

Adaptive Reuse as a Cultural Strategy: The Case of Cinema Bologna in Rome

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Abstract

The paper explores the relations between urban regeneration, heritage and adaptive reuse (AR) as mediation process between protection, transformation and the construction of a collective meaning. Dealing with heritage in Italy often entails a dual condition: on one hand, the bureaucratic stiffness that transforms protection into a constraint; on the other, the European vision of heritage as a shared and productive resource for inclusive growth and urban quality. This conflict results in a condition of *stasis*, where the city's transformation is hindered by the commodification of history and the loss of architecture's active role. Within this framework, adaptive reuse emerges as a cultural and strategic practice, no longer merely an environmental response, but a design approach that reinterprets the relationship between material heritage and present day needs.

Through the case study of ExtraLibera—the regeneration of Riccardo Morandi's former Cinema Bologna in Rome—the paper investigates how adaptive reuse can act as a tool to reconnect the physical and social dimensions of heritage. The project, promoted by Libera and designed by Berretta Architetti Associati, transforms a degraded modern structure into a cultural hub through a process of adaptation and reuse based on subtraction, adaptation, and social re-appropriation. Architecture operates together with the immaterial actions to reconstruct an identity, turning decay into a design resource. AR, understood as a cultural process, enables a dynamic interpretation of heritage, one that integrates historical, spatial, and social values into a forward-looking urban vision. Rather than opposing preservation and transformation, AR is the framework within which the evolutionary character of urban landscape is recovered in an inclusive and context sensitive regeneration.

Keywords: Modern Heritage, Urban Regeneration, Public City

On Urban Regeneration, Heritage and AR

As Italian architects and researcher dealing with heritage, we often find ourselves caught in a sort of dualism. This cross-eyed vision oscillates between a contemporary, more open interpretation of heritage as resource and a defensive bureaucratic approach that turns protection into constraints and limitations. Despite this tension, recent documents, as the “European framework for action on cultural heritage”, formalize cultural heritage as «shared resource» (European Committee 2018, 4) and a fundamental «element in the achievement of an inclusive growth» (ibid., 11). Heritage is widely invoked in the EU political agenda in an extended interpretation that combines protection and valorization encompassing

historic assets alongside environment, landscape and culture, as urgent contemporary themes. It is thus conceived as strategic lever for urban regeneration and as asset to improve the quality of the city (Galuzzi, Vitillio 2022, 88). This direction is reaffirmed in recent PNRR recovery plan, where heritage is a recurrent keyword and is, more explicitly, cited in the M1C3 investment chapter (Next Generation EU 2021, 108).

Conversely, in Italy we still witness a dysfunctional interpretation of heritage: a defensive approach generating constraints and, consequently, an opposition between transformation and protection. This often results in the assimilation of history into a product—as patrimonialisation imposed by cultural industry (Longobardi 2017, 23)—or\and in conditions where «those spaces, delivered to archeology, tend to configure as costly to maintain, poorly legible and difficult to understand» (Cellini 2017, 80). The outcome is a sort of paralysis, in which the only projects able to become reality are those where the exchange value of heritage is recognized and therefore exploitable. In such cases design plays a subordinate role as tool rather than as «main actor capable of combining conservation and valorization seeking new means, relations and attributions among the multiplicity of urban components and between them and the city» (MiBACT-Comune di Roma 2015, 4).

Those conditions reflect a *stasis* as a set of resistances and stalls hindering that evolutionary, once ineliminable, character of the urban organism (Stone 2023, 477) which historically shaped the identity and topography of Rome. Modernity did not disrupt this dynamic: horizontal development reinforced the vision of heritage as isolated objects, while simultaneously producing a new city with limited flexibility (Nieto Sobejano 2023), whose parts were rigidly tied to given functions able to exist only under specific conditions. As those changed, the urban fabric accumulated voids, abandoned and unused spaces both in its historic and more recent areas.

It is within this framework that AR comes into play. While it was historically characterized as a natural and progressive anthropic practice, it now appears as a more explicit and deliberate form of overwriting, often involving a violent superimposition of different conditions (Wong 2017, 54). Sustainability, the “reuse, reduce, recycle slogan”, once considered as its main driving argument, has progressively been sidelined by investment oriented logics, where voids are treated as quantities and heritage as an asset. Moreover, the loss of power and centrality of public administrations, due to both technical and economic reasons, has reinforced this trend. Consequently, AR has often been associated with private transformations driven by specific interests, in which urban regeneration, the improvement of urban quality and the rebalancing of social inequalities become conditional or scarcely visible.

Against this background, if it appears to depend on those dynamics rather than on an independent approach intended to envision the city’s evolution, the paper highlights possible conditions where AR, heritage and regeneration are keywords in a continuous-interdependent conversation about the making of the city. If today the cited sustainability includes the financial issues accepting the role of private sector in urban transformation, design must mediate among those forces, fostering a broader interpretation of heritage that goes beyond its material value. Therefore «heritage not much as a thing, but as a cultural and social process» (Smith 2006, 58), linking it with experiences and identities of a society as «tangible representation of intangible values» (Armagan Dogan 2020, 65). Through this perspective, it may be possible not only to redefine in a more adaptive way the relationship

between transformation and heritage, but also to reconsider the role of histories – in plural, avoiding the dominance of favored periods over others—in the construction of urbanity. The ExtraLibera project in its history embodies this reasoning: it exploits a specific condition of modern heritage, focusing on AR not merely as qualification of the work, but as a culture driven strategy that frames the entire intervention in its complexity and variables, setting the conditions under which heritage recovers its role within the urban landscape.

The Context: History and Consequences

Cinema Bologna has been designed by Riccardo Morandi between 1947 and 1949 and is among the nearly thirty projects he signed between 1932-1957 (Farroni et al. 2024, 1344). Located beneath a residential building, it accommodates a 1500 seats hall that immediately become an important cultural reference for the district (Fig. 1).

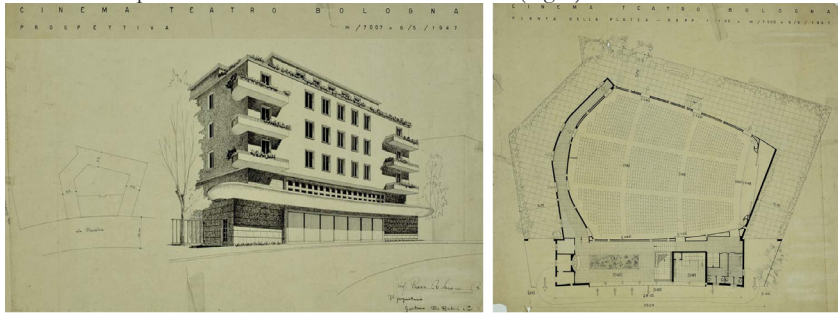


Fig. 1. Cinema Teatro Bologna, original drawings (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Fondo Riccardo Morandi)

After forty years of activity, the theatres crisis in the 90's led to its first closure until 2000, when it was transformed in a bingo hall thanks to a municipal plan allowing changes of use with few limits and conditions. This moment marked a turning point, producing a detachment from its socio-cultural role as well as a loss of its architectural character: the balcony was partially demolished, an horizontal floor, whose structures invaded the parterre, defined a completely different space while the foyer and other areas suffered a deep reconfiguration. The new use faced growing social opposition and denunciations. After a first closure in 2003, in 2014 it has been seized from the authorities following a bankruptcy trial. In 2018, the space has been included among the assets designated for social purposes under law 109/96 beginning the assignation process that, in 2020, identified Libera as recipient initiating the regeneration process. Cinema Bologna represents a specific fragment of that modern landscape and of its services infrastructure scattered accross the city: a texture still survived, today still living, partially forgotten, often reused incoherently, scarcely recognised in terms of value and protection. This deterioration—understood not only as material deterioration but mainly as a loss of complexity and plurality in the urban texture—can also be interpreted and exploited as a resource. Within this condition, the weaker limits and the decay, both material and immaterial, create a context where boundaries between transformation, reuse, and preservation became thinner and looser: a space where the project can recover its independence and centrality.

Adaptive Reuse as Cultural Strategy

Within the *European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage*, the European Committee moves beyond the idea of heritage as something to be preserved at all costs, defining instead the «adaptive re-use of the built environment» as a strategy to «preserve and enhance the values of our built heritage for future generations» (2018, 25). Starting from these premises, the paper, through the case study, explores conditions in which regeneration and rehabilitation processes engage with weaker forms of a partially lost and heavily deteriorated heritage, but also with the memory and value of those spaces. Moreover it faces the feasibility related theme, intended as the need of overcome the assumption of preservation as a non-repayable investment. In both directions, AR confirms its strategic role as the hinge around which the project manages its complexities.

As ICOMOS stated, «adaptation means the process(es) of modifying a place for a compatible use while retaining its cultural heritage value» (ICOMOS 2010, 9). Beyond linking AR practices to a continuous renewal that keeps heritage alive and adaptive, this definition emphasizes that the maintenance of patrimony is inherently tied to cultural processes which allow it to be recognized and thus to become identitarian. This link is bi-directional as the enhancement of relations between history and community is functional to the protection of material heritage (Marin 2022, 18).

The regeneration of Cinema Bologna unfolds across two intertwined layers: the architecture, as interface where takes action the physical rehabilitation and transformation of the spaces from the actual decay towards the new uses; the cultural project, as set of actions oriented to support and give meaning to those physical interventions. Considering the loss of continuity with the past—both materially and immaterially – the process of social recognition and appropriation becomes essential in the redefinition of heritage as something shared and clearly identifiable by the community (Smith, 2006, 11).

Since the preliminary phase of the assignment, the project incessant dialogue between these themes transformed the cultural hub into a device able to interact with the city building the key to the proposal success. It was then not just about filling the void, but to heal the opposition and separation of the recent past: a symbolic reappropriation that, although managed by a private entity, was conceived to redefine the physical and symbolic relations between inhabitants and space. Within this semantic dimension, the architecture operates both as image and as mechanism allowing the building to be read and used.

In this stratification, AR becomes the framework through which the various components of the project acquire meaning via their mutual relationships and their connection with the broader objective. It emphasizes and responds to the need for a semantic layer capable of stitching together, horizontally—toward the city—and vertically—within the building –, the different dimensions of the project in a processuality in which preservation here ceases to be a retroactive act and becomes part of a process oriented toward a future perspective (Koolhaas 2004, 2).

The ExtraLibera Project: Recover, Adaptation, Reuse

From its early stages, the design process worked on the feasibility of the functional program in relation to the project's spatial configuration and the set of immaterial actions considered essential to its definition. At its core, AR acts to set conditions of coherence, continuity, and

adaptation between space, context, new functions, and surviving memory: in other words, between the elements that concur in the definition of urban identity.

The project involved close collaboration between Libera, the architects (Berretta Architetti Associati with Arch. Michela Fresiello), Linee Films (for multimedia design), and, at different stages, the Municipality, the Superintendence, and other public stakeholders involved in funding. The two floors, totaling 1,600 m², are organized into five main clusters, four of which are accessible to the public, as evidence of a reuse vision that primarily looks at space as relational interface rather than quantity. The foyer, restored to its original continuity acts as a threshold open to the street “Fig.4”. It introduces the main functions: the multimedia exhibition area – specifically requested by Libera— represents the heart of the project both symbolically and functionally, while the multipurpose event hall serves as a versatile cultural space. The first floor hosts Libera’s offices, a library, and a multimedia archive, with a more intimate but still semi-public character (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. ExtraLibera, project plans (Studio Berretta Associati, 2023)

In operational terms, the AR process developed through three main phases. The clean-up phase addressed the need for a clear starting point by removing accretions and revealing the building’s spatial potential. Differently from a *tabula rasa*, it rather is an act of rediscovering within the overlapping random transformations of past decades. In the second phase the project explicitly comes into effect: as formalization of the clean up or as adaptation through additions and new architectural elements. Those are always declared, legible against the original background, reinforcing a dialogue between the surviving container and its reuse. In the absence of any surviving language that could provide limits or references for the design actions, this process requires a fundamental sensitivity: a balance and a hierarchy capable of avoiding the overwriting of the remaining spatial characters and, with them, of the cinema’s heritage. The final phase encompassed a set of hybrid actions, between material and immaterial, essential to bridging the gap between physical architecture and the construction of meaning. Here, the project shifts from form to sense, embracing a more adaptive context (Clementi 2018, 4) that is not the building itself but the regeneration of its identity: this social recognition embodies a form of rehabilitation that finds its expression

in architecture and its meaning in reuse.

Within this framework, the multimedia exhibition space is both the most symbolic and representative intervention for its meaning but also as it is one of the few existing in Rome. Visitors enter the former parterre through the rear doors, encountering an irregular square enclosed by the curved surfaces of the surrounding volumes. Architecture and storytelling merge here: video projections animate both vertical and horizontal planes, creating an immersive experience. The three new volumes, detached from ceiling and perimeter walls, assert their identity as additions. Inside, the hybridization increases as the design responds to specific spatial and perceptual conditions in coherence with the narrative and content: the result is an environment where architecture and narration blur into one another, making it impossible to discern where one begins and the other ends (Fig. 3). In this conversation, the multimedia exposition path is the more representative and symbolic action for both its physical outcome but, also, for the related network of actions involving on different layers the community.



Fig. 3. The multimedia exposition area (ph. Giovanni Stalloni, 2025)

The event hall occupies the full-height portion of the former theatre (Fig. 4). A screen is reinstated in its original position, recalling past uses. Here is located the most, and only, structural addition included in the project: the first floor has been extended toward the event space to house the library program that was essential for the feasibility of the project. A steel truss structure supported by four circular, fireproof-clad, columns enables this addition, while concrete structures from the bingo era are integrated into the new rooms. The result is a new order, where the only visible additions are related with the new use defining a straight dialogue without intermediaries between the Cinema and ExtraLibera. The separation between the exhibition area and the event hall is a hybrid membrane, partially glazed and partially interrupted by the protrusion of the volumes, that recalls the



Fig. 4. The foyer and the multipurpose event hall (photo by Giovanni Stalloni, 2025)

former continuity and directionality of the parterre.

The foyers, restored to their continuity, lead to the first floor where the reuse-heritage relation faced a challenging target. The demolition of the chaotic additions restored the flattened structural dome visibility as that of the skylights once used for ventilation. After essential maintenance, once not possible for the additions, these elements have been reinterpreted and included to improve spatial quality. The sub-horizontal windows in the office and reading areas have been shaded by translucent panels improving quality of daylighting, while at night the volumes glow like colored lanterns. The dome's continuity is reinterpreted within the limits of the new layout and of its functional needs: an alternation of opaque and glazed partitions allows its visibility through a complex perceptual experience between wider perspective and more enclosed views (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. The library, the reading room and a view of the offices (photo by Giovanni Stalloni, 2025)

Perspectives: AR, Heritage and Urban Regeneration

The ExtraLibera project stands as a significant reference for urban regeneration achieved through the rehabilitation of unused heritage, here AR acts explicitly as mediation between protection, adaptation, and transformation. Its centrality lies in the capacity to connect design and collective meaning, recognizing social engagement as an essential component of regeneration. Architecture and the set of immaterial actions merge, giving sense to the spatial configuration and restoring tangible relations with the context (Stone 2023, 478). The process thus deals with synthesis rather than opposition, recovering the evolutionary nature of the urban landscape and interrupting the paralysis caused by the autarchy of protection. This synthesis becomes also hybridization, as that condition where different

uses are not merely juxtaposed or assembled together, but they interconnect and interact generating different intensities (Fenton 1985) and meanings. At the same time, the project reveals the delicate balance on which its success relied, as fortunate coincidence where private and public actors interests aligned in a unique process. Ultimately, ExtraLibera demonstrates the complexity of AR not only as «reuse of pre-existing structures for new purposes» (Wong 2017, 30), but in a wider and deeper stratification in which the heritage is one of the elements belonging to environment that might be reinterpreted within the urban regeneration process avoiding both the commodification of heritage and its immobilization under preservation constraints.

If some conditions – as the interests alignment – are case study specific, the projects success might underline the need of designing the preparatory circumstances under which this collaboration is possible. In other words it states the possibility of a call for action to redefine the cooperation approach and hierarchies between private and public subjects. Only this mediation allows the heritage regeneration to become living part of the public city rather than objects or generic multi-purpose cultural spaces that are otherwise not sustainable, both financially and functionally. Together it confirms as, within the regeneration discourse, any autarchy is not allowed: that of conservation – or of cold coherence to normative approaches – but, also, that of the project as only and self-referenced expression of the process. The ExtraLibera case study represents a rare – but possible – formalization of this process in which the project centrality, as director, is not put in question but rather confirmed. The project is indeed requested to put back together, finding the spatial and architectural solutions, the inevitable disputes or misalignments: allowing the public to assume its responsibilities and intervene to support the process in its inevitable voids, and the private in its investments and feasibility without then freezing the process.

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