

Silent Resonances: Circus Arts Center in a Deconsecrated Church

Simone Gheduzzi

diverserighestudio, Bologna, Italia, architetti@diverserighestudio.it;

Abstract

The regeneration project of the former Church of San Barbaziano in Bologna, a late Manerist building designed by Pietro Fiorini and completed in 1608, represents a significant example of combining historical preservation with cultural innovation. After decades of neglect and misuse, the building is now undergoing an intervention promoted by the Ministry of Culture, as part of an experimental program granting use to third-sector organizations. The goal is to revitalize and return these cultural spaces to public use. The winning project, presented by AICS Provincial Committee of Bologna APS in collaboration with Eden ASDAPS, plans to transform the building into a center for documentation, training, and experimentation dedicated to the performing and circus arts. This adaptive reuse recognizes the historical value of the site while activating new cultural functions. The concept explores the dialogue between the original sacredness of the ecclesiastical space and the creative energy of contemporary circus arts, turning the church into a place that celebrates human creativity. The interior layout, an integral part of the restoration process, complements and enhances the building, making its cultural regeneration fully accessible and meaningful. To protect the original architecture, the central nave is left open, while modular freestanding structures are placed in the side niches. These structures are designed to respect the existing openings and preserve natural lighting conditions, thus ensuring functionality and accessibility without altering the original structure. The chosen materials, inspired by the poetics of Michelangelo Pistoletto, include mirrored surfaces that foster a direct interaction between object, viewer, and space, amplifying environmental perception and establishing a symbolic dialogue between body, architecture, and memory. More than a functional setup, the installation acts as a narrative device, marking a new chapter in the church's history. It restores value to a forgotten heritage site, promoting a contemporary and inclusive interpretation of its layered past.

Keywords: Memory, Dialogue, Reawakening

Introduction

In the current climate crisis, resource depletion and progressive contraction of the construction sector, the reuse and transformation of built heritage through adaptive reuse processes is an act of collective cultural, social and ecological responsibility. Preserving existing buildings through redevelopment not only means saving in terms of materials or land consumption, but also confronting the memory embedded in places, recognising abandoned architecture as a repository of silent stories and unexpressed potential.

Within this framework lies the reflection on design as a tool for regeneration, capable of activating relationships between past and present, between heritage and contemporaneity. Architecture, understood as a critical and transformative practice, can trigger processes of integration and urban rebirth, operating through measured interventions that preserve the traces of time while opening up new uses and meanings. These principles find concrete expression in the work carried out around the deconsecrated church of San Barbaziano in Bologna, an emblematic example of heritage awaiting regeneration, in which design responsibility, historical memory and public vocation are intertwined.

Historical Background—Memory

The former church of San Barbaziano is a historic building dating back to 1608, designed by architect Pietro Fiorini. It is located in the south-western part of the city of Bologna, within the first city walls, at the corner of Via Barberia and Via Cesare Battisti. The church, now deconsecrated and currently in disuse, has recently undergone consolidation and conservative restoration work aimed at preserving its surfaces and external decorative elements. Bolognese historiography traces its origins back to the early Christian era. From 1123 onwards, archival sources include contractual documents attesting to the management of the church and monastery by the Canons Regular of the Lateran. Subsequently, in 1430, the will of Valente di Bettino di Valentino, parishioner of San Barbaziano and former consul of the city, ordered the sale of his assets to finance the construction of a chapel and a tomb, but in 1449 it was decided to allocate the bequest to the demolition and reconstruction of the entire church. From 1480 onwards, the management of the church and monastery was assigned to the “Reverend Hermit Monks of St Jerome of the Observance, commonly known as the Girolamini”, who expanded their domain by incorporating other churches and lands. Despite the building boom that characterised Bologna in the last quarter of the 16th century, this convent complex had not undergone any substantial renovations. The religious corporation of the Girolamini initially attempted a modest restoration, but then decided to completely rebuild the church according to Pietro Fiorini's design at the end of 1585. However, Fiorini's design for the new church was only started in 1608, after more than twenty years of revisions. The church of San Barbaziano was completed and consecrated in 1612. In the following decades, the church underwent a period of fervent activity characterised by renovations and extensions to improve its structure, but which compromised the original decorations. From the 18th century onwards, there was a gradual decline, culminating in the suppression of the monastery following the Napoleonic laws in 1797. The church retained its parish status until the early 19th century, when its title was merged with that of the church of San Salvatore. In 1813, it finally passed under the control of the State, which authorised its purchase for military use and service. Following its decommissioning from military use in 1966, the building gradually fell into structural and cultural disrepair, with significant damage to the remaining decorations and its overall stability. During the 20th century, the former church, still state property, was converted for improper use, transformed into a mechanical workshop and later into a garage, activities that continued until 1994. Despite attempts to preserve the building by giving it functions more consistent with its historical and artistic value, the property remained without adequate maintenance for a long time.



Fig. 1. Ex Church of San Barbaziano, Via Cesare Battisti, Bologna. (Felice Croci, 1923, General Catalogue of Cultural Heritage, Italian Ministry of Culture, ICCD 0800676113)

Serious structural problems, combined with a chronic lack of financial resources, prevented systematic restoration work from being carried out until 2019, when, thanks to public investment from the Ministry of Culture, a conservation restoration project was launched, which has recently been completed. The former church of San Barbaziano is therefore an emblematic case not only for its historical and architectural value, but also as a paradigmatic testimony to the vicissitudes associated with the protection and repurposing of disused heritage. With its layered past, the building represents a symbol of the need for careful and continuous conservation policies aimed at preserving its historical memory and identity value in the urban context of Bologna.

Architectural Structure and Composition

The 17th-century building has a typically late Mannerist layout consisting of a single nave with four pairs of side chapels, a presbytery and a choir without a transept. The nave is divided into three bays: the first and third, which are smaller in size, are covered by barrel vaults with ribs, while the central bay, which is almost square in shape, has a cross vault, giving the space a slight central emphasis. The few remaining fragments of the interior architectural decoration consist of Ionic pilasters resting on high pedestals that rhythmically divide the space and support a continuous entablature on which arches and vaults are set. Outside, the façades reflect the rhythm and compositional structure of the interior. The main façade, topped by a triangular pediment with a central oculus, is organised into two superimposed orders. The conservative restoration work carried out by the Emilia-Romagna Regional Directorate of National Museums has consolidated the architectural appearance of the building in its peculiarity as an urban ruin, testifying to the resilience of the property and its ability to represent itself to the community as a collector of stories and memories of the city.

Reuse Principles—Dialogue

The former Church of San Barbaziano is part of the State's inalienable heritage, entrusted to the Emilia-Romagna Regional Directorate of National Museums, and was selected in 2017 as part of an experimental procedure promoted by the Ministry of Culture. The initiative involved granting the use of certain cultural assets to third sector organisations, with the aim of activating new models of enhancement and returning these places to public use. The concessionaires are required to implement a cultural project validated by the Ministry, accompanied by an economic-financial plan and in compliance with the standards of the National Museum System. The winning project presented for the repurposing of the deconsecrated church of San Barbaziano by AICS Bologna APS, in collaboration with Eden ASDAPS, proposes the creation of a documentation centre dedicated to the performing and circus arts: A.R.C.A—Accademia Rigenerata Circo e Arte (Regenerated Circus and Art Academy). This cultural project and the resulting intended use of the former church are the result of a careful analysis of the urban context, its potential and its existing features, as well as an assessment of the city's and national cultural offerings. The decision to focus on promoting the circus arts creates an innovative perspective that further enhances the value of the entire cultural initiative launched by the Ministry of Culture and serves as a tool for multicultural integration and the promotion of diversity. The circus practice in the form of *nouveau cirque* combines classical disciplines such as acrobatics, juggling and clowning with theatrical, musical and visual elements, focusing on storytelling and emphasising a strong artistic and symbolic component, transforming the show into a complete sensory and artistic experience. Space becomes a fundamental and integral part of the narrative and artistic experience. *Nouveau cirque* often uses unconventional spaces, symbolically transformed through the movement of the artists, lighting, music and props. The former church will thus become a place of documentation, training and artistic experimentation, with a strong public vocation.

Design Principles—Architecture as a Book

*«Dal giorno in cui la statua è terminata, comincia, in un certo senso, la sua vita. È superata la prima fase, che, per opera dello scultore, l'ha condotta dal blocco alla forma umana; ora una seconda fase, nel corso dei secoli, attraverso un alternarsi di adorazione, di ammirazione, di amore, di spregio o di indifferenza, per gradi successivi di erosione e di usura, la ricondurrà a poco a poco allo stato minerale informe a cui l'aveva sottratta lo scultore. Questi materiali [...] sono mutati come il tempo ci muta »*¹ (Yourcenar 1983).

Marguerite Yourcenar's words, describing the slow erosion of a sculpture returned to the raw material from which it was born, evoke a vision of architecture as a living organism, undergoing transformations, stratifications, oblivion and rebirth. From this perspective, the intervention becomes a means of dialogue between past and present, aiming to preserve the signs accumulated over time and project them into a new life cycle through respectful, cultural and shared use, forming a new page in a layered narrative. This project adopts the principle of minimal intervention and reversibility, aware that the current use represents only one phase in the life of the building. The walls, left in their raw state as per the conservative restoration, form the dimensional matrix for inserting new architectural volumes into the eight side chapels, adding a new chapter to this metaphorical book. Adaptability and flexibility are fundamental components: removable and reconfigurable furnishings allow the

space to be dynamically articulated according to today's needs, allowing for transformations that are not yet foreseeable. The idea of highlighting our intervention through a sincere realisation allows us to avoid committing a historical falsehood. The lighting design aims to emphasise the mystical atmosphere of this space, enhancing its height of approximately eighteen metres and highlighting historical and symbolic details.

Intervention—Reawakening

The system—designed in its entirety to be completely reversible—is conceived as a dynamic device, capable of modulating its configurations to adapt to different activities and a diverse audience. The installation does not “occupy” the church, but inhabits its intrinsic potential, highlighting the architectural and spatial characteristics of the building. It is a discreet presence, almost an operational shadow, which allows the historical material to emerge and enables the space to be reconfigured according to the activities on offer: workshops, shows, study sessions and artistic performances. The former church is thus transformed into a community workshop, a generator of cultural and relational capital. A floating wooden floor runs through the liturgical space, set back from the walls to fully restore the perception of the original volume and allow easy access for maintenance. The architectural structure thus remains legible and prominent, while the movable furnishings and lightweight structures define the functional configurations without imposing themselves on the space. The project is based on a vision of heritage not as an object to be contemplated, but as a catalyst for cultural and cognitive processes. Going beyond the traditional logic of restoration and promotion, the entire cultural operation implemented first by the Ministry of Culture and then by the concessionaire AICS Bologna APS proposes an integrated management model that enhances the generative function of culture.

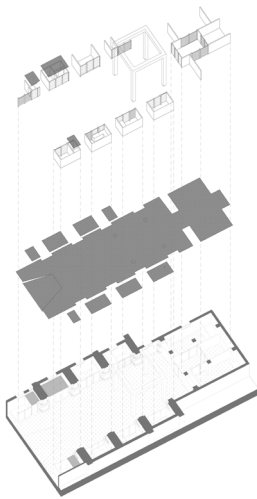


Fig 2. Axonometric exploded view highlighting the insertion of new architectural volumes in the former Church of San Barbaziano (diverserighestudio, 2025)

The reactivation of the property is not limited to physical intervention, but is renewed daily through its care, conscious use, cultural programming and user participation. In support of this vision, a scientific committee with expertise in the fields of restoration, architecture and cultural enhancement will be established. The committee will be responsible for monitoring the state of the property and supervising activities, ensuring that its use is compatible with its protection and promotes the effective regeneration of the site, not only materially, but also symbolically and socially. The intervention on the former church of San Barbaziano is conceived as an extended care project, where restoration is not an end point but the beginning of a new narrative: a narrative that intertwines protection and transformation, conservation and innovation, in which architecture returns to being a space for relationships, experience and meaning.



Fig. 3. Render of the project for the deconsecrated Church of San Barbaziano, Bologna (ParisRender for diverserighestudio, 2025)

Notes

1. My translation: From the day the statue is completed, its life begins, in a certain sense. The first phase, in which the sculptor transformed it from a block of stone into a human form, is now over; now a second phase, over the centuries, through alternating adoration, admiration, love, contempt or indifference, through successive stages of erosion and wear, will gradually return it to the shapeless mineral state from which the sculptor had taken it. These materials [...] have changed as time changes us.

Bibliography

- Archivio Arcivescovile di Bologna. *S. Barbaziano, Appalto per una ricostruzione della chiesa di S. Barbaziano su lascito testamentario*, 20 febbraio 1449.
- State Archives of Bologna. *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse, S. Barbaziano, busta 1/546, fasc. 47, doc. 8. Bozza di accordo, redatta da Pietro Fiorini, tra Don Eusebio (priori) e m.o Giacomo Dilanino ed m.o Domenico Canaza e m.o Alvise Scarpellini et compagni per fornire "liconcij di masegna che andarano nella fabrica della nova chiesa"*, 1586.
- State Archives of Bologna. *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse, S. Barbaziano, busta 1/546, fasc. 47, doc. 10. Bozza di accordo, redatta da Pietro Fiorini, tra i monaci di S. Barbaziano e "m.ro Matia di Ventura muratore" per "fare la fabrica di muro della nova chiesa (...) nel modo et forma che sta il disegno sopra ciò fatto di mano di me, Pietro Fiorini"*, 1586.
- Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation (ICCD). *Ex Church of San Barbaziano, Via Cesare Battisti, Bologna*. Photograph by Felice Croci, 1923. General Catalogue of Cultural Heritage, Italian Ministry of Culture. ICCD 0800676113. <https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/PhotographicHeritage/0800676113>.
- Malvasia, Carlo Cesare. *Le pitture di Bologna*. 1686. Bologna: Alfa, 1969 (ristampa anastatica).
- Melluzzi, Luciano. *I vescovi e gli arcivescovi di Bologna*. Bologna: La Grafica Emiliana, 1975. *Testamento di Valente di Bettino di Valentino con disposizione di far costruire la cappella grande e un'arca per sé*, 27 giugno 1430.
- Yourcenar, Marguerite. *Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur*, Paris 1983. Trad. it. G. Guglielmi, *Il tempo, grande scultore*, Torino 1985, p. 51.