

# INTRODUCTION

## The ArchéA Method

*Lamberto Amistadi, Coordinator and Scientific Director of the ArchéA project*

This book presents a collection of theoretical results of a research project called ArchéA (2018-1-IT02-KA203-048305).

ArchéA stands for Architectural European Medium-Sized City Arrangement and is a research project co-financed by the European Union under the program known as Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership for higher education. The program aims to innovate teaching relating to the study and design of European medium-sized cities (between 100,000 and 500,000 inhabitants): all five partners involved in the program are architecture schools based in medium-sized cities: Cesena/Bologna, Aachen, Gliwice, Parma, and Rouen.

Between 2000 and 2006, the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON)<sup>1</sup> conducted an in-depth study on the European city, funded by the INTERREG program of the European Regional Development Fund.

The aim of the SMESTO research<sup>2</sup> (Small and Medium-Sized Towns) was firstly to define the European medium-sized city, making it a category. This is based on a fairly obvious intuition: first, that there were cities in Europe with common characteristics that could be ascribed to the same category; second, that these characteristics made them a privileged place to live from many points of view, including accessibility, mobility, socioeconomic conditions, and also the psychological and aesthetic quality of the public space.

The aim of the research was to transform this intuition into a precise classification criterion, both to protect this particular urban phenomenon from uncontrolled growth and sprawl, and to frame their development within a broader design conceived as a constellation of medium-sized cities, or with a more technical language, in the perspective of regional territorial hubs.

The classification criterion of the SMESTO model is entirely placed in relation to the size of the city; that is, the decisive element is its dimension. The benefits deriving from an average dimension are analyzed according to three approaches: morphological, functional, and administrative.

However, all three approaches are treated – in their very own words – in a rather superficial way, and their exploration is postponed to later research. Also because the aim of the SMESTO program was not so much to further these approaches, but to compare and

analyze the classification criteria existing within the different national legislations of the member-states of the European Union and to identify a common classification criterion.

The ArchéA project aims to investigate one of these different aspects that can be considered a furthering of the morphological approach: the open space of the European medium-sized city.

The initial outline follows that of the SMESTO research to some extent, namely, the idea of starting from a fairly obvious intuition and trying to define its boundaries. The idea is that the open space of the European medium-sized city can be reasonably recognized – especially when compared to the large cities or megalopolises of Southeast Asia or South America – as a space of great quality from psychological, sociological, and aesthetic points of view, and for this reason, it must be held as a resource to be defended and consciously developed.

Assuming the open space of the city as a field of investigation allows us not only to consider this research as a furthering of the morphological approach of the SMESTO research but also to shift attention from an abstract morphological approach – in all 400 pages of the research, there are only outlines where the shape of the city is completely absent or reduced to an abstract symbology based on dots and spots without form – to an approach according to which urban morphology is placed in relation to the space of the city and ultimately to architecture.

This relationship between the shape of the city and architecture is very important for us not only because we are architects but also because it allows us to recover an Italian and European tradition of urban studies for which the morphological approach to the study of the city had reached a much different level of insight and awareness, with writings and projects that brought urban morphology side-by-side with architecture.

As we know, the medium term that conveyed the transition from form to space was the concept of building type. But the object of this research is no longer the relationship between building typology and urban morphology, but a broader possibility that was only partially experienced through that relationship; that is, the possibility of placing analysis and design, theory and practice, within a dialectical relationship where the ambiguity of this relationship is addressed, if not resolved, on the concrete terrain of drawing and representation.

In a booklet with the indicative title *Deciphering Architecture*, Ignasi de Solà-Morales (2001) says that the relationship between theory and design takes concrete shape through the tools of topographic and cartographic drawing. Oswald Mathias Ungers (1997, 17) goes on to say: “This highlights the idea of the city itself as a support on which to draw.” In the report on the design competition for the San Rocco district in Monza, Giorgio Grassi and Aldo Rossi (1970, 70) write: “In this sense, it seems important that the general case, the law that presides over the design, is still clearly legible in the drawing.”

The drawing is the element of mediation that stands between the existing city, the famous “urban artifacts” in the form of the past participle, “what has been done,” and the project. The intentionality with which the language used to describe the facts is constructed immediately leads the drawing from description to connotation, from analysis to project within a circular process whose direction is difficult to establish: the theory informing the analysis leads to the design through the drawing, but the same design outcome acts retroactively on the theory by modifying its initial assumptions.<sup>3</sup>

This same circular structure along which theory, analysis, and design are arranged is taken up in the learning/teaching method of the ArchéA program and defines the contents

of the so-called intellectual outputs: a theory course given online and the assumption of Bologna and Aachen as exemplary case studies on which to exercise knowledge, analysis, and design. Bologna and Aachen are not only the contexts used to select the study areas for the design workshops,<sup>4</sup> but they also become the specific objects of the representation, with the aim of defining the most suitable nomenclature, signs, and legend to represent the characteristics of the open space of the European medium-sized city according to five different approaches, each corresponding to a different school to which the five partner countries belong: a phenomenological approach (*mapping spaces*) of the Department of Spatial Design of the RWTH Aachen University; an approach related to the Italian tradition of urban studies (*mapping places*) of the Department of Architecture of the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna; an approach that puts green space and landscape at the center of the urban project (*mapping natural space*) of the ENSA National School of Architecture of Normandie; an approach according to which urban regeneration passes from the design of new centralities (*mapping centralities*) of the Department of Engineering and Architecture of the University of Parma; and an approach that tries to detect the social component of urban complexity (*mapping social space*) of the Faculty of Architecture of the Silesian University of Technology.

In this way, the cities examined in the observations are not fixed and identified once and for all but are subjected to an internally coherent symbolic activity according to which the observer knows what they produce by knowing it and produce what they know by producing it, generating a domain of new parallel and complementary descriptive dimensions: these descriptions do not arrange the representation at its final result, they do not exhaust its field of possibilities, but they give an account of the complexity of the urban phenomenon. The re-drawings of Bologna and Aachen are also collected in an illustrated atlas which includes 42 tables.<sup>5</sup>

This volume entitled *Mapping Urban Spaces: Designing the European City* presents in-depth essays by the members of the partnership and some guests in relation to the five thematic sections listed above. These theoretical writings constitute the conceptual cornerstones of the program starting from the same common premises and the same need for a theory of architecture, the substance of the relationship between analysis and design, the value of drawing as a tool for description, reading and interpretation of the city, as well as a vehicle for its transformation process.

Within a tenuous discipline such as architecture, this work can only concern an attempt to establish the terms of communication by convention; to rearrange, recapitulate, and compare more or less outdated issues that cross different European study and teaching traditions, according to different dominant aspects and with different meanings; and make such comparison available to as many students, teachers, and architects as possible.

Thus, between theory and design, hypothesis and results, science and art, ArchéA simply seeks to be a contribution that cultivates the ambition to consolidate a heritage that is too often underestimated: the historical experience of European architecture. Architecture understood dually, as the discipline and the set of works and places historically given and its ability to build a city that, due to size, shape, and quality of public spaces, must be considered as a model, if not to be replicated then surely to be used as a term for comparison and a measure of the intervention on the present and future city.

In other words, the question becomes: what are the characteristics of the urban space that allow us to ascribe European medium-sized cities to the same category? Recognizing that these characteristics make the European city a privileged place to live, what are the tools of

the urban design that allow us to bring these characteristics back into the design of the contemporary city? That is, a city within which citizens can recognize themselves and within which citizenship continues to be – as the German philosopher Johann Herder maintained, one of the fathers of European cultural identity – the very language of one’s own city.

On the other hand, the city intended as a place of citizenship and democracy has been closely related to the Erasmus program since its origins. In fact, the Erasmus program – which is also very Italian because it was an Italian official, Domenico Leonarduzzi (known as “Papa Erasmus,” the son of Italian emigrants in Belgium), who convinced Mitterrand to finance the project – was created thanks to the passion and political pressure of the first and now largest association of European students, founded by Franck Biancheri in the 1980s, a French student who later founded the trans-European party NewEuropeans. The association took the name AEGEE (Association of General States of the Students of Europe) in honor of the islands and cities of the Aegean where democracy arose, combining a touch of Greek democracy with a bit of the French Revolution.

### Notes

- 1 <https://www.espon.eu/>.
- 2 The Role of Small and Medium-Sized Towns (SMESTO). Final Report. [https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/fr-1.4.1\\_revised-full.pdf](https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/fr-1.4.1_revised-full.pdf).
- 3 It is a question of entrusting the drawing with that function of linguistic mediation which is indispensable for any intellectual operation and which Aldo Giorgio Gargani places at the base of a constructive and procedural scientific and philosophical method: “Now we know, and we have seen it above, that any cognitive operation, every description is not a static reflection of a state of affairs implemented by a subject independent of the state of affairs, but that it has a constructive and procedural character; in short, a world is as much described, discovered, as it is made and constructed. [...] The description of the observer unfolds as a constructive procedure that the observer recursively applies to himself. Therefore, an observer’s theory puts the observer and his descriptions in a sequence in the course of which the observer is configured as the result of the operations that recursively apply to his own result” (Gargani 1993, 68).
- 4 ArchéA’s program included two architectural design workshops (Intensive Programs for Learners) <https://site.unibo.it/ArchéA/en/mobility-1>: “Redesigning the European medium-sized city: the ex-market area of Bologna” (Cesena, November 23–30, 2019) and “Redesigning the European medium-sized city. The Driescher Hof in Aachen’s periphery” (Aachen, November 21–30, 2020). The projects for Bologna are published in the volume “The ex-market area of Bologna. Redesigning the European medium-sized city. International Workshop Bologna–Cesena, 11/–23 – 12/01/2019,” École nationale supérieure d’architecture de Normandie 2019.
- 5 *Mapping the City, on urban spaces – an Atlas in Aachen and Bologna*, Florence: Aión, 2021.

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