

# investigating the **public** realm



## Introduction

SUF   Syracuse University in Florence  
arc 407 - spring semester 2007  
Prof. Maya Krause

The main topic of investigation during the semester is that of PUBLIC SPACE and the shift in its expression and perception that has taken place throughout history. Florence as the primary subject of study, becomes in this context particularly interesting, in that it has preserved its various layers of history reflecting different values, be it social, economic or political, that have shaped the public realm of the city. With changing values over time and the increasing amount of tourism the spatial framework of the historic city has proven a high degree of flexibility and capacity to absorb change. At the same time the city has expanded beyond its historical confinements and mutated into a large peripheral zone, an urbanized landscape, defined by excessive amounts of infrastructure, car traffic, service facilities and rather generic building types. In contrast to the historic city it lacks the spatial definition and hierarchy of public spaces, which have shaped the center of Florence over centuries. At the same time it can be seen as a reflection of a different kind of society, with a different attitude towards public space and public activity in general.

The first part of the semester is directed towards a definition of 'public space' using photography as a way to critically observe and engage with the urban environment. The idea is to get familiarized with a different culture and context, as much as to challenge preconceived notions of public space. Based on the observations made, three major categories were identified: PUBLIC BUILDINGS, PUBLIC SPACE and INFRASTRUCTURE. The second part of the assignment focused then on an attempt to 'map the public realm' based on the categories previously identified. The challenge was not only to identify the various elements that exist within each category, but also to re-present the reciprocity of formal and informal systems that in the end constitutes the experience and the making of public space.



the RIVER armature - connecting the city center with the outer city

SITE AREA

## the final project

The primary objective of the final design project is the *making of public space* based on a strategy suitable for the given site. The site is located along the riverfront with a particular focus on a zone towards the east of the city center, that is becoming increasingly structured around public activities such as recreational activities and event spaces such as the 'Teatro della Tenda'. Despite the increasing amount of public activity, the area lacks a clear identity and consists of a series of fragmented territories, partly industrial and service based, partly recalling memories of the past such as the old mill, yet remaining to a large extent underdeveloped.

The river as a site is of particular interest for two reasons. One, because of its role as a place for the public throughout the history of Florence: 'as early as the thirteenth century, the Florentines were attempting to beautify their river through improvements and developments of its surrounding structures, for the common good of the people.' (Early Urban Projects and the Arno, Lisa Jane Neal). Second, because the river serves as an important infrastructural link between the inner center and the outer suburbs of the city connecting various ideas of public space and activity from the Cascine park to the densities of public spaces within the inner city to more recent recreational and entertainment activities along the river.

Various STAGES of the project:

- 01 MAPPING the river armature: public buildings, public space and infrastructure
- 02 interpretation and SITE analysis
- 03 STRATEGY for making public space (integration of...)
  - analysis on the public realm (project 01)
  - constructed reading and interpretation of the site
  - site analysis
  - ideas and insights from places visited and/or other reference projects
- 04 DESIGN (diagrams, concepts etc. should be derived from strategy)