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## Places

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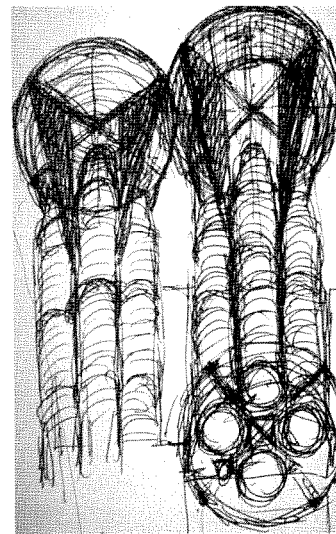
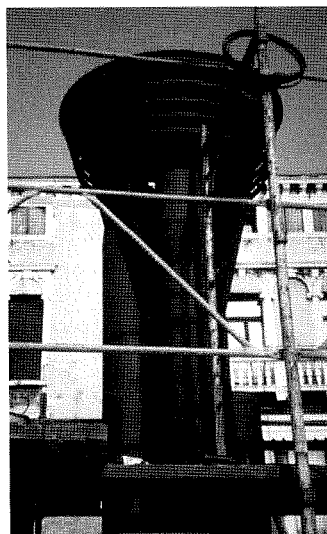
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**READING, DESIGNING AND RE-READING:  
MY EXPERIENCE IN VENICE**

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.

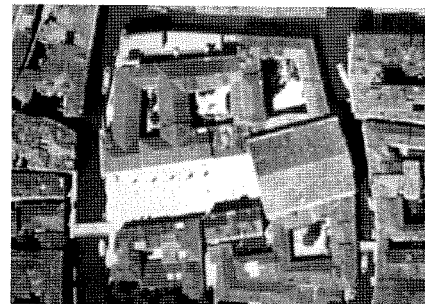
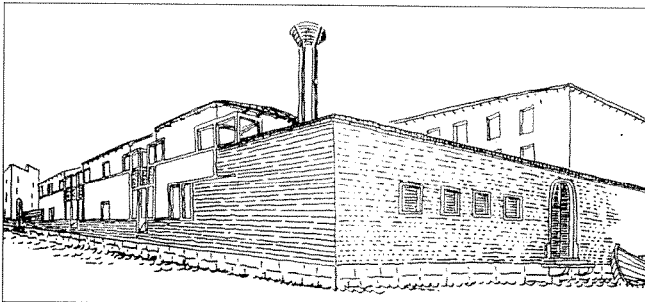
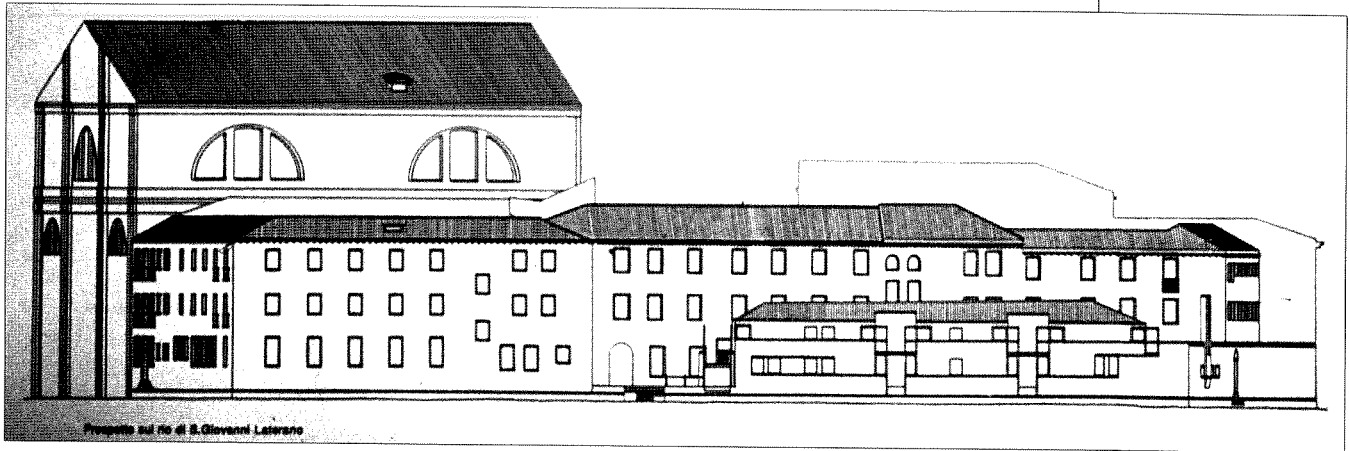
Later, the opportunity arose for me to work on two architectural projects in Venice, projects that differed in size, function and site. Into them, naturally, I poured everything I thought I had understood about the city. However, other insights, of no less importance, came to me through the projects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

Left: Aerial view of the insula of S. Lorenzo

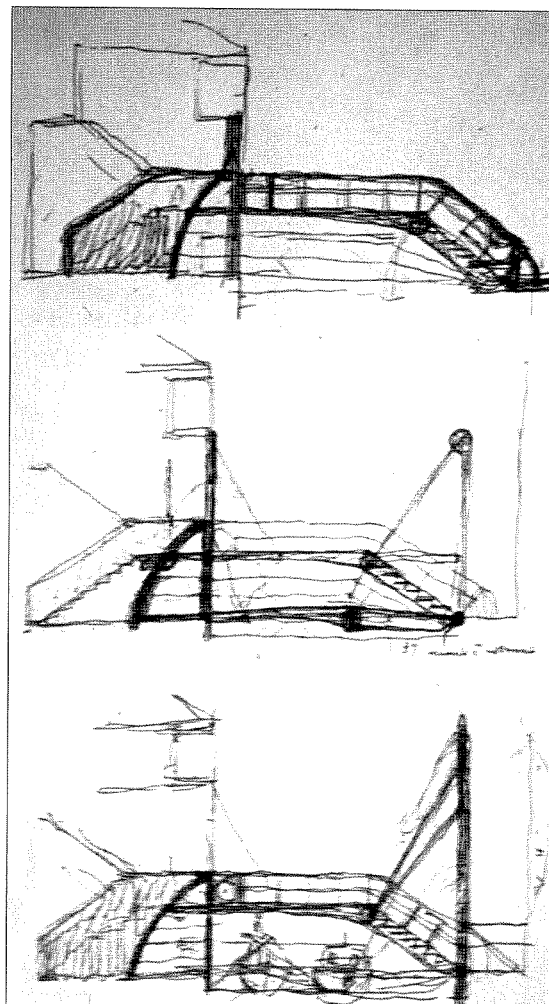
Below left: Sketches for the new mobile bridge

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 Venetian urban fabric – even the wooden Rialto Bridge, before the big fire of the sixteenth century – and Venetian bridges have continuously been re-invented 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-





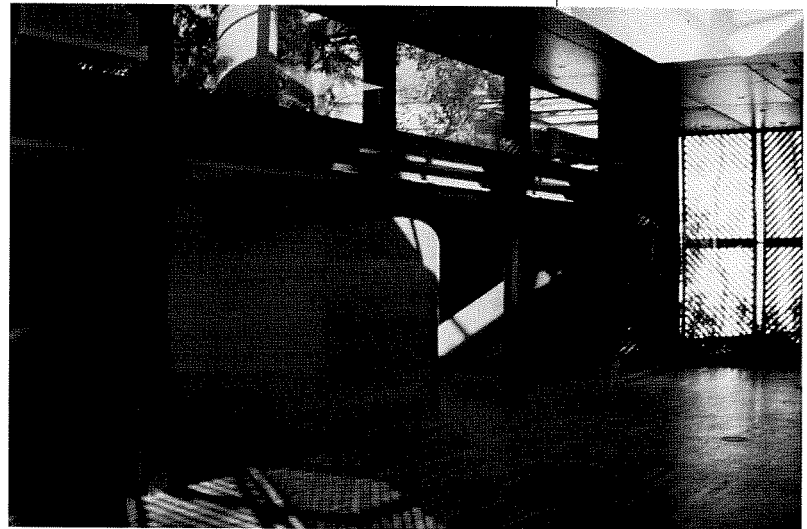
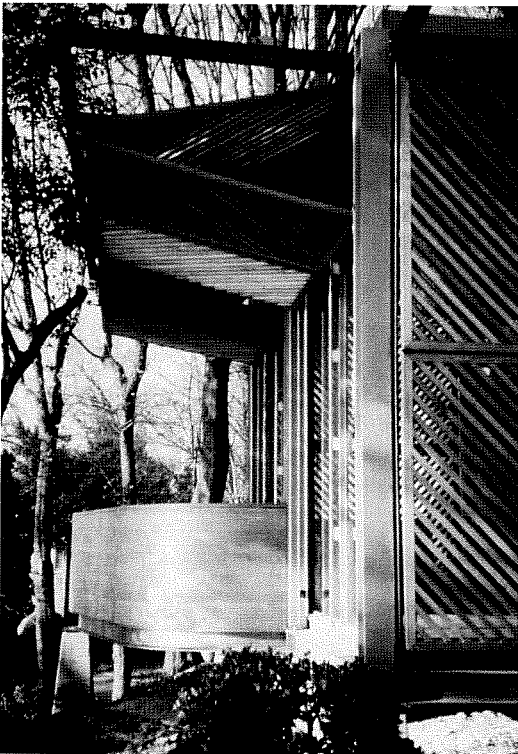


Korean Pavilion

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 northern 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 pavilion 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.