? Does our perception really rest on such a fragile foundation that it can disappear with a few scraps of paper discarded in a bin? If, to the contrary, our perception does not depend on them, why were they so important in the first place?

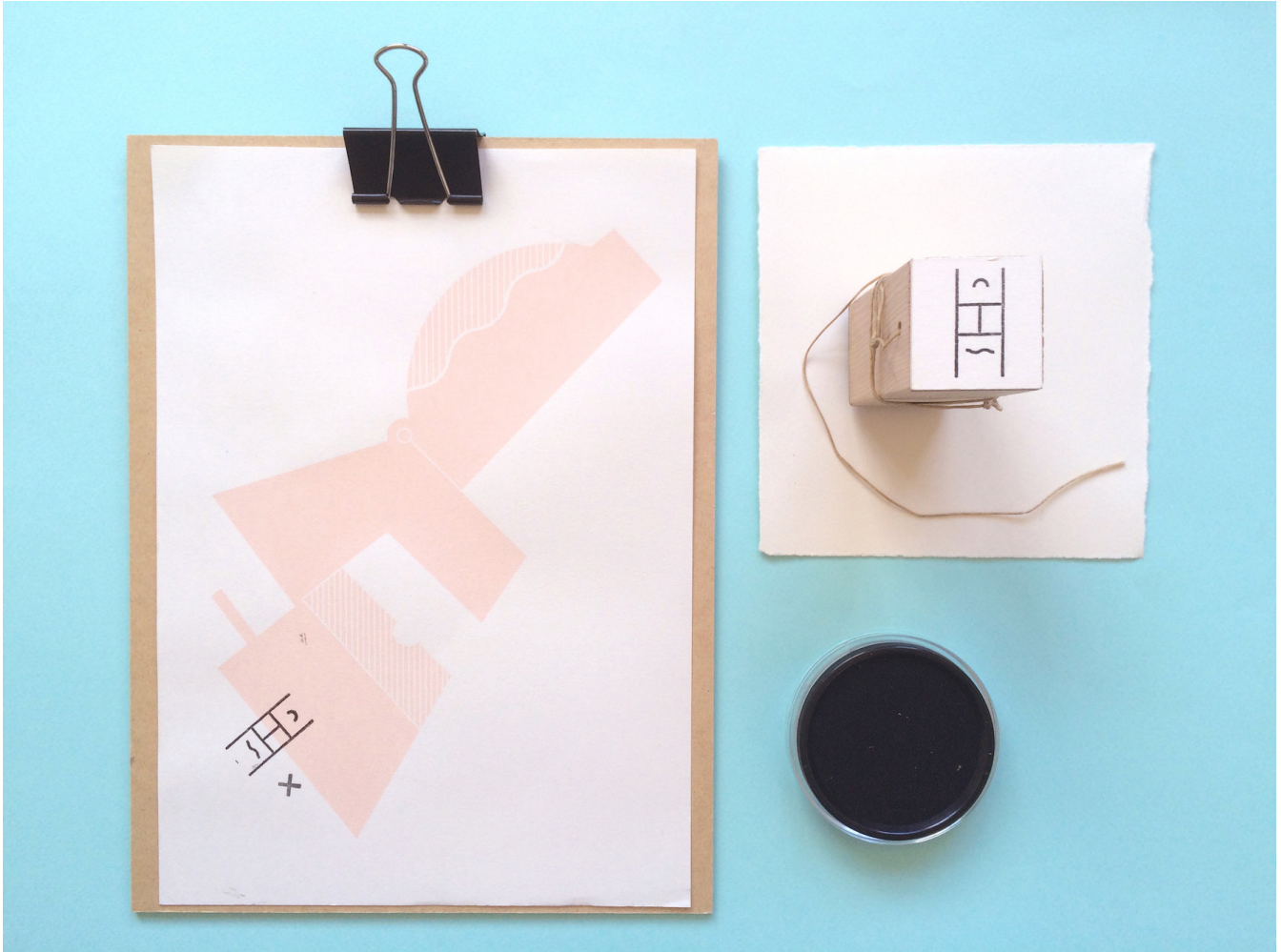


Figure 2. *Participatory mapping – the equipment needed for the walk* <http://www.davidlemm.co.uk/Landmarks> [accessed 23/01/17]. © David Lemm

At an event to accompany the exhibition, entitled *Landmarks*, held on a very windy Edinburgh day in March 2015, Lemm challenged us to recreate a version of one of his prints by walking a route in the neighbourhood of the gallery. Each of us was given a sheet on which the spaces of the neighbourhood were blocked out, in faint pink against the white background. Our walking route was marked out with waystations, and at each station we could stamp our sheet with a particular icon, selected from the repertoire of icons that Lemm had used for his prints, and drawing attention to a particular feature of the urban landscape visible from that point. This exercise was intended as a meditation on the fragmentary nature of experience, and on the tension between the bird's eye view of urban space and the street-level view of the built environment and its features. He also wanted us to reflect on the idiosyncratic construction of narrative meaning, and on how this influences our perception of place.

For me, however, the exercise brought to mind another set of concerns, which were perhaps highlighted by the fact that it was such a windy day. As I walked the streets, I felt almost as if I could have been sailing. And having already viewed the exhibition, and seen how Lemm had reused the old charts, I began to imagine



that I was myself at sea, that my ample raincoat was a sail, and that the balloons that marked the waystations through which I had to pass were buoys. Suddenly, the features that I was to seek out began to seem like bric-a-brac afloat in oceanic waves. Holding my coat before the wind, was I sailing a flooded city? In reality, of course, I was on dry land, and the features were all firmly fixed in place. I was not sailing but walking, and the pavement remained firm beneath my feet. But what if it were otherwise? What if the ground of the city were an ocean, and its buildings ships?

Here I am surrounded by buildings, laid out on a grid of streets. But do these buildings rest upon the ground like solid blocks on an underlying platform of support? Or do they float like ships in the ocean? The conventional discourse of infrastructure and superstructure, of course, inclines us to the former view. But as I sail the windy streets, holding in my mind Lemm's nautical charts, I wonder whether it might be otherwise. What if we were to think of buildings not as raised upon the solid foundation of the ground but as suspended in a world of earth and sky? To be sure, the surface of the street seems solid enough. But this surface was not given from the outset: it had to be engineered. Only by way of its *surfacing* – by coating with a layer of hard and resistant material such as concrete or asphalt, as in road building or laying the foundations for urban development – could the earth be turned into a platform, an infrastructure, upon which the superstructure of the city could be erected.

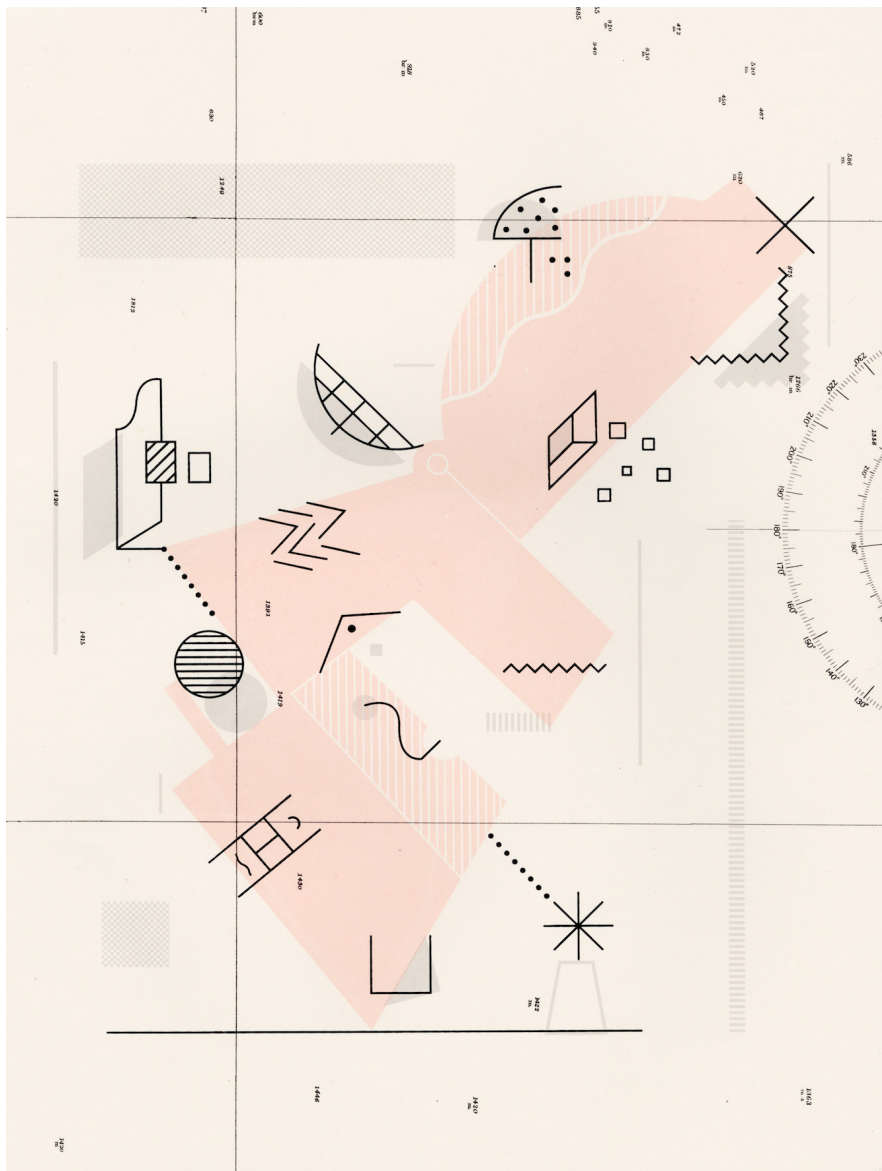


Figure 3. *Landmarks*. © David Lem

We might suppose that hard-surfacing is definitive of the built environment. Yet it is also inimical to life and growth. There can be no life in a world where the earth is locked up below ground and the sky locked out above it. For it is in the nature of living beings that, by way of their own processes of respiration, they bind the medium of air with the substances of the earth in forging their own ways through the world. Were the whole earth hard-surfaced, it would be a desert. Nothing could grow there. Complete hard-surfacing – the state that so many theorists have taken as an original condition for there being a material world at all – turns out therefore to be an ideal that can never be realised in practice. Even in the most heavily engineered of environments, the hard surface cannot withstand the elemental forces of the sky and earth that erode it from above and subvert it from below. Eventually, it cracks and crumbles, and as it does so – as the substances beneath are exposed again to the light, moisture and currents of the air – the earth once more bursts into life, overwhelming human attempts to cover it up. Even as I walk the Edinburgh streets, I have to watch my step for tree roots that have lifted paving stones, for weeds that have grown through the cracks, and for water-filled potholes in the tarmac. The hard surface, it turns out, is but the thinnest of crusts, beneath which the earth, slowly but surely, continues to heave.

What, then, becomes of buildings? The architect might like to think that the ground is no part of the building as such, but merely a place-holder, a reference-surface, a plot for it to stand on, a purely horizontal platform for his constructions. Perhaps he prefers not to dwell on the fact that there can be no building without excavating – without digging foundations on site, and without drawing or quarrying from the earth the materials from which the building is made, and to which, ultimately, these materials will return. For there to be building, excavation is as necessary as construction. And whenever material is taken out by excavation, pressures from the surrounding earth – which may behave very like a liquid and even have a high liquid content – can cause the walls of the new-formed crater to cave in. Architects' plans and elevations, however, do not show what is going on underground. The bulb of earth that absorbs the pressure of the building bearing down upon it remains invisible to them, as do the seismic shifts that occur where bulbs collide. Beneath the ground, the foundations of buildings converse with soil and tree-roots, with burrowing animals and subterranean waters. It is there, down below, and not at the ground surface, that the city has to contend with the forces of disintegration.

At sea, the attention of the mariner is directed not primarily to the surface of the ocean, but to what is going on below, in the watery depths, and above, in the sky. Is it any different on land, in the city? Starting with David Lemm's nautical charts, I have reached the view that the ground of the city may not, after all, be so different from the surface of the ocean, and that buildings – like ships – are not so much raised upon the ground as sunk into it. As the ground heaves with the swell of the elements, so buildings correspond not with the striations of the urban grid at ground level, but with the smooth space of an earth-sky world. Imagine a map of the city that would document such a world or help us navigate in it. On such a map, the outlines of buildings, as seen from above, would appear as mere shadows. The ground surface itself would not be represented since, like the surface of the ocean, it is unmappable. Indeed it is not really a surface at all but a zone of transformation, where earth meets sky in the ongoing generation of life. But the map would record the depths of foundations, corresponding to points on the seabed. A compass rose would enable us to plot the variable directions of the wind, which we feel on our cheeks and in the folds of our clothing. And a range of icons would be placed on the map at points corresponding to the locations of marker buoys. We would have arrived back to where we began, with *Debris and Phenomena*.

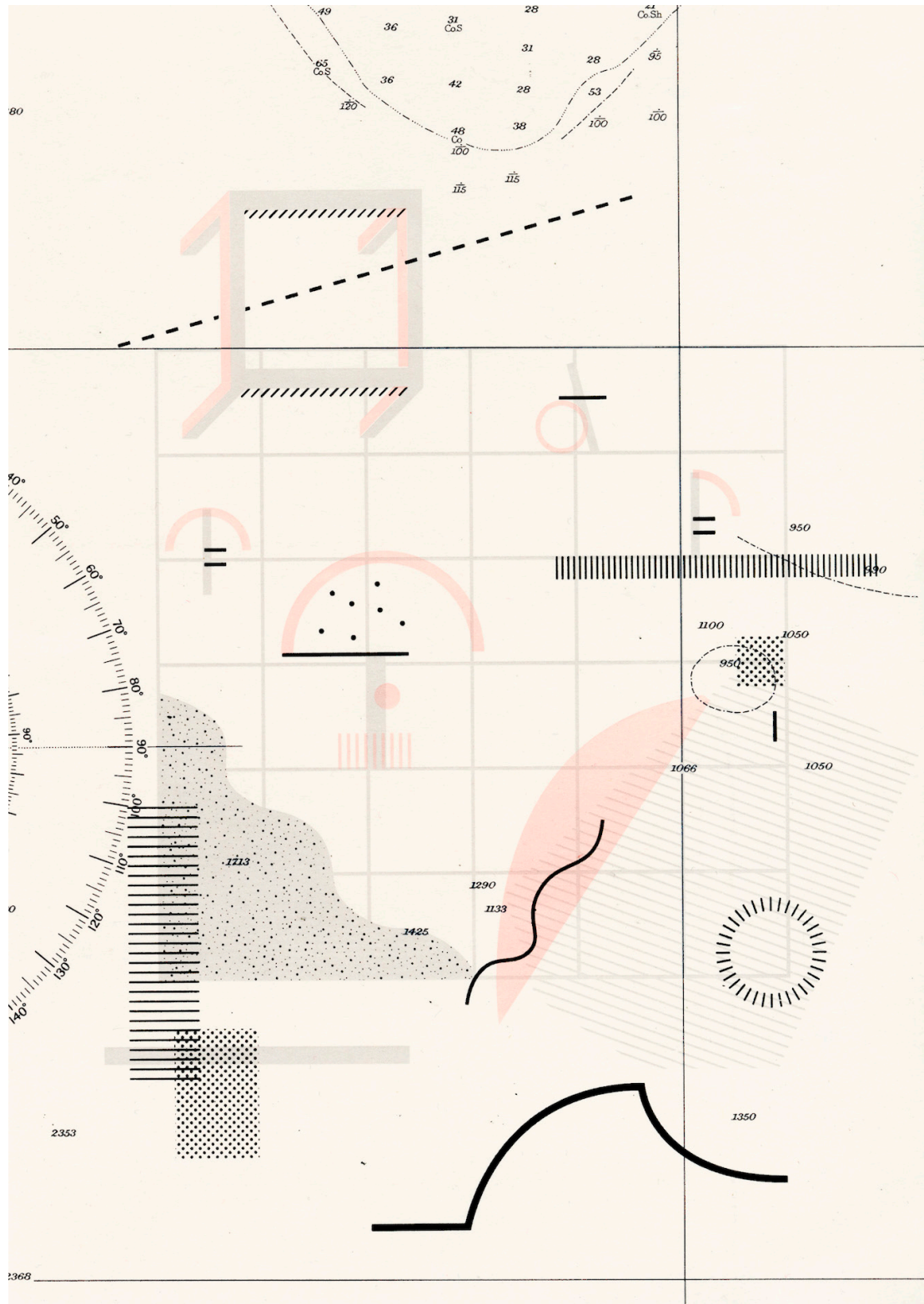


Figure 4. *Garden*. © David Lemm

1. This article about David Lemm's work is a much edited and reduced version of a more substantial paper by Tim Ingold, edited by both Tim and Oscar Aldred for Mapworks.