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To cite this article: Enrico Pietrogrande and Alessandro Dalla Caneva 2021 *IOP Conf. Ser.: Mater. Sci. Eng.* **1203** 032064

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Hypotheses of urban regeneration. Small towns in the Veneto region, Italy

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Abstract. This work considers the small towns of the Veneto region, Italy, as a case study, concentrating analysis and proposals for a new urban design on areas that has been affected by a rapid post 2nd world war reconstruction and by following building speculation, thus losing their organic unity with the surrounding parts. The violence that often characterizes the insertion in the twentieth century of disproportionate volumes into the urban fabric inherited from the medieval culture and enriched by Renaissance masterpieces is easily recognizable. This is the reason why a lower standard of living is now perceived, if we accept the idea that standard of living is proportionated to the level of culture expressed by the context. The methodology looks at the town as a result of its spatial structure. More than political, social, and economic systems, reasons for its special nature can be found because of its constancy. Planning new buildings starts from understanding the context, that is, its physical structure. The method adopted is based on studying the history of the place to understand the urban morphology of it. The physical specificity of the urban form is explored with the aim of elaborating a design process to reinforce the public space as a reference point for the community. The spatial aspects and formal image of the transformations have been studied as a premise for the design of the new architecture that has developed because of necessity and the events that have occurred in the territory. Intervening through a process of urban redevelopment inside the city involves measuring according to the values that have become rooted in the areas with the passage of time. Good regeneration practice must not leave recovering the old together with its values out of consideration. This point of view leads us to consider that urbanism as a group of skills and bureaucratic apparatuses must occupy itself with the city and above all with its formal structure rather than be occupied so much with the contents of the legal, financial-economic, and administrative order.

1. Introduction

The circle of walls is one of the most important characteristics of Veneto small towns (figure 1). Defended by the walls and protected by water obstacles, urban communities developed over the years. The layout of the town had already been determined at the end of the Middle Ages and has generally been preserved without significant changes until the mid-20th century. About seventy years ago, the post-war reconstruction process and the speculative effects produced by the economic boom have introduced elements of discontinuity in the urban tissue. New buildings often arose out of scale in relation to the historic architecture around, because of the disconnection from the community of investors, their low cultural preparation and limited investment capabilities.





Figure 1. Giorgione (Zorzi da Castelfranco), view of a city in the Veneto territory. Detail of the painting *Tempesta (Storm)*, 1502-03.

There are today several examples of small towns that once were coherent in their entirety and now show deep alterations. This condition presents negative consequences at different levels, mainly meaning a worse living condition for the habitants and a lower possibility in the increasingly important field of tourist attraction. The violence that often characterizes the insertion in the twentieth century of disproportionate volumes into the urban fabric inherited from the medieval culture and enriched by Renaissance masterpieces is easily recognizable. This is the reason why a lower standard of living is now perceived, if we accept the idea that standard of living is proportionated to the level of culture expressed by the context. It must to be possible to design and build new architectural volumes inside the historic urban tissue avoiding the decay of the artistic quality in minor buildings that still today compose main part of streets and squares. The damage that incoherent with the context buildings cause to the community of the small town also means a lower interest generated by the town, historic and artistic place, as tourist destination. The damage consists in the direct cut of richness for the inhabitants and, furthermore, in the decline in cultural consistency because of the decreased tendency to attract tourists. State the objectives of the work and provide an adequate background, avoiding a detailed literature survey or a summary of the results.

2. Method

The following project proposals, result of the above-mentioned didactic activity, are characterized by the common idea to adopt as a principle the construction of the city as a continuous tissue and to distinguish public and private functions by means of sequences of façades on streets and squares. As Anthony Vidler pointed out, this attitude belongs to those who “as the professional servants of urban life, direct their design skills to solving the questions of avenue, arcade, street and square, park and house, institution and equipment in a continuous typology of elements - that together coheres with past fabric and present intervention to make one comprehensible experience of the city” [1].

The design experience focuses on the city. Architectures become the defining elements of the city itself. Students develop their project to give form to “an analogous city”, composed by fragments,

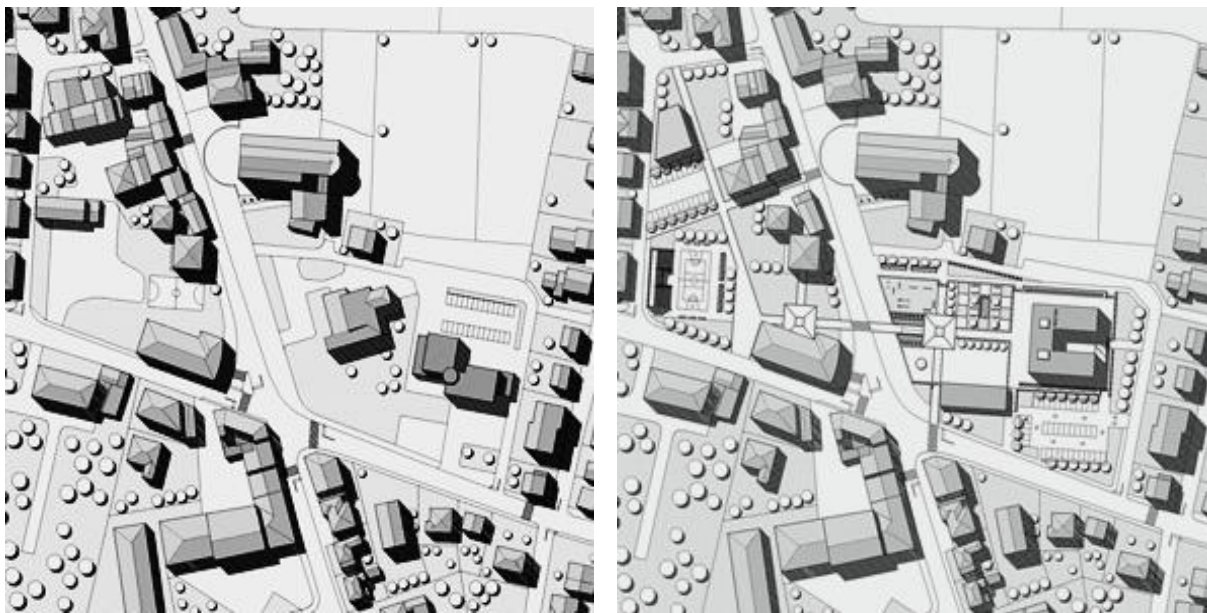
rediscovered architectures, already known shapes combined in an original way. These shapes are capable of evoking meanings and building endless relationships with the city. About the projects proposed by students it should be noted that analogy means referring to a lost world through an analogic, and so inventing, process.

The method is rooted in the well-known School of Venice, which “is based on the conceptual operation of disassembling traditional urban types into significant pieces, and then recomposing them remembering the following aspects: the overtime occurred meaning of shapes; their specificity, but also their hybridizations or contaminations with previous types; their reification in a new context” [2]. The invention composes in this way already known shapes. It’s the result of a dialectic relationship with history which has to be studied to discover new aspects. The aim is finding out past principles and rules, and not again proposing the past shapes. “As history shows, we have not to transport shapes, but ideas and emotions that we take from the shapes. Only recognising those ideas and the experience of those emotions, we will be able to find out new forms capable of representing our time values” [3].

3. Small towns in Veneto region. Project proposal

In this sense the student Angela Pengo develops the project dedicated to the town of Casalserugo, located not far from Padua. She composed redescovers, belonging to history architectures, which were ordered in a new project. The proposal of Pengo (figures 2, 3) is capable to regenerate an urban place that was subtracted from dynamics of development of urban life and so designed to remain an empty space devoid of quality.

The recall to basic typological forms, as the Stoa, the portico, the central-plan building, the court-shape or comb-shape types, is clear. All of these elements belong to a consolidated repertoire of classic, simple and popular forms which refer to a civil dimension of architecture. They put in scene the shared values on which the being in the world of a community is based. In this respect the city and its types constitute a collective product because the types were composed by the community and have represented fundamental meanings for the community. Architecture is assumed, in these pages, as a social art.



Figures 2, 3. Casalserugo, comparison between the current state and the project proposal by the student Angela Pengo. The main characteristics of this project are link and disposal of parties clearness

Composition is an individual work but thought for the whole community, for the city: “I support a civic dimension of architecture, according to which urban form and architectural form are the consequence of a collective experience that minimizes the individual elements and aims to a intelligible and shared dimension” [4]. According to the approach in general adopted, the students reject the idea of imposing the project on the existing reality. The urban composition method is rooted in tradition, against the mythology of new and provisional poetics of tabula rasa. Within tradition it’s possible to find “not only instruments and technics, but the same raison d’être you see in the construction of the urban space” [5].

For this reason the urban proposal by the student Giacomo Cappellesso includes in the central square of the town of Portobuffolè the demolition of the Pescarollo furniture factory, whose shape appears incompatible with the context formal aspects. Cappellesso suggests in its place a new building complex, coherent with the development, the history, and the forms of this medieval town (figure 4). The general idea that lies at the basis of the project proposes the theme of the court again, a civic space generated by the rigorous disposal of volumes around the central nucleus. So the motive behind the project may be exactly expressed with the following words: make recognizable the civic character of the place through its carefully ordered forms. The architectural proposal is the opportunity, or the general cultural motive, to invent a public space purposeful to enhance the furniture manufacturing. This is the reason why the court coincides with the space for antiques market, volumes around the court host craft workshops and an Exhibition Hall closes the square on the short side.

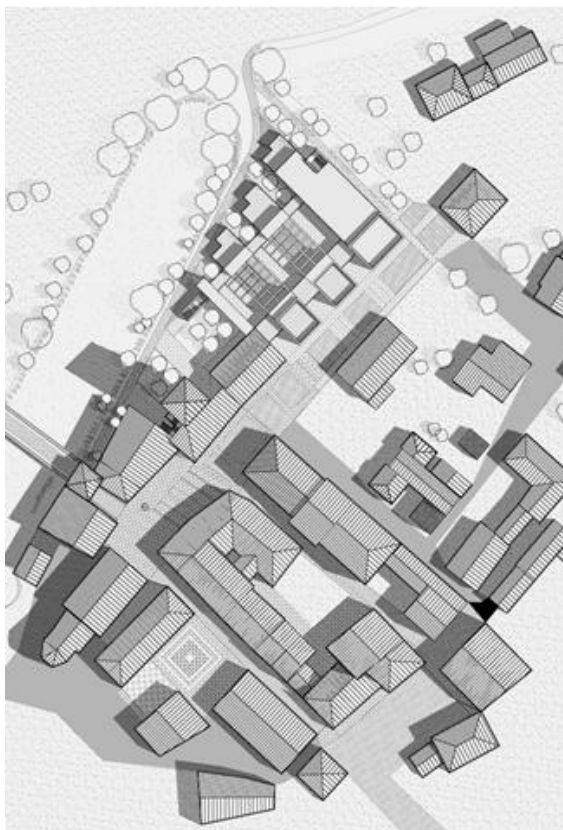
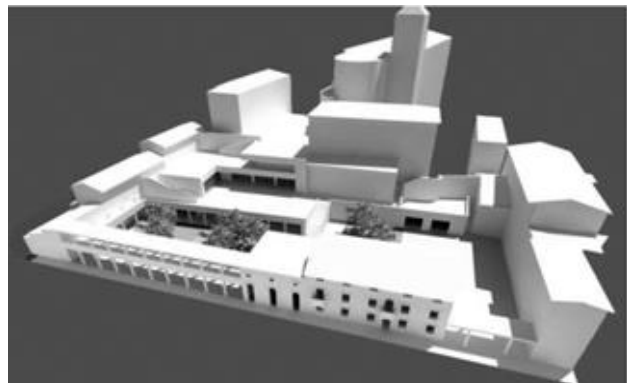


Figure 4. (on the left) Portobuffolè, project planivolumetric plan. From the work of the student Giacomo Cappellesso



Figures 5, 6. Soave, maquette of the project regarding the area behind the San Lorenzo Cathedral. Views of the porticos in the court around which the pre-existing and new buildings are placed. From the work of the student Giulia Michieletto

The decorum principle that is at the foundation of the project requires different ways to design main façades of the building complex. In this regard, the façade on the main street have a particularly compact character being aligned with the existing building front, and, on the contrary, the façade oriented towards the Livenza River seeks to establish a dialectic relationship with the surrounding countryside through the fragmentation of volumes.

The same reasons underpin the proposal suggested by the student Giulia Michieletto. Also in this case, the architectural project is based on the idea of the court thought as a public space with unifying function. Historic buildings and new volumes will have their place around it to respond to all requests of the community. Giulia Michieletto studies the area of the walled town of Soave near the Cathedral of San Lorenzo. She strives to reveal a relationship with the religious building by overcoming the existing discrepancy through a series of alternating volumes. In this way the student rediscovers the lost continuity, not only with the main religious monument of the city, but also with the historic square where the town hall of Soave is located and with the ancient city trail that leads to the castle on top of Mount Tenda (figures 5, 6). The reason is clear for wanting to understand the project first and foremost as the open-air vestibule of a broader path, which winds its way inside the city and through its main locations. The courtyard, the result of the demolition of a building inconsistent with the structure of the city, unifies the existing parish house with the construction of a series of factory buildings, in which there is a youth centre, which has with all the spaces needed to carry out community activities. The enclosure of the courtyard with a double-height portico on Corso Vittorio Emanuele II aims to fill an urban void, finding a continuity with the aggregate logic of the continuous roadside facades of existing buildings, as well as ensuring continuity and clear recognisability of the point of access to the courtyard's public space.

Continuity with history is the motive of student Alberto Rampon's project. The intervention proposes to recapture the unity lost in the heart of the village of Pontemanco (figure 7), near Padua, through a formal solution understood as a meditated synthesis between the values of tradition and those of modernity. The intervention rediscovers continuity, from the formal point of view, revealed by historical analysis, namely, the presence of two mills, one of which is now lost but reintroduced on the same site in memory to the previous one (figures 8). In this way, the presence of two urban signs that once characterised the city's image, is reconstructed without expressly reproducing the lost building, but by redesigning a building of the same shape, capable of meeting the needs and requirements of a community in transformation.

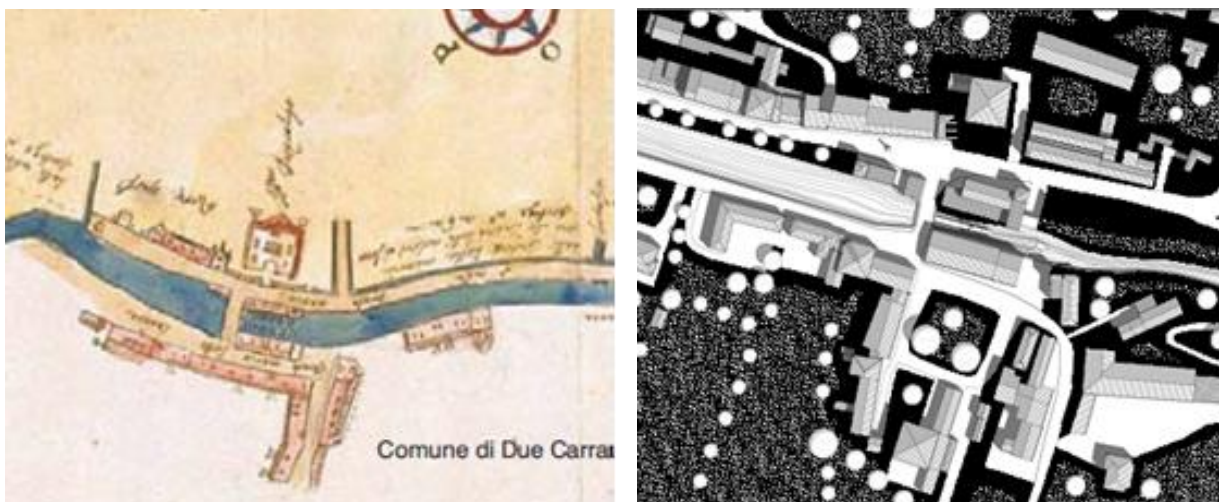
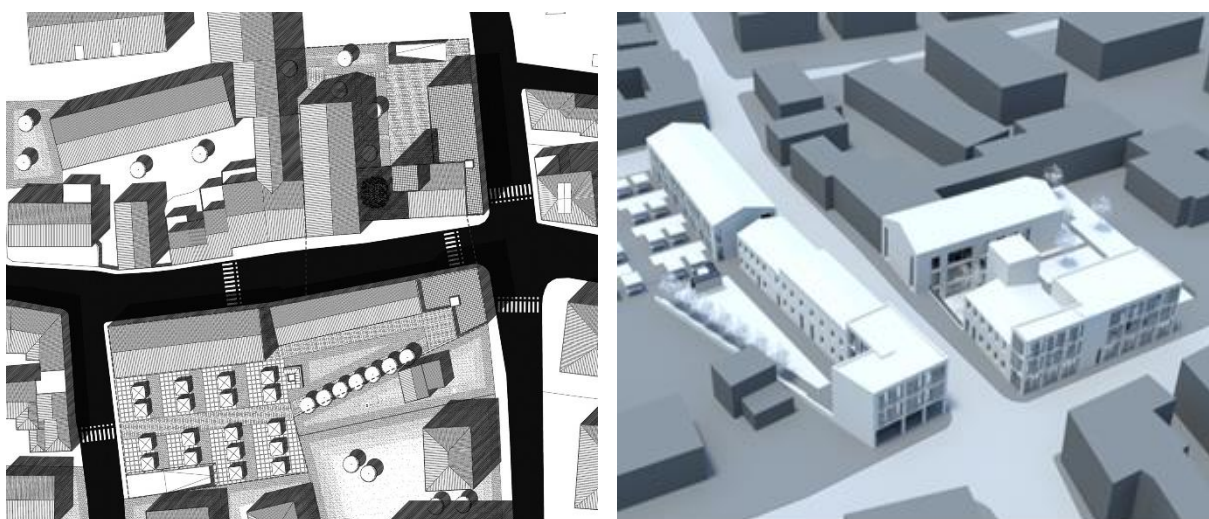


Figure 7, 8. Representation of the Pontemanco hamlet in a 1642 map. Pontemanco, project planivolumetric plan. From the work of Alberto Rampon

In this sense, the project fits within the dialectic of the historical process, where both conservation and construction are part of the same conscious act. Thus, the unmistakable antagonism between conservationists and innovators is overcome, as conservation is meant here in the sense of re-actualising the past, and construction as a continuation of the historical process. In this regard, Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1958) expresses himself in the following way: "Many who believe themselves to be innovators have in common with so-called conservationists the erroneous idea that both start from formal prejudices, believing that the new and the old oppose one another, instead of representing the dialectical continuity of the historical process; both limit themselves to the idolatry of certain frozen styles in certain appearances, unable to penetrate the pregnant essences of inexhaustible energies. Pretending to build in a modern a priori style is just as absurd as to impose respect for the taboo of past styles"[6].

The student Silvia Bego has studied the old hamlet of Camin in the territory around Padua. A progressive degradation characterized Camin during the second half of last century. The crossroad constitutes the centre of the small hamlet, once a place where to rest and meeting people, to find rows of trees on the side of the roads, the little Malibran Theatre, the Locanda, the tavern with outdoor tables. It is possible now to see a relevant increase of heavy vehicles, the substitution of discreet and characterising architectures which once defined the place with incoherent speculative buildings. The subject of the thesis developed by Silvia Bego is the enhancement of the west side of Camin Crossroad. The crossroad called Crocevia Otto Teste lost its Camin village centre function. It once continuously characterised the place, until urban speculation completely changed it. The project in this case aims to return the central role to the crossroad, restoring its function of representative place of the whole community. Bego proposes to build a new cinema and an osteria as spaces for social aggregation. For the same reason she designs also a square with the function of weekly market, a place that has always been missing in Camin. In this way the student tries to transform Camin into a livable neighborhood and identifiable through some specific features, converting a mere traffic channel into an urban space (Figures 9, 10).

For students Edoardo Savio and Antonio Zanini the small town of Quinto Vicentino presents an opportunity to provide the historic piazza with a new image. This piazza is characterised by the presence of Villa Thiene (figures 11, 12) whose architect was Andrea Palladio and which has housed the town council (municipal government) since 1871.



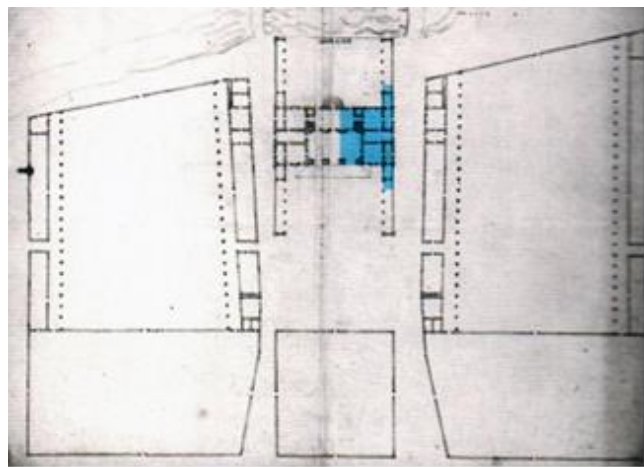
Figures 9, 10. Camin, planivolumetric plan and aerial view of the project proposal. The aim is to give new identity to the hamlet centre. From the work of the student Silvia Bego

Although it was designed by Palladio as part of a monumental complex, only a portion of the central body of the villa was actually built. Indeed, the architect wrote about it in his fundamental text *The Four Books of Architecture* [7]. The villa is modelled on Roman villas and thermal spas that the master architect from Vicenza studied on his travels to Rome. The project provided for a double courtyard composing the centre of this residence, the first open to the River Tesina and the second to the countryside. Only one part of the villa was built, because the building site was abandoned during the work not so much due to lack of money but more due to loss of interest from the buyer, Count Ottavio Thiene, who left Vicenza to live in the fiefdom of Scandiano near the city of Reggio Emilia. The villa became famous for its very rare gardens adorned with simple, cedars, orange and lemon trees as well as other fruit trees, with a very beautiful artificial labyrinth in the middle. Goethe visited the villa and admired the wonderful gardens of fruit plants and flowers of all types.

What remains of the great project of Palladio can be found in the piazza of Quinto Vicentino. This villa and its presence form the basis of the redevelopment project designed by the students. Their intention is to enhance the value of the building. The villa in fact nowadays seems to have been forgotten, inside the piazza which unfortunately is used as vehicular thoroughfare and for parking.

The idea of the students is composed of remodelling in the style of traditional Italian piazzas characterised by the shape of a recognisable urban space around which lie the public buildings of the town (figures 13, 14). Both the classical and medieval piazza are recognised by the presence of volumes arranged hierarchically around the empty space of the piazza. In turn the piazza is the urban fact around which the minor building development is distributed.

Notable figures in architectural culture such as Hendrik Petrus Berlage and Giorgio Grassi have endorsed this idea of city. In fact, the projects designed by these architects try to mediate between the past and the present in a synthesis of invention and remembrance. Consequently, the experience of architecture and urbanism in this idea is not only conservational but also transformational. In following this idea the students have designed the new piazza in sizes and proportions that restore what remains of the Palladian villa. Regular in form, it constitutes a space that is in part green as well as pedestrianised, and is no longer crossed by a vehicle road network. The organisation of the built-up area is recognised within a hierarchical distribution of the buildings starting from the monumentality of the villa and that of the school opposite. The students plan the abandoned school, which has become a warehouse for the town council, to have new civic functions with spaces allocated for temporary exhibitions and a library.



Figures 11, 12. Quinto Vicentino, view of Villa Thiene as it appeared before the restoration carried out in 1998; drawing by Palladio's workshop, with the highlighted part corresponding to the volume really built respect to the original building complex. The Tesina River is in the upper part of the image

The rectangular shape of the new piazza is defined by the arrangement of two new bodies of building that are aligned with the existing buildings of the school and town hall. In addition, a monumental portico contributes to closing the public space on the short side.

By adhering to the rules and principles of the past the project by the students aims at continuity with architectural tradition. As was written “The identity of places today as historically configured manifests itself in signs of crisis in socio-economic transformations at work in the individual centres on which large-scale plans and designs are often superimposed arbitrarily and in a general way that reflect the process of transformation of built-up centres in which the ability to understand and follow the rules of this identity delineated in the structure seems to be lost” [8].

4. Results and discussions

The aim of the course above all was not only historical research and documentation but also to contextualise the future image of the towns in architectural projects, including through its relationship with culture and history, in order to highlight the individuality of the time and space of the places. Consequently, the papers presented by the students could become starting points for in depth study and discussion and also form an instrument for a direct and immediate dialogue with those who care for. Working with the students has confirmed the natural inclination of the town to change, a point upon which Aldo Rossi dwelt in his essay *Caratteri urbani delle città venete (The urban nature of the city in the Veneto region)*. The writing of Rossi is the contribution of the great architect to the collection of essays published in 1970 under the title of *La città di Padova. Saggio di analisi urbana* [9]. This volume represents a fundamental reference in practical exercise: assuming Padua to be a research laboratory and model, it presents information, descriptions, and methods for the study of city development that are still current. The use of this volume as an instrument of study by the youngest generation has rekindled interest that the trained planners had in those years. Collected together by Mauro Lena, the essays of Carlo Aymonino (*The study of urban phenomena*), Pasquale Lovero (*The relationship between urban morphology and building typology in Nineteenth century Padua*), Gianni Fabbri (*Examples of reading, Via Savonarola e Borgo Santa Croce*) and Sergio Lucianetti (*The development of the medieval city*) in addition to the writings of Rossi quoted above have all remained basic contributions not only because of their scientific content but also because of their lucid reading of the town according to converging points of view.



Figures 13, 14. Quinto Vicentino, view of the central court. Current state, project planivolumetric plan. From the work of the students Antonio Zanini and Edoardo Savio.

5. Conclusions

As a proposition, in the analysis of the students every thought on the urban spaces is articulated by a significant relationship between architecture and the culture of the city. In-depth study of the history of towns is an instrument that clarifies the main aspects and opportunities. In particular, the research into the transformations of the spaces and shapes developing through time represented an indispensable premise for checking the planning proposal that aimed at reconstituting a coherent urban fabric in which residential and touristic uses play a role in connecting the distinct monumental phenomena present. The investigation of the history of towns formed the basis of the project solution illustrated above, in harmony with the belief that in teaching it is essential to promote a synthesis between knowing and doing. The study of what is already present in the area and the broader historical-building framework is an essential tool in the promotion of a new cultural layout based on the needs of the area.

The future image of the Veneto region also depends on the choices that will be made about the old towns. The search for a formal reordering is motivated by the conviction that architecture is a fundamental means for promoting a new cultural and social asset in the areas investigated, where the new architecture draws inspiration from the needs of the territory. Operating on the urban fabric means re-introducing the city within the more general theme of restoration in the sense of the place, of meaning and stratifications that the original forms bring with them and which need to be left intact during their transformation. In general, it is restoring a new civic life that is being dealt with not only by inserting new function but above all by reinventing the form in order to give architecture and contexts new values in a balance between invention and remembrance.

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