

## Between Site-Specificity and the Persistence of Memory

The Marino Marini Museum in the former Church of San Pancrazio,  
Florence

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### Abstract

In 1980, shortly before his death, the Italian sculptor Marino Marini donated his personal collection to the city of Florence, with the condition that it be permanently exhibited. Under the supervision of his wife Mercedes “Marina” Pedrazzini, the city selected the deconsecrated church of San Pancrazio as the museum’s site. Dating back to the 9th–10th century, San Pancrazio is one of Florence’s earliest parish churches. Over the centuries, it underwent multiple transformations—monastery, family chapel of the Rucellai bankers, Baroque church, and after the Napoleonic suppressions of religious orders even magistracy and tobacco factory—showing an unplanned, spontaneous form of adaptive reuse. Architects Lorenzo Papi and Bruno Sacchi were entrusted with converting the building into a museum of Marini’s work. Their challenge was to make readable the complex historical layers while creating a coherent spatial narrative for the artworks. Yet long before Marini’s horses and knights San Pancrazio was already exhibiting a unique piece: Alberti’s *Tempietto del Santo Sepolcro*, the Rucellai family tomb. The Sacellum, designed as a “room within a room”, stands autonomous in the still consecrated chapel, a sacred structure within a sacred space. The presence of this site-specific exhibit, with its spatial layering prefigures the site’s museographic potential, suggesting an intrinsic relationship between sacred and cultural. Could the coexistence of sacred and secular space in San Pancrazio offer a model for reusing Europe’s disused churches? A space for individual devotion outside of the liturgical function, increasingly recognised by modern catholic theology, could be left as a trace during the transformation. The article examines Papi and Sacchi’s project within this broader debate, exploring how architecture can preserve a building’s spiritual resonance while adapting it for new cultural uses.

**Keywords:** Adaptive Reuse, Sacred and Secular Space, Memory and Heritage Transformation

*Per i medesimi Rucellai in questa stessa maniera fece Leon Batista in San Brancazio una cappella che si regge sopra gl’architravi grandi, posati sopra due colonne e due pilastri, forando sotto il muro della chiesa, che è cosa difficile ma sicura. Onde questa opera è delle migliori che facesse questo architetto.*

(G.Vasari, Le vite)

## Introduction

This article discusses the adaptive reuse project of the Marino Marini Museum in the former church of San Pancrazio in Florence, framing it within the broader discourse on the transformation of religious buildings after their deconsecration. It will elaborate on how these buildings illustrate a specificity within the theme of reuse. They represent more than mere walls enclosing a space and offering a chance for a transformation: they are the materialisation of beliefs and traditions. A church is a generous space, in architectural terms, which embodies the persistency of memory—the deepest meaning of the Vitruvian *firmitas*—the most profound purpose of the act of building. In particular, the article considers how traces of this memory could be preserved during a transformation process, allowing for a coexistence of sacred and profane. History as a method will provide the instrument to extract principles to guide action.

## Historical Overview: the Church of San Pancrazio

### *The medieval church.*

From our privileged point of view we will fast forward over ten centuries of history, actions, decisions and memories, discovering an unplanned, powerful and spontaneous example of adaptive reuse.<sup>1</sup> Located just outside the first city wall of Florence, the Church of San Pancrazio is first documented in the year 805 a.C. The original building was one of Florence's oldest churches, becoming by the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century one of the twelve main parish churches of the city. By this time it was included within the city walls. The first changes were operated by the monks of Vallombrosa, who settled there since the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The religious order expanded the existing complex into a cloister, adding two side chapels to the one nave church, the transept, the bell tower and the crypt. One of the two lateral chapels was interested by a major transformation led by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) under the commission of florentine banker Giovanni di Paolo Rucellai (1403-1481). In 1457, the architect convinced his client to send an expedition to the Holy Land, to precisely measure the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre. His aim was to rebuild a space with similar proportions inside of one of San Pancrazio's side chapels. This typological exercise was consistent with the medieval topos of the "Copies of the Holy Sepulchre", the imitation of the Aediculae over the tomb of Christ in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

### *Leon Battista Alberti in the chapel Rucellai*

Alberti's intervention—finished by 1467, as noted in the temple's inscription—consisted in redefining the spatial hierarchy in the church by creating a full opening on the side wall toward the chapel. Two columns sustained an entablature and together with a system of paraste pillars, framed the view on the new space. Two wide steps, separated the church entrance from the raised level of the chapel, which was covered by a finely designed barrel vault. At the centre of the space, Alberti placed a masterfully designed small temple (Fig. 1.1)—a room within the room—elegantly decorated in coloured marbles. Three high rectangular openings, with very simple mouldings, were placed on the wall facing the side street (Via della spada). The light, coming from the back side of the temple, created a *chiaroscuro* effect which enhanced the silhouette of the small piece of architecture. Alberti



Fig. 1.1 (Left) Alberti's Sepulchre inside of the Rucellai Chapel. On the left the wall was open to the church. Fig. 1.2 (Right) The entrance with the spolia taken from the chapel (Vanni Sacconi, 2025)

formulated a space suspended between the inside and the outside, recognising to the room which contains the sepulchre the public role of the loggia, similarly to how he proceeded by designing the open portico in front of Palazzo Rucellai. The project needs to be read, as already noted by Maria Grazia Eccheli (Eccheli 2014), not as an autonomous act of creativity, but rather as a part of the project of the city: a public space to allow the public to see a symbolic manifestation of power. Alberti's intervention shows a very clear way of intervening on the existing; here the work of the architect is a continuous dialogue with the existing and the past, to create a new architecture which is at the same time new and in continuity with the old.

### *The Baroque Modifications*

Fast forward: the church underwent different transformations from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, mainly to adapt the interiors to the occurred changes in taste. The latest one, in baroque style, was led between 1751 and 1755 by architect Giuseppe Ruggeri. During this intervention the nave was shortened with the insertion of a new wall at the end of the Rucellai chapel and covered through a barrel vault with lunettes and lateral windows. It is within this time frame that the cupola at the nave's centre was erected.

### *The Deconsecration*

Following the suppressions of religious institutions while Napoleon was Emperor and King of Italy, San Pancrazio was deconsecrated in 1808. The building was reused first as

French Imperial Lottery, then as Magistracy and finally as Royal Tobacco Manufacture. During this time, pragmatic interventions were executed, such as the construction of a new ceiling on steel beams at mid height, which split the nave in two giving a sudden industrial atmosphere to the building. The property of the chapel was kept by the Rucellai family, but they were forced to close the magnificent opening between the chapel and the church designed by Alberti. The two columns were used to decorate the new church entrance (Fig. 1.2), according to the new eclectic taste following the archaeological campaigns in Egypt. Two stone lions were placed on the side of the new entrance stair. A fire, a debatable restoration and the use as a military deposit completed the state of things as in the 1950s the building underwent the supervision of the Cultural Heritage Authority of Florence.

### **The Transformation Project: the Marino Marini Museum**

A second artist, after Alberti, crossed his path with the spaces inside San Pancrazio. At the end of his career the Tuscan sculptor and painter Marino Marini (1901-1980) decided to establish his own legacy by donating a collection of his works to the city of Florence. Marini, whose artistic journey was deeply rooted in the archaic power of Etruscan primitive forms, probably felt coming back to Florence as a proper way of closing a career marked by international recognition. In his own words: «Sooner or later, you have to return to Florence because it gives you the value of life and that absolute precision which comes from the soul.» (Lachi 2004a, 30)

The city council of Florence offered to the sculptor and his wife Marina the tormented space inside of San Pancrazio. Entrusted with the project for the museum's organisation were from 1982 the architects Lorenzo Papi (1932-1999) and Bruno Sacchi (1931-2011). The two had been working together in private commissions as members of the group *Forté63*. What appeared to the eyes of the two designers, before starting to draw the first drafts of the project, was a building with a highly complex degree of successive stratifications.

#### *Working by Addition*

«To add perhaps, never subtract resources to the context» (Dezzi Bardeschi 1991, 101), these the words of Florentine restaurateur Marco Dezzi Bardeschi (1934-2018). From the same generation of the two authors of the Marini Museum, he summarises well in this thought a new sensibility toward the project on the existing, which must have been shared by Papi and Sacchi: their conceptual approach toward the transformation of the church was indeed to keep all layers of time readable, not refusing to add a contemporary signature.

#### *The Non-absolute Point of View*

The additive logic in the Marini Museum leads to the absence of a preferential point of view in time from which the building is being seen. The two architects don't try to recompose the church to a certain moment in history, they accept what happened, select representative episodes to be saved and try to celebrate the path of the building instead of crystallizing the results achieved in a specific period of time – no matter how exceptional it may have been. The starting point of the project is not only a church, it is a building which already has been a church, superimposed with many different usages.



Fig. 2.1 (Left) The central space under the dome in the Museum. Fig. 2.2 (Right) The last floor with the view to the vaults (Vanni Sacconi, 2025)

### *The Entrance*

The first object the visitor sees while entering the museum is a declaration of intents: the steel frames of the napoleonic mezzanine manifest through the red coating their strong presence as a trace of what happened to the church room. The steel frames create a height compression at the entrance and are integrated with translucent objects concealing air conditioning and lighting elements. The spatial sequence does not reveal itself immediately: the former church past is not right away obvious, it unravels while walking to the central space underneath the baroque cupola.

### *Time as Space's Fourth Dimension*

Acknowledging the lesson of the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century and the concept of relativity in science, time becomes in the Marini Museum the fourth dimension of space. Architecture stops revolving around the eyes of a fix observer. The central perspective of the Renaissance, probably the main instrument of church planning, leaves place to a complex system of suspended stairs and walkways. The architects tried not to emphasise the axially of the nave nor a privileged point of view to admire the works. The visit path develops through many different levels added to the existing mezzanine, allowing for multiple unconventional views on the church spaces and on the art.

### *The New Liturgic Fire*

The whole composition revolves, however, around “Equestrian composition”, the monumental sculpture which was placed following the will of Marini underneath the cupola

as a new focal point—a sort of new liturgic fire—substituting the altar. It is very interesting how, while at the same time the architects try to deconstruct the symmetry of the space, the centre of the church's axes remains the most important point in the project. There is a typological strength in the space which can't be ignored, and became the “conceptual epicentre of Marino's Poetics” (Lachi 2014, 46). It is this the point (Fig. 2.1) where the character of the church is clear and manifest to the visitor.

### *Light as Guidance*

The exhibition is organized as a ring, allowing visitors to move freely without taking the same path twice, yet in a non obvious way, thanks to the system of stairs and hanging walkways. The stairs offer themselves to the visitors, as the intensity of light guides the viewer to explore the space. The entrance, as already discussed, is artificially lit and dominated by the presence of the red coated steel beams. Light increases together with height, as we walk the nave. The final part of the building, in correspondence of the missing apse, has been entirely reconstructed, with a window open to the patio. Space is here defined by a gesture in section: the higher part of the window follows the arch with semicircular profiles, while underneath a second barrel vault in polycarbonate, placed orthogonally to the first, extends the interior covering the suspended walkways. This setting is perhaps the one where the taste of the time is better visible, with clear reminiscence of the Crystal Palace's front, similar to the gallery in the Lloyd Building by Richard Rogers.

### *The Archetypal Fragments: the House, the City and the River*

It is difficult not to read in this work the influence of the architect Giovanni Michelucci in the work by Papi and Sacchi. The latter used to collaborate with Michelucci in many important projects such as the *Monte dei Paschi di Siena* bank in Colle val D'Elsa or the Museum of the *Contrada di Val di Montone* in Siena. The biggest similarity we can find is though not a formal, rather a conceptual one. There is a deep connection with primitive and archetypal forms in the Marini Museum—common to Michelucci's work if we think about the pilgrim's tent of the church of *San Giovanni Battista*—not only in the artworks, but in the space. In the words of Bruno Sacchi: «If the path and light constitute the soul of this museum, there is a third element that inspires and permeates it: that of the house. Yes, I would have liked to build a museum with the characteristics of a house and to a certain extent of a theatre, a circus or an orchestra: these archetypes, the house, the theatre, the square, the orchestra always crowd the mind of architects. They are ancestral archetypes that belong to the unconscious and the collective imagination, yet they can hardly coexist within a single architectural solution» (Sacchi 2014, 35) [translation by the author]

It is through these archetypal spatial strategies that we can fully comprehend some of the episodes appearing in San Pancrazio: the cavea defining the section, connecting the ground floor with the crypt, the water which was supposed to be falling down from the curved windows, taking the river inside of the house. On the upper floor three sculptures were placed on a wheel, a rotating carousel reminding of a circus. Even the detailing of both the entryway and the ticket office, where thin concrete walls bend as moving scenes and offer a scenographic background to two sitting sculptures, show a relation with the powerful archetype of the theatre, so beloved by Giovanni Michelucci.

### *Materiality and Memory*

The materiality of the museum is in constant dialogue with the memory of the place. There is a will for using traditional materials, while at the same time the need for an opposite by contrast. The church floor—as all churches in Florence—is in terracotta tiles. In opposition, the upper floors and the stripe which, like a carpet leads to the sculpture of the knight, are in the beautiful black marble Cardoso from the Apuane Alps. This material is used to create visual contrast with the gips sculptures by Marini. The dichotomy old-new, the idea of contrasting materials seems to have led the decisions of the designers as noted by Sacchi himself. The chestnut wood of Florentine roofs is jointed with white coated steel. White plaster and white concrete meet the black marble, as the red metal beams, with their heavy presence at the entrance level, speak of the industrial parenthesis of the building.

### *The Last Floor or the Perception of the Church Room*

The last floor of the exhibition space is the moment the visitor gets to be near to the ceilings and is able to admire the vaults (Fig. 2.2) while the importance given to the multiple look downs is strengthened by the detail of the parapet. The wooden panel at the top is extended to become a surface to hold exhibits while looking down at the lower floors. A last mezzanine level, reachable through a spiral staircase, is placed on one side of the nave, contributing to unbalance the symmetry of the space.

### *The Reconnection of the Museum with the Chapel*

The peculiarity of this transformation project lies however in what hasn't happened, in what was left open, due to the presence of the Temple of the Holy Sepulchre designed by Alberti. Papi and Sacchi, for bureaucratic and administrative reasons, were not able to reconnect the church with the chapel. The disconnection operated during the Napoleonic suppressions, preserved maintaining the original purpose of the room, as the space was never deconsecrated.

Though it does not appear today as Alberti imagined it – the view from the side through the triforium must have been an amazing experience—it remains as the only memory of the religious meaning this building had for centuries.

Religious building and its spaces—even their transformation—need to be framed within a broader discourse including not only spatial matters, but theological implications. A debate is being held inside the catholic Church, regarding the risks of a substantial identification of churches with neutral liturgical Aulas. The centrality given to the celebration of the Holy Mass and to liturgy has lowered the importance of these spaces as places of retreat, prayer and personal devotion. In a note edited by the german Bishop's conference on the reuse of church buildings, churches are described as not only places for the liturgic assembly, but also for prayer and personal devotion (Sektretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 2003), in contrast with the classical liturgical position, centered around the celebration of the Eucharist. A different liturgical perspective could open new possibilities in the process of transformation of deconsecrated buildings, as a part could be maintained as a Raum der Stille, a room for silence, perhaps with a cross, to preserve at least the cultural memory of a territory (see Gerhards 2015).



Fig. 3.1 (Left) and 3.2 (Right). The new opening in the wall reconnecting the chapel with the museum (Vanni Sacconi, 2025)

### **The Sacellum as the trace of a votive space in a disused church: a guide to action**

In 2012, the need to make the chapel fully accessible, led to its reconnection, with a discreet, almost invisible door in the side wall. After centuries the two parts of the original church are reunited as two parts of the same system, despite the change of destination. I would like to draw the attention to this small gesture (Fig. 3.1 and 3.2), a simple opening cut in a wall, which reconnects the church with the chapel, letting different times and spaces communicate. Archaic enough to be primitive it allows all the memory of all these different times, the beliefs, the works, the dreams of people—the life, enter inside.

San Pancrazio, after a long line of successive stratifications, is not used as a church anymore, the space is today an exhibition space. The building remains alive by being used, the rooms are heated, visitors get inside wandering through the suspended walkways admiring the artworks. Yet not only preservation by usage is relevant during the transformation of a church building, but also the memory of what these spaces were meant to be. There are centuries of effort, of communities who used to gather inside these walls, that don't simply get lost when the use of the space changes. When the visitor reaches the centre of the aula—after the narrow metal ceiling—and rises the eyes toward the cupola, the original purpose of the space appears clearly. People wander around asking themselves what happened to the space, as they discover something more than a simple exhibition, a second layer made of traces impressed in the rooms.

It is through the presence of the chapel Rucellai—which was never deconsecrated—that the whole building acquires today a double meaning. While the museum itself bear impressed the traces and the memory of a different past, it is only inside the chapel that we

are confronted with what the building originally meant.

The coexistence of a sacred space within a non sacred one, a room inside a room, metaphorically so well represented by Alberti's intervention, could serve as a guideline for the adaptive reuse of sacred buildings. During the transformation, a trace of what the first usage of the space was, could be preserved, in order to not erase centuries of history. Due to today's increasing secularisation, many churches in Europe are being abandoned, as the communities are shrinking in number and are not able to take care of the buildings. Though there is still a high demand in society for places for social gathering, to meet and do things together, to share values and confront beliefs. In this sense, the case of San Pancrazio can be read alongside other European adaptive reuse projects of former religious buildings, such as the Church of St. Agnes in Berlin, transformed into a gallery space, the Dominicanen Bookstore in Maastricht, arranging books inside of a metal structure around the columns, or the conversion of the Carmelite cloister in Gent into the Kunsthall Gent. Yet, the specificity of San Pancrazio is its simultaneity, a certain degree of hybridisation between sacred and profane. If a church becomes deconsecrated and a transformation is needed to let the space live further, it still could be possible to maintain a trace of the original role intact. The lesson taught by San Pancrazio, the presence of a sacred place for personal devotion as part of a secularised space, in one of a mutual coexistence that suggests a model for guiding the adaptive reuse of Europe's abandoned church buildings.

## Notes

1. The historical reconstruction is based on Lachi (2004b), Dezzi Bardeschi (2013) and Vaccaro (2013a)
2. As noted by Anke Naujokat (Naujokat 2015) the main purpose of these buildings was to explain and make understandable and physically tangible the promise of life after death, through the metaphor of the "empty tomb". These objects could have been used as didactical-theological explanations. The Temple's decorations, instead, are used as a manifestation of power, influence, and to strengthen alliances.

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