During Camillo Sitte’s lifetime (1843-1903) Vienna’s population quadrupled from half a million to nearly two million, making it the fourth largest European capital after London, Paris and Berlin. Such rapid growth created a sharp contrast between the old city centers and their new peripheries. He saw Vienna’s beautiful 13th century fortifications demolished beginning in 1857, and their slow substitution with the modern Ringstrasse in a relentless building process that continued after his death until the outbreak of WWI. As major building projects were undertaken along the Ringstrasse in the 1880s, Sitte took up the post of Director of Vienna’s School of Applied Arts (1883) and turned to the study of city building, or what we now call city planning and urban design. His training in medical school on aspects of vision, spatial perception and anatomy combined with accomplished drawing skills (he drew the illustrations for the 18-volume Quellenschriften für Kunstgeschichte (1871-72) by Rudolf Eitelberger von Edelberg and Albert Ilg) gave him a unique edge on the subject. He was concerned with human experience and perception, rather than engineering efficiency. He was dismayed by the primacy of engineering over art, and the resulting tendency to design urban expansions as gridiron layouts, as in New York’s 1811 Commissioners’ Plan or Ildefonso Cerdà’s 1859 plan for enlarging Barcelona. Repetitive straight streets might be efficient for traffic and infrastructure, but they amounted to dreadfully “meager and unimaginative” environments to live in. Sitte set out to improve on modern urban design by incorporating within it the artistic principles drawn from European historical precedents. He believed that new urban extensions should not just be efficient, they should also be as beautiful as the old city centers. The modern street need not be straight, he argued. Many other street configurations could rationalize traffic, facilitate the burial of sewage infrastructure, and increase natural light and ventilation to improve the quality of life. At the heart of Sitte’s work was a new theory of urban expansion, which in many ways transposed to the urban realm the core of contemporary theories about architectural additions: cities should expand according to the same aesthetic principles as the historic fabric they touch, just like architectural additions should imitate the style of the original monument. It is worth noting that Sitte was the son of an architect active in restoring historic buildings, and apprenticed to architect Heinrich von Ferstel at the Wiener Polytechnisches Institut (later the Technische Hochschule). Sitte studied the historic urban spaces he admired, analyzing the relationships between their streets, buildings, monuments and plazas as one would analyze the stylistic logic relating the parts to the whole in a building. His analyses revealed how essential the urban fabric surrounding, and often attached to, historic buildings was to their aesthetic beauty. His work became incredibly influential for subsequent theories of urban preservation, helping to turn the tide against the 19th century custom of “freeing” important monuments by demolishing the houses surrounding them.

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