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Colletta di Castelbianco

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In this project we set out to redesign and give life to an old village that was abandoned two hundred years ago.

The village of Colletta in the commune of Castelbianco stretches for about 300 meters along the top of a hill just at the base of the Apennine Mountains about 75 km. west of Genoa. It lies along an old road which departs from Albenga on the coast, follows the Pennavaira valley inland, and then crosses the mountains to Ormea in Piedmont. The village was born, I believe, because the country people around there had commercial exchanges with travelers crossing between Liguria and Piedmont. But when a new system of roads was built two hundred years ago, bypassing it, the inhabitants apparently decided to abandon the village and move to another place.

A small developer from Alessandria had the idea that it would be possible to rehabilitate this village, and so he started to buy pieces of it. In his mind, the village had little potential as a place for ordinary vacations, because it is twenty kilometers from the sea. The surrounding nature was also very harsh, and he thought perhaps tourists wouldn't like that. But this was a place of solitude, and so he invented the idea that people he called "white eagles" would go there.

White eagles are people who work by themselves and are looking for isolation, but who also use computers and information electronics to remain in touch with what's happening. Not only are they in touch, but they may direct operations in other, more crowded places. These people usually can take long periods of isolation, and they may want to live in places which are completely quiet. "White eagles" were not very numerous in Italy at the time this project began. But there were some, and there are also other people who are completely tired of towns, and who want to go to very simple places where they can live a life in connection with nature and at the same time be in touch with what is happening around Italy.

The idea was fantastic. It was also immediately attractive to the mass media, because the mass media are curious about strange people, like white eagles. Financially, the formula also worked. This didn't mean the place could be sold immediately. On the contrary, the process was very slow. But its prospects were promising enough for the developer to invest the little money he had to begin the rehabilitation.

Facing page: The Italian village of Colletta di Castelbianco as it appeared after restoration.

Inset left: Crustacean form.

Inset right: The maison domino was modernism's famous distillation of vertebrate form. Images courtesy of Studio De Carlo.

Reading the Fabric

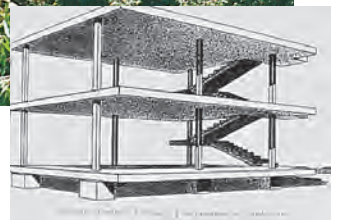
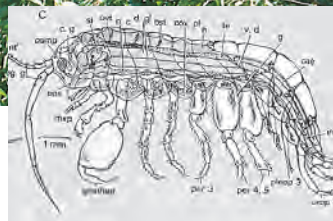
When I started to study this place of course I was not completely confident, because it was isolated, and because I am an urbanite and do not immediately understand places which do not have life inside them. But what interested me was the fabric. It is something which is absolutely woven together, and it had a series of qualities which I'm looking for in other situations. One of the remarkable situations I found here is that the open spaces are of the same size and quality as the built spaces. There is no discontinuity. You move out of the built space into the open space, and it is the same. The difference, of course, is that it is open; but the size, the way it makes an enclosure around you, is exactly the same — you have exactly the same feeling. You can hardly separate what is given to movement and what is given to stasis — the streets and the built spaces are again the same; they enter each other and produce situations which are incredibly intense.

I also found it very interesting that there was a consistency between the technology used to build this village and the system of its forms. The material used was stone, found in the fields. To grow olive trees, the villagers had to level the earth, and they had to pile the stones in order to leave the earth free. But in this case the same stone which was used to make walls for the olive terraces was also used to make their houses. The stone is not particularly strong, and the pieces are small. But they assembled and interlocked all those pieces in such a way that they became vaults. The technique was not sophisticated, but it affected very much the size of the space. You cannot find spaces which are larger than four meters wide. They are either square or they are rectangular, but the span between the walls is determined by the vault.

So all the spaces are vaulted, and they enter each other. And above the vault, the roof is flat because the villagers needed a place in the open air where they could dry the materials they got from the earth, the agricultural materials. If they were making wine, they could put the grapes out there; and the same with olives, and everything else. On the ground floor, which was perhaps the most humid area (and the most difficult to rehabilitate, of course) they had simple animals, donkeys.

Crustaceans

I began my research by making drawings to understand the texture of the place. At the beginning I was very hesitant because my generation, and also the generation before me and after me, were trained in the idea that a building can be flexible and adaptable if it is vertebrate. This means that it has bones and then muscles and then





skin — but the three are separated in such a way that everything is adaptable.

But when I met this village I understood that the crustacean form is as flexible as the vertebrate. And I tried to look at that idea of the crustacean in a completely different way. That is, the crustacean looks very strong and compact, like a unit in itself, but this is not true. It has an incredible number of joints and possibility of moving around and being flexible. Crustaceans are very capable of adapting themselves to the environment. This is what I discovered. And as soon as the metaphor came to my mind, my attitude toward the village changed completely. Strange what can happen to an architect! Sometimes you need a metaphor to glorify your ideas. And then you follow the matter for — not forever, I recommend you — just for a moment.

You remember perhaps a famous article by Le Corbusier. He was a great architect, but he also made some mistakes. And one of these was to believe that the crustacean was out of date — a bit stupid, heavy, etc. — whereas the vertebrate was flexible, slender, elegant, intelligent and nice. This is not true actually, because it depends on how you relate to the environment, to the general conditions. There is no possibility to establish a rule once and forever. In architecture you meet so many different conditions that you need an adaptable mind.

Yes, the vertebrate has that flexibility, but it is also very dogmatic. I mean, it has a lot of possibilities, but not an adaptability which is as complete as the crustacean.

When the idea of vertebration has been followed dogmatically — taking the maison domino by Corbu and making a model out of it (or, better, a type) — it has been repeated and repeated and repeated in a dull way without understanding. Our coasts in Europe were destroyed because that inflexible element was put all over.

Of course, some areas escaped because this construction system didn't have the capacity to understand the place

and adapt to it — whereas the crustacean has that capacity. And this is what I learned at Colletta. Going through this idea, I found how beautiful were, for instance, the connections, how complete was the intersection, the capacity of intertwining. You see it immediately in the stairs, which are full of imagination because they have to do unpredictable things in order to get to one point from the other. And many times in the crustacean those things have to be invented; they are not established once and forever. So in this village you find connections which are invented continuously. This was the wisdom of the people — they didn't have architects, of course.

The Code in Place

What I started to look for was the genetic code. It became clear to me there was a code, and that I had to discover it to change the place. Anything I could have done out of this genetic code would have been a mistake.

To enter the nature of this place I began to look at it through sections. This allows you to see how spaces are put together. And if you make them negative, other things become immediately important. It's a way of turning the problem on all sides and trying to understand its internal rules. At Colletta I found that the connections penetrated the volumes. Or, one may say, the volumes penetrated the connections. It is exactly the same.

And when I started to design apartments out of this congregation of spaces, I discovered that connections were possible in all directions. I discovered I could connect everything if I gave up some of the dogmas normally related to the composition of a plan. I found it was possible

Above: Even as an abandoned shell, the village contained elements that spoke of a tremendous vitality. Photos courtesy of Studio de Carlo.

Opposite: Section drawings were crucial to understanding the nature of the place. Drawing courtesy of Studio de Carlo.



to enter a space from many different directions, and also to give it different, but interchangeable uses. Why does the toilet have to be small and the living room large? Who decided that? In this context, it actually didn't matter.

It depended on levels of reasoning and use. So it was possible to cut and to isolate spaces and serve them in such a way they could become apartments for those people, the white eagles.

What was more astonishing was the way the section could be used. Because in this case it was not only a question of going horizontally to connect existing space. In this case the dance became very exciting because it was also possible to go vertically, or to go horizontally and then vertically. Or to go in an oblique way and to connect things in such a way that the houses could be served from the ground floor, or the top, or the middle. So it was possible to have a composition which was completely flexible and absolutely new to me.

When the apartments started to take form, they were of different sizes. But as soon as the first possible buyers arrived, the action of adjustment started. It was very easy to adjust the spaces if they expected a particular way of living.

In some cases there were built volumes on top which had been destroyed by time and weather, and we rebuilt them following the same pattern. But in other areas we were required to add parapets. Originally, there were no parapets or handrails. And the historic documents did not say that people died falling down. Nevertheless, the building organizations imagined that everybody would kill

themselves this way. They maintained especially that kids would fall down the stairs.

It was not my wish to make parapets. But I did, and it became a problem. Since the whole thing was made with unconscious skill, as soon as you add something, you find a problem. So I had to make many tries to get it to work. But sometimes, as in the homeopathic cure, by touching a poor point, you could also touch another point that would establish equilibrium. Perhaps what you were making was no longer a parapet, but a stair, or a piece of the street — because this is the way you have to proceed in order to establish equilibriums.

Windows

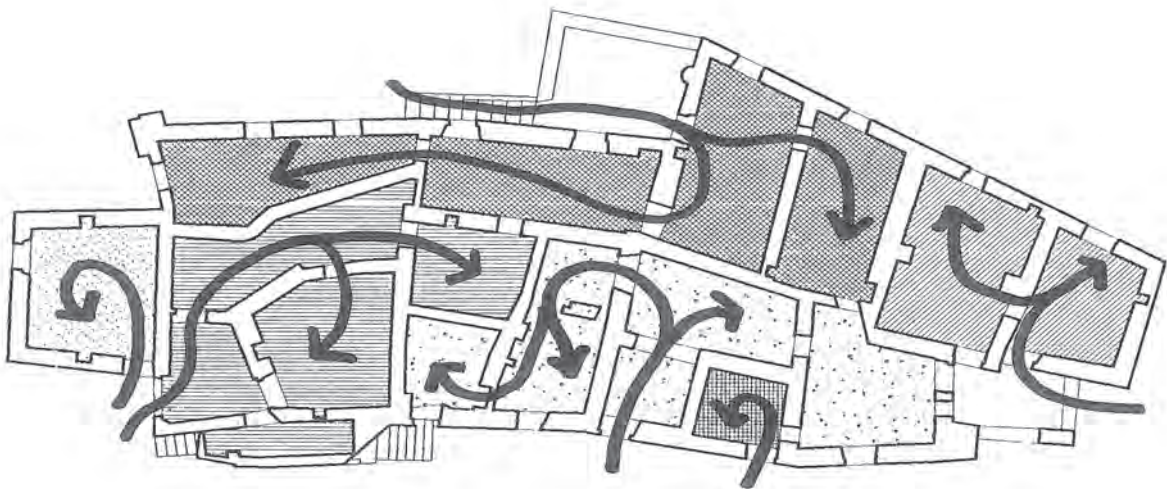
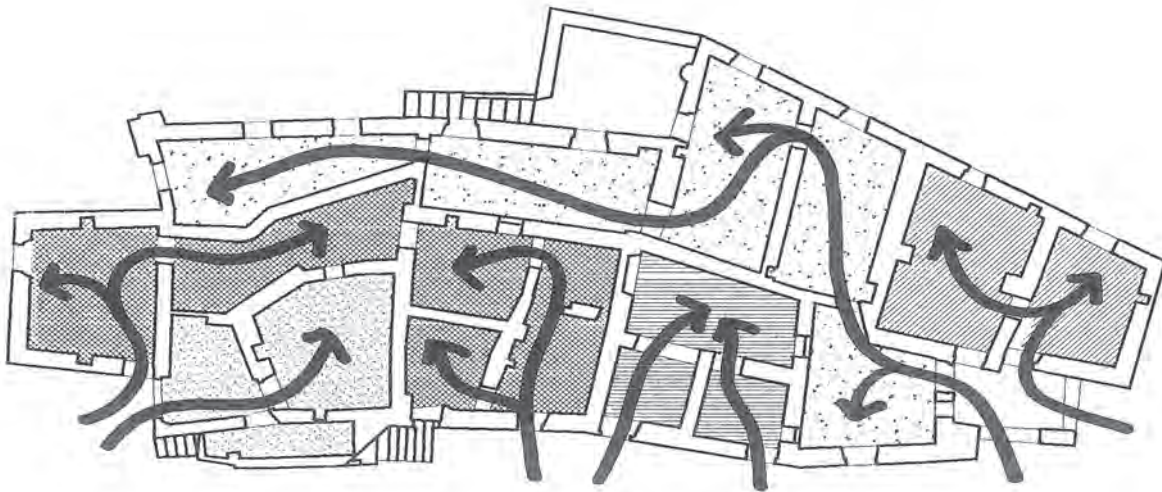
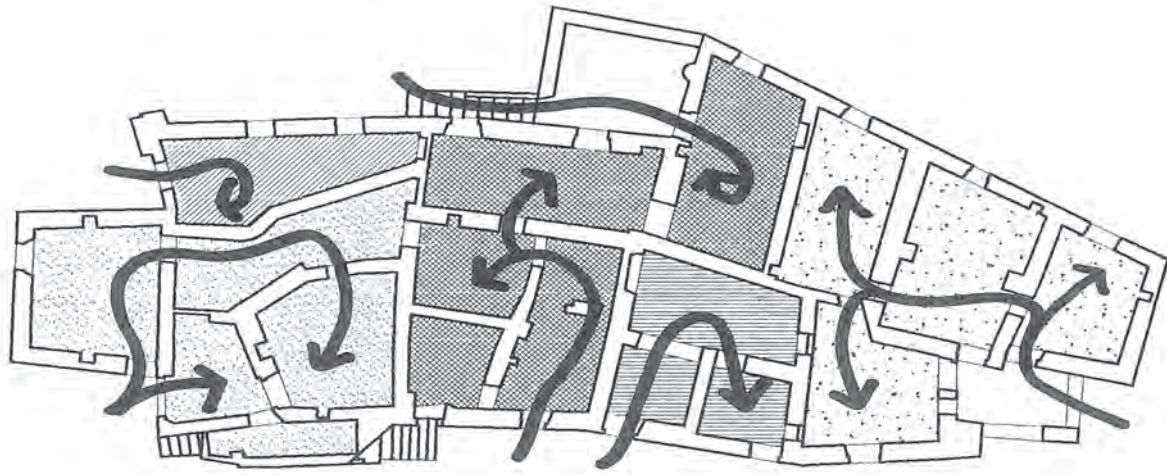
Studies in search of genetic codes were also made on the various components of the buildings. One thing which was shocking and very interesting was that all the windows in all the houses were framed with plaster and white paint. Of course, there was a functional reason for that. If you have to put a wood window in a wall you have to have a regular surface. So they used some plaster there.

But this was certainly not the only reason. A window is also a very delicate point in a house. It is a place where you have a transition from internal space to external. It is a dramatic point — something which gives you pleasure, and also fear, depending on the circumstances. So it has to be underlined as important. They didn't have smooth stone surfaces for framing openings. They just had the possibility to paint the plaster. But the painting was not only for

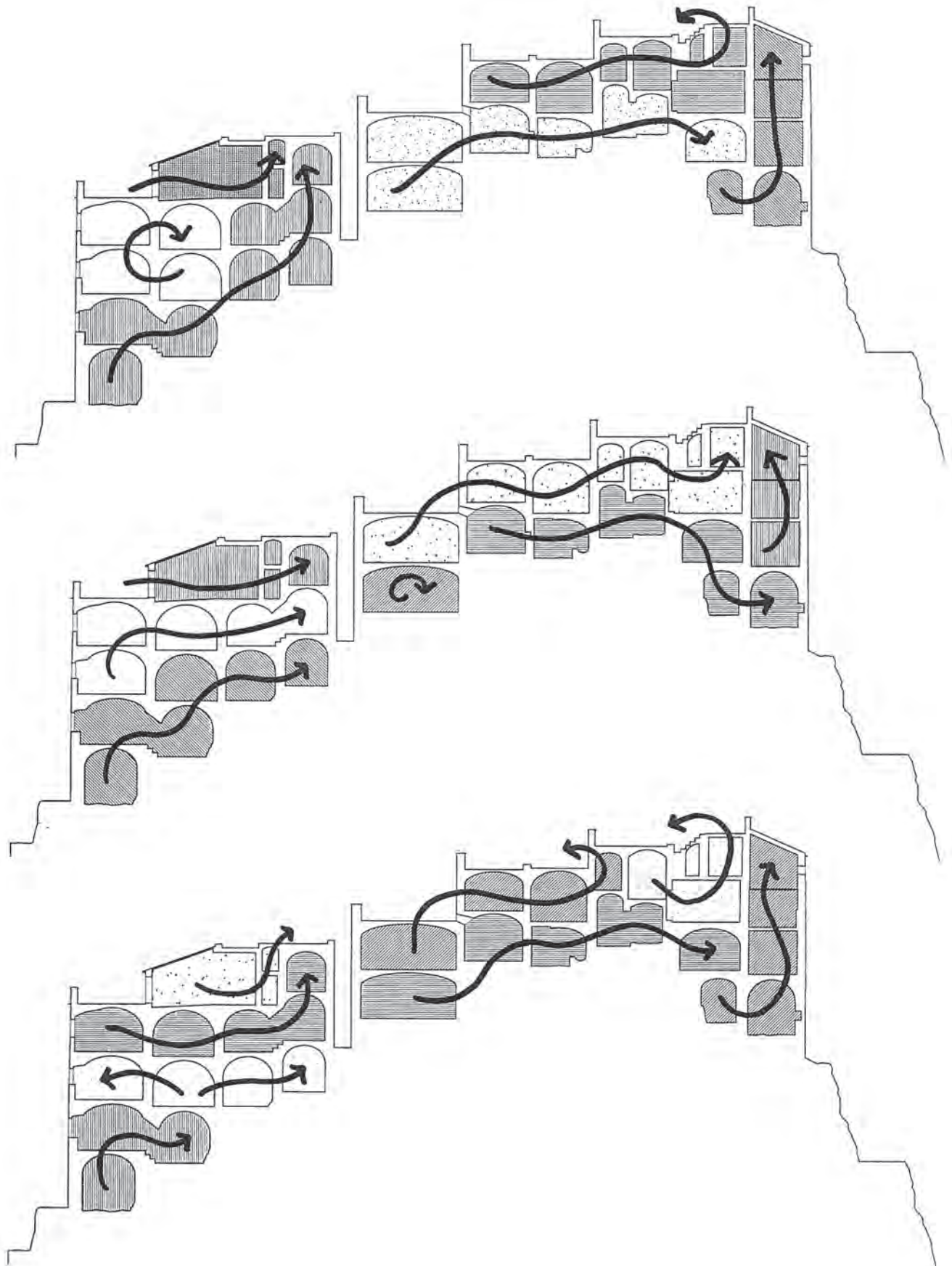


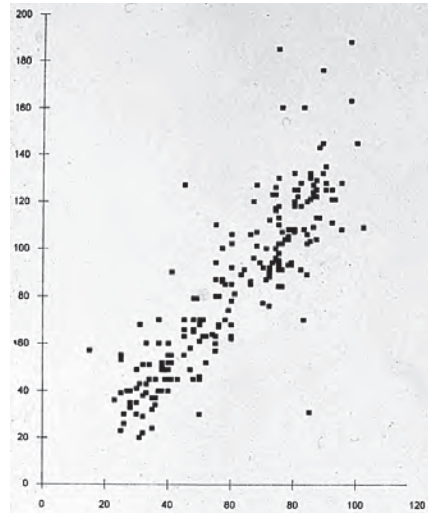
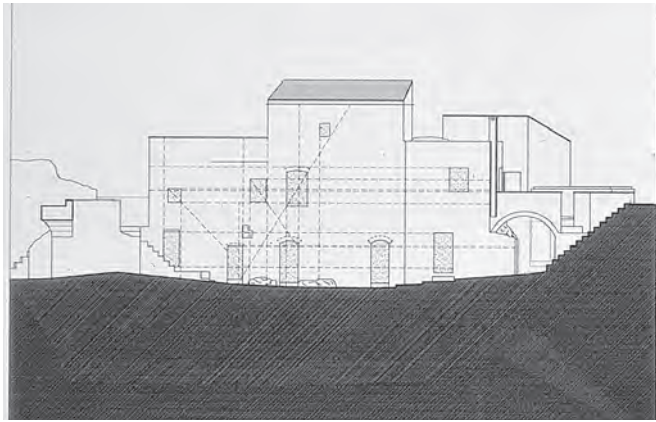
Above and facing page: The village today. Photos by Donlyn Lyndon.





Above and opposite: In the design of new apartments, connections were possible in all directions. Drawings showing three possible ways to connect the same rooms courtesy of Studio de Carlo.





functional reasons; it was done for reasons of expression, for self-representation.

For example, one man may perhaps have been richer — richer in terms of the general level of poverty in which they all lived. Or perhaps he had more imagination, or wanted to say that he was more sensitive. In any case, he wanted to declare his individuality and identity. So he painted his window in a very special way so that you could immediately recognize it in the general panorama of the village.

This is something you have to be careful about in the rebuilding. Because if you change it, or if you repeat it, redundancy is not accepted as simplification. So you have to find the right point, and it is again related to genetic codes.

Then in many cases I found myself needing to add some windows, because internally there was not enough light for present-day life. People are accustomed to having more natural light than in the past. So how to now open a new hole in those walls? It was necessary to understand precisely what the windows were. What was their design? What were the relationships between windows? The cadence, the rhythm, the size of openings?

When we began to study the height and width of the openings, we discovered that all the windows could be mapped according to a diagram which determined not that they have the same dimensions, but that they have very similar proportions. You have to stay within that diagram if you want to do something which doesn't break the system. Or, if you wanted to make a break — and this might happen if there was a need to show a change in organization — you had to calculate your break very carefully. It cannot be a break made by chance — or by distraction, which is worse. It had to be something which is really in

agreement with the system, the solids and voids which characterize the village.

When another exercise was made to understand how the walls were made, there was another discovery. It was that there are correspondences. In this case, if you trace the correspondences, one up over the other, etc. etc., you always have something which is precise enough to give you instructions about what to do. You can project the internal spaces on the wall to understand how the holes could be put — not only in relation of the internal space but also in relation to the facade and to the other voids.

Much of the village has now been renovated and inhabited, and the work is still going on. Of course, what was added that was completely new was the mechanics, because they need heating and electric light — and also, especially, the wires and plugs of information technology which don't affect so much the architecture, since they can be buried behind plaster and other finishes.

It goes very slowly because you cannot go very fast in this case. You have to work on each piece and put together things and stop and understand and start again, etc. It takes a lot of time to make the design of such a humble place.

Above: Diagrammatic analysis of window proportions and “regulating lines” helped reveal aspects of the village’s “genetic code.” Drawings courtesy of Studio De Carlo.

Facing page: The restored village. Great care was needed to understand such a humble place. Photo courtesy of Studio De Carlo.

