

Living in the University City. Giancarlo De Carlo and the University Colleges of Urbino

PEER REVIEWED

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1. Living as a Student. The Historic City and the City of Students.

The relationship between the city and the university, between residents and new students, has different nuances dictated by the time of residence, the services present, the connections, the reciprocal position, the organization of the city.

«The city of students and the city of residents are two realities that are sometimes parallel, sometimes intertwined, producing wealth and social capital, but also discomfort and tension».²

There are also different types of university students: the residents, the "commuters", who go there for lessons or exams and then return to their family context and the off-site students. For off-site students, the university represents a significant transition, with the consequent transfer and change of habits in a new context. Each type of student corresponds to a different way and time of experiencing the university space. The students experience the city through a provisional and temporary bond: cit(y)zens, passing citizens, live together with citizens, historical citizens, born and raised in that place.

The contribution focuses on the relationship between the city of residents and the city of university students, between the architecture of university residences and the host context through a paradigmatic example.

Urbino is a city which in terms of history, culture and size constitutes a paradigmatic example.

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² L. Ceccarini and I. Diamanti, "Urbino e l'Università: le due città," in *Studiare a Urbino. Gli studenti, la città, l'Università*, ed. G. Maggioni and I. Diamanti (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 2013), 51.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Urbino city-campus lived the coexistence of equal numbers of resident citizens and students.³ Two parallel ways of living that seem to touch each other without ever really touching, where time, space and the feeling of belonging are the true holders of the differences, delimiting the places of life, the rhythms of daily life, the lifestyle, the activities, expression of social reality and values. In these dualities, Giancarlo De Carlo's project for the Colleges of Urbino serves as a paradigmatic example.

The contribution starts from a rereading of De Carlo's thought regarding the relationship between the city and the territory, the basis of his architectural production. The relationship with the context becomes the key to understanding his projects, first with the Urbino town plan, then the construction of the university colleges. The latter are therefore analysed according to their relationship with the geographical, urban but also social context, which can be observed in the articulation of the architectural plans, sections, routes and individual rooms. Finally, a reading from the large to the small scale covers the design of the colleges in Urbino.

2. De Carlo, the City and the Territory.

Throughout his career, De Carlo has carried out constant research on the relationship between city and territory in design, through his teaching, publishing and professional activity. City and territory, historic city and new city, according to De Carlo, are two separable spaces but parts of a single system, where the territory is an expression of human experience. He presented a lesson in urban planning like a film at the 1954 Triennale, on the occasion of the Urban Planning Exhibition; he presented his research about the forms of collective participation to urban transformations: «there is no intelligent and sensitive urban planner who (...) does not recognize the imprecision, inefficiency or arbitrariness of his action and not feel the discomfort of continuing to operate according to abstract principles (...) on a reality that he is unable to approach and know».⁴ With this reflection, De Carlo manages to identify those recurring questions in his profession: the architect must design with the senses and control with the technique⁵ since the physical design of the space arises from local conditions and from the relationship with history. In fact, it is in the historic city that De Carlo traces his compositional principles; aware that «clearing the city of the idea of its own historicity, uprooting it from its relations with the geography of the landscape (...) means making it pure past and a tourist enterprise».⁶

³ F. Vetrano, "Urbino: una città "in forma di università" ", in *Città universitaria. Dalle buone pratiche all'identità*, ed. P. Nappi (Ferrara: Faust Edizioni, 2015), 158.

⁴ Giancarlo De Carlo, "Intenzioni e risultati della mostra di urbanistica," *Casabella* 203 (1954): 24.

⁵ Federico Bilò, *A partire da Giancarlo De Carlo* (Palermo: Gangemi Editore, 2007), 70.

⁶ Vittorio Gregotti, *Architettura e postmetropoli* (Torino: Einaudi, 2011), 35.

According to De Carlo, the city is without models and evolves through open, widespread, different systems; a city that mixes languages, uses and practices, which requires respect for this multiplicity; the zoning plan, in fact, corresponds to two closely related preconceptions: the existence of an incurable antithesis between city and countryside and the application of the urban plan to a determination in time and space. De Carlo proposes a multifaceted approach to the development of the city and in contrast with the theory of the compact city, he does not rely on a formulary, but on the search for a methodological rigor capable of restoring credibility to the design approach.⁷

The city that has seen the experimentation and application of De Carlo's research is Urbino, to the point of declaring himself "jealous" of the city. Its link with the city has had various vicissitudes, from the call by the rector Carlo Bo with his idea of the city-campus to the master plan, the university colleges, the faculties in the centre, etc.

3. Urbino, an Idea of a Plan an Idea of the City.

De Carlo was called by the rector Carlo Bo in 1948 and an intermittent planning followed for over fifty years. «I believe that my story with Urbino should be viewed from a broad point of view and recorded in a nuanced listening. I mean that in my works in Urbino I have grafted the experiences I had in the rest of the world and on the other hand there is always, in the fabric of my architecture, a warp or weft thread that leads back to Urbino».⁸ With the Urbino Regulatory Plan of 1964, De Carlo reorganised the territorial road system, connecting the city also to more distant urban realities; he proceeded to rationalise the accesses to the city, but the lack of homogeneity of the different urban nuclei prevented the formation of efficient widespread facilities, so that the qualitative increase of the city passed through the regenerative action of the decentralised or degraded fabrics. «De Carlo in Urbino had an entire historic city at his disposal as material. How does this reuse of the city happen? Its pieces are disassembled, others are added, others are changed; the relationships between the various parts change, the relationship with the territory changes. This project of a new city uses present and latent energy (...), the university becomes an open system linked through services to the life of the city» (De Carlo, 1983, 98). He proposed an overall rethinking of the city, based on the centrality of cultural functions and institutions. In the 1950s, the Renaissance city was transformed into a university city, providing for the recovery of the consolidated center and the transfer of university activities inside pre-existing buildings.

⁷ Manfredo Tafuri, *Storia dell'architettura italiana* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002).

⁸ Franco Bunčuga and Giancarlo De Carlo, *Conversazioni con Giancarlo De Carlo: architettura e libertà* (Milano: Elèuthera, 2000), 113.

An essential aspect of De Carlo's cultural activity in the years preceding the design of the “Collegio del Colle” concerns his international experiences, which led him to theorize a new model of expansion such that «Urbino today is three cities: the historic centre, the suburbs and university colleges. This is because (...) the weight of the universities, (...) has become strong, therefore, has generated phenomena of expulsion from the historic center (...), for which the objective is to control peripheral development, using "the surplus of built volume" in the historic center and set a limit to outsourcing with possible external settlements (...).»⁹

4. The University Colleges of Urbino.

«My effort was to build an unquestionably contemporary university settlement but permeated by the echoes of historic Urbino: to the point that the citizens could consider it another part of the city they already knew (...). In other words, the intention was to establish a permanent exchange between the historical city and the city of the Colleges».¹⁰

De Carlo rejected both the model of the campus, self-sufficient and decentralized, and that of the university dispersed in fragments, but nevertheless thought of the university as an articulated and multipolar system, in which the settlement principle seeks a balance between private, public and semi-public areas. Reflection on the civil and social role of education was at the fore in the project of the Colleges of Urbino, favored by an unprecedented cooperation between the Superintendency, the Municipality and the University.

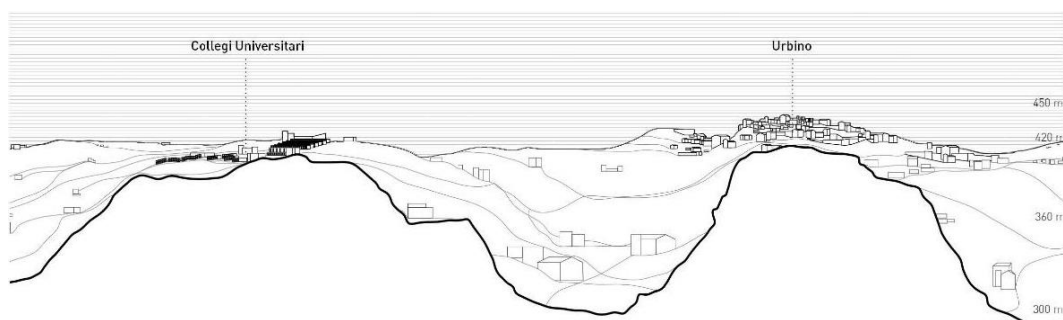


Figure 1| The relationship between the city of Urbino and the Colleges, territorial section.
Credits: Cinzia Didonna, Lorenzo Renzullo.

In the colleges of Urbino, De Carlo sought that «urban measure appropriate to what the city of Urbino was and is now, and to what it could be in the future»,¹¹ with the aim of designing a complex «opposite and at the same time analogous to the stronghold of the medieval city and which

⁹ *ibid.*, 141-143.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 132.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 176.

allows us to rethink the city as an entity on a territorial scale».¹² The architect recounts how, using the principle of time simulation, he considered the college the first nucleus of a city which, as it progressed, took on similar but different configurations, because the characteristics of the place and the human experience changed; and in order not to make the simulation including all the variables artificial: of nature, of the landscapes, of the inhabitants; dislocated the student accommodation outside the city walls, in the expansion area near an ancient convent, the University College is no longer expressed in a finished and immutable design, but «it is rather an open, dynamic, changeable system»,¹³ proving to be part of the city, it reproduces the urban elements of the historic city [Figure 1]: the variable texture of the paths, which offer a plurality of uses, the scale ratios, the uniformity of the materials and technologies. The first nucleus, made up of the “Collegio del Colle” (1962-66), established a peculiar dialogue with the morphology of Urbino [Figure 2], generating «an organism in the form of a city»,¹⁴ while the second nucleus, made up of the New Colleges (1965-75), configured the entire complex as a «piece of city».¹⁵



Figure 2| The colleges and the city of Urbino.
Credits: Cinzia Didonna, Lorenzo Renzullo.

¹² F. Zuddas, “Pretese di equivalenza, De Carlo, Woods e il mat-building,” *FAMagazine* 34 (2015): 45-65.

¹³ Giancarlo De Carlo, “È tempo di girare il cannocchiale,” *Spazio e società* 54 (1991): 4-5.

¹⁴ P. Nicolín, “De Carlo/Nicolín, Conversazione su Urbino,” *Lotus* 18 (1978): 4-41.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 18.

5. The Differences between Colleges: Accommodation and Collective Spaces.

Considering the peculiarity of De Carlo's architecture, the methodological choice of this essay fell on re-reading the work of the colleges for the relationship with the historic city and the collective spaces. Brief descriptions of the complexes, their peculiarities and differences in the places intended for interactions, collective and residential spaces and the multiple connections are presented below.

The buildings are presented in chronological order according to the year of construction. In this way, it is possible to assess how thinking evolves over time and is reflected in the built architecture. The following image compares the different college plans, showing the routes, private and communal spaces.

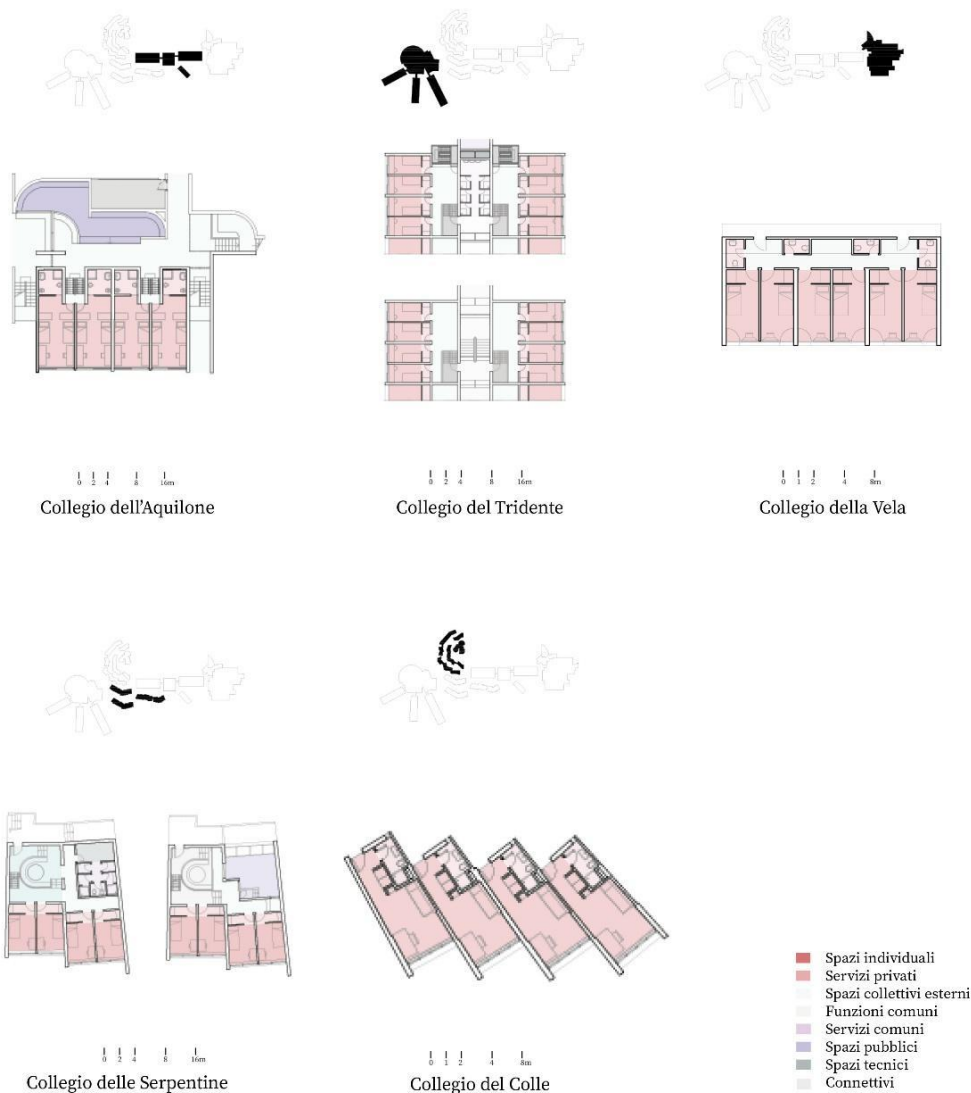


Figure 3| Typological plans of the colleges.
Credits: Cinzia Didonna, Lorenzo Renzullo.

“Collegio del Tridente” presents the building dedicated to common services on four levels, with classrooms, canteen, kitchens, parking and some rooms that can be used freely. The first two levels, partially underground, form a continuous plate on which the public square is set up which, built with exposed reinforced concrete pillars, follows a radial grid. The residences branch off from this building in three branches: 352 single rooms organized into blocks include 16 rooms arranged on two levels and share services and two common areas; in this way the students are «responsible for their common spaces all together; and for this they must make agreements, communicate, respect each other».¹⁶ The juxtaposition of the blocks allows for the differences in height to be absorbed, while access to the terraces on the roof is via metal stairs.

A strong emphasis on the collective space both outside and inside, dedicated to the different functions, respecting the territory, helping to experience it, reading it in the ups and downs, crossing it and observing it from the different paths made of ups and downs.

¹⁶ Franco Bunčuga and Giancarlo De Carlo, *Conversazioni con Giancarlo De Carlo: architettura e libertà* (Milano: Elèuthera, 2000), 135-136.

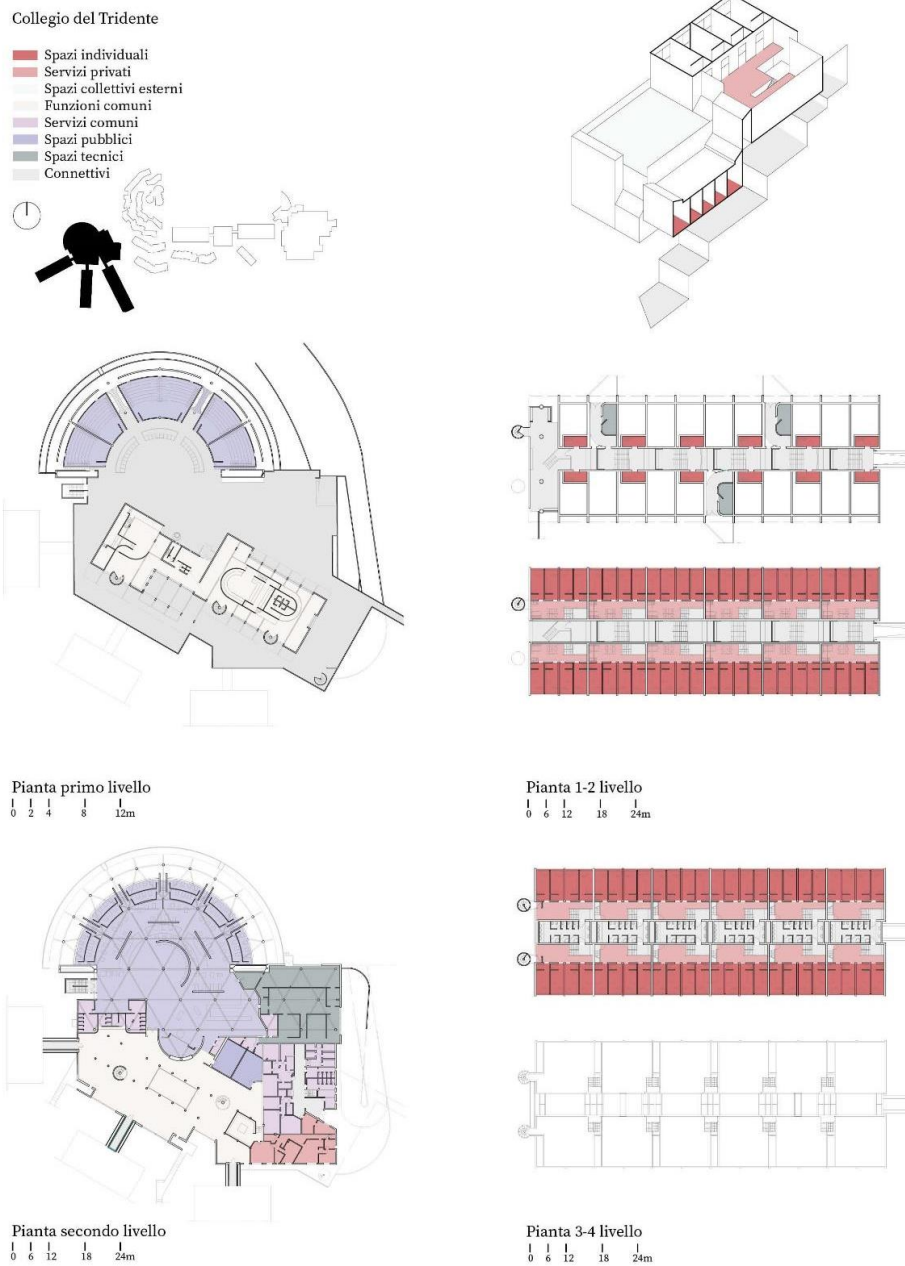


Figure 4| Plants of the college “Collegio Tridente”.
Credits: Cinzia Didonna, Lorenzo Renzullo.

“Collegio del Colle” was built between 1962 and 1965, it is the first college built by De Carlo in Urbino and includes 150 single rooms, arranged around the building that houses the common functions: spread over four levels above ground, one partially underground, it has living rooms, reception, manager's apartment, conference room, canteen - restaurant with kitchen, offices and service areas. The square leads to the upper levels, where the concierge and conference room are located; from here one descends to the living rooms and spaces located on the lower levels, from which the external pedestrian paths branch off which give access to the residences. The residences are organized in 10 blocks, each of which

contains from 12 to 20 single rooms with private bathrooms and are arranged on two levels, connected by a system of covered paths [Figure 3]. The communal functions are barycentred with respect to the residences, open to the public and residents, testifying to a concern for privacy, but also an openness to the city.

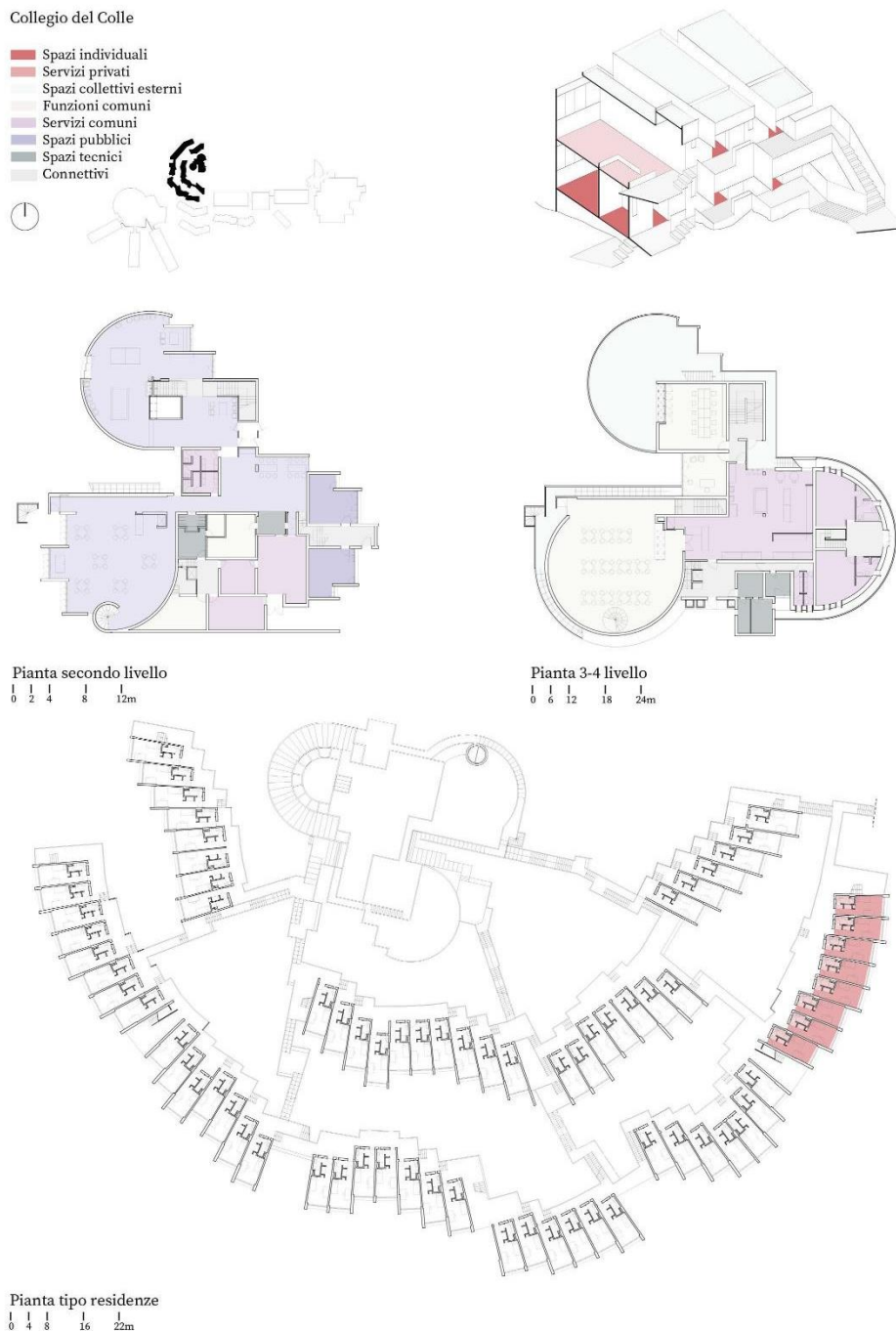


Figure 5 | Plants of “Collegio del Colle”.
Credits: Cinzia Didonna, Lorenzo Renzullo.

“Collegio delle Serpentine” comprises 152 single rooms organized in 3 blocks, each of which includes up to 7 cells/apartments containing 8

rooms on two levels. On the lower level of each apartment there is a double-height living space, the kitchen and shared services, while the bedrooms are located on the upper floors. While containing the same elements, the blocks and apartments are all different from each other. In each of the apartments, the rooms are in fact organized in a different way: these small adaptations make it possible to move the composition and, at the same time, to accompany the natural slope of the site. Personal care is placed at the centre, in the choice of customisation and in the division of interior spaces (living room/bedroom). an approach that therefore occurs at all project scales.

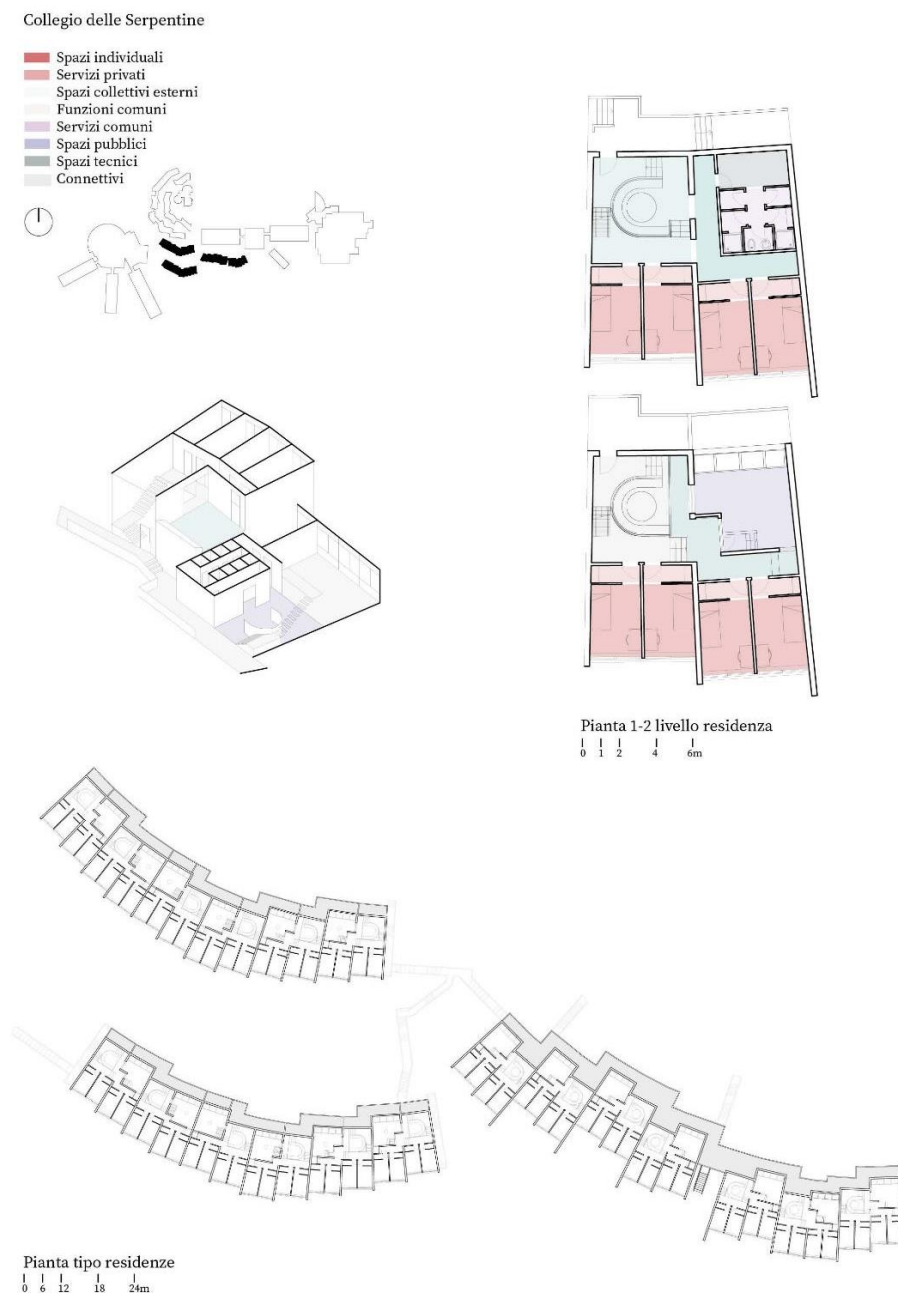


Figure 6 | Plants of “Collegio Serpentine”.
Credits: Cinzia Didonna, Lorenzo Renzullo.

“Collegio della Vela” is set on the fundamental axis that connects it to “Collegio dell'Aquilone” and the common areas are not located in a separate building, but are arranged, together with the residential blocks, in 8 sloping rows which include a variable number of rooms. 156 single rooms and 33 double rooms share a common area which includes toilets, showers and a small cooking area and are organized in blocks connected to each other by an internal path onto which small living spaces open; while on the fourth floor there is a larger space conceived as a real internal garden crossed by light metal walkways which constitute the element of continuity of the path on the roof. Here again, the relationship with common spaces is fundamental, with a relationship with personal and public green spaces; interstitial spaces become important in neighbourhood life.

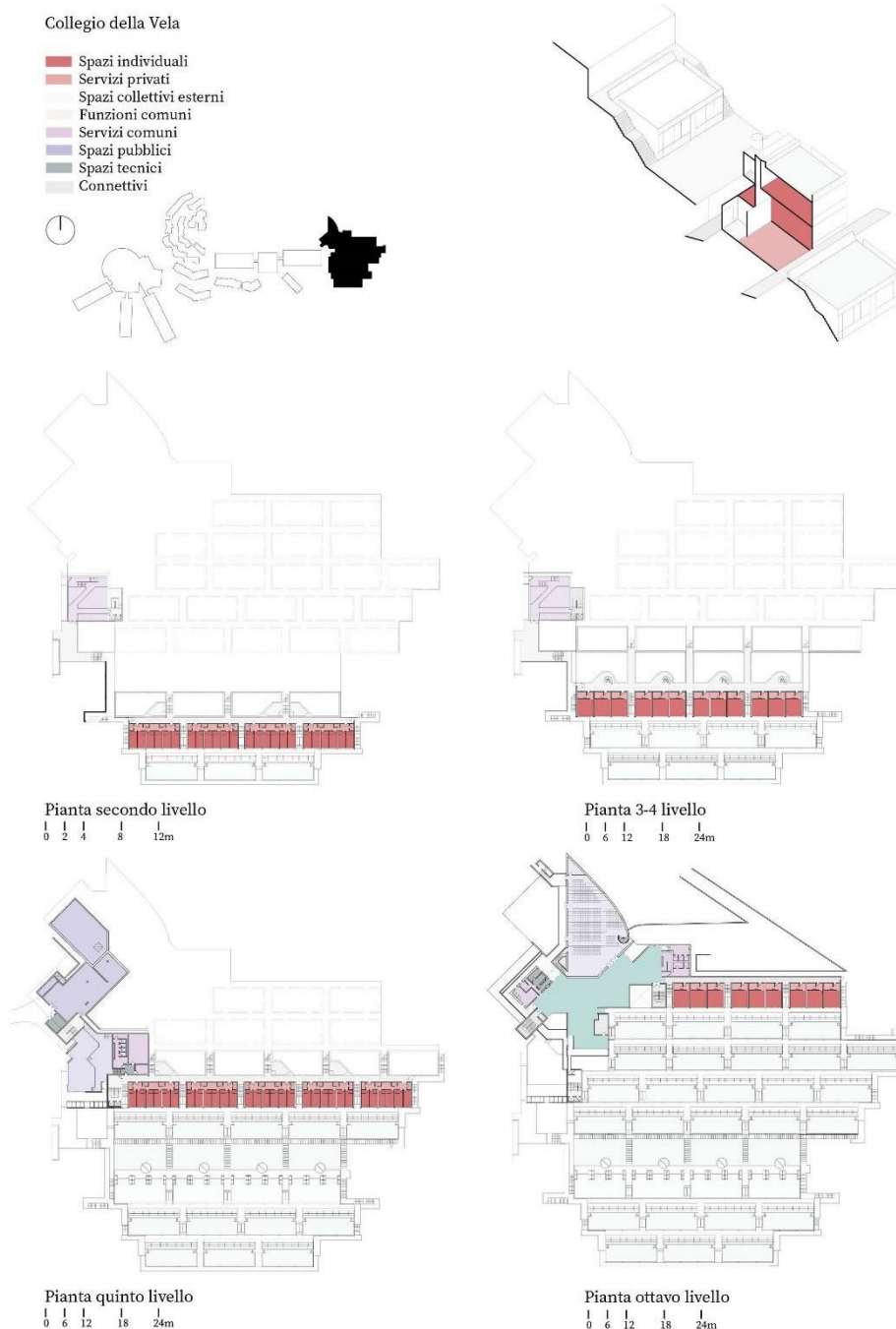


Figure 7| Plants of “Collegio della Vela”.
Credits: Cinzia Didonna, Lorenzo Renzullo.

“Collegio dell'Aquilone” is the first of the New Colleges to be built, it has 128 double rooms and accommodates 256 students. The rooms are organized in blocks of 4 units, aligned to form 4 arms. Each arm contains 8 blocks and is crossed by an internal and external irregular path. The stairwells between the blocks allow access to the roofs of the rooms, which form practicable terraces. At the center of the complex is the building that contains the common services, with a square planimetric layout on five levels above ground and a full-height central space, around which the spaces open to citizens are organized on the upper floors, while

on the levels lower than those dedicated to students. It encompasses all the elements tried and tested in the previously constructed buildings. The relationship with the public, with the land and with private spaces is evident: a city within a city, with a landscape context that is always the protagonist and an interior shaped to it.

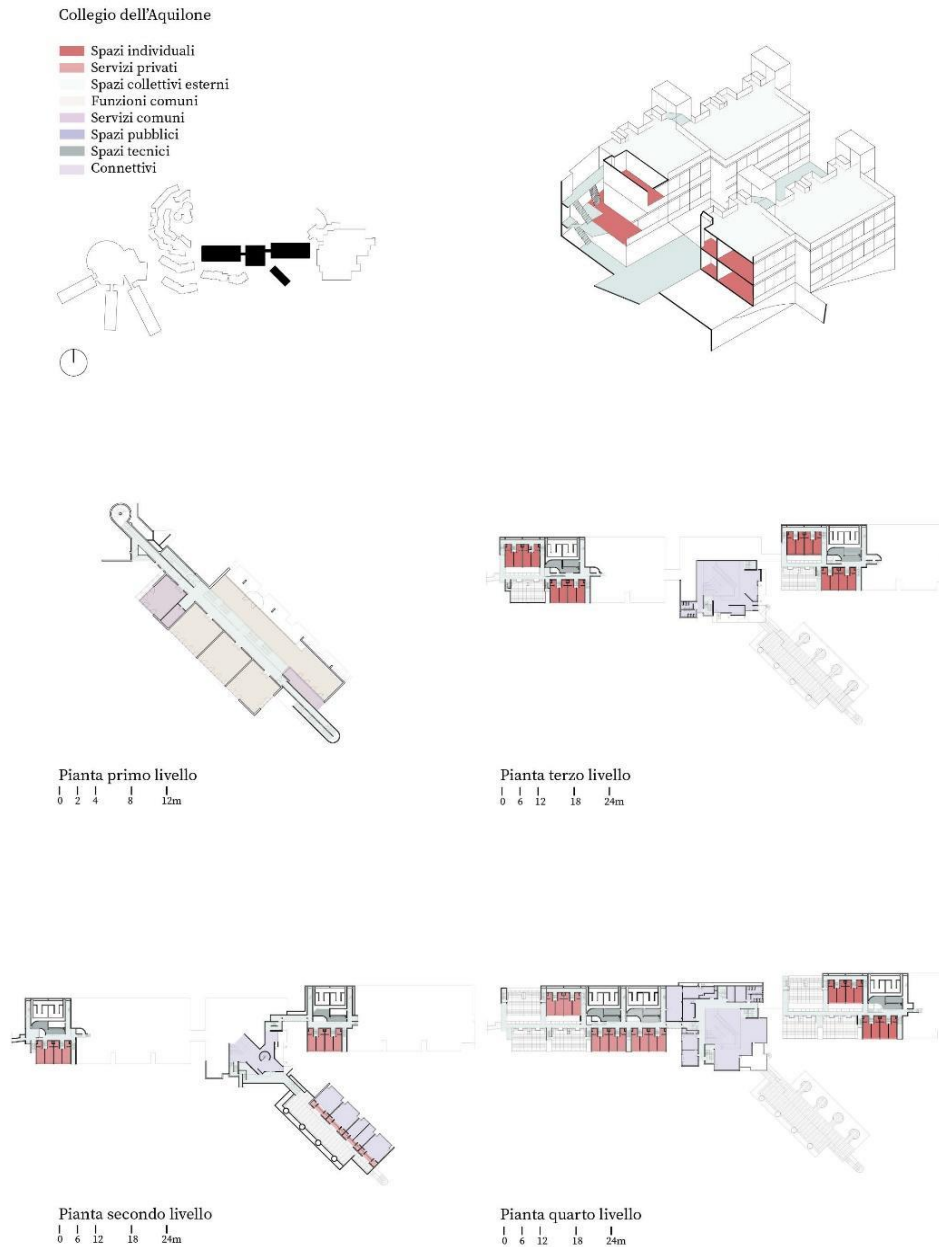


Figure 8| Plants of “Collegio dell’Aquilone”.
Credits: Cinzia Didonna, Lorenzo Renzullo.

6. The Social Meaning.

«There were few people, but those who were there greeted me, stopped to talk, and if they knew me - janitors, cooks, guardians - celebrated my return. I felt in a city that I knew well, I felt...at home?».¹⁷

The Colleges of Urbino retain within them a profound social dimension, rooted in the constant dialectical relationship between project and users. In developing the entire project, the architect takes into consideration three variables: the characteristics of the area, the presence of the city and the formal connections with it, the demands of social groups. In fact, De Carlo's work does not simply represent a space set aside for a residential function but qualifies as a place for social interaction. The social purposes of the architect's project are also demonstrated by the significant cultural value that "nomadic" users and "sedentary" inhabitants recognize both for the architectural quality of the spaces and for the community principles that they reflect. In fact, the social value of the complex is also recognized with regard to the aggregation and socializing function for the student community: the availability of meeting spaces and common areas have always stimulated the development of cultural initiatives and favored exchanges and interactions. These elements of both a social and spatial nature influence in providing the inhabitants of the colleges with a certain sense of belonging and an identity value. The experience in the boarding school therefore assumes the value of a transition between dependence and housing independence towards a participatory dimension, by virtue of which the boarding school rises to a more intimate dimension, becomes the home, understood as a family place.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 140.

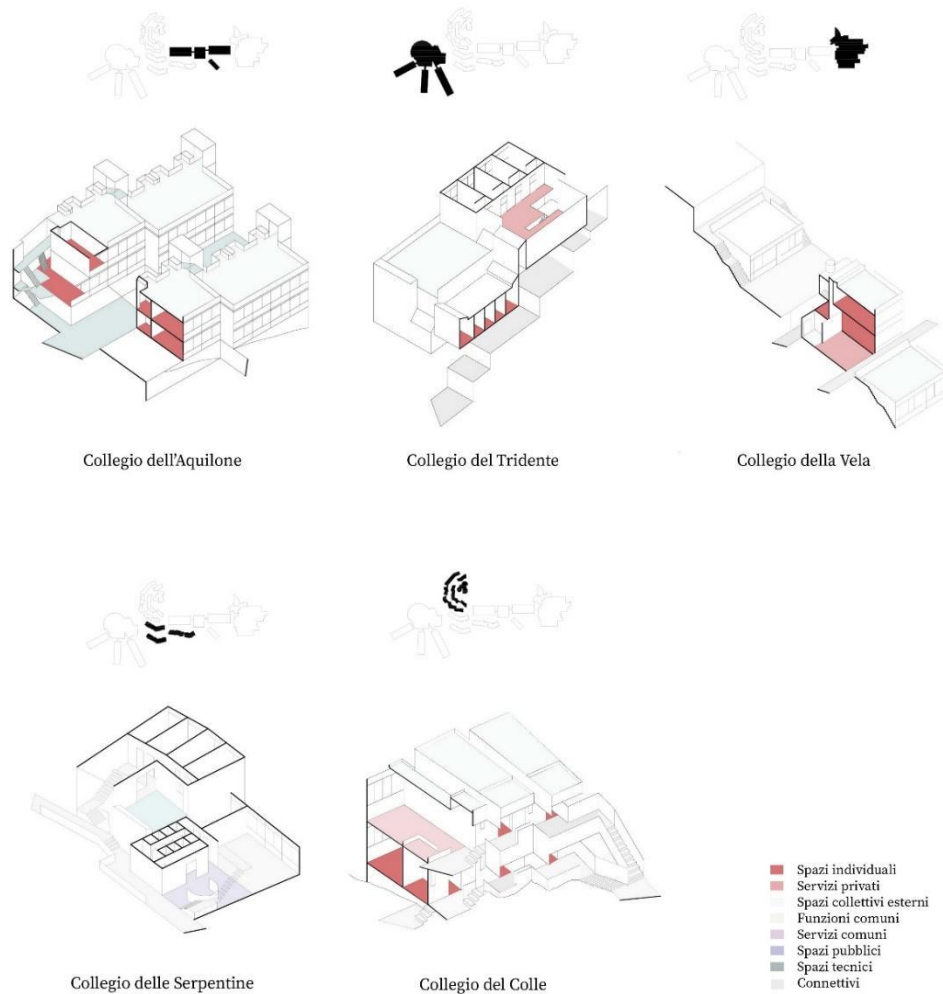


Figure 9| The colleges of Urbino.
Credits: Cinzia Didonna, Lorenzo Renzullo.

7. Articulation of Meanings: Paths, Individual and Collective Spaces.

«They tell me that you can get lost in the colleges and I think that getting lost is the best way to understand the place».¹⁸ In the College buildings, De Carlo worked on the proximity, continuity and maximum possible variety of spaces, moving from one space to another, from public to private, from individual to relational, moving in an articulated system of places public connections through walkways and paths, corridors in the form of roads. Addressing the theme of the university as an engine of urban development, De Carlo has shaped a university settlement; therefore, the housing cell becomes a space-generating element for the student. In fact, the new university residences and their typological proposals assume the topography of the ground, both in the relationship of each of them with the place and in the intimate relationships between the residential ensembles themselves, divided into clearly recognizable

¹⁸ M.P. Borgarino, A. Troisi, N. Bazzoli, D. Del Curto and A. Sansonetti, *I collegi di Giancarlo De Carlo a Urbino, piano di conservazione e gestione* (Milano: Mimesis Edizione, 2019), 124.

groups. The college is therefore a building that «gives more to the landscape than it receives from it, internalizing and differentiating it.¹⁹ It is a huge threshold that has the character of a city, woven into a whole, a geological formation.²⁰ The colleges of Urbino represent an exemplary case in which the design matrix is a dynamic structure, or rather an evolutionary, organizational and generative fabric at the same time. Recognizable geometries are used in an unconventional way, capable of impressing lasting change and strong images, but the basic criterion for the articulation of space has always been to use a measure perceptible by man.²¹

Each college can in fact be considered autonomous and complete despite being made up of a distribution system that leads towards public centralities: «(...) one nucleus contains large halls for conferences and meetings, another a general library, another a cinema, the second a place of open-air projections and some spaces for shops, the third also a restaurant (...). All contain rooms for meetings, seminars, reading, music, games; but in each of the “nuclei” the places have a different character (...)».²²

8. Conclusions.

The experience of the colleges of Urbino, which will accompany him throughout his career, highlights De Carlo's research and his evolution by specifying it. The colleges, all autonomous and different, have a common methodological-design matrix: the careful investigation of the historical and environmental context, with which the project is measured, reads the signs of time and reinterprets the way of living, restoring an architecture always "contemporary", specifically for the city of Urbino for residents and students.

In constant relationship with the city of Urbino, the landscape context and history, the collegium project captures within it the fundamental elements of the city, re-proposing them at all scales of the project, from the urban scale to that of the building, right down to the attention to detail. Thinking architecture built for relationships, with the public, with one's neighbours, with oneself, aware of being built for students, young off-site residents who want to build a future as men, professionals, citizens.

The project of the colleges of Urbino by De Carlo can still be paradigmatic today since it questions the social and relational aspect of the university residence, invites us to "learn from" the host city and from the life of the students, so that the project is the result of a constant action of dialogue

¹⁹ A. Van Eyck, "University College in Urbino," *Zodiac* 16 (1966): 16.

²⁰ P. Smithson, "PS. su G.D.C. ovvero... pensieri provocati dalle immagini di un libro," *Casabella* 550 (1988), 34.

²¹ S. Woods, *Candilis Josic Woods, Una década de arquitectura y urbanismo* (Barcellona: Gustavo Gili, 1968), 157.

²² P. Nicolini, "De Carlo/Nicolini, Conversazione su Urbino," *Lotus* 18 (1978): 4-41.

and interaction, with the territory, with tradition, with people: an original approach that far anticipated the thought of living as a contemporary student, increasingly dynamic, made up of proximity and sharing.

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