# PAPER 98

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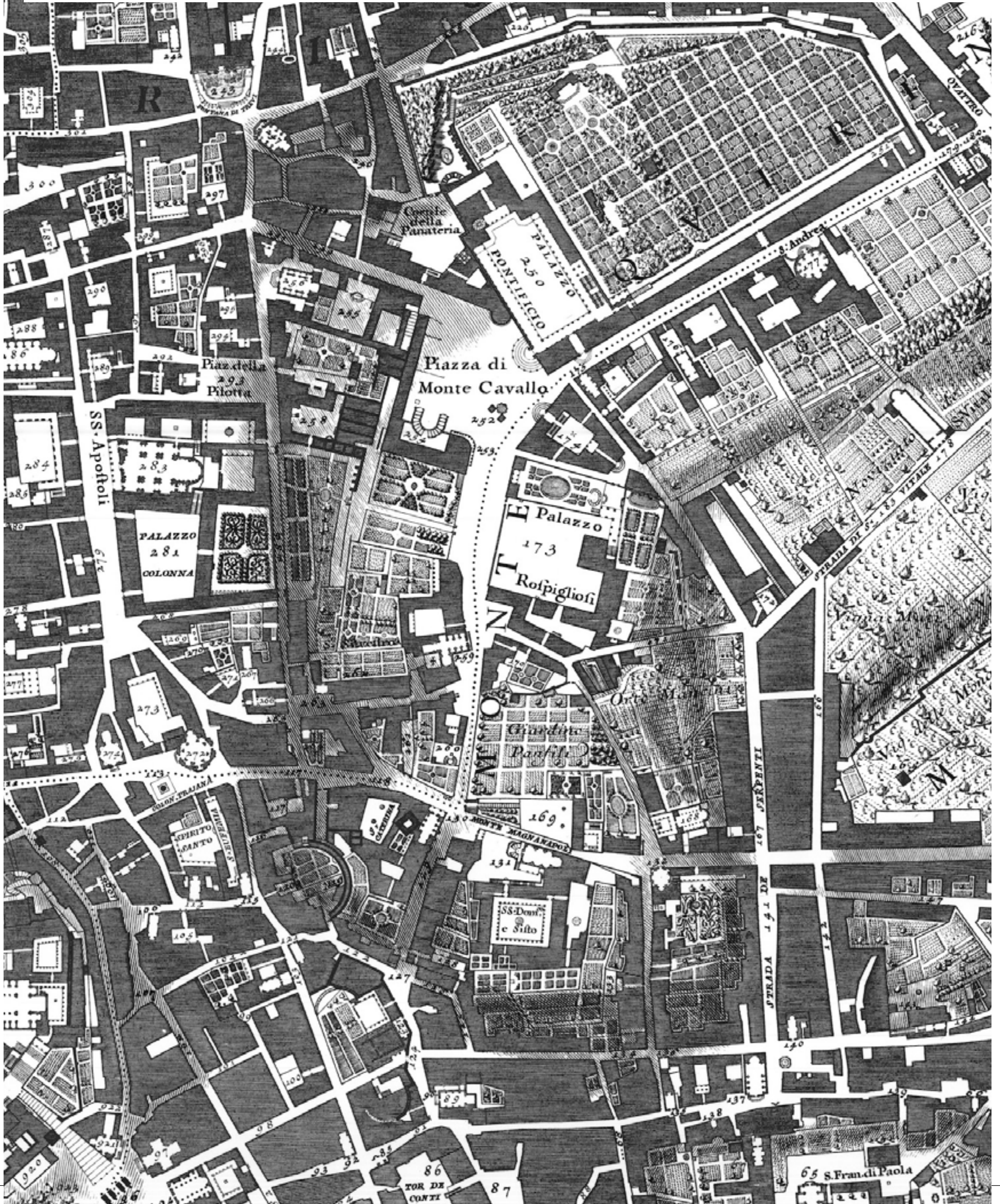
Giovanni Battista Nolli,
*Nuova Pianta da Roma*,
1748 (detail)

# Notes on the Origin of a *Farbplan*

by Jason Danziger



CECI N'EST PAS UNE CARTE. A map becomes a map—as opposed to a mere diagram or spatial illustration—once it begins to accurately depict information that is spatially based, while also describing or expressing some detail about how things work, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of its theme.

Great maps tend to present this information in a dense yet uncluttered manner, encouraging the observer to come to new conclusions previously unimagined or unexpected, a visual pleasure not unlike discovering a sweet burst of whiskey inside a chocolate truffle.

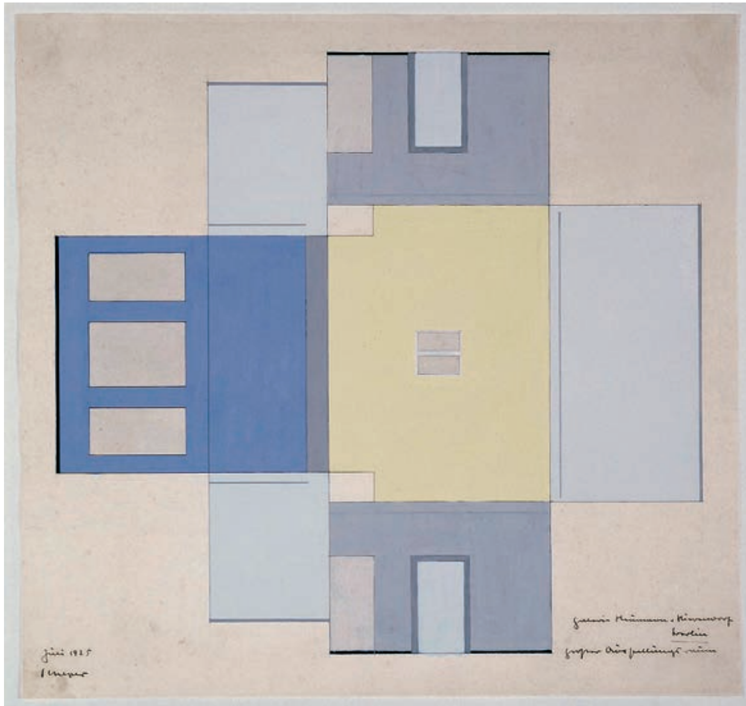
If we were to create a hierarchy of spatial representative drawings,it might look something like this: diagram (a schematic representation highlighting the workings of a thing or idea); spatial illustration (a diagram that expresses an idea about the physical or spatial relationship between two or more things); and, finally, a map (a data-driven, accurate representation of physical factors and which also shows or expresses the workings of a thing or idea).

Many architects (of which I am one) will tell you that their favorite map is the Nuova Pianta di Roma, drawn by Giovanni Battista Nolli, published in 1748. Painstakingly etched into twelve copper plates following a commission from Pope Benedict XIV, Nolli's map was unique at the time—not only for its remarkable accuracy (it has been said that the map was used widely by local planning authorities up until the early 1970s) but also because, in addition to the physical features of the city one would expect any map to show, it also documents social-spatial facts about the city and the unique political context in which it was made. In this way, Nolli- was able to map space, time, and civic–political experience in black-and-white. Within Rome's city boundaries, Nolli's basic rule was: draw black lines or hatches (poché) to show spaces that could not be visited by the public (such as housing or commercial spaces); leave the page white (void) to show spaces which could be accessed by anyone.

This being Rome at a time when papal power was, to put it mildly, "on the up," there were churches, abbeys, ecclesiastic piazze, or civic buildings of varying size and importance on nearly every block or street. And most of them were open to those participating in Christian civic life, which, in this time and place, was nearly everybody—and so these were all represented in white (void), depicting a series of unfolding and linked spaces.

Nolli's map doesn't directly show the city in its strictly physical form. Rather, it shows the prevalence of public/religious space within the city in a pure figure ground, subjective/political representation of papal power. My theory on why this jazzes architects so much is that there is a stunning density of information in the drawing: it is a line drawing representation of papal power first, which, almost as an aside, happens to precisely show the complex maze of Roman streets along with the main structural elements all the major buildings (which in many cases happen to be in churches or palaces of one kind or another).

While I have great love for the Nuova Pianta di Roma, my favorite map—in terms of inspiration, relevant my own work—is something simpler. Around the same time Hinnerk Scheper was named a *Jungmeister* at the Bauhaus, in 1925, he created a *Farbplan* (color plan) for the Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf, in Berlin. Scheper's drawing (map? painting?) exhibits the elusive quality of being far more than the sum of its parts. A description: on the left, a deep purple-blue lavishes the wall encasing the bay windows, spilling onto the adjacent ceiling. Directly across from the bay, a light grey-white tone coats the wall, dignifying any light that arrives there with a dependable reflective surface from which it may continue its journey. Above and below, the walls are supplied with deeper grey tones, which relegate them to a second league from the game being played by the rooms' primary surfaces. Finally, in the middle of the drawing, the central ceiling of the room is bequeathed a mild yellow-white,



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which further guarantees the distribution of the light in the room. Scheper's Farbplan depicts the physical features of the room one would expect any architectural drawing to show. But it expresses them in a manner which simultaneously foregrounds the narrative of the space: his drawing captures spatial factors while endowing them with movement (in the form of light in dance with color), thereby creating a map of the spatial-phenomenal experience—the atmosphere!—in the room, which—again, almost as an aside—also happens to show the scaled layout of his color design along with the main structural and built-in elements of the room.

Roughly 90 years after Scheper created his *Meisterstück*, I found myself spending a lot of time with psychiatrists. A friend of mine, working at the Charité annex at St. Hedwig's Krankenhaus, in Berlin-Mitte, had been given the task

of establishing a new ward for people suffering from a very specific illness, a form of schizophrenia, which, among other things, manifests itself as a malfunction of the perceptive system. This, I thought, would be a great opportunity to explore Scheper's spatial mapping toolbox in detail. As things go, soon my friend's task became our task, and we began looking at ways to write atmosphere into the ward, in order to support his therapeutic work in establishing what would be called the Soteria Berlin.

In terms of color, our idea was to somehow use the phenomenal interaction of color and light (artificial as well as natural) to contribute to an active (or rich) atmosphere (we hoped) could be tailored to address the perceptual difficulties his patients faced. We soon discovered that there was no firm, evidence-based indicators for particular colors that could be depended on to encourage or elicit a specific behavior on the wards. Instead, we focused on the perceptual mechanism itself, and the fact that light and color—any color combined with any amount of light—are always influencing one another; and that people—whatever the state of their perceptive system (short of blindness)—will see and, on some level, observe and relate to the changes or gradations in their interplay.

This gave us a framework for the color design, along with a loose set of rules: color fields would be distributed in relationship to light sources, natural or artificial, thereby providing at least one element of the rich environment we decided our project required. But we were not working with a single room but rather an entire ward, one that had differing zones—or "neighborhoods": a public area (or piazza) for common meals and group discussions, several more private bedrooms, and a series of linking spaces (corridors), which we also felt needed to be endowed, as much as possible, with further phenomenal, rich-environment elements.

Realizing that I had seen this type of problem before, I looked to Nolli for clues as to how to find additional ways to

# Soteria Berlin Farbplan

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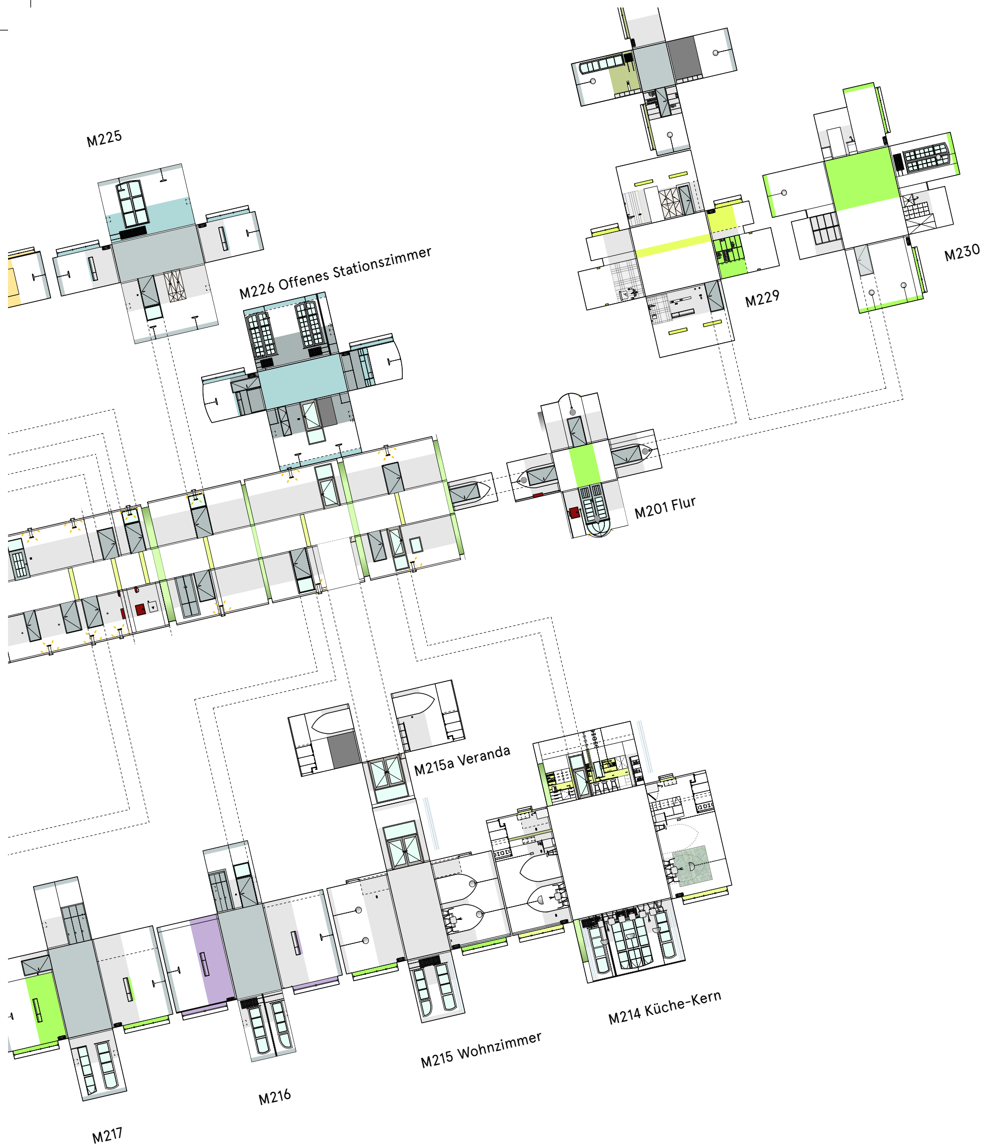

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M226 Offenes Stationszimmer
M229
M230
M201 Flur
M215a Veranda
M214 Küche-Kern
M215 Wohnzimmer
M216
M217

explore and express the spatial narrative of different rooms in terms of experience, highlighting both the differing elements of color design as well as repetition. Thus freed from "normal" architectural plan-representations, Nolli encouraged me to juxtapose individual Farbplans in a linking manner.

The result is one I modestly hope maps the spatial-phenomenal experience (or narrative) of the overall ward, and which, perhaps, as an aside, also happens to show the layout of the rooms.

As far as I can tell, most patients who have spent some time in the Soteria Berlin are appreciative, and I heard about many positive outcomes of their treatment. Though they may not know it, they have, at least in part, both Giovanni Battista Nolli and Hinnerk Scheper to thank for their gradual recovery.

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