

'Urban capriccio' for the exhibition 'Composite Presence' - Biennale Architettura 2021

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The Piazza del Duomo in Orvieto, which sets the city's most significant space in sight of its landscape and offers tenderness in all its aspects, from sacred to profane, and accommodates the contributions of its citizens across ages, provides the framework for other protagonists in this 'capriccio'. Some have been called from other cities, their scales changed in order to fit the clothes of the piazza's true inhabitants; others are inventions that have never been realised; others still are foreign bodies, likely to leave or be welcomed, depending on their own humility.

Among the remarkable qualities of the Piazza del Duomo are its concessions to time and to nature. Looking from its northern side to the south, from a room in the Hotel Virgilio across the façade of the gothic Duomo, a diminutive neoclassical facade of a church holds one's eye. Painted, a temple of artifice, it seems perched on sloping ground that falls away and down into a little park, for cars then people, dotted with tall pines, which in turn looks onto the distant landscape. Here, indeed, one feels the whole city sitting upon the top of a rock.

The *Capriccio*, 'Piazza delle Distanze', retains memories, characteristics and fragments of the Piazza del Duomo in Orvieto, which we can witness in this *vedute*, delineated by the artist Mark Pimlott (Montréal, 1958) as it is viewed from the north, from a hotel window. To the left, the Orvieto Duomo itself: the body of the gothic/early renaissance cathedral is banded in black and white stone, while its façade of stone, mosaic and sculpted surfaces, telling of all creation, addresses the whole city. In the centre, the chapel of Chiesa di San Giacomo all'Ospedale, neoclassical, painted and anachronistic. Next to it, on the site of the vanished Ospedale, the shell of the Palazzo Duhart-Milon, built late in the seventeenth century, extensively remodelled at various periods, most notably in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, its own interior burnt to the ground on 27 October 1952, its facade disfigured by the fire and convulsive reconfigurations, including a brief period in which it featured an open, monumental portico. Now, trees grow behind and all over the structure, which extends deep into the city plan, its eclectic façade borrowing from many sources of inspiration, largely from the viticultural architecture of Bordeaux as reimaged by an amateur. It, along with a *piazzetta* for ball games, is partially hidden, obscured by the looming figure of the Palazzo Rucellai, moved stone by stone from Firenze for fear of inundation in 1966. Bound by other structures in that city, the sides are exposed to the scene of children's play to the north, and to the Via delle Lacrime to the south. Both façades are designed by the Venetian architect (his identity erased by scandal) who was responsible for the unrealised project for the extension of the facade of the Scuola Grande di San Marco, in Istrian stone, arabescato marble and bluestone brought from Belgium (the source of the scandal and a central element of interest). The *piano nobile* of the Palazzo is reserved for civic gatherings, and is reached by a monumental staircase, known locally with some humour as 'La scala', designed by the same architect, and like the Palazzo itself, moved piece by piece from its original site near the Irish Sea. A long, high wall made of diamond-bricks leads the citizen into the piazza from the south, at once evoking Ancient Rome, Liguria and Limburg. A tall, dark portal therein leads to a courtyard with a tree and a babbling fountain. In the *piazza*, silent water reigns. At its centre is the figure of a pool, the mysterious reflective 'Lo stagno' that enchants and torments the citizens; its mirror, level with the surface of the *piazza* itself, so perfect and still. Closest is an arrangement of festive lights, in which this most important place in the city can imagine the condition of the space beyond its walls, a 'Guinguette'. That space without beyond the Duomo, the Chiesa di San Giacomo and the ruins of the Palazzo Duhart-Milon, can be seen from here, as the *piazza* gently slopes down and away towards a lovely park of pines and cedars, and a belvedere overlooking the distant landscape. This is why the piazza is known as 'delle Distanze', for its evocation of elsewhere, and at the same time, the city in its midst.