

## REUSE AND RENOVATION OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE BETWEEN GOVERNMENTAL, ADMINISTRATIVE AND RESIDENTIAL USES. THE CASE OF PALAZZO COLUCCI AND THE FORMER CONVENT OF THE VIRGINS IN THE HISTORIC CENTER OF ASCOLI PICENO/

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**Abstract.** As part of the “third mission” activities, the relationships between the Department of Civil, Building, and Architecture Engineering at the Polytechnic University of Marche (scientific director Prof. Gianluigi Mondaini) and the National Agency for State Property has produced a study aimed at verifying the potential of a possible strategy for the reuse and repurposing of two significant state-owned buildings in the heart of the historical center of the city of Ascoli Piceno.

In particular the paper treats the case of Palazzo Colucci, with its garden and the former Convent of the Vergini later transformed and expanded to serve as a military barracks. Within this transformation process, the hypothesis of converting these buildings into the new headquarters of the Prefecture of Ascoli Piceno and into the new headquarters of the Southern Marche Superintendency, together with a university dormitory with related services open to the public has been proposed.

To meet the changing needs of the contemporary city, the hypothesis of a functional mix of governmental, administrative, and residential uses within a strategic part of the historic city can be an opportunity for urban regeneration and enhancement of the pre-existing architectural heritage. This approach sensitizes and coordinates a variety of public and private entities that, together, would actively contribute to the urban transformation process, bringing life and innovative uses to an urban area that is currently largely inactive. The intervention hypothesis, taking into account the various demands, has engaged with the spatial, geometric, and qualitative features of a system of historic buildings that mark the end of the ancient decumanus of the Roman layout of the city of Ascoli Piceno. This approach aims to respond to new requirement frameworks while primarily promoting an integrated architecture capable of dialogue between history and contemporary innovation.

**Introduction.** The recent Italian city, at least in its consolidated part, has hundreds of thousands of square metres of vacant and unused spaces. These spaces offer the opportunity for innovative programmatic and regenerative actions by those managing the future of our urban realities. The

fundamental question driving the research experience presented in this text is the following: is it possible to create a multidisciplinary think tank to outline the main directions for administrative action in the innovative repurposing of historic buildings and parts of the urban fabric? This would frame interventions within a unified strategy that considers the importance of heritage and the social identity of the city, emerging services and needs, economic actors and dynamics, while fostering the necessary synergy with private and private-social entities.

At present, cities need not only to consider micro-urban regeneration projects and the reuse of abandoned historical assets but also to outline a developmental pathway that defines their overarching strategies for the future. Cities today are all in search of “economies” and, above all, a clear and attractive identity. It is crucial to deeply understand what a city can become over the years, particularly for smaller cities with less established attractiveness. Only by preparing a pathway, formulating a transformation strategy, and effectively communicating it can we attract investors capable of supporting administrations in developing recovery programme with solid cultural and economic foundations for successful implementation and sustainability. No strategic investment fund or financial entity, particularly the European Union, will commit to funding operations without clarity regarding objectives or the ability to track progress over time against the model of the city being envisioned.

Such a model must be shared with city stakeholders through dialogue involving policymakers, businesses, the non-profit sector, academia, civic associations, and actors concerned with public spaces as common goods. As the “Hub for Heritage and Habitat” research group within the DICEA Department of Excellence at the Marche Polytechnic University, we are involved in several strategic actions within our territory that aim to address this question positively. This text presents a research work focused on the relationship between contemporary architecture and innovative heritage regeneration. The case study we propose could serve as a virtuous model of public action: the programme known as “Piano Città” (City Plan), implemented by the State Property Agency in various Italian cities. As a university research structure, we are advancing this programme in Ancona and Ascoli Piceno in synergy with the Municipality, the Region, and the University. This is not a conventional urban planning instrument but a specific action dedicated to the recovery of unused heritage, demonstrating significant potential for cities. The State, as the owner of many vacant buildings across Italy, convenes the relevant public actors—Municipality, University, Region, competent Ministries, and State Property Agency—to reactivate these assets by proposing programme and projects to a pool of investors based on a strategic vision for the transformation of a site that serves as a catalyst for the process.

It is essential to develop this vision first, clearly convey its objectives, and articulate the quality aspirations to enable stakeholders and implementers to envision the transformation. The “Piano Città” programme addresses buildings owned by the State and properties functional to its activities. The programme for the city of Ascoli Piceno, presented in this paper, envisages the recovery of a part of the ancient city featuring architecturally significant historic buildings, such as Palazzo Colucci and the Monastery of the

Vergini. These buildings have been abandoned for many years and were further damaged by the destructive earthquake that struck central Italy in 2016. FIGURE 1.

**A systemic approach to urban regeneration: revitalizing Ascoli Piceno through architectural innovation.** The aim is to tackle the issue of regenerating large urban voids with a systemic approach, guided by architectural and spatial vision, employing various methods and approaches to identify real needs within a general programmatic and strategic framework. For Ascoli Piceno, the recovery of Palazzo Colucci through its expansion would allow the Italian State to refurbish a property, consolidating all functions currently housed in three separate and distant buildings for which the State incurs rental expenses. Beyond the evident economic savings from consolidating the Prefecture's functions into a single building, the systemic approach has identified space for additional uses, such as a student residence with associated services and the new headquarters of the Marche Sud Superintendency within the volumes of the convent adjacent to Palazzo Colucci. This initiative would regenerate and revitalize a central area of the city, which has long been perceived as peripheral due to its abandonment.

The innovative approach of this urban and architectural regeneration hypothesis lies, far from the ostensibly preservationist stance of the slogan “where it was, as it was,” in embracing the notion of “impermanence” in the city and its buildings. Urban spaces have always evolved, transformed, and borne witness to destruction, modification, and reconstruction, reflecting their era. “A continuous process of making, unmaking, and reinterpreting what exists... cannot be governed by ‘transcendent and immutable’ laws but must adhere to autonomous laws... of becoming, which Caniggia described as ‘processual’, highlighting a harmony between history as the current state of what is built and structure as the process of construction/ mutation over time.” (Cecilia Anselmi)

The innovation we propose lies precisely in the interpretation of “harmony,” which involves attention to and recovery of the existing fabric through interventions that interpret and read forms and languages of historical and typological value, introducing necessary spaces and volumes that do not renounce their contemporaneity but whose new morphology reflects an interpretation and “harmony” with the pre-existing. FIGURE 2.

### **Hypothesis for the enhancement of Palazzo Colucci and a new student housing in Ascoli Piceno.**

#### **Repurposing and expansion as the new headquarters of the Prefecture**

The re-functionalization project for Palazzo Colucci in Ascoli Piceno, intended to serve as the new headquarters for the Prefecture, respects the typological and distributive characteristics of the pre-existing load-bearing masonry building, striving to accommodate new functions while aligning with the original layout as much as possible. Specifically, the typological configuration of the existing Palazzo Colucci is well-suited to the new uses required by the Prefecture, though the total gross floor area is insufficient to host all necessary functions.

For this reason, it is proposed that the smaller adjoining structures be

demolished and reconstructed with an extension, preserving and conserving the historic facades along Corso Mazzini (the Decumano of the Roman-founded city of Ascoli Piceno), which represent the most valuable parts of these annexes. The main structure of Palazzo Colucci comprises three levels: a ground floor interfacing with both Corso Mazzini and the garden of Palazzo Colucci—a public space—and two raised floors, with an attic space beneath a gabled roof. While the ground and first floors would house offices, conference rooms (including an expanded circular volume extending into the historic garden), archives, and storage areas, the top floor would accommodate the residence of the Prefect and the accommodation for the President of the Republic. In the proposed design, Palazzo Colucci would be served by two stairwells with lifts: one for public use and the other exclusively for the Prefect, providing direct access between the office and residence.

The adjacent extension, preserving the two historic facades on Corso Mazzini, would comprise four above-ground floors: a ground floor and two raised floors for offices, archives, and storage areas, and a fourth floor for additional offices and a multipurpose representation hall directly connected to the residential spaces of Palazzo Colucci. The facades along Corso Mazzini would be restored, maintaining the original appearance along this historically significant thoroughfare. On the southern-facing facades overlooking the Colucci Garden, the historic fenestration would remain unchanged, with the addition of a new circular volume at the ground level for events and conferences, shielded by brise-soleil. Adjacent to the Colucci Garden facade, the new extension volume for offices would harmonise with the circular conference volume through its brise-soleil design, reflecting sustainability and protection from direct southern sunlight. FIGURE 3, FIGURE 4.

#### **Repurposing and expansion of the former Convento delle Vergini**

The Ex-Caserma Umberto I, located opposite Palazzo Colucci and separated by Corso Mazzini, consists of a main building and a western wing forming an internal courtyard. From this wing extends another structure bordering the rear plot boundaries, shaping a second courtyard that was originally the cloister of the Monastery of the Vergini, the complex's initial function. Although the system comprises diverse buildings, the open space of the former cloister is characterized by ground-floor porticoes that serve as thresholds and relational spaces between the garden and the interiors of the various volumes.

For its repurposing, the first section of the wing, directly connected to the main volume of the Ex-Caserma, is designated for the new Superintendency spaces, while the remaining portion will house a student residence and associated services. The building intended for institutional use by the Ministry of Culture will have functional spaces on all floors, adapting to the masonry building's typology, all interconnected by a new stairwell and lift to meet accessibility and barrier-free standards. On the ground floor, spaces unfold sequentially through openings carved into existing transverse walls, featuring a reception area, a library, and a conference/meeting room. On the upper floors, the distribution system includes a central corridor accessing functional and service spaces such as offices, archives, storage,

and a small coffee area. The third and final floor is a large open space with ancillary facilities, dedicated to the Superintendent's office and secretariat, suspended within the spacious volume created by the innovative redesign of the building's wooden roof structure, which provides generous spatiality through its truss design.

The student housing units are located in the terminal section of the main wing overlooking the former cloister, which belonged to the Monastery of the Vergini before becoming the Caserma Umberto I and now awaiting conversion into university student accommodation.

With regard to the first section adjacent to the Superintendency, the existing volume is characterised by the presence of a central spine wall which, in section, configures interiors whose flooring on each floor is not coplanar. This constraint has resulted in variable residential configurations, including simplex and duplex rooms of varying sizes due to habitable mezzanines.

On the ground floor, an entrance/reception area provides access to the student housing, rooms, and shared services. The large pre-existing portico is converted into a shared living space enclosed by transparent glazing, preserving the original portico's structure. This portico also connects to additional system wings leading to common areas/TV rooms and a self-contained service block at the rear of the lot, housing a gym, study rooms, and dining facilities. These facilities are purposefully designed as new constructions within the open space and can be privately managed and accessible to the citizens, ensuring the vitality of the public heart of the complex throughout the day.

The student accommodation rooms span the ground floor and mezzanine, the first floor and mezzanine, and the second floor and mezzanine. They are distributed along wide corridors featuring micro-social spaces, kitchens, and living areas. The rooms are of various types, providing a total of 50 beds across 32 rooms, ranging from single rooms to duplex mini-apartments for multiple occupants, accommodating the pre-existing building's morphology. The floors are interconnected by three stairwells: one pre-existing and two new ones with lifts, aligning with the sectional development of the building. FIGURE 5, FIGURE 6.

**Conclusion.** The research work described here ultimately aims to reactivate a portion of the urban and architectural heritage of Ascoli Piceno, interpreting its valuable legacy while layering, juxtaposing, and superimposing the complexity of the new with ethical awareness of its necessity. This conviction is aptly summarized in an interview with Francesco Cellini, who observed that “subsequent usage, or even a series of entirely unrelated utilizations, has often been the true cause of the luminous presence of an ancient structure in contemporary reality—that is, in our culture and historiography. Such cases convey essential lessons... the genuine preservation of an ancient asset often arises from motivations that are far from cultural, and frequently utilitarian or explicitly pragmatic in nature.” (Francesco Cellini).

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#### Figures.

FIGURE 1 – Urban Framework.

FIGURE 2 – General Plan

FIGURE 3 – Palazzo Colucci, Site Plan

FIGURE 4 – Volumetric View

FIGURE 5 – Plans and section of the design hypothesis

FIGURE 6 – Overall design volumes



