

RETHINKING WHAT EXISTS/

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Abstract. Architecture builds the city in detail. Space, whether urban, architectural or landscape, arouses such intense sensations and feelings that it inspires intellect and reason. However, those who experience the city of the present are often unaware of the archaeological, artistic and architectural heritage it possesses, and the need to consider the places and architecture of the historic city as historical-material-environmental permanences is becoming increasingly urgent.

Significant is the case of the former Church of San Lorenzo di Castello in Venice, which still stands today in its majestic grandeur; a place evocative of past events, in which echoes of successive generations and memories of splendours now faded remain. In fact, over time it has lost its formal and functional essentiality, thus becoming emblematic of a critical condition that often involves historical and especially religious buildings.

The uniqueness of this space also inspired the architect Renzo Piano in 1984, who created the temporary installation for Luigi Nono's Prometheus, a musical work recently revived on its 40th anniversary.

The increasingly evident phenomena of material decay and static instability made it necessary to carry out some preliminary investigations prior to consolidation and restoration work recently realized to reopen the building to the city as Ocean Space, a global center presenting exhibitions, installations, research and public programs to promote critical literacy on the Ocean and environmental protection through the arts promoted by the TBA21 Academy.

This, then, is the meaning of 'rethinking what exists': to give back its own modernity to a building anachronistically at odds with its real belonging to contemporaneity, demonstrating the need for a consistent change to survive in time and to return to fulfil a noble task that is now earthly, no longer spiritual.

The theme that manifests itself in its contemporary paradox, in a city like Venice - that is the essence of paradox - is today a necessity and primarily an opportunity: to build to preserve. The real contradiction of conservation, or rather of memory, is that it needs to change, just as it needs to repeat itself in order to be preserved.

Introduction. Venice, in its meaning as a city, is a work of art in terms of its singularity of shape, intrinsic characteristics and number of cultural assets. The management and protection authorities therefore have the onerous task of preserving and enhancing the artistic and architectural heritage. A case study is the deconsecrated Church of San Lorenzo di Castello, today Ocean Space/TBA21-Academy (FIGURE 1).

The main objective of the research on the most widespread topic concerning the reuse of ecclesiastical buildings closed for worship is to

investigate current issues such as the redevelopment, reuse and restoration of such buildings to return them to the city together with the values to which they bear witness. The intention was to define, through codified and analytical processes, the state of conservation of the Church, which was then followed by restoration work made by Tyssen Group to give new life to the space as Ocean Space, a global centre within which exhibitions, research and public programs are developed to promote a way of critical literacy on the Ocean and the environmental defence (FIGURE 2).

The architectural artefact as such remains an object of design experimentation in the academic didactic sphere, as a malleable space suitable for hosting performances, events, theatrical works and installations in an unfolding of sequences not only inside the building but also outside, extending to the homonymous Campo di San Lorenzo.

The Paradox of Conservation. Starting from a research work that keeps the project as conservation of architecture and that places itself on a level of interpretation of elements, signs and matter of which architecture is made, the need to consider the places and architectures of the historic city as historical-material-environmental permanence becomes increasingly urgent.

The question that manifests itself in its contemporary paradox, in a city like Venice, which is the essence of the paradox, is today a necessity and primarily an opportunity: to build in order to preserve. It is the paradox of conservation - that is, of memory - that characterizes the theme from which this work has begun, and as Salvatore Settis suggests - in his book *If Venice dies - about the paradox of memory* "it is that it needs change, just as it needs to preserve and repeat itself".

For this reason, the work presented here focuses on the physicality of the building studied, on the material, geometric and spatial assonances both inside and outside, on the stratified and contradictory solutions (of restoration, archaeological excavation and safety) that have followed one another over time and that have influenced, modifying them, the spatial characteristics of the building itself.

What emerges is the desire to preserve the meaning, not just the form, consolidating the role and function of an urban event, of a part of the city available for any collective use, in a dialogue between Old and New that passes through the inadequacy of an increasingly fragmented and divided culture, incapable of making a synthesis and questioning itself on how to revive the Old by practicing a contemporary architectural culture.

Starting from these assumptions, the research therefore proceeds by means of compositional figurations and constructive geometries that refer to the internal rules of the historical building, to its spatial character and to its iconic dimension. People who live in the present cities are often unaware of the cultural heritage they possess. Indeed, Salvatore Settis again writes that "cities die in three ways: when they are conquered by a ruthless enemy, when a foreign population settles there, or finally when the inhabitants lose the memory of themselves".

The city of Venice, so rich in monumental emergencies and yet so fragile and heedless of its own preservation and transmission to the future, can be approached to this last case. This is why the former Church of San Lorenzo di Castello, in its formal dimension, has been taken as an example of conservation through transformation.

History of the church. The Church of San Lorenzo is unique in its plan development, richness of decoration, articulated succession of stratigraphic sequences and complexity of the roof structure.

The first layout with three apses dates to the 10th century. Only later the church was enlarged to its current 17th-century form, with a single hall divided into two cross aisles by a passing structure consisting of three large arches with a monumental central marble altar (FIGURE 3). The uniqueness of this space also inspired the architect Renzo Piano in 1984, who, on the occasion of the International Festival of Contemporary Music, created the temporary setting-up for Luigi Nono's musical opera *Prometheus*, an event that was staged again in early 2024 to celebrate its fortieth anniversary, with a structure-environment re-imagined by Antonello Pocetti and Antonino Viola (FIGURE 4).

In the following years, the building began to show increasingly evident material decay and structural problems that made geological investigations prior to consolidation work essential, also involving the foundations. These operations inevitably entailed the removal of part of the interior floor, and archaeological excavations brought to light remains of mosaic decorations and foundations of the church's previous forms.

In addition, the consolidation of the roofing structures, which took place in the 1950s, may have changed the structural balance of the entire building, following the insertion of two pairs of pre-stressed reinforced concrete beams entirely cast in situ. This operation, *avant-garde* at the time, turned out to be a singular construction choice, constituting an additional point of interest for the building.

Archaeological excavations. The excavation campaign, performed by the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage, was carried out at the initiative of the city of Venice, owner of the building, as part of a broader context of restoration work in the church.

As described in Dr. De Min's studies, a sequence of different layouts emerged in chronological order starting from the 9th century A.D., when the complex was founded. This took place at the same time as the urban development of the city, which also included the foundation of the Marcian chapel and the Benedictine complex of San Zaccaria. The few remains that have been preserved suggest that the layout was originally articulated according to a plan with three apses, the main one rectangular and the lateral ones semicircular. A second construction phase almost certainly entailed the demolition of the first building and the construction, between the 10th and 11th centuries, of a new basilica with three naves divided by columns, with apses contained within the masonry of the rear façade, whose plan model can be traced back to the one widespread in the Veneto area from the 9th to 12th centuries. A subsequent building phase corresponds to the reconstruction, around the mid-12th century, of the previous building, which had been severely damaged by the violent fire that

destroyed much of Venice in 1106. The new church was built directly over the older one, respecting its layout, but it underwent substantial changes in the interior spaces, with the creation of a crypt, robust pillars in place of the previous columns and a dome at the centre of the two arms of a pseudo-transept raised over the side naves.

The distance between the four central pillars supports the hypothesis of the presence of a volumetrically raised transept and the dome or perhaps a polygonal tiburium, as Jacopo de' Barbari's 1500 map seems to suggest. However, it is not clear from reading the image whether the structure is a tiburium of small elevation or the tambour of an unbuilt or demolished dome, equipped with a canopy.

The main façade was provided with a colonnade in 1208; to this layout, which reveals transitional elements between the basilican and Romanesque shapes, belongs a mosaic floor covering the entire nave, some remains of which have been recovered from the excavation. The characteristics of the workmanship and the typology of the decorative schemes of the artefact show remarkable similarities, including stylistic ones, with the almost contemporary floor mosaics of the churches of San Donato in Murano, San Zaccaria and San Marco in Venice.

However, the demands of representation and the age of the church, as well as the rising water level and deterioration of the building materials used, led to its demolition and the construction of the present imposing building. Between the end of the 16th century and the middle of the following century, it was further transformed according to the new architectural and urban schemes.

Starting in 1602, in fact, San Lorenzo was divided into two halls, the first open to the worshipper and larger, the second reserved for cloistered nuns. The dividing altar is unusual because it is double-sided, allowing services to be held in both rooms. Only the façade remained unfinished, as evidenced by the brickwork still visible today.

State of the Art. The Church of San Lorenzo di Castello presented considerable conservation and static-structural problems, consequences of the inexorable passage of time and the actions of nature on the artefact.

The cognitive-diagnostic method used for the analyses, carried out mainly by sight or based on specific publications consultation, is divided into the three different components reading of stratigraphic sequences that made it possible to establish relations of relative chronology (antecedence-contemporaneity-posteriority) between the different material-stratigraphic units. Reading of material's phenomena degradation aimed at identifying its generative causes, and reading of the phenomena of instability underway, through the study of the manifestations of damage, was necessary to arrive at a concrete proposal for the recovery of the building.

It therefore becomes necessary to act by observing and design by knowing.

The analysis of the crack pattern essentially revealed two important phenomena of instability involving the load-bearing structure of the church. The first concerns the east wall, facing the canal, which is manifesting a slow mechanism of tilting outwards; the second concerns the plinths of the three arches of the central altar, which are slowly sinking due to

the excessive weight of the roof. This is due to the addition of massive prestressed reinforced concrete beams, the result of a restoration in the 1950s, when concrete was considered an avant-garde and versatile material.

The signs of the church's distress were already known during the last restoration in 2010, during which metal hoops with steel bars were also carried out: one at the height of the support of the wooden trusses (approx. 23 m) and one at the height of the impost of the nervometal vaults (approx. 15 m). Unfortunately, in spite of the remedies adopted, the crack pattern continues to be evident and to show further signs of structural failure.

Considerations on the restoration project. In having to rethink the Church of San Lorenzo di Castello, that is, finding ourselves interacting in a historical context with a pre-existence, it is necessary to take into consideration that moment of union between the outcome of the investigations linked to knowledge and the preparation of the operations of conception connected to that expression defined as cultural project.

By "*cultural project*" we mean the place of reflection within the project, where the relationship between the various possible theoretical approaches and what we are dealing with is brought into focus. The choice of theoretical direction is therefore not an a priori datum, which the designer imposes on the building, but the search for a harmony, a mutual adhesion between theoretical principles and the artefact as a restoration "*case*". The theory must therefore be measured each time in relation to the work itself, not decided by the designer once and for all as a personal idea to be extended to all the cases that have to be faced. The cultural project is therefore prefigured as a necessary tool for the restoration work. Starting from the identification of the building's characteristics, with the help of the previously described methods of investigation, certain needs are identified, i.e. interventions aimed at resolving the problems that emerged following the first phase of analysis in order to express the expectations, specific to each case considered.

At the beginning of the research, the building seemed to have exhausted its vital aura and manifested itself in the state of a tampered ruin, at the same time as a broken construction site, interrupted by lack of resources. However, from the archaeological excavations conducted in it, signs of past childhoods, remnants of previous floor plans and volumetries different from the grandeur of the two rooms that remain today, appeared. These are elements that testify to the ancient value of this place and well represent the intertwining of natural and man-made action; the fragments evoke a past that comes powerfully to the surface and that still has much to tell.

The events that followed are symptom of a path, they cannot be ignored in favour of a return to a completeness that occurred in flashes at precise and isolated moments: while degradations and injuries are stains and wounds that make a building inimitable, irreproducible and for this reason worthy of interest.

The restoration project cried out for redemption, and this is precisely what the planned interventions were aimed at, so that San Lorenzo could at least partially have its revenge on time. The synthesis of the analyses is concretised in the identification of the 'needs' already mentioned, to be applied to the damaged structures and all the missing and degraded parts,

following a single thread of the conservative proposal, which focuses on the choice of a critical restoration. The 'wrinkles' of time are to be shown in the church, and for this reason the imperfections present are indeed integrated, but always trying to make the contemporary operation carried out evident, without distorting the monument.

In this way, San Lorenzo was able to regain its original wholeness and stability, respecting the architectural personality of the building and maintaining its current configuration as much as possible, while observing the practical requirements of structural and functional adaptation necessary for its conservation. Seeking the utmost respect towards the pre-existence, the reversibility of the intervention is still declared necessary, in accordance with the principles of critical restoration, to guarantee the eventual removal of the added parts without causing damage.

The work, whether of art or even more so of architecture, cannot disregard the effect of the inexorable passage of time. Time, whether architect, artist or second architect, depending on how one prefers to consider it, gives every piece of built architecture the character of an open work, giving it specific value and uniqueness. The designer can determine what colour the plaster will be, the type of windows, the texture of bricks, the roof frame, but cannot predict what the passing of the years are going to do, or where the golden patina of time will settle, speaking in Ruskinian terms.

The restoration project therefore finds itself having to compare the initial intention of the first architect with what time and nature have instead decided for the building. It becomes inevitable to reflect *hic et nunc* and to act by observing what is left, knowing the building's characteristics and its needs, understanding what it evokes and considering the expectations - in this specific case its destination as an exhibition space initially linked to the world cultural event of the Venice Biennale, later linked to Ocean Space.

In order to make the conversion into an exhibition pavilion possible, certain criteria in particular were taken into account, understood as a guiding thread of the restoration theory advanced in this context such as the tolerability of the intervention, through the choice of compatible techniques, but above all its legibility. It is the search for a "*syntony*", between restoration work and place, which must translate into mutual attraction between the two components, intervention and building, without however confusing them by mimicry or lazy integration.

Conclusions. A spasmodic search for a state of finiteness that architecture itself may never have had proven therefore to be futile, risking losing its beauty and authenticity, that are result of the intervention of time, use and events. The project should embrace the balance that cannot be planned or foreseen, but is due to the natural succession of episodes in the history of an architecture, counteracting that incessant search for perfection, to which the work of art often cannot bend without ceasing to be a work of art. The intent becomes that of allowing the building to express its having existed in a given time and place, without undermining its genuineness. Here, then, is the meaning of "*rethinking the existing*", giving back its own topicality to a building anachronistically at odds with its real belonging to contemporaneity.

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Figures.

FIGURE 1 – The deconsecrated Church of San Lorenzo di Castello, today Ocean Space/TBA21-Academy

FIGURE 2 – Petrit Halilaj and Álvaro Urbano, *Thus waves come in pairs*, 2023

FIGURE 3 – The monumental central marble altar

FIGURE 4 – Luigi Nono's musical opera *Prometheus*, 2024

FIGURE 5 – *The Paradox of Conservation*



