

## The difficult relationship between ruins and modernity: the case study of the Mother Church reconstruction in Salemi (Italy)

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### ABSTRACT

Located in the heart of Sicily, Salemi, a town of Arab origin and first capital of Italy, was devastated by the powerful earthquake that struck the Belice Valley in January 1968. From that moment on, its historic centre has long been abandoned; a few restoration works have been carried out as it was preferred to reconstruct affected districts in new sites. Nevertheless, Salemi has generally maintained its medieval structure, still preserving the original attractive landscape of perched village, resulting from security and control needs of an area based on agricultural and pastoral economy. At its highest point, next to the majestic Norman castle, re-erected in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Frederick II of Swabia, stands the Mother Church, were acted the architects Álvaro Siza Vieira and Roberto Collovà. Their project, drafted in the early 80's, can be considered as an emblematic case of architectural conservation and cultural preservation. Remains have been seen here in their profound value as a testimony to memory, turning them into charming and moving scenery for the new square created around. The designers considered the traumatic event has a starting point for an overhaul of the historic urban core of the city. They founded the project on the idea of "opening and offering" this sacred space to the town, accepting and integrating the earthquake effects into the architectural plans. Starting from this experience of consolidation and architectural restoration, recalling in its expression Ruskin's romantic memory, this work intends to highlight the historical and today's difficult relationship between ruins and modernity, improvement and destruction, conservation and new buildings design.

### INTRODUCTION

The restoration of the pre-existing structures is a longstanding theme which strongly manifested itself, in Italy and Europe, following the Second World War. The unusual state of calamity disoriented the protagonists of the conservative discipline of that era, who were obliged to make significant choices about the future of cities. The enormous disasters caused by the bombings led to hardly discover that the directives developed by the culture of the restoration so far, were no longer adequate and that new instruments were needed. This situation opened the door to new reflections that will conduct to the formulation of conflicting solutions, ranging from the maintenance of the works of art in the state of ruins and their reconstruction "as they were and where they were".

This aged issue can be synthesised in today's, never resolved, debate between the proponents of a creative architectural design and the conservators, founding their projects on rigorous scientific and historical basis. That is, the contrast between two different ways of interpreting the architectural design concerning the testimonies of the past: the one related to the culture of the project and the other linked to the culture of the composition (Dalla Negra, 2011).

This paper fits into this context and will analyze, through an emblematic case study, related to the earthquake that struck the Belice Valley in 1968, the issue of the so-called "of necessity" restoration (Boscarino, 1992): a kind of intervention carried out in the aftermath of catastrophic events injuring not only the material and formal aspect of cultural heritage but also the social and identity-making values of the communities to which it belongs (Niglio, 2003).

In particular, by examining reasons and ways in which the architects Álvaro Siza Vieira and Roberto Collovà have since 1980 faced the difficult design approach with the *Mother Church* of the Sicilian town of Salemi, this paper aims to highlight the historical and today's apologetic relationship between modernity and ruins, destruction and improvement, conservation and new buildings design. Finally, it intends to focus on the opportunity to base any action concerning the remains of the past (regardless of the spirit and modes of

action) on a critical, respectful and conscious process that sees in the survey and in the knowledge project, its fundamental criteria.

## **THE HISTORY OF PLACE BETWEEN LOCAL CULTURE AND TRAUMATIC EVENTS**

Salemi is a town located in the heart of Sicily, in the province of Trapani (fig. 1). Scenario of the continuous wars between Syracuse and Segesta, it stands on the probable site of the Sican Halicyae. Under the Romans, thanks to its voluntary submission to the dominion, it was declared a city free and exempt from taxes, also obtaining both practical and social benefits. Following the fate of the rest of Sicily, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by the Vandals and the Goths, and then conquered in 535 by the Byzantine general Justinian, as testified by the remains of an ancient basilica of the early Christian era.

Following the Arab conquest in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the city centre acquired the current configuration: i.e. characterized by the presence of an intricate system of blind alleys and courtyards. The subsequent population growth made it necessary to widen the walls perimeter and to build new gates; to the ancient village with castle, other suburbs in the south and in the west, were added. After the Arab domination, it followed the Norman conquest and, since 1194, Salemi was dominated by the Swabians. Frederick II rebuilt the castle that still stands on the top of the city as an eloquent symbol of the period of splendour, Salemi went through, until the capture of the Angevins. This domination ended in 1282 with the revolt of the Vespers; the city was thus downgraded to a feudal one by Frederick III of Aragon, and ,at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, finally reacquired the privilege of state town.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the centre of Salemi, the imposing building of Jesuit College as well as numerous religious edifices and palaces were constructed. In June 1735, with the conquest of Sicily, Charles III was crowned King of Sicily, thus initiating the Bourbon rule that will end in 1860. In the month of May of that year, exactly in Salemi, Giuseppe Garibaldi planted it in person, on the top of one of three towers of the Norman-Swabian castle, the tricolour flag proclaiming the city, first capital of the liberal Italy.

Marked by a strong local culture and a symbiotic relationship with the land that surrounds and host it, the town of Salemi will be, nonetheless, forever marked by a terrible event: the violent earthquake that, on the night between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> January 1968 hit the western part of Sicily. This movement of the earth's crust developed its most disastrous effects in the Valley of Belice: the epicentre was near Gibellina, the city where it manifested with all its violence, but also Salemi, albeit in a slightly lesser extent, will undergo the consequences of this catastrophe.



Fig. 1: Aerial view of the town of Salemi.

Following the earthquake, its historic centre has been abandoned for long time. Only a few restoration works were carried out because it was preferred to decentralize its urbanization in the region downstream of the hill, then called *nuovo quartiere* and which today represents one of the areas with higher population density. Nevertheless, Salemi has generally maintained its medieval structure, still preserving the original attractive landscape of perched village, resulting from security and control needs of an area based on agricultural and pastoral economy. On its highest point, near the majestic castle, stands what remains of the *Mother Church* (Chiesa Madre). Designed by the architect Mariano Smiriglio and built in 1615, the Church had three ports of entry and three naves surmounted by three large windows. The plant was a Latin cross with a large transept; the nave was divided from the aisles by 6 one-piece marble columns in the Tuscan order with capitals supporting round arches. The central apse was raised about one meter from the floor and was reached by a marble staircase; the two side apses were lower. The side altars snaked along the aisles and the transepts, and were two steps higher (fig. 2a).

The chronicles of Salemi, the day after the disastrous episode of 1968, report that the church suffered some structural damages and the collapse of part of the roof due to the failure of the flying buttresses. However, both the prospectus and the aisles were not seriously touched; minor injuries were also caused to the apse. The transepts remained intact and, even the chapels, including that of the Immaculate with the shrine retaining the statue of the Virgin, and the altars were spared by the seismic activity (fig. 2b). Nevertheless, after the earthquake, the church was abandoned. The lack of immediate shoring work through the installation of appropriate supports or embankments and of a temporary roof covering, inflicted more havoc on the structure. The winter rains damaged further the works of art and the property speculation finished the job.

As for the rest of the city centre, most of the houses appeared, after the earthquake, still reparable. However, Salemi had yet to experience an even greater threat: the proposal made by the Sicilian Region administration to implement restructuring urban plans which foresaw the construction of a four-lane road and would lead to the destruction of an important element of the original city plan. Fortunately, thanks to some enlightened administrator, this danger was escaped. Demolition work was highly limited and needed new living quarters rebuilt in outlying areas.



Fig. 2a: (above) The Church before the earthquake. Fig. 2b: (below) The Church after the earthquake.

In September 1980, at the initiative of some of the municipalities affected by the earthquake of '68 and of a group of professors of the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo, and with the technical collaboration of the Curia of Mazara del Vallo, a design workshop entitled "Belice 1980" was organized in Gibellina. This workshop represented the first real moment of reflection and practical response to the needs dictated by the state of disaster in the area. Based on the idea of bringing into play a culture of planning, sensitive to local settlement's traditions and strongly critical on the common practice of reconstruction (Croset, 1987), it aimed to provide realistic and immediately operative architectural answers. Among the various initiatives carried out, there was that essentially dedicated to the Mother Church of Salemi, but which also included some suggestions for action on the whole historic centre. A few years later, the team led by the Álvaro Siza Vieira and Roberto Collovà translated preliminary ideas into an executive project that was implemented starting from 1984.

### THE RUIN AS A BASIC ELEMENT OF THE MOTHER CHURCH'S PROJECT

At the arrival of the two architects in the town, the first big problem to solve was of a conceptual nature. The Mother Church, while survived the earthquake though with considerable harms, had been the subject of a series of indiscriminate demolitions (fig. 3a). When Siza and Collovà were charged of the project, the building was in ruins, so the principal issue to address was that of its consolidation (fig. 3b). This was the first time that Salemi had to face with a similar situation; there was then a complete lack of any reference related to methods, techniques and procedures. On the other hand, in those years it was already possible to see the results of some hasty interventions carried out by private owners who, thanks to the financial contributions provided by the Italian government, had restored their homes *in stile*. Therefore, the need to create a real code of ethics related to the ways and criteria to be followed for the consolidation works, culminated in the drafting of a manual containing operating instructions for major interventions, such as the restoration of the church, but also for private maintenance actions (Rodighiero, 2008).

The population of Salemi, highly motivated to regain its native place, considered an essential component of their identity, vehemently fought the general trend based on the demolition and reconstruction of affected



Fig. 3a: (above) The Church during demolition works. Fig. 3b: (below) The Church after demolition works.

towns. This resistance to the "exile" and to the erasure processes of the local culture (strongly felt by its inhabitants), resulted in the will of the administration to give life to architectural and urban recovery projects.

The program proposed by Siza's group was focused on the idea of creating a relationship between the old and new quarters. They thus envisaged the densification of the new construction districts, as well as the requalification and valorisation of the ancient nucleus. At the same time, they highlighted the opportunity to create a link between the two areas through the maintenance of an urban void, punctuated by small residential areas, crossings, open fields and gardens. But, as already mentioned, it is in the historical centre that Siza & Collovà made their most consistent intervention, through the implementation of methodology and practices that found on the rips caused by earthquake, their basic sources.

In particular, as regards the *Madrice*, it was necessary to intervene in a block where chapels and abandoned homes stood on the church, by now almost destroyed. The working hypothesis formulated by the two architects concerned all the constructions located in the area and the relations system with the square in front of the church and with the plan Cascio quarter, situated on the slope behind it. Starting from the idea that the monument, at that time already in ruins, still held a strong value of physical evidence (and not merely figurative), the Siza & Collovà's project on the remains of the Mother Church (as indeed explained by the project report), proposed to detect "the matter and the laws of construction, the dimensional relationships, the decoration patterns"(Tamborrino, 1989).

Founded on a systematic consolidation project of the ruins, the remains of the church were maintained as a theatre backdrop. The ruins of the apse were cut and shaped as an immense sculpture, highlighting the different structural parts of the building. The old church was then used as an ideal setting for an elevated square - piazza Alicia - occupying the whole former church area and in which some elements - i.e. the bases of the columns, fragments of decoration or individual items recovered from demolition - were inserted. The project aimed at finding a "unity", through the composition of the fragments already existing or the relocation of materials *di spolio*.

The method used by Siza & Collovà group for the "survival" of old *Matrice* was, actually, based on the "invention, starting from what was found in the place (materials, spaces, colours, etc.) in the aim of allowing, in the processes of planning and constructions, the integration of new and old structures, without perceiving, at first sight, any difference, although expressing a strong and meaningful image" (Burkhardt, 1999). The aim of the architects was always extremely clear and referred to an action on the space made by "subtractions, cuts, nicks, re-use of materials (...), by pursuing the dual purpose of build the new church and reconstruct the memory of the past" (Tamborrino, 1989).

The architectural design so softened the memory of the earthquake through the transformation of the former sacred space in a piece of architecture that remembers more the kindness of archaeological remains than the drama of destructive calamities.

## **THE SURVEY'S PROJECT FOR THE MEMORY'S MAINTENANCE**

Generally speaking, the architectural restoration process cannot be separated from the "project of knowledge", a multidisciplinary approach by which the research object is studied simultaneously and synergistically in all its aspects. Its fundamental tool is the survey that, also thanks to the continuous and constant development of techniques for data capturing, processing and graphic rendering, provides an essential support to the discipline of restoration, both in terms of building's comprehension and testing of the design choices made.

Following the earthquake and subsequent demolition works, both the danger of collapses and the obstructions caused by debris, made difficult the measuring tasks of the *Chiesa Madre*. Due to these reasons, the geometrical survey carried out - as affirmed by the designers - was more an operation aimed at reading and understanding the complex - operated through sketches and life drawing - rather than a true accurate measurement campaign. A traditional approach to the place finds in this sort of methodology, the ideal tool to document spatiality, buildings peculiarities, and the relationship between the different parties, the wall texture, material properties and their condition. The eidotypes noted on sketchbooks to describe plans and elevations and record general measures, have however more the purpose of recreating and recounting the "essence and the spirit of places" than their metric relations, crucial support to direct and guide the designer in the project choices. In the case of the Mother Church of Salemi, the lack of an accurate geometrical survey

- as results from project drawings - profoundly influenced the architectural programme developed by Siza & Collovà.

On the occasion of the *A. Siza lection magistralis* held at the University KORE of Enna in July 2011, the authors of this paper have decided to carry out a detailed survey of the *piazza Alicia*. This as-built investigation has been undertaken, certainly not to support the restoration project (as already undertaken), but rather to document and promote an emblematic case of architectural conservation and cultural preservation (fig. 4). This "posthumous" survey has also benefited from the use of structured light measuring instruments (including *laser scanner* also known as *3D laser scanner*). This technology, which did not exist in the 80s, allows obtaining the rapid and complete measurability of the architectural object, through the measurement of distances, areas and volumes. It also permits, through the data post-processing, to produce important information about structural behaviour, the chemical and physical properties of the artefacts, as well as of their states of health, providing a reliable basis for the monitoring and control of the work of art.

The technique of laser scanning is of great interest in the field of cultural heritage and of the restoration of

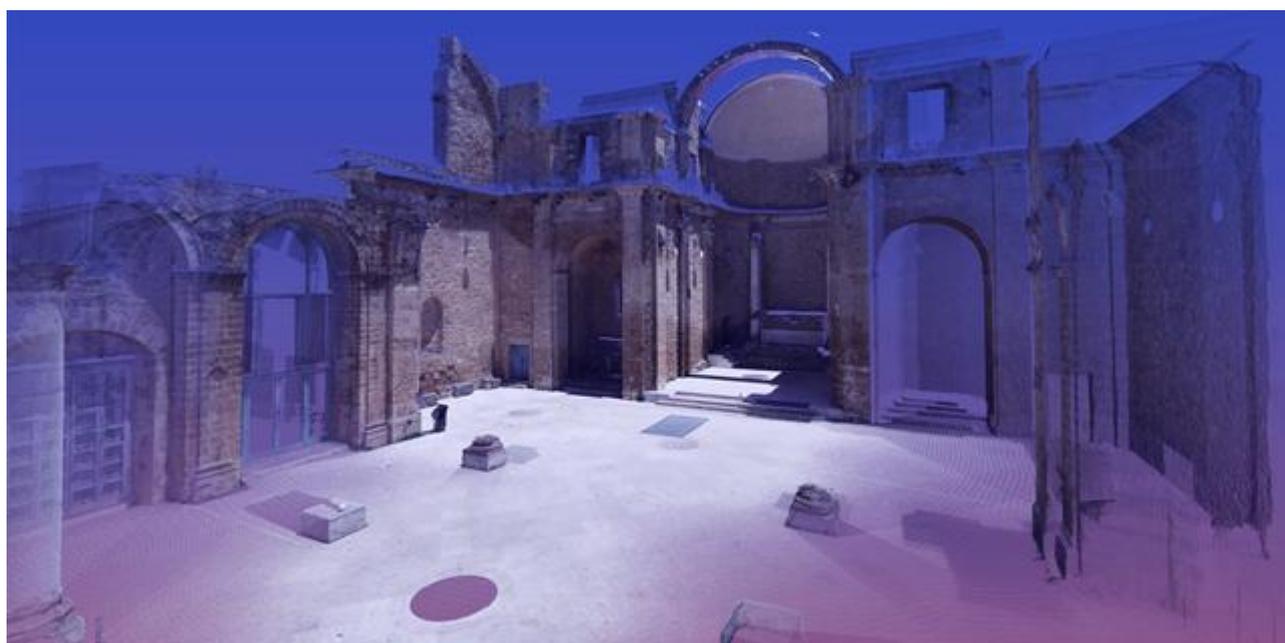


Fig. 4: 3D images obtained by laser scanning.

historic buildings, not only in terms of metric data acquisition, but also with regard to the representation and visualization of architectural objects and their contextualization in territory. The need to increasingly limit the time spent on survey activities (against an often dramatic geometric and formal complexity of the architectural object) and a growing obsession for precision, quality and efficacy in aesthetic representation, have made necessary the use of such techniques to complement and support the traditional ones.

In the past, the product of survey was essentially a basic document, a canvas on which to set up and develop further ideas. Nowadays, the latest generation of laser scanners, provides objective and precise measurements of the architectural structures and the environment surrounding them, in a very short time. They are able to reproduce range-scans which can be considered as 3D pictures, from which a number of information and models can be extracted.

Actually, the scan processing software incorporates specific functions such as the Web-Share application, allowing us to publish scanned data on the Internet, thus enabling everyone to share images, including metric, technical and material property information. Unlike photographs, which deliver only the image of the monument, the 3D model obtained from a point cloud is an incredible database, a kind of "solid" photograph which can "penetrate" the material state of an architectural object. It can be sliced in order to obtain cross-sections and plans and processed to create orthophotos.

Scans data can be also geo-referenced and exported, e.g. in Google Earth. The new frontier of laser scanning methodology thus offers significant new opportunities for cataloguing and storing cultural goods ensuring, over time, the transmission of valuable information about their state of conservation and the restoration work carried out, in order to safeguard their authenticity.

## CONCLUSION

Weightless and spontaneous, respectful of the site and landscape, clever synthesis and moment of encounter between different temporalities, the work of Siza & Collovà, has found in the relationship with the historic urban place, one of its moments of greatest splendour. In addressing the problematic issue of the comparison between old and new, never escaping it, even in the face of restrictions imposed by some academic criticism to the role of creative design in the restoration process, the two architects have set up their relationship with the architecture of existing buildings in a balanced manner.

This project has been widely discussed and analysed in the past years, even to a lesser extent than the architectural and urban operations that have concerned the city of Gibellina. Today, almost thirty years later, the people of Salemi, or at least a portion of it, does not seem anymore happy with this intervention and ask for the rebuilding of the church according to that *dov'era e com'era* approach, so much appreciated by a certain culture of restoration. This is a questionable position, although understandable for its sentimental and nostalgic reasons that reveals the complexity of an issue, constantly debated and, perhaps - by paraphrasing Simon Weil - the absurdity of the opposition between future and past; between the return of a *status quo* that coincides with the crystallization of a given form or image and the intervention on the matter, which, however, in the case of Siza & Collovà has been put in place without imposing itself, in a manifest desire of "incompleteness".

There is no doubt that this is not exactly a "restoration" project; certainly not a scientific nor a restoration based on a rigorous knowledge of the place, as evidenced by the substantial differences appeared in the comparison of design drawings and the survey carried out by the authors of this paper (fig.7). Nevertheless, the restoration of the Cathedral Church of Salemi is an example of careful development of the environment, produced on the basis of an incessant alternation between full and empty, continuity and ruptures, aimed at the memory's maintenance, operated through the method of the invention and the reconstruction of new architectural elements starting from the traces of the place's memory.

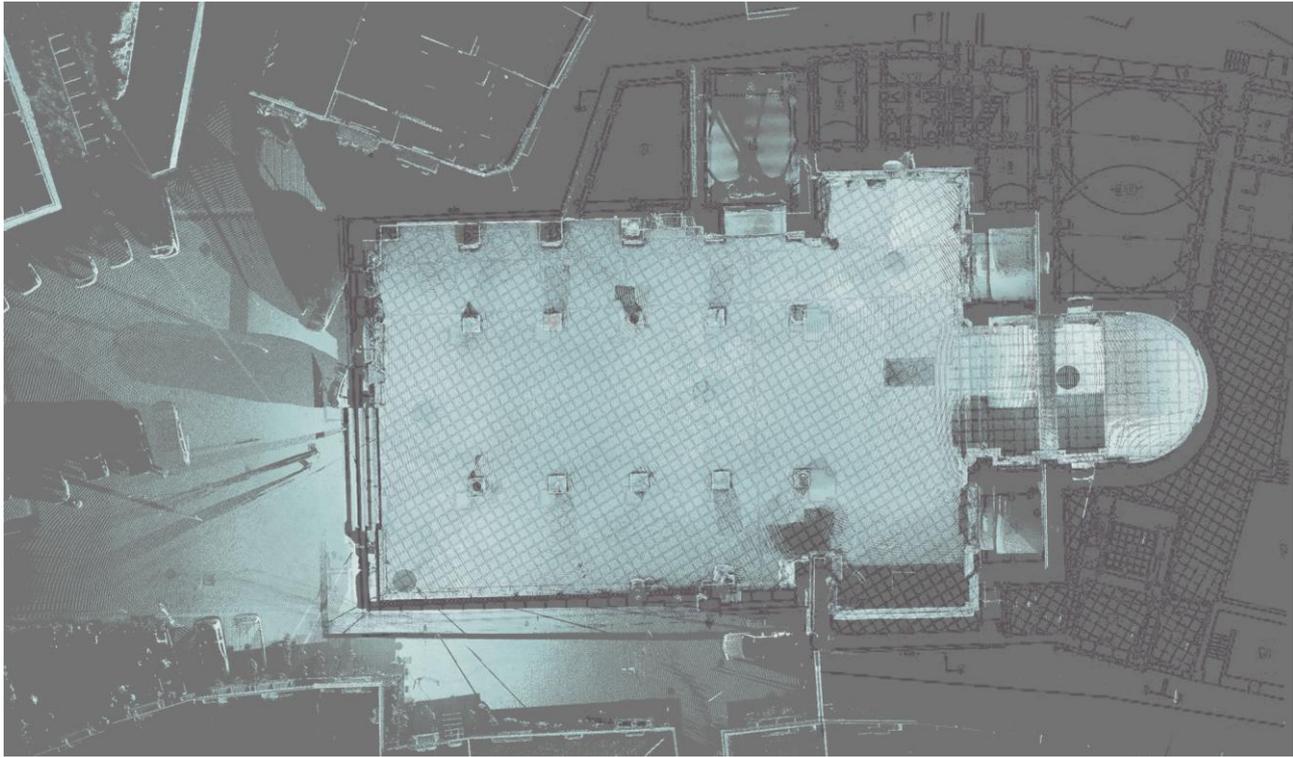


Fig. 5: Comparison between design drawings and survey made by laser scanning.

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