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BLOCK 6: RESTORATION, CONSERVATION AND RENOVATION

SPACES AND PLACES OF CULTURE FOR THE RENEWAL OF CONTEMPORARY CITY

Antonino Margagliotta^a

^aUniversità degli Studi di Palermo, Palermo, Italy

ABSTRACT

Spaces for culture are necessary places for human and community life. Architecture gives form to this need and contributes, at the same time, to the construction and modification of the city.

In countries where architectural culture is more widespread and civic sense is linked to the qualifying experience of space, the construction of new spaces for culture (museums, libraries, etc.) - or the redevelopment of existing ones - has contributed to spreading the presence of services into the territory and has proved to be a valid opportunity (or pretext) to launch urban qualification programs (of the historicized city as well as that of recent formation). Moreover, it allowed to give quality to the public space through the modification induced in the context by the architectural project, through its ability to define formal relationships and functional correspondences, as well as significant exchanges with the existing place. In some cases, the new architectures, designed or become the strategic presence of urban transformations, have collaborated to outline (and communicate) the true identity of the city. In particular, public library, more than any other space, revealed itself to be a political-cultural communication tool: library projects have often determined initiatives and established important dynamics for the regeneration of the city (requalification of historic centres, provision of services of the suburbs, attribution of identity to the newly formed settlements). The library, a place of knowledge and encounter, of sociality and dialogue, exalts and develops transversal processes up to be a suggestive pretext for defining a program on

the role of architecture and public space in the current urban scenarios.

In addition to outlining the theme in its transversal motivations and through some recent architectural solutions on the international scene, the contribution will present the results of an academic research project about the role of libraries (as representation of collective memory, invention and renewal occasion too) in the contemporary city.

KEYWORDS

Architecture; culture; city; library; project.

INTRODUCTION

The spaces and places for culture (especially libraries and museums, which are linked respectively and traditionally to the presence of books and of art) have been transformed spatially and typologically in recent decades; they have also modified specific settlement strategies, taking on precise roles in the organisation and construction of the contemporary city. Historically these architectures have been built (especially since the nineteenth century) in what we now consider the historic city, sometimes in buildings specially built for, sometimes in pre-existing buildings of considerable historical and architectural value. The latter condition, if on the one hand it has defined the identity and prestige of many cultural institutions, on the other hand it has also determined a strong link between institution and city, even helping to clarify the image of the city itself. Many libraries, located in buildings sometimes created even

earlier to the formation and transmission of culture (convents, monasteries, seminaries, colleges) have guaranteed the permanence and continuity of the cultural institution in precise areas of the city and allowed the architecture to last, despite transformations and tampering. In this sense architecture has represented the vocation of the place and the recognition of the cultural institution. However, this condition is now sometimes assumed to be a weak and a critical point: the presence of libraries and museums inside the ancient city and in historical containers opens up some questions to be read and interpreted in the necessary relationship between the cultural structure, the architectural organism and the city, which appear to belong to internal order (since historical buildings have little inclination to change and assume the degrees of flexibility that modern cultural services require) and to external order (because of the difficult accessibility, the impossibility of expanding and acquiring new functions). At the same time, now that the city has expanded and become polycentric, architectural culture and political strategies favour the diffusion of services for culture in the vast urban area, the prediction (or implementation) of which has often proved to be an opportunity (or pretext) to launch qualification programmes both in the historicised city and in the recently formed one; it has also made it possible to confer quality on public space through the modification induced in the contexts by the architectural project and the ability of architecture to define formal relations. In some cases, the new architectures, conceived or become the strategic presence of the transformations, have collaborated to delineate (sometimes even projecting outside) the identity of the city itself with the iconicity attributed to the project.

1. LIBRARY ARCHITECTURE IN CONTEMPORARY CITY

Among spaces for culture, public library - more than any other space - has revealed itself to be a political-cultural communication tool: library projects, through presence of service for community and the role of space, have determined several urban initiatives and established dynamics for the regeneration of the city as requalification of historic centres, provision of services of the suburbs, attribution of identity to the newly formed settlements. The interest comes from the role of library, outlined in these years, which became a fundamental space of sociality and democracy that helps to overcome the individualist risk of contemporary societies tending to impoverish city of public spaces and cultural spaces. Library's role and functions transformation has been supported by several experiences made in those countries where architecture culture is consolidated and diffused while civic sense goes through public spaces as necessary qualifying agent for growth and learning. At the same time, in these contexts library represents for inhabitants a service for the community and a usually frequented place. It represents for the city an opportunity to organize public space and, sometimes, to give and identity to the existing one. Construction of new libraries and the spatial and organizational requalification of many existing structures, became an opportunity to create places for encounter and dialogue, to provide services to territories and, even, to enhance city marketing actions undertaken through *cultural operations*. Library went beyond a certain rhetoric which for century has consider it as a space - if not as a temple - for books but it can't be considered anymore exclusively connected to preservation and access to books: it is no longer a poetic "public granary" as described by Marguerite Yourcenar because the primary role of the book is now substituted by the primary role played by the user, therefore by the person that reads, or better, by all those

people that populate this space also for activities different from traditional reading; it is neither the "splendid courtyard" described by Joseph Fletcher where it is possible to converse with old sages and old philosopher. To understand what a library of a contemporary city has become, it should be remembered that Temple University public library was open on 2018 in Philadelphia designed by Snøhetta to support 39,000 thousand students of the university but also to welcome (besides other traditional spaces for books storage, study and research) a variety of places for cooperative and social learning and to accommodate 5,000,000 visitors per year. During these years, library became a perfect architecture to start and establish urban transformation dynamics: there are many contemporary experiences where the project of a library allowed to offer or to return to cities, meant as *urbs* (therefore as space and organisms) and as *civitas* (therefore as a community), spaces and places that historically and traditionally belongs to territory and population as right to access to cultural development and to access to cultural services. Library, though as infrastructure and as fundamental service for city and territory (as well as hospitals) it is an authentic place of *urbs* and *civitas* which accelerate urban regeneration and qualification in a physical and social sense, applying democratic principles; therefore, the public library is protagonist of city redevelopment projects, being a perfect example of participation and sharing, of freedom and creativity of each citizen.

Especially from recent architectural experiences, the role played by public libraries in contemporary cities arise as strategic presence in transformation's dynamics as important public space to freely access to information, as cultural service oriented to a polyvalent character. The library has lost its mono-functional place sacral character responsible for books preservation and to knowledge diffusion, in order to become a

communication space (a centre of information and formation) and a place for community. From the organizational and spatial point of view library transformed itself in a flexible container capable to contain multiple functions and roles, likewise necessity of user as changed following the rapid development of multimedia and digital technologies, with a destiny similar to museums: it is not a coincidence that, among cultural spaces, it goes to Piano & Rogers' Centre Pompidou in Paris the claim and implementation of a *free* space to facilitate interdisciplinary of communication tool, youth and pauperistic language which, anyway, can't stand without support of most sophisticate technology, almost like a revival Labrouste's libraries technological vocation. The Beaubourg, like a supermarket - which will be taken up again twenty years later in the Idea-stores (new concept libraries and permanent training centres designed by Adjaye Associates in the East End of London as a response to the decline of traditional library and training services) puts at the centre of the project the void for users (who see and touch everything), not necessarily attracted by the book but by the activities connected to it. As well as the *Sala Borsa* in Bologna (2001) uses the covered courtyard of an old building, in communication with the street, as the main space of a public multimedia library of general information that privileges the use of electronic resources and access to new information technologies, positioning itself as a centre of aggregation through services and the organisation of cultural events open to everyone, the city and the metropolitan area: it is the *square of culture* (Agnoli 2009) that opens the library to the city and is itself a fragment of the city. The library, in this way, becomes dynamic and "moves, driven by the interests and interventions of its users that are constantly developing and transforming" (Oechslin 2017, 29).

The library is then to be considered as a mirror reflecting the city and contemporary sociality,

at the same time a place of education and communication, "instrument of a social communication strategy [...] emerging point of a leisure management policy that involves the urban equipment and the planning of specific metropolitan areas. Around [libraries] the cultural districts are organised, through which the revitalisation of disused containers is proposed" (Irace 2001, 6-7), ancient buildings are recovered and reused, particularly in cities where the number of historical buildings and the density of the urban fabric are significant. In this vision, even libraries institutionally responsible for conservation and documentation (often located in ancient

buildings) have directed their management towards overcoming the traditional model and have focused on promoting integrated cultural and social initiatives (Fig. 1). In these institutions, moreover, the enormous growth of the library heritage and of the number of users has in fact transformed the library into an urban component, a point of accumulation of the social and cultural life of the city; therefore, in any case, even historical libraries must perform more varied and complex functions than in the past and require reorganization with new architectural solutions.

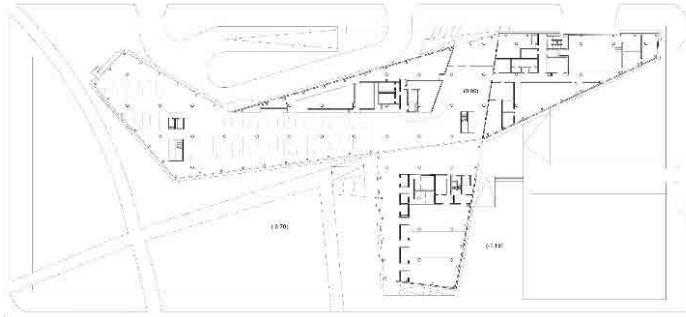


Figure 1. David Chipperfield, Des Moines Public Library, 2006. Source: (Biagio D'Ugo 2013, Paolo De Marco 2017)

2. THE PROJECT FOR NEW LIBRARIES FOR URBAN REGENERATION

Following the needs and transformations of the contemporary city, considering the role of the public library as an architecture that structures urban space, bearing in mind that the library still remains susceptible to definition and continues to offer itself for experimentation and research, the project of public libraries has often been used as a didactic theme for the students of the Course of Studies in *Building Engineering - Architecture* and in *Architecture* at the University of Palermo. The project of the public library, integrated in different urban contexts to propose services suited to the idea of the city, has for several years constituted the suggestive pretext for the definition of a programme about the role of architecture and public spaces in the contemporary city, with the ambitious intention of attributing to the projects the value of exemplariness, in the hope that the formal values of the building (and the transformations induced into the city) will generate further beauty in public and even private spaces. In any case, it proved to be an exercise in beauty and civil commitment. Within the framework of a general vision on the issues related to the library project in the contemporary city in different conditions and contexts in the didactic activity of the Courses,

the project of new architectures has been privileged with the intent also to study new places of culture and meeting in the territory of modernity and in the contexts of marginality. The first experience - *A library for every city* - carried out in the academic year 2008-09 (*Course of Architecture and Architectural Composition 1* - prof. A. Margagliotta, tutor Giovanni Lumia and Ignazio Saitta) involved the whole of Sicily since small towns do not always have public places and spaces where to cultivate cultural interests and have opportunities for meeting and comparison. In small towns the library can represent an important centrality and assume the function of a multi-purpose cultural service. On this occasion almost fifty projects of small libraries are formalized for as many cities for which, in addition to spatial and figurative, functional and constructive research, the positioning and insertion in the urban landscape, the design of open spaces played a fundamental role, having taken as a starting point for the construction of the place relations between the existing system of signs, with the idea of identity and belonging (Fig. 2, Fig. 3).

In the academic year 2012-13 (*Architectural Design Laboratory 1* - prof. A. Margagliotta, tutor Sebastiano Provenzano, Ignazio Saitta and Giuseppe Scuderi) the theme was explored with the project of *new architecture*

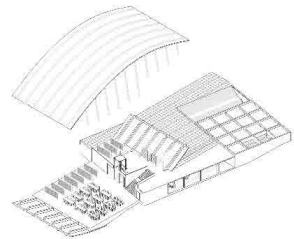


Figure 2. Project of Public Library in Buseto Palizzolo - Trapani. Source: (Paolo De Marco, Giuseppe Tranchida 2008)

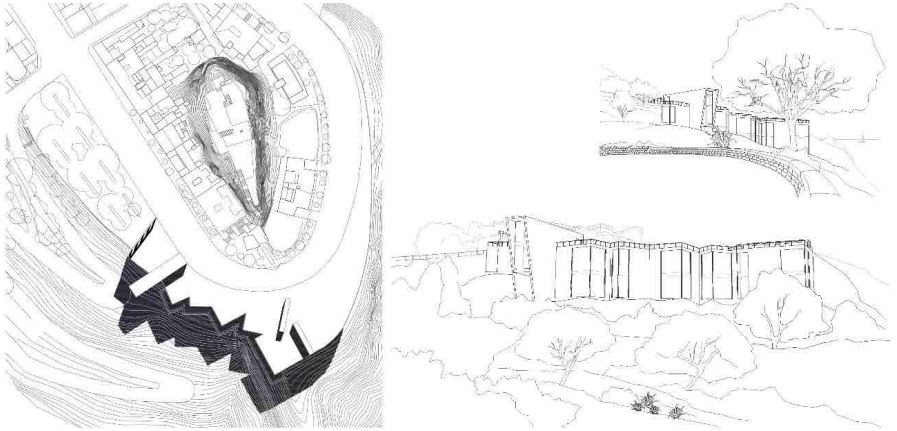


Figure 3. Project of Public Library in Termini Imerese - Palermo. Source: (Helena Cari, Melania Baldone 2008)

for the municipal library system in Palermo: small neighbourhood libraries to highlight the need for new *cultural infrastructures* for a city of great size (which, among other things, was preparing that year to become the Italian Capital of Culture 2019) with the intention of strengthening the municipal library system with a *widespread* presence to be established in emblematic areas, either in the organisational strategy of the neighbourhood, in the relation to the recognisability of the place, or in order to resolve critical spatial or environmental situations. Symbolically, eight areas were identified, corresponding to the municipal districts into which the city is divided, for which each library had to express its identity and explicit its identity. Thus the library of the old town centre (which is the district where all the ancient libraries are located and would be considered already abundantly served) is planned in a highly degraded but highly suggestive area for *the multimedia library*; in the district characterised by a small port (memory of a seaside village) the library requalifies the ancient landing place and builds the *library of the sea*; in a marginal district, marked by

environmental degradation, inside a disused quarry the *environment library* is planned; in the residential area, in the area belonging to a school, the programme includes the *learning library* (Fig. 4). In this way, besides proposing a realistic functional programme, the project participates in the idea of *propagation* of architecture and services into the city, so each site has been chosen with its own specificity, which the project have to highlight in relation to the logic of the settlement, the character of the place and the communities for which it is intended. In this way the library becomes a new urban centrality with the function of a multi-purpose cultural service that acts as a centre of aggregation capable of encouraging more intense and active participation by citizens in the life of the community.

In the Degree Course in Architecture in Palermo (Agrigento's headquarters) during academic year 2016-17 the students of *Laboratory 3 of Architectural Design* (prof. A. Margagliotta

- tutor Giovanni Gueli and Sandro Lo Bello) designed new spaces to enhance the existing municipal library of Agrigento with new functions and attractiveness. Strategically, the area below the railway station forecourt has been identified, which today constitutes itself an urban centrality and is close to the municipal library and other cultural institutions. Also in this case the formulation of the functional program foresees functions necessary for a library that intends to relate and identify itself with the activities of a

cultural production centre. The new place had to strengthen the existing service with new attractive spaces through the quality of the architecture that for didactic and narrative reasons is developed with a possible theme (the immaterial library, the library/archive, the children's and youth library, the multicultural library, the city library, the library of sounds, the popular library, the study-library, etc.) that synthesises the cultural and social needs of the city.

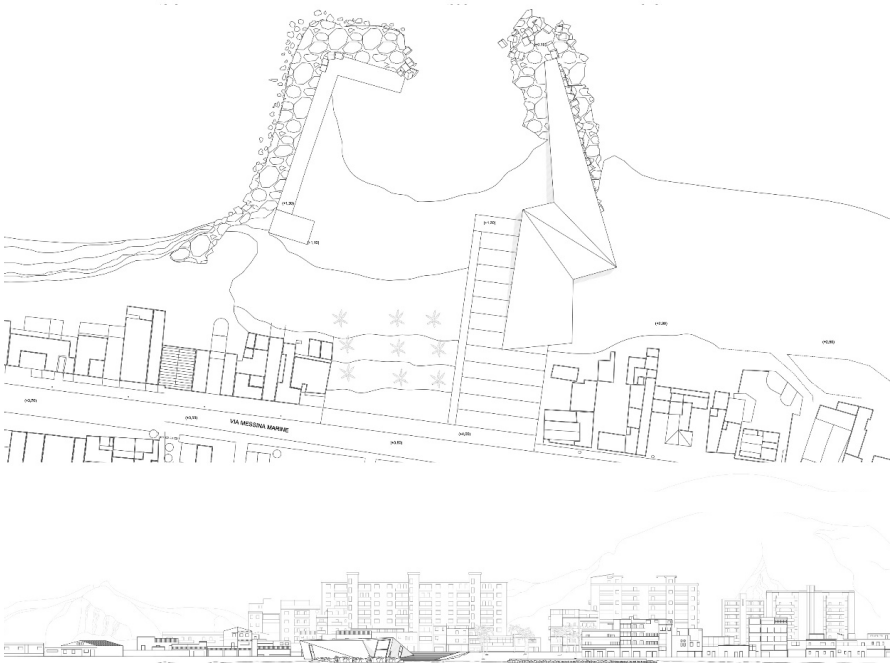


Figure 4. Project of Library of the sea on the small port of Bandita - Palermo. Source: (Mattia Bruno 2013)

3. THE DESIGN EXPERIENCE ON HISTORICAL LIBRARIES

For several years, from 2008 to 2013, the final thesis Laboratory of *Building Engineering - Architecture Degree Course* (in charge prof. A. Margagliotta) developed a study and project strategy on places and spaces for culture in the contemporary city, identifying as a privileged area of research the city of Palermo for which (in addition to museums and places for music) project proposals have been developed for the reorganization, enhancement and expansion of historical libraries. The methodological approach followed as a path:

- the study, critical analysis and redefinition of the organisational structure in relation to modern techniques and recent library economics;
- the understanding and the attribution of meaning to the spatial structure, conducted through the history of the fabrics, the survey of the architectural complexes (of which the libraries often constitute only a small part) in order to overcome, through the project, the dyscrasies and fragmentations deriving from property constraints that over time have dismembered the architectures and caused the loss of spatial unity;
- the definition of the institution's relationship with the city in order to rediscover the sense of architecture in its relationship with the urban structure, also taking the opportunity to resolve open spatial issues through the project, wounds that have never been healed, to restore quality of abandoned or degraded spaces, to restore meaning to spacial situations waiting to be defined, to build the city.
- the elaboration of a design solution on the scale of the building and the city.

The projects, starting from the analysis of critical issues, aimed at reorganising spatiality in relation to the reasons of architecture, often aiming at configuring

new extensions, sometimes redefining the proprietary framework because of architectural and urban coherence, sometimes with new projects describing new potentialities and new languages to be put in dialogue with what exists. Through the projects, an attempt was made to address a cultural policy for the city that aimed to adapt the library service to contemporary standards and, at the same time, to redefine the library's presence in the city (Fig. 5, Fig. 6).

All the project proposals, therefore, include both the redefinition of the existing spaces and the hypothesis of expansion through the search for a capacity of relationship that the new must establish with the historical architecture and cultural services existing in the urban surroundings; They also intend to express the sense of a research that contains the understanding of the urban phenomenon in relation to the artefact studied and the possibility of generating spatial relations, making the single intervention an opportunity for regeneration for a portion of the city (whose extension is connected to the capacity of interference of the single artefact with the morphology and the nature of the service offered). The project of the new, under this light, is not taken as an isolated phenomenon but is inserted into urban dynamics, generating relationships, connections, paths, unifying parts that have undergone processes of separation or detachment over time. Ultimately, through study, analysis and experimentation, the works as a whole have the ambition to offer a vision for the spatial and cultural redevelopment of the city.

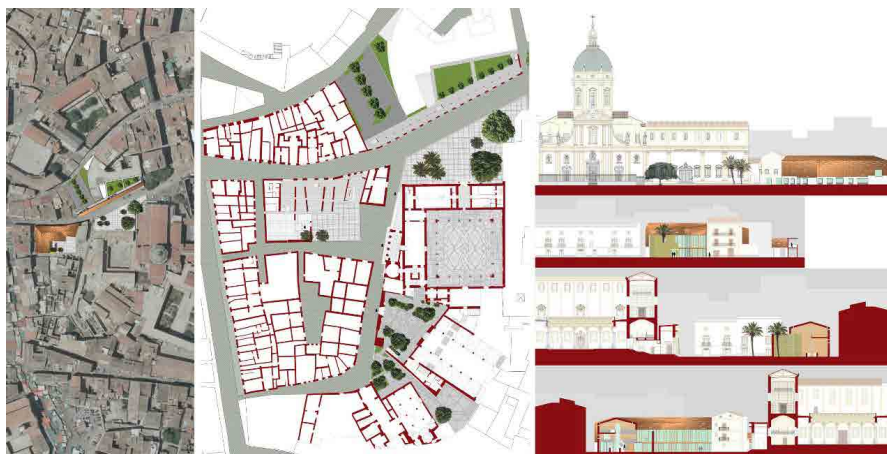


Figure 5. Reorganization of the Municipal Library of Palermo. Source: (Carmelo D'Anna, Antonio Giunta 2005)

4. CONCLUSION. EXERCISE THE COMMITMENT

Ultimately, the library requalifies the city in two ways and defines itself as a priority for the presence of users and is proposed as a place for the dissemination of knowledge, information and training, enhancing the possibility of developing cultural and social activities.

For the new libraries, which have become a symbol of urban public space, the project therefore becomes a way of rethinking urban spaces, of removing them from the increasingly rampant and pervasive commercialisation and making them places of encounter, exchange and collective action. In this vision, the public library becomes an *open territory*, a centre for reflection and knowledge sharing, the node of a network with other cultural institutions.

For the existing historical libraries, in particular, it is time to redefine the places in which they have settled, considering the condition that the contemporary city has assumed: in the face of the external turmoil, inside the library

it is possible to find spaces for silence and listening (listen to others, to memory, to oneself). However, it becomes essential to adapt the spaces to the new ideological and library-related needs, offering more modern and attractive services, mitigating the austerity and rigidity of the buildings with the provision, where possible, of new expansions that coexist with the presence of the past but speak the contemporary language.

These aspects, with a view that simultaneously embraces a single building, a system of buildings and the city, are analysed through the ability of architecture to offer itself, for its relational value, to address (and try to solve) spatial and socio-cultural issues, in the ideal of an architecture that knows how to become an instrument of promotion and development. We have tried to grasp this attention and share it with young people in the didactic dimension, with the awareness that the project's didactics accord aesthetic issues to ethical ones.

However, the library cannot renounce beauty and the presence of books: the library can only be beautiful because it bears values for the



Figure 6. Reorganization of the Library of the Capuchin convent in Palermo. Source: (Giovanni Lupo 2015)

space itself and for the city itself, knowing that beauty educates and generates other beauty. This is the great responsibility of architecture. The library, then, must build on the friendly presence of the book as it is an ancient but lasting sign of culture and an expression of the dissemination and sharing of knowledge. Jaen-Claude Carrière compared the presence of books to a warm fur that warms and protects. In fact, in a library one is protected "against error, against uncertainty [...] Being surrounded by all the ideas of the world, by all feelings, all knowledge and all possible errors, offers a feeling of security and comfort. You will never be cold in your library. Here you are at least protected, at least from the dangers of ignorance" (Carrière, Eco 2009, 247).

For this reason, therefore, through the project of new libraries, as well as through the work of dissemination (exhibitions, seminars, conferences in Palermo and in the places of interest) following many of the initiatives described, we have tried to link the concept of urbs to the civitas, in order to try to influence the quality of the service, the city and, above all, the consciences of young students: urging them to pay attention to the spaces for culture, to the knowledge (and love) for libraries, to the exercise the commitment to the cities we live in. "If there is a subject that is pleasing an architect and that is capable of inflaming his commitment - Etienne-Louis Boullè seems to write about it - this is the project of a Public Library".

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