

The new function of architectural monuments – a comparative analysis of two different cases: Palazzo Querini Stampalia and the Fondaco dei Tedeschi building

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University of Technology Press

Language Verification: Timothy Churcher,
Merlin Language Services

Typesetting: Anna Basista, Cracow
University of Technology Press

Received: July 27, 2021

Accepted: September 1, 2021

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Citation: Strzałka-Rogal, D. (2021). The new function of architectural monuments – a comparative analysis of two different cases: Palazzo Querini Stampalia and the Fondaco dei Tedeschi building. *Technical Transactions: e2021014*. <https://doi.org/10.37705/TechTrans/e2021014>

Abstract

This paper discusses the long-term vision of the historic city development, where buildings assume a new function over time. The discussion is based on the example of Palazzo Querini Stampalia and Fondaco dei Tedeschi – two monuments restored to Venice in a new, different role. In the comparative analysis of the transformation of the buildings, particular attention was paid to the cultural, social and economic context of the city. This article aims to review the strengths and weaknesses of the new-use scenarios, outlining the renovation of the monuments and its added value for cities. The author concluded that no matter what the new function of the building is, it is worth renovating them, because this way the heritage can survive and this should be the central objective of a long-term vision.

Keywords: monument preservation, local identity, Venice, architectural heritage

1. Introduction

Venice is a special city – an island city, a city of canals and gondolas but above all, a city of monuments. The exceptional richness and variety of forms preserved to this day determine the city's primary importance as a tourist centre, not only on the local scale of Italy but also globally. The historical part of the city, creating a unique urban complex of canals and bridges, makes Venice one of the most valuable items on the list of the world heritage of mankind.

At the same time, Venice faces a number of problems. Both the climate and the location mean that it is often flooded, which in turn has a negative impact on the condition of the buildings. The main threats have always been the regular tides of the sea and the collapse of the city – the slow decline of the lithosphere due to the movement of tectonic plates. This natural process is, however, enhanced by anthropogenic factors. For years, the city has been besieged by incoming cruise liners, and at the same time, there has been a systematic decline in the number of native inhabitants. There are ongoing discussions about finding a balance between the creative life of the city, which nurtures the identity of its inhabitants and the quality of city life, and the regulation of tourism profits. However, Venice is known for its commercial tradition accompanying achievements in the field of architecture and art – at the height of its heyday, it was considered the most important point of the exchange of material goods in the world. The disagreement on the further development of the city and the multitude of dilemmas are reflected in the process of transforming historic buildings, giving them a new function and adapting the form of buildings to modern purposes (Scheppe, 2009).

The article discusses the function of buildings and shows the action taken to ultimately protect the heritage of the city, which is seen as the most important priority. It compares two different objects in which conservation works were carried out – Palazzo Querini Stampalia and Fondaco dei Tedeschi. The first of these formerly served as a palace and is now a cultural institution offering a wide range of museum, educational and library activities. The second example, which has historically been a warehouse and accommodation for traders visiting Venice, currently functions as a luxury department store. A descriptive method based on a comparative analysis was used for the comparison. Two different visions were presented, as a result of which, the building was restored to the city, tourists and residents. Despite the controversy over the means by which the goal has been achieved, in both cases, the primary value is maintaining and cultivating the heritage in question in an accessible form. The way the object is transformed takes a backseat to the effect of the actions, as a result of which, an inaccessible part of this unique city has been unlocked. The priority is to restore Venetian monuments and incorporate them into the living urban tissue that coexists with the tourists and locals.

2. Palazzo Querini Stampalia

2.1. History

Built in the 16th century, the palace remains a typical example of Italian cinquecento Renaissance architecture. From the very beginning, it was the residence of the Querini Stampalia family, one of the oldest Venetian families and considered to be the founding family of the city. In 1869, the last descendant of the family, Giovanni Querini, donated the building together with the family art collection to the city. Querini, being a man of science himself, committed the donation in his will under conditions – the building was to house a library open especially in the evenings for the convenience of users, and a foundation should be established to organise events enriching cultural and scientific life (Schulz, 1999: 159–160).

Today, the building is a home to the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, which hosts a variety of events, concerts and lectures. Moreover, it functions as a library, archive, museum and gallery of contemporary art. The museum presents a large collection of works of art, especially by Venetian Baroque and Rococo artists such as Giovanni Bellini, Pietro and Alessandro Longhi, Giandomenico Tiepolo, Giulio Carpioni, Federico Cervelli, Matteo Ghidoni, Pietro Muttoni, and Marco and Sebastiano Ricci. Arcadian landscapes, genre scenes and Longhi's series of paintings depicting the Seven Sacraments are especially valuable. The museum also houses furniture, porcelain, and musical instruments (Foscari, 2014).

2.2. Architecture

In the years 1961–1963, Carlo Scarpa undertook the renovation of the building, restoring many of its parts to their former glory and also arranging some spaces anew. In the modernist tradition, he placed a garden in the courtyard of the building, consisting of islets delimited by a stream, decorated with a fountain, and he introduced water into the lobby (Dal Co, Polano, 2015).

The intervention in Palazzo Querini Stampalia is based on four issues related to the Venetian building tradition: a light arch-shaped bridge leading to the entrance to the building; the entrance with its barriers to protect against flood; the portego and the garden (Schulz, 1999: 124).

Carlo Scarpa introduced water inside the building, making it a metaphorical and material pillar of the concept. From the canal through the portal gates, water runs along the passageways; it is located in the garden, in a spacious multi-level copper pool made of cement and mosaic, and in a small canal with two labyrinths carved on the sides in alabaster and Istrian stone. It is placed inside in such a way that it does not interfere with communication; moreover, the materials have been selected so as to minimise its destructive effect. The architect turned the potential problem into an inspiration that poetically emphasises the identity of the Venetian building. Scarpa's restoration work is based on a balanced combination of new and old elements, as well as an excellent selection of high-quality materials (Foscari, 2014). Every element of

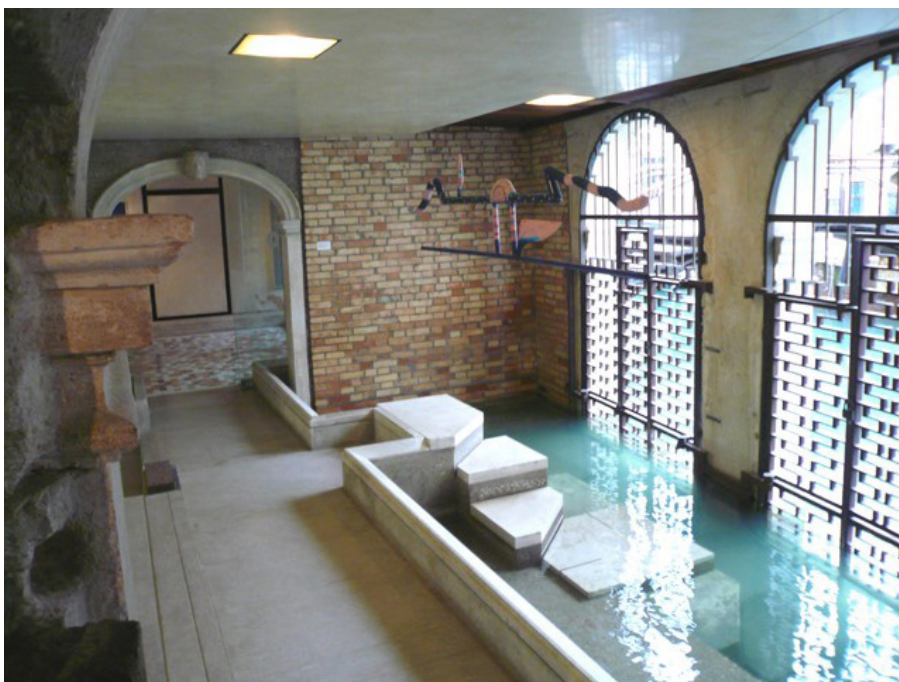


Fig. 1. Palazzo Querini Stampalia – water introduced to the building, 2019 (photo by author)

the building was designed down to the smallest detail. The original floor of the hall made of polychrome marble, has a similar pattern to the exterior cladding of the chapel of the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona. The roof is finished with red stucco. Elsewhere, the ground is made of Istrian stone, as is the structure that Scarpa covered with stairs leading to the library, galleries and offices on the first floor. From the portego, i.e. the space connecting the access from the water side with the entrance to the building, the central hall can be seen through the glass wall. The walls of the hall are finished with travertine panels equipped with special copper hangers for paintings or other works of art (Vecchi, 2018). The light comes from two short sides, both protected by glass walls – it is a combination of direct and reflected light (from water and plants in the yard).

Later, in the 1990s, Mario Botta introduced further changes to the facility. He added some decorative elements and also designed the exhibition space on the upper floor and the interior of the cafe.

2.3. The building in the context of contemporary Venice

The past and present coexist in perfect harmony in Palazzo Querini Stampalia, undiscovered by mass tourism. Thanks to extensive restoration work, the building kept up with the times and today is a gateway to the past of Venice which is also open to the present, in addition to primarily functioning as a house-museum, hosting events, concerts and exhibitions, as well as works of art from the 19th and 20th centuries and young contemporary artists who were invited to ‘dialogue’ with the building itself. The facility supports cultural productions by exploring its own historical and artistic heritage and is open to contemporary art. The renovated palace is a model example of adaptation in the context of the protection of cultural heritage, both in terms of form and function (Foscari, 2014).



Fig. 2. Palazzo Querini Stampalia – a view of the garden designed by Carlo Scarpa (photo by F. Castagna)

3. Fondaco dei Tedeschi

3.1. History

The history of Fondaco dei Tedeschi is rooted in the centuries-old commercial tradition of the city, accompanying the achievements in the field of architecture and art. By the thirteenth century, many merchants from across the Alps were present in Venice to exchange material goods. The city senate chose a seat for them – Fondaco dei Tedeschi, located on the Grand Canal, next to the Rialto Bridge – the heart of the city’s merchant heart. The facility was built in 1228 as a warehouse or accommodation for visiting traders, gaining control over their activities. At the time of Marco Polo, this building was a market for spices, silk and other goods traded between the Orient and Europe (Hoffmann, 1932). It was thoroughly rebuilt after a fire in 1505, and from 1939, it served as the seat of the Italian Post Office (Irace, 2016).

In 2008, the building was sold to the Benetton Group, owned by one of the prominent Italian families who had a vision to create a modern department store, incorporated into a Renaissance building that seamlessly blends commerce with the urban leisure lifestyle. The commission for the architectural concept was awarded to the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas together with the architectural office OMA. The renovation work at Fondaco dei Tedeschi lasted from 2009 to 2016, opening another controversial chapter in its history (Sacchetti, 2016).

3.2. Architecture

The transformation of Fondaco dei Tedeschi into a luxury department store implies its change ‘from within’. A detailed analysis of the historical outline of the interior shows that the building was never intended to serve as a typical Venetian palace. Its interiors, simple and durable, remained much more modest than those typical of Venetian decorative arts. This argument was raised by Jamie Fobert, an interior designer cooperating with the OMA studio, pointing to the relationship between the building and the central trade in goods. As a result of the



Fig. 3. Fondaco dei Tedeschi – a view of the central courtyard, 2019 (photo by author)

transformation, its original status was restored, allowing customers to get to know specific interiors of this building. The leading material for the whole concept is brass – it is most often found in various forms in individual configurations: wall cladding on the fourth floor, stairs, elevators, window frames and as a solid detail that shapes new balustrades. It is used in its natural state or transformed into a colour gradient by a special oxidation process, giving it a variety of shades – from cobalt blue to light gold. The interior walls of the pavilion consist of movable panels clad in various shades of oxidised brass and a mirror. A new floor, made of steel and glass, has been added in the courtyard, which, when viewed from inside, resembles a kind of contemporary version of the ceiling cassettoni. Its construction required careful research in order to find a way to understand the context of the 16th-century construction plan (Dal Co, Koolhaas, Molteni, 2016).

The designers tried to find a way to make the designed spaces smooth and pleasant. The typology of commercial districts from the 13th century was recreated, giving the customer much greater access to the product and information. The structural features of the building remain unchanged. Viewing platforms, balconies overlooking the Grand Canal, remains of art and frescoes that are still intact. Rem Koolhaas, along with a team of architects from the OMA studio, also added an elegant four-story Italian-style loggia with numerous red painted escalators. The main entrance to the building, now secondary, is located on the side of Calle del Fontego dei Tedeschi, at number 5364. It is formed by an arched portal, placed between two spiral half-columns with Corinthian capitals. The new roof is the result of the renovation of an existing 19th-century pavilion above a spectacular new glass and steel floor-ceiling that rises above the central courtyard. The

roof terrace, which opens up a spectacular view of the city, together with the courtyard below, has become a public place, accessible to everyone without fees or restrictions (Sacchetti, 2016).

3.3. The building in the context of contemporary Venice

Powered by commercial forces, the historic building renovated as a luxury department store sparked a wave of discussion. The Benetton Group, paying around 55 million euros, offered Venice City Council an additional contribution of 6 million euros in exchange for uncontrolled building permits. This sparked protests among activists to protect Italy's national heritage. The Italia Nostra conservation group launched a campaign to contest the approval of the design. Beppe Grillo from the populist political party 5 Star Movement, objecting to the implementation of the assumption, pointed to the fact that part of the ancient heritage of Venice will be irretrievably lost (Kington, 2012).

Fondaco dei Tedeschi is a silent witness of the Venetian mercantile era, the role of which is diminishing with the progressive depopulation of Venice. However, the commercialisation of the facility made it closer to people – both the organised program, which provides regular, cyclical cultural events, offers interesting offers to tourists and residents, and the architecture, which naturally exposes the entire monument. There is a cafe and restaurant in the building run by a Padua chef. In addition, there are souvenir shops, Italian food brands and shops selling products of Venetian craftsmen. Until 2007, the facility was partially abandoned – the post office occupied only the first two levels. A good summary of this view is the opinion on the OMA renovation scheme, which was published by the ArchDaily website: “The project – composed of both architecture and programming – opens the courtyard piazza to pedestrians, maintaining its historical role of covered urban ‘campo’” (ArchDaily, 2016).



Fig. 4. Fondaco dei Tedeschi – a view from the roof terrace open for all visitors, 2019 (photo by author)

4. Conclusions

The enduring nature of Venice is perfectly described by the words of Jo Ann Locktov: “Venice was built where no land ever existed. Water runs through her veins. Bridges, palaces, churches, every structure is a testament to the resiliency of imagination” (Locktov, 2016). Venice appears today as a place struggling to survive; besieged by tourists and environmental neglect. The influx of visitors means huge revenues for the city, but at the same time, has a negative impact on the monuments and the ecosystem. The bustling city is too unusual to neglect it and assumes the position of a silent witness to the devastation, and the most important goal of the measures taken is to preserve and save Venice's exceptionally valuable cultural heritage.

The two cases of the transformation of historical buildings discussed in the article present extremely different goals and methods of adapting the object to restore it for reuse.

Fondazione Querini Stampalia is an outstanding example of sublime architecture, timeless quality of detail, subtle solutions combining what is

new and old in the building. The originality of this old Venetian palace lies in the successful combination of the remembrance of a glorious past with modern splendour. The House-Museum has been open to visitors since 1869. It has a library, a museum and an area for temporary exhibitions. The intensive program of educational activities offers a variety of audiences new interpretations of the museum, library and the architecture of the building itself (Dal Co, Polano, 2015).

The adaptive reuse of Fondaco dei Tedeschi has sparked a debate about what the future of the city will be like – whether it should attempt to return to a residential, productive centre or undergo the continual transformation of Venice into a virtual replica of itself. In a situation where the inhabitants are mostly tourists, public life is a cyclically organised show, and the only meaning of time is money. There was a well-founded fear that the development of a long-term vision for the city's development could be blocked by short-sighted interests. The analysis of the actions taken shows that the facility clearly brings more to the life of the Venetian community than it receives. Based on historical sources, detailed architectural and urban analyses, it seems possible to strike a balance between the city's artistic heritage and commercial trends in Venice.

In the discussion about the further fate of the historic city, a view emerges that primarily calls to use what Venice offers us, respecting its fragility and cultivating its uniqueness. The article is against the emergence of museum cities, closed enclaves, and turning historic objects into inactive relics of history. First of all, if we restore monuments, it is an opportunity to make them a living part of the city. The final conclusion is that no matter what the new function of the building is, it is worth renovating them because in this way, the heritage can survive and this should be the central objective of a long-term vision.

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