HOUSING AND THE MAKING OF NEW URBAN FORMS: THE CASE OF VENICE

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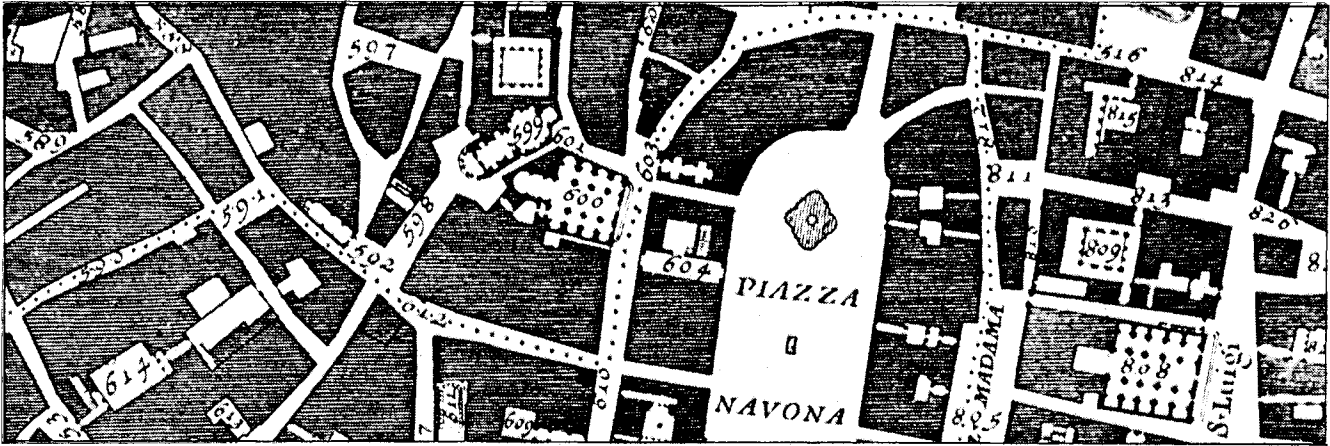Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia

Figure 1. Giovanni Battista Nolli, map of Rome, 1748, detail

The European city is undergoing fundamental changes, in the modes of living, working, producing and communicating, radically questioning the idea of "centrality," as new theoretical propositions (the diffused city or "metapolis") are being devised to understand and, possibly, control such a process.

How can housing still play a role in urban form making within this process of urban transformation ? Can housing still constitute the connectivity element of urban settlements which are far less physically connected than in the past or, rather, can housing materialize new kind of "centralities" within new urban networks?

A case-study of studio works developed on a site in historical Venice, tries to demonstrate (the uniqueness of the city notwithstanding) that housing is still a much needed component of contemporary urban form, capable to qualify "connections" and "places" within the physical and symbolic network of urban relations.

INTRODUCTION

In the construction of European cities, housing has played a key role in giving order, patterns, spatial and conceptual orientation to urban settlements. Housing typologies and forms have been a fundamental framework for urban spaces, monuments and institutional architecture, this latter needing the background of the housing fabric to mark particular sites and places. Moreover, housing has maintained the necessary vital support for the life of urban environments.

One may think at the medieval time of town building (when the European city was practically born) and the strong relationship between housing typology and urban morphology:

Venice represents a paradigm in this regard (see Maretto 1960).

One may also think at the XVIII-century Nolli's map of Rome, which is not a plan nor a design but simply an interpretative representation of how Rome through the centuries had grown. By focussing on the relationship between the urban framework of the open spaces, the outstanding elements of institutional or religious buildings and complexes, and the filling, but most necessary, building fabric (meaningfully enough represented as compact "grounds" against the "figures" of institutional architecture and urban spaces), Nolli showed how important the housing fabric was in the making of Rome.

We could also refer though to more recent examples of the Modern era when urban plans did not resign to compose some emerging public buildings with the housing fabric, no matter how abstract the planning schemes were, like for example in the 1930's plan for the city of Aosta by Italian firm BBPR (Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peressutti e Rogers).

Even in the Modern era, housing was still capable to play a role in outlining the modern metropolis (the myth of the *Großstadt*), even if it was seen mainly a social question to be tackled in its basic quantitative terms.

In our information era, as spatial proximity has ceased to be a fundamental requirement for the functioning of a global economy, the traditional urban patterns of fabric and emerging buildings are not any more at the centre of contemporary architectural and urban design investigations. Nowadays, when the border between city and countryside has vanished and the "loss of a centre" appears to be one of the most challenging question for architecture and urban design, the meaning of urban housing must be readdressed.
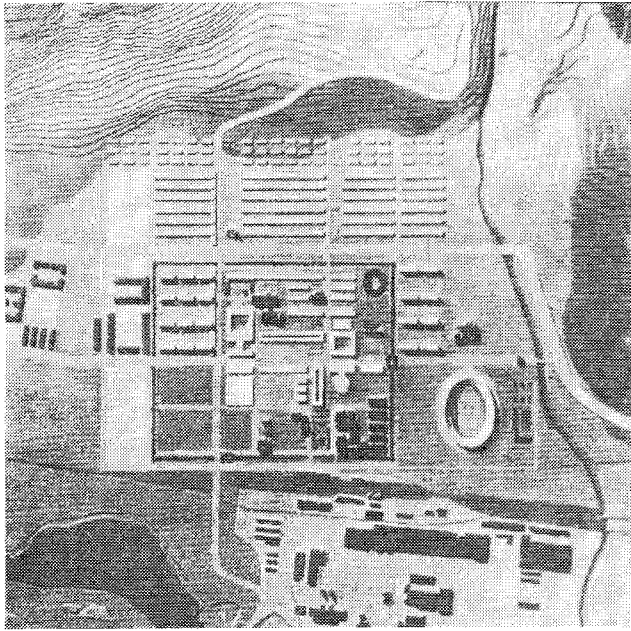
Figure 2: BBPR (Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peressutti & Rogers), master plan for Aosta (Italy), 1936, part view of the model
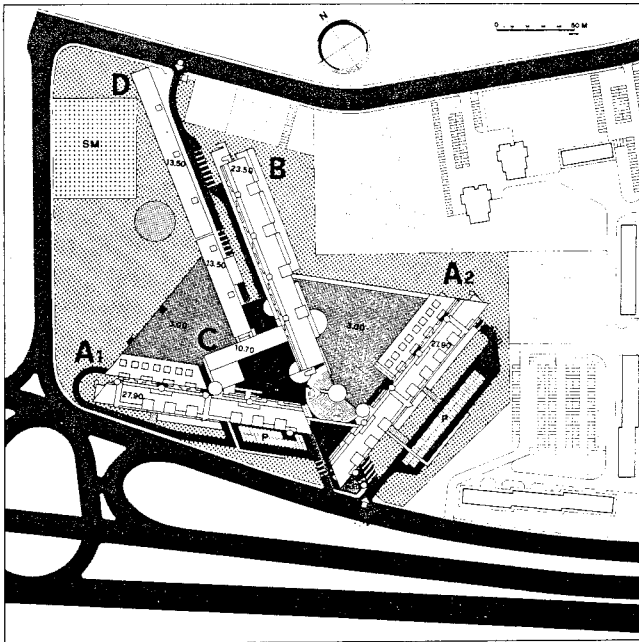

Figure 3: Housing complex "Gallaratese," Milan, 1967-72, by Carlo Aymonino (blocks A1,A2,B,C) & Aldo Rossi (block D), site plan

NEW URBAN FORMS

We are facing a kind of "nuclear fission" of our settlements due to a sort of "chain reaction" of increasingly complex functional requirements, conflicting real estate investment strategies, uncertain and conflicting as well planning policies due to a proliferation of decision making subjects, extremely varied living patterns, a tremendously increased propensity to mobility: "the city, as Rem Koolhaas pretends, does not exist any more."

In this scenario, housing has nothing to connect, as all the urban elements are scattered, being simply related by trans-
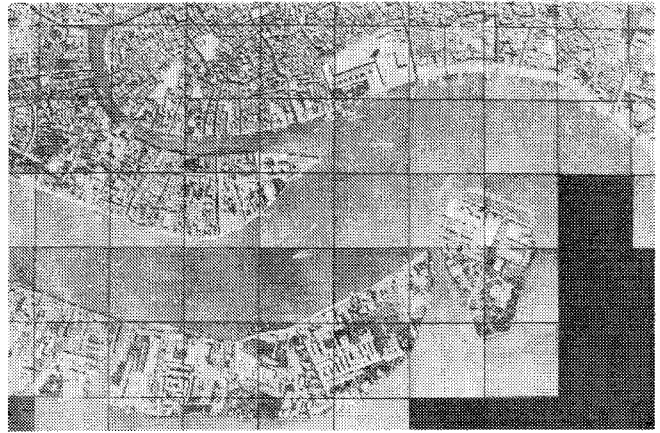

Figure 4: Aerial view of Venice. Detail on the Bacino San Marco: below centre, the studio project site on the Giudecca island

port networks. This loss of the urban condition is a fact and one cannot fight against it nostalgically by evoking patterns and solutions derived from historical examples. However, one cannot also celebrate this blossoming of urban chaos (as Koolhaas and others seem to suggests) with conciously uncohesive ("unformal" we may say) plans and designs, no matter how vital or disharmonically *a la page* they might appear.

Italian urban planner Bernardo Secchi, on the contrary, acknowledges the reality of the "diffused city," but also the need for a rational as well as imaginative effort for the solution of its problems (see Secchi, 1994).

A dense building fabric, nowadays, is an illusion: we have to think in terms of a diffused city, trying to tackle through our plans and designs the problems of such a megalopolis. In other words, the suburb represents for us new opportunities and new tasks: careful studies, professional proposals, rational approach. Our question is: what is the difference between the space of a community with a strong identity, contained within a physically limited realm, and the space without boundaries which is the result of the diversity, heterogeneity, fragmentation of our contemporary society ? (Secchi, 1992)

By studying how metropolitan conurbations are changing their physycal organizational patterns, exploding as well as imploding, rapidly redefining settlement groupings, centralities, hierarchies, producing new undefined, fragmented, diffused urban spaces, assuming the "hubs-and-spokes" pattern of modern transport systems as a new spatial paradigm, French urban economist François Ascher (1995) speaks of a modern "metapolis." However, in the midst of such profound physical and cultural transformations, the social and economic importance of the dwelling has not declined, rather increased: "Within a metapolitan kind of life, characterized by movement, instability, precariousness, irregularity, the home confirms its value as a fixed point...Rather the role of neighborhood spaces and second centralities is declining."

With striking similarities with American urban sprawls, Robert Fishman (1991) has pointed out how this new urban form has no centre and no boundaries: it is not urban nor rural, and it relies on time rather than on space. Each person, each family, makes up, so to speak, one's own city by composing/overlapping the different networks through which one operates: domestic, consumistic, recreational, cultural, and productive. After Fishman, we are facing an *a la carte* city, with different
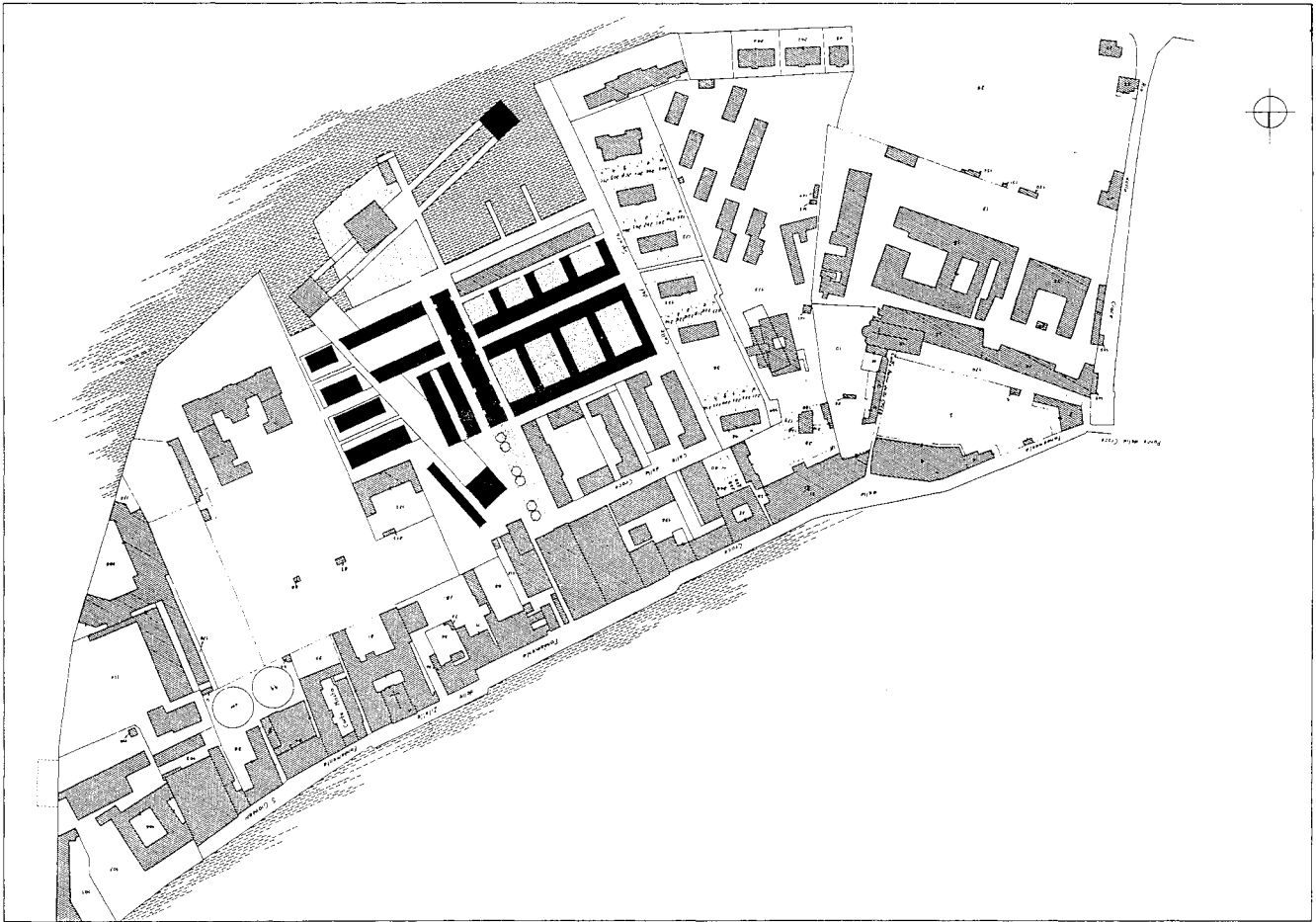
Figure 5: Student Cristina Bucchi (Aymonino studio class 1995, tutor: F. Polesello): site plan and partial perspective view

menus to serve the needs of our multiple options system, and yet with an important cultural (I may say emotional) centre: the house.

NEW DWELLING NEEDS

The information era has rearranged living and working patterns in that the Modern concept of separating functions in order to achieve higher productive efficiency appears to be not applicable any more. Living patterns have changed and become many and complex, not reducible to simple functional definitions. The range of housing users has significantly increased from the typical family unit. Actually, housing can be hardly reduced to a typological system as it has to respond to an ever increasing series of functional requirements, production systems, site conditions, urban contexts. In addition to it, as life patterns have become more and more complex, the demand for a viable habitable environment is still high.

New types of housing users are emerging. First of all, new types of families: not only singles, but singles-with-children, dwelling-sharing singles, grown-up youths (already working, often at professional level) still living with their parents, etc. Secondly, the elderly: not an age group any more but a social category of an ever increasing importance in our ageing society. One must also considers the youngsters still studying or part-time working; temporary workers who cannot commute from their too far hometown and yet are not willing to settle where they work given the precariousness of job conditions; people

needing social and medical assistance requiring particular dwelling types and services but also a social life like common people (see Farina, 1995).

Therefore, new building typologies, new planning patterns (or better care in planning urban relations), new ways of participation or involvement of users' committees and local communities are being experimented in various European countries in order to prepare more appropriate answers to the dwelling question.

HOUSING AS AN ARCHITECTURAL AND URBAN QUESTION

As people give more and more importance (and quota of their income) to their habitable space, and architecture by definition deals with the quality of the physical environment, the quality of a housing settlement therefore remains one of the biggest challenges for architectural and urban design. The differentiation of opportunities that architecture is able to offer through its "thoughtful making of space"—"and relations," as I have already tried to investigate (Sabini, 1995)—appears to be an important resource that the discipline has to offer to the social and cultural growth. The sprawl of the "urban effect" over large portions of the inhabited territory calls for a new important role that housing can play to give form, meaning and identity to places.

As cities do not have any more unitary forms and characters and they have turned to be complex and fragmentary built systems, the need to qualify the different places and areas
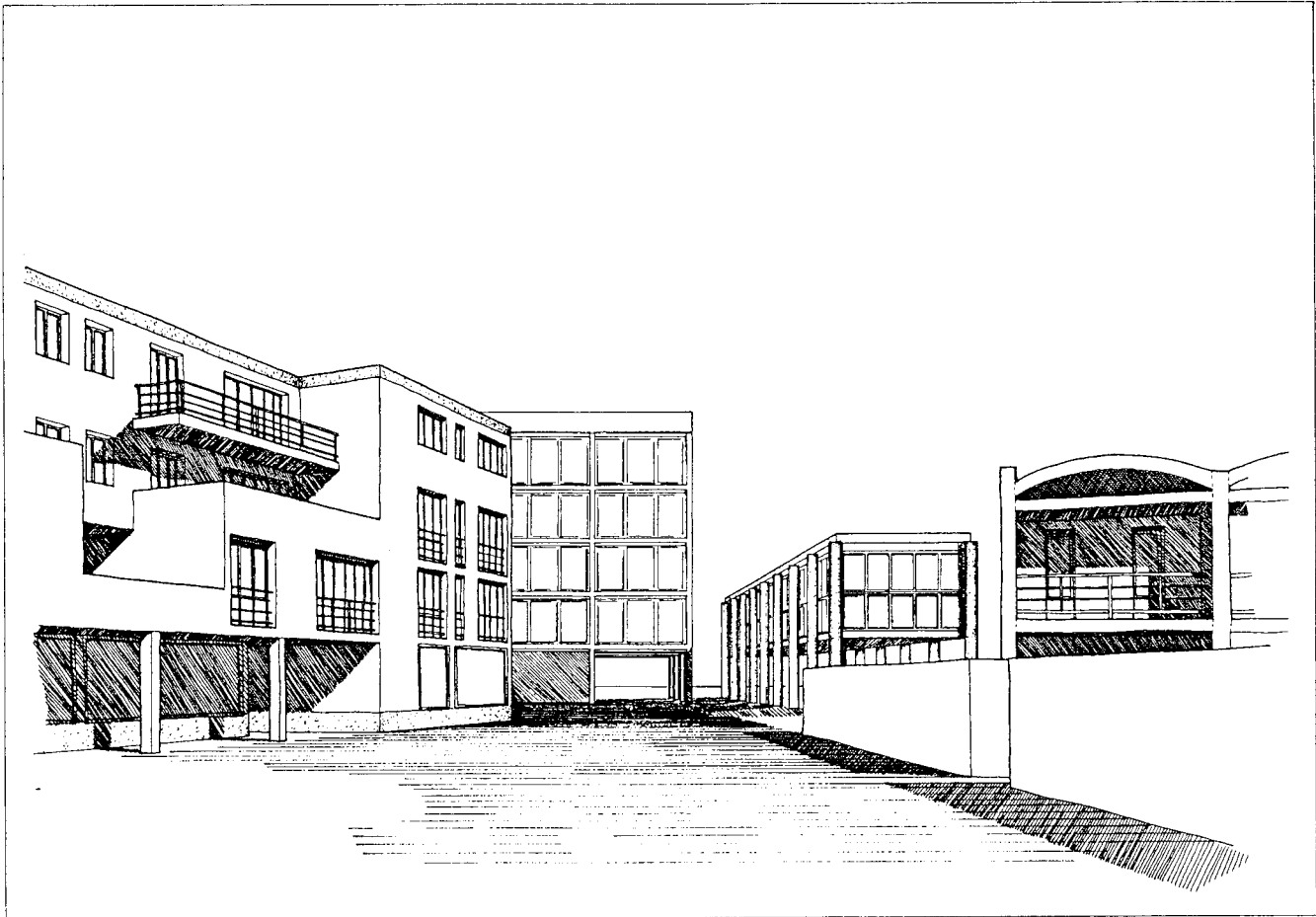
Figure 6: Student Cristina Bucchi (Aymonino studio class 1995, tutor: F. Polesello): site plan and partial perspective view

of such systems have started to emerge. Housing can play a primary role in addressing this need for residential quality, meaning residential in its broadest sense, including more free-time, recreational and cultural activities, as well as segments of the working cycles. Paraphrasing Louis I. Kahn, architecture today has a lot to do with "the thoughful making of place."

Also in terms of formal and spatial quality, housing settlemnts cannot be left to the spontaneous and straightfor-wardly market-based initiative of real estate investors. The architectural definition of housing units and complexes is the much needed planning input *vis-à-vis* the absence of form of contemporary metapolies, also to counter the resignation from a committment towards urban quality that public administra-tors, private operators, people at large (including some segments of our discipline) seem to have taken.

In this regard, it may be interesting to go back a couple of decades and take a refreshing look to a seminal design like the "Gallaratese complex" in Milan by Carlo Aymonino and Aldo Rossi.

As a kind of forerunner of a design approach which may have value nowadays like an island of urban form within the sprawl of Milan's most desolated outskirts, the Gallaratese complex dramatically suggests, in its stark contrast with the surrounding environment (but also declaring its limited, frag-mented impact on the real city) another possible city: an analogous city in the idea of Aldo Rossi (1981) where architec-tural typology and urban morphology are able to create a system

of spatially qualified places, also through the use of the subjective memory of the architect and of reference to the collective memory of the community.

The idea of Carlo Aymonino ("the city as a system composed by formally defined parts," 1975) develops the poet-ics of the fragment by Rossi at an urban level. Going beyond the too optimistic thought of Aldo van Eyck who spoke of the city as a whole composed of places, flowing one into another ("because one cannot leave a place without entering into another one"), Aymonino's proposal is based on the consciousness of the discipline's own limitations. However, it accepts the possibility and the capability of creating places, fragments of architecture and urban plans, even if it were only to suggest a better environment. Also through housing.

AN ACADEMIC CASE STUDY IN VENICE

As a partial demonstration of such a thesis, a sample of the studio work from the class of Carlo Aymonino at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia may serve as a case-study (see Sabini, 1996).

The chosen site, on the Giudecca island within (al-though at the edge of) historical Venice, is that one of a 1984 international housing closed competition which saw the con-frontation of leading world architects: Alvaro Siza (awarded with the first prize), Aldo Rossi, Carlo Aymonino and Rafael Moneo (mentions), Aldo van Eyck, Mario Botta, Boris Podrecca and others (see Quaglia & Polli, 1986).
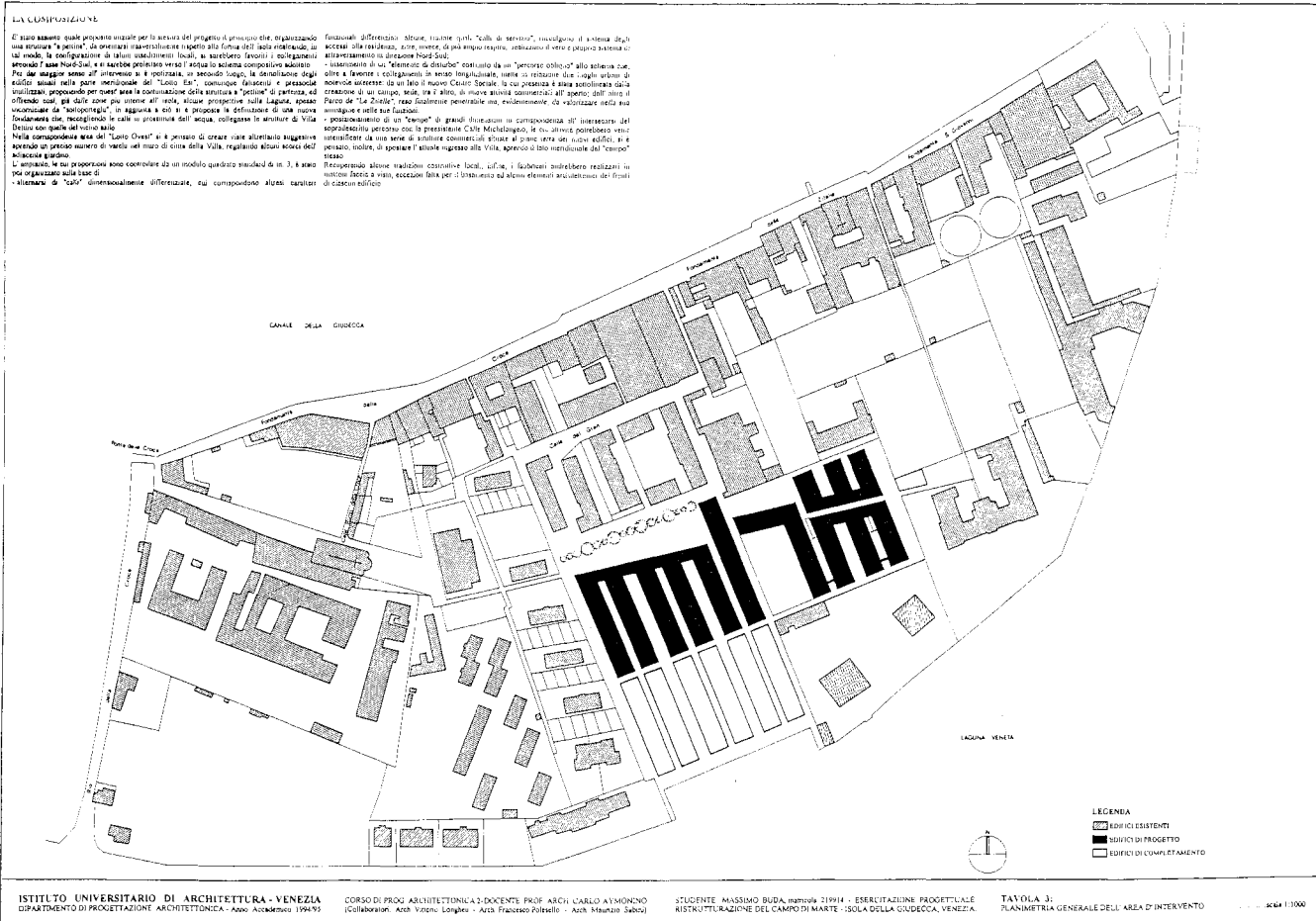
Figure 7: Student Massimo Buda (Aymonino studio class 1995, tutor: M. Sabini): site plan and typical units' floor plans

The site is also included in a strategic area for the current redevelopment urban policies of the city administration of Venice, since recently guided by Mayor-philosopher Massimo Cacciari, who sees the Giudecca island, with its potential for transformation, as a kind of "catalyst" of a large scale urban renewal programme, aimed at countering the selling-off of Venice on the tourist market.

The students were given the competition building programme purely as a guideline, subject to be changed through critical revision to make the programme itself more appropriate for emerging housing needs and fit for the urban and architectural solutions. The competition entries were also given to the students simply as examples of possible solutions, to be analysed as design case-studies but not as compelling design guidelines.

The very peculiar character of the urban set-up (historical Venice) in which the students' designs were thought does not affect the validity of the exercise as a test for the aforesaid more general theoretical assumptions. In addition to the very fact that every place, building site or city is unique like Venice (although not so uniquely beautiful), and no general theory at planning level is possible any more, the design approach tested in this particular studio work for a site in Venice could have well been taken in another context, with the obviously different inputs in terms of cultural and environmental factors. Also

Venice has its "normal" aspects: it is not a work of art in its totality and some parts need planning and design effort as is the case for any other city.

Moreover, Venice's very peculiarity in comparison with other cities (the separation of circulation networks) is paradoxically becoming a common feature of urban settlements, especially in suburban areas, where pedestrian and vehicular circulation channels tend to be more and more separated. Therefore, the focus that these projects have in terms of the relationship between building typology/urban morphology and architectural figures, may well still hold in other cases.

The challenges of such architectural and urban projects have been therefore: the confrontation of new housing types and site planning schemes with a surrounding historical context; the testing of the idea that contemporary standardized building systems may lead also to a richly articulated architectural and urban order; the envisioning of spatial quality and urban form through architectural artifacts, like the dwelling units, typically of a relatively repetitive character.

Ultimately, the challenge was to educate the students about the significance of housing in the making of contemporary city, to see if housing is still capable to be a fundamental component in the shaping of our urban environments, even if it is to create only "fragments of urban form."

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Figure 8: Student Massimo Buda (Aymonino studio class 1995, tutor: M. Sabini): site plan and typical units' floor plans