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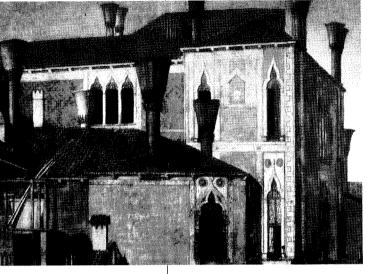
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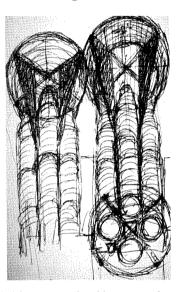
#### Franco Mancuso

# READING, DESIGNING AND RE-READING: MY EXPERIENCE IN VENICE

I once wrote a guide to Venice and crammed it full of everything I understood about the city. I tried to see Venice as did those who, at different times and in different circumstances, actually gave form to this extraordinary city, in a setting that was particularly hostile for dwelling.







S. Lorenzo Convent reuse project. Left to right: Venetian chimneys (from Giovanni Bellini), new chimney construction and sketch.

Photos and graphics: Franco Mancuso

I endeavored to come to grips with the methods that were invented to consolidate the land, and with the technologies that were used to construct the foundations of the buildings. I looked at the actions that had been taken to shape the insulae, gradually limiting the bodies of water and gradually constructing bridges to cross the water. I questioned how and why the squares came to be, with their wells for water supply. I wondered how the problem of the dearth of construction materials had been dealt with and why reuse was the rule, with pre-existing structures and buildings reconstructed on their original bases.

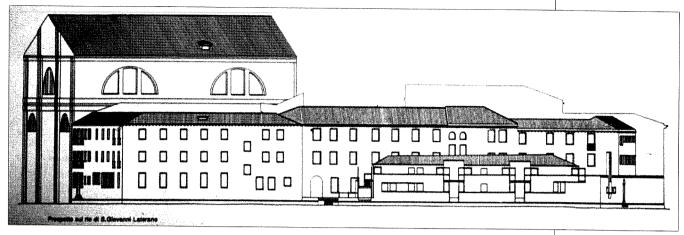
Later, the opportunity arose for me to work on two architectural projects in Venice, projects that differed in size, function and site. Into them, naturally, I poured everything I thought I had understood about the city. However, other insights, of no less importance, came to me through the projects themselves.

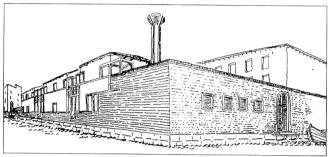
In my experience, there is no more effective or penetrating way for an architect to acquire knowledge from a site than to design a project for it. Reading a place is an endless process, and if this process is codified and transmitted, as through a book, it will be expanded, perhaps even questioned, when the time comes to design a project.

My first project called for reusing the old convent of S. Lorenzo to accommodate a retirement home. The project involved the restoration of the pre-existing structures, except for the rear building. The latter is to house a group of small living units, which will be built ex novo after the demolition of the parts of complex that are devoid of historical and architectural value.

Once renovated, the complex will host rooms, living units and spaces for related services for approximately twenty-two permanent residents. It will also accommodate services for outside users, offering temporary visiting facilities, a restaurant, a multi-purpose room, spaces for occupational activities, gardens, a health club, health care and therapeutic facilities, doctors' offices and a laundry.

Special attention was given to the design of the northern side of the building; I immediately realized the possibility of inserting some elements that derived from real understanding of the character of the Venetian urban fabric — using the foundations of the existing structure, aligning the building along the canal border and reprocessing, even in the foundation materials, the significance of the ancient monastery brick wall.







S. Lorenzo Convent reuse project

Above: Elevation along the S. Giovanni Laterano canal

Far left: Model of the new

Left: Aerial view of the insula of S. Lorenzo

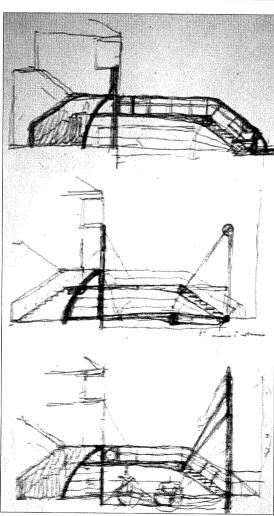
Below left: Sketches for the new mobile bridge

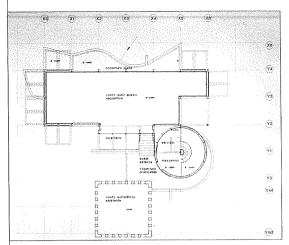
We proposed a new mobile bridge, connecting the insula with the most vital part of the city, behind the northern canal, and giving the old people living in the complex the ability to cross the canal easily when the bridge is flat. Mobile bridges have been very common in the Venitian urban fabric — even the wooden Rialto Bridge, before the big fire of the sixteenth century — and Venetian bridges have continuosly been reinvented according to the possibility of using new materials and technologies.

The facade is characterized by a particular conformation of openings, studied so as to solve the need, given the northern exposure, of at least partially capturing the sun from the east and the west, and to reflect the stylistic features of the building tradition in which masonry is defined by a weave of vertical and horizontal elements in white stone.

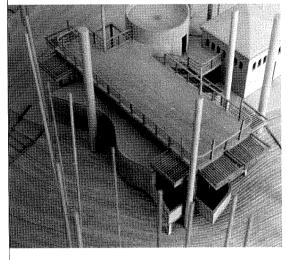
The second project is for the Korean Pavilion at the Biennale Gardens, conceived with the Korean architect Seok Chul Kim. The site of the Korean Pavilion is on the top of an existing artificial hillock full of trees, between the Japanese and German pavilions. Its elevation is approximately 4.5 meters above the Giardini embankment, and it offers a splendid view over St. Mark's Basin.

The site is occupied by a brick building that was constructed in the 1930s; it has a square floor plan, approximately six meters on a side, angled at approxi-





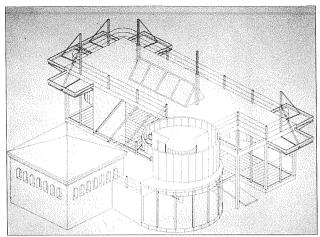
Korean Pavilion plan, axonometric and model



mately 45 degrees with respect to the pavilions around it. At the outset we decided to keep the brick building, which was in a somewhat rundown state. I discovered many fruitful characteristics of this very unknown and unusual place (in spite of the limitations imposed by the municipality, such as the obligation of respecting the existing trees, saving the slopes and having a building resting on supports, rather than on foundations).

The new pavilion is composed of two intrinsically connected units. The new part extends to the north of the existing building, and its planimetric configuration comes out from the position of all the existing trees. It was conceived as a transparent, light, suspended structure, resting on supports so as not to alter the present slope of the land. The tips of the supports are below ground level and fitted with stone elements to connect them with the structure of the building, as in Korean traditional architecture (but consider also that all the Venetian buildings are fitted on piles!). In this manner damage to the land and trees is avoided.

The building itself is made of steel and glass, and is conceived in such a way as to ensure maximum transparency: we put in practice the idea that the pavilion



should be open and permeable, so there is a view from the inside, over the basin, and from the outside, of the trees and vegetation.

Unlike the other pavilions, which are usually protected during the winter by temporary closure systems, the Korean pavilion will be equipped with an external protection system that is an integral part of the building and makes opening and closing operations fast and efficient. The system is based on external folding wooden elements, which hang on external cornices, as in traditional Korean architecture.

At the same time the effort of emphasizing the visual projection towards the water comes from the shape of Venetian shape of traditional houses and palaces, which open with transparent frames, balconies and loggias (where possible) towards water bodies — canals, basins and the lagoon itself. The flat roof is accessible (via two small stairways, one internal, the other external); it offers a place for open-air exhibitions that require more vertical display space and acts as a large balcony opened again to the basin.

Finally, we decided to test the use of wood for the balcony, the wave-like wall and the external locks. Wood is very common in both Venetian and Korean building; wood ensures an organic relationship with the surroundings.

The building will take on two distinct configurations during the year. Open, it will appear lighter and more transparent due to the impulse of the perimeter closures placed in a horizontal position, held in place by cables. Closed, it will take on the appearance of a building that belongs to the garden, that fits in perfectly with the trees and vegetation that surround it.

In Venice (and, I think, everywhere) the context obviously offers many suggestions. But in order to penetrate deeply into the richness of a place, you must be involved in a real design process.

#### **Project Credits**

S. Lorenzo Convent, Venice Client: Municipality of Venice, Edilvenezia Deisgn: Franco Mancuso (architect), Francesco Bono (engineer), with Alessandro Calafati and Clara Madeira De Andrade

Date: 1995-99

Korean Pavilion, Biennale Gardens, Venice Client: Korean Culture and Arts Foundation Architects: Seok Chul Kim, Franco Mancuso, with Alessandro Calafati, Chang Geun Park, Jin Young Choi, Seok Woo Kim Date: 1994-95

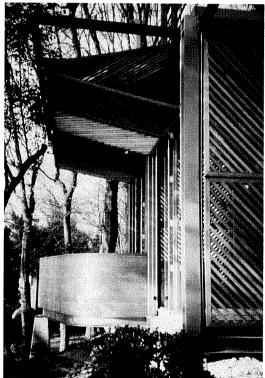


Korean Pavilion

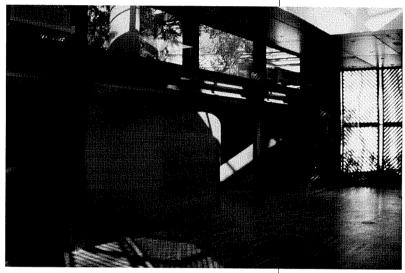
Left: View from the entrance side

Below left: The external wooden elements, opened

Below right: The curved wall as seen from the inside



This happened to me repeatedly. When I insisted on the idea of a bridge as a natural and logical means to connect the insula to the nothern side of Venice, I discovered, working at the archives, that a bridge had once existed exactly in that place (it had been demolished for the purpose of isolating the old monastery). Or, when working on the idea of a mobile structure, I went back to the history and uncovered the meanings of the many mobile bridges that have existed in



Venice. Or, when working on the design of the north side of the insula, I learned the role of the brick walls facing the canals or the lagoon as important ingredients of the urban scene. We understood the importance of the height of a place, in a city as flat as Venice is, when we realized that the Korean pavillion could be conceived as a real balcony toward the basin. And our reading is revealed in many minor elements: the shape of a chimney, the size of the stripes in white stone on the frame of the windows, or the plaster along the facades, to name a few.