

Morphology and meaning of public places: an inquiry into the shape and the semiotics of four European squares

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Place des Vosges in Paris, piazza Savoia in Turin, Regent Street-Regent's Park complex in London and Potsdamer Platz in Berlin are the specific topics of my thesis.

In spite of their different shape, period of construction, geographical and cultural ambit, these four places are usually identified as "squares", or in more generic terms as "public places".

The ambiguity of this typological attribution raises some unavoidable questions about the public place's nature itself: which are its distinctive shapes? Which meanings does it convey? What's the link between the physical shape and the anthropological meanings associated to public places? It's not easy to give exhaustive answers with such problems, and it's not the aim of this work.

In my thesis I try to answer that questions analyzing the four examples I chose according to a thematic – not monographic – point of view. I don't mean to bring about a direct comparison among the four "squares", but rather a mediate one, by means of some *fil rouge* I chose on purpose. Such bench marks, used and tested at the same time in the analysis, lead us to identify step by step the main traits of the typological class.

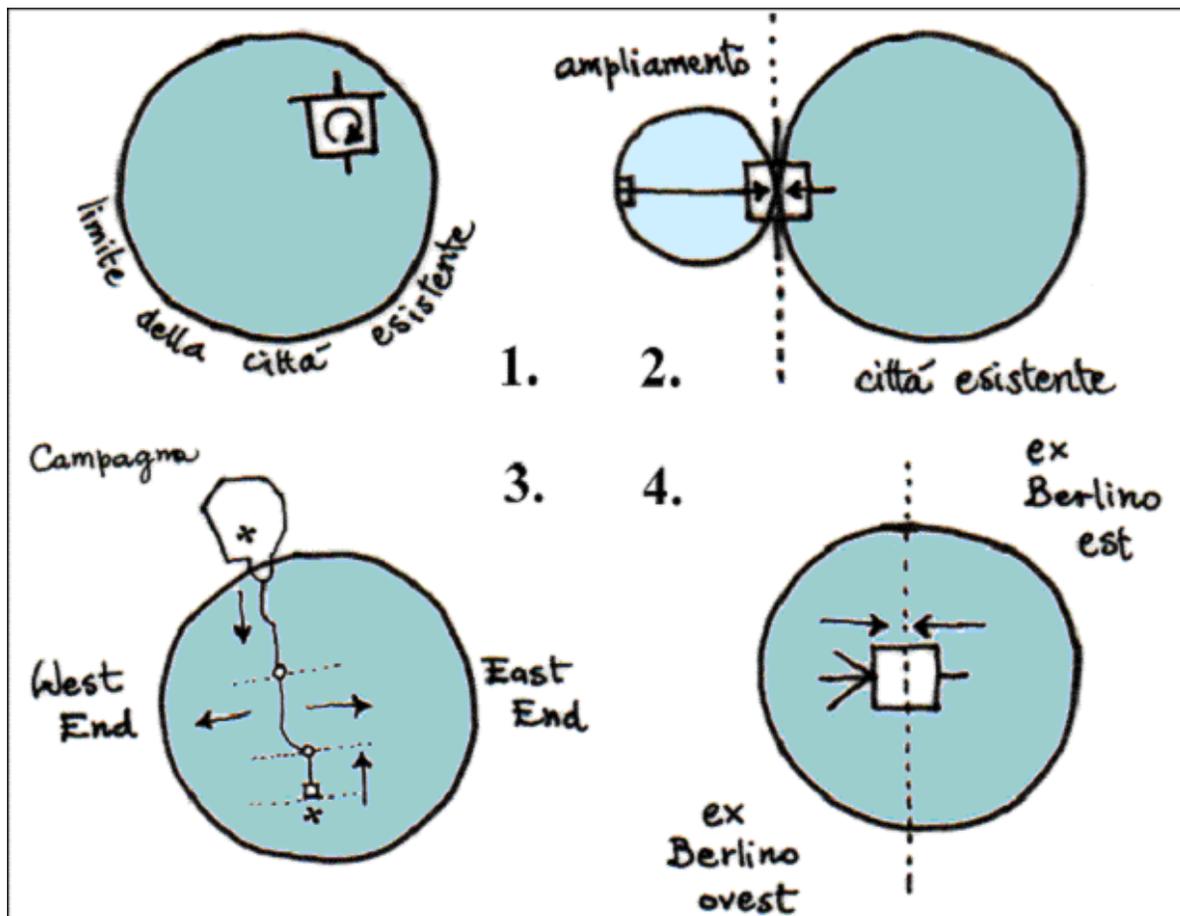
In the first chapter public places are depicted as "places for glances", since their spatial shape emphasize the act of seeing. According to this viewpoint, the four examples are described through a photographic cutting, the photos of which I took during some on-the-spot investigations.



Paris, Place des Vosges

The second chapter deals with the ideation and realization of the above-mentioned squares. Promoters and actors of the building process belong to a specific social and political ambit which deeply influences their decision, but without determining them in a mechanistic way. The emerging architecture itself plays an important role into the settlement of morphology and functions. So, in spite of its evident connection with public powers, it's not appropriate to consider the public place as a direct projection of a superior will on the urban fabric.

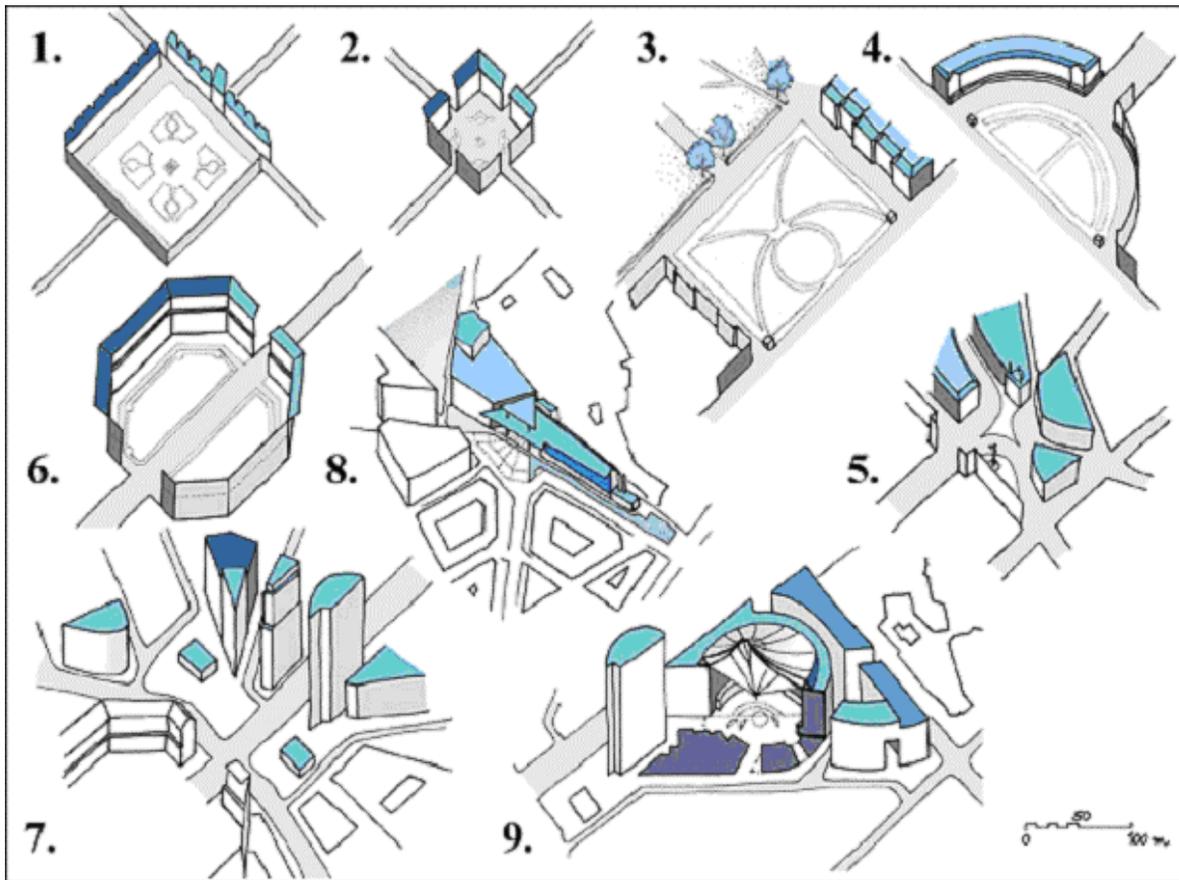
The link between public places and urban fabric is the main topic of the third chapter. Though a traditional metaphor depicts the square as "heart" of the city, the investigation of our four examples and of many other European squares reveals that such places often originated close to the city bound.



Graphic synthesis of the relationship between: 1. Place des Vosges and Paris 2. piazza Savoia and Turin 3. Regent Street- Regent's Park and London 4. Potsdamer Platz-Leipziger Platz and Berlin

In ancient towns this fringe position was often due to their peculiar functions; they housed some activities, like sports, games and horse markets, which were not allowed or possible in the city centre. This kind of "marginal square" has almost disappeared in nowadays towns. The loss of a definite city contour seems to go along with a progressive vanishing of public places, or in other words with their sometimes deleterious mutation: from the city square to the hypermarket car park.

The fourth chapter deals with the morphology of the examples I chose, looking at their hidden geometry. Comparing the four squares by means of graphical schemes prepared on purpose, it's clear that public places present a great variety of shapes; they can evidently express their own meanings by using other means apart from architecture.



Schematic axonometries of the squares analyzed in my thesis: 1.Paris, Place des Vosges 2.Turin, piazza Savoia 3.London, Park Square 4.Park Crescent 5.Piccadilly Circus 6.Berlin, Leipziger Platz 7.Potsdamer Platz 8.Marlene Dietrich Platz 9.Sony Forum

In the fifth chapter I try to reconstruct the formal relationships and analogies that link my four squares to other public places, searching for possible – or at list plausible – models. In the sixth and conclusive chapter public places are depicted as both objects and subjects of narration. Both the narration directions are index of the wealth of significance that characterizes public places, making them places for living in the best sense of the term.

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