

BASILICA NOVA: CONNECTING ARCHITECTURE PAST AND PRESENT

Michele Chiuini *

Introduction

For many years our school of architecture has offered a summer course in Italy including a design studio for students of architecture, planning, and landscape architecture. The focus of the studies has been preservation in historic centers and the reuse of abandoned sites. Each year a different Italian city has hosted the design studio and set a theme for the project, dealing not only with reuse of historic buildings, but also with abandoned industrial sites, and reconstructions of parts of the historic city. The question of conservation of historic centers has in this way been approached as an architectural problem, addressing new development in addition to conservation of the existing. Examples of these projects are the work on the Papigno area for the city of Terni, and on the Canapina area within the historic walls of Perugia. (Fig. 1 Papigno, Terni. Industrial area seen from the historic center of Papigno. Fig. 2 Perugia, Canapina project)

In 2001 the program received the collaboration of the Superintendence for Archeology of Rome, which has allowed undertaking a study of two major monuments: the Basilica of Maxentius, and the Baths of Diocletian. The questions raised by these students' projects are the dialectics between the city and archeology, the intelligibility of the ruins, and the public uses of these sites. The program for the Basilica of Maxentius in the Forum was provocatively requiring a reconstruction of the basilica as a usable space. This forced the students to look critically at authenticity and values in the light of recent examples of reconstruction of ruins, use of ancient monuments, and protection of archeological sites.

Architecture is built on the past, metaphorically and literally. Not only knowledge comes from the experience of building and the understanding of traditions: cities in Europe are literally built over older structures and along ancient roads (Fig. 3. Housing in the historic center of Lucca, built over the Roman amphitheatre). Archeological sites have become major tourist attractions but, at the same time, have frozen the historic architectural transformation process consequent to urban growth. The reconstruction of the Basilica posits the question of how reconstruction and reuse can preserve an archeological site and reintegrate it into urban life. It is essentially a critical analysis of current principles of conservation, and also a reflection on the impact that such monuments have had and continue to have on the

architecture of the city.

The architectural lessons

The Basilica (Fig. 4 Basilica of Maxentius as it stands today in the Roman Forum) is a very large building, even by today's standard, measuring about 65 m. x 100 m. The basilica was started by Maxentius, and was called at his time Basilica Nova, or "new basilica." We have purposely used this name in the program for its reconstruction, as it would be in fact, again, a new basilica. We refer to the original construction as the Basilica of Constantine, after the emperor who completed and remodeled it in the 4th century. This emperor is also responsible for major transformations in the Roman world: the legalization of Christianity, and the replacement of Rome with the new capital of Constantinople. In architectural terms, this is symbolic of the translation of the Roman basilica into a religious building type that continued to evolve from late Roman through medieval and modern Europe. What are the most important lessons to learn from the Basilica? Much could be said about the structural solution and the typology of this influential building, but we will focus here on its urban function.

The history of the Basilica reveals the concerns that the designers and builders had with the site. As with other large Roman buildings, the site had to be leveled by excavating the slope on the north, and filling over demolished structures on the southwest. Under the artificial platform created this way, there are archeological layers dating back to the origins of Rome, as the Basilica sits in the Forum, facing the Palatine hill. On the south the Basilica faced the Via Sacra, the main street along the Forum. The importance of this relationship was clear to Constantine, who had a new entrance built on that side, with steps leading up to a monumental porch. On the west, the new structure had to negotiate with Via ad Carinas, which was a busy access to the Forum from the north. After having been abandoned in the last centuries, this access is acquiring a new importance, as will be explained later.

What a site analysis cannot fail to note is that, although today the Via Sacra is part of an archeological area, it is still flanked, with some continuity, by buildings that are in use or still usable (Fig. 5 Plan of the Roman Forum with the Via Sacra and existing buildings). Descending from the Campidoglio, the Roman paving starts under the Arch of

Septimius Severus, and immediately to the left stands the Curia as reconstructed by Diocletian in 283 – it survived because it was turned into St. Hadrian's church by Honorius I, and used as such until the "restoration" of 1937. Past the ruins of the Basilica Aemilia, we can see the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina, converted to the church of S. Lorenzo in Miranda (Fig. 6 S. Lorenzo in Miranda with the 17th century entrance behind the porch columns). The church with its related monastery is now used by the government agency presiding over the conservation of the Forum, the Superintendence for Archeology of Rome. Next to this, still on the north side, we find the Temple of Romulus, built by our Maxentius, still with the original bronze doors, and transformed in the middle ages into the basilica of Saints Cosma and Damian. This is also a space used by the Superintendence. Via ad Carinas remains between this temple and the massive walls of Maxentius' Basilica (Fig. 7 Via ad Carinas). Standing next to the Basilica, the view is closed by the church of S. Francesca Romana (Fig. 8 S. Francesca Romana as seen in a 18th century engraving), built over the huge Temple of Venus and Rome, and now used as the main office of the Superintendence, including an archeological museum. Going on, we can now go through the Arch of Titus (restored by Valadier) and proceed towards the Colosseum, or take the way up to the Palatine and the Farnese Gardens.

Piranesi's etching of the Campo Vaccino (Fig. 9 G.B. Piranesi. Il campo vaccino. From *Antichità Romane*, 1756) reveals with extreme clarity this extraordinary fact: at his time, in the mid 18th century, the Via Sacra was in fact a functioning urban road, although much above the Roman road level due to the accumulation of debris. This space was evolving, as other parts of Rome, towards a new architecture that was different and yet strongly connected with the old, such as the shops along the frontage of the Basilica Aemilia, which existed also in Roman times. At the far end (east), the Campo is seen enclosed by the low building connecting S. Francesca Romana with the arch of Titus and the Farnese Gardens. On the south, the complex of the church of S. Maria Liberatrice and S. Maria Antiqua provides a visual end to the Farnese Gardens and turns the corner on the Vicus Tuscus. Piranesi's eye captures a striking sense of unity in the space of the Campo, compared with its current spatial arrangement as an archeological area.

As part of this sequence of major buildings along the Via Sacra, Constantine's Basilica is also a usable structure, as well as a major tourists' attraction. It has a tradition of open-air concerts, and other cultural events. The work recently done to replace the roofing of the three north vaults is part of a plan to make the roof accessible to the public as a panoramic terrace from where the view can spread over the Forum and Via dei Fori Imperiali, from the Colosseum to the Vittoriano. This project is linked to the construction of a new subway line that will have an exit right at the back of the Basilica, leading to Via ad Carinas at the Roman Forum level,

or to Via dei Fori Imperiali at the 20th century level (Fig. 10. Redesign of Via dei Fori Imperiali as a pedestrian street. Bonnie MacFarland and Sarah Davis). The Forum, which is already free for the public to use during the day as a unique pedestrian space, will consequently be more directly connected with the way the modern city works, and the site of the Basilica will play an even more prominent role as an urban node. Via dei Fori Imperiali will be pedestrianized, for about half its present length, behind the Basilica, and the Roman level will be excavated below, allowing the excavation of the Forum Pacis, now covered by this major artery.

The subway project brings to a conclusion a debate that has lasted over twenty years about the elimination of Via dei Fori Imperiali, a road built by Mussolini that carries a significant amount of E-W vehicular traffic across the historic center of Rome. The debate is symptomatic of the inevitable conflicts between archeology and urban planning. The idea of restoration is in fact trying to mend this rift between the ancient and the modern, conservation and development, archeology and architecture.

Design theory

The design choices have resulted from a critical look at the *International Charter for the Conservation and restoration of Monuments and Sites*, and at recent examples of reconstructions. Particular attention has been given to the writings of Giorgio Grassi for his reconstruction of the Roman theatre of Sagunto, Spain (**Fig. 11 Theatre, Sagunto, Spain. Reconstruction over the Roman ruins**). The interest for this project is in the typological approach to design, using contemporary but compatible materials. For Grassi restoration means primarily the reconstruction of the principal building structures, on the basis of the existing ruins, "of those structures which are essential" to the identification of the building as a Roman theatre. "...this completion will be carried out according to a principle of strict economy (an architectural lesson which has in fact come down to us from the building practices of the Romans)." The objectives of the completion are: a) to obtain a "perfectly functioning theatrical space"; b) to make the parts of the Roman theatre more understandable as a building unity. Functional use and intelligibility of the architectural system are also the primary objectives of the Basilica Nova project.

One of the fundamental rules of modern restoration is the distinction between "historic" and "modern", which is typically done by using different materials or separating the new from the "original" with a clearly expressed joint. Instead, this project is based on the notion of continuity of architecture, overcoming the artificial distinction between past and present. The recognition of continuity implies the possibility of modifying, adding to, or restoring the architectural heritage. Continuity is not incompatible with the preservation of ancient structures; in fact it is opposed to the type of "restorations" executed until the 1950s', that,

for instance, demolished Baroque additions to ancient monuments to reveal their “authentic” architecture. Each age should be able to bring its contribution, to build on the past without destroying it. The question of restoration becomes then an architectural question that leads to the exploration of different possibilities of rebuilding. First of all, the project becomes a statement of theoretical premises regarding what students think architecture ought to be. It also becomes an exploration on how the reconstruction should be made, including materials and details.

It is evident that during the short time devoted to theoretical discussion and design (less than three weeks) the students have not been able to develop a clear personal philosophy on such complex issues. Many of the solutions adopt a mixture of reconstructions “in the style of the Romans” in combination with a modern approach. All of them leave in evidence the original Roman parts, typically expressing the dis-continuity between Roman ruins and reconstructed parts. This is our inevitable contradiction if we want the reconstructed Basilica Nova to be a museum of itself, where the ruins are part of the museum exhibits, similar to Grassi’s “antiquarium” in the Sagunto theatre.

The Cripta Balbo, a recent addition to the National Roman Museum, was also an important influence, both as an underground museum of archeological layers, and as a showcase of anastylosis techniques (the column built with steel wire holding the surviving marble fragments, reminiscent of the “reconstruction” of temple of Apollo in Vejo). Lightweight reconstructions of the masonry vaults would serve the purpose of indicating the original form of the building. However this technique emphasizes only the abstract geometry of architectural space, and we tend to forget other perceptual qualities of space, primarily thermal and acoustic, that are so unique to heavy masonry construction. The complete masonry structure and finishes of the Basilica of Constantine would most probably have produced a significant passive cooling effect, as mentioned above; and we should not forget the negative effects of a glass or translucent roof in terms of acoustics or heat gain.

The idea of virtual reconstructions that could combine a virtual-reality space with thermal and acoustic sensations is certainly conceivable, and may be soon feasible. Still we need physical space to protect and exhibit Roman remains that are today scattered on the ground or stored in cellars.

The students proposals

Beyond their conceptual message, the design solutions presented here address a number of real design issues, reinforcing in most cases the orientation of the Superintendence. These issues can be grouped into three sets: interpretation, circulation, and uses.

Interpretation means the ability of the general public to understand what they are looking at; also, the ability to draw

conclusions from the remains about the architecture of the completed building. Interpretation is a complex system of information organized and visualized for an audience that ranges from tourists to scholars and professionals. In its current state, the basilica is much less clearly understandable than a century ago, when the entrance from the Via Sacra was at Constantine’s level, and free from the romantic shrubbery that was allowed to grow later (Fig. 12 The basilica after the 1900 excavations. From Lanciani. *Das Forum Romanum*.). The proposals concerning the space around the Basilica have attempted to make the building and Constantine’s entrance relate again to the Via Sacra (Fig. 13 Bonnie McFarland. Landscaping around Constantine’s entrance). All proposals have emphasized the reconstruction of the floor finish as the best way to regenerate the sense of unity between the covered and the open-air parts of the Basilica (Fig. 14 Floor plan. Brian Bohlender). The perception of the ruins as part of an architectural unity also depends on questions of circulation around the Basilica, of access to its “interior,” and on the reinstatement of that sculptural apparatus that was part of its meaning and image: the statue of Constantine and the column in S. Maria Maggiore (Fig. 15 Anastylosis of Constantine’s statue in the reconstructed apse. Matt Goehringer).

Significant work is in progress to reopen the road system on the NW corner of the Basilica, as mentioned in connection with the subway exit. New horizontal circulation levels could also be created corresponding to the different historic ground levels around the building, as suggested in Matt Goehringer’s drawings (Fig. 15).

A number of projects explored (conceptually, due to the lack of complete archeological surveys) the idea of using the space under the reconstructed floor of the Basilica as a museum space (Fig. 16 Kellie Force. Access from the floor to the underground ruins). There are today many examples of this kind, including the National Roman Museum at the Thermae or at the Cripta Balbo. This would provide a solution to three related problems that are perceivable from the point of view of the public: an interpretive center for the Forum; an enclosed connection between the different buildings used by the Superintendence; and an archeological museum (Fig. 17 Jennifer Rzab. Section).

The interpretive center for the Forum could provide information, services, and exhibits. The services could be located underground in the NE corner of the Basilica, which is not resting on older artifacts, as it was excavated on a hillside; an underground connection could be created with S. Francesca Romana.

The archeological museum would display the remains found in the excavation, explaining the history of that site and the construction of the Basilica, and could provide enough space to be an extension of the antiquarium of S. Francesca Romana. The museum design solution would depend to a great extent

on the location of the new elevator and on the subway station design. However these transformation are going to make the site of the Basilica more prominent than ever, not just in the Forum, but as part of that area of the city, and they justify the spirit of these proposals tending to make the Basilica more intelligible and more actively used as an urban node. In this sense they suggest a way to reconstruct the city, while preserving the integrity and the authenticity of the Roman remains.

*** Michele Chiuini**

Master of Arts, Department of Architecture, University of Sheffield, England, 1974

Dott.Ing. Civil Engineering (Building Section), Milan Technical University, Italy, 1973

Academic experience

Ball State University: Associate Professor, 1995-present; Assistant Professor, 1991-95; Visiting Professor, 1989-91

University of Nottingham, Department of Architecture: Lecturer, 1977-81.

Practice experience

Private practice, Perugia, Italy, 1985-90

Ceccarelli & Chiuini Associati, Perugia and Rome, Italy. Principal with G. Ceccarelli, 1981-85

Recent publications and conference presentations

“An International Educational Partnership on the Basilica of Maxentius”. Presentation at the International Symposium on the Basilica of Maxentius, University of Rome, November 2001.

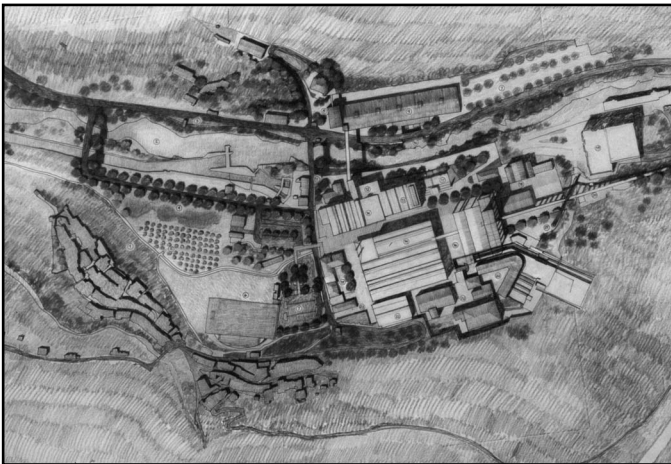


Figure 1

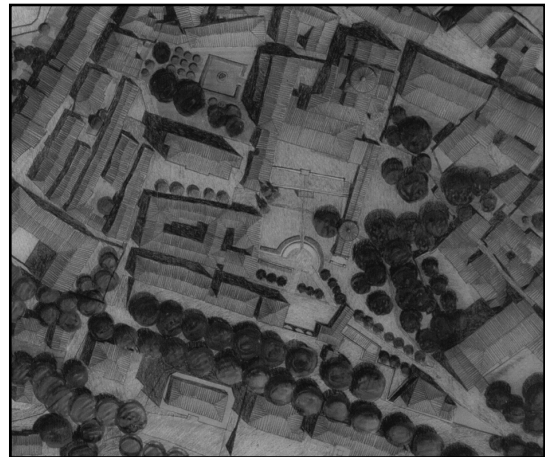


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

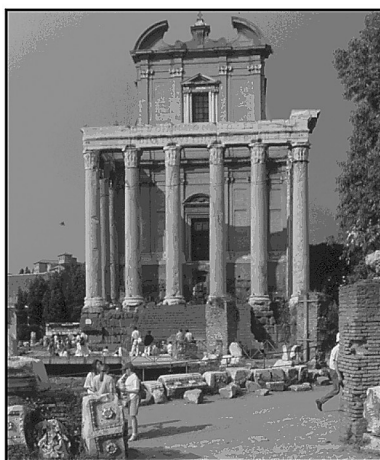


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

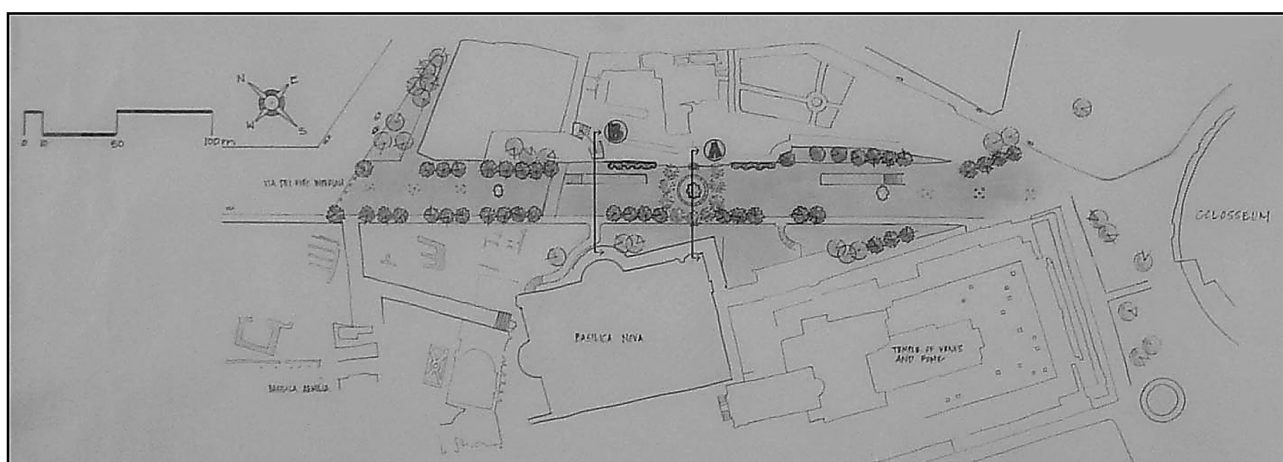


Figure 10

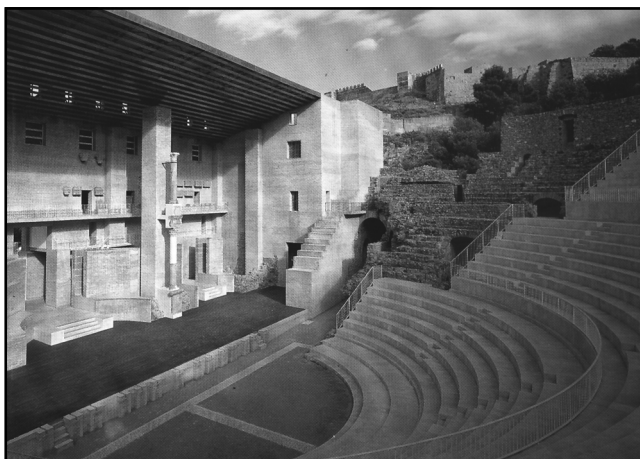


Figure 11



Figure 12

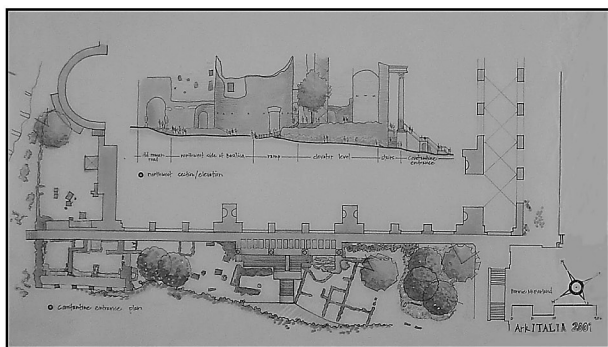


Figure 13

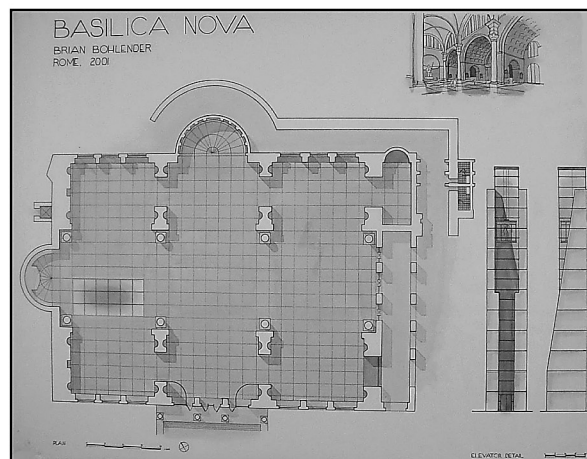


Figure 14

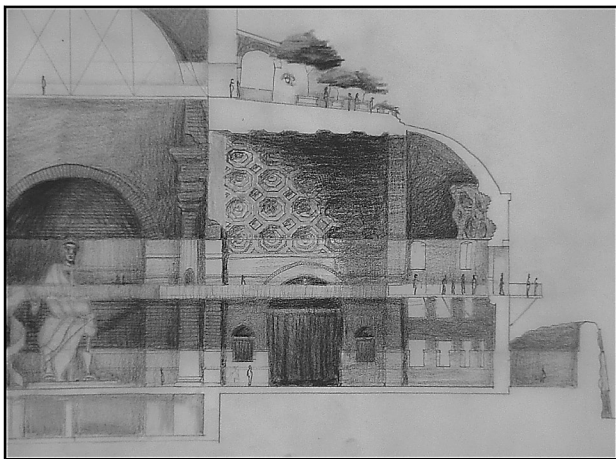


Figure 15

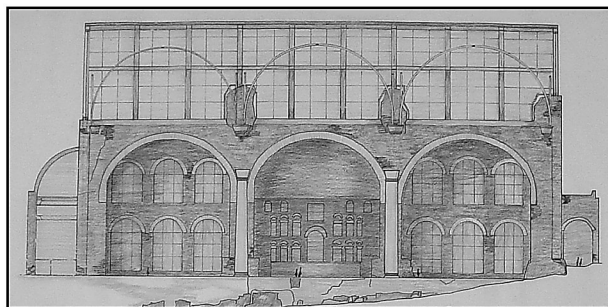


Figure 17

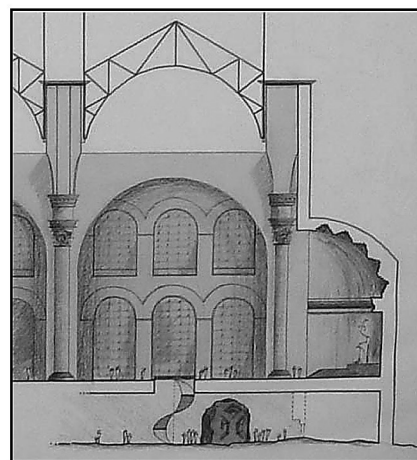


Figure 16