

Architecture, Image, and Sound across history and time: conservation, transformation, and enhancement of Roman Theatres.

Emanuele Morezzi¹; Emanuele Romeo²; Riccardo Rudiero³

¹Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), Polytechnic University of Turin, Italy, emanuele.morezzi@polito.it

²Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), Polytechnic University of Turin, Italy, emanuele.romeo@polito.it

³Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), Polytechnic University of Turin, Italy, riccardo.rudiero@polito.it

ABSTRACT

The architectural heritage of the Classical age, present both in Italy and in the other Mediterranean countries, has been subject over the centuries to different phenomena that have caused either its abandonment or the continuation of its use, its transformation or the loss of its integrity. These processes have ensured the survival of these buildings through a continuous integration in urban and cultural activities. The paper presents the results of research aimed at the preservation of this heritage, suggesting strategies for its enhancement that proposes a project for tourist fruition according to the theatres and their cultural and geographical landscape.

Keywords: conservation, restoration, memory

1. COMMEMORATIVE VALUE AND PRESENT-DAY VALUE IN ANCIENT CLASSICAL THEATRES

The classical architectural heritage is a significant presence in Italy, Europe, and other Mediterranean countries. Over time, it has been subjected to strongly diverse phenomena, which have led to its abandonment, use continuity, transformation, or disintegration [1]. In particular, theatres, following destructive events or interruption of use, have reached a state of ruin after transformations, re-functionalization, repairs from several types of damages, restoration or structural reinforcement, and adaptations to new stylistic canons. On one hand, these processes hinder the analysis of the typological characteristics of their original configuration; on the other hand, they have allowed their survival by integrating them continuously in urban and territorial activities. The relationship between ancient buildings, new architecture, urban environments, or landscape contexts has lasted over centuries. Following changes in their in-use destination, theatres were used for handcrafting or agricultural activities or were converted into households. Aside from subsequent adaptations to modern urban fabrics, these functions stayed unchanged until – with the rediscovery of antiquity – archaeological excavations and restoration interventions compromised their secular stratifications [2]. Nowadays, these artifacts are an integral part of landscapes and cities; their continuous transformation dynamics, imposed by strategies aimed at the tourism requalification of these contexts, are inexorably producing drastic separation between these monuments and their urban-territorial contexts. Conversely, they had been built in the framework of an inseparable relationship between theatres and landscape; sometimes, the latter even represented a natural scene for theatrical representations [3].

Ancient theatrical architectures can be categorized according to three factors: the historical vicissitudes that have allowed their conservation, their use over history, and their appreciation in the past. Hence, they can be divided into four categories: buildings located in archaeological sites; formally recognizable buildings, located in urban areas; buildings that, despite being still present in cities and territories, can only be identified through small traces, or are incorporated into modern buildings or complex urban fabrics, through modifications that, while preserving archaeological monuments, have limited their architectural interest by hiding their classical typological features; finally, still poorly examined buildings that are located in landscape contexts. These latter have a variable conservation state, are often abandoned, and are rarely the object of cultural enhancement strategies [4]. This distinction is essential, as until now artifacts in archaeological areas, or in urban centers when evident and tourism-attractive, have received a much wider interest. The present and past cultural conditions have been suggesting – too often – recovery or (stylistic) restoration interventions to remove additions and revert to the original appearance of the monument: however, this has led to the loss of the historical traces accumulated on these buildings over time. The presence of stratified elements has not been subjected yet to a recognition process, especially because of the lack of suitable tools for the comprehension of the underlying secular stratification processes [5]. This framework is compounded by the execution of badly conceived works of ‘functional actualization’, which have mostly overlooked investigation actions and conservation practices, proposing valorization strategies exclusively aimed at immediate returns in terms of economic efficiency and tourism.

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The interest in the protection of the cultural heritage in Italy, Europe, and extra-European countries, and the launch of initiatives for the restoration of the archaeological heritage [6], require an improvement in the knowledge tools of this heritage, and strategies for conservation and cultural development for sustainable fruition project. This latter has been encouraged more than 50 years ago by the Franceschini Commission [7], and more recently reiterated by the Siracusa Charter in 2004 [8]. This also requires total respect for the transformation dynamics that have always guaranteed a close relationship between theatrical building, city, and landscape, in addition to the awareness that valorization could also be performed by letting nature ‘use’ the archaeological ruin for the sublimation of a specific urban or landscape context. Hence, this paper proposes some methodological reflections for the analysis of this archaeological heritage by suggesting tools for the analysis of the transformation processes and for the verification of their current conservation state, suggesting suitable strategies for culturally sustainable promotion [9].

Notably, in some areas in Italy, Europe, and Mediterranean countries some studies have been performed in recent years and have sometimes served as a starting point for valorization projects of the diffuse archaeological heritage, especially theatres of the Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman age [10]. Following a literature review, this research is aimed at knowledge deepening for the theatres whose history (transformations, re-functionalization, total or partial destruction, *ante litteram* safeguard actions, stylistic restorations) has not been studied with sufficient detail. They have been transformed by these events for about 2000 years since their construction until conservation and valorization policies [11]. This knowledge is indispensable, especially to their possible re-functionalization as cultural and musical venues.

2. FROM THE ABANDONMENT OF RUINS TO SUSTAINABLE REUSE

In the framework of interventions on archaeological artifacts, especially on theatrical structures from the Roman age, one of the key items is the full understanding of the intrinsic meaning of the ruins, of their symbolic and semiotic value, in addition to their tangible characteristics, which are the object of physical modifications. The re-functionalization of an archaeological ruin implies a new conceptual and interpretative paradigm, which is an integral part of a multi-disciplinary transformation project. As highlighted above, ruins recall void, absence, gap, silence, and have a deeply strong relationship with the Past [12]. Ruins must be intended as architectures on the theme of silence, and that is the reason why for scholars, researchers, and artists these contexts and remains have originated important reflections, which have influenced Western artistic, literary, and architectural culture in the last centuries. Probably for this characteristic and unicity, architectural ruins are a rich and invaluable heritage, whose conservation is frail and exposed to many threats: when transformed into a ruin, a building loses its function and shifts from being architecture to being a memory, a monument, and a simulacrum of the

past [13]. The transition from an abandoned ruin to a restored building, with a new design, valid acoustic performance, and regulatory compliance cannot be implemented through the conversion of a single theatrical architecture; instead, it requires the semantic transformation of the surrounding landscape and context. In this perspective, the re-functionalization of the heritage can be performed only in a shared multi-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity, which allows a mutation of the historical context under careful supervision aimed at the conservation of archaeological and cultural ground [14]. Notably, some areas of the Italian, European and Mediterranean heritage have been the object of studies that served as a starting point for valorization projects on the diffuse archaeological heritage. However, this has been rarely supported by an interest in the landscape or urban context of the artifacts; instead, tourism-driven valorization projects have often led to landscape devastation and monument isolation, resulting in its desertification. Indeed, the study of a monument requires a complex knowledge process, starting from its origins and entailing all its historical stages, including the most recent ones, which have produced a surprising ‘symbiosis’ between human life and natural regeneration [15]. Hence, the main operations are: the individuation and cataloging of the heritage; the interpretation of the literary and epigraphic sources [16]; the consultation of cartographic, graphical, iconographic, and photographic records; the direct analysis of stratifications and the analysis of the conservation state of the buildings; the planning of interventions aimed at the conservation of the examined artifacts; the individuation of possible valorization strategies extended to the urban contexts and the landscape where the ancient places of performance are located [17].

In this perspective, the discipline of architectural restoration represents a potential coordination system for the activities aimed at the re-functionalization and valorization of the heritage. It can combine the fundamental study of archival and documental sources with the technique of building design and regulatory retrofit, hence coordinating transformations and ensuring a sustainable reconversion of the heritage. In fact, sustainability is not only related to the characteristics of the architectural work (soil consumption, material choices, programmed management criteria, ...) but also to the cultural dimension, including social and communicational aspects. Transforming the ruins of Roman theatres into new, efficient places, yet preserving the historical value of the archaeological space and ground, appears to be the fundamental challenge of our time for the conscious conservation of the built heritage.

3. USING THEATRES: THE CHARTERS ON THE ANCIENT PLACES OF PERFORMANCE, ACROSS CONSERVATION AND RE-FUNCTIONALIZATION

In addition to the abovementioned feature, another peculiar characteristic of ancient places of performance is the specific focus received by the International Charters, where the general strategies for the conservation of the cultural heritage are intertwined with more the cogent guidelines for archaeological artifacts. The Segesta Declaration (1995), the

Verona Charter (1997), and the Siracusa Charter (2004), despite not having a doctrinal nature, have become the reference documents for the compatible and sustainable use of theatres and amphitheatres, and have influenced many European and Mediterranean cultural strategies in this field. They follow the *European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage* (Valletta, 1992), adopted by the European Council, which had a mainly socio-political purpose, that is to fortify European identity also through the development of the heritage [18]. The pursuit of this goal has triggered the activation of many knowledge projects on this theme, in relation to the acoustic performance or the geometric and material configuration of buildings [19]. Moreover, it supported the restoration of the original in-use destination of many theatres, opening them to events and performances. Safety requirements and the intention of clearly displaying the original layout of the theatrical spaces often led to quite massive interventions, where reintegration was prioritized to the persistence of stratified spaces shapes and materials. This hints at a contradiction in the three Charters: the importance of the “minimum intervention” is affirmed, yet the reuse of theatrical structures is strongly encouraged, as if it were the only available option for their conservation.

Since the use of a building clearly implies a maintenance activity, is it necessary to fully restore the efficiency of ancient theatres, so as to make them available for reuse? Since the three Charters pursue this goal, are they antithetical to the criteria of restoration? Definitely not. Indeed, they have deeply influenced the cultural climate, fostering an in-depth technical analysis of every aspect of ancient places of performance. In particular, the Siracusa Charter provides well-founded support to the whole methodology of data acquisition and improved comprehension of these architectural organisms and contains useful management suggestions. However, not all ancient places of performance should receive the application of these directives, simply because not all of them are compatible with transformation. Or rather, they could be, but they would be turned into mere simulacra of design hypotheses.

The fulfillment of the transversal validity of the Charter requires clarifying that use is not an absolute postulate, but only one of the possible paths: probably, this path can be chosen only for a limited number of buildings. Different scenarios should be envisaged for all the others, in compliance with the indicated procedure: these could range from simple structural reinforcement to partial reconstruction, making them understandable but not usable, or even to the conservation of their collapsed state, with simple safety interventions [20]. In all these cases, as suggested in the Valletta Convention, there could be a more intense focus on virtual reconstructions, through shared scientific modalities, using the results of research activities also for communicational purposes [21]. If this were not to occur, the undoubted critical validity of the Siracusa Charter would keep being hindered. It would end up being a *checklist* for the achievement of good results, yet perceived as univocal. This should not happen, as restoration is, first of all, a philosophy [22], and its results – be they satisfying or not –

derive from a cultural reflection that technique must merely put into practice [23]. For all these reasons we believe that, after almost twenty years, the Charter should be revised: not in its prescriptions – which are still functional and effective – but in its premises, freeing it from eminently political interests. This opinion is also motivated by the introduction of new documents, which are changing the approaches to the heritage, such as the Faro Convention [24]. However, these documents must also be contradicted when they give higher importance to identity and processes than to the constraining role of architectural material, for the definition of orientation principles and operational models in restoration [25]. These latter must be questioned even more than the postulate of use; at least, they must no longer be the base for reflections that produce effects on the authenticity of the cultural heritage [26].

In conclusion, we believe this to be the time to debate again the fate of ancient places of performance. However, the object of the debate must not be “how” to intervene to preserve and use them at best, but “why” doing that. Almost thirty years of Declarations and Charters-driven restorations have certainly produced food for thought, together with the results of research in this field. However, these latter must be critically interrelated, leading to a trans-disciplinary – not only multi-disciplinary – comparison, based on a complex, global, and, above all, inclusive vision of knowledge [27].

4. REFERENCES

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