

Recovering of an identity: restoration works of the Orsini-Colonna castle in Avezzano, Italy

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Abstract

The Orsini Colonna castle of Avezzano represents one of the most important historic buildings in the internal area of Abruzzo. Founded at the end of the fifteenth century, on the rests of an older structure, with continuing modification till the sixteenth century, the building had several damages with the earthquake of January thirteenth 1915, which destroyed the entire city Avezzano and the neighborhood, causing more than 30000 victims. After the quake event, the efforts and the works for the preservation didn't have the time to start, because of the beginning of the world wars; in particular, the castle suffered more damages with the three different bombardments on the city in 1943 and 1944. The first works of recovering and restoration were achieved in 1964 by the Genio Civile of Avezzano, the corps of engineers, with the direction of Tommaso Orlandi; in this intervention, the building had been interested by the recovering of the structures, with the reconstruction of the perimeter walls, also with the purpose of avoiding deterioration and the complete abandonment. The second works were conducted by the architect Alessandro Del Bufalo, who designed the restoration of the entire building, inserting an internal concert hall in the courtyard with a new structure in steel and glass, recovering the castle basement under the towers, and creating a modern art gallery museum in the second level. The works finished in 1994. This paper aims to redefine the historical development of the building, focusing in particular on the restoration interventions of the last century, and their different methods in the efforts of preservation, which approached to the preservation and reconstruction of the building in different ways.

Keywords: History of architecture, restoration, earthquake.

1. Introduction

The following paper intends to show the development, from the beginning to the last years, of the Orsini-Colonna castles in Avezzano, one of the most important monumental buildings in Marsica, L'Aquila's province. The building, considered also as an interesting typology of defensive architecture, which during the centuries changed continually the architectural form and also the functional purposes, represents also an interesting case study of recovering and restoration. The building had several modifications due

to different aspects, both natural and artificial. Since the first development, the architecture has been continually changed, according to the necessity of the owners and, in particular in the twentieth century, according to trauma events such as natural disasters and world wars, which involved serious damages to the structures and the necessities of intervention. In detail, the earthquake of January 13th 1915, which completely destroyed the city of Avezzano and the neighborhood, causing also a large number of



Fig. 1. Satellite Pictures of central Italy, locating the city of Avezzano (from the web); aerial photo of Avezzano and detail on the Orsini Colonna Castle (from “Geoportale Regione Abruzzo”).

victims and homeless, involved lot of damages to the castle, thanks also to the structural modifications of the periods before the quake. With the beginning of the world wars, the castle had been seriously interested by more damages, cause to one bombardment in WWII, which caused the complete destruction of the interior courtyard and involved serious damages to the wall structures.

From the sixties, there were two main efforts of preservation and restoration, pursued by the authority of Genio Civile, the engineer corps, and

the Soprintendenza, the preservation authority of the region, which tried to give back the monumental architectural form, with the attempt to avoid any artistic reconstruction and leaving the recognition of new elements in comparison to the originals.

The work, divided in more chapters, intends to show and describe the history and development of the castle, since the foundation to the last interventions, underling also the logic and the most important aspects related to the preservation efforts.



Fig. 2. The Orsini Colonna castle of Avezzano today (picture from the web).



Fig. 3. The Orsini Colonna castle of Avezzano before the earthquake of 1915 (Lustri's collection, from Di Domenico, 2002).

2. History of the Castle

This chapter intends to show some of the most important phases in the development of the architecture since the foundation to the present day; the two different sub-paragraphs focus on different periods, taking as a separating point the twentieth century with its disasters, the earthquake of 1915 and the bombardments which occurred in the second world war. According to the first part, it is important also to understand the structural modifications, as can be seen in Fig. 3, that involved more damages with the earthquake. In this way, it is remarkable to underline the importance of the historic development of the building in the attempt of acknowledge of the building.

2.1. The Castle before the twentieth century

The Orsini-Colonna castle finds its origins since the twelfth century, strongly connected to the development of the city of Avezzano, L'Aquila province in central Italy, and the neighborhood. The first settlement of the castle can be find in the defensive purposes: starting as a single sighting towers, with a square plan, designed by Gentile De Palearia¹. Then, in 1490, the tower was fortified with walls around it, as a "defensive enclosure", assuming defensive purposes for the inhabitants of the county. According the edification of the four corner towers, higher than the

perimetral walls, but at a different level of the original tower, the castle took the form as Italian castles of the same period². In this way, thanks also to the date we can find next to the main gate, it is that the castle increased its volume and modified its purposes and form in this period (1490³). As told in the beginning of the subparagraph, the history and the development of the architecture is strongly connected to the development and to the history of Avezzano. With the mutation of the politic conditions of the "Regno delle Due Sicile"⁴, the defensive function were assigned to other fortifications, as L'Aquila and Gaeta: in this way, the castle of Avezzano lost the defensive purpose and, in the sixteenth century became a residence for the lords. Marco Antonio Colonna, the lord of the family who controlled the area, in 1520 and 1565 changed the architecture, inserting loggias at the top levels and creating the garden instead of moat around the building. The castle maintained its form till the twentieth century (Fig. 4), modifying its purpose continually; from cloister to school, barracks, and courthouse. The new family owners arrived in 1905⁵. In this last period, the castle was subjected to some modifications in the architecture, raising the last level in the north-east side; some years later, Francesco Spina demolished the "newest" loggia.



Fig. 4. The castle in a reproduction of the nineteenth century (Raffaele Spina's collection, from Di Domenico, 2002).

2.2. The earthquake of 1915

“With the first shake, Avezzano collapsed entirely, only the castle resisted. My father in that moment was going out from the church of San Francesco and he saw the entire city fell down except the castle; some minutes later, with another shake, also the medieval building collapsed”⁶. With these words, which show the situation of the entire city the day of the earthquake, January 13th 1915, it is possible to have an idea of the damages of which the entire city has been interested.

The castle, as well as the other buildings of the city, had several damages to the structures, which involved the collapsing of lot of parts. In this case, it is interesting to remark how the new additions during the times influenced the level of the damages, caused also to the addiction of new floors and loggias. Someone, as Di Domenico (see references) asserted that, without any modification to the original structure, the castle could be able to resist to the quake, always with several damages, but avoiding the collapse. The complete destruction of the architecture was due to the irregular and discontinuous insertion of new structures, modification of the openings and of the main structural walls.

During the earthquake, also the owner of the building, Francesco Spina, which was also the mayor of the city, died with his wife and without any direct heirs; all the nephews of Spina asked to Domenico Cerri to recover all the possible materials and remove the ruins (Fig. 5).

After years of debate about the possession of the buildings, among the heirs of the family and the municipality of the city, in 1929 the entire possession of the building left the Spina family; in this way the municipality asked to demolish the dangerous part of the building, and to make a recovering project, which never started because the beginning of the Second World War.



Fig. 5. The castle after the earthquake of 1915 (Photographical Archive of Soprintendenza, section of L'Aquila and subsection of Avezzano, from Di Domenico, 2002).

2.3. The bombardment in WWII

In 1944, during the conflict of WWII, three different bombs felt on the ruins of the castle, causing the complete destruction of the site, mistaken for a military fortress of defense for German soldiers. From this period, the castle started to be complete abandoned, becoming a weight for each municipality and mayors; one of the possible solutions proposed to the central authority was the complete demolition and removal of the ruins, involving the entire area to new requalification and purposes without the medieval architecture. Fortunately, after the official request of the mayor to the minister, the answer from the office of public works replied with the “inopportunitly and lack of necessity to demolish the building, because of the historic importance of the architecture, which represented a piece of the local history of the city, and also because of, even if there were no money for the instant recovery of the structures, the municipality could launch the first projects of static and structural preservation, in a way to stop the deterioration of the building”⁷. In these conditions, the city attempted to start the first recovering and preservation projects.

3. The restorations

This chapter is focused on the analysis of the different recovering and restoration interventions, which occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, performed according different necessities. The first one, conducted by the engineer Orlandi and the Genio Civile, the corps of engineers of the city, has been focused on the structural preservation of the building, while the second, pursued by the architect Del Bufalo, tried to give back to the castle new functions and volumes, which are recognizable from the original elements, in continuity to the critic and conservative restoration theory.

The following subparagraphs will expose each one of the interventions.

3.1. The Genio Civile and the reconstruction

The recovery of the walls and the reconstruction of new of the collapsed structures was pursued by the Genio Civile in the period between the 1958 and 1965, under the direction of the engineer Tommaso Lello Orlandi. In the project relations, the engineer explains the necessity of recover of the original materials, which were

found thanks to an excavation campaign around the ruins of the building⁸.

The most important works in this recovery phase focused on the structural preservation and fortification, with the aim to recreate also the top trench of defensive, recovered in one-thirds (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Drawing of the reconstruction project of Engineer Orlandi (1962, from Historic Archive of Genio Civile, section of L'Aquila, subsection of Avezzano).

Also, some elements were recovered or reconstructed, as the central medieval tower and the interior well. With the insertion of all the original elements, Orlandi asserted that the restoration could be considered “complete”, limiting the intervention to the architecture of the fifteenth century.

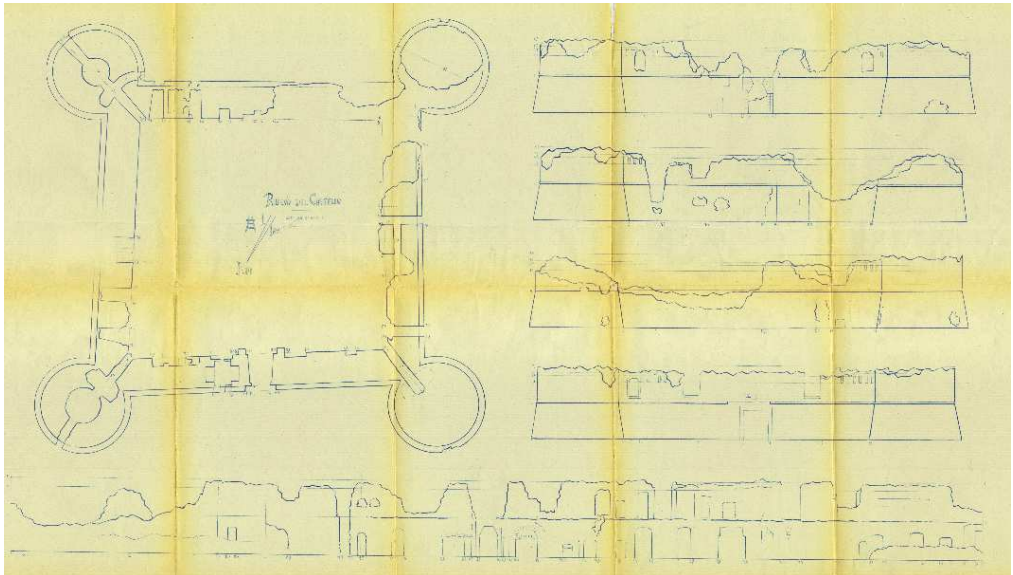


Fig. 6. Survey of the castle, with the identification of the collapses of the perimetral walls (Orlandi, 1962, from Historic Archive of Genio Civile, section of L'Aquila, subsection of Avezzano).

Asking the correct function of the building, Orlandi exposed the problems related to the lack of an adequate system of roofing on the towers. However, the engineer identified in the civic museum the correct purpose for the building.

3.2. The restoration of Del Bufalo

In 1990, thanks also to the efforts of local associations, the municipality didn't renew the license of a fuel station which, meanwhile, arranged close to the castle, and remove everything. With the project of the architect



Fig. 8. Recovering works on the castle (1962, Photo credits Ing. T.L. Orlandi, from Di Domenico, 2002).

Alessandro Del Bufalo, the works of restoration and recovering of the building started in 1994. While around the castle it has been recreated also the defensive moat, the most interesting part of the work focused on the interior of the building. In particular, the most important part of the project is related to the insertion of a new structure, completely independent from the masonry walls, in steel and glass, so lightweight and transparent, in a way to reconstruct with a modern key the lost architectural spaces, which contrast their lightweight to the material presence of

the walls. The new purposes of the building are divided according to the floors; in particular, the ground floor can be used as a concert/conference hall, thanks also to the insertion of a stage in one side of the courtyard; the upper level, instead, is characterized as an exposing space, for paints, drawings. (Figs. 7 and 8) The structure, composed of square section columns and beams in steel, interested also two new floors, always in steel, in a way to reduce the thickness of the slab, and inserted inside the courtyard (one floor is 5.00 m height from the ground, while the upper one constitutes the crawl space). The use of glass and steel let the users able to see and understand all the sides of the courtyard, and also to see the paints and the other exposed elements. The lower level, also, could be used as a conference/concert hall, thanks to darkening sails.

The spaces next to the perimetral walls, can be used as exposing spaces for the archaeological ruins of the castle, which are in the best conditions of preservation, being not exposed to the external climate, and still visible with the sunlight thanks to the glass elements. (Figs. 7 and 8).

4. Conclusions. The castle today

With the analysis of the development of this architecture, it is interesting to understand not only explain the changes which occurred to the structure, but also try to understand, with a critic approach, the logic and also the purpose which involved first Orlandi and then Del Bufalo to make their restoration works. It is also interesting to analyze how the study of the history and the development of the architecture constitutes the starting point of the projects. While Orlandi tried to redefine an older version of the castle, without any reference to the transformation of the last four centuries, Del Bufalo assumed that the starting point of the project is not only the purpose of the entire reconstruction, but, especially, the consciousness that the castle is the result of a unstoppable development, which comprised also the modifications involved with the natural disaster of the quake and the bombardments, denouncing different materials in the new elements.

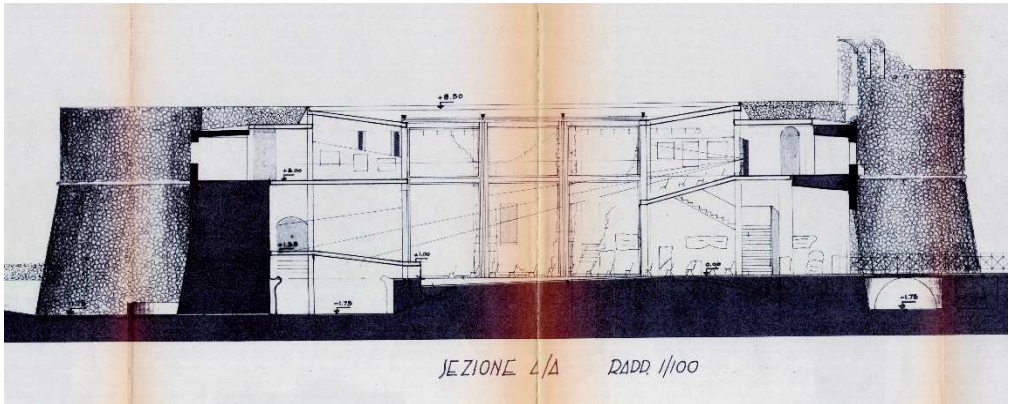


Fig. 9. Section drawing of the project (Del Bufalo, 1994).

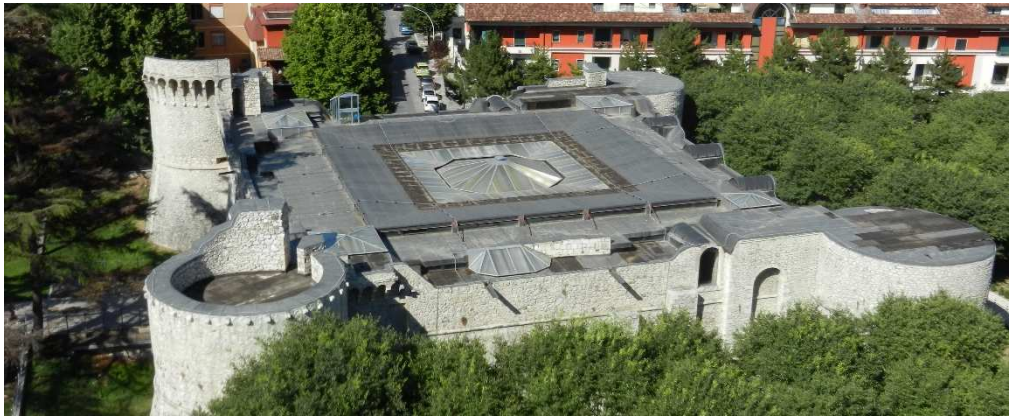


Fig. 10. The castle nowadays, with the steel and glass structure (Arch. Aldo Cianfarani, Avezzano).

Another important aspect can be strongly connected to the structural problem, which, with also new quake events that affected the territory of Avezzano and the neighborhood⁹, represent an actual problem to be solved. It is interesting to continue the research trying also to understand what can be the best approach to the preservation of this type of complex architectures, trying to keep in mind all the aspect which Orlandi, even in part, and Del Bufalo used for their project.

Notes

¹ Gentile De Palearia was lord of the Avezzano's Municipality county in the twelfth century, which built the tower in 1182 (from Soprintendenza, 1985).

² Some examples in this case could be the found in Ravenna (1470), Forlimpopoli (1471-1480), Imola (1472-1473) (from Soprintendenza, 1985)

³ The date is written in Roman number: MCCCCLXXX.

⁴ Literally, "The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies", which was the largest state of Italy, which comprised the entire southern part, before the national unification pursued in 1861.

⁵ The possession of the castle passed from Colonnas to Spina family.

⁶ Description of the earthquake by T.L. Orlandi (Domenico, 2002).

⁷ From the historic archive of the municipality of Avezzano, 1962.

⁸ The Ente Fucino, a local authority, proposed, with the collaboration of Soprintendenze, the national authority in cultural heritage, the excavation campaign, in a way that the local people could find ancient elements of the architecture.

⁹ One of these events is the earthquake of L'Aquila, occurred in April 6th 2009, which involved serious damages to the epicenter of the event, 40 km from Avezzano, and also to the neighborhood.

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