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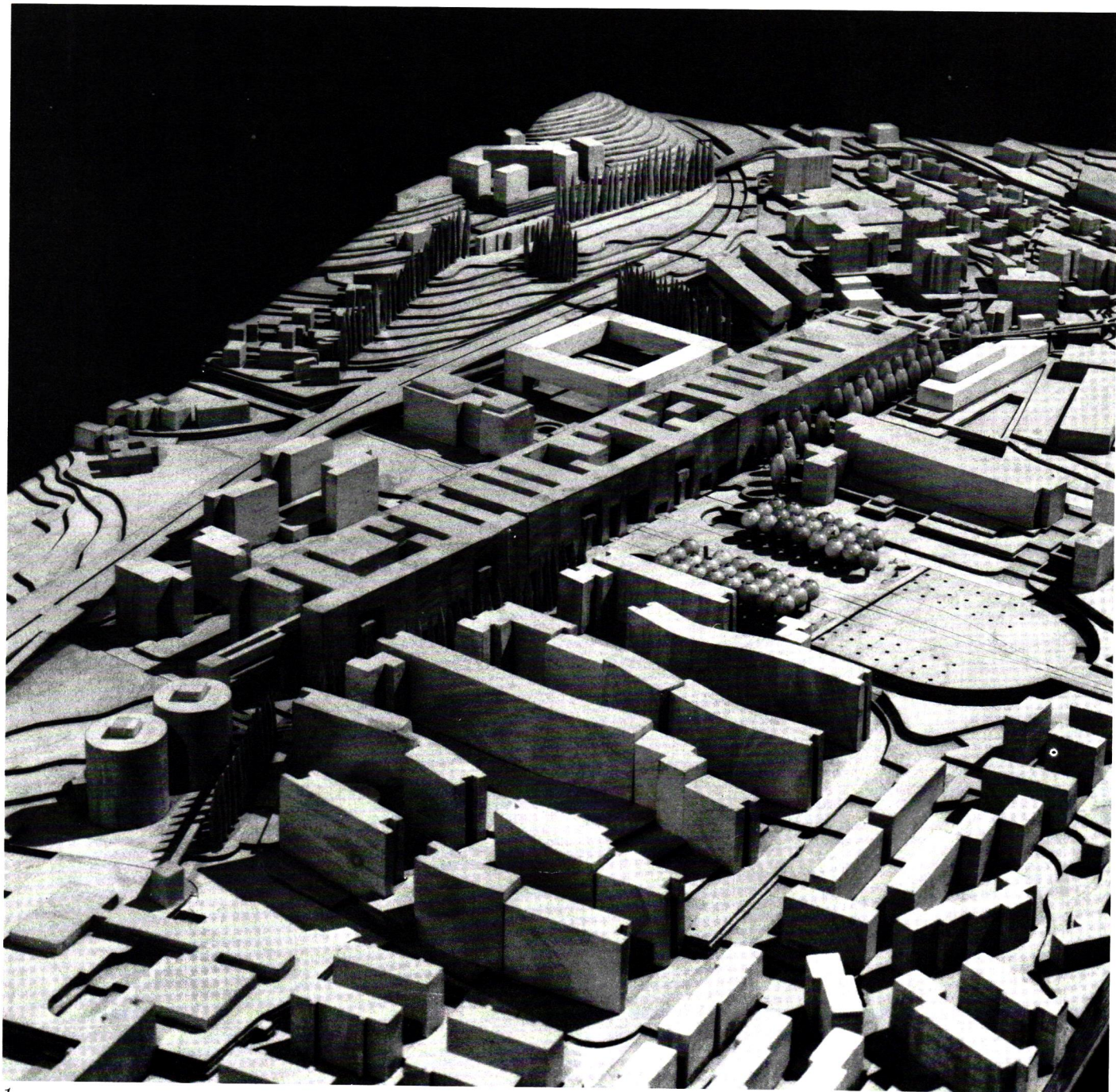
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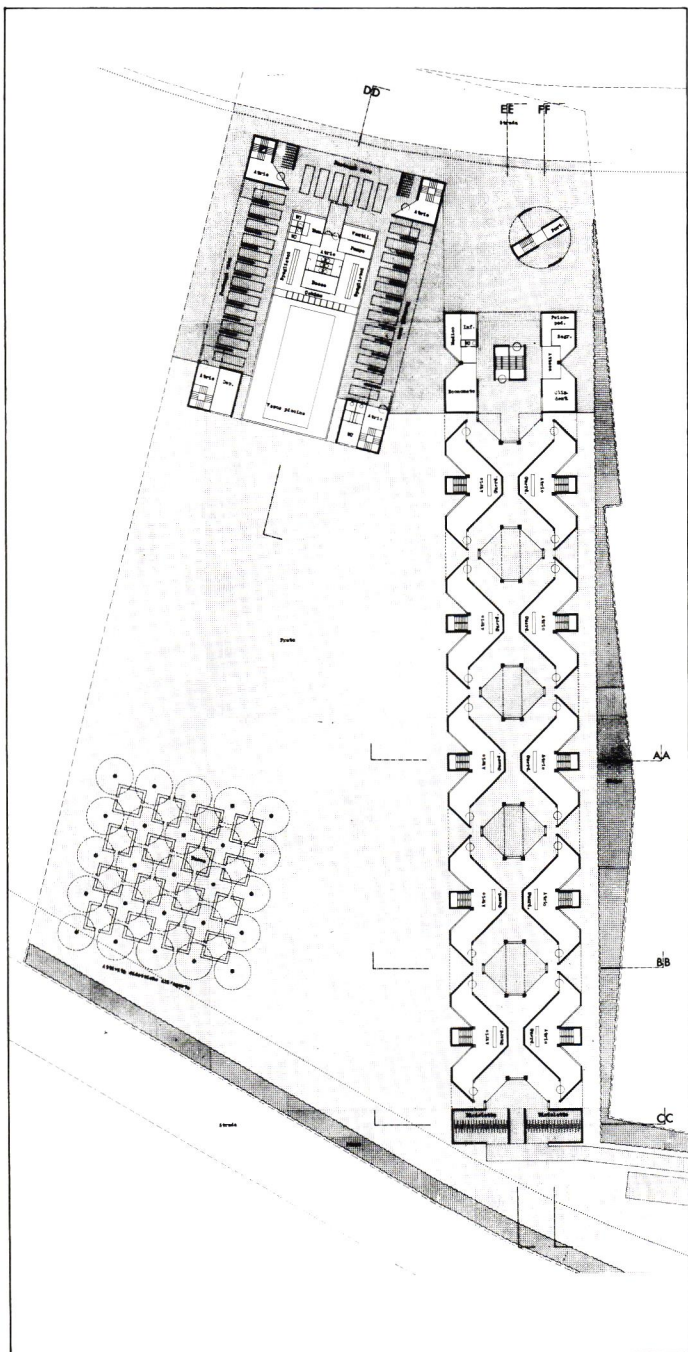
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1 (frontispiece) Competition for
Centro Direzionale, Perugia. Mario
Botta with Luigi Snozzi, 1971.
Model.

2 Competition for a school, Locarno.
Mario Botta, 1970. Ground floor
plan.

2



Without challenging its relevance to the present capacity of the building industry, the case can be made that the Italian Neo-Rationalist movement—the *Tendenza*—has been the most important development in the evolution of architecture over the last decade. This movement came to acquire its critical following primarily because its principles were seen as resisting the general tendency to reduce architecture to a commodity. In its simplest terms the *Tendenza* stressed: 1) The relative autonomy of architecture and the need for its re-articulation as a discourse in terms of *types* and *rules* for the logical combination of its elements; 2) The socio-cultural importance of existing urban structures and of the role played by monuments in embodying and representing the continuity of public institutions over time; and 3) The fertile resource of historical form as a legacy which is always available for analogical reinterpretation in terms of the present. It is interesting to note in this respect that the code phrase for Mario Botta's entry to the Locarno School competition of 1970 (fig. 2) was, significantly enough, *Il Passato come un amico*.

However, with the exception of some six structures realized by Aldo Rossi and about the same number to the credit of Carlo Aymonino, the *Tendenza* has built little, and paradoxically enough it is not in Italy but the Ticino where the *Tendenza* seems to have come into its own; that is to say, its principles have been more generally tested in Italian Switzerland than elsewhere. This fact offers further proof that the development of culture is by no means the simple consequence of acquiring power and accumulating capital. Surplus wealth is of course necessary but this in itself guarantees little. Knowledge is critical and refinement essential, but these attributes are impotent without the passionate adoption of a common cultural cause, without the use of architecture as an agent for both the realization and the representation of the society and its identity. Architecture, where it is not rooted in the community and cultivated equally by both the profession and the people, has little chance of emerging as a general culture, and the conditions under which the art of building may attain this stature are subtle in the extreme. To appreciate this, one need only compare the

quality of the recent architecture built in the Ticino—population two hundred thousand—to the relatively banal, if technically competent, work achieved in the rest of Switzerland over the same period and in the service of a population that is almost thirty times the size of the Italian canton.

To some extent the success of the Ticinese school derives from the cultural survival of the European city-state, a phenomenon which finds its political parallel (some would say parody) in the Swiss cantonal system which still offers the world's most direct form of citizen participation. Its unique insularity also depends on the fact that the Ticino is split along cultural and political lines more than any other language group in Switzerland; that is to say, it is culturally and geographically oriented toward Italy, while politically it remains firmly tied to the Federation by its own political volition. And while one cannot really compare the history of the Ticino to the radical, not to say rebellious, cultural traditions of Catalonia, the Ticinese and the Catalonians share the same experience of being a frontier-culture, that is to say, of lying between two strong cultural groups and of not really belonging to either. The privilege and the stigma of being such a culture find their most direct expression first in the Southern Alps, which psychologically and physically isolate the Ticino from Zurich and then in the Ticinese dialect which serves, however marginally, to resist the influence of Como.¹

One cannot justly situate the work of Botta without acknowledging that his Ticinese colleagues—principally Tita Carloni, Aurelio Galfetti, Ivano Gianola, Flora Ruchat, Luigi Snozzi, and Ivo Trümpy—have all frequently worked together both with him and with each other, and that these team efforts have been complemented by the daily contacts which have always been maintained between the various members of the group. At the same time no polemical formation seems to have been contemplated let alone declared, and it is possible that they remained totally unaware of their group significance until the publication of Martin Steinmann's *Tendenzen: Neuere Architektur im Tessin* of 1975.² However, where else in

the Western world save in Italy or in the Ticino would it prove impossible to write about the achievements of an individual without constantly referring to the collective effort of which he or she is a part? Nonetheless, it is clear that Botta has occupied and continues to occupy a unique position within this circle, in as much as he has played, like Galfetti in an earlier period, a central and catalytic role within the whole development. On the other hand, the caliber of Botta's finest public work would indicate that he has been at his best when collaborating with complementary talents such as Luigi Snozzi and Rudy Hunziker.

The relation of the Botta circle to Italy is extremely complex; for while the Ticinese are obviously indebted to the *Tendenza* and to Rossi for their overall attitude to urban form it is clear that, with the singular exception of Reichlin and Reinhart, they have tried to distance themselves from the specific syntax of his personal style. Instead, they have all remained closely affiliated to the work of Le Corbusier or where they have moved away from the Swiss master they have gravitated toward the Gruppo Sette and, in Botta's case, toward the later work of Kahn.

Botta's contact with Kahn, coming as it did at the moment of his graduation from the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (he worked briefly on the Venice Congress Hall project of 1969), was to be decisive for the rest of his career. It is interesting to note how Botta, as a direct pupil of the *Tendenza*, was able to return the work of Kahn to its roots, that is to say, to the Italianate, if not antique Piranesian Roman context from which Kahn drew his inspiration after 1951. This much first became evident with Botta's 1970 design for a school in Locarno (see fig. 2), a competition project which displayed to an equal degree both the Kahnian formal matrix and the Neo-Rationalist notion of an urban monument, conceived as representing and delimiting itself in terms of the overall fabric of the city. While both Kahn and the *Tendenza* seem to have agreed as to the importance of creating urban institutions in such a way as to permit renewal and reinterpretation, they seem to have differed as to the propensity for such structures to have a formally resonant