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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11 THE PROBLEM OF PERIODISATION: 
THE PERCEPTION OF TOWN PLANNING IN THE 13TH-14TH CENTURIES 
IN RELATION TO THE TRADITIONAL VIEW ON EUROPEAN HISTORY

In various of the previous chapters I have challenged specific existing ideas and theories concerning the 
founding and planning of new towns in the period under consideration. In these cases, the material that 
I found was clearly not in agreement with the existing ideas and theories. Reviewing these cases on the 
whole, it appears that a number of the biggest problems are more or less connected to a basic problem in the 
understanding of history and the development of the practice of town planning. In this chapter this problem 
will be analysed.

In the 12th to 14th centuries, particularly between c. 1250 and 1350, many more towns were newly founded and 
planned than in the centuries before and after.1 Despite that fact, the general idea that people have (the public 
as well as many scholars) is that real town planning only came to be practiced from about the middle of the 
15th century. It is believed that the art of town planning was reborn from recovered knowledge of antique 
theory and practice, during the so-called ‘(Italian) renaissance’.

So, since about the 19th century, the general idea is that the straight street, the orthogonal town plan and 
spatial regularity in general, are typical aspects of ‘renaissance’ or ‘modern town planning’; and, conversely, 
‘the medieval town’ is regarded as an irrational and irregular (albeit picturesque) ensemble of winding 
streets and narrow alleys within a tightly fitting town wall, the whole having grown spontaneously. Despite 
the more recent publication of various studies that clearly show that this image is wrong, it is still generally 
adhered to.

These misconceptions are due to the selective non-representative choice and over-generalising treatment 
of examples of historical urban structures and axiomatic ideas concerning ‘rationality’ in the periods of the 
‘middle ages’ and the ‘renaissance’ (or ‘modern times’), which are traditionally viewed as contrasting 
temporal entities. In this chapter the problem of periodisation, as it has been used in traditional historio-
graphy, will be discussed in the context of the history of town building. The object is to demonstrate how 
much the imperative vision of history as a sequence of different (style-)periods has forced the writing of 
history into a pattern of clichés which are largely wrong, thus distorting our knowledge of real develop-
ments. At the end of this chapter I will try to give an alternative interpretation that does more justice to those 
actual historical developments.

11.1 The cliché image of the ‘picturesque organic medieval town’

With the rise of ‘romanticism’ in about the late 18th century, a largely new attitude towards nature and history 
became widely influential. In this context the irregular layout of old towns, which mostly dated back to about 
the 10th to 16th centuries, became more and more appreciated as the ‘picturesque beauty’ of ‘organic growth’.2 
These ‘picturesque’ ensembles came to be regarded as the typical examples of ‘the medieval town’, and, with 
this, irregularity and picturesqueness came to be seen as the main characteristics of ‘medieval’ urban form. 
In this way a cliché-image was created of ‘the medieval town’.

The most famous towns and cities which have been thought of as typically ‘medieval’ since the 19th century 
(like Siena, Toledo, Bruges, Carcassonne, York and Prague) actually fit the cliché-image of the irregular and 
picturesque ‘medieval town’. In actuality, these places are particularly famous as ‘medieval cities’ precisely 
because of the irregularity and picturesqueness of their appearance, which invokes a sense of romanticism or 
historical exoticism, which has, among other things, made them very popular tourist attractions.

In the 19th and early 20th century, the many towns from about the 12th to 14th centuries that have regular 
layouts, were almost completely disregarded. Besides that, documentary evidence of town planning in the 
12th to 14th centuries had not yet been studied. Even though this situation has changed in the past few 
decades, many scholars still believe in the old, basically 19th-century, view of ‘medieval’ town building, and so 
does the general public.

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1 For that reason I have used the term ‘high-period of town foundation’. See pars. 0.1.2, 0.2.2, 10.2, 10.3.
According to various scholars, town building was no real art in "the middle ages", because they believe that it was not guided by abstract principles. But others, who were directly or indirectly influenced by 19th-century ideas on "the medieval town", such as those of the highly influential authors John Ruskin (1849) and Camillo Sitte (1889), did think of it as an art, precisely because of the irregularity and picturesqueness. In a reaction against what they saw as the 'mechanistic coldness' of the industrial era, ruled by machines and by too much rationality, they perceived 'medieval town building' as still being an artistic enterprise, because they believed that in their own time it had become too much a question of purely technical considerations.

Camillo Sitte and his followers believed that the 'picturesque beauty of the medieval town' was a goal which was consciously being strived after, driven by an unconscious ideal of beauty in town design, one which was not personally but rather culturally defined. What Sitte and followers tried to do was to uncover the (implicit) rules lying behind this historical 'picturesque' town building, and to revive this 'city planning according to artistic principles' - which was the title of Sitte's highly influential book. So Sitte and his companions studied old, often 'medieval', towns in order to find the 'principles' of 'picturesque' town building. These principles were not written down by 'medieval man' because (so they thought) he did not need a written theory, since he unconsciously followed the artistic tradition of his time. Although this vision has been cast off by many others since the end of the 19th century, the basic idea has survived up to this very day.

In many of the writings of the Sitte-followers one can recognise a certain sense of horror for urban plans that are too regular, but also for plans that are too irregular, as well. Following in Sitte's footsteps, many historians of town building appear to have had some vague ideal concept of regular planning adapted to the conditions of the natural topographical situation, which seems to have been connected to the idea of man living in harmony with nature.

Another ideological aspect of the appreciation for the 'medieval picturesque town plan' was that it was often more or less explicitly linked to the idea that the 'medieval town' was formed by some sort of socialist commune of labourers who were united by their freedom. This idea was almost generally adhered to in the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th century. 'Medieval' irregularity and informality were regarded as an expression of democracy, communal culture and the resulting fine taste for art of that period: the 'organicism' of urban form stood for the organic form of society and social cohesion, in contrast to the regular plan form, which could only come about by being enforced by a higher institution with power over society and the landscape. Although this view has been proven

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3 For instance: Viollet-le-Duc 1843-1868, vol.I, p. 325 (see par. 2.1.3); Lavedan 1941, p. 9; Feger 1963, p. 52; Broadbent 1900, p. 21; Parker Pearson & Richards 1994, p. 59.

Ruskin 1849 (see Fontinot 1922, pp. 249-251); Sitte 1965 (orig. 1889). It must be remarked, however, that Sitte was frequently misunderstood by his followers, who often gave much more weight to the importance of irregularity and winding streets for the aesthetically satisfying townscape than Sitte himself did. (Collins 1965, pp. 21-22, 51, 55, 63-64, 71)

5 Sitte 1965, p. 4. (see Collins 1965, pp. 1-22, 24, 48, 76-102) Similar ideas are later to be found with Mumford (1961), Gutkind (1972, pp. 29-34) and, more recently, with the Krier brothers (see Klotz 1984; Broadbent 1900, p. 238) and many others, who were mainly inspired by Sitte, directly or indirectly.


7 For instance, Stößler wrote already in 1890: 'The opinion as though they [the irregularities in medieval town plans] were made out of artistic purposes, has been generally rejected.' (Stößler 1942 (orig. 1890), p. 423) Brinckmann and others from the generation after Sitte often also considered him too romantic in this matter. (Brinckmann 1920, pp. 17, 104-105; Collins 1965, p. 54)

8 Sitte 1965; for information on the enormous influence Sitte had on later developments in town planning as well as in the writing of his history until the present day, see Collins 1965; Zucconi 1992. Some other works on 'medieval town building' influenced by Sitte: Hegemann & Peets 1922; Gantner 1925; Gantner 1928; Adams 1935, p. 79; Horns 1956 (especially pp. 87-108); Rauda, S.D.; Guidoni 1970, esp. pp. 25, 85-102; Guidoni 1992 (II), pp. 179-207, 207-211, 214-215.

Many other authors present the cliché picturesque image of "the medieval city" and its streets as the standard, but do not explicitly mention whether they believe that it was willingly planned as such or not. (for instance: Argan 1969, p. 11; Parker Pearson & Richards 1994, p. 55) According to some, it even had to be the standard, because it reflected the 'collective taste' of the period. (for instance: Morini 1953, pp. 121, 124)

9 Sitte 1965, p. 61. (see also Collins 1965, pp. 6-20 and 23) Some other authors who followed Sitte on this: Lavedan (see Hall 1978, p. 9, n. 39); Meurer S.D., pp. 67-72; Adams 1935, pp. 78-79; Fröhlich 1953, pp. 61-94; Horns 1956, pp. 87-108; Egli 1962, vol.II, passim, esp. pp. 107-111; Mumford 1961, pp. 302-303; Gutkind 1972, pp. 25-34; Zagrodzki 1966, p. 457; Rauda S.D.; Conzen 1968, pp. 119-120) That this tradition is still very much alive is shown by Broadbent (1900, passim) and the many town planners and architects he writes about.

The idea of irregular urban form determined by the landscape as a symbol of man's living in harmony with nature was partly rooted in early 19th-century German romantic Naturphilosophie, which was a reaction to the mechanistic theories of, among others, Newton and which had a great influence, with its propagation of a metaphysical world-view that re-integrated nature and spirit. (Snelders 1994) Darwinist theories of adaptation to circumstances as a condition for survival must also have played a role, connected to the metaphor of the city as "an organism of nature", which grows like a plant. (Carter 1975, p. 7; see par. 1.1.1.1)

10 For instance Eugene Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1870), John Ruskin (1819-1900), Augustus Welby Pugin (1812-1852) and William Morris (1834-1896) were strong supporters of 'gothicism', largely founding their view of 'gothic' architecture on their positive image of 'medieval urban society', which they believed contrasted sharply with the urban society of their own time. (Kruft 1985, p. 380, 383, 386-388; Van Kesteren 2004, p. 332) One can also find similar ideas in more recent literature. (for instance: Egli 1962, vol.II, pp. 11-61. See also: Kostof 1991, p. 64) The old idea of a sort of proto-socialism in the 'medieval town' was often presented as being opposed to the older, hierarchical society of feudalism in the countryside. (see par. 0.4.1.9)

11 Horns 1956, p. 97, for instance, writes that cities like Como and Lucca, which kept too close to the straight-lined plans of their Roman ancestors '..., suffered somewhat from the rigidity of plan to which classical pedantry led. This conflicted with the free, anti-feudalistic spirit of medievalism and, in that sense, was unrepresentative of the age'. Apart from the problem that the supposed 'free, anti-feudalistic spirit of medievalism' is an over-generalised and romantic concept which cannot be taken seriously any more, this formulation contradicts almost everything that I have found in the course of my research. Similar misconceptions can be found in Eisler 1914 (see Taverner 1978, p. 20); Hegemann & Peets 1922, p.231; Guidoni 1970, pp. 85-104.

11 Hiorns (1956, p. 97), for instance, writes that cities like Como and Lucca, which kept too close to the straight-lined plans of their Roman ancestors '...[...], suffered somewhat from the rigidity of plan to which classical pedantry led. This conflicted with the free, anti-feudalistic spirit of medievalism and, in that sense, was unrepresentative of the age'. Apart from the problem that the supposed 'free, anti-feudalistic spirit of medievalism' is an over-generalised and romantic concept which cannot be taken seriously any more, this formulation contradicts almost everything that I have found in the course of my research. Similar misconceptions can be found in Eisler 1914 (see Taverner 1978, p. 20); Hegemann & Peets 1922, p.231; Guidoni 1970, pp. 85-104.
largely wrong by thorough research in more recent times, the basic idea still seems to have survived in
some minds, consciously or not.

That the conception of ‘the medieval town’ as an irrational, irregular organism is certainly not representative
for towns in general in what is called the period of the ‘middle ages’, has been shown in the previous chapters. For
many cases the argumentation can even be turned around. One can clearly recognise a desire to give towns an
orderly appearance and structure in, say, the 12th to 15th centuries. This desire for order and clarity in urban space
may be seen as a reflection of the search for order in the universe and the striving for order in society as well.

11.1.1 Confusing concepts: ‘organic’ and ‘gothic’ town building

Since the end of the 19th century it has become quite customary to use the biological term ‘organic growth’
for towns that have expanded through time in a fashion that is believed to be unplanned or ‘spontaneous’. Consequently, plan forms that look irregular, especially when the lines in the plan are not straight, have been
labelled ‘organic’. This term is not only used because of the way the urban form is believed to have ‘grown’,
but also because irregular and curved lines are associated with vegetable forms. This metaphor is used by
(among others) Karl Gruber, according to whom ‘The medieval city-organism builds itself up like an organism of
nature, like an object that grows in cells, a plant [...]’.

The idea of Sitte and his followers, that ‘the medieval town’ was purposely built irregular and ‘picturesque’,
is just as untrue as it would be to state that cities from other periods like Rome, Rabat or Rio de Janeiro were
built with an irregular ground-plan on purpose. But the belief that the irregular town was not planned at all -
the organic metaphor of the city that grows unguided or spontaneous - is, on the other hand, just as wrong.
Cities, towns and villages are always to a large degree ‘planned’ - although it may not have been a case of
integral or all-over planning. An individual house did not need to be built because the settlement had to
grow; it was built because people wanted to build it. And in building it they had to obey rules, in a juridical as
well as a social sense. For instance, they could not just build anywhere they wanted. The very idea of ‘organic’
urban growth overlooks the fact that land was owned, or that some lord had rights over it. Owners or holders
of rights would mostly not sit passively watching a settlement grow into a town on their land. In this
respect there is no difference between the ‘middle ages’ and the ‘renaissance’, as some scholars claim. And
even when private persons or institutions were allowed to build at a certain place, the new building could not
just be made in any possible form, since there were regulations (whether written down or not) and rules of
decorum that were to be respected.

Man builds the town, and although he may not always do this according to an over-all plan, he builds
consciously. It is, nonetheless, true that town plans are influenced by the form of the pre-urban landscape: the
natural relief and the course of streams have a great influence on the form of town plans. But the landscape is
not just the natural landscape, it is also made by man, who took possession of the land, partitioned property
and rights, made boundaries, built structures, dug canals, built dikes and so on. Towns built in this landscape
must have been influenced by the natural as well as the man-made structure of this landscape in their spatial
form. This goes for towns with irregular plans, but also for towns with regular plans, since their location,
orientation, inclination and probably various other aspects or elements are also determined by the older
topographical situation. In most cases, this is no different at present: when a town is planned and built its
structure will always be determined by the existing landscape, at least up to a certain extent.

13 Although before the 19th century a town was a defined space of relatively great freedom for its citizens, its social structure remained very much hierarchial and it certainly
was no proto-communist egalitarian society - apart from a special case like the Hussite town of Tabó in 15th-century Bohemia. (See Mumford 1961, p.216; Heers 1990,
p.495; pars.0.4.1, p.9, 8;2.3)
14 See pars.6.5, 8.6.
15 The word ‘spontaneous’ has been used by many authors since the late 19th century. (for instance Lavedan & Hugueney 1974, p.1)
17 The term ‘organic’ is, however, rather confusing because the French use it in the opposite sense. Regularly planned urban form they call ‘organique’, whereas irregular
forms are called ‘inorganique’. (see for instance Cursente 1980, p.87; Heers 1990, p.103)
18 ‘Der mittelalterliche Stadtorganismus baut sich auf wie ein Organismus der Natur, wie ein in Zellen wachsendes Gebilde, ein Pflanze [...]’ (Gruber 1952, p.44)
20 For instance: Lefebvre 1991, p.272.
The idea of organic growth is also elementary in Enrico Guidoni’s use of the term ‘città naturale’ for the ‘curvilinear city’ of the 12th-13th centuries, in his 1970 book *Arte e urbanistica in Toscana*, but here it is associated with the flowing forms of ‘gothic’ visual arts. According to Guidoni, the ‘città naturale’ is formed by something that may be regarded ‘[…] as a natural law of development and growth, in a certain sense analogous to that which rules some natural phenomena’. 24 This would apply especially to the curvilinear aspect of the streets of the ‘città naturale’, which are compared to the curvilinear lines of gothic painting and sculpture. 25 The landscape, the relief and pre-existent paths play a role in the layout of the curvilinear streets, and so do concerns of traffic and defence; but what would be most important is ‘the collective emotional sense of urban space’. 26 Guidoni considers the curvilinear lines as wilfully designed, just as in the arts of painting and sculpture, but not rationally so. The curvilinear forms are like the emotions of the artist, who does not just design a personal document, but who follows the spirit of the society he lives in. 27 Taking society as an organism, and the form of the city as illustrative of its structure, the planner would think of the ‘città naturale’ as an organic entity. 28

The chapter with the title ‘La città naturale’ in Guidoni’s book is, revealingly, followed by a chapter titled ‘L’intervento razionale’. For, according to Guidoni, it was in the 13th century that, following the new rational Aristotelian thought of St. Thomas, the intuitive and emotional was won over by the rational. He claims that by that time urban form became theorised and consequently planned on a more grand scale. 29

A similar idea has been expressed by Spiro Kostof: ‘And whereas its neighbour and mighty rival Florence had begun to campaign for streets that were ‘pulchrae, amplaet rectae’-beautiful, wide and straight- in proto-Renaissance solicitude for visual clarity, and also in the hope of re-establishing the orthogonal lines of Roman Florentiae, Siena cherished the aesthetic of gothic curves. […] it aestheticized the flowing curves in an equivalent of tracery or the rhythmic drapery folds of the gothic artist.’ 30 So, the town plan of Siena is compared to the curvilinearity of ‘gothic’ tracery or the folds of sculpted or painted drapery, whereas the straightness of streets is believed to be something typically proto-renaissance. Curvilinearity, organicism and ‘gothic’ are thus contrasted with rectilinearity, rationality and ‘renaissance’. This idea is not the invention of Guidoni or Kostof, but is in fact at least a century old. 31 Joseph Gantner, for instance, used the term ‘Roman tradition’, for town plans with straight lines, while in his opinion ‘gothic town building’ could never be straight-lined or regular, because the ‘gothic town’ was essentially ‘irrational’ and determined by the landscape. 32

Since the 19th century, many scholars have thought that they could discern a typically ‘gothic’ sort of town building. It appears, however, that there were very different ideas about just what the typical aspects of ‘gothic town building’ would be. The problem of different views on ‘gothic town building’ has already been encountered in chapter 2. In reaction to the romantic ideas of (among others) Victor Hugo, who was a great lover of what he thought was ‘medieval Paris’, Félix de Verneilh, one of the first students of the regular bastide plans in southwestern France, wrote in 1847 that the ‘gothic towns par excellence’ are the regularly planned new towns of the 13th century. According to De Verneilh, they have true chequer board plans, and most chequer board plans are in fact ‘medieval’. 33 This new conception of ‘gothic town planning’ of De Verneilh was subsequently accepted by various other scholars in France.

This was, however, quite different in most other countries. 34 In England, for instance, the ‘gothic revivalists’ of the middle of the 19th century, Ruskin, Pugin and Morris - whom Sitte greatly admired - propounded the theory that asymmetry and irregularity were deliberately incorporated into architectural design in the ‘middle ages’ and particularly in ‘gothic’ architecture. The influential town planner Raymond Unwin, for instance, wrote in 1909 that ‘there can be no doubt that irregularity is a most marked characteristic of Gothic times and

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26 Guidoni 1970, pp.85-102. It remains unclear why Guidoni thinks the emotions of the individuals and the collective led to curvilinear forms instead of other possible forms, but similar theories have been propounded by other authors for ‘gothic’ sculpture and painting. The general idea of the forms of art works following feelings that were collectively held in a certain period comes from the idea of a so-called ‘spirito’, which was especially widely accepted in the 19th century. (see below, n.91)
28 Guidoni 1970, pp.86, 95, 104-106. It is certainly true that there was a considerable increase in the regularity of town plans in the 13th century, but it is not correct to regard this as an opposition between the town building of the previous centuries and the 13th century: it is more a matter of gradual development, rather than of revolution. (see par.10.2.2)
29 Kostof 1991, pp.70-71. The same idea is formulated by Guidoni. He writes that the wilful rectifications of Sienese streets, which are known from contemporary communal documents (see par.8.8.2; Braunfels 1953, p.102, n.343), can be disregarded because they concern only minor adjustments. (Guidoni 1970, pp.90, 252)
31 De Verneilh, LV (1847), p.25. See par.2.10.3; Pujol 1990, p.360.
32 One of the few exceptions was the German art historian A.E. Brinckmann, who followed De Verneilh in this, arguing that the bastides have the same clear and regular spatial structure that can also be found in the ‘gothic cathedrals’. (Brinckmann 1920, pp.14-17) Brinckmann used the term ‘romanesque’ for irregular urban structures. (Brinckmann 1920, p.9, and ch.3) Lavedan and Hugueney (1974, p.6) also used this term, but specifically for pre-12th-century towns with more or less round outlines.

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towards' and that the ‘irregular places of the Middle Ages were definitely designed on sound, artistic lines’. 34

There were also other individual opinions of what the typical ‘gothic’ town would look like. According to Werner Müller for instance, the gothic town plan is divided into four quarters by the central crossing of its two main streets. In his opinion, this implicitly followed from the ‘gothic cosmology’ and ‘gothic planning rules’. 35

The examples discussed above clearly demonstrate that there is no agreement between the various scholars on what ‘gothic’ town building is. Therefore it is only sensible that the term should no longer be used by most scholars with regard to urban form. There are, however, still exceptions. Pleßl and Koter and Kulesza, for instance, use the label ‘gothic’ for the regular geometric town plans of the late 12th to 15th centuries. 36 All in all, the ‘gothic’ case clearly illustrates the confusion over the history of town planning and its classifications into style periods.

11.2 The cliché image of ‘renaissance town building’

The cliché image of urban form of the ‘medieval town’ has come about as it is contrasted to urban form in ‘the modern period’. This ‘modern period’ is considered to have begun in Italy in the 15th century with the ‘renaissance’. An example of the influence of this vision on historical writing may be seen in this quote from the well-known art historian Giulio Argan: In the ‘middle ages’ ‘the city appeared as a closely packed aggregation of houses and craftsmen’s shops situated around an area of common interest, where the cathedral and the municipal palace were to be found, and where markets and fairs were held. The streets were usually narrow and crooked, with a concentric or radiocentric pattern.’ But by the end of the 16th century the city had acquired a totally different order and appearance’ according to ‘the humanist concept of the city.’ Argan does not explain what this concept was, but he does describe its supposed consequences for urban form: ‘The great innovation in the process of urban development was that, beginning in the 15th and 16th centuries, structural changes in the city were brought about by the will of the prince and the carefully studied plans of architects.’ 37 From now on, so he writes, new towns were built, existing cities were rationally enlarged and existing structures were regularised. Argan presents this as though it were all very new and typically based on the ‘humanist concept of the city’. However, as has been demonstrated in previous chapters, this is simply not correct. 38

Argan even goes so far as to write that ‘The idea of the value of the city, which began and was affirmed during the Renaissance, explains the ex novo rise of certain urban communities.’ 39 This statement is very problematical, because it suggests rather the opposite of the historical reality, at least as far as is known. As has been described above, hundreds of towns were newly founded and newly built in the high-period of town foundation. Due to deteriorating economic circumstances and such factors as plagues and wars, the founding of new towns became much less frequent after the first half of the 14th century. For Europe in general, it would take about five centuries before a comparable level of activity in new town building was to be seen. So, notwithstanding the new attention paid to town planning in the theoretical writings of the 15th-17th centuries, the actual practice of town planning lagged behind considerably. 40 Apart from that, it must be considered that many a town that was actually newly created in this period, just like many new town extensions, was not planned according to the famous radio-concentric models given in the theoretical treatises (see fig. 8.6), but rather followed the simple grid plan that was also used in the new towns of the preceding centuries. 41 Sometimes, new towns even came to be built following quite irregular patterns. 42 (fig. 11.2)
Such irregularities in town building projects from about the middle of the 15th century on are, however, often described as ‘medieval’ relicts in architectural practice. For instance, Nils Ahlberg wrote about Swedish new towns of the 16th century: ‘The early town plans were irregular, medieval in type, and adapted to the topography of the site’.41 Similarly, Spiro Kostof wrote: ‘Even after the entrenchment of Renaissance design theories, a backward-looking urban aesthetic stayed close to the surface, especially in the colonial experience. The first Spanish towns in the New World […] were not gridded […] The French tolerated cities like Quebec which grew, as John W. Reps put it, ‘like a replica of some medieval city’.42 (see fig.11.2) In this way the ‘middle ages’ are still blamed for any non-rational or non-geometrical planning in later centuries and even on other continents. This example demonstrates clearly how persistent the old ideas of ‘medieval’ and ‘modern town building’ are: Kostof certainly knows of rational and geometrical town planning in the ‘middle ages’, as can be read in his interesting book The City Shaped, but despite that he keeps adhering to the old cliché images.43

The cliché images of ‘medieval’ and ‘renaissance’ town building are so strongly impressed in the minds of many people that they sometimes require the strangest logical twists in order to keep them intact. A good example is the case of the well-known passage in Leon Battista Alberti’s De re aedificatoria (1452) in which the ideal layout of streets in cities and towns is discussed. Alberti wrote, ‘when the road reaches a city, and that city is renowned and powerful, the streets are better straight and very wide, to add to its dignity and majesty. But with a settlement or a fortified town44 […] it is better when the roads are not straight, but meandering gently like a river flowing now here, now there, from one bank to the other. For apart from the fact that the longer the roads seem, the greater the apparent size of the town, no doubt it will be of great benefit in terms of appearance and practical convenience, while catering to the requirements of changing circumstances.45 And it is no trifle that visitors at every step meet yet another facade, or that the entrance

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41 Ahlberg 2005, p.375.
43  Kostof writes, for instance, that the grid layout was sometimes used as an instrument of modernisation, for which he gives a number of examples, beginning with the ancient Romans and continuing with ‘in the Renaissance, princes extended the fabric of their medieval cities with exemplary gridded quarters’. According to Kostof, Ferrara’s extensions of the late 15th-century are an early example of this, as if no regular city-extensions had been built in the centuries before. (Kostof, 1991, p.102) Actually, some of the older extensions, such as the northern extension of Massa Marittima in Tuscany, of 1228, are more regular than those of Ferrara. (See Guidoni 1992 (II), p.80)
44 The first printed Latin text of 1485 reads ‘colonia aut oppidum’ (Alberti 1966, vol.1, p.397), which is probably more accurately translated as ‘colony or fortified settlement’.
to and view from every house should face directly onto the street’. This passage has been commented on many times in writings about the history of town building. Scholars have always found it strange that Alberti advocated winding streets for towns, because winding streets are regarded as typically ‘medieval’ (as opposed to ‘renaissance-like’) and Alberti is generally considered to be one of the very first ‘renaissance men’. According to the cliché-images, Alberti should only have advocated the straight street. Alberti’s vision was explained, however, by postulating that he was striving for renewal, but couldn’t help being influenced by the art of his time, which was still largely ‘medieval’. The same goes for Alberti’s recommendation for a labyrinthine street-system of narrow, short, curved and dead-end streets, which follows the passage on the winding street: this too has been interpreted as a ‘medieval relic’ in Alberti’s theory on town building, which is otherwise considered as being typical for a ‘renaissance’ work.

This explanation is, however, wrong. Of course Alberti was inspired by what he could see around him in his time; but advocating the winding street for reasons of decorum, aesthetics and spatial sensitivity was actually something very new, and possibly may have even been his own invention. Many new towns and

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48 When these passages are considered in the literature it is mostly in this way (see the previous note), but many (probably most) scholars who have treated Alberti in an art historical context seem to rather have disregarded these problematical passages in the De Re Aedificatoria, so that their vision of Alberti as a revolutionary renaissance theorist would not be disturbed or get too complicated. (cf. Germane 1976, pp.13-14)
49 With regard to the relevant passages, Alberti may have been inspired by Aristotle’s Politics, however. Aristotle advises the combining of straight streets and winding streets
town extensions were laid out with straight streets in the centuries before Alberti. In the 13th and 14th centuries, existing urban streets were sometimes even widened, straightened and regularised. So, it is clearly wrong to conceive of the 'medieval street' as being essentially un-straight. Crooked and winding streets certainly existed, but there is no proof at all that these streets were intentionally planned as such. Hence, one should consider Alberti's plea in favour of the winding street as something new, and his recommendation of straight streets for cities must be regarded as a traditional element, i.e., the precise opposite to what most scholars have argued up to now.

The same misunderstandings based on the cliché-images of 'medieval' and 'renaissance' town building can be recognised, but then the other way around, when scholars label regularity and ratio in pre-15th-century town building as 'a sign of the coming renaissance'. For instance, the terre nuove fiorentine (see ch.3) are mostly regarded as not really being a product of their own time. In the literature, the design of the regular orthogonal plans of these towns is often described as being either based on examples of the Roman past, or as proto-types of the coming 'renaissance'. Many scholars have opted for the latter option: the spatial layout and the basic idea of satellite-towns of the city of Florence were considered to be essentially foreshadowing the 'artistic revolution' that was to come later on. Of course, this also has to do with the fact that this 'renaissance' is generally considered to have begun in Florence, albeit about a century later.

This 'proto renaissance' idea is, however, nonsensical and quite useless for the study of history. The regular orthogonal planning of newly founded towns was not just a phenomenon typical of the Florentine sphere of influence, but could be found almost anywhere in Europe, although generally not in as regular a form as we see in the terre nuove. Moreover, more or less similar new towns and even cities were also created outside Europe, especially in Asia. (see fig.8.10)

Similarly, scholars have tried to connect the regularity in many other town building projects of the 12th to 15th centuries (as well as in town building of that period in general) with 'renaissance theory', thus expanding the idea of a ‘proto-renaissance’. This idea is, of course, a teleological construction a posteriori, which cannot possibly be a reflection of contemporary thought, essentially denying to the 'middle ages' any sense of order and regularity, rationality or even the ability to plan. Therefore, the concept of ‘proto-renaissance’ or of historical events or artefacts foreshadowing the ‘renaissance’ is of no use for arriving at a better understanding of history. Actually, it only blurs our view of historical development.

Another aspect that should be considered in this context, is that ‘the closely packed aggregation of houses and craftsmen’s shops’ which Argan, following the picturesque cliché, describes as typical for ‘the medieval town’, often has largely come about only in later centuries. The ‘close packing’ and the congestion often occurred from the 16th to 19th centuries. The vast and expensive fortifications, which were built in this period, often acted as a strait-jacket within which the cities and towns became more and more densely populated and built over. This led to high land values, speculation, high rents, overcrowding, slum-housing and bad hygienic conditions. While standards of living-space and hygiene often had been relatively high in the previous centuries, they could often no longer be maintained by this time.
11.3 An alternative vision of the historical development of town building

As described in the Introduction, the number of new town foundations decreased strongly after the middle of the 14th century and, as Leonardo Benevolo put it, ‘The mysterious art of designing a town, unlike that of designing a building, was forgotten before it could be theorised in drawings and in books.’ What did come to be theorised in ‘renaissance’ writing was, on the one hand, the utopian community, mostly in the form of a city, in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle, and, on the other hand, the physical city, with particular attention paid to new fortification techniques. The early treatises by Alberti (De re aedificatoria, 1452) and Filarete (Trattato di architettura, 1460-64) combined these two genres up to a certain extent, but later the genres became clearly separated. Treatises like those by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, Leonardo da Vinci, Pietro Cattaneo and Vincenzo Scamozzi have strongly contributed to the formation of the cliché of the ‘renaissance city’ as a regularly laid out structure with a polygonal outline and a radial pattern of straight streets. But it should be considered that there are also less famous treatises, like those by Albrecht Dürer (1527) or Simon Stevin (1548-1620), that contain model town plans that are much more pragmatic and stand much closer to the regularly laid out new towns of the 13th to 15th centuries. Especially the Dutch theorist Stevin may have had a considerable influence on actual town building practice in northern Europe in the 17th century, possibly more so than the Italian authors who have become so famous in art history.

As mentioned above, few new towns were actually built following the radio-concentric plans that dominate the cliché image of the ‘renaissance’ or, for that matter, the ‘baroque’ town. Most of the new towns that were built from the mid-15th century onwards, actually had an urban form that is closer to the new towns of the previous centuries than to the famous illustrations to be found in the theoretical treatises. The new theories put forward in the treatises did influence the new layout or restructuring of urban units within existing cities, such as the cathedral piazza in Pienza, the Strada Nuova in Genova, the Campidoglio in Rome or the Place des Vosges (formerly Place Royale) in Paris, but the main influence they actually had on practice concerned the construction of fortifications of a completely different type than those built in the previous centuries. On other points, the actual Western town-building-practice from the 15th to 17th century is often not in agreement with the most famous examples found in the contemporary theoretical treatises.

Alberti’s treatise De Re Aedificatoria from 1452 is the first source that explicitly speaks of the architectural principles of its time. Indeed, it is the first known treatise on the subject since Vitruvius’ De Architectura libri X (its main model), which is systematic in the treatment of different elements of architecture, including town planning. This is, in fact, the main reason why Alberti came to be regarded as the herald of the ‘renaissance’. However, it should not be forgotten that Alberti’s ambitions with this work, as with his other writings, were mainly literary. The subject matter was very theoretical and not very practical, and the style (in Latin) was very sophisticated. So for actual architectural practice the book would not have been very

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58 See pars.0.1.5 and 10.3.
59 Benevolo, 1980, p.478. Significantly, this is in almost complete opposition to the old idea of (among others) Gaetano, who, some decades earlier, was still completely fixed on the ‘picturesque’ in ‘the medieval town’ and therefore had a different point of view: ‘...the coming of the Renaissance, the irrational in town-building died under the new theorization.’ (Gaetano 1968, p.95)
60 Rahmsdorf 1999, pp.48-50.
64 See above, n.39 and par.10.3.
65 Gutkind (1972, pp.26-34) for instance, writing on town building in East and Central Europe, puts it as follows. From the second half of the 16th century, the planning of new towns, relatively many of which were built in eastern Europe, was increasingly coming under the influence of Italian ‘theoretical designs’. This was partly caused by the migration of Italian craftsmen and engineers to the north. ‘However, the number of new cities actually modeled on theoretical schemes was relatively small. It may be more appropriate to speak of the introduction of Renaissance features into traditional medieval layouts.’
66 Benevolo 1993, pp.578-581, 615-617, 645, 703-705; Morris 1972, pp.125-131, 138-143; Gutkind 1970 (vol.V), pp.262-274. Pienza has often been described as ‘a typical renaissance new town’ built by ‘the humanist pope’ Pius II. (for instance: Mack 1987; Chant & Goodman 1999, p.173) In reality, however, only part of the town, most notably the piazza on which the cathedral stands, was redesigned, more or less according to the new architectural forms that were current at the time, by the Florentine architect Bernardo Rossellino, in 1459-64.
68 It is also often regarded as a typical ‘renaissance’ aspect that Alberti was strongly inspired by Vitruvius. This was, however, not so new as is often thought, since Vitruvius’ manuscripts were already held in high esteem in the previous centuries and were often copied. (Kunsch 1967) In fact, the idea of the ‘renaissance’ as opposed to the ‘middle ages’ was partly inspired by the belief that Vitruvius’ treatise was only rediscovered in 1416 by the humanist Poggio Bracciolini (who, by the way, was born in the Florentine new town of Territoria). In fact, he did not really rediscover the treatise, but his contribution is that he drew the attention of the Florentine humanists to the various Vitruvius manuscripts that were held in different libraries. (Kunsch 1967, p.39)
helpful. To understand this, it should be considered that Alberti belonged to the circle of humanists, mainly based in Florence in the 15th century, whose main interest was in ancient literature and, particularly, in the classical Latin language. This has often been the case throughout history: many a time theoretical works are not written in order to contribute to actual practice, and therefore practice often does not follow written theory.

Nevertheless, the theoretical treatises on town building are mostly taken as the main source of information on the subject in general. Historians of town building often seem to have attached more importance to the written sources than to the actual towns that were created. I believe that this has led to the problem we are dealing with here: the theoretical treatises containing town planning theory of the 15th to 17th centuries have led to the idea that rational reflection on town building was both innovative and typical for that time; while vague notions, romantic misconceptions and the absence of written sources on contemporary town building principles in the previous centuries have led to the idea that town building had been irregular, irrational or even unguided in that period, notwithstanding all evidence to be seen to the contrary in the actual towns themselves.

In my opinion, the concept of a true ‘renaissance’ in town building is only based on the fact that scholars began to write theoretical treatises on architecture (and particularly town building and fortification) in the 15th and 16th centuries. The emergence of these treatises does not mean, however, that there had not been a rational practice of town building in the centuries before or, for that matter, in other parts of the world where there was no ‘renaissance’. And the absence of clear written sources for town building theory in the previous period, apart from Eiximenis’ ideal city, certainly does not mean that the rational town building practice in that time was a mere ‘proto-renaissance’, as it has often been typified.

When the actual practice and the actual landscape of towns that Europe has become are considered, it is rather senseless to make a sharp distinction between ‘medieval’ and ‘renaissance’ town building. In reality, there was a continuous development rather than a revolution.

Regarding the material itself, there is, however, one important aspect of discontinuity in the history of town building in Europe. This break, however, does not mark a difference in ‘style’, but only in quantity. Looking at the sheer numbers of newly built towns, it is plain to see how the founding of new towns halted in most regions of Europe by the middle of the 14th century, when economic depression and great disasters like the Black Death combined to cause a drastic decrease in population and wealth, the effects of which would last for several centuries. Eventually, the number of new towns created in the 13th and first half of the 14th centuries would only be equalled in the 19th and 20th centuries. Looking at the actual material, this discontinuity in quantity is infinitely more relevant than the supposed differences of ‘style’, the fixation on which is mainly the product of what we might call ‘art historical tunnel vision’.

11.4 The problem of periodisation into style periods

The cliché concepts of ‘medieval town building’ and ‘renaissance town building’ are problematic because they are, basically, constructs of a hundred years or more ago, and were largely founded on ideologies of their time rather than on thorough historical research. The vision of history as a sequence of different periods with their own particular character or style, such as ‘medieval’, ‘gothic’ and ‘renaissance’, tends to force our perception of historical events and developments into a pre-determined form. This can lead to prejudices, like the one expressed by the Dutch scholar Arthur Steegh: ‘With many medieval settlements that could be seen as expressions of planning, I get the feeling that we should see the regular form, in case of absence of written sources that prove planning, as efficiency [rather than planning]. This might be an expression of rationality, a label which we are supposed to put on our settlement-types only after the breakthrough of the Renaissance.’ Steegh then goes on to claim that the rectangular outlines and orthogonal grids laid out in the ‘middle ages’ are inherent to human...
settlement, as opposed to being wilfully planned, and concludes that ‘Planning in advance seems […] mainly to
be an idea applicable to our post-Renaissance […] way of thinking. For the Middle Ages we should […] try to place ourselves
in the medieval world of thought. From there we should reconsider if ‘planning in advance’ could possibly have a place in it.’
Obviously, the old clichés of ‘middle ages’ and ‘renaissance’ make it very difficult to look at the evidence
without prejudice.\textsuperscript{77}

In reality, however, there is not such a sharp distinction between ‘medieval’ and ‘renaissance’ (or
‘modern’) town building practice: it was rather the new theoretical treatises and the new techniques in
military fortification that made up the main difference.\textsuperscript{78} The problem here is that the history of the planning
and building of towns has been incorporated unreflectively into the study of general history, and especially
that of art, architecture and the philological study of art theory. In this way, a periodisation has been forced
on the history of town planning, although the periods barely fit its actual development. So, the description of
the actual developments had to be forced into the strait-jacket of the presupposed periods, by which they
have lost their original shape. The periods have been presented as being contrasting and progressing
towards the goal of our present situation (as we like to see it). Thus, it had to be invented (or rather was it
just taken for granted) that ‘medieval town building’ was irrational, unguided or even accidental, while town
building since ‘the age of humanism’ was in fact town planning: rational and well-founded in a philosophical
and aesthetic sense.\textsuperscript{79}

\section*{11.4.1 The concept of ‘the renaissance’ as a period}

In the traditional writing of Western history, there have been many ‘renaissances’. Most important amongst
these is the ‘Italian renaissance’, which was centred in Florence and, secondarily, in North and Central Italy
in the 15th and 16th centuries, and which is regarded to have touched just about every aspect of human exist-
ence. But adapted from the Italian ‘model’, other ‘renaissances’ have been recognised by scholars. To name
just a few, we have a Constantinian renaissance, a Byzantine, a Carolingian, an Ottonian renaissance, a
Florentine proto-renaissance, a renaissance of the 12th century, various regional renaissances like the Irish,
the French and the northern European, but also wider concepts like the Christian renaissance or the scien-
tific renaissance, or, on the other hand, personally inspired revivals like the Arnolfian renaissance, etcetera.
At first sight, it seems as though ‘renaissance’ is just a general historiographic term, rather like the word
‘revolution’. But when the use of the term is regarded more closely, it becomes clear that it just about always
refers back to the ‘main event’, the Italian renaissance: the concepts of the renaissances just listed are mostly
related in some way or another to ‘the renaissance’.\textsuperscript{80}

The Italian renaissance, however, is a concept, or rather a collection of concepts, that has come into
being in the course of time and which is rather complicated. When the term ‘Italian renaissance’, or just
‘renaissance’, is used, it mostly is not explicated exactly what it stands for: the configuration of ideas is often
implicitly assumed to be generally known.

The basic point in the concept of the ‘Italian renaissance’ is that there was a feeling among Italian artists,
patrons and authors in the 15th and 16th century that the arts were ‘restored’ in their home city or region, after
having been in a bad state for several centuries. The metaphor of rebirth in the arts was introduced in the
1550’s by the biographer of mainly Florentine artists, Giorgio Vasari, who came up with the term rinascità for
the new return of a particular élan in the arts, after a period in which they were dominated by foreign trends

\textsuperscript{77} ‘Bij veel van de middeleeuwse nederzettingen die als uitingen van planning beschouwd zouden kunnen worden, bekruipt mij steeds het gevoel dat we de regelmatige vorm, bij absente van schriftelijk bewijs voor planning, eerder kunnen zien als een uiting van doelmatigheid. Dit is wellicht een uiting van rationaliteit, een etiket dat we gewoon worden pas na het doorbreken van de Renaissance op onze nederzettingssystemen te kunnen plakken.’ Planning vooraf lijkt […] vooral een idee te zijn dat van toepassing is op on wisselvalligheidshistorisch […] denken. Voor de Mid-
deeuwse zouden we ons […] moeten proberen te verplaatsen in de middeleeuwse denkwijze. Van daaruit moet bezien worden of een begrip als ‘planning vooraf’ er überhaupt een plaats
in kan hebben.’ (Steegh 1988, pp.140-141)
Similar examples of how the idea of history as a sequence of style periods shapes the interpretation of historical matter, in this case architecture, can be found with,
among others, Bucher (1972, p.44) and Müller who has problems understanding the highly regular forms of Viking forts (see fig.8.4) because, in his opinion, ‘[…] die Vi-
tner Mannigfaltigkeit, Unregelmäßigkeit und Buntscheckigkeit das Mittelalter ken-
nenziehen und keineswegs die mathematische Regel.’ Müller 1961, p.199)

\textsuperscript{78} Also arguing against the traditionally described opposition of ‘medieval’ and ‘renaissance’ town building: Braunfels 1953, pp.130, 246-7; Franchetti-Pardo 1982, p.79;
Heers 1999, p.420; Trachtenberg 1997, pp.9-11; Faouquet 1999, p.7-

\textsuperscript{79} For instance: Argan 1966, p.15; Rahmendorf 1999, passim.
This idea of the great revolution of humanism can also be found in the still popular vision of architectural planning in general, as brought forth most of all by Rudolf
Wittkower in his Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism. (1949). He contrasted ‘medieval’ and ‘renaissance design’, as the former’s being based on irrational,
geometrical proportions, against the latter’s rational, arithmetic (musical) proportions. At present, however, this vision of contrasting periods in design methods seems no
longer valid, or at least highly exaggerated. (see par.6.5; Mitrowić 2001)

\textsuperscript{80} Van Domp 1983, p.1.
that Vasari despised.81 This period, lying between the period of classical civilisation and the ‘modern’ period, was later identified as ‘the middle ages’, a term first used by Cellarius in the 17th century.82 Since then, the ‘renaissance’ has come to be seen as a period in history, generally characterised by the conscious effort to revive (elements of) the classical culture of the Greek and Roman civilisations, which is contrasted with the previous period of the ‘middle ages’.83 With that, the periods of the ‘middle ages’ and the ‘renaissance’, (or, for that matter, ‘modernity’) have come to be regarded as historical truths.84

Originally the idea of the ‘renaissance’ was limited to the history of art. But gradually, the concept of the ‘renaissance-period’, has come to embrace many more elements of other disciplines in historiography: historians have made the whole history of European culture fit within the widened concept. Sometimes, these historians have had to distort either their subject or the general concept in order to make things fit. Rather than challenging the concept, adaptation was sought in order to keep things clear and not too complicated, and to make their point acceptable. Thus, historical material was interpreted in the light of the concept, rather than being approached with a more open mind.85 As I have tried to show, the historians of town building have, for the most part, also sought to confirm the traditional concepts of the different periods, because they started out, often unconsciously, with the idea of distinct periods, and therefore tended to disregard or distort elements that do not fit in to that idea, rather than to question the basic premises of it.

The supposed sudden rebirth of rational town planning is a fiction that is part of the general concept of the ‘renaissance’. Instead of this sudden rebirth, there actually was a long development, sometimes rapid and sometimes slow, with setbacks and dead ends along the way. This is no different with the other aspects that are traditionally ascribed to ‘the new civilisation of the renaissance’: there was no sudden rebirth of individuality, rationality, science or art, nor even of the fascination for ancient civilisation. It was all a question of gradual development. And although the cultural life in Florence in the 15th and 16th century certainly played a very important role in this development, modernity was not invented there and then, as many tend to believe or implicitly assume.

In reaction to the cliché image of ‘renaissance’ town building, Mumford wrote that the ‘renaissance’, especially when it comes to town building in practice, is more of a period of transition between the ‘middle ages’ and ‘baroque’ planning, than a period in its own right. In his opinion the real renaissance was rather in the 12th century.86 I believe that this is partly right, but it does not solve the problem, because the problem is, in my opinion, the very periodisation into style periods itself.

11.5 Conclusion

In their need for order and clarity, people have constructed a vision of history in which the ‘middle ages’ are magical, superstitious and irrational (or even barbaric, dark and chaotic), up until the revolution of the ‘renaissance’ brought rationality, order and human self-awareness.87 This is more or less what Jacob Burckhardt wrote in 1860, and in fact this is what many teenagers are still being taught in school.88 And

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82 Van Dorp 1983, pp.2-5. Since its publication, Burckhardt’s concept of the ‘renaissance’ has received severe criticism on just about every possible point but, despite that, the idea is still almost generally accepted.
83 Van Dorp 1983, pp.5-9; Miedema 1989, p.185.
84 It appears that the concepts of separate periods of different character and ‘the renaissance’ as a period of great change are attractive to many people because they find it pleasant to think that ‘the renaissance’ ended the ‘barbarous middle ages’ and returned to all people of the Western world the light of ancient civilisation and faith in man rather than in higher powers and rationalism instead of tradition and superstition. ‘The renaissance’ is regarded as separating ‘the modern world’ from the uncivilised past.
85 Of course one should be aware of the fact that this can only be relative: history cannot speak for itself and no man has an entirely ‘open mind’.
87 It must be acknowledged, however, that there have also been alternative trends in Western thought since the 19th century in which the ‘middle ages’ have been regarded positively because they are identified with (supposed) proto-communism, naturalness, mysticism, magic and, of course, the picturesque town. An ideal, containing many of the aspects that people miss so much in modern society, is projected onto the past; back then, when everything was simple and in harmony, and nature was still pure and unpoluted (the nostalgic parasitical component), when there were still mysteries, adventure and heroism (the component of historical exoticism). The basic belief is that the world was not yet ruled by cold, mechanistic rationality: the people were happily united in their religion and culture, and intuitively acted accordingly, thus creating harmonic and unaffected beauty.
88 On Burckhardt, see above, n.83.
actually, the generally accepted terms for the periods literally imply this: the ‘middle ages’ is a period ‘in between’, not worth much in itself, but rather a gap, a relapse in history that caused a delay in the progression towards our present situation. The glorious term ‘renaissance’ then, implicitly means that in this period the basic values that are estimated highly in the modern world were re-introduced.

This vision of history is, however, largely wrong: in reality there has been an ongoing process of structuring and ordering in culture since, say, the 7th to 10th century, up to this very moment. This process has brought us, among many other things, writing, canonised language, money, law, bureaucracy, nation-states, democracy, mathematics, science, standard measures of time, weight, distance, etc., and the ordering of urban space. All these things have gone on in the ‘middle ages’ as well as in ‘modern’ times, and all have undergone more or less radical changes and had interruptions along their path. But it is of no concern to give all, or so much, of the credit for progress to a short period or movement (active in a very limited region) which has been baptised the ‘renaissance’, and to deny it to the preceding centuries. In a certain sense, the vision of the ‘middle ages’ is comparable to the old denigrating view of non-western cultures: they too did not develop into a ‘modern’ civilisation. But in these cultures urban form could also be regular and intentionally planned, so that is not comparable to the old denigrating view of non-western cultures: they too did not develop into a ‘modern’ civilisation. In a certain sense, the vision of the ‘middle ages’ is comparable to the old denigrating view of non-western cultures: they too did not develop into a ‘modern’ civilisation. In fact, urban planning stood on a much higher level in many regions of Asia than in the West until about the 18th century. (see fig.8.10)

Above I have limited the problem to the (style-)periods of ‘middle ages’, ‘gothic’ and ‘renaissance’. But the same actually also goes for other terms, like ‘mannerist’, ‘baroque’ or ‘modern’, whether specifically in the context of town building or not. Many scholars use the terms, but do not make clear what they precisely mean by them and, if they do, it often means that most of the actual town-building practice from the periods they have in mind would not be covered by the term they choose to use. The terms for the different periods have become ‘contaminated’ with connotational meanings. Meanings which are often not explicitly expressed, and which are therefore very subjective. Thus, people in general and historians of town building as well, may understand very different things by the terms ‘romanesque’, ‘gothic’, ‘mannerism’, ‘postmodernism’, etcetera.

My argument is that there are great misconceptions with regard to the development of town building through history, which are caused by a fixation on the clichés inherent in the canonical historical periods. I believe that our view of real developments is actually blurred by the careless use of period-classification. Instead of being the classifying system that originally was meant as a tool, a model, for the study of (art-) history, the classification into historical periods has increasingly come to be seen as a historical reality.

Basically there are four different objections to the use of the canonical style-periods, in the history of town building as well as in history in general. The first problem is that in between the different supposed periods ruptures in time tend to get emphasised at the expense of continuities, and differences are emphasised at the expense of agreements. Secondly: people tend to give more attention to the features that are believed to be typical for a certain period, rather than to look at the whole or to a-typical features. Within periods unity of style is presupposed and demanded. This often brings with it the idea of a Zeitgeist, which is a concept created to justify the casting out from the human mind of anything divergent, obscuring rather than clarifying historical developments. Thirdly: the classification into the canonical (style-)periods is based on our values and our way of looking at history and its relics; it has rarely anything to do with the way people in the past thought about their own time or their own works of art. The fourth objection, finally, is that the terms for the different periods are contaminated with so many conscious and unconscious connotations that they are far from objective. In fact, most of the terms, such as ‘romanesque’, ‘gothic’, ‘mannerism’, ‘baroque’ and ‘rococo’, started out as mockeryes of styles that were found distasteful, wherefore they have never been really neutral terms.
Despite those problematical aspects, periodisation has become such an important handle for scholars as well as for the general public that it is often not recognised that the canonical periods are later inventions and represent no historical truth. In my opinion, the fixation on style-periods is responsible for worsening the general understanding of historical developments. For as far as I know, non-art-historical periodisations, for instance in geologic eras, evolutionary phases of man and his ancestors, of the main material man used for his tools, political systems or rulers, or even style-periods of pottery, have not caused so much damage to the conceptions people have of the history of culture. The terms for the styles and style-periods of art-historical origin apparently were such attractive concepts that they have found their way into general history, and there too they have led to a lot of undesired connotations and confusion. 93

Therefore, we should try not only to let go of the traditional art historical style-periods; we ought to try to use a more neutral temporal terminology, and try not to immediately classify history into periods or styles. We should keep an open mind, and we must try to use the historical matter, event or thought under consideration itself to teach us about history, instead of forcing it into our view of history before it can tell us its story.

It certainly is possible to classify historical matter, thought and behaviour into certain ‘modes’, or ‘styles’, but we must be very careful in formulating the discriminating elements, and we must try to constantly be aware of their relative importance within the larger complexes. Sometimes, we can also identify a specific period of time in which a specific mode was current. With this, however, we ought to be very much conscious of the fact that temporal continuity (rather than ‘historical development’ or ‘progress’) is not a sequence of such periods. Different modes or styles may exist side by side, or may shade off into one another without clear limits.

This is clearly also the case for the subject of town building in the period of about the 12th to 16th centuries. If this would be accepted, it would probably be much less difficult for many people to apprehend the significance of new town creation in the 13th and 14th centuries, which has played such an important role in the formation of the present pattern of settlement in Europe.

93 For instance in the history of literature. See Möbius 1984, pp.17-18.