

Grammars of Urban Space: A. Perret's Project for Place de l'Hôtel de Ville in Le Havre

Antonio Nitti

PhD candidate in Architecture, Departement of Architecture, University of Bologna
Via Cavalcavia 61, 47521 Cesena, Italy
nittiant@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study proposes to recognize that 'idea of city' at the foundation of the A. Perret's project for Le Havre. This experience seems to be defined as a paradigm in the relationship between building typology, urban morphology and physical geography: the aggregation of residential collective buildings defines those monumental places through which the city represents itself in front of those great forms of physical geography in which the project recognizes the identity of the *locus*.

This foundational relationship seems however to be achieved through the establishment of an appropriate grammar of urban form, through which the 'internal' space of the city defines a significant relation with the 'external' spaces of the nature and with the great forms of physical geography.

In the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville this grammar manifests itself in the most eloquent expression. In this place the city, thanks to the extraordinary expansion of the open space, defines its relation with the cliff, which in this way is introjected in the urban form. On the other hand, the definition of those spaces more contracts, such as the courts of the residential collective building, seems to affirm the value of the circumscribed space. The research of A. Perret is therefore oriented to define the correct syntactic relationships between spaces of different signification: the analytical definition of the parts that make up the edge of the void and the typological variation of these buildings makes intelligible the relations between the circumscribed spaces of residences and the dilated size of public places. In this way the urban space assumes the urbanity and the condition of finiteness of the historical city, but defines a significant relationship with the outdoor spaces of nature, thus acquiring the 'dimension' of the contemporary city.

KEYWORDS: Auguste Perret, Le Havre, Place de l'Hotel de Ville, Physical geography, Urban morphology, Building typology.

1 LE HAVRE: THE 'METROPOLIS' AS ENSEMBLE OF MONUMENTAL PLACES.

This study assumes as central the recognition of that 'idea of city' at the basis of A. Perret's project for the post-war reconstruction of Le Havre: it proposes to analyse the meaning and grammar of its form.

This experience, in fact, seems to be defined as a paradigm in the relationship between building typology, urban morphology and physical geography: the aggregation of several residences, reduced to the form of unitary buildings, defines the monumental places of the city, which structure its form through their relations. It also seems possible to say that in these places the city establishes a significant relation with the great forms of physical geography in which the project recognizes the identity of the *locus*, and yet, that the mutual relations of the geographical elements define the «specific character of the city» (Gregotti, 1957), and constitute the «etymological root of its *fatti urbani*» (Marti Aris, 2005) Figure 1.

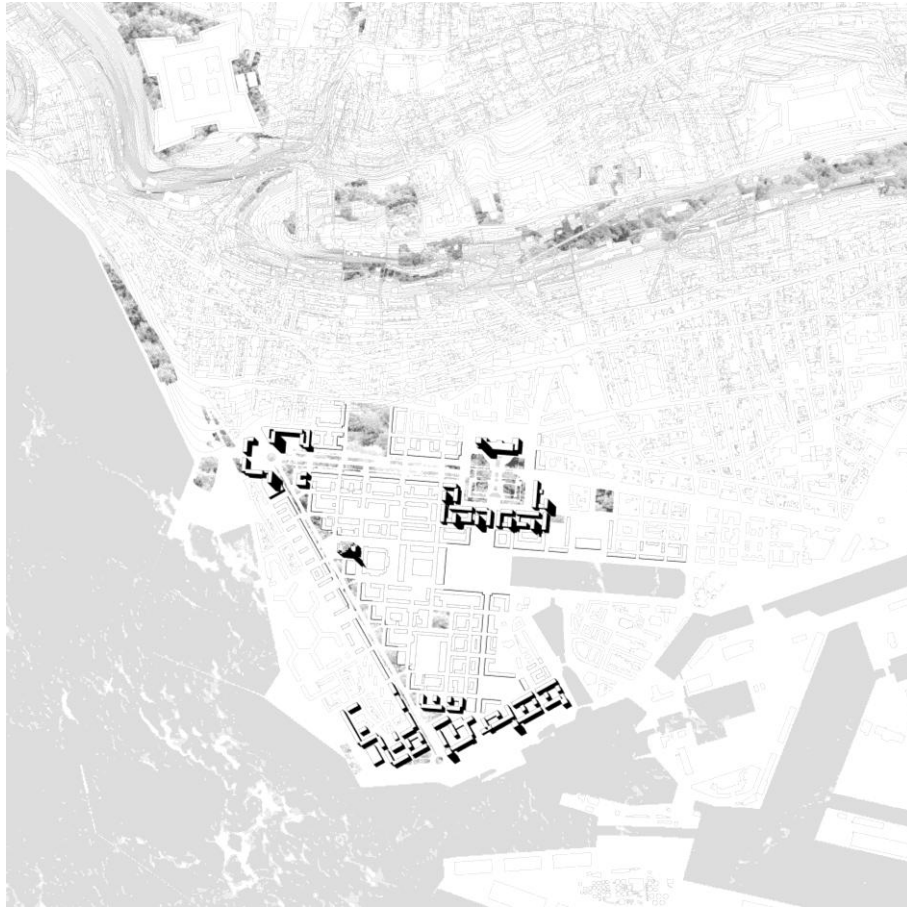


Figure 1: Le Havre. Planivolumetric. Drawing of the author.

It is therefore in this significant relationship between the settlement principles of urban form and the morphological ones of territory that could be identified the necessary foundation of the A. Perret's project for Le Havre.

Already through its own location, Le Havre describes the conspicuity of that point of physical geography identified, along the Atlantic coast of Normandy, by the estuary of the Seine. The city, in particular, is located in a narrow plain strongly characterized in its interior by the presence of port basins, on the north by the abrupt difference in height of the cliff, on the south by the mouth of the river, and on the west by the Atlantic Ocean.

It seems possible to say that in the form itself of Le Havre is recognizable a reflection of this particular geographical condition. Significant, in fact, in the A. Perret's project, is primarily the choice of structuring the urban form on the dialectic relationship between two orthogonal tissues rotated between them, recognized as autonomous and related paratactically in a state of tension, and not of continuity, relative to one another. Both of them, while the orthogonality of their own plant, describe the location of the city on the plain: one assumes, however, the orientation of the Bassin du Commerce, the other adapts itself to the coastline, and builds the front of the city on the river and its limit on the external space of the ocean. The two tissues that define the urban form appear clearly structured and hinged on the three monumental spaces of Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, Porte Océane and Front-de-mer Sud, in which the city represent itself, while interpreting the characters, in front of the three great geographical forms of the cliff, the Atlantic Ocean and the estuary of the Seine.

The significance of these places within the city is attained, as well as by means of a principle of extraordinary expansion of space, also through the recourse to tower buildings, which puts them in a constant relationship of visual triangulation, in order to make eloquent the hierarchies that govern the urban form. In each of these places is declined the role of the tower within the 'compact' city, for which are defined, from time to time, form, proportions and syntax necessary to establish the identity of the places where these are located. On the one hand, the Tour de l'Hôtel de Ville and the bell tower of the Church of Saint Joseph arise 'isolated' as cornerstones of urban form, respectively, to conclude the Rue de Paris and the axis defined by the Bassin du Commerce. On the other hand, the residential towers of the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville define a 'system' similar to one of a 'castle' that surrounds a square whose size allows to establish a significant relationship with the cliff. The towers of the Porte Océane are composed 'twin', to establish, as in a 'city gate' and through the opening in the enclosure, the relationship between the 'internity' of the city and the external space of the Atlantic Ocean. Those of Front-de-mer Sud are ordained in a 'succession' that defines, such as bastions and towers of a 'city walls', the 'colonnaded' front of the city along the river.

2 THE URBAN SPACE: FORMS AND CHARACTERS.

The foundational relationship between the three categories of building typology, urban morphology and physical geography seems to be achieved, as well as by means of a principle of correspondence between these monumental spaces and the form of the territory, also and above all through the definition of an appropriate grammar of urban form. Its significance is based on the recognition of two different and possible characters of urban space, on the assumption, at the same time, of the value of the enclosed space and the value of the open space. It could be affirmed that in this aspect can be recognized the founding principles of research, whose roots lie in some particular experiences that allow us to define a more general 'culture of inhabiting', in which we can place the reflection of A. Perret (Cohen et al., 2002). The realization already of the Parisian *Places Royales* contained in fact the seeds of a principle through which the civic space of the square, extraordinarily dilated, as in the Place des Vosges or Vendôme, or even open, as in La Concorde, reverberated in the contracted spaces of residential courts of the *Hôtels Particuliers* that made up the margin, or some of its parts, of the great void.

On the one hand, therefore, this grammar seems to pursue the character of urbanity and to evoke the spatial density of the historic city, yet in recognizing its civic value and identity in the 'internity' of its spaces. As the experience of history, in fact, the urban public spaces, attributable to the paradigmatic forms of the street and the square, and those of the residence, recognizable in the forms of the court, are clearly identified by means of definition of the limit that circumscribes and qualifies them as 'internal'.

On the other hand, even if identified through the construction of a margin, these places assume an entirely new character compared to the one of previous historical experience. First of all, the extraordinary expansion of the monumental spaces of the city seems to manifest the will of establish a significant relationship between its 'internal' spaces and the 'open' and 'vast' spaces of the nature, to describe, through properly urban forms, the characters of the great forms of physical geography. Secondly, it can be argued that, while referring to conditions of 'internity', there is a clear choice not to define the public spaces of the city and the residence through the conclusion and continuity of their enclosures, but to identify them through the juxtaposition of the parts composing the margin. Its points of discontinuity manifest with eloquence the principle of concatenation which structures the continuity of these places and allows us to combine the contracted spaces of the residence with those extraordinarily enlarged of the city, and so it makes clear the relationship that these spaces establish with the great forms of physical geography.

2.1 Place de l'Hôtel de Ville: the square and the courts.

The Place de l'Hôtel de Ville is almost certainly the place of the city in which this grammar of urban form manifests itself in the most eloquent expression Figure 2.

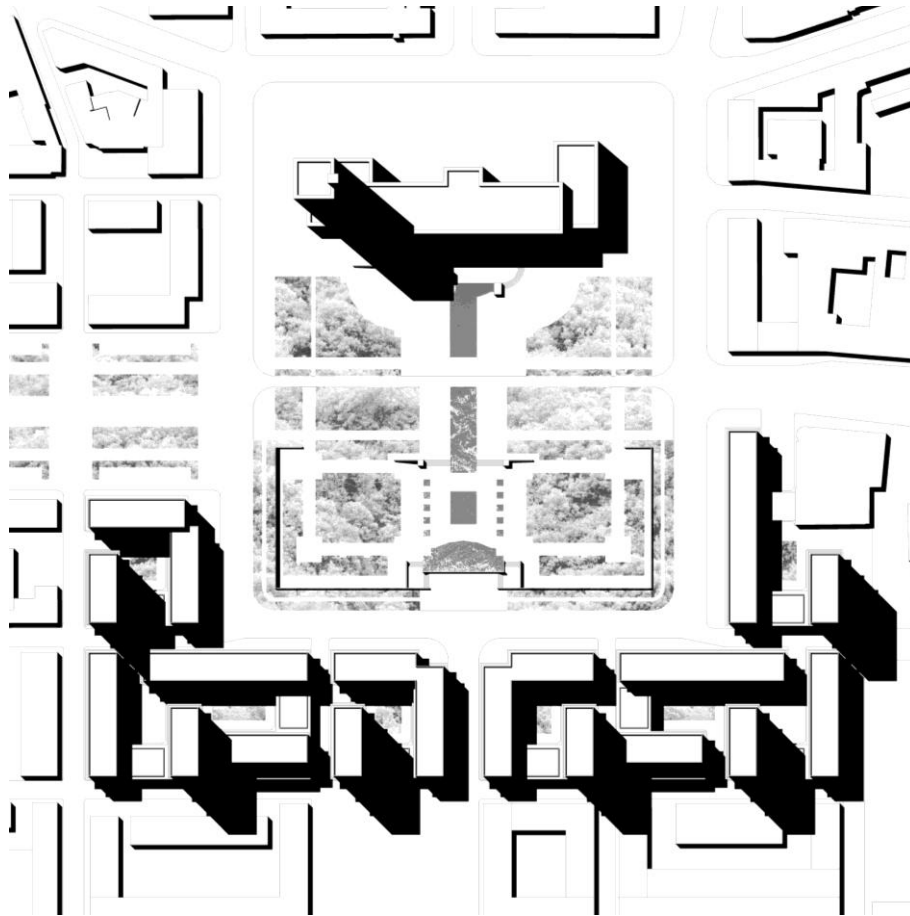


Figure 2: Place de l'Hôtel de Ville. Planivolumetric. Drawing of the author.

The square is the major place of those, the Avenue Foch and the Porte Océane, which define a more comprehensive system that, through the concatenation of spaces with different meaning and character, monumentalizes the foot of the cliff till the edge of the ocean. However, it seems that its significance and hierarchy than the other monumental places of the city are in some way the result, as well as its undoubted civic value, even of a series of further relationship that 'inform' this space.

As in some remarkable experiences in the history, if we think for example to the Place de la Concorde in Paris and the 'system' defined between the vast and open spaces of the Tuileries Gardens, the course of the River Seine and the Champs Elysées, the 'square' is defined as a necessary form to make intelligible the complexity of the mutual relations between the city and the many forms of nature. Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, in fact, is the place where the city, thanks to the extraordinary expansion of the open space, so vast as to visually sight it, represent itself in front of the cliff, which resonates in this way, looming, inside the urban form. Unlike other monumental places of the city, which are defined in relation to each one of the forms of physical geography, this one, by virtue of its constituent grammars, expresses its significance by establishing other relationships with the more distant horizons of the Ocean on one side and the harbor basins and the estuary of the Seine on the other. The Place de l'Hôtel de Ville arises therefore as a 'summary' of the many relationship that the city builds with the forms of territory.

The square results to be identified on the one hand by the Hôtel de Ville and his 'isolated' tower, which respectively builds the 'foot' of the cliff through the giant order of columns of the portico and as a *beffroi* manifests the civic value of the place, and on the other by a system of court blocks and residential towers, as a 'castle' which surrounds through its concavity a part of the space of the square Figure 3.

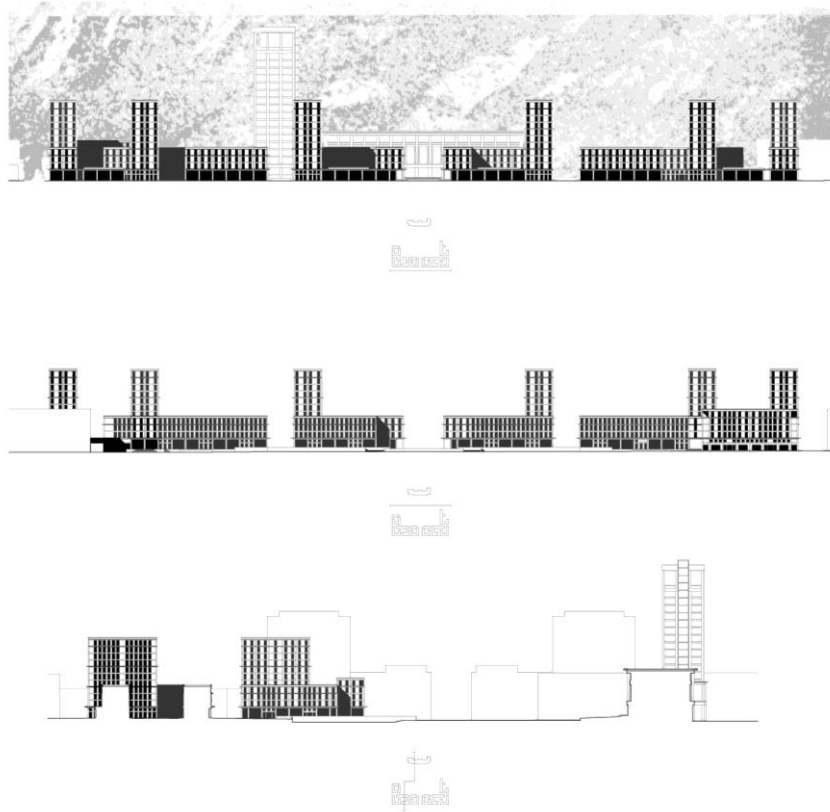


Figure 3: Place de l'Hôtel de Ville. Elevations and sections. Drawing of the author.

The relation between the civic and residential part of the square, 'measured' by the extraordinary expansion of the Avenue Foch, allows us to make and establish a meaningful relationship with that fragment of the Atlantic horizon framed by the far opening of the Porte Océane. The finiteness of the square, as well as its monumentality, are achieved through that axis of partial symmetry coincident with the Rue de Paris, whose porticoes frame the Seine estuary and harbor basins. The variations compared to this order, achieved through the asymmetrical placement of the Tour de l'Hôtel de Ville and the different planimetric articulation of some of the residences that build the margin, describe different conditions of urban form and territory in relation to the square, emphasizing in this way the relationship of concatenation with the Avenue Foch and Porte Océane.

The significant backing of the tower buildings compared to 'bars' defines clear hierarchies. On one hand the tower of the Hôtel de Ville and the residential ones identify as unitary the system constituted by the square and the courts. The relations between the towers, both civic and residential, qualify within the city the uniqueness of the place and their form defines clearly its meaning. On the other hand the giant order of the front of the Hôtel de Ville and the most domestic one of the 'bars' build the margin of the space, thus concurring in the definition of the 'internities', at different scale, of the square and residential courts.

The vastness of the square is controlled analytically, identifying its constituent parts, corresponding to the roads that run along the perimeter or to a variety of places in its central part, at different levels compared to those of the tissue road. Moreover, it seems possible to affirm that the representation of the identity and character of this place, as in some of the Parisian *Places Royales*, is achieved through the variation of the forms that nature can assume 'domesticated' and introjected inside the square. Figure 4.

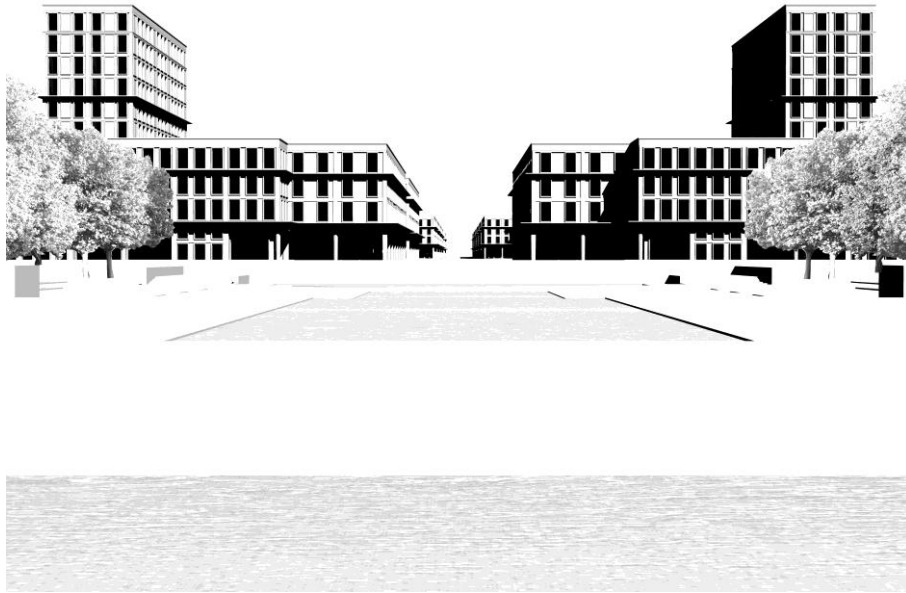


Figure 4: Place de l'Hôtel de Ville. Perspective of the square. Drawing of the author.

The spaces which order the central part of the square are in fact strongly characterized by a system of gardens, which confirm and reinforce the relationships that this place defines with the great forms of physical geography, according to that tradition which has its roots in the experiences of A. Le Nôtre (Laurent et al., 2006). This area is structured by a succession of spaces of different character, which underline the civic value of the site in the form of the podium on which stands the Hôtel de Ville, or 'domesticate' the naturalness of the cliff in the forms of a lawn or rows of trees. Each of these spaces is concluded, made recognizable, and brought back to a smaller scale than the vastness of the square through that points of discontinuity which allow us to achieve the cliff and the natural horizons of the Ocean and of the estuary of the Seine, and adjust the articulation of the soil. Significant are in fact, in the understanding of the relationships that order this spatial complexity, even those sensible variations in height that allow us to connect the elevated portion of the Hôtel de Ville to the lower gardens next to residences along the southern edge of the square. The unity of this concatenation of gardens and podiums is also achieved and emphasized through a linear succession of fountains which introjects in the square the form of the water, reflection of the close harbor basins and of the wider ocean.

2.2 Place de l'Hôtel de Ville: the towers and the enclosure.

This reflection on the urban space invests finally the construction of the block, to which is still attributed the possibility of being the constitutive syntagm of urban form, not without a necessary refoundation of its form and meaning Figure 5.



Figure 5: Place de l'Hôtel de Ville. Perspective of the courts. Drawing of the author.

In the form of these blocks, in fact, seems to be recognizable the identification of a 'measure' of higher order and complexity than the one defined by the urban block in its historical form. This is necessary to express 'organically' the system of relations between the vastness of civic space and the contraction of residential ones. These blocks are conformed in such a way as to define a 'unitary system' which at the same time assumes the scale of the space of the square, but is able to contemplate internally the residential spaces of courts and those of streets that cross it and relate its 'internity' to the public space of the city. So the typological variation of its constituent parts, 'bars' and towers, as well as being evocative of the complexity of the historical city, assumes a necessary role in order to make intelligible this kind of relations. The 'bars' are placed, therefore, to define the perimeter, more or less permeable, of this system; the towers instead, through their position and form, measure the vastness of the space and underline its urban value.

The continuity of their basements defines, through its planimetric disposition, a succession of courts, ordered according to different lying position that emphasizes their autonomy. These are related one to each other through the 'intervals' between the parts or by means of 'passages' opened inside the building curtain, which define the thresholds according to different forms and characters.

The planimetric disposition of the basements of buildings, although characterized by a marked continuity between the parts, suggests the definition of the grammar of parataxis that relates the building types. Eloquent in fact are the location of the 'passages', which discretize the building curtain in the corner points of the precincts, and above all, the corner conditions of the blocks, settled through a

disposition in 'whirlwind', or through the identification of a syntax which let recognize the juxtaposition of autonomous parts despite their continuity.

Over the basement, thanks to a higher discretization of the parties, this grammar becomes clearly evident. The order identified by the symmetrical placement of the tower buildings among the urban space, is 'declined' through the topological variation of the buildings that build the margin. The front on the monumental space of the square is in fact defined by a higher compactness and continuity of the limit, that through the backing of tower buildings gives 'thickness' to the margin and suggests the complexity of the interior space over the edge. The front on the Rue de Paris is instead characterized by a succession of porticoes which relate to the giant order of the Hôtel de Ville with the loggias that the Front-de-Mer Sud builds on the Seine. The front on the space more domestic and measured of the Rue V. Hugo, located in the south, is instead characterized, in contrast to the first, by a volumetric articulation that 'opens' and makes clearly recognizable the succession of residential courts. The 'bar' that builds the southern edge of the block sets back from the tower buildings among which is included, to qualify through this gap, the threshold that allows access to the interior of the courts. The alignment with the towers that frame it, and so the continuity of the street façade, is achieved through a deep porch, juxtaposed to the building, which correspond to the upper floor a series of 'balconies' which underline the character of domesticity and define the facing of these units on the street.

At least, in order to define the identity and the relationship between building types, seems to be clear the recourse to the 'overlap of the order'. The continuity of the order of basements or the solutions of continuity of their elevations allow us to identify each of these types as independent, but to relate at the same time in unitary systems. Moreover, the research of those 'convenient' forms which define from time to time the different orders, and the declination of their relationship allows to achieve the appropriate character for each of the parts that compose the block and define the character of the urban space.

3 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the reflection developed by A. Perret in the project for Le Havre expresses its value within that research, still needed, on the project of contemporary city: this one, in fact, «have a validity that is stronger than the aesthetic value, because it adheres to and interprets the development of city, because it is urbanistically valid» (Polesello et al., 1960). To this experience must be given the credited for having paradigmatically dealt with the issues of a 'idea of the city' which refer to, of his identity in relations with the historical one and nature, and most importantly, to have recognized the identity and quality of inhabiting in the relationships between the residence and the public spaces of the city.

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