

The Relief of the City

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What role does relief play in our image of the city?

Suppose that we choose a city of which we have both a visual and planimetric image and, with half-closed eyes, attempt to trace some of its characteristic features. We then draw another city, attempting to make it recognizable and distinct from the previous one. Successively we could accumulate sketches that would allow a person viewing them to immediately identify the place from the essential characteristics shown in our drawings. But of what would these drawings be, that is, which elements are in fact vital to the identity of a place?

It is well-known that cities, understood as plastic objects, are among the most difficult entities to represent. Perhaps this is why a picture, a story or a film is so much more evocative than a planimetric representation of a city, even though the plan is considered the city's most objective expression. One solution to this proposed exercise would consist of choosing specific buildings or the aura of certain places to characterize the city. We would refer to a city by searching in specific key elements for a total, all encompassing image. In this way, we might evoke a fragmentary though powerful figure of the city.

If we address this exercise, accepting the challenge of observing the city from a bird's-eye view, we would concentrate on the planimetric outline of human settlement in its most brilliant form, recognizing the city by way of its artificial constructions. But this sketch would be unintelligible without incorporating those geographic elements that testify to the presence of relief in the city. It becomes evident that the city is produced within a natural relief while at the same time producing its own particular relief, the latter being a certain transformation of the former.

This condition/property of the city is multi-faceted. Orography is in and of itself a fundamental aspect of relief, creating fronts and backs, and sunlit and shaded slopes. Relief's importance is even more apparent when geography is strongly in evidence, forming valleys, ravines, hills, promontories and natural amphitheatres. Relief builds riverbanks and coasts, headlands and terraces, washes and cliffs. Beaches, dikes, rivers, lakes, islands and isthmi

It is significant to note the importance of the grid in the square or rectangular form in these modern cities. It is the place which gives birth to and maintains the centralized character of the city even when the seminal grid is practically unlimited. In this way, these foundations are radically distinct from ancient ones, in spite of certain appearances. In contrast to modern cities, the ancient cities are characterized by the presence, the limit, or the form of the city walls, that which makes them into distinguishable, circumscribed units of space. In the ancient founding of cities that which describes a discrete *unity* prevails. In the modern founding of cities that which describes the *origin* prevails.

5. This tradition attempts to define a compositional order for the urban "solid" and resolve the lack of such order outside the city with a stylistic response.

In contrast, modern history is a chronicle of growth concerned with the relative composition of parts. The modern city distinguishes itself by overrunning the space of its founding; it is no longer an expression of the *castrum* against the *ignotum* or the "isolated fortress" against "the unknown." In addition, even the founding of settlements, since the time the Americas were colonized, is no longer a sacred cause. These cities' first iconographic representations of themselves reflect an infinite vocation, open and full of growth. This calling for growth is confirmed by later urbanistic interventions.⁵ As such, modern urban planning was founded on the presupposition of the city as open and growing (if we exclude the utopian visions from the Renaissance to the socialist utopias which are associated with a closed conception of the universe). But this presupposition is not sufficient alone to establish the ground rules for giving form to the human environment.

A great tradition which stretches until the present has kept a city/territory duality alive and irresolute. Both the founding plans of Latin America and those of European cities (especially the eighteenth-century plans) are expressed in drawings displaying two codes: one geometric and abstract code, referring to the city proper within its boundaries, and another extraordinarily phenomenological code, portraying the agricultural features and relief of the surrounding territory.⁵ In this tradition, city and territory, despite their presence together on charts and plans, were realities and representations which were not woven together but rather were contiguous entities, existing side by side, yet remaining distinct from each other. But the growing and therefore permanently inconclusive city requires other codes for its precise representation. These other codes are necessary due to the city's continual expansion and because, as a result, relief stops being a foreign context and becomes the text upon which transformations are written.

At the beginning of this century, Tony Garnier, in his famous plan for the *Cité Industrielle*, drew both city and territory in the same code. Geometry and relief here became one, so that the city, at once industrial and desirable, now incorporated the landscape as a necessary condition in the shape of urban growth. Garnier's plan inverts traditional discourse. Order is no longer a condition foreign to the land form; rather, relief becomes instrumental for composition. Almost at the same time, Eugène Henard, in his first of the "Etudes sur les transformations de Paris" essays defends an alternate layout for the extension of the Rue de Rennes, in terms of the value of the landscape, urban and natural simultaneously. He insists that progress should not destroy

understood as a context in which one struggles to place apparatuses (bridges, roads, tunnels, canals, etc.) in the landscape. In resolving a problem, the relief is considered a barrier to overcome. The success of an apparatus is measured by its ability to find favorable topographic conditions for the land's domination or exploitation. The beauty of the construction rests principally in its intrinsic reason for being. Something similar can be said for architecture. Buildings are subject to a site; but this is only one condition of architecture. Buildings must also face their own order, the sources of which must be sought out elsewhere. The good or bad fortune of the site is not inextricably linked to the worthiness of the project: the site does not pre-establish the project's value. For the architectural project, relief is an adjective, a "secondary virtue." To a great extent, the architectural project finds its value within itself, in its art. Architecture is normative and complete unto itself.

But the discipline which takes a more encompassing vision of the city and embraces the transformation of relief as its major challenge is urban planning. Here relief stops being the context in order to become the text of the discourse. This discourse engages the profile of the earth in order to imagine the form of the order yet to materialize, to search among the possible sites for the plausible sites, to make the project's site the subject of the project, and to imagine the way in which nature shall cede or reveal itself. The essential hallmarks of the artistic occupation called urban planning are the awareness of ground form and the discernment of those profiles of relief which will be incorporated into the future identity of the city.²

It is possible that this millenary occupation may still be confronted with new challenges. Some scholars, such as Joseph Rykwert, believe that the loss of the beautiful certainties about how the universe functions is at the very root of our inability to give form to the human environment today.³ Certainly something fundamental has changed since the time of the construction of ancient cities (or "traditional" cities, in Guénon's sense of the word). Their history was one in which time and place were the decisive factors in their founding. It was this place and no other, a site in singular. In the observance of ritual, naming the city was tantamount to naming the site. With the *sulcus primigenius* or "first plowing" a dominion was established over a territory and was by its very nature closed and circumscribed.

2. See the works of Manuel de Sola-Morales, *L'art de ben establir* (Barcelona: Laboratorio de Urbanismo, 1983) and "Amiens: vagues entrando en materia," *Arquitectura* 1985.

3. Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

1. See the pioneering work of Saverio Muratori, *Stati per una ricerca urbanistica di carattere Romano* (Roma, 1951), and the *Urbanistica* (1954, 1958, 1961), the journal of the school of Architecture founded in the 1960s and the early 1970s, which produced a number of studies already considered as classics, such as *La città di Piacenza* by Carlo Aymonino, et al. (Roma, 1969), Edizioni, 1971.

discourse, contemporary thought about the city has highlighted those historical moments in which structural techniques and interventions have given rise to humanity's most beautiful places. But recent contributions to the study of urban fabrics, of typology, and the idea of the monument and its siting have allowed a blossoming of many other images and tendencies in the material production of the city. The aim of these studies has been to uncover and give value to the order hidden behind common phenomena which had been considered up until then as simply enigmatic groupings of apparent disorder.¹ In a similar spirit, the object of this essay is to reclaim for topography the role of text of the city. This new imperative serves as a counterpoint to the many discourses that exclude relief as an essential condition of the design process; in the best of cases, these discourses suffer from a profound silence with respect to the site. Faced with so much misguided practice in urban development today, the understanding of natural profiles as the very text of the city reinstates relief as a crucial determinant in the design of cities.

The history of the construction and growth of cities is also the history of interaction with ground form; natural contours constitute the initial spatial form of the city. Relief becomes the seminal feature that is associated with an area where settlement takes place. In the making of the urban project, relief is among the few essential conditions which become associated with a settlement, its particular traits and its emblematic form. When we examine the form of cities we almost instinctively look for their outstanding features or reference points. We see how great figures or gestures formed by folds, panoramas or rivers create the context in which the master strokes of the city – avenues, neighborhoods, and gardens – are enhanced (or in some cases are undermined). Moreover, the entire order of the composition only becomes understandable, deserving of praise or criticism, at the confluence of man's interventions with these profiles.

What discipline deals with this kind of project?

Both territorial engineering and architecture participate in the transformation of space, although they go about this transformation in different ways. For engineering the territory is

provide the city with different scales and particular views; similarly, forests, marshes and deltas often provide the very reason for site development and its urban uses.

These are some of the phenomena which allow for an understanding of the urban reality through the idea of land form's *profiles*. By their tangible presence, profiles offer formative conditions to the city as givens. These phenomena speak to us as the foundations of the forms they support. (The great influence of such phenomena becomes evident when we look in an atlas that does not show place names and attempt to identify cities by their shape only).

Perhaps to resolve our exercise it would help to imagine for a moment that we could reduce any familiar city to the figure on a coin. Coins can be identified by their different sizes, weights and materials, but primarily they are identified by the figures which are embossed in relief on their surface. The grooves etched on the metal surface determine the figure. They outline the profile in such a way that they constitute the very nature of the image. The relief is the material with which one constructs the image.

With this analogy in mind, we might choose to draw the city emphasizing its topographic profiles. We easily obtain a sketch to which it would only be necessary to add the most relevant infrastructures (or urban events) in order to present a characteristic image of the city. Perhaps the learned observer would object to the absence of more canonized objects that represent the city's artificial condition. Even if an observer recognized the drawing, he might consider that valuable and emblematic elements were missing for this image to truly do the city justice. Why is this so:

For many years the culture of the city has advanced by stressing the value of artificial development of the territory, incorporating its laws and examples into the heart of urban planning. The objective has been the transformation (perhaps complete) of the natural environment. Sedentary civilizations have been understood as the conquest and creation of that place which would bring about the "right atmosphere" for the development of reason. Following this

the most beautiful profiles of the city. Both Garnier and Henard understood relief as a necessary condition of the modern city. They point out that along with the continuing composition of more and more parts, the city faces another intrinsic condition: the city must take into account natural profiles, incorporating them into projects as authentic elements of the composition, because those profiles are as necessary and as useful as the design itself.

Despite this awareness, the contemporary city continues to grow and develop, subjected to urban schemes which often ignore the meaning of the city's profiles; this often results in the destruction of an important aspect of the city's identity. It is as if such *erosion* were a sign of progress. Natural profiles have often been literally erased from the map when they come into conflict with problems of extension or re-structuring. This is particularly true when problems are addressed and resolved by the internal logic of systems that use criteria specific to themselves only (e.g., traffic systems, utility systems, public service systems) and without the mediation of urbanistic reasoning. The greater this process is in scale, the more abject and senseless the entire city will appear.

From this point of view, the marginality of outskirts with respect to the "solid" or central city can be measured not only by its land uses, lack of connection and distance from the center but also by the scarce incorporation of the ground form into their settlements. Paradoxically, only on its periphery does the city not consider itself powerful enough to compose or destroy its natural profiles. As such, these developments on the periphery of cities simply coexist with their natural profiles in a rather primitive way.⁶

We are faced with both the attempted destruction of the relief in city centers, calling for the complete transformation of the environment (which in reality merely silences nature), and the inability at the periphery of the city to confront nature, use it and enhance it. Somewhere between these two arises the effort which uses relief to make beautiful cities. These cities have sculpted an exquisite image of themselves by consciously manipulating their natural resources to their advantage.

Cities, like coins, will retain a form and identity, a *figure*, as long as they possess relief.

"The Culture of Description" and "The Relief of the City" were translated from the Spanish by M. Virginia Chapman with Daniel Smulian

6. Surely this is the only similarity yet also the most surprising one, which exists between such different phenomena, as urban areas referred to as shantytowns or *marginales* (the *habla* in Rio de Janeiro or the *barrios* in Lima) and the *barrios* in the south of Europe, or the urban residential developments in Los Angeles to those on city outskirts in the Scandinavian countries.