

Architectural squares between tradition and modernity

Mario Gallarati

Architect

Member, ICTP

Volume I Number 17

The study of Italian Renaissance architectural squares and of the larger scale successive baroque interventions on them, published in my notes on Urban Scale Architecture¹ does not only offer a new vision of the more or less renowned realizations on the theme of the *forum-square*, but has also permitted us to contrast the answers given in different situations to the question of an urban space treated as a unique architecture.

The theme is at all times up-to-date, both in the case of urban spaces to be set within consolidated fabrics, and in that of new settlements or new quarters, which require facing in one intervention problems varying from the *urban scale* (the role of the public space within the urban organism) to the *building scale* (definition of the public space through a plurality of single buildings facing it) and to the *architectural scale* (with particular reference to the treatment and articulation of the building fronts).

Therefore, the study and interpretation of the examples of the past, tending to single out the type-solutions for recurrent problems of architectural and compositive kind and not only to document a particular aspect of the history of the urban morphology, become a critical-operative instrument absolutely essential for the planning and realization of new building units and urban spaces architecturally unitary.

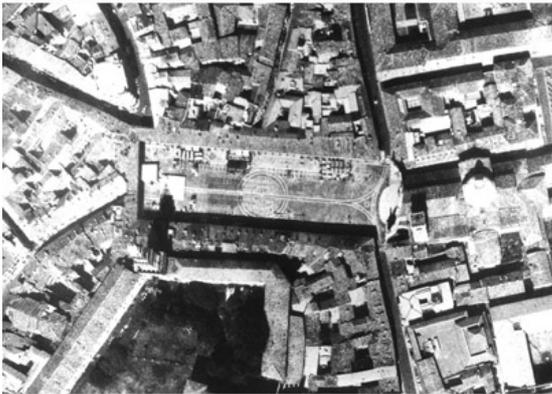
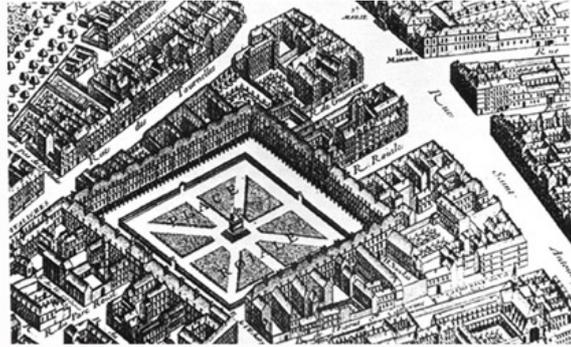
An experiment in this sense has been accomplished by the writer of these notes in the design and realization of the new Town Centre of Casarza Ligure, near Genova (1991-2005).

In this case the experience of the past has not ended in offering anew formal-stylistic elements borrowed from other times, but in acquiring the necessary awareness of the different questions connected to a project and of the relative type-solutions coming up all the time in urban scale architectural projects, and in their reinterpretation in the light of today's fruition necessities and building techniques.

1. *Connection with the Urban Organism*

The first distinction concerns the position of the public space (street, square) as to the system of *axes* and *poles* defining the urban setting. There are two main cases: in the first case the square is built within a consolidated tissue, through interventions of *restoration*, usually aiming at the enlargement and regularization of a pre-existing *nodal space* (see, for example, the Piazza Ducale in Vigevano, the Piazza del Popolo in Ascoli Piceno, the Piazza of S.S. Annunziata in Florence, the Piazza del Popolo in Fermo).

¹ M. GALLARATI: *Architettura a scala urbana - Urban Scale Architecture*, special issue of "Studi e Documenti di Architettura", Alinea, Firenze 1994, pages 1-220.



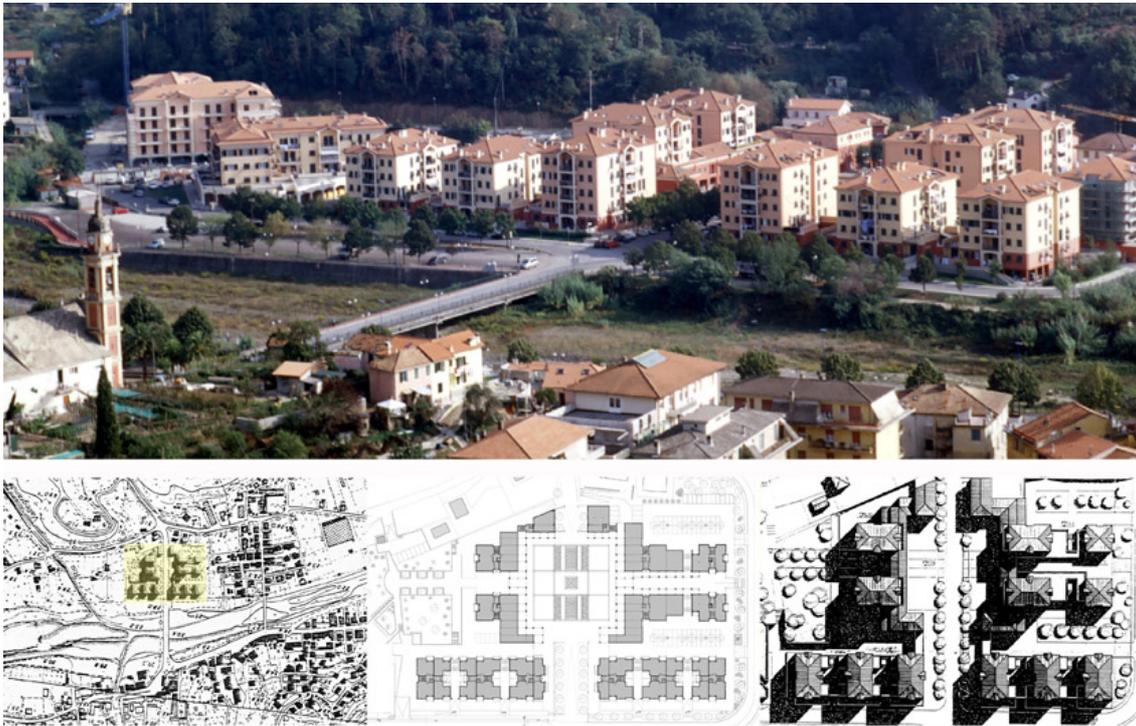
SQUARES WITHIN CONSOLIDATED TISSUES

In the second case the urban space is a unifying central element of new building interventions: at first as a Court of Honour facing castles or princely manors (see Piazza Grande in Carpi, Piazza Bentivoglio in Gualtieri and some Gonzaga squares), then as *axes* and *poles* of new expansion tissues (as in the case of baroque Turin and 17th-18th C. interventions in many european cities).



URBAN SPACES IN NEW BUILDING INTERVENTIONS

In the plan for the new Town Centre of Casarza Ligure, realized on an open, clear space beyond the river and facing the old centre, to which it is connected by a bridge, we have tried to take into account those experiences in order to compose, around a central pole architecturally defined, an urban fabric which, starting from occasional pre-existing situations on the outskirts, comes to acquire a higher degree of organization in approaching to the centre of the new settlement.



THE NEW INTERVENTION IN CASARZA LIGURE

2. *Space Setting and its Relation with the Urban Fabric.*

Starting with the first examples, strongly conditioned by the pre-existent, the interventions for the settlement of public spaces tend to more and more organic and regular solutions: in particular, the unitary aspect of the squares deriving from interventions of restoration of the urban fabric consists in many cases in the mere superimposition of homogeneous building curtains to the heterogeneous fabrics delimiting its space (again, Vigevano, Ascoli Piceno, Carpi, Fermo).

In the case, though, of new building interventions, the public space, organized along an *axis* or a system of axes, is defined by *serial building fronts*, typologically homogeneous and architecturally unitary (see, again, the S.S. Annunziata in Florence, for what concerns the building of the Loggiato and of the Serviti houses; and then Gualtieri, the Gonzaga squares of Pomponesco, Rivarolo Mantovano, S.Martino dell'Argine and, later on, the 17th-18th C. squares in Paris and Turin).

Others still, of the most significant, are in an intermediate situation, as they draw their ultimate setting - tending to symmetry and polarized by the presence of the church - from successive phases of realization (Vigevano, Firenze, etc).



GENERAL LAYOUT OF THE PUBLIC SPACE

The new quarter planned for Casarza Ligure shows a regular urban fabric, with blocks of buildings analogous to the others around, developing along two main *axes*: a longitudinal axis polarized by a central square delimited by two buildings fronts with arcades, destined to residential and commercial purposes, and a new cross-wise axis on which stand the buildings facing the river.

Even in this case, the serial building fronts of the square, lower than the residential blocks at the back, have a role of mediation between the main public space and the residential building tissue of new formation.

3 *Urban Space Architecture.*

As we pass from a typological-building scale to the formal-architectural one, the variety of the solutions adopted increases, according to the different contingent situations, the time of their realizations and the building language of the place: but, even in this case, some recurrent problems of composition and the relative type-solutions adopted can be singled out.

a) The *rhythmic front*: it is the formal result of the modular components, serially organized, of the building curtains delimiting the urban space: the module, whether it appears as an elementary tri-dimensional organism (Vigevano) or is limited to the mere thickness of the front, generally coincides with the porch span on the ground floor and with the corresponding order of the windows on the upper storeys.

The architectural unity of the building fronts is pursued through the repetition, in an individualized rhythm, of that elementary module. The rhythm may be uniform, following camps all of the same pace (which is the most common solution), and, if that is the case, accentuated on the upper storeys (either by doubling the openings as in Venice Procuratie Vecchie, or by alternating

chimneys and pinnacles as in Gualtieri), or else articulated by alternating modules of different width (as in Piazza Castello and Piazza S. Carlo in Turin).



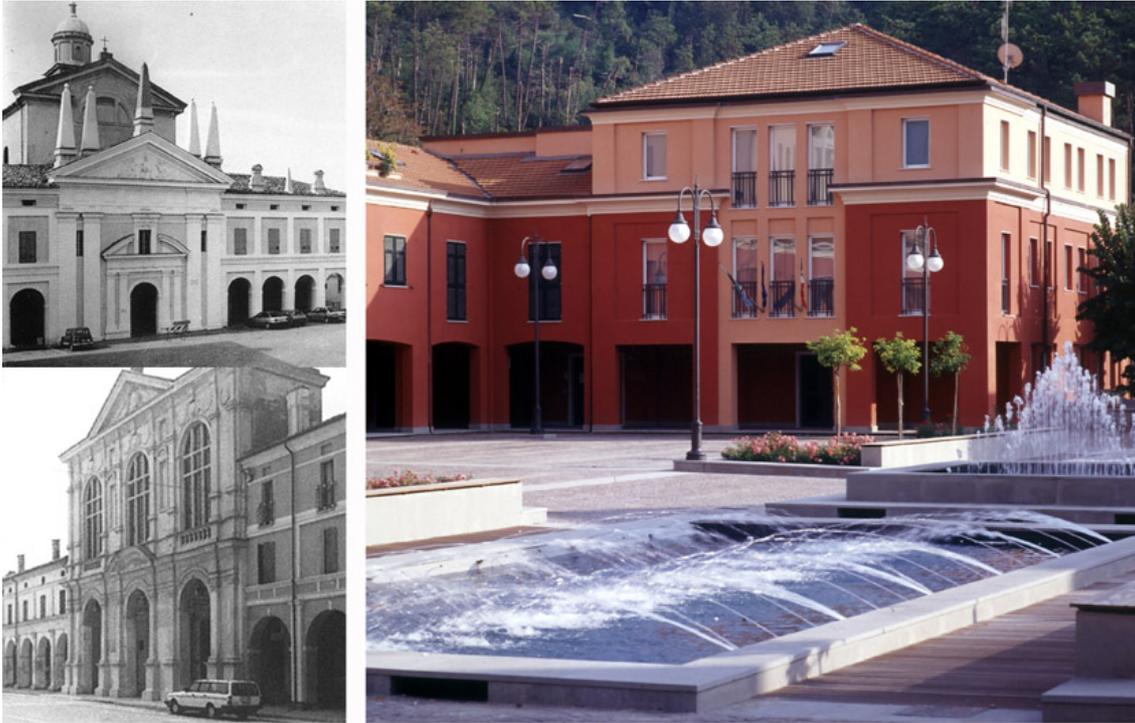
RHYTHMIC FRONTS IN SOME HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

b) The *Accesses to the Urban Space*: the theme of the access to the square (strictly connected with that of the conclusion and of the *returns* of the rhythmic wall into the streets of access) is itself dealt with in very different ways: in this case too it varies from more elementary solutions, as the mere interruption of the arcade, which therefore comes to offer its side to the roads of access to the main urban space (as in Ascoli Piceno, towards the secondary roads, in Carpi or in Vigevano, towards Cso. Vittorio Emanuele II and Via XX Settembre), to the *turning* of the arcade along the main routes of access (as in Ascoli towards the Trivio limited to only three camps facing the Loggia dei Mercanti, and then, in a more conscious and systematic way, in the Gonzaga squares of Pomponesco and S.Martino dell'Argine and, above all, in Turin, in the great 17th C. realizations successive to the first arrangement of Piazza Castello) to the building of a true gate of access, either shaped as a triumphal arch, as theorized by L.B.Alberti (which we still find in the 16th C. square of Isola Dovarese and was perhaps present in the original settlement of the Vigevano square), or as a clock tower (from the Codussi tower of Piazza S.Marco in Venice to that of Gualtieri, standing in the middle of the western prospect of Piazza Bentivoglio).



THE MAIN ENTRANCE TO THE PUBLIC SPACE

c) *Special Buildings*: the presence of a special building which is itself the cause and justification of the *architectural square*, assumes different forms too, ranging from the occasional placing of the special building in the square (as in Ascoli, chiefly for what concerns the church of S.Francesco, which, preexisting to the square, turns its side towards Piazza del Popolo) to its more or less coordinate insertion in the arcades (see the churches of Pomponesco and Gualtieri), to its *nodal* position at the end of the main *axis* of the space setting (as it is for the church of S.S. Annunziata in Florence, for Palazzo Bentivoglio in Gualtieri or for the Gonzaga castles, later demolished, for which the square was a court of honour) or, finally, at the sides of the two main accesses to the square (like the twin churches of Piazza S. Carlo in Turin).



THE SPECIAL BUILDING

d) *Architectural Apparatus*: by its own nature, the theme of the project, concerning the architectural unity of fronts made of contiguous buildings, leads to a "simplification of the decorative apparatus and to an accentuation of the horizontal elements meant to make the comprehension of the whole more immediate.

For what concerns the first, it goes from an enquiry on the simple geometric regularity (as in Vigevano) to the repetition of standardized detail elements (the white travertine windows of the Ascoli Piceno square; the mouldings and the *serena* (stone) windows and the majolic *tondi* in the Florentine square).

It goes again from the framing of the porch camp inside an *order* (as in the Piazza del Santuario di Loreto or in the Portico dei Banchi in Bologna and, later on, in Fermo or in Isola Dovarese) to the simplification of the same order, reduced to mere framing, and to its superimposition (as in Pomponesco or in Gualtieri).

For what concerns the second, it goes from the simple continuity of the gutter line (as in Vigevano) to the introduction of stone window-sill cornices (as in Ascoli), and to the progressive introduction of storey-marking cornices in the function of trabeation (as in Florence, Fermo, Isola Dovarese) and of unifying gutter cornices.



ARCHITECTURAL APPARATUS

In the case of the new urban centre of Casarza Ligure, the whole project is based on a modularity of alternating structures and spaces: this choice is reflected not only in the typology of the residential buildings, but also in the alternate rhythm of the building walls delimiting the central square.

To the different width of the porch bays there corresponds a different treatment of the fronts of the upper storey, with the presence of tripartite loggias corresponding with the minor cells, instead of the couples of windows related with the major ones.

The arcade turns with two camps along the main axis of access to the square, towards the old centre, to finish at the opposite end in the two special edifices at the sides of the same axis, characterized by a taller shape and coordinated with the remnant architecture of the square.

The treatment of the prospect walls, plastered in the Ligurian traditional way, and the continuity of the gutter cornices contribute to define the architectural unity of the whole.

Mario Gallarati

© October 2006

Email: m.gallarati@gallaratiarchitetti.com

Views expressed on this page are those of the writer and are not necessarily shared by those involved in INTBAU.