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Form and Content:

The Analysis of an Urban Setting

David Walters RIBA

This paper examines ideas of urban place. It does so by the graphic analysis of a specific locale, the town of Siena, in Italy.¹ It postulates a relationship between form and content, that is, the spatial structures and the functional or symbolic structures that comprise this urban setting. This analytical technique penetrates beneath the superficial appearances of buildings and spaces, and identifies a conceptual order underlying the formal relationships.

The phenomenon of place is considered as a conjunction of social and spatial concepts, and is initially defined as "space enriched by the assignment of meaning."² Place is therefore distinguished from simple space by a coherent structuring of form and activity within defined boundaries, and recognition of these characteristics is enhanced by the attribution of meaning and value to physical form. Place is both "experienced" as fact, and "understood" in terms of its meaning and societal significance.

The analysis is morphological in character: it examines the functional and spatial structures of the locale and postulates congruencies between these conditions. The terms functional structure and spatial structure refer to the patterns of use, both pragmatic and symbolic, and to the physical arrangements of space and form. By consideration of these relationships the analysis searches for deeper levels of significance in the composition of buildings and spaces. The analysis does not suggest that the rela-

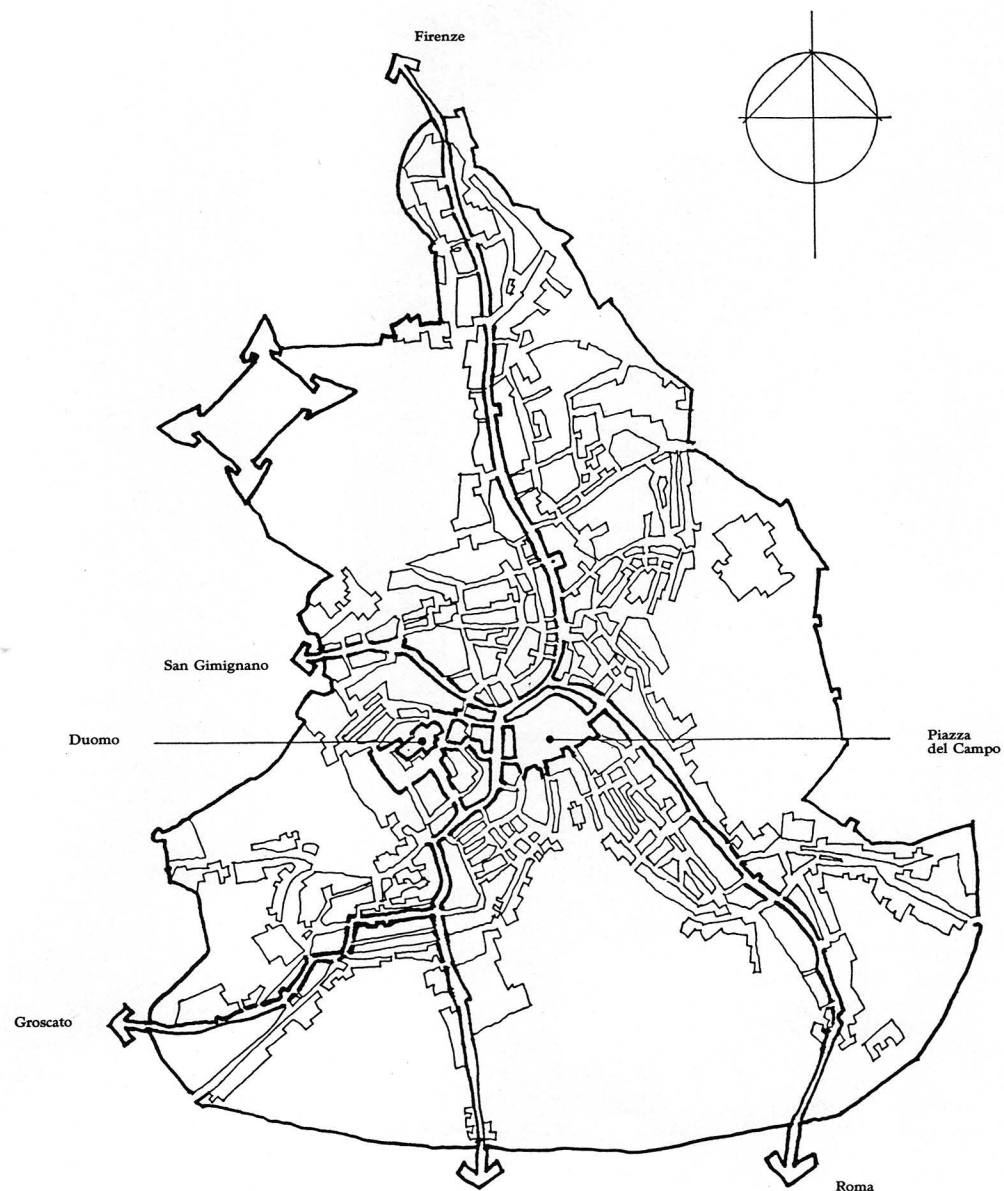


FIG. 1

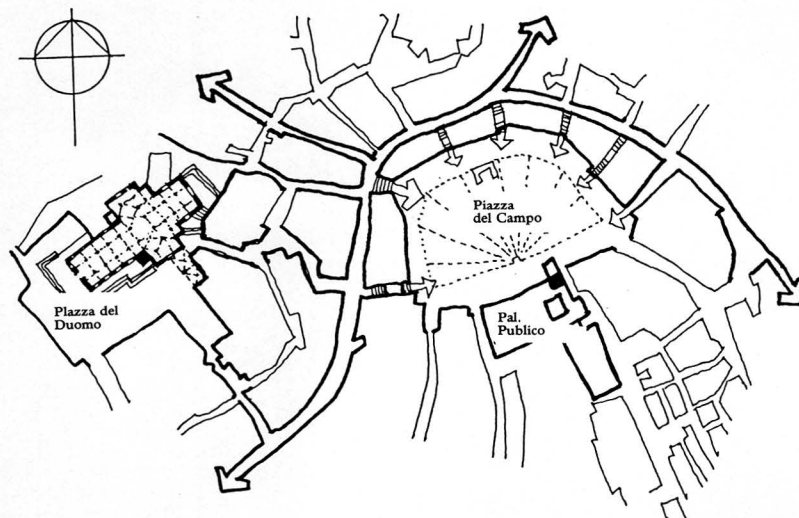


FIG. 2

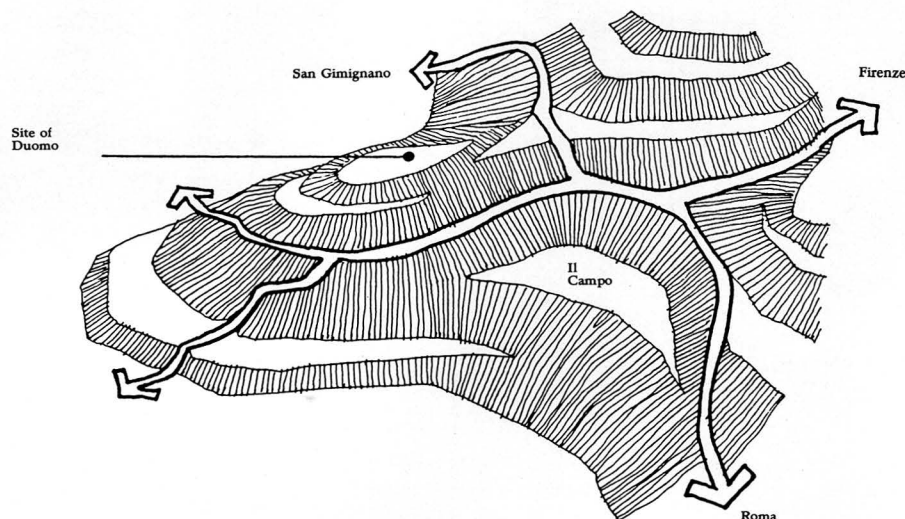


FIG. 3

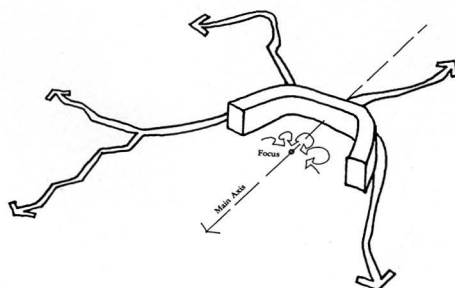


FIG. 4

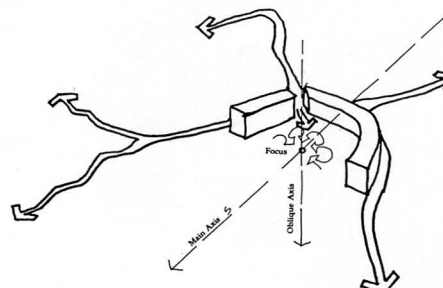


FIG. 5

tionships highlighted in the study were necessarily those in the minds of the original medieval designers and builders: it does not attempt to tell the story of how the place was built. It does, however, demonstrate that certain connections can be observed between the buildings and spaces of medieval Siena and the activities and values of its citizens.

This paper suggests, moreover, that the elucidation of these relationships is of more than historical interest: it is a source of enrichment to the intentions of architects in contemporary settings. Intentions, in this sense, are those frameworks of intellectual order that guide and inform design, conceptual constructs that "bridge" from exploration and analysis to conceptualization and synthesis. These are the motives that dictate the direction and character of architecture, and the enrichment comes from the inclusion, as architectural content, of the meanings and values of the society within which the buildings reside. Such attributes are illustrated at Siena by the way that buildings and spaces around the Piazza del Campo and the Cathedral are related within the guiding principles of an urban structure. Here a dialectic is revealed between the forms of the built environment and its content, in this case the functions and symbolic roles that buildings and spaces play in the life of the town.

The geography and urban relationships of the central area of Siena are shown in Figures 1-3. The Piazza del Campo, or

town square, is located within the valley formed by two ridges of land, and Il Duomo, the Cathedral, sits atop the western ridge. The roads generally follow the topography and thus assist in the definition of the setting for the Campo.

An analysis of the basic building form (Figure 4) demonstrates that the primary enclosure is created by the curve of the buildings on the north side following the streets and contours. The buildings and topography operate around a common axis, and the curve of the buildings creates a focal point along this axis.

This condition is elaborated (Figure 5) by a major break in the enclosure that occurs at a point which relates to the junction of major roads where the main pedestrian access rises up to the Cathedral. This articulation creates a secondary, oblique, axis that passes through the focal point of the space.

These relationships between enclosure, axes and focus form the thematic structure of the setting, and they are elaborated in a number of ways as indicated in Figures 6 and 7. The curve of buildings provides a backdrop for the major public building of the town, the Palazzo Pubblico and its attendant campanile, the Torre del Mangia. The placement of these major and contrasting building masses relates to both the main and oblique axes respectively, giving each of them extra strength and relevance. In the full enclosure of the south side of the Piazza by a nearly con-

FIG. 6

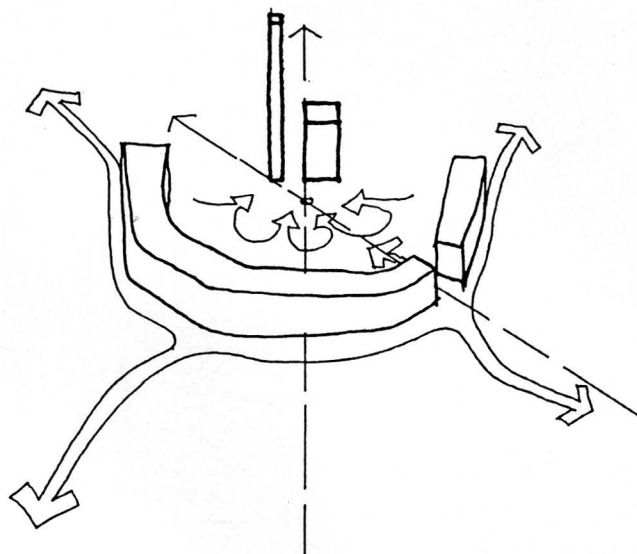


FIG. 7

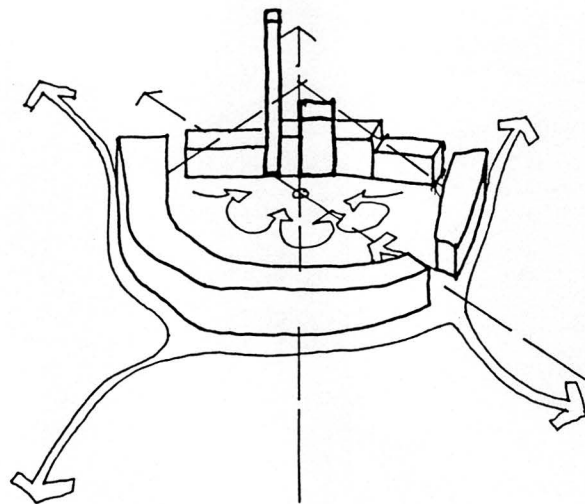
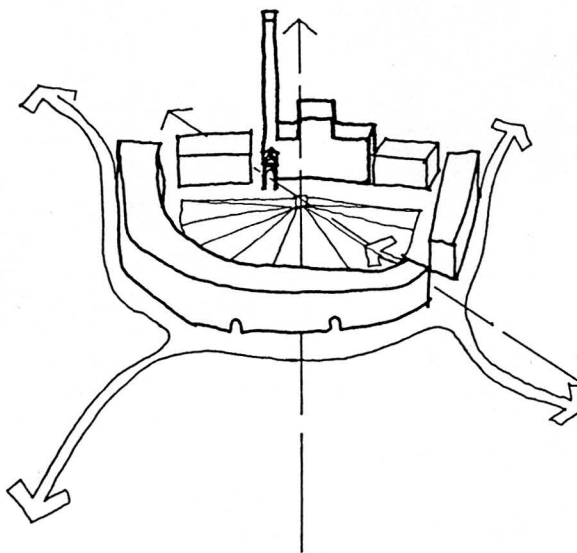


FIG. 8



tinuous wall of buildings, the massing of this edge creates a clear triangular form closely related to the thrust of the original main axis.

There is now a dynamic equilibrium between axial tensions, which is further enhanced by the local reinforcement of both axes. This is achieved by the placement of the overscaled porch at the base of the tower, and relative to the oblique axis, and by the location of a major fountain on the main axis. The convergence of these axes at the focal point of the Piazza is vividly marked by the ornamented storm drain and radiating paving pattern.

This powerful, yet subtle, composition is further enriched by the varying ways in which the enclosure is penetrated to provide a hierarchy of entry conditions into the Piazza (Figure 10). As noted above, the major break in the enclosing curve of buildings relates closely to the adjacent street pattern and the main pedestrian route to the Cathedral. This main entry point provides direct views of the Palazzo Pubblico (Fig. 10(a)). To the south of this entrance is a smaller and partial break in the enclosure. Here a thin vertical slot, adjacent to a secondary route up the Cathedral, provides a dynamically focused view of the Torre del Mangia. (Fig. 10(b)).

Other entrances into the Campo are suppressed and do not form breaks in the enclosing wall. A number of these sub-

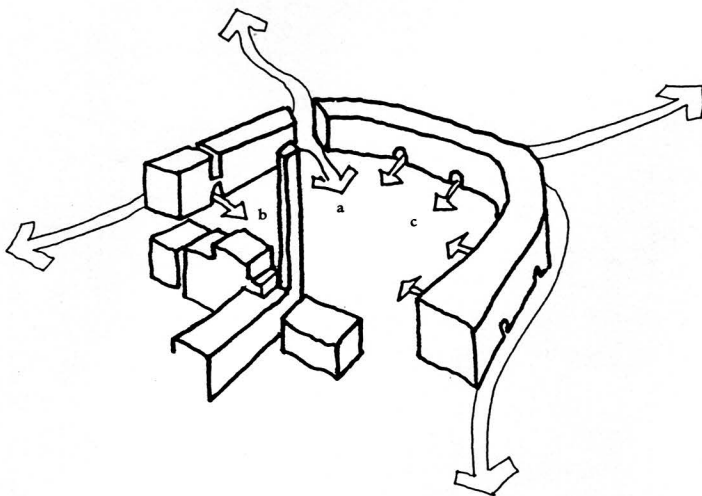


FIG. 9

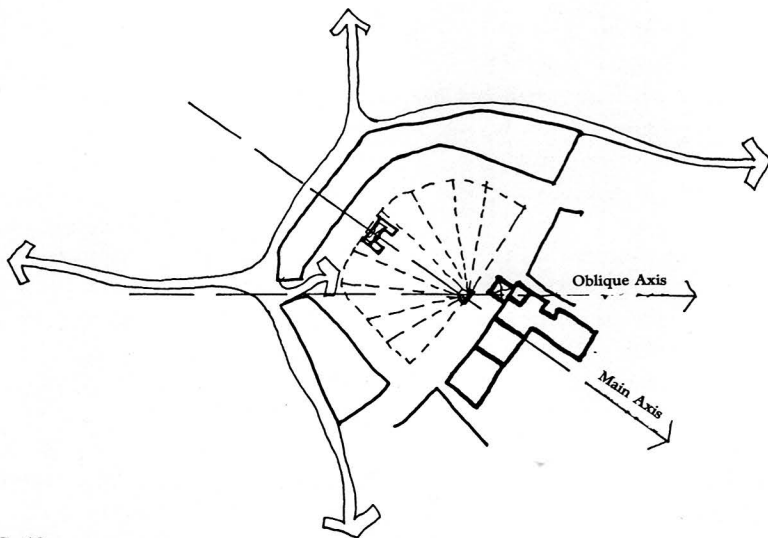


FIG. 10

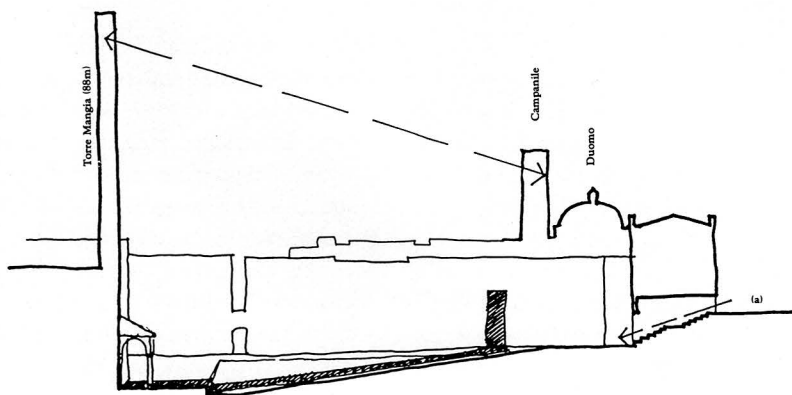
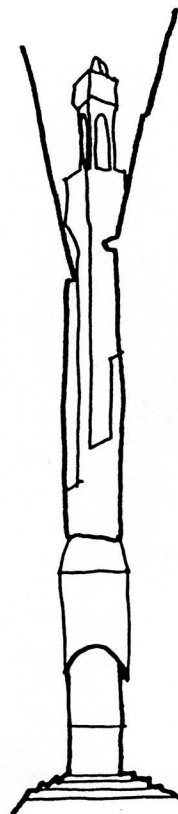


FIG. 11



View from (b)

sidiary entrances from the streets surrounding the Piazza form tunnels through the enclosing buildings (Figures 10(c) and 11(a)), and all views of the major buildings are concealed until a dramatic release of the viewer into the main space. These entrances are a function of the sectional relationship between the open space of the Piazza and the surrounding town fabric. This sectional relationship (Figure 11) reveals also how the exaggerated height of the Torre del Mangia enables the Palazzo Pubblico, as the secular focus of the town at its low point in the topography, to connect symbolically with the spiritual focus, the Cathedral seen in profile upon its hill with dome and campanile.

Within the Piazza del Campo itself, the shadow of the Torre moves around the paved surfaces and building facades as if radiating from a giant gnomon in a medieval sundial. This gives a direct and specific temporal reference to the space, and enriches the Piazza's role as the social armature of the city.

This series of diagrams indicates a complex synthesis in the composition of buildings and spaces, a synthesis that embodies the functional and symbolic references that help to delineate the social and physical fabric of the city. These relationships demonstrate a dynamic equilibrium between form and content, one of the prerequisite conditions for placemaking in an urban setting.

1. The examples that I have selected to illustrate the thesis of this paper derived from original studies carried out in the late 1960s with friends and colleagues Leon van Schaik, Geoffrey Baker, and particularly, Simon Buckley. The selection of Siena and Assisi as vehicles for architectural analysis was made originally by Simon Buckley, and many of these diagrams are developed from his early sketches. This fund of insight and technique has remained an inspiration over the years and has enriched the work of many members of that formative group.
2. This definition, although not for word, owes much to the discussions on place in Pocock, D. and Hudson, K., *Images of the Urban Environment*, London; MacMillan, 1978.