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# Ordinary and Extraordinary. The Experience of Parrish Complex in Dresano



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Architect since 1991, Ph.D. in Urban Design since 1997 and Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II since 2019. In 1995, with architect Vincenzo Corvino, he established corvino+multari, with headquarter in Naples and offices in Milan. He applied for several international competitions, followed by realization of housing, work spaces and open public spaces requalification. In 2005 the magazine *Ventre* dedicated his first monographic number of *Ventre Zoom* series to their work, publishing the monograph "Corvino+Multari 1995-2005". In 2006, with the Restoration project for Pirelli Skyscraper in Milan, Corvino+Multari wins the Special Award for Restoration at the Gold Medal Competition for Italian Architecture called by the Triennale of Milan, the Aluminium Renovation Award 2007 (Italy) and the European Aluminium Renovation Award 2007. In 2006 he also participated to the 10th International Architecture Exhibition at the Biennale of Venice with the project for the new Station in Castellammare di Stabia.

His current research investigates the existing, of different nature and scale, to define possible places and new strategies for the project, from Castel Volturno, Rosarno, to Naples. He has held conferences in Italy (Milan, Rome, Naples, Cosenza, Turin, Florence, Palermo) and abroad (Graz, Krakow, Warsaw, Mendrisio, Brussels, Paris, Berlin, London, New York); projects and creations have been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions and published in national and international architecture magazines such as *Casabella*, *Abitare*, *Domus*, *Area*, *d'A*, *The Plan*, *Concept* and *World Architecture*. Among his latest publications: *Italian Foreign Architecture* (Rome: Tab Edizioni, 2022), *Architettura Alto Adige* (Rome: Tab Edizioni, 2020); *La grande dimensione in architettura. Il Centro Direzionale di Napoli* (Rome: Aracne, 2015).

## Ordinary and Extraordinary

Sacredness is an ancient theme in architecture, but also a highly relevant one in contemporary discourse. It imposes the idea of a space that, in fulfilling ordinary tasks related to earthly rites, simultaneously evokes the extraordinary nature of its existence: “that the first origin of architecture must take place in the altars, on which the ancients sacrificed”<sup>1</sup>, as Mario Gioffredo asserted in his treatise “Dell’Architettura”, published in Naples in 1768.

To build a church, therefore, is to consider not only a merely practical purpose but the ability to translate human emotions towards the mystery into tangible architectural expression.

The relationship between worship and architecture immediately emerges through the markers of its historical and cultural complexity. The religious phenomenon, as well as the study of forms of expression, permeates the very development of the construction of a building of worship, in a phenomenology of the sacred that is the true object of investigation.

We should look at the manifold complexities that the investigation of the sacred proposes, with an awareness of the potential for synthesis, which brings out, where the whole is summarised, that essentiality that gives constant topicality to the built space.

In this sense, the relationship between form and the sacred is at the heart of the religious experience itself, constituting the very foundation of interest in the condition of a community that generates the place of worship.

An experience that reveals itself precisely in the possibility of linking earthly and temporal reality with the perception of a transcendent level of everyday life. The religious experience of life needs to give lasting representation to the immediate and momentary perception of the sacred.

It is therefore a relationship in which the aesthetic experience is present in all its strong value as a path to truth and meaning. A deeply inclusive relationship, since the presence of the sacred is inherently linked to form. We are therefore in the presence of an intangible, immaterial reality that is represented in the material forms of earthly life.

This bond takes on its specific value in the context of religious traditions, even manifesting itself in entirely new ways, highlighting the very reason for the presence of a religion that emerges and is based on the testimony of a revelation and a message of truth that has hitherto gone unheard.

From these initial considerations, we understand the difficult problem of designing a church, which lies in the relationship with meanings, with the sacred as emotion, and with its representation. This difficulty is renewed with each new project, as the process of defining the work struggles to articulate its reason, to find the right words and examples to guide the path of constructing an architecture of sacred space. At the same time, however, architecture itself, as matter made up of the works developed by man to respond to his own human

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1 Benedetto Gravagnuolo, ed., *Mario Gioffredo* (Napoli: Guida Editori, 2002), 25.

condition, needs and necessities, can guide this path of knowledge. It awakens questions embedded within these solutions, illuminating their value as answers to problems: birth, death, community, beauty, sacredness. Questioned in the right way, the architecture, that is, the built works, narrate the long work done to transform the solitude of each existence into a shared and conscious history. It is no coincidence that birth, death, community, beauty, and sacredness are all encapsulated in the experience of the church.

The theme of the church has the ability to lead us unmediated into the contradictions of contemporary architecture and, without mediation, confronts us with the need and difficulty of working with meanings, each time discovering that to do so we need forms that are recognisable, communicative, comprehensible, and shareable.

Certain forms, therefore, capable of inscribing themselves in that relationship of stability in which value is determined, a value that endures over time.

This may be the substantial inheritance of such a constructed architecture of the sacred: the effort to make things already known, evident, and stable speak, and to make them relevant.

It is not easy to measure oneself with the design of a church, which requires, on the one hand, recognisability, and on the other, renewal. Designing a church corresponds to fabricating that *trita et consumata meditatio usus*, as Vitruvius defined it, a process of seeking solutions through reflection on questions and practical needs, a practice that develops knowledge and in which the value and legacy of architecture emerge. A practice that makes architectural forms intelligible, for themselves, as tools for comprehending reality.<sup>2</sup>

To fabricate, it is necessary to act by forms, by spaces, to see the work from inside, from outside, from above, as Adolf Loos argued, and to think volumetrically.<sup>3</sup>

It is only when we try to do this that we discover how difficult it is to measure ourselves against this universe of the ordinary and the extraordinary, interpreting examples and forms experimented with and refined over time. These forms survive neglect and destruction, shared by those who came before us and who, crossing the same entrance, turning to the same light, and kneeling on the same stones, have made these spaces and forms a shared heritage.

An inheritance, as we said, that has rendered these forms and spaces stable a repository of efforts, as Cattaneo liked to say.<sup>4</sup>

The theme of the sacred, so evocative and difficult to avoid, brings us closer to architecture and to that world of knowledge that must confront contemporaneity while preserving the heritage that belongs not only to architects but to all humanity.

Hence, the references that emerge from this investigation: sacred space built on central space and sacred space built on longitudinal space the two main

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2 Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, Italian translation by M. Vitale (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 123.

3 Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime. Selected Essays*, English translation by M. Mitchell (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998), 78.

4 See: Carlo Cattaneo, *Industria e morale*, M. Vitale ed. (Brescia: Scholé, 2019), 32.

archetypes of the house of God, the central space, and the house of man, the nave space, as described in Carlos Martí Arís' beautiful treatment.<sup>5</sup>

The building of worship is fixed in the fundamental relationship and integration between the ecclesia, or the assembly of the faithful, and the altar-presbytery, i.e., the place of the rite. The hall/nave and the presbytery/altar have over time combined according to two spatial principles: the longitudinal one, closely linked to liturgical functions and the *domus ecclesiae*, and the central one, with clear references to the *domus Dei*. With the Second Vatican Council, the idea of making the church coincide with the hall emerges as a precise directive, emphasising the need for greater integration between the assembly of the faithful and the spaces of liturgical action.

Ultimately, it is a collective building a hall with a strong community value, a place where the community gathers and participates in a rite that unites them. This concept of communion still calls on architects to research and interpret evocative spaces. It is not a question of adopting predefined models for the church of the Second Vatican Council, but of developing forms in which the call of the faithful is realised from the entrance to the hall and up to the altar, in an initiation into the mystery, between construction and immaterial components, between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

A space that, as highlighted, has two distinct characters: the absolute and the phenomenal. The first corresponds to the constructive envelope of the building – an extraordinary empty space shaped by its structure. For example, the Church of Baranzate (1957) by Angelo Mangiarotti and Bruno Morassutti. In this church, the hall is conceived as a unified, light-filled space, devoid of superfluous divisions, where the glass-cement walls play an essential role. Light, filtered through the transparent material, defines the interior, creating an ethereal atmosphere that emphasises the spiritual character of the space. The simplicity of the design and the essentiality of the structure emphasise the dialogue between light, matter, and spirituality, making the hall the focus of the architectural experience.<sup>6</sup>

Then there is the phenomenal space, composed of smaller spaces within the larger building, as in Michelucci's Highway Church (1964). In this case, compositional elements play a key role in characterising the sacred space. The Church of the Motorway is distinguished by the presence of internal structures that articulate the space, such as chapels and internal pathways, which create a spatial layering. The use of natural light, filtered through irregular openings, and the contrast between unfinished materials and refined finishes amplify the dynamism of the environment. The layout of the spaces guides the visitor on a sensorial and spiritual journey, enriched by the compositional harmony of the architectural elements.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See: Carlos Martí Arís, *La variazione dell'identità. Il tipo in architettura* (Milan: Clup, 1993), 57.

<sup>6</sup> See: Florencia Andreola, Marco Biraghi, Gabriella Lo Ricco, eds., *Milano. L'architettura dal 1945 ad oggi* (Milan: Hoepli, 2018), 123.

<sup>7</sup> See: Giuliana Scotto, *La chiesa dell'autostrada di Giovanni Michelucci. Una lettura estetica* (Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2012), 30.



In both of these references, the theme of light is the main building material, and it is useful to quote Purini's discussion here:

(...) light has three fundamental aspects. The first type is emotional light: simply light that dialogues or contrasts with shadow. When we enter a Baroque church, for example, the dialectic between light and shadow, or even light and darkness, is fantastic: it grabs us completely, not only in the mind but above all in the body – it moves us strongly. (...) Le Corbusier ... even in the Chapel of Ronchamp there is this emotional light (...). Then there is a light that I call analytical, which throws itself over the building elements and explains what they are doing from a tectonic point of view. An extraordinary example is the architecture of De Stijl (...). Then there is a third and more difficult light perhaps impossible for us architects to achieve which is ontological light, i.e., light that does not illuminate space but coincides with space. So there is a spatiality of light, and this spatiality transcends the building and light itself onto another plane (...). Another great architect in whose work this light manifest itself in all its power is Mies van der Rohe.<sup>8</sup>

Light is also the element that establishes the relationship between the outside and the inside of the church, and in this sense it links buildings of worship to the community: the relationship between church building and context indicates another important field of action and proposes itself as a reference for places of proximity, for the neighbourhood and for the city.

Gio Ponti's Co-Cathedral of Taranto, born not out of the need for a new church, but for a religious centre that would be the fulcrum in the expansion of the city of Taranto between 1964 and 1970, was not only had to express a new religiosity, but it had to be a major element, the cornerstone for a new expansion. The Co-Cathedral of Taranto was conceived as a central element of the new urban development, capable of dialoguing with its surroundings. Its strategic position and the 'sail' tower, an iconic symbol recalling the city's seafaring tradition, make it a visible and significant landmark. The building is not only a place of worship, but also a space of aggregation and collective identity, capable of representing the link between past and future. The architecture stands out for its ability to combine spirituality and modernity, helping to characterise the expanding neighbourhood. The Co-Cathedral fosters social cohesion and strengthens the community's sense of belonging, acting as a symbolic bridge between the new development and the historic heart of the city. This balance between religious function, cultural symbolism and urban integration makes it an emblematic example of contemporary design.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Quote from the paper presented by Franco Purini at the "Spazio Sacro" conference part of the "Seed 2023 Project. Design Actions for the Future", Assisi – Italy, April 28-29, 2023.

9 See: Maria Maddalena Torricella, *Gio Ponti 1964-1971. Progetto e costruzione di una cattedrale – La Gran Madre di Dio a Taranto* (Venice: Gangemi, 2004), 25.

In conclusion, the investigation into the double register of interpretation, ordinary and extraordinary, even as reconstructed through the three case studies cited, makes available the necessary knowledge capable of supporting the difficult practice of designing and building a church.

## The Experience of Parrish Complex in Dresano

Sacred architecture represents an ambivalent and symbolic design field, where spatial composition and liturgical experience intertwine to create meeting places between the earthly and the divine. In the context of the Dresano parish complex, this relationship manifests through a balance of pure geometries and evocative materials, which engage in dialogue with the surrounding community and its spirituality. The project inspired by tradition but forward-looking, symbolizes collective life and the celebration of the sacred, where architecture becomes a tool for conveying profound and shared meanings.

The layout and architectural composition form the central theme in constructing a symbolic and representative building, serving as a witness to a community united by shared values and meanings. The volumetric definition of space and the composition of forms animate the architectural discourse, integrating light, function, and ritual, and assigning each element a precise and recognizable role. The architectural articulation of the parish complex derives from two elementary geometries: the circle, the purest form, which supports the ecclesiastical building the seat of the "*celebrated Eucharist*" and the rectangle of the basement structure, which encloses a central cloister surrounded by the pastoral ministry rooms, the seat of the "*lived Eucharist*." The church volume marked by its double height, stands at the center of the composition, extending into a paved churchyard. The basement structure spans the east-west axis of the site, developed on a single level, with reinforced concrete elements pigmented with iron oxide to emulate the brick tones typical of South Milan's agricultural architecture, allowing filtered light into the interior spaces.

The two volumes meet at the churchyard, forming a perimeter pronaos that welcomes the faithful while filtering the transition from public space to the sacred place of celebration.

The hall is organized into two concentric circles: the inner circle houses the hall, where the pews converge toward the presbytery, while the outer circle forms an ambulatory that envelops the entire assembly. This ambulatory allows natural light to flood the space and houses the key liturgical elements presbytery, Eucharistic chapel, baptismal font, and confessional. The presbytery, positioned at the culmination of the axial sequence of spaces (churchyard, portal, hall, apse) emphasizes the circular layout while introducing a symbolic axiality, culminating in Nino Longobardi's imposing Crucifix sculpture.

The concept of constructing a church recalls the experience of the Israelites in the desert when Moses returned from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the law and required a sacred space to preserve them. This pilgrim community needed

skilled artisans and architects to create the Ark of the Covenant and the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 24:1-40; 26:1-37). However, human ingenuity alone was insufficient; divine inspiration was essential. The Spirit of wisdom and intelligence bestowed upon Moses inspired the creation of something both beautiful and sublime, bridging the human and the divine.

Religious architecture transcends human skill, as it enters the sphere of the divine. It embodies both the ordinary and the extraordinary, symbolizing a reality that points beyond what is visible to the eyes toward the essence of the divine horizon. In sacred works, the divine spark shines, and human effort gestures toward ultimate reality. Beauty an attribute of God, serves two purposes: drawing the creature closer to the Creator and uncovering the spiritual depths of humanity. Beauty not only pleases the eye but also holds spiritual, social, and ethical dimensions.

A church, for instance, preserves and transmits immaterial values to present and future generations. It also reflects its social dimension, as the life of a Christian community often manifests its charitable mission in addressing the most challenging societal issues.

The architect as a mystagogue guides the observer through the meaning of the sacred space, helping them uncover values and spirituality that nurture their journey through life. The architect's mission requires both intelligence, to understand the needs of God's people, and wisdom, to bring them closer to His presence. In Dresano the lozenge-patterned churchyard encircles the church like an embrace, offering the first encounter with the sacred. This space transitions the faithful from communal gathering to the heart of the church. The circular hall, illuminated from above, enhances the sense of unity among the assembly. Light emphasizes the bright, open stone structure, celebrating the mystery of Christ's resurrection. The assembly is invited to turn toward the presbytery, where Longobardi's bronze Crucifix anchors the space. The symbolism of the Eucharistic celebration evokes the mystical tradition of the Church, represented by the water and blood flowing from Christ's side, the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. The journey continues into the cloister, which houses the pastoral ministry spaces. Here the "*celebrated Eucharist*" integrates into the believer's daily life. The cloister recalls the meditative paths of monastic tradition, emphasizing prayer as the foundation and culmination of all pastoral action. The community, inspired by the light of the Risen Christ, moves outward into the world, bringing with them the joy of the Gospel.



Fig. 1-29 corvino+multari,  
Parrish complex Madonna delle  
Grazie, Dresano 2009-2017  
(photo by Marco Introini).







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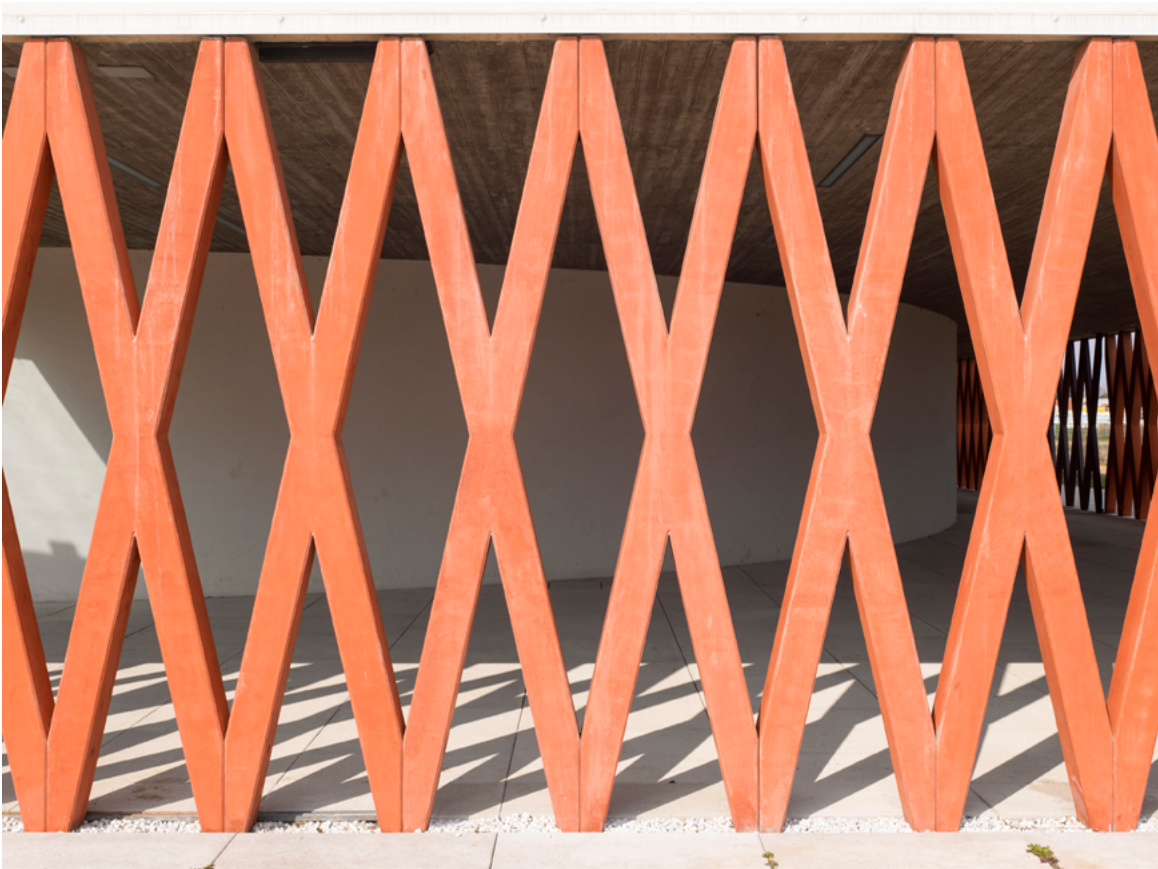


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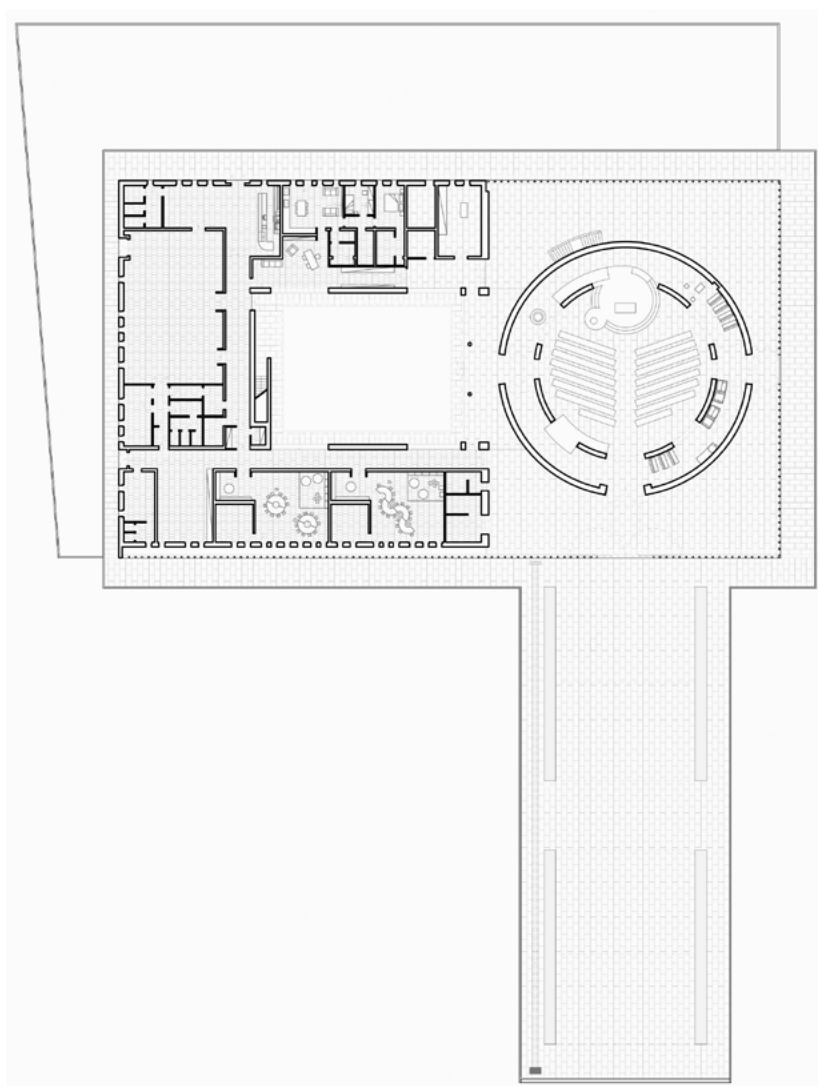
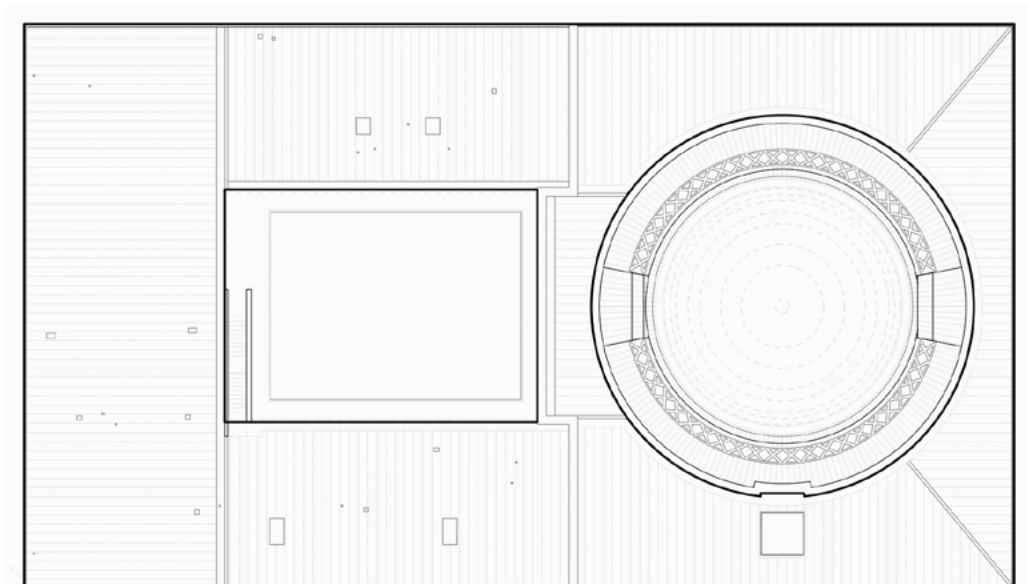
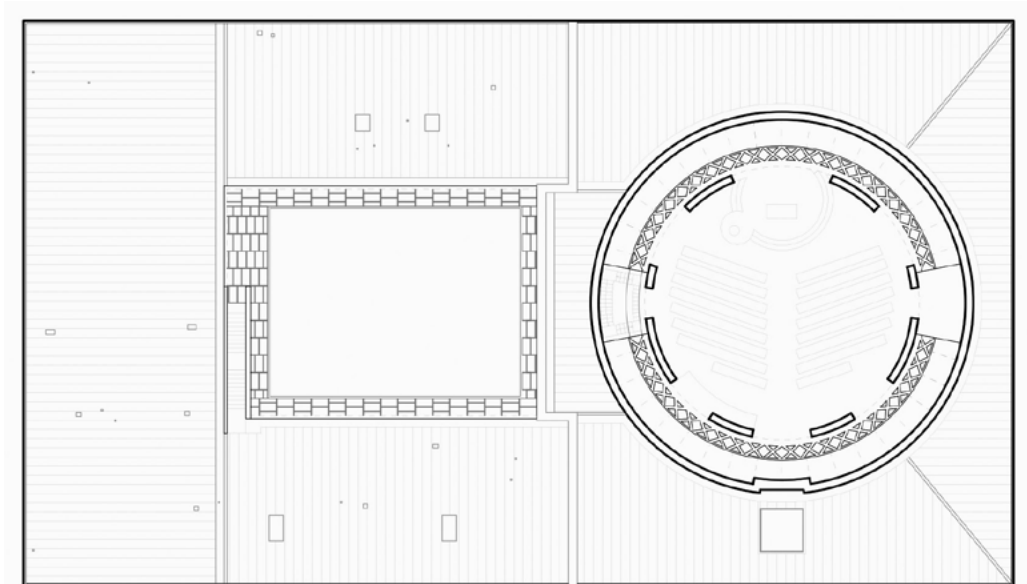


Fig. 30  
corvino+multari, Parrish  
complex Madonna delle Grazie,  
Dresano 2009-2017, plan of the  
urban context (corvino+multari  
archive).

Fig. 31  
corvino+multari, Parrish  
complex Madonna delle Grazie,  
Dresano 2009-2017, floor plan  
(corvino+multari archive).

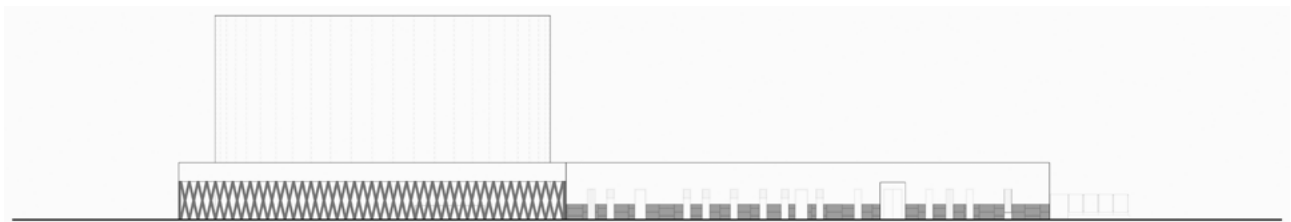
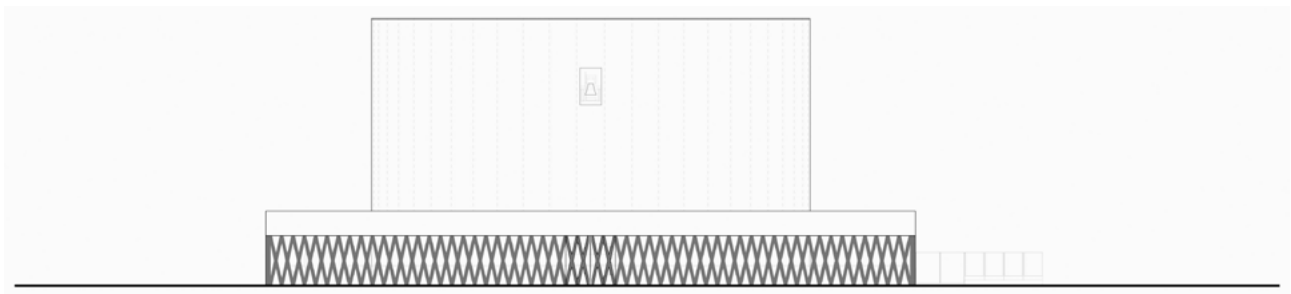
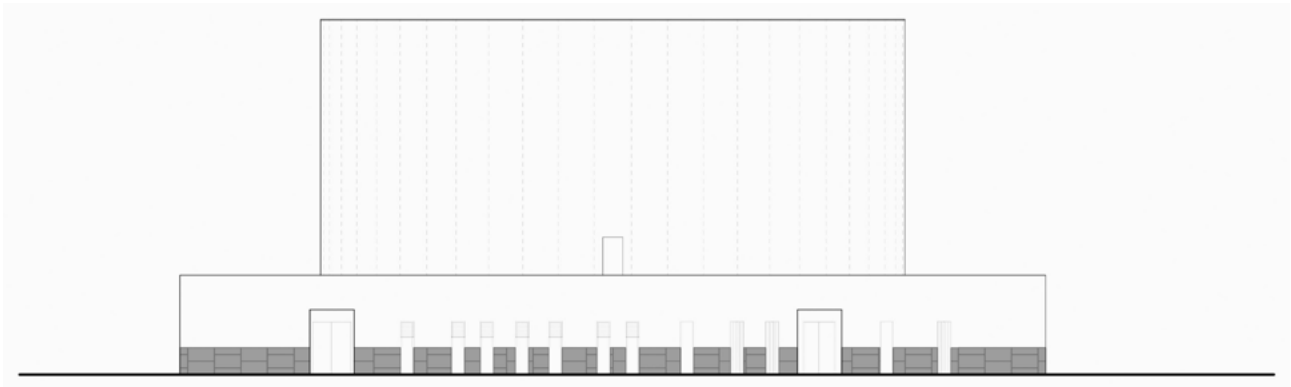
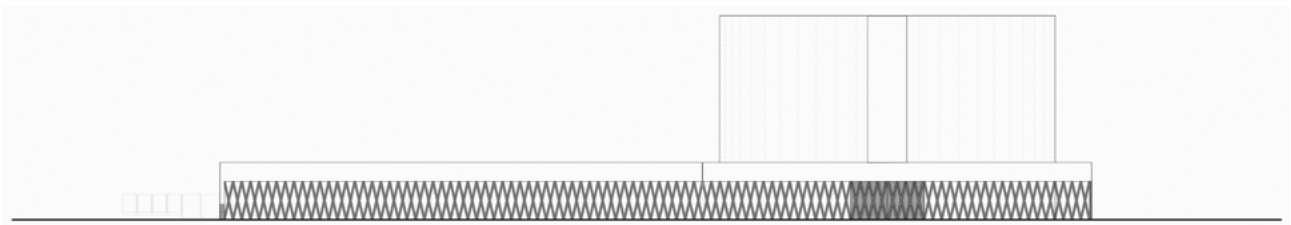


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Fig. 32  
corvino+multari, Parrish  
complex Madonna delle Grazie,  
Dresano 2009-2017, first floor  
plan (corvino+multari archive).

Fig. 33  
corvino+multari, Parrish  
complex Madonna delle Grazie,  
Dresano 2009-2017, roofing  
plan (corvino+multari archive).



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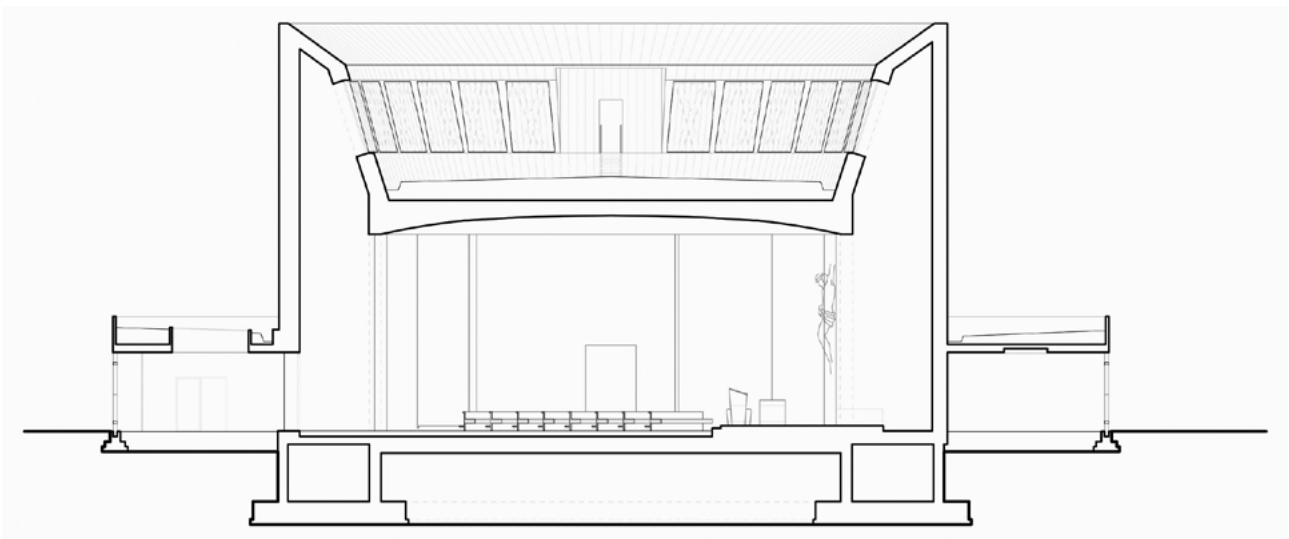
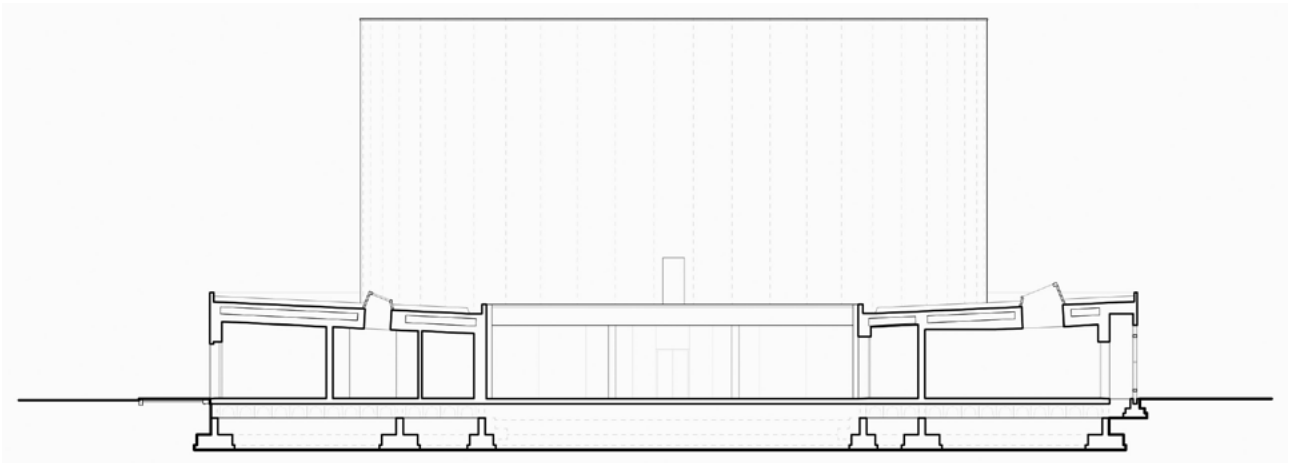
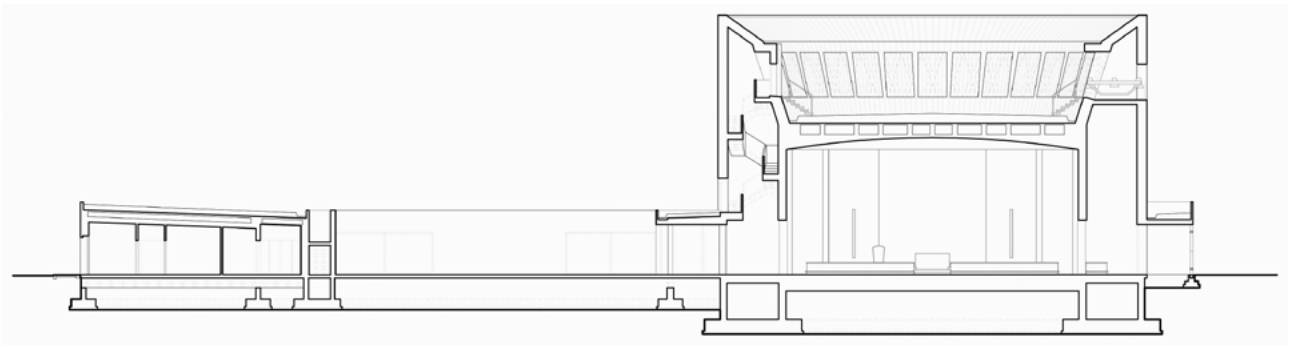
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Fig. 34-37  
corvino+multari, Parrish  
complex Madonna delle Grazie,  
Dresano 2009-2017, elevations  
(corvino+multari archive).

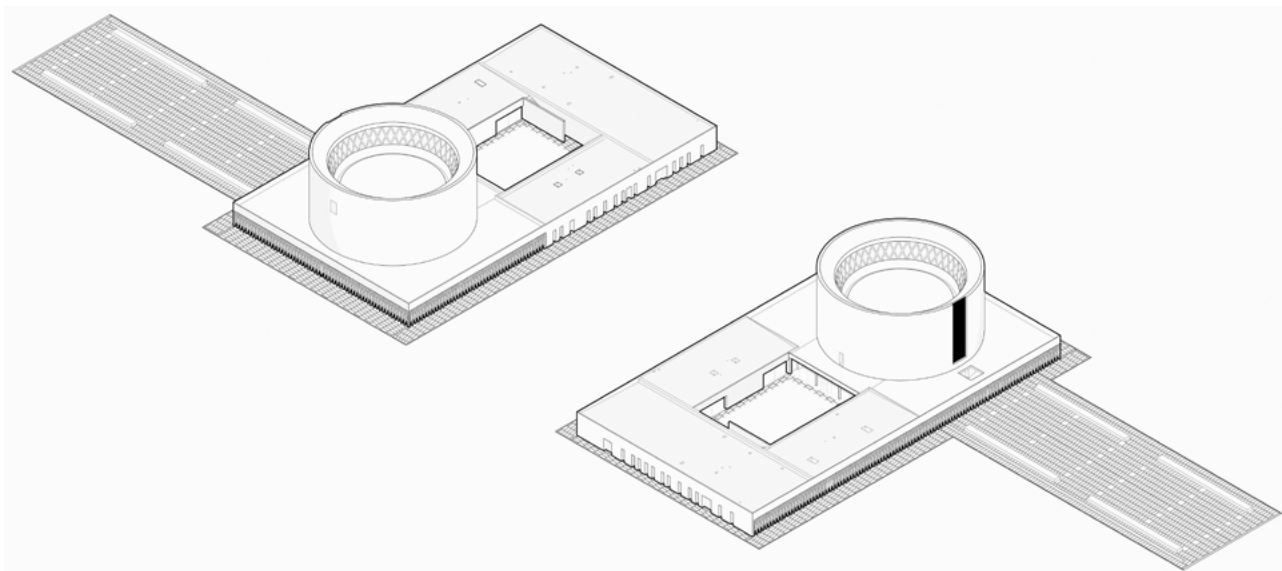




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Fig. 38-40  
corvino+multari, Parrish  
complex Madonna delle Grazie,  
Dresano 2009-2017, sections  
(corvino+multari archive).



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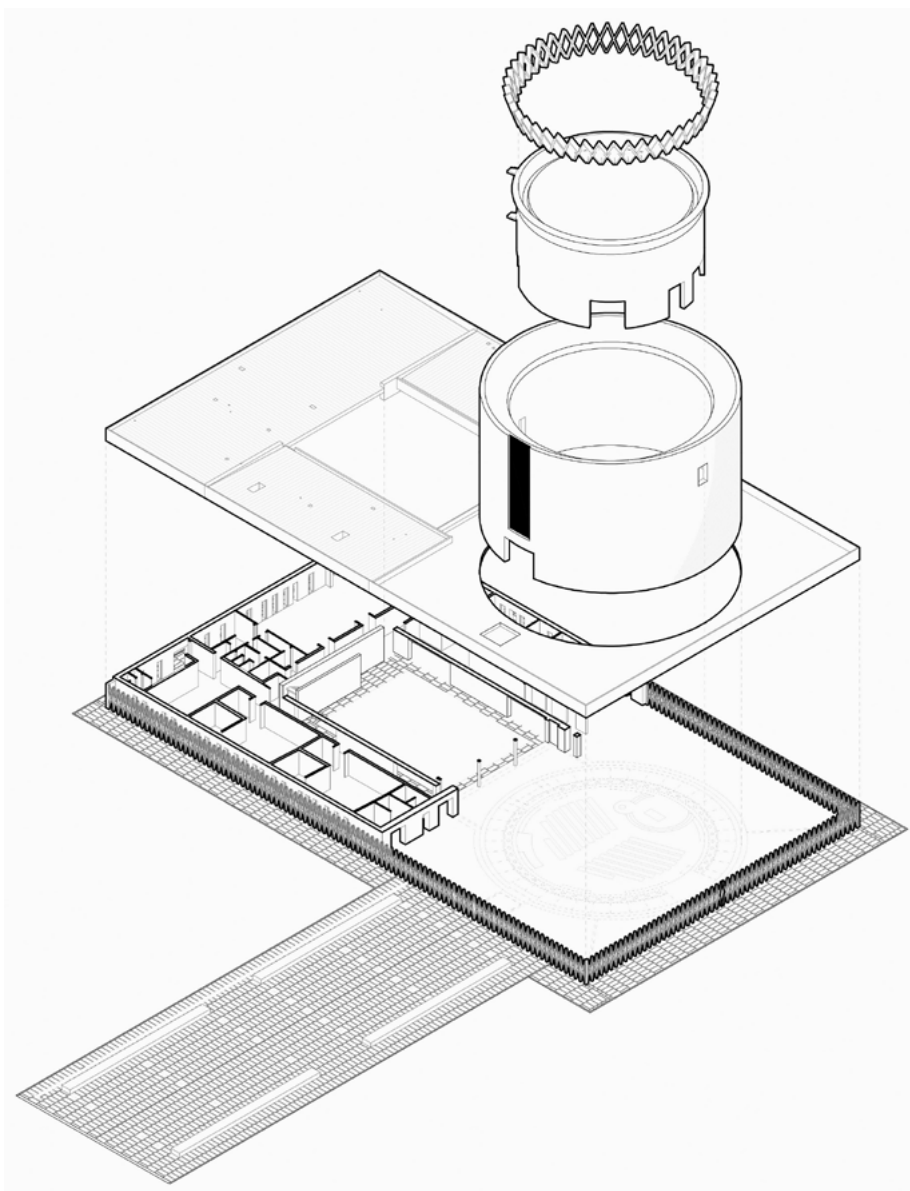
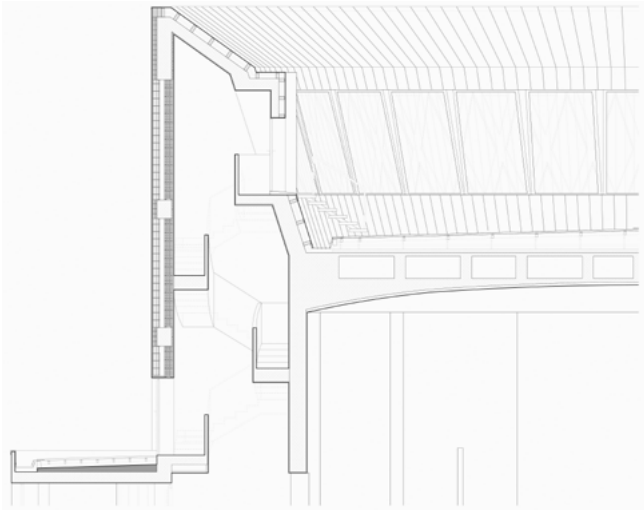
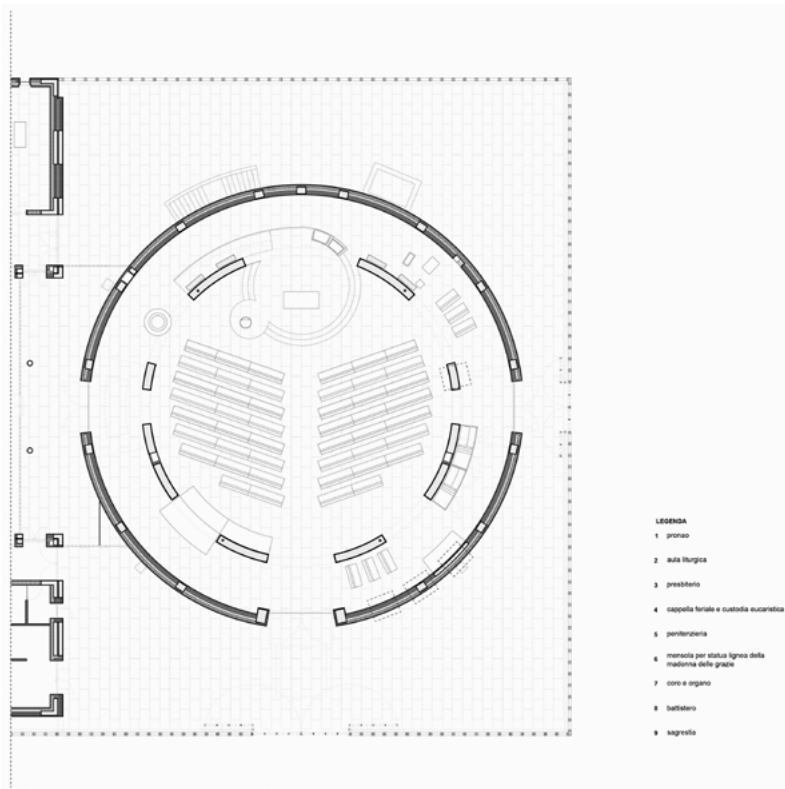


Fig. 41  
corvino+multari, Parrish  
complex Madonna delle  
Grazie, Dresano 2009-2017,  
axonometric views  
(corvino+multari archive).

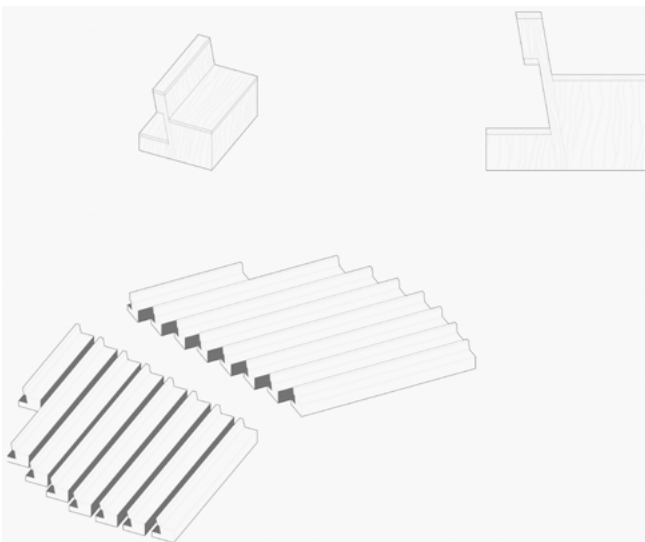
Fig. 42  
corvino+multari, Parrish  
complex Madonna delle  
Grazie, Dresano 2009-2017,  
exploded axonometric views  
(corvino+multari archive).



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Fig. 43-45  
corvino+multari, Parrish  
complex Madonna delle  
Grazie, Dresano 2009-  
2017, construction details  
(corvino+multari archive).

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