

A BOX-IN-A-BOX: BUILDING THE FUTURE INSIDE THE PAST. FRANCA STAGI IN MODENA/

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Abstract. The architect Franca Stagi (Modena, 1937-2008) collaborated for more than twenty years with Cesare Leonardi producing residential and public projects and successful industrial design objects. After the division of the studio in 1983, Stagi becomes the reference architect for Modena and she dedicates herself to the recovery and re-functionalization of the large historical buildings of the city center, to the design of greenery, to urban plans and to the construction of new places for the community. In the historic center of Modena, one can remember the projects for the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, one of Stagi's main clients, such as the restoration of Foro Boario, the cattle market (1989-2002) which became the seat of the Faculty of Economics, the reuse of the Sant'Eufemia convent (1994-1995) intended for the humanities faculties, and the recovery of the extensive San Paolo and San Geminiano cloisters (2005-07), which today houses the Faculty of Law, a library, restaurants, a kindergarden and a music school. The quality, quantity and size of her works produced an ongoing project in synergy with associations, citizens, and with local authorities, in particular with the first female mayor of the city, Alfonsina Rinaldi.

The paper highlights the method adopted by Stagi when operating inside the large container buildings that represented the history of Modena, capital of the small but glorious Duchy of Este. After a careful restoration, which tells the story of the building at different historical thresholds, the new functions are built inside the monument as independent boxes, in order to establish a respectful dialogue between past and present.

The article aims to reconstruct the precious vision that Franca Stagi had for the city and its territory, expressed through structural projects punctuated by specific interventions designed in detail, without ever losing an overall view. This vision represents at the same time a geographical and historical perspective, which takes into account the peculiarities of a place and its past, without giving up on transforming it in order to give it a future.

Introduction. The article concerns the production of a prolific but almost unknown Italian architect, Franca Stagi (Modena, 1937-2008) and try to define her design method. She was active for forty years, starting from the early 1960s, and her career can be divided in two phases. The first one is in collaboration with the architect Cesare Leonardi (Modena, 1935-2021), and produced industrial design works (Figure 0), housing, sports centers, architectural competitions and numerous public parks. In 1982, they published *L'architettura degli alberi* (The Architecture of Trees) [1], aimed at the design of green areas. After the separation from Leonardi in 1983 [2], in the second phase of her career, Stagi focuses on the restoration and reuse of the architectural heritage, dedicating much of her activity to the redesign of the city center of Modena. Working on existing buildings, Franca Stagi

always maintains an attitude of respect towards the ancient: her project is contemporary and does not seek mimesis, but its subordinate independence.

After a long period of oblivion, in 2012 the city dedicated to Franca Stagi a small exhibition of her drawings inside the Poletti Civic Library of Art and Architecture, followed in 2018 by a video documentary, a congress and an exhibition held inside the Faculty of Economics at the Foro Boario, building for which the architect undertook an important restoration and reuse project, therefore selected as a case study to be presented in the center of this article. Both exhibitions were accompanied by an exhibition booklet: these are the only published research works dedicated exclusively to Franca Stagi [3]. This research work begins to fill this critical void and to give back to Stagi the place she deserves in the history of the methods of investigation and intervention on the built heritage.

Foro Boario, from the cattle market to the university. The General Master Plan of Modena of 1958 provides for an expansion of the city on the zoning model, but preserving a linear system of parks surrounding the historic center [4]. The subsequent Master Plans depict a city in which the Modern has struggled to take root, and perhaps for this very reason so focused, as the nearby city of Bologna, on the conservation and reuse of the building heritage, activities for which it develops a refined model of diagnostic and intervention, applied in the selected case study.

The Foro Boario, the cattle market of Modena, was commissioned in 1833 by Duke Francesco IV d'Este, lord of the city, to the court architect Francesco Vandelli (Modena, 1795-1856), in order to provide livestock traders with a suitable place for their activities. The majestic character of the classical architecture aims to reaffirm the duke's authority in the city, while its urban layout proposes a long elevation (over 250 meters long and 19 meters wide) following the path of the city walls. The site was once occupied by the fortified citadel, and it presented a parade ground nowadays converted into a huge green space. In some paintings of the time, the building is depicted in its original state, with the colors of the period and the open arches at the ground floor to shelter the livestock. Over the years the building changed function, maintaining its public character as a container for services: it was used as a military barracks, then it housed the Fire Brigade and the Red Cross and this led to the closing of the arches on the ground floor and the insertion of partition walls and false ceilings [5].

The volume is divided into a central atrium with three bays on twin columns, surmounted by a toothed tympanum with a clock, and into two long wings supported by 17 smaller arches on simple pillars and concluded by higher and more compact heads. (Figure 1)

At the end of the 1980s, the University of Modena decided to move the Faculty of Economics into the Foro Boario building, which is located on the edge of the historic center, starting a successful process of redevelopment of an urban area characterized by degradation.

The pictures (Figure 2) depict the long wings at the first floor of the Foro Boario. The picture above shows the beginning of the project state, after the removal of the additions such as a ceiling hiding the wooden trusses and some internal walls added over the years. The rediscovered volume

shows the appearance of a three-nave cathedral with a long series of arches supporting the structure. The building thus restored appears as a box ready to accommodate new functions, as the balconies shown in the picture below (Figure 2), leading to the professors' studios, with a respectful mechanism called "box-in-a-box system".

Tools: the "box in a box" system and the "stitching" of spaces.

The "box in a box" system aims to build Chinese boxes inside the ancient volume. These new blocks must be structurally independent from the container, which is thus preserved and almost untouched, except punctually in the joints. The existing is continuous and made of heavy materials resisting by mass (bricks, stone); the new instead is built with light materials (metal, wood) and rests on point-like structures, so as to touch the ground and walls as little as possible.

The professors' studios are designed as suspended and transparent spaces, set between the windows in a game of interlocking in which the volumes of the new project float inside the solid case of the historic building. The galleries leading to the studios, detached from the façade (Figure 2, below), are suspended like the bridges of an ocean liner, or like the mobile scaffolding of a big factory. The interior design transforms these cultural institutions from ivory towers to democratic and accessible factories, a part of the city that can be crossed and enjoyed by citizens.

Historic buildings often grow in phases, because they result from annexations and partitions. This formal discontinuity can be an obstacle, and it's the reason why Stagi pays most attention in the construction of the paths, in order to connect the different parts of the volume. (Figure 3) The insertion of stairs and elevators as vertical connections, and the "stitching" of the volumes through the opening of horizontal passages allow the building to be "held together" on a functional level, looking at the paths of the users and their comfort while using the spaces.

The library of Economics is located on the ground floor, inside the volume defined by the arches, that once were open to allow the transit and rest of the cattle. Considering some exterior picture of the façade before the restoration, one can see how the formix were unevenly filled, generating a disorder in the elevations. Stagi's restoration punctuates the facade with equal windows, functional for the lighting and ventilation of the library, and at the same time aimed at restoring the rhythm of the original openings. Inside, close to the façade, book shelves separate the reading tables, while in the center there is a spine of bookshelves on two levels, to increase the storage capacity of the shelves and to multiply the points of view.

Much ado about the project. Some people proposed to reopen the formix, and this topic was much debated in the city, with banners hanging from the town hall and satirical cartoons published in the main city newspapers [6]. This quarrel shows an extreme position towards the restoration of a large historic building: the desire to bring it back to the original form, even if it makes the building unsuitable for new uses. Therefore, this choice would represent a deadly process of museification of the building.

The restoration and reuse project of the Foro Boario is due to two women: the architect Franca Stagi and the first female mayor of Modena, the PCI militant, then member of Parliament, Alfonsina Rinaldi (born 1947). In

some rare photos, one can observe the architect Franca Stagi while showing the state of the works to a delegation led by the mayor, who during her mandate promoted important improvements to the quality of the building heritage and mobility. The complicit faces of the two women testify to how powerful the virtuous union of architecture and politics can be, in a modern and inclusive dimension, for the first time all-female.

From the first phases of the project and during the whole construction process, Foro Boario is the object of unexpected media attention and sparks the city debate, for example on the question of color, which Stagi transforms from the neoclassical dark pink and yellow to the white of the new city [7]. During those years, entire columns are dedicated daily to the numerous restoration sites in the city, calling into question architects, associations such as Italia Nostra, journalists or ordinary citizens. The conservative attitude seems to prevail, aimed by a reactionary political opposition. Until the "Lady" intervenes to defend what the press calls "her jewels", which means her construction sites, and silences everyone by claiming the autonomy of her technicians and the trust that politics must grant them: "the solution must be technical-scientific and not political" [8]. The clashes decrease, and the construction sites multiply, often under the direction of Franca Stagi.

Franca Stagi and Modena: a lifelong project. Franca Stagi has dedicated much of her professional career to the recovery and reuse of the main buildings in the historic center of Modena. Below is a brief presentation of her main works, for which the same considerations expressed for the Foro Boario can be reworked.

The Collegio San Carlo (with Cesare Leonardi 1977; subsequent interventions by Franca Stagi 1992-2007) is a XVII century complex which occupies a large block in the very centre of the city, including the university college, a library, rooms, classrooms and a canteen; the theatre and the church [9]. There she intervened on several occasions for over thirty years producing a great formal synthesis and poetical solutions, from the mediated brutalism of the library to the light metal staircase blocks that connect the various levels, exploiting and recovering waste spaces such as light shafts in state of decay. (Figure 4)

After the separation from Leonardi, Stagi worked at the Palazzo dei Musei (1986-1999), covering and connecting the courtyards with a high-tech glass, thus creating a volume used both to house the Roman lapidary and to reorganize the distribution [10]. The project inserted a lift and emergency stairs in order to make the upper floors of the vast complex more accessible and to make the system of interior paths clearer.

The redesign of the former Convent of Sant'Eufemia (1994-98), an XI century complex which became a barracks under Napoleon the 1st and later a prison, allows Franca Stagi to house in the city center the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. (Figure 5) The redesign of the cloisters pays attention to connecting these open spaces, once divided, to build a pleasant inner circulation in the greenery. The careful choice of tree species reflects the experiences gained in the first phase of Stagi's career, with *L'architettura degli alberi* (The Architecture of Trees) [1].

Her works also include the restoration of the Synagogue (1995-97) [11] and the Municipal Theater (1995-98), a temple of opera nowadays dedicated to the great singers Mirella Freni and Luciano Pavarotti, both born in Modena.

Her last work occupy her until her death: it was the redevelopment of the adjacent Complexes of San Gemignano and San Paolo (project 2005-07, works 2010-2014), transformed into a multifunctional center, hosting the headquarters and library of the Faculty of Law, and public services such as a kindergarten, a nursery, a family center, a reading room, a music school and an exhibition space. In this project, especially in the layout of the Law Library, one can see an even more mature application of the box-in-a-box system already used at the Foro Boario. Inside the restored box of the convent there are double-height reading spaces flanked by mezzanine volumes to store books in free access.

Conclusion. Franca Stagi has long remained in the shadow of her more famous male colleague or perhaps she was forgotten because restoration was considered by a certain narrative of architecture as a handmaiden of the project. Her work silently stands the test of time and this is perhaps a distinctive characteristic of Franca Stagi, a shy and tireless professional who considered the project as a service to the community [12]. The techniques she uses are indicative of an aesthetic taste that aims to recover the purity of the original volumes without forgetting the needs of the present. Her architecture is made to be lived, discovered, adapted, as the university students in her buildings do every day.

The research aims to return this minor but significant story of virtuous practices that I hope the reader can now consider significant and worthy of being known.

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Figures.

FIGURE 0 – Franca Stagi on the prototype of the Dondolo seat, [1965-66]. Photo Cesare Leonardi. Archivio Leonardi, Modena.

FIGURE 1 – Franca Stagi, restoration and reuse project of the Foro Boario, technical drawings of the final project, September 1994. From the bottom: ground floor, first floor, second floor; elevations and sections. Details of the tables. (Poletti Civic Library of Art and Architecture, Modena – Franca Stagi Archive, hereinafter BPMO).

FIGURE 2 – Foro Boario, first floor, interior of the lateral wings. Top: view of the construction site after the demolition of the intermediate floor and the recovery of the original volume, 1989. Bottom: Stagi’s project completed with the long galleries leading to the studios, 1992 (BPMO).

FIGURE 3 – Foro Boario, first floor, one of the spiral staircases leading to the suspended galleries. Design, structure and completion in 1992 (BPMO).

FIGURE 4 – Collegio San Carlo (college, school, library, theatre, church), XVII century; reatauration by Franca Stagi and Cesare Leonardi 1977; subsequent restorations by Franca Stagi 1992-2007. Axonometry and view of the library

FIGURE 5 – Former Convent of Sant’Eufemia, 11th century, with significant 19th century renovations. Franca Stagi’s restoration and reuse project transformed it into the Faculty of Humanities in 1994-98. Aerial view and sketch of the connection system between the courtyards and their planting (BPMO).

FIGURE 6 – San Gemignano and San Paolo complex, XII century, heavy renovations in the 19th century. Restauration and reuse project by Franca Stagi with Politecnica, 2005-07, works 2010-2014. Sketch of the section on the library (BPMO) and view of the interior of the Law library.

