

Building in the built

A project for the University buildings in the historical center of Naples

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The project for the complex of the "Federico II" University in Via Mezzocannone, was an occasion to analyze a current theme about the transformation of the city: the relationship between the ancient city and the contemporary project. The essay focuses on: "Building in the built", with two main lines of response to the theme, one about the conservation, the other about the regeneration. The second approach is pursued: the contemporary becomes an expression of one's own age. We work through "fragments", that allows a re-reading of the context and the relationship with memory. The project for University's buildings is measured with the re-reading of the historical building and its relationship with the old center, through a strategy that works for punctual interventions, with new paths and functions.

The theme

The future of cities, characterized by the high density of constructions and the strong presence of historical and monumental buildings, comes to a theme: "building in the built"⁽¹⁾, that becomes imperative for the contemporary project. The discussion about the relationship between ancient and modern, leads to the responsibility of inserting a new architectural "fragment" with a new "life"⁽²⁾, which in turn will undergo changes and modifying the context in which it lives.

Starting from the second post-war period, the problem of the reconstruction of the areas devastated by the war puts the debate on the legitimacy of the insertion of the "new" into the "old". There were numerous meetings and conferences on the issue of restoration and reconstruction, but at the beginning of the Eighties the orientation matured the slogan "Building in the built", which identifies the theoretic and practical attention about the historical theme in the context of the project. In 1984 B. Secchi wrote: "the space in which we will live the next few decades is largely already built. The theme is now to give meaning to the future through continuous modifications to the city, the territory, to existing materials"⁽³⁾. Even today, the theoretical and operational trend, around thirty years after, is the feasible way in the international architectural scene, alongside environmental and land use issues.

There are two different approaches in response to the theme: on the one side, interventions that rely on the conservation of the existing, starting from the monuments and buildings considered significant, including the "urban fabrics", even of minor importance or quality constructive, developing building recovery and redevelopment techniques, aiming at reversibility and minimum impact; on the other side, interventions for renewal in response to today's needs, trusting in the possibility of contemporaneity to express themselves, as theorized by the Modern Movement, "every age has its own greatness" (Mies van der Rohe).

The second strategy, which in this research is to be pursued, aims to signify places through the contemporary, as E. N. Rogers wrote: "(...) we must have the courage to impress the meaning of our age, and the more we will be able to be modern, the better we will be connected to tradition and our works will be harmonized with the pre-existing environments"⁽⁴⁾. For E. N. Rogers, the insertion of the new architecture into historical contexts starts from the recognition of the environment as the place of all the pre-existences, of which each of us should feel the influence.

This means, therefore, taking into account the history and respecting its presence: "history has never been defined in a static system and it has always been resolved in a succession of mutations (...) it is logical to conclude that, not only it can prevent the passage to the expressions of contemporary society, but that it is only right to affirm our temporal presence with our natural settlement in space"⁽⁵⁾. The new buildings and the redevelopment of existing buildings become architectural occasions to re-read the context and give it a contemporary interpretation through the definition of new rules and new relationships with the existing ones, without falling into stylistic formalisms.

One of the first examples, which aroused quite a few controversies, was the Loos's project for the building in the Michaelerplatz. Ji Linzasoro wrote about the project of A. Loos: "the intervention sought not only to measure itself with the architecture of its time, but also with the place where it stood, without resorting to the unity of style"⁽⁶⁾. It was not the only example: in Germany there were R. Schwarz, with the Wallraf-Richartz museum and Hans Döllgast with Alte Pinakothek (1957); in Italy: the Goods Exchange in Pistoia by Michelucci (1949), the Bottega d'Erasmus in Turin by Gabetti and Isola (1953-56), the apartment building of I. Gardella alle Zattere in Venice (1954-1957), the department store La Rinascente in Rome by F. Albini with F. Helg (1957-61), the Querini Stampalia by C. Scarpa in Venice (1961-63).

The centrality of the theme in the debate of those years is evidenced by the proliferation of conferences, essays and articles, the apex of that parable can be traced in the First International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice, La Biennale in 1980, entitled "*The presence of the past*", edited from Paolo Portoghesi. "The presence of the past is neither just ironic nor purely voluptuous. Closed in the ghetto of the ancient city, memory has become inoperative, has become a factor of separation and privilege. Memory can help us to come out of impotence, to replace the magical act, with which we had deluded ourselves to exorcise the past and to build a new world, the lucid and rational act of re-appropriation of the forbidden fruit"⁽⁷⁾.

Building within an already consolidated fabric, involves a close relationship with the memory. The theme of memory is highlighted by A. Rossi, for whom the city can not be considered with a mere infrastructure of services, but as the raw material of identity and collective memory, "the collective memory becomes the same transformation of the space by the collectivity", "memory becomes the guiding thread of the whole complex structure", "memory is the conscience of the city"⁽⁸⁾.



Fig.1. left: A. Loos, Looshaus a Michaelerplatz, Vienna (1909)

Fig.2. right: Hans Döllgast, Alte Pinakothek, Monaco (1957)

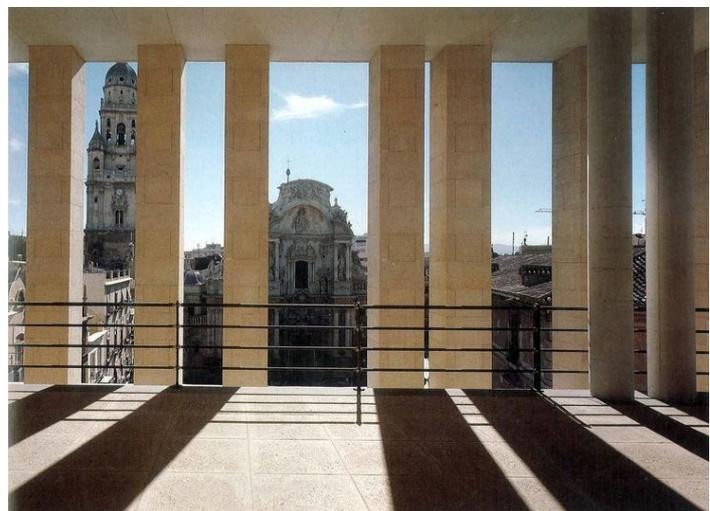
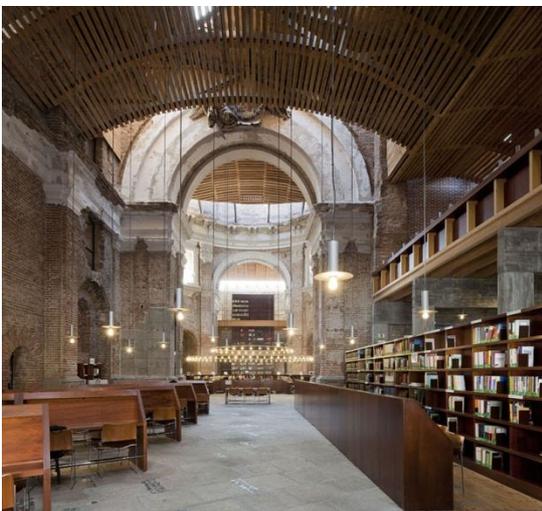


Fig.3. left: J. I. Linazasoro, Escuelas Pías de San Fernand, Madrid.

Fig.4. right: R. Moneo, Murcia City Hall, view of the Cathedral from the loggia

The will is to defend not only the history but the *mémoire* of the city, as J.I. Linazasoro writes, operating for "fragments". He underlines the "individualism" of the contemporary and the impossibility in the stratified fabrics of the historical cities to work on a single "story", in favor of a series of interventions "by fragments": "modern architecture is always revealed to us. In its fragmentary condition and, at the same time, yearning for a lost totality" (9).

He succeeds at both a theoretical and operative level, to ensure the permanence of the perception of space, respecting the architecture of the architecture, for example in the Escuelas Pias de San Fernand in Madrid, where he acted on a ruin of the pre-existing church by converting it into a library and succeeding to restore the spatiality of what had once been. Also the Municipality of Murcia of R.Moneo (1998) is a testimony of this operation: “through the new building, the city is part of the life of the square, enjoying the splendid backdrop offered by the religious façade”⁽¹⁰⁾, the study of alignments, geometry and public space has allowed to recover the condition of the square, urban space of greater value for the city. Example of how a contemporary “fragment” allows to re-read the square, take the measure and live it.

The project

In this debate and on this theme the Master in Design of excellence for the historical city operates, at the University of Naples “Federico II” which elaborates an attentive and measured investigation on the regeneration of the Ancient Neapolis. The project elaborated within the seventh edition, focuses on an important piece of the “ancient center” of the city of Naples: the complex of the Frederician University in Via Mezzocannone.



Fig.5. left: plant of the “old center” and identification of the university complex “Federico II”.

Fig.6. right: the internal path, the “Frederic corridor”.

In the historical center of Naples, the “building in the built” is the common code of the *urbis* form that still gives meaning and recognition to the Roman Greek plant of the foundation of the city. Founded around 460 BC, declared World Heritage Site in 1995 by UNESCO, preserves the original grid, consisting of *insulae* that regulate the whole form in which the conventual complexes become the exceptions to the rule. Naples takes the time and the modifications of the history in which the strength of the plant survives, the “architecture of memory” participates in contemporary life, the “phenomenal complexity”⁽¹¹⁾, the clarity of the Greco-Roman grid, more tangible element weather. The university building, with a convent structure, is today the result of a series of stratifications that took place from the 16th century to the present day. Initially a series of houses flanked Via Mezzocannone, as shown by the Lafrery view of 1566, but it was only in 1629 with the view of Baratta that the “new road of Jesus” was identified for the first time, designed for an agreement between the monastery of Donnaromita and the Jesus monastery, today called vico Orilia.

The Donnaromita monastery, suppressed in 1808, was used as the site of the Alta Corte Militae and orphanage. In 1863 the School of Applied Engineering was established: factories were raised in the cloisters, whose surrounding bodies are raised. With the Rehabilitation also the elevations on Via Paladino, rusticated with stucco and on vico Orilia, are changed, while the front of Via Mezzocannone is demolished and redone. The Jesuit complex, with the abolition of the order, is occupied by the University of Studies and was modified with the Rehabilitation, with the enlargement project. A project was created with this purpose, signed by the architects P. Quaglia and G. Melisurgo, which involved the construction, downstream of the university complex of three buildings that would have formed a single body. The new building would then be connected to the complex behind by a monumental staircase (called Scalone della Minerva), which originated in the courtyard of the University Building and ended in the Jesuit courtyard, overcoming a difference in height of more than 7m.

Thanks to the contribution of scholars of different disciplinary, the themes have been identified and specified, we proposed some interventions that regulate the large block of Via Mezzocannone as a new cultural Hub, open to the city. The proposal is aimed at the knowledge of forgotten places and abandoned to degradation, the first step for the enhancement. The project aims to give meaning to disused university areas, currently denied to the city, like the Salvatore’s ramps, closed in the ‘60s. The project consists of specific interventions, for example: the reopening of the Salvatore’s ramps, the redesign of the Minerva courtyard and the Savior’s courtyard, the redevelopment of vico Orilia. It is redefined, a path inside the complex, named in the activity of the master: “*Frederician corridor*”, which from Corso Umberto, the main entrance, crosses the whole building, passing through the cloisters of the former convents. On an urban scale, an analysis of the road system that surrounds the block has led to the definition of differentiated paths. If via vehicular use is confirmed via Mezzocannone, a pedestrian linking function is attributed to Via Paladino, enhanced by the reopening of the Savior’s ramps. Compared to this system of routes, vico Orilia, identified as a new public space, becomes an opportunity to link the two main roads (via Paladino and via Mezzocannone) and is no longer an element of separation, defines new access to the ground floor of the buildings facing it.

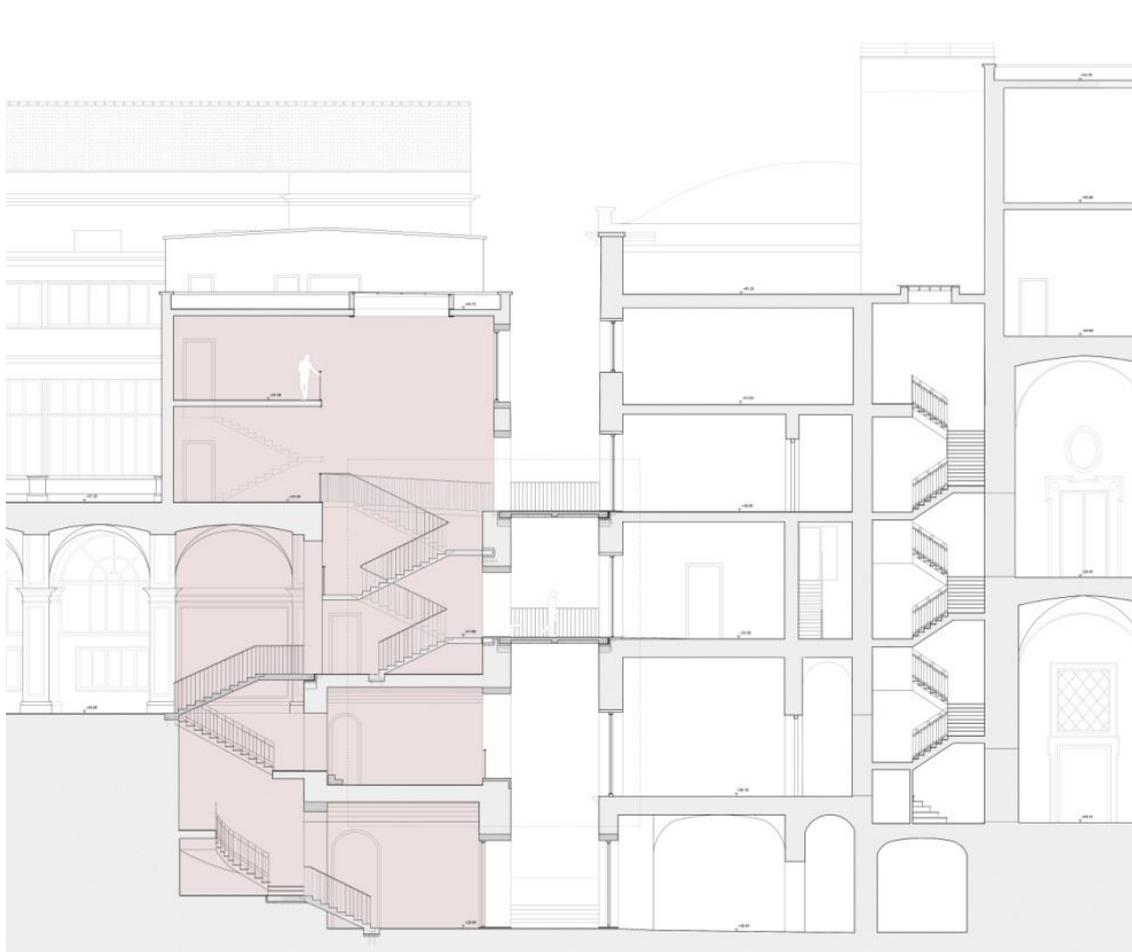


Fig.7. Section of the project

One of the “fragments” that make up the project is the vertical connection system in the Donnaromita complex (Mezzocannone n16) and the crossing of vico Orilia: the design choice comes from the reinterpretation of the Neapolitan staircase, traditionally open space that acts as a filter between public and private. “The characteristic of these open staircases that are so different from those of other countries is essentially due to the favorable conditions of the climate for which the whole Neapolitan life seems to tend to manifest itself to the outside” ⁽¹²⁾. In the same perspective, the new staircase and bridges, linking the two open spaces of the courtyards and the loggias, form an internal but open space, while the choice of materials and the design of the new connection reinterpret the architectural tradition of the Neapolitan scale.

The project, through specific programs, aims to renew the urban centrality of the university structure, respecting its memory. We tried to measure ourselves with a very current theme, inserting the contemporary into a historical artefact, maintaining its own identity in continuity with the existing one.

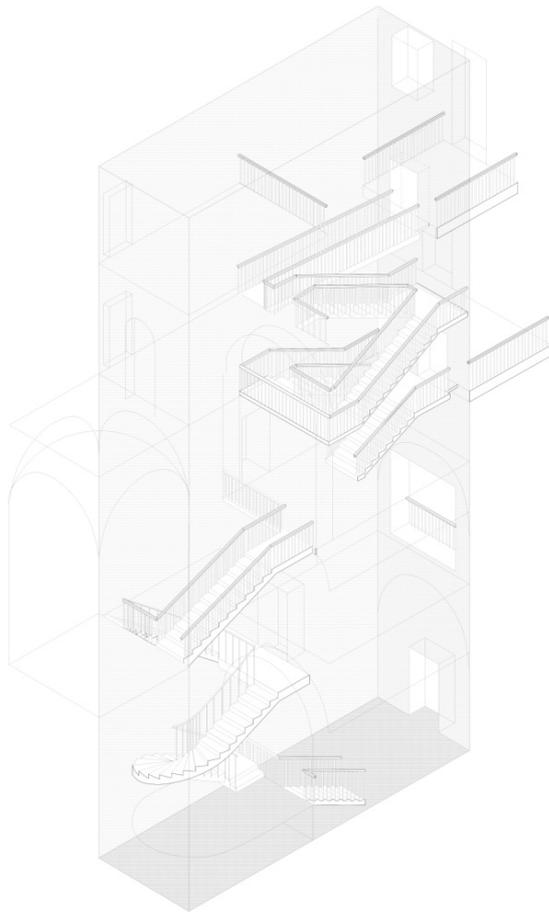


Fig.8. left: Project in axonometry

Fig.9.right: photo insertion of the project, view of the cloister of Donnaromita



Fig. 10. Views of vico Orilia, on the left the current state, on the right seen with the crossing project.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the project was an opportunity to study the relationship between contemporary design and the historic building. “The new” becomes an opportunity to reread “the existing” and the result will be the lever of renewal in respect of the context if perfectly integrated into the fabric of the historic city. In fact, the cities in which we live are the result of the coexistence of buildings from different eras, which represent the fruit of an urban transformation. The historical centers constitute, therefore, the ideal test bench for the practice of the contemporary project, necessary to safeguard the identity traits of the existing one. The exercise of “building in the built” remains one of the most interesting strands of contemporary design. In fact, it can critically contribute to re-establishing and continuing the process of transformation of the city, expressing the “greatness” of our age.

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