Gustavo Giovannoni
The Theory of Pruning
(1931)

Translated by Cesare Birignani

Word Count: 2,250

After the various measures mentioned above [...] have removed from the old urban center its intense traffic and the causes of excessive congestion, the problems of hygienic, social, and sometimes even aesthetic and economic improvement can be seen in their specificity, once they are no longer confused and mixed up with the issues of the city’s road network.

There are problems of hygienic improvement [*risanamento*], namely to reduce the density of the population; to bring air and light into closed neighborhoods and thereby improve both the streets and the houses; to fight away the dirt that nests there, which often the broom alone cannot sweep. There are problems of social improvement, such as the removal, from the central zones, of the most poor houses, the brothels, the taverns, and the hotels of the lowest rank. There is also a problem of gradual economic and even aesthetic improvement [*valorizzazione*], namely to set free art elements that have been obstructed, to restore other elements, to prudently remove amorphous elements, to open up vistas and bring back to the urban center the healthy and fresh beauty of vegetation.

All this must be done “with patience and care,” without wishing to do too much or change too deeply the type, the order of the neighborhood. All this must be done by diffusion and not by a linear urban renewal [*sistemazione lineare*], with small local measures and not with great means, freeing without adding, improving without radically transforming.

The solution to achieve this goal while reconciling the three factors of the urban renewal [*sistemazione*] (i.e., the local circulation, the local artistic appearance, and the requirements of hygiene) is, in many cases, the method of pruning.¹

What characterizes this method is not the regularity of new streets, but their irregular widening; the demolition here and there of a house or a group of houses, and their replacement with a little piazza with a park within, a small lung in the old neighborhood; the street would then narrow down and then widen again shortly thereafter, adding variety of movement and associating effects of contrasts to the original building type, which would thus maintain all its artistic and environmental character. Some rays of sun would enter the neighborhood; some new vistas would be opened; and the old houses, too close to each other, would finally breathe.

The method, in other words, consists in demolishing small, non-contiguous sections; leaving free certain areas and rebuilding little or nothing; and reducing thus to a minimum the introduction of new elements, which are almost always inharmonious with the old urban fabric.
It consists in choosing carefully the areas to be improved, without preconceived geometrical ideas of rectilinear streets laid out with a constant section. It consists in demolishing the buildings of no interest; opening up the most dense and filthy blocks; and finally evaluating in terms of perspective the vistas that would frame the major monuments and the characteristic groups of houses.

Hygienic and artistic advantages would go hand in hand, and the reasons of future development would not exceed or threaten those of the current development. The advantages of such urban rehabilitation could be extended to an entire area; they would not be localized to one street or one piazza. The picturesque character inherent in the different groupings of buildings, in the contrasts of lights and shadows, would be maintained and perhaps even emphasized. The general conditions of the neighborhood would improve without radically changing its economic order, that is, without attempting to transform the neighborhood into something it could never be. The work would be realized gradually and would continue year after year with funds to be regularly approved in the municipal budget. [...]

Whereas the study of the problems concerning the building of new suburbs and the design of the road system should be as wide as possible, the study of the layout of the areas of the urban center should be small and limited; it should be done carefully, on a case-by-case basis. Based on a precise knowledge of the streets and houses of a neighborhood as well as its art and history, it would be necessary, first of all, to determine the neighborhood’s unalterable cornerstones, that is, the buildings with a historic and artistic character that must be conserved, and the works and groups of works whose environment should be preserved. The possibility of pruning must then be considered from other points of view: the light and air that a partial demolition would bring to neighboring houses; the perspectival effects that would be created by the new layout; and the issues of traffic and circulation. This is so because often small cuts (the creation of a little piazza at the intersection of two streets; the removal of elements that project over the streets and create bottlenecks; or even the simple chamfering of a corner) can by themselves restore [ridare] equilibrium to the circulation in the street, which may be locally congested. [...]

Whether vast or small, however, the work of rehabilitation and embellishment—the work of hygienic and artistic improvement of an entire neighborhood—cannot end with the design and the opening of streets or piazzas, but [...] must be integrated by norms and measures that regulate building activity and promote the systematic restoration of houses, with respect to both art and hygiene. [...]

We should also address the question of the restoration of individual buildings. The restorations can be of two kinds, as double was the criterion that informed our proposals of building improvement (hygienic and artistic).

First of all, we should see that air and light, which will be brought inside the blocks through the openings created by pruning, be also brought inside the houses through a series of internal adjustments, including the opening of courtyards, the creation of breaks between buildings, the partial removal of added storeys, the improvement of staircases, the construction of new toilets, the structural renovation to combat humidity and saltpeter, and the absolute exclusion of habitation in ground floors, in the so-called “bassi,” unless such dwellings are raised at least 60 cm from the street level and fulfill the conditions required by hygiene.
We must indeed repeat these ideas: The rehabilitation of the old neighborhoods must be achieved from the inside more than from the outside; and often it will be achieved by bringing the houses and the blocks back to conditions close to the original ones, since the old urban fabric had its own order, its logic, its hygiene, its decorum; and if the streets were narrow, almost always the houses were very low, and thus the ratio was often better than the one in the streets of modern neighborhoods, and the houses breathed within, in the courtyards and gardens. Only the densification [addensamento] and the gradual impoverishment of the neighborhoods have changed these conditions, with the occupation of uncovered spaces, the addition of new storeys to buildings, and the increase in every way possible of the overall building density, either through the subdivision of properties or their transfer to speculative companies greedy for space in central neighborhoods. [...] 

As for the aesthetic order of the restoration [ripristino] of old buildings—buildings which once had dignity and art value, and in which some not-too-fragmentary remains of those values have survived—there is no one who does not see the beauty and value of a work meant to bring back to their original appearance so many clear witnesses of the past—not only as a memory, but as art; not only for erudition, but as a gift to the people, as a useful contribution to the formation of a public consciousness of civil culture and civic affection and to the flourishing of that traditional sentiment of Italian genius which gave life and embellished the great palaces and the modest houses of our forebears. To remove amorphous outgrowths and additions [superfetazioni]; to restore and complete mutilated or missing elements; to free the original decorations from the bruises of make-up [livido del belletto]; “to purify the building from any disformity injurious to its noble history and from any damage of time” ii: this task should proceed in conjunction with building measures that, while respecting the environmental conditions, would bring decorum and health back to the neighborhood and allow to see and appreciate its neglected and decayed beauty and to understand the injury of neglect. [...] 

But let’s go back to the system of pruning and to its many questions. Once the neighborhood has been improved through both the simple building renovation [sistemazione] and a rehabilitation and a restoration going from the inside to the outside; once the efficiency of the public services has been improved and the new order of cleanliness, health, and decorum has been established; we should ask to what social and urbanistic function should the new neighborhood be destined.

The answer is offered by several areas of old cities which, instead of declining to the lowest degree, remained centers of a modest and tranquil bourgeois life, in a “pudic and sober peace” among the small streets and the cozy little piazzas: much of the old Florence, saved from the cataclysm that ravaged the center; many beautiful neighborhoods in Venice, Siena, Bologna, and Ascoli; in Rome itself [...] the areas below the Campidoglio, between Piazza Margana and Piazza Campitelli, or in Via dell’Anima, Via delle Coppelle, and Via Giulia. Not popular neighborhoods, but not too rich houses either; shops and small industries, but not important business centers; comfortable residences of tranquil people that do not want to leave the center; or even upper-class [signorili] families that understand how much better life is in the great rooms and over the noble courtyard of an old restored palace, as opposed to a papier-mâché villa in the periphery, with thin walls, small and low rooms, and a miserable appearance; the shops on the main streets, so much more frequented in an environment of not-too-intense circulation; culture and art associations, and the artistic industries which blossom on the trunk of tradition.
In this respect, Piacentini aptly says: “The old city will remain as a Citadel: ... and it will remain (let’s be clear) alive; but of a life less commercial and prosaic [bottegaia], less contaminated by the thousand modern necessities, which are in absolute contrast with its physiognomy; it will be the precious tribune where the treasures and the traditions of past eras are religiously conserved.” iii [...] 

The municipal administration can and must carry out the building part of the rehabilitation, that is, realize the pruning by degrees; see to the improvement of all the public services; and prepare a special building code that would regulate the new works and avoid that they benefit only a few. [...] 

It is necessary, on the other hand, to distrust the private building industry, which is generally the direct auxiliary, the natural executor of new buildings. Too many are the tendencies of private interest to relax the rules [rallentare le remore]; too many are the temptations to do more than necessary [...]. 

The only solution [...] is to create a new institution, an autonomous administration, free from any profit motive and preoccupied only with a wise administration in the public interest. All powers should be given to this new institution, and all competences should report to it: the powers derived from special legislative and regulatory norms concerning eminent domain and the possibility to negotiate the buildings; the artistic and historical competences, in partial delegation from the Royal Superintendencies for Monuments; administrative competences for relations with financial institutions and public housing institutions, and sanitary competences by way of assignment or intervention of the municipal authority. 

The new institution would have a double function, namely a role of stimulus and help to private initiatives as well as one of direct intervention. [...] 

Few people know that the current laws of protection of the national artistic patrimony give powers to promote and impose restorations, but those powers are very limited and not easily put in practice. [...] 

The measures that need to be taken are therefore of many different kinds; the work here imagined is complex and multiform; it should be conducted with prudence, gradually, within a comprehensive program which should never lose sight of the various goals proposed. But the result will certainly be positive, if it is pursued with the continuity of a practical program enlivened by the continuity of a tradition and a thought. And the goal is certainly noble and worthy—the goal of redeeming so many characteristic areas of our old cities by saving them from the international vulgarity that levels everything. A happy image comes to mind: while the new agglomerations spread out over the gentle countryside in neighborhoods gladdened by green and the sun, inside the cities, which have lived for so long, science and modern art will unite not to violate, but to reawaken “the soul of the centuries.” 

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i This analysis follows a first study of the subject by G. Giovannoni, “La teoria del diradamento edilizio,” Nuova Antologia, July 1st, 1913, and the report of the same to the committee for the building organization [sistemazione] of the Rinascimento neighborhood in Rome, published by the municipality of Rome in 1920. Based on these studies, but without quoting its sources, is the report by L. Piccinato, “Sistemazione delle città e carattere storico,” in the proceedings of the international congress on housing and urban planning held in Rome in 1929.
ii A. Rubbiani, *Di Bologna riabbellita*, Bologna, 1913, p. 27.