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**New Public Spaces in the Historic City
Centre. The Verdi Theatre Area in
Padua, Italy, as a Case Study**

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New Public Spaces in the Historic City Centre. The Verdi Theatre Area in Padua, Italy, as a Case Study

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Abstract

The theme of this paper is the design of new public spaces and new building types in the historic city center. The method adopted is based on analyzing the history of the city to understand the urban morphology, considered to be the memory and image of the community.

The urban form is the result of its spatial structure. More than political, social, and economic systems, which are important but not sufficient, 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, and this is especially so in the historic city center.

The teaching on the Architectural and Urban Composition 2 and 3 courses at the Department of Civil, Environmental, and Architectural Engineering at the University of Padua examines basic 1960s studies concerning urban morphology and typological analysis, especially by Aldo Rossi. The theme of the spatial aspects is investigated by studying the formal image in the transformations of the city as the starting point for designing new architecture.

The Verdi Theatre area in Padua is one of the subjects investigated by the students. The area was an opportunity to redesign the lost unity of a historic part of the city: here the order and hierarchy of the elements that characterize the form of the place have experienced significant alterations since the Second World War. Progressing from the study of how the area has evolved through time, students had to define new proposals for the area.

Keywords: Dynamic urban space, Identity, Indelible reminder

Introduction

The idea that the protection of the urban landscape and its transformation can occur according to a unitary process is the basis of the teaching experience described below. The assumption is in line with the main contribution of the most advanced active community of scholars in Italy on this subject during the second half of the twentieth century, the so-called *School of Venice*. According to lecturers who taught at the University Institute of Architecture in Venice, the relationship between a city and architecture, referring to the city's scale in the study of architecture, is the fundamental fact that at the origin of an effective theory on the project in the years following the war, which defines a synthesis between analysis and design, architecture and urban planning, the acquisition of information and work on artefacts.

Giuseppe Samonà, founder of the school, starting from teaching the *Elements of architecture and survey of monuments*, turns his attention to the "history of the architectural object, analysed and reconstructed using both *ex cathedra* lectures and exercises for the survey and redesign of artefacts used as case studies, studied on site or through books and photographs"¹, expressing an interest in the pragmatism of history in terms of doing things. Egle Renata Trincanato accompanied students on site to investigate the buildings being studied, explaining the reasons for "a design that patently, but not at all costs, had to be in that place and at that time"² and studying what is already there together with the students to determine the means for future designs.

Also rooted in the instrumental value of history is Saverio Muratori's thinking, for which students must first learn that "the study of a building begins [...] with understanding its environment"³. Aldo Rossi, Muratori's assistant in Venice, insists on the absolute consistency between the analysis of buildings and urban analysis, emphasising the importance of finding precise relationships between architectural and urban structures⁴.

At the Institute of Architecture in Venice, with the passing of the years and lecturers, the analytical study of architecture consolidates interest in the city, starting with the examination of its urban fabric. We believe that there is the same reference to pre-existing environmental and historical artefacts as a founding value of teaching especially in the present day, marked by key issues of sustainability, and underpins the teaching experience described in the following pages.

¹See Domenichini, R. (2011), 'Il corso di Elementi di architettura, da Del Giudice a Trincanato'. In Zucconi G. & M. Carraro eds., *Saggi sulla scuola di architettura di Venezia*. Venice: Marsilio Editori, p. 67.

²Trincanato, E. R. (1997), 'Sull'insegnamento di Giuseppe Samonà'. In *Su Venezia e la laguna veneta e altri scritti di architettura 1948-1993*. Rome: Officina, p. 449.

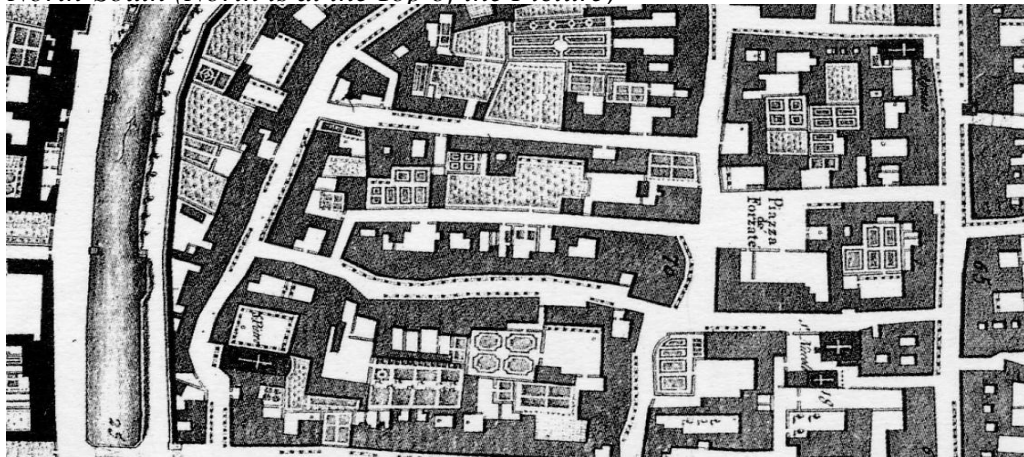
³Muratori, S. (1950). *I caratteri degli edifici nello studio dell'architettura*, a lesson held for the start of the academic year 1950-51. Venice: University Institute of Architecture, p. 13.

⁴For this lecturer see, in particular Rossi, A. (1970), 'L'obiettivo della nostra ricerca. Lezione'. In the Faculty of Architecture at the Polytechnic of Milan, research group supervised by A. Rossi, *L'analisi urbana e la progettazione architettonica. Contributi al dibattito e al lavoro di gruppo nell'anno accademico 1968-69*. Milan: Clup, p. 15.

Context

In the historical city centre of Padua, enclosed by medieval walls, the study area is located in the north-eastern quadrant, around a square that no longer exists, named after the abbot Giordano Forzaté, an open space of a regular shape into which, on either side, flowed four narrow streets on which municipal buildings rose, some of which had porticoes. Historical maps (figure 1) show the Italian style gardens and private orchards, protected by the buildings themselves and high walls that also made up this part of the fabric of the ancient city.

Figure 1. *The Verdi Theatre, with the Number 70, on the South-West Side of Forzaté Square on Giovanni Valle's Map of Padua (1781-84). The Theatre is located between Via dei Livello to the South and Subbiotti Alley to the North. A Third Route running from East to West Appears on the Upper Side Now known as Via Carlo Leoni and on the Right Side there is Via Dante running from North-South (North is at the Top of the Picture)*



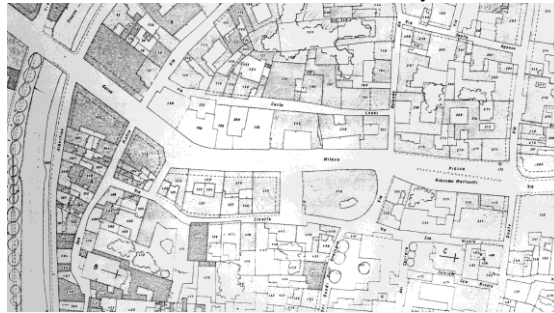
The theatre now dedicated to Giuseppe Verdi, which still exists in the city, albeit in a completely different context, stood on the west side of Forzaté square, on the southern side. The building, designed in 1748 by the architect Antonio Cugini, a pupil of Francesco Galli Bibiena, was built under the supervision of Giovanni Gloria and was inaugurated in 1751. Its relationship with its surroundings derives, in particular, from a project designed a century later by Giuseppe Jappelli for the main façade east-facing, with a salient towards Forzaté square. The façade, which was approved in August 1845 and subsequently built, was placed on the existing structure by Jappelli in order to take the form of a quarter-circle on the map, to look both unified and monumental at the same time (figures 2 and 4)¹.

¹For this building, see: Bertinelli, C. (1998). *Il teatro comunale Giuseppe Verdi di Padova: storia del teatro Verdi*. Abano Terme: La tipografica.

Figure 2. *Planimetry of the Area dated 1902, prior to the Inauguration of Corso Milano*



Figure 3. *Current State. The Verdi Theatre is isolated on All Four Sides. Forzaté Square has been absorbed by Corso Milano which Flanks the Theatre Building and Covers the Area where Subbiotti Alley used to be*



Figures 4 and 5. *The Verdi Theatre, the Façade designed by Giuseppe Jappelli and built in the Mid-Nineteenth Century and the Interior*

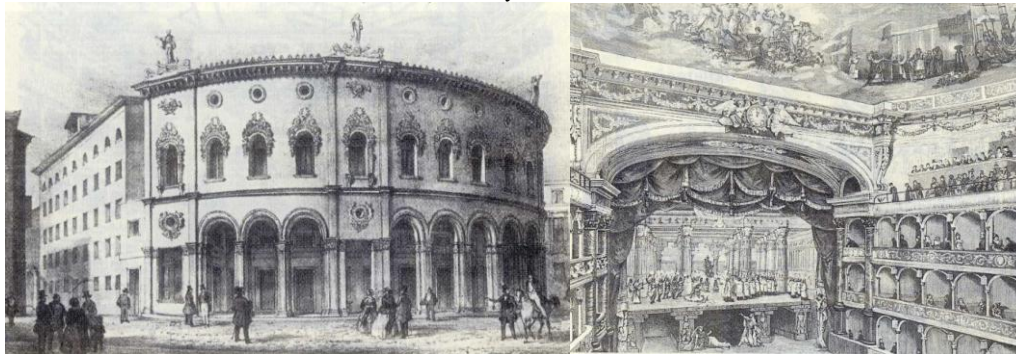


Figure 6. *The North Side Elevation of the Verdi Theatre when it still Overlooked Subbiotti Alley, prior to the Inauguration of Corso Milano*



Figure 7. *View of Corso Milano from the West, showing the Theatre to the Right and the Public Works Department to the Left. Current State. Photograph by Student Marco Sartori*



Figure 8. *View of Corso Milano from the East, showing the Historical Buildings that Survived Demolition to the Right and the Left and, in the Centre, Part of the Theatre and the Outsize Public Works Building. Current State. Photograph by Student Claudia Reddi*



The theatre underwent no further changes of urban note until the demolition of the historic building fabric carried out in the middle of the last century, when Corso Milano was inaugurated (figures 3, 7 and 8). This artery, designed between 1936 and 1938 by the Paduan engineer, Ettore Munaron, and the Roman architect, Luigi Piccinato, connecting the city centre with the western road towards Milan, involved the demolition of a considerable part of the urban fabric, including the area between the surroundings of the theatre and the city walls. The project was implemented over several years, mainly due to problems in the process of expropriation of buildings and land. Between 1939 and 1942, the group of houses that stood on the east side of Forzaté square, located between the square itself and the north-south axis of the city now known as Via Dante, was knocked down, forming a new temporary urban space named Via Matteotti after the war. Later, when the war had ended, work resumed in January 1958 with the demolition of the building on the west side of the square, the former headquarters of the public works department and, from that moment on, continued without interruption with the demolition of other ancient buildings that were considered minor and the elimination of the roads and gardens that were on the route of the artery towards Milan. The new route was finally inaugurated in November 1962, at the end of a long process testifying to a lack of second thoughts on the part of successive public administrators¹.

Critical Aspects

Having taken over the entire area of Forzaté square, the layout of Corso Milano, eighteen metres in width, was stretched over the narrow Subbiotti alley, a poky little road with service entrances to private gardens and courtyards of houses and buildings with façades on the main parallel roads located to the north and south, now respectively known as Via Carlo Leoni, previously named Via Schiavino, and Via dei Livello.

The inclusion of the theatre in the fabric of the historic city was turned upside down. The building, once the delicate relationship with the square was lost, was completely isolated from its surroundings. In particular, the north side elevation, a modest operational façade overlooking the narrow Subbiotti alley (figure 6), unwillingly became the most exposed façade, at the expense of the monumental nineteenth century façade designed by Giuseppe Jappelli, following the transformation of the alley into Corso Milano. Even the rear of the theatre, historically adjacent to neighbouring houses, was re-organised and displayed three large arched windows that still exist. The empty space created between the building and the new buildings is now used for public parking.

The contradictory spirit of wanting to transform the medieval village into a modern city with wide open spaces, which survived the fall of fascism, the

¹In general, regarding changes to Padua in the twentieth century, see: Torresini, D. (1975). *Padova 1509-1969. Gli effetti della prassi urbanistica borghese*. Venice-Padua: Marsilio Editori.

destruction of war and the period of ideal high tension reconstruction, was not fully achieved and gives us the current contradictory layout of this part of the city. Corso Milano, originally planned to facilitate movement from east to west across Padua, currently ends abruptly in what was formerly known as Spalato square, which has improperly become a big parking lot. On either side of the stream of cars are lines of alternating building façades of two opposite types: in the vicinity of the theatre, the rears of buildings that once overlooked private gardens that subsequently became part of the avenue are most frequent; elsewhere, there are outsized apartment buildings of eight or more floors constructed from 1958 onwards, far taller than the originally prescribed height. Completing the compromised framework of the area are architecturally unaltered eighteenth-century buildings, between the theatre itself and Via Dante, that once overlooked Forzaté square.

The inauguration of the new road, which also represented a new perspective axis, radically altered the physical form of the medieval style urban fabric that also characterised this district of Padua. It also changed the time and manner of the perception of surviving buildings and spaces, generating long views that are incompatible with the past.

Among the new buildings that clash the most with the historical city is the headquarters of the public works department, built on the north side of Corso Milano, opposite the theatre. It is a high-rise building clad in stone which is devoid of any reference to the historic city and devoid of any expressive, defining qualities. The planned relocation of the public works department to new headquarters on the outskirts that are more easily accessible by users provides an opportunity for changes close to the theatre. This is the reason for the area being chosen as a case study for the didactic work referred to below.

Design Proposals as a Teaching Experience

The area of the Verdi Theatre is one of the topics studied in the "Urban and Architectural Composition 3 and laboratory" course between the 2008-09 and 2010-11¹ academic years in the fifth year of the Master's Degree in Architectural Engineering at the University of Padua². The general academic goal was to investigate the relationship between analysis and design through the study of important places in the city where students live and study. Teaching is based on the belief that the survey and analysis of the historic fabric of the city support the project because they help to identify the relationships between architectural and urban structures, since the study of the building unit is the key to interpreting the entire city. As stated by Giorgio

¹Regular professor Enrico Pietrogrande, with co-workers in the laboratory Adriano Rabacchin, Paolo Marcolongo, Manlio Michieletto, Anna Giusto, Alessandro Dalla Caneva.

²Department of Civil, Environmental, and Architectural Engineering.

Grassi, analysis is not a premise that is optional for the project, but is an organic part of it, representing the initial phase¹.

Putting the city at the centre of teaching is, as already mentioned, the specific vocation of the University Institute of Architecture in Venice, at which the group of lecturers carried out its studies and where the practice of architecture is primarily seen as a survey of organisms and complex figurative events, where attention to context and the relationship with the surrounding environment is crucial to building design, regardless of its architectural function. The teaching model defined over seventy years ago by Giuseppe Samonà in his "Elements of architecture and survey of monuments" course shares same very topical reasoning, the programme of the course stating that: "The student, keeping in mind some of the monumental elements of a particular group of buildings, will add a new building to them, if the situation permits (an open space in the area or an area occupied by old houses that need redeveloping), or modify existing buildings, if they clash with the environment"².

Turning our attention to the experience regarding the area of the Verdi Theatre in Padua, the design ideas students were asked to come up with had to tend towards the consolidation of the urban fabric that had been violently lacerated by the new road and the configuration of the theatre as central to the district, taking into account the possibility of replacing the self-referential, prismatic public works department block with a different architectural proposal. The students were given no other specific instructions for the project, to avoid limiting the potential of proposals. Below are four of the solutions developed individually by students.

The solution proposed by student Marco Sartori (figures 9 and 10) endeavours to limit to the space where Forzaté square used to be, replacing the public works building, which is clearly out of place among its surroundings, with a new building closer to the theatre, just like the previous public works building that was demolished after the war.

¹See Grassi, G. (1970). 'Analisi e progetto'. In *L'analisi urbana e la progettazione architettonica: contributi al dibattito e al lavoro di gruppo nell'anno accademico 1968-69*. Milan: Clup, p.65.

²Samonà, G. (1940). 'Programma del corso di Elementi di architettura e rilievo dei monumenti', academic year 1940-41. The quotation is taken from Domenichini, R. (2011), "Il corso di Elementi di architettura, da Del Giudice a Trincanato". In Zucconi G. & M. Carraro eds., *Saggi sulla scuola di architettura di Venezia*. Venice: Marsilio Editori, p. 68.

Figure 9. *From the Work of Student Marco Sartori, Academic Year 2009-10. View of the Project Lodge forming the Western Border of the Reconstituted Forzaté Square*



Figure 10. *From the Work of Student Marco Sartori, Inclusion of the Project Solution in the Photomap*



Marco Sartori suggests that a two storey lodge building, an offshoot of a new building housing a dance school in place of the public works department, also functionally related to the theatre, should act as a border in order to reconstitute Forzaté square. The lodge crosses the path of Corso Milan: the ground floor allows the passage of people, while the upper level houses the school's showcase rehearsal room, giving an indication of what the school produces: art and entertainment.

A second building in the project connects the back of the theatre to buildings constructed in the fifties and sixties on the south side of Corso Milano, providing physical continuity between the emerging architecture and the surrounding buildings that typified the area over time. This second building, tasked with enhancing the urban open space next to the theatre, would serve as a theatre school.

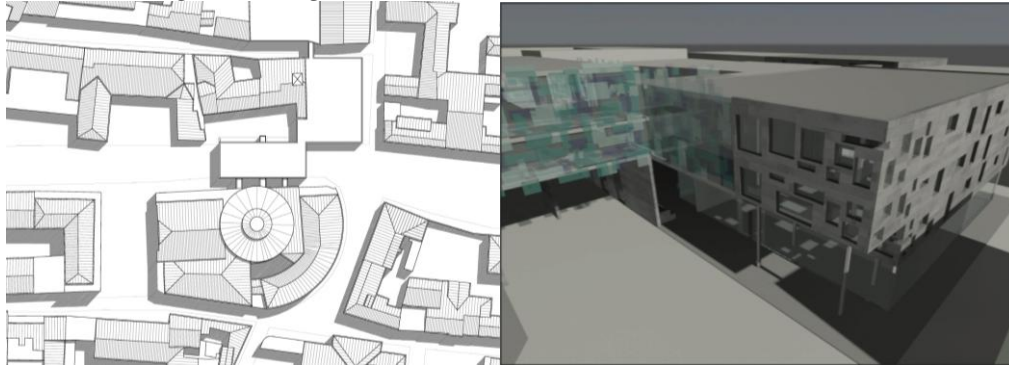
As requested, the student's proposal derives from assessments of the public space. In fact, Corso Milano in the vicinity of the theatre, which is currently basically a thoroughfare for motor vehicles, has been converted into two public areas and two separate squares connected by the dance school lodge. In one, the development of the surface area alludes to the former Forzaté square, some buildings of which are still standing. The other arises from the demolition of the historic fabric carried out after the war and focuses on the direct presence of the theatre: Finished off with flooring and furnishings which

favour experimental theatre performances by students, it is presented as a tool available to students to help with their training.

The premise of the project is that traffic towards the centre of Padua can be stopped upstream, where parking that currently occurs in the heart of the city can also be accommodated, and an underpass can be built for public transport, the emergency services and residents.

The second solution, developed by Alice Bartolozzi, involves mending the urban surroundings of the theatre and absorbing the laceration made by the inauguration of Corso Milano by constructing independent and coordinated buildings, intended to host university accommodation that would act as a new point of reference for students, a situation that has typified the city for centuries (figures 11 and 12).

Figures 11 and 12. *From the Work of Student Alice Bartolozzi, Academic Year 2008-09. Planimetric and Volumetric Plan and View from the East of the Building that Replaces the Headquarters of the Public Works Department and the New Bridge Building Planned Over Corso Milano*



There are three adjoining buildings: a four-story one to replace the headquarters of the public works department, a second one located on a secondary road called Via Carlo Leoni and a third that crosses over Corso Milano, supported by pillars and dividing walls, breaking up the axis of perspective resulting from demolition without affecting its purpose as a main traffic artery within the city.

The first building, designed for the area currently occupied by the headquarters of the public works department, consists of a ground floor designed as a covered square, coordinating common spaces designed to bring people together, causing interaction, friendships and dialogue. The three floors above provide rooms for no less than thirty students. This building connects to the two other buildings via walkways suspended in mid-air.

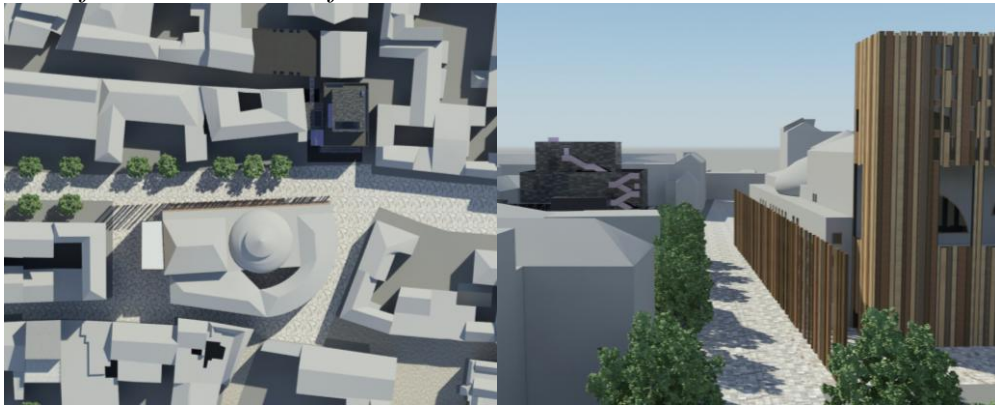
The second building included in this project replaces a point of discontinuity on the north side of Via Leoni, currently consisting of a garage that clashes with the historic fabric that still exists along this ancient road. It has the same intended use as the first building, with the ground floor dedicated to communal facilities – the parking of bicycles, a laundry and a warehouse – and the three floors above providing another thirty rooms.

In the intentions of Alice Bartolozzi, the bridge building over Corso Milano represents the fulcrum of the entire project: a coffee house spread out over two floors, 7 metres above the avenue, for students residing in the nearby accommodation, for the entire population through the use of a separate entrance and, in particular, for those who go to the theatre for shows, thanks to three planned walkways, suspended in mid-air all at the same height, which connect to the theatre itself. The empty area under the walkways corresponds to the width of the old Subbiotti alley. The structure of the suspended architecture consists of continuous masonry walls all the way to the ground floor that imitate the porticoes which typify the houses of the city with their alternating arches and columns.

The project ultimately expresses an attention to changes in the urban fabric carried out in the twentieth century. As with the previous project which saw traffic routed through a tunnel below ground level, but contrary to the two other projects, it attempts to demonstrate the possible coexistence between infrastructure and architecture.

The solution suggested by student Chiara Sambataro, that subsequently became her degree thesis, is the transformation of the theatre's surroundings into a pedestrian area in which the vegetation and widespread presence of wood finishes pay homage to the gardens that once existed and upon which Corso Milano was built (figures 13 and 14).

Figures 13 and 14. *Proposal for the Redevelopment of the Verdi Theatre Area as a New Urban Garden. Project Planimetric and Volumetric Plan and View of the Area from the West, with the New Buildings covering the Side and Rear Facades of the Theatre to the Right and the Architecture of the Book-Caf  to the Left. From the Work of Student Chiara Sambataro*



A row of trees on the north side of the avenue and the new fa ade on the side of the theatre define the borders of the pedestrian area of the former road to which only residents' cars and public transport, including trams planned by the local authorities, are allowed access.

This project also consists of several integrated parts which make up the overall result. The public works building would be knocked down and replaced by a new, five storey building comprising a book-caf , a bookstore that sells

coffee organised into areas for exhibitions and conferences that are also places where readers meet and discuss issues in the name of slow-life. Regarding the specialisation focusing on theatre and the performing arts, this use, extended for administrative purposes to the renovated building in Via Carlo Leoni which has already been mentioned, weaves a continuous relationship with the nearby architecture dedicated to Giuseppe Verdi

Other works included in this project are, in fact, directly related to the theatre, such as the cladding of the side façade of the building on the avenue and a new building at the rear.

The first operation is the creation of a second façade before the one on the side of the theatre, behind which there are new stairs and safety evacuation routes for spectators. The façade corresponds to the corridors in the theatre that lead to the various levels of box seating and the proposal therefore allows an increase in the number of people who can attend shows.

The second operation, designed adjacent to the rear of the theatre, consists of a new building of considerable height, with various uses related to the shows. The ground floor houses a warehouse connected to the stage, which is particularly appropriate given the small size of the warehouse currently being used. The other four floors house guest accommodation for artists who therefore have the opportunity to stay close to the theatre: twenty-four beds in sixteen rooms located in the upper part of the building, in direct contact with the stage area. In the middle part, a terrace space allows the theatre's three huge lancet windows to remain as visible signs on an urban scale.

The use of wood finishes in these new buildings, along with newly planted trees, give a garden feel to the area that this solution creates, in which the road is converted into a public green space.

The fourth project, by student Stephen Hsia, is based on the careful study of the old public works building that existed before the inauguration of Corso Milano and reproduces the floor plan with new building architecture (figures 15 and 16). The result is similar to the solution proposed by Marco Sartori, but in that solution the interruption of Corso Milano is achieved by a lodge with an opening to allow thoroughfare, while in this solution the interruption is clear-cut. The planimetric solution, which also sees the removal of the clashing public works building in front of the theatre, can be traced back to the situation immediately prior to the inauguration of the avenue, with a new building to provide a border for the restored Forzaté square, hosting a permanent exhibition on the history of the city of Padua. In this proposal, therefore, the relationship between architecture and the city, as well as being investigated by a study of the area, also becomes the driving force behind the area becoming central to the city in a broader context, thanks evocations by the subject of the exhibition.

Figures 15 and 16. *From the Work of Student Stefano Hsia, Academic Year 2008-09. Isometric Diagram of the New Proposed Building in Place of the Public Works Building and View from Above, with the Theatre Building in the Background*



The building at the centre of the revaluation project developed by Stefano Hsia consists of three distinct volumes. One to the north, of greater height and located in the farthest position from the theatre, which bonds the new architecture to the historical urban fabric, hosting administrative offices on the ground floor and a workshop with a warehouse in the basement. Upstairs, an enclosed exhibition hall is illuminated from above by four shed lights. The volume in the south-east, which juts out at an intermediate height towards the theatre, houses services on the ground floor, such as a ticket office, cloakroom and toilets, as well as vertical access points leading to the large exhibition hall above. The volume which is lowest in height, placed to the south-west, has a large terrace which extends alongside the avenue and serves as an outdoor space for displaying sculptures.

Conclusions

The investigation of the relationship between the architecture and culture of the city formed the basis of the project solutions 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.

Through the design of new buildings for public use, some coherence and consistency can be brought to this unresolved area in the heart of the city and a new integration with the urban fabric that has been preserved around the laceration can be achieved. The future image of Padua also depends on the choices that will be made when the public works department is relocated.

The on-going teaching experience at the University of Padua has so far also proven to be effective in making the relationship between lecturers and students a cohesive one.

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