ARCHITECTURE

29 Giglio Fiorentino. Reconstruction of the plan (ASF *Uff. Cast., Rocche,* 1, fols. 15v – 18r, 19 May 1350. Text and translation in Document 19).
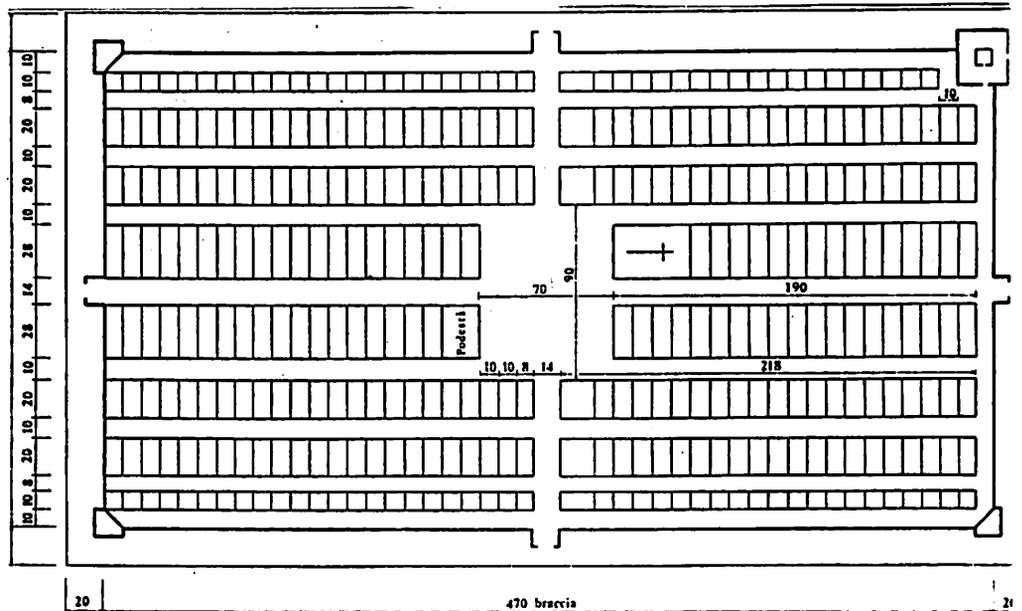
Florentine New Towns: Urban Design in the late Middle Ages. David Friedman. (Architectural History Foundation/MIT Press, $45.)

Nowhere is architecture more closely linked with public policy than in the new towns built by the city of Florence in the early 14th century. As part of a concerted effort to destroy the influence of the landed nobility and gain the allegiance of the rural populace, the Florentine merchant commune established five new towns on the main roads out of the city—San Giovanni, Castelfranco, and Terranuova, on the southern road leading through the Chianti hills to Arezzo and on to Rome, and Scarperia and Firenzuola, on the northern road leading through the Appennines to Germany and Switzerland. In a book remarkable both for its beauty and for its fine writing, David Friedman presents the story of these towns as the story of urban aspirations defined by architectural form.

The merchant commune came to power in Florence in 1282. At once the communal government set about the task of securing its trade routes, and access to its hinterland, known as the *contado*. Although the villagers of the countryside sought Florentine protection from the feuding nobles whom they served, they were not expected to move voluntarily into the new towns. The policy was to resettle them *en masse* within the fortified walls of each town, often moving rural parish churches into the towns along with the people. The policy thus aimed to change the character of the countryside and to forge strong bonds between the outpost communities and Florence.

Within a short time, a new urban order emerged in these rustic, often war-torn areas. According to Friedman, it was the orthogonal and symmetrical town plans that were largely responsible for the society that evolved there. Unlike the maze-like street patterns associated with medieval towns, where powerful noble families controlled fortified and inaccessible precincts, streets in the new towns ran straight and crossed at right angles. Through the pattern of open streets, the communal government asserted its authority over the territory and its inhabitants.

Planners sited each town so that its principal axis was the existing main road. A cross-axis perpendicular to the main road defined a central open plaza, focus of the town's life. Friedman is careful to avoid the term "grid" because new town plans reveal a design sophistication that goes beyond a simple grid composed of evenly spaced elements. Through an analysis that is solidly documented and draws from varied sources, Friedman meticulously uncovers the geometry that underlies the plans and makes a strong case for the role of design professionals, not just city officials or military experts, in the planning process.

"The Florentine new towns were works of art in the literal sense that their designers were artists," Friedman says. The designers were mason-architects associated with major buildings projects in Florence, including the construction of the new cathedral and the monumental town hall—projects initiated by the merchant commune soon after it came to power. While Friedman cites numerous examples of other medieval European new towns, he says that none, aside from those founded by Florence, left evidence that esthetic considerations played a role in their design.

In Florence, at the time of the new town expansion, there was increased appreciation for straight, smooth, paved streets, what Friedman calls "the basic unit in the new urbanism." Civic leaders saw beauty in properly arranged streets and also in the closely controlled wall of building facades enclosing the streets. With the power of eminent domain and extensive design control devices, Florence began to straighten its streets and unify the city with a regularized system of public spaces even before Renaissance ideals were widely recognized in Italy. If the city encountered obstacles in its efforts to rationalize the pre-existing plan, already sprawling and intricate, it was able to realize an ideal order in the new towns that it created and controlled.

Between 1299 and 1350, the new towns showed a gradual trend toward more regular street schemes and a more regularized arrangement of lots. Viewed as egalitarian places, the towns were designed to accommodate few distinctions in class or income. A new building type emerged at the same time in Florence, the large private palace oriented to the public street rather than to a privately controlled enclave. But no such landmarks appeared in the new towns or even just outside of them, because wealthy magnates were prevented from buying land in or near the towns.

Friedman tells us that the uprooted villagers eagerly sought the sanctuary of the new towns. He says that there is little evidence that they resisted resettlement and the subsequent obliteration of their villages. But how could people's lives be so completely changed without a noticeable impact? Leaving behind feudal servitude and being exempt from all taxes as they constructed the new towns for Florence, the new city dwellers must have found the rel-

ative security of town life far superior to isolated country living, but it is hard to believe the transition was a smooth or easy one.

In an attempt to maintain former village ties, the urban immigrants defined districts for themselves within the first new towns, generally gathering around their churches. But fragmentation of the population led to civil disturbances. Designers moved quickly to alter the street and lot plans. Aspects of Terranuova's 1337 plan that supported neighborhood identity are absent from the 1350 plan for Giglio Fiorentino, where there is only one church sited on a single central square, and other features of the town layout that supported separate neighborhood identities are absent. The plan for the unrealized town of Giglio is so regular and so ordered by precise proportions that it resembles a building plan by Mies van der Rohe.

As planners eliminated more and more of the eccentricity of organic growth from the layout of these environments, did the towns really achieve a greater sense of popular unity? Or is it possible that they showed less public spirit as the scale of the neighborhood increased and the sectional identity decreased? There is no way to answer these puzzling questions from available evidence, but they are no less relevant today than they were 600 years ago.

Friedman teaches architectural history at MIT, and MIT published the book in association with the Architectural History Foundation. It is no surprise, therefore, to find the book a beautiful collection of black-and-white photographs, elegantly drawn plans, and many other fine illustrations. Even the cover, a 1584 view of Florence reproduced in sienna, with blue and black titles, is handsome and worth noting.

It is due to the richness of the material in the Florentine archives that Friedman was able to reconstruct this chapter of medieval history. This study combines the art historian's painstaking attention to artistic detail with the urban historian's keen awareness of interrelationships among social and political phenomena. Only because Friedman's perspective is so broad is he able to make such a convincing case for the Florentine new towns as purposeful works of art. Had he limited his purview to the appearance of the towns and to their architectural organization, his arguments would never have been as persuasive. It is his discovery of artistic intent and the subtle and not so subtle ways Florentine planners incorporated that intent into urban public policy that makes Friedman's book so unusual and satisfying. As a case study in urban design history, this book will appeal to architects, planners, historians, and all the fortunate travelers who have explored the Tuscan landscape or would like to do so.—JANE LOEFFLER

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