

Reading the current city to design the future one – urban sequences of Rome

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Abstract

The dysfunction of our cities is the consequence of the ideological mistakes following the Nineteen's century urbanism and, (later), of the obsession with modernity, seen as something independent from the past.

Indeed, in the implementation of “*modern*” cities, the town planners’ greatest mistake has been the complete misunderstanding of modernity itself! Their presumptuous and ideological approach made them blind, preventing them from being able to meet the real sense of *advanced society*, i.e. the way it was defined by Edmund Burke: «*A healthy civilisation is one which maintains the relationships with the present, the future and the past. When the past nourishes and supports the present and the future, a society is advanced*» [1].

By aiming at bringing back our cities to a more human and healthy scale, we do not need to *reinvent the wheel*. We simply need to read the urban structures of the cities we have inherited and, honestly, try to understand what has made them either successful or unsuccessful.

The reading of the dynamics of urban development, but also the understanding of the “*urban tools*” as well as of the strategies adopted by our wise predecessors, might be extremely helpful to design new places and/or reorganize the unsuccessfully designed ones ... then we can generate new livable cities.

Keywords: *Urban Analysis, Retrofitting the Existing City, Sustainable Urban Design, Urban Sequences, Piazza, Pedestrian Friendly Cities*

1. Introduction

Nothing, more than Plinio Marconi's words, is better maybe, to understand what strikes a pedestrian as he strolls through the streets of an old town. «[...] *The architecture as a whole of streets, varied and picturesque in the chance composition of many disparate elements – crossroads, entryways, narrow underpasses, the unexpected emergence and sight of walls, balconies with flowers, little loggias, swings counts more than the detail of each building in itself*» [2].

When Marconi wrote his essay, was not alone and Italy was not the only Country where these kind of studies were being developed. Nevertheless, in the same period other architects, sponsored by car and oil industries, were following the dream of *modernity*, with less ethic and poetic interests. Unfortunately, under that kind of patronage, they were much more powerful in changing the destiny of the world.

Indeed, the analysis of any 20th Century's "*urban*" development, demonstrates how the obsession with a predefined and self-judged "*rationality*", led the designers to distrust all of those wise guidelines – based on the experience of human needs and tailor-made for each place by place – that for centuries, had overseen the harmonious development of cities. Those "*guidelines*" have been responsible for the creation of a place's "*character*" and, because of it also for the so-called "*campanilismo*", (i.e. the citizens' pride to claim that "*their bell-tower*" was better than the one of the neighbour town).

As I wrote in some of my books [3], the traditional type of city (the COMPACT CITY) has been abandoned in the name of a modernist *suburban* type, (the SPRAWLING CITY), which puts us through what has been imposed by Le Corbusier with his "*visionary dream*" of the *Ville Radieuse*: ... «*Towns will become part of the countryside; I will live 30 miles from my office, in one direction, under pine trees; my secretary will also live 30 miles from the office, but in the opposite direction and under other pine trees. We will have our automobile. We must use it until we wear it out, consuming roads, surfaces, and gears, consuming oil and gasoline. Everything needed for a large workload ... enough for everyone*» [4].

Few years ago, opposing the way we were keeping developing our cities, James Howard Kunstler – the author of *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993), *The City in Mind* (2001) and *The Long Emergency* (2005) – railed against the limits of the model (*city sprawl*) we constantly repeat. In his invective Kunstler said: «*the absence of decent public areas; the extreme separation of functions; the disadvantages for children and senior citizens who do not drive, etc.*» and he pointed out that: «*The least natural and legal residential layout is uncontrolled expansion, originating in the United States, which began in the twentieth century with huge, domestic oil reserves. Now we desperately depend, for more than half of the petroleum we use, on nations, which hate us. The age of sprawling expansion as a credible alternative is coming to an end [...]*».

Notice that the "*urban drama*", so well depicted by Kunstler, is not something limited whitin U.S.A.! Indeed, it affects nearly all the Western countries and now, even the emerging countries, which seem to have become the soil for testing – without informing the residents about it – new "*urban forms*", child of ideology.

If the scientific data reported in "*The Long Emergency*" are true – notice that, since 2005, nobody has been able to refute them – we have to recognize the urgent need of a process of re-compacting of our cities.

Aiming at this, a possible way could be to study the structure of different city quarters, both inside the historical centre and outside it. This kind of analysis, as has been demonstrated, might give us the right suggestions for a possible re-configuration of our cities.

However, what are the crucial aspects to investigate for a successful urban structure?

Of course, there are too many of them: nevertheless, I would like to introduce here a short description of what we can learn from some urban-analytical study made in Rome. This is an opportunity to recognize the importance of aspects like the *surprise effect*, the *reference points* (or *landmarks*), the *piazzas* and all the typical elements of the historical cities: the network of these elements could be defined *URBAN SEQUENCES*.

It is possible to subdivide those *URBAN SEQUENCES* into a hierarchy, consisting of *MAIN URBAN SEQUENCES* – those along which we find the main streets and piazzas – and *SECONDARY URBAN SEQUENCES* – those used as pedestrian shortcuts and simple smaller piazzas or courtyards.

Both these kinds of *urban sequences* always use public spaces and landmarks as *hinges*, to attract and re-direct walking people. Those *hinges* beat the *rhythm* of our stroll.

These sequences make the city pleasant and varied. ... *The possibility to choose among the different pedestrian connections*, together with the *presence of many different activities*, invites people to walk through the center, without any need of cars. ... The positive effects of the pedestrian city are obvious.

Keeping to the topic, I find it very useful to remind Richard Sennet's definition of the urban orthogonal grid: «*it represents the first manifestation of a peculiar modern form of repression denying the value of the others as well as the spaces specifically assigned to the construction of the daily banality*» [7].

Mindful of this thought, it is clear to anybody that the value of continuity in buildings, streets and piazzas needs to be reaffirmed, together with the undeniable interconnection between places of private daily life and places to live extended relations. The new districts, but also the existing ones to be renewed, should be conceived of as composite spaces in which both simple and monumental buildings, as well as piazzas, are just one component of the urban composition, not so important to satisfy the need of people for gathering and for having social relationships.

The knowledge of the structure of historical cities gives us the possibility to plan new cities pleasant as the historical ones.

The understanding of this “*system*” of streets, piazzas, mix of functions, mix of incomes, building variety and all those elements that make urban spaces pleasant, might be crucial in helping us to retrofit all the badly planned more recent districts!

2. The reading of different Rome's urban textures

The following is a short description of the urban tissues of Rome one can meet along an ideal stroll, that from the centre of the town leads us towards the periphery. The sensations along the

streets and piazzas of this path allow us to recognize at least four different “cities of Rome” and to identify both their values and limits.

1. (THE COMPACT CITY) “*The Historical City and its urban fabric*” – Urban sequences inside the historical part of the city.



Roma, network of urban sequences leading to Piazza della Rotonda

It is characterized by a compact tissue, apparently irregular – but provided of its own rational logic – where we can recognize different systems and subsystems (*urban sequences*), made of roads, streets, alleys, piazzas, small piazzas and larger openings. Here, the mixing of functions is the rule; “*noble*” buildings are juxtaposed to those “*minor*”, in a bijective harmonious relationship. Here, the *res publica* (those public/monumental and “*special*” buildings and places) is wonderfully blended with the *res privata* or *res economica* (those mixed-use common buildings and places), generating the *civitas* (the city). The progression of the roads, except for certain linear axes, presents slight – or strong – curvatures that, even in the case of narrow alleys, offers the opportunity to enjoy the view of the facades of the buildings, often displayed in order to play the role of the “*visual target*” or rather “*landmark*”. ... This is something that highlights how many of those spaces, that our “*modern rational minds*” understand as “*accidental*”, are indeed rationally calculated by their wise authors!

This “*stroll*” not only shows all the different ways to get to a piazza, but also highlights how, nearly all the times, there is never an axis directed to the center of the main façade of the main building. The foreshortening of it seems to have always been privileged as much more stimulating than the obvious frontal view, typical of the post-Enlightenment’s urban planning and based on central perspective. The glimpse of the monument among other things allows the building to be framed in the context from different directions. An emblematic example is the *Piazza della Rotonda*, where none of the nine streets entering the Piazza converges on the Pantheon!

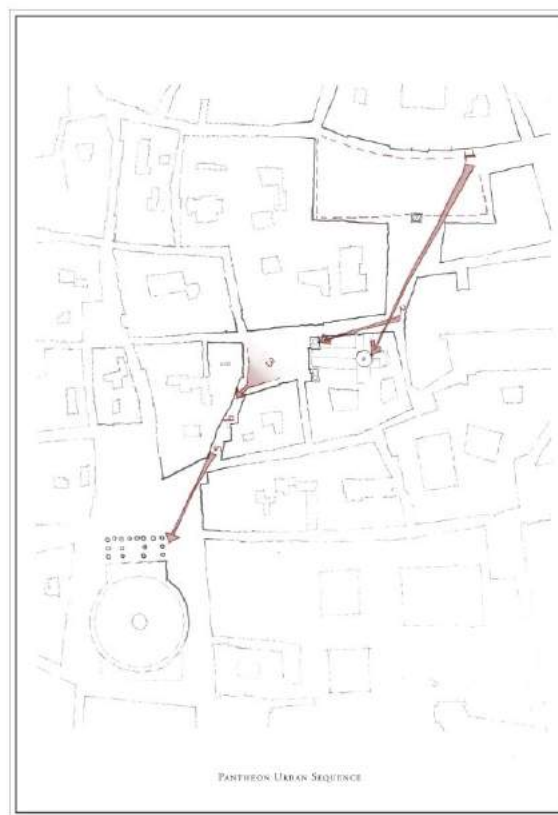
If we analyze the social life of this network of places within the historical center, we realize that there are dozens of different activities happening all at once: from children playing to elders talking in-group, from locals who walk and buy goods in the shops, to tourists who simply enjoy the space.

Many tables of bars and restaurants, displayed along streets and piazzas, amplify happiness and life of the public space, while several street artists perform for our pleasure. Yet all these activities, more than anything else, with their presence and “*spontaneous surveillance*”, play the important role of keeping these places safe!

Moreover, I want to underline one last very interesting thing: while experiencing an urban sequence of historical center we can realize that, no matter how long our stroll takes, we never get tired!

Indeed, as we walk along various and attractive places, our senses are almost all “*occupied*”, especially the sight and this kind of pleasant distraction makes us more and more energetic. The more we are stimulated to see something that was only partially announced by a glimpse, the more we would like to reach that target and when we reach it, we always glimpse further landmarks, inviting us to reach them ... and so on!

1.1 A graphic study made with my graduate students at the University of Notre Dame – *walking in Rome from Piazza Montecitorio to Piazza della Rotonda* (drawings by René Salas)



Plan of the sequence from Piazza Montecitorio to Piazza della Rotonda, showing the visual references that attract and re-orient the pedestrians



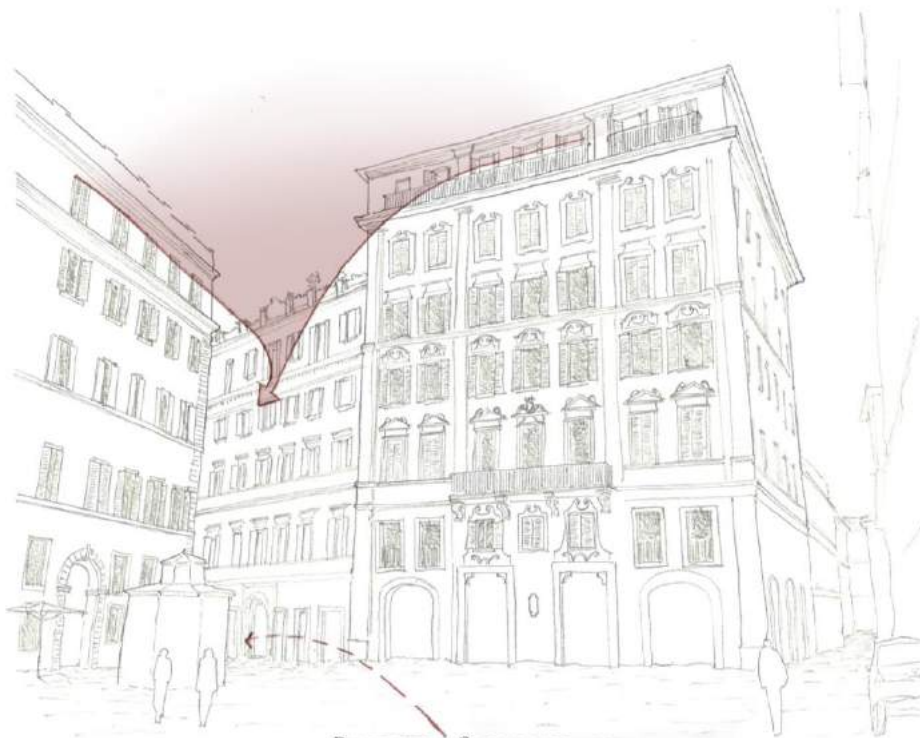
PANTHEON SEQUENCE - 1

This view shows how, when we enter Piazza Montecitorio, our attention is first attracted by the obelisk (displayed in a place that creates an ideal separation between the two spaces of the “T” shape piazza), then we are attracted by the presence of the dome of Santa Maria in Aquiro’s Church.



PANTHEON SEQUENCE - 2

This second view shows how, when the dome of Santa Maria in Aquiro’s Church is no longer visible, there are a bell tower of that church and the glimpse of the piazza in front of it inviting us to walk in that direction.



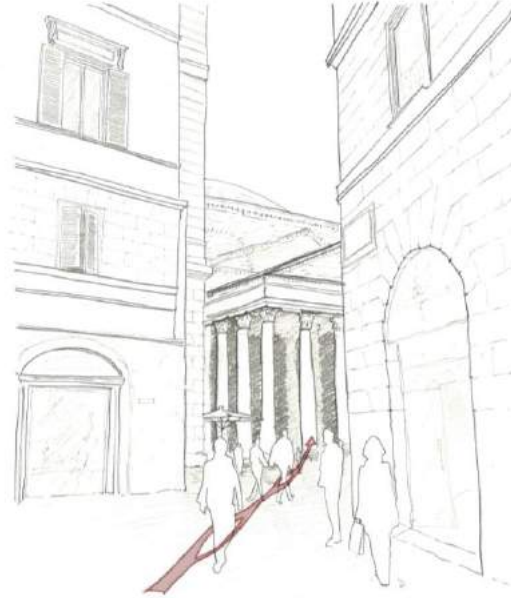
PANTHEON SEQUENCE - 3

When we get to Piazza Capranica, the church is behind us. We immediately notice that the piazza is almost rectangular, because two sides are just a little bit inclined and create a sort of “cone” which leads us into the alley that appears as the major axis of the piazza (the presence of retail confirms its hierarchical value).



PANTHEON SEQUENCE - 4

Still in the piazza, just before approaching the alley, our view is attracted by a glimpse of a corner of the Pantheon, framed by the volumes of buildings flanking the alley: we are invited to proceed in that direction.



PANTHEON SEQUENCE - 3

Finally, at the end of the alley we can approach, in oblique, the grandiose presence of the Pantheon



Urban Sequence from piazza di Pietra to Piazza della Rotonda

2. (THE GRID CITY) “*The Post-Unification City and its urban fabric*” – Urban sequence inside recent districts of the city developed after the unification of Italy: The city after 1870 – the so-called “*reprimand of and a lesson quarters for old Rome*” – the case of the Esquilino



Roma, “Piazza” Vittorio Emanuele II in the “Esquilino” district

Here, the urban tissue is organized according to the model of the urban grid, whose urban tangles – due to the speculative system behind it – result badly connected both to the historical center and among themselves. Notice that the “*New Capital City*”, built in defiance of old Rome and based on the Beaux-Arts approach, was called a “*reprimand of*” and “*a lesson for filthy and stinky old Rome*”¹. In the post-unification Rome, the roads are rigidly straight and the rare squares, in order to be “*proportioned*” to those roads, appear humongous and very different from any possible sense of human scale. Here the center of the piazza is always crossed by an axis. Along the streets, the façades become monotonous: despite the number of buildings behind them, they tend to coincide with the entire urban block, thus losing both the rhythm and variety of the historical center. Nevertheless, the architecture is still rich and, sometimes, pleasant; streets still maintain some vitality, thanks to the mixed use and the presence of retail along the sidewalk. ... But this Rome, by having lost the “*surprise effect*” – in the name of the “*order*” the “*uniformity*” – and the foreshortenings with the visual targets have made the stroll boring and wearisome, even though still possible.

The piazzas of these Nineteen-century districts are almost independent from the rest of the city; neither have they appeared as something that belongs to a network of spaces, nor they seem “*protected*” from cars, as they should be, at least on one side. Indeed, they look like like self-sufficient spaces, sometime useful for the surrounding buildings life, but they do not to create and inviting “*urban sequence*” where to stroll, i.e. they do not generate any pedestrian friendly districts.

¹ Giovanni Faldella, *Roma Borghese*, Rome 1882.



Urban Sequence from Piazza della Repubblica to Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II

3. (THE “COURTYARDS” CITY – SHORTCUTS WITHIN THE CITY BLOCKS OF THE “ORTHOGONAL CITY”)
“*The Earliest Twentieth Century City and its urban fabric*” – Urban sequence inside the city developed at the beginning of the 20th Century: The city between 1900 and 1925 – “*the attempt at reconciliation with the urban spaces*” – the quarter “*Piazza d’Armi*” and its courtyard blocks.



Roma, Piazza Mazzini in the district Prati (former “*Piazza d’Armi*”)

An urban fabric, organized according to the principles of the orthogonal grid, characterizes also this part of Rome. Here, the great axes of the Nineteen-century matrix still dominate the scene. The width of the streets has lost the proper relationship with the height of the buildings.

Due to the need of recovering the sense of urban containment, trees on the sidewalks constantly flank roads.

While this solution can “*solve*” that problem, on the other hand, as the façades are hidden behind the trees, they lose any reference value for the city and of course, for the pedestrians.

When walking through these districts, it is impossible to find any possible idea of spatial hierarchy among the streets. Nevertheless, pre-modern Rome is the latest model of city that – at least at the architectural level – tries to maintain a direct relationship with the historical city. In many of these districts, despite the loss of the proper relationship between “*height of the buildings*” and “*width of the streets*”, and despite the monotony of the views – conceived for a fast vehicular transit, rather than for a slow and pleasant stroll – buildings still have shops and other activities at street level. The presence of these activities secures the “*spontaneous surveillance*” [6], very important for pedestrians that and later disappeared.

In these districts, there are rare examples of piazzas, enormous and independent from the network of spaces. Here the piazzas do not appear “*protected*” enough from vehicular circulation: they are conceived as “*roundabouts*”. Nevertheless, all the spaces for social activities are provided within the blocks: they create a fantastic pedestrian network of green courtyards, where it is possible to find playgrounds for children, benches and tables for elders and alternative paths for pedestrian only as well!

A peculiarity of these districts is that all the accesses to the houses are located into the courtyards, whereas the street fronts are left to retail and workshops.



pedestrian shortcuts throughout the courtyards of the former social housing district Trionfale in Rome

4. (THE VISIONARY CITY) “*The Modernistic City and its urban fabric*” – Urban Analysis of an urban sequence inside the EUR, the most representative part of the “*visionary city*”, begun before 1942 and completed after WWII: The city before and after the Fascism – “*the metaphysical city for the cars*” – the E.U.R



Roma, l'area dell'EUR

It is possible to use this definition just for the EUR district in Rome, where the general logic of the master plan, as well as the original intent of it – (a temporary demonstrative project) – are still readable.

Believe it or not, even in this case it is possible to find a hierarchy among the streets, but it still results independent from any possible idea of human scale: the main axis of the masterplan, via Cristoforo Colombo, with its 100 metres, results immensely wide compared to the height of the buildings. Via Cristoforo Colombo is a designed-for-cars road ... and no a wise man would never think to walk in the middle of the road, hoping to enjoy the “*reference points*” (readable only in the project). Those elements are extremely distant one from each other and deprived of any possible “*built-up frames*”: this is why, despite their size, they are dissolved in the air!

It is not a case if the EUR district, dimensioned for cars and left uncompleted within WWII, has been promoted and completed – after the Fascism’s end – by the FIAT factory.

The urban structure of this “*district*”, though showing a great coherence in its *Rationalist* buildings, represents a model of city a far cry from human needs: it might be coming out from a metaphysical painting by De Chirico, where spaces generate agoraphobia, rather than attracting people!

Another peculiar character of this district – planned for cars and based on the idea of the zoning – is the lack of social and commercial activities along the main axis and “*piazzas*”.

Here, we cannot find shops, bars, restaurants and “protected” spaces, where we can walk safely and meet people: the only “shops” are a row of gas stations flanking the lanes ... thus confirming that we are in a sort of suburban place where it is better to drive a car rather to have a stroll!

One saddest element of this part of the city, especially if we look at the more recent buildings, is that they do not frame the streets anymore; indeed, their façades are separated from the useless sidewalks and closed inside horrible cages.

This kind of city is not for blending people and making them socialize, but for isolating individuals and promoting insecurity!



Sequence along Via Cristoforo Colombo in the district E.U.R.

3. Conclusions

There would be at least two “*other Romes*” to describe, both belonging to the category of the so-

called “*Rome of the palazzinari*” (i.e. Rome of the speculators). The first, built immediately after WWII, the latter (worse than that one), developed after the Master Plan of 1962 and the following Plans for Economic and Social Buildings ... but they are not worthy to be described, since the only thing one can learn from them, is that they are urban models not to repeat!

Resuming, the reading of the urban texture of the different quarters is helpful to understand all the advantages, and/or disadvantages, of the different cities within the edges of Rome. The knowledge of these advantages can suggest us all the possible solutions to reorganize all those zones where it is difficult to find any urban design.

The analysis of a historical center points out the importance of aspects like the “*surprise effect*”; the “*visual references*”; the “*rhythm*” of the stroll – marked by the sequence of public spaces (network of piazzas); the “*variety*” of the façades, following one another along the streets fronts; the sense of “*unity without uniformity*” of the buildings, etc. The network that keeps all these elements together is what we define “*URBAN SEQUENCE*”.

It is possible to subdivide hierarchically there *SEQUENCES* into:

- *MAIN URBAN SEQUENCES* – those along which we find the main streets and piazzas.
- *SECONDARY URBAN SEQUENCES* – those along which secondary pedestrian paths lie, with smaller and humble piazzas and courts.

Along the main sequences, we generally find shops and retail, while along the secondary urban sequences we find the artisans’ workshops, the garages, the private accesses and *blind* or *impermeable* ground floor walls.

Both these kinds of *URBAN SEQUENCES* use public spaces as hinges, to attract and re-orient people as they walk. The existence of these sequences explains why the historical piazzas of the center perform much better than the piazzas of “*modern*” districts, too independent from any pedestrian network.

Indeed, the latter always appear over dimensioned and conceived as independent and self-sufficient – they never belong to a more complex, interconnected system of public spaces – i.e. they never have the same pleasant and welcoming effect on pedestrians as central piazzas have being not part of a pedestrian path! Consequently, they do not generate life inside the districts.

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