

The concept of copy in art and architecture and its application in reconstruction projects

A study on Ernesto Basile and one of his lost works

Doctoral thesis at HafenCity Universität Hamburg

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The concept of copy in art and architecture and its application in
reconstruction projects.

A study on Ernesto Basile and one of his lost works.

A thesis

submitted to the doctoral committee of the HafenCity Universität Hamburg in
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Engineering (Dr.-Ing.)

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A Nadine, Ioia e Michi

*Lesser artists borrow; great artists steal.*¹

_ S. Jobs? - P. Picasso? - I. Stravinsky? - T. S. Eliot?...

*Der Praktik der Adepten ähnelt das Experimentieren der barocken Dichter. Was die Antike hinterlassen hat, sind ihnen Stück für Stück die Elemente, aus welchen sich das neue Ganze mischt. Nein: baut. Denn die vollendete Vision von diesem Neuen war: Ruine. Der überschwänglichen Bewältigung antiker Elemente in einem Bau, der, ohne sie zum Ganzen zu vereinen, in der Zerstörung noch antiken Harmonien überlegen wäre, gilt jene Technik, die im einzelnen ostentativ auf die Realien, Redebäumen, Regeln sich bezieht. ›Ars inveniendi‹ muß die Dichtung heißen. Die Vorstellung von dem genialen Menschen, dem Meister artis inveniendi, ist die eines Mannes gewesen, der souverän mit Mustern schalten konnte.*²

_Walter Benjamin

¹ <https://artfulstrategy.com/2014/07/31/lesser-artists-borrow-great-artists-steal-igor-stravinsky/> [16.06.2022].

² Benjamin Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] First edition 1925. Redaktion Gröls-Verlag (Edition Werke der Weltliteratur), 2022 _P. 151.

Abstract

The dissertation investigates the concept of copy, its ideological and aesthetic value in current architecture. The focus is on the question, if, after western modernity's rejection and postmodernity's reconsideration, the copy is rehabilitated today. In which context, under which conditions and interventions could the reproduction of a past lost building become a model for the future?

The research starts from the specific case of the demolished Jugendstil villa Deliella designed by Ernesto Basile in Palermo and aims to analyse in general the phenomenon of historical lost buildings reconstruction, especially in urban situations where city development needs to take architectural heritage in account.

The study of the lost villa and its creator is used as an opportunity to provide a new key to the interpretation of the work, different from the rigid and reductive historical labels that some critics have given it in recent decades. Particular attention is also paid also to Basile's conception of copy and reconstruction. The investigation of artistic techniques of "rewriting" models, as well as the historical development of the concept of copy spans between ancient mimesis theory and Walter Benjamin's notions of authenticity and aura. The aim is to develop a specifically contemporary thesis on copy and reconstruction in architecture. At the same time, the study allows to examine some significant cases of reconstructed architecture, conceived in different places and times with various approaches ranging from "as it was, where it was" to reminiscent reinterpretations. The reflective comparison of the contextual aesthetic, architectural, social, and political characteristics of the observed cases contributes to understanding the conflicts and critiques associated with copies today.

The theoretical research is accompanied by a design practice that presents different scenarios for the reconstruction of Villa Deliella in the context of today's Palermo. These scenarios refer to the particular Deliella case and explore "methods of imitation" in concrete, historical, urban and aesthetic terms in the present site. They aim at a "restoration" of the building as an idea, fragment, reference, and discourse offer. This enables the development of a reflexive approach to reconstruction that takes into account both places and the times in which the respective models and their copies were built. In relation to Benjamin's idea of translation as an art form, not as a secondary derivative, reconstruction is treated as a process of form-finding in which a lost building -the Villa Deliella- is translated into a contemporary context-the today's Palermo.

Zusammenfassung

Die Dissertation untersucht den Begriff der Kopie, ihren ideologischen und ästhetischen Wert in der aktuellen Architektur. Im Mittelpunkt steht die Frage, ob nach der Ablehnung der westlichen Moderne und der Rückbesinnung der Postmoderne die Kopie heute rehabilitiert wird. In welchem Kontext, unter welchen Bedingungen und mit welchen Eingriffen kann die Reproduktion eines verlorenen Gebäudes der Vergangenheit zu einem Modell für die Zukunft werden?

Die Untersuchung geht vom spezifischen Fall der abgerissenen Jugendstil-Villa Deliella von Ernesto Basile in Palermo aus und zielt darauf ab, das Phänomen der Rekonstruktion verlorener historischer Gebäude allgemein zu analysieren, insbesondere in städtischen Situationen, in denen die Stadtentwicklung das architektonische Erbe berücksichtigen will.

Die Untersuchung der verlorenen Villa und ihres Schöpfers wird als Gelegenheit genutzt, einen neuen Schlüssel zur Werkinterpretation zu liefern, der sich von den starren und reduktiven historischen Etiketten abhebt, mit denen einige Kritiker sie in den letzten Jahrzehnten versehen haben. Besonderes Augenmerk wird auch auf Basiles Konzeption von Kopie und Rekonstruktion gelegt. Die Untersuchung künstlerischer Techniken des "Wiederschreibens" von Vorbildern sowie der historischen Entwicklung des Begriffs der Kopie spannt sich zwischen antiker Mimesistheorie und Walter Benjamins Vorstellungen von Authentizität und Aura auf. Ziel ist die Entwicklung einer spezifisch zeitgenössischen These zu Kopie und Rekonstruktion in der Architektur. Gleichzeitig ermöglicht die Untersuchung die Betrachtung einiger bedeutender Fälle rekonstruierter Architektur, die an verschiedenen Orten und zu verschiedenen Zeiten mit unterschiedlichen Ansätzen konzipiert wurden, die von "wie es war, wo es war" bis hin zu evokativen Neuinterpretationen reichen. Der reflektierende Vergleich der kontextuellen ästhetischen, architektonischen, sozialen und politischen Merkmale der beobachteten Fälle trägt zu Verständnis der Konflikte und Kritik bei, die heute mit Kopien verbunden sind.

Die theoretische Forschung wird von einer entwerferischen Praxis begleitet, die verschiedene Szenarien zur Rekonstruktion der Villa Deliella im Kontext des heutigen Palermo vorlegt. Diese Szenarien beziehen sich auf den speziellen Fall der Deliella und untersuchen „Nachahmungsmethoden“ konkret, historisch, urban und ästhetisch am gegenwärtigen Ort. Sie zielen auf eine „Wiederherstellung“ des Gebäudes als Idee, Fragment, Verweis und Diskursangebot. Dies ermöglicht die Entwicklung eines reflexiven Rekonstruktionsansatzes, der sowohl Orte als auch der Zeiten, in denen die jeweiligen Modelle und ihre Kopien gebaut wurden, berücksichtigt. In Bezug zu Benjamins Idee der Übersetzung als Kunst-Form, nicht als sekundäres Derivat, wird die Rekonstruktion als ein Prozess der Formfindung behandelt, bei dem ein verlorenes Gebäude –die Villa Deliella– in einen zeitgenössischen Kontext –das heutige Palermo– übersetzt wird.

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Introduction

The dissertation investigates the concept of the copy, its ideological and aesthetic value in current architecture and urban planning. The focus is on the theoretical and practical discussion of the question, if, after western modernity's rejection and postmodernist's reconsideration, the architectural copy is rehabilitated today. In which context, under which conditions and interventions does the reproduction of a past (most often lost) building may become a model for the future? While acknowledging the existence of diverse notions of the copy across different cultural, social, and political contexts, this project confines itself to analysing and advancing the theory and practice of the copy in a contemporary European context. It aims at filling a theoretical and methodological gap that has resulted in an often-polemical controversial surrounding individual reconstruction projects, e.g. the Berliner Stadtschloss, Schinkel's Bauakademie, etc.

The project idea starts from the case of Ernesto Basile's Jugendstil Villa Deliella in Palermo, which was demolished, following an aggressive attempt of urban speculation, in 1959. The villa has become the symbol of the so-called *sacco di Palermo* -sack of Palermo -, a devastating action carried out from the 1960s onwards by a certain political and economic class, in collusion with the mafia, which upset the city's urban and territorial structure and wiped out countless important historical-architectural testimonies. Today the need to rebuild the villa is strongly felt and requested by the community.³ The politic administration is currently actively working to carry out the acquisition of the area with the aim to realise a museum dedicated to Liberty-style art.⁴ The debate is raging on how to carry out the reconstruction: copy of the lost villa or its contemporary reinterpretation? Taking

³ An extensive collection of various articles on this subject can be found on the following website, which is regularly updated: https://www.repubblica.it/argomenti/villa_deliella [25.06.2022]. The topic is explored extensively throughout the dissertation.

⁴ Stile Liberty is the Italian name/variant of Art Nouveau.

this question as a starting point, the research aims to analyse in general the phenomenon of historical lost buildings reconstruction, and the relative role of copying, especially in urban situations where city development needs to take architectural heritage in account. The thesis, ultimately, presents some design proposals for the reconstruction of the lost Basile's Villa, addressing ideological and methodical issues not only in theory but also in practice.

While architecture's disciplinary constitution is based on its relation to the histories of its own practice and theory, reference has, since the breakthrough of modernity, been abstracted from the individual design object. Arguing that a project has to emerge exclusively from its specific situatedness in time and space, or from its function, modern architectural convention has asked for the usage of a contemporary language with diverse answers to what this might be. At the same time, the thousand years old process of imitation in the production of architecture has been discredited as anachronistic, dysfunctional and deceptive, and has been replaced by the quest for singularity and originality. This attitude has led to the emergence of singular projects that have replaced vanished historic buildings, so unrelated to them that traces of their memory have been lost. One of these is, for example, precisely the unrealised project that Mario Botta drew up for the Villa Deliella site in 1989. His proposal, which envisaged the construction of a multimedia cultural centre, was conceived with self-referential aesthetic characteristics, - identical to those of many other of his projects realised in other places - without any formal or typological reference to Ernesto Basile's missing building, nor any reference that might recall its brief existence and subsequent demolition. Similarly, a project by Giovanni Michelucci, the church of Santa Maria Immacolata built in Longarone to replace the old one destroyed in the Vajont

disaster of 1963, was criticised for erasing the historical image of the old building that the local community was attached to.⁵

Conversely, in recent decades there has been a tendency to "archaeologically" reconstruct lost buildings, which has led to the creation of one-to-one scale replicas of them. These architectural copies are interpreted by many scholars as fakes that, due to their excessive resemblance to the original, create misunderstandings about their real age. A famous case, analysed in the thesis, is the recent reconstruction of the *Frauenkirche* church in Dresden and the adjacent square, the *Neumarkt*, both destroyed during the 1945 bombing. The façades of the buildings facing the square, simulating the appearance of past centuries, are in stark contrast to the modern interiors for hotels, restaurants, shops, etc., that they cover. These architectural copies have been interpreted by many critics as empty theatrical backdrops, "*Kulissen*", demonstrating their lack of authenticity, placed as they are in temporal and situational contexts profoundly changed from those in which their respective originals were conceived. In their view, these interventions clearly stem from certain political and economic interests that speculate on phenomena such as mass tourism, with important consequences on the perception and understanding of the city and its history; this is why, as Susanne Vees-Gulani reports, some of them have called Dresden "*the new Las Vegas an der Elbe (Ruby) or a Barock Disneyland (Delau)*"⁶. The particular operation of 'selection of history' carried out with the decision to rebuild the *Frauenkirche* also had the consequence of eliminating the monument represented by the ruins of the Baroque church, which had been left in that state as a testimony to the consequences of the war. The church rubble pile had characterized the configuration of the city center for several decades during the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and had somehow also become a witness to

⁵ Mauro Petrecca wrote: "The approval of the project in 1967 did not stop the opposition of the inhabitants, who wanted a more traditional construction". in - *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* - Volume 74. Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana. Roma 2010.

⁶ Vees-Gulani, Susanne; From Frankfurt's Goethehaus to Dresden's *Frauenkirche*: Architecture, German Identity, and Historical Memory after 1945_P. 154.

that historical period. Phillip Klein says that looking at the new church, despite the tormented vicissitudes it has gone through, it seems that from 1743, when it was inaugurated, to the present day, "*nothing has happened*".⁷

With the twofold aim of understanding the reasons for these contradictions on the one hand, and of searching for design strategies supported by solid speculative foundations for the reconstruction project on the site of the lost villa in Palermo on the other, the analysis of Walter Benjamin's theory of the decay of the aura was chosen as a theoretical starting point. In his complex essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the German philosopher claims that every copy is devoid of aura, i.e. "*the here and now of the original [that] constitute the abstract idea of its genuineness*".⁸ According to his thought, despite the extraordinary possibilities that modern reproduction techniques allow, the aura of a work of art, i.e. its authenticity, cannot be duplicated. The aura is not an intrinsic property of the work, but is linked to the relationship it establishes with its context, in a precise moment: its *hic* and its *nunc* (here and now). The copy, relying only on similarities with the original and unable to perform the role of 'historical testimony' that only the latter plays, fails. Moreover, the anachronistic attempt to introduce auratic and sacred works into modern contexts, typical of totalitarian regimes, is seen by him as a retrogressive activity that inhibits the function of cultural emancipation that Art should have. His writings show that he attributes the ability to perform this educational task to works that reinterpret tradition and adapt to new spatial and temporal contexts. In other words, re-productions, such as, for example, the *Trauerspiel*, to which he dedicated a specific essay, which originated from Greek tragedy, but was transformed into a new theatrical genre adapted to German Baroque culture. Similar reflections were also made by Benjamin with regard to the translation of literary texts: he wrote:

⁷ Klein, Phillip: *Frauenkirchen Mania - The Frauenkirche 'Dresden Cathedral' and the Reconstruction, in: Abolish Commemoration – A Critique of the Discourse to the Bombing of Dresden in 1945*, online at <http://www.abolishcommemoration.org/klein1.html> [03.03.2022].

⁸ Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* London, Penguin 2008_ P. 5.

“It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language, which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.”⁹

Good translation in this sense transforms and renews the original, seeks to actualise its content, regardless of its similarity to it, and almost aims to become a work in itself, an expression of its own time and historical context. It was precisely the theme of 'translation as re-creation' that provided the thesis with a useful key to understanding the themes of art and architecture studied by analogy.

This conception of Benjamin is in many respects in continuity, and perhaps represents its culmination, with the notion of mimesis expressed by ancient philosophers, a theme that is also explored throughout the dissertation. Analysing the writings of authors such as Aristotle, Vitruvius, Quintilian, Leon Battista Alberti, Giorgio Vasari, Quatremère de Quincy and others, a fundamental difference emerges between the notion of copy, which reproduces by similarity a previous work, and imitation, which instead uses it as a model to be reinterpreted. These two different aesthetic subjects, copying and imitation, have respectively fulfilled different functions throughout history: the first purely pedagogical, linked mainly to the training and practice of pupils, while the second has allowed the transmission of the memory of works of tradition that have in turn served to create new artistic products representative of the culture of their time. Imitation ultimately contributed to the evolution of culture and styles in any artistic field. The following quotation from the entry “copy” in Quatremère de Quincy's 1832 *Dictionnaire Historique d'Architecture* may clarify what has been stated above:

“What differentiates he who imitates preceding works from he who is but their copyist, is that the first knows how to read in the inventions of others the maxims or the inspirations which produced them, and having studied the paths through which their genius passed, he learned to tread similar paths; while the other repeating borrowed ideas in servile works, crawls

⁹ Benjamin W. The task of the translator. In *Selected writings* vol.1 1913-1926 Harvard University Press, London 1999_ P. 261.

behind, instead of walking by himself. (...). There is perhaps no other art whose teaching requires more the practical application of this distinction, than the art of architecture.”¹⁰

The dissertation also analyses some literary cases of rewritings of previous works, such as Phaedrus' and La Fontaine's fables inspired by Aesop's fables, or cases of pictorial reinterpretations, such as Pablo Picasso's *D'Après* inspired by Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, which by analogy offer food for thought on the architectural theme treated. The theme of reinterpreting architecture from the past also characterised Ernesto Basile's artistic career. A constant of his buildings are the quotations and references to the medieval and renaissance Sicilian architecture, combined with the free schemas and floral forms of the Art Nouveau. In the cases of reconstructions of lost historical architectures, he always used a modern language that clearly differentiated the new buildings from the old structures, as in his designs for the town hall of Reggio Calabria and the cathedral of Messina destroyed by the earthquake of 1908.

The study of Villa Delielle is dealt with in the first chapter of the dissertation in order to understand its characteristics and the artistic, cultural and political context in which it was conceived. For some of its historicist decorative details, the villa has been defined by some critics as the result of a phase of rethinking by its designer compared to his most brilliant creative phase linked to Art Nouveau themes. With similar considerations, Ernesto Basile's entire artistic career has been relegated to rigid and reductive historical labels that some scholars have given it in recent decades. This research seeks to understand the reasons for such historical critiques and methodologies and uses them as an opportunity to provide a new key. The entire project also attempts to introduce interest in Basile's work beyond Italian borders by highlighting the importance of his experience in a broader context of international studies on the origins, diffusion and decline of the Art Nouveau style.

¹⁰ Quatremère de Quincy, Antoine-Chrysostome. *The Historical Dictionary of Architecture*, trans. Samir Younés in *The True, the Fictive, and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy*. Papadakis Publisher, London. 1999_ P. 126.

In the second chapter, case studies of emblematic architectural reconstructions, realised with different approaches, are explored, and knowledge of the events and design choices that determined them is deepened. In particular, the various versions of the project for the new *Reichstag* dome, the vicissitudes of the *Stadtschloss* in Berlin that replaced the *Palast der Republik*, and the different projects submitted for the two competition phases for the *new Master's Houses* of the *Bauhaus* in Dessau were analysed. On the one hand, the study provided an opportunity to verify, through the perspective of aura theory, the adherence to the 'here' and 'now' of each project, its imitative characteristics of the previous model to which it refers, and its capacity to become a historical testimony of its era. On the other hand, the social and political consequences each of them has brought about in their respective communities were explored through critique, trying to understand whether, ultimately, reproduction serves the commons, or is part of city marketing, speculative investment or gentrification processes. This last aspect still highlighted the potentials of a reproduction, in reference to Benjamin's suggestions of its educational and political role. The case studies examined also provided the inspiration for the subsequent conception and elaboration of four possible scenarios for a "new" Villa Deliella.

The application design part of the dissertation, dealt with in Chapter 3 and illustrated in Section 4, is preceded by an in-depth analysis of the Deliella site and the urban context in which it is inserted in present-day Palermo. Some traces of the past villa remain on the site, which need to be preserved and restored, such as the caretaker's small house, the fence wall and some trees that survived demolition. The plot is set in a traffic-congested square that over the years has become a sort of vehicular roundabout and car park. Nearby there is a historic park, the *Giardino Inglese*, which is very neglected and crossed by driveways that restrict its use. As an alternative to the construction of the large museum that the Region of Sicily wants to build, considering the scarcity of public green space in Palermo, the overabundance of built homes, and the existence of numerous buildings confiscated from the mafia that have remained unused for decades, the idea arose of

hypothesising the setting up of the museum just in one of these buildings; the area of the square where the Villa Deliella lot is located would instead be transformed into a public park directly connected to the adjacent one. By not constructing any large new buildings, the savings in terms of energy and economic resources would be considerable and, in addition to creating a green environment for the community, a strong signal of legality and civilisation would be given against mafia organisations and the complicated bureaucracy that hinders the reuse of 'their' buildings.

From these premises, a basic project has been developed on an urban scale involving the restoration of Villa Deliella's Art Nouveau garden, integrated with a new palm grove that develops the site's potential by modularly multiplying the existing palm trees, in imitation of similar squares typical of Palermo's historic centre. This solution represents the common basis on which four different design versions are grafted, each interpreting Ernesto Basile's villa on the basis of a specific artistic conceptual strategy. The portion of ground originally occupied by the villa becomes in each of the four imagined scenarios a particular square surrounded by the greenery of the restored garden. All versions seek to create places at once enjoyable and of intimate reflection, which, each with their own specific design characteristics, emphasise the memory of the vanished villa and seek to bear witness to its tormented history. Four scenarios intended as translations/re-enactment of the missing prototype that seek to adapt to the "*hic et nunc*" of this particular site in contemporary Palermo. The design driven research sought to verify that art and architecture together, viewed through the lens of Walter Benjamin's Aura Theory, fundamentally have the potential to provoke perceptual/educational "shocks" in observers and at the same time become historical testimonies of their era. The translations of the Villa Deliella model are, in short, new aesthetic subjects whose installations seek to highlight and pass on its architectural qualities over time and which themselves aspire to become milestones of its existence. Each of them will

probably in turn inspire new translations that will help transmit the identity of the prototype to future generations.

Ultimately, the thesis aims at developing a corrective to a contemporary architectural history and theory, that is essentially constructed through a modernist lens. At the same time, a corrective is also highlighted for the currently fashionable trend, opposed to modernism, of copying *a l'identique* of historical buildings that no longer exist. The discourse on imitation/re-production thereby serves as key term that makes it possible to disclose and deconstruct preconceptions, blind spots and normalizations underlying the discipline's self-understanding: The rethinking of the notions of original, influence and author are entailed, as much as the reconsideration of context and timeliness.

In the dissertation, independently of any evaluation, the terms "faithful copy", "duplicate", "clone", "facsimile", "reconstruction one-to-one", "replica", "copy *a l'identique*", "archeologic reconstruction", "as it was, where it was", will be used to indicate examples reproduced in the image and likeness of pre-existing artistic models; while the words "imitation", "reinterpretation", "re-writing", "re-enactment", "emulation", "translation" will be used to designate those works which, although referring to an archetype, reproduce it in a modified version, still allowing a reference to its provenance. The previous terms are used almost as synonyms, although obviously each of them has different nuances in the text.

It is specified that in the text of this dissertation all references to persons are specified using the masculine and feminine but are nevertheless to be understood as neutral because they apply to whatever gender each of them may belong to.

1 VILLA DELIELLA AS A COMPROMISE BETWEEN ECLECTICISM AND LIBERTY STYLE

1.1 The short existence of a historical architecture

The research took as a starting point the idea to rebuild the lost Villa Lanza di Deliella in Palermo. Designed by Ernesto Basile, one of the most important exponents of the Italian Art Nouveau movement, the so-called Liberty style, the villa once stood, surrounded by a garden, in what is now Piazza Croci, in the area of the city's nineteenth-century urban expansion. The three-storey architecture was characterized by asymmetrical plan and elevations, balanced articulations of volumes and particular corner solutions, as well as by the skilful use of different materials and the refined design of every detail. The interiors, for which Basile had also designed all the furnishings and accessories, were distributed according to their function, and were located around a double height central hall, crossed by an internal gallery. This noble residence was conceived by the architect in the Jugendstil phase of his career, which was characterized by the difficulty to completely detach himself from classicism and eclecticism. The villa, yet, was an important testimony of the architecture of the Palermo Belle Epoque, built at the time of the Florio dynasty, a period in which the Sicilian city, economically and culturally very advanced, was able to compete with the main European capitals.

However, in 1959, the city council, in an obtuse and aggressive system of urban speculation typical of those years, authorized its destruction with a bureaucratic trick. Although it was Basile's architecture, the protection restriction of work of artistic and historical interest could not yet be placed, according to the law of the time, because the building was not yet 50 years old; the construction of the villa had begun in 1906 and had been completed in 1909. The demolition was carried out in

November 1959, just on one weekend, only few days before the Superintendence's safeguard constraint came into effect. The villa was destroyed with the purpose to build at its place a multi-storey building; however, right after, the judiciary blocked definitively all actions. Until last year, for a long period, an illegal car wash and a parking occupied the space where the villa once stood.

Since 1959 its physical memory has been completely erased, and, in the urban void that has been determined, not a single table has ever been placed to remember its brief existence and its sad end. In 2018 Christoph Büchel, as part of the biennial travelling exhibition *Manifesta 12*, created a significant art installation in the area of Piazza Croci, using an old photograph that portrays the workers intent on demolishing the villa Deliella, with the provocative slogan "Manifesto Real Estate Development. Invest in Palermo". He also added the phrase "Palermo is beautiful, let's make it more beautiful", a motto attributed to the mayor of the time, Salvo Lima, who was one of the main protagonists, not only of the destruction of the villa, but especially of the so-called "sack" of Palermo. The sack was a devastating action carried out by a certain political-economic class, colluded with the mafia, which upset the urban and territorial planning of the city. With the complicity of the owners, eager for earnings, who sold their ancient aristocratic residences to unscrupulous contractors, innumerable important historical architectural testimonies were erased and huge anonymous buildings were built in their place, both in the nineteenth-century urban area and in the countryside of the so-called Conca d'Oro, where new messy neighbourhoods quickly developed.

Today, more than ever, Villa Deliella has become the symbol of the damage caused to the Sicilian city by that system in those years. Similar phenomena of ferocious building speculation in the 1960s and 1970s of the last century have also occurred in other European countries, where important architectures of the past were demolished to make way for more profitable multi-storey buildings. Unfortunately, the case of the Maison du Peuple in Brussels, a masterpiece of Art

Nouveau by Victor Horta, is also famous. In 1965 it was destroyed, despite countless protests from all over the world, and a 26-storey tower was built in its place.

After the devastation that the historical-architectural heritage in Europe has undergone, first caused by the bombing of the two world wars and then by the work of political and economic power groups that have heavily transformed the historical centers of the cities, there is now a frantic activity in various countries to rebuild some significant architectures that had been destroyed in the past. The reconstruction phenomenon of lost buildings is now so widespread, that scholars like Tino Mager even defines it as a real architectural movement¹¹. Because of its persistence and global validity, he even considers it the most successful of the movements of the 20th century. In many cases, modern buildings are demolished and replaced by facsimiles reconstructed as copies with the same appearance as their predecessors, such as in Berlin where the 1976 *Palast der Republik* was razed to the ground to revive the Prussian castle, which in turn had been destroyed in 1950. He wonders whether the current continued proliferation of architectural clones, is not somehow a consequence of the failure of contemporary architecture. Villa Deliella represents an emblematic case study to make a reflection on these aspects. Despite the fact that the Municipality of Palermo has an executive project by Mario Botta, carried out in 1989 for the construction of a multimedia space of contemporary art, just in the area where Villa Deliella once stood, which could be updated and built, today the reconstruction of Basile's work is in great demand. The project of the Swiss architect, as already mentioned, was conceived in a contemporary style, without any formal or typological citation to the pre-existence, and, precisely because of this total absence of references, its hypothetical realization would probably contribute to the definitive oblivion of the previous lost architecture.

¹¹ Mager, Tino. *Architecture reperformed: the politics of reconstruction*. London, Routledge 2016. _P. 1.

In 2015 two architects, Giulia Argiroffi and Danilo Maniscalco, proposed to reconstruct Villa Deliella in the same place where it was once. They have collected more than 100 signatures and adhesions from specialists, intellectuals, professionals and artists to support their idea. They haven't however developed any technical project for this rebuilding operation, but their action to raise public awareness has already had concrete results: the politic administration is currently actively working to carry out the expropriation, the acquisition of the area to the regional State Property with the aim to rebuild the lost villa, which probably will become a Museum of Art Nouveau. In November 2019 a workshop was held in Palermo to establish the guidelines of an architecture competition for the reconstruction of the villa.

In the following paragraphs, the nature of this disappeared architecture will be investigated, together with the complex figure of its creator. Basile's relationship with the copy and imitation through his writings and works will also be investigated, not so much to try to imagine how he would reconstruct Villa Deliella if he were still alive, but to understand if the ideas he expressed on the specific theme of reconstruction contain valid general principles that can give inspiration to the research.



Figure 1. Villa Deliella in the 1950s



Figure 2. Article of L'Espresso issue of January 3, 1960

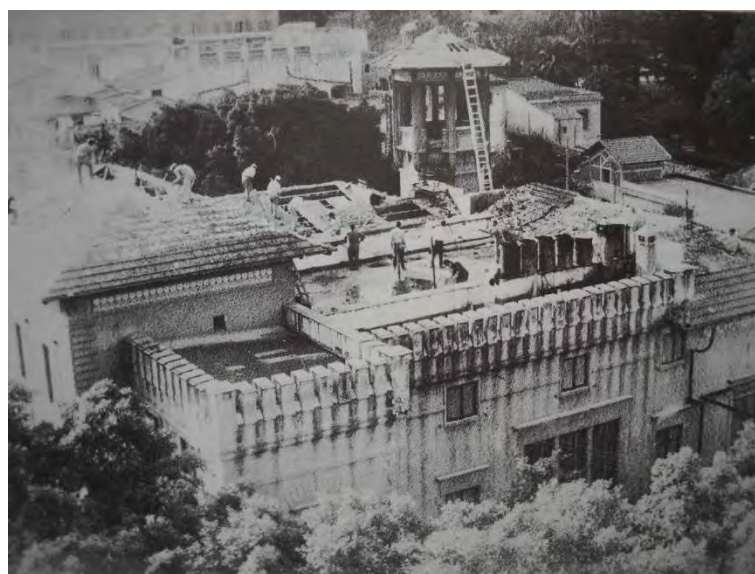


Figure 3. The demolition of the Villa, December 1959



Figure 4 The Villa Deliella plot used as a car park and car wash (until 2020)

1.2 The figure of Ernesto Basile through criticism

The vast architectural production of Ernesto Basile is characterized by a variety of languages and references that testify to the deep political, social, artistic contradictions of the particular period in which he worked. These contradictions were experienced by him with a certain restlessness and inner torments that were reflected in his architectural experimentations, whose characteristics, often heterogeneous, were in many ways interpreted by critics as a kind of inability to adapt to changing times. Villa Deliella in particular was considered by many to be an architecture that came out of a phase of Basile's rethinking of the modernist principles of Art Nouveau; a work that would mark the beginning of the decline of his best creative activity. Instead, an attempt will be made to demonstrate in the following paragraphs that he was able to interpret the epochal changes in an original way, and that he was able to draw precious cues from them for his compositional strategies, always experimenting with new languages that made him independent from the fashions of the moment. The ability to mediate between

tradition and innovation was perhaps its most relevant quality that the critics have not yet conveniently highlighted. Villa Deliella in particular was conceived, in its singularly elegant configuration, thanks to these negotiating skills that Basile put into action; he was able to combine, harmoniously and with balance in a single architectural organism, the elements linked to tradition, that were required by the clients, with his compositional ideas. In addition, it will tried to demonstrate the inadequacy of the division of his career into three periods, which has been carried out in recent decades by some scholars¹², who crystallizes his works in allegedly rigid homogeneous chronological phases, distorting the understanding of his non-linear artistic path.

This paragraph begins with the introduction of his complex artistic career through the reading of quotations taken from the main pages that have been dedicated to him, whose variety could help to properly frame his figure and his thought; immediately after will follow the biography and the description of his works. This research aims to contribute, as far as possible and within the limits of a dissertation carried out outside the Italian borders, to a greater knowledge of Ernesto Basile in an international context, just starting from multiple points of view that describe his work.

Ernesto Basile was one of the pioneers and most authoritative interpreters of the Art Nouveau artistic season in Italy, the so-called Liberty style. First Bruno Zevi¹³ in his History of Modern Architecture and then Paolo Portoghesi¹⁴ consider Basile, together with Raimondo D'Aronco, the major Italian protagonist of this movement.

Yet, for a long time, Basile had fallen into oblivion and was variously criticized. The exponents of the fascist regime expressed negative opinions on many of his works, starting with Benito Mussolini who, in his inaugural speech delivered on 16 November 1922, despised the parliamentary hall of Montecitorio palace, designed

¹² See e.g.: Sessa, Ettore. *Ernesto Basile 1857-1932 Fra accademismo e "moderno", un'architettura della qualità* Flaccovio 2010 Palermo.

¹³ Zevi, Bruno. *Storia dell'architettura moderna*. Einaudi Torino 1975_ P. 169.

¹⁴ Portoghesi, Paolo et al. *Ernesto Basile architetto*. Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia 1980_ P. 11.

by the architect from Palermo, which had been inaugurated just four years earlier, saying the following words: "*I could make this deaf and grey hall a bivouac of maniples*".¹⁵

Marcello Piacentini, in September 1932, a few days after Basile's death, wrote a commemorative article in *Architettura, Rivista del Sindacato nazionale fascista architetti*: on the one hand he defined him as "a truly conscientious artist and formidable designer", on the other hand he harshly criticized his adherence to Art Nouveau, judged as a "deviation" from his early projects of eclectic matrix. He believed that Ernesto would have done better to choose to follow the noble and courtly path traced out by his father, the famous neoclassical architect Giovan Battista Filippo Basile.

In particular, Piacentini criticized the palace of Montecitorio, which he thought was not very monumental and was designed using an inadequate language for the institution it represented:

"Basile wanted to add too many floral adjectives to the Roman nouns. He enervated every structure, he did not take into account the strong nature of our travertine. Not that the wisdom and taste of the details are missing in this work: the relationships, indeed between the various members, the sharp play of light and shade, the elegance that never fails always reveal, even here, a master, a great Master. The greatest note that can be made at the Basile in this work is that of having been too precious."¹⁶

In this way, Basile is almost lowered to the rank of mere decorator. But, despite his declared contempt for Art Nouveau, in the same article, Piacentini speaks of Ernesto as the best of the Italian architects who took the modernist path and at the same time recognizes the specificity resulting from his ability to blend the new style with elements of historical Sicilian architecture.

"His project for the classical and grandiose Palace of Justice in Rome would have been more worthy of the present one, and perhaps would have saved

¹⁵ Meroni, Corrado. *Il fascismo italiano 1919-1945*. Alpha Test _P. 57 (my translation).

¹⁶ *Architettura. Rivista del Sindacato nazionale fascista architetti*. Treves Editore. Milano. Issue of September 1932 (my translation).

his art. But immediately afterwards he enthusiastically embraced the new currents of the end of the century. Differentiating himself in this from his contemporaries, who were also innovators, Moretti, Sommaruga and D'Aronco, he was more impressed by the decorative forms of northern Europe, especially the Boberg, grafting with ease, almost as a logical spiritual link, the new decorative ideals on the Norman-Sicilian structures, which he deeply felt and studied. His was therefore a Sicilian floral, all personal, refined, which came to a homogeneity even stylistic, very different and far superior to all experiments congeners."¹⁷

However, during his career, especially in the first two decades of 1900, Basile was praised by international critics and his works were published many times in major Italian and foreign architecture magazines, including *The Studio*, *The Builder*, *Der Architekt*, *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, *Academy Architecture* and many others.

Just to give an impression of the esteem that he, still forty, already enjoyed in the international arena and how his ideas were then considered innovative, an extract from an article in *The International Studio* of 1904 is given below:

"The centre and leader of the art movement in Sicily is Ernesto Basile, an architect of great learning and taste, essentially modern, inexhaustibly inventive, many sided, but thorough. In architecture he long since broke with academic tradition, translating Sicilian mediaeval tendencies into forms suited to modern requirements. The corresponding aims of the firm of Ducrot in the treatment of furniture enabled him to carry out his ideas in detail. The cooperation of two painters — De Maria-Bergler and Enea — and of a sculptor, A. Ugo (known to the readers of *The Studio*), has made this establishment a perfect centre of applied art. The undertaking — a labour of love — though still in its infancy bears the stamp of genuine vitality; and, with all their seriousness, the designs have a lightness characteristically suited to the Southern climate that gives them birth. (...) Nor is there any fear of a lapse into archaic taste; Nature is faithfully studied as the inexhaustible source of fresh inspiration in structure and decoration; reliance on tradition is rigidly banned. The fundamental principles of the revival in Sicily are identical with those in the North — rebellion against the

¹⁷ *Architettura. Rivista del Sindacato nazionale fascista architetti*. 1932 (my translation).

tyranny of the past, and a search for new forms of expression in harmony with the spirit of the people.”¹⁸

These progressive and anti-academic ideas, which he always continued to develop and carry on, obviously fell out of tune with the fascist ideology that became established in the following years and, for this reason, in the last part of his career Basile suffered an unjust artistic isolation. After the fall of the regime, however, the figure of Basile was gradually re-evaluated, especially from the publications of his students, such as Giuseppe Capito and Salvatore Caronia Roberti, or scholars such as Gustavo Giovannoni, who underlined his qualities as an innovator and precursor of the new modernist language, in line with the main European Art Nouveau experiences. Moreover, his extreme attention to detail began to be interpreted as a specific quality of his design poetics and not as a defect.

Caronia Roberti clarifies the reasons for the criticisms that had been made, in these terms:

"For this undoubted prevalence of the merits of detail over the overall composition in all the works of Basile, some contemporary critics, in the most benevolent of cases, exalted in the artist more the decorator than the architect; in this sense the criticism had to be accentuated in this period of transition (...) It is easy to understand how certain extremist schools, where the ban on the shape and the ornament is proclaimed as useless survivors compared to the prevailing utilitarian sense and the vertiginous dynamism of contemporary civilization, cannot be found admirers for an artistic production interwoven with refinements, meticulous fruit of drawing and exceptional care in execution.”¹⁹

However, Caronia Roberti, referring to her openly modernist works, although exalting the qualities of the Master, does not hide her disregard for the "fashion" Jugendstil:

¹⁸ *The International Studio*, Volume 21 John Lane Company, New York 1904.

¹⁹ Caronia Roberti, Salvatore. *Ernesto Basile e cinquant'anni di architettura in Sicilia*. 1935 Palermo. F. Ciuni editore_ P. 46 (my translation).

"we are at the end of the century: influences from beyond the Alps have also affected our taste and the so-called Art Nouveau style starting from the furniture and moving from the decoration has also invaded the field of architecture: it may have been a breath of fashion fortunately of short duration, but the fact is that no one could escape it. Even the Basile, with its precious set of classical studies and stylistic preparation, turned towards the prevailing fashion, but it did so with such refinement and always with such personality that here among us only his works, however outdated, remain in the rank of works of art."²⁰

In the following years the critics have instead interpreted with coldness, both his eclectic works of the early phase, and those late, in which by now the modernist momentum had been attenuated by the return, in his architecture, of elements from the repertoire of tradition. On the contrary, the qualities of his works in pure Art Nouveau style, in line with European modernist currents, have been exalted. These scholars were generally sensitive only to the modernist episodes, interpreted positively, only because they were considered as a phase of preparation for the future development of rationalist architecture. For this reason, the architecture of the last 15 years of his career, considered as a sign of an ambiguous classicist regression, has been accused of anachronism.

Manfredo Tafuri writes:

"B.'s problem was therefore that of inserting the liberty language (...) into a society that had ignored its premises and developments: the singular "contaminatio" of floral and 15th century Sicilian decorative elements can therefore be explained by the attempt to find a justification for the new language, basing it on a historical and regional tradition even more than national. He adds: "In this way we define the typical Basilian "manner" of the best works (...) in which the geometric purism of the surfaces and volumes is contrasted with the floralism of the decorative parties in a happy and measured dialectic that refers more to the ways of a Wagner or a Hoffmann than to those of a Horta."

Finally, speaking of the works after 1909, in the same script he writes:

²⁰ Caronia Roberti, Salvatore. *Ernesto Basile e cinquant'anni di architettura in Sicilia*. PP. 51-52 (my translation).

"there is a progressive loss of grit in his experiences that will no longer reach, even in the best examples, the happy expressiveness of the villas Fassini and Deliella."²¹

Neither Nikolaus Pevsner's nor Kenneth Frampton's histories of modern architecture ever mention the name Basile. Bruno Zevi, who in general criticizes the entire Italian Art Nouveau movement, as arriving too late and being linked more to formal than substantive issues, defines Basile in his history of modern architecture, along with Raimondo D'Aronco and Giuseppe Sommaruga as "*late and secondary figures*". Then, comparing them to the protagonists of European Art Nouveau, he describes them as "*noble but pale figures*" and adds:

"While Van de Velde and Hoffman had the intelligence to understand the demands of the new generation, Basile and D'Aronco, jealous of their past, did not recognize the legitimacy of an architecture achieved without the filter of exquisite pencil-pointed drawings, or turbulent and bloodstained sketches."²²

It was however Bruno Zevi himself who denounced and condemned in 1960, on the pages of *L'Espresso*, making it a national case, the devastation that had taken place a month earlier in Palermo with the demolition of Villa Deliella. In an explicit direct attack on the mayor of the time, he defined the case as an example of shame and piracy perpetrated against

"one of the rare works of Ernesto Basile, the most important architectural personality of the beginning of our century."²³

In his history of modern architecture, Leonardo Benevolo dedicated only two laconic lines to him:

²¹ Tafuri, Manfredo - BASILE, Ernesto. *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* - Volume 7_ Treccani (1970) (my translation).

²² Zevi, Bruno. *Storia dell'architettura moderna*. Einaudi Editore, Torino 1950_ P. 173 (my translation).

²³ Zevi, Bruno. *Assalto a Villa Deliella* L'ESPRESSO issue of January 3, 1960_ P. 16 (my translation).

"Ernesto Basile (1857 - 1923) at the agricultural exhibition in Palermo accepted the same motifs [of Art Nouveau]."²⁴

In an article in the magazine *Domus* n.388, January 1962, are presented some projects carried out in Palermo in those years, and are described some significant works of Ernesto Basile, called "*nineteenth-century pioneer of modern Sicilian architecture*", and is stressed the urgency of safeguarding them.

Gianni Pirrone is credited with having promoted the collection, conservation and cataloguing of Ernesto's and his father's drawings, models, photos and manuscripts, as well as the books and journals of their libraries. He tenaciously expressed the need to make this great heritage accessible to scholars. In 1968, he set up the Basile archive at the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo and two years later had the Ducrot archive materials purchased from the University. Pirrone wrote numerous essays and monographs on Basile's works and drawings; he organized several exhibitions and conferences, which also stimulated subsequent studies on Sicilian Art Nouveau. Pirrone has framed the activity of Basile in its specific condition of "peripheral" modernism, always poised between modernist impulses and formal persistences, deriving from its geographical and historical hinterland. He defines Basile as:

"one of the most sensitive and refined interpreters [of Art Nouveau] and certainly the most representative figure of the southern European "frontier"."²⁵

In 1965 Pirrone wrote an article about Ernesto Basile as a "designer" where he underlined the avant-garde position he occupied on an international level, not only as an architect, but also as the artistic director and designer of the *Ducrot* furniture factory. In this role, according to him, Ernesto succeeded in expressing his most genuine creativity, without the inevitable conditioning of the repertoire references that "major" architecture entailed. He writes:

²⁴ Benevolo, Leonardo. *Storia dell'architettura moderna*. Laterza, Bari 1960_P. 357 (my translation).

²⁵ Pirrone, Gianni. *Palermo. Architettura del XX secolo in Italia*. Vitali e Ghianda, Genova 1971_P. 61 (my translation).

"very skilful and precise designer (...), his meticulous attention to detail would seem to free him precisely in the "interior" from any constraint or traditional stylistic reference, giving him the pure joy of the line."²⁶

Pirrone has always studied the Basilian stylistic evolution in parallel, both in the field of furniture design and in that of architectural works, highlighting the fact that his was an original Modern Style, free from purely imitative stylistic flattening and strongly linked to the *genius loci* of his land.

Manfredi Nicoletti defines Basile as an authoritative and refined figure with a "*very personal imprint, attentive to and involved in European events*" and underlines the influence his father exerted on his education. In his book *L'Architettura liberty in Italia*, he emphasizes Ernesto's stature as a founder and points out how he contributed to making the city of Palermo, together with Turin, the most important pole of Art Nouveau in Italy. He describes Ernesto's life and works, emphasizing the contradictions that characterized his career, always in tension between the impulses towards innovation on the one hand and the weight of his background of historicist matrix, from which he never managed to completely free himself, on the other hand. He writes:

"for him, however, the conditioning barrier is the same one that grips Olbrich's first and last works: the illusion of the possibility of implementing an effective renewal without renouncing the historicist lexicon. Therefore, his medievalist constructivism, nourished by sincerity and dynamic Morriessian dissymmetries, and then his longing with secessionist themes in a "Mediterranean" key, clashes with linguistic obstacles that cannot be overcome by the imaginative explosion alone. It is for this reason that Basile's great versatility will find its most actual, forerunner and complete conclusions in furniture design, where it reaches important levels."²⁷

According to Nicoletti, in addition to furniture design, Basile only succeeded in two other cases in expressing his creativity without conditioning: the villas Ida and Fassini. He considers these two buildings, unique in the entire architectural history

²⁶ Pirrone, Gianni. *Ernesto Basile "designer"*, in «Comunità» n. 128, Ivrea 1965_P. 56 (my translation).

²⁷ Nicoletti, Manfredi. *L'architettura Liberty in Italia*. Editori Laterza Bari, 1978. _PP. 76-77 (my translation).

of the Italian Modern Style, for their functional characteristics and for the structural frankness with which they were conceived. It is evident that this type of criticism contributes fundamentally to the construction of a history and theory of architecture through a modernist lens.

Rossana Bossaglia, in its numerous texts on Art Nouveau, attributes the merit to Basile for having been able to acquire the formulas of the Modern Style at an early stage and for having known how to spread them among its illuminated clients. The particular Basilian language, based on the fusion of regional motifs with those of his contemporary architecture, is interpreted by the scholar as an attempt to develop the architecture of his time and to combat the tendency to search for an imaginary national style based on monumental classicism:

"Basile (...) uses the patrimony of images and local iconography as a basic repertoire for the anti-academic invention".²⁸

In 1980, during the Venice Biennale directed by Paolo Portoghesi entitled *The Presence of the Past*, which remained famous above all for the setting up of the *Strada Novissima*, an exhibition was held entirely dedicated to the work of Ernesto Basile. This event contributed to his definitive revaluation and to the re-awakening of interest in him at an international level. In the monographic work dedicated to him, which was published on that occasion, the themes of his architectural language, of his adhesion to the ideas of Jugendstil, of his relationship with classicism and Sicilian tradition, of his drawings, of his furniture, and of his Roman works, were mainly examined in depth. Basile's works have been part of the main exhibitions on Art Nouveau and many monographic exhibitions have been dedicated to him, including the one in Rome in 2000, *Ernesto Basile a Montecitorio e i disegni restaurati della Dotazione Basile*; the one in Palermo in 2004, *Dispar et unum 1904-2004 I cento anni del villino Basile*; and that of Rome in 2018, *La nuova Aula della Camera dei deputati. Il progetto di Ernesto Basile per Montecitorio*.

²⁸ Bossaglia, Rossana. *Il giglio, l'iris, la rosa*. Sellerio editore Palermo, 1988_P. 145 (my translation).

Eliana Mauro and Ettore Sessa, in numerous studies dedicated to Basile, divide his large body of work, in broad terms, into three seasons: the eclectic, the modernist and the last phase of the so-called "manner".²⁹ This periodisation is certainly useful for framing his biography and his vast architectural production in the historical context of reference, but at the same time it could give rise to abstract interpretative categories that could distort an objective historical reading.

There are actually homogeneous groups of Basile's works, which have common construction and language characteristics, but many of them, even if conceived with the same stylistic and construction criteria, are not necessarily placed in the same time frame. On the other hand, observing parallel works, such as the Villa Deliella and the Villa Ida Basile, one notices considerable stylistic differences, especially in the conception of the decorations, in the coverings and in the rhythms of the façades. These differences are even more evident if one compares the palace Moncada di Paternò, with its rigid and strictly historicistic language -of which, however, there is a sketch of the tower in Art Nouveau style with the contemporary Florio all'Olivuzza villa, characterized by complicated articulations of volumes and conceived according to a free and asymmetrical floral composition.

Taking two other buildings, both from 1907, as an additional case in point, the Caltagirone electric power plant, designed in the Liberty style, and the headquarters of the Cassa di Risparmio Vittorio Emanuele in Palermo, with its severe neoclassical elevations, even these architectures, due to the strong differences in language, would almost seem to have been designed by two different subjects. While, finally, if a comparison is made between the same villa Ida and the Ribaudo kiosk in Piazza Castronovo, which was built 20 years later, in the presumed period of "involution of manner", these two works, although chronologically distant from each other,

²⁹ Mauro Eliana. Sessa Ettore. *Collezioni Basile e Ducrot. Mostra documentaria degli archivi*. Pumelia Edizioni, Palermo 2014 _P. 31 (my translation).

appear totally similar and generated by the same creative inspiration and the same expressive principles.



Figure 5. *E. Basile. Palazzo Moncada di Paternò, Palermo 1899 (demolished)*



Figure 6. *E. Basile. Villino Florio all'Olivuzza, Palermo 1899*



Figure 7. *E. Basile. Electric power plant, Caltagirone 1907*



Figure 8 *E. Basile. Cassa di Risparmio Vittorio Emanuele, Palermo 1907*



Figure 9. E. Basile. Villa Ida Basile, Palermo 1903-04



Figure 10. E. Basile. Chiosco Ribaudò, Palermo 1916

Basile's career, therefore, does not present a linear path and can with difficulty be divided into rigid chronological terms; it should perhaps be read as a continuous

flow of ideas in evolution, a flow that, certainly, for reasons linked to the specific political, economic and social context, suffered slowdowns and frequent episodes of rethinking and compromise. As seen, however, Ernesto has been criticized several times for the heterogeneity, anachronisms, and contradictions of some of his works.

Paolo Portoghesi, referring to the language of Basile writes:

"Basile's architectural thought develops in the course of time, becomes richer and is then exhausted in tiredness and disengagement. The constantly present difficulty of combining new and old, the rejection, on the one hand, of sterile imitation and, on the other, of a superficial assimilation of principles and formulas born in a different cultural context and of the identification between validity and novelty for its own sake, could seem in the past, from the evolutionary point of view of the modern movement, a factor of indecision and a lack of courage. Today, more correctly, we see the understandable suffered attitude of those who, together with their enthusiasm for change, feel lost in the face of the risk of losing that thread of Ariadne's memory without which a vital current is irrevocably interrupted."³⁰

Basile, after the creative experience of the first decade of the twentieth century, would therefore feel lost when faced with the unknown of the modern and for this reason would take refuge in the "safe harbour of tradition". He is somehow criticized, both for not having been able to bring the Art Nouveau experience to the end, and for having remained indifferent, in the final part of his career, to the ferments of rationalist architecture that were germinating in those years. However, one may wonder whether these factors actually depended on his will and whether they should really be considered anachronistic.

If one examines the stages of his career, his writings and his works, Basile, for various reasons, appears anything but a conservative or an undecided architect, who does not like to experiment. First of all, it can be considered that, in the general

³⁰ Portoghesi, Paolo et al. in *Ernesto Basile architetto*. Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia 1980._P. 14 (my translation).

climate of distrust that reigned in Italy towards Art Nouveau, then considered a frivolous and inadequate trend, especially in the field of public buildings, he succeeded in countertendency to create many architectures in this style. He even had the ability to introduce Art Nouveau in the capital of Italy, precisely for the most important and representative building, the Palazzo di Montecitorio, seat of the Parliament. Ernesto moreover never closed himself in provincialism, he travelled frequently abroad, keeping himself constantly updated on contemporary artistic tendencies, and never subjected his art to the fascist regime. His initiative and open-mindedness are also demonstrated by the force with which he promoted, in 1897, a revolutionary pact between 18 artists, a sort of "manifesto of the Palermo secession", to support the Modern Style art in opposition to the conservative academic culture of the time. Another element that reveals his progressive thinking is the fact that he conceived and realized, free from external conditioning, his house-manifesto, the villa Ida Basile, in a pure geometric style floral avant-garde. An architect's personal home is like a showcase in which he presents the best of his own style and artistic credo to the society and potential clients. Basile describes this work, in the magazine *la Casa* in 1909, with words that denote his very modern conception of architecture:

"I planned my house thinking first of all of the interior distribution for the purpose of convenience, then of the construction, and finally of the decoration, which must be the logical consequence of the ground plan and the structure."³¹

The fact, however, that in parallel he designed buildings still linked, even if partially, to tradition, such as Villa Delietta, can be seen as a clear contradiction. But why would a designer who proudly displayed his home and described it as the fruit of his most intimate design convictions, at the same time have changed his mind and used a different language to create an important noble residence, located in the same district a few blocks away? The main cause of his difficulty in breaking away

³¹ Gössel Peter, Postiglione Gennaro, Acerboni Francesca. *100: One Hundred Houses for One Hundred European Architects of the Twentieth Century*_ Taschen. Koeln 2004_P. 38.

from tradition is plausibly linked to the laborious relations he had with most of his clients, both public and private, who, as already mentioned, still considered the Liberty style superficial and unsuitable for the construction of representative buildings. In general, in Italy the new style was not accepted by the public and was considered more suitable for private residential buildings. Locations of banks, insurance companies, ministries, etc.. in their monumental sumptuousness had to express an image of financial solidity, achievable only with "*the use of an architectural language historical-academic of more proven tradition*".³²

The same distrust of the new style was also typical of a large part of the private clientele; in particular, in Palermo at the beginning of the 20th century, the landowner nobility was still strongly anchored to artistic repertoires of the past. Mainly, the exponents of the cadet branches of ancient noble families, with the classicism and sumptuousness of their new residences, wanted to express and underline, with a certain ostentation, the pomp and splendour of their aristocratic origins, which they probably felt were endangered by the political and social changes of the time. But, in the same years, in contrast, a large number of bourgeois clients, representatives of a dynamic and cultured entrepreneurial and mercantile class, such as the Florios, the Inghams, the Withakers, welcomed and promoted Art Nouveau, a style that expressed those values of cosmopolitan modernity in which they reflected themselves. Basile's clients belonged to all the categories described above and probably their requests, with which he had to continually compromise, were the main cause of his varied and in some ways discontinuous work, always poised between avant-garde and tradition.

The vast heritage of architecture, drawings and writings that Basile has handed down allows, above all and precisely through these contradictory aspects, to study his thought in relation to the historical, cultural and geographical context in which he worked; for this reason, it can be misleading to isolate parts of his career and to

³² Bairati Eleonora, Riva Daniele. *Il liberty in Italia*. Editori Laterza. Bari 2001_ P. 15 (my translation).

attribute, even unconsciously, more or less value to certain presumed stylistic phases. Even the much-criticized indifference of the last Basile towards the ferments of rationalist architecture, which were spreading at the time, can perhaps be interpreted in a differentiated way; that is, as his rejection of a universal language that flattens regional differences and annulled local traditions. This refusal was almost a prophesy of that degradation that shortly afterwards, certain negative consequences of the spread of the International Style, in its lower-level interpretations, would have caused in Italy and in particular in Sicily. Paolo Portoghesi in the preface to an essay on Sicilian Art Nouveau, speaking in general of the fact that functionalism succeeded in supplanting both Art Nouveau and Expressionism, writes

"The planetary triumphant of the battle for new architecture was not ideological Rationalism, but its utilitarian disguise, codified in the so-called International Style, what, through infinite corruptions and degenerations, has become the language of urban speculation and unauthorised development".³³

Certain unscrupulous groups then used these corruptions and degenerations of Rationalism as instruments of economic power, with the effect of distorting the appearance of cities and territory and destroying much of the historical-artistic heritage. The demolition of the Villa Deliella and the so-called sack of Palermo were sad consequences of this devastating system.

After introducing Basile through the lens of the critic, in the following pages the various phases of Basile's career and his most significant works will be chronologically presented and analysed. Ernesto was born on January 31, 1857, in Palermo from Giovan Battista Filippo Basile and Benedetta Vasari. His father was an architect and university professor, famous above all for the construction of the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, whose neoclassical project was awarded in 1864 by Gottfried Semper, president of the jury of the competition. Giovan Battista Filippo

³³ Rizzo Eugenio., Sirchia M. Cristina. *Sicilia liberty* Dario Flaccovio, Palermo 2007_P. 6 (my translation).

denounced in his writings the need for a renewal of Italian architecture of the second half of the nineteenth century, which he considered anachronistic in relation to the evolution of the Risorgimento society and the progress of technology. He executed numerous works, mainly in Sicily, with an eclectic language of an international character, but based mainly on the reinterpretation of regional themes.

The villa Favalaro, from 1889, his last work, later completed and transformed in 1914 by his son, with the addition of a small tower and a veranda, is considered an example of proto-Art Nouveau; the fretworks of the loggia and of the windows, conceived with very modern geometrical squiggles, of which one can guess the Sicilian-Renaissance matrix, seemed almost to anticipate the following developments of Art Deco. What Ernesto wrote about this villa in an unpublished manuscript, reported by Vittorio Ziino and cited by Gianni Pirrone, summarizes briefly the affinities of thought and the relationship of professional continuity with his famous parent:

"My father was a very free artist and initiator of a free style. The Favalaro building, built when the new style was not really thought of yet, is proof of this worthy of singular mention".³⁴



Figure 11. G. B. Filippo Basile. Villino Favalaro, Palermo 1889

³⁴ Pirrone, Gianni. *Palermo. Architettura del XX secolo in Italia*. Vitali e Ghianda, Genova 1971_P. 90 (my translation).



Figure 12 . G. B. Filippo Basile, E. Basile. Teatro Massimo, Palermo 1875-97

Ernesto grew up in an environment steeped in architectural culture and showed a strong propensity for drawing and art from a very young age. As a boy, he filled his notebooks with drawings of the botanical world, portraits, castles and architectures of the past, and when he was only twenty years old he began to realize his first projects, guided by his father. He made several trips to Europe and other continents, learned German, English and French, languages that will help him to read various texts. He graduated in architecture in 1878 from the Royal School of Application for Engineers and Architects in Palermo and shortly afterwards he was appointed assistant professor of Technical Architecture. An important formative experience of this period was the collaboration with his father for the compilation of the volume on the *Curvatura delle linee dell'architettura antica, con un metodo per lo studio dei monumenti: epoca dorico-sicula*, which will be published in Palermo in 1884. His pupil Salvatore Caronia Roberti writes:

"The examination of this work can only explain how a young architect who has collaborated or even studied on it, must have drawn and preserved the most refined taste of the line, the most harmonious visions of skilful curves, virtuous clusters of chiaroscuro, penetrating into what is most nobly

classical (in the sense of perfection due to the centuries-old reworking of the same schemes) is in the spirit of Greek Architecture.”³⁵

During this period he also devoted himself to the in-depth study and survey of other Sicilian architectural monuments, in particular those of the Norman and Renaissance periods.

The relationship with historical architecture profoundly influenced Ernesto Basile's thinking and was a constant in his career. He studied the nature of the buildings of the past, their typological and stylistic characteristics, and the relationship they established with their surroundings. He investigated in depth the effects that materials, lines, optical corrections and the play of volumes had on human visual perception. Caronia Roberti reports that Basile, summarizing her design philosophy, often said that you have to “*think in the ancient way and speak the language of the contemporaries*”.³⁶

In 1881 he moved to Rome where he worked as an assistant at the university and already in 1883 he became full professor. In 1882 Ernesto drafted a short treatise, never completed, entitled *Architettura. Dei suoi principii e del suo rinnovamento*. The main theme of the treatise is, in clear harmony with his father's thought, the need to renew the historicist language typical of his time and to interrupt the practice of passive imitation of the styles of the past; surprisingly, in some passages of the book he also deals, well in advance, with themes that would be typical of Art Nouveau, such as the opportunity to study and borrow from *nature* “*forms of the vegetable kingdom, leaves, fruit, flowers*”. He took part in various public architectural competitions, including the one for the Palace of Justice and the monument to Victor Emmanuel II in Rome. In 1883 he won the first prize in the competition for the palace of the Parliament of Rome in 1885 for the ossuary monument of Calatafimi. In 1886 he created in Rome the house-studio for the Spanish painter Josè Villegas,

³⁵ Caronia Roberti, Salvatore. *Ernesto Basile e cinquant'anni di architettura in Sicilia*. 1935 Palermo. F. Ciuni editore _P. 19 (my translation).

³⁶ Caronia Roberti, Salvatore. *Ernesto Basile e cinquant'anni di architettura in Sicilia* _P. 31 (my translation).

in neo-moorish style, with explicit formal references to the *Patio de los Leones* of the Alhambra.

On request of the Brazilian government, in 1888, he drew up the plans for the renovation of Avenida da Liberdade and the construction of the courthouse, the great theatre and the national bank in Rio de Janeiro; these works were not carried out due to the fall of the government of the time.

During his stay in Rome, he also made accurate surveys of churches and palaces of various epochs and wrote various articles in newspapers and magazines. In 1889 he published the booklet *Il Palazzo del Parlamento di Berlino*, in which he illustrated the contents of the public competition and described and analysed Paul Wallot's project.

In 1891, the year his father died, Ernesto returned to Palermo. In this period the city is going through a favourable phase of economic and cultural development, witnessed among other things by the contemporary construction of two important theaters, the *Massimo* and the *Politeama*. A progressive and enlightened bourgeois class, of which the Florio family is the most representative, brought the Sicilian city to compete economically and culturally with the main European capitals. This climate allowed Ernesto to establish himself both as an architect and as a university professor. He obtained the Chair of Technical Architecture at the Royal School of Application for Engineers and Architects and continued his father's work in teaching architectural composition and survey and study of historical monuments in Sicily. He completes the work of the Teatro Massimo, designing its interiors and furnishings, and realizes the ephemeral buildings for the Grand National Exhibition in Palermo. This enormous exhibition complex was conceived in an eclectic style, with explicit references both to buildings constructed for other international exhibitions, and to regional historical architecture.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century he carried out numerous projects, many of which were built. In addition to various aristocratic chapels, he carried out the extension of Villa Bordonaro, the house/atelier of the painter Benedetto Civiletti,

the Vicari and Ribaudo kiosks in Piazza Verdi, the entrance and garden of the castle of Falconara, the extension of a rural building in Canicattì. The works of this period are conceived with particular eclectic declinations, in which, even if reinterpreted, the influences of the architecture of the Greek, Arab-Norman and Sicilian-Renaissance periods are perceptible. Observing these early architectures also reveals a peculiar characteristic of his style: the geometric simplification of the forms and the composition obtained with joints of pure, freely aggregated volumes. Villa Bordonaro and the project for Palazzo Lanza for the Princes of Delia in Piazza Castelnovo (never built) clearly show these peculiarities: the rigour of the neo-Renaissance language of the façades is contrasted by the masses of volumes and projecting towers of different heights.

Ernesto Basile, already starting from the completion of the Teatro Massimo, had the intuition and the ability to surround himself with avant-garde artists such as Ettore De Maria-Bergler, Benedetto Civiletti, Mario Rutelli, Ettore Ximenes, just to name a few, who collaborated with him throughout his career and provided important impulses to his cultural growth. Interested as he was in the rejuvenation of eclectic culture, he kept himself constantly updated on contemporary European trends, especially through his travels and the consultation of magazines from which he drew inspiration for his creations (only in the archive of the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo are preserved over 2400 magazines and periodicals of 70 Italian and foreign newspapers that belonged to him and his father). In 1898 he made a journey to Europe and also visited Vienna, just as the Secession Palace was being completed; the following year he went to Brussels and Paris.

He was the promoter of an artistic pact that was signed in February 1897 in his studio by a group of eighteen people: four architects, eleven painters and three sculptors. It could be described as a sort of manifesto of the "Palermo secession", through which the organization of private modernist art expositions was promoted, in opposition to the traditional academic exhibitions that were organized every year by the Artistic Circle of Palermo. This pact was probably made in the wake of the

declarations of artistic secessions that had already taken place in those years in Munich and Berlin and anticipated the Viennese one by a few months.

In the same year Ernesto began his collaboration with the *Golia-Ducrot* factory in Palermo, of which he was the artistic director until 1912 and for which he designed both one-off furniture and several high-quality lines of furniture produced in series, which were constantly shown in major exhibitions and published internationally. He also always designed the settings of the rooms where his furniture was exhibited, such as the rooms at the National Biennial Art Exhibition in Venice in 1903, 1905, 1909. During his career Ernesto always turned to this company to have the furnishings of all the architectures he designed produced, as well as to have the installations that he created for the interiors of some large ships and yachts made. Since he was a boy, Basile was used to personally drawing every single detail for his clients' homes: furniture, door handles, lamps, tapestries, letterheads; for Ignazio Florio he had even created his own personal tattoos.³⁷ The complete design of his works was linked to his innate idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which put him in perfect harmony with the European trends of Jugendstil.

Ernesto over the years formed a large number of skilled craftsmen, who were able to materialize his designs and ideas and who contributed to the spread of Art Nouveau style in all Sicilian provinces. Around 1899 Ernesto created numerous works, including the Teatro Sociale in Canicattì and, in Palermo, the Villa Moncada di Paternò, the Grand Hotel Villa Igia and the Villino Florio. These last two architectures can be considered real pioneering works in the Italian panorama of the Liberty and they, even if different in typology and scale, are joint by the fact that the historicist quotations, of which they are rich, begin to be intertwined with the modernist themes. Both are characterized by masses that fit into asymmetric and

³⁷ Ernesto Basile was a designer in the modern sense of the word, as he lent his creativity to industrial companies that produced objects in series, such as *Ceramiche Florio* and *Ducrot*, dictating their artistic lines and coordinating their technical offices. For these companies he curated the integrated image, designing the shops, the exhibition halls, the letterheads, the logos, the advertising. In addition to furniture, chandeliers, handles, carpets, he designed the most disparate objects, including, just to name a few, a set of cutlery and a clip for Queen Elena, a piano for Mrs. Krupp, an ostrich egg holder for Ignazio Florio, an urinal.

dynamic compositions. Their spatial and decorative conception is in line with the ideas of the European avant-garde secessionists of that period; however, some elements taken from the regional repertoire remain both in the facades and in the interiors, such as: arches, columns, cymatiums, string courses, ashlar, etc. The hall of Villa Igiea, for example, is strongly characterized by very modern elements such as the walls entirely frescoed by Ettore De Maria Bergler in a style very close to that of Alphonse Mucha, the sinuous frames of the doors and mirrors, the inverted trusses, the organic wooden ceiling, the "whiplash" of the furniture, the floral chandeliers in wrought iron and glass; but at the same time, this large room has an eclectic colonnade inside, composed of five lowered arches supporting a skylight, which explicitly refers to the fifteenth-century courtyard of Palazzo Ajutamicristo in Palermo by Matteo Carnalivari. The result is an enveloping and luminous space where these heterogeneous elements enter into symbiosis.



Figure 13. E. Basile. Salone degli specchi, Grand Hotel Villa Igiea, Palermo 1899



Figure 14. E. Basile. Salone degli specchi, Grand Hotel Villa Igia, Palermo 1899



Figure 15. M. Carnalivari. Palazzo Ajutamicristo, Palermo 1490-95

After these first experiments, in the first five years of the twentieth century his production shows his full adherence to the Jugendstil, even if some works still show classical elements, such as the Vanoni and Rudinì buildings built in Rome, respectively in 1901 and 1904, in which the new style is limited to occasional and discontinuous decorations applied on structures basically neo-renaissance. But other architectures that he designed in the same years by now indicate the codification of his personal language based on the fusion of Jugendstil themes with stylistic elements of the Sicilian-Norman tradition, simplified, and the abandonment of any direct historical reference. These characteristics are particularly evident in three private residences in Palermo: Villa Fassini (demolished), the small villa Monroy (not built) and his personal home, Villa Ida Basile (now devoid of its original garden) which have been called "*ville bianche*", because of the colour of the smooth facade coverings and the general compositional and decorative sobriety. The spaces were extremely functional, designed to respond to the housing needs of the emerging bourgeois class, more sensitive to the comfort and enjoyment of the home, rather than to its monumental representativeness. The compositions, always based on asymmetrical systems, grouped the rooms into balanced masses of clear, interconnected volumes. Any traditional motif (arches, mock ashlar plaster, columns, etc.) disappears and the modulation of the facades is entrusted to the rhythm of the soaring pilasters, to expressive corner solutions and to the use of sinuous iron grilles, majolica and ribbons in pure floral style. The wall masses are marked by chiaroscuro effects, determined by the plastic articulation of the surfaces that move forward or backward on different planes. The interiors are always centred on a large double-height hall, with balcony and loggia, on which overlook the various rooms in a centripetal composition. The same compositional sobriety of these architectures is also found in other Art Nouveau works such as the second Palazzo Utveglio and in the exhibition pavilions he designed for the Agricultural Exhibition of Sicily 1902, and for the International Exhibition of Milan 1906 (stand Florio).



Figure 16. E. Basile. Stand Florio at International Exhibition of Milan, 1906



Figure 17. E. Basile. Villino Fassini, Palermo 1903 (demolished)

Basile is in the mature phase of his career, he obtains numerous assignments from a heterogeneous clientele and many of his works are published in the most important national and international journals of the sector; he obtains awards and recognitions and is part of the commissions of the most important competitions, such as the one for the library Florence, for the reconstruction of the bell tower of San Marco, etc..

In 1902 he began to plan the transformation and extension of the palace of Montecitorio in Rome, to make it the seat of the Parliament of the Kingdom of Italy. He kept intact the southern wing of the baroque palace, which was designed by Bernini, while he demolished the entire rear part of the building, inserting a new large block. The operation also determined the modification of the historical urban structure and the creation of a new square. Ernesto created the elevations of the new building in Art Nouveau style, creating a unified architectural organism with the existing building, without interruption, but at the same time denouncing his intervention with historical objectivity. Because of the representativeness and importance of the institution that the building was to house and the relevant architecture with which he had to deal, it would have been more cautious, for those times, to use a more classicist language, perhaps referring to the style of Bernini. Basile, on the other hand, decided against the trend of creating an openly modernist work. Obviously, he had to partially dampen his creative impulses and make many compromises, because of the demands of the government representatives who wanted to make the work as monumental as possible. The furnishings and decorations, both in the parliamentary hall and in all the interiors, were also made in floral style. The building was solemnly inaugurated in 1918 and its creator was publicly praised but, as already mentioned, it was subsequently the subject of numerous criticisms, which were first made by the exponents of Fascism and then by various scholars who analyzed it exclusively under a modernist lens.

The work for the new Parliament, which had begun in 1904, certainly helped to increase Basile's fame and to get him new prestigious orders. Some of the most

important architectures that he produced during those years are: the town hall of Licata, the Florio stand for shooting in Romagnolo, Villa Deliella in Palermo, Palazzo Bruno di Belmonte in Ispica (1906), Villa Manganelli in Catania (1907), the Electrical Power Station in Caltagirone (1907), the headquarters of the Cassa di Risparmio in Palermo (1907) and always in Palermo the memorial of May 27, 1860, (1909-11), the palace of Assicurazioni Generali (1912) two houses for artists, the Kursaal Biondo (1916). These and many other works built in this interval of time, reveal the full mastery of Basile in designing spaces and volumes in his own "manner", drawing now from his personal repertoire of composition and decoration, which had consolidated over the years. The elements of tradition in these works can now be perceived only as a matrix of inspiration and no longer as direct and explicit references. The calligraphy of Carnalivari or the Arab-Norman volumes are no longer reposed with the methodology of duplication, perceptible in the works of his youth, but they, in symbiosis with the floral themes, are presented as impalpable quotations result of a deep assimilation.

But depending on the client and the intended use of the buildings, the degree of freedom of Basile in adopting modernist compositional and decorative themes, however always present in his architecture, or almost. In 1911, for example, on a specific occasion he absolutely had to renounce any Jugendstil element and return to the eclectic themes of his youth: the design of the Sicilian Pavilion for the National Exhibition in Rome. The curators of the event, to celebrate the first fifty years of the Kingdom of Italy, had imposed a folkloristic program for which the buildings had to remember the architecture typical of each region. Basile conceived a pavilion that didactically proposed the Arab-Norman buildings: Moorish tunnels and *muquarnas* inside, facade with two symmetrical towers surmounted by domes, central front with large ogival arch recessed identical to that of the *Zisa* castle in Palermo. The First World War was just around the corner and the air of nationalism in the air certainly did not favour the free expression of artists. In the same year he published a monograph on the sculptor and plasterer Giacomo Serpotta, expressing his deep

interest in Baroque art, then undervalued and considered as an aberration of the Renaissance style. From what he writes it can be deduced that even in his studies of art history he perceived the academic cultural backwardness of that period:

"As for the art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which includes, especially in Palermo, a moment of flourishing creative freedom and great genius, it is almost to our days held in such universal disregard, considered as something of so unspeakable and indisputable decadence, that no one, you can well declare it, has had the thought and courage to make himself loving and worthy illustrator."³⁸

Basile, in some contexts still has the opportunity to freely express its modernist language, now more linear and almost devoid of floral elements, as in the Town Hall of Reggio Calabria, in the extension of Villa Favalaro in (1914) and in the second kiosk Ribaudo (1916). In 1924 he built the villa Gregorietti in Mondello and in 1925 he designed a futuristic underground hotel in Piazza Castelnuovo, which was not realized, but the language from the stylized geometries of these works is already close to the taste Deco. The last part of Ernesto Basile's career is characterized by a further rigorous simplification of his formal repertoires and by an accentuated functionalist conception; these aspects are evident in some hospitals and public houses he built mainly in Palermo. By now, the fertile season in which the open and enlightened bourgeoisie of the end of the century had tried to transform Sicily into one of the most important European regions had come to an end. The society had a conservative involution, whose reflection also manifested itself in the tastes and expectations of the clients. Here, in some of Ernesto's works, a neoclassical language reappears, as in the Cassa di Risparmio in Messina (1926-29) and in the exedra he built in 1927 in Palermo around the war memorial, which he had already erected in 1911. Basile's last work is the church of Santa Rosalia in Palermo, begun in 1928 and completed by one of his sons after 1932, the year of his death. The building with a

³⁸ Basile, Ernesto. *Le Sculture e gli stucchi di Giacomo Serpotta*. Società italiana di edizioni artistiche C. Crudo & C., Turin 1911. (my translation).

single nave has all the formal elements of its repertoire but in a much-simplified form. The interiors are essential, almost devoid of decoration. A dome covered with majolica rises on an octagonal drum that has four protruding foreparts, of Borrominian memory, which enhance the plasticity. The exteriors are also very articulated, above all thanks to the presence of the typical Basilian structural half pilasters that go beyond the eaves line and mark the rhythm of the facades. This detail, derived from the church of Santa Maria della Catena in Palermo, designed by Matteo Carnalivari at the end of the 15th century, was so dear to Ernesto and appears in a poetic way in his last architecture. With this sober work, perhaps Basile wanted to achieve his much-sought goal of unity between structure and decoration. However, Tafuri, referring to this building, writes:

"the church shows, with its tired eclecticism, the complete exhaustion of the classicistic-floral poetics, now completely alien to the evolutionary line of modern Italian and European architecture."³⁹

Basile did not adhere to this "evolutionary line" and never renounced the ornamental component in his buildings. This departure from the fashion of functionalism, so opposed by critics, was perhaps instead an act of coherence and prudence. Probably his choice was determined by the rejection of an international style that proposed itself as a unique solution for every place, determining in fact a stylistic flattening, deaf to local characteristics and traditions. Perhaps he sensed its future failure. It is significant that in 1980 an important retrospective exhibition was set up entirely dedicated to Basile at the Venice Biennale entitled *The presence of the past*; his works were in some way related to those of the architects of the *Strada Novissima*, who, aware of the need to overcome the crisis of the International Style, tried to reintroduce, albeit in an ironic and experimental tone, elements of tradition in contemporary architecture.

³⁹ Tafuri, Manfredo at the entry "Basile Ernesto" in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* - Volume 7. Treccani Roma 1970 (my translation).



Figure 18. E. Basile. church of Santa Rosalia, Palermo 1928-32



Figure 19. M. Carnalivari. Santa Maria della Catena, Palermo 1492

The revolt process of the Postmodern movement took place afterwards, while that of Basile was perhaps a far-sighted preventive refusal. He did not passively accept standardized fashions but contextualized his architectures by rooting them in their *genius loci*.

In the decades following his death, the consequences of the new abstract international style and its degradation proved to be disastrous, particularly in Sicily where the ease and speed of execution of anonymous large buildings led to disorderly and uncontrolled expansions of the cities, to the detriment of the environment and the historical-architectural heritage.

Basile contributed to the spread of Art Nouveau in Sicily and Italy, influencing several generations of architects with his works and university lessons. Hundreds of students were trained in his university courses and many students and collaborators continued his work arriving at different outcomes, from Art Deco to Rationalism. Some of them were: Francesco Fichera, Ernesto Armò, Saverio Fragapane, Enrico Calandra, Salvatore Caronia Roberti.

1.3 Villa Deliella: a “crossbreed”, result of negotiations

At least five projects were drawn up by Ernesto Basile for the construction of Villa Deliella from 1902 to 1905. Work began in 1906 and was completed in 1909. In 1902 he was commissioned to design the villa by the princes of Deliella, Nicolò Lanza and Anna Drogo di Pietraperzia, who had obtained in emphyteusis, from countess

Maria Wilding Radaly, a piece of land located on the Croci plain, an open space bordering the Giardino Inglese, crossed by the large boulevard of Via della Libertà. This road axis, which from the historic city centre extended towards the so-called *Piana dei Colli*, was the natural continuation of the seventeenth-century via Maqueda, and from the end of the nineteenth century determined the urban development of the city in a northerly direction.

In 1891, at the beginning of the avenue, the large pavilions of the National Exhibition, designed just by Ernesto Basile, were built and after their demolition, at the end of the important event, the area began to be parcelled out and there began to be built the residences of the most influential bourgeois families of Palermo at the time.

In 1896, the Lanza family had already commissioned Basile to design a large palace to be built in a lot at the corner of Via della Libertà and Piazza Castelnuevo. The design of the imposing urban palace, never built, had been conceived with a planimetric layout with two buildings placed in an "L" shape, which delimited the block and enclosed a private garden inside. The building had been designed in a highly courtly, neo-Renaissance language in the two main fronts, which had partitions of the facade with its own completeness, and were characterized by traditional decorative elements such as: rusticated stone on the ground floor, string-course bands, arched windows with ashlar on exposed surfaces plastered, mullioned windows, cornices and so on. The classicism of the building, however, was attenuated and contradicted by the general asymmetry of the composition and the play of volumes, mainly obtained by the insertion of a tower, which framed the main entrance, in a lateral position on the southern front, and two other lower side turrets on the east elevation, of which one at an angle between the two wings of the palace. The masses of the towers protruded forward from the edge of the elevations, thus creating a plastic effect, as well as accentuating the dynamic perception of the building.



Figure 20. E. Basile. Palazzo Lanza, project. Palermo 1896

The suburban residence, Villa Lanza di Deliella, which the couple finally decided to build on another site, the current Piazza Francesco Crispi, formerly *delle Croci*, had some similarities in language with the drawings of the building described above, despite the different construction type and scale and despite the fact that the new project was conceived in the more purely Jugendstil phase of Basile's career. As already mentioned, in the first five years of the 20th century he designed the sober, functional and geometric "white villas". Villa Deliella had in common with these architectures many characteristics that made it modern, but compared to them, still showed eclectic features, particularly in the references to Tuscan neo-renaissance facades. The villa today, in the general heat due to the debate on its reconstruction, comes from all the media, with absolute certainty, called "Liberty", when perhaps it would be better to speak of an architecture of heterogeneous nature. The building was certainly imbued with modernist features in its general composition, but these features were contradicted on the other hand by the severe language and the massive facade cladding. As will be seen later, even the interiors had some dissonances, evident in the contrast between the furniture elements in severe empire style, visible in some period photos, and the avant-garde spatiality of the rooms.

The villa was located in an isolated square lot of 46 meters side facing the Piazza delle Croci, about seventy meters behind the elegant wide tree-lined Via della Libertà, and adjacent to the convent delle Croci and the Giardino Inglese park. The lot was entirely fenced: two walls closed the south and east sides, while two wrought iron gates were placed on the other two sides. These gates created a visual continuity between the raised floor of the villa and the garden with the square and the Giardino Inglese. The main entrance gate was located on the north side, where the janitor's house, still existing, was built on two levels with sloping pitched roof. The villa was surrounded on all four sides by a garden with sinuous paths paved in stone and flowerbeds planted mainly with palm trees and magnolias, some of which still exist. Outside the villa presented itself with an articulated system of interconnected architectural volumes, which made it perceived as a plastic and dynamic organism. The two buildings east and north, not symmetrical to each other, were joined by a winter garden with a square base and a beveled corner, which protruded with respect to the facades, and from which an octagonal turret rose above the pitched roofs. The southern facade exceeded the other elevations in height in the central part and was covered with a pitched roof. This protruding mass visually balanced the weights of the volumes of the turret and the other buildings. The west and south facades were connected by an L-shaped balcony, typical of the corner solutions of other Basile's architecture. The east facade was also asymmetrical: on the left a sort of crenellated tower protruded sideways, while the central part also crowned by merlons was characterized by the presence of two rows of three large overlapping windows. From the right side protruded the inclined pitch of the northern body of the building that surmounted the main entrance of the villa, which was accessed by a staircase covered by a portico.

The articulated and measured volumetric composition of the exteriors corresponded to an equally dynamic and rigorous distribution of the interior spaces: they were organized in a centripetal manner around a large double-height hall that represented the fulcrum of the composition.

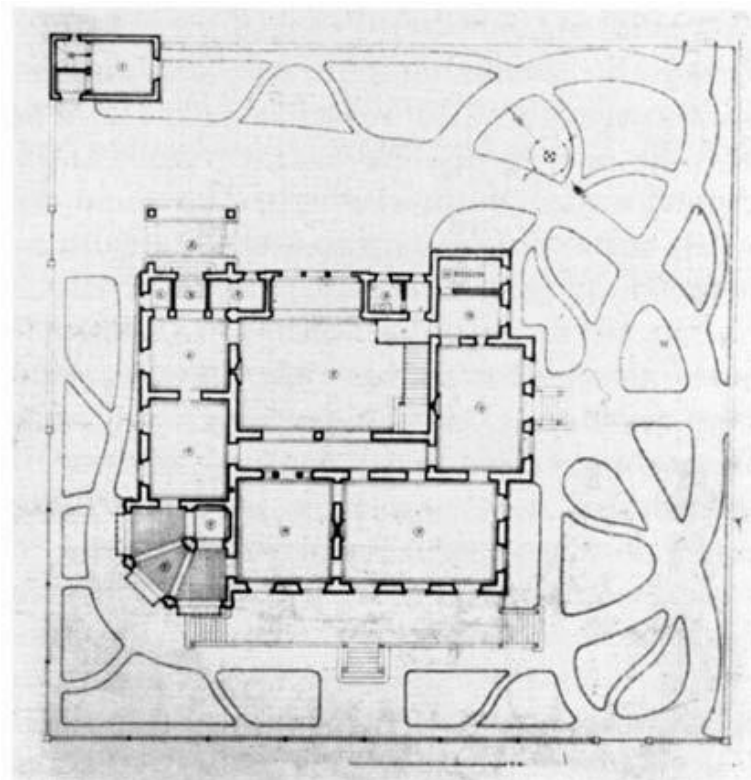


Figure 21. E. Basile. Villa Deliella, plan of the mezzanine floor and garden. 1905

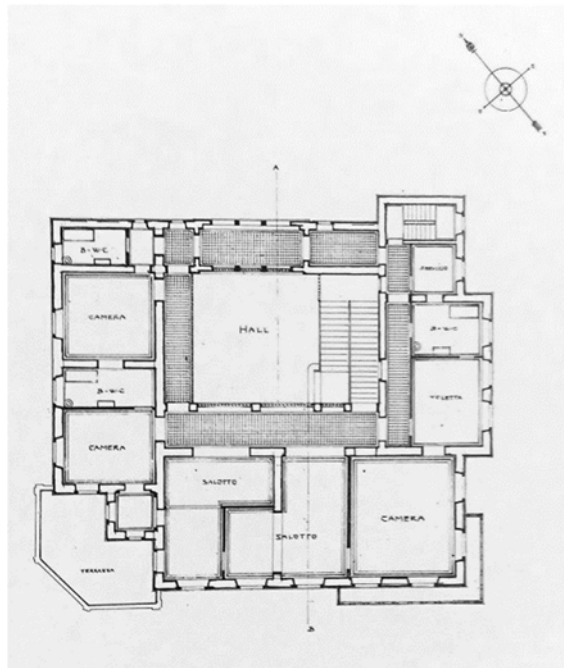


Figure 22. E. Basile. Villa Deliella, plan of the first floor. 1905

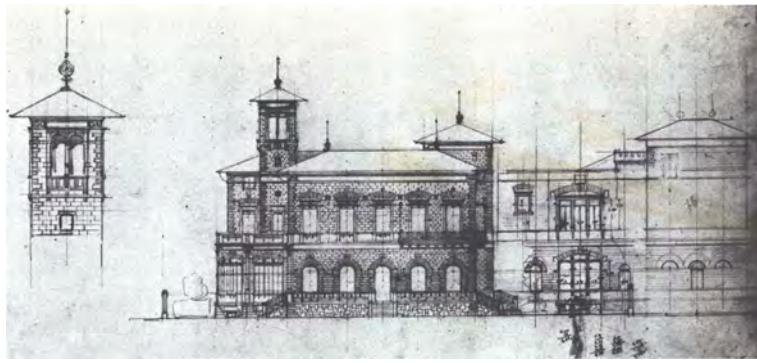


Figure 23. E. Basile. Villa Deliella, Study of the elevations. 1905

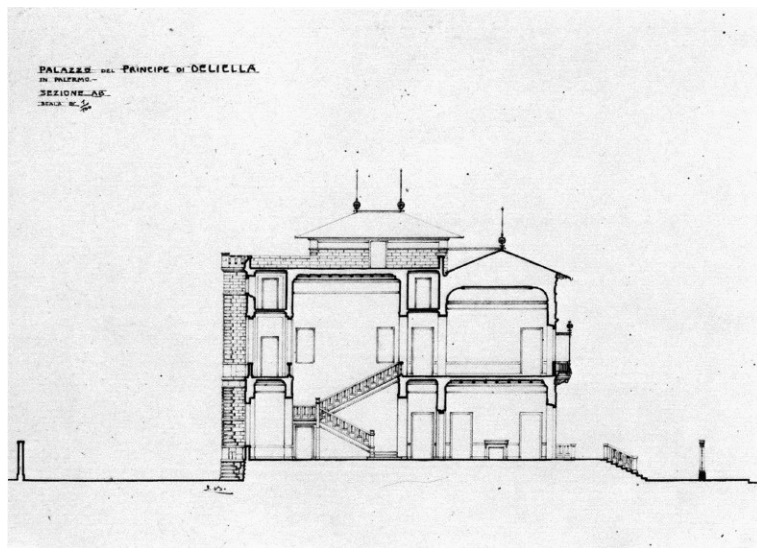


Figure 24. E. Basile. Villa Deliella, Cross-section. 1905

A few steps up the portico led to the entrance, where there was also a wardrobe room. The central hall, used as a hall and equipped with a large fireplace, was illuminated by six large windows on the east facade, and allowed access, through an adjacent porticoed corridor, to the reception rooms: three salons, a dining room, a winter garden with fumoir. From these rooms it was possible to access directly to the garden or enjoy its view through the numerous openings. On the same floor there was a study, the toilet and the service staircase. The paths of the service staff were designed so as not to interfere with the spaces intended for the owners and their guests. The main staircase with two flights was located on the large hall and

landed on a gallery on the second floor. This internal balcony allowed the view of the hall from four sides and ensured the connection of the rooms on this floor: the master bedroom with toilet and bathroom, two bedrooms with separate bathrooms, two living rooms and a terrace.

The division between sleeping area and living area of the house was optimal in terms of separate routes and privacy. The master bedroom overlooked the corner balcony, from which one could look out over the garden below and the square through the palm leaves. The terrace above the winter garden, accessible from a living room and a bedroom, allowed the view of the arches of the Convento delle Croci and the greenery of the adjacent park. The second floor on the south side was for the service staff, while the large terrace and the belvedere tower were used by the owners. The turret was covered by a pyramid-shaped canopy with an octagonal base and allowed a 360-degree view of the city. It is not difficult to imagine that, before the construction of the high buildings that today surround the square, it was possible to observe the city from the turret, with the free background in the distance of the harbour, Mount Pellegrino and the mountains of the *Conca d'Oro*. The continuous perceptive interaction between interiors, garden, city and landscape that allowed this architecture, shows how careful Ernesto Basile's studio had been in the distribution of the rooms, in their natural lighting, in the strategic positioning of openings and overlooks. The geometric rigor and the marked expressiveness of the interlocking volumes that characterized the exterior of the villa, markedly defined this part of the city and represented an important visual reference point. In particular, the octagonal turret that emerged from the roofs and canopies of the trees was visible from afar and attracted the gaze of passers-by; with a metaphor it could be associated almost to the raised index finger of a large hand that communicates a phrase like: "I am here"!

These considerations about the interaction of the villa with the urban environment will probably provide cues for the final reconstruction project.

The building, which could be described as a kind of crossroads of styles, was imbued with modernist traits in its general composition, but these traits were contradicted on the other side by the severe language and the massive cladding of the façade. This work was, also for these reasons, unique and strongly characterized, exemplary precisely because it contained all those contradictions that critics have always found in the Basilian poetics, perennially unresolved in-between tradition and innovation. Among the many elements that gave the villa a classic appearance, there was, for example, the stone ashlar on the ground floor, very marked, whose ashlar extended into the rays of the arches of the French windows; even the stone cantons were very pronounced and framed in the corners the surfaces of the walls of the upper floor, which were treated with plaster imitation of squared ashlar. The roof of the winter garden, located in the corner under the tower, was supported by pillars covered with half-pilasters of Corinthian order, which framed three modern and large bow windows in iron and glass.

In Villa Ida Basile, on the other hand, which was designed at the same time and completed only two years earlier, these same architectural elements are treated in a completely different way: all the openings are architraved and surmounted by taut ribbons, there is no arch; the walls, plastered in white, are divided by pillars and half-pilasters, with smooth and white surfaces, which protrude beyond the crowning of the building. Here there is no real rustication: the basement of the building is covered with a wide band of red bricks, which rises above a row of free design stones of different sizes and heights, in contact with the ground - this identical motif is still legible in the external walls fence remains of Villa Deliella-; the bricks are interrupted above in a band of stone at the base of the windows of the mezzanine; the stone cantons do not continue throughout the height of the building, but are interrupted above the band just described. In short, the two villas, almost contemporary, although conceived with similar modern compositional principles, are presented on the exterior with two "skins" that made them appear very different from each other: one pure and linear, the other courtlier and more traditional.

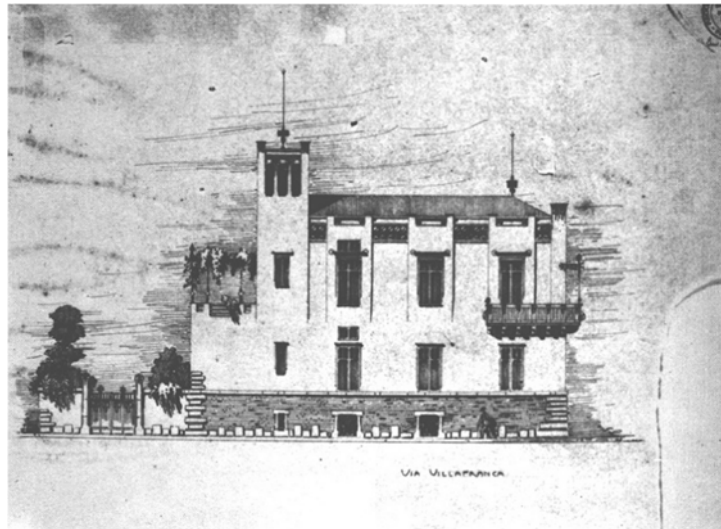


Figure 25. E. Basile. Villa Ida Basile, west elevation. Palermo 1903-04.

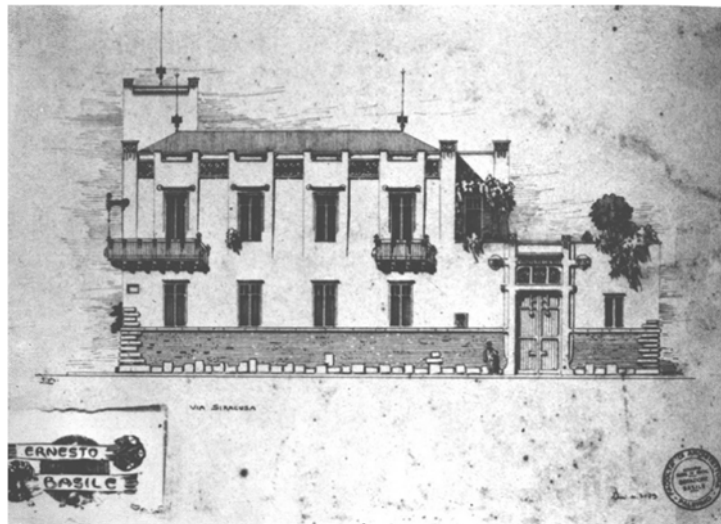


Figure 26. E. Basile. Villa Ida Basile, south elevation. Palermo 1903-04.

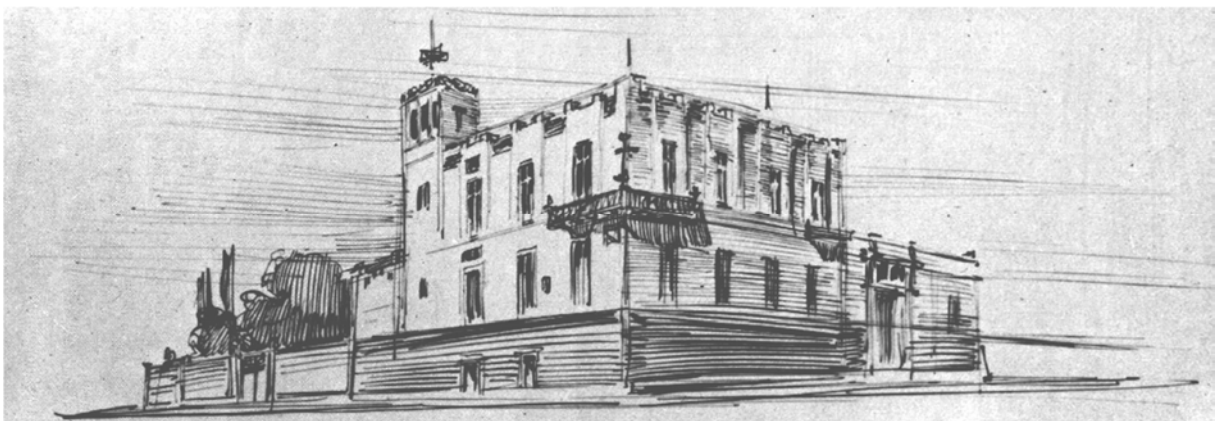


Figure 27. E. Basile. Villa Ida Basile, perspective sketch. Palermo 1903-04.

These differences, as seen above, have been interpreted by critics as the result of a stylistic involution of the Basile; according to many scholars, during the design of Villa Deliella, at the very moment in which he was experimenting with the modernist language, he suddenly and voluntarily took a step back and returned to the eclectic motifs typical of his formative period. Manfredi Nicoletti referring to this villa, while praising its compositional characteristics, critically describes it as the result of a "rethinking" of the architect. after his brief experience purely Jugendstil, where only, according to the scholar, had managed to produce original architecture, having been able to combine in a creative way the historical repertoire with the characteristics of the new style. Instead, he undoubtedly decants a single element designed for the villa in pure Art Nouveau style, but which was never made: the wrought iron entrance gate to the fence wall, with sculpted stone jambs, that is known through a drawing. In this regard he writes:

"Ernesto Basile, who has never been immune to curvilinear seductions, in the villa of prince Deliella (...) offers his masterly interpretation of this flowing language, but only in one detail, the entrance gate, of which there is a sketch dated around 1905. (...) the building, instead, is a composed elaboration of the fifteenth-century villas of Tuscany, unbalanced by calibrated movements, shy of every volumetric sumptuousness. (...) Basile, after his brief Hellenic-Secessionist interlude in which he never abandoned the tradition but was able to absorb it in the "will of the simple" and even more in the purity of a happy poetic moment, returns to intellectualize the tradition itself, tracing the inspirational motives of about six years ago. Villa Deliella already shows this phase of rethinking".⁴⁰

Even Gianni Pirrone, describing Villa Deliella, speaks of a sort of regression and of Basile's return to the historicistic themes of his youth:

"a work in which the floral language, except for the furnishings, is already expressed by hints, in a sober, more generally classical version, even if it is

⁴⁰ Nicoletti, Manfredi. *L'architettura Liberty in Italia*. Editori Laterza Bari, 1978. PP. 188-189 (my translation).

free in volume, with a clear return to the Renaissance vocabulary characteristic of the first manner Basile".⁴¹

In an attempt to better understand Ernesto's personality and to correctly frame his architectures in the historical context of reference, it is appropriate to try to understand if this presumed involution really depended on his voluntary choice, or if it was generated by other factors. As seen in the previous paragraphs, Art Nouveau, such an innovative style and far from the academic tradition, struggled to enter the society of Palermo in the early twentieth century, especially among the exponents of the aristocracy. Many of the patrons of Basile, including in part the Lanza di Deliella family, belonged to that landowner nobility, now in decline, who, in order to show off their important origins, wanted their new homes to have luxurious environments and reminiscent classical facades. They wanted to distinguish their houses from those, considered modern and bizarre by them, that the new bourgeois entrepreneurial class was building in those years.

In the monograph dedicated to Basile by the Venice *Biennale* in 1980, mention is also made of the project for the entrance gate and Villa Deliella is described as the result of a phase of regression of Basile; but here, however, reference is also made to the probable external conditioning that he had to undergo for the conception of this work, in particular on the part of his "cautious taste" clients:

"It is a return of the Basile to the model of the Tuscan palaces, but interpreted on a smaller scale, seeking in the complex grouping of volumes, the presence of plastic motifs is reduced to a minimum, perhaps by explicit request of the client. The beautiful design for the gate (...) the audacious interweaving of irons and wall members, which recalls certain experiences of Gaudi where iron and wall come into symbiosis and transmit latent impulses to each other, must have seemed scandalous to the cautious taste of the Deliella family."⁴²

⁴¹ Bossaglia, Rossana. *Archivi del Liberty italiano. Architettura* Franco Angeli Libri 1987 Milano _PP. 498-499 (my translation).

⁴² Portoghesi, Paolo et al. *Ernesto Basile architetto*. Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia 1980._P. 341 (my translation).

It is now important to briefly mention these customers of Basile. Nicolò Lanza (1875-1934), who commissioned Ernesto to build the villa, was the youngest of five brothers; son of Francesco Lanza, Prince of Scalea (1834-1919), an important politician, with progressive and enlightened ideas, who was senator of the Kingdom of Italy and held numerous public positions in the field of archaeology and the protection of ancient monuments. Nicolò's mother, Rosa Mastrogiovanni Tasca d'Almerita (1843-1900), was also a cultured woman, who could boast friendships with writers and artists of the calibre of Richard Wagner or Guy de Maupassant. Two of the brothers followed in their father's footsteps and also established themselves in politics and in the world of culture. Nicolò, on the other hand, did not make a career, but from a young age he had the ambition to somehow enter the social circles of Palermo's high society. In 1895, in his early twenties, he married Annita, daughter of the rich landowner Rocco Drogo, mayor of Pietraperzia, a small provincial town in the Sicilian hinterland. It was probably a marriage of convenience. At that time it was common for the cadets of noble families to marry the children of wealthy families in order to obtain financial benefits, while in return, the rich children had the opportunity to acquire coveted aristocratic titles. The following sentences, taken from an article in which the story of these two families is compared to that narrated in the novel *The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, briefly summarise the stormy history of the princes of Deliella:

“Prince Francesco Girolamo Lanza di Scalea acquires from the sovereign Umberto I for his cadet son Nicolò, twenty-year-old penniless like Tancredi, the title of Prince of the Deliella fief in the territory of Caltanissetta, in order to achieve a marriage of interest with the only daughter of Rocco Drogo. (...) Nicolò Lanza di Scalea [obtained the money] to better enjoy himself in the Palermo of the Roaring Years, where the sovereigns and nobles of half of Europe loved to stay. (...) Nicolò Lanza began to erode his wife's patrimony by secretly profiting from the products of the feuds. The dissolute life in Palermo and the Deliella villa with its costs did not allow him to meet normal expenses. (...) The

princess no longer wanted him by her side and (...) guaranteed him a sufficiently large income to remain in exile in the Villa Deliella in Palermo.”⁴³

The rich father of Nicolò Lanza's wife had contributed to the financing of the construction of the villa and, it seems, conditioned the relative aesthetic choices to realize it, putting the censorship, with his provincial tastes, to many of the modern proposals of the architect.

Angela Persico, referring to a letter that Nicolò Lanza wrote to his father, states:

"Relations with his wealthy father-in-law did not follow the desired course, and the prince of Deliella had some economic difficulties in facing the cost of building the villa in Piazza Croci, all the more so because he was forced: «to persuade my father-in-law to many small innovations that he often does not share»".⁴⁴

His wife, Mrs. Annita - who, by the way, because of her origin from the country small town, had been nicknamed with a certain contempt in the aristocratic circles of Palermo "*la principessa villana*" - the peasant princess -⁴⁵ probably also had, as her father did, tastes very close to tradition, as can be seen from the style of many pieces of furniture that decorated her house. In particular, for the bedroom of villa Deliella she had purchased mahogany furniture with gilding in the "Empire" style, produced by the Ducrot company. These imposing pieces of furniture, rather far from the Liberty style, except for the presence of some floral elements, were presented at the Milan Exposition in 1906 and were designed by Ernesto Basile himself. The company had also exhibited in that same event other furniture of Basile, with decidedly more modern and fluid features than those later chosen by Mrs. Annita, furniture that were also used by the same architect in his villa. The

⁴³ Zaccaria, Sonia. *Annita Drogo: la principessa villana. Il vero e il verosimile nella storia*. in "Studi storici siciliani, semestrale di ricerche storiche sulla Sicilia" Anno VII n.8 Marzo, 2020_ Empedocle - Consorzio Universitario di Agrigento_PP. 4-5. (my translation).

⁴⁴ Persico, Angela. PhD thesis. *Le architetture di Ernesto Basile per i principi di Scalea e di Deliella*. 2010_Università degli studi di Palermo_PP. 49-50 (my translation).

⁴⁵ "Her standard of living seemed to equal that of the city's older nobility, whose economic competition she certainly did not fear, but she was never accepted as an equal and despite her acquired noblesse, she remained 'the peasant princess' to all." From: Zaccaria Sonia. "*Annita Drogo: la principessa villana. Il vero e il verosimile nella storia*"_P. 4 (my translation).

coexistence of these two different lines in the production of the Ducrot company is emblematic of the fact that, in Italy in the first decade of the 20th century, a large part of the clientele still appreciated a neoclassical style and considered Jugendstil fashion too modern and unconventional. Both Ducrot and Basile, in their respective activities, had to adapt to the needs of the market.

“In 1906 Basile also exhibited furnishings such as the beige lacquered sitting room (a playful mixture of Louis XVI and Art Nouveau styles, with references to Georges De Feure, Eugène Coillet and Eugène Gaillard) and the bedroom in “mogano e oro” with Vernice Martin grounds painted by Giuseppe Enea, in which modernist formal instruments and “empire style” components were metabolized on the historic Sicilian derivation of the English Hepplewhite furniture, presenting a luxury line that was to have great success with the most elite market (among the first purchasers, and perhaps inspirers, of this formula were the princes of Delia). However, it is a quality production, but it is in stark contrast to the objective series of furniture “Tipo intaglio crostacei”, which Basile also used for the dining room of his own house, and to the “Tipo intaglio papaveri””.⁴⁶

These elements can open up a new key to Ernesto's career, which relates his discontinuous phases to the historical and social factors that determined them. Although he was an open-minded architect, he had to confront and compromise with many of his clients, who had remained anchored in traditional stylistic models. This same cultural conservativity also led, on the other hand, to the failure of the socio-economic activity of the enlightened bourgeoisie of the time, such as the Florios. The works of art are the mirror of the society that produced them, their critical reading allows us to frame and understand the historical, political, economic aspects of a given period. In this sense a “hybrid” architecture like Villa Delia can be seen as the exact reflection of the contradictions of Sicily at the turn of the century, in which an old feudal aristocracy tries to preserve its economic power still based

⁴⁶ Sessa, Ettore. *Ernesto Basile, Vittorio Ducrot e Ignazio Florio all'Esposizione Internazionale di Milano del 1906: l'ultima stagione propositiva del modernismo palermitano*, in *Per l'Esposizione, mi raccomando. ! Milano e l'Esposizione Internazionale del Sempione del 1906 nei documenti del Castello Sforzesco*. By Giuliana Ricci, Paola Cordera. Published by Comune di Milano / Biblioteca d'Arte - CASVA, Milano, 2011_P. 125.

on the latifundium, against the progressive political ferments that were developing in those years.

Ernesto's ability to negotiate forms and contents of his architectures with clients was probably an opportunist strength and not a lack of courage. Mariella Palazzolo in the *Encyclopedia of interior design* writes:

“At the end of his career Basile returned to the eclecticism which he had previously despised. This move was mainly an attempt to satisfy the demand of patrons whose tastes ran more to revivalist than to modern designs. Nevertheless, his work retained the drama and individuality characteristic of his earlier years, and today he is justifiably remembered as one of the most innovative Italian designers of the 20th early century.”⁴⁷

Artists and architects are never completely autonomous, as they have to deal with the needs, even of an aesthetic nature, of the clients who finance them; it is enough to think of the conflicts between Michelangelo Buonarroti or Caravaggio and their powerful ecclesiastical patrons who imposed their constraints and vetoes on many of their works. The conception of the second version of *the Calling of St. Matthew*, for example, was the obvious result of a compromise: it was determined by the rejection of the first painting by the congregation of *San Luigi dei Francesi*, as Caravaggio had represented the protagonist of the painting as a simpleton with a silly air, badly dressed and with rough bare feet in the foreground. Just to make one of the infinite possible examples of a similar case in architecture, mention may be made of Giovanni Michelucci's design for the reconstruction of the bridge *alle Grazie* in Florence, which had to be modified due to some explicit requests of the competition commission, which considered some elements not in tune with the urban historical context. In particular, the designer had to give up a series of turrets protruding from each pylon, which, taking their cue from the ancient, bombed bridge, strongly characterized the aesthetics of his proposal (this project will be further described in

⁴⁷ Banham, Johanna. *Encyclopedia of interior design*. Routledge London, 1997_P. 105.

the next chapter). The constraints and vetoes of the clients, however, always pose new challenges and stimuli to the author, who must seek new creative solutions. In the early Renaissance, Filarete allegorically declared in his treatise that architecture was the result of the union between a mother, the architect, and a father, the customer.

“The building is conceived in this manner. Since no one can conceive by himself without a woman, by another simile, the building cannot be conceived by one man alone. As it cannot be done without a woman, so he who wishes to build needs an architect. He conceives it with him and then the architect carries it. When the architect has given birth, he becomes the mother of the building. Before the architect gives birth, he should dream about his conception, think about it, and turn it over in his mind in many ways for seven to nine months, just as a woman carries her child in her body for seven to nine months. He should also make various drawings of this conception that he has made with the patron, according to his own desires.”⁴⁸

Villa Deliella seems to have been conceived adopting this concept in full.

Ernesto Basile, through the study of his works and writings, can be defined as a versatile and eclectic architect. His profound knowledge of history and his interest in the international architectural events of his day provided him with a vast figurative repertoire from which to draw inspiration for his compositional experiments. As will be seen later on, at different stages of his career he took his inspiration for his projects mainly from Sicilian architecture of the Greek, medieval and fifteenth century, and from that of the Tuscan Renaissance, but he never declined into pedantic historicism; instead he had the ability to choose, reinterpret and combine elements taken from the repertoire of history, to create original constructions that were at the same time contextualised in the specific places where they were built. His eclecticism which characterised his youthful phase was developed in his refined way of combining and adapting references. Eclecticism,

⁴⁸ Filarete's *Treatise on Architecture* Translated with an Introduction and Notes by John R. Spencer Vol. 1: The Translation. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1965_P. 15.

which was so denigrated by modern critics, has been re-evaluated in recent decades because of the expressive freedom of its exponents who did not want to conform to the academic historicist culture of the 19th century and who chose independently in which style to build. The title of Heinrich Hübsch's book *In Welchem Style sollen wir bauen?* expresses this attitude in a concise and emblematic form. Chiara Visentin in her essay entitled the misunderstanding of eclecticism, writes:

"The varied world of a thousand references, the sublime encyclopaedia of cultured man in the 19th century, become a sort of *ars combinatoria* with which the designer is no longer bound to a specific genre and composition. He can move with ease from one trend to another, from one juxtaposition of formal and constructive components to another, so much so that already in the first decades of the nineteenth century urban streets became animated with asymmetrical buildings, with stylistically different facades".⁴⁹

Returning to our case, it is well known that in the archives there are at least five design versions that Basile proposed to the Deliella couple for the construction of their villa. This high number of variations already testifies to the efforts that he had to make in an attempt to find their consent. A very detailed drawing, dated 1902, shows a forepart of the rear front of the villa in pure Art Nouveau style, very different from the one later made. Also the design of the gate of the fence wall, not realized, is characterized by flexuous and organic lines that appear in contrast if compared with the facades of the built villa, in a severe and rigorous language. As already mentioned, the proposal was certainly rejected by the client and the idea of the "Guimard" gate remained only on paper.⁵⁰

The corner balcony of Villa Deliella with its wrought iron crown and topper placed above the railing, were almost a replica of those of Villa Ida Basile. These details, so similar to those of his modern home, can be interpreted almost as

⁴⁹ Visentin, Chiara. *L'equivoco dell'Eclettismo, imitazione e memoria in architettura*. Edizioni Pendragon. Bologna, 2003_P. 18 (my translation).

⁵⁰ Indeed, it can be said that the project was actually realised indirectly, as it inspired the construction of at least two other very similar gates, one in Messina in Villa Garnier, and the other even in China, in Beijing. See: <https://www.balarm.it/news/si-trova-o-trovava-a-pechino-il-cancello-di-villa-deliella-in-una-fotografia-del-1908-108348> [16.06.2022].

residues, survivors of various other solutions and architectural elements, which Basile had to give up, to meet the demands of the customers. Among other things, Basile had already built the family funerary chapel for the Lanza di Scalea in 1900, in Art Nouveau style, but with some eclectic reminiscences, represented above all by the small dome on an octagonal drum, and by the pronaos supported by two columns with capitals, of a pseudo-Corinthian order. For this specific detail he had designed a series of phytomorphic capitals with lines free from any classicist reference to be proposed to the client, which were discarded. It is emblematic that in the monograph *Ernesto Basile, Studi e Schizzi*, printed in 1911 by the editor Crudo of Turin, there appears a perspective sketch of the Lanza di Scalea chapel, specifically prepared by Basile for that publication, in which the colonnade prothyrum has been eliminated and an octagonal pyramidal cover replaces the dome. The Pavilion that Basile built for the Florios at the International Exhibition of Milan in 1906, was designed with the same volumes as the Lanza Chapel. In this building, created for up-to-date cosmopolitan entrepreneurs, Ernesto was able to express his creativity, free from conditioning, and created a purely Jugendstil work.

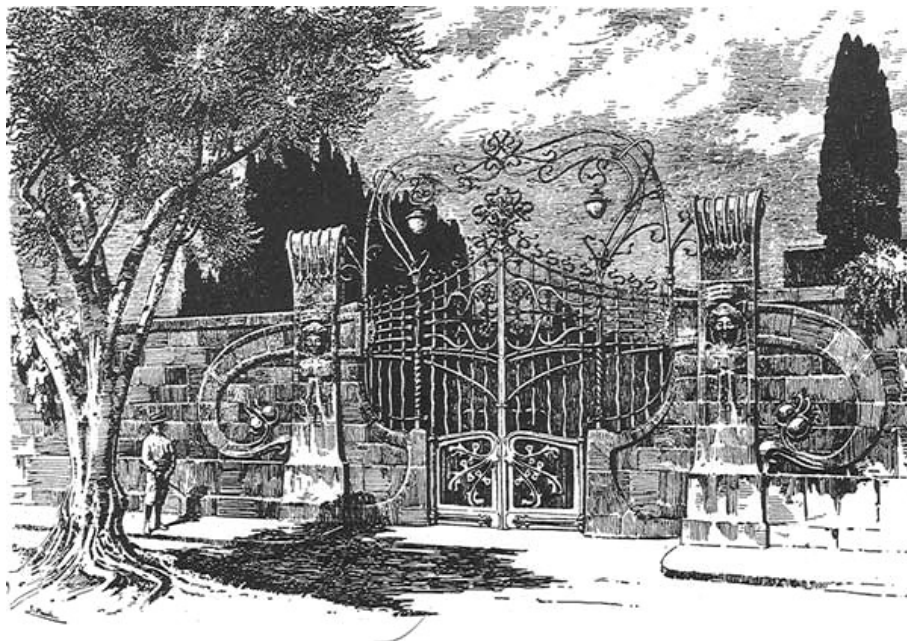


Figure 28. E. Basile. Drawing of the main gate of Villa Deliella, not realised



Figure 29. E. Basile. Lanza di Scalea Chapel. Palermo 1900

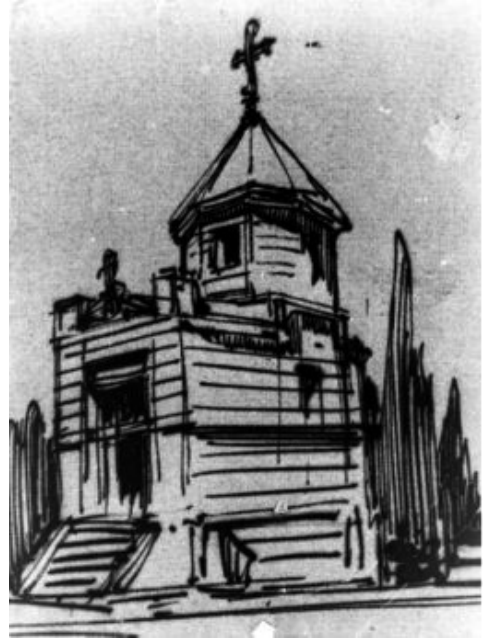


Figure 30. E. Basile. Lanza di Scalea Chapel, sketch published in 1911



Figure 31. E. Basile. Lanza di Scalea Chapel. Palermo 1900

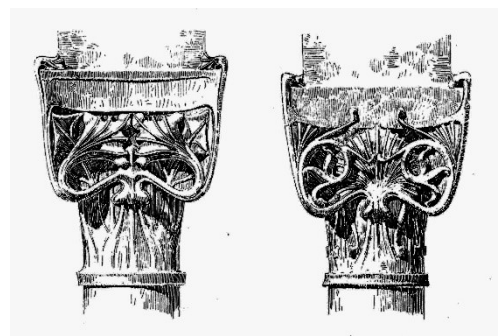


Figure 32. E. Basile. Lanza di Scalea Chapel, study of capitals.

Here the themes of the noble chapel are expressed with a genuine modernist language: the crenellated drum of the tower in this building has no dome and is surmounted by a wrought iron crown, while the entrance, framed by two pillars, has no pronaos or columns.

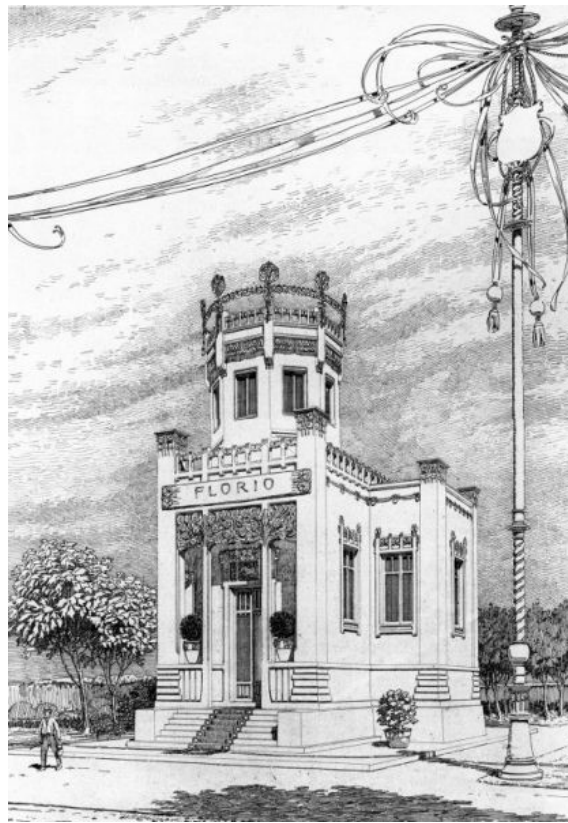


Figure 33. E. Basile. Florio stand at the International Exhibition in Milan, perspective. 1906

To imagine what was the climate of strong distrust towards Liberty in Palermo at the beginning of the century, it is interesting to read a passage from the technical report evaluating the project of Palazzo Dato, a work with clear Franco-Belgian influences. The designer was Vincenzo Alagna, an engineer, one of the pioneers of Art Nouveau in Sicily. In 1901 he had presented the drawings for the construction of the palace to the Municipal Building Commission with a request for approval, but obtained a bizarre and provocative response:

"The municipal engineer S. Castiglia writes in report: "The attached type of decorative design, with the criteria of the old architecture is to be judged as

a joke. Instead, it will be acceptable if it is a new type of art unknown to me". Alagna himself, later, in a long and interesting report forwarded to the Building Commission, writes: "[I am] doubtful why it seems that I am being called a revolutionary".⁵¹

Ernesto Basile's intervention was decisive for the approval of the project, as he was a member of the Building Commission of the municipality in those years. Ettore Sessa writes:

"Strengthened by its position of prestige and its effective academic power, as a member of the Building Commission of the City of Palermo, Basile endorses proposals to renew the production of building otherwise opposed, one of the most significant cases is the opinion in favour of the heterodox variant of upholstery, parties modelled in fluid-phytomorphic key, for the remaking of the elevations of the newly "reformed" palace Given in Via XX Settembre".⁵²

In this difficult context, Villa Deliella was conceived. Its play of volumes and in particular the solution of the north-west corner with the tower that connects the two wings of the building, directly influenced some students of Basile. In particular, G.B. Santangelo explicitly proposed this corner solution, making almost a real replica, in the small villa Sergio of 1916 in Palermo. The quotation seems to express a clear homage to his teacher. In 1909 also G. Tamburello in Villino Bonanno had treated the corner in a similar way. Raimondo D'Aronco's project for the *Banca Cooperativa Cattolica* in Udine in 1907, which was not built, also has strong volumetric similarities with the corner of Villa Deliella that Basile had designed two years earlier. The villa designed by Basile also inspired the imagination of the writer Santo Piazzese who, in a suggestive scene of one of his novels, imagines the Nobel Prize winning physicist Niels Bohr walking in Palermo in the 1950s. The narrator says:

"in Piazza Croci Niels was impressed by Villa Deliella, and wanted to walk around, intrigued by the strange shape of the tower. I too would have

⁵¹ Bossaglia, Rossana. *Archivi del Liberty italiano. Architettura* Franco Angeli Libri. 1987 Milano _PP. 488-489 (my translation).

⁵² Sessa, Ettore. *Ernesto Basile 1857-1932 Fra accademismo e "moderno", un'architettura della qualità* Flaccovio 2010 Palermo _P. 64 (my translation).

dedicated a less superficial look at it than usual if I had suspected the fate that awaited it shortly afterwards.”⁵³

It should be noted that the scene told is the result of the imagination of the author, since in some scientific work it is reported as if it had really happened.⁵⁴



Figure 34 *E. Basile. The west corner of Villa Deliella in the 1950s*



Figure 35. *G.B. Santangelo, Villa Sergio Palermo 1916 (demolished)*

⁵³ Piazzese S. *Il viaggio segreto di Niels Bohr a Palermo*. Sellerio 2009_ Palermo (my translation).

⁵⁴ P Persico A. PhD thesis. *Le architetture di Ernesto Basile per i principi di Scalea e di Deliella*. 2010_Università degli studi di Palermo _P. 134.

1.4 Ernesto Basile's relationship with the copy

At the age of 25, in 1882, Ernesto Basile began writing a treatise entitled *Architettura, dei suoi principi e del suo rinnovamento* - Architecture, its principles and its renewal -. The manuscript remained incomplete and was published almost 100 years later, in 1981.

In this youthful writing he already demonstrates his early deep architectural knowledge, dealing with issues relating to the historical evolution of architecture, building systems, the principles of composition and the relationship between structure and decoration. The text, however, focuses above all on the need to renovate the revivalist languages typical of his time and, in some ways, seems to be a critical essay against the practice of historicist imitation in architectural design. The terms copy and imitation recur constantly throughout the manuscript and are often used as synonyms for each other, and always with a negative connotation. Already in the introduction, one notices a lively and polemical attitude towards many of his contemporary architects, to whom he reproaches the inability to produce new and significant architecture and who he defines as:

"hirelings [who] are composing by searching from different sources and stealing here and there from books, drawings, photographs. And they leaf through and consult; and when they have found something that satisfies them, they copy, and they return to consult, and now on the one hand they draw a little idea, now on the other they copy a little motif and they still copy and they believe they have created a whole with the jumble that they make of their robberies."⁵⁵

He continues by denouncing the state of vulgarity and cultural backwardness, which is demonstrated by the buildings erected in Europe in those years. The designers to whom he refers tried to copy elements typical of the classical tradition, but decontextualized them, without understanding their characteristics, or the lines

⁵⁵ Basile E. *Architettura, dei suoi principi e del suo rinnovamento*. 1882. Editrice Novecento Palermo, 1981_P. 18 (my translation).

or proportions from which they had been generated. For these reasons he affirms that since antiquity, against the revival, a "*desperate cry of protest*" seems to rise up and compares the progress of art to a flooding river that cannot be stopped by the "*miserable embankment*" of historicistic imitation. In a heated passage against the revival he writes:

"the pedantic imitation of the past, and then the copy, end up killing it [the art] (...) but in a copy, even if it were wonderful and the most admirable monument of ancient architecture, it finds only its tomb. It is not by drawing the Walhalla that one can succeed in the resurrection of art."⁵⁶

On every page of the manuscript Ernesto, using hard and passionate words, expresses all his contempt for the sterile imitation and proclaims the need for the modernization of culture and an awakening of the art of his time; in every line one perceives the frenzy that the young architect feels in order to soon find his own independent creative path. He asks himself:

"and is this principle of imitating or copying without doubt, besides reducing art to a trade, not in itself the greatest impediment to any progress or transformation? How much can or must one reasonably maintain of the ancient and in what way can one look for novelty (...)"⁵⁷

According to him, the correct method for producing new architecture consists in borrowing elements from the repertoire of tradition and recomposing them creatively to adapt them to new situations and purposes, just as artists did in the Renaissance. He sets the example of Filippo Brunelleschi and Michelangelo Buonarroti, who used building systems that had already been extensively tested in the past to create their domes, but strongly personalised and redesigned them according to their taste and the specificity of the context. He states:

"novelty is not to be found in the elements, but in the way in which they are brought together and grouped together to achieve a specific aim. (...) The

⁵⁶ Basile E. *Architettura, dei suoi principi e del suo rinnovamento*. 1882. P. 136 (my translation).

⁵⁷ Basile E. *Architettura, dei suoi principi e del suo rinnovamento*. 1882. P. 28 (my translation).

artist did not propose a faithful copy, nor a pedantic imitation of the ancient, but only aimed at turning and adapting the ancient forms to the new needs of his time."⁵⁸

In his opinion, from the study of ancient works, it is necessary to extrapolate elements of general composition such as:

"the special shape of the contours, the projection of some parts and the re-entering of others, the different heights, to which full and empty spaces are connected, which then determine the contrasts of light and shadow (...)"⁵⁹

These were the teachings that the classical repertoire could still provide. According to him, Greek Doric architecture had achieved the ideal balance in the relationship between structure and decoration, since decoration was precisely the expression of the construction system and formed an inseparable whole with it. He writes that when comparing two apparently identical temples, generated by the same canonical invariable method, one discovers differences in the proportions, in the relationships between the parts, and these differences "make alive and strong the idea of the artist" who created them. While respecting the general schemes, each architect left his "comprehensive power of art", his creative imprint on his own work. By contrast, he considers the work of the treatise writers such as Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola, Vincenzo Scamozzi and Andrea Palladio harmful, because with their "grammar of art" and the rigid rules established and canonized, they had pushed architects to generate buildings that were always the same and had inhibited their freedom of expression. He is convinced that in designing the "compass and the sixth should be set aside" and freehand drawing should instead be used in order to find new creative solutions.

At a certain point in the book, he argues that throats, bulls and echini should be freely modified, distorting the embalmed rules of the treaties and favouring the free line guided by the eye and by feeling. In that same page of the manuscript, he

⁵⁸ Basile E. *Architettura, dei suoi principi e del suo rinnovamento*. 1882. PP. 126-127 (my translation).

⁵⁹ Basile E. *Architettura, dei suoi principi e del suo rinnovamento*. 1882. P. 49 (my translation).

sketches several times, as an example, the same moulding with different proportions and inclinations. The direct experience of drawing Greek Sicilian architectures, characterized by singular lines, curves, geometries and proportions, while respecting the orders, had shown how deceptive and far from reality were the proportional relationships rigidly canonized by the treatises, in their academic interpretation of the classical repertoire. He also expresses the need to renew the Italian schools, on the German and French models, promoting the study of the history of art and architecture with the dual aim of obtaining, on the one hand, valid and prepared professionals, and on the other hand, cultured masses that can distinguish the true works of art from those generated exclusively by the sterile imitation of the past.

In the last part of the book, almost apologizing for the repetitiveness, he writes again that:

“with fixed rules and norms, imitating only without any freedom, architecture can never be art, but science of archaeologists; an appearance of art and nothing else.”⁶⁰

It is interesting to note that still in 1910, 28 years after that youthful manuscript, Basile looking back at the architecture of the late nineteenth century, describes it with the same bright tones of the time and with very similar phrases:

"what came from the process of restoration - there was no true and sincere manifestation of art - indeed with the premeditated renunciation of all originality was less art - was made of archaeology and not architecture.”⁶¹

In short, for the young Ernesto the practice of copying is the main obstacle to progress in the field of architecture. But taking into consideration Basile's early works, one could find contradictions between the language he uses to conceive them, and his declared aversion to imitation. Probably in some ways this

⁶⁰ Basile E. *Architettura, dei suoi principi e del suo rinnovamento*. 1882, P. 140 (my translation).

⁶¹ Basile E. sull'architettura contemporanea. Manuscript dated 1910, reported by Gianni Pirrone in *Palermo una capitale. Dal Settecento al Liberty*. 1989 Milano. Electa_ P. 268 (my translation).

discrepancy exists, due to the presence of explicit formal and stylistic references that he borrows from the architectures of the past, but it can be read as his personal path of progressive detachment from tradition, towards the search for his own style. Basically he, seeking a language specifically anchored to the origins of his island, refers, from the beginning, to Greek architecture and to the Sicilian-Norman architecture, which he had studied down to the last detail. His pupil Caronia Roberti, describing one of his first works, the Calatafimi Ossuary Monument, designed in 1885, reports the words of the teacher:

“It was my thought to do something severe and simple ... useless any ornamentation whose effect could not be recognized at a distance ... a few masses appreciable from far ... sought finesse in the general feeling of lines and silhouettes. Such are the artistic criteria from which I moved and of which I had a few steps from Calatafimi, a splendid example: the temple of Segesta”.⁶²

The work, which stands on a high podium, is made up of pure superimposed volumes: the pyramid trunk of the base, the obelisk and the stepped structure that connects them. The fulcrum of the composition is the Doric prothyrum, with a triangular tympanum framing a round arch. The pediment, the angular acroteries and the trabeation are the only elements that could recall the temple of Segesta, but they are strongly stylized, not easily recognizable and placed in a new context. If one looks at the preliminary sketches, the prothyrum, in its first versions, is closer to the main front of a Doric temple: it has four columns in the round, instead of the two side semi-pillars that were then made. The creative process that generated the work is clear: Basile, inspired by the nearby Doric temple, indirectly evoked it in the lines and clear volumes, borrowed some formal elements and then reworked them to adapt to the new architecture; almost a postmodern operation!

⁶² Caronia Roberti, Salvatore. *Ernesto Basile e cinquant'anni di architettura in Sicilia*. F. Ciuni editore, Palermo 1935 _ P. 23 (my translation).



Figure 36. *E. Basile, Calatafimi Ossuary Monument 1885*



Figure 37. *The Doric temple of Segesta, Calatafimi. 5th century BC.*

Two years later Basile built a villa in Rome for the Spanish painter José Villegas Cordero in Hispanic-Moorish style and here the imitative process was even more explicit. The building, which no longer exists, was clearly inspired by the *Alhambra*

of Granada, and built around a central courtyard surmounted by a dome. The main facade was characterized by a forepart on which opened a large three-mullioned loggia with pointed arches that rested on slender columns and tall pulvinos, single in the center and double on the sides. The loggia, decorated with typical motifs of the Arab tradition and bordered by a frame with geometric stars, was almost an identical copy of the two symmetrical loggias that protrude towards the interior of the *Patio de los Leones* at the *Alhambra*.

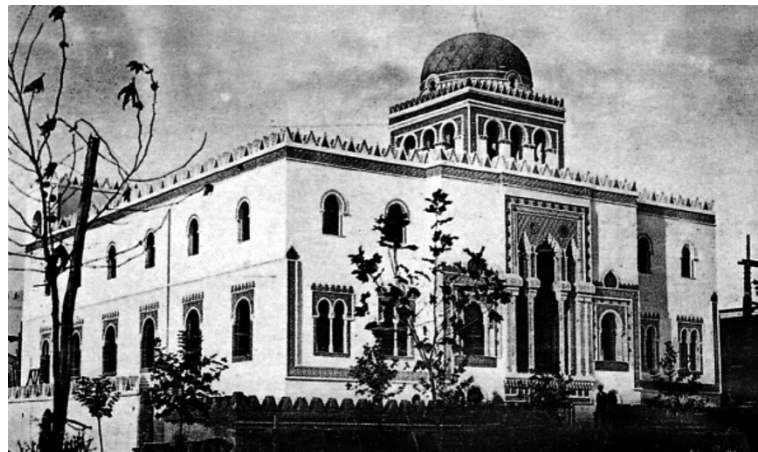


Figure 38. E. Basile, *Villa Villegas* Rome 1887 (demolished)



Figure 39. *Patio de los Leones*, *Alhambra*, Granada 14th century

In the same years he drew up the project for the National Exhibition of Palermo in 1891. This immense ephemeral work, which made his notoriety take off, was a sort of eclectic "collage": Basile wanted to give a Mediterranean and at the same time modern expression to the whole exhibition complex and to this end he used evident formal references taken from both the repertoire of tradition and from contemporary architecture. Zevi's critical description of the building makes us understand the models from which Basile drew his inspiration:

"Pavilions inspired by the Norman world, and a gallery of machines closed in on the façade by heavy towers, a provincial echo of the Parisian prototype of 1889".⁶³

Fabrizio Agnello and Mariangela Licari, in a specific work dedicated to the virtual reconstruction of these disappeared architectures, *La ricostruzione della città perduta: l'Esposizione Nazionale di Palermo (1891-1892)*⁶⁴ have documented the main sources that probably inspired the Basile in the excited months in which he designed the immense work. The monumental access to the exhibition, in its general composition, is clearly inspired by those of the façades of the Norman cathedrals of Cefalù and Monreale: two symmetrical lateral towers framing a portico. But the geometry and size of the central portico of the entrance designed by Basile are even identical to that of the southern facade of the cathedral of Palermo. This architectural element has been faithfully reproduced, except for the decorations, on a scale of one-to-one, and then re-proposed in a different context. The source of inspiration for the dome, illuminated by windows at its base above the festival hall is also clear: the *Hagia Sophia* Mosque in Istanbul. Other strong similarities can be found between the Palace of Fine Arts and the similar one that was built for the Universal Exhibition of Philadelphia in 1876. The two scholars point out that the general layout of the Exhibition also has a clear reference: the museum designed by J.N.L. Durand for the

⁶³ Zevi, Bruno. *Storia dell'architettura moderna*. Einaudi Torino 1975_ P. 170 (my translation).

⁶⁴ Marsiglia, Nunzio. *La ricostruzione congetturale dell'architettura. Storia, metodi, esperienze applicative*. Grafill Palermo 2013.

second Grand Prix and underline the fact that Basile's personal library was equipped with several books by the French writer such as the *Recueil et Parallèle des édifices de tout genre...* and the *Précis des leçons d'architecture...*

In short, the young Ernesto, while criticizing the copy and imitation, could not avoid referring more or less explicitly to different stylistic repertoires. Even his most mature works will always reveal the sources of inspiration, but in a less direct way, as the process of appropriation and reworking of models will be more complex and hermetic. Just to give two examples, mention may be made of the lowered arches and protruding side pillars of the church of *Santa Maria della Catena* in Palermo, which inspired the external porticoes of Villa Igiea and his design for the façade of the Electric Power Station in Caltagirone in 1907, and the dome of the medieval church of the *Martorana* proposed again in the *Tavernetta del tiro al piccione* that he built for the Florios in Palermo.

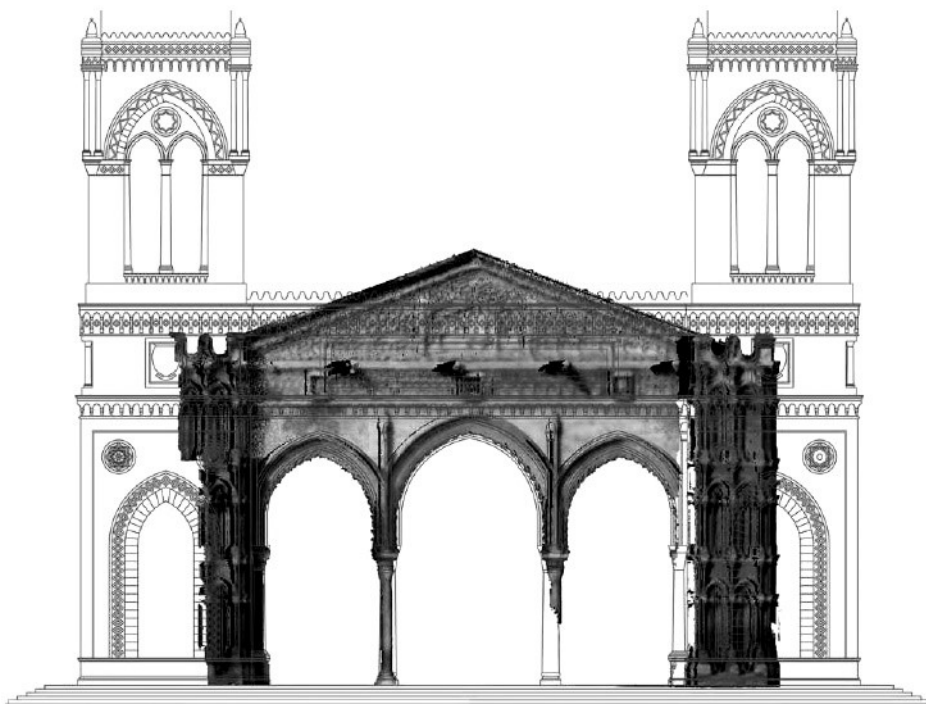


Figure 40. Superimposed images of the porticoes of the 1891-92 National Exhibition pavilion and Palermo Cathedral. (Image taken from: *La ricostruzione congetturale dell'architettura. Storia, metodi, esperienze applicative*. Grafill Palermo 2013).

The models that Basile borrowed from the historical tradition, such as, for example, the tower, the pilaster that rises above the eaves line, or the "*clef faillante*" of its rusticated arches, then became pieces of his personal repertoire, elements that he recombined and reinterpreted in an original way with the floral forms of Art Nouveau to express his personal idea of Art.

Perhaps the best synthesis of Ernesto's complex relationship with the copy is represented by the epigraph that stands out on the imposing entrance gate of his studio house where it is written in Latin: «*Dispar et Unum - 1904*».



Figure 41. E. Basile. Villa Ida Basile, detail of the main door. Palermo 1904



Figure 42. E. Basile. Villa Ida Basile, the inscription: *DISPAR ET UNUM* 1904

The two adjectives, which can be translated as "different and unique", are used in the neutral genre and evidently refer to his work (*opus*), built in 1904. From the motto can be deduced the concepts of diversity, non-homologation, uniqueness, independence; qualities that he has always searched for in his work in opposition to the mere copying. This attitude distinguished him not only in the design of new constructions, but also in his experiences of partial transformation of pre-existing architectures and the reconstruction of lost historical buildings. With regard to the latter field, there is a written document from 1907 signed by Basile which clearly illustrates his position: it is the report on the project of rebuilding of the Bell Tower of San Marco in Venice. On the night of July 14, 1902, the ancient bell tower collapsed into a huge pile of rubble. After heated debates, the city council of Venice decided to rebuild a facsimile of the ancient architecture, discarding, as will be seen later, various other hypotheses that were then formulated. In 1906, however, a few months after the laying of the first stone, works were interrupted, due to the numerous criticisms that were directed at the way in which the new tower was being executed. When the base had already been built and the walls had reached a height of four metres, the Venetian citizens asked for clarifications, above all regarding the colour of the bricks that were being used and the marble steps of the base that had replaced the originals. A special commission of experts was then appointed, composed of Ernesto Basile and the engineer Antonio Federico Jorini, chaired by the restorer and painter Alfredo d'Andrade, in order to express a technical and aesthetic judgment on the project, and then to restart the work appropriately. The three published a report on 2 May 1907, in which they basically recommended the use of modern materials and techniques for the new tower, which would make it clear that it was a reconstructed work and not an original one. They declared:

"In the special case we can't talk about restoration at all. We restore what we have existing parts of and the missing ones are completed in the same way or on the possible traces of the others that existed before and here instead it is a complete remake; (...) it is indeed [in this case] indispensable and honest

that the work, without falsity, without hypocrisy, appears for what it really is, new. Time will then give them their patina"⁶⁵.

It is clear that Basile, in tune with the other two members of the commission, denounced the need, as far as possible, not to make a false historical, even if by now the decision to rebuild the bell tower "*com'era e dov'era*" - as it was and where it was - had already been taken by others some time ago.

In another passage of the report, the conflicting opinions that the intellectuals of the time had expressed, immediately after the collapse of the bell tower, on the methods of reconstruction that should be adopted, are briefly summarized. The following are cited: the supporters of the "as it was where it was"; the promoters of the construction of a new modern tower; those who no longer wanted to rebuild it, leaving the ruins visible; and, finally, those who wanted to rebuild it, but in another position of the square. The report mainly emphasizes the position of the "modernists" who would have liked to build the new tower in a contemporary style, which would not copy the ancient forms of the lost building. This last idea, strongly supported also by Otto Wagner, comes from the three experts between the lines explicitly approved. In fact, they write:

"there were also those who imagined changing the design of the Bell Tower with a new style, thinking and perhaps not wrongly, that if it had collapsed in other times, when love and study of the past were the foundation, not obstacle, to the search for the new, no one would have thought to rebuild it not say the same way, with the same materials and imitations of the old processes, but not even with the same forms and would have become something different, with the feeling and the will of the art of the moment."

⁶⁶

In 1910 Ernesto Basile was also a member of the commission that was appointed by the Italian government for the reconstruction of the cathedral of Messina, which

⁶⁵ *Relazione 2 maggio 1907 dei sigg. D'Andrade, Jorini e Basile - Relazione 1 maggio 1907 del pittore prof. Cesare Laurenti sul progetto di ricostruzione del Campanile di San Marco*. Officine Grafiche C. Ferrari, Venezia 1907_ PP. 15-16 (my translation).

⁶⁶ *Relazione 2 maggio 1907 dei sigg. D'Andrade, Jorini e Basile*_ P. 14 (my translation).

had been destroyed by the earthquake of 1908. Of the Norman church, built in 1123, only part of the apses and the perimeter walls of the naves and transept remained standing. Basile proposed to consolidate and restore the surviving walls of the naves, leaving them in a state of ruin, and not to rebuild the roof, transforming this part of the ancient religious building into a sort of open-air museum. His idea was to build a new church adjacent to the old one, which would incorporate the transept and the apse. In the end, his proposal was not accepted and, in 1923, the remaining ancient walls were demolished and a replica of the cathedral was rebuilt in reinforced concrete with claddings in an assumed medieval style. Gustavo Giovannoni, referring to this specific case in Messina, wrote:

"It is to be wondered if such a reconstruction with an organism completely different from the original was appropriate, instead of following the proposal of Basile to make a new cathedral, leaving the front part of the old as an open atrium, accessing the part of the transept and the presbytery, remained almost intact".⁶⁷

Also in this case, as for the bell tower of San Marco, Ernesto's idea was to intervene using a modern language that objectively differentiated the new building from the old structures; not a copy of the disappeared temple, but a contemporary architectural artefact.

During his career, Basile was confronted on several occasions with the task of transforming existing buildings or rebuilding missing architectures. Even in these cases, his attitude was always consistent with the principle already expressed for the Venetian bell tower, according to which "the work, without falsity, without hypocrisy, appears for what it really is, new". The most famous case was the enlargement and transformation of the already mentioned palace of Montecitorio in Rome, which was originally designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini and completed by Carlo Fontana. In 1902, Basile was commissioned to build the new seat of the Italian Parliament and decided to demolish the rear part of the building and to add a new

⁶⁷ Giovannoni, Gustavo, *Il restauro dei monumenti*, Ed. Cremonese, Roma 1946_P. 57 (my translation).

building to the seventeenth-century wing that was maintained. The facades of the new added building could have been conceived continuing the style and rhythms of Bernini's elevations, but Basile chose instead, without reverential fears and in contrast to the then prevailing national-popular historicism, to use the contemporary architectural language: the Jugendstil. The old and new parts of the building, while forming a unitary architectural organism, are now clearly distinguishable and objectively report the historical events of the palace. Boscarino describes the intervention in these terms:

"On that important professional occasion, Basile had not renounced either the respect for the pre-existing architecture of the old palace of the Innocentian Curia, dating back to the Bernini-Fontana, nor its architecture by inserting a very modern building, while respecting the complex logic of the existing ancient organism. He thus avoided the solutions frequently adopted by what we can call the classicism of the new Italy of the time".⁶⁸

Another case in which Ernesto was confronted with a pre-existing building was the extension of the already mentioned *Favaloro* villa in Palermo, which had been built by his father in 1889. In 1914 Ernesto added an iron and glass winter garden to the villa and inserted an octagonal cantilevered tower in the southwest corner of the building, designed in pure Liberty style. On the first floor he proposed the same wall surfaces of the building and extended the string-course bands to integrate and wrap the new tower. The latter has on this level three windows of the same size and surrounded by the same stone frames of the original ones. Ernesto, however, differentiated the top of the new windows by drawing new marble fretworks, tuned and similar, but different from the braided arched motifs of the old ones. Also for the openings on the top floor of the tower he designed similar decorations, but with different geometries. It would have been possible for reasons of visual continuity to reproduce the same motif as the pre-existing over-windows, but he deliberately

⁶⁸ Boscarino, Salvatore. *Il Duomo di Messina dopo il terremoto del 1908 tra consolidamento e ricostruzione*. Archivio storico messinese n.50. Industria Poligrafica della Sicilia. 1987 Messina_ P. 18 (my translation).

decided to make formal variations on the originals. It is as if Ernesto, with these small stylistic diversifications, had wanted to "date" with the stone materials his intervention, carried out 25 years later on his father's work, in order to highlight the distinction between the original and the parts added by him.



Figure 43. E. Basile. The turret added to Villa Favalaro in 1914, Palermo

On many other occasions Basile found himself expanding existing buildings and his attitude was always the same: to express his contemporaneity, clearly differentiating the new from the old. Just to mention a few: the castle of Falconara, Villa Bordonaro, the Hotel delle Palme, the Grand Hotel Villa Igia, the town hall of Licata, the headquarters of the Cassa di Risparmio di Palermo. In the latter case Basile did an operation similar to that of Montecitorio: he added a building to an existing convent, creating, with the main front, a sort of scenic backdrop on the square in front. He kept the remaining elevations of the ancient building unchanged

and, on the side alleys, made evident the grafts with the old walls with a slight retreat of the new walls.

An experience of effective reconstruction of a historical building that Basile carried out was that of the town hall of Reggio Calabria. The old Palazzo San Giorgio, seat of the municipality, was destroyed by the earthquake of 1908 that razed Messina and Reggio Calabria to the ground. The collapsed palace was a building in severe neo-renaissance style, of which some photographs remain today. Basile decided not to make an exact replica of the lost building and in 1914 he built a new palace in a simplified Liberty style. Plans, elevations, volumes and decorations are new and reflect his functional and modernist architectural vision. Already in 1911 he had conceived another project for the reconstruction of the same building, again in Art Nouveau style, but it was rejected, also because it had two turrets, not existing in the collapsed old town hall, which were not allowed by the recent anti-seismic regulations of the time. The building he constructed has some similarities with the antecedent one, which show how this was the main source of inspiration for Basile. He wanted probably to evoke Palazzo San Giorgio, re-proposing the same rhythms of the façade and, as far as possible, a similar shape, but not identical, also because he was forced to make one less floor for anti-seismic issues. Using a period photo, one can compare the main elevations of the two buildings and note the common matrix of some details: the tripartition, the plastic treatment and the protrusion of the central bodies; the same number of openings and their very similar profiles; the ashlar, the pilasters and the clearly analogous corner corners. If in the picture of the old building the second floor were erased, the similarities can be clearly perceived. He avoided copying the disappeared building one by one; instead he reinterpreted it in the style of his time, imitating it in both general and detailed planning. Basile's design method appears once again consistent with what he wrote in his 1907 report on the reconstruction of Venice's bell tower:

"This is not a real restoration, but an essential reconstruction, which not only admits, but requires, as has already been stated, greater freedom of treatment."⁶⁹

Therefore for him the concept of reconstruction excludes the copy.



Figure 44. Old Town Hall of Reggio Calabria, Palazzo San Giorgio, collapsed in 1908.

Figure 45. E. Basile. Town hall of Reggio Calabria, project version of 1911

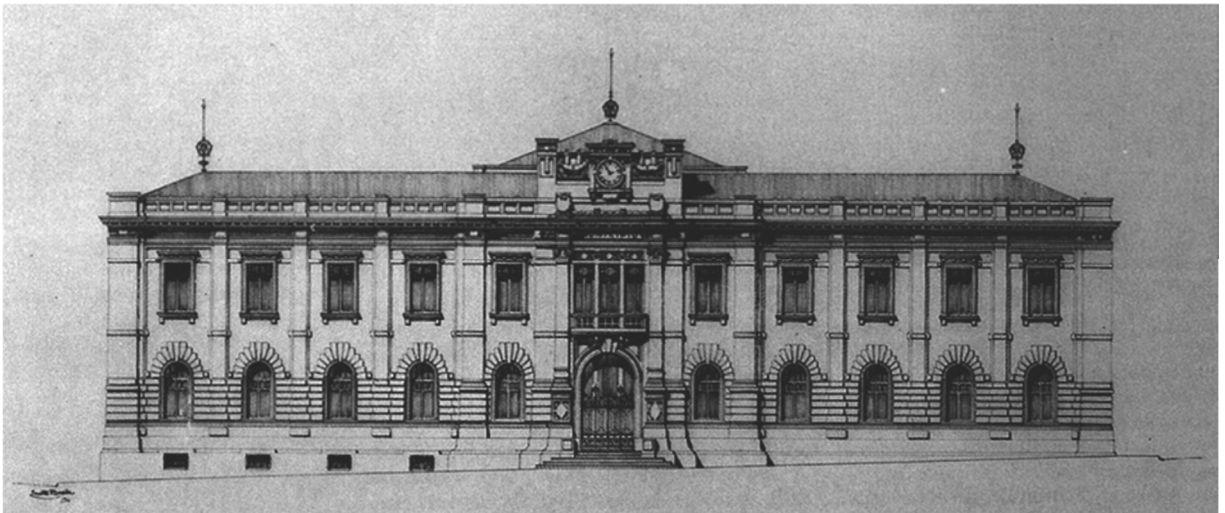


Figure 46. E. Basile. Town hall of Reggio Calabria, final version of the project, 1914

⁶⁹ Relazione 2 maggio 1907 dei sigg. D'Andrade, Jorini e Basile - Relazione 1 maggio 1907 del pittore prof. Cesare Laurenti sul progetto di ricostruzione del Campanile di San Marco. Officine Grafiche C. Ferrari, Venezia 1907_ P. 21 (my translation).

1.5 How is a reconstruction of the villa possible today?

After having known the events of Villa Deliella and its author, one might better understand the reasons for the urgent desire for its reconstruction, which many citizens of Palermo today feel.

The demolition of the villa has become a symbol of the vast destruction of the cultural heritage that the city of Palermo has suffered since the 1960s. The current urban gap in Piazza Francesco Crispi is perceived as a real "wound" to be "healed": an architectural, cultural and sentimental void that the community wants to compensate for. Desirée Maida writes on this subject:

"The void left by the Villa Deliella is certainly not unnoticed, morally, culturally and in terms of town planning. (...) That of Villa Deliella is considered a "wound that has never been healed", also because it is the symbol of a historical period from which the city, especially in recent years, has done everything possible to recover."⁷⁰

This is currently one of the most discussed architectural topics in Sicily and there is of course the usual debate about the most appropriate way to rebuild the villa. Danilo Maniscalco writes:

"With regard to reconstruction and with it the redevelopment of the entire area, so far Palermo is divided into two apparently distinct and distant schools of thought, that of the integral reconstruction of Villa Deliella and that of the contemporary project to replace it."⁷¹

The discussion on Villa Deliella was reactivated by the aforementioned petition made in 2005 to reconstruct it *à l'identique*. On that occasion, it was pointed out that in the archives of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Palermo and in the archives of Ernesto Basile's heirs there are the original drawings made for the

⁷⁰ Maida, Desirée, *Nasce a Palermo il Museo del Liberty. Sarà costruito dove prima sorgeva Villa Deliella*. In *Artribune* 10, issue of 25 April 2021. Artribune s.r.l. Roma (my translation).

⁷¹ Maniscalco Danilo, *Il parcheggio della discordia viene chiuso: ecco il progetto per piazza delle Croci*, in *Balarm*, issue of 14.03.2018, <https://www.balarm.it/news/il-parcheggio-della-discordia-viene-chiuso-ecco-il-progetto-per-piazza-delle-croci-20545> [16.06.2022] (my translation).

construction of the villa and numerous period photographs, documents with which it would be possible to make a replica very faithful to the original. But in the years that followed, this proposal was criticised by many; Renata Prescia, for example, while understanding the main motivation of those who wanted a copy of the ancient villa to be built, namely the desire to give back to the community a significant work of its cultural identity, stated that there were other design possibilities for achieving the same goal. Above all, she emphasised that any design choice should be preceded by an analysis of the current urban context:⁷²

"In the case of urban gaps, compensation is generally considered necessary, even if not indispensable, but its methods can be many and varied, making it necessary to exercise a design culture that tries to hold together the many requirements: from technical to spiritual to economic. The proposal put forward in the case of Villa Deliella, lacking any consideration of the urban context, which has since changed completely, or any real programme of feasibility, does not seem to me to succeed in balancing the sentiment, albeit legitimate, of redeeming a negative period in our history, the building sack. Relations with the context are a first requirement to be investigated in the case of a gap."

And continuing, she highlighted the fact that the cultural reference models, which she called 'alibis', that inspired the petition carried out in Palermo in 2005, came from cases of reconstruction performed in modern times in other European countries:

"Let us now turn to the methods of reconstruction. I am certainly concerned that in the proposal, which moreover was initiated by two young people, we see the paradoxical persistence of old patterns and/or traditions in the field of cultural heritage, such as: the use of the abused slogan of 'as it was where it was', even in contexts of no need, perhaps using similar European cases as

⁷² The reconstruction proposal made in the 2005 petition was later made explicit by the publication in an online magazine of a rendering superimposing an old photo of the villa on the image of the current state of the site where it stood, without any analysis or in-depth investigation of the urban context. See the online magazine Balarm of 20.03.2018. <https://www.balarm.it/news/quel-luogo-fantasma-in-centro-a-palermo-ecco-come-sarebbe-villa-deliella-ricostruita-20589> [16.06.2022].

an alibi; the perpetuation of the restoration method as the only choice of intervention, which still brings with it the demonisation of the Modern."⁷³

One of the most emblematic cases of reconstruction in Europe in recent decades, similar to those referred to by Renata Prescia, is the *Frauenkirche* in Dresden. The late-baroque church, consecrated in 1743, was destroyed by Anglo-American bombing in 1945. During the GDR period, the few ruins that remained standing and the residual pile of rubble were left in their original state as a war memorial until 2005.



Figure 47. The ruins of the Frauenkirche in Dresden in the 1960s

In 1990 an international petition and appeal entitled '*Ruf aus Dresden*' - call from Dresden - was signed for the financing of the rebuilding of the church which had the desired effect; work began in 1994 and was completed in 2005. The Frauenkirche was reconstructed in its original state, faithfully copying every detail from ancient drawings and available period photographs. The walls were built using the remaining original stones as much as possible and replacing the majority of missing ones with new stone blocks.

⁷³ Prescia Renata, *Ricostruire sulle rovine attraverso la cultura del progetto*, in PER - Giornale della Fondazione Salvare Palermo onlus, N.44/45 Januar – August 2016_P. 11 (my translation).



Figure 48. *The new Frauenkirche rebuilt in 2005 and the Neumarkt square, Dresden*

The operation of anastylosis, i.e. reassembling the structures with original pieces, was integrated with a complete restoration of the building using modern materials and techniques; as Susanne Veas-Gulani reports, this specific case of reconstruction was defined as "archaeological" by the construction director Eberhard Burger:

"The strong opposition to the rebuilding is matched by the unquestionable belief in the project by its supporters. They insist that by re-building the Frauenkirche according to its original plans—for which the term archeological reconstruction was coined in 1991"⁷⁴

In the new Frauenkirche, the difference in colour between the old stones, blackened by the patina of time, and the clean, light-coloured new ones is the main element which currently makes it possible to perceive from the outside that the church has been rebuilt. In this connection Philipp Klein writes that in the future, once the environmental phenomena have harmonised the colouring and surface appearance of the original stones with the new ones, it will no longer be possible to understand that the church was destroyed and then rebuilt. Observers will think that the church has always been in its original configuration and that no changes or events have taken place since it was built:

"Today, there is only a little of the original sandstone in the exterior wall to indicate the intervening non-existence of the building. This piece of

⁷⁴ Veas-Gulani, Susanne; *From Frankfurt's Goethehaus to Dresden's Frauenkirche: Architecture, German Identity, and Historical Memory after 1945*, in *Germanic Review*, Heldref Publications, Washington DC, 2005, _P. 153.

information has a 'sell by date' because when the new sandstone assumes the patina and colouring of the old due to weathering, this visible historical reference will also have disappeared."⁷⁵

According to many critics, therefore, reconstructions like the one in Dresden cause confusion about the datability of the intervention, misleading most visitors into believing that they are actually standing in front of the original building instead of a replica. In this regard Susanne Vees-Gulani reports the following statement by David Lowenthal:

"Fidelity to every detail is not truly necessary for a building to represent the past and serve as a basis for identity formation. As many reconstructions, re-enactments, and even Disneyland reveal, as long as the image satisfies the onlookers' expectations, viewers perceive the building as true to the past and often are unaware that the object was altered"⁷⁶



Figure 49. Detail of a corner of the new Frauenkirche Dresden

⁷⁵ Klein, Phillip: *Frauenkirchen Mania - The Frauenkirche 'Dresden Cathedral' and the Reconstruction*, in: *Abolish Commemoration – A Critique of the Discourse to the Bombing of Dresden in 1945*, online at <http://www.abolishcommemoration.org/klein1.html> [03.03.2022].

⁷⁶ Vees-Gulani, Susanne; *From Frankfurt's Goethehaus to Dresden's Frauenkirche: Architecture, German Identity, and Historical Memory after 1945*_P. 155.

It is no coincidence that, according to the American scholar, the city of Dresden has been compared to Disneyland and Las Vegas because of the numerous *à l'identique* reconstructions carried out there after the reunification of Germany:

Since the emphasis on the archaeological and historical nature of the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche and its significance for preservation goes against the standards developed for conservation of historical buildings, these claims for the justification of the project are questionable. This is one reason why the rebuilding critics have called Dresden the new Las Vegas an der Elbe (Ruby) or a Barock Disneyland (Delau).⁷⁷

These appellations, which associate the old German city with the two ultra-modern American tourist locations, derive mainly from the numerous reconstructions in style that have been carried out in its historic centre in recent years, particularly the buildings overlooking the Neumarkt, the square surrounding the Frauenkirche. The façades simulating the appearance of past centuries are in stark contrast to the modern interiors, intended for hotels, restaurants, shops, etc., that they cover. As the following quotations from Rob McFarland show, these architectural copies have been interpreted by many critics as empty theatrical backdrops, "*Kulissen*", demonstrating their lack of authenticity, placed as they are in temporal and situational contexts profoundly changed from those in which their respective originals were conceived:

"The duties of an "authentic" building as a Baudenkmal, as an accurate, solemn witness of historical truth, are replaced by the media circus of the reproduction. Craven publicity campaigns attract—gasp—the Americans and the Japanese, who (characteristically, to assume from Seiß' choice of nations) downgrade the true, local identity of Dresden into a tourist trap. Beyond their ephemeral existence as Medienarchitektur, Germany's historically reconstructed buildings function in a filmic way that resonates with Benjamin's ideal of a reproducible work of art. With the often-repeated

⁷⁷ Veas-Gulani, Susanne; *From Frankfurt's Goethehaus to Dresden's Frauenkirche: Architecture, German Identity, and Historical Memory after 1945* P. 154.

derision of reconstructed buildings as theatrical backdrops (Kulissen), critics bring attention to the connections between historical reconstructions and the medium of film. Andreas Ruby laments the status of Dresden as “eine Stadt im Kulissenwahn”. Ivan Reimann sees the façades of Dresden’s reconstructed Neumarkt as signs of a new “Diktatur der Ökonomie” where “nur das Jetzt, nur das Bild, die Oberfläche, eine photographierbare Kulisse zählen [...]” Peter Kulka sees the Neumarkt as a cinematic space: “Auf den Betonkuben dieser Gebäude werden historische Fassaden und Ornamente— wie auf Leinwände projiziert.” The most important filmic attribute of the reconstructions, however, is the distracted gaze that is brought about by the building’s permanent state of transience, so different from the mythical, eternal status of the ideal old city. Reimann identifies the façades of the Neumarkt’s hotels, the historicized restaurants, and the glass entryway to an underground garage as classic examples of what Marc Augé calls “Non-lieux,” the placeless spaces of modernity.”⁷⁸



Figure 50. Modern building near Dresden's Neumarkt with a “17th century-style” façade

According to the architectural critics quoted by Mc. Farland, these so-called 'Kulissen' reconstructions clearly derive from certain political and economic

⁷⁸ McFarland, Rob. *Attack of the Cyberzombies: Media, Reconstruction, and the Future of Germany's Architectural Past*, in TRANSIT 10 (2), UK Berkeley 2016_P. 7.

interests that speculate on phenomena such as mass tourism, and have important consequences on the perception and understanding of cities and their history.

Returning to the Frauenkirche, Susanne Vees-Gulani states that criticism of the reconstruction of the church is not only related to the datability of the building, but also to other important aspects, mainly linked to the selection of history made by the promoters of the reconstruction. First of all, according to her, the ruins of the church in Dresden – which consisted of two vertical portions of walls that remained standing after the bombing and towered over a hillock of rubble - had become a characteristic element of the old town with its own symbolic aesthetic value. The fragments were deliberately left in that state in order to serve the function of historical testimony with educational purposes. She states:

“It also should not be forgotten that the rebuilding of the church actually requires the destruction of another monument to the German past, namely, the Frauenkirche ruins that had shaped the Dresden cityscape for several decades. As a symbol of official GDR policies, as well as of subverting the GDR system by opposition leaders, it had become a key site for processes of cultural and national identity formation and with significant historical and educational value. Thus, a strong case could be made for preserving the ruins.”⁷⁹

For this reason, she argues that many critics opposed the reconstruction, claiming that the church in its ruined state was a powerful physical witness that made the result of the disasters caused by the war sensorially perceptible. The symbolic message conveyed by the monument was meant to clearly represent how the violence of armed conflict can reduce buildings like churches, places of peace and aggregation, to piles of rubble. She states:

“Other critics, such as Christof Ziemer, who led rallies for democracy in 1989, argued for leaving the ruins the way they were. He hoped that by

⁷⁹ Vees-Gulani, Susanne; *From Frankfurt's Goethehaus to Dresden's Frauenkirche: Architecture, German Identity, and Historical Memory after 1945*_P. 154.

displaying this offene Erinnerungswunde (qtd. in Kohlhaas 26), memories of the war and its causes and consequences could be kept alive.”⁸⁰

The cancellation of this historical testimony with the decision to rebuild the Frauenkirche, selecting its original configuration as a model, has been interpreted by many as an attempt to erase the traces of a negative epoch in German history by choosing another, idealized one, which better suits the political desires of those in power today. In this regard Philipp Klein writes:

“At the same time this context made it impossible that the destroyed Frauenkirche and German-Nazi-era crimes could be associated in any way whatsoever. Under the slogan ‘archaeological reconstruction’ the form of the old Frauenkirche was mimicked down to the last detail, it was as if nothing had happened.”⁸¹

In his view, the implications of an ‘archaeological’ reconstruction are so politically and culturally incisive that they can erase the historical stratigraphy of a site and its societies. Susanne Veas-Gulani even argues that the removal of the church ruin monument was intended to erase not only the events of the Second World War but also the historical traces related to the GDR:

“With the Frauenkirche, such a negating process goes even beyond those of the immediate post-war era, as it wipes out not only the visible marks of the consequences of the war but also more than forty years of Socialism.”⁸²

The reconstructed religious building is therefore interpreted by many as a work that derives from the intention to replace another, cancelling its monumental function, in order to express totally different political and cultural values.

The “monumental” function of architecture and its ability to express certain values is succinctly expressed in a sentence taken from Ernesto Nathan Rogers’ presentation of

⁸⁰ Veas-Gulani, Susanne; *From Frankfurt's Goethehaus to Dresden's Frauenkirche: Architecture, German Identity, and Historical Memory after 1945*_P. 153.

⁸¹ Klein, Phillip: *Frauenkirchen Mania - The Frauenkirche ‘Dresden Cathedral’ and the Reconstruction, in: Abolish Commemoration – A Critique of the Discourse to the Bombing of Dresden in 1945*, online at <http://www.abolishcommemoration.org/klein1.html> [03.03.2022].

⁸² Veas-Gulani, Susanne; *From Frankfurt's Goethehaus to Dresden's Frauenkirche: Architecture, German Identity, and Historical Memory after 1945*_P. 155.

his *History of Modern Architecture* course to the students of the Milan *Politecnico*; he, speaking of the role of memory and the sense of history in the creative process of design, said:

"To admonish and to remember, 'moneo' [...] the word 'monument' stems from it with the double meaning of 'admonish' and 'remember', of being something representative of a certain event so that this glory is repeated or that damage is not repeated."⁸³

From what has been considered so far, reconstructed architecture, i.e. architecture designed with the intention of compensating for the loss of a historic building and remembering its existence, should also play the role of a monument, precisely in the etymological sense of the Latin verb *monere* from which the term derives, as mentioned by the Italian architect; "to remember" and "to admonish". This two-fold monumental function might be extended to the case of the reconstruction of Ernesto Basile's lost villa, with the dual intention of recalling it and "healing the wound" that the citizens of Palermo feel they have suffered with its demolition. On the one hand, the new architectural design would testify to the historical and artistic value of the original Art Nouveau building, and on the other hand it would symbolically denounce the destructive action inflicted on it in the late 1950s by the political/economic class that caused the so-called "sacco di Palermo". The new Villa Deliella, regardless of its degree of resemblance to the prototype, would in this sense be a monument capable of warning future generations not to repeat illegal speculative building phenomena, and to make them aware of the need to respect and protect their cultural heritage. The possible design strategies to achieve this aim are multiple and will be explored and deepened in the following chapters, specifically in the practical part of the research. For the moment, keeping in mind the events of the Frauenkirche in Dresden and the related criticism, one

⁸³ Rogers E.N., *Il senso della storia*. Unicopli, Milano 1999_P. 17 (my translation).

wants to understand what consequences the hypothetical realisation of a facsimile that looks exactly like the demolished original might have.

The opposite alternative to an "archaeological" reconstruction of this kind would be to design a totally new building which does not present any kind of typological, stylistic, formal reference to the pre-existing one, such as the multi-storey one that the mafia would have wanted to build in place of the villa. It is evident that a project of this kind has no possibility of carrying out the dual "monumental" function of remembrance and warning because it would erase every trace of the vanished predecessor; but probably not even a facsimile would be capable of this, as it could be confused in time with the original, as in the case of the church of Dresden that today appears intact "as if nothing had happened". Its new fake facades would not convey any clue of the vicissitudes experienced by its illustrious predecessor, and would not stimulate any reflection in this sense in the observers; on the contrary, they would contribute to the oblivion of one of the most striking episodes of the phenomenon of the "sack", which, for the community of Palermo, should instead be remembered and reported. In this sense, perhaps paradoxically, the current urban void is even more eloquent than a replica!

But what design measures can be taken to ensure that these specific reconstructed buildings can actually become datable monuments, which do not cause any misunderstandings about their age and the fact of being one-to-one copies? To clarify the importance of this question, it is useful to consider by analogy another recent case of reconstruction performed in Sicily, that of Villa Bonajuto, a late eclectic 1934 building in Catania, which in some ways has had a similar history to that of Ernesto Basile. In 1985, almost half of the building was illegally demolished and immediately after, as had already happened in Palermo 25 years before with Villa Deliella, the work was blocked by the judiciary. For more than two decades the villa remained in a state of semi-ruins in its eastern wing, reduced to a heap of rubble, with the gap evident in the residual masonry. The building, in its state of ruin that clashed with the adjacent intact buildings, had accidentally become a sort

of "manifesto" that physically testified to the results of Sicilian building speculation indifferent to the historical and artistic heritage.



Figure 51. Villa Bonajuto in Catania after the partial demolition in 1985

Today, the demolished part has been reconstructed on the basis of documentary research, and no physical element bears witness to the hardships that the building has gone through. The new part, blending perfectly with the original residual portion to which it has been added, does not allow it to be recognised as a recent restoration work.



Figure 52. Villa Bonajuto in Catania after its restoration in 2013

Similarly to the case of Dresden, probably the aim was to select and try to replicate through a copy a certain phase of its existence, obscuring other significant ones. When you look at the villa, if you do not know its history, it seems to be in front of one of the typical residual architectures of the 30s in Catania that have survived the building speculation. However, due to its troubled recent history, the villa has become a special piece of architecture and probably, with other methods of reconstruction, could have been able to fulfil its role as a monument today, in the sense of bearing witness to the actions it has suffered in a certain historical phase, and as a symbolic warning for the future to protect the cultural patrimony.

After the immense tragedy of the demolition of the Twin Towers in New York, in an interview with the Guardian, the writer Salman Rushdie had expressed his proposal for their reconstruction, which was centered precisely on the concept of symbolic monumental function. He had imagined two buildings in imitation of the collapsed ones that would have, starting from the levels where the air attacks were launched, the last dozen floors empty. In his idea, the tops of these memorial towers would have been enormous illuminated transparent atriums, that would have made evident to future memory the traces of the immense wounds suffered. He declared:

“If I had to choose, I'd probably side with those who wanted the new buildings to look like the fallen towers, at least on the outside. Those who destroyed it were making a symbolic statement and we must answer them in symbolic terms. So, what if we did build a new 110-storey tower here, or even two towers; but what if the top 30 or 40 storeys of one or both the towers were then left empty, filled only with light, like a giant atrium or pair of atriums, and what if that were the memorial - a memorial in the very sky-space where the assaults had occurred, and which repossessed and dignified that space for ever?⁸⁴

In a different way, but with similar intentions, the memorial that was realized in 2011 expresses today the memory of the tragedy with two giant excavations in the

⁸⁴ Rushdie Salman, *Reach for the sky*, in The Guardian, 27 Jul 2002.

ground that symbolize the "scars" left by the two collapsed buildings, emphasizing the feeling of their loss.



Figure 53. The 9/11 Memorial Museum located at the World Trade Center in New York City, 2011



Figure 54. Detail of the 9/11 Memorial Museum, New York City, 2011

Taking a cue from these two different ideas, returning to the case of villa Bonajuto, whose scale and minimal history is obviously not comparable to the catastrophe that occurred in New York in 2001, perhaps having made its gash visible in some way, while reconstructing the missing wing, or having reconstituted the latter in a simplified way, would have been physical signs capable of expressing an effective historical testimony of what had happened. Probably, a contemporary reinterpretation of the destroyed part, or the emphasis on the state of ruin, could

also have re-actualized the villa, making it take on a new artistic dimension. Further on, the various alternative design strategies to standardised 'archaeological' reconstruction, which can be adapted to individual cases, will be explored.

In Vienna, too, there is another example of a reconstructed historical architecture, which today is confused with the original it replaced: the *Laimgrubenkirche*. The 18th century church was demolished to make room for a new wide street. A twin church was built in 1907, also in Baroque style, a few dozen meters away from the original. For some time, during the construction of the new church and before the opening of the road, the two buildings coexisted next to each other in an unusual and surrealistic configuration. Bruno Mager writes about this:

“Today, nothing indicates that the apparently Baroque church is from 1907.”⁸⁵

These two cases seem to confirm that it actually might be inopportune to perform exact replicas, unable to communicate their location in time and space and needing signs or captions to express the fact that they are copies.



Figure 55. *The new and the old Laimgrubenkirche, Vienna, photo around 1907*

⁸⁵ MAGER T. *Architecture reperfomed: the politics of reconstruction*. London, Routledge 2016._P. 5.



Figure 56. *The new Laimgrubenkirche, Vienna 1907*

Ernesto Basile himself, just twenty-five years old, in his manuscript of 1882, severely criticizing historicism, pointed out that the fake ancient architecture built in his time, could have created confusion even to a competent observer. He stated that:

"The artist [of the revival] does not tire or fatigue his intellect in the search for new forms and new compositions, adapted to the needs of the new civilization, (...) he tends (...) to faithfully imitate, scrupulously, with all possible exactness (...) such or such a monument to the unanimous cry recognized admirable; and copy it so that even the most profound and talented connoisseur of the ancient, can, in seeing it, doubt in his heart to be in front of a modern work of art." ⁸⁶

But back to the case of Villa Deliella: how and to what extent can the vanished prototype of this historical architecture represent a model for its reconstruction today? A first general answer to the question could be deduced from the approach

⁸⁶ Basile, Ernesto. *Architettura, dei suoi principi e del suo rinnovamento*. 1882. Editrice Novecento Palermo, 1981_P. 132 (my translation).

of the architectural historian Wolfgang Pehnt who, in an interview with *Der Spiegel* magazine, formulated five criteria as conditions under which an architectural reconstruction is possible today:

“Wenn man rekonstruieren will, dann müssen für mich fünf Kriterien erfüllt sein. Erstens müssen zuverlässige Baupläne vorliegen. Zweitens muss der Bau am selben Standort errichtet werden wie der Vorgängerbau. Drittens dürfte die Geschichte nicht über diesen Bauplatz hinweggegangen sein, er muss also unbebaut geblieben sein. Viertens muss noch genug historische Bausubstanz vorhanden sein, die das künftige Gebäude sozusagen beglaubigt, es durchdringt wie der Sauerteig das Brot. Fünftens müsste die neue Nutzung verträglich sein mit dem Charakter des zu rekonstruierenden Gebäudes.”⁸⁷

These operating rules seem to propose a single universal solution and are in line with many current cases of archaeological reconstructions completed, or in the process of being carried out, in Germany and in various countries around the world. It would seem that since these five points are met in cases of the reconstruction of lost historical buildings, the only possible solution were the execution of a facsimile. However, it is very difficult to base reconstructions on scientific documentary studies for various reasons, including the absence of absolutely certain historical documentation, or the difficulty of finding original materials, or workers capable of carrying out work using ancient techniques. But in the presence of a hypothetical, true system of historic reconstruction, an important consequence would be an objective restitution of the building, independent of the personal tastes and interpretations of the designer.

Pehnt's five conditions could somehow be applied to the case study of the present dissertation; thus, based on them, theoretically a replica of Basile's Villa could be built on the original site in present-day Palermo. But, for the ethical and aesthetic reasons examined so far, probably at least a sixth point should be added to those of

⁸⁷ „Es fehlt der Sauerteig“ [“The leaven is missing”] Der Architekturhistoriker Wolfgang Pehnt über Geschichtsm Manipulation beim Wiederaufbau des Stadtschlösses. *Der Spiegel* Nr. 49 issue of 31/11/2008.

the German scholar: the replica should clearly express its date of execution. The new villa is supposed to be distinguishable from the model to which it refers, so as not to generate confusion similar to that of the *Frauenkirche*, the villa in Catania, or the church in Vienna of the previous examples. For these reasons, the new architecture shall be able to "speak" and "tell its own story" and clearly present itself as a new work. However, according to critics such as Thomas Will, copies seem to lack these capabilities; he, referring to reconstructions made in recent decades in Dresden, states:

„Auf der anderen Ebene ist nach der Autorität von Bauten als Geschichtszeugen zu fragen. Hier kann es im Gegensatz zur ästhetischen Ebene keine Annäherung durch Abbildung geben. Im Gegenteil: Wo die Imitate dem historischen Vorbild allzu ähnlich werden, wirkt der Hinweis auf „die“ Geschichte verfehlt, denn diese verschleiern sie ja gerade. „Rekonstruktionen – je echter, desto schlimmer“ schrieb Otto Bartning seinerzeit zum Wiederaufbau, denn „dass wir’s verloren gehen ließen, müssen wir unseren Enkeln eingestehen.“⁸⁸

According to the German historian, the replicas of buildings of the past that have disappeared, although they are born with the intention of recovering the history of a place and a community, in fact on the contrary they contribute to confuse it. He fundamentally believes that the authority of historical testimony is not transmissible. The more similar a copy is to the original, the more easily it can be mistaken for it, due to the lack of evidence of its non-authenticity; and this will become increasingly problematic for generations to come. A replica also risks undermining the authority of the authentic historic architecture with which it coexists: in the many cities where, as in Dresden, numerous buildings have "reappeared" from the past with the likeness of their predecessors, it will become increasingly difficult to understand whether a truly historic edifice nearby is

⁸⁸ Will, Thomas. *Städtebau als Dialog. Zur Wiederbebauung des Dresdner Neumarkts*. From: *Historisch contra modern? Erfindung oder Rekonstruktion der historischen Stadt am Beispiel des Dresdner Neumarkts*, hg. von der Sächsischen Akademie der Künste und dem Stadtplanungsamt der Landeshauptstadt Dresden, Dresden 2008, p. 33.

authentic or not. And referring to those who are convinced that they can duplicate works of art in series as if they were industrial products, he, referring to Walter Benjamin, argues that they unlike these have a "residual aura" that cannot be reproduced:

„Diese nicht übertragbare Autorität der historischen Zeugenschaft gilt ähnlich auch für den Bereich der Kunstwerks. Wenn einige suggerieren, man könne Kunstdenkmale auf der Basis wissenschaftlicher Dokumentation zu beliebiger Zeit und damit beliebig oft wieder errichten – gleich der Aufführung eines Musikstücks – sprechen sie der bildenden Kunst, die bis ins 20. Jahrhundert an das originale Material gebunden war, ihren ureigenen Charakter ab, nämlich persönliche Werke zu schaffen, die im Material die Zeit überdauern. Sie verweigern ihnen den Rest an Aura, der sie von der Industrieware unterscheidet. So werden einstmals einzigartige Kunstwerke durch den Anspruch auf Wiederholbarkeit zur Gebrauchsware einer Kunstgewerbe-Industrie degradiert. Wenn wir auf diese Weise glauben, alles wiedergewinnen zu können, sinkt jedoch der Wert der noch verbliebenen historischen Originale. „Die unbestrittenen technischen und ästhetischen Errungenschaften des Wiederaufbaus von im Krieg zerstörten Altstädten [...]“ werden „zu einem Argument der Geringschätzung vorhandener echter Denkmäler umgemünzt.““⁸⁹

Therefore, as an alternative to pre-packaged theoretical guidelines, such as those of Wolfgang Pehnt, it is considered opportune to investigate other possible cultural and artistic design strategies for dealing with particular cases of architectural reconstruction, of which the Villa Deliella is an example, mainly taking into consideration the concept of the irreproducibility of historical testimony through copying. With the intention of deepening this last specific aspect, the next chapter will attempt to examine it through the thought of Walter Benjamin and through the study of the related imitative processes in art.

⁸⁹ Will, Thomas, *Städtebau als Dialog. Zur Wiederbebauung des Dresdner Neumarkts*. 2008_P. 33.

2 IMITATION VERSUS COPY: PERMANENT PROCESSES IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

2.1 The original, the copy and the imitation

Referring to the 'archaeological' reconstruction of the Frauenkirche mentioned above, Susanne Vees-Gulani states:

“When considering the possibilities that the reproduction of art in the twentieth century offers with its technical advances, Walter Benjamin ascertained early on that although copies of art might look the same externally, they lack the special aura that makes the original unique.”⁹⁰

In her opinion, the reproduction of the Dresden church failed because it created a superficial image of its predecessor, a sort of scenographic installation only apparently identical to it, but it could not reproduce its aura, that characteristic of works of art which Walter Benjamin defined as the here and now (*hic et nunc*) of the original. The aura, the theory of which will be explored in the next paragraph, could be synthetically defined as that special atmosphere that surrounds the original work of art in its specific space-time context, making it unique and authentic, and therefore unrepeatable. According to the German philosopher, the authenticity of a work of art is what can be handed down as historical testimony of it, and is something that no means of reproduction, not even the most technically sophisticated ones, can duplicate. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* of 1935, he states:

“The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical

⁹⁰ Vees-Gulani Susanne, *From Frankfurt's Goethehaus to Dresden's Frauenkirche: Architecture, German Identity, and Historical Memory after 1945*. The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory Volume 80; Issue 2. 2005 Heldref Publications_P. 153.

testimony relating to it. Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition.

One might focus these aspects of the artwork in the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura."⁹¹

Therefore, the advent of modern mechanical reproduction techniques, which Benjamin considered to be the most up-to-date manifestation of the human mimetic faculty, had undermined, "jeopardised", two fundamental aspects of the work of art: its character of historical witness on the one hand, and its traditional weight on the other. This double effect is summarised in the crucial concept of the "decay" of the aura. For the moment, let us focus more on the first of the two endangered aspects.

Miriam Bratu Hansen elaborates on the role played in the theory of aura decay by the transformation of mimetic power, - that innate human faculty of seeing similarities and representing them -, which modern technology has pushed to advanced levels. Referring to Benjamin's 1933 essay *On the mimetic faculty*, she states:

"The question of what such a transformation might look like and in which areas it might be taking place implies, not least, the possibility of a resurgence of mimetic powers within the disenchanted modern world. It is important to note that Benjamin considers the category of similarity or similitude (*Ähnlichkeit*) from the start, even in its phylogenetic trajectory, as marked by its "nonsensuous" quality, that is, as distinct from a resemblance that appears overt and self-evident. Similitude works on the order of affinity (*Verwandschaft*), rather than sameness, identity, copy, or reproduction (a distinction that matters for our reading of the artwork essay)."⁹²

⁹¹ Benjamin Walter, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Edited by M.W. Jennings, B. Doherty, and T. Y. Levin, translated by E. Jephcott, R. Livingstone, H. Eiland, and Others. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England 2008_ P. 22.

⁹² Bratu Hansen, Miriam, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. University of California Press, 2012_ P. 147.

Those manifestations of mimetic activity that can determine the evolution of thought, such as language or works of art, are characterised by imitative processes that do not aim at similarities recognisable through the senses, but at affinities perceivable with the intellect. In other words, a copy of a previous work that is based merely on similarity to it and reproduces only its material and form does not have the value of an evolutionary (phylogenetic) trace in Art and cannot therefore constitute historical testimony. Consequently, it can be assumed that according to Benjamin, the products of mechanical reproduction, understood as copies, fail because, through the likenesses on which they are based, they can only reflect the superficial appearance of the original work, not its aura. The latter is linked not only to the materiality of the work, but above all to its "physical duration", that is, to its specific historicity and situationality. From this perspective, the hypothetical creation of a copy of Villa Deliella would be inadequate today, both because its "nunc" has changed - the building was constructed in 1906 - but also its "hic", since, although the site is the same, the urban context has been profoundly altered with respect to the original situation. The changed social and political conditions of today also make the site where the villa stood significantly different from when it was still standing. Ernesto Basile's original work and its original aura are therefore irremediably lost. A copy of the missing prototype would, like the reconstructed buildings in Dresden, falsify the perception of its 'physical durability', i.e. give the untrue impression that it has remained unchanged since its origin at that site, and that nothing has happened since.

It is now considered useful to briefly mention the second "attack", mentioned by the Berlin philosopher, on the authority and traditional weight of works of art generated by the action of modern reproduction techniques. Cinema, photography and, as will be seen, even architecture, being conceived through evolved imitative processes, according to the radical Benjaminian vision can change the course of art, cancelling its traditional auratic/aesthetic role and creating a new political/educational one. This function is entrusted to "re-production", understood

in its literal sense as "production again", which through mimicry can create new versions of pre-existing artistic exemplars based on affinities (*Verwandschaft*) rather than sensual correspondence. An example Benjamin uses in his essay *On the Mimetic Faculty*, which provides a semiological understanding of how the human faculty of imitation can typically recall certain meanings, and remember different objects without copying them, is as follows:

"The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train."⁹³

Children do not need to precisely copy an object that is evidently different from themselves, but they can effectively represent it and recall it to memory by mimicking it with their gestures and their voice. The object is imitated by affinity of sign and not by identity of form. These complex aspects of the aura, which were expressed by Benjamin in a fragmentary way, with a rather hermetic language, will be analyzed in depth in paragraph 2.2, in an attempt to better understand if they can build, in their specificity, a solid theoretical base to sustain the strategies of reconstruction of the lost originals that are being sought.

In his text *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* of 1928, one of the fundamental theses he supports is that the authors of this particular poetic/theatrical art took their cue from classical Greek tragedies, not limiting themselves to copying them, but transforming them into modern works in terms of style and composition. As will be seen later, he would go into this theme in greater depth about seven years later in his essay on reproducibility, applying it in general to works of art from all past eras. On this subject Charles W. Haxthausen writes:

"To reproduce a work of art was for Walter Benjamin a means of renewing it, of making it useful again in the present. (...). As his essay of 1936, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", makes clear, the stakes were high: Benjamin saw in the technique of reproduction an

⁹³ Benjamin, Walter. *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings: 1927-1934*, Volume 2. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1999_P. 720.

instrument for making not only the work of art but the world new; it led to a "shattering of tradition," which was "the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity."⁹⁴

Thus, the reproduction of a work of art as a means of renewing it, and making it useful again in the present; it is precisely in this perspective that Benjamin identifies the origin of German Baroque dramas, in their affinity with ancient models, which they sought to 'elevate' (Erhöhung) and 'overcome' (Überwindung), that is, to celebrate and improve by adapting them to the culture of their time, rather than attempting to take their identity. He writes:

„Als diese »wesensfremde Theorie« durchdrang die Interpretation, aus deren Kraft das Neue durch die Geste einer Unterwerfung die bündigste Autorität sich sichert, die Antike. Die Macht der Gegenwart in deren Medium zu erschauen, war dem Barock gegeben. Daher verstand es seine eigenen Formen als »naturgemäß« und nicht sowohl als Gegensatz denn als die Überwindung und Erhöhung der Rivalin. Auf dem Triumphwagen des barocken Trauerspiels ist die antike Tragödie die gefesselte Sklavin.“⁹⁵

Such innovative plays, which were able to emulate and update their ancestors, "chaining them in a triumphal chariot," were, however, belittled by those literary critics whom Benjamin openly opposed, who instead interpreted them as poorly executed caricature versions of them. In fact, his essay reads:

„Vielmehr hat ein sehr unkritisches Haften an der barocken Theorie des Dramas mitgewirkt. Es ist die den Tendenzen der Epoche angegliche des Aristoteles. In den meisten Stücken war diese Angleichung eine Vergrößerung. Ohne nach den erheblichen Bestimmungsgründen dieser Variation zu fahnden, war man allzuschnell bereit, von einem entstellenden Mißverständnis zu reden und von da war es zu der Auffassung, die Dramatiker der Epoche hätten im wesentlichen nichts gegeben, als die unverständige Anwendung ehrwürdiger Präzepte nicht mehr weit. Das Trauerspiel des deutschen Barock erschien als Zerrbild der antiken

⁹⁴ Haxthausen Charles W.; *Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein*. October 107/2004. October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 2004 _P. 47.

⁹⁵ Benjamin Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] First edition 1925. Redaktion Gröls-Verlag (Edition Werke der Weltliteratur), 2022 _P. 74.

Tragödie. In dieses Schema wollte ohne Schwierigkeit sich fügen, was einen geläuterten Geschmack in jenen Werken befremdend, ja wohl barbarisch anmutete. Die Fabel ihrer Haupt- und Staatsaktionen entstellte das antike Königsdrama, der Schwulst das edle Pathos der Hellenen und der blutrünstige Schlußeffekt die tragische Katastrophe. So gab das Trauerspiel sich als die unbeholfene Tragödie."⁹⁶

According to these critics, the authors of the seventeenth century had not been able to imitate the ancient models properly, as the artists of the Renaissance had done, because they had deviated too much from them, that is, they had added contents and stylistic elements so foreign that a lover of Greek tragedy could have defined them as "barbaric" aberrations. According to them, the baroque poets should have remained with a Renaissance spirit more faithful to the original prototypes without too many variations, almost copying them. Giulio Schiavoni states:

"Benjamin's challenge to German aesthetics and Kunstwissenschaft is already clear in his choice of field, namely his in-depth study of the artistic problems of the seventeenth century. For a long time, in fact, the entire Baroque era, and in particular the German literary production of the period, had been the object of reductive evaluations, which included it in the perspective of an presumed moral decadence or defined it as a mere period between the Renaissance and the age of reason (one thinks, for example, of the aesthetic condemnation pronounced in this regard in the eighteenth century by the Zurich proto-Enlightenmentists Breitinger and Bodmer). The works of writers such as Gryphius and Lohenstein, the two playwrights most frequently mentioned in Benjamin's book, of Opitz, Hallmann and so on were almost forgotten and hardly ever performed. Benjamin, on the other hand, did not only include the short-lived European Baroque - the German Baroque - as the subject of his treatment, but also intended to give full poetic dignity to the genre of the Trauerspiel, which was less successful and was seen by some as a pedantic imitation of Greek tragedy."⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Benjamin Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] First edition 1925. Redaktion Gröls-Verlag (Edition Werke der Weltliteratur), 2022 _P. 26.

⁹⁷ Schiavoni, Giulio. *Fuori dal coro*, in Walter Benjamin, *Il dramma barocco tedesco*. Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino 1999 _P. XXVII (my translation).

Other critics instead saw Baroque drama as a pedantic imitation of classical tragedy. Benjamin makes it clear that these reductive evaluations derive from a misunderstanding that influenced research and judgement on the *Trauerspiel*, - and on Baroque art in general -: a prejudice that presented it as a sort of contaminated copy of ancient drama. To this end, he uses a quotation from Fritz Strich (in the essay he makes use of more than 600 quotations) who had given a completely different interpretation:

„In seiner Arbeit über den lyrischen Stil des XVII. Jahrhunderts hat Strich diese Äquivokation, die längst die Forschung lähmte, aufgedeckt. »Man pflegt den Stil der deutschen Dichtung im 17. Jahrhundert als Renaissance zu bezeichnen. Wenn man aber unter diesem Namen mehr versteht, als die wesenlose Nachahmung des antiken Apparates, so ist er irreführend und zeugt von dem Mangel an stilgeschichtlicher Orientierung in der Literaturwissenschaft, denn von dem klassischen Geist der Renaissance hat dieses Jahrhundert nichts gehabt. Der Stil seiner Dichtung ist vielmehr barock, auch wenn man nicht nur an Schwulst und Überladung denkt, sondern auf die tieferen Prinzipien der Gestaltung zurückgeht.“⁹⁸

German baroque dramas are ultimately, according to Benjamin, purely seventeenth-century works, witnesses to their era, albeit with classical roots, with which, however, their authors do not want them to be exclusively identified.

Already Quatremère de Quincy in the first half of the 19th century, precisely using the term "mechanical" operations, writes that any copy made with the intention of replicating the identity of a model is to be considered a failure, destined to "destroy itself", because it generates confusion and tends to hide the fact that it is the extreme result of imitation:

“Those objects then are called identical, which simply appear to be so, as are all the works produced by mechanical operations. This kind of apparent identity, which is the cause of confusion between similar objects, is precisely that at which the imitation of the fine arts ought not to aim. Such

⁹⁸ Benjamin Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] First edition 1925. Redaktion Gröls-Verlag (Edition Werke der Weltliteratur), 2022 _PP. 27-28.

resemblance ought not to be its end. Repetition by means of an image being the exact opposite of that by means of identity, all imitation which has the latter in view tends only to destroy itself, since in so doing it no longer aims at appearing imitation."⁹⁹

Imitation and copy are thus presented as two distinct products of human activity and, according to the French theorist, the former, in order to be aesthetically and ethically valid, must not encroach upon the latter. The exact copy, the double, thus represents the extreme limit of imitative activity: it is the product of the reproduction of a pre-existing object in such a close aesthetic resemblance that it can be confused with it.

This argument was further explored by Charles Blanc who wrote in 1876:

"The last word in imitation is to produce a copy that one could take for the original; in other words, the masterwork of the imitator would be to make an illusion (...). It follows that the characters represented in the wax cabinets, dressed in their own clothes, with hair, eyelashes and natural eyebrows, so as to deceive the spectator, would be, in the highest degree, works of art. (...) nothing falsier than this perfect resemblance."¹⁰⁰

He therefore clearly defines the copy as a fake that generates the 'illusion' of being the original itself. In the example he uses, in which he compares copies to realistic characters in wax museums, he also wants to highlight their lack of artistic qualities. On the contrary, a work of art, to be defined as such, according to his vision, should be able to interpret the object it represents and grasp its profound essence; in fact he declares:

"Far from limiting itself to an exact copy of reality, art must penetrate the spirit of things, it must evoke the soul of its heroes"¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Quatremère de Quincy, *An Essay on the Nature, the End, and the Means of Imitation in the Fine Arts*, trans. By J.C. Kent, Smith, Elder and CO., Cornhill, London 1837_P. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Blanc M. Charles, *Grammaire des arts du dessin, architecture, sculpture, peinture: jardins, gravure en pierres fines, gravure en médailles...* H. Laurens Edit., Paris 1908 (First edition 1876)_P. 18 (my translation).

¹⁰¹ Blanc M. Charles, *Grammaire des arts du dessin, architecture, sculpture, peinture: jardins, gravure en pierres fines, gravure en médailles...* 1908_ P. 19 (my translation).

Richard Shiff considers both visions of Quatremère and Blanc in an essay specifically dedicated to the complex topic of the relationship between the original, the copy, and the imitation. This study will be explored in the next few pages in an attempt to better understand the three terms. He focuses his attention mainly on aesthetic criticism and 19th century artists, but his study tries to extrapolate the meaning of these three concepts in a general sense. He reports that at the beginning of that century, copying was considered in a negative sense as the result of a mere technical operation, where the presence of the artist's intervention lost all meaning. He writes:

“Certainly, mere copying was not regarded as a valuable artistic act, but was instead seen as meretricious, a prostitution of the self. Even when artists were commissioned to copy masterworks for educational purposes, they were not expected to suppress entirely their own personalities.”¹⁰²

So little value was attributed to the copy that even when it was made by a pupil who wanted to practise his technique by reproducing an earlier work, the master required that his personal mark emerge from it. Quoting Jacques Nicolas Paillot de Montabert, author of the *Traité Complet de la Peinture* of 1829, he reported that the mere activity of copying in the field of art was considered a “*singerie*”, an aping, generated by primitive instincts that represented the basic stage from which each artist's personal style would then develop.

Shiff goes on to explain that 19th century art theorists argued that in the imitative process as a means of producing new works, it was precisely the variations on the reference models, whether natural or artistic, that allowed the author to express his personality, to convey his ideals and his world view. Intellectual and stylistic composition allowed him, on the one hand, to penetrate the spirit of the originals

¹⁰² Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*. In Yale French Studies No. 66, *The Anxiety of Anticipation* (1984), Published By: Yale University Press_ P. 41.

he had selected as models and, on the other hand, to clearly show his belonging to his historical era.

“[the ideal] becomes the evidence of technical choice and manipulation, the gradual accretion of style leading away from direct imitation (copying) toward an ultimate idealization; it is also the sign of intellectual activity and, more generally, the imprint of the human spirit striving for a divine perfection. Is there then something subhuman in a simple copying, a thoughtless animal-like ‘*singerie*’! -” the conceit of the copyist quite often imposes the name of creation [creation] upon what is only a successful aping [*une heureuse singerie*].”¹⁰³

According to the 19th-century critics, therefore, imitation had to elevate itself from the status of a mere copy, of a ‘singerie’, which could not achieve any cultural or artistic goal. And the American historian points out the convergence in this direction of Quatremère's ideas, to which he refers when writing:

“Simply put, imitations should aim at being different from, not identical to, their original and each other. (...) Artistic technique (convention) becomes the “difference” or differentiating medium that accounts for the “ideal” quality of an image, the product of intellectual composition.”¹⁰⁴

Returning to the essay on the Trauerspiel, which seems to present basic analogies with this view of the value of imitation, Walter Benjamin associates the concept of original work with that of ruin that is transformed into a seed for a new rebirth. The original is not something fixed and unchangeable, it enters the vortex of history and is continually transformed and renewed. In fact, he states in the opening part of the book that:

„Der Ursprung steht im Fluß des Werdens als Strudel und reißt in seine Rhythmik das Entstehungsmaterial hinein.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*. 1984_P. 41.

¹⁰⁴ Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*. 1984_P. 34.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] First edition 1925. Redaktion Gröls-Verlag (Edition Werke der Weltliteratur), 2022_P. 22.

And further on he writes:

„Diese Umbildung der Sachgehalte zum Wahrheitsgehalt macht den Verfall der Wirkung in dem von Jahrzehnt zu Jahrzehnt das Ansprechende der früheren Reize sich mindert, zum Grund einer Neugeburt, in welcher alle ephemere Schönheit vollends dahinfällt und das Werk als Ruine sich behauptet.“¹⁰⁶

The 'charm' and 'ephemeral beauty' of the work, i.e. its innovative force, the status of modernity and topicality that it experiences in its own time, gradually attenuate in subsequent epochs; it becomes obsolete and turns into a ruin that bears witness to its past history. What remains is the nucleus, the essence, which becomes the germ to be reborn as a new aesthetic subject in new cultural and stylistic contexts. It is precisely in this way that, according to Benjamin, the German *Trauerspiel* was born in the 17th century on the ruins of ancient tragedy, which in turn had developed on those of the epic saga.

In light of what has been seen so far, and also in light of this complex consideration by Walter Benjamin, is it adequate to speak in absolute terms of the original? Or rather, does it make more sense to approach the idea of many originals that cyclically become ruins and are continuously renewed? Originality in art and architecture has been recognised as an abstract and theoretical concept. Richard Shiff in a footnote to the essay *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic...* being explored, provides a brief description of originality with the following sentence:

“In general, I associate the *modern* concept of originality with "finding," or the making of something (*seemingly*) out of nothing.”¹⁰⁷

According to the art critic, the fact that any work of art comes "from nothing", that is, that it is the absolute anticipator of ideas and images not present in previous

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] First edition 1925. Redaktion Gröls-Verlag (Edition Werke der Weltliteratur), 2022_P. 151.

¹⁰⁷ Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth- Century France*. 1984_P. 27.

works, is only an appearance, "seems to be". He maintains that the original has a "wild" nature, a character that cannot be univocally defined and that, in order to be understood, should be seen precisely in the relationship of complicated and conflicting cyclical interrelationship that it has with the concepts of copy and imitation. To underline how controversial the issue is, he quotes some official definitions where the copy is even identified with the original itself that it reproduces:

"Two versions of one of the more troubling definitions of the noun copy: (a) the original writing, work of art, etc., from which a copy is made (Oxford English Dictionary); (b) in printing, the [original] manuscript text on which compositors work (Littre, 1863). (In other words, the "copy" is the one and only "original" and is that which is to be copied.)"¹⁰⁸

His aesthetic criticism is focused precisely around the discourse on the uncertain nature of essential originality, for which the original in absolute terms would not exist. Referring to the artists and critics of early modernism, and more generally to aesthetic criticism, including that contemporary to him, he writes:

"In general, nineteenth-century discourse recognizes the wildness of the original; and in the wavering motion of its consequent insecurity, it anticipates and evades the incisions with which critics today would undercut any rigid or seamless history of origins. (...) In fact, many of them appear to have regarded originality just as problematically as critics do now; and it would therefore be judicious note that the discourse of early modernism characteristically attains no further level of confidence than to be *self-assuring*. (...) Clearly it sought the original-but could it ever be certain of having found it?"¹⁰⁹

According to him, this uncertainty and vagueness of the concept of the original is not only linked to theoretical speculation, but has always had concrete effects on the way artists feel and act. In fact, he argues that painters at the end of the 19th century

¹⁰⁸ Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*. 1984_P. 29.

¹⁰⁹ Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*. 1984_PP. 27-28.

experienced real identity crises caused by their search for originality and authority. On the one hand, they wanted to find a style that would be outside the history that had preceded them, and which would make each of them a forerunner, impossible to copy and match; on the other hand, they were aware that the general public would not understand and accept their works if they did not resemble others. A work of extreme originality, if it could be achieved at all, would have confused observers and would have been interpreted by most as extravagant, precisely because it could not be compared to other similar works. In this respect, Shiff describes the ambiguous working and existential situation in which Paul Gauguin found himself in the early 20th century:

“When Gauguin wrote from Tahiti (his primordial "Eden") to the Parisian dealer Vollard, he expressed the irony of his Situation: his potential for commercial success seemed to depend on both his difference from others and his likeness to them. The fact that others imitated him would make his own work, otherwise so original as to be unassimilable, meaningful and acceptable to the public. Yet if he were copied, if he served as the original "copy" *for* others, he might lose his originality-both his singularity and his priority- and appear be the copy *of* others.”¹¹⁰

The search for originality led many 19th century artists, who did not want to acknowledge their roots in the historicist neoclassical tradition, which they considered obsolete and anachronistic, to seek a language of origins by referring to distant cultures, such as Tahitian or Japanese, or by taking inspiration directly from nature. But even these innovative references, although filtered through the artist's creativity, could always be traced back to an imitation of something that already existed and were in turn imitated by others. In this regard, Shiff poses the following question:

¹¹⁰ Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth- Century France*. 1984_PP. 29-30.

"Clearly it [the discourse of early modernism] sought the original, but could it ever be certain of having found it?"¹¹¹

The answer he seems to give himself is that the only originality that can be detected in some artists, such as Gauguin or Cezanne, tormented by their "anxiety of anticipation", is that of the particularity of style, so personalised as to make them what he calls "spontaneous classics", original to the point of being inimitable. He closes the essay by writing:

"The conclusion has become as inescapable as the influence of the classic: Gauguin, in his dealings with Vollard, should not have been so worried about resembling his own followers, " those who resemble me, that is those who imitate me." Gauguin had his own spontaneity, his primitivism. He was (is) a classic. He could survive as an original who became the original copy for others. (...) If Gauguin was a classic, then he is in all of us. We are like Gauguin. Accordingly, we grow anxious over the fact that all people and all things are like one another: the emulative imitation, the deliberate misrepresentation, and even the aping copy-all may resemble the original with as little or as much identity and difference as it takes to displace the original('s) meaning. The vexing problem is that the final distinctions are not at all self-evident."¹¹²

From what he writes, it is clear that according to him, every work can be imitated with varying degrees of similarity to the original, to the extreme of being copied, and all of this modifies the meaning of the original, to the point of making its identity and authorship indistinguishable.

The American scholar argues that the misunderstanding of originality, both for art critics and for artists themselves, is mainly due to the fact that it has not been recognised that the processes of imitation are innate and fundamental elements in the creative act, and that instead they have been univocally associated in a pejorative sense with the concept of copying. He states in this regard:

¹¹¹ Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth- Century France*. 1984_P. 28.

¹¹² Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth- Century France*. 1984_PP. 53-54.

"The meaning of "imitation" was shifted (sometimes rather abruptly) from a relationship of synonymy with "invention" to a relationship of synonymy with "copy""¹¹³

This shift of meanings and the confusion between the three terms -copy, invention, imitation- is for him evidently something typically linked to the modernity of the second half of the 19th century; before then it was considered normal for artists to borrow artistic models or parts of them from other authors, to assimilate and reinterpret them, thus inventing new artefacts. Indeed, in 1832, under the heading 'invention' in his *Historical Dictionary of Architecture*, Quatremère de Quincy wrote:

"Consequently, in the language of the fine arts, invention is synonymous with creation; and these two words are drawn together by a common notion, which also serves to define them. One must stipulate, in fact, that man creates nothing in the elementary sense of the word, and that he only finds new combinations of pre-existing elements."¹¹⁴

For the French theorist, invention and imitation are two inseparable concepts, almost synonymous: in fact, under the heading 'copy' in his dictionary, he states:

"We have said that the idea of copy excluded that of imitation, and that invention eminently constituted the true imitation."¹¹⁵

Ultimately, he argues that copying is not an activity of imitation, whereas imitating is a true act of inventing. Imitation is a creative tool of combination of some other known works.¹¹⁶ In this regard, Shiff points out the convergence of ideas of Quatremère and Blanc:

¹¹³ Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*. 1984_P. 28.

¹¹⁴ Quatremère de Quincy, Antoine-Chrysostome. *The Historical Dictionary of Architecture*, trans. Samir Younés in *The True, the Fictive, and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy*. Papadakis Publisher, London. 1999_P. 179.

¹¹⁵ Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, *The Historical Dictionary of Architecture*, trans. Samir Younés in *The True, the Fictive, and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy*. Papadakis Publisher, London. 1999_P. 125.

¹¹⁶ If one could retrace in time and space all the passages that any work of art has gone through, following backwards its direct or indirect references, one would probably arrive at models that date back to prehistory, like the imprints of human hands in some cave of the Palaeolithic. But even those marks impressed on the rocks were in turn created by a process of imitation: the imitation of a part of the human body, and consequently of nature. If one wants to continue on this imaginary journey, one could say that even those

“Blanc defines (and dismisses) extreme realism as “imitation without choice”. Like Quatremère, Blanc conceives of an idealizing art as a process of invention or composition, a combination of elements. (...) In the end, one arrives at a higher form of reality, not at falsity or mere repetitious convention.”¹¹⁷

In his essay on German Baroque drama, Benjamin speaks in very similar terms of the creative combinations of elements borrowed from tradition that 17th-century artists used and could not, nor would not, conceal:

„Sein Kombinieren darf der Dichter nicht vertuschen, wenn anders nicht sowohl das bloße Ganze, denn dessen offenbare Konstruktion das Zentrum aller intentionierten Wirkungen war. Daher die Ostentation der Faktur, die, bei Calderon zumal, hervorbricht wie die aufgemauerte Wand am Gebäude, dessen Verputz sich gelöst hat.“¹¹⁸

And he states that the true artist in ancient times was a master of the *Ars inveniendi*, the art of inventing, that is, he was the one who used ancient models and had the ability to reinterpret and combine them skilfully to create new works. The

physical hands of our ancestors, which served as a cast to make the impressions, were in turn the result of a process of biological-molecular replication. Even in nature, however, there are no originals, but only continuous copies that are similar to each other. At the various “scales”, from cells to evolved organisms, nature constantly creates replicas of itself that resemble, but are not perfectly identical. Genetic variations determine the evolution of living organisms, which always adapt to new environmental conditions in dynamic processes.

Modern technology, however, already makes cloning of plants and animals possible. But the risk for an imaginary world inhabited only by clones is that, in the absence of genetic variability, it could remain deserted because the populations, being always equal to themselves, would not be able to react to the changing environmental conditions and after a few generations would become extinct. It is precisely biodiversity, together with the genetic variations of individuals, that guarantees the development and survival of living beings and their species, which with their continuous changes adapt to ever-changing environments. A world made only of biological replicas would be a sterile world, destined for extinction.

Also the study of these phenomena, associated and compared by analogy to the field of architectural reconstructions, could contribute to provide useful elements for the purpose of this research. Imitation of nature is indeed at the heart of the aesthetic research of Western philosophy and it is significant that the research platform *Original - Copy: Techniques and Aesthetics of Reproduction* of Bern University, which studies the relationship between original and copy, just starting from the theory of Walter Benjamin, includes, in an interdisciplinary context, also molecular biologist argumentations. They make comparisons between animal and plant reproduction systems with the processes of replication of works of art, from ancient times to the present day. However, this dissertation will be focused, by methodological choice, on a deductive historical analysis narrowing the field to art and architecture.

¹¹⁷ Shiff R. *The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*. 1984_P. 41.

¹¹⁸ Benjamin Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] First edition 1925. Redaktion Gröls-Verlag (Edition Werke der Weltliteratur), 2022_P. 148.

philosopher also argues that the concept of creativity, typical of his time, which by the use of imagination and fantasy seeks to break away from references to tradition, was unknown before modern times.

„Der Praktik der Adepten ähnelt das Experimentieren der barocken Dichter. Was die Antike hinterlassen hat, sind ihnen Stück für Stück die Elemente, aus welchen sich das neue Ganze mischt. Nein: baut. Denn die vollendete Vision von diesem Neuen war: Ruine. Der überschwänglichen Bewältigung antiker Elemente in einem Bau, der, ohne sie zum Ganzen zu vereinen, in der Zerstörung noch antiken Harmonien überlegen wäre, gilt jene Technik, die im einzelnen ostentativ auf die Realien, Redebäumen, Regeln sich bezieht. ›Ars inveniendi‹ muß die Dichtung heißen. Die Vorstellung von dem genialen Menschen, dem Meister artis inveniendi, ist die eines Mannes gewesen, der souverän mit Mustern schalten konnte. Die ›Phantasie‹, das schöpferische Vermögen im Sinne der Neueren, war unbekannt als Maßstab einer Hierarchie der Geister.“¹¹⁹

In an essay with the emblematic title *L'originale assente* - The Absent Original -, Monica Centanni, referring to the classical art repertoire, describes it as a set of works that at a given time were recognised by critics and the community as the bearers of authoritative ethical and aesthetic values which, in order to survive and be transmitted, wait to be chosen, re-proposed and re-interpreted in other epochs. Classical works constitute the raw material available to the artists of future generations who will use them as models to create new compositions. Ancient artistic subjects pass through the epochs maintaining their recognisability, but reappearing each time with modified aspects and adapted to new cultural contexts. She describes this dynamic process in the following terms:

“The classical tradition is a *thesaurus* in constant definition and growth. Gestures, figures and ancient symbols reveal their vitality precisely because they are continually challenged, and thus irreligiously rethought and betrayed; in fact, in the struggle for survival they are transformed,

¹¹⁹ Benjamin Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] First edition 1925. Redaktion Gröls-Verlag (Edition Werke der Weltliteratur), 2022 _P. 151.

entrusting their signs to a motion of continuous selection and reinvention, both formal and thematic."¹²⁰

When one considers classical art, one thinks of a set of fixed and unchanging works: exemplary and canonical buildings, paintings and sculptures that seem fixed in time and space, immobile in their presumed absolute originality. But individual works of art, by nature, only acquire the status of classical works a posteriori. When they are created, they are conceived by artists who are still unaware of their classicism, who in turn draw models from the repertoires of tradition and rework them with varying degrees of fidelity and new languages. The Italian scholar also states that:

"The classical tradition is the transmission of changing heritages, and is nourished by the reworking of knowledge, redrawing, in forms that change from period to period, the profile of memory. The classical artist retrieves from the repertoire a starting point, a trace, a design."¹²¹

On the one hand, therefore, the artist borrows and re-proposes elements of previous works, helping to transmit their contents to future generations, and on the other hand, he manipulates, re-interprets and transforms them into something else, to tell the subjects of his own present. The driving force behind this constantly evolving creative process, which on the one hand confirms tradition and on the other transmits it to the future and updates it, is imitation. In Monica Centanni's essay, Daniela Sacco states that:

"Imitation is at all times the impulse that drives tradition."¹²²

In support of this thought, she refers to Aby Warburg, the inventor of the "engram" theory, who in his *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* - consisting of more than a thousand images from different periods and contexts compared by analogies - investigated

¹²⁰ Centanni, Monica, *L'originale assente. Introduzione allo studio della tradizione classica*. Torino, Bruno Mondadori 2005_P. 9 (my translation).

¹²¹ CENTANNI Monica, *L'originale assente. Introduzione allo studio della tradizione classica*. 2005_P. 8 (my translation).

¹²² CENTANNI Monica, *L'originale assente. Introduzione allo studio della tradizione classica*. 2005_P. 56 (my translation).

the descent of modern works of art from representations of ancient myths and divinities. Images made in imitation of previous models in time and space were considered by the German critic to be the main means of transmitting and keeping alive the memory of cultural tradition. Sacco states:

"Aby Warburg, one of the first scholars to retrace the uninterrupted paths of artistic expression, teaches that the past can return through mnemonic traces, "engrams of emotional experience that survive as hereditary patrimony of memory". In this sense the ancient material returns without ever being identical to itself but from time to time modified in the different cultural contexts in which it is reborn, and therefore distinguishable under new guises."¹²³



Figure 57. Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne Atlas*. PATH V (plates 37, 39) *The irruption of Antiquity: drawing, grisaille, courtly games, mythical allegories (Pollaiuolo, Botticelli) 1924-29.*

The original, the copy and the imitation, have been considered so far through criticism focusing on specific periods, but the intention is to understand whether

¹²³ CENTANNI Monica, *L'originale assente. Introduzione allo studio della tradizione classica*. 2005_P. 52 (my translation).

and to what extent the reciprocal relationships between the three terms have characterised historical periods, including the present one. To this end, the concept of imitation in particular will be dealt with in detail in section 2.3.

Now taking a cue from the misunderstanding mentioned by Richard Shiff regarding the confusion that has been made by associating, in a pejorative sense, the term 'imitation' with that of 'copy', rather than with that of 'invention', it is considered useful to refer to the specific field of architecture. It was seen in the first chapter that this misunderstanding also characterised the theoretical experiments of the young Ernesto Basile, who in his youthful essay waged a battle against copying and imitation, two terms which he considered to be almost synonymous. Although he sought an absolutely new style, in the conception of his projects he could not avoid borrowing elements from tradition and then re-using them. His creative impulse was driven by processes of imitation, both when he deliberately faithfully reproduced details of earlier buildings and transposed them into new contexts - as for example the loggia of the *Patio de los Leones* in Granada for the Villa Vallegas in Rome - and when instead he reinterpreted them by making their origin less easily identifiable - as in the Calatafimi Ossuary Monument vaguely inspired by the Doric temple of Segesta -. The eclectic culture of the second half of the 19th century in which Ernesto Basile was formed can be seen as a movement against copying, driven by a desire for renewal and independence from the dominance of the repertoire of neoclassical tradition, which was already seen as a unique source of inspiration for the conception of new architecture at the beginning of the 19th century. The creativity of eclectic architects was expressed through experimentation with figurative references from different cultures and eras such as Romanesque, Gothic or Baroque, reinterpreted in a modern revival.

However, by the end of the 19th century, the architects of Art Nouveau wanted to disrupt an artistic condition of their time that they considered static, repetitive and academic, which they saw as based on the principle of eclectic historicism, in their view an arbitrary imitation of past styles. This world of historical replicas was

therefore countered by a new art, which was directly inspired by natural forms. This modern style spread through prints, magazines and international exhibitions which provided architects and artists with an immense 'natural' repertoire of images and forms to refer to when creating their works. The formal and decorative aspects were thus easily reproduced, and were in turn criticised by the next generation who accused them of favouring the repetition of superficial forms over the essence or core of a true work of art. It was probably this continuous copying activity that led to the decline of this style.

In 1922, when Adolf Loos' radical ideas on the abolition of ornament were already widespread, Hans Tietze, in an essay on the architect Otto Wagner, criticising his pure Jugendstil works, metaphorically hoped that a flood would rid them of the superfluous decorations that obscured their structure and masses - in his opinion the only essential constructive and aesthetic elements -. Tietze's sentence is quoted by Werner Oechslin, in his book *Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos und der evolutionäre Weg zur modernen Architektur*:

„Nach der radikalen Erfahrung eines Loos konnte Wagner letztlich nichts anderes bleiben als diese Mittelstellung, für die Tietze Worte wie «Tagesmode», das «Frivole» und «individualistische Dekoration», die <<nicht dem Baukern entwächst», anführt. Um dies zu verdeutlichen, bemüht er das Bild, gemäss welchem gleichsam ein Platzregen diesen Kern freilegen sollte: «Man könnte sich ein Elementarereignis vorstellen, das das Unwesentliche von Otto Wagners Bauten herabwüschte und sie nicht verstümmelte, sondern zu konzentrierter Wirkung erhöhe.»“ Man kann sehr wohl nachvollziehen, dass sich dieses Modell einer Mittelstellung, der die Modernität bloss in ihrem «Augenblicks— Vorzug» eigen war, zu dem Zeitpunkt besonders deutlich niederschlug, als Adolf Loos ins Zentrum der Aufmerksamkeit rückte.“¹²⁴

Werner Oechslin uses the metaphor of the *Stilhülse und Kern* - stylistic shell and kernel - to investigate the evolutionary processes that gave rise to modern

¹²⁴ Oechslin, Werner. *Stilhülse und Kern: Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos und der evolutionäre Weg zur modernen Architektur*. gta Verlag, Zürich, 1994_P. 97.

architecture. The art critics he considers in his essay had used the so-called theory of clothing - *Bekleidungstheorie* - to explain, by analogy with fashion, the gradual shedding of stylistic decoration (*Stilhülse*) that the late Otto Wagner - in part - and the proto-functionalist architects had brought about in their conception of the volumes and "naked" surfaces of their buildings (Kern). From his analysis it emerges that most modernists interpreted Otto Wagner's works in a reductive way; they criticized them only on the basis that they resulted from imitative processes, of which the repetitive stylistic decorations were the consequence. On the contrary, he interprets the progressive transformation of the Viennese architect's projects - from those rich in floral decoration, to the late ones where the aesthetic aspects were entrusted almost exclusively to tectonics and masses - as the stages of a formal and intellectual research preparatory to the development of the future style.¹²⁵ According to Oechslin, therefore, certain functionalist critics condemned the 'stylistic shell' in retrospect, only because it was linked to imitation, but did not realise that it represented a fundamental historical step towards the affirmation of the 'Kern'.

The bare essentiality and normalization of buildings that the Modern Movement proposed in order to free architecture from the shell of imitation, however, also underwent a process of standardisation, still paradoxically determined by the very phenomenon it fought against. Wim Denslagen argues that the architects of this movement, like those of any age, could not have been exempt from transferring into

¹²⁵ Werner Oechslin, in the English version edited by Harry Francis Mallgrave in 1993, *The evolutionary Way to Modern Architecture: The Paradigm of Stilhülse und Kern* states:

"We can generally observe in Wagner's late work that although foreshortened, the "Kern formation of a modern style" thrives to such an extent that the Hülle is confined to a few decorative accessories." (P. 387), and concludes by saying:

"Just as we can see the expressive function of the details and the decoration pass - from Blondel to Etienne-Louis Boullée - to the architectural body itself, so we can also see Wagner's position in relation to the fully developed Modernism (for example, to the primary forms [*formes primaires*] of Le Corbusier) as a valid aesthetic for architectural masses. The models and theoretical references discussed here are not a substitute for a precise architectural and historical analysis of Wagner's work. It is hoped, however, that this account may give some indication of the rich and complex set of conditions with which Modernism struggled at that time, before the network of arguments was altogether abandoned or laid aside under the banner of later radicalism" (P. 396).

their projects the souvenir signs of other buildings they had appreciated. He considers imitation to be an innate mechanism in creative processes that designers, consciously or unconsciously, cannot do without. He states in fact:

“Historicism in its turn was driven out by the Modern Movement with the argument that architecture had above all to be functional and that stylistic imitations were a tragic mistake perpetrated by the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, despite its rational and humanitarian ideals, the Modern Movement never succeeded in totally eliminating imitation.

Why was this so? Perhaps the explanation is that it is simply impossible to create an architectural design that is based a hundred per cent on functional requirements and which does not contain the slightest reference to other works of architecture. Presumably no architect is capable of completely ignoring his feeling for form and designing as a sort of automaton, without any memory of the architecture he or she had once been taught to admire. Pure functionalism is perhaps a fiction after all.”¹²⁶

Thus, to briefly summarise the content of this paragraph, the search for absolute originality, although probably impossible to achieve, has in every age motivated artists to undertake creative experiments that are always new compared to those of the generations that preceded them. With multiple approaches they have reused, reinterpreting them in varying degrees of adherence to them, works taken from the repertoire of tradition. Most of them, however, starting from the second half of the 19th century, according to Richard Shiff's interpretation, have confused the concept of copy with that of imitation, and because of this misunderstanding have aimed their strategies at fighting against the latter, believing they were doing so against the former. It has also been seen that mere copying has been interpreted by historians such as Blanc or Quatremère as a source of ambiguity that makes no contribution to the evolution of art, and by Walter Benjamin predominantly as a repetition that undermines the authenticity of the original work and its value as historical testimony, that is, its aura.

¹²⁶ Denslagen Wim, *Romantic Modernism. Nostalgia in the World of Conservation*. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2009_ PP. 169-170.

The exploration of these aesthetic/philosophical speculations now contributes to a better understanding of the motivations behind the criticism of the *Frauenkirche* in Dresden, seen in the previous paragraph, and in general of those copies of buildings from the past which are widely built in historic city centres now out of context, the so-called "Kulissen" architecture. In this respect, it may be useful to consider the ducal palace in Braunschweig, whose new baroque facades, built in 2005, even enclose part of a modern shopping centre with more than 150 shops called *Schloss-Arkaden* to which they are fully integrated; or the Stadtschloss in Potsdam, whose reconstruction was completed in 2013, standing in an area now crossed by large highways. Significantly, the western façade of the latter building bears the large inscription *Ceci n'est pas un château* - This is not a castle - by the artist Annette Paul, as an explicit reference to René Magritte's painting of 1929, in which the caption *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* appears under the realistic image of a pipe; The Belgian artist entitled the painting *La trahison des images* - the betrayal of images -, emphasising the ambiguity between the image depicted and the real object it represents. The parallel is clear: just as the painted pipe is not a real pipe, the reconstructed facades of the Stadtschloss do not enclose the original rococo palace, but only represent it. This artistic citation of Potsdam, therefore, could be interpreted as a kind of caption that very briefly recounts the vicissitudes of this building, i.e. trying to explain to observers that it is a copy of its predecessor and not the authentic original; but if in the future the inscription is removed, there will be one less visually perceptible clue to understanding this fact. Therefore, it is necessary to understand by means of which speculative strategies and architectural practices the model of a historical building that no longer exists can be reproduced, in order to avoid a forgery that can generate misunderstandings: how, in which context and under which conditions. To this end, two parallel directions will be followed: on the one hand, the evolution of the concept of mimesis in the aesthetics of Western philosophical thought will be investigated; on the other, the world of copies and imitations will be explored through the critical analysis of some exemplary case studies of

architectural reconstruction from the 19th century to the present day. The intention is always to develop a design approach to the specific case of the reconstruction of Palermo. The study will start from an analysis of Benjamin's philosophical conception of the aura, in an attempt to understand whether in particular his early intuitions on reproducibility, with the consequent aesthetic and political implications, could form the basis of the formulation of a reconstructive Villa Deliella.



Figure 58. *The new Residenzschloss and the Schloss-Arkaden, Braunschweig 2005*



Figure 59. *Interior of the Schloss-Arkaden shopping centre, Braunschweig*



Figure 60. *The Potsdamer Stadtschloss, rebuilt in 2013*



Figure 61. *"Ceci n'est pas un château" by Annette Paul, Potsdamer Stadtschloss 2013*

2.2 Walter Benjamin and the decay of the aura

As already seen, the aesthetic analysis of the concepts of copying and imitation in art is a fundamental theme that constantly recurs in Walter Benjamin's writings. In 1933, in *The Doctrine of the Similar*, he declared that imitation is, among human activities, the most important:

“Nature produces similarities- one need only think of mimicry. Human beings, however, possess the very highest capability to produce similarities. Indeed, there may not be a single one of the higher human functions which is not decisively co-determined by the mimetic faculty.”¹²⁷

Two years later, he explored specifically the theme of the copy in his famous essay *The work of art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction*, some aspects of which have already been considered. The edition of this text went through very troubled events. Between 1935 and 1939 Benjamin produced five different drafts, all incomplete, four in German and one in French, the only one he could see published before his early death. He did not consider this edition as legitimate because of the cuts that the publisher made to the text without his permission. In this work he analysed the influence that technological evolution has had in the field of art and the new possibilities it has offered to mass society. However, this aesthetic-political theme is not treated in a linear and immediately comprehensible way, because of the fragmentary and enigmatic style with which it was written.

In the first chapter, he states that the work of art has always been reproducible and that the copies in the past have had basically three different purposes: they were mainly used by artists as tools for the practice of their students, as a means to make their works known in faraway places, and by others as a source of income.

¹²⁷ Journal Article. *Doctrine of the Similar* (1933) Benjamin W. and K. Tarnowski_ New German Critique No. 17, Special Walter Benjamin Issue (Spring, 1979). Published by: Duke University Press, P. 65.

“Such copying was also done by pupils as an artistic exercise, by masters in order to give works wider circulation, ultimately by anyone seeking to make money.”¹²⁸

This short introduction briefly illustrates what has been the function of copying works of art since antiquity, and coincides with the philosophical reflections of many thinkers who, from ancient Greece to the 19th century, analysed the roles and differences between copying and imitating in art. The aesthetic theories that Aristotle, Seneca, Francesco Petrarca, Leon Battista Alberti, Quatremere de Quincy, and many others formulated in different eras show strong similarities: they attributed to copying predominantly an educational function, while they recognised in imitation, understood as a representation of nature and/or pre-existing works of art, a creative tool that allows the creation of new works and knowledge. These aspects alluded to for now will be further explored in the next section.

Already Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. argued that imitation is an innate characteristic of human nature, a source of knowledge and at the same time a useful educational tool. Referring to the origins of poetic art, he states:

“From childhood men have an instinct for representation, and in this respect, differ from other animals that he has far more imitative and learns his first lessons by representing things.”¹²⁹

Similarly, about four centuries later, in imperial Rome in the 1st century AD, Quintilian (35-96 AD) advises his pupils to take as a reference what has already been invented, just as painters imitate and follow the masters of the past, but warns them that it is not enough to be able to reproduce copies of previous works (by imitation) to be a valid orator or artist. In this regard he states that:

¹²⁸ Benjamin W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*_ P. 3.

¹²⁹ Aristotle: *The poetics* in: *Aristotle: The poetics. "Longinus": On the sublime. Demetrius: On style*, trans. W. Hamilton . William Heinemann Ltd, London 1927_P. 13.

“The first point, then, that we must realise is that imitation alone is not sufficient, if only for the reason that a sluggish nature is only too ready to rest content with the inventions of others. For what would have happened in the days when models were not, if men had decided to do and think of nothing that they did not know already? The answer is obvious: nothing would ever have been discovered.” (X, II, 4).¹³⁰

Ultimately, for the Latin writer, if artists merely copied the models of already realised works, without adding their own creative contribution, the evolutionary processes of culture and art would be interrupted.

In this regard, it is considered pertinent to mention the case of the Latin poet Phaedrus (ca. 15 BC - ca. 50 AD), from the generation before Quintilian's, representative of the aesthetic debate on imitation. His *Fabulae* were conceived as a translation and rewriting of the *Fables* of the Greek poet Aesop (620 – 564 BC); about five centuries later, he used the same subjects and characters to express his personal vision of life and art. Phaedrus' fables in turn were rewritten in the 2nd century AD in Greek verse by Babrius (late 2nd century - first half of the 3rd century) and, some 1600 years later, by the poet Jean De la Fontaine (1621 -1695) in French in the work entitled *Fables choisies mises en vers*. The contents of the fables are practically identical, although each writer translates them into his own language and interprets them in his own personal style, adapting them to the tastes of the time in which he lived.

Phaedrus tells in the prologue of the fifth book of his *Fabulae*, which in his time was in vogue a sort of revivalist trend that made his contemporaries appreciate reproductions of classical masterpieces. The absolutely new and original works of art, on the contrary, were even perceived with distrust and envy to the point that artists, in order to sell their creations, were forced to sign them using the names of ancient sculptors or famous painters – as Praxiteles or Myron - in a misleading way.

“I have already paid to Aesop whatever I owed him by way of acknowledgment, and if I bring in his name hereafter anywhere, you must

¹³⁰ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* Volume 4 transl. H.E. Butler. Harvard University Press, Cambridge; William Heinemann, Ltd. London, 1936_P. 77.

know that it is for the sake of his prestige, just as certain artists nowadays succeed in getting a higher price for their new productions if they inscribe the name of Praxiteles on their marbles, Mys [Myron] on their polished silver, and Zeuxis on their paintings. So much greater is the favour that biting envy bestows on bogus antiquities than upon sound modern productions."¹³¹

His is an explicit critique of the cultural backwardness that makes people prefer false, repetitive copies of works of the past to contemporary works of art that can instead express values and content reflecting the current context. In this passage he also clearly explains the reasons that led him to take Aesop as a reference, and at the same time expresses his attitude towards him. According to the Roman fabulist, the re-use of a previous work, selected from among many for the recognition of its artistic value, emphasises and reinforces the authority of the original author, helps to increase and perpetuate his notoriety, and in parallel allows new concepts and feelings to be expressed. In each of the five books of his *Fabulae* he always quotes Aesop and pays homage to him, explicitly stating that he was inspired by his art. But progressively from the first to the fifth book he is increasingly proclaiming his own creative independence. In his view, the fact that he took his cue from fairy tales written some five centuries earlier by another author did not detract from his autonomous creative ability and literary skill, and he explicitly and proudly proclaims this throughout his book. This process of progressive detachment from the original source of inspiration is explained by Concetto Marchesi who writes:

"(...) the Aesopian fables of Phaedrus: which Phaedrus now calls Aesop's fables, with careful and solicitous distinction, because they belong to Aesop's genre, not because they are Aesop's, since he has dealt with many new subjects using an old genre and perfecting it. Thus Phaedrus, while continuing to proclaim brevitas as the canon of his art, is increasingly asserting his own originality. In the first book he declares without any doubt that Aesop is Auctor of his fables, in the second he asks for licence only for

¹³¹ Babrius, Phaedrus, *Fables* Translated by Ben Edwin Perry, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965. _P. 351.

some pleasant novelty, in the third he boasts of having made a way of Aesop's path and of writing a book in Aesop's style, in the fourth he glories in his fables that are Aesopic but not Aesop's. In the fifth he finally announces that he has long since given back to Aesop what he owed him, and warns that he has used Aesop's name, by grace of his authority, as some artists used to put the name of Praxiteles, of Scopas or of Myron or of Zeus to their works because the biting envy, ready to bite the best productions of more recent times, usually spares even false works of antiquity. Thus he ends up with an explicit profession of originality: and Aesop "auctor" in the first book, has become merely a label in the fifth."¹³²

Phaedrus, therefore, drew inspiration from the original Greek work, translated it, reworking it in a modern key, but avoiding a priori to execute a mere copy; his fables are developed with autonomy of style, contents, and different meanings, and with an updated and personal vision of life and morality. This interpretation of the concept of translation perhaps allows us to understand why sometimes the remake of a film, a ballet, or a pop song seems to reinforce and re-actualise the qualities of the original prototypes, at the same time generating new independent aesthetic subjects which over time take on an authenticity of their own.¹³³

Returning to Walter Benjamin's premise quoted at the beginning of the chapter, it is clear that the value he attributes to faithful copies of past works of art, made throughout history, coincides with that of the ancient authors considered above: mere facsimile artistic production has after all always had an important educational and dissemination value, not much more. As he writes, it is also clear that he considers the pragmatic creation of replicas not very noble, when this is aimed exclusively at the search for economic profit through their sale. Continuing on, he

¹³² Marchesi, Concetto, *Fedro e la favola latina*, Vallecchi Editore Firenze, 1923. _PP. 43-44 (my translation).

¹³³ In the field of music composition, new versions of famous classical symphonies have been continuously created through the practice of transcription. The composer Ferruccio Busoni (1866 - 1924) devoted much of his career to transcribing for piano works that Johannes Sebastian Bach had written for organ, harpsichord, and other musical instruments. His approach, at once faithful and emancipatory, allowed him to re-actualise the archetypes he referred to and contributed to further enhancing the prestige of the great German composer. This practice is currently widespread and one of the countless examples of transcriptions that could be cited are Vivaldi's Four Seasons reinterpreted by Max Richter who introduced sounds produced by electronic instruments among the original violin ones.

states that any copy of works of art, even if performed with the most sophisticated systems, cannot reproduce its authenticity, the *here* and *now* of the original. As previously mentioned, it is precisely because of their lack of *hic* and *nunc* that copies in the past have contributed to strengthening the authority of the original works, generating the concept of authenticity. Observing an original of which a copy has not yet been made, there is still no reason to think about its uniqueness. Referring to the possibilities of reproduction of the images, which the technique of xylography had already allowed, he in fact states that:

“‘Genuine’ was something a medieval Madonna image was not at the time of his making – not yet; then was something it became over the course of ensuing centuries, most plentifully, perhaps, in the last.”¹³⁴

Eva Guelen, in describing this concept, introduces the fundamental one of the decline of the aura:

"Authenticity is a belated effect. In the beginning was not the original, but rather the reproduction, which makes the concept of authenticity possible in the first place. Authenticity becomes "authentic" only against the background of reproducibility. That means, however, that authenticity is compromised from the start, inauthentic from the start, for its origin lies not in itself, but rather in its opposite, reproduction.

Like authenticity, aura is essentially determined through its loss. The decline does not happen to, but rather constitutes the aura. The content and contours of the definition of the aura are determined by the fact that it appears only as it is disappearing.”¹³⁵

The advent of modern technology, with its ability to produce in a very short time an infinite number of re-productions of works that have already been conceived, and to exhibit them simultaneously in different places, has, on the one hand, made it possible to confirm their authenticity - indeed, it has actually generated it - but, on the other hand, has also compromised it, because it has created new, non-auratic

¹³⁴ Benjamin W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*_ P. 39.

¹³⁵ Guelen, Eva in: *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, edited by Gerhard Richter. Stanford University Press, 2002_P. 135.

versions of them that determine their decline. From this phenomenon were born, according to Benjamin, the premises for an epochal revolution: the massification of art. In other words, the work of art has lost its traditional role as a cult object, which had always been used to represent and legitimise the power of restricted privileged groups, and has become a real product at the service of multitudes of people. Benjamin writes:

“A cathedral quits its site to find a welcome in the studio of an art lover; a choral work performed in a hall or in the open air can be heard in a room.”¹³⁶

The new media - cinema, radio, photography - in modern times have the strength to threaten the authority of the original work, which for millennia had managed to maintain its supremacy over manual reproductions; the aesthetic value of artistic images takes for the first time a marginal position with respect to the political function that they can and must play, in view of the education and emancipation of people, towards a classless society. In this sense, he considers "the concepts of creativity and genius, of eternal value and mystery" to be obsolete, as well as dangerous, in that, in the hands of totalitarian regimes, they can become the retrieved instruments of mass manipulation. The reproduced work definitively competes with the original and eradicates its traditional function from the foundations, completely changing the general meaning of art. On this subject Patrice Ladwig writes:

He proposes that modern technologies such as film and photography change the way we perceive the world: While a painting as an original has, according to Benjamin, an “aura” (substituting the “magic” of his language philosophy), modern techniques of reproduction (the capacity to produce infinite copies) and mass consumption are not able to incorporate this aura. However, Benjamin here exposes not a simple melancholia for older times and other cultures, but also sees opportunities opening up through this concept. The cinema itself, with its fast-moving images and overstimulation, can, first, create a shock that frees the subject from its routines. Secondly,

¹³⁶ Benjamin W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*_ P. 7.

Benjamin proposes that, through these technologies, the masses develop a greater desire to get closer to the image, and to annihilate the uniqueness of the object by mimetically appropriating it.¹³⁷

In this radical vision, the concept of aura, the leitmotiv around which the essay is structured, plays a central role. In 1931, he had already written in his *Little History of Photography*, referring to photographer Eugène Atget:

“He was the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of decline. He cleanses this atmosphere—indeed, he dispels it altogether: he initiates the emancipation of object from aura, which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography.”¹³⁸

The aura to which he referred, evidently, consisted of the pomposity and sacredness that emanated from traditional photographs, which were still conceived, in the early decades of the 20th century, with the compositional methods typical of academic painting, and in which the protagonists were mainly human subjects. The French photographer, on the other hand, portraying for the most part only deserted and abandoned glimpses of Paris that objectively documented common urban situations, taken in their frank everyday life, had desecrated the aura of nineteenth-century bourgeois tradition. He did not seek the beautiful, “*the great sights and so-called landmarks*”, but portrayed unconventional subjects such as “*the Paris courtyards, where from night to morning the handcarts stand in serried ranks; or the tables after people have finished eating and left, the dishes not yet cleared away*”¹³⁹. In short, the random and immediate photo of the wretched entrance to a Parisian brothel was, according to Benjamin, much more eloquent than any meticulously designed auratic portrait, showing allegorical subjects conventionally placed in the image.

¹³⁷ Ladwig, Patrice. Mimetic Theories, Representation, and 'Savages': Critiques of the Enlightenment and Modernity Through the Lens of Primitive Mimesis. in Forberg, C. & Stockhammer, P. (eds.). *The Transformative Power of the Copy*. Heidelberg University Publishing. 2017_PP. 59-60.

¹³⁸ Benjamin W. *Little History of Photography* Selected writings vol.2 1927-1934 Harvard University Press London 1999_P. 518.

¹³⁹ Benjamin W. *Little History of Photography*_P. 519.



Figure 62. Eugène Atget, *Cour 16 rue Saurin (?)*, c. 1912. The Clark Art Institute



Figure 63. Eugène Atget, *Entrance of a brothel in Paris, 106 rue de Suffren*, c.1900

In the same pages of the essay on photography is his famous and hermetic definition of aura:

“What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the

hour become part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.”¹⁴⁰

It is evident that for him the aura is not precisely a characteristic that belongs to the work itself, anthropic or natural as it may be; instead, it is to be found in the relationship that the artistic product, inserted in its original context, establishes with its place and the observer, at a precise moment. This principle is clarified by Miriam Bratu Hansen who, in a study specifically devoted to the aura, referring to Walter Benjamin's essay on photography, writes:

“The aura of objects such as clothing or furniture stands in a metonymic relation to the person who uses them or has been using them. Thus Schelling’s coat will pass into immortality with the philosopher’s image—“the shape it has borrowed from its wearer is not unworthy of the wrinkles in his face” (...). In other words, the aura of Schelling’s coat does not derive, say, from its unique status as a handcrafted, custom-made object but from a long-term material relationship with the wearer’s physique or, rather, physiognomy. It thus seems to participate in—and figuratively instantiate—the logic of the trace, the indexical dimension or existential bond, in photographic signification.”¹⁴¹

These characteristics of the aura are peculiar to works of art which, as in the example of the coat of the philosopher Friedrich Schelling, - an original example immortalised in a photograph whose shape has adapted to that of its owner's body -, bear witness to the imprint of their history not so much in their materiality as in the unique union they have established with the place and time in which they were conceived. The perception of the original work of art is the result of this symbiosis, from which it is inseparable. Bratu Hansen states:

“These few examples make it evident that the aura is not an inherent property of persons or objects but pertains to the medium of perception, naming a particular structure of vision (though one not limited to the

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin W. *Little History of Photography* _PP. 518-519.

¹⁴¹ Hansen, Miriam Bratu. *Benjamin’s Aura*. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 2, The University of Chicago Press, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1086/529060>. [16.06.2022] _PP. 340-341.

visual). More precisely, aura is itself a medium that defines the gaze of the human beings portrayed.”¹⁴²

The traditional aesthetic dimension of art, however, according to Benjamin, has had in the past, and can have even more, dangerous reactionary effects in a capitalist society, and for this reason he foresees and hopes for the decadence of the auratic dimension of the work, that is, of its ritual aspect, linked to the sacred and religious sphere. He claims that an important media that can accelerate this process of decay, aimed at the politicisation of art, is the cinema, which is able to expose images simultaneously in various places to large audiences. The German historian writes further:

“As is often pointed out, Benjamin deploys Riegl’s concepts, in particular the opposition of contemplative distance and haptic nearness, throughout the artwork essay to throw into relief the tac-tile, haptic character of twentieth-century avant-garde art and film against the phenomenal distance of traditional, auratic art.”¹⁴³

Figurative arts such as painting, not only the traditional auratic ones but also the avant-garde ones, although reproducible, by their nature have less chance of being spread and understood than cinema. According to Benjamin, the same uncultivated masses that show indifference or aversion to a Picasso painting, not having the tools to decipher its contents and not having many opportunities to see it, can instead appreciate a film, for example one by Chaplin, and even unconsciously receive progressive teachings from it. Movies like *The Circus* or *Modern Times*, to give an example, with their tragicomic situations and surreal effects, had the ability, on the one hand, to excite the spectators and, on the other hand, through the themes of denunciation dealt with, to make them become aware of their new political-social role. Without realizing it, in distracted habit, seeing and reviewing these new cinematographic products, the new proletarian classes would have formed their

¹⁴² Hansen, Miriam Bratu. *Benjamin’s Aura*. Critical Inquiry, vol. 34, no. 2_P. 342.

¹⁴³ Hansen, Miriam Bratu. *Benjamin’s Aura*. Critical Inquiry, vol. 34, no. 2_PP. 352-353.

own opinion as "competent judges", emancipating themselves from their condition subordinate to the power of a few.

In this regard Eva Geulen states:

"The other central theme is the modern masses, the advent of which Benjamin relates in temporal and mutually causal terms to the new technologies of reproduction. Fascism and reactionary politics aim to repress the revolutionary character of the new media, in which the masses look themselves in the eye for the first time. The cult of stars testifies to the politically motivated and inherently anachronistic attempt to reanimate the aura of former times."¹⁴⁴

Therefore, this same instrument, the cinema, in the hands of totalitarian regimes can be used in reverse for reactionary and demagogic purposes. In this regard, Benjamin writes in the afterword to his essay on the work of art:

"Fascism leads logically to an aestheticization of political life. The violation of the masses, which in a leader cult it forces to their knees, corresponds to the violation exercised by a film camera, which Fascism enlists in the service of producing cultic values."¹⁴⁵

Fascist propaganda, through the projection of appropriately manipulated films and documentaries, celebrated the war and supported the submission of the masses to a despot. These were attempts to maintain the status quo, exploiting the persuasive power of the cult value of the image, which Benjamin, however, considered outdated by the historical process of politicisation of Art. The mis-use of the cinematographic medium was fed by the same motivations that induced dictators to use the technique in general for inhuman purposes:

"Rather than develop rivers into canals, it [the imperialistic war] diverts the human stream to flow into the bed of its trenches; rather than scatter seeds

¹⁴⁴ Geulen, Eva in: *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, 2002_P. 127.

¹⁴⁵ Benjamin W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*_ P. 36.

from its aeroplanes, it drops incendiary bombs on cities; and in gas warfare it has found a new way of doing away with aura".¹⁴⁶

The new advanced technological tools therefore offer important new opportunities, but the mere fact of utilizing them is not enough to ensure the achievement of a democratic utopian goal; it is necessary to use them, but in an appropriate manner. In this regard, he wishes philosophers, intellectuals, and artists to direct the realization of works that have the dual objective of making the masses aware of their political power and educating them according to progressive social principles.

Eva Geulen writes:

"In fifteen sections, Benjamin diagnoses the decay of the aura as a symptom of modernity. The receptive stance corresponding to the auratic work of art is that of contemplation. Both are based on the concept of cult-value, which is opposed to the exhibition-value of the work of art that is not only reproducible, but is from the start conceived with reproduction in mind. From the standpoint of reception, film demands and promotes the stance of distracted attention, the structural characteristics of which Benjamin develops with reference to architecture as an ideal type."¹⁴⁷

At various points in the essay, Benjamin associates cinema and architecture, because of their similar intrinsic communicative characteristics, as well as the possibility that they can both be seen by a large number of people at the same time. He uses architecture to explain the mechanisms, already described, with which cinema is perceived by the masses, that is, through its unconscious use, in "distraction". He writes:

"Architecture has never had fallow periods. Its history is longer than that of any other art, and its effect ought to be recognized in any attempt to account for the relationship of the masses to the work of art. Buildings are received in a twofold manner: by use and by perception. Or, better: tactilely and optically. Such reception cannot be understood in terms of the concentrated attention of a traveler before a famous building. On the tactile side, there is

¹⁴⁶ Benjamin W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, PP. 37-38.

¹⁴⁷ Geulen, Eva in: *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, PP. 126-127.

no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side. Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation. (...) Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to evade such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important tasks wherever it is able to mobilize the masses. It does so currently in film. Reception in distraction-the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception-finds in film its true training ground. Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception. In this respect, too, it proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics."¹⁴⁸

In the essay on the reproducibility of the work of art, he frequently uses the term of perceptive "shock" that modern art, freed from its auratic dimension, provokes in the observers, who are unconsciously educated according to progressive values through its apperception. He explicitly states that art and architecture, like cinema, can also play an important role as a media tool in the process of liberation of peoples, who in the distracted habit of its daily use and through visual perception should be able to understand its deep meaning over time. But if it is intuitive to imagine how progressive ideals can be expressed for example by a director through a film, it is certainly more complicated to understand how this can be done by an architect through a building. Benjamin does not mention this explicitly in his essay, but as will shortly be seen, the answers can be found in his other texts.

This question of the possibility of using the communicative faculties of architecture retrospectively or progressively, like those of the cinema, seems to be important and topical today, particularly in the field of reconstruction where, according to many scholars, as we have seen, some interventions have attempted through copies *à l'identique* of ancient buildings that have disappeared to select

¹⁴⁸ Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England 2008_PP. 40-41.

history in order to affirm the political ideas of the ruling class. Examples such as the *Frauenkirche* in Dresden show how the political classes in power who promoted them resurrected an idealised image of a specific moment in history, erasing others that were not in line with their own ideas. This has resulted in 'archaeological' reconstructions that have inhibited the possibility of making citizens, especially those of future generations, critically aware of all the historical events that their community has gone through over time. As seen, according to many scholars, the preservation of the church ruins in their state would on the one hand have left a clear trace of the German socialist period and on the other hand would have testified and warned citizens against the catastrophic results of the war, which are no longer perceptible today.

Drawing a parallel with the specific case of Palermo, a false copy of the Villa Deliella built today would give the impression of wanting to wipe out the memory of the "building sack", that vast demolition action carried out since the 60s by the corrupt powers of the city, heedless of the preservation of its historical and artistic heritage. Instead, the citizens of Palermo, like those of any other city, need to be informed and to become aware, also through art, of the important issues of their community, in order to be able to consciously and actively participate in its political and social life. To this end, the particular site of the villa would require the presence of some significant work that, conceived with the most disparate artistic strategies, would be capable of provoking that "perceptive shock" of which Benjamin spoke. In short, it would be desirable to install a "monument", according to the etymological definition given by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, which on the one hand can recount the historical events of the site, and at the same time stimulate the critical sense of the observers. An expressive work, rich in content, which, like the rubble heap of the *Frauekirche*, bears witness to the past and offers opportunities for reflection for the future.

The emancipation of the masses through art has always been oppressed instead by totalitarian regimes, to which Benjamin was openly opposed, which have always

promoted re-propositions in style, or reconstructions of monumental buildings of the past, aimed at the instrumental celebration of the greatness and power of the nation. An example that could be given in this regard is that of the ephemeral reconstruction of the Roman basilica of Leptis Magna in Libya that Benito Mussolini entrusted to the architect Armando Brasini to represent Italy at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris. Monica Palmeri writes:

“By reproducing the Leptis Magna Basilica in Paris, the Italian committee wanted to date the starting point of Italian colonial history back to the Roman Empire, consequently creating a bond between the past and the present and increasing the prestige of the Fascist regime’s policies.”¹⁴⁹

On that occasion, the classical forms of the building that Emperor Septimius Severus had built in the Libyan city in 209 A.D. were copied, with the aim of associating the origins of the fascist regime with those of the Roman Empire and thus justifying the colonial expansionist policy under the pretext of being the legitimate heirs of those lands. Monica Palmeri states:

“The decision to use the Roman architectural lexicon enriched by Renaissance details was part of the Italian committee’s program to re-write and re-interpret history. The Fascist government chose to present the African war campaign not as a conquest but as a homecoming to legitimise their imperialism by reaffirming their supposed right to recover something stolen. At the same time, the Italian section at the exhibition was supposed to claim the common origin of European imperialism in the glorious Roman past and present the Fascist Italian state as its heir, underlining its role as a legitimate European empire of the twentieth century.”¹⁵⁰

Thereby the use of a copy of an ancient building was obviously reduced to visual propaganda, asserting a historical or mystical continuity to legitimize current political claims.

¹⁴⁹ Palmeri Monica, *The Time of the Myth: Situating Representations of the Roman Empire within Italian Colonialism, 1911–1940*, in *Global Histories*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Oct. 2017_P. 118.

¹⁵⁰ Palmeri Monica, *The Time of the Myth: Situating Representations of the Roman Empire within Italian Colonialism, 1911–1940_P. 115.*



Figure 64. A. Brasini, interior of the Italian pavilion at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris.

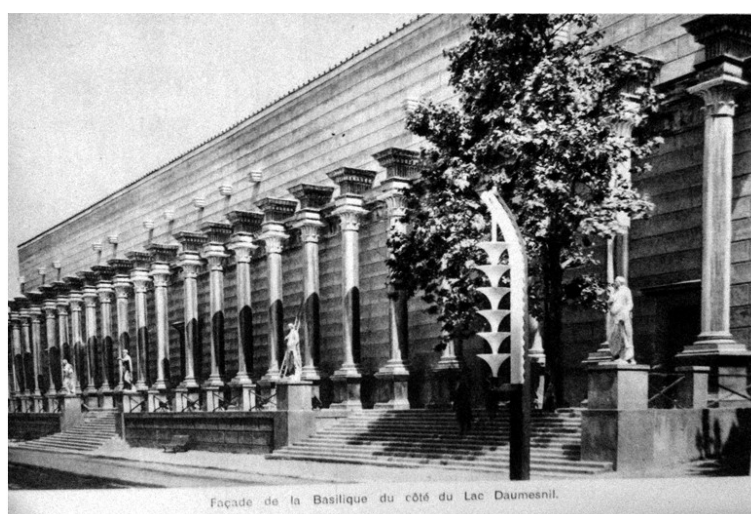


Figure 65. A. Brasini, exterior of the Italian pavilion at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris.



Figure 66. B. Mussolini visits the ruins of the Basilica of Leptis Magna, 1937. Istituto Luce.

Miriam Bratu Hansen, points out that the critique against these instrumental attempts to re-emerge the auratic art of the past was central to Walter Benjamin's analysis of the delicate relationship between art technology and the masses:

“Diverse practices of aura simulation converged and culminated, however, in supplying the means for resurrecting the aura’s undead remains in the arena of national-populist and fascist politics. More precisely, this fatal resurrection was the heuristic vantage point that mandated, in the first place, Benjamin’s genealogical tracking of the catastrophic concatenation of art, technology, and the masses.”¹⁵¹

In *Experience and Poverty* of 1933, Benjamin points out how humanity had failed to make proper use of the experience of culture and history, producing the horrors of war and transforming itself into a new barbaric society.

“For what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience?
Where it all leads when that experience is simulated or obtained by

¹⁵¹ Bratu Hansen, Miriam, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. University of California Press, 2012_p. 117.

underhanded means is something that has become clear to us from the horrific mishmash of styles and ideologies produced during the last century – too clear for us not to think it a matter of honesty to declare our bankruptcy. Indeed (let's admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism."¹⁵²

It is interesting to note that he interprets this new state of "barbarism" as an opportunity for a rebirth of culture from scratch. He expressed his hope that the new architecture of iron and glass, promoted by the Bauhaus, would increasingly take root in all modern states. These buildings would free the art of building from the weight of that "horrific mishmash of styles" due precisely to the inability of 19th century architects to establish a fruitful dialogue with history, the result of which was the mere reproduction of sterile copies of the past. He states:

"Adolf Loos, the forerunner of modern architecture, states, "I write only for people who possess a modern sensibility... I do not write for the people consumed by nostalgia for the Renaissance or the Rococo." A complex artist like the painter Paul Klee and a programmatic one like Loos – both reject the traditional, solemn, noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past. They turn instead to the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present."¹⁵³

Continuing on, he referred to the houses designed by Loos and Le Corbusier claiming that:

"To return to Scheerbart: he placed the greatest value on housing his "people" – and, following this model, his fellow citizens – in buildings befitting their station, in adjustable, movable glass-covered dwellings of the kind since built by Loos and Le Corbusier. It is no coincidence that glass is such a hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed. A cold and sober material into

¹⁵² Benjamin W. *Experience and Poverty* Selected writings vol.2 1927-1934 Harvard University Press London 1999 _P. 732.

¹⁵³ Benjamin W. *Experience and Poverty* _P. 733.

the bargain. Objects made of glass have no “aura.” Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession.”¹⁵⁴

A modern transparent building would therefore present itself to the community without those classical masks, full of backward symbolic meanings, which enveloped the typical regime architecture. The observation of the frank nudity of diaphanous construction could have the same shocking effect on the distracted public as a Chaplin film, inducing them with a sort of evaluative attitude that could contribute to the growth of a democratic consciousness. In other words, the masses could develop over time a capacity for observation and comparison that allowed them to read the differences between the fetish-architectures of totalitarian regimes and those that represent contemporary reality, its mutations and trends. According to the Berlin philosopher, every piece of architecture, like every work of art, must therefore be an expression of its here and now and adapt to its own particular context, without copying auratic styles of the past; in this way it becomes a clear historical testimony of its own era. Ultimately, with the question of the irreproducibility of the aura, Benjamin highlighted how copying, understood as mere replication of past art, is a retrogressive failure.

2.3 From ancient mimesis to modern rejection of imitation

Benjamin gave an interpretation of the concept of copying, linked to his progressive thought and reflecting the particular era full of contradictions in which he lived, where, on the one hand, the artistic avant-gardes condemned the imitation

¹⁵⁴ Benjamin W. *Experience and Poverty* _P. 734.

of the art of the past, while on the other hand, reactionary regimes tried to re-propose historicist-classicist styles for political propaganda purposes. With his theory of the decline of the aura he was clearly opposed to the latter, but in some ways, he also contested the absolute rejection of the former, as he proclaimed that it were copies – in the sense of “re-productions” - of works that would have the power to revolutionise modern mass societies. His interpretation of the role of technological reproduction of works of art probably represents a crucial concept in Western aesthetic conception, which since antiquity, as already mentioned, had always placed the discussion on the value of imitation at the centre of philosophical speculation: the debate on *mimesis* and *imitatio*.

“Mimesis” (*Μίμησις*), a Greek term that can be translated as imitation, representation, and which was to become “imitatio” for the Romans, formed the basis of aesthetic research in antiquity aimed at understanding and defining the origin and role of Art in society. Two key figures who explored this theme are the philosophers Plato and Aristotle. According to Plato (427 BC - 347 BC) there are two different types of reality: the world of Forms and the physical reality. For the Greek thinker, the 'true' reality is that of Forms - or Ideas - while the physical world is an imitation of the former: it is a mere reproduction of it. In his vision, the material world is imperfect, and art is itself an imitation of it, and consequently occupies a secondary position. Art is a mere imitation of imitation and therefore doubly inferior to the original idea that it represents. Plato actually accuses art because it is based on *pathos*, on what is subjective and unmeasurable. In his ideal state, *The Republic*, where everything functions in a utopian way according to democratic principles, art and poetry, due to their anarchic nature that stimulates the emotional side and feelings at the expense of the rational side, are superfluous. Theoretically, a perfect community does not need works of art or laws.

In his late work entitled *Laws*, Plato states clearly that repetition and representation of artistic themes from tradition is to be preferred to absolute

innovations. Referring to the choreographies and their pictorial representations in Egyptian temples he recounts:

“It appears that long ago they determined on the rule of which we are now speaking, that the youth of a State should practise in their rehearsals postures and tunes that are good: these they prescribed in detail and posted up in the temples, and outside this official list it was, and still is, forbidden to painters and all other producers of postures and representations to introduce any innovation or invention, whether in such productions or in any other branch of music, over and above the traditional forms. And if you look there, you will find that the things depicted or graven there 10,000 years ago (I mean what I say, not loosely but literally 10,000) are no whit better or worse than the productions of to-day, but wrought with the same art.”¹⁵⁵

Ultimately, his conception of the repetition of existing works for educational purposes and his utopian vision of the ideal society that does not need art emerge from these words.

Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC) agrees fully with Plato on the essence of art as an imitation but reverses Platonic metaphysics. He doesn't take into consideration an ideal world, but only the physical world, nature, the universe. According to him the art that imitates nature therefore produces pure knowledge. The concept of mimesis thus assumes an explicit positive value. He states that by means of imitation, one can represent images of original natural elements that, while being representations of them, allow one to get to know them in depth, and as works of art provide aesthetic pleasure in those who observe them. In his treatise entitled *Poetics*, referring to imitation he writes:

“And then there is the enjoyment people always get from representations. And then there is the enjoyment people always get from representations. What happens in actual experience proves this, for we enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, obscene beasts, for instance, and corpses. The reason is this: Learning things gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but also in the same way to all other

¹⁵⁵ Plato, with an English translation IX. *Laws*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. William Heinemann Ltd, London 1961_ PP. 101-103.

men, though they share this pleasure only to a small degree. The reason why we enjoy seeing likenesses is that, as we look, we learn and infer what each is, for instance, "that is so and so." If we have never happened to see the original, our pleasure is not due to the representation as such but to the technique or the colour or some other such cause."¹⁵⁶

Imitation is thus both an act of knowledge of reality and a creative tool. Pierluigi Donini writes that Aristotle conceived mimesis as:

"an operation of selection and interpretative recomposition of somehow privileged aspects of reality, so as to restore the truest sense of it, precisely that which escapes direct perception of the totality of what is or happens".¹⁵⁷

Consistent with these philosophical principles, in ancient Greece the invention of architectural orders and the codification of building types generated architectures that were very similar to each other, resulting from continuous processes of imitation of pre-established designs. With a sort of coding and copying system it was possible to export, even to the distant colonies of *Magna Graecia*, temples, theatres and all sorts of buildings, all very reminiscent of those in Hellenic cities. Capitals, pediments, triglyphs, metopes and so on, were standardized elements that, composed and assembled all in different rigorous systematic schemas, produced buildings whose artistic value was fundamentally linked to the similarity to an ideal model, rather than to the originality. A sort of grammar of architectural composition was created that favoured the proliferation of similar, though not perfectly identical, buildings that drew on the same matrices in the most disparate territorial and social contexts. The small, gradual compositional and typological variations that were made to each new architectural example with respect to the canonical models gradually contributed to the evolution of the style and made new architectural inventions possible over time.

¹⁵⁶ Aristotle: *The poetics*. "Longinus": *On the sublime*. Demetrius: *On style*, trans. W. Hamilton. William Heinemann Ltd, London 1927_P. 13.

¹⁵⁷ Donini, Pierluigi, *Aristotele. Poetica*, Torino, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2008_P. XXII (my translation).

As already mentioned in the previous section, in 1st century AD Rome, Quintilian also theorised the educational value of reproductions of works of art and encouraged students, and artists in general, to imitate previous authors. He argued that in the educational phase, pupils should practise copying previous models to learn techniques, styles and principles, but that later they should find ways to create new original works themselves. In his *Institutio Oratoria* he writes:

“It is from these and other authors worthy of our study that we must draw our stock of words, the variety of our figures and our methods of composition, while we must form our minds on the model of every excellence. For there can be no doubt that in art no small portion of our task lies in imitation, since, although invention came first and is all-important, it is expedient to imitate whatever has been invented with success. And it is a universal rule of life that we should wish to copy what we approve in others. It is for this reason that boys copy the shapes of letters that they may learn to write, and that musicians take the voices of their teachers, painters the works of their predecessors, and peasants the principles of agriculture which have been proved in practice, as models for their imitation. In fact, we may note that the elementary study of every branch of learning is directed by reference to some definite standard that is placed before the learner. We must, in fact, either be like or unlike those who have proved their excellence. It is rare for nature to produce such resemblance, which is more often the result of imitation.”¹⁵⁸

For him, the ideal creative process consisted in drawing inspiration from appropriately selected traditional works, a vast source of ideas from which to draw, and the ability to update them with personal variations. He states:

“Shall we follow the example of those painters whose sole aim is to be able to copy pictures by using the ruler and the measuring rod? It is a positive disgrace to be content to owe all our achievement to imitation. For what, I ask again, would have been the result if no one had done more than his predecessors? Livius Andronicus would mark our supreme achievement in poetry and the annals of the Pontifices³ would be our ne plus ultra in

¹⁵⁸ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* Volume 4 transl. H.E. Butler. Harvard University Press, Cambridge; William Heinemann, Ltd. London, 1936_P. 75.

history. We should still be sailing on rafts, and the art of painting would be restricted to tracing a line round a shadow thrown in the sunlight. Cast your eyes over the whole of history; you will find that no art has remained just as it was when it was discovered, nor come to a standstill at its very birth, unless indeed we are ready to pass special condemnation on our own generation on the ground that it is so barren of invention that no further development is possible; and it is undoubtedly true that no development is possible for those who restrict themselves to imitation."¹⁵⁹

According to the Roman orator, if imitation of the works of previous authors were reduced to mere copying and no attempt was made to improve and adapt them to the particular needs of one's time, in every field of art and human knowledge there would be no cultural contribution to be handed down to future generations.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BC - 65 AD), who lived in the same century as Quintilian, composed his philosophical writings and dramas explicitly inspired by earlier Greek works. His tragedies *Oedipus* and *Medea*, for example, are rewritings of their counterparts by Sophocles and Euripides, which he adapted in his personal style to the eclectic tastes of his time, contaminating them with other sources. In his *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, a kind of true treatise on imitation, he describes his method of composition, which consists in the appropriation of works by earlier authors, in particular those of Epicurus, considered as the collective heritage of humanity. He states:

"Besides, he who writes last has the best of the bargain; he finds already at hand words which, when marshalled in a different way, show a new face. And he is not pilfering them, as if they belonged to someone else, when he uses them, for they are common property."¹⁶⁰

But copying them passively alone is not enough to produce new works with artistic qualities that will allow them to be accepted in turn into the great reservoir of

¹⁵⁹ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* _PP. 77-79.

¹⁶⁰ Seneca L.A., *The Complete Moral Letters to Lucilius* Written by L. Annaeus Seneca, Translate by Richard M. Gummere Updated, Annotated and Expanded by Michel Daw. Stoici Civitas Press, Ottawa 2013 __P. 254.

knowledge; instead, according to him, it is necessary to take inspiration from them and reuse them in new contexts, in an independent and personalised manner:

“10. (...) However, the truth will never be discovered if we rest contented with discoveries already made. Besides, he who follows another not only discovers nothing but is not even investigating. 11. What then? Shall I not follow in the footsteps of my predecessors? I shall indeed use the old road, but if I find one that makes a shorter cut and is smoother to travel, I shall open the new road. Men who have made these discoveries before us are not our masters, but our guides. Truth lies open for all; it has not yet been monopolized. And there is plenty of it left even for posterity to discover.”¹⁶¹

In the letter entitled *On Gathering Ideas*, using the allegory of bees, he argues that one must explore different sources (flowers) - and then produce one's own work (honey):

“We should follow, men say, the example of the bees, who flit about and cull the flowers that are suitable for producing honey, and then arrange and assort in their cells all that they have brought in; these bees, as our Vergil says, pack close the flowing honey, And swell their cells with nectar sweet.”¹⁶²

His sources were classical texts inherited from the Greek and Hellenistic tradition, whose universal values he recognised as still relevant for his time. He continues his letter by stating that it is necessary to assimilate the contents of others' works and then mix them appropriately and express them in such a way that one's own personal style emerges. He speaks metaphorically of the need to digest sources, as one does with food, in order to transform them into new energy, that is, into a new autonomous aesthetic subject:

“We also, I say, ought to copy these bees, and sift whatever we have gathered from a varied course of reading (...) we should so blend those several flavours into one delicious compound that, even though it betrays its origin, yet it nevertheless is clearly a different thing from that whence it came. This

¹⁶¹ Seneca L.A., *The Complete Moral Letters to Lucilius* _P. 94.

¹⁶² Seneca L.A., *The Complete Moral Letters to Lucilius* _P. 281.

is what we see nature doing in our own bodies without any labour on our part; the food we have eaten, as long as it retains its original quality and floats, in our stomachs as an undiluted mass, is a burden; but it passes into tissue and blood only when it has been changed from its original form. So it is with the food which nourishes our higher nature, – we should see to it that whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged, or it will be no part of us. We must digest it; otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the reasoning power. (...) This is what our mind should do: it should hide away all the materials by which it has been aided, and bring to light only what it has made of them.”¹⁶³

In the next passage of the letter, Seneca clearly states that the imitation of a work or author should not be a mere copy. According to him, the new artistic-literary subject has to resemble the model to which it refers like a son to his father, not instead be identical, for example, like a portrait to the image it portrays.

“Even if there shall appear in you a likeness to him who, by reason of your admiration, has left a deep impress upon you, I would have you resemble him as a child resembles his father, and not as a picture resembles its original.”¹⁶⁴

And he continues by saying that the artist must be able to skilfully amalgamate all the sources he cites, translates, rewrites, into a new work that is unified and independent, as is the sound of a choir that is perceived as a single harmonic whole but which is formed by several voices:

“Do you not see how many voices there are in a chorus? Yet out of the many only one voice results. (...) I would have my mind of such a quality as this; it should be equipped with many arts, many precepts, and patterns of conduct taken from many epochs of history; but all should blend harmoniously into one.”¹⁶⁵

This last sentence sums up succinctly what was Seneca's eclectic compositional conception, namely the imitation of different models drawn from the repertoire of

¹⁶³ Seneca L.A., *The Complete Moral Letters to Lucilius Written by L. Annaeus Seneca*_P. 282.

¹⁶⁴ Seneca L.A., *The Complete Moral Letters to Lucilius Written by L. Annaeus Seneca*_P. 282.

¹⁶⁵ Seneca L.A., *The Complete Moral Letters to Lucilius Written by L. Annaeus Seneca*_PP. 282-283.

tradition and their fusion to conceive new artistic works. As will be seen shortly, these principles were taken up in later centuries by other philosophers, especially in the revivalist period of Humanism.

Arno Reiff explains the practice of imitation of Greek literary models by the Roman writers¹⁶⁶, according to three different methods: *interpretatio*, *imitatio*, *aemulatio*. The *interpretatio* is the real copy, the faithful translation; the *imitatio* is a free, higher version of reproduction that, borrowing form, content, or both, form and content, from a model, can improve it thanks to the originality and sensibility of the copyist; while the *aemulatio* implies a creative competition that the artist can undertake with the model of reference, trying to overcome it, and to be independent of it, after a profound assimilation of its characteristics. Moreover, the *aemulator* can also introduce in his work new elements taken from different repertoire sources. This categorization relates to literature, but today is also applied to architecture and figurative arts. The Roman artists essentially drew ideas and contents from the enormous reservoir of the Greek art of the V century B.C. and with different degrees of creative freedom reinterpreted them in an original way, adapting them to the tastes and needs of the time. One of the countless possible examples of this practice in architecture is the evolution of the typology of the Greek theatre in ancient Rome. The Roman architects began by imitating the semicircular *cavea* that the Greeks had always built on natural slopes; however, through gradual variations (structural systems of vaults, arches and galleries), they conceived aesthetically and functionally innovative theatres that could also be built on flat terrain. At a later stage, with the same archetype in mind, they had the intuition to mirror the *cavea* and orchestra, creating yet another completely new typology: the amphitheater.

For centuries, the 'grammar' of building composition promoted by architectural treatises, of which the oldest known is Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's *De Architectura*, written around 15 B.C., ensured the possibility of constructing - in different

¹⁶⁶ Reiff A., *Interpretatio, imitatio, aemulatio: Begriff und Vorstellung literarischer Abhängigkeit bei den Römern*. Universität Köln, 1959.

contexts, places and times - buildings of various types that, despite their singularity, displayed the common matrix from which they derived. It was precisely the continuous gradual practices of imitation and reinterpretation of pre-existing models that prevented architectural production from crystallising into a single style and allowed the art of building, and all the other arts, to evolve. According to Vitruvius, it is precisely the ability to imitate that allowed humanity to originate architecture and enable it to progress. The dwelling house for example is according to him an evolution of the primitive hut, which in turn was modelled on natural shelters. The first chapter of the second book of his treatise on this subject reads:

“And since they were of an imitative and teachable nature, they would daily point out to each other the results of their building, boasting of the novelties in it; and thus, with their natural gifts sharpened by emulation, their standards improved daily.”¹⁶⁷

Even every single detail of the architectural orders evolved, according to Vitruvius, by means of imitative processes that transposed/translated the components that constituted the wooden huts into corresponding building elements made of stone. In the treatise, referring to the origin of the temple, he describes in detail the derivation of each individual element and the imitative principle that produced it:

“Thus each and every detail has a place, origin, and order of its own. In accordance with these details, and starting from carpenter's work, artists in building temples of stone and marble imitated those arrangements in their sculptures, believing that they must follow those inventions. So it was that some ancient carpenters, engaged in building somewhere or other, after laying the tie-beams so that they projected from the inside to the outside of the walls, closed up the space between the beams, and above them ornamented the coronae and gables with carpentry work of beauty greater than usual; then they cut off the projecting ends of the beams, bringing them into line and flush with the face of the walls; next, as this had an ugly look to them, they fastened boards, shaped as triglyphs are now made, on the ends of the beams, where they had been cut off in front, and painted them

¹⁶⁷ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books On Architecture*. Translated By Morris Hicky Morgan, Cambridge Harvard University Press London: Humphrey Milford Oxford University Press 1914_ P. 39.

with blue wax so that the cutting off of the ends of the beams, being concealed, would not offend the eye.”¹⁶⁸

Leon Battista Alberti around 1450, on the model of the Vitruvian treatise, wrote the *De re ædificatoria*. It is a true design manual, a guide for the conception of new buildings, based on the principle of imitation of classical Greek and Roman art. His attitude towards the rediscovered architecture of the ancients is clearly expressed in a passage in the first book of his treatise where, speaking of the subdivision of the floors of buildings with the succession of architectural orders from Doric to Corinthian, he declares that in general the “descriptions” of the ancients are not to be observed/copied to the letter as if they were irrefutable dogmas, but that they are to be revisited and adapted to the specific aesthetic, functional and constructive needs of each particular case. For Alberti, the classical models of architecture are references, “starting points”, which must be assimilated and then creatively reinterpreted and possibly surpassed.

“In general, in fact, departing from traditional methods is unpleasant, while following them is advantageous and gives excellent results; and in fact the most famous architects with their works seem to demonstrate that a certain direction in the subdivision, Doric or Ionic or Corinthian or Tuscanic, is the most convenient of all. This does not mean that we must adhere strictly to their schemes and incorporate them as they are in our works, as if they were mandatory laws; but, having their teaching as a starting point, we will try to come up with new solutions and thus achieve a glory equal to theirs or, if possible, even greater.”¹⁶⁹

In fact, considering works of the Italian Renaissance architect, such as the *Basilica of Sant’Andrea* in Mantua or the *Tempio Malatestiano* in Rimini, one can see how both derive from the revisited typological model of the Basilica of ancient Rome. Indeed, he wrote in Book VII of his treatise:

¹⁶⁸ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books On Architecture*. Translated By Morris Hicky Morgan_P. 107.

¹⁶⁹ Alberti, Leon Battista. *L’architettura (De re ædificatoria) / testo latino e traduzione a cura di Giovanni Orlandi; introduzione e note di Paolo Portoghesi*. Edizioni il Polifilo, Milano 1966_P. 68 (my translation).

“Because of its natural analogy with the temple, the basilica demands to a large extent the ornaments characteristic of the temple; it demands them, however, in such a way as to show itself rather to imitate the temple than to be equal to it. It will therefore be built on a podium, like the temple; but this podium will be lower than an eighth of its height.”¹⁷⁰

This attitude influenced the thinking and practice of artists throughout the Renaissance: it was a common view that they should draw inspiration from other works, not to copy them passively, but to re-elaborate them creatively in new contexts. The following anecdote, from *Lives of the most eminent painters, sculptors and architects*, clarifies this concept: Giorgio Vasari, writing about the life of the architect Simone del Pollaiuolo, known as Cronaca, narrates that he copied a cornice from ancient Roman ruins, re-adapting it, to a Florentine palace he had designed. Vasari reports that the aesthetic result was exceptional, and that the compositional method used to conceive this work was an excellent example of appropriation of the classical prototype, according to the practice of *imitatio*:

“Thus did the genius of Cronaca enable him to avail himself of the works of others and even to make them almost into his own a thing which few succeed in accomplishing; for the difficulty does not consist in merely becoming possessed of drawings and copies from fine works but in knowing how to use them in such sort that they shall be in harmony with that to which they are applied, and shall conduce to the beauty, grace, and convenience of the whole, in due measure and proportion”¹⁷¹

Vasari then goes on to say that, in turn, another architect, Baccio d'Agnolo, copied the same detail from the Cronaca for the design of another building, but the result this time, in his opinion, was deleterious.

“But this [the cornice] succeeded so ill, from the fact that it had not been judiciously suited to the edifice, that the effect could not well be worse, and the building reminds to the spectator of a small head buried beneath a huge cap. It is not sufficient that an artist, when he has completed his work, shall

¹⁷⁰ Alberti, Leon Battista. *L'architettura (De re aedificatoria)*. P. 632 (my translation).

¹⁷¹ Vasari G. *Lives of the most eminent painters, sculptors and architects* translated by Jonathan Foster, Vol.III. _ London 1851. P. 82.

remark, as many do, in excuse for its defects: "*it has the exact proportions of the antique and has been copied from good masters,*" seeing that a sound judgment and correct avail more in all cases than does the mere admeasurement with the compass."¹⁷²

Baccio d'Agnolo responded to his fellow citizens' criticism by claiming to have been inspired by the art of the ancients, but Vasari clearly stated that, it is not enough to copy classical models to produce works of art that can be defined as such, it is instead necessary to understand them, reinterpret them and creatively adapt them to the new situation.

This approach to imitation in the Renaissance comes from a path that began in the second half of the 14th century, when the philological study of classical Greek and Latin texts, which during the Middle Ages had been set aside or contaminated by Christian interpretations, began to take place, and the concept of *imitatio* once again took on a decisive role in philosophical thought and artistic production processes.¹⁷³

Francesco Petrarca (1304 - 1374), a poet considered a precursor of Humanism, systematically analysed the principle of imitation. He argued that the *imitatio antiquorum*, i.e. the practice of referring to the masters of the past, who in turn imitated their predecessors, was the only creative strategy to conceive new works

¹⁷² Vasari G. *Lives of the most eminent painters, sculptors and architects* translated by Jonathan Foster, Vol.III. London 1851. PP. 82-83.

¹⁷³ At the end of the Roman empire and during the Middle Ages, it was thanks to the large number of copies made by Christian monks that the transmission of texts and works of antiquity to subsequent generations was possible. However, while the Christian church contributed to the preservation of the classical heritage, it also had a hostile and distrustful attitude towards it. What was contemptuously called "pagan culture" was fought by theologians such as Tertullian or St. Jerome, or was interpreted by philosophers such as Augustine of Hippo who mostly tried to attribute pre-Christian values to it. The legacy of texts and works of art from Greek, Hellenistic and Roman civilisations was interpreted as anticipating the advent of Christ. Secular texts were artificially manipulated in order to be presented almost as if they were a foreshadowing of the gospels. This so-called "sacred theft" is explicitly promoted by Augustine in *De doctrina christiana*, who invites Christians to take possession of classical works just as the Jews had done with those of ancient Egyptian civilisations. Chapter 40 of Book II is precisely entitled "*Whatever has been rightly said by the heathen, we must appropriate to our uses*". A similar fate to the literary texts was suffered by most works of art and architecture that were plundered and used for the most diverse purposes. The power of the Christian church during the Middle Ages certainly fought and obscured secular ideologies that were branded as heresies and punished with excommunication or other coercive practices.

that were rich in content and artistically valid. In his vision, however, ancient models were not to be seen as unquestionable dogmas, but as models to be deeply understood and assimilated, and then surpassed with one's own autonomous style.

In the letter entitled *On Inventiveness and Talent* (*Epistolae familiares* I, 8.) addressed to his friend Tommaso da Messina, who asked him for advice on how to reuse classical texts for the production of new literary works, he expresses his opinion on the matter by paraphrasing the metaphor already used by Seneca - who is explicitly quoted - of bees producing honey and wax by collecting nectar from various flowers:

“If after a trial you discover that it is ineffectual, you must blame Seneca. But if you find it effective you must render thanks to him and not to me. In short I want you to realize that he is the source of this advice. His loftiest advice about invention is to imitate the bees which through an astonishing process produce wax and honey from the flowers they leave behind.”¹⁷⁴

In the metaphor, flowers represent the texts from the immense archive of classical antiquity; bees are the poets; and honey and wax are the new artistic product, poetry. As the Latin writer had already argued some twelve centuries earlier, he too believes that artists should draw from multiple sources, borrow themes already expressed by other authors and rework them with resemblance (*similitudo*), not by copying them identically (*identitatis*). The *imitatio antiquorum* thus conceived renews the relevance of classical texts, celebrates their authors, and feeds the great library of human knowledge with new works.

And yet he then goes on with another allegory, saying that perhaps even better than bees do, does the silkworm, which is able to produce silk directly from its own entrails. In the same way, new works should be conceived by poets, having assimilated the lesson of the classics and having skilfully amalgamated these sources within their own creative mental processes.

¹⁷⁴ Petrarca, F., *Letters on Familiar Matters (Rerum familiarium libri)*, Translated by Aldo S. Bernardo, Vol. 1 Italica Press, New York 2005_P. 41.

“To repeat, let us write neither in the style one or another writer, but in a style uniquely ours although gathered from a variety of sources. That writer is happier who does not, like the bees, collect a number of scattered things, but instead, after the example of certain not much larger worms from whose bodies silk is produced, prefers to produce his own thoughts and speech provided that the sense is serious and true and that his style is ornate.”¹⁷⁵

In his vision, works conceived with such an approach would in turn stimulate the imitation of other artists, creating a historical continuity between cultures of various times and places. In another letter from the *Familiars*, addressed to Homer, Petrarca imagines that when the Greek poet wrote his verses, he was aware of his own artistic greatness and foresaw that many would imitate him in the future.

“And now what shall I say about the matter of imitation? When you found yourself soaring so high on the wings of genius you ought to have foreseen that you would always have imitators. You should be glad that your endowments are such that many men long to be like you, although not many can succeed. Why not be glad, you who are sure of holding always the first place, when I, the least of mortals, am more than glad, am in fact puffed up with pride, because I have grown great enough for others---though I scarcely can believe that this is really true---to desire to imitate and copy me? In my case the pride and joy would only increase if among these imitators there should be found some few who were capable of surpassing me.”¹⁷⁶

Petrarca tells him that he should not regret this because, even if many of those who imitate him are not up to his standards, the mere fact that he has been appreciated to such an extent that he inspires entire successive generations makes him permanently successful. Imitation, therefore, is seen by the Italian poet fundamentally as a means of celebrating a past author and reinforcing his fame. He himself is proud of the fact that there are already poets in his time who are inspired by him and would be even more proud if he knew that someone in the future,

¹⁷⁵ Petrarca, Francesco, *Letters on Familiar Matters* (Rerum familiarium libri), Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1982_P. 42.

¹⁷⁶ Robinson, James Harvey, *Petrarch The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*. The Knickerbocker press, New York and London, 1914_P. 256.

imitating him, would surpass him. Ultimately, according to him, a good imitation is a competition one undertakes with the models one chooses to reuse, the result of which should be the creation of new autonomous works, even if not entirely. Virgil's *Aeneid*, which Petrarca loved and refers to in the same letter, is a clear rewriting of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* adapted to the taste and ideals of the Latin poet. This dialogue between texts so distant from each other in space and time was so fruitful that it reinvigorated the fame of Homer's works, making them rise to the role of true archetypes, and inspired further reinterpretations of them (such as Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*).

The debate on the rediscovery of classical antiquity, and how it should be used to learn from it and produce new works, influenced all fields of art and culture from the end of the 14th century onwards. The analogy between Francesco Petrarca's ideas with the principle of imitation later postulated by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise, and with the known theories and design practices of Renaissance architects is evident.

The dispute on imitatio between Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494) and Paolo Cortese (1465-1510) is an episode that clearly shows how the debate on imitation in the Renaissance proceeded in continuity with the theses of Petrarca and the Latin thinkers. Paolo Cortese is an Italian humanist who, in some letters sent to the literate Poliziano, defends the theory of imitation of classics, in particular of Cicero. In a letter in reply to Cortese, Poliziano polemically argues for the principle of originality of style, while respecting tradition and ancient models, which, however, must not be the object of passive imitation. He provocatively compares those who merely imitate the works of others, without understanding and reinterpreting them, to parrots who repeat what they hear without understanding the meaning. According to Poliziano, a single, absolute model must be avoided; references must be multiple, in-depth, understood and creatively reworked. The following is a passage from a famous letter sent by Poliziano to Cortese:

“As I have understood you, you are unaccustomed to approve any style of writing that does not portray Cicero’s features. (...) Those who engage in composition solely by imitating seem like parrots who say things they don’t understand. Men like this, what they write lacks strength and life, energy, emotion, and innate character; they lie down, they sleep, they snore. There is nothing that is true, nothing solid, nothing effective. Someone might say: you don’t express yourself like Cicero. What then? I am not Cicero. Still, I represent myself, I believe. (...) But when Cicero and other good authors you will have read abundantly, and for a long time, and you have studied them, learned them, digested them; when you have filled your chest with the knowledge of many things, and you will finally decide to compose something of yours, I would like you to proceed with your own strength would like you to be yourself once, I would like you abandon this too anxious concern to reproduce exclusively Cicero, I would like you to risk putting all your skills into play.”¹⁷⁷

This letter seems to have been animated by the same conception of imitation expressed by Giorgio Vasari in his narration of the story of the cornices designed by Baccio d'Agnolo and Cronaca.

The continuous drawing on the great reservoir of tradition to produce new works has basically represented a chain of reciprocal interrelation between the cultures of the various epochs, and has allowed the diffusion in time and space of models which, because of their artistic characteristics and their intrinsic historical, political and religious meanings, were considered archetypal. In extreme synthesis it can be affirmed that the memory of sculptural, pictorial, architectural, literary prototypes has always been handed down through reproductions, characterized by the different degree of similarity with them: from the faithful copy to the inspired reinterpretation. Consistent with the principles of imitation explored so far, architecture always seems to have manifested itself in buildings that are similar to each other but not perfectly identical, at least until the end of the 19th century.

¹⁷⁷ Garin, Eugenio *Il dibattito sull'imitazione in Prosatori latini del Quattrocento*, Ricciardi, Milano-Napoli, 1976_Vol.7_P. 903 (my translation).

Perhaps, in Western culture, the first real attempt to create an architectural replica on a one-to-one scale is the Nashville *Parthenon* of 1897, which reproduces the original prototype of Athenian acropolis, while the first case of historical reconstruction of a collapsed building, with the same identical forms and in the same place where it stood, is the bell tower of San Marco in Venice. Previously Antonio Canova had built a church in Possagno, clearly inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, and Leo Von Klenze had built the Walhalla temple almost identical to the Parthenon; however both were not exact copies of their respective models. In the art of building, on the other hand, single architectural elements, or groups of elements, have always been reproduced, copied from pre-existing edifices, but once put together they have generated new artefacts, similar to each other, not identical. As mentioned earlier, for example, architectural orders have been endlessly used to create the most diverse buildings, in the most diverse contexts; in this sense, these with their geometric-morphological rules and characteristics could be compared to musical notes that, when composed together, generate infinite autonomous symphonies. Considering, for example, the archetypal form of the gabled façade with pediment supported by columns, it can be seen that its diffusion has characterised buildings that are very similar to each other, but never perfectly equal, like Greek temples. This same element, however, reused in different eras and places, has also allowed the creation of the most diverse architectures: from the *Pantheon* to Renaissance churches, from Palladian villas to nineteenth-century theatres. These imitative processes were facilitated by the treatises on architecture that, after Leon Battista Alberti's, were written by numerous architects such as Sebastiano Serlio, Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola, Andrea Palladio, Vincenzo Scamozzi, Guarino Guarini and others, who disseminated repertoires of images, technical, typological and stylistic models that promoted the production of buildings whose artistic value was fundamentally linked to their similarity to ideal models, rather than originality.



Figure 67. W. Crawford Smith. *The Parthenon in Centennial Park, in Nashville, Tennessee 1897*



Figure 68. A. Canova, *Church of Santissima Trinità. Possagno, 1819-1832*

Even in times when treatises were not used, as in the Middle Ages, there was an extraordinary similarity and unity of style and language that came from the architects' continuous reference to existing buildings; for this purpose, among the countless possible examples, French Gothic cathedrals or Tuscan tower houses can be considered. Similarly, in turn, seventeenth-century architects such as Francesco Borromini or Gian Lorenzo Bernini used the same tympanums, the same identical columns and frames that characterized the plates and austere façades of the Roman Renaissance churches, but with very different stylistic and expressive results.



Figure 69. G.L. Bernini: Church of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale. Roma, 1658



Figure 70. F. Borromini, The façade of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. Roma, 1644

The new artistic inventions were determined precisely by the gradual reinterpretations and variations of the same themes and models, deriving from ancient emulative techniques.

Quatremère de Quincy (1755-1849), as already seen in section 2.1, in continuity with his ancient predecessors, was in open polemic against historicist architects who merely imitated, almost copied, the works of others. On the other hand, he emphasised the creative role of imitation as a fundamental driving force in the development of art. However, his criticism was directed not only at copyists, but also at some of his contemporaries who, in search of a vague originality for the conception of their buildings, had deviated from mimetic practices and references to the history of architecture. As seen above, he started from the principle that pure invention did not exist, or rather, that every invention was the result of re-elaboration of pre-existing elements. According to him, the inventive abilities of an architect, and of every artist in general, came from the ability to imitate the masters who had preceded him through the selection, study and creative reinterpretation of their works. He affirmed that a student who extends the passive copying phase of other people's works too long, even though it is necessary, without beginning to take his own creative path, risks remaining forever a mere copyist. According to him, the artist, instead, through reproductions, must appropriate the compositional and stylistic principles of those who conceived them, and then find their own way, linked to tradition, but also creatively autonomous, and which in turn, could represent a reference point for the students of the following generations.

It is considered useful to report a long excerpt from the "copy" entry of his *Historical Dictionary of Architecture*:

"Copie and couple in French signify the double of a certain object. Hence, copiare [Italian: to copy] signify to make the double of this object.

This is, as one observes in the realm of imitation, the precise use of the word copy, and the definition of the idea that it expresses.

To imitate, as mentioned in the article imitation, offers a wholly different idea, with a much wider, and at the same time more elevated meaning. Its general definition is found in the idea which expresses the repetition of an object expresses the repetition of an object by and with another object, which becomes its image. It is clear that the analysis of this theory could present as

many kinds of imitation as there are different manners with which to reproduce an object within another object.

But there is also a triple division of imitation, considered in the simple idea of the action of repeating an object.

There is the manner of producing a repetition through an image which demands of its author the resources of genius, of feeling, of the imagination; this is, properly speaking, imitation in the moral sense of the word.

There is a material imitation. It is that which produces the repetition of an object by mechanical procedures and unfailing means, and where consequently moral action has no effect.

There is between these two sorts of imitation yet another means of repetition, which is equally distant from that which characterizes genius in an artist and that which constitutes the routine procedure of the worker; it is the art of the copyist.

In fact, the *copy* in the truly imitative arts, is more the result of the talent of the artist than a technical operation independent of its user. The *copy* supposes an accuracy of sight, a facility in execution, and a feeling for the beauty of the original; consequently, it requires talent and intelligence.

Copying is therefore not an entirely foreign matter to the art of genius, but only to the genius of art or to invention.

We should also add that the idea of imitation applies to the repetition of the works of nature, while the idea of copy applies to the repetition of works of art.

Since it is generally from works of art that one learns, as in a mirror which best assembles traits, to know, and imitate those of nature, it is ordinarily through *copies* that beginners proceed. This is why students' studies begin with copies, and it is by *copying* that those who intend to take up imitation begin.

We have said that the idea of *copy* excluded that of imitation, and that invention eminently constituted the true imitation, Hence, if one must begin by *copying* in order to learn how to imitate then one must not indulge for a long time in work that holds the inventive faculty within an inertia which sometimes prohibits it from developing. (...) One has seen great men imitate the works of their predecessors, and appropriate even their taste and manners, without being less reputed as original or inventive. Indeed, it is always possible to exercise on the ideas and the conceptions of others the very action of invention. It is possible to follow their progress without tracing their very footsteps, and to pattern oneself on the spirit rather than the letter of their inventions, in such a way that, while profiting by their

examples, one also acquires the right to serve as a model for those who follow. (...) Therefore, what differentiates he who imitates preceding works from he who is but their copyist, is that the first knows how to read in the inventions of others the maxims or the inspirations which produced them, and having studied the paths through which their genius passed, he learned to tread similar paths; while the other repeating borrowed ideas in servile works, crawls behind, instead of walking by himself. (...). There is perhaps no other art whose teaching requires more the practical application of this distinction, than the art of architecture.”¹⁷⁸

This centuries-old conception of the primacy of imitation over copy, together with Walter Benjamin's particular interpretation, will be considered a fundamental theoretical basis that could provide answers to the design strategies for the architectural reconstructions sought, which are the subject of this dissertation.

Quatremère de Quincy, however, did not consider the possibility of reconstructing buildings that had been completely destroyed, for the study of which he considered the restitution through drawing to be of fundamental scientific importance. He wrote:

“One *restores* a dilapidated or partially destroyed work of art, based on the surviving remains that allow, more or less, the repetition of what is missing; one *restitutes* a work or a monument that has entirely disappeared based on the authority of descriptions, or sometimes based on indications furnished by other works of the same kind.”¹⁷⁹

His contemporary Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879), on the other hand, did not limit himself to graphically restoring medieval architectures reduced to ruins, which he was commissioned to restore, but physically reconstructed them, using a method that can be defined as archaeological interpretation and reinvention. His theoretical writings and numerous works demonstrate his personal and original

¹⁷⁸ Quatremère de Quincy Antoine-Chrysostome, *The Historical Dictionary of Architecture*, trans. Samir Younés in *The True, the Fictive, and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy*. Papadakis Publisher, London. 1999_ PP. 125-126.

¹⁷⁹ Samir Younes. *The True, the Fictive, and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy*. Papadakis Publisher, London. 1999_ P. 217.

way of conceiving the principle of *imitatio*, which is synthetically expressed in his most quoted phrase:

“To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair, or rebuild it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness which could never have existed at any given time”¹⁸⁰

With the purpose to restore an architecture with missing parts, or to rebuild a monument that had been demolished, according to the French architect, it could be possible even to copy similar elements from other coeval buildings; the concept of appropriation is thus taken to the extreme. It was somehow the same attitude of Renaissance and Baroque restorers who added missing parts to classical sculptures, trying to imagine how they might have been at the origin. Besides, Prosper Mérimée, the writer who had appointed Viollet le Duc as the responsible architect for historical monuments of the French Ministry, stated:

“in a restoration when the traces of the ancient state are lost, the wisest think to do is to copy the motifs in a building of the same time and province”¹⁸¹.

The practice of restitution, which Quatremère considered suitable for the creation of drawings useful for the study and understanding of buildings that have disappeared, was in this case applied to architectural restoration. Drawing from the vast French Gothic architectural repertoire, Viollet le Duc created churches, castles and whole villages in style, copying and re-adapting entire parts of other buildings.

The historically false rebuilt architectures of Viollet le Duc were criticized by his contemporaries, first of all by John Ruskin (1819-1900), but also from historians like the German George Dehio (1850-1932), whose dictum was “*conserve, do not restore*”, or the Italian Camillo Boito (1836-1914). The criticisms were directed overall to the

¹⁸⁰Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, “Restoration” from the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XI^e au XVI^e siècle* (1854-1868). English edition. London, 1875.

¹⁸¹«dans une restauration lorsque les traces de l'état ancien sont perdues, le plus sage est de copier les motifs dans un édifice du même temps et de la même province». P. Mérimée, Rapport au Conseil des Bâtiments civils, 11 mars 1844, published by P. Léon, La vie des Monuments, destruction restauration. Dauphine-Gouverneur, Paris, 1951 P. 384.

absence of certain data on the original configuration of the works, and to the impossibility of clearly distinguishing the original parts from the added ones. Boito, in the first dialogue of his essay *Restoration in Architecture*, writes:

“Do you want me to say it openly? When the restorations are carried out with the theory of Mr. Viollet-le-Duc, which can be called the romantic theory of restoration, a theory that until the day before yesterday was universal and nevertheless is followed by many, indeed even by most in Italy, I prefer badly made restorations to well-made ones. Whereas those, by virtue of their beneficial ignorance, let me distinguish clearly the ancient from the modern part, these, with admirable science and cunning, by making the new appear ancient, put me in such a fierce perplexity of judgment that the pleasure of contemplating the monument disappears and studying it becomes a most fastidious labor.”¹⁸²

Boito was one of the principal authors of the *Carta Italiana del Restauro*, (1883), called *Boito's Charter*, where, with extraordinary anticipation on the next preservation documents, as the Athens and the Venice charters, he recommends to avoid any addition and falsification and to make any restoration work reconnaissable, datable, and reversible. In particular, the third article of the aforementioned document reads:

“Should the question be, instead, of constructing parts that have been destroyed or that for fortuitous reasons were originally never completed, or of rebuilding ashlar that is so decayed that it cannot remain in the structure, or when there is still the old form to be reproduced with accuracy, it would be advisable anyhow that the additional or renewed blocks, whilst taking the original form, should still be made of obviously different material, or that they be clearly marked with an engraved sign or better still with the date of the restoration, so that not even here a careful observer be misled. In monuments of Antiquity and in others of particular archaeological interest, any parts which must be completed for structural or conservation purposes should only be built with plain surfaces and using only the outlines of solid geometry - even when they do not appear to be

¹⁸² Boito Camillo. *Restoration in Architecture: First Dialogue* (1893) Translated by Cesare Birignani Word Count. 2009.

other than the continuation or a firm attachment to other moulded or ornamental antique parts.”¹⁸³

The reconstruction of historic buildings, or parts of them, that attempted to imitate what time had erased, was therefore considered an arbitrary and deceptive operation. Boito, however, does not limit himself to condemning reconstructions a priori but provides precise operational indications to identify the time of the restoration work, such as the use of distinguishable materials, processed and shaped in a simplified way, the inscription of dates and identification marks, and so on. The use of these simple prescriptions in current reconstruction cases, which seek to revive in every detail disappeared architectures of the past, could perhaps already contribute to mitigate the ongoing controversy.

John Ruskin notoriously was one of the first to hardly criticize the copy and the fakes, by claiming that deteriorate historic buildings should be left in the state of ruins, as a testimony of the past; to him

“Restoration, so called, is the worst manner of destruction (...) do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end. You may make a model of a building as you may of a corpse, and your model may have the shell of the old walls within it as your cast might have the skeleton, with what advantage I neither see nor care: but the old building is destroyed.”¹⁸⁴

However, it is remarkable that many English architects, just under the influence of his books and drawings, in particular *The stones of Venice*, have imitated numerous Venetian Gothic elements and proposed again them into new buildings.

Quatremère de Quincy himself openly criticized the English romantic conception of "ruinism", stating instead that, in the practice of restoration, the degraded parts of a historic building can, following an exact observation of the measurements and

¹⁸³ Boito C. *Questioni pratiche di belle arti, restauri, concorsi, legislazione, professione, insegnamento*. Hoepli, Milano 1893, P. 29 English Translation Jokilehto J. *A History of Architectural Conservation* PhD Thesis, I.A.A.S., YORK 1986_P. 464.

¹⁸⁴J. Ruskin. *The seven lamps of architecture*. 1849 Aphorism 31.

proportions, be reproduced. At the same time, however, he also stresses the need to distinguish the original parts of the monument from the added ones, in order to prevent the observer from falling into errors of reading and historical interpretation; in other words, to avoid a fake. He therefore places himself in a middle way between the "restorers", followers of Viollet le Duc, and the "runderizers", close to the Ruskin's thought. According to him, on the one hand, the ruined architectures must be kept alive through active restore operations and transmitted as far as possible to future generations, on the other hand the restoration of the missing parts, executed with "fakes" identical to the originals, is absolutely to be condemned. Quatremère de Quincy intuitively anticipates what will then be resumed in all subsequent restoration theory statements.

Now follows an excerpt from the *restore* entry in his *Dictionary of Architecture* in which his ideas on these themes are expressed concisely. Referring to the replacement of a granite column and part of the corner entablature at the Pantheon in Rome, which he had taken as an example, he writes:

"In fact, who prefers to see this beautiful ensemble degraded by an unfortunate mutilation? On the contrary, who does not prefer to enjoy the totality of its composition, especially when the restoration in question induces no one into error? How many antique monuments would be preserved if only the care was taken to put back in place the fallen materials, or to replace a stone by another stone?

A ridiculous prejudice has prevailed over this subject for a long time. This is owing to the kind of mania that was engendered by the so-called picturesque system, of the genre of irregular gardens, which by excluding from its compositions all buildings or complete constructions, seems to admit only ruined buildings in its landscapes, or those that appear to be so. Painting had also previously made fashionable the genre called of ruins. (See RUINS) Since then, any project of restoring a ruined antique monument was subject to the disapproval of the followers of the picturesque.

However, we acknowledge that there is a middle ground to be kept in the restoration of antique edifices which are more or less in ruins.

Firstly, one must restore the extant remains, only in view of preserving that which is likely to offer some valuable examples to the art of models or to the

science of antiquity. Thus, the measure of these restorations must depend on their pertaining interest, and the degree of dilapidation of the monument. A prop is quite often the only thing needed by a monument, in order for it to be assured of many more centuries of existence.

Secondly, if the building in question is composed of columns, with entablatures and friezes ornamented with sculpted foliage or filled with other figures hewn and cut by the ancient chisel, then it should suffice to bring back the missing parts in their ensemble, and treat their details such a manner that the observer is not mistaken between the ancient work and the work that was brought solely to complete the ensemble.

What we are proposing here has recently occurred in Rome with respect to the famous triumphal arch of Titus, which has fortunately been extricated from all that obstructed it, and whose defaced parts have also been very wisely restored, precisely in the manner and the measure that has just been described.”¹⁸⁵

According to Quatremère de Quincy, the restoration of Titus’s Arch in Rome, started by Raffaele Stern (1774-1820) and achieved by Giuseppe Valadier (1762-1839), in the first half of nineteenth century, can be read as a representative model in terms of objective and clear distinction between old and new architectural elements. This triumphal arch was built in the second half of the 1st century AD, from Vespasian to honor the memory of his father Titus. The monument remained intact throughout the imperial age, but during the Middle Ages it was incorporated into the fortified walls and, over the centuries, columns, capitals, inscriptions, sculptures had been stolen and only the central archway remained. After releasing the monument from the additions, an architectural restoration project was carried out based on the study of the original residual elements still intact, especially in the basement. An accurate comparison was made with other similar architectures, in particular the triumphal arches of Ancona and Benevento, and ancient Roman coins representing the arch were also studied. Valadier describes in detail, with drawings and written reports, the entire intervention and decides to reconstruct the lost lateral

¹⁸⁵ Samir Younes. *The True, the Fictive, and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy*. Papadakis Publisher, Singapore. 1999_ PP. 219-220.

pillars and complete the attic. In the added parts, the frieze is not sculpted, but remains smooth, as well as the shafts of the Corinthian columns, which in the original parts are instead fluted. The added stone blocks are simple, stylized and without details. Valadier uses travertine instead of marble for the added parts. The two materials are similar, but slightly different both from a chromatic and perceptual point of view, so seen from afar make the work appear unified and intact, but to a closer view objectively shows their diversity. The new artefact with its added parts, schematic and simplified, almost minimalist, tells us the story of the work with clarity and without deception. The reference to the principles of this compositional method, which using Arno Reiff's parameters can be defined as *imitatio*, will be taken into consideration in the conception of design strategy for the reconstruction of Villa Deliella. Despite the great commitment that Valadier had in carefully, distinguishing the new stones from the old ones, and the scientific rigor with which he carried out the restoration, he was starkly criticized by Stendhal who in 1829 wrote:

"This is the most ancient of those to be seen in Rome; it was the most elegant up to the time when it was redone by M. Valadier. This man is an architect and a Roman by birth despite his French name. Instead of supporting Titus's arch, that was falling into ruin, by steel reinforcements, or by an arched buttress of bricks, quite distinct from the monument itself, the poor man rebuilt it. He had the nerve to hew blocks of travertino after the form of the antique stones and to substitute them for these, which were carted away I know not where. What remains to us is therefore but a copy of Titus's arch."¹⁸⁶

He calls the result of this restoration work a 'copy' in a derogatory sense, although he briefly describes some aspects of it that allow it to be identified rather as an interpretative imitation of the original monument, such as the use of travertine instead of marble. The French writer's criticism could be indicative of the fact that

¹⁸⁶ A Roman journal (by Stendhal); edited and translated by Haakon Chevalier. The Orion Press Limited. London, 1959_P. 146.

already the rejection process for the concept of imitation had begun. However, as reported by Quatremere, the two architects had conceived their project using special expedients to prevent the restored parts from appearing as faithful copies of the missing originals. Jukka Jokilehto says that:

“In spite of all doubts and criticism, the *restoration* of the *Arch of Titus* laid some foundations for *modern* principles in the treatment of historic buildings, and has later often been referred to as a model.”¹⁸⁷

Even today this intervention, for its rigorous method, is considered as the first case of modern scientific restoration. The new parts added imitate the missing ancient ones without copying them, and are distinguished from the surviving original ones, in order to make the overall image of the monument recognizable as a whole.



Figure 71. The Arch of Titus, Roma.

¹⁸⁷ Jokilehto J., *History of Architectural Conservation*. Routledge New York 1999_P. 85.



Figure 72. Detail of the Arch of Titus, Roma.



Figure 73. Gaspar van Wittel: Rome: View of the Arch of Titus, c. 1710

On the website of the *Archäologisches Institut* of the University of Cologne this pioneering work is described as the first example of modern restoration:

„Im ersten Viertel des 19. Jhs. wurde er von Stern und Valadier so restauriert wie er heute zu sehen ist; Der Titusbogen ist das erste Beispiel moderner

Restauration, indem ergänzte und antike Teile deutlich voneinander unterschieden werden.“¹⁸⁸

Michael Pfänner also considers it to be the first case of restoration carried out according to the modern concept, which is still relevant today:

„Die Rekonstruktionsmethode -Ergänzung in Travertin mit schmucklosen Profilen -wählte man offensichtlich deswegen um antike und moderne Teile deutlich zu unterscheiden. Das bezeugen viele zeit genössische Quellen wenn auch die Restauration an sich teilweise auf Kritik stieß. Der Titusbogen stellt somit das erste Beispiel einer modernen Restauration dar“¹⁸⁹

Despite the fact that, as seen, for several centuries the concept of mimesis was at the centre of the artistic creative process and Western aesthetic reflection, from the 19th century onwards it came under fierce criticism. Modernity then rejected and definitively discredited the principle of imitation, exclusively celebrating the originality and novelty of the work of art. Romanticism has promoted the values of novelty with respect to tradition as an essential condition of legitimacy and value. Thus begins the process of detachment in all the arts from the works and styles of the past and the ideal of an art that arises from the need to express mainly individual feelings and passions is exalted. This is the same path that in architecture led progressively, as mentioned, to the stripping of buildings of their ornaments, which Werner Oechslin described through the metaphor of *Stilhülse und Kern*.

In the nineteenth century the artistic experimentation of the revivals generated architectures that reflected the search for a style that was representative of the new cosmopolitan culture and, at the same time, emancipated from the exclusive dependence on the models of the neoclassical tradition. In this era of great journeys, contacts with different civilisations provided architects with new sources of inspiration, in addition to those deriving from the rediscovery and revaluation of

¹⁸⁸[https://arachne.uni-Koeln.de/arachne/index.php?view\[layout\]=bauwerk_item&search\[constraints\]\[bauwerk\]\[searchSeriennummer\]=2100070](https://arachne.uni-Koeln.de/arachne/index.php?view[layout]=bauwerk_item&search[constraints][bauwerk][searchSeriennummer]=2100070). [16.06.2022].

¹⁸⁹ Pfänner M., *Der Titusbogen*. Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz am Rhein 1983_PP. 10-11.

all the historical styles of the past, without exceptions. Architects could therefore choose their stylistic references inspired by oriental or Moorish buildings, as well as medieval or baroque architectures, and combine them into infinite creative solutions. They were realised, for example: neo-Gothic architectures, such as *Caffè Pedrocchi* in Padua; or neo-baroque, as the Paris Opera; or buildings with an oriental appearance, such as the *Palazzina Cinese* in Palermo. These characteristics, linked to the choice and synthesis of heterogeneous elements, gave rise to the so-called eclectic style, whose arbitrary component was criticised, starting with the modern movement, for its supposed inability to express the spirit of the time and for its excesses of decoration. Eclecticism, however, seen precisely from the perspective of the historical evolution of architecture, is now being re-evaluated. Paolo Portoghesi wrote in the introduction to Chiara Visentin's book entitled *L'equivoco dell'Eclettismo* - The misunderstanding of Eclecticism-:

"Eclecticism is not a random set of quotations, but a careful and conscious choice of the best that can be found in the experience of architecture, why then close oneself only in the experience of the past?"¹⁹⁰

Eclectic architects rejected the idea of depending only on a single style from the past, as their neoclassical colleagues had done, and freely decided from which repertoires to draw the elements they considered suitable to express their, for those times, non-conventional architectural conception. The nineteenth-century experiments, therefore, although focused on the search for an original style, were always based, necessarily, on the principle of imitation. The excess of this principle progressively transformed Eclecticism into a sterile historicism, a sort of mode based on copying, that determined its decline. Otto Wagner had defined the architecture of that period as a "hotchpotch of styles" where everything was anachronistically "copied" from

¹⁹⁰ Visentin C. *L'equivoco dell'Eclettismo, imitazione e memoria in architettura*. Edizioni Pendragon. Bologna, 2003_P. 18 (my translation).

the buildings of the past, even their "patina". To express his desire for renewal in art, he often used the analogy between fashion and architecture, emphasizing the need for buildings to be designed in an independent modern style. In 1896 in the style chapter of his *Moderne Architektur* he wrote:

„Ja die Sache läßt sich soweit verfolgen, daß sich uns schließlich die Überzeugung aufdrängt, die großen Meister vergangener Jahrhunderte seien daran gescheitert, wenn sie Gestalten in Trachten ihrer Vorfahren darstellen wollten. Ihre Anschauung, ihr Empfinden entsprach eben immer nur den Formen ihrer eigenen Epoche. Was Stift und Pinsel schuf, war immer der ureigene Stil ihrer Zeit.

Wie so ganz anders heute!

Ein Sammelsurium von Stilen, alles wird kopiert, sogar patiniert; und das soll mit unserer Außenscheinung stimmen?

Es ist nicht nötig, Künstler zu sein, um diese Frage mit einem kräftigen „Nein“ zu beantworten.“¹⁹¹

He used the example of a person who, at the time he was writing, had gone around wearing antiquated 18th century clothing, which would naturally appear bizarre to everyone; he wondered why the same sentiment did not arise instead at the sight of works of art copying styles from the past:

„Ein Mann im modernen Reiseanzuge wird beispielsweise sehr gut zur Bahnhofhalle, zum Schlafwagen, zu all unseren Vehikeln stimmen; was würden wir aber für Augen machen, wenn wir beispielsweise eine Gestalt in der Kleidung der Epoche Ludwig XV. derartige Dinge benützen sehen würden?

Dieses erstaunliche Feingefühl der Allgemeinheit in Bezug auf die Mode einerseits, diese Gleichgültigkeit, ja dieser Stumpfsinn betreffs künstlerischer Werke andererseits findet seinen Grund im Folgenden: Vorerst ist die Mode das Näherliegende, Leichtfaßliche, leichter zu Beeinflussende, das Vorbereitende des Stils, während der Stil selbst den erstarrten, schwerer zu beeinflussenden und geläuterten Geschmack

¹⁹¹ Wagner, Otto. *Moderne Architektur: seinen Schülern ein Führer auf diesem Kunstgebiete*. Wien: Schroll, 1902_PP. 55-56.

repräsentiert, dessen Beurteilung schon Vertiefung und Verständnis erheischt.“¹⁹²

These words show how urgent Otto Wagner considered the development of a process of modernisation of architectural theory and practice, and how much he considered it necessary to undertake a general promotion of artistic culture in society. The evolution of art and style would have occurred more quickly if adequate knowledge and aesthetic sensibility had developed among the common people.

The essay on the reproduction of the work of art, as seen above, seems to have provided more than three decades later a theoretical answer to this need: in a nutshell, the new technical possibilities of reproduction freed art from auraticity and opened them up to the availability of the masses. Art and architecture became means of communication capable of making people aware of their social and political role.

Art nouveau artists, although driven by innovative and future-oriented principles, had tried to remove the historicist *Stilhülse* from buildings, but they ultimately created another decorative shell which soon revealed its fragility and in turn led to the birth of a new style in opposition to it.

All the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century, just starting from the abandonment of the concept of art as imitation, have promoted their independence from tradition, definitively undermining the principles of order, proportion, symmetry. The notion of beauty and the very concepts of space and time, until then undisputed references in Western culture, were shaken by a wave of renewal. In this sense, it is significant and emblematic in particular the extreme attitude of the Futurist painters, which in the first three points of their *Manifesto* they proclaim:

“With our enthusiastic adherence to Futurism, we want:

1. To destroy the cult of the past, the obsession with antiquity, pedantry, and academic formalism.

¹⁹² Wagner, Otto. *Moderne Architektur: seinen Schülern ein Führer auf diesem Kunstgebiete*_PP. 57-58.

2. To disdain utterly every form of imitation.
3. To exalt every form of originality, however daring, however violent".¹⁹³

The same identical attitude of radical rejection of imitation can also be found in all the other Futurist Manifestos, from sculpture to music. In particular Antonio Sant'Elia in 1914, in his *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture*, wrote:

"This is the supreme imbecility of modern architecture, perpetuated by the venal complicity of the academies, the internment camps of the intelligentsia, where the young are forced into the onanistic recopying of classical models instead of throwing their minds open in the search for new frontiers and in the solution of the new and pressing problem: the Futurist house and city."¹⁹⁴

The consequences of this attitude of rejection towards imitative practices, as will be seen, will be perceptible in the architectural theory and practice of the following decades, and in particular in many cases of reconstructions indifferent to historical contextualisation. It was then probably Walter Benjamin with his theory of the Aura who revived interest in technological reproductions of works of art, re-evaluating the aesthetic-political function of imitation in contemporary society. With his vision, in many ways in continuity with the ancient thinkers explored in this paragraph, he wrote a fundamental page in the centuries-old debate on *mimesis*.

¹⁹³ U. Boccioni, C. D. Carrà, L. Russolo, G. Balla, G. Severini *Manifesto dei Pittori Futuristi* 11.02.1910.

¹⁹⁴ Hongmin Kim H. *Graphic Design Discourse: Evolving Theories, Ideologies, and Processes of Visual Communication*_ Princeton Architectural Press_ New York 2018_ P. 31.

2.4 Breaking with history but... recovering the past

The rejection of imitation, and the consequent veneration of originality, in the modern architecture of the last century, manifested itself fundamentally in two major fields: that of new projects and that of restoration and reconstruction work in historical contexts. For the purposes of this study, aspects of the latter will be taken into greater consideration, although, obviously, the disciplines of architectural design and restoration are complementary and closely linked. The works of the Modern Movement have been substantially characterized by the exaltation of the functionality of buildings, the use of new materials and technologies and a radical detachment from the decorative tradition of academies. In reality, however, the classical tradition, regardless of the fact that decorations were banned, has always continued to influence modern architects, mainly with regard to typological layouts and proportional systems of plans, volumes and spaces. Some examples in this sense could be represented by the influence that the neoclassical lessons of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand and the architecture of Karl Friedrich Schinkel had on the projects of Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe; or by the use of modules and the golden ratio in Le Corbusier; or by the references to the buildings of ancient Rome in the language of Louis Kahn. It is rather singular and emblematic in this regard that Adolf Loos, considered a pioneer of the International Style, who explicitly condemned decoration and any formal reference to the architecture of the past in modern buildings, used himself classical columns in his *Looshaus* in Vienna and that he even designed a skyscraper in the shape of a giant Doric column, for the competition of the *Chicago Tribune* headquarters.

On the other hand, considering the extraordinary repetitiveness and stylistic uniformity of the International Style, it can be affirmed that even the architects who designed the most purely functionalist buildings inevitably had to imitate, consciously or not, the formal, spatial, typological and technical solutions of other functionalist buildings.

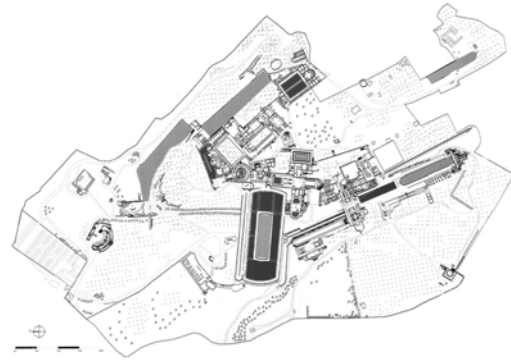
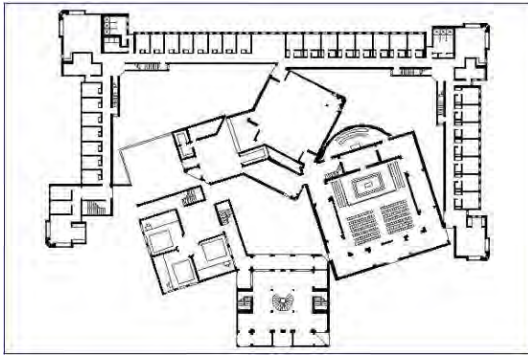


Figure 74. *The Dominican Motherhouse by Louis Kahn (1965-1968) in Media PA and Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli (117-138 AD)*



Figure 75. *K.F. Schinkel. Altes Museum, Berlin (1823-1828) and L. Mies van der Rohe's Crown Hall, Chicago (1954-1956)*

Paolo Portoghesi states:

“Every single architecture originates from other architectures, from a series of precedents, consequently combined by imagining a process the implicates the solitude of thought, that converge in a non-fortuitous manner with the chorality of our collective memory. (...) “architecture originates from architecture tout court, a result of love stories between buildings far away in

space and time, in which the architect is only an indiscrete accomplice, a matchmaker, an indispensable catalyst, and not a creator."¹⁹⁵

The same contradictions related to the presumed independence of art from history and imitation, are also present in twentieth-century painting and sculpture; some examples are: the reclining figures by Henry Moore, related to the sculptures from the east pediment of the Parthenon; or the nostalgic dreamlike works of De Chirico, imbued with classical atmospheres; or the so-called "*d'après*" by Picasso, paintings in which he explicitly quoted masterpieces from the past, reworking them in a contemporary key. The originality sought by artists with an absolute detachment from tradition was fundamentally impossible to achieve, if the premise is true that the creative act is always the result of continuous appropriation and re-elaboration of already existing elements; and this is probably the key to interpreting these apparently contradictory attitudes. Some artists were aware of this and openly declared their references to the past, others did so perhaps unconsciously, but they could not escape the phenomenon of imitation. Even those who referred to other modern works, apparently disconnected from tradition, unconsciously followed in their creative process a trait or traits of that chain that links, through continuous references to the past, all artistic products. If, for example, an architect were to design a building today based on Louis Kahn's ultra-modern Kimbell Art Museum, he would indirectly reproduce those archetypes of classical Roman architecture, which in turn influenced this masterpiece.

Ernesto Nathan Rogers, during the same lecture at the Milan Polytechnic in 1964 mentioned above, in which he gave the etymological definition of "monument", focused his speech on the fact that it is impossible for architects and artists of all times to be completely detached from history:

¹⁹⁵ Portoghesi, Paolo, *Combinando cose lontane*, in *TECHNE Journal of Technology for Architecture and Environment*, Issue 12 Year 6, FUP (Firenze University Press), 2016_P. 40.

“Knowledge relies on memory, from memory is influenced every creation, even the most original, the one that seems or believes to be completely detached from experience and believes to have arisen, like Minerva, from the brain of Jupiter.

Every work, even the most detached and original, if it is not a freak, is linked to this current, from which we draw nourishment...”¹⁹⁶

These ideas are clearly evident in the buildings Rogers designed with the BBPR group he founded, which show recognisable references to earlier historical architecture, such as the 1955 *Torre Velasca* in Milan, an explicit reinterpretation of the medieval towers of Lombardy.

Historical memory plays a fundamental role in any artistic creative process, and even more so in the field of restoration and architectural reconstructions. But how can one imitate without copying, and thus create fakes, a building, or a part of it, that time and events have made disappear? The "imitation versus copy" debate will in this sense be explored, analyzing some emblematic case studies.

A fundamental event was the reconstruction of the bell tower of *San Marco* in Venice, which has already been mentioned in particular in paragraph 1.4, in which, after the work had already begun, Ernesto Basile was called to carry out an expertise and to give his technical/aesthetic opinion. On 14 July 1902 the old tower collapsed, disintegrating into a huge pile of rubble. In the days following the disaster, a heated debate opened, widely documented by Italian and foreign newspapers, on how and where the bell tower was to be rebuilt. Many even argued that the square, in its new unexpected configuration, was much more beautiful than before and therefore proposed not to rebuild the tower. This idea was among others supported by the *Londoner Daily Express* and by some French artists including Felix Ziem. In the days following the collapse, Otto Wagner granted an interview, reported by the newspaper *Avanti*, in which he suggested rebuilding the bell tower, but in another

¹⁹⁶ Rogers E.N., *Il senso della storia*. Unicopli, Milano 1999_P. 14 (my translation).

position and in a modern style. At the same time, the Viennese architect pointed out the danger of falsifying history if the monument were rebuilt in the old style:

“it seems to me that Venice should not suffer serious damage due to the collapse of its bell tower. It should lovingly collect among the rubble every stone, every bronze, every fragment of ornamentation and reconstruct with them the bell tower, as a historical reminder. But I'd like to see it in another point, because where it was, it undoubtedly spoiled the harmony and aesthetics of the square. I would not even be alien to the idea that the new bell tower of the basilica was built in a modern style. For what reason should not modern style be represented in the square of Venice, since by now the misfortune has happened? It would be a wish to falsify the history of architecture if the bell tower were rebuilt in the ancient style.”¹⁹⁷

Finally, the idea of reconstruction in style prevailed, and the tower was rebuilt by Luca Beltrami in the same original shape, but with a reinforced concrete structure and a slightly tapered profile upwards. It was coined on that occasion, by the words spoken by the mayor at the time, the motto “*as it was, where it was*”, still used today in the restoration field to indicate this type of reconstructions. The debate continued for many years even after the rebuilding was completed, but in the end the replica was accepted worldwide for its strong symbolic function, and the fact that it restored the city skyline, which would have been seriously altered without the tower. Even Gustavo Giovannoni¹⁹⁸ a pioneer of scientific restoration based on respect for the original material and authentic archive documents, although he considered reconstructions “in style” as fakes to be avoided, nevertheless wrote about the replica of the bell tower:

“Rivers of ink have been poured pro and against reconstruction, and for new style or imitation from the old. And in theory everyone was right. But those who were in Venice during the years when the bell tower no longer existed could not have doubts: Venice, without the main mast proclaiming the

¹⁹⁷ *Avanti! Giornale del Partito socialista*. Edizione del 19 luglio 1902– Archivio storico Avanti! del Senato della Repubblica Italiana. _P. 2 (my translation).

¹⁹⁸ Gustavo Giovannoni would later become one of the major protagonists of *The Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments* – 1931.

queen of the seas from the extreme lagoon or the open Adriatic sea, was no longer Venice: Piazza San Marco no longer had its harmony and meaning... In this contrast between the various attitudes of reason, between the reason and the feeling is the tragedy of the restorers. "¹⁹⁹



Figure 76. Venice, Piazza San Marco after the collapse of the bell tower in 1902



Figure 77. Venice: the bell tower of San Marco under reconstruction in 1911

¹⁹⁹ Giovannoni G., *La tutela delle opere d'arte in Italia, Atti del CX Convegno degli Ispettori onorari dei Monumenti e Scavi, tenutosi a Roma il 22-25 ottobre 1912, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, direzione Generale delle Antichità e Belle Arti, Roma 1913* (my translation).

In 1931 the *Athens Charter* was published, whose recommendations explicitly condemned fakes. The document reads:

“Whatever may be the variety of concrete cases, each of which are open to a different solution, the Conference noted that there predominates in the different countries represented a general tendency to abandon restorations in toto and to avoid the attendant dangers by initiating a system of regular and permanent maintenance calculated to ensure the preservation of the buildings. (...) When, as the result of decay or destruction, restoration appears to be indispensable, it recommends that the historic and artistic work of the past should be respected, without excluding the style of any given period. (...) In the case of ruins, scrupulous conservation is necessary, and steps should be taken to reinstate any original fragments that may be recovered (anastylosis), whenever this is possible; the new materials used for this purpose should in all cases be recognisable.”²⁰⁰

Two years later a homonymous *Athens Charter* was published by the fourth CIAM conference organized by Le Corbusier, and also in this document, obviously, the imitation of ancient architecture, in cases of reconstruction, was condemned. Article No. 70 of the document reads:

“The practice of using styles of the past on aesthetic pretexts for new structures erected in historic areas has harmful consequences. Neither the continuation of such practices nor the introduction of such initiatives will be tolerated in any form. Such methods are contrary to the great lesson of history. Never has a return to the past been recorded, never has man retraced his own steps. The masterpieces of the past show us that each generation has had its way of thinking, its conceptions, its aesthetic, which called upon the entire range of the technical resources of its epoch to serve as the springboard for its imagination. To imitate the past slavishly is to condemn ourselves to delusion, to institute the “false” as a principle, since the working conditions of former times cannot be recreated and since the application of modern techniques to an outdated ideal can never lead to anything but a simulacrum devoid of all vitality. The mingling of the “false” with the “genuine,” far from attaining an impression of unity and from giving a sense of purity of style, merely results in artificial reconstruction

²⁰⁰ Erder C. *Our architectural heritage: from consciousness to conservation*. UNESCO Paris, 1986 _P. 211.

capable only of discrediting the authentic testimonies that we were most moved to preserve.”²⁰¹

After the destruction caused by the bombardments of the Second World War, in which entire historic centres of several European cities were heavily damaged or even completely razed to the ground, the subject of reconstruction and the ensuing debates became urgently topical. The dispute between two different schools of thought that in the immediate post-war period animated the city of Florence, which had lost much of its artistic heritage, is exemplary of what was happening in the rest of Europe. In 1945 on the magazine *Il Ponte* Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli and Bernard Berenson express their different opinions on the theoretical principles and design strategies to be followed for the reconstruction of the city, and in particular that of three historical bridges destroyed on the Arno river: *Ponte alle Grazie*, *Ponte alla Carraia* and *Ponte Santa Trinita*. Berenson proposes to reconstruct the bridges, and the historical centre of the city, according to the authentic appearance of traditional models, searching for the picturesque character of lost architecture. He argues that the mental image that the Florentines have of their disappeared monuments would be altered by the introduction of modern architectures; the historical image of the city would be lost and no memory or imagination could ever recover it. He writes in an article entitled *Come ricostruire la Firenze demolita* - How to rebuild the demolished Florence -:

“Even if you want to do it, you can, there is a quantity of drawings, prints, engravings, photographs, watercolors and other visual documents that can serve the purpose. (...) one more reason remains to reject any proposal except that of integral reconstruction. Is that for centuries when the name "Florence" was pronounced, the visual image that first flashed to mind was that of the Ponte Vecchio and from the opposite side of the Arno (...) if we do not reconstruct it, we would replace the mnemonic image of Florence that we and our predecessors have known for generations, with something that breaks so violently with tradition, that at first sight we would no longer

²⁰¹ CIAM's "The Athens Charter" (1933) Translated from the French by Anthony Eardley. From Le Corbusier's *The Athens Charter*. (Grossman. New York, NY: 1973).

recognize identity and we would be forced to reconstruct it by putting together this or that visual fragment."²⁰²

Berenson's ideas were shared by most of the citizens who feared that a city as rich in history as Florence, severely mutilated by aerial bombardments, would risk losing its memory irreversibly and forever. Even, in those years, some promoted the demolition of the shops and of the gallery on the *Ponte Vecchio*, to allow the passage of cars! This attitude of indifference towards the historical heritage had previously produced some damage before the war. In 1944, e.g., due to the installation of the tram rails, the *Ponte alle Grazie*, bridge on the Arno river later destroyed by the bombs, had already undergone the mutilation of its characteristic small architectures, known as "*casette*" - chapels, oratories and shops - which stood on each of its pylons. Somehow originally, this bridge was built like the nearby *Ponte Vecchio*, but, unlike this, with small point-like and non-continuous architectures. At the same time the carriageway was enlarged with additional cast iron arches, that further distorted the aesthetics of the bridge.

Bianchi Bandinelli has a different idea of the reconstruction of the city than Berenson: he wants instead contemporary architectures to be introduced in the historical context. According to him, a copy of an urban organism that had gradually formed spontaneously over the centuries cannot be artificially reconstructed; it would result in something fake, anonymous and cold. In response to the American art historian, he writes in an article titled *Come non ricostruire la Firenze demolita* - How not to rebuild the demolished Florence -:

"There are two dangers: the first is to rebuild our cities indiscriminately in glass-cement; the second, that we want to restore "as they were" by reconstructing them on the photos and on the casts. Of the two dangers we immediately denounce the second as the more serious, also because it will have in its own favor the opinion of a majority of so-called cultured people of the bourgeois classes, always in favor of the rhetoric of the ancient fake. (...). We have also seen, for example in Bremen, in the Roselius-Haus, an

²⁰² Berenson Bernard. *Come ricostruire la Firenze demolita*, Il Ponte, anno 1, n.1_01.04.1945 (my translation).

ancient street restored and outwardly intact, but of which every life was extinguished, whose houses then formed inwardly, put in condition one with the other, an exhibition, an exhibition and a museum. At the thought that something similar can become stable and perpetual, that we can give an artificial heart to our Florence, only to not disappoint tourists accustomed to the stereotypical postcard of the Ponte Vecchio with its mirrored houses on the Arno, we cannot do without feeling horrified and to wish immediately not to continue to live in a false city, as this would be. (...) Florence has not, is true, the right to change its face; but it has a duty not to make it papier-mache. (...). We Italians refuse to be nothing but the custodians of a museum, the guardians of a mummy, and we claim the right to live in living cities, within cities that follow the evolution of our life, the vicissitudes of our history, high or poor that they are, as long as sincere, provided that there are no remaining of rhetoric."²⁰³

In the following years, however, only a few buildings were rebuilt according to a contemporary approach, while most of the architectures of Florence were reconstructed following the thesis of picturesque reconstruction, in rare cases with a scientific method based on historical research. The case of three bridges that were destroyed in 1944 by the retreating Nazi troops is significant: each of them was then rebuilt with clearly different results. The bridge *alla Carraia* was rebuilt by Ettore Fagioli, who proposed a project in style, so to speak, in the manner of Viollet le Duc, that Giovanni Klaus Koenig critically described:

"a five-arched bridge covered with pietraforte [a typical local stone] incredible imitation of a very arched medieval bridge".²⁰⁴

The design pedantically followed the shapes of the demolished bridge, visible in some antique prints, and its reinforced concrete structure was camouflaged with fake stone coverings. This project was directly imposed by the central government of the state, which ignored the result of a competition that had been announced by the municipality of Florence a few years earlier. It was immediately called by the

²⁰³ Bianchi Bandinelli Ranuccio. Come non ricostruire la Firenze demolita. Il Ponte, anno 1, n.2_02.05.1945 (my translation).

²⁰⁴ Koenig Giovanni Klaus. *Architettura in Toscana, 1931-1968*. ERI, Torino 1968. _P. 62 (my translation).

Florentines “*il ponte gobbo*” - the hunched bridge -, because of its accentuate profile, which sparked heated controversy not only among scholars, but also between citizens. The new bridge, in 1952, was even inaugurated without any official ceremony.



Figure 78. E. Fagioli, *Ponte alla Carraia*. Firenze, 1952

Ponte alle Grazie was rebuilt in 1953 after an architectural competition won by the Giovanni Michelucci group, with Edoardo Detti and others. The new bridge, with its modern design and its pre-stressed reinforced concrete structure, does not passively reflect the shape of the previous one. First of all, the arches are five instead of seven, and have a much lower curve than those of the missing prototype. The pillars are covered with local stones and the five arches are in fair-faced concrete. The vertical surface of each arch is concave, that is the keystone is on a plane set back from the impost. This sophisticated solution makes the bridge organic and lean. However, the actual bridge is different from the original project, because the design was modified during the reconstruction, due to administration competition committee critics: in particular the planned height of the bridge pillars was strongly re-dimensioned. The Michelucci team had imagined that the height of each pier should have significantly exceeded the parapets, accentuating the rhythm of the

aches, “with a powerful effect coming out of the water.”²⁰⁵ Probably, the choice of this design element was not only related to the aesthetic, but, above all, to historical issues. It is evident that the unrealized protruding pylons wanted to re-propose in a modern key the historical “cassette” - small houses - of the bridge, destroyed in the nineteenth century, recalling them in the volumes, but without any faithful replica.



Figure 79. Giovanni Michelucci group, Ponte alle Grazie. Florence, 1953



Figure 80. F. Borbottoni (1820-1902). View of Ponte alle Grazie with the “cassette”. Florence

²⁰⁵ A. Aleardi, C. Marcetti. *L'architettura in Toscana dal 1945 ad oggi*. Alinea Editrice. Firenze 2011_P. 53 (my translation).

In the final solution these "full" elements, that the competition commission had criticized, have become "empty" with the choice of a bronze linear balustrade at each pylon that interrupts the masonry parapets. One could say that the memory of these particular little houses is evoked by emphasizing their absence. The ancient technique of *aemulatio* is here, perhaps unconsciously, used with the result of a harmonious integration of the modern architecture in a historical monumental context, derived from the direct confrontation undertaken with a lost prototype, that pays homage to predecessors and history. Also another group of architects coordinated by Giuseppe Giorgio Gori had proposed for the competition a project marked by the motto "*le casette*", where the pillars reached upwards with little belvedere rooms in explicit memory of the small missing architectures.

In 1958, the lost *Santa Trinita* bridge was rebuilt, according to the sixteenth-century project of Bartolomeo Ammannati. The original stones were lifted from the bottom of the Arno and the new ones were extracted from the same quarry used for the first construction of the bridge, and, as usual, on the one hand the design was praised, on the other hand it was strongly attacked for having reconstituted the monument in a state belonging to a historical period that no longer existed.



Figure 81. The *Santa Trinita* bridge in Florence, rebuilt in 1958

One of the critics most opposed to this reconstruction was Cesare Brandi who in 1963 wrote:

"if instead the missing elements were in themselves artworks, then it is absolutely to be excluded that they can be reconstituted as copies. The environment will have to be reconstituted based on the spatial data, not on the formal ones, of the missing monument. So it was necessary to rebuild a bell tower in San Marco in Venice, but not the fallen one: so it was necessary to rebuild the bridge to Santa Trìnita, but not the Ammannati bridge".²⁰⁶

In the 1964 Venice Charter, of which Brandi was one of the main theorists, Article 15 reads:

"All reconstruction work should however be ruled out "a priori". Only anastylosis, that is to say, the reassembling of existing but dismembered parts can be permitted. The material used for integration should always be recognizable and its use should be the least that will ensure the conservation of a monument and the reinstatement of its form."²⁰⁷

In short, the exact replica of a lost monument, such as the *Santa Trìnita* bridge, is branded as a fake.

These three bridges were, each in a different way, reconstructed in the image of their respective lost prototypes and can be ascribed to the three aesthetic categories of Arno Reiff. It can be said that the *alla Carraia* bridge was built using the *interpretatio* method, as the designer tried with his own means, just as an interpreter does, to literally reproduce the forms of the ancient model in order to re-propose its image to his contemporaries, without however exploring it deeply and somehow creating a historical fake and a hybrid (reinforced concrete structure disguised by the apparently antique stone cladding). The scientific and technical effort used to build the *Santa Trìnita* bridge, in order to pass on its image and structure as faithfully as possible, could be considered as a form of *imitatio*, since those who have rebuilt the ancient structure had to somehow put themselves in the role of the

²⁰⁶ Brandi C. *Teoria del restauro*. Piccola biblioteca Einaudi Torino, 1963_P. 80 (my translation).

²⁰⁷ Feilden B.M. *Conservation of Historic Buildings* 2007. Architectural Press. London_P. 362.

architect of the 16th century and retrace the phases of the aesthetic construction process. The homage to Bartolomeo Ammannati is evident in the complicated imitative path of form and content - although, just as in the later case of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, this architectural replica is criticised for the difficulty of historical attribution it generates in observers, and for the fact that it does not allow the traces of the Second World War to be perceived -. The *alle Grazie* bridge is indeed a clear example of *aemulatio*, as the historical study of the prototype inspired the designers of the Michelucci group for the creation of the new building, who, while evoking the ancestor, tried to overcome it with form, language and contemporary techniques. The result is a sort of actualised translation of the lost original.

The architecture of Giovanni Michelucci, who has fully adopted the positions of Bianchi Bandinelli and Brandi, are exemplary and precise cases of a type of post-war reconstruction in historical urban contexts, conceived with an absolutely contemporary language, devoid of folkloristic and formal style references. However, these buildings try to be at the same time respectful of the typological tradition of cities, integrated in the historical urban context and strongly anchored to the *genius loci*, so much so that they have appeared "anti-modern" to some critics, despite their abstract and linear formal rigor. Referring to Berenson's proposal to indiscriminately reconstruct in old style the blocks of Florence destroyed by the war, Michelucci declared:

"It Was from the thought of this threat, of which the majority of the citizens had not become aware, but that nevertheless warned, that the idea of regaining what had been lost was born, by reconstructing the buildings - where they were and how they were-. But that wasn't an idea, it was rather a lack of ideas. To The voice of those citizens joined the authoritative one of Berenson; who, while, as a deep connoisseur and lover of ancient painting, never would have advised or bought a false painting, proposed in that occasion to reconstruct the facades of Por Santa Maria, Borgo San Jacopo and Via de ' Bardi -as they were-." ²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ G. Michelucci, *Intervista sulla nuova città*. Brunetti F. a cura di. Laterza Bari. 1981_ P. 56-57 (my translation).

The Italian architect places on the same level a hypothetical fake ancient painting and the façades, also falsely ancient, that Berenson proposed to realize for the buildings to be reconstructed in Florence, and wonders why the contempt that the American scholar surely feels for the former in the field of painting, does not feel it instead for the latter in the field of architecture.

Michelucci designs in 1954 in the historical center of Florence a building for houses and shops, commissioned by the *Ina* company. The lot is located at the corner of a block of medieval origin, which had been severely damaged by the bombing of the Second World War. He, coherently with his ideas, does not create a fake fourteenth-century building, but neither does an anonymous block, detached from any relationship with the urban context; instead he conceives a "medieval" L-shaped typological system with two distinct parts, crossed on the ground floor by a vaulted passage, that gives access to an internal courtyard. On the street level there are shops, each connected to a residence above, typical of the traditional Florentine "house-shop", and, on the upper floors, the architect uses two other different building typologies: traditional apartments on one level, and duplex apartments connected by an internal staircase, which recall the fourteenth-century tower house. Also the projecting roof, the protruding volumes to the upper levels of the south front and the use in façade of *pietraforte*, a very diffused stone in Tuscany, recall the Florentine building tradition. The result is an articulated volume, with proportionately and chromatically balanced facades, contemporary and properly set in the historic urban fabric. Using modern construction techniques and materials and a frank rationalist style, Michelucci has established a dialogue with the history, leaving in this place a clear imprint of his time and his thought. However, no clue lets us guess what were the shapes, volumes and colours of the houses destroyed by the bombardments that this building replaced. However, can it be affirmed that Michelucci's method, although so rigorous and scientific in terms of respect for the traditional typology of that particular urban context, can still be used today as a model in cases of reconstruction? The absolute formal and stylistic detachment from

the models of the past can guarantee, by itself, the aesthetic and typological development appropriate for our historical cities?

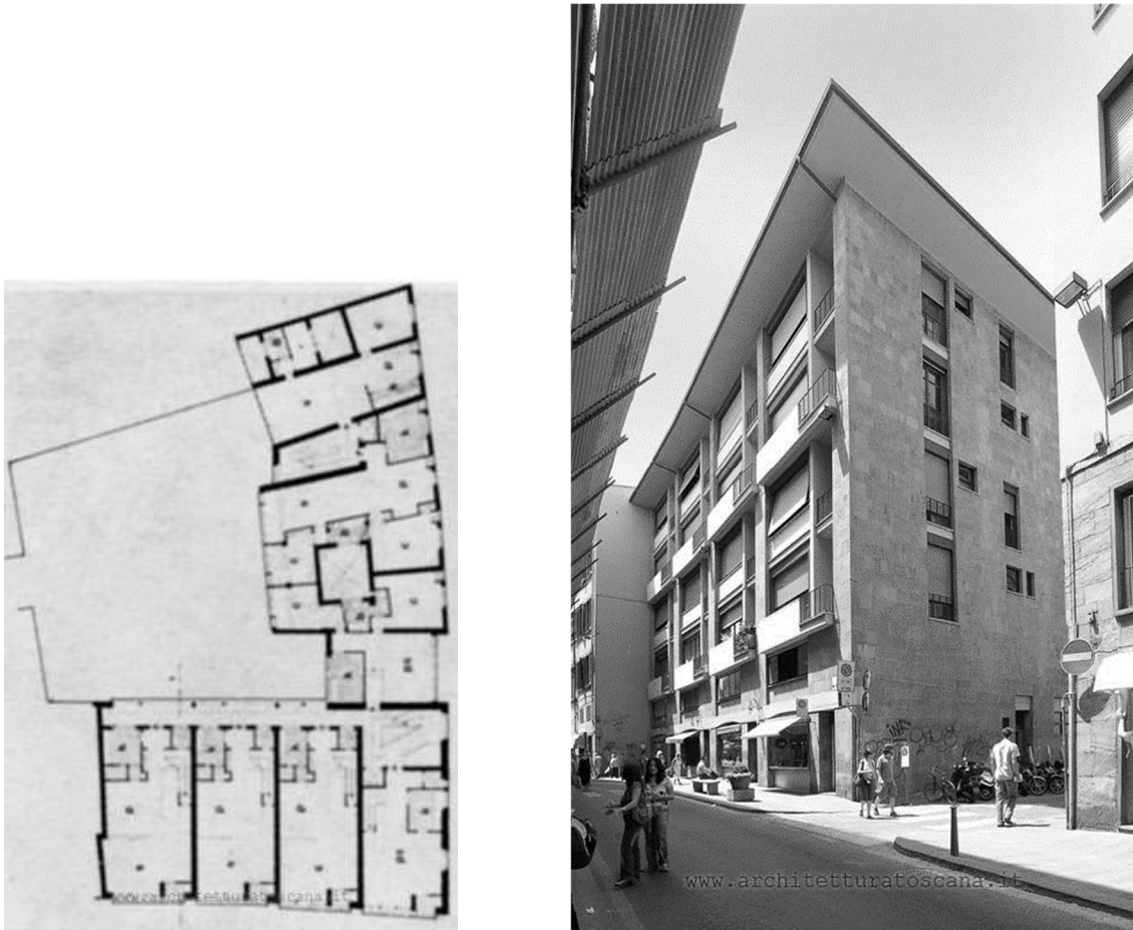


Figure 82. G. Michelucci. Casa in via dello Sprone, Firenze 1954-58

The Italian architect, years later, making self-criticism, even declared that this building, already so formally innovative, was still too tied to history. He declared:

"This is the building where I have mainly suffered the influence of the environment and, therefore, the accusation of medievalism is right. After this construction my reaction was violent and it was expressed in the buildings I built later. I mean, finally, that this is not the building that interests me most among those I built in Florence, (...). As I have already said, this is a building I don't like very much, because there is still a concern for architectural composition, from which I tried with all my strength to free myself later. There is still, I would say, a somewhat didactic or scholastic

feeling, an attempt to formally specify certain technological elements (...). But this building still lacks a freedom that I consider essential in architecture".²⁰⁹

Giovanni Michelucci expressed this freedom in many of his later works, and in particular in a project that definitively demonstrates his aversion to imitation: the Church of Longarone. This town, due to the Vajont disaster in 1963, was literally swept away by a wave of mud and water generated by a landslide upstream of the dam. The old disappeared religious edifice was built in 1717, it had a single nave with a deep apse, a gabled façade and a side bell tower; today only a few stone and bronze fragments remain, that are exposed inside the new church. Citizens who survived the catastrophe would have wanted an exact copy of the destroyed monument, but after many debates, it was decided to build a completely new church in fair-faced concrete. Mauro Petrecca writes on this subject:

"The approval of the project in 1967 did not stop the opposition of the inhabitants, who wanted a more traditional construction; the foundation stone was not laid until 1975, and the work was completed in 1978."²¹⁰

The new architecture, with its organic forms and spaces, dialogues with the surrounding landscape and with the reconstructed town, it will probably become in future the symbol of Longarone's rebirth, but still today it raises controversy and heated debates fueled by the nostalgic of past, since it has no formal or volumetric connection with the ancient church. The work is a clear sign of our time; however, one wonders if this is the right way to follow today in the case of reconstruction of lost works. The missing church was certainly not by far the highest example of eighteenth-century architecture, but it was a building with its own historical, artistic and landscaping value, and, above all, for the community it represented an important visual and symbolic point of reference. The fact of not having taken it at

²⁰⁹ Borsi Franco (a cura di), *Giovanni Michelucci*, LEF Firenze 1966. _PP. 123, 124. (my translation).

²¹⁰ Petrecca Mauro, in - *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* - Volume 74. Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana. Roma 2010.

all as a reference in the new design project, and having proposed a completely new and original construction, perhaps, represents a limit and a missed opportunity.

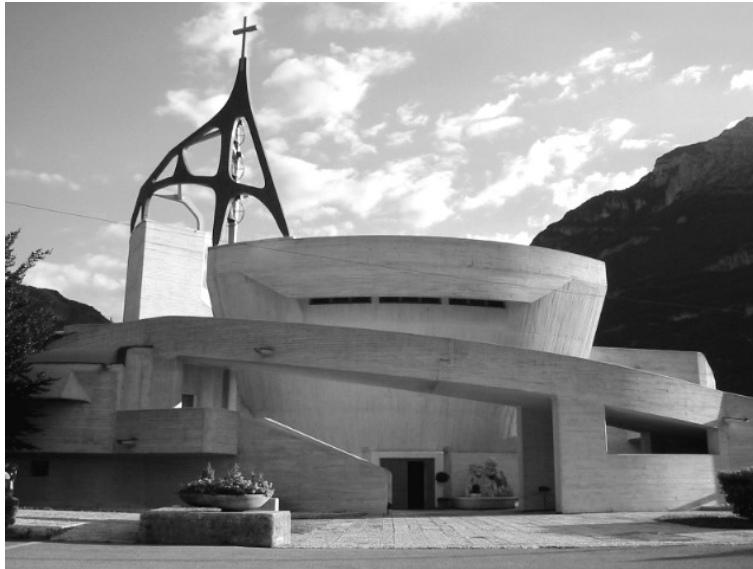


Figure 83. G. Michelucci. Church of Santa Maria Immacolata, Longarone. 1975-78



Figure 84. The old Church of Santa Maria Immacolata in Longarone, before its destruction.

The ancient concept of mimesis does not seem to have been taken into consideration here by Michelucci, who among other things together with Carlo Scarpa, Mario Ridolfi, Giancarlo De Carlo and many others is considered the most "historic" and least radical of the post-war reconstruction architects in Italy. Even the already

mentioned project that Mario Botta carried out in 1989 on direct assignment (without a public competition) of the Municipality of Palermo, for the construction of a *multimedia space of contemporary art*, just in the area where Villa Deliella once stood, seems animated by the same attitude of “indifference” towards the missing monument, that Michelucci had shown towards the old church of Longarone. His project, that was never realized, consists of a three floors square-plan building, which occupies a much larger surface than that of the disappearing villa, surmounted by a garden roof in the shape of a cylinder cut at 45 degrees. In the center, the lowered circular multipurpose central space is illuminated by roof-mounted skylights. The project shows no reference to Ernesto Basile's pre-existing architecture, not even the preservation of the small surviving Art Nouveau keeper's house and exterior garden fence. He did not even consider the possibility of carrying out an archaeological excavation to bring to light and make evident in some way the ruins of this important architecture. It is significant that the only hint that Botta makes to the villa in the project report is exclusively this:

“The block on which the new project is set is a quadrilateral of about 50 meters on each side of which stood Villa Deliella, one of the most significant works of Ernesto Basile, demolished in the space of a night, about twenty years ago.”²¹¹

He then goes on to describe his project without ever mentioning the villa. In one of his axonometric sketches, a small tower volume can be seen in one of the four corners of the building, which could perhaps be reminiscent of the corner tower of the ancient villa, but this is only a speculation. In reality, the project seems completely new and indifferent to the context, it is similar to dozens of others that the Swiss architect had already carried out in different urban and geographical situations. The inclined cylindrical tree crown of the roof, for example, recalls those

²¹¹ Illustrative report on the project drafted in Lugano on 15 December 1989, published in the magazine „Per“ N.9 maggio-settembre 2004. Giornale della Fondazione “Salvare Palermo”. Authors: Mario Botta, Nino Vicari, Vittorio Fagone. Original article's title: *Progetto per uno spazio multimediale d'arte contemporanea a Palermo*. PP. 10-11.

of many of his other buildings built in different countries, before and after the project of Palermo, such as the *Cathedral of the Resurrection* in Évry (1988), the *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art* (1995) or *Petra* winery in Suvereto (2005); this leitmotiv seems to denote only a self-referential and self-celebrating will, rather than the attempt to establish a dialogue with the disappeared model. Paradoxically, it seems that Botta wants to avoid copying and evoking the past, but at the same time, it is evident that he is always obsessively copying himself.

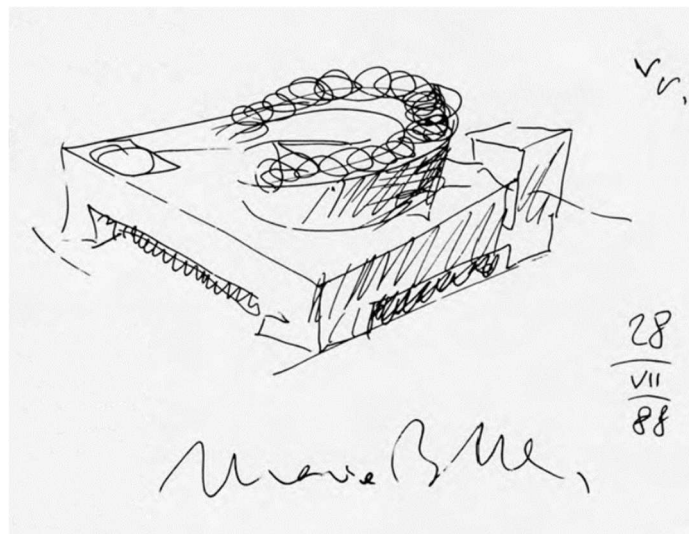


Figure 85 M. Botta. Project for a multimedia space of contemporary art in Palermo. 1988-89

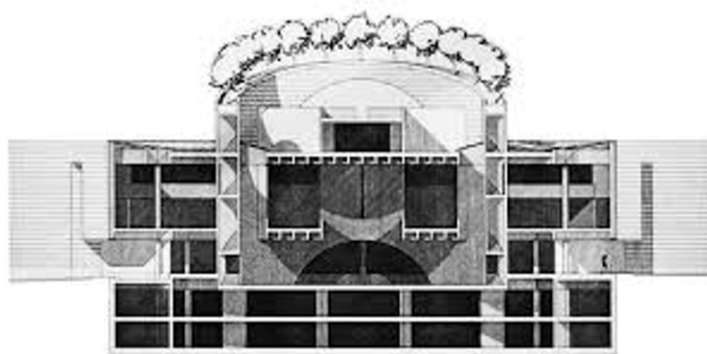


Figure 86. M. Botta. Project for a multimedia space of contemporary art in Palermo. 1988-89

Paolo Portoghesi writes about Botta:

“After the intense work dedicated to the theme of the house, Botta proposes again, in buildings of different intended use and size, the morphology of the cube and the cylinder, but usually he fails to recover the expressive

happiness and control capacity that characterizes the first works, often highlighting the forcing that the a priori choice of the volumetric model imposes on the spatial organism. Botta does not like to be included in the Post-modern category, but his work has many of the features that critics have attributed to this category, in particular the recovery of morphological elements typical of the classical language such as the bow, the column, the capital, the axial scale, the barrel vault, the symmetrical layout, even if they exclude the quotation, coincide with a language based on conventions that link the present to the past. The author often offers a functional or constructive motivation, but these are rarely elements linked to the context, and they often represent a characteristic of the taste with which the designer proposes his own image. (...) Prisoner of a compositional formula of undoubted efficacy, the architect repeated it to the point of exhaustion, taking from the historical legacy, not what he could give to his images of the roots in the place with a typological connection, but what was sometimes more suitable to give the image a sort of hypnotic power. ²¹²

There is a small doubt that, if Botta's building had been constructed in a place as rich in meaning as *Piazza delle Croci* - the site where Villa Deliella once stood - precisely because of its absolute lack of ties to the past, it would not have remembered it. It would probably not even have had the communicative characteristics that would have allowed it to become the symbol of the rebirth of Palermo, a role that it would have to play in witnessing the looting and disasters that this city has suffered since the 1970s. On the other hand, this purpose would probably not even have been achieved, and perhaps even less so, with a facsimile of Villa Deliella, which many would now like to see realized. In this regard Francesco Maggio writes:

"The demolition of Villa Deliella, a small masterpiece by Ernesto Basile, striking because it took place in a single night, still shouting revenge; in the collective memory the "sack of Palermo" coincides with the destruction of the villa that belonged, in the end, to Franco Lanza di Scalea. Currently the place where it stood is an urban void. Intellectuals, Cultural Associations, "Attentive" Citizens, today are working to rebuild the villa in style to restore

²¹² C. Di Stefano, P. Portoghesi. *I grandi architetti del Novecento*. Newton & Compton, Roma. 1998. _ To the item: „Botta“. (my translation).

the image of the history of the city avoiding, in every way, the opportunity of to create a contemporary architecture. Yet another contradiction; the request for new architecture is answered with a pedantic reconstruction: how it was and where it was. This culture of the rejection of a new architecture probably derives from the memory of what happened in the years of the "sacco" but also for a recovery policy of the historical center, marked by "architectural paradoxes". (...) An architecture [the Botta project] left in the drawer; 1989 - 2018, "only" twenty-nine years separate the possibility to achieve a contemporary design (at that time) from a part of the culture of a city that today, wants even to propose again villa Deliella in style. Maybe someone needs purifying actions of conscience? Part of those "innocent victims" accomplices of the "sacco"? Contradictions of a city condemned to an autophagic fate."²¹³

It therefore seems almost as if the same bourgeoisie, that at the time contributed to the urban deterioration of the Sicilian historical artistic heritage, wants today to go back on its own steps by performing unoriginal copies of the destroyed buildings. In this case, the selection of history is interpreted as the desire of an entire ruling class to absolve itself of the misdeeds committed in recent decades to the detriment of cultural patrimony, pretending that nothing has happened. A hypothetical exact copy of the ancient Villa would, however, today be immersed in an urban context completely distorted compared to the original one and would be anonymous and decontextualized. It would be, to use Benjamin's terms, a retrieval and impossible attempt to recover the lost aura of the building. Looking at a postcard from 1950, it can be seen that the villa, not yet demolished, was already struggling to communicate with all the new buildings that had been built in the meantime and that were suffocating it.

²¹³ F. Maggio, *Storie e immagini di una città contraddittoria* in *La Città Altra /The Other City History and image of urban diversity: places and landscapes of privilege and well-being, of isolation, of poverty and of multiculturalism* by F. Capano, M. I. Pascariello, M. Visone. Federico II University Press, Napoli, 2018.



Figure 87. *Piazza delle Croci with Villa Deliella in the background, Palermo, 1950s.*

A resurrected replica today would amplify this effect and probably would give above all also the wrong message that, with the power of money, one can erase the traces of history; with its fake features, it would deceive future generations who, observing the fake villa, would not perceive the events traversed by the monument in particular, and by the city and society in general.

The cases examined in this paragraph, from the bridges of Florence to the church of Longarone, to the Botta project for Palermo, demonstrate that probably there are no universal design rules and every case of reconstruction of a lost building, as generally every architectural project, is unique and specific in its place and in its time. But, the analysis conducted so far, - especially through Walter Benjamin's thought on authenticity as a value of historical testimony and on the educational function of Art, and through the case studies analyzed -, highlights the fact that reconstruction projects in particular, as well as restoration projects, should have a strong component of historical testimony and should narrate the events that the disappeared architectures have gone through. At the same time, for the respect of the historical instance of restoration theory and practice, the reposed buildings should objectively appear as replicas that cannot be confused with the originals. The causes of the destruction of artistically relevant architecture of the past are always

linked to anthropic or natural events that are worth witnessing and remembering, through projects conceived with artistic strategies that make reconstructions "monuments", with the double meaning of the Latin word *monere*, whose etymology Ernesto Nathan Rogers referred to.

The next chapter will return to aura theory and in particular those aspects of it that analyse the relationship between the model and its imitation. An attempt will be made to further verify whether Walter Benjamin's thought is able to provide answers to speculative questions, and related design practices, even in the specific field of architectural reconstruction of lost buildings.

3 RECONSTRUCTION AS TRANSLATION

3.1 Imitation as Translation (vs. copying as a mechanical process of reproduction)

To try to understand the mechanisms of imitation in the production of works that refer to a given prototype, it will continue to use the concepts of translation and reinterpretation of classical texts, whose exploration in the previous paragraphs has provided useful information by analogy on the mimetic process in art and architecture throughout history. This journey will proceed by analysing, with the same comparative tools, Walter Benjamin's conception of the translation of literary works, a topic for which he wrote a specific essay in 1923. He claimed that:

“It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language, which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.”²¹⁴

According to the Berlin philosopher a good translation should not be a "deaf equation of two dead languages", it need not necessarily resemble the original. The translator must first of all grasp the essence of the literary text he is working on and then he can express it with a free, non-faithful translation, with a reinterpretation, as close as possible to what he calls "pure language". The latter can be described as an ideal and utopian language, which does not undergo the changes and aging processes to which all the idioms of the various nations are subject; a sort of archetypal emanation of the world of ideas, of Plato's memory. The good translation in this sense transforms and renews the original, tries to update its contents, independently of the resemblance with it, and almost aims to become a work in

²¹⁴ Benjamin W. *The task of the translator*. In *Selected writings vol.1 1913-1926* Harvard University Press, London 1999_P. 261.

itself, an expression of its own time and historical context. And it is Benjamin himself who explicitly speaks of the profound analogies that exist between the translation of texts and the aesthetic theory of reproduction:

“To grasp the genuine relationship between an original and a translation requires an investigation analogous to the argumentation by which a critique of cognition would have to prove the impossibility of an image theory. There it is a matter of showing that in cognition there could be no objectivity, not even a claim to it, if it dealt with images of reality; here it can be demonstrated that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife - which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living - the original undergoes a change.”²¹⁵

images of the reality - in the german version of the text: “Abbildern des Wirklichen” - do not generate knowledge. Instead, it is the continuous reinterpretations of the existing, and therefore also of works of art that feed the evolution of historical processes, renewing the state of culture and societies. Even the original translated text itself is reactivated by these changes. These dynamic mechanisms are perceptible in the variations that both the languages and the meanings of the works are subjected to over time. A translation of an ancient text made, for example, in the German language during the early 20th century, which for those years was considered very modern, today appears rather old-fashioned. Languages evolve, they age: what is in the vanguard today, tomorrow may be perceived as outdated and obsolete. One cannot have the presumption of stopping this process, thinking of finding the definitive translation of a literary text, because every language version is by its very nature provisional, the product of its time and the mirror of the society that produced it. The translator's task consists precisely in trying to awaken, through the use of his mother tongue, what Benjamin calls "the echo of the original", to make its contents comprehensible to his contemporaries. He writes:

²¹⁵ Benjamin W. *The task of the translator* _P. 256.

“The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original.”²¹⁶

Basically, it can be said that this is what they did, in various degrees and ways, both, for example, Jean de La Fontaine in the 17th century and Phaedrus about, 1650 years earlier rewriting Aesop's fables from the 4th century B.C., or, by analogy, in the field of restoration, Stern and Valadier reinterpreting the lost original of the Roman triumphal arch of Titus. All these works mentioned are similar to the models they are inspired by, but not identical to them: the simple translation become a creative reference that generated new aesthetic subjects. . It is precisely in these terms that Neal Leach describes Walter Benjamin's conception of mimesis, i.e. as an artistic reinterpretation of a given prototype that actively produces another. He writes:

“To reproduce something is to step beyond mere imitation. Here Benjamin challenges the inherited view of mimesis as an essentially compromised form of imitation that necessarily loses something of the original. For Benjamin mimesis alludes to a constructive reinterpretation of an original, which becomes a creative act in itself.”²¹⁷

Benjamin himself rewrote a short version of the fable *Little Briar-Rose*, by the Grimm brothers - who in turn had taken inspiration from Charles Perrault's *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* - freely modifying its setting, actions and characters. This writing was used by him in 1928 as an introduction to his essay *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, in order to express his disappointment with the academic committee that had rejected it three years earlier when he applied for a professorship at the University of Frankfurt. It is significant that he deliberately chose a work of

²¹⁶ Benjamin W. *The task of the translator* _P. 258.

²¹⁷ Leach Neil, *Walter Benjamin and Architecture* Edited By Gevork Hartoonian, London and New York 2009, Routledge _P. 124.

tradition, modifying it and loading it with new allegorical meanings, to tell with impetuous irony a situation of his present. His fable begins as follows:

"Ich möchte das Märchen vom Dornröschen zum zweiten Male erzählen.
(...)"²¹⁸;

the *Little Briar-Rose* helped him denounce what he saw as the backwardness of the academic culture of his time.

At one point in the essay on translation he writes:

"If the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations, this is not accomplished through the vague resemblance a copy bears to the original. It stands to reason that resemblance does not necessarily appear where there is kinship."²¹⁹

This concept of kinship-affinity, as opposed to that of resemblance-sameness, may perhaps represent a fundamental key to interpreting the German philosopher's thought on the principle of imitation also in the artistic and architectural field.

In the essay on reproducibility, published sixteen years later, several analogies with that of 1920 are evident: just as the translation should not be faithful to the original, from the text of 1936 it could be deduced that, in the same way, the reproduced work of art should differ from the reference model, while remaining similar to it. Both processes follow parallel paths that aspire to achieve convergent utopian results: the "pure language", on the one hand, and the democratization of art, on the other. Ultimately, the evolution of human phenomena, whose final goal is the foundation of a society without differences and without classes, always occurs through evolved reproductions, updated to the times and contexts in which they take place, not through continuous processes of copying. The parts of the essay from which these deductions come will now be analyzed.

The essay reads:

²¹⁸ Tiedemann R., Schweppenhäuser H. *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften* – Band III. Suhrkamp Frankfurt 1991_P. 901.

²¹⁹ Benjamin W. *The task of the translator*_P. 256.

“And when Abel Gance exclaimed excitedly in 1927: ‘Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will made films [...] All legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religions – all religions, indeed [...] await theyr filmed resurrection, and the heroes are pressing at the gates,’ he was calling (doubtless without meaning to) for a comprehensive liquidation.”²²⁰

With the advent of cinema, inevitably, all the works of repertoire, of the various artistic fields, would be re-proposed in movies. Dramas, concerts, paintings, epic poems and anything else, of course, transported in films, would be revealed as reinterpretations of the models handed down by tradition, adapted to the present. These rewritings, particularly the great historical films, according to Benjamin, would have transferred the repertory works into new spatial-temporal contexts, thus depriving them of their original aura. But precisely because of their lack of authenticity, the new works adapted to the cinema, cleaned of the magical-religious envelope that still surrounded them, would have had the power to definitively modify the traditional character of art, or even to destroy it. Charles W. Haxthausen states:

“As his essay of 1936, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” makes clear, the stakes were high: Benjamin saw in the technique of reproduction an instrument for making not only the work of art but the world new; it led to a “shattering of tradition,” which was “the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity.”²²¹

In the seventh chapter of his essay on the work of art, Benjamin openly disapproves of those retrograde film critics according to whom cinema, instead, could have gone from a simple technical activity to a real autonomous art form, through the use of all those specific expressive possibilities that allowed it to evoke enchanted and sacred atmospheres. These scholars had not understood, according to him, that cinema, like and even more so than photography, had by then undermined the very

²²⁰ Benjamin W. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction_P. 17.

²²¹ Haxthausen Charles W.; *Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein*. “October” Vol.107, published by: The MIT Press (Winter 2004);_P. 47.

meaning of art, and that it was transforming it from an aesthetic object to a political subject. In particular, he provocatively quotes Franz Werfel who, in an article in 1935, on the one hand praised the magical and supernatural atmospheres that Max Reinhardt had managed to create in his film adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while, on the other hand, he despised all those objective representations of the real world, "with its streets, interiors, railway stations, restaurants, cars and beaches"²²², which other directors in those same years proposed in their films. It can be deduced that Benjamin, instead, hoped for a massive irreverent revival of traditional works in a contemporary key, possibly set in modern metropolises, and perhaps played by street actors. Shakespeare's drama itself, for example, originally conceived to be acted on stage, which would be transferred in such supposed ways into a film, would be considered aesthetically less valid, less authoritative, than Reinhardt's oneiric colossal or one of his theatrical performances, and would contribute to the desecration of the original work, in the literal sense.

In the footnote n.3 of his essay, he explains with an example the term "authority", with the following example:

"The crummiest provincial performance of Faust nevertheless has this over a Faust film: notionally, it stands in competition with the first Weimar performance. And what, in terms of traditional content, the audience may recall across the footlights becomes unusable in the cinema (e.g. the fact that the character of Mephisto contains elements of a friend of Goethe's youth, Johann Heinrich Merck, and so on and so forth)."²²³

From a superficial reading it might seem that Benjamin here has a nostalgic, almost fetishistic view of the *Faust* premiere and that he disregards, in a conservative sense, the possibility for cinema to re-propose the original. Benjamin, on the contrary, expresses a diametrically opposed idea: on the one hand, according to him, any theatrical representation is not an exact copy of the début of *Faust*, but a competitor

²²² Benjamin W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*_P. 17.

²²³ Benjamin W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*_P. 39.

of it, a trait of the existence and diffusion of the work. On the other hand, *a fortiori*, he seems to tell us that a film that represents Goethe's work, not only cannot be a faithful reproduction of the first performance, but rather that it must necessarily distance itself from the tradition and sacredness of the work. In other words, the memories linked to certain specific details of the original play that contributed to the formation of its aura, i.e. to the here and now of it, which might still transpire from traditional theatre performances that repeat/copy it, disappear in a modern film version that re-produces/imitates it. Even at the time of Benjamin's writing, perhaps a hypothetical theatre director who staged *Faust* would have hired an actor for the character of *Mephisto* with physical and expressive characteristics similar to those of Johann Heinrich Merck who had inspired Goethe. Both the director and his audience were probably still familiar with these physical traits of the actor from the premiere of the tragic play who resembled the poet's childhood friend, because they had seen other performances, mindful of the premiere, which had passed on this impression.

The actor Karl von La Roche, who played the role of *Mephisto* at the Weimar premiere on 19 January 1929 and who performed the same part for many years afterwards, had in fact been meticulously instructed personally by Goethe. In a memorandum from the city of Vienna in 1888, it is reported:

„Behagen - ein Lieblingswort und ein Lieblingszustand Goethe's - an diesem Worte müssen diese beiden übrigens so rastlos thätige Menschen einander erkannt haben. Solche Menschen sind Meister in der Kunst, den Faden des Lebens in unabsehbare Länge zu spinnen, und La Roche, der sein Vorbild darin noch übertroffen, ist für Wien Jahrzehnte lang der »alte La Roche« gewesen. Noch aus der fernen Weimarer Zeit hat La Roche seinen Mephisto mitgebracht. Der Dichter selbst hatte die Rolle mit ihm durchgegangen, sich gegen ihn über die Bedeutung dieser Gestalt ausgesprochen. In der Rolle des Mephistopheles wie ich sie gebe, hat La Roche sich geäußert, ist jede Geberde, jeder Schritt, jede Grimasse, jede Betonung von Goethe; an der ganzen Rolle ist nicht so viel mein Eigentum, als Platz hat unter dem Nagel. Man kann das allenfalls glauben, denn La Roche's Mephisto war ein höchst

massvoller, behaglicher Teufel, wie er etwa der Altersauffassung Goethe's entsprechen mochte."²²⁴

Returning to Walter Benjamin's note, he argues that these characteristics of the actor's resemblance to the poet's youthful friend, which would allow one to perceive the aura of the first theatrical performance of Faust, would vanish in a film based on the same tragedy, they would be superfluous and perhaps not even known by its director. Mass audiences would not recognise them, among other things since they would have no other terms of comparison than the film itself. In short, the film creates an updated version/translation of the play where the details of the now decayed aura no longer have any meaning because the conditions and the space-time context have changed. In fact, after the aforementioned note he writes:

"We can encapsulate what stands out here by using the term 'aura'. We can say: what shrinks in an age where the work of art can be reproduced by technological means is its aura. The process is symptomatic; its significance points beyond the realm of art. Reproductive technology, we might say in general terms, removes the thing reproduced from the realm of tradition. In making many copies of the reproduction, it substitutes for its unique incidence a multiplicity of incidences. And in allowing the reproduction to come closer to whatever situation the person apprehending it is in, it actualizes what is reproduced. These two processes usher in a mighty upheaval of what is passed on – an upheaval of tradition is the verso of the current crisis and renewal of mankind. They are intimately bound up with the mass movements of our days. Their most powerful agent is film. Even its most positive form (indeed, precisely therein) the social significance of film is unthinkable without this destructive, this cathartic side: namely, liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage."²²⁵

Therefore, the loss of the here and now of the work of art, due to its serial reproduction would be seen by Benjamin as a moment of historical turning point concerning the role of art in society. In this sense, as seen, cultic art ends up existing

²²⁴ *Wien 1848-1888: Denkschrift zum 2. December 1888*, Volume 2 herausgegeben vom Gemeinderathe der Stadt Wien. II Band, Wien 1888_ PP. 365-366.

²²⁵ Benjamin W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*_PP. 8-9.

and it is transformed into a mass product and an indispensable educational tool. The translation of a traditional work of art, similar but not identical to it, such as the example of a modern film inspired by *Faust*, with contemporary locations and characters, will be more understandable to the mass audience and will certainly contribute to its growth. The re-production of the tragedy 'actualises' it, creates a new, updated version of it, suitable for the present time and expressing new meanings. The fact that he rewrote the Brothers Grimm's fable, depriving it of any traditional auratic atmosphere, and using it exclusively as a pretext to denounce the need for renewal of the German universities of his time, also seems consistent with the above considerations.

Similarly, it can be deduced that the architect, like any other artist, should act: his contribution to the process of politicization of art is given by re-proposing archetypes of the historical heritage in new languages and techniques. It has been seen that, according to Benjamin, the naked expressive power of glass and steel would help to purge buildings of their aura and would revolutionize the way they are used and perceived. It is legitimate to assume that in this "purist" and "minimalist" *ante litteram* vision, he would certainly have appreciated transparent architectures such as those by Mies Van der Rohe inspired by Schinkel's classicism, or as, to use a current case, the glazed vault of the Reichstag parliamentary chamber created in 1999 by Norman Foster. Considering this new diaphanous and ethereal dome, inspired by the one destroyed by the fire of 1933, and comparing it, for example, with that of the recent reconstructed *Stadtschloss* in Berlin, made of heavy reinforced concrete covered in bronze, in imitation of the baroque one destroyed during the GDR period, it is not difficult to understand which of the two is closer to Benjamin's progressive vision and which is the more retrograde (both these Berlin cases will be further examined in the next paragraph). Applying Benjamin's already mentioned motto, Foster wanted to reawaken the original echo of the nineteenth-century vault of the German parliament building, re-proposing its mass and silhouette in a contemporary key, adapting them to the new context. The intrados

was also made accessible through ramps that allow direct access to the visitors during the assemblies, this transparent architecture proved to be highly symbolic and capable of communicating political messages in a progressive sense. Returning to the essay on reproducibility, there is a passage that unequivocally confirms that Benjamin believed that an artistic reproduction, technologically advanced and not resembling the original, could itself become an authentic work of art:

“But while in relation to manual reproduction (the product of which was usually branded a forgery of the original) the genuine article keeps its full authority, in relation to reproduction by technological means that is not the case. [...] Through photography, for instance, it [the technological reproduction] it is able to bring out aspects of the original that can be accessed only by the lens (adjustable and selecting its viewpoint arbitrarily) and not by the human eye.”²²⁶

So, for example, the (photo)copy of an enlarged detail of a painting, or of a sculpture, can become a new aesthetic entity in its own right, independent of the subject it portrays, and can even become its authoritative competitor, not a forgery then, like manual copies, but a new work of art. Indeed, a multitude of works of art made a few decades later by various artists confirmed this prediction: for instance, the different irreverent versions of Andy Warhol's *Mona Lisa*, or the paintings he made by isolating and decontextualizing details of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*.

These concepts, deduced from the complicated theory of the aura's decay, already allow to imagine a possible reinterpreted version that could "translate" Villa Deliella in a re-actualized architectural structure. A reproduction, reminiscent of Basile's lost architecture, could recall and celebrate it by expressing new contents, just as Warhol's *Mona Lisa* recalls and celebrates the painting by Leonardo da Vinci that inspired it. The basis for a possible formulation of a reconstruction project is emerging.

²²⁶ Benjamin W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*_P. 6. (my translation).

This paragraph will also analyse some modern cases that suggest a reconsideration of the role of imitation processes as a creative form, in a cultural landscape such as the current one, where everything that cannot be labelled as "original" is still generally regarded with distrust and contempt.

The most famous Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose*, begins with the sentence: "*It was a beautiful morning at the end of November*". This simple debut, apparently devoid of any link with other texts, is instead a veiled homage to Charles M. Schulz, as the author himself stated.²²⁷ His character *Snoopy*, a funny little dog writer, in fact, every time he undertakes his novel, never completed, always with the same sentence: "*It was a dark and stormy night*". Schulz, in turn, using this phrase in his comics, referred to famous writers such as Alexandre Dumas in *The Three Musketeers*; Ray Bradbury in the opening phrase of his novel *Let's all Kill Constance*; Edward Bulwer-Lytton in the novel *Paul Clifford*; and perhaps even more others.

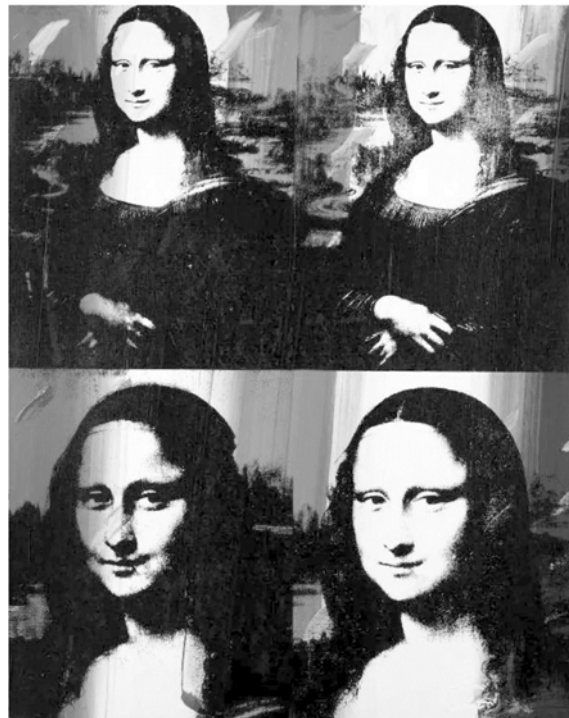


Figure 88. Andy Warhol, *Mona Lisa Four Times* 1978-79

²²⁷ Gnoli A. Eco '*Così ho dato il nome alla rosa*' _ La Repubblica issue of 09.07.2006.

Eco, who was a great admirer of the value and cultural importance of the *Peanuts*, used this sentence, modifying it and adapting it to his story, to describe the initial atmosphere from which the narration starts, but above all to make the hermetic humour aimed at attentive and erudite readers capable of recognizing the quotation. It is the so-called double coding, a peculiar feature of postmodern literature and art, which consists in the ability of a work to speak simultaneously to two different audiences, one more cultured, able to appreciate its subtle hidden intertextual references, and one simpler that takes pleasure in it even without totally capturing all its meanings. This "double coding" is ultimately the presence within a text, of one or more pre-existing, borrowed and reworked, subtexts.

The Name of the Rose, like Eco's other novels, is imbued with quotations and tributes to authors he loved and who gave him cues for his narrations: from Alexandre Dumas to Dante Alighieri, from Alessandro Manzoni to Conan Doyle. These communicative possibilities, which the wise use of quotations allows, i.e. the reference to a text or a work already existing and therefore historicized, is not a peculiarity that belongs only to literature but also to music, art, architecture. Can a project of architectural reconstruction have a foundation on citation methods, in order to evoke and give a new life -not trying to resurrect it- to a disappeared work? Can a disappeared work be a subject mentioned in the new reconstruction? After all, it would be a question of exalting the expressive and communicative capacity of architectural works to which Benjamin referred in his essay on reproduction, which are received "through how they are used and how they are perceived".

Quotation, imitation, replica, double, false, have been widely analyzed and recurrent themes, both in semiotics essays and in Eco's novels. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, referring to the replicability he states:

"Paper money has a minimal material value but receives a sort of legal value by a convention, so that it cannot be infinitely replicated; moreover, the process of replication is so technically difficult that it requires special

techniques (the reasons of that difficulty are similar to those which seemingly forbid the reproduction of Michelangelo's *Pietà*; oddly enough this, too, has received a sort of conventional and 'legal' investiture whereby a replica, no matter how perfect, is refused as a fake)."

He affirms that the perfect copy of a work of art and its original model, from the point of view of semiotics, are equivalent because both, through the material and the signs deriving from their shapes, surfaces and colours, are able to express the same ideas and provoke the same sensations in the observer. In fact he, still referring to replicability, continues:

"A perfect replica of Michelangelo's *Pietà* which rendered each nuance of the material texture of the original with great fidelity would also possess its semiotic properties. Therefore the value accorded to the 'authenticity' of the original statue has more relevance for a theory of commodities, and when given undue importance on the aesthetic level it is a matter for social scientists or critics of social aberrations. The lust for authenticity is the ideological product of the art market's hidden persuaders; when the replica of a sculpture is absolutely perfect, to privilege the original is like giving more importance to the first numbered copy of a poem than to a normal pocket edition."²²⁸

And in the Italian version of the essay, he concludes this sentence by adding the following statement:

"(...) matter for antique dealers and not for literary critics".²²⁹

If, hypothetically, it was to be discovered today that the *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is a fake, but that it had been faithfully made on Michelangelo's original model, its possibilities of use, its artistic value and its importance in art history studies would probably remain unaltered. A perfect replica of the work would in any case continue to be admired by visitors and would allow, without compromise or limits, to understand the characteristics of Buonarroti's style and artistic

²²⁸ Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, 1976. _PP. 178-179.

²²⁹ Eco, Umberto. *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Studi Bompiani, Milano. 1976. _P. 242 (my translation).

language. Two objects that are identical in shape, size, material, proportions, surface finish etc., and that are exhibited in the same context, give the observer the same sensations. Probably, however, perception would be disturbed if the term "copy" were displayed next to one of the two objects: this would be immediately judged to be poor and devoid of value and meaning, due to the preconceptions and stereotypes typical of Western societies.

Speaking of doubles he writes in the same essay:

"In order to obtain a double it is obviously necessary to reproduce - to a given extent - all the properties of the model-object, maintaining their original order and interrelationships. But in order to do so it is necessary to know the rule which governed the production of the model-object. To duplicate is not to represent, to imitate (in the sense of making an image of), to suggest the same appearance; it is a matter of equal production conditions and procedures."²³⁰

In the book *On the Shoulders of Giants*, he even argues that, paradoxically, the Parthenon of Nashville should be considered even more original than what remains today of the ancient temple on the acropolis of Athens:

"For example, from an aesthetic point of view, it is usually said that a work of art lives on its own organic integrity, which is lost if it is deprived of one of its parts. But from an archaeological point of view it is thought that, even if the same work of art has lost some parts, it is still authentically original. It so happens that the Parthenon in Athens has lost its colours, a large quantity of its original architectural features, and some of its stones. But those that remain are presumably the same ones laid down by the original builders. The Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee, was built in accordance with the Greek model as it appeared at the time of its splendour; it is formally complete, so much so that it is the Greek Parthenon that should be considered an alteration or a counterfeit of the one in Nashville. However, the half-temple located on the Acropolis is considered to be both more "authentic" and more "beautiful" than its American facsimile, not least

²³⁰ Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, 1976_P. 180.

because it stands in its context. In fact, the fundamental flaw in the Nashville Parthenon is that it stands on a plain and not at the top of an Acropolis.”²³¹

With the same unprejudiced and somewhat irreverent attitude, referring to a famous theatrical piece by Edmond Rostand, in his essay on translation entitled *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* - Saying almost the same thing -, Umberto Eco states:

"For example, I have always been convinced that the Cyrano de Bergerac in Mario Giobbe's Italian translation is often better than the original by Rostand.”²³²

A literary text translated into a foreign language literally, thus in some way a copy of it, may even arouse stronger emotions in the reader than the source. In this case, he refers to certain phonetic characteristics of the Italian language which, in his opinion, made the text more suitable for performance in the theatre than the original language.

What has been read so far might lead one to think that Eco was a defender of pure copying in art, and that he was essentially promoting nostalgic replicas of works of the past to be re-proposed in the present, but this is not the case. His reasoning and his colourful examples should be read exclusively from the point of view of his semiological studies and his aprioristic opposition to any ideology which favours a clear break with the past and which, on the other hand, exalts originality at all costs. According to him, the artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century, even the most extreme such as abstractionism or Dadaism, tried to "kill their fathers" without succeeding and he is convinced that a conscious and intelligent reinterpretation of history can revive contemporary culture, injecting new lymph and inspiration into it.

The comparison between the Parthenon of Athens and the Parthenon of Nashville or the example of Michelangelo's *Pietà* by Eco are certainly the result of provocative

²³¹ Eco, Umberto. *On the Shoulders of Giants*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2019_ P. 187.

²³² Eco, Umberto. *Dire quasi la stessa cosa Esperienze di traduzione* RCS Libri, Milano 2003_P. 125 (my translation).

and ironic syllogistic reasoning that needs to be interpreted from an aesthetic-philosophical point of view, but they make us understand that the value of a masterpiece does not only lie in its physical authenticity, but in the ideas that it is capable of transmitting. In any case, in both examples the Italian semiologist underlines the importance of the "conditions" and the "context" in which the copies are found, thus confirming the Benjaminian logic according to which, theoretically, if the here and now remain unchanged, an identical reproduction of a work of art would be possible.

The mimetic principle played a primary role in Umberto Eco's literary activity: in fact, he continually used fragments of literary texts from various periods, quoting them more or less explicitly in his writings, manipulating them and recombining them in new narrative contexts. His emulative processes were not limited to the reorganization of elements taken from tradition in modern collages, but also manifested themselves in declared complete rewriting of works from the past. In fact, he rewrote Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, addressing mainly a young and cultured public, adapting history and making continuous references and ironic allusions to the present. He also rewrote, with daring style exercises, the fable of *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi. He had also begun to rewrite the *Count of Montecristo* of Alexandre Dumas, which, according to him, had been badly written from the beginning, putting himself openly in direct competition with his famous predecessor. Eco gives his interpretation of the reasons for the style of this particular work, which he declaredly considered prolix, heavy and repetitive: it was a serialized novel, so that, as it happens today in television series, at the beginning of each episode the events of the previous one were recapitulated, and moreover the French writer was stimulated to write a lot because he had a contract with the publisher which provided that the earnings were directly proportional to the amount of text produced. This is how Eco describes his ideas in this regard:

"Why Dumas shamelessly lengthened it is well known and has already been said, he was paid a lot per line, and many times he repeated because the story appeared in episodes and it was necessary to remind the forgetful reader what had happened in the previous episode. But should the same requirements still be taken into account in a translation made today? Could one not work as Dumas himself would have done, if he had been paid as much as he could have saved lead? Would he not have proceeded more quickly if he had known that his readers had already educated themselves on Hemingway or Dashiell Hammett? Wouldn't it help the *Monte-Cristo* by making it quicker where redundancy is useless?"²³³

According to him, there are no "sacred" texts that have reached such a level of perfection that they cannot be improved or reused in part to create new artistic or literary works. From his words one can extrapolate a definition of rewriting:

"The cases of poetic remake, [are those] in which a great author takes up a previous work and repeats it in his own way: this is a very ancient procedure, in which the sometimes unconscious dialogue between texts that are far from each other comes into play, the homage to the fathers (and the so-called "anxiety of influence"), the fertile misreading, and sometimes even the translation error, due to a lack of familiarity with the source language accompanied by intense love for the model, from which very poetic reinventions can be born."²³⁴

He further states that:

"However, in principle, I would say that the translator should not intend to improve the text. If he believes that that story, or that description, could have been better, he should practice authorial remaking, just as Sartre had rewritten Dumas' *Kean*."²³⁵

Drawing a parallel with *Villa Deliella*, which, as seen, was conceived with the acceptance by Ernesto Basile, in spite of himself, of compromises that caged his creativity and his stylistic beliefs at that stage of his career, one could say, using this logic, that it would be congruent and legitimate to rewrite/rebuild it today in a contemporary language, cleaning it up from the heavy neo-Renaissance decorations

²³³ Eco, U. *Dire quasi la stessa cosa Esperienze di traduzione*. PP. 134-135 (my translation).

²³⁴ Eco, U. *Dire quasi la stessa cosa Esperienze di traduzione*. P. 124 (my translation).

²³⁵ Eco, U. *Dire quasi la stessa cosa Esperienze di traduzione*. PP. 129-130 (my translation).

that Basile had been in some way forced to make in order to satisfy the antiquated tastes of his clients.

For Eco, therefore, every work of art is temporary, unfinished, theoretically rewritable an infinite number of times. Each new version of an archetype spreads its values and strengthens its memory and identity. In the essay *Opera aperta* of 1962 he argues that every artistic expression can even be modified with the active creative participation of the users. This text had a great influence on the radical movements *Archizoom* and *Superstudio*, which established themselves at the end of the 1960s in Florence, the city where Eco was a professor at the faculty of architecture from 1966 to 1969, deepening precisely the theme of architecture as a language.

Now it will be illustrated a recent well-known case in which the one-to-one replica of a work of art that, according to many critics, has even surpassed its reference model: the facsimile of *The Wedding Feast at Cana* by Paolo Caliari, known as *il Veronese*. The original painting of 1562 is now in the Louvre museum, since in 1797 Napoleon Bonaparte took it from its original location as war booty, the refectory of *San Giorgio Maggiore* in Venice designed by Andrea Palladio, and had it sent, cut into pieces, to France. The large canvas (10m x 6.70m) was then reassembled and exhibited in the Parisian museum in the same room as the *Mona Lisa*, placed right on the wall in front of Leonardo da Vinci's painting. The Venetians have never accepted the loss of the work and have repeatedly demanded its return. The wall of the Palladian refectory remained bare for over two centuries, until in 2007 the *Cini Foundation* commissioned the Spanish company *Factum Arte* to make an exact copy of the painting and place it in its original location. Cutting-edge digital technologies were used in this operation, which made it possible to scan the Veronese's painting down to the smallest detail, acquiring the image in 1591 files which were then printed in 3D with acrylic paints on a canvas prepared in plaster, with a chemical-physical composition almost identical to the original, and then assembled on an alveolar aluminium support. Finally, once the work was placed in the original wall, a team of specialised restorers carried out all the retouches

between the joints. The final result is remarkable, as the copy faithfully reproduces every single brushstroke with its thickness, every single shade of colour, the shades and even the imperfections of the canvas.

Jean Clair asserts:

"But what about a fake that becomes truer than the truth? Also in Italy, in Venice, the Cini Foundation has just reopened the refectory of the Palladian convent of San Giorgio Maggiore. (...) While waiting for France to decide to return this masterpiece to Venice, it was decided to make a copy. Of the same dimensions as the original, it was made with such perfection that it is almost impossible to realise with the naked eye that it is a reproduction. The illusion is so total that it was decided to leave the copy in the place of origin of the painting, so as to give back to the refectory its meaning...(...) Its meaning comes back to life, as the colours come back to life, brighter than before, more authentic, more faithful than those of the deteriorated canvas still visible at the Louvre. It is true, yes, that it is only a copy, but it is so perfect and so happily situated that, looking at it, one feels a much greater joy than the original canvas, flanked by other paintings and under a miserable light."²³⁶

From his words, "a fake that becomes truer than the truth", "it is only a copy", one perceives that he, while recognising the cultural value of this initiative, somehow considers the copy as a 'genetically' inferior entity to the original. However, is it still appropriate to define as 'false' such a work of such high scientific and political importance that it has probably managed to heal from an emotional and psychological point of view the ancient wound inflicted on the Venetians by Napoleon's disfigurement? It can be said that a fake that is passed off as original is certainly generated by bad faith, while that of *Factum Arte* is a work presented publicly for what it is: a replica, among other things, executed with scientific method, technical expertise and adequate economic investment. But can a perfect replica today assume the role of an autonomous work of art, without compromise, surpassing even the model from which it is inspired? Adam Lowe and Bruno Latour

²³⁶ Clair Jean, *L'inverno della cultura*, Skira, Milano, 2011_PP. 88-89 (my translation).

believe that this is possible, and that even, in this specific case, the aura of the painting kept in the Louvre has moved into its modern Venetian clone. They make a comparison between the intervention in the refectory of San Giorgio and the restoration, carried out in 1997, of the painting *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein, commissioned by the National Gallery of London. According to them, this painting has been brutally renovated, with colours that are too bright and shiny, flattening the images to such an extent that it even looks like a recent replica of itself. They argue that today, works of art from the past are restored pretending to bring the image back to the exact day they were created, but in reality, the patina of history is often erased and postcard puppets are created, which can be appreciated mainly by visitors without artistic skills and accustomed to hasty superficial observations. Lowe and Latour, referring to *the Ambassadors*, claim that:

“The original has been turned into *a copy of itself looking like a cheap copy*, and no one seems to complain, or even to notice, the substitution. They seem happy to have visited in London the original poster of Holbein's *Ambassadors!*”²³⁷

They declare that the aura of the painting has been lost. The same, according to them, happened to the original canvas of *the Wedding Feast at Cana* in the Louvre because of several factors: the enormous new golden frame in which it was inserted; the placing too low inside the exhibition hall, which falsifies the perspective perception of the spaces and characters represented; the zenithal light that strikes it; etc. In fact, the work was designed by Veronese, in direct collaboration with Andrea Palladio, precisely to be received in that precise wall of the Venetian refectory, at a specific height, with natural light coming from the windows on both sides. The central perspective created the illusion that the scene represented in the painting, originally frameless, was almost a natural continuation of the space of the large abbey dining hall. The lively and airy original Mannerist canvas is instead

²³⁷ Latour Bruno & Lowe Adam. *The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its fac similes* in *Switching Codes*, University of Chicago Press. 2010_P. 2.

reduced today to a "dark giant", suffocated in the anonymous and inadequate room of a museum. According to Lowe and Latour the facsimile, or rather the double that was placed in the original location in Venice, instead, with its extraordinary technical and artistic qualities, has restored dignity to the work of Veronese.



Figure 89. *Factum Arte, replica of the Wedding Feast at Cana. San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice*



Figure 90. *Paolo Veronese, the Wedding Feast at Cana. Louvre, Paris*

Rather than a replica, it could be defined as version no. 2 of *the Wedding Feast at Cana* and, according to them, paradoxically, it made the aura of the work migrate again from Paris to Venice.

Referring to an imaginary visitor, the two scholars write:

"Is it possible that the Venice version, although it clearly states that it is a facsimile, is actually more original than the Paris original, she wonders? She now remembers that on the phone with a French art historian friend, she had been castigated for spending so much time in San Giorgio with the copy of the *Nozze*: "Why waste your time with a fake Veronese, when there are so many true ones in Venice?!" her friend had said, to which she had replied, without realizing what she was saying: "But come here to see it for yourself, no description can replace seeing this original... oops, I mean, is this not the very definition of 'aura'?...". Without question, for her, the aura of the original had migrated from Le Louvre to San Giorgio: the best proof was that you had to come to the original and see it."²³⁸

This position appears to be in contrast with Benjamin's theory which has been examined in the previous paragraphs. The assertion that the original aura of the work painted by Veronese, now de-contextualised in the Louvre room, has decayed, seems to conform to the logic of the German philosopher; but the assertion that it may have been transferred into a mechanically reproduced copy appears to be decidedly at odds with it. It has been seen that Benjamin considered this neither possible nor necessary; on the contrary, he claimed that the vain attempt to restore the lost aura of a work through faithful copies based only on likenesses was a vain operation. In the next paragraph this very reasoning will give the cue for the theoretical formulation of this dissertation.

Anne Eriksen writes:

"Benjamin's notion of the aura and its implications for the production of copies, facsimiles and new media versions has been vigorously criticised by

²³⁸ Latour Bruno & Lowe Adam. *The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its fac similes* in *Switching Codes*, University of Chicago Press. 2010_P. 3.

Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe. They argue that rather than chasing the aura of the original, we should approach copies and new versions with an assessment of whether or not they are well made. If they are, their aura, or rather the feeling of authenticity that they evoke and the aesthetic experience they may produce, can well exceed that of a musealized and scientifically conserved original".²³⁹

The discrepancy between the two art critics' statements and Walter Benjamin's thought probably stems precisely from the fact that they equate "copies and new versions", underestimating the crucial issue that the two terms describe different and antithetical aesthetic subjects. This question seems marginal in their discussion, while they focus on the potentiality that the technique of reproduction - in the sense of copying - of advanced quality has in taking the aura from an original and transferring it elsewhere.

Adam and Lowe indeed state that:

"In effect, Benjamin confused the notion of "mechanical reproduction" with the inequality in the techniques employed along a trajectory. No matter how mechanical a reproduction is, once there is no huge gap in the process of production between version n and version n+n, the clearcut distinction between the original and its reproduction becomes less crucial—and the aura begins to hesitate and is uncertain where it should land."²⁴⁰

Therefore, according to the two scholars, when Benjamin formulated his theory, he would not have understood how far technological evolution would go in the following years, allowing the creation of identical clones; but the essay on reproducibility is based on the very assumption that the technique was already so evolved at the time it was written, that it could create perfect copies, but that this was irrelevant for the possibility of transferring authenticity from a prototype to its reproduction. Latour and Lowe blame Benjamin for helping to discredit the value

²³⁹ Eriksen A., *Copies, Concepts and Time* Culture Unbound, Volume 9, Issue 1, 2017_Published by Linköping University Electronic_P. 19.

²⁴⁰ Latour B., Lowe A. *The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its fac similes* in *Switching Codes*, University of Chicago Press. 2010_P. 9.

of the notion of reproduction in art, but it is well known that the German philosopher was not a priori against the imitation, on the contrary he considered it so important that he attributed to it the power to change the course, not only of art, but also of politics and history. Following is a statement by Lowe in which his personal interpretation of the aura theory is briefly expressed:

“The word "copy" has always had a positive meaning. It was the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, with his famous 1936 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility*, that put it in a bad light. (...) As Philippe Daverio once said, with the facsimile of *The Wedding at Cana* we have made Benjamin definitively obsolete. Because Art is eliminating prejudices”.²⁴¹

It is precisely modern prejudices against copies, according to Lowe and Latour, that prevent us from accepting today that a well-executed replica can be given the status of a work of art. The very high quality that a facsimile can achieve today with modern 3D digital media seems to them to be a sufficient condition, not only to generate a new aesthetic, but even authentic subject.

“What we want to do in this paper is to specify the trajectory or career of a work of art and to move from one question that we find moot ("Is it an original or merely a copy?") to another one that we take to be decisive, especially at the time of digital reproduction: "Is it well or badly reproduced?" The reason why we find this second question so important is because the quality, conservation, continuation, sustenance and appropriation of the original depends entirely on the distinction between good and bad reproduction. We want to argue that a badly reproduced original risks disappearing, while a well accounted for original may continue to enhance its originality and to trigger new copies. This is why we want to show that facsimiles, especially those relying on complex (digital)

²⁴¹ *Icon Design*, Mondadori Media S.p.A. - Milano 2020_ <https://icondesign.it/storytelling/adam-lowefactum-arte/> [16.06.2022]. (my translation).

techniques, are the most fruitful way to explore the original and even to help re-define what originality actually is.”²⁴²

Every single reproduction is a segment, a stage in the life of the work of art. The prototype is considered as the progenitor of a long series of possible replicas made over time, which together constitute the "career" of the work. The higher the number of good copies made, the more the work is destined to survive, since its image is passed on, and the ideas behind it spread. The two scholars place emphasis on faithful duplications as subjects that can undermine the authenticity of the work and even appropriate it.

In order to reach these conclusions, however, in the most salient points of the essay *The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its facsimiles*, a lengthy excerpt of which is forthcoming, they use reasoning that comes mainly from cases of reinterpreted and reworked copies, not facsimiles. This aspect of their analysis seems contradictory, as the relationship between repetition and imitation seems to be confused. They explicitly state that good reproductions and revivals should be evaluated on the basis of their artistic qualities and the contribution that their existence is capable of making to the valorisation and evolution of the original, regardless of their degree of similarity with it. They also highlight the fact that today, while revivals of antecedent works in the musical, literary and theatrical fields are commonly accepted and included in the field of artistic expression, they are considered false and worthless when they concern the visual arts. They claim that no spectator would ever question the artistic legitimacy of any theatrical replica of *King Lear*, compared to the first work; not even the freest and most irreverent one, in which the protagonist, for example, eventually disappears "in a submarine". Every single representation of Shakespeare's tragedy, whether orthodox or innovative, may provoke different reactions in the audience, but it will always be perceived as one of the many authentic stages in the life of the work, of its

²⁴² Latour B., Lowe A. *The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its fac similes* in *Switching Codes*, University of Chicago Press. 2010_PP. 4-5.

"trajectory" in time and space. Critics will judge the quality of the single reproduction, measure its degree of adherence to the model and its innovations, but will never question its artistic legitimacy just because its author, after drawing inspiration from the archetype, has moved away from it, giving it his own free interpretation. In fact, they write:

We have no difficulty raising questions about the quality of the entire trajectory when dealing with the performing arts, such as dance, music and theatre. Why is it so difficult when faced with the reproduction of a painting, a piece of furniture, a building or a sculpture? This is the first question we want to clarify.

No one will complain on hearing King Lear: "But this is not the original, it is just a representation!". Quite right. That's the whole idea of what it is to play King Lear: it is to replay it. In the case of a performance, everyone is ready to take into account the whole trajectory going from the first presentations through the long successions of its "revivals" all the way to the present. There is nothing extraordinary in considering that "one good representation of King Lear" is a moment, a segment, in the career of the work of art called King Lear, the absolute Platonic ideal of which no one has ever seen and no one will ever be able to circumscribe. In addition, it requires no great sophistication to be fully prepared for disappointment at not finding "the" first, original presentation by Shakespeare "himself", but several premieres and several dozen different versions of the written play with endless glosses and variations. We seem perfectly happy to be excited by the anticlimactic discovery of the source of a major river in a humble spring barely visible under the mossy grass. Third, and even more importantly, spectators have no qualm whatsoever at judging the new version under their eyes by applying the shibboleth: "Is it well or badly (re)played?" They can differ wildly in their opinions, some being scandalized by what they take as some revolting novelties ("Why does Lear disappear in a submarine?") or bored by the repetition of too many clichés, but they have no difficulty in considering that this moment in the whole career of all the successive King Lears — in the plural — should be judged on its merit and not by its mimetic comparison with the first (entirely inaccessible anyway) presentation of King Lear by the Shakespeare company in such and such a year. It is what we see now under our eyes on stage that counts in making our judgment, and certainly not the degree of resemblance with another Ur-event hidden

from view (even though what we take to be the real "King Lear" remains in the background of every one of our judgments). So, clearly, in the case of performance art at least, every new version runs the risk of losing the original —or of regaining it. So free are we from the comparison with any "original", that it is perfectly acceptable to evaluate a replay by saying: "I would never have anticipated this; it is totally different from the way it has been played before; it is utterly distinct from the way Shakespeare played it, and yet I now understand what the play has always been about!" Everything happens as if some of revivals —the good ones— had managed to dig out of the original novel traits that might have been potentially in the source, but that have remained invisible until now and are made vivid again to the mind of the spectators. So, even though it is not evaluated by its mimetic resemblance to an ideal exemplar, yet it is clear, and everyone might agree, that, because of the action of one of its late successors, the genius of Shakespeare has gained a new level of originality because of the amazing feat of this faithful (but not mimetic) reproduction. The origin is there anew, even though it is so different from what it was. "²⁴³

Reading this long quotation, without knowing that it refers to the new copy "as it was and where it was" of Paolo Veronese's painting, it would seem, on the contrary, to be in front of a text advertising a revised version of it "with endless glosses and variations". The contents of the essay would seem to confirm Walter Benjamin's theses explored so far, on the value of historical authenticity that generates the imitation/translation of a model, to which its authors, instead, openly oppose. It is not clear how their dynamic vision of life, or career, or trajectory of the work of art (which they claim to develop through its revisited reproductions, which are authentic regardless of the "degree of similarity with another Ur-event") can be referred to both a passive repetition, such as *the Wedding Feast at Cana* copy, and a highly innovative remake, such as the hypothetical *King Lear* "using the submarine". They assert that the same evaluation criteria that allow the "revivals" to be equated with their respective prototypes, considered as traits of their trajectory, in the theatrical or literary field should also be extended to pictorial,

²⁴³ Latour B., Lowe A. *The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its fac similes* in *Switching Codes*, University of Chicago Press. 2010_PP. 7-8.

sculptural, architectural replicas. But even here it does not seem evident how, in their opinion, exact replicas can be placed on the same aesthetic and historical level with reproductions that are only inspired by their predecessors, but not identical to them. It is as if, in the specific field of architectural reconstruction, one wanted to assimilate, for example, the replica of *St. Mark's* bell tower with the *Alle Grazie* bridge by Giovanni Michelucci, to which reference was made earlier, or, to come to the present day, the new *Stadtschloss* in Berlin with the *Reichstag* dome, works resulting from diametrically opposed theoretical conceptions. In the next section, an attempt will be made to explore this issue in more detail by learning more about the history of these two Berlin reconstructions and other significant case studies. In order to better understand if there are actually inconsistencies between the contents of Latour and Lowe's essay and the facsimile of *the Wedding Feast at Cana*, an argument will start from the hypothesis of a new imaginary version of the painting and the speculative implications this might have.

3.2 Contextualised translations and new design strategies

Lowe and Latour's arguments in support of the operation of *the Wedding Feast at Cana*, despite its media success, have nevertheless been opposed by many scholars who, while recognising its educational and scientific value, have branded the replica of *Factum Arte* as a fake. Cesare De Michelis in an article with the provocative title *Seconde nozze immorali* -Immoral second wedding- writes:

“When the cloth that obscured the great painting finally came down freeing the Veronese Wedding, a dark sense of guilt took over my soul and now I would like to account for it without moralism or pretence: when the past is literally re-surrected, suddenly life, experience, the present claim the right to remind us that time is not allowed to be brought back, or, that it is the same, that man, despite or because of his primacy in the world, is denied the possibility of returning to his own steps.

This limit, at the same time horrible and sublime, lies at the basis of every human morality, of the very sense of responsibility, both inevitably frustrated by the possibility that repetition is allowed to avoid every error.

The copy, or rather the re-production, is so useful and necessary to help us in the adventure of knowledge, so devastating and even "immoral" if it claims to replace the original, just as in the case of the cloning of life.

The aura, unfortunately, is not a fantastic fancy of a German Jew exiled to France, but the essence of the primacy of art in Western humanism, a primacy dramatically challenged by pressing modernity and, if you like, by Napoleon himself, but in any case indispensable to the persistence of humanity and its moral right.

The copies, the copy, are indisputably signs of abundance, not so much of rigour and happiness.”²⁴⁴

The reference to Walter Benjamin is explicit. The attempt to evade the mistakes of the past - in this case the Napoleonic war theft - by creating clones is a vain attempt to stop the course of history. The fact that the aura of *the Wedding Feast at Cana* in the Louvre has decayed could probably have represented an opportunity, an alternative

²⁴⁴ De Michelis, Cesare. *Seconde nozze immorali*. Il Sole 24 Ore, issue of 16/09/2007. (my translation).

to the one-on-one replica of *Factum Arte*, to create a new work, which could make its own contribution to Art and the emancipation of society. It is perhaps possible to speculate that, in a similar situation, the Berlin philosopher would have presumably hoped for a translation of the painting, rather than the re-proposal of a facsimile of it; in short, a version that, adapting to the new space-time context, would be able to "awaken the echo of the original".

These considerations provide the cue for a speculative reasoning: let us imagine that in the wall left empty by the French soldiers in the hall of the refectory of San Giorgio a new painting had been made in the past, freely inspired by that of Veronese. Let us suppose, for example, that a pop art remake had been made by an artist like Andy Warhol. Let us suppose that the American artist had reproduced exactly the same scene as the large canvas, with his typical technique combining drawing with basic printmaking, the so-called blotted line. The work would have looked almost like a large billboard of advertising graphics, a print; the silhouettes of the characters and the contours of the architectural scene would have had sharp edges and bright, uniform colours. In short, an operation similar to those of his free reproductions of the *Mona Lisa*. The result would have been a new imitative version of the painting with its own authenticity.

Or rather, let us think of one of Pablo Picasso's "*D'Après*", works where the strategy of re-interpretation and re-creation of the model is even more articulated. He would probably, as he did for his famous fifty-eight reinterpretations of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, have proposed again the same spaces, the same characters, the same point of view, as in Veronese's great painting, but he would have represented everything in a caricatured way, with new dimensions and proportions, using flat and abstract shapes, marked outlines, in absence of chiaroscuro. In other words, he would have translated the 16th-century painting into his contemporary language. Considering his free and desecrating vision of Art, the religious theme would have had an irrelevant role in the new work, which, while reproducing the same scene, would have expressed new artistic thoughts and

contents: a clear example of destruction of the religious cult value of the reproduced image.

The question that arises is whether, in contrast, the operation of Factum Arte, despite its scientific and didactic value, has not only created a mere simulacrum, blocking and crystallizing the trajectory of the work in a period that is now distant and out-dated, and involving the waste of an opportunity for its real update. This hypothetical modern work of art, compared to the facsimile, would not only have constituted a new stage in the existence of the *Wedding Feast at Cana*, but would also have represented its evolution; it would probably also have made observers perceive the sense of the loss of the painting to which it referred, and would have been able to express and denounce the causes of its absence. This historical message would have passed without the need to put "facsimile" signs near the work, and the mimetic characteristics of the remake would have stimulated the curiosity of the spectators to really deepen their knowledge of the trajectory of the work, studying and comparing the two different versions. At the same time, the Venetians would have had an authentic work of re-enactment art, a truly new version of *the Wedding Feast at Cana*, which, without having auratic aspirations, would have established a new aesthetic binomial with Palladio's hall, calibrated with its changing spatial-temporal conditions. The re-produced work, like a translation according to Benjamin's conception, would have "reawakened the echo of the original", presenting itself simultaneously as a clear historical testimony of its own era. In these terms, Adam and Lowe's thesis that an original work that has disappeared can only be revived through a good reproduction, made with complex technological tools in its perfect image and likeness, i.e. a copy, appears rather retrograde. The authenticity of the new imaginary canvas, conceived as an imitation and reinterpretation of the original in the Louvre, would probably have given the Venetian community a greater sense of belonging and identity than a perfect, but inauthentic, copy.



Figure 91. *P. Picasso, The Maids of Honor (Las Meninas, after Velázquez). 1957*
Museu Picasso Barcelona



Figure 92. *Diego Velázquez, Las Meninas. 1656. Museo del Prado, Madrid*

This speculation also raises the following question: in the case of a hypothetical return of the canvas stolen by Bonaparte, would it have been appropriate to move Picasso's imaginary modern work to another location?

A somewhat similar dilemma arose when in the 2000s the German Bundestag decided to demolish the *Palast der Republik* to rebuild the *City Palace* - the *Berliner Schloss* -. During the Second World War, the 17th century building had been badly damaged by bombing, but much of the structure had remained standing; however, in 1950 the Socialist Unity Party (SED) decided to demolish it and build the modern seat of the People's Chamber, the unicameral parliament, in its place. The new building, called the *Palast der Republik*, which was also the most important cultural centre of the GDR, inaugurated in 1976, had overwhelmingly and brutally replaced the historic palace of the Prussian emperors and erased the meanings it expressed, but at the same time, regardless of its aesthetic qualities and the ideologies it represented, it too had become "historic", as a symbol of a fundamental phase that twentieth-century Germany went through. After the fall of the wall, in 1990 the building, then unused, was closed due to the presence of asbestos. The building was reclaimed in 2001 and 2003 and, then emptied and gutted, it was provisionally used as an exhibition space and event location for artists. There were countless demonstrations and protest actions for its protection, but without success; in fact in 2006 the building was demolished and the rebuilding of the Prussian castle in neo-Baroque style began, based on a project by Franco Stella. The Italian architect had won a competition, launched in 2002, which proposed the faithful reconstruction of the three of the seventeenth-century facades, the dome and the so-called *Schlüter court*, while the design of the facade on the Spree and the other internal courtyards had been left free from constraints. The new building is also called the *Humboldt Forum*.

One of the most important promoters of the reconstruction was the historian Joachim Fest who, in an article published in 1991, argued that this central area of Berlin should regain its original monumental image, which the disappearance of the

Baroque palace had compromised. The volumes of the rebuilt castle would, according to him, restore the harmonious spatial relationships between the historic buildings that had survived the bombardments and demolitions. His motivations were not only urbanistic but also political; he declared that this reconstruction, after the fall of the wall, would have an important symbolic meaning to testify to the failure of the communist ideology of the GDR:

„Wenn der Abbruch des Schlosses das Symbol ihres Sieges sein sollte, wäre die Wiedererrichtung das Symbol ihres Scheiterns.“²⁴⁵

It can be said that the German democratic parliament, like its predecessor, used the same selective method of memory, due to the fact that it had eliminated an architecture reminiscent of a historical period, judged controversial, and replaced it with one representative of its own power. The new democratic values have been paradoxically expressed through the exhumation of monarchical symbols. This is illustrated in a humorous way in an article in *Der Spiegel* of 2003:

„Der Witz geht so: Kommt ein Mann zur Demokratie und sagt: "Ich will ein Schloss bauen." Sagt die Demokratie: "Aber ich bin doch keine Monarchie." Sagt der Mann: "trotzdem". Sagt die Demokratie: "Aber ich weiß doch gar nicht, was wir mit einem Schloss machen sollen." Sagt der Mann: "trotzdem". Sagt die Demokratie: "Aber ich habe auch gar kein Geld." Sagt der Mann: "trotzdem". Sagt die Demokratie: "Vergiss es!" Und natürlich wird das Schloss gebaut. Der Witz geht aber noch weiter. Denn das Schloss ist erst der Anfang. "Berlin soll wieder wilhelminisch werden", sagt der Mann, von Boddien heißt die Nervensäge, und die Demokratie zuckt nur ratlos mit den Schultern.“²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Fest Joachim. *Plädoyer für den Wiederaufbau des Stadtschlosses*. [Plea for the reconstruction of the city palace]. „Das Neue Berlin“ 1991. Article republished in „Das beste vom Berliner Extrablatt 1998 bis 2011“, Förderverein Berliner Schloss e.V.. Hamburg 2012_P. 18.

²⁴⁶ Diez Georg., *Aufstand der Zombies*, in *Der Spiegel* issue of 14.06.2013. <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/kolumne-von-georg-diez-ueber-das-berliner-stadtschloss-a-905705.html> [16.06.2022].



Figure 93 *F. Stella, Humboldt Forum. Berlin, 2020*



Figure 94 *H. Graffunder, Palast der Republik. Berlin, 1976*



Figure 95. *Das Berliner Schloss – The Barock Royal Palace, Berlin, c.1900*

The most popular slogan among the protesters of the reconstruction project was: "*Kein Schloss in meinem Namen*". Significantly, even after its demolition the *Palast der Republik* has continued to be the protagonist of numerous exhibitions and

debates celebrating the avant-garde cultural and recreational activities that took place there. A recent event, which showed that public interest in it is still very much alive, was the exhibition entitled *Palast der Republik. Utopie, Inspiration, Politikum* organised by the Rostock Kunsthalle, which was visited by more than 20,000 people and was proclaimed 'exhibition of the year 2019' by the International Art Critics Association.²⁴⁷

Regardless of its symbolic political significance, even in the years before its dismantling, the palace, although gutted and disrupted by asbestos decontamination work, had become an avant-garde cultural centre assiduously frequented by the citizens of Berlin, many of whom, among other things, remembered some positive aspects of an era in which they somehow recognised their origins. Particularly in 2004 and 2005, the '*Volkspalast*' project organised exhibitions and art installations, theatre and dance performances, concerts and conferences that made the building an important and suggestive location attracting the interest of different types of public. In an interview quoted by Tim Birkholz, Amelie Deußhard describes this project as an 'open house of culture':

„Die Veranstaltungen deckten die riesige Bandbreite verschiedener Möglichkeiten auf, die sich durch die entkernten, weitläufigen Räumlichkeiten boten. Es gab u. a. Theater-, Konzert-, Kino-, Club-, Tanz-, Sport- und Diskussionsveranstaltungen. Einige waren ‚Clubkultur‘, andere ‚Subkultur‘; bewusst wurde aber auch ‚Hochkultur‘ miteinbezogen. VOLKSPALAST war ein, offenes Kulturhaus‘.“²⁴⁸

Tim Birkholz underlines the fact that the artists and intellectuals of the *Volkspalast* project emphasised the versatility and exhibition potential of the building's huge interior spaces, and that they also managed to make it politically neutral, i.e. no longer associate its image with the ideology from which it originated.

²⁴⁷ <https://www.zeit.de/news/2020-10/05/kunsthalle-rostock-ausstellung-palast-der-republik-geeht> [16.06.2022].

²⁴⁸ Birkholz Tim, „*Schloss mit der Debatte!*“? Die Zwischennutzungen im Palast der Republik im Kontext der Schlossplatzdebatte. Universitätsverlag der Technischen Universität Berlin, 2008_P. 33.



Figure 96. The VOLKSPALAST flag covers the ring emptied of the DDR emblem, 2004²⁴⁹



Figure 97. „Der Berg“ – The mountain-. Artistic Volkspalast installation, 2005²⁵⁰

He states:

„Diese Veranstaltungen setzten sich zwar nicht mit dem Gebäude als solches auseinander, sie trugen aber dazu bei, den Palast zu ‚entideologisieren‘, indem sie deutlich machten, wie vielseitig und vollkommen unideologisch er trotz seines Zustandes nutzbar war. Diese flexible und vielseitige Nutzbarkeit wurde vor allem durch VOLKSPALAST auch einer breiten Öffentlichkeit deutlich gemacht.

²⁴⁹ Photo taken from „Schloss mit der Debatte!“?, 2008_P. 32.

²⁵⁰ Photo taken from „Schloss mit der Debatte!“?, 2008_P. 38.

VOLKSPALAST war für die Künstler darauf ausgerichtet, „den Spielort selbst zu verfremden, indem sie ihn in ihr Spiel mit einbeziehen und kreativ interpretieren.“²⁵¹

In 2017 the artist and architect Daniel Theiler even proposed a reproduction of the building „in der entkernten Version aus der Zeit nach der Asbestsanierung“.²⁵² in Leipzig, in the urban void of Wilhelm-Leuschner-Platz. He is actively raising funds and approval for this project.

The new Berlin City Palace designed by Franco Stella is currently being completed and the controversy between those who appreciate it as a sign of historical re-appropriation, and those who reject it because they consider it a fake, is always very heated. It can be said, however, that each of the two factions, although diametrically opposed, fundamentally reveals the psychological need of people to identify themselves in buildings which are representative of the historical period in which each of them recognises their roots, and which are at the same time able to express the values of their present.

The fact of having chosen, in the formulation phase of the competition announcement, to include a facade and part of the courtyards in a contemporary style in the replica of the baroque palace, probably arose from the attempt to mediate the different positions. However, in my opinion, one of the endless possible design solutions that would have made the traces of the historical phases visible would have been to preserve and include a part of the *Palast der Republik* - or at least some fragments of one of its facades or walls - in the new reconstruction project. Probably there is no longer even a segment of its foundations underground or some evidence that, in an imaginary future where written and multimedia information would no longer be available, could give indications to archaeologists to understand the stratigraphy and history of the site; in this dystopian perspective the 32 years of existence of the GDR palace would no longer be documented.

²⁵¹ Birkholz Tim, „*Schloss mit der Debatte!*“, 2008_P. 32.

²⁵² Joka. *Palast der Republik soll auf dem Leipziger Wilhelm-Leuschner-Platz entstehen*. [Palace of the Republic is to be built on Leipzig's Wilhelm-Leuschner-Platz.] in Leipziger Volkzeitung issue of 03.03.2017.

One wonders if the new facade on the Spree will be able to denounce on its own, in the linear language with which it was conceived, the fact that the entire meticulously reconstructed building, of which it is a part, is a reconstruction of our times. It also seems legitimate to wonder whether, when the work is completed, and increasingly in the decades and centuries to come, an uninformed observer might believe that the building, rather than a facsimile, is an authentic baroque architecture and might even be led to think that only the façade overlooking the river was for some reason demolished and then rebuilt in modern style. In order to respect the historical issue at this site, on the other hand, the whole new building should allow us to understand the transformations it has undergone over time. The historical instance is also closely linked to the expressive monumental one, which should ensure that a building represents the physical testimony of the events and societies that generated, modified, destroyed and, finally, rebuilt it. It would seem that the new building in Berlin, due to the possible misunderstandings that it may generate, does not appear to respect the previous instance, nor the historical one. It could be argued that if the artistic inscription "*Ceci n'est pas un château*" mentioned above were moved from the new Stadtschloss in Potsdam to the one in Berlin, it would have the exact same communicative effect.



Figure 98. F. Stella, south-east corner of the Humboldt Forum, Berlin 2022

This architectural operation turns out to be a failure, in a Benjaminian sense, because it anachronistically attempts to restore, only by means of likeness, the lost aura of the castle in an urban site and in an era that have changed profoundly. Moreover, the presence of the new palace could also convey the message that, in a capitalist society, with the economic power, it is possible to rework and manipulate history, erasing the traces of a part of the past, to restore the previous situation. Some banners protesting against the demolition of the *Palast der Republik* bore the motto: "Und wann kommt der König?"²⁵³ A similar doubt also arises to the scholar Julien Bastoen, who even wonders whether, behind the reconstruction of some symbolic buildings of past French regimes, such as the *Tuilleries Palace* in Paris, there is not a real political will to return to the monarchy.²⁵⁴



Figure 99. Protest banners against the demolition of the *Palast der Republik*, 2005

A couple of kilometres from the *Berliner Schloss* there is another Wilhelminian building, mentioned earlier, which was restored in 1999: the *Reichstag*. Originally for the construction of the building, the seat of Parliament, which was inaugurated

²⁵³ <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/mediacenter/fotostrecken/berlin/palast-der-republik-im-zeitraffer/1728518-7.html?p1728518=7> [16.06.2022].

²⁵⁴ BASTOEN J. *The Issue of 'Identical Reconstruction' on French Heritage Sites: Architectural Cloning, Alternate History and Tourism*. in MAGER T. *Architecture reperformed: the politics of reconstruction*. London, Routledge 2016.

in 1894, a competition was launched in 1882 which was won by Paul Wallot. The German architect's project, even before the work was completed, had been appreciated and studied in depth by Ernesto Basile himself, who, in 1889, published a specific monograph entitled *Il Palazzo del Parlamento di Berlino*.²⁵⁵ In 1933, the same year in which Adolf Hitler became Chancellor, the palace was destroyed by a fire. In the 50s and 60s of the last century the building was used to host exhibitions and shows, after a partial renovation was carried out, which involved the demolition of the original glass pavilion vault, placed in the centre of the building, because it was unsafe. In 1990, after the reunification of Germany, it was decided to bring back the Bundestag's seat from Bonn to Berlin and later a competition was launched for the restoration of the *Reichstag* building, to be used again as a parliamentary chamber. In 1992 Norman Foster's project was chosen. In his initial proposal, he planned to surmount the old palace with an enormous transparent canopy supported by slender columns, placed in an asymmetrical position, consisting of sixteen bays that repeated the original skylight module. Foster, at the invitation of the political representatives, who wanted to reconstitute as much as possible the original image of the palace, had to modify his project and finally proposed to cover the parliamentary chamber with a large steel and glass dome reminiscent of the vault of the disappeared Wallot.

This restoration work, although it did not involve the reconstruction of the entire building from scratch, allows us to know a totally different design approach to that of the *Berliner Stadtschloss*. The new dome, in glass and steel, was conceived as a free reinterpretation of the original large skylight. To illuminate the parliamentary chamber, Paul Wallot had created a drum with a square windowed base on which a glass pavilion vault surmounted by a lantern stood. The new dome designed by Norman Foster has a hemispherical profile and is deprived of a lantern and drum. Its volume and silhouette, although different from those of the ancient skylight,

²⁵⁵ BASILE E. *Il Palazzo del Parlamento di Berlino*, Annali degli Ingegneri e Architetti Italiani. Roma, Vacchelli 1888.

recall and evoke it, reminding its mass. After the demolition of the vault, the building had lost the central fulcrum of its composition and the volumetric relationships between its parts appeared altered. The new dome, although futuristic and very different from the antecedent historical one, has translated the visual weights of the building's articulated plastic masses and at the same time allowed the observers to have a general visual perception not very dissimilar to the original one.

The intrados of Foster's dome is crossed by two helical ramps that allow visitors to observe both the panorama of the city and the interior of the parliamentary chamber. Since the structure is diaphanous and passable, this architecture appears particularly expressive and symbolic; the main message its designer wanted to express is that of transparent, participatory democracy. When parliamentary meetings are held during the day, the citizens - to whom, among other things, the main entrance is reserved - symbolically attend them from below, while when they take place at night, they are informed by the light coming from inside and filtering through the glasses. The building has been conceived as a sort of lighthouse of political progress; it can be said that it is at the same time able to tell the present historical phase and to translate the past, without creating any possible misunderstanding about its dating. The contrast between the modern dome and the pre-existing neoclassical structures, with which it entered into symbiosis, makes the historical stratification of the building clear and comprehensible. Unlike the case of the reconstruction of the City Palace in Berlin, Foster's intervention, is not a traditional restoration but a translation project, that has managed to give the building a symbolic and iconographic value that a reconstruction in style perhaps would not have had. If it had been decided to rebuild the pavilion vault with drum and lantern as it was originally, its dating would not have been visually perceptible today and any trace of the effects of the 1933 fire, an event of great importance, also to understand the history of the emergence of National Socialism, would have been

erased. A facsimile, unlike the new dome, could not even have transmitted symbolic messages regarding the culture of the present era.



Figure 100. Foster + Partners, *The Berlin Reichstag dome*

Using the aura theory, which is a cornerstone of this dissertation, as a parameter of evaluation, it seems legitimate to state that Foster's contextualised transparent building, being devoid of pompous mimetic pretensions, seems to be compatible with Benjamin's predilection for diaphanous architecture: "*Objects made of glass have no "aura". Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets*".²⁵⁶ It appears to be a coincidence that a suggestion for the reconstruction of Villa Deliella could come just from that palace in Berlin that the young Basile studied in detail and admired so much that he published a specific monograph and drew inspiration from it for the distributive-functional and stylistic conception of his Roman projects. A reconstruction carried out with the approach of the new *Bundestag* makes it possible to remember and pay homage to the historical architecture, to denounce the causes that destroyed it and, at the same time, to express the contemporary nature of the intervention through the artist's creativity.

²⁵⁶ Benjamin W. *Experience and Poverty* _P. 734.



Figure 101. Reichstag Building in Berlin with the new dome



Figure 102. Reichstag Building in Berlin, ca.1900

The missing monument, in the end, is translated in a new version, to the new urban, social, political and aesthetic context in which it is conceived.

Translation processes of this kind are however questioned by those who claim that copies *à l'identique* are the only possible solution in case of disappeared historical buildings, who, to support their thesis, often resort to reconstruction practices typical of Eastern culture, such as Japan and China. It is well known that the aversion to copying, typical of European or Western societies, is less pronounced in Eastern cultures. Many historical Chinese or Japanese architectures, built mainly in wood, have been periodically renewed by copying and replicating always the same model; some examples are the *Temple of Heaven* in Beijing, the *Kasuga-Taisha* sanctuary in Nara, or the *Ise Grand Shrine*. In the latter sanctuary, the temple is

ritually destroyed and rebuilt in identical form every 20 years: on each occasion, a single column, each time different, is saved from the old building, which is incorporated into the new one. In short, the material that makes up this ancient Japanese temple is never more than twenty years old. These buildings, which are cyclically rebuilt as copies of themselves, are considered in those countries to be authentic ancient monuments and not fakes.

These aspects, however, seem to be limited to specific building typologies and precise oriental religious rituals, and not representative of the general theory and practice of reconstruction. Claudine Houbart and Stéphane Dawans write in this regard:

“In 1994 the document of Nara had attempted to rethink the criteria of authenticity assessment in the light of the problems raised by the periodical reconstruction of the Ise temples, which seemed in complete opposition with the Western concept of material authenticity. Even if certain scholars emphasised right at the start that we were dealing with a religious rite, on the fringe of conservation practices, which could by no means be generalised to reconstruction practices in Japan as a whole, the discussions raised by this key issue were very soon simplified and the idea of a radically different vision of authenticity between the East and the West imposed itself in numerous future debates. Yet although identical reconstruction of heritage buildings is not representative of Japanese attitude as a whole, the last decade has shown it is increasingly favoured by the West, who found it offending only twenty years ago and often justifies it by less coherent arguments than the religious discourse underlying the ritual reconstruction in Ise, based on a still vivid thousand-year-old tradition and on the renewal of buildings by definition not quite perennial in their materiality.”²⁵⁷

The two scholars point out that the example of these practices, although unrelated to any real principles of restoration theory, has begun to influence the concept of authenticity in Western thought since the late 1990s. In the meetings of the World Heritage Committee, the authenticity of historical works of art began to be

²⁵⁷ Houbart Claudine, Dawans Stéphane. *Identical Reconstruction and Heritage Authenticity*. Conference S.A.V.E. *Heritage: Saveguard of Architectural, Visual, Environmental Heritage*, 2011 Aversa, Capri (Italy)_P. 1.

considered not only as a quality linked to their physicality, but also to the intangible qualities of their immaterial sphere, such as form, conception and tradition.²⁵⁸ This renewed concept of authenticity allowed for the inclusion of reconstructed Oriental historical temples and sanctuaries in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The taboo of the non-original monument had been questioned from a completely different standpoint and its overcoming has allowed UNESCO, and related organizations such as ICOMOS, in recent decades to promote the creation of copies of historical buildings, which destructive natural or anthropic events have made "intangible", and to include them too within the world cultural heritage to be protected.²⁵⁹ Some of these facsimiles are the *Old Bridge* of Mostar, the *Tombs of the Buganda Kings* at Kasubi, the mausoleums of Timbuktu, which were destroyed in 1993, 2010, 2012 respectively. Still, the question of an adequate translation remains, as well as the datability and recognisability of the reconstruction work as a copy.

An emblematic case in which UNESCO and related organizations have tried to promote copies of disappeared buildings in a European reconstruction context are the *Bauhaus Masters' Houses* in Dessau, but the outcome has been quite different from their proposals. The complex was built by Gropius' project in a suburban green area about one kilometre from the school, and consisted of the director's house and three twin duplex houses for teachers and their families. After the closure of the school in Dessau in 1932, the houses were heavily modified by the National

²⁵⁸ Articles 7 and 13 of the 1994 ICOMOS "Nara Document on Authenticity" follow:

"7. All cultures and societies are rooted in the particular forms and means of tangible and intangible expression which constitute their heritage, and these should be respected."

"13. Depending on the nature of the cultural heritage, its cultural context, and its evolution through time, authenticity judgements may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. Aspects of the sources may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors. The use of these sources permits elaboration of the specific artistic, historic, social, and scientific dimensions of the cultural heritage being examined."

²⁵⁹ The ICOMOS Charter of Krakow of 2000 "Principles for conservation and restoration of built heritage" in article 4 states: "The reconstruction of entire parts 'in the style of the building' should be avoided. Reconstruction of very small parts having architectural significance can be acceptable as an exception on condition that it is based on precise and indisputable documentation. If necessary, for a proper use of the building, completion of more extensive spatial and functional parts should reflect contemporary architecture. Reconstruction of an entire building, destroyed by armed conflict or natural disaster, is only acceptable if there are exceptional social or cultural motives that are related to the identity of the entire community."

Socialists, who did not share its aesthetic values. In 1945 the director's house and half of one of the duplex houses, which had been inhabited by Moholy-Nagy, were destroyed by bombings by the British allies. In the 1950s a building *Haus Hemmer* had been built on the foundations of the Gropius house; it had a steeply pitched roof and features typical of GDR architecture. The other surviving houses were still intact, but they too had been distorted during the same period by crude and sloppy renovations and various additions that heavily altered their appearance. The complex was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996 and the original houses were restored in subsequent years. In those years there was a dispute about how to intervene instead on the voids caused by the destruction of the disappeared houses of Gropius and Moholy-Nagy; those who promoted the faithful reconstruction were opposed by the Superintendence for the preservation of historical monuments, which instead considered it neither opportune nor possible, due to the lack of the original executive drawings and other sources of information, such as detailed colour photographs. The *Bauhaus Foundation* proposed a solution, which consisted in launching a competition asking participants to replace the gaps in the *Masters' Houses* complex with new buildings that would reinterpret and translate the no longer existing architecture in a contemporary way.



Figure 103 *Emmer Haus, Dessau*



Figure 104. The Kandinsky/Klee house before and after the 1998 restoration²⁶⁰



Figure 105. The Kandinsky/Klee house before and after the 1998 restoration²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Picture from: <https://www.moderne-regional.de/fachbeitrag-die-meisterhaeuser-von-dessau/> [16.06.2022].

²⁶¹ The old photo above is taken from *Monumente Oktober/2012. Die Diskussion zur Restaurierung der Meisterhäuser in Dessau Idee oder Substanz?* © Mensing, Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz.

However, the brief of the competition was publicly opposed by authoritative representatives of ICOMOS and UNESCO. An article in the magazine *Monumente*, with the significant title *Idee oder Substanz?* reports some of these criticisms:

„Der Präsident des Internationalen Rates für Denkmalpflege ICOMOS, Michael Petzet, fand es "völlig unangemessen, in dieses Ensemble einen Neubau zu setzen."“

„Birgitta Ringbeck, Vertreterin der deutschen Länder beim Welterbekomitee der UNESCO, riet ebenfalls von einem "Neubau auf dem Gropius-Sockel" ab.“²⁶²

The architectural competition was launched in 2007, but none of the 26 projects submitted was considered suitable for implementation and therefore no first prize was awarded. Nevertheless, the same article reports that the projects were praised for the fact that they reinterpreted the predecessor buildings without proposing reconstructions that would erase the traces of history:

„In einer Presserklärung des Kultusministeriums vom Mai 2008 zeigte sich Minister Jan-Hendrik Olbertz erleichtert, "dass keine Empfehlung zu einer direkten Rekonstruktion ausgesprochen wurde", denn "Denkmalpflege kann nicht so vorgehen, als sei nichts geschehen.“²⁶³

No one won first place, but two second prizes were awarded in a tie to two design firms that submitted very different proposals: Lina Lippuner and Johannes Wick (*Nijo*) from Zurich, and Ekkehard Gnadler, Christof Meyn, Andreas Woitassek (GMW) from Stralsund. The GMW architectural firm proposed to intervene as little as possible, leaving the site's status almost completely unchanged, apart from the addition of a small new pavilion for visitors. Their strategy tended to make evident all the traces that historical events had left behind: on the one hand the gaps caused

²⁶² Mrass, Marcus. *Die Diskussion zur Restaurierung der Meisterhäuser in Dessau. Idee oder Substanz?* [The discussion on the restoration of the Masters' Houses in Dessau. Idea or substance?]. In *Monumente: Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz: Magazin für Denkmalkultur in Deutschland*. Bonn, October 2012.

²⁶³ Mrass, Marcus. *Die Diskussion zur Restaurierung der Meisterhäuser in Dessau. Idee oder Substanz?* In *Monumente*, October 2012.

by the war, and on the other hand the *Haus Hemmer* of the GDR era: in short, neither reconstruction nor demolition. The small pavilion added would in turn be a sign of the present time. This minimalist approach, which plays on the contrasts between the discordant existing buildings and the empty spaces of the absent ones, clearly expresses the designers' vision and seems to fully respect the historical instance of restoration.

The Nijo architectural studio instead planned to eliminate the *Emmer house*; their project consisted in recomposing on a 1:1 scale the original silhouettes of the lost buildings with new volumes in black fiberglass, devoid of any detail or decoration. Jürgen Tietz interpreted the dark masses of this design concept as the "shadows" of the absent predecessors:

Ihr Entwurf sah eine abstrakte Komposition schwarzer Kuben anstelle der Häuser Moholy-Nagy und Gropius vor, deren Abmessungen sich zwar am verlorenen historischen Bestand orientieren, sich ansonsten aber wie die Schatten der verlorenen Originale ausnahmen.²⁶⁴

Lina Lippuner and Johannes Wick describe the intentions of their design strategy, emphasising the fact that they intend to make the traces of time evident:

„Unser Entwurf beabsichtigt, die städtebauliche Erscheinung der Gesamtanlage präzise wiederherzustellen, die Baukörper des Direktorenhauses Gropius, der Doppelhaushälfte Moholy-Nagy sowie der Gartenumfassungsmauer jedoch auf einer elementar-abstrakten Ebene zu halten. Unsere Haltung verweigert sich der Verlockung einer detailgetreuen Rekonstruktion, welche die Spuren der Zeit verunklären würde.“²⁶⁵



Figure 106. Nijo architekten, Zürich. Design for Master Houses Competition. 2008

²⁶⁴ Tietz, Jürgen. *Schattenspiel oder Spiegelfechterei?* [Shadow play or mirror fencing?] in *TEC21 Fachzeitschrift für Architektur, Ingenieurwesen und Umwelt*. Verlags-AG der akademischen technischen Vereine Zürich (CH) 18/2009_P. 15.

²⁶⁵ <https://www.nijo.ch/> [16.06.2022].

A similar approach characterised the proposal of architects Christiane Tenbohlen-Welp und Uwe Welp from Berlin, who designed the missing buildings as their own 1:1 scale models in exposed white concrete, formally simplified to be distinct from the originals. The silhouettes of these concrete "casts" would at the same time visually restore the overall urban appearance. This is how they described their project:

„Das Ensemble der Meisterhaussiedlung wird städtebaulich ergänzt und dadurch wieder als Ganzes erfassbar. Die Baukörper der verlorenen Häuser Gropius und Moholy-Nagy werden als 1:1-Modelle wiederhergestellt. Die Modelle sind als Betonabgüsse einer verlorenen Architektur konzipiert. Die Abgüsse werden in weißem Sichtbeton ausgeführt. Durch formale Vereinfachung, Reduzierung auf die Bauskulptur und Materialästhetik entsteht eine eigenständige Architektur. Ein Kontrast zu den Originalen der Siedlung wird vermieden. Der Besucher kann das Ensemble als Einheit wahrnehmen. Er bleibt sich gleichzeitig bewusst, dass es sich dabei um Originale und um ergänzende 1:1-Modelle handelt.“²⁶⁶

The model by the third-prize winners, Berlin-based BSA Studio, presents a new pavilion along the rear south edge of the lot, and exposes the base walls of the two bombed-out houses in their state as archaeological ruins. The Emmer house is not preserved.

The contents of the submitted projects were useful in outlining the guidelines for the announcement of a second competition; they consisted, in short, of the desire to restore the urban and landscape image of the Master Houses complex through new architectural works that would integrate with the existing buildings. In this regard, Bauhaus-Chef Philipp Oswalt in 2009 stated that the project sought should not exactly reproduce the originals, but recall their spatiality and be able to make evident the traces of the events that the site has gone through:

„Dieses Projekt erfordert eine besondere Sensibilität im Umgang mit der historischen Bausubstanz und ihrer Geschichte. Es kann nicht darum gehen,

²⁶⁶ <https://www.welparchitekten.de/meisterh%C3%A4user-dessau/> [16.06.2022].

den Zustand der 1920er Jahre exakt zu reproduzieren. Es geht um einen Entwurf als kritische Rekonstruktion, die sowohl die einstige Räumlichkeit erinnert, aber auch die Zerstörungen und Überformungen der letzten siebenzig Jahre lesbar macht.“²⁶⁷

Nevertheless, not all of the historical 'super-formations' were subsequently preserved, or at least made readable. In particular, the Emmer House was given the same destiny as the Palast der Republik in Berlin, namely its demolition. The building, which had been acquired by the municipality of Dessau in 2002, was the subject of various debates and workshops in the years that followed, aimed at interpreting the value of its presence on the site and understanding with what artistic/design approach it should be treated in relation to the Gropius house it had replaced and its relationship with the existing buildings. Monika Markgraf writes:

„2003 wurden in einer Ideenwerkstatt am Bauhaus Ansätze zum Umgang mit dem Haus Emmer bzw. dem ehemaligen Haus Gropius unter verschiedenen Gesichtspunkten diskutiert: Was für eine Rolle spielt die Idee der Moderne in der Architektur heute? Wie stehen wir zur Rekonstruktion? Was kann man von alternativen Ansätzen wie: Manipulation, Collage, Neutralisation, Redefinition, Reinterpretation und Neubau erwarten? Welche Effekte werden sich bei der Bearbeitung für das Bauhaus, die Stadt Dessau, die Besucher, die Architekturdebatte, das Gesamtensemble und die Denkmalpflege einstellen? Was könnte eine programmatische und formale Antwort auf die Frage einer Aktualisierung der Moderneidee sein? 25 Ideen wurden in Zeichnungen und Modellen festgehalten und in die Welt hinausgetragen. Das Modell wurde in einem Koffer verstaut und wanderte zu herausragenden Persönlichkeiten in Architektur und Gestaltung, deren Kommentare in einem Video festgehalten wurden.“²⁶⁸

In 2006, two students, Michèl Flaßkamp and Stephan Weber, won the first prize at the 4th International Bauhaus Award with a project entitled *EMMER moves out*. Their plan was to physically move the house by several dozen metres in order to

²⁶⁷ https://www.baunetz.de/meldungen/Meldungen-Neuer_Wettbewerb_in_Dessau_gestartet_885334.html [16.06.2022].

²⁶⁸ Markgraf, Monika, «Rekonstruktion? Das Gropius-Haus in Dessau», Vortrag anlässlich des Symposiums «Nachdenken über Denkmalpflege» (Teil 6): «Denkmale nach unserem Bild? Zu Theorie und Kritik von Rekonstruktion», Bauhaus Dessau, 31. März 2007, in: *kunsttexte.de*, Nr. 3, 2007_PP. 2-3.

free the base of the Gropius house that it loomed over and expose it in its authenticity.

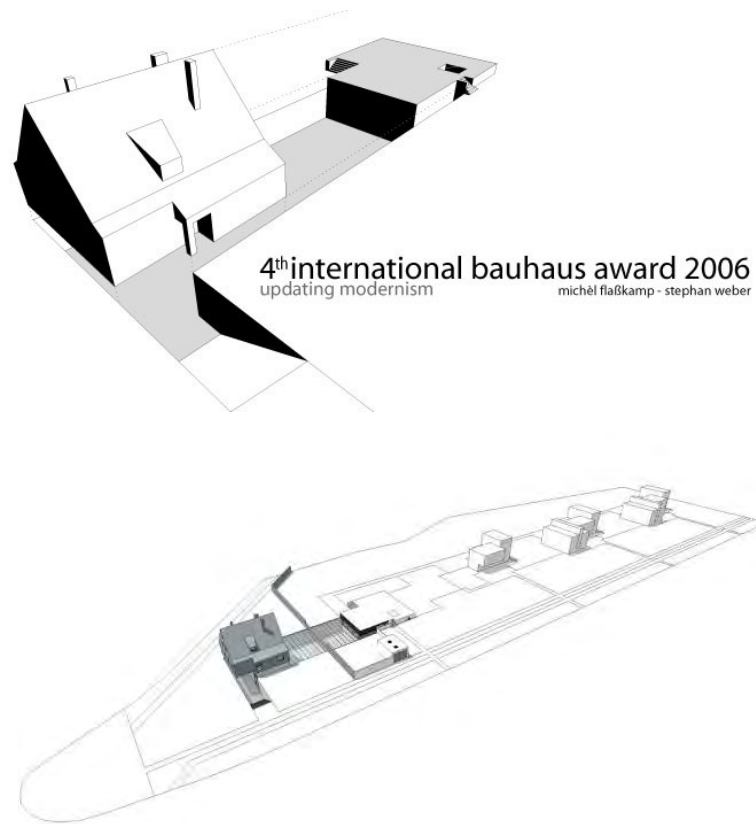


Figure 107. M. Flaßkamp and S. Weber, *EMMER moves out*. Dessau, 2006

In the end, under pressure from the Icomos, which considered the building to be a disturbing element, it was decided to remove it, thus de facto selecting history. For Ronald Berg, the disappearance of the Emmer Haus was a "bitter loss" because it, whether it had aesthetic qualities or not, represented a clear historical testimony to the architectural vision of the GDR, as opposed to that of the Bauhaus, and its perceptibility would perhaps have helped better understand the complex political and cultural events that went on at this site. He writes:

„Ein herber Verlust. Nicht weil das Haus der Familie Emmer architektonisch sonderlich wertvoll gewesen wäre, sondern weil es eine Menge zu erzählen hatte.

Der Internationale Rat für Denkmalpflege (Icomos) bescheinigte dem Haus eine „Irritation auslösende Zeugnishaftigkeit“. Jetzt fehlt bei der Darstellung der Geschichte des Bauhauses und seiner Rezeption, zu der die

Stiftung Bauhaus sich ihrer Satzung gemäß verpflichtet, die Zeitgeschichte der DDR. Haus Emmer zeigte bis zu seiner mutwilligen Zerstörung, dass die DDR in den fünfziger Jahren ein strikter Feind der Bauhaus-Tradition war. Eben deswegen bekam der verbliebene Rest des Gropius-Hauses ein biederes Einfamilienhaus mit Satteldach aufgesetzt.“²⁶⁹

The final architectural competition for the reconstruction of both bombed-out houses was launched in 2010 and was won by architects from the Berlin-based firm Piero Bruno, Donatella Fioretti and José Marquez. Similarly to the two last projects of the 2007 competition mentioned above, their proposal, rather than reproducing a copy of the original buildings, which would have been confused with those that escaped the bombing, included highly evocative works of reference architecture that reproduce their dimensions, volumes and forms in their external shells, but in an extremely synthetic version.

“Rather than faithfully reconstructing the destroyed buildings, Bruno Fioretti Marquez decided to retain the proportions of the original structures but further reduce the already minimal design of the exteriors and create them using contemporary methods.”²⁷⁰

Architect Jamie Fobert's design, submitted for the same competition, also included a semi-gloss envelope reminiscent of the volumes of its vanished predecessors. These thin perimeter walls enclosed a building of fair-faced concrete and glass with a new independent form. The project involved the demolition of the Emmer Haus and the preservation and restoration of the surviving original basement on which the new structure would be erected.

Some photomontages taken from Forbert's project show an imitative diaphanous shell that simultaneously conveys the sense of loss and the symbolic presence of the original building designed by Walter Gropius..²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ <https://taz.de/Bauhaus-Neubau-in-Dessau/!5042014/> [16.06.2022].

²⁷⁰ Griffiths, Alyn. Bauhaus Masters' Houses reinterpreted by Bruno Fioretti Marquez, Dezeen, 29 May 2014.

²⁷¹ <https://jamiefobertarchitects.com/work/house-gropius/#view-related-projects> [16.06.2022].



Figure 108. The Emmer Haus. (From Jamie Fobert – Architects project).



Figure 109. Photomontage with the original base of the Gropius house freed from the Emmer Haus. (from the Jamie Fobert – Architects project).

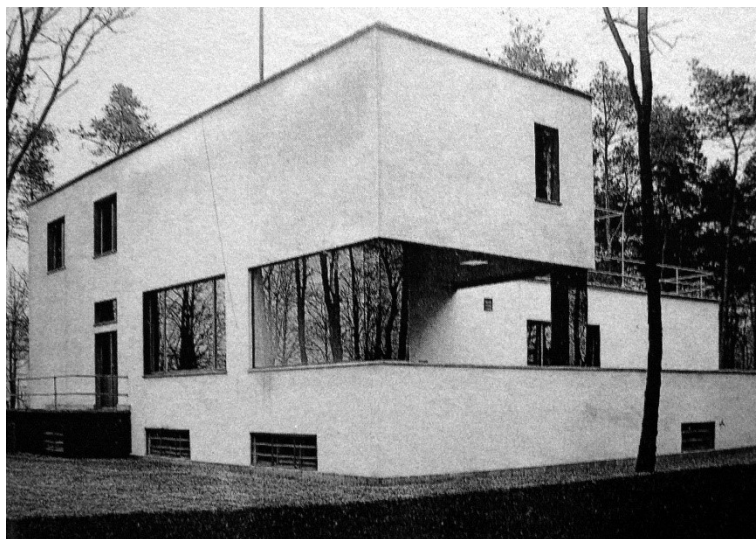


Figure 110. W. Gropius, Bauhaus Director's House, Dessau 1925.



Figure 111. *Jamie Fobert – Architects. Project, House Gropius – Bauhaus Masters’ Houses , 2010*

The designers of the winning project in a public presentation of their proposal, prior to the drafting of the executive project, stated that their approach was based on the theme of the imprecision of memories and the resulting 'blurred' images:

„In dieser Aufgabe steht nicht die Dokumentation eines historischen Zustands im Vordergrund, es geht nicht um eine wissenschaftliche Pflicht gegenüber der Geschichte der Architektur. Es geht hier um etwas Subtiles, um etwas Hinterlistigeres; es geht um ein Gedächtnis, es geht um Erinnerungen.

Erinnerungen leben von Unschärfen, Ungenauigkeiten. Wir müssen mit diesen Unschärfen und Ungenauigkeiten arbeiten, um den richtigen Tonfall für diese Aufgabe zu finden.

Die neue Intervention konfrontiert uns mit einem ziemlich unlösbaren Rätsel: Sie muss die Kraft haben, eine Präsenz und gleichzeitig eine Abwesenheit zu evozieren. Sie muss präzise mit Unschärfe umgehen können.“²⁷²

This approach was openly criticized by Michael Petzet (Icomos) who, ironically using the term "blur", hoped that their idea would be set aside and that instead the

²⁷²https://baunetz.de/meldungen/meldungen-Plaene_fuer_Dessauer_Meisterhaus_vorgestellt_1094849.html [16.06.2022]

houses of the masters would be reconstructed "authentically" and in a manner compatible with those that survived the bombings:

"It is also to be expected that the concept for the exterior of the new buildings will be found incompatible with the authentic design of the ensemble of the Masters' Houses, because according to the rather nebulous architectural concept of "Unschärfe" (blur or state of being out of focus) the exterior is to be inspired by the blurred character of old photos (suggestion of windows as translucent openings, etc), while doing without all architectural details typical of the Bauhaus era (handrails, window frames, roofs, etc). (...) We hope the matter of "blur" that seems hardly compatible with the authentic spirit of the Bauhaus will soon vanish into thin air. The famous ensemble of the Masters' Houses should be preserved for future generations "in the full richness of its authenticity".²⁷³

The desire to make an "authentic" reproduction appears in clear contrast to what has been explored so far in terms of the lack of value of historical testimony of the copy expressed by Walter Benjamin; a copy based only on the resemblance to the original, in addition to falsifying its authenticity, would inhibit the educational function - the formation of a historical awareness - that the imitation of an artistic work, understood as its translation, can have.

The *New Masters' Houses* were finally built according to the design of Bruno, Fioretti and Marquez and opened in 2014. Their main sources of artistic inspiration come mainly from the field of photography and in particular, as they declared, from the blurred images of Hiroshi Sugimoto and from those of the architectural paper models without details by Thomas Demand.

„Um „die Umrisse des Entwurfes zu definieren“, greifen die Architekten auf Konzepte der Kunst zurück. Sie berufen sich dabei zum Einen auf die „Architecture-Serie“ von Hiroshi Sugimoto. Dafür wurden Architektur-Inkunaben mit der „Doppelt Unendlich“-Einstellung fotografiert, was für „die gleichmäßige Auflösung aller Konturen, das Verschwimmen der Formen, die Reduktion der Masse auf ihre Helldunkelwerte“ sorgt.

²⁷³ Petzet, Michael. *Heritage at risk*. ICOMOS world report 2008–2010 on monuments and sites in danger. Hendrik Bäßler Verlag. 2010, Berlin_P. 67.

Außerdem berufen sich die Architekten auf die Arbeiten von Thomas Demand, der seine Szenarien als Papiermodelle nachbaut, diese fotografiert und die Modelle hernach zerstört: „Die Bilder werden durch das bewusste Auslassen von Details abstrahiert und verfremdet.“²⁷⁴

The two new houses that have been realised are an abstract minimalist reinterpretation where the details of previous historic buildings are simplified to the extreme. The pure squared volumes of the new constructions are underlined by the smooth concrete finished surfaces, devoid of any relief or protrusion; by the opaque and whitish glass panes, glued flush with the wall without frames and fixtures; and by the inaccessible balconies without railings. The surreal soft-focus effect of these houses is accentuated by the contrast perceived when visually comparing them with the adjacent ones, plastered in white and in which every detail of the original project can be read as a contemporary translation.

This competition provided designers with the opportunity to revisit Gropius' project in a contemporary key and emulate it, to the point of audaciously developing his pioneering ideas of simplifying forms, pushing them to an extreme degree. An interesting detail in this sense, in the director's new house, is the cantilevered volume on the first floor overlooking the terrace on the ground floor, which in the original prototype was supported by two external pillars. From the old photos it can be seen that Gropius had coloured these pillars black, most likely to put them undertone and visually emphasise the protrusion of the white parallelepiped mass over the void; the new project, using modern technology, has managed this without supports, translating and accentuating Gropius' architectural idea. The two reconstructed architectures were created as exhibition centres for art events, and their interiors were conceived as continuous full-height open spaces crossed by raised walkways. The absence of the attics on the first floor makes it possible to observe the intrados of the external walls, with their unreachable

²⁷⁴ https://baunetz.de/meldungen/Meldungen-Plaene_fuer_Dessauer_Meisterhaus_vorgestellt_1094849.html [16.06.2022]

openings which, with their smooth, opaline glass, appear suspended over the void, in memory of what were the original doors and windows. The space almost suggests a post-war ruin, now emptied, of which only the outer shell remains standing.



Figure 112. Bruno Fioretti Marquez. New Masters' Houses. Dessau (2014). Interior detail.

Regardless of any aesthetic question, and despite the designers' explicit intention "not to document a historical condition", it can be said that this project has established a direct dialogue with the adjacent pre-existing architecture, presenting itself in a contemporary and recognisable manner. The characteristic of recognisability in this case is twofold: on the one hand it concerns the fact that the style and period of the intervention can be objectively determined, and on the other that, although in a revisited version, the identity of the lost buildings has been maintained. This aspect is perceptible not only in the built work but, as seen, also in many of the projects that did not win the 2007 and 2010 competitions, although each of them was conceived with its own specific artistic strategies. With yet another

reference to Walter Benjamin, it can be said that the designers have managed to emphasize the concept of loss of the aura of the original houses. After all, they used the ancient mimetic technique of *imitatio* providing a reworked translation adapted to the new context.



Figure 113 Bruno, Fioretti, Marquez. *New Masters' Houses. Dessau (2014). Gropius House*



Figure 114 Bruno, Fioretti, Marquez. *New Masters' Houses. Dessau (2014). Moholy-Nagy House*

The didactic and monumental value of the new *Meisterhäuser* in Dessau is accentuated by the evident contrast that their presence has established with the adjacent surviving restored houses, in comparison with which they appear almost like a sort of resurrected doubles of the houses bombed in 1945; the observer, perceiving the differences in style, materials, colours between the old and the new buildings, despite the general similarity of their forms, senses the history of destruction that wartime events caused. However, as mentioned above, in the opinion of many a full reading of the stratigraphy that history has left on this site has been severely limited by the decision not to preserve any traces of Haus Emmer.

This modern case of architectural translation shows clear analogies with Umberto Eco's postmodernist thesis according to which, as mentioned above, a pre-existing work can be endlessly rewritten, each time assuming a new independent aesthetic dimension; just as the text of *Cyrano de Bergerac* translated by Giobbe, or Dumas's *Kean* rewritten by Sartre, possess common identities, which nevertheless manifest themselves in distinct aesthetic subjects, the new Master's houses seem no less authentic than the adjacent ones, in that, being a contemporary translation of the lost exemplars, they have re-actualized their aura. In other words, the translation of Gropius' original "text" has been combined with the translation of the memory of the events that eliminated it. The notion of translation allows for a particular conception of a reconstruction project, unique in its place and context, according to design and technological choices, use of materials, distribution of space, style and language that have to be negotiated with the civic society and shareholders. The reconstruction, depending on the different cases and functional programmes, could be a real building or a permanent or ephemeral artistic installation which, by evoking the disappeared 'original', becomes part of the context in which it is inserted: a contemporary street, a square, a park, a garden. Ultimately, the aim is to create a referential architecture that creates a unique translation and that establishes itself as a work of contemporary art that can also tell the story of our time to future

generations; as both Foster and the architects of the two competitions of the New Mester's Houses in Dessau did in their works, following very different paths and visions. This lengthy exploration of different case studies has highlighted the fact that fundamentally there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for dealing with individual cases of reconstruction, but that different design strategies can provide variously meaningful responses to different contexts, and that part of their success is also linked to the ability to make people read the phases of history.

On the basis of these considerations, the idea of carrying out a translation of Villa Deliella, of its identity and memory, which could take root on the original site that time and people have modified, starts: a version (or probably more than one...) among possible others of Basile's work that tries to adapt to the new urban, political and social situation, that tries to express the values and expectations of the present community.

3.3 Should a large new museum be built on the site of Villa Deliella?

The observation and analysis of the case studies previously considered, read in a Benjaminian key, show that a reconstruction project can be considered as a process of translation contextualized in its specific space-time situation. This particular perspective provides suggestions for finding a design strategy for the specific case of Villa Deliella.

As already mentioned, the regional administration of Sicily intends to launch a design competition to build an Art Nouveau museum on the site of Ernesto Basile's villa. Although the idea of reviving Villa Deliella officially dates to 2005 with the aforementioned collection of signatures to rebuild it "as it was and where it was", the regional government is now leaning towards the construction of an avowedly

modern building. Indeed, the results of a special workshop held in Palermo in November 2019, aimed at defining the guidelines of the future competition, suggest that designers will be asked not to carry out a reconstruction, but to design a contemporary building that refers to the lost work and highlights the history and vicissitudes of the site.

Nevertheless, it is not clear whether the desire to build a museum in that place derives from the socio-urbanistic analysis of the current context of Piazza Francesco Crispi -ex Piazza delle Croci- or whether it depends on the imposition of a political will of a part of the city's intelligentsia. In addition to the study of the context managed exclusively by a small circle of architects, town planners and politicians, it would be desirable to carry out a participatory town planning project - now widespread in the management of development processes in the main northern European cities, but unfortunately still almost totally absent in Sicily - in which needs and desires of the population are considered through surveys, meetings, conferences and workshops.

The feeling of loss of the historic villa is indeed widespread among the citizens, who are calling for a "monument" that can commemorate it, but it is also true that a large slice of the community does not want new buildings to be built, of which today's Palermo is saturated; rather, they are calling for parks, pedestrian zones and cycle paths, which the city lacks. Many people are also wondering whether it would not be more appropriate to devote the available money to the restoration of the city's still considerable Liberty architectural heritage, which lies in critical condition, rather than using it to build a new building. Desirée Maida, in a specific article on the case of Villa Deliella published by Art Tribune, writes:

“On the other side there are those who believe that the reconstruction is a ‘philological’ exercise for its own sake, inconsistent from a historical-artistic and anachronistic point of view because it would not consider the urban evolution of recent decades. But above all, many people ask themselves: why re-propose the no longer existing instead of using energy and resources

for the recovery and valorisation of goods on which the cracks of oblivion still loom?"²⁷⁵

Among other things, thousands of unused buildings that already exist in Palermo could be appropriately converted into museums, with consequent savings in environmental and economic resources. Examples are the buildings that in recent years have been seized and confiscated from mafia organisations, which according to the law should be used by the community for institutional or socio-cultural purposes, but in reality, most of them remain unused and are in a state of decay. In many cases even some of these estates are still illegally occupied by unauthorised persons. The *Corriere della Sera* in an article dated 14.01.2020 reports the numbers of this phenomenon:

In Palermo, the Agency has 1991 properties designated, but on the institutional site there are 846, of which 177 declared unused and 83 illegally occupied.²⁷⁶

The causes are due to lengthy bureaucracy, poor management and organisation of the bodies in charge as well as a lack of controls. Realizing the Liberty Museum in a confiscated building at Cosa Nostra would make it possible to avoid a new construction, saving public money and energy and environmental resources, but above all it would have a strong symbolic value of re-appropriation of goods and spaces by the population, against the same criminal organizations that determined the demolition of Villa Deliella and countless other historical buildings.

In the national and European rankings concerning the quality of life and the environment, drawn up by institutions such as *Il Sole24ore*, *Legambiente*, *Greenpeace*, and others, Palermo occupies the last places mainly because of the lack of public green areas, the massive vehicular traffic and subsequent air pollution. In this

²⁷⁵ Maida D. *C'era una volta la Belle Époque. A Palermo*. In *Artribune*, issue of 17 February 2016. *Artribune* s.r.l. Roma

²⁷⁶ <https://www.corriere.it/dataroom-milena-gabanelli/criminalita-65mila-beni-sequestrati-confiscati-8-anni-nessuno-sa-quanto-valgano/263cba58-36f4-11ea-8c20-22605fcc4a4b-va.shtml>. [16.06.2022]. "A Palermo, l'Agenzia conta 1991 immobili destinati, ma sul sito istituzionale ne risultano 846, di cui 177 dichiarati inutilizzati e 83 occupati abusivamente".

regard, the following is an excerpt from an article by Claudia Brunetto published in *La Repubblica*, Palermo edition of Nov. 8, 2021, entitled: *Traffico, tanto smog e pochi alberi. La Sicilia non è una regione verde* - Traffic, so much smog and few trees. Sicily is not a green region -.

"In the annual report of Legambiente on the urban ecosystem, Palermo is in last place in Italy and Catania to the penultimate on the judgment weigh the flop of recycling, the poor use of public transport and the poor air quality. (...) The air quality is poor because there are still too many cars and the trees on the street are always few. (...) Palermo is last in the ranking of *Ecosistema Urbano 2021*, the annual report on the environmental performance of the Italian capitals, drawn up by Legambiente in collaboration with Ambiente Italia and Il Sole 24 Ore, which tells the slow green change of Italy. The Sicilian capital is in 105th place compared to 100th two years ago and 103rd last year. (...) Sos smog. The air remains unbreathable and compared to 2019 also increase the cars in circulation per inhabitant. In Palermo are 61, (...) "In Palermo and Catania the use of private cars remains prevalent, because the offer of public transport is poor, but the air quality is also linked to urban green areas always insufficient." In Palermo there are 11 trees per 100 inhabitants, in Catania 12."²⁷⁷

These problems adversely affect the quality of life of citizens, therefore, today any intervention that determines an urban transformation, from the smallest to the largest, should always take these factors into account. In particular, the area where Villa Deliella stood is crossed every day by thousands of cars and what was once a square has become a disorderly asphalted car park. Just a few metres from Piazza Crispi is the *Giardino Inglese*, one of the few parks in the centre of Palermo, which was built in 1851 according to a project by Ernesto Basile's father, Giovan Battista Filippo. The park is currently crossed by a section of the wide Via della Libertà, which divides it into two parts and makes it difficult to use it as a whole. This area could be turned into a pedestrian-only zone, and one of the possible solutions

²⁷⁷https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/11/08/news/traffico_tanto_smog_e_pochi_alberi_la_sicilia_non_e_una_regione_verde-325636586/ [16.06.2022] (my translation).

would be to channel the vehicular traffic of this segment of Via della Libertà into an underground tunnel, the extrados of which could be covered with a garden to eliminate the existing interruption. A few dozen metres from the Giardino Inglese, separated from it by a road and a difference in height, there is also the eighteenth-century park of Villa Trabia. By eliminating these interruptions, even by means of simple pedestrian subways, the parks could be unified, creating a single green lung that is fluidly walkable, wider and more liveable. Also the area of Piazza Francesco Crispi, given its urban structure and topological configuration, could become an extension of this large new park. Such interventions would be part of the process of redevelopment of urban areas that the Municipality of Palermo has been trying to carry out in recent years, through the extension of pedestrian areas and cycle paths, even if it has to face enormous political, bureaucratic and above all cultural difficulties. The years of gentrification and wild overbuilding have caused the loss of a large part of the historical, artistic and environmental heritage, and have led to the development of the Sicilian capital city in function of cars, rather than in accordance with citizens' requirements for liveability.

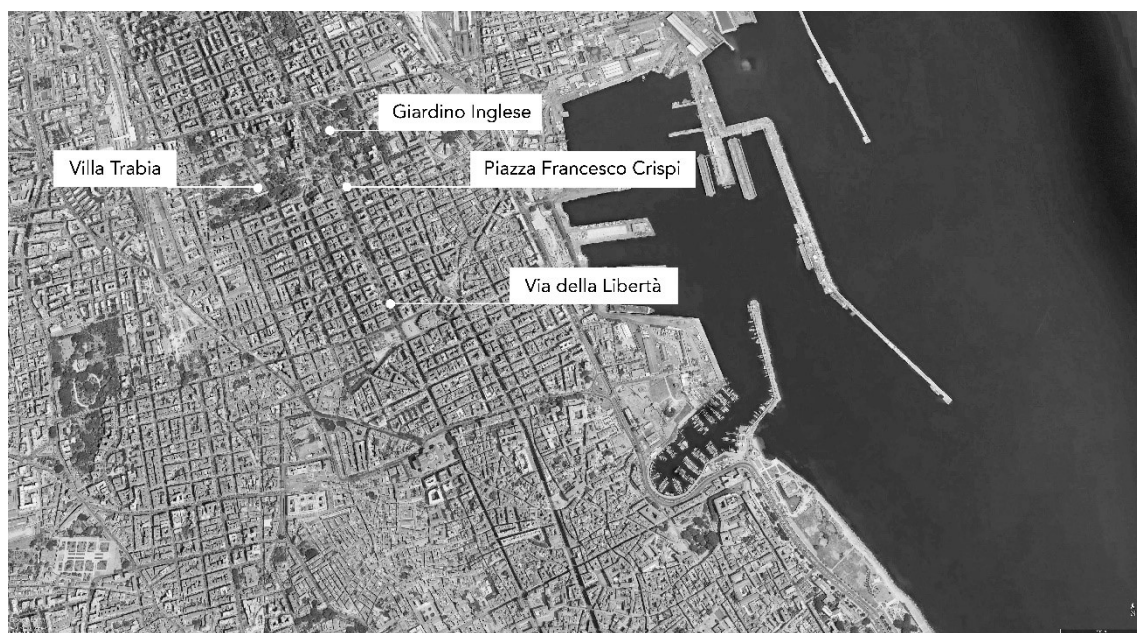


Figure 115. Current aerial photography of the 19th-century area of Palermo developed along the axis of Via della Libertà

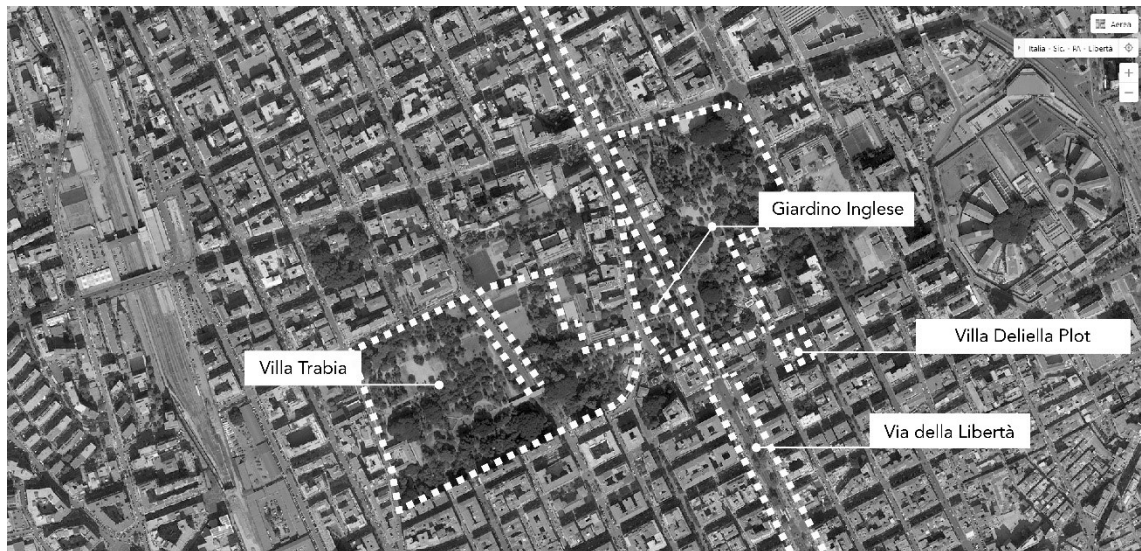


Figure 116. Current aerial photography of the Giardino Inglese and Villa Trabia area



Figure 117. Current aerial view of the areas adjacent to the Villa Deliella plot in Piazza F. Crispi

There is an urgent need for a process of refitting its new neighbourhoods, now saturated with concrete and asphalt and unfortunately lacking in public greenery, to align them with modern standards of environmental sustainability.



Figure 118. Current photo of Piazza F. Crispi with the empty lot of Villa Deliella in the background



Figure 119. Current photo of the empty lot of Villa Deliella

The design part of this research, which will be described in the next paragraph, is focused on the area in the immediate vicinity of the Villa Deliella site, but the intervention is envisaged on an urban scale as the piece of a possible broader plan for the forestation of the entire district. The intention is both to create new parks and to enhance and expand the heritage of existing public gardens with some mending intervention, to protect them as much as possible from smog and noise, and to create new poles of biodiversity that can become points of reference for the whole city. The project idea envisages the transformation of the current chaotic Piazza Francesco Crispi, some adjacent streets, and the empty Deliella lot, into an urban park attached to and integrated with the one already existing in the immediate vicinity: the Giardino Inglese.

3.4 The translation of villa Deliella

On the basis of the reading of the urban context of Palermo today and the considerations made in the previous paragraph on the possible alternatives to the construction of a large new museum on the site of Villa Deliella, an attempt for some design scenarios will be made; this will be tried with some interventions that refer to the work of Ernesto Basile, translating it into new architectural complexes that

try to meet the needs of today's community. The design approach is mainly based on the cornerstones of research, in particular: the work as the result of a process of translation of the model from which it derives, contextualised in the present; the principle of imitation as an instrument of artistic production; the need to preserve the memory of the material and immaterial traces of the cultural heritage. It is for these reasons that the practical part of the research is developed, rather than as a traditional architectural project, as a practice of imitative references that delves into multiple possible hypotheses. Thus, relating to the unique case of Ernesto Basile's vanished villa, different design strategies will be explored, leading to four different design proposals, which are illustrated in Section 4. Ultimately, the design driven research will try to demonstrate that the artistic imitation process constitutes an interpretation/translation of an assumed original.

The approach is based on the idea of creating, on the site where Villa Deliella once stood, just a few installations reminiscent of it, realised with minimal architectural interventions and very low environmental impact. The new site, in its various proposed versions, could become one of the stages of the cultural tours of Palermo's Liberty architecture and could be linked to the museum that, as already mentioned, could be set up in one of the buildings confiscated from the mafia, as an alternative to the large structure that the Sicilian administration wants to build.

This is the starting point for the four design scenarios, which will be described by focusing on the method of imitation used and the model/original taken into consideration in each case. The four scenarios have in common the conservation, restoration and exhibition of the architectural elements that escaped the demolition of the villa and that currently remain in a state of abandonment and degradation, namely: the caretaker's house, the perimeter garden fence walls, a section of the wrought iron gate and its decorated corner support pillars.

Some of these elements are depicted in the following photos and drawn in Figures 159 to 164.

The lot would be freed from all the things that have accumulated since the villa's disappearance, during decades of inappropriate use as a parking lot and car wash, which have altered its aspect: huge billboards, crude wire mesh closures and iron gates, castings of cement on the ground, etc. The janitor's house will also be restored by eliminating the elements that have caused the physical and aesthetic degradation in which it currently finds itself: the roof, which has been stripped of its overhangs and brackets and covered with modern Marseilles tiles, the closure of the staircase windows, the anodized aluminium window frames, the plastic plaster on the facades, etc.



Figure 120. The surviving janitor's house of Villa Deliella

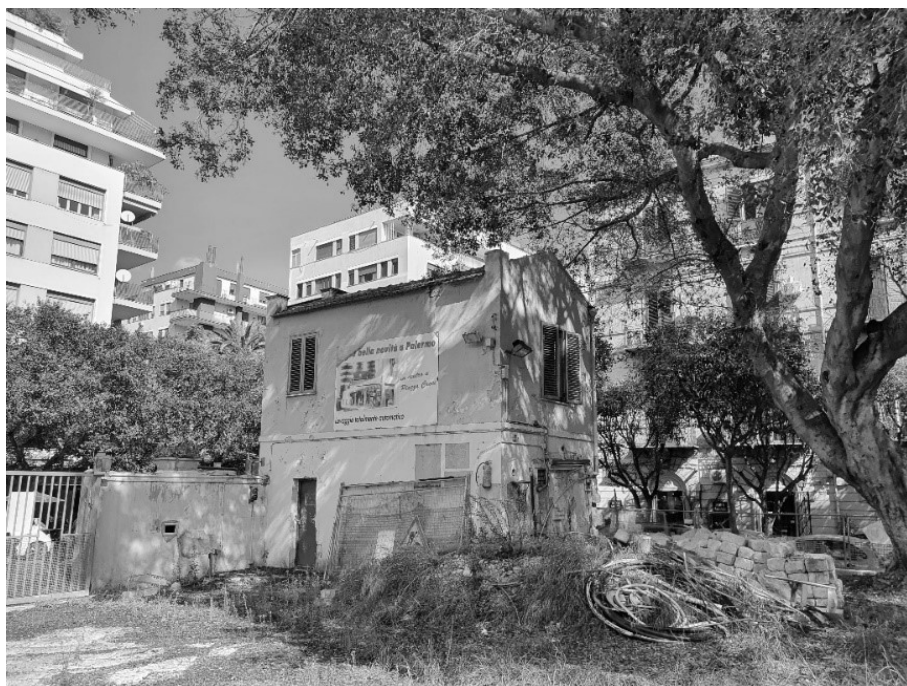


Figure 121 *The surviving janitor's house of Villa Deliella*



Figure 122 *A fence wall of Villa Deliella*



Figure 123. Villa Deliella fence railing



Figure 124. A corner pillar of the fence of Villa Deliella

The design approach also presumes to restore the original curvilinear paths and flowerbeds of the villa's Art Nouveau garden visible in the original plan of the ground floor, of which traces very probably remain underground; the survived original trees - two big palms and three large magnolias - will be preserved. The

new plants and trees that will be planted will conform to those that were originally chosen by Basile and are still visible in the old photos. The restored Deliella's park, with its natural motifs, aims to reawaken the memory of the Belle Époque years that passed through these places, and at the same time would respond to the liveability needs of today's Palermo. The garden, which was originally privately owned, and which was destroyed due to private interests, would now become public, open, and accessible to the community; the idea is to leave the garden always open.

This preliminary operation is aimed at safeguarding and making readable the remaining original fragments of the villa's lot. The restored historical garden would also respond to the current urban configuration, especially in terms of accessibility and possibility of use. Still, the smog and noise from the chaotic streets surrounding the lot would not allow visitors to enjoy its spaces in relaxed conditions. The project therefore envisages transforming the existing Piazza Francesco Crispi and the sections of road adjacent to the Villa Deliella lot into a new urban park planted with palm trees, seamlessly connected to the Giardino Inglese. This part of the project investigates a first type of imitation method: imitation as a multiplication of pre-existing elements. In this case, as will be seen, what is taken as the original is twofold: on the one hand, some palm trees surviving on site serve as a model; on the other, some ideal typological references are transferred by analogy to the new park, namely the typical urban palm groves of Palermo. The area in front of the empty lot of Villa Deliella today bears only the name of "piazza" – square -, but in fact over the years it has become a sort of traffic circle and parking lot for vehicles. What today is a busy and noisy widening was originally conceived, as can be seen from some period photos, as a tree-lined square that could visually harmonize the different significant urban elements that faced it: Via della Libertà to the west, the Convento delle Croci and the secondary entrance to the Giardino Inglese to the north, nineteenth-century buildings to the south, and Villa Deliella to the east. In a central position on the side of Via della Libertà was placed the statue dedicated to Francesco Crispi still existing - whose railing in pure Art Nouveau wrought iron

that surrounded the flowerbed has unfortunately been removed -, while on the perimeter edges east and south of the square there were two rows of palm trees planted with a distance of about ten meters between the trunks. Today only six palms have survived, five along the south side and one on the east.



Figure 125. Piazza delle Croci (today Piazza F. Crispi) in the 1950s with Villa Deliella in the background



Figure 126. Piazza F. Crispi today with the remaining palm trees and the empty Villa Deliella plot in the background



Figure 127. The trunk of a remaining palm tree in Piazza F. Crispi surrounded by asphalt



Figure 128. One of the two surviving palm trees in the Villa Deliella plot



Figure 129. The Villa Bonanno palm grove in Palermo



Figure 130. The palm grove in Piazza Castelnovo in Palermo

Palm trees are typical and widespread in Palermo and were probably introduced by its Phoenician founders, continuing to be cultivated by the various dominations that

followed over the centuries, in particular the so-called Arab-Norman one; it may be stated that these Mediterranean plants, which characterise the city, represent one of its main symbols; no other city in Sicily has such a large number of specimens. Numerous squares, streets and parks in Palermo are home to palm groves, some of the best known of which are Piazza Castelnuovo, the Giardino Inglese, the gardens of Villa Bonanno and Villa Giulia. Considering the origins and vocation of the particular site of Villa Deliella and the requirements of its current community which, as seen in the previous paragraph, needs pedestrian and liveable areas²⁷⁸, the idea is to develop the green potential of Piazza Crispi starting from the traces left of its initial configuration, namely the palm trees and the module of their spacing, and to develop them on the model of other similar places in Palermo, in particular that of the nearby Piazza Castelnuovo. In the project, the new parallel rows of trees start from the existing ones and develop repeating the rhythm of the 10-metre spacing in a south-north direction, adapting to the morphology of the site. The square becomes exclusively pedestrian and the asphalt is replaced by beaten earth. The southern edge of the new park coincides with the pavement of Via Alfonso Borrelli, where a row of palm trees will be planted following the rhythm of the existing ones. The view of the statue of Francesco Crispi remains unobstructed from the Via della Libertà side and the new rows of palm trees form the background, creating a natural scenic backdrop.

In addition to the new Piazza Francesco Crispi, which in the project proposal becomes the natural continuation of the Giardino Inglese and fully encompasses the Villa Deliella lot, the two adjacent stretches of Via delle Croci and Via Giorgio Castriota also become exclusively pedestrian-only; this choice would entail a minimal change in the current vehicular routes, which would continue to affect the roads bordering the new park. The Villa Trabia with the western part of the English

²⁷⁸ See previous note: article by Claudia Brunetto published in *La Repubblica*, Palermo edition of Nov. 8, 2021 entitled: *Traffico, tanto smog e pochi alberi. La Sicilia non è una regione verde* - Traffic, so much smog and few trees. Sicily is not a green region -.

Garden, and the latter with the eastern part, are connected in the project by two little pedestrian subways crossing Via della Libertà and Via Marchese Ugo, making the three existing parks usable through fluid paths without vehicular interference. The connection path diagram is illustrated in figure 148.

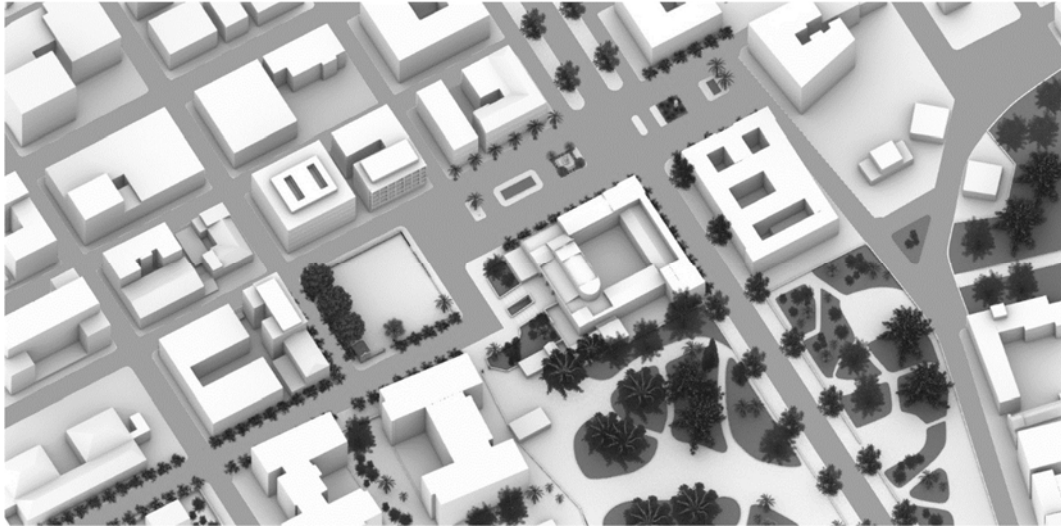


Figure 131. The current state of the Villa Deliella site surrounded by vehicular roads. The two halves of the Giardino Inglese and the park of Villa Trabia separated by roads.

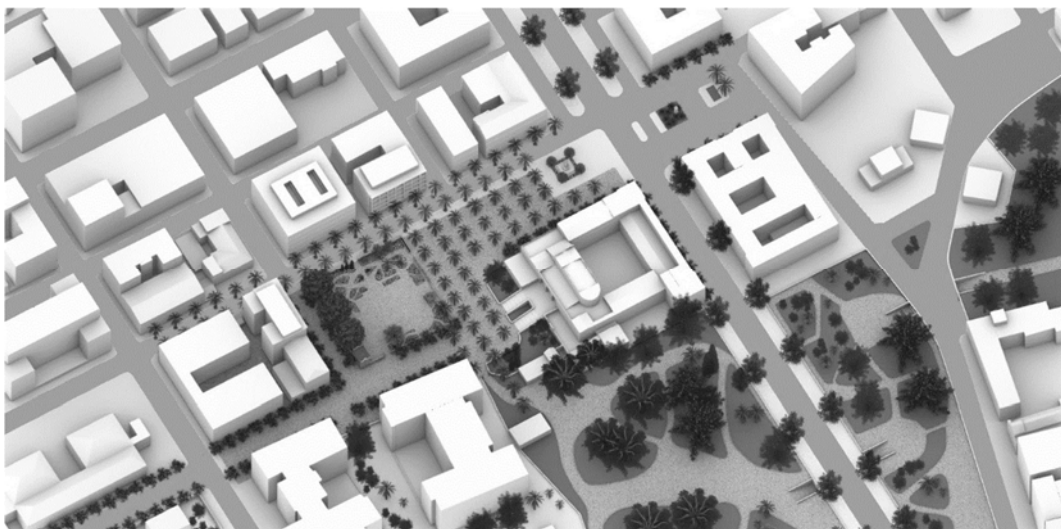


Figure 132. Restoration of the garden of Villa Deliella and project for a new palm grove in Piazza F. Crispi as an extension of the Giardino Inglese. Two new pedestrian subways connect the existing parks currently separated by roads (visible below right)

The new park as a whole is conceived as an urban hinge that redefines and brings order to the structure of this part of the city. This small urban forest is intended to be a sort of refuge to protect the memory of Villa Deliella and is planned to give citizens the opportunity to stroll and relax, observing the city from the new perspectives determined above all by the parallel rows of palm trees. Over time, this green area should also create the conditions for the settlement and development of populations of birds and other animals and act as a forerunner for similar projects to create small public gardens in other areas of the city. In a real case of urban planning for the actual creation of the park, it would be desirable to carry out the design and construction processes with the active collaboration of the citizens, so that their actual needs and expectations are taken into account and a strong sense of belonging to the community is established from the outset. The new urban park described above, formed by the restored garden of Villa Deliella and the new palm grove, represents the common base on an urban scale on which the four different architectural scenarios described below are grafted. The project proposal is illustrated in detail in comparison with the current state in Section 4 in Figures 148 to 158.



Figure 133. The new palm grove in Piazza F. Crispi seen from Via della Libertà



Figure 134. *The new palm grove in Piazza F. Crispi seen from the garden of Villa Deliella*



Figure 135. *The janitor's house and the fence of Villa Deliella with the new palm grove in the background*



Figure 136. The restored garden of Villa Deliella seen from the palm grove of Piazza F. Crispi

The first scenario, called “the archaeological excavation”, starts from the idea of excavating and restoring the currently buried foundations and the remaining walls of the villa, making them visible and usable. This scenario does not perform the reproduction of objects but the imitation of a methodology concerning other disciplines and practices: in this specific case archaeology and excavation. This project proposal is presented in Section 4 from Figure 165 to 173.

Archive photos taken immediately after the demolition in 1959 show the rubble lying on the basement floor below ground level. It is very realistic to assume that a scientifically performed archaeological dig would bring to light the ruins of the villa, the foundations, and the bases of the surviving walls. It is assumed that a conservative restoration and anastylosis of the excavated original stone elements would be carried out, integrating the gaps with red pressed bricks or other recognisable materials, as is the practice with ancient architecture, to distinguish the added parts from the old ones. The scientific technique of excavation is typically used for the discovery of remains of prehistoric, classical antiquity, or medieval buildings, while in this particular case it is provocatively applied as a design strategy to an early 20th century architecture. The ruins are particularly exhibited

to underline the historical value of the vanished villa and to make clear the effect of the damage caused by its demolition. The result would be an open-air “archaeological” site at a height of minus 60 ca. centimetres above present-day street level, bordered by the ruins of the original perimeter walls of the villa; the plan of the building would thus be visible from above, with any foundations, paving, thresholds, internal walls, plasterwork, etc. found. From an exhibition point of view, the layout of the ruins would have strong analogies with the vestiges of much architecture from antiquity in many Sicilian cities that are out in the open and visible from above street level, such as the foundations of the Roman amphitheatre in Catania; these, from the time they were unearthed in the 18th century, have become characteristic elements of the modern city and have created a particular visual tension between buildings from different historical periods.



Figure 137. First scenario: "The archaeological excavation"

The excavation imagined in the first scenario, directly connected to the garden, becomes an integral part of the new urban park and allows visitors to access and walk through the ruins of the villa, thus understanding its layout and spatial character through direct physical and visual contact. This small archaeological site

is also intended to be an intimate place. The relatively isolated and low position of the ruins should create an unusual perspective from below towards the garden and the city, making this area a space for reflection where visitors, walking or sitting on the restored walls, could perceive the aura of the former noble residence. The imitation of a methodology specific to the discipline of archaeology thus provides scientific knowledge that allows users to understand what the villa's real original dimensions were, while at the same time allowing them to perceive its presence as an absent monument, of which only vestiges remain today.

The second scenario, illustrated in Section 4 from Figure 174 to 182, envisages leaving the area where the villa stood in its current degraded configuration untouched. This portion of soil, entirely surrounded by the garden, would remain asphalted, with yellow stripes drawn on the ground in memory of the unauthorised car park/car wash. Again, the intention is to evoke the Ernesto Basile-designed house through its absence, but this version further emphasizes the aspect of leaving a record of its demolition and the misuse of the lot for decades. This scenario, called “the caretaker’s cottage (s)”, is produced by an imitation process as an updated/simplified repetition of pre-existing elements. The pre-existing element referred to is indeed the two-storey caretaker's cottage already mentioned, which survived demolition and is still located in the north-east corner of the Villa Deliella plot. The idea of re-producing the cottage stems from the hypothesis of making a small permanent exhibition on the subject of Liberty-style architecture, displaying its contents through multimedia tools, linked to the large museum that is imagined to be set up in a confiscated building.

Although the small building has undergone some rough alterations over the years, especially to the façade and roof, it is still almost intact but in need of restoration. If suitably equipped, it could house part of the little exhibition, but given its small size it consists of a total of two rooms measuring approximately 6 metres x 3.70 metres each - it would be necessary to increase the exhibition space; for this reason it has been planned to design two/three/four (depending on the

expositive needs) additional small pavilions in its vicinity. The original small service building was conceived by Ernesto Basile in the archetypal form of a gabled house, with small proportions and decorations, adding to the fact that it represented a modular piece of the design of the entire organism composed of the villa and its garden. Its formal characteristics and certain typical details, such as the base made of square stones of various sizes, the string-course cornice, the projecting corner and central pillars, recall some of Basile's major works such as Villa Ida (1903-04), the Theater Kursaal Biondo (1913-14), or the Dispensario Diurno (1920-25).



Figure 138. *The surviving janitor's house of Villa Delielle*

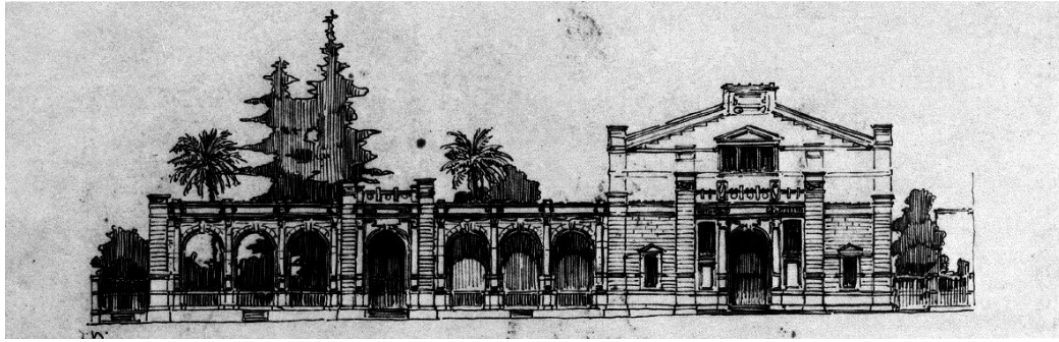


Figure 139. E. Basile. Drawing of the Kursaal Biondo Theatre of Palermo 1913-14, (partially demolished)



Figure 140. E. Basile. Sanatorium for tuberculosis "Dispensario Diurno", Palermo 1920-25

The shapes and volumes of this tiny house represent the modular matrix for the production of new architecture: the two new pavilions for the exhibition, identical to each other, replicate the module of the small house, repeating its volumes and dimensions in simplified forms. The scenario designed envisages two of them, but their modular nature allows them to be multiplied according to needs within the plot, possibly with dismountable temporary solutions. The two small new pavilions are located in the garden of Villa Deliella, parallel to the eastern wall of the enclosure, in the open spaces next to three existing large magnolia trees, in line with the caretaker's house but slightly offset from it. This position makes it possible to

observe these two new "naked" versions, together with the prototype from which they are inspired, and it allows to perceive their similarities and differences.

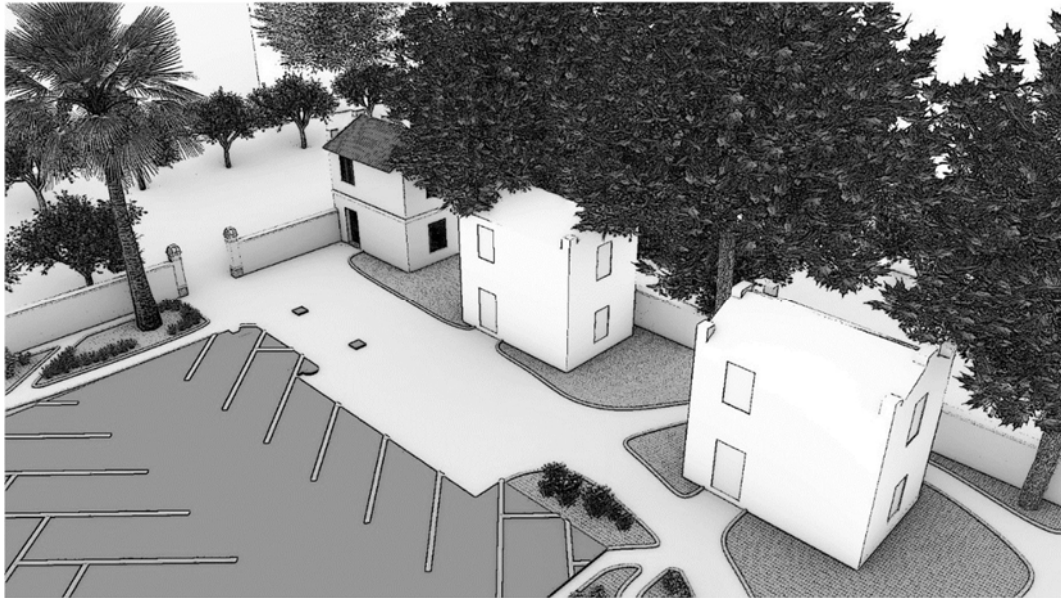


Figure 141. Second scenario: "The caretaker's cottage(s)"

The masses, the overall dimensions, the heights, the inclination of the roof pitches, the projecting central and side pillars of the gabled façades, and the openings of the two 'clones' faithfully repeat the corresponding elements of the original from a proportional and dimensional point of view. The skilful way in which the windows in the façades of the little house were inserted and sized by Basile is repeated in the two new pavilions, also with the aim of providing them with the means to counteract the hot Sicilian climate and have balanced natural lighting in every season. What is not copied, by contrast, are: the stone ashlar of the basement, the coloured plasters, the door and windowsills, the stringcourse band, the mouldings of the top pillars. The new facades are perfectly smooth and opaque white, as are the roof slopes; the new top pillars are simple vertical elements without any decoration. The windows do not have marble sills and their glazing is imagined in semi-transparent white satin glass.



Figure 142. Second scenario: "The caretaker's cottage(s)"

The main reference for the design of this part of the project comes from the New Masters' Houses in Dessau by Bruno Fioretti Marquez (2014). From a methodological point of view, the project also has similarities with Norman Foster's first proposal for the reconstruction of the Reichstag in Berlin (1992), where he had multiplied the module of the old pavilion glass vault with a square base to create a large canopy over the Neo-Renaissance building.

The third scenario takes as its original to re-produce the image of the lost prototype of Villa Deliella and attempts to provide an imitation/translation that could re-enact it in the context of present-day Palermo. This version of the project is titled "the new Villa Deliella ruin" and is illustrated in Section 4 from figures 183 to 191. Based on the analysis of drawings and old photographs, the idea takes inspiration mainly from the project by Robert Venturi called 'Ghost Houses', realised in Philadelphia in 1976. It is a memorial dedicated to Benjamin Franklin on the site of his house and print shop, which were demolished in 1812. On the archaeological excavations of the two buildings, the American architect has built two paved bases with the design of the house plans. These small "squares", set in a garden, overlook the ruins below and are topped by two steel sculptures that trace

the contours of the volumes of the two houses, without walls or roofs. These "ghost structures" allow visitors to imagine the outlines of the two buildings that no longer exist, passing on their memory. Similarly, the third scenario imagined for Palermo try to provide the possibility to understand and perceive what the original volumes and dimensions of Ernesto Basile's vanished villa were, through a diaphanous sculptural-architectural steel installation built on its perimeter that recalls the silhouette of part of the outer walls and the turret. This element offers the opportunity to practically experiment with imitation as a translation/re-enactment of the missing prototype.



Figure 143. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Franklin Court 'Ghost Houses', Philadelphia 1976

The artistic installation consists in a sort of diaphragm, a scenography, that reproduces stylised fragments of the ancient facades on a 1:1 scale, faithfully respecting the measurements and proportions of the original masses. This "contemporary ruin" with its semi-transparent metal skeleton that progressively dematerializes upwards should look almost like the shadow of the missing

building. In particular, the structure aims to emphasise and reproduce the plastic north-west corner of Villa Deliella, characterised by the turret that stood out between the volumes of the north and east wings, with the winter garden and its three large bow-windows at the base. This mainly because this corner, in the collective imagination, became the most representative element of the villa, so much so that it inspired, as already mentioned, the works of other architects and the scene of a contemporary novel of Santo Piazzese.

A fragment of the walls of the south-east corner is also 'reconstructed' to facilitate the reading of the volumetric configuration of the villa and to visually counterbalance the weight of the north-west structure.



Figure 144. Third scenario: "The new Villa Deliella ruin"

The Corten walls of the new ruins enclose a square accessible from the garden on each side of its perimeter. On the paving of this internal "piazza", following the model of Franklin's Memorial, is represented the plan of the mezzanine floor of the old, demolished villa. The projections of the walls, openings and stairs are designed with Corten sheets laid flush with the stone paving, with which they form a single

walking surface. This "translation" of Villa Deliella is also intended to serve as a celebratory memorial of the work of Ernesto Basile, recalling its demolition.

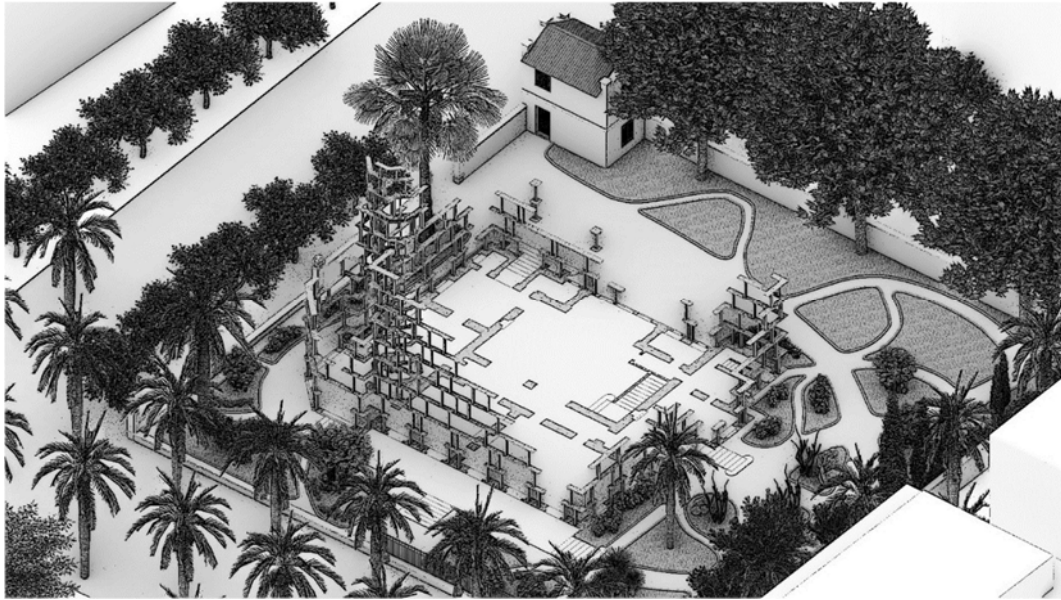


Figure 145. Third scenario: "The new Villa Deliella ruin"

As repeatedly stated, the fundamental message that each designed scenario wants to convey to future generations is the warning to protect their historical cultural heritage and to put the interests of the community before those of a few, so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past that led to the "sack of Palermo". This issue is of fundamental importance in Sicily, where building is still being carried out in a wild manner and where building amnesties are systematically proposed by a certain political class in order to legalise a posteriori demolitions and illegal constructions that irreparably devastate the landscape and the historical centres of the island's towns. The intention is ultimately to use the "progressive attitude" of "collective and simultaneous reception" that Walter Benjamin in his essay on the reproduction of the work of art attributed to architecture with the function of emancipating the masses.

Like the previous ones, the third scenario also has a didactic function, as the combination of the floor plan drawn on the floor and the 'reconstructed' walls should guide observers to discover what the villa once was and its history, and stimulate their curiosity and desire to learn more about it. From a functional point of view, the metal structure could be a suitable support for exhibitions and events of various kinds, which can take place in the square and in the surrounding garden: its walls, formed by a grid of beams and pillars, should be appropriate for installing all kinds of scenography, screens, lights, panels, stages, walkways, etc. Another important functional aspect of the metal structure is its ability to create shaded areas inside the square with its brise-soleil and possibly with climbing plants that could cover its surfaces. This scenario, with its free pedestrian pathways and the absence of gates or fences, tends to favour a dynamic perception of the spaces and objects designed. The new palm trees, the square with the plan of the villa, the sculpture/ruins, can be observed from different perspectives in combination with the pre-existing elements, with which they try to integrate to visually mend the urban disconnections that the void of Villa Deliella has determined.

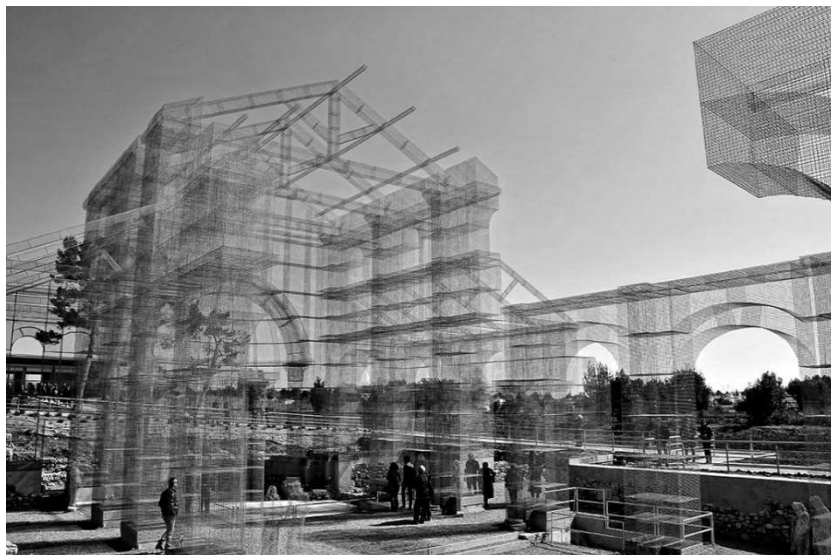


Figure 146. E. Tresoldi, *"Dove l'arte ricostruisce il tempo" Basilica di Siponto, Manfredonia 2016*

In addition to Venturi's project of "ghost houses", the installation is also inspired by Edoardo Tresoldi's wire mesh sculptures that "reproduce" on a one-to-one scale the volumes of architectures of the past that have disappeared, and in particular the one created in 2016 above the ruins of the early Christian basilica of Siponto entitled: *Dove l'arte ricostruisce il tempo* - Where art reconstructs time -.

In conclusion, the design strategies used, all based on imitation understood as translation, have made it possible, for each of the elements designed, to make evident on the one hand the aesthetic tension that is determined in the relationship between model and copy, and on the other hand the meanings that can emerge from their comparison. Thus, the archaeological method translated - in the etymological sense of transferred/carried across - to the case of a relatively young building has created an unusual example of an excavation dedicated to Art Nouveau rather than to ancient architecture, generating a space for reflection that underlines the value of lost architecture regardless of its age.

The two pavilions that translate the caretaker's cottage, reproducing it in a revisited way, also create a simultaneous visual tension with the prototype that still expresses the recognition of the artistic strength of this small prototype, which becomes the source of inspiration for the production of new architecture, somehow exempting the designer from the need to invent completely original forms.

The vanished villa, or rather the memory of the villa's image, is instead translated into a set of fragments of the parts that composed it, generating the blurred silhouette of a new ruin; it is a translation that seeks to transmit the identity and essence of the work to the future.

Finally, the new rows of palm trees are translated/transferred from the typological idea of the palm groves of similar squares in Palermo to Piazza Francesco Crispi, to transform it into a new urban park, firmly anchored to the *genius loci* of the city.

These different translations, while in continuity with their respective reference models, are to varying degrees not faithful to them, but, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, it can be said that each of them is a "recreation that tends to reawaken the

echo" of its own "original". This vision accompanied by a focus on the hic et nunc of present-day Palermo guided the scenarios for the new Villa Deliella site, creating a set of new aesthetic subjects, inspired by the memory of the lost original Villa Deliella, now irreproducible. Each element designed obviously does not claim to remain unchanged in time, but represents one of the infinite possible design responses for this particular case, today.

Mona Mahall and Asli Serbest describe each architectural design process as an individual subjective artistic strategy that adapts to a particular place, situation, and moment:

"Architecture emerges, when it is visible, readable, or hearable. How to do this, cannot be determined by an objective procedure, because the rules, contained in every algorithmic method, have to be interpreted for every individual case, they have to be adapted to contexts, and they have to be realised under particular conditions. This always depends on subjective decisions of a designer - in the same way, as a stock picking is a subjective decision of a broker."²⁷⁹

This freedom of individual interpretation also suggests that, although the widely analysed reasons for the inappropriateness of copying lost works of art in this research,, it is not excluded that in a given future historical moment, some designers may propose to reconstruct a perfect clone of the villa destroyed in 1959, adapting it to the changed socio-political-cultural conditions of their time, and laying the foundations for new scientific, as well as artistic, approaches.

The design strategies used for the hypothetical scenarios on the Deliella site also try to conform to Basile's attitude towards reconstructions of works from the past, which, as seen above, led him on every occasion to carry them out in memory, but using his own modern language adapted to the particular situation. The design research is ultimately focused on translating the model of Villa Deliella into *n* versions that seek to highlight and pass on its architectural qualities over time and

²⁷⁹ Mahall, Mona and Serbest, Asli. *How Architecture Learned to Speculate*. Igmade.edition – D93 Stuttgart 2009_ P. 155.

that aspire to become milestones of its existence themselves, which will probably in turn inspire new translations that will help pass on its identity to future generations. In this perspective, a possible subsequent, almost dreamlike development/transformation has been designed for the 'ruin' of the third scenario, to further emphasise its contents.

In this last fourth version, which could be imagined either as a large ephemeral or even permanent art installation, the new metal structure, entirely wrapped in white fabric, is suspended from a huge gantry crane, without any connection to the ground. The idea is to use an old one among the many disused ones in the city's harbour. The ruin of the villa thus literally floats in the air like a ghost. The turret that seemed to say, "I am here" in this version is emphasized. The drawings of the fourth scenario, called the "Deliella ghost", can be found in Section 4 from Figure 192 to 200.



Figure 147. *Oneiric version of the third scenario: the "Deliella ghost"*

Each scenario drawn seems to have verified that art and architecture together, viewed through the lens of Walter Benjamin's aura theory, ultimately have the potential to provoke perceptual/educational shocks in observers and at the same

time are capable of producing unique works in continuity with history that become testimonies of their era.

To conclude, recourse will once again be made to the field of literature, which in the course of the dissertation - from Phaedrus's fables, and Francesco Petrarca's letters, or Walter Benjamin's treatise on the *Trauerspiel* - has offered by analogy so many reflection inputs for the formulation of the design strategies sought.

The following is a well-known case of literary translation of a poem by Sappho (630 – 570 BC), the so-called *Ode to Jealousy*, performed by Catullus (84 – 54 BC) in the first century B.C., which gave rise to the famous poem in Latin *He seems to me equal to a god*. In this ancient free translation of a pre-existing poetic composition, parallels can be drawn to the arguments that have been discussed in this dissertation on the subject of architectural imitation of earlier models. The original poem, for example, can be compared to villa Deliella, while the subsequent reinterpretation can be compared to one of the interpretations proposed in the four scenarios where the memory of Ernesto Basile's building is always the protagonist. More than five hundred years after the death of the poetess of Lesbos, Catullus too wishes to express forcefully the theme of the universal power of love and the overwhelming effects it has on the human soul; and to do so, he decides not to create an entirely new ode, but to re-use and update her verses. He translates the passionate original poem - the term 'original' is here used, assuming Sappho, in turn, had not already been influenced by some other previous poetess or poet - to his own personal situation, readapting it in the style of his time. Below are the two versions of the poem, with their English translations, the comparison of which shows how the Latin poet created a new and autonomous aesthetic subject, but at the same time closely related to his Greek predecessor:

“Sappho Fr. 31

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
ἔμμεν' ὦνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι

Catullus 51

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,
ille, si fas est, superare divos,

ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδῃ φωνεῖ-
σας ὑπακούει

qui sedens adversus identidem te
spectat et audit

καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὴν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·
ὥς γὰρ <ἔς> σ' ἴδω βρόχε', ὥς με φώνη-
σ' οὐδὲν ἔτ' εἴκει,

dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis
eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi
[vocis in ore]

ἀλλὰ τῇ μὲν γλῶσσα τῆ ἀγέῃ, λῆπτον
δ' αὖτ' ἄρ' ἡρώϊ πῦρ ὑπαδεδορόμακεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδὲν ὄρημ', ἐπιβρό-
μεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
flamma demanat, sonitu suo
tintinant aures, gemina teguntur
lumina nocte.

τέκαδε μ' ἰδρὼς κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὖται.

Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:
otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:
otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.

ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ τῇ καὶ πένητα

(**Sappho fr. 31:** He seems to me to be equal to the gods / that man who sits opposite you / and nearby listens to your / sweet voice / and amorous laughter; truly this / makes my heart flutter in my breast; / for when I look at you for a moment, / I cannot speak anymore / but my tongue breaks, at once / a subtle fire runs under my skin, / I see nothing with my eyes, / my ears roar, / a cold sweat comes over me, trembling / seizes me all, I am greener than grass, / and I seem to me to be little far from death. / But all can be endured, since even a poor man...

Catullus 51: He seems to me to be equal to a god, / that man, if it is possible, seems to surpass the gods, / who sitting opposite you always / looks at you and hears you / sweetly laughing. This rips all senses / from me miserable: / for as soon as I see you, / Lesbia, I have no / voice left in my mouth / but my tongue numbs, a subtle flame / runs down through my limbs, / with a sound of their own / ring my ears, a twofold night covers my eyes. / Idleness, Catullus, is giving you trouble; / in idleness, you revel and yearn too much; / idleness has already destroyed both kings and / happy cities)."²⁸⁰

²⁸⁰ Piantanida, Cecilia. *Sappho and Catullus in Twentieth-Century Italian and North American Poetry*, Bloomsbury Publishing. London, 2021_PP. 4-5.

Catullus' beloved was actually called Clodia, but he calls her Lesbia, precisely in order to recall - one might say with a sort of "postmodern" ante litteram technique of double coding - the reference to Sappho. In other words, he pays homage to the Greek poetess without explicitly naming her, consciously perpetuating the identity of her verses through a new translation. Referring to the ode, Cecilia Piantanida states:

"By evoking Sappho through the namesake, he redoubles his sense of longing directed both toward the beloved and the lyric tradition represented by Sappho. As a translator, Catullus might also be expressing his 'yearning for a communion with a historically, culturally, and linguistically distant text'."²⁸¹

The fact that the Latin poet chose to rewrite this poem more than five centuries later, renouncing an entirely autonomous and new poetic composition, is interpreted as an empathic act that binds him to the tradition of the past. With his new aesthetic subject, he consciously transmits the identity of Sappho's verses to future generations. Countless translations of the two poems have been made into various languages, and it is likely that other artists will undertake new literary contests with Sappho and Catullus and, by re-using their works, narrate their own present, each with their own personal artistic strategies. New versions/translations of the *Ode of Jealousy* may emerge, manipulating and repeating it in full or in fragments, perhaps in the form of videos, performances or musical pieces, and in turn they may take on a canonical status that will allow them to become part of the repertoire of tradition.

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²⁸¹ Piantanida, C. *Sappho and Catullus in Twentieth-Century Italian and North American Poetry*, 2021 _P. 5.

4 DESIGN PROPOSAL OF FOUR POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR THE NEW VILLA DELIELLA

Comparison between the current urban context and the design of the new Deliella Park.

Common basis at the urban scale for the following four scenarios of the project proposal. The existing parks, currently divided, are in the new project connected by two pedestrian subways (in yellow).

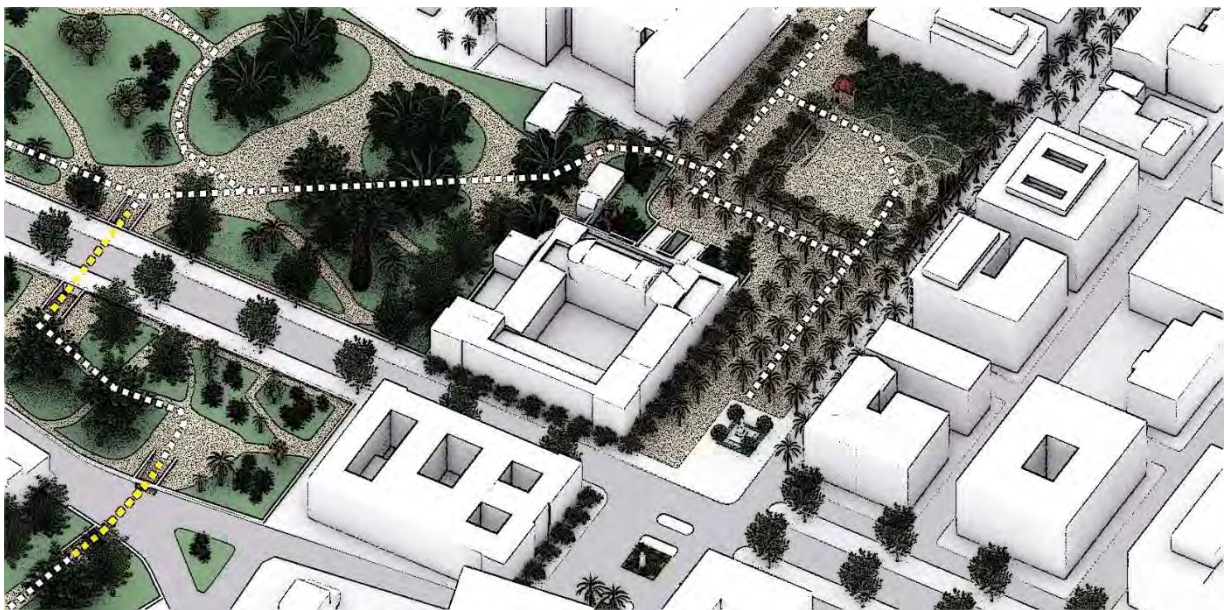


Figure 148 Project axonometry of the new park



Figure 149 *Planimetry of the current state*



Figure 150 Project planimetry



Figure 151 *Planimetry of the current state*



Figure 152 *Project planimetry*



Figure 153 Site plan of the current state



Figure 154 Project site plan



Figure 155 *Axonometry of the current state*



Figure 156 *Project axonometry*



Figure 157 Axonometry of the current state of the Deliella plot



Figure 158 Project axonometry of the Deliella plot

Drawings of some architectural
elements that survived demolition



Figure 159 View of the surviving caretaker's cottage at Villa Deliella



Figure 160 Axonometry of the caretaker's cottage at Villa Deliella from inside the plot



Figure 161 Axonometry of the caretaker's cottage at Villa Deliella from inside the plot

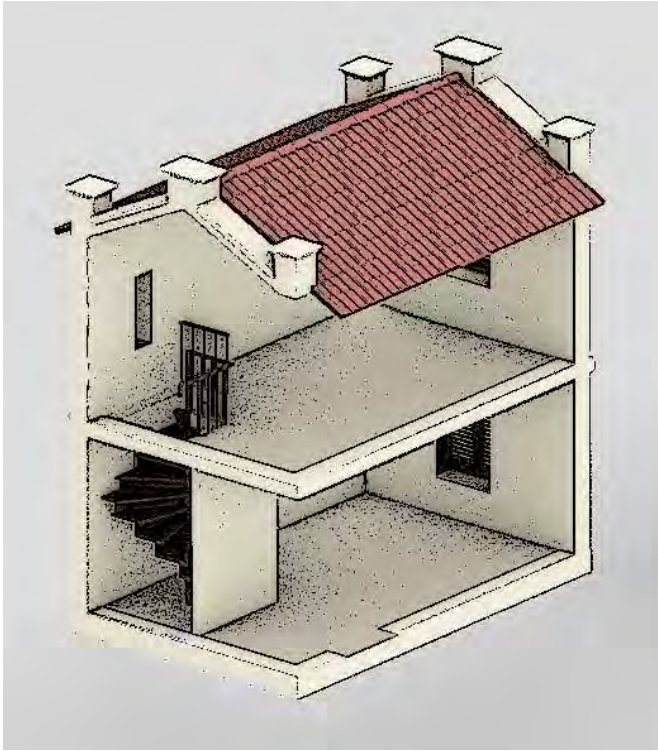


Figure 163 Axonometric cross-section of the caretaker's cottage



Figure 162 Cross-section of the caretaker's cottage

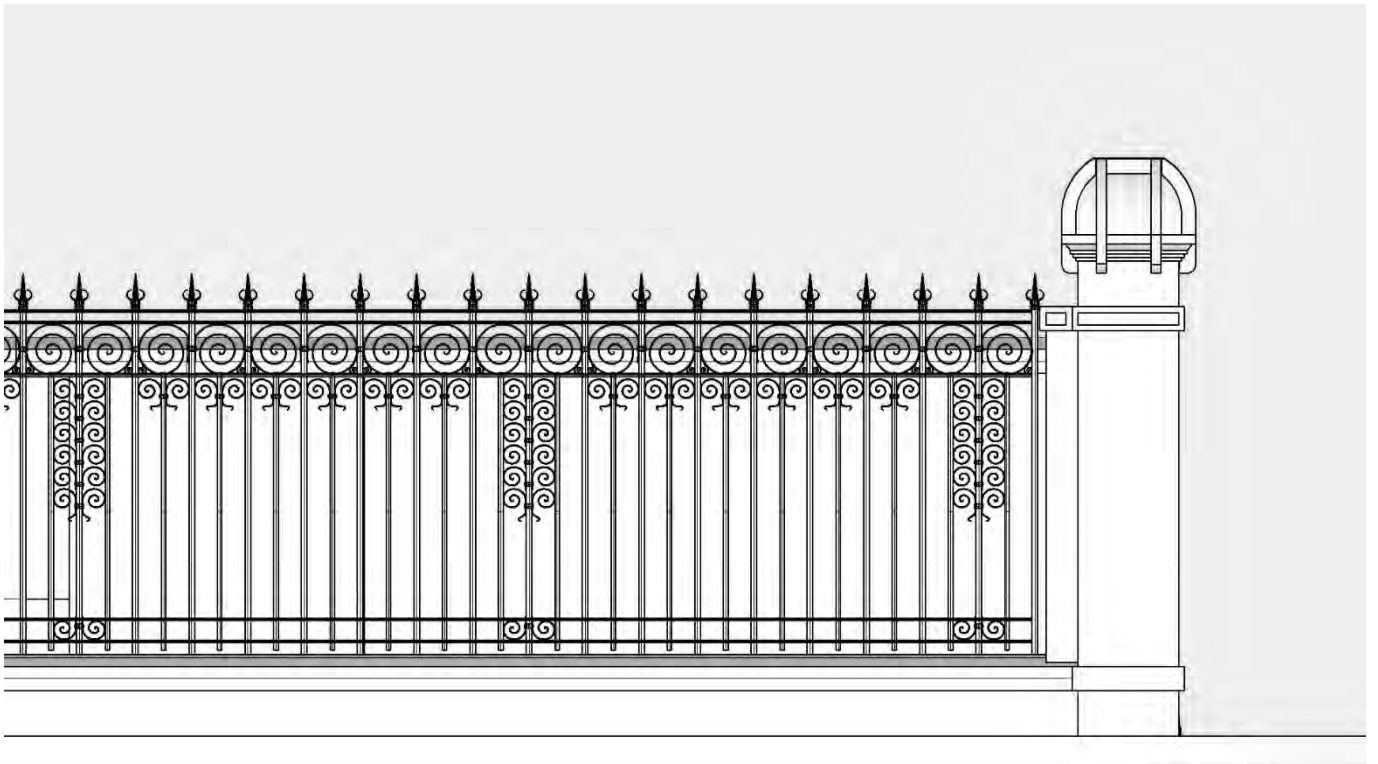


Figure 164 Elevation of the fence and a corner pillar of the Villa Deliella plot

First scenario: "The archaeological
excavation"



Figure 165 *View of the archaeological excavation of Villa Deliella*

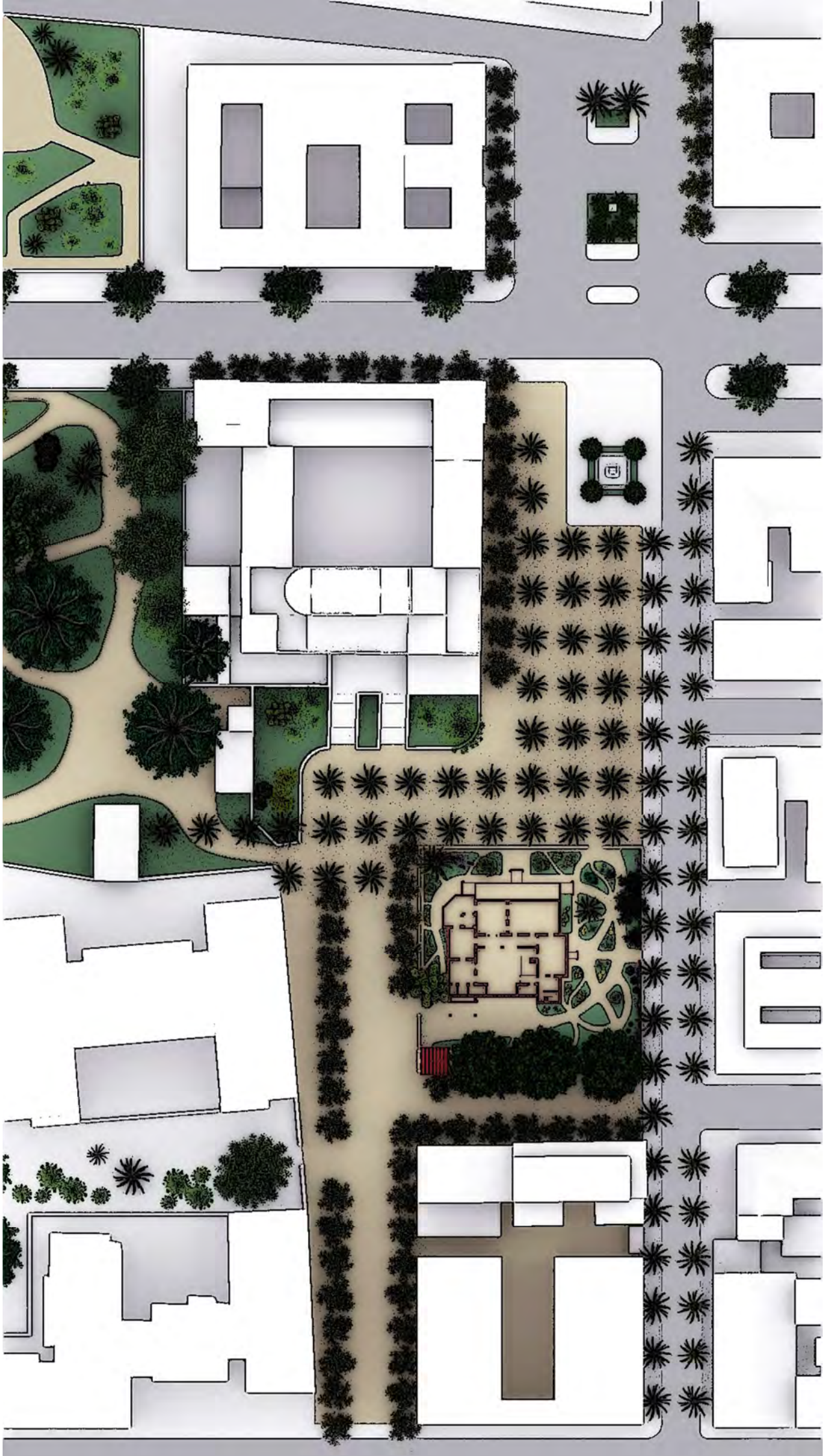


Figure 166 Project site plan of the first scenario



Project plan of the first scenario

Figure 167



Figure 168 Axonometry of the first scenario



Figure 169 Perspective view of the excavation and garden of Villa Deliella with the new palm grove in the background



Figure 170 *Perspective view of the first scenario from outside the Deliella plot with the caretaker's cottage in the foreground*

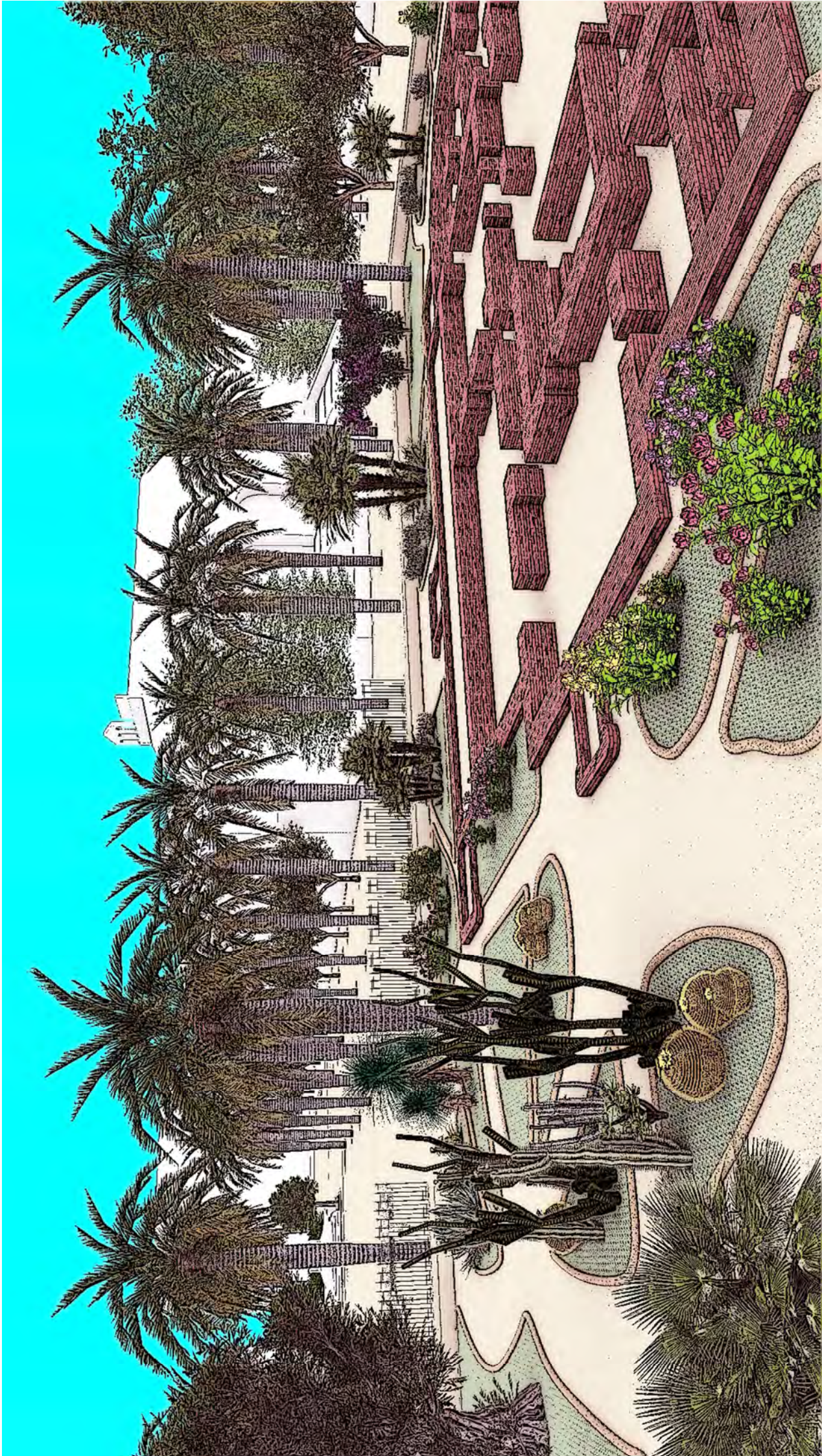


Figure 171 Perspective view of the first scenario from inside the Deliella lot with the Convento delle Croci in the background

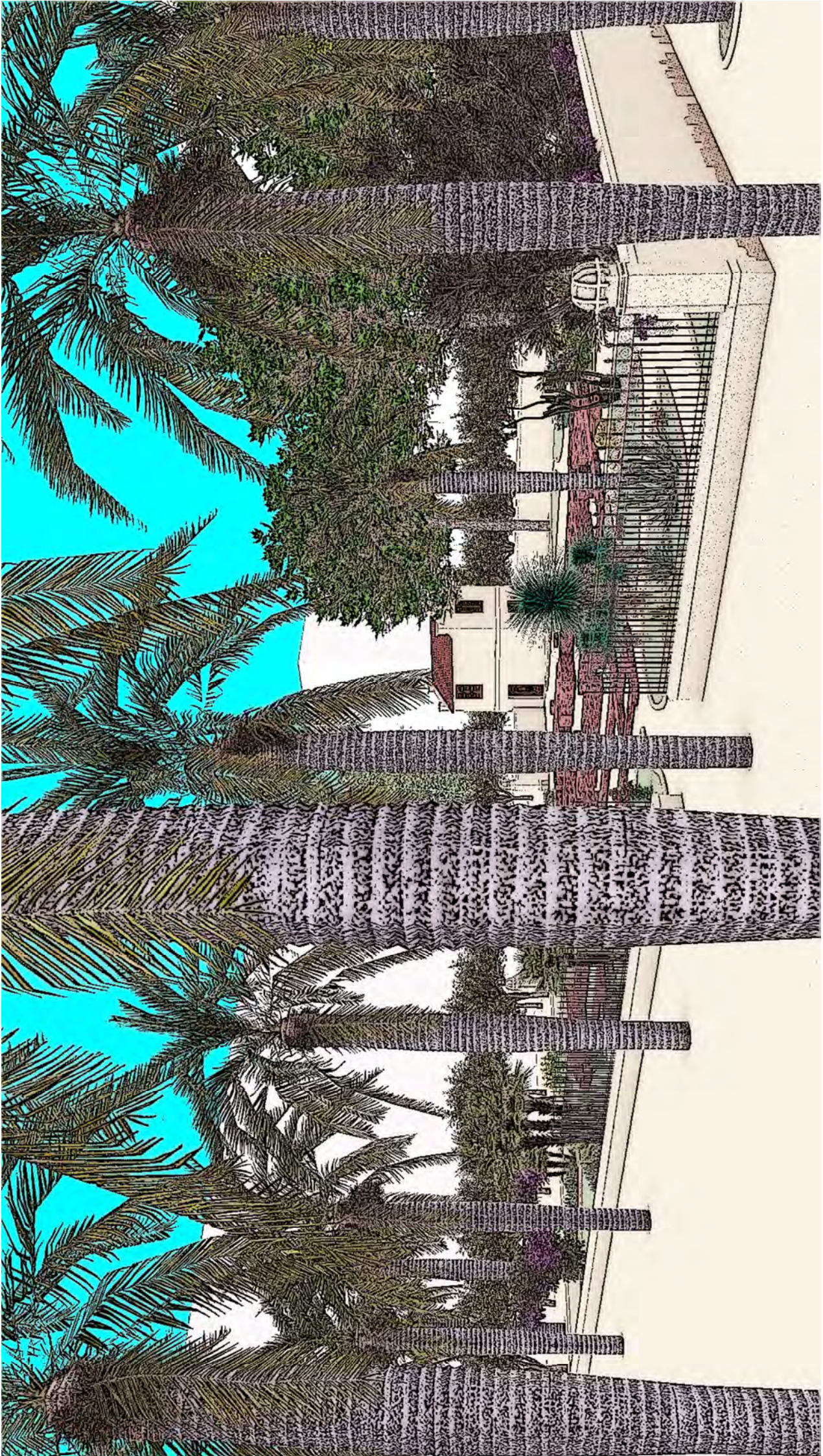


Figure 172 *Perspective view of the first scenario from the new palm grove with the caretaker's cottage in the background*

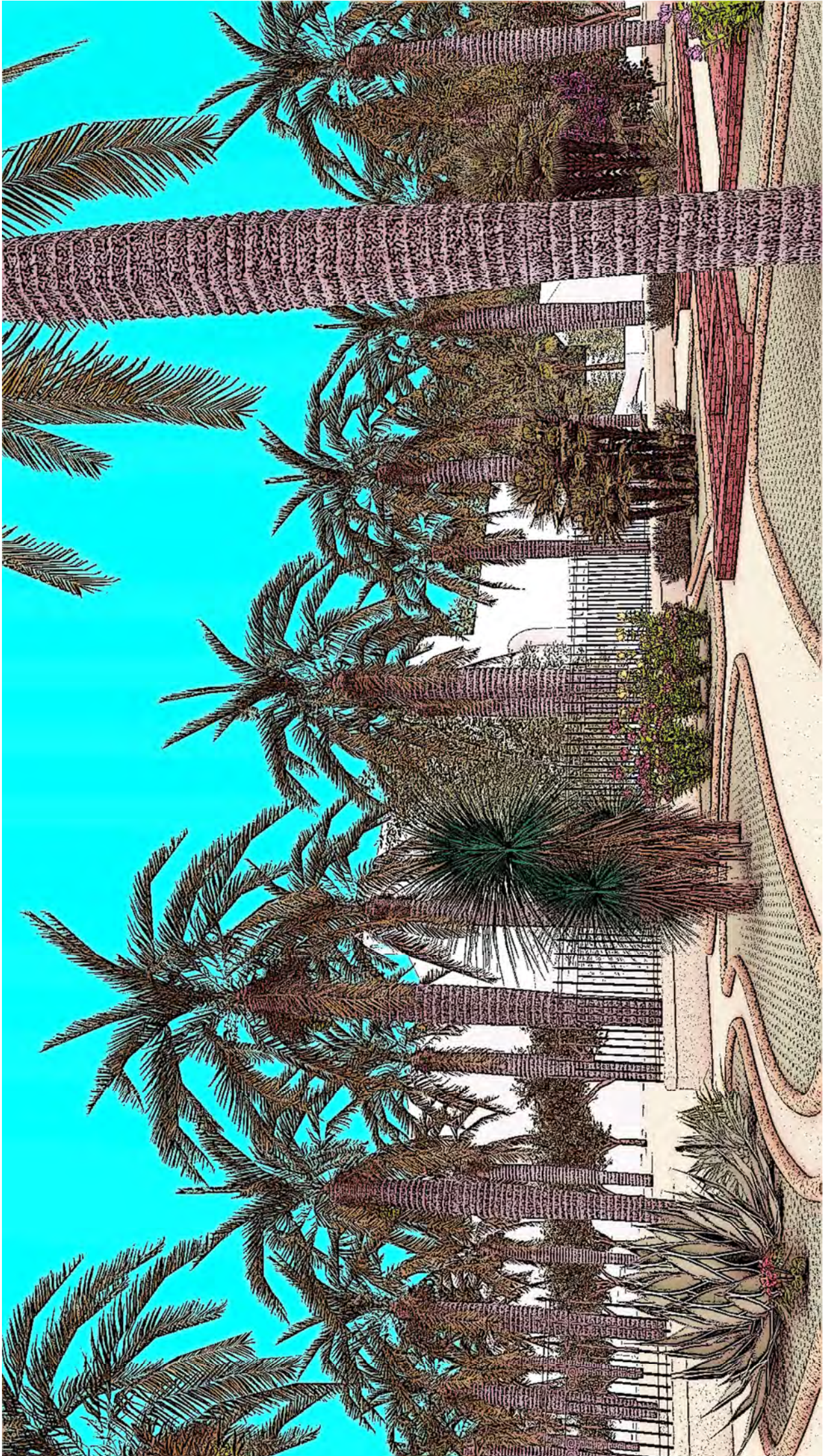


Figure 173

Perspective view of the first scenario from inside the Deliella lot with the Convento delle Croci in the background

Second scenario: "The caretaker's
cottage(s)"



Figure 174 *Perspective view of the small pavilions imitating the caretaker's cottage*

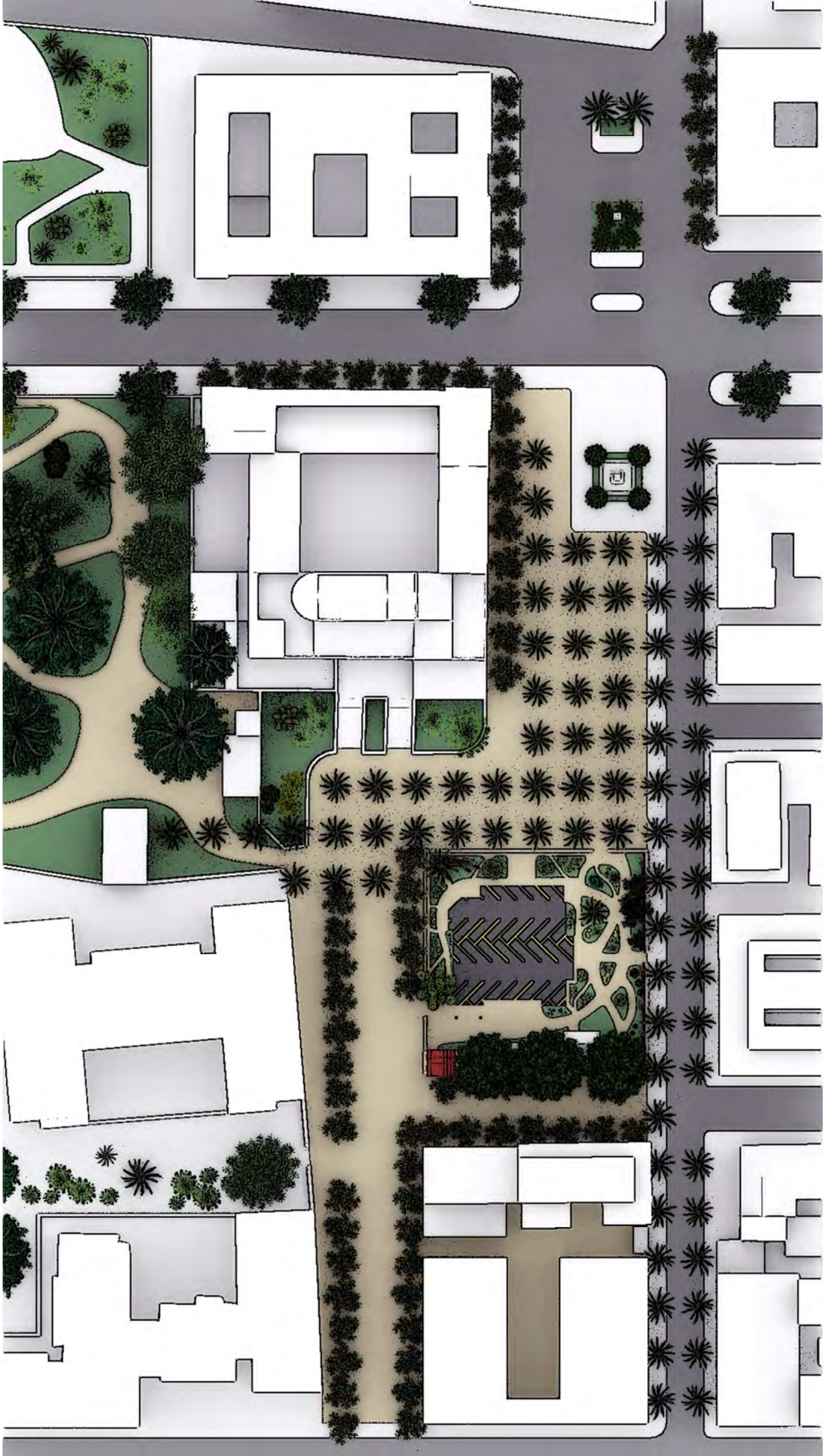


Figure 175 Project site plan of the second scenario



Figure 176 Project plan of the second scenario



Figure 177 Axonometry of the second scenario



Figure 178 *Perspective view of the second scenario from outside the Deliella plot with the caretaker's cottage in the foreground*



Figure 179 *Perspective view of the two small pavilions and the caretaker's house, with the remaining asphalt from the car wash.*



Figure 180 *Perspective view of the two small pavilions and the caretaker's cottage, from the garden*



Figure 181 Perspective view of the second scenario from the new palm grove

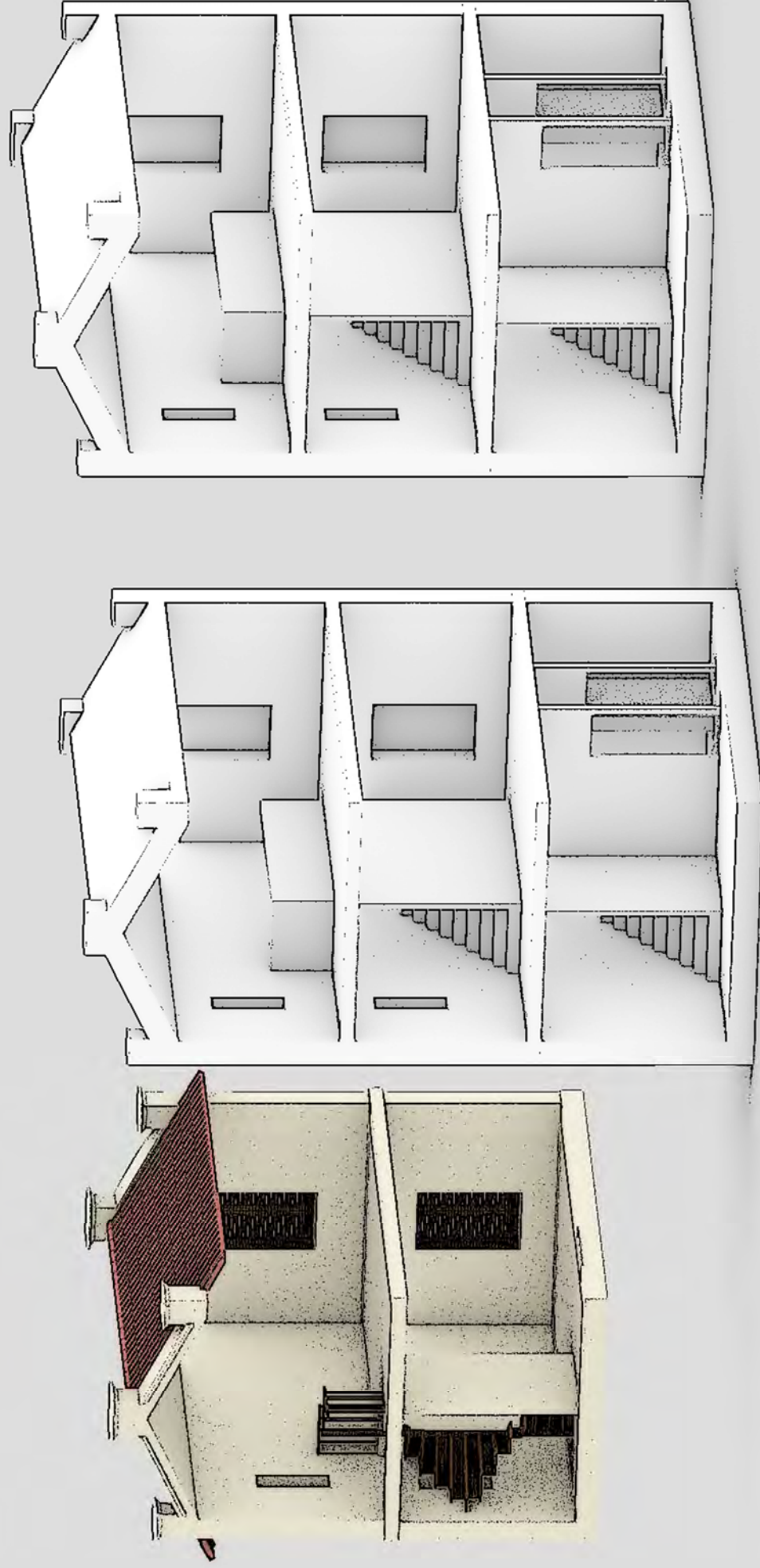


Figure 182 Axonometric cross-sections of the caretaker's house and the two small pavilions

Third scenario: "The new Villa
Deliella ruin"



Figure 183 Perspective view of the corten ruin structure

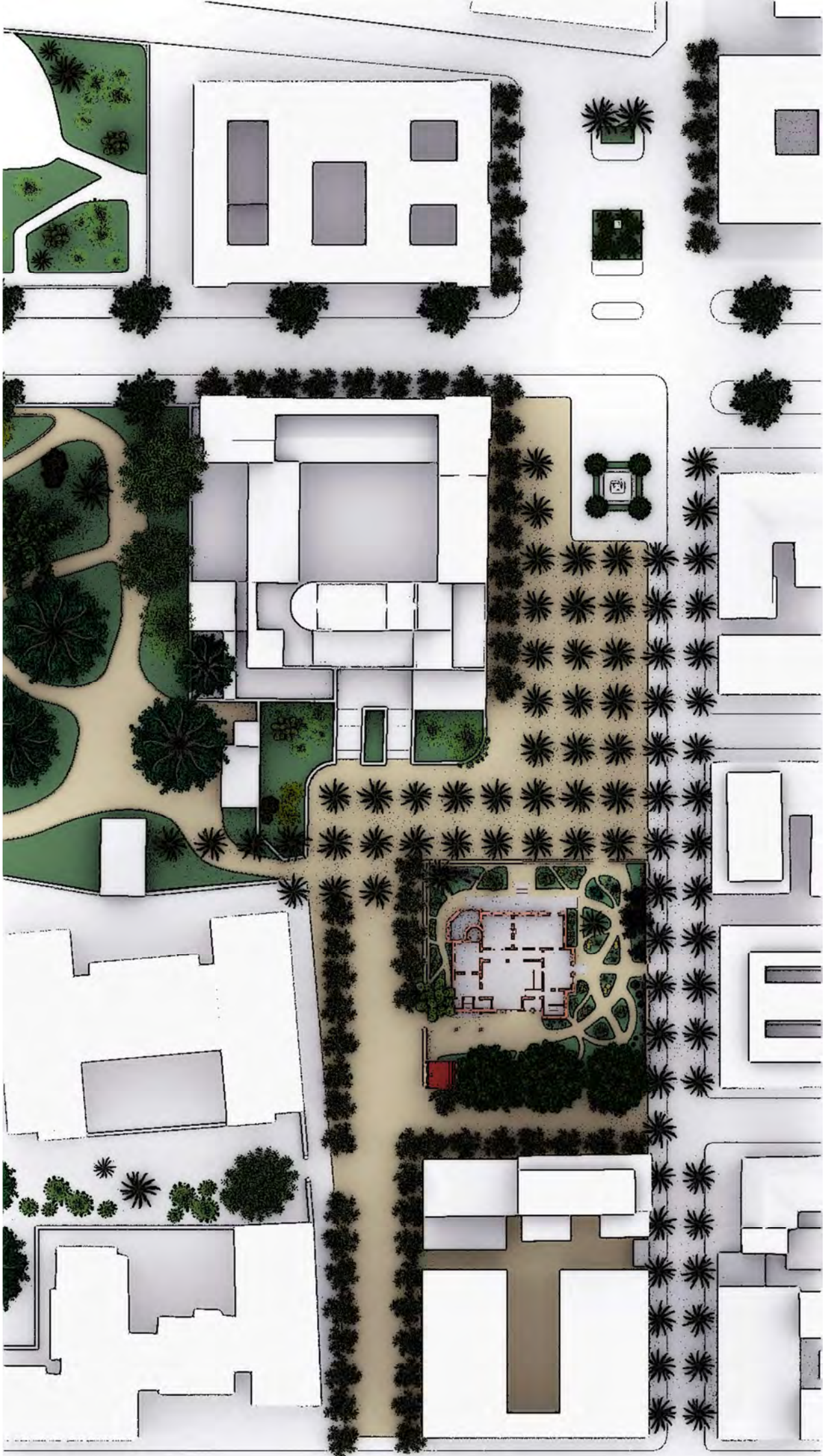


Figure 184 Project site plan of the third scenario

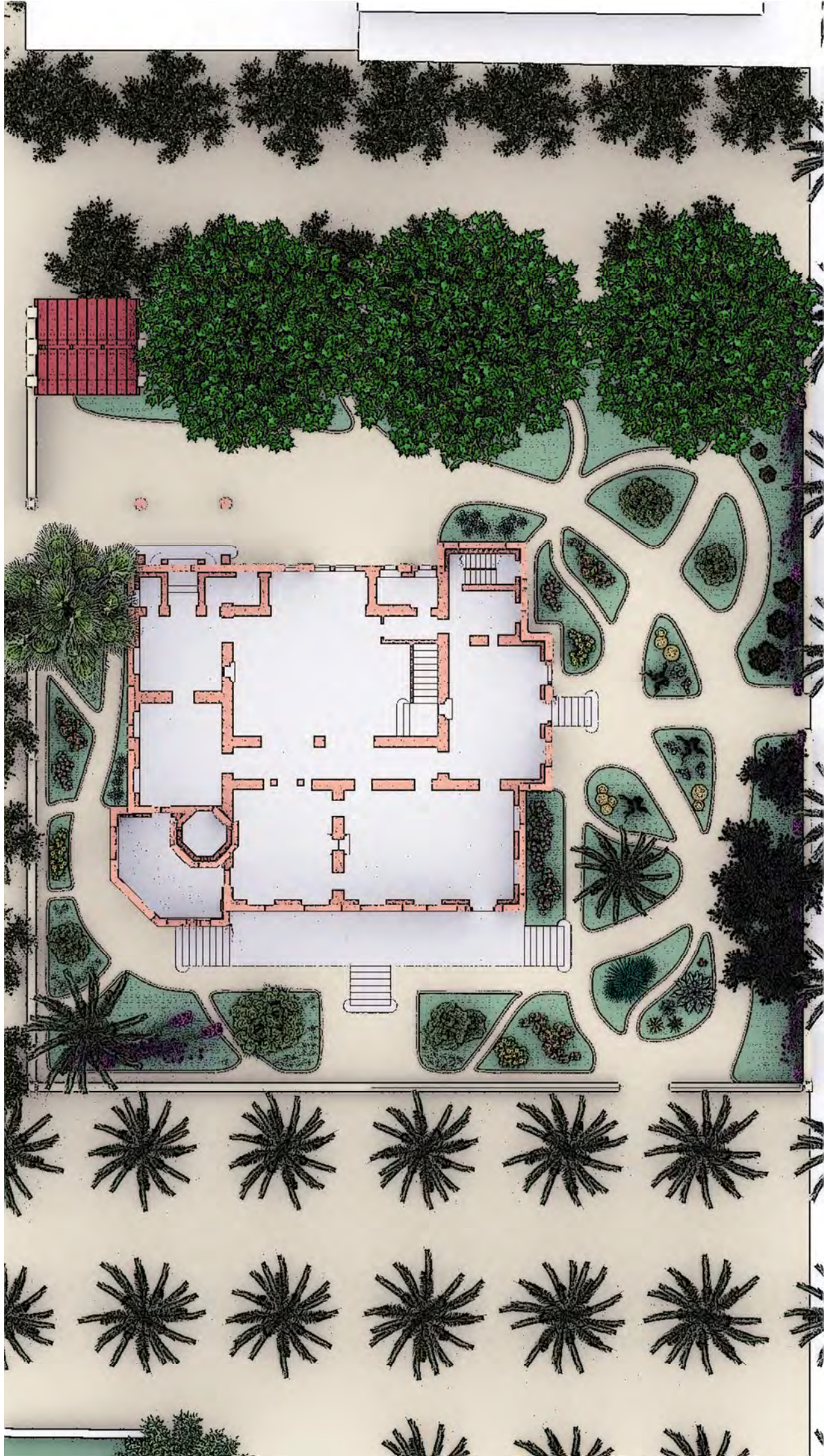


Figure 185 Project plan of the third scenario



Figure 186 Axonometric view of the third scenario



Figure 187 *Piazza Francesco Crispi with the statue in the foreground and the palm grove. The turret of the new 'ruin' in the background*



Figure 188 View of the new 'piazza' with the plan of Villa Deliella drawn on the floor



Figure 189 View of the new 'square' with the caretaker's house in the background



Figure 190 View of the north-west corner with the turret of the new 'ruin' of Villa Delietta



Figure 191

View of the third scenario from the new palm grove

Oneiric version of the third scenario: the “Deliella ghost”



Figure 192 View of the north-west corner with the turret of the new 'ghost' version of Villa Deliella



Figure 193 Axonometric view of the fourth scenario



Figure 194 *Perspective view of the fourth scenario*



Figure 195 View of the 'ghost' Deliella structure suspended from the gantry crane



Figure 196 View of the 'ghost' Deliella structure suspended from the gantry crane from outside the fence



Figure 197 View of the 'ghost' Deliella structure without any contact with the ground



Figure 198 View of the crane suspension cables of the Deliella 'ghost' structure



Figure 199 View of the 'ghost' Deliella structure without any contact with the ground



Figure 200 View of the gantry crane and the Deliella 'ghost' structure from outside the plot

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Acknowledgement

The subject of the lost Villa Deliella has intrigued and fascinated me ever since I was a young student at the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo in the early 1990s. Every time I passed through Piazza Francesco Crispi, I used to fantasise about the splendours of the decades when the villa still existed, but these thoughts were immediately interrupted when I observed the squalid car wash, surrounded by huge billboards with tasteless advertisements, that had invaded its lot. Over the years, I have imagined dozens of possible redevelopment projects for the area and new versions of the villa that could keep alive the now almost vanished memory of the lost original building. For me, this place has become the emblematic symbol of a Sicily mistreated by malfeasance that needs to protect its vast remaining cultural heritage, and for this reason I have always promised myself that I would take an in-depth look at the project to 'reconstruct' Ernesto Basile's building. I was able to realise this intention after many years at the HafenCity Universität Hamburg, which accepted my candidature for a PHD on this topic. The theoretical study and architectural project done far away from Palermo offered probably a privileged lens, especially from a country like Germany which, besides being the home of modern philosophical aesthetic thought, has for decades been a testing ground for numerous cases of reconstruction of historical buildings that were destroyed during the Second World War.

Although I am a fan of Umberto Eco, who in his essay *How to Write a Thesis*²⁸² argues that it is in "bad taste" to thank one's thesis advisor, in my particular case I feel I want to transgress this recommendation.

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²⁸² Eco Umberto, *How to Write a Thesis*, © 2015 Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Translated from the original Italian, *Come si fa una tesi di laurea*, © 1977/2012 Bompiani/RCS Libri S.p.A., Milano

