



John McKean

Giancarlo De Carlo: Layered Places

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Giancarlo De Carlo (born 1919) has been at the centre of the European architectural scene for half a century. His career epitomises the engaged intellectual. His rigorously achieved socio-political position grew from action as a young anti-fascist partisan in the 1940s who then in the 1950s became an uncompromising critic of the International Style and a central member of Team 10 which finally broke with the CIAM establishment in 1959. His philosophy has found expression in half a century of coherent architectural work: writings, teaching, design projects, publishing and – centrally – built and inhabited places layered into an existing world.

History is central to his design process. There is a deep physical »reading« of place which allows the layering of new engavings on its surfaces, transformations which can unlock behaviours and re-articulate perceptions of place. Such work also depends on a deep social »reading«, an engagement through active participation with the actual social condition and the rights of users to express themselves, and to question the traditional processes of architectural formation.

De Carlo gained an international reputation with his first student housing at Urbino. Since the publication of his planning study of Urbino, his name has become almost synonymous with that Renaissance city, which he continues to transform with newly inserted layers.

His ability to work with city fabric, adding and removing with surgical precision, is exemplified by his celebrated University School of Education in Urbino (1968). But his careful yet utterly un-nostalgic processes have produced plans and built projects all over Italy from Sicily to Venice.

By the 1980s he had become one of the most important and penetrating architectural thinkers of our time. Astonishingly, since then his architectural designing has itself been renewed with a series of sinuous, luminous and amazingly youthful, even playful, building forms most of which have not before been widely published.

The book, which gives a survey of De Carlo's work from the beginning in the early 1950s up to the present day, accompanies an exhibition on the architect in the Centre Pompidou in Paris and other venues.

John McKean trained as both architect and historian. He is professor of architecture and director of architectural research at the University of Brighton. For two decades, he has been invited by De Carlo to Il Laboratorio Internazionale di Architettura e Urbanistica (ILAUD) each summer. He guest-edited the *World Architecture* monograph issue on De Carlo in 1991. He has made a video film on Carlo Scarpa and published books on Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the Crystal Palace and James Stirling's Leicester Engineering Building.

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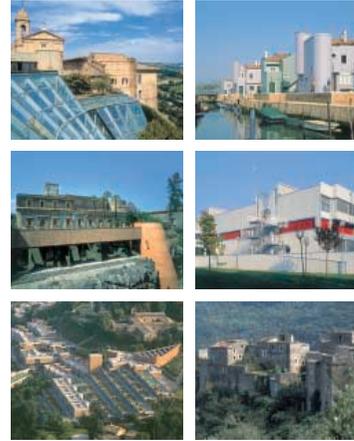
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Merges



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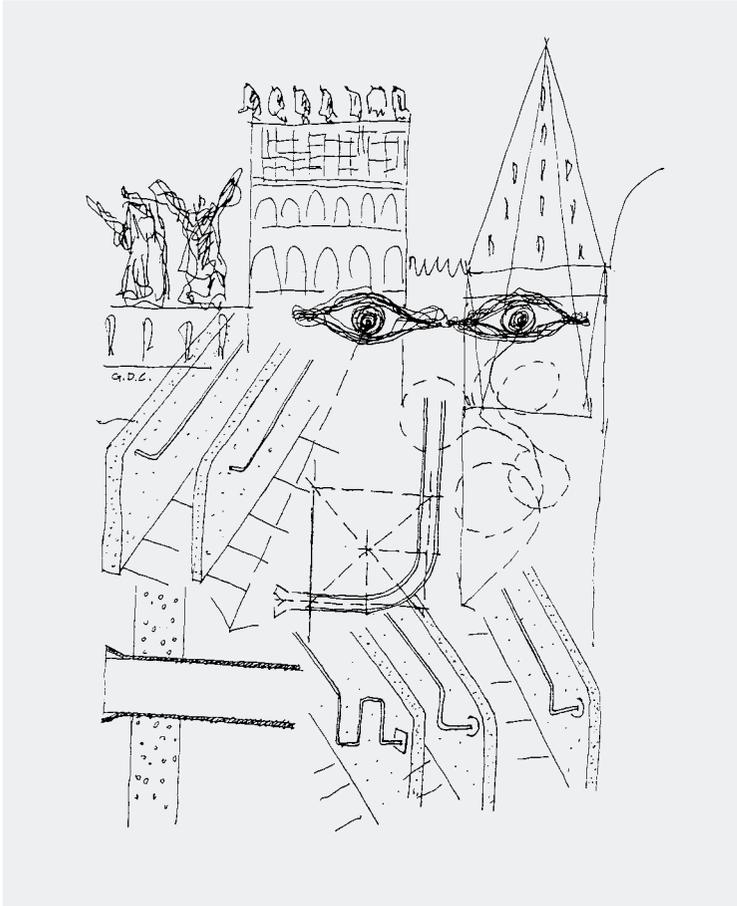
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Melt into air

Who is Giancarlo De Carlo? He is both elusive and yet absolutely clear. He is both renowned and yet a secret. One of the foremost architectural thinkers of his time, he has published no unified volume of theory. He is not an architect who plays at being a theorist, but an intellectual whose medium is architecture. (That is, not abstract writing around architecture, but its concrete profession, embedded in its social practice.) He is one of the most memorable architectural teachers of his generation, and yet has always set himself outside, at a critical angle to the academy. He enjoys disguise, but never attempts to hide. He writes under transparent pseudonyms – such as Heres Jedeco or Irmé (only understood when pronounced as if it is English). His career seems as a resistance movement born in the interstices of Modernism; yet he never hides in the shadows.

He is, as his close friend Aldo van Eyck first said half a century ago, a master of paradox. With infuriatingly paradoxical consistency, his evolving and often unexpected architectural language, over more than half a century, ever thwarts our wish to pigeon-hole. (One recent book introduces him as «anomalous».) Yet his themes, always modulated by contingent reality, have remained stoutly consistent. If Giancarlo De Carlo is, as Manfredo Tafuri suggests, a rare intellectual in architecture, he is something of architectural theorists, his aim always being action. And his rigorously achieved socio-political position finds expression in a lifetime of coherent work: writing, teaching and publishing, design projects and planning studies; and, centrally, interventions in the built and inhabited fabric of our world.

By teaching that architecture cannot be dissociated from the social and moral conditions of the age to which it belongs, he restored to the architect an awareness of his mission among humanity. With his work and the example of his life, he showed that anyone who wanted to build for people had to share in humanity's problems and misfortunes, to struggle at its side in order to satisfy its moral and material needs. He taught that, if architecture were to be authentic, it could not be limited to a question of taste or style, but had to expand, to become an active principle that took in all human activity.

That last paragraph is how, 56 years ago, Giancarlo De Carlo described William Morris. The world, emerging deeply shocked from the Second World War, was then at a point of immense potential. De Carlo enlisted Morris in his cause, adding that his teaching formed the ethical foundation of modern architecture, the foundation that links modern architecture to the story of the struggle for human freedom. While it might equally stand to describe De Carlo himself today, it is not a media-friendly message. De Carlo is not easily consumed: his words are carefully chosen, his arguments subtle. While his space-making is highly sophisticated, his architecture does not consist of a series of objects which can be captured on the pages of a glossy picture book. Rather it is a flux, it is slippery, elusive and not easily pinned down; it consists of processes rather than products, means rather than ends; it

is centred on people and action; and it is meaningless without them.

The career of De Carlo, who was born in 1919, offers an original lens through which to focus the last half century's architectural debate; while it also articulates a role for the committed professional actor today. How was he located in these currents? Discussing the post Second World War years, key architectural themes were recently listed as: popular culture and everyday life, anti-architecture, democratic freedom, *homo ludens*, primitivism, authenticity, architecture's history, regionalism and place.² Giancarlo De Carlo was at the centre of exploration of each one of these issues.

And of the 1970s? That was the time, Tafuri suggests, when «the most interesting designs have given rise to themes revolving around the concepts of place, context, modification, reweaving, the relationship between an intervention and its surrounding conditions ...»³ Which is exactly what De Carlo had always been up to, not least when it was far less fashionable than it later became.

And then the key themes of the 1960s? Frampton's construction suggests four important groupings: the dominant Populism and Productionism (that is, broadly, Postmodernism and high-tech); the critical Rationalism and Structuralism (the former, a «desperate artistic commentary on the lost nature of the modern city»,⁴ led by Aldo Rossi and Giorgio Grassi, the latter named from structural anthropology was led by Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger). He then suggests that a further critical strain would lead architecture forwards; it would have a commitment to place and «tectonic density»; he called it regionalist. While Frampton's final images were of Pikionis' hill-path in Athens and Utzon's Bagsvaerd church near Copenhagen, it is De Carlo who has come as close as anyone to resembling Frampton's critical regionalist.

And of the later 20th century? A more pessimistic view of its architecture sees it as oscillating between the yearning for a technocratic order and an idiosyncratic individualism. This theme, articulated earlier by Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co among others, is taken up by Dalibor Vesely: «The technical homogenisation of modern life makes it much easier to share the illusion that even the most abstract architectural solutions, based on narrow technical criteria, may be adequate and appropriate. ... The anonymity and the disembodied nature of modern technology is complemented by a second main modern tendency, represented by an introverted and highly personalised culture. ... The architect sees himself as a sole agent fully responsible for everything related to creativity. ... The concentration on private experience, imagination and fantasy contradicts the very nature of architecture, which is always open to and judged by a shared public culture.»⁵ It is against precisely these trends that De Carlo has stood; and it is in what Vesely calls that «grey zone of modernity», lying between the solipsistic world of personal experience and an abstract culture dominated by the instrumental, that he has always attempted to operate.

De Carlo would argue that the space assigned to the architect has nothing innocent about it: it answers to particular tactics and strategies; it is, quite simply, the space of the dominant mode of

1. Giancarlo DeCarlo, Vertical reconnections to restructure the Palazzo degli Anziani, Ancona, 1999–, Detail



production, and hence the space of capitalism governed by the bourgeoisie. These words, however, are from Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, alongside which De Carlo's critique of architectural practice stands close.

Lefebvre's criticism is of architects' complicity, in their narrow privileging of the image and of its consequence, an impoverished understanding of inhabited space. He attacks the architectural discourse for its imitation or caricature of the discourse of power; suffering from the delusion that «objective» knowledge and «reality» can be contained in its graphic representations, a discourse wherein the user's space finds expression only with great difficulty. De Carlo, who had already been arguing very similarly, was teaching in the Venice architecture school in May 1968, at the hub of the Italian revolt; while Lefebvre, in Nanterre, was a key influence behind the Parisian students. They linked in the 1970s when Lefebvre's briefly flourishing magazine *Espaces e Sociétés* became transformed into De Carlo's *Spazio e Società*, a journal which he ran until its end in 2001.

While he was always building, writing essays and lecturing, since the 1970s De Carlo has made a quiet stir with his own independent platforms for debate. Both *Spazio e Società* and the remarkable master class, the International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD) meeting annually in Urbino, Siena, San Marino and now Venice, are entirely De Carlo's children. Buttressed by Team 10 and other younger colleagues from around the world, they calmly rode through tides of the «tendenza» and «Postmodernism», of «community architecture» and «vernacularism», of high-tech and the signed artwork. But this should not suggest that his ideas or his own expressive language stood still.

De Carlo's understanding of the heritage of the historic city and the debate as to how it can be renewed, has always avoided nostalgia – from post-war Neorealism to Postmodern neo-Historicism. What his work teaches is the remarkable value of a participatory, deep reading of place; its specificity in formal fact, its material and social formation buried in civic memory, its present social

inhabitation and aspirations, its offering links to possible, but unknown, futures. His own language has evolved and developed extraordinarily, particularly in the decades when more sensible men were enjoying retirement: in many ways his most significant built oeuvre dates from the years since his 65th birthday.

His buildings are complex responses to particular sets of questions, and do not reveal themselves all at once. Being the least seductive of architects, typically, he is suspicious of any proposed book about his work. To admire elegant images of his buildings is like admiring individual phrases, say, from Lefebvre's essays on Rhythm-analysis. Two decades ago, a publisher adding De Carlo's work to a series of glossy monographs, was nonplussed by being offered working drawings rather than beguiling artwork. De Carlo does not feed art editors' desire for abstract artwork in the landscape. His drawings have little intrinsic value beyond their part in the more important production process. Meaning is breathed into his spaces by honouring the complex processes of their formation and their creative inhabitation. As Hertzberger quoted at one of De Carlo's ILAUD meetings, «It doesn't matter how it looks without people. What counts is what the people look like in it.»

De Carlo's ideas are also rooted in practice; but that in no way implies a simple pragmatism. Theory and practice are not autonomous, architectural hypotheses are inevitably social; architecture without building is nonsense, as is building without architecture. His architecture centres on buildings – needed, created and occupied – whose enclosure and space is only the outline of a potential made relevant by the group of people it is intended for. For him «the reality of a building consists in creating a congenial condition in which a society, using that building, can make choices and mix together.»⁶

He never deals with a «how?» question without considering the underlying «why?» This has not endeared him to authorities (who resent being asked why their housing budget is so parsimonious) or to colleagues (whose sails are trimmed

to fit prevailing political winds). All fine architects' careers are strewn with disappointments; competitions lost, projects founded, clients lacking courageous commitment. De Carlo, however, by refusing to temporise and – uniquely in 20th-century Italian culture – refusing to align himself with the essential channels of political patronage, has ensured that his output remains even smaller than most. In Milan, his home city, for half a century he says he has not even been asked to produce a dog-kennel. 25 years ago, another city governed by the left offered him a major project, only to stifle it as soon as a progressive solution seemed to be appearing: for no-one is more scared of change than socialist bureaucrats, and De Carlo would always be opening up issues, be enabling more questioning.

His reputation therefore has an unusual, and elusive quality. Italians seem to remember his contribution to debate in 1950s' Casabella, then Team 10, the Urbino colleges and perhaps his Terni housing – then silence. Spazio e Società, though co-produced with MIT for some years, was hardly noticed at home. He has been isolated both in the profession and in the academy; with his culture always antithetical to provincialism and to fashion, with his materialism untouched by the Italian love of ambiguous metaphysics. It is partly the perception, exemplified by Tadini, of a clear generational gap between De Carlo, Gardella and others on the one side, Gregotti, Aldo Rossi and their friends on the other. But it is not an issue of age. Was his really a generation of architects doomed, as Joan Ockman even more crudely suggests, 'to the limbo between Modernism and Postmodernism? And what then does De Carlo mean by embracing Modernism?

In most of the west, pre-war architectural Modernism had been the province of an avant-garde minority, where it hadn't been repressed by the Nazis. In Fascist Italy, however, it had thrived with an ambiguous difficulty. Then, following the war, it quickly became the face of institutional capitalism, seen to serve other repressive ends, while to the avant-garde its monolithic International Style now seemed arthritic and rigid. De Carlo's whole career, starting up at that moment, can be seen as an interrogation of Modernism; but what is the image of Modernism at the core of his critique?

«All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real condition of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.» These famous lines at the core of *The Communist Manifesto* define a Modernism De Carlo would certainly recognise. Marshall Berman's take on modernity slams the city of Le Corbusier, Sigfried Giedion and CIAM as «a modernised vision of pastoral: a spatially and socially segmented world ... where haloes could begin to grow around people's heads once again.»⁸ In contrast, with more enthusiasm, Berman embraces today's «contemporary desire for a city that is openly troubled but intensely alive, that is a desire to open up old but distinctly modern wounds once more. It is a desire to live openly with the split and unreconciled character of our lives and to draw energy from our inner struggles, wherever they may lead us in the end. If we learned through one Modernism to construct haloes around our spaces and ourselves, we can learn from another Modernism

to lose our haloes and find ourselves anew.»

Here is the modern world within which Giancarlo De Carlo works: Modernism died, will die many times and, he argues, it will be reborn; «because, under its ashes, the matrix that has generated its previous existences remained intact: This was the principle that architecture, if it is to find again its most authentic essence, must be disentangled from the requirements of power.» Such an architectural production cannot avoid conflict. We must exploit the uses of disorder, and run the risks inherent in that undertaking. Fluidity is of its essence, openness to the changing situation. The city, as an organism rather than an aggregation of objects, is swirling, gathering at points he calls (and designs as) «condensers». Today, for a major project in 2001 (for which he was competing with Koolhaas and van Berckel), sensing the time for his ideas to be ripe, he argues: «The idea is in the air that the project that aims at the 'stable' and 'finite' no longer corresponds to the state of things, and that the only way to organise and give form and space is to start 'processes' ...»⁹

As a practitioner's approach to urban planning it has been little understood. Does this contribute to how De Carlo has managed to remain so much a secret? While, for example, Lefebvre's critique was growing in influence, so De Carlo was attempting to approach a similar agenda from the position of engagement: his muddy realism of conflict and commitment was a long way from the nihilistic ivory tower from which Venice's famous architectural historians could sneer. There is irony here in how theories of architecture as event and situation can transfer into a context of critical theory or of art production, while their architectural manifestation might pass unrecognised. While Lefebvre theory becomes required reading among thinkers about the environment, De Carlo's praxis becomes marginalised among the tasty flavours enjoyed by teachers and publishers of young architects, and so almost invisible. Theory and practice are comprehended separately; and where they are intimately connected, we tend to look at the wrong thing, at images rather than events.

Why, in so many tales of the period, does De Carlo keep mysteriously vanishing from the story? Two recent examples: First, talking of the early 1950s, Joan Ockman says «Gregotti, with Rossi, Gae Aulenti, Guido Canella and a handful of others, came under the wing of Ernesto Rogers during the years when *Casabella Continuità* played its major role»,¹⁰ thereby eradicating the central thinker on that magazine for a few key years. Second, talking of the later 1950s, at the crucial confrontation of Team 10 with the CIAM Council at La Sarraz in September 1955, Eric Mumford names «Rogers, Giedion, Alison and Peter Smithson, Wogenscky, Roth, Bakema, Max Bill, Howell» and various others present, but omits De Carlo – particularly extraordinary since he, apart from Alison Smithson has surely written most about it.¹¹ (But then again, in Alison Smithson's own eight-page Team 10 bibliography published in 1982, there is not a mention of De Carlo.)

Going further back, on the 1960s' cover of the essay *New Directions in Italian Architecture*, it says «Dr Gregotti discusses the major figures of the 1960s – De Carlo, Scarpa, Samonà, Michelucci»; but inside, De Carlo is barely referred to and never for his designs. The 9th Triennale is praised

2. Giancarlo De Carlo, Ponte Parodi e la Città di Genova development plan, 2000/01. Section with stairs and tower.



for «devoting substantial research to spontaneous architecture and dedicating a remarkable exhibition to it», but there is no mention of the designer-curator whose exhibition it was.

The *Penguin Dictionary of Architecture*, but only in its Italian edition, described De Carlo in 1981 as «one of the most interesting post-war Italian architects», yet he seemed better known abroad, being a regular visiting professor in the United States, then recipient of the UK's Royal Gold Medal for Architecture. A poll in 2002 asked UK architects to name their most influential architect in the world alive today, while the top few signatures were predictable, De Carlo, remarkably, came eighth. Where, we wonder, might an Italian poll have ranked him?

In Urbino, a city to which he has devoted his life, he appears Milanese, to Milan he is oddly Anglophile (and his studio always used to stop for tea at five o'clock in the afternoon); while to the British and Americans he remains very Italian. Perhaps, finally, he is happiest on the margins, in the interstices, always resisting the thoughtless flow. «I have always been an outsider (he uses the English word «outsider» in this Italian conversation). I taught at the university for a long time but have never been an academic; I had a practice of design for many years but never became a real professional; I write about architecture but am not a writer; I draw and paint but I don't sell my artwork. At the end of the day I simply keep alive the energy from my childhood.»

«So why is it that after being famous, he is now almost unknown? Probably because he is intrinsically an anti-establishment character, he does not belong in the dominant neo-capitalist and consumption-oriented flood that is enervating the West; because he remains an outsider in the academic world; because he has harshly criticised the blindness of Modernism without deigning a glance at the idiosyncrasy of the Postmodernists; and finally, because he has not made a pact with the devil of the mass media ...»¹²

Here was Giancarlo De Carlo talking, in 1990, about Christopher Alexander. But fully aware that it was also a canny and proud self-portrait.

Thanks to the unending friendship of Simonetta Daffarra since we first met at ILLAUD two decades ago, to Colin Ward for discussions over even more years including an abortive attempt to get Gian-

carlo to Cornwall a decade ago; to Elisabetta Pedron for considerable assistance with untangling the rhetoric and idiom of intellectual Italians and to Angela Momi for endless assistance in Studio De Carlo.

Thanks, centrally, to Giancarlo De Carlo for the privilege of invitations to join him at ILLAUD and in the pages of *Spazio e Società* over 25 years, and particularly for his typical encouragement and commitment to this book, and to my independence in its writing. Uncredited quotation is from long (usually taped) conversations we had since 1999, or those he had with Franco Buncuga which are published as a book in Italian.¹³

Thanks finally are due to the University of Brighton for supporting this project, and particularly my award from the Arts and Humanities Research Board in 1999/2000 which granted sabbatical leave to undertake the research. Awkwardly, my lengthy illness at that time was followed by De Carlo's own sudden and critical illness, and the project ground frustratingly to a halt. De Carlo, though by now over 80, with astonishing resilience soon recovered much of his old vigour and returned to the studio, to attack the range of work still under production, impatiently sensing «so much to do, so little time», yet still wonderfully keeping alive that energy from his childhood. Early in 2003, just back from lecturing at various conferences, he was considering a lecture trip to the United States.

Typically, he sees an academic career as the opposite of such a trajectory, the secret of academic success lying, he says, in «knowing how to conceal one's own thoughts for years. The fact is that, in the majority of cases, this task becomes an increasingly less arduous one, until in the end success coincides with no longer having anything to think about.»¹⁴ I trust that, as my university offered me a professor's chair in 1996, this text might slightly disprove that rule. I hope, even more, that it might encourage you out of your chair to experience the places De Carlo has touched.

Housing on Mazzorbo, Venice, 1979 to 1985

Collaborators: Alberto Cecchetto, Connie Occhilini, Daniele Pini, Renato Trocchia

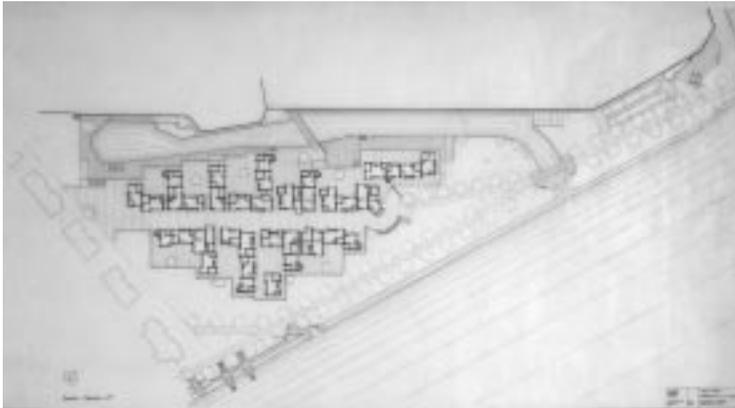
This lightly populated island is linked by footbridge to the more famous Burano, in the lagoon about 10 km from Venice. Housing pressure on Burano led to De Carlo's commission for 80 dwellings on Mazzorbo. «In any part of the world, 80 dwellings could be accommodated within a single building and go unnoticed», said De Carlo, «but on the islands of the Venetian lagoon, 80 dwellings are, or should be, 80 houses that, together, take on a great dimension. This is because the land and the waters of the Lagoon contain within them a universe of minute signs, and any sign, even if scarcely perceptible, is always of crucial significance.»⁹⁵

The participatory processes at Terni had centred on encounters with potential residents in that seemingly featureless location. Here it centred more on encounters with the nuances of the existing place, to reveal the life led and be suggestive of design solutions. De Carlo's studies of Burano

architecture and its details became a fund of knowledge accessible to the community. He adapted the characteristic Burano morphology of *caile* (pedestrian spine), small *campri* (courts) usually facing water and a *fondamenta* (path alongside the canal), shaping the public spaces with great care and expense. The canal was re-created, and the whole site raised by a metre so that communal life in doorways might co-exist with flood tides.

A set of house types was evolved and a first phase of 36 dwellings built, the aggregated forms derive less from internal spatial requirements (as at Terni) than from their position in the overall scheme (such as at corners or terrace ends). The forms avoid the trap of picturesque mimicry, thanks to their rigorous development process. The elements, manipulated as at Terni, are now projecting staircases, cylinders, rhythmical and positional elements, as well as colour. The result for the residents is dwellings strangely familiar and surprisingly novel. The larger project was later revised down to accommodate the unmoved football pitch, but sadly only the sports hall was then built.

1. Site plan. (CGP 5331-17)
2. House types.





3. General view from the southeast.
4. View from the northeast.
5. View from the west with the little harbour.



New gateways to the Republic of San Marino, 1994/95

Collaborators: Paolo Castiglioni, Takachi Kanehara, Antonio Troisi

While ILLAUD was in San Marino, De Carlo was commissioned to design various portals to this tiny, ancient republic within Italy, though only the major one, on the highway to nearby Rimini on the coast, was constructed. Seven others were projected, four of which were commissioned to final designs, three in natural countryside and one in the village of Chiesanuova.

The built Dogana gateway, with its festive mast and spiral stair, incorporates a footbridge over the busy four-lane highway. It is a wonderful space to occupy: the spiral rise, the gently arched timber deck which widens in the centre, the splayed sides held apart by a series of struts each centred on a different luminous eye. The language of tower and gate, with its lightness and dynamic asymmetries, offers a most appropriate entrance today to this chaotic city of luxury commerce.

The other four developed designs, however, are quite different, even more intriguing boundary markers in the landscape. Having to signal the border without resorting to tower or gate, they developed sculptural, structural shapes combining tension and bending; two are cantilevers (at Cerbara and Chiesanuova), one has tied that down (Gaidicciolo) and the fourth has a rotational symmetry (Faetano). The forms, designed closely with the structural engineer, were developed in model, indeed for Faetano no drawings were used at all.

«Unfortunately», as De Carlo says, «the Republic of San Marino just lets everything drop» – ILLAUD projects, other initiatives, and the gateways. «It is a place where ideas flourish and are equally quickly forgotten.» The problem is not likely to be money, they simply say «why bother?». Even when the footbridge at Dogana had the spiral access at one side removed during adjacent building work, on my last visit they had not bothered to replace it.

1, 2. Models of two gateways which were not built.

