

The "ball" church of Quaroni in Gibellina: a circular restoration

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Abstract: 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 earthquake. The reconstruction is characterized by the decision to make a clear break with the past, both from a social and cultural point of view. The new city, born from the project of Marcello Fabbri, is characterized by a strong utopian tension, linked to the experimentation of the city of the future. The usual and popular image of Gibellina is in fact the oleographic one of its timeless architectures. But time cannot stop and it continues inexorably to settle on surfaces to remind us of the inexorable cycle of life. The contribution aims to show the relationships between use, maintenance and conservation of the work. Specifically, the construction difficulties caused by Ludovico Quaroni's audacious project contributed to creating distrust in the citizens. The church is experienced more as a monument than as a fulcrum of the religious community. The preservation of the "ball" church therefore requires in the first-place full recognition by the community. If this did not happen, the risk of demolition would be ever greater. The conservation of a building is inextricably linked to the reasons for its use and constant maintenance. Secondly, the research highlights the need for constant maintenance of the structures, reporting the technical-diagnostic strategies necessary to ensure maximum durability of reinforced concrete structures. Last but not least, there is the legislative problem of protection.

Keywords: Gibellina Nuova, Ludovico Quaroni, modern architecture, conservation.

1. Introduction

The parish church of Gibellina belongs to that row of monumental buildings wanted by the mayor Corrao to give fame and notoriety to the new Gibellina, as if the quality architecture and contemporary art could compensate the inhabitants of the mourning suffered. The 1968 earthquake destroyed the old Gibellina and the new city was animated by the desire to detach itself from the past and redeem itself by embracing modernity. In Sicily in the 1970s, a frenetic and utopian construction site began, aimed at building new links with the future. From the past, any foundational reference is refused, starting with the choice not to place the church in the main square of the town but on a hill in an isolated and dominant position over the built-up area. These choices were made from above and not discussed with the inhabitants who still today complain of a sense of alienation and strangeness to places. The city planned by Marcello Fabbri appears more an exercise in style than a reflection on the construction of a place destined to welcome earthquake victims. Although the project should be contextualized with the reflections of that period on the experimentation of the city of the future and on growth flows linked to the forecast of a large conurbation that never took place, leaving the city of Gibellina Nuova with oversized streets and buildings. Ludovico Quaroni aims to create a new church that could express a modern and monumental religiosity. Having no other conditioning than the ambition to leave his mark, he creates an imposing but fragile building, structurally and emotionally.

Obsessed with the external form, he neglects the interior of the hall and the concrete religiosity of the place. There are many formal references, sought after among the most famous domes in the history of architecture but few links with the Sicilian territory and with local testimonies. Note that it was necessary to place the old bell and the wooden crucifix present in the old collapsed church to make the faithful feel more at ease. These considerations are functional to the historical-social framework of the building which is essential to the correct work of knowledge aimed at the restoration. Gibellina is no longer the utopian city designed by ISES in 1970, therefore restoring the Quaroni church also means trying to bridge the gap created between the building and the faithful. It is not only a technical problem but also an ideological one. Is it possible to integrate this monument into the daily life of the community? Or is the "ball" church destined to remain a monument for tourists? The contribution analyzes the design and construction story of the church up to the interventions of 2010 which led to the consecration and affixing of the protection bond from the DARC. Today, more than ever, the need for the conservation of materials, structures and the mending with the urban and social fabric is imposed. Let's start by analyzing the critical points. Is the shape of a city or a building sufficient to create symbolic, social, emotional connections? The absence of links with the history of the area and the local construction tradition can be seen as the main cause of alienation of the building. The church of Quaroni is so projected to the divine that it has neglected the people.

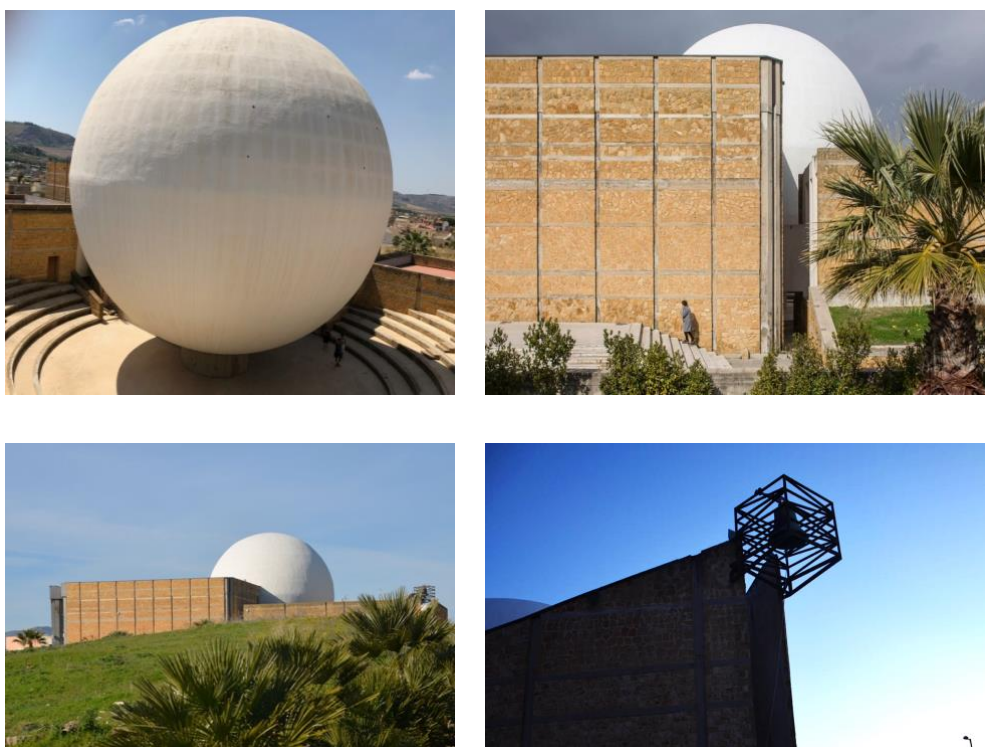


Figure 1. The church and the context

2. To know in order to preserve. From the project to the consecration of 2010

In 1970 Ludovico Quaroni and Luisa Anversa were commissioned to design the parish church of Gibellina on the top of a hill, at the highest point of the town. Even if the preliminary project dates back to 1972, it is necessary to wait until 1981 to have the resolution of the city council and the assignment of the executive project. The Diocesan

Commission of Sacred Art does not participate in the project process, left completely in the hands of the mayor Corrao. The geometry of the church of Gibellina represents a novelty, not only in the typological scheme of the building and in its relationship with the place, but also in the language of the architectural forms. The various functions are collected and distributed within a parallelepiped with a square base of about 50 meters per side. The geometric and symbolic centre of the monument is the white sphere of reinforced concrete, which hangs over the faithful. The construction is divided into two distinct phases. The first (1985-1987) concerns the central body of the hall, the apse, the parish residence and the amphitheatre. The second refers to the completion of the interior of the hall, the external fittings and the churchyard. In the mid-1980s Quaroni fell ill and died in 1987 at the age of seventy-six. The work group continues without the guidance of the teacher. In the executive phase, important changes were made to the initial plant. The parish complex appears rotated 45 °, cancelling the axis of Elimi street as a monumental entrance route to the parish complex. The structure is also modified as well as the coating of the sphere. A composition of prefabricated concrete elements to be assembled on site is preferred to the geodesic structure of the sphere. The internal and external coverings of the dome were not made at this stage. The exterior is plastered, as is the interior. These variations do not correspond to the project which provided for an external covering of the sphere with cut-outs of coloured clinker mosaic. In 1990, diagnostic investigations revealed deep cracks in the roof of the classroom which collapsed miserably on August 15 of the same year. The failure of the roof was caused by differences in the quantity and size of the irons used in the roof, results lower than the forecasts of the structural calculations. The church, which was to symbolize rebirth after the earthquake, is reduced to a pile of rubble before it was even inaugurated. At the same time, the Diocese expresses concern for the building not yet consecrated and considered unsuitable for the liturgy due to an improper conformation of the premises. Emblematic was the question of the then bishop Monsignor Caterinicchia who asked Monsignor Valenziano how to "make a church". The works resumed in 2002 with a completion and structural consolidation project by the Civil Engineers of Trapani. The roof of the classroom is rebuilt with a lighter metal structure than the previous one, with a metal lattice structure. Using the original project drawings, the external spaces and the prayer room are completed with the new altar designed by Enzo Fiammetta and Umberto Leone. The lighting system has been redesigned, as well as the external layout and the sacred furnishings, though the benches, the baptismal font and the fixtures seem not to be up to the original project. On 28 March 2010, about forty years after the drafting of the project, the church was consecrated and dedicated to Saints Diego and Scholastica. The building unused from 1987 to 1994, reduced to ruins from 1994 to 2003, then transformed again into a construction site and opened to the public only in 2010, twenty-three years after its construction, sees the construction event concluded. The protection of the building for its architectural value is prescribed by the DARC since 2007 and guarantees that no transformation can modify the building.

3. Maintenance and Conservation

The affixing of the protection bond was only the first step to ensure a long life for a monument of modernity. As is known, the deterioration of reinforced concrete exposed to the elements is inexorable. Only a punctual maintenance and protection work on finishes and structures can prevent more substantial interventions in the years to come. In addition, the building still has unresolved technical problems regarding the critical state of the foundations. From the surveys carried out it emerged the presence of water infiltrations, which penetrated through the limestone steps of the amphitheatre. This caused the foundations to flood. A remediation

intervention is urgently needed to remove the cause. After fixing the joints, it is necessary to design an adequate waterproofing and drainage system for rainwater. The external plasters protect the structural elements and the walls from atmospheric agents. It represents the "skin" of the building and precisely because of their protective function from external aggressions they are among the constituent components most subject to phenomena of material degradation. As can be seen in the photos, the condensation phenomenon forms dark deposits on the surface of the sphere, also damaging the aesthetic perception of the monument. Condensation, cracks, flaking, detachment are the most common phenomena affecting the plaster of the church of Quaroni and their occurrence can only be slowed down with a diagnostic campaign scheduled for five years, and with periodic rehabilitation interventions as happens for the most important one's contemporary architecture in Europe (Caccia Gherardini, 2017). The walls in calcarinite and local stone are affected by the typical degradation of natural stone, sensitive to deposits, biodeterioration and wind erosion. The restoration and ordinary maintenance therefore, they assume a role of primary importance in the protection of cultural heritage in our possession; the term indicates the set of movable and immovable cultural assets that have historical, artistic, archaeological, ethno-anthropological, archival interest and bibliographic as testimony having the value of civilization (Article 2, paragraph 2 of Legislative Decree 42/2004, Code of Cultural Heritage). Cultural heritage is subject to protection and enhancement with the aim of preserving historical memory for use by future generations. The restoration, therefore, becomes the main means for the achievement of conservation implemented through protection and enhancement. The conservation debate is very complex, but if we are to summarize its meaning, we can quote the recent definition that is due to Dezzi Bardeschi which recalls how the verb to conserve responds to the need to preserve, that is, to save from decay and, in the long run, from loss. So, he identifies himself with the commitment to protect and preserve the collective heritage to pass it on to the future (Dezzi Bardeschi, 2017).



Figure 2. The interiors, before and after the collapse

4. How to “make it a church”? The liturgical question

The Diocese of Mazara del Vallo, while recognizing the architectural value of the work, immediately expressed doubts about the liturgical adequacy of the religious building. The archetype of the Mother Church of Gibellina is the Greek theatre. The hall has a *cavea* layout, from the Greek *theatron*, a place from which one looks, which makes the faithful 'spectators' of a fixed scene. The sphere is an apse, dome and *onphalon*, it sucks everything up, remaining the absolute protagonist of the vision, both internal and external. There are examples of churches with a central plan, where the sacred space is characterized by that circularity typical of the Greek theatre. But the planimetric distribution in those cases has the ability to involve all the participants. In the church of Gibellina the faithful become passive observers, while for the post-conciliar Church the faithful must be able to participate. The architectural / liturgy contradiction cannot be resolved by making changes to the building. Instead, one can think of the possibility of adapting the functional and symbolic needs of the liturgical space to the places. It is clear that Quaroni's will was not to design a church, but a sculpture, a universal place, a secular space for reflection. Even the client, Ludovico Corrao, conceives the Quaroni church more as a symbol of cultural renaissance than as a religious building. The hypothesis of the variation of use is an extreme choice and justifiable only in extrema ratio. More interesting is trying to mend the emotional relationship between the building and its faithful. In fact, the most evident contradiction concerns the relationship between the church and the city. It is necessary to create paths that strengthen the link between the church, the city and its citizens, and between the church and the surrounding context. Beyond the protection measures implemented by the DARC, in fact it will be the use by the community to guarantee constant maintenance and the permanence of this monument over time.



Figure 3. Foundation premises flooded

5. Conclusions

Gibellina's "ball church" is an emblematic case of how the restoration of the modern is not just a problem of conservation of more or less serial materials, but a more complex process of conservation of symbolic and social values. What must be preserved and strengthened is the link between the building and the community, so that the church stops being a monument for tourists and truly becomes the religious fulcrum of a community. This can be achieved by improving the access routes, redeveloping the surroundings, and giving architectural quality to the inside of the building, which is too symbolically crushed by the strength of the outside. Legislative protection must be followed by a virtuous process of constant care and maintenance of the property. If the church has been protected by virtue of its architectural value, the social and emotional value for the community must be built.

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