

## 07. A Bomb in the Atrium: Mutilated Memories and Prosthetic Presents

Nadia El Hakim



Ground of the Atrium, 2018

The heavy bombings of Palermo during the Second World War left a trace on the ground of the atrium of Casa del Mutilato. The pieces of pavement that were damaged during the raids were

replaced by new tiles with a slightly lighter colour, marking the difference between the authentic marble of the atrium and the new 'graft' covering the impact.

In the scope of a critical preservation proposal, this fragment offers the opportunity to question the replacement of missing parts in a damaged building, which is a systematic act in mainstream preservation.

### **1. Mutilated Soldiers, Mutilated Building, Mutilated City : Loss as Identity**

During the Second World War, Palermo was heavily targeted by the Allies' acrian raids. Because of its location in the Mediterranean sea and its proximity to the African coast, the island of Sicily had a strategic importance in the conflict. The port of Palermo represented a crucial point both for the Axis and the Allies. Year 1943 was marked with recurrent heavy bombings, of the port but also of the city, leaving Palermo in a state of decay. The attack of the port resulted in the explosion of the Volta boat, carrying ammunitions, the disintegration of which expanded to a radius of 800 meters, affecting buildings in the city away from the coast. Amongst them, Casa del Mutilato received a piece of the hull that made a hole in the atrium.<sup>1</sup>



Aerian picture of the bombing of Palermo, 9 may 1943

Source: Nino Badalamenti (<https://ninobadalamenti.wordpress.com/2014/05/09/palermo-9-maggio-1943/>)

The many airstrikes on Palermo left the city and its population in a traumatised state. On May 9th 1943, the city was to be awarded the '*medaglia di mutilata*' by the fascist regime for its

<sup>1</sup> A. Bellomo, *Bombe su palermo: cronaca degli attacchi aerei 1940-1943*, (Zanice: Soldiershop, 2016) p. 3.

martyred condition. Ironically enough, the ceremony was cancelled as the Allied launched the most violent raid on the same day, enhancing the representation of Palermo as a *mutilated city*.

Casa del Mutilato, as many other buildings in Palermo, asserts to some extent this status of *mutilated* in the aftermath of the war. Having lost a part of itself in the battle, it thereby crystallizes the vindication of Palermo as being a *mutilated city*.

If *mutilation* induces *loss* and thus *replacement*, it is also defined by its ostentatious aspect: the status of *mutilation* is a claimed one, the scars on the body of the mutilated are evidences of their suffering and their identity lies on the very absence of some of its parts.

How then can we go beyond the dramatic narrative of loss induced in the mutilation? How can this absence be the place for a creative process rather than be stuck in the memory of loss?

## 2. Authenticity in Question

The 1964 Venice Charter, setting guidelines for the conservation and restoration of monuments states that ‘replacements of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence’.<sup>2</sup>

The replacement of the missing tiles in the atrium of Casa del Mutilato seems to match this guideline. The scar of the war is repaired but still present: 25 tiles were replaced in order to cover the impact of the projectile that fell on the building. The tiles replaced are mimicking the original ones but are slightly lighter. Whether this difference was intended to keep the memory of the event or was due to a material necessity, it surely maintains the absence of the lost part by pointing at the ‘fallacy’ of its replacement.

The debate around authenticity in mainstream preservation presents two different, opposing views: does authenticity lie in the architect’s design or, instead, in the original stones that served the construction? We in turn consider that the building interacts with its environment, materially but also socially and that these interactions are part of its narratives. Rather than an abstract image once conceived, we prefer to see Casa del Mutilato as a dynamic palimpsest of events marked in the materiality of the building by things that were not originally planned or built but are still part of the history of the building.

## 3. Critical Preservation : the Anachronism of Replacement

In the face of a narrative of the loss, critical preservation would suggest the narrative of replacement. If the loss of the missing part inscribes itself in a particular moment in time, the replacement inscribes itself in another, leading to an overlay of narratives and temporalities. How can we express both the absence of the lost part and the anachronistic presence of the replacing part, the ‘prosthesis’?

Instead of replicating the original, a critical preservation would prefer to inject a piece of the present, regardless of the ‘authentic’ image of the building as it was conceived and in spite of losing its integrity and monumentality.

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<sup>2</sup> Venice Charter 1964, article 12.

As time goes by, Casa del Mutilato would be a collage of different materials that each account for different moments of the building's history, making it a living object that absorbs the process of time. The absence, the 'missing part', at first seen as a subtraction, can thus be the place for a creative process, an opportunity to constantly reify the present.

### **Bibliography**

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