

Former Saint Dominic Convent in Pesaro

Natural Renewal of Religious Memory

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Abstract

The heritage of abandoned religious architecture defines a specific disciplinary chapter on the subject of adaptive reuse, since it combines technical complexity of transformation and awareness of the necessary contemporary innovations, with the memory of pre-existing structures and of the spirituality of the community who animated them. The rehabilitation project of the former Saint Dominic convent in Pesaro is a clear example of this. The complex bears witness to the Dominican presence since the 13th century, starting with a chapel, later incorporated into the Saint Dominic Church. The transformative instances of the church wing on the square to insert commercial activities marked the city's history. The complex expanded from the basilica on pre-existing buildings to reach the Charity Church. Since the early 20th century, Saint Dominic Church has transformed in Art Nouveau style and is now the headquarters of the local Post Office; the south wing of the convent became an art school; the internal connecting volumes were demolished and the cloisters converted into the city market. The Municipality promoted the project by arch. Guido Canali for the establishment of university spaces. The project evokes lost spatial atmospheres by reconstructing the demolished buildings and restoring the internal cloisters. The proposal of pedestrian galleries into the greenery and of widespread pergolas over which creepers extend, innovate the project. Nature regenerates the common squares and inspires students and teachers. Ongoing investigations lead to the implementation of the identity contents of this religious architecture. The excavation of tombs, the frescoes on the life of Saint George, the painted surfaces in the area of the Charity Church, guide us in rethinking the project during the execution: the generative spiritual seed of the complex is an integral part of the current history of the city and the community that lives there.

Keywords: Restoration, Historical Findings, Rehabilitation

Introduction

My contribution to the discussion on the main subject of the Convention centers on a single idea: religion and spirituality are ontological conditions of human beings. Regarding the adaptive reuse of religious architecture, the task is not connected to a specific faith, as it can be any, nor is it connected to a specific type of religious building, as again, it can be any, for instance a Shinto temple in India or a Catholic Church in Italy. However, I believe that when we, as architects, are required to work on the adaptive reuse of a religious building we have the responsibility not to forget, but rather to highlight, the original purpose, intention or mission that drove its construction, which was essentially religious.

By doing so, we will preserve the memory not only of a specific faith, but also the religious sensibility of a specific community of human beings in a particular place and at a particular moment in history.

I decided to show the main tasks of an intervention in which I'm not involved as the first designer, but rather as the General Works Director. This means that I'm responsible for leading the project from the hands of the original designer into the actual construction phase, effectively managing the transformation of the building into what it is intended to become. I also have the responsibility not to betray the mission of the original designer nor the most significant insights emerging from the building site, especially when they are linked to the initial idea that, in the past, religious consciousness was the *first stone* of the entire building. As general works director, I have the duty to bring these two objectives together. In a sense, this means that I'm the final designer of the intervention.

Former Saint Dominic Church and Convent

If you visit the Church of Saint Dominic today, entering through the main door of the facade, you will find yourself in the secondary entrance of the central Post Office, with a cash machine on your left (Fig. 1). That intervention is a historical fact and is not part of the project in which I am personally involved. However, it stands right beside the former convent we have to transform, and, in a sense, represents what we aim to avoid, as we wish to achieve a more sensitive approach to the building's religious origins.

Guido Canali's Intervention

The Municipality of Pesaro is the owner of the complex and commissioned Guido Canali to be the designer of the transformation by which the convent will become a university faculty. Guido Canali is an extraordinary Italian architect. He has worked at several adaptive reuses during his career. This chance indeed won't be enough to introduce his work, but nevertheless I would like to fix a couple of elements: firstly, the idea of an "artistic promenade" which is increasingly common especially inside his new buildings such as factories or offices. Secondly the idea of nature inside the building as an instrument to promote psychological well-being for people in their everyday lives.

In this specific cultural building, nature should be an important source of inspiration for

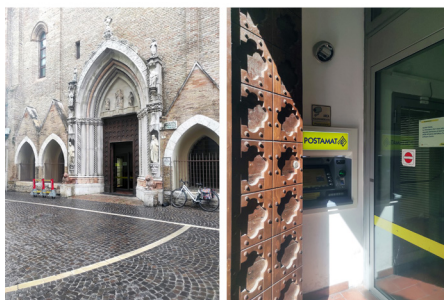


Fig. 1. Saint Dominic Church's entrance, currently the central headquarters of the Post Office in Pesaro, Italy (AAFerraresi, 2025)

students. The project in Pesaro encompasses several key aspects: the restoration and the repurposing of the buildings for cultural and commercial uses, and the opening of all accessible ground-level spaces—the cloisters and the courtyards—to the city. The aim is to reclaim the identity of the Saint Dominic complex, by restoring its lost atmosphere, spaces, aura, and proportions, reinterpreting its spaces and suggesting new meanings. This is not simply a process of recovering memory and time, but of modernizing them with respect for the building's history, enhancing latent or neglected aspects, and attention to the suggestions of today's city. A wing of the former convent was an art institute at the beginning of the 20th century; during its life, passed many phases and also many demolitions. From its foundation in the 13th century until the early 19th century the complex reveals a rich history of development, growth, and change. This period of splendor was followed by a period of decline and abandonment, leading its partial destruction from the 19th century to the present day. Following the suppression of the Dominican Order in 1860, the spaces of Saint Dominic were adapted for a wide variety of uses, becoming a School of Applied Arts in the early 20th century. The cloisters and ground floor once housed the city market, which was later closed.

The complex is now undergoing a new phase: its physical restoration of the complex designed by Studio Canali, and its reintegration into the city's social and cultural fabric. This is particularly true thanks to its new university function, promoted by the Municipality, with the goal of making the building once again an important cultural hub for the city of Pesaro. The new entrance leads visitors into the building, along a pergola-covered path flanked by green flowerbeds. The small courtyard, with its trees, provides to shade benches for students, surrounded by greenery. Finally, the outdoor plaza will become a garden square, connecting the city with the renovated complex. In the new project, greenery characterizes the complex, marking it from the outside and creating a small garden in the heart of the city. To achieve a better distribution of the new university spaces, Guido Canali designed a new crossing structure to connect the two remaining wings.

A view of the courtyard of the Dominican Friars in Pesaro, dated 1851-1852 and drawn in pencil, pen, and gray ink with watercolor (214 x 280 mm) by the artist Tancredi Liverani (Faenza, 1837—London, 1890), offers an idea of what Piazza delle Erbe and the cloister once looked like, with the former church, now the Post Office, standing behind them. A detail of the still-existing bell tower is visible; it was lowered in 1669 due to structural instability and removed in 1910 because of its weakened structure and risk of collapse (the bell is now preserved in the atrium of the Town Hall). The view also shows the presence of the “wing”, which existed at the time but was subsequently removed. This evidence further supports the intention to reconstruct the pre-existing wings, which are necessary to restore the system of courtyards and squares upon which the original complex was based.

So, he designed two new steel buildings, incorporating nature both inside and on their facades, serving as artistic and natural promenades in the spaces previously occupied by the old demolished ones.

The archaeological excavation uncovered a stratigraphy of uninhabited deposits containing Roman-era pottery fragments, revealing a complex and coherent space overall, also in relation to the Roman and medieval urban structure of Pisaurum, although its exact chronology has not been precisely established. Logistical and safety conditions did not allow the excavation to continue, so the preventive archaeological work was considered complete

and the excavation was closed, with suspended construction resumed in the surrounding areas. The Superintendency's recommendations regarding the discovery established new guidelines for the planned construction of one of the two "wings" at the site prohibiting deep pile foundations. For this reason, the project proposed a shift to shallow foundations in order to preserve the uncovered structures and stratigraphy.

Inside the complex there is access to a basement that descends beneath the square. Here, construction elements such as stone capitals, belonging to the former wings, have been uncovered. This space has therefore preserved the remaining vestiges of the old wings over time.

The Chapel of Saint George and Saint Catherine, the first Dominican nucleus

According to historical source, the presence of the Dominican community in Pesaro since the 13th century is evidenced by its frequent use of the Chapel of Saint George and Saint Catherine, later incorporated into Saint Dominic Church. Over time, the religious community sought to transform the wing of the church overlooking the main city square, currently called Piazza del Popolo, to accommodate commercial activities, and this has marked the history of the city. The transformative nature of the convent complex is embedded in its DNA: the convent expanded from the basilica over pre-existing structures to reach the Charity Church, later built and connected to the Dominican community. The Napoleonic conquest, however, changed its development, stripping the structure of its original spiritual function. Then, in the early 1900s, the church was transformed into the Art Nouveau style and now serves as the post office; the southeast wing of the convent was used as an art school before being abandoned; the internal connecting volumes were demolished and the cloisters were converted into the city market.

Investigations carried out during the project encouraged us to expand the known contents, including the memory of the spirituality of the city's community. The excavation of tombs, the testimony of the Dominican Blessed Marco Scalabrini, the fragments of the fresco cycle depicting the life of Saint George, and the uncovered paintings under the surface of the supposed to be Charity Church, are guiding the project's implementation, aiming to enrich its contents through conservation and protection measures.

The historical testimony of the building for the city of Pesaro motivates further stratigraphic investigations, particularly in the oldest 13th-century core near the former church, now the post office. This site was originally the Chapel of Saint George and Saint Catherine, later transformed into the Chapter House. In this room, the 15th-century coffered ceiling, a floral frieze, and the fresco depicting "The Martyrdom of Saint George" are already clearly visible. Therefore, additional stratigraphic tests are being conducted by a qualified restorer, in accordance with the instructions from the Superintendency. These investigations will also help refine the scope of consolidation interventions for any affected masonry.

Charity Church

On the southwest side of via Giovanni Branca, on the ground floor, a fragment of ancient plaster, showing a cross-shaped decoration, was discovered during the preparatory stages of the project. This decoration is also documented in the stratigraphic report prepared by the restorers responsible for the preliminary surveys, which has already been submitted. The finding prompted further investigation into the possible presence of additional traces

of the original Charity Church, located next to the Saint Dominic convent complex at its southwest end (Fig. 2). The newly acquired documentation adds to the historical research previously carried out. The material consists of:

- Fazi land registry, a watercolor drawing on canvas by Alessandro Fazi, depicting the first district of Pesaro and held at the “Biblioteca Oliveriana” in Pesaro, dating back to 1600;
- Stefani map from 1790, by Giovanni Stefani and held at the “Biblioteca Oliveriana”, where the Charity Church is visible at number 35.

By comparing overlapping aerial images of the current building area from Google Maps with the discovered historical cadastral plans, it can be assumed that the site of the former Charity Church was gradually incorporated into the adjacent spaces of the present complex, the former convent of Saint Dominic, now undergoing renovations. It is hypothesized that the traces of the cross-shaped decoration are located on a historic wall, testifying the church past presence.

An etching by Johan Janssonius Blaeu, first published in Amsterdam in 1661, a cluster of buildings can be seen behind the Convent of Saint Dominic that corresponds to the Charity Church (number 9 in the engraving), while in Studi Pesaresi, the journal of the Società



Fig. 2. Charity Church, Pesaro Italy (AAFerraresi, 2025)

pesarese di studi storici, volume 2/2013 edited by Marcello Luchetti “The Confraternities in Pesaro from the 13th to the 17th Century”, from pages 87 to 98 there is an in-depth study on the Charity Company which was headed by this church.

The important historical evidence justifies further stratigraphic investigations, being carried out by a qualified restorer, with the aim of consequently also perfecting the extension of the consolidation interventions to any affected walls.

Findings that will remain within the complex:

- cycle of frescoes depicting the life of Saint George, objects of restoration, located in the

oldest part of the complex on the via Giordano Bruno side near the former church, in the room—formerly the chapter house—which will become the student administration office and thus the university's official reception room;

- frescoes in the portico on the ground floor of via Giordano Bruno;
- decorations from the 20th-century art school, mainly located on the first floor of the building.

Findings that do not yet have a definitive location:

- remains discovered in the portico area along via Giordano Bruno;
- frescoes from the art school period on the first floor that have been removed.

On the first floor facing via Giordano Bruno, stratigraphic investigations revealed tempera wall paintings dating to the first half of the 20th century depicting rural scenes and an allegory of Italy. The former are on a load-bearing perimeter wall, while the latter are on a facing that turned out to be a perforated brick false wall. On the first floor facing via Giordano Bruno, two walls were found to have tempera wall decorations depicting the signs of the zodiac. These decorations, extend across a horizontal band, date to the first half of the 20th century, when the building housed the “School of Applied Art for Industry.”

The wall currently adjoining the corridor, is planned for demolition, to transform the space into an atrium with adjacent restrooms. Given the qualitative value of the decoration and the historical significance of the building's time as a school, in agreement with the Superintendency, it was decided to remove the wall paintings before proceeding with the planned demolition or consolidation of the affected walls.

Conclusions

In the adaptive reuse of a primarily religious building, the aim is to enhance its intrinsic aspects related to its spiritual and religious origins, reflecting the Pesaro community over the centuries.

Inside the former Saint Dominic complex, tombs from various periods reveal the presence of unorganized cemeteries adjacent to the two original churches, the Saint Dominic Church and the Charity Church. Equally important is emphasizing the value of the fresco cycle in the chapter house, which is to be transformed into the student secretariat. Likewise, the restoration of the entire Saint Dominic complex will highlight the presence of the Charity Church through its still visible traces.

This will be achieved by fully restoring its façade, currently incorporated into the porticoes on the ground and first floor overlooking Piazza delle Erbe. The façade will be enhanced by the rediscovered decorative elements belonging to the area where the church historically stood (Fig. 3).

The general works director's key mission is certainly to enhance and preserve the religious origins of the complex while upholding the principles that inspired, and continue to inspire, architect Guido Canali's project.

A proposed intervention that could both reinforce the spiritual identity of the complex and remain faithful to the architect's design philosophy involves gathering the decorative elements from the various surviving phases—such as the sleeve capitals and the detached decorations from the School of Art—and organize them along “artistic promenades” throughout the circulation spaces and gardens.



Fig. 3. Testimonies: fresco “Martyrdom of Saint George” and archaeological excavations, Pesaro Italy (AAFerraresi, 2025)

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