

The Meaning of Patterns:

Camillo Sitte and Evolution of Ancient Towns

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Abstract

The role of history and memory and the concepts of space and time are important concerns in the nineteenth century *arts of city building*. The nineteenth century put into questions not only the relationship between history and the city but also the public realm of the city, the reweaving of city fabric. Questions arose such as what aspects of city plan resist change and which do not, or what structure or forms have evolved slowly over time.

Analogous to living organism and the pattern of its internal organs, can a town be considered and studied in terms of its working members and patterns? If so, what can one learn from such analogy? In *The Art of Building Cities (Der Städtebau)*, published in 1889, Camillo Sitte offered an analysis of successful public spaces in ancient towns in terms of patterns and relationship of town elements, the sequence and complexity of plazas and streets. He endeavored to derive from these examples the abstract principles which possibly formed the basis of their beauty. Once these principles were understood, they could be followed again. Sitte's "*Artistic Principles*" were addressed in terms of the pattern and optical principles. Both the street patterns and the treatment at the face of the building are important to the physiognomy of the city.

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Keywords : Camillo Sitte, Artistic Principle, town planning theory

The Meaning of Patterns

Camillo Sitte and Evolution of Ancient Towns

This paper investigates the meaning of *City Fabric* and its role in an evolution process of towns. It will focus on the theoretical work of Camillo Sitte, a pioneer of modern thought on the city whose influence is still at work today. The paper is based on the unpublished manuscripts found in Sitte Archive in Vienna. George and Christiane Collins referred to the existence of these text in their major work on Sitte "Camillo Sitte and the Birth of Modern City Planning," yet a large number of Sitte's theoretical writings have neither been translated into English nor published in its original language, German. Thus this paper aims to introduce a few of his ideas not yet been presented to the general public.

Camillo Sitte's theoretical opus mainly investigated the city images and the creation of meaningful public space through an examination of successful urban spaces of the past. In his architectonic image of the city (*geschlossenes Architekturbild*) Sitte sought a special sort of continuity of effect in the fabric of the city.¹ In question is the fundamental relationship between architecture, urban form and history. Sitte's idea on the city fabric is related to his thoughts on an evolution of art forms both evolved from his research on Natural Science. His admiration of asymmetrical deviations and picturesque quality of town scape of the past had a deeper significance than historic revivalism. Sitte tried to idealize in architectural concepts the deviations he observed in nature. Perhaps the strongest influence came from Darwin, for whom Sitte had a strong admiration. For Sitte, the picturesque irregularities of the old urban structures are a result of gradual development. They developed *in natura*.

In this paper, Sitte's theory will be reviewed in analogous to one of his sources, Natural Science. In doing so, the paper will be developed in three parts: the first part is a study of the relationship between Sitte's artistic principles in town planning, his idea of town fabric and his thoughts on an evolution of art forms. The second part will address Sitte's idea of city pattern will be reviewed in relation to Natural Science: the ideas of Charles Darwin and George Cuvier. The last part is a study of Sitte's idea of city patter, type and its transformation.

¹ George Collins, Camillo Sitte: the birth of modern city planning, New York: Rizzoli, 1986, p.66.

The Art of Building Cities

In May of 1889, a small volume of essays entitled *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* appeared in Vienna. The author, Camillo Sitte, analyzed the civic and artistic character of old European towns that had survived in relatively unspoiled state from the preindustrial age. With the intent to discover the principles that might be learned from them, Sitte had turned to unplanned and incrementally developed towns ranging chronologically from Roman times to his own day. The continuity of space and time which caused a perpetual evolution of the urban fabric were for Sitte the fundamental aspects of older towns. Focusing on public spaces, plazas, streets and their choreographic sequence, he searched for an inner structure, a hidden pattern, that allowed for unending change.²

Ever since the city planning profession established itself in the course of the nineteenth century, it has received many ideas from individuals who were either external to it or not deeply involved in its practice. Pivotal theories and discoveries in modern city planning also came from collateral professions and disciplines. Sitte's *Der Städtebau* is no exception.³ His work is the alarmed outcry of a cultured and sensitive citizen about the disturbing urban development of his day. Sitte was involved professionally with arts and crafts more than with architecture and city planning. Many of his ideas about cities and town are related to his firsthand experience with traditional crafts and folk art.⁴ As director of the Vienna State School of Applied Art (*Staatsgewerbeschule*), he was engaged in teaching the technical as well as the creative aspects of Applied Art (*Kunstgewerbe*). Sitte was involved in abstracting principles from works that had been created anonymously, perhaps unconsciously. It was perhaps the vernacular whose secret he was trying to unravel; the vernacular in objects of daily use, in the building of single structure, and in building towns intimately responsive to the function of daily life. Sitte's most fundamental complaint was against the prevalence of plans made up by surveyors and representing only a surface survey. (*Grundriss, Stadtplan, Stadtanlange*) He urged the use of a *Bebauungsplan*, a city plan conceived in three dimensions. The *Bebauungsplan* eventually became the basis for detailed building regulations, especially as regards zoning for height, as German planners became increasingly concerned with its use in the 1890's.⁵

² Ibid, 15.

³ Ibid, 19

⁴ Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981): 24-115.

⁵ Collins, 36.

Sitte's search for the principles of timeless structure in town planning has been confused with historic revivalism. Sitte did not simply express his contempt for planning procedures in the New World. We might have to recall Adolf Loos' language to help us understand Sitte's idea. In language similar to Sitte's, Loos advocated a return to "the ancients," to basic building traditions free of the trapping of style. Only by a return to fundamentals could a true expression of one's own time be found. Like so many of their Viennese contemporaries, Sitte and Loos were intensely preoccupied with style, the cause and origin of stylistic change and the copying of styles. In their preoccupation with defining a style for their own time, they both turn to space (*Raum*). While Loos turned to interior space, Sitte focused on urban space and analysis of the sequence and complexity of the plazas and streets in ancient towns.⁶

We also have to recall Loos's rejection of the idea of the architect as an artist in favor of the architect as a stonemason who happens to know Latin. Yet at first glance, Camillo Sitte seemed to call for an artist to save the contemporary city and the build towns according to artistic principles. Here his ideas on city building seemed to take an opposite direction from his interest in traditional crafts and folk art that had been accomplished without the conscious intervention of an artist - a genius. But if we look closely at his analysis of ancient towns, his meaning of "*artistic principles*" lies perhaps in the evolution process of those towns intimately responsive to the function of daily life rather than an intervention of a genius or a committee. He did not search or attempt to present the principles or pattern to be followed; only a study which aim at an understanding of an evolution of a town, to find timeless principles that will not crudely disrupt the spatial-temporal continuum of urban fabric.

Sitte's diagrams of plazas have to be considered within a context of place as well as in terms of their ability to endure within a process of urban change. His analysis of patterns of compositional elements analogous to those in tiles and textiles derives meaning from the relationship and contiguity of such elements. His work can be considered in terms of pattern and the semiotic analysis of ornament

⁶ Ibid.

and of individual elements within the whole. His patterning principle is a way toward an evolving unity and universality in planning.⁷ Josef Frank, a Viennese architect, had transferred Sitte's principles to the private realm in his essay of 1931 *Das Haus als Weg und Platz* (The House as Path and Place). Frank's consideration of the plan as a society of rooms connected by a coherent pattern also echoed Christopher Alexander's ideas in *A Pattern Language* which evolved from Sitte's pattern principles. For Alexander, as for Sitte, no pattern is an isolated entity. Each pattern can exist only to the extent that it is supported by other patterns that are the larger patterns in which it is embedded, the pattern of the same size around it, and the smaller patterns which are embedded in it.⁸

It has been suggested that Sitte's interest in city planning derived from his teacher Rudolf Eitelberger who had lectured and published on the subject many years before. Sitte's immediate stimulus to write on the subject was also the current building activity on the Vienna Ringstrasse and its disturbance to the spatial-temporal continuum of the city fabric. He was upset about the handling of space around the major building and the method of placing public monuments that led him to publish his study of old-time urban spaces. But significantly enough, his first major effort in this direction was an exposition of the city planning ideas of Gottfried Semper. Semper is an architect for whom Sitte held a lifelong admiration and whom he had met personally through Richard Wagner and Hans Richter, Sitte's school friend then a concertmaster for Wagner.

Evolution of Art Forms

Evolution of Towns

Though we do not know of Sitte's knowledge of Semper's theoretical work on Style, *Der Stil*, he apparently shared one of Semper's sources, Natural Science. Sitte described, in a letter to a friend Ferdinand von Feldegg,⁹ how he gradually reached a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of culture on the basis of his research of natural history and cultural history. Sitte had studied ideas of Charles Darwin and George Cuvier, along with art history before he laid down an outline for an eight volume project intended for publication.¹⁰ The first five

⁷ Collins, 16.

⁸ Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language: towns, buildings, construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977)

⁹ A letter of July 6, 1899, a copy of which is in Sitte Archiv.

¹⁰ His eight volume were to include:

Vol. I. Über die Entstehung der Grundformen der alt-griechischen Baukunst und Ornamentik

Vol. II. Die Wurzeln der etruscisch-römischen Baukunst

Vol. III. Geschichte des perspectivischen Zeichnens

Vol. IV. Die Figurendarstellungen in der grossen Kunst

Vol. V. Beiträge zur Erkenntnis des Völkerwanderns und Völkwerdens

Vol. VI. Die Physiologischen und psychologischen Ursachen von Weltanschauungen

Vol. VII. Das Deutsche Kunstwerk der Zukunft

Vol. VIII. Gesammelte Pädagogische Aufsätze

volumes would interpret “*Die Erkenntnis des Culturwerdens, des Kunstschaffens*” (The perception of cultural evolution, of artistic creation). His outline of the first two volumes suggested a concept somewhat parallel to Darwin. While the first would interpret the development of the basis forms of ancient Greek architecture, the second volume would show the roots and evolution of Etruscan and Roman architecture. Sitte described the idealism connected with it as an affirmation of a belief in the continuous evolution of cultural groups (*Culturvölker*). From the observation of nature, he concluded by analogy that in the creations of our hands, in the works of art, approximately the same kind of process is to be found.

For Sitte, there are the laws governing the work of art. The same laws work for *Kunst* and *Kunstgewerbe*. The laws which govern the conception of a work of art can be inferred from the practice of simple craft. An evolution of the work of art is governed by such laws analogous to the particular inherent formal laws that allowed animals to develop. As has been suggested, both by George Collins and Carl Schorske, many of Sitte’s ideas about cities and towns are related to his experience with crafts and functional beauty of folk art as well as applied art. His analysis of the sequence and patterns of plazas and streets in ancient towns is grounded on such experience. On the one hand while his ideas on the evolution of art forms are inspired by Darwin,¹¹ on the other hand his belief in the laws governing such process that led to his analysis of the town pattern and their types is more related to Cuvier’s classification of forms. We know of Sitte’s personal contact with Semper through Richard Wagner but we do not know of his knowledge of Semper’s theoretical work. Consider Sitte’s background and his position as the director of the State School of Applied Art, he was also well read and well informed in the subject. It is highly possible that Sitte had knowledge of *Der Stil*. But if not, Sitte certainly shared another two of Semper’s sources: the hermetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the classification of forms by Cuvier and interpret them at the scale of a town. In other words, his pattern principles can be seen as an analogy to Cuvier’s classification of forms.

¹¹ Collins, p. 33.

In Cuvier' s classification, one finds the types of even the most complicated forms of the animal Kingdom. His method is based on organization of inner structure. Animals are classified by the way their internal organs functioned together. In other words, there is a hidden pattern of such internal organs that function as an operative system. The great innovation which Cuvier had introduced was to shift the emphasis from description by the identifiable members of an organism, and classification by description to classification by function performed. Resemblance was no longer the principal criterion of classification but the working of the member within the organism. This new kind of classification based on function rather than resemblance implied a discontinuous view of organic development. Species were fixed and developed by their particular inherent formal laws, never by some transformation from one to another.

Sitte was involved in abstracting principles from the works that had been created anonymously for a belief that such works provided a model of articulation. There are radical, irreducible elements and patterns to be found in folk arts as well as ancient towns which correspond to the ways of operating. Perhaps it could be said that Sitte was searching for types in such works as well as in ancient towns. While art forms as for animal forms developed, some identifiable members of the forms may change. Hence, description cannot be used to determine their types; rather one has to consider the function and the pattern of working members.

City, Typology and Transformation

From Sitte's speculation on the development of towns, it convinced him that there was a logically consistent system in the patterns of towns which could be defined as the theory of originating principle, from which the art of building cities is born. This idea of system is applicable to more than one kind of town and that each town can have its own. Perhaps this fundamentally universal concept could be called the metaphysics of towns.

Sitte's view on the origin and the fundamental relationship between the work of art, architecture, language and society were brought together and unified

within the framework of the city pattern and typology. By introducing type and pattern, he aimed at forming operative means for “building” the city. Equally integral to his idea of pattern was social organization, for it, along with physical conditions, determined which type was to take root. He referred to different patterns or types of towns as well as the social order that adhered with them. The pattern he introduced were principle types from which all the different towns known to us emanated. For Sitte, this notion of pattern was both a dynamic architectural element and an operative principle of the city. Pattern was one of the most important factor in the process of city development and the relationship between the city’s first and later manifestation was evolutionary. Sitte saw the existence of pattern or type perhaps as an answer to a complex ideological, religious or practical demand which arose in a given historical condition of whatever culture. It is an abstract notion of historical continuity of the city.

Sitte did not see architecture as an imitation of nature but a product of man responsive to nature. He did not consider type and pattern as a model but as an operative system to be respected. The problem of the relationship between the ancient and modern cities was the transformation process of type, a conceptual metamorphosis of architecture. Sitte’s pattern principles can not be seen as static rules or conditioning model to be imitated for he saw them as inhabitant space accompanied with an idea of transformation, an admit of change within the realm of rationality. In Sitte’s view, there was an interlacement between the city pattern and the inventiveness of the creative process. In other words, there was an organic law of development within the city typology that allowed rational changes towards ideality.

With the question of stylistic change and intervention of artist-genius within the arts, Sitte did not simply try to expand historicism to redeem man from modern technology and utility. He did not present anti-urban point of view, but rather accepted the city as a vital part of cultural development. Nowhere in his writing do we find a rejection of urban development in favor of ancient towns. Rather, Sitte firmly believed that if properly guided the modern city was capable of fulfilling

civic, cultural, and human needs. Looking for possibilities of such guidance, Sitte turned to towns of the past believing in the free form of ancient and medieval city space organization which arose not on the drawing board but "in natura."¹² Analogous to working the members of living organism, a town also has a pattern of its working members inherent in nature and functions of daily life. Forms of towns continually changed or developed though time. Identifiable members of towns or descriptions such as rectilinear, radial, triangular or uniform grid alone do not suggest the towns function and relationship of each working member. Sitte did not reject the uniform grid on the basis of its being modern rather on the ground that any pattern originated on the drawing board may crudely disrupt the spatial-temporal continuum of an evolution of urban fabric.

Perhaps in the same way Cuvier classified animal forms, Sitte was looking into each separate members of towns to determine the way they functioned together. Each plaza, square, street can not be considered as independent artistic element. It must be considered as a part of urban fabric which cannot be altered without affecting the others. Artistic principles refer rather to the patterning principles of compositional elements that derive meaning from the relationship to each other than a creative power of an artist.

Sitte's patterning principles show his idea on the relationship of nature, original models or types and man's creative work of art. Artistic principles are considered according to the universal principles closest to the intentions of nature or the original type which only the study of the creator can reveal. Using examples ranging from Roman time to his own days represent an attempt to explain the plurality of origins and the diversity of forms. His principles did not aim toward an imitation of concrete material models, rather to universality and flexibility of elements and at the same time toward an opening to new possibilities. His artistic principles were perhaps abstract, without reference to concrete form but to the spirit and function expressed by them.

¹² Schorske, p. 63

Sitte made clear that the original forms of towns arose from human's need and human's response to nature. As time progress, everything including our environment changes but the fundamental principles of town and its operative system did not change. Such working principles when found in living organism are considered typology by Cuvier. Sitte's notion of "type" or patterning principles certainly allows an opening to changes and transformations. The act of referring itself to the original type, function, or purpose of such pattern would make all changes rational, be it a change into uniform grid or other systems. At a time of great change, Sitte was in search for pattern in ancient towns, once and for all, not for a return to the pattern of the past but for a link between the city of the past and the city of the future. He found such link in the patterns of towns that can be used as a parameter of satisfy ever-present, universal needs of communal living - social and aesthetic as well as functional.

Abbreviation

ABZ = Allgemeine Bauzeitung (Wien)

Dat.= Datiert

Jg = Jahrgang

Mähr.Tgbl.= Mährisches Tagblatt

Ms. = Manuscript

NWT = Neues Wiener Tagblatt

ÖIAV= Österreichischer Ingenieur und Architektenverein

Salzb.Ztg.= Salzburger Zeitung

Salzb.Gewerbeblatt = Salzburger Gewerbeblatt

Undat. = Undated.

Unveröff.Ms. = Unpublished Manuscript

ZÖIAV = Zeitschrift des Österreichischen Ingenieur und Architektenvereines

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