

## MAIN SECTION

# The aesthetic (urban) experience of the historic(al) city: Ontological and conceptual clarifications

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## ABSTRACT

When asking what role, the historical city plays in the aesthetic experience of the contemporary city, it is important to clarify what do we mean by "historic(al) city" and what categories of urban aesthetic experience may be relevant in this context. From the hypothesis that the ontological structure of a city is itself historical in character, we need to disentangle what is historic about some cities or parts of cities. With the help of authors such as Riegl, Sitte, Giovannoni and Choay, we need to understand how notions like history, monument, museum and heritage reveal layers of meaning of the historic. Then, with categories such as "ruins" (an explicit category of the historicity, ephemerality and endurance of built environments), "rhythms" (an analytical tool for assessing the dynamics of urban flows), "atmospheres" (a phenomenological concept that allows for an understanding of the affective tonality of spaces or situations) and "cityscape" (in all its multisensory, multilayered and symbolic comprehensiveness) we briefly try to shed light on the aesthetic role of the historic(al) city in the general urban experience, keeping in mind a renewed notion of aesthetic experience that is situated, multisensorial and engaged with the city.

## KEYWORDS

*Historicity; Monument; Heritage; Aesthetic Experience; Ruins.*

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When considering the role of the historical city in the aesthetic experience of the contemporary city, it is important to clarify what is meant by 'historic(al) city' and which categories of urban aesthetic experience may be relevant in this context. Assuming that the ontological structure of a city is historical in character, we will first unravel the conceptual layers of urban historicity, through notions like history, monument, museum or heritage. In the second part of this paper, we will show how aesthetic categories chosen for their connection to the temporal and processual nature of cities such as *ruins*, *rhythms*, *atmospheres* and *cityscapes* can illuminate the aesthetic role of the historic dimension in urban experiences, but within the framework of a renewed notion of aesthetic experience, one that is situated, multisensorial and engaged with the city.

## I. "What is a city?"

To understand the contemporary aesthetic experience of a historic(al) city, we need first to clarify what we mean by the term "historic(al) city". And although it seems to be a rather simple and intuitive concept, there are many layers of meaning to unravel. Before dealing with the adjective historic or historical<sup>1</sup> we must ask "What is a city?". A few years ago, when asked about the kind of ontological category that best fits the city, the Italian philosopher Achille Varzi said that it is a *process*<sup>2</sup>. Varzi was simply interested in using a basic contemporary metaphysical category that would allow cities to resist the challenge of identity through time: how can we use the same name (Rome, Paris, etc) for different sets of buildings, streets, blocks and neighborhoods through the ages? Sets that were successively destroyed and replaced by other sets of buildings, streets and blocks, several times and in different configurations throughout its history, and think that it is the same city even if constitutionally different each time? So, what becomes evident from this processual nature of cities – and this is the reason why I evoke Varzi's answer – is that they are temporal processes and thus have an historical character: they are series or sequences of different events related to each other in different causal relations at different moments in time (and space) that involve a constant and convoluted transformation of states of affairs and forms. The plural seems, actually, more accurate, since a city is not only a process but a set of processes, given the complex and convoluted variability of processes of urbanization that constitute cities. And because these processes occur at different times and with different speeds/rhythms, we could even adopt Reinhart Koselleck's pluralistic perspective on history and its cor-

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1 I'm distinguishing the "historical", when it is related to a general and more abstract determination, as in something that is related or pertains to History, from "historic", when this is a concrete determination, as when it is perceived or valued as some important event, situation or object of a specific past.

2 Achille Varzi, "What is a city?", *Topoi* 40, n° 2 (2021): 399–408, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-019-09647-4>

responding stratigraphical metaphor of different layers or “sediments of time” (*Zeitschichten*) constituting the city.<sup>3</sup>

## Cities as historical

Saying that all cities are historical means that they endure through time, that they are subject to change, that they have variations on their structure, their constitution and their form, that they are sequences of events, that have causes and consequences, preparing, originating or preventing other events, which now considering how they can be perceived, understood or represented also means that they might be read (or told) as going in a certain direction, sometimes interrupted, sometimes deviated or merely transformed, carrying a certain purpose but that they can also be remembered or envisaged in a different way at a different time.

“History” has this congenital ambiguity of meaning both a series of events occurring in time (and space) and a way to report, to remember and to narrate this spatio-temporal occurrence or sequence of events. In an essay on history for the encyclopedia Einaudi, the French historian Jacques Le Goff recalled the etymology of the word to highlight the testimonial and narrative aspect of history but also stressing this ambiguity between the object of the narration and the narration itself.<sup>4</sup> We can easily infer that it is this narration that gives meaning and order to the sequence, if not the actual sequentiality of those events. Hence “historical” means that it belongs to the character of the city to be part of a narration. Its historicity is not only linked to the fact of its existence in space and time but also (and probably more importantly) to its ability to feature a narrative account of its existence. And, to clarify my previous distinction against historical –, historic means that it is already the result of a particular account, of a judgment on its significance and value for a particular history, be it personal, municipal, national or even universal.

## History, memory and monument

Yet, to fully understand the multilayered meanings associated with the historic city in the context of contemporary urban aesthetics, we also must consider other notions that enrich and complexify the category we are dealing with. One of them results from the close connection between history and memory. History is a way to report what has been seen, giving testimony and thus preserving what is known from what took place. It is a way to remember and pass on to the next generations the knowledge about what occurred. In fact, a complex dynamic between the past, the present and, in a certain sense, also the future is constantly undergoing

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3 Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, transl. and ed. S. Franzel and S.-L. Hoffmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 3-9.

4 Jacques Le Goff, *Storia e memoria* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), 5.

in the making of history. As an interpretative narration, history is always being made in the present, even if using the traces and remnants of the past. There is constantly a reordering of the past that is being made from the point of view of the present, using the criteria and values of the present and often rhetorically oriented to a virtual future or, to say it in other words, with a certain goal. So, the documents and monuments that can be seen as the signs of the past are, in this sense, historical tools or artefacts of collective or objectified memory.<sup>5</sup>

Monuments are often produced intentionally to convey a certain interpretation of what occurred serving the purpose of remembrance or commemoration of a meaningful or even a symbolic past. This is evident from the etymology of the word “monument”, from the Latin verb “*monere*”, meaning “to warn”, “to recall”, to bring to memory or to mind.<sup>6</sup> What matters here is, of course, the *historic city* and not necessarily the *historic monument* but in a sense the historic city is a derivation from this idea of the historic monument, as the late Françoise Choay has properly demonstrated in her persuasive book, translated into English as *The Invention of the Historic Monument*<sup>7</sup>. There she begins by underlining a sometimes-overlooked distinction between the *monument* and the *historic monument*, alluding and expanding from the one made originally by the Austrian art historian Aloïs Riegl in his short but influential essay from 1903 on the *Modern Cult of Monuments*.<sup>8</sup>

According to Riegl, there is already a difference between a *monument* as an intentionally produced artefact – which is the original meaning of the term, “a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events (or a combination thereof) alive in the minds of future generations”<sup>9</sup> – and an *unintentional monument* – which is a monument that can only produce this effect of remembrance, of bringing the past to mind. Which it does *subjectively*, that is to say, in the eyes of the beholder, and *a posteriori*, because it is seen retrospectively by a modern observer as having an historical value.<sup>10</sup> For Riegl this means that the artefact is a trace, a sign, of something that once occurred or came to be and is no more, which makes it thus *historical*<sup>11</sup>. Of course, any object or remnant from a bygone age can be invested with a memorial function by

5 See Pierre Nora, “Mémoire collective” in *La Nouvelle Histoire*, edited by J. Le Goff, R. Chartier and J. Revel (Paris: CEPL, 1978), 398-401.

6 Le Goff, *Storia e memoria*, 443. See also Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, transl. Lauren M. O’Connell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6.

7 It was published originally in French as *L’allégorie du patrimoine*, in 1992, at Éditions du Seuil.

8 “Der moderne Denkmalkultus: sein Wesen und seine Entstehung” was published in Vienna by W. Braumüller and translated into English as “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin”, trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 21–51.

9 Riegl, “The Modern Cult”, 21.

10 Ibid., 23.

11 “Everything that has been and is no longer we call *historical*, in accordance with the modern notion that what has been can never be again, and that everything that has been constitutes an irreplaceable and irremovable link in a chain of development.” (Ibid., 21).

the modern observer, but it is often the sensible effects of the ravages of time on the appearance of the object – its state of degradation, of ruination, its *patina* – that arouses in the modern individual this diffuse impression (this *Stimmungswirkung*) of the voracity of Chronos and the representation of the inexorable cycle of generation and corruption, life and death, “of the emergence of the particular from the general and its gradual but inevitable dissolution back into the general”.<sup>12</sup>

Since Alois Riegl, an art historian but also a philosopher and a jurist, was writing this essay as the president of the Austrian Commission on Historic Monuments, he was both interested in the aesthetic and the scientific/historical issues and the more practical and even socio-political aspects of restoration and preservation policies.<sup>13</sup> So, deciding what an historic monument - is and by extension an historic city -, summons not only theoretical considerations but also cultural, political and even economical ones.

### Historic values: historicization, aestheticization and eventual museumification

Moreover, we must know that, for Riegl, this modern cult of monuments is structured by a dialectical opposition between memorial or commemorative values (*Erinnerungswerte*) and contemporary or present-day ones (*Gegenwartswerte*). It is within those commemorative values, the ones linked to the past and that invoke memory, that he includes the, aforementioned, *historical value* along with what he calls the “age-value” or *value of antiquity* (*Alterswert*).<sup>14</sup> This last one results from the perceivable marks of time and this “vaguely aesthetic” sentiment of its incommensurable age (or antiquity) and of our own transience and ephemerality. The historical value purports to a more cognitive type of value, as it relates us to and informs us about something that occurred in a past era which, otherwise, we could not have access to. And Riegl was, of course, very aware of the different attitudes and sensibilities toward historic monuments. On the one hand, he considered the Romantic cult of ruins and antiquity that inspired authors such as John Ruskin to praise the value of monuments that should be preserved in their authentic state, even if they were dilapidated. On the other hand, he considered the interest in restoring old monuments, sometimes replacing lost parts with new ones or rebuilding them in the presumed style to make them more accessible to present and future generations.<sup>15</sup> In fact, these historian and preservationist attitudes already had a long history at the time, since the modern fascination with

12 Ibid., 24. See also Michael Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface: Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2006), 153.

13 See Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 111 and Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface*, 141-4.

14 Riegl, “The Modern Cult”, 23-24.

15 The most renowned representative of this attitude would, of course, be the French architect Viollet-le-Duc. See Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 92-106.

ancient monuments could be traced at least to the Renaissance, although Françoise Choay wonders at the possibility of tracing it back further to Medieval times or even Antiquity, when people already revealed a certain interest in respecting and collecting antiques.<sup>16</sup> But Choay rightly points out that there is a need for the *distanciation* of history, for an interruption or discontinuity in the process of cultural tradition between the Ancients (of Antiquity) and the Moderns (of the Quattrocento), in order to properly speak of the birth of the *historic monument*.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly enough, when we consider the evolution of the concept of historic heritage in recent years, we can see that the distance between the past and the present has been shortening, particularly in regard to the historicization of certain districts in contemporary cities for the purpose of urban regeneration induced by tourism.

This invention of the historic monument in the Quattrocento, the Modern cult of monuments, was also combined with the birth or, at least, the beginning of the process that would take us to our Modern conception of art. So, it is not a surprise that there was and still is an aestheticization of our perception of historic monuments (and, by extension, the historic city). The thirst for knowledge of the humanist scholar (the "historian") was paired with the delighted contemplation of the Renaissance artist and the avid *amateur* of these fascinating antiques, which quickly became prey to the concupiscent collecting impulse of princes, aediles and other *signori*.<sup>18</sup> These private collections could be now seen as anticipating the idea of the museum, which would develop in the following centuries and would become public and institutionalized after the French revolution. Of course, a similar attention to ancient buildings and public monuments started to emerge before, and already with some social, political and economic impact, but only after the French revolution did a more scientific and systematic policy concerning the preservation, conservation or restoration of historic heritage become properly institutionalized.<sup>19</sup> Historic monuments became also symbols for whole nations, for a whole collective memory, and thus turned into public property, at first national but, with time, earning the right to become also humanity's universal heritage. It was the democratizing and emancipating ideals of the Enlightenment that prepared this new layer of meaning concerning the historic monument and a new conservation attitude towards it, but also this consequence of the museumification of heritage.<sup>20</sup>

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16 Ibid., 17-27.

17 Ibid., 20.

18 Ibid., 27-39.

19 Ibid., 83-89.

20 Ibid., 66-69.

## Historic values: from monuments to cities

So, the *historic* (in this context) is associated with a variety of values and layers of meaning that qualify it accordingly. It is related to the rememorating or commemorative value of the monument, its cognitive, artistic and symbolic value (collective, national or even universal) that became to deserve an almost pious preservation, if not a restorative and revivifying treatment, which eventually crystalizes into a museum-like piece of property and thus a worthy public asset, a valuable item of heritage. But even if these developments and specifications of the adjective historic (and historical) seem to apply only to isolated items, monuments or buildings, they were progressively transferred to situated and local ensembles or parts of (if not whole) cities.<sup>21</sup> However, worrying about an historic city or an historic urban district would only begin to make sense at a time when planning a city or doing a big urban intervention was also a concern. Moreover, considering its historic status also needed a certain distance or a sort of interruption between urbanization processes, between urban rhythms or urban forms, probably also different styles of *urbanizing*. What I mean is that the difference between a modern city and an older or ancient city – how it is structured, how it is shaped – would have to be noticeable in order to consider the latter *historic*. In fact, only after the Industrial Revolution and its indelible impact on the processes of urbanization did this difference become apparent and a concern. The development of cities or the appearance of new ones embodying the values of rationality and productivity, implementing the geometric optimization of space for the purpose of efficient arrangements and fast circulation, deployed new morphological patterns in the built environment that were radically different from the organic forms and the slow-paced yet harmonious rhythms of pre-industrial towns.

Many authors, poets and artists noticed this transformation, and some deplored these new ugly and inhumane settlements with disgust and a fair amount of nostalgia for the old traditional townscapes that, by contrast, were becoming memorials of merrier times. Architects like Augustus Pugin, pioneer of the Gothic revival movement in England, and aesthetes like John Ruskin, who praised the integrated harmony of historic cities like Venice, Florence or Oxford, or even Victor Hugo, in what concerns the “Vieux Paris”, were sounding the alarm for the disappearance of the old towns fabric and advocating a return to the past or, at least, calling for the preservation of their remains.<sup>22</sup> But it was the Viennese architect and painter Camillo Sitte who gave a more reflective and critical account of

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21 Ibid., 117 sq.

22 See Françoise Choay, *L'urbanisme: utopies et réalités une anthologie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 10-24 and Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 118-122.

the aesthetic quality of the *historic city* in his influential *Städtebau*.<sup>23</sup>

Not only that, but he was the one understanding the historicity of the pre-industrial city, using what some have called an “operational” notion of the historic city.<sup>24</sup>

Even if he assumes the evolution of cities as historical continua, when studying the morphology and typology of urban forms diachronically he reveals important differences between Modern (industrial) urbanization and the character of pre-industrial cities, which already belong to the past: *they are historic cities*. Contrary to a wrong and widespread interpretation – disseminated mainly by modernists such as Le Corbusier – Sitte did not promote a reactionary return to the past. He understood that times had changed, that he and his contemporaries were living different times and distinct rhythms, governed by very different values and prospects, but he was nonetheless a critic of the Modern urban city-building because of its strict focus on technical, predictable and functional patterns which made it aesthetically meagre, unimaginative and uninspiring.<sup>25</sup> Through the thorough analysis of the urban forms of ancient cities (which most likely makes him the godfather of urban morphology), he then fostered the historic city as an aesthetic model for future planning, even if he was aware of the limitations of a systematic implementation of that model. If city-building is to be artistic, it must be conceived with touch and intuition. The rules of city-building cannot be reduced to universal principles, and what works in one town does not necessarily apply to another.<sup>26</sup>

One of the dangers of historicizing cities or parts of cities is, as we have mentioned in relation to the historic monument, the temptation of wanting to preserve the city or urban ensemble as an untouchable work of art, removed from daily life, that should be only contemplated and not actually experienced. This is the danger of *museumification*. Treating a city or a part of a city as a museum-piece is the same as killing that city or urban area. To quote Françoise Choay, “In becoming historical, it loses its historicity”<sup>27</sup>. To prevent this nefarious consequence of historicizing cities, it is important to understand that a city is not just a physical built environment, but a dynamic environment where the “social action” – to quote

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23 Originally published in Vienna in 1889 by Carl Graeser as *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, it was later translated into English for a collection of Columbia University Studies in Art History and Archaeology as Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, trans. George R. Collins and Christiane C. Collins (New York: Random House, 1965).

24 Francesco Bandarin and Ron van Oers, *The Historic Urban Landscape: Managing heritage in an urban century* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 10. In a preface to the French translation of Sitte's *Städtebau*, Françoise Choay acknowledges him as being the inventor of the term “historic city”. See Françoise Choay, foreword to *L'Art de bâtir les villes – L'urbanisme selon ses fondements artistiques*, by Camillo Sitte (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), iv.

25 See Sitte, *City Planning*, 83-90.

26 Ibid., 84-85.

27 Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 129.

Mumford<sup>28</sup> – occurs. As a dynamic environment it is a complex system of differently integrated structures, performing a variety of functions and constantly changing. And to recall what has been said at the beginning of this paper, the city is a process or a set of processes, consequently, different times and distinct rhythms may have to coexist, interact and mingle in the same urban system.

## Urban heritage (*patrimonio urbano*) and environment (*ambiente*)

One of the inheritors of Camillo Sitte's morphological approach was Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947), architect, art historian and engineer. In his underread book *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova* (1931)<sup>29</sup>, – which could probably be translated as *Ancient cities and new buildings or new urbanism*<sup>30</sup> – Giovannoni grants the historic urban ensembles – or urban heritage (*patrimonio urbano*) – not so much a museum value as a contemporary use value (which was, as mentioned, one of the present-day values (*Gegenwartswerte*) acknowledged by Alois Riegl to historic monuments), properly integrating them in the context of the whole city (or the region) and of modern society. According to Giovannoni, the historic city could still play a relevant role, not necessarily linked to the productive and communication functions of the urban system, but rather to the social and cultural dimensions of local city life.<sup>31</sup>

This is not the place for the particulars of Giovannoni's proposal, but I just want to underline that his principles in urban planning were very much aesthetically and artistically-oriented – as in Sitte's view – and they implied a contextual treatment of the urban heritage. In this regard and to emphasize the fact that a historic city is not just a collection of historic buildings but a whole environment where the buildings, streets and the activities there occurring are interconnected, he used the notion of *ambiente*, which could be translated here as context or urban fabric.<sup>32</sup>

These notions of urban heritage (*patrimonio urbano*) and later urban landscape would become important in the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly, after the 60's, in the international context of practices

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28 Lewis Mumford famously characterized the city as both a physical environment (a set of built structures) and the dynamic social web of interactions, the theatre of "social action". See Lewis Mumford, "What is a city?" in *The City Reader*, ed. R. LeGates and F. Stout (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 93.

29 Given the absence of an English translation and the unavailability of the Italian version, I'll refer to the French translation: Gustavo Giovannoni, *L'Urbanisme face aux villes anciennes*, trans. Jean-Marc Mandosio, Amélie Petita and Claire Tandille (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).

30 Having in mind the expression "edilizia cittadina" as the French translators explain in the glossary included in the French edition: Giovannoni, *L'Urbanisme face aux villes anciennes*, 334.

31 Ibid., 210-219, and Barbarin and van Oers, *The Historic Urban Landscape*, 14.

32 He explicitly assumes the "contextualist" approach when discussing the problem of historic neighbourhoods. See Giovannoni, *L'Urbanisme face aux villes anciennes*, 211, 216 and 333, for an explanatory glossary included by the French translators.

of preservation with UNESCO's recommendations of 1962 and the Venice Charter of 1964,<sup>33</sup> but also with the theoretical influence of the morphological analysis of townscapes throughout history by the urban geographer M. R. G. Conzen, who showed how the fabric of a city is the outcome of a historical process of successive layering<sup>34</sup> and of the typo-morphological approach by the Italian architects, such as Saverio Muratori and Leonardo Benevolo.

Of course, the notion of heritage (*patrimonio*) carries with it an unavoidable economical dimension and the consequences of patrimonialisation of historic cities or historic districts would have strong impacts on their political economy and consequences on society and cultural industries.<sup>35</sup> This is obviously an issue that affects tremendously the aesthetic experience of contemporary cities.

## II. Urban aesthetic experience as an “engaged” environmental experience

We will now consider the city from an aesthetic perspective, exploring the kinds of aesthetic experiences that can be had in the context of a historic city. However, to do so properly, we must understand that the city is not merely an object to be contemplated, and that aesthetic experience should not be confined to the traditional framework which pits a contemplating subject against a separate object that would be the sole focus of aesthetic appreciation. Urban aesthetic experience should instead be understood as a situated, immersive, multisensorial and *engaged* kind of experience that occurs in a continual interaction – or “aesthetic transaction” – with a dynamic environment where, to evoke the American philosopher Arnold Berleant, an “aesthetic field” emerges.<sup>36</sup> It is in this environmental and “engagement” perspective that aesthetic experience in the city does make sense, all the more because a city is not an object that could be contemplated from a glance, but a dynamic and convoluted environment that must be endured in space and time, in multiple directions, in many different sensory modalities and hopefully also within the framework of the historical and cultural background that will contextualize the experience and symbolically inspire the imagination. And since we have previously identified the city with a set of spatio-temporal processes, there are some aesthetic categories that relate adequately to these processual and temporal dimensions of urban environments and thus may help us

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33 Barbarin and van Oers, *The Historic Urban Landscape*, 37-41.

34 Ibid., 27.

35 Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 138-163 and, for a general discussion of the theme, the classic but still relevant G. J. Ashworth and J. E. Tunbridge, *The Tourist-Historic City* (London and New York: Belhaven Press, 1990).

36 Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Cybereditions, 2000), 82-84.

to shed light on the qualities of this kind of urban aesthetic experience.<sup>37</sup>

## Ruins

The category of *ruins* – to mention one that immediately refers to the historical nature of cities – has been evoked quite frequently in contemporary aesthetics, but it has also fascinated poets, writers, and artists since at least the Renaissance, as shown by Choay. Ruins are the result of temporal processes partly natural, such as erosion and material degradation caused by geological, meteorological, and biochemical processes; and partly human, such as the cessation of human activity, abandonment, and loss of functionality. This is probably why ruins are symbols of the passage of time and the fragility and ephemerality of human existence. Because of this, they represent an inevitable fate for cities or parts of cities. They are monuments of an urban past and perceptual evidence of the historicity of urban environments. On the one hand, ruins are perceivable traces of the constant transaction between the built environment and the forces of nature. On the other hand, as unintentional historical monuments, ruins allow meaning to be produced in a place. This is because they are fragments in the puzzle of history and enigmatic expressions of a place's singular character, its *genius loci*.<sup>38</sup>

As Alois Riegl pointed out, the age-value of ruins manifests itself through sensorial perception and is thus an important feature of urban aesthetic experience in cities with a long history. Of course, it's not only ruins from classical antiquity or the medieval ages that we can come across in contemporary cities. Industrial and commercial ruins have also become common, such as old factories, warehouses, abandoned parking buildings, closed malls, bankrupt stores, and decadent infrastructure like stadiums, unfinished bridges, and roads. Most of these are not considered heritage sites – yet. However, the history and spirit of a place can be perceived through these modern ruins, which, through their character and the quality of the debris (or rubble), can tell us a lot about the culture and era.<sup>39</sup>

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37 In a recent article, I explored some aesthetics categories that would be suitable to better understand urban experience, precisely related to the spatio-temporal dimension of cities. Here I am using some that are more relevant to their temporal and historical aspect. See Nuno Fonseca, "On Some Aesthetic Categories of Urban Experience: Surveying Conceptual Tools for an Aesthetics of the City", *Iride* 37, n°s 102-103 (2024), 347-359. <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1414/116267>

38 Ibid., 351-52.

39 The French philosopher Bruce Bégout considers that a significant number of contemporary buildings are products of a consumer society where goods are made to be consumed or destroyed, not to last. This logic of programmed obsolescence is embedded in their essence, so they will not endure the natural process of decaying into ruins. Instead, their destruction produces mere rubble. While ruins have historical and aesthetic value, rubble is simply worthless, amorphous, and meaningless. See Bruce Bégout, *Obsolescence des ruines. Essai philosophique sur les gravats* (Paris: Éditions Inculte, 2022), 113-147.

## Rhythms

The different types of ruins, that manifest themselves through a different character but nonetheless are eventually scattered through a variety of areas in the same city are also perceptible traces of different epochs, different processes at different paces that occurred throughout its history, as if they were “sediments of time”, to reuse Koselleck’s expression, and thus present a geological or stratigraphical image of the distinct layers of historical meaning in the city. From the robust – even if eroded by time – stone of ancient temples and monuments to the gravel or junk quality of contemporary derelict buildings and infrastructure, they give us the impression of different *rhythms* of history too – rhythms that are perceptible through sensorial experience and can thus be referred to as another aesthetically relevant category. However, this impression often contrasts with the contemporary rhythms surrounding those same buildings or monuments. A musical metaphor applied to temporality and recently discussed by Andrea Borsari, “dissonance”<sup>40</sup>, could be useful to understand the contemporary experience of historic cities (or districts) in the context of urban neoliberalism and touristification, as there seems to be a mismatch between the different temporalities and how they are perceived, a dilation between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” – to reuse Koselleck’s vocabulary evoked by Borsari in the same article – and a compression of the perception and representation of history in a thin-layered present.<sup>41</sup>

From an architectural and morphological perspective, the different rhythms can also be perceived and furthered by the strong, noticeable differences between modern planning and ancient city structures, as pointed out by Sitte and Giovannoni: large-scale avenues, geometric alignments, regular blocks, and open spaces in modern cities, against smaller streets, irregular paths, and more typological variation in buildings in historic districts. These differences affect not only the sensory experience, but also the rhythm of the actions and activities that occur in these distinct places.

## Atmospheres

When talking about historic cities, historic buildings, ruins and rhythms and how these affect the urban aesthetic experience, we could probably also evoke a notion like *atmosphere*, which resonates other concepts like «*stimmung*», mood, «*aura*» or *ambiance* in a conceptual constellation that somehow refers to the affective tonality of places and/or situations. This

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40 Andrea Borsari, “Dissonant Times,” in *Temporary: Citizenship, Architecture and City*, ed. A. Borsari, A. Trentin and P. Ascari (Springer, 2024), 109-119.

41 Borsari here evokes Enrico Traverso’s analysis of the social and cultural consequences of “presentism”, François Hartog’s coined regime of historicity. See Borsari, “Dissonant Times”, 114-15.

ontologically peculiar, hybrid, category<sup>42</sup> is linked not only to the sensory, the material (even the meteorological), but also to the symbolic and cultural characteristics of a particular environment or urban context, a part of a city or the whole city. But it is precisely its ephemerality and transience, the fact that it emerges and endures, that it may change, evolve, and eventually disappear, that makes it appropriate to take the temperature of the historical dimension of streets, neighbourhoods, and cities.

## Cityscape

And finally, as a summation of the preceding ones, the *cityscape*,<sup>43</sup> which is not only a visual perspective of the urban landscape, since the city is not just a complex set of visible surfaces, but a dynamic, multisensory and symbolic environment. Thus, the cityscape should also include the social “action” of the city, the character of its everyday life, its cultural idiosyncrasies, its historical narratives, symbols and icons. In a way, we could say that the cityscape includes, or stems from, the city's *atmospheres*, *rhythms* and *ruins*, so its historical character and its historicity is expressed and represented in this image or collection of images (not only in its visual but in the multimodal sense) of the city.

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The aesthetic experience of the urban landscape is thus always affected by the multilayered historicity of a city, which is embroidered in its texture and even in its structure, and results, not only from the contingencies of the (spatio-)temporal processes of urbanization, but also from the socio-political, economic, cultural and symbolic strategies in the perception and representation of that history. As previously shown, the historic is associated with a variety of values and layers of meaning related to collective memory – which is often objectified in commemorative monuments, groups of buildings, or whole districts – and related to several historicization and aestheticization processes that can result in different attitudes and perceptions, ranging from impulses to restore and preserve to romantic contemplation and worship of ruins. Ultimately, this can turn historic districts into lifeless, museum-like scenery and frequently monetized as a touristic asset or transformed into symbolic urban heritage capital. But if, on the contrary, it can be wisely integrated into the urban structure and harmonized with the rhythms and dynamic life of the city, with its atmospheres and overall cityscape, it can certainly allow meaningful and valuable aesthetic experiences.

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42 Tonino Griffero calls it a “quasi-thing”, not entirely subjective, neither entirely objective. See Tonino Griffero, *Quasi-Things. The Paradigm of Atmospheres*, trans. Sarah de Sanctis (New York: Suny Press, 2017).

43 Even though we could find glimpses of a notion of urban landscapes or images of the city already in authors such as Simmel, Sitte, Kracauer or Benjamin, and a more stabilized even if mostly focused on the perceptual and cognitive “imageability” of the city with Kevin Lynch, I am here expanding the notion of cityscape to include the social, cultural and symbolic landscape of the urban experience. See Nuno Fonseca, “On Some Aesthetic Categories of Urban Experience”, 356-7.

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