

Reuse of deconsecrated churches. The case of Pavia

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SUMMARY.

It is difficult to talk about the Italian religious heritage that, once abandoned, has been reused, for there would be to talk of a number of buildings so huge that have not yet been determined. It is otherwise possible to talk about this theme observing singular and pregnant examples. The one chosen for this paper is that of the churches of Pavia, a town in the north of Italy, near Milan, for centuries and still now home of a prestigious University that has influenced its urban development. Inside the old wall perimeter of the city there are twenty two deconsecrated churches belonging to different historical and architectural periods. The presence of these numerous huge and empty "containers" with a very high symbolic and cultural value represents a problem, but also a resource. Almost all of them are desecrated by the end of the eighteenth century, and since then more or less abandoned or engaged to different uses; all of them are listed and are part of Italian cultural heritage. With a summary table we can imagine their great value, and also appreciate the variety of uses that now characterize them. The aspect that most of all influences the choice of a new use is, understandably, the ownership. The definition of a new use for the churches now belonging to private normally doesn't take into account the religious specificity or the cultural value of the building; this also affect the restoration approach. For the public owner, on the contrary, there appears to be a certain awareness and conservative planning will respectful of what already exists, but the outcomes are evidently affected, in some cases, by the lack of money. This is so true that the decision not to intervene is sometimes compulsory. The University, pulled by the need of spaces inside the historic center, is another protagonist of the restoration of former churches. Here we can briefly analyze the case of San Tommaso and the largest University classroom in its nave. Finally the important role of the colleges. In particular the Aula Magna of the Ghislieri college in San Francesco da Paola evidences which peaks of property a project on a desecrated church can achieve. This paper finally tries to show how the urban context and its peculiarities (in this case, prominently, the presence of the university) offers a fertile ground for a correct and compatible reuse of places of worship.

Pavia is an Italian country town 35 km from Milan, with about seven thousand inhabitants. It homes architectural heritage of great value, which first expression are the churches, and one of the first European universities that still characterizes the city. In the XVIII century the Habsburg rule develop a plan of reforms for the University, which arrangement of spaces is facilitated by the suppression of religious orders¹. This action has a huge weight in the management of Church property: in the following century many nationalized buildings remained unsold, unoccupied and unused. The continuation of this desolation is what largely led to the loss of this heritage and, on the other hand, to the challenging issue of reuse of what is remained.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the University requires expansion in other areas. While at the beginning it searches for areas outside the center, especially since the nineties it is followed the opposite trend that wants to find inside the city new spaces². In fact in Pavia emerges a need for a policy that looks to the city as a whole. The last decade is characterized by regeneration policies in urban and territorial scale affecting brownfield sites internal to the urban fabric. Indeed the Introduction of the Report to the Urban Development Plan (2003) says that «the Plan does not renounce the possibility of expanding the presence of the University, to mix students and citizens , to "exploit" the prestige of the University of Pavia to upgrade and enrich the entire city.»³

The historic center of Pavia coincides with the area enclosed within the walls built in the twelfth century and demolished in the second half of the nineteenth century⁴. This area, over the ages, overlapped countless testimonies, including those of religious nature. From studies on several texts that record the religious buildings of the city⁵ emerges that 101 churches (of whom there is

no trace except for a few bricks or toponymy names) are disappeared, that 16 are still used as parish churches and that 22 have lost their original function.

It would be really interesting to recall the peculiar history of each of these 22 buildings, but for reasons of space and clarity here we choose to provide only a summary table and to focus on the most important cases for our purpose. The indication of the century in which these churches are built recalls how this heritage covers many ages and it is expression of different architectural languages; the indication of the owners intend to evoke the Italian problematic of managing cultural heritage belonging to so many different individuals and legal entities.

Church	Built in (century)	Present use	Owner
Chapel of the Ospizio dei Derelitti	XVIII	House	Private
San Colombano	XIII	House	Private
Santa Trinità	XVIII	Restaurant + House	Private
San Nicolò della Moneta	XIII	Shop	Private
San Sebastiano	XIV	Shop	Private
Santissimo Crocifisso	XVI	Shop	Private
San Giuseppe	XVI	Art gallery	Private
San Rocco	XVI	Bookshop	Private
Santa Mostiola	XIII	-	Private
San Maiolo	XVI	-	State
Santa Maria Annunciata	XV	Conference room	Province
San Dalmazio	XIII	-	Municipality
Santa Clara	XV	Library (project)	Municipality
Santa Maria delle Cacce	XVII	Evangelical church	Municipality
Santi Quirico e Giulitta	XVIII	Hall for weddings	Municipality
Santa Maria Gualtieri	XI	Conference room	Municipality
Santa Maria di Ognissanti	XV	Science labs	University
San Matteo	XV	Classroom	University
San Felice	VIII	Classroom	University
San Tommaso	XIV	Classroom	University
Sant'Antonio da Padova	XVI	Conference room	College
San Francesco da Paola	XVIII	Aula Magna	College

Almost all of them are desecrated by the end of the eighteenth century, following the reforms of Joseph II and since then more or less abandoned or engaged to many different uses⁶; all of them are listed and are part of Italian cultural heritage.

The definition of a new use for the churches now belonging to private owners was not subject to special projects taking into account the religious specificity: as history has handed over to new owners, they have used them for their own purposes⁷ (Fig.1)

Before analyzing the most interesting cases of public owners, from the restoration point of view, it is necessary to remark that in this context the financial availability matters a lot. For this reason, sadly, the church of San Maiolo is still waiting for a destination. It is out of the question the importance of the complex⁸. Since 1962 it is occupied by the State Archive of Pavia, and it is prepared a draft to transform it into the study room by lofting the nave. This proposal has remained on paper, because works on archeological remains have exhausted the funds available and left the intervention of the church for better times that have not yet arrived.

Surely the most interesting municipal building is the former church of Santa Maria Gualtieri⁹. In the XIX century it is turned into residential building with shops on the ground floor and apartments on the first floor, second and attic, obtained by piercing the entire façade. In order to achieve horizontal elements, the pillars of the first span and their vaults have been demolished. In the forties is drawn up a large urban project in the heart of the city, and since the beginning the church is thought as a multi-purpose room for diverse cultural activities¹⁰. In 1976 eng. Aiace Astori (city planning commissioner), assisted by prof. arch. Gazzola (member of the High Council for the Arts) and arch. Libero Cecchini choose to restore the factory to the Romanesque phase to maintain the unity of the space (Fig.2). With hindsight, we see that the solutions had a good deal of arbitrariness, but it is based on real traces. The intervention in the thinking of designers should be based on the principles of flexibility, multi-functionality and compliance with

the building.¹¹ It is managed mostly as exhibition hall by the Department of Culture of the Municipality of Pavia.

Speaking of the churches belonging to the University, we can focus on that fourteenth-century of San Tommaso. Arch. Piermarini, who in the XVIII century is entrusted with the task of adapting the complex to establish the Lombard Seminar, demolishes the right aisle, dab the large openings (including the rose window on the main façade and arched lancet on the south transept), opens some rectangular windows and transforms completely the interior inserting a horizontal element that still remains. Closed the General Seminary in 1791, the huge building is converted into barracks and the former church used as a military hospital¹². Eng. Gianpaolo Calvi, with the collaboration of the architect Fumagalli, in 1992-1995 realizes the restoration. Interestingly, in this case the subdivision of the space created in the previous centuries has been maintained. Therefore, in what was the original space of the church are now housed three classrooms (in the nave, in the old chapel and the chancel) and two corridors (north aisle and transept). The aula magna occupies the space of the nave and offers a capacity of 308 seats, the largest of all the lecture halls of the center of Pavia. If it were not for its external *facies*, it is almost unrecognizable as a church (Fig.3).

To conclude the overview, we have to mention one building entered into the heritage of one of the most prestigious colleges, the Ghislieri. Its Aula Magna is located in the former church of San Francesco da Paola, with its eighteenth century façade still intact¹³. The restoration took place from 1997 to 2001. A large single hall, now bare of any decoration except for a very few pictorial remains, is the subject of a conservative and mimetic intervention, which has seen the integration of damaged elements (bases of pilasters, brick floor) and the reconstruction, using a different plaster coloring, of lost elements (capitals and entablature). The minimum functional additions are characterized by a not impacting recognition (e.g. the lift encased in a small side chapel in the first span on the left). It is particular the recall of the canvas once in the church on the acoustic correctors on the walls. On what was the presbytery, it is placed a stage where the top two levels (with the same red seats of the hall) are used by the choir. The apse has an opening that leads into the former sacristy now equipped as rehearsal room (with panels for soundproofing). The *Aula Magna*, opened in 2002, can accommodate up to 350 people and hosts national and international scientific conferences, meetings with institutional conferences and lectures, theatrical and musical performances, including in particular the 'Ghislieri Musica' artistic season. It is definitely one of the best examples of compatible and desirable reuse of deconsecrated churches (Fig.4).

The results found in this vast architectural palimpsest, diversified depending on the financial resources available, demonstrate a general conservative and respectful approach and returns the heritage to the community as dignity useful. It doesn't exist a comprehensive plan for the conversion of these assets, which evidently are considered individually, since everyone has a unique story. The only exception is the project that has made Santa Maria Gualtieri the centerpiece of an urban intervention in the heart of the city. In general, each institution has followed its own management policy. The expansion of the University by a centrifuge phase is passed to the centripetal, expanding its presence in the historical centre. Public bodies demonstrate cultural awareness of their heritage, but unfortunately when there is no money, the buildings are abandoned or at risk of falling into the hands of private interests.

The recent affair of Santa Maria delle Cacce¹⁴ is instead a symptom that the Curia has not disinterested in the fate of buildings once used for worship. Factor to consider for this specific case is also and above all the fact that churches are deconsecrated from more than two centuries and almost all have had different functions, although degrading.

Culture had certainly its weight in the choice of conversion, as it is clear in the approach to restoration. Indeed, while in Santa Maria Gualtieri they pulled out a Romanesque church from a nineteenth century condo, San Tommaso is even not recognizable as a church. The rediscovery and attention of these places, especially in the last twenty years, is a sign that now the idea of cultural heritage as a resource has penetrated into Italian society and it's no longer felt as a scandal a church transformed into something else.

In fact, in Italy the ecclesiastical legislation is very cautious and reduction to profane use as last option is the basic principle that guides the approach to this issue. For deconsecrated churches are proposed solutions that protect the public use of the building as cultural heritage, such as venues for artistic activities, libraries, archives and museums. Furthermore, the question is covered with greater importance when it is instantly recognizable, in the architectural structure,

the original sacrality¹⁵. In these examples were perhaps unconsciously followed the guidelines provided by the Catholic Church. Indeed the destination is always for public utility and cultural aims. This shows the general respect for an Italian mentality still tied to the symbols of the religion.

We can then conclude that the proposal of the Urban Development Plan, that is the revitalization of the city based on his university vocation and the 'exploitation' of cultural heritage, is being achieved. The case of Pavia's deconsecrated churches, turned into facilities for public and university life, could be taken as an example for other similar context all over Europe.

¹ Cf. Pietro Vaccari, *Storia della Università di Pavia* (Pavia: Università di Pavia editrice, 1957), 164; Luisa Erba, *Alma Ticiniensis Universitas* (Pavia: Silvana, 1990).

² Cf. Claudio Baracca and Giorgio Corioni, Massimo Giuliani, 1988, "La città fuori le mura", in *Pavia: ambiente, storia, cultura* (Novara: Istituto Geografico DeAgostini, 1988), 86; Giulio Guderzo "Perché l'Università" *Annali di storia pavese* 27 (1990) 13-29.

³ Comune di Pavia, Assessorato all'Urbanistica, *Documento di indirizzi urbanistici per la redazione del Piano Regolatore Generale di Pavia* (Milano, 2002) 18.

⁴ Cf. Flavio Conti and Vincenzo Hybsch, Antonello Vincenti, *I castelli della Lombardia* (Novara: Istituto Geografico DeAgostini, 1993).

⁵ In 1315 Opicino de Canistris in the *Liber de laudibus Civitatis Ticiniensis* claims that in Pavia there are «133 churches, 21 convents of nuns» and makes a valuable list. Cf. Michele Chieppi, *Le chiese di Pavia entro il primo muro della città secondo Opicino de Canistris* (Pavia: Luculano, 2008); Rodolfo Maiocchi, *Le chiese di Pavia* (Pavia: Tipografia Artigianelli, 1903); Antonello Sacchi, *Pavia acra: arte, fede, storia* (Pavia: Comune di Pavia, 2010); Luciano Marabelli, *Pavia: le chiese, le contrade, realtà e leggende, curiosità* (Pavia, 1997).

⁶ One of the few exceptions is that of San Colombano Maggiore: it was suppressed in 1565, and since then it is a private residence. Cf. Marabelli, *Pavia*, 17-18.

⁷ Maybe the only exception is the Feltrinelli bookshop: after the dismantling of the Roma movie house, in 1996, during the restoration works reappeared the altar of the old church of San Rocco, still visible today. Cf. Marabelli, *Pavia*, 58.

⁸ The monastery is founded in 967 and given to saint Maiolo, abbot of Cluny, and becomes the main center for the dissemination of the Cluny reform in Lombardy, while the church is rebuilt in 1596 by the Somascan Fathers who have there their main house. Cf. Silvia Brugati, "La chiesa di S. Maiolo a Pavia: vicende storiche e struttura architettonica" (Thesis, Università degli Studi di Pavia, 2000); Ettore Cau and Aldo A. Settia, *San Maiolo e le influenze cluniacensi nell'Italia del Nord: atti del Convegno internazionale nel millenario di san Maiolo (994-1994)*. *Pavia-Novara 23-24 settembre 1994* (Como: Tipografia New Press, 1998); Davide Tolomelli, "La casa generalizia dei Padri Somaschi a Pavia" *Bollettino della Società pavese di Storia Patria* 50 (1998): 243-276.

⁹ Cf. Aiace Astori, *La chiesa di S. Maria Gualtieri in Pavia: indagini, analisi, progetti e metodologia di restauro* (Como: New Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Cf. Baracca and Corioni, Giuliani, "La città", 84.

¹¹ And in fact, e.g., the technological systems of reproduction of image and sound are fully 'disappearing' by using the floor unevenness. We can register also an attention to the outside, with a floor that emphasizes the entrance mitigating the slight difference in height and with a port whose vertical cutting allows you to 'peek' inside the hall when it is closed.

¹² Cf. Rodolfo Maiocchi, *La chiesa ed il convento di San Tommaso in Pavia*, (Pavia: Tip. del Priv. Istituto Artigianelli, 1895); "Vicende storiche e artistiche del complesso di San Tommaso in Pavia: relazioni e comunicazioni. Atti del Convegno di Studi. Pavia, 15-16 aprile 1988" *Annali di storia pavese* 18-19 (1990).

¹³ The church, designed by architect Giovanni Antonio Veneroni, is built from 1715. In 1805 the parish is suppressed and the church used as a weapons depot. Passed to the Municipality of Pavia, it hosts the Civic School of Design and the nucleus of the Archaeological Museum. For this purpose, they created a horizontal element that disrupted the internal space. Needing for more space for its cultural initiatives, the Ghislieri College obtained from the Municipality to have on loan for use the property for 99 years, providing in exchange its restoration. Cf. Maria Grazia Albertini, "Nota sulle trasformazioni della piazza del collegio Ghislieri dal secolo XVI alla metà del secolo XVIII", in *Atti del convegno di studio sul centro storico di Pavia (4-5 luglio 1964)* (Pavia, 1968), 355-356; Aurelio Bernardi, *Il collegio Ghislieri* (Pavia: 1950).

¹⁴ Abolished in 1799, after it became a shrine of the 'fascist martyrs' in the last century, since 2012 homes the Evangelical Christian Church of Pavia. The municipality, with the full consent of the Curia, has granted free use of the deconsecrated church to this community, though as a temporary solution. Cf. Jessica Maffei and Ilaria Nascimbene, Alessandra Viola, *Santa Maria delle Cacce di Pavia: leggere la storia del monumento per guardare al suo futuro* (Pavia: Società per la conservazione dei monumenti dell'arte cristiana in Pavia, 2007). Another case of a new use that approaches to the original one is that of the Santi Quirico e Giulitta oratory: adjacent to the Town Hall, it is known to be the civil marriage hall. Cf. Susanna Zatti, *Il Palazzo e l'Oratorio dei Mezzabarba a Pavia* (Pavia: Comune di Pavia, 2010).

¹⁵ Cf. CEI, Comitato per gli Enti e i Beni Ecclesiastici, *Le chiese non più utilizzate per il culto*, Roma, Prot. N° 932/2012; Carlo Azzimonti and Alberto Fedeli, "La riduzione ad uso profano delle chiese e il loro riutilizzo" *Ex Lege* 4 (2002); Alessandro Bucci, "Brevi note sul vincolo della destinazione all'uso degli edifici di culto in Italia" *Caietele Institutului Catolic* 2 (2009), 111-136 Paolo Cavana, "Il problema degli edifici di culto dismessi" *Stato, chiese e pluralismo confessionale* 4 (2009).