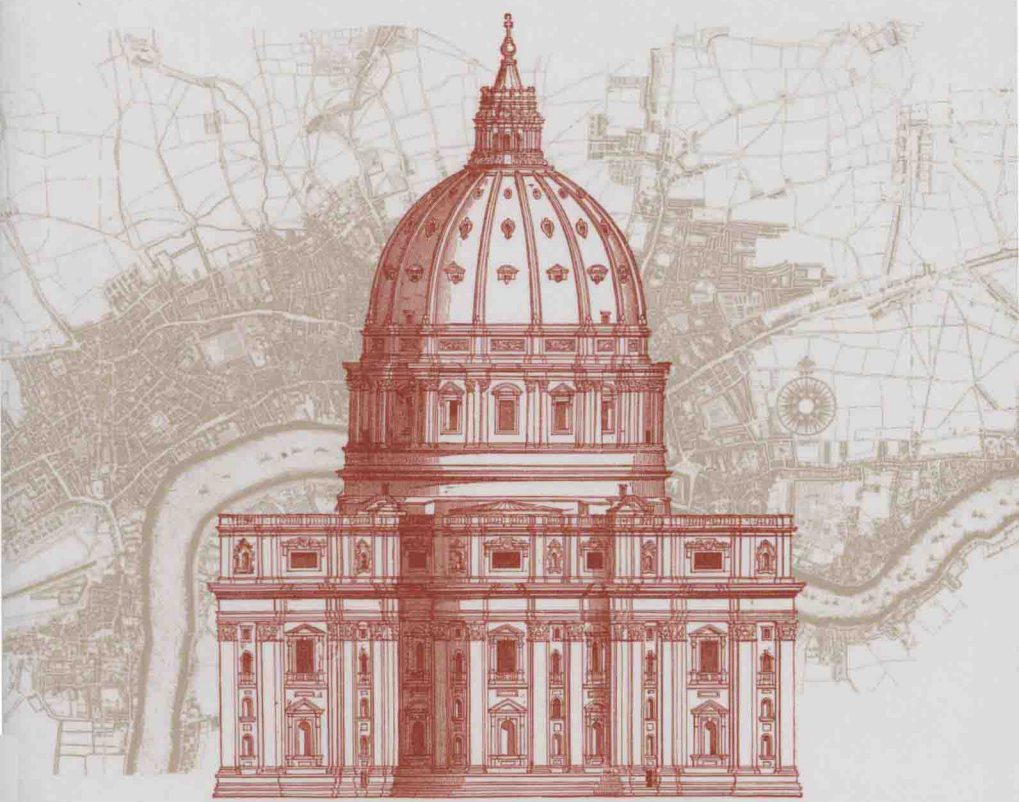
HOW TO READ TOWNS & CITIES

A crash course in urban architecture



Jonathan Glancey

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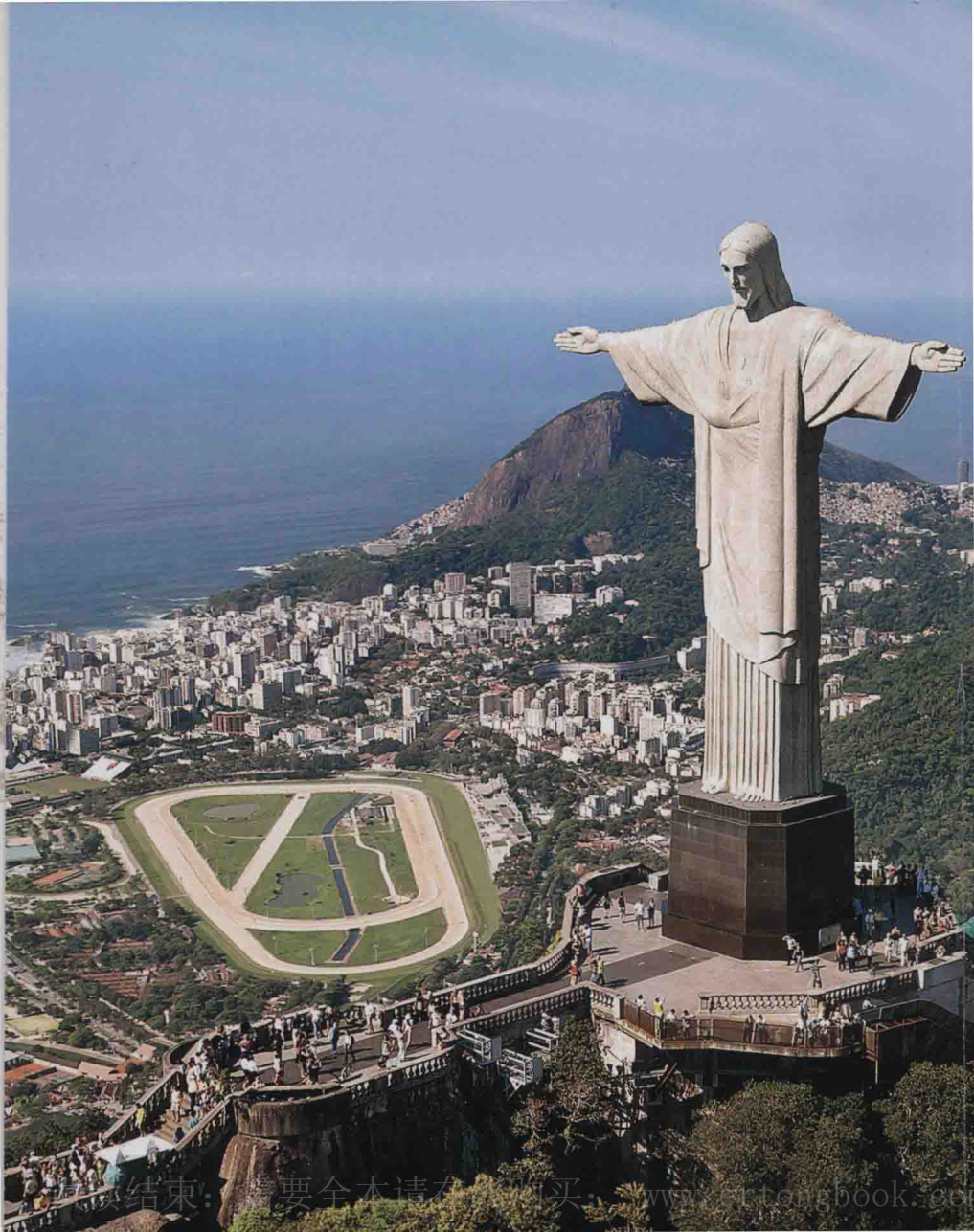
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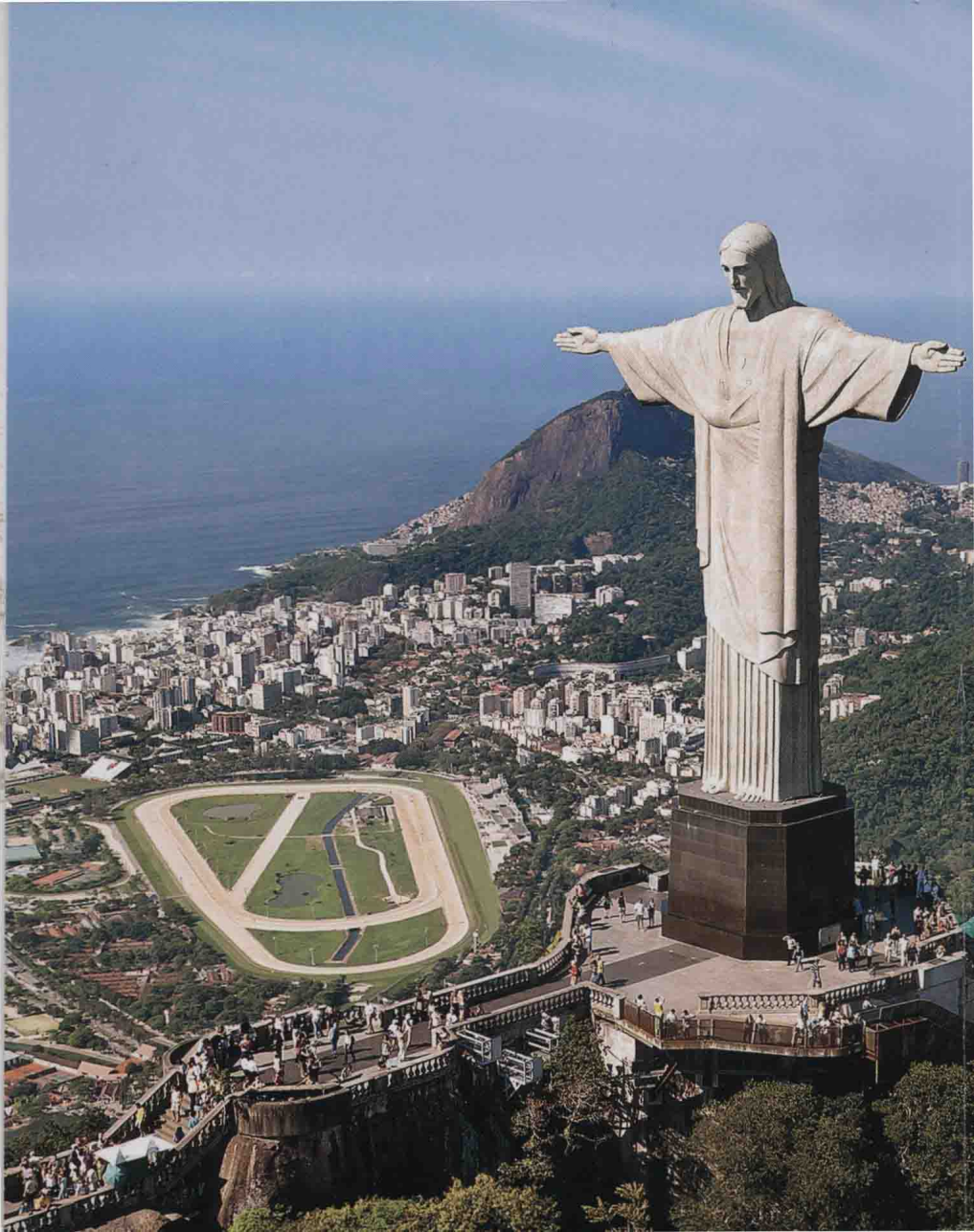

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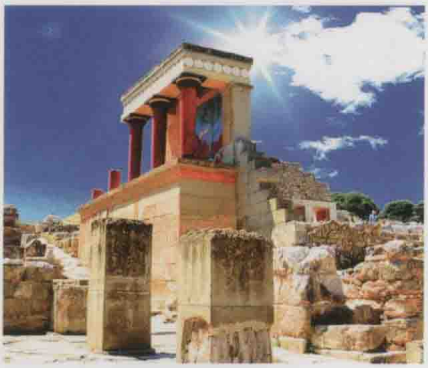
INTROD

When is a town not a city and a city not a town? This question, or riddle, is unanswerable, a fact that will hold little appeal to the tidy-minded urbanist. The definition of what can constitute one or the other varies with governance around the world. In Britain, a town can become a city overnight if the monarch so decrees. In her Diamond Jubilee of 2012, Queen Elizabeth conjured three old towns Chelmsford (England), Perth (Scotland) and tiny St Asaph (Wales) into cities. Confusingly for visitors to Britain, London comprises two cities – London and Westminster – as well as a vast, doughnut-ring of suburbs.

There are no reliable definitions of a city or a town, and yet we know, as if instinctively, the essential and emotional difference between the two. Big or small, a city is the seat of regional power and administration and at least offers and expresses an intensity of life or cultural purpose different from that of towns.

Cities tend to change more quickly than towns, too. They are places people come to make their fortunes, to lose themselves, and even to change identities. They are where successive waves of immigrants arrive in search of work, shelter and, in certain parts of the world at least, freedom.



Knossos
Knossos was not large, yet the power of this city was amplified by the myths enveloping it: the labyrinth and the Minotaur.

UCTION

Traditionally, towns have been settlements largely devoted to local interests and particular trades and industries. This has made them powerful in their own right, and yet they are rarely centres of regional let alone national power. Where in Renaissance Italy, for example, there were many rival cities no bigger than contemporary English towns, these were first and foremost political entities, often fighting one another, for political rather than purely commercial gain.

The joy of reading towns and cities lies not so much in battling with definitions and semantics, but in their glorious variety. Identifying the elements of towns and cities of all eras worldwide and learning to understand these is a lifetime's joy to anyone with an eye for difference, a lust for travel and a keen sense of continuously unfolding urban and civic history.

City of London skyline
London is vast, its core remarkably small: the City, a place of modern myth that revolves around financial might.

Looking for Clues

The urban grid
The grid patterns of ancient Greek and Roman cities made rational and military sense. They imposed a sense of order on landscapes. They were easy to oversee and to extend in a neat and orderly fashion. They instilled a sense of purpose. This type of plan was to shape cities around the globe for many centuries.

Seen from afar or from on high, the patterns of very different towns and cities can be seen, if not necessarily understood. It is only down on the ground, in their grids or labyrinths of streets, that these all too human constructions reveal their identities and the visitor learns how to equate abstract, bird's-eye views with the life and character of individual towns and cities. Their characters and purposes, however, can be recognised by certain easily identifiable clues.

Many early cities, and again those of the Renaissance and Industrial eras – despotic regimes, too – have been laid out on geometric grids, evoking a sense of discipline and harmony, and expressing a sense of civic and civil order.

Urban sprawl (right)
The car changed everything. From the mid-20th century, towns and cities that might have begun with simple, geometric grid plans sprawled out to accommodate the all-conquering automobile. Beginning in the USA, this dynamic created its own patterns of loops, swirls and intersections best looked down on from skyscrapers.

Squares

Whether a dust-covered central marketplace or a voluptuous Baroque piazza, the vast majority of towns and cities boast squares that draw visitors like bees to nectar or, by night, moths to a flame. These are their civic hearts, their cornerstones.

Commerce

Although globalism is changing this, each town and city has a distinct commercial character expressed historically through ports and quays, stockyards, office towers, banks, and in such compelling buildings as poetic medieval European cloth halls and prosaic 19th-century Manchester mills.

Skyline (below)

Adorned with cornucopias of towers, spires, domes or skyscrapers – and perhaps all of these – skylines offer an immediate sense of the life and character of a particular town or city: compare low, laid-back Copenhagen to high, intense Manhattan.

Poverty

Successful towns and cities have long been magnets for the rural poor and other immigrants. Whether in the guise of sprawling, low-rent suburbia, slums or shanty towns, this type of housing will only increase as global urbanisation grows apace.

PART ONE

The Grammar of Urban Architecture