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Architecture, Territory, and Society:
Two Projects for the Veneto

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An architectural territory is an area of human settlement that exhibits consistent architectural conditions or elements. In this thesis, three primary aspects of territory are considered: massing patterns, circulation networks, and typological structure.

Many European architects work to extend, delimit, and join territories through their architectural interventions. In this way buildings function both as objects in themselves and as linking or delimiting parts in an urban whole.

This thesis presents an American’s understanding of a typically European approach, gained during a year of study at the Accademia di architettura in Mendrisio, Switzerland. Combining observations of Accademia pedagogy with the presentation of two projects undertaken there, it offers a definition of territory and two territorial discourses. In the first project, located in Padua, the intent is to strengthen the definition of two adjacent territories by means of an interstitial housing and office complex. In the second the territory of a service island at the edge of Venice becomes the primary influence for the form of a rock venue and contemporary cultural center.

The social and political territories in a city, powerful forces for architecture, are also discussed in the context of Padua. An aging and shrinking population may not need or want a building typology that interests elite political and economic actors.
Advisors at the
Accademia di architettura,
Mendrisio, Switzerland

Prof. Marc Collomb
Prof. Jacques Gubler
Arch. Massimo Cattaneo
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Introduction

Palazzo Canavée, Accademia di architettura, Mendrisio, January 2006
From October 2005 to July 2006 I studied at the Accademia di architettura, Mendrisio, Switzerland, a national architecture school founded in 1996 by a group of renowned Swiss architects. The experience deepened my interest in the concept of architectural territory. Territorial study usually goes beyond what my committee chair has called the “object-oriented” approach common in many American schools of architecture. Rather than deepening my exploration of the architectural object, I have sought in this thesis to grapple with architecture as part of a larger urban whole.

I once heard architect and Accademia professor Valerio Olgiati offer a typical European critique of the American approach to the built environment: every element of life – houses, schools, hospitals, offices, stores – is treated as a box independent of every other, the freestanding terminus of a car journey. By contrast, Prof. Olgiati continued, European architects seek to understand the urban or environmental whole in which their every project must stand as an intelligent and functional part.

This generalization, however, refers to sprawl, which exists on both continents. Sensitive additions to cities can certainly be found in America. Nonetheless, Prof. Olgiati may be right that many American architects pay less attention to the greater whole their projects change. In the U.S., territorial study is generally seen as the province of specialists, “urbanists.” But as architect Luigi Snozzi persuasively argues, successful cities require architects to
submit to their rules, and understanding their rules requires making an architectural proposal. He points out that some architects will not sketch a cityscape without including a quick idea for a building of their own, to see how the territory reacts.

I carried out two projects at Mendrisio, both for sites in the Veneto, a region in northeastern Italy. Together they constitute a thesis about the role of territorial study in formulating an architectural response to a given problem. Both projects confront secondary themes as well. The first was done in the third/fourth-year atelier of Prof. Roberto Collovà, a Sicilian architect best known for a group of building typologies that won a competition for the completion of development along Barcelona’s Diagonal. The intent of his atelier was the composition of an architectural figure: a series of towers marking an elongated parkland in a low-rise suburb of Padua. Although my perception of the relevant territorial facts differed from his, I found an urban site at the end of the parkland where I could develop a project that seemed reasonable to both of us.

Prof. Marc Collomb, founder and principal in the Swiss firm Atelier Cube, and Arch. Massimo Cattaneo, a young Ticinese architect, proposed a project for the second semester and very generously followed me regularly in its development. The theme was a cultural center for young people, primarily a place for rock concerts. The site was the Tronchetto, a modern service island at the western extremity of historic Venice. Ironically, the Tronchetto was created...
to satisfy requirements of space and vehicular access beyond what a dense urban fabric can provide, requirements analogous to the generators of commercial sprawl across America.

How does one follow the rules of a service territory when one wants to introduce typically urban spaces that promote social interaction and creativity? My solution was to organize the program in a territorially appropriate shell around an urban piazza. But can a true piazza exist in isolation from urban fabric? It may be only the openness of the building to territorial resources – water and views – that separates its form from a certain type of sprawl part, say the California shopping mall. If I were to continue working on this project, I would develop a broad vision for the improvement of the Tronchetto, proposing common elements and joints between its parts: between the cultural center and the long park adjacent, between the cultural center and the long office building, and between the parking structure, the parking lot, the park, and the office building. In the end, it may be that gestures on the smallest scale create the continuities and transitions that sustain a territory-level intervention.
Architectural territory

Site model and territorial proposals, Snozzi diploma atelier, Mendrisio, July 2006
“We are not interested in originality; we are interested in understanding the rules by which one adds to a city.”
—Luigi Snozzi, explaining the pedagogy of the Accademia di architettura, Mendrisio

In general, a territory is an expanse of land where a given condition has a particular value. This might be the regular exercise of political control, domination by a certain animal, or corporate presence. Where the value changes, the territory ends. A patch of land in the Serengeti might be part of the Kenyan political territory, part of a lion pride’s hunting territory, and part of the protected territory of the Serengeti UNESCO World Heritage Site. Territory must be defined with respect to something.

In critiques I observed at the Accademia di architettura in Mendrisio, architectural territories were most often identified relative to three conditions: the interrelation of solid and void, the influence of circulation networks, and the distribution of built typologies. The figures below show the territory defined by each of these conditions relative to one site on Virginia Tech’s campus.

For anyone who considers territory an important force in the forming of architecture, a project begins with the

The parking lots behind Derring Hall at Virginia Tech can be seen as part of (a) a territory of parallel masses separated by parallel voids; (b) a territory defined by an important circulation ring; and (c) a typological territory of parking lots.
selection of a few territories of importance to the given building site and continues with extrapolation of their rules. Then one chooses a position: should the building extend, delimit, or define a particular territory, or join two adjacent ones? To what extent should it conform to territorial rules, and to which ones? Reflection and analysis must give way quickly to a proposal, which is tested planimetrically and volumetrically in context relative to the territorial intent.

Doing so requires approaching the design process in a certain way. A good model facilitates territorial study, as an anecdote may illustrate. During a summer seminar with Luigi Snozzi, my group decided that the materials of our model should distinguish between the new territory we were proposing and the existing fabric of Monte Carasso. To Prof. Snozzi, this obscured the most important aspect of our proposal: its joints with the old. “Siete degli zuconi!” he chucked at one critique. “You are so interested in showing off your project that I can’t read it as part of the city and see if it stands.”

A building inevitably changes a territory, and it is best if it does so according to a mature intent. The great test of the diploma year at the Accademia is whether a student can respond intelligently and effectively to territory.

A word about social territory and political territory. These were especially important to me in the Padua project conceived by Prof. Collovà, where I found that the social territory did not support the architectural proposal: tower housing normally responds to a growing population, but the Paduan district under study is decreasing in inhabitants.
Moreover, the economic growth and urban dynamism high-density development often brings is implicitly unwanted by people who have chosen to live in a quiet lower-density setting. Imposing city life on them smacks of the spirit 1960s urban renewal in America – undemocratic change willed from outside.

Politically, the will of the people of this part of Padua should be embodied in the regulatory plan, which bans residential towers, as well as in the council of the southeastern ward, with one of whose members I corresponded electronically. It is clear, however, that there are stronger political actors than the plan and the council; one development under construction now was approved by the city despite a 19-1 vote against by the ward council. It is telling that the only Paduan Prof. Collova ever cited as “liking” the idea of residential towers was an assistant to the mayor. But a detailed discussion of the politics of architecture is beyond the scope of this thesis.

This model, made for my defense, gives a sense of the sections in the Padua area of study. I identified sub-territories based on the average height of their buildings, and represented them here in correct proportion to the one existing exception to the height rule: the hospital (two parallel slates in middle ground). I also represented the four proposals for residential towers that I was required to make. Rather than forming a coherent residential fabric with each other or with the existing housing, they are clearly exceptional elements that would have to have symbolic value similar to the hospital.
Territorial intent

Bellinzona, Switzerland, where an elevator by Aurelio Galfetti links two territories.
You can ignore territory, pretending your surroundings are the desert sands. The Palafenice, an extreme example, is a complex of tents deposited on the Tronchetto island (pictured below) with no architectural relation to what exists. In Luca Vacchelli’s winning 2005 competition project for the Palafenice site, the territory is not only ignored but replaced. The unexecuted proposal would have severed the southern tip of the island and loaded it with a patchwork of diminutive territories, parts and whole out of scale to the massive buildings and ships all around.

Creating new territory with its own rules was also the intent of the first atelier I completed at Mendrisio. Prof. Collovà considered a seventy-foot-wide, mile-and-a-half-long strip of parkland in Padua coherent enough to constitute a territory. Within it a number of residential towers should be built, unbound by the rule that habitations are never more than seven stories (and usually just three) on either side of the strip. After seeing the area on a class trip, I was convinced that the strip was too tight and too fragmented – a tower with all its attendant street-level infrastructure would inevitably be perceived as part of the low territory around it, not as part of a territory continued by another tower 2000 feet away. And in that case it would be an exceptional, or in Aldo Rossi’s terminology, a primary element of the territory; such an element cannot have the same residential function as all the buildings around it. This is especially true in this context, where the principal primary element, the district hospital, is distinguished by having the only tower for miles.
In response to this dilemma I made a counterproposal in late 2005 of a more easily consolidated territory at the fork of a main canal. Here new residential fabric would accommodate high, medium, and low density from inception, following different rules from the low suburban area. Towers and medium-height buildings could enclose and protect open space against the infilling tendency of low residential development (see drawings).

Now consider two examples of projects that accept their territory and seek to work within its logic. The first is Peter Cook and Colin Fournier’s Kunsthaus for Graz, Austria (2003). In nearly every formal and material respect, it breaks with its context. And yet Cook and Fournier followed a few key rules to achieve a real territorial integration: the Kunsthaus rises to the same height as neighboring buildings, it accepts the existing automobile and pedestrian circulation networks, and it shares the predominant territorial orientation toward the river. As a civic monument, a primary element, it could not follow all the rules of the territory, but it is better for following some.

My proposal for a cultural center on the Tronchetto also accepts many rules of the territory, but without being as openly exceptional. It accepts a fundamental rule of the territory: buildings should have a great mass with a homogeneous skin. On the other hand, it challenges the graining of the territory, forming a perpendicular termination to an island on which most buildings run parallel to the length. And the hollow at its core has nothing to do with the territory. Inside the monolith a more varied skin defines a social space.
I also sought to join two territories with this project, the land of the Tronchetto and the water next to it. I did this in two ways, with a roof that unites the land and water under it in the two performance spaces, and with a cut in the Tronchetto that brings water into the space of the land.

My final Padua project seeks to clarify the boundaries of two territories that now run together. It is at the extremity of the strip parkland, the atelier area of study to which Prof. Collovà urged me to return. Here existing houses at the triangular meeting of two territories joins them into a meandering fabric. My early 2006 proposal was to better define the two territories through the extension of a street and the introduction of large built masses that would delimit and separate the territories. I concentrated housing in the first six stories of the project (presented here), reserving exceptional functions for the tower – a restaurant, gallery, and observation area.

One achieves one’s territorial intent by following just the right subset of rules. It is a subtle art that must take many years to master.

Territorial intent

In the existing Padua situation (a), different circulation networks define two small territories. Small houses stand awkwardly between them. The proposal (b) is to strengthen the definition of the joint with a building complex that articulates the two territorial limits and offers public space where they join. In addition a new street defines the eastern extent of one of the territories.
Unity and multiplicity

Delugan Meissl, Paltramplätz Housing, Vienna
Balance between unity and multiplicity was the main theme of the housing I proposed for Padua. The name Corbusier used for his famous prototypes, Unité d’Habitation, reveals his position and that of his myriad followers toward architectural expression in collective housing; many singular dwellings are subsumed in a unified architectural monument. The contrary position was taken by Moshe Safdie in his Habitat ’67 project in Montreal. Safdie sought to emphasize individual prefabricated units, the whole being an agglomeration without a controlled form. From my first explorations in Prof. Collovà’s studio I was interested in a middle ground where the ensemble and its constituent parts would both be strong and legible.

In present-day Western society, single-family homes are often seen as preferable to apartment buildings. One reason may be that even the most uninteresting house has an exterior image: an identity and a distinctness that allow us to point out, remember, and draw it. For example, when she was thirteen, my sister made a glazed clay model of our childhood home, which remains on display in our new one. I believe the iconic potential of a house is satisfying to many people.

One shortcoming of most apartment buildings is that one can rarely form an image of one’s own home, or if one can, it is only as one unit identical to every other. As I began dealing with housing, I wondered whether one could compose units in such a way as to make each identifiable and somehow memorable.
After some initial experimentation with large and small apartments punctuated with terraces, I tried a more systematic, smaller-scale approach. I began by defining four apartment typologies, consisting of between three and five modules in a two-by-two-by-two matrix. Inside, an L-stair would define the connection between the entry (public) and displaced (private) floors, and each unit would be entitled to an additional balcony module.

I then composed instances of each typology into a slab (see drawings section) using terraces, expansion joints, and string courses as punctuation between the eight units. In the final composition for the project I call Tower 1, I sought an irregularity that creates moments: a three-module opening, for example, or a symmetric pair. Apart from an exceptional mail-room corner unit, the resultant body was composed only of housing, with circulation relegated to a connected second slab with commercial functions. Solid and unified, the office slab serves as a foil to the permeable, articulated housing slab. In this way each unit, at two stories a maisonette or a “little house,” has both a clear definition and a distinct role to play in creating a larger composition.
VENICE PROJECT THEME

Universal vs. specialist space

Architecture studio, San Francisco
Neutral box or specialized rock theatre? That was a defining decision in the design of the 5,000-person auditorium at the heart of the Tronchetto arts center. Should it be a multifunction room suitable for many different types of public spectacles from ballet to basketball, or one narrowly tailored to the needs of the average rock concert?

I tried both possibilities, strongly encouraged by my professors in Mendrisio to pursue a large black box ringed by galleries, not privileging any particular direction or type of spectacle. A directional “theatre” parti could be trite and limiting, they suggested. In the end, I concluded that I had to make the choice between a universal and a specialist space based on the specific parameters of the project brief.

Five-thousand-person concerts do not yield the high profit margins of 20,000-person stadium concerts, I found, and cannot support the immense costs of fabricating, transporting, erecting, and dismantling scenery and equipment at each tour stop. Artists generally make more money on recordings than on tours; most smaller tours are actually subsidized by recording labels and depend on a pre-existing stage, lighting, and sound infrastructure at each venue. These considerations led me to begin defining a venue specifically for the typical rock concert, where fans look in the same direction at musicians on a fixed stage.

I also observed that rock concerts do not rely exclusively on the space of the stage. Periodically stage lights are
redirected around the room to show the audience the gathered crowd and the vast space they share. Inspired by the Rolling Stone in Milan, I felt that monumental objects for the lights to play on — in my case the large rectilinear masses of the boxes for VIPs, and the cylindrical volumes of the spiral ramps toward the back of the auditorium — would energize the illuminated space.

Finally, I observed that a neutral box would rule out any relation with the surroundings. And I wanted it to be possible for performers to bring the water of the lagoon and the striking light tableau of Marghera’s industrial cityscape into the space of the spectacle. By directing the auditorium west, and designing colossal doors behind and on either side of the stage, I could make the location part of the experience of a rock concert on the Tronchetto.

My early explorations encompassed both specialist and universalist approaches toward the rock venue. It was important to decide whether to give the space fixed directionality.

Once I settled on a directional space, I could incorporate the light tableau of the Marghera industrial landscape into the venue.
2\times 6 \times 6 + 1

Housing and Offices for Padua, Italy
This early 2006 project is presented in the following pages. My intent was to delimit the territories north and south of it, which now run together. This seems a more reasonable territorial intent than that proposed in the Padua atelier and embodied in my other three towers — to define a new territory of high-rise housing in the long, fragmented strip of open land running southwest-northeast through this part of the city.

Rather than more habitations I envision pedestrian/bike trails and a few distinctive parks in the strip.

This short-lived proposal from late 2005 for a mixed-density development would begin to define a new territory at the fork of a main city canal. Additional apartment towers on the sites to the south and east could extend the mixed-height residential fabric.
Walls placed along the southern and northern edges of the triangular site of Tower 1 define the limits of two territories with different circulation axes. The public space of a piazza and a bar/café mark this a special place.
In section the Tower 1 complex clearly privileges the northern edge of the site, which leads to the strip of open land under study in the Padua atelier.

Besides the main project, there were undeveloped proposals for a second housing complex (right side of piazza) and a long two-story parking/shopping center (behind main project).
The following pages present the ideas for the lower portion of the building — below the tower. The southern side (visible in this view) is housing; the northern side offices.
The housing element of the project began with the definition of four apartment typologies: each occupies three to five modules in a two by two by two matrix, with an additional open module serving as a terrace.
Instances of the various typologies are composed to create distinct "moments" and draw out individual unit identity.

Drawings: Padua
Following pages: Axonometrics reveal the organization of the housing units and their connection to the office slab. Offices are open-plan with the glazed side facing north. Services are concentrated at one end of the slab; both ends provide vertical circulation.
Drawings:
Padua
The public, office, and housing elements of the program create a complex whole.
Center for Music & Art
Venice, Italy
The Tronchetto is a mid-twentieth-century service island at the western extremity of Venice.
The Tronchetto and adjoining port island form a homogenous territory of large masses and large voids oriented parallel to the edges of the islands.

This drawing shows a future vision for the Tronchetto. The cultural center at the southern tip is part of a revitalization effort that also includes replacing a portion of the exterior parking surface (just northeast of the rock venue) with a park that could be used for summer festivals.
A perspective gives a sense of the elevations and masses of the existing buildings and the proposal. The relentless exterior skin of the cultural center contrasts with the more dynamic interior facade system.
The piazza is a social space defined by surfaces less relentless than the tilted panels on the exterior of the mass. Voids below balconies are used to express hierarchy: the great opening at the entrance to the rock venue contrasts with the lower spaces below balconies on either side.

Drawings:
Venice
Drawings: Venice

Ground floor, 1:500
The focus of study was the rock venue, but the organization of the entire complex was also important. South of the rock venue is a covered, unenclosed theater looking over the water and toward Marghera, accessible from the first and second floors.

East of this, above the restaurants and media store on the first floor, is an undeveloped discotheque occupying the upper portion of this wing of the complex.
The auditorium is organized around a stage flanked by two colossal doors that, like the back wall of the stage box, can open to the lagoon and make the water and Marghera lightscape part of a concert. Large elements contribute to the monumentality of the room.
I greatly appreciate Professor Heiner Schnoedt’s help as I have sought to frame my Accademia work for a Virginia Tech masters thesis. His high standards made it a more serious and mature exploration than it otherwise would have been.

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Vita

Born in 1975, Elon Danziger graduated from Princeton High School in 1993 and Stanford University in 1997, with a bachelor’s degree in art history and Italian language and literature. After a term of national service in AmeriCorps*NCCC, he worked for several years at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, in the Department of Renaissance Paintings and the Editors’ Office. In 2003 he matriculated at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. During the three-and-a-half-year master of architecture program, he took advantage of his Italian language ability to study extensively in the Italian-speaking canton of Switzerland, the Ticino.