HUMANITIES ESSAY

Archive and site: The ghost of Peter Eisenman's 1978 Cannaregio Ovest project in Venice

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss Peter Eisenman's unbuilt proposal for the Cannaregio Ovest district in Venice and develop a speculative reading linking the project's archive and the site. I account for different absences involved to visually represent the archive and site in a multi-layered and open-ended relation. Through a critical and creative reading of the archival material of the project and its underpinning discourse, in the light of the present of both its intended location and the debates around Venice's built heritage, I reveal the potential of the archive as a tool to reimagine the experience of the city and to inform a critique of its conservation.

Dedicated to the memory of Jonathan Hill.

Keywords:
Venice, Cannaregio, Peter Eisenman, discourse, photography, archive, site, layering, absence, nostalgia, housing

Introduction

When observing Eisenman's design for Cannaregio Ovest in Venice, absence emerges in different forms, ranging from the unbuilt condition of the project to the overlooked spaces and ruins in Cannaregio's built fabric; from Eisenman's architectural discourse featuring an idea of absence (of which this project is a key precedent), to the looming disappearance of the city, slowly but steadily submerging in the Venetian lagoon.

Eisenman's project blends Venice's history and myth through a fictional narrative that explicitly engages with absent dimensions of the city to articulate a critique of both modernist and postmodern architecture yet ignores the more tangible aspects of use and experience. He regards Le Corbusier's unrealised Venice Hospital as part of the context and draws on the death of the sixteenth-century philosopher and alchemist Giordano Bruno, who was betrayed and captured in Venice after having been invited to teach the art of memory.

My investigation confronts project and site from the point of view of their reciprocal absence – not a reconstruction 'as if built' of a design that was ultimately not intended to be constructable, but acknowledging it as being fundamentally unbuilt, reimagining as such an absence in the site.

Absence refers to a sense of distance from the here-and-now of experience, which is brought to presence through a trace, a fragment, or a void. This distance can be physical but also temporal, pointing to the past as well as the future. Being

interrogated through the perceiver's memory and imagination, absence implies the evocation of multiple, uncertain, and distant presences that remain away from our grasp, in an open-ended relation with its material remains. The most direct example of absence in architecture is the ruin, but it may also comprise the unbuilt project, which is the main case here: the distance between the design (materialised in the archive), and the site where it was expected or imagined to be realised [1].

This essay relies on two distinct components. First is a comprehensive study of the original drawings and models of Eisenman's project stored in the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal: which I will call the 'archive'. Second, is a photographic survey of the Cannaregio Ovest area in Venice, including on-site and aerial imagery, through which I will trace and explore the absence of Eisenman's project: this being the 'site'. In the essay I will thus be relating the archive and site at both analytical and speculative levels.

Eisenman's design proposal unfolds as a sequential and articulate overlap of horizontal layers of intervention, each one with a specific role and distinctive components. I develop an analysis and critique of his scheme following this mode of operation, revealing nuances and contradictions not mentioned by Eisenman in the texts that he used to disseminate his proposal. My study of the project's archive in the CCA involves the close observation of a vast number of drawings (and fewer models) of the Cannaregio design. I have overlaid and re-traced the drawings on plans and aerial images of the site and its context, at that time in the late 1970s and now in the present, to develop a deeper understanding that goes beyond the succinct texts through which Eisenman presented it back then. I am thus following Eisenman's archaeological drive by blending fictional pasts (his project and that of Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital) with the present as layers to be seen in simultaneity, observing the design within a wider timeframe. To reimagine the project's absence from the site, however, I will shift to a different form of multi-layered representation, of a more open nature and suggesting a more perceptual, tactile dimension of place and project, for which I use the term 'layering'. In this case, it is the layering of photographs from both the archival material and the site, which I blend to visualise the hauntings of an alternative past future (Eisenman's proposal) in the current materiality of Cannaregio in Venice. This therefore is a more speculative way to reflect upon Eisenman's proposal; a creative use of the archival material, preceded by a more analytical, detailed study of it in relation to

the project's physical site and its context. My text develops from the observation of this visual material in dialogue with literature relating to the project, its theoretical references, and to Venice in a wider sense.

Through this new *misreading* of Eisenman's work and discourse [2], I will bring forward the use of archival materials as a means to critically read and creatively interpret this paradigmatic project under the lens of absence. Through this new *afterlife* of Eisenman´s unrealised design for Cannaregio Ovest [3], I also further address the contingency of his discourse, which aimed to destabilise architecture's conventional realities and discourses at the time. I revisit the project and its ideas to critically comment upon the increasing touristic efforts for Venice to remain identical to itself, retaining an image of its past as a frozen present.

In synthesis, my aim is to critique Eisenman's project and discourse from within so as to offer: a) a richer and more nuanced understanding of the Cannaregio scheme that complements the writings of other authors who focus more on how it relates to his wider work and its underpinning theories; and b) a re-contextualised vision of Cannaregio's design that re-frames (or subverts) Eisenman's abstract criticism of nostalgic approaches to architecture in Venice. These representations suggest material and immaterial qualities, and real and fictional dimensions of a drifting city, to question the fixed, idealised image of Venice as subject of tourist-led heritage conservation [4: p. 520].

Venetian imagination and nostalgia

> *Decadence is therefore conservation, in which Venice is preserved not as a Ruskinian historical circularity but as the last territory of experience where meanings efface each other and the adventure of being is realised in utmost uprootedness.* [5: p. 10]

Francesco Dal Co seems to point at a radical sense of openness coming through ruination, which gives way to new beginnings, new imaginations. He understands decadence (he uses the Italian term 'decadenza') as a positive force, as Teresa Stoppani suggests, through which Venice both resists and assimilates the transformative forces of modernity [6: p. 163].

In my reading of these words written in the late 1970s, Dal Co is referring to the city as a ruin, in a state of openness and becoming, through which it constantly reinvents itself. Decades later, however, the process of accumulative growth and change of past centuries and those moments of ruination and openness, seem closer to a freezing point – at least in its emblematic, historic parts. Contrary to common belief, Venice has in fact changed significantly over the last two centuries. Although to a great extent preserving its medieval urban fabric and many of the buildings and monuments built in the Renaissance, Venice was subject to substantial urban transformations in the following centuries. According to the art historian Margaret Plant, these changing forces of modernisation have been continuously countered, however, balancing the process through 'resistance – or inertia – in the face of the new' [7: p. 2], complementing Dal Co's poetic vision.

Currently, in the increasing pursuit to remain identical to itself, there is little room for Venice to capture – to materialise – a piece of time present, but only to retain a specific current image of its past. Already at the turn of the twenty-first century, Plant had noted: 'Much of the modern interventions of Venice were aimed at conserving or reconstructing its built fabric – facsimile or heavily up-lifted buildings, they pretend being from the past yet respond to more recent interventions' [7: p. 1].

In the winning entry for a new IUAV architectural school building in 1998, Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue sought to play in the conceptual margins between 'the same' and 'almost the same', as they ironically used this situation to criticise the new constructions in Venice trying to resemble the old ones. They defined their project as a reflection: 'it is to find another building, in the reflection of its big windows', in a city 'that is beautiful because it is not there' [8: pp. 200-201]. At least in the realm of the city's imagination, this haunting, ungraspable sense of Venice as absence was conveyed, which was then synthesised into another (unrealised) design. Miralles and Tagliabue's project playfully engaged with the city's memory and fabric, challenging existing approaches to its built heritage [9].

To explore the absence (or the haunting presence) of Eisenman's project in Cannaregio Ovest, I will use a method of visual representation based on photography that I call 'layering', with which I seek to recreate the experience of openness, of multiplicity, of uncertainty – as described in Venice through Dal Co's words, and also reflected in the project by Miralles and Tagliabue. These images assemble a series of photographs of Venice, stimulating free associations by blurring limits and definitions, echoing the layered formation of the city and its constructions. They also recall the city's fragility due to a slow yet imminent process of ruination and subsidence, almost anticipating or enacting its future absence. They portray Venice – and the Cannaregio Ovest area in particular – as a vanishing ruin, dematerialising in a hazy autumn light (Figure 1) [10].

Ruins recall, in an uncertain way, their former constitution and the life they hosted. In their incompleteness, they refer us to an absence, mediating between something past and something imagined. They also suggest potential, thus the evocative power of ruins points at the past as well as the future, as Jonathan Hill asserts [11: p. 96]. Therefore, retrospective and prospective imaginations blend in the experience of ruins: imaginations of something that is not there at hand to the senses, of other times – and possibly other places.

Francesco Dal Co refers to Venice's unique relation with modernity in his introduction to the book, *10 Visions for Venice*, which aimed to discuss new ways to intervene in its historic urban fabric [12]. His book and related exhibition in 1980 originated from a seminar he had held in 1978, gathering proposals from a selection of renowned local and international architects for the redevelopment of the unconsolidated area of Cannaregio Ovest, seen as suitable for new housing. By inviting Aldo Rossi, John Hejduk, and Rafael Moneo, amongst others, the intention of Dal Co and the other organisers was to take the opportunity to open new theoretical grounds and go beyond the reductive ways in which modernist architecture approached historical contexts [13]. Included was the proposal by architect and theoretician Peter Eisenman, discussed in this essay, which along with other nine projects feed into the vast immaterial imaginary of Venice as ultimately none of them was built.

Eisenman's project was thus situated in broader discussions about the historical city. Architectural debates in the late 1970s were marked by a strong revision of the modernist rationalist approach. One of the trends in opposition to modernism highlighted the values of vernacular and historical architectures – as well as urban typologies – as inspirations to create forms more connected to tradition. Eisenman shifted this discussion to a different level, however, as through his design

Figure 1:
Layered composition by the author using photographs taken in Venice, 2014. Previously published in: Lanuza [10: p. 86].
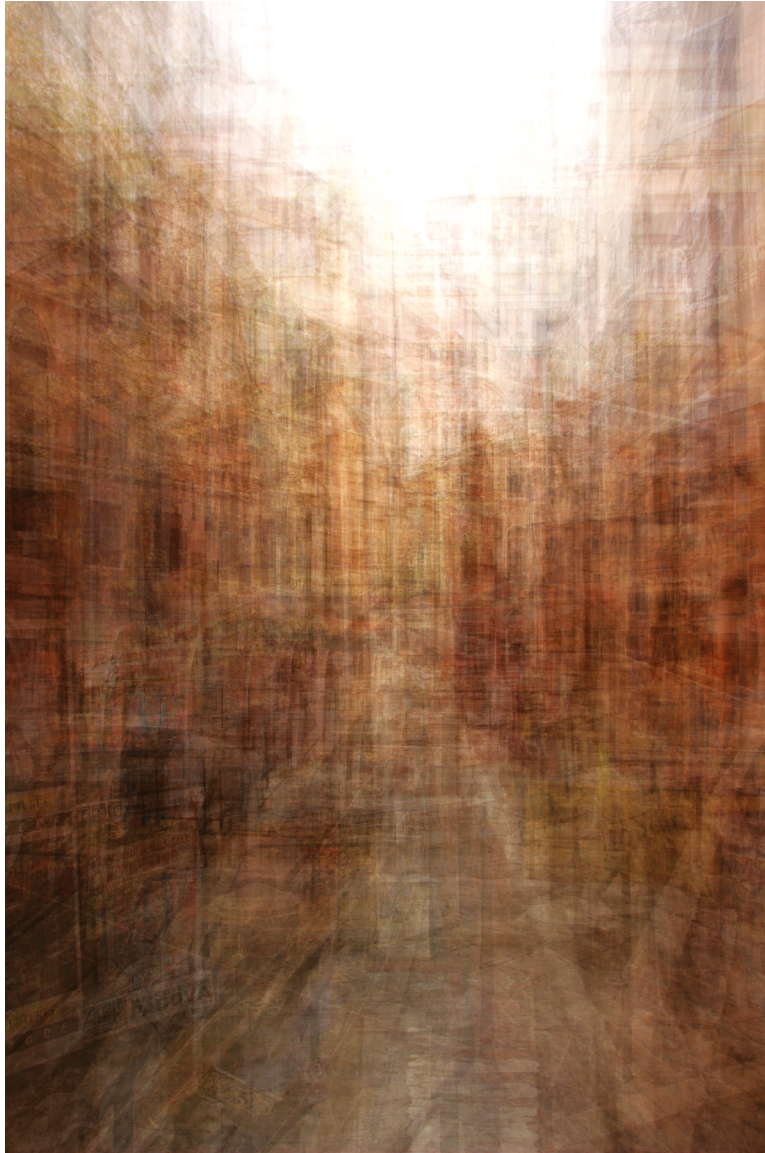
he articulates a provocative critique of what he regarded as a nostalgic attitude, in both modernist and postmodern architecture. In this way, he was reacting against 'three prevailing "isms" of architecture that all involve nostalgia, a malaise involving memory – modernism, a nostalgia for the future; postmodernism, a nostalgia for the past; and contextualism, a nostalgia for the present' [14].

Stoppani regards Venice as being, for Eisenman, 'the ideal "laboratory" to experiment with and develop strategies for a process-based architecture that operates in the city' [6: p. 163], the place where he applied his ongoing design investigations within an actual urban context for the first time. She highlights how Eisenman uses Venice's physical and historical context to inform a diagram that is both architectural and urban, exposing the contradictions of modern and postmodern architecture; the production of a narrative that can be reused elsewhere, which he subsequently did [6: pp. 168-169]. Whilst Stoppani locates the Cannaregio project within Eisenman's own developing discourse, and interprets its relationship with Venice as a rich experimental ground, Stefano Corbo prefers to emphasise its archaeological sense and its relation with the different philosophical references influencing Eisenman at the time, with Cannaregio being the first of a series of his projects that used the city 'to demonstrate the discontinuous and fragmented character of history' [15: p. 42]. Corbo thus further traces how Eisenman's design ideas evolved (or not so) in later projects – for example Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, Parc de la Villette in Paris, and the City of Culture in Santiago de Compostela. These two accounts of the Cannaregio project, along with other authors like Michael Jasper, who discusses the role of gold in Eisenman's projects [16], or Ersine Masatlioğlu's account of Eisenman's theoretical positions in his 'artificial excavation' projects [17], look 'outwards' from the Cannaregio project in order to position the proposal as part of Eisenman's wider works. None of these analyses go beyond Eisenman's own fixed terms, however. Even in 'Cities of Artificial Excavation', a retrospective on Eisenman's 'ground' projects that drew upon his archive at the CCA, Jean-François Bédard's interpretation focuses on the generative aspects of the proposal, observing the different stages of the design process to complement Eisenman's own descriptions of the final drawings and models [18].

The analysis and interpretation of Eisenman's Cannaregio project in this essay is deliberately more inward-looking, at least initially, thereby producing a denser observation of the final proposal and its relation to the actual physical site – thus revealing ambiguities and contradictions between Eisenman's written text and his design. The creative mis-reading that follows envisions the reciprocal absence between site and design (archive), unsettling Eisenman's articulate project narrative. By evoking Cannaregio's materiality and atmosphere [19], I challenge Eisenman's abstract approach and visually reframe his critique of architectural nostalgia to reflect upon the current conservation of Venice as an idealised image of itself. My images may appear nostalgic to the reader, however, rendering Venice as unstable, uncertain, and inherently changing. Following Svetlana Boym's wider critique, they correspond more to a 'reflective' kind of nostalgia that is subjective, open-ended, and critical of the present, and which can be seen to counter a more 'restorative' nostalgia that seeks to bring back a fixed and idealised image of the past [20].

Reading

Eisenman regards each of the intervening layers with which he articulates his proposal as texts which interact with one another yet retain a degree of autonomy (Figure 2, left). The first layer/text, namely 'the emptiness of the future' [21: p. 47], extends the grid of Le Corbusier's Hospital project onto the site – a grid of voids that, according to Eisenman, represents the emptiness of rationality as the driver of modern progress. This series of holes pierces a cleared Venetian ground and colonises the site in a strictly autonomous manner. As a result, a mechanical and simplified repetition of Le Corbusier's 1960's scheme is superimposed onto the site, but devoid of any meaning or function. This first layer of intervention intersects with some existing buildings at random points, again underlining its autonomy and disregard of the city.

After having drawn from the unrealised Venice Hospital to develop his critique of modern architecture, Eisenman refers next to contemporary architectural approaches in the late 1970s. Two types of objects are placed either in or in-between the voids and the remaining city fabric as the second layer/text, corresponding to 'the emptiness of the present' [21: pp. 47-48]. The first type

refers to what Eisenman calls contextualism: these seem to be displaced pieces of the surrounding urban fabric, yet they contain nothing, as they are filled volumes that have left a trace of their movement on the ground to 'mark the absence of their former presence; their presence is nothing but an absence' [21: p. 48]. The second type corresponds to a previous project by Eisenman, House 11a, being composed of a series of assembled three-dimensional 'L' shapes. According to Gavin MacRae-Gibson, they encompass the tension between the nostalgia of the past expressed in the solid cube, and the uncertainty of the future expressed in the carved voids [22: p. 35]. As a simple geometrical configuration, they represent the complex cultural condition of what Eisenman regards as 'an age of partial objects' [23: p. 47].

In this way, the design for House 11a is repeated at three different scales, which Eisenman suggests we should read as 'model' (smaller than the original house, in which a person would have to crouch), 'house' (itself and containing the model) and 'mausoleum' (which contains the house, and inside that, the model of the house) (Figure 2, right). Eisenman argues that these elements offer no possible relation to a user other than uncertainty regarding what they are, what they represent, what the right size of the object is, and whether it is the actual object or just its representation. Therefore, by appearing in three different sizes and without giving clues as to which is a model of the other, Eisenman suggests that these objects destabilize the fixed architectural notions of scale and meaning and their relation to the human body and mind, standing 'at the limits of architecture, in terms both of their scale and their naming' [21: p. 48]. Although Eisenman is not totally explicit, a reading of the design sequence of 'model', 'house', and 'mausoleum' condensed in one object could speak of the simultaneous life and death of contextualist architecture by compressing the timeline of his own architectural design to convey a message. We could think of the monumental condition of a mausoleum as a sign and container of the death of (present and contextualist) architecture, and also of how Venice may become a mausoleum of itself, freezing its inherent, creative becoming through architectural contextualism and conservation.

In observing the arrangement of these objects of the second type ('intransitive objects' according to Eisenman), they seem to dialogue in a loose way with the grid of voids forming a geometric composition. What also becomes evident from observing the drawings and models, as well as from Eisenman's description, is that

Figure 2 (following page):
Left: Design development drawing, Cannaregio Ovest project, by Peter Eisenman Architects, 1978;
Right: Iteration of House 11a, section model assembling multiple three-dimensional "Ls", Cannaregio Ovest project, Peter Eisenman Architects, 1978 (courtesy CCA).
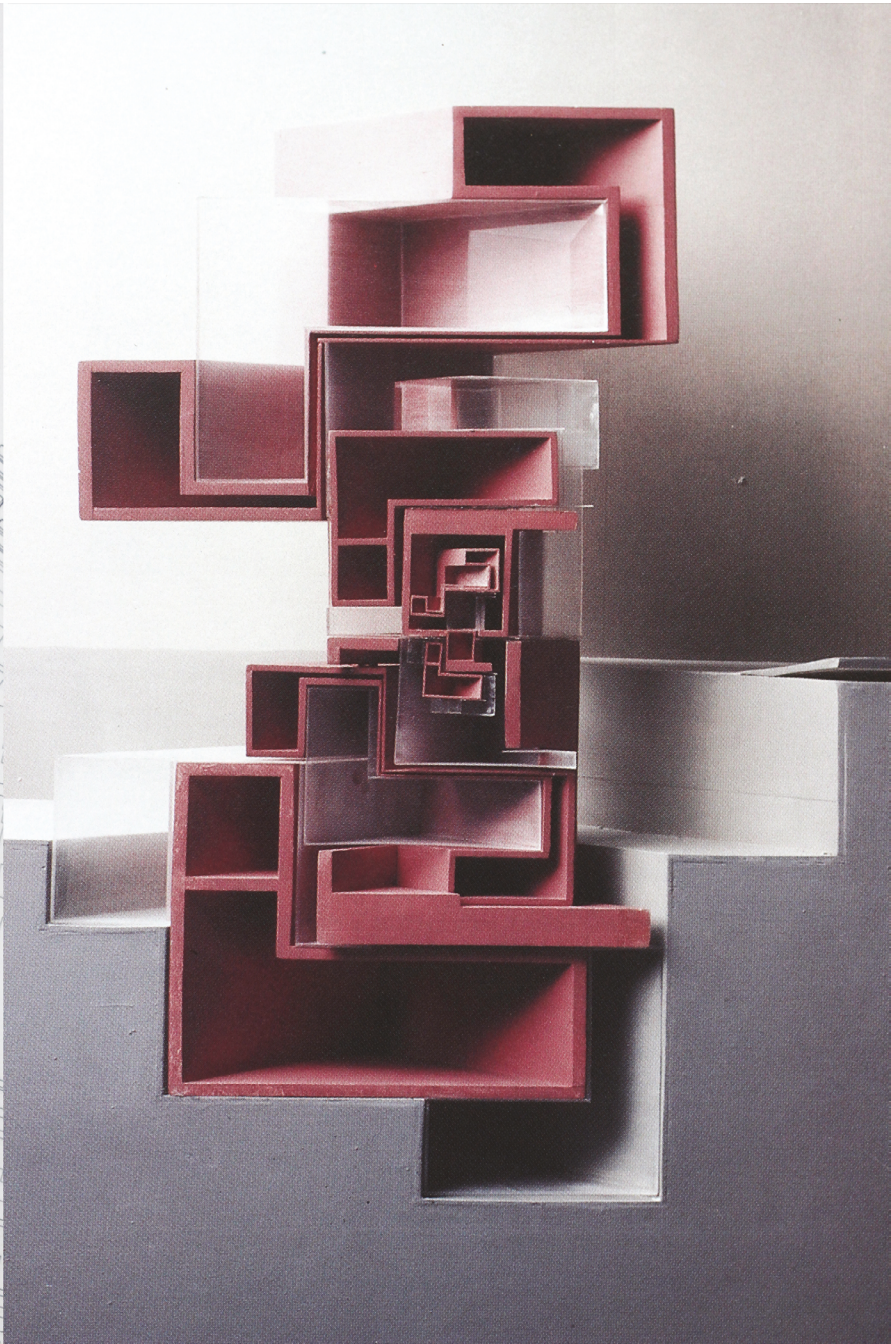
the pink-red objects of the second kind are clearly predominant within the project and its discourse. By contrast, when examining the final drawings, there is only one clearly identifiable object of the first kind visible in the central open space (Figure 2, left), represented with the same colour as the existing context. Is it the only one, or are the rest so closely integrated into the existing urban fabric that they have become unnoticeable? This one single recognisable contextual object of the first type (and its trace, re-shaping a nearby canal) remains as an isolated and strange element: a purpose-built ruin that ambiguously connects with the context while simultaneously denying it.

The third layer/text, which Eisenman calls 'the emptiness of the past', is a diagonal line crossing the whole site as if it was a fissure in the earth's surface that had started to peel back to reveal what was hidden underneath. Eisenman asks whether it could be the unconscious or the shadow of memory – something emerging from the darkness, which cannot be held by the rationality of an axis [21: p. 48]. This contradictory element links two important access points to the area for the project without creating a pathway or any other functional connection. Possibly ironic, it is the only single gesture which expresses a relationship with the 'real' city of Venice.

Eisenman concludes his discussion of this proposal by referring to the noted alchemist, Giordano Bruno, who had been invited to teach the art of memory in sixteenth-century Venice – he was subsequently betrayed, captured, and eventually incarcerated and burnt to death in Rome, having been accused of heresy. According to Eisenman, because it was believed that alchemists could turn dross into gold, his final submitted drawings and models were gold-coloured, representing Bruno's mysticism [21: p. 48], while the objects of the second layer/text were in a Venetian pink-red to depict the alchemist's tragic destiny. By linking his project to Bruno's story, Eisenman was criticising the way in which architects were addressing memory within the context of postmodern architecture. Eisenman instead argued that we need to accept that past, present, and future are obscured by shadows and loss: 'we must now learn to forget' [21: p. 48].

Cannaregio marked an important turning point in Eisenman's work and was influential on his projects in the 1980s. He shifted to a more contextual approach, previously having emphasised the more autonomous formal syntax of architectural projects in a well-known series of house designs [24: pp. 10-11]. In one of his 1980s projects, he recreated the story of Romeo and Juliet as a sequence of layered transparent sheets that unfolded a complex narrative, transposing the fiction of the story into (a representation of) the reality of Verona as a city. Many of the ideas and methods distilled in that project were those he had developed earlier for the Cannaregio scheme, such as the topological and scaling devices, the articulation of superimposed layers, the site as a fictional context, and the narrative of a project based on specific cultural references.

In his Romeo and Juliet project, the overlay of architectural drawings was how Eisenman conveyed the ideas of 'an architecture of absence' to criticise designs which conform to the metaphysics of presence, as an attempt to follow Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction [25: p. 3]. Eisenman thus described these projects from Cannaregio Ovest onwards as:

> … *a series of palimpsests, a dynamic locus of figures and partially obscured traces … involved in the generation of fiction, of histories, archaeologies, and narratives that are other than and dislocated from the history, archaeology, and narrative of origin and of truth in the metaphysic of architecture.* [2: p. 186]

The term 'absence' now became key to Eisenman's discourse as he leaned ever more on Derrida's philosophy. Eisenman even reached the point of inviting Derrida to collaborate in designing one of the gardens within Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette in Paris. After showing initial interest, however, Derrida came to distance himself from Eisenman and his ideas, as well as from his own participation in the design. In a letter he later wrote to Eisenman, he commented: 'you perhaps believe in it, absence, too much'. Derrida also wrote in that letter 'about the role that this word "absence" will have been able to play at least in what you believed you could *say* if not *do* with your architecture' [26: p. 7]. In my reading, Derrida's phrase, 'to say if not do', refers to what architecture can say as a purely intellectual work which exists through representation, but which it cannot necessarily do when built, exposed to reality (use, ageing, change and so forth). For Derrida, the physical existence of architecture seems to matter the most [27], rather than the arguments and ideas it can convey through drawings and models, which Eisenman emphasised [28].

Re-reading

As a piece of rhetorical architecture conceived to be read but not necessarily inhabited, and thus conceptual architecture more so than architecture to be experienced, this condition is made evident in the absolute absence of human figures in all of Eisenman's drawings for Cannaregio [29]. The project was certainly materialised through architectural representations, but it did not need to be built and it did not need Venice as a material foundation to exist. It works by being absent from the site. If built, it could well have produced readings, impressions and uses that might differ from – and even subvert – the sophisticated discourse with which Eisenman generated it, playing upon the blind spots of its rationale.

The architectural historian and critic Robin Evans pointed out the gap in the 'translation' between architecture as drawing and built form, as meaning cannot glide totally unaltered from one realm to the other, in a process that Evans saw as similar to translating a text from one language into other [30: pp. 3-4]. If we consider that Eisenman was far less concerned if his design for Cannaregio Ovest was constructed in reality and was actually more focused on the project's meaning as text, then the extent of that 'translation' gap becomes more evident: indeed, I would suggest that to construct the project on that site would be equivalent to its ruination as a building. Not in negative terms, of course, but instead because it would open up the scheme to the complexity and uncertainty of Venice's day-to-day life, as experienced by its many inhabitants and visitors.

In the letter referred to above, Derrida also challenged Eisenman to think of architecture as ruins. All architecture, according to Derrida, is haunted and marked by the signature of its ruin, so (and synthetically rephrasing Derrida), what was the new image of the ruin contained in Eisenman's design [26: p. 11]? An interesting way to redirect Derrida's inquiry (and explore the limits of Evans' translational gap) would be to think of Eisenman's built architecture as the ruins of his drawings, with the integrity of their form and meaning exposed and affected by a reality outside the limits set out by their design. It is not possible to assess this in the case of the Cannaregio project, unfortunately (or fortunately?). Nonetheless, to observe how that unrealised design relates to the site offers an opportunity to reveal nuances, gaps and contradictions that are absent from the message Eisenman sought to convey, but which can enrich our understanding of the project from today's perspective.

Thus, whilst in the first section of this essay, the attempt was to analyse the project alongside Eisenman's writings, here I will try to go beyond Eisenman's intended reciprocity or inseparability between the writings, drawings and models. For Cannaregio Ovest, Eisenman claimed that the design was in fact formed by three texts. Such a claim of architecture *as* writing has been criticized by those like Evans, who argues that Eisenman's writing is a protective wrapping which makes the work (even more) impenetrable [31: p. 68]. He even questions Eisenman's claim for the status of architecture as language, arguing that it is more like the study of language – hence Eisenman's architecture, no matter what he says, does not do what he says it does [31: p. 69]. In this, Evans echoes Derrida's critique mentioned above. Nonetheless, Evans agrees that Eisenman's architecture is *doing* something interesting, and hence it is worth to explore it beyond the architect's words. This leads to the next issue, in that the writing (in words) with which Eisenman explains the writing (in drawings and models) for Cannaregio Ovest is very succinct: around 1,400 words in Italian [32] and then only 716 words in English [14; 21]. In being so brief it starkly contrasts with the sheer number of drawings and models with which Eisenman presented his proposal. When examining the project's archive in the CCA, this imbalance is even more evident. The vast amount of Eisenman's distinctive explorative sketches, and development drawings and models developed in his office, exceed by far the notes that put Eisenman's thinking into words. In what follows; therefore, I will try to read also into the *writing* that is manifest in the design itself, particularly in the way it relates to the urban context in which it is – fictionally – placed; a step further from Bédard's interesting reading of the project's generative process [18].

It is true that Eisenman's Cannaregio Ovest project is ultimately less about adapting to the Venetian context and more about bringing it into play within the representational apparatus he uses to develop the proposal. Judgements of how an architectural project fits into its context are often only based on how that context is represented within the drawings and models, whereby the context may also be 'adapted' to suit the design, at least to some degree. Hence it is necessary to bring in other contextual information that was not included in the project
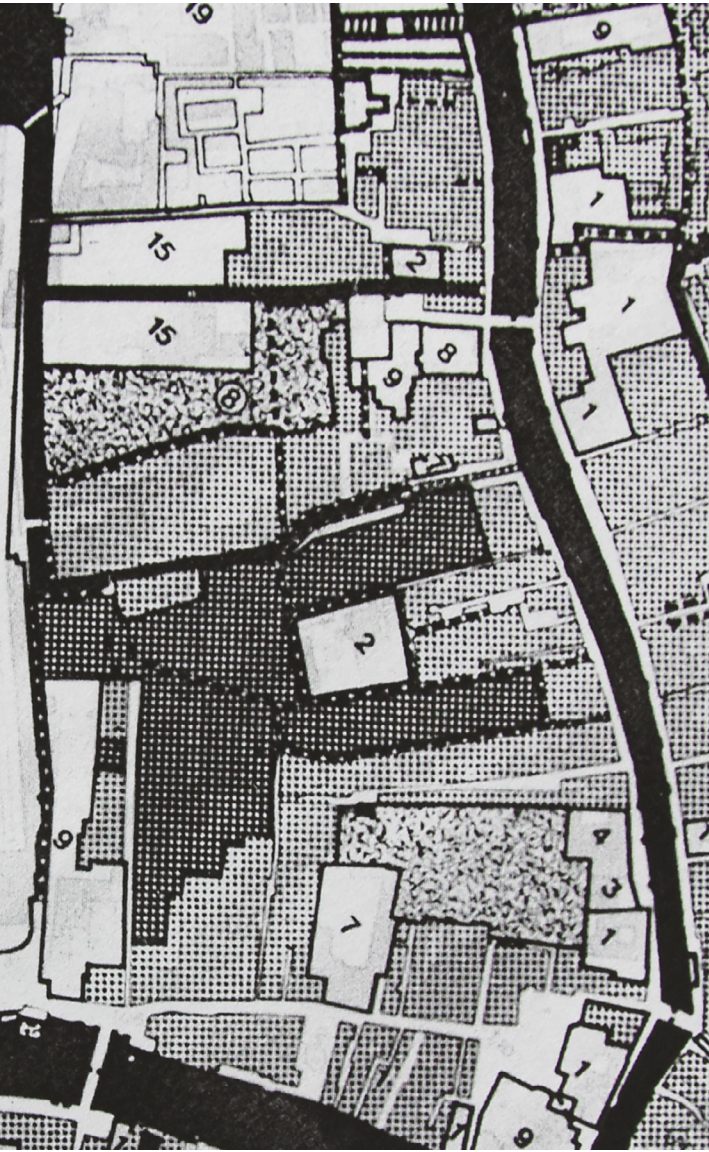
material when analysing whether the design does beyond what Eisenman says it does (or would do, if built). Eisenman's reference to Giordano Bruno not only illustrates a conflicting point about rationality and memory but also determines his project to feature red and golden tones, distinctive to the city of Venice. The level of abstraction in the representation of Eisenman's proposal and the surrounding buildings in the Cannaregio area is somehow compensated for by using these Venetian colours. Indeed, every element of the city and the project are represented with the same tones (across all models and drawings), smoothing over the differences – that is, everything but the 'intransitive objects' which punctuate with their pink-red. In this way, Le Corbusier's unbuilt hospital scheme and the series of voids that extend from it, plus Venice's buildings, its ground and water, and the axis that crosses the site, are represented as integral to the urban fabric. The actual city, the unrealised hospital and proposed elements together form a uniform ground in which the repetitions of Eisenman's House 11a assert their autonomy in contrast with everything else. Venice is transformed into a fictional context that merges both real and imaginary elements to make the design appear as part of the city, highlighting just the red intransitive objects.

An unrealised conceptual project cannot be subject to physical ruination, but the drawings and models which materialised it can reveal some decay. Even though being conserved in excellent conditions at the CCA, the material for the Cannaregio Ovest project was stored for at least seven years in Eisenman's office in New York [33], in what seem to have not been optimal conservation conditions (The Cannaregio material was created in 1978 but did not receive professional archival conservation until it was acquired by the CCA, between 1987 and 2006). Indeed, the models are more affected by the passing of time than the drawings. In the site context model, while the colour strategy is still evident, and the insertion of the project alongside Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital shows just how well both these designs would have fitted into the city, the shiny golden paint that was shown in contemporary publications has turned into an uneven and rough brownish colour, suggesting an inversion of the alchemic metaphor by turning gold into dross. This unintended yet inevitable decay catching up with the project's models allows the design to share a condition with the materiality of its Venetian context, and decadenza, rather than remaining just at an abstract level.

One other contradictory strategy can also be observed in Eisenman's Cannaregio

Ovest project, which he presented as criticising contextualism. In fact, as noted, the design adapts subtly to the given site. The very first design operation that Eisenman decided on was to respect what the organisers had determined as the area for intervention. In his proposal, no existing building outside those margins was to be replaced to make room for the project (the entries by some of the other architects invited by Dal Co, despite incorporating traditional architectural features into their designs, were far less respectful of the urban context). Eisenman placed his project with surgical precision within a space defined by the buildings which needed to be retained [5: pp. 29-30, 58]. As a result, the sinuous perimeter of the area defined by the organisers became the actual limit of the carved void in which Eisenman's project mostly takes place. This irregular site offered a space of uncertainty and opportunity for future construction, according to Eisenman [32: p. 56], and it recalls the shapes of many hidden squares scattered across Venice's dense fabric such as the Campo Santa Margherita or Campo Santa Maria Formosa. This makes Eisenman's project look more familiar to the city, despite the inherent foreign-ness of its constituting elements (Figure 3).

Furthermore, unlike other design proposals which incorporated monumental new buildings, especially Aldo Rossi's, the built elements in Eisenman's project are mostly hidden in voids behind the houses facing onto the main canals in Cannaregio. Only one small 'intransitive object' was to be exposed, standing by the Ponte Tre Archi at the northwestern limit of the site. Through these choices of preservation and deference, the project clearly respected Venice's cityscape. It hardly builds anything at all, instead highlighting the surrounding buildings in their contrast to the few but radically different proposed constructions. These proposed elements were at a very human scale, although the interpretation and understanding by actual people (if built) may well be different from what Eisenman prescribes. They are strange in shape and position, but they correspond to the urban texture through their size and colour. The colour strategy in the models and drawings, and the retention of the existing 'void' as part of the project, were however not emphasised by Eisenman as relevant design decisions in what he wrote about the scheme: perhaps this would have made his statements sound less radical, and less critical of what he was calling the 'malaise of contextualism'.

Observation of the project's constitutive layers superimposed onto the aerial

photographs of the site, as it exists nowadays, reveals more about its geometry and its integration into the urban surroundings. More than four decades later, Cannaregio Ovest has been visibly transformed. No longer is there a void left by old buildings that the Venetian authorities saw fit to demolish in the late 1970s: replacing them is a housing scheme by Vittorio Gregotti Architects, constructed between 1981 and 2002. Its buildings are mostly painted in pink-red, reminiscent of Eisenman's 'intransitive objects', yet as a modern contextualist version of Venice's urban fabric it represents the kind of project Eisenman criticised.

Superimposing Eisenman's plan onto the aerial photograph today, its subtle interaction with the existing urban fabric becomes apparent. The positioning of his 'intransitive objects' and some minor 'L-shaped' voids were on an angle slightly different from the rigid grid projected by Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital design. This shift in geometry, plus their variety in size, gives them more autonomy in relation to the surrounding buildings. Nonetheless, Eisenman derived the angle from the context, precisely from the alignment of the buildings in the north-east sector of the central void (Figure 4). It is notable that the same angle was later used by Gregotti for aligning his housing blocks.

There were two open areas in Eisenman's design. The first of these, on the north-

west side, and contiguous to where Le Corbusier's project was to be located, was like an open buffer zone which establishes a certain distance so that the other layers of the project could exist in their separate ways: today, it is a disused green space with trees and a few ruined buildings, with no public access and apart from the public life of the city (Figure 4, bottom left). The second open area held a concentration of Eisenman's inserted elements: today, it is occupied by Gregotti's development. In Eisenman's design, this second open area would have connected to the Parco Savorgnan, a park of unusual dimensions in Venice (Figure 4, upper right). Hence his project articulated a sequence of open spaces of considerable size, yet were internal to Venice's urban structure in that they were not visible from the surrounding canals but instead secretly hidden inside the seemingly continuous urban tissue.

Zooming into the central part of Eisenman's project reveals how one of the local

Figure 4:
Layered composition by the author based on a design development drawing for the Cannaregio project by Peter Eisenman Architects (1978) and an aerial photograph of Cannaregio Ovest, Venice (2014) (courtesy CCA and Google Earth).
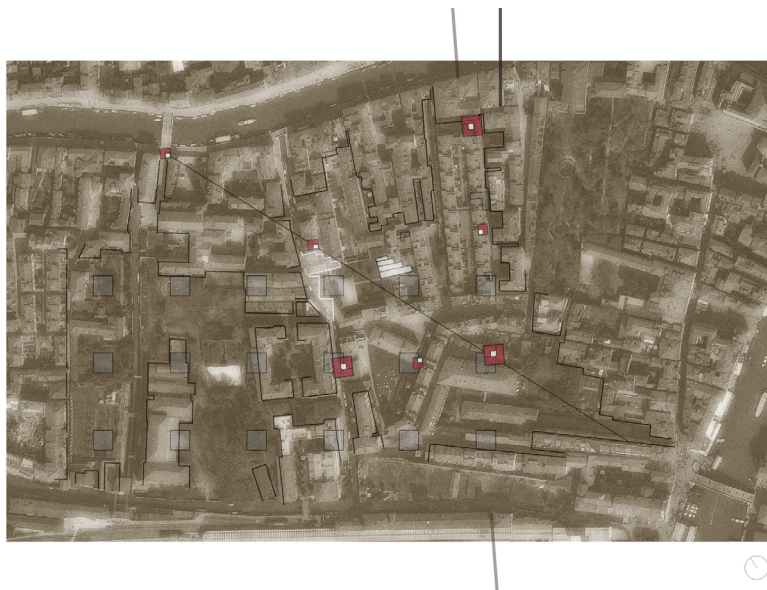

Figure 5:
Layered composition by the author based on a presentation drawing of the Cannaregio Ovest project by Peter Eisenman Architects (1978) and an aerial photograph of Cannaregio Ovest, Venice from 2014 (courtesy CCA and Google Earth).

canals was to be modified to adapt it to fit one of the square-shaped voids that were excavated to echo Le Corbusier's hospital grid, and to configure a 'trace' for the only 'contextual object' of Eisenman's second layer/text: the stray fragment located a few meters east into the main project area (Figure 5). The canal's angle was also taken from the shape of the main open space and the intricate geometry of the existing buildings nearby. An examination of the project through these representations thus allows for a deeper and more critical understanding, beyond Eisenman's discourse. It shows that a great deal of his thinking (intellectual as well as intuitive) was never translated into words but remained implicit in the qualities of the drawings and models, particularly in terms of the relationship between the urban context and Eisenman different layers or 'texts'.

By re-reading the Cannaregio Ovest scheme in that manner, the distant presence – or absence, both physical and temporal – of the Venetian context nowadays destabilises the message Eisenman was trying to convey. The proposal still holds a critical position towards a nostalgia of the past (as seen in postmodernist architecture) and a nostalgia for the future (as in the modernist utopia), but the scheme's nostalgia for the present seems to pervade through its contextualist traits, which Eisenman claimed to be criticising. Might this have been a nuanced, reflective form of undeclared (or unconscious) nostalgia?

Mis-reading

To further explore the relationship between archive and site in the Cannaregio Ovest project, this section turns to my layering of photographs (and fragments of photographs) that I took both from Eisenman's drawings and from the Cannaregio area, making use of absence as a generative force that allows what otherwise remains at a distance – in a physical as well as temporal dimension – to come forward. This layering of photographs of the place and the archival material plays on their reciprocal absence in an atmospheric, even emotional dimension, blurring distinctions between archive and site to produce new readings and impressions.

A photograph captures an imprint of light of both a moment that becomes past and of a place that is away from the different (other) places in which the image may circulate. If we consider absence in its fundamental meaning as 'being away' [34],

both physically and temporally, photography thus carries a sense of absence in its distancing from reality. Timothy Wray regards photographs as traces haunted by the event they captured, like ghosts caught in light which occupy 'a realm between reality, memory and the imagination' [35: p. 105]. Jean Baudrillard indeed refers to the etymological origin of photography as 'writing of light' to characterize the immaterial presence of reality it portrays [36].

I propose that we should consider photography as *the drawing of light*. The Greek root for 'graphos' corresponds to the recording of impressions on a surface, which Svetlana Alpers suggests is a form of description that includes writing as well as drawing [37: p. 136]. My use of photography to relate Eisenman's design (the archive) and the area of Cannaregio Ovest (the site in its current state) hence seeks to represent absence through layering by producing *palimpsests of light*, consisting of dense images that result from the overlaying of, and transparency through, a series of photographs that appear simultaneously but remain away from our grasp, inviting us to recreate them through our memory and imagination. Appearing in simultaneity they further unsettle the illusion of the 'present-ness' of photography based on the coincidence of the point of view of the eyes of the photographer and viewer, and (or through) the lens of the camera [38: p. 180].

The photographs of these two distant realms – archive and site – configure a virtual space of encounter, yet they are images of different nature. To explore this distinctiveness, I treat Eisenman's drawings (the archival material) as drawings, and with them, I *draw within* the layers made with photographs of the Cannaregio site, also *withdrawing* parts of the photographs from the overall composition. Through this action I separate from the rest of the picture the actual lines with which the project's elements were drawn, turning them into fragments de-contextualised from the image drawn onto the backing paper or cardboard. These lines represent a fictional place drawn into a strange new context made of photographs of the real place. By rendering the site's photographs in black-and-white only the crude light causes an imprint onto the image, and the fragments of Eisenman's drawings stand out as emerging within it (Figure 6).

To visualise this 'ghost' inhabiting a recognisable part of Cannaregio, in some compositions I chose one photograph – with a degree of transparency – as the main view in which to intervene with inserted pieces of photographed drawings

Figure 6 (following page):
'Study 5: lines and section drawings'. Layered composition by the author using his own photographs of Cannaregio Ovest from 2014 and multiple drawings of the Cannaregio Ovest Project archive of 1978 (courtesy CCA).
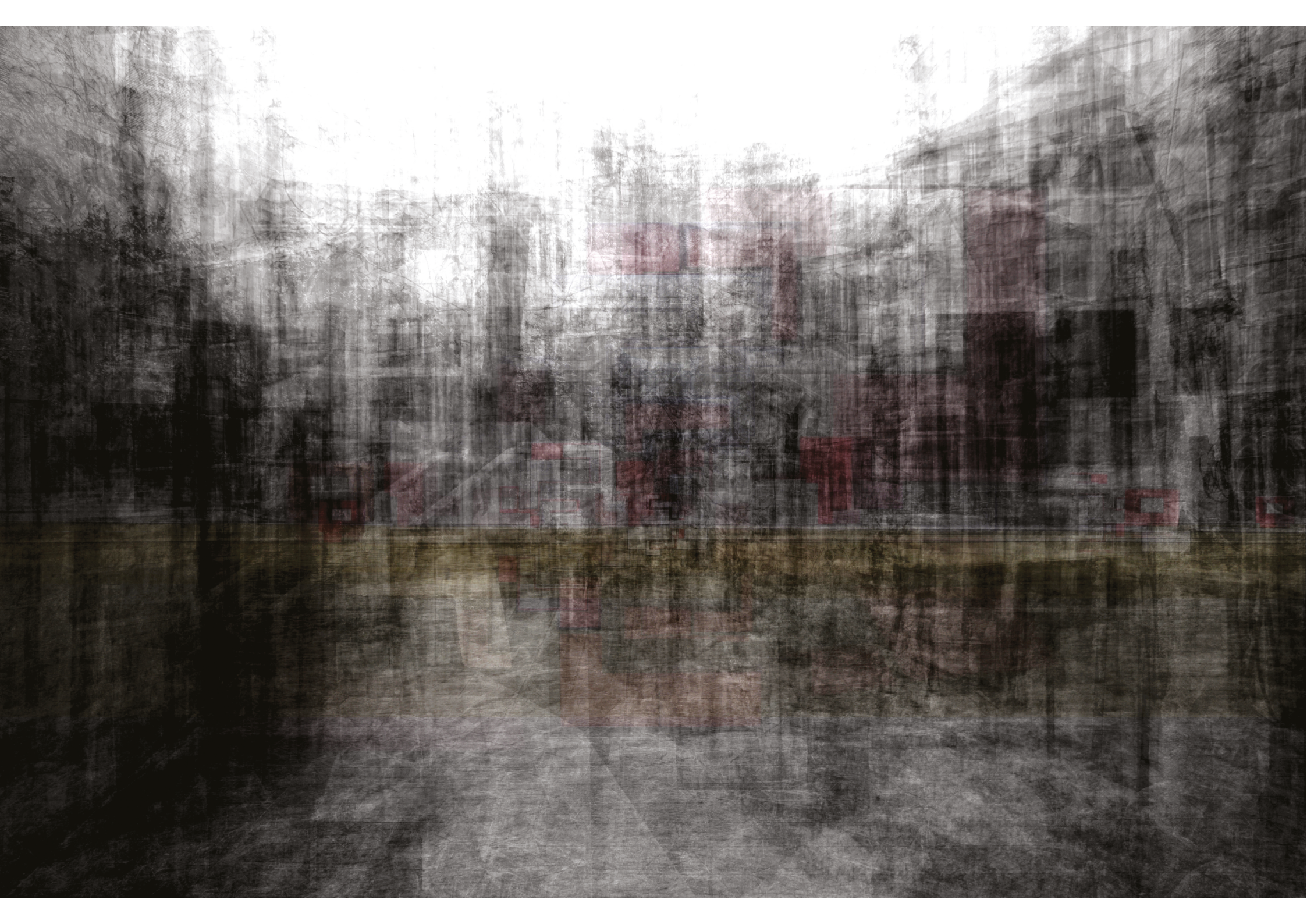
as well as subtractions defined by their transpositions onto the site photographs (Figure 7). By emphasising just one perspective of the site, and one specific intervention, they suggest that the project must be represented as sensed in the real experience of the city and its atmosphere as if it were a trace – a trace that connects to an absent past as well as to the surviving buildings, ruined surfaces, and hazy air. Hence, despite bringing the Cannaregio Ovest project – or its absence – one step closer to the current site, it continues to inhabit the realm of representation. This is not the abstract realm of architectural discourse but moves away from Eisenman's intended message (and his approach to absence) to embrace more open-ended interpretations (Figure 8).

By layering Eisenman's project onto the Cannaregio site, and reimagining it as an absence, the logic of superimposed layers of intervention and the relation they propose to the existing city is revealed as more complex than his original conception (past – axis; present – objects; future – voids). Eisenman developed this method of horizontal layering as articulated levels of meaning which added up to create the plan, with his final project in turn represented through abstract views pertaining to the form of technical drawings: plan, section, axonometric. The artificial, self-referential quality of those drawings reinforced the abstraction of the project they wished to convey. By now exposing his drawings to experiential impressions of the site, conveyed through photographs, makes the project denser and gives it a new aesthetical adventure: translated or transposed to this new context, it becomes a ghostly, haunting presence. The resulting images suggest an experiential, tactile quality that is at odds with Eisenman's abstract intellectualism, demonstrating the possibility of enriching a conceptual project by representing it as an absence. Through this overlap, his drawings appear as disparate, strange traces on the site's layered materiality, forming an immaterial ruin.

As a reimagination of Venice's materiality, these blending photographs stray away from the aim of Ruskin's first daguerreotypes of the city to create truthful documents that would frame *The Stones of Venice*, published in the 1850s [39: pp. 39-40]. Ruskin advocated for the protection of the city's architectural and urbanistic value, with his book becoming key for the idea of conserving Venice's physical fabric [40: p. 212]. His daguerreotypes preceded the insane numbers of photographs taken since of the city as a paradigmatic tourist hub. Ruskin's vision was also at odds with Francesco Dal Co's idea of Venice preserving herself through

drift and decay, giving way to new forms and meanings. In sympathy with the latter, and despite being created from photographs, my images sit perhaps closer to Joseph Mallord William Turner's impressions of Venice: 'atmosphere is my style', is how Turner explained his work to Ruskin. Painted a few years before Ruskin took some of the first-ever photographs of Venice, Turner emphasised a sense of ambience and openly accepted ruination in his work. Indeed, as Hill notes, Turner allowed his unsold and unfinished paintings to be exposed to the weather in his dilapidated London studio [11: p. 173].

I must acknowledge that a sense of nostalgia is evident in my representations of Cannaregio Ovest's archive (Eisenman's design) and the intended site (photographs). Therefore, my subversion of Eisenman's discourse is that I shift his critique of nostalgia to the use of nostalgia as a means of critique, by reimagining his Cannaregio proposal. However, this reimagination does not point at the fixed image of an idealised past of the city to be kept or recovered in the present. To counter such 'restorative' sense of nostalgia, prevalent in most of Venice actions of heritage conservation, my compositions recreate Venice's intrinsic drive for simultaneous decay and change which defines how it assimilates modernity – echoing thereby the views of Dal Co and Stoppani. It also links to Boym's suggestion that:

> … a cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface [20: p. 7]

By holding together different temporalities of a place without effacing each other, my multi-layered images suggest nostalgia in a critical as well as in a reflective way. They seek to prompt an alternative vision of what Venice may have been or may be. There is an affinity, in this sense, with what Eisenman defined as a 'space of possibility' – namely the void in his proposed design – as well as with his critique of architecture's attitudes towards historical contexts [32]. Yet while the city is for Eisenman a conceptual ground for delivering a wider message, I reaffirm Venice's materiality and actuality to subvert Eisenman's proposal from within, to challenge its detachment from the experienced city, and to show that the relationship between architecture and nostalgia can be open-ended. This

Figure 7 (following page):
'Study 7: lines and reflections by a canal'. Layered composition by the author using his own photographs of Cannaregio Ovest from 2014 and multiple drawings of the Cannaregio Ovest Project archive of 1978 (courtesy CCA).

analysis and reinterpretation of Eisenman's Cannaregio Ovest scheme thus reveals a richer relation with absence and nostalgia, although it can only correspond to a 'reflective' form of nostalgia whilst being critical of a 'restorative' form of nostalgia. To Eisenman's statement, 'we must now learn to forget', I would reply that we must accept that we remember in some way, regardless.

Concluding remarks

My intentions in this essay are both to account for and probe Eisenman's Cannaregio Ovest project beyond the limits which he set out in its underpinning narrative. In the same way that Eisenman asked Derrida to allow him to misread the latter's philosophical writings, I am asking Eisenman to allow me to misread his architectural discourse – being that his drawings, models, writings, or all of them together. I have not sought to show Eisenman's project as if it were built, which itself would be an interesting endeavour, given Evans' ideas about the translation from one realm to the other and given Eisenman's disregard of architecture as experienced as built reality at that time. This is outside the scope of this essay. Instead, I have approached Eisenman's proposal as being intrinsically absent from the site, and thus uncertain and ungraspable, only existing through its own traces and reflections. This subversion of the project is performed by the subversion of Eisenman's drawings using photography. The scheme is now shown as inhabiting the materiality of Venice, and reciprocally, the fragility of the urban fabric and its ruinous surfaces pervade the drawings to bridge between archive and site. These layered images mediate between recollection and immediate experience; they are suspended between the present and a past, non-realised future.

In addition to this physical distance between the project's archive and its site, there is also the temporal distance which Cannaregio has gone through in its changes over the years. For Eisenman's project, this same temporal distance marks its transition to an archival condition. The images presented here thus explore a possible afterlife of his design as absence – a revival that stretches the role of the archive from the historical to the creative, involving both dimensions. This movement resembles what Eisenman was doing himself with Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital in terms of creatively using the archive and bringing to life an unbuilt design within the context of a fictional narrative. However, there is a key

difference. Whilst Eisenman's aim was to convey the emptiness of the future as reflected in the modernist dream of architecture, and thereby to critique the latter, my images seek to create a haptic, atmospheric realm to reimagine Eisenman's approach in the light of the distance between archive and site.

In my analysis of Eisenman's project, the absence of the urban context haunts his narrative – whereas in my layered images, the project's absence haunts the real city, opening a possibility for critique. By transposing the archive as a fictional memory of the site and revisiting the arguments that Eisenman put forward when formulating its proposal, I am challenging the efforts to preserve Venice as a staged image of itself. In this regard, my reappraisal and reinterpretation of Eisenman's project for Cannaregio Ovest could even be considered also within the context of recent discussions about postmodernist architecture. Although that is a task beyond the reach of this work, my main intention here is to expand the critical power of architecture to carry a message – whether as drawing, building, text or anywhere between – through the possibilities of its own absence. Sharing Eisenman's confidence in architecture's capacity to convey meaning, although differing from him in many other aspects, I am too criticising the conservative vision that now controls how Venice's built heritage is treated, and which so greatly affects its social realm [4: p. 537]. The city's physical form has remained almost intact since the 1970s, and this does not seem set to change in the future [41]. Venice's present time – and recent past – has made little material impact on the well-protected evidence from its past time. Or perhaps the opposite can be argued: that the ultimate impact of recent time, and of modernity, in Venice is the absence of its gradual, inherent change.

In 1980, Francesco Dal Co called for Venice's preservation through ruination, a process in which creativity and change could be transformative and assimilative forces. None of the projects gathered in *10 Visions for Venice* however engaged with his provocative view. Nor did the book's proposals for how architecture should deal with Venice's historic fabric influence how it evolved in the ensuing decades. Twenty years later, the proposal by Miralles and Tagliabue conceptually testifies to the ever-increasing pressure to conform to a narrow, commodified understanding of Venice's urban and architectural heritage. In Boym's terminology, the 'restorative' nostalgia for the past in Venice is now immobilising its present and taking over its future. In response, in my images I embrace the critical as well as

Figure 8 (following page):
'Study 6: intransitive object by Ponte Tri Archi'. Layered composition by the author using his own photographs of Cannaregio Ovest from 2014 and multiple drawings of the Cannaregio Ovest Project archive of 1978 (courtesy CCA).

creative potential of the archive to propose a more 'reflective' nostalgia which reimagines the hauntings of an alternative past for Cannaregio today, in the hope that Dal Co's words as quoted earlier may become recognisable and meaningful again.

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Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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