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THE EUROPEAN MEDIUM-SIZED CITY

The Characteristics of the Urban Form

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Introduction

All urban organisms can be considered according to the essential concept of anthropic settlements in the territory or, rather, originally, on natural soil that is transformed into civil soil through the intervention of man. The organization, reclamation, and “colonization” of the territorial area pertaining to a settlement generally follow the same criteria with which, through the relative subsistence routes, has made the morphology of the natural soil its own, contributing to identify its formative *ratio* and define its primary structure. A structure that forms the basis of any subsequent urban and social organization. But this structure is always an expression of a corresponding social structure with that assembly of shared polarizations and spatial hierarchies that identify a community. A community that therefore tends to “gather and identify” in collective spaces. Spaces that multiply, differentiate, hierarchize, as the society that proposes them expands and enriches itself, developing a civil complexity that is punctually reflected in the system of its polarizations, its routes, and its fabrics. From the origin of the first primitive stable settlements, three key concepts emerge that characterize all human settlement practices up to the 20th century: the concept of *polarity*, the concept of *route*, and the concept of *fabric*. We could say the entire urban morphological discipline is founded on the basis of these three elements and a latent logical structure, on which, for millennia, the city has been built and of which the European medium-sized city constitutes an exemplary case study, begins to be outlined.

Polarity

A city is a system in which all life (...) shows the tendency to polarize, to unfold in terms of the public or private social collective. The more strongly polarization is exercised, the tighter the exchange ratio between the public and private spheres and the more “urban,” from the sociology point of view, is the life of a collective.

(Bahrdt 1966)

FIGURE 21.1 Semantic image of a city: Norimberga (Schedel, H., 1493. *Liber Chronicarum*, xilografia).

It is no coincidence that the vast historical urban iconography presents the city as an object enclosed by the walls and internally exalted by towers and domes (Figure 21.1).

The view generally tended to synthesize the essence of the place and to fix its particularities in a “semantic image” in which each element constituted a key to access that complex social, economic, and cultural system of which the city was an expression. Said towers, walls, bell towers, and domes, are what emerges of the urban polarities; they are those identifying and recognizable elements of their presence and their role within the structural and social fabric of a city. Their task is that of coordinating urban fabrics, and their role is that of identifying the different urban communities, giving all citizens the sense of belonging to a single civil identity. Historically, they have the task of highlighting the presence of a city in the territory by implementing that “unifying distinction” between city and countryside that characterizes all historical urban iconography (Figure 21.2).

The polarities can thus be accentuating or delimiting an urban individual. In particular, the most civilly and socially representative buildings were generally located in the heart of the city or its neighborhoods (the cathedral church, the parishes, the Bishop’s or Lord’s Palace, the Municipal palace, the Market, the Stock Exchange, etc.), while the specialized buildings (the city walls, the lazarets, the monasteries, the barracks, etc.) both because of their greater overall dimension and because of their role, specialized within the civil fabric, tended to place themselves at the margins of the city, to occupy those urban *fringe belts*, so important as they are determining, at the same time, both the urban border and its points of exchange with the territory. Depending on its location within the fabric, therefore, each building and each public space finds its own identity and the measure of its urban role. A measure that changes over time, in relation to the dialectical change of its context.

The richer and more articulated the *civitas*, the clearer and more evident the symbols that “gather” and recognize it in the *urbs* must be. However, if in small-sized cities the relationship between the fabric and the collective themes is clearly perceptible thanks to the

FIGURE 21.2 On the left. Conjectural diagram of a German city around the middle of the 13th century. The dialectic between internal (civil) and perimeter (specialist) polarizations in their role as “primary elements” of the urban transformation (and foundation) appears clearly: the Duomo with the market square and the Palazzo Pubblico in a central position, the castle, and the monastic welfare complexes to mark the limit, the passage between city and countryside (Gruber 1952).

On the right. Conjectural diagram of a German city around the middle of the 14th century. The city confirms its settlement ratio by proposing the same logic of transformation of the urban morphology: the large specialized complexes (monastic welfare) become new centers of urban aggregation (complete with a themed square) – local polarities of a premature polycentric system, and the bridge now plays an eminently nodal role, while equivalent specialized structures are located outside the new city walls (Gruber 1952).

substantial visibility of the latter within the urban fabric, confirming and consolidating the image of the *urbs* as a unitary fact, in the cities of greater dimension, the perception of this relationship is undoubtedly more difficult and more “mediated.” The unitary value of the city, as a whole, will then be entrusted to the evidence, in the fabric, of *local* themes (parish churches, libraries, “town halls,” museums, markets, etc.) that will have the task of revealing its belonging to the wider urban system.

Thus, there are two fundamental elements that emerge when studying the concept of *urban polarity*. The first is the dynamic relationship that is established between the polarities. It is a relationship on which the very “supporting structure” of an urban organism depends. It is in the examination between polarity that urban structures can survive and transform. The second element is the relationship that is established between the polarities and the urban fabric. It is a relationship of reciprocity: it is the fabric that indicates the various polarization potentials available within it, but it is the physical construction of the polarity that allows those potentialities to materialize and the fabric to be realized. Except, again, that the latter, the fabric, guarantees its survival by supporting its role over time. Let us see how urban phenomena can be read, then, according to a complex dialectic of differently collaborating systems, each with its own hierarchy of relations between center

and periphery, between polarity and anti-polarity. Dialectical (and hierarchical) systems of relatively self-sufficient urban areas and capable of forming an “urbanity” but always complementary to the wider urban organism. *Autonomy and complementarity* that underlie the formation, over time, of a flexible and dynamic organism, open to change but always consistent in its processes of modification. An organism that is the contemporary city, with its sudden transformations and its millenary logics. A city as “an object of nature and a subject of culture, individual and group, lived and dreamed, a human thing par excellence” (Levi-Strauss 1968).

Routes

The routes are the tool that, perhaps more than others, allows us to understand and read the processes of anthropization of a territory in their “structural” aspects, that is, in those aspects capable of synthesizing the experiences of a society, in a given place and in a given time, so as to grasp the elements of continuity and discontinuity with respect to the societies that preceded it and ultimately understand their settlement morphology. The more, in fact, a context is anthropized, the more the logics that guide the formation of the routes are precise and concise until they reach a recognizable and analytically evaluable form within the urban fabric (Figure 21.3).

In general, we can distinguish between designed systems and spontaneous systems. We will mainly deal with the latter. Having to analyze, in fact, the logics underlying the formation, over time, of urban fabrics and the “informal,” daily, private aspects that we must look at because these aspects are the main protagonists of the transformations of a city, they are a direct expression of an urban society and its vitality and understanding and knowing how to address them, where possible, can make the difference between the success or failure of an intervention of urban regeneration. Overall, it is possible to identify some “basic” typologies of routes that are found, for the most part, in all spontaneous building fabrics, from the medieval city to the contemporary *informal city*. They are routes that belong to the very logic of settling and therefore constitute a valid basic structure on which to read and consciously design urban transformations. Given then any two nodalities (urban or territorial), the route designed to connect them in the most direct way possible can be called the *Matrix route*. The building that will subsequently provide the margins will tend to define a continuous belt of relevance, substantially parallel to the course of the route, the depth of which will depend on the diachronic variations of the subdivision type (building type) which, from time to time, will conform the structure. This represents a *first level* of routes, with a strongly “connective” function, from one center to another, tending to maintain this role for a long time. This is why it is often more recognizable than the others. In order for an urban sociality to develop, however, there must be collective places where the *civitas* gathers and recognizes itself: “nodalities.” The construction therefore will be concentrated in the vicinity of these nodalities. Except that the linear construction along a route tends, at least at first, to have a limit in its longitudinal extension and when the distance from these nodalities becomes significantly higher than that in depth of the areas behind the belt of relevance, then the so-called *Building routes* will be formed, so called because they were immediately conceived as building structuring routes, that is, capable of forming a fabric. Normally they will develop orthogonally to the matrix route on which they maintain, with the respective belts of relevance placed starting from the limit of those on the main route.

FIGURE 21.3 Bristol (symbolic-figurative synthesis of 1479). The crossroad is another urban figure of great importance in the history of the city, which owes its physical and symbolic perception to the arrangement, in the relevant points of its routes, of polarities/landmarks whose urban (“polar”) meaning is thus entrusted to the design itself. This is so true that, as in the figure, the representation of the city is often diminished with that of its *crux viarum* as a “place of polarities.”

FIGURE 21.4 The dialectic matrix route of the building system is particularly evident in the interpretation of the Trident of Campo Marzio in Rome. Clockwise, we note how the construction of the fabric took place according to three morphological systems, each having a reference matrix route: Via di Ripetta, Via del Corso, Via del Babuino, and a series of plant route orthogonal to it. At the end, we find a system consisting of four matrix routes (Via dei Condotti is added to the three axes of the Trident), a network of plant routes and some connecting routes motivated by the shape of the Trident itself but, above all, by its building times.

The need for optimal use of the new building fabric will also lead to a preferably linear trend of these routes, in order to allow the orthogonal arrangement of the building lots. The average distance between one route and another, within the same fabric, will thus correspond to double the size of a belt of relevance and will codify, in a nutshell, the future size of an urban “block.” This is a second *level* of routes, capable of playing a fundamental role within the fabric as real connection axes, at the neighborhood scale, only to be hierarchical in proximity to the matrix routes. Again, however, the construction of a route does not continue indefinitely: beyond a certain distance, a new system of *connecting* routes will tend to form between the route of the building system (connections; Figure 21.4).

At this point, the definition of the urban “block” concept emerges. Before the 19th- and 20th-century block building and often also in these cases, in fact, the belts of relevance of each route were certainly more cohesive and related to each other than those of the block in progress: the road was always the privileged place of the local unity, and also the presence of those magnificent collective courtyards that made the history of the European city at the turn of the 20th century will never reach those same urban and civil values. Terms such as “suburb” and “district,” frequent in medieval toponymy, indicate precisely how the matrix of the formation of urban fabrics is the built route and not the block. What distinguishes the concept of “road” from the generic one of “route” lies precisely in the, albeit varied, construction of its margins that make the former an “urban route” in all its possible manifestations.

In addition to these types of route, there may be others of a more local nature, and there may be important variations within the same “type” of travel, but what we want to underline here is the presence of a hierarchical system of urban routes all the more important as they are directly related to the different forms of urban living. The city, however, is a dynamic

organism that, through the constant transformation of its urban structures, finds the ability to evolve and persist over time. The three basic types, now identified, can repeat, overlap, replace, transform over time. If this is more difficult and slower as regards the local and “fabric” routes, it is much more frequent and possible, on an urban scale, in the matrix routes. Indeed, we could say that, normally, any modification of the road layout of an urban environment arises precisely from a modification at the matrix routes level. The need to connect preexisting polarities with new ones can, in fact, lead to the tracing of urban *restructuring* routes. That is, routes that tend to overlap with preexisting fabrics, modifying their structures and hierarchies. In fact, these are new matrix routes with consequent new belts of relevance, normally characterized by more specialized typologies and higher settlement yields.¹

A dynamic and vital structure thus forms the foundation of the urban transformations of the spontaneous city. A concrete structure directly linked to the settlement and living needs of a community that finds its identity in the daily public space. For this reason, the most original and updated research in recent years in the field of urban morphology has been concentrated on the role of the public space, on its uses, and on its perception within urban fabrics. Whether it is the main square of the city or whether it is of simple building relevance, identifying a particular urban sector or assuming the character of a specialized space such as the numerous market squares or “lawns,” the public space continues to play a fundamental role in the design of the city. A role that, it should be remembered, is based on two primary needs: that of being “themed” (Romano 2004) and that of being clearly identified from a spatial point of view. The first requirement lies at the basis of the very function of a square as an urban place: too often we see the definition of simple voids, of banal interruptions in the building fabric, as “squares,” as if the spatial expansion alone were sufficient to attract functions and to characterize a space as a place for social gathering.

It is still the building fabric (its “nodal value”; Maretto 2020) that gives a “theme” to the square and eventually changes it over time, without however affecting its urban role (Figure 21.5).

FIGURE 21.5 On the left. Parma, themed square. The square is entirely defined and “specialized” by the religious complex of the cathedral and the baptistery.

On the right. Ascoli Piceno, themed square. Substantially indifferent to the great longitudinal urban axis that at this point is completely incorporated into the unitary perceptual image of the square, so much so that only the side of the church, used as a backdrop (therefore not thematizing), allows its presence, in the apparent incongruity of its orientation, to be perceived. The subsequent uniform design of the other sides of the square only confirms what has been observed.

The second, fundamental aspect is that which concerns the “margins,” that is, the construction of that limit which is the real definition of a square. Spatial dilation is not enough, and neither is its functional identification; it also has to be made comprehensible. Its characterization from urban “void” to urban “place,” and, consequently, its dimension, its social and civil “measure,” depends substantially on the quality of its perimeter. A dimension that is often reflected and enhanced by the presence of a building of public importance that substantially absorbs its role or by a special structure that summarizes and “puts into operation” its latent meanings.

“Fabrics”

A city is an organism made of “fabrics.” Social, economic, cultural, and environmental fabrics, on whose interaction the very functioning of an urban structure depends. The more these are interrelated and efficient, the more an organism will be able to be dynamic, versatile, and able to satisfy the needs and aspirations of its citizens. Fabrics of which it is useless and perhaps impossible to try to understand their forms but of which it is possible to understand their relational logics. The way in which these fabrics interact with each other, in fact, is an expression of the way citizens live the city; it is an expression of the way in which citizens transform the city through their daily actions (Habracken 2000).

There is a system of building structures in this context that have the essential task of mediating the transition between the individual sociological dimension of the citizen (or family) and the public one of the city. The richer and more articulated this is, the more these structures play an important role in the functioning of an urban organism. They are the “social-building neighborhoods” – those structures that are, together, physical and social to which an important part of the construction of the city has been entrusted for centuries. In fact, if, as a settlement principle, the neighborhood is a “potential reality,” over time the social group evolves and becomes complicated and then it will be the *building environment* of residence (that street, that court, that square) to allow and favor the development of the local community, determining, to a large extent, the same internal, relational connotations. And this is very interesting because, on this point, the traditional dialectical relationship between subject and object is completely overturned as it is the individuality of the building that “qualifies” the men who live there, identifying them in turn as a *community*.

The neighborhood, in fact, while being the indispensable means of ascending between the family and the urban community, is a generally noninstitutionalized reality and finds its essential recognition only in the building scale. For this reason, it is usually largely determined by the general political climate: in situations of highly centralized power, it is possible to tend to summarize all social life in correspondence with the representative centers, that is, in public spaces hierarchized on an urban scale; the exact opposite can occur in situations of strong decentralization.

In principle, the precursors of the “neighborhoods” are all the ancient streets, places of mutual relations of sight, speech, and exchange in general, so much so that they often gather specific work activities; see the countless streets “of Blacksmiths,” “of Bakers,” “of Grocers,” “of Wool” that medieval toponymy has handed down to us throughout Europe, up to the well-known examples of aristocratic neighborhood such as the “Strada Nuova” of Genoa or the series of “architectural squares” such as the Place des Vosges in Paris and the subsequent French “Places Royale,” the various Spanish “Plaza Mayor,” and so on.

FIGURE 21.6 On the left. Venice. Marinarezza complex. On the right. Lubecca. Planned social-construction neighborhood.

However, the identification of the neighborhood unit has been, for centuries, the fundamental tool of the urban-building design of the city. The richest historical example is perhaps the Venetian one, where the system of parish islands of the 10th and 11th centuries made the neighborhood systems the basic structure of the entire urban morphology, not to mention all those famous and beautiful social housing units, made from the 14th to the 18th centuries, and generally centered on deliberate neighborhood spaces: the courts.

Other significant examples are the medieval beguinages and the subsequent Dutch *hoffs* (literally meaning “inner courts”; such as the well-known *beguinhoff* of Amsterdam), up to the very famous *Fuggerei* of Augusta (Ausburg), the English *squares* and *mews*, and many others, with their common spaces fittingly achieved by the walls of houses (often serial and therefore unitary in their “collective” image) and polarized in the center by a collective service: the garden, the common well in Venice, the chapel (co-housing?), and so on (Figure 21.6).

In fact, the collective dimension of space which is the fundamental sphere of mediation between the urban public space par excellence and private appurtenant spaces is due to the social-building neighborhood. A semipublic space of great importance for identity, functionality, and urban sustainability. In fact, above all in the polycentric city, the transition from the individual (single or family) to the *civitas* is anything but taken for granted and often requires an intermediate level of belonging in which to recognize that it is made up of the neighborhood. It is, we could say, a “daily” level of belonging to which the size of the neighborhood is not always able to respond, which assigns to the neighborhood collective space for all those activities and functions that cannot be easily carried out at home or in the street. A space in which to carry out all those *co-housing* actions, once partly implicit in extended family systems, is now indispensable in the contemporary metropolis: nursery, workspace, laundry, sport facilities, and so on.

Finally, the social-building neighborhoods also constitute the *urban sustainable units* of the contemporary city. Their joint, collective, and unitary character allows, in fact, to implement a first strategic level of sustainability which, reduced to the scale of the single building, would, in fact, be ineffective. The collection of rainwater and grey water, a centralized heating system and the production of clean energy, and a capillary separate collection of

FIGURE 21.7 London, Covent Garden, 1673 (Inigo Jones). The case of Covent Garden in London is emblematic of the urban role represented by these building structures. Originally a square, the space was initially themed by the presence of the Landlord's house (Bedford House). Its evolution into a real urban space will subsequently take place through a renewed unitary design of its margins (following the example of the Italian and French "architectural squares") and the construction of the church of Saint Paul (new spatial "theme"). However, its great definition as an important urban square will be completed only with the construction of the great Covent Garden Market which will thematize this great urban organism once again (definitively).

waste, per "neighborhood," are just some of the aspects that a neighborhood building unit can respond to.

The value of the social-building neighborhood lies, therefore, precisely in its positioning as an intermediate (social and urban) dimension between citizens and *civitas*; between the public and private spheres, common rights, and individual rights; between the maximum of urban openness and permeability and the maximum of appurtenant closure, playing a role capable of gathering some of the elements of plurality that characterize urban fabrics, together with those needs for unity that distinguish private living: a sort of unity in the plurality that we believe can play an interesting role in the sustainable city project of the 21st century. On closer inspection, all the elements that characterize a social-building neighborhood (streets, squares, courtyards, building types, vegetation, special buildings, etc.), albeit on a small scale, are the same that define any urban fabric. This confirms them being one of the most important and resilient structures in the history of the city, representing a sort of morphological and social "urban tool kit" for the contemporary urban project. The European medium-sized city is a shining example for the study of the urban form. The formative logic of its fabrics, the organization of its building structures, and the sequential order of its public spaces constitute a precious logical framework of reference, on multiple levels of evaluation and on multiple dimensional scales, for understanding the city in sight of its transformation (Figure 21.7).

Note

- 1 This is the case of all the great "demolitions" that have characterized the history of the city, from the Middle Ages to the second half of the 20th century.

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