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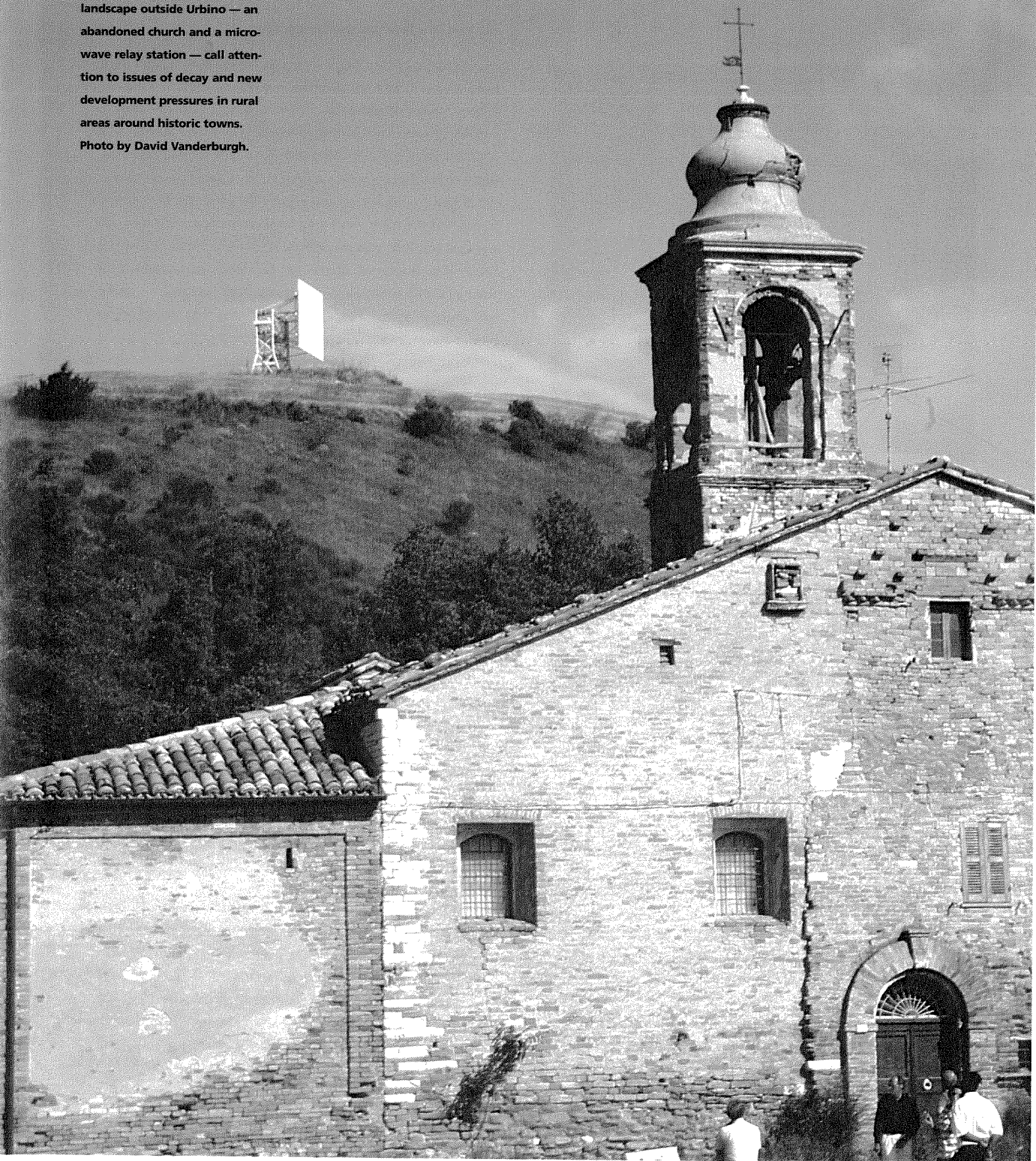# Planning, Preservation and Polyculture

David Vanderburgh

The colors of the Urbino landscape are ruthlessly exact, like old Kodachrome. They meet your eyes directly without waiting for your vision to arrive. The landscape is neither neutral nor passive; it is like an advertisement for, or perhaps against, the land use policies of half a century. Since the 1930s, machine-farmed wheat has taken the place of mixed crops, highways the place of roads, housing estates the place of farms and faubourgs. But increasingly, the region's inhabitants see the landscape as more than a backdrop for urbanism, more than a collection of industrial or residential sites: The landscape is the register in which the region's vitality or senescence will be written.

In Europe, the ideas and goals of historic preservation are changing, and Urbino, known since the Renaissance as "a town in the form of a palace, a palace in the form of a town," is caught in the shift. When "preservation" meant restoring monuments, priorities were clear: Money and effort flowed to the palace, which presided over the town, which in turn presided over the surrounding territory. Urbino, like so many other "historic" towns, was the jewel, its surroundings the setting, and development outside the center was a separate issue.

Today, though, signs of displacement abound: Farmers live in highrises, academics live in farmhouses, and tourists and students live in medieval town houses. The newest monumental forms are microwave relay stations. Preservation will never again seem so simple.

Signs of displacement in the landscape outside Urbino — an abandoned church and a micro-wave relay station — call attention to issues of decay and new development pressures in rural areas around historic towns. Photo by David Vanderburgh.

The countryside outside Urbino
includes old smallholdings,
which support sparsely planted
vineyards, and consolidated
parcels, where wheat is grown.
Photo by David Vanderburgh.

Urbino: The Town in the Landscape

The region's history begins with its topography, a slow race between earth and water. Urbino is on the eastern flank of the Upper Appenine mountain range, a series of north-south wrinkles formed by compressive forces. But the eastward flow of rivers from the Appenine divide can cut sudden canyons that catch these meandering ridges by surprise. Sometimes the ridges predominate, sometimes the canyons: It is hard to find a pattern, even when you know it is there. Selective erosion has left hills and mounds in seemingly random distributions, like pimples on the ridges, on slopes, or sitting on the floor of a valley. On two of these random bumps, two and a half millenia ago, appeared the settlement that would dominate the region until the present.

Several centuries before the Christian era, the Romans had established an outpost named Urbinum as part of their conquest of central Italy. The settlement took its name from the two principal hills of its site, though some scholars believe that it mainly occupied the lower and southernmost of these. A series of expansions and enclosures during the Middle Ages eventually included the second hill and various faubourgs along the slopes.

It was during Federico da Montefeltro's long tenure (1444-82) as Duke of Urbino that the town acquired its famed town-as-palace aspect. In a brilliant stroke of contextual urbanism, Federico transformed a scattered ancestral compound into a gracious, outward-looking facade for the town — and, by careful massing on the saddle between the two hills, appropriated the town's entire form to serve as formal foil for the palace. A huge piazza, below the palace and outside its walls, formed a new gateway to the town and was linked directly to the palace by an unusual spiral ramp attached to the wall.

A subsequent ring of fortifications, built in the sixteenth century, defined the limits of the town for the next three centuries. Development within the walls generally followed the lines established by the Renaissance planners. These walls still mark an important separation between the *centro storico* (historic center) and its surroundings.

The landscape outside the walls would remain a patchwork of small agricultural holdings, wresting a weak yield from the poor soil, until 1900. After the plague of 1350, during which 70 percent of the region's population died, sharecroppers were invited in to work land that had been left idle. By 1500, the land was repopulated and many sharecroppers had come into ownership. But because livestock were expensive and scarce, and because of the steep slopes, farming remained labor-intensive, so sharecropping continued. Owners were obliged to build housing for the sharecroppers, and the landscape is still studded with these defensively clustered groups of small

The now classic view of Urbino from the southwest, dominated by the twin spires of Federico's Ducal palace.
Photo by David Vanderburgh.

An aereal view of Urbino's *centro storico* (historic center).
Photo courtesy Giancarlo DeCarlo.

houses, usually built on slopes unsuitable for planting. By the nineteenth century there were small rural ghettos, not really towns, populated by these poor sharecroppers. Especially near the end of the century, as population outstripped the inefficient production methods, famine was common.

The major crops grown under this system were a distinctive blend of wheat and viniculture, where widely spaced rows of vines made thin stripes across the wheat fields; the vines often were supported on wires stretched between rows of living oak trees. This system helped control erosion of the thin layer of topsoil on the steep slopes, and the practice of mixing crops, or polyculture, helped prevent soil exhaustion. After the seventeenth century, corn was also introduced in small quantities, and many farmers grew dye-producing plants as cash crops on less fertile land.

During the turbulent mid-nineteenth century Risorgimento period, when rising nationalism drove Italy toward political unification, architect Vincenzo Ghinelli produced a plan for Urbino that reflected the rationalist spirit of the time. Completed in 1841, the plan introduced a new street winding along outside the walls and south from the old eastern gate, sloping up gradually enough for carriage and wagon traffic. The road slipped just inside to follow the curve of the walls at the southeast gate, then cut north along the foot of the palace and cathedral to a spacious new piazza near the town's commercial center. Its last 200 meters — named Corso Garibaldi after a hero of the Risorgimento — linked a new theater, inventively sited on the top of Federico's famous spiral ramp, with the new piazza via an arrow-straight string of rationalist arcades. Despite its undeniable hubris, the work has become inextricable from the social and physical fabric of the city.

The period after unification marked the beginning of the countryside's decline: It changed more during the next few decades than it had in centuries. The first years of the twentieth century saw some agricultural reforms, which increased production while preserving the multi-cropping practices. But under Mussolini the state enforced the monoculture of wheat, clearing woodlands and draining marshes to put every acre into production. The overstrained land lost a great deal of soil to erosion, and chemical fertilizers could not compensate entirely for the loss. Meanwhile, put out of work by mechanization, starving sharecroppers fled toward the big cities.

During the harsh years leading up to World War II, the buildings of the town fell into disrepair, particularly in the district near the eastern gate and in the old Jewish ghetto near the western gate. It was during this period, when owners were too poor to re-plaster the street facades of their houses, that Urbino developed a bare-brick exterior to match its interior. The war itself was not directly responsible for further degradation of Urbino's historic tissue, although it did prolong and exacerbate the economic deprivation that was making proper maintenance and repair difficult.

Regional Centralization and the First Master Plan

The postwar climate, with its blend of anxiety and technocratic euphoria, favored regional administration as a way of maintaining central control over diverse localities. At the top of a territorial hierarchy of *regione*, *commune* and *frazione*, Urbino could look forward to a sudden increase in its prestige and population. Urbino's first comprehensive master plan was thus to provide for two major objectives: the rehabilitation and renovation of the *centro storico* and the provision of regional public services.

In this chaotic period of reconstruction, there were two opposing schools of thought in Italian society about how to repair the damage of the war. The construction industry and many politicians were impatient and pragmatic and held that reconstruction should happen as quickly as possible because thousands of people were without housing; large-scale demolition and development were inevitable, in their view.

Another point of view, represented by recently formed preservation groups like Italia Nostra ("our Italy"), was strictly opposed to any intervention in historic fabric other than the stabilization of ruins. One consequence of this polarized atmosphere was to heighten development pressure on decaying town fabric and on abandoned agricultural land. Italia Nostra was overwhelmingly focused on aristocratic and religious monuments, so speculators might have a relatively free

hand in other areas unless measures were taken to guide development comprehensively.

Giancarlo De Carlo, a young Milanese architect who taught in Venice and who had recently done some work for the Urbino Free University, was engaged to direct Urbino's new plan. De Carlo was well placed to resolve the contradictory pressures of development and preservation: A committed Modernist, he was nonetheless critical of its orthodoxy and soon joined Team X, a group of designers who dissented from party-line Modernism.

De Carlo's team quickly established the main principles for the master plan. It was to provide guidelines for the rehabilitation of blighted areas of the *centro* and at the same time bring coherence to the expansion areas outside the walls. Since World War I, many small-scale developments had sprung up without controls, with the result that traffic was chaotic and the utility infrastructure was overburdened.

In the *centro storico*, De Carlo's strategy was to tie the new guidelines to a series of illustrative projects. After an exhaustive survey of the *centro's* architectural resources, the plan made recommendations both for use and for physical reconstruction. Then, selecting a smaller area of a few square blocks, De Carlo made detailed plans and elevations, showing how the guidelines might be put to use. The recommended physical changes ranged from demolition of unsalvageable

Allocation of Ground Floors

■ Commercial Areas

▨ Housing for
Temporary Residents

■ University

▦ Public Offices

■ Religious Buildings

▥ Public Services

▦ Arcaded Areas

▨ Artisans

▨ Warehouses, Entrances,
Community Services

▨ Pensions and Hotels

Urbino's 1966 master plan (left) included detailed preservation and land-use components. The preservation plan ranked each building on a scale, from "restoration/absolute preservation" to rehabilitation to demo- lition, and provided precise pro- visions for each level of action. The land-use plan suggested finely mixed uses, including housing, offices, religious and university facilities, tourist lodgings, workshops for arti- sans and warehouses. A "plan of public action" (above) for seven blocks provided detailed architectural and interior plan- ning guidelines, along with pro- totype elevations and plans. Courtesy Giancarlo DeCarlo.

A street in the *centro storico*. Courtesy Italian Cultural Institute.

Time Depth

The theory and practice of preservation in Europe are more developed and more complex than in North America, chiefly because the continuous large-scale occupation and alteration of the landscape have a much longer history there. While European colonists were ignoring or destroy- ing Native American archi- tectural and urban achievements, those who stayed in Europe were using and re-using the same sites they had occu- pied for centuries. Still, "preservation" as a distinct, conscious activity in Europe was a product of the burgeoning national- ism and historicism of the nineteenth century.
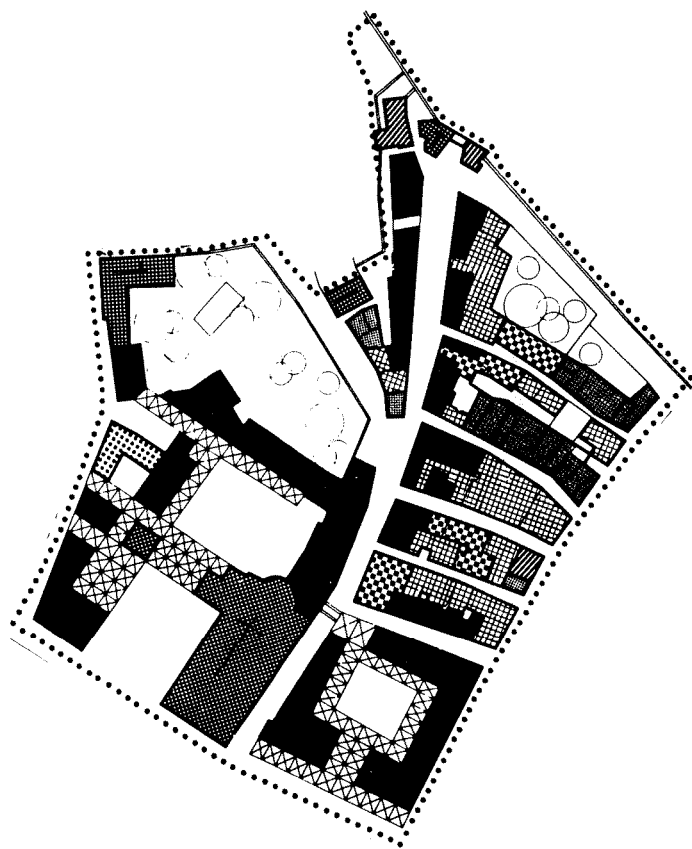
Tradition and innovation

Preservation, though con- sidered by many a "pro- gressive" cause, stems from a conservative impulse. It could be argued that Napoleon's empire-build- ing activities are a root cause of much of European preservation theory and practice. On one hand, his classical shopping sprees in Italy resulted in a more widespread and more direct appreciation of clas- sical antiquity. On the other, his imperial ambi- tions provoked fears of cul- tural dilution among his increasingly nationalistic

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adversaries. Napoleon thus helped to publicize the value of the old and at the same time stimulated the protection of the local.

By the end of the nineteenth century, art-historical consciousness had developed enormously in Europe: The valuable past had become more and more recent. Early in the century, there had been little appreciation for any styles later than those of antiquity. But just as theorists like John Ruskin and Eugene Viollet-le-Duc rehabilitated the Gothic around mid-century, succeeding thinkers did the same for the Renaissance and the Baroque.

Europeans began to value the treasures around them, usually in a rather competitive light, and by the end of the century historic preservation of monuments was highly developed in theory and practice. Concurrently, an appreciation of folkways, and some of the first attempts to study them systematically, represented the impulse to defend the local against the cosmopolitan influences.

War Damage

In the face of the enormous destruction that followed two world wars, Europe became a tragic case study in preservation, the likes of which the

Americas have never seen. With the sudden necessity to make massive interventions in many historic centers, preservationists, architects and planners quickly developed and tried a range of strategies, from strict reconstruction to large-scale replacement of historic fabric.

The result of this intensive workshop was that, by the end of the 1950s, the theoretical and practical alternatives for working within historic contexts were clearly laid out in Europe. In the U.S., it would be another 20 years before, spurred in part by destructive urban redevelopment programs, debates reached the same level of sophistication.

— *David Vanderburgh*

fabric to "absolute restoration" of the town's monuments, such as the Ducal Palace and the nineteenth-century theater. Much of the *centro* fell between these extremes, however, and the plan's strength lay in its carefully reasoned recommendations for partial restoration, for treatment of surfaces and for recognition of historic relationships among buildings and groups of buildings.

Perhaps the most important work De Carlo did for the town was in a series of projects for the Free University. In these projects, De Carlo put into practice the principles espoused in the plan. In the *centro*, schools of law (1968) and education (1968-76) were installed in convent complexes at the southern end of town, displaying an inspired blend of renovation, restructuring and new construction.

Both projects, though visibly new in striking ways, used materials and forms that echoed the familiar. The School of Education presents an almost blank brick facade to the street, but faces the countryside with an adventurous semicircular glazed lecture hall. The Law School preserves the former convent's courtyard by excavating underneath to provide library stacks.

Outside the *centro*, an art school and a student housing complex were given a more frankly modern character while adapting sensitively to the topography. The most successful of these, the Collegio del Colle (1965), gives residents a rich experience blending building and landscape, and provides panoramic views from almost every point.

At the same time, De Carlo was able to get appointed to Urbino's design review board and thus to help ensure that the principles of the plan were understood and followed. Public

Architect Giancarlo De Carlo, who developed Urbino's 1966 master plan, also undertook several projects that put its principles into practice. His School of Education (1968-76) incorporates a prexisting brick facade along the street and faces the countryside with an adventurous semicircular glazed lecture hall.
(Right) Photo by David Vanderburgh.
(Below) Photo courtesy Giancarlo DeCarlo.
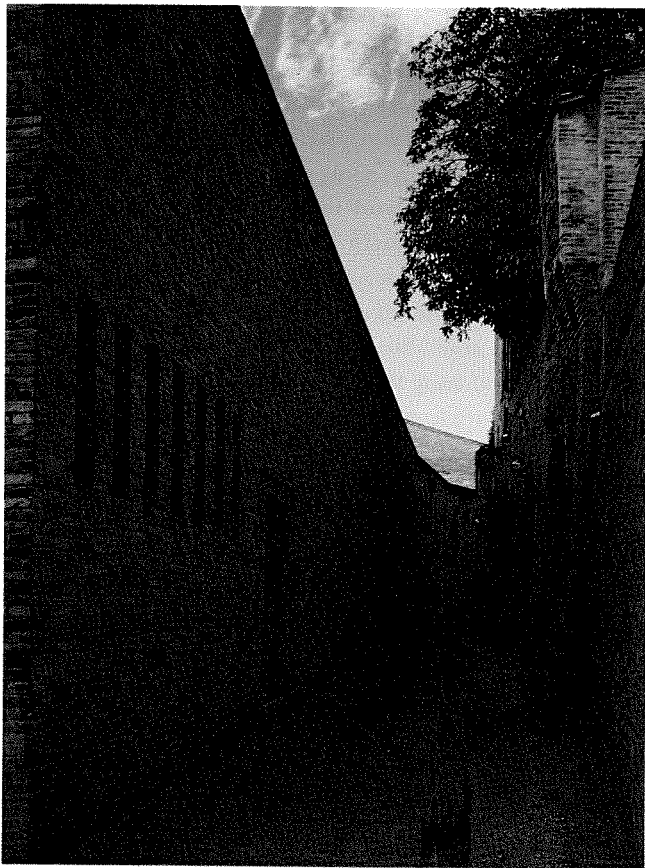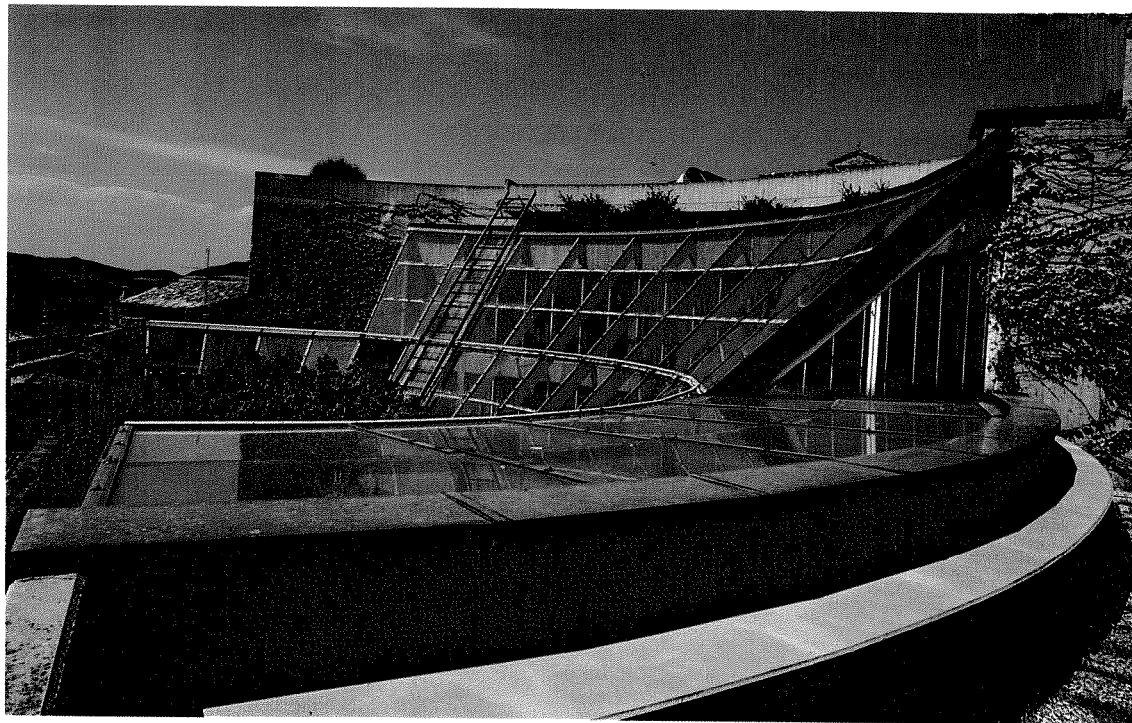
meetings quickly raised public consciousness about the value of the town's historic fabric and about the need for change to be planned carefully.

More troublesome were questions regarding the areas of expansion outside the center. It was difficult, in the 1950s and 1960s, to convince anyone of the need for restrained and sensitive development when any "vacant" land could be viewed as a building site. Though the plan documents insisted on the need to preserve historic landscapes, the legal basis for such efforts was much weaker than that for controlling the restoration of the *centro*.
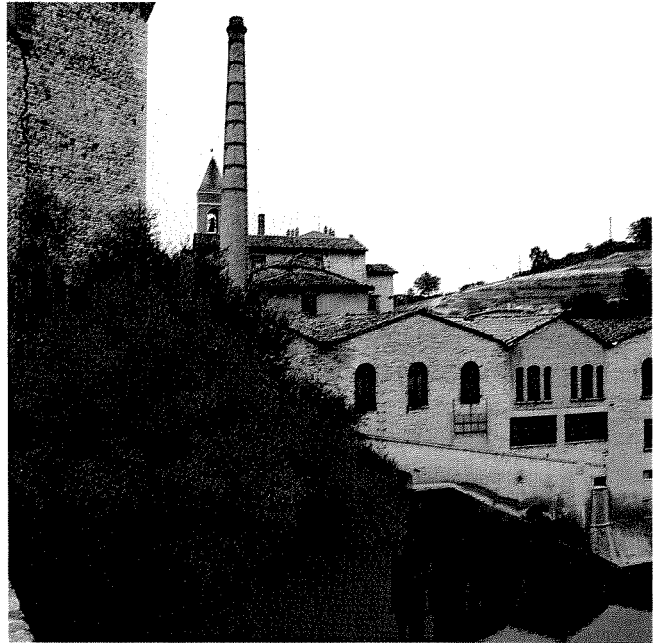
The plan was completed and approved in 1964, amid a great deal of interest and controversy. It was quickly and widely recognized as a new paradigm in its blend of architectural and planning sensitivity. Other towns and cities, small and large, put similar plans into action: Gubbio, Assisi, Ferrara and Bologna were among the cities that were able to exercise effective control over growth and preservation.

There were problems with the use of Urbino as a literal model, however. Its small size and urbanistic coherence contrasted greatly with larger cities whose nineteenth- and twentieth-century development, unlike that of Urbino, had already fragmented and dispersed much historic fabric. And smaller towns that lacked Urbino's perceived cultural importance saw extensive development as their only chance for survival.

De Carlo left his post in Urbino in the early 1970s, for reasons having to do with Italy's labyrinthine politics. Local interest in comprehensive preservation was at a low ebb, and planning work under a variety of short-term consultants from Venice and Rome concentrated on the development of open

land for housing. Some continuity, however, was maintained by local officials under the unpretentious rubric of Urbino's *Ufficio Tecnico* (Technical Office), which is responsible to the Regional Councillor for Urbanism. If, indeed, the *Ufficio Tecnico* had had more supervisory power, several housing projects outside the *centro* would have been realized more efficiently and more sensitively.

The New Master Plan

De Carlo was invited back to Urbino in 1989, an event of great emotion on both sides, marked by a public celebration in which he was invested with honorary citizenship. Given the chance once again to direct Urbino's development, De Carlo and his team have widened their focus to include the surrounding landscape, with its struggling small towns.

In 1951, 61 percent of the working population in the Urbino region was engaged in agriculture; 40 years later, the figure has shrunk to 10 percent. Since World War II, the Urbino region has seen its people leave the land for other occupations, and the land not left vacant was turned over to cultivation for wheat by state-supported agribusiness. Despite the fact that nearly 100,000 hectares of farm land has gone out of production in the last four decades, the yearly yield of wheat has doubled. Today in Urbino, tourism, industry and the university are the principal sources of both economic growth and pressures for transformation of the landscape. Consequently, they are the main targets of regulatory efforts.

In 1991, De Carlo's 17-year-old International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD), a workshop that brings faculty and students from all over the Western Hemisphere, met in Urbino. Participants visited every corner of the region and were invited to dinners and public meetings in many of the small towns whose future now hangs in the balance. They looked at the potential for resuscitating a long-unused local railway system and proposed projects of varying size and ambition for many problem areas. ILAUD will continue to meet in Urbino yearly for the foreseeable future.

As a part of the new planning effort, De Carlo's team is using an analytical framework that takes into account both old and new "systems" of infrastructure in the landscape: waterways, mills, brick and pottery kilns, churches and convents, lookout towers, abandoned clusters of houses and, of course, the railway. The team's thesis is that by teaching people about these systems and using them as a basis for planning, the new master plan can argue more effectively for directed development than did its predecessor.

Though the new plan will largely consider the work on the *centro* done, some unresolved issues remain. The first concerns the interior alterations to townhouses, changes that were essentially left to the owner's discretion under the 1964 plan. But owners, under pressure to maximize rents by renting to students and tourists, often carved up single houses into cramped multi-unit dwellings. The cumulative architectural and economic effect of these actions is beginning to worry the town as long-time residents find themselves priced out of the rental market

A second problem is the coloring of street facades in the *centro*. The *Ufficio Tecnico* has recently prepared guidelines based on archival research into the standards followed in the nineteenth century. Before the period of early-twentieth-century poverty, during which most facades lost their plaster to

**Their rich variety is suggestive
of the many uses that the land-
scape will have to support.
Photos by David Vanderburgh.**

the elements, pigment had been applied to wet plaster in a method resembling that used for frescoes. The result was a rich, slightly uneven blanket that butted up against raised stone window frames and corner moldings. By the time of Italian Unification in the mid-nineteenth century, standards were in place that required most owners to maintain the same colors when renovating or re-plastering.

Today there is some disagreement on the question: Some owners are happy to be able to color their facades, but are reluctant either to use older methods or to follow rigid color schemes. Since preservation work in the *centro* is watched closely by the surrounding towns, the resolution of these issues holds importance beyond the immediate context.

Towards Polycultural Preservation

The region's inhabitants are optimistic about the new direction planning has taken. In recognizing that preservation is no longer a matter only of individual masterpieces, but of an entire environmental heritage, local people are finding value in places thought to have none.

It is telling that the best-known image of Urbino should be the one seen from the countryside. The Ducal Palace, facing defiantly toward Rome and the Vatican, is what most tourists would recall of a visit to the region, even though they must tramp around that very countryside to get the requisite snapshot of the Palace. What tourists think is becoming increasingly important to Urbino and to the region as the new master plan gets underway. Many locals believe that tourists must be drawn into a broader appreciation of the region and its landscape: In this way, both the positive and negative impacts of their presence will be spread around the region instead of being concentrated around the *centro storico*. Like industry and the university, tourism is a force that must be reckoned with.

Urbino is no longer just "a town in the form of a palace, a palace in the form of a town"; and its image as a post-war regional capital is almost as dated as that of its Renaissance heyday. Just as the land supported many crops before the hegemony of wheat, the cultural landscape will have to support many uses: Perhaps polyculture is the wave of the future as well as the way of the past.