

Preserving the Palimpsest: Adaptive Reuse of Palazzo Donnaregina (MADRE) in Naples by Álvaro Siza

Laura De Riso^a, Teresa Cunha Ferreira^b

^aScuola Superiore Meridionale - Faculty of Architecture of University Federico II, Naples, Italy, laura.deriso@unina.it; ^bCEAU, Faculty of Architecture of University of Porto, Portugal, tferreira@arq.up.pt

Abstract

Álvaro Siza has consistently engaged in the reuse of pre-existing buildings, commissioned by public or private entities in various countries. Particularly in Naples, Siza designed significant projects focused on cultural heritage preservation, such as Donnaregina Museum of Contemporary Art (MADRE) in collaboration with Studio DAZ and the Metropolitan Station Municipio with Eduardo Souto de Moura. These projects demonstrate a careful approach to the city's physical and social stratifications over time. This contribution aims to provide a critical reflection on Siza's intervention in the Donnaregina Museum of Contemporary Art, emphasizing the challenges associated with the urban landscape and history of the pre-existence, the design strategies, the tectonic and material solutions and the critical reception of this adaptive reuse within the architectural debate. The methodology combines a cross-analysis of literature review, archival research and fieldwork surveys. This project by Álvaro Siza involved analysing the building's historical transformations and architectural specificities as a foundation for understanding its spatial configuration and its capacity to accommodate new functions and meet contemporary museum requirements. The interventions included demolishing the inappropriate additions, such as 20th-century reinforced concrete volumes in the inner courtyards, while preserving the spatial layout and original materials as much as possible. The new additions, such as staircases, pathways, and installations, establish a harmonious relationship with the existing structure. The ventilation and lighting systems are housed in a suspended ceiling detached from the walls, while electrical, acoustic, and fire protection systems are integrated into the plasterboard lining of the perimeter walls. The MADRE project exemplifies, through Siza's pedagogy, the potential for contemporary architecture to engage with complex historical contexts, demonstrating a commitment to both preserving existing structures and creating new cultural spaces for the community.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Adaptive Reuse, Álvaro Siza

Introduction

Adaptive reuse of historic buildings for cultural and museum functions has emerged as a fundamental field of inquiry within contemporary architectural debate. Such interventions require a careful balance between conservation and transformation, reconciling historical continuity with new spatial, functional, and symbolic requirements (Plevoets, Van Cleempoel 2019). The Donnaregina Contemporary Art Museum (MADRE) represents a significant

case within this debate, offering insight into how contemporary architectural practice can engage with complex, stratified historical and urban contexts.

Álvaro Siza's architectural projects are distinguished by an enduring dialogue with the environmental, historical, and social contexts in which it is situated (Siza 1983, 78; Frampton 2000). Analytical observation and the practice of drawing constitute fundamental epistemic tools within his design methodology. Through freehand sketches, Siza explores spatial configurations, the modulation of light, and the reciprocal relationships between architecture and its context (Cunha Ferreira 2023).

Although his professional activity has been primarily rooted in Portugal, Siza has cultivated, over time, a meaningful and sustained relationship with Italy. Through his engagement with various Italian cities, he has undertaken a critical and productive study of the country's extensive architectural heritage, developing numerous projects concerned with the adaptive reuse of existing buildings (Cremascoli and Moschini 2016).

Siza's presence in Italy, and particularly in the city of Naples, offers a significant case study for examining the adaptability and coherence of his architectural poetics within complex, stratified, and historically charged urban environments. Naples, in particular, is a city notoriously challenging for the insertion of contemporary architecture due to its historical density, vibrant dynamism, and multiple contradictions. In this context, Siza has developed two major projects: the design of the Donnaregina Contemporary Art Museum (MADRE), in collaboration with Studio DAZ, and, together with Eduardo Souto de Moura, the metro station and urban redevelopment of Piazza Municipio (Santangelo 2004).

These interventions do not assert themselves as self-referential gestures. Instead, they result from a careful process of listening to and interpreting historical continuities and urban dynamics. This approach seeks to define new architectural forms that emerge from pre-existing conditions and are coherently integrated within the urban fabric. Siza's architecture never seeks to impose itself but instead engages in dialogue with the landscape, with the memory of places, and with the quotidian life unfolding within public spaces (Miano 2023, 70–71). In this sense, one of the cardinal principles of his design approach is measure, understood not only in proportional terms but also as a sensitivity to the identity and specificity of place. In Naples, a profoundly layered and complex urban context, this notion translates into a meticulous attention to human scale, the balance between solids and voids, the articulation of natural light, and material expression. Siza's projects reveal a restrained architectural language, composed of essential geometries and materials carefully selected to resonate with the city's climate, chromatic atmosphere, and textural qualities (Ottavino 2021, 129–134).

The present contribution offers an analytical and critical examination of Siza's intervention at the Donnaregina Contemporary Art Museum. It focuses on the challenges posed by the urban and historical context, the design strategies adopted, the tectonic and material solutions developed, and the critical reception of this adaptive reuse project within contemporary architectural debate.

The Donnaregina Contemporary Art Museum (MADRE). The Pre-Existing Context

Palazzo Donnaregina is located in the historic center of Naples, within the monastic insula of the Donnaregina convent. On the side facing Via Settembrini, the building stands along

the boundary of the ancient Greek city walls, remnants of which were uncovered during the restoration works.

The original nucleus, known as Palazzo Capano, probably dates back to the seventeenth century and comprised the southern block of the complex, facing the courtyard of the *Banco dei Pegni*. In the mid-nineteenth century, Palazzo Donnaregina was acquired by the Banco di Napoli and converted into the headquarters of the *Banco dei Pegni*. Between 1845 and 1872, the building was expanded through the addition of two wings and the reconfiguration of the front façade along Via Settembrini, where the main entrance, the entrance hall (*androne*), and two staircase blocks were constructed.

During the twentieth century, the palace underwent a series of inappropriate architectural alterations. These included the construction of an elevated atrium occupying part of the upper courtyard, and the addition of a reinforced-concrete structure adjacent to the Church of Donnaregina. The latter intervention completely concealed and incorporated the original seventeenth-century façade of Palazzo Capano. Numerous internal partitions and mezzanines were introduced, significantly altering the original typology. In addition, the insertion of air-conditioning systems compromised the structural and architectural integrity of the entire complex. Following the 1980 earthquake, structural reinforcement works were carried out. However, after the damage and resulting static instability caused by the 2001 flood, the building was abandoned. In 2003, the property was acquired by the Campania Region, which initiated the restoration works aimed at the creation of the Museum of Contemporary Art, based on a design by architect Álvaro Siza, with design development and construction supervision carried out by the Neapolitan Studio DAZ—Dumontet Antonini Zaske Associated Architects (Divisare 2010).

Design Strategy: Conservation and Adaptive Reuse

The design strategy was grounded in a thorough study of the building's original structural configuration, as well as in an analysis of its historical and artistic stratifications (Scotto di Vettimo 2017). Álvaro Siza, in his design, respected the complexity of the city, devoting particular attention to preserving the relationship of the palace with its surroundings and with the living core of the city (Ferraro 2014).

The numerous sketches produced by Siza reveal his intention to achieve integration with the urban fabric and respect for the building's historical layers, while introducing modern elements that do not impose themselves but rather blend harmoniously with the existing environment.

The restoration works were the outcome of a careful process of subtraction, involving the demolition of inappropriate architectural additions accumulated over time. The evolutionary history of the building, its volumetric configuration, spatial structure, and original materials, was preserved to the greatest extent possible, despite the need to accommodate new museum requirements (Giardiello 2005, 134–137).

The large central courtyard, onto which the exhibition halls now open, was recovered through the demolition of a raised volume constructed in the early twentieth century, which had previously occupied approximately half of its surface area. (Fig. 1)

The clear internal organization and the succession of well-proportioned rooms radiating from the central courtyard were regarded as key starting points for adapting the pre-existing structure to exhibition use. Below the courtyard, accessible from the ground floor



Fig. 1. Internal courtyard of Palazzo Donnaregina before and after demolition works, Naples (photograph courtesy of Studio DAZ Archive, 2003; Laura De Riso, 2025)

immediately after the entrance hall, a large multipurpose hall/auditorium has been created through excavation works. Entirely undecorated and painted white, like the other rooms of the building, it features a structural framework composed of large steel beams. Beneath the structural layer, a plasterboard panel is suspended, which, together with the stretched fabric ceiling, conceals the lighting system.

On the side facing the Church of Donnaregina (the courtyard known as *Banco dei Pegni*), the reinforced concrete building volume was completely demolished, leaving an open space that provides an unprecedented view of the church.

The boundary wall has been redesigned with a crenellated motif intended to establish a dialogue with the imposing ribs of the adjacent church. Moreover, the ancient façade of Palazzo Capano has been revealed, including the remains of its original piperno stone portal (Divisare 2010).

A small steel bridge crosses the open atrium, connecting the sequence of exhibition rooms located on the first floor with the café and the restaurant . (Fig. 2)

No movable panels or prefabricated structures were used; rather, the spaces themselves establish a natural dialogue between the architecture and the artworks. The exhibition areas, developed over three levels around the central courtyard, are arranged as a sequence of neutral spaces of varying dimensions, fully plastered in white and without baseboards, thereby creating a continuous visual perspective axis (Di Meo 2006, 109–121). Particular attention was devoted to the design of the lighting and heating systems. All equipment was carefully concealed so that only the artworks remain visible. In the exhibition rooms, the ventilation grilles and lighting fixtures are integrated into a suspended ceiling detached from the walls. Similarly, within the plasterboard lining of the perimeter walls, the electrical outlets, sound system, and fire protection system are discreetly incorporated. (Fig. 3) The building's roof is divided into two parts. One is an inaccessible section, composed of of



Fig. 2. Crenellated wall in the courtyard of the Banco dei Pegni, with the Church of Donnaregina in the background and the steel connecting bridge, Palazzo Donnaregina, Naples (Laura De Riso, 2025)

white pebbles and mixed vegetation, designed to conceal the large service ducts. The other is an accessible section, reached via a new stone staircase, offering views over Naples' historic center, with Mount Vesuvius and the sea in the distance. Two concrete blocks, positioned on either side of the ancient clock, serve to conceal the air intakes¹. (Fig. 4)

Today, the Madre not only hosts numerous works of art but also functions as a venue for a variety of social events, establishing itself as an important cultural and social hub within the city. The MADRE museum project in Naples represents a paradigmatic example of how Siza approaches the reuse of architectural heritage and the integration of contemporary architecture within historic contexts. His design process can be understood as a delicate rewriting, guided by the intent to achieve harmonious integration with the urban fabric and the multiple layers of the building. The result of three years of work, from 2003 to 2005, is what Siza himself calls "*un Progetto felice*"², a work that has restored compositional unity and formal elegance to the entire architectural complex.

Critical Reception: Preserving the Palimpsest

The project for the restoration and adaptive reuse of the spaces of Palazzo Donnaregina, aimed at establishing the Donnaregina Contemporary Art Museum (MADRE) and represents Álvaro Siza's first architectural intervention in Naples.

«I often think this way when I return to the hotel, leaving behind the old and solid palace that I am to transform into a museum. A building confined by narrow and massive constructions, so that its form cannot be fully perceived. These are structures that shape spaces imbued with intimacy and mystery, conquerors of light emerging from penumbra, pierced by enormous doors that reveal courtyards filled with plants, dust, and ancient



Fig. 3. Interior exhibition rooms and suspended ceiling detail concealing lighting and ventilation systems, Palazzo Donnaregina, Naples (Laura De Riso, 2025)



Fig. 4. The building's roof, Palazzo Donnaregina, Naples (Laura De Riso, 2025)

stones.»³ (Siza 2016, 209–211)

The project involved the complex rehabilitation of a historic building composed of structures from different periods. Over time had been severely compromised by continuous alterations and by the assignment of heterogeneous functions incongruent with the building's morphology and spatial character. Although the intervention appeared simple, the design process faced significant challenges. These were mainly due to the need to work with a stratified and highly articulated historical pre-existence. The intervention was grounded in a meticulous analysis of the building's historical transformations and architectural specificities, aimed at understanding its evolution over time, its spatial configuration, and its constructive complexity. This investigation formed the basis for assessing the building's capacity to accommodate new functions and meet contemporary museological requirements, while safeguarding its historical, cultural, and identity values.

Siza, while demonstrating a profound respect for the existing structure, reveals through his work a sustained interrogation of the building's historical layers, seeking a conceptual thread capable of re-signifying the entire fabric. The Portuguese master does not establish a hierarchy of values between the parts to be preserved and those open to transformation. Instead, he makes selective choices guided by the search for meaning within the new project. This results in a calibrated synthesis between inherited values and newly introduced significance, a necessary transformation that supports the transition from obsolete functions to current exhibition needs. Certain design decisions, such as the recovery of the main courtyard, the reorganization of circulation flows, and the innovative use of portions of the roofscape, constitute the guiding lines of a design strategy. This strategy unfolds through a sequence of precise and measured interventions (Giardiello 2005, 134–137).

Conclusions

The MADRE project, through Siza's pedagogical approach, exemplifies the potential of contemporary architecture to engage with complex historic contexts. It demonstrates a synthesis between the preservation of existing structures and the creation of new cultural spaces. His intervention in Naples thus becomes as a lesson in method and sensitivity. It invites reflection on design as an act of listening, respect, and continuous dialogue with places, their memory, and the historical architectural heritage. Heritage is used as a concrete tool in the process of interpreting and shaping the contemporary city. Siza himself states: «The idea of Heritage and the need to preserve it is today decisive in the paths of Architecture and the City. (...) In this context, the awareness of the need to maintain and use what we call Heritage does not only refer to the need for Beauty but also, and above all, to its indispensable presence as an instrument of invention, as a ramified thread of support – more than ever today, in a time of profound and uncertain transformations.» (Siza 2018, 89)

Heritage becomes for Siza both a cognitive and operational tool, guiding urban and architectural transformation according to principles of coherence and integrity. Constructed memory, far from being an obstacle to experimentation, constitutes a “ramified thread of support.” It provides a network of references and connections that allows architecture to maintain critical continuity with its own history. This is particularly important in the present-day context characterized by rapid change, discontinuity, and uncertainty.

From this perspective, conservation is no longer merely an act of protection but a continuous dialogue between memory and innovation, permanence and transformation. Through Siza's approach, the reuse of heritage becomes a concrete instrument for recovering compromised buildings. It enhances their historical, urban, and architectural traces and integrates them into a new spatial and functional narrative.

Notes

1. Most of the information regarding the project was obtained from the general dossier of Studio DAZ;
2. “Álvaro Siza e il restauro di Palazzo Donnaregina,” video interview, MADRE – Museo d’arte contemporanea Donnaregina, March 27, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqD4YejIz6Q>. Accessed April 28, 2026.
3. Authors' translation from the Italian original version.

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