

IL CORPO DELLA CITTÀ **TELO MESTA**

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Quelli che vediamo contenuti in questa pubblicazione sono gli esiti di un esperimento-esercizio doppio, che quest'anno accademico 2023-2024 abbiamo affrontato con l'obiettivo di studiare la città, ma anche di "farci studiare-informare" dalla città. Il primo aspetto dell'esperimento riguarda il fatto che il laboratorio si è cimentato in questo esercizio di indagine al contempo scientifica e poetica, che ha richiesto l'applicazione di strumenti e metodi oggettivi e soggettivi contemporaneamente per scoprire e dissezionare il corpo di queste due città, producendo l'anatomia di un'immagine, direbbe Zigaina, che però non è solo indagine architettonica, urbana e urbanistica didatticamente fine a se stessa, ma è invenzione, ricerca di ispirazione poetica, libertà di espressione e formulazione di un linguaggio, quello che possiamo vedere e "ascoltare" nelle pagine che seguono. Il secondo aspetto dell'esperimento riguarda la modalità con cui è stata affrontato l'esercizio dal Laboratorio. Gli studenti del Laboratorio di Progettazione Integrata dell'Architettura e del Costruito – RRR International Lab quest'anno si sono autocostruiti in un "collettivo" (COLGO!) ed hanno lavorato assieme, con uno spirito attivo e libero d'altri tempi, lavorando come un corpo unico. E questo, soprattutto oggi nell'ambiente universitario, per quella che quest'anno registriamo come la *Koinè* del Laboratorio, non è poco.

Adriano Venudo

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**IL CORPO DELLA CITTÀ** **TELO MESTA**



A cura di: Thomas Bisiani e Adriano Venudo

## Il corpo della città. Telo mesta

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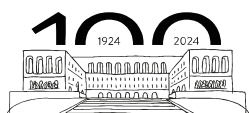
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tain effectiveness. Just think of *Minimum*, the photographic essay, which is also a lesson in architecture and a declaration of poetics, by John Pawson.

Today, more than ever before, it is extremely easy to take photographs, or perhaps we could say with a paraphrase “to produce images”, to distinguish between the authorial work of the photographer and the shooting we can do on a daily basis with a smartphone. The fact remains that ever-increasing quantities of images are deposited in architects’ digital memories. They can be of different natures, visual notes and memos, image surveys, visual documentation of the realization of a work, but also attempts to capture the atmosphere or spirit of a place, “impressions”. *The Body of the City* from this point of view also wants to have this character. Testimony – analytical as possible – of a place and a moment. Memory even, certainly obtained in a more expeditious manner than a systematic collection of data, perhaps punctual, but nevertheless effective. Photography thus seems to take on reassuring tones, because intuitively one tends to consider it an objective medium.

### **Derivative**

Photography, however, is also a semantic derivative, and probably in this dimension lies the greatest value for the architect. Photography we actually know cannot be objective, the eye, the framing, is already a form of interposition. This basic action of composing – it could correspond to the act of “fencing” or “cropping” – has a selective character, it produces an image of a “specific reality”, because of what, more or less consciously, we decide to keep within the perimeter of the photographic shot. It is a copy of reality, not reality itself. It

is precisely in this aspect that its interest lies: the photographic shot can in fact assume an unexpected autonomy *ex post*, with respect to our gaze, with respect to the “impression” we had at the moment, allowing us to see – at least a little – beyond our gaze. Photography thus allows a form of “retro-duction”, it allows us to ideally return to places and see them again with a “different” gaze, which can allow us new observations, the emergence of unexpected data and consequently a broadening of knowledge.

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## The protagonism of the urban body. A Dialogue on and with the body of the city

Adriano Venudo

[...] And now, as far as the narrowness of space allows, we would like to extend this concept to the point of saying that the city is the only principle by which the thirty centuries of Italian histories can be reduced to a clear and continuous exposition. Without this ideal thread, the memory gets lost in the labyrinth of conquests, factions, civil wars and in the assiduous composition and decomposition of states; reason cannot see the light in a rapid alternative of power and weakness, virtue and corruption, wisdom and imbecility, elegance and barbarity, opulence and desolation; and the soul falls back, saddened and oppressed by the feeling of a gloomy fatality. From the very beginning, is the city different in Italy from what it is in the east or north? [...]<sup>1</sup>

I begin with this text from Cattaneo's work *The city considered as the principle of Italian histories* because, prior to delving into the intricacies of the "body of the city" and its narrative, a subject that has perpetually resonated with humanity as a fundamental need and desire for describing and discussing cities, I wish to draw attention to the concept of the "Italian difference." This notion, recently acknowledged by Alberto Ferlenga<sup>2</sup>, resides specifically within the realm of the city – in urban architecture as an anthropological underpinning, a universal principle, and notably as a cultural and distinctive facet of community formation, of shaping "space and society."

In this text and throughout the associated book, we approach the city as an organism, viewing it through the lens of a biological-functional, historical-evolutionary entity, and as a genetic-cultural legacy of humankind. Through the lens of this didactic-scientific case study, we propose a perspective that views the city as a matter of the "culture of corporeality." Reimagining the city as a corporeal entity, we interpret the urban phenomenon as a conglomerate of bodies, intertwining and interacting in a complex tapestry of urban life.

The uniqueness of the Italian context, as articulated by Alberto Ferlenga, revolves around the notion of "urban protagonism," an intrinsic and defining feature of Italy's historical trajectory. Italy has perennially been characterized as a "nation of cities," despite their relatively modest scale, often referred to as "small cities." These urban centers, identified by numerous researchers in the fields of architecture and urban studies, are seen as the foundational elements of settlement development, embodying a distinctive urban ethos that has shaped Italy's urban landscape.

Italian cities have wielded a profound and lasting cultural influence throughout history, contributing significantly to the construction and evolution of the nation's territorial fabric. Alberto Ferlenga further posits that this legacy has transformed Italy into a veritable "open-air urban archive" on a national scale, where the unique qualities and diverse characteristics of cities are vividly showcased, akin to living entities that narrate the rich tapestry of Italy's urban heritage.

Throughout the ages, Italy has held a unique position as a muse for artists from around the world, inspiring them to capture its natu-

ral, rural, and urban landscapes in countless ways. In his often-overlooked work *History and Culture of the Italian City*<sup>3</sup>, Piero Maria Lugli points out that from ancient Roman times to the rich medieval depictions, the representation of human events has been consistently intertwined with urban settings. This artistic tradition has highlighted the humanization of the urban environment and its formal values, always tailored to the human scale, reflecting a deep connection between people and the cityscape.

A quick reflection on the classical iconography from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance reveals the significance of architectural framing in Italian art. This architectural context not only serves as a visual backdrop but also symbolizes the organization of social life and the community's collective needs. The structured integration of city and countryside in Italian artistic expressions evokes a unique essence, blurring the boundaries between urban and rural spaces. This harmonious relationship echoes the ancient principles of blending the rural and urban, as articulated by Vitruvius in his concept of *Rus in urbe and Urbs in rure*.

In essence, Italian civilization exhibits a distinctive urban character, where the city and countryside are seamlessly intertwined to form a unified whole. This "agrouban identity" embodies a holistic vision where the urban landscape is not merely a physical setting but a living canvas that reflects the symbiotic relationship between architecture, society, and the natural environment.

The peculiarity of Italian cities lies in the fact that they have not been uniformly homogeneous, but have developed in a wide range of variations, always maintaining their own vi-

talities, which has manifested in the sedimentation of time. This diversity has contributed to shaping a diverse urban landscape, ranging from rare «small metropolises»<sup>4</sup> to villages. Cities, both large and small, have been the cornerstone of building the identity of a certain part of Europe (Italy, Austria, Germany, Hungary, and the entire Central European area) over the centuries, serving as political, cultural, and economic centers<sup>5</sup>. Think of the analogies in the medieval formation of villages and towns between Germany and Italy as studied by Francesco Tentori, regarding the «Mediterranean settlement principle and the German settlement principle»<sup>6</sup>. Colonies and Siedlungen. As Emilio Sereni<sup>7</sup> points out, this is also reflected in the intricate relationship with the Italian agricultural landscape because the adherence of rural communities to cities has generated an inseparable bond between city and countryside, with cities representing not only a geographic reference point but also fundamental political and social entities. This bond was particularly evident during the transition from rural life to citizenship, in the various cycles of urbanism, which occurred through a dual process: a general belonging to the city, to the urban world, and simultaneously a bodily identification with its specific characteristics, those derived from the era of the "thousand Municipalities."

The cyclical dynamics of "rurbanization" have generated forms that find specificity in typological aggregation and in the urban articulation of fullness and emptiness, resulting in an Italian tradition of "urban morphologies" that not only confers identity but precisely that materiality inherent to the city phenomenon, and which we propose to re-read now and here as a body, ... "the body of the city".



Within cities diversity is reflected in neighborhoods, districts, and quarters contributing to strengthening the bond between residents and their urban environment according to the analogy of the organs of the body and the modalities of symbiosis. This peculiarity of Italian cities lies in the process of progressive growth through different parts that have integrated according to processes of stratification, while always maintaining their own formal and cultural characteristics, generating what we technically define as “morphotypes,” and creating a sort of “city within the city,” or “city of cities.” Similarly to organic dynamics, evolution is simultaneously incremental and metamorphic: from unicellular, evolution progresses into multicellular organisms until becoming complex, conscious beings with character and souls.

This prominence of the urban body anticipated the modern concept of globalization by centuries, based on vastly different economic and political dimensions, as belonging to the world is closely linked to belonging to the city, which acts as a local representation of the world itself, a metaphor for the global. The role of city-bodies in interpreting, but especially in “assimilating and metabolizing” external agents and influences – geography, history, landscape, context – has manifested through architecture, particularly through “urban architecture,” which played a crucial role in empowering dominant classes, representing their prestige through eloquent language, and giving meaning to place. Architecture and **logos**. Architecture and power. Architecture and politics. *Polis*.

Hence, the language of urban architecture speaks about both the ordinary and the extraordinary. It speaks about the past and the

present, individual and communal spaces. It does this by always following a principle of part hierarchy and a logic of continuity. The city, although in different forms and models, expresses and develops connection and permeability as a principle of life and “instinct for survival.” Whatever may be said, a city cannot be a-gerarchical, discontinuous, and impermeable, but we can discuss the levels and intensities at which these phenomenologies manifest. Just as it happens with living beings. Permeability between internal and external parts, between city and surrounding environment. A system of relationships, body, and embodiment, which constructs the distinctive character of each city, and today we will say is crucial in qualifying urban life: the relationship between settlement and nature, transforming natural elements into an integral part of the urban fabric.

Cities – all of them – despite their variety and diversity, share a number of universalities related to faith, politics, languages and culture. These are spiritual dimensions, which constitute the soul of the city, and are manifested through the presence of churches, squares and other places. It is the **topos**, which history and geography have loaded with meanings through symbols: the *logos*.

The reinterpretation through the metaphor of the urban body is not only distinguished by its intrinsic peculiarities (the eye, the fingerprint, etc.), but represents the central aspect of urban protagonism (character and temperament) as a social and cultural dimension that then extends to the relationship with the territory and geography, reflecting the deep connection with history, which is the true identity of man, the community and therefore the city. According to this interpretation, the concept of

the urban body takes on an even broader and more complex dimension, because cities are not simply ensembles of buildings and streets where people stay or move, but true living organisms that dynamically narrate, evoke and interact with the surrounding territory, according to organic dynamics of profound reciprocity. Cities integrate harmoniously with the natural environment, adapting to the topographical and climatic characteristics of the place, but the surrounding territory also actively influences the form, matter and materials, and development of cities, contributing to shaping their identity, character, languages, atmosphere, or as it was defined at the end of the 19th century, the *urban milieu*<sup>8</sup>. The context influences the city and the city influences the context. According to this approach, the concept of the urban body extends beyond the physical boundaries of the cities themselves, embracing also the surrounding territory and the natural environment in which they are embedded. Cities are connecting nodes between man and the land, between man and the Earth, between man and nature. Cities are ganglia that embody symbiosis with the surrounding environment in what, even contradictorily, is called “protagonism of the urban body”, and, with unfortunately not always positive meanings, is today one of the symbols of the anthropocene.

But now, after all these considerations, if it is clearer to us where and how it all begins, and we have some more data on the “living together” between the body of the city and urban protagonism, we have to ask ourselves:

What is the body of the city?

And when we speak of the city as a body, who are we referring to?

We could try asking the city itself.

Below a short – imaginary – interview with the Body of the City (CdC):

AV: Adriano Venudo

CdC: the Body of the City

**AV: Where does this parallelism between city and body originate and how does it develop?**

**RE: CdC: The city as an urban body is an ancient metaphor and a profound analogy with you humans.** In the intricate fabric of my (urban) history and culture, I emerge as a living organism, an “urban body” to accommodate other human bodies. I breathe, I evolve and I interact with the environment in ways strikingly similar to you humans. This analogy between city and body is an ancient story that reveals deep aspects between you and me since the origins of life on Earth. My structure, my skeleton, my muscles, my growth and my identity are intrinsically linked and similar to your vital organs in their functioning.

**AV: What kind of body are you?**

**RE: CdC: Geography and strategic location are my anatomical foundations.** Like the body of you humans, I am shaped by geographical relationships and “more or less” strategic position in the larger context of nature. The physical features of nature – the mountains, the rivers, the sea – act as my skeleton and muscles, and define my body shape and structure. Similarly, my location, since I am no longer nomadic and have decided to put down roots, is always a choice of strategy in relation to your needs, defensive lines, trade routes, secular cultural communities, and in relation to what the environment is, i.e. the presence of rivers,

mountains, seas, prairies, etc., to favour or limit the constant flows of energy and vitality, which feed my development and growth over the time of history. My (urban) body lives on relations in time.

**AV: What is the city body made of?**

**RE: CdC: Urban structures are my functional organs. The bodies of the city are all different, but the vital and functional organs are always the same.** Within the city, the different urban structures – the buildings, the streets, the squares, the neighbourhoods – are the functional organs that work together and according to principles of hierarchy and connection, to support the life and activities of you people, you city dwellers. Like your cardiovascular system, for me the streets and urban transport act as arteries that carry you and your goods from one point to another, while the squares and public spaces and buildings are my beating heart (sometimes more than one) that nourish your social and cultural life.

**AV: What is the metabolism and how does it feed the body of the city?**

**RE: CdC: Local communities are the living cells that feed the functioning of the organs of my body.** Within the urban complexity, not the individual, but the local communities act as your cells, those of the metabolic and lymphatic system. Communities are alive, and live through shared values, which always arise from places, and then become logos, symbols, common feeling.

Communities for my body are systems of assimilation and then digestion that produce energy for the body of the city, nourishing me, and which then also expel residues.

Communities and their spaces, let us also say

“space and society”, are for my body lymphatic systems that keep all organs in communication and constantly transmit signals, building networks for me lymphatic, for you cultural and tissues for me epidermal, for you social, thus keeping my body, the body of the city, alive.

Like the cells of your organism, communities work together to support my growth and well-being, as a whole, contributing to my vitality, which is what characterizes my identity.

**AV: How and with whom does the body of the city communicate?**

**RE: CdC: Architecture is the language of the city body. We bodies of the city communicate through you, the man-citizen.** The architecture of the city is our language and with architecture we express ourselves and tell ours, which is also your history, culture, and above all memory. The combination of these three themes is our identity. Our skin consists of our facades, decorations and ornaments, monuments, gardens and squares. This architectural embodiment tells our stories of growth, change and adaptation over time (we reproduce ourselves in so many ways, by expansion or implosion, by subtraction or addition, by layering or by integration of parts, etc.) and bears witness to the cultural and historical influences that have shaped us over the centuries.

**AV: What is the identity – and soul – of the city body? Who are you?**

**RE: CdC: I am the living manifestation of history. I am geography. I reveal myself as a living manifestation of human culture and history.** I am a complex organism that breathes and evolves in response to the influences of your actions, your desires of your needs, but also those of nature. In short, I, the body of the

city, hold the environment and the community together. I have also been called the habitat of man, but that seems a bit reductive to me.

Because I mould myself to you and the environment, but I, the body of the city also mould you. I shape man and nature. I influence communities, their ways of living and their relationships.

This analogy between my body and yours helps us better understand the profound nature of intrinsic connection between you and me, both living.

I conclude by reminding you that my body is born in relation to nature and your needs (economic, commercial, communicative, political), and I can also die for the same reasons. For these same reasons I can be reborn through cures that you, Man, can put in place. I am committed to urban regeneration, architectural reuse, landscape and urban redevelopment, and spatial and functional reconversion.

We have evidence of numerous forms of hermitism and semi-solitary life, but man inevitably lives in community, he has an intrinsic need for relationship that drives him to “live together”. After that, we can discuss the intensities, magnitudes and forms of “living together”, which always depend on the extent on Earth and in relation to nature to exist. Intensities, magnitudes and forms that range from the village to the suburb, from the city to the metropolis, up to the megalopolis. But man is a social animal, as Socrates said, and we would also add political and poetic. The polis that hosts him and that he poetically constructs himself in order to “live together” is representation, metaphor, form and meaning of his own embodiment, it is ethical and aesthetic body. But it is also a

body that always exists with respect to what is around it, and which manifests itself in a “being present and in relation”, hence in a protagonism that can be good or bad, beautiful or ugly, but always with respect to the rest, to the context to the other, which is nature. It is a co-protagonism that is born from both a desire and a survival instinct. It is a body that always manifests itself with “necessary urban protagonism”.

Our conclusions on the city as a body outline a comprehensive view of the dynamic relationship between the urban environment and its population, emphasizing the relevance and utility of the concept of the city as a living organism. In brief, we want to place particular emphasis on the Italian urban landscape, recognized for its central role in defining the cultural and historical identity of our country. Cities, far from being static, reveal themselves as entities in continuous evolution, shaped by the complex socio-economic dynamics and environmental influences at play. In this context, architecture emerges as a crucial element in conveying the collective memory, culture, and identity of the communities that inhabit them. In light of these considerations, the importance of adopting a holistic perspective to promote urban regeneration and actively engage local communities is emphasized, aiming to ensure the vitality and sustainability of cities in the long term.

All this applies to Gorizia, to San Pietro, to Salcano. Nova-Gorica has another genealogy, it is a “foundation city”, whose history is limited in time, but whose body is nevertheless a protagonist in this “short history”. The bodies of Gorizia and Nova-Gorica live in symbiosis and together constitute a further body, a cross-border superbody. And with respect to

evolutions, profound differences without having to include them in a theory capable of explaining relations, cause-effect relationships in a deterministic manner. Of course, there were recurring elements and they were very evident, especially among cities that had developed in homogeneous historical and social contexts. The sharing of common elements in the origins led to very evident recurring aspects such as to facilitate the understanding of urban fabrics and the relationships between the elements, despite which there were differences that could be eliminated to the benefit of unifying theories, but on the condition of losing the ability to fully understand the soul of cities.

Among all cities, the ones most dear to him had always been water cities. In his personal ranking, those located on the sea occupied a primary role over river cities. The incessant flowing in one direction had always brought to his mind a sense of melancholy, as well as the one-way motion a sense of constraint that he did not find in sea cities. The port by its very nature was the place from which to depart towards distant destinations along different routes, with the possibility of charting new ones. A sense of possibility and hope that could also include the concept of return. He had to recognize that the port could be considered, once again, as the heart of the city. He could not deny it. But it was always the variety of evolutions that attracted his attention the most.

**Domina** was his birthplace, a reality defined in its form by the water that surrounded it, permeated by liquid arteries, with more or less generous widenings that retained the ancient name of open fields wedged between the thickened buildings, joined in such a way as to hold each other up and share a precari-

ous situation. A city with a finite form, perpetually in balance between destruction and the will to resist that had always been for him an emblem of human endurance, of the positive faith in a future that sooner or later might have failed, but that was never able to make its inhabitants give up the will to believe and to ingenuity in order to achieve the realization of the dream. An emblem of the slowness and inexorable work of people. The decision to make it a city out of time pained him, even though he understood the need to protect such a vast and important repertoire of cultural beauty. Somehow, the city had given itself free territories in which to experiment the future so that they became places for the representation of the future for the benefit of the rest of the world. Lab-places in which to welcome, experiment and criticize. Avant-garde places within an open-air museum for the use and consumption of tourists. Was it still a real city? Would that have been its designated future? Teaching-related enclaves stood in the middle of events as beacons destined to define future courses. There was still hope for further evolution, and recent technological innovations, though hard-fought, represented a chance not to succumb in the face of a destiny that for many was doomed to disappear.

**Helsa**, an exotic and extreme destination because of its climate, had been one of the places of learning. Its harbour, fundamental to the economy of the entire nation, had helped to define a large part of the relationship with the sea, at the same time the variety of situations determined by the islands and peninsulas that made up the territory occupied by the capital had characterised the city, giving it a truly unique relationship with the natural elements. Nordic pragmatism had done the rest, allowing

a rationalist matrix to be used to define parts of the city that might have been conflicting in other places. What had struck him was how the struggle against a hostile climatic reality had stimulated the search for a widespread quality, where nothing was by chance and everything was a synthesis of beauty and functionality. In other places, this difficulty would have made people turn towards a sense of practicality devoid of aesthetic quests. Not here. On the contrary, refined design skills were often combined with a desire to be projected into the future, seeking innovative solutions and trying to be at the centre of the world despite the geographical location. Geography as destiny was, in this case, perhaps more related to how people's souls were forged. The result was a narrative devoted to experimentation, where people felt part of an international future and the rootedness of traditions, even constructive ones, did not detract from this propensity.

In the end, **Trigesta** represented a return to the places of his roots, to the territory where he had grown up. A place of enquiry and at the same time an unexpected destination given his desire to leave again for faraway places. Likewise, the continuation of training in such a place had been unexpected. Here, the parts of the city were expressed in a manner as evident as were the physical signs of the evolutionary phases and the importance of an infrastructural legacy that had allowed the port and the city to become what it is today.

In this case, geography contributed little to the understanding of urban evolution, but it did further explain the evolution of the political history of a territory that represented the maritime outlet on the Adriatic and therefore on the Mediterranean of a now dissolved empire. A city that for a long time was immersed

in the torpor of those who think they are powerless in the face of their own destiny, only to rediscover themselves at the centre of a larger territory when compared to their own urban and national borders. A city that has had to rediscover itself as international and not just cross-border. Compressed in its geography in a visceral relationship between Karst land and sea. A tale extended in time, just as its shape and projection was equally stretched.

This had always been his favourite point of view: cities as open narratives, stories to be told by trying to grasp the interweavings and nuances according to multiple, even contradictory paths, as are the situations one can come across on a journey within the most complex and fascinating human creation: the city.

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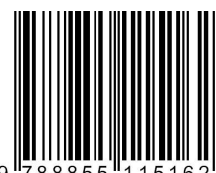
Noi, COLGO!, siamo un gruppo di studenti del V anno del Corso di Studi in Architettura dell'Università degli Studi di Trieste. COLGO! è un nome che abbiamo scelto in quanto siamo un collettivo di giovani che studiano insieme a Gorizia. COLGO! non è solo un abbreviativo, ma la metodologia con la quale scegliamo di studiare le due città: il nostro intento è cogliere l'anima della città nella sua totalità, cercando di riflettere anche su aspetti più profondi e reconditi che si possono individuare passando e "perdendosi" nell'urbano. Il progetto della mostra prende vita a partire dal Laboratorio annuale RRR International LAB GO/N.GO, per il quale l'obiettivo è quello di studiare le città "gemelle" di Gorizia e Nova-Gorica in vista dell'imminente evento GO!2025, dove le due città diventeranno Capitale Europea della Cultura.

“Una città ha un sistema nervoso e una testa, spalle e piedi.  
Una città è una cosa distinta da tutte le altre,  
così che non vi siano due città che siano eguali.”

John Steinbeck



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