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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The “narrative sincerity” in museums, architectural and archaeological restoration of Franco Minissi



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Abstract

The Italian historiography of the architecture of the second half of the Twentieth century has not given due weight to the dialectic qualities of work of Franco Minissi on ancient structures. He became known for the debate on the use of innovative materials in archaeological sites and not for the extent of his contributions. The world do not know his museums, Italian and not, his many conservation and restoration projects, his archaeological parks, redevelopments of historic centres, new buildings, interior design projects, shops and exhibitions.

A reading of his museological works alongside of his experiments on archaeological sites, can help highlight the conceptual congruence with which Minissi tried to meet the needs of the present and the preservation of antiquities, as a dialogue with the past, of refined sensibility and intended to a reversibility respectful of preexistence. This places him among the key figures of the origins of the critical restoration, as an inspiration that continues to offer fruitful ideas to the new generations.

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1. Introduction

Franco Minissi (1919-1996) was born in Viterbo near Rome in 1941. Minissi graduated with an architecture degree during the

Second World War. He started working in architectural conservation in the early 1950s with a collaboration with Istituto Centrale del Restauro (ICR).¹ His idea of architecture combined ancient values and new spaces, such that during the post-war

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¹The Institute was founded in 1939 at the suggestion of Giulio Carlo Argan and was directed by Cesare Brandi until 1959, as a centre of scientific and technical advice for the restoration of works of cultural heritage. Founded as an Italian ministerial body, it has

reconstructions, he defended the historical heritage against the damage of building speculation that followed. His idea of museum design process attempted to give a new meaning to cultural heritage and its preservation referred to concepts of interaction developed by architectural historian, Bruno Zevi, and by theorist of conservation and restoration, Renato Bonelli.²

In the mid-1940s, Renato Bonelli, Roberto Pane, Agnoldo Pica, and other representatives of the critical wing of Italian restoration theory sought for new perspectives, because this field was still founded on late 19th century theoretical background. Thus, conservation and repair of damages caused by the war resulted in debates based on the combination of old and new architecture. Within this context, Franco Minissi started to experiment with the addition of modern elements on historical buildings and seeking new connections between conservation theory and practice.

During those years, the borderline between conservative solutions and modification of ancient buildings had become less sharp for the contributions of architects such as Franco Albini, Carlo Scarpa, Giovanni Michelucci, Mario Ridolfi, and Ignazio Gardella, or their younger counterparts, namely, Ludovico Quaroni, the BBPR group, or the least known Neapolitan architect, Ezio Bruno De Felice (1916-2000), who carried out works conceived in simultaneous mixture of new and old materials, as a new layer of the building process.³

Comparing Minissi with such figures indicates that he showed greater confidence with the basic assumptions of conservation heritage, and that his innovative approach enhanced historical buildings by a set of standards that may be defined as means of museum design rather than architectural volumes. Indeed, while facilitating new functions, he also accomplished the possibilities granted by the protection of the values assessed in the buildings, recurring to transformation provisions that decreased in proportion to the traces of memory that are to be transmitted integrally to the community.

Apart from designing and carrying out a number of works on historical buildings, Minissi designed new buildings, thus contributing to widening up conservation objectives from one single building to urban areas and from simple maintenance to architectural restoration of those monuments that had been damaged during the war. He proposed innovative solutions, in which the main guiding principle was distinguishing the addition from traditional shapes, subordinating to them dimensional characters, and using materials more perishable than pre-existing constituent materials.

A complete overview of his works can be drawn from this recent research, which considered the conceptual aspects

(footnote continued)

since been operating both in Italy and abroad (<http://www.icr.beniculturali.it/>, last accessed June 2014).

²Renato Bonelli's theoretic contribution consists in transferring to the restoration the acquisitions of thought aesthetic, critical, and historic of Benedetto Croce, in an attempt to offer new prospects to the philological orientation of late Nineteenth century matrix. Cf. Carbonara (2001).

³Among his major works: the exhibition arrangements for the Museum of Capodimonte (1951-1957), the Provincial Museum of Salerno at S. Benedetto (1959-1964) and the cathedral of Pozzuoli (1968-1982). Cf. Cocchieri (2006).

on which Franco Minissi based his work and possibilities of those times (Vivio, 2008, 2010).⁴

2. Walls of Capo Soprano at Gela, Caltanissetta (Sicily)

The protection of the Greek fourth century B.C. walls found at Gela was one of the first works carried out by Minissi for ICR. He followed a previous design experience for the archaeological shed of one of the city gates of the ancient Hittite village of Karatepé in Turkey.

At Gela, the walls had been brought back to light between 1948 and 1954 by the Super in tendency of Antiquities of South-central Sicily. The walls were composed of a stone basement and above were double skins of raw clay bricks with stone-filled cores. The ICR had already made a few attempts to consolidate the *terracruda* walls, such as the injection of a specific cement called “fondo coriarca,” but these attempts were unsuccessful. Therefore, the higher portion of the walls was coated with an innovative system designed by Minissi. The system composed of tempered glass plates, which exercised static pressure similar to that of the earth that was almost buried by the century-old walls, and thus, prevented the disintegration of the walls.

The setup comprised a glass box placed on the walls and was similar to a showcase built *in situ* to have the lowest visual possible impact on the monument (Figure 1). The unbreakable glass plates were connected with ties in stainless aluminium alloy and tightened with screw hubcaps with a plastic interface. The ends of the ties gave a new visual pattern visible behind the glass, which recalled ancient clay weaving (Figure 2). However, the diameter of the ties was reduced from 25 to 20 mm, while the core samples had a 50 mm diameter. These dimensions caused a slow and gradual curving of the ties that was rather moderate in the lower holes of the stone basement but quite marked in the crude-clay walls, whose unstable structure did not oppose any resistance to the deformation.⁵ The slight movements that took place later caused water infiltration in-between glass plates. Nonetheless, the situation was kept under control for a long time with a light covering on the restored walls. Such a covering was placed

⁴The richest documentation about Minissi's production may be found at the Italian State Central Archive in Rome, where the documentation of his office is kept. In-depth theoretical studies were carried out also through the consultation of documents at the library of Iccrom (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) and at the library of History, Representation and Restoration of Architecture Department of “Sapienza” University of Rome. Part of his original drawings were found in the archives of the administrative and historic documents of the Museo delle Genti in Pescara; the private archive of architect Filippo Danese in Brindisi; the private archive of Borghi-Prospieri-Pozzi office in Rome; the private archive kept by the heirs of architect Mario Ezio Pappalardo.

⁵According to the draft, the weight of the crystals had to be unloaded directly to the ground through a thin metal frame leaning against the stone base. In the embodiment, however, this structure was eliminated and the whole load went to affect on the bars below, crossing the stone base.

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