Incremental Urbanism in Medieval Italy: The Example of Todi

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Medieval Urban Planning:

The Monastery and Beyond

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CHAPTER EIGHT

INCREMENTAL URBANISM
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THE EXAMPLE OF TODI

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Ever since Wolfgang Braunfels’s pioneering work on medieval Italian urbanism appeared in the 1950s, it has been accepted that modern town planning in Italy did not begin in the Renaissance. Powerful city states and powerful individual rulers were busy founding and laying out new towns in Piedmont, Lombardy, Tuscany, Apulia, and Campania from the thirteenth century on. Thirty-five years after Braunfels’s book, David Friedman published his study of the Florentine new towns of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in which he reiterated that link. Friedman wrote “the town plans proposed by Filarete, Francesco di Giorgio, and the theoreticians and town builders of the sixteenth century placed a premium on centrality, symmetry, and fixed proportions, all of which were essential aspects of the fourteenth-century Florentine new-town plans.”

Friedman’s study emphasized the most rigidly planned exercises in city design of the Italian Middle Ages. Much less attention, however, has been focused on planning practices in towns that already existed in Italy, and which flourished due to the demographic and economic boom of the twelfth through early fourteenth centuries. The growth of these many towns, located on irregular sites, and with long and tangled building, property, and political histories, is still too often dismissed as “organic” as opposed to a “planned” development. The legacy of twentieth-century urban planning practice, which favored the big plan and the clean slate, still influences views of what planning was in the past.

In many older towns that lack the regular and easily recognizable orthogonal plan of new towns such as S. Giovanni di Val D’Arno (Tuscany), Cittadella (Veneto), or L’Aquila (Abruzzi), one must look more carefully to detect evidence of an urban vision. There are no specific city building treatises before Alberti’s 1452 De Architettura, and no lengthy descriptions of

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city planning and building, such as in Manetti’s biography of Pope Nicholas V, also from the 1450s, so we cannot be sure what even a few highly educated people desired of the cityscape. With the exception of Bonvicensus de Rippa’s description of Milan from 1288 and Giovanni Villani’s account of Florence, written before 1348, there are few instances where we see the medieval Italian city, real or ideal, through contemporary eyes. Specific directions for new neighborhoods do survive, for example, from Brescia, Assisi, and Florence. While Friedman and others have examined the well-developed practice of urban geometers for laying out orthogonal city streets and plotting rectangular building lots, for most Italian towns, the evidence is largely circumstantial. Still, we can understand that there were many different ways in which towns and cities could be planned.

In the case of the Umbrian hilltown of Todi, however, the evidence is substantial enough to indicate that medieval citizens were strongly concerned with their city’s physical condition and visual appearance (Fig. 8-1). They followed a practical approach to urbanism, necessary since the town had been occupied for more than a millennium, and authorities rarely could plan or build from scratch. They tried to correct and adapt existing situations. Improving city fabric was an exercise in civic unity; as important in forging a polity as the raising of an army.

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7 Paula Spilin, “Ut Civitas Ampliatur,” especially 273-301.
8 The basic history of medieval Todi remains Getulio Ceci, Todi nel Medioevo (Todi, Formi, 1897), which describes the organization of the government and its responsibilities. In addition to the city statutes, the commune maintained the The Libro del ruolo dell’accavallata del 1340 (Archivio Comunale di Todi, Fondo Statuto), a list of those responsible for maintaining a good horse ready for any call to war. The military force of Todi was divided into the militi and the pedoni. The militi, or horse soldiers, were the primary force. In 1288, in the war of Foligno, Todi sent in aid to Perugia 800 horse soldiers, and there is no indication that this was the full strength of the army. In 1297 the number of horses available to the commune had increased by 100. The accavallata was the calling together of the knights. The few richer men were responsible for two; the less well-to-do one. Some individuals were responsible for a fraction of a horse, and they probably paid a cash substitute. A few individuals or families supplied three horses or more. We do not know how large a force Todi had in the thirteenth century, but in 1347 there were 1070 individuals listed responsible for providing 1004 horses. The list is arranged by stones, and provides a good indication of the distribution of wealth throughout the city. See Gruber, Medieval Todi, 103.
9 Primary and secondary sources for the urban and demographic development of Todi are examined in Gruber, Medieval Todi, op. cit., 16-22 and passim.
for its piazza and for a few notable churches, such as the late medieval Franciscan church of San Fortunato and the High Renaissance gem of Santa Maria della Consolazione, attributed to the circle of Bramante.

Todi’s triangular plan shape converges on the central piazza, and is caused by the extension of several ridge spurs which extend from the town center. In part because of the varied topography, the overall plan includes several types of street and building patterns. On the spurs, where new borghi were laid out in the thirteenth century, the fishbone arrangement is most evident. In the center of town, however, on the long sides of the piazza, the street pattern suggests an orthogonal arrangement, adapted to the topography of the site. This grid is probably Roman in origin. Across this rough grid of streets around the piazza is the three-way intersection of major streets into the piazza. The triangular street arrangement is thus compressed into the grid plan.

Life in the city revolved around this central piazza that had evolved over centuries from a Roman forum and on which, by the early thirteenth century, centered the power centers of commune and bishop. The piazza served as an expression of public power through the presence of its impressive civic palaces. The construction of these buildings continued for over a century and Todi’s citizens would have had the frequent reminder and sometimes inconvenience of the expanding presence of their popular government. But Todi’s piazza was not just empty space between buildings or the point of convergence of rioni. The open space of the piazza, used as a market and the site of civic events, was as important to the life of medieval Todi as the activities that took place in the surrounding buildings.

14 On the Piazza see Getulio Cini, and Umberto Bartolini, Piazze e palazzi comunali di Todi (Todi: Rev Tudesirn, 1979), and Gruber, Medieval Todi, op. cit., 171-204. The activity in the piazza was often politically significant, such as the annual recognition of the subjugation of Terni and Amelia, particularly Amelia, which had been conquered in 1208. Every June 29th, during the Vigilia of San Fortunato, both cities made their annual act of submission. The sindaco of Terni was received in the midst of the consiglione where he presented his ten marks of silver, but the representative of Amelia presented the podestà with his tribute of a fifteen-pound candle at the foot of the steps of the Palazzo del Comune. A procession would then pass through the piazza, probably along via Mazzini, to the church of San Fortunato. Political life of a more everyday sort took place in the

Flanking the piazza were rows of houses, most of them connected, which belonged to members of Todi’s oldest families and to affluent members of its middle class. Many of these houses had shops on their ground floors while in the central space took place the full range of medieval commercial, judicial, and ceremonial life. Some of these houses, particularly those on the southwest and northeast corners of the piazza, survive.

Throughout the town the siting of buildings was planned in respect to property boundaries and conditions for light and air, but within the interconnected street networks, views from streets and piazze were also a serious consideration. This was true for public buildings and for many private dwellings. The relation of streets to houses helped focus attention even on less distinguished structures. Visible locations were seemingly preferred for building. Unlike today, the rich and powerful did not build for privacy; as participants in public life and as local political and religious patrons their private architecture played a public role. Public character of houses, however, was determined more by siting, size, and quality of workmanship than by stylistic novelties or ostentatious display. On the one hand, major houses and palaces are located on corner sites where they can be seen at best advantage, and where they received maximum light. On the other, such a location elevates a house to a higher status.

Documentary evidence, particularly city statutes, demonstrates that there was civic effort to control urban development. Statutes promote an idea of urban order. Issued periodically, statutes record citizens’ concerns and responsibilities in their relations to government, to the land, and to themselves. They are a critical primary source about life in the medieval city. The regulations of Todi were gathered together in extensive editions in 1275 and 1337, and a printed edition in 1549, when the city was under papal rule.

Other than the definition of the offices of the government and reiteration of the criminal code, the maintenance of the physical town and the proper function and upkeep of public amenities was the chief concern of statute writers. Like municipal governments today, the infrastructure of the town was government’s greatest asset and greatest liability. The 1275 Statutes show the city at a period when it was defining itself in many ways: militarily,
territorially, economically, politically, commercially, and administratively. 14

Many statutes respond to particular problems, and it is clear that statutes were often reactive rather than preventive 15. Individually, statutes cannot be taken as enlightened town planning, or even conscientious management. They might, indeed, be construed as evidence to the contrary. But when presented in large wood-bound codices in the Palazzo del Comune, the individual statutes took on a more coherent collective meaning, representing the commune, and the podestà and staff sworn to uphold them. Beginning in the early 1200s as a government with an ad hoc attitude toward city maintenance, Todi developed a real policy toward maintaining the order of the city that included citizen responsibility, private denouncements, and regular public inspections to detect problems and prevent damages.16 This corresponded with the final period of Todi’s expansion and enclosure of areas in its third wall. The statutes’ specificity about the city mirrored, if not equaled, more complex criminal laws.

Each incoming podestà was required to examine public properties and to affect repair immediately.17 Fines on the podestà and his staff were steep, and could be withheld from salaries. The podestà was also charged with maintaining the public water supply, including aqueducts, cisterns, and fountains. By the late thirteenth century, the commune was also purchasing properties for demolition and development for civic use, competing with local religious orders. 18

The statutes ordered the podestà and staff to be concerned with streets and piazzas and their physical upkeep and improvement, empowering the index extraordinarius to determine which streets, roads, and bridges should be repaired, widened, or cleared of obstructions, including balconies and other additions to houses that, as in many medieval cities, gradually encroached upon the public street space. A typical example: “proprietors of houses with frontages on communal or private streets [are allowed] to construct terraces and balconies without payment of any sort to anyone, provided that they do not extend beyond the middle of the streets and on the condition that they are at least ten feet above the level of the ground walkway and that they are adequately supported or attached to the buildings so that nothing can fall and endanger any passerby.”19 Under these same projections it was not allowed “to dump or allow to pile up garbage, or to build cesspools.” The same provision states that violators were fined 20 solidi.

The statutes, like the city street network, are a patchwork affair. Reading them one senses constant tinkering to make the city a better place to live. Greater cleanliness, light, and access also seem to be the fundamental elements behind the development of Todi’s street network and siting of its important buildings. This patchwork approach, sewing small pieces of urban fabric together, created over time an almost seamless urban environment.

Can we call this urban planning? Certainly yes, in the sense that officials, owners, and builders consciously followed rules and regulations in order to create specific built forms and spatial effects and impressions. It is harder to say whether this incremental urbanism reflects a larger urban vision—let alone a specific articulated urban plan with clear goals. With few exceptions, the types of evidence that survive—notices of meetings, provisions of legal statutes, and occasional contracts, and, of course, the

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15 For example, a statute that addresses the problem of garbage removal in the piazza in front of San Fortunato (1275 Statutes, I, rub 59): “Item statutum quod potentatres faciant digemorari plateam Sancti Fortunatii et quod in ea non prohiberit aliquid turpe et qui contra fecerit et quotiens in predictis, in X. solidos punitur.” Similar restrictions and fines for projecting building additions that intrude upon public space (sporti) appear to address common continuing problems of medieval and early modern cities with ground level stalls or upper story (sporti) react to continuing problems of medieval and early modern cities. See Ceci and Pensi, Statuto di Todi del 1275, op. cit.
16 Beginning in the early 1200s as a government with an ad hoc attitude toward city maintenance, the commune of Todi developed, by the second half of the thirteenth century, a real policy toward maintaining the order of the city. This policy was wide ranging, and included citizen responsibility, private denouncements, and regular public inspections by city officials to detect problems and prevent serious damages. The specificity of the statutes regarding the city came to mirror, if not equal, the more complex criminal laws. As seen in the Statutes of 1285 and 1337, most of these issues are considered in a “do’s and don’ts” manner, specifying particular actions that are or are not allowed within the town walls or within the larger territory. Often the place or time allowed for a specific activity, especially when commercial, is stipulated in the statutes. The regulations fall into three main categories: 1) those insuring that the town is kept clean and healthy, 2) provisions for the maintenance of specific buildings, and 3) regulations concerning new buildings.
17 On the role and responsibilities of the podestà, his “famiglia,” and other officers of the commune, see Ceci, Todi nel Medioevo, 203-24.
18 Many of these documents pertain to the purchase and demolition of buildings for the creation of civic buildings around the piazza. These are discussed in Graber, Medieval Todi, op. cit., Chapter V (the Piazza del Popolo), 171-91.
19 Ceci and Pensi, Statuto di Todi del 1275, op. cit. I, 80 (translation by author).
buildings, streets, and piazze themselves—are related in purpose, material, and styles; but not usually connected in design. Encircling the piazza were residential neighborhoods divided into six rioni. Further out from the center were borghi. While one can find remnants of the Roman plan in the center, the borghi were thirteenth-century developments built along the main approach arteries, and tucked into the lower folds of Todi’s hilltop site. Sometimes this encompassed earlier, previously isolated churches and chapels. Two borghi were regularly planned residential extensions of the urban core laid out in a “fishbone” pattern with their major spines the ancient arteries that rose to the town on Todi’s northern and southern spurs, beginning just within the city gates of the third circuit wall. Similar development is apparent in nearby Perugia, a larger city.

In Todi, the uniformity of the street and lot patterns at the Borgo Ulpiano suggests a single development after the extension of the city wall in the 1240s, where there was open land between the Porta Romana and Porta della Catena available for subdivision into nearly equal lots along relatively straight streets (Fig. 8-2). Borgo Ulpiano stretches along a ridge to one of Todi’s major streets, an offshoot of the Via Flaminia that approached the town from the south. The borgo doubled the length of the street, taking it to a new city gate, and added a network of narrow cross streets descending from the major artery down both sides of the ridge. These new streets were regular in their layout, though their length differed because of the terrain. Most of the house frontages on the vicoli (little streets) are equal, and many of the cell-like houses were built at the same time. Single family dwellings in the Borgo Ulpiano have remained so to this day. In the Borgo Nuovo, on the north side of town, however, development seems less regular, suggestive of multiple small lots and perhaps more owners building over a longer period of time.

The creation of the linear borghi type expanded towns in one direction at a time, and created settled areas far from the city center. Hilltown topography usually left no other choice. About the same time as Todi’s expansion, its Umbrian neighbor Gubbio’s topography allowed a more regular growth onto the plain at the bottom of the town, creating the newly orthogonally organized San Pietro district, which filled rapidly with stone row houses for the growing artisan middleclass. The Umbrian town of Assisi expanded its wall in 1316, also creating new borghi on the hillside below the earlier town. Contemporary documents record the distribution of the building lots for rows of houses along parallel streets.

Fig. 8-2. Todi, Italy, Borgo Ulpiano.

We do not know who developed Todi’s Borgo Ulpiano, but its proximity to the Benedictine monastery of San Nicolo, also the district’s parish church, suggests the monastery was involved in the area’s development, and may even have owned the subdivided land. Documents indicate a pattern of ecclesiastical land ownership in Todi, and the collection of small annual ground rents from literally hundreds of local residents. One now-lost document described in the seventeenth-century was a property list of the Benedictine monastery of Sant’Angelo de Fontanelle. It recorded in 1284 that the monastery owned 443 properties.

20 Documentary information concerning the vast majority of Todi’s buildings must be gleaned from the sources, or does not exist. The important sources concerning the neighborhoods of Todi and the residents of the town are the various catasti or census records. The earliest surviving census is the Liber focularium, ovvero libro dei fuochi, from 1290 (Archivio Comunale di Todi, Fondo Stuatiti). This was prepared in two volumes, one for the city and one for the territory. Unfortunately, the first volume is lost, and only the total numbers for each rione are preserved. The census of 1322 is of particular importance because of its good state of preservation and the wealth of information it contains about the property holdings of Todi’s citizens. The volume lists each property owner by rione and parish, and then all properties throughout the entire territory by location, size, and value.
almost all in the new _borghi_ adjacent to its site, namely the Borgi S. Stefano, S. Giorgio, della Cupa and de Plagis.21

Paula Spilner documented in Florence that monasteries actively developed land they owned, and the lot sizes which she identified are close to those we see in Todi's _borghi_.22 Enrico Guidoni also demonstrated the role of the Umilati in the residential development of Milan.23 On the other hand, Cesarina de Giovanni has demonstrated that in Assisi, at least, the aforementioned development was by the commune.24 In Viterbo, the commune developed new _borghi_ on land leased from monasteries.25 In Perugia, it is likely but not certain that the monastery of San Pietro played a pivotal role in the development of the Borgo di San Pietro that grew up in its vicinity.

In comparison to these sites, another type of more nuanced planning took place in Todi, focused on adjusting the older central urban fabric by carefully inserting new buildings, and framing views of buildings old and new. Naturally, most buildings were sited in respect to property boundaries and conditions for light and air, and as population grew in the thirteenth century, space was valuable. Still, views from streets and piazza of both public buildings and for many private dwellings were a serious consideration. The relation of the streets to the houses helped focus attention even on many of less distinguished structures.

21 The property list was copied by Luca Alberti Petti in _Commentarii ovvero memorie di Todi_. 6 MSS vols. (Todi: Archivio Comunale di Todi, 1630), Arm. IV, Cas XI.
22 Spilner, _op. cit._ in passim.
25 David Andrews, "Medieval Domestic Architecture in Northern Lazio" in _Medieval Lazio: Studies in Architecture, Painting and Ceramics_. Papers in Italian Archaeology, III, David Andrews, John Osborne, and David Whitehouse, eds., (Oxford: BAR International Series 125, 1982), 1-121, 6 ff., notes that the elliptical _borgo_ of Piano Scarrano was founded in 1187, though it is first recorded as a _vicus_ from the early ninth century. The Commune leased the site from the church of Santa Maria della Cellina in 1148, already apparently in anticipation of development. The Commune stood to lose money if the plan failed, but all went well, and the _borgo_ was successfully settled. Another suburb, the Piano di San Faustino, was enclosed with walls ca. 1208. According to the chronicles (Ciampi, 1872, 14), "furono ordinate le strade con le corde."

Much of the urban experience of Todi is episodic, with a series of planned local vistas, of micro-environments. Almost every public building, whether civic or religious, can be seen before it is reached, but these buildings are rarely approached head on. Direct axes do not exist. Sharp corners and rounded apses project into the sight lines of approach streets, and the full building is only slowly revealed. Even the Duomo is seen at first indirectly. Seen by themselves, urban adjustments to buildings-street relationship can appear casual, even accidental. I would argue that Todi's urban adjustments are part of a medieval aesthetic, and, at best, examples of sophisticated planning.

The prevalence of curving or angled streets allows many buildings to be seen obliquely (Fig. 8-3). In the case of a rowhouse, this allows more of the facade to be seen at a longer distance. For corner site buildings it allows two sides of the building to be viewed at once. The angled view of buildings is particularly important in a town like Todi, where streets are narrow, so that even when standing in front of a building it is often impossible to see its entire facade. Where angled views are not provided, or where they only reveal of portion of the building, the symmetrical disposition of the facade is not important, because the opportunity to understand it does not exist.

More important is the placement of single notable doorways and windows in positions where they are central from the viewers' perspective (Fig. 8-4). The focusing of streets on specific buildings, or sitting of buildings—or their doors, windows, balconies, and corners—on streets, occurs again and again throughout the city. It is in part an example of the process of siting recommended by G.B. Alberti in the fifteenth century. Alberti writes that when planning a small town

it will be better, and as safe, not for the streets to run straight to the gates; but to have them wind about somewhat to the right, sometimes to the left, and within the heart of the town it will be handsomer not to have them straight, but winding in several ways, backwards and forwards, like the course of a river. For thus, besides that by appearing so much longer, they will add to the idea of greatness of the town, they will likewise conduco very much beauty and convenience, and be a greater security against all accidents and emergencies.

He goes on to say,

Moreover, this winding of streets will make the passenger at every step discover a new structure, and the front and door of every house will directly face the middle of the street; and whereas in larger towns even too much breadth is unhandsome and unpleasant, in a small one it will be both
Fig. 8-3. Via di San Fortunato, Todi. Source: Author.

Fig. 8-4. Via dei Fredi, Todi. Source: Author.
healthy and pleasant to have an open view from every house by means of the turn of the street. But further, in our winding street there will be no house but what, in some part of the day, will enjoy some sun; nor will they be without gentle breezes, which whatever corner they come from, will never want a free or clear passage; and yet they will not be molested by stormy blasts, because such will be broken by the turning of the streets. Add to all these advantages that, if the enemy gets into the town, he will be in danger from every side, in front, in flank, and in rear, from assaults from the houses.26

Medieval planning went beyond Alberti’s prescription, however, because in Todi the focus on specific buildings does not just involve curved streets, but occurs with straight streets, too. These, when they do occur in the maze of the city plan, are constantly interrupted. Via di San Lorenzo, for example, runs parallel to the Piazza del Popolo in front of the parish church of San Lorenzo and heads dead-on into a door (now blocked). On the other side of the obstructing building, the same thing happens. Similarly, Via del Mercato Vecchio is aligned on the blocked door of Corso Cavour #36.

The public character of houses was determined more by siting, size, and quality of workmanship than by stylistic novelties or ostentatious display. On the one hand, major houses such as the Palazzi Chiarevalle, Astancolle, Uffreducci, and Landi are all located on corner sites to be seen at best advantage, and for air and maximum light. On the other hand, such a location elevates a house to a higher status.

In a small town city like Todi, too, where even in the Middle Ages there were relatively few open spaces, the breaking up of streets into more discreet units through curves or obstructions created a series of enclaves that while not quite piazzes, could serve as nodes of neighborhood activity. The widened Via del Monte (Fig. 8-5) and Via dei Fredi are, in fact, piazza in all but name. The sections of Via di San Lorenzo that are divided by the protruding building mentioned above are no more than streets, but their enclosure has turned them into clearly defined spaces in view of, and dominated by, the houses around them. They function as semi-private courtyards, where it can be assumed all surrounding residents were well aware of what their neighbors were doing.

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We cannot know the reasons for this approach to city building. Certainly, the final effect is that more buildings had “proprietary” relationships with streets. In a small town like Todi, the curving and breaking of streets to better emphasize buildings, or the placement of buildings to interrupt the direct flow of streets, increases the visual excitement of a walk through the town in a very democratic way. The drama of the approach to the Palazzo del Comune, described below, is multiplied on a smaller scale dozens of times throughout the city.

Samuel Edgerton detailed this perspectival viewpoint when describing the trecento artist of the Loggia del Bigallo fresco of Florence,

The painter... did not conceive of his subject in terms of spatial homogeneity. Rather he believed that he could render what he saw before his eyes convincingly by representing what it felt like to walk about, experiencing structures, almost tactilely, from many different sides, rather than from a single, overall vantage.\(^\text{27}\)

Examples of the varieties of relationships of buildings to streets can be seen on the three main streets leading into the Piazza del Popolo. As Via Mazzini enters the piazza, only the right hand side of the Duomo and the campanile are at first visible, framed between large buildings. Nearing the piazza the street narrows, squeezing the view into a tightly controlled vista (Fig. 8-6). The corners of buildings defining this “picture frame” are detailed with applied colonnettes topped with capitals or sculpted decoration, something extremely rare elsewhere in Todi. These, and a similarly articulated third corner at the same intersection, at the end of the west “wall” of the piazza, accentuate the view’s significance. This practice of literally framing views differs from what Marvin Trachtenberg’s demonstrated for Florentine geometors who widened the mouths of Via Calzaiuoli and Via Cerchi for more explicit views of the Palazzo Vecchio, similar to Giotto’s perspective; but the intentional view of the relationship is related.\(^\text{28}\)

In Todi, the second street entering the piazza is Corso Cavour that begins at Porta Romana and then steadily climbs to the piazza; an experience in the gradations of city power and authority, beginning with the transition from country to town, as one passed through the medieval gate, then continuing from borgo to rione, or new town to old town, as one climbed and passed through Porta Catena. In the fourteenth century, the completed campanile of San Fortunato stood as a beacon at the top of the town, completely visible and precisely on axis with the route. The climb continued through the ancient Porta Marzia to the heart of town. Each arch and slight curve opened up another vista.

The route’s goal, visible in the final stretch, is the Palazzo del Comune—center of power and of civic responsibility and pride (Fig. 8-7). The street targeted the stairs (since moved), which led to the Great Council Hall of the governing citizen assembly. The palace projects into the piazza and presents itself to all six rioni. The street focuses on the southwest corner of the Palazzo del Comune that beckons from afar. That slice of the palace is perceived as the full destination, but on getting closer, Piazza Garibaldi opens on the right, and one realizes the greater extent of the palace. The street predates the construction of the Palazzo del Comune, and it must have been a conscious choice to have the important building seen from the street, rather than to extend the piazza to allow the street to enter it directly.

\(^\text{27}\) Samuel Edgerton, The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 9-10. These principles of medieval urbanism were first described in detail by Camillo Sitte, Der Stadtbau nach seinen kunstlerischen Grundsätzen (Wein: Graesser, 1889). This work is translated and edited as George R. and Christiane Cresemann Collins, Camillo Sitte: The Birth of Modern City Planning (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), who also place the work in the context of late turn-of-the-century planning ideas. The Collins point out that much of what is usually attributed to Sitte, particularly regarding the nature of medieval streets is, in fact, the work of Camille Martin who rewrote Sitte’s work for the 1902 French edition. It was this French edition that provided the basis for the English translation of 1945. In the words of Sitte’s modern editors, “in the apparently chaotic jumble of the unplanned, he searched for an inner structure, a hidden pattern, that allowed for unending change in response to the demands of historic time.” Though at times criticized for going too far in his analysis, it is Sitte who best teaches how to read the morphology of a medieval town. While his arguments were directed at the contemporary architectural and planning establishment, the lessons are important for urban historians. As Trachtenberg demonstrated in the case of adjustments to Florence’s streets to provide vistas of the Duomo, the Bargello, and the Palazzo Vecchio, oblique views were indeed favored in the Middle Ages, just as Sitte had maintained a century earlier. Similar oblique views help accentuate important buildings throughout Italy—from Montagnana in the Veneto to Lucera in Puglia. While almost every public building in Todi, whether civic or religious, can be seen before it is reached, these buildings are rarely approached head on. Sharp corners and rounded apses project into the sight lines of approach streets, and the full building is only slowly revealed.

\(^\text{28}\) Marvin Trachtenberg, Dominion of the Eye, op. cit.
Fig. 8-6. Todi, Via Mazzini view to Duomo. Source: Author.

Fig. 8-7. Palazzo del Popolo from Corso del Cavour, Todi. Source: Author.
This deliberate placement of the Palazzo del Comune is even more obvious when one looks at how the Palazzo del Capitano del Popolo was built much later in the century. This was set back in regard to the earlier palace. The consistent piazza line is not that expressed by the Palazzo del Comune, but that maintained by the Palazzo del Capitano and all other private buildings alongside it. From both sides, the new Communal Palace stuck out, a bravado show of communal pride, and perhaps at that early stage of communal development, defiance. From the west, the Palazzo del Comune is also framed from the narrow Via del Monte (made smaller by a post-medieval "ponte" spanning the street), where the walls seem to open up, so that about five meters from the end the entire Palazzo del Comune is visible.

The third main street into the piazza is Via del Duomo, a relatively short stretch that collects Via del Borgo Nuovo and Via di Santa Prassede and continues them into the upper town. The systematization of this street must date from the construction of the Gothic “navatella” of the Duomo in the fourteenth century. It seems thoroughly within the planning sensibilities of Todi’s medieval surveyors that the Duomo expansion which also included the building of shops in the Duomo’s foundation beneath the “navatella” and the probable widening and straightening of the street was a response to the regularization of the south side of the piazza and the building of the new Palazzo dei Priori, on which it focuses (Fig. 8-8).

The various urban elements I’ve summarized in this essay join together to create what for many is an archetypical Italian hill town. Buildings and streets form the connective tissue of the town that joins the monumental urban elements and thus their appearance and the experience of approaching and using them. Together, and over time, these elements were constructed, joined, juxtaposed, and amended through countless decisions and actions to create a medieval cityscape that is a work of collective art. There is intentionality—though not all would call it planning. In the end the satisfying overall effect of Todi is due not to the work of any single architect or planner, but is the sum total of its built history, its incremental urbanism.

Fig. 8-8. Palazzo dei Priori seen from Via del Duomo, Todi. Source: Author.
Chapter Eight


Sitte, Camillo. In *Der Stadtebau nach seinen kunstlerischen Grundsatzen.* Wein: Graeser, 1889.


