

# The Beauty of A Place: The First and Main Factor In the Origin of Cities

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## Abstract

Aesthetics is the most important basis for choosing a place for a city, often more important than economic, defense or state considerations. The preservation and enhancement of the beauty of the place is the main concern of the residents of the city, as the historical experience of Europe, Russia and America shows.

**Keywords:** City; Genesis; Beauty of the place; Sleeping shop

## What I Have Been Taught

I was very lucky. My teachers of urban geography either at university or at work, or at the conferences and other public events, in passing, were including geographers, architects, economists, and historians. For a long time they have been trying to convince me that almost all cities originated as transport and industry hubs while only very few of them developed in exotic ways: as resorts, fortresses, agro-industrial and trading centers, places of worship and religious sites (the functional-genetic typology of cities).



Figure 1: “Sleeper” workshop at the Magnitogorsk iron and steel works.

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In G.M. Lappo’s book “The Cities of Russia”, the well-loved and deeply respected author states as follows: “The city of Naberezhnye Chelny produces large-load automobiles”. Soviet enthusiasm was gradually followed by post-Soviet dismay, but the ontology of the city was left almost unchanged [1-10].

Table 1: Development of Medieval cities.

Tribal settlements turned into Roman cities	Cities developed at the sites of Roman military camps	Cities near fortresses (the largest group)
Metz-civ Mediomatricum	Köln-civ Agrippinensium	Zülnich-Tolbicum
Trier-civ Trevirorum	Strasbourg-civ Argentoratensis	Bitsburg-Beda
Tongres-civ Tongromm	Xanten-col Trayana	Nijmegen-Noviomagum
Speyer-civ Vangionum	Basel-civ Basilia Ranracorum	Kreuznach-Crikiniacum
Worms-civ Nemetum	Mainz-civ Moguntiamm	Bonn-Bonna
Augsburg-col Augusta Vindelicorum		Regensburg-Castra Regina
Chur-col Curia		Passau-Castra Batava
Bregenz -col Bregantia		Zürich-Turicum
Kempton-col Campodunum		Koblentz-Coniluentes
Salzburg-col Janvavum		

Cities as “sleeper” workshops of large manufacturers – this was the reality I was surrounded by and convinced that it could not and should not have been otherwise (Figure 1).

All cities including Moscow and Leningrad have functioned as “sleeper” workshops in some sense.

What they teach now I have no idea and no interest in: it could be that all cities have been founded by holy men or martyrs at the sites of miracle manifestations, for example “The appearance of the GOELRO plan to Saint Gleb in the city of Kolpashyovo”. Long before the Perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union I have become unmotivatedly interested in the history of trade and European cities, which emerged, according to pre-revolutionary scholars, on a wide array of occasions and reasons. Here are a number of examples of different ways the Medieval cities developed through the system of Roman settlements [11,12] (Table 1).

Cities emerged at trade sites and near monasteries, along the transportation routes, mainly river and sea waterways, and also by the virtue of fairs. However, this broad variety somehow did not satisfy me: true cities, for most part, have turned to be inextirpable regardless of their size, in contrast to the cities of the Russian North (Figure 2).

Braudel wrote: “The Medieval cities revived the freedom that the mankind had almost lost” [13-16].



*Figure 2: There are dozens of cities like this. And they keep on building them.*

During the Great Migration of Peoples, the Roman cities with all their infrastructure had been destroyed and from 5th century onwards lay buried and forgotten for hundreds of years. To be a Christian during those first centuries of Christianity were to be a peasant, a cretin, a “true Christian”, because Christ and his disciples hated cities. Early Christians left cities, abandoning them to be robbed by barbarians and vandals, while carrying with them an idea that a city has an unfavorable and negative value. Instead of civitas there appeared pagus, the civilization was desolated and the “dark ages” followed – spaceless and timeless (nowhere and forever) instead of previous place, situation and “here and now” of the ancient city. History is merciful, nevertheless, and cities have not died. According to the decisions of the Councils of Laodicea and Sardinia acknowledged by Charlemagne, the bishops’ residencies were to be located only in

cities, which of course did not fully recover them, yet did not let life fade away from them forever. Unfortunately, Orthodox hierarchs were the first to leave their cities and cathedras: in the 13th century at the approach of Batu, the Kievan patriarch fled for Vladimir and then for Moscow, not returning from there up to this day. Half a thousand years later, a new type of city emerged, medieval in the narrow sense, different from the Greco-Roman city, although often built on the same place from what had been left from the old city, and inheriting certain toponymical leftovers. Bishops preserved cities as sites while merchants developed them [14-16]. Not without a reason the words “burger” (“bourgeois”) and “merchant” have been synonyms for a long time. Elected in the parliament of the Hanseatic League were 99 merchants and only one craftsman. The structure of a medieval city, compared to the classical form, was plainer and simultaneously more political: there were three main focuses of governance in the city – the judicial district, the Temple (“saved place”) and the marketplace. “Die Stadtluft macht frei” – in the legal, spiritual, economic and material senses, as well as in terms of understanding freedom. It was sufficient to live in a city for a year and one day for a person to be vested with freedom from feudal lord, debts and even crimes. Freedom cost European cities a high price: “The bounds of slavery depend on the will and courage of those who suffer it”. The idea of freedom is a great idea but it accounts for cities’ survival, not their genesis. And this pushed my quest forward [17].

### What I Have Seen

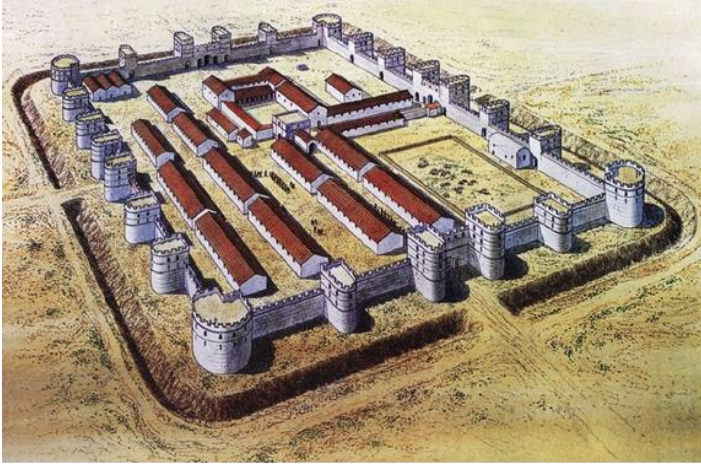
From the top of the Masada fortress, at the shore of the Dead Sea in Israel, one can clearly see (in the low left corner) a camp of the Roman legion (Figure 3):



*Figure 3: The view from the Masada fortress.*

One can see similar structures along the north border of the Roman Empire: they are connected by straightforward, almost soulless, limes or border roads. This is also typical for ancient Aosta (Northern Italy), American Fort Ort and Russian Fort Ross in California. These Roman “cities” and roads between them are

outright and totally uninspiring: the roads between true cities should be winding and twisted with spectacular views opening at every turn as described (Figure 4).



*Figure 4: The reconstruction of a Roman military settlement.*

“Les Chouans” by H. de Balsac who was, as it strikes me, the conceptual and aesthetic inspirer of Paul Vidal de la Blanche. In the Roman tradition before 4–5th centuries a.d., a municipium was a reinforced castle (“castel”, “castro”, anglicized “chester”) with municipes – the guards who defended the castle ready for hand-to-hand fight (“muni” conjugates similar to “mani” – hand), headed by a consul (count, liege lord) and a proconsul (viscount), accompanied by curiales (escort), lodged at curia (yard), which also includes senatores (noblemen and other free people), a praetor (prévôt, spiritual father) and quaestores (liege lord’s officers). This whole infrastructure comprised a consularis – a county, i.e. a territorial unit that ensured the corporeal independence and resilience of a town and its liege lord. These war settlements, stigmas on the face of the Earth, were never to become true cities. Along many of the Alpine roads one can see lonely rocks-castles-fortresses. On the slopesides of the valleys, high over the villages, vineyards, gardens and fields, one can see castles rising. These were not built for defense. The highborn lords of the castles were typical racketeers. The castles were disposed within a 10-kilometer distance in sight of each other. Imagine a merchant’s or ambassador’s caravan moving at the bottom of the valley. Spotting the cavalcade from distance, a bandit baron with his chivalrous gang descends to the road and gently offers his escort service: “The places are not safe here, some robbers are messing around”. If travelers agree, they have to pay a hefty sum of money by Geleitrecht (“the Escort right”) [18–20]. And this happens all along the way. If the merchant stubbornly refuses, a signal is sent from one castle to the other, and the merchant will be robbed at the next standing. Although the robberies were usually peaceful: bandits fell back before strong guards. Higher above the castles one can see recluses,

chapels, monasteries. Such height is not because of their arrogance but due to their spiritual seeking of God, and to be further from us, sinners. One should say that the medieval world is all about barriers, borders and traps: there were 60 pikes and customs on the rivers Rhône and Saone, 70 on the Garonne, and 64 on the Rhein. There were taxes on everything: bridges, gates, wheels, dust (from herds or horsemen) and many others. There was a right of shipwreck, a ground right, a staple right, a guest right, a right of the forbidden mile – merchants and traders were basically fleeced of all their money. These castles and monasteries were not to become cities – they were born not by beauty but by something else. It was in Italy, in a nameless passer-by city where I was sitting with a glass of cold and slightly wintery white wine, looking at crimson vineyards (contemplating beauty requires deep and intent idleness) when I realized a simple and obvious truth: cities originate from the beauty of the place. A person, when seeing beauty and being unable to force one’s gaze away from it, an immensely enticing and magnificent view, says to oneself: “I will live here, this is my place on earth”. Either alone or with his family and kin, he settles here, and only afterwards he thinks of a trade that will feed and sustain him, he seeks and finds rational grounds: economy, transportation, commerce, defense, and, mainly, he is anxious not to disturb the beauty of the place, but to augment it by his presence, his life, activities, and architecture (Figure 5,6) [21–23].



*Figure 5: Soave, a place where they produce most exquisite wines that complement the town and surrounding vineyards.*



*Figure 6: Arco, a small overland Venice, a snail town coiled inwards, where on the outside in the lowland there are open roadways while on the highland there are hidden lanes with life sheltered from outsiders and totally open to neighbors. Yards, benches, nooks and blind alleys.*

Arco is the capital of mountaineering, and mountaineers, as is commonly known, are poor folk and cheapskates. This is why here in Arco the mountaineering equipment is very cheap. Alpinists, the aristocrats of mountain tourism, do not turn their noses from stocking up exactly here. The road from Arco and Riva Del Garda along the steep western shore of the lake starts with tunnels which turn into galleries unfolding the view on the lake. If one doesn't head to Salo, the final stronghold of the Mussolini's government, but instead turns right shortly into the sheer cliff, the road will move stiff upwards like a cork-screw, giving, however, a feel of a climbdown to hell. Rocks, waterfalls, waterdrops, thickets, steep slopes and suddenly, as if nothing had happened, a cute and homely small town of Tremosine. A couple of restaurants emplaced beyond the cliff, hanging in the air, from where one can enjoy an exciting view of Lake Garda. A sip of refreshing prosecco and one is ready to fly and dissolve, to melt and turn into an invisible atom or a drop in Lake Garda's waters (Figure 7).



*Figure 7: Tremosine, an entrepôt on the way to heaven.*

In the mountains, to the south of Rome, there is a volcanic massif with three crater funnels. Two of them are filled with water which creates a small lake Nemi and a bigger lake Albano (the White lake) (Figure 8).



*Figure 8: Albano, at the foreground: the summer residence of the Pope, at present the agricultural enterprise of the Vatican.*

The views unfolding from the Pope's residence Castel Gandolfo resemble those one sees from the rocks of Lake Garda near Salo. Here one can taste the mouthwatering Porchetta sold on every corner and within a kilometre from the lake. They used to call Lake Nemi the mirror of Diane. Here Caligula built a peculiar ship for his orgies, debaucheries and revelries resembling a hanging garden. The town literally hangs over the lake latching on sheer rocks (Figures 9,10).

Inspired by such picturesque landscape the townpeople do everything to make their place even more beautiful. The place is so beautiful but so tiny – it will never grow into a big city. Paul Vidal de la Blanche (Blanche, 1903, 2000, 2021) insists on orography and hydrography as the main factors inciting the charm of French cities, towns, settlements and sceneries, and he is definitely right.



*Figure 9: Bright colours is another attraction of the small town over lake Nemi.*



*Figure 10: Ceri – a town on a rock, a temple, 80 residents and a restaurant for 300 persons. One can never pry oneself away from the amazing view unfolding from here or find words to describe it.*

The beauty is often very localized. On the south edge of Monterey Bay there formed a cluster of towns and cities that are mostly of minuscule and delicate nature and do not strive to expand, develop and grow in population. Monterey (32 000 people),

## SUNTEXT REVIEWS

Pacific Grove (15 000 people), Pebble Beach (less than 3000 people), Carmel-by-the-Ocean (15 000 people) (Figure 11). Only very few cities manage to grow large without destroying their beauty and even enriching it. Venice, Genoa, Verona, Florence, Rome Barcelona, Cordoba, Sevilla Paris, Lyon, Marseilles, San Francisco, Boston. Rio de Janeiro – it is the beauty of these and very few other large cities that attracts people above all things (Figure 12-14).



**Figure 11:** Pebble Beach, “A Lone Cypress”. Point Lobos at the horizon described by Stevenson as the Treasure Island.



**Figure 12:** I have never seen anything this breathtakingly beautiful in my life. The Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore – the most unexpected miracle in the world.



**Figure 13:** Naples, a marvellous human ant-hill that plays football on every patch and sings “O, solo mio”.



**Figure 14:** Warm colours of Rome.

At the beginning of the 18th century, an entrepreneur and industrialist Akinfiy Demidov founded more than 20 cities on the Ural. A convoy of vessels was travelling upstream the Ural rivers where one could find infinite supplies of forest and water stretching beyond the horizon that were needed for metal manufacturing. At the places where Akinfiy saw exceptionally beautiful sceneries he ordered to go on shore, and if ore finders found copper or iron ore there, a mine and a town were built. Tagil, Kyshtym, Miass, Zlatoust, Chelyaba, Kasli and it was not ore, forest (required to produce wood charcoal) or water, but beauty that served as the main input to foundation of the Ural cities (Figure 15).



**Figure 15:** A toylike Miass.

As a summary of this piece: there are many theories explaining the origins of cities, some of which are smart and pleasant. Western scholars such as prefer sacred relics and places of worship, including genius loci, heathen fanes, and places of sacrifice, altars, temples and monasteries. I thought, however, that beauty was and still is the main and probably the only criterion for choosing a place to set up a city.

Such place is found on a lonely mission or by a group of people and later the beauty and the habitableness of the place increase synergistically because people try to bring their dwellings in

accord with the innate beauty of the place they chose and make everything belong together.

### When a city stops being a city

When a city loses its beauty, its individual beauty (because beauty of cities and places is always individual and inimitable in contrast with the standardized beauty at the contests such as “Miss Universe”), it is no longer a city. This happens when:

- Large-scale same-type housing is introduced
- A city acquires a predominant function such as transportation or industry development
- A city overflows the bounds outlined by the beauty of the place
- Control over a city becomes dominant – beauty, culture, traditions and indeed a human being cannot be put under control or deprived of independence by any sort of plans, supervisors, non-formative or non-creative interferences.
- People lose their sense of beauty or a measure of it, or do not even notice it
- Capital: a city and an asset

In many European languages the main city (of the world, country, province, or any other territory) is referred to by the word “capital” or the words derived from this stem. Undoubtedly, “capital” descends from the Capital, the central hill of the hills of Rome, but it has long since then acquired a different meaning. Capital is “thinking money” that has such property as speculativeness, upscaling volumes and intensifying cycles. Capital is a place where people think of the world, country, province, or any other territory, and in this sense capital is truly a main place, die Hauptstadt, where human and money capitals are accumulated, which is convincingly described. It may be assumed that capital is also the most beautiful city or at least a city which is more and better decorated compared to other places. Amenities and adornments are collected here: museums, pictures, temples, architecture in general, theatres, beautiful women and beautiful things. In the Russian language the main city is called “stolitsa” (derived from the Russian noun “stol” – table). According to, cities usually emerge near the places of ancient heathen fanes where there were altars in the shape of a table or a trapeze. Such heathen fans were often located at the tops of table-topped mountains or “trapezus”. One can mention the Acropolis of Athens, the Temple mountain of the Israeli Jerusalem (Melchizedek put a tabernacle at the top of this mountain where a pagan heathen fane of Canaan had stood before and renamed Salem into Jerusalem, a City of God, where later king Solomon built the Temple that was several times destroyed but revived again), the Capitol of Rome, Montmartre and Sacre-Cœur in Paris, the mountain at the bottom of which Scythian Neapolis was founded, presently Simferopol, the capital of the Crimea, the

Detinets in Kyiv, the Borovitsky hill in Moscow, Hradcany in Prague, the trapezus of Lviv, Krakow and many other European cities.

These places offer most exciting and magnificent views, these are the places of power and beauty, attractive and unforgettable. The world “stolitsa” has lost its implicit meaning of “altar” to acquire a new meaning of “table feast”, “revelry”, and a place which nibbles from its own country, province or region, a place where a lord’s table (a seat at the top of the table) is located and the greediest eater of the country or land is settled. This is how Moscow of the current-day Russia is perceived: here live only 10-15% of the country’s population and reside 80–90% of the Russian money. Among 123 Russian billionaires, only a few are not physically or legally connected with Moscow, do not “board” here. This makes Moscow an outstandingly attractive and simultaneously a very repulsive “city” from the perspective of Russia and its satellites.

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