

# Redevelopment of the Urban Area of the Former Canossian Oratory within the City Walls of Feltre

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## Abstract

This paper concerns the redevelopment of an urban space within the historic walls of Feltre, an ancient city located in the province of Belluno, not far from Venice. It is particularly focused on the disused Oratory of the Canossian Friars, at the top of the medieval city. The site is now abandoned and degraded, devoid of function and unresolved in form. It is located close to the city's main square and is bordered by pre-existing buildings of relevant historical importance, including the Castle, the Napoleonic Stables, the Clock Tower, the Civic Museum and the Church of San Rocco.

In another respect, the former Oratory of the Canossian Friars, which was investigated by our research group at the Department of Civil, Environmental and Architectural Engineering of the University of Padova, is proposed as a case study regarding the relationship between new and old.

**Keywords:** Regeneration; Urban Analysis; Memory; Identity; Public Space.

## 1. Introduction

The theme presented here concerns an area located in the oldest part of the city of Feltre (Figures 1, 2), at the base of the castle, to the east of it. The area (Figure 3, 4), within the circle of the city walls, consists of buildings of different ages and origins, some of which are now disused and abandoned, arranged around a large forecourt now used mostly as a car park (Figures 5, 6, 7). Due to its location at the top of the hill on which the historic part of Feltre stands, known as Colle delle Capre (Goats' Hill), the area maintains an intense dialogue with the natural context surrounding the city and the valley below. It is located near the main square of the city, Piazza Maggiore, which today has an exclusively administrative vocation due to the lack of commercial activities and meeting points frequented by the community.

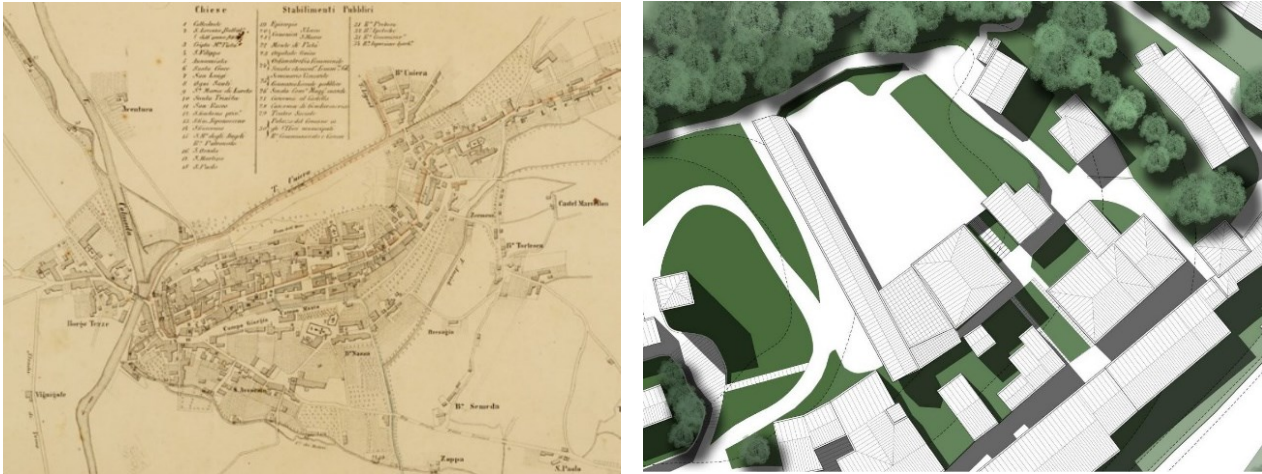
Two buildings, in particular, characterise the site: the buildings of the former Oratory of the Canossian Fathers, which define its southern boundary (Figure 8). The volumes are separated by the axis of the Villabruna climb (Figure 9) that, initially in the form of a flight of steps, connects the forecourt object of study to Via Lorenzo Luzzo, a key urban axis located at a much lower level. Over time, a third volume was added on the south side of the forecourt to the two buildings, to saturate the void in relation to the elongated building present on the west side.

The two buildings of the former Oratory of the Canossian Fathers, which stand out for their size, quality of workmanship of the construction parts, consistency and degree of preservation, date back to the 17th and 18th centuries. They are the result of successive extensions carried out as the needs of the religious function changed. They appear today as an abandoned place, devoid of function and on the whole unresolved in form.

On the west side of the forecourt is an elongated volume that constitutes a continuous, mute presence with no openings. The building, which in Napoleonic times housed the stables of the occupants, now houses the rooms of the Civic Library with access from the opposite side facing the surviving remains of the castle. It includes a reading room, archive and services. In correspondence with this building there is a significant change in the height of the land: the building in fact presents towards the castle a low façade directly corresponding to the library rooms and towards the forecourt a front of much greater height, with a reinforced concrete wall in the lower part having the function of containing the terrain. The difference in altitude between the access floor of the library and the forecourt is approximately 4 metres.



**Figure 1.** Domenico Falce, *Feltre, view of the city* (17th century).

**Figure 2.** Feltre, today's view of the town dominated by the remains of the castle.**Figure 3.** Historical map of Feltre, 1866.**Figure 4.** Planivolumetry of the area that was the subject of the project activity. The large square now used as a car park is bordered to the west by the building in line that houses the Civic Library and to the south by the buildings of the former Canossian Oratory. To the east, isolated, is the small Church of the Holy Trinity.

To the north and east, the forecourt is defined by a boundary wall that is interrupted at the corner between the two alignments to give way to the driveway entrance. The series of buildings directly involved in the project theme ends with the small 15th-century church of the Holy Trinity located to the east, in an isolated position (figure 10) beyond the boundary wall and the narrow Salita Turrigia road that starts at the city wall gate called Port'Oria (Oria Door).

The setting up of the library in the elongated building was realized with the intention of helping to attract citizenship to the old town centre, but this objective does not seem to have been achieved since even today the Piazza Maggiore and its surroundings are still modestly frequented by citizens. This is the aim of the project proposals presented below, which consider environments and buildings of historical-artistic importance that have to be revalorised as public spaces and as architecture.

The design experience of the research group tends to construct civil places of living by interpreting the city as a unitary fact with a clear and distinct form made up of interconnected spaces, formally different from each other, but related in rich spatial sequences which express the civil character of the city (Figure 11).

## 1. Methodology

The contribution considers the typological and morphological studies and the theory of space elaborated by Uwe Schröder (2015) to be fundamental for the redevelopment of abandoned and degraded areas within the historic city centre. Whenever the architect gets the opportunity to deal with an urban theme, in other words to build a fragment of a city – because the city today can only be built by parts that are formally complete and unitary in the relationships they establish (Capozzi, 2023) – the objective to which it aspires is to offer, as a gift, a place in which the community recognises itself and to which it feels it belongs. A beautiful place for this, a theatrical space (Ungers, 1998) made of architectures designed to organise according to a certain order (Capozzi, 2023) a scenic backdrop to the civil rites of men's lives. When the need arises to build a new fragment of a city, perhaps within a historical context, the first thought turns to the form this place should take.

The architect is not concerned with giving an immediate response to the conditions of necessity of architecture (utility, solidity) that he already sees as outdated, but rather with giving them something more – a form (Rossi, 1995) – to make the architecture beautiful, not only responding to material requirements, but to the desires of citizens to represent human values (Orfeo, 2017).

This is a noble aspiration, a great dream (Zecchi, 2006) that one can also renounce. But, renouncing the desire for the form to respond to the fullness of men's ethical and civilised life (Carpinzano et al., 2018) would force the architect to produce artefacts devoid of quality, perhaps well resolved from a functional, constructive and technological point of view, but destined not to be part of the world of architecture if not thought out in terms of form. Because, from the point of view of the arts, of which architecture is also a part, building a beautiful place is above all a problem of form. This condition of necessity that links architecture and form explains the interest of designers in history, considered the place where to find the operational tools for the construction of a conscious project aimed at enhancing the urban space of the city. The Masters of architecture, with respect to this aim, have acted in exactly this way, learning the lesson of history, considered as the place - the container of forms - in which to re-find the principles generating the project. A procedure, that of the study of history and its examples, which therefore does not have an exclusively cognitive character, but an operational one. The architectures of the past, although different in style and language, can all be traced back to the application of similar principles, adopted to survive the passage of time.



**Figure 5.** Zenith view of the castle area and the square under study with the buildings around it.



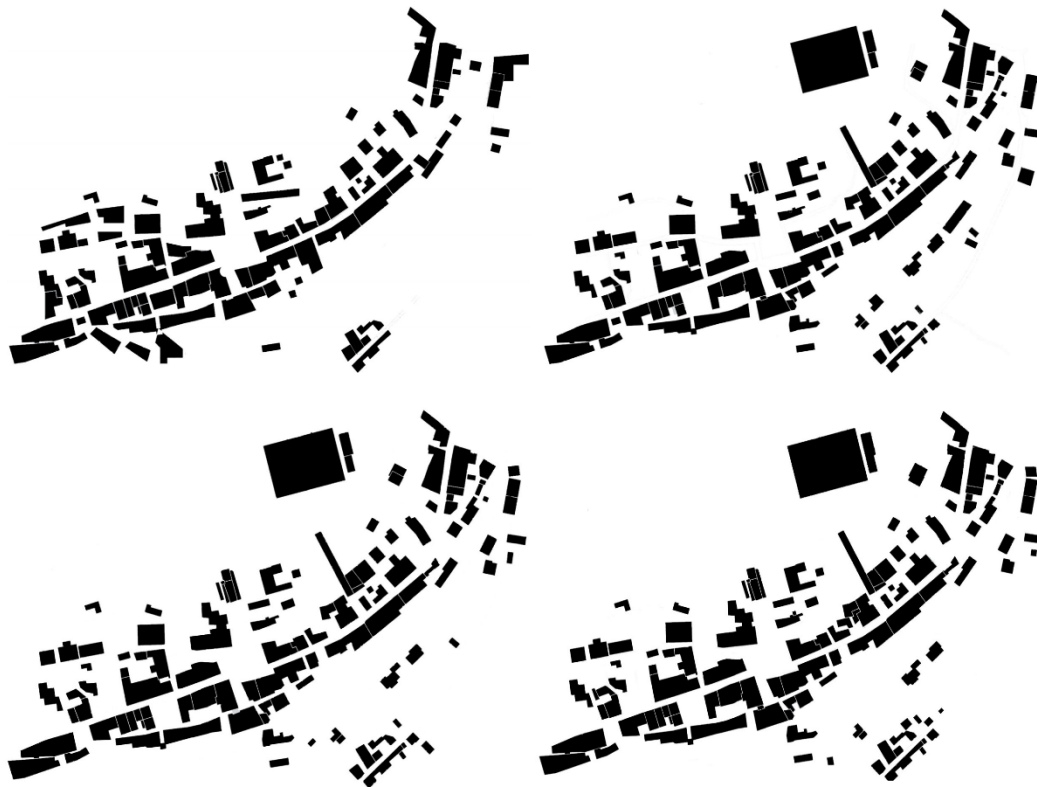
**Figure 6.** View of the forecourt from the driveway entrance. The building housing the Civic Library is in the background.

**Figure 7.** The elongated building where the Civic Library is located seen from the opposite side.

One of these principles, among all, seems important to us. The one that refers to the construction of space to which historically, on the other hand, architecture is destined. Hendrik Petrus Berlage, for example, who made a cognitive journey of the architecture of the past by exploring cities in the East, summarising this experience in the drawings of his travel notebooks (where he redrew the places he passed through with monuments, building complexes and urban spaces) arrives to consider architecture as the result of the application of a few fundamental forms. “If we now want to understand the essence of architecture – Berlage wrote – then the first question to be answered will be: what is meant by building? This can be answered by saying that the purpose of building - because a practical art must have a purpose - is to separate a part of infinite space on earth and make it available to man (...). It goes without saying that hand in hand with his own spiritual development, man slowly seeks to improve his dwelling, so that the result is a circumscribed space, delimited by four walls and enclosed by a roof, whether flat, which is easier to achieve but not sufficiently secure against rain, or pitched, for which an initial form of architectural composition is now needed” (Berlage, 1934).



**Figures 8, 9, 10.** The main of the two palaces of the Canossian Fathers seen from Via Lorenzo Luzzo; the Villabruna climb leading to the square from the south; view of the small Church of the Holy Trinity.



**Figure 11.** Structure of urban space in Feltre: 1866 (top left), 1959 (top right), 1987 (bottom left), 2022 (bottom right).

We have come to consider space in its form and its irreducible elements, the result of subtracting a finite portion of space from the infinite space offered by nature. This is the theme constantly at the base of architectural design – especially in times of crisis – already theorised by Vitruvius, who, with regard to space, identifies its origin, its sacred and civil value in an act of deforestation.

Even today, drawing a boundary is equivalent to an act of foundation according to sacred and civil rituals (Raggiu, 1995). The city was in fact born in this way, drawing the line of the walls to distinguish the shape and boundary of the city from the outer infinity. Because the delimiting to separate a finite interior from an infinite exterior is not only a material physical sign on earth, but already from its origin and manifestation appears as an act of appropriation and construction of a new world that is characterized by the birth of a culture of living ordered more on values than on empirics.

This is why the sacred flame of the hearth burns in the private space of the domus and in the public space of the piazza, under the protection of the family Lares of the former and under the protection of the public deities of the latter. Tracing the limits of being is accompanied by the desire to make space beautiful. Beautiful in order to respond to the representation of social living, which is not only satisfied with tracing arid signs on the earth, walls embedded in the ground, but to imprint in them the enduring symbols of civilised living. To respond to that atavistic decorative impulse

that from primordial caves is now transferred - according to a more rational design - into the decisive elements for the construction of space. And so partitions become walls, vertical point structures become columns, taking on the appearance of figures full of meaning representing civilised living when they make a fine show of themselves in the design of the unitary space that they configure (Schröder, 2015).

The delimitation of space gives rise to an emptiness that, as Renato Bocchi reminds us, in the Western tradition “is the subject of a procedure of true construction that disregards the work of excavation, but rather works on frameworks and scaffolding and the constitution of rooms”. The empty space thus understood refers back “to the archetype of the enclosure, the the megalithic circle of Stonehenge, all the way to Laugier’s hut, the architectural refuge founded on the trilithic construction resting on the ground, and on to the Greek temple and beyond. Empty space is contained, limited and defined by a precise geometric-architectural foundation and construction, with its own geometric and tectonic rules, which configures empty space itself according to a cast derived from the spatial coordinates determined by the application of those same rules” (Bocchi, 2011). For millennia, the ancient city was built according to the concept of enclosed and limited space. The spaces of the city are the repetition and reification of this concept. Just as the interior space of the dwelling appears through enclosure, that is, through the arrangement of walls, so the public space of the city is defined by the arrangement of walls, those of the building fabric that organically delimit the continuous spaces of the city. For architects and town planners, the key points were a few squares and some main streets that represent for a city what a hall represents for a palace. When we look for the reason why old squares and streets give us a pleasant effect, we realise that it is attributable precisely to the ‘enclosed’ nature of these spaces. This was a secret known by the old masters. The theory of space promoted by architect Uwe Schröder stands within the same thought. Uwe Schröder shifts the focus from the type-morphological sphere and the relationships that elements (type, block, street) establish between them to recognise in space, in the relationships between spaces, different in character and hierarchy, in their organicity, the true motive for the constitution of the space of the city: “The city as a big house establishes a system of architectural spaces. The order of society is enshrined in the arrangement of the spaces of the city and the house” (Schröder, 2015). Schröder indicates a typology of spaces that bind together to represent, with respect to position, hierarchy, order, a way of life in which the community recognises itself. It is precisely the appropriate syntactic relationships between spaces that represent the sense of space. A limited space, recognisable as an internal space, even when it is an open square, but limited along the perimeter, open to the sky.

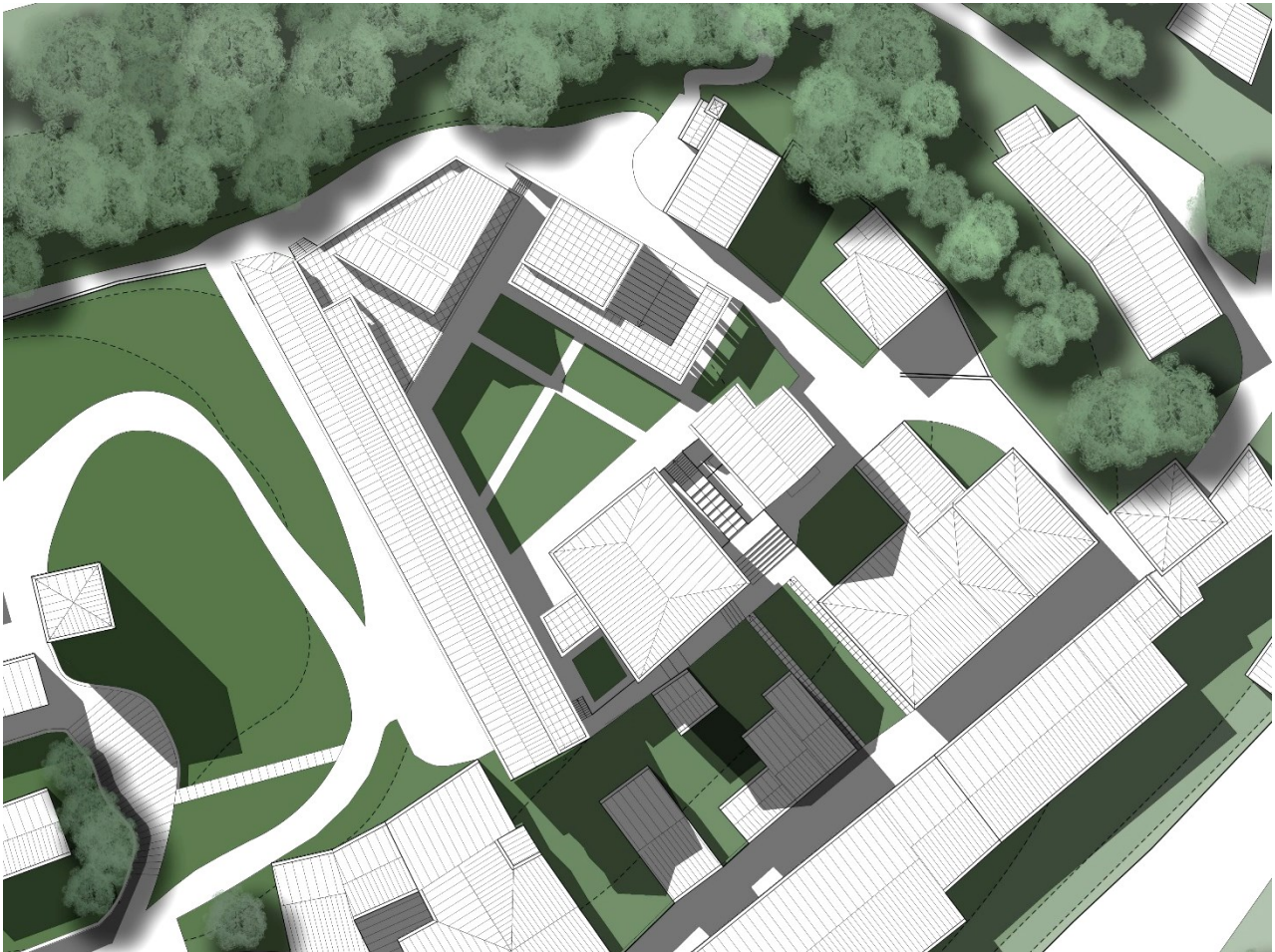
Even in the openness of space one must recognise the sense of interiority, of the limit that identifies space. The contemporary city that is made up of free volumes in space runs the risk of losing its sense of interiority due to the failure to recognise the limit. This idea of the construction of space based on the principle of the limit is the starting point for the urban projects considered here.

### 3. Intervention strategies

Due to an increasingly necessary and urgent culture of civilised living, the idea is emerging that architecture can contribute to a better society through thoughtful reflection on the spatial conception of the city. Indeed, what place is more representative of the exercise of civil living and social cohesion than the city with its collective living spaces? Squares, streets, courtyards and in general the spaces around which the urban form is built are exactly those places of social relations that strongly identify a culture of civilised living to which architecture should turn its main attention. In this unitary fact that is the city, every single building participates in the organic construction of the urban form, according to an idea of place made up of interconnected, clear and distinct spaces, formally different from each other, but related in rich spatial sequences that are significant of the civil character of the city (Romano, 2008). Every single building is not indifferent to the space that surrounds it, but as a work of architecture it participates in transforming and ordering the surrounding space, giving it a form and identity while at the same time assuming from the place the reasons for its own form.



Figures 12, 13. Project views from the work of the students Ilenia Gatti and Giulia Moro.



**Figure 14.** Project planivolumetry from the work of the students Ilenia Gatti and Giulia Moro.



**Figure 15.** From the work of the students Rzearta Agasi and Simone Galimberti: project planivolumetric representation.



**Figures 16, 17.** Views from the project solution proposed by the students Rrezearta Agasi and Simone Galimberti.

Generally the start of an urban regeneration process involving the disused areas considered in the research begins with an unavoidable premise, the one that considers the areas as being within a historicised context. In this sense, the redevelopment project cannot ignore the dialectic relationship establishing between the existing and the new. Regarding the subject of architectural forms, this means a direct confrontation with a tradition of building the city that has its roots in the idea of the closed city within which it is possible to draw “not only the tools and techniques, but the very *raison d'être* of the construction of collective space” (Gravaguolo, 1997). Urban design is not asked to intervene with surprising effects, with muscular architecture that only enhances itself and the personal ambition of the designer. Architecture is asked to enter the context with discretion, interpreting its settlement rules, the character of the place, the specific atmosphere.

Create spatial sequences by arranging volumes in continuity with existing ones, respecting their alignments on both horizontal and vertical planes. There is no need for the forms of the project to mimic the historical forms of the city. Rather, there is a need for the form to interpret the reasons for the construction of the urban space in which the project fits. Intervening within the historic city through a process of urban redevelopment implies consider the values that these areas have sedimented over time, and therefore a good redevelopment practice should not disregard recovering the ancient in continuity with its values. This perspective invites us to consider that town planning, as a set of competences and bureaucratic apparatus, should deal with the city from the point of view of its formal structure rather than its administrative, legal, financial and economic contents.

Working in the historic centre, therefore, means reintroducing the city within the more general theme of recovering the sense of place, of the stratifications of meaning that forms bring with them in their transformation. It is a question of giving new civic life to a part of the city not only through the insertion of new functions, but above all by reventing the form in order to generate new value to architecture and contexts.



**Figures 18, 19, 20.** Project planivolumetry and views from the work of the students Davide Brusutti e Francesco Lutman.

#### 4. Conclusions

It seems that those involved in architecture today do not care about the physical form of the city. We consider the city a great artefact, a work of engineering and architecture whose physical form is the ultimate datum of a more complex reality and is what remains of what can be sensitively perceived by man who experiences its spaces. Town planning is also no longer concerned with the physical form of the city, more concerned with establishing normative and quantitative standards that have little to do with the idea of the city.

In an abstract way, laws and norms were progressively produced that defined ways of doing and building that no longer concerned the physicality of the city. Gradually, architecture has moved away from the disciplinary sphere that it belongs to. That of form or space.

Architecture should take care of the quality of space because the space houses values that are an inalienable right of society. On this premise, a methodology has been developed that aims to build places to which the community feels it belongs (Monestiroli, 1999), considering the form of space the true driving force of the project. The results of the research (Figures 12-20) consist of a series of urban regeneration projects that verify – within a historicised context – the initial objectives and aims. The projects fit within the sequence of the city's public spaces while respecting the formal structure of the historic city.

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