

**Accomplished Space: The Italian Piazza**

by

Julie Ann Kephart

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APPROVED:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Olivio Ferrari Chairman

\_\_\_\_\_  
D. Eugene Egge

\_\_\_\_\_  
K. C. Arceneaux

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Olivio Ferrari Chairman

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(ABSTRACT)

Inspired and subject to individual experience, an indepth study of eleven piazzas yielded a set of Architectural elements, characterizing each piazza. Clearly, "intention" supplements their unique evolution, and the layered symbolism over time, throughout the urban fabric, emits a specific disposition within each piazza.

The consistent refinement of particular conditions developing from common initial intentions may lead to a basic Architectural criteria. Though not accepted as a universal standard, this criteria produces a set of characteristics applicable to a multitude of open spaces; hence, like the Italian Piazza, "accomplished space".

## Acknowledgements

To Mom and Dad, who have always said, "go for it.";

To [redacted] for his patience in answering my 'myriad' of questions;

To [redacted], for their continued friendships.

This book is dedicated to Cisco.  
"You have always kept me on the edge!"  
"(And thanks for [redacted]  
It was inspirational, especially in Europe.)"

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## Introduction

The Italian Piazza has retained the honor over the decades as a model of a successful urban design. Long ago, it established itself as a tourist attraction, due to its ever-present ancient castles, romantic Medieval setting, museums and shops, or simple appeal as a "people place". In the last 100 years, the relatively new discipline of Urban Planning has accepted the Italian Piazza as a role model for urban open spaces worldwide. Unfortunately, too often the resulting plaza is a sad replica of its Italian precedent. Somehow, while urban planners and designers extract what they think makes an Italian Piazza a *piazza*, they seem to miss what makes an Italian Piazza *Italian*.

Therefore, this exploration is prompted to establish not only what an Italian Piazza is, but to express why the Italian Piazza *is*, something about its "Italian-ness". The experience of crossing a piazza was perhaps the greatest lesson. Secondary is to know what created the feeling. The first is emotional. The second is historical. Through both I have constructed a list of Architectural elements common to a majority of Italian Piazzas.

### *Means of Study*

*"Nothing can become real until it is experienced."*-John Keats

*"It is not enough to see Architecture, you must experience it."* --Steen Eiler Rasmussen

I have chosen eleven piazzas in seven cities of Italy, having experienced each of them. "Experienced" is hard to define, because after having been in them and then studying their history and architecture later, I find it inseparable to tell what I actually consciously viewed, and what I read or saw in my studies. The piazza evokes such a feeling of *presence*, or undeniable belonging, that I very well could have perceived many details and intentions outside my conscience. Thus, the study after the fact served as clarification and proof of what I already knew.

Of the eleven piazzas I have chosen as examples, I found that two of them did not quite fall into the category I established (that of why Italian Piazzas are successful), though they still remain important to the study to give relevance to the reasons for excluding them, and to show precisely why the others tend to have the same elements and therefore succeed as usable, Architectural spaces.

I succeeded in experiencing several of the piazzas at different times of the day and night, on different days of the week. This too, is an invaluable tool in assessing their success and comparative characteristics, since by nature, Italian Piazzas change hourly.

It is important to define the word "success" as used in reference to the Italian Piazza--not only does the piazza fulfill its functions; but the intention is clear--hourly, daily, often with multiple, simultaneous functions, people occupy piazzas.

*"Enclose space as if it were precious not for the sake of space itself, but for the life that goes on within it."*--George Nelson

### **Architecture Tenets**

*"Architecture--an idea built into infinite space, manifesting Man's spiritual energy and power, the material form of His destiny, of His life."--Hans Hollien*

There are three tenets of Architecture--Light, Space, and Time. Every work of Architecture depends on these rudiments, though perhaps varying the intensity of application from work to work. The Italian Piazza applies these tenets by very elemental and literal means, as well as by more abstract and inferred resources.

As in most works, the emotion evoked by vision is the result of Light and its absence. Perhaps it could be said it's the most essential element, as Architecture is primarily a visual experience.

With Light, Space has a reality. Light gives Space depth and boundary. The Italian Piazza is most literally a space, but it's the edge of the space that characterizes its presence.

Time is perceptible from physical movement. The Italian Piazza has the added Time of ages past--the symbols, layered and subconscious, are in some way felt as one passes through Space, from Light to dark to Light. It is the combination of the two Times that the Italian Piazza has continuum.

Though in reference to the Architect as a singular creator, the following words are applicable to the centuries of contributors to the piazza:

*"He seeks to create a space which is energized by Light...The architect makes Light appear in the space created that symbolizes a particular state of his consciousness, Light that is a direction of energy, Light that acts and transcends. His is a journey through Time, Space, and Light."--Timothy Archer*

## The Italian Conscience

The Italian city development was rational and irrational simultaneously. All of the cities in this study began to grow during the Dark Ages. Though Roma existed long before that era, it had degenerated under anarchy and misleadership into the 15th and 16th centuries. The eleven piazzas had their beginnings in that period as great urban spaces, and have remained nearly unaltered in size and use, though several have had "facelifts".

Contrary to today's city expansion problems of urban sprawl and suburbia, Medieval Italy found it necessary to build inward. Nearly all major cities were independent governments, and necessarily had their own warring demands on neighbor cities. Fortification was essential to maintain autonomy, so walled cities developed. Either the builders of the cities were shortsighted, or outside pressure pushed a speedy defense, for the city dwellers found themselves in tight masses of buildings, soon building on top of each other. Of course, this was an ideal defense against the foe who might penetrate the walls and go into labyrinthine narrow streets and tunnels, lost and vulnerable in the unfamiliar system. But eventually, the walls could no longer contain the growth. Soon, a new wall was needed, and another, until Time outgrew the feudal system and the Renaissance changed their feuding nature.

Yet even in its beginning, there was always a space somewhere near the center of the city. In the pre-Medieval age, it was perhaps a place to trade goods, stop for a night, or rendezvous. But as Christianity soon dominated Europe, the *space* changed to *place*. That place held the Cathedral. Religion was the Medieval Man's sole guidance, his every move directed by the current doctrine of his time.

The Church was not just a building--it was his life. Its place was central, both spiritually and physically, and so must its sanctuary be the visual reminder to the citizens. It can be argued that the piazza evolved first as a trading and social center, the church put into it because the piazza was already central and transversed; or perhaps the piazza was made to give respect to the Cathedral, a space in front or around the building to show its symbolic aloofness.

While both of these evolutions are probable, the piazza provided another important function--light and air. The tight, shaded streets and homes were often slum-like and undesirable places to spend one's day. The piazza was a window to the sky, and in the predominately warm climate, it is no surprise that the Italian found himself spending a great deal of his hours there. Not only was it a convenient place of business and worship, the government was also housed there, as were the richest families.

The piazza was not just a space that was traversed--religious and civic activities were outdoor events: parades, holidays, elections, trials, and executions. Games, both organized and spontaneous, were common, and the ever-present merchant sold his wares from the periphery wall, and outside from wagons and carts. It was the place to meet, to watch, to participate. The buildings, as well as the people, were a showcase of the city's heritage. Whether in Architectural detail or in the costume of the era, the piazza was a rich ledger of the city life.

**City Characteristics**

*"Men mold some cities; some cities mold men."*--Sidney Sheldon

The seven cities are not much different from one another in their origin or growth. Even today, much of their heritage is still quite visible as a layered and confusing map of time. Yet there are some obvious differences that really don't interfere with the underlying standard elements of the piazzas.

The seven cities and eleven piazzas are listed on the following page. Except for this list, all further references to these places will be with their Italian names.

CHIEFTAIN BAND

CITY

PIAZZA

San Gimignano

Del Duomo e Della Cisterna

Siena

Del Campo (The Field)

Vicenza

Del Signori e Delle Erbe

Venezia (Venice)

San Marco(St. Mark's)

Roma(Rome)

Di Spagna(Spanish Steps)

Navona

Firenze(Florence)

Della Signoria

Milano(Milan)

Del Duomo(Dome)

Roma(Rome)

Del Popolo

San Pietro(St. Peter's)

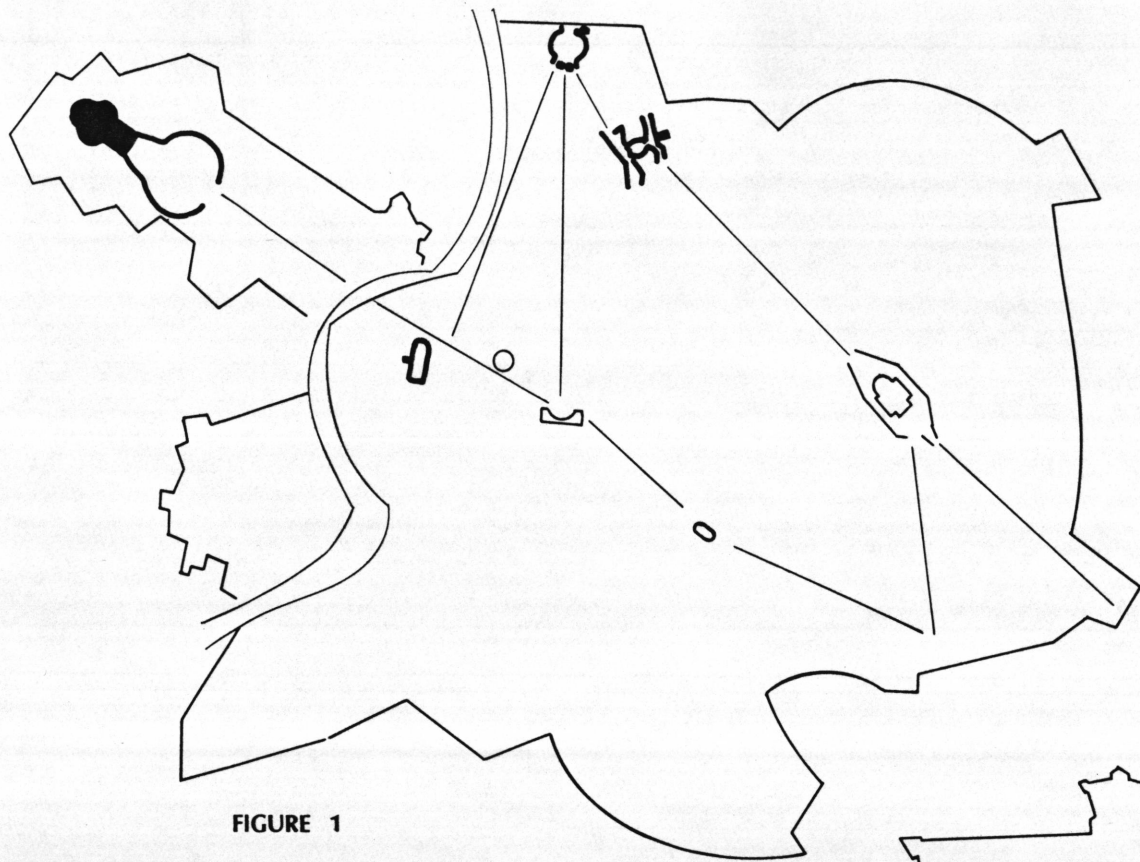


FIGURE 1

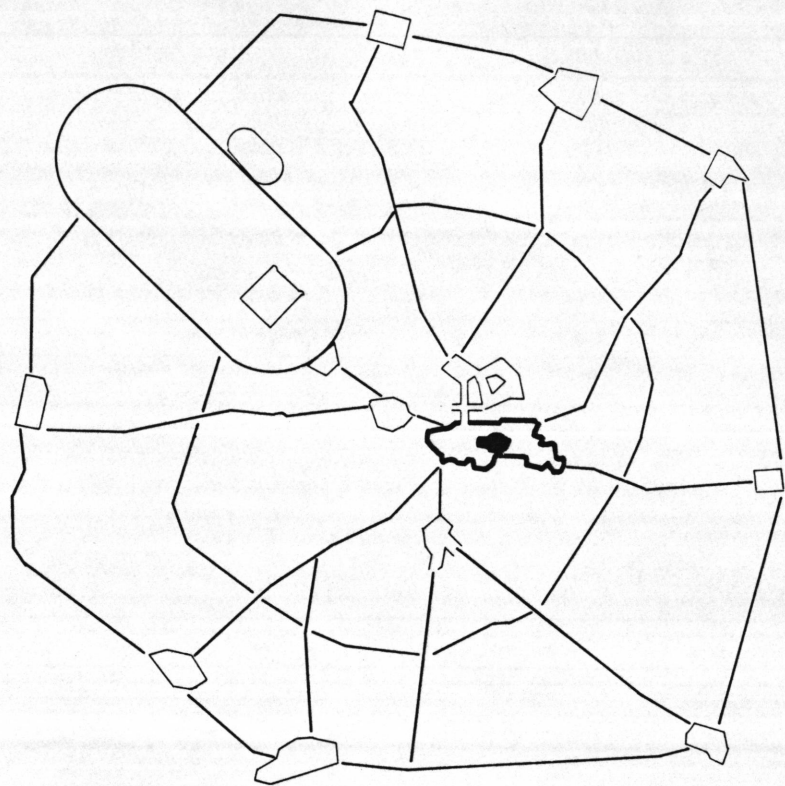


FIGURE 2



FIGURE 7

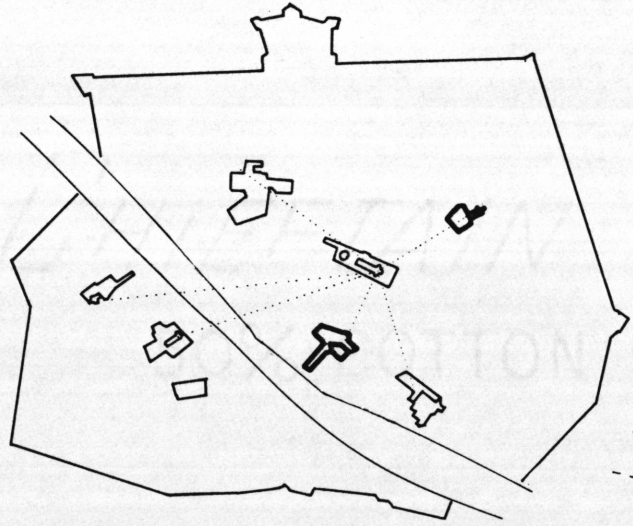


FIGURE 4

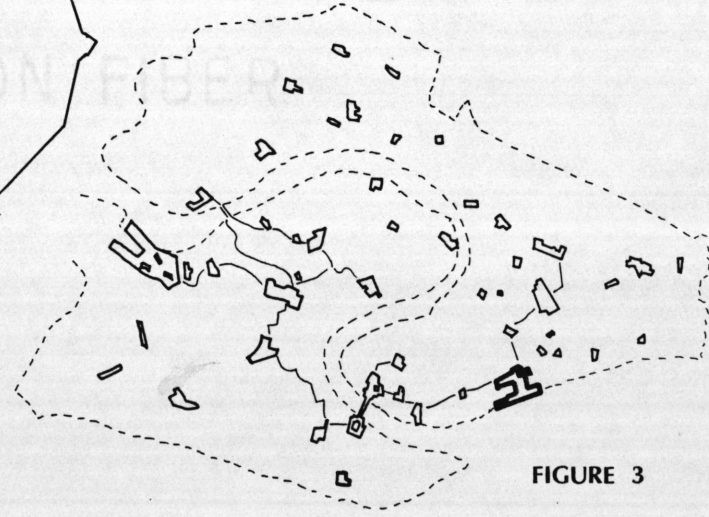


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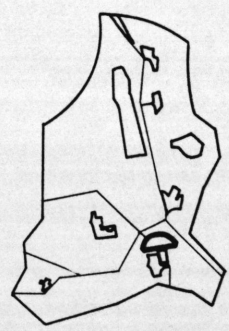


FIGURE 6

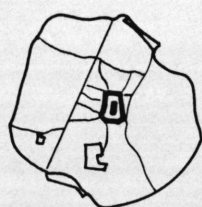


FIGURE 5



## Cities

"Rome! What other city finds it virtually impossible to complete its subway system because every hundred feet it digs it bumps into a new archaeological treasure? What other city has five hundred relatively inexpensive small restaurants where it is impossible to eat badly? In what other city do cats have such a kingdom? In what other city is the second language that of human hands? In what other city is the Baroque style so at home with the bizarre forms of present-day politics?" -John Hersey

Roma is one of the oldest surviving active cities of Italy. It is not unusual to pass a Fascist government building, cross a street to an ancient ruin, and turn a corner to sit beside a Baroque fountain in front of a Renaissance palazzo. This conglomeration of timeless structures is somehow ignored, or perhaps unconsciously accepted, by the Romans. Over two millenia have had little effect on city life. Nor does modernity alter its existence--the car is as much at home as is the market place.

More particularly, the piazzas of Roma have tolerated many changes. Initially, Ancient Roma was of a compressive nature, with *massive, monumental buildings of formal geometric design, laid against one another and related to one another by sheer inertia of their mass.*" (Francis Bacon, *The Design of Cities*, P. 86). There were nodes throughout the city, often open forums. As time passed, these forums became Medieval piazzas. Each sphere of influence was rather isolated, and the piazzas were self-contained.

Because of this isolation and the growing area of the city, the 16th century Pope Sixtus V introduced a Baroque city plan that accentuated the tension among the city centers (Fig. 1, pg. 6). With piazzas already existing around ancient buildings, churches and gates, the addition of obelisks (called "*points in space*" by designers) and the paving of the street connections gave a new tension to a disjointed Medieval city.

Additionally, nearly all the church piazza received a Baroque *facelift*, the supplementation of facades, steps, fountains and statuary. The Baroque "sense of movement" with perspective and flowing forms, was often added directly on the old facade.

The Baroque tension was chosen to connect spaces around old buildings. The spaces existed not only in deference to the building, but to contain the traffic already present in the area. And the ancient buildings were often near gates to the city, or at a higher elevation.

To an extent as in no other Italian city, Roma is the addition of parts. Layers of time are not only common, but they are necessary in understanding what choices were made in construction.

Unlike Roma's growth as a compressive then tensile sprawling urbania, **Milano** almost literally followed the Medieval model of tight buildings around a central open space (Fig. 2, pg. 6). The Cathedral occupies that center and is set with space all around. In the original forti-

fied city, Piazza Del Duomo was very nearly the geometric center, with radiating roads to the gates, like wheel spokes. All of the traffic passed through the piazza. When the city expanded beyond its walls, the spaces at the gates became piazzas. The radial pattern of growth continued into the 19th century.

The Renaissance and Baroque periods brought some *facelifts* to many buildings, but much of Milano was built and rebuilt after WWII with massive Fascist facades and boulevards. The clearing away of tight buildings was practiced and probably many structures of historical value were lost.

Even with these overlays, the essence of Medieval Milano is retained in its central piazza and narrow streets, such as the covered Galleria Vittorio Emmanuele.

*"Venice: unique but relevant, for it is a city where the pedestrian has always been supreme, where spaces are at his scale and accommodate his needs."--David Specter, Urban Spaces, Ch. 2*

**Venezia** is a rare example of necessity and choice. From its beginning, Venezia has been a city of the sea, and the canal system still winds through its myriad of "islands". Modern life has only a dim existence, as there are no cars (nor space for them), no monumental structures (no stability to support them), and modern conveniences seem of little consequence to the natives. Indeed, Venezia has always lived tightly. Its natural fortification of water also prevented its expansion--there was no place to go beyond a wall, that wall being a bulkhead. So the streets, even the busy ones, are no more than ten feet wide, and often are as little as five feet. As the islands have been sinking over the years, many bell towers, or *campinale*, are leaning into the canals. And since it is at sea level, its not uncommon for Venezia to be "below" sea level. Yet all of this contributes to its charm as a Romantic, aged city.

As in most Medieval cities, its tight streets are labyrinthine, and it is challenging to take identical routes from point to point. Its piazzas are invariably in honor of a church, or *chiesa*, irregular in form, and impacting the entrant with a burst of space and light.

Venezia is a clear example of a city with a primary center that is copied in a subordinate scale throughout the city (Fig. 3, pg. 6). Piazza San Marco has the *chiesa*, *campinale*, shops, monuments and civic headquarters of the city. Every other piazza is similar, yet slightly less complete, with no *campinale* higher than San Marco's. The citizens interact closely with their local neighborhood, while identifying with the central piazza and feeling the civic "oneness" of the total city.

Where Baroque dominates Roma and Venezia is essentially Medieval, **Firenze** is the Renaissance city of Italy. Not only producing art and music, Firenze accumulated many Architectural tributes to the New Birth, which remain unchanged. The cramped streets of the Middle Ages open into the solid, geometric proportions of the "updated" piazzas.

Extensions from the central piazza of the Cathedral, Santa Maria Del Fiore, connect to other major piazzas, such as Piazzas Della Signoria and Santissima Annunziata (Fig. 4, pg. 6). Like

the gates of the wall of Milano, these connections visually end, the Piazza Della Signoria terminating through the Palazzo Uffizi into the Arno River, and Piazza SS Annunziata stopping at the front door of its chiesa. These ties, along with the Brunelleschi dome on the Cathedral, unified the cityscape and suggested the urban structure later implemented in Roma.

Again, built on the principle of fortification, **Vicenza** existed in an environment squeezed within an enclosing wall. The central area was left for the piazzas, with tiny alleys emptying into their sunlit basins (Fig. 5, pg. 6).

Now, known as a Palladian city, many of Palladio's buildings are places of pilgrimage to tourists. Among his greatest works, the Basilica holds the honorary position in the central piazzas. Though no chiesa faces this area, it still remains the pivot point of the city.

The hilltowns of Italy, though geographically different, are generally formed on the same premises as those previously mentioned-- Medieval background of fortification, suffocating masses presses to one another and nearly overrunning the streets, and a few piazzas to relieve the compression.

*"...For while Siena has seen three civilizations, the Etruscan, the Roman and the Mediaeval, the first is for archaeologists, the second is for historians, and it is the Mediaeval which remains before the eye."--Sean O'Faolain, **A Summer in Italy**, from **The Hilltowns of Italy**, Carol Field.*

**Siena's** central piazza not only contours to a basin-shaped geography, but its builders used this form to highlight a particular building. Like Venezia, Siena is divided into subcities, though more by political sections that are geographically formed, than by piazza and surrounding neighborhood (Fig. 6, pg. 6). Though it endured long years of feudal wars, it has remained intact as an example of a Medieval hilltown.

*"...Its color was brown, and it revealed not a single house--nothing but the narrow circle of the walls, and behind them seventeen towers--all that was left of the fifty-two that had filled the city in her prime. Some were only stumps, some where inclining to there fall, some where still erect, piercing like masts into the blue."--E. M. Forester, **Where Angels Fear to Tread**, from **The Hilltowns of Italy**, Carol Field.*

**San Gimignano** also used much the same techniques as Siena. Unlike most of the other walled cities, it has barely exceeded its boundary, and remains a gated city (Fig. 7, pg. 6). Its unique display of towers is reminiscent of the feuding families who built them as if their homes were literally "castles". Though most have fallen and crumbled away, those that are left add to the Romantic presence of the city.

BOND

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CHIEFTAIN BOND

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The conclusions to be made of these descriptions are those of the intentions in Italian townbuilding in the Middle Ages--fortification and its inherent massing, the need for an open space for commerce and citizen gatherings, minimal access through the city, and the spiritual need to accentuate particular aspects of Italian life, through built form. It is now possible to scale down to the immediate vicinity of a piazza, generally a small city within itself.

## Recurring Elements

Many Architectural elements, both physical and perceptual, often recur in Italian Piazzas. Inevitably, all of them can be traced to the intention of the piazza builders--i.e., a place for light, air, accessibility, communication, business, religion, and city identity. It is redundant to explicate these points because, through the delineation of less than a dozen characteristics, these intentions are manifest.

The following page lists several elements that occur in each of the eleven piazzas of this study. The brief examples give a visual reference of these elements, but their value is more conspicuous with experience.

After the list, descriptions expound on the perceptual characteristics that lend themselves to the understanding of the physical elements. It is as important to *feel* the piazza as well as to know what is within its boundary.

## Traits in Common

Steps--on monuments, churches, bases, seats

Threshold--arched entrances, narrow entrances, focal entrances, axial, terminating, exits from buildings

Focus--churches, civic, monuments, fountains

Cover--built (arcade, colonade, overhang, entrance, market stand) temporary (market, cafe, vendors)

Shops--under houses, vendors, market, tourist

Stone--floor, buildings, monument, steps

Open from closed--tight streets to open spaces

Roman and/or Medieval location

Axiality--intersection, termination, focal, centralized

Texture--various shapes and sizes of buildings, material change, patterns (floors, elevations), color, shape of piazza

Mass--the way the buildings are placed

Height change/hierarchy--visual guide to important places

Support space--courtyards, piazzas, interior halls (Cathedrals)

Light/shade--differentiation of shadow against (behind) sunlit areas, arcade, tower (monument), partial shade of piazza due to buildings

Change--movement (water, vehicles, birds, people, tables [cafe]), Use (civic, religious, parking, market, performing arts, general pedestrian)

Anticipation--juxtaposition of buildings, level change, tunnels

Impact--dark to light, tight to open, height changes, texture changes

Sphere of influence--within space, immediate vicinity, town

Symbolism

# Elements

## Anticipation

*"Architecture is the articulation of space so as to produce in the participator a definite space experience in relation to previous and anticipated space experiences."*--Francis Bacon, *The Design of Cities*, Intro.

A wonderful aspect of the piazza is its definite and necessary relationship to the streets of the city. Whether or not one knows to expect a street to end in a piazza, there is the anticipation of an event. By nature, the narrow streets and corners inevitably lead to a bright space. The play of light and shadow on mass is never so necessary as in the slits between buildings. It is often easy to find a piazza by visually following the skyline--the ribbon of blue that winds its way into a basin of light. It is the anticipation through the juxtaposition of these masses that provides the impact necessary to appreciate the existence of the piazza.

The Italian townscape had little problem in creating anticipatory street scenes with juxtaposition of buildings. He found many ways to lure the eyes around a corner, over a hill, or through a wall. In particular, the street was treated with a burrowing, rather than bulldozing, nature.

The curve of a facade, the glimpses of buildings above and through an opening (such as an arch), and the opening's ability to connect across the street rather than beside it, all increase the pedestrian's awareness of a continuous "something" beyond. The anticipation of a space, or piazza, is also induced by another often used concept, the proscenium arch, or picture frame. It is easy to see the anticipatory quality--there is a strong need to see the whole picture after passing through such an opening, the whole picture most often a piazza. (Figures 14 and 16, p. 27)

Another invitation to continue is the curved wall. A simple curve can gently guide a person around a softened corner. Changes in facadal color and shape also suggest something else to follow. Ground level arches or thresholds ask to be glanced through and inevitably, one of them will frame a courtyard, a street, stairs, or a piazza. The curved wall does not need to end in a piazza to be dramatic: since the eyes tend to look straight first, the delicate angles and framing of an arch can work to counter the curve of a wall. (Figures 4 and 11, p. 27)

It is easy to tell a deadend and what it implies. But subtle details in a building at the end of a street suggest something else. A frontal elevation often is a deadend, but an arcaded base suggests extension beyond the corners of the street. A blackened arcade against a white facade is an anticipation of passage through the facade, and objects in view above the facade are also a clue to a space behind the building. (Figure 15, p. 27)

A tunnel through a building that crosses the street's path is fundamentally more inviting than a blank facade. In addition, buildings seen beyond and through the archway are indicative of spaces. The proscenium arch is ideal as an invitation.

Often the anticipation is in the form of the increasing functional use and importance of buildings as one draws closer to the piazza. Generally, the average family dwellings rim the city, furthest from the center. As the streets approach the central piazza, inns, food and goods shops, and museums appear and become more numerous. Then schools, hospitals, and larger homes announce the nearness of the town center. Finally, just before entering a

piazza, a chiesa spire or dome is glimpsed, as well as a bell or fortification tower belonging to a castle.

It is not unusual, especially in hilltowns, for a street to narrow near the threshold of a piazza. There may be a "gate" in the form of an arcade, or perhaps a tunnel through a building. With this shutting-down of light, it is no accident that the contrast of shade and light employed to a threshold is ideal in producing impact.

Whether a curved wall, set of stairs, dark recesses, picture frame, the peak of a tower, a dome, or a shadowed corner, the incessant "need to know" always works to the advantage of the impact of a piazza.

### ***Impact and Event***

*"...use such elements as are capable of acting on our senses, of satisfying our visual needs and so arrange them that they are visual impact."--Le Corbusier*

In its many forms, impact is always present in the Italian Piazza. When entering the piazza, left behind is the claustrophobic street. The piazza's expanse is seldom broken, except for the occasional fountain or monument. Unusually the bright, reflective, flat stone of its floor is in sharp contrast to the undulating, shadowed facades that border it and the streets.

After the impact of light and space, an object may seem to appear from nowhere--a tower, a campinale, a chiesa, or a palazzo. The most important buildings face the piazza and are unseen from the narrow streets of the city. Sometimes, these points are not seen as one enters the piazza--the tower's shadow may be its own first announcement; the chiesa may be set so close to an entrance that only from the opposite side is it visible; the ground level may have similar arcading or recesses and only standing away reveals the different facades that distinguish building types.

The use of level changes is clear only if seen from particular angles, or upon crossing the piazza. Steps work toward impact when climbed. Church or civic buildings are set at prominent places in the geographic slope. Further, the act of leaving the piazza is as moving as entering, due to the difference in facades, slope, and texture. The same point of threshold may have a different character from one side to the other.

Impact is an event as well. The event of a piazza is its contrast to the city. It never can be entered the same way twice--whether its the position of the sun or a cloud passing, the market being set-up or the cafes being closed down, the moving of rain or birds or people--the piazza is an event that captures attention upon impact and continues to surprise and move the viewer.

### ***Light***

*"But what gives you this architectural shock? The impact of the proportions that you see. What produces these proportions? The objects and surfaces you see, because they are in the light." --Le Corbusier*

Light is the essential element of the piazza. The piazza not only opens to the sky; it manipulates the light to accentuate, shade, reflect and illuminate.

This manipulation is mistaken for other common traits. An arcading or colonade is most often for access, shading, and building support. The finer observation reveals that these recesses, along with windows, doors, niches, reliefs and other textural qualities, accentuate the light and detail on a building. The piazza is more prominent with varying borders--an example of the contrary is the American plaza with its concrete floor, concrete fixtures, concrete and glass facades from top to bottom. It is not the lack of material change that defeats them: most piazzas are entirely stone. It is the severity of light, always reflected, always on a flat surface. The degree of lighting in a piazza is as textural as rough stone--light bounces from the domed cathedral, or is absorbed to a dark gray in the arcade, or is totally absent in the upper floor windows of a palazzo.

With this variation, the piazza's boundaries of buildings never quite seem as imposing as a wall--they undulate, more like a curtain, something that is a division yet can be egressed with ease.

With juxtaposition, light can turn corners or cast shadows that lure the eye. It may not be solely the position of a building that gives it hierarchy--shadows of recesses in the bases of surrounding buildings give solidity to the illuminated building.

### **Symbolism**

*"Cities...are embodiments of the past and mirages of unfulfilled dreams."--Sibyl Moholy-Nagy*

As a finale to the perceptual characteristics of piazzas, symbolism holds the highest spot. Perhaps this honor is due to its complexity and obscurity, often too subtle for the foreigner and too subconscious for the native.

As exemplary in the city of Roma, Italy is a result of addition, not substitution. From the humblest country barn to the richest palazzo, nothing that crumbles is replaced, simply propped up or hidden with another style. Like the layering of strata, the symbolism of many periods stand next to each other, often on the same surface. Sculptures and monuments, windows and doors, hierarchy of buildings and streets, even the order of tasks in a day, are all part of the Italian culture. His symbols, the accumulation of time, is inborn and inseparable from him. Often the Italian does not even notice these symbols, they are so interwoven. And the piazza is, of course, his showcase, so it is here that these symbols are numerous.

Symbolism borders on tradition, but only in that they are both things of the past and present. The application of tradition in build form, i.e., symbolism, is perhaps closer to representing the passing of Time.

Foregoing details about symbols, their importance is in the ability of the observer to perceive them. It would take many books to understand Italian symbolism in the piazza. Let it suffice to observe that the sensation of many ages have passed through each piazza, and their remembrance is embedded in subtle objects and arrangements in form.

## Change

*"There are really no ultimate solutions, only a system of change, doors that open and close, light that illumine and darken."-- Pietro Belluschi*

Symbolism is a system of change. The sense of passing Time is part of the piazza. Timelessness is also a key to perceiving the full impact of a piazza. Somewhere between constant change and no change, the piazza is a motion of itself.

The ability to change is an essential part of Italian life. The constant activity of the street vendors, cars, people, birds, and cafes, conspicuously depict the average Italian day. Added to these are the temporary marketplace, the weekly arts and crafts exhibits, occasional civic activities, public games and religious holiday ceremonies. The impatient pace of the Italian is only temporarily slowed by the sidewalk cafe and the soothing sound and feel of the fountain. As all of this activity continues, other sublime alteration occur hourly--the sun moves across the piazza, pushing before it shadows and reflections that keep the bordering buildings in a constant visual movement. Cafes chase the shade of buildings and towers, opening and closing with their movement. Even the market stalls tend to stay close to the protective, cool shadows.

If one is perceptive enough to observe all of these changes, including the historical significance of ages past, he will also sense that there is more to come--future changes, added to that which exists. The piazza loses the stagnant meaning of *place*--it is something that does not wait to be admired, but impatiently tries to improve.

*"...the city is a construction in space...a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time."--Kevin Lynch*

## Street

*"In the city, the street must be supreme. It is the first institution of the city. The street is a room by agreement, a community room, the walls of which belong to the donors, dedicated to the city for common use. Its ceiling is the sky. From the street must have come the meeting house, also a place by agreement."--Louis I. Kahn in **Between Silence and Light**, John Lobell*

For anticipation, the street must give itself to the piazza. Invariably, all roads empty into a piazza. This may be a reason why the piazza has such diverse activities--there is little discretion about what happens in the piazza. Modern plazas are often "bordered" by a street, or cut completely from them and sandwiched between two or more buildings. With this arrangement, nothing happens because nothing *is forced to happen*.

Cars have no choice but to traverse or circumvent the edge of a piazza. If they park, it often is not discretionary. The pedestrian must dodge cars as deftly as he dodges pigeons.

The street is always an exit from a piazza as well. The two directions are different in character. To enter is often the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. But the reverse side can be more like a marker or hole in the wall of a building.

A street can exist within a piazza. The arcading of buildings, while a transition from outside to inside in one direction, is also a type of street in the cross section. It is public in that one is free to observe individual shops without entering. Yet often a storekeeper will treat the cover outside of his shop as his own, as with the setting of cafes or the cleaning of the ground.

Further, the interior of a chiesa or a public building is still more of a street than it is a building. The sanctuary of San Pietro has colonades on the sides (a type of public access), with the seating for personal use. All aisles (or streets) lead to the altar (or space at the front), and this area also has public and private places. The Palazzo Uffizi is an indoor street, one side having windows to the piazza (like an arcade), and the other side has doors to individual rooms (much like a shopping street for art).

The street is a decision-making place. While in it, one can see many options all around him. By deviation from its path, a decision is made. Or following the street, which enters a piazza, is the decision of the street.

### ***Sphere of Influence***

A piazza is like a small city, with its major business near it and a fringe of residents. The Italian will do most of his business and pleasure in his neighborhood piazza. His chiesa may be there, as well as grocers and favorite cafe. In some cities, individual civic buildings are in each piazza. Of course, major holidays, civic business, and just a change of place takes the Italian to the major piazza of the city.

The smaller piazzas are influential in a local area. The central one is of townwide influence, yet is only important to that particular town, and then only for one or two special reasons, as a major religious center or general public meeting place. Otherwise, the Italian prefers to do most of his activities "at home", in his local piazza.

### ***Support Space***

As has been noted, the pleasures of the piazza are caused by extraneous forces. Support spaces also act outside the immediacy of a piazza, yet are often vital in perceiving the piazza in its entirety.

Most often of secondary nature, the support space acts as a buffer to a piazza. In the former description of undulating walls that border the piazza, passing through these walls must be

to other areas besides streets. Courtyards in palazzos, while private, are viewed through the buildings and give further anticipatory relationships from one space to another.

Smaller piazzas, lightwells into the city, are connected by streets or arches. Sometimes they give a directional path for the pedestrian, a reason to go somewhere in particular.

The most important support space is the building that is the namesake or of honorary position in the piazza. As with Cathedrals, this space is proportionally similar to the piazza and is the hierarchical point. Yet even as the major structure of the whole piazza, it not only is secondary in size, but in use. The church has lost its all-encompassing power, though it remains central to Italian social life. The increase of shops, cafes, museums, and civic buildings on piazzas also draws attention from the Cathedral. (See Comparison diagrams, p. 22)

Support space finishes the pattern set by anticipation, threshold, impact, and event (ex., the path to the Cathedral) this series of actions, carried out over a period of visual time, often focused on particular buildings or details, represents the passing of Time, into the ultimate destination of *piazza*.

### **Physical Elements**

These elements are the physical, and most obvious representatives, of the more subtle characteristics associated with **intent**.

Though piazzas are often set in a spiderweb of streets, and thresholds are from anywhere but head-on, every piazza has a form of **axiality** by level change, or by the geography of the land, axiality establishes path, building or points outside the piazza.

In Roma, the piazza axes have been majestically planned, with a Baroque styling of movement--fountains and statues guide the eyes to a focal point, or they may delineate a path through the space. In the hilltowns, the opposite extreme of placing the building according to the slope of the piazza gives it visual axis. In Siena, the civic building was placed at the lower rim of the basin. The natural direction of foot traffic is down, so the axis is toward the civic building and tower. (See Comparison diagrams, p. 23)

Of course, the **focal point** is the visually important reference of a piazza. The church is a large building, but additionally has domes or spires that are unique to the piazza. The difference in geometric shapes attracts attention.

The tower or campinale is a vertical marker of focus. The campinale of San Marco necessarily calls attention to itself, but the slender shaft is an announcement of the multi-domed Cathedral. In Firenze, the Castel Vecchio's tower is a point that connects the Palazzo Uffizi to the Piazza Della Signoria. From every threshold, the tower is visible as a sign of an important building. (See Comparison diagrams, p. 23)

**Level changes** are minute events that can have dramatic effects on how a piazza or building is discerned. In the form of steps, a building can be given an authoritative position, especially if it alone occupies a higher level. A Baroque "swelling" of stairs into a building induces the movement from outside to inside. The Renaissance steps were a podium for chiesas and palazzos. The hilltowns often had steps down or up to a piazza, because of the geography and to give the piazza a unique level in the town.

A level change may be in the form of bi-levels. A space flowing into another space, such as in Vicenza, is divided by a building. Piazza Di Spagna's gradual upward progression is a series of steps, as well as platos, which give snapshot frames of the chiesa. This dictated pausing at different viewpoints increases the drama of the approach. (Figure 8, p. 25)

The arcade of a building will often be a step or two above the piazza, adding the transitional aspect of the recess at a building's base. A curb may step up near the center of a piazza, announcing a monument or pedestrian-only area.

The monotony on a flat place is broken by monuments, usually set on steps. These steps function as seats, as do any steps in the piazza. Except for cafes, no street furniture is present or necessary--again, the Italian shows his adaptability and common sense. A piazza is always a place to sit and watch people. The level changes of podiums, steps, monuments, and even the bases of buildings are seldom empty of the leisurely onlookers.

The **threshold** on any piazza is dramatic and unexpected. By narrowing the street as it approaches the piazza, tunneling through a building, or arching the entrance, light is cut down. This makes the entrance into the piazza not only the passing from dark to light and closed to open, it also incurs a feeling of passing through the door in a wall.

**Masses** often guide the eyes to appropriate important buildings. The towers of San Gimignano are exciting in themselves. But their repetitious vertical shafts only enhance the flatness of the Piazza Del Duomo and the gabled roof of the chiesa.

The placement of masses around open spaces must balance the perception of open and filled space. Piazza Di Spagna is framed by buildings, but they give it enough room to be a "built form" of itself. In Milano, the receding of buildings all around the Cathedral induce a greater feeling of vastness, though the space in front of the doors of the Cathedral is most often used. This "respectful distance" is one more reminder to the user why the piazza exists.

Masses perform another function in the piazza--that of texture. On a large scale, buildings set against buildings cast shadows, give depth, and vary in material appearance. In Venezia, the continuous arcade around three sides has a redundant pattern, yet it contrasts to the texture of San Marco and its domes, the Palazzo Doges and their connection. The church sits forward several feet from the palazzo, while the arch that connects them is set further back (Fig.8, left). This variation in stone sets a background for the brick campinale. Each mass compliments the other, while also proclaiming the presence of each other.

Each building has a **texture**, due to its window and arch patterns, the relief surface of its material (usually stone), the decorative quality of statues and columns, and color of its facades.

Thus, the piazza is a tactile sensation, though mostly sensed with vision. The floor of the piazza often has a tactile, *visual* impact when there is a color pattern, such as on Piazza San Marco or Milano's Piazza Del Duomo. In addition, the tactile, *audible* impact is a powerful means to communicate location and direction--the sound of stone changing to granite or marble underfoot indicates a cathedral, or the sound of ascending steps or slope suggests an important place.

What seems to be the opposite of stone actually serves similar purposes. **Water** is literally a touchable element, but as a fountain it has the visual and audible "touch" of stone. Fountain noise draws one to its source, as relief from heat and a buffer from street noise. In the Middle Ages, water was the center of activity in the piazza as the public well. As a fountain, it frames and directs the viewer to a dominate structural axis, tactically blending with a wall of the piazza, as in Piazza Della Signoria. Not present in every piazza, water escapes its stagnant identity of "well" into dynamic, moving form, visually concerted with stone in its many forms. (Figure 10, p. 27)

The final element tied to the piazza is the **merchant**. Cafes, shops, grocers, and craftsmen gather in the heart of the city, or where the business is located--on the piazza. For some piazzas, the merchants were first, at the crossroads of a town or at the bend in a river. The piazza was built for them. For other spaces, the merchants moved to be near them, as they were already established as town and religious centers.

The arcade could have been especially for the stores protection, or came to be used as an after thought. Nevertheless, its usefulness to the shopkeeper is a necessity--shelter for the cafe patrons, limitation of bright sunlight, and transition from in to out.

The temporary shop, or street vendors, are just as essential as the permanent stores. Their daily use of the piazza continually alters its presence. The awnings of the carts add yet another form of cover or overhead shelter. Often, a piazza is so full of umbrellaed carts that it is hard to imagine an unbroken space under the myriad of tents.

These are the Architectural--perceptual and physical-- characteristics of Italian Piazzas. It should be noted that most of the elements mentioned tend to overlap, and the continuity with which all of them operate indicates the relevancy of my beginning statement, that *it is intention that directs the execution of a physical reality*.

Comparison of Piazzas

Piazza Dei Signori e Delle Erbe, Vicenza

Piazza Della Cisterna e Del Duomo, San Gimignano

Piazza Del Campo, Siena

Piazza San Marco, Venezia

Piazza Della Signoria, Firenze

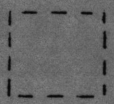
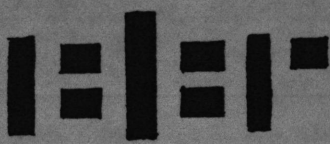
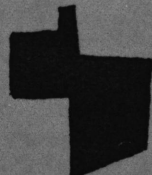
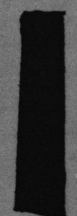
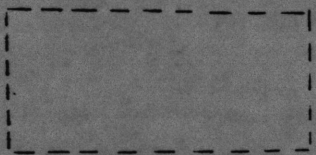
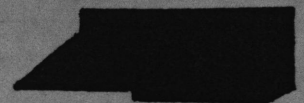
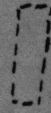
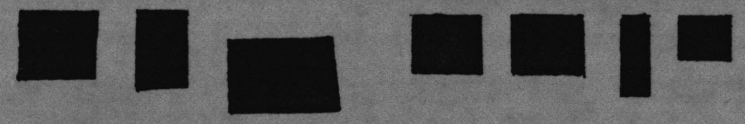
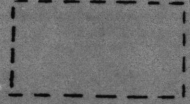
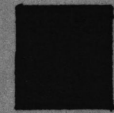
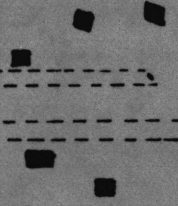
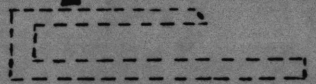
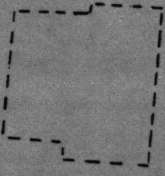
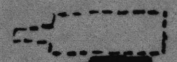
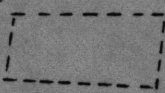
Piazza Santissima Annunziata, Firenze

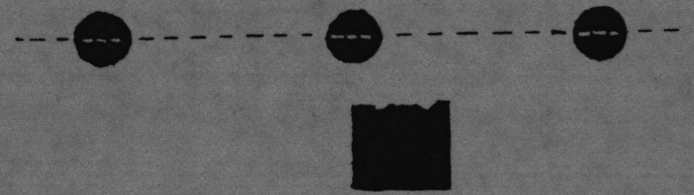
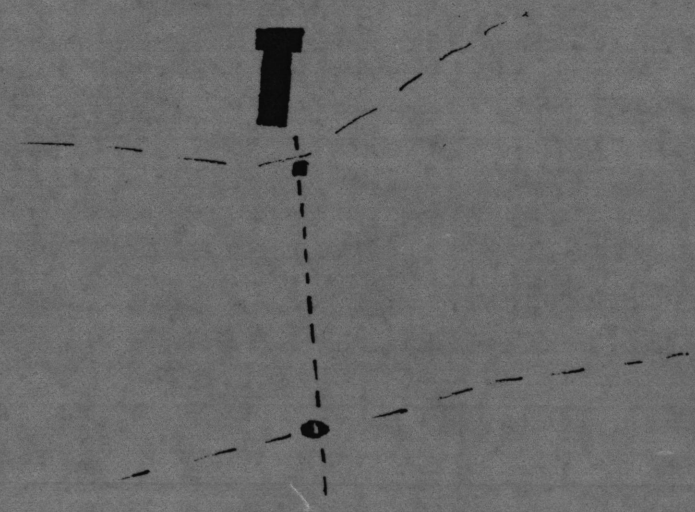
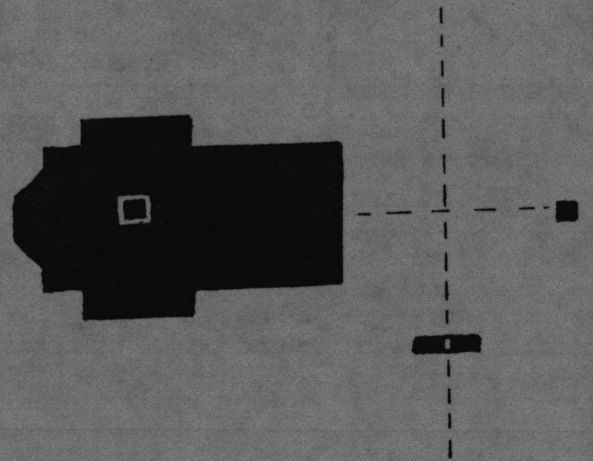
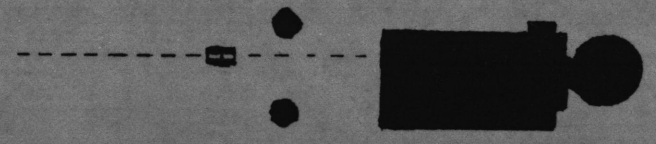
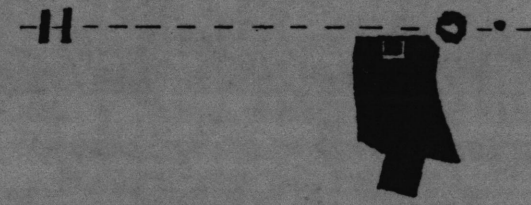
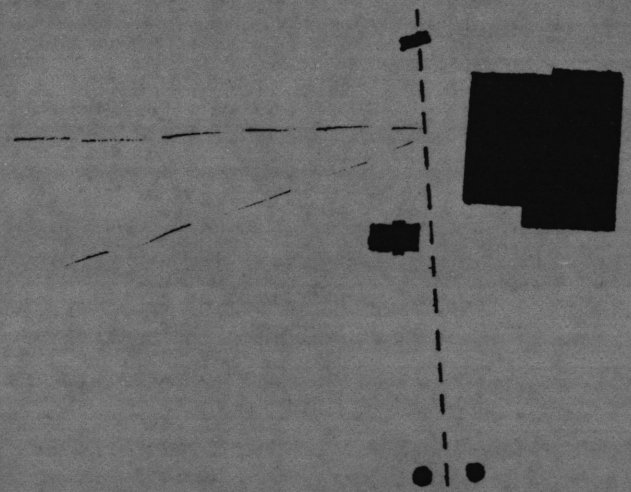
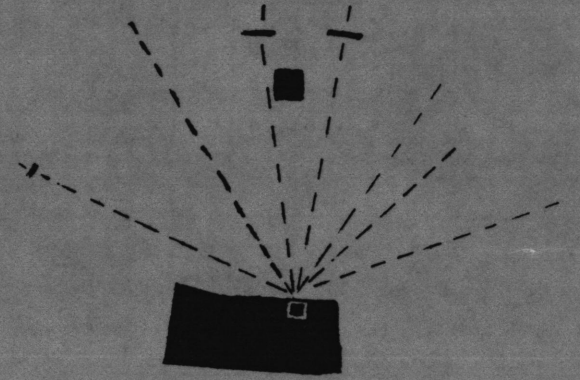
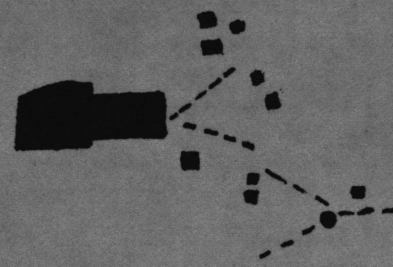
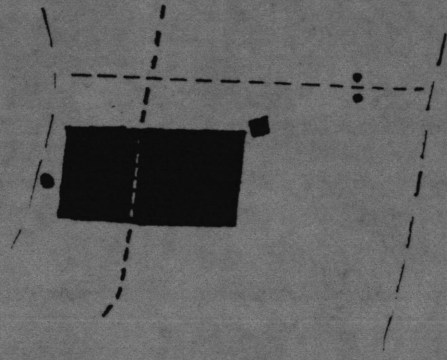
Piazza Del Duomo, Milano

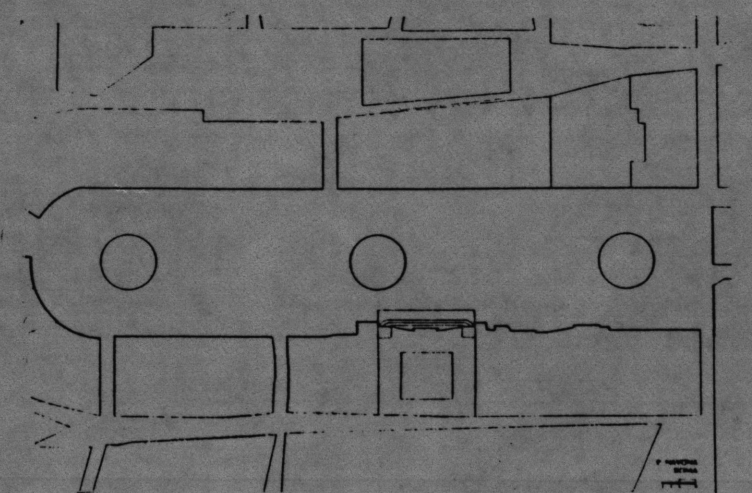
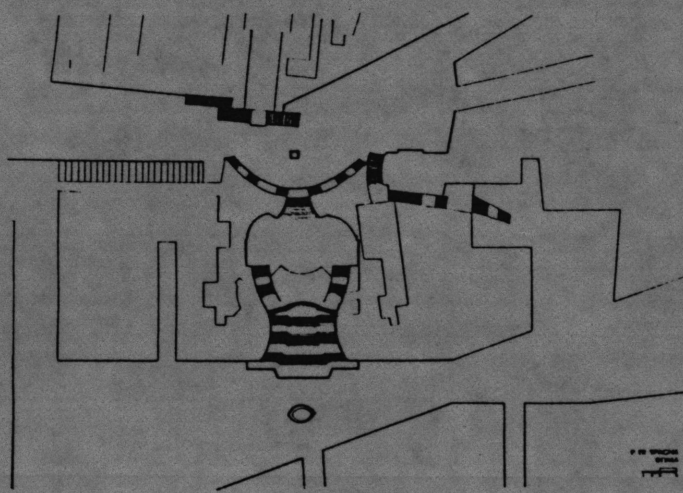
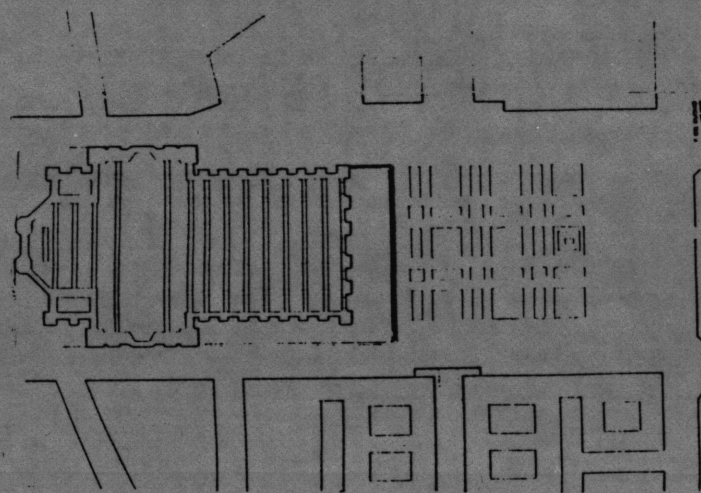
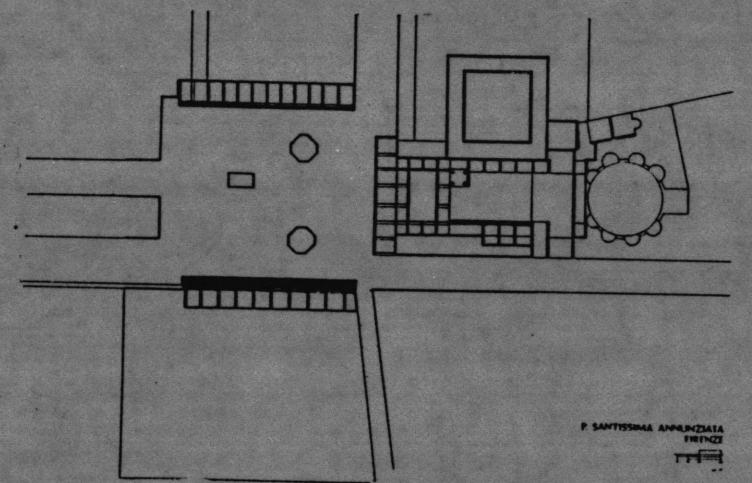
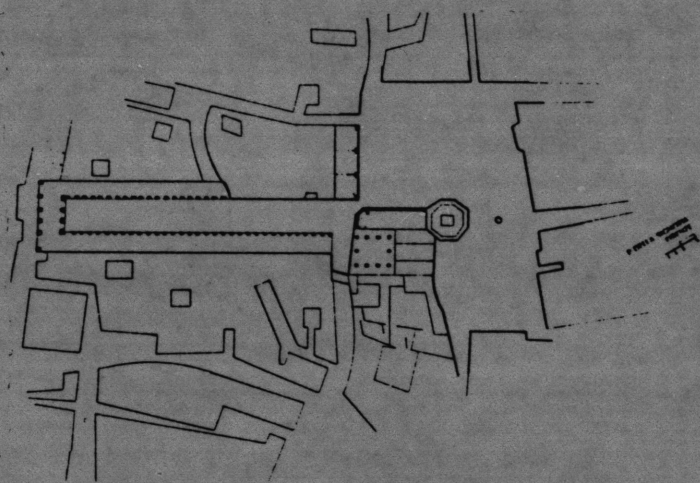
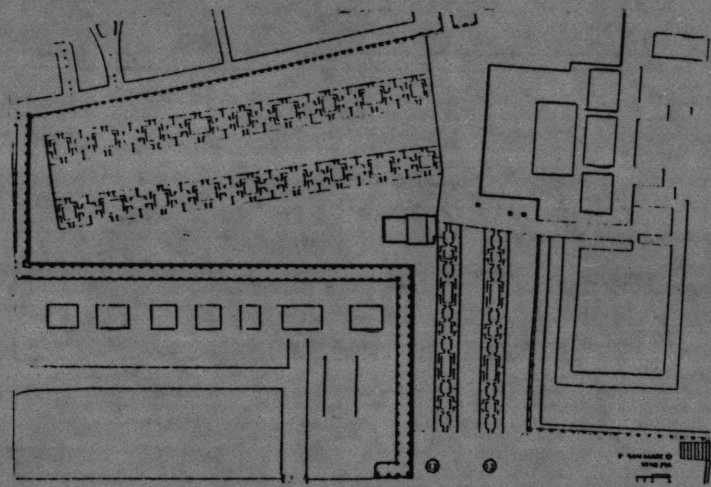
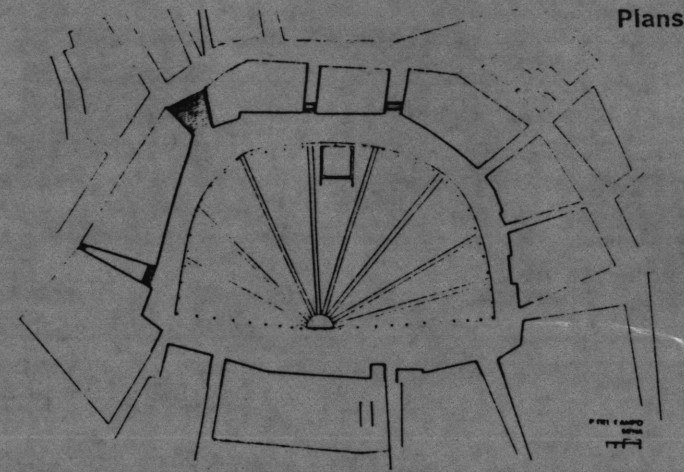
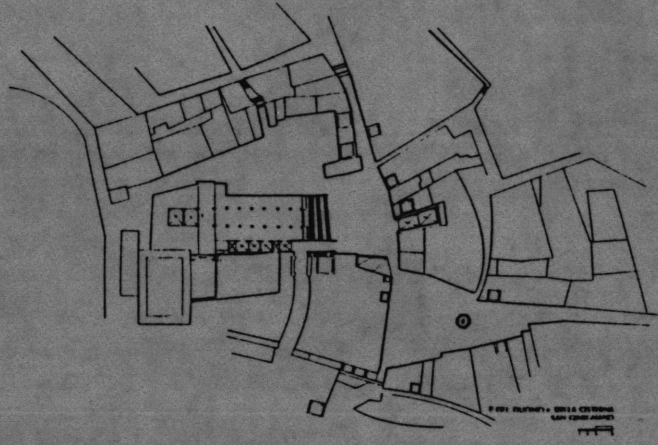
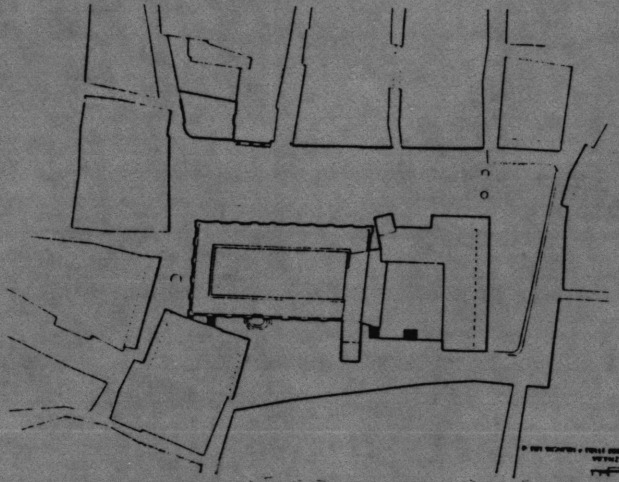
Piazza Di Spagna, Roma

Piazza Navona, Roma

Support Space







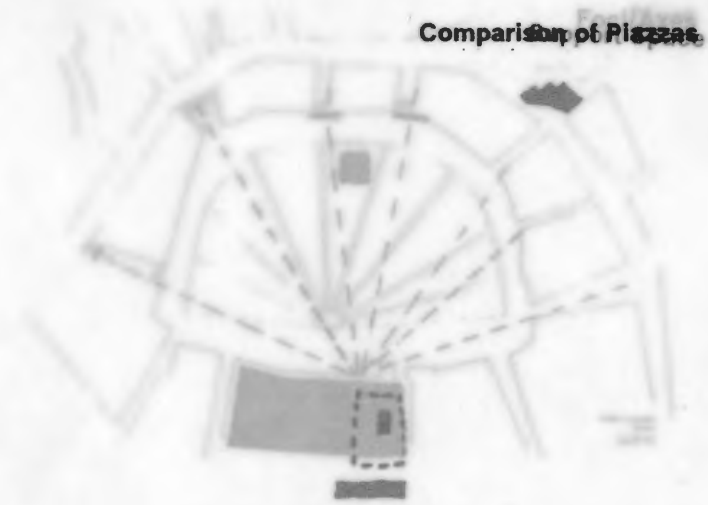
Comparison of Piazze



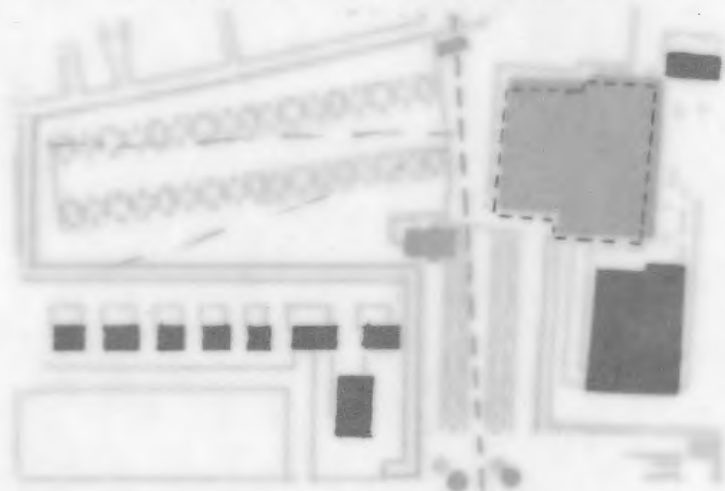
Piazza Dei Signori e Delle Erbe, Vicenza



Piazza Della Cisterna e Del Duomo, San Gimignano



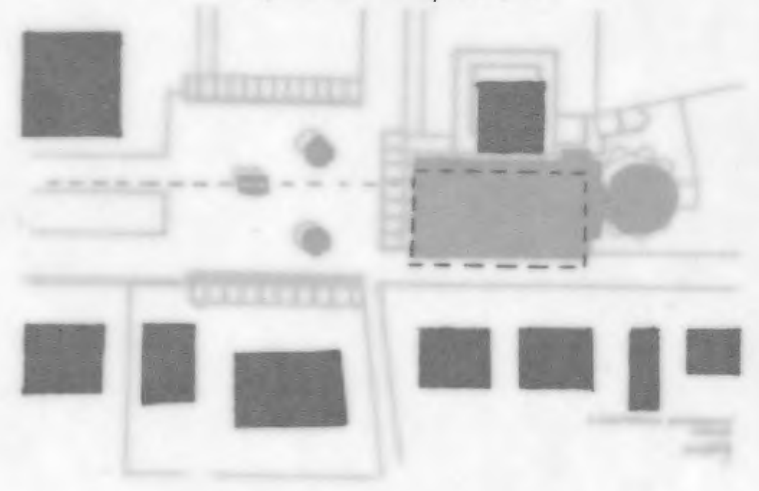
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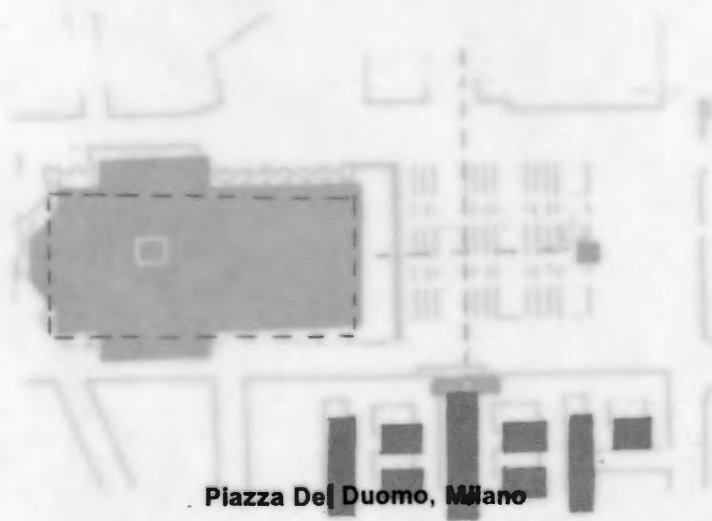
Piazza San Marco, Venezia



Piazza Della Signoria, Firenze



Piazza Santissima Annunziata, Firenze



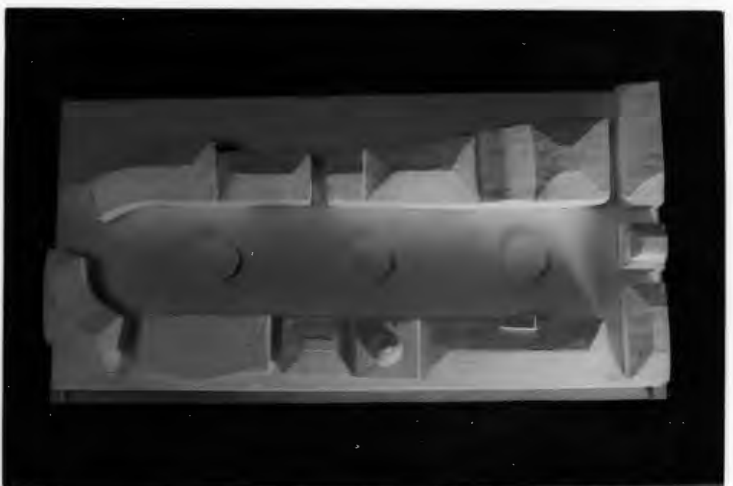
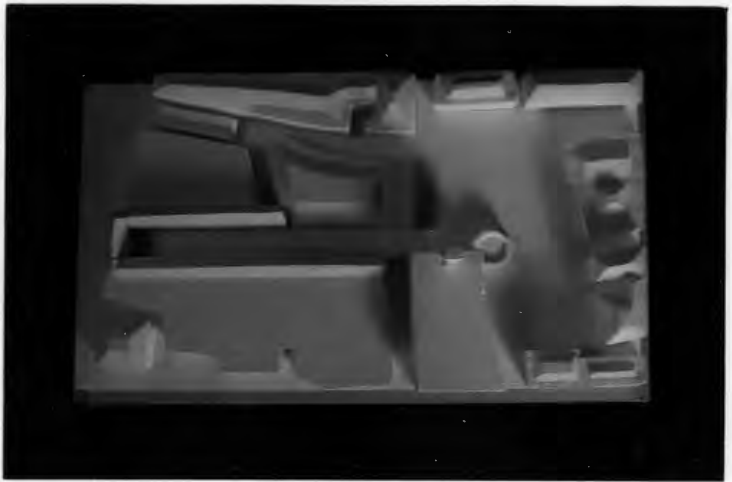
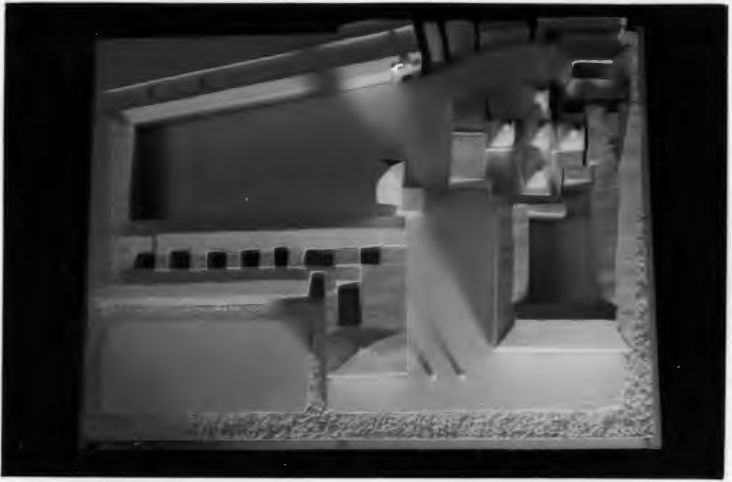
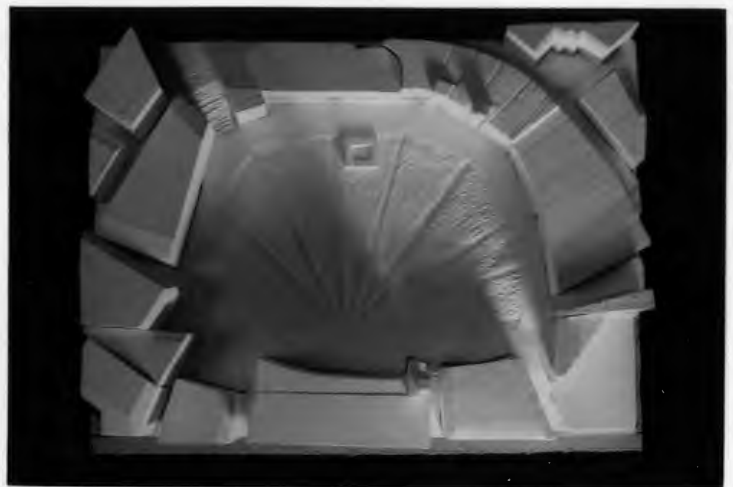
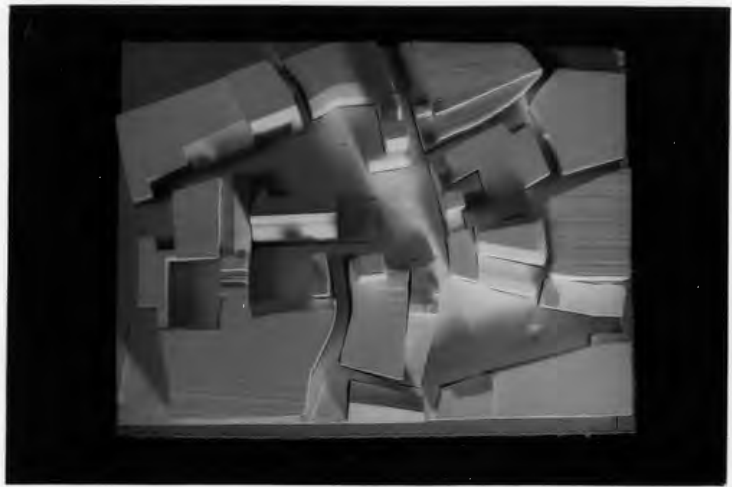
Piazza Del Duomo, Milano



Piazza Di Spagna, Roma



Piazza Navona, Roma



MILANO  
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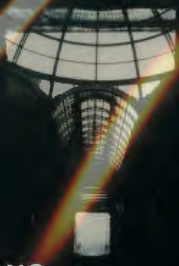
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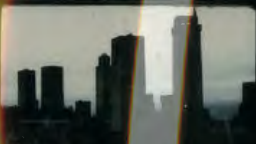
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## The Piazzas

Each piazza possesses its own source of vitality and delight. This unique quality and the common characteristics present in each piazza are given in the next eleven descriptions. The piazzas are in no particular order, though grouped together when one piazza resembles another in one or more aspects.

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## Piazzas Dei Signori e Delle Erbe, Vicenza

Central to the city, these two piazzas border the long sides of the Palladian Basilica, while one short end borders Piazzetta Palladio with its appropriate statue. The Northeast end shares a wall with another building, which in turn borders a fourth piazza, Della Slada.

To have a structure or group of buildings surrounded by piazzas is not frequent, but is often the case with Cathedrals. Vicenza's unique addition to Architecture is the Basilica as a "space". Not only does it have three facades, but it is a transitional passage from Dei Signori on the northwest facade to Delle Erbe on the southeast. Though its open galleria is on the second level, its canopy affect is sensed when passing through the first floor tunnel. The shops built into this main floor do not quite touch the roof, and most of the columns remain separate, a notable foresight of the shop designers. The total space is still perceived--a "space" separating spaces.

A third delight of the Basilica is its transitional action of leading one level into another. Piazza Dei Signori is about five feet higher than Piazza Delle Erbe. A grand staircase flows into Delle Erbe from a passage through the Basilica that narrows toward Dei Signori. The visual "spilling" into the piazza not only directs movement, but makes an entrance.

Another subtle, narrow stair, passes from Piazzetta Palladio into Delle Erbe by the corner of the Basilica. It borders a building of shops. Its five foot breadth is a romantic touch as it descends toward a view of the grander stairs.

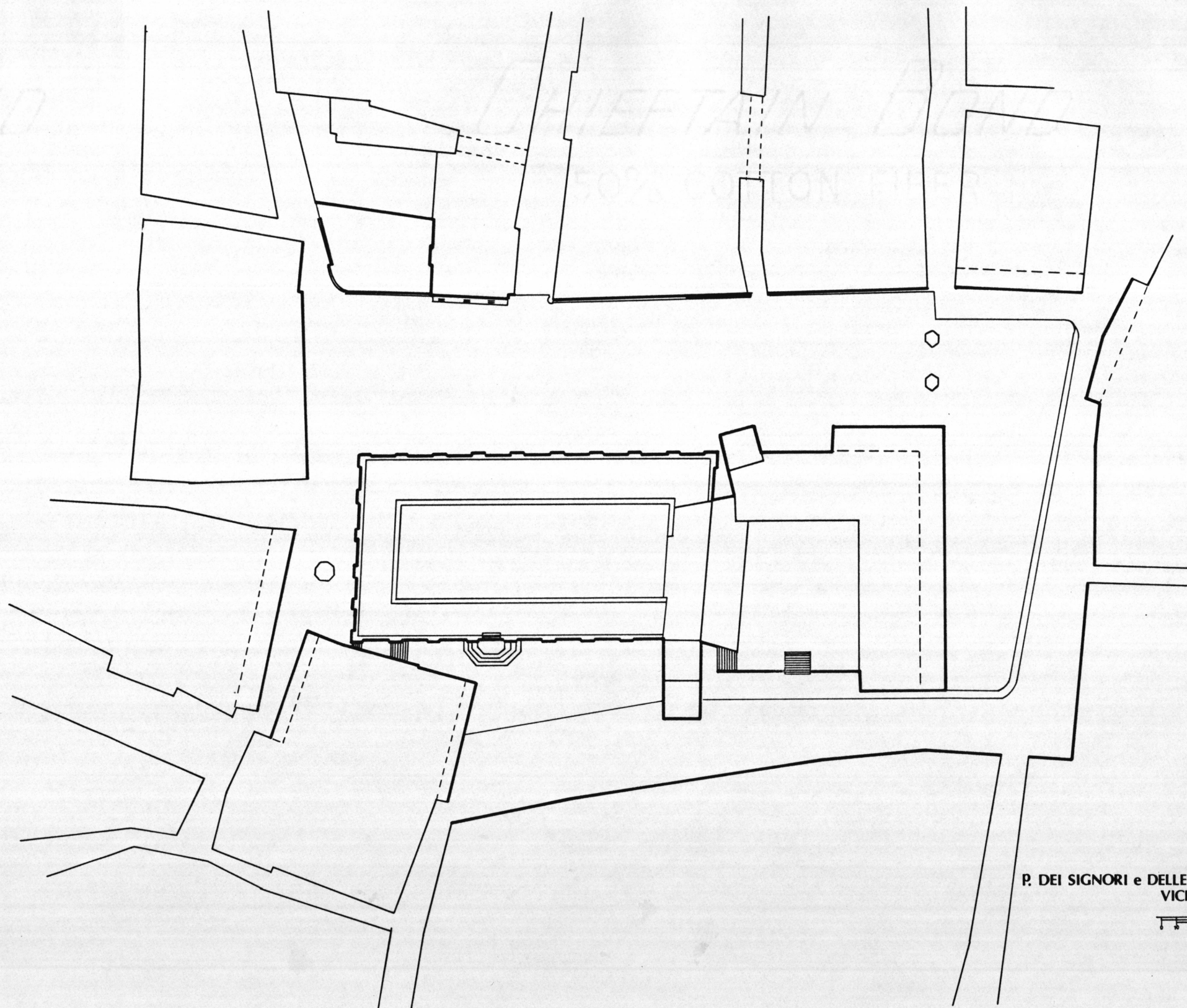
This entire central space is often cluttered with cars, vendors, and people. Piazza Delle Erbe contains a daily flower market that replaces the stone floor with a field of color, as seen from the Basilica steps. Piazza Dei Signori frequently has a goods market, wrapping around the pseudo-Corinthian columns at one end and the Palladio Statue at the other. The flat deck of a cafe is opposite the Basilica. Another Palladian building compliments the piazza, its podium of steps used as seating and display areas for the vendors.

A tower, set askew to the Basilica, has a clockface, and is a timepiece of itself as its shadow moves across the piazza. Its height is a marker for the piazza, laudatory to the barrel vaulted Basilica. Here the geometry of the vertical shaft, the rectangle and curve of the Basilica, the flat, raised podium of the cafe, the two columns, and the random massing of surrounding buildings counterbalance and offset each other, on the ground level as from above. When entering any of the spaces from one of a multitude of thresholds, one is at once aware of the spaces, filled and open.

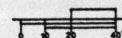
Piazza Delle Erbe is directional to the stairs of the Basilica, sloping up to them. The building closest to the corner steps is angled inward, also directing traffic through the Basilica passage. A short tower borders the other side, cutting a smaller area away from the stairs.

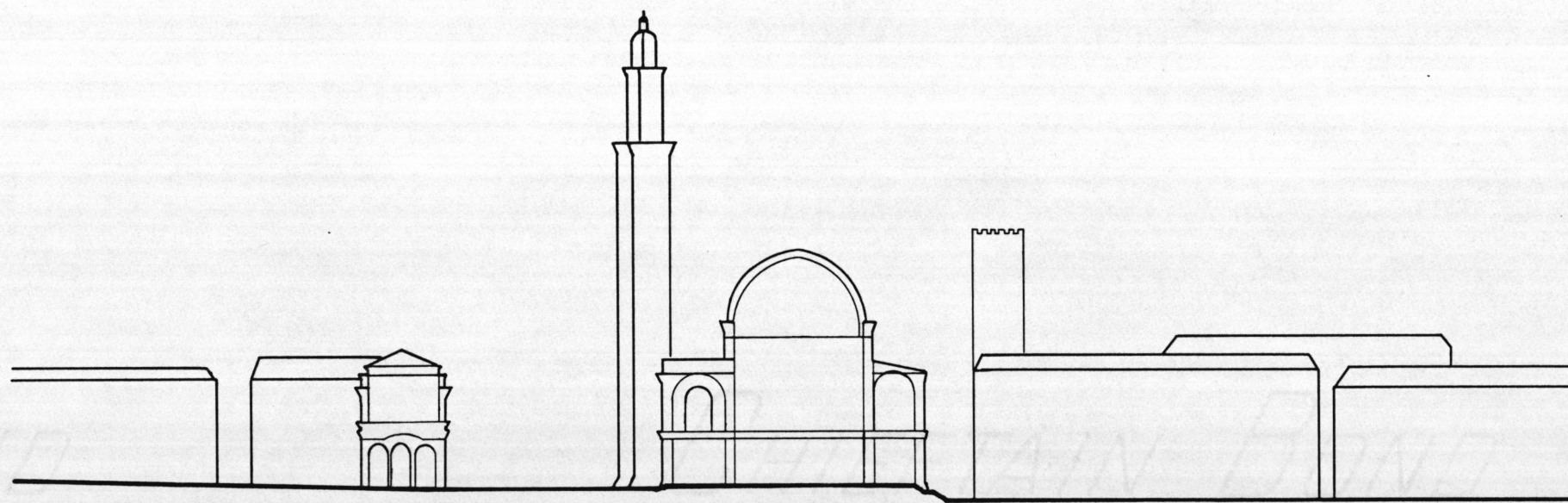
The Piazza Dei Signori acts in a different way--its axiality is parallel to the Basilica, the space nearly the same dimension as the enclosed space of the building. The columns at its northern end announce the piazza's existence to the passing street, Contra Delle Gazzole. The columns' whiteness contrasts to the dark arcading around the piazza, the two extremes in turn offsetting the colorful activities of the piazza. (Figure 2, p. 27)

The entire space is a dichotomy of intention, due to the characteristics present--the Basilica as a division of space, separating use and axiality, while acting as a gate for the two piazzas, causing anticipation and impact in opposite directions, resulting in different events. And because the Basilica itself is a "space", entering that "gate" from either piazza elicits impact and event.



P. DEI SIGNORI e DELLE ERBE  
VICENZA





PIAZZAS DEI SIGNORI e DELLE ERBE

SECTION



## Piazzas Della Cisterna e Del Duomo, San Gimignano

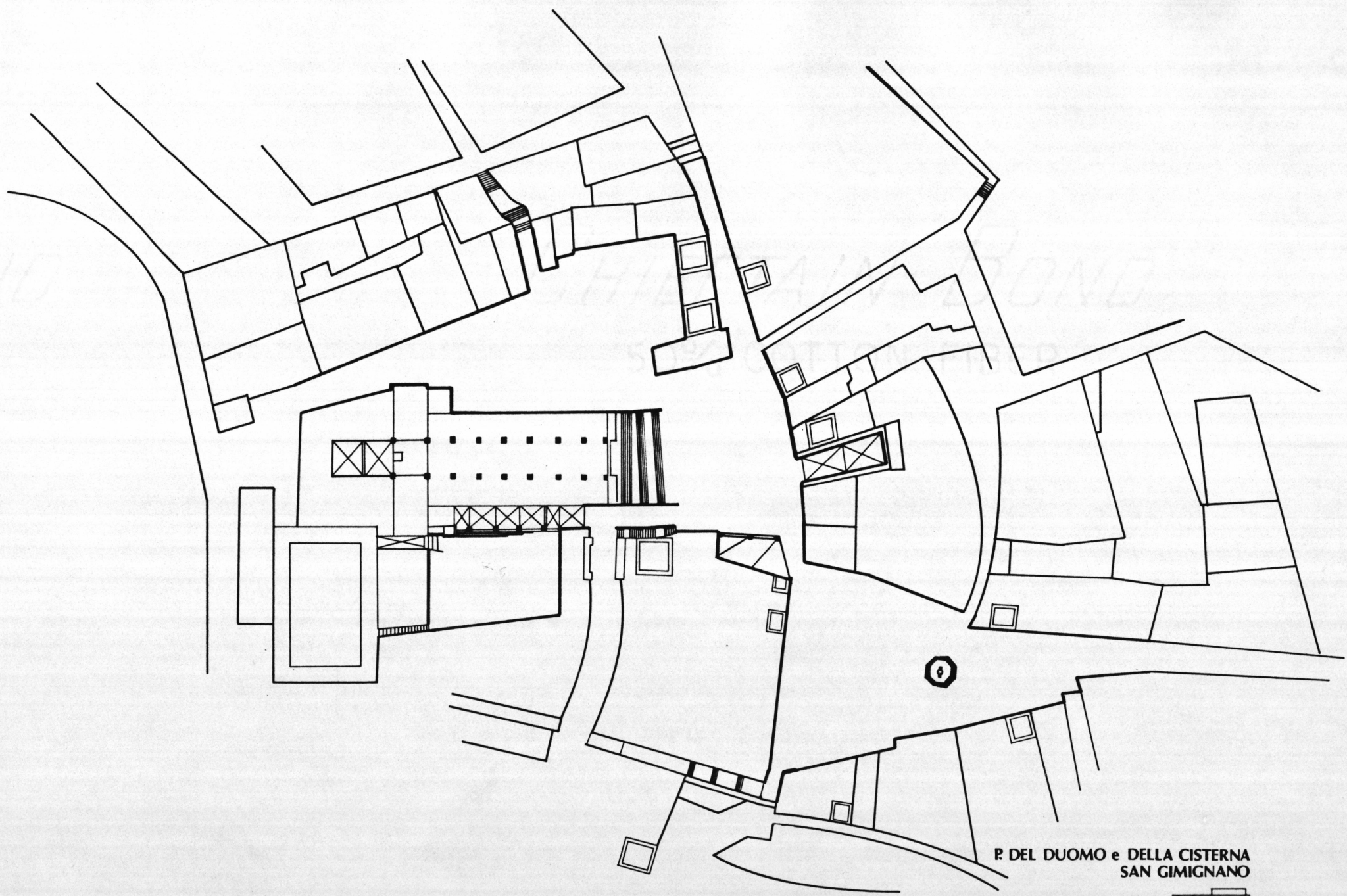
The hilltowns in Italy, while unique in geography, have much the same character as their sister cities in the valleys. Like Vicenza, San Gimignano has a group of open spaces as its town center. Flowing downhill, a school courtyard passes to a semi-private piazzetta, which passes beside the chiesa into Piazza Del Duomo, and through a narrow opening into Piazza Della Cisterna.

San Gimignano's well-known towers are its feature attraction, their rectangular shafts seen for miles. As mentioned, these towers were an outward sign of power in the Middle Ages. A rare bird's eye view was awarded to their owners. But at ground level, common townspeople used the towers for the simple purpose of shade. The jagged edged skyline was balanced by flowing steps and sloped on the ground.

The Piazzas Del Duomo and Della Cisterna collect all the roads of the town. The town well, or cisterna, is still a functioning part of the piazza. Piazza Del Duomo is bordered by cafes, shops, palazzos, town civic building, and the chiesa. The chiesa's interesting feature is not a dome or spires or windows, but that it is submissive in appearance, called to attention only by its steps that fall into the piazza. Though it has only a gabled roof, this and its rectangular mass are in direct contrast with the towers. The chiesa's place of honor and attention is due to opposite extremes--its humbleness is its unique quality in its surroundings.

Though the towers are more numerous in the vicinity of the piazzas, there is little warning as to where the major open spaces of the city are located. Yet the streets slope toward "something"; the buildings curve or are set in wings to show "something"; the sight of an arch is definitely an announcement of an important event. There is no perception of space beyond a group of buildings: the spaces are narrow in proportion to the towers. But the ground characteristics are legible at a high level of sensitivity.

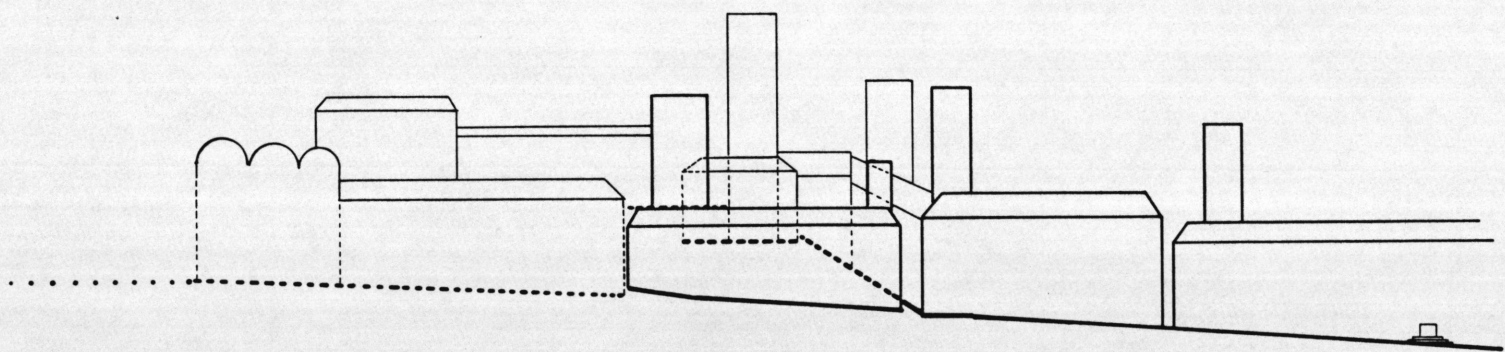
The arch entrance from the north end of town is set at a slight bend in the street. As mentioned, the anticipation of space beyond its opening strengthens as the pedestrian approaches. Upon crossing the threshold, the street approaching the entrance now has a feeling of "in-ness"--a hallway entering a room. Since this arch has been passed, the street widens, rather than narrows, as it confronts the piazza. Nonetheless, entering the piazza at the lower corner impacts the pedestrian. (Figures 7, 14, and 16, p. 27)



P. DEL DUOMO e DELLA CISTERNA  
SAN GIMIGNANO



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PIAZZA DEL DUOMO e DELLA CISTERNA

SECTION



BOND

CHIFFAIN BOND

## Piazza Del Campo, Siena

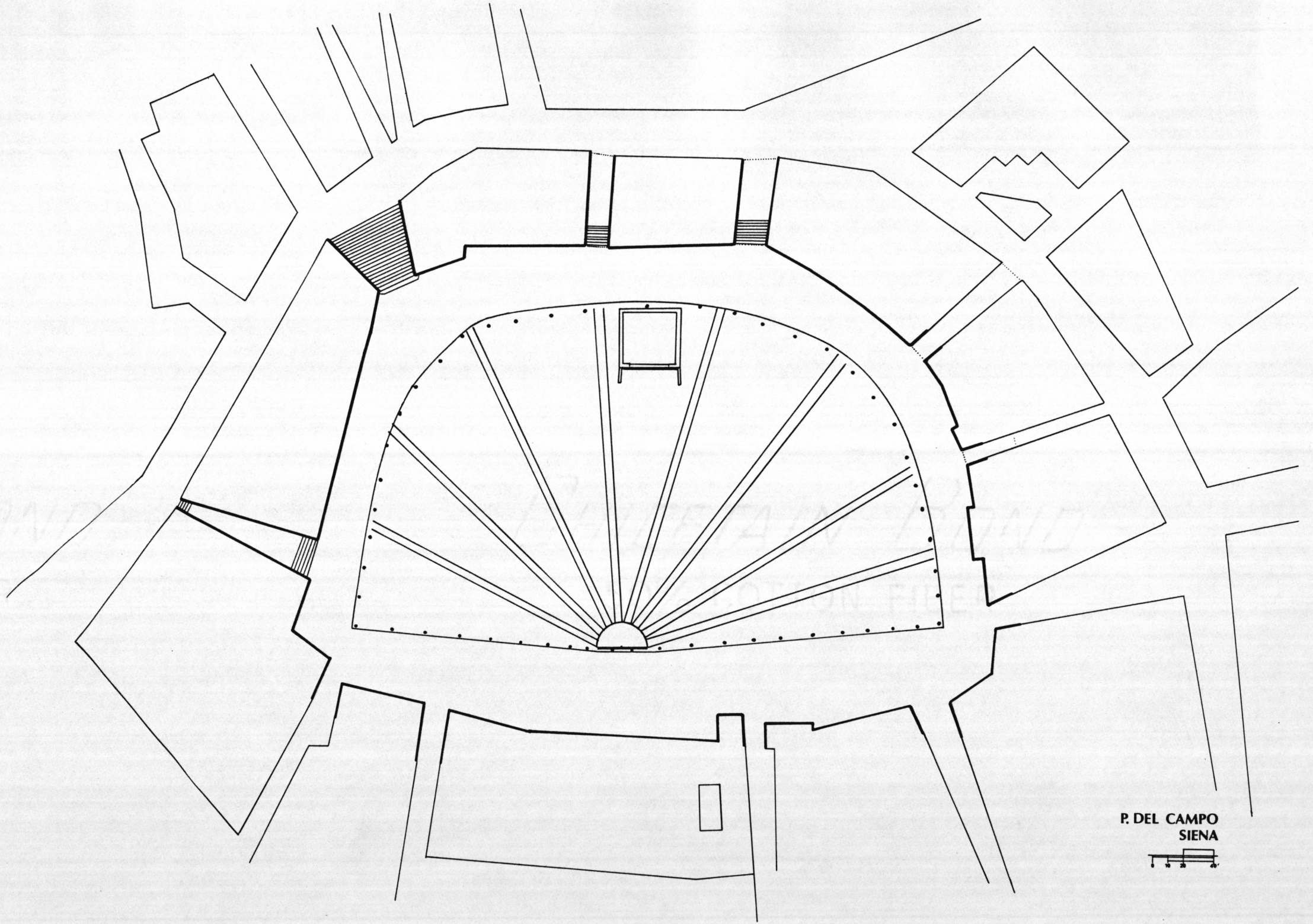
The basin that is Piazza Del Campo is, of course, a geographic feature. The three hills of Siena meet here. The builders of Siena used its form to delineate hierarchy and boundary for the piazza. One of the most beautiful elements is the fan-like appearance of its floor. Bricks set contrary to the pattern spread away from the bottom center in eight strips. They seem to point toward entrances to the piazza yet, on closer examination, coyly miss their targets. They function as drainage for the piazza, stopping short of another brick pattern that is a road around the edge of the space. The sections of the piazza number nine and represent the rulers at the time of construction in the 14th century. (Figure 13, p. 27)

Like San Gimignano's piazzas, Del Campo is hidden from view. The stairs at its upper corner are a surprising first clue as to the existence of the space. Careful discernment of the convex curve of the street's boundary is another clue--there must be a concave side, and a space that it contains. Another indicator is the repetition of public steps descending through the buildings of this convex wall. These tunnels burst into the piazza from all sides, and echo the geometry of the fan.

Torre de Mangia, the tower of the Palazzo Pubblico, equalizes the proportions of space to height. The shadow of the bell tower moves across the piazza, dictating the life of cafes, loiterers, and vendors. The slope of the piazza is ideal to sit on--in the heat of the day, those seated are in a strip that the shadow contains. This change enlivens the piazza floor, the bricks appearing to move of their own accord.

The support space next to Del Campo is also reclusive. Now more of a parking lot, a piazza is at the base of the backdoor of Palazzo Pubblico. The space on the low side of the civic building accentuates its importance and visually isolates the tower.

The piazza functions as a town and business center, though it lacks a chiesa. Its annual town horse race makes Piazza Del Campo into a boisterous, gambling rivalry among Siena's citizens for one day a year. Otherwise, the piazza's daily activities echo most other Italian Piazzas.

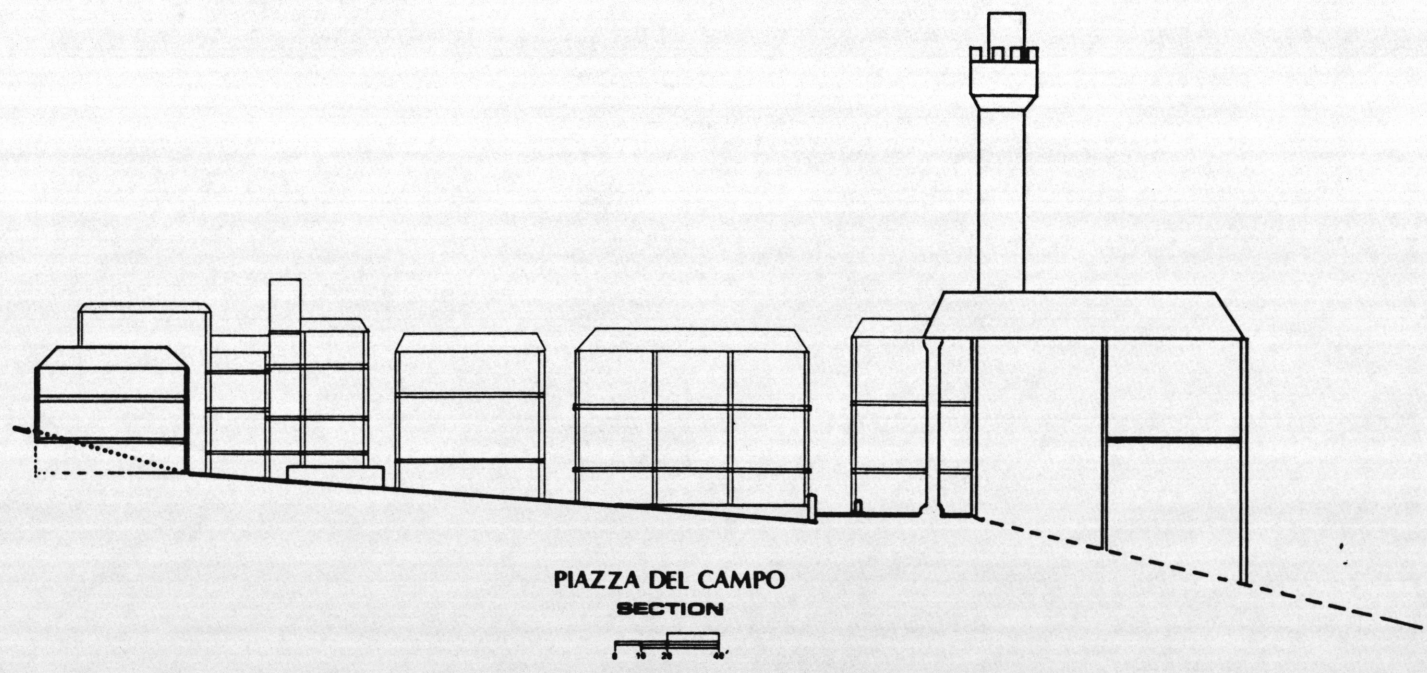


P. DEL CAMPO  
SIENA



BOND  
FIBER

CHIEFTAIN BOND  
50% COTTON FIBER



## Piazza San Marco, Venezia

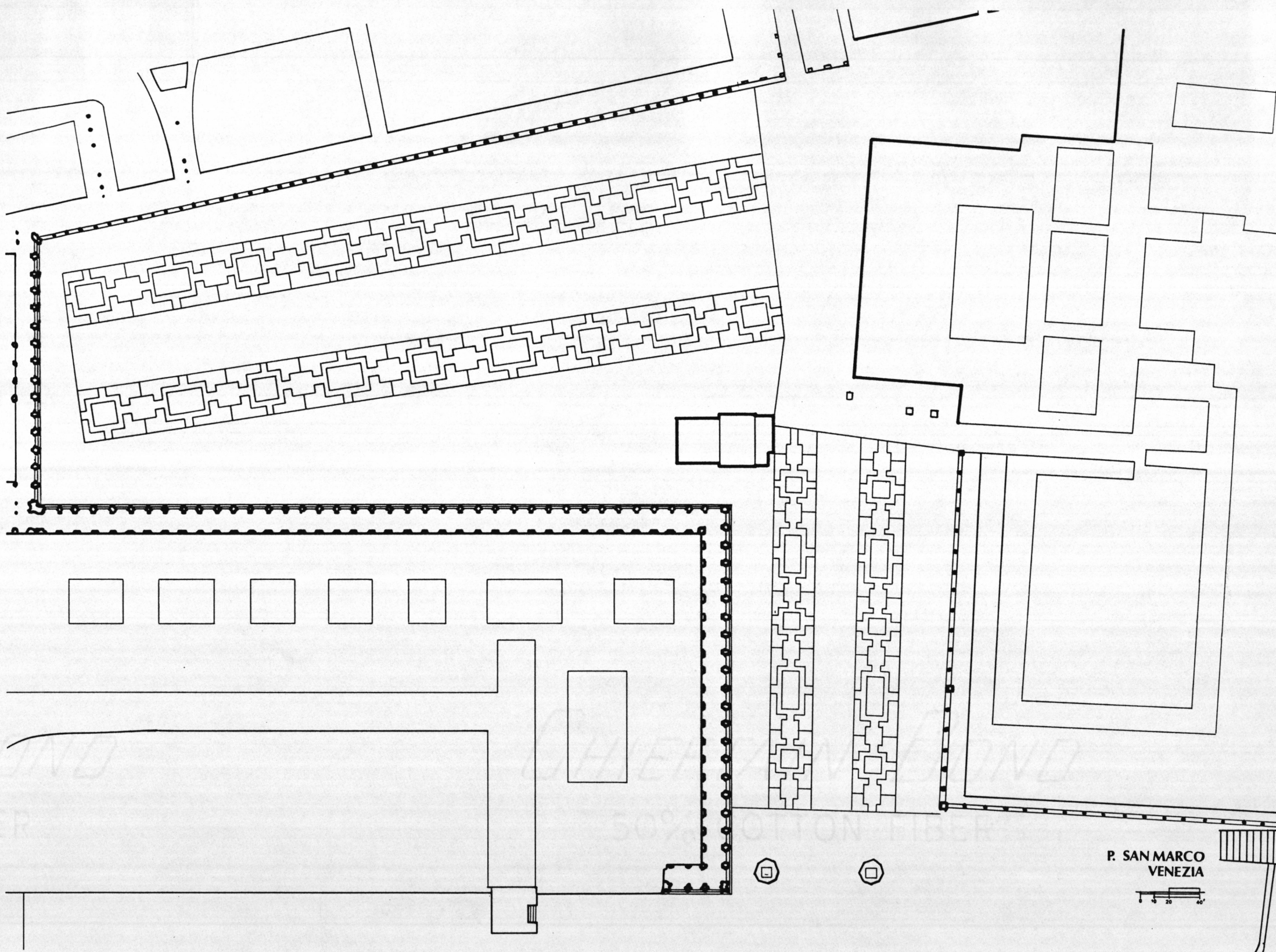
As previously explained, the system of dominate and subordinate piazzas is implemented in Venezia, with Piazza San Marco as the central one. It borders a port from the Grand Canal, so a major axis is rather open, the placing of two columns frame the arch at the opposite end, specifying a path. (Figure 4, p. 23)

An interesting feature is the three sides of arcading that appear as a continuous building, similar to the Palazzo Uffizi of Firenze. Only on the arcaded "street" will the individual shops and paths stand alone. One must burrow through the building to get into the piazza. But to leave is visually impossible--the three sides are identical from roof to base. Only the buildings seen over the roof indicate anything beyond the arcade. This is one of the few times an arcade is imposing, with too much repetition. Yet it also encloses the piazza and enhances the feeling of space. (Figure 17, p. 27)

One side of the arcade wraps around to the port, the far side ends in a triumphal arch, the threshold at the end of the axis from the port. The large opening is a change in the arcaded rhythm and attracts the desired attention to itself as an exit.

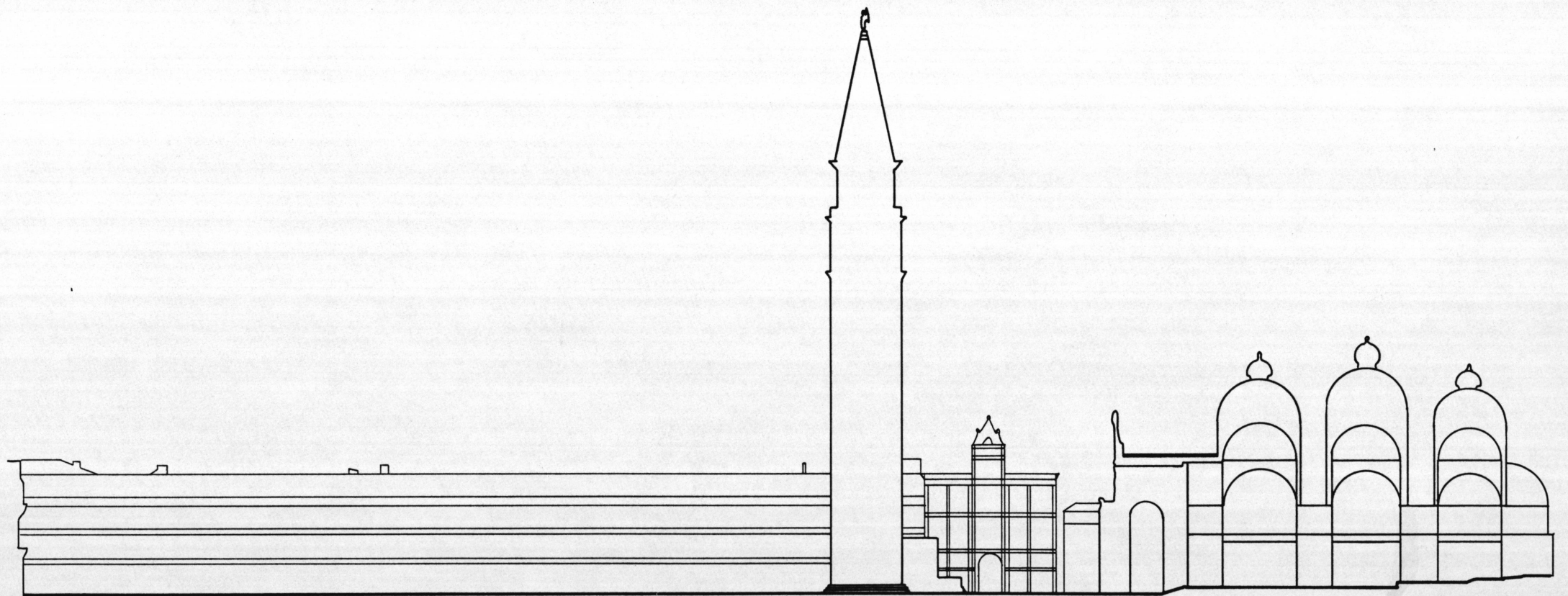
The unbroken expanse of the piazza is set with a pattern that extends away from the church. The flatness is manipulated with this geometric coloring and combines with shadows and people in a symphony of movement.

Nothing is at a right angle in the piazza. Even the streetlamps near the chiesa do not touch the floor pattern with any reason. The campinale is slightly angled at the corner of the arcade. Only the Corinthian columns are set in line with the edge of the arcade on one side, and a footbridge on the other, all parallel to the port. Italian impatience prevents time-consuming measuring, which somehow matches the ever-changing environment he has already created.



P. SAN MARCO  
VENEZIA





PIAZZA SAN MARCO  
SECTION



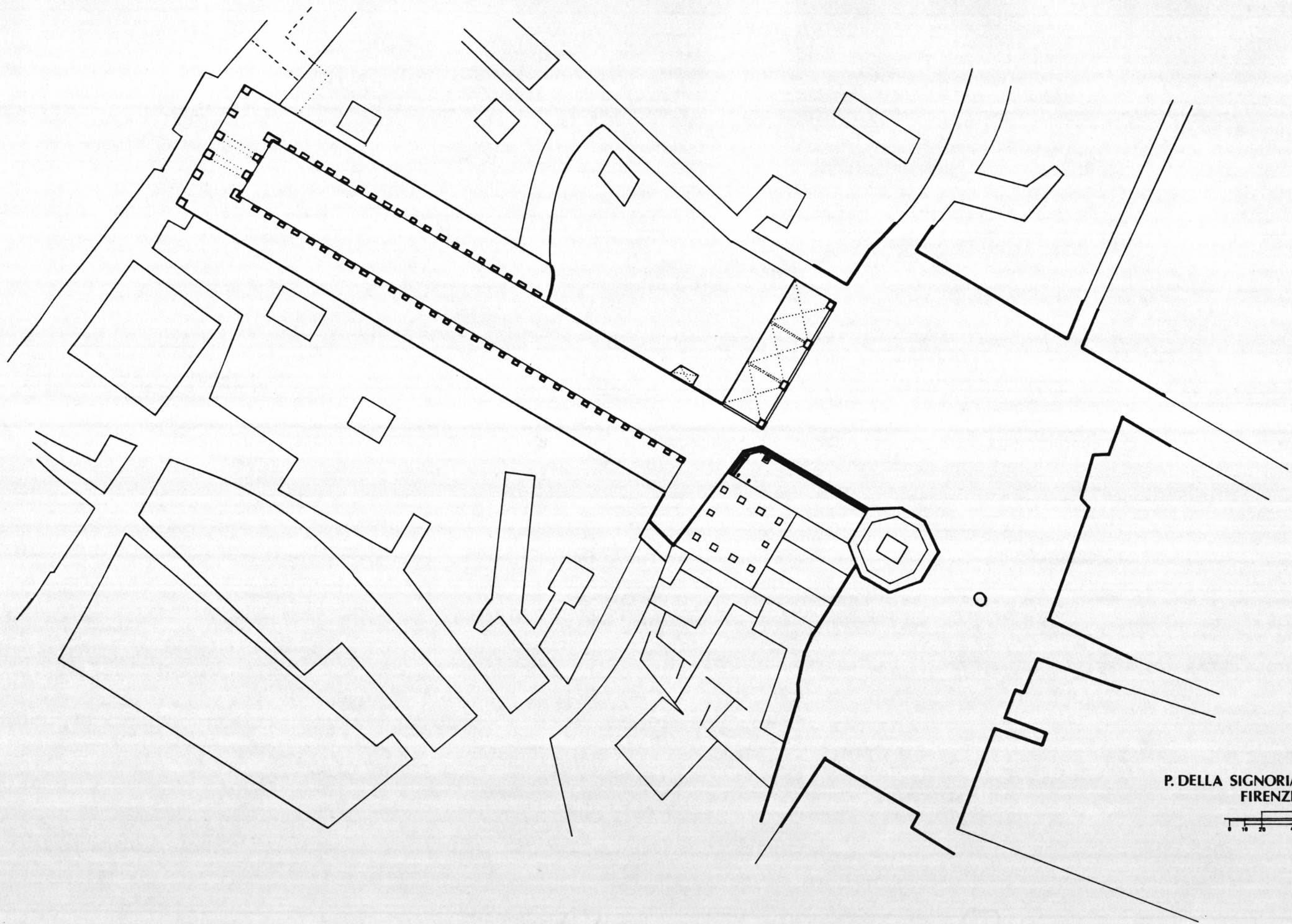
## Piazza Della Signoria, Firenze

Piazza Della Signoria displays the elements of a Renaissance make-over--fountains, statuary and squared geometry. Of course, its Medieval origin clings to its presence--irregular shape, crenelated Castel Vecchio and its tower, and rough stone floors.

Like Piazza San Marco, the Palazzo Uffizi envelopes three sides of the wing of the piazza, but its far end is one large arch, suggesting enclosure without termination. The arch frames the tower, the shoulder that attaches the arm to the main body of the piazza.

The steps of the castle and the loggia near it are the resting place of sculpture and pedestrians. The statues are placed to be offset by their surroundings, and succeed. The large basin of the fountain balances the pillar of the tower. And from every entrance, as well as throughout the city, the tower is visible as a marker. (Figure 20, p. 27)

Featured in this piazza is the cross-city connection from Castel Vecchio through the Uffizi, across the Arno River by way of the Ponte Vecchio, winding through other shop buildings until it reaches the Palazzo Pitti. This structural connection is countered in another direction by the visual anchoring of the Cathedral to the tower of Castel Vecchio, part of the visual radial system to all major piazza markers.



P. DELLA SIGNORIA  
FIRENZE

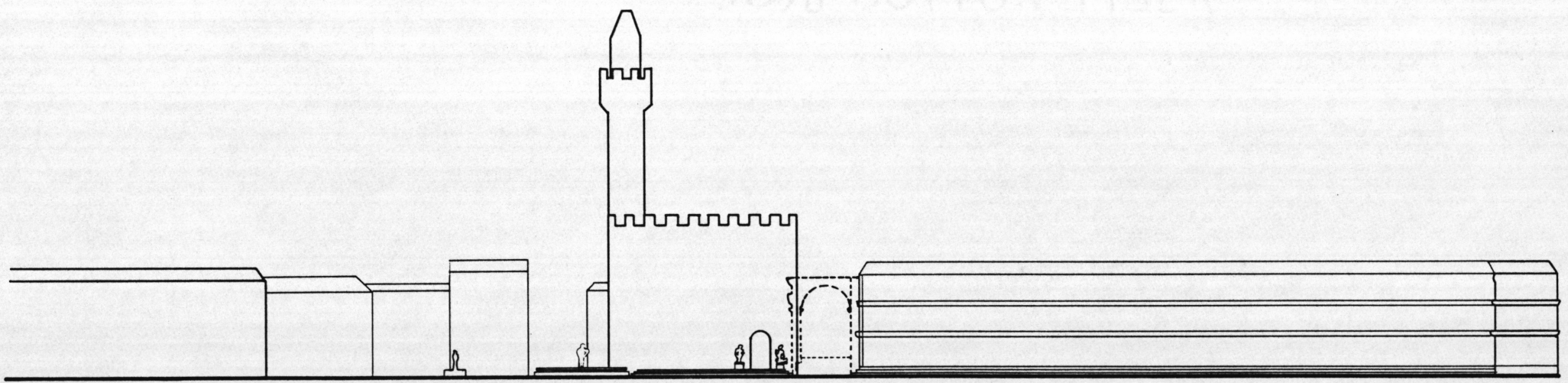


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PIAZZA DELLA SIGNORIA  
SECTION



## Piazza Santissima Annunziata, Firenze

Another piazza visually connected to the Cathedral, SS Annunziata is truly a Renaissance piazza--square in form, modest, axial statuary and similar facades. A chiesa, a hospital and a school border the piazza, all stepped up, all with similar arcades. Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital was built in the early 15th century. Its arcade was echoed by Sangallo's arcaded building opposite the hospital in the early 16th century, establishing the theory of the second man, "...who determines whether the creation of the first man will be carried forward or destroyed." (Francis Bacon, *The Design of Cities*, p.109) The final addition to the front of the chiesa by Caccini another 100 years later was the completion of this theory.

The chiesa has a modest dome, barely visible. No tower graces the piazza, as well as few vendors. But the piazza "moves", its steps cluttered with students and tourists. The fountains soften the repetition of the arcades. The entrances are at the side corners, none of which has a direct axial view to the chiesa or hospital, but more of a view under the arcades. This affords a pleasant light/dark/light drama.

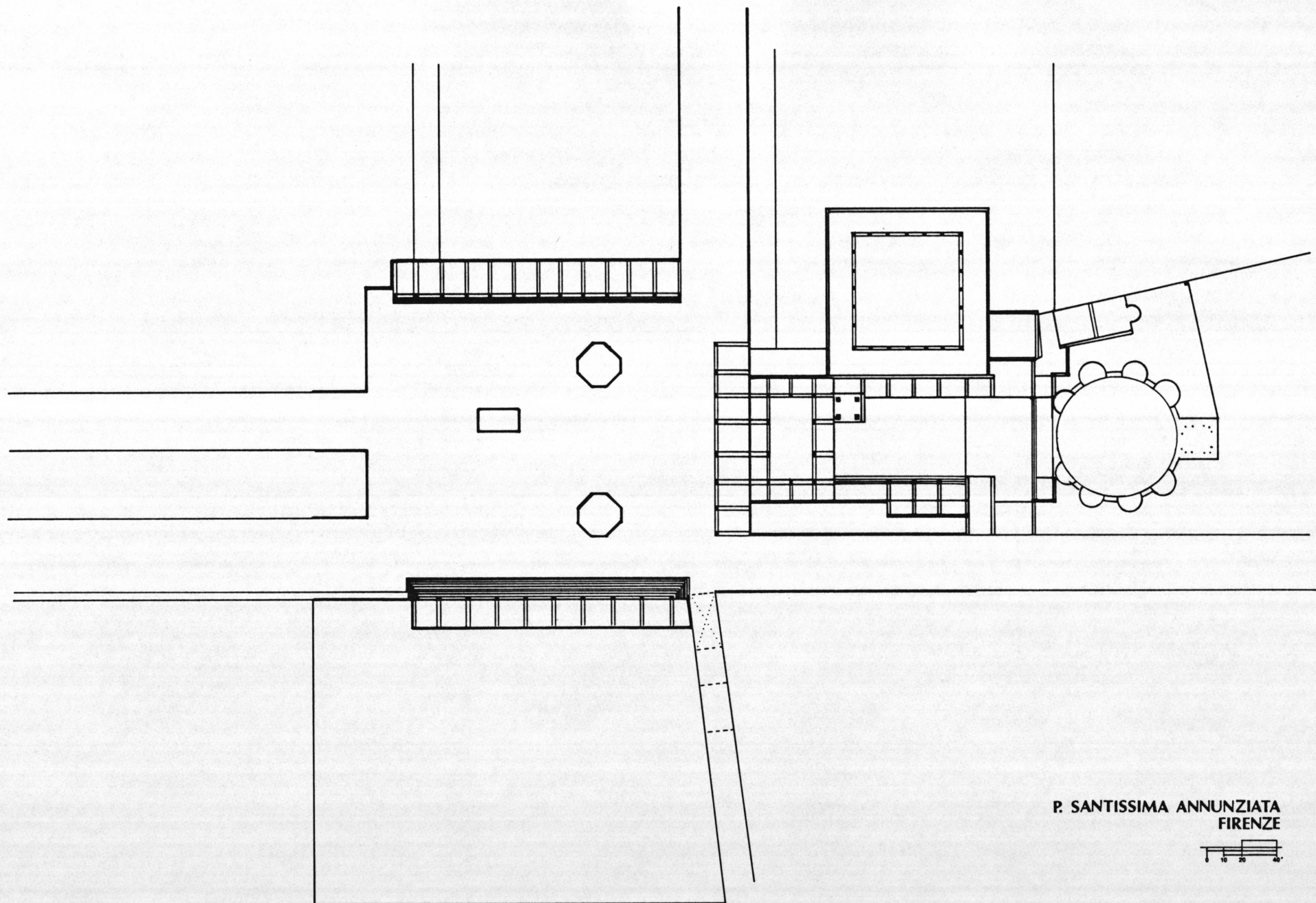
Piazza SS Annunziata is one of the more quiet piazzas, a quiet that powerfully manifests itself in its controlled facades that contain its rambunctious inhabitants.

BOND

CHIEFTAIN BOND

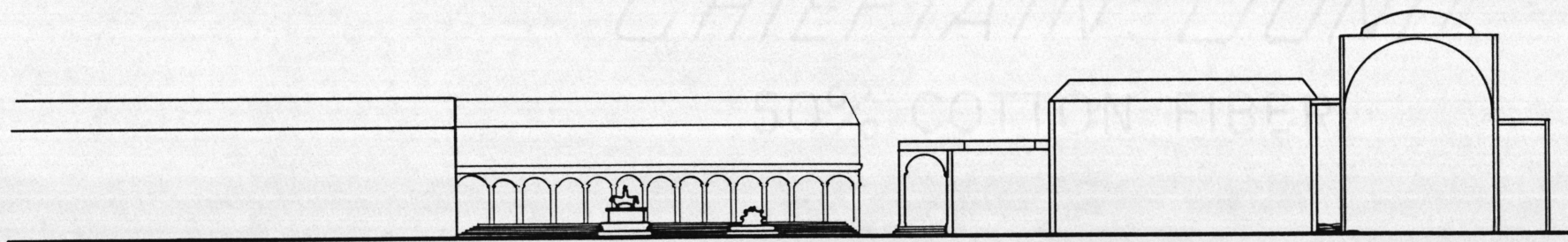
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P. SANTISSIMA ANNUNZIATA  
FIRENZE





PIAZZA SANTISSIMA ANNUNZIATA  
SECTION



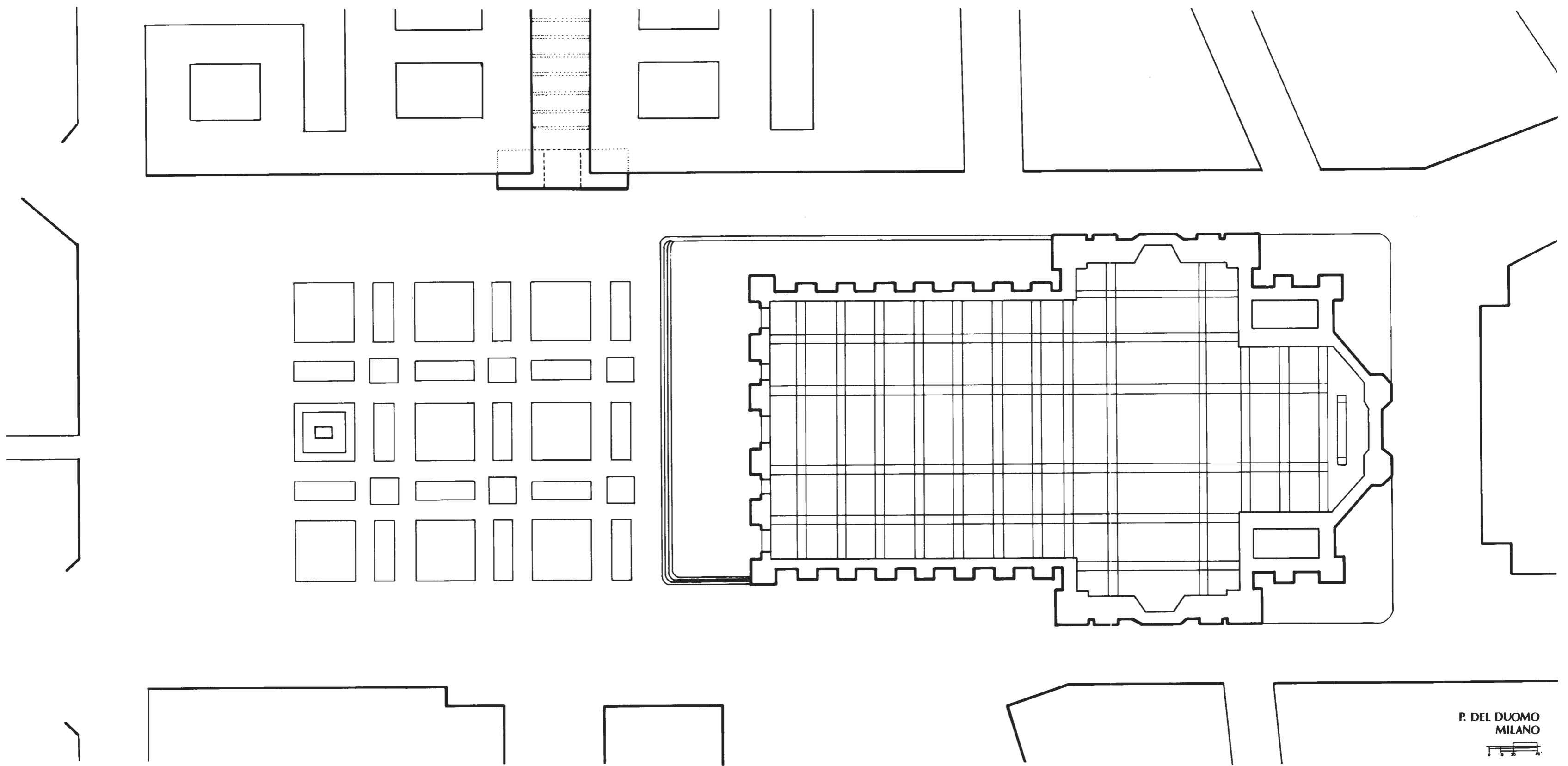
## Piazza Del Duomo, Milano

*"The pattern of lines and geometric shapes and the changes of color, as well as of texture, provide a scale against which the pedestrian measures his movement."--David Specter, **Urban Spaces**, Ch. 4.*

Piazza Del Duomo houses one of the largest Cathedrals in Europe. As a pivot point of Milano, the piazza is crossed by a tremendous amount of traffic. At the center, it begins and ends city races; grandstands face the cathedral doors with political rallies; multitudes of people horde the steps of the Duomo and feed the million pigeons; and cars race along the periphery.

Specialty stores border two arcaded sides of the rectangular piazza, directing the majority of axial traffic across the space. The covered street of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele is an ideal example of anticipation from a dark street approaching a lighted opening, a proscenium arch that frames a space. The threshold, a triumphal arch, propels one onto the piazza. (Figures 1 and 18, p. 27)

The dark arcades offset the Cathedral, its bright stone facade anchored to the ground. Like Piazza San Marco, a geometric pattern decorates the piazza floor, though squared with the piazza (unlike San Marco's). In fact, the whole piazza is rather a rigid symmetry, due to 19th century razing of Medieval buildings to increase the piazza size. Its entrances still elude to the narrow streets of the Middle Ages.



P. DEL DUOMO  
MILANO

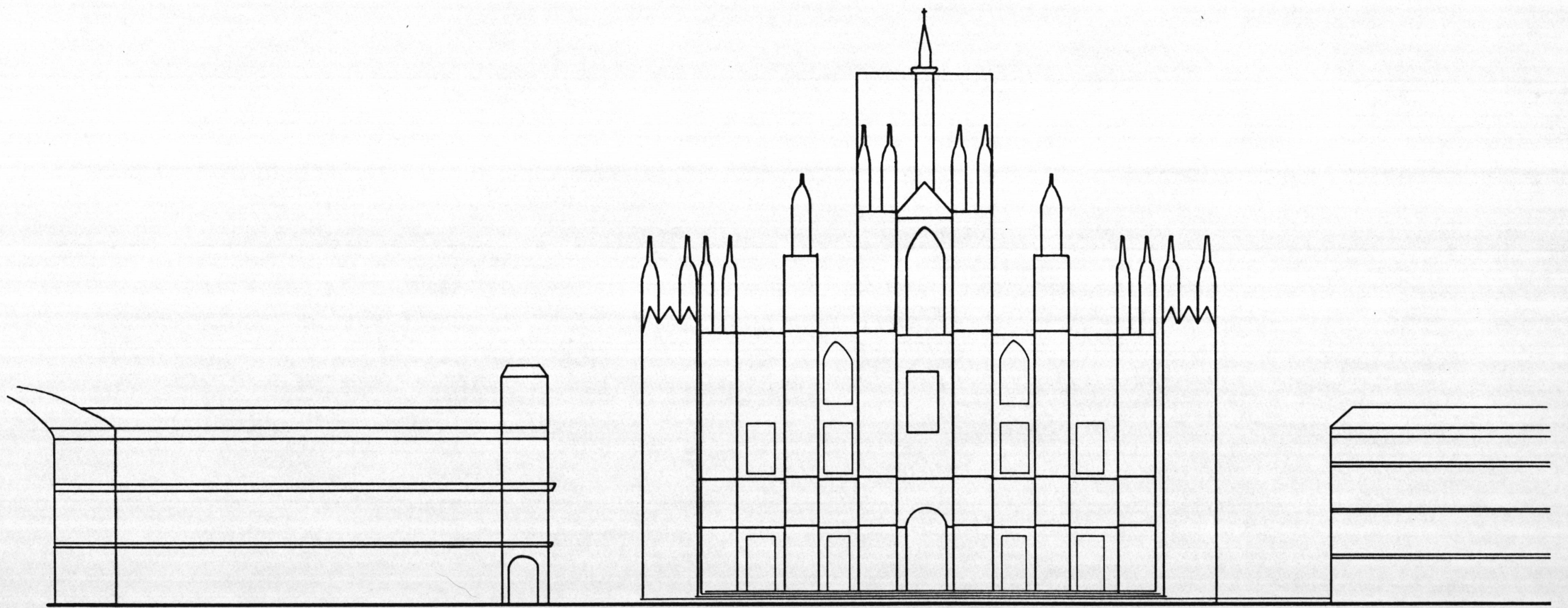


BOND

CHIEFAIN BOND

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PIAZZA DEL DUOMO  
SECTION



## Piazza Di Spagna, Roma

*"The world's most elaborate continuous bench."*--David Specter, **Urban Spaces**, Ch. 9.

What more can be said of Piazza Di Spagna? A Baroque cascade of stone connects two streets and two levels. Axial focusing extends through the piazza. A chiesa at the top of the steps is cut by an obelisk. The steps are symmetrical, and at their base is a fountain. The axis crosses the street and continues down another street. at the top, one has the additional axial view of San Pietro's dome in the distance.

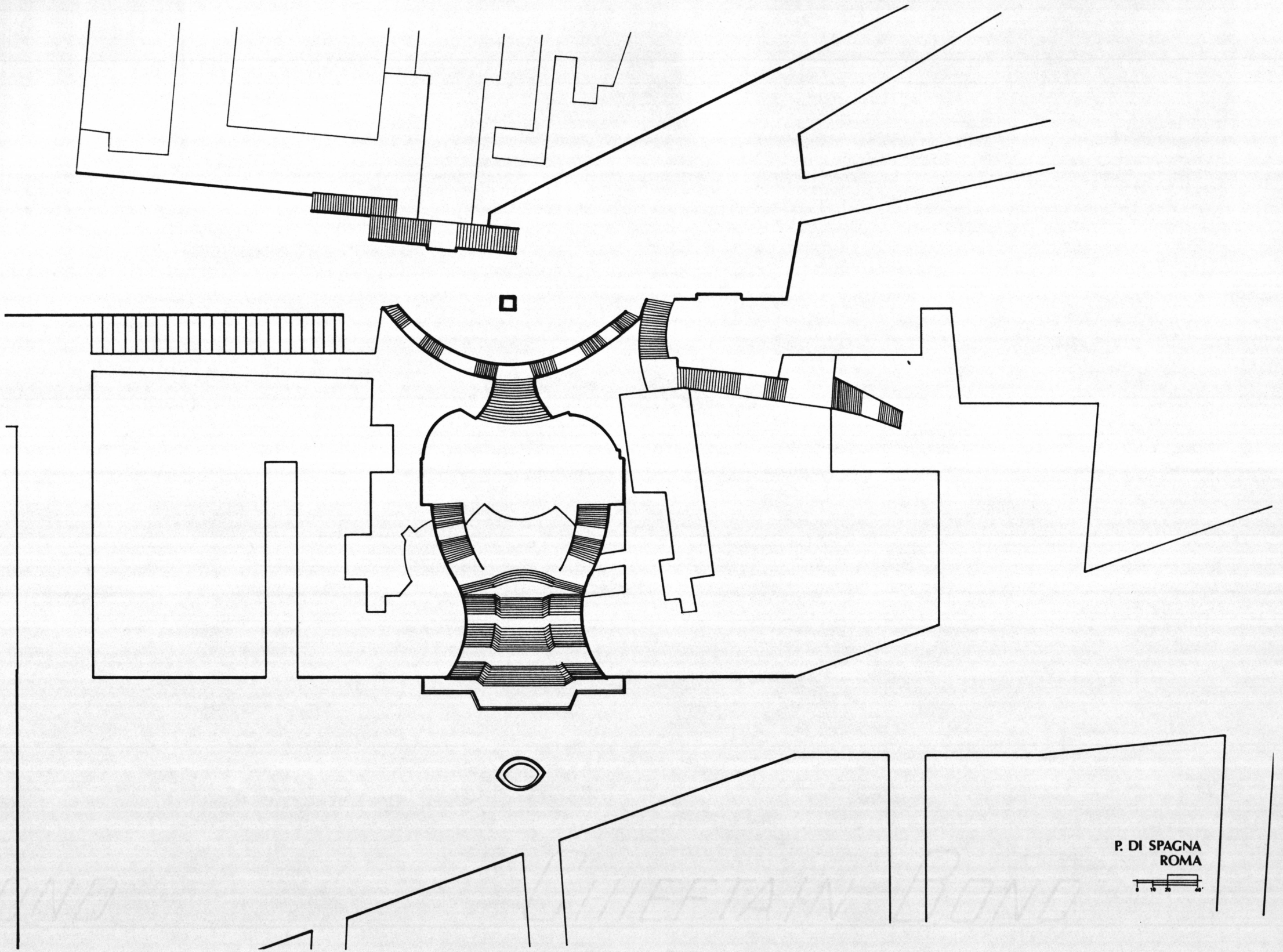
Even with the streets at the top and bottom that run perpendicular to the steps, the surrounding buildings belong to the piazza. Like Vicenza, it is a transition from one level to another.

But the space that has the most occupation is the transitional point, the threshold. The steps are a ubiquitous movement, visually, of themselves, and physically with people. Day and night, they are descended and ascended, with the traditional pausing to watch everyone else. The cafes at the base pre-empt the eventual ascent.

The one axial threshold from a street acts as a proscenium arch--the steps are visible at a distance, but only a small unreadable section. At the threshold, though one knows he faces a set of steps, the steps fully impact only when passing into the piazza.

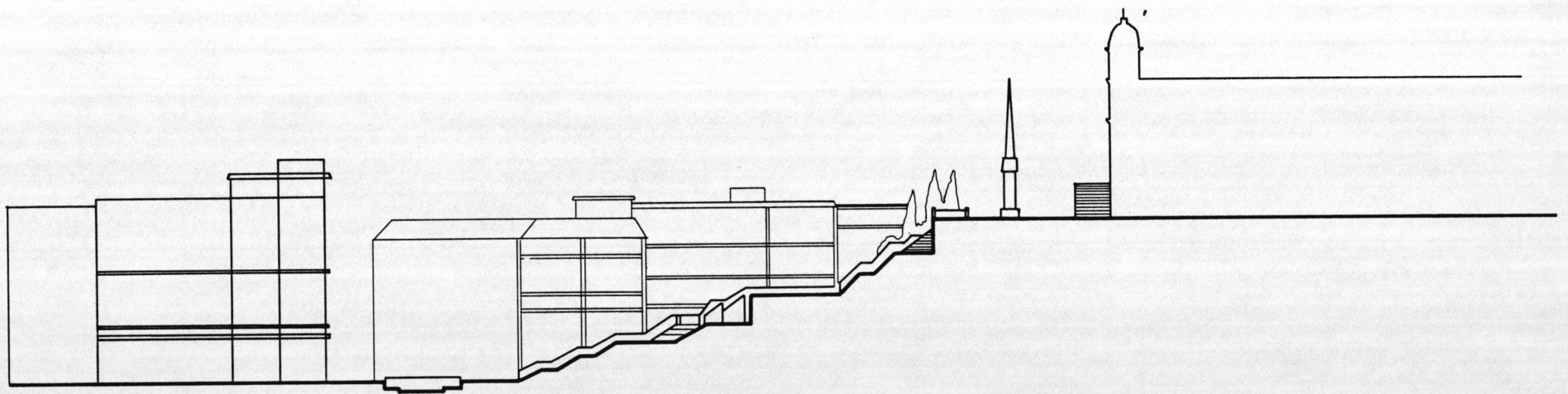
The darkened bases of the buildings offset the bright steps, and space on either side of the steps contains trees, their dark green another "highlighting" device. A flower market once graced the base of the steps, yet another border.

Piazza Di Spagna's conception and construction fall in the shadow of its best Architectural element--the ability to move and pause with each step.



P. DI SPAGNA  
ROMA





PIAZZA DI SPAGNA  
SECTION



## Piazza Navona, Roma

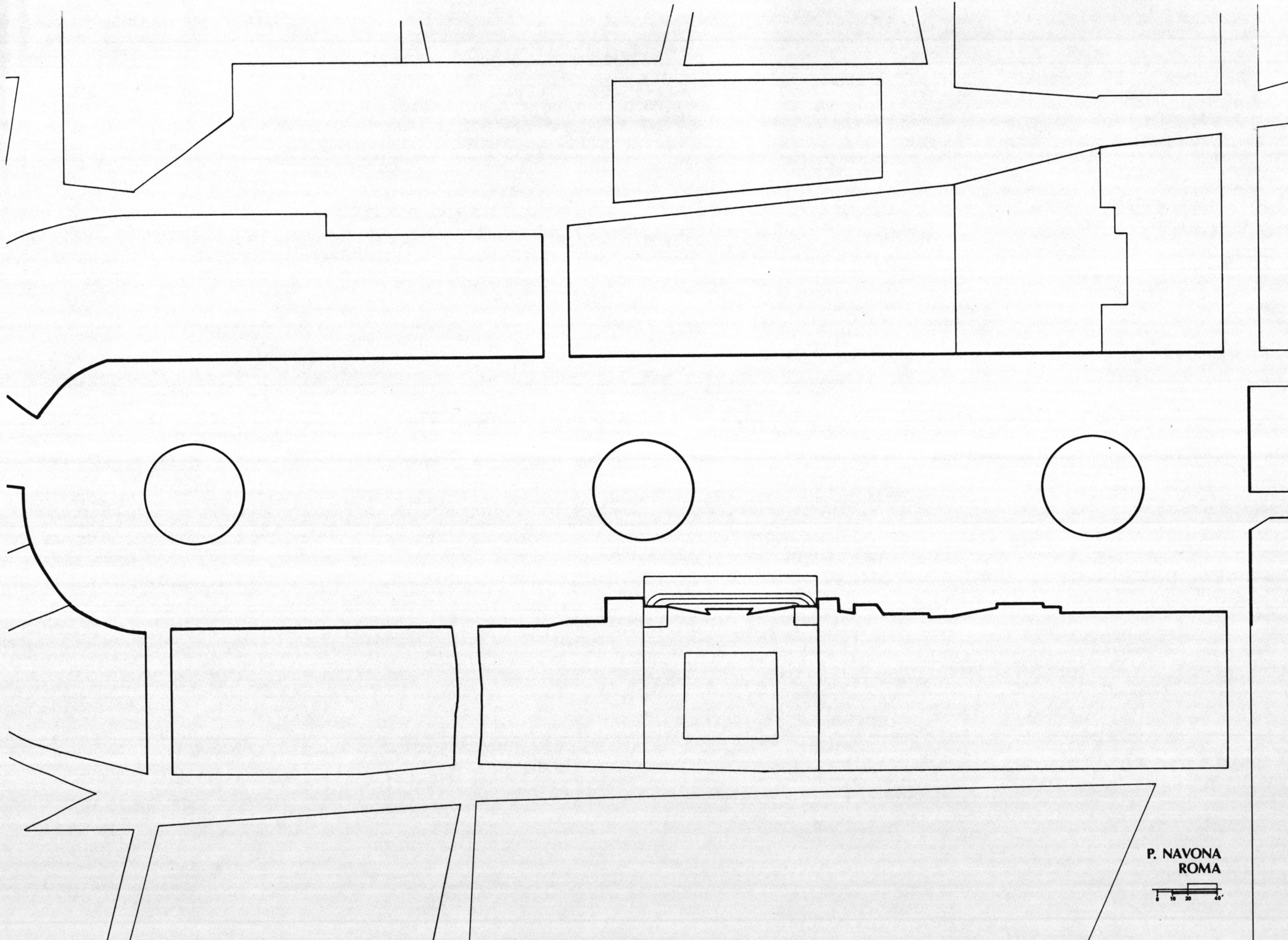
Piazza Navona is no exception to the facelifts of Baroque Roma. But one is stumped when defining its period--as in few other piazzas, no one age dominates its appearance. The obvious form of the elongated area, or circus, is of Classical Roma. Medieval buildings were constructed on the ancient bleacher foundations. A few Renaissance palazzos have facades to the piazza. And Baroque additions add "movement" to the chiesa and axis of fountains.

Piazza Navona ideally displays markets and craft shows in its curbed central part, which excludes car traffic. The fountains, a linear axis parallel to the St. Agnese Church, do not lead to any focus point. They are themselves foci, with seating and the white noise of water.

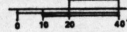
Multiple entrances impact the pedestrian as in Siena--there is no warning in the Medieval streets that a space is nearby. It also just misses the city planned connections of the 16th century. Due to this, its Medieval activities remain intact, as persistent traditions in a museum of symbols.

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P. NAVONA  
ROMA

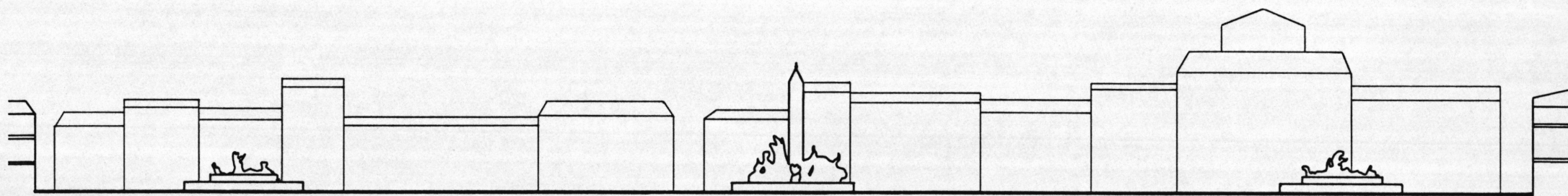


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PIAZZA NAVONA  
SECTION



## Piazza Del Popolo, Roma

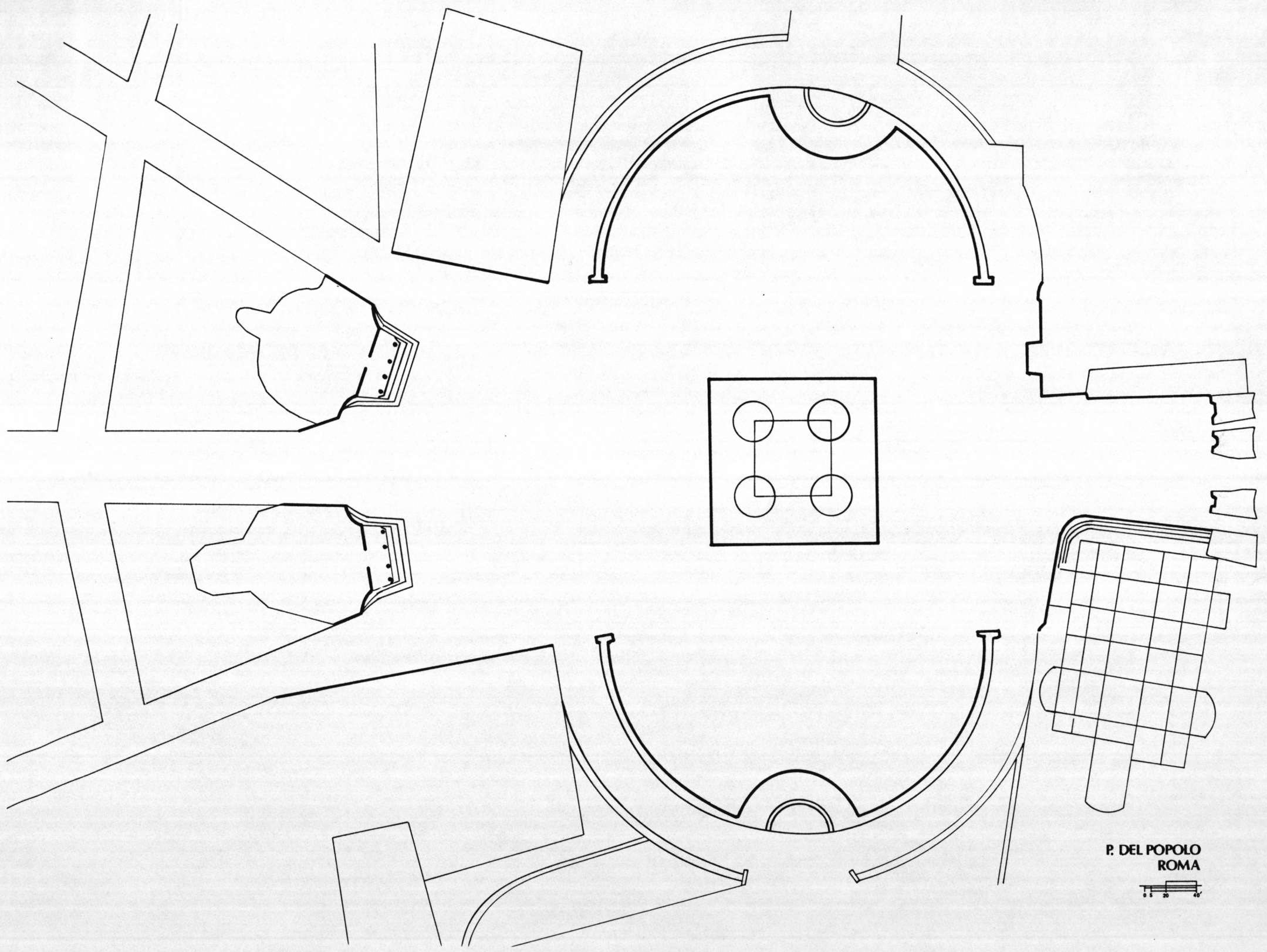
Formerly an important piazza at the gate to the city, Piazza Del Popolo is a congested merger of three major Roman streets. To cross the street on foot is suicidal, yet the Italian has no problem accomplishing the task. The obelisk in the middle is a sort of traffic island, always supporting a few pedestrians.

The twin chieras at the threshold of streets symmetrically balance the piazza. They finish the axis from the gate through the obelisk. A fountain rests in each side of the piazza, also occupied by pedestrians. The piazza is a type of cross with a trident of openings at one end.

It's hard to imagine this piazza as being comfortable and leisurely. The tremendous auto traffic negates any soft qualities. Though cafes exist at one end, few people venture beyond these awnings.

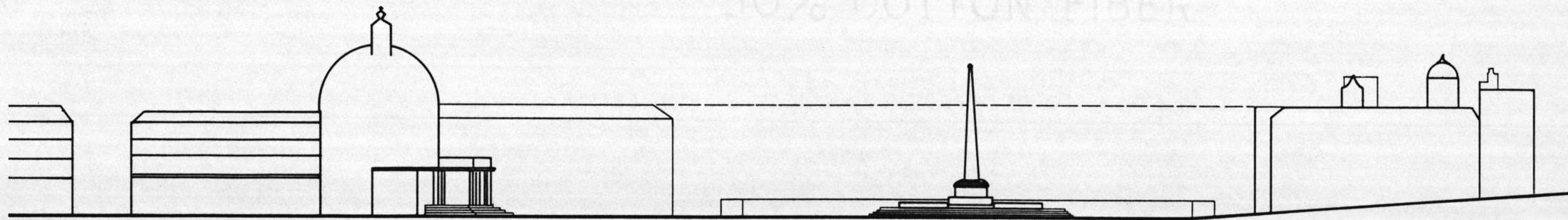
The piazza is bounded on all sides, yet has a sprawling effect-- gardens extend beyond the fountains, so no massing visually encloses the sides. Though many qualities of the Italian Piazza remain, another important feature exempts Piazza Del Popolo from successful piazzas. Its focal points are its entrance and exit. There is no threshold for the car, due to its speed. And the car is the only movement the piazza now welcomes. The rapid movement with which its elements are read make Piazza Del Popolo a *vehicular* piazza, one that is simply in the path of two points. "Italian-ness" is nebulous--there is no need to be seen.

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P. DEL POPOLO  
ROMA





PIAZZA DEL POPOLO

SECTION



## Piazza San Pietro, Roma

The world's largest Christian Cathedral created Piazza San Pietro. The space, once a Roman circus, has held a Cathedral since early Christianity. It has always been a center of religion and government, and for many years these two were from the same source. It was easy for merchants to exist near the Cathedral--everyone passed through its piazza.

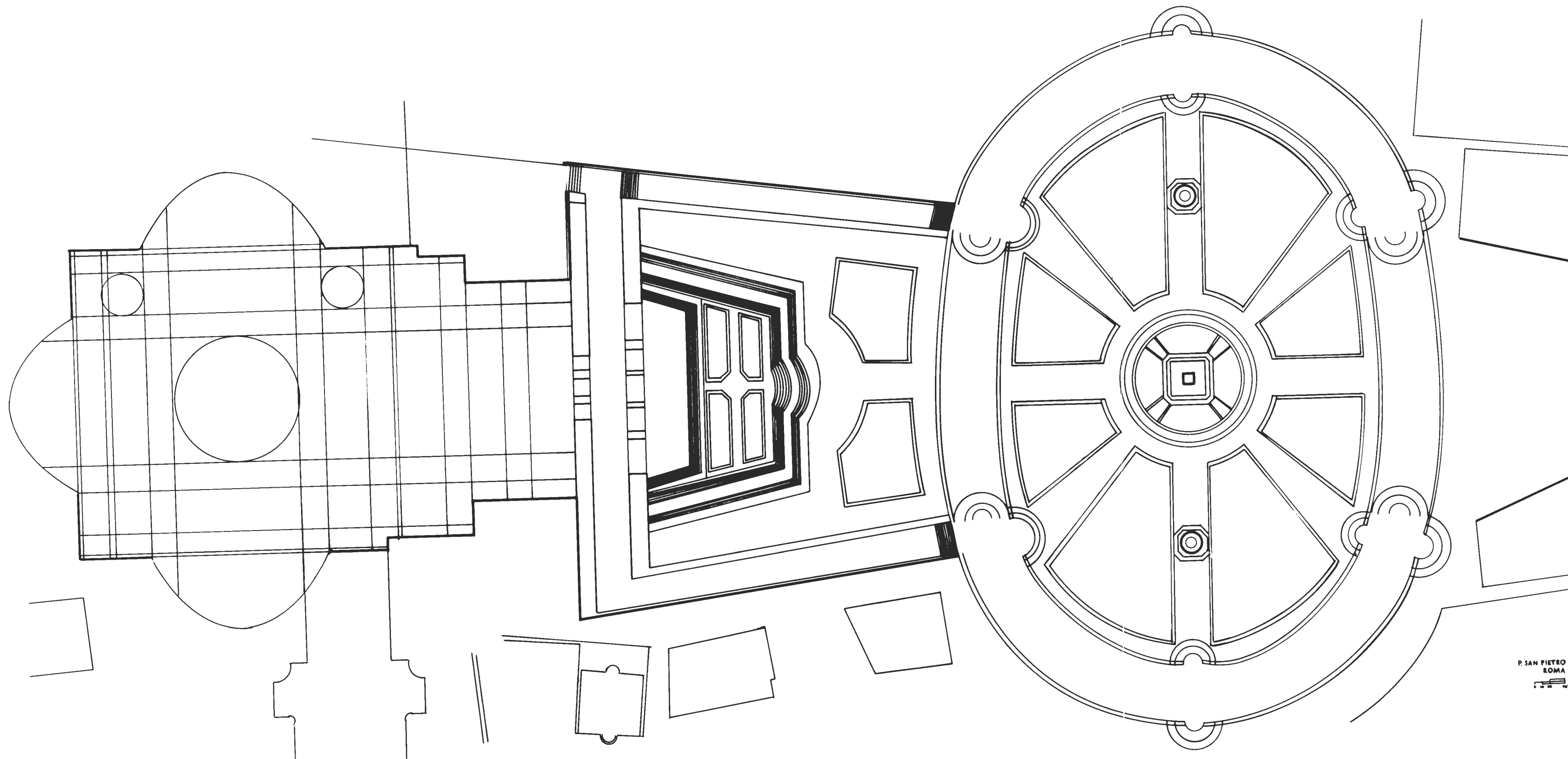
Time passed and created a Cathedral of Baroque design that became the religious center of the world. The demanding job earned the current three part piazza, with its colonade "arms". Activity on the piazza steadily increased.

But the piazza outgrew itself, or its function outgrew the piazza. The vendors all but disappeared. The Medieval closeness of buildings disappeared when the majestic Via della Conciliazione was cut to the Cathedral in the 1930's. Though the piazza is visually enclosed, there are no shops or cafes on the piazza. It has multiple entrances, but they are redundant, through the colonade. The piazza is not boring, but its rigid symmetry has erased the impatient irregularity of true Italian construction.

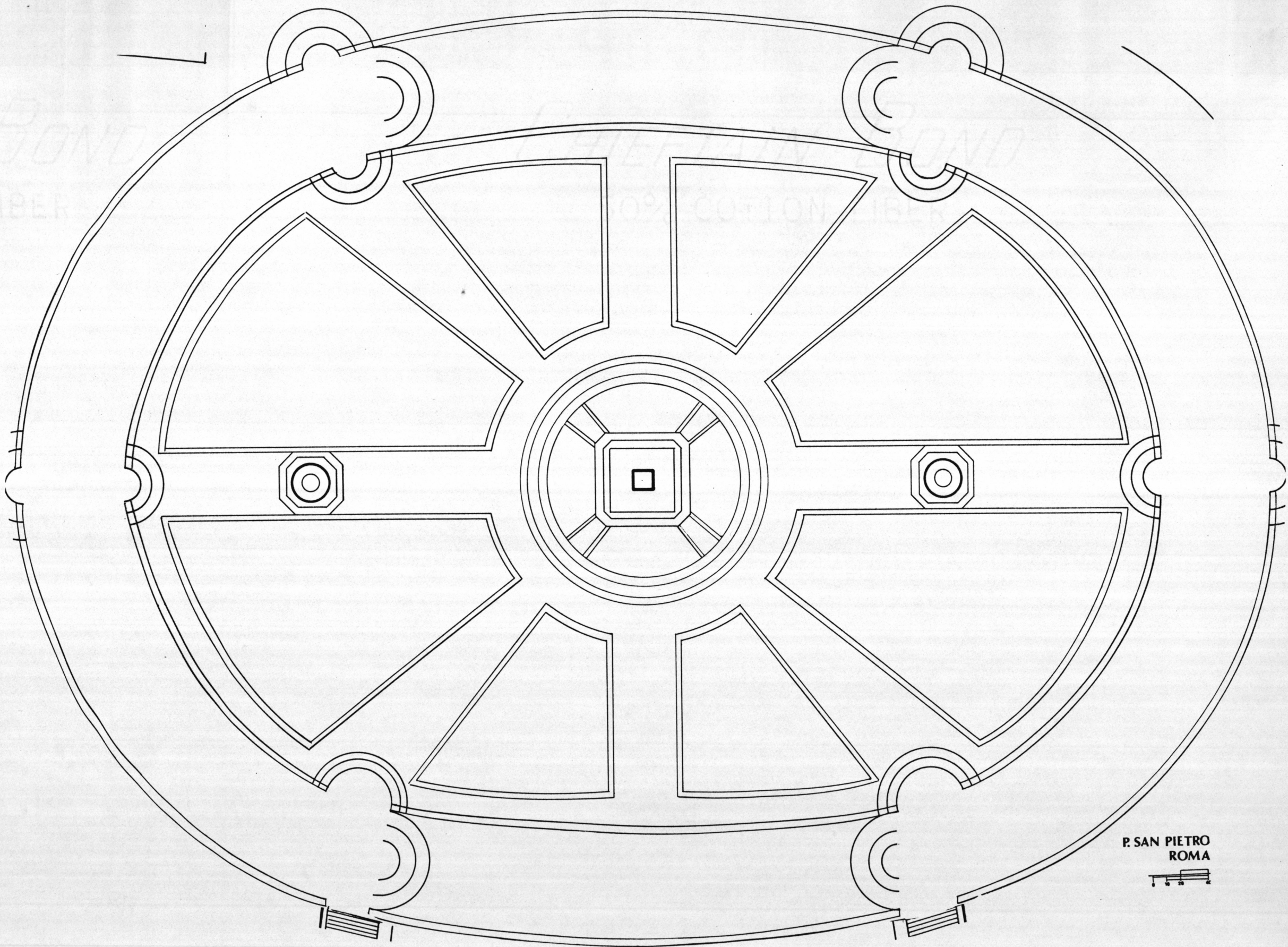
The piazza physically epitomizes a religion. A cascade of steps suggests an elevated realm. The protective colonade arms enfold a vast area, often filled with people. The ceremonial boulevard that runs to the front door of San Pietro, and even continues inside to the altar, delineates one way to a goal, a monotheistic end. (Figure 8, p.27)

Physically, the piazza has become too specialized. It is bigger than itself, its sphere of influence is worldwide, far beyond the simple neighborhood localities of normal Italian Piazzas. It acts as a termination, not as an ongoing, ever-changing force in Italian culture. Its enormous success as a religious center cancels its humble piazza origin.

[Note scale change of proceeding drawing]

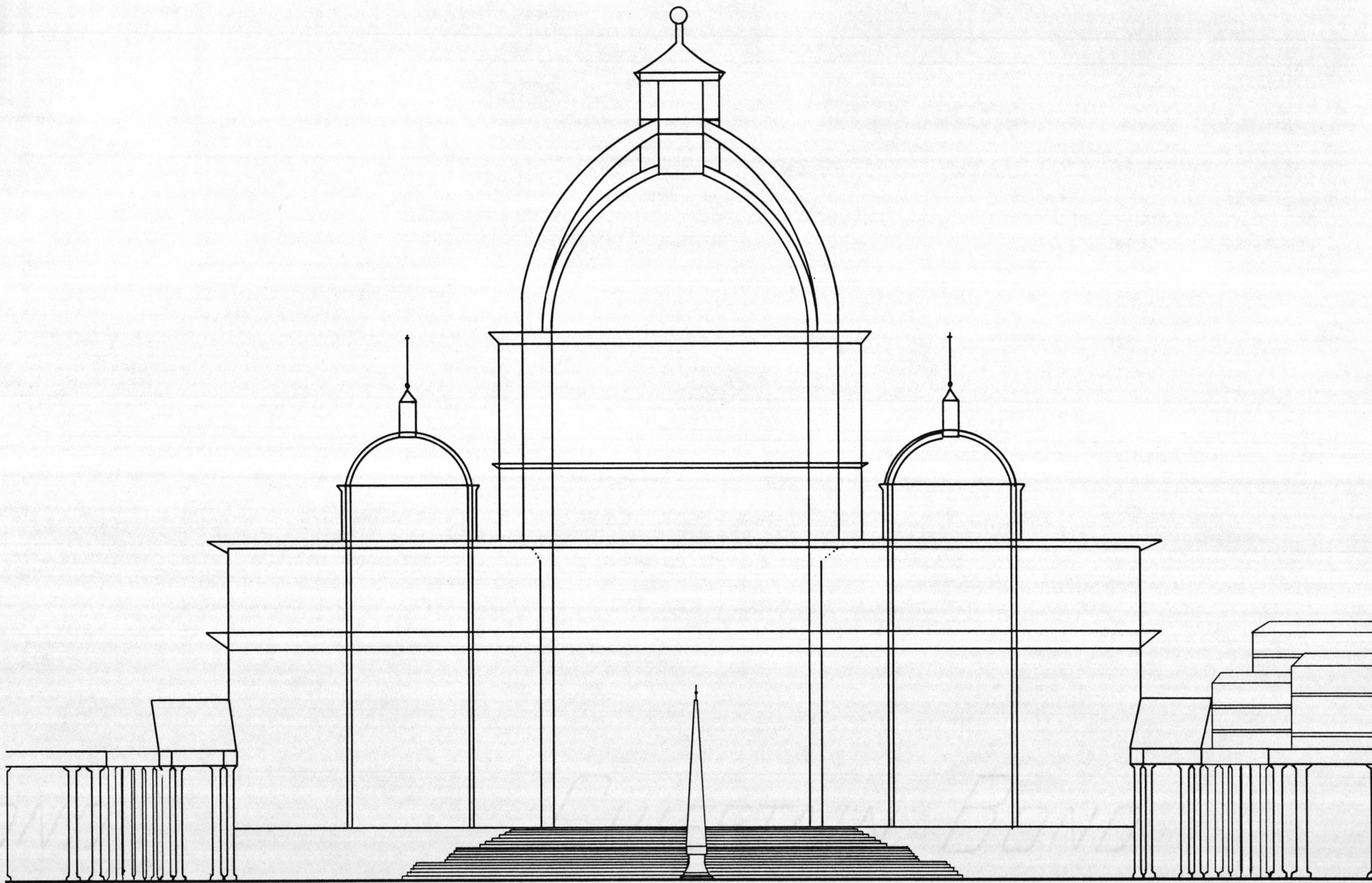


P. SAN PIETRO  
ROMA



P. SAN PIETRO  
ROMA





PIAZZA SAN PIETRO

SECTION



## Conclusions

### *The Recurring Characteristics*

Intention propels any architectural endeavor--the Italian Piazza is no exception.

Simply: Light, Space, and Time accomplish intention.

The Italian Piazza has two realities of intention--physical and perceptual.

As elaborated, a series of perception occurs as one approaches, enters and inhabits a piazza. They are: anticipation, impact, event, sense of symbolism and therefore, sense of time.

This progression is accomplished through physical means--light and its absence, juxtaposition of masses and their shape and size, and distribution of space.

In turn, other physical elements and their placement highlight the perceptual characteristics--masses in relation to space, narrowing of streets to thresholds, arcades and other recesses, support spaces, steps, texture, color, cafes, merchants, and general movement.

Constant change, sensed in structure and felt in space, constitutes the culmination of intention and its components.

### *Elements of Translation*

Having established the common elements, the obvious question is their usefulness in new design. One would have to wait several hundred years for proper development to create an Italian Piazza. Or the manipulation of a few particular aspects can improve an existing space.

The natural growth of some piazzas from hilltown geography is intransitive. Nor is the crunching of space due to walled cities a way to translate. Excluded is perception of time due to layered meanings, and multiple outdoor use has been replaced by interior space in the modern world. Therefore, the few elements left rely on physical manifestations.

Anticipation and impact will not be achieved through narrow streets and burrowing masses. Yet, the addition of structures or filling up gaps around a plaza may make the boundaries and thresholds needed to feel *enclosure*. Too many piazzas leave too many gaps and never achieve *space as place*. There is no *in and out* to them.

Focal points and hierarchy can be established by simply making one building higher or more elaborate than the others. Or perspective and axis can be created--not elaborate, but obvious.

As mentioned in the Introduction, plazas tend to be one color or one lighting. Recessive bases and textured facades manipulate the light, giving subtle movement to a stagnant place.

Seating is absolutely essential, but not "street furniture". Level changes and steps work well for multiple purposes, as in Piazza Di Spagna. One or two steps make a podium for a building, give it hierarchy, provide seating, and create a transitional space. Even the slight extension of building bases are "seats".

Of course, these things make the plaza more interesting to view. But without activities to lure people, use is still not ensured. Change and movement must occur for a successful plaza. Multiple businesses must function on the plaza. Though sidewalk cafes are European, varied functions could make a demand for such a place.

The key is remembering it is not a *piazza*, but a plaza. Nothing can make it Italian, but borrowed characteristics can make it successful.

*"It seems that new kinds of urban spaces will appear, suited to the climate and the temperament of our people, and made economically feasible by the ingenuity of our city planners. The successful urban space will be a dynamic and complex blend of the rational and irrational, the planned and the unintentional. Its universal constant will be its essential humanity, its accommodation of people's need to be at once individual and part of their city."*--David Specter, **Urban Spaces**, Ch. 2.

### **Hypothesis Results**

*"It may change its function from hour to hour; the successful urban space doesn't stand still to be photographed."*--David Specter, **Urban Spaces**, Ch. 3.

The qualities of each piazza reflect Italian intentions of use, hierarchy of buildings, and cultural display. Each uniquely achieves these intentions with varied combinations of constant elements. Each piazza has a common strength of development in the Middle Ages. Yet their current users carry out much the same functions as their predecessors. The Italian therefore, is a dichotomy of character--he is impatient and in constant motion, yet this is an unchanged attitude for many hundred years. The piazza is the physical reality of this attitude--it collects everything the Italian gives it--styles and customs added to its overload of symbols--and yet never alters in perception; the passing of Time is sensed in stillness.

To reiterate, one must realize the extent to which Italian Piazzas are a result of culture, changes through time, and accumulation of symbolism. There is a tremendous continuity of intention in any piazza. The greatest Architectural contribution of the Italian Piazza is its successful reality of that intention.

## Book Listing

### Significant References:

*Design of Cities*--Edmond Bacon

*"The Design of Open Spaces"*, *Casabella*--Victorio Gregotti

*The Hilltowns of Italy*--Carol Field

*History of Urban Form*--A.E.J. Morris

*The Italian Townscape*--Ivan DeWolfe

*"Plazas of Southern Europe"*, *Process: Architecture*

### Others:

*The Arcade*--G. Ungaretti

*Architecture as Space*--Bruno Zevi

*Between Silence and Light*--John Lobell

*Cities and the Forces that Shape Them*--Cooper Hewitt Museum

*Comparative Urban Design*--Melville C. Branch

*Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*--Robert Venturi

*The History of the City*--Leonardo Benevolo

*The Ideas of Le Corbusier*--Jacques Guiton

*"Is the Piazza Un-American?"*, *Ekistics*--M.C. Cunningham and D.F. Savoie

*La Basilica di San Pietro*--Alberto Carlo Carpiceci

*La Piazze*--Franco Borsi and Geno Pampaloni

*Medieval Town*--Fritz Rorig

*Piazza Navona*--Isola Dei Pamphilj

*Piazza San Marco*--Guiseppe Samona

*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*--William H. White

*Town and Square*--Paul Zucker

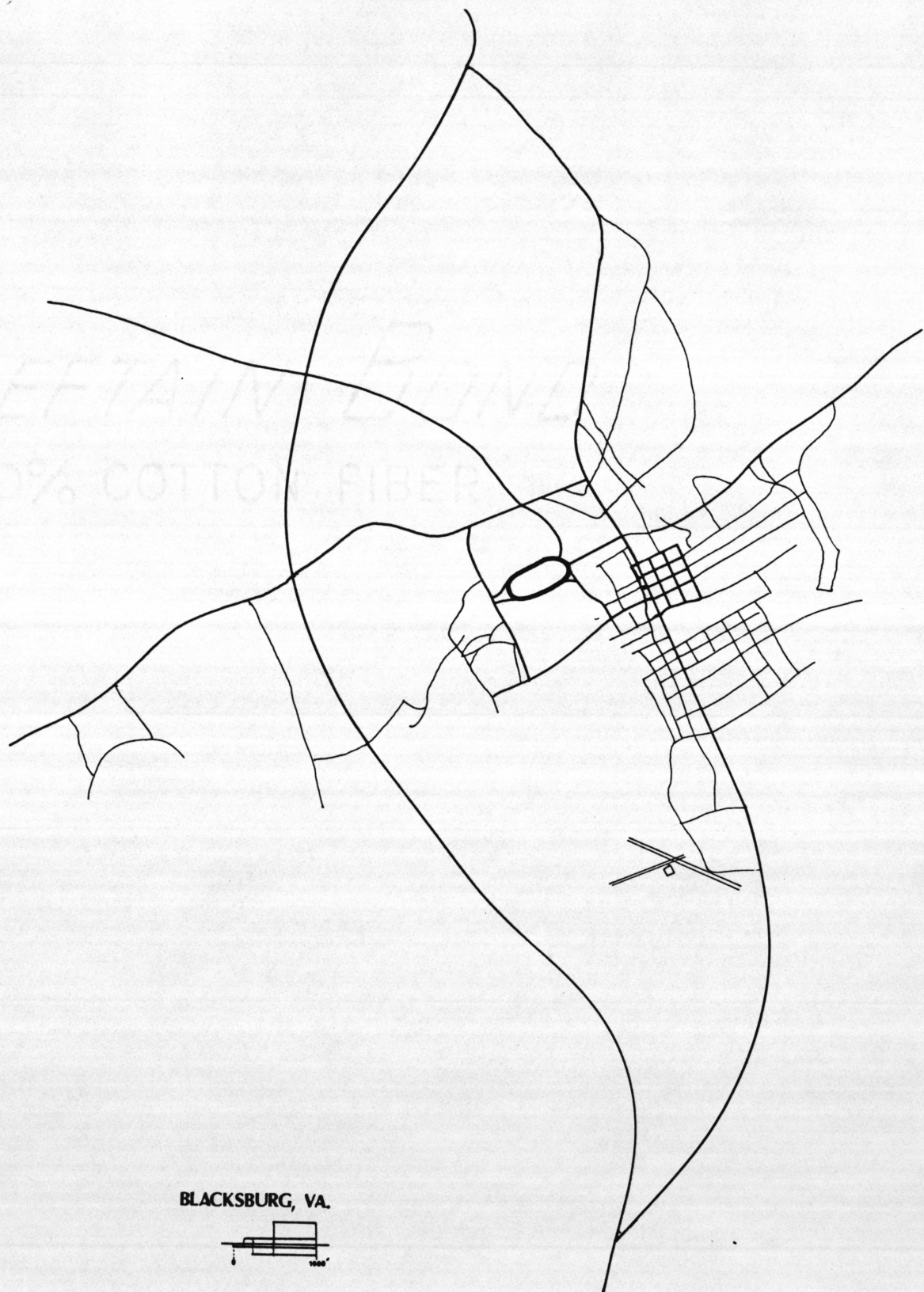
*Urban Spaces*--David Kenneth Specter

## Appendices

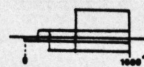
### **Scale Reference**

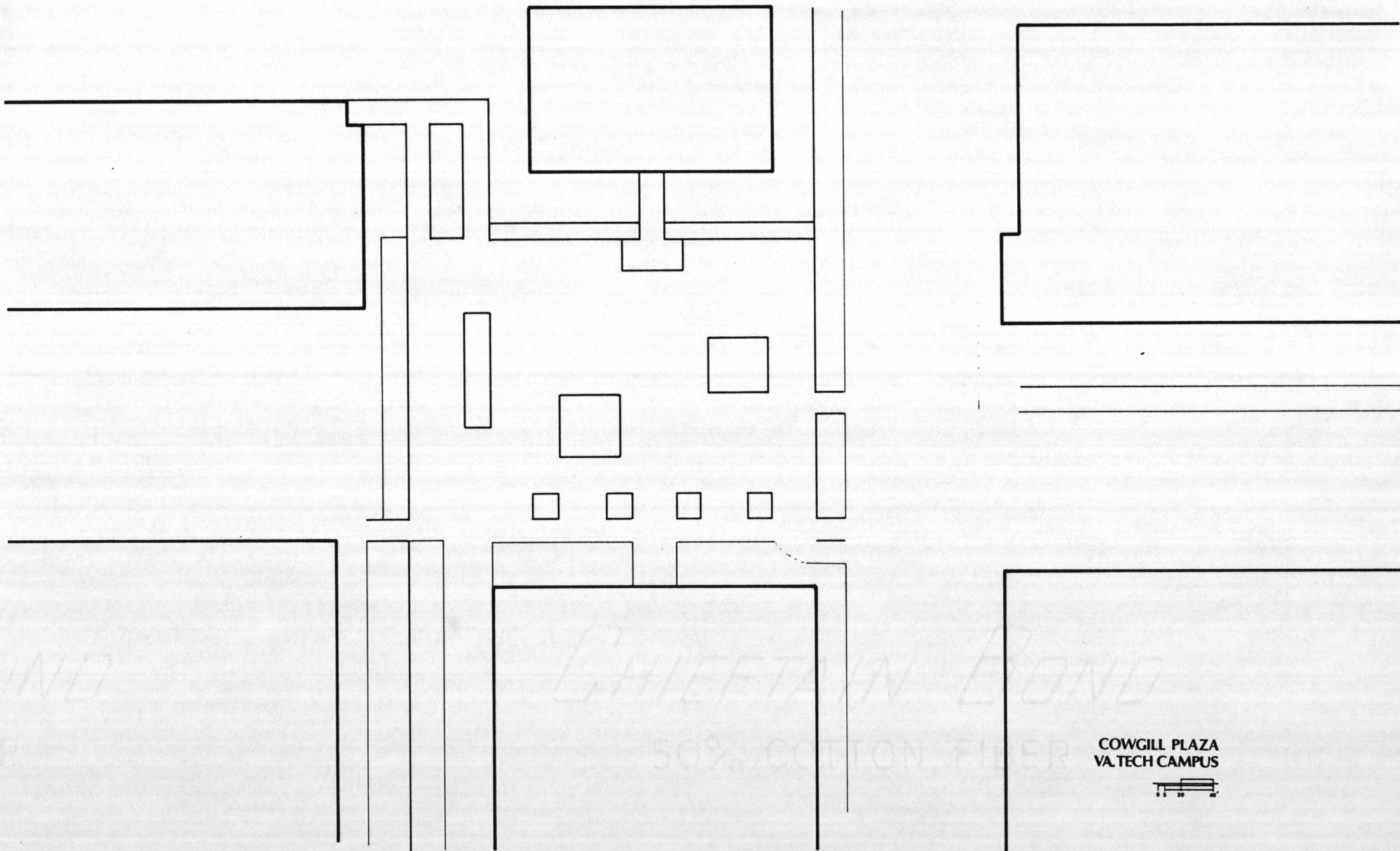
Blacksburg, VA--same scale as Medieval City Maps, p. 6.

Cowgill Plaza, VA Tech Campus--same scale as other drawings

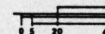


BLACKSBURG, VA.





COWGILL PLAZA  
VA. TECH CAMPUS



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