

Le Vie dei
Mercanti

XVII INTERNATIONAL FORUM

WORLD HERITAGE and LEGACY

CULTURE | CREATIVITY | CONTAMINATION

Naples 6 - Capri 7|8 June 2019

Interior space as communicator of cultural significance

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Abstract

The conservation of heritage buildings can include a wide range of approaches but existing theories recommend reuse of buildings, which ensures the continuity of their life. On the other hand, proposing a sustainable and compatible use necessitates the continuation of the buildings' cultural significance. In this perspective, the role of interior architecture is extremely important as it provides an authentic interaction between users and spaces. So, reuse proposals need to integrate existing buildings to contemporary life by considering all spatial aspects that contribute to their architectural identity and cultural significance. In this sense the conservation of interior envelope and interior elements of cultural significance rises as a very important issue to be discussed. Thus today the conservation practice and reuse proposals focus on preserving the architectural envelope of buildings rather than interior aspects. Conversely, interiors need specific safeguard not only due to their cultural significance but also because they are the most "volatile" part of the architectural heritage, being closely connected to the real life of users.

This paper aims to discuss the dialectic relationship between interior environments of heritage buildings and users, and the importance of preserving internal elements as communicators of cultural significance.

Keywords: Interior space, heritage buildings, cultural significance, reuse.

1. Reuse and Interior Space

"Reuse" is defined as "making suitable for new requirements through modifications" (Burden, 2004). According to the Venice Charter of 1964 the conservation of buildings is always facilitated by making use of them for some socially useful purpose but only modifications demanded by a change of function is permitted [2]. The Venice Charter proposes 4 main requirements to be taken to account for conservation and restoration of historic buildings, which can be summarized as authenticity, reversibility, compatibility and retreatability.

The authenticity of a structure can be defined as different layers of significance. The present situation of an antique structure even destroyed or damaged represents a "state of understanding" [3]. Due to the requirement of the preservation of as much of the original material as possible, any intervention should be kept minimum. This means that nothing more should be done than is strictly necessary to guarantee the proper use, conservation and prolongation of the life of the original fabric [3]. Conservation theory has also placed value on "reversibility" which is defined as the ability to undo repairs that later generations regard as substandard or incorrect [4]. For interiors reversible interventions are even more important as interiors are changed more often according to changing human needs. Differentiation of the new and the old helps to maintain reversibility since additions are often structured as independent bodies and they are built of different materials and techniques with a new design language. Standards for Rehabilitation published by "U.S. Secretary of the Interior" in 1978 strongly propose that the new work should be differentiated from the old and it should be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion. SBAP principles predominantly used within Great Britain encourage expression of modern needs in modern language [3].

The last requirements, compatibility aims to ensure that introduced materials will not have negative consequences and retreatability focuses on the type and extent of conservation treatment in order to make sure that the present interventions would not preclude or impede further treatment of the future.

The historic environment is subject to change including buildings and all their interiors and adaptation is an inevitable outcome of this process. According to the Burra Charter [5], adaptation means changing a place to suit the existing use or a proposed use. Use means the functions of a place, including the activities and traditional and customary practices that may occur at the place or are dependent on the place.

According to McCallum [6], reusing buildings is a simple way of achieving sustainability and it helps to reinforce a strong sense of place. Furthermore restoring the historic environment creates jobs and helps underpin local economies. Once the historic environment is evaluated appropriately, it contributes to the quality of life and enriches people's understanding of the diversity and changing nature of their community and it becomes a powerful focus for community action.

Cities and all their components including buildings and their interiors are living structures. If they are abandoned without a use, they become frozen in time. Reuse is the way to make them breathe and make them apart of our lives.

Spatial potentials are mostly defined by the innate and unchanging properties of the building and they are very important in order to understand the cultural significance of the place. The interior environments of heritage buildings can have different meanings and cultural significances according to the building typology and relationship between architectural envelope and interiors. In this sense the appropriate way of proposing a new use might differ a lot from building to building. But the most important concern is to consider the potentials of buildings and their surroundings as well as the expectations and needs of users. A recent architectural competition in Turkey was titled "what would the Izmir Electric Factory would like to become?" aiming to increase awareness about the values of heritage buildings in collective memory and public life. In this sense, interiors of buildings with specific cultural value have a great potential as communicators of cultural significance. Buildings representing different historic and cultural layers can contribute to the continuation of public memory only if their interiors can communicate the embedded meanings about their existence.

2. Different Conceptions of Reuse for Interiors

Depending on the architectural layout and character of the envelope, interiors can have different meanings and priorities. The type and extent of reuse proposals can vary greatly according to these different conceptions.

- Interiors dominating architectural and spatial Identity
- Interiors as followers of architectural envelope
- Interiors as spatial components
- Interiors perceptually detached from the architectural envelope
- Interiors reflecting particular aspects and elaborate detail
- Urban interiors (exterior interiors)

2.1 Interiors Dominating Architectural and Spatial Identity

Depending on the character of the architectural layout and envelope, architectural identity can be highly dominated by the interior environment. In this case, the interior dominates spatial perception and experience. The Grand Bazaar can be a very significant example to this type of spatial development (Figure1). The bazaar cannot be perceived as an entire building from the exterior while the interiors underline all the specific aspects of spatial organization and identity. The Old Bedesten of Grand Bazaar can be regarded as the most precious part of the bazaar as it was also used for storing the most valuable merchandise in the bazaar. It is one of the oldest examples of the Bedesten typology, which is a commercial building usually composed of single commercial units surrounding a central space. The central courtyard is covered by 15 domes resting on pointed arches supported by 8 tetragonal bases. Nevertheless in time this courtyard was divided into smaller parts and sold to individual merchants. Today the courtyard is dominated by one-storey commercial units that are used to exhibit antique Ottoman goods. Even if the units can physically be interpreted in different ways, they cannot be removed. Therefore these different physical layers that have become part of building's identity, restrict greatly the type of possible interventions. While evaluating different spatial layers in the Old Bedesten, we can observe a chaotic situation. Today when we go there we cannot see the vaults, which characterise the interior envelope of the building because they are partially hidden by the dominance of the retail units. Figure 1 shows the physical layers that block perception of the original spatial envelope. The section at the bottom part shows part of the void that cannot be perceived by the observer. While dealing with historic buildings with important cultural background and high

architectural quality, it is not enough to preserve the physical aspects but it is also essential to make them a part of spatial experience. In the example of Bedesten the interior envelope is the most important spatial aspect to be underlined. The original brick vaults, arches and walls are elements that define spatial identity so indisputably they are to be intensely emphasized.

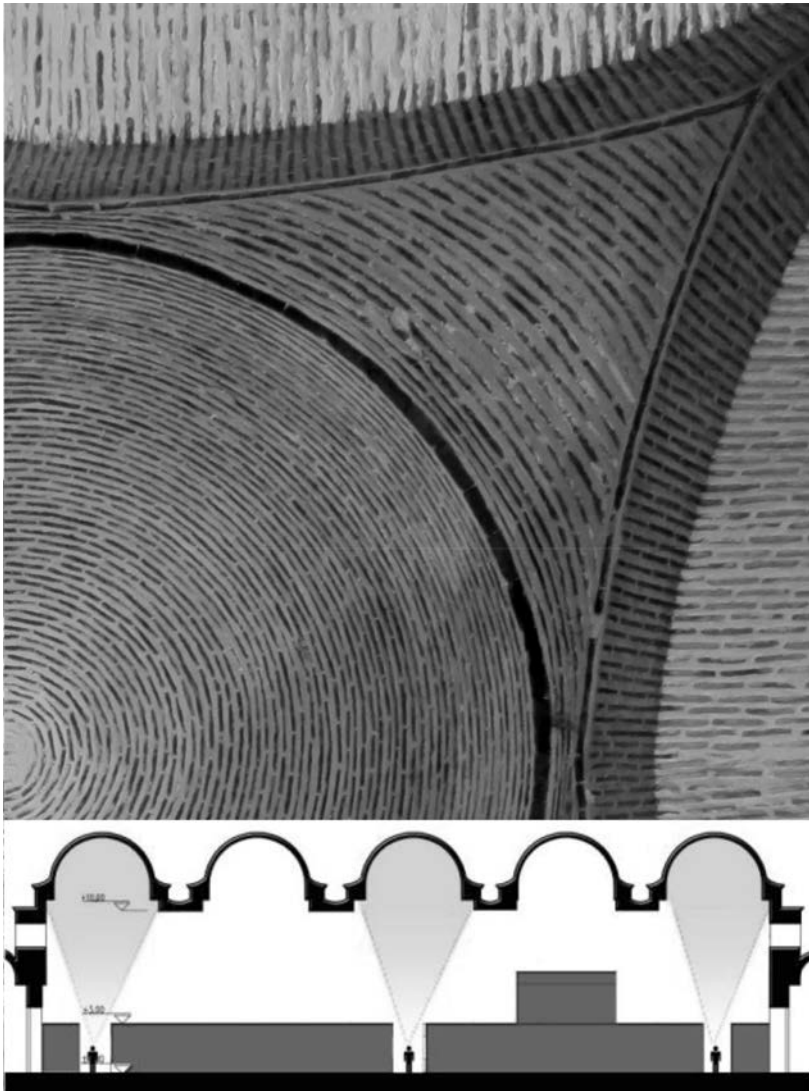


Fig. 1: The vaults as architectural elements to be underlined in Old Bedesten situated in Grand Bazaar [7].

Another example for the dominance of Interior Space is the “Palazzo dell’Esposizione Internazionale del Lavoro”, or simply “Palazzo del Lavoro” designed by the engineer Pier Luigi Nervi (in collaboration with architect Gio Ponti and Gino Covre) as part of the large complex of “Italia 61” built for the celebrations of the Unification of Italy centenary: it is a compact volume that overlooks an urban artery of great flow, at the southern gates of the city (Figure 2). In this case the interior atmosphere created by the structure of the building is strongly legible from the interior and not from the exterior (except at night, when – if illuminated - the interior appears). The pillars and their expressive connection to the roof structure create a unique pattern and spatial identity to be underlined. The outer shell is technologically interesting but - especially after so many years of neglect - not at all attractive, it hides the spectacular interior: huge “tree pillars” of 40 m side separated by continuous strips of skylights mark an empty space totally disproportionate to the human dimension and therefore all the more surprising. Three mezzanine floors have been created along the perimeter, overlooking the enormous central void. It was a remarkable exhibition structure in terms of size and technological innovation, but after some exhibition events the problems related to its size prevailed over the possibility of using it continuously. Its use was varied, as it hosted trade fairs, exhibitions, offices, educational spaces, sporadic commercial activities, to be abandoned in time [8]. In 2015 a fire made the situation even worse, but also drew attention to the issue of its future: over the years, a number of projects and proposals have taken turns, also trying to involve the inhabitants. The difficulty of preserving and at the same time restoring life to this volume is the reason why it is still unused today. In 2008, a Ltd. company bought the Palazzo del Lavoro to turn it into a shopping mall: the project was discussed,

2.3 Interiors as spatial components

Some buildings and interiors owe their particularity to their spatial organization or in other words to the way spaces come together just like the Han typology developed by the Ottomans. Han buildings are characterized by the repetitive use of identical spaces called cells, which usually come together around a central space like a courtyard. Figure 4 shows one of the typical examples of this typology, Ali Pasa Han situated on the historic peninsula of Istanbul. The building offers different levels of interaction to the surrounding urban spaces with cells opening to streets and to the courtyard and becomes important with its functional competence thanks to its spatial organization. In this case interiors are not so impressive on their own but they create an overall spatial consequence and quality by the way they come together. While proposing reuse proposals for these kind of buildings, the role of interiors as spatial components need to be underlined by conserving their particular spatial organization. This necessitates preservation of the interior envelopes and the main concept of spatial circulation that connects them. In numerous recent reuse proposals, these repetitive cellular spaces are evaluated as restrictive because of their minimal dimensions that may not be efficient for activities and functions that require more space and consequently some interior walls are eliminated to maintain bigger spaces. However this kind of interventions break the concept of spatial repetition which is the most important factor of the building typology and ruin the cultural significance of the building. In the example of Ali Pasha Han the cell is the key element of architectural and spatial identity creating a unique repetitive pattern both with its form and function.

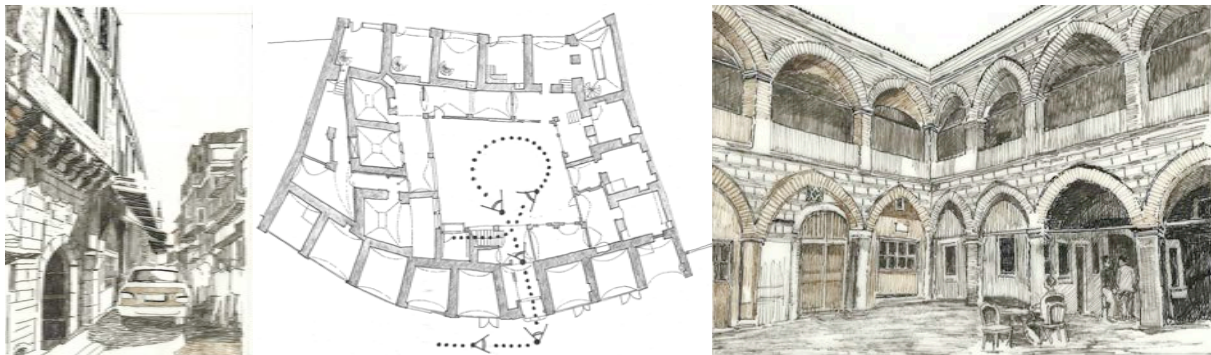


Fig. 4: Ali Pasa Han, Istanbul (Author Saglar Onay's drawings).

2.4 Interiors perceptually detached from the architectural envelope

A third case in Turin that, together with the nearby Palazzo del Lavoro, was the symbol of the celebrations of "Italia '61", is the Palazzo a Vela", a multi-purpose building originally called "Palazzo delle Mostre", designed by Franco Levi, Annibale and Giorgio Rigotti, owes its merit to a bold and harmonious, self-supporting structure, the sail to which it owes its name, which rests on the ground on only three points (with underground tie rods) expressing a lightness apparently incompatible with the reinforced concrete that constitutes it. The glazed walls of the perimeter, in addition to emphasizing the lightness of the structure, help to generate an interior space so large and bright as to appear as an exterior.

Also in this case the extraordinary spatiality has been experimented in particularly suggestive exhibitions (like the one on Calder arranged by Renzo Piano in 1986) or to install functions that could hardly be hosted in an interior (an athletic track, a climbing gym).

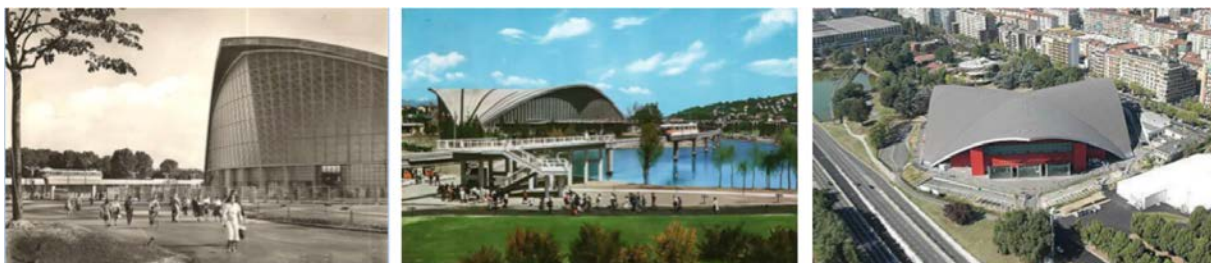


Fig. 5. Left and middle: "Palazzo a Vela" in its original version [13] and right its reuse by Gae Aulenti Architect (2003) [14].

Nevertheless, also in this case the lack of strong functional projects made this structure difficult to perform until, after years of oblivion, a project of reuse was carried out in occasion of XX Winter Olympic Games in 2006. In 2003 Gae Aulenti Architect with Aurelio De Bernardi Engineer converted it as an ice rink. Unfortunately, the preservation of the shell was only partial: the reinforced concrete sail was saved while the boundless windows were removed. Without a perimeter curtain wall, the interior

was completely erased and the sail became the simple “protective cover” of a second building with a radically different geometry and even strident with respect to its harmonious curve. A composition of red parallelepipeds emerges from the roof, humiliating the sail and depriving it not only of its function and autonomy, but also of its interior (Figure 5).

Even if the structure has been physically preserved, it cannot be said that the space it created has been conserved. Interior, as it would be detached from its architectural envelope, has not been considered in preservation issue: but architecture IS its space, and above all its *interior*.

2.5 Interiors reflecting particular aspects and elaborate detail

While changing the scale in observing interiors, details are the most volatile layer, extremely difficult to preserve in time. A Further case study will show that details can be preserved as a significant part of architectural interior. Café Baratti di Milano in Torino is a historic company located in the heart of old Turin. Founded in 1858, it has remained in business all this time and was the supplier of the Royal House.

When in 1872 the "Galleria dell'Industria Subalpina" (a pedestrian passage) was designed, it became an elegant and bright place for commerce and offices, and several commercial activities were moved there. In 1874 also Baratti & Milano decided to settle in the gallery becoming one of the busiest tea rooms in the city. Local newspapers celebrated this new shop, noting "sumptuousness and good taste", "mirrors of large surface area... artistic walnut woodcarvings... splendid gilding" [15].

In 1911, the fiftieth anniversary of national unification, the extension of the Baratti & Milano café was inaugurated: in fact, in 1909 the company had acquired further rooms and had entrusted the project to the architect Giulio Casanova in collaboration with the sculptor Edoardo Rubino. They adopted the Art Nouveau language, conceiving the new rooms with great refinement and care in details also in the furniture and chandeliers.

In 1942 and 1943 the bombing did considerable damage demolishing some parts of the Subalpina Gallery: the Café was also partially damaged. The glass furniture was destroyed and the furniture in wood, marble, mirrors, chandeliers, fabrics and objects were ruined, but in 1944 the renovation of the cafeteria began and the accurate restoration testifies a positive approach towards this heritage. In 1985 the Ministry for Cultural and Environmental Heritage imposed protective restrictions on the spaces and on the furnishings, thus recognising their historical value. In 2003, the property carried out a thorough conservative restoration of the prestigious premises, bringing the furnishings, stuccoes, decorations, marbles, wooden inlays, the façade and the stained-glass windows back to their original splendour (Figure 6).

In this case, the primary role of interior architecture has been recognized in defining the historical and cultural value of a place: customers feel in this place the same atmosphere as a hundred years ago, thanks to the colors, materials and details - which characterize the interior architecture design that have been preserved with great care. Not only spatiality, therefore, is evaluated as a cultural value to be preserved, but also the refinements themselves become an integral part of cultural significance.



Fig. 6. Above: "Baratti & Milano" after war damages in 1944, and its previous appearance. Below: the interior as it appears today, and some details of the inlaid marble floor [16].

2.6 Urban interiors (exterior interiors)

Very similar, albeit with different results, is the example that concludes the case studies in Turin: a site linked to the great theme of the recovery/reuse of dismissed industrial buildings, which in effect today we call industrial *Heritage*. These are the warehouses of the former Teksid - Deltasider, industrial activities linked to the establishment of the FIAT car factory. Dismantled in the 1980s, they have been the subject of studies and national competitions for the redevelopment not only of the volumes but of the entire area, lapped by the river Dora that had been covered to increase exploitable surface. Some structures were too heavy, and the difficulty of eradicating the imposing pillars with deep foundations suggested leaving them as authentic ruins of *industrial archaeology* in a renovated urban park. While only the pillars of a shed were left behind, in a second one also the roof was saved, obtaining (as in the case of Palazzo a Vela) a protected space of considerable height and size. Below this, the most diverse events take place: from the "street food" event to football matches; from Muslim rituals to rock concerts (Figure 7). Unlike the Palazzo a Vela, the interior has still a spatial value, being transformed into a covered exterior, then protected, and perhaps it is more correct to say that it changed its identity and its scale: from private, monofunctional interior to urban, public and multifunctional exterior.

The memory is saved, but at the same time it's been turned to the present. Interior spaces – very simple from the formal and functional point of view – preserve their identity, although as "ghosts" but still recognizable.



Fig. 7. Different uses of new "urban interior": playground [17]; prayer on the occasion of the conclusion of Ramadan [18]; "Kappa FuturFestival" Torino Summer Music Festival [19]; street food" [20].

3. Conclusion

Interiors are the spaces we live in embracing most of our activities. So, if correctly evaluated, historic interiors can communicate all values of cultural significance making them part of spatial experience. In some examples interiors are considered less important but in fact authenticity necessitates conserving all layers that contribute to the buildings identity. In the interiors that we live in and experience, while the architectural envelope although very important for urban totality is mostly something that we look at. Considering the continuity of spatial experience, the interiors need to be considered as important as their architectural envelope.

There is a difference between buildings that are conserved and those that simply *remain*. Conservation is also a question of spatial atmosphere. It's important to define appropriate uses and appropriate interventions that respect cultural significance: interior spaces (defined not only by their tangible envelope, but also by intangible features as light, temperature, smells...) maintain the "aura" of their original function, that's culturally as important as their physical shape. New functions could be not consistent with it, creating a sort of break in the memory (and actual conservation) line, while other, respecting the past, could emphasize the potential of shapes and spaces (Figure 8).



Fig. 8. Preservation of the "atmosphere" associated with the original, religious function. Left: the interior of Selexyz Dominicanen Bookstore, 2007 [21]; right: mezzanine for the catering of Kruissherenhotel Maastricht, in the former Monastery of the friars of the Holy Cross, converted to a luxury hotel in 2011 [22].

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