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Once in a Blue Moon

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The Piazza Bucintoro at the Lido in Venice, Italy, may best be considered as an extraordinary park pavilion. It is a place of public use located at the intersection of the famous Lido beach with a wide, grand avenue leading across the island from the Venice lagoon to the sands of the Adriatic shore. It's an intricate structure of steel and stucco and paths that offers many things. It is a landmark, a fantasy, a pair of gardens, a platform for performances, an outlook, and a threshold to the beach. It sits at the site of the legendary Blue Moon, a free-spirited jazz nightclub destroyed out of spite by the Nazis when they abandoned their occupation of Venice at the end of World War II.

The piazza is a place to gather, a place to be alone among others; a place to soak in the sun, a place to rest in the shade; a place for watching and a place to be on display. It can be a place of resort, and a place of reflection; a place to dance, and a place to clap. It will let you preen across platforms, nestle against walls, burrow into the sand, and spiral into the sky. The way that it has been designed encourages you to move through, over, under, and around its various elements — and yet those elements are distinct enough to serve as nodal points for both personal and collective memories.

The many opportunities that this place affords, and its capacity to garner memories both result from the inventive and disciplined geometric investigations that its architect, Giancarlo De Carlo, has used to govern its design. De Carlo, one of the leading architects of Italy, may be best known in the U.S. for decades of work in the hilltown of Urbino. There, his overall urban plan guided preservation of the city's important historic qualities, while his designs for brick and concrete buildings, admirably suited to

their sites, allowed expansion of its university — both within and outside the ancient city walls. At the Lido, the challenge, and the vocabulary used, are much different. Here, De Carlo's use of multiple overlapping geometric figures, and a web of interlocking steel members has allowed the design to absorb and integrate an array of different conditions and requirements.

At its core the project is a network of differing paths, each affording choices of outlook, shade, and enclosure. The paths require varying degrees of effort in movement, and they offer many different prospects for meeting other people who may also be using the buildings, terraces, and beach. By choosing among these paths and combining them, people may construct differing itineraries for encounter and experience — depending on their moods, purposes, and physical conditions.

The itineraries that are constructed through places, and the sequences of views and encounters they involve, fill the vessels of the mind with daily content. In Venice, intricate, unfolding paths, which lace between buildings, along canals, over bridges, and through the open *campi*, sew the fabric of the city into a place of perpetual discovery. Here, in the midst of the much more conventionally structured Lido, the forms are very different. But the diversity, complexity, and episodic quality of the experiences that this single work of public architecture affords are comparably engaging.

Take for example several possible choices of itinerary:

- People reaching the site by walking north along the beachfront avenue may choose to go down a ramped passage and around the side of the building directly to the beach. Alternatively, they may proceed

a little farther north to descend gentle steps to the shelter of a broad circular porch, fronted by the stucco walls of the main restaurant, bar, and service building, and then pass through a surprising slot, and out, between wood stages, to the beach.

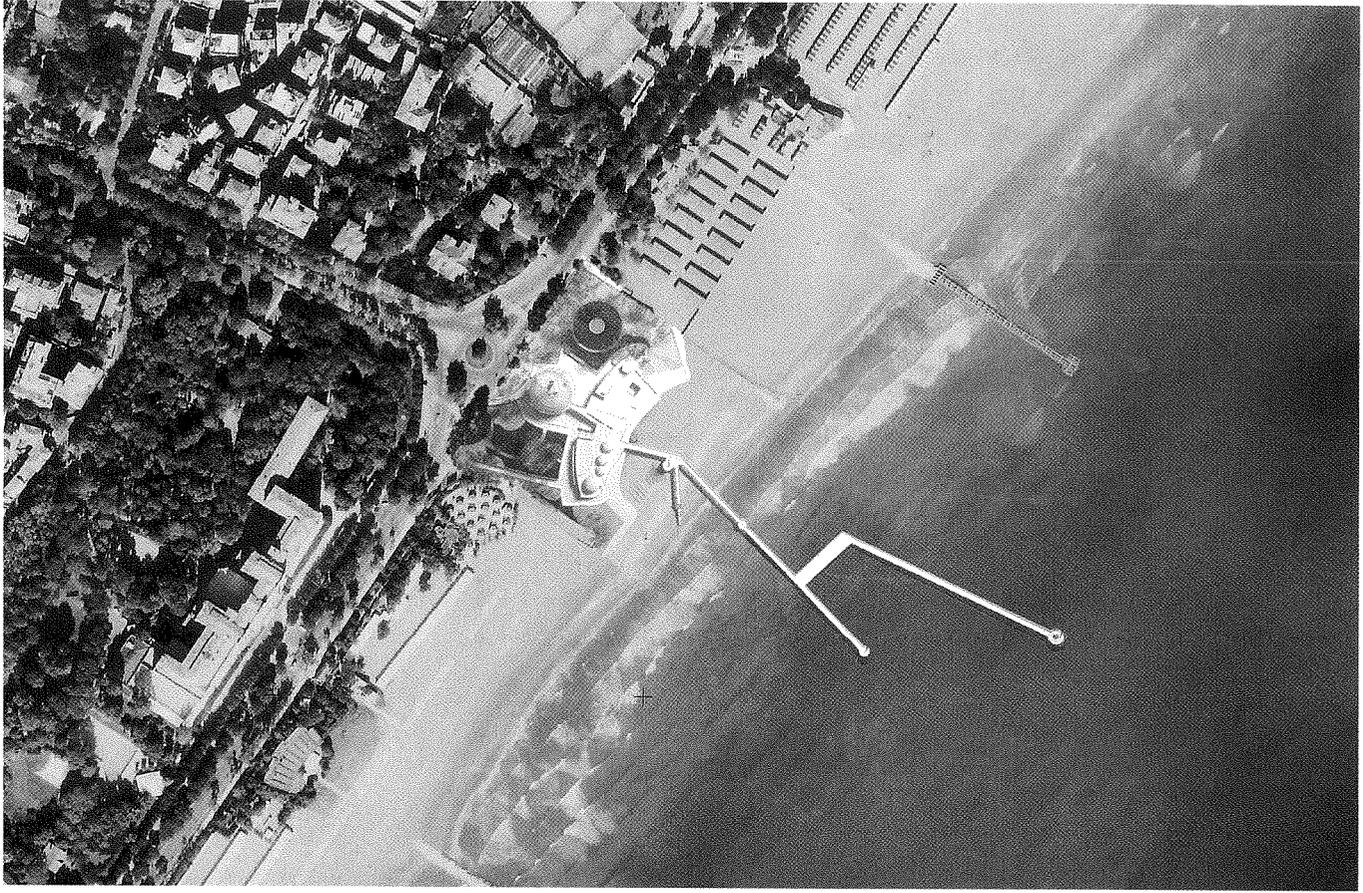
- Or, from the street, they might climb a narrow set of stairs to the top of the circular raised wooden platform from which they can view the broad surroundings (and be seen from afar, as though on a stage). They might then cross over a bridge to the roof terraces of the main building — there to linger in the sun or proceed out along a raised platform toward the sea. Along the way they may decide either to remain on the elevated lookout scanning the beach, or descend sharply onto the sand, perhaps to duck into the shade of the main structure.
- Less beach-inclined visitors will be able to move to either side of the circular platform/porch structure and find places to sit in a garden on long concrete benches amongst vegetation, the dappled shade of trees, and a fountain. Later, they may choose to enter the restaurant or peruse the scene from one of the domed bar spaces in the softly colored stucco interior, or simply stroll among the row of columns outside, that forms the sea side of the building.
- Or a visitor may choose to do all of the above.

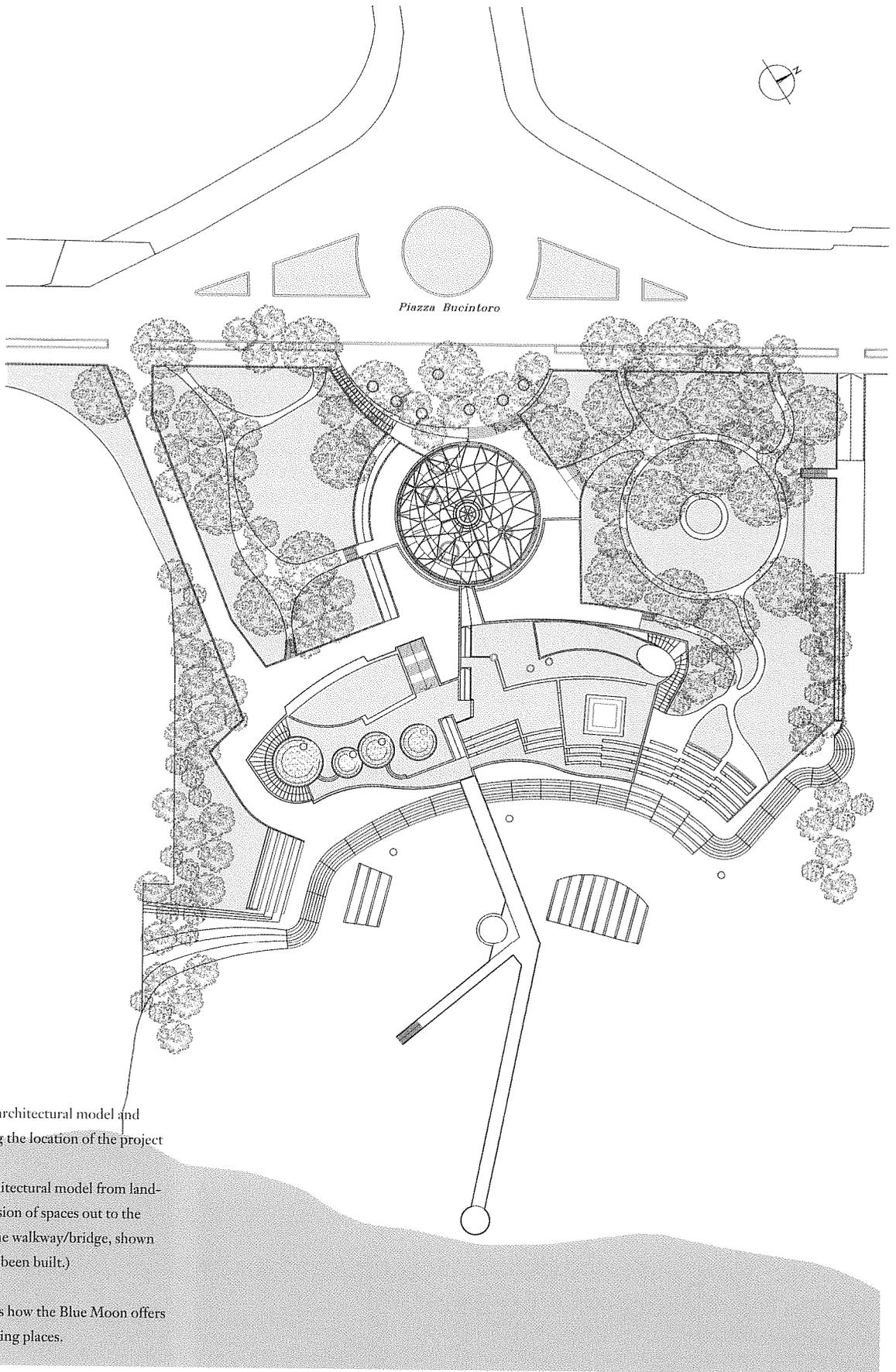
Each person who moves through, observes, or participates in the experience of this architecture will, of course, bring his or her own

Above: View along walkway/bridge to sea.

Below: View from lower level up through wooden platform to dome and stair.







Left top: Collage view of architectural model and aerial photograph, showing the location of the project in the Lido of Venice.

Left bottom: View of architectural model from landward, showing the progression of spaces out to the beach. (The extension of the walkway/bridge, shown in both images, has not yet been built.)

Above: The site plan shows how the Blue Moon offers numerous paths and gathering places.

expectations and associations to it. Each will therefore take away a different experience of the place. Yet their responses, though individualized, will be prompted by the structure that has been established — by the nature of the movements in which they are engaged, the character of the scenes which unfold, the presence of the people and things they encounter, the nature of the forms and relationships to which they are invited to give their attention, and the varying qualities of light and air in which all is immersed.

This is an architecture that is richly participatory. It goes beyond simply meeting expectations and proffering a range of immediate physical experiences and social encounters. It offers as well the prospects of reflection and association. And it affords opportunities to make connections to a larger order in the community, to the history and ecology of the territory, and to the imaginative attention of the people who use it.

The structure that marks all this in the larger landscape is an unusual dome constructed of steel framing that is irregularly placed and

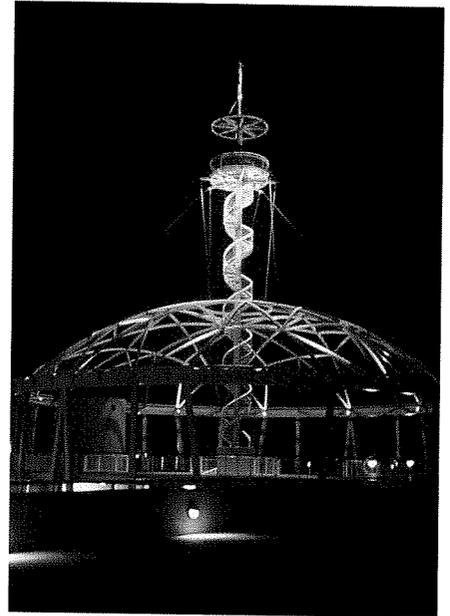
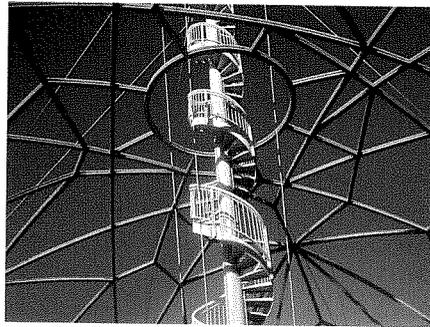
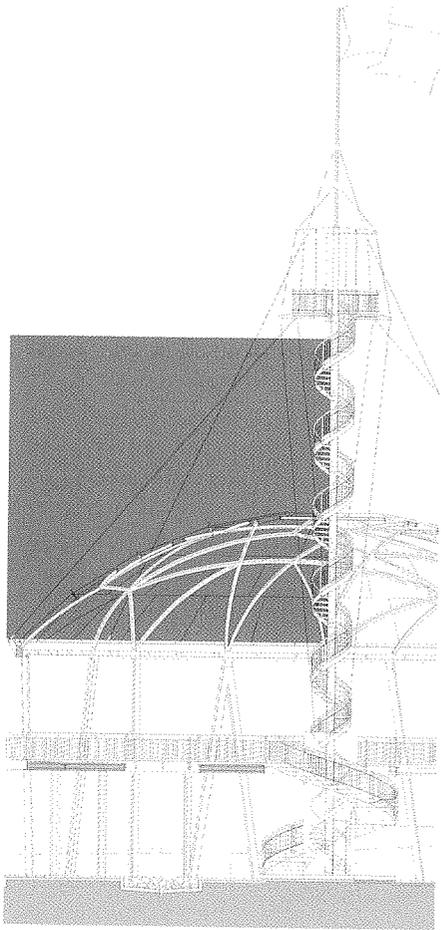
somewhat inexplicable. The dome is partially supported by a central mast, with cables tying elements together. Here, De Carlo has bypassed the simplified patterns of order that have enabled generations of designers to grasp control of the forces of gravity. Instead, he has capitalized on the computer's ability to sort through a larger set of factors in determining a pattern for load distribution that brings other considerations to bear. Thus, the form of the dome still carries conventional landmark qualities, but the stability of perception that a domical form generally affords — appearing the same from all angles — is replaced by more ephemeral qualities.

Plans call for the dome to be partially skinned with wood lattice so that its surface will appear incomplete, with light filtered through to the spaces below. In addition, the dome's structural members take surprising angles, relating more to the bent trunks of surrounding wind-swept trees than to the geometrically calibrated and rectified traditions that are more familiar in buildings. This is

a form full of surprises, one that engages the interest of passers-by with patterns and shadows that shift according to viewpoint and time of day.

Those who enjoy puzzling about buildings and studying their forms will recognize a semblance of the traditional domes surmounting public places; and for the small, delicately tiled domes on the roof they may imagine sources in North Africa (or on the roof of the grand exotic hotel distantly visible down the beach). But they may also see, along with some Italian commentators, that the mast rising through the platform and dome carries recollections of the great sailing vessels that created the wealth and culture of Venice. Moreover, if they are familiar with De Carlo's eloquent talks and writings, they may see hints, in the complex geometry and stair winding up through it, of the angled, spiraling framework of Tatlin's Tower — the stunning revolutionary image created in the Russia of 1919 — an image intended to signal the promise of fresh ways of thinking for a society based on benefits for all.





This design by De Carlo, which has come to be known by the name of its antecedent, the Blue Moon, is a lesson in what architecture can give to place. It has things happening above, below, around the corner, and in the mind — and it makes them securely a part of the site. It amplifies the ability of this location to support the life experiences of many people with varying interests, associations and expectations, yet it binds their disparate encounters together through the magnetism of a distinct

and memorable structure; a place that is figuratively spinning at the intersection of sea, sand and city.

All site photographs are by Lou Embo and Francesco Calzolaio. Photography of model by Andrea Martiradonna. The associated architect was Antonio Troisi. All images are courtesy of Studio De Carlo, Milan, Italy.

Opposite left: From the street, the forms and structures of the Blue Moon invite exploration.

Opposite right: The walkway bridges land and sea.

Above: Detailed views of framework dome, spiral stair, and mast.