

MONUMENTAL RECONSTRUCTIONS IN FASHION SHOWS /

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Abstract. Within the frame of innovative exhibition practices intertwined with the contribution of creative industries, the paper focuses on fashion shows, scenography and scenic design. These examples of large 'ephemeral reconstructions' are magniloquent scenic tools for the success of the event, and also genuine museum and scientific devices that stage replica models of monuments or fragments of architecture that gain as much relevance as the collection itself. The contemporary project design for fashion events constitutes a paradigm shift concerning the theme of the project on the pre-existence and preservation of monuments, understood not as a direct intervention but as a cognitive tool in the form of scenic and interactive displays which may be seen as "*in-vitro*" reconstructions, in which the reconstruction of a monumental facies takes place thanks to the recomposition of architecture within controlled perimeters, understood both formally (i.e. large event spaces that accommodate the runway) and temporally (i.e. reconstructions that live the time of the unfolding of the event). An in-vitro reconstruction appears as an operation adherent to the reference form in which the reconstructed portion acquires the fullness of meaning by being perfectly adherent and recognisable to itself, with a minimum quantum of interpretive interpolation. The contribution formally studies these episodes of ephemeral reconstructions and how they contribute to developing a new exhibition model of architecture and monuments out of their context.

Introduction. The aim of this contribution is to highlight some relational dynamics that can be observed when architectural reconstruction interacts with the world of fashion. More specifically, when these reconstructions become the backdrop, and sometimes even active participants, in the events organized by fashion houses – runway shows foremost. In order to properly analyze these operations – which involve aspects of brand image communication as well as architecture, through the means and materials used to create these setups – it is necessary to start with some fundamental considerations and in-depth insights, which are addressed step by step in this contribution.

The first focus is on the role of knowledge transfer that can be attributed to reconstruction operations, through their individual processes. In this regard, particular attention is given to the processes involved in so-called "in vitro" reconstructions, where one or more parts of an architecture – of various scales – are reconstructed in an environment detached from the original, such as in a laboratory.

Having established the foundational understanding of reconstruction processes, the second focus is on the narrative systems used, especially in recent decades, by fashion houses, where the relationship between fashion

collections and cultural heritage, with particular emphasis on architecture, becomes increasingly evident. Architecture is involved both through the choice of specific locations and, as the focus of this analysis, through monumental reconstruction operations of architectural elements or entire structures. Despite some potentially negative aspects – such as the instrumentalization of places caused by the mere monetization of events – the attention is directed on the processes – ephemeral, above all – of interaction with cultural, architectural and monumental heritage.

The third focus is on the use of set design for the transposition of concepts within the scope of a show or event. Considering both the epistemic role of reconstruction operations and the potential of scenographic setups, it becomes clear that every reconstruction – and every set design that utilizes it – carries with it a specific set of contents and, potentially, meanings that enrich and shape the experience of the event. In this regard, at the end of the paper, several fashion shows (as case studies) are presented, specifically selected to elucidate some steps in this vast range of possibilities offered by the fusion of architectural reconstructions and fashion events.

Reconstruction as a cognitive tool. Whenever discussed as a tool for scientific investigations, reconstructive choices are linked to the satisfaction of emotional reactions and contextual reasoning linking the two dimensions of visible state of a monument and its invisible evocation [1]. Therefore if staged in an museographic oriented context, reconstruction is legitimized in dealing with interpretative solutions in the overall project design. Reconstruction of a building or a monument in a different and distant context does not attempt to falsify reality or the original state and historical or monumental values [2]; it is still the project of a new building, despite the historical forms, recognisable as such to contemporaries and identifiable as such in future generations [3].

In particular, scenography as an exhibition practice oriented towards different declinations for temporary or permanent solutions, in a borderline territory between distinct disciplines, opens up to contaminations from different areas of research. Nevertheless, scenography has always had a close link with architecture in that it represents a building or a portion of it according to rules of perspective [4], not only through the application of optical laws but also in accordance with the rules of architectural and spatial configuration of form. Architecture and scenography aim at creating a space; scenographic space is the illusory space of representation, a space that is constructed according to compositional rules proper to the discipline of architecture, articulating itself in a formal level that has a perceptible level of reality linked to its structure, and in a level of pure visibility, linked to its image. We speak of the relationship between scenography and architecture not only because elements traditionally belonging to the language of architecture are re-proposed on the scenic level, even in an ephemeral key, but above all because elements capable of composing and decomposing the scenic space are used.

The role of scenographic reconstruction is to bind these two dimensions, on the one hand examining the potential of the visual, spatial, material

environmental to shape performative encounters and to offer sites for imaginative exchange, and on the other as a means of receiving and communicating the artistic and architectural heritage, which, synthesised through selected and precise images, becomes a means of an immediate unprecedented experience of space. The contribution takes as its starting points reconstruction in a new expanded declination for stage design to analyse a wider notion of scenography as spatial practice.

“In vitro” reconstruction. From this perspective, scenography can be seen as a phenomenon of architectural reconstruction: the reconstruction of a form that is ‘extraneous’ to the container in which the event takes place, justifying its presence by narrative and compositional necessity. Scenography itself aims at the reconstruction, illusory or ideal, of the place in which a theatrical action sets up. For many years, the scenographer’s aim was to achieve an illusionistic construction for the spectator, who was emotionally involved in imagining himself in a reality different from his own. Therefore the peculiar case of fashion shows’ scenography may be investigated within the frame of ‘in vitro’ reconstructions which involve a paradigm shift in the field of ephemeral staging projects in relation to a pre-existing monuments, in light of their preservation and comprehension.

The term ‘in vitro’ is borrowed from the scientific language, which refers to biological processes occurring outside a living apparatus: in a laboratory, inside a test tube [5], and, in architecture, on a new structure. ‘In vitro’ process, therefore, takes place within an external system which allows in-depth studies. This kind of architectural operations represents one of the most debated issues, in fact it raises a crucial question about the authenticity related to the relocation and the visualisation of an architectural apparatus far from its original context. In light of an analysis of the temporal and figurative components of architecture, these reconstructions identify a form which is well-defined in a clear moment in time (e.g. the façade of a church or palace in a precise state of conservation) while the formal contribution can be interpreted even in an antithetical way: in fact ‘in-vitro’ reconstruction may appear, on one hand, adherent to the reference form (i.e. it is staged as it appears in the original context), on the other, the abstraction of architecture which selects only certain part of a wider environment may be interpreted as a project of invention, if not even as an ex novo project.

Actually, abstraction itself legitimates ‘in vitro’ reconstruction; when extracted from its context of origin, architecture acquires the status of a model in relation to a given image, recognised as existing outside the stage. Therefore the ambivalent relationship between monuments existing in external reality, permanent and stratified, and image-replica, vivified for the event alone, guarantees the authenticity of the reconstruction without any doubt of historical mystification. The origin of this practice can be traced back to the first ‘in vitro’ processes which took place in the 19th-century European cultural milieu in which archaeologists and architects conducted large excavations surveys in the area of the Mediterranean basin revealing traces of ancient settlements and monuments that later were re-assembled together in museum spaces with the desire to reconstruct architectural masterpieces of antiquity in their original dimensions, thus showing the actual proportions and giving the visitor an adequate sense of space.

Net of the political implications of these vast operations, interventions on compromised fragments and elements which lost their autonomous static function later recomposed allowed to regain a monumental facies within controlled structures (i.e. the case of museum displays) or in the urban and archaeological fabric (i.e. where an intact building or structure accommodates the recomposition of the fragments), therefore the cognitive and scientific issues legitimised the transport and relocation of fragments from the original fabric into new constructions.

One of the most exemplary cases of ‘in vitro’ reconstruction is the rescue of the façade of the church of St. Sebastian (Verona, Italy) and its recomposition on the unfinished fabric of the church of St. Nicolò. In the broader panorama of Italian post-World War II interventions, the historical events of this project concern the almost total destruction of the neoclassical church of St. Sebastian during 1945 shelling and the subsequent decision to dismantle the surviving façade and recompose the stone elements on the unfinished fabric of the near baroque church titled to St. Nicolò, within a spatial frame of architectural and monumental relevance. The operations eschewed any preconceived philological criteria, and the scenographic reconstruction of the surviving façade on an independent host structure is now presented as a didactic palimpsest; each layer is comprehensible in its formal sequence from the baroque structure to the neoclassical setting that opens towards the civic square.

The staging of a monument in a new environment thus acquires a status of truth that disregards history and its original conditions, reconstruction therefore reaches the true meaning of ‘exhibition’ which, from its original latin term ‘exhibere’, in fact defines a showing that is closer to the operation of ‘drawing out’, to ‘presenting’, ‘offering for viewing’, an operation of showing in which the action is assimilated to the result, in which the setting itself becomes the work of art [6]. By virtue of being a backdrop for fashion shows, these projects for monumental scenographies don’t aim to the same quantum of truthfulness which urban projects are endowed to, while actually existing in the ephemeral condition of stage and event-related necessities. Redefining a new value system between the set piece and its context/background implies the recognition of the scenographic architecture as a work of art, attributing to it a new exhibition value, whose function is no longer just to exist, but to be seen, made available for enjoyment [7].

New reconstructions for new narratives. Observing the major fashion events – what today would be reductive to identify as mere fashion shows – that the most prestigious maisons have put on in recent years, the desire to build a link with the world of heritage and, therefore, also with architecture, becomes increasingly evident.

Starting with the first presentations of clothes to potential customers that took place within the Parisian salons and moving on to some of the most famous shoots in places of great beauty (such as those of Dior at the Acropolis of Athens in 1951 and 2022), the relationship between the place where the collection is presented and the clothes themselves is becoming increasingly consolidated, in search of a communion of aesthetic values. Beyond the evidently existing economic dynamics and

the monetization of image return, the increasingly frequent choice by fashion houses to organise their flagship events in heritage sites seems to be driven by the desire to associate the image of their garments with that of the great beauties of heritage. These operations are not without criticism, particularly regarding the potential instrumentalization of places or their appropriation to carry out content and experiences entirely foreign to them. However, it is important to consider that these are always temporary and ephemeral operations, which, although they may at times detach from the true and authentic identity of the heritage, offer an interpretation confined to the course of an event – often, moreover, accompanied by economic or visibility benefits.

In the case of the Dior Cruise 2021, for example, the lighting setup created for the event was heavily criticized because it obscured the surrounding urban context. However, such criticism overlooked the fact that the lights are an integral and defining part of the very same context in its temporary dimension, during local festivals. The temporary dimension, in this sense, is not meant to be considered a “justification” but rather a fundamental key to interpreting ephemeral projects and installations [8].

When fashion meets heritage, sometimes the connection between a brand and a place is primarily linked to the proximity of the fashion house to certain places or cities of origin – as seen in the experiences of both Fendi and Valentino in Rome. Other times, the connection is directly related to the themes of the collection – as in the case of Gucci in the necropolises of Arles, where the theme of death and other funerary elements appeared within the collection. Or, in the case of Dolce & Gabbana at the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento, where architectural details stood out on the garments

We can thus say that the perfect scenography sometimes exists. While at other times, it is designed – or reconstructed. And in this latter case – when the scenography is explicitly created by proposing a total or partial reconstruction, but still a result of a designed concept, of architectural artefacts – the reflection on the design operation can take on even more significant nuances. Indeed, as previously illustrated, reconstruction is a tool of knowledge and, as such, is capable of conveying content and understanding.

It is particularly interesting to investigate how these issues intersect with the communicative goals of the fashion house and the fashion event – especially when these overlap with those of heritage. And therefore, what the added value of reconstruction is, and what its narrative role is within the event’s story.

Revisiting the concept of ‘in vitro’ reconstruction, we can assert that architectural reconstructions made within fashion events can belong to this category of reconstructions that reproduce architecture in a location far from the original, with the aim of creating a new narrative based on the scientific value of the entire operation. Similarly to what happens with ‘in vitro’ dynamics, the construction of a scenography that is both invention and reconstruction inevitably involves a new set of knowledge, which does not belong exclusively to either the values of heritage or those of the fashion house, collection, or fashion event. Instead, it belongs to the mechanisms and reflections triggered by the reconstructive operation, its realization methods, the quantity of elements involved, and the new interpretive perspective adopted.

By observing completely different scenographies, created in different contexts and eras for the setting of the same play, Oedipus Rex by Sophocles, we can focus attention on some fundamental design themes: the mechanism of transfiguration that allows the city of Thebes to be brought onto the stage, and the mode of representation adopted. In Vincenzo Scamozzi’s scenography designed for the inauguration of Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza, Italy) in 1585, the transfiguration mechanism brings on stage the “seven streets” of the city of Thebes, with highly detailed facades on multiple levels and architectural elements in the style contemporary to the project’s realization – and anachronic in relation to the original setting of the tragedy.

The mode of representation is absolutely central and dominated by the use of a perspective trick that intensifies the depth of the streets, which seems to pull the entire space of the theater, including actors and spectators, into the stage [9]. Indeed, the sixteenth-century scenography was not strictly linked to the unfolding or theme of the theatrical representation; rather, it tended to replicate an architectural space that became the background to a fixed urban reality, preferably of idealized ancient taste [10]. Differently, the scenography designed by Concetto Santuccio and Carmelo Minniti for the Greek Theater of Syracuse in 1958, the transfiguration mechanism reduces the city of Thebes to a single monumental entrance framed by two powerful walls, a sort of podium with a sequence of horizontal planes, ramps, and staircases leading to a colonnade of four cylindrical pillars, partially topped by an architrave and partially by a portion of a pediment.

The mode of representation is realistic in terms of the cyclopean texture detailing the lateral walls but decidedly essential in full rationalist style for the podium and monumental entrance, where the theatrical work effectively concentrates [11]. Also at the Greek Theater of Syracuse, a more recent scenography curated by Radu Boruzescu for the 2022 season takes the abstraction process to a much higher level, with the city of Thebes being synthesized into a single large staircase that serves as the backdrop for the entire scene.

Transfiguration and representation can thus be considered two design themes capable not only of shaping different scenographies but also of defining the audience’s experience, modulating interaction with the presented work, directing attention to the work, the actors, the scenography, but also to the existing “theater box.” And, clearly, of conveying different contents.

Case studies. The considerations presented so far about ‘in vitro’ reconstruction practice and the potential knowledge value of scenographic projects provide a useful set of references for investigating the experience of certain fashion shows that have included these design themes in their productions. This is especially true when considering the immense importance these shows have for brand communication – particularly when they engage with sites, objects, and representations related to heritage.

The analysis of these scenographic cases immediately draws attention to their intradiegetic dimension [9], where the audience finds itself first in a location-container, within which a second location-stage is set up/

reconstructed, linked to the narrative of the show and the collection.

In this regard, four emblematic cases were chosen, between 2009 and 2020, staged by the fashion house Chanel within the spaces of the Grand Palais in Paris: the Spring/Summer 2009 Prêt-à-porter collection, the Fall/Winter 2017-18 Haute Couture collection, the Spring/Summer 2017-18 Cruise collection titled “Modernity of Antiquity” – all under the creative direction of Karl Lagerfeld – and the Spring/Summer 2019-20 Métiers d’art collection, signed by Virginie Viard. Each case presents a particular scenographic selection of the monument staged, either opting for a totalizing and immersive representation of a space reconstructed in its full formal legibility, or a precise evocative abstraction where the study and understanding of the monumental system is entrusted to the presence of a few recognizable elements.

In the first case, the only scenographic element was the 1:1 scale reconstruction of the façade of the fashion house’s historic headquarters, located at 31 Rue Cambon in Paris. Thanks to a structure that expanded beyond the façade itself, declaring its temporary and ephemeral character. During the event, the models walked in and out of the building, creating a radical change in the perception of the building itself: no longer approached in a liminal way within the narrow streets of the 1st arrondissement, but rather from a frontal perspective, thanks to an unprecedented perspective avenue that allowed the full exposure of the entire façade [12], now appreciable in its rhythmic sequence, with a base and three tiers of windows, typical of late 18th-century Parisian architecture [13].

The second case – the Fall/Winter 2017-18 Haute Couture collection – was dominated by the presence of a reproduction of the Eiffel Tower, about 30 meters high, which rose from its powerful base towards the glass dome of the Grand Palais, disappearing under clouds of dry ice. Consistently, at its base was recreated a sort of public urban ground, with the audience seated on green metal garden chairs, while the models walked on a gravel runway, surrounded by green flowerbeds. The representation was so close to reality that it was astonishing, like a giant trompe-l’oeil of an open space inside an enclosed space [14]. Beyond the symbolic aspects related to the use of the Eiffel Tower in a show for a hyper-français brand, from an architectural perspective this reconstruction breaks the usual dimensionality of the space, bringing the entire city of Paris, personified by its tower, to the center of the stage.

In the case of the “Modernity of Antiquity” show, the setup focused on evoking the peristyle and cella of a ruined Doric temple. This was not a precise formal reference, but rather a collectively shared image of a classical scenario where the ruins themselves serve as both trace and testimony. Lagerfeld himself had stated, regarding the lack of a true historiographical ambition, that reality was not of interest to him and that his Greece was his own idea [15]. While not referring to a specific spatial experience, this reconstructive setup allowed to trace, through the rules and codes of classical architecture, a system of signs and proxemics: the show took place within the ruins of a Greek temple that established its own relationships between the interior and the context, regardless of its completeness or its reference to a specific monument.

The final case investigates the reconstruction of an otherwise invisible part: the system of rooftops and coverings typical of Paris. The Parisian urban landscape is inseparable from the presence of zinc, slate, verdigris-covered roofs, and small clay chimneys that emerged from the mid-19th century onward. The entire reconstruction of the rooftops of a city block reveals the compositional system of a part of the city otherwise hidden from the sunlight. The different levels of walkways, the different connections, and moments of continuity of mansard roofs belonging to otherwise distinct buildings at street level can only be understood when the entire system is reconstructed and reconfigured as a catwalk for the fashion show.

Concluding remarks. Monumental reconstructions staged for fashion events become ephemeral setups of ‘external’ artifacts, for which, however, there is a sense of permanence. This discrepancy opens up a comparison between the didactic nature of a precise reconstruction, which must refer to design tools and surveying methods specific to architecture, and its dreamlike character, where the needs of a short-term installation may allow for a higher degree of formal invention. Within the very particular category of fashion shows illustrated, where multiple layers of heritage and cultural values coexist – the places where events are held, the objects staged, and the collection presented – it is therefore possible to affirm that reconstruction not only serves as a cognitive tool but it also maximizes the communication of the values brought to light through the definition of a narratively effective and theatrically stunning design.

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Figures.

FIGURE 1 - Detail of the new reconstruction setup of the façade of the Church of St. Nicolò, Photo by Pietro Brunazzi.

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