

Ecology of *Hortus Conclusus*: The Idea of Self-sufficiency from the Greek Polis to the Fascist Housing to the Green Deal

*By Susanna Piscicella**

From the end of the 17th century, with Cartesian thought and then the Second Industrial Revolution, cartographic representation changed and, consequently, so did the construction of the territory. Following the Second Industrial Revolution, the creation of the great energy network constitutes an important watershed, from material infrastructure it becomes a new cultural model. It marks the opening of a progressive distance between the individual and doing, between production and widespread skills. Dependence on large production systems, i.e., on the network, makes both the built heritage more vulnerable and individuals, rendered incapable of directly providing for their livelihood and thus more vulnerable. The process of progressive lengthening of production chains has been matched by a gradual human alienation from the environment as a habitat. The 'strategic' model adopted by the European directives pursues the framework of remote, abstract enactment, inscribed within the present capitalistic models of growth, which is substantiated through a system of mandatory deadlines leading to the goal of "Transition", a rapid and efficient response but not designed for long-term effectiveness, as the term itself witnesses. On the opposite side, Transformation would instead presuppose a radical and permanent change of the status quo, possible only through what Michel De Certeau calls 'Tactics', i.e., a capillary model that starts from the bottom. The article proposes to reopen the notion of sustainability by identifying a double ideological and methodological grid. On the one hand the transition scenario proposed by the Green Deal through the system of Strategies. On the other, an alternative scenario of active adaptation, aimed at a permanent Transformation, using the tool of Tactics.

Introduction

Before autarchy took on the national scale to which we have become accustomed through Fascism, Nazism, and, in part, Roosevelt's *New Deal* through protectionist policies, and all those countries that, like England and Australia, responded to the Great Depression by adopting agricultural autarchy policies, in short, before the subject took on a collective and then national value in the Enlightenment of the 18th century, autarky was an entirely individual practice, involving the construction of one's own *hortus conclusus*, and was projected onto the daily economy -*oikos nomos*, good domestic administration- producing housing solutions that optimized the reciprocity of the relationship between human and geographical singularity. In Italy, this particular relationship of connivance based on maximum agricultural exploitation coinciding with maximum care for the land -cleaning of embankments, anti-erosion terracing in mountain agriculture, and, in general, widespread adaptation to local

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ographic and hydrographic specificities in order to maximize resources- has led to a highly anthropized and infrastructured landscape that is nevertheless among the richest in architectural diversity and landscape interest. A constructive *savoir faire* not based on pre-established architectural types or a priori abstractions, but on the need to minimize thermal exposure and dispersion, to encourage the channelling of cool winds or rather the deflection of cold ones,¹ the need to shelter livestock or dry fish, etc. The system of variables is so vast that, together with the specific building materials available in the area, the different sizes of families, and the unique productive and social needs, it generates dwellings that are as unique as the people who inhabit them. These are unique, unrepeatable constructions and, as such, conflict with the abstract idea of selecting a typical case to replicate, which is instead the basis of the self-sufficient rural villages built by the two regimes in the era of the network, which became the greatest common denominator of the entire landscape built since the Second Industrial Revolution and, above all, since the great post-war reconstruction.

The Fascist Idea of Autarky at the Scale of the Whole Nation

In the 1930s, Bernard Rudofsky exhibited a small selection of photographs from his collection *Architecture without Architects* at the *Bauausstellung* in Berlin, where it was met with great success. At that time, a regionalist movement was gaining ground in many European countries, studying the building and infrastructure traditions that had developed over centuries in their respective territories with a view to preserving them. In Germany and Italy in particular, under pressure from the fascist and Nazi regimes, national autarky policies aimed at productive and food self-sufficiency had been initiated since the early 1930s, leading to the recovery of as much agricultural land as possible through extensive land reclamation and the construction of new agricultural towns and villages to which farmers and unemployed people were transferred. The regimes isolated a preferred type of settlement, that of the garden city, and within it selected the types most characteristic of regional rurality. In Germany many villages, called *Siedlungen*, were built during these years in the form of garden cities consisting of single houses with green areas for vegetable gardens and special spaces for domestic livestock breeding for the economic self-sufficiency of families. The *Mustersiedlung Ramersdorf* in Munich was built next to and in contrast to *Neu-Ramersdorf*, which had been built a few years earlier in the rationalist style of the Weimar Republic. The houses in the *Ramersdorf* model settlement adhere to the *Heimatschutzstil*, the Nazi aesthetic that promoted the revival of traditional Germanic elements such as sloping roofs and the use of local materials such as wood and brick in order to comply with economic self-sufficiency directives. The same applies to the *Siedlung am Hart and Kaltherberge*, also in Munich, and many others scattered throughout the German countryside to counteract progressive urbanization and encourage an increase in domestic agricultural production.

1. V. Pracchi, *Efficienza energetica e patrimonio costruito* (Energy Efficiency and the Built Environment), (Rimini: Maggioli, 2013).

In Italy, too, the Fascist regime had begun building new rural settlements, combining stylistic elements and building traditions of an idealized Italian agricultural identity. Following on from the anti-malaria reclamation projects of the Giolitti era, extensive agricultural reclamation projects were launched in 1923 in the name of national agricultural and industrial self-sufficiency. Vast estates were confiscated in the south and put to more intensive and industrial production. The houses in the new villages, from Agro Pontino to Polesine, were designed to have their own vegetable gardens and small livestock farms for self-production and self-sufficiency. The names of the settlements were evocative, Littoria, Pontinia, Fertilia, Arborea, etc., for over a hundred new towns or villages.²

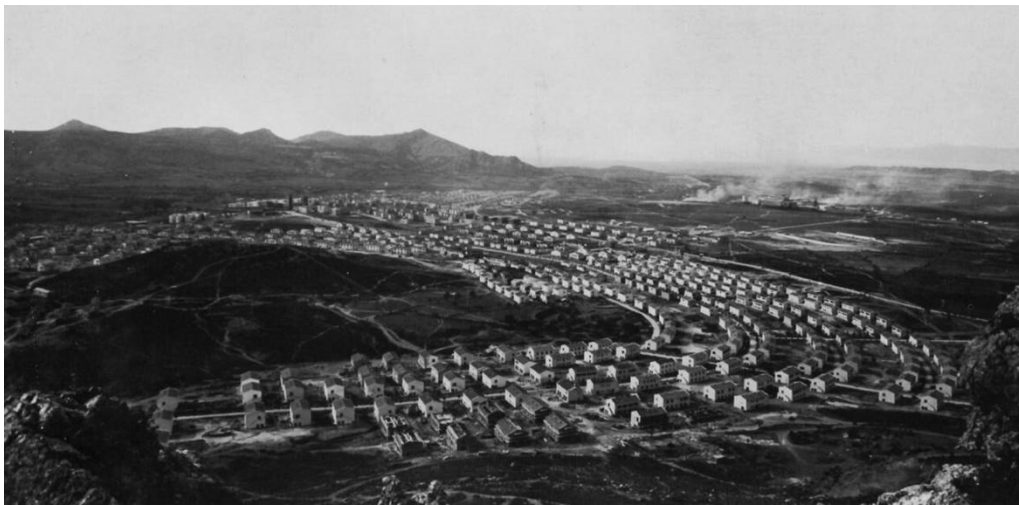


Figure 1. *Examples of Rural and Autarchic Foundation Cities in Fascist Italy, Carbonia 1937*

Source: Museo del carbone, Carbonia.

However, the process of selecting and synthesizing the minor rural architecture of a given territory in search of the ideal typology to be replicated within the Fascist garden cities ended up taking the form of a typification and abstraction that conflicts with the natural richness of the built historical heritage, and therefore with critical regionalism itself. At the 6th *Milan Triennial* in 1936, Giuseppe Pagano and Daniel Guarniero exhibited their photographic collection *Case rurali italiane*,³ a retrospective journey through the dialectic between environment and built heritage, or rather the cause-and-effect logic that led from the most prehistoric and nomadic forms of shelters and haystacks to the progressive petrification and stabilization of housing and work structures. The study investigates the ways in which, in response to functional needs that were unique in each case, linked to the particular crop, the materials of the land, the configuration of the territory, etc., forms were constructed that were always adapted to specific conditions, forms that were always different. The study,

2. A. Pennacchi, *Fascio e martello. Viaggio per le città del Duce* (The Fascio and the Hammer: A Journey Through the Cities of the Duce) (Roma: Laterza, 2020).

3. G. Pagano, and D. Guarniero, *Architettura rurale italiana* (Italian rural architecture), (Milano: Hoepli, 1936).

aimed at finding a methodology for rural housing in the 1930s, is a strong criticism of the fascist government's obstinacy in defining a single "perfect solution for farmhouses" with which to populate entire countryside and reclaimed areas (Figure 1). Pagano and Guarniero's research focuses on minor, residential architecture, precisely to avoid the more lofty themes. Rural houses offered a long historical perspective, dating back to prehistoric times, of refined adaptations to the territory and an intimate relationship with local production (Figure 2). The clear conclusion of this study is that the loss of authenticity and even specificity of rural houses, often converted into small villas, is a function of the loss of specificity and uniqueness of the crafts and skills of those who live there. The lengthening of the production chain and the progressive distancing of humans from the raw materials of different geographical areas is causing a contraction in living, in the sense of homogenization. The specific skills and tools of farmers, shepherds, dairy farmers, blacksmiths, etc. are moving outside the home, which is reduced to the lowest common denominator of the vital functions of protection and nutrition, opening the door to vast possibilities for the typification of a rurality of forms now emptied of meaning, to abstractions that no longer meet the realities of the places.

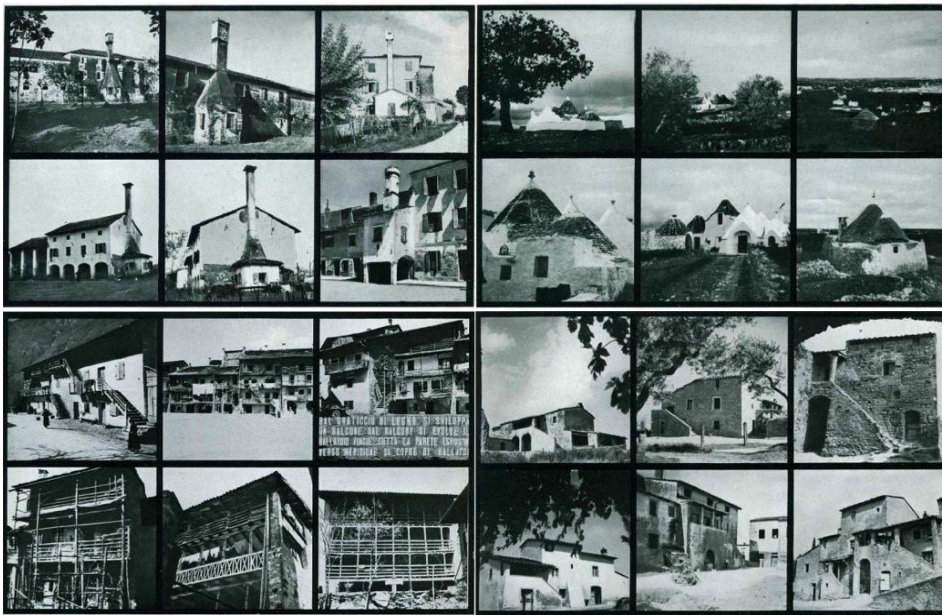


Figure 2. *Examples of Early 20th-Century Rural Housing in Italy, where Living and Production Coexist in Different Ways Depending on Environmental, Climatic, Energy, and Food-Related Factors*

Source: Pagano G, Guarniero, D (1936) *Architettura rurale italiana*, Milano: Hoepli.

The Greek Idea of Autarky at the Scale of Singularity

Autarky is one of the cornerstones of Western traditions of living. Social and architectural organization are a function of its dialectic.

Autarky, from the Greek *autós-arkéo*, means being self-sufficient. Within it, the term ark resonates, a closed structure serving as a shelter, in which to treasure what one has, so that it can mature to its fullness and multiply. A dual action resonates within it: on the one hand, an autonomy resistant to the social and urban context, such as the iconic image of Diogenes of Sinope, the founder of the idea of autarky, meek and patient in his cask, free from any desire for the possessions or power of others, striving for the greatest degree of connection with nature, for the growth and realization of one's own singularity. The same concept evoked by Aristotle in the *Politics* for every Athenian citizen, *polites*, who finds in the polis the most suitable habitat for their material and cultural fulfillment. The polis itself is autarchic as an independent and self-sufficient community⁴, capable of self-government, as dictated by the further root that resonates in autarky, *archè*, which also gives meaning and direction to architecture, attributing to *techne* a role of reflex function. Whereas today, technology is instead the instrument and purpose of any activity, even architectural.

Autarchy, Aristotle further specifies in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is the happiness that comes from one's own fullness, from not having to depend in any way on anything else or anyone other than oneself. A state of inner imperturbability already explored by Socrates, then by Stoicism in the form of wisdom as *ataraxia*, detachment from earthly needs, which becomes an authentic rejection of the social structure with Cynicism. Epicurean joy that comes from frugality. Forms often at odds with the system of social interdependencies that structure the polis, almost unimaginable compared to the current model of total dependence on the internet.

European Green Deal and the Recycling of the Idea of Autarky

The *European Green Deal*, which today aims to restore levels of self-sufficiency across the entire built heritage by focusing on energy, actually risks becoming yet another major wave of neutralization of the built heritage, something that, in terms of geographical scale, emergency timelines and landscape impact, appears to be similar to post-war reconstruction, at least in Italy, where over 90% of the built heritage has very low energy performance values⁵ and where landscape restrictions apply to most of the territory. Once again, as in the days of the regimes, the idea of an ideal type of intervention prevails over reality, further reducing the already very low levels of diversity and complexity within the built landscape. The directives of the European Green Deal, specifically the EPBD (Energy Performance of Building Directive), favour the installation of photovoltaic panels, integral cladding with external insulation, and the replacement of windows and heating systems everywhere. The first two solutions are often incompatible with landscape regulations and historical constraints, but above all, they are incompatible with architectural and geographical common sense. Maps relating to solar radiation, for example, show

4. Aristotle, *ibid*.

5. The calculation is based on buildings constructed before 2005, the year in which the EPBD I directive came into force in Italy, with a predominantly G energy class. The percentage is taken from the 2022 building stock provided by Cresme (Rome).

how solar potential in many valley areas or areas particularly prone to fog, pollution or other types of shielding is less efficient than other local renewable sources that may have been more characteristic of the area over the centuries. A monocultural, standardizing culture that is in many ways contradictory to the very principles of ecology it purports to pursue – *oikos logos*, care for one's habitat – presides over the directives related to the Green Deal. A race to replace all devices currently in use in order not to change the consumption habits of European citizens, imposing deadlines that are so close and therefore so unachievable, but which in the meantime, from vehicles to buildings, massively increase the disposal of previous objects and the consumption of materials for the production of new ones, with extensive use of plastic materials, from cars to thermal envelopes to photovoltaic panels. This is an operation that is closer to satisfying the production markets than to ecology.

Autarchy, evoked today only in the most dramatic geopolitical circumstances, such as the sanctions of the twenty years of Fascism, the great energy crisis of the 1970s, the more recent crisis linked to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, or, once again, the recent economic war of tariffs, always shows how autarchy has been distorted, moving from being a practice of conscious cultivation of one's own uniqueness to being a defence strategy; to being so on the national scale of an entire country. Whereas autarchy used to indicate the concentration of skills on the subject capable of achieving enough to be self-sufficient, today it indicates the subject's perfect dependence on a production chain external to him, the new subject of any autarchy. An ancient Chinese saying that goes, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”, sums up the policy now adopted by many missions to countries historically affected by severe food crises, which for decades had been resolved by simply distributing food. The progressive lengthening of production chains and the marginalization of individuals from skills and the ability to produce their own means of subsistence places contemporary individuals in the richest countries in a potentially similar condition of powerlessness in the event of a serious crisis, a potential condition that conflicts with the myth of resilience pursued.

The self-sufficiency that the research project *Autarky of Dwelling* aims for goes beyond the European directive, incorporating not only energy self-production but also water self-production, through rainwater collection and filtering devices, and food self-production, through the conversion of green areas belonging to the house into vegetable gardens. Not only because water is already beginning to represent a major emergency even in our part of the world and food, as a result, an emergency in the near future, but because it is precisely through self-production that important skills can be regained, without which no economic resilience, balance or social well-being is possible.

Bringing production back into the home, on the other hand, would in some ways characterize it, linking it to the specific characteristics of the territory in which it is located, making it not the end point on which the directives of the “ecological transition” rain down, but the starting point. We would move from the panoptic dimension of European strategies, which must be adapted indiscriminately to different territories, to the dimension of specific tactics on a case-by-case basis, arising from

individual territories and everyday practices.⁶ In this case, we could also stop talking in provisional terms of “transition” and, with much slower deadlines, start talking about “ecological” and social “transformation”.

Lining up and superimposing the autarchies of the 20th century is useful for highlighting the areas of research that the autarchy evoked today has lost even compared to its closest historical precedents. In fact, due to its temporal proximity to tradition, the autarchy of the 1920s is still characterized by some sensitivity to territoriality, even in the search for an ideal type that synthesizes the different landscape singularities. Furthermore, despite the panoptic coercion of the regime, it promoted collective inventiveness towards new materials and energies, and this period saw the first systematic studies on solar sources,⁷ biofuels and new low-cost building materials dictated by the need to make do with the little that was available. The value of this frugality is boosted and made attractive in various sectors by promoting fashion shows based on waste materials such as *lanital*, by promoting the myth of domestic food production, reuse and recycling, the long life and repairability of objects, etc. The communication of the Green Deal directives, the punitive language and the panoptic scale extended to the entire European continent are no less punitive, but communication, lacking in empathy and seduction, struggles to enter everyday life because it is as abstract as the distant production system on which we now depend. The self-sufficiency evoked after the 1973 energy crisis promoted a literature now disconnected from local architectural heritage but nevertheless closely connected to the environment thanks to the promotion of passive devices capable of maximizing the prevailing local thermophysical meteorological contribution. This literature is faced with the energy problem in a new built environment for the first time; villages have broken up and homes have lost the benefits of compact adjacency. The massive post-war reconstruction is characterized by isolated buildings, exposed on all sides, highly dispersive, indifferent to a whole series of measures - orientation, arrangement of openings, etc. - because they were built to serve a distribution network that would always guarantee a continuous flow of energy. The literature of these years attempts to correct the results of thirty years of unconscious design. The devices promoted in the 1970s were architectural features such as greenhouses, ventilation chimneys, green roofs, etc. However, this segment of research came to an end in the 1990s, giving way to new solutions that were less architectural and more technological and plant-based, in the clear belief that any design oversight could be easily compensated for with more powerful thermophysical systems and the use of new materials, regardless of latitude and altitude.

A process of progressive abstraction from the landscape and progressive alienation from the singularity of the subject leads to the neutral standardization that characterizes today's directives, essentially constructed *in vitro*, according to panoptic strategies unrelated to any specific territory.

6. M. De Certeau, *L'invenzione del quotidiano* (The practice of everyday life), (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2010).

7. G. Vinaccia, *Il corso del sole in urbanistica e edilizia* (The Course of the Sun in Urban Planning and Construction), (Milano: Hoepli, 1939).

A Prototype for Venice Lagoon

The “autarchy of living” project attempts, particularly in North-Eastern Italy, to imagine reversing the process, starting from within the territory, from the deep agricultural tradition of the Po Valley, which was maintained and converted into sharecropping even when the countryside was abandoned. Recent experiences of thermal insulation and self-production of energy have reawakened in north-eastern Italy the pleasure of producing part of one's own means of subsistence autonomously, returning to making the home a small forge of productive activities, as was the model even for the smallest Venetian villas until the early 19th century. Along the waterways of the Brenta, Brentella, Sile and Piave rivers and their diversions, Villa Godi in Lonedo Vicentino, Villa Gradenigo Dolfin in Villarazzo di Castelfranco Veneto, Villa Feletto in Robegano di Noale, to name but a few, where water wheels, mills and cloth fulling mills were the normality,⁸ in a cultural context in which the home was a combination of *otium* and *negotium*, a clear and crystalline reflection of the singularities that inhabited it. In a context where Veneto itself up to mid XIX century was counting on more than 1800 active mills (Figure 3).



Figure 3. “Floating Mills on the Adige River Near Castelvecchio” Bellotto, 1745. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, “View of the Mills at Dolo on the Brenta River” Canaletto, 1735

Source: Palladio Museum, Vicenza.

8. R. Vergani, *Villa e acqua in Villa veneta. Siti e contesti 1400-1600*, (Villas and Water in Venetian Villas: Sites and Contexts, 1400–1600) curated by Enzo Derosas, (Villorba: Edizioni Fondazione Benetton Studi e Ricerche, 2006).

The project illustrated below, exhibited at the Italian Pavilion of the 19th Venice Architecture Biennale *Intelligens*, 2025, is an attempt to find ways to achieve ecological transformation in an urban environment that is already poorly connected to local resources and, moreover, one of the most delicate and restricted environments, namely Venice, the most fragile and precious town of north-eastern Italy. These ways of transformation can be offered as a tool for further enhancing the unique characteristics of its architectural and landscape heritage.

Venice has always been a delicate balance between innovation and conservation, between the real and the ideal. Built on an inhospitable marsh by the heroic efforts of a community, it has constructed its own nature through artifice. A dual, amphibious nature. Water is the lifeblood of Venice, but at the same time it is a real threat.

A city that is highly relevant today for having preserved its character by escaping the processes of urban decay that have affected all other cities, it is also highly relevant in anticipating many of the destructive processes triggered by climate change, which in the Mediterranean encounters a catalyst for various critical phenomena, in particular the progressive rise in sea level. The MOSE (Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico) dam is a name with great symbolic power for a potential scourge of biblical proportions. Among other destructive processes is global mass tourism, which erodes the city from within, acting like termites to crumble entire historic building complexes. Behind façades bound by the superintendency and landscape laws, adjustments are being made rapidly to accommodate tourism, with significant and, above all, irreversible impacts. The equally irreversible consequence is depopulation, with more accommodation now being used for tourism than for residential purposes.

The project is a sketch for the new waterfront of the island of Giudecca and attempts to complete a scenography that has been interrupted since the early 20th century, in a city that makes representation the centre of meaning of its constructive approach (Figure 4). Representation, re-presentation, bringing something that cannot be seen into presence, is the character of the city with which every project must contend, in the awareness that there is no representation without form, without a beginning and an end. And the Giudecca Canal condenses the city's maximum theatrical power. The Giudecca forms a concave lens that acts as a receptacle for the city, generating precise perspective viewpoints across the entire southern front, from Sant'Elena to Piazza San Marco, the Basilica della Salute and the former IUAV cotton mill. A powerful condenser of images, on which three large churches by Palladio have been built, mirroring each other: San Giorgio Maggiore, the Chiesa delle Zitelle, and the Redentore.

At the eastern end of Giudecca is the 16th-century complex of San Giorgio Maggiore, clad in Istrian stone, like every important Venetian building. While at the western end stands the imposing Mulino Stucky, built at the end of the 19th century in exposed brick with a Hanseatic façade, reminiscent of the great northern European ports of Hamburg or Gdansk, confirming the island's strong industrial vocation. In order to further expand the industrial area, in the mid-19th century, a *velma* - a shallow portion of the lagoon bed - was filled in, giving rise to the island of Sacca Fisola. Its industrial function lasted just over half a century, then, with the transfer of the industrial area from Giudecca to Marghera in the 1920s, Sacca Fisola was designated as a working-class residential neighbourhood. The current buildings date back to the

1960s and contradict the continuous fabric of minor Venetian residential architecture that also characterises the entire front of Giudecca. In Sacca Fisola, the block buildings import the post-war typology of the suburbs.

The new building stands entirely in the water, taking advantage of the shallow isobaths in front of Sacca Fisola. Its purpose is manifold: to complete an interrupted landscape, but at the same time to pick up the threads of a discourse that began a century ago and was also interrupted, that of housing for residents. While at that time the aim was to provide healthy housing in an overcrowded city with poor sanitary conditions, today the aim is to provide housing for those who would otherwise be forced to leave due to a real estate market that is almost exclusively tourist-oriented. The new waterfront aims to address two further issues: the erosion of the banks and the ecological conversion of a city like Venice. In order: the building, slightly shorter than the Mulino Stucky, could house over 300 medium and large apartments for Venetian residents, in a central and strategic location in the city. The construction on the water, in addition to not requiring demolition and responding to a natural technique for the city, would involve the creation of a new canal between the building and the current *fondamenta*, useful not only for mooring near the Giudecca Canal, but also for protecting the current quay from erosion. Although Sacca Fisola, thanks to its higher elevation than the rest of Giudecca, does not yet suffer from the erosion phenomena affecting the banks of Zattere and Giudecca, which are increasingly flooded due to currents and intense nautical traffic in the canal, the layout can nevertheless be configured as a preventive measure with a dam function. The waves that currently break on the quay would be intercepted by the foot of the building and channelled into the internal canal in the form of calm water. As the waves pass through the pipes, a system of turbines would capture their kinetic energy, producing electricity for use in the building. The entire base of the building, just below the water's surface, would be equipped with movable sluice gates fitted with turbines, thus forming a small underwater hydroelectric reservoir to power the new urban backdrop. At the same time, at the top, where there is a large public terrace overlooking the city, rows of figures reminiscent of the crenellated facades of Ca D'Oro, Fondaco dei Turchi, Fondaco dei Tedeschi or the statues at the top of Palazzo Giustinian Faccanon could be actively involved in the project by the Accademia di Venezia, support micro-wind turbines that exploit the constant and continuous flow of wind. In a city where current photovoltaic systems are incompatible with the landscape unless they are built in the form of photovoltaic tiles, with the associated reduction in efficiency, the project seeks to enter into symbiosis with the energies that drive the daily tidal cycles of the lagoon, in the belief that only the specificity of places can provide the possible symbolic and technical answer to construction and ecological transformation.

Over the centuries, every Venetian project has been conducted on the dual track of technical effectiveness and symbolic power. A continuous dismantling, enlarging, rebuilding, and moving, to restore the original image each time. Like the lead domes of St. Mark's Basilica, a necessary addition to restore the view from the water basin after the construction of the Doge's Palace, which had ended up hiding them. There is no work today that can escape comparison with that representation, an intimate image of the city, its invisible power.

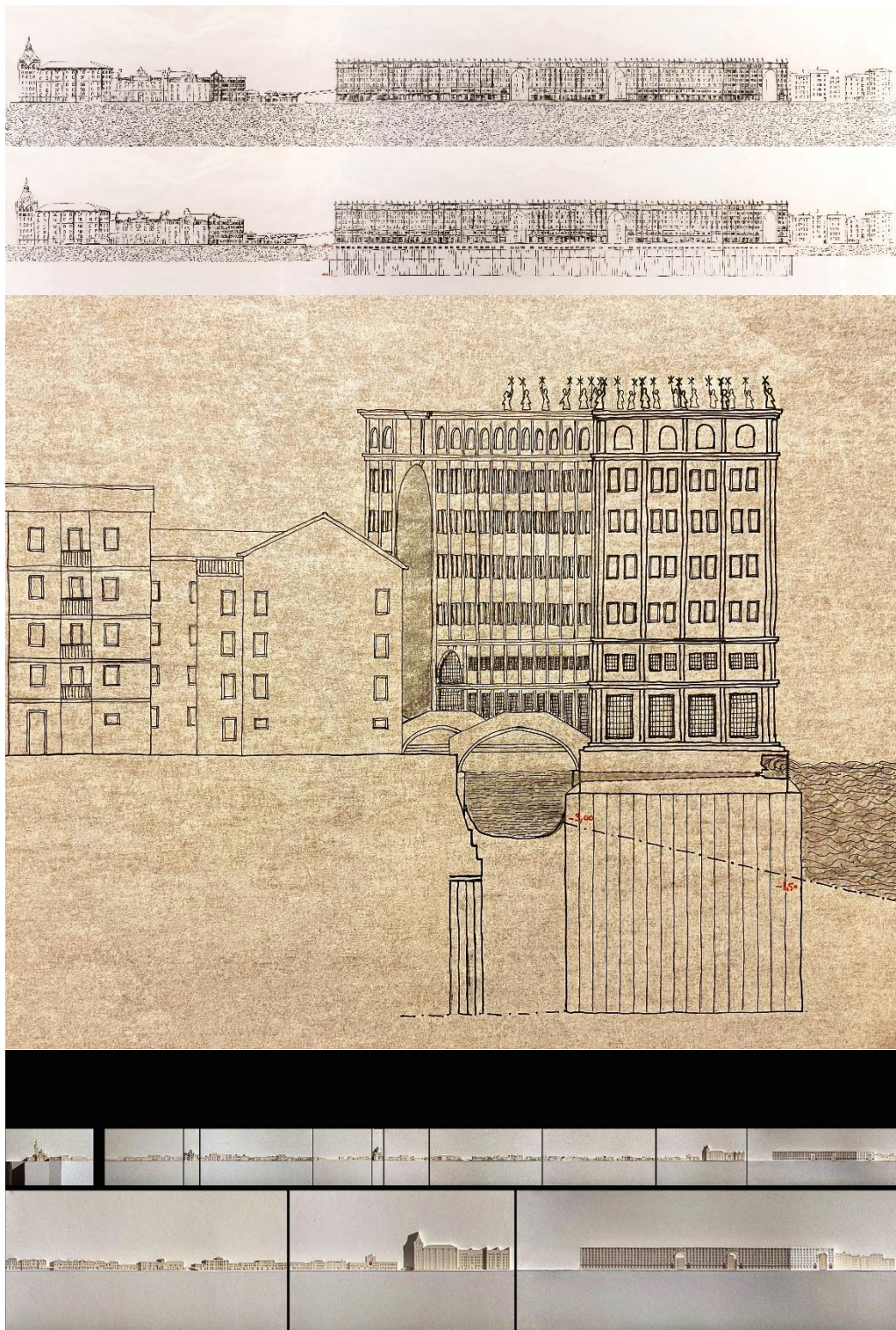


Figure 4. Proposal for a Residential Building in Venice along the Giudecca Canal to Complete the Landscape that was Interrupted at the Beginning of the 20th Century (The building exploits the kinetic energy of the small breaking waves of the lagoon along the Giudecca Canal, linking itself in a very specific way to the territory. The draft project is on display at the Italian Pavilion of the Intelligens Biennale, Venice, 2025)

Source: S. Piscicella. Collaborators: A. Mozzato, G. Antonioli, M. Renzi.

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