

HOW TO LOOK AND SEE A TOWN

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Guide books usually suggest that we visit the most important monuments in a city. These are often those with a significant aesthetic value and that have been selected from the viewpoint of art history. Almost always these monuments are in large cities that have considerable resources.

Thus the landscape of all cities appears to be substantially homogeneous; a fabric of houses of little interest (if not when there are the decorated facades of European renaissance palaces or the *haveli* in Rajastan, and recently the picturesque ones in Italy's historic centres) out of which these monumental buildings emerge in a framework that makes European cities look the same as those all over the world. The Notre Dame in Paris would be the same as the Blue mosque in Istanbul or the Taj Mahal in Agra.

But things aren't just like this, because every European city – contrary to those in the rest of the world – *or the sum of its houses and important buildings is in fact a work of art*, and as such we must become able to see them. This is a capacity to see that is the same as that necessary to appreciate the very same monuments mentioned in the guide book, otherwise they too would be difficult to read. On coming back from a trip who would remember why the cathedral in Amiens is so different from London's Westminster Abbey if he hasn't already read something about Gothic architecture?

So that something can be considered a work of art – with everything called into question by this notion of philosophical theory – in most cases it has to be thought out by an artist with conscious aesthetic intent and such intent has to be recognized and appreciated by someone, at least by the person or body who has commissioned it, or even better by the artist's public. This is true for a picture as for a statue or a building.

A city is made up of monuments whose importance in art history is guaranteed by the guide books. This includes some important privately-owned palaces or buildings, but it is the *houses* of a city's inhabitants that are important. Generally these can be ignored but instead in Europe, and only in Europe, they have been built with the deliberate intention of making them *beautiful*.

The fact is that for a thousand or so years the citizens of a European city are such not only because they share a pact. This is the statute which once was solemnly sworn in public and today is acknowledged when a change of residence is recorded at the municipal registry office and which constitutes *civitas*, moral citizenship. But above all they own an abode (whether owned outright or under an equivalent title) where they can be contacted along with their nuclear family and which altogether constitutes *urbs*, material citizenship. Both of these are connected, in the same way as the palm of a hand is connected to the back of the hand.

Nothing like this happens in other civilizations, where men are socially recognized persons above all because they belong not to a city but a *gens*, a clan, a tribe, an ethnic group (groups with blood relationships), a faith or even a corporation which lives in a

big house, around a courtyard where each generation has its own room. They can even live in a quarter, such as the 40 into which Baghdad was divided in the thirteenth century, or the 50 in Cairo at the beginning of the nineteenth century, whose entrances were which were locked in the evening.

Civitas can be imagined as a living organism, a real “person” with its own will which is at a higher level than the individual will of the constituent citizens, almost as though it were a benevolent but authoritative father. This will is expressed by a government elected by some sort of means, whereas, in general, in other civilizations cities were run by councils of elders who became wise by virtue of their very survival. Larger cities were run by the sovereign with his own civil and sometimes religious functions, or by bishops or *mukhtasir*.

As well as being democratic in expressing its collective will, European *civitas* is above all an open, mobile society in which every one can take part by migrating and can reach the top thanks only to the reliability demonstrated by the exercise of a profession, regardless of birth, so much so that for some centuries its political nature was entrusted to corporations or guilds. These were quite different from the Greek polis, which was a closed society whose citizens were the sons of the founders. Different again are Islamic societies where the privilege of belonging to the clan or the tribe ensures privilege of race as can be seen in Iraq, which was dominated for a long time by the Sunnis.

Since *civitas* therefore is a mobile society and citizenship is connected to ownership of a house, each citizen publicly demonstrates his *status* in the social hierarchy by the façade of his house, which was built and decorated with the precise intention of making it as beautiful as possible, a work of art, in that is part of his material assets and cultural inclinations. Therefore we can say that all houses are the outcome of a conscious aesthetic will, the reading of which constitutes a register of our aesthetic appreciation of a city.

If the aim of beautifying houses is to demonstrate one’s status publicly, (preachers would reproach the rich for their building mania, saying that the money would be better spent to save their souls by giving to the poor), the legitimate desire of everyone to seem to be different from the others is mitigated by the need to respect a certain unwritten conformism. From the moment when status consists of social reliability, an excess of eccentricity or immoderate exhibition would cause the opposite effect.

The conformism aspired to by each generation is only a ground rule. In respecting this, each citizen however has the chance to express his own status and personality – just as we can express ours in the way we dress. This is obvious to our contemporaries, but becomes less recognizable as time passes. When the prevailing architectural style has changed considerably, at first the historic centres seem to be only made up of similar facades because we are often not in a position to read the specific characteristics distinguishing one house from another (and not because society in former centuries, smitten by in-faction fighting, was more homogeneous than ours). In the same way we cannot distinguish differences in Chinese faces, as was noted by the fifteenth-century essayist Filarete.

When visiting a city we should therefore learn to recognize the architectural characters constituting the basic conformity on which each person has embroidered his own expression onto his own facade. We should appreciate the slight transgressions that everyone makes when deciding on the windows. Are they lined up one against the other, almost making a continuous window, or else with a lot of masonry, what are their odd or even rhythms, what are the more or less elaborate decorations around the windows and doors, how do the balconies and the balustrades transgress, and their footings and their cornices, and often their chimneys (such as those in Turin or those in Venice seen in Carpaccio's paintings), and the materials, plaster, masonry, bricks, timber, either veneered or painted, and the dominant colours?

Just as citizens as individuals demonstrate their own aesthetic will in their houses, *civitas* as a whole demonstrates it in its *collective themes* – whose realization comforts citizens as to their existence as a *civitas* – their status vis-a'-vis other cities, collective themes that our mutual experience teaches is the same for all European cities, from the village to the capital city, just as the Russian matryoshka are distinguished by their size and not their decoration.

The catalogue of collective themes is enriched by successive generations but, once put into being, each of them is then put into the realm of mutual experience and will be freely taken up by subsequent generations. In this way when we visit a city we consider them all together as the terms making up the city's beauty without regard to their chronology. At the most those who have studied their origins and grammatical rules are in a position to understand the history of the city starting from their site.

Just as the facades of the houses mirror the aesthetic will of each citizen as an individual, so do the collective themes, in their visible and gaudy waste, in the richness and dignity of their architecture, mirror the aesthetic will of the *civitas*. As the result of the aesthetic intent of the *civitas*, the collective themes must correspond in principle to an architectural language that can be understood by all citizens who, because they financed and promoted them, are also the legitimate judges. The citizens of Florence were even consulted on the shape of the capitals of Santa Maria del Fiore, a radical difference from monuments in other cities in the world which were promoted and financed by the sovereign or by a wealthy benefactor. It would never have occurred to a citizen of Istanbul to think that the architecture of the Blue mosque was something concerning him just as no-one would have discussed the exterior of the Coliseum, a magnificent donation by the Flavians to the people of Rome.

However the fact that the houses and the collective themes were implemented with the intent of making them works of art and the citizens requested their constructors so to do, does not yet let us confirm that *urbs* as a whole is a work of art. All being said and done even an Indian city sometimes has facades and often has a few Hindu temples or a couple of mosques. But it is not considered a work of art for this reason.

Over the centuries Europeans on the other hand have implemented *themed roads and squares*, which is of course a very original invention without equal in any other city in the world. The squares and roads have their own names and their own recognized role, with specific material characteristics and located in particular sites. They are the main

square, the market place, the convent square, the fair ground, the church square, the monument square, the national square, the main street, the triumphal way, the promenade, the boulevard, the tree-lined avenue.

Have these squares and themed roads ever existed elsewhere? They certainly have. Even as far away as Uruk there were sometimes huge spaces that were empty of things that were not needed in the narrow little roads between the houses. These went from the juggling shows to the merry-go-rounds and the livestock sales. There are the vast areas underneath the Cairo citadel or Tiananmen square, the immense military parade ground in front of the Imperial Palace in Beijing. Elsewhere there were shops, but they were mostly concentrated inside a grid of small shopping streets in the form of a bazaar. In Islamic or Chinese cities they would sometimes be embellished by the sovereign but in principle there could not be monumental roads, and examples of promenades are very rare, the only one perhaps being the Shah Abbas one in Isfahan.

Themed roads and squares permit collective themes to be arranged in sequence, in a closely connected contiguity wherein their meaning as a collective expression of *civitas* is confirmed and even exalted. To be recalled is the Uffizi sequence in Florence from the main square (with the Lanzi loggia, the Signoria, the monuments and the statues) of Via dei Calzaioli with the Orcagna loggia, the Duomo square with the Santa Maria del Fiore bell tower and baptistery, Via Larga with the Medici palace and other important palaces, the square at the San Marco convent and finally the Piazza della Libertà', a monumental square whose architecture has been designed around a city gate. In Paris there is the very long sequence from the park at Fontainebleau to the Place de la Nation, to the Museum of Man, to the Chatelet with its own square, the Louvre square and the monumental facades of rue Rivoli which overlook the Tuileries. From here it continues along the same straight line which is marked by the Carrousel arch in Place de la Concorde, the Champs Elysees – in the same rhythm as the Grand Palais and the Petit Palais – to finish up at the Arc de Triomphe. This is followed by the faraway perspective of the Defense but mostly by the marvellous Avenue Foch up to the Bois de Boulogne.

Each time a collective theme has appeared on the horizon of a European city, *civitas* has deliberately put it into sequence with the existing ones in the convinced intention of exalting this contiguity. Sometimes it is made the end of a triumphal perspective in a sequence that goes right to the outer part of the city, up to its borders. In this way even citizens who live in the very outer suburbs can understand that they belong to the symbolic figure of *urbs* because of the presence of such a sequence. Thus the dignity of their moral membership of *civitas* is fully recognized.

Since citizens have also decided to place the collective themes in the most appropriate sequences, the rhythm of which is given by the themed streets and squares, they have made their city a work of art, the expression of a constant and careful aesthetic intention as a whole and considering not only its houses and its collective themes. And every *urbs* is itself a work of art because of the aesthetic will of the generations who constructed it, bestowing on it the same dignity as all the others. If all the collective themes of the larger cities are memorable, then their arrangement can be suggestive even in the smaller ones.

Constant recourse to the same expressive language, to collective themes and their sequence with the themed streets and squares does not in fact mean that each city is the same. On the contrary each of them, even though they use the same materials, is a single entity, just as the architects constructed it with the same order, and buildings different from one another. We can therefore legitimately state that each city has its own recognizable style, and when we judge a city either ugly or beautiful, we are in fact making a judgment on its style.

The expression of a recognizable formal will as part of the same linguistic universe has been enabled by the fact that the collective themes have been arranged according to some grammatical rules (they are so-called because of a distant analogy with the syntactical rules of verbal language) which are consistent in some almost constant habits regarding their arrangement. Each of them is in fact usually placed either nearer to or further away from others in the family to which it belongs, or else arranged either inside or outside the built-up area (and according to yet other rules). These allow us, among other things, to reconstruct from the actual site, the city's consistency from the moment when each was founded.

The peculiar character of each city's style can be read in the modest transgressions of these grammatical rules, just as poetry can be distinguished from current language because poetry slightly transgresses the syntactical rules we usually observe because otherwise we are afraid of not being understood.

For example Milan and Dijon entrust their own style to arranging the collective themes in the heart of the city, whereas Palermo and Bordeaux arrange them on the outside. In Rome and Turin there are twin churches, one in Piazza del Popolo and the other in Piazza San Carlo, which constitute a transgression underlining the unusual will to exalt the form of a square. In Genoa we see private palaces emerge with a richness that is not present in the less important of its collective themes. We see cities such as Voghera or Vercelli generously entrust themselves to their boulevards, the *passegiate*, the tree-lined avenues whereas Prato ignores them entirely. In Lucca we can see a rich counterpoint of small squares and churches whereas in Pistoia we can barely recognize the more classical of its squares. And suddenly the different aesthetic intentions emerge from the folds of their forms, the intense diversity of their wish for form.

Just as for the recognition of any other work of art, understanding the style of a city involves a comparison with the others, and as we learn to see them and appreciate them as works of art, visiting a city becomes an emotional adventure into the age-old souls of their citizens, which we can conjure up in the thousand-year-old form of *urbs*.

Now we know that appreciating a city necessitates the slow reading of its style, and just as we cannot understand War and Peace because we have read a summary of it or we have seen the film, the reading of a city needs time, attention to detail, reflection on its style. We must walk around it on foot, slowly, without being overcome by the anxiety to visit many of them, filling up an imaginary game bag. Rather we should dedicate to each the respect it merits without neglecting all those contemporary aspects – shop windows or restaurant menus – that make up the newest and vivacious expression of the

same *civitas* of which the present generation is the follower and which has then, in knowing how to recognize it, the same wish for form incorporated in its centuries-old walls.

Now we know how to read it, and those cities that perhaps before eluded our memories, an ephemeral framework of roads connecting up the monuments, have now become the expression consequent on a stylistic wish where houses and the collective themes express a recognizable wish for form, which we will commit to memory as the conscious expression of a *civitas* that we have learned to recognize and love. Another of the hundred thousand cities that for thousands of years have populated Europe.

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