BASILICA NOVA: CONNECTING ARCHITECTURE PAST AND PRESENT

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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