

# LATIN LESSONS

Clare Melhuish went to see if architecture among the descendants of the ancients is as moribund as outsiders assume.

SOME ten thousand architects are registered in Rome alone as members of the Ordine degli Architetti, equivalent organisation to the RIBA.

The Architectural Faculty of the University of Rome is presently training up some 3-4,000 students to join the ranks. But of these vast numbers very few actually build buildings, or are likely to in the near future.

This has become a platitude among British observers by now, who in typical pragmatic fashion overlook the existence of a flourishing "architectural culture" in Rome that is lacking here. It is interesting to draw a comparison between Francesco Moschini's AAM gallery (Coop Architettura Arte Moderna) near the piazza del Popolo, and London's 9H.

The principle of the former, which will be showing projects for the reconstruction of Cerreto Sanita, a town devastated by earthquake last year, from January, is not to exhibit any architecture actually under construction or completed. The latter, by contrast, will only show built work as a rule. A new gallery in Rome, Forma e Memoria, in via della Scrofa, which will be mounting the 9H's Herzog and de Meuron exhibition, is dismissed by Moschini as "just a furniture shop", rather than a serious platform for architectural ideas.

So just what was "The New School of Rome", an exhibition held two years ago at the Frankfurt Architecture Museum, all about? Although it included several well-established members of the Roman "old guard", such as Aymonino, Anselmi, Quaroni, and Purini, all the projects dated from the eighties, and a substantial proportion were destined for construction, or were even under way or completed. Moreover, the ranks of the visionaries were swelled by various representatives of a younger generation: such as Constantino Dardi, Vittorio de Feo, Massimiliano Fuksas, Dario Passi, or Franz Prati.

All these architects are Rome-based, though clearly most of those commissions with which they are involved are not for sites in Rome itself, but dispersed across Italy with a fair concentration in and around the capital. If there is a "new school" as such, it has to do with a communion of thought and influence rather than a physical corpus of built works.

Georgio Muratore, who played an important role in putting this exhibition together, and teaches at the university and is a co-author of the most recent guild to modern architecture in Italy *Italia: Gli Ultimi trent'anni* comments with resignation that "the reality is not very inspiring". But the reality which is the historical city of Rome is of course an unending source of inspiration, not only to outsiders, such as the architectural scholars who come to study at the British School of Rome, but, especially, to the architects who work there now.

As Elspeth Latimer, one of this year's Rome scholars, points out, the urban structure of Rome, the city planning and all the interventions within it, is unique. Regardless of any new architecture, or the lack of it, Rome teaches present-day architects aspects of their art which you simply can't understand in a city like London. It will form

the subject of her studies this year.

It is a sensitivity to urban form and a profound awareness of history and tradition which forms the common ground between Roman architects; this becomes clear in conversation, even when the architects concerned heap scorn upon the work of their fellows, or even deny knowledge of their existence.

Certainly, the Romans do not present a united front: there are deep divides. But essentially there is a shared understanding, which shaped by Rome's specific character, that extraordinary mix of ancient monumentality, Baroque splendour, and present-day chaos has inspired an architectural culture, founded on urban concepts, which has become known as the "new school of Rome".

Apart from the exhibitions, the wealth of publications, the endless talk, what outlet is there for these ideas? Last autumn the city was foundering in election quicksand, combined with preparations for the World Cup which have been nothing if not disruptive.

Election publicity slapped across the distinguished walls advertised a single cross-party message: Rome is stagnating! What are you going to do about it? Its citizens complain endlessly of its inefficiency, the lack of cultural facilities or even stimulus, the boredom of life in Italy's capital city. They laugh at themselves and their plight you have to rely when, as a final irony, the election results themselves are thrown into doubt because of a failure to operate the computerised vote-counting mechanism correctly.

Paulo Portoghesi's election manifesto put forward most of the points with his own proposed strategies. Standing as candidate for the Socialist party he suggested "Ten Ideas to Change Rome". These address the problems of an overloaded traffic system, failed zoning in the new districts, urban decay both in the historic centre and in the suburbs, maintenance of historic monuments, planning for the young, and provision of facilities for scientific and technological development.

Portoghesi has himself been involved for many years in projects for a new science museum in Via Giulia, and the conversion and re-use of the old matatoio, or slaughterhouse, at Testaccio, into a cultural complex, both projects very far from realisation, the first little more than a fantasy, although another project for a new mosque is indeed well under construction, despite Rome's negligible Muslim population.

Another candidate standing, this time, for re-election, was Renato Nicolini, for the Communist party, a qualified architect who has more experience than most in the matter of the city's needs.

As initiator of the famous "estate romane" during his leadership of the commune, a series of summer seasons when Rome came alive with entertainments and happenings of different sorts, he introduced the interesting institution of "ephemeral architecture" to the city, transforming its spaces with temporary interventions. And with architect Carlo Aymonino, Assessor from 1981-5, he was responsible for drawing up a major programme for the revitalisation of the historic centre, particularly the Forum, which political changes and prejudices

have reduced to little more than an interesting document.

Aymonino has left Rome for a university post in Venice, apparently in despair at the situation in the capital, the deadlock between politicians and professionals, the endless debates and dissensions over any course of action, while powerful construction firms have forged ahead with the worst kind of speculative developments in the absence of any controls. Aymonino's most concrete achievement, which he indicates with some pride, would seem to be publication of a manual to the restoration of historic buildings, the *Manuale del Recupero*, which was produced at his initiative in a joint venture between the commune (department for the historic centre) and the university's department of industrial design and construction.

The future of the historic centre remains a key issue in Rome, with EUR, the SDO (Sistema Direzione Orientale, or eastern expansion zone), and redevelopment of the old industrial area along the Tiber to the west high on the agenda too. The conservation and green lobbies have developed significant profiles in the debates over short period, and critics such as Muratore maintain this has not helped get things done.

So the role of architects is seriously circumscribed by a complex tangle of other circumstances. Muratore maintains that the difference in the North in the architect's lot is attributable to the existence of a private market for his work in addition to the public sphere which dominates in Rome. The construction industry itself, which might supply the gap, "distances

architects" rather than taking on board a role in patronage.

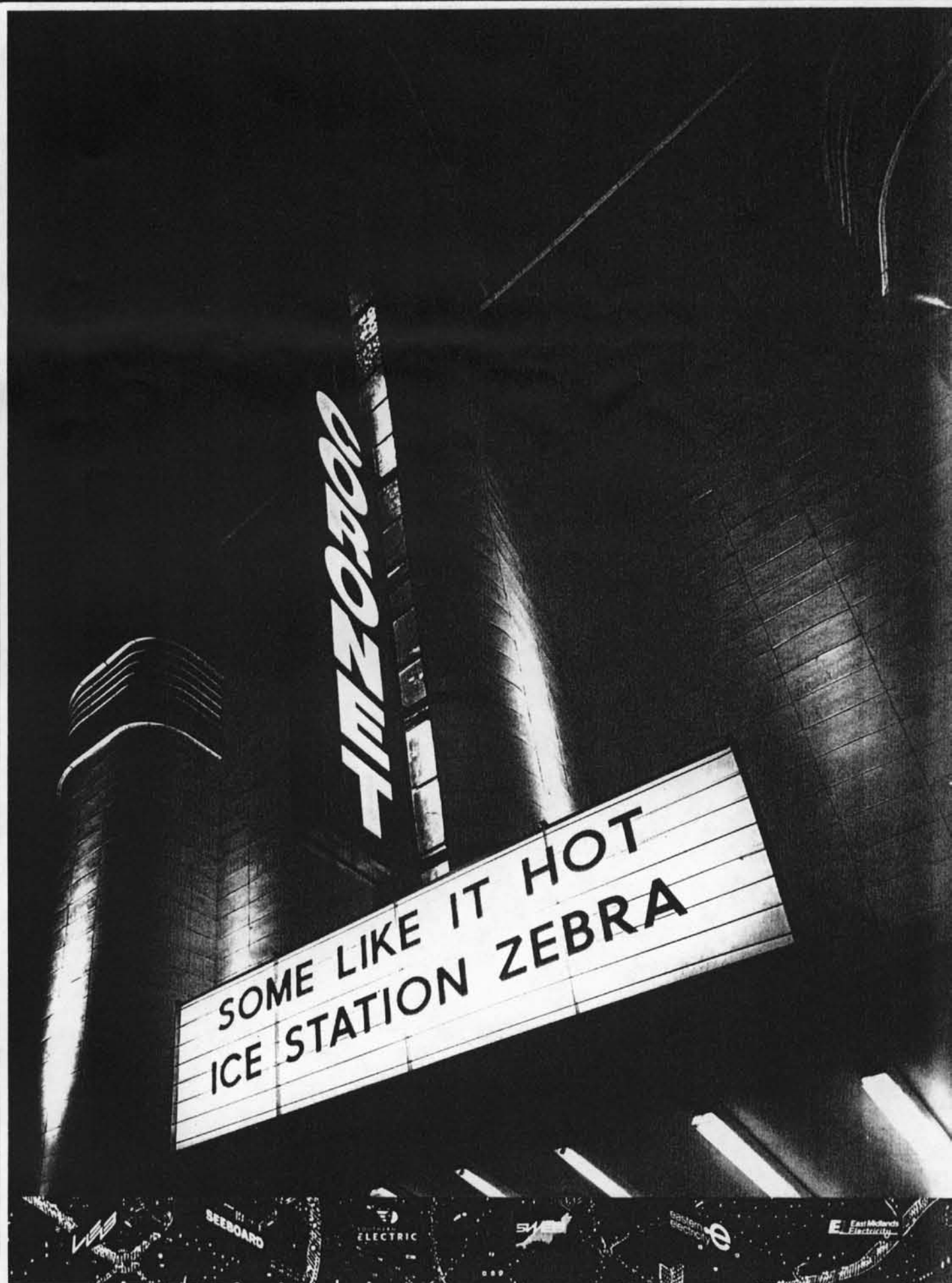
Nevertheless there are architects in Rome with work, and they take it very seriously. What is refreshing, talking to them, is their commitment, but open-minded attitude, to architectural tradition and historic conditions, and passionate enthusiasm for beauty and noble ideas. With all due respect, they say, your Grimshaws and Fosters have achieved magnificent things in architecture, but technology will not stand alone: you've got to have something inside as well. Typology is their overwhelming interest: exploration of building types and their functions and potential lines of development for the future. What makes a house a house? A church a church?

This puts the question of what we use our buildings for at the

forefront of the debate, but without any sacrifice of architectural quality. It's all part of the exploration of the idea of a building: the idea, rather than a set of problems requiring cut-and-dried solutions dressed up in a certain style.

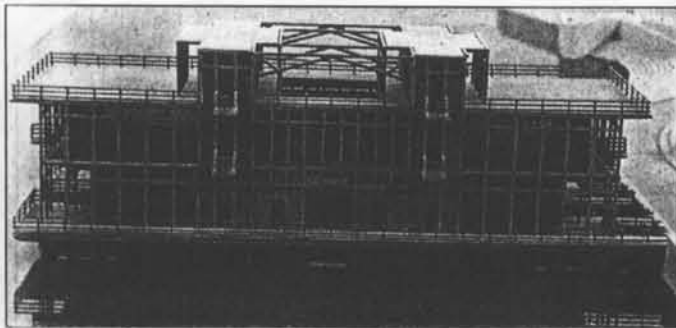
There is, of course, a stylistic debate in Rome, and the buildings and projects presented here will show clearly the main forces to be the Italian rationalist tradition and the more recent post-modernist developments in which Portoghesi has played such an important part.

But rarely does one hear "style" discussed as an issue in itself, or proposed as a remedy for urban problems. You never see pastiche. The understanding goes deeper, and the results, though they may leave us cold or even shocked, are rooted in Italian culture.

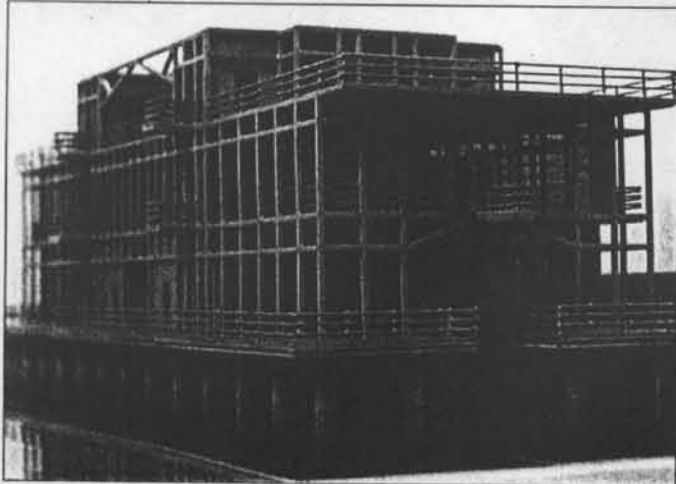




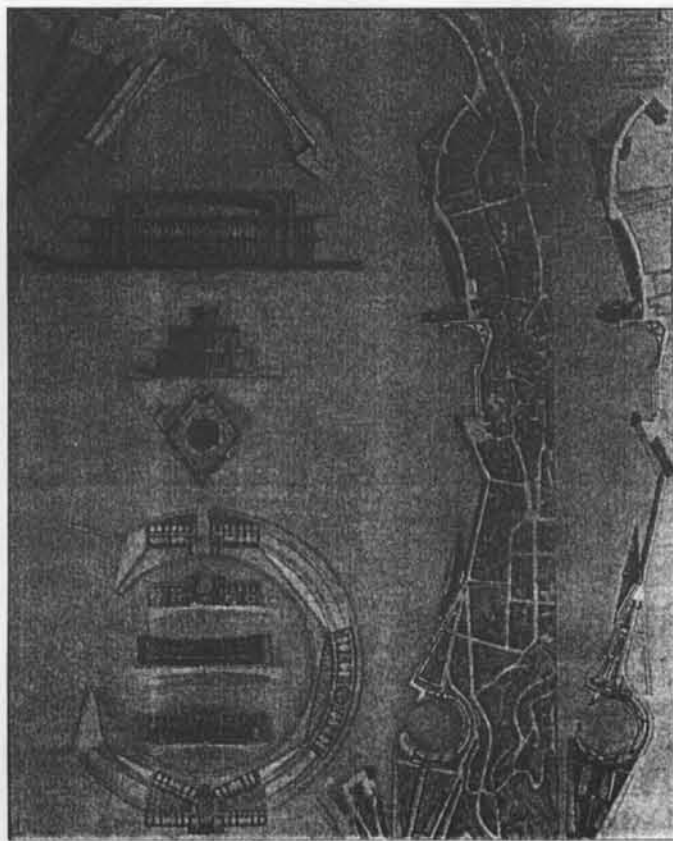
## Rome



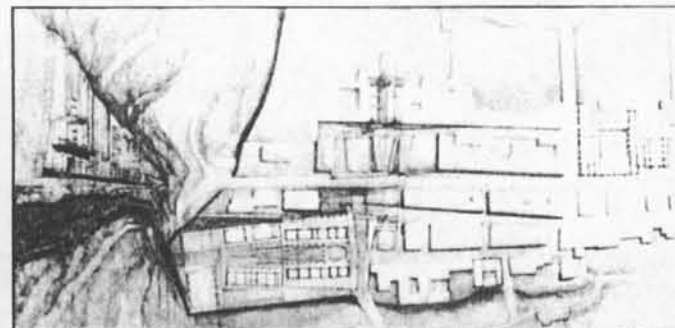
Lovere waterfront: view of model.



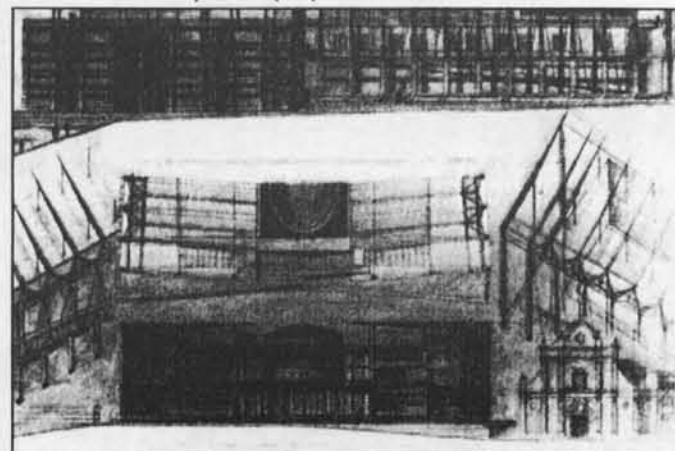
Lovere waterfront: model of tourist facilities building.



Lovere waterfront: plan showing layout of waterfront.



Cerreto Sanita: site plan and perspective of school extension.



Elevations of school facing over valley (top) and onto piazza (bottom), with details of roof plan (middle) and views of structure (left and right).

## Franz Prati

NOT a native of Rome, Franz Prati teaches at the university and regards his role in the architectural debate as being to "fight against polarisms".

His Venetian background and training enable him to view the Roman problem with the cool eye of detachment, although he is passionately concerned with the need to find solutions for a city in crisis. He has every faith in academic study as a means of achieving results: it is no good rushing in with half-formed strategies, nor are plans and masterplans, based on an oversimplification of the problems, much use.

Prati insists on the "need to reflect". The city needs to be rethought, he maintains. He sees himself as a mediator between the north and the capital.

Other architects in Rome, and particularly those more closely involved with the university, admire Prati's contribution to architectural thinking in the city. Although he has built nothing so far, his various projects for systematisation or restructure have attracted considerable notice, revealing a strongly held belief in the urban role of architecture, as opposed to architectural autonomy.

No doubt the presence in the School of Architecture in Venice of Samona, Gardella, Scarpa, Aymonino and Rossi at the time of Prati's graduation was of some enduring influence.

## Lovere Waterfront Competition 1988

Franz Prati, with G. Amici, L. Rattazzi, and G. Morabito, produced a winning design for a structure in the historic centre of this town, which may be built. The building incorporates a hostel, council chambers and

ferry landing-stage. Its iron and wood construction calls on the industrial past of Lovere for its inspiration, while in profile and from an aerial view the building resembles nothing so much as a large sailing vessel, moored in the harbour. There is a strong element of rationalism in the clean horizontal and vertical lines, which articulate a form built up on a simple rectangular plan.

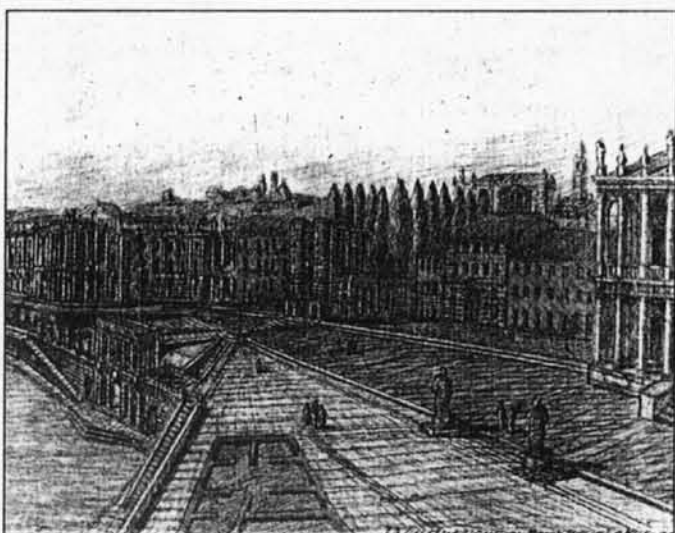
The competition was not restricted to the design of one single building in the town, but embraced the systematisation of waterfront as a whole. It concerned the bringing together of different elements — port, centre, mountains, in a unity which would give Lovere a new identity after the decline of its industrial fortunes, and a consolidation of its touristic potential.

## Cerreto Sanita

In October 1988 the town of Cerreto Sanita was devastated by an earthquake. Five groups of Roman architects were asked to consider schemes for the restructuring of the town. The high mountainous site, and proximity to the sky, and the strong horizontal axis were important determining factors in the form the restructured town should take.

Prati's scheme examines in detail the rebuilding and expansion of the school, or technical institute, facing the main piazza. The complex mixture of functions is contained within a large rectangular envelope, in a manner which to us would probably suggest megalomania, but which in Italy is clearly related to the understood and familiar rationalist tradition. The use of iron construction echoes the Lovere building again, although the technology here is rather more sophisticated.

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Systematisation of piazza Mateotti, Vicenza, 1987: perspective.

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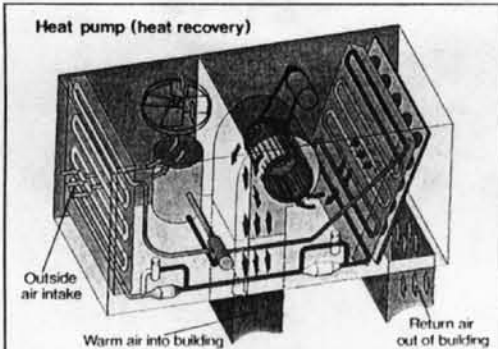
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