

Reinventing Liberty

Adaptive Reuse and the Contemporary Life of Early Modern Architecture

Trayana Kovacheva

Politecnico di Milano, Milano, Italy, trayana.kovacheva@polimi.it

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of reusing early 20th-century architecture in Genoa, with a focus on buildings designed in Liberty style. Originally conceived to embody the values and functions of a rising bourgeois society—residences, financial institutions, and leisure facilities—these structures are increasingly being reinterpreted to meet the demands of contemporary urban life. Through selected case studies—including the Palazzo della Nuova Borsa, now partially repurposed for cultural events; Hotel Miramare by Gino Coppedè, which currently hosts both residential units and a casino; and the Castello Mackenzie, a former private villa transformed into an auction house—the paper examines how adaptive reuse navigates the balance between historical significance and functional transformation. The widespread shift from residential to office use along Via XX Settembre further illustrates how architectural forms are reshaped by evolving social habits and economic models. These examples show that adaptive reuse is not merely about repurposing space, but also about negotiating identity. While it enables buildings to survive and remain active in contemporary contexts, it also entails risks of compromise. Functional changes—such as the conversion of residential units into offices—often require spatial reconfigurations that alter the original architectural layout and social meaning of interiors. Likewise, the treatment of exterior surfaces—especially in privately owned buildings not subject to mandatory protection—can lead to uncontrolled or inappropriate restoration, threatening the material and aesthetic integrity of the façade. Understanding original construction materials and techniques is crucial for effective adaptive reuse. These buildings often incorporate distinctive materials and artisanal methods that demand specific expertise for appropriate preservation. Inappropriate interventions—such as using incompatible materials or neglecting traditional construction—can lead to deterioration and loss of historical value. Thorough material analysis and research are therefore essential to develop conservation strategies that respect heritage while supporting contemporary adaptation.

Keywords: Liberty Architecture, Prospects, Identity

Introduction: A Shared Definition Still Missing

Despite the increasing frequency with which the term “*adaptive reuse*” appears in both academic literature and public discourse, a clear and universally accepted definition is still lacking. This terminological ambiguity presents a particular challenge when attempting to understand if and how the reuse of Liberty architecture—as explored in this study—

might be framed. This reflection begins by drawing on existing glossaries and operational definitions provided by institutional and technical bodies. The word adaptive derives from the Latin components “*ad-*”, meaning toward, and “*aptāre*”, meaning to fit or to make suitable. In this sense, “adaptive” implies modifying something to make it appropriate for a particular use or context. Reuse, likewise, originates from the Latin “*re-*” (again) and “*usus*” (use), and can be understood as the act of putting something back into service. This linguistic reconstruction reveals an important nuance: adaptive reuse does not specify whether the object was abandoned, obsolete, or still in use, nor does it necessarily define the degree of transformation required for its new function. This open-endedness allows us to explore more recent and still debated cases, such as early modern architecture, where the very question of what constitutes heritage—what is worth preserving, adapting, or reinterpreting—remains a topic of active discussion. Adaptive reuse extends beyond the heritage field, operating across architecture, engineering, real-estate development, and sustainability planning. Each discipline brings its own priorities, making the term inherently plural and context-dependent. In this study, we approach adaptive reuse through the lens of built heritage conservation, while recognizing the need for shared interdisciplinary frameworks. The reuse of a building—especially one with architectural or cultural significance—is never a merely technical or aesthetic operation. It involves negotiations of value, memory, and meaning, and thus requires input from a wide range of actors. Recent theoretical frameworks have further defined adaptive reuse as a conceptual field grounded in notions such as memory, identity, and transition, emphasizing reuse as a process of reinterpretation rather than mere functional replacement (Crudeli 2024). Within this field, a key institutional reference is the *Burra Charter*, developed by Australia ICOMOS. It defines adaptation as «additions, new services or uses, or changes to safeguard the place», noting that the adaptation of a place for a new purpose falls under the same conceptual scope.

Liberty Architecture: Origins, Materials, and Local Context

The Liberty style—known internationally as Art Nouveau—emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a cultural and architectural response to the profound transformations triggered by the Industrial Revolution. Characterized by curved lines, floral motifs, and the integration of the applied arts into architecture, Liberty represented for the Italian bourgeoisie not only an aesthetic choice but also a symbolic expression of modern identity and social progress. One of the most distinctive traits of Liberty lies in the use of innovative materials—cement, artificial stone, ceramics, wrought iron—often combined with traditional marble and sandstone. The introduction of the “*cementista*” as a new professional figure highlights the hybrid nature of this architecture, poised between artisanal knowledge and industrial seriality. This material experimentation not only defined the aesthetic of Liberty façades but also defines today’s conservation challenges. In Liguria, the Liberty style left a heritage that represents a significant layer of the early modern built environment. Based on existing scholarly literature, it emerges that more than half of the Liberty heritage of the region (about 54%) is concentrated in Genoa, the metropolitan center that underwent the most radical transformations. Imperia accounts for about 21%, reflecting the role of the western Riviera as a tourist destination for the upper classes, while La Spezia (18%) and Savona (7%) also preserve significant clusters of buildings linked to naval, industrial, and commercial expansion.

Scholars such as Rossana Bossaglia and Franco Sborgi have underlined the complexity of defining Liberty in Liguria: rather than a unified style, it should be understood as a polycentric and hybrid phenomenon, oscillating between tradition and modernity, eclecticism and innovation. This ambiguity makes Genoa's Liberty a fertile ground for studying both the artistic ambitions and the material fragilities of early modern architecture. Genoa became the main stage of Liberty experimentation. Within its distribution, three main areas of concentration of this architecture can be identified (Fig. 1). The first is Via XX Settembre, densely built with Liberty and Eclectic-style buildings, with the street itself designed and opened as part of the same wave of modernization that marked the new bourgeois city center, together with Piazza De Ferrari. Despite this widespread experimentation, archival research reveals that Liberty in Genoa also faced resistance. Several sources, including urban planning documents and architectural journals, show how the style was often perceived as excessively ornamental or foreign (Moretti 1905, 16–19). A key figure in this opposition was Cesare Gamba, the urban planner responsible for the reconfiguration of Via XX Settembre, who favored more classical solutions over Liberty principles. Nevertheless, architects such

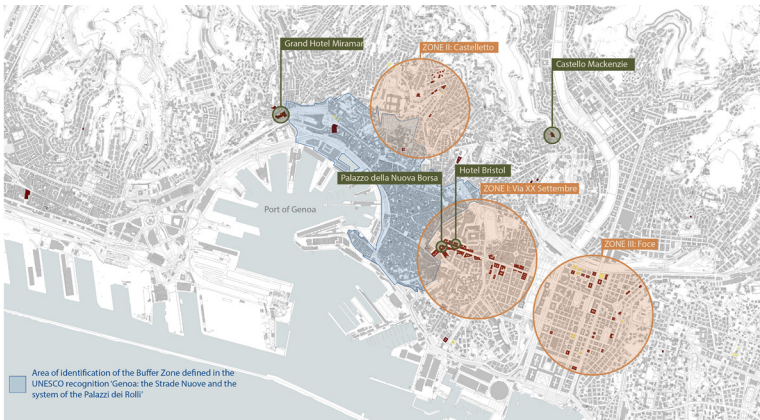


Fig. 1. Liberty architecture areas. Via XX Settembre, Castelletto, and Foce, Genoa¹ (Trayana Kovacheva, 2025)

as Dario Carbone and the Coppedè brothers collaborated with a dense network of artisans, cement manufacturers, metalworkers, and ceramic producers. This productive system blended craftsmanship and industry, ensuring that innovation remained rooted in artisanal expertise. The second area is the Castelletto district, a neo-bourgeois neighborhood whose development began in the mid-nineteenth century with the Barabino plan. It was further articulated during the Liberty period through the construction of modern villas, some of which were designed by Gino Coppedè. The third is the Foce area, a zone of urban expansion that embodies a modern planning approach and contains a high concentration of residential Liberty buildings that mark the start of the significant expansion of the city.

Liberty in Contemporary Contexts: Invisible Transformations

Liberty architecture constitutes a modern and relatively recent heritage. Unlike ancient monuments, these buildings rarely appear as ruins; instead, they remain an integral part

of the city's living fabric. Their transformation is therefore less visible: it unfolds through everyday use, small-scale interventions, and gradual material substitutions that accumulate over time. In many cases, buildings have never ceased to be used—residential palaces became offices, villas were subdivided into smaller apartments, and decorative façades were periodically repainted or restored. However, these incremental modifications, though apparently minor, alter the perception of the original fabric as profoundly as more radical interventions. Precisely because these buildings remain active, they risk being overlooked by heritage frameworks, normalized as background architecture, and gradually erased under the guise of modernization. This is why adaptive reuse cannot be limited to the revival of disused or derelict structures. It must also include the critical reassessment of actively used heritage, where continuity and transformation are entangled in slow, often unnoticed ways. This perspective aligns with recent theoretical approaches to adaptive reuse, which frame reuse not as an exceptional response to abandonment, but as an ongoing process of re-evaluating and rebalancing the values of existing buildings—particularly those that remain in use and are therefore subject to gradual, often overlooked transformations (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019). At the same time, this heritage is not immune to abandonment. While less frequent than in older monumental architecture, episodes of disuse and neglect have occurred, leading in some cases to deterioration before large-scale rehabilitation or reinvention projects could be implemented. In this context, abandonment does not always mean total ruin. However, it does create a condition of suspension: buildings that survive physically, yet remain empty of function, awaiting a renewed role. When reactivation occurs, it often requires substantial internal reconfiguration, a condition widely discussed in adaptive reuse literature as a common response to functional obsolescence in heritage buildings, particularly in urban contexts (Bullen and Love 2011).

Case Studies: Functional Shift Without Abandonment (Via XX Settembre; Hotel Bristol Palace)

The residential palaces along Via XX Settembre represent the first typology of transformation within Liberty architecture: buildings that were never abandoned yet underwent a radical shift in function. Built in the early twentieth century as large apartments for the upper-middle class, they have remained in continuous use, but their original domestic role has become largely obsolete for the contemporary lifestyle. Over the years, these interiors were progressively converted into offices, banks, professional studios, and bed-and-breakfast accommodations. Such changes often required substantial interior reconfigurations—subdivision of rooms, insertion of new infrastructures, removal or concealment of decorative elements—that altered both the spatial logic and the material integrity of the original design. From the outside, these buildings may appear largely intact, but their interiors tell the story of a profound functional displacement, one that occurred without ever passing through a phase of physical abandonment. In this category, the case of Hotel Bristol Palace offers a further perspective. Unlike the residential palaces, its destination has remained unchanged: from its inauguration in 1905 to the present day, it has continuously operated as a luxury hotel. Yet continuity of function did not prevent extensive spatial and material transformations. Archival cadastral plans clearly document how, over the course of the twentieth century, the internal layout was repeatedly modified to comply with evolving hygienic, safety, and accessibility standards (Fig. 2).

In the original distribution, entire floors shared a limited number of sanitary facilities, while guest rooms were arranged in large suites opening onto the monumental oval staircase. According to the last available cadastral plan from 2010, the second floor features the progressive addition of new sanitary facilities, concentrated along the western wing, which replaces portions of former bedrooms and service areas. On the opposite side, a large new dining room was created by unifying several smaller rooms along the eastern façade. These transformations fragmented the original suites, redefined circulation, and reduced the representative scale of the interiors. Further adaptations included the installation of three elevators, a secondary emergency staircase, and a fire-protection lobby, all of which were required to meet modern standards of accessibility and fire prevention.



Fig. 2. Second-floor plans. Hotel Bristol Palace, Genoa² (Trayana Kovacheva, 2025)

These interventions, while vital for the building's continued operation, reshaped the hierarchy between representative and service areas. The Bristol thus demonstrates that even in the absence of abandonment or a change of use, Liberty architecture can be profoundly redefined by the cumulative effect of regulatory adaptation. Regulatory frameworks act as key drivers of transformation, ensuring the survival of historic hotels while reshaping their architectural identity. In both the Bristol and the residential palaces of Via XX Settembre, the façades remain the most tangible evidence of Liberty architecture, projecting its early-twentieth-century image into the urban landscape even as interiors have been reconfigured.

Case Studies: Adaptive Reuse after Abandonment (Grand Hotel Miramare)

A second typology involves buildings that experienced a period of neglect and abandonment before being reactivated with a completely new function. The case of Hotel Miramare illustrates this dynamic with clarity: built as a luxury hotel in 1905, it was left unused for decades, its monumental façades exposed to atmospheric decay, invasive vegetation, and partial disrepair. The recovery project, initiated in the late 1990s, involves transforming the site into residential units, commercial services, and a casino, with a substantial reconfiguration of interior spaces. Large halls and vestibules were subdivided into apartments; service wings such as the kitchens were demolished to create new terraces; and new infrastructures were integrated, including an underground parking garage and reinforced accessibility systems. Externally, however, the intervention took the form of a restoration. The façades were

entirely restored, with a systematic cleaning and reintegration of decorative surfaces. The travertine basements were cleaned and consolidated, cementitious plasters with “*finto bugnato*” were restored, and missing portions of “*stucco*” and artificial stone were reconstructed using molds based on the original designs. Decorative ironwork, wooden window frames, and Venetian-style “*graniglia*” pavements were either conserved or reproduced. These choices maintained the visual identity of the building within the urban landscape, while its internal organization was radically altered. The Miramare thus becomes a paradigmatic example of adaptive reuse as a form of negotiation between the conservation of decorative identity and the reprogramming of function. It also reflects the tension between the safeguarding of collective memory and the demands of the contemporary urban economy. The building, once a locus of Belle Époque sociability, now exists as a hybrid residential-commercial organism, where the restored façade endures as a cultural signifier of a past that the interiors no longer embody.

Case Studies: Preserved Fabric and Residual Function (Mackenzie Castle; Palazzo della Nuova Borsa)

A third typology is defined by buildings that retain their monumental presence and decorative richness, both externally and internally, even as their original functions have been progressively emptied or replaced by occasional uses.

The first building in this category is the Mackenzie Castle (1893–1905), designed by Gino Coppedè as a private residence for Evan Mackenzie. Its architectural language combines medieval revival imagery with modern material experimentation. Although it was never entirely abandoned, the castle experienced a long sequence of temporary and transitional uses after the Mackenzie family left, before its acquisition by the Cambi Auction House. A conservative restoration was carried out in 2002, aimed at stabilizing mosaics, artificial-stone façades, painted interiors, and wooden furnishings. The intervention marked a new phase in the building’s life, preserving its external image and securing its fragile decorative materials. Today, however, the building serves as the headquarters of Cambi Aste, hosting exhibitions and art sales. This new function guarantees maintenance and partial accessibility, yet its activation is limited to specific events and occasions. For most of the time, the castle remains closed, operating more as a museum of itself than as a living space integrated into the city’s everyday life. Mackenzie Castle thus acts as a cultural container—materially authentic yet socially detached—its decorative identity still shaping Genoa’s collective memory. At the same time, its function has shifted from private representation to episodic display. A similar fate has befallen the Palazzo della Nuova Borsa (1909–1912), designed by Dario Carbone with decorative contributions from Adolfo Coppedè. Inaugurated as the center of Genoa’s financial life, the building featured the monumental Salone delle Grida, rich decorative façades celebrating bourgeois prosperity, and interiors equipped with offices, telegraph rooms, and a library. Its structure employed reinforced concrete by the Porcheddu Company under the Hennebique system, an innovation for the time. The progressive loss of financial function—following the 1991 abolition of stockbrokers, the 1994 last trading session, and closure in 1998—left the Borsa without its “*raison d’être*”. Today, it hosts only occasional events and exhibitions, preserving its monumental image but not its operative purpose; for most of the time, it remains closed to the public and empty. Seen within the broader urban fabric of Via XX Settembre, the Palazzo della Nuova Borsa

should not be regarded as an isolated monument but as part of a coherent architectural narrative. Together with the surrounding residential palaces built in the same decades, it defines the material and symbolic core of Genoa's Liberty identity—an ensemble where decorative ambition and structural experimentation converged to shape the city's modern image. Both cases exemplify the ambivalence of adaptive reuse within Liberty heritage: meticulous conservation of architectural fabric paired with the erosion of functional and cultural continuity. Castello Mackenzie and the Palazzo della Borsa remain intact in the urban scene yet function today as scenographic shells—preserved containers where memory endures through material presence rather than living use.

Conclusion: Liberty Architecture as Material Shell of Memory and Adaptive Continuity

Across the three typologies examined—continuous use with functional shift, reinvention after abandonment, and preservation with residual function—a common thread emerges. Liberty architecture in Genoa and Liguria often survives as a material shell of memory: a physical envelope that absorbs transformation while preserving the most authentic traces of its original identity. Even when interiors are reprogrammed or emptied of their initial functions, façades and decorative surfaces continue to convey the language, materials, and aesthetics of their time. Adaptive reuse, in this sense, is not a binary choice between preservation and transformation, but a continuum of negotiated adjustments.

Preserving the material and artistic integrity of these external surfaces is therefore essential to safeguarding the architectural identity of Liberty buildings. This requires not only technical skill but also a deep understanding of historical construction methods, material behavior, and artisanal practice. Liberty architecture in Liguria relied on experimental materials, whose innovative character makes them particularly vulnerable to salt crystallization, corrosion, and surface recession. Addressing these vulnerabilities through diagnostic investigation, mapping of pathologies, and evaluation of conservation treatments is fundamental.

The archival research undertaken in this study has proved fundamental to understanding the construction logic of Liberty architecture. In the Via XX Settembre residences, for instance, structural systems were designed in close relation to the decorative program. This insight remains crucial for any meaningful conservation of Liberty heritage. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that adaptive reuse can only be effective when grounded in material knowledge and historical awareness, allowing Liberty architecture to endure as both a memory and a material presence.

Notes

1. The map has been elaborated by the author as an interpretative tool. It highlights the area of Genoa's historical center and locates the Liberty architecture areas and case studies examined in the paper;
2. The image illustrates two comparative plans: the original plan of Hotel Bristol (left) (AA.VV., 1902) and the 2010 cadastral plan (right), redrawn by the author to highlight the spatial impact of regulatory adaptation.

Bibliography

- AA.VV. *Genova nuova*, Genoa: Bacigalupi Editore, 1902.
- Australia ICOMOS. *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, 2013*. Burwood: Australia ICOMOS Incorporated, 2013.
- Balletti, Franca, and Bruno Giontoni. *Genova. Cultura urbanistica e formazione della città contemporanea 1850/1920*. Genoa: Fibbiani Editore, 1984.
- Bossaglia, Rossana. *Il Liberty in Italia*. Milan: Il sagggiatore di Alberto Mondadori Editore, 1968.
- Bossaglia, Rossana, and Mauro Cozzi. *I Coppedè*. Genoa: Sagep Editrice, 1982.
- Bozzo, Gianni, and Matteo Cambi. *Il Castello Mackenzie a Genova: l'esordio di Gino Coppedè*. Cinisello Balsamo (MI): Silvana Editoriale S.p.A., 2008.
- Bullen, Peter A., and Peter E. D. Love. "Adaptive Reuse of Heritage Buildings." *Structural Survey* 29 (5), 411–421, 2011.
- Cametti, Laura. *Il Signore del Porto. Apogeo, declino e rinascita del Miramare di Genova*. Genoa: San Giorgio Editrice, 2006.
- Crudeli, Andrea, ed. *Adaptive Reuse: Theoretical Glossary and Design Labs*. Florence: STH Press, 2024.
- Giola, Vittorio. *Cementi decorativi liberty. Storia, tecnica, conservazione*. Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2009.
- Fochessati Matteo, and Gianni Franzone. *Dalla città al museo: percorsi nella Genova dell'Ottocento e del Novecento tra storia, arte e architettura*. Genoa: Sagep Editrice, 2014.
- Moretti, Gaetano. "Sistemazione di Piazza De Ferrari a Genova". *L'edilizia moderna*, Anno XIV, n. 1. Milan: Stabilimento Tipografico Arturo Demarchi, 1905.
- Nicoletti, Anna Maria. *Via XX Settembre a Genova. La costruzione della città tra Otto e Novecento*. Genoa: Sagep Editrice, 1993.
- Nicoletti, Anna Maria, Elena Manara, and Gianni Bozzo. *Genova. Il Palazzo della Nuova Borsa*. Genoa: Sagep Editrice, 1999.
- Pintossi, Nadia, Deniz Ikiz Kaya, Pieter van Wesemael, and Ana Pereira Roders. "Challenges of cultural heritage adaptive reuse: A stakeholders-based comparative study in three European Cities." *Habitat International* 136, 102811, 2023.
- Plevoets, Bie, and Koenraad Van Cleempoel. *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline*. London–New York: Routledge, 2019.
- Sborgi, Franco, Orietta Banchieri Vitone, and Luce Tondi. *Testimonianze Liberty a Genova*. Genoa: Sagep Editrice, 1986.
- Sborgi, Franco. *Il mito del moderno. La cultura Liberty in Liguria*. Genoa-Imperia: Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Genova e Imperia Banca Carige, 2003.