

Overall view of the complex of the monastery from the main square of the town of San Benedetto Po



Summary

The construction of the Monastery of “San Benedetto in Polirone” dates back to the sixteenth century, even if it was built over pre-existing structures of the eleventh century. The famous renaissance artist Giulio Romano is the author of the architectural outline and of the many important frescoes and decorations in the complex. The monastery is formed by several buildings irregularly distributed around two main cloisters.

In 2004, the municipality of San Benedetto Po, owner of a portion of the complex, decided to publish a tender for the restoration of part of the Monastery and for the creation of an ethnographic museum and other public spaces. The design team lead by Eng. Nicola Berlucchi won the tender for the preliminary and detailed architectural design and for the restoration of the decorated surfaces.

The team realized an overall project that included all the portions belonging to the Municipality. The restoration and renovation works were divided into separate portions and realized over the last 6 years, in order to guarantee the financial feasibility of the overall intervention.

The complex was refunctionalized, all bearing structures were reinforced and finally the plastered and decorated surfaces were restored to render a unitary common image. The project has included the optimization of internal routes for visitors and employees, the realization of new and efficient lighting and heating systems and the adaptation to the fire safety requests. All these interventions were carried on with the maximum respect for the identity of the existing structure, trying to minimize demolitions.

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2005-2011. Restoration of the Complex of San Benedetto in Polirone

Decision-making cross-referred to ICOMOS guidelines

- A.** read a monument, ensemble or site and identify its emotional, cultural and use significance
- B.** Understand the history and technology of monuments, ensembles or sites in order to define their identity, plan for their conservation, and interpret the results of this research
- C.** Understand the setting of a monument, ensemble or site, their contents and surroundings, in relation to other buildings, gardens or landscapes
- D.** Find and absorb all available sources of information relevant to the monument, ensemble or site being studied

The complex, even if unitary, was split among different owners with different necessities and priorities. Despite the client was just one among other owners, the preliminary phase of the design was focused on the entire site of the Monastery; the possible necessities of each owner and of each function were considered and studied in order to guarantee the sustainability for the restoration, and of the possible future intervention of the portions not actually being restored. Such sustainability was interpreted as an economical aspect (the future functions will be able to



The level of complexity of the interventions was increased by several additions and by many overlapping decorative layers stretched during the long history of the Monastery. Only badly made integrations and concrete plasters insertions were completely removed. The methodology adopted requested to maintain all other historical traces without choosing to privilege any particular period or style. The monument was considered as a “stratified document” that needed to be fully preserved. Such preservation was mediated with the necessity of a formal unity: for example, the decoration of the vault of the main library was characterized by wide lacks. The problem was solved with the restoration of the preserved areas and with the filling of lacking portions with a uniform neutral color, rendered with the geometrical pattern only. That allowed the general

readability of the overall image without introducing any fake. The restoration interested even stucco decorations and “marmorino” (fake painted marble) surfaces, that where accurately cleaned and preserved respecting the pre-existences.

Unfortunately a few months before the ending of the whole restoration works the strong earthquake damaged seriously all the buildings of the monastery, now the monastery is partially closed to public waiting for the strengthening projects.

Every specific decision concerning the re-organization of the internal rooms and the restoration of the decoration was agreed with the Department for Historic Architectonical Heritage, which was repeatedly involved during all the different phases of the work.

maintain themselves), as an artistic value (the modification will not affect the aesthetic value of the building) and as a coherence value (will future function be coherent with the existing ones). The team has decided to give a huge importance to the “constraints” of the site before trying to find any possible solution.

E. Understand and analyze the behaviour of monuments, ensembles and sites as complex systems

F. Diagnose intrinsic and extrinsic causes of decay as a basis for appropriate actions

In addition to an important historic research concerning the Monastery, the design group has completed a comprehensive survey of the building: after the geometrical survey (realized with laserscanner technology), the team designed a series of analysis to further understand the chemical and physical specifications of mortars and plasters, the presence of humidity and the conditions of all bearing structures (made of wood or masonry).

G. Inspect and make reports intelligible to non-specialist readers of monuments, ensembles or sites, illustrated by graphic means such as sketches and photographs

The municipality of San Benedetto Po, purchaser of the restoration, has promoted a series of conferences to explain the project to the citizens and to promote the ethnographic museum. The

The main cloister of Secolari
 after the interventions





The northern façade of the Cloister of Secolari before and after the restoration



Main facade of the "Musei Civici Poltroniani" (Comunal Museum of San Benedetto Po).
Picture before the intervention, mapping of the degradations and chromatic study



The monumental stairway before and after the restoration



The main vault of the room of the monumental stairway before and after the restoration





An original fresco discovered under a more recent layer of uniform paint, cleaned and restored. Confrontation between the situation as it was before the intervention and result after the restoration



design team has always given a big support in preparing clarifying material, drawings, posters and presentations or even participating as lecturer.

H. Know, understand and apply Unesco conventions and recommendations, and ICOMOS and other recognized Charters, regulations and guidelines

I. Make balanced judgement based on shared ethical principles, and accept responsibility for the long-term welfare of cultural heritage

Since the building is scheduled under the protection of the Department for Architectonical historic heritage of Mantova, every single modification of the monument needed to be discussed and authorized in advance. Such authorization depends on the conformity to the methodology delineated by the directives of the Ministry.

The choice to preserve every historic trace without privileging any particular style, derives from the responsibility of delivering a document to who will follow, without trying altering it. Only

harmful integrations were removed, e.g. concrete plasters, because were considered an extrinsic a cause of decay.

- J.** Recognize when advice must be sought and define the areas of need and study by different specialists, e.g. wall paintings, sculpture and object of artistic and historical value, and/or studies of materials and systems
- K.** Give expert advice on maintenance strategies, management policies and the policy framework for environmental protection and preservation of monuments and their contents and sites
- L.** Document works executed and make same accessible
- M.** Work in multi-disciplinary groups using sound methods
- N.** Be able to work with inhabitants, administrators or planners to resolve conflicts and to develop conservation strategies appropriate to local needs, abilities and resources

The tender for the work explicitly requested the construction of a multidisciplinary team. The experience acquired by our firm in the field has allowed the construction of several professional connections over the years with other specialized firms in every single field interested. Such decennial experience has allowed Eng. Berlucchi to take the role of design manager, to optimize the decisional multidisciplinary process.

The east wing of the museum & stucco decoration before and after the restoration





The overall look of the main room of the library before and after the interventions