The foundation, planning and building of new towns in the 13th and 14th centuries in Europe: an architectural-historical research into urban form and its creation

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PREFACE

The urban environment is the physical and social habitat for almost half of mankind in the present day world. In ‘developed’ regions such as Europe even almost three quarters of the population live in towns and cities. This urban environment has strongly contributed to the shape of our personal and common identity, our culture, both in the past and in the present.

For instance, many important facets of our modern world are essentially urban in origin. This holds true for, among other things, the core family as social unit (instead of extended families or tribes), for the freedom of person and personal possession, for the freedom of trade and profession (and thereby for professional specialisation and the recognition of the importance of schooling), for market trade, money and democracy.

Conversely, the physical and social urban environment also expresses our common identity. And the forms of historic towns and cities also express the identity and aspirations of our ancestors, which is also important for our own identity, giving us a place in history. Generally speaking, the historic manmade landscape offers us a tangible idea of the long history of our culture and of our own position in history. This holds particularly true for the landscape with many historic buildings, in old villages, towns and cities. This built landscape offers us a strong suggestion of the connection with our ancestors that created (elements of) this landscape in the past, and it makes us more or less conscious of both cultural change and continuity in the course of the centuries. Therefore, the historic urban landscape, as it exists, has to be treated with care and respect. And therefore it also deserves to be studied, and if possible, explained. That is what this study is mainly about.

The greatest part of urban space in Europe has been created since the industrial revolution, which, depending on the region, generally took place in the late 18th to early 20th century. The general development of the strong urbanisation in this period is relatively well known to us. But many, or probably even most, of the towns and cities that presently exist have originally been created in the period of about the 12th to 14th centuries. In this period there was also a high degree of urbanisation, which is quite well-known as a general fact, but relatively little is known of what precisely happened.

Therefore, this study seeks to understand more of this period of strong urbanisation, and more precisely about the spatial or architectural aspects of this urbanisation. In particular, this study focuses on towns that were intentionally created from very humble beginnings within a relatively short period of time. It is a known fact that many towns were newly created in this way throughout Europe particularly in the 13th and 14th centuries, but very little is known of how this actually happened, and it appears that part of the ideas that people presently have concerning this subject, are largely erroneous. Therefore this dissertation is intended to shed more light on the subject of the creation of new towns in Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries, by analysing the towns and the relatively sparse written sources on the subject.

The study of the wilful creation of new towns in the past is particularly interesting because it is not just about shaping pieces of landscape, but also about creating societies that were meant to function in social and economic sense. There are various aspects which are of great interest, such as, among other things, the siting of the settlements, the distribution of the land, the creation of facilities for traffic and defence, aesthetics, and the political, social, economic and religious organisation.

The scholarly study of the subject of historic town planning was initiated in the later 19th and early 20th century, mainly by architects. It is no coincidence that town planning was becoming a professional discipline which was systematically dealt with in that same period. Planners sought inspiration and tried to learn from the past, but they also used their interpretations of the past to justify and give significance to their own ideas and methods. This is the reason that many of those interpretations, as published in articles and books, have some particular bias and that quite some of them are not very reliable as accounts of history.

Since the early 20th century the study of the subject has also been taken up by historians and geographers. But up to the very present many publications on historical urban planning are still written with the (tacit) intention to influence the present practice of town planning.

That certainly is not the aim of the this study; although I hope that spreading knowledge of the subject may help to increase respect for historic urban ensembles and be helpful in their conservation. The approach

1 Slater 1987, p.191, referring to Tout 1917.
of this study has been architectural-historical from the outset. At first it was purely about historical town planning, but gradually my interest also came to include the historiography of town building history. What particularly aroused my attention was the position that was ascribed to the period of about the 12th to 15th centuries within the discourse of the history of urban creation in Europe. This specific interest was brought about by what I read in many publications on town building history and by the reactions that I received when I told acquaintances in general and fellow historians about my research. It appeared to me that most people (the public in general as well as many learned people in art history, history, architecture and geography) have ideas about ‘medieval towns’, ‘medieval town planning’ and ‘the middle ages’ in general, which do not match with the material I was studying. Hence, my attention shifted to the question of how this was possible. Part III of this dissertation (chapters 10 and 11) is largely the result of that. There I describe how largely erroneous ideas regarding ‘medieval town planning’ and history in general have come about, and I give some suggestions for an alternative approach which will provide a more objective understanding of the past.

It took me more than ten years to finish this dissertation. That is much longer than I initially planned. The reason for that is quite clear, in retrospect: the subject of this study is rather large. The original plan was to limit the geographical extent to central and northern Italy, and to focus particularly on the method of design of the newly founded towns there. The committee which was to decide over whether or not to grant me a scholarship from the Rijks Universiteit Leiden, however, advised me to widen the geographical scope, in order to get a better view on the international developments in town planning. I gratefully agreed, because that was what I thought too, and I still do. But I did not know then, that it would take me so much time to reach a result which I found agreeable. If I had known then what I know now, I would have done it differently, since it has cost me so much of my spare time. Nevertheless, I have generally enjoyed working on the project.

Reading guide

Since this book has become rather voluminous, I do not expect that every reader is going to read all of it. Therefore I would like to give some advice for whom what to read.

I would advise those readers with a general interest in the subject to read at least the introduction and chapter 9, which will give a good impression of the starting point of this study and the most important facets of the creation of new towns in the 13th and 14th centuries. For those who want to know more about some specific examples, grouped by regions and founders, chapters 1 to 3 may be of interest, and the readers interested in the position of town building in the 13th and 14th centuries within a wider temporal spectrum might want to read chapter 10. The rest of the chapters are more focused on specific aspects of the creation of towns in the period under consideration, or the way this subject has been approached in studies of the last two centuries or so. I believe the titles of the chapters clearly indicate the aspects concerned. The final section of the book (section 12) contains a short summary of the introduction and chapters 1 to 11. Reading this summary, may help to get a picture of what is treated where and what the most important conclusions are.

Acknowledgments

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