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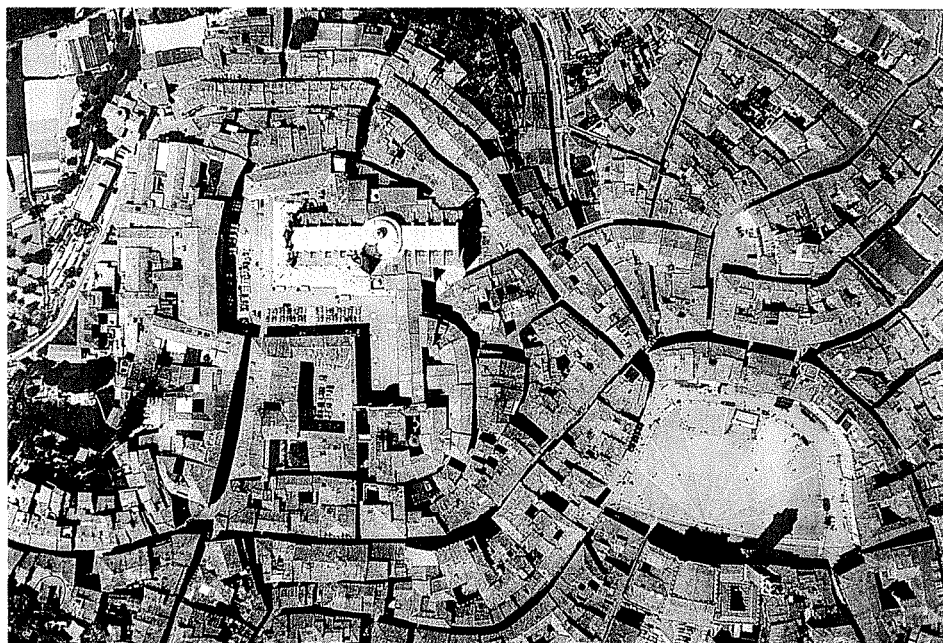Places, 6(2)

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STREETS AS LANDMARKS

**Aerial view of Siena
and the Piazza del Campo.
Photos courtesy
Giancarlo De Carlo.**

We complain that the streets of urban peripheries are boring, that they do not offer the same opportunities for encounter, exchange, curiosity and attention that are offered by the streets of the historic centers. It is not surprising, as the streets of the historic centers were made for the motion of human beings whereas the streets of the periphery have been made for the motion of automobiles.

The difference between these two kinds of motion is immeasurable. Human beings' motion is slow, inordinate, erratic: it tends to follow winding trajectories (if it is not forced to go straight on by other more aggressive motions such as car traffic), it seeks encounters that once found can make it change route and even go back, and it tires not so much in proportion to the distance traveled as in inverse relation to the quantity of stimuli it meets.

Car motion is fast, peremptory, determined: it generally moves in a straight line and, when it changes direction, it takes narrow curves that lead it in another rectilinear trajectory; it avoids encounter with other cars (because that would mean a collision) and never goes back unless it has reached the pre-established destination; it does not tire or stop, unless it experiences mechanical failures or obstacles barring its way; it is totally indifferent to the environment it crosses since its only relationship is with the strip along which it runs, that is, with the surface of the road.

The major difference between human motion and car motion is that the first is of man or woman, therefore "organic," whereas the second is of machine and therefore "inorganic." One could observe that cars are driven by human beings and are "instruments" governed by organic will. But this does not change a thing.

Plan of Siena and its region.
Courtesy Giancarlo De Carlo.

First, the instruments invented by humans always modify both their behavior and their way of thinking. Then, in this particular case, the instrument has a volume about sixty times bigger than that of its operator, whom it also contains. Lastly, the fact of being contained, disjointed and somehow imprisoned leads drivers to a state of estrangement that blunts their capacity of criticism and pushes them to elementary and stereotyped reactions.

Nevertheless, one cannot imagine that it is enough to prevent cars from running along roads to make these roads interesting. It doesn't seem possible, because cars have an irresistible attraction and it is therefore unthinkable that they can be done away with, and because roads in the periphery, having been designed for car needs, can change only if they are redesigned in order to correspond to a set of more complex needs, to the combination of car and human needs.

A street winding through Siena.

About the irresistibility of cars: everybody speaks against them, but hardly anybody would do without them. Together with great disadvantages, cars offer some highly appreciated advantages: door-to-door service, the possibility of reaching far places that cannot be reached by other means, time saving compared to public transport and the privilege of hiding in a cockpit where one can feel "unique," free from any rule of civic behavior, protected from social control, powerful, safe and often compensated for the desolation of one's living place and the dreariness of one's working place.

It seems difficult to get rid of cars until other means are found that offer even more advantages with fewer acute disadvantages. Therefore, peripheral roads will continue to be traversed by cars and the only thing one can do is redesign them so that they can correspond also to human needs.

But, then, how to redesign the roads of the periphery?

To approach the problem one should probably start by distinguishing between internal roads that serve buildings door-to-door and external roads that serve the whole district and connect it with the city center, the other districts of the periphery and the net of regional roads.

On internal roads traffic is slower than on external ones, and cars could be regulated so that they never overcome the threshold beyond which, be they still or in motion, they start to oppress human motion. It is not difficult to reach this goal, as we now can rely on effective instruments of revelation, monitoring and information that allow us to foresee traffic, avert it, divert it and absorb it on alternative routes.

The most decisive interventions are those that affect the design of the road itself, which can be remodeled in such a way that pedestrian paths and car lanes coexist in a joint configuration. The task of pedestrian paths is to allow people to start living on the street again.

To attain this goal, the transformation of roads should focus on a series of converging scopes and make use of many different instruments. One should aim at changing the geometry of internal roads, making it more complex; bringing human motion closer to the foot of the buildings to make the routes more interesting and the activities more accessible, both longitudinally and transversely, with connections that can be perpendicular to the edges, or oblique, elevated, ascending, descending, or level, depending upon the destinations to be reached and the character of the places that are crossed; and enriching the meaning of the road spaces through the insertion of significant elements, such as pavings, signals, street furniture, manufacts and artifacts, colorings, and clusters or lines of trees.

These interjections, like the net of pedestrian paths, should no longer be imprisoned in the implacable linear geometry that at present regulates roads. On the contrary, they should break that geometry down, generating sequences of complex spaces and chains of pleasant places where human motion can freely express its tendency to seek and experience what is most congenial to it.

As for the external roads, one can say that they display the same problems internal roads do and can be redesigned with analogous criteria at some points or along some stretches (especially where human presence is denser). But they display other problems as they directly confront nature and, even though the people who designed them rarely thought about it, they are (and always have been) fundamental components of the landscape.

One should first ask oneself what could be their role in the landscape to which they belong. This role could be defining a border between two territories differently inhabited or cultivated; or establishing connections among sequences of inhabited nuclei or fields or water beds; or setting the matrix for a system of fencing, rows of trees, ditches, banks, that structure the agricultural areas; or cutting a horizon between land and land or between land and sky, to announce not only an end but also the presence of something beyond what is visible.

One should take these roles into account when designing the external roads. The crux of the problem is to free them from the unification imposed upon them when they were considered only as lanes to be measured in terms of traffic intensity rather than as significant parts of the landscape, always different from one another.

The aim of their redesign is therefore to characterize them differently. The method is to extract the characteristics (geographical, geological, topographical, topological, aesthetic) of the places they cross and transfuse those attributes into the design. The tools are common techniques and materials, used in a way that they end up by being consistent with the other components of the landscape, modeled, that is, upon the multiple order of nature.

Every element contributing to the formation of roads should be re-examined critically in order to be redesigned, in itself and in conjunction with the other elements, giving birth to new configurations ruled by much more complex geometries than the linear ones that are, always and everywhere, re-proposed. Roadways, platforms, retaining walls, connections, crossings, viaducts, parking areas, green systems, artificial lighting, furniture, signals, etc.: each part should be redesigned in order to compose roads that are consistent with the areas they cross, and therefore, in most of their aspects, unique—like places.