

## Historical Cities and Everyday Life

Carlotta Fontana

Much has been written about the architectural and aesthetic virtues as well as the history of Italy's ancient cities. But how do these places meet the everyday needs of contemporary living? For the last three years Carlotta Fontana and her students have studied Mantua to get a better handle on this.

Many authors<sup>1</sup> have often praised the Italian historical towns and cities because of their complex and sophisticated quality, capable of fulfilling both aesthetic aspirations and sensorial desires, in contrast with the general dissatisfaction generated by the functional urban schemes of the contemporary city. Historical cities have been intensely analysed, with many different methods and tools, trying to capture the secrets of their wonderful capacity in satisfying different levels of human needs. However, less effort has been made to understand how these cities perform in meeting everyday needs.

In most cases, the historical centres of what we call “cities of art” are architectural monuments in their own right: visitors and tourists appreciate the human scale, the proportions, the materials of ordinary buildings and open spaces as much as the monumental beauty of the grand palaces, churches and piazzas. Quite often, the opinion of visitors and inhabitants on the quality of this kind of urban fabric diverge, as though locals perceived a hindrance where visitors appreciate a quality. This is not just the case with very special cities such as Venice, where the simple act of purchasing and delivering a washing machine may prove difficult. It is, quite often, the case in less obvious examples of historic centres, where the pressure of everyday contemporary life puts a strain on the built environment, which impacts on the inhabitants' behaviour towards their own city.

In the past three years, my students and I decided to explore this field. Most of the students in the course<sup>2</sup> come from abroad; they are mainly interested in restoration issues and choose to study in Mantua, where the Milan school of Architecture has a branch, because it is one of the most beautiful art cities in Italy. As soon as the course started, I realised that my students scarcely looked at the city as a “real place”. Rather, they tended to see its streets, piazzas and arcades like a theatrical stage where people are actors, and houses, shops, restaurants and cafès represent a highly valuable scenery. In fact, there is something to it.

Mantua is a quite affluent city of about 50,000 inhabitants, surrounded by three artificial lakes, derived by the river Mincio in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, which create spectacular views. It was founded in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC by the Etruscans. It became an important Roman city, where the poet Virgil was born, later on a thriving Medieval free commune<sup>3</sup>, and finally a beautiful renaissance capital under the powerful House of Gonzaga, who ruled the city and its wealthy region for almost 4 centuries, establishing marriage links with royal families all over Europe. Such a long and regal history resulted in a rich heritage of art treasures and architectural masterpieces, all of them set in a homogeneous, well-balanced urban fabric where, in present days, many cultural events take place throughout the year. During literary and musical festivals, thousands of international visitors flow

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Cullen, Christopher Alexander, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Jan Gehl, to name just a few,

<sup>2</sup> Scuola di Architettura e Società of the Politecnico di Milano – International Master Degree in Architecture – *Architecture and Preservation*.

<sup>3</sup> In Medieval Northern Italy many cities managed to break away from greedy overlords, becoming independent city-states based on a form of democracy by the institution of the *Comune* (Lat. *communis* = common). The Comune was a sworn allegiance between productive citizens to ensure mutual protection and peace within the city. It entailed the right to armed self-defence, to freedom of trade, and often to mint coins.

along the streets and sit in the piazzas and under the arcades, moving from one “stage” to another, and the city where Giuseppe Verdi set his *Rigoletto* actually shows its theatrical soul.

Yet, Mantua is a city where real people live their everyday life. I invited my students to explore the ordinary, common character of a built environment they used to observe from a completely different point of view. I suggested a performance-based approach<sup>4</sup>, thus connecting functional aspects and the inhabitants’ perception. As our case-study, we chose the Percorso del Principe (“the Prince’s Path”), a thoroughfare which runs for almost two kilometers across the city centre, connecting Piazza Sordello, the main city square, to Palazzo Te. The route is significant, because it links places and monuments which attract hundreds of visitors every day: at the Northern end, the large Piazza Sordello is surrounded by important buildings from the 14th to the 18th Century – San Giorgio Castle, the Cathedral, the Palazzo Ducale, the Palazzo Arcivescovile. At the Southern end, just across a nice park, sits the magnificent Palazzo Te, the pleasure palace which Giulio Romano designed for Federico II Gonzaga. Along the road, one can find medieval buildings and arcades, and outstanding monuments, such as the church of Sant’Andrea by Leon Battista Alberti, the House of Mantegna, the Temple of San Sebastiano, all of them spaced out by a curtain of ordinary houses that have been built over time, mainly in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, flanking the once suburban trail.

The “hard facts” of the townscape (dimensions, shape, materials, texture, colour) have been mapped, together with the street equipment and furniture, as well as street level functions and activities (ground floors and shop-windows, traffic, bus stops), and viewpoints and landmarks. A simple “environmental landscape” model has been derived by observing - from March to September - how sun and shade, wind and rain play along the Path, its walls and floors. Within this framework, people have been observed: different groups of “city users”, their activities and interaction with the open built environment, their movements, flows, use of urban equipment and furniture during the day and the night, and during the week. In three years, about 50 students have been involved in direct observation, taking photos and videos, interviewing over 700 people in the streets – two thirds of them residents or local workers, one third visitors. Investigation has been focused upon the observable (by researchers) and perceived (by users) performance of places, furniture and equipment, in terms of safety (mapping critical points for risk), comfort (mapping critical points for heat/cold, noise and so on) and use-adequacy (mapping critical points for poor condition, failures, unclean/unkept places, poor accessibility, poor wayfinding etc.).

One practical result of this work was, of course, a mass of detailed data and observations, organized by place and time, about such issues as pedestrian safety and wellbeing, wayfinding, “hot spots” of overcrowding, poor maintenance, lack or wrong position of equipment etc., all of them producing a wide range of performance assessment, especially in the field of safety and use-adequacy. Such observations provide useful suggestions for willing city managers

The “users’ survey” confirmed a few seemingly obvious facts: both resident and non-resident “city users” enjoy the piazzas and arcades as outdoor living-rooms where people can meet, stroll, sit, chat over a cup of coffee or an ice-cream and watch the world go by; tourists’ flow patterns are conditioned mainly by the location and opening hours of museums, monuments, shops and restaurants; residents’ movements follow the timetable of schools, offices, weekly markets. Both

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<sup>4</sup> For a quick reference see: S. Mallory-Hill, W. F. E. Preiser, C. G. Watson (eds.), *Enhancing Building Performance*, Wiley Blackwell, 2012.

groups enjoy sitting and looking at “the other half”; notably, for many older residents watching tourists seems to be the main daily entertainment.

A closer scrutiny of residents’ activities and perceptions gave more interesting results. Residents, like visitors, complain about the overwhelming number of cars and motorbikes parked everywhere but, at the same time, dislike the idea of enlarging pedestrian areas or further limiting car access. They are usually very proud of their beautiful city and of its treasures, but many complain about some typical “positive characters” of historical centres, such as the narrow streets and sidewalks, because of the cramped bus stops, the traffic sweeping near pedestrians, the difficult movement of buses and service vehicles - cleaning up after the weekly street markets seems to be a major problem. On the contrary, the irregular traditional paving (cobblestones, stone slabs) and stone kerbs are never mentioned as a nuisance, even by older people, although they are forbidden in the newer developments along the road by safety regulations. Younger residents seem to be quite indifferent to the abundance and quality of their usual outdoor meeting places: they “take them for granted” without paying much attention, consider the city “a place for old people” and, although the steps of Alberti’s Sant’Andrea are a very popular after-school meeting place, for the boys and girls interviewed there the most significant local landmark seems to be the McDonald’s restaurant nearby. This point raised many questions among my surveyor-students; in the end, the lesson learned from the place was that you do not need to be aware of the cultural significance of a specific place to enjoy the pleasure it gives. The kids sitting in the small piazza on the church steps do not stand in awe looking at Alberti’s facade because it is a familiar backdrop on their way to school. Nevertheless, they do perceive and enjoy the affordance of the place, the well-tempered dimensions of the open space, the friendly measure of the arcades across the street, the apparently carelessness of good city form. They just sit there and chat, the McDonald’s sticking out of their memory when asked because it’s part of their teenage imagery.

Most of my architects-to-be surveyors were puzzled, at first, by the idea of linking together the analysis of the “good city form” embodied in a real historical city and the analysis of how “normal” people (not tourist or visitors) use it. The foreign students, especially, found it difficult, at first, to look at the city in terms of different layers of the same reality. They were more accustomed to consider the two aspects - the mundane and the artistic – as worlds apart. The Italian students, on the other hand, while sharing widely the same point of view, used to be more cynical, taking for granted that living in a monumental city is, in many ways, a bother - and that’s it. Both groups seemed to also share the unexpressed perception that, as far as architects are concerned, residents in a city of art are, above all, a nuisance.

The discovery of a necessary negotiation between the monumental dimension and everyday life, both having to share the same built environment, and the difficult task of preserving the cultural heritage while providing good levels of urban use-adequacy, gave the students involved in the work a fresh outlook on the possibilities of their future profession.

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