

This book documents and analyses the experience that has seen students and professors of the Politecnico di Milano collaborating with the Municipality of Pecetto di Valenza to create a short circuit between the university's training and research activities and the needs of the public administration to find solutions for the redesigning of Carlo Orsini Primary School and Joseph Canepari Afterschool Learning Centre.

An important opportunity for students in training, but also for academic researchers, to operate in a context where there is no simplification of reality, but in which the confrontation with the public administration that defines the requirement framework takes place directly and without filters. It is also the demonstration of the role of university, with its triple action of training, research and "third mission", as one of the fundamental poles of the new knowledge society.

In Pecetto di Valenza a creative, participatory and open design process was tested, capable to guide the transformation of the School to meet new and different social and community demands. The approach that emerges from the proposals synthesized in this book integrates the correct response to innovative didactic and pedagogical models with feasible technical-constructive solutions and identifies the "need" of pupils and teachers as the guiding criterion of the choices.

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Redesigning Carlo Orsini Primary School and  
Joseph Canepari Afterschool Learning Centre

edited by  
**Giovanni Castaldo**  
**Pierluigi Salvadeo**  
**Andrea Tartaglia**

# Redesigning Carlo Orsini Primary School and Joseph Canepari Afterschool Learning Centre

introduction

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texts

**Giovanni Castaldo**  
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**Andrea Tartaglia**

# **Redesigning Carlo Orsini Primary School and Joseph Canepari Afterschool Learning Centre**

  
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## The didactics of the project between theory and practice. Carlo Orsini Primary School and Joseph Canepari Afterschool Learning Centre of Pecetto di Valenza ... a fragment of the town

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The Carlo Orsini Primary School with the Joseph Canepari Afterschool Learning Centre of Pecetto di Valenza is, on a small scale, a fragment of the town where it is possible for young students to experience more transversal and authentic socialization processes, relating to classmates and people of different ages, in a natural way, thus as it happens in the family or the everyday social life. The mixed classes of the school are composed of pupils of different ages, who are facilitated in accommodating their own development phases and individual learning pace by following a common path with the same teacher. The teachers at the school even claim that mixed classes favour the possibility of learning from each other, encouraging mutual help and pushing competition. Furthermore, being able to compare themselves with more capable or less experienced schoolmates, boys and girls have even more chances of feeling valued in their potential and personal attitudes. Hence, starting from these assumptions, the thesis formulated to launch the School's reorganization project was to hypothesize the study of a new type of simple and flexible relational space, which was conceived, at least initially, as "overgrown and invasive" at the same time.

Indeed, as already mentioned, the school's didactic project envisages the idea that certain types of social relationships or vital expressions, which normally characterize life outside the school perimeter, in the family or society, can bring some aspects into the School. It is desirable that such an open and inclusive educational project would be able to generate new and virtuous behaviours even outside the classrooms. These effects will be measured in the future, but they could also have much more rapid impacts both in time and in space. The project should be able to generate conditions of use that could in turn trigger new virtuous constitutive processes and have an effect even outside of the school, in the use and articulation of the spaces that inside are projected outwards, to the point of invading other places and other contexts. In short, by launching the School's reorganization project, it was thought that this could be an opportunity to imagine a new balance between the use of its

internal spaces and some fragments of those complex dynamics that characterize human relationships outside the institution and in the everyday life.

A place where the story of life is not only taught but where it can be authentically lived and experienced. Therefore, a school is conceived as a fragment of existence, as a small piece of the town, complex, articulated, inclusive, often as complex as the town itself, but always stimulating and positive. That same town includes "texts" of different natures, also belonging to other worlds that lead, if necessary, even outside the spaces of architecture: a large plankton of different styles and forms, of uses, of places, of environments, of enclaves of technologies, services, information, languages. In our cities, space has ceased to be described only for its architectural characteristics to become a complex use structure, where the residential, productive, and service functions are freely distributed on a continuous uniform plane. Moreover, today our actions are often nothing more than a continuous superimposition of situations of different nature, which happen in places that are also very different from one another and in an indifferent way both indoors and outdoors. An inhabited whole, which is expressed in a panorama of diversity, is always traversable and organized as a sort of continuous system.

This complexity, made up of deforming and performing multilevel contents, multi-textual expression to be understood as a clear outcome of contemporaneity. The competition for the reconversion of the Carlo Orsini Primary School originated from this conceptual framework. The quality of the space could no longer be determined solely by the architecture but, as for the contemporary town to which the proposals refer, from a broader system of relationships between subjects of different nature. The project is conceived as a sort of curatorial practice capable of entrusting quality not only to the characteristics of the space but also to its possibilities of use. The possibilities are understood as the generating and propulsive forces of the project itself, which should not propose finalized projects, but be open to further available processes of constitution and use. That should not be achieved through definitive architectural solutions but, on the contrary, through adaptation of the space for possible uses, considering the young students not so only as users but also as actors who can move through spaces following imagination. This logic would certainly have pushed the architectural project towards other horizons, more open to experimentation, more transversal and capable of taking care of many other impulses and thrusts from the outside. Thus, the aim was for a space that strongly identifies with the actions that take place in it and which does not necessarily have its main reference scenario in the architecture.

A project that evolves towards new territories, often difficult to describe with the classical architecture language and not perfectly understandable or universally shared, but certainly with a strong dynamic, performative and inventive capacity. In contexts imagined in this way, the perimeters within which the project usually operates fade and different impulses arise, beyond those of the architect that contributes to the definition of new spaces. Therefore, in this sense, we speak of curatorial practice, as a sort of disintermediation of the role of the designer, no longer understood as a demiurge and mediator between the universe of ideas and their materialization, but rather understood as part of a more complex process of dialogue between real practices and theory. To use a metaphor, the architectural project should look more like a theatrical direction project in which the director brings together all the components of the work making them dialogue with each other, even those that are apparently in contradiction with each other. Therefore, no coincidence that the elaboration process of the project of the School of Pecetto di Valenza was highly participatory and organized with the intervention of a large number of designers involved. This is a way to express different points of view and ideas about the future of the School through discussion and creativity.

Precisely starting from these same assumptions, already ten years ago a sociologist and media theorist David Gauntlett wrote an interesting essay in which he supported the current vital need for our societies for comparison and synergistic use of the capabilities, that would allow us to implement complex and participatory design processes capable of opening up to different sensibility in developing the project, virtuously modifying our way of imagining and doing things, and thus helping to promote happiness and well-being (Gauntlett, 2011). This is exactly what we tested in Pecetto di Valenza: a creative, participatory and open design process that is capable of opening the future of the School to new and different social and community demands. An experience that also took the form of a two-way enrichment (collaboration) both for the Orsini School and for the students of the Architecture courses who had accepted to participate in this particularly challenging activity. In general, the university, with its triple action of training, research and “third mission”, represents one of the fundamental poles of the new knowledge society as represented by Etzkowitz (1993). That is, a propeller with three blades (academia, state and industry) rotating around the same axis. In this sense, its activities must not only interact but also intersect with the worlds of

<sup>1</sup> The “third mission” of the Italian universities has been defined by the ANVUR (Italian national evaluation Agency of the university system and research) as the propensity of the didactics/research structures to be open towards the socio-economic context, exercised through the enhancement and transfer of knowledge.

production and public administration, or rather with society in general. The university must continuously confront and relate to reality and operational practice in order to fully fulfill its training function.

Even more when the training concerns fields such as architecture where the theoretical vision and the abstraction of evolutionary models find a real moment of verification in the practical experimentation by the end users. The architectural project is “a plural, dialogic and multiple instrument, which can anticipate environmental transformations and manage the challenges of the quality of cities and urban life, of multi-ethnic societies, of economic and social responsibility, of climate change, of the overcoming of the dependence on fossil energy and of the needs of knowledge and progress. The result is a process of scientific research, which progresses with theoretical reflection and finds concreteness in the experiential and pragmatic comparison” (Bellini & Tartaglia, 2020: 169). Hence the need for students in training, but also for teachers, to be able to operate in contexts in which there is no simplification of reality, but in which the confrontation with the public administration that defines the requirement framework takes place directly and without filters. At the same time, the proposals cannot avoid being configured considering the possibility or “risk” of having to move on to the implementation phase. Phase in which the designers have to assume important levels of responsibility with respect to the real quality of the proposal. However, these initial experiences cannot simply be transferred to typical internship in the professional field, but rather a separate essential experience within university framework is necessary.

The internship in the professional field is a moment of first immersion in the world of work, in which students face different organizational and management models. The intern discovers the administrative bureaucratic component linked to the project approval process and experiences the interaction with other professionals. Moreover, the intern perceives the difficulties in managing the relationships between the different actors involved in the interventions. Furthermore, the intern may discover the versatility required to adapt to an already structured context, in which it is necessary to take part in a collaborative and proactive way. The opportunity to operate in the design process with real responsibility for the interpretation of the requirements framework recalls also for the importance of keeping coherence between the theoretical setting of the proposals and their development towards solutions capable of guaranteeing their feasibility.

But this coherence is often lacking in the professional field: there is no need to have an





Main facade of the town hall and school building.



Courtyard of the school.



Detail of the facade of the school building.

overall vision and control of the process and its possible outcomes, not only regarding the technical aspects but also and above all cultural and methodological ones. Only the university can guarantee the construction of an operational framework in which the student can then carry out this type of experience in a controlled and rigorous way.

Experiences that cannot be requested or even “imposed” on a professional structure, based on different assumptions from those of an academic reality. It is even more evident in the era in which the digital transition is pushing professional structures to strengthen their staff, especially about the management of the project information framework through the appropriate software tools – which in some areas also have a legislative obligation – but also towards the production of documents for the communication of the project in which the graphic component overcomes the architectural content. Therefore, this makes the involvement of interns in the real design and development process of design contents increasingly rare.

It is consequently necessary to develop new experiential forms of relationships among the university as research and training institution, the professional world in which entrepreneurial aspects must objectively guide choices and public administrations as referents capable of directing processes in line with the needs of a society whose elements of crisis represent the action priorities for a designer. Furthermore, the project of a school, even of small dimensions such as that of Pecetto di Valenza is an emblematic theme to be faced by designers who are themselves students.

A theme in which the young designers can bring back elements of experiences not so distant in time, identifying themselves more easily with the little users. It is easy to understand the needs and requirements of the teaching staff, who are often able to formalize very clear and coherent requests. However, it is more difficult to understand the perception that children have of the spaces in which for many hours they develop fundamental experiences for their growth not only cultural but above all personal. The theme of the school also represents a centrality, or rather criticality, at the national level and for which 5.2 billion euros have been reserved in the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) for the construction of nursery schools, kindergartens, and innovative schools, to enhance the canteens and the gymnasium, but above all to redevelop the school building stock. The heritage that presents important critical issues to the state of maintenance with also real safety problems for users. However, above all, a school system relies more than other building typologies on structures born for very different pedagogical and educational models in which spatial constraints limit the possibilities of experimenting with new teaching

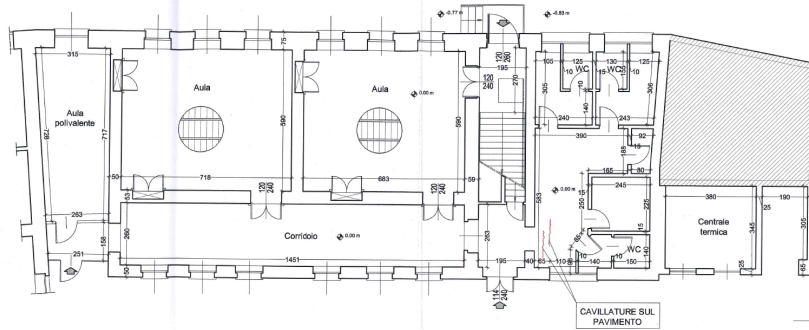
forms, and of quickly reorganizing spaces to articulate different teaching forms during the same day. Even the equipment of the spaces themselves reflects traditional models that are no longer adequate and therefore it becomes necessary to rethink spaces and equipment managing to decline abstract models in already existing spaces in compliance with the specificities and peculiarities of the original structures.

We must place in this scenario the experience that has seen students and professors of the Politecnico di Milano collaborating with the Municipality of Pecetto di Valenza to create a short circuit between the university’s training and research activities and the needs of the public administration to find creative and unpredictable solutions. The projects presented were numerous and each of them provided articulated answers not only on an architectural level but also from the point of view of the proposed use of the space. In most of the proposals the narration prevails, conceived not so much as the description of the project itself, but as the anticipation of the tales and stories that will be able to take place in those same spaces. These are narrations that drawings and words convey and it is completely indifferent to read a text or look at a drawing, so much so that when reviewing the projects, one can often find oneself, conversely, reading a drawing or looking at a text. Just like Gio Ponti did when he sent his unforgettable drawn letters to friends and clients.

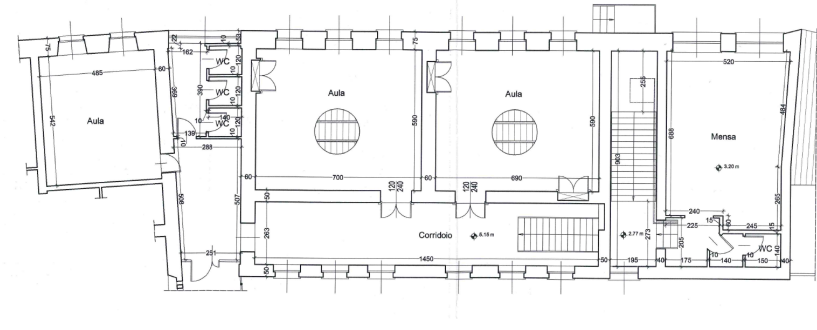
Due to that, when scrolling through the proposals, the description of the actions is mixed with the design of the spaces, highlighting research paths in which new connections of meaning very often trace strong partial solutions, distinguished by acute weak connections. Demonstrating that more than the general architecture, what matters above all are the specific solutions of use that the individual parts of the projects propose and to which specific architectural and figurative solutions correspond.

It is from this point of view that the questions that the projects bring into play seem to be more important than the answers and, more than the final results, the underlying ones. However, this reflective and questioning attitude was in the presuppositions, and so coherently with the premises, all the proposals put the project before the analysis, the supposed before the presupposition, the action before the theory. The approach that in the proposals well integrates with clearly feasible technical-constructive solutions and in which the “need”, understood as the correct response to the didactic pedagogical desires, is the guiding criterion of the choices in many projects.

Elements that at first glance might seem ornamental or decorative are in many proposals closely related to the needs of a space for the growth of pupils structured according to



Ground floor.



First floor.



Classroom in 2021.



Classroom in 2023. Photo by Federica Sirangelo.

up-to-date educational models and which see experience, sensory stimulation, and the multiplicity of possible teacher-learner relationships as essential elements of quality.

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Corridor at the ground floor in 2021.



Corridor at the ground floor in 2023. Photo by Federica Sirangelo.

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