

Architectural squares between tradition and modernity

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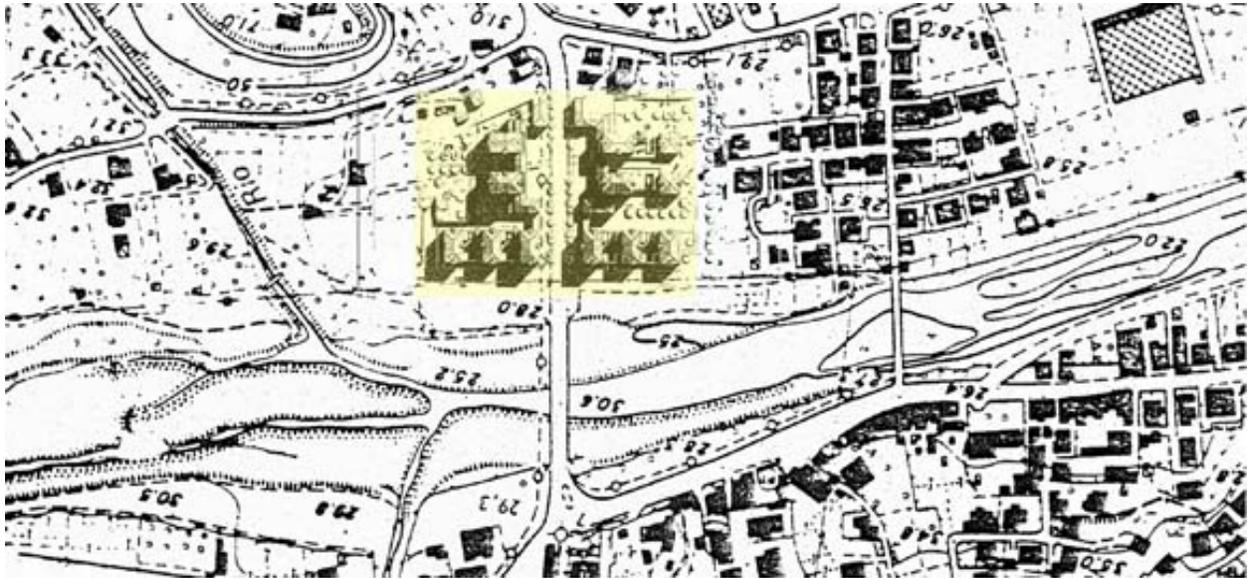


Figure-ground diagram of the author's new architectural square in Casarza Ligure, Italy

The study of Italian Renaissance architectural squares and of the larger scale successive baroque interventions on them, published in my notes on Urban Scale Architecture, not only offers 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 tissues, 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).

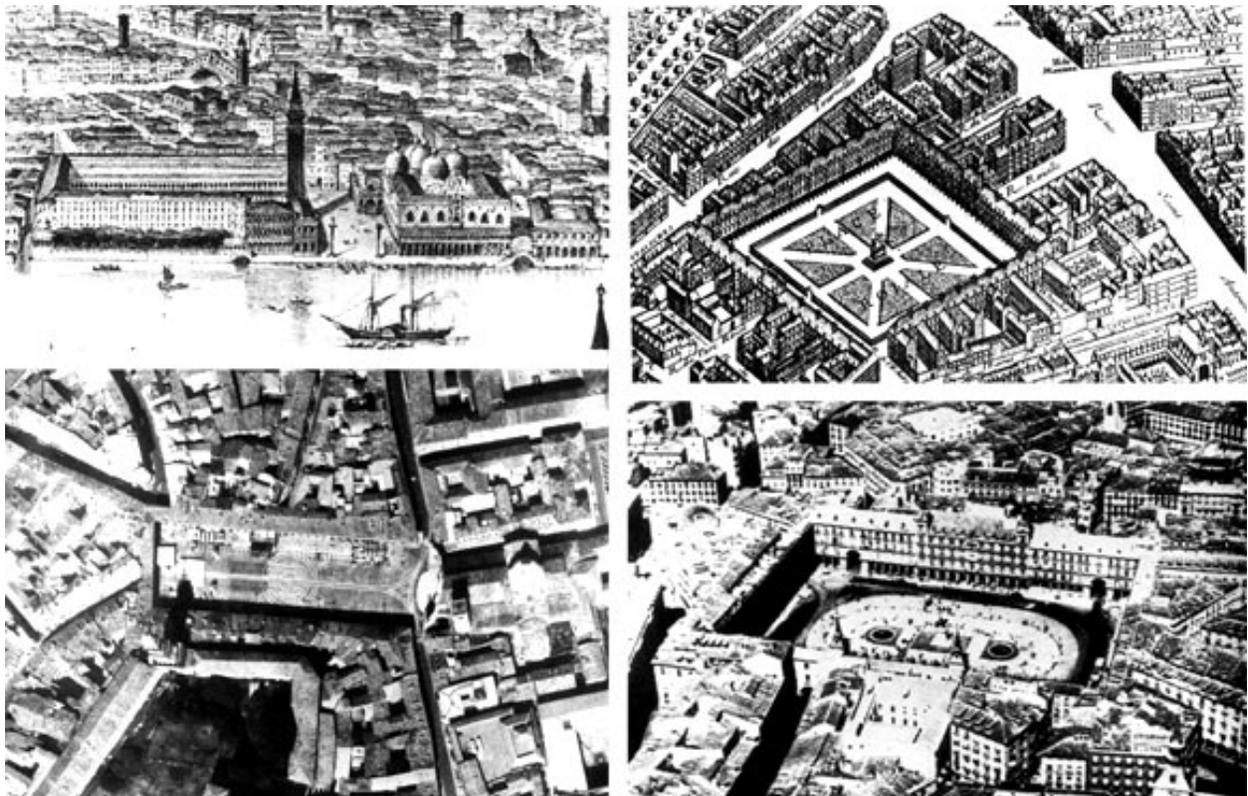
Therefore, the study and interpretation of the examples of the past, tending to single out the type-solutions for recurrent problems of architectural and compositive kind and not only to document a particular aspect of the history of the urban morphology, become a critical-operative instrument absolutely 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, above).

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 production necessities and building techniques.

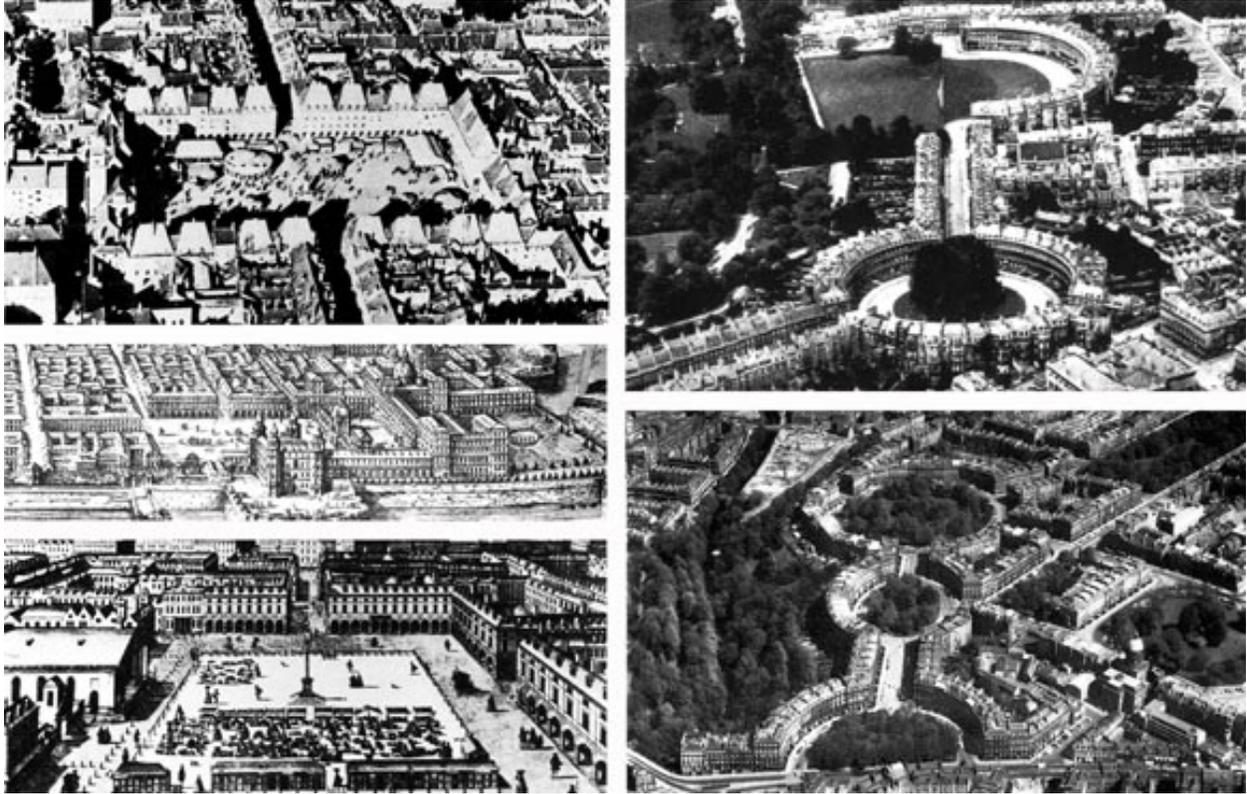
1. *Connection with the Urban Organism*

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).



Squares within consolidated urban tissue. Image: Mario Gallarati

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. Image: Mario Gallarati

In the plan for the new Town Centre of Casarza Ligure, realised 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 tissue 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.

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

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 tissue consists in many cases in the mere superimposition of homogeneous building curtains to the heterogeneous tissues 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).



Rhythmic fronts in some historical examples. Image: Mario Gallarati

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).

The new quarter planned for Casarza Ligure shows a regular urban tissue, 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.



The main entrance to the public space. Image: Mario Gallarati

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 realisation 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.



Architectural Apparatus. Image: Mario Gallarati

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, as distinct from the pairs of windows related with the major cells.

The arcade turns with two bays 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, characterised by a taller shape and co-ordinated 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.

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1. 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 three-dimensional organism (Vigevano) or is limited to the

mere thickness of the front, generally coincides with the portico span on the ground floor and with the corresponding order of the windows on the upper storeys.

2. The architectural unity of the building fronts is pursued through the repetition, in an individualised rhythm, of that elementary module. The rhythm may be uniform, following bays all of the same width (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).
3. b) *Access to the Urban Space*: the theme of the access to the square (strictly connected with that of the conclusion and of the openings of the rhythmic wall into the access streets) 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 access roads into 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 bays 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 following to the first arrangement of Piazza Castello) to the building of a access gate, 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 square in Vigevano), 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).
4. 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 itself (as in Ascoli, chiefly for what concerns the church of S. Francesco, which, pre-existing to the square, turns its side towards Piazza del Popolo) to its more or less co-ordinated 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 (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).
5. 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.
6. For what concerns the first, it starts with an enquiry into 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 *pietra serena* (grey stone) windows and the majolica *tondi* in the Florentine square).

7. It proceeds again from the framing of the porch bay 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).
8. As for the 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.