

ABSTRACT

In 1984, the Municipality of Genoa initiated the preliminary planning of the methods and spaces intended to host the 1992 Expo. This commission was entrusted to Renzo Piano, who, a few months later, presented his initial proposal. The Expo represented an opportunity to embark on a series of initiatives aimed at revitalising the historic centre and refining its urban design approach by implementing new public spaces. In this context, the square assumed a pivotal role. Positioned at the Porto Antico, Expo's primary objective became the reconnection of the city to the sea, re-establishing a link that had been lost for decades. This article, the result of an ongoing research supported by the Renzo Piano Foundation, explores the potential of the first proposal for Genoa's Porto Antico redevelopment, aligning it with various studies that characterized the architect's prior experiences. Starting with the Plateau Beaubourg square, passing through the historic centre revitalisation with the *Laboratori di quartiere*, and concluding with the Molo district recovery plan, Porto Antico emerges as a significant new public space returned to its city, capable of initiating a gradual urban rehabilitation process. Rediscovering this plan and its antecedents today entails contextualizing Renzo Piano's applications within a broader research trajectory aimed at examining public space as a tool for urban and port recovery.



Renzo Piano and the Porto Antico of Genoa. A Research Path on Public Space

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KEYWORDS

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Introduction

Today, when we talk about Genoa's Porto Antico (Old Harbour), we are primarily referring to an urban layout that originated from the architectural design carried out by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop for the Colombian celebrations in 1992 (Figure 1). Indeed, 1992 holds immense historical importance to Genoa's city, as it marks the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's discovery of America. This commemoration led the municipal administration to organise one of the events that most deeply transformed the city's both social and urban history: the Specialized Exposition "Cristoforo Colombo: la nave e il mare" ("Christopher Columbus: the ship and the sea").

The project was entrusted to the Renzo Piano Building Workshop in 1984, initiating an extensive reflection process in the methods and appropriate locations to accommodate given celebrations. The decision to reclaim the city's Porto Antico was arguably the most fitting choice within the Expo context during that specific historical period. Those were the years of significant urban redevelopments, and Genoa's case proved emblematic, encapsulating a series of interventions and reflections on the urban fabric that Renzo Piano had been pursuing for decades.



Figure 1. The Porto Antico in Genoa in 1992.
Ph. Publifoto © Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects.

Through the examination of materials preserved in the Renzo Piano Foundation's archives, it is now possible to accurately reconstruct the path that led to the development of the various solutions presented during the planning of the Genoese Expo (1984-1992) directly from primary sources. Following a brief historical overview of the urban and port context of Genoa in the early 1980s, this article offers a critical interpretation of references and projects that decisively influenced the fate of the Porto Antico project, identifying and highlighting the most prominent aspects of Piano's research regarding public space design methods.

The final section of the article ultimately focuses on the analysis of the Porto Antico initial proposal presented in December 1984. The solutions and fundamental principles introduced in this presentation remained unaltered in subsequent plan proposals and still represent key points concerning interventions in urban public spaces. Recounting the history that led to the realisation of Genoa's Porto Antico project means reviving a vein of thought concerning urban and social enhancement from the creation of new public spaces. Rediscovering this project today is undeniably stimulating and relevant, as it serves as a fundamental reference for future urban and port redevelopment initiatives.

The Context: The Fracture Process Between Port and City

To fully acknowledge a comprehensive understanding of the extensive transformation regarding the Porto Antico intervention and its impact on the entire city, it is necessary to briefly trace Genoa's harbour history, one that decisively shaped the destiny of the city over the centuries. Indeed, it could be asserted that the city itself was born around its port configuration, also thanks to its central geographical location in relation to the entire European continent, which facilitated the flourishing of maritime trade. The city's historical core, due to its challenging orographic area conditions, initially developed from a hilly area southeast of the port basin and gradually expanded over the centuries until it filled the late-medieval city walls by the 17th century¹. Approximately up to the second half of the 19th century, the Genoa's port continued to develop around the bay enclosed between the Molo district and the San Benigno area (Figure 2). Only with the arrival of technologies introduced by the first industrial revolution, Genoa's port layout underwent significant changes, expanding further westward². Genoa represented the maritime gateway of the Italian industrial triangle that emerged between Milan, Turin, and Genoa. An increase in commercial traffic, the railway line construction, and maritime industry development served as Genoa's economy primary drivers for several decades spanning the 19th and 20th centuries.



Figure 2. San Benigno area and the Lanterna in the mid-20th century.
Ph. Publifoto © Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects.

¹ P. Sirolli, G. B. Poggi (eds.), *Genova verso il 1992*, Bonati & Scalenghe, Bufala, 1988, pp. 139-142.

² For more information about Genoa's port history see: U. Marchese, *La vicenda dell'economia genovese lungo l'800 e il '900*, in P. Sirolli, G. B. Poggi (eds.), *Genova verso il 1992*, Bonati & Scalenghe, Bufala, 1988.

Following the wartime period, which nevertheless played a fundamental role in shaping Genoa's contemporary metropolitan entity³, the port reconstruction and the continued exploitation of coastal areas to compensate for the lack of storage space accelerated the disconnection process between the city and the sea, which had already begun earlier⁴. In the latter half of the 20th century, coinciding with the old port area, two elements, more than any others, contributed to the complete separation of the city from the sea. The first, less visually intrusive but more critical, was the customs barrier that physically separated the city from the commercial port. The second, significantly more prominent yet less obstructive, was the *Sopraelevata* (Causeway) that runs along the entire *Ripa Maris*⁵. The presence of the customs barrier effectively rendered any form of communication and interaction between the city and the commercial port impossible, definitively rupturing a centuries-old relationship that had always determined city's destiny and life⁶ (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The Porto Antico and the Sopraelevata in 1980s.
Ph. Gianni Berengo Gardin © Gianni Berengo Gardin.

³ During the twenty-year fascist period, the municipalities gravitating around Genoa were all merged into a single administration to create a single large metropolitan urban area. See P. Sirolli, G. B. Poggi (eds.), *Genova verso il 1992*, Bonati & Scalenghe, Bufala, 1988, p. 49.

⁴ The break between port and city did not occur with a single circumscribed event but was the outcome of a greater port area delimitation process. As early as around 1550, the new bulwarks construction towards the land posed a first discontinuity physical element; about a century later, the *Muraglette* further increased the separation between the port and the city; with the Kingdom of Sardinia arrival, the latter were demolished to increase the port space, which was again delimited by the "*Terrazze di marmo*" (Marble Terraces), built to a design by Ignazio Gardella in 1836. For a more detailed reconstruction, see: E. Poggi, L. Stefani (ed.), *Il porto vecchio di Genova*, Sagep Editricie, Genoa, 1985.

⁵ *Ripa a Maris* refers to the facade's scene consisting of the buildings that directly overlook Genoa's waterfront. The built-up area conformation is particularly interesting, forming a seamless urban scene that significantly characterises the city's appearance from the sea.

⁶ GB Projects, no. 7, May-June 1991, pp. 13-14.

Reactivating the Historic Centre: First References and the Square

Genoa's Porto Antico "is an idea that originates from afar, precisely born on an evening in 1984 when the then Mayor of Genoa [...] proposed the idea of creating a Colombian Expo for 1992"⁷. As Renzo Piano himself asserts, the history of the Colombian celebration project began several years before 1992. As early as 1982, the Municipality of Genoa had sent a telegram to the Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry, expressing the local administration's desire to host a series of initiatives to commemorate the grand Genoese occasion. Within the document, Mayor Fulvio Cerofolini officially requested the transmission of this information to the Bureau International des Expositions in Paris to commence the official registration process for an international exhibition⁸.

However, delving even further into the origins of this project through the archive's documentation at the Renzo Piano Foundation reveals that its roots extend much deeper. In fact, Genoa's Porto Antico case study is the result of several reflections that have always accompanied the architect's studies and interests, dating back to his earliest design applications. The studies conducted by Piano from the 1960s onward led him to a growing awareness of the historic city, which increasingly appeared to him as an urban sector characterized by specific urban conditions capable of enhancing social and liveability features. To confirm this, the young architect collected a series of readings⁹ describing the conditions and transformations of historic centres, particularly in Italy. These readings became a fundamental reference for his future projects. The Italian historic city seemed to possess the most interesting characteristics¹⁰, and Piano drew from history an element that would accompany him forever: the model was Siena's Piazza del Campo (Figure 4), whose image constantly recurred in the following years.

The encounter with Yoshinobu Ashihara's writings¹¹ and the aforementioned readings led the architect to make some important considerations, summarised in two articles published in 1970¹², which synthesized his thoughts on interventions in historic centres. Piano advocated for a new approach to design in consolidated urban areas that could better integrate both environmental and social needs with building design¹³. However, it would take several more years before Piano had the opportunity to put these concepts into practice within an actual case study.

⁷ *ivi*, p. 33. Translation by the author, original text: "è un'invenzione che viene da lontano, nata esattamente una sera del 1984 in cui l'allora Sindaco di Genova [...] propose l'idea di creare un Expo Colombiano per il 1992".

⁸ The telegram in question is deposited at the Renzo Piano Foundation archives (Colombo Fund, folder COL_002).

⁹ Reference is made to the following magazines issues that Renzo Piano consulted and noted down during the 1960s (preserved today at Renzo Piano Foundation archive newspaper library): *L'incontro tra l'antico e il nuovo*, "Casabella", no. 314, 1967, pp. 14-53; W. Cowburn (ed.), *Housing and the Environment*, "The Architectural Review", vol. 141, no. 11, 1967; E. N. Rogers, *Milan. La coscienza di una metropoli*, "Casabella-Continuità", no. 256, 1961, pp. 2-3; V. Vercelloni, *Milano 1861-1961: un secolo di occasioni mancate nello sviluppo della città*, "Casabella-Continuità", no. 253, 1961, pp. 28-41; I. Nairn, *Stop Press (Outrage: a Monthly Anthology from all over Britain of Townscape Problems, Outrages and Opportunities)*, "The Architectural Review", various volumes, 1968-1969; S. Tintori, G. De Carlo, *Il piano intercomunale milanese*, "Casabella", no. 282, 1963, pp. 4-27; A. Rossi, *La città e la periferia*, "Casabella-Continuità", no. 253, 1961, pp. 23-27; G. Campos Venuti, *Bologna un esempio concreto di pianificazione comprensoriale*, "Casabella", no. 269, 1962, pp. 4-28.

¹⁰ See the text by Y. Ashihara, *Exterior Design in Architecture*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1970 which is the expanded and revised English version of *Galbon Bubai No Kosei (Exterior Space in Architecture)* published in 1962 by the Japanese publishing house Shokokusha in Tokyo.

¹¹ Y. Ashihara, *Exterior Design in Architecture*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1970 (expanded and revised English version of Y. Ashihara, *Galbon Bubai No Kosei*, Shokokusha, Tokyo, 1962).

¹² R. Piano, *Renzo Piano*, "Architectural Design", vol. 40, no. 3, 1970, pp. 140-145; A. Cereda, *Alcune recenti esperienze nel campo della industrializzazione edilizia. Tre architetture di Renzo Piano*, "LIPE. L'industria Italiana per l'Edilizia", extract from no. 3, March 1970, pp. 1-12.

¹³ For a more in-depth account of Piano's research in the 1960s, see B. Hamzeian, *Live Centre of Information. Da Pompidou à Beaubourg*, Actar Publishers, New York-Barcelona, 2022.

"The primary scope of the square, of public space, to generate intense relationships [...] makes cities visible and, ultimately, irreplaceable, according to Piano"¹⁴. The concept of the square as a system of relationships within the built city fascinated the architect to such an extent that it became a constant device in his projects and assumed different values, dimensions, and objectives depending on the location, scale, and usage methods. Piano's public projects can indeed be interpreted and integrated into a comprehensive framework depending on their interaction with the city, their social impact, and their urban significance.



Figure 4. Piazza del Campo, Siena. Y. Ashihara, *Exterior Design in Architecture*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1970, p. 15. Ph. Yukio Futagawa.

Starting with the Beaubourg project (1971-1977), the application of public space elements studied by Piano finally took shape. The Parisian competition was the first opportunity to refine a system of urban spaces capable of initiating a gradual rehabilitation process of the urban and social characteristics of the area where the project was situated. The Centre Pompidou project is emblematic for the research it represented regarding the value of the piazza, which Piano, along with Richard Rogers (1933-2021) and Gianfranco Franchini (1938-2009), conferred the primary significance of social interaction and the urban character which primarily distinguishes Italian

¹⁴ L. Ciccarelli, *Renzo Piano prima di Renzo Piano. I maestri e gli esordi*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2017, p. 71. Translation by the author, original text: "Questa capacità della piazza, dello spazio pubblico, di generare rapporti intensi [...] rende, secondo Piano, visibili e, in ultima analisi insostituibili, le città".

origin historic centres. The solution of the bar placed on Rue de Renard was the result of the quest to create a meeting place that would become the central node of this intervention in the heart of Paris (Figure 5).

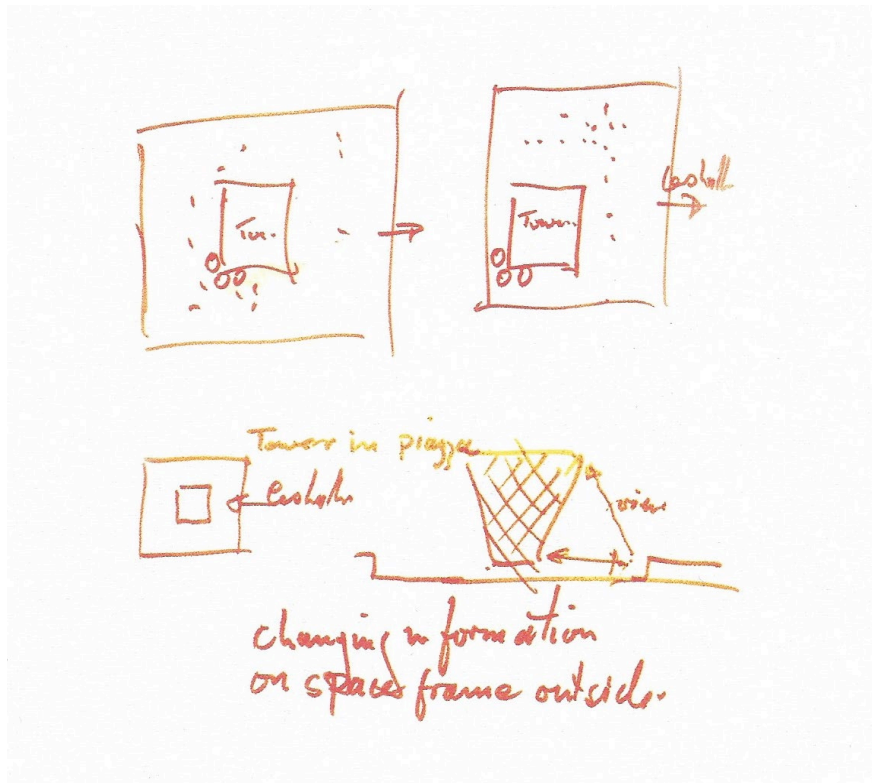


Figure 5. Richard Rogers' first sketches for the Plateau Beaubourg.

B. Hamzeian, *Live Centre of Information. Da Pompidou a Beaubourg, 1968-1971*, Actar Publishers, New York-Barcellona, 2022, p. 153. RSHP Archives © Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers.

"While the English experiences played a decisive role in shaping the building's aesthetics, Piano's and Rogers' [and Franchini's] Italian cultural and urban roots underpin the parvis, the open esplanade that, like a forecourt, releases the vital energy of the building into the urban atmosphere. [...] This decision was also motivated by the fact that the Centre Beaubourg needed to integrate into the Marais, the Parisian district with the highest residential density and a scarcity of squares and public spaces"¹⁵. Positioning the building on one side of the plateau meant it could be hollowed out at its centre to allow the creation of an open and free public space. The Plateau Beaubourg piazza could thus be capable of capturing and accommodating metropolitan pedestrian flows within it, and its sunken form is nothing more than the transposition of Siena's Piazza del Campo's image¹⁶. What Piano, Rogers, and Franchini sought to achieve with the Centre Pompidou was essentially a "technological device for the rehabilitation of the historic centre"¹⁷, a public and cultural place with an intrinsic urban character considered to deal with the environmental needs of the established city, consequently generating a gradual revitalisation process within the built surroundings and the social structures.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 286-288. Translation by the author, original text: "Se le esperienze inglesi ebbero un peso determinante nel definire l'estetica dell'edificio, le radici italiane, culturali e urbane, di Piano e Rogers [e Franchini] sono alla base del *parvis*, l'ariosa spianata che, come un sagrato, libera all'aria di città la carica vitale dell'edificio. [...] Una decisione motivata anche dal fatto che il Centre Beaubourg doveva inserirsi nel Marais, il quartiere con la più alta densità abitativa di Parigi, e povero di piazze e spazi pubblici".

¹⁶ B. Hamzeian, *Live Centre of Information. Da Pompidou a Beaubourg,, 1968-1971*, Actar Publishers, New York-Barcelona, 2022, pp. 156-158.

¹⁷ *ivi*, p. 315.

Regenerating the City: Neighbourhood Workshops in Otranto and Genoa

Both national and international cultural debate on the preservation of pre-existing urban centres became, between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, one of the central themes of discussion in the architectural and urban planning scenarios¹⁸. This is evidenced by the significant efforts undertaken to draft planning instruments at the municipal and territorial scales, aimed at providing initial solutions for the revitalisation of extensive urban areas that had deteriorated and been underutilized. Particular attention was given to maintaining these places' social and identity framework. For instance, notable examples include plans for Bologna's historic centre by Pier Luigi Cervellati¹⁹ and territorial urban plans such as those for Milan. These projects were meticulously studied by Piano, who has preserved all the readings from that period, all heavily annotated²⁰.

The context in which these studies were carried out was oriented in the opposite direction. Once the era of extensive post-war reconstruction had concluded, the construction field's primary focus shifted toward new developments. Pre-existing urban centres appeared to have an uncertain and hopeless fate. In worst cases, this manifested in massive urban renewal projects, resulting in the loss of historical and social architectural heritage. An illustrative case is the Genoese neighbourhood adjacent to Via Madre di Dio, where demolition works commenced in 1975²¹. In place of the community residents' homes, a new and futuristic tertiary-use district was erected, entirely altering the area's character. It was only through significant social and political activism that the foundations for a productive dialogue concerning the future of the historic city, with an emphasis on its valorisation and recovery, were established.

Seizing the opportunity of these investigations, in 1979, Renzo Piano, whose international reputation was by then well-established, had the prospect to apply his reflections on historic centres revitalisation more extensively and comprehensively. This opportunity came through as an initiative sponsored by UNESCO. The result of this work was the establishment of what became known as *Laboratori di quartiere* (Neighbourhood Workshops). The Neighbourhood Workshop was conceived as a genuinely applicable tool to "assist residents in a specific district or group of

¹⁸ For a more in-depth analysis of the subject, see the essay cited by Renzo Piano: Centro di documentazione della facoltà di architettura del Politecnico di Milano, *La questione dei centri storici e del recupero del patrimonio edilizio in Europa*, Cooperativa libraria universitaria Politecnico, Milano, 1979.

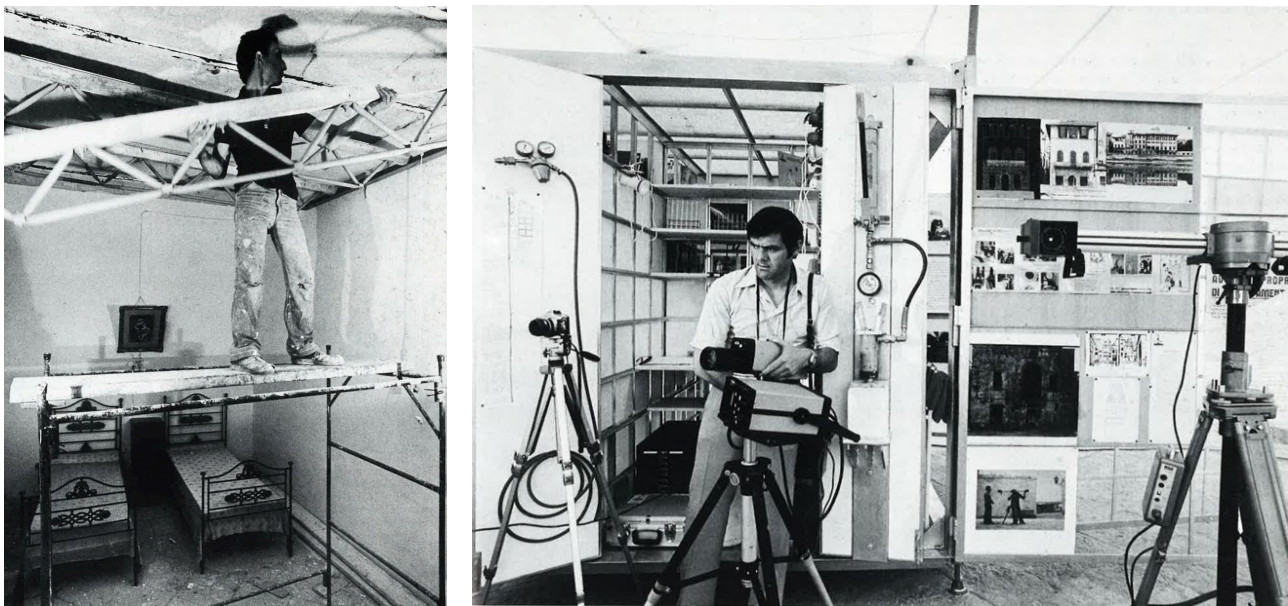
¹⁹ Although Piano does not fully share his views on preservation, the Bologna plan drawn up by Cervellati is a well-studied subject. For Renzo Piano, the historic centre cannot be considered as a stationary artefact, immobile in time, that cannot undergo any kind of transformation: this attitude would lead the city to annihilate itself due to the lack of any vital force that could animate it. "Considering a historic centre as an accomplished and untouchable artefact, searching through archive consultations and abstract research for the presumed constructive and stylistic homogeneity of precise historical periods, means not being able to read on the buildings the adaptation evidence to the materials and labour availability and the interventions trace carried out by the inhabitants. It means eliminating, through a violence and cultural prevarication process, even the desire signs to adapt one's old house to new and 'modern' housing models. To renew not by demolishing, nor by changing architectural constants, but simply by modifying, by adding something to an organic body through a stratification process that was exactly the opposite of the petrification caused by past constraints" (R. Piano, M. Arduino, M. Fazio, *Antico è bello. Il recupero della città*, Laterza, Bari-Roma, 1980, p. 22; translated by the author, original text: "Considerare un centro storico come un manufatto compiuto e intoccabile, cercando con consultazioni di archivio e ricerche astratte la presunta omogeneità costruttiva e stilistica di precise epoche storiche, significa non saper leggere sugli edifici la prova dell'adeguamento alle disponibilità dei materiali e della manodopera e la traccia degli interventi effettuati dagli abitanti. Significa eliminare, attraverso un processo di violenza e prevaricazione culturale, anche i segni del desiderio di adeguare la propria casa vecchia a modelli abitativi nuovi e 'moderni'. Cioè di rinnovare non demolendo, né mutando costanti architettoniche, ma semplicemente modificando, aggiungendo qualcosa a un corpo organico attraverso un processo di stratificazione che era esattamente il contrario della pietrificazione provocata dai vincoli passati").

²⁰ Reference is made to: *Bologna, un esempio concreto di pianificazione comprensoriale*; P. Cervellati, U. Pallotti, F. Tarozzi, *Lo sviluppo della città*; G. Campos-Venuti, *Relazione 1962 sul Piano Intercomunale*; *Dichiarazione programmatica dei 15 Sindaci del comprensorio*; *Norme tipo per i PRG di completamento e di minima previsione*; *I progetti di ricerca urbanistica a Bologna*, "Casabella-Continuità", no. 269, September 1962, pp. 4-28; *Piano Intercomunale Milanese*; S. Tintori, *Lo stato attuale degli studi*; G. De Carlo, *Realtà e prospettive del primo schema*, "Casabella-Continuità", no. 282, December 1963, pp. 4-27.

²¹ Renzo Piano mentions this project in R. Piano, M. Arduino, M. Fazio, *Antico è bello. Il recupero della città*, Laterza, Bari-Roma, 1980.

districts in realising ‘recovery’ in collaboration with the municipal administration that had decided it, in compliance with existing regulations and urban planning instruments”²². It served as a meeting place for the local community in need of renewing their living spaces, along with the public administration and architecture/engineering fields professionals. In this way, the Neighbourhood Workshop did not function as a tool for a city radical transformation but aimed to become the intermediary location for initiating a gradual maintenance effort throughout the built environment, where most needed. In a certain sense, it perhaps became the tangible embodiment of an “urban historic centre rehabilitation tool”, similar to what Beaubourg might have been in different ways, with different dimensions and contexts.

“The Neighbourhood Workshop wants to be a tool at the service of citizens who reject the transformation of the city and the environment in which they live when such transformation occurs through the operators’, administrators’, designers’ actions, distant as abstract entities yet possessed of all power”²³. The Neighbourhood Workshop project, therefore, embodied a new vision of sociality and urbanity within established historic fabric. These areas could not afford regeneration projects that displaced the less privileged social classes who had always inhabited these places, leading to their exclusion and marginalisation on the fringes of the city. Among the Neighbourhood Workshops implemented by Piano, the one in Otranto (1979) marked the first experience in this regard (Figures 6-7), and based on its outcomes, a publication authored by Piano, along with Magda Arduino and Mario Fazio, was produced²⁴. In subsequent years, the Neighbourhood Workshop was also trailed in other cities, including Burano, Bari, Perugia, Rhodes, and Genoa.



Figures 6-7. The Neighbourhood Workshop in Otranto (1979). Lightweight recovery interventions and diagnostic tools testing. Ph. Gianni Berengo Gardin © Gianni Berengo Gardin.

In February 1981, Renzo Piano was summoned by the then Mayor of Genoa to be entrusted with the design of an urban recovery plan for one of the city's historic centre districts. The architect, fresh from his initial experiences in historic centres revitalisation initiated through the

²² R. Piano, M. Arduino, M. Fazio, *Antico è bello. Il recupero della città*, Laterza, Bari, 1980, pp. 16-17. Translation by the author, original text: “aiutare gli abitanti di un determinato rione o insieme di rioni a realizzare ‘il ricupero’ in collaborazione con l’amministrazione comunale che lo ha deciso, nel rispetto della normativa esistente e degli strumenti urbanistici”.

²³ *ivi*, p. 17. Translation by the author, original text: “Il Laboratorio di quartiere vuole essere uno strumento al servizio dei cittadini che rifiutano la trasformazione della città e dell’ambiente in cui vivono quando tale trasformazione avviene per mano di operatori, amministratori, progettisti, lontani come entità astratte e però dotate di ogni potere”.

²⁴ Reference is made to R. Piano, M. Arduino, M. Fazio, *Antico è bello. Il recupero della città*, Laterza, Bari-Roma, 1980.

Neighbourhood Workshops sponsored by UNESCO, accepted the assignment and commenced the Molo district project development. Alongside him, five other architects worked on equally significant areas²⁵ within the context of producing a more comprehensive urban development plan encompassing the entire city centre.

Genoa's Molo district is the closest historic centre area to that of the Porto Antico. This experience proved to be crucial for the architect because, further to implementing his own ideas regarding historic centres and existing heritage revitalisation, it allowed him to develop initial concepts regarding the old port area arrangement, where the Expo would settle a few years later (Figure 8). If Beaubourg, as an information and gathering device, had the capacity to initiate a rehabilitation process in Paris' historic centre, and the Neighbourhood Workshops laid the groundwork for a slow but extensive widespread regeneration operation in cities, the Molo district recovery plan emerged as a concrete tool for the redevelopment of an entire existing urban district, organised by articles with regulations defining the requirements, typologies, and implementation methods for the project's approved interventions. Such a plan was structured as a comprehensive document with systematic interventions for genuine urban regeneration within the district.



*Figure 8. Genoa's historic centre and the Porto Antico.
Ph. Publifoto © Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects.*

The project embraced the challenge of slow, gradual, and extensive regeneration through a series of numerous small-scale interventions aimed at architectural and hygienic improvement of buildings. Furthermore, the plan directly addressed work execution methods, taking into account users' and residents' presence, thus continuing the experiments initiated with the Neighbourhood Workshops. Proposals for widespread regeneration interventions and broader redevelopment

²⁵ In particular, Prè district recovery plan project was entrusted to Giancarlo de Carlo with ILAUD; that for the Carmine to Lodovico Belgiojoso; the Molo to Renzo Piano; Porta Soprana to Ignazio Gardella; the Maddalena to Luciano Grossi Bianchi; Borgo Incrociati to Cesare Fera.

strategies coexisted internally in this project, which did not focus solely within the Molo district but also referred to the relationship between this one and the city, a relationship reflected in the transportation infrastructure and access points design. This line of inquiry, aiming to explore the regeneration potential resulting from a new relationship with the city and the context, became crucial for the architect's subsequent design season and the development of the 1992 Columbus celebrations exhibition project.

In particular, the recovery plan for the Molo district²⁶ was structured into three projects that differed based on the scale of intervention: an urban project addressing the relationship between the district and the city; a recovery project for the Molo area that interacted with internal district issues and the implementation of the Neighbourhood Workshop; a pilot project that focused on a four blocks building scale. The work conducted at the city scale proved to be particularly stimulating due to its strategic proposals. The relationship between the city and the district was developed by the design of a "*Polo dei Servizi*" ("Services Hub") in Piazza Cavour: this new urban and social infrastructure aimed to establish a true public zone with shared functions within the historic centre, representing an initial example of how to facilitate the re-appropriation of the sea by the community. Working on this area meant intervening on the edge of the historic centre with a series of spaces capable of catalysing movements and public functions to activate virtuous progressive urban and social regeneration processes.

The plan included an initial rationalisation of the Porto Antico territory by removing constraints and obsolete constructions, hence transforming this new open space into a "square by the sea". To confirm this, the project envisaged the creation of what was called a pedestrian "plate" where necessary commercial activities would converge to ensure the proper functioning of this area and the historic centre. The use of public spaces elements, once again manifested in the form of a piazza, serving as the key link between the architect's primary references, public-cultural designs, and urban centre recovery plans. This complex system of relationships reflects Renzo Piano's ongoing exploration of the fundamental architectural themes that captivate him the most: the design of a socialisation and aggregation place, which, in most cases, also becomes a culture and information centre and, above all, the driving force for the activation of a gradual urban and social city recovery process.

Thus, at the new Porto Antico seafront square, Piano envisioned the construction of three large structures in the port area, which took the form of colossal bars meant to channel the view from the city toward the sea, almost resembling three ships anchored off Genoa. These large bars were intended to serve important public functions at the metropolitan level and would become an integral part of the reactivation system of the entire Porto Antico area. These three structures were deliberately positioned transversely to the coastline, emphasizing the creation of pedestrian flows that could penetrate the historic city. This was nothing more than the desire to devise an urban mechanism that could genuinely influence and attract social and urban dynamics, reconnecting the city to the sea and considering the recovery not only of the Molo district but Genoa's entire historic centre (Figure 9). However, it is important to emphasize that the Service Hub project did not consider the significant historical and testimonial value of some existing buildings in the area, which, in these initial proposals, were slated for demolition. Only further and more specific work led the architect to gain a greater awareness of the heritage present in this area in view of its recovery.

²⁶ The Molo district recovery plan drawn up by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop for the Municipality of Genoa is kept at the Renzo Piano Foundation archives.

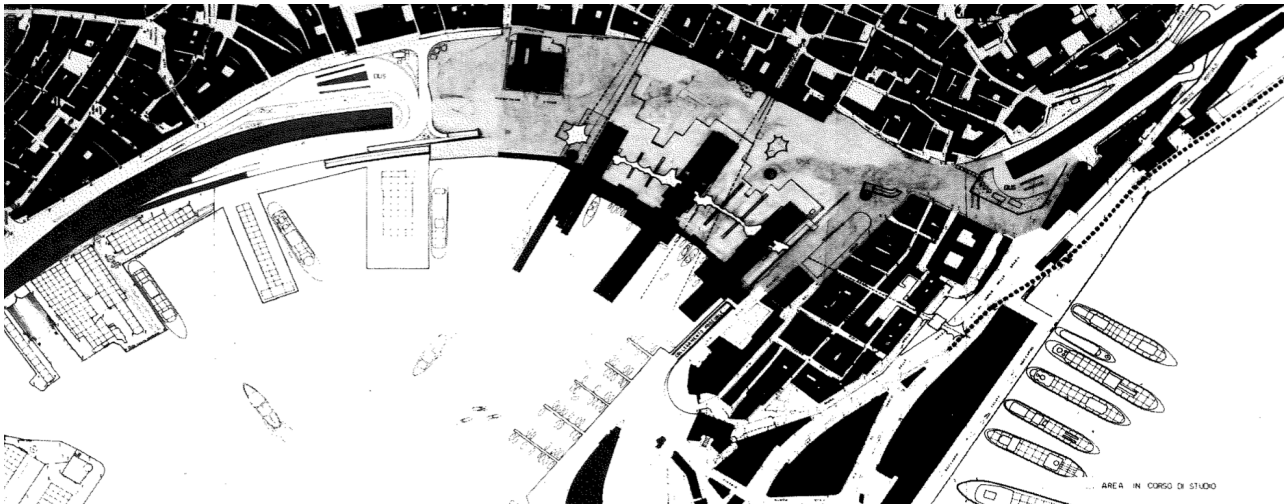


Figure 9. The "Service Hub" plan.
Renzo Piano Building Workshop © Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects.

Reconnecting the City to the Sea: the Expo "Masterplan"

On the 15th of February 1984, Renzo Piano received a letter from the Mayor of Genoa, informing him of the assignment to draft a "masterplan of initiatives to be undertaken in anticipation of 1992, quincentenary of the discovery of America by the great Genoese Navigator"²⁷. When Piano initially pondered the ways and characteristics of an event dedicated to the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's discovery of America, he primarily envisioned a series of events capable of permeating the entire city, infusing it with vitality. The concept of leveraging the milestone of 1992 as a summary moment of a series of urban interventions was not only Renzo Piano's personal idea but the result of a series of reflections that accompanied the city's political and social discourse from the 1950s and 1960s. Notably, these were the years in which Franco Albini, one of Renzo Piano's great mentors²⁸, carried out several interventions in Genoa's historic centre aimed at rehabilitating various cultural and social spaces and institutions, including the San Lorenzo Cathedral Treasure Museum, Palazzo Bianco, Palazzo Rosso, and Palazzo Tursi. These architectural works paved the way for a transformative process within the city which, from that period onwards, increasingly distanced itself from the predominantly industrial character that had defined it in the first half of the 20th century.

The intention of all parties involved (citizenship, administrations, designers) appeared to "[...] seize the opportunity of '92 to enrich the city with essential spaces and structures, relinquishing ephemeral creations that are confined to the celebratory occasion. Genoa's '92 Exhibition, while being part of the broader context of Columbus commemorations and representing its most prominent event, uniquely distinguishes itself through the selection of a specific theme, 'Christopher Columbus: the ship and the sea', which serves as a particular interpretive key for the Columbus event"²⁹. To fulfil the significant demands and needs of such an event, Renzo Piano

²⁷ Letter from the Mayor of Genoa Fulvio Cerofolini to Renzo Piano, prot. no. 557, 15 February 1984 (the letter is kept at the Renzo Piano Foundation archives, Colombo Fund, folder COL_002). Translation by the author, original text: "piano quadro delle iniziative da assumere in previsione del 1992, quinto centenario della scoperta dell'America ad opera del grande Navigatore genovese".

²⁸ On the intellectual relationship between Franco Albini and Renzo Piano, see L. Ciccarelli, *Renzo Piano prima di Renzo Piano. I maestri e gli esordi*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2017.

²⁹ GB Projects, No. 7, May-June 1991, p. 49. Translation by the author, original text: "[...] assumere il '92 come occasione per arricchire la città di spazi e strutture indispensabili, rinunciando a realizzazioni effimere, che si esauriscono nell'occasione celebrativa. L'Esposizione Genova '92, pur inserendosi nel più vasto ambito di celebrazioni colombiane e rappresentandone l'evento di maggior rilievo, si caratterizza in modo originale per la scelta di un tema particolare, "Cristoforo Colombo: la nave e il mare", che costituisce una specifica chiave di lettura dell'evento colombiano".

promptly sought to address the question of a location that could be fully dedicated to the exhibition. However, from the very outset, the demand of establishing a dialogue between the urban structure and the exhibition area became evident, without creating vast centres detached from the existing urban dynamics. He prioritized territories already present within the city that could be reactivated and returned to society. The goal was to avoid the creation of large isolated fairgrounds that would have fallen into disuse once the initiatives concluded, as had occurred with the 1961 Expo Italia not too many years earlier³⁰. This investigative element constituted one of the fundamental aspects of the project and was never disavowed by the architect. It was precisely this choice that allowed Genoa not only to initiate a gradual revitalisation process for its historic centre but also to host the Expo itself.

Genoa was not the only city in the world aiming to host an international exhibition in 1992 to celebrate the significant anniversary of the discovery of the New World. In fact, both Seville and Chicago also presented themselves as candidates to host the Universal Exposition. This particular circumstance was, in reality, pivotal not only in determining the manner of the exposition to be held in Genoa but notably the way the entire exhibition infrastructure was conceived. From the very earliest project presentations³¹, it became evident that there was a desire to rethink the traditional Expo organisation. Genoa's case represented an opportunity to develop new exhibition methods that would be more in line with the specific location and eliminate wastefulness. It sought to avoid the creation of purpose-built fairgrounds destined for obsolescence, instead focusing on revitalising deteriorated sectors of the existing city. The fact that the city of Genoa became the stage for the Expo allowed for the creation of exhibition routes that were not necessarily concentrated in a single vast area but were spread throughout the urban centre. This approach aimed to genuinely foster the city's gradual rediscovery. Consequently, from the early project drafts, a series of culturally and artistically significant city landmarks (such as the Carlo Felice Theatre and Palazzo Ducale) were mapped out to resonate with future Expo spaces.

Based on these considerations and the experience gained in the early 1980s, Piano opted for the Porto Antico area as the most suitable location to potentially host the 1992 Expo. This was the same area where he had envisioned the creation of a Services Hub as part of the neighbourhood recovery project, adjacent to the Molo district. Porto Antico is of utmost importance to the entire city as it represents a connection to its history and origins. The occasion of the celebrations seemed perfect for initiating a reflection on the revitalisation of the historic port basin, which served as an identity-defining place for the entire community. Thanks to the considerations made in the initial metropolitan urban context analysis, the Building Workshop developed a strategic plan that, using a few rationalised choices, could enable the realisation of a large exhibition area connected to the historic city. The aim was to lay the first foundation for a subsequent gradual historic urban structure regeneration process.

It was evident that there was a strong intention to emphasize Piazza Caricamento's centrality (Figure 10) as the pivotal hub around which the entire redevelopment operation would revolve. As a result, two main axial lines branched out, akin to an ancient Roman square, regulating the connection flows within the area: one perpendicular axis to the coastline embodied by the extension of Via S. Lorenzo, denominated as *Via S. Lorenzo al mare*; a second axis running parallel to the shore, facilitating the connection between the Porto Antico exhibition area and the one located further north at the Darsena. The connection with the city was not solely limited to the Expo entrance positioned along Via S. Lorenzo axis but was also extended to the surrounding areas, especially at the entrances to the Molo district, Via delle Fontane, and Piazza Sant'Elena.

³⁰ E. Piccardo, A. Lavarello (eds.), *1992 Piano per Genova*, plug_in, Genoa, 2022, p. 23.

³¹ Reference is made to a specific design presentation elaborated in December 1984 by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop as the first solution to the Genoa City Council's commission to design a masterplan to be adopted for 1992 Columbus celebrations. The design book is kept at the Renzo Piano Foundation archives.

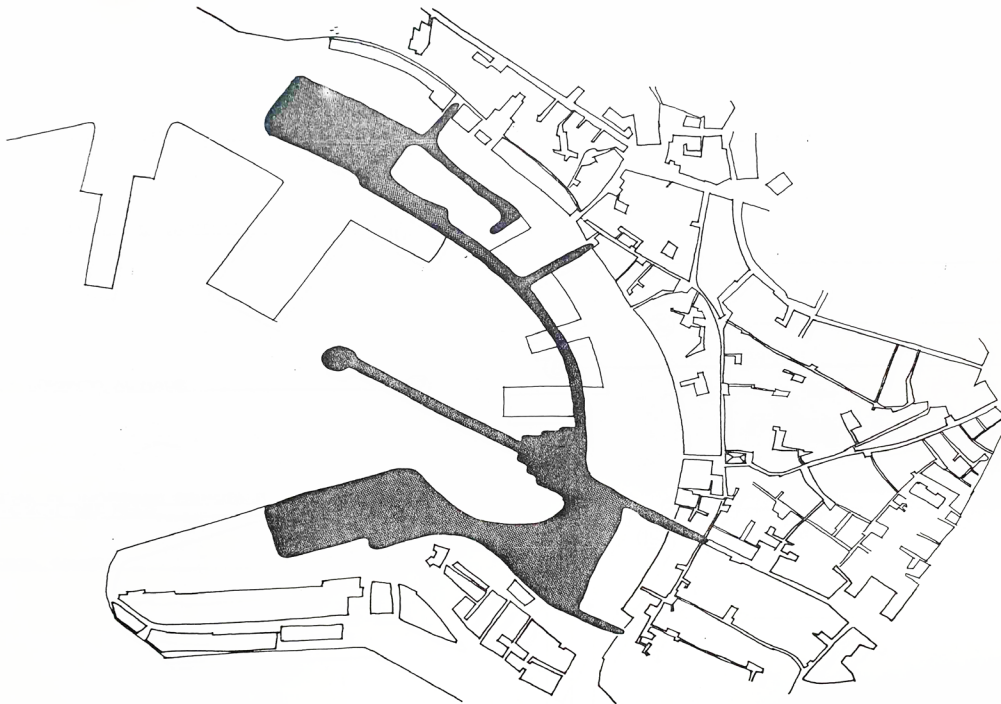


Figure 10. The Exhibition area at Porto Antico.
Renzo Piano Building Workshop © Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects.

Both exhibition areas (Porto Antico and Darsena), guided by design conditions that remained consistent throughout all subsequent development phases, saw a rationalisation of the built environment with the aim in preserving the existing heritage by recovering and repurposing it. This less impactful redevelopment strategy remained a central point of the exhibition project and, to some extent, contributed to its success. With this new approach, Piano took a further step beyond the Molo district devised recovery plan solutions, where, perhaps not fully cognizant of the heritage within that area, he had initially proposed the complete demolition of buildings in favour of creating a broad pedestrian platform that would have cleared the space between the historic city and the waterfront.

In the design drawings, the exhibition space was consistently depicted as if it extended into the city's urban fabric, as if it reached and engaged with some of the primary points of interest within the historic centre itself. Notably, these include the Palazzo di Banchi Piazza, the Cathedral Piazza, and the Palazzo Ducale Piazza. This representation choice was indeed an expression of intent to devise a design framework whose benefits could permeate throughout the existing city, initiating a regeneration operation from the coastline towards the hinterland. The operational connection between the city and the waterfront was thus carried out by prioritising transverse pathways along the coastline rather than those that followed the shoreline itself.

Therefore, it became increasingly evident that the intention was to create an area that was not detached from the rest of the urban structure, but a zone within which a functional mix could be established, allowing the entire community to reclaim the city's waterfront. This concept also gave rise to the idea of proposing certain synergistic activities placement that could lay the groundwork for a gradual process of integrating the exhibition area in the post-Expo scenario. These activities included a freight centre, a university library, the Marine Centre, the Italian Navy Hydrographic Institute, the Ligurian Crafts and Arts School, a small harbour, and a permanent crafts market (Figure 11).

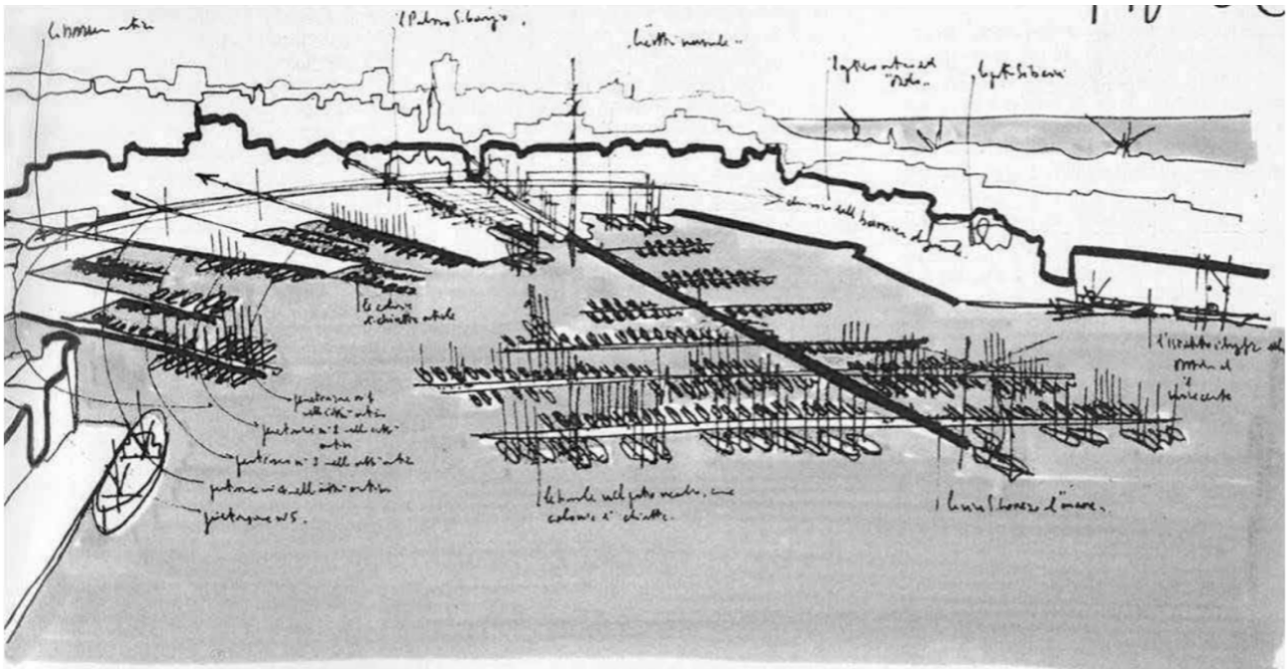


Figure 11. Renzo Piano's sketch of Via S. Lorenzo al mare.
Renzo Piano © Renzo Piano.

Via S. Lorenzo, along with its extension to the sea, constituted the authentic project backbone (Figure 12). It represents the element that synthesizes years of reflection on the historic centre and the relationship between the urban fabric and the water, a relationship that had been entirely severed in Genoa over the course of the 20th century due to the unrestrained port and industrial activities development. As the guiding axis shaping the entire exhibition space, the new Via S. Lorenzo emerged as an intricate squares system that extended from Palazzo Ducale to the Porto Antico's water basin centre, intersecting along its route Piazza S. Lorenzo, Piazza della Raibetta, and the information tower (the future Piazza delle Feste) that the architect envisioned placing at the small harbour entrance. Once again, the square element usage, or rather, in this case, a system of squares, became crucial to the successful project's primary objectives realisation: serving as a mechanism for urban redevelopment and reconnection between the city and the sea.

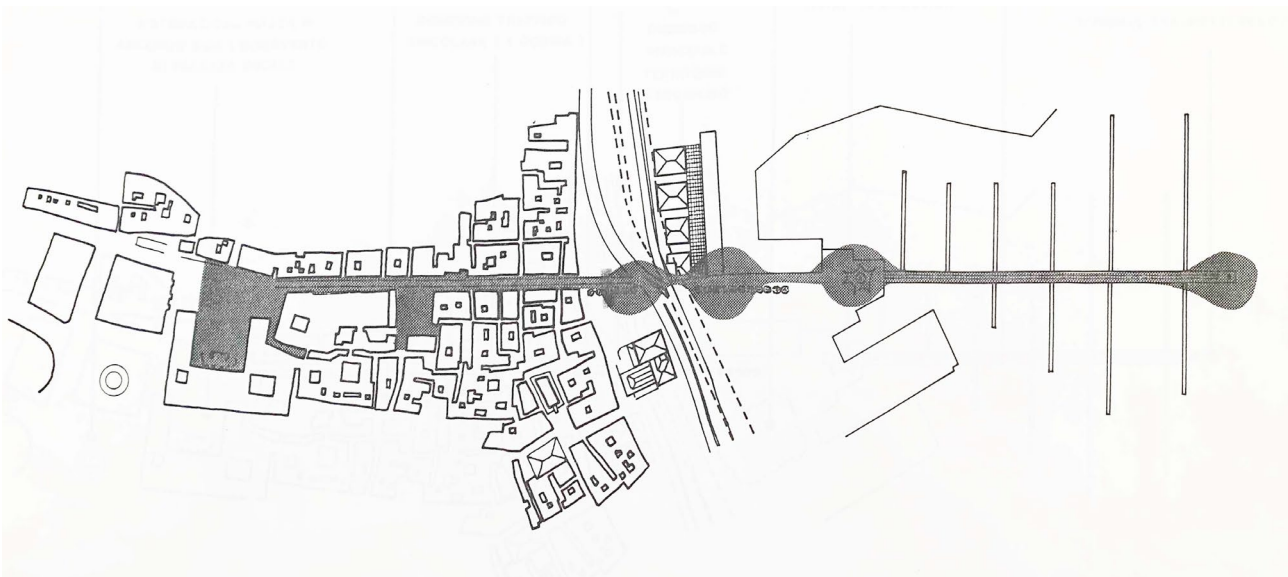


Figure 12. The squares system along Via S. Lorenzo.
Renzo Piano Building Workshop © Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects.

In the multiple sections developed along Via S. Lorenzo, the representation does not merely encompass the exhibition area alone; rather, the drawing expansively extends to depict a considerably broader context. On one side, the sea is portrayed as a bustling expanse replete with small vessels, while on the other, the facades of significant cultural edifices that align with Via S. Lorenzo are rendered, including Palazzo Ducale and the Church of S. Lorenzo's side. The objective, therefore, is to emphasize the purpose of the Porto Antico Expo project as a pivotal element bridging the sea and the city, a place capable of transmitting its beneficial effects in both directions, with the aim of their total reconnection (Figure 13).

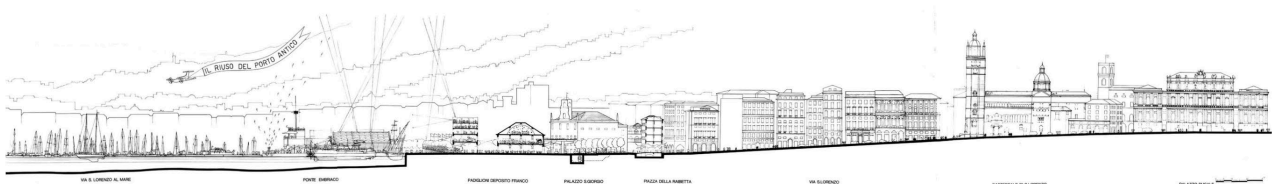


Figure 13. Section of Via S. Lorenzo.

Renzo Piano Building Workshop © Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects.

Conclusions

The considerations and strategies developed in the proposal presented to the Municipality of Genoa in 1984 remained unchanged in subsequent project phases, albeit with different applications due to the evolving challenges that arose during the design and construction process. Despite its subsequent transformations, the project consistently adhered to its original objectives and emerged as a worthy successor to those experiences that allowed Piano to mature his own design methodology in established urban contexts through the utilisation of public space elements as urban devices capable of initiating a genuine re-appropriation and regeneration. From its initial application with the piazza on the plateau Beaubourg, passing through the Neighborhood Workshops, and then to the Molo district recovery plan, the public space analysis and application led the architect to expand his field of action.

The article traces a research path which, focusing on the 1960s-1980s time frame, presents an analysis of the projects which enabled Renzo Piano to develop his thoughts regarding social and urban re-appropriation operations through the creation of new public spaces. The case of Genoa becomes particularly significant as it facilitated the tangible implementation of these elements in a context urgently requiring public spaces. Subsequently, Porto Antico's applications culminated in the establishment of a very "*Parco Urbano Portuale*" ("Urban Port Park")³² that continues to yield beneficial effects to the surrounding urban context to this day³³.

Tracing this research approach on public space permits to frame Piano's projects in a specific view which focuses on urban and social rehabilitation. In this regard, Genoa's Porto Antico redevelopment project, more than 30 years later, still represents an exceptionally stimulating reference point for future port areas conversions within established and historic urban settings. It is the result of a lengthy process of accumulating thought regarding public space as an instrument capable of implementing a gradual activity of urban and social revitalisation.

³² E. Poggi, L. Stefani (eds.), *Il porto vecchio di Genova*, Sagep Editrice, Genoa, 1985, p. 141.

³³ Reference is specifically made to the G8 project (2001) and to the Affresco plan (2004) which necessitate integration within the scope of this research on public space.

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