

## RECONFIGURATION OF THE LOST UNITY. THE CONVENT OF SAN BIAGIO IN VICENZA, ITALY

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### ABSTRACT

This work concerns Vicenza, a city located not far from Venice in the north-east corner of Italy, and it specifically refers to the abandoned convent of San Biagio on the banks of the Bacchiglione river. Once intimately part of the city's historic center, the area gradually lost its functional and social identity. The idea of restoring that degraded area of the city of Vicenza has long been the object of discussion on the part of local authorities.

The convent of San Biagio is one of the subjects recently investigated by our students at the 'Architectural and Urban Composition 2' course taught on the master's degree in Architectural Engineering at the Department of Civil, Environmental and Architectural Engineering of the University of Padua. The working method is based on the belief that, in the study of urban morphology, is basic to analyse the history of the city, clarifying the relationship between permanent structures on the one hand and temporary ones on the other. The history becomes an indispensable tool to know the deep reasons of the urban structure which is the memory and the image of the community. The methodology looks at the city as a product of functional systems (political, social, economic), but overall contemplates the urban form as a result of its spatial structure. The life of the urban form is then investigated especially in its physical specificity, the only one able of giving reason of its special nature.

The San Biagio area has been affected by heavy transformations that has resulted in the organic unity with surrounding parts of the city being lost. The order and hierarchy of the elements that characterize the form of this old place were compromised. The convent and the church of San Biagio in Vicenza were thought by our students as an opportunity to reconfigure the lost unity of a symbolic and representative place of the city, custodian of its memory and identity.

**Keywords:** Memory, Identity of the Community; Public Space; Urban Analysis; Sustainable Development

### 1. INTRODUCTION. ABOUT THE CITY OF VICENZA

This study focuses, from an applicative point of view, on the historic fabric of the center of Vicenza (Figure 1), a city situated between Venice and Verona in the Northern part of the Italian Peninsula. More in particular it examines the area bathed by the Bacchiglione river near

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to where the desecrated church of San Biagio and what remains of the convent stand. With Padua and Treviso, Vicenza was one of the most important cities of the Serenissima Republic of Venice, the maritime republic that boasted Venice as its capital. With other less important, smaller cities, it was part of a network extending into the region's countryside and including urban centers enclosed behind walls and in the shadow of castles busting with history and art. We must take into consideration that the Republic of Venice was the Italian state which has perhaps most characterized "its own institutions and its own political and cultural autonomy" and has maintained its independence up until the modern era (Rossi 1970).

Like the other cities of the Veneto Region, Vicenza has conserved largely intact its walls, which allow the reading of its urban form as it changed over time (Carta, Magliani, Scarpari, Zirona 1983). The walls constitute, in fact, the real architecture of a city conceived as a collective building. It should also be remembered that the walled cities of the Veneto Region, in this case Vicenza, possess neither center nor peripheral area and present at the end of the Middle Ages definite morphological characteristics which are transmitted to the Renaissance. The fabric of the city at the threshold of the fifteenth century admits few, rare variations: "with its palazzi (urban mansions), houses, churches and public facilities - theaters, hospitals, academies - the urban countenance of Vicenza presents particular monumental architectures in an already formed fabric". (Crippa 1964). In fact, already in the second half of the thirteenth century, Vicenza established precise rules and modalities on how to build volumes. "In 1264 the assembly of the citizens approved the prohibition of tearing down existing buildings and of constructing new structures more than fifteen meters tall. Furthermore, it was required to respect the regulations concerning alignments and care of the city's urban décor" (Rossi 1970).



**Figure 1.** Cristoforo Dall'Acqua, general view of Vicenza in the XVIII century. The city appears surrounded by defensive walls. The urban silhouette was characterized by a multitude of churches and chapels with countless towers.

During the Renaissance one of the most important architecture designed by Palladio, the Basilica placed at the center of the city, is characterized by "the coexistence of gothic masonry and white stone", a coexistence leading to a singular effect "that is typical of Venice and becomes almost symbolic in the Filarete's fragment on the Grand Canal" (Rossi 1970). In a particularly positive way, Palladio inserts its architectures in the urban landscape of cities of the Republic of Venice.

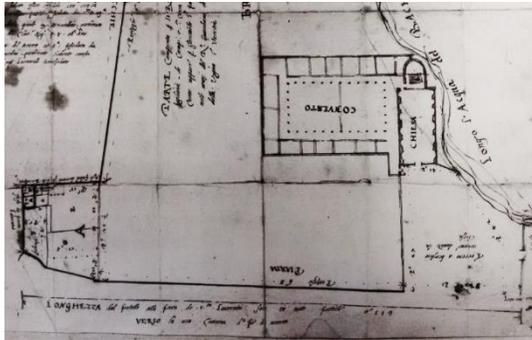
## 2. HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE CONVENT OF SAN BIAGIO

The church and convent of San Biagio were transferred here from a previous location in 1522. The structure of the church was originally composed of a single nave with five chapels on each side and a choir (Figure 2). The facade, marked by four pillars (Figure 3), had a central rosette (Dirani Mistrorigo 1988).

Access to the convent was situated in the south, at the corner of the church's facade corresponding to the churchyard (Figure 4), while the internal connection between the church and the convent was in the north. Of the two cloisters, the one closest to the church is slightly smaller and housed the library, hospital and pharmacy. The second cloister contained the monks' cells, the refectory and the chapter house.

In May of 1797 Napoleon's armies entered Vicenza, ending the long history of the Republic of Venice and declaring the end of its government. The convent was used as a barracks and military prison. In 1812 the conversion of the convent was confirmed, with the barracks on the ground floor and prisons on the upper floors. The church was converted into stables. After coming under Austrian rule in 1813, the barracks and the prison remained operational and no major changes were made.

Vicenza became part of the Kingdom of Italy in 1866. Between 1872 and 1892 the convent underwent radical alterations, notably including the large expansion of the prison through the construction of a massive new wing (Figure 5). Its function as a prison would finally end in 1986.



**Figure 2.** Convent and church of San Biagio, Vicenza, original state. General plan.

**Figure 3.** Church of San Biagio, Vicenza. View of the facade before the transformation of the church into a garage. On the left appears the entrance door to the convent.

The church, only the outer walls of which were kept intact, was granted for use to the R.A.C.I. (Italian Royal Automobile Club) in 1928. It was subsequently transformed into a garage. The facade was removed (Figure 7) and it was internally divided into a duplex to increase capacity (Figures 8, 9). Furthermore the historical churchyard saw the violent construction of a new building for the R.A.C.I. offices, which now houses the municipal offices for the Inland Revenue (Figure 10).

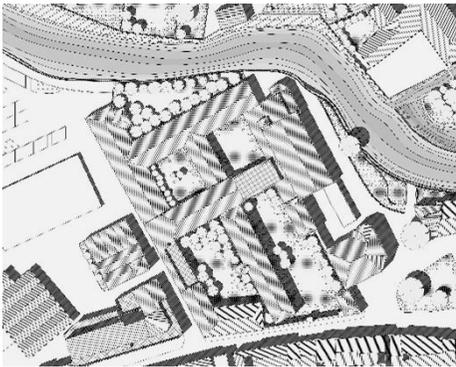
The building complex of San Biagio also hosted other functions for a short time, particularly including school activities and public institution archives.

For several decades now, this important part of the city has been in a state of neglect and decay. Almost completely abandoned (Figure 6), only the parking service within the church is

currently active, which is clearly incompatible with the historical, artistic and religious value of this architecture. The fragmentary evidence of an urban centre full of potential still remains, and it can again become an integral part of the city to which it belongs. In recent years, studies and surveys have been conducted that have unearthed many valuable elements such as frescoes, vaults and capitals of historical and artistic value. However, they have also revealed the need for urgent consolidation interventions.

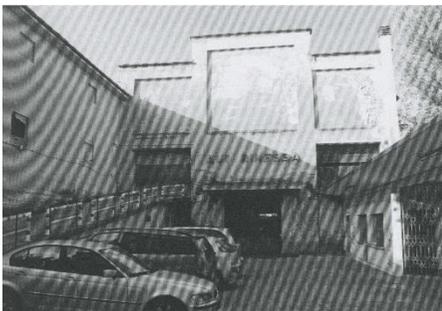


**Figure 4.** Cristoforo Dall'Acqua, view of the courtyard in front of the church of San Biagio, XVIII century. The church partially appears on the left.



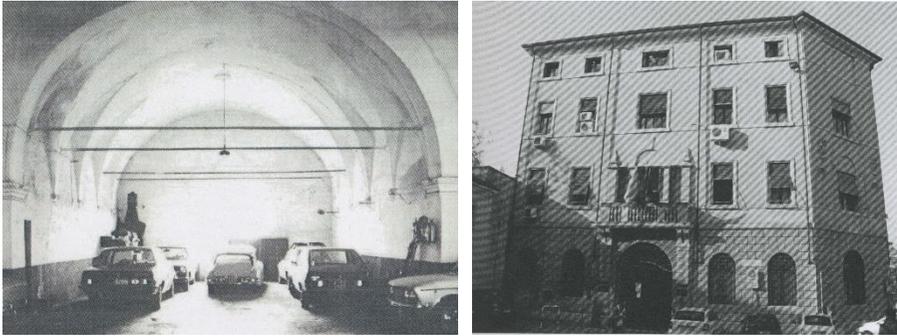
**Figure 5.** Planivolumetric plan of the San Biagio area, current state. From the work of the students Francesca Andreolli and Martina Concordia, academic year of 2015-2016.

**Figure 6.** Detail of the cloister closest to the church, current state.



**Figure 7.** The new facade of the church, transformed into a garage after the year 1928. The ramp loading vehicles on upper car deck inside the church is visible on the left.

**Figure 8.** View of the interior of the church transformed into a garage, lower deck. The former holy space has been divided in two parts through the realisation of a slab.



**Figure 9.** View of the interior of the church. Detail of the choir, upper deck.

**Figure 10.** View of the incoherent volume built in the churchyard which now houses the municipal offices.

### 3. THE SAN BIAGIO AREA AS A DIDACTIC EXPERIENCE

#### 3.1. Methodology

It should be noted that studying the historic town centre in relation to the events of the past that have contributed to defining the current state of affairs makes it possible to gain important information for the development of a reasoned plan to recompose the compromised areas (Semerani 1982). In the didactic experience here presented, it was adopted as a fundamental component the investigation into sources, particularly the iconographic ones.

Our students on the course of Architectural and Urban Composition 2 at the University of Padua, Department of Civil, Environmental and Architectural Engineering (regular professor Enrico Pietrogrande, coworker Alessandro Dalla Caneva, academic year of 2014-15 and 2015-16) based on this principle their proposals for a renewed life in the area.

The general teaching aim was to develop the relationship between analysis and project by studying this important area in the city. As already indicated, the teaching is based on the conviction that surveying the historic urban fabric of the city helps the project since the study of the building cell is the key to reading the whole city, and the analysis forms an organic part of the initial phase of the planning project.

#### 3.2. The student's projects

The projects submitted are based on the same principle: restoring value to a remarkable urban site, the former convent of San Biagio, which has lost its role within the city. Its functional recovery should respect the types of spaces that were present within the former convent, in continuity with the historical forms inherited from the past, for example the cloisters and the church.

The recovery of the convent of San Biagio is so considered as an opportunity to enhance a fundamental monument in the city of Vicenza. As Alberto Ferlenga said: "Recycling parts of the city should provide an opportunity to reflect on how densification or partial destruction can become design themes, or how alterations that add to or integrate with architecturally obsolete but structurally integral constructions can change the appearance and quality of life of entire neighbourhoods". (Ferlenga 2015, p. 51).

The design choice of students Marco Paccagnella e Giovanni Marcolin (Figures 11, 12) originates from a fundamental consideration. They consider demolishing the more recent volumes added to the original architecture, the prison wing in particular, crucial for restoring value to what remains of the old convent nucleus.

The project presents two new courtyards designed in close relation with the convent cloisters. The volume that ends to the south towards the main road is partly arranged in continuity with the historic buildings' street fronts. Part of it is set back and forms a public space with the pre-existing facades and serves as an urban entrance to the entire complex. This urban space has also been envisaged as a meeting point for the different routes that converge in the area.

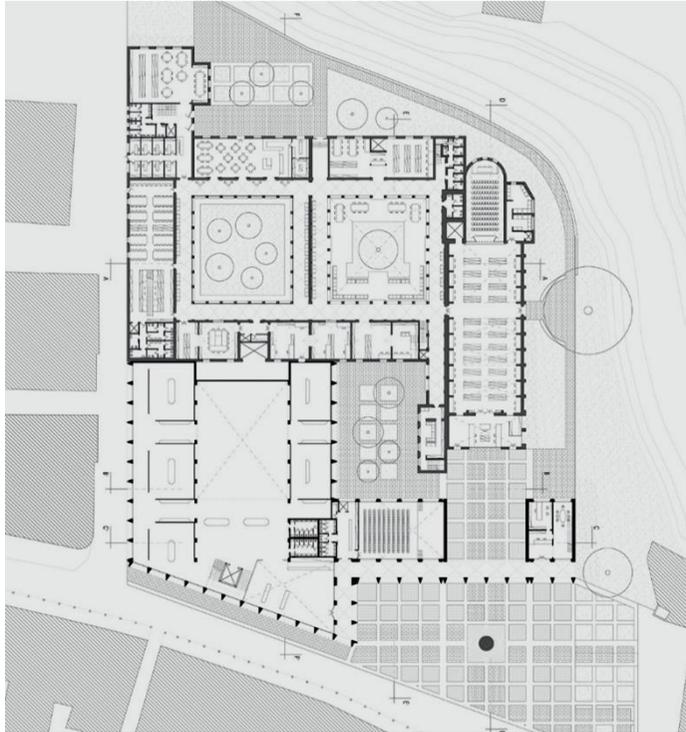
The front facing the street is characterised by a giant, monumental-like porch that recalls the architecture of the Mondadori headquarters in Milan, designed by architect Oscar Niemeyer. The motif of the giant arched portico evokes the same motif repeated on the ancient lateral facades of the church. In addition, the porch is a typological element that is characteristic of the urban form of the city of Vicenza.

Particular attention was paid to the sequence of the public spaces which provide access to the entire building complex, in keeping with ways of constructing urban space that refer back to the tradition of composing paratactic successions of spaces in the city of Vicenza, and in the historic city more generally. The height of the volumes was conceived in relation to the existing urban structures in order to establish visual continuity between historical and modern architecture.

In line with the decisions of the local administration, the proposed design's theme for the redevelopment of this remarkable urban area within the city is that of a cultural centre. The idea of a cultural centre seems to be appropriate for defining a combination of functions that can increase the possibility of generating a dynamic urban place that is open to the city and its inhabitants.

In particular, the cultural centre is characterised by the presence of a library system that arranges the reading rooms through the spaces that revolve around the cloisters. The reference books are in the ancient church's basilica hall, and exhibition and recreational spaces in the newly constructed parts. The choice to place the library reading room in the church makes it possible to give value to this site. In fact, the idea of having a single reading room space coincides with the typological basilica arrangement of the ancient church, which was compromised by the addition of floors and partitions in both the horizontal and vertical planes in the twentieth century.

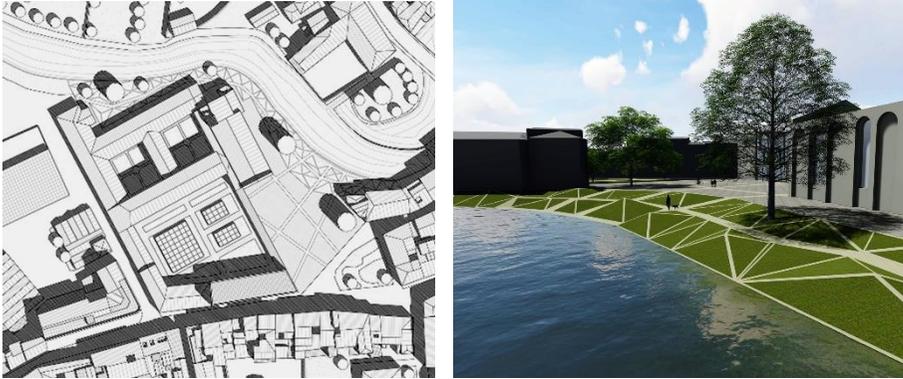
The project by students Sebastiano Favaro e Luca Scancelli (Figures 13, 13, 15) starts from the same premise as Paccagnella and Marcolin. Their design strategy is to enhance what remains of the old convent of San Biagio after eliminating the additions from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. New volumes will be added to the original nucleus, arranged on the land of the convent's missing original cloisters. In this way, the original unitary form of the old convent of San Biagio can be recovered. The remaining interior space will not be occupied by a double court as a mirror repetition of existing cloisters.



**Figures 11, 12.** The San Biagio area converted in cultural centre. Plan of the ground floor and new facade on the Contrà Pedemuro San Biagio. Proposal made by the students Marco Paccagnella and Giovanni Marcolin, academic year of 2014-15.

Instead, it has been deliberately designed as an undivided large urban square open to the diverse cultural needs of the city. Within this empty space, glazed roofs emerge covering the three underground double-height spaces. The empty space in front of the former church refers back to the existing old forecourt and becomes urban public space, serving as the point of access for the entire complex. The space of the forecourt and the square are mediated by a volume intended as a porch connecting the two urban spaces. As in the previous case, the students recognise the intentions of the municipality administration, whereby the area is to be redeveloped into a cultural centre. The functions proposed by the students are similar to those of the previous design; however, they are arranged in a different way within the complex. In

fact, the space for the library with the reading rooms is located in the double height underground spaces under the square.



**Figures 13, 14.** Planivolumetric plan and view of the public garden between the church and the river. Project solution designed by the students Sebastiano Favaro and Luca Scancelli, academic year of 2014-15.

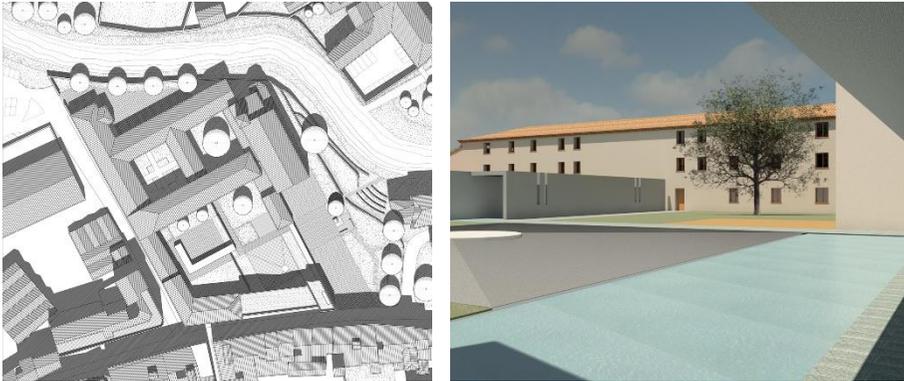


**Figure 15.** View of the churchyard and the building complex of San Biagio, Vicenza. Proposal created by the students Sebastiano Favaro and Luca Scancelli.

The students paid particular attention to the redevelopment of the outdoor spaces. The space next to the old church that comes into contact with water has been repurposed, recovering the public space that is currently unusable and dilapidated. The arrangement of this stretch of land by the water is meant to stitch the land and water together, as well as enrich the city with new urban routes.

The design developed by students Marco Cecchetto e Luigi Forlin (Figures 16, 17) envisages the demolition of the buildings that altered the complex's original appearance, as in previous cases, and introduces features compatible with the building's nature. The redevelopment of the outdoor spaces was carefully considered with the aim of enhancing the relationship with the Bacchiglione River.

The church is currently used as a garage. The restoration project involves the demolition of a small building located behind the facade that was built in the mid-twentieth century as a ticket office, as well as the removal of the concrete ramp leading to the upper level of the garage.

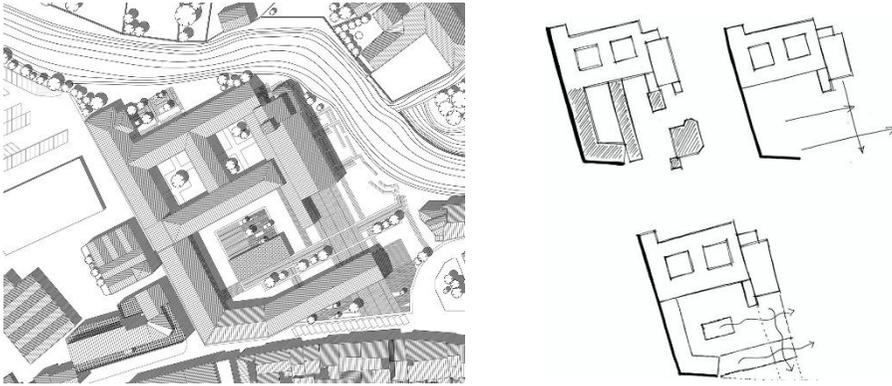


**Figures 16, 17.** From the work of the students Marco Cecchetto and Luigi Forlin, academic year of 2014-15. Planivolumetric plan and view of the convent from the churchyard.

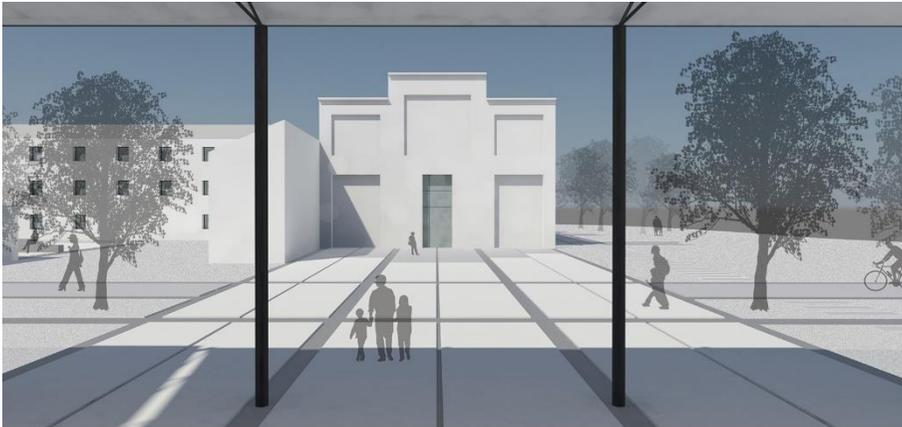
It is also envisaged the demolition of the twentieth century building in the churchyard in the south which currently houses municipal offices. The intention behind this is to restore the church square that was originally present and provide direct access to the church structure. The church's facade, which is already compromised, will be replaced with glass. In doing so the church will be emptied of all its improvised structures, and the increased light entering from the new glass facade is very well suited for the placement of a public library serving the city of Vicenza. The interiors of the former church will be restored to their original state, with a single nave covered with wooden trusses.

This project proposal also includes the demolition of the nineteenth-century wing built as a prison, which does not integrate well with the nature of the convent. This results in the formation of a courtyard in close relations with the churchyard square. This space is further characterised by a partition wall that divides the court into four different environments, each with its own spatial quality. The sequence of spaces introduces the entrance to the convent building, which is designed to house the state archives. Part of the complex is intended for warehouses, offices and rooms for temporary exhibitions.

The outdoor area towards the Bacchiglione River is reclassified from an environmental point of view. The plan involves expanding the staircase structure that slopes down to the river with amphitheatre spaces, thereby improving access to and use of a space which has great potential. The goal of students Francesca Andreolli e Martina Concordia (Figures 18, 19, 20, 21) was to define a place for social relations that interacts with the city and its citizens' needs, with a focus on young students and local families. For this reason and from a functional point of view, they propose repurposing the convent spaces as university residences. The ground floor includes the cafeteria, study rooms and recreational rooms, while the upper floors host the rooms for students. The university-based character of the entire intervention is reinforced by a library located in the deconsecrated church of San Biagio where students can study and which provides access also to the public.



**Figures 18, 19.** Planivolumetric plan and design scheme from the work of the students Francesca Andreolli and Martina Concordia.



**Figures 20, 21.** View of the former church from the churchyard, view of the interior space. From the work of the students Francesca Andreolli and Martina Concordia.

The steel structure on the inside of the church's recovered aisle is deliberately placed in the centre of the space, detached from the perimeter walls to enhance the original basilica hall-like form.

The south side of the complex has been almost completely redesigned in order to serve as a filter between the city and the new complex of San Biagio. The side directly facing the road has a long porch that opens onto the river. This building ends with a canopy in line with the church, which also frames the facade. The geometry creates an interior courtyard with a more intimate space and a bar with a few outdoor tables in the centre. The entrance to the residence halls is located on the east side of the courtyard and runs parallel to the church, which is closed on the west side and open to the river. The new and existing parts will be connected by flooring running along the main axes, in particular the one that connects the church facade with the marketplace.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The deepening of the relationship between architecture and culture in the city formed the basis of the planning hypotheses illustrated in this article in agreement with the conviction that it is fundamental in teaching to promote a synthesis between knowledge and action. The consideration of the pre-existing environments and the widest picture of the historic built environment represent an indispensable instrument in promoting a new layout and cultural structure based on territorial needs. The study of the transformations of the spaces and shapes developing through time represented an indispensable premise for making the planning proposals that aim at reconstituting a coherent urban fabric in which different uses play a role in connecting the distinct monumental phenomena present. The search for a formal reordering is motivated by the conviction that architecture is a fundamental tool for promoting a new cultural and social asset in the areas investigated, where the new architecture draws inspiration from the needs of the territory and the events that have shaped its development.

In addition to being the basis for further architectural research and discussion, it is hoped that the ideas of the students, and their theoretical works, will become instruments for a fruitful and direct dialogue with all those involved in the town, particularly the town administration. This degraded area in the heart of the city can be made harmonious and coherent by means of new architectural projects for public functions, formulating a new integration of the urban fabric torn apart by choices that neglected the context.

The teaching experience has proven to be effective in making the relationship between teachers and students a cohesive one. The architectural projects presented by the students, that is the most important aspect of the paper, could become starting points for in depth study and discussion and form an instrument for a direct and immediate dialogue with those who care for.

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