

Morfologia urbana e tessuti storici: il progetto contemporaneo dei centri minori del Lazio. Urban morphology and historical fabrics: contemporary design of small towns in Latium by *Giuseppe Strappa, Paolo Carlotti and Alessandro Camiz*, Gangemi Editore, Rome, Italy, 2016, 207 pp. ISBN 978-88-492-3191-5.

The Italian school of built environment morphology has always considered the morphogenesis of human settlements as the main source of knowledge for the design disciplines, that is architectural design, urban design, and territorial planning. This book belongs to that particular research genre, which postulates the necessity of understanding the existing built environment formation and transformation process before designing any intervention in it. It explores the question of how the design of contemporary projects in small old towns can contribute to restoring their cultural identity, obliterated by uncontrolled development, and how in particular the revitalization of such towns can represent an alternative to the contemporary metropolis. The book gives an account of the studies and projects carried out as part of the academic activity of the Architectural Reading and Design Laboratory at the University of Rome *Sapienza*. These research activities are both fundamental and applied in nature.

The authors use the example of small historical towns from the Latium region, in Central Italy, to show how the design process can be informed by results achieved by morphological analysis, in order to work out intervention projects congruent with the rules governing their historical dynamic transformation process. Built fabrics and urban fabrics could easily be typified, using floor plans and modern and historical land registries. Being the product of models and constructive practices belonging to the same culture, the studied buildings from the different towns present many common distributive and constructive characteristics. Further, the urban historian Alessandro Camiz shows the usefulness of toponymy, used in combination with morphology, to investigate, in a larger setting, the historical relations between inhabitants and territory.

The studies show how, in spite of the significant inertia of massive bearing walls, the phenomenon of fusion and mutation of basic built fabric elements occurred in the past to create specialized buildings. This allowed the latter to occupy the

best location pertaining to their function, that is the most appropriate 'relative position' in the spatial setting of the town, while contributing to the formation of nodes in the collective public space structure. The understanding of key aspects of the urban fabric specialization process suggests the basis for introducing new structures in the central areas of historical towns. The knowledge of historical transformation rules provides powerful *cognitive* tools. These help reconcile necessary adaptations to evolving human needs to the conservation of the structures of heritage cities. Allowing the latter to keep their recognizable cultural identity.

In Italy, like elsewhere, small historical cities constitute the 'infrastructure' of the territory. As collective creations and products of the material culture, they are the reflection of the social and cultural evolution of society. They are the expression of institutions, values, art of living, constructive practices, and aesthetic currents embraced by previous generations, while testifying to their appropriation of the territory, adaptation to their surroundings and sense of creativity. Yet such cities are victims of marginalization and relative abandonment. Losing their traditional function as part of a network of market places for their surrounding countryside, they are now mostly reduced to residential use, while service facilities tend to locate outside their historical perimeter. The lack of adequate transformation control mechanisms contributes further to their progressive deterioration.

The design method advocated by the authors might provide one means of aiding the recovery of small historical cities as living and thriving environments. Restoring their traditional combination of functions by reintroducing new specialized buildings in their central areas serves such a purpose. The latter buildings could play a structuring role for the public space domain, contributing to the revitalization of the town and to the requalification of the territory as a whole. In short, the authors propose the revitalization of small historical towns as a solution to the current disequilibrium induced by disorderly urban growth and the sprawling contemporary metropolis, which coincides, perhaps not fortuitously, with the decline of smaller towns.

The morphological methods of analysis illustrated in this book are not only important in the context of architectural and urban design processes. They are essential cognitive tools that provide much needed knowledge to develop evidence-based heritage preservation policies more congruent with the broadening in recent

years of the notion of built heritage. Formerly limited to historical monuments, the built heritage, considered as a collective good, today includes an organized set of elements of various scales: vernacular architecture, urban fabric, historical cities and territorial structures. Together these components form the cultural landscape that bears the collective memory of social groups, testifying to their history while framing and enabling their life.

Urban morphology and historical fabrics has great didactic value, since the methods and design approaches used by the authors can be generalized. The numerous illustrations are superb and it is very fortunate that the texts are provided in

both English and Italian. We are indebted to Italian researchers for major advances in the development of knowledge on human settlement morphogenesis, but since Muratori's study of the 'active' history of Venice, half a century ago, the language barrier has caused considerable delay in the diffusion of their best contributions. Such bilingual books are welcomed.

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