an urban intervention in Milan

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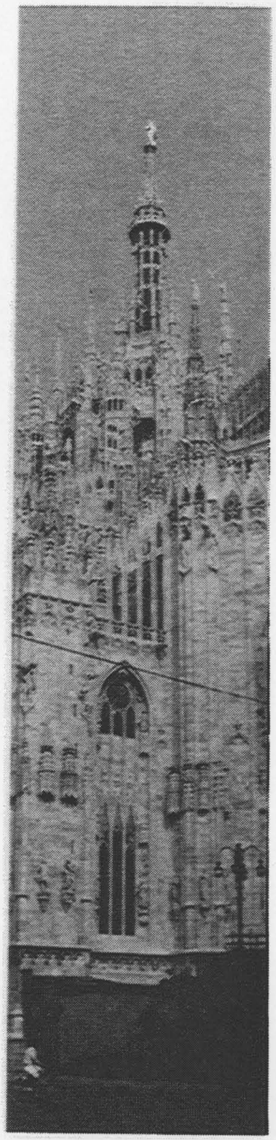

AN URBAN INTERVENTION IN

Milan

Olivier Rochat

Thesis submitted to the faculty of
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment for the requirement of the degree of

Master of Architecture

approved

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Daniel Stuver

"City air makes man free"

- Medieval proverb -

abstract

The project is one building and the floor of the Piazza del Duomo, in Milan, Italy.

The piazza is an ideal case history of the development of an urban fabric,

and of the consciousness of urbanism itself..

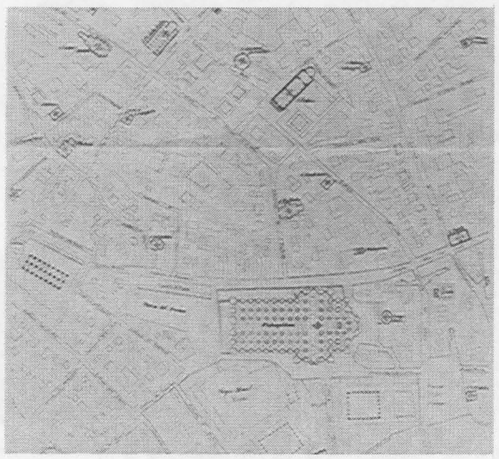
Urban life has existed from the time that men came together to function as a coherent group. This community, or *polis*, to ancient Greeks, made man both free and dependent: dependent upon it to fulfill his needs, yet freed through the power and efficiency it rendered. The polis gathered the fruits of many labors, and this harvest, both material and conceptual, was the symbol of the society's endeavor. As the apparatus of the harvest, the polis had also to create and conserve the arena of men's freedom, which, like the harvest, was necessary for the maintenance of the group. This it did through the agora, which acted as the market place and open debate space of the citizens of the polis.

The city continues to be an agora, the place where the sparkle of intelligence is made possible through diversity. To manage the harvest, that is, to collect and retain the goods, acts, thoughts, and principles of a people, implies a desire for continuity, and gradually the city becomes the artifact of these collections. The agora embodies the development and cultural peculiarities of a civilization. It is the frame or filter through which a man finds an identity, and yet through which men can achieve diversity. Diversity and identity define each other, and it is the task of the city to nurture them both.

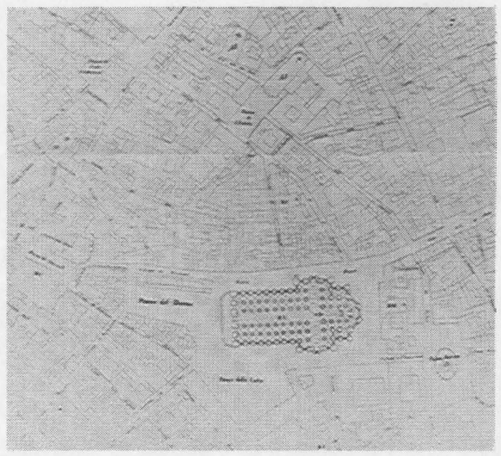
Urbanism is the characteristic way of life of city dwellers, a social, political, and poetic phenomena. It is not "zoning", a mere mechanical tool, used to separate functions from each other, to form single elements, empty of substance and diversity. "Negative satellites [shopping mall, campus, industrial park] embody the end of the city as a controlled space, the original manifestation of a society".[1] Urbanism is not only the study of the physical needs of man. Its task is to insightfully sculpt the spaces which the life of a society describes; it is a human science, working with the psyche of man, knowing the shape of his cosmos. It involves an attentive listening to the city, not only to the rational programatic needs, but to the formal, historical and emotional ones as well: it is an art.

[1] Jean Baudrillard: La fin de la modernité ou l'ère de la simulation.

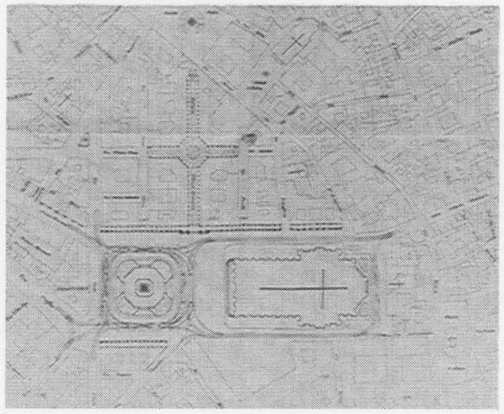
Milan, with the project represented



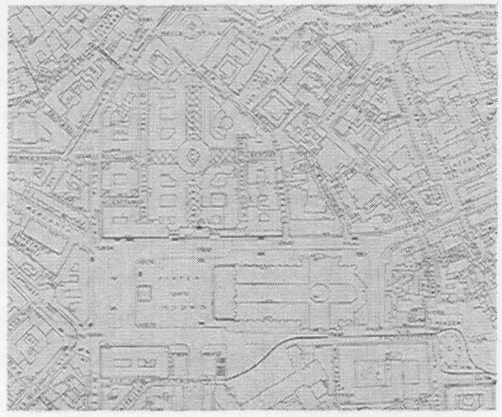
Milan developed on an ancient Roman settlement. The medieval city did not respect the original grid and formed a dense, spontaneous, core. With the construction of the Duomo on the site of the burnt "Santa Maria Maggiore" begins the imposition of controlled, classically planned urban elements, upon the heart of this medieval city.



Here the Piazza del Duomo (and I use the Italian word *piazza*, rather than the English *plaza*, because it evokes a much fuller meaning. Just as *garden*, or *park*, can only be describe by its English name) is oblique to the facade of the duomo, which almost touches the wall of the Ducal Palace. When the palace court was opened, the spaces, though connected, remained distinct, and it was still the medieval, spontaneous urbanism which determined the majority of the space, and the result was two spaces, Piazza del Duomo and Piazza della Corte, forming a stereo metric system around the cathedral.



The intervention continued in the classical vein: the reduction of the spontaneous system of the medieval city into planned, orthogonal spaces. With the Galleria Vittorio Emmanuel (which was built as a "salon" for the city, a grand social stage, and still works today as such), the cardinal grid orientation radiated out from the cathedral to impose itself upon almost all of surrounding spaces and buildings. This trend made the piazza frontal to the cathedral, and treated the Piazza della Corte as a leftover aberration.



Finally the last remaining element of the medieval city, the Piazza della Corte, to the southeast, was brought to account, and its west wing was destroyed, in order to form a perfectly orthogonal space about the cathedral, and frame the entrance of the Galleria. This was consacrated by the construction of two symmetrical fascist buildings, framing a perspective of a building tower far to the south of the piazza. The Piazza della Corte is opened, yet disconnected, and emptied of its spatial and historical importance.

Historically, the Duomo was a symbol of the unification of men under one belief, and the statue of Vittorio Emmanuel II a reminder of Italy's unification under one government. Because of the symbolic and historic dimensions of the piazza, only a new program of major importance can truly join the other elements with an equal contributuion. After the times of the grand families, nobles and kings, patrons of the arts, sciences and architecture, history is in search for new forces able to influence our cities. Today Milan stands upon its historic foundations within the circle of a unified Europe, and it is the goal of the project to address this new sphere of Milan's existence. The program is for a center of information and regional dealings of the EEC, a representative office, and part of a network of similar centers around Europe. It is a place where the individual can enter into dialogue with the institution, the place where the institution is close to the individual in the exercise of democracy. In permanent contact with the other parts of this continental network, it is an international agora accomplished through the modern devices of communication.

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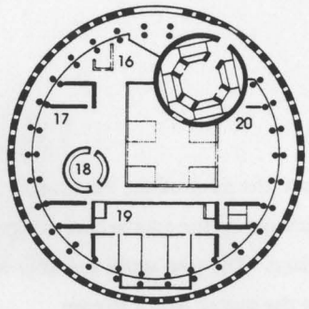
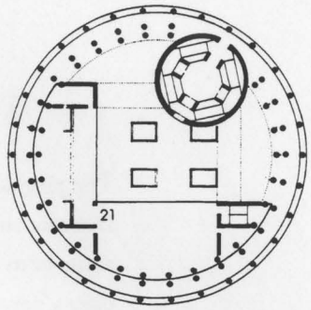
Plans and section of the EEC building

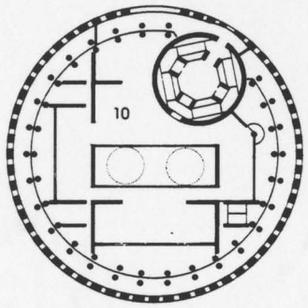
1. Covered piazza
2. Vertical street
3. Elevated piazza
4. Lobby
5. Auditorium
6. Conference room
7. Bar
8. Entrance to art gallery
9. Art gallery, first floor
10. Art gallery, mezzanine
11. Entrance to media-room
12. Info-travel
13. Newspaper room
14. Movie theater: Info-world
15. Post-office
16. Entrance to administration floor
17. Regional offices E.E.C.
18. Lab
19. Studios radio Europe
20. Administration officies
21. Restaurant - Bar
22. Services/restrooms
23. Safety stair

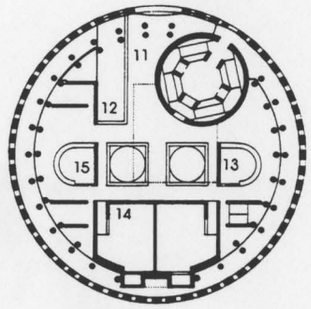
fifth floor - roof terrace



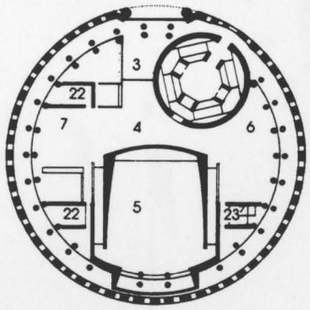


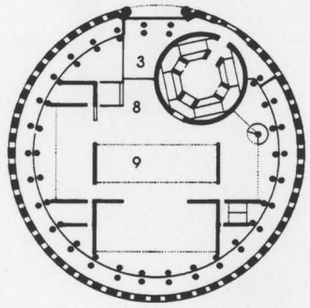
third floor - fourth floor



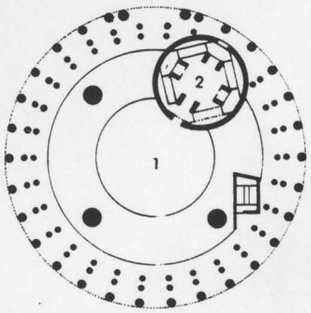


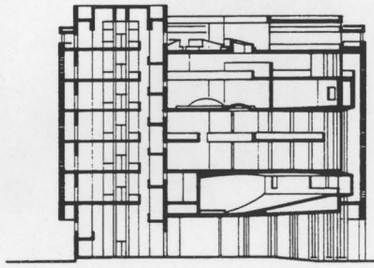
first floor - second floor



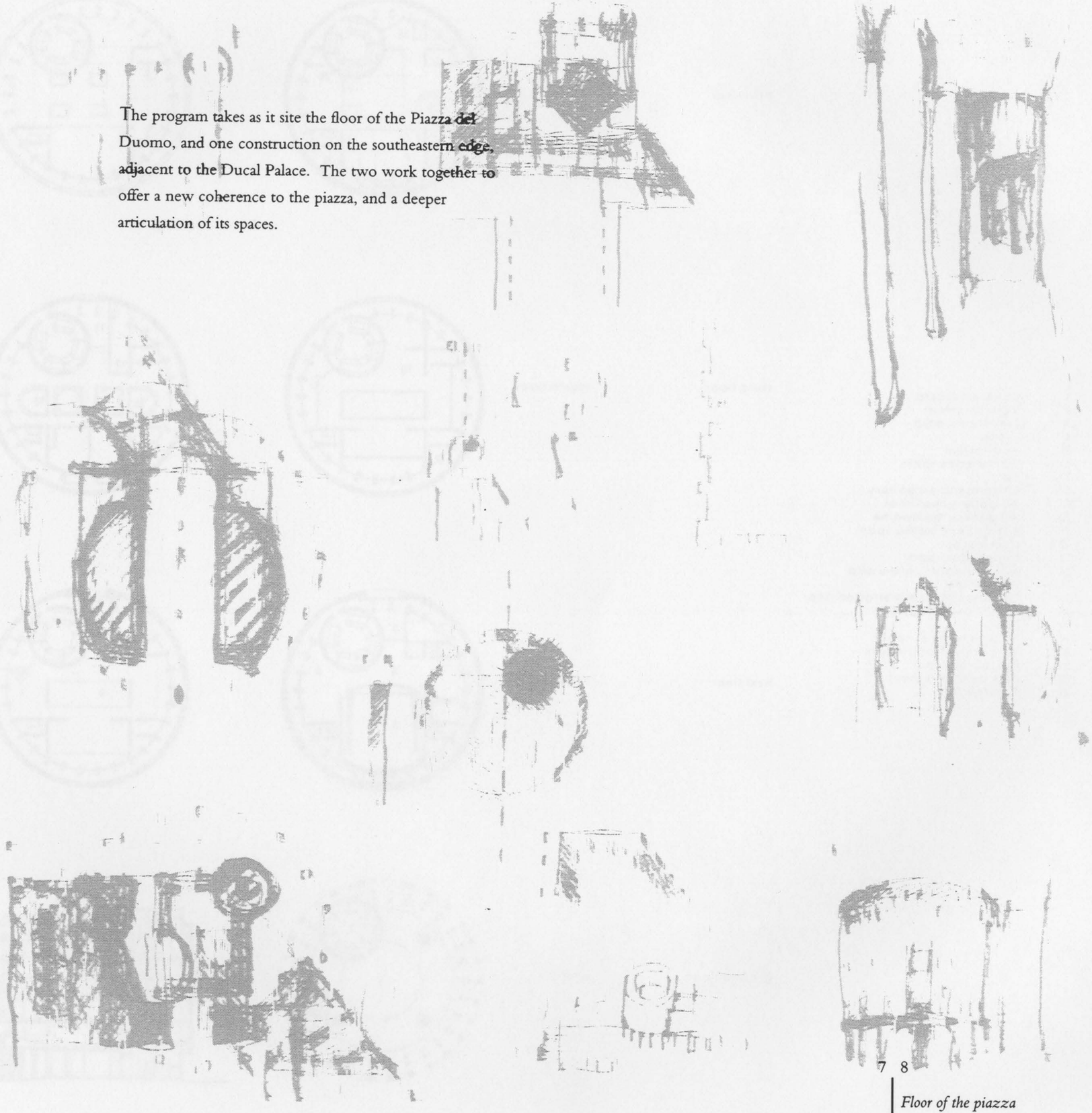


ground floor - section

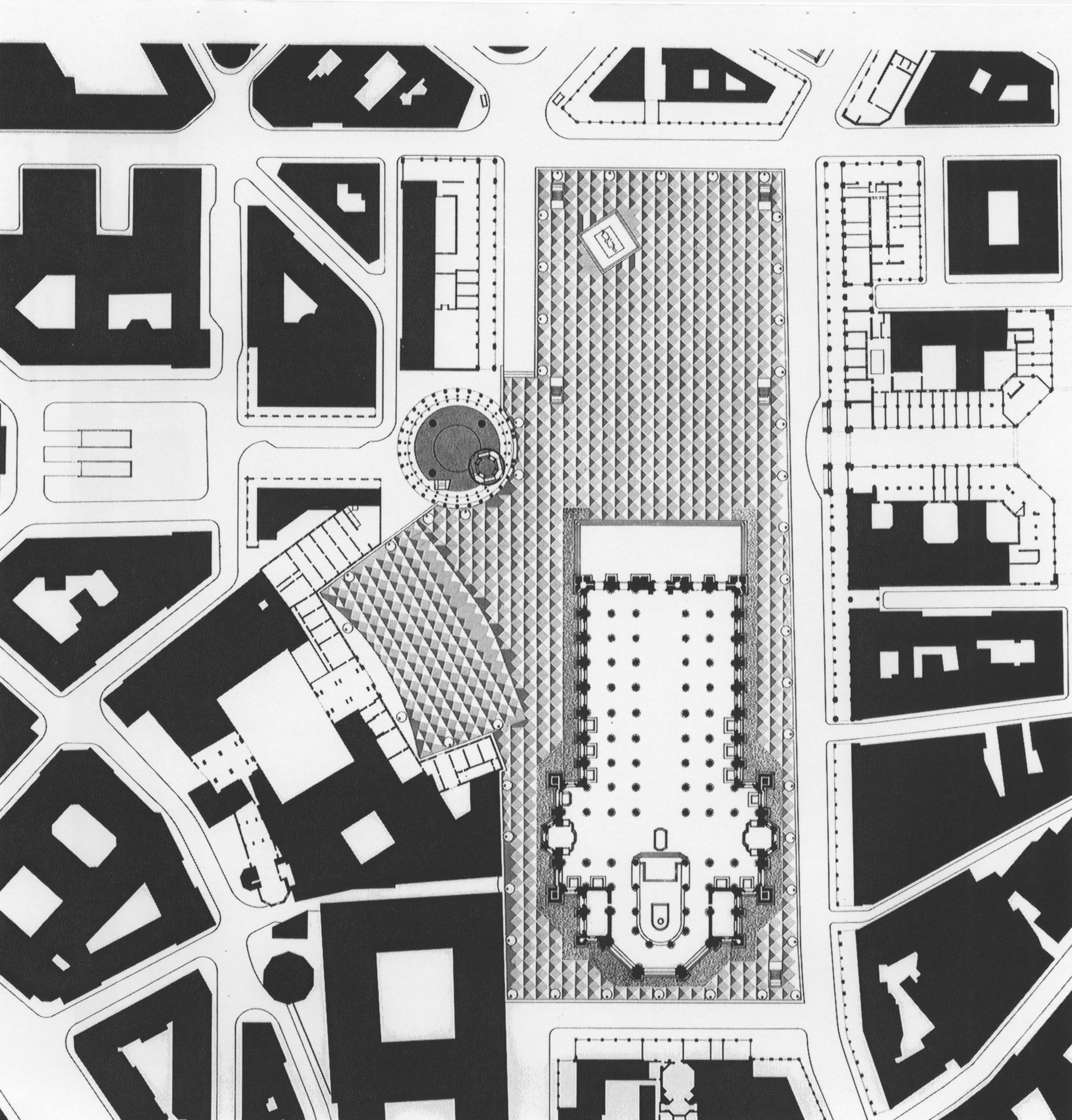


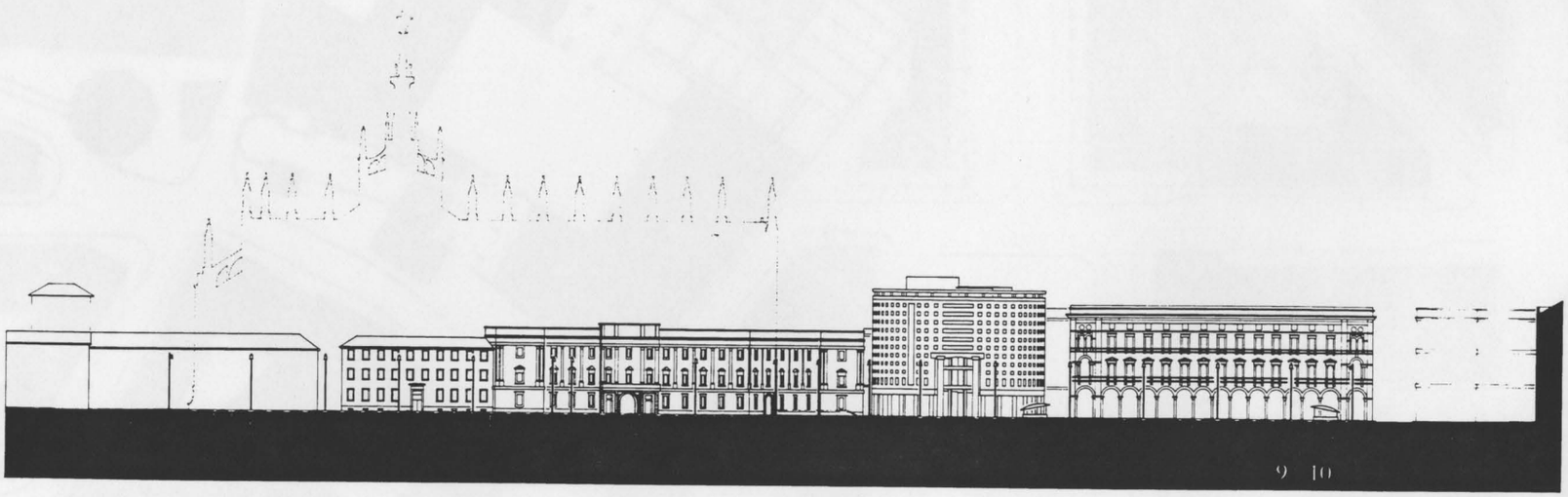


The program takes as it site the floor of the Piazza del Duomo, and one construction on the southeastern edge, adjacent to the Ducal Palace. The two work together to offer a new coherence to the piazza, and a deeper articulation of its spaces.



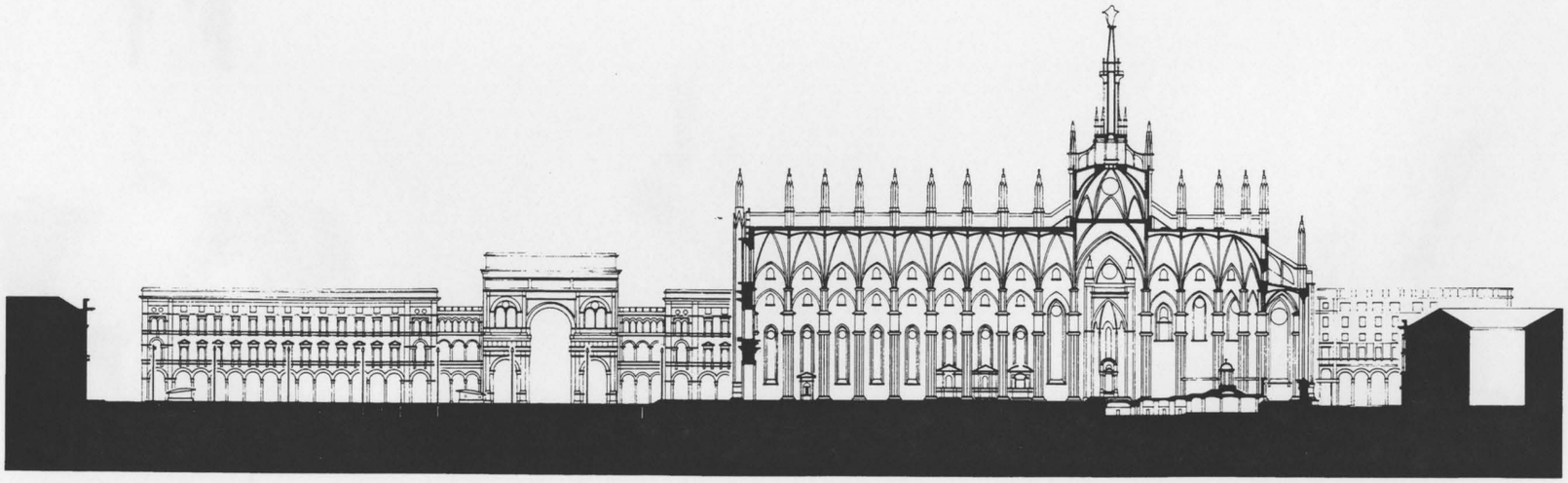
Floor of the piazza



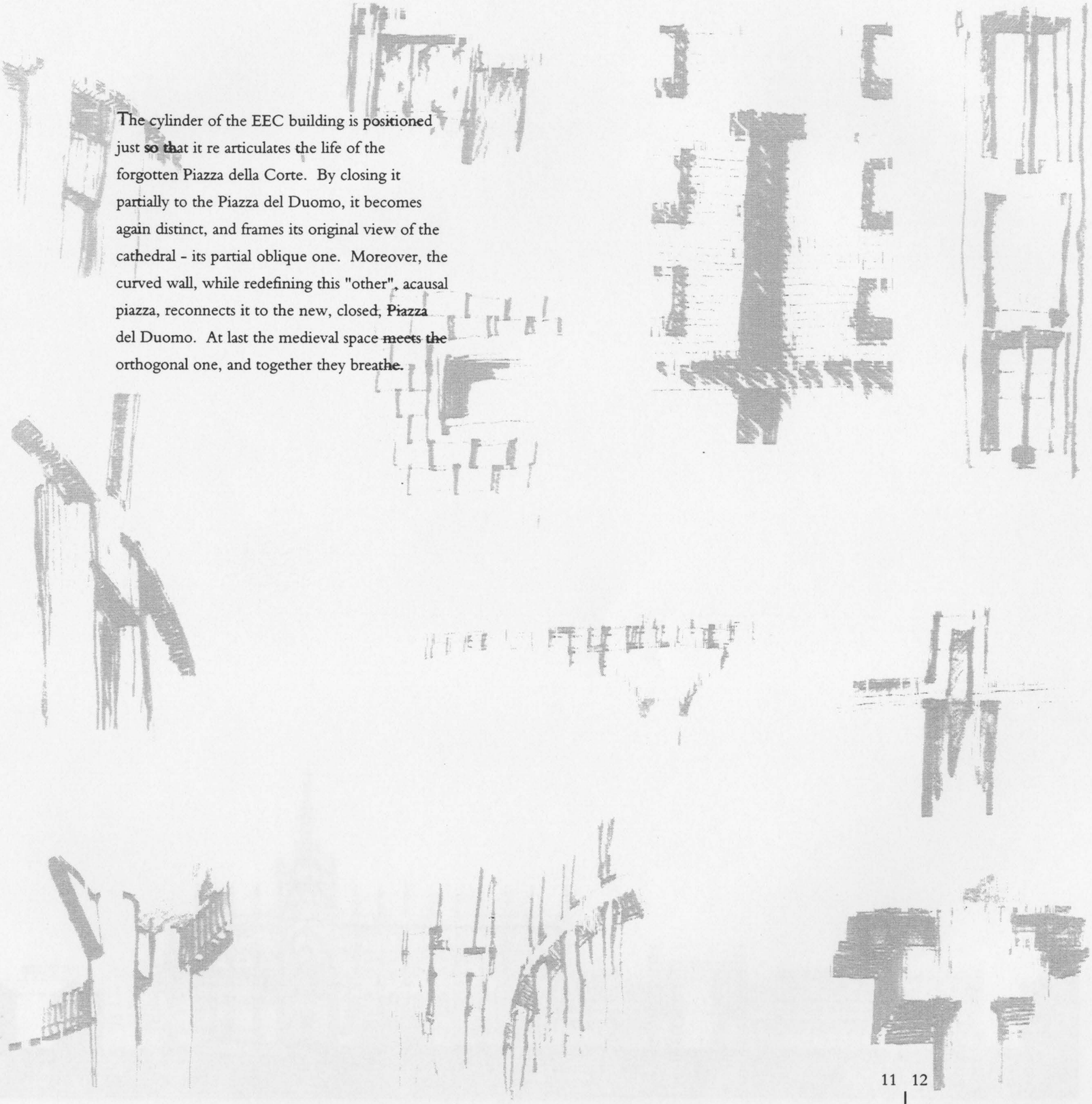


East - West section through the cathedral

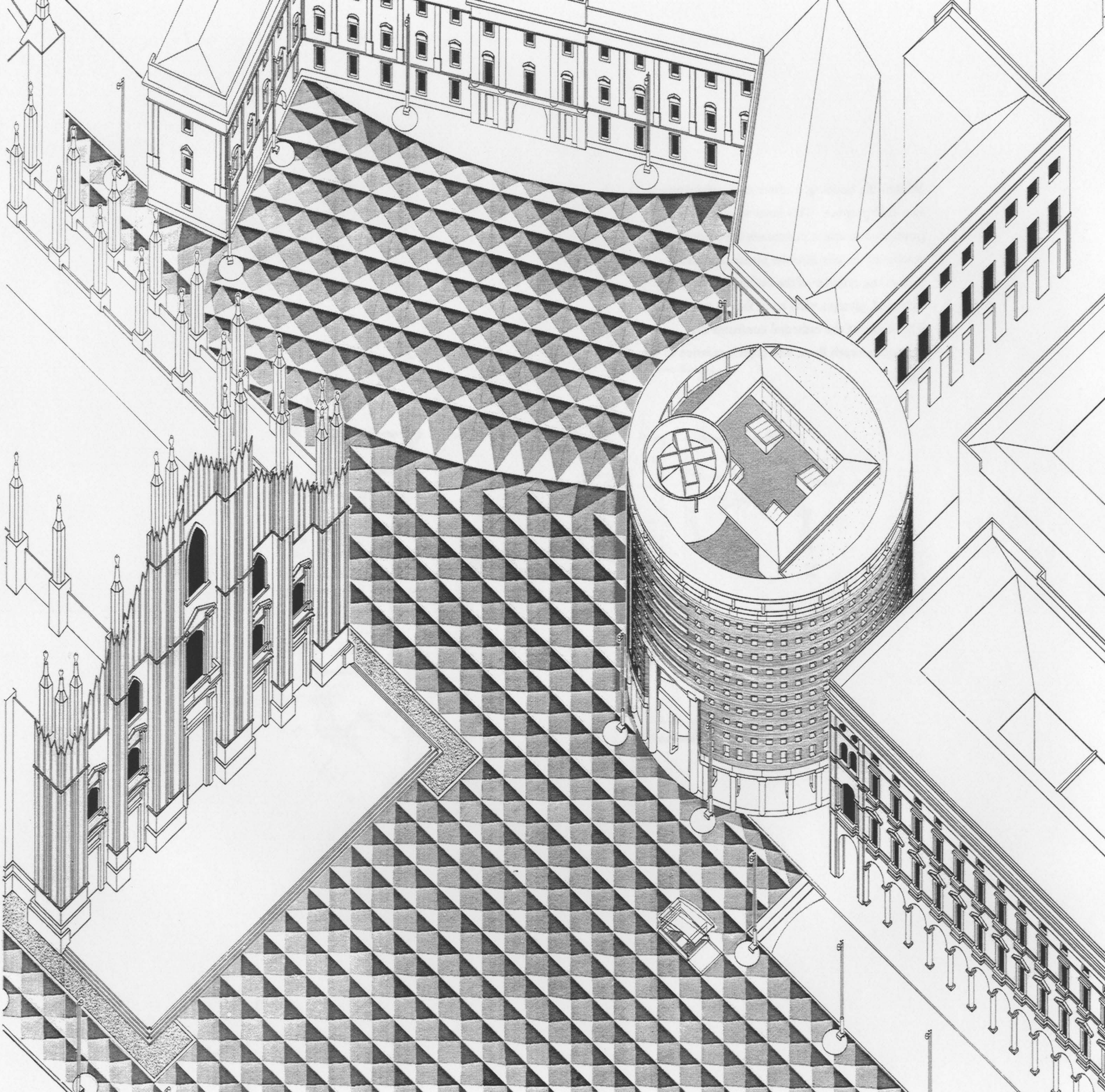
East - West section view of the EEC building



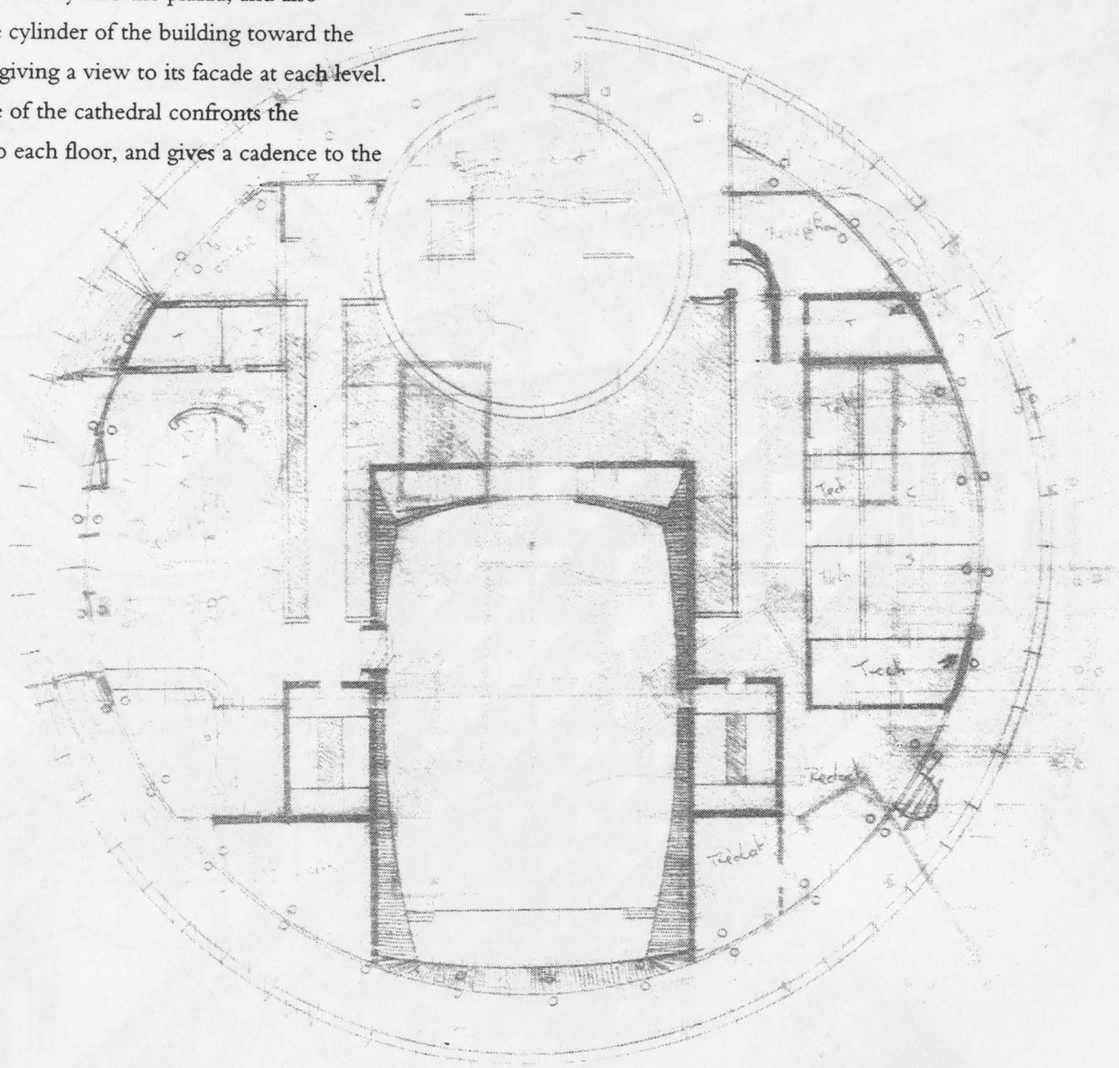
The cylinder of the EEC building is positioned just so that it re articulates the life of the forgotten Piazza della Corte. By closing it partially to the Piazza del Duomo, it becomes again distinct, and frames its original view of the cathedral - its partial oblique one. Moreover, the curved wall, while redefining this "other", acausal piazza, reconnects it to the new, closed, Piazza del Duomo. At last the medieval space meets the orthogonal one, and together they breathe.



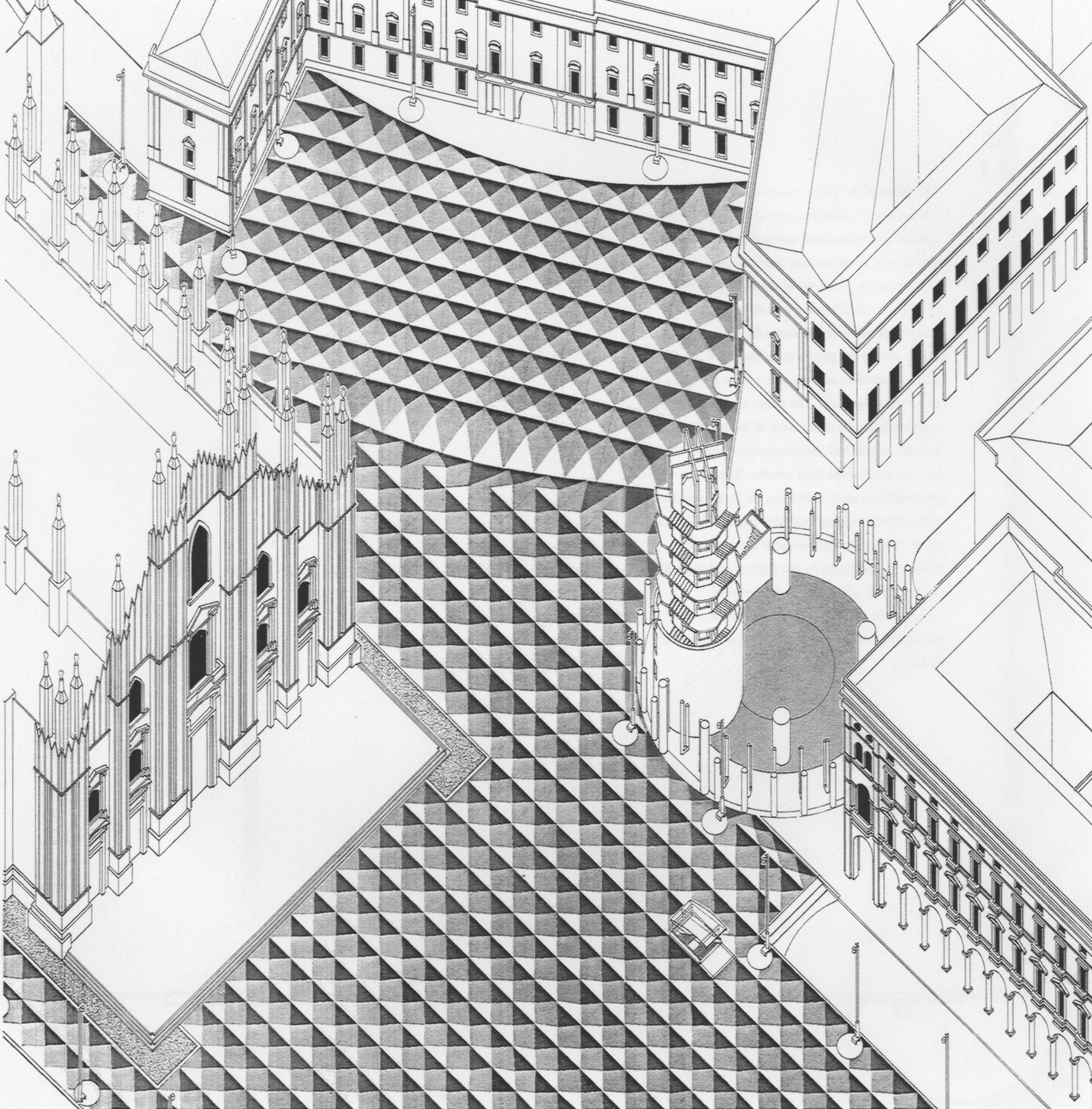
Axonometric view of the project and cathedral



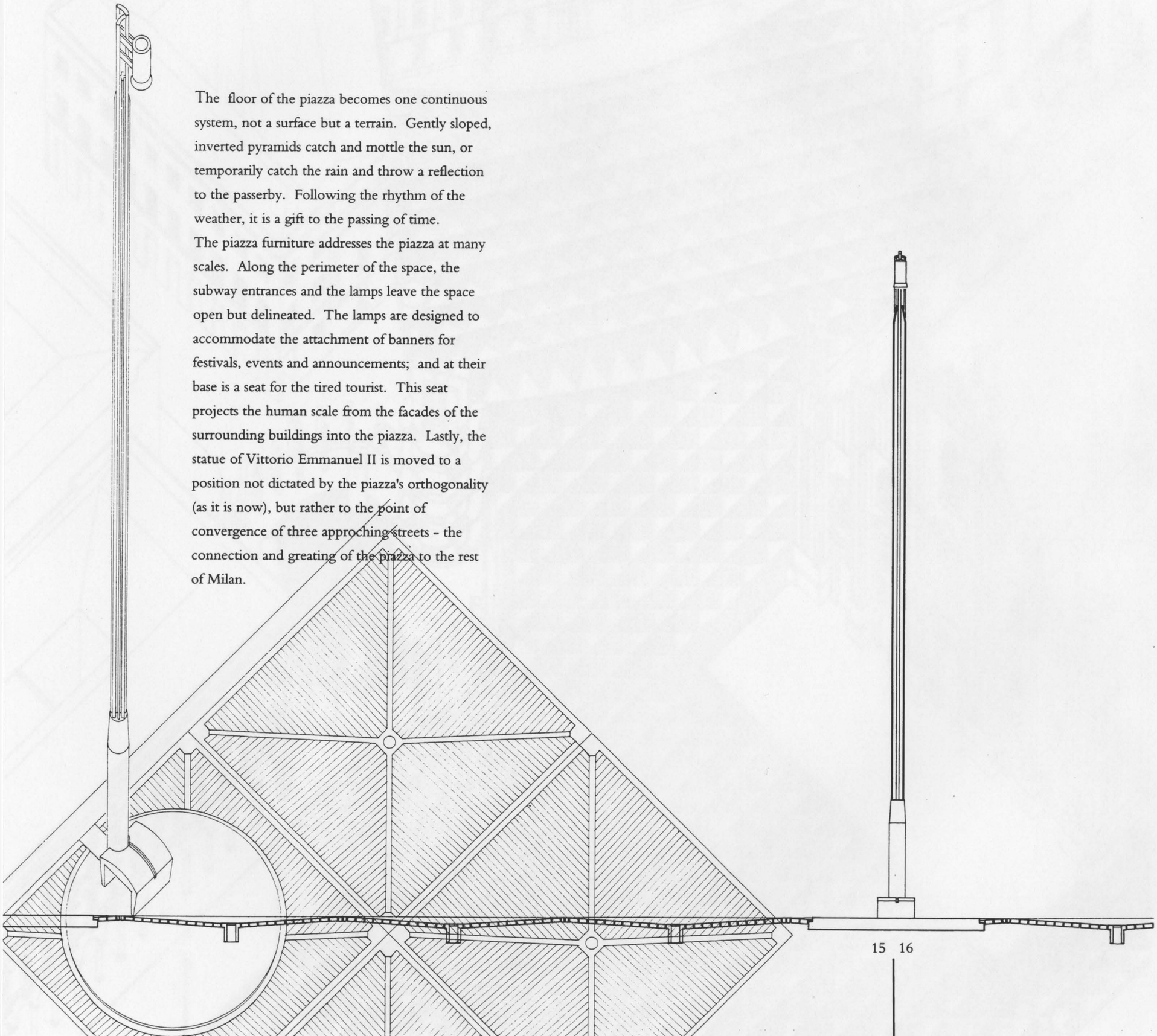
Within the building, a tower rises, articulating a two-fold purpose. This inner structure is positioned so that it punctuates the furthest reaches of the city into the piazza, and also orients the cylinder of the building toward the cathedral, giving a view to its facade at each level. This frame of the cathedral confronts the entrance to each floor, and gives a cadence to the ascent.

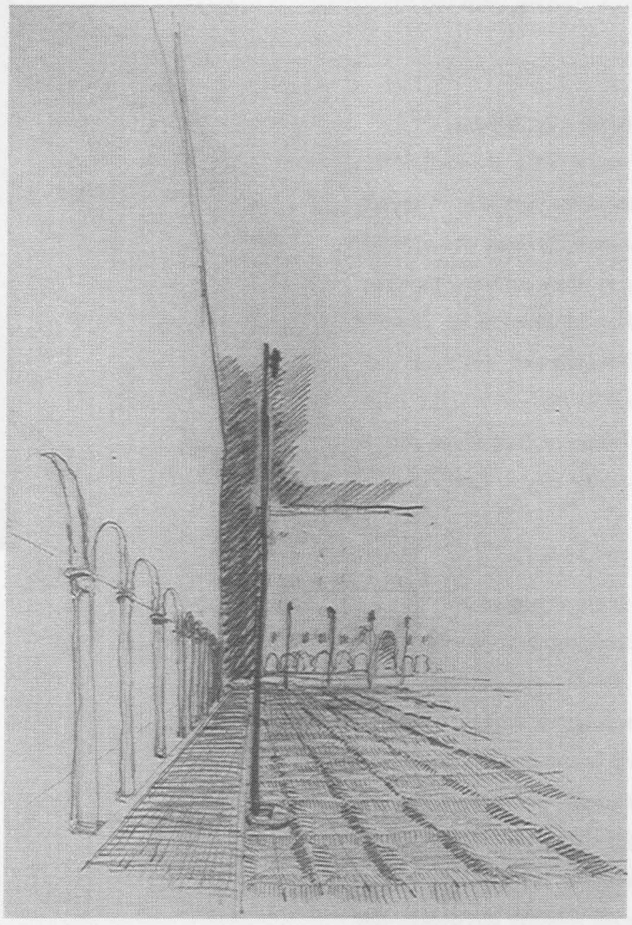


Axonometric view of the cylinder and its urban effect



The floor of the piazza becomes one continuous system, not a surface but a terrain. Gently sloped, inverted pyramids catch and mottle the sun, or temporarily catch the rain and throw a reflection to the passerby. Following the rhythm of the weather, it is a gift to the passing of time.
The piazza furniture addresses the piazza at many scales. Along the perimeter of the space, the subway entrances and the lamps leave the space open but delineated. The lamps are designed to accommodate the attachment of banners for festivals, events and announcements; and at their base is a seat for the tired tourist. This seat projects the human scale from the facades of the surrounding buildings into the piazza. Lastly, the statue of Vittorio Emmanuel II is moved to a position not dictated by the piazza's orthogonality (as it is now), but rather to the point of convergence of three approching streets - the connection and greating of the piazza to the rest of Milan.



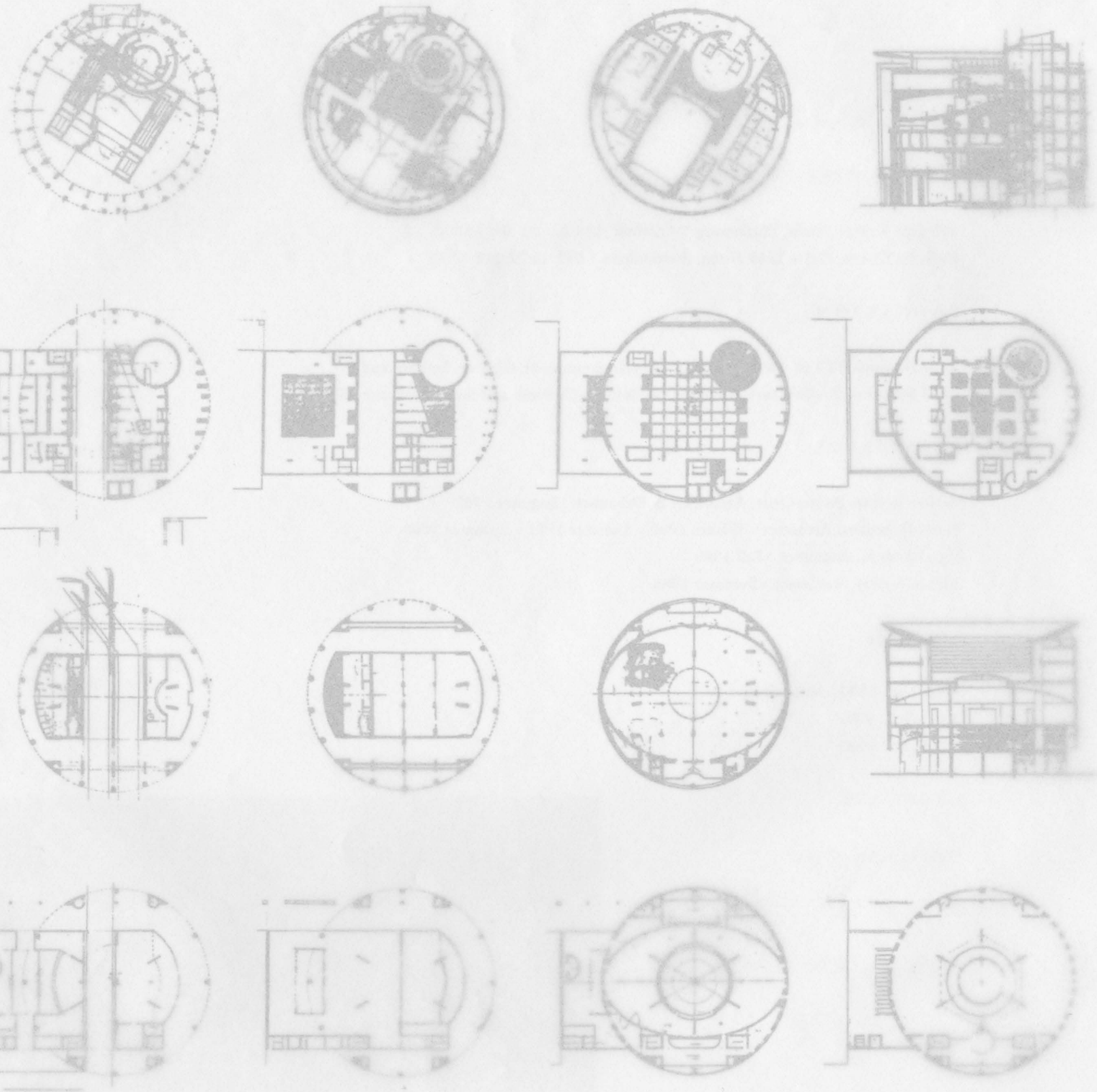


"Being in the world through words represented a spontaneous, legitimate and symbolic organization where obscurity reigned. Having lost the feeling of mystery, man lost the feeling of feeling..."[2]

The community gave birth to philosophy, science, technology, ideals, dogmas, and many artifacts - each of these needed the city for its own existence and growth. They all have evolved and transformed human life, over the ages, and they are justfiable entities as long as they continue to serve human needs. But as many of these children of the city find their autonomy, they are freed from the city, and from the needs of man. They begin to exist in their own right, even to worry about their continued existence, and to use man in much the same way that man used the city to develop himself.

These creations are capable of overpowering man, endangering his existence, and dominating his world. Man must remember that historically the city was not the home of servitude but of freedom; it was an agora, a stage, a platform for his words and deeds. The city in this sense is the only means through which he can reconquer the world; that is, his frankenstein of technological, political, and economic systems. Diversity, which is eradicated for the development of these systems, is the only basis for relevant discussion, the only voice with which to disagree. The first institution of society, the first function of the city, is the agora, and its survival is vital to man's health and well being.

[2] Gilbert HOTTOIS: lecture text



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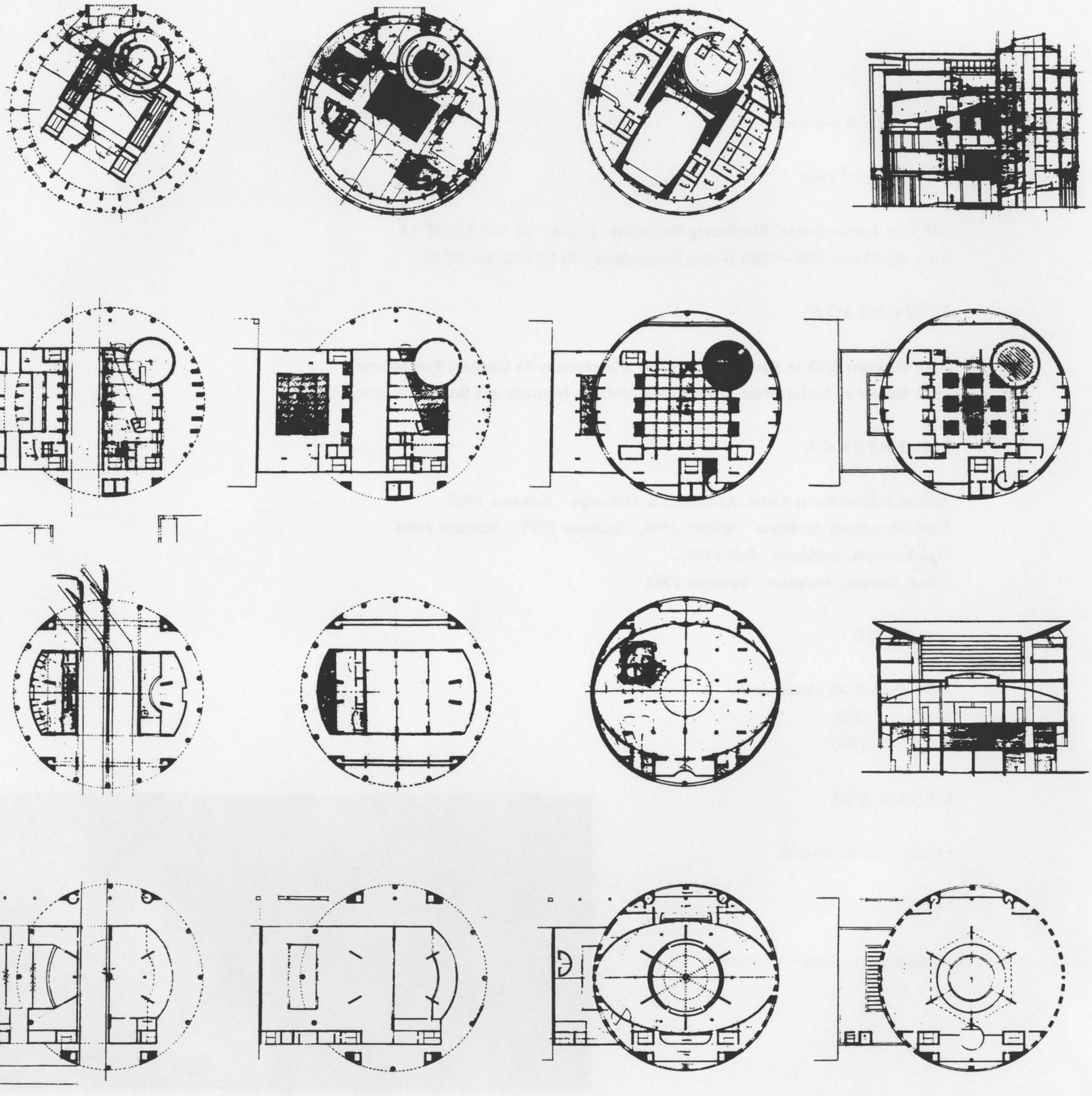

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EDUCATION

1990 Diploma ETS in Architecture, Ecole d'Ingénieurs de Genève, Switzerland
1993 Master of Architecture, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, U.S.A.

EXPERIENCE

Arlette & Jean-Pierre Ortis, Architects & Urbanists Summer 1992
Rudy Hunziker, Architect Winter 1990 - Summer 1991 / Summer 1989
Ugo Brunoni, Architect Fall 1990
Albert Cornaz, Architect Summer 1988

AWARDS

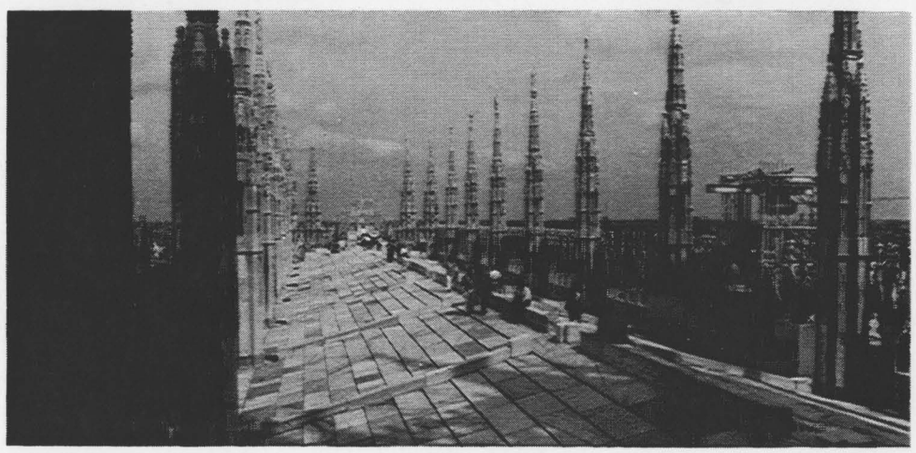
AGA prize 1990, thesis work
EIG prize 1990,
ATG prize 1990

LANGUAGE

French, Italian, English

OTHER

photography, silkscreen, pottery



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