

Tommaso Brighenti
The schools of Guido Canella.
Type, form and behaviour

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to briefly retrace the experience of one of the main masters of Italian architecture, Guido Canella, in particular from the period when he began to form a precise idea of architecture, namely, during his years as a young teacher at the Polytechnic University of Milan, and how this idea would be directly reflected in his built works, while focusing on a particular typology which was to characterize Canella's work and research: the school building. This research conducted on schools, initially together with Ernesto N. Rogers, later resulted in various built works in which the school activities, by means of a progressive "typological expansion", were joined by extensive work on function which enabled the transformation of the traditional school building into a public building.

Keywords

Guido Canella — Hinterland — Schools

In talking about Guido Canella's work, particularly as regards projects and research on various types of school, we should not fail to very briefly retrace certain chronological and other fundamental issues related to the formation of a precise idea of architecture, acquired as a teacher in university lecture rooms. This is because, for Canella, a built work and the research done on schools were two inseparable elements, which progressed cheek by jowl. An initial priority is to divide his teaching experience into two periods: a first season, which could be defined as the "great founding research projects"¹ beginning from his experience in Venice as a voluntary assistant in the early 1960s on a course taught by G. Samonà which segued into two years as an assistant for a course of E. N. Rogers titled *Elements of Composition* from 1962 to 1964, working on the theme of the Primary School, and then responsibility as a professor in charge of the same course working: from 1964 to 1966 (on the theatre); from '66 to '68 (on the prison); from '68 to '70 (on the university); from '69 to '70 (on the trade fair as a way of developing the cities of Lombardy and the Veneto)²; then a second phase which began in 1974, during which Canella would begin extensive research into the typological characteristics of architecture by working on recontextualizing Milan³ in collaboration with Antonio Acuto and a group of young teachers who were his students. In this essay, I am going to deal briefly with the first period, when Canella would piece together a theory on the city and its transformation processes, designing and building some of the main types of public buildings, including schools, in relation to the city and its territorial context. In these buildings, and above all in his teaching projects, the conception of typology as a morphological invariant would stand out; something which would allow Canella to



Fig. 1
Book cover: AA. VV, *L'utopia della realtà. Un esperimento didattico sulla tipologia della Scuola Primaria*, De Donato, Bari, 1965.



Fig. 2
Book cover: Guido Canella, *Il sistema teatrale a Milano*, Dedalo, Bari, 1966.



Fig. 3
Book cover: Guido Canella, Lucio S. D'Angiolini, *Università, ragione contesto tipo*, Dedalo, Bari, 1975.

search for those “case-by-case” characteristics in a circumscribed concrete historical period, while taking into account, as Bordogna has stated, «of the contextual specificities and hypothetical transformations in individual functional structures: it is in this sense, in fact, that typology acquired the value of a methodological assumption, becoming the architect’s real ‘philosophy’» (Bordogna 1981, p. 78). To do so, it is necessary to clarify some passages of his thinking before introducing some specific cases related to his teaching and the works that were built.

Historical awareness; formal-functional invariants; typological conception

The approach to teaching which Canella used to deal with issues related to architectural design dates back to the course called *Elements of Composition* which he participated in from the academic year 1962-1963, trying from the outset to delimit the sphere of relevance which revolves around a project, considering it necessary «to make analysis of architecture operative outside of any behavioural examination, but also safe from an aesthetic-conventional examination, by means of a more complex philological-semantic process, i.e., referring to architecture as a wholly historical product» (Canella 1968a, p. 90). Canella would conduct an analysis of those figures of architecture who had characterized the historical sequence, in order to «remove certain prejudices and historicize the causes of competition – in order to use them in architectural composition, capable of involving them, together with the emblem, in the behaviour required by it» (Canella 1972, p. 100). The acquisition of a “historical awareness”, where «the representations of life are gradually realized in a concrete determination» (Rogers 1963, pp. 2-3), rich in those “seeds” suitable for transformation, thus became the first element of the architectural phenomenon to be acquired, an essential cognitive tool to understand reality. After which, it is important to remember that, precisely on the basis of this historical awareness, Canella would introduce one of the most important elements of his research, the *formal-functional invariants* which, as he himself claimed, would constitute «the arrangement of a work of architecture in a physical context: both when it takes it into account directly (as a practice), or when it takes it into account implicitly (as a theory)» (Canella 1968a, p. 90). The invariant thus became the tool which let him study these spatial arrangements in order to define a new architectural typology concept. To clarify, in addition to the example he gave in his essay *Dal laboratorio della composizione*, in which he demonstrated how the form of the Renaissance central-plan temple does not depend solely on allegorical-iconological issues taken from Renaissance treatises, but on the relationships it enjoys

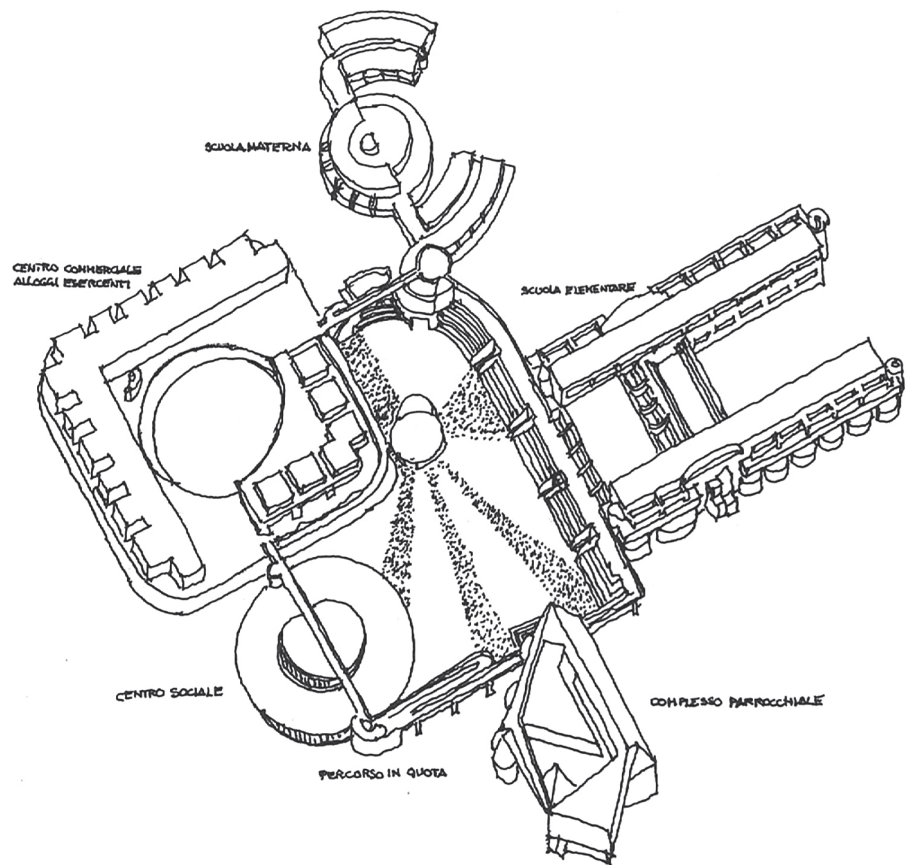


Fig. 4

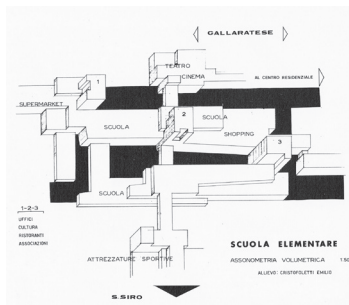
Guido Canella, Square in the Service Centre at the INCIS Village, Pieve Emanuele, Milan, 1968-91. Sketch by Guido Canella. Guido Canella Archive, Milan.

with the destination context. In one of his essays from some years later, Canella would identify examples of invariants in Milanese architecture, fundamental tools which would go on to find a practical confirmation in built works, such as *polycentrism*, *discontinuity* (in the sense of lack of hierarchy and a crescendo by sequences), *introversion*, *promiscuity* and *contamination* and finally *anachronism*; all invariant elements which he himself defined as unquestionably «morphologically incoherent – but – structurally organic since they typically highlight the frequency, intensity, and polarity of exchanges which a frontier culture and an archipelago-style settlement configuration have established in the long term» (Canella 1989, p. 59). Consequently, the choice of the invariant – which arises from an intuitive-interpretative inclination, finds its application in the real world through the passage from an «abstractly delivered figuration», as happens for example in literary, pictorial, and musical compositions, «to a historically and collectively constituted context», such as that of the city⁴ and its suburbs, a place where architecture has no need to blend in, but has room to deepen the institutional task it must perform. Thus, the city understood as a historical and structural fact from which it is possible to extract and re-configure those functional, typological, and above all formal potentialities according to words of “conformity” or “discrepancy”, but always implicit in a hypothesis of transformation. «Because it is precisely in the physical body of the city that the structural dynamics and cultural superstructures are translated into spatial arrangements, in other words, blocks, squares, new neighbourhoods, infrastructures, until the specific architectural work has been determined» (Manganaro 2013, p. 108). History, the city and its physical context, and the formal-functional invariants, would lead Canella to develop a new concept of architectural typology which, as we shall see later, would be implemented especially in his school buildings. The study of typology became an operational tool geared directly to design, «that

specific invariant relative to the spatial arrangements assumed by a specific intended use or function, within a historical succession» (Manganaro 2013, p. 111), research characterized by a constant questioning of the typology, arriving, through the project, at a constitutive and subjective form and an idea of architecture aware of the functional task which architecture cannot eschew⁵. The typological conception therefore represents that capacity for synthesis which the architect – but also the learner – must possess in order to achieve a “conceptual” but also “physical” place in a design which promotes «disciplinary progress, thus guaranteeing full scientific legitimacy» (Canella 1989, p. 57). On this matter, Canella wrote: «[...] By typology I do not mean a taxonomic, distributional classification – in the sense used by linguists – but research aimed at recovering (in a critical-historical analysis) and re-expressing (in a compositional-planning synthesis) those primary characteristics, of a longer duration [...] which distinguish the singularity of an anthropic landscape. The degree of rationality of a work of architecture cannot therefore be deduced from a formal and construction logic, but from its complex way of corresponding in time and space, by coherence or by contradiction, to that whole of which urban individuality has assumed the function and meaning» (Canella 1989, p. 57).

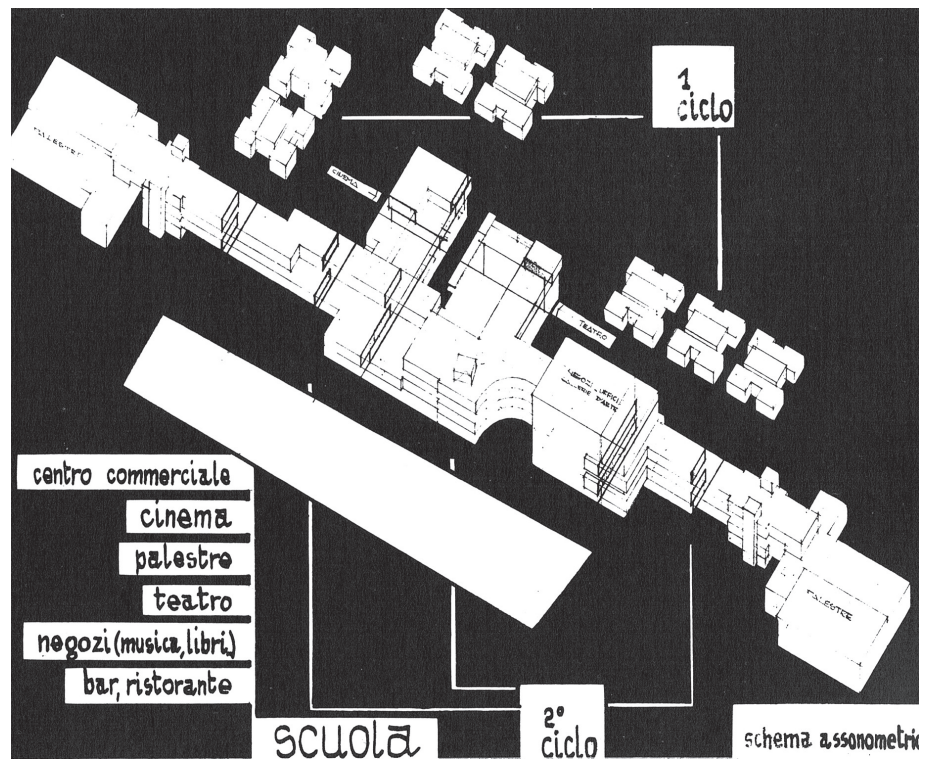
School. Between theory and practice

The themes which distinguished his courses concerned those formal cornerstones of architecture that Canella himself would relegate to “mausoleums” in his important 1968 essay entitled *Mausolei contro computers* [“Mausoleums against computers” t/n]. These issues were related to the kinds of behaviour and functions of social life: behaviour capable of changing a city’s underlying bone structure. Thus the school, the theatre, and even such marginalized functions as the prison, the university or the trade fair are seen as urban “ganglia”, «cornerstones on which a new image of the city should be organized, built and qualified, as a link, to a time, a phenomenal horizon, a ‘vision of the world’»⁶ (Canella 1968b), mausoleums endowed with their own “autonomy of meaning” and a “visual hierarchy within the surrounding environment”. However, it is on the theme of the School⁷, the subject of this issue of FAM, on which I would like to dwell in this second part, a theme in which the most up-to-date pedagogical models would be used as an expression of a social fabric, while the school organism would be set up and deciphered starting from its pedagogical-didactic components and how these research projects would then find a physical concretization in the works built and realized by Canella, in particular in the Milanese hinterland. The primary school theme was the first one addressed in the “foundational research” of the 1960s, in a two-year period from 1962 to 1964. At the time, Canella was assistant to Ernesto Nathan Rogers at the Faculty of Architecture of the Polytechnic University of Milan for the course, *Elements of Composition*⁸, and a part of the works done with the students would be published in the famous book *Utopia della Realtà*, which ended up as a slogan in the «meaning of a kind of research capable of transcending contingency in the name of a reality that is never static but always on the go» (Rogers 1965). This course was in antithesis to all the contemporary manuals which conventionally assigned to teaching notions given as definitive, a methodology which in those years often prevailed in the various Faculties of Architecture, one which attempted to involve different problems simultaneously, with continuity, through an attempt to attribute less automaticity and immediacy to the architectural

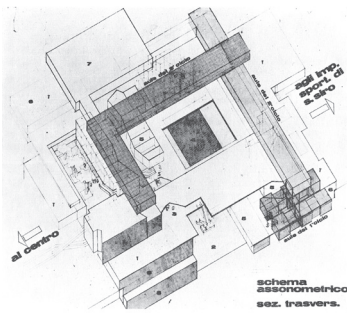


Figg. 5 a-b

Projects carried out during the Elements of Composition course at the Faculty of Architecture of the Polytechnic of Milan under the guidance of Ernesto N. Rogers. Teaching projects for Primary Schools, academic year 1962-63. Assistant Guido Canella. Consultancy for the dynamic structure of the territory, Lucio Stellario d'Angiolini. Axonometric projections of secondary-level services: projects by the students E. Cristofolotti (above), V. Paci (on the right).

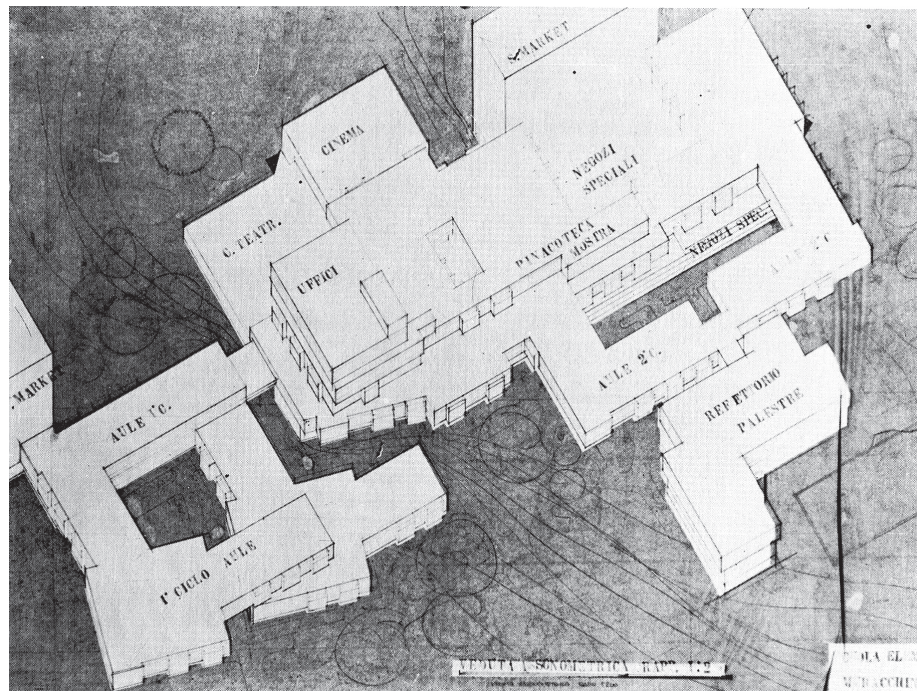


composition, but to focus on the intrinsic properties of its specific technique and its uninterrupted relationship with the history of architecture. The theme of the primary school typology was addressed as a research methodology, so not “pragmatic-professional” but one which could «take on the task of anticipating, by means of verification models, the functional evolutions into which society tends to organize itself in its expressions» (Rogers et al. 1965, p. 134). The study was mainly aimed at the social content of the school, where the pedagogical choice was a given as a logical consequence of research. The school thus became an opportunity to study the relationship between people and city, and the problem – still present today – of adapting the structures of society to the needs of the citizen: «Knowledge of present-day society implies knowledge of history, of which the present is a moment of development: without this knowledge the consideration of any phenomenon remains indeterminate, and objects cannot be located within the coordinates of space and time» (Rogers 1962). As can be seen in the works that were published, the projects were not geared to architectural detail, to a search for materials or linguistic aspects; the figures remained neutral forms, composed one with the other up to a “cognitively founded” choice, in which the student could «indulge, to the point of binding, respect for a precise programme and a decisive transformation» (Canella 1972, p. 99) arriving at a synthesis consistent with a formal or construction logic. All of which can be clearly seen in the works published in the book *L'utopia della realtà*, in particular by the groups which Canella himself coordinated) and would subsequently also find confirmation in the famous didactic prototypes where those “formal embryos” would be created in which the «dictation of society became more incisive», and which contained the «seal of the architectural idea» (Canella 1966, p. 165). The formal embryo would be the decisive element of his design research in the 1960s; works of architecture capable of representing the potential for transforming behaviour in social life and the study of typological issues, the result of an assembly of integrated functions, which could only find formal completeness in their union. Works of architecture, arranged typological

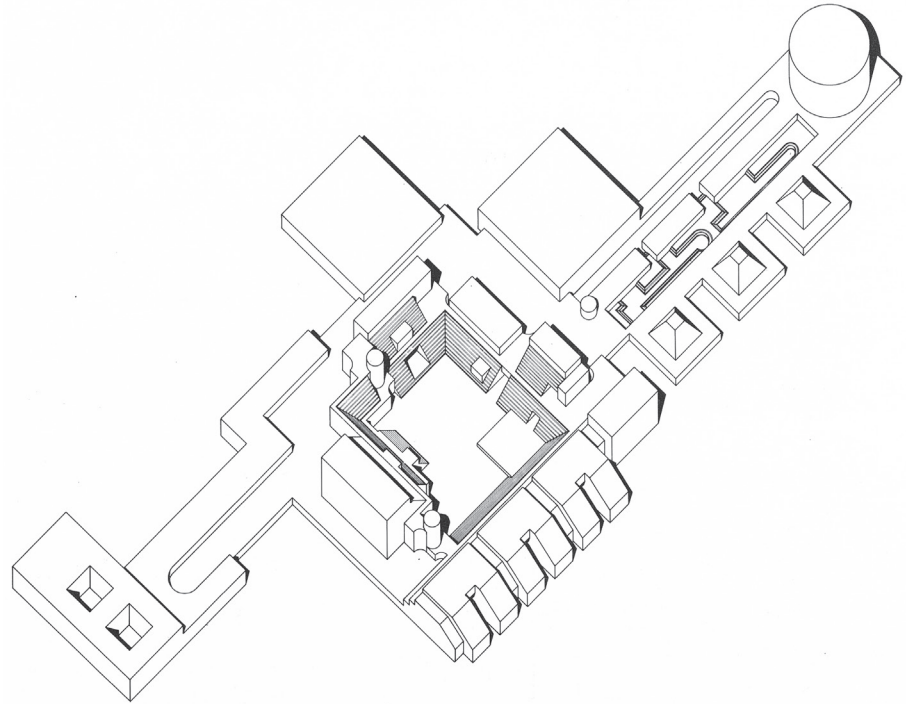
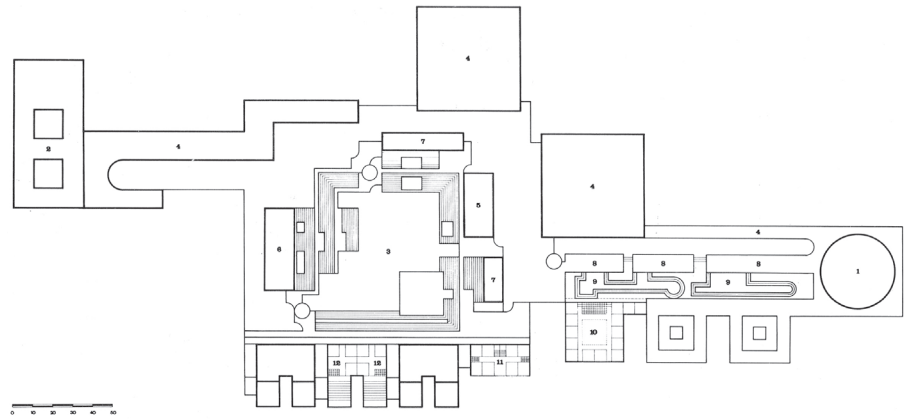
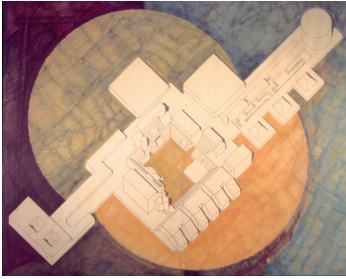


Figg. 6 a-b

Projects carried out during the Elements of Composition course at the Faculty of Architecture of the Polytechnic University of Milan under the guidance of Ernesto N. Rogers. Teaching projects for Primary Schools, academic year 1962-63. Assistant Guido Canella. Consultancy for the dynamic structure of the territory, Lucio Stellario d'Angiolini. Axonometric projections of secondary-level services: projects by the students A. Cominazzini (on the right), E. Muracchini (above).



logically, but made up of neutral volumetric masses, devoid of detail, in which the invariant would become something real and concluded, physically verifiable and identifiable through a well-defined functional system seen «as an inseparable heritage from the history of architecture [...] which cannot be reduced to the particularistic meaning of function inherited from nineteenth-century manuals and exasperated by the Taylorist component of the modern movement» (Bordogna 1987, p. 16). These works show how even work on the form would assume extraordinary importance, a form which therefore did not arise from a systematic deduction, from predetermined rules and repeatable typologies, but from the very essence of the means employed, from an analysis, therefore, and from a careful selection of the chosen means: «Therefore, in this work, the presuppositions of a tendency in the choice of similar figures valid everywhere need not be found, but must be verified in common intentions and directions of knowledge, capable of recognizing and conquering a new context for architecture – a form – capable of involving the behaviour required by it together with the emblem. Only in this way, by promoting the choice of the figure as one with the choice of the type (that is, with the actual geometry of the function), is it able to constitute itself as a programme against separation, for a different and new kind of behaviour, for a different and new kind of relationship between public and private, collective and individual, and so on» (Canella 1972, p. 99). It is undeniable that these research projects on the theme of the Primary School, these “formal embryos”, contributed to the development in Canella of a precise idea of architecture that would find its maximum achievement in his realized works, in which would be clearly impressed, as Bordogna has stated, «the influence of studies on functional integration and consolidation processes, interpreted as structural trends which characterize the typological and settlement configurations of highly developed contexts; tendencies in themselves neutral, but which, in the planning stage, need a forcing of positive virtuality through a strong intentionality of distinction and the prefiguration of a new mass behaviour». In these projects, the scholastic activity was always integrated into a multifaceted functional regime, transforming the school building into an au-



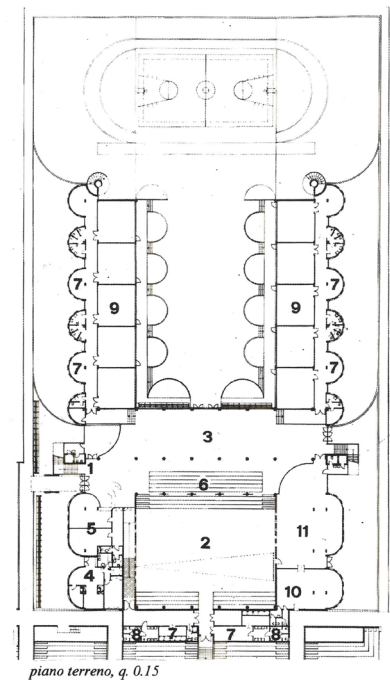
Figg. 7 a-b-c

Teaching project no.4. Piazza-amphitheatre; State school complex; Consumer equipment. Novegro di Segrate. 1. Silo. 2. Railway and metro station. 3. School camp for theatre and outdoor activities. 4. Uses. 5. Restaurant. 6. Hospitality 7. Offices. 8. Galleries. 9. Open-air exhibition. 10. Junior secondary classrooms. 11. Senior secondary basic classrooms. 12. Higher education educational residence; Axonometric projection of the prototype; plan; Guido Canella's drawing of the prototype. Guido Canella Archive, Milan. Canella Archive, Milan.

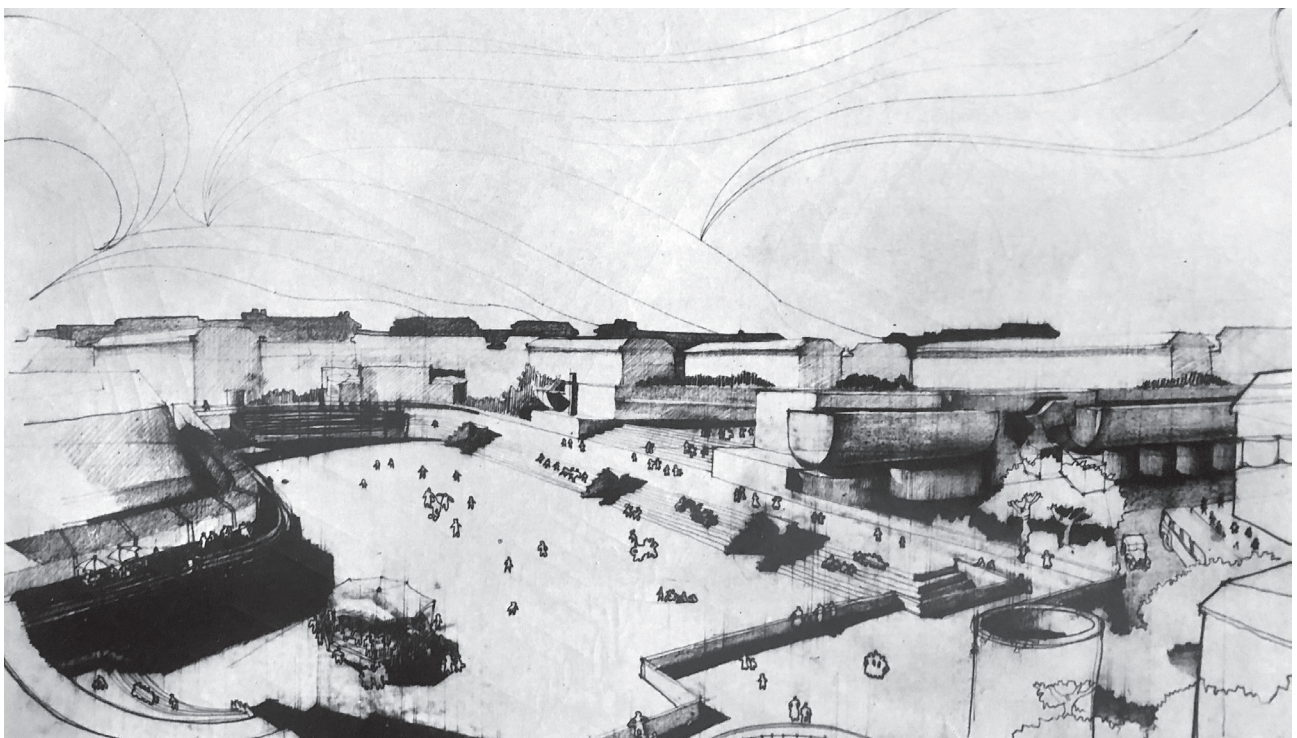
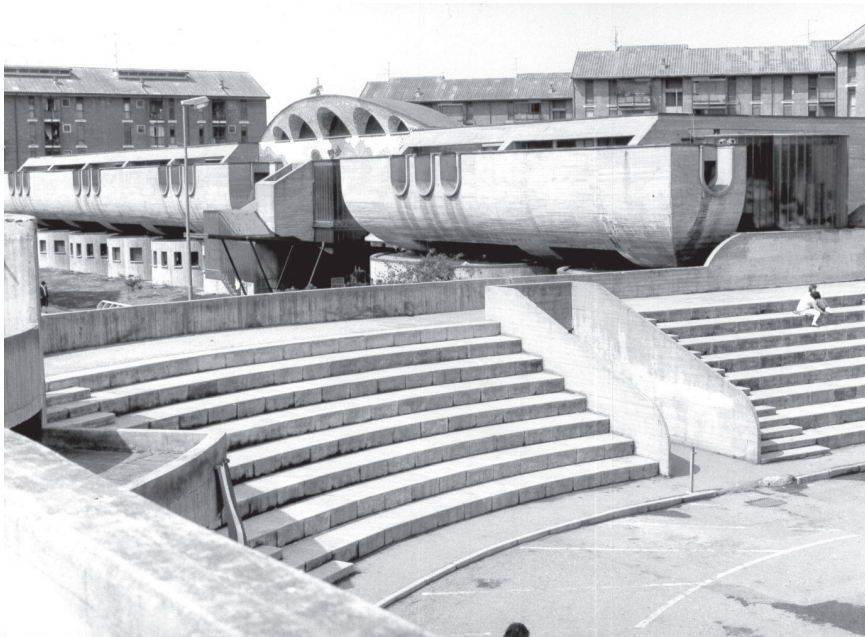
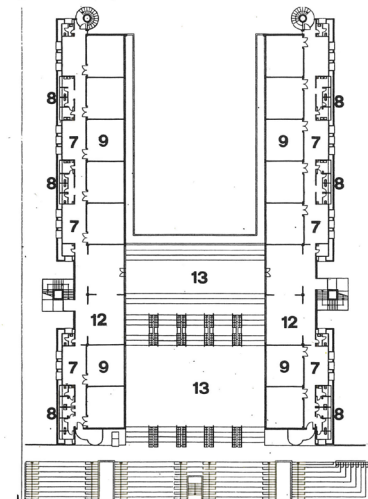
thentic public building which, like a secular basilica, through a skilful linguistic characterization full of citations coming from that historical awareness described initially, «becomes a moment of cultural identification and self-representation of the communities for which it is intended» (Bordogna 1981, p. 78). I will mention only four cases, in my opinion among the most emblematic schools designed by Canella⁹. The Elementary School in the INCIS Village of Pieve Emanuele (1968-73), a building which helped construct a public square in the company of several constructions with different functions (Elementary School, Nursery School, parish complex, shopping centre, a multi-purpose building), is divided into three blocks. Two of these are parallel, with classrooms and a unit interposed orthogonally between them containing the entrance hall, open directly onto the lower gym, the refectory, the secretaries offices, but above all characterized by a large flight of steps, formed from the roof of the changing rooms of the gym below, which outlines the short elevation of the entire school overlooking the public square (terraces now unfortunately replaced by a green embankment). The elementary school at Noverasco with a nursery section and a sports field (1971) adopts the form of a basilica with three naves. In the side aisles are classrooms and services while in the central one Canella inserted a gym, overlooked by a flight of steps which serve as both a grandstand and a small theatre/lecture hall available to stu-

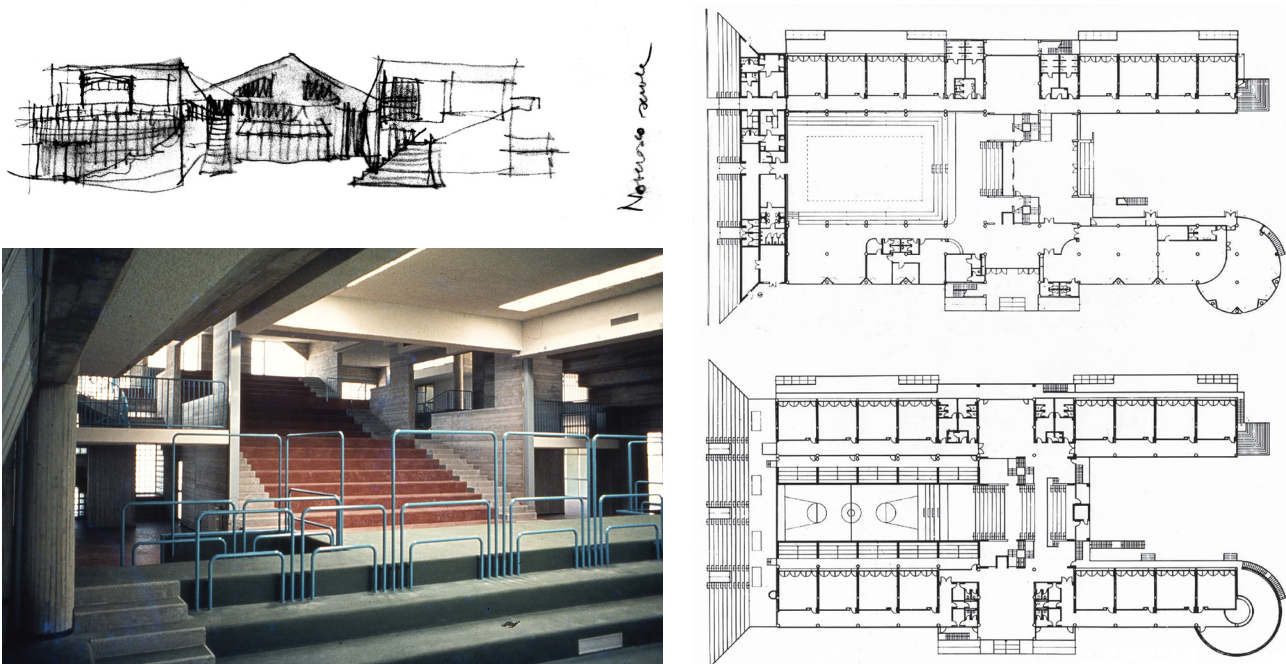
Figg. 8 a-b-c-d

Guido Canella with Michele Achilli and Daniele Brigidini. Square in the service centre at the INCIS village of Pieve Emanuele, Milan, 1968-82. South-west view of the courtyard (photo by E. Ghiringhelli); project plan; view towards the square with the steps (photo by E. Ghiringhelli); view of the square. Guido Canella Archive, Milan.



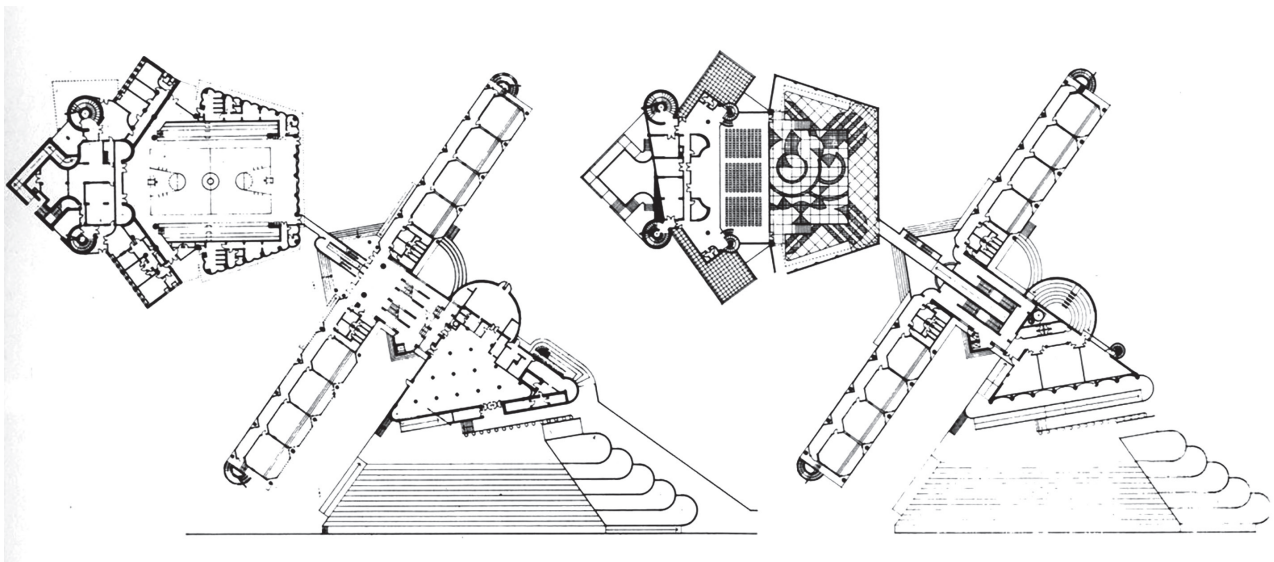
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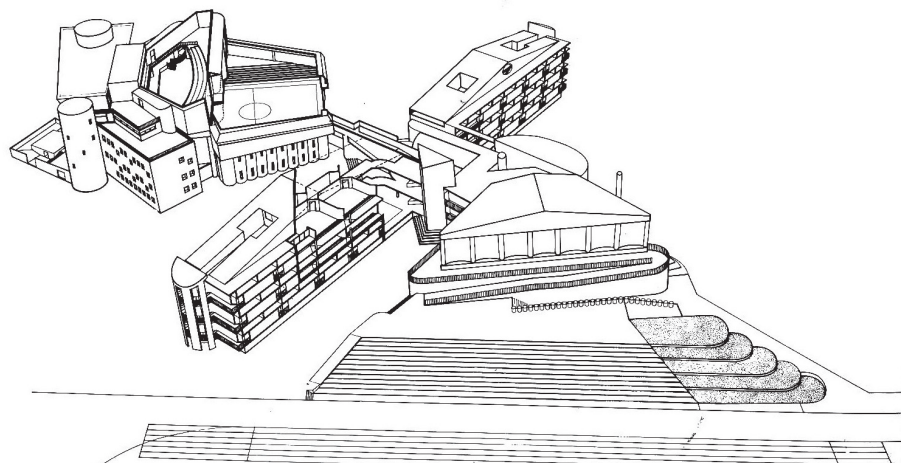
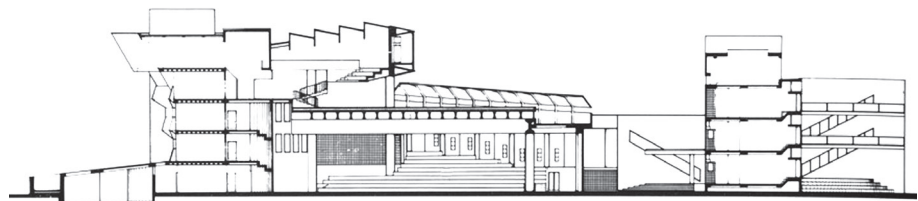
**Figg. 9 a-b-c**

Guido Canella with Michele Achilli and Dante Brigidini, Elementary school with nursery and sports field at Noverasco, Opera, 1974-76. Project sketch; Ground floor and first floor plans; Internal view of the steps overlooking the sports field which become a small theatre.

dents and the community, and covered in turn by a stepped roof which becomes a small outdoor terrace for the classrooms of the north building. In the middle school annexed to the municipal complex of Pieve Emanuele (1972), the school functions are physically integrated with the activities of the local community, ranging from municipal and administrative amenities to cultural and sporting ones: the school gym becomes a sports hall and its terraces a waiting room for those visiting the town hall; the aula magna becomes a council chamber, auditorium and theatre, hosting major theatre companies for several years; the school library becomes a municipal library; the refectory a canteen for municipal employees and local workers, the roof of the gym a large elevated plaza with a view of the surrounding landscape. Finally, the Monaca middle school with municipal social facilities in Cesano Boscone (1975-1982), which represents one of the most emblematic cases of Canella's work due to its assumption of being able to transform civil behaviour. The complex consists of a large cylindrical block, acting as a hinge between two in-line school buildings, which contains a large gym, topped, through a supporting structure of reinforced concrete columns and transverse steel trusses, by an auditorium/theatre containing around 500 seats with adjoining dressing rooms, a library, and special classrooms. This cylindrical block, which would become a theatre, cinema, sports hall for an entire expansion area of West Milan, would alternate city life with school life, becoming in fact «the visual and civil fulcrum, thus assuming the characteristics of a 'foundation architecture', a driving force of urbanization and social re-aggregation of highly degraded settlement contexts» (Bordogna 1981, p. 78). In conclusion, it is necessary to bring the question back to today and ask ourselves what the legacy of this research and these works is, and why it is important to continue studying them, showing them to students, questioning them. In the first place, the main reflection focuses on a certain way of understanding schools, teaching, and research for Canella, and how this research then found confirmation in built works. With regard to research on schools, Rogers wrote that it should remain «free from those compromises of a practical and contingent nature which weigh down the explanation (and even the formulation) of the programmes of a society in the making» (Rog-

**Fig. 10 a-b-c**

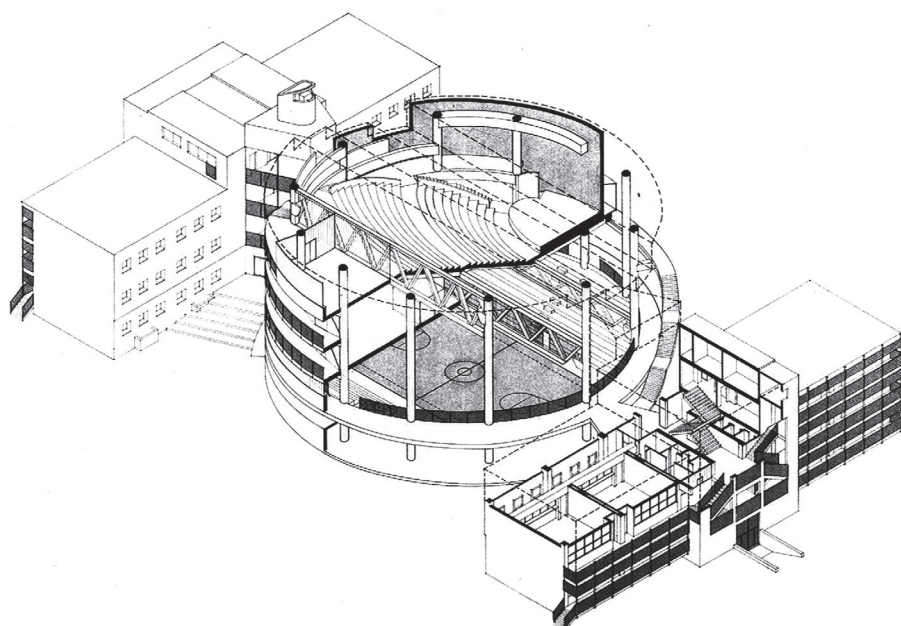
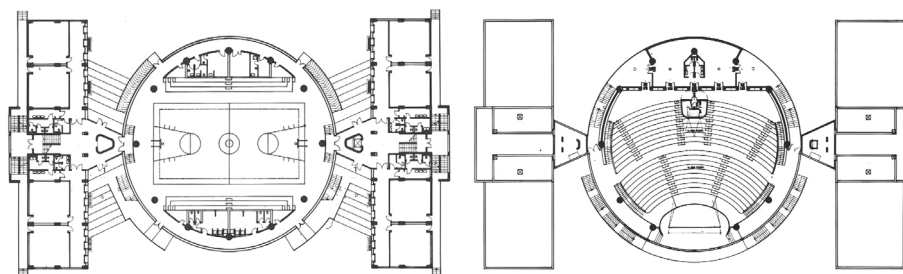
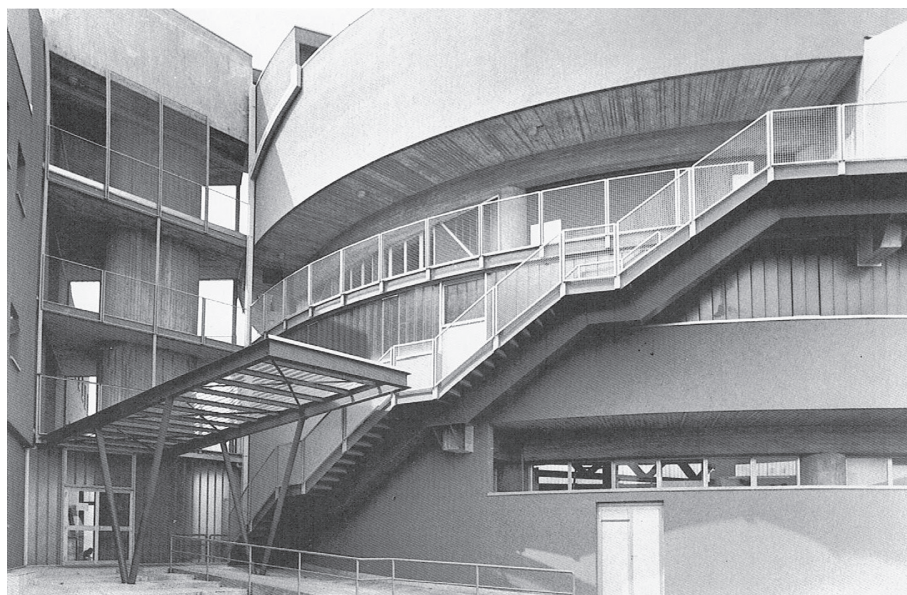
Guido Canella with Michele Achilli, Civic centre with town hall, middle school and sports field in Pieve Emanuele, 1971-1978. General plans of the ground floor and of the second/third floor; Cross-section; Axonometric cross-section.



ers 1965, p. 14). This aspect, which is gradually crumbling today, ought to be an indisputable point within our universities. Then there is the importance of certain theoretical aspects, which for Canella, concerned «more the object and the means of transmitting knowledge than the ultimate definition of architecture in keeping with any style»¹⁰ (Fiori, Boidi 1984, p. 17) a noble ambition, which does not remain just a utopia but finds real verification in the project, moving away from those works of architecture conditioned by a dominance of the image, by consumerist needs, by the illusory motives of technology and fashion. Finally, the last aspect is related to a certain way of understanding architecture, not merely as a representation, but as a desire for transformation which contemplates a conception of the world, an attempt to construct a new identity, a place in which to transmit a knowledge base to develop expression, with autonomy and rigour. All fundamental aspects which need to be constantly discussed and to remain at the very core of our discipline.

Figg. 11 a-b-c

Guido Canella with Michele Achilli and Dante Brigidini, Middle school with municipal social facilities at Monaca di Cesano Boscone, Milan, 1975-82. View of the entrance and external paths, (Photo by Carla De Benedetti); plans of the ground floor and third/fourth floor; axonometric cross-section.



Notes

¹ Of these experiences, the two-year duration of the research work should be emphasized first off, in which a preliminary analysis assumed a decisive role, in many cases venturing beyond the strictly disciplinary bounds thanks also to different skill sets transmitted by teachers from various disciplines, to then be implemented by Rogers and his students. This approach, characterized by a firm stance, focused on the centrality of the architectural project against the tendency to marginalize or even exclude its educational role in the Faculty of Architecture in the period of contestations from 1963 to 1968. The volumes published by Canella regarding these research projects include: *L'utopia della realtà*, published together with Rogers, edited by Canella himself; *Il sistema teatrale a Milano* which, in 1966, launched the series *Architettura e Città* edited by Canella and published by Dedalo for which, in 1975, Canella along with D'Angiolini also published the book *Università ragione contesto tipo*.

² This first phase would end in 1971, with the suspension which the Christian Democrat Minister Misasi brought against the Faculty Council consisting of seven members of several generations of masters, including Albini, Bottoni, Belgioioso, De Carli, Viganò and, among the younger members, Rossi, Canella and Portoghesi. This suspension was to last for the best part of three years and had far-reaching consequences since Albini and Bottoni were never reinstated and Rossi would no longer return to teach in Milan because of moving to Zurich and subsequently to Venice. Regarding the years of training, see the text by Bordogna E. (1987) – “Gli anni della formazione”. In: Id., *Guido Canella. Architetture 1957-1987*. Electa, Milan, 7-12.

³ From 1974 to 1979, Guido Canella would direct the Institute of Composition, from 1979 to 1981 the Department of Architectural Design of the Polytechnic University of Milan, and in 1977 would found the quarterly journal *Hinterland. Disegno e contesto dell'architettura per la gestione degli interventi sul territorio*.

⁴ As Elvio Manganaro wrote in his book on the concept of building typology in Italy: “In reality, the search for invariants is not only a reflective and descriptive mechanism, good in the analytic phase, but is reversible, since it sorts knowledge into formal and functional categories which can be used immediately by an architect. Canella also speaks, with regard to invariants, of functional and physical embryos in which the architect can control architectural processes”. In: Manganaro E. (2013) – *Funzione del concetto di tipologia edilizia in Italia*. Mondadori, Milan, 110.

⁵ See Canella G. (1985) – “Dieci opinioni sul tipo. [with contributions by] Oswald Ungers, Oriol Bohigas, Carlo Aymonino, Anton Schweighofer, Aldo Rossi, Manuel de Solà-Morales Rubió, Ludovico Quaroni, Rob Krier, Guido Canella, Aldo van Eyck”. Casabella, 509-510, (January-February), 108.

⁶ Canella G. (1968) – “Mausolei contro computers”. *Il Confronto*, 1, (IV), 39-43. Republished in French under the title “Mausolées contre computers”. *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 139, (September 1968), 4-7; and in the journals *L'architetto*, 1-2, (XIV 1969), 8-11; and *Hinterland*, 18 (September 1981), 4-9; and finally republished in Idem (2011) – *Un ruolo per l'architettura*, Monica L. (ed.). Clean, Naples, 6-45.

⁷ Canella G. (1965) – “Relazioni tra morfologia, tipologia dell'organismo architettonico e ambiente fisico”. in: AA. VV., *L'utopia della realtà. Un esperimento didattico sulla tipologia della Scuola Primaria*. Leonardo da Vinci, Bari, 66-81.

⁸ E. N. Rogers was appointed to the *Elements of Composition* course held at the Faculty of Architecture of the Polytechnic University of Milan in the two academic years 1962-1963 and 1963-1964 (the latter the year when Rogers became holder of the chair).

⁹ With regard to the school buildings designed by Guido Canella, see in particular the monographs: Suzuki K. (ed.) (1983) – *Guido Canella*. Zanichelli, Bologna; Bordogna E. (1987), *Guido Canella. Architetture 1957-1987*. op. cit.; Bordogna E. (2002) – *Guido Canella. Opere e progetti*. Electa, Milan. See also the contribution in the volume: Prandi E. (2014) – “Nel gran teatro dell'Hinterland e non solo”. In: Bordogna E., Canella Ge., Manganaro E. (ed.) (2014) – *Guido Canella 1931-2009*. Franco Angeli, Milan, 231-237.

¹⁰ Fiori L. and Boidi S. (1984) – “Intervista a Guido Canella. La reinvenzione tipologica”. In: Id (ed.) – *Canella. Centro Civico*. Abitare Segesta, Milan, 17.

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Tommaso Brighenti (Parma 1985), architect and researcher at the Politecnico di Milano (Department of Architecture, Construction Engineering and Built Environment), he graduated from the Scuola di Architettura Civile of the Politecnico di Milano. In 2015, he took a Ph.D. in Architectural Composition. He is currently developing teaching methods at the Politecnico di Milano where he teaches architectural design. He has collaborated with several Italian universities, in particular, the Politecnico di Torino and the Università di Parma, giving lessons and participating in design experiments. He is editor-in-chief of the online journal FAMagazine devoted to research and projects concerning architecture and the city. He has published a book entitled *Pedagogie architettoniche. Scuole, didattica, progetto* for the series AAC – Arti | Architettura | Città – studi, temi, ricerche (Accademia University Press, Turin, 2018).