

Design Strategies of Palazzo Agonigi da Scorno

Intervention by Piero Sanpaolesi

Bridging Urban Remains through Formal Continuity

Pedro Freitas

Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal, pfreitas@arq.up.pt;

Abstract

The fertile context of post-war reconstructions in Europe provided different conditions for the development of numerous architectural interventions, ranging from total reconstructions to pure material conservation. Despite the harsh activities, it enabled the analysis of historical structures while fostering a new design dilemma as a condition for the “new”. How could a fragmented ruin support the necessary information to shape the formal identity of a new building? Supported by textual and iconographic sources available in Italian institutions, this paper describes an introductory analysis of the design strategies adopted from 1958 to 1968 by the architect Piero Sanpaolesi on the remains of the Palazzo Agonigi da Scorno, in Santa Maria Street, Pisa. The scope of the work is to fill a gap about the building’s design process, aiming to contribute to the discussion on how Piero Sanpaolesi’s design recovered the palace’s urban significance through the means of remanufacturing contextual typology while fostering material contrast. The case presented reveals a pioneering vision that emphasizes that preserving a building’s original form while adapting it for modern needs is crucial for a city’s vitality and significance.

Keywords: Intervention in Ruins, History of Conservation Design, Post-War Reconstruction

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the destruction of Italian cities and the urgent need for reconstruction became a fertile context for the development of numerous architectural interventions in ruined heritage buildings and sites. From 1944 to 1964, in the decades that saw the Venice Charter take shape, a new design culture flourished, reviewing conservation principles through the emergence of how to master the preservation of the “old” and bridge the conditions for the “new” (Boriani 2008). During this period, several works began to offer mixed possibilities for intervention design, ranging from total reconstructions to pure material conservation, while specialized critics moved beyond the constraints imposed by urgent heritage safeguarding (Ceschi 1970).

As part of this process, the work of different Superintendents, dealing with the casualties of the war, has been re-examined as important pioneering activities that contributed to this movement (Fiengo, Guerriero 2004). Despite the harsh conditions, lacking proper instruments or even adequate criticism to foster good practices, Superintendents throughout Italy acted as first-response architects, rapidly gaining practical experience by tackling

unforeseen problems caused by the destruction while providing backing to the most recent adaptive reuse theories and discussions.

In Pisa, through the work of superintendent Piero Sanpaolesi, several cases of reconstruction were conducted, enhancing the analysis of historical structures, understood as a condition for authenticity against different levels of mimetic values (Spinosa 2011). Hence, Pisa, along with several Italian cities, became a fertile laboratory for the historical exhibition of building archaeology (Freitas 2018), which was conveyed locally by the Pisan tower-house typological identity (Ciuti, Lunatici 2006).

This procedure, often criticized by its aesthetic fragmentation and *ad nauseam* uses, introduced a new design dilemma as a condition for the “new”. How could a fragmented ruin support the necessary information to shape the formal identity of a new building?

This paper describes an introductory analysis of the design strategies adopted from 1963 to 1968 by the architect Piero Sanpaolesi on the remains of the Palazzo Agonigi da Scorno, in Santa Maria Street, Pisa. Despite its façade design being considered remarkably influenced by contemporary Italian discussions, the intervention is yet poorly described in international literature due to the difficult assessment of its design process from 1957 to the most recent intervention in 1993. The work aims to integrate the case as an important pioneering study of “formal continuity”, a strategy that will gradually become a preferred approach for fostering good practices of conservation design.

A Remaining Ruin in Santa Maria Street

The Palazzo Agonigi da Scorno is a palace built in the 17th century in the city of Pisa, situated in Santa Maria Street. In 1922, it became historically significant to the city as the residence of Professor Carlo Francesco Gabba, a renowned professor of Philosophy of Law and Civil Law at the University of Pisa. During the Second World War, the palace was almost destroyed by the bombings of Pisa in 1943 and its subsequent liberation in 1944, leaving traces of the first floor and parts of the frontal and rear façade (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. At left, view from the Santa Maria Street, c. 1950s (*Archivio Generale*, SABAP-PI, f. 120, m. 231); At right, current condition of the building (Pedro Freitas, 2024).

According to textual and iconographic sources available in Italian institutions, namely the *Archivio Generale* from the current *Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le province di Pisa e Livorno* (SABAP-PI), a letter from Professor Giovanni Polvani informed Superintendent Sanpaolesi about the state of decay and its effect on the *Domus Gallileana*, a neighbouring palace that houses an institution and library associated to the University of Pisa. Asking for a proper intervention still in the context of post-war reconstructions, he expresses the poor condition of the ruins where damages by “water that, during rainfall, pours onto the north wall” and “the disgraceful condition of the courtyard between the two houses” (Polvani 1957, 1) were still a great inconvenience for both properties.

In fact, the palace’s condition by the end of the 1950s is still a remarkable exception to the Pisan reconstruction period. As available by the debate extensively documented in the literature, Pisa will be a city that will gradually be completely “under construction” until the mid-1950s. Beginning at the end of 1944, despite the lesser notoriety of the medieval historic centre and its peripheral situation to the other dilemmas faced by the new Italian government, the city was the site of a strong presence of two polarities regarding major interventions: the first, which favoured small and medium-scale repairs to destroyed buildings, or the second, their complete reconstruction using modern materials.

From 1944 to 1960, Sanpaolesi devoted himself to an extensive task of cleaning, investigating, and physically restoring several monuments of historical and artistic heritage in Pisa and the surrounding area. The main feature of these actions was the concentration of efforts to repair many churches and progressively restore works of art, adopting as a basic procedure the recommendations from the Athens Charter of 1931, still adopted as a principle by many superintendents. For this reason, “constructive techniques and modern materials, especially reinforced concrete, were used not only in consolidation, but also in the reconstruction of roofs, levelling and load-bearing structures [...] and an absolute respect for the monument, united by a trust in the expressive capacity of contemporary architecture” (Lamberini 2006, 142-143)

This is evident in many worksites, easily associated with these principles, such as the restoration of the *National Museum of San Matteo* and the reconstruction of *San Paolo a Ripa d’Arno* church, while others, like *San Michele in Borgo’s* cloister demolition and the new support for the *Camposanto Monumentale’s* frescoes, have not always been consistent with the approach. In fact, these activities were not isolated processes, as they stimulated a “broad urban renewal, in which the Pisan superintendency played a leading role, taking into account [...] urban and landscape issues, aware that the need for rapid and improvised building reconstruction could lead to an equally rapid transformation of the historic city and its territory” (Spinosa 2011, 151).

According to Piero Sanpaolesi (1954, 24), “[...] from the beginning, [the Superintendency] rejected the principle of reconstructing pre-existing structures and façades as they were when the building was completely lost, leaving instead the task of preserving where possible to repairs and initially to propping works, i.e. where the pre-war appearance and forms were largely preserved with sufficient architectural elements. On the other hand, [the Superintendency] accepted without prejudice the insertion of new forms into the old urban fabric when no trace of the old building remained. The problem, therefore, shifted from restoration to design. All architects were called upon, and the Superintendency set limits on height and volume, and almost always accepted the forms they proposed after careful

consideration. Although some of the rebuilt buildings are not excellent in terms of form and invention, almost all of them fit into the complex without disturbing it, and in many cases represent a rejuvenation that has done nothing but good.”

From Restoration to Design

With these parameters in mind, in 1958, the Superintendency rejected the first intervention project commissioned to architect Lamberto Bartolucci, which included the reconstruction of the building with six floors instead of the four that existed before the war damage (Fig. 2, left). The volume would have 22,5 meters in height, against the nearby condition of 18,4 meters of adjacent buildings. The Superintendency, however, did not criticize the reconstruction itself “in style”, but recommended that floor heights must match pre-existing structures, which should also be given more attention and care. This recommendation commanded the beginning of conservative interventions, focused on the medieval structure of the building.



Fig. 2. At left, the refused façade design, 1958; At right, scraping and liberation of architectural elements (*Archivio Generale, SABAP-PI*, f. 120, m. 231)

This is evident by the clear intention to reveal different architectural elements that became refined or liberated. Where medieval arches in verrucan stone were visible, the most recent mortar was scraped and spans reopened. Hence, in an analogical process of research for the new building's image, architectural elements were individuated. In the central pillar on the ground floor, a column partly buried with a valuable marble capital attributed to Romanesque sculptor Biduino was the main discovery. Findings also included a 14th-century fresco and geometric decorations, redefining the artistic value of the palace (Fig. 2, right).

Design Strategies

During these works, a project designed by Bartolucci, probably created through preparatory consultations with the Superintendency, was approved in 1960. However, the design is yet a draft of how to combine these findings into a new façade (fig. 3, left). The proposal innovates with a contemporary housing program, adopting modern concrete slabs and window frames. However, the proposal still deals with two opposite tendencies, made clear in the absence of relation between pavements and ceiling heights by the reconstruction of a medieval façade through formal analogy (keeping a recent cornice), and, on the right, a

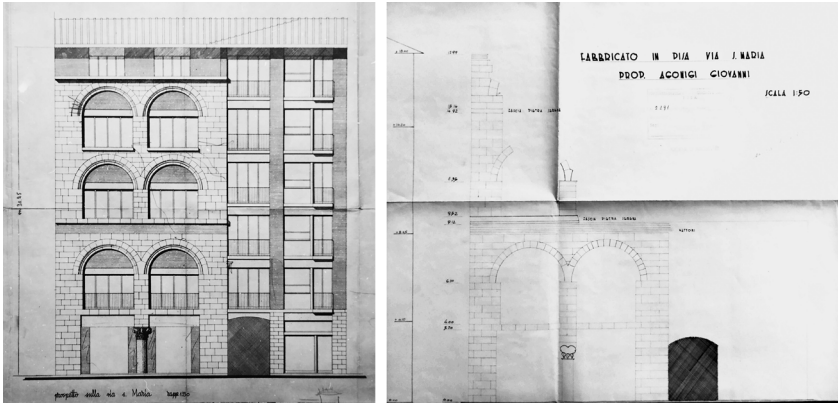


Fig. 3. At left, the new proposal by Lamberto Bartolucci, 1960; At right, documentation of materials considered authentic (*Archivio Generale*, SABAP-PI, f. 120, m. 231)

completely new five-floor building topped by a traditional ceiling.

From one standpoint, the method of direct onsite investigation allowed for an operative condition to create the “new”. The verrucan stone is considered a material reference, outlining the source of the palace’s artistic value (Fig. 3, right). From another, it seems that a satisfactory composition was yet unclear.

Further research is needed to interpret the different problems faced by the implementation of the new worksite, as months later, the approval was revoked. Since by the end of that year Sanpaolesi will leave the Superintendency to become a Full Professor at the University of Florence, a possible controversy with the new Superintendent, Nello Bemporad, might be an explanation. He argues, in a letter to the owner, Mr. Giovanni Agonigi: “important architectural elements will have to be preserved and enhanced in the reconstruction of the building”, which should draw up a new design that can guarantee “in respect of the ancient important structures, a harmonious reconstruction” (Bemporad 1961, 1).

The sudden death of architect Bartolucci in 1963 made it impossible to assess his interpretation of “harmony” in this case. As an alternative, the project will be providentially commissioned to Sanpaolesi. Despite understanding the different layers of the valuable structure (Fig. 4, left), the design continued to present challenges due to issues with volume and height, as well as conflicts over maintaining the ruin as a fragmented piece or a recomposition. Sanpaolesi develops two new proposals.

First, a new version, approved in 1963 by the Superintendency but altered in 1964 to be approved by the *Comune di Pisa*, realigns the pavements towards a proper composition in relation to the medieval structure. This strategy enhances the former tectonic design, offering a “transition” to contrast, through the alignment of different horizontal (concrete slabs) and vertical (existing pillars) strength lines. Thus, a more integrated relationship between the “old” and “new” structures (fig. 4, right) enhances both sensations of solidity and transparency, while approaching the solution to contemporary discussions and recent design principles developed in projects such as the *Casa alle Zattere*, in Venice, from Ignazio Gardella, just recently finished.

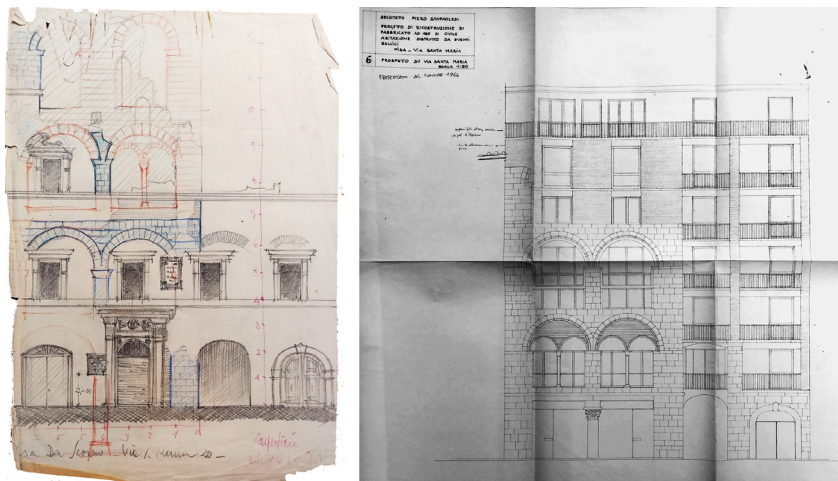


Fig. 4. At left, a drawing indicating, previous state, findings, and possible compositions of the remains, undated and unsigned; At right, project approved by the *Comune di Pisa* in 1964 (*Archivio Generale, SABAP-PI*, f. 120, m. 231)

On the third floor, the concrete slab through the span of the reconstructed arch acts resourcefully as an element of transition in a separated plan, a design technique that will be highly explored by Carlo Scarpa in the *Castelvecchio*, among others. Even if undocumented, the final alterations to include a new brick arch (Fig. 5, centre), instead of reconstructing it on verrucan stone, kept the design aligned with good practices of distinguishability of authentic materials, which were becoming more and more recommended and experienced. This design, however, was never considered finished by the Superintendency. According to an available report probably produced in 1967 (*Relazione... s.d.*, 3), it still surpasses the height suggested by Sanpaolesi himself years before and removes the traditional ceiling to create an open-air penthouse. Responding to several complaints addressed to the worksite, Sanpaolesi presents a final solution in 1966, reconsidering the traditional ceiling at a lower level but including the reconstruction of two sets of three-mullioned windows in the first floor. We can only suppose that this was intended to deceive the Superintendency, who refused the proposal, while keeping the construction active with the use of a covered jute that was interpreted as an instrument to hide the final result (Fig. 5, left). The *querelle* will provoke the suspension of the construction license in 1967, while an agreement will be reached in 1993, when parts of the last floor were demolished to adapt a new scenographic overhang, as it has already been considered more suitable to match the general landscape of the Santa Maria Street (Fig. 5, right)

Despite these polemics, in between those two “ideals”, a method of intervention that enhances typological harmony was achieved by supporting historical fragmentation, while reinforcing formal continuity with an intersected approach that reveals, mediates, and reframes Pisa’s architectural heritage and the urban setting of Santa Maria Street.

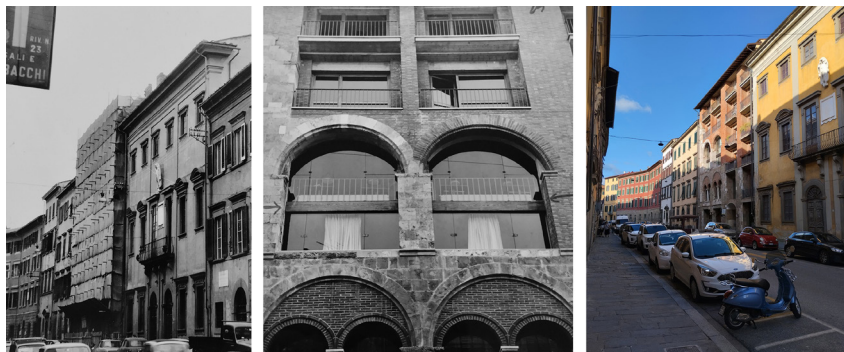


Fig. 5. At left, the construction covered with jute in 1965; At the centre, the detail of the completion of arches in brick aside the original one in verrucan; it is also possible to visualize the concrete slab crossing both spans, s.d. (*Archivio Generale*, SABAP-PI, f. 120, m. 231); at right, a recent view of Santa Maria Street (Pedro Freitas, 2024)

Final Remarks

This work reinterprets the transformation of the Palazzo Agonigi da Scorno site from the bombing remains, shedding light on the decisions that shaped the building reconstruction. It offers an introductory view about how different actors with significant power to change proposals and convey different expected results were able to address this complex issue in post-war Italy.

From a myriad of proposals and written debate with the Pisan Superintendency, the scope of the work is to contribute to the discussion on how Piero Sanpaolesi's design recovered the palace's urban significance by connecting its remains to new housing requirement standards. Sanpaolesi was able to adapt a solution that enhanced contextual typology while fostering material contrast, despite an intricate process of conservation decisions.

Despite his scientific pursuit, Sanpaolesi's personal solutions (De Vita 2015, 30) led most of his studies as an art historian, architect, and conservator to be severely condemned and disregarded in general Italian discussions. This has been revised in the last decades, and a new perspective is being given to his excellence in developing architectural composition, the documentation and analysis of the "old", sometimes refusing pure reconstructions, here seen in these formal strategies. As a pedagogical instrument of architectural design, the study confirms the idea that the Palazzo Agonigi Da Scorno's final aspect represents a pioneering vision, emphasizing and integrating contemporary questions. Above all, it expresses that preserving a building's original form while adapting it for modern needs is crucial for a city's vitality and significance.

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