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PRESERVATION AND VALORIZATION OF PALAZZO PRINCIPI D'ACAIA IN PINEROLO (TURIN, ITALY): AN IN-PROGRESS, PARTICIPATORY PROJECT

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Abstract

From a methodological point of view, drafting a restoration project for conserving an architectural heritage first requires an in-depth understanding of the building and its stratifications. The restoration project adopts the results of studies and analytical surveys to preserve and pass down to future generations what characterizes the building and determines its historical and cultural value. This contribution presents the results of the investigation work carried out by the Polytechnic of Turin on the so-called Palazzo Principi d'Acaia in Pinerolo (Turin) aimed at actively contributing to elaborating an appropriate restoration and valorization project.

Keywords

Knowledge; conservation; diagnostic investigation; valorization

1. *Introduction*

Architecture represents "an asset in progressive and collective evolution" (Dezzi Bardeschi 2004, p. 138). It is "the place of existence; it lives in time and is substantiated by its modifications" (Bellini, 1997, p. 18), whose reasons reside in sociocultural changes and in the changing needs and services required by those who use it. As Amedeo Bellini states, "Preservation [...] is but the search for a regulation of transformation, which maximizes permanence, adds its mark, reinterprets without destroying, in the awareness of the uniqueness of each artifact and its manifold documental nature" (Bellini, 1997, p. 18). So, even though its purpose is to preserve the architectural asset, any restoration intervention necessarily transforms the artifact.

This transformation can be conducted "controlled and proactive" (Carbonara, 2012, p. 19) only if it is designed based on an in-depth study of the building, conceived as an irreplaceable document of material culture. From a methodological point of view, the knowledge phase represents the primal, essential step toward conscious design, respecting and preserving the artifact's recognized qualities and responding to the needs of those who will use and care for it. Indeed, preservation does not necessarily imply assuming a condition of imprisonment with the testimonies of the past, but rather the elaboration of projects that give them a future through their value and potential.

The definition of an appropriate intervention proposal necessarily flows from the search "[of] the most suitable response to the considered circumstance with effort and method, case by case, acknowledging the always multifaceted and new context of each monument" (Carbonara, 2012, p. 19). As recently emphasized in the guidelines developed by ICOMOS to promote the adoption of quality standards for EU-funded projects[1], "project design must express an understanding of cultural heritage, its context and values. New respectful and compatible uses of cultural heritage should always be clearly and explicitly connected to its 'intrinsic value'" (Icomos 2020, p. 36).

Therefore, any restoration intervention needs to be based on "feasibility and detailed studies to determine the characteristics and values of the cultural heritage, its state of conservation, needs,

[1] The *Quality Principles* were developed by ICOMOS under the mandate of the European Union Flagship Initiative of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018. They aim to "provide guidance on quality principles for all stakeholders directly or indirectly engaged in EU-funded interventions that could impact on cultural heritage" (ICOMOS, 2020, p. 5).



Fig. 1: Pinerolo, the so-called Palazzo dei Principi d'Acaia, seen from the garden. The building results from the amalgamation of several units, whose architectural language was later uniformed during the Renaissance period (R. Rudiero 2024).

and opportunities, risks, and the objectives of the project" (Icomos 2020, p. 36).

Conducting indirect and direct analyses of the artifact allows designers to acquire useful information to orient the restoration project toward solutions enabling the asset's enjoyment. In this way, its distinctive characteristics, which determine its historical and cultural value, can be preserved and transmitted to future generations (Dalla Costa, 2000; Carbonara, 2012; Musso, 2016). By collecting and studying archival, iconographic, and photographic material, designers deepen their knowledge of an artifact's history and many transformations. Indirect investigation is compounded with direct surveys aimed at determining the building's geometry, construction and structural features, material texture, and state of preservation. As Mario Dalla Costa pointed out, "Historical knowledge and technical (and technological) knowledge of architecture allow the restoration intervention to adhere to the principles of respect for the work, of non-falsification and non-distortion of the constructive and material context, and finally, of the preservation of the historical documental evidence, which goes beyond the architectural object but involves all the built environment with recognized historical values" (Dalla Costa, 1994, p. 12).

It is also possible to resort to non-destructive diagnostic survey tools that offer valuable support in analyzing the built environment, allowing the acquisition of useful information to direct the restoration and recovery project (Musso, 2016; Volinia & Tamburrino, 2023). This may occur in the presence of difficulties in identifying the building's stratifications or if a more profound knowledge of the materials and their chemical-physical and mechanical characteristics is sought, along with investigating the presence of degradation phenomena that are not visible to the naked eye.

It is considered interesting to present here the results of an investigation conducted in the fall of 2016, requested by the Associazione Italia Nostra, Pinerolo section "Ettore Serafino", engaged in promoting the preservation of the so-called Palazzo Principi d'Acaia in Pinerolo, in the

Metropolitan City of Turin (Fig. 1). To contribute to the elaboration of an appropriate restoration, reuse, and valorization project for the Palace, a diagnostic survey campaign was deemed appropriate. This campaign allowed for a deeper understanding of the complex and its stratifications and a qualitative assessment of the state of conservation of some structural elements.

2. Palazzo Principi d'Acaia in Pinerolo: brief historical and construction notes

The origins of Pinerolo are uncertain; however, it is known to have fully developed in the medieval period and was articulated entirely from the slopes to the apex of Mount Pepino. It was divided into two portions, each equipped with defensive walls. One was the Piano (Plain), towards the bottom, hosting the church that rose to the title of cathedral from 1748: the Cathedral of San Donato. The other was the Borgo (Hamlet), in the upper part, characterized by the church of San Maurizio and the Bersatore Castle, the seat of the lords of the city and the whole of Piedmont, the Savoia-Acaia (Calliero & Moretti, 2009a). Administrative functions and noble residences were concentrated within the Borgo, probably the oldest core. However, following the second French domination (which began between 1630 and the following year), it was almost totally obliterated by the building of the Citadel. Its dismantlement with the return of the Savoy family (1696) rendered this area almost devoid of recognizable architectural evidence, making the Piano the best-preserved urban district (Carminati, 2015; Comoli Mandracci, 1982). The latter – more recent – mostly housed commercial and artisan activities, along with the residences of professionals. Over time, the latter progressively aimed (and managed) to establish themselves in the Pinerolo political scene. The palatial complex under investigation is located in the highest part of the Piano, close to the thirteenth-century walls that separated it from the Borgo. This location – close to the center of city power – and the fine architectural workmanship led to its identification as the residence of the Acaia family[2] (Fig. 10), at least from the early 19th century. This attribution, consolidated over time yet always discussed, led to new investigation and historical research at the turn of the last century.



Fig. 2: The facade of the Palace on Via al Castello. Note the string course and one of the ogival openings with decorated terracotta elements (R. Rudiero 2024)

[2] With his *Alle porte d'Italia* (1884), Edmondo de Amicis supported and diffused the wrong hypothesis of attribution of the Palace to the Princes of Acaia.

First, this erroneous interpretation was disproved (Calliero, 2002); then, the Palace's ownership was identified in the Vastamiglio family, originally from Vigevano and already holding administrative and legal positions in the Duchy of Milan (Calliero & Trombotto, 2017; Trombotto 2022). Some of its representatives moved to the Pinerolo area, driven by opportunities for establishment in the professional sphere. Thus, they assumed several important public offices in Pinerolo while apparently continuously residing in the Palace.

Therefore, they likely initiated the campaign to modernize the medieval pre-existing constructions on that lot, giving rise to the so-called Palazzo Principi d'Acaia at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. This date is apparently also asseverated by the recent interpretation of some frescoes inside the north sleeve (Calliero & Trombotto 2017, pp. 17-18) (Fig. 3). Based on the previous layout, the building is divided into three separate wings, yet interconnected in a U-shape, with a courtyard in the center.



Fig. 3: One of the frescoed rooms on the second floor of the north wing belonging to an originally unified hall that was, over time, split with partitions and lowered with suspended ceilings. Note the superficial holes from the recent stratigraphic surveys and restoration of the building, as well as the deeper one to investigate its upward development (R. Rudiero 2024)

The latter opens to the west onto a garden, enclosed by walls, and to the east onto a small courtyard surrounded by walls, too, which houses a well. The only street front has three stories above ground, while the other two wings are higher by one story each (Fig. 1).

In 1664, the Palace was foreclosed to the heir of the Vastamiglio family, Michele Rorencho (Trombotto, 2002, p. 317). Thus, it ceased to be a stately residence and became, almost seamlessly, a hospital for the poor until 1836, when it was used as a Hospice for the Catechumens (Calliero & Moretti, 2009b, p. 127). After being progressively fractionated into small houses, it assumed the function of residence for families in need from the postwar period onward. In 1983, it was acquired by the municipality – and is still in its possession; around the 2000s, it was decommissioned and abandoned – this event increased the process of deterioration already taking place (Fig. 11).

Therefore, the complex is now characterized by a series of stratifications that trace its transformation from a stately home to a functional building. These stratifications inevitably conceal some of the valuable qualities that characterized it. One example is the grisaille frescoes on the second floor of the north wing, which were consistently covered by successive layers of plaster and partly destroyed by the construction of partitions and the opening of new windows on the courtyard front (Fig. 3). Another example – from a functional point of view – is the disuse of the original cylindrical stair tower, which was replaced by a new and more operational ramp in the 19th century (Calliero & Moretti 2009b, p. 125). In contrast, anthropomorphic and phytomorphic terracotta window frames and string courses remain almost intact on the prospect along the street to the Castle (Fig. 2). The same is true for the articulation in the porch and overhanging loggia of the same building toward the inside of the courtyard. In particular, the brick columns on the ground floor are crowned with elegant stone capitals carved with scroll motifs (Fig. 8). On the upper floor, the wooden elements are carved instead, serving as a connection with the beam that supports the roof pitch (Fig. 5). In the interiors, wooden coffered ceilings are still present, partially visible thanks to fortuitous falls of the thatched ceilings due to water infiltration (this affected mainly the south wing, which has since been restored, but also the other ones, as shown in Fig. 11). Similarly, simplifications in the articulation of the ribbed vaults on the first floor have been deduced in the north wing of the building, including the addition of a thatched counter-vault (Fig. 4). Moreover, partial tests on the concrete brick floors have unveiled a decorated band and an additional

wooden ceiling on the floor where the frescoes are (Fig. 3).

The Palace is still unused and definitely not in optimal condition. However, thanks to the studies mentioned above, above all, to the interest of associations that statutorily pursue the preservation of historical heritage, and to the municipality's intervention, a virtuous circle has been produced, and a spotlight has been rekindled on the Palace and its preservation and valorization. The workshop we will now briefly go over is part of this process that led to the implementation of some safety and restoration interventions, as described in the conclusion.



Fig. 4: The intervention to mask the ribbed vaults on the first floor of the north wing (R. Rudiero 2024)

3. Diagnostic surveys for a more comprehensive understanding of the architectural asset

Alongside the now well-established tasks of education and scientific research, the university has long been entrusted with fulfilling what is called the "Third Mission"[3]. This requires Universities to turn to the socio-economic context by enhancing and transferring knowledge acquired in research activities. The aim is to promote the economic and social growth of the territory through interventions with cultural, social, and educational implications. With this in mind, the request for collaboration by the Associazione Italia Nostra Pinerolo section was accepted. It was decided to initiate a program of detailed investigation of Palazzo Principi d'Acaia to contribute to the elaboration of the project for the Palace's preservation and valorization by sharing the knowledge acquired through the analysis activities[4].



Fig. 5: Porch and loggia of the south wing, overlooking the inner courtyard (R. Rudiero 2024)

[3] For a more precise definition of "Third Mission", see Art. 3 c. 1 of the ANVUR Establishment Regulation in Presidential Decree. 76/2010.

[4] It should be noted that the survey campaign was limited to analyzing a few areas of the Palace, while a more comprehensive and focused analysis of the factory will be carried out later.

The survey activity was conducted by professors and students of the Polytechnic University of Turin with the support of the specialists Arch. Monica Volinia and Mario Girotto of the Non-Destructive Diagnostics Laboratory of the Department of Architecture and Design. It allowed both to help define the stratigraphic palimpsest characterizing the building and to perform a punctual assessment of the state of preservation of some structural elements (particularly wooden beams and masonry columns) (Fig. 6).

Endoscopic and thermographic tests were conducted to improve the framework of knowledge of the building's history and its transformations. The former aimed to investigate the composition and stratification of some floors (made with masonry or wooden vaults) whose real constitution was difficult to identify.

Then, the thermographic scanning campaign identified ogival openings partially buffered and concealed by plaster (Fig. 7). It also revealed the trace of an ancient chimney, mentioned in bibliographic sources but no longer visible today, testifying to the building's multiple transformations over time. Finally, penetrometer tests at the headers of some of the beams of wooden coffered floors allowed for qualitative rather than quantitative assessment of their state of preservation. Criticalities only appeared in some of the beams tested.

Although partial, the surveys conducted have indeed allowed for a deeper understanding of the Palace and its state of preservation. They helped shed light on the multi-layered palimpsest that characterizes it and highlight critical situations that the naked eye cannot immediately detect. However, a more complete and exhaustive knowledge of the artifact would require conducting a more extensive survey campaign, an essential prerequisite for implementing appropriate and compatible interventions. In fact, as Giovanni Carbonara states, “designing or, even worse, intervening without preliminary analyses and studies means postponing the confrontation with the knots and difficulties – which will not be long in coming once the construction site opens – until a time that is certainly less favorable for the artifact” (Carbonara, 2012, p. 99).



Fig. 6: Pinerolo, the so-called Palazzo dei Principi d'Acaia, seen from the court. Students engaged in activities to assess the state of preservation of brick columns (M. Mattone 2016).

4. For shared knowledge: a participatory and in-progress project

As anticipated, the 2016 workshop represented a moment of in-depth technical and scientific study and a harbinger of new historical acquisitions. It was part of the process where the Polytechnic of Turin itself (e.g., Ientile & Romeo, 2009), local scholars, and associations such as Italia Nostra have dedicated to relocating the so-called Palazzo dei Principi d'Acaia to the center of the conservation policies of the Municipality of Pinerolo. This is testified by various conferences pertaining to the topic (including the one in 2010 titled *Il palazzo dei Principi d'Acaja di Pinerolo. Un monumento da salvare*), several photographic exhibitions, the creation of a popular video featuring historian and professor Alessandro Barbero[5], and the inclusion of the complex within the Art Bonus initiatives[6].

It seems worth highlighting that the workshop's results, in line with the university's Third Mission, were the subject of an itinerant photo exhibition and a seminar day.

This type of action, in which diagnostic researches are disseminated, supports the concept that the various phases of the restoration process – knowledge, intervention, and valorization – are closely interconnected and weave osmotic relationships between them. Although methodologically proper, these phases cannot be considered in a one-way succession; on the contrary, each of them inevitably influences the others. For example, restoration work on artifacts is often the harbinger of new and sometimes unexpected discoveries of a historical nature. Therefore, the knowledge phase cannot be considered exhausted at the beginning of the process. The desire, hence, to publicise the results, even if only partial, of diagnostic research, leads to the enhancement in progress of the artifact being investigated, with the dual consequence of disseminating historical news but also of explaining to the public how operations preparatory to an intervention work, emphasising their irreplaceable value in drawing up a quality project (Della Torre & Russo, 2023; Rudiero, 2023, Valzano, 2020).

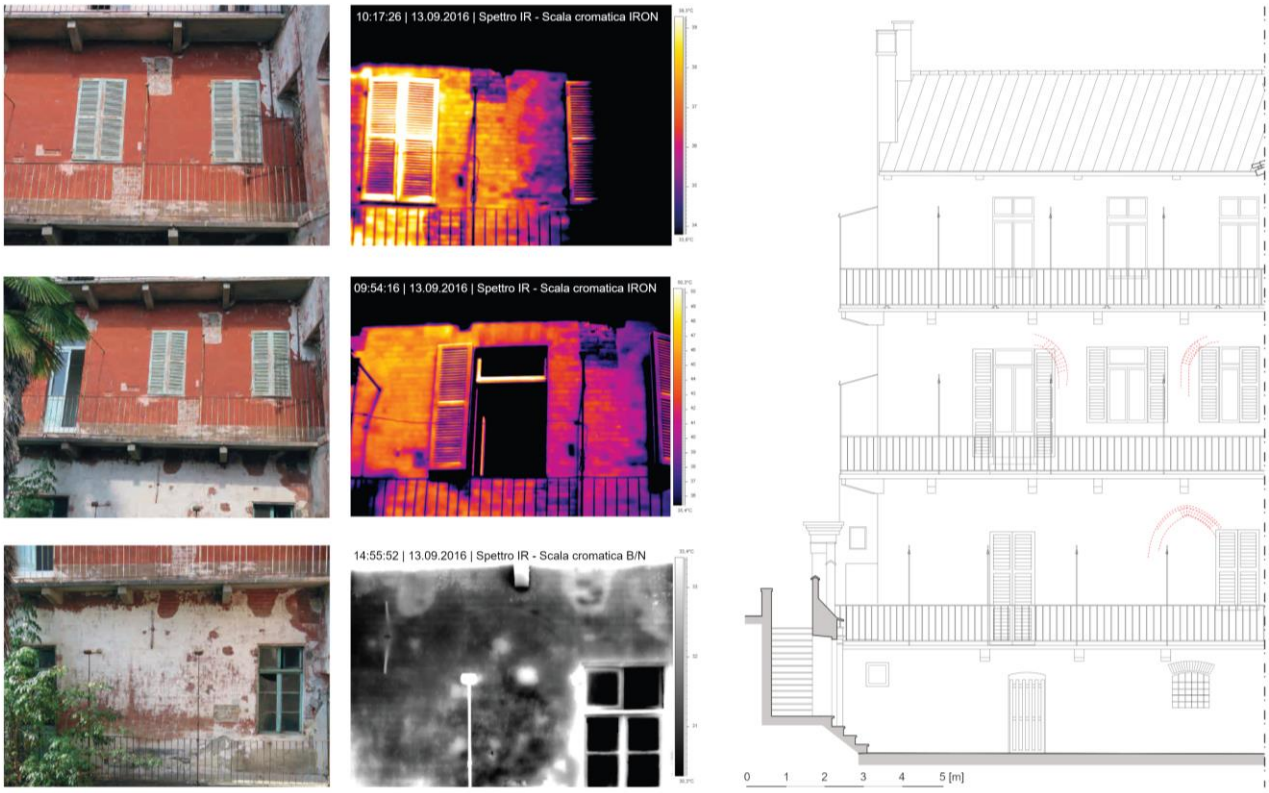


Fig. 7: A thermographic survey conducted on the inner court's south prospect shows the presence of buffered ogival openings (elaboration by G. Bergamo, 2018)

[5] See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jhPoluqtXo

[6] See: https://artbonus.gov.it/palazzo-acaja.html

Once this has been specified, it is essential to underline that the research carried out under the direction of the Polytechnic University of Turin was part of a broader and long-standing process, locally active through voluntary yet organically organized activities. They aimed to make the citizens aware of the values of an asset characterized by fragmentary knowledge and, above all, not properly preserved and used. So, with these renewed solicitations and the new analysis, the first restoration interventions designed to secure the Palace were carried out starting in 2019-2020. First, the roof of the south wing was rebuilt, and the wooden floor immediately below it was integrated and restored (Fig. 12). Analogous interventions were performed on the loggia floor. On its ground floor, the columns were consolidated (Fig. 8), and portions of eroded bricks pertaining to the dignified facade overlooking Via al Castello were reintegrated (Fig. 9).



Fig. 8: The brick pillar of the porch on the ground floor, after restoration. The wooden ceiling of the covered side room has also undergone conservation work (R. Rudiero 2024)

A portion of the boundary wall, partially collapsed in 2016, has been rebuilt. In addition, a provisional covering was added to the north wing to prevent further stormwater infiltration (Bosco, 2019) (Figs. 10-11). More recently, thanks – again – to the intervention of Italia Nostra, the Zonta Club Pinerolo, and Associazione Mellon, as well as the cooperation of the City of Pinerolo, the surface removal and restoration of the fresco cartouches in one of the Palace rooms were carried out in 2021 (Trombotto, 2022) (Fig. 3).

The realization of all these interventions has allowed the asset to be usable again, at least in its external parts. Indeed, as of September 2020, it is periodically open to the public. This is also possible thanks to the efforts of Italia Nostra volunteers, who organize guided tours to foster a more widespread knowledge of this complex stratigraphic palimpsest. Thus, it is now part of a larger city route, a destination or crossroad of an urban-scale valorization. It also includes theatrical performances narrating the true or alleged events that occurred within the complex.



Fig. 9: Reintegration of detached bricks on the main exterior facade (R. Rudiero 2020)

This last consideration leads us to a concluding reflection related precisely to the systemic valorization of the heritage of Pinerolo and the

Pinerolo area. By tradition and mythography – and also in a factual way (being an important architectural testimony of one of the pivotal centers of the Principality) – the Palace belongs to a specific branch of the Savoy family. Thus, in recent years, it has been involved in projects aimed at valorizing the entire territorial asset south of Turin by using the House of Acaia as a propeller for cultural tourism[7]. This occurrence had the merit of prompting new studies and research, producing a virtuous circle. This is demonstrated, for example, by the itinerant conference entitled *Tutela, conservazione e valorizzazione dei beni Acaia in Piemonte* (Protection, Conservation and Valorization of Acaia Assets in Piedmont), held in Turin, Pinerolo and Fossano in December 2018, organized by the Regional Council of Italia Nostra Piemonte, which also gathered several proposals on how to conserve the Palace in Pinerolo (Trombotto, 2019).



Fig. 10: View from one of the rooms on the top floor of the north wing. The proximity to the church of St. Maurzio, already part of the Borgo, clarifies the possible unintentional mystification about the Palace's ownership (R. Rudiero 2024)

[7] Among these is "Terre d'Acaia", the most organic and best-developed (Chiapello, 2016), but despite this, it failed (centrostudisilviopellico.it/the-project-terre-dacaia-closes/).

However, several years have passed since then. The most pressing interventions on the complex have been carried out, but it has emerged that a lot still needs to be done. More studies would certainly be needed to enhance the already conspicuous analyses of the state of preservation. Archaeological investigations, including excavation and analyses of the building body, would also be useful in determining the construction periods and subsequent stratifications with certainty.



Fig. 11: Room on the upper floors of the east wing. The presence of furniture and furnishings denounces the Palace's last function, residence. Also note the partial fall of the thatched ceiling due to water infiltration, which required introducing a temporary covering to counteract the situation (R. Rudiero 2024)

Beyond all of this, and despite being usable only from the outside, the Palace is already a cultural hub for citizens, who have been sensitive to its preservation over time. This is mainly thanks to the actions of local associations and scientific societies. We firmly believe that further



Fig. 12: Restoration work on the first-floor hall of the south wing. Subject to consistent deterioration due to infiltration, a new roof was recently built, and the corresponding floor underneath, previously concealed by a thatched ceiling, was restored. Most planks in this room have been replaced; instead, where possible, original beams have been kept (R. Rudiero 2024).

cooperative relations between them and the university are necessary. On this basis, and with a renewed commitment from the public administration, an out-and-out heritage community can be realized (*Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society,* Faro 2005) to best preserve the Palace in a way that makes it truly public, alive and vivifying.

Credits

The article is the result of the joint work of the two authors. Manuela Mattone is the author of paragraphs 1 and 3, and Riccardo Rudiero is the author of paragraphs 2 and 4.

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