THE PLANNED CITY?

ISUF International Conference

Edited by Attilio Petruccioli, Michele Stella,
Giuseppe Strappa

VOLUME I

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Edited by **Attilio Petruccioli, Michele Stella,**
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Pienza, a Planned Vicus that Became a Town
Pienza, the Town Plan

Alessandro Merlo, Giancarlo Cataldi, Fausto Formichi, Laura Visentin

The events leading up to the papal founding of Pienza and the creation of its square are common knowledge, having been widely researched in recent years. The last exhaustive work of Pieper (Pieper, 2000) meant a breakthrough in the knowledge of its history. However, further progress can be made by re-interpreting 15th century planning in the light of the new swing-back hypothesis of Corsignano before Pienza, illustrated in the previous paper, where the layout of its main longitudinal route (basically following the promontory's ridge) consists of three rectilinear segments facing in different directions and serving as plan-directional axes vis-à-vis building tissues that gradually grafted onto them.

In other words, the three development phases of its built-up area spatially typify the three historic sectors of its medieval settlement, whose remerging is the joint upshot of minute spontaneous building intervention and further-reaching uniform planning intentions, which always arise from the need to redesign the overall shape of any built-up area that has grown in time and which can, to some extent, be named "town". In a nutshell, Corsignano's building structure had its future intervention in its DNA, i.e. it virtually had a propensity to the 15th century plan of Pienza, whose degree of "innovativeness" is due to a whole series of (typological, stylistic, town planning and environmental) reasons affecting the whole built-up area and which must not, therefore, be limited conceptually (as has occurred up until now) just to its square and monumental buildings. In Pienza, of all its urban ingredients, its diffused architectural quality boosted its settlement scale from an intentionally planned cluster of buildings to a town.

Whereas the reading of Pienza's town plan must focus on the "town idea" governing the uniform series of papal actions. It is common knowledge that this idea is clearly linked to the anthropomorphic (and anthropometrical) metaphor of the human body, which has the merit of referring the thinking subject (the customer-planner duet) and thought object (the planned town) to a conceptual common denominator with an analogical relationship guaranteeing a priori obeyance of the man-size principle, fundamental to the entire community's psychological appreciation of a building.
First and foremost, this new town idea must not be confused with the similar sounding, yet profoundly different, idea of "ideal town", which mainly refers to the typical (polygonal)

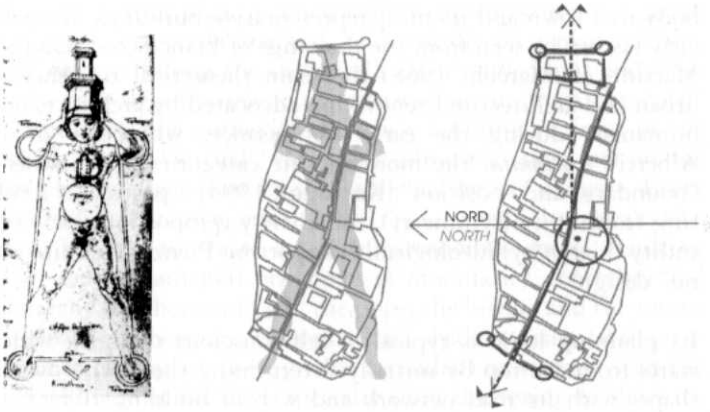

Fig. 1 - The idea of a town in the early Renaissance: the town as type

shape of fortified towns, following on transformations induced by weapons, whose problems were mainly tackled by engineers and military architects during the mid-16th century and, to a lesser extent, by generations of 15th century "pioneers", motivated by working at a culturally stimulating time and intentionally fuelled by classic renewal. In fact, the concept of *renovatio urbis* essentially entailed a comparison with the ancient idea of towns, whose vestiges were visible and measurable in Rome, and to which reference was made with the "real" term of modern towns – first and foremost Florence, which was the first to start (after its slump following on the plague) upgrading its medieval townscape. They lived this "season" as a sort of challenge, in which their thoughts and text- and ancient context-interpretation were oriented towards "rewriting", as in the case of Corsignano's transformation into Pienza.

During the Middle Ages, Corsignano was one of the numerous castles scattered throughout the countryside between Rome, Siena and Florence. Its only claim to fame was that it was the birthplace of a great humanist, Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405-1464), who suddenly became pope in 1458, under the name of Pius II, after an astounding diplomatic and ecclesiastical career. Immediately after his election, he set about renovating the town, as discussed in Rome with Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) and other major humanists, under Pope Nicholas V (1397-1455) when Renaissance Rome's initial major townscaping (1447-1455) was under way under the guidance of Bernardo Rossellino (1409-1464) and the supervision of Alberti.

Due to its size and the amenity of its site, Corsignano seemed to have the necessary requisites to act as a laboratory to the actual experimentation of the new town planning principles that had recently been established by Alberti in his *De re aedificatoria* (1443-1452 circa), based on the concept of *concinnitas* in its modern meaning of organicity (Vagnetti, 1973). In fact, anthropomorphism, which metaphorically likens the human

body to a town and its most representative buildings, is explicitly (as can be seen from the drawings of Francesco di Giorgio Martini, cf. Marconi 1968) the main theoretical reference of urban and architectural renovation advocated by architects and humanists during the early Renaissance, whence – as in Alberti's *concinnitas* the more specific categories of "number", "boundary" and "position" (Karvouni, 1994) – postulates resulting from unity (symmetry), modularity (proportion) and centrality (hierarchy) ideologically supporting Pienza's "architectural" design.

Its planning logic is typical of self-conscious thought, which starts from the top by initially determining the town's overall shape, with its road network and web of building tissues, to then pass on to the plan of its square and, lastly, the design of its main buildings, i.e. proceeding as follows:
1. Urban form unity is obtained by "architecturally" redesigning its walls, which outwardly feature, on its short sides, the "majestic" image of its symmetrically positioned corner towers, also where (due to pre-existences) it does not contain the city gates but a perfectly centred panoramic balcony. Also on its long side overlooking val d'Orcia (the only one intact), its modular scanning of keeps seems to demonstrate a similar intention to express unity but in a substantially serial manner.
2. Its main street is upgraded on both sides partially (typologically) by encouraging the tendency to convert houses into palaces and partially (linguistically) with the inexpensive expedient of graffito work to give the complex adequate styling uniformity.

3. Architectural upgrading of its forum, i.e. its main urban node (its new central square where it crosses its side street),

Fig. 2 - Corsignano becomes a town, Pienza: the town as organism

through a strict plan, geometrically founded on the new revolutionary perspective method, i.e. basically on a man-size virtual grid, set along the cathedral's right-angled axis and, therefore, privileging viewpoints situated on it: from the "real" viewpoint of the corner of the brick building in front of the church to the "virtual" viewpoint (almost a stage set) on the further convergence of its side walls acting as "wings". Every building has it own ratio (1:4; 1:5; 1:6) with its perspective grid, helping to create a single harmonious space, resulting from the fundamental principles of modularity, centrality and hierarchy (the house of God, the pope, the bishop and the municipality). Furthermore, the cathedral's shade is designed to project onto the square paving (like a sundial) to visually scan the central hours of the day, especially from the spring to the winter equinox: Pieper, 2000).

4. Lastly, mention must be made of repositioning from scratch, in its urban tissue, of certain buildings alienated and demolished after previous intervention, including the "twelve new houses" in the north-eastern sector (once up against the wall), the new premises of Santa Maria della Scala hospital and the opening of an inn which, despite its fortuitous location, reveal the "town-planning" desire to equip the newborn town with an adequate number of facilities.

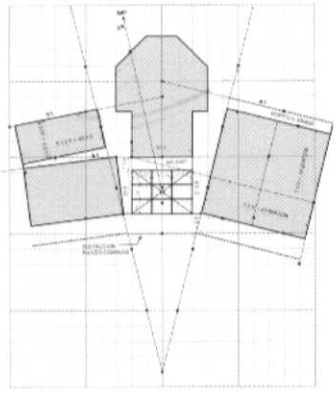

Fig. 3 - The design of its square

Passing onto Pienza's major plan, let us strive to retrace in detail its mechanisms, which could have been dictated by the following process logic:

1. Tracing its symmetrical axis by partially taking pre-existences into account (i.e. its *castrum*'s cross walls, the bend in its main street and its town hall, but not the church of Santa Maria which was then demolished) and according to 2:9 angulation with its celestial north-south to align with the summit of Amiata (Pieper, 2000) which was significantly the local centre of the Roman geodetic grid.

2. Measuring its basic module and perspective cone. The distance is established along the previous axis between the three main planning points: the cathedral centre (where the nave and transept cross), its outer threshold and the composition's "real" perspective centre in front of it, 45 *braccia* from one another (45 is half of 90, deducible from the 2:9 ratio). This distance, subdivided into 5 parts of 9 *braccia* each, produces a grid, still fundamentally based on a square 9 x 9 *braccia* module (5.07 metres: Pieper, 2000) and its multiple of 5 (on which Roman metrology is based), advantageous on account of its approximate diagonal measure (=7), enabling straight lines to be traced on site. The angulation of the castrum's pre-existing wall (1:4 ratio) was then discharged, through symmetry, onto the modular grid to obtain, starting from the converging point of the axis with the cathedral, a sufficiently wide perspective cone to frame its façade.

However, its new orientation forced the architect to place the huge building below the square's bearing surface, beyond the brow of the promontory: hence yielding and cracks right from the day the church was inaugurated.

3. Determining the plan of individual buildings, which all turn out to start from a basic modular grid, in relation to which vertices establish a series of progressive ratios: 1:4 the papal palace, 1:5 the presbytery and 1:6 the sloping wall of the new town hall, whose façade, parallel to the cathedral, closes the square's volume.

4. Determining the square's paving. Having established the shapes of buildings, the paving had to be designed to sum up the previous inspiring criteria. In front of the church façade, in particular, the square area was beyond the church's ideal line joining the two corners of the new palace of the pope and the pre-existing palace of the bishop: a rectangle that could also be measured in approximately whole numbers along its diagonal (ratio 8:9, i.e. 32: 36: 48 *braccia*). Excluding the church's raised courtyard (8 *braccia*), the remaining space could be subdivided into 9 rectangular squares (9 in Greek *Ennéa*, in honour perhaps of "Aeneas", name of the pope: Pieper, 2000) in herring-bone brick with travertine strips in between.

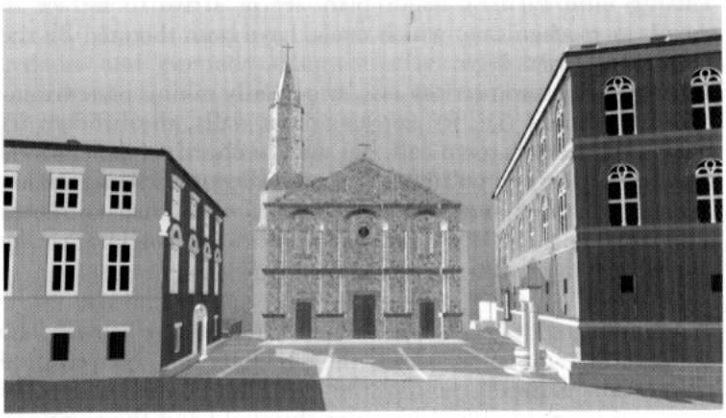

Fig. 4 - The perspective of the square

Whereas the new planning weapon of early Renaissance architects, clearly the perspective method, was used not only to verify a priori, through drawings, the spatial results of their choices but to determine their upshots, in a vision that assumed checking of the planned space from precise privileged points, as in our case the "real" point in front of the cathedral and perhaps the further "ideal" point where the side walls converge, evidently assuming the virtual elimination of the main street's northern buildings like a sort of stage set, reminiscent of the famous paintings of ideal cities, perhaps painted with Pienza in mind.

This is a specialized topic that cannot be examined on this occasion. The idea that the cathedral's shade was used, with its

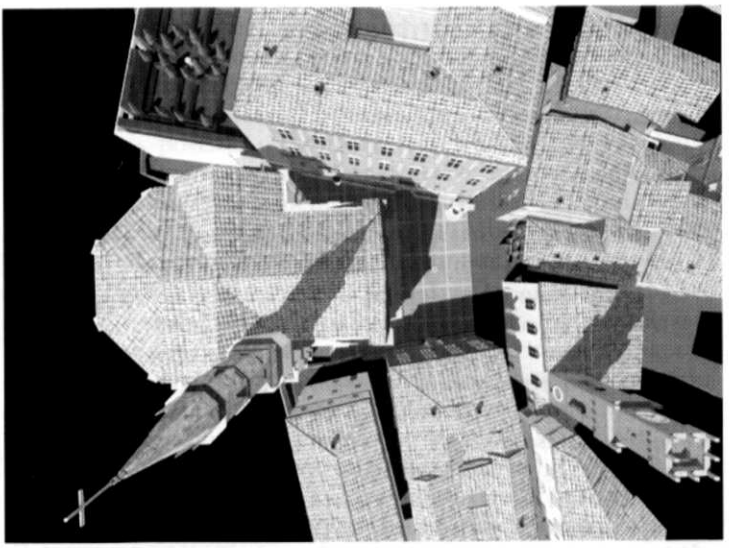

Fig. 5 - The astronomy of the square

paving design, on special days of the year like a large sundial, seems to have led to the raising of the church's façade (Pieper, 2000). It could be significant to end our paper on this note, pointing out the north-south orientation of the presbytery wall: when the sun starts to light it up, it is midday in Pienza. Did the architect - as in every planimetry - wish to leave us together with the unit of measure of the well's architectural order, also the physical indication of the north?

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