Castiglion Fiorentino: Re-thinking the Spirit of Place

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Abstract. Hill towns reveal themselves in the morphological traces of their history. Organic urbanism was normally formed from a nucleus and then grown outward. Some cities are coherent in their evolution while others are more fragmented. When there is urban coherence you will encounter the spirit of place even if the buildings are in different styles. This sense of wholeness is often missing in modern urban design as architects and planners are impatient with existing conditions and preoccupied with inventing new architectural forms and master plans that ignore the existing urban system. What we understand as spirit of place emerges through an adaptive design process that transforms existing conditions and generates a formal coherence in the fabric.

The urban form of Castiglion Fiorentino that we see today was not designed; it was constructed piecemeal over hundreds of years. The organic process of building involved transforming inherited conditions to accommodate changing uses and meanings. Consequently, through this adaptive process the hill town has come to embody a *spirit of place* through the process of making its fabric. According to Vittorio Gregotti (1985), who had studied the hill town of Urbino over decades:

> The physical spirit of history is the built environment which surrounds us, the manner of its transformation into visible things, its gathering of depths and meaning which differ not only because of what the environment appears to be, but also because of what it is structurally. The

environment is composed of the traces of its own history. If geography is therefore the way in which the signs of history solidify and are superimposed in a form, the architecture project has the task of drawing attention to the essence of the environmental context through the transformation of form.

When we speak of "spirit of place" in this context, we are referring to its *genius loci*. The ancient Romans believed that, "every independent being has its genius, its guardian spirit. This spirit gives life to people and places, accompanies them from birth to death, and determines their character or essence. Even the gods had their genius, a fact which illustrates the fundamental nature of the concept. The genius, thus denotes, what a thing is, or what it 'wants to be', to use a word of Louis Kahn" (Norberg-Schulz 1980). The word genius (essence or character), refers to those "constancies, i.e. stable relationships which stand out from the more transitory happenings" (Norbert-Schulz 1980). Spirit of place is ultimately the intensity of wholeness one experiences in the place. The constancies are morphological. Like a guardian spirit, such constancies are always present at every stage of morphogenesis.

Urban geographers identify two fundamental types of urbanism: (1) *pre-conceived*, planned or fabricated and (2) *organic*, generated, or natural (Dickinson 1961). The ancient Greek city of Miletus in Asia Minor is predominately an example of the former while the Mediterranean hill town is an example of the latter type. Historical cities normally embody both types within the same urban morphology. I have always been impressed with the spirit of place (and morphological coherence and fine grained complexity) that I have experienced in Italian cities and hill towns and have often wondered how it was created. Christopher Alexander's book *A New Theory of Urban Design* (1987) provides an important insight. "When we look at the most beautiful towns and cities of the past, we are always impressed by a feeling that they are somehow organic.

This feeling of 'organic-ness", is not a vague feeling of relationship with biological forms. It is not an analogy. It is instead, an accurate vision of a specific structural quality which these old towns had…and have. Namely: each of these grew as a whole, under its own laws of wholeness and we can feel this wholeness, not only at the largest scale, but in every detail: in the restaurants, in the sidewalks, in the houses, shops, markets, roads, parks, gardens, and walls. Even in the balconies and

ornaments…Thus, in our view, it is the process above all which is responsible for wholeness…not merely the form" (Alexander 1987).

Alexander posits seven preliminary rules that motivate organic urbanism. *Rule 1: Piecemeal growth*: no building increment can be too large, must be a mixture of sizes and functions; *Rule 2: The growth of larger wholes:* "every building increment must help to form at least a larger whole in the city"; *Rule 3: Visions*: "every project must first be experience and then expressed, as a vision; *Rule 4: Positive urban space:* "every building must create coherent and well shaped public space next to it"; *Rule 5: Layout of large buildings:* "The entrances, the main circulation, the main division of the building into parts, its interior open spaces, its daylight, and the movement within the building, are all coherent and consistent with the position of the building in the street and in the neighborhood*"; Rule 6*: *Construction:* "the structure *Rule 7*: *Formation of centers*: "every whole must be a 'center' in itself, and must also produce a system of centers around it" of every building must generate smaller wholes in the physical fabric of the building, in its structural bays, columns, walls, windows, building base, etc.—in short, in its entire physical construction and appearance".

I will suggest that Castiglion Fiorentino was generated through a recursive process that resembles a self-organizing system, i.e. self determined and governed by its own inner laws: "Every new act of construction has just one basic obligation: It must create a continuous structure of wholes around itself" (Alexander 1987). Alexander formulates seven intermediate generating rules that generate wholeness. I think we will see them at work in Castiglion Fiorentino.

According to Vitruvius "Architecture consists of ordering, which is called *taxis* in Greek, and of design—the Greeks call this *diathesis*—and shapeliness and symmetry and correctness and allocation, which is called *oikonomia* in Greek" (Vitruvius1999). The Latin *ordinatio* or Greek *taxis* "appears to be the initial commitment to a geometrical system that controls the subsequent design, usually a modular layout" (Rowland 1999). The Latin *disposition* or the Greek *diathesis* seems to putting down or placing the elements of the building in order. Leon Battista Alberti's Latin word *concinnitas* extends Vitruvius's definition further "It is the task and aim of *concinnitas* to compose parts that are quite separate from each other by their nature, according to some precise rule, so that they correspond to one another in appearance…Neither in the whole body nor in its parts does *concinnitas* flourish as much as it does in Nature herself…beauty is a form of sympathy and consonance of the parts with a

body, according to definite number, outline, and position, as dictated by concinnitas, the absolute and fundamental rule in nature"(Rykwert 1988).

Christopher Alexander deploys a biological reinterpretation of the concepts *taxis* or *concinnitas,* and the Latin *dispositio* or ancient Greek *diathesis* in the concept of "wholeness". Vitruvius defines *disposition/diathesis* as drawing (*ichnographia* as a plan, *orthography* as an elevation and *scenographia* as a perspective in shadow relief). He sees that "The activity we call building creates the physical order of the world, constantly, unending, day after day" (Alexander 2001). The aim of organic urbanism is to create an environmental continuum where every part of it is whole and that organic order is generated through a step by step "unfolding" process of design. Alexander discovered a parallel in the way that organisms and built environments are created: "In the present way of thinking about architecture, one is supposed to design a building completely, occasionally even plan a whole neighborhood, and then use the description (the design, with its plans and drawings) as a specification from which to build…Instead of using plans, designs, and so on, I shall argue that we must instead use generative processes. Generative processes tell us what to do, what actions to take, step by step, to make buildings and building design unfold beautifully, rather than detailed drawings which tell us what the end-result is supposed to be"(Alexander 2002). Therefore, the generative process is similar to a recipe or a medical procedure that guides the "unfolding" of the urban form. The insight here is that organic towns unfold through a recursive process that follows some simple rules applied over and over again.

Lets look an example of two rules that Alexander posits in *The New Theory of Urban Design*: first, "positive urban space"; the rules says: "Every building must create coherent and well-shaped public space next to it"(Alexander 1987) and second, "The formation of centers", which is that "Every whole must be a 'center' in itself, and must also produce a system of centers around it"; also a center is "a 'thing', not a point. A center is not merely, as the word suggests, a point that happens to be a center of some larger field. A center is an entity; if you like, a thing. It may be a building, an outdoor space, garden, a wall, a road, a window, a complex of several of these at the same time."(Alexander 1987).

We can see both rules demonstrated in many other Italian towns. Areli Marina (2006) observes, in her study of evolution of the Piazza del Duomo in Parma (from 1196-1296), that each architectural increment that was added to the piazza attempted to bring geometric coherence (wholeness) to the several monumental buildings around the Piazza. What is interesting about Marina's research is that this sort of concern for spatial and dimensional coherence was manifest in Parma centuries before

Brunelleschi designed the Ospedale degli Innocenti's loggia façade that defines the east side of Piazza Santissima Annunziata, a model of Italian Renaissance urban space.

This leads to the realization that the overall structure of the town is an organization of centering relationships that lead to a general spatial and physical coherence. All centers have smaller ones within them creating a continuum of centers from the largest scale (the region) to the smallest (a door step). Unlike the mechanical model of order which can be defined as a composition of parts, the organic model conceptualizes order as a system of wholes at every scale. For our traditional designer-builder, the art of building was based on knowing how to articulate and strengthen these centers in every act of construction.

Now let us turn to Castiglion Fiorentino (a small hill town in Tuscany with a population of 12,000 located at the eastern edge of the Valdichiana between Arezzo to the north and Cortona to the south), an *organic, concentric—radial hill town,* created by numerous anonymous builders through a slow process of piecemeal growth and adaptation of pre-existing topographic conditions. We can identify five stages in its urban morphogenesis:

1. *Prehistoric Site*
2. *Etruscan Castrum*
3. *Abandonment and Ruin*
4. *Pre-Urban Nucleus: Stronghold*
5. *Medieval Town*

All five stages of growth have reinforced the original center, the Etruscan castrum. Each building and street conforms to the concentric-radial topographic structure of the hill. All additions seem to conform to "the overriding rule": "Every increment of construction must be made in such a way as to heal the city" and "Every new act of construction has just one basic obligation: it must create a continuous structure of wholes around itself" (Alexander 1987).

Morphological conditions can be considered physical constancies: "since biological and psychological qualities of humans persist, built forms relate to human scale; for example, the height of doors does not change very much. Properties of the physical world, like geographic characteristics, are relatively unchanging. Due to its materiality, urban morphology changes less than human institutions. Physical change is evolutionary. Old buildings are slowly being transformed or replaced by

new ones following precedent in, materials and in form. This perpetuates the existing form of the city" (Vance 1990).

Every increment that was added to the town had to adapt to these pre-existing conditions. Morphological layers do not necessarily correspond to historical periods. A morphological layer is created through a process of morphogenesis, that is to say, generated through fundamental social and economic conditions that might not change even though there is historical change. From its very early beginnings of Castiglion was, by the nature a defensive position between two valleys.

Pre-historic peoples lived in the Valdichiana and the Val di Chio three thousand years ago and were attracted to the concentric landscape form of the hill; they likely found the hill top defensible and gave them an extended view over the two valleys. Over time these nomadic people cut pathways over the hill and ridges over looking the valleys. The main street running in a north south direction through the town, is likely one of theses ancient foot paths.

By the 6th century B.C.E. Etruscans settlers entered the valleys and established settlements in strategic locations. The hill top was valued for its defensive position and views of the surrounding valleys so they could monitor travelers on their way to and from the copper mines which were located in the mountains just beyond the Val di Chio and the salt road that came up from the Valdachiana and across the Apennines to the Adriatic. The decision to build a castrum was taken sometime during the Etruscan period around the 6th and 5th century B.C. Eventually, a defensive wall and gate were added as well as a temple, and a necropolis. An aqueduct and pipes were installed to provide fresh water to a well within the castrum walls. As a center, the castrum was the nucleus that has held through all subsequent layers over the next 1400 years.

During Roman times agricultural production was organized in the valleys and the castrum was abandoned. By the 6th century, Roman influence in the valleys had almost completely vanished and the land around the hill had become a marsh. By the 10th century, a political vacuum led to political instability in the region and led to the rise of a feudal system in Italy. This coupled with a chronic problem of flooding and the growth of the marshes in the Valdichiana, local farmers returned to the hill tops for security. Montecchio and Castiglion were reclaimed by feudal lords who appreciated the strategic importance of the site. A local feudal lord (Marquis di Monte Santa Maria) remodeled the castrum ruins

into his stronghold. Consequently, the hill town was named Castiglione. During the 11th, the castrum tower and defensive walls were added to improve the defensive capability of the medieval fortress. Later the Perugians connected the tower to the so-called "wall of the wing" or "winged wall"; we can consider these symbols of San Angelo (St. Michael the Archangel). Footpaths along the hillside and a road along the Val di Chio connected the parishes that formed in this period.

The main street of Castiglione, which led to the entrance to the Castrum stronghold, formed a cross axis with the church. The fortress wall and the church together formed a defensive gate that faced an open field, a latent center and positive urban space, and later evolved into a market and eventually through incremental growth into, what is known today, as the municipal piazza. The first houses added outside the fortress were added between the fortress wall and the main street thus following the contours of the hill.

During the late middle ages, the town was controlled by Arezzo, Perugia, and Florence in order to secure a strategic location for control the surrounding valleys. Consequently. the hill town was named Castiglion Arezzino, Castiglion Perugino, and finally, Castiglion Fiorentino.

By the 12th century, the growing town constructed a second circle of defensive walls and gates and a Romanesque church, dedicated to San Angelo. The church was built over the ruined foundations of an Etruscan temple. The patron saint (genius loci) of Castiglion Fiorentino is San Angelo (or aka St. Michael the Archangel) who is emblematic of the original nucleus and defining character of the town, the winged tower is emblematic of San Angelo.

By 1256, Franciscan friars built the church of San Francisco outside the second circuit of walls. Finally, a third circuit of walls, constructed in the 14th century, enclosing two evolving parishes: San Francesco and Pieve; this addition required that a second set of gates be inserted in the walls: the Florence (Arezzo) gate to the north and the Pieve/Collegiata gate to the east. By the end of the nineteenth century, the town completed its medieval morphogenesis. The hill town is essentially medieval with transformations made between the 12th and 19th century. These transformations, though they reflect changing styles and tastes, do not change the essential morphology.

The Loggia di Vasari, a Renaissance insertion added in 1513 and incremental addition that simply enhances—creating an arcaded boundary to the rectalinear shape of the municipal piazza. On the south side of the piazza—which is now the post office—is a complex form that

incorporates several older buildings from the 16th and 12th centuries that have been consolidated into a single urban block that enhances the positive space the municipal piazza but also the main street. Several rules are deployed here: piecemeal growth, growth of larger wholes, positive urban space, layout of larger buildings, and the formation of centers. All these brought coherence within a layered complexity.

The Municipal piazza is defined by several important civic buildings: the town hall (Palazzo Comunale) on the west side and post office embedded in an 800 year old urban block is an irregular polygon: the north façade is the south boundary of the piazza and is directly linked to the Loggia of Vasari. The west façade defines the spatial edge of the Corso and reveals the traces of the medieval houses that have been incorporated in the remodeled building. The corner that connects the west façade and the east faced defines a "Y" shaped piece in the Corso whose corner is truncated and defines the north boundary of a triangular shaped urban space. This piece of urban fabric is a remodeling of a remodeling: i.e. the current form incorporates a 16th century building which incorporates an earlier structure from the 12th century—containing a series of medieval houses. The extent building was remodeled in the 20th century to accommodate the post office and shops along the Corso. This urban block though oddly shaped, actually reinforces the urban structure while maintaining the coherence of the municipal piazza and the Corso. The town hall was also built incrementally and has undergone a consolidation of various buildings on three levels since the 11th century; the Perugians made additions in 1350. The exterior was restored and the Sala del Consiglio added in 1489. In 1919 the building became a pinacoteca. In 1936 was restored once again and converted into the present town hall. The front entrance is prominently positioned toward the municipal piazza.

Several nineteenth and twentieth century extensions and insertions were added; the addition of the church of the Collegiate di San Giuliano in 1869-67; the bell tower was added in the 1930s and was compatible with the neo-classical architecture of the church.

Suburbanization developed around the train station since the 1970s. Between 1945 and the 1975 the town lost inhabitants as it had fallen into an economic slump. This explains why the town has not been "modernized" during the decades of the 1950s and 60s when many historic centers in Italy were marred by misguided post-war development.

The city of Castiglion Fiorentino incorporates five morphogenetic layers. All five stages of growth reinforce and articulate the original center. Each building and street conforms to the concentric-radial topographic structure. All additions in the town's morphogenesis strengthen this concentric-radial order.

What can Castiglion Fiorentino teach us about how spirit of place is created? Spirit of place resulted from the process of transformation of persistent physical conditions—concentric-radial topography, hill top, access to water, fortress, paths, sand stone. As an example of *organic urbanism*, the hill town's fabric resembles a *self-organizing system* where certain rules governed incremental growth: "every increment of construction must be made in such a way as to heal the city" (Alexander 1987); and that smaller centers reinforce larger ones; urban coherence is the result because each part was *centered* from the scale of the town to piazza, block, building, and detail.

The key to achieving the spirit of place is ultimately based on understanding the history of a place in order to discover the constancies, the originating conditions. As we have seen, wholeness (spirit of place) is generated through an adaptive design process applied to a place over centuries of piecemeal growth.

A spirit of place is often missing in modern urban design because many urban places are designed all at one time, not unfolded through a step by step process over many years. It is important to learn from places like Castiglion Fiorentino. How do we preserve the spirit of place? First, we must understand the history and morphogenesis of a place over time and re-learn and re-apply the simple rules that generate organic urbanism. If we apply these rules and apply an adaptive design process to the places we have inherited we shall transmit spirit of place to future generations.

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