Benedict Zucchi

Learning from Giancarlo De Carlo: Interview with Benedict Zucchi, by Antonello Alici

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Anglosaxon sensibility; William Morris and Patrick Geddes; "Simulating slow growth"; Stamina; Commitment

/Introduction by Antonello Alici

Giancarlo De Carlo's centennial has the merit of bringing the younger generations of students and researchers closer to the work of an extraordinary interpreter of 20th century architectural culture. An uncomfortable and controversial interpreter who has experienced all the seasons of the second half of the 20th century with tenacity and consistency, opposing every form of architecture distant from the experience and needs of society.

In a panorama of studies that up until now has been lacking, two of the most important monographs on De Carlo, capable of fully grasping his complexity and modernity, are by English authors first of them is Benedict Zucchi who approached De Carlo during his studies at the faculty of architecture in Cambridge, and then further enriched his experience with a professional internship at his Milan office. Almost thirty years later, Zucchi confirms the value of that experience and clarifies De Carlo's affinity with Anglo-Saxon culture, but also the influence that his work continues to exert on British architects. Zucchi was able to exploit that experience in building his own professional career.

The relevance of the example or teaching of Giancarlo De Carlo is also evident in Zucchi's way of conducting the interview, with full lucidity of expression. Retracing the salient highlights of his meeting with De Carlo is a way of allowing us to experience the stages of a journey of discovery of architectural design. Design intended as a discipline, as a slow process of adaptation to situations in continuous evolution and open to dialogue with the needs of its users. This is his precious legacy, left not only to students and young professionals, but also to the "public of architecture", a term very dear to Giancarlo De Carlo.

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Benedict Zucchi studied architecture at the universities of Cambridge and Harvard, writing his degree dissertation on the work of Giancarlo De Carlo. This was subsequently published in 1992 as the first comprehensive English-language monograph of De Carlo's work. After a period in De Carlo's Milan studio, Benedict joined Building Design Partnership (BDP) in 1994.

BDP's culture of user-centred, interdisciplinary design was a welcome compliment to his experience with De Carlo, leading to a rewarding sequence of public sector projects across the education and health sectors.

Benedict became a Principal of BDP in 2005 and is now Head of Architecture with responsibility for the overall strategic direction of BDP's 500-strong architect group.

His work has achieved public recognition through a number of prizes, including Royal Institute of British Architects Awards for St Joseph's Hospital in 2003, Marlowe Academy in 2008 and Alder Hey Children's Hospital in 2016 and the Prime Minister's Better Public Building Award (the highest British accolade for a public project) for the Royal Alexandra Children's Hospital in 2008 and Alder Hey in 2016.

Interview

1. What expectations do you have have for the Centennial of GDC's birth? Why and how is GDC's legacy relevant today for young architects and scholars?

It seems to me that Giancarlo De Carlo is not as well known today as he deserves to be. His writing, teaching and designs mark him out as one of the most significant postwar architects, whose contribution is as relevant today as it was fifty years ago when he published 'An architecture of participation'. This manifesto, in particular, still resonates very strongly because it is essentially a call for a more sustainable approach to architecture, based on a thorough engagement with people and place. This is the only credible antidote to the 'anywhere architecture' that continues to plague the planet with its anonymous formulaic forms, generating equally anonymous urban monocultures. It is obviously too much to hope that this year's centennial can turn things around but I do believe that the debates and encounters it stimulates can make an important contribution to refocusing attention, particularly that of the younger generation, on how architects can make a real difference and respond to the most pressing issues of today like climate change.

2. You have suggested that GDC had an Anglosaxon sensibility, and an Anglosaxon quality of 'plain speaking'. Can you explain this?

I would say that not only aspects of De Carlo's intellectual outlook were Anglo-Saxon but also something in his manner, which by Italian standards was rather reserved. This did not diminish his capacity to convey his views, and very forcefully when required, but it meant that he chose his words carefully and never spoke for speaking's sake. Whilst always supremely able to make a strong case for what he believed in, whether in writing or face to face, he was wary of rhetorical language and verbosity which I think he associated with obfuscation and muddled thinking.

This is what I mean by his Anglo-Saxon quality of 'plain-speaking'; not hiding behind techno-speak, the privileged discourse and codes of a professional elite, but always seeking to explain his ideas and engage with people through clear prose and drawings.

I once read Lucio Costa's description of the genesis of his competition-winning concept for Brasilia, which seems to me to represent the absolute opposite of De Carlo's approach. Costa said that his design for the new Brazilian capital emerged as an act of pure (perhaps divine) inspiration, untainted by any meaningful engagement with the complex realities of the site or brief. This was a 'take it or leave it' top-down architecture, resistant to any form of challenge

or adaptation through dialogue and design development. De Carlo's commitment, on the other hand, was always to a bottom-up approach, what today we might call an evidence-based architecture.

Perhaps it was De Carlo's initial training as an engineer that drew him to this empirical way of designing; or his international upbringing. Whatever its source, his natural affinity with Anglo-Saxon lines of thought, for example the 'enlightened pragmatism' of the American school, marked De Carlo out from most Italian architects of his generation, who were in thrall to the neo-Rationalism of the 'Tendenza' with its canon of Platonic forms and pure, eerily empty urban spaces. Hence De Carlo's opposition to all forms of 'style', whether the International modernism of the immediate postwar years or the Postmodernism of the 1980s, both examples of what he termed 'architecture for architecture's sake'.

3. Are the lessons of William Morris and Patrick Geddes still relevant today? What are their messages for contemporary society?

Geddes and Morris were very different kinds of thinkers, operating at very different scales, but united by a common sense of social purpose and a desire to 'get things done'. Morris had the courage to challenge the technologically driven zeitgeist of the industrial revolution and posit a very different vision, which reintroduced human scale and what today might be called a sense of 'localism' in the face of the prevailing tide of mass-production and globalism.

Again, perhaps because De Carlo was an engineer, he was not sentimental about science or inclined to an uncritical endorsement of technological progress, whatever the cost in social or ecological terms. This was evident in his Royal Gold Medal speech in 1993 when he spoke of unleashing the real creative potential of technology rather than fetishising it as a 'high-tech style'. The key thing for him, as for Geddes, was to harness science and systematic analysis and invention for the benefit of society. I think that Geddes, Morris and De Carlo all had an instinctive feeling for the qualities of place and design that we associate with enduring and distinctive local cultures; qualities that nowadays we would say are fundamental to 'social value' and a place's longterm sustainability. These include, amongst other things, its climate, topography, flora, urban morphology, craft-base and social structure. These local values would inevitably be overlaid in time by specific strands of artistic or architectural culture, locally or internationally derived, but to De Carlo this was a secondary consideration.

I remember asking him once where his formal inspiration came from; how he came to adopt a particular architectural language, for example the stark Brutalist forms of the Urbino colleges. As I recall, the essence of his answer was that architects would always feed off each other's work (as he did from Le Corbusier and Aalto or Morris, Wright and Geddes) but the key was not to let considerations of style eclipse substance. When De Carlo referred to a

'multiplicity of languages' in architecture I think he was alluding to the idea that a strong concept can be expressed in many different ways (just as different languages offer different words and sentence structures) but its underlying meaning and relevance to the context is what really matters. Geddes' Outlook Tower in Edinburgh was a way of encouraging people to engage with their context and take time to understand its 'DNA', what De Carlo called 'reading the city'. This approach underpinned De Carlo's International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD), the 'summer school' which for many years immersed a diverse team of academics, students and practising architects in the historic contexts of Urbino, Siena and Venice.

4. What was your experience studying GDC's work and then working with him?

My first encounter with De Carlo was an interview he gave to the Architectural Review in 1979 about his work in Urbino. I was enthralled by the way he described the historic setting and the almost fairytale story of how he discovered Francesco di Giorgio's spiral ramp whilst restoring the municipal theatre and then brought it back to life, not as the private domain of the prince riding up to his palace on horseback as originally designed, but as a new route within the city open to all.

Intrigued by what I had read, my next encounter was in the early 1980s when I went to Urbino to research my degree dissertation on his work. I remember walking towards the Magistero down the steeply descending spine of the old city, marvelling at Urbino's beauty and coherence and the ways in which man-made and natural were so delicately intertwined. And then spotting a small unprepossessing door in the side of a building that gave absolutely nothing away (apart from a sign saying Magistero). Crossing this modest threshold, I found myself in a quite different realm; a sequence of spaces of unexpected scale and variety, first compressing one's field of view and then opening it up to the light and sweeping panorama of the great concave skylight over the main lecture theatres. I remain fascinated by the quality of this space both internally and externally. Apart from being very ingenious in its versatility (with multiple lecture theatres capable of being used independently or in alternative combinations), it heightens one's experience of the place in surprising ways, hovering as it does between new and old, inside and outside, man-made and natural, light and dark... From the outside it is the only visible sign that a modern intervention has taken place but, whilst uncompromisingly new and of its time, it somehow fits in perfectly as if it had always been there.

I finally met De Carlo in 1987 when I interviewed him for my dissertation. In response to my wide-ranging questions about his work he spoke engagingly without interruption or repetition for well over an hour. The clarity of

thought, which had already struck me in his writings, came across forcefully in conversation as did his subtlety of expression. The range of topics touched on was amazingly broad, from the fortifications of Francesco di Giorgio to De Carlo's conversations with Robert Venturi or his time at CIAM Otterlo when the future members of Team X first started to coalesce in opposition to the International Style.

In 1991, after completing the manuscript of my book on his work (published in 1992), I went to work in his Milan studio. Having by then finished my university studies, I was straining at the leash to give tangible architectural form to the project I was set, a part of De Carlo's update to his earlier local development plan for Urbino. The specific task was to prepare guidelines for a series of small satellite villages connected to Urbino by a disused railway, which he proposed to reinstate as part of a plan to redirect population growth away from the historic centre. De Carlo resisted my repeated 'leaps to form' (with signs of increasing frustration) until I finally understood the essence of the task, which was not to produce a finite formal solution on day one but to identify a set of principles, drawn from the context and the brief, capable of supporting a variety of different (short and longer term) outcomes. Again, substance over style; clarity of structure before detail. And discipline! De Carlo could not abide sloppy thinking or its physical expression: untidiness. I recall arriving at the studio first thing one morning to discover small felt tip notes in De Carlo's crisp distinctive writing on some of the drawing boards, including mine, telling us to tidy up!

5. Can you suggest a less studied and less appreciated work or project by GDC worth to be revisited today?

Without wishing to dodge the question (which I think expects me to name a lesser-known building), I would say that for me the works most worth revisiting are some of De Carlo's classic texts from the 1960s and 70s; I'm thinking in particular of 'Order Institution Education Disorder', 'Architecture's Public' and 'An Architecture of Participation'. All three remain remarkably relevant today and yet are probably largely unknown to the younger generation of architects.

The first text might be said to anticipate the disruptive influence of the internet and the demise of traditional conceptions of education and their architectural counterparts: fixed buildings in segregated academic silos. The second begins with the startling assertion that "architecture is too important by now to be left to architects" because architects' fixation on 'How' (technology and style) rather than 'Why' (the overarching social purpose which was modernism's original driving force) can only be cured by breaking out of academic silos and professional jargon and engaging with people in tackling the multi-faceted challenges of their physical environment. In the third text De Carlo's systematic attack on the International Style prefigures the key tenets of today's sustainability agenda.

Never was there a clearer analysis of the origins of modern architecture's failings, most obviously the way in which it "lost contact with - and even knowledge of - the context in which it wanted to act". The International Style had, he argued, misappropriated the laudable aims of the early modern movement (its social conscience and commitment to man's fundamental environmental rights of lumiere, espace, verdure) and converted them into a dogmatic and over-simplified series of stylistic prescriptions, focusing yet again on the 'how' rather than the 'why'. Hence the origins of the 'cookie-cutter' anywhere-architecture that has become so ubiquitous all around the globe, forms that can be replicated easily without the investment of time required for a more contextually sensitive approach. To this mechanistic, formulaic architecture, which he referred to as the "cool neutrality of techniques", De Carlo associated a contrasting but related phenomenon, what he termed the "hot arrogance of art". In his view, both approaches, the technological and what is now commonly termed 'starchitecture', represented nothing less than a dereliction of duty by architects, whose real commitment should be to the people who use and inhabit their buildings and neighbourhoods - something which can only happen through participation of the users in the shaping of their environment.

In his Royal Gold Medal address De Carlo reaffirmed this view when he said that "the time for vanity and arrogance in architecture is over; architecture is about to resume its responsibilities towards human beings, societies, the physical environment, nature"; a plea for sustainability many years before the term became commonplace and one that recognises that designing sustainably means, above all, creating successful places. As Jan Gehl, the Danish urbanist once said: "Life, spaces and buildings - and in that order please!"

6. Can you suggest a correct approach to architecture today from your own experience?

In my view good architecture springs from the imaginative choreography of three influences: people (not just our clients but the people who use and experience our buildings and spaces); place (the project context in its widest sense, physical as well as cultural and environmental); and process (the way the project's conception, design evolution and implementation are orchestrated effectively and inclusively).

To bring all three together requires great agility, stamina and vision as well as the support of great clients. This last point should not be underestimated. Just like a film director or screenwriter is nothing without a producer and a team of people to assist in the creation of their films, an architect would be consigned to abstract theorising without the opportunities clients bring to implement their ideas. De Carlo's lifelong relationship with Carlo Bo, the head of Urbino University, is a perfect example. It underpinned De Carlo's relationship with

the city for over fifty years and undoubtedly contributed to the originality of approach that he was able to bring to successive projects there. In today's fast-paced world it seems all the more important to me to take time to establish a rapport with clients, users and the project context. These are key to the kind of rootedness that is for me the essential antidote to 'fast-architecture', the ubiquitous forms of a debased international modernism that I mentioned earlier.

I think this is what De Carlo was alluding to when he spoke of the importance in his work of 'simulating slow growth'. In my larger projects I find it very useful to think of them as small cities. It helps to break down the scale into smaller elements: a series of 'buildings within the building' which can be articulated around internal streets and squares, spaces for movement and social interaction that feel like they are outside. The city analogy is not only useful because it resonates instinctively with people and helps them to move around large complexes intuitively (by reference to memorable crossroads, landmarks or vistas) but also because it allows conceptual room for the different 'buildings' to evolve (grow slowly) with a degree of independence from one another. If participation is to be taken seriously, the flexibility this brings is crucial. For example, in the case of a large faculty building, hospital or residential neighbourhood, it allows design conversations with different stakeholders (whether academics, students, medical staff or residents) to evolve in parallel without paralysing progress of the overall vision. The design of each departmental cluster can then respond to the creative inputs of its users and continue to be fine-tuned, just like buildings may change over time within the overall framework of an urban structure. This flexibility is very important during the extended periods of design development (typically several years in the case of large hospitals for example), ensuring that the design that is finally executed is not already out of date on completion. But equally important is the flexibility this brings for future change, allowing the architecture to be adapted (and improved) incrementally, just like a town when cherished and nurtured morphs over time without losing its underlying spirit of place.

I mentioned stamina earlier, which is the natural companion of the other quality architects need to display: commitment. Both are qualities that De Carlo exemplified. His commitment to the places he worked in was absolute. And through that commitment one is able to build up a relationship of trust with client teams and others connected with (or affected by) the projects, including the many people involved in implementing them. De Carlo used to say that he got real pleasure and creative stimulus from discussing details on site with builders and adapting the design to incorporate their contribution. This is another manifestation of the flexibility I spoke of earlier. It is not feasible if the architecture is preconceived and rigid in its prescriptions (in other words a 'style') but, if the architecture is the product of the kind of process I have been advocating, the result I believe will always be richer, more nuanced and ultimately more enduring.

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Fig. 1
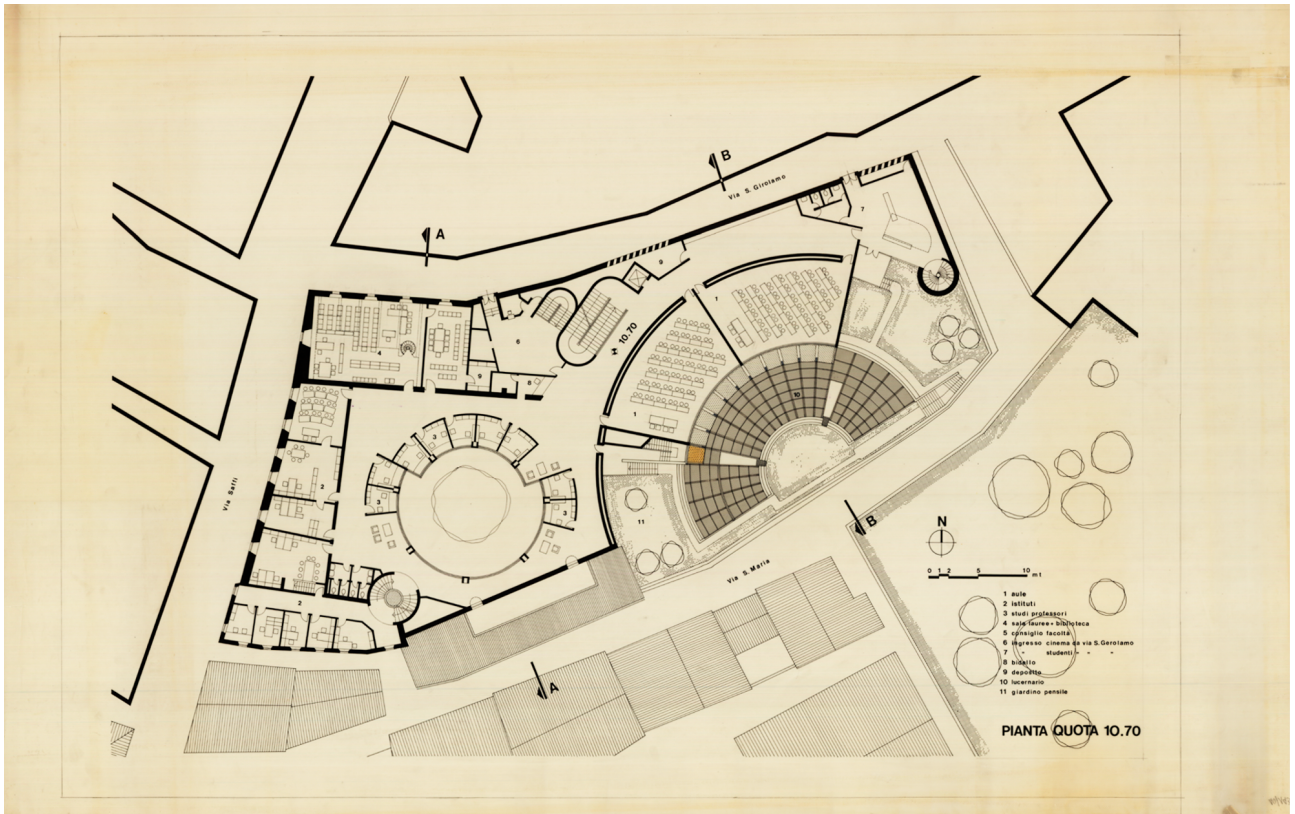GDC, Lesbo, 1972
credits Anna De Carlo,
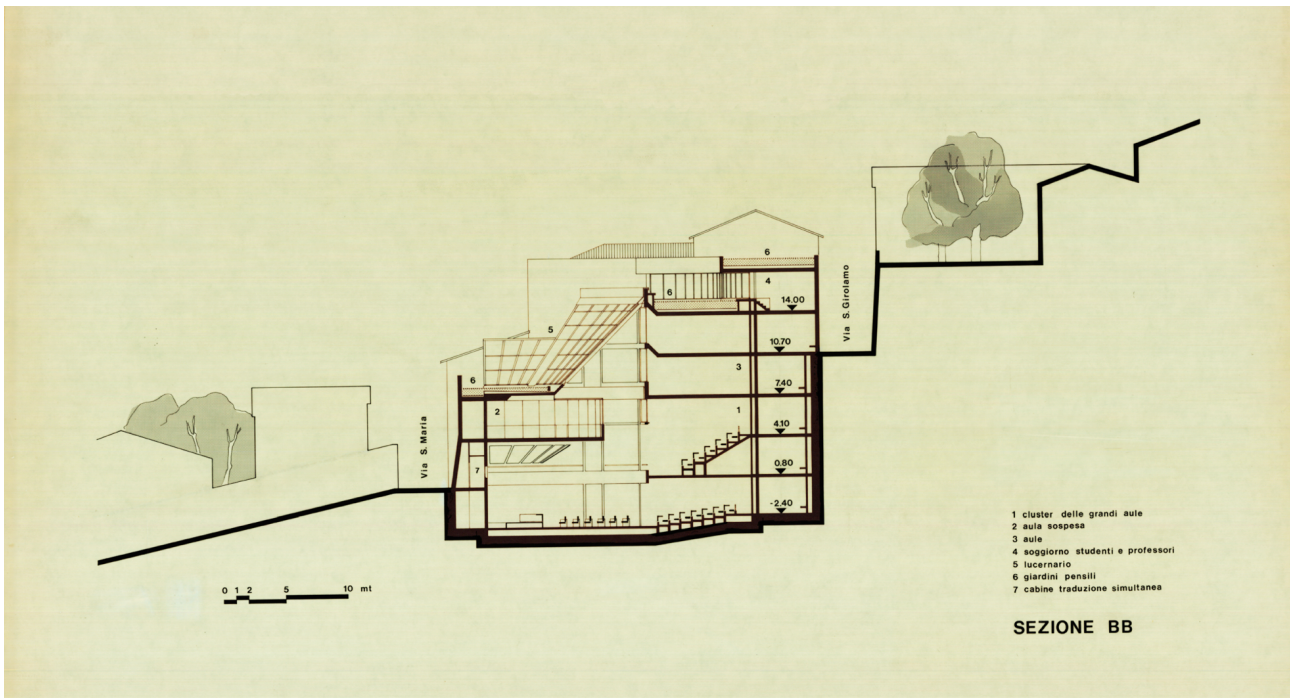private collection

2 |

3 |

Fig. 2
Urbino, aerial view, from *Urbino.
La storia di una città e il piano
della sua evoluzione
urbanistica*,1966

Fig. 3
Urbino, Magistero Faculty,
model, credits Università Iuav
di Venezia, Archivio Progetti,
fondo Giancarlo De Carlo

4

5

Fig. 4
Magistero Faculty, Urbino, credits Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti, fondo Giancarlo De Carlo

Fig. 5
Magistero Faculty, Urbino, credits Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti, fondo Giancarlo De Carlo
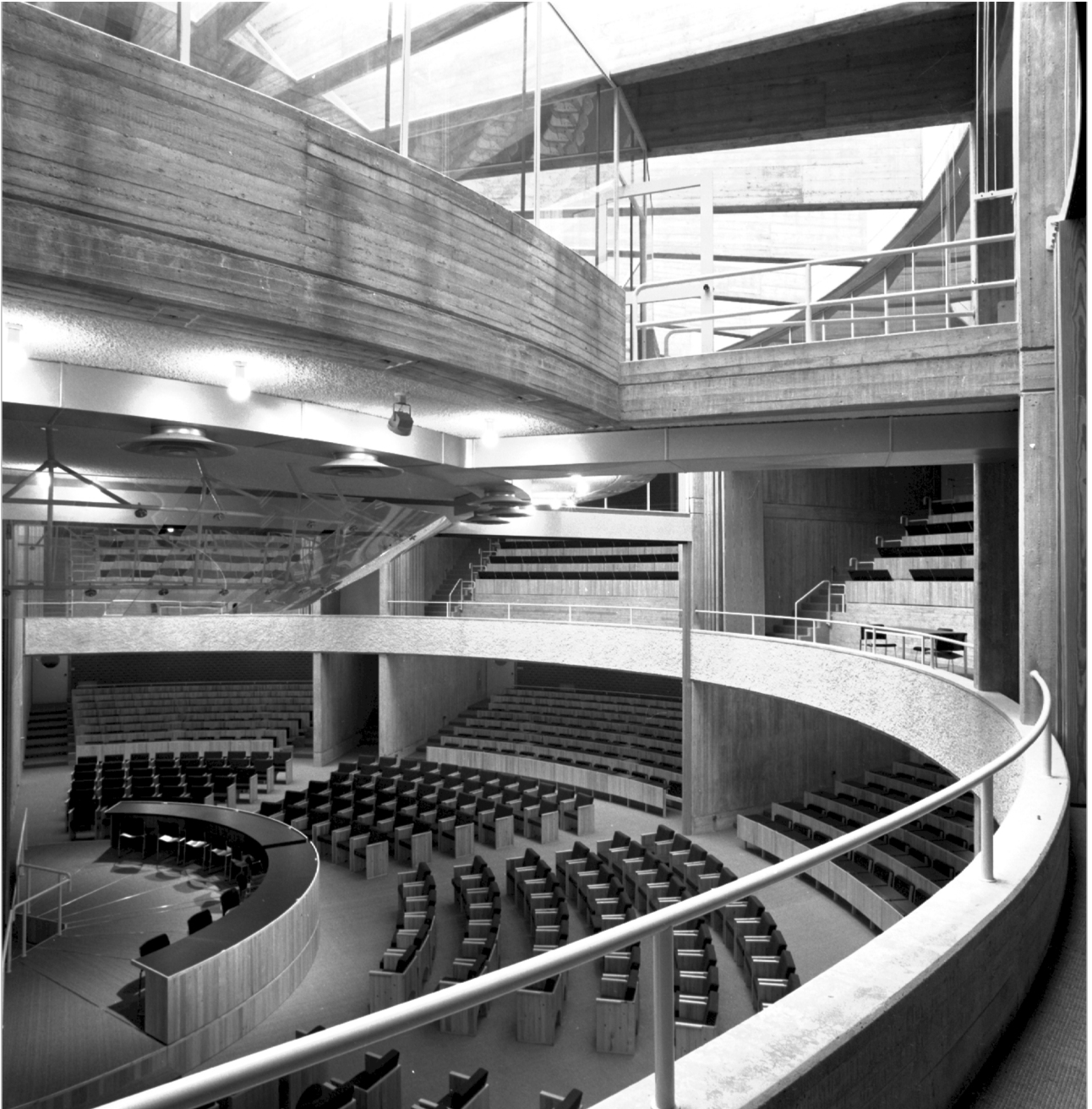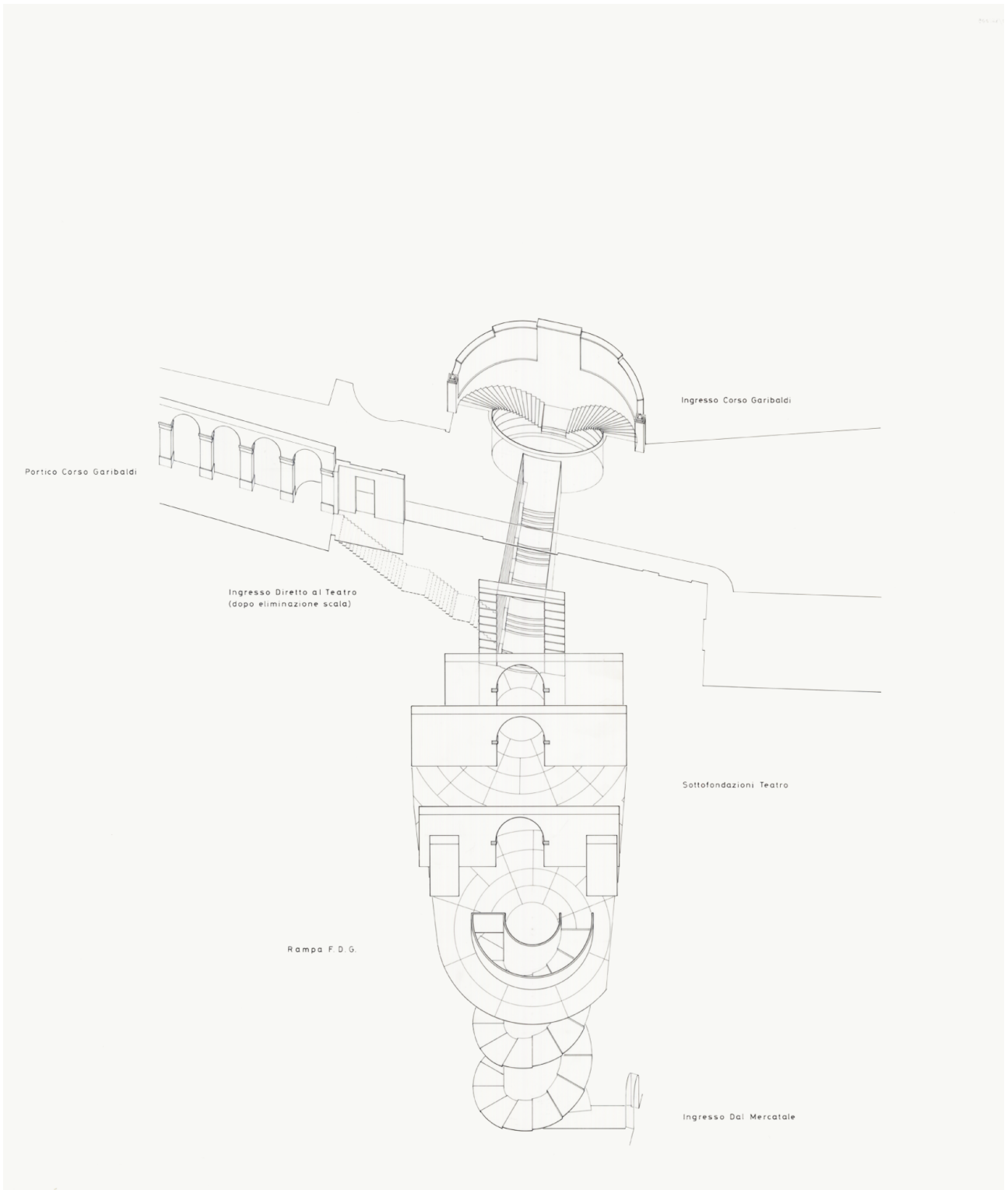
Fig. 6
Aula Magna, Magistero Faculty,
Urbino, credits Università Iuav
di Venezia, Archivio Progetti,
fondo Giorgio Casali

Ingresso Corso Garibaldi

Portico Corso Garibaldi

Ingresso Diretto al Teatro
(dopo eliminazione scala)

Sottofondazioni Teatro

Rampa F.D.G.

Ingresso Dal Mercatale

Fig. 7
The reopening of the Ramp by
Francesco di Giorgio Martini
connecting Mercatale with the
Ducal Palace, Urbino
credits Università Iuav di
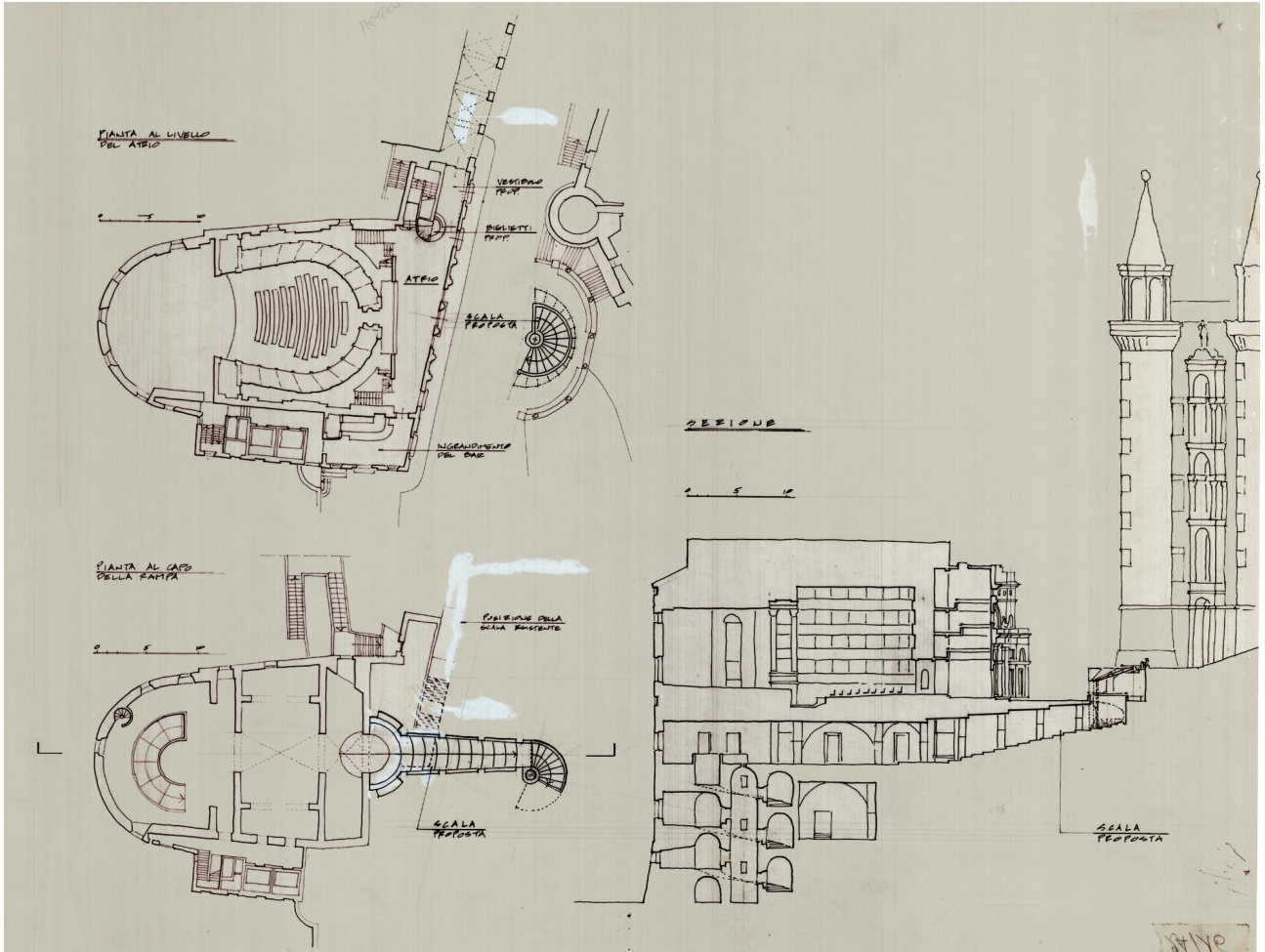Venezia, Archivio Progetti,
fondo Giancarlo De Carlo

Fig. 8
Operazione Mercatale, Urbino
credits Università Iuav di
Venezia, Archivio Progetti,
fondo Giancarlo De Carlo