

ITALY

Environmental and monumental SOS from Florence: Damages due to wrong ideas of modernity and embellishment

Almost 100 years ago Max Dvořák, in his still topical publication *Katechismus der Denkmalpflege* (*Catechism for the Protection of Monuments*), gave a list of the dangers threatening ancient monuments, including the “misunderstood ideas of progress”, the “presumed exigencies of the modern age” and “the eagerness of a wrong embellishment”.

It is unfortunately exactly what is happening in Florence as a consequence of some choices of urban planning taken in the last decades by the administrators, who want to relieve an artistic city from its secular “immobility” and to open it up for the economic and social exigencies of the new age of globalisation.

The consequences of the decision to locate a large exhibition and fair centre in the Renaissance monument of the Fortezza da Basso, already denounced in the 1960s as an unsustainable proposal, are visible today as its infrastructure and parking system endanger the monumental complex of the Fortezza designed by architect Sangallo and of its public gardens designed by Giuseppe Poggi,

while Florence was capital of Italy (1865-1870).

The construction of the fast open-air metro network with trains of 35 metres length in a reserved carriageway is dramatically threatening the public trees and the monumental heritage of the city. The first victim of the construction of line 1 (Firenze–Scandicci) has been the historic park of Cascine, through which the new urban train will pass. The realisation of an underpass in the esplanade at the entry of the park has interrupted the physical unity of the original layout of the park and impoverished the arboreal heritage. Two tram lines will pass the site of the two side alleys and the first part of the main alley of elms. The winter promenade bordering the river Arno will be interrupted by the metro rails and the ramps of a new bridge, irreparably damaging the park layout and the views of the river and the town in the background, which over time have been preserved almost identical to the well-known 17th-century views by Van Wittel. The remaining evidence of the first industrial settlement of Florence (the Pignone) has been completely destroyed by the edge of the same bridge on the left bank of the river. But, the climax is represented by the other two lines of the open-air metro. Trains are expected to pass a few meters near the Baptistery and beneath the complex of San Giovannino by the architect Ammannati, then past the well-known Palace Medici



Crossover of the park of Cascine with indication of the track (in red) of the open-air train, line 1

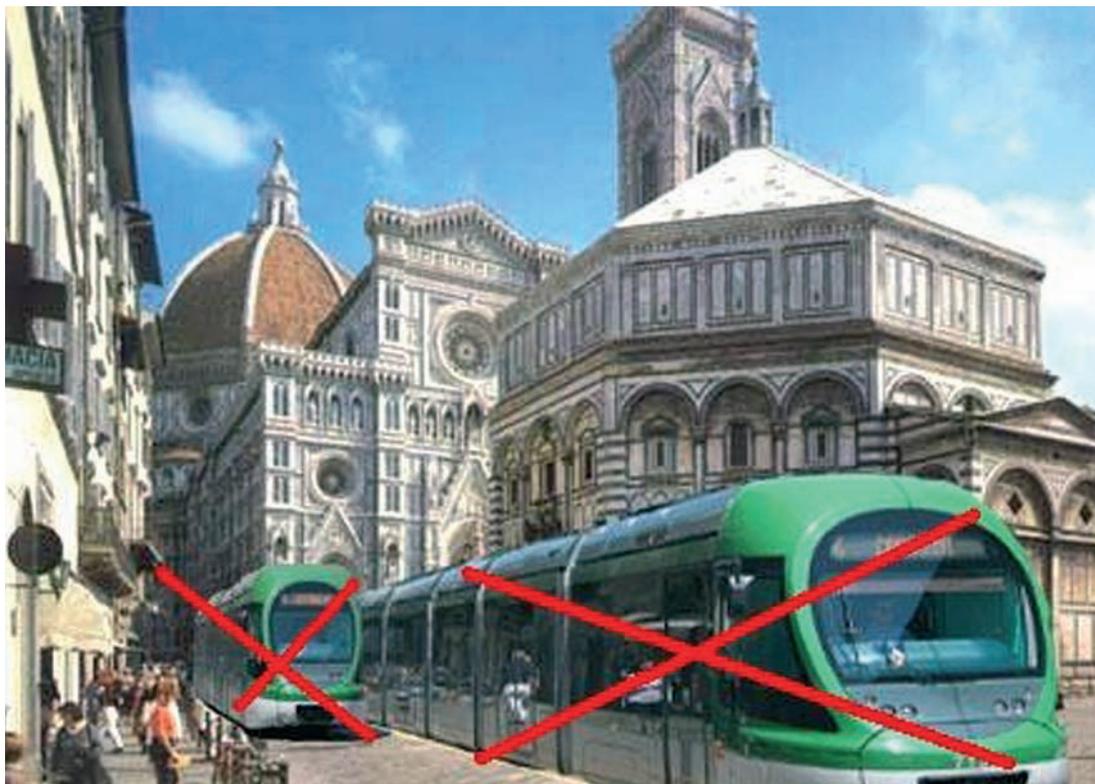
The park of Cascine in a view by G. Van Wittel



The new metro bridge between the river Arno and the Cascine.

The central alley of elms dug up for the instalment of train rails



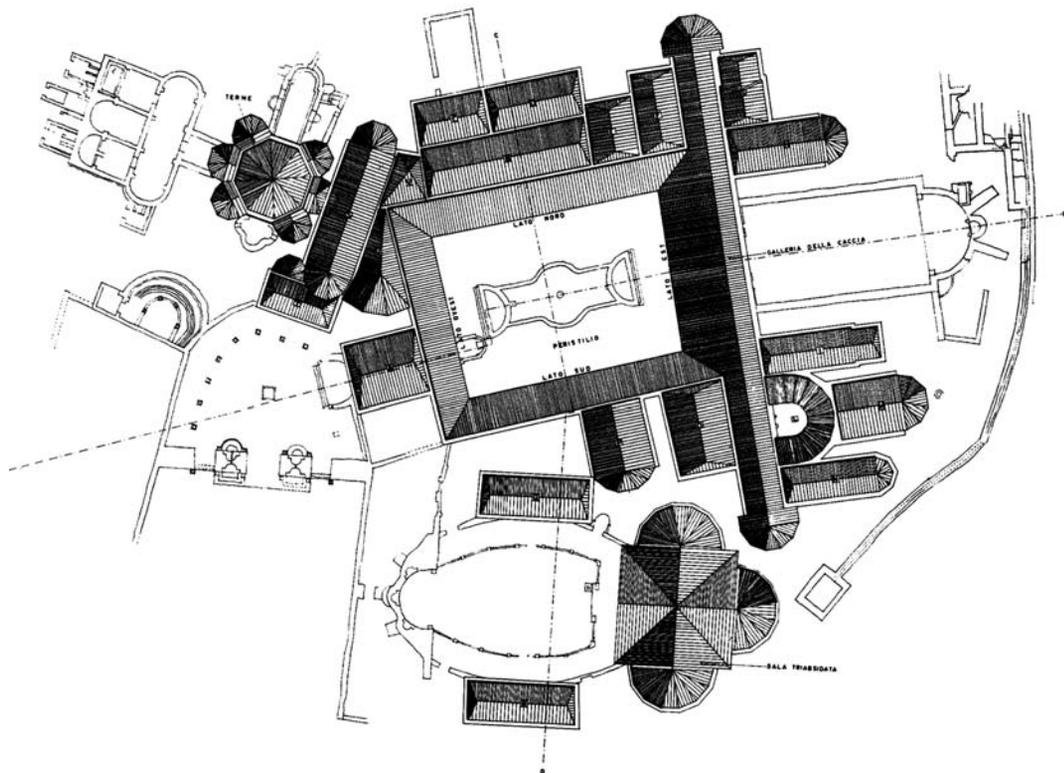


Model of the train passage in Piazza Duomo

Riccardi, the Biblioteca Marucelliana, crossing piazza San Marco to continue bordering the well-known Florentine botanical gardens (Giardino dei Semplici). Line 3 will destroy all the trees and public green which are part of the layout of the 18th and early 19th centuries and which grow along the new arterial streets connecting the Fortezza da Basso with the new hospital centre of Careggi, at via dello Statuto, piazza Vieusseux, piazza Leopoldo and viale Morgagni: about 400 tall trees will be cut down, of which some (in viale Morgagni) not only have great environmental value but also constitute the historic memory of the dead of the First World War.

The general public considers such projects as devastating, too expensive and unnecessary, particularly as there are possible alternative solutions which are considerably less expensive, have less impact and are more respectful of the delicate urban setting of a city of the arts as important as Florence.

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Plan of the roofing system designed by Minissi for Piazza Armerina (Dossier: Salviamo Minissi a Piazza Armerina, ANANKE 44, 2004)

The work of Franco Minissi at the Roman Villa in Piazza Armerina in danger

While the 2006/2007 issue of *Heritage at Risk* is being published, this text will risk sounding like a necrology for one of the first examples of innovative museographical interventions on an archaeological site in Italy, realised as an open-air museum immediately after the Second World War, rather than like an urgent appeal for modern heritage in danger. The warning was already launched in 2004, when – for political reasons – the Communal Administration of the Roman Villa at the World Heritage site of Piazza Armerina (Enna) selected an *aesthete* art critic, Vittorio Sgarbi, as Conservator of the Roman Villa. As is known, Sicily is a region with an autonomous status; cultural properties are not under the responsibility of the Ministry of Cultural Properties and Activities but of the Ministry of Regional Tourism. This Conservator, faced with the serious decay due to a complete lack of maintenance of more than 2000 square metres of the famous polychrome floor mosaics discovered in 1927 by the archaeologist Paolo Orsi, pointed his finger at the roofing system. The latter was designed and realised by architect Franco Minissi in 1957-1963 to protect the mosaics, with the consultation of ICR (Istituto Centrale del Restauro) directed at that time by Cesare Brandi. This intervention, which was immediately met with unanimous consensus from scholars and the public, was then considered an exemplary solution (“esemplare”) for its light structures (“leggerezza delle strutture”), its modernity (design and materials) and its minimum impact (una soluzione “integralmente moderna e integralmente modesta”).

In Italy, the practice of protecting mosaics with temporary shelters or with a layer of sand has been considered a good practice, recommended already in the first Guidelines for conservation of archaeological contexts produced by the young reunited country (i.e. Giuseppe Fiorelli, 1875, art. 95: “nell’autunno di ogni anno dovranno esser coperti di arena i pavimenti di musaico e di marmo”).

In Sicily, architect Franco Minissi (1919-1996) was the author of a comprehensive campaign of protection and valorisation of cultural heritage, with on-site and museum interventions. In the case of Piazza Armerina, the intervention, requested by the *Direzione Generale* of the Ministry (directed by Guglielmo de Angelis d’Ossat), cleverly united the need for protection of the archaeological remains and the educational purpose by reconstructing the lost volumes of the Roman Villa with a light transparent structure – at the time experimental – in iron and perspex. The ancient walls of the perimeter were used to host foot-paths for visitors in order to offer them the best point of view of the precious floor mosaics and to avoid that visitors walk on them. For the innovative museography of the post-Second World War period and the presentation of archaeological contexts *en plein air* this intervention immediately constituted one of the first celebrated examples, its historic value still enduring in manuals to this day (e.g. Voce ‘Conservazione’ in *Manuale del Restauro*, Mancosu, Roma 2000).

After the proposal by the Conservator to dismantle the Minissi structure, a vast campaign was launched and is consultable on the website prepared by Prof. Franco Tomaselli from the University of

Palermo (www.unipa.it/monumento-documento). This strong mobilisation, led by researchers and experts, is attempting to modify the selected project by avoiding the unacceptable environmental impact which could occur with the construction of a giant reticular dome of more than 110 m diameter and 30 m height (“cupolone (big dome)? No thanks!”). However, so far it has not succeeded in changing the negative judgement of the Conservator who to this day insists that the Minissi masterpiece is only horrible scrap-iron (“una orribile ferraglia”) which needs to be removed and replaced by new and more traditional structures. These structures, which would be bounded by masonry walls, covered by an opaque new wooden roof and have a ventilated air-chamber covered in pre-oxidised copper lamellae, are justified as a historic evolution of the Minissi project (“un’evoluzione storica del progetto Minissi”). The new works benefit from funds from the European Union. The company has already been contracted (with a 38% reduction by the company, which is a clear sign of the technical approximation of the project) and the fieldwork has started, notwithstanding that the site of Piazza Armerina is inscribed on the World Heritage List as a whole (the appeal: “Salviamo la Villa del Casale dalle cupole”, officially addressed on 6 December 2006 to UNESCO, has received no reply yet). This is therefore an urgent and last collective call to prevent the loss of a significant work of art consisting of its precious floor mosaics and the Minissi masterpiece.

As was claimed many times in vain by Franco Minissi during his lifetime and never envisaged by the site administration, a proper and systematic maintenance of this masterpiece would be the desirable remedy, which at the same time could benefit from today’s technologies for ventilation and micro-climate monitoring. This is an appeal for a wise management of the public budget (30 million euros for the new structure have been allocated) and for the implementation of in-situ conservation works of both the floor mosaics and the Minissi construction as a whole system. This is also an appeal against a parody of a modern structure already rich in historic value which constitutes a highly recognised highlight of Italian innovative museography of the post-Second World War period celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 2007.

References

For a detailed documentation of this case, see in particular the following reviews:

- ‘L’Architettura, cronache e storia’ (588, October 2004: “Da Agrigento a Piazza Armerina: Franco Minissi o della Modernità a rischio”)
- ‘ANANKE 44 (December 2004: Dossier con inchiesta fotografica “Salviamo Minissi a Piazza Armerina”)
- Architettura informazione della facoltà di Architettura di Napoli (24, May-June 2006: “Piazza Armerina al Salone del restauro di Ferrara”)
- L’Ingegnere, 11, January-February 2007: “Protagonisti della nuova museografia: Franco Minissi a Piazza Armerina”)

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View of the site



View of the site



Rendering of the foreseen project which will replace the Minissi masterpiece (www.unipa.it/monumento-documento)