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Rebuilding an urban empty space. The area where the Eretenio Theatre once stood near the River Retrone in Vicenza, Italy

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**III. INTERNATIONAL CITY PLANNING
AND URBAN DESIGN CONFERENCE**

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REBUILDING AN URBAN EMPTY SPACE. THE AREA WHERE THE ERETENIO THEATRE ONCE STOOD NEAR THE RIVER RETRONE IN VICENZA, ITALY

ENRICO PIETROGRANDE, ALESSANDRO DALLA CANEVA

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Abstract

Vicenza is an ancient city located in the Veneto region, not far from Venice, in the north-east corner of Italy. This work specifically refers to the area of the Eretenio theatre on the bank of the River Retrone. The theatre was bombed and destroyed in 1944. Intimately part of the historic center of Vicenza, this abandoned area gradually lost its functional and social identity. The idea of rebuilding that degraded place has long been the object of discussion on the part of local authorities. The Eretenio theatre area is one of the subjects recently investigated by our students at the 'Architectural and Urban Composition 2' course taught on the master's degree in Architectural Engineering at the University of Padua. Students were required to present project hypotheses to reconfigure the lost unity of this symbolic part of the city. The history is considered an indispensable tool to know the deep reasons of the urban structure, which can be used to control the change of functional systems (political, social and economic). The Eretenio theatre area was proposed to our students as an opportunity to suggest new ways to manage the passage from past to future in the shadow of Andrea Palladio's architecture.

Introduction

The following pages consider a case study themed on the reconstruction of the historic Italian city centre missing buildings due to acts of war and other traumatic events. Indeed, the empty space resulting from the demolition of a building is a deep wound in the historic urban fabric, a fabric composed of relationships that bring the public space to life. Transformations oriented in different directions can be made to this alteration but in the past Italy has often suffered reconstructions completely incompatible with the merits of the valuable historic and artistic context.

In the specific case explained below, in the past, it has been rejected the idea to propose a new building where before the Second World War a monumental building stood. The missing volume has left an interruption in the urban fabric but this tear can be mended. This should be in a similar way when the remedy is being attempted in a historic city in contrast to the incoherent dissonant buildings hurriedly built in the period of economic growth that marked the 1950s and 1960s.

Furthermore, the trend in urban redevelopment particularly in Italy has been towards studying and documenting the urban context in which the transformative reconstruction will take place. This trend

considers investigation of the urban facts and their interpretation in the context to be a real and true first phase in the planning project.

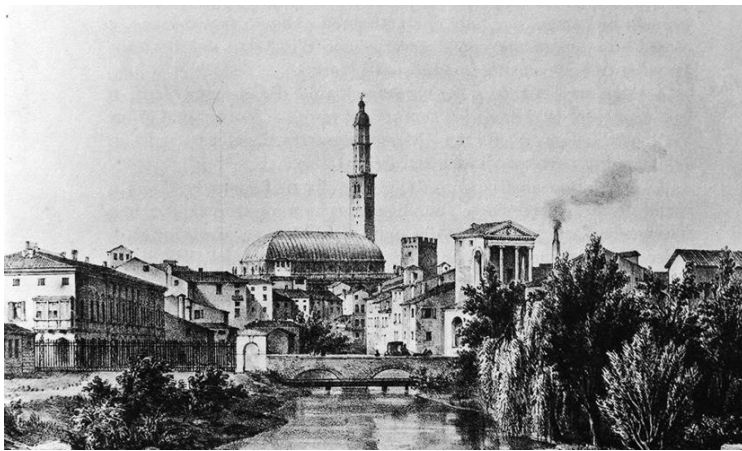


Figure 1. View of the River Retrone and the city of Vicenza with the Basilica designed by Palladio in the background. The Eretenio theatre used to stand to the left of the picture, over the bridge.

Figure 2. Austro-Italian cadastral map showing the position of the Eretenio theatre in Vicenza, 1846.



Figure 3. Main entrance to the Eretenio theatre in Vicenza and portico on Viale Eretenio (Ferrini collection, Vicenza). Photograph taken at the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

Figure 4. View inside the Eretenio theatre (Ferrini collection, Vicenza).

The context

The area studied is located inside the Medieval wall of the historic city of Vicenza in the Veneto region of Italy. The area has a strong connection with most important symbols of the city, some of which are still present and that testify to both a thriving past and a lively present. Here runs the River Retrone and passes the Furo bridge, here stands the sixteenth century palace of the Palazzo Civena Trissino whose architect was Andrea Palladio, and here also stood the Eretenio theatre which this article concentrates on (Figures 1 and 2).

The Eretenio theatre was built at the end of the XVIII century and is still rooted in the memories of elderly Vicenza inhabitants (Formenton, 1867; Schiavo, 1978 and 1984). It stood next to the palace designed by

Palladio near the River Retrone. The job of completing the project in relationship with the city was assigned to the architect Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi who was a prestigious exponent of neoclassicism (Olivato, 1975). The east façade faced the river and was divided into two parts whose colonnaded portico followed the line of the road. The shorter part, in line with the Palazzo Civena Trissino, hosted an ample portico which proceeded to the theatre entrance. The other part was inclined to the theatre hall and the stage, and was composed of five arches with surfaces decorated with ashlar work interspersed with rosette medallions portraying famous dramatists. People coming from the city centre found their way to the wide theatre entry portico through the narrow portico flanking the Viale Eretenio (Figure 3) while the entrance hall was preceded by three base steps in case of flooding from the river. Then inside the theatre building, there were three rooms above the portico of the entrance hall. Furthermore, there was the possibility of entertainment in the wide entrance hall where the theatre café was found. The theatre held about 1250 spectators distributed in the stalls and on the 4 orders each composed of 25 boxes (Figures 4 and 5). It had extraordinary acoustics which were so refined that the breath of the actors could be felt.

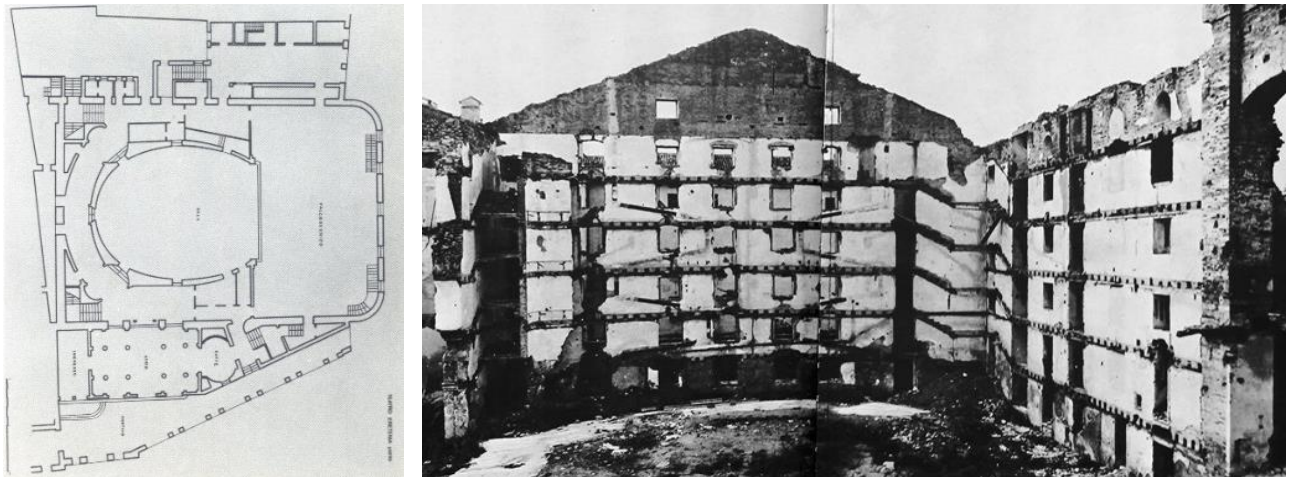


Figure 5. Eretenio theatre, Vicenza. Plan. The two portico sections and the entrance oriented east towards the River Retrone can be seen at the bottom of the drawing. The front onto Via Contrà delle Grazie is on the right. Part of this with the service entrance has been preserved.

Figure 6. View of the ruined Eretenio theatre after its destruction in the Second World War by bombing (2 April 1944).



Figure 7. The stage of the Eretenio theatre seen from the downward slope of Via Contrà delle Grazie and showing what remained of the façade after the 1944 bombardment.

Figure 8. Planivolumetric plan, current state. The area in which the theatre was located at the conjunction of Viale Eretenio and Via Contrà delle Grazie is now a public car park, and rounded in form. From the work of the student Diego Cavestro.

The Eretenio Theatre was inaugurated on the 10 July, 1784 and competed with the most famous theatres in Europe throughout the XIX century putting on many works by Rossellini, Bellini, and Donizetti. It was significantly restored around 1850 during which the stage was enlarged over the Via Contrà delle Grazie. Notwithstanding the repeated successes also favoured by the introduction of electric lighting in the hall in 1883, the Eretenio Theatre suffered competition from the *Teatro Verdi* (Cogo, 1949). The shows at the Eretenio Theatre also suffered a progressive decline due to cinemas being introduced in Vicenza. Indeed, the Eretenio Theatre itself became a cinema during the First World War (Bacci, 2014).

Furthermore, the Eretenio Academy was closed in 1936 and the property passed definitively to the Vicenza town council (municipality) in 1940. Initial maintenance was only decided upon in 1943 and was composed of repainting of interior and new gilding of the stuccowork. Then Vicenza suffered heavy aerial bombardment from 1943 with important buildings in the historic centre and surrounding areas being destroyed. On the evening of the 2 April 1944 the Eretenio Theatre was not spared. Only the outer perimeter walls remained (Figures 6 and 7) and were demolished fifteen years ago on the grounds of public safety as they were dangerous. Unfortunately hardly anything is left today. Going along Via Contrà delle Grazie the walls that anticipated the wide stage can be made out and these now delimit the open air car park that was adapted to the area on which the theatre stood. In part walled to consolidate the structure, this short section of outer perimeter wall along Via Contrà delle Grazie includes three semicolumns with Doric capitals and a small portico.

The place is extraordinary due to its environmental and architectural quality. The River Retrone flows slowly along the tree-lined axis of Viale Eretenio and extremely prestigious architecture is aligned along Viale Eretenio such as Palazzo Civena Trissino, which was built in 1540. Using the surface on which the theatre stood as a car park devalues the actual condition of this part of the urban fabric in Vicenza and the memory of the city itself (Figures 8 and 9).

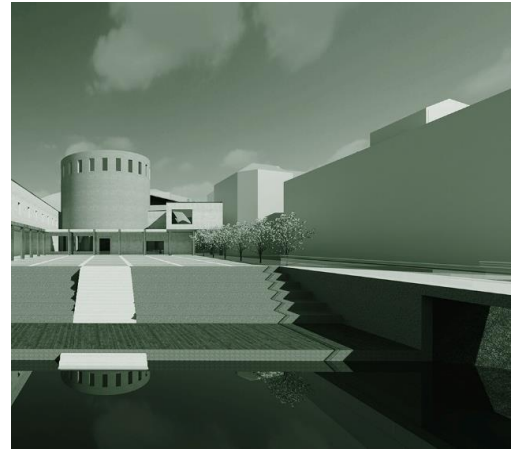


Figure 9. Panorama of the area. From the left, Palazzo Civena Trissino which was designed by Palladio, the empty space caused by the 1944 destruction of the Eretenio theatre which has not been rebuilt, the entrance to Via Contrà delle Grazie and that of Via Carpagnon, and lastly the building situated between Via Carpagnon and the River Retrone. From the work of the students Chiara Duranti e Anna Mason.

The didactic experience

Several proposals for the redevelopment of the area are now presented. They were developed on the Urban and Architectural Composition 2 course at the Department of Civil, Environmental and Architectural Engineering at the University of Padua taught by the authors. The planning projects refer to the degraded area inside the historic centre of Vicenza on which stood the Eretenio theatre and this is an area that needs to find a role and purpose inside the city. It now presents as an empty urban space (Espuelas, 2004), but the monumental bulk of the theatre used to act as an element stitching the urban fabric between the Palazzo Civena Trissino that aligns its portico alongside the River Retrone and the residential built-up area along Via Contrà delle Grazie. In general, the planning choices presented aim to enhance the quality of the urban spaces and the pre-existing artistic history is used as a mechanism to trigger the revitalisation of the urban fabric including from a socio-economic point of view.

The plans presented revolve around the same principle: the restoration of the abandoned, disused, and distorted urban areas, which are points of discontinuity in the cityscape, by formal proposals in continuity with the historic forms inherited from the past. The compositional techniques adopted by the students refer to the building principles inherited from the historic city. So the city is thought of as a place of relationships between the forms. The students were invited to study the effect in the space produced by the forms, an attitude that is a reminder of the experience of the travelling architects of the first few decades of the Twentieth Century when they redesigned urban spaces and their form in their sketch-books using their appreciation of landscape, "in the first few decades of the Twentieth Century our young travellers approached the Tuscan and Umbrian piazzas and the conformation the differing places on the peninsula with a more or less deliberate purely visibilist attitude" (Mangone, 2002). Consequently, the students thought of the project in relation to the pre-existing with which they established functional relationships to construct urban places provoking a "poetic reaction".



Figures 10 and 11. From the work of the students Massimo Ramazzotto and Valentina Zuecco. Site diagram and view from the River Retrone of the piazza in front of the cylindrical volume that contains a library.



Figures 12 and 13. Planning project for the area where the Eretenio theatre stood. View of the new piazza in front of the library. View of the suspended walkway which runs alongside the course of the River Retrone. From the work of the students Massimo Ramazzotto and Valentina Zuecco.

The proposals presented draw inspiration from the character of the great civil architecture. In fact, irrespective of fashion, this seems to generally constitute a significant point of departure in redeeming certain urban contexts that often lack a specific identity.

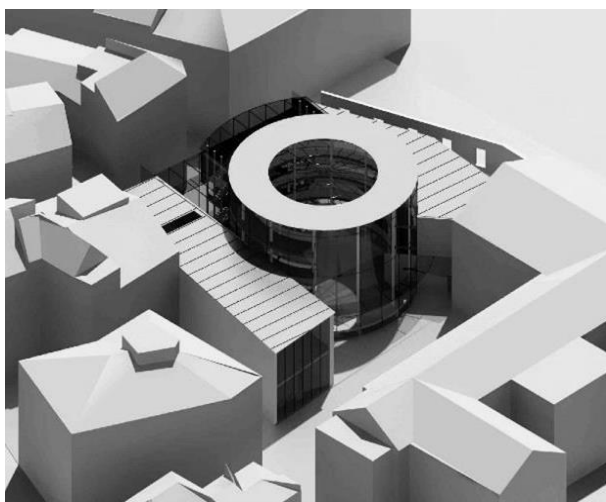
Next, the theme of cylindrical form plays a central role in the planning hypothesis proposed by the students Massimo Ramazzotto and Valentina Zuecco (Figure 10) The purpose of the body of the cylindrical construction targets the hosting of a library and pays homage to the library in Stockholm by the architect Gunnar Asplund which is also explicit in the function. The idea of the cylindrical form was chosen because of its monumentality and ability to relate to the urban context visually (Figures 11 and 12), and the plan by these students clearly makes a statement of opinion about the issues affecting the development of the area. Along with viewing this as an opportunity to compose a plan within the precise but indispensable limits of the area, the students interpret the planning experience by giving themselves the objective of

establishing relationships and meaningful connections with the main urban facts in the conviction that this attitude can produce a new role and value inside the city.

Therefore, this plan reconfigures the area by assuming and discovering a completely new form in its renewal. It is clear that the reasons motivating the proposal are the fruit of choices over and above the reasons for a stringent functional programme and are above all dictated by a more general desire to reconfigure the whole structure and layout of the area. The general idea from this point of view is to construct a new urban pole by arranging an L-shaped volume that defines two different spatial environments. The first is the piazza by which the cylindrical bulk of the library will stand. The second is the new piazza of the market opposite the Palazzo Civina Trissino. The arrangement of the volume along the banks of the River Retrone remakes historic examples such as that of the corridor by Giorgio Vasari in Florence and the organisation of the piazza of the central market place in Ljubljana by the architect Jože Plečnik (Figure 13). The two-level volume does not separate the piazzas as they are thought of as porticos or permeable space between the public spaces of the city. The reading rooms that complete the library are located above the portico.



Figures 14 and 15. From the work of the students Maddalena Purgato and Silvia Venturini. Proposal for the construction of a new theatre. Layout of project plan and aerial view from the east.

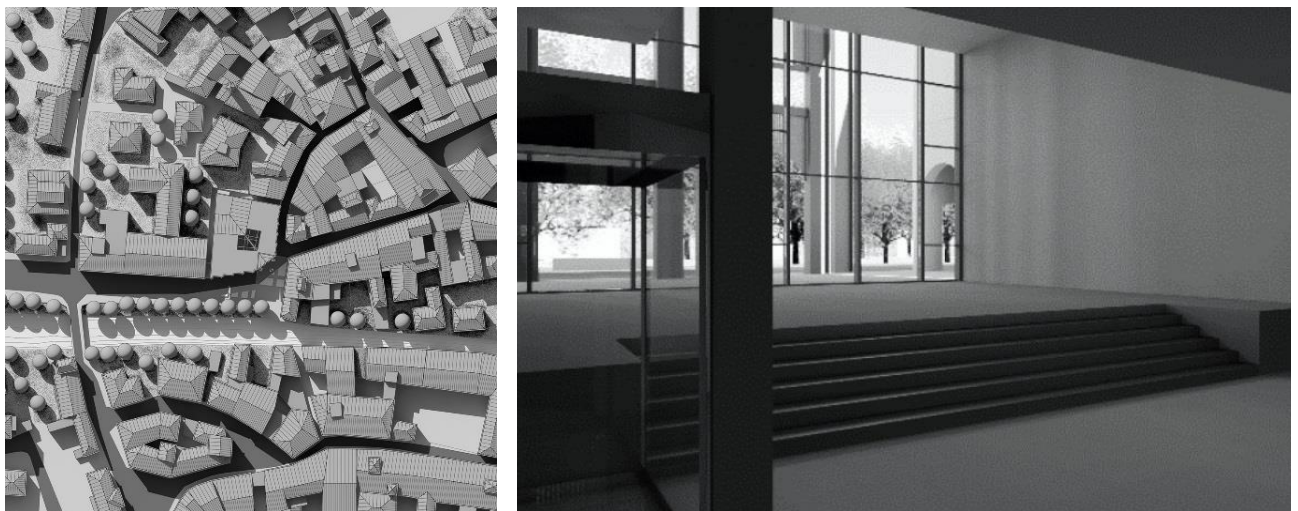


Figures 16 and 17. Aerial view of the glass cylinder that contains the new Eretenio theatre and view from the entrance looking towards the outside. From the work of the students Maddalena Purgato and Silvia Venturini.

The planning idea of students Maddalena Purgato and Silvia Venturini repropose the building of a new theatre but provide collective spaces permeable to the city. The proposal is still based on a cylindrical form and from a formal point of view the characterising elements are identified by the circular theatre hall around which the volumes dedicated to the collective functions such as a dance hall, a restaurant, and a room for temporary exhibitions are arranged. Continuity on the roadside façade is provided by the philological reconstruction of the old Eretenio theatre façade, by the restoration of the existing façade on the Via Contrà delle Grazie, and by a new volume in glass for the entrance to the foyer which is very permeable to and from the external urban space. The formal elements that characterise the project are clearly identifiable in the urban fabric and they are rigorously aligned with the pre-existing historic buildings (Figure 14). As a result the cylindrical theatre hall shows its monumental presence in the city.

However, the students propose a building that does not exclusively correspond to the purpose or to certain figurative demands but it knows how to become a significant construction that not only satisfies a need but also represents and symbolises it, that is, manifests the idea in its construction. Indeed, Schinkel spoke of architecture as being construction elevated to feeling. In the case presented by these students, the aim of creating a monumental form is obtained by examining examples from history. First and foremost the Globe Theatre in London, then the theatre of the world in Venice designed by Aldo Rossi, and the New Globe Theatre in New York by Norman Foster. All of these examples rework the typological idea of the building with a circular central plan. In fact, the cylindrical form of the theatre hall (Figures 15 and 16) is deliberately differentiated from the other parts of the building, the latter in stone, with a glass skin (Figure 17) so that its form is perceived in a distinct way.

The intention of making the area the location of a congress centre underlies the planning proposal of the students Gianluca Iraci Sareri and Edoardo Rudella. The theme of the congress centre is played out by arranging a volume so that it is aligned on the roadside in line with the existing historic buildings (Figure 18). Then continuity is solved by reproposeing the duplication of the architectural part of Palazzo Civena Trissino in the new elevation/façade which is interpreted using language that looks to modernity.



Figures 18 and 19. Proposal to develop a congress centre. Layout of project plan and view from the inside towards the open space delimited by the River Retrone. From the work of the students Gianluca Iraci Sareri e Edoardo Rudella.

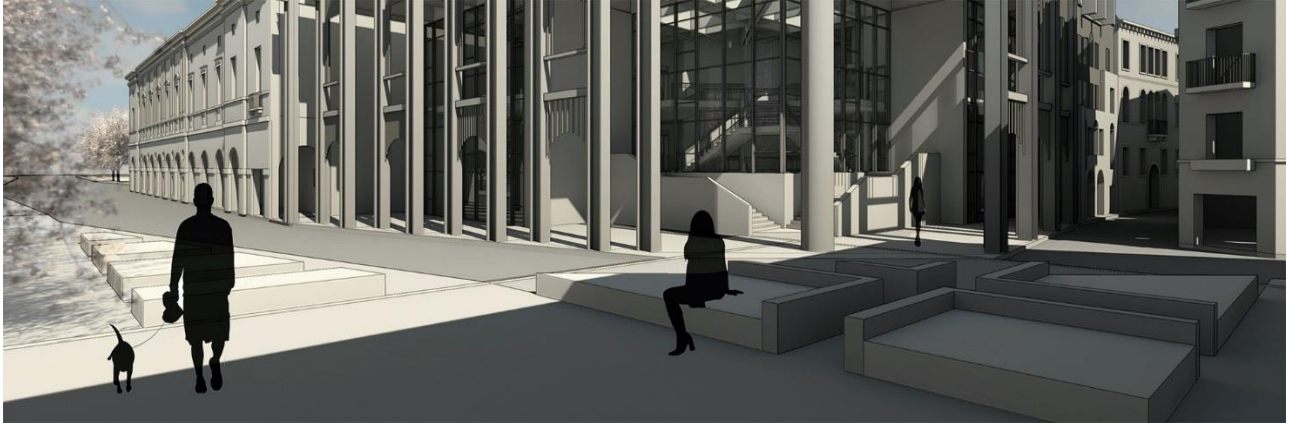


Figure 20. View of Viale Eretenio and the entrance to the new congress centre. From the work of the students Gianluca Iraci Sareri e Edoardo Rudella.



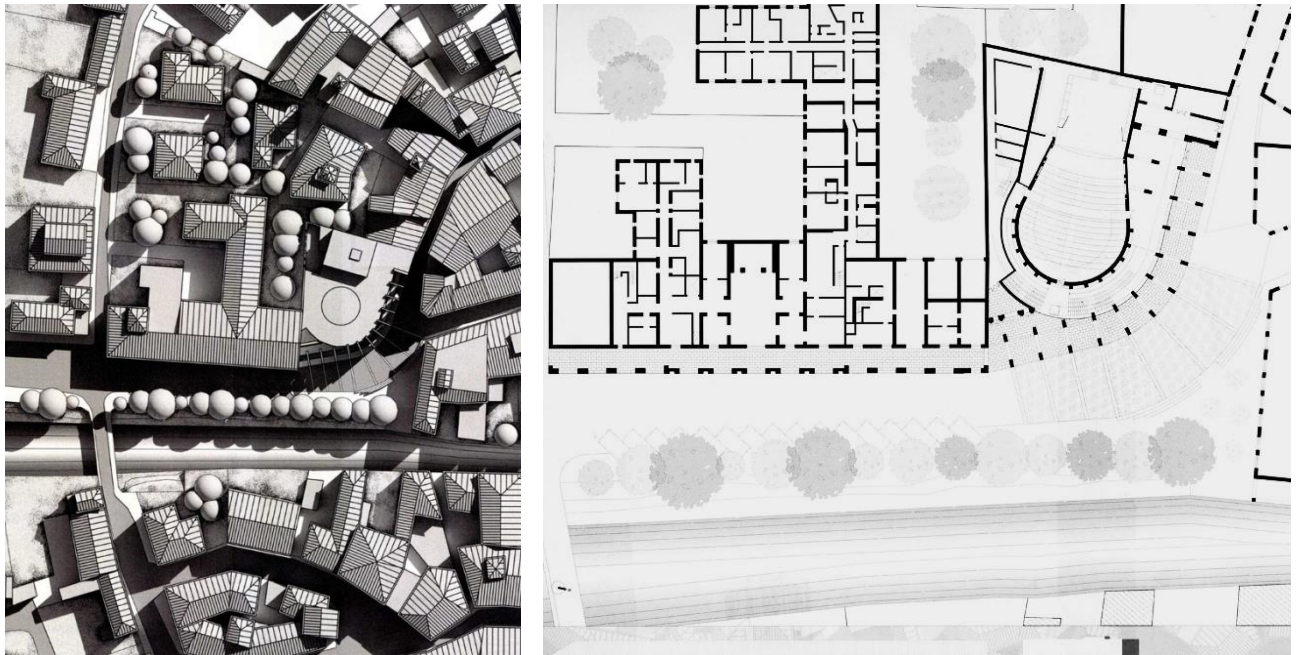
Figure 21. Work of the students Gianluca Iraci Sareri e Edoardo Rudella. Proposal of a new theatre on the site where the historic Eretenio theatre once stood. Façade on Viale Eretenio looking towards the course of the River Retrone. The façade of the sixteenth century Palazzo Civina Trissino appears on the left of the drawing.

Consequently, the brutalist choice of visible load-bearing reinforced concrete structures is integrated with wooden cladding on those parts with cladding (Figure 19). The compact volume planned occupies the entire perimeter of the development and this contains the congress hall and the triple-height entrance foyer. In fact, the latter is arranged in strict relationship with the external urban space due to the glass façade defining spatial continuity between the inside and outside (Figures 20 and 21).

The same principle of saturating the development area with a compact volume is adopted in the planning proposal made by students Vidale and Zuliani (Figures 22 and 23), who like Purgato and Venturini also provide for the construction of a new theatre. The alignment along the road front is solved by reproposing the portico type theme which once again takes up the rhythm of the façade of Palazzo Civina Trissino (Figure 24). The portico mediates the entrance into the foyer from Viale Eretenio where the original entrance of the Eretenio theatre is to be reconstructed as it was while access for the artists is from Via Contrà delle Grazie, improving the historic façade that survived the 1944 destruction of the old theatre. In addition, the portico and foyer are mediated by using a glass façade to repropose spatial continuity between the inside and outside. Next, the façade on Via Eretenio is solved by repetition of layers of double thickness concrete that confer a monumental appearance to the theatre as the students intend. The layers take up the idea of a succession of trilithic portals again and through which passes an aerial walkway on the first floor that enhances the visual relationships with the city.

Conclusions

The urban voids of the historic city represent an opportunity to regenerate parts of the city by conferring a new role and meaning on them. This is not just rethinking exclusively new functions for the abandoned area but involves creating forms that know how to dialogue with the settled framework of the city by constructing urban spaces in which the community can recognise itself. Moreover, the project is not required to intervene with surprising effects using muscular architecture that only values itself and the personal ambition of the planner.



Figures 22 and 23. Layout of project plan and plan of the draft planning proposal for a new theatre. From the work of the students Lorenzo Vidale and Federico Zuliani.

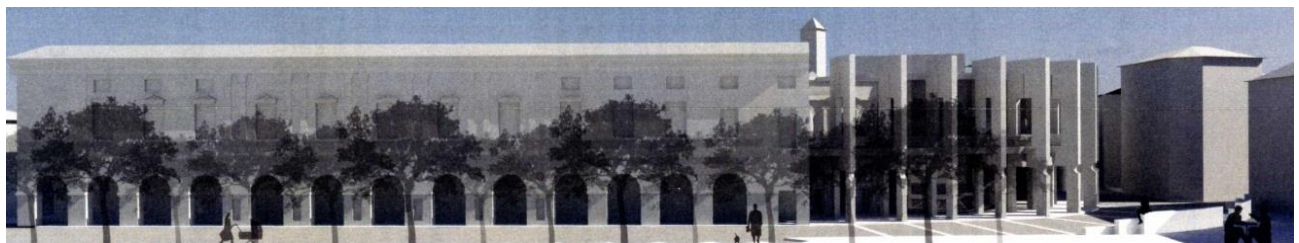


Figure 24. Façade of the new theatre in continuity with the façade of the Palladian Palazzo Civena Trissino. From the work of the students Lorenzo Vidale and Federico Zuliani.

It is more the case that the architecture needs to fit into the context discretely by interpreting the rules in the settlement, the character of the place, and its atmosphere. This is achieved by constructing spatial sequences in which volumes are arranged in continuity with the existing ones, respecting the alignments as much on the horizontal as on the vertical plane. There is no need for the forms of the plan to mimic the historic forms of the city. Above all, the form needs to interpret the reasons for the construction of the urban space into which the plan will be inserted.

In particular, the urban gap, the unresolved empty space that Vicenza inherited from war in recent history, makes this Venetian city the ideal place to experiment and verify the construction principles for the compact city. The planning experience of the students represents an attempt at coherent construction in the historic context into which the project will be inserted. Therefore, the city is planned. It is the plan that moves on the level of the form, regulation should not make it rigid since this leads to the renunciation of the planning of the modern city, as history teaches. Today the methods of transformation scenarios show that they do not finish like this. Plans, laws, and regulations are more occupied with thinking of a regulatory system appropriate to the aesthetic needs of architecture. So the regulations have evolved in such a way as to establish quantity without providing information on the form of places. Architecture has consequently been uprooted from the role it fulfils, that is, giving form to the city through a clear formal idea. Laws and regulations have been issued in progressively abstract terms that have defined methods and construction that no longer concern the physicality of the city. Urban regeneration plans can become a valid instrument in constructing the urban form in the moment in which they consider architecture to be an instrument for the quality of the space in its role as a discipline that makes volumes available in space by designing the relationships between the physical forms. In conclusion, this is the point of view from which the students have examined the planning experiences they developed and presented.

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