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#MAESTRO

il quaderno | the ISI Florence Architecture Series

03

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The ISI Florence architecture series  
SPRING 2018

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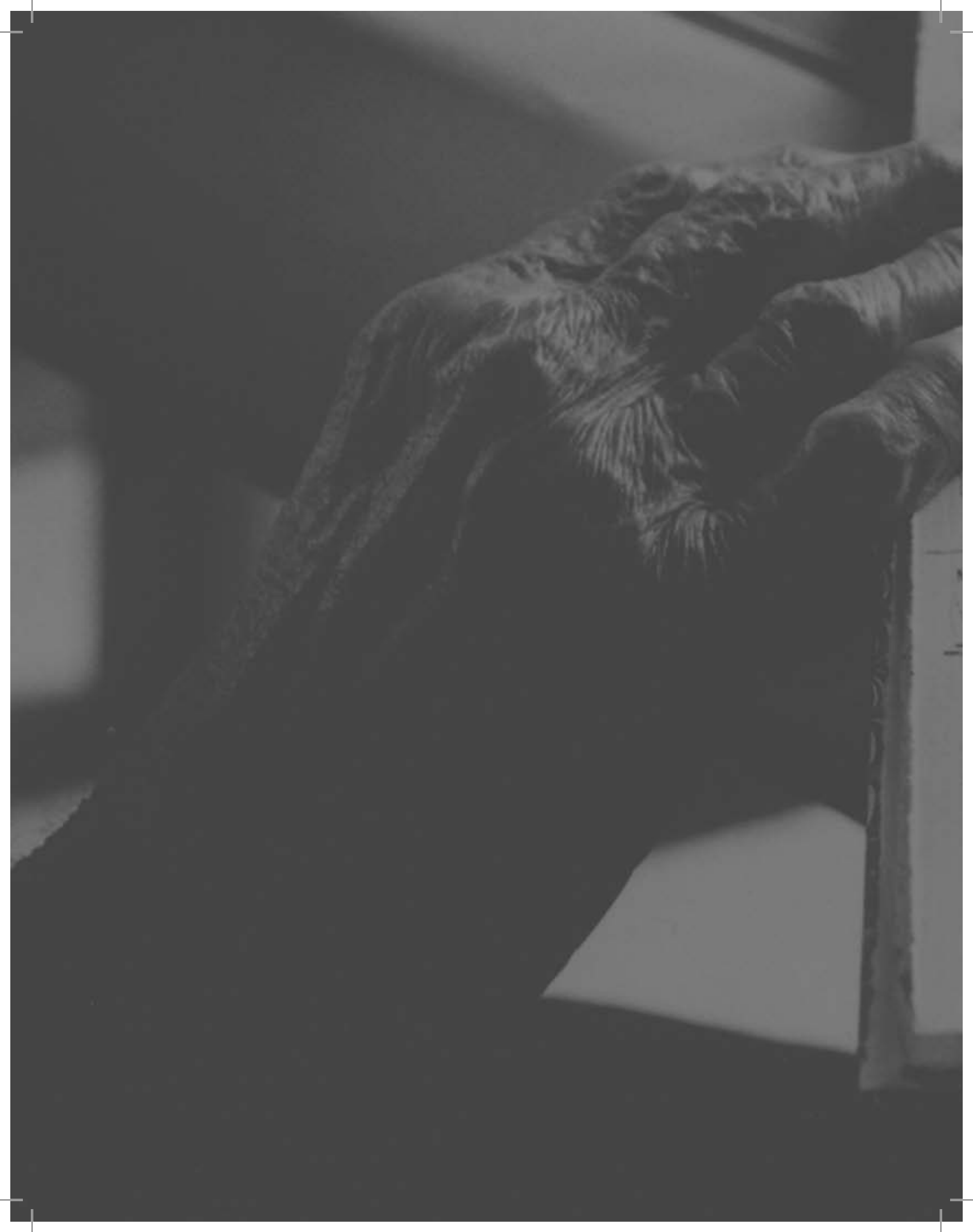
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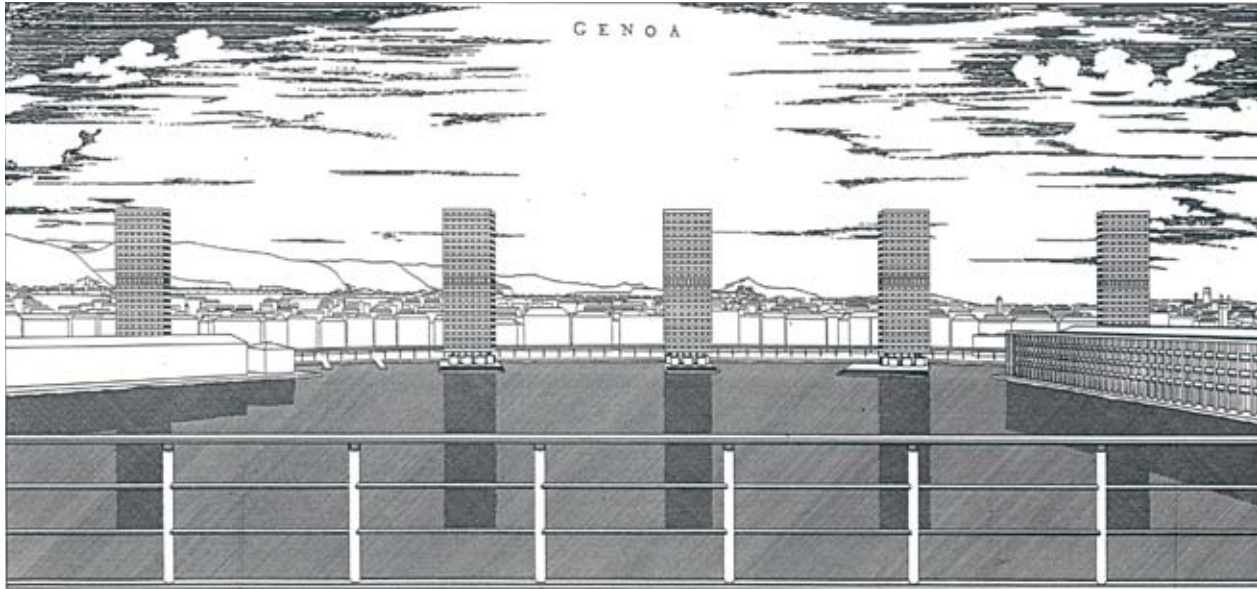
# Mentoring Architecture: Two Different Examples

Alessandro Rocca

I can say that my educational journey was especially long, because of various reasons: my trust and passion in mentors, the long temporal extension of my studies, the traveling through different cities and universities, and, last but not least, my juvenile fickleness. At a certain point of my student career, after some years of doubts and hesitations, I was eventually able to face and overpass some difficulties and leave Genoa to go to Rome, to study under the mentoring of Franco Purini. He was the architect and professor capable of seducing me with his drawings and projects, and I can say now that he was, at that time, the only active connection between architecture and me. In those seminal years, I did not pay any attention to architectural practice. After some internships, as a drafter, in architectural firms both in Rome and Genoa, I got a feeling of total reject of two focal points of architectural practice: the relationship with the client and the construction process. I discovered later how interesting these two fields can be, and how much I lost in those years. Because, in those years I was passionate about drawing and writing, both intended as solipsistic practices, unrelated with any real architectural work. In my eager quest for the real meaning of architecture, Purini's work and teaching gave me the perfect answer: architectural composition. The formal research, the arts of drawing and writing, were for me

the field of activities that best suited my passions and, somehow, my skills.

We were in the eighties, when Italian architects and historians were leading the world's scenario, and when any theoretical excess appeared useful and desirable. In that atmosphere, Purini embodied for me the mentor, the guide who made architecture worth a real passion, for his rich humanist culture, for the peculiarity of his drawings (I still find them beautiful) and for the clarity and complexity of his speech. Also, there was another aspect that made Purini, in my eyes, more appealing than other masters, and this was his belonging to Roman environment, and his constant reference to Roman classical architecture and culture. He was an intelligent medium between the grandeur of Roman heritage and a contemporary Italian and Roman Renaissance, putting together the peerless fascination of antiquity, with its archeological aura, the bold radicalism of some Fascist examples, and the possibility of a brand new Roman architecture. His belonging to the so-called Scuola Romana, where he played a leading role, was relevant, making evident the possibility of a large Italian movement recognized at an international level. This point, for me, made Purini more interesting than Aldo Rossi, who related his version of Rationalist architecture with more Nordic references, such as Milanese Neo Classicism.



Alessandro Rocca, *Urban Development in the Old Port of Genoa*, MSc thesis project, supervisor Franco Purini, Università La Sapienza, Roma, 1988.

I liked Roman travertine, the Holy City's special skies and sweet hills, the plastic evidence of all its architectures, from ancient Rome to the Baroque masters and the heroic modernists, such as Adalberto Libera, Giuseppe Moretti, the eccentric Armando Brasini, and Ludovico Quaroni. In comparison, the Milanese aura of Aldo Rossi seemed to me wonderful, in its poetry, but also pale and quite incorporeal. In Rossi's work I was missing the heaviness of stone and concrete, the plastic effects of structures and materials, the southern contrast between light and shadow. The other aspect that seduced me, in Rome, was the strong relationship with the landscape. If Milan is a city made of buildings and urban fabric, streets and piazzas, Rome is a city made of buildings and landscape. The Roman downtown is the archeological core: the fora and the Palatinum, the Caracalla Baths, etc., where there is no city but just monumental remains plunged in marvelous natural frames. Purini kept this substance, from Rome, and elaborated a series of quite theoretical projects of villas and houses located in the Campagna Romana (Roman countryside), catching and developing the inexpressed deep relationship between the city and its silent, archaic surroundings, where the enchantment of Claude Lorrain's and Nicolas Poussin's arcadian views still resonates.

Purini also bravely measured his thought and design

with classical orders, carefully studied and drawn by the students in his classes, and Giambattista Piranesi, with the opinions of Manfredo Tafuri and Colin Rowe, and with the projects and texts of Robert Venturi and Peter Eisenman. His classical references, initially hidden under a super-rationalist approach, sprang up with the Postmodernist movement. With his partner, in work and life, Laura Thermes, they participated in the 1980 Venice Biennale directed by Paolo Portoghesi, building one of the facades of Strada Novissima. In those years classical elements appeared in his projects, such as the out-of-scale cornice he put over the front of Castelforte city hall, in a competition project of 1983.

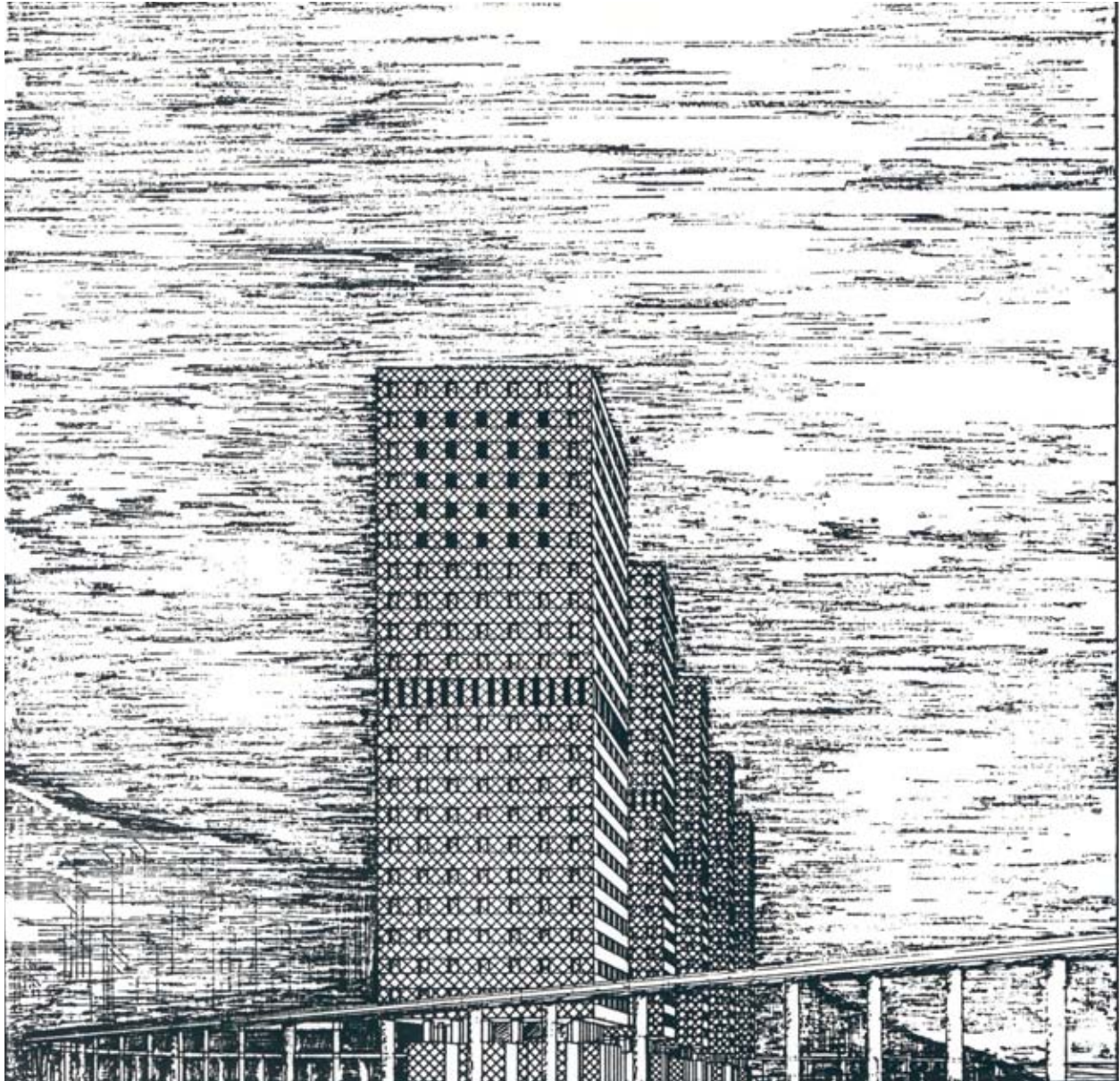
Purini also contributed to the hectic publishing activities of those years with remarkable books, such as "Luogo e progetto" (1976) and "L'architettura didattica" (1980), which remain a precious testimony to those golden years, the age of cardboard architecture. I know that my love story (intellectually speaking) with Purini is exceptional just for me, and that it is so similar to many analogous biographical souvenirs of many other architects, each one mentored by a teacher who, at one peculiar phase of their education, unveiled some dramatic statements that appeared as the true essence of architectural design. In the following years I met other mentors, but, so



to speak, I had already lost my virginity, because the first mentor is like the first love, which remains different, more intense and unique, than all others. Even if I have to admit that the “Purini effect” was not a first imprinting but it arrived at the end of my student’s career and it acted as a complement, and also as a contradiction and an overpass, of my previous architectural education.

Flashing back to the beginning of my architectural consciousness, I could say that I draw a lot from the architecture and the urban form and landscape of Genoa, the city where I was born and where I spent my first twenty years, and where I started studying architecture. Each city is different, especially in Italy, where mid-size centers like Genoa have a glorious past of state capitals, and where their own history, aristocracy, language and culture, are still alive and operate in molding beliefs and behaviors of their citizens. Now, I am not interested in resuming the typical Genoese characters. I was never passionate about social studies; rather what really mattered to me was the physical consistency of the city, its matters and its views, its orography and stratified and compressed historical layers. Here architecture develops a very original set of relationships with urban space and fabric. The old town, still based on its medieval footprint, is so compact, dense and continuous that it can be understood as a lonely, huge building, infinitely complicated, in its shape, but also compliant with a reduced range of rules that resonate everywhere, in every corner and alley. This mysterious and powerful body, well explored in Michael Winterbottom’s movie “Genova” (2008), became understandable, and accessible, through the teaching of another great

mentor, Ennio Poleggi, professor of urban history at the local school of architecture and author of the best book on Genoa ever (Ennio Poleggi and Paolo Cevini, “Genova”, 1981). The harsh aspects of this downtown, which was, and still is, huge, poor, and in a state of severe and extended decay, were really enthralling me. I was captivated by how almost every building was a secular compound of different layers, adaptations and extensions that, while different in each case, followed more or less the same processes, techniques and rules. It was evident that there was a corpus of non-written guidelines, regularly updated, which drove the making and the remaking of the city in the last thousand years. Each ordinary building was remade, transformed, elevated, and enlarged many times: almost always you can recognize a medieval basement and Renaissance details, such as monumental entrances and stairs, and late Renaissance modifications such as larger windows, redesigned elevations with more recent upper stories, and further recent modifications such as roofs and window frames. In this continuous post-medieval ever changing fabric there are exceptions, elements of permanence, that are usually noble palaces made of the unification of existing old medieval houses mixed together in a more modern complex. One also finds remarkable palazzos built ex novo as those aligned along the famous Strada Nuova, the Genoese Renaissance monumental avenue which was laid down in 1550, at the border of the medieval town. This complex changed the notorious lustful brothels’ quarter in the most luxurious and elegant district, representing the conspicuous wealth of the more powerful Genoese families. This built fragment of



Alessandro Rocca, *Urban Development in the Old Port of Genoa*, MSc thesis project, supervisor Franco Purini, Università La Sapienza, Roma, 1988.

ideal city inspired Pieter Paul Rubens, who drew and published beautiful images of the magnificent palaces, and later Paolo Portoghesi, who from this extraordinary place took the idea of the Strada Novissima, built inside the Corderie at the Venice Postmodernist Biennale of 1980. Also, as strangers in a mono-ethnic crowd, you meet unexpected modern buildings, which occupy the empty spaces provoked by WWII bombings: usually they are architecturally poor, suffocated by the oppressive

density of the medieval town, humbled by the major richness of the ubiquitous patrician palazzos. To stop this flow of memories, I must admit that I had some other #MAESTRO, older colleagues and friends who, before and after the stories I reported here, gave me a lot of ideas, suggestions and enthusiasm for architecture and other fields, such as literature and landscape. The whole bunch of my mentors, whom I'll try to list on another occasion, has been very important to my education. In fact, they are unforgettable.