

Gibellina and the identity of community. Brandi, Burri and the conservation of the 'ruins'

Cinzia Accetta¹

¹Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Ph.D Conservazione dei Beni Architettonici, Palermo, Italia
cinzia.accetta@posta.istruzione.it

Topic: T2.2. Heritage education and social inclusion

Abstract

The construction of the new Gibellina is the starting point to reflect on the importance of memory. The construction of the city resulted from the destruction of the Belice earthquake of 1968. What remains of the old city destroyed by the earthquake has been transformed from a pour of concrete into a work of art: the "Cretto" by Alberto Burri. The new site arose from the design of Marcello Fabbri was the result of experimentation for the city of the future. The citizens of Gibellina had lost their place of origin, their "sacred pole". The contribution aims to highlight the links between past and future in the history of a place that pass through the relationships between the urban and social fabric in the transmission of the memories and identity of a people. After several decades, it is possible to evaluate the emotional effects of the choices made and reflect on the strategies that can be applied to heal the obvious gap between design and actual use of a place. The comparison between the settlement rituals of the nomadic tribe of the Omaha people based on the continuity of a symbolic object, the sacred pole, and the loss of the "genius loci" of Gibellina caused by the occultation of the macere, allows to identify an interesting and unprecedented parallelism in the re-foundation symbolic of the settlement principle which is at the basis of the rebirth of a community. As Torsello and Boscarino suggests, the memory of a people passes through its monuments. Etymologically it can be traced back to the Latin verb "monere" that is to remember, emphasizing the act of admonishing, warning, remembering the history imprinted in the voluntary action of building for the community.

Keywords: Gibellina, Urban Restoration, Historic town, Modern architecture

1 Introduction

The usual and popular image of Gibellina is the oleographic one of his architecture, fixed by the lens in the aseptic purity of style exercises (Dezzi, M., 2003, p. 87). Presented several times as an emblem of utopia (La Monica G., 1981, p.73), the city symbolizes the reality of a constantly changing society. The story of the foundation of Gibellina turns out to be rich in topics for reflection, regarding the evolution of the city and its

tendency to self-celebrate in the production of art and architecture (Dorfles G., 1997, p.30). The foundation of a new city is never a painless event and the birth of the new Gibellina is linked to the events of the Belice earthquake¹.

¹ On January 15, 1968, the earthquake destroyed the towns of Gibellina, Poggioreale, Salaparuta, Monteveggo and damaged the town of Santa Margherita.



Fig. 1. Vista aerea del Belice dopo il terremoto (1968)

2 The reconstruction of Gibellina

The reconstruction is characterized by the decision of the residents of Gibellina to make a clear break with the past, both from a social and cultural point of view. The new city born from the design of Marcello Fabbri is characterized by a strong utopian tension, linked to the experimentation of the city of the future. In the wake of the experimental experience of the Olivetti Park in Ivrea (AA.VV., 1998, p. 120). A fertile site for the architectural experimentation of the Modern Movement of the twentieth century, consisting of a unique complex of architectures, which arose from the industrial, cultural and social vision of Adriano Olivetti. Where, with the collaboration in 1950 of architects such as Figini, Polini, Gardella and Nizzoli, the futuristic vision of the industrial city was shaped. In Gibellina's experience, having oversized development flows has led to the creation of a city with extremely dilated spaces. There is a recurring sense of "unfinished" that persists to this day. Past, present and future confront each other in the search for a new identity without finding a solution. The few ruins of the old city of Gibellina have consequently become like monads of transformation in the sign of rebirth. Architects and artists interpret, in their own way, the 'sense' of tradition, transmigrated into an object-fetish, or reminded in the serial repetition of a theory of pillars. In this *en plein air* museum, architecture becomes art and art takes on the spatiality and materiality of architecture. One of the most important monumental works of land art of the twentieth century, the Grande Cretto by Burri, for example, has a precise symbolic and programmatic purpose.

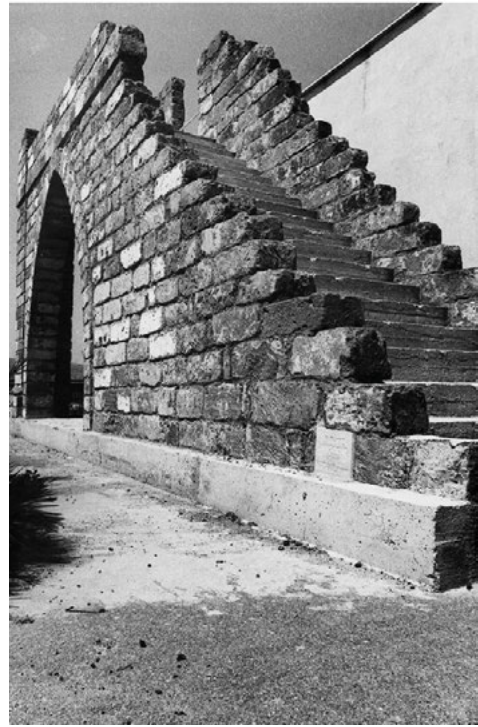


Fig. 2. Gibellina, Nanda Vigo, Tracce antropomorfe (1989)



Fig. 3. Gibellina, F. Purini e L. Thermes, Sistema delle piazze (1982-90)

The transformation of the site of the city destroyed by the earthquake, with all its dramatic heritage of ruins and rubble, into a work of art, testifies to the precise will of the administration to erase the past, hidden and forgotten under a pour of white concrete furrowed by ways - wounds.

3 Brandi and the poetics of the “Grande Cretto”

The "Grande Cretto" of Gibellina is characterized, in Cesare Brandi's reflections by a tension entirely directed to the evocative charge of matter (Brandi, 1979, p. 5).



Fig. 4. Gibellina, Burri, Grande Cretto, aerial view (1985-1989)

Even from an object that apparently does not represent anything or from a raw material, says Brandi, such as Schwitters' Collage or Burri's Sacks, it is essential that the "constitution of an object" occurs, which is not so much a choice of contents, as well as a selection of significant characters concerning the form of the expression. Although from the point of view of artistic creation, and of the appreciation reserved for the latter by the community, a general and widespread consent to Burri's work can be found, the same cannot be said for the repercussions of the artistic gesture on the preservation of the historical memory of the country. Characters and forms, in the Grande Cretto, irreparably overlap the ruins of the destroyed Gibellina, hiding them forever from sight and memory. In Gibellina the remains of the old destroyed city, hidden in their dramatic materiality, participate in a transmigration of meaning and form to become an artistic representation of themselves. The transformative action does not stop at use but abruptly and 'irreversibly' invests the material. In the frantic pursuit of the new, the memory of the past becomes an embarrassing baggage, the more un-

comfortable the past to remember, the more it will be at the center of incandescent negotiations, the more likely it is to give rise to ambivalent representations (Tota, 2002, p. 90).



Fig. 5. Alberto Burri, Cretto G 3 (1975)

4 Art, wreck and ruins

But what does Gibellina mean by the term ruin and its analogue, wreck? Generally the first refers to *rudus*, the second to *ruina*, a derivation of *ruere*, in which we can recognize the reference to a consciously destructive action on the part of man. The ruin, which can be understood as the residue of a testimony that refers to another entity other than itself, that is, to a whole, is seen as a fragment of a human work. The difference between ruin and waste consists in the fact that if the first represents a real identity statute, the second represents indeterminacy and stasis, tells remains without a trace of a possible new meaning without history, or with a history of little importance (Marini, 2010, p. 58). Yet even the gap can take on the dignity of an artifact, capable not so much of recounting past or presenting futures, but of asking for critical reflections on the methods of construction of the territories of the present. Ruin is such only in the thought of those who, observing it, are able to exercise memory and planning on it: other-

wise it is rubble, waste, scraps, mute matter without ethical or semantic potential, elements looked at mostly with a certain apprehension, such as uncomfortable objects, embarrassing witnesses of painful events (Tortora G, 2006, p.10). In this referring to human work the ruins of Gibellina, which have become ruins, other than themselves, transmuted by the artistic sign, are loaded with meanings extraneous to them, but irremediably lose the strength of memory.



Fig. 5. Gibellina, Burri, Grande Cretto, landscape (2015)

If Cretto subtracts the ruins from the action of time by passing them on to the future, on closer inspection the work of Burri makes this assignment a subjective rather than an objective fact. The remains of the destroyed city were not swallowed up by the forces of nature because an artistic gesture wanted to direct the shaping of the material. The expressive power of Cretto ignores the real presence in the concrete volumes of the real houses of the Gibellinesi, of those places of memory that are now buried. After all, Burri himself has repeatedly highlighted the absolute lack of symbolic relationships between the work and the material used, seen as a mere tool of the creative gesture. Several times Burri (Caroli, 1979, p. 107) testifies to the secondary nature of the material medium².

² Serafini G., 1999, p. 56. Burri never supported content or symbolic interpretations of his works: «non ho mai avuto un rapporto ossessivo, come qualcuno ha detto, per i materiali su cui ho lavorato attraverso gli anni. Quello che ho cercato di tirar fuori è solo la loro 'proprietà'. Il ferro, per esempio, mi suggeriva il senso della durezza,

Every understanding is a happening, a historical event in its turn (Gadamer, 2000, p. 55).



Fig. 6. Gibellina, Burri, Grande Cretto, internal road (2015)

The symbolic nature of the Great Cretto, its elevation to the shroud of the telluric event, constitutes the great contradiction of the choice of a zeroing with the past and at the same time of the scenic representation of the time that has elapsed. The "story of time" becomes the object of interpretations, often discordant and conflicting, leading us to reflect on a certain starting point: the 'perception' of time is not an objective fact. It is influenced by the specific way of understanding and defining time itself (Fancelli, 2003, pp. 125-154). Studies of psychology and sociology have observed how in dreams, in religion and in politics there are sensible modifications of the continuity and irreversibility of time. If Freud, for example, examines in the Interpretation of Dreams the way in which the sequence of experiences in the course of our conscious life is rearranged, to adapt to the needs of the dreaming mind, in the sacred representation of time it is implicitly discontinuous, thanks to exceptional events, such as the appearance of the divinity, which cause an interruption in the continuity of the succession of instants.

del peso, del tagliante. Non mi interessava 'rappresentare' il ferro. Che quel materiale fosse ferro, lo si vedeva subito. Volevo invece spiegare quello di cui il ferro è capace».

The time of the "pure conservative" is linear and irreversible, not cyclical and reversible as the "restorer" would like to consider it (Dezzi Badeschi, 2003, p. 104).

So what is time? San Agostino asked himself, over fifteen centuries ago. It appears as an entity that gives meaning to human experience as it is an extension of the inner life of man through memory, in the inner continuity of consciousness that preserves the past within itself and extends towards the future. The ideological revolution carried out by novelists, psychiatrists and sociologists alters the traditional distinction between a personal time, which flows obediently alongside the progressive path of public time. Public time is built with the activity of producing new representations. Each era, in fact, has a characteristic sense of the past (Kern, 1995, p. 163). The interest in the modern era for the relationship between memory and architecture has not turned so much to intentional monuments, but to the role played by memory in the perception of architectural works in their entirety, whether they are intentional or not (Minkowski, 1971, pp. 152-174).

The description of an ancient church by Marcel Proust and Simmel's essay on Ruin reveal the sensitivity of the heart of the culture of the time for the ability of architecture to impress the memory of the past on the built material. What Proust sees in a church Simmel finds in a ruin that revitalizes and completes the past in the present (Proust, 1969, p. 67). In the story "La strada di Swann", the church of Combray celebrates the drama of history: the solidity of its walls guarded "the rough and rough ninth century", the sepulchral stones that time "had made sweet", the stained glass windows covered "with dust of the ages". The city of Gibellina does not escape the evocative power of time and remembrance. The inhabitants of Gibellina have lost their "sacred pole" and this sense of alienation permeates the fabric of the city and culminates in the negation of the memory of the Great Cret- to which from the point of view of conservation represents the negation of memory and the im-

possibility of transmitting to the future the memory of their roots. In the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, it has been placed the "Real Omaha". This sacred pole (Piccaluga, 1974, pp. 113-137) is made of cottonwood and bears marks of great age. Its presence affected Omaha's life since they moved, several hundred years ago, from a homeland east of the Mississippi to their present location on the Missouri River.

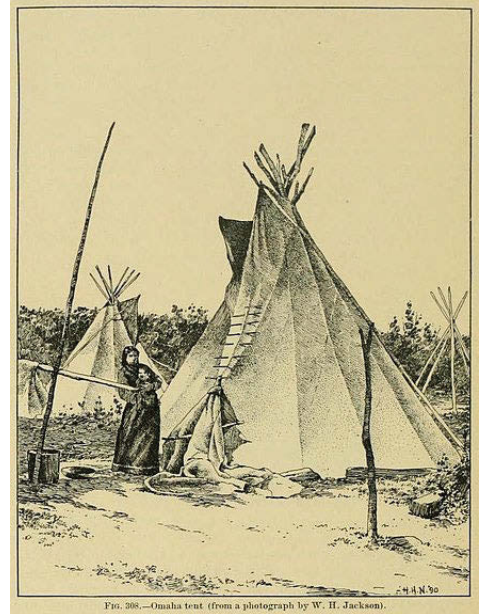


Fig. 7. Omaha tent, W.H. Jackson

Omahas' sacred pole testifies how a society, although primitive, is an organization addressed by laws, conformable to which we recognize as instrumental in the unfolding of the human mind. Unfortunately it is worth little to regret nowadays the vestiges of a city that no longer exists. It is worth asking ourselves, in the light of Brand's reflections, on the interpretation of this voluntary action. And on the relationship between art and ruin, artifice and nature, between transformation and conservation. When and why do the reasons for art exceed the documentary value of the text? And again, when the ruin loses its memory value to become inanimate matter to be molded in the name of a higher end? The treatment of the ruins is a topic

extensively investigated by Cesare Brandi. In the Theory of Restoration he places the ruin at the center of the same attention, both from the point of view of the aesthetic instance and that of the historical instance. This involves a complex work of in-depth study and the contribution of different disciplines such as aesthetics and contemporary philosophy, from Crocian reflections to existentialism, from phenomenology to structuralism, passing through the psychology of Gestalt (Gizzi, 2006, pp. 78-90). Brandi derives equally central positions, which place the ruin under the patronage of the conservation action of the restoration. Both the ruin and the ruin refer to another state of matter, different from the current one, that is, to a whole, to the finite, that is to the complete work. This initial contrast between the fragment and the whole, between the finite state of finished matter and its surviving fragment, the result of the slow wear of time or the destructive action of man or calamities, is overcome in Brand's reflection in the observation of how the work survives in the fragment, preserving its artistic potential, and its documentary value. In his recalling the whole, in the ruin the miracle of the transmigration of meaning, of the recognition and attribution of meanings that ignore the completeness of the text takes place. If in the *Theory of Restoration* this concept is widely debated and clearly supported by Brandi, the same cannot be said for the reading of *Celsus* or *Poetry*, which precedes the Theory by a few years, where some pre-eminence of the whole is mentioned. to the detriment of the fragmentation of the work. On the one hand, the fragment, for Brandi, fully retains the expressive potential of the whole, on the other it is seen as something that has lost its connotations, a "bare bones" that remains, so to speak, "hanging". Again in the General Theory of Criticism, in reference to the work's enough, Brandi will argue the loss of the work's expressive capacity due to its being incomplete, that is, as a result of damage to both the "form" and the "structure". With regard to Burri's work, and also with reference to the creative intent imple-

mented in Gibellina, the aesthetic evaluation of the fact obviously prevails. The interpretation of the work of art is superior to the detriment of the testimony value of those fragments which, judged as lacking both "form" and "structure", have become the starting point for a new creative process, material to be transformed into the name of a more contralto purpose. And it is no coincidence that Burri is entrusted with the task of carrying out this transmigration of meaning. Giulio Carlo Argan (Serafini, 1991, pp. 28-29), in the 1960 Venice Biennale catalog, recognizes Burri the merit of having touched the last of the expressive possibilities of the subject. Brandi recognizes the ability of Burri's creations to resolve the antinomy of matter / form by canceling it (Brandi, 1963, p. 24). Matter assumes a fundamental role, undermining the function of form or even color from time to time. These are materials that do not imitate other materials, but are transformed to become something else. There is no hidden symbolism: their being is part of the symbolic act of constituting themselves as a new significant object. In Burri's work, what takes place is a transformation: by sewing up bags, oxidizing iron, burning plastic, as well as showing the cracking of cracks, Burri has attempted to grasp the essence of the transformation, showing its inexhaustible otherness with respect to the original matter. Art is not simply an object to be admired; the work strikes and transforms, enabling us to overcome the present and experience diversity, manifesting a new time. The kaolin of the Cretti treated with vinyl resins which during drying produces a craquelure effect, largely unpredictable, determining the spatial and temporal structuring of the entire surface, produces what Brandi identifies as a principle of rhythm (Brandi, 1979, pp. 359-361). This arbitrariness of the creation of the work, in Brand's reflections, even involves the user, in the moment of recognition and perception of the work. In Gibellina the viewer is called to relive the drama of the telluric event through the artist's creative gesture. The interpretative moment coincides with the vision and

physical use of the work, which invites to be walked and crossed. In Gibellina's "Grande Cretto" contemporary art declares the deep split with the permanence of memory; and again, the role of remembrance is entrusted to the "symbolic sign" rather than to matter, detached from the consistency of the lost stones, just as lost is the hope of continuity with the past. Not the memory but the transformation, not the commemoration but the overcoming of the archaic image through the reinterpretation in an abstract key (Argan, 1964, p. 261).

The artistic sign represents the flow of things, the reinterpretation of history in constant change. A metamorphosis that the work is already facing due to the action of time that corrupts the whiteness of the concrete pour and adds new cracks to the symbolic cracks desired by the artist. It is a wound that is everywhere, that trembles everywhere. A shock, a torment, a precipitate of infinite and ungovernable cracks. As Recalcati writes in *Alberto Burri and Gibellina's Grande Cretto*, in the woods the wound is generated by the fire and the carbonization of the material but, above all, by the rest that survives the burn. In the Combustions, the crumbling of matter, the manifestation of its very human friability, of its most radical vulnerability, is returned with great poetic and formal balance. This is also what happens with plastics where, once again, it is always the use of fire that inflicts on a weak and inconsistent material, the burn of life and death (Recalcati, 2018, p. 87).

In Gibellina the symbolic vision of a past deprived of its dramatic truth has become a curtain, created by the hand of man to rework the mourning of loss. If the sublime of this work is in its appearance as a magical and archaic place, its contradiction lies precisely in its irremediably concealing the past. There are rooms, places, streets, squares, cities, houses, where you are, others where you are not, but also where you get lost, you are only in insoluble discomfort.

There are cities (Brusatin, 2000, p. 46) that orient, others that disorient, whether they are traveled by slow or fast means, the foot or the mind.

5 Conclusions

After several decades, it is possible to evaluate the emotional effects of the choices made and reflect on the strategies that can be applied to heal the obvious gap between design and actual use of a place. The theory of architectural restoration does not only address the conservation of materials but also the perpetuation of memory and identity. There is a silent restoration made up of small cultural and political gestures, of care and attention planned for the rites of passage. In this transmigration of real and symbolic values, memory is a precious exchange currency between past and future. The comparison between the settlement rituals of the nomadic tribe of the Omaha people based on the continuity of a symbolic object, the sacred pole, and the loss of the genius loci of Gibellina caused by the occultation of the macere, allows to identify an interesting and unprecedented parallelism in the re-foundation of the settlement principle which is at the basis of the rebirth of a community. As Torsello (Torsello, 2005, pp. 134-157) suggests, the memory of a people passes through its monuments. Etymologically it can be traced back to the Latin verb *monere* that is to remember, emphasizing the act of admonishing, warning, remembering the history imprinted in the voluntary action of building for the community. In conclusion, the only way to heal the rift between old and new in Gibellina is that of re-appropriating the monuments, the objects that admonish and deliver the very strong message of having been to the new generations. The monuments of the old Gibellina have merged into a large, gigantic work of art, also visible from space, which restores the emotional charge of a community to the future. The genius loci of the new Gibellina must be the Great Cretto which from a burial place must become the fulcrum for the community, must be placed at

the center of emotional and cultural negotiations. Only in this way will the new inhabitants be able to recognize the artistic gesture and understand its metaphysical meaning. Today the work appears too disconnected from the new center, without the right signage, cut off from the paths and from city events. The new squares of Purini and Thermes cannot replace the memory of the old city, they have the strength to generate new relationships. It is precisely the Cretto who must return to the city and if he cannot do it physically, he must do it socially and culturally in the political and educational actions of the community. It is no coincidence that all the events organized on the Cretto site involved crowds of citizens and visitors, arousing strong emotions and great clamor.



Fig. 8. Giancarlo Neri, *Winning is due to fate*, 2010

Suffice it to recall the light installation by artist Giancarlo Neri "Winning is due to fate" in 2010, which through the luminous helmets worn by the spectators active protagonists of the event brought life and sacredness back to that place for one night. To warm the hearts of the inhabitants you need the warmth of the past guarded by the symbolic material shaped by Burri. A matter that must return prolifically in the hands of the administration and citizens.

References

- AA.VV. (1998). *Architetture olivettiane a Ivrea*. Gangemi.
- Argan G. C. (1964). *Salvezza e caduta dell'arte moderna*, Il Saggiatore.
- Brandi C. (1963). *Burri*. Editalia.
- Brandi C. (1979). *Scritti sull'arte contemporanea* II. Einaudi.
- Brusatin M. (2000). *Arte dell'oblio*. Einaudi.
- Caroli F. (1979). *Burri: la forma e l'informe*, Mazzotta.
- Dezzi Bardeschi M. (2003). Conservare, non restaurare, *Restauro*(164), pp. 69-108.
- Dorfles G. (1997). *Fatti e fattoidi*. Neri Pozza.
- Fancelli P. (2003). Tempo, natura, rudero, in B. Billeci, S. Gizzi, D. Scudino (Eds.), *Il rudere tra conservazione e reintegrazione*, Gangemi, pp.125-154.
- Gadamer H. G. (2000). *Verità e metodo*. Bompiani.
- Gizzi S. (2006). Il rudere tra conservazione e reintegrazione da Alois Riegl a Cesare Brandi, in M. Andaloro (Ed.), *La teoria del restauro nel Novecento da Riegl a Brandi*(pp.78-90). Nardini.
- Kern S. (1995). *Il tempo e lo spazio: la percezione del mondo tra Otto e Novecento*. Il Mulino.
- La Monica G. (1981). *Gibellina ideologia e utopia*. Ila Palma.
- Marini S. (2010). *Nuove terre. Architetture e paesaggi dello scarto*. Quodlibet.
- Minkowski E. (1971). *Il tempo vissuto: fenomenologia e psicopatologia*. Einaudi.
- Proust M. (1969). *La strada di Swann*. Einaudi.
- Piccaluga G. (1974). *Terminus: i segni di confine nella religione romana*, Edizioni dell'Ateneo.
- Recalcati M. (2018). *Alberto burri e il grande cretto di Gibellina*. Magonza.
- Serafini G. (1991). Burri. *Art & Dossier*, N 62, pp. 28-29.
- Tortora G. (2006). *Semantica delle rovine*. Manifestolibri.
- Torsello B. P. (2005). Spazio, tempo, restauro, in M. Dalla Costa, G. Carbonara (Eds.). *Memoria e Restauro dell'architettura. Saggi in onore di Salvatore Boscarino*, FrancoAngeli, pp. 134-157.
- Tota A. L. (2002). *Sociologie dell'arte: dal museo tradizionale all'arte multimediale*. Carocci.