

HISTORIC CENTRES: SINCE WHEN ARE THEY AN ISSUE?

Donatella Calabi

Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia - IUAV

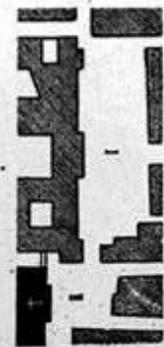
calabi@iuav.it

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to present a sort of «genealogy» of the concept of historic centres, starting from the early modern age to the most recent documents drawn up by international bodies (such as UNESCO) who deal with the urban landscape of existing cities. New strategies for creating an urban image charged with architectural significance, like the ones that the Museums in Bilbao, Rovereto and Barcelona give to their respective cities, can help us to consider the function that special buildings can have in controlling mass tourism, at least in part. It is a question of suggesting itineraries that differ from the traditional ones and a diversification of users (tourists, scholars, citizens of different age, culture and origin, children, older people, immigrants). It is a question of promoting new routes and selecting new places of interest.

1. – The following is an attempt to present a sort of «genealogy» of the concept of historic centres – the result is a highly diversified account.

One of the first, if not the first, decree for the conservation of an urban site is the one issued by Isabel of Castile after 1492, establishing that the Alhambra must be «protected for all eternity». However, the need to preserve a city's architectural, historical and artistic heritage is an invention of the late 19th century, when the most important contribution to an aesthetic theory based on space as the object of formal perception and as an epistemological figure comes from Vienna and its movements of artistic reform. In this paper I would like to take a quick look at the principal stages of the history of the preservation of historic centres, while also taking into account the UNESCO recommendations of the Vienna Memorandum, 2005. My aim is to comment some of its points to show that they originate from the debate, decisions and experiences of the previous century.



A MODENE
I. Piazza di S. Domenico. II. Piazza Reale



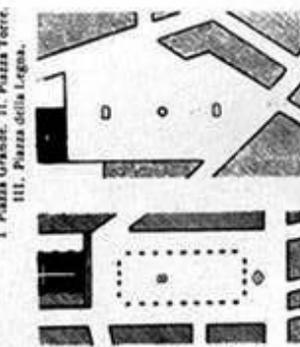
B MODENE
I. Piazza Grande. II. Piazza Torre
III. Piazza della Legna.



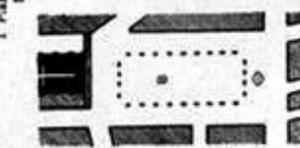
C PALERME
Piazza S. Francesco.



H PALERME
S. Cita.



G FLORENCE
Piazza S. Maria Novella



F FLORENCE
S. Croce.



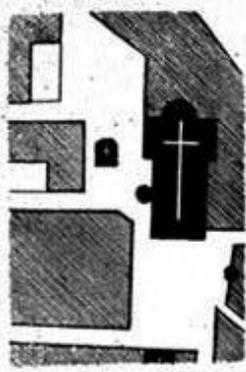
E PADOUÉ. Piazza Ferrara



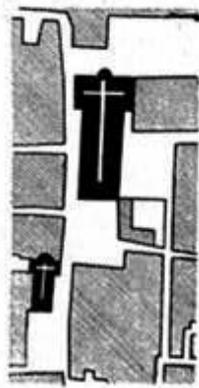
K VERONE. S. Fermo Maggiore.



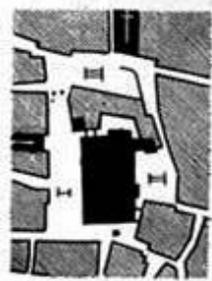
L VERONE. S. Anastasia.



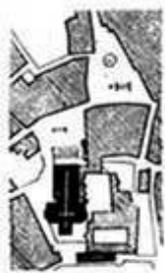
D RAVENNE. Piazza del Duomo.



J LUCQUES. Piazza Grande.



O VICENZA
I. Piazza del Signori. II. Peschiera
III. Piazza della Biara



N S. GIMIGNANO
I. Piazza del Duomo.
II. Piazza della Cattedrale.



M VERONE. Piazza del Duomo.



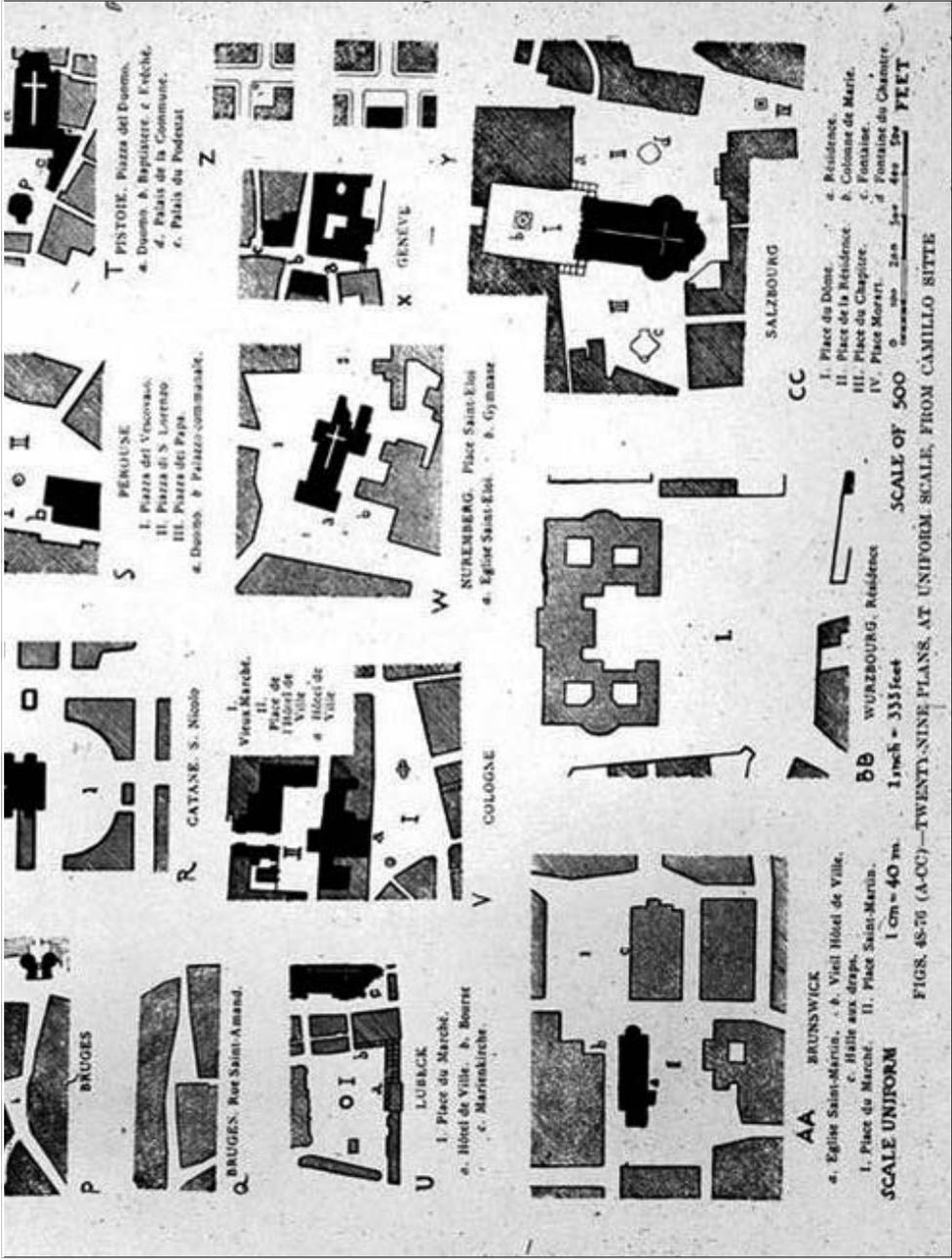


Fig. 1
 Camillo Sitte's analysis of public spaces, from W. Hegemann and E. Peets, *Civic art*, 1922.

It is a well-known fact that Camillo Sitte in his *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (1889) presents a detailed analysis of space within the city (Fig. 1), studying the forms of the past and trying to explain its morphology through references to the physiology of space and artistic theories. Urban space, that is the empty space between buildings (or squares or streets) was also studied by scholars from other countries: Cornelius Gurlitt and Albert Brinckmann in Germany, Raymond Unwin in England, Charles Buls in Belgium. These studies are presented as a scientific discovery and constitute an occasion to discuss practices of control over urban transformation (Vienna Memorandum 2005, point 24 regarding the design of public space).

The town centre becomes a privileged subject of investigation: starting from antiquity, scholars focus on the city's «characteristics», analysing specific case-studies and then proposing a generalization – their starting point is the contrast between past and present.

The physiological mechanism of vision is chosen as the principal rule on the basis of which the regularity of urban space achieved at the drawing board is judged or criticised. The influence of these studies in the practice of design is destined to be considerable and to continue for a long time, as well as laying the foundations of the need for conservation.

There is a phase in which theorists insist, more than in the past, on the need to resort to «artistic» principles in urban transformation, a phase usually defined as the age of the birth of «Civic Art» (also called «Arte di costruire la città», or «Art Urbain», «Art Public», «Urban Aesthetic», «Stadt-baukunst», «City Beautiful») (Zucconi 1992: 7-8, 35-44, 66-82).

A great number of books and periodicals are published on the subject, while societies are founded for the protection of monuments and urban sites. In 1866 Haussmann insists on the publication of a *Topographie du Vieux Paris*, in the context of the preparation of a new general history of the town. The commission *du Vieux Paris*, which establishes exchanges with institutions of other countries, counts among its members famous personalities such as Marcel Poëte (Calabi 1997: 59-71).

These Civic Art studies are not so much the result of scholarly work as another way to discuss the fragmentation of knowledge: little by little

they outline a new profession, that of the «Conservator». In conclusion, historical and artistic issues are increasingly linked to each other and to preservation policies and refer not only to individual buildings and objects, but to issues of the historical and artistic identity of urban centres. The expressions most frequently used are «artistic environment» and «typical feature of a city», while the Vienna Memorandum requires «a vision on the city as a whole with forward-looking action on the part of decision-makers, and a dialogue with the other actors and stakeholders involved» (Vienna Memorandum 2005, point 13).

2. – In some European countries (Spain, Belgium, Italy) the conservation of old urban centres is strictly linked to reconstruction after World War I. However, attitudes vary greatly. In some ancient cities (Madrid and Brussels, for example) the criteria of a traditional design approach prevail, proposing enlargements and demolitions along the streets. The municipalities propose the substitution of parts of the urban fabric to introduce tertiary functions and, nearby, the reconstruction of certain buildings or the unification of major estates. In Berlin competitions or direct commissions lead to the implementation of the plans for Unter den Linden and Gendarmenmarkt (Calabi 2005: 270-274): the volumes and reorganisation of the road network correspond to an enlarged scale of the buildings, open spaces and prospects. They also finance studies and the «sanitisation» of the lots previously occupied by the *Mietkasernen*, by opening up closed blocks, regenerating new intermediate spaces, reducing high density, creating new streets or enlarging existing ones.

In Italy Giovanni Muzio says «Existing cities (and their central nuclei) must not be devastated by forcing them into functions unsuited to them» (*L'architettura di Giovanni Muzio*, 1994: 212). Looking back to experiences of reconstruction in the past, such as London after the fire in 1666, or Catania after the eruption of Etna, or Lisbon after the earthquake, he points out that they have established a rule: the importance of the road network. He considers the rule to consist in the conservation of the road network as the principal element of historical authenticity (Vienna Memorandum 2005, points 14-15). Roads are always rebuilt following the original layout, not only for reasons of ground values, but

because of what remains in the memory and behaviour of the inhabitants (Fig. 2). Finally, he claims the predominance of cultural over economic values. In Rome the AACAR (Artistic Association of Architecture Experts) and the GUR (the Urban Planners' Club) advocate a study of the form of the big city, considered as the spiritual, political, economic, artistic and scientific heart of the nation. Nostalgia for the beauty of the architecture of the past fuels civic attitudes and fosters an assessment of design projects in terms of dignity of the urban environment (Fig. 3). In writings of this period we must underline the use of expressions such as «old city», «old centre», «conservation», «physiognomy», «environment», «liberation of the monument». They are the key words of a common language drawn up by the sponsors of Civic Art in Europe – they enter into the programs, and even more into the urban transformations carried out.

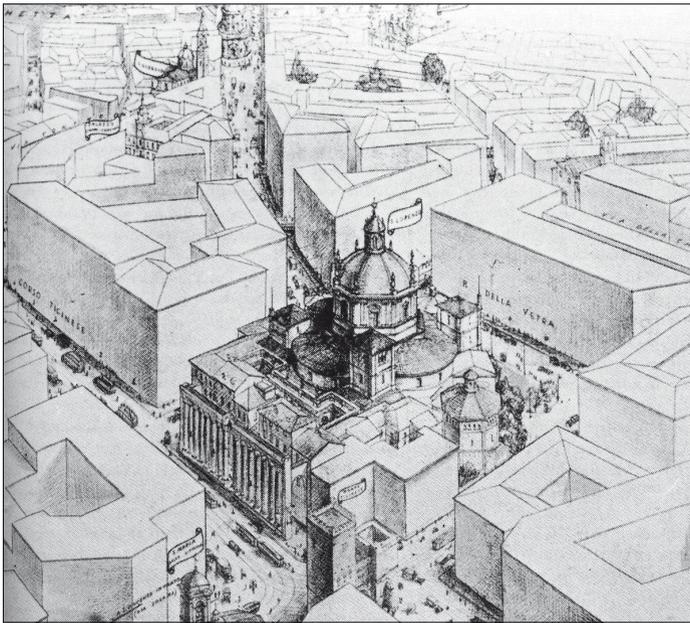


Fig. 2
Giovanni Muzio, project for the area of San Lorenzo, Milan.

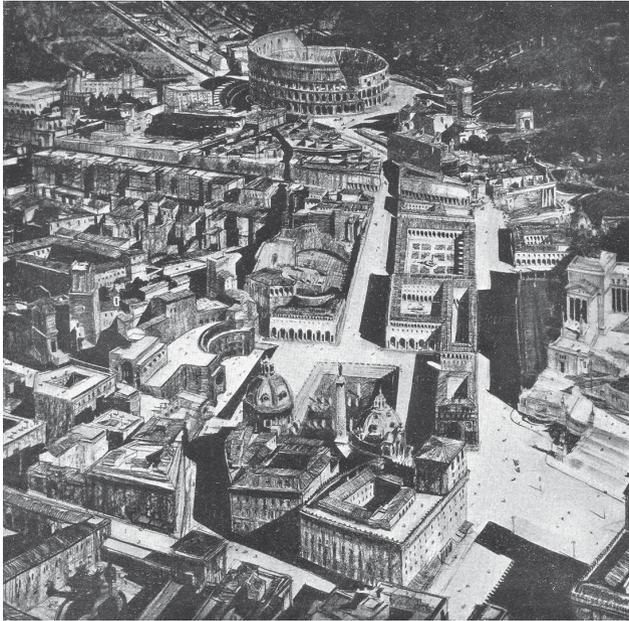


Fig. 3
*La Burbera, perspective view for the forum area of Rome,
plan proposed in 1929.*

3. – After World War II historic centres became one of the most important urban issues. Faced with ruins, with the memory of the lost city, in many cases material reconstruction is seen as the way to preserve the value of tradition. The slogan «Where it was, as it was», though sometimes violently opposed, was often the solution adopted, even when presenting the appearance of a nostalgic anachronism.

In French reconstruction examples *à l'identique* are frequent. St. Malò lost 80% of its heritage within the fortified citadel designed by Vauban, which was intact until the war. In the reconstruction work the criterion of maximum «conservation» was applied to those damaged monuments (walls, ramparts, castle) which could be rebuilt – but a conservationist and historicist attitude was also extended to the rest of the city, almost completely destroyed (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4
Saint-Malò.

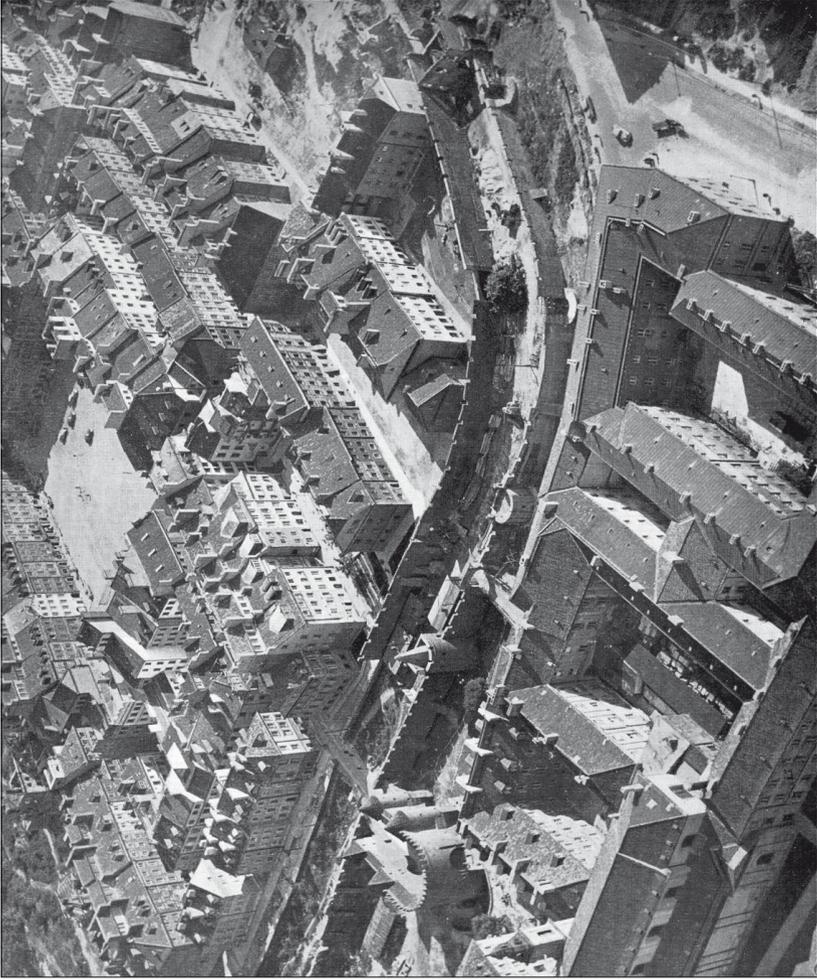
Taking the few remaining ruins as starting point, old alignments were confirmed; those buildings which still had vertical structures were rebuilt in the same place in an identical fashion; the road network was re-created following the old layout; the former skyline was reintroduced; local material was used: all decisions were subordinated to the restitution of an image. This kind of approach is strongly criticized by the Vienna Memorandum (Vienna Memorandum 2005, point 20) .

In Germany the case of Münster, which suffered a great number of aerial attacks between 1940 and 1945 resulting in the destruction of 90% of the historic centre, also posed the problem of a comparison with the traces of its past. However, a very different solution was adopted. Today, in the Gothic centre developed in the Baroque age, continuity of space and typological homogeneity suggest a «historical» atmosphere whose authenticity is cast in doubt only after a close look at the details (Vienna Memorandum 2005, point 21). In point of fact, the town is the result of a complete reconstruction, begun in 1945 and finished at the beginning of the Sixties, as elsewhere in Westfalia. The plan is not identical – on the

contrary it has been decidedly modified, to adapt the former scheme to the present way of life. The political decisions exclude any repetition, proposing instead an interpretation of the *genius loci*, a fascinating substitute of the old city. However, it is hard to define what is «culture and architecture of the place»(Vienna Memorandum 2005, on «façadism» points 19, 21, 26). The same procedure has been followed in several Belgian cities, where the central areas present traditional typology and styles (roofs, sky-lights, wood or stucco) to the point of caricature.

Another case of reconstruction that must be mentioned is Warsaw, where decisions are justified from an ethical point of view as a denial of the siege of 1939 and of the deportation of millions of Jews to concentration camps, events which transformed the city in a desert of ruins between 1943 and 1944. In the town centre the Poles opted for restoring the road network; in some parts of the city for the neo-classical architecture of the 19th century; in others (Constitution Square) for a simplified order. But the final design for the district of Muranow (1948-49) involved a reconstruction which actually used the ruins as a resource, selecting the material that could be saved. In short, reconstruction began with a catalogue and inventory of the ruins and continued with the construction of Market Square (1953) and its environs (1956), resulting in a piece-by-piece restoration of the entire district (*Fig. 5*). An enthusiastic and patient work of philological restoration is the moral condition indispensable for the rebuilding of the modern town following innovative principles: the power of the image and of the message conditions the context. This experience seems to be, in fact, at the basis of point 16 of the Vienna Memorandum.

Other significant examples of post-war reconstruction in which historic centres are considered «works of art» are to be found throughout Europe: Amiens, Lubeck (the plan by Tessenow in 1947), Terni (Ridolfi's plans dated 1944-1959), or Le Havre (Perret's design), where the architects do not forgo following the criteria of modernity in their plans. A completely different option, the opposite of a strategy of continuity, is to denounce the destruction as an unavoidable break with the past, to accept the irrevocable loss of a historical structure caused by an exceptional event (such as war). Here the problem of identity is solved as a free reconstruction of what is lost, following modern criteria.



*Fig. 5
Warsaw: reconstruction of the city center.*

4. – Throughout Europe the issue of conservation, which at urban level appears as the definition of «sectors» to be protected, arises again in the Seventies. In Paris two *arrondissements*, the third and the seventh, are entirely protected since 1962 – the rest of the historic city is protected only in certain points, through listing or the inclusion in a list of buildings within an area to be protected as a historical monument.

More recently some *Plans d'Occupation des Sols* have been approved in specific zones, where total protection goes hand in hand with the recommendation that the destruction of certain old buildings should be avoided. Paradoxically, in French culture the notion of «secteur sauvegardé» (the equivalent of «zone of protection») is in line with the Modern Movement, in the sense that it corresponds to the concept of the city as broken up into zones – a division that is often artificial, in part due to post-war experience of unhealthy areas. In the zoning plan a historical area is shown as a «zone», as if it were a destination of use, on a par with commercial or residential zones (Porfyriou 2002).

5. – Though interest in ancient towns mainly dates from the second half of the XIX century, the adoption of specific rules is relatively recent. The difficulties of comparing the legislation for the protection of the architectural heritage and the built environment of the various European countries is evident if we take into account institutional diversity and actual implementation. In the United Kingdom in 1967 a law for the protection of entire areas was approved when the Ministry for Building and Local Government commissioned some studies to prepare a new strategy for historic centres. Four cities (Bath, Chester, Chichester, York) prepared these studies with the aid of consultants outside of the local authority: their suggestions for financial assistance, a list of historic buildings, control given to the local authorities, are enclosed in the planning legislation. In Chester the studies on the historic city were entrusted to Donald W. Insall and associates, whose book titled *Chester: a study in conservation*, published in 1968, reveals the neglect, under-utilization or inappropriate use of several buildings and the need for immediate intervention and restoration (Porfyriou 2002: 168-178). In 1969 a large *Conservation Area* was established, extending beyond the walled centre to include a new construction area (Fig. 6).

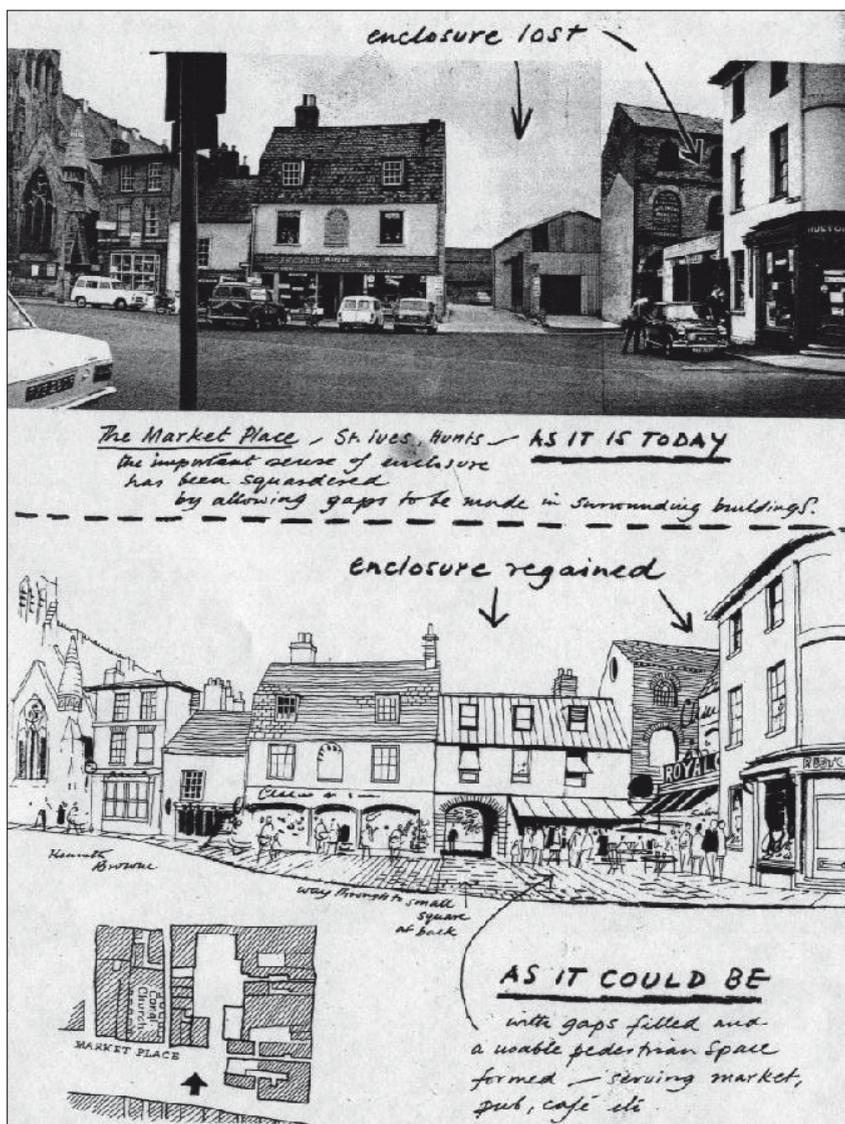


Fig. 6
Chester: analysis of urban enclosure.

A fund for preservation was set up, to be used if necessary in the course of several financial years. This conservation programme includes pilot projects, such as provisions to reduce traffic in the town centre and provide financial assistance for private owners for the restoration of their buildings. In 1975 it was chosen as one of the best fifty projects for European Heritage Year, attracting worldwide attention (Vienna Memorandum, 2005, point 23).

With regard to Germany, the reclamation of the industrial areas in the Ruhr basin was very innovative.

In Italy the term «monument» includes all properties of varying ages with specific artistic or historical characteristics, of civilizing import. Not only great works, but even the most modest, as long as they have cultural value or documentary relevance. The opening paper at the Conference of Gubbio (1960) by Mario Manieri Elia and Antonio Cederna states that the monument to respected and protected is the historic city in its entirety, as formed through the ages (Ciardini and Falini 1978) (Vienna Memorandum 2005, points 23-24). Yet a consequence of this type of approach is a restrictive conservation which isolates the historic centre from the rest of the city, preventing the access of contemporary architecture. The centre is increasingly defined as a reserve, delimited by a perimeter, outside of which all is permitted.

As a reaction against this attitude the plan for Bologna, which for the first time sets aside funds (a very modest amount, to be honest) for existing residential buildings, introduces the practice of «typological restoration», founded on studies by Saverio Muratori (Muratori 1960), based on the observation that non-monumental architecture reveals permanent characteristics that define the urban fabric, that is building types. These studies are directed towards a harmonious insertion of new buildings in the ancient fabric. Their field is the definition of new parts of the city as a way to plan the extension of historic cities. However, the same method is also used in restoration work, to restore the regularity of the built environment, guided by the architecture of the past. The local government's intervention in the historic centre soon became a model as to procedures and typologies – a clever advertising campaign aroused considerable interest throughout Europe. Bologna was in fact the first Italian city to launch a government policy concern-

ing the historic centre for residential purposes, also linked to a revitalization of small building firms. Local authorities and communities, planning commissions and even simple citizens must be considered among the designers, following a form of social and political control of urban development (Vienna Memorandum 2005, points 24, 25, 28F). The attempt is to preserve building typology, considered the main characteristic of the old city. The result is a classification of the need to intervene by means of total or partial restoration, reconstruction or the replacement with new buildings.

A restoration based only on typology, however, inevitably emphasizes analogies and abolishes all traces of diversity. It eliminates (or strongly influences) the possibility of a contextualization of contemporary architecture (Vienna Memorandum 2005, point 32C).

Finally, we can state that Gubbio represents an important turning point in which the issue of «historic centres», previously the preserve of art historians and urban historians, suddenly becomes the primary issue for town planning actions.

Meanwhile, already since the Conference of Amsterdam in 1975 and the European Paper of the Architectural Heritage issued by the European Council, the important question became the implementation of the management of buildings to be preserved – many subjects (such as analysis, design, restoration) are connected with the urban fabric and are all a part of this new field of study (Vienna Memorandum 2005, point 28). The conservation of the architectural heritage depends on its integration with the life of the city's inhabitants. «Integrated conservation» must necessarily be one of the first steps of urban and regional planning.

6. – Today the legislation of conservation is more and more sophisticated, yet at same time episodes of extreme violence against the heritage of the past still take place. The damage to ancient Babylon and its archaeological sites caused by the war in Iraq is the most sensational example. Yet even without considering the extreme and dramatic cases that have recently attracted world-wide attention, there is no doubt that the incompatibility of everyday life with the fragility of some historic towns is an issue of vital importance for us all and that mass tourism is one of the most evident examples.

The risk of turning the entire restoration process into a «musealization» of the urban scene exists. It is necessary to find a strategy which does not simply consist in saving buildings threatened by their scarce adaptation to contemporary needs – we must give them a correct meaning and an appropriate use integrated in the urban fabric, without causing ruptures and lacerations. Colour plans or the insertion of urban furniture considered as typical, even if often considered an improvement by the inhabitants, contribute to the transformation of our historic cities into museums, with a tourist function to be economically exploited (Vienna Memorandum 2005, point 15).

A difficult equilibrium in the management of the historic city can be achieved by balancing the restoration of the built environment with the musealization of the urban scene, those who stress the importance of revitalising the buildings (by giving them a new function) with those who ask for their absolute conservation, untouchable and unrelated to a process of development.

The lively debate of the last sixty years has had the merit of transforming the issue of historic centres from a question for specialists into a theme of general interest and political and administrative action. However, the debate on restoration has always been expressed only at theoretical level, with a great amount of rhetoric and principles – every methodological application regularly fails to comply with its assumptions and underlines all the limits of its practical realization.

A chocolate-box, eternally changeless city is very different from a city capable of preserving the memory of its past thanks to museums, archaeologists, scholars and urban planners, without losing contact with its complex reality (Vienna Memorandum, 2005, point 15).

The heritage does not exist in itself and can only be defined as «heritage» as the result of a selection process. In other words, it implies a choice – it represents something that society intentionally wishes to hand on to posterity, filtered through a system of values which changes in different periods, places, cultural situations. A great part of the cultural heritage is in danger of becoming a victim of its success. Accessibility must remain within the limits established by the need for protection. Nowadays the call for culture often becomes a marketing strategy which uses the «glorious past» to give new life to the present (and to the municipal budget).

Yet other strategies for an urban marketing based on the creation of a landscape and of a cultural image of interest to us today do exist: they are the ones presented by some of the big new museums, such as the Guggenheim by Gehry in Bilbao (*Fig. 7*), the Mart by Mario Botta in Rovereto, the Museu d'Art Contemporani by Meier in Barcelona). They attribute an extraordinary function to the capacity for communication of the new architecture. In these cases, the museum plays a role which is not only of enhancement of an area, sometimes transferring the interest of visitors from ancient monumental areas to suburban zones – they frequently modify the importance of the city in which they are located and their hierarchies, thanks to new tourist attraction processes and new urban planning activity that sets itself the goal of controlling the city's skyline (Vienna Memorandum 2005, points 16-17). However, these choices should also be considered with a critical attitude and an awareness of the passing of time and of the dynamics that they engage. In the last three years Bilbao (not only the museum but the entire city) has had less visitors, and the trend has increased in proportion to the increase of museum maintenance costs (Lopes Cordeiro 2009). This means that an image can wear out, a fact that must not be underestimated.



Fig. 7
Guggenheim museum by Frank Gehry in Bilbao.

These episodes can help us to consider the function that special buildings such as the City Museums can have in controlling mass tourism, at least in part: by opening up to suggested itineraries and user diversification (tourists, scholars, citizens of different age, culture and origin, children, older people, immigrants). It is a question of creating new routes, of promoting and selecting new places of interest (taking as an example the work on the London docklands).

REFERENCES

- L'architettura di Giovanni Muzio* (1994). Catalogo della mostra, Milano, Abitare Segesta.
- Calabi D. (2005). *Storia della città. Età contemporanea*, Venezia, Marsilio.
- Calabi D. (1997). *Parigi Anni Venti: Marcel Poëte e le origini della storia urbana*, Venezia, Marsilio.
- Ciardini F. and Falini P. (eds.) (1978). *I centri storici: politica urbanistica e programmi di intervento pubblico: Bergamo, Bologna, Brescia, Como, Gubbio, Pesaro, Vicenza*, Milano, Mazzotta.
- Lopes Cordeiro M.J. (2009). Paper given at the *II international Conference on urban history*, Campinas, 26-29 October.
- Muratori S. (1960). *Studi per un'operante storia urbana di Venezia*, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato.
- Porfyriou H. (ed.) (2002). *Studi comparativi: 2. La legislazione relativa ai settori di salvaguardia in Europa*, Venezia, Regione Veneto.
- Vienna Memorandum (2005). <http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-47-2.pdf>.
- Zucconi G. (ed.) (1992). *Camillo Sitte e i suoi interpreti*, Milano, Angeli.

RIASSUNTO

Questo contributo cerca di presentare una «genealogia» del concetto di centri storici, a partire dalla prima età moderna fino alle carte più recenti siglate da enti internazionali (come l'UNESCO) che si occupano di paesaggio urbano delle città esistenti. Alcune

nuove strategie per creare un'immagine urbana densa di carattere architettonico come quella data dai Musei di Bilbao, Rovereto e Barcellona, possono aiutarci a prendere in considerazione la funzione che edifici speciali possono avere nel controllare almeno in parte il turismo di massa. Si tratta di suggerire itinerari differenti da quelli tradizionali e una diversificazione degli utenti (turisti, studiosi, cittadini di età, cultura e origine differente, bambini, anziani, immigranti) È una questione di promozione di nuove strade e di scelta di nuovi luoghi di interesse.