

LIMINAL SPACES OF THE ANCIENT CITY. REDEVELOPEMENT PROJECT FOR THE SANT'AGOSTINO COMPLEX IN COMACCHIO

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Abstract. What is the meaning of “tradition” and what role might it serve in contemporary practice? Trying to answer these questions, the text explores the interplay between tradition and innovation in the context of architectural regeneration. The discussion focuses on the Sant’Agostino Complex in Comacchio, Italy, a competition project aiming to redefine the relationship between historical preservation and contemporary intervention. The design integrates the site’s historical elements with new, context-sensitive architecture, creating a multifunctional space that bridges urban, cultural, and social needs.

The competition highlights the duality of architectural contests in Italy: their potential for interdisciplinary creativity versus systemic inefficiencies. Despite these challenges, the project leverages the competition as a critical tool to propose alternative visions for urban regeneration. It emphasizes the role of architecture as a medium for cultural dialogue, sustainability, and innovation.

The design strategy incorporates historical and morphological analysis of Comacchio, respecting its canal-based urban fabric and monumental heritage. The program features a theater, cultural spaces, a hostel, and artisanal workshops, linked by a cohesive architectural language and sustainable materials. Phased construction ensures feasibility while addressing environmental and social needs.

By critically reinterpreting the competition framework, the project transforms constraints into opportunities for experimentation. It underscores architecture’s role as a transformative force, offering a sustainable, tradition-conscious model for urban and cultural renewal.

Introduction. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet [...]; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his place in

time, of his contemporaneity» [1].

These words by Thomas S. Eliot clearly and effectively summarize the measure through which historical heritage—and, more broadly, tradition—should be understood. Every writer, poet, artist, musician, architect—every composer—must comprehend not only the belonging of ancient works to the past (their temporal dimension) but also their belonging to the present (their timeless dimension), as “present” entities rich with significant-non-temporal – values that still contribute to shaping the contemporary world.

It is within these terms, and according to this vision, that the competition project for the urban redevelopment of the Sant’Agostino Complex in Comacchio was approached [2]. The pre-existing elements of the ancient city, which are intended for substantial preservation, undergo a process of re-signification through the insertion of a contemporary sign. In this way, historical heritage is returned to the present with a new meaning, actively participating in the construction of the city’s contemporary image (Figure1).

Architectural competitions in Italy. To clarify the strategy adopted for this competition, it is essential first to understand the critical framework within which the project was developed.

In the panorama of contemporary architecture, competitions represent a condition of ambivalence: on the one hand, they provide a horizontal platform for the development of original solutions through interdisciplinary dialogue; on the other, they suffer from evident contradictions that limit their effectiveness. These include, as in this case, the structural deficiencies of the competition system itself, often stemming from persistent technical-political and bureaucratic-legal-economic approximations. The lack of strategic vision in drafting calls for proposals and the absence of a shared commitment to innovation inevitably lead to outcomes disconnected from the needs of the territory and its communities. Competitions thus risk becoming formal exercises, detached from an authentic vision of urban and social regeneration, reflecting a broader crisis in the relationship between architecture, institutions, and society.

In this context, the project for the Sant’Agostino Complex in Comacchio emerges as an emblematic case that transcends merely responding to the call for proposals, positioning itself as a critical and manifest exercise. Fully aware of the intrinsic shortcomings of the competition structure, this opportunity was embraced as a chance to question the present and the very role of architecture in contemporary society. Here, the project becomes a narrative tool, presenting a programmatic vision regarding the relationship between architecture and history.

The project as a manifest and critical tool. The proposal for the Sant’Agostino Complex in Comacchio was conceived as an exercise in architectural critique – an effective opportunity for self-reflection rooted in prior project experience, such as the “Mare Culturale Urbano” artistic and cultural production centre in Milan. That project had already addressed many of the themes at hand, not only in terms of functional program articulation but also regarding a strategic vision embedded in the project’s regenerative potential.

Far from being merely repetitive, this approach allowed for refining and expanding research based on real issues and a careful reading of the context. The project does not simply comply with the requirements of the competition but leverages it as an opportunity to test ideas, challenge conventions, and propose an alternative vision of the relationship between urban space and cultural production within a built environment rich in historical pre-existences. The project's manifest value lies in its ability to use the competition as a critical narrative: rather than adopting a rhetorical and self-referential approach, the work for the Sant'Agostino Complex serves as a form of experimental verification. Through a thorough study of the context and the competition's guidelines, the project does not passively adhere to them but reinterprets them as constraints (rather than rules), proposing alternative solutions that respect but challenge their rigidity. This approach finds historical precedent in numerous examples where architectural innovation arose from critical reinterpretations of existing rules.

Every design choice was guided by a commitment to coherence with available resources and the ambition to withstand the test of time. The aim was not to produce a self-serving work but an architecture that dialogues with the existing city, addressing present needs while envisioning a sustainable future. In this sense, the project becomes an act of resistance against the wear of time, not only in material terms but also culturally and socially.

The competition here becomes an opportunity to delve into fundamental questions such as the boundary between interior and exterior, the complementarity of functions, and the value of urban space as a place of relationships. It thus acts as an exercise in listening, capturing and reinterpreting the signs of the context to propose a vision that transcends bureaucratic and technical-formal rhetoric.

Morphological and geographical specificities of Comacchio.

From an urban perspective, the project considers the entire *forma urbis* of Comacchio, characterized by a strong morpho-typological imprint and a clear geographical orientation. The project aims to culminate this system, aspiring to be a formally "qualified and qualifying" [2] intervention – a clarifying role in the city's urban matrix, particularly concerning the large void of Piazza Roma, located near the intervention site.

Morphologically, the city is structured along a linear east-west axis (Corso Garibaldi), intersected by an urban fabric composed of continuous building fronts, cut perpendicularly by various water channels.

Walking along the main axis from west to east, one encounters a series of significant monumental buildings (Figure 2) around which the urban structure unfolds, culminating in the Sant'Agostino Complex area: Santuario di Santa Maria in Aula Regia; Cattedrale di San Cassiano; Chiesa dei Caduti o del Suffragio; Loggia del Grano and Torre Civica; Chiesa del Rosario; Ospedale degli Infermi; Palazzo Bellini; Ponte Pallotta or Trepponti. With its network of canals and peripheral condition, Comacchio provides a unique context for reflecting on the destiny of Italy's historic-artistic centres. The city exemplifies territorial fragility, where urban regeneration faces challenges related to preserving architectural heritage and enhancing local resources. The decision to launch a competition for a multifunctional complex centred on artistic and cultural production reflects an attempt

to address these issues, though the operational modalities of the call for proposals betray a somewhat approximate and non-strategic vision.

The Sant'Agostino Complex project addressed these territorial specificities through an in-depth analysis of Comacchio's morphological and geographical characteristics. The objective was to integrate the new intervention into the existing urban fabric, proposing a system of functions that would meet local community needs while also attracting a broader audience. This focus on context translated into a design that aims to establish a dialogue between historical pre-existences and new insertions, avoiding dissonant contrasts while embracing a contemporary language.

The project - Design strategy and functional program. The Sant'Agostino Complex is located at the end of Corso Garibaldi, at the eastern end of the urban longitudinal axis. It was built between the 6th and 7th centuries and initially dedicated to Saint Mauro. Over time, it underwent numerous invasions by Venetians and Saracens, falling into ruin before being reactivated in 1622 by the Augustinian Fathers. In the early 1700s, it was transformed into a military fortress by the Austrians, but later, the religious community restored its original function. Since then, the church has seen various uses, becoming a school in the 1920s until its complete abandonment around 1967.

From the programmatic point of view, it is possible to trace the integration of the different elements of the new complex, organized according to an appropriately articulated distribution scheme (Figure 3). These functions relate to each other through a collaborative logic that allows the entire complex to operate simultaneously and complementarily, adding hospitality and accommodation functions to the main theatrical purpose. This includes not only spectators but also artisans, artists, and resident companies. The importance of residential spaces in such a structure is demonstrated by the main similar experiences in contemporary theatre.

The entire complex's distribution backbone on the ground floor includes a large linear covered foyer, which connects all the main functions and links the courtyard-garden with the bar-bistro and restaurant (Figure 4). It also connects to the outdoor staging area (cinema, scenic setups, outdoor concerts, performances, installations, etc.). Longitudinally, there is access to the kitchens and staff areas for the bar-restaurant, as well as service entrances for scenic warehouses and workshops. The theatre is equipped with a wardrobe and ticket offices, which are centrally located and serve as distribution points, information desks, and monitoring stations for the entire complex. In addition to numerous dressing rooms, the theatre includes a makeup room and laundry facilities. Near the pedestrian bridge, there is a bookshop.

On the opposite side of the foyer, with independent access from Piazza Roma, is the reception for the hostel, overlooking the small "Corte delle Betulle" (Birch Court). This wing also houses several classrooms for educational purposes, which open onto another garden area with seating. This space faces a series of duplex ateliers designated for various forms of sustainable craftsmanship. On the first floor, above the restaurant, are the administrative offices, a technical volume for soundproofed systems, and a large auditorium that occupies the church's volume. The linear foyer is

intended as a large rotating exhibition space and artist residence workshop. Additionally, a rehearsal room, remote audio-video control room, and costume storage are located here. In the opposite wing, there are hostel rooms, while the perimeter volume accommodates artist residencies. A structure with such an articulated program increases the performance capabilities and opportunities for use, favouring evident positive effects on the entire urban sector. The main idea of the project is to redefine the site perimeter starting from a long, variable-section volume (Figure 5), capable of enhancing the figurative impact of the intervention by evoking an ancient dimension, making it easy to perceive the Sant'Agostino Complex as a fortified mass, the ultimate result of Comacchio's morphological system. Urbanistically, the project includes a connection to the road network via a bridge that extends the lateral road at Piazzale Roma towards Via degli Agostiniani, crossing the Marozzo Canal. A pedestrian bridge is also planned to accentuate the longitudinal essence of the city of Comacchio and offer access to the complex from outside the city.

Materials and architectural language. The project adopts an architectural language that harmoniously interacts with the historical context of the city, reinterpreting it in a contemporary way with the clear intention of “recovering its beauty” [3]. The choice of materials was guided by sensitivity to local tradition and the desire to ensure environmental sustainability and durability. The edge volume is designed with small brick blocks arranged on edge. The theatre volume, with its facade facing the large green courtyard, is envisioned with backlit glass blocks. The connecting volumes with the existing structure are made of cement conglomerate in olive-green tones, while the linear foyer is clad in galvanized sheet metal to establish its own linguistic autonomy. All floors are made of pigmented concrete in various shades that reference the materials of the construction (Figure 6).

Sustainability strategies. Environmental sustainability is a central element of the project. Solutions include ventilated facades and thermal insulation systems that ensure high energy efficiency. Natural ventilation is facilitated by the strategic placement of openings, while heat pump systems and photovoltaic panels reduce overall energy consumption. Rainwater recovery is integrated into the water resource management system, with collected water used for irrigation of green areas. These solutions not only reduce environmental impact but also contribute to creating a virtuous cycle of resource management.

Construction phases. The project serves as an exemplary model of how architecture can respond to the challenges of urban and cultural regeneration. Its strength lies in the ability to integrate tradition and innovation, proposing solutions that engage with the historical context and meet contemporary needs. However, some challenges, such as costs and construction timelines, require particular attention to ensure the success of the intervention. For these reasons, the complex functional structure of the new buildings, in addition to being traceable in the evolution of its different uses throughout history (the complex has functioned as a fort, monastery, educational complex, etc. since the 16th century), sees a possible realization through a phased construction program divided into three distinct stages: the first phase includes the construction of the 480-seat

theatre and its accessory spaces, the restoration of the Sant'Agostino complex for entrance and bar/bistro functions, securing all existing buildings, and the creation of the new restaurant block; the second phase includes the restoration of the Sant'Agostino wing for the new Comacchio Hostel (with classrooms), the construction of the new covered linear foyer and exhibition space, and the new volume for the suspended hall; the third phase involves the creation of the atelier-laboratories block and the artists' residency accommodations.

Conclusions. The desire to combine a critical approach with a programmatic and sustainable vision is concretized through a constant dialogue between tradition and innovation. The project proposes an architectural model that does not merely respond to functional needs but questions the role of the project as a tool for social and cultural transformation. Architecture can still represent a means to explore the future possibilities of our places. The confrontation with history and tradition was addressed starting from the elements present on-site, envisioning their contemporary reinterpretation for the city of today. The thoughtful use of resources, attention to environmental sustainability, and the search for a language that withstands the test of time were the cornerstone principles of the project. The competition can still be an effective tool for questioning the present and proposing alternative visions. Far from academic or speculative logics, the project stands as a critical and constructive act, capable of transforming the limitations of a brief into opportunities to explore new possibilities. This experience underscores the fundamental role of architecture as a critical and manifest narrative, capable of impacting not only physical space but also our way of living and interpreting the world. The contents of this essay have been fully discussed, structured as a whole, and shared by the authors. Specifically, the paragraphs “Introduction” and “Architectural competition in Italy” were written by Andrea Valvason; “The project as a manifest and critical tool” and “Morphological and geographical specificities of Comacchio” by Carlo Gandolfi, while the entire section titled “The project” was co-authored by both authors.

References.

- [1] T. S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, in Id., *The Sacred Wood* (Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1920), pp. 43-44.
- [2] The project was developed by Bunker Arc studio in Milan in 2017. Architectural design: Carlo Gandolfi, Roberto Molteni, Matteo Donghi with Andrea Valvason. Acoustic design: Dario Paini. Landscape design: Atelier de Molfetta Strode. Model photos: © Marco Menghi.
- [3] G. Grassi, *Un progetto per Marburg*, invitation-only competition (1986), with M. Dörrie e N. Deigo, 1st prize. From the project report cited in G. Crespi and S. Pierini (edited by), *Giorgio Grassi, I progetti, le opere e gli scritti* (Electa, Milano, 1996) p. 204, also in G. Crespi e N. Deigo (edited by), *Giorgio Grassi, Opere e progetti* (Electa, Milano, 2004) p. 208.
- [4] See, in this regard, Paolo Marconi, *Il recupero della bellezza* (Skira, Milano, 2005) pp. 37 et seq.

Figures.

FIGURE 1 – Composition with a view of the project (right end) featured in F. Felletti, processional banner of San Cassiano, detail with view of Comacchio, 1865, Chiesa di San Cassiano, Comacchio (Ferrara).

FIGURE 2 – Axonometric view of the city of Comacchio highlighting the monumental pre-existing structures (in yellow) and the project (in red).

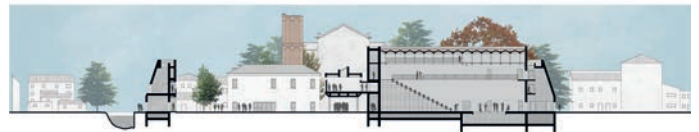
FIGURE 3 – Architectural model, top-down view. (Ph. © Marco Menghi)

FIGURE 4 – Ground floor plan.

FIGURE 5 – Cross-sections.

FIGURE 6 – Elevations: West; North; East.

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