

Re-Membering the Adige: An Architecture of Memory and Inclusion

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... A description of (the city) as it is today should contain all (its) past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.
— Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, "Cities and Memory 2"¹

An entry to an international design competition undertaken by faculty and students at two schools of architecture, this is a proposal for the redefinition of a residual urban space in Verona, Italy. It is explored through the design of a new piazza/exhibition hall/library/market arcade for a plaza-cum-parking lot that was once a narrow island floating in the river Adige. Recognizing the important role played by the automobile in the inhabitation of the simultaneously historic and contemporary European city, this proposal sees the motor car as an opportunity to explore alternative means of residing in, moving through and thus understanding that city. An archeological/thematic exploration of a unique site, the proposal draws both advantage and inspiration from the city's commitment to construct a two-level underground parking garage beneath it. That intent fuels an investigation of the morphology of the site before it was transformed from island to solid ground, and invites not so much its reconstruction, as its reconceptualization. In the process, the project unearths literal and figurative echoes of disenfranchised lives — those of dwellers of the working periphery of the river *Adige*, as well as residents of the underside of Veronese society prior to the end of the last century. The project reincorporates these echoes in a design proposal that revives and re-assembles forms which speak of that hidden layer of society while working to legitimize the contribution of those lives to the historic as well as to the contemporary city.

This study is a collaborative, interdisciplinary effort. It articulates the perspectives of architects and landscape architects (faculty and students) at two schools of architecture — Florida International University and the University of Miami — in the service of enhancing the quality of a unique public space. It does so by modifying those infrastructure networks that sustain the renewal of residual urban sites. Studies such as these are often born of international design competitions — vehicles that blur distinctions between public responsibility and private interests, while eliciting and engaging a broad range of responses. The complexity of these initiatives mirrors the complexities of the contemporary city, which in turn are reflections of those forces that give it form.

Our proposal for *Piazza Isolo* is one such project. It perceives the simultaneous mandates for new civic space and new parking facilities as an opportunity to reconceptualize an urban site in the Veronetta rendered residual by physical as well as social changes in the city. By re-assembling various of the historic physical and spatial elements

of the city — and by striving to understand the socio-cultural implications of that new assemblage — the project speaks to a definition of architecture that is shaped by the multifaceted nature of the society that creates it — and that must, in turn, be represented by it.

Convinced of a need to establish our proposal as an intrinsic part of Verona — a part that speaks to the collective memories of the city as it responds to its contemporary needs — our project grows from a design strategy based loosely on the nineteenth century concept of "the city as museum,"² and thus on *collage/montage*. The project seeks to draw together "bits and pieces from various heterogeneous systems of objects and buildings" in order to generate "an alternative reality, a critique of reality."³ The strategy supposes an assembly of disparate parts that presents a momentary illusion of seamlessness, but that can always disintegrate into its diverse contradictory elements. In the junctures between its incompatible parts, in the "by-product of the technique" of assembly, lies its identity. Collage/montage ruptures the Modernist unity between form and content, making multiple meanings possible.⁴

Inasmuch as it brings together bits and pieces from various heterogeneous systems of objects and buildings in order to generate an alternative contextualism⁵, our own project re-assembles historic urban patterns in the Veronetta. We record and interpret context by examining its patterns and textures, looking at our reassembled pieces as a means of symbolic communication.⁶ Our project draws upon the forms of floating river dwellings, of riverside tenements and warehouses of the last century, upon the historic forms and materials of regional artisanship, upon the relationship between city and river, between city and fortification wall, between city and civic space, between city and open green space — to discover a new identity for *Piazza Isolo* that incorporates the ghosts and echoes of its past lives.

In *Invisible Cities* Italo Calvino's Marco Polo describes infinite aspects of his beloved Venice, arguably making an eloquent case for simultaneous perceptions of the city — for the city as collage/montage. He writes of the complex, ephemeral city of myriad meanings, the hidden city of memory and desire, the city that resides below yet is inextricably intertwined with the city that lies above the plane of conventional experience. That city: "does not consist of (precise physical descriptions), but rather of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past."⁷ It is this city that we seek to invoke in our proposal for *Piazza Isolo*. We contend that our intervention in the Veronetta explores the city that dwells beneath the post-industrial historic urban center — and might thus begin to redefine it.

Our proposal is an argument for an intervention in contemporary Verona that refrains from demanding massive alterations of its surrounding context in order to establish urban intentions. Instead,

this project is an example of an intermediate scale intervention that effectively embraces the changing morphology of the city by proposing a complex composite building strategy whose relationship to its context is understood primarily in section. Through this proposal we suggest that by exploring contemporary city growth sectionally, disparities between the collective fabric and the individual building, between the urban scale and the scale of the single structure, may be successfully mitigated. By exploring forms that, cutting across boundaries of privilege, embody the histories and collective experiences of a place, architectural projects might speak most directly to the challenges posed by residual urban spaces to traditional meanings of public, community and citizen. The resulting buildings gain depth and nuance from their conception as intersections among myriad systems and infrastructures: road and waterway systems, private commerce and governmental policies, social structures and private lives.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This, then, is a proposal for the redefinition of *Piazza Isolo*, an unusual residual urban space in Verona, Italy. The project “posit(s) the continued existence of a public realm within which architecture is still able to convey meanings, even if in fragmented and displaced form...”⁸ It understands the city as a multilayered artifact whose form records a complex social, political and cultural history. The proposal is a critical exploration of the nature of that artifact, undertaken through the design of a new piazza and exhibition hall/library for a space that was once a narrow island floating in the river *Adige*.

Verona’s *Isolo* (or, “island”), was originally situated outside the first Roman city walls. It became, during the Middle Ages, the heart of a new urban expansion named the Veronetta. Included within the fortification wall built by the *Cangrande* in 1325, *Isolo* became a link between the parts of Verona growing on the right and those growing on the left banks of the *Adige*. A main water link connecting the *Tirol* with the Adriatic Sea, the *Adige* developed numerous commercial activities. *Isolo* itself became a center for warehousing and woodcutting activities throughout the eighteenth century. At its upstream extremity, *Isolo* housed the *Dogana d’ Aqua* (the water Customs House) and its riverfront edges housed numerous water-driven sawmills. Like the river banks of Venice on the *Canal Grande*, the banks of the *Adige* formed a continuous facade on the river whose basement level was occupied by *sequeri* (warehouses) as well as boat docks. During the floods of 1882 the city of Verona built great retaining walls along the principal banks of the *Adige*, a river that traverses — and in many ways defines — the city. The resulting configuration called for the infill of the *Aqua Morta*, a branch of the *Adige* which was itself divided into the two narrower canals that originally created *Isolo*. Although the infill project alleviated many of the flooding concerns of the city, it also effectively dissolved the centuries-old connection between vast areas of the Veronetta and the river.⁹

Due to the original course of the *Aqua Morta*, the residual space (and *de facto* parking lot) currently known as *Piazza Isolo* has a curvilinear configuration. For almost a century, the municipality of the Veronetta has attempted to give the piazza an identity by assigning it various uses: Beginning in the 1930’s, a large bus terminal and fruit market were built in there. However, the urban design choices of subsequent decades relocated such functions to other parts of the city, leaving *Piazza Isolo* to deteriorate. Although the location of the piazza allows significant upward views toward the ancient city walls, the *Castello* and the hill of *S. Pietro*, its internal views toward the surrounding urban fabric are more unassuming. The facades of those city blocks that define the piazza on its western edge are fragmented and largely discontinuous. Composed of interior courtyards and industrial/residential buildings which had once fronted working canals, these facades have defined *Piazza Isolo*

from the time of the nineteenth century infill project to the present day. The church and cloister of *S. Maria in Organo*, built and variously transformed from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries, “provide the architectonic moment of greatest importance on the eastern edge of the piazza.”¹⁰

Our proposal for *Piazza Isolo* suggests solutions to a myriad of contemporary pragmatic issues (traffic, parking, the demands of a growing tourist industry in a historic city center and the generation of flexible, usable public open space) while tackling much larger iconographic ones. The preliminary underground garage plans proposed by the city — and included in the competition package — rely for vertical circulation upon two large pairs of spiral ramps at the northern and southern extremities of the proposed piazza. Those ramps, while efficient, sharply disrupt both the scale and the character of *Piazza Isolo* and its surroundings. Rather than accept them as project parameters, we propose alternative means for reaching the subterranean parking levels. In lieu of the spiral ramps, our project suggests lowering the level of the *Aqua Morta*, effectively transforming the contemporary street that was once a branch of the *Adige* into a linear ramp. We propose that the *Aqua Morta* descend from its current elevation to reach both levels of the new subterranean parking, before rising to rejoin the existing network of city streets. This strategy alters the relationship between *Piazza Isolo* and the *Aqua Morta* (today a highly trafficked automobile and bus route), while allowing the piazza to remain anchored at street level to the surrounding urban fabric on its other three sides. Paradoxically, through a series of bridges that cross the sunken *Aqua Morta*, our proposal renders *Piazza Isolo* more easily accessible to pedestrians than it had been, while securing the infrastructure of a viable public space.

Perhaps more significantly, however, our strategy works to reveal long-buried layers of the city that were visible only when water flowed through the *Aqua Morta*. As a result, the riverfront warehouses and wood mills that once formed the facades of the *Adige* along *Isolo* (the island), become newly accessible. Our proposal suggests that these rediscovered spaces might be rehabilitated to re-introduce a level of commercial activity accessible to pedestrians at the lower elevation. Stairs, elevators and pedestrian bridges connect this newly recovered stratum of pre-nineteenth century Verona to the island/ piazza and to the street above.

The long, composite space of the new piazza largely follows the form of the ancient *Isolo* — although in the tradition of the wide platforms that joined riverfront mills to the island prior to 1882, it widens to form a generous public space that bridges over the lowered *Aqua Morta* in front of the church of *Sta Maria in Organo*. Our proposal for *Piazza Isolo* is itself divided into five parts. At either end, landscaped terraces form urban gardens. The three middle portions of the piazza step upward, revealing three thin concrete floors that are suspended above two levels of underground parking. While the thinness of the slabs is intended to evoke the tenuousness of walking on water, their upward climb emphasizes both the predominance of *Castel San Pietro* atop a hillside in the local landscape and the foothills location of the city of Verona. A row of Italian cypresses, icons linked to public open spaces throughout Verona, traces the limit of the water that once described the island. A necklace of urban green spaces connects the new piazza to the *Adige*. Finally, a new pedestrian bridge crosses the river and reconnects the piazza to Verona’s historic city center.

We propose a new civic structure to anchor *Piazza Isolo*, giving it both scale and a formal facade. This structure, conceived as an exhibition hall and library, responds formally to adjacent street conditions. It encloses three linear courtyards that bring light and air to the parking levels below, while tracing the trajectory of the second branch of the *Adige* that originally created *Isolo*. The building is assembled in three bays connected by bridges whose varying lengths are determined by the dimensions of the urban blocks immediately adjacent to them. Each of these, in turn, is composed of three parts:

The first is a long, thin, walled enclosure built along the line of the retaining wall of the former *Isolo*. This space houses artisan shops along *Seghe S. Tomaso*, exhibition storage and library stacks in its mid levels, and a public belvedere at its upper story. From that rooftop vantage point, it becomes possible to re-establish the important connection between *Isolo* and the river *Adige* that was destroyed by the infill project of 1882. Viewed from other parts of the city, the belvedere echoes the fortification walls of the city even as it transforms them.

The second part of the proposed structure is a series of slender, glass and steel pavilions (exhibition halls/ reading rooms) deriving their roof forms from the distinctive silhouette of Verona's ancient city walls and forming a covered loggia that defines the new piazza at pedestrian level. Tenuously anchored to the retaining wall as boats once were along the *Adige*, these copper roofed pavilions with stained glass mosaic facades evoke the movement and reflections of water while drawing upon the glass artisanship of the Venetto. Finally, spaces that operate as "book ends" or "ramparts" serve to negotiate level changes between surrounding streets and the new piazza, accommodate the wall structure to the particularities of its site geometry and provide vertical circulation and services for all building levels.

A clock tower near the principal entrance to the exhibition hall joins a field of vertical projections at the scale of the city. Punctuating the urban assemblage, the tower extends downward from the piazza to the lower parking levels and acts as a bus stop below grade. Water runs the length of the piazza along a linear fountain, starting at the base of the tower and cascading downward to a pool at its lower end. On rainy days, a series of channels bring run-off from the pavilion roofs to this new urban water feature. The metal channels, which run along the piazza floor, separate its Prun stone and terracotta paving into a series of narrower subdivisions that simultaneously emphasize the unusual geometry of the piazza and serve to give it scale.

Occupying the location of an earlier, seventeenth century structure located along the axis of *Vicolo S. Foustine*, a new, pedestrian bridge connects the two banks of the *Adige* and forms the final piece of the design proposal. Our project, which understands Verona as a city of towers, bridges and fortification walls, rendered poignant by the echoes of fragile lives led in their shadows, ultimately proposes a public space that assembles and recombines elements of each while reclaiming and redefining a rich residual urban space.

This proposal for the redefinition of *Piazza Isolo* represents an iconographically specific instance of a broader argument for intermediate scale interventions that work sectionally within the parameters of a given urban context to enhance it — retaining its historic character even while introducing program congruent with its time. The proposal argues for a design strategy based on collage, but tempered by readings of program and site which explicitly recognize the significance of typology and the complex intricacies of context. This process of understanding Verona through a careful examination of its historic, physical and symbolic characteristics is deeply relevant to an exploration of the increasingly powerful mechanisms through which architects, landscape architects and planners might

look at the interdependent relationships between infrastructure and public space in the post industrial city .

NOTES

¹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, translated by William Weaver, (New York, London, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1972), pp. 10 - 11.

² See, generally, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1975), pp 125-149 for a discussion of the uses of collage as an architectural design approach in which "objects are conscripted or seduced from out of their context." See also Antonio Monestiroli, "A Project By Others," in *Lotus 7: Quarterly Architectural Review* (New York City: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992), pp. 108 - 111. Monestiroli makes an argument for collage, differently defined, as the ideal means of understanding and organizing projects with multiple architects in a complex context. He posits collage as a stimulant to interpretation, simultaneously "...guaranteeing the unity of the result and the multiplicity of the choices."

³ K. Michael Hayes, *Unprecedented Realism: The Architecture of Machado and Silvetti* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), p. 14.

⁴ See Rodolphe el-Khoury, "Paradoxical Seams" in *Ibid*, pp. 92 - 103, for a discussion of montage as a design strategy.

⁵ Rodolfo Machado uses this construction in the syllabus for an academic studio project describing what he terms "unprecedented realism" to a group of architecture students. In K. Michael Hays, *Unprecedented Realism: The Architecture of Machado and Silvetti* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), p. 14.

⁶ See Denise Scott-Brown, writing of the changes in the work of Venturi, Rauch, Scott-Brown after the firm's study of Levittown and Las Vegas. She notes a new ability to understand symbolic meaning in the textures and patterns that comprised the Modern reading of architectural context. In "Invention and Tradition in the Making of American Place," *Precedent and Invention: The Harvard Architectural Review* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1989), pp.163- 171.

⁷ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, translated by William Weaver, (New York, London, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1972), p. 8.

⁸ Alan Colquhoun, writing about the work of Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti in K. Michael Hays, *Unprecedented Realism: The Architecture of Machado and Silvetti* (New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton, 1995), p. 9.

⁹ Livio Dimitriu and Vincenzo Pavan. Extensively quoted and paraphrased from the impressively thorough, highly informative and evocative international competition brief, NJIT/ USA Institute: "Redefinition of the Spaces of Piazza Isolo," summer, 1997, pp. 1-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid*. Competition entries have been published by NJIT/USA Institute in *Palimpsests in Stone* (1998).