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Lévy, Bertrand

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## THE EUROPEAN TOWN SQUARE AS AN IDEAL PLACE, OR CAMILLO SITTE REVISITED

Bertrand LEVY, Department of Geography, University of Geneva

*Abstract: The Urban Square is first considered as a place and even a high place of the European town. Criteria established by Camillo Sitte regarding the ideal urban square are then discussed from a morphologic and aesthetic point of view. These criteria are interpreted in the context of more contemporary functions and uses, and Sitte's criteria are either validated or invalidated.*

*Keywords: urban square, ideal square, place, form, functions, uses, Camillo Sitte.*

*Theoretical frame: The sense of place*

The sense of place will first be defined and then evaluated in the context of the ideal public square, a construction inherited from the past but remaining, we believe, the quintessence of the European town. An urban square is a place in so far as it is a significant urban feature and the extent to which the four characteristics of place given by Marc Augé (1992: 100) and us are respected: to be 1) historical, 2) imbued with human identity, 3) relational, and 4) charged with symbolic meaning.

The place/non-place dialectic is crucial in the context of the European city threatened, as are cities worldwide, by a process of standardization of space which stems from diverse technological and cultural causes, accelerated by financial and technical globalization and a certain manner of thinking the city (Lévy, 1981). If Europe has not distinguished itself by the planning of exurban townscapes that look identical with their hodgepodge of gas stations, commercial centers and building grids, the Old Continent has, historically-speaking, created some of the most remarkable urban forms. Thanks to their historic heritage, European historic city centers are at once a crystallization of local life and a great tourist attraction. Today, the public square is the foremost landmark capable of defying the global trend towards standardization. To discover the central historic square of a city or neighbourhood is a significant personal experience, facilitating both personal and urban identification.

In the context of globalization, the place represents a certain permanence in space as opposed to non-places produced by excessive modernity and

growing mobility (Balandier, 2001: 62-76). Places structure space and human identity. The urban place touches on existential factors, which is why it is defined in humanistic geography as a central locus of human spatial awareness enabling the individual to create – through memory – a coherent personal and social identity.

If the urban square is a place embodying personal and collective memory, it is also a place charged with historic events (Le Goff, 1988). Marc Augé relies mainly on historic and temporal criteria: non-places are created by excessive modernity which privileges transient spaces such as airport terminals, exhibition halls, highways, fast-food outlets etc. In other words, places devoid of either historical association or emotional significance. History, nevertheless, will decide if such present non-places will become places in the future. In contrast, the urban square functions as a place to pause and refresh oneself in the midst of the city.

Camillo Sitte's (1965) masterwork, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, has been chosen because the author considers the urban square as a significant urban place. Today, the modern city is devoid of special places, or for that matter places of any kind. Sitte's work, based on the urban past of European towns, is still able to inspire us today. The historical context of Sitte's study (1899) traces the great urban transformation of Vienna's Ring. Vast esplanades, often decorated with gardens, punctuate the Ring. They consist of open spaces *par excellence*, distinguishing themselves from the narrow streets and intimate character of cities in the Middle Ages. The radial city, born during the Ring period and the model for all city planning in Europe in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hausmann's Paris, Barcelona's Eixample, Fazy's Geneva), is opposed in his mind to the "Gemütlichkeit" of the medieval town and its protective urbanism. Certainly, contemporary architecture and urbanism have changed a lot since the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Sitte does not answer all the questions we pose today, but his work clarifies what goes into the making of successful urban places, the best of which survive as the most admirable urban forms ever built.

But what is a high place? It is a place endowed with spatial prominence and distinct temporal references. Spatial prominence equates to an easily recognizable physical aspect, as well as a structuring role in the urban plan. Its temporal dimension has to do with the crucial role it played in History. Urban squares are the physical embodiment of regional and local history. They may have been transformed and even destroyed, but the central square is invariably rebuilt as it was before: Brussels' Grand Place after the destruction of 1695, Frankfurt's or Warsaw's Market Place after the bombing during the Second World War. The urban square symbolizes the soul, the heart, the umbilical cord that binds everyone to the history of his city, as Guido Ceronetti (1996) expresses it.

### *Role and functions of urban squares*

The urban square is the place where *urbs*, the built city, and *civitas*, the citizen's community coincide. It is the epitome of the public space. The Greek agora was the birthplace of democracy, the Roman forum the place for the *disputatio*. Their functions were still multiple (political, civic, religious, commercial, etc). Other functions, not mutually-exclusive, have been added: residential, administrative, cultural, festive, recreational, sportive, touristic etc.

The central square attracts pedestrian flows from all over the city, since it is its centre of convergence. Sitte (1965) rightly insists on its ideal location, that is to say near commercial streets. A square located apart does not function well. Urban squares have grown historically. Some of them were places of contact between the town and the countryside, for example the Old Town Square in Prague. That explains its cavernous dimension; it catered for cattle fairs as well as serving as the city's main market place. When that fair and market function was relocated outside the city proper, the square began to accommodate ornate, prestigious residential buildings. Brussels' Grand Place, located in the heart of the city, was during the Middle Ages a permanent market place. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the development of the drapery industry, the municipality garnished the place with beautiful buildings that were appropriated by the guilds. The city hall had to rival with its gorgeous equivalent in nearby Bruges. La Grand Place embodies a national destiny; in 1996, the flower carpet that covers the ground every two years – a long-lived tradition in some other Northern cities such as Lille – exposed the Belgian Crown emblem, surrounded by a motto expressed in both national languages: "L'union fait la force – Eendracht maakt macht". With the advent of leisure and tourism, these squares have become tourist traps with all the accompanying problems. In certain cases, these large squares have transformed themselves into special event squares: the Prato della Valle in Padova, originally a field and subsequently the site of a fair, was decorated with its famous statues in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Today it accommodates open-air mega-concerts; that function is not entirely new, for it was already a place of drama representations during the Middle Ages.

The functional evolution of European town squares runs in the same direction: increasingly important cultural and leisure functions are added to the three basic ones (civic/political, religious and commercial). Thus, the Piazza Grande of Locarno becomes during the film festival an open-air cinema, and then is filled with sand to become a beach-volley playing field. The predilection for sporting competitions in an urban setting is ancient: the Palio horse race in Siena, which takes place on the Campo, goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But the tradition goes as far back as the Middle Ages, when a sort of collective boxing called the *pugna* took place. There were also

buffalo and donkeys races. The Palio, supposed to channel Siennese aggressiveness, reasserts the city's identity; each "contrade" (neighbourhood) fighting in the circle's figure, a symbolic image of concord.

Human imagination is without limits when trying to find new, if only temporary, activities to organise in the urban square. Kaltenbrunner (2003) argues that in the present "experience society", the square should become a multi-functional space. The squares best adapted to events are not necessarily the Sitte-style squares, but scenic and practical spaces that can be easily converted to other uses.

The central square of a European town attracts people from far beyond the limits of the city. Take a walk through the Piazza del Duomo in Milan on a Saturday afternoon in May. People gravitate there from all over the region to meet, stroll or shop. Commemorative, political or festive meetings take place. The square magnifies daily events, or else acts as the venue to celebrate a football victory. Indeed, the urban square, as a high place of collective memory, is also host to the "big events of the present". It is an excellent repository of the city's traditional customs, or even those of the region or nation as a whole. Some squares earn an international reputation, not only for aesthetic reasons, but by playing an active role within a particular domain, such as the Papal Piazza San Pietro in Rome.

At some distance from the central square, a network of secondary squares structure community life. The majority of studies devoted to urban squares focus on the central urban squares, on account of their historical, artistic and architectural heritage (Bertrand, 1984; Mancuso, 1989). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to neglect the community squares, which are human and relational nodes endowed with local life and a strong affective sense. In the square we take a break, whereas we cruise through the streets. We may stop for a drink, have a chat and contemplate the passing theatre of life.

This social function is threatened by the massive influx of tourists in some high places. The square is transformed into a place to pass through, at odds with its primordial function. Thus, the crowds of tourists which circle aimlessly around Prague's Old Town Square without stopping (there is nowhere to sit!), or the similar crowds in St. Mark's Place, Venice, which transform the square into a photographic free-for-all – in both cases, the primary functions of the square, namely rest and contemplation, are undermined. One must await the cloak of darkness to recapture the square's magic.

### *The urban square, a European privilege?*

European civilization does not own a monopoly on urban squares; worldwide there is a shared need to be at the heart of something, to be able to interact with one's fellow man, or admire a particularly inspired urban

landscape. The specificity of the European urban square is its degree of artistic and architectural achievement, its theatrical and historical aspect. Every town, even modest, has tried to transform its past into stone or brick. Sometimes, the square looks like a splay street, or is embellished with a garden or a fountain. The Latin square is usually without vegetation, whereas the Anglo-Saxon square integrates elements of nature. It would be interesting to study the differences of use between Southern and Northern Europe. The seasonal and meteorological factor is much more determinant in the North compared with the South. When the first autumn rains arrive, Northern and Central Europe squares depopulate themselves, whereas the Italian square knows how to deal with rain and cold.

The American town is far less rich in urban squares than the European one for cultural, urbanistic and technological reasons. Anglo-Saxon culture has always given the park preference over the public square as an urban space of contemplation and meeting. The public space embodied by the urban square does not have the same prestige as private place in American culture. American-style urban planning has given priority to private or privatized space: multi-functional shopping centers, suburban sprawl, all kinds of leisure and sporting facilities. The detached housing model of “home sweet home”, surrounded by a garden, is synonymous with a loose urban fabric. It is not favourable to the emergence of paved urban squares (Tuan, 1982:3-34). Furthermore, the priority given to the automobile has produced an urban space incompatible with the European-style urban square. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that Northern-American cities do not have urban squares: the commemorations following the attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York took place in the symbolically-named Union Square.

Before being expelled from the European city center in the 1980s, the automobile had transformed many urban squares into open-air parking. That period is over. The European-style urban square has never been adapted to motorized transportation.

Europe has exported models of urban squares: the Italian *piazza*, the Spanish *plaza* (de Boccard, 1978) or, more seldom, the French-inspired *places royales*. And, for example, the Plaza Mayor in Mexico City, a renowned magnet for celebrations and protests, is a larger reincarnation of the Plaza Mayor in Valladolid (Spain). Latin American baroque squares, often remarkable, are urban squares inspired by the classical European town, a type of square often conceived on a rational plan but gradually transformed by ornamental architecture. In Asia, Tiananmen Square (the square of Heavenly Peace) in Beijing, which covers 40 hectares, or Red Square in Moscow are vast esplanades rich in art and more extensive than the European square. They are squares of the highest artistic or political importance, and reflect the immensity of the country as well as the centralising forces at work. But they do not respond to the needs of daily

life, as exemplified by the squares of St. Petersburg, impressive but not very people-friendly. Like Place de la Concorde in Paris, they do not correspond to the morphologic criteria formulated in 1889 by Camillo Sitte, who tried to delineate the ideal features of the European town square.

### *The ideal criteria of the urban square according to Camillo Sitte*

Having established that the square is a place of geographic convergence and historic memory, we agree with Jacques Dewitte (1987) that its foremost function is to symbolize the archetype of human encounters and encourage urban contemplation. Camillo Sitte's work addresses the morphology and aesthetics of the square rather than its function and use. His ideal criteria may be resumed as follows:

#### **Ideal morphological-aesthetical criteria of the urban square**

- Closed and protected space
- The center should be free (to enable sight-lines to and from)
- Monuments placed on the perimeter
- The element of surprise (narrow, crooked streets)
- Attractiveness of architectural façades (« Handwerk »)
- Concavity and aesthetic paving

Other criteria to do with present-day functions and uses may be added to these ideal topographical-aesthetic criteria,

#### **Functional and amenity criteria of the town square**

- Closed to traffic/pedestrian accessibility
- Restoration/rehabilitation of ancient buildings
- Provision of various kinds of landscaped seating
- Close to commercial activities (pedestrian flows)
- Diverse animation (music, dance, theatre...)

Jean-Bernard Racine (1999:220) considers that the urban square should remain a “collective property”, a space of shared citizenship, inhospitable to commercial demands and speculation. The urban square is a space of co- (community, communication, communion, continuity) rather than of dis- (discrimination, disparity, discontinuity). Indeed, the roots of Sitte's work stemmed from a deep concern for the very idea of community (Dewitte, 1987).

Sitte situates the origins of city building in the disposition of empty and full spaces. His reasoning belongs to a moral and philosophic conception of

the city, of which the square symbolizes its beating heart. If the central square is a place of convergence for the city as a whole, it is because the ideal urban map is concentric (Waltenspühl, 1997). Thus, the city must have a well-identified center, and this is no longer the case in the modern multinuclear metropolis. Large European cities (Paris, London or Berlin) are endowed with many centers, and it is no coincidence that Sitte is unable to cite an ideal square in any of them. It is also a question of size and culture: every cartographic excerpt in his book concerns a city built on a strictly human scale (Ulm, Salzburg, Verona, Peruggia, Venice...).

The ideal square suggests a freeing of space into the full structure of a town as opposed to a square that would be settled *a posteriori* in a free space. Sitte disapproves of the American-style block system in which the square occupies the space of a missing block. This kind of square does not possess the closed and protected nature of the ideal urban square, and it engenders a lot of urban planning problems (see Place des Nations in Geneva). Indeed, deprived of a contiguous urban fabric, this type of square resembles a destructured space, a traffic junction. If urbanization is denser and the square located on a traffic node, arranged on several levels (such as Potsdamer Platz in Berlin or numerous modern station squares), their redevelopment is complicated by traffic constraints (Nielebock, 1996). Indeed, an urban square, even located in the heart of an urban network, ought not to be a traffic thoroughfare, for two reasons: the proximity of passing traffic compromises the sought-after quiet, and the open sight-lines undermine the desired element of visual surprise.

On the contrary, the main street must by-pass the square, as do the Banchi di sotto and the Banchi di sopra around the Campo of Siena. The streets leading to the square should be narrow and crooked in order to provide the pedestrian with a moment of surprise and wonder as he reaches the end of the street. Most Medieval and Renaissance squares, as well as some baroque town squares, respect this criterion. The self-enclosed square favours a feeling of calm and security and, on this point, Sitte reveals himself to be a real visionary: semi-open squares situated in the midst of heavy traffic axes will become noisy crossroads, such as the Rond-Point des Champs-Élysées or the Place de la Concorde in Paris, which are incompatible with contemplation. A relatively wide street crosses Place Vendôme, a masterwork of classical and elegant architecture; a column is planted in its center, and for that reason among others, it is not ideal according to Sitte's criteria. However, due to its historic, architectural and commercial prestige, it is the most studied square of Paris (Ziskin, 1999). The Place du Tertre in Montmartre, on the other hand, represents the model of a "village's square in a town", as do the Place du Bourg-de-Four in Geneva or Piazza di Spagna in Rome. These are familiar squares and pedestrians love them for their irregularity and their provincial charm. They are intimate and embody a



world of proximity. One of their problems, however, is the growing impact of tourism.

The urban square provides a spatial pause in the dense plan of the town. The free space must consequently be large enough for the eye to roam but not so vast that all feelings of intimacy are lost. Large squares are in most cases affirmations of power. They intimidate the pedestrian. On the other hand, if space is too confined, the person will feel overwhelmed by the architecture. This is the case in many cathedral squares in Europe; the cathedrals are not given enough room. Sitte recommends a vacant central space in the square so that sight and spirit are unencumbered. If a monument (a church, a campanile, a statue, a fountain etc.) is to be located anywhere, it must be on the perimeter, so that it creates an asymmetry. Such is the case of the David of Michelangelo on Piazza della Signoria in Florence or of Piazza San Marco's campanile in Venice, and of many churches that are integrated into the fabric of buildings hemming the square. Sitte insists on the architectural charm of the facades along the square, on the "Handwerk", a mark of diversity and authenticity.

Finally, and this confirms the Viennese architect's eye for detail, the surface of the square should be concave and decorative. The Campo of Siena, with its brick pavement forming chevron patterns, is divided into nine parts (symbolizing the Government of the Nine) and converges in front of the Mangia Tower. All the most beautiful urban squares of Italy are provided with a geometrical surface decoration. The paving is usually made up of stones of different kinds and colors (grey pavement and strips of black stone, for instance). An ideal square should never be covered with macadam. Convex or sloping squares with stairs, such as Place du Bourgade-Four in Geneva or Piazza di Spagna in Rome, also possess their own charm. The irregular topography provides a greater variety of urban landscapes for the eye to contemplate. Walking through Rome, Julien Gracq (1988:83) compares some squares to central rooms of a labyrinth, into which one can emerge fortuitously.

### *Conclusion: the future of the European urban square*

If the urban square is a bedrock element of the European town, it is nonetheless threatened. The European-style urban square is synonymous with equilibrium: of its social and economic functions, as well as its ecological, cultural and festive functions. If the square is inscribed in an unbalanced socio-economic urban context, with socio-spatial segregation, the square, a great urban integrator, may also magnify the city's problems. If unbridled commercialism dominates, the square becomes a consumerist haven, covered with advertisements and devoid of places for pedestrians to rest. Such is the case of the Old Town Square in Prague, which has given

excessive priority to outdoor cafes. In Milan's Piazza del Duomo, the problem is elsewhere: how to limit the down-and-outs and illegal trafficking. If the downtown is economically devitalized by the relocation of shopping centers to the periphery and becomes increasingly inaccessible - something which Italian land use strategy avoids (Lieutier, 1997) - the central square will no longer be able to fulfil its primary function.

Pedestrian city-centers have plunged urban squares into a conundrum: by jettisoning automobile traffic, by re-establishing their attractiveness to both inhabitants and merchants, they have arrested the terminal decline of their architectural heritage, henceforth renovated and restored by a caring urban population and responsible civic authorities. The commercial tissue has been preserved. Nevertheless, rampant tourism engenders a growing tension between gentrification (higher property prices) and accommodating mass tourist behaviour (Lévy, 2004). Urban squares are privileged places where inhabitants and tourists congregate and sometimes meet, but a very agoraphilic square may provoke agoraphobia; it then becomes tempting to head for less busy neighbourhood squares, or less tourist-saturated cities. In Italy, for example, Bergamo's Piazza Vecchia is qualified by Le Corbusier as "absolutely sublime" - according to the *Guide bleu* of Northern and Central Italy -, no doubt for its sober forms; and the Piazza of Cremona is "one of the most extraordinary medieval squares of the Peninsula" (André Suarès, 1984:50). Mercifully they are not yet overburdened.

Camillo Sitte points out in his detailed study that the ideal urban squares are, for cultural and urban know-how reasons, located in Italy rather than North of the Alps. There are, of course, very beautiful urban squares in other parts of Europe (in Spain, Belgium, Poland, Austria, Germany, the Baltic countries.) However, the uniqueness of Italian squares is that not only has the architectural equilibrium been maintained, but the social function has also been protected, thanks to the timeless habit of the *passaggiata*; the extensive opening hours in the historical center have ensured a lively atmosphere that is very often lacking in Northern or Central Europe. The glut of shopping and leisure centers in the periphery kills life in city centers. These new sub-urban consumer playgrounds are covered and cut-off from their natural environment and climate, while all arterial circulation is internalized (halls, escalators, lifts etc.) The heating and air-conditioning costs are huge. Space is privatized and therefore closed after a certain hour. These are places of consumption rather than contemplation.

A caveat that must be added to the morpho-aesthetic vision of C. Sitte: numerous urban squares do not respect all his ideal criteria and yet have kept or increased their social function as a social hub thanks to flexible planning, for example Trafalgar Square in London or Plaza Catalunya in Barcelona. On the other hand, Piazza di Spagna in Rome, far from respecting all of Sitte's criteria, continues to retain pedestrians and those with a contemplative turn of mind thanks to its provincial charm and its

views of Rome from its majestic stairs. And one must not forget that Sitte's morpho-aesthetic conception is not always shared by the contemporary public, fond as it is of multi-functional spaces able to accommodate various events. Nevertheless, Sitte-style ideal square remains a privileged place of European urbanity where *vita activa* and *vita contemplative* can be practiced, as well as what Hermann Hesse calls "The Art of Idleness" (Hesse, 2002).

## PICTURES

The medieval Piazza del Commune in Cremona symbolizes a European ideal urban square, less known than its counterpart in Siena or Venice. (Photos Bertrand Lévy)

1. The harmonious volumes and proportions of the human-scaled space stand out thanks to the rain, as well as the geometrical decoration of the pavement. On the left, the orthogonal baptistry dates from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the two sides facing the Dome are covered with polychromous marble from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
2. An hour later, the September sun shines again and the square once more becomes lively. "The town square of Cremona is a lyric tragedy of the strongest and the most severe style; all the soul of the city sings there" (André Suarès, *Voyage du Condottiere*, 1910-1932).
3. The Dome's façade (13-14<sup>th</sup> centuries), with its openwork arcades and galleries, is a great example of "Handwerk"; it brings grace and lightness to the edifice, typical of Lombard architecture (12-13<sup>th</sup> centuries). On the left, the *Torrazzo* is, at 112.10 meters, the highest church tower made of brick in the world.
4. Facing the Dome stand the symbols of political power: on the right, the City Hall (13<sup>th</sup> century), typical of the Lombard structure of the *Broletto*, and left, the Soldiers' Lodge, which kept its original trefoil windows, whereas the ones of the City Hall were enlarged during the Renaissance. The brick and the crenellated lines give to the block a feeling of rigor and warmth.

## GLOSSARY

### **Town square**

*Piazza* in Italian, *plaza* in Spanish, *place* in French, the town square is a Greek and Roman invention (agora and forum). Very fashionable during the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Baroque period, the square is open to the urban landscape but should at the same time be an intimate space. The square is a place of pause in the city. Its ideal morphological and aesthetic criteria have been stated in Camillo Sittes' work, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*.

### **Place**

A place is a fragment of urban or landscape that makes sense. It has to respect four conditions: it must be historical, confer a sense of identity, relate to its surroundings and convey symbolic meaning. The place relies to a certain degree on its rootedness in space, which is linked to mobility. If places structure space identity, they also structure human identity; indeed, places are endowed with an existential dimension, which is reflected in the expression "sense of place".

### **Non place**

The non place is the result of a process of standardization of space that proceeds from technological, economic and cultural causes. It is a place deprived of memory, born of overmodernity which privileges spaces of mobility (airport terminals, exhibition halls, freeway turnpikes, fast-food outlets...). The non place has a weak affective sense. History will decide if some non place will eventually become places.

### **High Place**

The high place is a place endowed with a prominence in space and density in time. The prominence in space is its physical feature, easily recognizable, as well as its structuring role in the urban plan. The density in time consists in having played a major role during certain periods of History.

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