

Urban Spolia

The Case of Carminiello ai Mannesi

Giacomo Viscovo^a, Lorenzo Palladino^b, Giuseppe Sorrentino^c

^aArchitect, Napoli, Italia, viscovogiacomo@gmail.com; ^bUniversità di Trento, Trento, Italia, lorenzo.palladino@unitn.it; ^cArchitect, Napoli, Italia, peppe.24.gs@gmail.com

Abstract

On February 20, 1943, a bombing in the heart of Naples' historic center—later recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site—hit the church of Santa Maria del Carmine ai Mannesi, creating a void in the urban fabric. Beneath the rubble, Roman-era remains unexpectedly emerged: a catastrophic event that was unintentionally revealing. The archaeological site of Carminiello ai Mannesi stands today as a significant case of unintended urban transformation. Unlike conventional adaptive reuse interventions, this outcome is not the result of a deliberate project but rather of an occurrence—or perhaps a *non-project*. While history acted arbitrarily and human response was delayed, leaving the site abandoned for decades, the ruin sits within a vibrant urban fabric shaped by informal construction. This unique case offers a space where the ruin itself becomes a critical device. Its distinctive feature lies in placing all historical layers—from Roman architecture to post-war residential constructions—on the same level, both literally and metaphorically. Resonating with contemporary adaptive reuse theories that view built heritage as a dynamic palimpsest rather than a static artifact, this story raises crucial questions about conservation across different historical eras. Rather than correcting the site through imposed values, it suggests listening to its fluid condition. Carminiello ai Mannesi reflects the deepest nature of historic centers: a continual layering of materials and stories—*urban spolia* to be reassembled into ever-new functional orders.

Keywords: Ancient Center, Forma Urbis, Palimpsest

Introduction

en Spolia: reuse of old and, for the most part, ancient pieces (known as spoglie) in a new context, whether similar or different, or in a new functional order.¹

Originally emerging from pragmatic considerations, the practice gradually evolved into a conscious mode of action, aimed at judging or glorifying the past, to become today an ethical and ecological virtue. Actually, *spolia* represents any opportunity for change that preserves traces of the entire process. The material itself becomes the starting point for a line of reasoning that reveals not only the state of what exists, but also a concrete reality whose every part can be analyzed and recovered. For those who live and move within the historic city, the term *spolia* evokes familiar images of juxtaposed fragments composing the tangible palimpsest of the memory of places. An urban epiphany that takes place daily in front of those who walk the streets of the historic center.

The case study examined here is not a conventional example of adaptive reuse—as an operational and programmatic strategy employed by an architect—but rather a spontaneous, necessary reuse through which the city itself accommodates the transformations imposed by society. The archaeological site of Carminiello ai Mannesi exemplifies this process, encompassing transformations from the Roman Republic, through medieval and seventeenth-century buildings, to post-war speculative construction. All these layers are connected through the total or partial reuse of the same materials, shaped and adapted to the evolving needs and forms of the city over time.

The Historical Vicissitudes of the Site

The site lies within the *insula* to which it gives its name, embedded in the pseudo-Hippodamian grid of Naples' ancient center². Bounded by the modern Via Duomo to the west, Via dei Tribunali to the north, Via Vicaria Vecchia to the south, and Vico Zuroli to the east, the *insula* underwent major transformations in the 19th century along the Via Duomo frontage. Meanwhile, internal structures dating back to the 15th and 16th centuries remained largely intact until World War II, when many were severely compromised or destroyed.

Among the losses was the seventeenth-century church of Santa Maria del Carmine ai Mannesi. Today, the Carminiello ai Mannesi archaeological complex stands in its place, covering seven hundred square meters nestled behind the curtain wall of Via Duomo. Here, significant evidence of Roman masonry in *opus latericium* and *opus mixtum* has emerged, rising to a height of about two floors. The remarkable preservation of these Roman walls suggests they were incorporated into later buildings rather than demolished. It is possible to hypothesize that, given the limited archaeological awareness of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, new masonry was founded directly upon pre-existing Roman structures, thereby unintentionally ensuring their preservation.



Fig. 1. Carminiello ai Mannesi archeological site (Gianluca Piccolo, 2019)

On (Architectural) Abstinence and Obstinacy

Naples' urban history—specifically within its ancient center—tells the story of a city that grew vertically. Confined within the ducal walls (sixth to twelfth centuries) and nourished by the quarrying of local tuff, the city repeatedly deconstructed and transformed its body while adhering to the limits of the Greek grid. The bombings of World War II catalyzed this phenomenon: the voids left by explosions often encouraged spontaneous, speculative reconstruction in the absence of institutional planning.

This observation suggests that the *forma urbis* recognizes transformation not as a discontinuity, but as an intrinsic part of its evolutionary process. As society continually redefines its organization, built matter reinserts itself into new functional and formal orders. Ancient environments are thus nourished by the continuous labor of inhabitants: a process of adaptation, overlap, and rewriting where every constructive gesture renews and simultaneously preserves the memory of previous forms.

The built environment becomes the repository of a collective consciousness, allowing the city to regenerate without severing ties with its origins. This physical stratification mirrors the sedimentation of memory, expressing the reciprocity between built form and historical time. Such a condition is particularly evident in Naples, where public space is rarely the result of a unified design but rather the outcome of layered practices and customs. As Salvatore Di Liello observes:

«Quasi mai la piazza, spazio elettivo della dimensione pubblica, è a Napoli il risultato di un progetto unitario [...] Più spesso, un largo informe definito da tracciati naturali o un'addizione irrisolta di un ampliamento urbano, acquista spontaneamente significati legati a memorie del luogo [...] E la storia urbana di Napoli sembra del resto ribadire la forza delle identità permanenti [...] anche quando i programmi decisi del potere hanno tentato radicali trasformazioni» (Di Liello 2008, 299).

Roberto Pane, historian of architecture and restoration, formalized this condition through the concept of *istanza psicologica*³. Coinciding with his study of Carl Gustav Jung, Pane proposed the notion of the *centro antico* (ancient center). He identified the psychological balance of the inhabitants as the deep motivation for conservation, viewing heritage not merely as an art object but as a complex system of values inherent to human anthropology. For Pane, ancient environments must remain places where people live in equilibrium with their community, rejecting sanitization that would reduce them to cold museums or luxury enclaves (Pane A. 2017, 47). As he stated, environmental stratification is a precious legacy precisely because it constitutes the irreplaceable heritage of memory: «The ancient is not just a document-object to be contemplated, but the testimony of a history of which we ourselves are the living stratification» (Pane R. 1977, 305)

Not just a Matter of Semantics

In this context, Roberto Pane's definition of *centro antico*—proposed in 1966 and formalized in 1971—represents an attempt to organically link historical stratification, morphological permanence, and urban conservation planning.

Naples presents a complex case where the historic center's boundaries are difficult to define unequivocally, as shown by the discrepancy between the current municipal zoning plan and the UNESCO World Heritage perimeter⁴.

Aiming to transcend the generic notion of “historic center,” Pane identified an older nucleus characterized by the persistence of the Greek-Roman layout, a density of medieval and modern structures, and significant archaeological evidence (Mangone 2016, 261). Preliminary research for the historic center plan began in 1964, coinciding with the Venice Charter and the international conservation debate. This work emerged in response to the failure of the 1958 zoning plans⁵, which had proposed massive demolition and construction incompatible with the historic fabric’s scale.

Operationally, Pane’s response did not demand the absolute inviolability of the center. Instead, it allowed for building replacement regulated by volumetric parameters designed to preserve environmental characteristics, viewed as visible manifestations of collective memory. Thus, the definition of *historic center* assumes a dual meaning—conceptual and operational—capable of discretizing historical complexity while interpreting urban transformations.



Fig. 2. Carminiello ai Mannesi archeological site (Gianluca Piccolo, 2019)

Conclusions

The city acts as a vast quarry of material and space to be reassembled. Like ancient vestiges embedded within ever-changing patterns, these elements allow for the recovery of shared memory. From an operational perspective, spolia is not an invitation to resignation. On the contrary, it exhorts us to bear witness to our own time by consciously manipulating the city’s material.

The catastrophic bombing of Carminiello ai Mannesi marked a dramatic moment in history while simultaneously revealing the layers hidden beneath. This process aligns with contemporary adaptive reuse strategies that prioritize the circularity of heritage resources

over static preservation. Rather than viewing the ruin as a void to be filled or fixed, the site demonstrates how the city can metabolize trauma. Ultimately, Carminiello ai Mannesi stands as a testament to the resilience of the urban fabric, where the past is not merely displayed but actively reintegrated into the living present.

Notes

1. Definition of the term *spolia*, rendered in English by the author, based on the entry in the Treccani Dictionary: [Treccani, “*spolia*,” *Dizionario Online*, <https://www.treccani.it/>];

2. «È ben noto che in ambito europeo Napoli rappresenta un caso a sé [...] la città meridionale non avrebbe registrato tra Ottocento e Novecento radicali ed estesi processi di trasformazione urbana, tanto che in larga parte nella sua struttura urbana e nella sua consistenza edilizia, l'articolatissimo abitato pre-ottocentesco è sopravvissuto fino ai nostri giorni. Si tratta di un insieme tutt'altro che compatto e omogeneo [...] Allorché nel secondo dopoguerra si afferma il concetto di centro storico, le difficoltà di approccio a una struttura così eterogenea emergono subito. È persino complicato definirlo per antitesi rispetto all'espansione moderna, atteso che le stesse zone di espansione non di rado assorbivano antichi borghi, casali agricoli [...] Proprio dall'osservatorio napoletano, e tarando l'esempio sulla specificità del caso partenopeo, cogliendo l'inevitabile correlazione tra la questione semantica e le eventuali azioni di tutela, a partire dal 1966 Roberto Pane propose la nozione di “centro antico” [...] La nozione proposta calzava alla perfezione alla specificità del caso napoletano, in cui era enucleabile una parte più antica, caratterizzata dalla sostanziale permanenza del tracciato di fondazione greco, non troppo modificata da ristrutturazioni urbanistiche ottocentesche e novecentesche, particolarmente densa di strutture architettoniche e artistiche di età medievale e moderna tra cui alcuni dei più caratterizzanti monumenti, ma ricca di presenze archeologiche». (Mangone 2016, 259–261)

3. «A me pare che il danno e lo spreco che si vanno perpetrando siano da individuarsi proprio come qualcosa che tocca la sfera del nostro inconscio; che, in altre parole, i termini puramente razionali, con cui simili vicende sono abitualmente considerate, non permettono di individuare il male e l'impovertimento che essi apportano alla nostra più intima natura [...]. C'è da aggiungere che la conservazione e l'incremento del verde non riguardano solo e semplicemente le esigenze dettate dalla vita biologica e dai vantaggi del turismo ma qualche cosa che ha sede nella nostra interiorità e che risponde ad un profondo bisogno della vita psichica. Purtroppo, però, i nostri comportamenti sociali dettati esclusivamente dall'economia di profitto e di consumo, ci rendono sempre meno adatti alla valutazione del profondo danno che la nostra vita interiore subisce come conseguenza della estraniamento del nostro ambiente urbano [...]. La psicoanalisi ammonisce che è presente in noi una profonda vita dell'inconscio e che, se vogliamo difendere la nostra salute psichica, non dobbiamo mortificarla, né tollerare che essa sia forzata da comportamenti esclusivamente razionali ed ai loro standards economici. [...] In tal modo, le ragioni dell'arte, degli ambienti storici e delle bellezze di natura troveranno il loro più valido fondamento in qualche cosa che preesiste ad ogni considerazione pratica o estetica perché ha radice nella nostra stessa interiorità. [...] Esiste un'antichità che è stratificata in noi stessi e che va considerata come premessa e condizione di ogni nostro divenire [...]». (Pane R. 1966, 15–19)

4. The inclusion of Naples in the UNESCO World Heritage List, completed in 1995, identified the parts of the city considered to have such qualities and identity value as to justify their recognition as world heritage sites. However, given the inadequacy of the overly extensive boundaries of the historic center defined by the municipal urban planning instrument in force at the time, it was hastily decided to resurrect—with all its limitations—the 1972 perimeter, covering approximately 720 hectares, with the sole addition of the monumental parks. The current perimeter of reference for the General Urban Plan derives instead from the 1999 amendment, which, based on aerial photogrammetry from 1943, expanded the area to include approximately 1,917 hectares of municipal territory.

5. «Per comprendere il contesto nel quale si sviluppano le ricerche preliminari al piano per il centro antico di Napoli del 1971 occorre fare un salto indietro al 1958, data fatidica per le vicende urbanistiche napoletane, coincidente con la fine dell'amministrazione monarchica del sindaco Achille Lauro (1952-1958) ma anche con la presentazione di un piano regolatore – redatto da una commissione di ben 108 esperti istituita nel 1955 – il cui unico scopo era favorire il partito dei costruttori, prevedendo quasi ovunque l'incremento della densità edilizia. Per il centro antico, in particolare, il piano proponeva un insieme sconcertante di demolizioni, accompagnate da nuove costruzioni con volumetrie ed altezze incompatibili con il tessuto urbano della Neapolis greco-romana. Si trattava di una proposta che appariva in totale contrasto con quanto si discuteva a livello nazionale da circa un decennio, ovvero la necessità di tutelare i centri storici, attraverso gli strumenti urbanistici, dalla minaccia della speculazione edilizia». (Pane A. 2020)

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