

URBINO

From the past emerge some significant principles to nourish the present

About 100 miles due east of Florence, not far from the Adriatic, there stands the magnificent old town of Urbino (below right)—a great architectural sculpture placed on a hilltop pedestal about 1,500 feet above sea-level. It is an annual attraction for discriminating tourists and for some 7,000 idealistic students. Its permanent non-student population, now as during the Renaissance, is 8,000 people. One of the natives of Urbino was the painter Raphael, born there in 1483. Among its visitors, in that same century, were artists like Piero della Francesca, Uccello, Botticelli, Bramante, and many others.

All this is tourist guide chronology. What is at least as significant, to *our* time, is what has been happening on the nearby "Hill of Cappuccini" during the past two years. For here, on a much smaller scale, but perhaps with much greater conscious deliberation, a young Milan architect has brilliantly demonstrated the uses of the past to help nourish the present.

The young architect is Giancarlo De Carlo (left), and on the Hill of Cappuccini he has built a group of dormitories, plus communal facilities, for 150 of Urbino's students. It is not a large project, but it demonstrates certain principles that are applicable to urban design problems elsewhere.

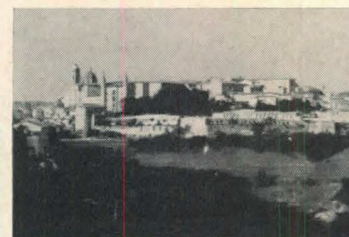
The first of these principles is that to create a sense of continuity it is not necessary to make new buildings look like historicist re-interpretations of their older neighbors. For De Carlo's "Urbino" bears no surface resemblance whatsoever to the old city; it is a much more serious effort than that.

The second principle demonstrated is a logical extension of the first—for what Urbino taught De Carlo was how to conceive of *any* town, or of *any* sort of community, however small.

To him, the old town was really, a *single building*: a building with public corridors (streets) and private rooms (houses), with public

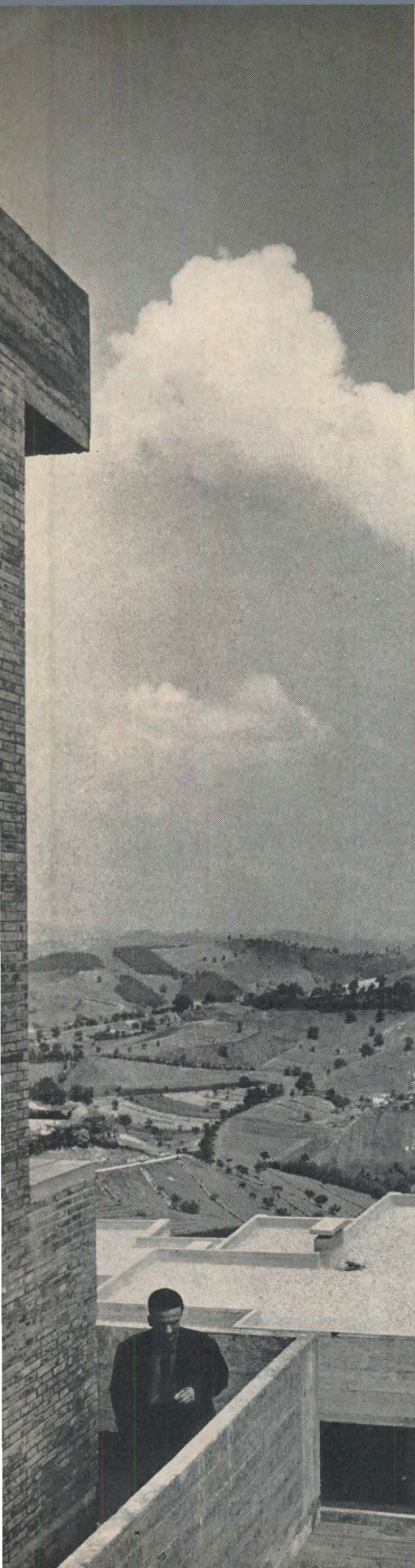
spaces open to the sky, and private roofed-over spaces reserved for special assemblies; a building of similar roofs and similar walls, of similar floors and similar doorways and windows; a building that contained certain symbols of temporal as well as ecclesiastical power; a building that was, in short, a single perfectly unified organism.

This lesson of a city conceived as a single building De Carlo applied to his "Little Urbino." Here, too, he created an organism based upon a varied, but consistent, net-

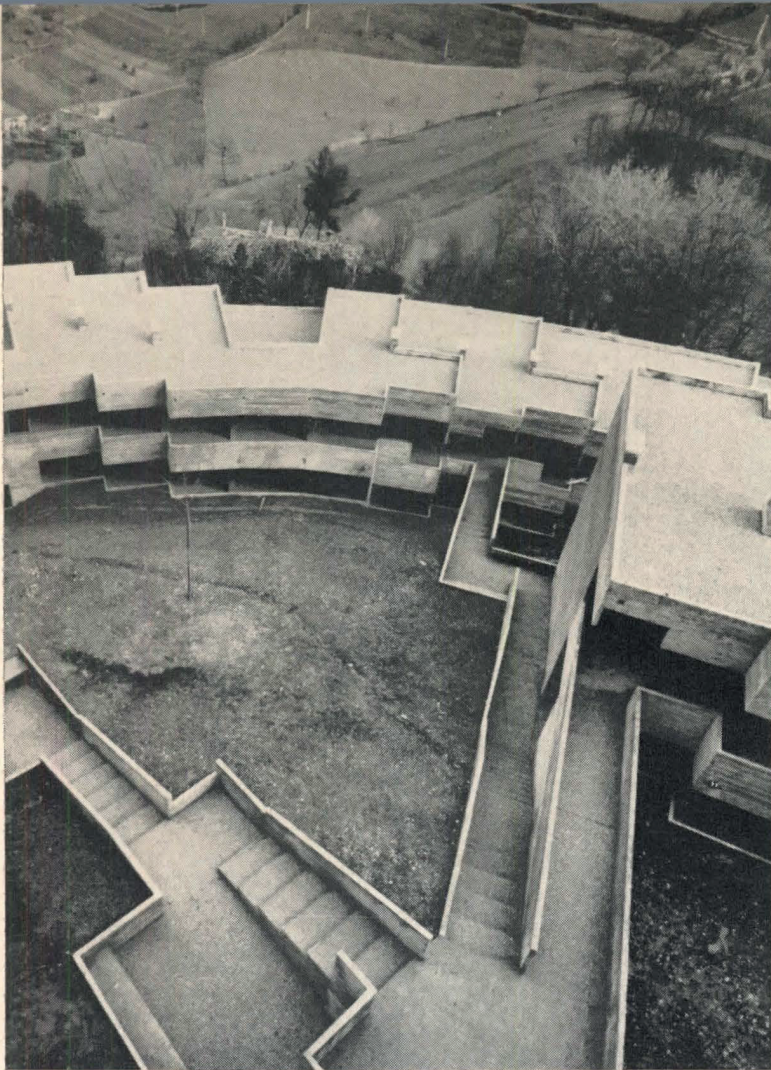


work of covered and open walks; a "single building" consisting of 150 more or less identical little rooms, each subtly different from the next by virtue of its different outward views (plan, right). Here, too, he used identical walls (brick) and identical roofs (concrete parapets, white marble-chip decks—see gate-fold picture). And he crowned this hilltop with a dominant sculptural symbol, not a symbol of autocratic power, but a symbol of democracy—a commons building for relaxation, learning, communication. As in the old city, De Carlo's network of "streets" is full of surprising turns, unexpected openings to beautiful views, and unexpected spaces in which to meet.

In one essential respect De Carlo's Little Urbino differs from the old town: whereas the latter is an enclosed group of buildings, firmly surrounded by a system of fortifications, De Carlo's Little Urbino is an organism designed for growth and change. For the only governing principle of our century is, of course, the principle of constant change, and an architecture which does not permit and imply change and growth is alien to our time.







The old town suggested the basic patterns for De Carlo's new concept

The streets of Urbino are paved with bricks and good intentions. The bricks are not for our own impoverished age, but the good intentions very clearly can be. In De Carlo's dormitories, they are.

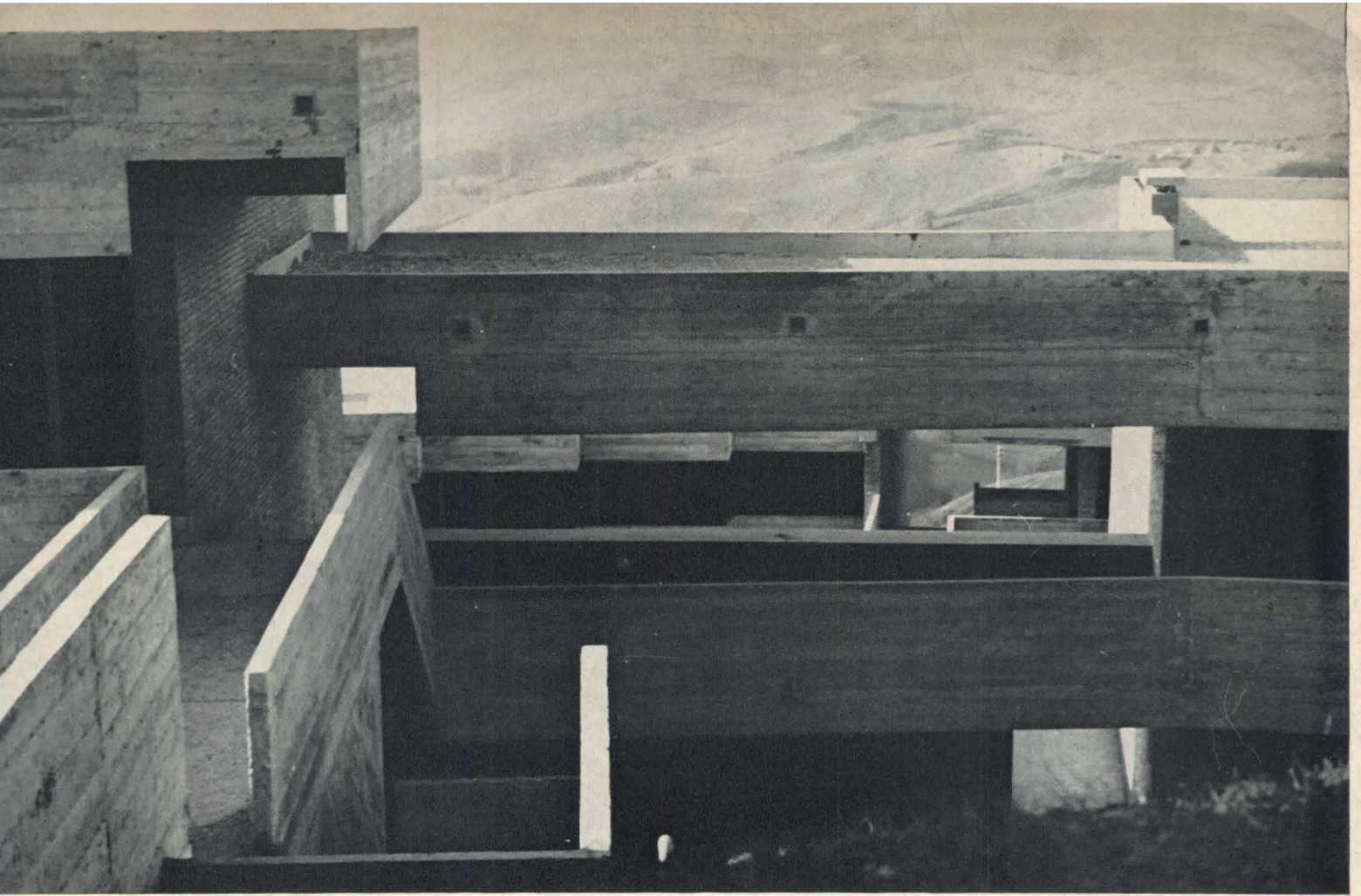
The streets of the old town (facing page) are not chasms that divide the community, but seams in an urban fabric that join rows of houses on opposite sides. These streets are meeting places, generally open to the sky; they turn and twist, widen into small places and larger squares, and contract again into alleys; they are rooms with views of a distant landscape or of a passage that wanders off to one side.

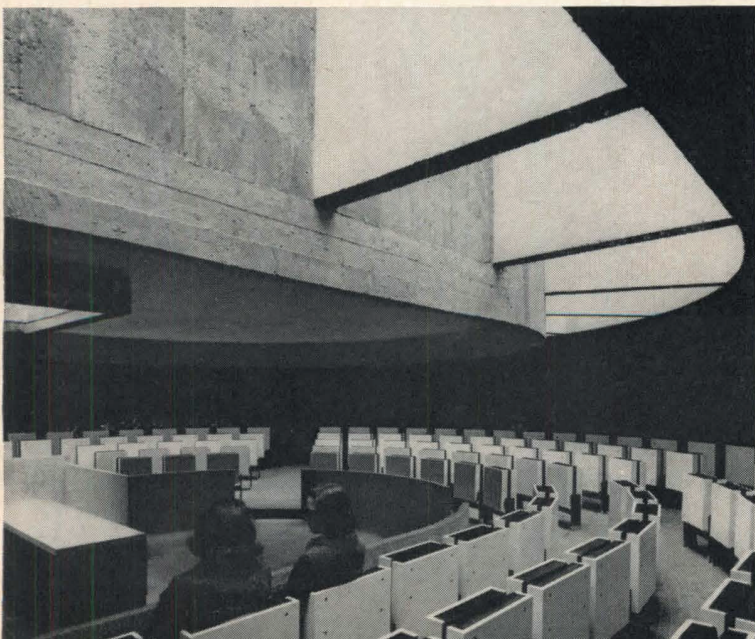
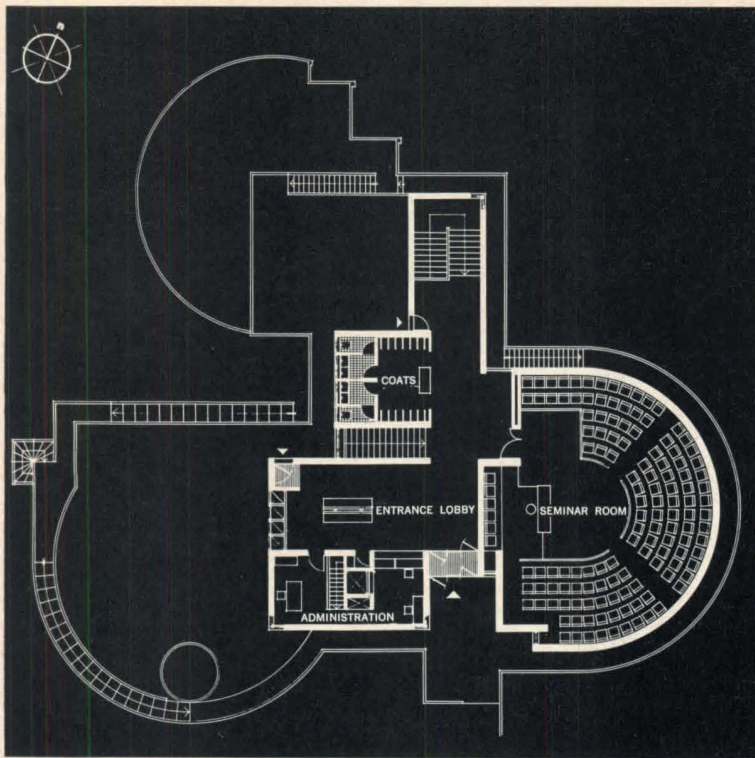
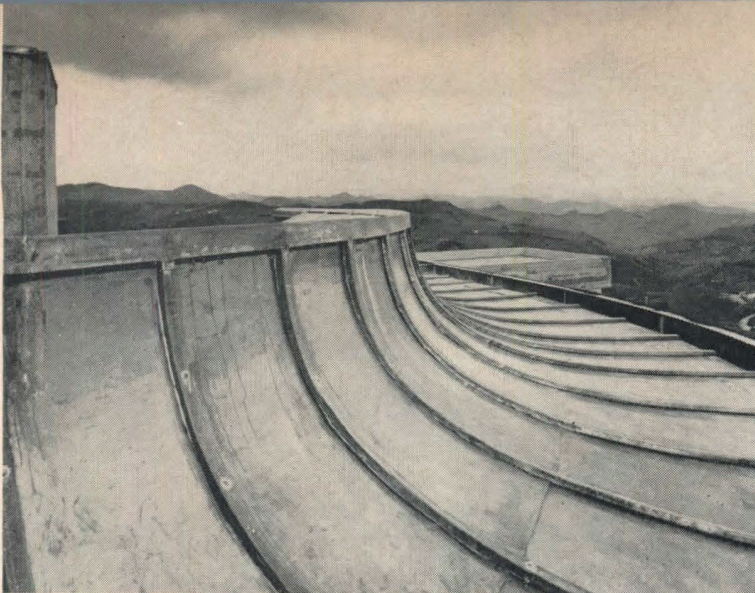
Indeed, until the streets of the old town were invaded by cars and motor scooters, the streets *were* the town. Under a new zoning proposal for Urbino, such traffic will be halted at the gates.

The "streets" of the small dormitory town (above, opposite) have all these characteristics, but they add a few significant twists: first, De Carlo's connecting passages are almost entirely covered; second, they are located on different levels, and often form bridges over other passages and terraces below; and third, they are formed like branches of some plant, capable of future expansion by at least one third—unlike the streets of the old town, which are stopped short by surrounding defensive walls.

Moreover, De Carlo has made much more of the magnificent views of the Apennine hills than was made by the builders of the old town, who tended to wall out the potentially hostile surroundings. Because his dormitory passages are single-loaded, to avoid having dormitory rooms facing uphill and away from the view, De Carlo was able to make his streets both seemingly enclosed (between raw concrete parapets and deep fascias), as well as open to views he chose to frame.

The comparative bird's eye views (left) show these striking similarities, as well as the differences, in the patterns of the old and the new Urbinos. They also show the harmony achieved by the unity of materials employed—and the great variety that is possible within such self-imposed restraints.





The Commons Building, is the dominant feature of the "Little Urbino"

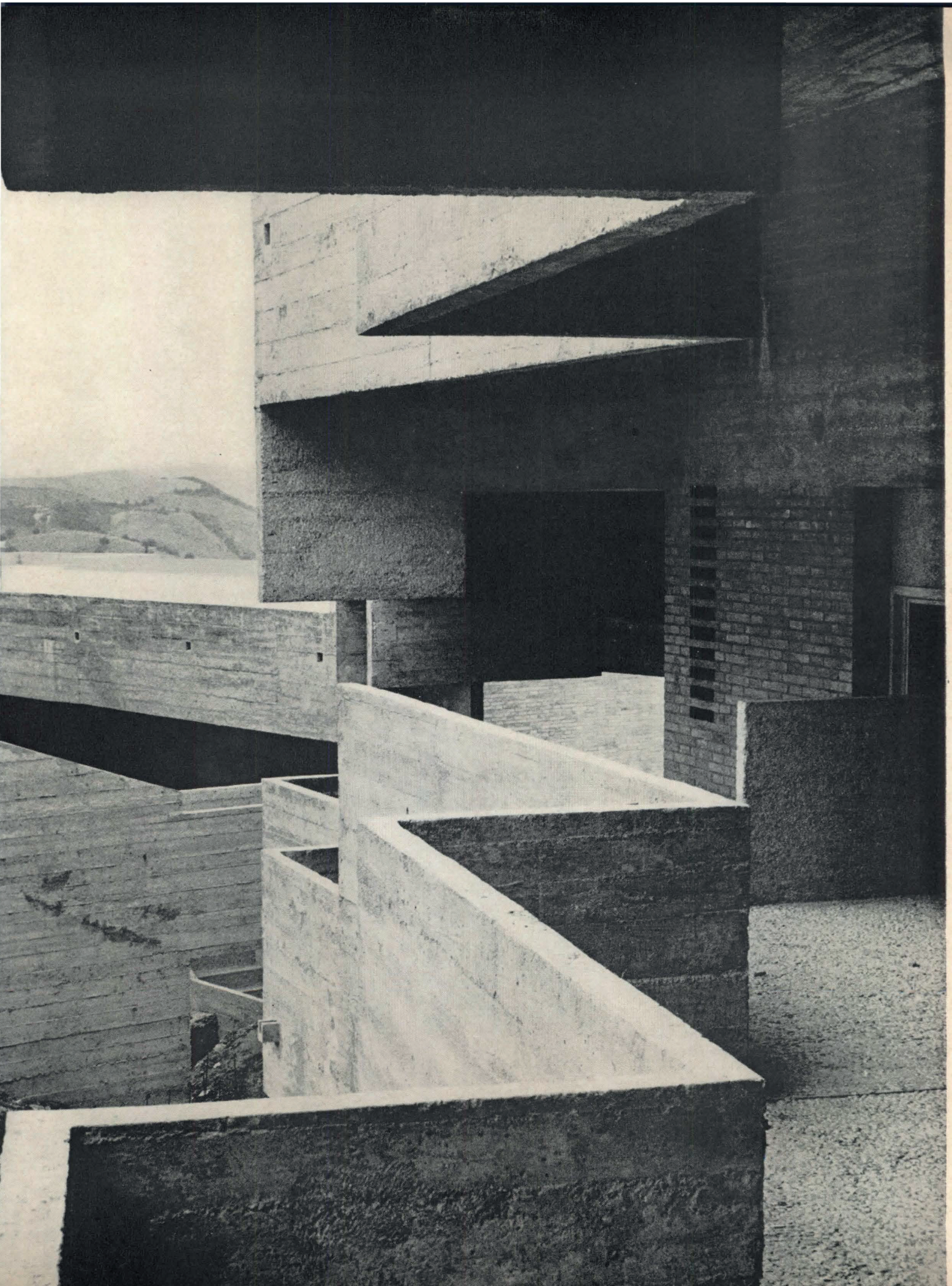
Like the *Palazzo Ducale* that dominates the old city (see page 44), the commons building that dominates the dormitory complex on the Hill of Cappuccini is very different from the buildings in its shadow: It is a multi-level structure, intricate in plan (main entrance level, with seminar room, is shown at left). Its forms are circular, as befits a crown, rather than angular as in the dormitories below. It has many terraces; winding peripheral walks; viewing-slots that give hints of the landscape beyond, without revealing its full spectacular sweep; and great skylights. (The semi-circular skylight over the seminar room is shown from above at top, left, and from inside that room in the bottom photo.)

Despite the deliberate contrast of forms between the commons building and the strings of dormitory rooms, there is also a clear kinship: for both echo the contours of the land, and both, though barely completed, are already an integral part of the landscape—as integral a part as the old town nearby, which seems to have grown out of its hilltop site by some act of nature rather than of man.

Not many urban problems today can be approached exactly as De Carlo approached the problem of the Hill of Cappuccini. But most of them can be approached in the *spirit* of this small project: a spirit that is respectful of the past, modest about the relative importance of the immediate present, and sufficiently open-minded to create buildings that will be given their ultimate form by other men and other needs.—PETER BLAKE

FACTS AND FIGURES

Dormitories and Commons Building, "Libera Università di Urbino," Italy. Architect: Giancarlo De Carlo. Collaborators: Francesco Borella (design); Vittorio Korach (structure); Lucio Seraghi and Astolfo Sartori (supervision). General Contractor: Impresa Montagna, Pesaro. Building area: 71,300 sq. ft. Construction cost: \$570,000. Furnishings and equipment: \$90,000. Cost per student: \$4,400 (All costs figured at L. 620 equals \$1.) Photographers: Cesare Colombo on pages 44, 47, 48 and 49 (top), 50, 51. Franco Ciannetti on page 49 (bottom).





**ARCHITECT JOSEPH ESHERICK PREACHES
MATHEMATICS, BUT IN HOUSES LIKE
THIS ONE, HE PRACTICES ART.
BY CHARLES MOORE, THE FORUM'S
WEST COAST CORRESPONDENT**

action house

Joseph Esherick believes that architects most often miss the boat because they fail to analyze (or more often, even to recognize) the problems they are supposed to be solving. This leaves them taking refuge in vague programmatic generalities and irresponsible formal



BOY FLAMM PHOTOS

games, in Esherick's opinion.

Esherick's sessions with graduate students at the University of California are devoted to the development of an analytical design method, using mathematical tools, in order to effect more responsive and responsible solutions to prob-

lems (and to the problem of finding out what the problems are).

Esherick's houses, on the other hand, are more likely to use the instant analytical techniques of the painter, especially the action painter, than those of the mathematician. The McLeod house, on

the top of Belvedere Island overlooking San Francisco Bay, is a strong case in point. There is the sense that the architect plunged down the steep hill past the oak to the marine view, gobbled it all up, and brought forth the house in chunks of light and outlook—

the way the action painter flings his wet paint onto his canvas, then responds directly to it in whatever way the ensuing seconds seem to demand.

This is not to say that the McLeod house is careless: the detailing is meticulous, the workmanship