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Naples vertical

"Deep holes" in a porous city

The history of art and architecture in Naples is marked by a constant overriding - even more so than in Rome or other cities founded in antiquity, because the city from the late Middle Ages until the unification in the 1860s has been continuously (albeit under very different political dynasties) the 'capital' of southern Italy. In consequence in Naples have been produced exceptional urban structures and buildings as well as decline through overpopulation. In addition, it has been plagued several times by catastrophic earthquakes that shaped the form and identity of the city (and its population) to this day.

And: The art and cultural history of Naples remains in the shadow of other Italian cities such as Rome or Florence until today, so that the characterization of the city is usually carried out more through delimitation and/or stereotypes of the equally beautiful and depraved.

One of the goals of my project is to leave these well-trodden tracks and to test a characterization of Naples that is actually paying attention to the peculiarities of the city itself rather than its apparent 'mistakes' compared to other cities.

The other, no less hard-to-reach, goal is to fundamentally reconsider the art-historical description of a city, with the main issue being how to relate space and time, built city and history to one another. Instead of a linear historiography, a new spatio-temporal approach shall make it possible, in particular, to dig 'deep holes' at junctions of the grown city, which serve to examine the structure that has developed over centuries based on the neighborhoods of buildings and monuments.

As already indicated in the title, 'porosity' (a term to describe the permeability of a certain material as for example tuff, but also a term to describe improvisation and penetration in social urban space) is to be tested as a relatively unusual category, which has been closely linked with Naples for some time now.
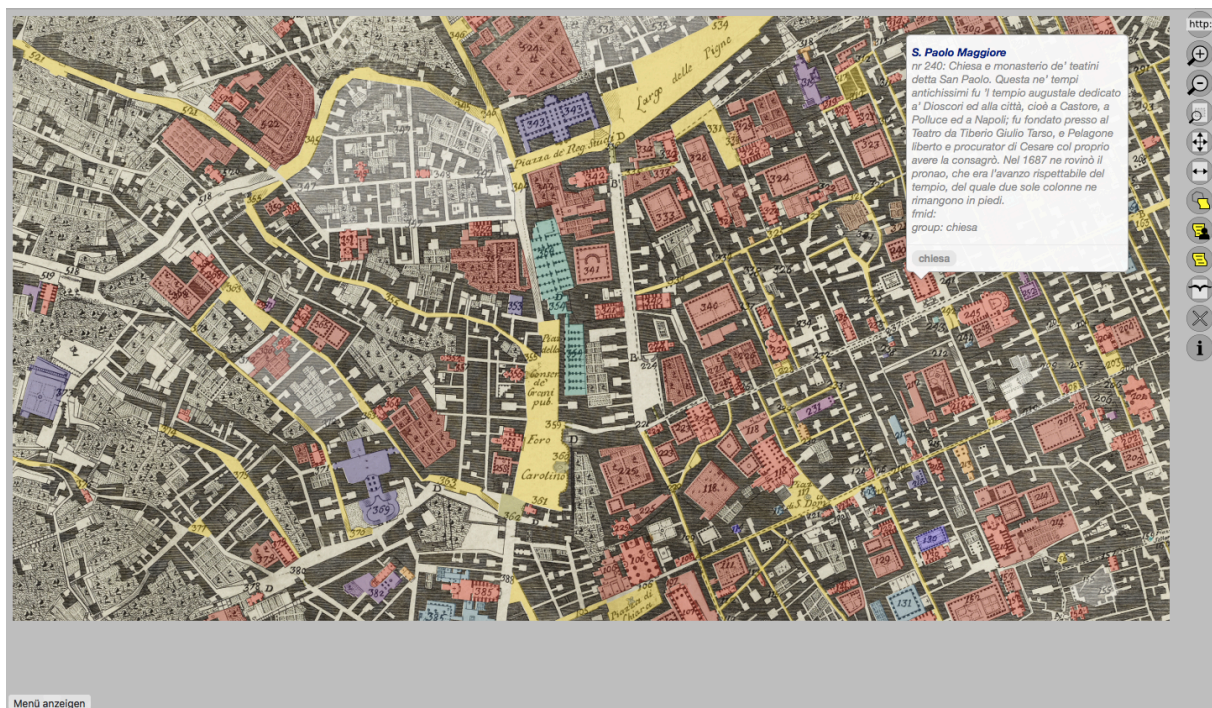
With the conception of a city as a grown organism (a concept that was already developed in the 1920s and 1930s by some urbanists, but was not pursued further), a fundamental methodological rethinking is connected: Instead of a chronological and often monographic treatment of individual buildings, which are in seemingly empty space, or abstract urban

structures that grow 'on their own', this study proceeds from the power of the historical built-up space in which new projects are inserted.

The overarching project is a monograph of the city, which is based on the thick description of exemplary junctions of urban space. As difficult as that is, and as many historians have tried to do so with different categories of description and description order, it is explicitely about interlocking the horizontal extension of the city in space with the temporal axis, which in abstract terms is set as vertical.

As I come from a background in historical geography (with the last monograph on the relationship between netherlandish landscape painting and contemporary maps), historical maps seem to me to be particularly suitable objects for analyzing the historical image of the city itself as well as the historical perception and understanding of its space.
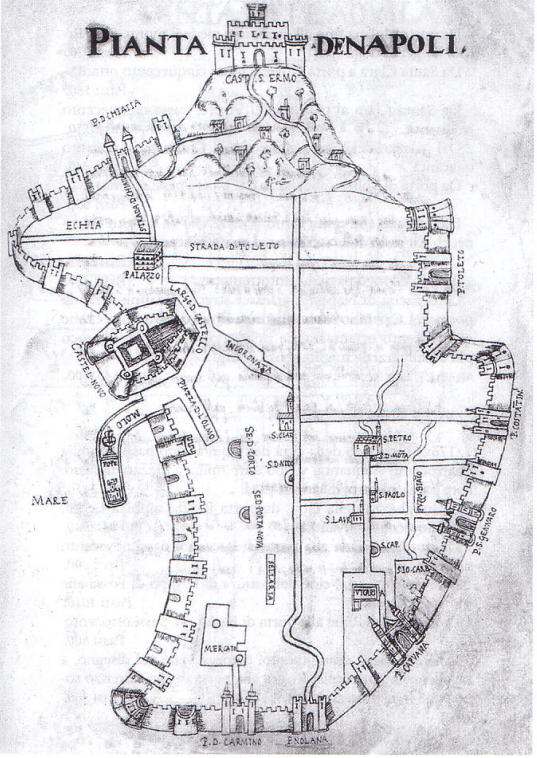
To give one example:

Map of Naples and surroundings, Giovanni Carafa di Noia 1775, detail (with annotation from the legend)

240. *Chiesa e monasterio de' teatini detta San Paolo. Questa ne' tempi antichissimi fu 'l tempio augustale dedicato a' Dioscori ed alla città, cioè a Castore, a Polluce ed a Napoli; fu fondato presso al Teatro da Tiberio Giulio Tarso, e Pelagone liberto e procurator di Cesare col proprio avere la consagrò. Nel 1687 ne rovinò il pronao, che era l'avanzo rispettabile del tempio, del quale due sole colonne ne rimangono in piedi.*

The cartographic display shows its geographical data (in our case the buildings of a city) by definition in an ideal horizontal extent. The city appears flat, but all map readers know that it is an abstraction - and the advantage of the map anyway is to show neighborhoods and relations of places. The entry to a particular church (S. Paolo), which connects the history of the city with its form through its text, in a figurative sense digs a hole in the map. In the entry for S. Paolo in chronological order, the layers of the preserved building are named, along with the few surviving remains. The names of the founders anchor the building in a story of actors - and the anchoring in the grown space also happens by naming the proximity to the theater. Cartographers and historians struggle with the same problems but in very different media: namely, the connection of space and time either in a narrative that can only name or describe places and spaces, or in a map that relegates the timeline to the external legend.

New techniques of digital cartography make it possible to visualize these vertical layers by superimposing layers of different times. With a small team in collaboration with Università Federico II, we are also working on creating a *master version* of Naples with the overlay of maps. Unlike many other projects, however, we will link them also to the texts from city guides of their time, so that the spatial knowledge of other media with the specific of the map will give a new whole.

Methodologically, I am concerned with using the maps as an anchor point for the sites (still to be selected for the monograph), in order to be able to transform the observations that arise at individual points of the network into a whole. In addition - the maps are to be evaluated in their own statements. The point is not to look through the maps at an alleged historical reality, but rather to elicit from them the historical understanding of space.
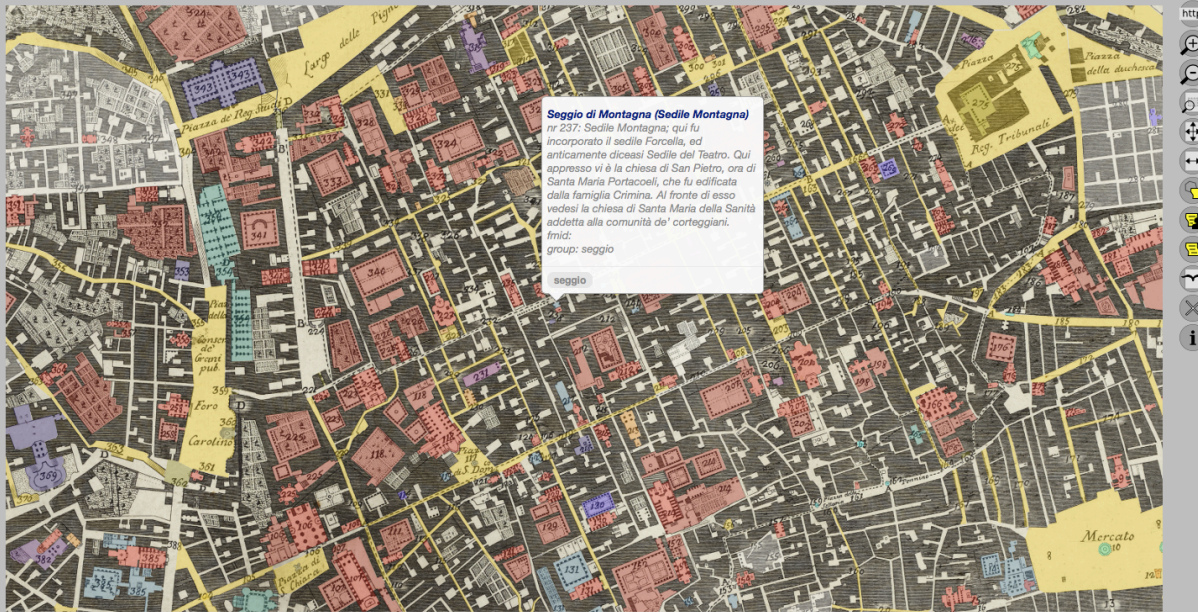
This map is not a simplification, but an explanation of the surveillance of Naples by the viceroys.

It would have to be warped too much to be placed on a "normal" georeferenced map of Naples. Nevertheless, there is valuable information about the social space of the city in the 16th century, which was determined by the aristocratic communities of the seggi that are located here. - It helps to understand the concrete space-bound power of the seggi.

It could be seen as a Kevin Lynch-map of the Naples *everyone knows* at that time.

Ieronimo Pico Fonticulano, in: Breve descrittione di sette città illustri d'Italia, 1582

The later map-maker Duca di Noja gives a much more detailed information on the seggi in his legend – and we see the individual site in the dense fabric of the city near to S. Paolo and the ancient forum.

In the dense urban development, one can almost ignore a seggio, but its historical value is not least measured by the way in which it nonetheless determines the social space. A seemingly locked room - a loggia in which the nobles met, provided a good insight into the lives of the happy few, but the sphere that was connected to this life was also clearly differentiated from the one on the street. „Life and death" of such a building could become a chapter, because it is already connected with the entire quarter by its function.

Starting from this example, a hard cut can bring us to Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, who have chosen a very different approach to understanding a city like Naples. It was them who introduced the term *porosity* in 1925 to describe the social and urban structure of Naples. And so that we can seriously discuss the advantages and disadvantages of porosity as quality of Naples on Wednesday, I ask all of you to read carefully this short text, which I provide in German and English (warning ... that the English translation has some problems).

Subject of the so-called „Denkbild" ("mental image" - „illumination" – „visual thought" as it was called later in the Collection of Benjamin's writings) ‚Naples' is a seemingly loosely sequenced series of observations of social life in urban space, whereby fascination and repulsion alternate. Despite the essayistic writing of Benjamin and Lacis, their methodological approach is of wider interest because they combine observations on urbanism and architecture with those on the social behavior of the Neapolitans. In addition to some well-known features such as Catholicism, superstition, poverty and mistrust in the state, the authors describe other qualities of the city and its inhabitants, namely the 'passion for improvisation', the use of buildings as a stage and the constant interpenetration of very different areas (which nowadays has almost become synonymous with *porosity* in research).

The advantage of writers or essayists over historians is that they can much more easily select the individual objects of their analysis – and they don't have to defend their choice. Nevertheless - I would suggest - one can learn something from their selection. In particular, one can learn something about the condensing (Verdichtung) that makes it possible to use particular observations as pars pro toto (as I would like to do chosing only some telling places/sites in Naples in order to describe the peculiarities of the city as a whole in a constructive way).

In advance I want to discuss only the first paragraph on ‚the city' as a whole, where the term ‚porosity' is lacking, but where the method of describing the particularities of Naples becomes quite obvious.

*Fantastic travel reports have painted the city in water colours. In reality, it is gray: a grayish red or ocher, a grayish white. And entirely gray against the sky and the sea. Not least this is what takes the pleasure of the citizen (*disheartens the tourist*) . For anyone who is blind to forms sees litte here. The city is rocky (craggy). From the height where the calls do not come up, seen from the Castell San Martino, it is extinct at dusk, grown into the rock. Only a strip of shore stretches flat, behind which the buildings stagger over each other. Ten and six-storey tenements, on which stairs run up, appear against the villas as skyscrapers. In the rocky ground itself, where it reaches the shore, caves have been hewn. As in hermit images of the Trecento, here and there in the rocks a door appears (is seen). If it is open, one looks into large cellars, which are at the same time a sleeping place and a warehouse. Furthermore, steps lead to the sea, to fishermen's taverns, which have been installed in natural grottoes. Dim light and thin music penetrates from there upwards.*

In a very interesting editing (as in a film) we constantly move. We have a panorama in gray, a gray that citizens / tourists don't like. We understand that forms are not there but must be created, we switch all the time between different point of views, times (now and Trecento), the inner and outer space, nature and culture; and music and light bind spaces together that are very far away. Naples is described here as a rocky/craggy body whose units/forms are difficult to recognize, a body that is gray but constantly changing. A ‚tuff city' as it was called in a recent publication on urbanism in Naples. Explicitly images are evoked - both one that reflects the gaze of the current viewer and one that is imprisoned in the Middle Ages. Sleeping places can become warehouses, grottoes are used as taverns. Above all, there is an atmosphere of constant change, of improvisation, of backwardness and gravity, which in my opinion can not be read totally in a positive way - as most literary scholars do.

The porosity of the city, in the meaning of a certain social space, a specific relation of private/collective life and as something that determines also the architecture of Naples is a very fascinating concept, which has inspired many current urbanists to reconsider the planning of public space as a place of exchange.

In an abstract manner the historical term of the 1920s can be defined as:

      - an almost ‚natural' quality of Naples and the south (in terms of urbanistic and social structures)

- a quality of a transcultural contact zone

- a fragile threshold from the private to the collective

- a promise for the stranger who discovers spaces for new possibilites

- a social ability of improvisation

- a quality of specific (?) urban spaces

Obviously, there are some correspondences between this category of porosity and my own reflections on how to understand a city based on its evolved spaces and the appropriation by architects and inhabitants. The above mentioned *seggio* would be a good example for a porous architecture, that can be found in Naples ... but – that can be found also elsewhere - at least similar.

At the moment I'm dealing with two questions regarding porosity and Naples, that I would like to discuss on Wednesday:

1) How can we use the term ‚porosity' in order to grasp urban qualities?

- Shouldn't we use ‚porosity' as a quality that all cities share but in different degrees?

- Isn't porosity simply one quality that defines urban life and its architectural forms quite well but is very difficult to describe when it comes to concrete analysis?

2) What exactly describe Benjamin/Lacis when they talk about Naples?

- a strange but fascinating city?

- a new picture that wants to overcomes bourgeois tradition?

- individual places as metaphors for society (the street cafe - the hidden churches – the staircases)?

- as almost always when dealing with Naples in literature...: especially the poor who live in holes of the old town, but not the whole society / city ?

- a porous body that needs a porous description (as Benjamin-Scholars would say) ?

Lit. (mostly on Benjamin and porosity):

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