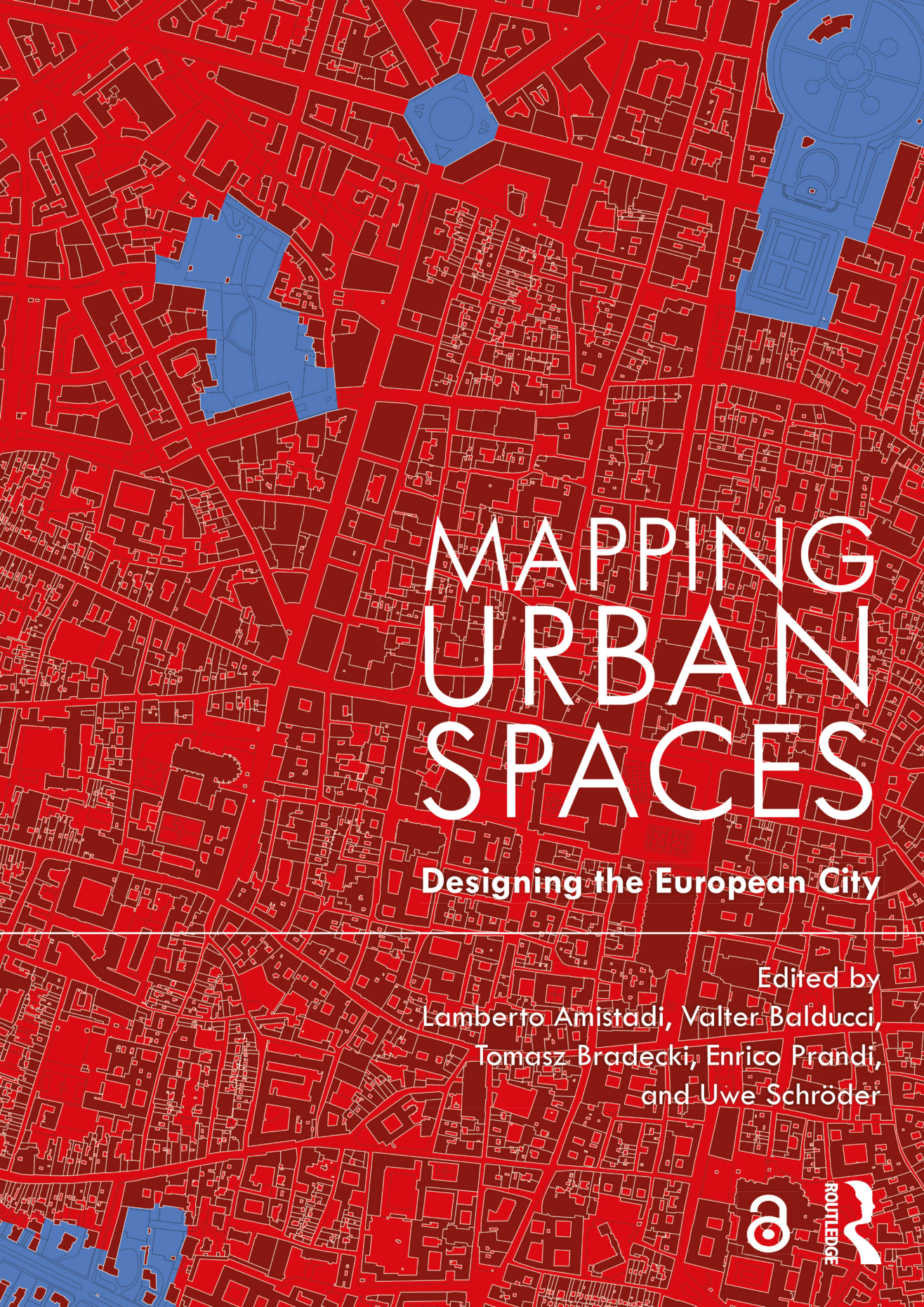

MAPPING URBAN SPACES

Designing the European City

Edited by
Lamberto Amistadi, Valter Balducci,
Tomasz Bradecki, Enrico Prandi,
and Uwe Schröder

ROUTLEDGE

MAPPING URBAN SPACES

Mapping Urban Spaces focuses on medium-sized European cities and more specifically on their open spaces from psychological, sociological, and aesthetic points of view. The chapters illustrate how the characteristics that make life in medium-sized European cities pleasant and sustainable – accessibility, ease of travel, urban sustainability, social inclusiveness – can be traced back to the nature of that space.

The chapters develop from a phenomenological study of space to contributions on places and landscapes in the city. Centralities and their meaning are studied, as well as the social space and its complexity. The contributions focus on history and theory as well as concrete research and mapping approaches and the resulting design applications.

The case studies come from countries around Europe including Poland, Italy, Greece, Germany, and France, among others. The book will be of interest to students, scholars, and practitioners in architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2022
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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This Research is produced under the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership for higher education Programme. Project Reference: 2018-1-IT02-KA203-048305.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Amistadi, Lamberto, editor. | Balducci, Valter, editor. | Bradecki, Tomasz, 1979– editor. | Prandi, Enrico, editor. | Schröder, Uwe, 1964– editor.
Title: Mapping urban spaces: designing the European city / edited by Lamberto Amistadi, Valter Balducci, Tomasz Bradecki, Enrico Prandi and Uwe Schröder.
Description: New York, NY: Routledge, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021009841 (print) | LCCN 2021009842 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032041261 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032041247 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003190660 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: City planning—Europe. | Open spaces—Europe. | Architecture and society—Europe.
Classification: LCC HT169.E8 M36 2022 (print) | LCC HT169.E8 (ebook) | DDC 307.1/216094—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021009841
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021009842

ISBN: 9781032041261 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781032041247 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003190660 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by codeMantra

ArchéA
Architectural
European Medium-sized City
Arrangement

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

CONTENTS

List of Contributors *ix*

INTRODUCTION
The ArchéA Method 1
Lamberto Amistadi

PART I
Mapping Spaces: The Phenomenological Approach to the City of Spaces **5**

1 A Spatial Understanding of Architecture and the City 7
Uwe Schröder

2 Landmarks in a History of Spatial Mapping 15
Felix Mayer

3 The Many-Faceted Notion of Space: On the Hypothesis of Mapping and the Observation of Spatial Phenomena 26
Sarah Maria Schroeter

4 *Stadtraumgestaltungen*: On Perceiving and Reading Urban Spaces 34
Timo Steinmann

5 Where the Compact and Open City Meet: Inner and Outer Spaces on the Periphery of Aachen North 44
Ilaria Maria Zedda

6 Here and There: On the Ambivalence of Transitional Spaces 54
Franziska Kramer

PART II
Mapping Places: The Italian Tradition of Urban Studies 61

7 Drawing the City: Form and Meaning 63
Lamberto Amistadi

8 Urban Events and the Soul of the City: The Poetic Political Tripartition of Urban Form 76
Ildebrando Clemente

9 Civic Urbanity: The Places of Everyday Life 86
Francesco Saverio Fera

10 Venice as a Paradigm: Urban Studies and the Value of Emptiness in the City's Design 94
Giovanni Marras

11 Nature Prepares the Sites, But It Is Man Who Creates the Organism: Bologna through Its Geography, Its History, and Its Planning Tools 106
Valentina Orioli

12 New Urban Landscapes: Fragments of Civil Architecture 118
Gino Malacarne

PART III
Mapping Natural Space: Greenspaces and Urban Design 131

13 The Role of Greenspaces in Urban Design Theories in France 133
Valter Balducci

14 Greenspace as an Element for a New Urban Dynamic 146
Fabienne Fendrich

15 Uses of Mapping: Methods of Investigation and Ways of Narrating Territory in Architectural Practice and Teaching 154
Anne Portnoï

16 Towards a More "Natural" City? 164
Jean-Marc Bichat and Philippe Chavanes

PART IV
Mapping Centralities: Urban Regeneration toward a Polycentric City 179

17 The Long-Term Method of the Urban Project in Italy and the Parma School 181
Carlo Quintelli

18 Designing the European Medium-Sized City: Urban Regeneration Technique through the Structured Densification of the Centrality System 193
Enrico Prandi

19 The Project of a Metropolitan Urban Centrality: The Case of the Former Fruit and Vegetable Market of Bologna 206
Paolo Strina

20 Densification as the Key to Suburb Regeneration: The Case of Driescher Hof in Aachen 215
Giuseppe Verterame

21 The European Medium-Sized City: The Characteristics of the Urban Form 225
Marco Maretto

22 The Idea of Space and Urban Sequences: The Case of Parma 236
Carlo Gandolfi

PART V
Mapping Social Space: Demographic Analysis as an Image of Urban Complexity 249

23 Mapping Urban Spaces with the Use of Physical, Digital, and Augmented Reality Models: Experiences from Applications in Architectural and Urban Education 251
Tomasz Bradecki

24 The Urban Circle of Life of People with Disabilities: Mapping Urban Inconveniences 261
Katarzyna Ujma-Wąsowicz

25 Multigenerational Spaces in Conceptual Urban Projects in Polish Cities 270
Agnieszka Labus and Paweł Woźnicki

AFTERWORD
Problems of the Contemporary City 283
Raffaella Neri

Index *291*

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AFTERWORD

Problems of the Contemporary City

Raffaella Neri

With the ending of the ArchéA research, we have had an opportunity to take stock, naturally somewhat schematically, of what we commonly call "the urban project," and the issues that revolve around it, beginning from themes that emerged from the chapters in the book in various ways.

First and foremost, we must underline a fact of no small significance, namely, that the research in question was conducted by means of projects: the latter were applied to certain sample areas picked out in different European cities, choosing cities that were similar, of a medium size, with contexts that were alike in terms of condition, generally suburban or semi-suburban, and with problems of reconversion, reconfiguration, and recomposition within the framework of urban relationships. Thereby underlining the role of the architectural project and its essentiality in defining strategies, principles, and ways to tackle the problems of the contemporary city, starting from an analysis of the sites and a knowledge of the places on which to base any work: an act that was scientific but also interpretative, considered in different ways, whose necessity was reaffirmed, and whose modus operandi was discussed. In addition to the possibility of comparing different hypotheses that allowed a questioning of the principles through trial and error, applied to some real cases. A way of conducting research in the field of architecture that sought to update theory through practice, bringing the goal of every reflection back to architecture, its definition, and the project itself: a procedure that, for this reason, ought to be systematically pursued on every occasion.

Let us begin from two points: on the one hand, the condition of European cities and their current problems, a situation that it is necessary to acknowledge and, of course, interpret; on the other, the current condition of architectural culture, which, while counting on a long and significant tradition of studies and projects, particularly rich in Italy in the late 20th century, has become extremely motley, divided, and at variance when it comes to the ways of understanding the city and architecture. The point of view that we will be presenting should therefore be considered partial, intentionally based on rational thought and research

done on the bedrock, and purposely inserted into the aforementioned tradition of studies with the aim of highlighting certain questions that remain open.

The problems of cities. It seems superfluous to reiterate that the contemporary city – at different times depending on individual conditions of growth – not only no longer has a unitary, recognizable, and describable form but also, in its more or less recent expansions – especially post–Second World War – has failed to put forward principles that can give a clear form to the individual parts and, consequently, to the quality of certain places, those of the residences and of social life. The city envisioned by the Modern Movement has never seen the light in any of its interpretations, even though it has undoubtedly left us episodes of great interest and absolute value. The reasons are many, and I do not think they can be attributed to the lack of a precise vision, as evidenced by the proliferation of assorted proposals that have followed one another since the end of the 19th century. Pressing needs, economic interests, lack of political direction, administrative subdivisions, privatization of the territory and more, are just some of the reasons (which we shall not be investigating) that have led to the status quo.

Having now realized the impossibility of going back to imagining a city that is unitary in its form and its principles of growth, and in re-proposing the by-now-shared condition of the growth of cities by different parts, it is easy to see that in today's cities the only truly recognizable parts, terminated, with a clear and distinct form, are still and only the ancient nuclei that grew within their own walls. Or at times a few pieces of compact cities based on a unitary design, yet generally still relying on an organization by blocks and on the block–street relationship, gradually diminished during the 19th century and subsequently thrown into crisis by the Modern Movement.

There are therefore two fundamental urban growth problems that constantly attract attention: the rapid, extensive, abnormal, and unregulated development of multiple agglomerations, which considers the countryside that has always surrounded cities in a vital relationship as a land of conquest for future expansions, including its gradual removal and expulsion from inside major urban centers. In parallel to this, the imbalance between the oldest and densest parts, which have grown over a long period of time based on an essential relationship between different activities, whether collective or private, on the coexistence of places and distinctive works of architecture, of public institutions and housing, of the public city and the residential city, and the most recent expansions given over almost exclusively to housing, with at most some essential services: a firmly rooted discrepancy, well known to all, between the center and the suburbs, which we now look upon with resignation, as if it were a structural sine qua non of the contemporary city.

This is a twofold problem that on the one hand has to do with the growth model used, totally biased in favor of land consumption rather than subsequent urban expansions – so that they cannot be dubbed the formless and limitless extensions of certain agglomerations – lacking in vision, unrestrained, and untidy, and on the other, to do with the definition of those parts added gradually over time, which have extended the urban boundaries but have seldom enriched the civil life.

Some of these issues are now recognized as distinct and universal trends. The polycentric city model, extended to the regional dimension, seems to be a shared future vision and a target aspired to by the majority. Based on this rationale, a city is not only its compact constructed part, contained within boundaries that are no longer identifiable or solely within administrative boundaries. Instead, it is to be seen as a more complex and extensive entity,

a grouping of poles, of settlements of different sizes, relatively distant from one another but unified in a single network by an (efficient) public transport system. To clarify the sense of this, these new territorial or regional entities have been repeatedly defined in various evocative ways, *archipelago, constellation*, and the like, analogies that seek to underline the idea of *unity*, even when composed of different and quite distinct parts. Similarly, the polycentric city should be made up of *parts* that differ in their substance and in their physical and formal identity, and of heterogeneous *elements*, meaning not only aggregations of buildings and built-up areas but also of free, open spaces, empty spacers that are equally indispensable – natural elements, the countryside, water, hills, and so on: elements of a different *nature* established in unity, as an *archipelago* in fact, by virtue of their cultural ties, their belonging to a geography with common characteristics, their proximity, and their potentially rapid interconnection: the equitable distribution of community facilities that are urban in the proper sense of the word.

As Giuseppe Samonà suggested, Le Corbusier had previously pointed out, and many have experienced for themselves and emphasized, Venice is the city that, even today, fully conveys the idea of this latter principle, albeit on a rather reduced scale: perhaps because it really is an archipelago, perhaps because the water makes it more difficult to appropriate the land beneath it and make it fit for building, perhaps because no one dares modify it, in awe of its incomparable beauty. Here the parts are effectively separate and unequivocally distinct, interconnected thanks to the public transport system, with many communal activities, on an urban scale but not only, spread across the various islands. And then, a fundamental fact, each of these islands has its own physiognomy by virtue of the variety and individuality of the public places it houses and the works of architecture that define them. Because if the parts were all the same and, in some way autonomous, like the "self-sufficient" neighborhoods of the 1900s, perhaps they would not form a unity: each would be self-sufficient (or insufficient). To give rise to a rich, articulated, complex unity, it would be desirable that the parts of a city were different but necessary to one another in order to recompose the bigger picture of urban activities. This would mean that, for example, in one you could find the hospital, in another the university, in a third the cathedral, in yet another the institutions of justice, and, in all of them, the basic facilities for living: shops, schools, play and meeting areas, public parks, and so on. Distinct, separate, identifiable parts, recognizable above all thanks to their public places: these are the recognized values of the center of every European city.

But how can we distinguish the parts in general when we are not constrained by geography, as in Venice?

In a similar way to the amphibious city, the distinction is, first of all, unquestionably physical, a separation due to an alternation of solids and voids, the presence of open, empty spaces that distance and close off the parts, as happened with the ancient city walls, traces of which are almost always still present. In this regard, Le Corbusier argued that built-up areas should end up "overlooking the countryside," in a clear-cut, precise way, without becoming lost within the infinite fraying of scattered houses and random warehouses, which leave the margins of settlements so vague.

However, such a distinction is also obtained through the recognizability of each part, the differentiation and identification of places, in particular those for the community and the most representative ones, their completeness, precise character, architecture, and formal quality. Also in this respect, Venice is a true master: the city, with its complex layout, is a succession of places, which can be recognized by their formal precision, the relationships

that the artefacts establish between each other, the relationships between the solids and voids, their size, and their proportion.

Both modes presuppose finiteness, a certain boundary, a clear limit between built-up areas and open spaces, a precise and therefore recognizable formal configuration, and it is the architecture that is always responsible for these.

This is a fundamental theme that emerges from the chapters and which I believe it is useful to reiterate. A city is made up of *places*, open spaces, specific in their meaning and in their consequent configuration. Architecture is the tool that can give form to indistinct and empty spaces, and this is equally true in the case of a single building: because the definition of a space, the identification of places, is undoubtedly the primary task of architecture. The inseparable relationship between the typological characteristics of buildings and the morphology of places derives exactly from this imperative purpose of architecture, from this almost instrumental condition, we might call it. Architecture dons the character of contexts, affirms it and reaffirms it, amplifies it and flaunts it, transforms it into typological features to give a new definition, to modify the spaces and endow them with a new identity.

If this happens in the case of a single work of architecture isolated in the landscape – suffice it to think, for example, of the role of Palladio's villas in the Venetian countryside, or of a castle on top of a hill – then this is even more true when defining the places inside a city, the large and small squares, the lanes, and so on, which depend upon the layout of the architecture, or better, on the way the individual buildings are composed. Reiterating that the city itself is an artefact is useful when reaffirming the need for form, for that control which only the layout and form of works of architecture can exert on the quality of places. Since the city has a physical substance, it is only through the formal clarity of its constituent elements that it manages to represent the value and meaning of the life that gave birth to it – its fundamental *raison d'être*. An urban project for the places and settlements of a city concerns the composition of the works of architecture and seeks to bring identity to the single parts.

With the same objectives and the same tools, the elements that separate, and at the same time unify, the built-up parts of a city, the open spaces we mentioned earlier, the parks and the countryside, need to be brought under control. And, in the notion of the polycentric city, once again they then become their own, constituent, necessary elements for the construction of the contemporary city.

This aspect raises yet another major question posed in more than one chapter, which has become current again in this period with the indications contained in the documents of the "Green Deal," which are steering the future of the European cities and regions toward a desirable ecological transition: the green issue.

Green is an extremely generic term, too vague to be considered an element of the construction of landscapes and territories. To wit, green is the color of the meadows, of the leaves on the trees; it is the color with which we generally refer to the elements of nature. By extension, green has become the direction of our future development, a synonym of what is natural, respectful of cycles, and the preservation of nature's assets for the survival of the planet. Green is the guideline of the new European project that is supposed to steer every choice of urban and regional expansion or transformation, every attention to land consumption versus a greater density among the already built, to energy-saving and mitigation, to the curbing of climate change, and to guarantee populations a sense of well-being and conditions of equilibrium. However, to be understood as an element that participates by right in the construction of the city, this green must be sorted into the various identities and

forms that it can take: a cultivated field, a meadow, a wood, a pine forest, a park, a garden, a courtyard, a row of trees, and so on, including a "green roof" or a planted terrace.

This theme has actually come from afar in time. Back in the 1700s, the Physiocrats had already posed the problem of the loss of balance among urban nuclei as voracious consumers of products, and the surrounding countryside, a supplier of raw materials, general provisions, and food. The point of observation was purely economic, aimed at balancing resources and consumption between city and countryside, but the repercussions quite clearly aimed to plan and control the ways cities grow. So much so, that bright Enlightenment architects such as Ledoux and others took these aspects seriously enough to transfer and interpret them in their urban theories. In an already turbulent period, Howard confronted them with his *Garden City of the Future*, where *green* took on a greater specific meaning and distinguished between different roles. A little later, the need for *green* was invoked to improve the hygienic conditions of the housing in the decrepit urban nuclei of the early 1900s, in the form of free spaces to interrupt the houses and guarantee light and sunshine, guidelines that were then transferred to the worthy experimental housing estates built across Europe. Le Corbusier, Hilberseimer, May, and many others would end up champions of the need to think of a city of quite different dimensions, one that bore the countryside within it and one that made meadows, parks, and natural elements the general context within which to construct a city in its new expansions and also, rather more provokingly, to replace the old nuclei.

All this is known history and, for some, also water under the bridge. I personally believe that these theories, in addition to the manifesto aspect and the differing temporal collocations, have the merit of emphasizing a theme that has not yet received unequivocal answers, and which today, as often happens in the recurrences of history, is again relevant in the face of pressing climatic and survival problems. Yet again, the question comes from other fields, but it falls on the role that natural spaces – extending the term 'green' to other elements, for example, water, open landscapes, and the productive countryside – can or indeed must have in building a polycentric city today.

The need to understand the agricultural countryside, not exactly a natural space, but, on the contrary, a space designed from time immemorial by man down to the tiniest detail, from the sprawling systems of ditches and channels that spread across the land, to the rows of trees to shade certain crops, and the hierarchy of local routes that allow the organization of fields and farms, as already mentioned. The same delicate role of distinction between the parts can be taken on by parks and gardens, inserting themselves within uninterrupted urban extensions and salvaging unfinished and abandoned pieces of land, testing out new relationships between architecture and open spaces, similarly to what already occurs with our cities' historical or historic parks.

Furthermore, green spaces can become elements to construct modern urban squares, collective places on a smaller scale, always defined and given measure by the surrounding architecture, similar in meaning but different in principle to the squares of historical cities. If we look closely, history has handed down to us many extraordinary examples where nature has entered in no small measure as an element that constructs places, bestowing extraordinary quality and a special character upon them. Without harking back to the exceptional Venetian "water piazza," lying between Saint Mark's Square, the island of San Giorgio, and the Punta della Dogana with the Salute watching over it, for me, one of the most exemplary squares today is still the magical "Square of Miracles" in Pisa. Or again, so unexpected in such a dense fabric as the center of Milan, we have the Basilicas Park, an

unplanned side effect of the wartime bombing, overseen by the apses of the two churches of San Lorenzo and Sant'Eustorgio: a true place of collective gathering, corresponding to an ancient square, characterized by the two important works of architecture that guard it, a park contained in its measurements, yet which has managed to reverse the frequentation of the streets around it, to bring the community life back inside it. And in addition, the recent revamping of the Darsena area, another "water piazza" in which a natural element is once again the protagonist, mirroring the houses and the city gate designed by Luigi Cagnola, which has acquired a fresh quality and vitality thanks to its new architectonic definition. These are merely a few examples, to suggest the possibility of imagining elements of nature inside a compact city, to investigate their potential role in the construction of public urban places, to study their extent, certainly different from that of the "stone piazzas" of history, and above all the compositional principles imposed by the works of architecture that must define them, including their type, character, identity, and form.

Arguably even more difficult and uncertain, arduous certainly yet urgent, is an equally essential issue for envisioning the form of the future city and responding to the challenges posed by the guidelines from Europe. I am referring to the issue of housing estates, still the quantitatively most consistent destination of cities, which defines the structure and organization of the largest swathes of fabric.

Here too, it may be necessary to distinguish between two issues. When speaking of suburbs, we are not referring so much to the physical distance from a center but to a distance in meaning and value, to the condition of parts that lack genuinely urban qualities, the institutions and collective places that identify them and encourage a frequentation that is not limited to local residents but extended to the inhabitants of the whole city. The beauty of the Old Towns, at times despite deprived dwellings born as council housing, redeemed almost everywhere from decay in the later decades of the 20th century, depends precisely on the extraordinary wealth of the public places, as well as the public, secular, and religious buildings present, which sum up their identity in a nutshell. Because, as Pausanias was wont to say, a city cannot be called such if it has no theatre. Translated into modern times, this means that there can be no city without institutions and public places to represent the civil community. It follows then that any redemption of the suburbs inevitably derives from the establishment of public places that must belong to the city as a whole, interlinked with others and accessible. This condition is conclusive.

After which, the second urgent issue is to define the compositional principles of residential areas, in search of a relationship between the private home and the public spaces of the city, a relationship that has been the city's main quality throughout history. The direct relationship between the house and the street is none other than the ability of the former to define collective, open, vital places, something the street has always represented in European cities. The question we must ask ourselves is this: is this model still valid and practicable, even in the face of the changes in the role of the street which almost everywhere has become a route for car traffic? Is this model the only one possible? And, above all, is it the same in new settlements, in those extended areas that increasingly offer themselves up to radical transformations?

Research into the definition of public places is intricately linked to this theme, which, in specifying its meaning, could be defined as a search for the principles to define a minimum dwelling unit, similar to that of the block in its relationship with the street and on the hierarchy of semi-collective interior spaces, so that the quality and richness might be equaled

and surpassed. As always, this entails rethinking the building types that constitute it, their interrelationships, and the form of the places that their composition can generate, along with the ways of aggregating the units and the fabric they create.

The issues of climate mitigation and the possible role of natural elements, as suggested by the European guidelines, must be included in research into the general identity of spaces that can be defined through the use of *green*, to also be included in residential areas. This too remains an open question, one that finds special opportunities for experimentation in the large areas where our suburbs have been reconverted, the industrial ones, whose activities have long since been expelled from European cities: railway marshalling yards, disused barracks, and so on.

The importance and delicacy of this theme, addressed in the project seminars and cited in the chapters, is particularly evident if we consider that the destiny of the contemporary city, its hoped-for new "green" course of action, its transition toward models with a social and economic balance as well as a stable quality of life – which includes the quality of places – can only be decided in our cities' suburbs, in those parts where the greatest transformations can actually take place, the most consistent changes remain possible, and where the most massive interventions will prove necessary. Given that our centers are already rich and have their own identity, the possible operations here are precise and few. The destiny of the cities will lie in the transformation of the suburbs, which must not catch us unawares.

In closing, just one last question: why talk about cities that are European and medium-sized, the main theme of this research?

Because these, I believe, already possess some of the qualities that we would like our future cities to possess: the recognizability of the parts, built up over time and still not muddled or completely swallowed up by the new expansions, the quality of the public places and works of architecture, a relationship still more or less in balance between expansions and the surrounding natural environment. These conditions allow us to glimpse a direction of development that has not yet been compromised and is therefore more easily feasible. They also present some of the problems set out, the existence of large outskirts with no identity, for example, but also the conditions for their effective transformation plus various abandoned areas for conversion of a sufficient area to allow a broad reflection on issues of development and urban design. These cities are the real wealth, the priceless heritage to be preserved and governed as well as possible, which probably only Europe possesses on such a large scale and in such variety.

Indeed, what was it that attracted Frederick Barbarossa in the far-off Middle Ages to descend into northern Italy to conquer Lombardy? None other than the wealth of a territory that, favored by its location on a plain, consisted of a large number of municipalities scattered with regularity across a fertile countryside. A single large city, we would say today, a well-distributed urban presence, because, it was said, there was no farmer who, in the space of a day's walk, could not reach a marketplace to sell his products: a place that could be recognized from a distance thanks to the bell tower that showed him the way, and, closer to, thanks to the compact city walls he had to cross through to reach the market. This was the great, palatable wealth of a balanced territory. A polycentric city, we would say, which, updated in its forms and ways, is what we wish for the destiny of our cities. An ancient teaching, yet still very up to the minute.

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INDEX

Note: **Bold** page numbers refer to tables, *italic* page numbers refer to figures and page numbers followed by "n" refer to end notes.

Aachen 34, *35,* 36, *36,* 37, *38,* 39, 40, *40, 41,* 74, 136, 204; Driescher Hof 215–224, *217–223*; mapping 253, 255–258, *256, 257, 258*; North 44, *46,* 46–48, *50, 51*
Abłażewicz-Gornicka, U. 271
Abbott, E. 26
Abdelkrim al Khattabi dam 156
accessibility 175, 194, 197–199, *200*, 207, 212, 221, 256, *258*, 262–265, 271, 279; mapping urban 262–265, 267–268, *264, 266*
Ackerman, J. 83
acropolis 78, *79,* 81, 82, *82, 84,* 240
administrative boundary 56–57, 284
Agence Ter 142, *142,* 154–158, *156, 157,* 159
Alberti, L. B. 17, 40, 74, 181, 245
Albrecht, B. 57, 59n9
Alcock G. L. 252
Alexander, C. 39; *Pattern Language, A* 58
Al Hoceima bay 154–158, *156, 157*
Alphand, A. 134
American grid 164
ANRU *(Agence nationale pour la rénovation urbaine)* 169
Architectural Design Workshop 204, 208, 215
Architectural European Medium-Sized City Arrangement (ARCHEA) 44–45, *46,* 48, *48, 50,* 52n4, 63, 146, 163n1, 191, 193, 204, 208, 215, 254, 258, 283
architecture: composition 103, 184, 185, 201; modernity and space 8–9; spatiality 8, 11–13
Ardoines project 175–177, *176*
Argan, G. C. 74, 223
aristocratic territory 164
Aristotle 17; *Politics* 78
Arsene-Henry, X. 138
articulated composite cluster 198
Athens 76, 77, *77,* 78, *79,* 80, *80,* 81, *81,* 137
augmented reality (AR) 251, 255–256
Autobahn 44 216–218
Aymonino, C. 68, 74n1, 103, 104n4, 184

Bacon, E. N.: *Design of Cities* 237
Barde, C.: *La science des plans des villes* 137
Bars (Floyer) *54,* 54–55
Barthes, R. 73
Bauman, Z. 89
Behne, A. 120
Benevolo, L. 57
Benjamin, W. 39, 58; *Naples* 55
Benoit-Levy, G. 136
Benveniste, É. 80
Berlage, H. P. 86–87, 91; *Über moderne Bouwkunst* 90
Berlin 20, 123, *124,* 136
Blyt H. 252
Bofill, R. 111
Bollnow, O. F. 27, 31n6
Bologna 69–72, *70–73, 108*; history and geography 106–109; mapping 254–255, *256*; metropolitan urban centrality 206–214, *207–213*; Urban Plan 109–114
Bononia 106, 107
Bordeaux Metropolitan Area 141
boundary 59n1; forms of 55–58; issues 54–55; threshold 58–59; white walls and black lines 55–56
bourgeois city 164

Bourne, I. 139
Bourne, Michel 139
Bristol *229*
building routes 228
Burckhardt, L. 37, 39, 42n10, 42n11, 42n15

Canella, G. 103, 104n4, 183, 184, 191n1, 191n2, 191n3, 191n5, 221
Casabella 92, 182, 183
cellular automata model 252
centrality 119, 120, 126, 142, 185, 190, 194–204, *197*, 206–211, *207–209*, 214, 214n3, 223; declination of 201, *203,* 204; factors 198, 220, *220,* 221; field 197–198, *199, 200, 202, 219*, 220, *220,* 221; space that interprets 198–199
Central Station system *208,* 209
Cerchia del Mille 108
Champs-sur-Marne 167–168, *168*
Chemetoff, A. 142, 150, 151
de Chirico, G. 92
Choisy, A. 240
Christofellis, A. 191n5
Circla 69, *70*, 72
Circle of Thousands 69, *70,* 72
Cittaemilia 185, 189, 191n6, 205n5
Clause Bois Badeau project 171–173, *172,* 178n17
Clement, G. 147–148, *148*
community 58, 76, 79, 88–91, 137, 182, 186, 187, 191, 216, 225, 231, 232, 237, 239, 288
Confini del paessaggio umano (Benevolo and Albrecht) 57
contemporary city 194–195; centrality 196–204, *197, 199, 200, 202, 203*; shaped city 195–196, *196*
Corner, J. 155
Covent Garden *234*
Cracow 123, 125, *125*
Crau region 173, *189*
CSAC (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione) 187
Cymer, A. 271

Dardi, C. 221
Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen (Sitte) 17–18, *19*
Descartes, R. 27
Design of Cities (Bacon) 237
Desvigne, M. 144, 151
Devillers, C. 165
Die Architektur der Großstadt (Scheffler) 89–90
diffuse city 195
Driescher Hof 215–224, *217–223*
Duisburg 121–122, *122*
Dumézil, G. 78–79

École Nationale du Paysage de Versailles (a national landscape school) 149
Ecoquartier Flaubert project 143
Einstein, A. 27
Emilia-Romagna 107, 191n8, 193, 216, 224n2
emptiness 68, 99–103
empty space 195–198, 239, 285
ENSA Normandie architecture school 158–161, *159–161*
EPAORSA (Grand Paris Amenagement) 178n22
Erasmus 146, 163n1, 190, 192n11
European medium-sized city 225; fabrics 232–234; polarity 225–228; routes 228, 230–232
European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) 194
Evidence-Based Design (EBD) 263

fabrics 159, 166, 225, 232–234; urban 142
Faculty of Architecture 183, 185, 191n2, 253, 258, 265, *266, 268*
Fainstein, S. 262
Farnsworth House (Mies van der Rohe) *9*
Faubourg du Bois district 171
figure-ground analysis 195
Flatland (Abbott) 26–27, 31n1
flooding 149, 150, 155, 174–177
Florence 240
Floyer, C.: *Bars 54,* 54–55
Fondazione Innovazione Urbana (FIU) 113
Fontana Vecchia 107
Forensic Architecture 154
Forestier, J. -C. -N. 134–136, 139, *135*
form 63–67
France 133, 134, 136, 139, 141, 146, 167, 177n4, 182; *see also* green urban areas
French formal gardens 164
fruit and vegetable market *see* metropolitan urban centrality
full space 195–197

Gallaratese 184
Gardella, I. 96, 183, 184
garden city 59, 136, 164, 171–173, 287
General Urban Plan 109–114, 116n7
germe & JAM 165, *168, 170, 172, 174, 176,* 177n7
globalization 189
global warming 174
Goethe, J. W. 31, 32n25, 106
GPRU (the *grand projet de renouvellement urbain*) 169
Grand-Quai 151
Grassi, G. 74, 74n1, 191n3
greenspace 133–134, 146–153, 154, 166, 286–288; *Grenelle de l'Environnement* 141; open ground 137–139, *138, 140*; park system 134–137; territory and 141–144, *142, 143*; town planning approach 139–141

Grenelle de l'Environnement 141
Grether, F. 144
Grimms Wörterbuch 56–57
Grumbach, A. 141
Gründerzeit 47, 49, *50,* 52n12
Gruppo Architettura 103, 104n5
Gutton, A. 137
GZM (Gornośląsko-Zagłębiowska Metropolia) 253–254, *254, 255*, 257–258

habituated boundary 56–59
Haider, J. 271, **272**
Halbwach, M. 77
Hamilton D. K. 263
Heidegger, M. 28, 31n10
Hénard, E. 134
Hippodamus 78
History of Architecture (Choisy) 240
Howard, E. 136, 287
hypothesis on the nuclear city (Trincanato) 96–97, *97*

informal city 228
Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (IUAV) 63, 96–98, *99–102*, 103, 183, 184, 191n3
Italy 63, 94, 95, 106–109, 181–184, 189, 214n4, 283, 289; *see also* Parma

Jameson, F. 87–88
Jardin en Mouvement (Garden in Motion) 147–148
Joseph-von-Görres-Straße 47, 49–50, *50*
Jülicher Straße 44–52, *46–48, 50*
Just City, The (Fainstein) 262

Kahn, I. 237
Kalache, A. 271
Kaplan, M. 271
Katschhof 40, *40*
Koetter, F. 22, 23, 24n23
Konigsstadt/Königsstadt 123, *124*
Krier, R. 19–23; *Stadtraum in Theorie und Praxis* 19–22, *21,* 24n17

La Bolognina 109, 110, 114
Laboratory of Architecture 60+ Foundation (LAB 60+) 270, *277*, 280n2
La Charte de l'urbanisme (Gutton) 137
la Circla 108
Lacis, A. 58; *Naples* 55
La città dei musei 87
Lafayette Park (Mies van der Rohe) *12*
land consumption 185, 194, 195, 205n8, 215, 284, 286
La Prairie de l'Abbé 149–150
La science des plans des villes (Rey, Barde and Pidoux) 137
Laugier, M. -A. 133–134
Le Champ Libre 148
Le Corbusier 22, 74, 79–80, 99, 104n1, 137, 139, 285, 287
Lefebvre, H. 31n4, 118–119
Le Havre 150, 151, *151*
Leibniz, G. W. 27, 31n3
Lesko 270, 276–277, *277*, **278,** 279
Les Mureaux 169, *170,* 173, 177n9, 177n10
Leveau, T. 139
liminality 57
linear cluster 198
Lods, M. 137–, *138*
Loos, A. 91
Loraux, N. 76, 82
Loudon, J. C. 136
Lynch, K. 18, 236, 237, 246n3, 254, 256, *256, 258*

Madonna del Soccorso 69, *70,* 71, 72, *72*
Maldonado, T. 110
mapping 15–23, 23n3, 26, 28–31, 31n18, 35–37, 42n2, 44, 45, 51, 52n4, 55, 56, 65, 154–155, 251–252; Aachen 255–256, *257, 258*; Al Hoceima bay 155–158, *156, 157, 159, 161,* 163n5; augmented reality 255–256; Bologna 254–255, *256*; and designing space 22–23; 3D models 252, 254–258, *255–258*; GZM 253–254, *254*; PBL method 252–253; territory and 158–162, *159–162*; urban circle of life 262–267, *264, 266*
Margherita Gardens 69, *70*
Marinarezza complex *233*
Marx, K. 84, 123
Mastercampus 188
mathematics 26–29
matrix route 228, *230*
Matteotti Bridge *208,* 209
Meaning in the visual arts (Panofsky) 67–68
medium-sized European cities 30–31, 68, 118, 146, 193–194, 197, 201, 225–234, 236, 237
mental health 267
Metropolis of Rouen Normandie 148
metropolitan urban centrality 204, 206–214, *208*, 219, 221
Mies van der Rohe, L. *9, 12*
Miramas 173, *174,* 178n19
Modena 125–127, *126,* 185, *187–189*, 191n10
Modern Movement 103, 284
Monastery of San Francesco 69, *70, 71*
Mönninger, M. 57–58
monument 16, 17, 17, 65, 68–73, *87,* 90, 91, 107, 123, 137, 181, 184, 210, 234, *238,* 240
Mount Oliveto 72
multigenerational space 270, 279; in Lesko 276–277, **278,** 279; literature analysis **272**; public spaces 271, *274, 275*; WDS project 273, 276
Municipal Structure Plan (PSC) 114, 116n8
Muratori, S. 22, 65–66, *67,* 74n1, 97–99, 183

Naples (Benjamin and Lacis) 55
natural spaces 133, 134, 136, 139–141, 142, 144, 147, 150, 164–168; Ardoines project 175–177, *176*; Champ-sur-Marne 167–168, *168*; Clause Bois Badeau project 171–173, *172*; Les Mureaux 169, *170,* 173; Miramas 173, *174*; *see also* greenspace
"Nature" in the heart of the town. Matthäus Mérian 167
neighborhood unit 232–234
Neumeyer, F. 51, 52n14
neurodiversity 267
New Hospital of Venice 98–99
Nolli, G. B. 16, 17, 18–19, 21, 35, 42n5; *Nuova Pianta di Roma 16,* 16–17
Novissime project 99–103, *101, 102,* 104n3, 184
Nuova Pianta di Roma (Nolli) *16,* 16–17, 22
Nuova Sacca del Tronchetto 98

Olivetti, A. 182, 246n1
Olmsted, F. L. 134–135
"ON AIR" exhibition *152,* 152–153
open ground 137–141, *138, 140*
Osty, J. 143, *143*
Oued Nekôr 157

Padua 17, 63–64, *64,* 74n1, 74n2, 184
Panofsky, E.: *Meaning in the visual arts* 67–68
Parco del Navile *210*, 212–213
Pardié (Schröder) *13,* 31n8, 36–37, 42n6, 44, 52n3, 52n5–8, 55–56
park city 169–173, *172,* 173, 178n16
park system 134–137, 139
Parma 74n3, 115n5, 181–191, *186–190, 187*, 193, *196, 197, 199, 200, 202,* 204, *231,* 236–246, *241, 243*
Pasolini, P. P. 90–91
passive boundaries 35, 37, 56
Pattern Language, A (Alexander, Ishikawa and Silverstein) 42n16, 58
Perec, G. 27, 31n7, 32n26
Pfalzkapelle 221, 223
physics 27–28, 31n11
Piano regolatore e di ampliamento 109, *110*
Piazza della Signoria 240
Pidoux, J.: *La science des plans des villes* 137
Piketty, T. 80
place-spaces 239
Plato 77, 78, 81, 82
Plouffe, L. 271, **272**
Poland 253, 261, 263, 265, 267, 268n2, 270, 271, 273, 277, **278,** 279, 280n1
polarity 197, 225–228
Polesello, G. *101, 102,* 103, 104n2, 104n4–5, 184, 191n3, 246n7
Politics (Aristotle) 78
polycentric relationship system 204, 204n1, 207, 214n3
poly-cluster 198, 220–221
Popper, K. 30, 32n17, 32n19, 32n22–27
Post-occupancy Evaluation (POE) 263–264
PPRI (*Plan de prévention du risque inondation*) 175
Program Plan of the Historic Center of Palermo (Samonà) 65, *66,* 75n5
Project-Based Learning (PBL) formula 252–253

Quaroni, L. 236, 246n1

radiant city 164
red-blue plan 28–29, 36–37, *38,* 44–46, *48,* 48–51, *50*
Reihnische Westfalische Technische Hochschule (RWTH) 13n8, 34, 44, 52n4
relational cluster 198
revolutionary didactic approach 95
Rey, A. -A.: *La science des plans des villes* 137
Risler, G. 136
Rogers, E. N. 88–89, 92, 183, 191n4
Rohde, E. 77
Rossi, A. 16, 22, 23n11, 44, 52n1, 65, 72, 74, 74n1, 74n2, 76, 77, 83, 84, 102–103, 121, 183, 184, 191n3, 221, 246n2
routes 228, 230–232, *230*
Rowe, C. 21–23, 24n23, 177n1, 195

Samonà, G. 64*,* 73, 95, 96, 99, *101,* 102, *102,* 103, 183, 184, 239, 285; *Program Plan of the Historic Center of Palermo* 65, *66,*75n5
Sancta Hjerusalem 72
San Giovanni Evangelista 72, 242, 243, *244, 245*
Santa Maria dei Servi *71*
Santa Maria della Visitazione al Ponte delle Lame 72, *73*
Scagliarini studio *112,* 112–114, *113*
Scheffler, K.: *Die Architektur der Großstadt* 89–90
Schmidt, H. 119
School of Venice, The 94–98, 103
Schröder, U. 34, 51; *Pardié 10*, *11*, *13,* 36–37, 44, 55–56
Schroer, M. 55, 59n3
Schwellenatlas (Stalder) 58, 59n4
selenite walls 107
semantic densification 68, 69
semantic image 226, *226*
Semerani, L. 65, 74n1, *99–102*, 103
Sereni, E. 106
shaped city 195–196, *196,* 201, 206, *207*, 216, 218
Simon, J. 136
Sitte, C. 11, 22, 23, *238*; *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* 17–18, *19, 42n17*
social-construction neighborhood 233–234
Sörgel, H. 13n1, 39, 42n20
spatial boundary 56–59

spatiality: of architecture 7–8, 11–13; of city 11–13, 29–33, 34, 42n2, 49, 52, 55–56, 64, 123, 201
spatial mapping 15–16, 22–23; *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* 17–18, *19*; *Nuova Pianta di Roma 16,* 16–17; *Stadtraum in Theorie und Praxis* 19–22, *21*
Spinner 2013 185–186, 191n8, 193, 206, 216
square effect 212
Stadtraumgestaltungen, Kartierung städtischer Räume 34–41, *35, 36, 38,* 42n2
Stadtraum in Theorie und Praxis (Krier) 19–22, *21,* 24n17
Stalder, L.: *Schwellenatlas* 58, 59n4, 60n13, 60n17
storytelling 154, 158–162
strategic dimension 65, 67
structural boundary 8, 56–59
Studium 107, 108
summer architectural project 188–189
Szukalski, P. 271, **272**

TDSC technique 185, 193–195, 199, 201, 204, 205n3, 206, 208–209, 214n1, 216, 220, 223, 224n3, 224n5
technological progress 267
territorialized city 166
territorial scale analysis 215–221, *217, 218*
territorial signs *197,* 216–217, *218*
territory: geography and landscape 166–168; and greenspace 141–144, *142, 143*; and mapping 158–162, *159–162*
Theodor-Körner-Kaserne 216, 222, 224n4
3D models: mapping 252, 254–258, *255–258*
thresholds 55–56, 58–59
Torresotti circle 108, 109
town planning approach 139–141
trame verte 139–141
transcalar process 216
transport 267
Trierer straße 216, 218, 222
trilateral system 216
Trincanato, E. R. 95, *97,* 100, *101,* 102, *102*; *Venezia Minore* 96
Tubertini, E. 109, 115n4

Über moderne Bouwkunst (Berlage) 90
Ungers, O. M. 30, 32n21, 67, 86, 103
Unimetal factory 144
universal design 262, 263, 265, 267, 270, **278**, 280n2
urban artifacts 63, 68–70, 73, 74n2
urban centrality 120, 142, 194–195, 197–198, 201, 204, 206, 207, *207,* 208–209, *209*, 210–211, 214, 221
urban circle of life 262–267, *264*
urban fabric 17, 49, 72, 100, 107, 134, 137, 141–144, 148, 161, 166, 168–171, *172,* 173, *176,* 177, 177n4
Urban Plan 109–114
urban restructuring table 100
urban space 11, 15, 19–23, 34, 40, 133, 147, 150, 151, 195; from mathematical space to 26–28; mapping of 29, 31; uncertainty of 55
urban strategy 270
urban suburbs 118–119
usability 199

Valls, F. 252
Van Gennep, A. 55, 57, 58, 59n2, 60n14
Velasca Tower of BBPR 184
Venezia Minore (Trincanato) 96
Venice 65, *67*, 74, 74n1, 94, *97–98*; emptiness 99–103; school of 94–98; theory 103–104
Vernant, J. -P. 78
Verona *127,* 127–129, *128*
Via Aemilia 106, 107
Via Emilia 127, 185, 239, 240
visibility 199
Vitry-sur-Seine 175–177, *176*, 178n22

Warsaw Social District (Warszawska Dzielnica Społeczna, WDS) 270, 273, *274–275*, 276, 277, **278,** 280n5
Watkins D. H. 263
well-being 152, 267, 271, **272, 278,** 279, 286

Zéro Artificialisation Nette (zero net artificialization) 167
zero land consumption *see* land consumption

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