

The landscape aspects of the historic city

Foreword

GUGLIELMO VILLA¹

The increasing interest that in the last decades scholars have shown for the landscape, intended as a visual expression of the structure of a territorial area, has opened up promising perspectives for the cities' studies, offering also new methodological keys for interpreting their building history.

The landscape that unfolds in front of our eyes is the result of land transformations induced over time by human activities, except in rare areas that have remained intact in their state of nature. Towns – both large cities and smaller rural centers – are the manifestation of these transformations. As nodal components in functional terms and the organization of material structures, they have been decisive in the building processes of human habitats, according to their size, location, and vitality. They carried a significant weight about the network of material and immaterial relations that have innervated the territory, but also to its concrete image; so as to become more or less extensive characteristic elements of the landscape, places in which cultural values had been thickened up to becoming identity components of that places.

The development, growth, and transformation of some human nuclei or even their decay, until their abandonment and reduction to ruins, have represented the outcome of socioeconomic dynamics or, less frequently, of political choices with a broader scope, except in cases attributable to the contingent conditions or exceptional events. At the same time, however, and on an equally broad scale, they have triggered profound and lasting changes in the organization of anthropic space and the definition of its formal aspects. Their impact can therefore be measured on two different, yet complementary levels: one more

1. Department of History, Representation and Restoration of Architecture, Sapienza - University of Rome (guglielmo.villa@uniroma1.it)

strictly pertinent to the settlement *nuclei*, portions of the man-made environment, defined by more or less established limits and endowed with specific formal connotations; the other inherent to their interactions with the territorial area of reference which, from a landscape perspective, transcend the limits of a merely dialectic interpretation, highlighting instead preponderant fields of integration.

The different scale references provide useful indications to focus on the broad spectrum of issues that help outline the landscape values of urban spaces. To specify the perimeter and establish the focal elements of an approach suited to the needs of the historical research, however, some further preliminary considerations seem to be appropriate.

Any piece of landscape is a phenomenal reality, which we can only investigate as it appears, namely in its concrete materiality. Make no exception to the declinations that belong to the urban sphere. It is not a homogeneous reality, but rather a sort of palimpsest that has been configured through successive phases of writing and rewriting, produced by the evolution of the ordering principles of society, which are the economic models that have guaranteed its sustenance, and the dynamics of population. As in a palimpsest, the current configuration preserves the memory of previous arrangements in a more or less relevant and tangible dimension: permanencies, often fragmentary, transfigured by use; but also slender traces, less evident, sometimes residual when not even latent. We could refer to the archaeological evidence that time has obliterated. It is up to the historian to illuminate these testimonies, framing them in a correct diachronic perspective, to give them a critical interpretation that allows to attempt a reconstruction of the development of the formative process or, even, the restitution of a particular frame of time. For this purpose, it will be necessary to adopt a methodological criterion that must be regressive, taking advantage not only of material testimonies, but also of written documentation that hands down the memory of the territory transformations, descriptive sources, and iconographic ones which offer indications, often not otherwise available, on its formal components.

The properly urban landscape, subject to continuous mutations due to its nature, is qualified, first and foremost, by how the built-up area relates to the natural conditions of the site: to its altimetric trend, the

water basins (where there are watercourses), lagoon canals or the sea-coast, as well as, obviously, to the vegetation components. Also, there are the specific connotations of the built environment, such as the formal configuration of public spaces, and the volumetric proportions between open spaces and buildings, which decline in time and space in infinite quantitative and qualitative variations. It is then necessary to consider the altimetric and spatial relations between the different building components, concerning the most eminent buildings, whether monumental or not, which may assume peculiar semantic values; as well as the perspective or at least visual correspondences between public spaces and notable buildings, and those at a distance between buildings emerging with respect to the more minute fabric. Another significant topic useful to determine the landscape ‘qualities’ of urban centers is the configuration of their boundary, which continuously change according to the socio-political context and available technological resources.

The *parabola* that urban fortifications have experienced in Western Europe since Late Antiquity is emblematic. With the decline of the Roman Empire and the security conditions that its state organization guaranteed, city walls became an indispensable infrastructure for the existence of any inhabited centers. The construction of new defensive circuits, and the restoration and integration of those that already existed, although in disuse, profoundly marked the city’s history, changing the structure and perception of urban space, which once again became enclosed within a concretely defined perimeter. In his *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville had summarised the importance of this aspect in an incisive enunciation, identifying the fortification structures as the most effective *medium* of representation of a city’s identity, in its meaning of material structure: «urbs ipsa moenia sunt».

During the Middle Ages, urban fortifications changed several times, depending on the expansion of the settlements and the technological development of defensive techniques, impacting considerably both in terms of *utilitas* and *forma*. Changes of even greater magnitude occurred at the beginning of the Modern age, when the technical ‘revolution’ given by the spread of siege artillery imposed radical transformations. The affirmation of the bastion front made the defensive apparatuses ever more gigantic and invasive, accentuating as never

before the city's enclosure and its separateness from the environment. When, at the end of the Modern age, the military usefulness of urban fortifications declined, the practical relevance of the walls and, with it, the value of a physical and symbolic limit that they had interpreted, gradually disappeared. Then the walls will be dismantled, absorbed into the urban fabric, like relics of an era that was over. Often, their structures were demolished, completely or in part, or destined for other functions; in any case absorbed by pressing urbanization. The limits of the city, thus, tended to lose their clarity, to gradually disappear into the new urban image of our contemporaneity.

The definition of the physical limits of the settlement is relevant not only to the urban sphere, but also to the territorial scale. It must be recognized as a primary element of the image that settlements project onto the territory, that is how settlements can be visually perceived in their context. An urban center perfectly delimited by a continuous wall, for example, comes across a very different way for someone who is gradually walking towards the margins of less dense suburbia. And, in the meantime, can appear infinite nuances. It is therefore a theme that has an ambivalent scale reference.

A similar role is played by the most important buildings, which also characterize how an urban center, whatever its size, can be perceived from the outside: monumental buildings, especially religious ones, but also soaring buildings such as towers and bell towers have permanently marked the profile of many cities, constituting a not secondary element of their visual identity. Examples include the cathedral in Orvieto, the towers of San Gimignano, the bell tower of San Marco, and the Redentore Church in Venice.

On a broader scale, the two considered aspects stand concerning the elements that constitute the structure of the territorial area in which a town is located, contributing to the composition of that interweaving of forms that determine its configuration. These include natural elements such as hillsides, watercourses and stretches of water, the coastline, for coastal villages, how the vegetation cover of the land develops, anthropic components, and artificial works created to meet the needs of society. With respect to these constructions, inhabited areas have not only had a visual impact. Their presence and the needs related to the sustainability of urban life have recently oriented deci-

sive choices in the organization of human activities on the territory, with repercussions on the landscape: in the organization of infrastructural systems, for example, in the management of water resources and forests, in some cases in the very governance of agricultural activities and in the arrangements that have become necessary for their conduction and development.

The issue of the impact of urban buildings on the landscape suggests a further thematic knot that cannot be evaded. The transformations of the structure of the territory and, consequently, of its forms depend to a large extent on functional reasons, namely how they reflect endogenous or induced changes in the way the land is used and, more generally, about the available resources. For this reason, they must be ascribed predominantly to a temporal dimension. However, specific intentions invariably contribute to the development of generative processes and, above all, constructive initiatives capable of orienting the outcomes; initiatives that not infrequently go beyond mere utilitarian instances to become factors of visual qualification both concerning the urban space and the territory, sometimes assuming representative values. The instances of visibility that underlie their conception also imply considerations regarding how the factories can be perceived, the choice of particular viewpoints, of physical places from which it is possible to have full knowledge of the formal qualities that the factories express in a vision at a distance, for themselves or in relation to other architectural emergencies.

Many of the themes outlined emerge in the papers collected in this volume discussing particular case studies. These works refer to a wide period, ranging from Antiquity to the 20th century, and very different geographical and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, a common orientation can be observed, aimed at identifying in the structural components of urban centers the formal connotations that determine their landscape value. Research has privileged the 'urban landscape' dimension. However, there are also broader perspectives that tend to reach a larger scale, focusing on the sphere of interactions of the settlement structure with the closest territorial area. The adoption of a methodological approach is largely shared, which in the critical exegesis of material sources, written sources, when available, and iconographic evidence, as well as in the diachronic perspective of the investigation,

refers back to a solid tradition of historical studies on the city, albeit from a perspective that aims more specifically at the reading of the 'landscape' characteristics of urban construction. Also common is the recognition of the cultural value of the built space, conceived as the proper expression of a society, of the systems of relations on which its organization is based, of its political and economic structures, and its customs. All in all, the texts compose a *panorama* from which can certainly draw useful hints for further thematic developments and the methodological refinement of studies on the landscape dimension of the city.