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**The ancient village of Sottomarina in the Venetian lagoon and the demolished  
Church of Saint Martin Bishop**

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**Abstract**

*This work concerns Sottomarina, a village located in the Venetian lagoon, and it specifically refers to the demolished Church of San Martin Bishop. The idea of restoring the central area of the village where the Church rised has long been the object of discussion on the part of local authorities.*

*The village of Sottomarina is one of the subjects recently investigated by our research group at the Department of Civil, Environmental and Architectural Engineering of the University of Padua. The centre of the ancient village of Sottomarina in the Venetian lagoon was thought as an opportunity to reconfigure the lost unity of this symbolic and representative place, custodian of its memory and identity. The order and hierarchy of the elements that characterized the form of this old place have been reconsidered. The intent to regenerate the area and the observations about the relationship between the village and the Venetian lagoon lead to recognize in the demolished Church of Saint Martin Bishop a unique opportunity which allows to recover rituals and connections from the past.*

*The working method is based on the belief that, in the study of urban morphology, is basic to analyse the history of the city, clarifying the relationship between permanent structures and temporary ones. The history becomes an indispensable tool to know the deep reasons of the urban structure which is the memory and the image of the community. The methodology looks at the city as a product of functional systems (political, social, economic), but overall contemplates the urban form as a result of its spatial structure. The life of the urban form is investigated in its physical specificity, the only one able of giving reason of its special nature over every social, economic and political aspect, certainly important but not sufficient.*

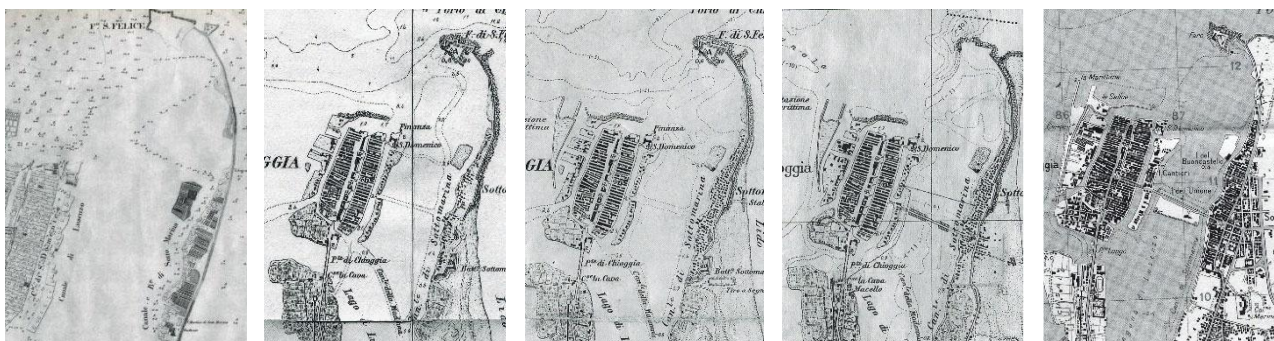
**Keyword:** *Sottomarina, Venetian lagoon, urban form, memory, identity*

**Introduction**

The peninsula that takes its name from the ancient village of Sottomarina constitutes the first segment south of the series of strips of land that separate the lagoon of Venice from the open sea. It seems to have been founded in the VII century A.D. when it was called Clodia minor, that is, Chioggia minore referring to the nearby city of Chioggia in the lagoon.

With the passing of time that part of the peninsula where the waves from the sea lap onto its shore has widened due to the detritus deposited, creating a deep beach. The village stands on the opposite part, on the bank of the lagoon, with the island of Chioggia lying opposite (Figure 1). In the XIV century events fundamental to the survival of the Republic of Venice took place in these places. It was here that the final part of the 1378-1381 war between Venice and Genoa for supremacy in trade with the East was fought. The

Venetians won the war notwithstanding the Genoese getting so close to the lagoon city that Sottomarina was completely destroyed. It was only reconstructed in the second half of the XVII century.



**Figure 1.** Sottomarina (on the right in the pictures) and the island of Chioggia. Maps of the years 1809-1811, 1882, 1908, 1931, 1963.

The village rose around the church of Saint Martin Bishop, built where a religious building once stood which was destroyed by the Genoese. The façade of the church, built at the end of the Eighteenth Century and consecrated in 1801, faced south (Figure 2). Notwithstanding the immediate expansion by the addition of the last two side chapels, the increase in the number of parishioners soon made it necessary to build the current church whose first stone was blessed in December 1859 with work proceeding slowly, being completed at the end of the century. It was arranged orthogonal to the previous one, with its façade facing west, perhaps to make the building very visible from Chioggia due to the rivalry between the two built-up areas (Figures 3,4). The fabric of the built-up area is imposed on a series of narrow lanes called *calli* oriented orthogonally to the bank. The buildings are largely late nineteenth century, with others built after the Second World War integrated among them. The place where the two churches rose is on the axis of the cross-lagoon bridge connecting Sottomarina and Chioggia (Figure 5), finished in wood in 1921 and using masonry in 1932.

The eighteenth-century church was abandoned after the new sacred building started being used. The roof became dangerous and was demolished. The space uncovered was initially used as a storage area and place of support for oratory activities. The volume of the apse was incorporated into the parish complex functioning as the vestry and then as a winter chapel. This paper is concerned with what remains of this building.

## Methodology

The planning proposal presented in this paper aims at urban regeneration which has nowadays become a practice of redevelopment in line with the more innovative strategies of European development involving urban sustainability (Musco, 2009). All of this presupposes the redevelopment of degraded areas and the restoration of buildings from the past to re-insert them into the circuit of life in the historic city.

The theme of recycling and reusing historic buildings is a practice that also in Italy has been subject to discussion in the community for some time. The conviction that has matured is of being able to restore

buildings, factories, and monuments by re-adapting them to the new needs and changing uses of modern society (Ferlenga, 2015).



**Figure 2.** The old, eighteenth-century church of Saint Martin Bishop in the Napoleonic land register (1808).

**Figure 3.** The eighteenth-century church and the actual one, perpendicularly built, in a map dated 1895.

The history of architecture contains examples of spontaneous regeneration of more extensive urban structures and buildings. So it is difficult to say that the theme of reuse belongs exclusively to a society like that of today characterized by economic crisis and disuse of large areas caused by the passage to a new cycle of economic production.

The contribution presented in this paper refers to the theoretical progress in the field of architecture as physical fact and as spatial facts made by Antonio Monestiroli (Monestiroli, 2004), Uwe Schröder (Schröder 2015) and Carlo Moccia (Moccia, 2015) in a school of thought – rationalist of Italian and foreign origin – that investigated these spatial themes in the past, giving life to a trend that considers the morphological-type questions as the basis of urban projects in historic centres. The inadequacy of the modern project in operations concerning consolidated urban fabrics has in fact given rise – in opposition – to a completely Italian trend guided by the figure of Aldo Rossi whose text 'Architecture of the City' published in 1966 led to a new season and new way of looking at the historic centre restoration project using new operations.



**Figure 4.** Façade of the current church, partially hidden by a building. Picture taken in about 1921.

**Figure 5.** View of Sottomarina from the bell tower. Chioggia appears in the background. On the left the bridge connecting Sottomarina and Chioggia. Picture taken after the Second World War.

The enthusiasm of the modern movement for an operational method founded on the objectivity of standardised typological schemas, on the subdivision of the city into distinct functional parts, on the use of standardised parameters to define the size of the roads and accommodation, without any relationship with the form of the historic city, had consigned operational planning instruments into the hands of architects that are inappropriate for solving the pressing problems of post-war reconstruction. The thoughts of Rossi against this way of thinking about architecture were so strong as to lead to a real and true revolution since in the autonomy of form he stated the disciplinary field appropriate to architecture. The study of the city starting from its constitutional elements lead Aldo Rossi to consider the formal dimension to be central thereby overturning the form-function equation so dear to the modern movement (Rossi, 1966).

The analysis of the city showed how the monuments, provided with high formal value, persist as invariants while the functions are subject to continual change. Arising out of this, form and its permanence become central to architecture. The discovery of the value of the form, its invariance, above all in monuments, has led research towards the formative processes of the city, leading to the study of building typologies in relation to urban morphology. The studies of Aldo Rossi have therefore strongly focussed attention on the spatial dimension of architecture. His studies have been recognised internationally and become the reference point for several schools of architecture (Caja, 2017). The urban form of Sottomarina is constructed according to the settlement principles of the closed city (Monestiroli, 1997). It is clear that intervening in the historic city of Sottomarina means insertion in the slot created by a consolidated tradition that interprets methods of constructing the space typical of the closed city where the relationship between house and street, public building and piazza inescapably constitute the main founding principle.

The invention used in the project cannot exclude the memory of the place inside which it is possible to trace the reasons for a coherent development of the project based on the identity of that place. Restored existing buildings and new buildings (which substitute the demolished ones) should coexist with the aim of reinterpreting the settlement characteristics of places by paying particular attention to the sequence of the spaces in order on the one hand to exalt the closed nature of the compact city inside the city walls and on the other to multiply the relationships with the whole community.



**Figure 6.** Aerial view of Sottomarina in the sixties of last century, with the deep beach and the open sea. On the right the volume of the actual church appears, partially outside the framework.

**Figure 7.** Historical centre of Sottomarina, planivolumetric plan of the current state.



**Figures 8, 9,10.** Remains of the eighteenth-century church of Saint Martin Bishop. External view of the façade, internal general view towards the entry, view of the actual dominating church. From the work of the students Marco Costantini and Debora Formentin.

### Teaching experience

An urban redevelopment project experience carried out within the framework of the Urban and Architectural Composition 2 course at the Department of Civil, Environment and Architectural Engineering at the University of Padua, Italy (teachers the authors), is now briefly presented. The project concerns a degraded area inside the historic centre of Sottomarina (Figure 6) and the expectation of re-finding a role and purpose for the inside of the village. In particular, the area is characterised by the former church of Saint Martin Bishop, the historical pre-existence around which gravitates the residential fabric (Figure 7). In general, the planning choice presented here aims to enhance the pre-existing artistic history considered to be the stimulus triggering processes that will revitalise the area from a socio-economic point of view.

The project, developed by the students Marco Costantini and Debora Formentin, provides for a new cultural pole in Sottomarina characterised by an auditorium, an art gallery, and a library. The auditorium is in the large abandoned space of the old church of Saint Martin Bishop (Figures 8, 9, 10, 11). The art gallery and the library are contained in an L-shaped volume related to the church. In particular, the new building substitutes the analogous volume of a pre-existing building to form, along with the church, an external public courtyard (Figure 12) that as an idea resembles a *campiello* (small square/piazza in the Venice area). Positioned in the heart of the built-up area of Sottomarina, the project inserts itself in the context by respecting the settlement principles. The remains of the church constitute the premise for restoration of the building by respecting the history but simultaneously recomposing the image lost by reconstructing what is demolished using contemporary materials (Figures 13, 14). Consequently, the recomposed building restores the volumetric image of the old church (Figure 15) clarifying its stratigraphic reading where the pre-existing brick walls are set against the superelevation made of corten material. The reconstruction principle of “as it was where it



was” which provides for a sort of museumification of the existing building inserting a new lay function inside the former religious space is surpassed.



**Figure 11.** Remains of the eighteenth-century church. Internal view towards the apse.

**Figure 12.** Historical centre of Sottomarina. Planimetry of the ground floor, showing the insertion of the project in the urban context. From the work of the students Marco Costantini and Debora Formentin.

The main nave becomes the new auditorium whose roof is a glazed steel solution held up by a thin metal punctiform framework which acts autonomously without needing the existing continuous walls. Detached from the walls and painted white, the construction idea brings out its formal clarity and respects the pre-existing archaeology. The idea of a formally recognisable individual space is seen in the use of an essential language that concentrates on abstraction rather than the picturesque according to the miesian principle of “less is more”. The students use the idea of a glazed roof to recompose the bulk of the church as perceived inside the urban fabric making the relationship between ancient and modern explicit.

The new L-shaped body is defined by the relationship of two orthogonal bodies in relationship with the church. The body lying parallel to the church and contiguous to an existing residential building hosts the art gallery while the orthogonal body contains the library organised on two levels (Figure 16). In the point where the two bodies meet is a covered passage that introduces the *campiello* and where the entrances to the art gallery on the one side and the library on the other are found.



**Figures 13, 14.** *Project for a new cultural pole in Sottomarina. The new auditorium. From the work of the students Marco Costantini and Debora Formentin.*



**Figure 15, 16, 17.** Project for a new cultural pole in Sottomarina. External view of the auditorium, the art gallery and the library. The buildings generate a new public courtyard, a campiello, according to the tradition of Venetian culture. From the work of the students Marco Costantini and Debora Formentin.

The two separate bodies seem to be functionally one single volumetric building from the outside, unified by vertical wooden cladding composed of boards that mark the form of the whole building (Figure 17). It is a matter of a formal solution that recalls the ancient *squeri* (boatyards) built of wood and masonry present in the lagoon landscape. The materials used, wood for the cladding, *trachite* stone for the flooring, and tiles for the roofs remake the typical characteristics of the Venetian construction culture.

## Conclusion

The area around the church of Saint Martin Bishop is inserted inside a wider perspective that views the historic centre as a place of collective memories. Memories that are not exhausted in the idea of a museumification of the existing building but are memories capable of meeting the challenge of the future, the new themes of sustainable urban development imposed by modern society. The historic centre is called to have a key role compared to other parts of the city and the wider area in which the city is located. Intervening by applying a process of urban redevelopment inside the historic city involves measuring this by using the values such an area has assumed through time and so good regeneration practice should not leave restoring the ancient in continuity with its values out of consideration. This perspective leads to urbanism as a harmonious composition of skills and bureaucratic machinery needing to treat the city from the point of view of its formal structure and less from the contents of administrative and financial-economic orders.

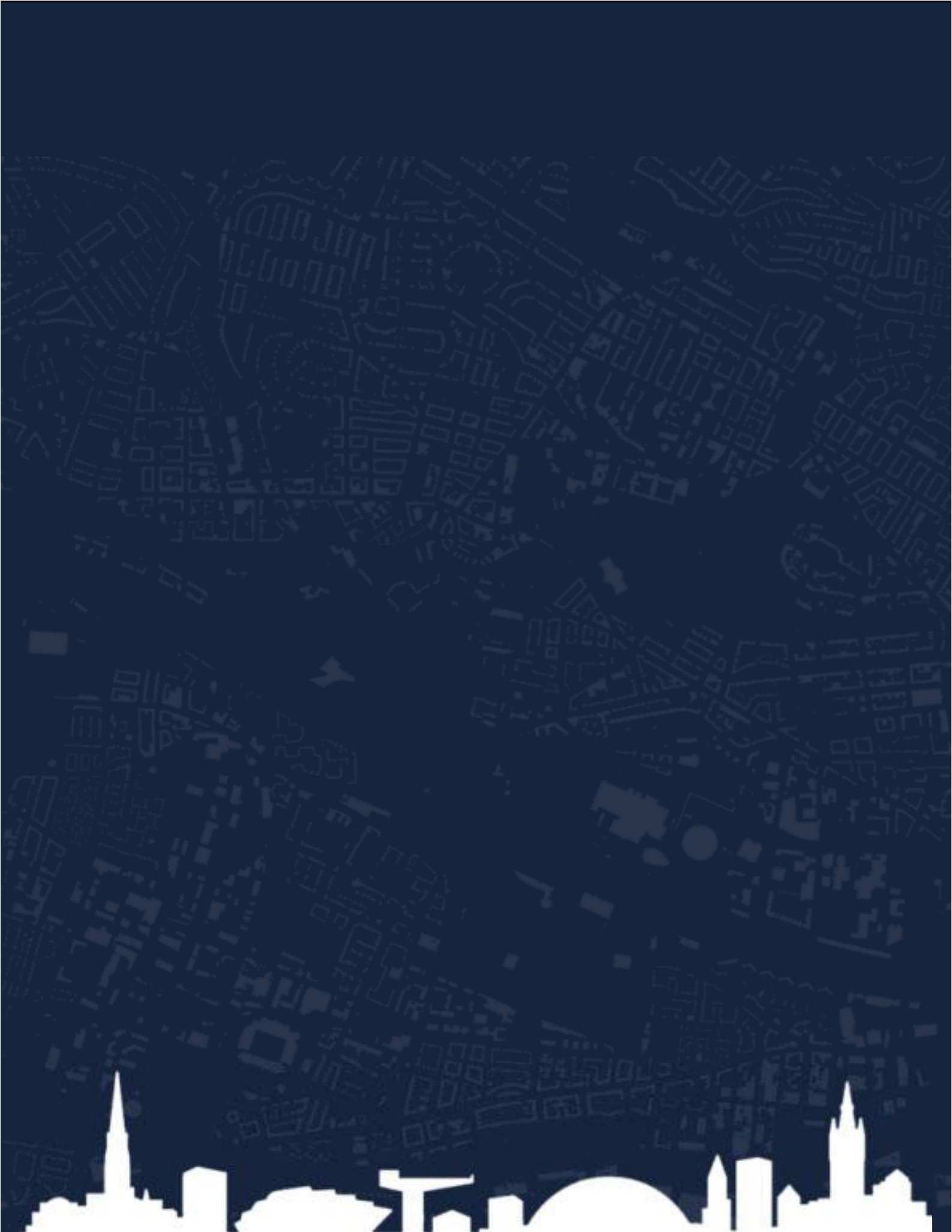
The dialogue established by the project using the techniques of composition inherited from the historic city facilitates the finding of continuity with the character of the place. Above all from a spatial point of view because architecture is mainly the art of constructing space. It is precisely space that contains these values that define the environmental atmosphere rich in meaning and content that the collectivity recognises as appropriate. A continuity that is reflected in the methods of arranging the volumes in space and in the relationships that these establish with pre-existing historic environments. Consequently, the regeneration

project is not enclosed within limits of the sphere of intervention but opens up to the city in establishing formal continuity and also interweaves profitable social and economic exchanges.

Empty containers, parts of the city abandoned to themselves need new uses to adapt to the changes demanded by society. Functions that enhance sociality show a possible way of revitalising a degraded area in the project presented in this paper, having a domino effect on the rest of the city.

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