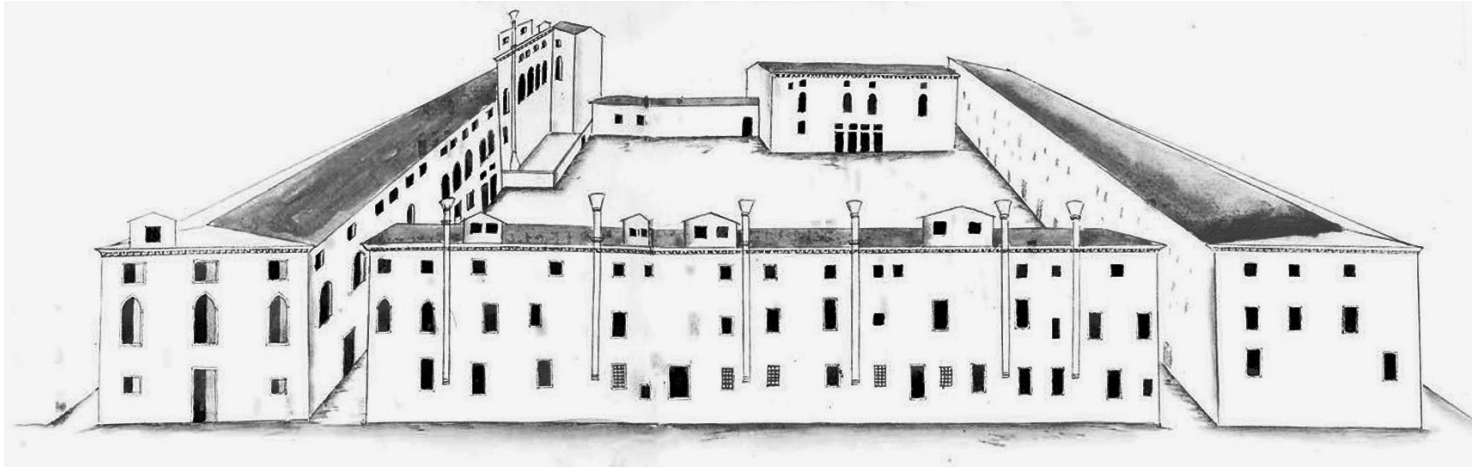# The Birth of Social Housing:
The Politics of the Scuole Grandi's Collective Habitations in Sixteenth-Century Venice
Theodora Giovanazzi

The collective row-housing block of Corte San Rocco
in Santa Maria Maggiore in the early 16th century.
Adapted by the author, from Giovanni Rizzi, *Veneranda Scuola. Altro corpo di fabbriche in contrada a l'Anzolo Rafaele in corte di San Rocco*, early 18th century. From Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Seconda Consegna, Reg. 3°/2 C, cc. 8–9, Venice.

In the sixteenth century, the Republic of Venice witnessed the unprecedented diffusion of *Pro Amore Dei* dwellings—a novel form of tenure that offered dwellings free of charge or at very low rents to those in need.[1] This innovative practice gave rise to the construction of several purpose-built, large-scale, collective row-housing blocks designed to accommodate specific groups of urban poor. These blocks were often situated in rapidly evolving urban areas, such as the new islands of Santa Maria Maggiore in the *Sestriere* of Dorsoduro, which became almost entirely designated for charitable and affordable housing. Corte San Rocco, on the southernmost island of the territories of Santa Maria Maggiore, stood as a striking example of this novel phenomenon. Commencing in 1516, the construction of this Pro Amore Dei housing block extended over a period of more than a century due to incremental additions and transformations.[2] Accommodating approximately 500 needy individuals by the mid-sixteenth century, the Corte was built by the Scuola di San Rocco.[3] Its sheer size made it the most important charitable block owned by the Scuola for centuries.[4] Adjacent to Corte San Rocco stood another example of collective housing, Corte San Marco, which serves as a paradigmatic example of architectural standardization. The complex, built by the Scuola di San Marco between 1534 and 1540, included 24 apartments.[5] Notably, each apartment within this court followed an identical floor plan, meticulously standardized and consistently replicated across the entire blueprint.

1   "Pro amore Dei" is a Latin expression translating to "for the love of God."
2   Paola Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', *Studi Veneziani*, no. V (1981), 98–100.
3   Gianmario Guidarelli, 'Le Scuole Grandi Veneziane Nel XV e XVI Secolo: Reti Assistenziali, Patrimoni Immobiliari e Strategie Di Governo', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Moyen Âge* 123, no. 1 (2011), 63.
4   Ruggero Maschio, 'Investimenti Edilizi Nelle Scuole Grandi a Venezia', in *Investimenti e Civiltà Urbana. Secoli XIII-XVIII. Nona Settimana Di Studi Dell'istituto Internazionale Di Storia Economica «Francesco Datini» [22-27 April 1977]*, by Annalisa Guarducci (Florence: Le Monnier, 1989), 424.
5   Giorgio Gianighian and Paola Pavanini, eds., *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803* (Venice: Arsenale Editrice, 1984), 45.

Overall, the influence of the novel phenomenon of the Pro Amore Dei tenure type is evident. By the second half of the seventeenth century, approximately 33 percent of the total population of Venice resided in Pro Amore Dei dwellings or other similar affordable or charitable housing.[6] Such a unique occurrence, specific to the Venetian context, thrived due to various confraternities, with the *Scuole Grandi* being the most prominent, taking on the responsibility of constructing and managing Pro Amore Dei dwellings.

Distribution of Pro Amore Dei dwellings in eighteenth-century Venice.
Adapted by the author, from Ennio Concina, *Venezia nell'età moderna. Struttura e Funzioni* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1989), Map 12.

Architecturally, the development of this new tenure type coincided with a crucial typological shift in the island's housing paradigm. If its medieval urban form was mainly characterized by *individual* house-types, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Venice witnessed the emergence and growing prevalence of *collective* row housing.[7] This invention coincided with a growing diversification of social groups, occurring not only between patrician and non-patrician members, but also within each group itself. For instance, "the poor" were no longer perceived as a homogeneous category. Rather, they were increasingly classified into distinct subgroups, each defined by different degrees of need, moral standing, and social utility. As a result, access to charity, shelter, and housing became increasingly differentiated and category-specific.

Through a close reading of Corte San Rocco and Corte San Marco, this essay argues that the Venetian Pro Amore Dei housing case may be

6   Brian Pullan, 'Poveri, Mendicanti e Vagabondi (Secoli XIV-XVII)', in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 1. Dal Feudalesimo al Capitalismo*, ed. Corrado Vivanti and Ruggero Romano (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), 994–995.
7   Pietro Maretto, *L'edilizia Gotica Veneziana*, 2 [1. Ed. 1960] (Venice: Filippi Editore, 1978), 42.

read as an architectural, bureaucratic, and ideological precursor to modern social housing models. Aspects such as the development of collective row housing blocks, the financial mechanisms that sustained their construction, maintenance and lease, their efficient circulation systems, the repeated and standardized floorplans of the dwellings, the overall economization of construction, and most importantly, the typological and aesthetic qualities of these housing blocks prefigure many of the defining characteristics of modern social housing. Indeed, although social housing first emerged only in the twentieth century, the Venetian experience examined here allows us to shed light on some of the inherent contradictions, complexities, and tensions that have marked the *longue-durée* prehistory of this phenomenon.

THE VENETIAN SCUOLE GRANDI

During the Middle Ages, craft guilds and religious confraternities evolved rapidly in European urban settings. While craft guilds were created by artisans to oversee their common interests and support one another, religious confraternities were established by laypeople for mutual aid and personal salvation through the collective worship of a patron saint.[8] Known by various names such as "fraternities," "companies," and "congregations," the religious confraternities were referred to as *Scuole* in the Venetian context. If the term initially denoted their place of assembly, or Seat, it later came to signify the confraternity as a legal entity[9]

Venice had three types of Scuole: the *Scuole di devozione*, or devotional confraternities; the *Scuole artigiane*, or artisanal confraternities associated with craft guilds; and lastly the *Scuole dei Battuti,* or confraternities 'of the beaten,' so named because their members practiced acts of self-flagellation during public ceremonies until the fourteenth century.[10] By the second half of the fifteenth century, the devotional and artisanal confraternities became known as *Scuole Piccole*, while the Scuole dei Battuti were referred to as *Scuole Grandi*.[11] In total, there were six Scuole Grandi: the Scuola di Santa Maria della Carità, the Scuola di San Marco, and the Scuola di San Giovanni, the Scuola di Santa Maria della Misericordia, the Scuola di San Rocco, and, lastly, the Scuola di San Teodoro.[12]

Although they first emerged in the thirteenth century, it was during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that the Scuole significantly intensified their charitable efforts.[13] This was possible because of the substantial real estate portfolio that the Scuole managed to amass during this period. Stemming from land and property donations gained through perpetual trusts, a significant part of their assets was devoted to charitable activities. Their renewed commitment to charity coincided with a vast demographic expansion that increased the number of Venetian inhabitants to more than 150,000 by the middle of the sixteenth century.[14] During this time, Venice became the third-largest city by population in Europe after Paris and Naples.[15] As a result, the issue of poverty became central both for the confraternities and the public authorities.[16]

8   William Wurthmann, 'The Council of Ten and the Scuole Grandi in Early Renaissance Venice', *Studi Veneziani* XVIII (1989), 18.
9   Patricia Fortini Brown, 'Le scuole', in *Storia di Venezia*, trans. Luis Contarello (Rome: Treccani, 1996), 2.
10   Brian Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: The Social Institutions of a Catholic State, to 1620* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 34.
11   Fortini Brown, 'Le scuole', 3.
12   Wurthmann, 'The Council of Ten and the Scuole Grandi in Early Renaissance Venice', 20–21.
13   Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 63.
14   Giorgio Gianighian, 'Antonio proto spiega al Capitolo della Scuola di San Rocco il miracolo della moltiplicazione delle case (1534)', in *Come la marea: successi e sconfitte durante il dogado di Leonardo Loredan (1501-1521)*, by Donatella Calabi, Giuseppe Gullino, and Gherardo Ortalli (Venezia: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 2023), 195.
15   Giorgio Gianighian, 'Building a Renaissance Double House in Venice', *Architectural Research Quarterly* 8, no. 3–4 (December 2004): 299–312, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135504000314, 302.
16   Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 216.

Members of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista
marching in Piazza San Marco.
Gentile Bellini, Procession in St. Mark's Square, c. 1496, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

Through the construction, management, and distribution of Pro Amore Dei housing to the poor or at-risk segment of the population, the Scuole effectively became the protagonists of the Venetian charitable and affordable housing sector. As a result, the Scuole contributed to the maintenance of social order on behalf of the State. In turn, by delegating a significant portion of the administration of housing to the Scuole, the Venetian state alleviated its social responsibilities.[17] In such a way, the State could instead focus on addressing other forms of destitution that were seen as posing a direct threat to societal stability.[18] As a matter of fact, mendicants, beggars, and individuals experiencing extreme poverty were accommodated in alternative institutions, such as hospitals or hospices.

How did the Scuole Grandi become the principal providers of charitable housing in the Venetian context? Most importantly, what motivated them to offer free Pro Amore Dei dwellings to those in need, and how did the Scuole finance the construction and upkeep of these dwellings?

PERPETUALLY TRUSTED

The growing concern for the spiritual and material welfare of the poor also extended to rich Venetian testators, who, since the mid-thirteenth century, began to donate various assets upon their passing to either the confraternities or to other institutions via the means of 'perpetual trusts.'[19] A perpetual trust is defined as a fiduciary legal arrangement requested by a trustor who assigns a trustee to manage property assets for an indefinite period. This agreement is typically set up for the benefit of entities or specific individuals known as *trust beneficiaries*.[20] In the Venetian context, perpetual trusts were often drafted by wealthy citizens, both patricians and non-patricians, intending to donate their assets, such as real estate, or money, to a beneficiary organization responsible for holding and administering them for charitable purposes. These initiatives primarily aimed to assist the city's poor and needy through various means, including the construction of Pro Amore Dei dwellings from the fifteenth century onwards. These were leased free of charge or at very low rents to impoverished confraternity members, their families, or other individuals in need.[21]

17   Maschio, 'Investimenti Edilizi Nelle Scuole Grandi a Venezia', 395.
18   Guidarelli, 'Le Scuole Grandi Veneziane Nel XV e XVI Secolo: Reti Assistenziali, Patrimoni Immobiliari e Strategie Di Governo', 60.
19   Brian Pullan, "'Houses in the Service of the Poor in the Venetian Republic', in *Poverty and Charity: Europe, Italy, Venice, 1400-1700*, by Brian Pullan, Collected Studies Series CS 459 (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1994), 1.
20   Jeffrey A Helewitz, *Basic Wills, Trusts, and Estates for Paralegals*, Seventh (New York: Wolters Kluwer Law & Business, 2016), 80.
21   Wurthmann, 'The Council of Ten and the Scuole Grandi in Early Renaissance Venice', 48.

By establishing perpetual trusts, wealthy Venetian testators could ensure their riches would serve social functions indefinitely after their deaths. In addition to guaranteeing the trustor an urban and historical presence beyond their death, perpetual trusts and charitable donations also satisfied a critical religious and personal function: they mediated the fear of the other world, becoming earthly tools for the salvation of the testator's soul in the afterlife. This fear can be read in close connection to the Medieval creation of purgatory as a "third place" between hell and heaven.[22] Not existing before the twilight of the twelfth century, purgatory played a critical ideological role in the world of the living. Defined as "an intermediary other world in which some of the dead were subjected to a trial that could be shortened by the prayers, by the spiritual aid, of the living,"[23] the idea of Purgatory incentivised the wealthy to buy their way into paradise through charitable donations and prayers during their earthly stay. Jaques Le Goff argued that the creation of purgatory implied not only "spiritual power," but also "considerable profit" for the Church.[24]

In return, those benefiting from these assets were expected to pray for the soul of the deceased testator and their family and actively engage in various devotional activities organized by the trustee institution.

Unlike standard trusts, which typically have an expiration date, *perpetual* trusts were designed to persist indefinitely, fulfilling their long-term aims. Therefore, to meet the strict requirements of such trusts, Venetian testators needed to rely on robust and trustworthy organizations capable of effective management. In the European context of the Middle Ages, monetary donations were generally handled by the Roman Catholic Church and its institutions, as charity and renunciation were seen as essential duties for the faithful seeking salvation from earthly sins.[25] Destitute and needy individuals were either assisted through material donations or provided shelter in almshouses, hostels, or small hospitals under the parish's oversight. However, due to the Republic of Venice's intricate relationship with the Catholic Church and the Papacy,[26] as well as the growing number of needy individuals at the beginning of the early modern period, there were really two institutions, namely the Procurators of San Marco and the Scuole Grandi, who took on this responsibility. While the Procurators usually administered the trusts of the most prestigious and highest-ranking Venetian patricians, the Scuole Grandi managed those of professionals, ordinary citizens, and non-patrician merchants.

"FOR THE LOVE OF GOD"

Through the administration of their properties, the Scuole Grandi became important charitable institutions within the Republic. However, the engagement of the Scuole with philanthropic buildings had already begun in the Middle Ages. In the fourteenth century, they initiated the construction of small hospitals and almshouses to assist poor and sick individuals, as well as their brethren.[27] A prominent example is the small hospital founded in 1330 by the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista for its destitute members in the Parish of San Vito.[28] Simple institutions like this one served as both hospitals providing medical care and hospices offering

22   Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 2.
23   Ibid., 4.
24   Ibid., 12.
25   Bronisław Geremek, *Poverty: A History* (Oxford, Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1994), 19–20.
26   The difficult relationship between the Venetian State and the Church was mainly caused by political reasons and shared interests. Between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Venetian State passed a number of laws aimed at limiting and strictly regulating the power of the Church and of the clergy on the island. Pope Paul V reacted by imposing the Interdict in 1606, which lasted approximately one year. Indeed, as noted by Brian Pullan, the Pope was not only perceived as a spiritual leader, but also as a political figure whose interests often clashed with those of the Venetian government. See: Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 44-45, and: Fortini Brown, 'Le scuole', 3.
27   Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 64.
28   Wurthmann, 'The Council of Ten and the Scuole Grandi in Early Renaissance Venice', 47, note 84.

lodging, food, and spiritual support for the needy.[29]

A significant distinction between these medieval hospitals and the fifteenth-century Pro Amore Dei housing complexes is that the former catered exclusively to individuals on a short-term basis. In contrast, the latter also welcomed families for longer periods. Moreover, the hospitals' accommodations were not governed by a formal tenure system, functioning more like hostels than permanent residences. Despite their limited size and scope within the urban poor relief landscape, Medieval hospitals laid the ideological foundation for the Pro Amore Dei housing movement.[30]

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Scuole Grandi owned approximately 206 Pro Amore Dei complexes, of which around one-quarter belonged solely to the Scuola di San Rocco.[31] During this time, around forty hospitals were also present in Venice—for example, the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Pietà, the Ospedale della Cà di Dio, and the Ospedale di Sant'Antonio.[32] The fact that hospitals continued to exist alongside the development and proliferation of Pro Amore Dei housing is a tangible demonstration of their differentiated role. By the late sixteenth century, both large and small hospitals primarily served individuals who had exhausted their resources due to disability, illness, or old age. Hospitals also offered shelter to the *fuoricasta,* or outcasts, who were completely reliant on public charity: the marginalized individuals who, through either misfortune or a rejection of societal norms, had been permanently ostracized from the community. In contrast, Pro Amore Dei housing also aimed at assisting the *popolo minuto*—the lower classes who, despite their state of poverty, continued to either contribute to the workforce or to maintain their social standing.[33]

Although Venetian testators and the Scuole refrained from precisely defining "the poor" for whom they aimed to provide housing, the target tenants of Pro Amore Dei housing did belong to limited social categories. These included widows, elderly women, and impoverished artisans working in common trades, such as weaving, spinning, leatherworking, boxmaking, and shoemaking. Mariners, arsenal laborers, retired galley servicemen, and wage earners with large dependent families also fell into this category. Additionally, female members of Franciscan and Dominican third orders—women who could not enter convents but sought social respectability through religious affiliation, known locally as *pizzochare*—were likewise considered part of this group of impoverished individuals.[34]

A parallel may be drawn between the target tenants of Pro Amore Dei housing and the social group of the *poveri vergognosi*. This latter category, known as *pauperes verecundi* in Latin*, shamefaced poor* in England, and *pauvres honteux* in France, emerged at the beginning of the fourteenth century to describe individuals who, despite their destitution, refrained from openly begging out of shame.[35] Since they were believed to have fallen into poverty through no fault of their own and did not contribute to public disorder, they were considered to deserve special treatment and attention compared to those other beggars who, in the following century, would be referred to as the "undeserving poor."

CHARITABLE VERSUS REVENUE-PRODUCING REAL ESTATE

Acquired through perpetual trusts, the properties of the Scuole in Venice fell into two categories. The first, defined as *charitable* real estate, includ-

29   Ibid., 47.
30   Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 65.
31   Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', Note 67, page 98.
32   Ibid., Note 67, page 98.
33   Ibid., 110.
34   'Houses in the Service of the Poor in the Venetian Republic', 3–4.
35   Pullan, 'Poveri, Mendicanti e Vagabondi (Secoli XIV-XVII)', 1038.

ed buildings and lots designated for welfare purposes, such as Pro Amore Dei buildings constructed by the confraternities to support impoverished members. Examples from this category include Corte San Marco and Corte San Rocco in the area of Santa Maria Maggiore, among many others. The second category, describable as *revenue-producing* real estate, included houses, workshops, shops, and large buildings available for rent at high or premium rates. An example of this category is Castelforte San Rocco, an apartment block built by the Scuola di San Rocco in 1549 and designed by Antonio Abbondi, also known as Scarpagnino, who won the commission in 1547 through a competition between five participants.[36]

Facade of the Castelforte San Rocco (1549) apartment block from the canal.
From Manfredo Tafuri, *Venezia e il Rinascimento*, Image 83, *Antonio Abbondi detto lo Scarpagnino, Le case di Castelforte San Rocco: facciata sul canale.*
Photograph by Maria Ida Biggi.

Located near the Seat of the Scuola, the land for erecting Castelforte San Rocco was purchased for 1,400 ducats between 1534 and 1535.[37] Once completed, Castelforte comprised four apartments, each defined by a floor area of almost 500 square meters, designed to be rented to middle-class tenants for around 60 ducats per year.[38] Each dwelling had its individual entrance and staircase. Generously distributed over four floors, Castelforte was one of Venice's first "double houses," a typological novelty of the Renaissance. It included the intricate *Leonardo* scissor stairs system,[39] which allowed a complex distribution of each apartment over four floors while maintaining the complete privacy of each dwelling's vertical circulation. According to Giorgio Gianighian, from this point on, the double house model came to be used for all residential buildings that were neither palaces, nor, we may add, affordable or charitable housing.[40]

The long-term financial viability of the Scuole's charitable projects relied on the income generated from their revenue-producing real estate. Within many perpetual trusts, it was common to designate a few dwellings within a Pro Amore Dei residential complex for market-rate rental pur-

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36 Gianighian and Pavanini, *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803*, 80.
37 Ibid., 80.
38 Ibid., 83.
39 For a detailed description of this stair system, see: Gianighian, 'Building a Renaissance Double House in Venice', 310–311.
40 Ibid., 305.

poses to generate revenue for the building's maintenance costs. A notable example of this strategy is the Corte Nuova complex of the Scuola della Misericordia, where, by the eighteenth century, two apartments were rented out to subsidize the upkeep of the other nineteen units, which were designated for impoverished residents.[41]
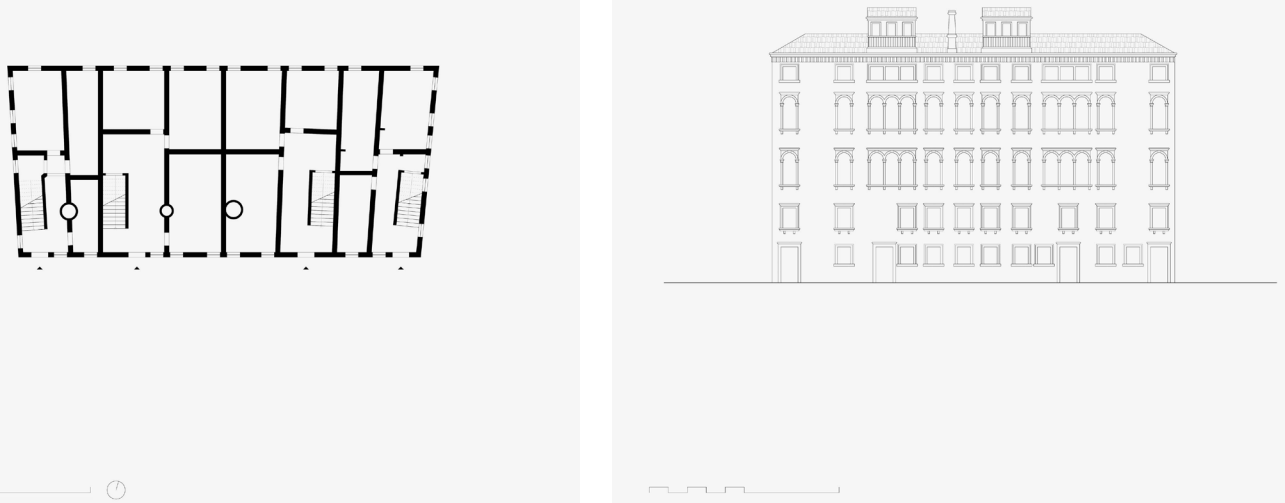
Left: Castelforte San Rocco, ground floor plan.
Right: Castelforte San Rocco, elevation with the four entrances to the apartments.
Drawing by the author, adapted from Giorgio Fossati, *Catastico Universale di tutte le fabbriche e stabili in specialità della veneranda Scuola di San Rocco*, 1770.

Although it may appear counterintuitive, the revenue-producing category was at the heart of the financial strategy employed by the Scuole to finance charitable housing initiatives. Based on cross-subsidization principles, the surplus of funds generated through the rental of their revenue-producing stock enabled the Scuole to finance a significant portion of the expenses associated with land acquisition, construction, and maintenance of their Pro Amore Dei housing blocks. This approach effectively established a nearly self-sustaining funding model, wherein profits from higher-income tenants contributed to the costs associated with their charitable and affordable housing stock. Therefore, it is evident that charitable operations still relied on land and real estate speculation, highlighting how the history of Pro Amore Dei housing was deeply entrenched in the market logic of capitalism.

TAKING OVER VACANT LAND

Prior to the sixteenth century, Pro Amore Dei housing projects typically consisted of small-scale interventions near the Seats of the Scuole. These were often limited to either donated apartments that had been converted into charitable dwellings or modest housing clusters in close proximity to

41   Guidarelli, 'Le Scuole Grandi Veneziane Nel XV e XVI Secolo: Reti Assistenziali, Patrimoni Immobiliari e Strategie Di Governo', 64.

the confraternities' headquarters. One of the earliest recorded examples of such a configuration of Pro Amore Dei dwellings is that established in 1414 by the Scuola di Santa Maria della Carità for eight poor brothers and their families near the Scuola's Seat.[42]
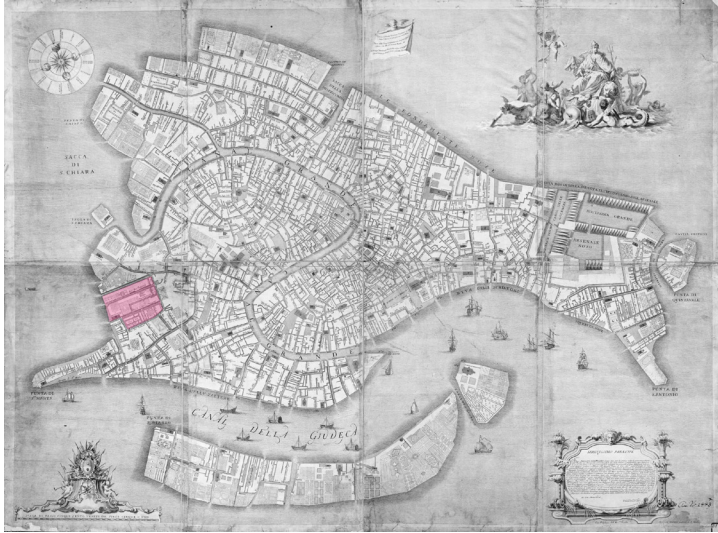
Area of Santa Maria Maggiore in Dorsoduro. Adapted by the author, from Ludovico Ughi, *Pianta topografica della città*, 1729. Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
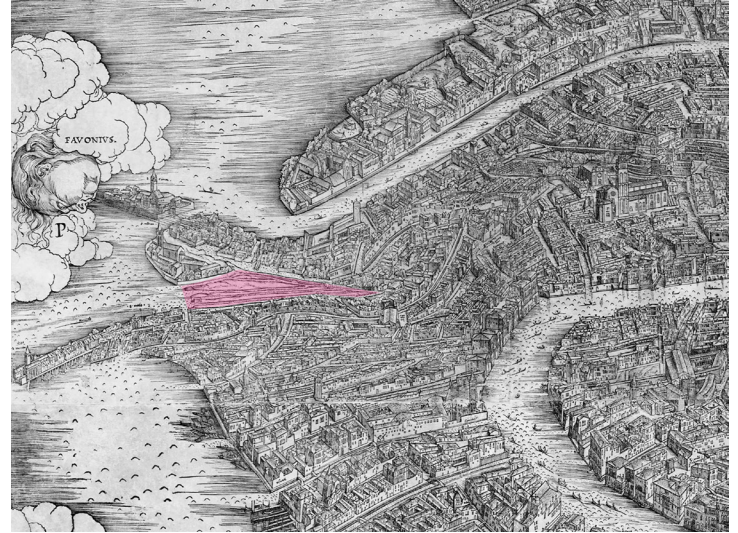
The newly remediated land of Santa Maria Maggiore before its development. Adapted by the author, from Jacopo de' Barbari, *View of Venice*, ca. 1500, Museo Correr, Venice.

Islands of Santa Maria Maggiore in Dorsoduro, 1500 ca.
i. Corte delle Procuratie; ii. Calle del Volto; iii. Corte San Rocco;
iv. Ca Cappello; v. Corte San Marco.
Drawing by the author, adapted from Giorgio Gianighian, Paola Pavanini,
Dietro i palazzi (Venice: Arsenale Editrice, 1984), 50.

42   Wurthmann, 'The Council of Ten and the Scuole Grandi in Early Renaissance Venice', 48–49.

It was only during the sixteenth century that the phenomenon of Pro Amore Dei housing came to occupy entire underdeveloped areas of Venice. A pivotal example of such areas are the islands of Santa Maria Maggiore in the *Sestiere* of Dorsoduro.

Located in the westernmost part of Venice, this area underwent remediation between the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century. This intervention coincided with the State of Venice's increasing interest in managing embankments, timber pilings, and quays.[43] Following the reclamation efforts, the land was divided into a series of regular islands that ran parallel to each other.[44] During the first forty years post-remediation, the southernmost island of Santa Maria Maggiore primarily hosted charitable housing and welfare complexes—around 136 Pro Amore Dei accommodations in total[45]—of which Corte San Rocco (III.) is a notable example, along with the neighboring Corte delle Procuratie (I.), built in the 1500s, on the western side, and Corte San Marco (V.), finished in 1534, on the eastern end.[46] An area exclusively devoted to charitable housing existed nowhere else in sixteenth-century Venice, marking a new chapter in the history of the island's urban welfare. However, despite its predominant charitable use, this area was not exempt from later market-driven land appreciation. As noted by Giorgio Gianighian and Paola Pavanini, when the Scuola di San Rocco purchased the land to build its Corte San Rocco, the cost was approximately one ducat per square *passo* (about 1.73 square meters). In contrast, forty years later, Paulo D'Anna, a real estate owner, would have paid four times that amount for the same plot of land.[47] This suggests that even areas that were initially designated for charitable purposes were not exempt from land speculation; on the contrary, investing in charitable housing could present opportunities for profit over the long term.

AS MANY HOUSES AS NECESSARY, LEASED FOR LIFE

Within the Scuole's administrative organization, internal bodies composed of elected members were established to manage the individual perpetual trusts, known as the *Commissarie*. Each Commissaria functioned as the actual trustee of the bequest and had autonomous accounting and administrative powers over its assets and real estate portfolio.[48] By assigning a separate Commissaria to oversee each perpetual trust, the Scuole implemented a decentralized administrative system that enabled more efficient real estate management and facilitated swift decision-making. A remarkable example of a perpetual trust commissioning a Pro Amore Dei housing project to the Scuola Grande di San Marco is that of Pietro Olivieri. Drafted in 1515, Olivieri's perpetual trust instructed the executors of his Commissaria to sell all his property upon his passing in order to:

> purchase a suitable plot of land in an area of [the Scuola's] choice to build as many houses as deemed necessary. These houses should be built to guarantee a rent profit of 5 to 6 ducats per year each, if necessary. [However, these houses should be given for free to the] poor brothers of the Scuola di San Marco, and especially to those with children. The houses should be leased for life, and upon the death of their inhabitants, they should be transferred to other brothers of the Scuola […].[49]

43   Manfredo Tafuri, *Ricerca Del Rinascimento: Principi, Città, Architetti*, Saggi 760 (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1992), 120.
44   Gianighian, 'Building a Renaissance Double House in Venice', 303.
45   Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 104.
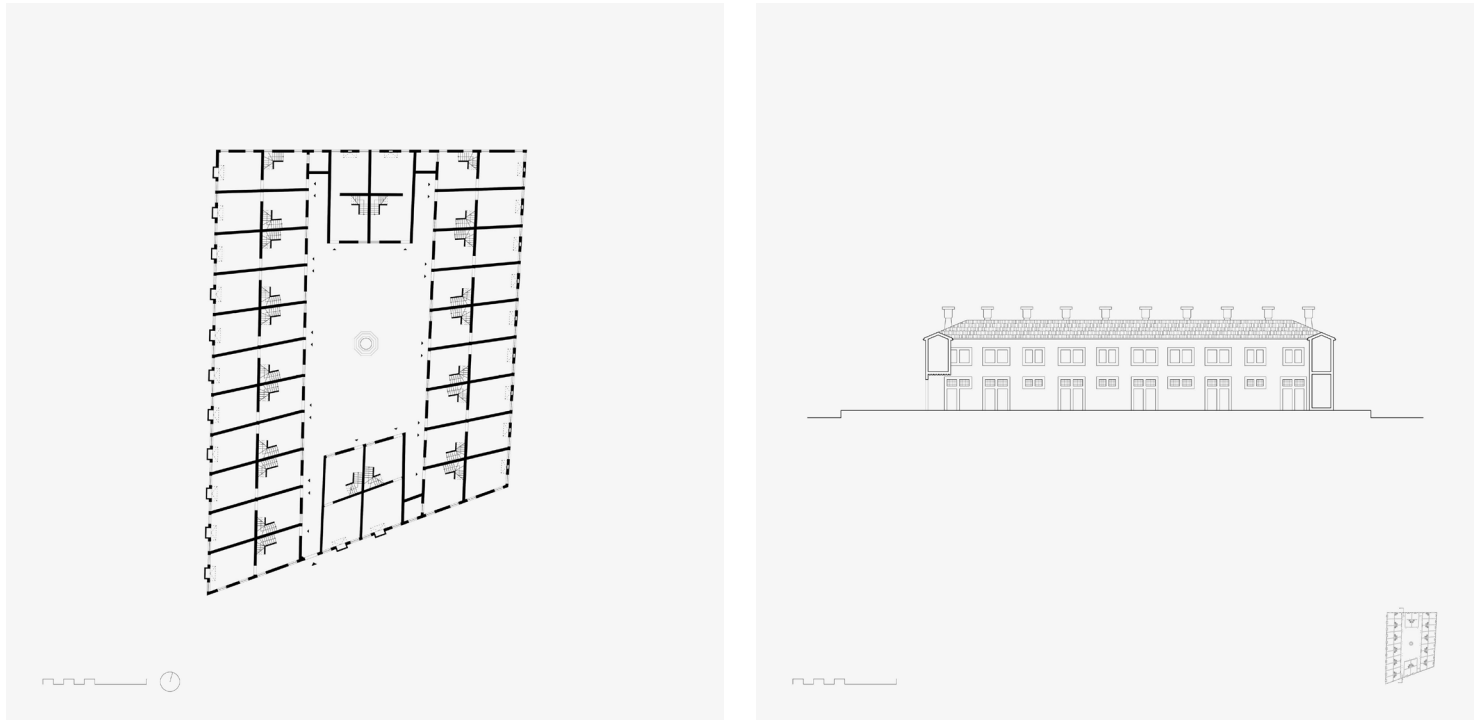46   Gianighian and Pavanini, *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803*, 45.
47   Ibid., 45.
48   Guidarelli, 'Le Scuole Grandi Veneziane Nel XV e XVI Secolo: Reti Assistenziali, Patrimoni Immobiliari e Strategie Di Governo', 61.
49   Author's translation. Gianighian and Pavanini, *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803*, 111.

His trust, managed by three elected brothers of the confraternity, resulted in the construction (1534–1540) of a court of 24 Pro Amore Dei houses after his death in 1529.[50] Located on the eastern side of the southernmost island of the remediated territories of Santa Maria Maggiore, the court was finalized in 1542. It came to be known as Corte San Marco.

Left: Corte San Marco, ground floor plan.
Right: Corte San Marco, internal elevation with the entrances to the apartments.
Drawing by the author, adapted from Giorgio Gianighian, Paola Pavanini, *Dietro i palazzi* (Venice: Arsenale Editrice, 1984), 110-115, and Gianluca Aldegani, Fabrizio Diodati, *Le corti: spazi pubblici e privati nella città di Venezia* (Venice: Edizioni Cluva, 1991), 181.

The Corte occupied a trapezoidal plot of land that defined the perimeter of the four housing rows. At the center of the complex was a private courtyard with a communal fountain. Courtyards like that of Corte San Marco played essential social, sanitary, and infrastructural functions within charitable and affordable housing complexes. Socially, the courtyard served as a shared space where residents gathered, children played, and laundry was hung. Sanitary benefits derived from its role in facilitating light and air circulation into the surrounding dwellings. Infrastructurally, the courtyard accommodated a communal fountain connected to an underground water-collection basin, which purified rainwater and distributed it to all residences within the complex. As Fabrizio Diodati has argued, the courtyard in these housing complexes functioned as an extension of the domestic interior.[51]

The two vertical housing rows included nine and eleven houses, while the two smaller horizontal rows accommodated the remaining four, two on each side.[52] All dwellings could be accessed only from the courtyard. Small volumes were placed to close three meeting points between the housing rows. The fourth one, an arcade, was instead used as the only entrance point to the private courtyard.[53]

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50   Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 103.
51   Gianluca Aldegani and Fabrizio Diodati, *Le corti: spazi pubblici e privati nella città di Venezia* (Milano: CittàStudi, 1991), 18.
52   Gianighian and Pavanini, *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803*, 113.
53   Ibid., 113.

Perspectival views of a typical apartment in Corte San Marco.
Left: ground floor; right: first floor.
Drawings by the author.

Within the rows, each house contained a single dwelling organized on two floors and an attic. The ground floor featured a generous entrance room (A) and the kitchen (B). A quarter-turn staircase found in the entrance led to the upper floor, which contained a total of two bedrooms of almost identical size (C and D). The stairs continued upwards to the attic. Corte San Marco presented a case of a perfectly optimized plan: each of the twenty-four dwellings followed an identical blueprint, with the same modular unit repeated twenty-four times. This had the consequence of maximizing spatial efficiency, streamlining construction processes, and reinforcing a sense of uniformity and order within the collective housing complex.

With the construction of Corte San Rocco, the phenomenon of Pro Amore Dei housing reached an entirely new scale due to the size of the complex, marking a shift in the scope and ambition of Venetian charitable housing. Compared to Corte San Marco, which hosted one apartment per module, Corte San Rocco represented a high-density development for the construction knowledge of the time, as each module comprised two apartments stacked on each other.

As early as 1511, the Scuola di San Rocco expressed interest in purchasing a plot of land in Santa Maria Maggiore to build Pro-Amore Dei housing.[54] The following year, the Scuola acquired a square plot measuring 555 passi (approximately 972 square meters) on the southernmost island of Santa Maria Maggiore. This island was surrounded by the Fondamenta of the Rio di Santa Maria Maggiore on the northern side, the Fondamenta of the Rio dei Tentori on the southern and western ends, and, finally, the Fondamenta of the Rio del Gaffaro on the eastern side.

The previously discussed housing complex of Corte San Marco was adjacent to the plot purchased by the Scuola di San Rocco. The Scuola paid a total sum of 831 ducats to its original patrician owner, Alvise

54　Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 98.

Pisani.[55] The project of Corte San Rocco was to be designed by the Scuola's *protomaestro,* the same architect that designed Castelforte San Rocco, Antonio Abbondi, also known as Lo Scarpagnino.
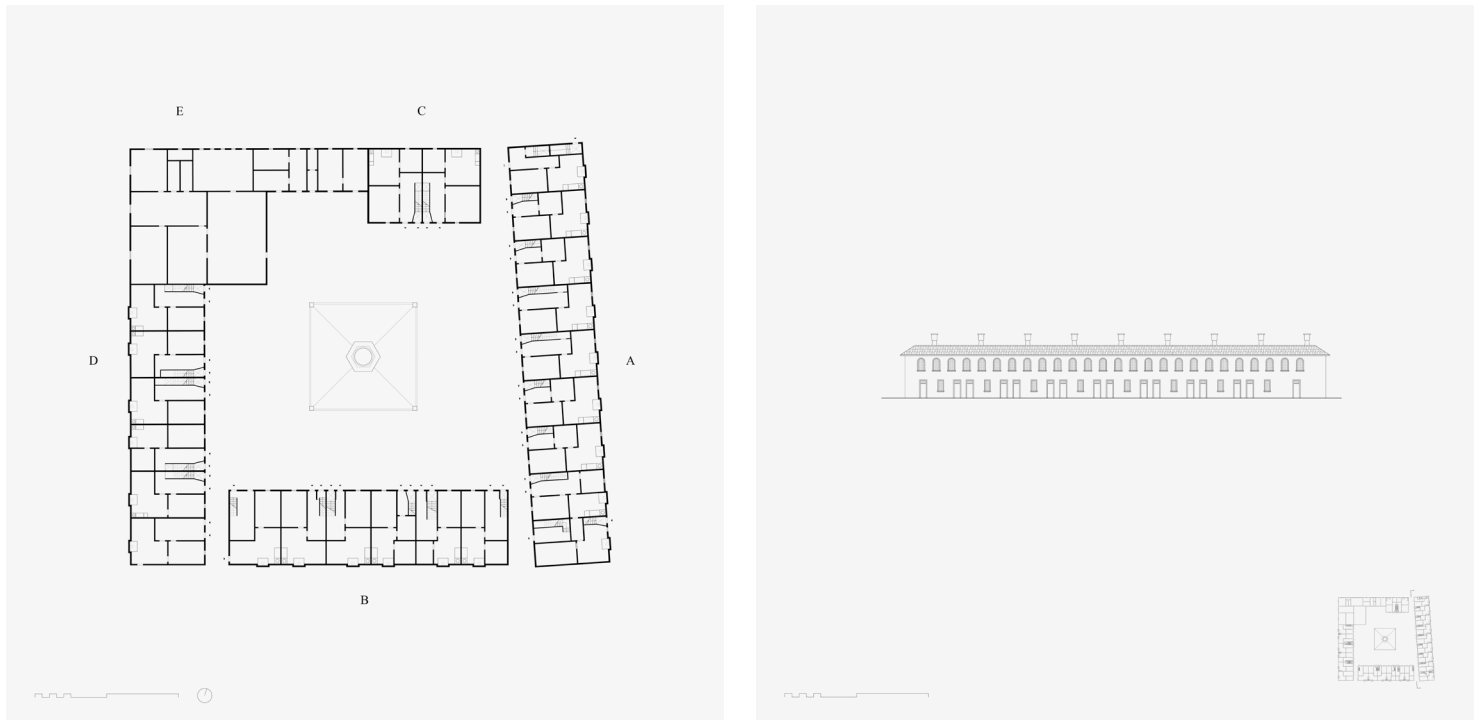
Left: Corte San Rocco, ground floor plan.
Right: Corte San Rocco, internal elevation with the entrances to the apartments.
Drawing by the author, adapted from Giorgio Fossati, *Pian terreno di tutti li stabili posti in corte di San Rocco all'Angelo Raffaelle, di ragione et in specialità di essa veneranda Scuola* (1770), 482, reg. 26/2 C, disegno n. 31 and n. 42.

The protomaestro, also known as a *proto*, was a salaried employee responsible for coordinating and supervising the entire construction process of an institution's projects. Often, the proto also covered the position of chief designer of the works, or architect.[56] Working as a proto was a highly coveted job since it was a permanent and semi-public position of social relevance. For this reason, the Scuole attempted to choose the best architects in Venice to fulfil this role. For example, the proto of the Procurators of San Marco was Jacopo Sansovino, who became known as one of the most prominent architects of the sixteenth century.[57] The fact that a proto would take on the design and supervision of Pro Amore Dei projects was not an exception; instead, it was common practice. Charitable and affordable housing, as well as the Scuole's Seats and various revenue-producing buildings, were all designed and supervised by the Scuole's proti. In this way, the centralized management of the Scuola's projects ensured the efficient coordination of all construction initiatives, allowing for a strategic allocation of labor and material resources. Workers could be deployed across multiple sites according to the specific stages of construction, while building materials could be systematically managed and distributed as needed.[58] Indeed, as part of a unified building program, the construction of Corte San Rocco coincided with the establishment of the Scuola di San Rocco's Seat,[59] as

55   Ibid.
56   Richard J. Goy, *Building Renaissance Venice: Patrons, Architects and Builders c. 1430–1500* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 89.
57   Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 75.
58   Guidarelli, 'Le Scuole Grandi Veneziane Nel XV e XVI Secolo: Reti Assistenziali, Patrimoni Immobiliari e Strategie Di Governo', 64.
59   Gianighian and Pavanini, *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803*, 40.

well as two additional welfare projects, underscoring the rapid expansion and prolific building activity of this newly founded Scuola.[60]

The construction of Corte San Rocco began in 1516. Upon its completion, the complex occupied the entire perimeter of the lot, consisting of four wings of multistory rowhouses organized around a spacious square court.[61] The Corte underwent several modifications throughout its gradual construction over a century.
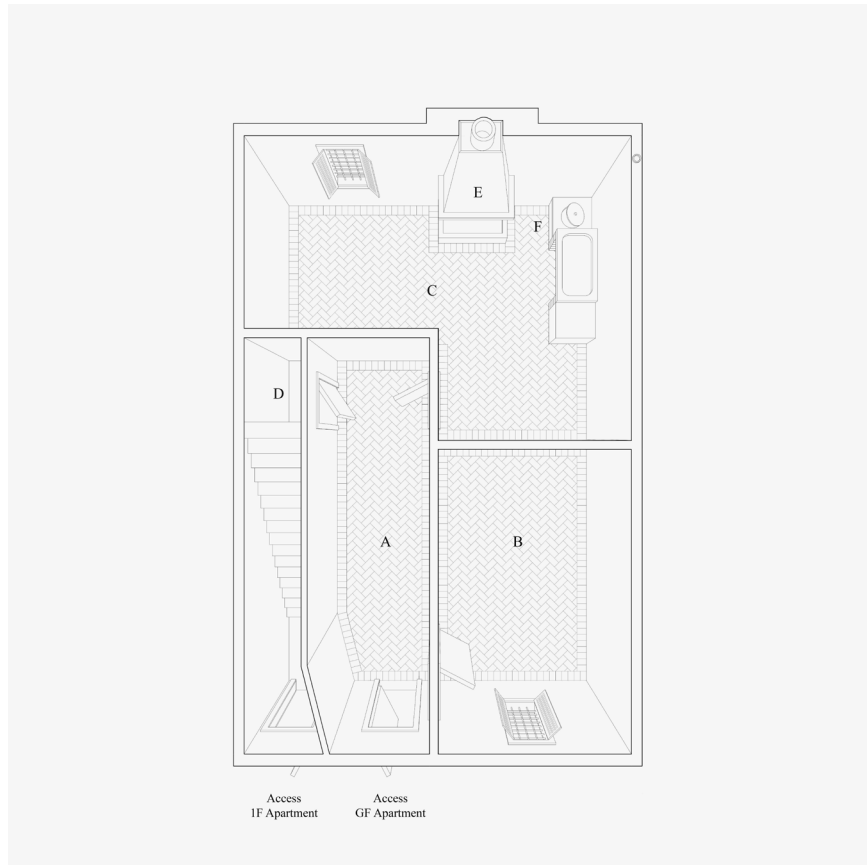
Perspectival view of a typical ground-floor apartment in row A of Corte San Rocco.
Drawing by the author.

Soon after the completion (1512–15) of the first eighteen apartments—nine on the ground floor and another nine on the first floor of the first row (A)—it became clear that more dwellings were needed due to the high demand.[62] It was only in 1527 that the decision was made to add another twelve apartments in a two-story row (B) and another smaller row of four (C), which were completed already one year later.[63] In 1538, the Corte hosted thirty-two apartments; by 1547, around 500 needy individuals resided there.[64] During 1550–60, another twelve apartments were added in a two-story row of six modules (D).[65] In the seventeenth century, the apartments in the Court ceased to be given *pro amore Dei* and started to be leased at rents between 12 and 26 ducats.[66] In about 1605, a new building

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60   These two projects are the charitable housing projects of St. Andrea and Santa Maria Zobenigo. See: Maschio, 'Investimenti Edilizi Nelle Scuole Grandi a Venezia', 424.

61   Gianighian and Pavanini, *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803*, 65.

62   Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 98.

63   Pavanini, 99.

64   Guidarelli, 'Le Scuole Grandi Veneziane Nel XV e XVI Secolo: Reti Assistenziali, Patrimoni Immobiliari e Strategie Di Governo', 63.

65   Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 100.

66   Gianighian and Pavanini, *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803*, Sheet "Ricostruzione dei 'Terreni nuovi de Santa Maria Mazor' alla fine del seicento," description 33.

(E) was constructed for rent at 140 ducats on the northwestern area of the site, indicating that its target tenants were of bourgeois standing.[67] The complex continued to expand, adding additional floors to the existing fabric and other building extensions, reaching fifty-nine dwellings by 1661.[68]

Concerning the first row built in the first decade of the 1500s, each two-story rowhouse module—measuring approximately 6 meters in width and 10 meters in depth—contained two apartments stacked one on the other. On the ground floor of each housing module, two separate doors provided access to the respective ground-floor and first-floor apartments in each module. The entrance to the ground-floor apartment led to a spacious hallway (A) with doors to a room facing the court (B) and an L-shaped kitchen (C) facing the outer Fondamente.[69] The entrance to the first-floor dwelling, instead, opened to a narrow antechamber (D) where a single-flight staircase was located. Upstairs, the plan was identical to the ground-floor apartment. An additional floor with a small attic was present, which could be reached from the first-floor apartment with a wooden ladder.[70]
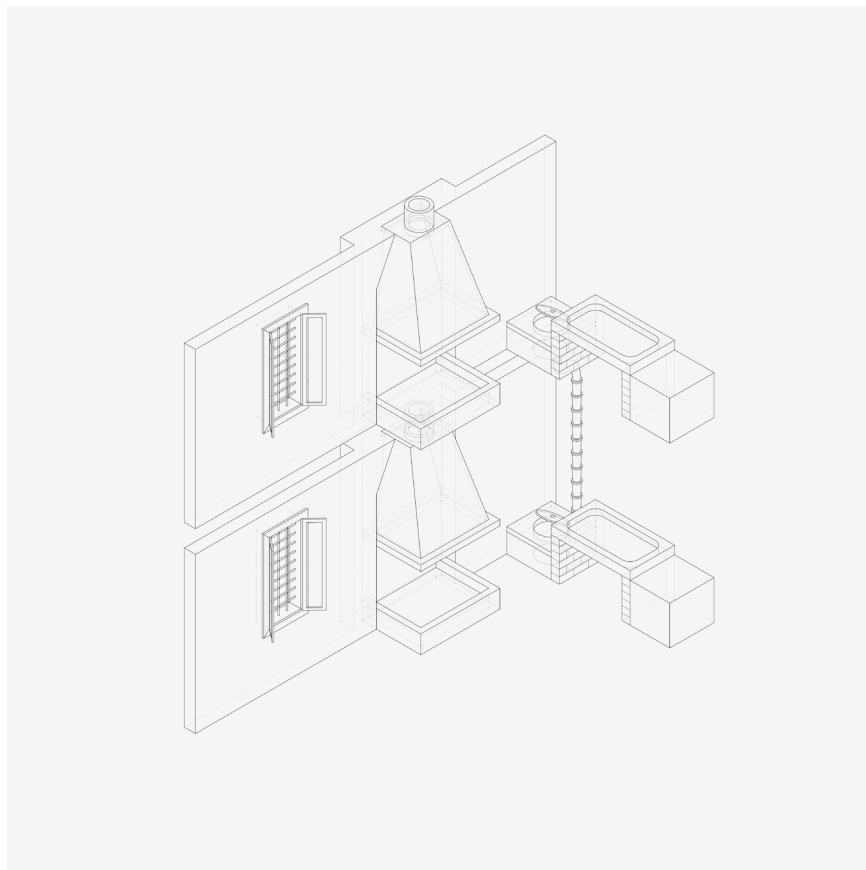
Vertical alignment of the chimney flue and the latrine pipes in Corte San Rocco.
Drawing by the author.

Apart from minimal variations, the same apartment type was repeated throughout the entire blueprint of the Corte. The spatial organization of the apartments followed the functional logic imposed by the building elements: the perimeter of each room was defined by the residual space

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67   PavaniniPavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 100.
68   Ibid.
69   Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 105.
70   Ibid.

formed between the intersecting load-bearing walls.[71] In addition, service elements—such as the chimney flue of the hearth (E) and the adjacent latrine pipes (F)—were vertically aligned across the two floors,[72] reflecting an effort to rationalise and optimise the building's modular structure.

It is through the repetition of these elements, together with the doors and windows within the row modules, that the aesthetic rhythm of the façade was defined. Indeed, despite the partial variation derived by these elements, both facades are devoid of other intentional aesthetic expressions.

Cost-saving considerations not only drove the optimization and standardization of the building module, but also of the courtyard. At first glance, the generous central courtyard might appear at odds with this logic, as it occupied valuable space that could have been used to increase density through additional housing rows. Nevertheless, apart from its religious, social, and economic purposes, the courtyard fulfilled a crucial infrastructural role: it housed a central fountain and a shared underground water collection basin that supplied water to all of the Corte's dwellings.[73] This collective solution, which was typically used in medieval times in Venice, might have proven more economical than constructing individual water collection systems. These had started to be used for privately owned housing, initially located on rooftops and later integrated within each building lot, to enable the exact correspondence between the building's perimeter and the land parcel, thereby maximizing density.[74] As an architectural element, the courtyard differentiated Corte San Rocco, among other charitable housing complexes, from other private or speculative residential projects.[75] On one hand, the courtyard unified the entire complex, serving as both a communal and distribution space,[76] as well as a point of access to each dwelling. On the other hand, the courtyard became an opportunity for control and surveillance. Following mischievous and unruly behavior by some residents of Corte San Rocco, the Council of Ten decreed that no ball games or dance parties were to be held there, and no swear words were to be heard, under penalty of eviction for those who disobeyed.[77] Similar rules were in place in Corte San Marco.

FROM INDIVIDUAL HOUSE TO COLLECTIVE HOUSING

What is the city but the people?
True, the people are the city.
—Coriolanus, Act 3, scene 1.

Corte San Marco and Corte San Rocco may be read as relevant examples of a broader phenomenon that characterized sixteenth-century Venice: the proliferation of large-scale, *collective* row housing. Indeed, while architectural historian Paolo Maretto noted that collective housing complexes were practically absent during the medieval period,[78] Paola Pavanini and Giorgio Gianighian pointed out that row housing, a commonly employed type among the higher classes, had not yet been used for the lower segments of the population until the Renaissance period.[79] Prior to the sixteenth century, the urban landscape of domestic architecture in Venice

71   Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 105.
72   Pavanini, 106.
73   Giorgio Gianighian, 'La casa veneziana complessa del Rinascimento: un'invenzione contro il consumo di territorio', in *D'une ville à l'autre. Structures matérielles et organisation de l'espace dans les villes européennes (XIIIe-XVIe siècle) Actes du colloque de Rome (1er-4 décembre 1986)*, vol. 122 (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1989), https://www.persee.fr/doc/efr_0000-0000_1989_act_122_1_4610 559.
74   Gianighian, 563–64.
75   Gianighian, 558.
76   Maschio, 'Investimenti Edilizi Nelle Scuole Grandi a Venezia', 424.
77   *San Rocco 1*, folder 71, file 7 (first), folio 55, n.d. (ca. 1560), Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Venice, as quoted in note 89, page 111 of Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca'.
78   Maretto, *L'edilizia Gotica Veneziana*, 42.
79   Gianighian and Pavanini, *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803*.

was mainly characterised by individual houses, ranging from the patrician *domūs* to the smaller wooden houses of the lower classes.[80] Therefore, how and why did these large-scale, collective row housing types appear in Venice precisely during the sixteenth century?
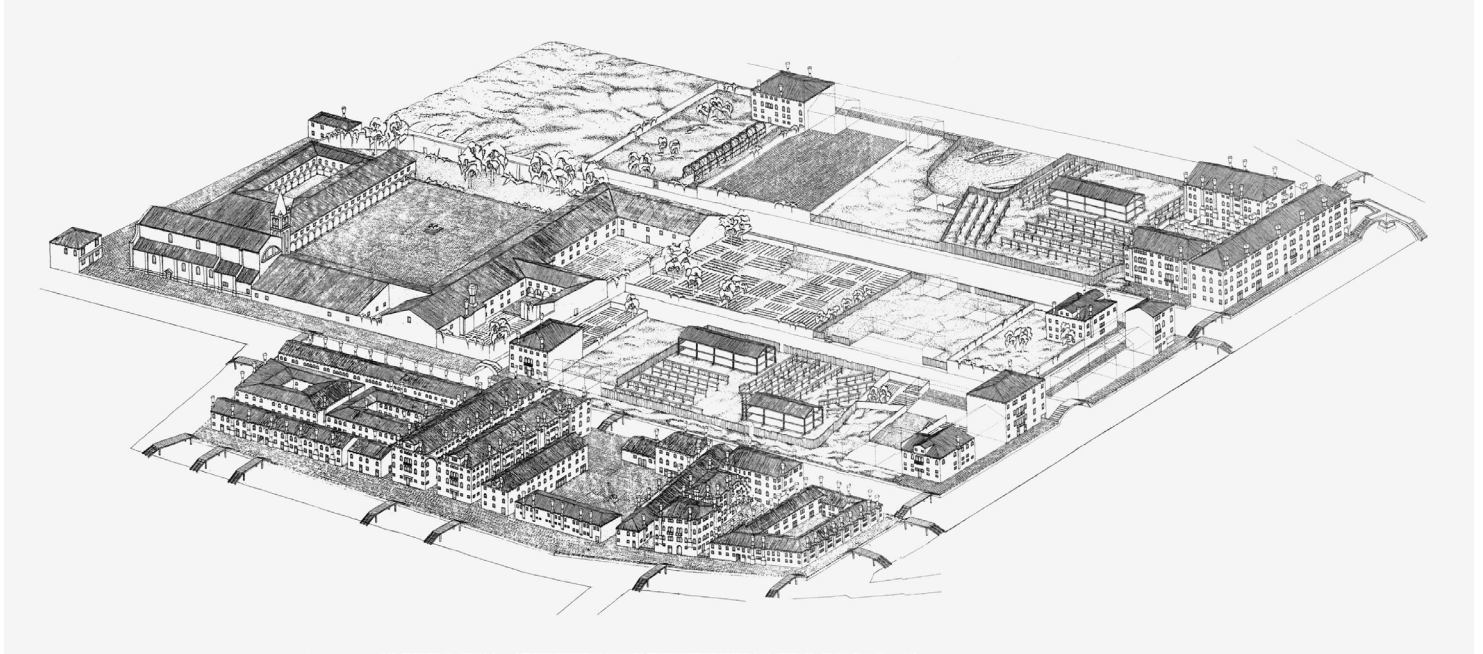
The area of Santa Maria Maggiore in the 16th century, with Corte San Marco and Corte San Rocco in the southernmost island.
From Giorgio Gianighian, Paola Pavanini, eds. *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803* (Venice: Arsenale Editrice, 1984).

If, on the one hand, interventions such as Corte San Rocco and Corte San Marco were responses to the population increase of the mid-sixteenth century and the resulting need to densify urban areas,[81] on the other hand, they also demonstrated increased attention to a new and urgent social, political, and, therefore, *urban* issue: that of housing the poor but 'deserving' members of society. Early modern social organisation was increasingly more variegated than during the Middle Ages.[82] Although society in the Venetian context has commonly been divided between patrician and non-patrician members, each social group presented various subgroups, complicating this dualistic understanding. If the patriciate constituted only a small minority of the total population, the rest, the *popolani,* formed the majority of the social makeup of Venice. This latter group was complex and contained multiple ranks, ranging from wealthy merchants to the *popolo minuto*, or "little people," who were at the opposite end of the social gradient.[83] Indeed, as new social, political, and economic groups emerged in the early modern period, an increasing differentiation and heterogeneity occurred within each group.[84]

The emergence of new ranks and the diversification of their internal hierarchies in Venice was mirrored in the appearance of new architectural domestic types and their subtle aesthetic and formal variations in the urban landscape. In the same way as specific items of clothing, manners, and

80   Maretto, *L'edilizia Gotica Veneziana*, 42.
81   Gianighian and Pavanini, *Dietro i Palazzi: Tre Secoli Di Architettura Minore a Venezia 1492-1803*, 48.
82   Andreas Gestrich, "The Social Order," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350–1750*, ed. Hamish M. Scott, First edition, vol. I: Peoples & Place, Oxford Handbooks in History (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 296.
83   Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani*, Digital [1st ed. 1987] (Johns Hopkins University Press, n.d.).
84   Gestrich, 'The Social Order'.

etiquette, among other factors, came to differentiate one social group from the other, domestic architecture and the formal and typological characteristics of residential buildings also became a concern of social expression and economic capacity.[85] Thus, what we may call an early precursor of "social housing" in the Venetian case was not an isolated phenomenon but part of a larger social, political, and, in turn, architectural mechanism that increasingly segmented society into social groups.

The new issue of housing for 'the poor' also presented architectural, stylistic, and aesthetic questions that had never been asked before, questions that were answered by avoiding flashy decoration in favor of the rigorous and simple repetition of structural elements defining the rhythm of the facades of these complexes. The dilemma of expenditure was also resolved by the rationalization of the floor plan, which allowed minimum waste, ease of maintenance, and the possibility for densification. The *tabula rasa* offered by the territories of Santa Maria Maggiore, which had not been urbanized until the 1500s, presented the perfect site for this new typological experimentation. Here, no existing urban constraints had to be considered, except for the physical boundaries of the islands defined by the canals and the property boundaries of the plots.

The wealthy merchants, non-noble professionals, and artisans stood at the other end of the non-patrician social spectrum: just as with the housing of the *popolo minuto*, the formal expression of their dwellings increasingly reflected their social rank. Architecture responded by generating new types, such as the 'double house' discussed by Gianighian, and aesthetic languages that visually and typologically registered their position within the urban hierarchy. Despite the low density and ample floor area of its dwellings, Castelforte San Rocco can be viewed as an example of housing for the middle class.

For Pier Vittorio Aureli, it is precisely with the birth of *housing*, hence when houses could either be rented or purchased, that "typological design" was developed as an architectural approach.[86] According to this method of designing, the organizational logic precedes the formal appearance of the building, resulting in what Aureli has called an "architectural silence."[87]

The *architectural silence* of Corte San Marco and Corte San Rocco, among many other examples here not mentioned, may be argued to have laid the foundation for the aesthetics of affordable and social housing for centuries to come. Paola Pavanini noted that the particular design tradition that distinguished Venetian charitable and affordable housing not only operated independently from the typical sixteenth-century Venetian architectural experimentation but also continued across different historical periods until the eighteenth century.[88] Characterized by repeatability, optimization, and standardization in plan and elevation, the aesthetic quality of these charitable housing complexes lies in the uniform and austere forms that they embody.

Manfredo Tafuri argued that the anonymity and simple formal composition of Corte San Rocco had been shaped by its charitable function. In *Interpreting the Renaissance*, he wrote that the "modest formal profile [of charitable housing complexes such as Corte San Rocco] participates in a *decorum* whose parameters are provided by the public welfare functions they were asked to perform,"[89] therefore, implying that the architectural style and simplicity were shaped by the buildings' role in serving the public good. However, we may also argue that the opposite is true, or that the aesthetic and typological qualities of this Venetian phenomenon became

85   See: Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process, Vol.I. The History of Manners* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).
86   Pier Vittorio Aureli, 'Enjoy the Silence: The Case for Typological Design', *Burning Farm*, no. 10, accessed 21 January 2025, burning.farm/essays/enjoy-the-silence, 5.
87   Aureli.
88   Pavanini, 'Abitazioni Popolari e Borghesi Nella Venezia Cinquecentesca', 106–107.
89   Manfredo Tafuri, *Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architects* (New Haven: Cambridge, Mass: Yale University Press; Harvard University, Graduate School of Design, 2006), 90.

themselves defining characteristics of charitable and affordable housing for many centuries to come. Indeed, the optimization of form and the austere aesthetics of these housing complexes gave birth to an architecture reduced to its essential elements in plan and elevation, both features that would shape affordable and, later, social housing until the present day.

AUTHOR

Theodora Giovanazzi is an architectural designer and PhD candidate at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (TPOD Lab). Her research interests include the history and theory of architecture and domesticity, with a specific focus on both social housing and the socio-economic construction of poverty in the European context.

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