

Interior / Exterior: Public and Private Space in Historic Centres

Abstract: The interventions on architectural resources are placed in a dense network of interactions with the social and cultural structure of the places thus the condition of “sustainable use” of architectural resources arises as a collective heritage and as a potential benefit for the community. We have to face the settlement system as a dynamic system where needs change very quickly both in relation to the dimension of housing and to the way of using urban space and infrastructures, anyway in this process a need of memory remains for continuity with the past and we must know how to recognize and select the traces to be preserved. Our interest in this study is focused on the relationship between public and private spaces in order to control its evolution during time.

The urban space of the mediterranean city between memory and transformation

The physical space of the ancient city is made of stone, colours, lights, noises and shadows, it is continuously dressed and stripped of new uses and habits, some of them are transient, disappear and are lost, some others are permanent and leave the mark of time; therefore, the continuous evolution of places moves in the already consolidated urban structures in which the modifications must confront

the material reality of the ancient city that undergoes them, makes them their own or rejects them.

In this process, the real barriers to the transformation of places come from historical value, that value which is at the same time constraint and potential that conditions the possibility of adapting cultural heritage to the requirements for new functions.

The interventions on architectural resources are placed in a dense network of interactions with the social and cultural structure of the places and precisely because of this intricate framework of balance between different components, the condition of “sustainable use” of architectural resources arises in an important way both as a collective heritage and as a potential benefit for the community.

We must therefore ask ourselves about the meaning that we want to give to the theme of coherence with the context, considering that “context” is not only the surrounding physical reality but also the time and the people. The construction work can be placed in a precise temporal dimension while the settlement system is a dynamic system, in continuous evolution, where needs change very quickly both in relation to the dimension of housing and in relation to the way of using urban space and infrastructures. The changes affect the habits and ways of living and, consequently, impose new requirements on architecture, however, a need for memory remains, for continuity with the past also made of images, shapes, colours and sounds that are fading but they belong to the collective memory. Although the history of men has gone through moments of rupture with the past in which architecture has undergone a sacrificial role in the name of the need to destroy in order to affirm more strongly new ideologies, however, the need to preserve its roots has always been felt and therefore represents one of the needs to be highly considered in the regeneration projects of the city and buildings.

We cannot freeze the anachronistic image of the buildings but we can and we must know how to recognize and select the traces to be preserved because they still have a function or because they constitute an important link in the chain of continuity with the past. In a certain sense it is a path for progressive selections of the tracks that

can be lost or preserved in order to avoid abrupt and traumatic continuity solutions. This unstoppable growth process must be regulated by a critical evaluation that defines the tools useful for adapting the requests for growth and transformation with the physical reality of the building that “hosts” them.

We must also consider that urban regeneration interventions are increasingly aimed at minimizing the consumption of soils, which correspond to mainly exploiting and adapting the existing architectural heritage. The most coherent approach with this guarantee vision, compared to waste not only of soil but also of services and infrastructures, is oriented to the recovery of continuity and constitutive features of the traditional urban network, through recovery or replacement interventions aimed to “mend” and to optimize existing resources.

These premises, therefore, explain how with a view to optimizing resources and minimizing transformation, the adaptive reuse of the building heritage is aimed at triggering self-requalification processes thanks to the activation of renewed economic and social interests, starting from micro-interventions that do not distort the consolidated urban fabric but, at the same time, make it interesting and appropriate again for the change of urban life, thus enhancing the continuity with the past which constitutes the unique and non-reproducible resource on which to invest. Especially in historic centres, where the need for conservation conflicts with innovation, creativity is the only resource capable of promoting new cultural, social and economic layout for the historic city of the 21st millennium.

Public space and private space

In the processes of valorisation and development of historical centres, the relationship between public and private space often represents an element of conflict; in the historical city public spaces were, for the past, strictly distinct from private ones and closed within well-defined borders. This limit over time has weakened and more and more

we are witnessing contaminations that occur with the insertion of pieces of public functions in what were the exclusive homes of the aristocracy or clergy; finally, there are also reverse episodes of privatization of public spaces. Economic reasons, changing capital regimes and new functions that expel the old city model are at the origin of the changes affecting the historic centres. It does not refer only to the material consistency of the buildings, defined by physical construction elements, but also to those aspects that define the “atmosphere” of the buildings, courtyards and gardens, often they were separated by small barriers, sometimes were visible, anyway they strongly marked the limit of very close but exclusive and forbidden places, behind doors that opened to worlds regulated by other laws, other rules, other needs.

Perhaps the transition from the public to the private dimension is what most identifies the change from the historic city to the modern city; the passage between two parallel dimensions that slowly melt together in the modern era, engulfing the space of the city and letting the body of the building be decomposed and recomposed with a new soul.

In many historic buildings the street-entrance hall-court system is the place where the private space met the public space, but this relationship has changed and continues to change: the rooms of the internal courtyard on the ground floor host more and more new functions, generally shops or cultural or social centres thus determining the entry of people unrelated to the residents, thus substantially affecting the public / private relationship of the courtyards. This change, therefore, leads to the loss of exclusive use and the introduction of new activities that require different ways of using the space (parking spaces, accesses, communication, reception) and therefore new configurations and new technical elements (windows, signs, air conditioning systems, elements for overcoming architectural barriers).

If in the past these changes took place in extended times that cushioned the impact of the transformations, today we are witnessing an acceleration of this process which is difficult to cope with in the sense that in the space of a few months, if not days, rapid decisions must be faced that cause invasive and irreversible transformations. In the face of this

scenario, it is necessary to prepare flexible, easily comparable and updatable tools, so that the impact of new destinations or ways of use can be immediately coded in relation to the impact that would be produced on the building, highlighting what transformations are acceptable and not, without facing analyses and hypotheses that would require times incompatible with the needs of new functions. It is therefore necessary to focus research activities on the definition of tools for the identification of those sentinel factors to be monitored in order not to compromise the cultural continuity of the configuration of the courtyards in dialogue with the contemporary.

The value of perception

Through the form and the material that constitutes it, each technical element represents information of the time and place in which it was produced. These data are essential to formulate design hypotheses that are consistent with the environment; the knowledge project must therefore restore the complexity of the built heritage and identify those elements that connote it in a more significant way, both in material and constructive and formal terms. An expert eye can grasp the signs of the stratifications that have occurred over time, the growths and tampering through which the original model has been adapted to changing needs but, at the same time, can recognize the signs of permanence, those traits that, although sometimes disfigured, testify to history. It is therefore the ability to recognize the system of constraints in relation to the context, which regulates this process of transformation over time and moderates the “expectations of use” with regard to requests to protect the identity of the heritage. The protection of cultural heritage is traditionally exercised on physical components of buildings but even the perceptual component can be betrayed while respecting the constraints.

These reflections want to highlight the centrality of the perceptual – cultural aspects in the interventions on cultural heritage, aspects that escape a precise rule but which, as a whole, present repetitiveness

in the context and uniqueness in relation to the culture of the places. The identification of the semantic characters of the built heritage through specific indicators, makes sense to report conditions of compatibility or incompatibility of the transformations not referring to a structural apparatus, but to the communicative component with which the asset comes into contact with the observer that stores it in its experiential baggage.



Il. 1. City event in Palazzo Caracciolo, Naples



Il. 2. Concert in San Domenico Maggiore court, Naples