

STORIA · SAGGIO

Paper Cities

Municipal archives and the making of urban memory

Elena Duarte

Universidade de Lisboa

ABSTRACT

Municipal archives do not merely preserve the memory of cities: they help to build it. The essay follows the case of a European port city between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, showing how registers, maps and land surveys decided which places, trades and communities would enter urban history and which would be left out.

RIASSUNTO

Gli archivi municipali non conservano soltanto la memoria delle città: contribuiscono a costruirla. Il saggio segue il caso di una città portuale europea tra Sette e Novecento, mostrando come registri, piante e catasti abbiano deciso quali luoghi, mestieri e comunità sarebbero entrati nella storia urbana e quali ne sarebbero rimasti esclusi.

Parole chiave: municipal archives, urban history, maps, civic memory, early modern cities

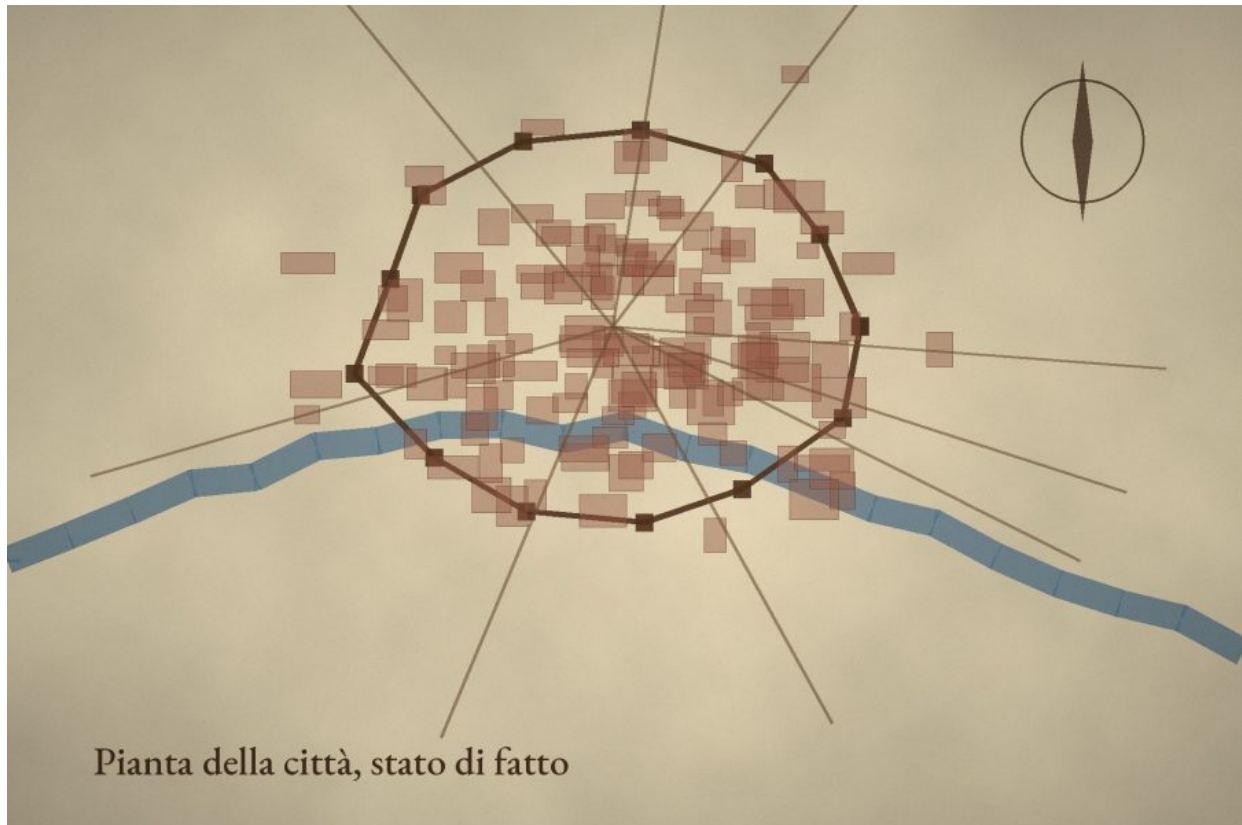
Every city has two shapes. One is made of stone, streets and water. The other is made of paper: registers, maps, deeds, petitions and minutes, kept in the municipal archive. Historians usually treat the second as a mirror of the first. This essay argues that the relationship runs both ways.

WHAT THE ARCHIVE RECORDS

A municipal archive records what the city needed to govern: property, taxes, licences, public works.

Whatever escaped administration, informal trades, temporary dwellings, the lives of those who owned

nothing, left fewer traces or none at all.¹



Pianta della città, stato di fatto. Immagine dimostrativa

The archive did not simply remember the city; it decided which city would be remembered.

MAPS AS ARGUMENTS

Urban maps are a case in point. A plan drawn to support a new street or a demolition is not a neutral survey: it shows the city as it should become. When such plans are later read as evidence of how the city was, the project quietly turns into history.

READING AGAINST THE GRAIN

None of this makes municipal archives less valuable. It means reading them against the grain: looking for the gaps, the marginal notes, the petitions that were rejected, the neighbourhoods that appear only when they are about to disappear.

NOTE

1. On the experience of working with such sources, see A. Farge, *Le goût de l'archive*, Paris, Seuil, 1989.

COME CITARE

Duarte, E. (2026). Paper Cities. Cronotopie, 1(2), 37-58. <https://doi.org/10.99999/cronotopie.2026.2.02>

Pubblicato il 5 ottobre 2026 · Vol. 1, n. 2 (2026) · Archivi · pp. 37-58

DOI <https://doi.org/10.99999/cronotopie.2026.2.02>

Versione online <http://127.0.0.1:8098/articoli/paper-cities>

Licenza CC BY 4.0 · Revisione tra pari, in doppio cieco