

# The Sociality of Form: Camillo Sitte's Urban Morphologies

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## Abstract

This article examines a text by a lesser-known figure of fin-de-siècle Vienna, Camillo Sitte's *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (1889), tracing the relationship between urban form and social structure in Sitte's treatise. It identifies the key points of this relationship in terms of *causality*: the form of public spaces can determine the form of social life; *surrogacy*: the throngs of the places' inanimate inhabitants, the statues and monuments, are placeholders for the missing human gatherings; and finally *displacement*: the thick sociality of community life is transferred onto a heightened relationality with urban forms. Sitte's text sublimates the social; it diffuses abstract social structures—density, relationality, connection—onto the spatial morphologies of the city. Ultimately, this diffusion results in a capacious yet weakened model of sociality.

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Writing in 1952, the Swiss architectural historian Sigfried Giedion notes the “demand for the reestablishment of community life” in cities (127). Although he asserts that “the endeavor to reestablish an equipoise between the individual and the collective sphere is proceeding today throughout the world,” his observations, written almost three-quarters of a century ago, still sound relevant today (126). They seem pertinent in the wake of a pandemic that showed the meaning of social isolation; in the context of centers that cities struggle to revitalize; and in the framework of online communities and the disembodied intersubjectivities they give rise to. Consider for instance, that the 2024 Pritzker Prize, the “Nobel Prize of architecture,” went to Riken Yamamoto, an architect whose buildings emphasize “community and

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connectivity,” encouraging, according to the prize citation, “people to convene in different ways” (Pogrebin; qtd. in Pogrebin). Whereas for Yamamoto the question of how spatial forms motivate people to come together is formulated in architectural terms, in buildings, for Giedion it is best exemplified in urban planning terms, in the city center. In this respect, Giedion formulates a connection between urban space and sociality that was first articulated by the Austrian architect and town planner Camillo Sitte (1843–1903) in his treatise *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (1889). This article is about Sitte, arguably the first to theorize the relation between town planning and sociality and the first to thematize the city’s empty space—the plaza, marketplace, square—as a “Medium von Kopräsenz” (Mönninger, “Schönheit” 17).

City planning as an independent discipline was founded in the last decades of the nineteenth century when cities faced unprecedented urban growth. *Der Städtebau* was written in response to changes in urban planning in Vienna in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1857, Emperor Franz Joseph I ordered the tearing down of the old embankments, fortifications, and moats, because Vienna had expanded far beyond these. In the years that followed, the medieval city walls were replaced by a grand boulevard, the *Ringstrasse*, which displayed an imposing array of historicist architecture such as the Vienna State Opera and the Town Hall. Vienna, like Berlin, had followed the model of Haussmann’s Paris: while its discernable city limits expanded, it completed many demolitions to build large wide avenues and large-scale public spaces. This led to a growing amorphousness of space in the city—to a fading of its outlines and an ebbing of its demarcations. Sitte’s treatise reacts to this new spatial formlessness in the city, to the proliferation of the urban void in large boulevards, open plazas, and empty spaces as well as to its consequence, namely, the thinning of the city’s social fabric, the evacuation of its public sphere, and the retreat of its social life indoors. Sitte decries the vast public spaces—“einförmige Raumleere” (35), “öde Platzleere” (131), “formlose[s], öde[s] Platzmonstrum” (164)—and their spatially exposed monuments and plazas. In view of these developments, his text offers a plea for reendowing urban space with form with the hope of reviving the city’s civic centers. He extracts morphological rules from past examples of town planning in the hope that the urban forms of the past can rekindle forms of communal life in the present.

Sitte, a lesser-known figure in the cultural history of fin-de-siècle Vienna, has had a fraught reception. In his seminal study on turn-of-the-twentieth-century Vienna, Carl Schorske presents Sitte alongside the architect and urban planner Otto Wagner as the “two pioneers of modern thought about the city [...] whose influence is still at work among us” (Schorske 25). However, whereas Wagner is seen as a modern functionalist, Sitte is regarded as a conservative communitarian. In 1941, Giedion too described Sitte as “the town planner [who] had lost contact with his period. He was a kind of troubadour, ineffectually pitting his medieval songs against the din of modern industry” (qtd. in Collins and Collins 116). Nevertheless, writing ten years later, Giedion echoes Sitte when he wants to understand how our forebears

“develop[ed] social intercourse” so that we may apply their knowledge in our own city centers bereft of community life (Giedion 128). Much like Sitte, who begins his study with the agora of ancient Greece and the Forum Romanum as models of public life, Giedion invokes the city core in Greece and Rome as ideal gathering places for the people, as models of a democratic notion of life. Lately, perhaps under the influence of New Urbanism, slogans such as Jan Gehl’s “cities for people,” and attempts to bring back multi-functional city centers and create fifteen-minute cities, there has been an increased interest in Sitte’s emphasis on the lived actuality of public spaces and a corresponding interest in revisiting his work (Sonne, “die lange Gegenwart” 26). Sitte’s collected works, in six volumes, appeared between 2008 and 2014. He appears to have an afterlife in contemporary follow-ups to his treatise such as Christoph Mäckler’s *Handbuch der Stadtbaukunst* (2022).<sup>1</sup> Sitte’s treatise has been translated into fifteen languages since it first appeared; a Korean translation was published in 2023.<sup>2</sup> However, with the exception of Collins and Collins’s *Camillo Sitte and the Birth of Modern City Planning* (1965/1986), there is little published on Sitte in English.<sup>3</sup>

Scholarship has repeatedly pointed out Sitte’s attempt to unleash “mit dem Mittel der Architektur ... soziale Bindekräfte” (Mönninger, “Naturdenken” 40). Yet in this article, I show that Sitte argues for the social by continually displacing it. In *Der Städtebau*, the category of the social rests on abstract structures of thought such as density, relationality, and connectivity. I suggest that the treatise sees these structures at work not only among the human inhabitants of a city but also among its inanimate inhabitants—its buildings, monuments, and statues. *Der Städtebau* is thus interested not only in a city’s inhabitants congregating, but also in its objects, buildings, monuments, and sculptures amassing. Beyond human gatherings and inanimate groupings, there is a further level on which the structure of density comes to the fore in Sitte’s writing. This level refers to humans’ encounter with urban space itself, which in Sitte’s view, is not a mere container for the social but also an active agent thereof; it is not merely a medium for encounters but can be encountered in its own right as a picturesque tableau. As such, urban space needs to be molded into form, into a *Stadt-bild* or *Bühnenbild*. This means that what I call the “sociality of form” refers not only to urban space forms that enable social interaction but also to urban space forms that can themselves be interacted with. Sitte fights the thinning of the social fabric at the end of the nineteenth century with a vision of capacious density that refers not only to forms of communal life (family, community, nation) but also to modes of inanimate congregating and spatial encountering. This article thus traces the different levels on which the social operates in *Der Städtebau* to show how Sitte diffuses density and relationality onto the spatial morphologies of the city. This diffusion results in a capacious yet weakened model of sociality. It is thus more fitting to describe the treatise as animated by a logic of abstract density rather than one of genuine sociality. Perhaps in the planned second volume on *Der Städtebau nach seinen wissenschaftlichen und sozialen Grundsätzen*, the social would have been in preponderance; in this first volume, however, the aesthetic comes first.

## SITTE AND HIS TREATISE

Collins and Collins reconstruct in detail Camillo Sitte's biography (21–34), so I will mention only a few key moments to help contextualize him.<sup>4</sup> He studied art history, archaeology, and anatomy. His interests in the arts and crafts ranged from drawing and painting to “bookbinding, leatherwork, porcelain, and ceramics” (25–26). In 1875 he became the director of the State School of the Applied Arts (*Staatsgewerbeschule*) in Salzburg and later Vienna. Throughout his life, Sitte had a keen interest in pedagogy, and he worked as a trade school teacher. While completing architectural and city planning commissions, he also published on an array of topics ranging from Richard Wagner to Piero della Francesca; acoustics and church architecture; Islamic ornament and color theory. With the publication of *Der Städtebau* in 1889, Sitte became famous almost overnight—though more so abroad than in Vienna where the city planning office was less than enthused about his critique of the *Ringstrasse*. At the time of his death, he was working on the second volume of his treatise concerned with scientific and social principles, *Der Städtebau nach seinen wissenschaftlichen und sozialen Grundsätzen*, as well as on a multivolume history of art with an emphasis on cultural history and Darwinism (30).<sup>5</sup> Sitte's *Der Städtebau* helped coin the name of the new discipline of city planning in German, and Sitte, alongside Theodor Goecke, published the first German-language professional journal on town planning (Bihlmaier 335).

Sitte is considered among the first writers since Alberti to theorize the *artistic* aspects of urban planning (Hagen and Hauer 7). To understand his intervention in the field, it is helpful to refer to the only other book comparable to Sitte's at the time and the only one on town planning that Sitte references in his treatise: Reinhard Baumeister's *Stadt-Erweiterungen in: technischer, baupolizeilicher und wirtschaftlicher Beziehung* (1876). The engineer and urban planner Baumeister published the first systematic study of the city and thereby founded the discipline of urban planning in the German-language context. Sitte sets up his work in explicit contrast to Baumeister: whereas the latter concentrates on technical and economic aspects of city planning, the former emphasizes artistic considerations.<sup>6</sup> Sitte laments: “Um den Stadtbau als Kunstwerk kümmert sich eben heute fast niemand mehr, sondern nur als technisches Problem” (94). He criticizes a planning practice concerned exclusively with traffic, hygiene, land surveying, and engineering; he condemns an indoor drawing-board practice that produces rectangularity, rectilinearity, and pedantic symmetry. As Klaus Semsroth emphasizes, Sitte was keen to protect the city from merely economic interests, which, he felt, destroy its humane structure by ignoring aesthetic and social aspects of public spaces (Semsroth vi). While Sitte's text is a milestone in the history of urban planning manuals, it is in the subfield of *aesthetic* town planning that it represents a foundational document.

In *Der Städtebau*, aesthetic considerations must be understood in terms of the picturesque (*das Malerische*). The idea of an aesthetically pleasing townscape was not entirely new: Alberti had already pointed to the significance of facades for

walkers (Hnilica 202). The city landscape should yield picturesque urban vistas for the dweller and the passerby. For Sitte, the aesthetic aspect of urban planning was not an end in itself. He invoked Gottfried Semper to argue that his project amounted to a practical aesthetics meant to serve the higher goals of community life, livability, or general wellbeing (“Glück”). The historian and theorist of architecture Wolfgang Sonne argues that one of Sitte’s main contributions is the recognition that economic and technological concerns lead to an aesthetic deficit in nineteenth-century city planning and that these concerns came at the cost of livable urban design. “Diesen [...] Mangel,” writes Sonne, “als Ausgangspunkt für eine Reform des Städtebaus genommen zu haben, war im deutschsprachigen Raum Sittes Verdienst” (Sonne, “Politische Konnotationen” 88–89.)

## SPACE FORMS

What then were the characteristics of an aesthetically pleasing urban landscape, according to *Der Städtebau*? The most important trait of public spaces is that they should constitute closed-off organic forms, that is, tableaux, or *Stadtbilder*. This implies, for instance, that there should not be too many streets leading in or out of them. Sitte understands his urban space forms as images akin to Romantic landscape paintings or Wagnerian stage design sets. Under the influence of Wagner’s stage sets designed by the Austrian painter Josef Hoffmann (1831–1904), Sitte recommends that a public square act like a self-contained *Bühnenbild*. Sitte was not primarily interested in architectural forms such as buildings’ facades, structural edifices, or ornamental patterns; instead he argued for the intentionally formed urban space, for the empty lot turned into a positive aesthetic instance. For example, in the context of the *Ringstrasse*’s unrestrained historic resuscitations, Sitte laments that buildings of the past are copied without their accompanying spaces: “Die Walhalla zu Regensburg erstand als Spiegelbild eines griechischen Tempels [...] altchristliche Basiliken wurden wieder errichtet, griechische Propyläen und gotische Dome gebaut, aber wo blieben die zugehörigen Plätze? Die Agora, das Forum, der Marktplatz, die Akropolis – Daran dachte niemand” (92). When Sitte laments that “nicht einmal der leere Raum zwischen den ‘Baublöcken’ wird ihm [dem Städtebauer] freigegeben zur künstlerischer Formierung” (93), then he grants empty spaces a form potential. Traditionally the categories of form and space are at opposite ends of the aesthetic spectrum.<sup>7</sup> *Der Städtebau*, however, harnesses the idea of forming space itself—a novel idea in nineteenth-century architectural theory.

An early manifestation of this idea can be found in the work of the art historian Karl Schnaase who, according to J. Duncan Berry, was perhaps the first to consider space a “historically contingent and aesthetically significant theme of architectural experience as early as 1834” (Berry 158). Carl Boetticher’s *Tektonik der Hellenen* (1844) as well as his lecture “Das Princip der Hellenischen und Germanischen Bauweise” (1846) are further important precedents in this respect. In his lecture,

Boetticher moves away from the outer shell (“äussere Schale”) of architecture to the question of space construction. Deeply impressed by the new architectural possibilities of iron at the time, Boetticher imputes to it an ability to bring about new space forms; he describes it as “raumbildend.” Whereas for Boetticher, iron construction promised to give rise to new space figures in architecture, for others, such as his colleague Gottfried Semper, iron and glass construction harbored seeds of formlessness; since it threatened to do away with the fixed contours of space, architecture as a “spatial art” became all the more urgent (Semper qtd. in Mallgrave 289). For instance, in the “glass-covered vacuum” (qtd. in Mallgrave 288) of Paxton’s Crystal Palace, the loss of form and the void went hand in hand much like in Sitte’s treatise, in which the dissolution of form and emptiness go together. Sitte too bemoans things and people locked in a glass-iron bird cage (“glaseisernen Vogelkäfig” 15). The architectural molding of space was thus both a consequence of and an antidote to iron construction’s “attenuation of form” (Mallgrave 288). For Sitte, the tempering of urban space forms goes hand in hand with the rarefaction of social structures at the end of the nineteenth century. To counter this socio-spatial dilution, he recommends thick urban forms meant to bring back correspondingly dense social structures.

The idea of causality between urban form and social structure points to a further backdrop for Sitte’s space forms: namely, to nineteenth-century sciences of form that saw deterministic relations between milieus and morphologies. It is no coincidence that Sitte’s treatise channels two models of environmental regulation: on the one hand, it invokes Hippocratic thought and its concern with the effects of the physical environment on living organisms as seen in the bioclimatology of *On Airs, Water, and Places* (in this respect, Sitte notes how “die unverwüstliche Heiterkeit des Südländers an den hellenischen Küsten [...] ein Geschenk der Natur [sei]” [1]). On the other hand, the treatise resorts to a biological determinism in the vein of Darwin and Haeckel, both of whom Sitte read. Thus, he ponders the “ewigen Kampf des Lebens” and the “Einwirkung der äusseren Umgebung” (1). Sitte’s interest in urban morphologies, in the history of what he terms “Formgebung der Plätze” (84), must therefore be understood in the context of morphological projects of the nineteenth century in which aesthetic and biological perspectives on forms merge. Goethe’s morphology, in particular its reception in the work of Romantic physician and painter Carl Gustav Carus, hovers over Sitte’s attempt to identify the formal laws governing cities of the past. (Sitte lists Carus as an influence in his curriculum vitae.)<sup>8</sup> The broader encounter between aesthetic and biological form-sciences in the period is evident not only in parallels between Robert Zimmermann’s *Allgemeine Aesthetik als Formwissenschaft* (1865) and Haeckel’s *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen. Allgemeine Grundzüge der organischen Formen-Wissenschaft* (1866); it is also present in the work of Semper, whose *Stillehre* deeply influenced Sitte’s form-analytical approach to city planning. With his comparative theory of style, Semper “wollte auf kunsthistorischem Gebiet leisten, was der französische Naturforscher Georges Baron de Cuvier (1769-1832) mit seiner vergleichenden Anatomie für die Naturgeschichte getan hatte” (Mönninger, *Vom Ornament* 101). Sitte, who regarded the city as a large-scale organism that

developed over time, found inspiration in others' work that entwined architectural and biological form sciences. Perhaps Haeckel's work and its interest in ecology as "die gesamte Wissenschaft von den Beziehungen des Organismus zur umgebenden Aussenwelt" (Haeckel 286) also influenced Sitte's attempt to delineate the ideal relation between social intercourse and the built environment.

## SPATIO-SOCIAL CAUSALITIES: FAMILY, COMMUNITY, NATION

*Der Städtebau* begins by suggesting that the right urban design is conducive to a vibrant public life in the city. Plazas and marketplaces are containers of a progressively expanding circle of community that begins with the family and ends with the nation. The text implies that the built environment not only affects the mental and corporal wellbeing of inhabitants but also that it helps bring about the body politic in the first place. Baumeister too thought about the *Gemeinde* when he considered the interest of local communities and local corporate authorities; yet he did not envision the kind of spatio-social causality that Sitte did. The latter looked at the city's empty lots and he argued that by turning these into self-enclosed wholes the urban planner could elicit corresponding social structures of wholeness. Sitte's word choice is particularly revealing in this context for he continually contrasts spatial qualities such as "zerfahren," "vereinzelt," "verzettelt," "ausgeschält" "zerstückelt" with those related to "Versammlung," "Zusammenhang," and "Zusammenhalten." On one level, he is talking about the necessity of turning urban spaces into closed off forms, tightly bounded pictures. A plaza should not be too open and thus dissipate away visually: "Dieses Zusammenhalten des Bildes, so zwar, dass man nicht aus dem Platz hinaussehen kann" (39)—this was crucial. Yet on another level, when Sitte describes these features of urban design, he is also talking about the scattered social fabric that needs to be molded back into coherent social structures.

The smallest unit of this social structure is the family. This unit functions as a metaphor in the text insofar as Sitte compares a city's core to the atrium—the central space—of a family home. "Der Forum," he claims, "ist für die ganze Stadt dasselbe, was für ein einzelnes Familienhaus das Atrium ist, der wohleingerichtete, gleichsam reich möblierte Hauptsaal" (10). Yet the most common social forms that Sitte invokes are of a higher order than that of the family. They are iterations of a city's public life in its visible human congregations of public festivities, markets, councils. The models for these social units on a larger scale are correspondingly larger architectural units: not rooms, but rather buildings, so called hypaethral buildings, which lack a roof and are thus open to the sky. He reminds us of past roofless temples, uncovered theaters, and residential buildings with roofless inner courtyards: "alles öffentliche, mehr weniger [sic] zu architektonischen Werken ausgebildete Versammlungsorte unter freiem Himmel" (6). Their inhabitants, the religious congregation, the council, the theater audience serve as models for a city's public places and their corresponding social configurations. If the city is a large-scale building, then the



forum is its ballroom (6), the square its theater (8), the plaza its concert hall (8), and the piazza its roofless assembly hall (8). Sitte yearns for “das [...] rege Vorhalten eines öffentlichen Lebens auf den freien Plätzen” (15); he wants them to be sites of “Menschengedränge,” “Geschäftigkeit,” and “Verkehr” (18).

Since he regards the city layouts of the past as manifestations of the great artistic tradition of a people, the highest level of sociality—after the family and the public gathering—becomes the nation. Public spaces should be modelled on the intimate spaces of the family home; they should house different kinds of congregations ranging from councils to festivities; and finally, they should embody the higher form of community of a people. Plazas and squares should be the sensuous appearances of a nation’s worldview: “die Versinnlichung der Weltanschauung eines grossen Volkes” (12), “der Volksseele” (122–23), “der Volkspoeseie” (194). As collective aesthetic instances, public spaces should be embodiments of “Volkskunst [...] im Dienste eines grossen nationalen Gesamtkunstwerkes” (211). In these statements, Sitte combines a number of interests specific to his time and place: an interest in folk art evident also for instance in Gottfried Semper’s attention to “Kunstgewerbe” or Alois Riegl’s study of “Kunst-Industrie”; a Wagnerian interest in the total work of art; as well as an interest in nation building through art.<sup>9</sup>

## SURROGATE SOCIALITY

However, it is not only the large-scale sociality of the nation—its soul, its worldview, its art—that is embodied in urban forms, but also abstract structures of the social. Density is one such structure that Sitte repeatedly displaces from the human domain into the built environment. *Der Städtebau* fantasizes about constriction and narrowness (“enge Gässchen,” “Enge der Strassen”) (35, 39); it argues that a grand palace belongs not on a massive empty plaza, as is the habit in the period, but rather in a narrow back alley. Perhaps density is nowhere more evident than in Sitte’s vision of richly decorated public spaces that abound in statues and ornaments. On the one hand, this wealth of objects acts as a corrective for another, unwelcome overabundance at the time, namely, that of mass production. Sitte frowns upon the mingling of high art with lowly industrial products, objects of the general store, junk, clutter, and oddments. He is in favor of inanimate collections yet not the profane ones, not the surplus of industrial mass production but a surfeit of original artworks. On the other hand, the plenitude of objects inhabiting public spaces acts in Sitte’s text as a corrective for a missing plenty, namely, that of community life. Indeed, the agglomeration of the city’s inanimate inhabitants becomes a placeholder for the elusive sociality of its dwellers. Statues and ornaments become surrogate sites of thick relationality. This heightened sense of *Dichte* is apparent when Sitte argues that plazas should emulate city cores of the past decorated with “dichtstehenden Säulen [...] dicht besetzt mit öffentlichen Bauten” (8); when he mentions the “Häufung prächtigster Monumentalbauten” and “Fülle von plastischem Schmuck” (68); or when he



describes plazas “welche [...] in dichteren Massen häuften, was sie an öffentlichen Kunstwerken aufbringen konnten” (102). The text’s urban forms thus negotiate between two opposing forces: on the one hand those of limitation (small spaces, without too many lines of vision leading out of them or too many streets flowing into them); on the other hand, those of excess (an overabundance of plastic ornaments, *Konzentriertheit*, *Häufung*, and *Fülle*). When Sitte sings the praise of so much beauty unified on a single small spot (“so viel Schönheit auf einem einzigen Fleck vereinigt”) (68), he confirms that his urban forms are built on a duality of demarcation and proliferation. This duality describes the logic of density that subtends them.

While the text yearns for a bygone era of communal life *en plein air*, it regards the properly formed city plaza as more than cause and container of this life. In a sense, the plaza already enacts this life not only in its iterations of density as described above but also in its dislocations of sociality onto the city’s inanimate residents: its buildings, monuments, and statues. Consider the following sentence, which transitions seamlessly from decorative displays to human dissipations, from insular works of art incarcerated in museums to isolated human beings banished from communal life: “Auch die Kunstwerke wandern von den Strassen und Plätzen immer mehr und mehr in die Kunstkäfige der Museen, und ebenso verschwindet das künstlerische Getriebe der Volksfeste, Faschingszüge, sonstiger Umzüge, kirchlicher Prozessionen, der theatralischen Aufführungen auf offenem Markt” (117). This sentence sets up a parallel between the newly acquired solitary life of a work of art in a museum and the newly thinned out life of the community in a city.

Even as *Der Städtebau* lingers on city dwellers and imagines them in various social configurations, its main interest is in the inanimate inhabitants of the city and the spaces that house them. The text may be interested in gatherings of people, but it is even more interested in groupings of plazas (“Platzgruppen”) and buildings (“grosse Baugruppe[n]”) (181). Even as the text notes the housing crisis in the period, its real interest lies with unhoused statues. It considers the plight of itinerant statues that wander about in Vienna, a city that cannot decide on a square to house the goose girl, Radetzky, or Haydn: “Dieses Schicksal erfuhr das schöne Gänsemädchen, das lange umherirrte, bis es ein bescheidenes Plätzchen in einer Strassenecke fand” (21). And while *Der Städtebau* references people experiencing agoraphobia in vacant public spaces, it is particularly struck by statues suffering of this condition. With “agoraphobia,” Sitte references the work of the German psychiatrist and neurologist Carl Westphal who coined the term (in the sense of a fear of the *agora*, the public space) in 1872. Sitte diagnoses agoraphobia in the inhabitants of a city in which shapeless empty spaces proliferate and in the monuments of a plaza that has fallen prey to the “moderne Freilegungswahn” (206). He notes: “die ‘Platzscheu.’ Zahlreiche Menschen sollen darunter leiden [...] auch aus Stein und Erz geformte Menschen auf ihren monumentalen Sockeln [werden] von dieser Krankheit befallen” (56). Much like their flesh and bone counterparts, people made of stone and ore do not fare well alone; they benefit from the company of other buildings and monuments. The treatise repeatedly stresses the importance of meaningful connections and associations

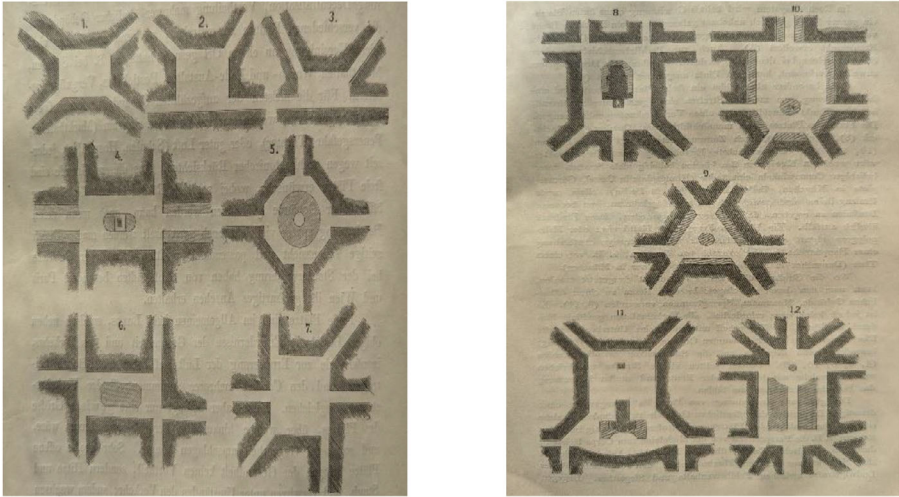
between monuments and their surroundings (“lebensvolles, organisches Verwachsen mit der Umgebung”); it laments the plight of buildings that stand exposed, bereft of architectural adjacency (“architektonische Nachbarschaft”) and deprived of connection (“das Theater steht ohne Verbindung allein da in der öden Platzleere”) (30, 198, 131). The implication is that the right association between a statue and its surroundings, or a building and its environs, will facilitate a corresponding social connection among the city’s residents.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, the relationality among the city’s inanimate dwellers is meant to be translatable into the sociality of its human population. Yet on the other hand, the text also tends to go beyond this causality between urban form and social form. It is as if the promise of the social consumed itself in the text’s abstract connections, relations, and adjacencies.

## DISPLACED RELATIONALITY: AESTHETIC INTERACTIONS

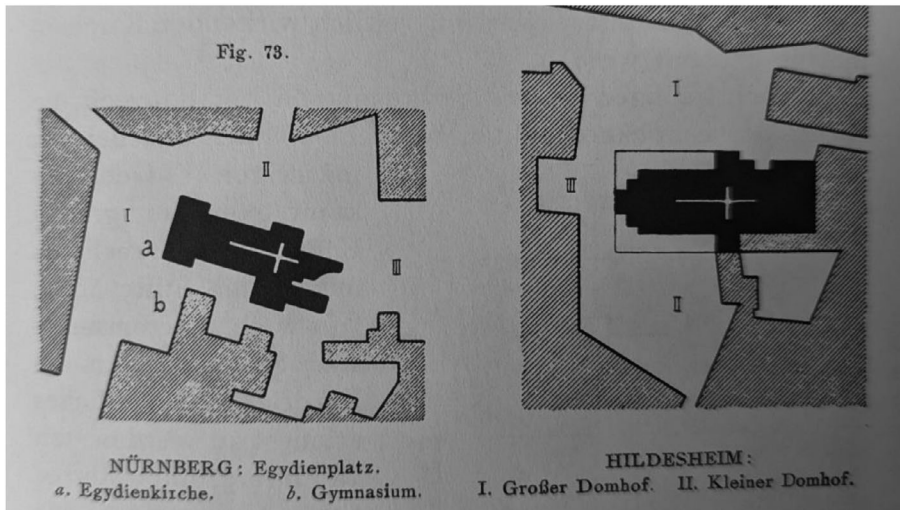
While residents are poor in the meaningful connections of a past communal life, they can potentially make up for this social poverty with aesthetic riches. If this is the time in which social bonds are weakened, as *Der Städtebau* bemoans, then, so the treatise’s implicit argument, one can see this weakening reflected in the feeble relationship between monuments and their surrounds as well as in that between dwellers and their urban spaces. Sitte asks: How can one re-intensify relations? The precondition for this heightened relationality is that a city’s empty spaces, its vacant lots be turned into entities that can be encountered—that they not be mere negatives among the positive architectural instances, but rather be endowed with form. Sitte’s emphasis on the value of attentiveness, as an instance of taut relationality with something, fits into this interest as well. How can one create a taut relation with an urban space instead of indifference, languidness, casualness, or disinterest? The answer turns on two points: the viewer’s ability to see spaces as self-contained forms and forms’ capacity to have an effect on viewers. Sitte’s theory of town planning delineates the parameters of a coactive aesthetics by asking *what do we do to forms* and conversely *what do forms do to us?* In line with his era’s overcoming of representationalist models of perception, *Der Städtebau* involves the viewer in the construction of spaces into forms. In what follows, I trace this aesthetic entanglement of the beholder by showing, on the one hand, how forms are a matter of staged effects and, on the other, how forms themselves have effects upon those who perceive them.

To understand the meaning of urban form in Sitte’s project, it is helpful to return to Baumeister’s *Stadt-Erweiterungen* for comparison. Although Baumeister’s text has a section titled “Zweck und Form freier Plätze,” it considers public spaces primarily as factors for traffic, fire hazard, air quality, or future planning purposes. When Baumeister concedes aesthetics as a factor, he gives suggestions for spatial morphologies. Unlike Sitte’s, however, Baumeister’s are not the forms of existing places; they are model configurations (Figures 1 and 2).

For Baumeister, these are morphologies designed in the abstract, viewed on paper. In contrast to a planning method executed in abstractum, Sitte extols the importance



**FIGURE 1a and 1b** Baumeister, Reinhard. *Stadt-Erweiterungen in: technischer, baupolizeilicher und wirthschaftlicher Beziehung*. Ernst & Korn, 1876, p.180–181.



**FIGURE 2** Sitte, Camillo. *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*. 1909. Birkhäuser, 2015, p. 87.

of real three-dimensional space—that is, the perceived over the abstract geometrical space. He emphasizes that his studies are based exclusively on sites he had personally visited.

Consequently, his treatise considers what it would feel like to be physically located in them. In other words, Sitte's forms come into their own, as forms, only through

the corporeal presence of the city dweller. Perhaps under the influence of Ernst Mach, his contemporary in Vienna, Sitte regards spatial figures not as given, but rather as forms constructed in the inhabitants' perception. Sitte's aesthetics of effects is helpful for understanding how spatial figures come into their own—as forms—in the process of reception. In Sitte's model of form, aesthetic effects take the place of the “real” ones (“[die] künstlerische Wirkung an die Stelle der wirklichen tritt”) (56). Although Sitte's illustrations might appear less enclosed than Baumeister's on paper, Sitte can nevertheless argue that the closure of form must be the indispensable feature of public spaces because this enclosure need not be objective (geometrical); it suffices for it to be actualized in the perspective of the physically present viewer and for it to be a product of visual deception (“Täuschung des Auges”) (64). In this context, Sitte notes the “Zwiespalt zwischen dem wirklichen Plan und dem Vorstellungsbilde der Piazza S. Maria Novella zu Florenz” (59). The picturesque urban spaceform is relative and contextual; far from being an absolute value, the picturesque appearance is a matter of well-orchestrated visual effects.

If the perceptual physiology of viewers helps space forms come into their own, then, in a feedback loop of sorts, forms act back on viewers. Thereby, *Der Städtebau* displaces city dwellers' social intercourse into an aesthetic interaction in which viewers are not only constructors of images but also recipients of their effects. In Sitte's theater of urban form, *aesthetic effect* (“künstlerische Wirkung”) refers both to the site of urban forms' engenderment and to the modality of their bearing on the spectators. Sitte's text overflows with accounts of aesthetic interactions in which passersby have an intense encounter with public spaces. As a theatrical *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a public space should have a sense-captivating, overwhelming effect, a coercive power over the viewer. Sitte writes of “sinnberückende Wirkung,” “überwältigende Wirkung,” “zwingende Gewalt,” “mächtige Eindruck,” and “ungeheure Wirkung” (64, 10, 17, 17, 22). This aesthetic intensity in the encounter with urban space as a work of art serves as a corrective for the limp relationality of social encounters in the modern city.

A particularly striking instance that shows the priority of the aesthetic over the social is evident in the text's discussion of public health. Since the dense historical layout of the city is conducive to the spread of illness, Sitte addresses sanitation and hygiene repeatedly throughout his book. Gabriele Reiterer observes that as early as 1874, Sitte wrote about the importance of viewing artistic forms from a physiological perspective (Reiterer 33). I would like to suggest that by 1889, when Sitte published his treatise, this physiological perspective allowed him to think about the ability of urban space forms to cause intense psycho-physiological effects. These effects referred not only to agoraphobia, as mentioned above, but also to forms of aesthetic contagion. Space forms exude effects upon the human body in a manner that recalls miasma theories of disease transmission: looking at plazas or a monument means receiving their overpowering effects, which cause either wellbeing or disease. Erika Fischer-Lichte has shown that in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theater, aesthetic contagion implied a bodily impact on the audience, an immediate sensuous effect (“eine unmittelbare sinnliche Wirkung,” 37). The actors' affect is contagious,

communicated to the viewer, who subsequently experiences a corporal and mental transformation. Sitte's model of aesthetic reception replaces the social proximity with an aesthetic intensity: since too much social density facilitates the transmission of disease (as in the layout of medieval cities), the text displaces physiological contagion into an aesthetic one. It takes the problematic aspect of thick relationality between people and sublimates it into an intense relationship between people and works of art; it reconceptualizes bodily contamination as aesthetic contagion.

## CONCLUSION

Sitte, described as “de[r] erst[e] urban[e] Feldforscher und empirisch[e] Stadtanalytiker” (Reiterer, “Wahrnehmung” 227), was rejected by the modernists; miscopied by the cultural heritage protectors; and forgotten by the postwar world (Mönninger, “Naturdenken” 35–36). His pan-Germanic stance and subscription to a Wagnerian brand of national mythology are possible reasons for this reception; so are the perceived similarities between the city as artwork and the aestheticization of the everyday in fascism. Sonne argues that Sitte's reception has taken place on a wide political spectrum. Hailed as a champion of modern urbanism with an epochal book, his ideal of the picturesque town found resonance with some socially progressive currents such as parts of the Garden City Movement. Bruno Taut's Gartenstadt Falkenberg and Ebenezer Howard's Garden City made the picturesque townscape productive for their socially progressive projects.<sup>11</sup> On the other side of the political scale, he was politically instrumentalized by German nationalists. They turned the picturesque townscape into a question of national culture and an ideal of the Germanic race in contrast to the regular and rigid Romanic one (Italian Renaissance and French Baroque).

Indeed, despite recent attempts to reevaluate Sitte, it is difficult not to see in the pining for community and the desire for a richly animated public life that takes place *en plein air* and unfolds like a *Gesamtkunstwerk* a guiding light for National Socialist longings. *Der Städtebau* invokes the public spaces of the past, the agora or the marketplace, as sites of lively social interactions that corresponded to a now lost density in the social fabric, to a sense of *Gemeinschaft*, and on a higher level, to an emphatic sense of *Volk*. Presumably though, Sitte would not have been keen on the Nazi Party's rally grounds: their vastness and openness, their emptiness, regularity, and exact structuring are not in line with the urban morphologies that *Der Städtebau* envisions. “Je grösser der Raum,” claimed Sitte, “desto kleiner [...] die Wirkung” (57). Perhaps the problem lies with the treatise's conceptualization of the social as such, with its displaced thematization of social structures.

Foremost among these structures are density and relationality, which resurface in aesthetic guises in the description of urban forms. They oscillate between causality and enactment: on the one hand, the text argues that a network of taut relations in the urban spatial fabric results in corresponding dense bonds in the social framework. On the other hand, these structures act as displaced fulfillments of the social: the society



of sculptures; the gathering of monuments; the kinship of statues and their places—they push the communal life of humans into the background of the text. *Der Städtebau* reacts to the thinning social fabric by envisioning a densely organized urban landscape. Since dispersal and dissolution are anathema to this dual socio-spatial order, the treatise not only argues for densely formed spaces, it also envisions a density between dweller and space, an intense connection between beholder and the space form of a public space. One problem with this connection is that it posits a passive subject who undergoes the overpowering aesthetic effects of urban morphologies. Whereas for Giedion, “the man in the street—and that means each of us—undoubtedly has an urgent desire to get away from his purely passive position as an onlooker” (129), for Sitte, the man in the street is an onlooker above all else. He is depicted as a passive recipient of aesthetic effects—and as such, also as a passive political agent.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Sonne, “Die lange Gegenwart” (29) for other examples including: Sophie Wolfrum’s *Platzatlas* (2015) and Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani’s *Atlas zum Städtebau* (2018).
- <sup>2</sup> I thank Ethan Waddell for this reference.
- <sup>3</sup> Some exceptions include Bohl and Lejeune, Herscher, Hanisch, Moravánszky.
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Mönninger best summarizes Sitte’s wide-ranging interests. See Mönninger, “Naturdenken,” as well as his book on Sitte, *Vom Ornament zum Nationalkunstwerk*.
- <sup>5</sup> See Collins and Collins’s selected bibliography of Sitte’s other writings (416–17).
- <sup>6</sup> To be sure, Sitte exaggerates somewhat Baumeister’s focus on the technical; Baumeister too gives suggestions on how to enhance artistic effects in a city.
- <sup>7</sup> For more on this, see Christian, *Objects in Air*, especially “Coda” (143–48).
- <sup>8</sup> See Reiterer, *AugenSinn* 34–37, 106n67.
- <sup>9</sup> See Mönninger, *Vom Ornament* and “Naturdenken.”
- <sup>10</sup> It must be noted that the causality here remains vague: elsewhere the text suggests that the city’s beautifully molded spaces have disappeared in the wake of the disappearance of open-air community life.
- <sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of Sitte’s political reception, see Sonne, “Politische Konnotationen” (63–90) as well as Moravánszky, “Erzwungene Ungezwungenheiten” (47–62).

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**How to cite this article:** Christian, Margareta Ingrid. 2024. "The Sociality of Form: Camillo Sitte's Urban Morphologies." *German Quarterly*, pp. 1–16.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12485>