



**Conversations on composition.**  
**Interdisciplinary reflections on contemporary**  
**urban planning projects**  
English Version

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## 1. Composition and urban planning projects

A few years ago, speaking about an essay by Ladislav Tatarkiewicz, Bernardo Secchi pointed out that while form is a customary topic of discussion in many disciplines, this is not so in city planning practice. This attitude, whereby this topic is generally overlooked in the context of city planning disciplines and in many cases even meets with diffidence, can be also observed where the notion of composition is concerned, especially when it is construed as an activity to do with the organisation and management of actions in space. In the history of the discipline the theme of composition has behaved like a subterranean river that sometimes comes to the surface. In the recent past, as the debate began to focus on a description of the contemporary city and territory, this has remained concealed. As is known, between the late 1980s and the 1990s, a season of intensive research and project development made it possible to identify and give a name to new physical and social aspects of urban phenomena, through interpretative categories, geographic and anthropological approaches, observations of evolving practices and original lifestyles. The wealth of research works and projects produced during this period in Italy and in Europe redefined the very notion of city and contributed to a definitive validation of its multidimensional nature. Thus, describing acquired the dignity and the positive connotations of a planning activity, well beyond the contribution made by urban planning and architectural projects to making description into an investigative tool<sup>3</sup>.

While in the past the discourse about the role and the forms of a project remained beneath the surface, in recent years the theme has come to the fore and has been addressed by a number of authors asking questions about the form of a project, its function as a knowledge tool, what urban planning is all about<sup>4</sup>.

While a certain diffidence toward composition persists, this may be due to the plural roots of urban planning, which continue to coexist in practice, in the schools, in the institutions. This theme is *taken for granted* in a context where it is underpinned by a city planning tradition that admits no breaks with the methods and languages of architectural and landscaping composition and that deals with the organisation of activities and functions in space. Conversely, addressing the theme of composition may seem of little

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<sup>3</sup> In this connection, consider the ideas expressed by N.Privileggio in the introduction and the final essay contained in N. Privileggio (ed.), *La città come testo critico*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2008. On the sense and the need to move beyond the researches developed in Italy over the last twenty years, see C. Bianchetti, *Il novecento è davvero finito. Considerazioni sull'urbanistica*, Donzelli, Rome, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> On the relationship between the multiplicity of forms of the project, its capacity to generate knowledge, and the role of practical experience, see F. Infussi, "Fenomenologia del progetto mite: per una pratica progettuale inclusiva delle diversità", in A. Lanzani, S. Moroni, *Città e Azione pubblica. Riformismo al plurale*, Carocci, Rome, 2007; P. Viganò, *Territorio dell'urbanistica. Il progetto come produttore di conoscenza*, Officina, Rome, 2010; Gabellini, *Fare urbanistica. Esperienze, comunicazione, memoria*. Carocci, Rome, 2010.



consequence or even *inappropriate* if urban design projects are approached from the standpoints of social and geographic sciences, planning, territorial engineering. This underscores the need for a unbiased reflection on the term and concept of composition and its relationship with urban planning projects.

The necessary coming together of different bodies of knowledge, techniques and skills engenders new, unexpected forms of (urban planning) project. And this is precisely the reason why it is important to recognise that the notion of composition belongs to a planning practice approach encompassing many disciplines and techniques, where its ingrained interdisciplinary condition may find full expression. In this perspective, composition may be viewed as an activity stemming from a responsible choice, whereby objects and situations are brought together through an ability to build significant correlations with the context and with the recipients: an activity that shares many features with other artistic and creative practices that can boast a full awareness, long-standing familiarity and working traditions with the themes, the techniques and the reasons of composition.

## **2. Composition dialogues: starting from the outcomes, reflecting in order to take action**

This article develops the contents of a first cycle of seminars on composition held at the Scuola di Architettura e Società of the Politecnico di Milano, between May and June 2010, within the framework of a study conducted by the two authors on the *modalities, forms and techniques* of contemporary urban planning.

As a suitable means to reflect on contemporary urban projects and composition practices it was decided to examine different disciplines before taking up again the specific aspects of the town planner's job in order to identify analogies and differences in the procedures, account duly taken of the distinctness of the techniques and materials employed.

These notes should be viewed as a path that moves away from the specific aspects associated with our discipline to feed the discourse with suggestions coming from other areas. To this end, designers, artists and craftsmen, some of them from fields close to urban planning, such as architecture or photography, and others from very distant fields, such as choreography, cooking, music, visual communications, theatre and opera directing, were invited to exchange ideas about composition by presenting their latest and most significant works. By illustrating their experiences and reflecting on their jobs, and speaking with reference to the specific materials used and the results obtained, each speaker highlighted the essential aspects of his/her composition process and, at the same time, outlined elements of a more general nature. The exchange took place live - between



two guests, the moderators and the participants attending each seminar<sup>5</sup>, and remotely - statements were collected in a video that was used to introduce the discussion during the

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<sup>5</sup> The guests were Massimiliano Viel, Alessandro Cimmino, Giovanni Anceschi, Pietro Leemann, Enzo Procopio, Francesco Micheli, Beniamino Servino.

Massimiliano Viel (<http://www.massimilianoviel.net>), composer. Studied piano, electronic music, conducting, ethnomusicology and composition in Milan, Paris, Salzburg and Odense. Keenly interested in the relationship between music and other forms of expression, he has worked on a wide variety of performances in many fields: theatre, videos, ballet. He collaborates with Otolab and in 2003 founded Sincronie, an organisation devoted to exploring the encounter between "classical" music traditions and the contradictions of the contemporary world through the creation of spectacular events. He holds the chair of "Composition Elements" at the Bozen Conservatory.

Alessandro Cimmino (<http://www.alessandrocimmino.com>), photographer, always engaged in projects concerning the territory and the transformations taking place in the urban landscape. His works have been displayed at many shows and exhibitions in Italy and abroad (Biella, Genoa, Naples, Nuremberg, Weimar and Berlin, Zurich and Cologne). 2006 saw his photos on display at a one-man show, Fotografie – CCTV, at the Nowhere Gallery of Milan and a one-man show, Works, at the Overfoto Gallery in Naples.

Giovanni Anceschi (<http://www.iuav.it/Ateneo1/docenti/design-e-a/docenti-st/Giovanni-A>), designer and essayist, after his experience with the Programmed Art movement, in the 1960s, he taught at the Ulm School. He is the editor of a magazine, "il Verri", the author of many books, the 1998 Compasso d'Oro, and the 1999 Icoграда Excellence Award for distinguished services to graphic design. He teaches visual communication at claDIS, heads the multimedia laboratory at clasVEM, and is full professor of industrial design at the IUAV of Venice.

Pietro Leemann (<http://www.joia.it>), chef. After working traditional cuisine restaurants in Italy and France, he embraced the revolution of the "Nouvelle cuisine" and Italian creative cuisine, working with Gualtiero Marchesi and Fredy Girardet, to arrive at a natural cuisine philosophy highly original and innovative, appreciated at the international level. Since 1989 has been the owner of "Joia, alta cucina naturale" in Milan, the first vegetarian restaurant in Europe to receive a Michelin star in 1996.

Enzo Procopio (<http://www.tiltspaziodanza.it>), choreographer. After attending the Folkwang Hochschule in Essen, he continued his education by studying with Peter Goss in Paris and the most important release technique teachers in New York. A teacher of contemporary dance since 1987, in 1994 he was invited to join the dancing department of the New York University as "visiting choreographer". Since 1996, the Compagnia Enzo Procopio has focused its attention on video dance. Videos such as "Colpi" and "Attraverso" have been projected and have received awards at the main international video art and video dance festivals. His video installation "Eco" (2006) was presented at the Teatro Valli in Reggio Emilia and at the Festa del Teatro in Milan, in 2007. In the course of the same year, his solo "Ozen" was presented at two festivals: "Solo in azione" in Milan and "Insoliti" in Turin.

Francesco Micheli (<http://www.francescomicheli.com>), director. After obtaining a university degree in Literature and graduating from the Civica Scuola d'Arte Drammatica "Paolo Grassi" of Milan, in 1977 he made his debut as opera director at La Scala Theatre Museum with La Cantarina by Niccolò Piccinni; since then has directed many operas in Italian and foreign theatres. Since 1997, has collaborated with Milan's Pomeriggi Musicali,

final seminar<sup>6</sup>. The guests presented their works in reply to a series of questions: what they believed composition to be, what devices and techniques they used, what was their relationship with the other players involved the process, what were the limits.

Two intentions underlie the choice of speakers and the style of the exchange. On account of its very nature and tradition, as well as the issues addressed, urban planning is at a crossroads where different disciplines come together: this is what prompted the desire to cross over into other realms to nurture the reflection on an interdisciplinary theme. The other goal was to reflect on theory and methods starting from the outcomes. This makes it possible to acknowledge in an efficacious, less rhetorical fashion the habitual and recurrent elements in the composition process, identify the tools and the techniques used, reconstruct recurrent working methods. These two goals – to promote an interchange of ideas between different disciplines and to start from the outcomes – are not extraneous to the fact that action is the focus of research. In recent years, the authors have practiced many different forms of project, on different scales, and often in an eclectic manner. Their interest in composition-related themes comes from an awareness that more and more frequently it proves necessary to reconstruct the reference framework and the specificity of a project, to define the materials to be used, and the limits, in a continuous tension between the need to acquire new skills and the need to use and refine - like craftsmen – well-established bodies of knowledge, all the time paying the utmost attention to the technical traditions of each.

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writing and staging several plays and shows in and off the theatrical environment; among these, we should mention *A Midsummer's Night Dream* by Shakespeare- Mendelssohn, the *Threepenny Opera* by Brecht-Weill, *Il Piccolo Mozart*, the *Musicians of Bremen*, the *Little Mermaid*, and, starting from these experiences, has initiated with non-theatrical organisations a collaboration in which the classical repertory meets the languages of the present day.

Beniamino Servino (<http://ec2.it/beniaminoservino/projects>), architect. Graduated with Michele Capobianco in Naples, in 1985. Works primarily in the field of architectural design and participates in numerous national and international competitions. His works have appeared on the most important national and international trade magazine. He is invited to display his works in Italy and abroad (e.g., at the 2002 Venice Biennial, at exhibitions on Italian architecture in New York and Beijing). In 2002 and 2004 was a candidate for the Mies Van der Rohe Award. In 2007 he received the International Award Architecture in Stone.

<sup>6</sup> The last meeting was attended by Aldo Cibic, Patrizia Gabellini, Francesco Infussi, Gabriele Pasqui, Cino Zucchi. The discussion was introduced by the project of the video "I dialoghi della composizione" (by Antonella Bruzzese, Antonio Longo and Federica Verona, that can be seen at [www.dialoghidellacomposizione.it](http://www.dialoghidellacomposizione.it)) and is based on interviews with the guests who attended the meetings and made it possible to carry out a process of selection and synthesis of the issues addressed.



### **3. Toward a repertory of shared themes: composition as practiced by other disciplines**

By juxtaposing different disciplinary frameworks and observing how each of them addresses the composition process one is forced to set aside specific aspects of products and techniques and to concentrate on the essence of the process observed. In this manner, it becomes possible to define a shared space where there is room for the interaction of a number of recurrent themes that cut across the board, themes to do with the methods and procedures of the composition process.

We are well aware that our reconnaissance encompassed a limited range of experiences from which to begin the analysis, and yet, from the exchange of opinions two main groups of questions concerning composition emerged, of special interest to town planners and urban projects. One question is about the technical dimension of the composition process and concerns “internal” aspects and rules: the case-by-case selection of materials, tools and procedures. The other question is about the modalities through which the composition process establishes relationships with space and with the context, conceived in the broadest acceptance of the terms.

#### **3.1 The technical dimension of the composition process: materials and tools**

##### **From a knowledge of simple materials to an understanding of the effects of combinations and interactions**

A frequent acceptance of the concept of composition is that of “putting together” simple materials, according to clear-cut criteria and goals<sup>7</sup> that presuppose a masterful use of the basic materials. Without a thorough knowledge of the characteristics and properties of these materials, it is impossible to make them interact efficaciously; this emerges clearly in the considerations voiced by Pietro Leeman when he underscores the importance of having a precise cognition of the taste, consistency and flavour of the different ingredients in order to create a dish.

Knowing the materials to be assembled means to have defined appropriate criteria for their selection and their utilisation in the composition process. Thus, the materials are never “given”, rather, they are the outcome of a choice, of a deliberate act of attribution of value and importance, as is the case in many other disciplines<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> This was the position of Giovanni Anceschi, who, during the seminar held on 31 May, introduced his comments by calling into question the very term and associating it with the notions of arrangement and giving shape. Composition is understood as both as the act of assembling different elements and as the creation of a malleable, adjustable form. See also G. Anceschi, *L'oggetto della raffigurazione*, Etas libri, Milan, 1992,

<sup>8</sup> In the field of urban studies, consider the notion that it takes an elementarist approach to understand the city and formulate a project, as proposed by P. Viganò, *La città elementare*, Skira, Milan, 2000.



However, a knowledge of the materials alone is not sufficient in the composition process: it is essential to be aware of the effects of their interaction or, in other words, of their compositional properties. In many instances, the “basic” materials are treated and altered with respect to their original state. They are the result of a partial composition. It means it takes an awareness not only of the simple materials, but also of the minimum composition units, using a language that is customary in the field of urban planning, the language of complex materials. Far from being a mere juxtaposition of ingredients, for a cook the composition process is an activity that unfolds over time. The composition process is construed as a sequence: it presupposes preliminary steps, includes a preparation stage and, finally, reaches out to a time that comes after the preparation, through the fine-tuning of the experience of the guest. As a result, the material of the composition acquires meaning not only from its intrinsic properties but also as a function of the way it is prepared, and, more importantly, from the changes it undergoes during its fruition.

### **Refining tools and techniques: the importance of repetition and practice**

The choice of tools and techniques changes the outcome of the composition process. Knowledge and control of the tools used and refined composition techniques are the fruit of painstaking, extensive work. This is the case when a photographer selects and tests out the lenses or analyses the variations of a frame, as illustrated by Alessandro Cimmino; it is the fruit of compositional research conducted through the practice of design, or a nearly obsessive repetition of the same shapes, as we heard from Beniamino Servino; it is the fine-tuning of a dancer’s movements or the musician’s sequences, as discussed by Enzo Procopio and Massimiliano Viel.

The examples mentioned in connection with these processes show that it is precisely through reiteration, at times in situations remote from the urgency of the relationship with the reality of things, that techniques and tools can be refined and perfected, their potential can be explored. Composition calls for patient, reflective practice, through an action, which, as pointed out by Richard Sennet, entails repetition, a systematic encounter with errors and corrections, in an experience relieved from the constraints of communication and relations<sup>9</sup>. An ongoing theoretical/practical exercise which is a common feature of artistic practices where the relationship with the world is frozen momentarily, and transformed into an instantaneous condition, outside history.

The immobility of the representation of the images by Beniamino Servino or the graphic visualisations of musical composers reveal a need to devise appropriate ways to investigate and interact with the world. As in the case of the musician who acquires the ability to perform any piece in his repertoire through systematic exercise, in the case of composition, practice invariably includes phases of internal fine-tuning accomplished by

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<sup>9</sup> See R. Sennet, op. cit., chapter 1 pp.27-29.

experimenting with, and adjusting, technical and theoretical skills, which, though they have no direct, immediate correlation with the action, nevertheless are of vital importance to it.

### **3.2. Composition in action: improvisation, tradition, directing**

#### **The unexpected as material to be included in the composition and the irreplaceable value of improvisation**

The composition skills obtained through technical refinement and control go hand in hand with the opposite theme, i.e., the surprise factor, the unexpected: there is an essential relationship between the will, albeit weak, to have full control over the expected result and what, mostly unexpectedly, actually happens. In many cases, this is the ingredient that makes a result unique.

Alessandro Cimmino presented a series of photos, of houses in the districts of Naples, taken by holding the shutter open for several minutes. His images, carefully prepared in terms of frames, are evidence of how composition is the capacity of combining expected elements and elements that may escape control into a consistent whole.

The capacity to deal with the unexpected leads us to the theme of improvisation. In dancing, where choreography is the pivotal term of reference, improvising is a method used to produce “choreographic materials” and the deviation between fixed elements and unexpected situations opens up further possibilities, which may then be adjusted and included in the choreography: in this manner the choreography is enriched and implemented in a continuous chain of improvements.

Improvisation does not mean proceeding at random, without any rule. It is the capacity to create a new order, a new consistent system. Procopio defines it as a sort of “automatic writing”, a creative process that comes in the wake of extensive training and the acquisition of appropriate mental schemes and rules of behaviour. The same applies to the jam sessions of jazz music, where improvisation stands for a series of variations within shared rhythmic patterns, resulting in new reconfigurations.

#### **Reinterpreting traditions: materials from history and the ability to make them current**

In one of his Norton Lectures<sup>10</sup>, Igor Stravinsky described the relationship of 20th century music with tradition: a disenchanting relationship, even cynical at times, within which historic materials take on a totally new form. Tradition is reinvented and becomes live material for the composition process. Opera director Francesco Micheli<sup>11</sup> does something of the kind in his “Opera Off” show format<sup>12</sup>, when – by experimenting with

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<sup>10</sup> I. Stravinskij, *Poetica della Musica*, Curci, Milan, 1943.

<sup>12</sup> Off Opera is a theatrical show format on and about opera, conceived by Francesco Micheli in collaboration with the theatres of Reggio Emilia with the aim to familiarise

hybrid formulas combining cinema, acting and original music – he reinterprets the materials of the opera repertory to conceive new forms and new contents. In a similar manner, Servino, in describing his design research work uses terms like *tradition*, *translation*, *betrayal*. The so-called *pennate* are small rural buildings that characterise the landscape of Campania: in Servino’s view they are the significant materials of a local tradition that manifests itself in the permanence of signs in the territory, a memory of old building methods and elements that are part of the shared image of those locations. These artefacts are studied, redesigned, reinterpreted, deformed, recontextualised. In other words, they are “translated” into new forms and eventually “betrayed” through the project that reconstructs their sense and functions. In this case, the composition process amounts to re-writing documents from the past, where, in this case, the documents are the existing portions of the city, the types of construction we have inherited, the building traditions that have been passed down to us through generations.

### **Authoriality and different bodies of knowledge: composition as a coordination capability**

Lately, the notion of authoriality, whereby a work is associated with a single author, has been called into question in many fields, although the need to associate a work with a name persists, oftentimes due to formal rather than substantial reasons.

In addition to creating the choreography, Procopio makes dance videos. A dance video is a highly sophisticated artistic product, that entails the participation of different figures; dancers, scenery designers, directors, musicians. It is born of a succession of actions that starts with the choreographer’s idea, develops with the execution by the dancers and their ability to depart from the original template with their interpretation, and becomes a finished product through a chain of actions including shooting, frame selection, video editing, post-production, and the (subsequent) construction of the soundtrack to back up the scene. The scene is conceived by the scenographer in close correlation with the bodies of the dancers, who do not merely follow the indications of the choreographer, but also improvise. The musician composes his track on the finished video and music follows the dance. So, who is the author of the composition?

Apart from the need to attribute a work to a single author who assumes responsibility for the choices and the final control, the experience of the choreographer shows clearly how not just the production of the final product, but the stage of conception – and composition – also depends on a multiplicity of subjects. In this perspective, the composition process is close to directing, conceived as a capability to have different subjects and fields of expertise interact with one another in order to accomplish the intended purpose. Ultimately, this demonstrates that compositional know-how does not

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high school students with opera theatre languages and techniques.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GAt1-ToyH0>



amount solely to taking responsibility for the choices that are made, it also includes coordination skills: aspects that are closely tied with the modalities of urban planning composition and the role of the city planner.

#### **4. The ethics of composition and correspondence to a system of values**

We believe that our reconnaissance of composition practices has identified a number of relevant aspects. Surely, the issues addressed (mastery of both the materials and the effects of their combinations and interaction; the need to refine the techniques and tools through practice and repetition; the capability to include the unexpected in the design and composition process while taking context data into due account; the ability to coordinate different bodies of knowledge) are not new in the debate about the construction of projects for the city. However, the exchange of ideas undertaken has identified a number of recurrent characteristics of the design process that we believe may contribute to realising the wisdom of setting aside the “diffidence” toward form and composition, which we mentioned above, and to go back to a reflection on the specific features of composition in urban planning and design.

Let us conclude by mentioning one final issue, raised by Pietro Leeman. The chef reminded us that the product of the composition process – in his case, a dish – should correspond to a system of values. A composition should reflect the convictions of the person that brings it into existence, This implies that a product should be consistent with the thinking that has generated it, and also that it calls for the ability to translate an idea into a project. This last consideration has to do with the ethical dimension of the composition process: to include this dimension among the goals of the creative/composition process amounts to saying that the results must be evaluated in terms of their correspondence to the initial intentions, their capacity to reflect ideas, and, where applicable, to reflect the underlying system of values. Once again, we think this is an excellent consideration, worth transferring to the reflection on the role of composition in urban planning.



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