

## GIUNTI ODEON IN FLORENCE: AN HYPERTOPIA CHALLENGING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN HERITAGE AND INNOVATION

**Giovangiuseppe Vannelli** - *Department of Architecture – University of Naples “Federico II”, Via Forno Vecchio, 36, 80134 Napoli, Italy*  
giovangiuseppe.vannelli@unina.it

**Abstract.** The Giunti Odeon in Florence is a remarkable case study when rethinking the relationships and boundaries between heritage and innovation. The contribution will deal with a modern heritage and the concept of innovation will refer to its technical aspects but above all to its cultural and theoretical dimensions. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the former Cinema-Theatre housed in Palazzo dello Strozzi underwent a financial crisis. The latter has represented the opportunity to reinvent this place, a heritage protected by the Ministry of Culture and deeply rooted in the collective memory of the inhabitants of Florence who fought to defend the cinema’s function. Following its opening to the public in 2023, the majestic space restored by Studio Benaim houses in an almost sacred atmosphere a cinema and a bookshop that seem to define an extension of the outdoor public spaces. The complexity of the proposed programme, addressed through a project that appears rigorously elementary, is the strength of a proposal capable of combining economic sustainability, social demands and above all architectural values. The two functions overlap in the central space of the ancient palace inducing silence and respect for the users while working, eating, shopping, reading, watching films or just wandering. Considering that the uncontrolled diffusion of streaming platforms for movies and series has put the Foucauldian heterotopia of cinema currently at risk of disappearing, beyond the various and valuable adaptive reuses of underused architectures as movie theatres, Studio Benaim’s Giunti Odeon appears as a spatialisation of the concept of “hypertopia”. In this sense, the case study will be discussed to demonstrate how a different and innovative approach to the modern heritage of heterotopias is possible if the boundaries of design are challenged through a complex design approach that demonstrates a cultural innovation that enhances differences and promotes coexistence.

**Introduction.** This paper is part of research concerning the obsolescence [1] of those recent heritages conceived with a strong relation to progress (e.g. industrial heritage [2]), functions (e.g. cemeteries [3]), norms (e.g. asylums [4]) or technological innovations (e.g. temporary post-emergency residences [5]).

Within the complex contemporary urban reality in which, on the one hand, the pace at which the relationships between supply-demand and need-possibility change seems unstoppable and, on the other, living has an increasingly nomadic character [6] also due to the pervasiveness of the virtual, the process of producing “former-something” [7] has become extremely fast and widespread. This system of very diverse heritages in terms of size, types and materiality represents indeed a complex and wide-ranging problem if we agree on the need to go “against the throwaway city” [8] and to

experiment with strategies of regeneration, reuse and reactivation [9].

One of the first effects of obsolescence at the urban scale is the decommissioning of these former something. And yet, assuming on the one hand the impossibility of physically removing a building – unless in specific and rare cases – and on the other the reticent approach to demolition – rooted above all in the Italian cultural and therefore regulatory panorama –, this process of decommissioning results in terms of urban form almost always in the creation or reinforcement of closures, fences and enclosures [10]. In fact, either in order to protect these places or to protect the surrounding urban system from these places themselves, such obsolete artefacts are isolated – turned into islands – atomising them within the urban system. Interestingly, such isolation sometimes, when in the most fortunate conditions it escapes oblivion, becomes a premise for the germination of new communities, actions, desires and values. In this sense, this modern and contemporary heritage that becomes a former-something can be considered a critical heritage to be reinterpreted in relation to the critical contemporary context [11].

Through the case of the Giunti Odeon, the paper intends to show how, by adopting paradigms and design approaches aimed at favouring the concepts of coexistence and co-presence, these former-somethings can represent opportunities for innovation in which the term ‘heritage’ addresses the future and the attribute ‘critical’ relates positively to the condition of ‘crisis’, understood as a moment of choice and therefore of origin.

In this sense, design action should counter the paradox of protection. The enucleation of these encapsulated, hidden and forgotten urban organisms ends up defining cysts in the body of the city instead of providing new resources, even temporary ones, and opportunities for experimentation for new design and management models. In fact, a project aiming at the valorisation of these urban resources should not enclose but open up and make available, enable existing social forces and interests, design with what already exists [12], ultimately act against protection understood as a mantra necessary for conservation, and as a factor sometimes concurrent to obsolescence and thus negation.

At this end, the article interprets the cinema as a modern architectural type conceived as a heterotopia [13] subject to a sudden process of obsolescence over the last decade and, through the case of the former Cinema Teatro Odeon in Florence, shows how a contemporary design approach to the heritage valorisation can innovate both the memory and the new urban value of these former-something.

**The cinema nowadays.** The cinema was considered by Michel Foucault, together with the garden and the theatre, to be one of the heterotopias most representative of the third principle of heterotopology, namely the capacity “of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. [...] The cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space” [13]. However, the cinema today is an architectural type whose *raison d’être* is being questioned because there is a progressive “loss of darkness” [14], that is, a loss of one of the elementary physical and spatial conditions for the architectural composi-

tion of these facilities. Also, “to make one’s way into the Wagnerian darkness of a cinema is an aesthetic experience of extraordinary power and intensity. In that moment we are not merely entering a space within a building, we are also entering a place elsewhere” [15]. The question therefore arises as to whether the darkroom, although challenged by the ways of inhabiting and receiving the film product, continues to live on and can maintain its identity despite the transformation.

Today, film products reach us everywhere, offering themselves for - even more - mass consumption, and this distances us from those buildings that over the last century have created bridges between local and global as well as between present, past and future. This is a building type that has progressively sought its own character: first starting with the travelling shacks of the cinematograph that acted as temporary and wandering pavilions, then hybridising places in the city previously designated for other uses such as cinema-bars, and then reaching and transcending the theatre model [15]. In conclusion, what can be observed over the last twenty years or so is a progressive estrangement from cinemas, a progressive loss of that social ritual that saw in dark halls a moment of encounter - a threshold - between the real and the imaginary, the individual and the community. The obsolescence of these architectures, conceived in the second half of the last century as specialised buildings, sometimes leads to the ruin or loss of ordinary heritage, but in many cases it is possible to recognise interesting design experiments belonging to a prolific history of the relationship between architecture and cinema that is closely intertwined with the history of cities and forms of life in the modern and contemporary metropolis [16].

Today in Italy there are hundreds of cinemas awaiting new visions. Yet in cases where the process of decommissioning due to obsolescence has not led to complete demolition, all too often it has been preferred to up-root the relationship with the uses, communities and rituals proper to those places. Take, for example, the fate of the Ariston in Pisa, on the site of which new residences have been built, the Maestoso cinema in Milan, which will house a Virgin fitness centre, or the shopping gallery that will fill the Odeon Cinema. In other cases, by virtue of the cultural value of the function, actions of resistance have led to a rethinking of the cinema in terms of uses but not of spaces: the Modernissimo in Bologna, for example, which integrates projection spaces with spaces for workshops and exhibitions [17].

**Cinema Teatro Odeon: the heritage of a heterotopia.** The Odeon Theater cinema is believed to represent an example of interest within this history of cinemas in Italy [18].

The Art Deco hall of the Cinema Teatro Odeon was designed by Adolfo Coppedé then completed by Marcello Piacentini as part of the Palazzo dello Strozzi, a Florentine Renaissance building conceived by Filippo Brunelleschi and built by Michelozzo. In 1922 it was opened under the name Cinema Teatro Savoia and then with the Germani family a transformation of the historic building was proposed including the introduction of a projection room, a dance floor and two floors for offices [19].

The building has performed its role as a heterotopia of fiction within the city of Florence for decades. Yet although the Odeon Cinema Theater represented an important history of the second half of the 20th century, the

crisis in the film industry did not spare it. With the Covid-19 pandemic, it became necessary for this heritage, too, to search for new economic and management models as it was no longer sufficient for the film activity alone to make it sustainable.

Initially, the design concept completely denied the projection hall function, and this transformative prediction was called into question by the most devoted customers who took part in a public-private discussion process. This set the stage for a project that negotiated both the monofunctionality of the venue and the heterotopic essence of this building physically defined by the presence of a distinctly separate interior and exterior.

The active citizenship intervention in addition to showing the audience’s affection for it, seems to validate what Francesco Casetti wrote in reference to the current dual role of the cinema device: “reality can be threatening; hence the need for a physical enclosure that works as a sort of shelter and for screened images that work as a sort of filter [...] Once we look at cinema from this point of view, an entirely new perspective surfaces. Cinema is not primarily a medium that expands our senses, an “extension of man”, as Marshall McLuhan famously states. On the contrary, it is a dispositif of protection that spares individuals direct exposure to the world – or at least the world in which they usually live – without interrupting their interaction with reality” [20].

**Giunti Odeon: the innovation of a hypertopia.** The Giunti Odeon project in Florence demonstrates how it is possible to allow cinema to preserve its identity despite its transformation [14].

The project realized by Studio Benaim first of all emphasized the decorative apparatus by restoring the space to its former charm. The restoration and valorization project was careful but not restrictive to the transformation of this iconic place: the decorations on the columns, light fixtures, pavements, fountains, and glass in the dome were restored consistently in accordance with the Ministry of Culture’s protection constraint [21].

In particular, the study of historical documents confirmed that the sloping slab was subsequent to the construction, and this made possible the most significant de-composition act, i.e., the deconstruction of the inclined structure that allowed the design of the bookshelves on the ground floor. Therefore, the most innovative valorization measure went through an act of partial demolition that reconfigured the space making different uses possible in terms of accessibility and flows. Thus, through this removal of the inclined slab on the ground floor it was really possible to interpret the large projection hall as the interpenetration of two spatialities that offered themselves to different uses and users.

The design of the furniture crowns a careful study of details that renders a strong synergy between preservation and innovation, for example, while on the ground floor the bookshelves were adapted to the lighting needs arising from the coexistence of the two functions, so on the upper floor additional steps were used to integrate some of the disassembled armchairs in the stalls. Moreover, in addition to the cinema hall and bookstore that coexist in the generous empty space, many are the annexed spaces and temporary activities that enrich the offer proposed by this venue to the city. The typological variety of spaces adjacent to the great void of the hall allows for

the recreation of spaces available for solitary or group activities, stationary or dynamic, cultural or recreational (book presentations, study spaces, concerts or reading workshops, etc.).

It is evident that conservation, valorization and innovation have found great design expression in the Benaim studio's project. This is evident as much in the expertise with which all the plant systems have been skillfully integrated into the mobile and fixed structures of the architecture, as in the refinement with which the history of the place has been brought to value, as was the case with the design of the restrooms that refer to the aesthetics of theater dressing rooms. Still, the innovation of the largest LED wall in Italy is certainly a diriment factor in relation to the possibility of rethinking the heterotopic character of the projection room space.

Design, art, and technique find a valid synthesis here. In this sense, the Giunti Odeon designed by Studio Benaim seems to make manifest the contemporary character of the cinema described by Casetti: "Cinema's migration toward new environments implies many new elements. While the darkened theater appeared to be a space mainly oriented to the film viewing, and was recognizable as such, today sites of viewing – domestic spaces like my living room, or urban spaces like public squares of the hall of a train station, or exposition spaces like galleries and museums – take on a more complex status. In these sites, cinema is no longer an exclusive presence, but rather is placed alongside other points of interest; it is not a permanent presence, but often closely tied to specific occasions; it is thus not something that we can rely on finding consistently in the same place, but rather something that seems to "take place" from time to time" [14].

Indeed, the majestic space restored by Studio Benaim houses in an almost sacred atmosphere a cinema and a bookstore that seem to define an extension of the outdoor public spaces. The complexity of the proposed programme, addressed through a project that appears rigorously elementary, is the strength of a proposal capable of combining economic sustainability, social demands and above all architectural values. The two functions overlap in the central space of the ancient palace inducing silence and respect for the users while working, eating, shopping, reading, watching films or just wandering.

**Conclusion.** The Odeon cinema in Florence is considered a good example of a project on a critical heritage, where design capacity has been demonstrated in innovating a heritage that has been revalued and resemantized without obliterating its history. Also through the central consideration offered to communities, desires and values established over time, the Odeon cinema instead of becoming a former something has rethought and reintroduced its history into the contemporary city by employing new design and management models. Central in this specific case was the role played by the "save cinema" rule of the Florence Municipality which requires the private owner to maintain the cinema activity on at least 60 percent of the total surface area of the property in case of transformative actions [19]. Thanks to the expertise of the Benaim study, this rule did not become merely a restrictive and protective constraint but rather the essential premise for a balanced design innovation.

The case study demonstrates how continuity and negotiation are two

necessary approaches to heritage valorization in order to counter obsolescence, negation, and pure conservation. In this sense, hypertopia has become an interpretation of cinematic space that allows one to go beyond the univocal use of the space: the transformation has thus defined a space that is open even beyond the projection hours and that is offered to a wider and more diversified audience that can make this heritage alive and contemporary. Thus what used to be a heterotopic space where people entered to be in the dark of the cinema is now a hypertopic space where different flows manage to coexist in an unprecedented dimension of socio-cultural aggregation, combining cinema, books, art and theater into a single experience.

Recalling Casetti: "it is no longer something that "is there"; it is, if anything, something that "intervenes", "complements" or even "intrudes" [...] there is no longer the opening of a "here" toward an "elsewhere", but rather an "elsewhere" that arrives "here" and dissolves itself in it. I call this new spatial structure hypertopia, in order to underline the fact that rather than taking off toward an "other" place, there are many "other" places that land here, to the point of saturating my world [...] Hypertopia does not necessarily make an absolute of the "here". On the contrary, thanks to a sense of articulation and alterity that it brings with it, it can emphasize how this "here" is a space ready to open itself, to transform itself, to renew itself - no matter how full it already is" [14]. Thus, Studio Benaim's Giunti Odeon appears as a spatialisation of the concept of "hypertopia". In this sense, the case study demonstrates how a different and innovative approach to the modern heritage of heterotopias is possible if the boundaries of design are challenged through a complex design approach that demonstrates a cultural innovation that enhances differences and promotes coexistence.

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## Figures.

FIGURE 1 – The cinema and the bookshop. [photo by G. Vannelli]

FIGURE 2 – The LEDwall and the bookshelves. [photo by G. Vannelli]

FIGURE 3 – Layers and uses. [photo by G. Vannelli]

