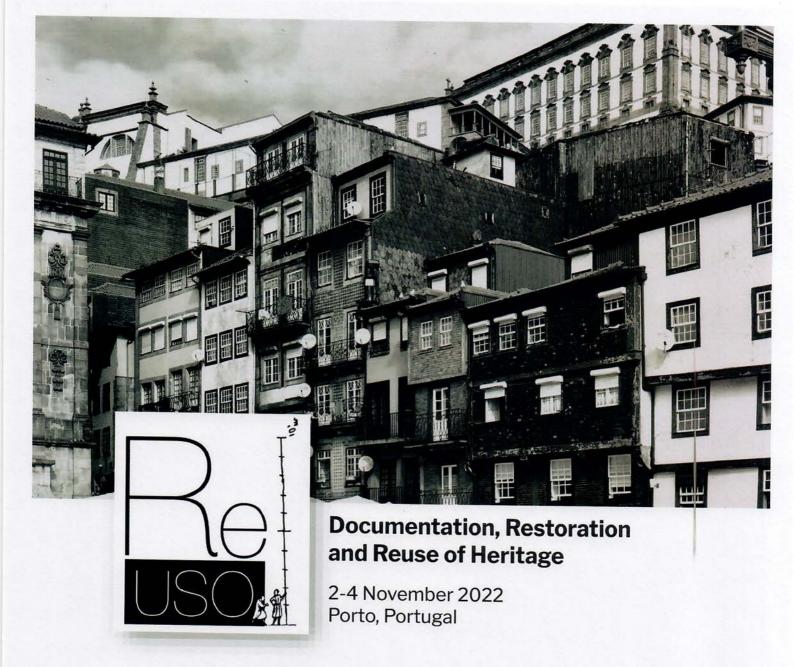
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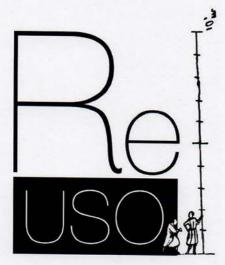












Documentation, Restoration and Reuse of Heritage

Book of Extended Abstracts

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RECOVERING THE MODERN. A "fragile" work of Ignazio Gardella.

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Abstract: At the beginning of the 20th century the Borsalino family, owners of the well-known hat factory, in an effort to build a modern and efficient city, entrusted several construction sites to Arnaldo Gardella and his partner Luigi Martini. The entanglement between Alessandria, the Borsalinos, and the Gardellas grew closer over the years. The intense activity of the Gardella Martini firm was interrupted by Arnaldo's sudden death in 1928. The construction site of the sanatorium, in the Orti district, was the setting for the forced passing of the torch between the father and his son Ignazio Gardella who, even though he had not yet graduated, was called upon to replace him abruptly. This opened a season that brought Alessandria to the center of twentieth-century architectural history. Some masterpieces, later recognized by international critics, would be built here. Within the construction site of the sanatorium, yet to be completed, the young Ignazio took charge of the design of the small church, a manifesto of one of the future protagonists of the Italian twentieth century. The chapel possesses, in essence, the elements that characterize the modern movement (bell tower, blades of light to illuminate the apse, the anomalous floor plan separated by the thick septum wall wanted by the iron rules imposed for tuberculosis patients and excavated to house the confessionals) but unfortunately today it demonstrates it's fragility.

Keywords: Gardella, Modern movement, restoration, Borsalino, sanatorium

1. Introduction

The "short century" also proved over time to be the "fragile century" of Architectural History. The large quantity of buildings produced in that limited time span has, as the years have gone by, suffered an undoubted decline in architectural quality. The materials with which this heritage has been built, despite a relatively young age, have now revealed a number of problems of physical deterioration and decay, certainly also due to exogenous factors such as air pollution, rising average temperatures, neglect of environmental problems, etc.

The fragility increases if the heritage of the modern is located in a context not so studied or outside established cultural paths. This is the case in Alessandria, located in the north of the Italian peninsula, where today it would be possible to build and enhance a pathway through twentieth-century architecture, which is the result of the joint efforts of a family of entrepreneurs and three generations of engineers and architects.

2. Gardella for the Borsalino

The Borsalino family, owners of the well-known hat factory in Alessandria since the mid-19th century, entrusted several construction sites to Arnaldo Gardella and his partner Luigi Martini in the early 20th century in an effort to build a modern and efficient city. After World War I, the financial contribution that Teresio Borsalino directed to the modernization of the city became increasingly more substantial. He took on the task of equipping Alessandria with basic infrastructure without neglecting social-welfare initiatives, culminating in the expansion of the retirement home and the construction of the Hospice of Divine Providence whose design was entrusted to engineers Arnaldo Gardella and Luigi Martini. A close collaboration between the Borsalino and Gardella families (father Arnaldo and son Ignazio, and much later grandson Jacopo) was thus inaugurated. Designers were called upon on several occasions (and over several decades) to respond to needs expressed on several fronts. In the private sector they built villas, studios, the family cemetery chapel for the Borsalino family. On the commercial side they built stores, booths, lodging for the factory employees, and managed the extension and reconstruction of the factory. They also did work in the field with strong social welfare implications (Institute of the Sisters of Divine Providence, Vittorio Emanuele III sanatorium, children's hospital).

However, the intense activity of the Milanese Gardella Martini firm was interrupted by Arnaldo's sudden death in 1928. The construction site of the sanatorium, in the Orti district, was the setting for the forced passing of the torch between the father and his son Ignazio Gardella who, even though he had not yet graduated, was called upon to replace him abruptly. Ignazio would work more and more in Alessandria for the Borsalino family. The factory, offices, employee houses, the store but also schools, extensions to the children's hospital and the asylum, and the anti-tubercular dispensary are just some of the works Gardella designed in the city. These works opened a season that brought Alessandria to the center of the history of twentieth-century architecture: some excellences would be built here, later recognized by international critics.

Within the construction site of the sanatorium, yet to be completed, the young Ignazio took charge of the design of the small church, a manifesto of one of the future protagonists of the Italian twentieth century. The chapel possesses, in essence, the elements that characterize the modern movement (bell tower, blades of light to illuminate the apse, the anomalous floor plan separated by the thick septum wall wanted by the iron rules imposed for tuberculosis patients and excavated to house the confessionals) but unfortunately today it demonstrates it's fragility.



Figure 1. The chapel of the sanatorium of Alessandria, designed by I. Gardella (photo by P. Mellano)

