

The Public Systems of Siena: Infrastructure, Architecture and Public Space

Nuria Casais

INTRODUCTION

“The Public Systems of Siena. Infrastructure, Architecture and Public Space” is an artistic research project that reflects on the spatial and programmatic qualities that set the framework of a good urban life and a good urban settlement. It addresses the physical design and thinking of cities –the city’s form, space, architecture and materiality– and reflects on practices to imagine alternative living conditions. Particularly, this contribution aims to emphasise the role of public systems in the definition, performance and experience of urban spaces. It focuses on the public systems of the city of Siena, linked to infrastructure, architecture, and public spaces, and on how they come together and coexist over time in a city and its transformation.

The debate about how to build new urban fragments is not new and has been addressed from different perspectives and disciplines. Depending on the context, the questions and reflections behind how a city should grow differ due to societal or territorial realities. However, looking at various locations or historical times, concrete urban spaces could perform as tools to question local assumptions or imagine alternative scenarios.

The artistic research departs from reflecting on new, mainly residential, urban fragments in Denmark while putting into question the qualities that municipalities, developers or architects take into consideration for their design and materialisation. The city of Siena appears in the research as a tool and a case study to reflect the main topics of infrastructure, architecture and public spaces while approaching concepts such as the connection between building volumes, how the built and unbuilt intertwine, attractive and multifaceted densities, the influence of ordinances on city beauty and form, the order and the disorder of urban fabrics, the balance between extraordinary and ordinary moments, and the representative and everyday life.

SIENA'S FRAGMENTS

Siena does not play a romantic notion of a case study to reproduce or copy, but as a city that delivers fragments that support reflections on how public systems at different scales can structure spaces with distinctive identities to influence the city life and the city performance. Spaces that incorporate transformations over time, changing societal needs or planning trends that allow the city to accommodate contemporary life, avoiding becoming a static scenography.

The urban structure of Siena is dense, compact and coherent, but still has a balance between extrovert and introvert, modest and monumental, extraordinary and ordinary spaces shaped as a product of interventions, alterations and adaptations over time exhibited in the city layers. Siena's urban fabric, developed in the 12th and 15th centuries, is present in the modern layers and continues to support the well-functioning daily spaces and infrastructures. This complexity converts Siena into an urban form that cannot be directly read at first glance, and one must inhabit it to disclose the richness and nuances of the spatial generosity.

The three selected fragments represent a mutable understanding of what is considered modernity linked to infrastructure in close connection with architecture and public spaces. City fragments in which –on occasions hidden– systems of infrastructure organise monumentality, beauty, identity and endurance. City fragments in which efficiency and beauty coexist with such a strong dependence that one could question whether those spaces are a result of a beautiful design or a direct consequence of the pragmatic functioning of the embedded infrastructural system. The fragments evidence the virtues of interventional design as part of the architecture and urban practice, and how the process of altering architecture is echoed at the city scale.¹ They evidence the rich complexities that urban form gives when maintaining and valuing continuity,² and when it is designed to support transformation. The city fragments mark the relationship between the formal and the social in the urban fabric.³ But also how the shape and appearance of the public is a product of specific regulations and ordinances that were considering the life of the city, the beauty of the city, and the relation of the city with the surrounding landscape.⁴ Materiality, architectural elements, exterior appearance, proportions, and dimensions respond to ordinances introduced in the 13th century to detail the city and its presence from a notion of space and beauty from medieval times. Details become expressions of defining spaces, give character to spatial compositions and create places within regulations that sought a cohesive appearance and conscious outcome of the city space.

The fragments depicted in the WORKS show three scenarios reflecting on the city's public space and its relation to public systems such as the water system, the institutional system and the parking system. Systems that also respond to different historical moments, city and society requirements.

Water System and Public Space [Figure 01]: The shell-shaped square of Piazza del Campo presents a ground to perfectly guide the surface water coming from the different parts of the city into a central drain in front of Palazzo Pubblico. Gaia Fountain represents the architecture of the water and a physical manifestation of the underground aqueduct system of the city. Geometrically perfect at first glance, the square includes alterations that allow its adaptation to the surrounding buildings or streets. The openness of the main space contrasts with the narrow alleys connecting to the busy streets. The sloping red brick surfaces contrast with the travertine divisions, bollards and fountain. The square becomes modest and monumental at different times. On occasions, it performs as the main city square and the representation of the public realm; on others, it invites a pedestrian informal pause.

Institutional System and Public Space [Figure 02]: The fragment contains an outstanding institutional programmatic variety. It includes a sequence of public spaces of different natures linked to public and private institutions. The fragment comprises several alterations of the urban space, evidencing the transformation of the historic city into a contemporary one. Different city times and ideals coexist, demonstrating processes of growth and expansion, and the institutional presence in the city. It evidences the different encounters of the city mobility with the pedestrian's everyday life. Piazza Salimbeni, with the historical headquarters of the Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena at one end, represents a private and inaccessible institution that includes extraordinary architectural transformations and details showing the historic city alteration process. The Stadium, at the other end of the fragment, depicts the introduction of modern programs in closer relation with the historic city, articulating topographic challenges and transition spaces towards the green wedges.

Parking System and Public Space [Figure 03]: The parking infrastructure is essential for the current historic city's everyday life. Their peripheral location gives the parking a transitional performance, becoming articulations between the existing and the new, the built and the landscape, the pedestrians and the cars, the historic and the modern. Parking Il Campo represents an

infrastructural architecture performing as a companion to the Monastery of St. Augustine Park. It expands and blends with the existing park, contributing with a grass-covered roof that helps to address the different topographic levels of the hill.

ARTISTIC WORKS PRODUCTION

As initially stated, the artistic research work aims, through artistic production, to reflect on the city's form, the city's space and the city's architecture. This contribution includes three works in the format of models that provide a representation of three fragments of the city of Siena, carefully defined to address the research investigations. Built at the scale of 1:200, the models represent and reflect on the different scales that influence the city's spatial experience and city life, going from urban transformations to material details or architectural ornamentations. The models aim to give new meaning to the selected city fragments and new knowledge to the research project; therefore, a direct copy of the existing city fragment is avoided. The models are accurate and precise, but with some artistic liberties in the model production and spatial definition. Each model fragment consists of several additions and exclusions made to focus on specific spatial features and themes. The built elements selection has been made to provide clarity to the works concerning the project research focus and the statements that each model questions. Questions regarding urban transformations, spatial hierarchy, institutional and domestic architecture, urban and architectural materiality, extrovert and introvert public spaces, beauty and ornamentation, superposition of historical layers, the role of topography, or city legibility are discussed through model production. The sequences of spaces focused on infrastructure, architecture and public spaces, emphasising the balance between city aesthetics and efficiency through time. The models' materiality approaches in the same way historical and modern city fragments, so the architecture, the space and the urban form defined are the protagonists. The contrast between the accuracy and precision of the built elements and the homogeneous material appearance synthesises with clarity a focus on the city's form, the city's space and the city's architecture, and provides room for new reflections on the observer.

**Authorship of the models exhibited: Nuria Casais, Jens Christian Pasgaard.*

Collaboration in the models' production: Ida Bølling Kongsted.

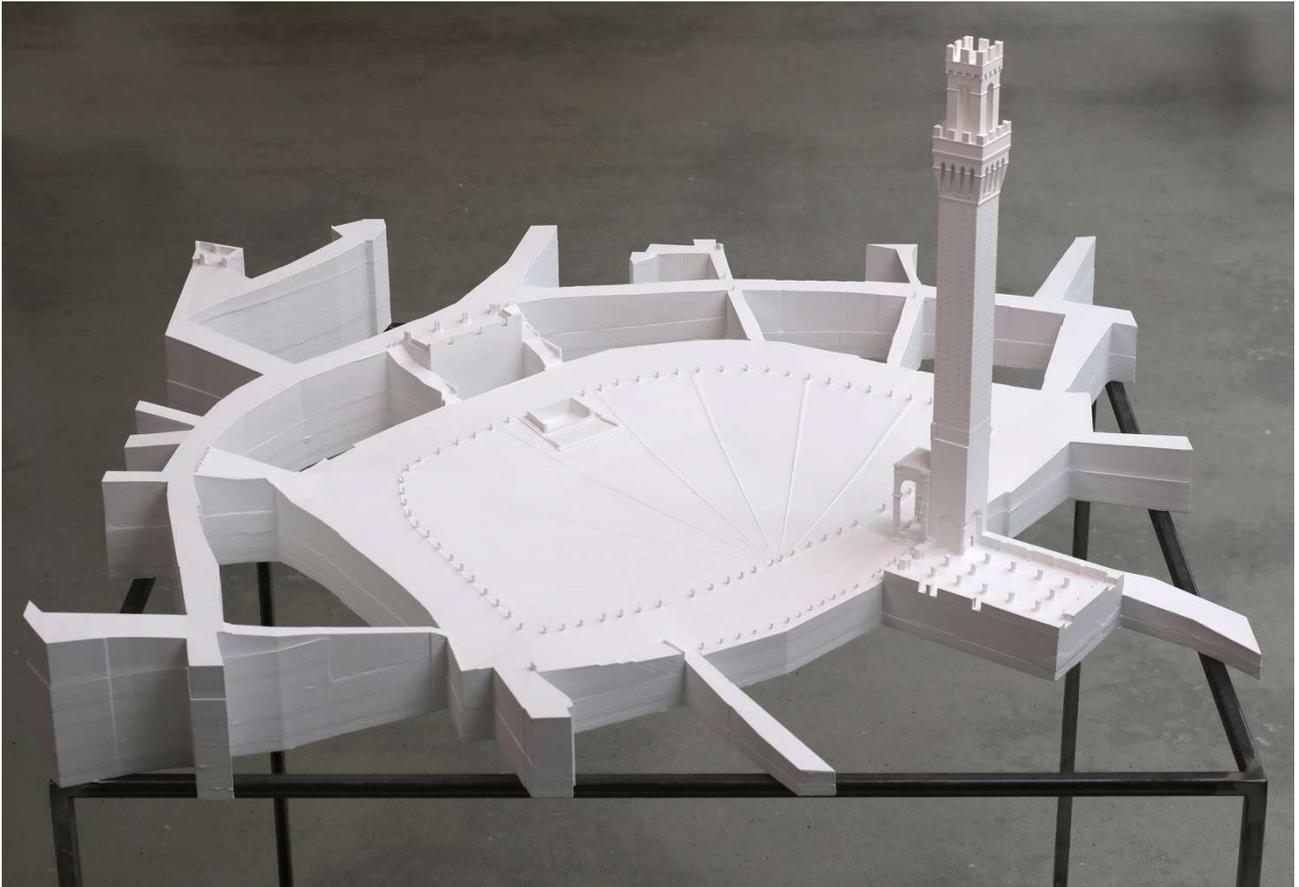


Figure 01. Water System and Public Space. Authorship: N. Casais, J. C. Pasgaard.



Figure 02. Institutional System and Public Space. Authorship: N. Casais, J. C. Pasgaard.

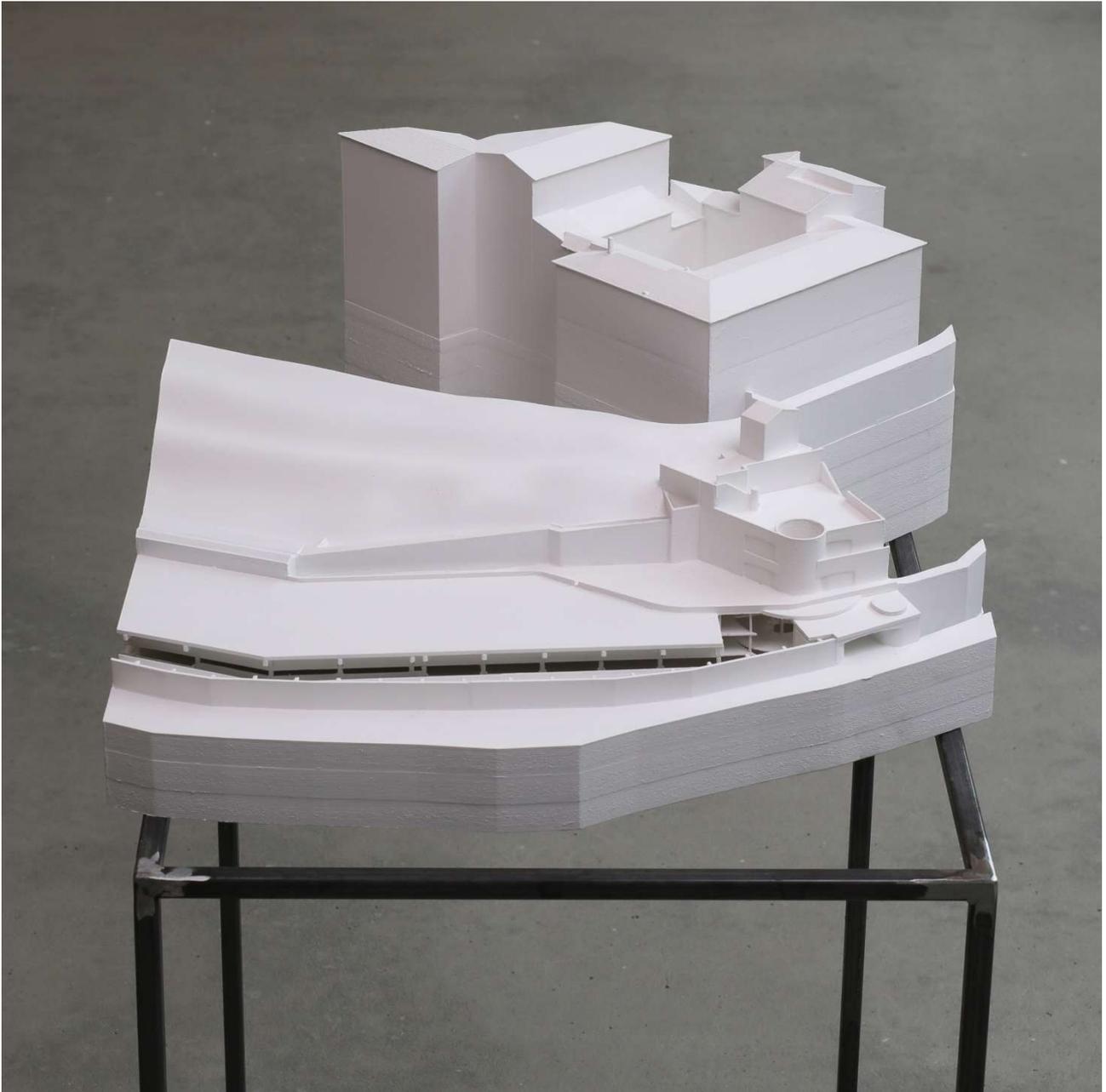


Figure 03. Parking System and Public Space. Authorship: N. Casais, J. C. Pasgaard.

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Bio

Nuria Casais (Dr. Arch) is an architect and urbanist involved in research, teaching and practice. Currently, she is an Associate Professor at Aarhus School of Architecture. Her research agenda looks at architecture and urban spaces from a trans-scalar approach, looking at the relations and influences between territories, cities, buildings and details, questioning contemporary urban living, and how it is conceived, imagined and designed. She was the co-director of the architecture journals *Quaderns* and *AT*, and extensively disseminated her work through publications, lectures, and exhibitions.

Notes

¹ Fred Scott, *On Altering Architecture* (Routledge, 2008).

² Rodrigo Pérez de Arce, *Urban Transformations and the Architecture of Additions* (1978; Routledge, 2015).

³ Camillo Sitte, *The Art of Building Cities. City Building According to Its Artistic Fundamentals* (Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1945); Pérez de Arce, *Urban Transformations and the Architecture of Additions*.

⁴ Tadashi Yokoyama, *Villages and Towns #4, Italy 1*, ed. Yukio Futagawa (A.D.A. EDITA, 1973).