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Urban sketching for reading the spaces of the historic city. L'Aquila and its squares

In the history of the city of L'Aquila, squares have always had a pivotal role in the foundation and transformation of its design. In fact, squares in L'Aquila have always been part and parcel of the city's image, each one with its specific identity and meaning; meeting and gathering places in which the inhabitants recognize themselves and of which they have suffered the absence during these years of reconstruction following the earthquake of 2009, still underway today, that is finally allowing the population to reclaim the spaces of the historic centre.

The paper delves into the values of hand and life drawing, which still has great potential as a scientific process made up of technique, perception and critical restitution, in order to read and document the urban spaces of the city's identity and to recognize their historical and architectural values.

Keywords:

Urban Sketching; Hand drawing; Life drawing; Graphic analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The characteristics of the urban form of the city of L'Aquila derive from the synthesis between the Angevin foundation plan and a widespread system of squares. These last, although over the years have seen a modification in their function, use and individual importance, reflecting the social change of the city, have always had a central role in the foundation and transformation of its design. The 2009 earthquake caused significant damage to the city and in particular to the historic center, leading to its temporary depopulation, still partially ongoing, due to its inaccessibility for years. The reconstruction process, currently still underway, is allowing urban spaces to be re-appropriated, even in a different way than in the past, making

it possible for the inhabitants to finally recreate their sense of identity and connection with these places (Brusaporci, Graziosi, Franchi, Maiezza & Vernacotola, 2018; Tata, 2023).

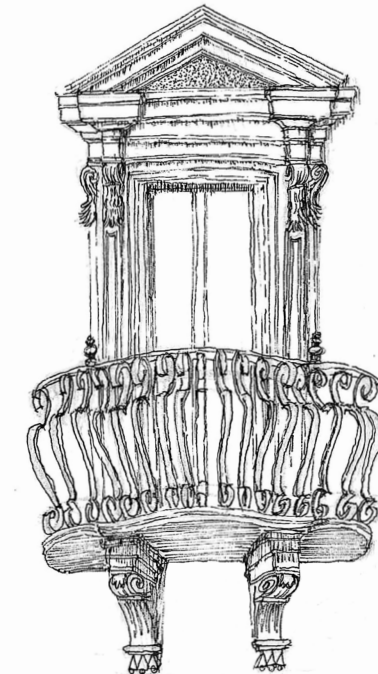
The aim of this research is to carry out a study on some of the squares of the city of L'Aquila, through the use of traditional drawing representation methods, in order to read and document the urban spaces of the city's identity and to recognize their historical and architectural values.

Life drawing offers a first fundamental approach and tool of knowledge, allowing the observer to transcribe information deduced from reality, eliminating what is not needed, following an iterative and mutual analysis and selection process between the observer, the object of the study and its context (Docci, Gaiani & Maestri, 2011).

The human hand, in this case, operates as an extension of both the eye and the brain and proves to be a crucial tool, capable of describing and expressing what we see and feel. Unlike digital drawing or photography, hand drawing is a tactile exercise in which reality and perception, thought and imagination, blend together in a process of observation and mimicry of the rhythm of the lines of the subject we are drawing. Therefore, as stated by Pallaasma, the act of drawing and sketching produces three sets of images:

Fig. 1 - Central perspective of San Biagio square with the church of Santa Caterina Martire in the center and on the left Benedetti palace.

Fig. 2 - Detail of the corner window of the first floor of Benedetti palace in San Biagio square.



the drawing that appears on the paper, the virtual image recorded in our brain memory and a muscular memory of the act of drawing itself. The three temporal images are a record of the iterative temporal process of perception, measurement, evaluation and representation that characterize the multiple and layered nature of this act, which allows the scholar to come into close contact with the subject of the drawing and to vividly remember its details even after a long time (Pallasmaa, 2009).

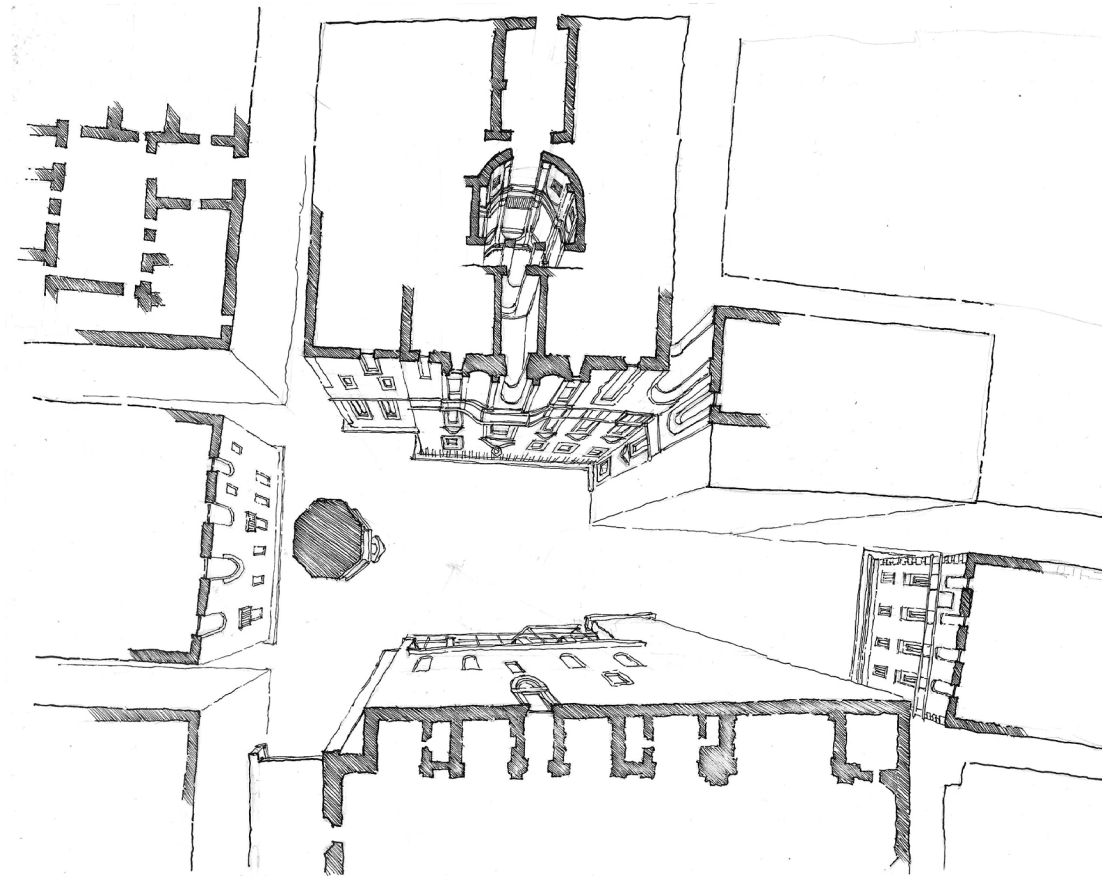
This paper aims to delve into the values of this approach, understood as a scientific process made up of technique, perception and critical restitution, to rediscover and document the urban spaces of city's identity through urban sketching (Lynch, 1964; Cullen, 1976).

2. LIFE DRAWING FOR READING THE CITY

Although hand drawing is not an approach currently investigated by the main lines of research, it still has great potential, as highlighted by the important experiences on this topic, and on life drawing, in particular (Albisinni & Chiavoni, 2014; Ching, 2000; Chiavoni, Diacodimitri & Pettoello, 2017; Calia & Conte, 2021).

Life drawing represents a great tool for knowledge, reading and analysis. The on-site presence, outdoors and into direct contact with the subject of the drawing, allows the scholar to establish a continuous comparison with it and with the context that surrounds it and to critically select and summarize what there is in front of him, by graphically transcribing the resulting information, eliminating what it is considered superfluous for the purposes of drawing, in a continuous iterative process with the reality (Bertocci & Bini, 2012).

In life drawing the observer can note how the subject of the drawing changes depending on the position and the height of the chosen point of view, and on the context (brightness, use, presence of people etc.) and critically decide what to include in the drawing, from what point of view, at what angle and at what time of day to draw the subject.



Urban sketching, in particular, represents a branch of life drawing and, specifically, a real artistic movement characterized by short times and a free style, deriving from not having the creation of an exact and detailed copy of reality as one of its targets.

The urban sketchers movement was born online in 2007 from a journalist and illustrator from Seattle, Gabriel Campanario, who invited all sketchers to share their works on his forum (Campanario, 2009). The movement, which today

Fig. 3 - Down to top perspective of Santa Maria Paganica square. Above is Ardinghelli palace with its courtyard passing over the two streets, below is the church of Santa Maria Paganica. On the left, in the center of the square, there is the octagonal fountain.

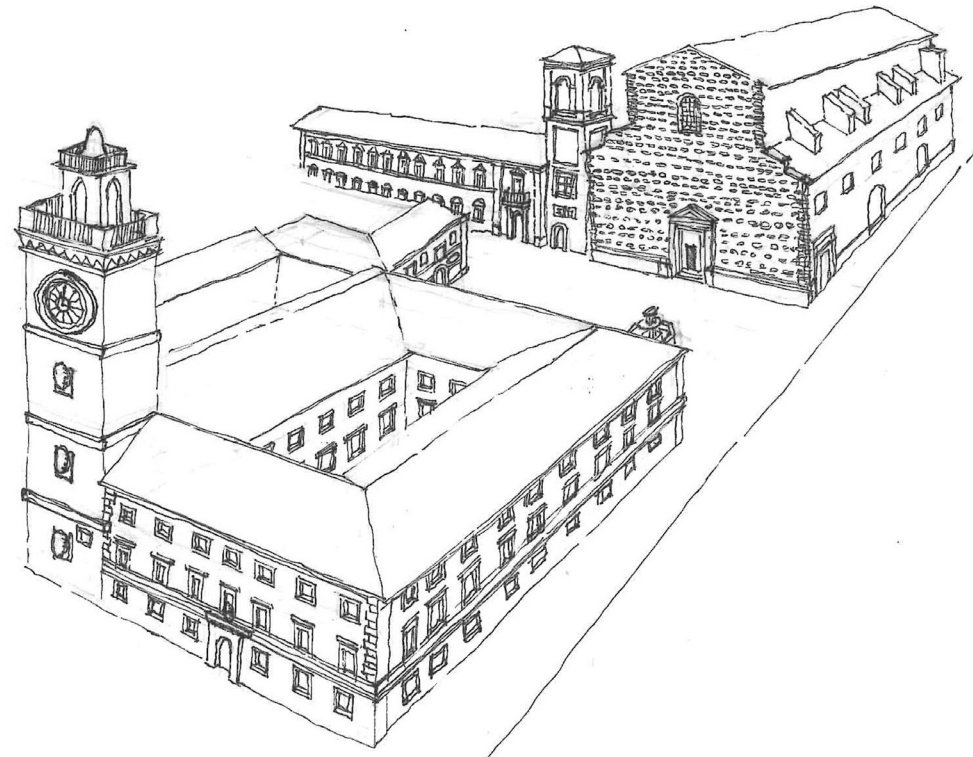
consists of a real manifesto divided into eight points that define its main aspects, has begun to expand over the years and today represents a global and collective trend that is dedicated to the "urban portrait" and finds its foundation on aspects of community and sharing.

The drawings that characterize this style are often the result of a synthesis between reality and perception and have the aim of representing and communicating some subjects or aspects considered of particular interest, recording them in a specific time. The result is a sort of visual diary that collects and documents everything interesting that captures the observer gaze, becoming an always available tool for that, helping him to connect with the surrounding environment, refining his observation skills and capturing details that otherwise would go unnoticed (Edwards, 1994).

3. THE SQUARES OF L'AQUILA

The current shape of the city of L'Aquila derives from a formation process characterized by three main phases and numerous earthquakes, which have marked and modified its evolution over time (Spagnesi & Properzi, 1972; Clementi & Piroddi, 1986; Morlacchi, 2016).

Of particular importance for the modification of the city's design is the phase that goes from 1266 to 1300, in which, to reduce feudal power, the castles located in the valley of L'Aquila were demolished, and the inhabitants of the former feuds were pushed to move to the city. On that occasion, to plan its future development, the organization of the city into *locali* (locals) was set up, each of which corresponding to the castles of origin, both in name and assigned size. Hence, within the urban perimeter a series of inhabited areas, gravitating around a still recognisable polycentric structure, made up of a square, a church and a fountain, were formed. These locals, which had previously been used as a tool for subdividing and planning the development of the city, both at an urban and building level, in an attempt to promote unified development of the city, in 1275 were grouped and hierarchized into *quarti* (quarters) by Captain Lucchesino. The city was divided into four quarters, and the local squares and churches that have acquired particular importance and prestige over the years were promoted to "head-quarter", becoming real polari-



ties and acquiring an even more central role in the growth of the city.

Given the particularity of its foundation and its development, the history of L'Aquila has always been characterized by a multiple system of squares that integrates into the urban fabric of the city and contributes to the conformation of a complex urban design, in which they reaffirm their own identity value. Thus, a system organized into urban squares, head-quarter squares and local squares is formed. The first, made up of Duomo square and Palazzo square, are the squares in which the economic, political and religious life of the city and all official public events take place. The latter, made up of Santa Giusta square, San Marciano square,

Fig. 4 - Accidental perspective of Santa Margherita square. In the foreground the palace of Santa Margherita d'Austria with the clock tower and the internal courtyard. At the back is Santa Margherita square with Palazzetto dei Nobili on the left, the fountain in the center, and, in the background, Camponeschi palace and the church of Santa Margherita.

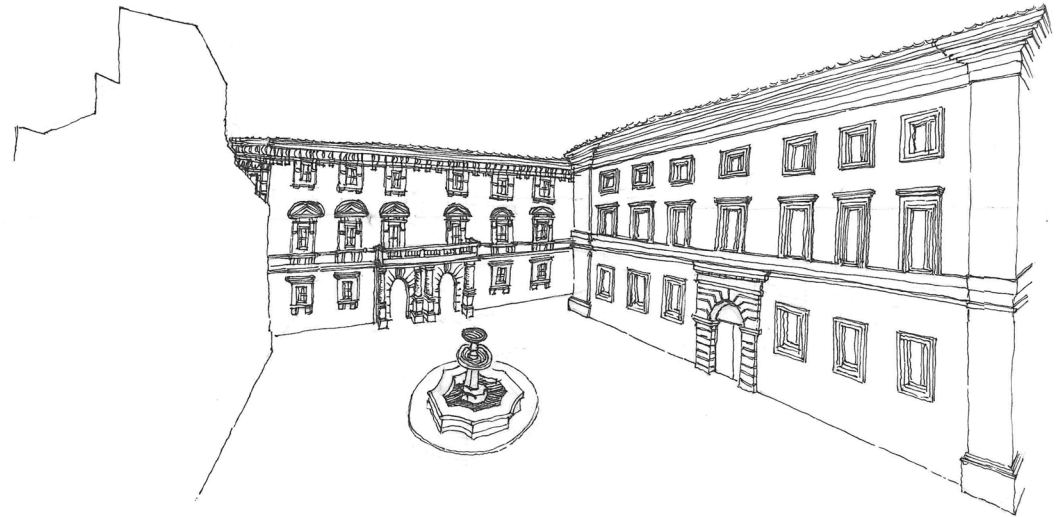
San Pietro in Coppito square and Santa Maria Paganica square, are the squares at the heart of the life, organization and power of the city's neighborhoods. Finally, the local squares have their origins in the urbanization mechanism that took place towards the end of the 13th century. Among these are Chiarino square, San Flaviano square, Nove Martiri square and San Biagio square. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries

the city of L'Aquila was the subject of a figurative renewal that has involved the redevelopment of spaces and urban axes. The squares became the main location of new architectural settlements and, in the reconstruction following the earthquake of 1703, were the subject of a building reconfiguration which saw them as the object of events of individual architectural enrichment (Centofanti, 1992; Stockel, 1989).

These modifications were superimposed on the pre-existing urban system, modifying its formal values, perceptive and spatial, through the construction of new buildings, often antagonistic to the existing ones. Particularly after these modifications, the majority of the squares in L'Aquila are traditionally made up of a church, a fountain and a palace. Moreover, regarding palaces, another aspect of identity in the architectural history of the city is the theme of the courtyards, which in the palaces of the 15th and 16th centuries tends to qualify as an autonomous spatial and figurative value. These courtyards in the reconstruction process are often incorporated and metabolized into the figurative modernization on the street fronts, where the facades constitute a filter between public and private spaces (Brusaporci & Centofanti, 2011). Among the numerous squares of the city, the following are proposed as representative: San Biagio square, Santa Maria Paganica square, Santa Margherita square, San Marciانو square.

3.1 San Biagio square

San Biagio square, belonging to the quarter of San Pietro, is a rectangular square that opens along via Sassa, a few meters away from Duomo square and the cathedral of Santi Giorgio e Massimo. The square is characterized by the juxtaposition of two churches: the basilica of San Giuseppe Artigiano, former church of Santi Biagio e Vittorino, bordering Via Sassa; the new church of Santa Caterina Martire, located at the bottom of the square, in a perfectly symmetrical position with respect to it (Fig. 1 - 2). The basilica of San Giuseppe Artigiano, rebuilt following the earthquake of 1703 which completely destroyed the previous church of San Biagio, de-



rives from a long reconstruction process that led to the creation of a partially unfinished and different church. In fact, the main facade is aligned with the street level rather than the back, as originally planned by the designer, and the church develops on a single order of pilasters with three stone portals, while the upper part is left unfinished due to economic problems that arose.

The church of Santa Caterina Martire, finished in 1752, is characterized by a convex front, vertically divided by columns and pairs of pilasters, all in Corinthian order, inside which the main portal and large windows are positioned, and which support a massive entablature. Above the entablature, in the background, stands the prismatic volume of the remodeled dome with a small lantern on the top. Finally, on the western side of the square, on the corner with Via Sassa, stands Benedetti palace (1728). The palace presents a courtyard with complete spatial articulation and architectural qualification for the late-Baroque configuration and a façade organized with a layout marked by pilasters which tend to accentuate the verticality, as well as

Fig. 5 - Accidental perspective of Santa Margherita square. In the foreground the Pica Alfieri palace, in the center the octagonal fountain, on the right the back of the palace of Santa Margherita d'Austria and, to the left the church of Santa Margherita.

an original solution of windowed corner and a very particular attic formally resolved as a balcony. To date, the restoration and consolidation works of the square following the earthquake of 2009 have been completed. The only building that is still at a standstill and still propped up today is the church of Santa Caterina Martire.

3.2 Santa Maria Paganica square

Santa Maria Paganica square has a rectangular shape and is dominated by a perspective view which sees, on the one hand, the side of the church of Santa Maria Paganica and its churchyard, and on the other the important Ardinghelli palace, now a branch of the National Museum of 21st Century Arts in Rome, with its monumental facade (Fig. 3). The construction of the church of Santa Maria Paganica dates back to the XIII century, but its con-

struction lasted until the mid-fourteenth century, when the bell tower was built.

The palace, which by design should have homogeneously covered the entire front of the block on the square side, remained unfinished, and on Via Paganica is next to the Camponeschi houses. The building is articulated on two fronts, and overlooks Santa Maria Paganica square and the parallel Via Garibaldi, with an extension onto Via Ardinghelli.

The palace is one of the rare cases of *ex novo* solutions. It was indeed built from scratch after the earthquake of 1703. It is characterized by a courtyard with a particular semicircular shape and a late Baroque facade of three orders with attic where the square window of the first order is literally hung from the high frame, which also forms the parapet of the main floor, while that of the attic floor hungs from the cornice.

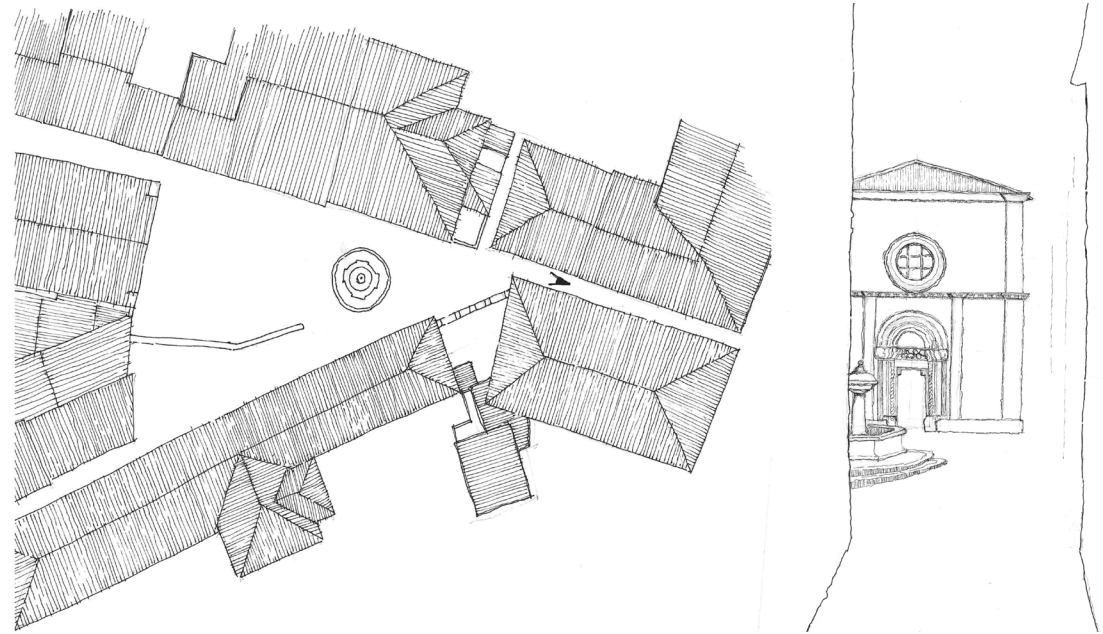
The two spatial sequences of the church and of Ardinghelli palace are hinged on the eighteenth-century fountain by Pietro Paolo Porano, aligned with the facade of the church.

To date, the restoration and consolidation works of the buildings overlooking the square have all been completed, while those concerning the church of Santa Maria Paganica, seriously damaged by the earthquake and still propped up today, are still at a standstill.

3.3 *Santa Margherita square*

Santa Margherita square finds its definitive structure with the reconstruction following the earthquake of 1703, through a long and complex process of transformation which leads to its formal and figurative definition and that of the nearby Piazza dell'Annunziata.

This square, located along the main urban axis of Via Roma, despite its small size, has particular importance from an architectural point of view. In fact, on the square overlook: to the south the so-called Palazzetto dei Nobili (17th century), with its mannerist style facade and a sumptuous interior of Baroque influence; to the north Pica Alfieri palace (1711 -1727), former seat of the palace of the Count of Montorio, character-



ized by an important facade in late Baroque style with a double ashlar portal, framed by four Doric columns, result of a renovation in 1726-27; to the west the small church of Santa Margherita (former church of Gesù), left unfinished following the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Kingdom of Naples in 1767; to the east the back of the palace of Margherita of Austria (1572-1575) (Fig. 4 - 5). The latter, whose main facade overlooks the nearby Palazzo square, is the result of a radical nineteenth-century transformation intervention, deriving from the restructuring and expansion of the pre-existing Capitano palace (14th century) and the tower of clock, higher than the current one, which has produced an organism completely different from the previous one. Finally, on the west side, overlooking the square are a corner of Quinzi palace (1721-1725) to the north and to the south, adjacent to the church of Santa Margherita, a portion of the the *Aquilanum*

Fig. 6 - On the left, view from above of the square of San Marciano with the church of San Marciano and Nicandro perpendicular to the main entrance of the square, the fountain at the intersection of the two streets and Rustici palace to the south. On the right view of San Marciano square from the main entrance of via San Marciano (point of view indicated in the plan).

Collegium, later transformed into a noble palace (1783), today the headquarters of the Rectorate of the University of L'Aquila and commonly called Camponeschi palace. This last, like the church, is an incomplete work which consists of only two of the four wings envisaged by the original project (Centofanti, 2003).

Finally, the square is embellished with an octagonal fountain and the statue of Charles II of Habsburg, placed on a pedestal and positioned symmetrically in front of the Palazzetto dei Nobili. The statue originally stood in the center of the square. It was placed in its current position in 1903, to make room for the fountain moved from Palazzo square.

3.4 San Marciano square

San Marciano square, and in particular the church of Santi Marciano e Nicandro in 1276 were elevated and promoted to head quarter by the City Captain Lucchesino of Florence, acquiring a growing importance in the history of the city as religious and administrative center of the neighborhood. The promotion to head quarter originated from the aim to replace the church of San Giovanni di Lucoli which, after having suffered extensive damage from the various earthquakes that hit the city, progressively lost its importance (Fig. 6).

The square has a particular triangular shape deriving from the confluence between via Santa Chiara d'Aquili and via dei Drappieri, both deriving from ancient irregular layouts dating back from the pre-existing settlement to the thirteenth-century foundation. The main access to the square is from Via San Marciano, from which the church, positioned perpendicularly at the bottom of the square, is immediately visible, framed by the buildings along the street, and the fountain, positioned at the intersection of the two streets. The high slope of Via dei Drappieri is exploited from an architectural point of view to expand the perspective space of the square.

Only the first level of the church façade remains original. The earthquake of 1703, in fact, heavily damaged the church and the upper part was rebuilt with a gable roof and two lateral rectangular windows, symmetrical with respect to the facade. In 1940 the original façade was finally recovered, and the small windows were replaced with the rose window aligned with the main façade and the ribbed façade, and the lateral square tower bell tower dated 1579 was demolished.

The square reaches its definitive shape through a progressive stratification of insertions and reconstructions, including the church, dating back to the 14th century, and the 18th century Visca and Rustici palaces.

To date, the buildings overlooking the square have been completely restored, while work on the church, heavily affected by the 2009 earthquake, is still at a standstill.

4. CONCLUSION

This contribution deals with the topic of life drawing, understood as a cognitive and exploratory process in which the image is understood as an outcome of a process of reading and analysis. It is the so-called graphic intelligence, expression and evolution of multiple intelligences, in the meaning theorized by Howard Gardner in 1983, defined by Cicalò as the "ability to use graphic skills and more generally the ability to integrate the use of the eye, mind and hand, to solve problems and create effective products aimed at acquiring new knowledge" (Cicalò, 2016: 41). Hence, the focal point of drawing is not the mere "product", understood as a simple graphic representation, but the critical and cognitive process that led to the production of the image itself.

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