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Where Gaia and Ouranos Make Love

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This story begins in Pienza, a little town in the south of Tuscany, where a humanist Pope, Pius II, wanted to set up a kind of laboratory for Renaissance culture, of which he was one of the most passionate promoters.

Pienza is situated on the extreme edge of a plateau, overlooking the wide and deep Val d'Orcia and facing the Monte Amiata. In laying out the new town, its architect, Bernardo Rossellino, retained the roughly orthogonal grid plan of the old village Corsignano, on whose site it was built. Pienza is shaped like an elongated rectangle, oriented east-west along a central Corso, itself parallel to the sides of the plateau but winding slightly in its middle. The secondary streets that cross the Corso run roughly north-south, emerging at the edge of the town above the Val d'Orcia.

Fortifications act like buttresses to the plateau; they hardly rise above ground level, only to the top of a parapet which borders the path running around the town. They do not interrupt the view beyond to the south; the land outside Pienza is invisible from within the town, since it lies way below the town. From these narrow streets, squeezed in between house fronts, the sky alone is visible. But the sky is seen in a horizontal format, rather than a vertical one, through the "crack" left between overhanging roofs. In Pienza the sky is not only above our heads but in front of us and, even, most astonishingly, beneath us. For anyone inside the town the sky fills the Val d'Orcia, whose floor remains out of sight.

It was there that I witnessed the meeting of Earth and Sky for the first time, Sky apparently sharing with Earth a dwelling in lower regions, which are usually reserved for the latter by itself.

This experience in Pienza was the moment at which I understood what spatial design means, at an architectural scale as much as at an urban or landscape scale. It is to offer Earth-Gaia and Sky-Ouranos a place where they celebrate anew their fruitful love. According to Greek mythology, the result of that love is the universe itself with its gods, men and landscapes:

First of all, there was Void; then came Earth, with her generous flanks, forever providing the living with a stable domain, and Eros, the most beautiful among Immortals...Void gave birth to Erebe and dark Night. In her turn, Night gave birth to Ether and daylight. Earth first gave birth to a being equal to her [and] able to cover her entirely, starlit Sky, who forever provided the blessed Gods with a stable domain. She gave birth also to the high Mountains.

Then, from her embrace with Sky, Ocean came into life, with his deep whirlpools...Then came Chronos, the god with double-dealing thoughts, the most redoubtable of her children; and Chronos began to hate his flourishing father. She gave birth also to the violent-hearted Cyclops, with their brutal souls, similar to the Gods apart from their single eyebrow. Then came the hundred-armed Giants and other terrifying beings, thanks to their power and skill. For they were terrible sons, those born from the embrace of Earth and Sky.¹

To us it seems quite normal that Earth and Sky, who were permanently in love with each other while still being mother and son, could only give birth to monstrous creatures—the Cyclops. And let us not forget that these Cyclops were the first builders, as though the art of building is the outcome of a union between those elements that should not be united,

Sky and Earth. Thus, building cannot be anything other than a violent act, a matter of breaking the established order of classification and of risking to bring together that which was in the first place separated.

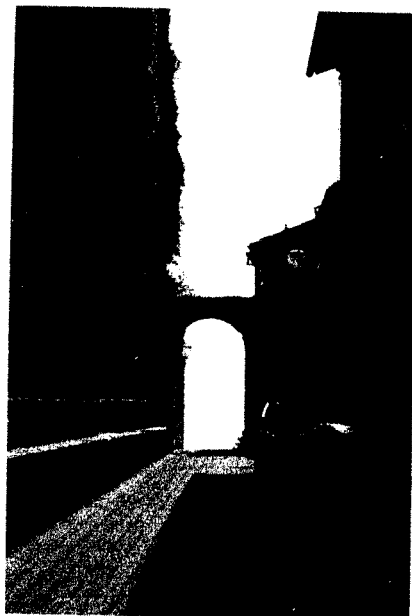
This was exactly the tale that I recognized in Pienza, albeit retold in a gentle way, as if to reassure our human weaknesses.

But Pienza is a small town, an exceptional experiment carried out in the Early Renaissance by a generous Pope together with an excellent architect. It is thus a fragile testimony, constrained by our limited ability to build within earshot of the gods.

Hence my surprise, and delight, in rediscovering the same spatial effects in San Francisco—this time not at the scale of a small town, miraculously spared from the voracious ebb and flow of human history, but at the scale of a city, and in the capital of one of the fastest changing regions in the world. The same effect I had found tacitly in Pienza's calm, I rediscovered *alla grande* in the much more intense ambience of a great American city.

Everyone knows the streets of American towns are laid out on an orthogonal grid. Everyone knows San Francisco is built on hills. Everyone has seen—in detective films at the cinema or on television—cars chasing each other up and down the city's steep streets. But not everyone has seriously considered the spatial consequences of applying, absolutely rigorously, a strict grid to a hilly site, one where the gradients are sometimes extremely severe.

Usually towns laid out like checkerboards are to be found on flat land, where an orthogonal grid can develop unhindered. When a town is to be built on a sloping area, the usual layout is in a spiral form, in order to let the streets unroll—in volutes—around the slopes; thus, these slopes neither deny



A view down a street in Pienza into the sky beyond.

their intrinsic physical structure nor impede man from moving around them easily. Anyone who has been in a hill town like Siena knows how to weigh the longer distance of a route that offers easier walking against the shorter but more tiring route along streets that follow the line of the steepest gradients.

San Francisco began with the imposition of a relentless grid on the hills. Then, little by little, this checkerboard spread over the many hills and equally over flat areas along the peninsula between the Pacific Ocean and the inland bay. Only within the last two decades have some parts of the town been built up following the natural contours. Nevertheless, this refusal to confront the slope is most exceptional and seems unacceptable to the *genius loci*.² It thus cannot dilute the genuine character of San Francisco.

What interests me is the richness of the spatiality made possible by stubbornly applying a grid to a terrain whose very nature contradicts it. It is precisely in this conflict between urban planning patterns and the hilly charac-

Photos courtesy Bruno Queysanne.

San Francisco's grid is warped by the city's hills, yet the point at which a street meets the summit and touches the sky is a place of exhilaration.



ter of this landscape that places are created where Gaia and Ouranos meet each other again and again. The violence of their divine coupling echoes the town's spatial construction. That Earth and Sky "embrace" is about as "natural" as this conjunction of grid and hills.

The wonder of San Francisco derives precisely from this artifice, this "dis-natural" device, which violates the inherently hilly nature of the place in which it takes place. The same effect that occurred at a small scale in Pienza, as if in a laboratory, happens here a thousand times over, in an obsessive way. Thanks to the alignment of the steep slopes, each street offers a glimpse and holds out a promise of this cosmic embrace at its summit. The sky is not only above the earth but also beneath it, behind the hill. It billows up from below, rather than descending to it.

To be sure, not all the hills have the same character. Some are hard and some are soft. Some are covered with little wooden houses, and others with concrete blocks of flats. So the aper-

tures that streets open up, towards their hilltops, present a wide variety of frames. But the sky always lies behind, forming the backdrop yet never offering the same setting.

In order to witness this divine coupling one has to pay a certain price, to suffer through the very human act of walking, but one's entire being is exhilarated. It is almost disappointing when people give up laying out the city, taking an easier mean than the steepest slope—when the straight street has been replaced with steps, or with hair-pin bends as in Lombard Street. For then they have given up the effort required for enjoying the company of the gods in exchange for picturesque pleasure.

I exaggerate, for a number of these stairways, which enable the conquest of hilltops that are really *too* steep, are charming places. But they are only human places; Gaia and Ouranos, at our coast certainly, prefer to meet each other at the top of straight, continuous streets that obey the implacable grid.

Notes

1. Hesiod, *Theogony* (116-155).

2. Let's remember that Arne Novak, in his wonderful *Prague Baroque* (1938) was the first to re-enliven the notion of "genius loci."