

CONSERVATION/ TRANSFORMATION



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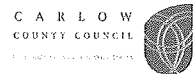
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This book presents the papers written by 65 participants after the 2nd Workshop in Conservation, organized by the Conservation Network of the European Association for Architectural Education in 2009 in Ireland.

The workshop was attended by almost 65 participants representing: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, United States of America, United Kingdom.

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Ruins preservation, transformation in use: projects for the old town centre of Palermo

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Palermo has a particular history, being a geographical *topos* that has been inhabited for twenty-five centuries, whose most evident material expression is found in its architecture and urban morphology. Palermo has its own unique quality: it has been the centre, the place of encounter and conflict for many civilizations that dominated the southern area of the Mediterranean, from Punic to Romans, from Arabs to Norman-Swabians. Few other places have achieved such a degree of homogeneity as has this city 'tutto porto', home to people so diverse in terms of traditions and customs, religion and race. And from this melting pot a great urban civilization was born (De Seta 1980).

But Palermo is also the symbol – together with other Italian cities such as Naples – of all the misfortunes that the passing of time, the intolerable pushiness of greedy speculations, mixed with ignorance and roughness, has visited upon its face and on the magnificence inherited from its past. After the enormous destruction caused by World War II, some Sicilian historians of art have tried, on different occasions and for research purposes, to reconstruct the face of the ancient city. By speaking of *membra disiecta* of architecture, and recalling Cesare Brandi's concept of the formal fragment ripped off the integrity of the work, they have shown the possibility of a non-negative use that aims to recover the value of the architectonic fragment (Brandi 1956). The job of the restorer can be that of collecting the *disiecta membra* of the building and, by healing its wounds, bring it back to life. It is also necessary to think of a larger body, to think of the *disiecta membra* of the urban organism, which silently, but accusingly, waits for our rescuing work. We cannot simply stand still and just contemplate the scattered, though extremely noble, limbs of the city, such as churches, religious houses, palaces, and so forth. It is surely possible that with effort, they can be restored in the scenario of an environment that still exists, though wounded and despised.

The city of Palermo is a palimpsest that offers a stratified accumulation of data derived over several millennia; these data, sometimes dense, at other times scarce, are displayed uninterruptedly. Yet, it has been observed that owning

a dead collection of ancient treasures is not enough, since it is better to aim at an 'actual' vitality of culture and art (Calvesi 1997). For our modern sensibility, that statement amounts to the research and defence of our own identity. To deal with the problems generated by the survival of these memories of the past is not enough, because identity needs to benefit from the lessons these memories can still give us. We can refer to the interpretation of the work as a natural-cultural and anthropological-historical 'totality'.

This interpretation can be applied also to those parts of the old town centre that are still in ruins as a result of wartime bombing, in spite of the decades that have since passed. The warning that ruins carry with them reaches beyond any understandable gesture of rejection of the destructive results of tragic events such as wars, results that are aggravated by subsequent neglect. To be truly avoided in the future, tragic events have to be witnessed in all their resultant tremendous, irrepressible truth. This means evoking the concept of the 'pedagogical vocation' of ruins fostered by Marc Augé. In that context we think of ruins as historical statements "in terms of eloquent concreteness, which cannot be lost with impunity, without causing a substantial, severe harm to the souls and the future society" (Fancelli 2006).

However, to envisage restoration as preservation of the 'totality' of the work, taking in the entirety of elements, does not preclude – as the case of 'inhabited ruins' in the old town centre of Palermo suggests – the theme of transformation of their use, as long as this is rendered compatible, with the addition of new, necessary architectonic elements. With regard to the ancient building, we can consider the point of view that container and content observe different ageing processes, i.e. structure as against function (Eco 1968). The more ancient a building is, the more probable it is that its original structure is no longer intact and that its function has disappeared. Other functions will have taken advantage of opportunity, replacing the first and thus ensuring the building's continuity through time. The elements of many buildings are no longer employed as originally intended, though without detriment to their present function. It can be argued that the loss of function itself can "suggest conditions of survival, and function as a possibility for integration in our culture" (Corboz 1976).

As far as the other aspect of the theme of transformation is concerned – that of the insertion of new architectonic elements and of other devices for reuse – and even if the insertion is partly reversible, it inevitably causes an alteration of the remains as a whole, and of their exposure to the simple act of contemplation. Accepting the principle of 'equilibrium', which should regard every restoration as a separate case, for the *preservation* of values and memories the encounter between the figurative characters of the new parts

that are considered essential for the *transformation* of use, and the original forms of the architecture, must to be taken into consideration. A.C.

Interventions in the old town centre of Palermo: Between 'preservation' and 'transformation'

As mentioned earlier, more than fifty years after World War II, part of the area of the old town centre of Palermo still manifests in the texture of the old town centre as well as the marks of the damage caused by bombing and the related consequences (Fig. 1).

One of the symbols of these transformations is undoubtedly the place called Piazza della Magione. Before the war it did not exist as a square, but was instead a complex of blocks and residential buildings divided by streets and courtyards. The big square that exists today is the result of wartime destruction which was evidently concentrated in this place, and also of some interesting planning choices made in the last twenty years that were too weak and insufficient for the improvement and reuse of this space (Fig. 2).

The outline traces of the blocks that were destroyed – a planning decision of questionable quality – are marked by low walls that allow one to understand the building texture that previously existed. Within these, grass-covered areas have been created that are used for cultural events or as play spaces for the city. But as often happens, in a city full of contradictions and where managing its cultural heritage is poorly advanced, the total lack of maintenance and the licence given to small pedlars to use the areas of the meadow, have made this interesting space 'suspended out of time' into a place of decay (Fig. 3).



Fig. 1
Palermo, ruins
in the district of
'Monte di Pietà'.
Damages caused
by the bombs on a
palace in 'Via dei
Cassari'.



Fig. 2
Palermo, Piazza Magione. The walls of the blocks which disappeared after the bombings are intended as an archaeological site



Fig. 3
Palermo, Piazza Magione. One of the few buildings which did not collapse after the bombings

Besides, the unjustified planting of forest trees in front of the façades of the monumental buildings prevents one from enjoying the view from the square of the most interesting perspective.

If for 'Piazza della Magione' the important opportunity to improve what already existed has not matched the unquestionable and acknowledged potentialities, other examples are as unfortunate, such as that of 'Piazza Garraffello' inside the historical market of the 'Vucciria district' (*Fig. 4*) or the market itself and its beautiful abandoned buildings. Many of the buildings scattered all over the old town centre have suffered the same fate, with no difference between common buildings, big noble residences, churches or former convents, which have been either simply made safe or have never seen any form of intervention (*Fig. 5*).

But what 'types' of interventions have been carried out or are under completion

today, within a plan for the reclaiming of the old town centre that is still changing? They could be summarised by identifying three different kinds of practice.

The first takes as a starting point the interventions that follow the slavish 'imitative rebuilding', ordered in the Detailed Plan for the Old Town Centre (Di Benedetto 2000), and backed by the Manual for the Reclamation of the Old Town Centre of Palermo (Marconi 1997). In this category we identify all the rebuilding - most of the time comprising complete rebuilding and carried out after unjustified demolitions - where building typologies, openings, frames, balconies, decorations and plasters are re-proposed ex-novo, thus cancelling every trace of material authenticity that had survived through the course of historical events to our time (*Fig. 6*).

The second type of practice is to intervene with openly contemporary new buildings that take into account the ratio between the building heights and the lacunae in the historical texture which they infill. There are only a few examples of this second type of intervention, but these exhibit an interesting alternative attitude which has given the old town centre opportunities for transformation that are far more stimulating compared to those more common examples of typological restoration (*Fig. 7*).



Fig. 4
Palermo, Piazza
Garaffello inside
the 'Vucciria'
market



Fig. 5
Palermo,
abandoned
buildings in the
'Tribunali' district

The third category of intervention consists of particularly interesting cases of re-use. We refer generally to those cases where ruins, through compatible transformations and the attempts to preserve existing traces – while not always fully successful – have activated the new practice of the opening of cultural spaces for the old town. Such interventions have often also improved the quarters where the monuments were placed (*Fig. 8*).

However, it has to be said that these interesting choices of intervention are not always the result of enlightened choices by the public authority. They are often an alternative, and not final, route of progressing incumbent rebuilding projects often forgotten on the desks of the public authorities because of lack of funds to carry them out. A case in point is the preservation of the ruins of Palazzo Bonagia (*Fig. 9*), which became an enchanting open space concert theatre. A baroque monumental great staircase that has been used as a backdrop for the events is now in a storage yard, due to a rebuilding project for the palace that is being put into effect.

In many cases rebuilding will not take place. The fact that timescales are long, coupled with the lack of funds, will probably save this 'transitional moment' in which both the ruins and their transformation co-exist and are still identifiable, as in the case of the impressive church of the 'Spasimo' and of the garden over its bastion, which has become the venue for some of the summer cultural events of the city. Another instance is the case of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie di Montevergini. Here, in order to totally preserve the surfaces of the space intended for art and theatre festivals, a new independent steel structure has been built inside, with tents on its sides functioning as scenes.



Fig. 6
Palermo, church
of 'San Giovanni
Decollato', in the
district of 'Palazzo
Reale'



Fig. 7
Palermo, the new project for the square in front of the court of justice



Fig. 8
Palermo, church of 'Santa Maria allo Spasimo'.



Fig. 9
Palermo, ruins of 'Palazzo Bonagia'.

This new structure, due to its flexibility, can transform the space according to the needs of the fit-out without clashing with the pre-existing structure. These transformations have so far brought interesting results for both the 'preservation' of what already existed and the architectural 'transformation', with an evident revitalisation of these parts of the historic city, though with all the limitations that have to be acknowledged in each of them.

Two examples: the Palazzo Belmonte-Riso and the 'Teatro Garibaldi'

During the 1943 air raids the Palazzo Belmonte-Riso suffered serious damage from bombing. The whole west wing was razed to the ground, while the east wing was destroyed only in part. The façade remained intact, and together with the rest of the palace, would remain abandoned until 1980, when the palace was bought by the authorities of the Region of Sicily. In the 1990s the palace underwent many interventions: one involving the reconstruction of the floors and of the roof covering, another the preservation – one concerning the surfaces with little addition to the façade and a third one dealing with the treatment of the interior and the surfaces of the court and with rebuilding of just the facades of two courts. In 2001 the palace was opened again to the public and in 2006 it became the seat of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Sicily.

The palace was not rebuilt apart from a portion of the volume of its west wing. This partial rebuilding leaves the typology of the baroque palace visible, with a volume in the façade and two volumes respectively to the right and left of the central court. Following the same requirement of maintaining the character of the baroque style of this space, the wings of the two courts were also rebuilt, with the columns separating them, and the great staircase in the centre as a background for the *effilade* (Fig. 10). The final project (by architect Matteo Scognamiglio), which is today being completed, provides for the building of the full extent of the curtain wall to its original height, with a differing treatment between the inside and outside surfaces of the court (Fig. 11). The rebuilding reproduced solids and voids but not the details on the outer face (Fig. 12). The space which before the bombing was occupied by the palace became an internal garden, hollowed out between the change of level between the blocks open to the air (Fig. 13).

During the works carried out in the 1990s numerous lacunae were discovered in the façade, which is substantially intact. These were restored through infill, treated with a mortar of a colour that was matched to the ashlar masonry but was still perfectly identifiable (Fig. 14). On the façade an intervention has been carried out (supervised by architect Franco Tomaselli) for the preservation of the whole surface. This provided for cleaning by means of a nebulised water system and for the pointing of the joints between the huge ashlar blocks of the limestone-faced wall (Fig. 15).

The surfaces of the courts and of the spaces inside the building have been treated in different ways. While new plasters have been made for the two courts and for the interior façades, for the two floors of the palace the treatment of the walls has been different. For the ground floor and the piano nobile new

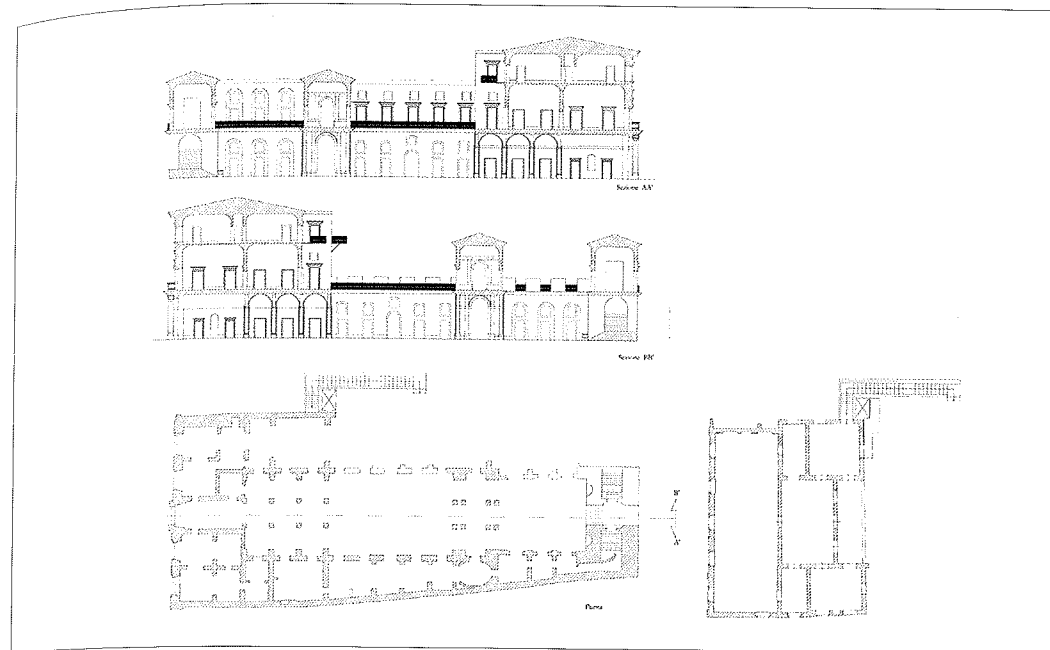


Fig. 10
Palermo, 'Palazzo Belmonte-Riso'. The project for a partial rebuilding by the Monuments and Fine Arts Office of Palermo



Fig. 11
Palermo, 'Palazzo Belmonte-Riso'. Inside view on the face walls of the courtyard



Fig. 10
Palermo, 'Palazzo Belmonte-Riso'. Outside view on the face walls of the courtyard.

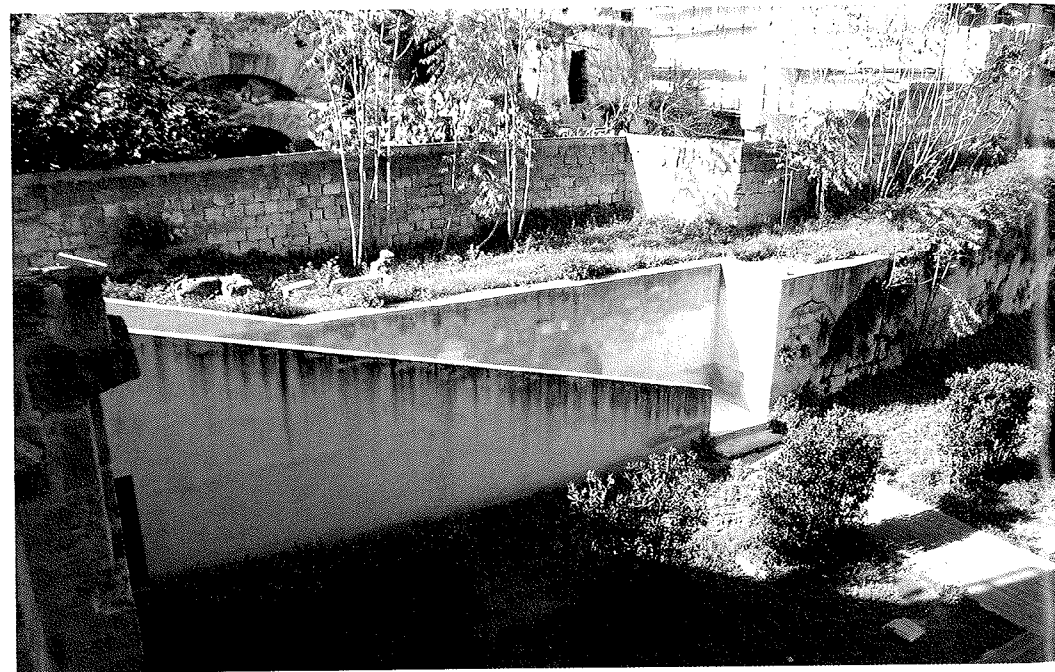


Fig. 11
Palermo, 'Palazzo Belmonte-Riso'. New staircase of access to the palace from the garden

plasters have been employed and the articulation of the decoration which originally covered the walls has been repropose, with new plasterboard panels. These are laid on the surface of the wall and are distinguishable from the original masonry. The result is the equivalent of an installation, without being imitative and always manifestly recognisable (Fig. 16). Much more interesting is the treatment of the surfaces on the second floor: these were left as they were found, without layering new plasters, thus highlighting all the changes of use, transformations, destructions and abandonments which the building has undergone in the course of time (Fig. 17), including the works for the consolidation and restoration of the lacunae carried out with the last



Fig. 14
Palermo, 'Palazzo Belmonte-Riso'. Detail of the outside façade face wall during some of the phases of the yard



Fig. 15
Palermo, 'Palazzo Belmonte-Riso'. Façade facing 'Corso Vittorio Emanuele'

intervention.

The result is a space mangled by events. While unfortunately no coherent planning choices are evident, such as sharing the same treatment of the lacunae for all spaces, still the space retains its image thanks also to a new public and cultural use that employs its condition of ruin as a value-added starting point on which to invest for the future (Fig. 18).

The Teatro Garibaldi today faces the huge Piazza della Magione, which as we have seen earlier was created by the ravages of war. It is an Italian-style theatre and was opened by Giuseppe Garibaldi in 1862. Soon after World War II it was damaged by fire, abandoned for many years, then made safe to be used as a ruin (Fig. 19).

Having survived thirty years of decay as a ruin, it resumed use as a theatre at the beginning of the 1990s as a result of an almost archaeological rediscovery that occurred in the 1980s while Leoluca Orlando was the mayor of Palermo (Fig. 20). On that occasion no major work was carried out and the boxes, the stage and the stalls were reused in their spectral condition, leaving the sunlight filtering from the stage tower. The theatre was used by making the most of the infinite possibilities provided by the stage space and by employing contemporaneously both the hall and the stalls – an exploitation

Fig. 16
Palermo, 'Palazzo
Belmonte-Riso'.
Hall, piano nobile

made possible by its particular defective condition caused by the fire and the subsequent carelessness. Only in the last few years has there been a project for restoration which is currently in the final phase of execution.

Today the 'Garibaldi' is a member of the Union of the Theatres of Europe. In 2003 the Union gave it an important acknowledgement as an integrated cultural operation, including the architectural project (by architect Giuseppe Marsala) (Fig. 21). The project, besides modernising the services and bringing its facilities into conformity with today's standards, is all based on a series



Fig. 17
Palermo, 'Palazzo
Belmonte-Riso'.
Hall, third floor



Fig. 18
Palermo, 'Palazzo
Belmonte-Riso'.
Hall, third floor.

of possible transformations of the stage space and on the flexibility of the relation between stage and audience, which can be challenged continuously and subjected to a wide range of possible changes: mobile stage; retractable apses; natural and artificial light that can be modulated; up to the total dissolution of the boundaries between stage and audience (Fig. 22, 23). At present the yard is still open; there have already been two changes mainly concerning plant engineering problems.

The spoliation of the elements, first through the damage caused by the fire and subsequently through the theft of all the wooden materials, has, paradoxically, 'linked up' the two spaces, the stage and the boxes. Time has become the main actor within this new space that the project aims at giving back, by avoiding the choice of in-style restoration and by including a series of services that are useful for the theatre and the quarter itself (Fig. 24). According to the planner this approach 'does not make the ruin sacred' but is instead a 'project strategy which puts the understanding of the transformations in the primary position'. So far we are still waiting for the results of this transformation of the total theatre which uses the traces of its history as a scene to be narrated, and are hoping they are encouraging. The transformation involves a new roof covering using wooden trusses, and a few added elements in the stage and boxes. At the same time, the lacunae are considered as resources of the project that should be turned to better account and brought out (Fig. 25). The proposal contained in the project is to leave the signs of time by not replastering the interiors.

* Introduction by Antonella Cangelosi, the two following paragraphs by Zaira Barone.



Fig. 19
Palermo, 'Teatro
Garibaldi' before
the interventions

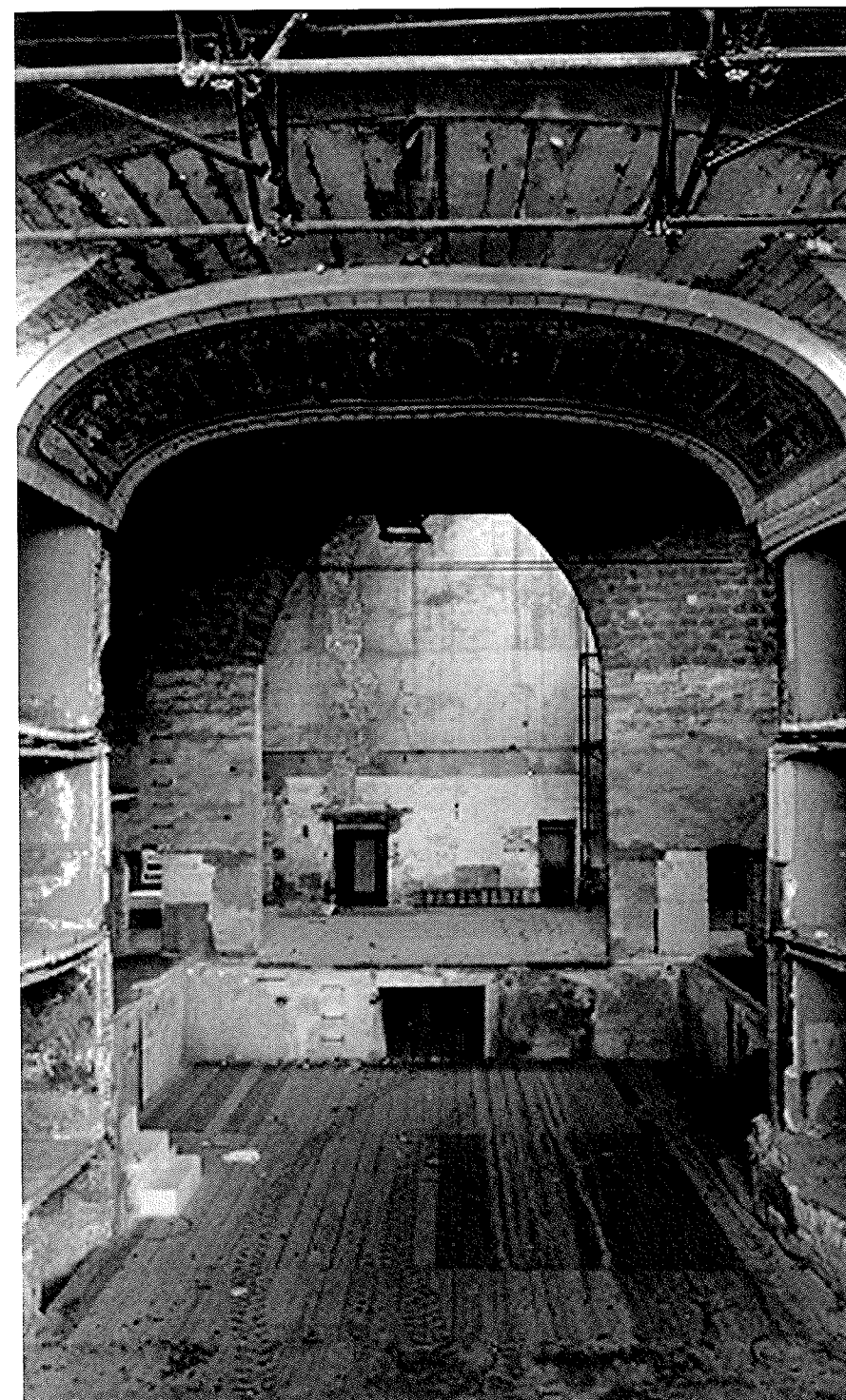


Fig. 20
Palermo, 'Teatro
Garibaldi' after the
first reinforcing
interventions

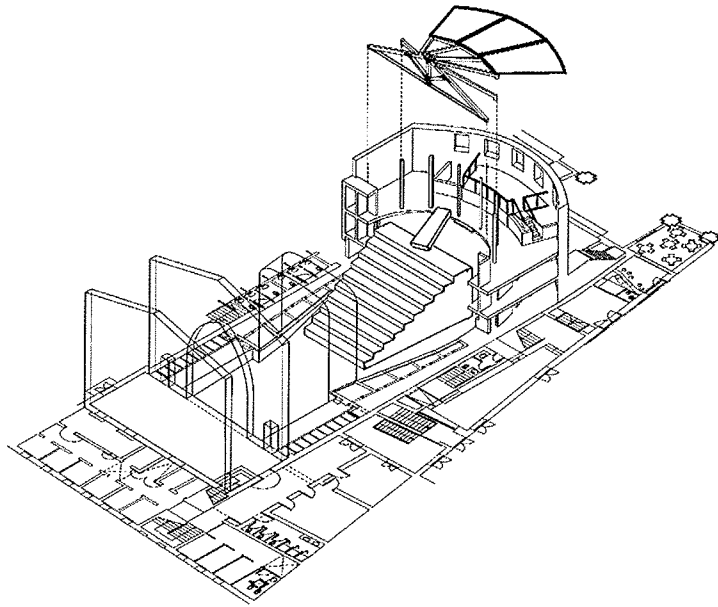


Fig. 21
Palermo, 'Teatro
Garibaldi'.
Axonometric
projection of the
last project

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