

READING URBAN FORM: TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Figure 1. Illustration used in the call for papers. Created by Alessandro Camiz with help from AI.

Reading Urban Form

Cities are among humanity's most enduring and complex artefacts. At any time, they are material and symbolic, planned and accidental, stable, and frustratingly unfinished. To read urban form is therefore not simply to describe urban tissue, such as buildings, streets, blocks, and squares, but to engage in an interpretive act—one that treats the city as a manuscript written over time by an unseeing multitude of authors, transformed through conflict, negotiation and cooperation, and understood differently by each generation that inhabits it.

The idea of *reading* the city has long served as a powerful metaphor in urban thought. The early Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo did *read* the antique metropolis of Rome and Babylon as symbols of human imperfection (Augustinus, 2013), in its *libido dominandi* proud and powerful but vain and fragile. His concept of the two cities, earthly and heavenly, stands for the moral scepticism of the mediaeval age up to the Crusades.

It was first when the earthly Jerusalem again was in reach for European thinkers that the idea of urban planning could

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bringing urban life closer to the moral ideals of Christendom. It is therefore of special interest that the schematic illustrations of Jerusalem of the so-called *Crusader maps* of the 12th and 13th centuries seem to spark a new ideal of urban community, where moral virtues and urban form coincide in circular cities with a cruciform rectangular street grid. The illustration from the *Liber Floridus*, created around 1120 (Saint-Omer, 1120), is displayed on the cover of the *Forma Civitatis* 2025 issue. It is one of the oldest Jerusalem maps and symbolises how new ways of reading the city gave birth to the geometric layouts exhibited during the urban revolution of the 13th century all over Europe.

From mediaeval cartographic representations to contemporary urban analysis, scholars and planners have sought ways to decode the meanings embedded in urban form. The act of reading implies more than observation or measurement. It seeks to uncover practicality, context, and interpretation. It demands attentiveness to layers of history, social relations, political power, economic forces, and cultural imagination. Urban form is never neutral. It tells stories about people, humans who shaped the city, their way of living and thinking, and for whom the city was shaped, and at what cost.

Renewed attention to form

Historically, the study of urban form has swung between descriptive taxonomy and normative order. Early urban morphology sought to read and classify cities according to street

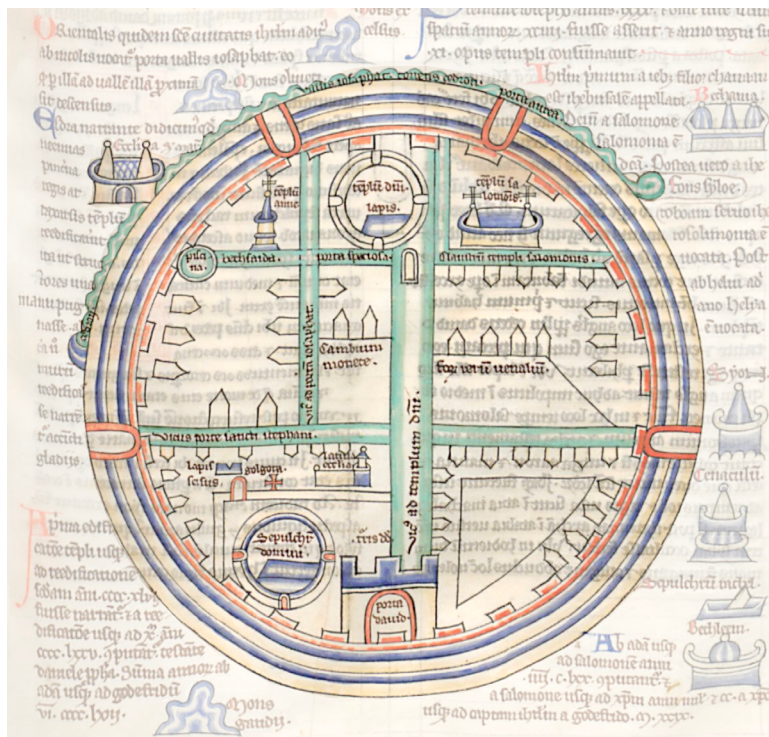


Figure 2. Map of Jerusalem from the Liber Floridus. One of a number of schematic maps of the holy city that became the ideal for urban planning in the 13th century.

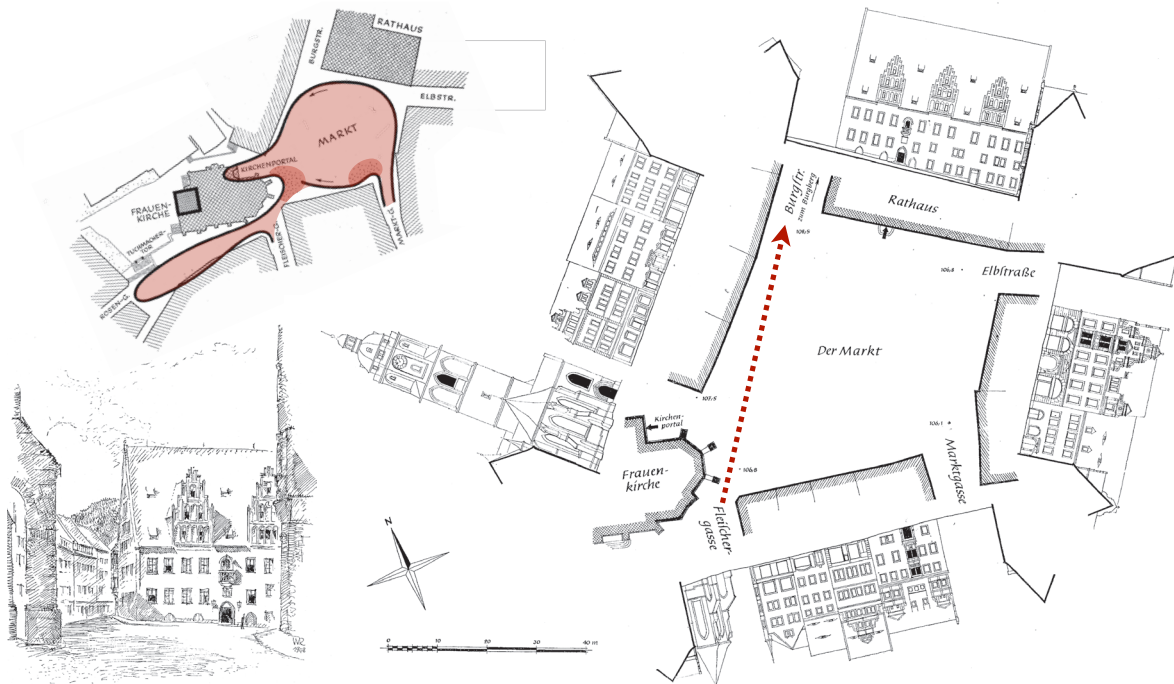
Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica. Lambertus de Sancto Audomaro, Liber Floridus, folio 133r. The copy has been digitally altered and enhanced by the author.

patterns, plot structures, and building typologies (Meurer, 1914; Stoob, 1979). Their work established foundational vocabularies—plots, blocks, streets, and fabrics, centres and peripheries—that continue to inform planning and design practice. While urban planners such as Camillo Sitte and Wolfgang Rauda (Sitte, 1889; Rauda, 1957) (Fig. 3) were contemplating the sources of beauty in urban planning, modern urbanists such as the CIAM planners often treated form as a mere instrument: a means to engineer social order, efficiency, or hygiene. For them, reading was subordinate to writing; context was subjugated to intervention.

The latter half of the 20th century complicated this relationship. As critiques of modernist planning emerged, the city began to be reimagined as a palimpsest rather than a tabula rasa. Scholars such as Aldo Rossi and Henri Lefebvre—each in distinct ways—reasserted the importance of historical awareness, memory, and everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991). Form could no longer be understood solely through geometry or function; it had to be read through practical experience and historical narratives.

To read urban form is to recognise its diachronic dimension. Every street alignment, plot boundary, or building footprint can be traced back to past decisions, some deliberate, others circumstantial. The metropolitan ring roads of the late 19th century inherited their space from the mediaeval walls; prime-value loft apartments can be traced back to industrial warehouses; modern infrastructure like roads originates from informal paths of the past, as Pasquale Tunzi shows in

Figure 3. Reading the space. Wolfgang Rauda's analytic sketches of the market square in Meißen, Germany, in an attempt to find a method to analyse the visual effects of mediaeval spaces. The illustrations contain a collage of different figures, digitally altered by the author. Source: Rauda, 1957, p.187–208.



his contribution. Urban form accumulates texture, often unevenly, producing contrasts that resist simple narratives of progress or decline. Reading these forms requires historical sensitivity: the ability to see continuity and rupture, persistence and erasure. This is exemplified with the contribution of Marian Rębkowski, introducing the mediaeval town of Wolin as an example of a great number of places formed by the urban revolution of the 13th century.

Reading urban form is a craft, set centre stage by urban morphology. Its methods and taxonomy have grown into their own during the last decades, not only thanks to light-house contributions by Enrico Guidoni (Guidoni, 1980), Gianfranco Caniggia, Silvain Malfroy (Malfroy, Caniggia et al., 1986) or Karl Kropf (Kropf, 2017). While its language and methodology are consolidating (Gerber, 2021), its spectre is widening by the inclusion of digital methods and artificial intelligence. Giorgio Verdiani and Andrea Rosone show in their contribution on the survey of the theatre of Priene how digital methods can be used to increase our understanding of our antique heritage. Caterina Juric shows in her contribution how the abstraction of complex systems such as underground infrastructure can bend our understanding of space and functionality.

This issue provides *Reading Urban Form* not as a method or doctrine, but as a shared intellectual endeavour. It displays contributors from many professions, such as historians, archaeologists, architects, and planners alike, to approach the city as an object of interpretation, where morphology, spatial organisation, and physical reality are inseparable from its practical use and meaning. In doing so, it positions itself within a tradition of urban study that demands renewed attention to form.

Reading as an act of care

Reading urban form is seen as a generative practice. For designers and planners, careful reading can improve understanding, generating more contextually grounded and socially responsive interventions. Understanding morphological patterns, spatial logics, and cultural meanings can support processes of continuity and transformation. In this regard, reading becomes a precondition for responsible writing.

The metaphor of reading also underscores the relational nature of urban form. Just as a manuscript can be interpreted differently by various readers, urban forms can be read contradictorily by different actors. A boulevard may signify civic pride to some and surveillance to others; a redevelopment



Figure 4. Designed in the *Zeitgeist* of the 13th century: Neu Kalen, chartered in 1281, is only one of hundreds of new towns inspired by the Crusader maps of Jerusalem. Source: Cadastral map, graphically altered by the author.

project may open possibilities for some and displacement for others. These divergent readings coexist, sometimes uneasily, within the same physical form. Recognising its multifaceted nature is essential for understanding spatial conflict and negotiation.

What unites the works of this volume is a shared commitment to attentiveness. To read urban form is to slow down, to look closely, and to resist reductive explanations. It is to accept ambiguity and complexity as inherent qualities of urban life. In an era frequently characterised by acceleration and abstraction, such attentiveness is itself a critical practice.

Finally, reading urban form is also an act of care. To read is to acknowledge that objects and their space in the city matter—that their form shapes lives, memories, and futures. Reading urban form is a way of deepening our understanding of our spatial environment. If cities can be recognised as manuscripts written over time, its actors are surrounded by a living library, readable through the methods of urban history, archaeology and morphology. The city, their streets, blocks, squares, churches, and monuments form a three-dimension-

Figure 5. Reading history from urban form: the remains of the Roman amphitheatre in the ground plan of modern Firenze. Source: Benevolo, 1982, p. 500.



al book deposit through which social dynamics, economic forces, and cultural aspirations are expressed. To read urban forms can therefore be seen as an inquiry of the human spirit that built them. As cities confront profound social, cultural, and environmental challenges, the ability to read urban form turns from an academic exercise to a civic necessity.

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