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Source: *AA Files*, No. 10 (Autumn 1985), pp. 13-17

Published by: [Architectural Association School of Architecture](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29543469>

Accessed: 17/06/2014 08:42

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VENICE AND THE NEW MODERNISM

Vittorio Gregotti

The idea that Venice could be conceived of as a city of the 'new modernity' might at first seem paradoxical, for everyone thinks of Venice as the ancient city *par excellence*, a myth linked to that of its completely natural origin, which seems to allow of no transformation, particularly toward the modern. Even those who have a more than touristic acquaintance with Venice, who are aware that it has been extensively and continually manhandled, and indeed to what extent violation, contamination and stratification constitute the very fabric of the city, cling to the myth of its ever-renewed unity. Whether observer or active participant, each tries to reconcile innovations with this myth, which, since the fall of the political oligarchy that fostered it, has petrified the city of Venice into a romantic, inscrutable labyrinth.

During the last century this attempt to see things in terms of the mythical unity of the city has become increasingly uncertain in aim and method. It has opened up a series of 'cracks' by the very attempt to adapt, to show respect without exactly knowing for what or, more importantly, how, and in a number of important places in the city it has produced worrying examples — more numerous than one might think — of an inability to understand the structure, the principles of settlement and the organization of this extraordinary city. Only the great architects, Kahn, Wright, Le Corbusier, who through sheer force of quality might have been able to contribute to the richness of Venice, have been rejected, and this has been a great loss.

During the last twenty years, just when the myth of unity was becoming less certain, there have also been persistent efforts (particularly at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia) to analyse and understand the complex but certainly not unfathomable rules which have governed the formation of Venice and the surrounding region. Some convictions have gradually emerged, with far-reaching results. First, there has been a return to clarifying the vital relationship between Venice and its lagoon. This is not simply a matter of conservation (indeed, as Venice itself teaches, there is no conservation without development and change) but is essential for an understanding of the morphological roots of the city. Today — though this was not always so — Venice is the strongest point in a vast and discontinuous system, a veritable mimesis of the strategic principles of the old 'Stato da mar' (seastate). Ranging from Chioggia to Mestre, from Pellestrina to the islands, Venice emerges as a great city, disparate but indivisible. Second, the resistance of Venice to extensive modernization, first during the Renaissance, then in the nineteenth century, has left an urban narrative which is incomparably richer than that remaining in most European cities, whose connection with the ancient city, in the wake of the expansionist

cyclone of the bureaucratic nineteenth century, is more apparent than real. Venice was in fact extensively altered in the nineteenth century, but the attempt to rationalize it quite simply failed, and within this system, particularly on the island of Venice itself, there remain incomplete or unresolved areas which could be improved with 'microsurgery'.

Are these not in fact the conditions for a new urban modernity? A city based on a diffuse, precise and flexible rationality; endowed by virtue of its discontinuity with extensive open spaces; geared to public transport and pedestrian accessibility; free (for those able to interpret water as an opportunity and not an obstacle) from the traffic congestion which plagues other cities; blessed with extraordinary and unexploited potential in the quality of its living conditions. A city whose livelihood will never be affected by the inevitable problem of the large amount of space which must be given over to the manufacture of industrial goods will thus be in a better position to contend with its sole occupation of tourism. This, inasmuch as it comprises its sole occupation, is one of its riches as well as being one of its misfortunes. Above all, Venice has inherited a considerable richness of morphology, more complex than the commoner dialectic between street and block. A series of subtle conjunctions and disjunctions, particularly between the public and the private, mediate the relationship between site, typology and architecture. The extensive terminology of urban parts (*campo, ruga, piscina, sottoportego, riva, salizzata, calle, campiello*) is evidence not only of the large variety of possible combinations but also of the rigour of the rules which govern them.

Today the slogan 'Venice, city of modernity' has yet another significance. Modern architecture *needs* Venice, the quintessential 'place', because of gradual and profound changes which have occurred during the last two decades. The first of these changes is the breakdown of the unitary system which goes under the name of 'Modern Movement' — a unity of hopes, that is, since there never was a unified theory. This state of fragmentation, a consequence of the varying interpretations of modernism, has given rise to absurd distortions — but also some new possibilities. Nevertheless, the common ideal of social progress — and not just technical progress — that went with 'modernism' has ceased to exist, and functionalism has largely been reduced to mannered empiricism. Moreover, there is no longer even the possibility of a common approach — and this is true not only in the discipline of architecture. Another significant change is that modern architecture has stopped being avant-garde — with a corresponding change in attitude with regard to history and tradition — despite the fact that the condition of mass culture forces it continually towards the modish, the slogan, and the

hyper-modern. Or it may force it towards the opposite stance, that is, the definitive solution, whether technical and impersonal or empirical and participatory. What is expected of these 'final' solutions is that all historical contradiction will vanish, but what also vanishes is any sense of logical necessity. For some architects, merely fitting in with the existing environment is enough to resolve all conflict, but the result is the lack of any critical tension — all is provisional and architecture is defeated.

The changed attitude toward history, or rather to what exists and its history, and the demise of the Modern Movement have also put an end to perhaps too abstract a notion of architecture, based not on taste or an abstract language but on the idea of the universal model, the use of undifferentiated spaces, and the building as an isolated, self-contained entity. This has been replaced by a piecemeal and empirical approach, more sensitive to particular situations and contexts. It is undoubtedly a more limited approach, but it is the only one that can be pursued with certainty. There are nevertheless a number of difficulties with this claim. Many theoreticians and architects, past and present, have rejected contextualism as a fruitless or even dangerous point of departure. It will certainly resurrect some of the old issues related to the use of the characteristic or the existing environment for stylistic inspiration, as widely discussed and practised in the fifties — and still practised by conservationists. Indeed, the old theme of the *Heimatstil* might even rear its head again.

Contextualism is too often interpreted as a search for the 'spirit' of the place, purged of all dialectic and historical contradiction and frozen at a moment regarded as typical in its development — a sort of mental construct of the place. Furthermore it is essential to disentangle contextualism from the prejudices associated with pure conservation or the ideal reconstruction of a world inhabited by the 'noble savage'. All these attitudes have been superimposed upon a notion of context as merely a collection of tangible and logically cohesive phenomena built up through history. Despite these difficulties, sensitivity to the existing environment has undoubtedly increased, as has an awareness of being part of it and of the need for a new kind of architecture which corresponds with this new sensitivity. The environment, it is often said, is composed of the physical remains of the history which has created it. In order to approach its ideal centre, to discover its 'place', it is necessary to retrace the history of the successive modifications which have produced it and to align oneself with them — bearing in mind that all description of context is in fact the description of a field of conflict, that the notion of relationship to the environment, which is fundamental to the process of planning, means not unity or continuity but dialectic and distance, that the quality of architecture is entirely dependent on the quality of the description of this non-correspondence with the existing character of the place, and that the existing determines the quality of its modification.

The principle of modification is a viable working method for three principal reasons. The first is that the conditions of building in Europe have radically changed, and the main thrust of development is now entirely towards the alteration of the existing environment. One might say, as indeed many do, that the situation in the eighties and nineties will be mainly that of building in already built-up areas. Whatever exists, and not just the monuments, has assumed the status of heritage. Apart from the passive idea of reuse, every architectural act will increasingly be an act of partial transformation. Even the urban periphery has become a 'place' in search of an identity through modification. In the countryside itself, large-scale changes tend to occur as a result of moderate goals and minute, specific changes, not according to the rules of the absolute solution, in which everything must be designed, and every design becomes a model. The second of these reasons is linked to the wretched condition of thought in our discipline. Today, unfortunately, it tends to produce not so much principles and methods as formal models to be imitated,

and it does this in accordance with the techniques of mass production, so that what is being imitated is behaviour and style rather than the theoretical or artistic necessity which produces the transformation. On the contrary, it is necessary to investigate the significant differences and to seek the specific solution, and to distil, from the principles of its construction, the elements that will advance the theoretical basis of architecture. The third reason is that architecture must return to being a repository of the collective memory face-to-face with a future that is infinitely variable, provisional and flexible. What this new world needs is elements of reference that are as enduring as the relationship of the building to its site, the wealth it produces, and the devastating effects it may bring about. Architects must become aware of the consequences of each one of their deeds, must recover their professional integrity, must 'faire des belles ruines', as Perret said, rather than leaving behind only junk.

For these reasons I believe that building in Venice today has a novel significance both for architecture and for the city of Venice. In the case of Venice the specific qualities which must be identified in order to develop a new modern architecture are so dense and complicated that they tend to have a paralysing effect. But grand gestures are no longer needed. What *is* needed is the patience and ability to read between the lines, a task which demands great prudence, a highly developed sense of quality, and a strong dose of intellectual independence on the part not only of architects but also of the city institutions, since our arguments bring us dangerously close to the edge of an abyss.

Transformation and speculation, renewal and technocratic opportunism have for many years been inseparable in Venice — and not just in Venice. Above all the modern Venice that we envisage must not be subjected to arrogant self-seeking mistaken for managerial decisiveness, unscrupulous cynicism mistaken for a struggle against ideology, or the seizure of all power with the complete abdication of duty.

Translation by Judith Landry.

THREE PROJECTS FOR VENICE BY GREGOTTI ASSOCIATES
(Augusto Cagnardi, Pierluigi Cerri, Vittorio Gregotti)

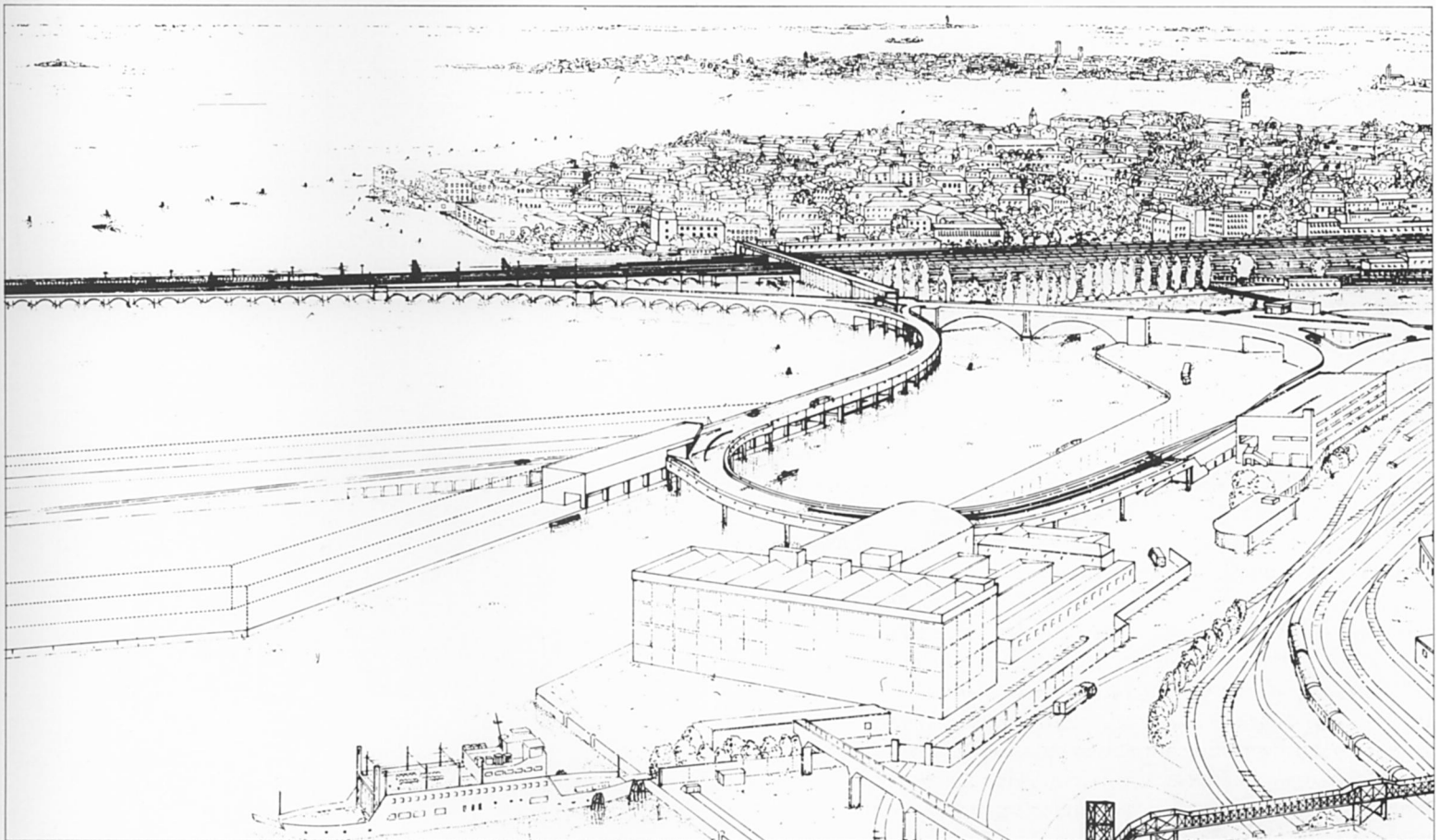
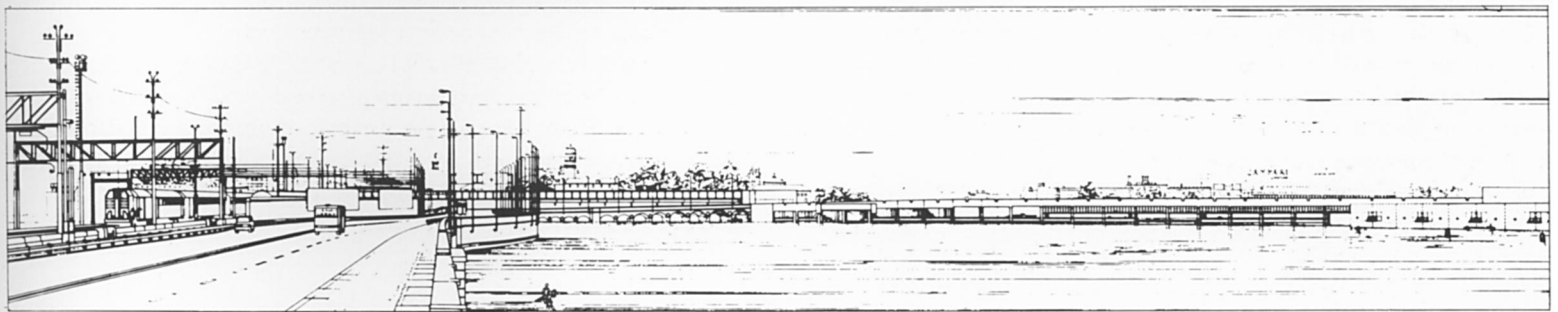
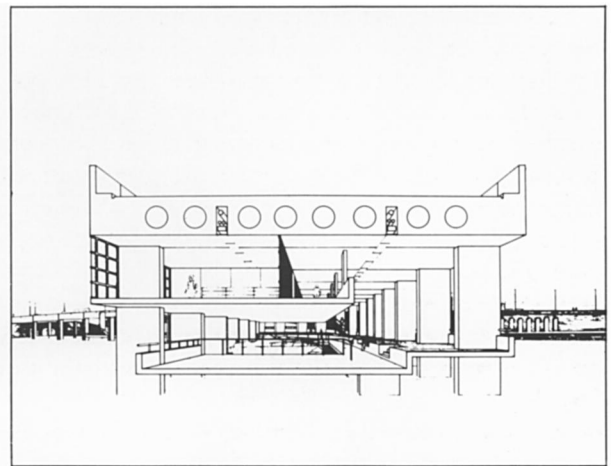
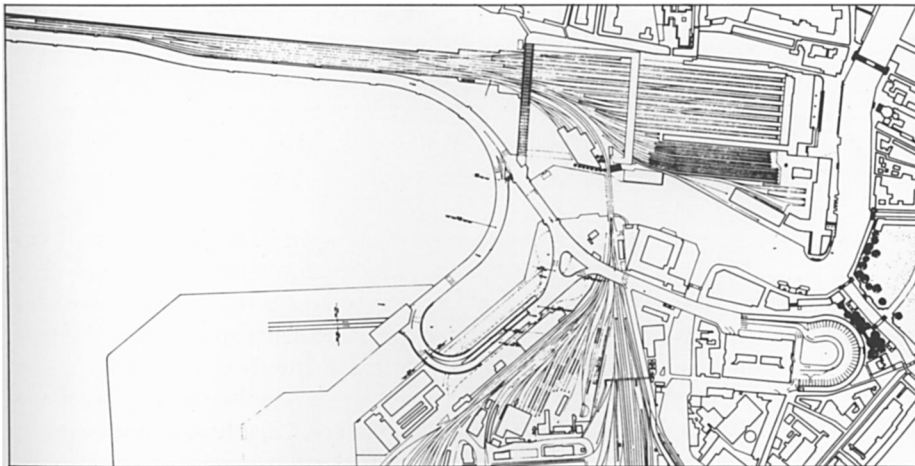
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New Arrival Terminal, 1981

with Elvio Casagrande, Carlo Magnani, Filippo Messina, Franco Trabucco,
Pier Antonio Val, N. Ventura

The scheme for this part of the city is an element of the comprehensive

reorganization of the system of access to Venice. Resembling a large palisade, the terminal acts as a precise conclusion to the Grand Canal. A footbridge unites the island of Tronchetto with the tip of Cannaregio, integrating them into a single system.

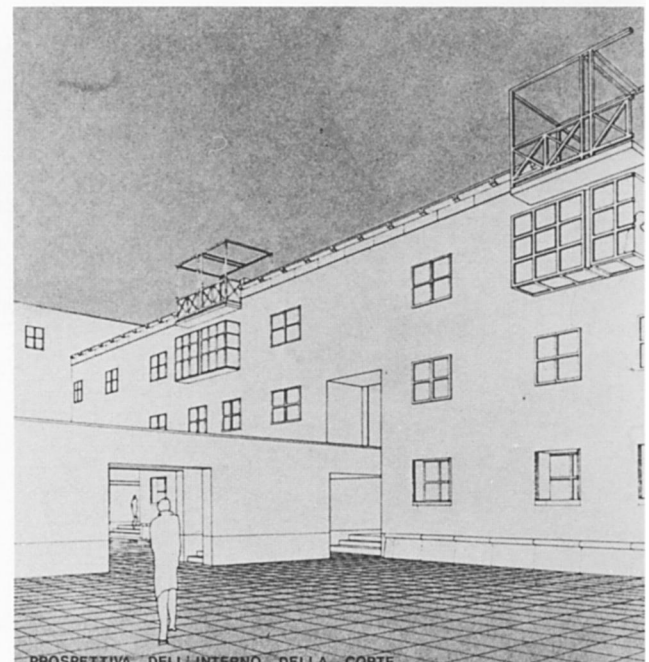
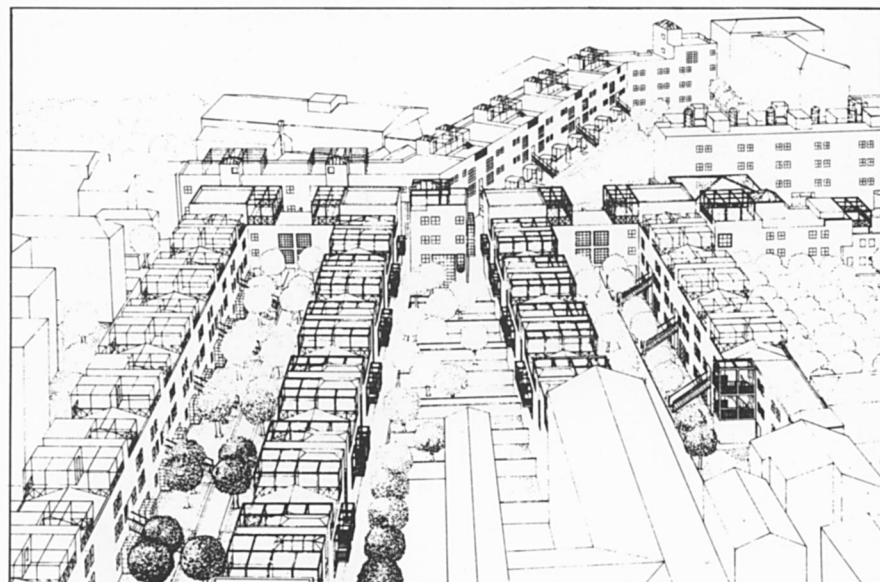
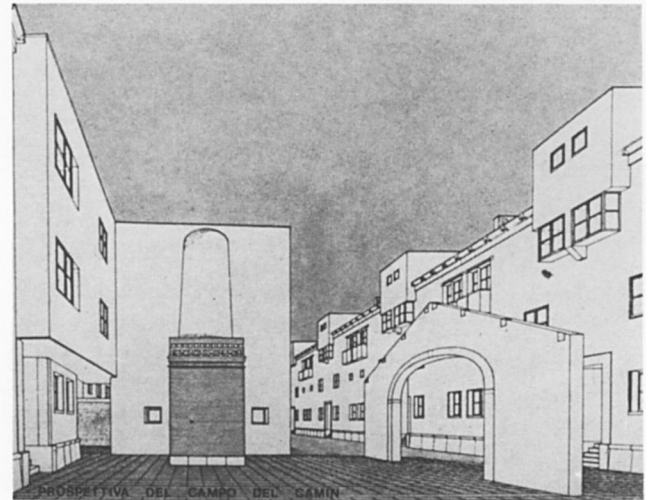
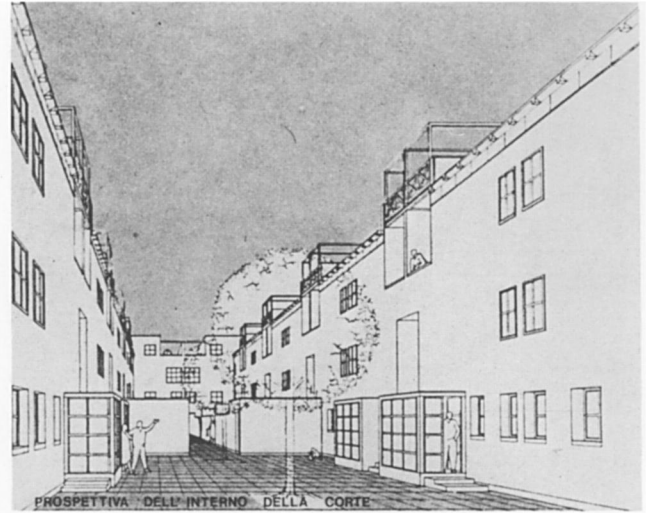
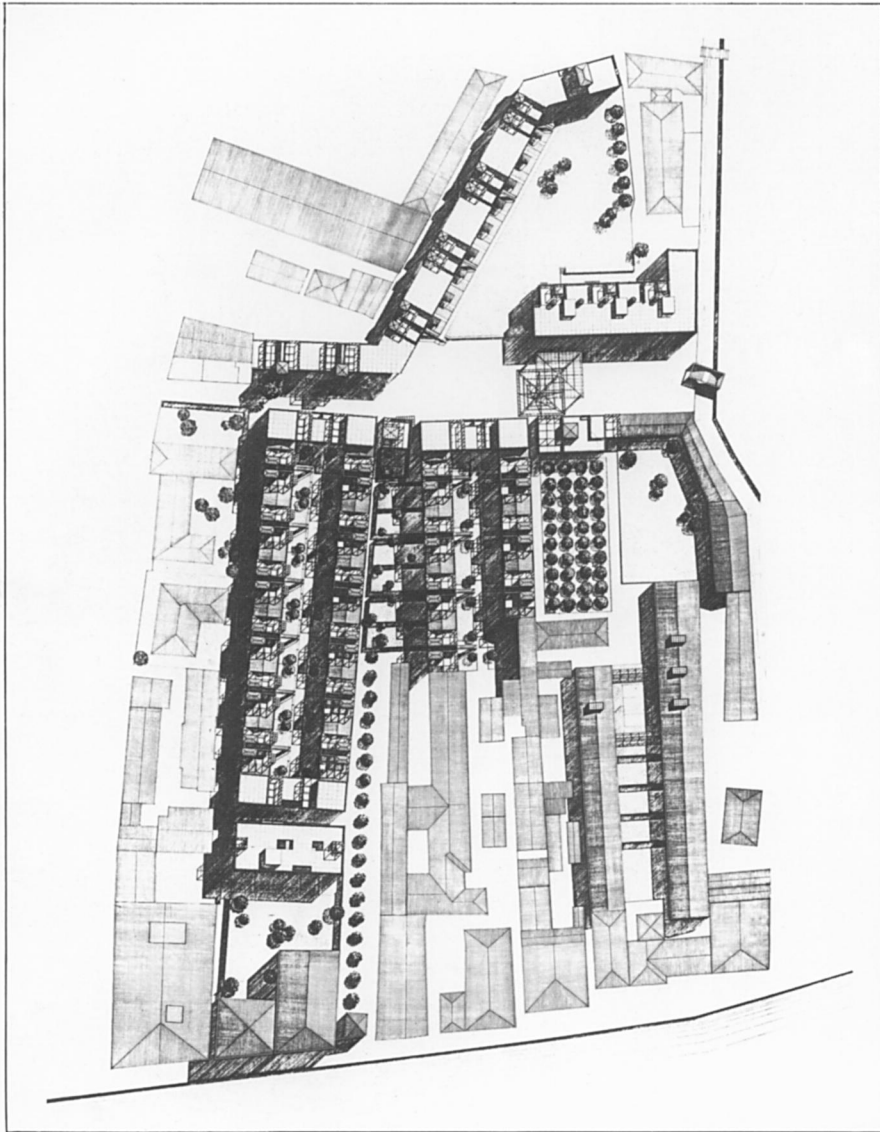


Housing in Cannaregio, 1981-3

with Elvio Casagrande, Carlo Magnani, Filippo Messina, Franco Trabucco, Pier Antonio Val

The site is a vaguely defined area between the Lista di Spagna and the comb-toothed plan of the Cannaregio waterfront. The project proposes both the construction of new buildings as well as the re-use of existing ones, and the redefinition of the system of open spaces and walkways. The ends of the elongated

courtyards of the housing face a newly created campo, or green space, which establishes the principles and relationships uniting the various building systems. Although it comprises a number of units, the design of the housing completely rejects seriality, creating instead a distinct hierarchy which reinforces the significance of each element in relation to its particular location.



A.C.T.V. Boatyard on the Giudecca, 1980-81

with Spartaco Azzola, Elvio Casagrande, Carlo Magnani

The site for the boatyard of the Municipal Transport Authority of Venice traverses the entire width of the island of Giudecca, a feature which became the guiding principle of the layout. Equally important was the aim of preserving as many of the existing buildings as possible, not just for the sake of preservation but because the alignment of buildings on the northern edge of the Giudecca is an integral and

valuable part of the urban fabric, and the purposes these buildings will serve (entrance, offices, changing rooms, etc.) can be accommodated merely by restructuring the interiors. The new boatyard comprises two complex systems of construction — one aligned with the Rio del Ponte Lungo, the other perpendicular to the lagoon — which are connected by a wall. The new buildings are faced with exposed brick, in accordance with the Venetian tradition for large-scale industrial buildings, and all exposed metal is painted black.

