

In search of a possible dialogue between restoration and ruins. From ekphrasis to the ‘*new whole*’ evoked by the architectural fragment.

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Abstract

The ruins, the buildings in the state of ruins, the architectural fragments that characterize a landscape are increasingly involved in planning interventions; however, these interventions often go beyond the narrow field of conservation, which has as its aim the transmission to the future of the values still existent from pre-existence, but also from that of restoration in its present meaning, to encroach on real compositional exercises where the new architecture does not enter into any relationship with the ancient. It is possible, however, to glimpse in contemporary work also a conscious attention to the aesthetic and historical values transmitted by the buildings to the state of ruins that in their transformation have found a new balance.

The relationship that is established over time with the environmental context makes the ruin ‘second work of art’ characterized by a new spatiality. This new spatiality will have to be considered both if there are still residual formal traces able to tell the historical past of the pre-existence (and also any relationship with other architectural emergencies, such as in the case of a fortified system to defend and control a given territory), both when the pre-existence in its fragmentary state has become a ‘new whole’.

Keywords: ruins, architectural fragment, restoration, landscape.

1. Introduction

The growing attention that in recent years has been devoted to the restoration of the buildings to the state of ruins, increasingly involved in the planning operations, denotes a varied sensitivity towards these artifacts. Compared to the past it is more inclined to consider, in the intervention, also the residual aesthetic-formal aspects; that is those deriving from the architectural language still expressed by the pre-existence and, as such, released from the feeling triggered by the contemplation of the same.

This feeling is the result of that added aesthetics inherent in the process of decay that every ruin causes to visual perception alone, whose appreciation has roots in nineteenth-century romanticism. This leads to considering, even if in a limited way, the question of the ‘reinterpretation’ of the fragmentary architectural

organism, with solutions that go beyond the only environmental arrangements, dictated by the historical instance. So that, in the intervention of preservation of the ruins, there is also space for proposals aimed at satisfying the specific values of the aesthetic request.

This attitude, which is also encouraged by a less restrictive feeling towards the corollary of ‘minimal intervention’; a basic condition in a restoration that defines itself as such, that sees in the current panorama more strongly emerging interventions that often imply the exclusion of critical judgment in the assessment of pre-existence.

On the accidental ruin, of natural or anthropic origin, are still proposed today, with great ease, solutions à *l’identique*; that is, we search in the

project a figurativity similar to the original, justified, as in the past, by the desire to erase, or attenuate, the memory of the disastrous event that caused losses to architecture, in the wake of the well-established 'psychological instance'. The historical ruin, however, that caused by the slow work of time is now more frequently part of the new design, pushed beyond the only 'indirect intervention' desired by Brandi, and is often relegated to remain a foreign element.

However, among these extremes it is possible to identify different scientific positions that with various nuances try to confront the pre-existence-ruin; aware of the changed perceptive value that today this has assumed, requiring greater involvement of the project action.

To understand if the operating path triggered by today's sensitivity to the ruins leads to interventions included in the sphere of architectural restoration, and then follow the modern principles, it is good to highlight, albeit for general lines, the path of that mutation.

The contemporary feeling that makes us able to appreciate the incomplete, as Giovanni Carbonara recalls, "the fragment as such and in the aesthetic 'second' values brought, over the centuries, by nature and, in some cases, by man", has clear roots in the romantic movement and nineteenth-century historicism (Carbonara, 1997).

This attitude is mediated by the acquisitions already present in more ancient times (in Humanism, through literary works, then in the Renaissance with the first systematic studies aimed directly at the ancient and, finally, during the eighteenth century thanks to the important archaeological discoveries started with excavation campaigns). Only later will the perception of temporal detachment mature, and not only, with the works of the past, considered 'concluded' also in their fragmentation and, as bearers of values, worthy of being safeguarded.

2. For the recognition of the value of the ruins

The Edict of 7 April 1820 drawn up by Cardinal Pacca for the State of the Church, is commonly considered by literature as one of the most complete documents for the time in terms of attention to pre-existence; preceded by a long series of other emanations in this sense, makes explicit reference, regarding the buildings in the state of ruin, not to insert any addition, "retouches or inappropriate restoration", as they would only

cause damage "altering the antiquity". This appreciation for the incomplete, or fragmentary, will be explained later by John Ruskin (*The seven lamps of Architecture*, London 1849); in the decomposition of architecture into forms close to nature, become integral parts of the landscape through the continuous action of time, he will see that "added and accidental beauty [which in architecture] is often found in contrast with the preservation of the original character".



Fig. 1- View of Cascia (D'Avino, 2009)

In France, in the stylistic period, there is a countercurrent attention to the ruins, which are perceived by Prosper Mérimée, in the expression of Stella Casiello, as «subjects of study on which interventions could be made that took into account only the historical instance» (Casiello, 1974); even if then, as in the case of the amphitheatre of Arles, will be legitimized operations aimed at eliminating the stratifications deemed to be without historical evidence, in favor of the reinterpretation of the oldest structure. In the field of literature Francois-René De Chateaubriand (*Le génie du Christianisme*, Paris 1802), to whom we owe the distinction between 'man-made ruins' and ruins due to the work of nature, stresses that the latter do not disturb the sight, indeed they are pleasant, unlike the others who instead remember the dramatic event that produced them.

For Camillo Boito the study of the ruins becomes essential for the understanding of the buildings, of the building elements, of the anatomy of the structure, valid investigations also to arrive at a possible recomposition; but, just for the precious information contained therein, concludes that «it is better to preserve the ruins as they were, without getting bogged down to put them back together» (Montanari, 2009).

The evaluation of the aesthetic aspect induced by the transformation process is highlighted by Georg Simmel (*Die ruine*, in *Philosophische Kultur, Gesammelte Essays*, Leipzig 1911), according to which «the ruin of a building (...) shows that in the disappearance and destruction of the work of art other forces and other forms have grown, those of nature, and so, from what still lives in her art and in what she already lives of nature, a new whole has sprung, a characteristic unity». On the same line, Alois Riegl (*Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, sein Enttehung*, Wien 1903) expresses the charm that the ruin causes in the user: «the ruins become more and more picturesque, the more parts yield to degradation; with the increasing dissolution their 'value of the ancient' certainly becomes more and more reduced, that is, it becomes a value caused by parts that decrease; for this same reason, however, is more and more intense, that is the fragments that remain produce a more effective effect on the observer», even if «a simple pile of stones is not enough to offer a 'value of the ancient': there must be at least one trace (...) of a becoming that survives».



Fig. 2- Fortress of Cascia (D'Avino, 2009)

From the awareness of the values inherent in buildings to the state of ruin, thanks to the literary ferment in this sense, derives the operational will not unnecessarily alter their character during operations aimed at their preservation. The Charter of Athens of 1931, influenced by Italian cultural contributions, especially by Gustavo Giovannoni, reports that “what it is about ruins, a scrupulous conservation is imposed and, when the conditions allow, it is happy to put back in place the original elements found (anastilosis); and new materials for this purpose must be recognizable”. Already Boito in 1893, in *Practical Matters and Fine Arts*, classifying the

interventions in categories that reflected the era and the type of monument, in the case of archaeological restoration only admits conservation operations and anastylosis; this indication reflects, moreover, what was expressed earlier in the document voted at the IV Congress of Italian architects and engineers held in 1883, in which for the «monuments that draw their beauty from marbles, mosaics, paintings, as well as from the signs of time» only «consolidation works are recommended (...) reduced to the minimum necessary» (Montanari, 2009).

In his essay *Il restauro dell'opera d'arte secondo l'istanza della storicità*, published in 1952 (later and with several additions inserted as a chapter in the *Theory of Restoration* in 1963), Cesare Brandi recognizes in the ruins the «extreme limit (...) the one where the formal seal on matter (...) [appears] almost disappeared and the monument itself almost reduced to a residue of the matter in which it was composed».

From this we deduce that in the work in the state of ruin the distinction of matter in 'appearance' and 'structure' becomes very labile, because the process of transformation triggered by natural decay tends to advance the 'matter as structure' which thus becomes 'matter as aspect', in which the image is revealed by the degradation of the matter itself.

It follows that any possible intervention would fall on the aspect of the work, as the two faces of the matter of which the work itself is composed coincide; it is because of this singularity that Brandi does not admit any 'direct' intervention on the ruins, nor for the historical instance, nor for the aesthetic instance, except for the consolidation that, in this circumstance it seems for him not to have to obey critical implications.

On this question are known the statements of Roberto Pane expressed in the Report held in Venice in 1964 on the occasion of the Second International Congress of Restoration (published in *Attualità dell'ambiente antico*), in which he claims that «even in the static restoration of the ruin there is a criterion of evaluation and choice for which the addition due to a consolidation or the replacement of some columns' rocks pose problems that lead us back, inevitably and necessarily, to the aesthetic instance and not only to that which imposes the respect of the integrity of the document» (Pane, 1967); therefore it will be the critical judgment that from time to time

will assign the prevalence to one of the two instances that in every intervention interact simultaneously.

For Brandi the ruin, from the aesthetic point of view, is «any leftover work of art that cannot be traced back to the potential unity without the work becoming a copy or a fake of itself», as defined by the author in the essay *The restoration according to the aesthetic instance* of 1953, also then republished as a chapter in the *Theory*; but this negative connotation is contrasted with the positive one highlighted by the connection of the same «to another work of art, from which it receives and to which it imposes a special spatial qualification, or adapts to itself a given landscape area». The state of this second work of art, he argues, has the right to prevail if the environment «has now historically and aesthetically reached a settlement that must not be destroyed neither for history nor for art». The intervention must therefore respect the new autonomous space of the monument-ruins and will be aimed at the needs that both favor «the aesthetic enjoyment and those required by the preservation of the material to which it is entrusted»; respecting therefore the indications of the ‘preventive restoration’ in which the indirect intervention (the only one admitted by Brandi on the ruins) finds interaction «in preparing the happiest conditions for the preservation, the visibility, the transmission of the work to the future; but also as safeguard of the figurative requirements that the spatiality of the work produces with regard to its setting» (Brandi, 1963).

The planning that derives from this intellectual path, while not intervening directly on the ruins, shows attention to its peculiarities and under the guidance of critical judgment will tend to show through ‘minimal signs’ and ‘diacritics’, maintaining a substantial overall balance; the latter will be ensured by a *modus operandi* tending to aesthetic compatibility (as well as material) in which the ‘reversibility’ of the inserts, especially on rough contexts, will ensure the provisional nature of the solution indicated.

In this way it is understood that not all the interventions on the ruins can be considered restorations, in the meaning that today is recognized at the end. This happens only when through the project we approach the peculiarities of the ancient architectural text; otherwise we are in the presence of contemporary architecture that

uses the pre-existence as an inspiration, without being bound; that is, it is «creative enhancement and [of] free planning, which reduces the ancient stimulus ‘poetic’ of the architect on duty», as recently pointed out by G. Carbonara, in the essay Brandi and architectural restoration today, collected in *The theory of restoration in the twentieth century from Riegl to Brandi*, (Carbonara, 2006).

In the restoration, the theme of the ruin adapts more than others, to conceive in a clearly separate way the conservative act of the status quo from that merely designed, in line with the theoretical current defined ‘pure conservation’. The addition of the ‘new’, through the design operation, it is often in sharp chromatic and material contrast with the pre-existence, against which no dialogue is sought. It follows that only those interventions can be identified within the field of restoration that, whatever the approach to the ancient work, do not alter its figurativeness and the reading of the values expressed by it, even if, in line with today’s feeling, go beyond the minimum necessary for their understanding.



Fig. 3- Ciciliano, hill Cocciarello. Remains of fortifications (Mari, 2015)

More and more often we see instead operations that involve fully the ancient work in the new formative process by making the pre-existence assume, whatever its consistency, the value of the architectural fragment, that ends up being estranged from the reality desired by the new planning.

Finally, mention should be made of all those ‘exercises to the truth’ expressed directly on the pre-existences in the state of ruins that, pursuing the sole didactic function, arrive at the repositioning of the original form, with a more or less ‘compatible’ language, that varies from the revival of ancient stylistic styles tout cour to the

version of the same in a post-modern way. But even when this can be controlled in the design phase, ensuring the corollary of distinctiveness, without going to solutions *à l'identique*, this appears however as an operation that goes beyond the field of architectural restoration, being closer (at least conceptually) to certain forms of nineteenth-century restoration, as it does not imply the critical interpretation in the solution of the added elements.

Instead, they must be in accordance with the pre-existence, within a large conservation project, in tune with the vocation that it expresses through its process of transformation and its new spatiality; that is, with what Brandi has defined 'the second work of art'.

3. Ruins and landscape qualification: from ekphrasis to the 'new whole'

Particular attention should be paid to the fortified systems built in the various eras passed to defend and control the territory and their relationship with urban settlements and sacred emergencies. Every trace still present in the landscape (every architectural fragment) should be traced back to the dense network of references, visual, perceptive and historical memory, in order not to lose (or recover) the identity of the places, at the same time paying attention to all those intangible data that characterize the same territory, acting directly or indirectly on what is materially payable, with all the necessary precautions.

It follows that the ruins and archaeological remains that blend with the landscape, connoting its aesthetic qualities and visually marking its history, up to being identity elements of the environmental context, cannot be considered outside their current spatiality; with the loss of their original form, they have in fact acquired a new figurativeness, which extends to its context. Any evaluation should derive from this new figurativeness.

As Cesare Brandi reports: «a work of art reduced to ruin, it performs the function of enhancing a landscape or an urban zone, in the consciousness of a person who recognises its validity (that is, one who sees the work on this sense as active), this is connected not to its original oneness and completeness, but to its current marred state. In its marred state, the work provides an environmental solution on the pictorial level: that is, not on the rigorous level of the work of art, but

on that addressed to a certain view of the object – arranged, lit, staged according to a particular formal conception. Accordingly, a marred work of art reverts to an artificial object, seen in the true reality of its marred state, and in its presence combined with other objects» (Brandi, 1963; Brandi 2005).



Fig. 4- Ciciliano, ruins of the Vicus Sancti Valerii (Minorenti, 2014)

The relationship that is established over time with the environmental context therefore makes the ruin a *second work of art* characterized by a new spatiality. And it is precisely in this spatiality that the various declinations in which the ruin presents itself must be considered. When in its fragmented state it has become 'a new whole': a presence sufficient in itself, albeit mutilated, which does not figuratively refer to its original form. But even when there are residual formal traces capable of telling its history and its possible landscape relationships with other architectural emergencies in the area; as happens in the fortified defense and control systems of a specific geographical area. In such cases the 'narration expressed by the architectural text' could be favored by a cautious design operation, which helps the reading of the residual figural values still present.

Such as, for example, in the restoration work carried out on the fortress of Paul II in Cascia (Fig. 1), in Valnerina (Umbria), where a vast archaeological campaign and the consequent

discovery of the original 12th century structures required the construction of a bridge in corten so as to connect this structure to the late fifteenth century one (D'Avino, 2009). An intervention that does not affect the material consistency of the structure and also does not alter the relationship that the ruin has established over time with the landscape; a solution that describes itself and its transformation (Fig. 2), not verbally, but an ephrasis required directly on the architectural palimpsest, which keeps the balances achieved with the environmental context intact.

An architectural text that tells and describes itself, in which the incomplete parts are 'suggested' by the design action, through minimal diacritical signs also aimed at highlighting the relationships with the landscape context.

On the other hand, we can include the archaeological remains of the fortifications dating back to the 5th-4th century BC. located near Ciciliano, a town in eastern Lazio, along a «natural route that connected the Aniene valley to

that of Salto» (Mari, 2015) (Fig. 3), or, again in the same area, the ruins of the *Vicus Sancti Valerii* (Minorenti, 2014) (Fig. 4), or the pre-Roman polygonal enclosure of a probable sanctuary set at the base of a suitably chiseled rock face (1), whose ruins blend with the landscape triggering a profound symbiotic relationship, in which traces of the past remain, determining a new work, a new whole (Fig. 5), «concluded in itself and contemplable in itself» (Pareyson, 1960), which does not need anything but maintenance care.

Notes

(1) These first observations are part of a broader research aimed at the study of settlements, with particular interest in religious ones, in the Sublacense area, between the Giovenzano and Empiglione valleys, in eastern Lazio (Department of History, Drawing and Architectural Restoration, Sapienza University of Rome).



Fig. 5 - Ciciliano, loc. Quarantelle (Mari, 2015)

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