Camillo Sitte 'Der Städtebau'
Translation: 'City design* according to its fundamental artistic principles'

This is arguably the most famous publication in the history of urban design theory. It is certainly the publication that was most fiercely debated, because it appeared at a time many people felt uneasy about current urban design. Either because they thought it had gone too far or because they thought it had not gone far enough.

The book appeared just before the advent of modernism and for them it became the symbol of 'wrong urban design'. The symbolism of the book prevailed and most modern architects did not even bother to read it and still called it 'reactionary', a well known pattern in the case of so called 'offensive books'. Only in the period of post modernism in the 1980's some started to read it, the first Dutch translation dates from 1991, more than 100 years after the first publication. It turned out to be an interesting, pleasant and still relevant book, be it with a limited scope because the emphasis is on esthetics. This is not because Sitte only had an eye for esthetics. On the contrary, he had planned a second book City design according to its fundamental scientific and social principles'. This never materialized, leaving critics with an easy shooting target to project their anti-esthetic anger on (and thus covering up that there own views where highly esthetic, be it of a different kind).

However even in the text of his first book it becomes clear that Sitte was well aware that urban design was about more than making pleasant spaces. For instance he emphasized the importance of the program, condemning 'empty esthetics'.

* As has been stated before the word 'Städtebau' - 'Stedebouw' in Dutch - cannot really be translated because of its cultural meaning.
German: Städtebau
Dutch: Stedebouw
Can not be translated into English
German: Städtebau
Dutch: Stedebouw

place building / making
/ constructing

‘making places’

Urban Design and Planning
Akademie der Kunsten, Wien
Camillo Sitte (1843 - 1903) was an architect who from 1883 until his death was head of the art academy of Vienna (illustration above). This was situated in the Ringstrasse zone and that is perhaps why he was so eager to show that its design in his eyes was flawed. He was most annoyed by the vast and weakly defined spaces with public buildings. His own academy is not the worst case, because it forms a complete building block in line with other building blocks.
Squares from Sittes book

Sitte book contains a great number of plans of squares. He uses this to show that in the middle ages and the following periods the high quality of public space was achieved be certain design principles.
Steenstraat, Brugge

Sittes book had many prints in short succession. In later additions more illustrations were added as was a part about green in the city. This illustration is often used as it is perhaps the first examples of the idea of a picturesque sequence as the basis for the design of public space. More than in the first prints, that only contained plans, it also shows Sitte was concerned about the 3D appearance of public space.
Principles Sitte

Sitte opposes what he calls 'the poverty of the modern', of course he means the 19th century urban design and not what would later be called 'modern'. His main objections are that plans are made on the drawing board as abstract schemas with stiff geometry and random forms. There only purpose often seems to be to divide space into blocks that can be build over profitable. Talking about the normal practice of his time he states that everything is decided on the basis of project development. Sizes of blocks and streets are predetermined in some meeting of the developers and policy makers and "...successively the parcelation plan of the new city quarter can be made by even the lowest ranking administrative employee or courier" A situation that some planners even today see as desirable.

In contrast to these rejectable habits Sitte poses:

- Public space should be designed according to artistic principles. However this should not be the esthetics of the drawing:

- The experience of space must be the starting point. He criticizes Baumeister: His model squares are just traffic nodes, abstract figures that draw no lessons from the past. The making of the walls is left to chance by Baumeisters suggestion that it should be allowed that people set there individual building back from the building line (although we have seen that Baumeister is ambiguous in this respect). For Sitte the 'perspective effect', as he calls it, is very important. In his case this equals a 'picturesque effect'.

- Studying the qualities of squares form the past should form the basis of the design of new squares.

- Public space should be enclosed space and it should have the correct scale. In particular it should not be too big.

- It is important that monument are well placed. In the middle ages monuments were never placed in the centre of the square. According to Sitte this is because they were placed outside the lines of traffic over the square, a kind of 'natural' position, that also was beneficial for the esthetics.

- Monumenal buildings should be part of the walls of squares and should not be free standing.

- Streets should be sinuous for an enclosed effect, for variation and to achieve the effect of a sequence.
Sitte on public space

• Artistic principles basis for design
• Experience of space is starting point
• Learning form the past
• Enclosed space, correct scale
• Monuments should be well placed
• No free standing buildings
• Winding streets
• Coherent plans, related to a program

Continued

Plans should be coherent. No plan without a program (*A kind of 'form follows function'!*).

According to Sitte the lack of a program is one of the causes of the lack of substance of urban designs.

Sitte explains how a good plan could take shape:

First of all there should be a survey and preliminary research. This should cover probability calculations of the growth of the population, growth of traffic and other statistics. On the basis of this research it should be established how many public buildings are necessary and what locations would be best for them. The location of squares could then be based on this. As a matter of course the design should then be made according to artistic principles formulated by Sitte. But he adds that also climate should be taken into consideration in the design as should be the irregularities of the terrain. These could provide good motives to make the plan interesting.
Sitte on squares

Two main types: 1. depth squares  2. Length squares
Third type: grouped squares

- As enclosed as possible. Not te many entrances. Maximum size 137 meters
- Width:height of dominant building  1:1 > 1:3
- Irregular form is pleasant, but no strict recommendations possible due to possible visual effects
- Proportions for groundplan that do not work 1:1 or >1:3
- Single axle symmetry could be acceptable, but no slanted walls or beveled edges.

Sitte distinguishes between two main categories of squares:

1. **Depth squares.** Meaning the emphasis is on the length and the dominant building is on the short side of the square.

2. **Width squares.** With the emphasis on the short side and the dominant building on the long side.

A third category are **grouped squares**, made up of several interlinked square spaces.

- To make a square as enclosed as possible, the number of streets leading to it should be limited. They should not be too wide and should be layed out in such a way that it is never possible to look along many streets at the same time. Winding streets also are a means of achieving an enclosed effect.

- He notes that the biggest squares in old cities are about 57 by 143 meters and recommends 137 meters as maximum size.

- The minimum proportion between the width of a square and the height of the dominant building should 1:1 and the maximum 2:1, depending on the architecture of the building. For instance a small number of high floors gives the impression a building is smaller than it actually is, changing the impression of space.

- Sitte points to the fact that many historical squares have irregular forms and still look attractive. However he hesitates to give concrete recommendations on the form because the way a form is experienced is so much dependent on human perception. - Examples show that the only proportions for squares that do not seem to work for the groundplan of a square are 1:1 or proportions of more than 1:3. E with square seems to be more tolerant to an elongated form than an length square.

- Sitte emphasizes the qualities of an irregular form for squares. He states that squares with a one axle symmetry can be acceptable but only if they are very well designed and rectangular or almost rectangular. Symmetrical squares with slanted walls or beveled edges never work, especially when they approach a triangular form.
Illustrations of some of Sittes ideas
Piazza Santa Maria Novella, Firenze

(drawing from Sittes book)

Sitte illustrates his point about the impossibility to give absolute recommendations for irregular squares this with the Piazza Santa Maria Novella in Firenze. Its plan is a pentangle, but everybody experiences the square as being rectangular with four corners. This is caused by the fact that we cannot oversee the square at once. If we are on the square and turn around the brain has deformed our first impression in such a way that it is adapted to the image we see at that moment. A remarkable piece of early perception-psychology by Sitte. based on modern scientific insights we could also say: the largest part of what we think we see is based on what we know. Our brain expects a square to be rectangular, so all incoming visual information is interpreted in that way.
Piazza Santa Maria Novella
Looking towards the dominant building, the famous church by Alberti. Alberti of course being a fore runner of Sitte as regards theory.
Sitte illustrates his ideas by making designs for improvements of the Ringstrasse in Wien. He considers the disposition of the Votivkirche to be a good example of bad urban design. The church drowns in its surroundings, dwarfing it. The space itself is not very pleasant, despite fancy garden design one feels lost.
The present situation
Illustrates Sittes point. He also remarks that making too much public space has the effect of ‘thinning it out’, it leads to a lower density of use and less people per square meter. If this falls below a certain level space becomes ‘dead’. An argument still very much valid today.
Sittes design to improve the situation

D = Atrium

- Framing the church by means of a square with arcades (Sitte talks about an atrium) makes it look much better and also more imposing. See the illustrations in the lectures about the renascence and the baroque (Piazza San Pietro) that demonstrate the effect.

- The arcade performs the double function of creating a quiet area, separated from the Ringstrasse, this makes it much more useful. It could for instance be a quiet green area.

- Old examples show that a square in front of a church has roughly the same surface as the church itself. The most imposing and biggest possible square should be maximal about three times the ground surface of the church. The vicinity of the big Ringstrasse justifies this largest size.

- The building blocks G and H should be so high that the buildings behind it cannot be seen from the new atrium.

- Situating another building block alongside the church (J) could divide the remaining space in such a way that two squares of good proportions and dimensions are created. Enclosure could be achieved by narrowing the passage (as shown on the left above block G) and by using arches (as shown above 'E').

- The arcade should be detailed in the style of the church and it should be slender and high to set off the church.

- The front of the atrium on the side of the Ringstrasse should be designed carefully, it should fit the architecture of the Ringstrasse as well as that of the neo gothic church. The arch can form a break of style. The narrow passage makes the transition because: 'what can be seen at the same time must fit together, we don't have to bother about things that cannot be seen together', says Sitte

- The remaining space is still large, This can be overcome by placing a sizable monument in it (K in the drawing).
All of Sittes proposals (red)
Projected on to the original design of the Ringstrasse.
All aimed at limiting the vast spaces and making less megalomaniac public spaces. The idea is to create a kind of 'forum like' area with public spaces for public life with the emphasis on the qualities as places to stay. He even suggests that the tram lines should be diverted to this aim. While in modern days trams are seen as some of the few means of transport compatible with public space for pedestrians (See for example the Leidschestraat in Amsterdam) because they are quiet and clean and have predictable paths, Sitte apparently saw them as representatives of hectic society.

From the point of city design his proposal to 'behead' the Ringstrasse is a bad one. On the level of a city these kind of structures play a very important role in the mental image. Continuity is paramount to achieve this. He is however right when he remarks that urban design should contribute to the feeling of attachment of citizens to their city by not alienating them form their environment and by being specific for a place.
Camillo Sitte: 'regulating plan' for Marienberg, 1904

Present name of this town: Ostrava-Marianské Hory

'Regulating plan' is the old name for what we would call a zoning plan or a structure plan. The Italians still use the name 'Piano Regolatore'.

Because of the focus on his book and the fact that he was director of an art school is often forgotten that Sitte also made plans himself and was an advisor for other plans. The example of Marienberg shows an ambitious plan to turn a small settlement into a town based on artistic principles. The design for the church square is by Camilo Sitte and his son Siegfried Sitte.