

For an Alternative and Surrealist Use of History

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, in the work of an architect, it happens that the process of design acquires an autonomous value besides the specific demands of a precise place or a limited community. It happens then, that beyond the architectural ideas, beyond the inventions, you could find yourself drawn to the context where all this occurs; and that the object of your own attention is not the project in itself, but a vision of a new link with the past.

The last decades have been characterized by two opposite directions, alternatives to one another, and popular at different times. Our relationship with history has swung between a complete reverence, the time of memory, and a complete indifference, the time of omission.

History has been used to legitimate architectural answers: we choose the silent reproduction of historic forms; we, and we use fragments wishing that our work will belong to a new classicism. Sometimes we bond the new with a mythical past, at others we leave it behind and in opposition we build our modernity.

But the question goes beyond the single solutions: in all these cases the architect risks becoming prisoner of his relation with the past. The representation of history is a sterile instrument if it grows into fetishism, if memory transforms itself into an idol.

History, used as a starting point, is fruitful when not ideologized, when it becomes the tie between remembrance and invention, necessity and risk.

The project I am going to discuss wants to present a subjective answer to the relationship between history and invention.

In disclosing the poetic suggestions of a site, we look for signs of a past that is not simply represented by architectonic forms, urban pattern, colors and materials of the built environment. History is a wide category that incorporates all the aspects of a place development: architecture first of all, as a representation of economic and social conditions, but also manner of use, memories of rituals, recollection of public and private life. History is a time before architecture, when the space was shaped by natural elements, geological and climatic circumstances.

LOCUS

Poggio Mirteto is a small town located in a hilly site north of Rome. It is one of the most important economic centers of the Sabina area. Barycentric to its own territory, it developed a high concentration of industrial and commercial activities.

The piazza, object of our intervention, is the vital core of the urban organism and center of trade and cultural exchanges. Over time it acquired a remarkable importance as the place of community. Lately, this public space, even though it maintains all its social values, reached an absurd level of congestion and is not lively anymore.



Fig.1 Site condition.

La piazza Martiri della Libertà di Poggio Mirteto is located immediately outside the original nucleus of the little town: it presents itself as a wide and scenographic vestibule, once opened to the views of the countryside.

Its linear figure laid out on the hill's ridge constitutes the mediating element between the historical center and the new urban expansions. Amid the piazza and the town a silent dialogue of contrapositions occurs: on one hand, the longitudinal quality of the urban void and the concentric closed form of the fortifications, on the other, the appearance of the Vescovado proportions and the continuous facades of the houses that hold the project's site.

This locus appears as architecturally incomplete: the historical village is closed in upon itself and the piazza is unable to resolve the relationship among the old, the new, and the landscape.

Nature seems foreign and far away, a theatrical scene that is closed out in the distant hills; and the ancient urban fabric remains an isolated entity behind Porta Farnese, the old entrance to the historical center.

Today, the piazza is organized around a little garden, an island of green in the center of the void which is barely used and acts more as a traffic divisor than a place of quiet. The presence of this undesigned vegetation not only hides the house elevations but also transforms the dynamic qualities of the urban void in a centralized and stable space.

THE PROJECT

The chief design intentions want to exalt the original quality of the space, to strengthen the tension lines among the two seventeenth-

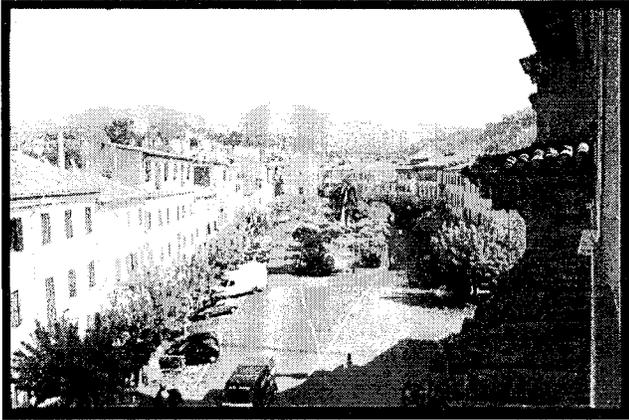


Fig.2 Piazza Martiri della Libertà.

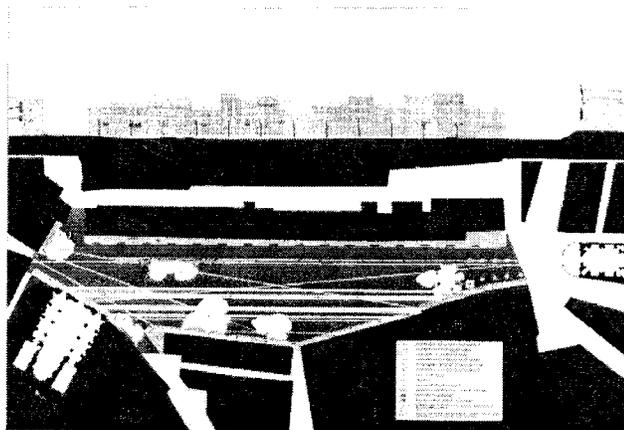


Fig. 3. Site plan.

century churches of Chiesa di San Rocco, Chiesa dell' Assunta and Porta Farnese, the ancient access to the medieval nucleus.

We searched the elements of memory and nature, we translated them into images, and allowed the architecture to represent itself.

PRESENCE AND MEMORY: MULBERRY TREE IMPRINTS

With the displacement of the garden from the piazza center, we emphasized a will to recover the dynamism of the urban structure, but above all, we tried to link to the original condition of the site, when the definition of space was due to the absence of architecture, the necessity of protecting nature and the desire of exploiting the void.

When, during the seventeenth century, the village started to grow beyond its fortifications, the first buildings were erected around an area cultivated with mulberry trees. The presence of the plants has always conditioned the building expansion, and more than one attempt was made to try building on the mulberry tree site. But the plants were respected and the piazza composed its irregular form around the planted rows.

Therefore, this void, defended over time, more for economic reasons than ecological ones, was born through a collaboration between man and nature.

The space of nature was transformed into a space of architecture. The memory of mulberry trees becomes the petrified sign of fallen leaves on the piazza. A level of abstraction is required: these natural elements are overscaled, defined with a regular geometry, and built with hard materials. The surface of the void is covered by them,

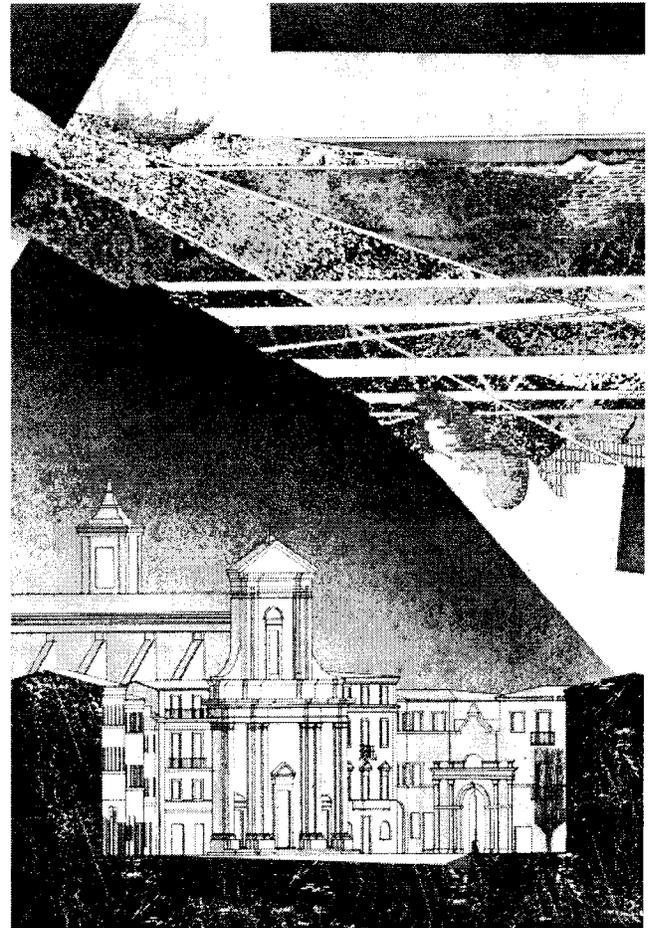


Fig. 4. Section.

creating ambiguous conditions. We could perceive pieces, fragments, suggestions of leaves, when we walk through space. It is only from a privileged vision above that the entire composition can be read and recognized. It requires different levels of attention, different levels of comprehension. The leaves of stone, embedded in the piazza pavement, are evocative signs, allusions to a history without architecture, before architecture.

The petrified nature defines architectural spaces, a dynamic site creating a polycentric system of small rooms inside the big urban void—a system that moves towards the medieval core of the village, pushed by an invisible light wind.

WATER AND FOUNTAIN

An ancient aqueduct provided water to the old center. It started on the hills behind the church of San Rocco and finished at a fountain close to the entrance of the village. The line of this water supply ran parallel to the first row of houses built around the mulberry tree site.

The memory of the water is the second sign of the project and is changed into a narrow stream. The axial relationship between the church of San Rocco and Porta Farnese becomes apparent like the linearity of the piazza itself. The presence of the water, like a thin fault line which disrupts the ground, draws the new section of the designed piazza. The space is not flat anymore and it is transformed into a slight slope, that reaches its peak beyond the geometric center of the void, creating an unbalanced division of the place.

This sign, the fountain, divides the vehicular street from the pedestrian side that becomes the natural theatre of public events.

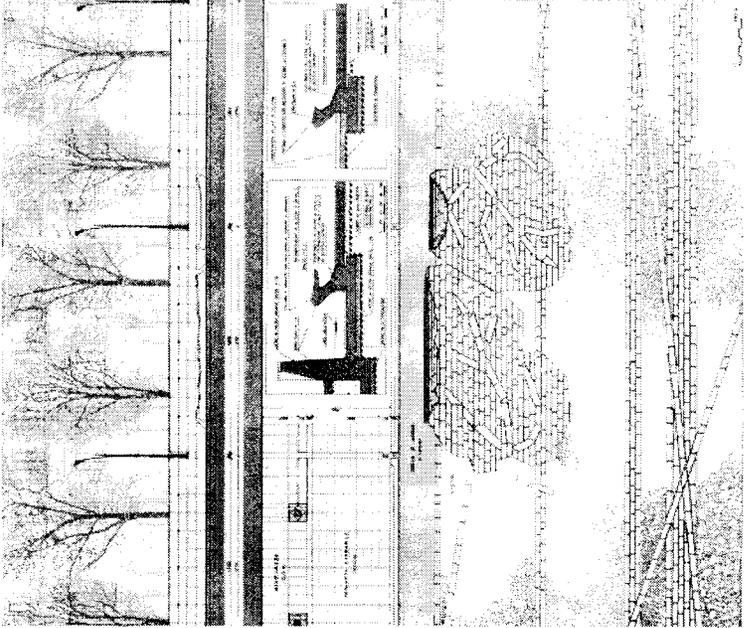


Fig. 5. Fountain and paving details.



Fig. 7. Model: View towards residential units.

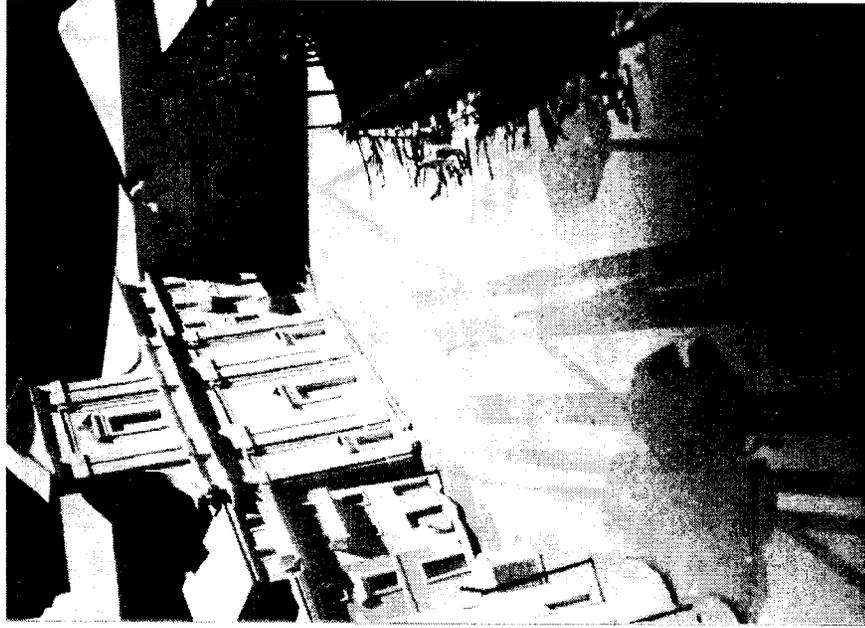


Fig. 6. Model: View towards Santi' Annunziata and Porta Eumese.

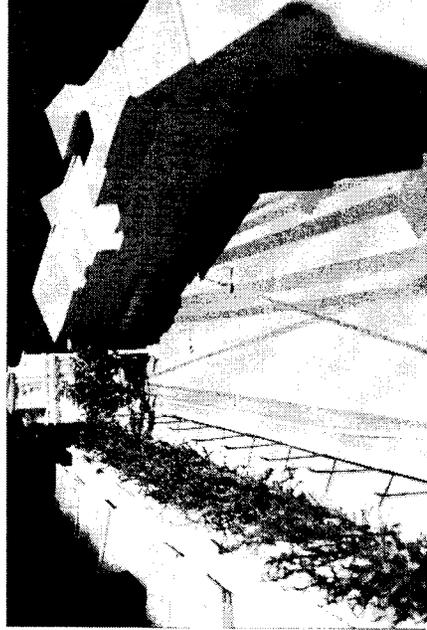


Fig. 8. Model: View towards San Rocco.

WIND

The strong sense of linearity of the piazza is directional. The designed elements contribute to the emphasis this concept: the fountain spouts are all arranged to orient the water jets toward the ancient center, the streetlights, like a gentle metal stem, are folded at the top and look toward the medieval nucleus. A light wind, a natural presence on the ridge, drives these elements, together with the purified leaves, to the entrance of the town core.

Lines on the ground measure the public space. They draw paths

running parallel to each other or they overlap, creating directional intersections. Geometry runs after history. The guideline is the axis that passes through the Church of San Rocco and Porta Farnese. Gigantic linear strips extend the presence of the church Santa Annunziata inside the piazza void, projecting on the pavement the rhythm of its pilasters.

Some oblique lines connect the geometric swerve of the houses and suggest the existence of the piazza barycenter inside the medieval center. Another one emphasizes the relationship between the two churches.

From the uniform weaving of the piazza paving, the only emerg-

ing lines are the ones which comment on the context. This specific pattern is determined by the combination of two materials: basalt blocs and fields of pebbles embedded inside chromatically differentiated colored concrete.

The project appears oriented towards the historical center, but its solution on the side of San Rocco is not secondary. Indeed, the piazza is isolated from the heavy traffic of the street by a group of trees that acts as a filter.

But this grove also wants to be the beginning of a possible tale: "In the beginning there were the mulberry trees and nature..."