

The View From Rome

Steven W. Semes



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Teaching Architecture in Rome: PART II

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Our graduate students, in Rome this semester pursuing a concentration in Traditional Urbanism, recently returned from a field trip to Pienza, Siena, Florence, Venice and Torino. Yes, I could have chosen a hundred others, but these five cities are especially relevant to the graduate seminar "Italian Urbanism" that I teach. We are examining these cities for the presence, in different degrees and at different times, of four patterns in city-building that, together, define what we mean by "the traditional city." These are the geometric, the topographic, the scenographic, and the romantic patterns. Every historical city represents a distinctive profile in which all four patterns are visible, though in different proportions and combinations at different times.



Torino is an excellent example of the geometric pattern in cities: the original Roman grid was repeatedly extended, and the impressive piazzas are governed by the overall pattern. The Piazza San Carlo is a lively square surrounded by unified facades with continuous arcades on the ground floor. The classical architecture and the geometrical urban plan work seamlessly together.

The *geometric* model begins with an abstract pattern, such as the grid, and sets out the city in a way that is predictable and extendable. Many American cities follow this pattern, though it is ancient, having been popularized by Hippodamus of Miletus in the fifth century B.C. While continuous, straight streets forming square grids are common, other patterns are also visible, including plaids and diagonal systems. Because of the potential monotony of such a layout, exceptions to the rule – like Manhattan's Broadway threading up the island "against the grain" – or limits imposed by physical boundaries – again like Manhattan's waterfronts – become very important. Otherwise, the pattern is limited in its extent by the risk of boredom.

In contrast to this, the *topologic* model is entirely place-specific, based on place-making and path-finding in close correspondence to landform and natural features; it is, therefore, unpredictable. This pattern reached its artistic peak in the high Middle Ages and is epitomized by such hill-towns as Siena. While medieval



Siena is perhaps the archtypal topologic city, laid out along three ridges that converge on the central Piazza del Campo. The winding streets follow the contours of the hillsides, but tend to direct the visitor toward the most important piazzas and monuments of the city.

town layouts are often described as "organic" because of their winding streets and irregularly-shaped piazzas, they are in fact rigorously logical, although the logic is not that of formal design but of incremental adaptation to the site and among the buildings. Such towns almost always have streets that lead to important destinations and buildings are usually arranged for maximum picturesque effect. A visual logic leads one through the town with relatively short views and intimate spaces, though the absence of a larger-scale pattern can impose its own limit: the risk here is not monotony but disorientation.

In the scenographic pattern, this visual dominance is pushed further and at a larger scale. This pattern organizes the town as a system of vistas and lines of movement between destinations at a distance. Major streets and piazzas set off monumental buildings and establish direct routes between them. The pattern is visible in the late 16th-century plan of Pope Sixtus V for Rome, in which the major pilgrimage churches were connected to one another by straight streets whose crossings and destinations were marked by the placement of Egyptian obelisks. The city became a network of such grand visual corridors and the destinations places of spectacle. The city as a whole takes on the character of a theater, and a show-piece like Saint Peter's was referred to in the 17th century as a *teatro*. The limit here is one of sensory overload – after the initial awe, one may long for a less-insistent

projection of power and wealth, for an alternative to monumentality and grandeur. One looks for something more personal and, perhaps, a little spot of green nature.



Rome has many impressive examples of the scenographic pattern, in which a sense of drama and spectacle lead to theatrical vistas connecting distant points. Here in the Piazza del Popolo, the "trident" of three streets diverging from the central obelisk and fountain draws the visitor in from the city's "front door" (the Porta del Popolo, entry for travelers entering from the north). A pair of nearly-identical churches frames the views of the three avenues, each of which leads to important monuments: the Vatican to the right, the Capitoline straight ahead, and a series of other pilgrimage churches to the left.

The romantic pattern enters here with evocations of far-away times and places, and a closer relationship to nature. The city might open a panoramic terrace overlooking a superb landscape, or buildings and spaces might be designed to evoke memories of other times and places. Literary allusions and "the association of ideas" add significance by tying what is present and familiar to what is absent and recalled with sentiment. While we associate these developments with the Romantic Movement of the 19th century, the motive is ancient – the emperor Hadrian, in designing his villa at Tivoli designed entire complexes and landscapes that reminded him of places he had seen on his journeys.

The little Renaissance town of Pienza was the first Italian hill-town to open up views of the surrounding landscape from its principal piazza – a practice later followed by Gubbio, Todi and others. The English square, as in the West End of London or Gramercy Park in New York, is a later expression of this pattern, bringing a contained natural landscape into the center of the city. This pattern, too, has a limit, in that extending it too far risks losing the urban character altogether, in its extreme form leading to suburban sprawl, and that leads us back to the first

pattern, or a combination of patterns to overcome the weaknesses of each.



Rome is also a city offering the romance of panoramic views – in this case from the Giardino degli Aranci (Garden of the Orange Trees) on the Aventine hill, with its terrace overlooking the Tiber and Trastevere. While associated with the nineteenth-century Romantic Movement, the impulse to embrace the distant, including the natural world, transcends all historical periods.

One of the great things about Rome is that we can see all four patterns at work in different parts of the city and at different times in its history. While Rome was not planned on a grid like the military towns founded by its ancient builders, the capital did have areas arranged according to a geometrical logic, the greatest of these being the sequence of the Imperial Forums. On the seven hills and throughout much of the flat land, the city had to adapt to the slopes and the bends of the Tiber and developed more informal, place-specific configurations of streets and spaces.

The need for projecting the majesty and power of the state was answered by scenographic arrangements like the sequence of the Roman Forum and the temples on the Capitoline hill. Finally, a romantic feeling comes into the layout of the luxurious villas and gardens that cascaded down the hillsides, with their groves and pools, statuary and mural painting, fountains and aviaries. Indeed, all four of the patterns are present and

working throughout the ancient city, an observation brought to life by viewing the model of Rome as it might have appeared at the time of Constantine in the Museum of Roman Civilization at EUR.

The patterns are not historical phases, though historical developments exemplify them. They are not limited to specific periods because they represent energies or tendencies that are inherent in human nature. Each pattern presents characteristic opportunities and limits. The character of a city can be understood as the resultant of a unique profile of the four patterns, perhaps not unlike the ancient concept of the "four temperaments," whose interaction constituted human personality. This may account for the fact that cities, like human individuals, have many things in common and yet no two are alike.

Such, at least, is the subject under study this semester as we try to understand yet another of the gifts of Italy to the study and practice of architecture and urbanism around the world.

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