



The Colosseum: an iconic space

Barbara Nazzaro¹; Federica Rinaldi²

¹Parco archeologico del Colosseo, Italy, barbara.nazzaro@beniculturali.it

²Parco archeologico del Colosseo, Italy, federica.rinaldi@beniculturali.it

ABSTRACT

The Colosseum is the greatest and most important Roman Amphitheatre, built by the Flavian dynasty. It is the most visited monument in Italy and has become an icon for its imposing architecture, for the memory of the popular shows performed in it and later for its Christian reuse.

The restoration works started at the beginning of the XIX century and never stopped until today, thus both to preserve the monument for the future generations and in order to assist contemporary visitors by introducing facilities such as elevators, a modern lighting system and the new arena floor.

Keywords: Colosseum; conservation; visitors

1. INTRODUCTION

The Colosseum is not only an icon, a must-see, visitors from all over the world come to Italy and to Rome attracted by the charm of a nation that has identified itself with its culture and art. The amphitheatre is also one of the most extraordinary monuments of antiquity, in terms of building technique, architecture, history and symbolic function; it is still capable of engaging visitors in an exciting journey, seducing the imagination, inspiring new stories that renew its fascination lasting since 2000 years.

This story begins at the time of Emperor Vespasian, in 71 AD, when the construction of the Colosseum began in the valley occupied by the immense lake around which Nero's *Domus Aurea* stood and where the colossal statue of the emperor was placed.

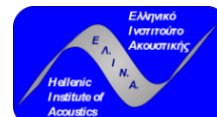
The inauguration took place under Emperor Titus in 80 AD, spectators accessed the monument passing through numbered archways each bearing a ticket to reach the assigned place in the *cavea*. Seats were strictly divided according to their social class. The performances attracted people from all over the empire, and the amphitheatre became a real melting pot. Noise and bustle characterised the stands, darkness and stench the underground levels where the “entertainment machine” was set up. This is where slaves, animals, those condemned to death and above all gladiators, waited to appear on the *arena* floor. During the first centuries of its use, earthquakes along with renovations requested by emperors, led to modifications, restorations and new installations, all designed to accommodate between 50,000 and 70,000 people.

The shows lasted till the 6th century, when new political demands and religious fervour, along with the Christian Emperors' aversion to bloody games, contributed to the progressive deterioration of the building. As a symbol of imperial power it reflected the city's decline: the building was turned into a place of conflict between Rome's most prominent families, a domestic space with stables and vegetable gardens, until it was lastly silenced and abandoned, and its ancient role forgotten.

From the Middle Ages and up to the 18th century, a combination of sacred and profane factors played an important role; it is in this time that the Colosseum became, unknowingly, the world icon it is today. In the interaction between secular and Christian usage, the symbolic function and identity of the monument are played out, recognized and admired by people from all over the world. Inscriptions, artifacts, paintings and traces left on its walls act as a guide on this journey of knowledge. A renewed awareness in conservation began in the 19th century and the same Popes who in the past centuries had tried to cover it up, chose now to implement it. It was the Popes who appointed, among others, the architect Raffaele Stern to build the eastern spur, also by fixing and “freezing” the state of collapse of the third order, and Giuseppe Valadier who built the western one [1-2].

In the meantime, excavations began in order to clear the monument of debris, which had been covering it, up to the corbels of the arches of the first tier. In 1899 the entrance ticket to the Colosseum, costing 2 lire, was instituted in order to increase the funds for archaeological excavations in Rome.

10.58874/SAAT.2022.214



It is the beginning of a new phase, approaching the recent times, which will see in the following decades the Colosseum supporting the fascist propaganda and the idea of urban modernity, as for the construction of the subway line B, which cut off the western foundations of the amphitheatre, definitely compromising the water outflow from the underground levels. It is for this reason that today the undergrounds undergo frequent floodings. In the 1970s, the area of the Colosseum was freed and it was tuned into to a traffic free island, in conjunction with a renewed season of excavations and restorations conducted with rigorous scientific method, still ongoing today.

In the last twenty years many initiatives have been carried out in the Colosseum, with a specific attention to the scientific investigations and care of the monument, as well as to the needs of visitors from all continents. This was done in a constant dialogue with the institutions and the civil society of Rome, in order to make the Central archaeological area more and more the beating heart of the city.

Despite its shape, articulated in archways, ambulatories, stairs, orders and levels, the Colosseum is,



Figure 1 – The Colosseum by drone

for the great majority of the areas, opened to the public and accessible to all. Soon it will also be possible to take advantage of further facilities to reach newly opened areas.

In ancient times the use and access to the amphitheatre did not give the chance to those with reduced mobility to reach the various levels of the *cavea*, but nowadays the Colosseum has become a place that allows everyone to admire the mastery of the Roman construction technique and the remains of an imposing entertainment machine.

Accessibility is an imperative act of civilisation; the challenge for those who have to match the conservation of the monument with the removal of architectural barriers is to insert such facilities in the existing structures, with no harm to the monument, making the most of the possibilities offered by the building itself.

Currently there are two kinds of accessibility: cultural and physical. Cultural accessibility concerns the

opportunity for visitor to use applications and experiences such as video and light mapping to improve knowledge and enjoyment of heritage [3].

Concerning the physical accessibility, we can say that today access to the Colosseum does not reflect the ancient one; in the past, infact, the access took place radially, from each numbered archway and spectators were led to the path they had to follow in order to reach the assigned seat, which, as we said, was differentiated according to the social class.

Nowadays, for visiting needs, involving also security checks that have become necessary in the last 15 years due to the changed international condition, the access takes place through some selected gates and introduces visitors along the ambulatories, corridors that form the four concentric ovals of the Colosseum.

Three levels are currently open to visitors: what is conventionally called first order, which corresponds to the ground floor, is externally framed by Tuscan semi-columns; the second order, corresponding to the first level, so named for the arches bordered by half-columns with capitals of the Ionic order, and the underground level or hypogea, recently reopened to public after a long restoration campaign.

All areas of the first level are accessible by visitors; ramps have been built in case of differences of height and their visual impact was mitigated with a studied and contextualised insertion.

Access to the second order is possible through 4 steep stairs with two ramps, rebuilt around the 30s of the '900 on the footprints of the ancient ones, and, through two elevators built on the occasion of the Jubilee of 2000. The two elevators are inserted in a space where, due to the collapse of ancient structures, a section of the floor is missing, thus allowing an insertion that did not require any changes to the monument.

Access to the second order is possible through 4 steep stairs with two ramps, rebuilt around the 30s of the '900 on the footprints of the ancient ones, and, through two elevators built on the occasion of the Jubilee of 2000. The two elevators are inserted in a space where, due to the collapse of ancient structures, a section of the floor is missing, thus allowing an insertion that did not require any changes to the monument.

The entire first floor, so-called II order, is accessible and can be visited as it is, on the same level.

Between the second and the third tier, in the northern part of the monument, there is a section of the intermediate gallery: this corridor is extremely evocative for the alternation of views towards the arena that create panoramic glimpses towards the inside of the Colosseum. It also bears interesting traces of plaster and graffiti.

Access to this intermediate tunnel was of course via stairs, two of which have been adapted, in recent years. The construction of a panoramic lift is nearly completed, so to allow people with reduced mobility to access this area.

The latter has been designed starting from the second ambulatory, taking advantage of the lack of vaulted structures and allowing the insertion of a highly transparent structure. This will both permit to

reach the intermediate gallery and will offer a spectacular view of the inside of the Colosseum during the ascent.

The underground levels are also accessible to everybody: in 2010, during the first restoration, a modern staircase and a freight elevator were inserted in a spot, already in used in ancient times to bring props and equipment down to the lower levels. Moreover, since 2021, the latest restoration work has made it possible to open to public the undergrounds in their entirety without any architectural barrier, while at the same time preserving the delicate *opus spicatum* floors.

Presently, to go back to the first order after the underground tour, visitors use an evocative and narrow staircase that retraces what in ancient times allowed workers to move from one level to another. For those who have reduced mobility, the route provides to go back along the walkway to the existing freight elevator; however, it is planned to build another lift with an extremely slender and transparent structure that will complete the path.

The accessibility for all also includes the recon-



Figure 2 – The Colosseum and the arena

structed portion of the arena floor, allowing visitors to enjoy a 360° view of what remains of the incredible *cavea* and all its levels.

The arena floor currently has a surface area of approximately 700 m² and, since its construction in 2000, it has been the venue for numerous events, both contemporary and classical music concerts, plays, movies with live music, presentations, conferences, charitable initiatives, and shows with educational purposes.

2. CONCLUSIONS

The goal always pursued by the Administration was to link the image of the Colosseum to cultural initiatives or charitable purposes, connoting the contemporary civilization of different values from those for which the Flavian Amphitheatre was built.

From the summer of 2022 to the Jubilee of 2025, the protagonist will be the project for the complete reconstruction of the arena floor with an intervention

that, by fully respecting the monument, will use the most advanced technologies to reproduce the dynamism that the arena floor had in ancient times with its numerous movable devices.

3. REFERENCES

- [1] R. Rea, S. Romano, R. Santangeli Valenzani (edited by). Colosseo, Milano, Electa 2017.
- [2] B. Nazzaro, Il Colosseo modello di architettura dal Rinascimento, alle utopie Neoclassiche, agli *Envoi* accademici, al Novecento, in R. Rea, S. Romano, R. Santangeli Valenzani (edited by). Colosseo, Milano, Electa 2017, pp. 144-166
- [3] A. Russo, F. Rinaldi (edited by). Gerusalemme al Colosseo. Il dipinto ritrovato, Milano, Electa, 2020.