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The Future of Churches - Identity System for the Valorization of Local Contexts

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The future of churches has been an international symposium organised by the Department of Architecture of the University of Bologna, the archidioceses of Bologna, FTER – Theological Faculty of Emilia-Romagna and Centro Studi Ghirardacci (www.ghirardacci.org). It took place in Bologna between 5th and 7th October 2016 and more than fifty international researchers attended this meeting, under the Carracci's frescos in palazzo Magnani.

As the secularization of western countries changes the societies we live in, it leaves thousands of empty and abandoned churches behind. What can we do with this invaluable heritage? Who is going to take care of all the churches which are scattered in our cities and countrysides? These questions are essential and need to be answered by architects, historians, jurists and geographers alike. The destiny of the religious heritage is not only a matter of architectural restoration; it is also deeply intertwined with urban politics and social landscapes. The symposium in Bologna was a chance for different research fields referents to meet and discuss each other.

The essential start of the discussion was the study by Luigi Bartolomei (researcher at the University of Bologna and promoter of the conference) on territorial and statistical surveys on churches in the diocese of Bologna. Being both numerical and historical, this study stressed the dangerous situation in which a great part of our religious buildings lies nowadays.

From a keynote lecture by jurist Paolo Cavana to study cases in Montreal, Flanders and Italy, the symposium included speeches on archeology, sociology and legal issues. Beyond doubt it was interesting to acknowledge the innovative re-designs of

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deconsecrated churches which take place in the UK thanks to The Churches Conservation Trust and in the Netherlands, thanks to the open-minded approach of independent architectural studios. Though it is right to ask oneself which boundaries define the rules of renovating an abandoned church: what does undignified use mean? What is acceptable and what is not behind the walls of our religious heritage?

It is indeed necessary to combine the study of architecture with history and, more important than ever, with law. It is impossible to even think of the reuse of this heritage without a proper discussion within the field of jurisprudence; this is why architectural design professor Sara Marini (IUAV), for example, decided to investigate the system of abandoned churches of Venice with the help of Micol Roversi Monaco (IUAV), researcher in administrative law. Moreover, it has been clear that this kind of studies cannot be limited to the research on a single building, but they need to be extended to a larger system that connects several churches. As a matter of fact, the issue of abandoned or under-used religious buildings can only be solved if analysed on a regional or even national scale, in order to connect all the elements into a social and geographical network. Thus it is possible to rediscover the tourist potential of this heritage, which is so deeply related to the Italian and European landscape. Religious pilgrimages merge with tourist paths, adding historical value to our daily environment. Yet, religious buildings are often victims of the economic crisis which has struck so many towns. This is why the key of their renovation lies within bottom-up management policies such as the one chosen for the Taranto study case presented by Anna Trono, Giovanni Berardi e Valentina Castronuovo (University of Salento). In the

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Flanders region of Belgium, both Dominique Vanneste (KU Leuven) and Jonas Danckers (CRKC) presented parallel research topics linked to the important dialogue among local church communities and the Government, in order to establish which churches to maintain as places for worship and which ones to redevelop into new uses.

One of the topics that was highlighted during the conference was the subtle yet strong relationship between churches and art. First of all, it is compulsory for all architects to face the importance of the artistic heritage, which plays a great role in our churches, from paintings to sculptures and ancient furniture. Giulia Iseppi (Biblioteca Hertziana) and Elena Pozzi (University of Bologna), for instance, highlighted the essential connections between paintings and churches in the diocese of Bologna. Secondly, religious buildings are often the perfect stage for contemporary art installations, such as De Dominicis' La Calamita Cosmica, installed into a former church in Foligno, presented in a speech by young researchers Diana Lapucci (Università di Camerino) and Francesco Di Lorenzo.

To conclude, it is clear that the future of churches has been a significant opportunity to discuss on the urgency of dealing with underused and disused religious heritage in our contemporary societies. Similar symposiums, which could be organised in the upcoming years, would be a powerful tool to keep on investigating this field of studies and, hopefully, establish common guidelines for architects and planners who have to work on this delicate issue.

For more informations about the conference:
http://www.da.unibo.it/it/eventi/convegno-il-futuro-degli-edifici-di-culto-the-future-of-churches

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