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# Pienza, Lessons at the Edge

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Approaching the wall that crowns the ramparts of the Tuscan city of Pienza, one is greeted by a breathtaking view of sumptuous landscape stretching in all directions. This view is all the more spectacular for the striking contrast it affords with the winding, narrow streets and busy, compact blocks just behind. The moment of emergence from the knot of shady streets to behold the full sun-drenched panorama is arresting, uplifting, and sublimely beautiful. Inspiration for better things fills the soul in a kind of Ambrogio Lorenzetti moment.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of an abrupt edge between compact urban development and open countryside, as in Pienza, is as mesmerizing in its normative beauty as it is perplexing to unlocking lessons for development today. In terms of the transect and its codification in the SmartCode, this edge completely omits the sub-urban T<sub>3</sub> and T<sub>4</sub> zones that are the focus of so much development today, and the area where New Urbanists wage their fiercest battles against sprawl.

The complete absence of this battle zone in Pienza would seem to suggest the city is irrelevant in its “arcane banality”—as one contemporary admonished me recently. However, something haunts in the unquestionable perfection Pienza seems to offer. Perhaps there is more to be learned from the agricultural edge than might first be imagined.

## “Civitas”

To understand the origins of Pienza’s edge one must look to the city’s medieval roots. Social instability during the Middle Ages encouraged farm villas to congregate tightly into defensible villages. Later, the demographics of these dense agricultural communities made them highly suitable for mercantile trade. But in the beginning, the

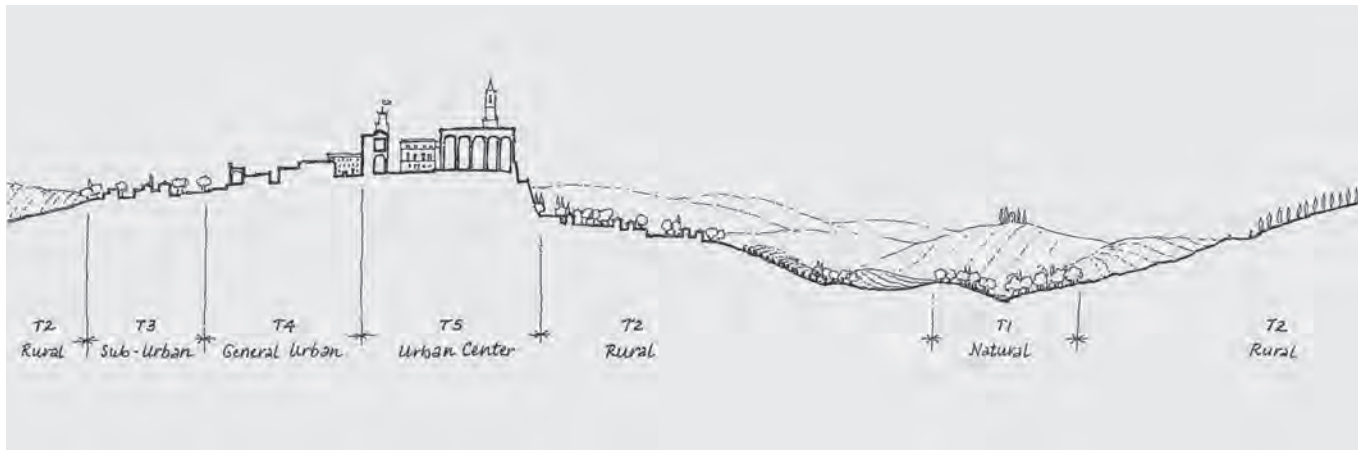
villages were purely agricultural, and their shapes evolved organically according to considerations of security, topography, fertility of land, and the needs of circulation.

One of the principal concerns was that agricultural land be close at hand to expedite travel on foot or beast between village and fields. This meant that the acreage needed to sustain the village population often created an agricultural zone which completely encircled it. As the villages grew, this agricultural border pressed in on the village because of the need to keep daily commutes as direct as possible. It also encouraged higher-density development within the village. Thus, through a self-reinforcing loop, the point of contact between urban and rural became highly pronounced.

By the mid-fifteenth century the organic development of agricultural Pienza had evolved to fully incorporate the shops and markets we enjoy today. It was on this evolved palimpsest that Pope Pius II inscribed the aesthetic and philosophical changes that transformed it into an influential “utopian city.” Pope Pius II’s adjustments considered intellectual and visual relationships of the public and private, religious and secular, urban and rural. As the first and most clearly planned Renaissance city, Pienza eventually came to embody a model of ideal living and government based on the concept of a self-sufficient, peaceful and hardworking populace.

Such qualities of “civitas” inspired utopian thinkers for centuries, and it is through these qualities that the breathtaking epiphany experienced at the agricultural edge is best understood. The epiphany is all the more remarkable when

Above: The urban edge of Pienza. Photo by author.



we realize that the open space beyond the wall is not natural countryside but productive farmland carefully orchestrated to reward our view, not just to grow crops and livestock.

### Giving Place to Farming

A study of these patterns in Pienza reveals a curious omission from within the New Urbanism. While the transect diagram claims to illustrate a full spectrum of development, from high-density urban cores to no-density virgin “nature,” it depicts no agriculture. To be sure, farms do appear, but only as dressing at the outer edges. The quality and potential for agriculture to be a fully contributing participant in urbanism does not receive its due.

On closer examination, it is remarkable that industrial farming has so entirely escaped the New Urbanist critique. Although industrial farms don’t bring wasteful mega-parking lots, they are no less dependent on petroleum, and their chemical dependency is no less destructive to the environment (not to mention to human health) than the American suburb. In fact, industrial farming outstrips them all.

Where then does industrial farming reside on the American transect, and where might New Urbanists place an alternative?

Much is made today of how (mostly young) suburban expatriates are moving back to once-charming urban neighborhoods. The quality of life in these places is being newly unveiled partly because their assets were once so unfairly obscured by denunciations of “urban blight”—perhaps more a euphemism concealing bigotry against the poor and ethnically “undesirable” than a fit description of the physical structure of the cities. Today it is easy to understand how the steady degradation of all aspects of

life by low-density consumerism has fueled dissatisfaction and a search for alternatives. For those spurred by such vision, the negative stereotype of blight no longer presents a barrier to appreciation of city environments, made richer by their ethnic diversity.

It must be added, however, that other young suburban expatriates have been attracted to farming. These people’s aspirations may seem different from their urban counterparts; but maybe they are not. Can New Urbanism offer a conceptual home for them, too? It might—if it could be broadened to include sustainable organic farming.

According to farmer Robbins Hail of Bear Creek Farm in Osceola, Missouri, the most manageable organic farm requires only eight acres, a size that can also produce enough revenue to support a family comfortably. Processed foods, which, of course, are part and parcel of the fuel age, could remain the purview of industrial farming on huge tracts in the hinterlands. But sustainable farming could be integrated far closer to, or even within, new pockets of urbanism.

Life on a farm in the middle of nowhere can be pretty unappealing. But given a place within the urban realm, sustainable farming might both reduce agriculture’s impact on natural ecosystems and allow a rethinking of the isolation of farm life. Furthermore, if we remember the lessons of Pienza, farming’s presence might enhance the quality of urban life.

Above: Pienza transect. Drawing by Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk.

## Agriculture and the New American City

Using the Pienza example, cities might consider selecting their most arable available land and reserving it for farms. The availability of such land is greater than one might imagine, as the plans showing the de-densification of a part of Detroit from 1950 to 1990 indicate. In particular, so-called brownfields, once the sites of important industries, today approximate the size of agricultural areas. If these abandoned sites could be reclaimed and joined into a continuous belt, the same self-reinforcing edge identified at Pienza could help give form to American cities.

Some may worry that former factory lands may be too contaminated to safely grow food. However, one might compare such concerns to those over American waterways not long ago. After a clean-up period, these waterways are now healthy and productive.

Some may also argue that adequate legal mechanisms exist to create viable agricultural edges around American urban areas. In Oregon, for example, growth boundaries have been used to protect farmland and contain urban development. Other places—such as Lexington-Fayette County, Kentucky; Baltimore County, Maryland; and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania—combine such growth boundaries and agricultural zoning with the purchase of development rights from farmland owners. Since farmland near metro areas may be worth far more for growing houses than for growing crops or raising livestock, these legislative practices are vital to counteract the pressures of the marketplace.

Good and necessary as these legislative efforts may be, however, they still segregate agriculture from urbanism. Legislated growth boundaries also have yet to be shown to be effective at producing compact walkable neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the farms they seek to preserve are precisely those mid-size tracts destined for extinction under the onslaught of the mega-farm. Legislated and development-rights efforts do offer legal frameworks for resisting the marketplace, but they need further enhancement through New Urbanism to amount to true community-building.

New Urbanists have the tools to interpret successful enterprise from the past into sustainable practices for the future. Rather than preserve tottering 40- to 320-acre tracts, New Urbanists might propose that arable land close to urban development be subdivided to make it more desirable for organic farming. One method would be to create narrow strips, say 2,640 feet (1/2 mile) by 132 feet (or perhaps even more sliver-like), so that each tract would be about eight acres (to meet the Hail standard). Two to three



tracts could then fit next to each other within a typical city block, and farmhouses could mix with other houses on the streets abutting the fields. If enough fields could be massed together (the more the better to feed and ring the city), they might eventually create an agricultural edge with a similar, exhilarating effect as at Pienza.

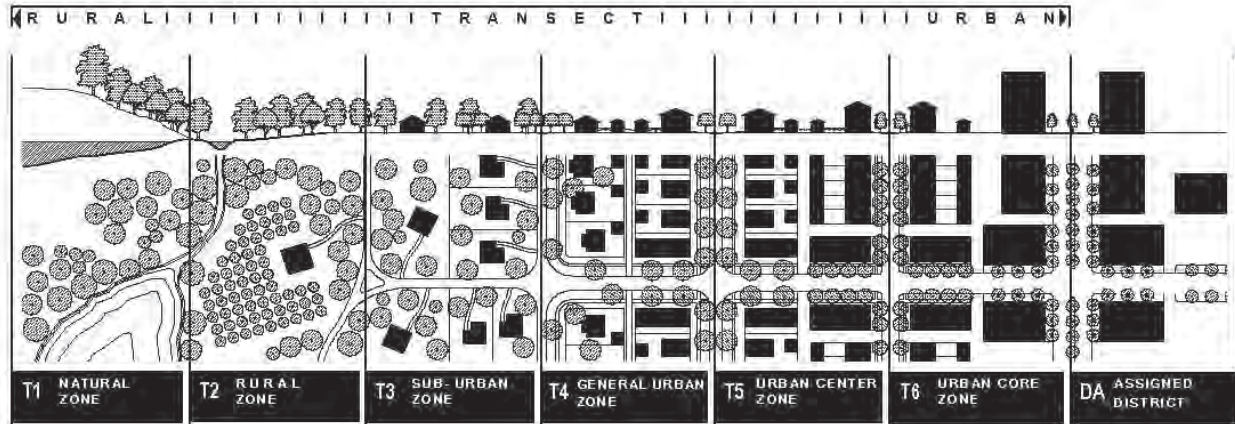
Clearly, sustainable farming already nudges at the gates of our cities in a nascent movement known as Urban Farming. It is important to carefully and quickly observe the lessons of Pienza so that farming can be reintroduced to urbanism for the greater public good. In the end, a joining of agriculture and New Urbanism might rekindle the promised utopia of “civitas.”

### Notes

1. I am referring to the frescoes of “Good Government” and “Bad Government” by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena’s Palazzo Pubblico (1338), which depict how the best in government and urban design bring out the best in human nature.

**Above:** The de-densification of Detroit has created possibilities for reintroducing agriculture to the city. Drawings courtesy of Douglas S. Kelbaugh, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan.

**Opposite:** Some initial attention has been given by New Urbanists to food production in and around cities, but more is needed. This depiction of an agricultural transect shows how food can be grown virtually anywhere—so long as the scale and technique are appropriate. Drawing courtesy of Duany Plater-Zyberk and Co.



• **Wilderness:** an area approximating the natural condition which is to remain perpetually uncultivated and sparsely inhabited, such as a forest, a mountainside, or a desert. Berries may be picked and certain game taken with permission.

- **Farmland:** an area for the cultivation of crops and the raising of livestock. Farming at this scale requires early morning use of machinery, spraying, and heavy fertilizer. It is not compatible with residential areas.
- **Hand-Tended Agriculture:** cultivation of high retail value can be hand-tended. The planting, pruning, fertilizing and harvesting can be done by hand and thus is compatible with urban areas, even in close proximity.

• **Kitchen Garden:** a portion of a private yard for the small-scale cultivation. Kitchen gardens are expected to be utilitarian in appearance and maintenance and, as such, restricted to the backyards. If dedicated to raising chickens or rabbits (viviculture), the kitchen garden should be walled. Permission for viviculture in an urbanized area should be by consent of neighbors.

• **Community Garden:** a grouping of garden plots available for small-scale cultivation, generally to residents of apartments and other dwelling types without private gardens. Community gardens should accommodate individual storage sheds. Community gardens are valuable for their recreational and communal role, similar to that of a resort cabins. Syn.: **Allotment Gardens**

• **Container Gardening:** The growing of food crops in a container ranging from 5-gallon buckets to bathtubs. The increased amount of soil allows the growing of larger vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers, and more of them than you could in balcony boxes. Useful when the yard soil is polluted.

• **Balcony Boxes:** for apartments that do not have a yard, the possibility of planting on windows, balconies and terraces could provide for fresh herbs and the comfort of growing something green.