
A rich visual and statistical compendium of information on the city square, Gatje’s book is primarily a reference source and starting-point for more in-depth research. It draws upon a modern tradition of books by architects and planners analyzing urban spaces (Camillo Sitte, Hegemann and Peets, Edmund Bacon, and Rob Krier come immediately to mind). The great virtue of Gatje’s book is the quality of computer-generated color plans, all at the same scale, which depict not only the solid-void of urban spaces but also their pavements, textures, and major elements such as fountains, stairs, and towers. Gatje’s plans are akin to Giambattista Nolli’s famous 1748 Pianta di Roma in that he includes the public interior space of major buildings surrounding the squares, an integral but often overlooked aspect of the urban fabric, giving Gatje’s plans greater utility than those which only indicate building massing.

The book is structured as a series of case studies, opening with a brief introduction and ending with a very useful summary of data noting in a comparative table the date, dimensions, area, and skyline features (highest point, width-to-height ration, angle of view) of each square. The book is heavy on European examples, with Italy taking up fifteen cases (six from Rome alone), while the United States is the only non-European country represented, with four squares. Most of the squares are well-known (Saint Peter’s in Rome or Place des Vosges in Paris), but a few are relatively unknown even within architecture circles, especially for an American audience (Fountain Square in Rhodes, Greece, or Piece Hall in Halifax, UK). A broader look at other non-European squares would have made the book more valuable in this global age, but Gatje’s choices are reasonably representative of major post-medieval historical periods. Gatje’s criteria for inclusion were “utility, integrity, and delight,” roughly following Vitruvius’ ancient and well-known criteria for architecture.

Each case study begins with the digitally-created plan, all of which are contained on a single page allowing for easy scanning and visual comparison. The plan is followed by a table of physical-visual statistics and then by Gatje’s brief discussion of the history, functions, and physical aspects of the square. Historians might wish that his discussions were more scholarly—instead, they are primarily anecdotal and conversational, often tracing the author’s steps upon visiting the square to document it and to experience its social functions. A very brief bibliography appears at the end of the book, just before the index. However, a list of references at the end of each case study would have been more useful than the idiosyncratic and extremely limited bibliography.

The large-format of the book (28.4 x 28.2 cm) makes it ideal for depicting the plans at a generous scale, but slightly unwieldy to hold. The photographs following each commentary are sometimes too small to do justice to the details of texture and the experiential aspects of the squares with which Gatje is interested, and they are placed rather casually on the page, giving some pages a cluttered look. They do, however, give the reader a rich visual sense of each urban place, which could be well-supplemented by online sources such as Google Earth. Architects and planners are the major audiences for this book, although architectural and urban historians will find value in the statistics and maps if not in the brief, too-casual descriptive commentaries. The book will undoubtedly be much consulted in design, urban planning, and architectural history libraries.

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