URBAN SPACES:
Comparative uses, size, and character

by
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This thesis is dedicated to Kathryn.
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Abstract

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When a student of architecture attempts to study the morphology, character, scale, and life of outstanding urban spaces of the world, he faces a disparity of information that is seldom combined into a single source. The material usually includes photographs and drawings (some of which are incomplete, too small to understand, or at different scales). There is a need, therefore, to consolidate that scattered body of information into a concise, regular format in which urban spaces can be compared without countless hours of cross referencing architectural texts.

To compare some of the significant urban spaces, this thesis attempts to discuss briefly the historical development of the square, its use, and the organizing elements characteristic of its period, to show graphically the comparative sizes by drawing the spaces at the same scale whenever possible, and by delineating the detail of the buildings around the square, the shadows cast by the buildings, and furnishings, to attempt to capture the character of the square.

Each square is accompanied by a smaller area plan to show the relationship between the square and the approaching streets emptying into it. The approach to a square in many cases is an integral part of the overall experience. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions of reproduction and thesis format, the larger squares are not shown at the same scale as the majority of the plan drawings.

Eduardo Catalano, Thesis supervisor
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Urban spaces
Comparative analysis

All the squares on these two pages are shown at the same scale, 1" = 300' within an urban area of 160 acres (one quarter mile by one-quarter mile) to show their comparative size and relation to the adjacent urban fabric.

Plans

1. Santiago de Compostela - Santiago, Spain
2. The Central Area - San Gimignano, Italy
3. Piazza del Campo - Siena, Italy
4. Piazza del Popolo - Todi, Italy
5. Piazza della Signoria - Florence, Italy
6. Piazza Annunziata - Florence, Italy
7. The Campidoglio - Rome, Italy
8. Plaza Mayor - Salamanca, Spain
9. The Spanish Steps - Rome, Italy
10. Amalienborg Square - Copenhagen, Denmark
11. Place des Vosges - Paris, France
12. Darbar Square - Patan, Nepal
13. Darbar Square - Bhadgaon, Nepal
14. Lower Plaza, Rockefeller Center - New York, New York
15. City Hall Plaza - Boston, Massachusetts
Santiago de Compostela
Santiago, Spain

The eleventh century marked the beginnings of what is today one of Spain's architectural landmarks. The center of religious faith in Spain, the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela stands out as a religious shrine of the western world.

After the discovery of the remains of the apostle St. James on the site of Santiago de Compostela, a small nave was constructed, and then a modest church was built in 899 both under the direction of King Alfonso II. By the eleventh century, as more and more pilgrims journeyed to this shrine, Don Diego Pelaez saw the need for a greater church to serve as a climax to the long pilgrimages. Plans for the cathedral were commenced, and the cathedral was consecrated in 1211. During the succeeding centuries, the cathedral and its facades underwent continual renovations. Ornate decorations...
which ran the gamut of architectural styles were added to the original Romanesque work. Up until the eighteenth century vast sums of money were lavished on the cathedral's remodeling, but since then, the sums have been more modest, and the church was spared further nineteenth and twentieth century renovations.

The medieval Spanish plazas that surround the cathedral are separate and distinct spaces, not linked or organized into any kind of unified whole. The random plazas are diverse in size, orientation, and level with no attempt at an overall spatial organization. The plazas provide no contribution to the buildings around them and no complement to one another. They are only loosely connected by passageways, staircases, ramps and covered corridors. Ultimately, the plazas provide two things: space for the gatherings of pilgrims, and a link from the streets to the cathedral by means of the staircases.

The plazas are typically Spanish; that is, they are irregular open spaces and multi-leveled with connecting staircases. Of the five plazas surrounding the cathedral, the Plaza de Alfonso XII or Plaza de Obradoiro along the western facade is the largest and most regular plaza. Conceived in 1783 by Fernando Casa y Novoa, the plaza opens onto a hospital, the Palacio Consistorial, and the Colegio de San Jeronimo. Its famous elaborate staircase is the focus of this plaza. Smaller and more intimate, the Plazuela de las Platerias in front of the southern transept has fifteen broad steps that lead to the church. This plaza provides a transition to the larger Plaza de la Literarios behind the church and the Plaza Quintana nearby. On the north side of the cathedral is the Plaza de la Inmaculada which is linked to the others by means of angular passageways.

Scale
Area plan 1" = 300'
Site plan 1" = 60'

Plan key
1. Santiago de Compostela Cathedral
2. Plaza del Obradoiro
3. Plazuela de las Platerias
4. Plaza Quintana
5. Plaza Inmaculada
6. Plaza de la Literarios
2
The Central Area

San Gimignano, Italy

The central area, comprising three contiguous piazzas -- Piazza della Cisterna, Piazza del Duomo, and Piazza delle Erbe -- form the physical and social center of the small medieval hill town of San Gimignano, forty kilometers south of Florence.

The physical shape of the town was derived from two early ninth century settlements and their circuit of defensive walls. After the church was built in the eleventh century, a market place, the Piazza del Duomo, was created in front of it; and a major commercial route, the Via Francica developed. As the population grew, the market place acquired new importance, and in 1273 an open space, the Piazza della
Cisterna, was created with the well as a focus.

Unlike some older Italian towns, San Gimignano has retained much of the medieval spirit with its menacing towers, palaces, and piazzas.

Every wealthy and powerful family erected a high tower over its palace as a symbol of dominance and for security from rival families. The towers served as a place of refuge during siege and a place for defensive attacks. As many as seventy-seven towers existed in San Gimignano; hundreds more existed in larger cities such as Florence. After battles or conflicts, the tower of a defeated rival was often razed. As regional governments became stronger, individual battlements and towers which were the symbols of resistance and autonomy were not tolerated. Fortunately in San Gimignano, the local government permitted many of the towers in the center of the town to remain.

Towers are the unique formal elements of San Gimignano. From a distance they define the town. The towers provide orientation to the sequence of piazzas and assist to define their volumes.

Activities in the two main piazzas are differentiated. The Piazza del Duomo, symbolically situated on higher ground with the two tallest towers, functions as the center of public activities -- religious, governmental, and commercial. The Piazza della Cisterna, on lower ground, functions as the center of personal activities -- socializing and shopping.

The disparity in scale between towers and adjacent buildings provides a sense of monumentality to the piazzas despite their actual small size.

Scale
Area plan 1" = 300'
Site plan 1" = 40'

Plan key
1. Piazza della Cisterna
2. Piazza del Duomo
3. Piazza delle Erbe
4. Water well
5. via Francisca
3

Piazza del Campo
Siena, Italy

Located in the medieval city of Siena, fifty-five kilometers south of Florence in the heart of Tuscany, this square is situated at the geographic center of the three contiguous hilltop communities that compose the present municipality of Siena -- Camollia, Citta, and San Martino. The development of the Piazza del Campo followed a gradual transformation which began in the tenth century when the site was used for a market and meeting place for
the three communities. Later the area was partially built, and by the twelfth century streets connected the communities at a point near the piazza. Further development that century included the construction of a large retaining wall on the uphill side of the piazza to control flooding, and the construction of the Palazzo Pubblico was begun along with several great palaces surrounding the piazza. By the fifteenth century the rest of the enclosure was completed according to design standards.

The main entrance to the square is called Costarella, a series of steps from the via del Pellegrini, which is the primary access from the cathedral. The perimeter of the large square is closed by a unified building line of four-storied palaces, office buildings, and shops and is highlighted by the Palazzo Pubblico (1288 - 1309), its extremely tall Torre del Mangia (1338 - 1349), the Capella di Piazza (1352 - 1376), and Jacopo della Quercia's Fonte Gaia (1419) inside the square.

The whole square slopes gradually to the center and to the base of the Palazzo Pubblico like an amphitheater. The converging lines marked in the pavement in the fifteenth century give the illusion that the slope of the piazza is steeper than it actually is and de-emphasize the importance of the dominating Torre del Mangia by shifting the point of interest to the Palazzo Pubblico.

Today the space of the Piazza del Campo is available for private use by merchants and small businesses as well as for the enjoyment of the general public. In late summer, the city holds the annual "palio di Siena," a colorful medieval pageant with a tempestuous horse race around the perimeter of the square.

Scale
Area plan 1" = 300'
Site plan 1" = 40'

Plan key
1. Piazza del Campo
2. Palazzo Pubblico
3. Torre del Mangia
4. Cappella di Piazza
5. Fonte Gaia
Piazza del Popolo
Todi, Italy

Located in the medieval city of Todi, 100 kilometers north of Rome, these two interlocking squares, the smaller Piazza Garibaldi which overlooks the rolling Umbrian countryside, and the larger Piazza del Popolo which is the principal civic square of the city, are positioned between opposing vistas and were conceived as separate space volumes.

The Piazza del Popolo is enclosed by the facades of successive tall buildings giving an urban character to the square. The cathedral and the Palazzo del Popolo -- the symbols of the principal functions of communal life, the archbishop and the mayor -- are precisely defined in plan and in section. The entrances to both the cathedral and the Palazzo del Popolo penetrate the perimeter of the square with large flights of steps that rise above the plane of the public square onto a level of their own. The Piazza Garibaldi is open at one end drawing in with its wide expanse the spirit of the countryside. The identities of urban and country are separate and clearly defined within the individual parts of the composition.

The intersection of the two squares is reinforced by the diagonally located towers of the Palazzo del Popolo and the Palazzo dei Priori.

Scale
Area plan 1" = 300'
Site plan 1" = 40'

Plan key
1. Piazza del Popolo
2. Piazza Garibaldi
3. Palazzo del Popolo
4. Cathedral of Todi
5. Garibaldi statue
6. Palazzo dei Priori
Piazza della Signoria
Florence, Italy

In the older medieval section of Florence between the Arno River and the cathedral (Santa Maria del Fiore) is the Piazza della Signoria which has been the principal civic center of Florence for more than six centuries.

The main approaches to the piazza are from the Arno River along the extension of the Uffizi Gallery and from the cathedral down via Calizaioli. Since none of the narrow, dark streets leading into the square are opposite each other, one's approach to the square is always centered on a building facade or sculptural object in a complete, organized design composition.

The principal architectural elements that define the "L-shaped" square are the Palazzo Vecchio which penetrates the open space and which serves as a fulcrum around which the space revolves, the Loggia dei Lanzi which terminates one side of the space, and the extension of the Uffizi Gallery that links the square to the river.

The irregular shape of the square, with streets entering from all sides and at different angles is consistent with medieval practice, but contrary to the Renaissance ideals. Therefore, in the sixteenth century, the strategic placement of the sculptures of David, Hercules and Cacus, Judith, the fountain of Neptune, and the relocation of the equestrian statue of Grand Duke Cosimo I, turned the unbalanced square into two separate rectangular spaces whose irregularities became aesthetically irrelevant.

Scale
Area plan 1" = 300'
Site plan 1" = 60'

Plan key
1. Piazza della Signoria
2. Palazzo Vecchio
3. Loggia dei Lanzi
4. Uffizi Gallery
5. Arno River
Piazza della Signoria
Sculpture Grouping

Palazzo Vecchio
1 Cosimo I
2 Neptune Fountain
3 Judith and Holofernes
4 David
5 Adam and Eve
6 Cupid with Dolphin
7 Hercules and Cacus

Loggia dei Lanzi
8 Perseus
9 Hercules slaying the Centaur
10 Menelaos and Patroclus
11 Hercules and Anteus
12 Rape of the Sabine Women
13 the Virtues
6 Piazza Annunziata
Florence, Italy

Developed over two centuries as an architectural whole this square which is located in the older medieval section of Florence closes a long straight street leading from the cathedral (Santa Maria del Fiore).

One of the first examples of Italian Renaissance architecture, Brunelleschi's arcade begun in 1409 in front of the Foundling Hospital set the pattern and motif for the completion of the square. The arcade, completed in 1427, was followed by the construction of the central bay of the Santissima Annunziata Church by Michelozzo (1454) and by the construction of the Servi di Santa Maria by Sangallo which was built opposite the Foundling Hospital and was completed in 1516. These later works of Michelozzo and Sangallo, designed in harmony with the pattern established by Brunelleschi's arcade, further unified and balanced the appearance of the square.

The later placement of the statue of Ferdinand I in 1608 which terminates the axis of the square from the dome of the cathedral, and the two adjacent fountains which align with the entrance to the Foundling Hospital, together complete the balanced design of the square.

The Piazza Annunziata conforms to the stylistic trends of the Italian Renaissance, i.e., the use of arcades and loggias to connect architectural elements and facades of the square's perimeter, and the use of fountains and statues for spatial unity.

Scale
Area plan 1" = 300'
Site plan 1" = 40'

Plan key
1. Piazza Annunziata
2. Foundling Hospital
3. Servi di Santa Maria
4. S.S. Annunziata
5. Ferdinand I
6. Fontana della Taccanella
Centered on the ridge of the Capitoline Hill, the Campidoglio is the main civic square of Rome and hosts the celebration for visiting dignitaries, and presentations of awards and honors.

Michelangelo was commissioned by Pope Paul III in 1537 to regularize an existing irregular complex of medieval buildings and create a monumental square on the Capitoline Hill. He established a line of axis on the Palazzo dei Senatori as an organizing element and a geometric configuration based on a central trapezium (the piazza) with an inscribed oval combined with a second trapezium (an access ramp, the Cordonata) and two irregular rectangles (the lateral staircases). The trapezium shape was generated by the existing acute angle between the facades of the old Palazzo dei Senatori and the Palazzo dei Conservatori and at the same acute angle to the Palazzo dei Senatori.

Moving up the Cordonata, the angular alignment of the Palazzo dei Conservatori and the Capigoline Museum tends to monumentalize the Palazzo dei Senatori by reducing the impression of depth. This foreshortening of the space may be termed "anti-perspective" as it aims to influence the perception of rectangular space, free from distortion.

By employing this visual tool, Michelangelo reduced the rigidity of a perpendicular composition through the variation of planes and the complex geometric relationship of the volume.
The medieval city of Salamanca is the site of perhaps the most beautiful Spanish plaza, the Plaza Mayor. Irregular in design until the eighteenth century, the square served as a place for markets, festivals, bull races, gatherings of the citizenry and military, and for the monumental prestige of the city.

The plaza itself was designed in an elaborate baroque style which was made possible by the excellence of the local stone. The quadrilateral of the plaza is framed by uniform four-storied houses which were designed by Andreas Garcia de Quinones. At street level of these houses is a continuous arcade which masks the streets running into the plaza and gives the entire plaza a closed or contained character. Along one side of the plaza is the town hall, the Casa Consistoriale, designed by Nicolas Churriguera which is slightly higher and more ornate than the houses. These buildings have an overall strongly horizontal design that unites the square, and they are accented by a vertical ornamental design on the balustrades of the roof parapet.

In the area neighboring the Plaza Mayor are the church of San Martin and the market place, the Plaza de la Verdura, so in this general area are the city's religious, government, business, and administrative centers. The Plaza Mayor, therefore, is still a vital, thriving part of the city of Salamanca.

Currently, the center of the plaza is empty. The kiosks and gardens of the nineteenth century have been removed.
The Spanish Steps (1721 - 1725) by Alessandro Specchi and Francesco de'Santis with its one hundred thirty-seven steps are a unique case in which the principal part of the square is not the piazza but the staircase itself. The Spanish Steps connect the Piazza di Spagna at the bottom, to the piazza in front of the Church of Santa Trinita dei Monti at the top.

Five streets lead into the triangular square of the Piazza di Spagna which is the starting point for the spectator's rise up the steps.
One of the five streets, the via Condotti, is the axis which leads first to the piazza, through Pietro Bernini's boat-shaped fountain, up the steps themselves, to the obelisk at the upper piazza, and then into the church facade at a slightly oblique angle (which is not discernible on the site). The steps are the visual and spatial center of the piazza, not just a staircase leading to a monument.

The Spanish Steps are divided into several sections, the first of which are three uniform sections of steps that taper toward the center to provide an upward thrust when viewed from the bottom. These three sections are followed by a fourth series of steps that widen at each side and then split into two side ramps that lead to a landing which stretches the entire width of the stairs. This landing serves as a resting point halfway up the stairs offering a vista back to the city and serving as a platform for street vendors. From this expanse of landing are two more series of steps that gradually narrow, and divide again into two narrow, curved series of steps that appreciably decrease in rise and ultimately open out onto the piazza of the church. This ascent to the church affords the spectator a continuous change of vista and direction, as well as a change in the function of the steps, i.e., from a steep rising sequence, to a resting stage, to a very gradual rising sequence again. The spatial concept of the Spanish Steps has been copied all over Europe but has never succeeded elsewhere.

The area surrounding the Spanish Steps has traditionally been reserved for foreigners and artists due to the prevalence of hotels which have been there for centuries and nearby embassies. Another tradition, an abundant flower market, graces the foot of the Spanish Steps.
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Amalienborg Square
Copenhagen, Denmark

In 1749, which marked the anniversary of the House of Oldenburg, King Frederik V of Denmark presented his subjects with a large piece of land which included a park of one of his royal palaces and an adjacent drill ground. For that site, which was actually an entire district in Copenhagen, the architect Nicolai Eigtved designed a great monumental plaza surrounded by several buildings including four palaces with eight attached pavilions, a magnificent church with a great dome, a hospital, and neighborhoods of uniform houses for the streets approaching the plaza.

The plans, begun in 1749, were completely laid out and many of the buildings completed by the
time of Eigtved's death in 1754. The palaces which are now the residences of the king were placed on the four angled corners of the octagonal plaza, and eight smaller two-storied pavilions were attached to either side of the palaces. The design for the Marble Church was never carried out, but was modified and completed in the form of the Frederik Church by Jardin and later Meldahl after Eigtved's death. The hospital's functional plan was carried out; and the plain gray houses which were built on the streets approaching the plaza stand out in contrast to the otherwise brightly colored sections of Copenhagen.

Two principal roads, each seventy feet wide, where many of these houses were built, intersect the plaza; the Amaliensgade runs north and south and parallels the river. Along the southern side of the place, the Amaliensgade is roofed by a great colonnade that links the two wings of the southern pavilions. This portico serves to accentuate the equestrian statue of King Frederik V which was done by the sculptor Sally and rests in the center of the plaza. The other intersecting road, the Frederiksgade, runs east and west and provides a significant link stretching from the wharf through the plaza to the Frederik Church. This shaft of space along the Frederiksgade terminates the principal vista on the great dome of the church and creates a thrust of design used elsewhere in eighteenth century northern European civic design.

Amalienborg Square remains as the royal residence for Denmark and as a tribute to the talents of Nicolai Eigtved whose plan was not merely a group of buildings built around a square, but was a composition of several buildings with various functions which unite to form a rhythmic whole.
11
Place des Vosges
Paris, France

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France, there developed a design for urban spaces with several specific characteristics—called places royales. These characteristics included a mathematically regular layout, nearly complete continuity of framing facades, uniformity of the facades, and accentuation
of the center. The Place des Vosges is the archetypal place royale with its quadrangular layout, its repetition of three-storied facades, and its equestrian statue of Louis XIII in the center of the place.

Originally, the Place des Vosges was intended by Henri IV in 1607 as a large square with homes for nobility, a sort of cosmopolitan retreat within the city. The square was isolated from traffic with gateways at the north and south centers, and later street entrances were made at two corners where they were concealed by special pavilions incorporated into the continuous row of thirty-eight houses. The houses are united at street level by an arcade but separated at the roof line.

The place has gone through many changes and renovations. Originally it was sand-covered and bordered by a wooden fence; during this period it was used for military tournaments, processions, jousting, and ceremonies including the marriage of Louis XIII in 1615. Later a grated railing was added; a pond was placed in the center and removed seven years later; a lawn was placed over the original sand; trees were planted along the paths; and sidewalks, gaslights, kiosks, and other accessories common to Parisian squares were added.

It has been suggested now that the best time to see and appreciate the Place des Vosges is on a clear winter morning when the bare trees afford a clearer overall view of the place. One then can use the imagination to "restore" the place to its former unencumbered purity. Currently the Place des Vosges is a residential square with the place itself housing flower beds and groups of trees. It is the only extant Parisian place not spoiled by crossroads of intersecting traffic.

Scale
Area plan 1" = 300'
Site plan 1" = 60'

Plan key
1. Place des Vosges
2. Louis XIII statue
3. Fountains
The Newar architecture of the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal escaped Western influence until the mid-nineteenth century. At that time a few artifacts were imported for the ruling families, but the culture was basically without contact with the West. The architectural traditions of Kathmandu Valley have, therefore, evolved purely without outside influence in that isolated peasant culture, and are sophisticated examples of urban planning.

The dominant feature of the Darbar Square in Patan is that of density. Arable land in Nepal is at a premium; consequently, the cities and villages themselves are very compact for conservation of valuable farmland. Also in early times, it made possible the defense of the
The Darbar Square in Patan has an enclosed, cohesive feeling largely due to that compactness. The city closes in tightly around the square, and there is very little open space. On three sides of the square are three and four-storied houses. The fourth side has extensive open gardens which were behind the palace and were reserved for the exclusive use of the royalty. The complex around the square was actually built as the royal residence for the Malla kings; most of the great palaces and temples were built between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Within the complex and the square are many free standing temples and pagodas, informal groupings of sculpture, bells, platforms, and a water well. The main building material is red brick with windows and roof structures made of ornately carved wood. The deep red is accented by a rich green growth between the bricks that is commonly associated with regions of this climate and humidity.

The main water well in the square is built about twelve feet below the main level of the square. Six feet below the present street level is a broad walk that surrounds the lower square. At the east end are steps that lead another six feet lower to where water flows from ornately carved taps. This deep pit dates back to the tenth century.

In Malla times, the Darbar Square was a place for the court activities. Currently the space serves as a background for religious festivals and ceremonies, and a public gathering place. Since the people of Patan spend so much time outside their houses in the streets, the Darbar Square is used continuously.
Bhadgaon, which is a city terraced on a hillside, has a Darbar Square which is similar to the Darbar Square of Patan in that it is built within a compact urban environment. This Darbar Square is another example of sophisticated urban planning by a culture primarily composed of peasants.

The square itself is separated into two main sections, that is, a palace square, and on a slightly lower level, a temple square. The majority of construction in the squares took place in the sixteenth century.

Darbar Square is quite filled with statues, a huge free standing bell, and several temples of varying sizes. The red brick is predominant in buildings and paving patterns, and the ornate wood carving is seen on panelling and detailing. The green growth in the brick joints accentuates the deep red.

The square is linked by a steeply descending ceremonial path to the Chupin Ghat area of Bhadgaon. These interrelated spaces are the setting for the annual chariot festival. The main Darbar Square also serves as a much-used public gathering place.
The City Hall Plaza in Boston's Government Center is an eight-acre expanse of open space in an otherwise crowded, claustrophobic downtown area. Part of an extensive urban renewal project completed in 1969, the sixty-acre Government Center was a national design competition, ultimately planned by I.M. Pei. A maze of twenty-two existing streets was simplified into six main routes. This openness and simplicity combine to create a remarkable contrast to the rest of the city.

The plaza is separated from all traffic which provides a less frantic, quiet quality to the space. As an initiation or lead-in to Kallmann and McKinnell's City Hall, it has a feeling of motion and space rather than one of seating and sculpture. The spectator is asked to walk through the open plaza.

The plaza is built of red brick paving which unites it to the neighboring red brick Sears Crescent (1841), the older red brick Fanueil Hall (1742), and the modern Center Plaza (1966-9). The flat terraced steps of the plaza lead to lower plaza levels, up to a subway station (a design extension of the same red brick), and up to City Hall.

City Hall Plaza is a dramatic element that reinforces Boston's City Hall as the focal point of Government Center. Specific uses of the plaza are a public gathering place for the city, and a place for concerts, festivals, demonstrations, and other meetings.
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