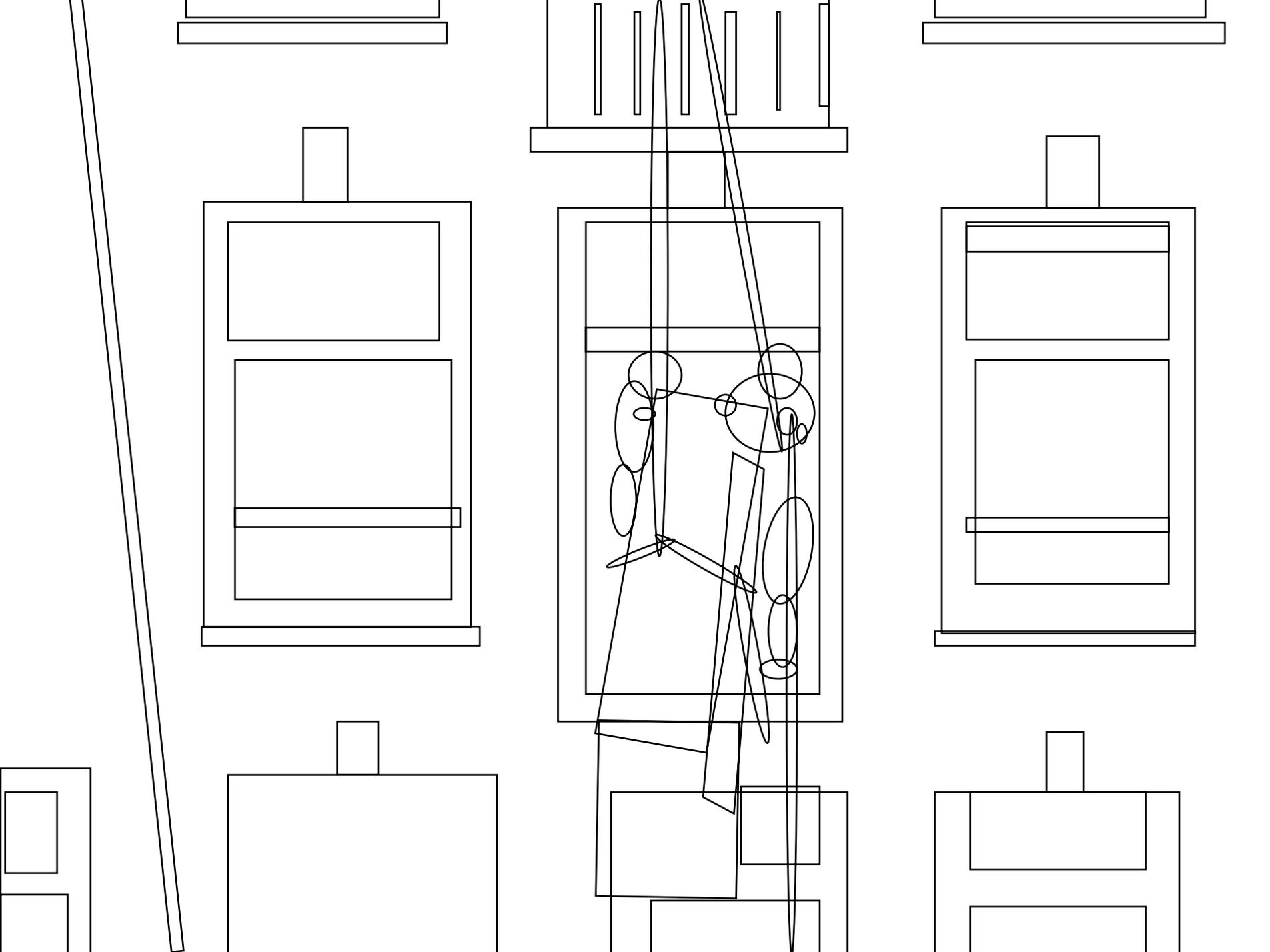


OFF THE GRID



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Editorial

For centuries the grid has dictated how human beings move through space; read images, texts and maps; and exchange goods and energy. Entire cities are modelled on the rectangular division of space, and, although predominantly associated with modernity and Western civilizations, there are examples of premodern non-Western gridded cities that could be regarded as blueprints for contemporary urban environments. One well-known example is the Aztec city of Teotihuacan, located in today's Mexico. Recently, archaeologists discovered that Nixtun-Ch'ich', an early Mayan city situated in what is now Guatemala, was also built according to a gridded structure between roughly 600 BC and 300 BC. This discovery was called remarkable in *Live Science* by Timothy Pugh, researcher and professor in archaeology at Queens College, as “[m]ost Mayan cities are nicely spread out. They have roads just like this, but they're not gridded [...] the space is more open and less controlled.” Pugh goes on to say that the top-down organization of Nixtun-Ch'ich' denotes “a very powerful ruler,” and speculates that such a “controlled environment” might not have been the Mayas' favourite place to live in, it being such an

anomaly compared to the more typically spacious, lush and freely organized Mayan cities.

While such conclusions may be deemed anachronistic, Pugh's reading of the ancient Mayan city illustrates the workings of gridded structures: a rise in power and population combined with scarcity of space seems to demand a top-down, gridded organization. The grid has proven its use time and again as an efficient tool of government and organization — as well as oppression. In today's networked society, these kinds of organizing structures seem omnipresent, both materially and immaterially: the railroad network, electricity grids, telecommunication systems. As a response, an increasing number of people in the Western world are seeking ways to live their lives in the marginal spaces beyond the hegemonic grid, to take control back into their own hands. Developing the theme for this issue of *Soapbox*, the editorial board wondered whether such a thing as going off the grid is still possible, considering ever-present surveillance, pipelines and data accumulation. In other words, is going off grid now nothing but a romantic, and ultimately futile, gesture?

Going off-grid certainly seems to be something of a fantasy for the privileged few. Around the globe people fight for access to the grid — whether that is to educate their children, take a bus to school or work, heat their homes, or communicate with far-flung relatives. Inhabitants of some favelas attach their own

wires to electricity pylons — thus very literally attaching themselves to the grid from which they have been denied access, and at the same time cheating and manipulating the system.

The articles we present in this issue take up these and many other questions discussing the grid's enduring lure and pitfalls. The manifold ways in which grids operate, leave their mark on everyday life, and can perhaps be resisted are taken up by these wide-ranging articles. We open with Gretchen Bakke's insightful and witty introduction. She takes up the threads of some of the articles in more detail in the next few pages, but suffice it to say here that the range and depth of ideas and approaches to this issue's topic are myriad. To round off the collection, Jeff Diamanti provides another perceptive reflection in his afterword, where he advocates for an infrastructural turn in academia. In conversation with two *Soapbox* editors, Noura Borggreven and Calvin Duggan, Katia Truijen, Marten Kuijpers, and Marina Otero, researchers and curators at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, approach the grid from a crucial vantage point: that of the (public) institute and the people working in it. And last but not least, besides taking care of the graphic design, Sissel Vejby Møller and Stepan Lipatov contribute to this issue with a collaborative visual essay that explores how things get stuck and unstuck.

To the authors of this issue's papers: Thom Aalmoes, Mina Burnside, Tânia Cardoso, Aaron Dowdy, Pepita Hesselberth, Lena Reitschutser — thank you for your inspired ideas, and for the relentless redrafting and rewriting of your papers. It has been well worth the effort, if you ask us. And, again, we would like to take this opportunity to say a big THANK YOU to everyone who has worked with us on this issue.

On behalf of the editorial board,
Zoë Dankert and Laura Pannekoek