

STRATEGIES AND VISIONS FOR NEW URBAN HABITATS. THE RE-FUNCTIONALIZATION OF THE FORMER 'CONVENTO DEI CAPPUCCINI' INSIDE THE NATURAL PARK 'CARDETO' IN ANCONA'S CITY CENTRE/

Gianluigi Mondaini - *Università Politecnica delle Marche*
Francesco Chiacchiera - *Università Politecnica delle Marche*

g.mondaini@univpm.it

Abstract. The opportunity to establish a reflection on the relationship between Heritage and Innovation, on the role of built heritage as a significant element for the medium-sized city, and on the relationships between Heritage, the Contemporary City, and its uses, arises from a series of applied research studies conducted by the UNIVPM research group 'Hub for Heritage and Habitat' as part of the activities of commissioned by the Regional Office of the State Property Agency. This research focused on the case study of the area known as 'Colle dei Cappuccini' within the Municipal natural park called "Cardeto" inside the city centre of Ancona, specifically on the built complex of the former Capuchin friars' convent, later a military barracks, which is now disused. This area of the city, which includes various pre-modern fortifications, is an extraordinary blend of artifice and nature, with a highly valuable historical stratification close to the city's historic core. However, it is in a state of 'periphery at the center,' where many of the existing structures are in a state of abandonment. The owner's intention to transfer the Provincial State Archives headquarters there represents an opportunity to reactivate not only an urban container but an entire habitat where nature and artifice, landscape and environment, meet through the creativity of the architectural project and its functional program. This allows for a new dialogue between heritage and innovation, between the present and the future.

Introduction. Although sometimes inaccessible or even invisible to the community, the public heritage of abandoned properties, especially the one related to former military and conventual uses, today represents an opportunity to rethink the contemporary city and constitutes a strategic resource of extraordinary importance for urban and territorial regeneration [1,2]. This heritage consists of a wide and varied collection of assets, distributed extensively across the territory, characterized by a plurality of historical periods, architectural languages, functional typologies, and spatial configurations. It includes complex building aggregates, isolated prestigious buildings, and entire territorial compartments, often located in areas of great landscape or historical-artistic value, which are frequently in a state of abandonment or disuse due to functional obsolescence or challenges in accessibility.

This latent condition poses a dual challenge for contemporary design: on one hand, the recovery of these assets offers a unique opportunity to redefine roles, meanings, and methods of action on the existing; on the other, it invites a reconsideration of territorial usage dynamics through

the introduction of new functions and programs capable of addressing socio-economic transformations and new living paradigms [3]. The abandoned buildings and complexes, often of historical value and subject to preservation constraints, therefore, require integrated and multi-stakeholder design approaches that balance respect for the memory of the place with functional and technological innovation. From this perspective, abandoned heritage can be interpreted as an urban and territorial palimpsest, a trace upon which to overlay design visions that do not limit themselves to mere conservation but engage with the complexity of contexts and contemporary needs.

The transformation of these assets thus becomes an opportunity to tackle major contemporary challenges: from combating urban sprawl to regenerating peripheries; from creating inclusive spaces to meeting the housing needs of the most vulnerable population groups. The introduction of new uses [4]—ranging from innovative residences to community services, from productive activities to culture and tourism—also allows for a rethinking of the city's edges and the reconnection of fragmented territories, both in central and peripheral urban areas. This condition is not exclusive to Italy: similar dynamics are observed in many European countries, where the recovery of abandoned public heritage intertwines with different normative and cultural traditions[5]. However, the peculiarities of the Italian context—characterized by a vast historical-architectural heritage, often of high quality—make it particularly urgent to develop design strategies capable of combining preservation with innovation. In this sense, architectural design is proposed as an operational and critical tool, capable of transforming the "voids" left by functional obsolescence into spaces for new urban and territorial utopias. Through the recovery and regeneration of abandoned public heritage, perspectives open for a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable city, capable of responding not only to immediate needs but also to the aspirations of a continuously evolving society [6].

The Case of Ancona: Evolution and Future Perspectives. Within this general framework lies our reflection, focusing on a large area of the historic center of the city of Ancona, located within the perimeter of the Parco del Cardeto. This area includes archaeological sites, buildings, and robust city fortifications with significant historical, identity, and heritage value for the city. It has been a privileged site for a series of research projects at various scales, commissioned by the regional headquarters of the Agenzia del Demanio—the owner of many buildings in the area—and considers the area as an "open-air laboratory" and a living material through which to explore the relationship between Heritage and Contemporaneity.

The city of Ancona [7,8], strategically located on the promontory of Monte Conero, represents a unique example of urban evolution closely linked to its defensive function. Founded as a Greek colony with Syracusan roots and developed into a commercial outpost in Roman times, the city progressively assumed a prominent role in the Adriatic context thanks to its strategic position and the natural conformation of its port. In the Middle Ages, the city consolidated its strategic role due to its political independence as a maritime republic, supported by intense maritime trade and the construction of defensive and civil structures that defined its urban character around the harbor. Starting in the 16th century, Ancona's inclusion

in the Papal States led to a substantial transformation of its urban fabric, “militarized” through the creation of a complex system of fortifications on the surrounding hills.

In its recent history, the city underwent profound transformations induced by catastrophic events of both anthropogenic and natural origin: it was devastated during World War II, suffered the destructive consequences of an earthquake in 1971, and was further marked by a landslide event in 1982 [9]. These events caused irreversible changes to the urban fabric, leaving vast areas of the historic center, including much of the urban fortified heritage, in conditions of decay and abandonment. This phenomenon created a sort of “urban aporia,” in which the historic center, historically the city’s beating heart, was relegated to the role of a “periphery at the center.” Today, the urban landscape of the historic center appears fragmented: extraordinary archaeological layers coexist with historic buildings reduced to empty containers, awaiting a regeneration project capable of giving them new vitality.

The Cardeto Park as an Urban Extension of the Natural System of the Conero Park and as an Outpost for Cultural Development in the City of Ancona. The Cardeto Park, a vast naturalistic area on the doorstep of the historic center of the city of Ancona, constitutes the urban extension of the Monte Conero Regional Park. With its 35 hectares, it is one of the most extensive “urban forests” in the peninsula. It is characterized by a perfect blend of nature and artificiality—resulting from a succession of urban transformations linked to the city’s defensive functions. The park, with its historical and orographic stratification, has given rise to a complex system of structures, artificial terraces, and pre-modern military infrastructures of extraordinary environmental quality, where the integration between natural elements and historical-architectural structures offers a layered narrative of the relationship between humans and the territory.

The park includes a series of structures related to the city’s defensive function that testify to its evolution and represent an opportunity to rethink the relationship between historical heritage and contemporary development.

The valorization strategy for the Cardeto Park and the Cappuccini Hill in Ancona presented here is configured as a strategic interpretation of a large part of the city, aiming to provide an innovative scientific basis for subsequent interventions and urban and architectural regeneration programs. The objective is to integrate historical heritage with new contemporary uses. The primary goal is to create an innovative urban habitat capable of reintroducing abandoned heritage into the city’s life cycle, avoiding purely conservative approaches and proposing solutions that reinterpret the area’s potential. This would involve introducing functions and uses that reintegrate the heritage into the surrounding city’s life cycle. In this context, the urban strategy is presented as a coherent vision of urban regeneration, where nature, history, and new functions intertwine to generate a culture-based development model. The project aims to reinterpret these traces, transforming the hill into an “Acropolis of Memory and Culture,” capable of dialoguing with the surrounding urban fabric and the environmental context.

Analysis of Historical-Architectural Emergencies. Objectives and strategies. The proposed urban vision falls within a general interpretation of the area “in section,” which reexamines the city’s stratifications, distilling and enhancing them. This is summarized in the development of pathways that identify areas of potential urban regeneration, starting from opportunities to enhance archaeological sites and repurpose existing historical structures. These nodal points are capable of reactivating, as a whole, the historical body of the Doric city in an ideal series of ascensions “from port to sea,” eventually connecting to a new system of entrances to the Park itself.

Within this macro-strategy of reconnecting the Park to the city and vice versa, an integrated system of area accessibility was studied, including the addition of park-and-ride facilities in strategic, non-invasive locations and mechanized access systems to the area, integrated into the hillside.

The research thus began with a critical interpretative analysis of the Built Heritage within the Park’s context, identifying several main “clusters”:

1. The archaeological-monumental cluster, centered on the archaeological remains of the Roman city and the major medieval monuments tied to the city’s religious and temporal powers. Today, these serve as cultural, administrative, and religious institutions (the Municipality, Archdiocese, and National Archaeological Museum housed, respectively, in the Palazzo degli Anziani, the Cathedral of San Ciriaco, and the noble Ferretti Counts’ Palace).
2. The cluster related to the transformations of pre-modern military structures, connected to the economic pole of the Polytechnic University. This includes the Faculty’s headquarters in the Villarey Barracks, the future student residence in the former food warehouse, and several buildings awaiting further use, such as the Castelfidardo Powder Magazine and the so-called “casematte” area.
3. The cluster of the so-called “San Paolo Bastion,” the focus of this investigation, acting as the cornerstone of the new enhancement system. It comprises the complex of the former Stamura Barracks/former Capuchin Convent, the fortified system of the San Paolo Bastion, and the system of lighthouses and Napoleonic batteries.

The area’s enhancement strategy includes selective demolitions of obsolete and incongruous structures to configure a series of public spaces and the assignment of new functions to the historical structures, made accessible by a new entry system and served by new parking areas integrated into the natural setting.

The Macro-Strategy of Reconnecting the Park to the City and the Regeneration of Colle dei Cappuccini. The strategic vision for the San Paolo Bastion cluster involves transforming the area into a cultural hub tied to urban memory. This transformation is primarily anchored in the inclusion of the Provincial Headquarters of the State Archives within the former convent complex, as outlined by the Agenzia del Demanio (Italian State Property Agency). This initiative is expected to trigger positive urban regeneration processes in the area, made possible by the synergy between public investments and private activities. The goal is to foster a multiplicity of uses, encouraging functional hybridization and opening the building to the city.

From the perspective of the area's macro-functional division and following a cultural development logic, structures to be transformed, restored, or conserved and enhanced have been identified, as well as those to be demolished due to incongruence or incoherence. Simultaneously, the interpretative analysis of the site revealed three distinct zones within the fortified system, which were subsequently identified as separate areas of urban regeneration and intervention, each with specific uses and functions.

The regeneration of Colle dei Cappuccini thus revolves around three main intervention areas:

1. The Terrace of the Lighthouses: This is a new system of public spaces and panoramic paths connecting the old lighthouse, Risorgimento-era military batteries, and the ancient port. This area serves as a privileged observation point and a connection between Colle dei Cappuccini and Colle Guasco, reinforcing the relationship between history and landscape.
2. The San Paolo Bastion: As the project's centerpiece, the bastion is repurposed to house a cultural and museum center, as well as an interpretive center focused on the city's military and fortified history. It will also feature open public spaces and new access systems.
3. The Former Stamura Barracks: The transformation of this historic structure includes an innovative functional program. It will feature spaces dedicated to the State Archives, a museum-exhibition interface, and multifunctional rooms related to the Archives under the concept of an "open archive." Additionally, it will include a conference center and a panoramic bar/restaurant, offering new opportunities for the city and its inhabitants to enjoy and engage with the space.

The Former Stamura Barracks. The meta-design strategy for the former Stamura Barracks serves as a paradigmatic example of the adopted approach. With the dual aim of hosting the new headquarters of the State Archives and incorporating a functional mix with an innovative program for a building open to the city, the intervention at the Stamura Barracks includes contemporary light "infill" elements made of metal and glass.

These will be placed in the empty spaces left by the historical structure, both above ground and underground, ensuring the proper use of all available spaces without overloading the precious historical edifice. The addition of these contemporary elements—such as an underground "archival vault" for document preservation and a metal canopy over the smaller courtyard to transform it into a flexible space for events and exhibitions—balances functional needs with the preservation of historical heritage. This transformation solidifies the building's role as a central node in the new cultural network.

The enhancement actions for Colle Cappuccini, culminating in its complete restoration, will represent a crucial step in reconnecting the Cardeto Park to the city of Ancona. The entire area is reimagined as a kind of Acropolis of Memory and Culture. The regeneration of Colle Cappuccini and Cardeto Park marks a significant turning point in the relationship between Ancona and its heritage. By interpreting the area as a new Acropolis, the project goes beyond merely preserving the memory of the site, reimagining it in a contemporary context and transforming it into a dynamic

and vital part of the city. Through an approach that combines preservation, innovation, and sustainability, the intervention becomes a model of urban regeneration where the past serves as the foundation for building a new urban future.

Acknowledgements. These results are part of a research conducted by H4HH – Hub for Heritage and Habitat, architectural and urban design research group of DICEA Department – Marche Polytechnic University of Ancona, within "Agenzia del Demanio" (Italian State Property Agency) – Marche Region offices.

References.

1. Ashley AJ, Touchton M. Reconceiving Military Base Redevelopment. *Urban Affairs Review*. 2016 May 9;52(3):391–420.
2. Federico Camerin FG. Rigenerare le aree militari dismesse Prospettive, dibattiti e riconversioni in Italia, Spagna e in contesti internazionali. Santarcangelo di Romagna (RN): Maggioli Editore; 2021.
3. Baum M, Christiaansee K. City as Loft. Adaptive Reuse as a resource for sustainable urban development. Zurich: ETH, gta Verlag; 2012. 8–13 p.
4. Bollack F. Old buildings, New forms. New York: The Monacelli Press; 2013.
5. Mérai D, Veldpaus L, Pendlebury J, Kip M. The Governance Context for Adaptive Heritage Reuse: A Review and Typology of Fifteen European Countries. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice*. 2022 Oct 2;13(4):526–46.
6. Chiacchiera F. Cultural-led Adaptive Reuse for development of consolidated urban spaces. In: 11th ACAU 2022: Proceedings of 11th International PhD Students Conference. Brno: VUT v Brne, Fakulta architektury; 2022. p. 98–105.
7. Pavia R& SE. Le città nella storia d'Italia. Ancona. . Bari: Laterza; 1990.
8. Sori E. Ancona 1870-1900. Storia narrativa della città. Dallo Stato Pontificio a Roma Capitale. Bookstones; 2017.
9. Salmoni V. Ancona 1982. Dopo la frana. . In: Ricostruzioni Architettura, città, paesaggio nell'epoca delle distruzioni. Milano: Silvana Editoriale; 2018. p. 105–10.

Figures.

FIGURE 1 - General overview of the Ancona's territory and the Cardeto Park area as a urban terminal of Mount Conero regional Natural Park.

FIGURE 2 - General overview of the city with the Cardeto area highlighted, and the medieval wall system outlined.

FIGURE 3 - The three Heritage Clusters involved in Cardeto Park area.

FIGURE 4 - Overall urban strategy.

FIGURE 5 - Pictures of the actual state of Stamura Barracks.

FIGURE 6 - Bird-eye view of the preliminary design.





