These notes and sketches are based on the author's travel journal from his visit to Italy in the summer of 1987. They reveal a spectacular sequence of spaces and vistas from San Giulio, a small medieval town in the north of Italy. They also reveal what an incredible asset that sketching and observation are in the education of a city planner and urban designer who is always looking for the perfect place.

These are sketches of Orta San Giulio, a small town of 1,200 people on the shores of Lake Orta, north of Milan, in Italy’s Piedmont lake district. They illustrate the succession of pleasant, contrasting and sometimes surprising spaces that pedestrians encounter while walking from its main entrance parking lot through a covered passage to an inclined ramp with a beautiful church at one end and a glimpse of Lake Orta at the other. Then, at the bottom of the hill is Piazza Motta, enclosed on three sides by buildings is a spectacular view of Isola San Giulio, a small island in Lake Orta, its monastery, and the mountains in the background.

Whether this exemplary progression of spaces and views is the result of deliberate design, or happy accident through the centuries, is not known, but anyone who has traveled through Italian towns can appreciate that this is no rare occurrence. They teach us how space can reveal itself through movement in a succession of angles, planes, vistas and surprises.

Michael MacDougall is an architect (Hong Kong University) with graduate studies in the Architectural Association (London) and an MCRP (Cornell). He practiced for 13 years in Hong Kong and in the Bay Area, where he was a principal designer for Foster City. He taught in Cal Poly’s city and regional planning program from 1972 to 1992.
Sketch 1:
As one enters the town from the main parking lot, one walks through a short, dark corridor which emerges through an archway (not shown) at the middle of a cobble-stone ramp. The ramp, enclosed by buildings is, in effect, an inclined mall. Looking left toward the top of the hill and terminating the vista to the upper end of the ramp, is a small yellow 15th century Baroque church, Santa Maria Assunta. Its upper silhouette adding to the beautiful skyline, it was built in the days when the church and religion dominated public life. Its visual prominence reflects that position and it is one of the San Giulio’s landmarks.

Sketch 2:
Looking downhill from the previous position, one looks west through a gap in the surrounding buildings and gets a glimpse of Lake Orta and distant views of the mountains. The ramp gently curves to the left at the bottom of the slope, allowing partial enclosure of the ramped mall, above. It is, in effect, an outdoor foyer or antechamber to the waterfront Piazza Motta which lies below.
Sketch 3:
At the bottom of the hill, one turns right (south) and comes into Piazza Motta. Like most Italian piazzas, it is a pedestrian-only urban stage, and the heart of the community civic activities. This sketch is from the opposite end of the Piazza Motta, which is enclosed on three sides by shops, restaurants, hotels and apartments. Mostly from the 17th and 18th centuries, the buildings are adorned with wrought ironwork. At the far left, just opposite where the ramp in Sketches 1 and 2 terminates, is the old covered market used as the community center and known as Il Palazzetto. A narrow street runs by its side and connects to an extension beyond the piazza.

Sketch 4:
Views of San Giulio Island in Lake Orta – with its Romanesque basilica, bell tower, nunnery and houses with their covered boat-houses, and hanging gardens – can be seen from charming Piazza Motta. Two rows of trees, partially seen at right, frame lakeside views and give partial enclosure to the piazza. On certain days, an open air market with stalls covered with colorful awnings is held here. The sketch for the original watercolor was drawn while sitting at one of the restaurant tables that show in the foreground, and colored back in California.

The Orta San Giulio environment is like a stage setting with dramatic effects.