6.7

6.6

Figure 6.6 Plan of Piazza
della Signoria, Florence
Figure 6.7 Piazza della
Signoria, Florence

façade of the Palazzo Vecchio, continues to the
dome of the cathedral, while the subtle placing of
the Neptune fountain, at forty-five degrees to the
corner of the palace acts as a fulcrum about which
both spaces pivot (Sitte, 1901) (Figures 6.6 and
6.7).

Sitte's views on the placement of statues,
monuments and fountains were a reaction to the
leaden neo-baroque and academic formalism prevail-
ing during his time. The result of such formalism
was a stultifying insistence on axial planning and
long vistas. Sitte claimed that the impulse to centre
something perfectly in a square is an 'affliction' of
modern times. Nevertheless, Christopher Alexander
(1977) makes an analogy with a table: 'Imagine a
bare table in your house. Think of the power of the
instinct which tells you to put a candle or a bowl
of flowers in the middle. And think of the power of
the effect once you have done it. Obviously, it is an
act of great significance; yet clearly, it has nothing
to do with activities at the edge or in the centre.'
Alexander, however, concedes that the effect may
be purely formalistic 'the sheer fact that the space
of the table is given a centre, and the point at the

centre then organises the space around it, and makes it clear and puts it roughly at rest. The same thing happens in a courtyard or a public square.' Nevertheless Alexander's prescriptive pattern remains essentially true to Sitte's view: 'Between the natural paths which cross a public square or court-yard or a piece of common land choose something to stand roughly in the middle: a fountain, a tree, a statue, a clock-tower with seats, a windmill, a bandstand. Make it something which gives a strong and steady pulse to the square, drawing people in toward the centre. Leave it exactly where it falls between the paths; resist the impulse to put it exactly in the middle.'

Elbert Peets (1927), in his review of Sitte's work, qualifies his outright condemnation of the centring of public monuments in public places and along axial lines in formal compositions. Peets thought that Sitte's preference for the picturesque qualities of the urban landscape caused him to fail to appre-ciate the reasons for such placements during the Renaissance. According to Peets, Renaissance designers set fountains and monuments on the axes of buildings in order that, by the optical law of parallax, the spectator might have the means of measuring his distance from the building he was approaching and thus have a lively impression of the extent of the area and the size of the building. Peets does, however, agree with Sitte's view that the centre of a building or any other particularly decorative part of a building should not be obstructed by a monument. Not only, according to Peets, would such monuments obstruct a richly articulated section of the building, but such decora-tion would be a poor and confusing background for a finely modelled ornament.

Before considering the particular siting require-ments of a range of civic monuments it is appropri-ate to summarize the general principles of their organic placement as outlined by Sitte and modified by his followers. The first principle is the need for a neutral background for the monument: 'The decisive difference in this case between the past and present

is that we always look for places as magnificent as possible for every little statue, thus diminishing its effect instead of augmenting it, as could be done by means of the neutral background that a portraitist would choose for his heads under the circum-stances' (Collins and Collins, 1986). The second principle is that monuments should be placed in areas that do not conflict with traffic movement: 'To the ancient rule of placing monuments around the edge of public squares is thus allied another that is genuinely medieval and more northern in character: to place monuments and especially market fountains at points in the square untouched by traffic' (Collins and Collins, 1986). The third principle, and the one where there is some ambivalence from later writers, is that the centre of the square should be kept free for activities associated with the square. Perhaps this principle can be tempered by the suggestion that in some spaces the centre is the inevitable position for a statue or monument. The best example is, of course, the location of the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in the Campidoglio, Rome. Other well known examples include the statue of Stanislas

Figure 6.8 Equestrian statue, Piazza SS Annunziata, Florence