

A stillborn initiative. The theater “in ruins” dedicated to Gabriele d’Annunzio from its construction to its conservation

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Abstract

With the collapse of fascism and the dramatic conclusion of World War II, which saw Pescara heavily bombed, the recollection of Gabriele d’Annunzio experienced an inevitable decline, at least at a national level. Throughout Italy, the plans for the monument to be erected in memory of the poet were understandably shelved, but not in his hometown, where a competition of ideas for the construction of an open-air theater, modeling the ancient ones, was launched. The Pescara competition constituted an interesting break with contemporary architectural research, even if among them, the winning project by the architects Mariano Pallottini, Antonio Cataldi Madonna, and Filippo Marinucci is the most predictable: perhaps by incorporating the ideas present in the outdoor scenes set by the same poet. In fact, it proposed a quarter-circle auditorium carved into the ground, with a balcony raised on coupled frames where “tragedies will be played and in which the absolute modernity of inspiration will join a purity of form not unworthy of the times of Athens.” This contribution reconstructs, on the basis of unpublished documents, the lengthy story that led to the construction of the monument to d’Annunzio in the 1950s, which has been the victim of a condition of marginalization and degradation, the result of a lack of recognition by citizens and institutions.

Keywords: open-air theater, Gabriele d’Annunzio, restoration, conservation, safeguard.

The monument to the poet-hero Gabriele d’Annunzio

On June 7, 1943, a few years after the sudden death of Gabriele d’Annunzio¹ on March 1, 1938, the legislative commissions of the Chamber of the Fascists and the Senate of the Kingdom approved the bill for the *Erezione a spese dello Stato del monumento nazionale a Gabriele d’Annunzio in Pescara*² (Erection at the expense of the State of the national monument to Gabriele d’Annunzio in Pescara).

¹ A man gifted with great ingenuity, Gabriele d’Annunzio (1863-1938) was one of the greatest exponents of European Decadentism, demonstrating since his adolescence an avid, sensual, happily osmotic and creative personality, continually feeding on ideas, images, people, and things, in order to immediately translate them into sensations, thoughts, and symbols, which were both his and, at the same time, those of an era. With a certain fragility in his ideas, but with a profound curiosity, for thirty years he managed to plow through one of the most significant parables of the cultural and civil decadence of European society, until he was exhausted, on the threshold of World War I; gradually losing his imaginative faculties and changing, still with instinctive awareness, the poet into the hero, and becoming, in spite of himself, a politician of a great achievements. He was then forced for the first time to no longer embrace only the circumstances, but to seek to go beyond them, blatantly failing, or rather preferring the Vittoriale prison to this latter test. The national poet, the *pater patriae* was thus associated with the new fascist government: he gravitated, ideologically conniving, into the orbit of the dictatorial state, applauding the adventure in Ethiopia, and manifesting timid perplexities only in 1937, in the face of the Italian-German alliance. Some minor insubordination remained confined to confidential meetings with trusted friends and in the exchange of letters with the Duce; moreover, the narrow view of the requests for personal favors, allowed Mussolini to exercise a polite but peremptory control and censorship of the poet, confined to the Vittoriale, a sort of prison of gold. Of the vast array of sources and the very large bibliography featuring Gabriele d’Annunzio and his work, we give here only some biographical information useful for the purpose of the discussion (Ojetti, 1957; Alatri, 1959; De Michelis, 1960; Rizzo, 1960; De Felice e Mariano, 1971).

² The act number 647 was published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* on July 23, 1943, number 169. *Erezione, a spese dello Stato, del monumento nazionale a Gabriele d’Annunzio in Pescara*. The text consisted of 6 articles relating to the establishment of a Commission that was to supervise the choice of the site where the monument was to be erected, the methods and procedures with which it would be built, at the expense of the State, with the financial years of 1943-1944 (and subsequent) of the ministries of finance and public works. See *Raccolta ufficiale delle leggi e dei decreti del Regno d’Italia* (1943: 2055-2057). See also: Archivio storico della Camera dei Deputati (1943).

The decision to dedicate a monument to the poet-soldier, known both for an inexhaustible ability to assimilate the new literary and philosophical trends, reworking them with a refined writing technique, and for his heroic deeds was not accidental; the figure of d'Annunzio lent itself well to represent a symbol of heroism and sacrifice, fully embodying the ideologies of fascist military policy. The Commander of the grand enterprise represented, for a nation marked by the loss of so many young lives on the battlefield, an example to follow, upon which to mold a propaganda strategy of redemption, which would soon prove ineffective.

With the collapse of the fascist regime, which coincided with the capture of Mussolini on July 25, 1943—only a few weeks after the approval of the act—and the dramatic conclusion of World War II, which had seen Pescara heavily bombed, the recollection of the poet experienced an inevitable decline, at least on a national level. Throughout Italy with the exception of his hometown, plans for the monument to be erected in memory of the poet were understandably shelved. The credit for the initiative for its construction certainly belongs to the local political authorities, but the idea of this kind of theater in Pescara, modeled on the ancient ones, must be attributed to the poet himself; he had imagined for the city of Albano, near the homonymous lake, an auditorium surrounded by nature, preceded by the stage and orchestral pit where tragedies that were absolutely modern in inspiration, but worthy “of the times of Athens,”³ would be represented (Chiara, 1999: 113-137).

Recent studies show that since 1936, there was the desire to build a monument to d'Annunzio in his hometown, entrusting the development of the project to the same architect who, in those years, followed the work of the Vittoriale, Giancarlo Maroni (Irace, 1993). Although there are still many doubts about the actual inspection carried out by the latter in the Adriatic city, it was decided to study the site carefully,⁴ including from the sky, with a device sent expressly by the Vittoriale⁴ (Fiadino, 2019: 102).

The lack of extraordinary funds led to the failure to apply act 647/43, which continued to be disregarded for many years despite numerous requests by local administrators to remind governmental bodies. A notable boost to the initiative occurred in 1950, when the request to follow up on the celebrations in honor of the poet held in 1949 in his hometown, having received a great consensus both in Italy and abroad, was unanimously approved during the Council meeting chaired by Mayor Mario Muzii on June 22. This resulted in a blossoming of d'Annunzio's studies. The report attached to the resolution of the Council signed by Councilor Gerardo Gentile clearly underlined the reasons that had prompted the Pescara administration to take urgent measures to attend to the numerous delays that had occurred in the erection of the monument in honor of Gabriele d'Annunzio. “Since the times of the ‘Fire’—writes Gentile—he thought of an open-air theater, which was an indispensable corollary to the complete artistic realization of his dramatic art linked to the great traditions of Greek drama” (A.S.Pe., 1950).

³ D'Annunzio's interest in open-air theater on the model of the ancient ones is punctually reflected in the poet's biographies, some of which have already been cited (see note 1). These trace back the passion for theater and its technical aspects to the meeting between the poet and the actress Eleonora Duse, in the autumn of 1894, with whom he entered into a sentimental relationship in September of the following year. Others argue that the decisive factor was participation in the cycle of performances *The Eriynas* of Aeschylus, held in the Roman theater of Orange in August 1897, as evidenced by the article *La rinascenza della tragedia* published in *La Tribuna* on August 2, 1897. In it, he emphasized the value of dramatic theater (d'Annunzio, 2003: 265). These experiences shaped the poet's idea to propose, together with Duse, the construction of an open-air theater in the heart of Lazio. A dream that never materialized, both due to the lack of financiers willing to participate in the enterprise, and to the end of the relationship between the two artists, in 1904. Although he abandoned the idea of the theater in Albano, d'Annunzio did not give up his desire to represent his works in open-air theaters, turning his attention first to the Roman theater of Fiesole, then to that of Tusculum (1907), until reaching, in 1910, a new theater, in the city of Paris where he was appreciated like an undisputed genius (Antongini, 1938: 634-635).

⁴ Original quotation: “anche dal cielo, con un apparecchio inviato espressamente dal Vittoriale”.

In 1955, following the request for a rough estimate and, above all, for clarifications as to “how the monument in question is to be concretized” by the Ministry of Public Works, the local administration decided to announce, in compliance with article 4 of the act of 1943, a national competition for an open-air theater. The latter would be distinguished “from common commemorative monuments, to become a grandiose work of public interest”⁵ (A.S.Pe., 1955) to be placed facing the sea near the Pineta district. The monument was intended for the southern area of Pescara, which, since the early years of the 20th century, had been redesigned as a large “seaside-climatic”⁶ (A.S.Pe., 1911) district that took its name from the nearby pine forest of Avalos, based on a project by Antonino Liberi, engineer and brother-in-law of Gabriele d’Annunzio. Although initially designed a tourist place for the purpose of recovering a coastal area that in the early 20th century was still marshy and abandoned, the district was set up as a result of the broader debate that animated Europe centered on the theme of “garden cities,” that hosted both private residences and places of leisure. Liberi himself, in presenting the project to the City Council, and recalling d’Annunzio’s affection for the pine forest, proposed to reserve “a large area at the extreme limit towards the sea [...] for his villa to be built, when the elder brother will return to his home country.”⁷ Also, in honor of the illustrious fellow citizen, he proposed to name the districts’ streets after his works, and to dedicate the square in front of the Kursaal bathhouse to Francesco Paolo Michetti (A.S.Pe., 1912).⁸

The theater, from the competition to its construction

The announcement published on December 15, 1955,⁹ drafted on the initiative of the Municipal and Provincial administrations and the Provincial Tourism Board,¹⁰ provided for a general project for a commemorative theater dedicated to d’Annunzio, with a capacity of no less than three thousand seats and the rehabilitation of the surrounding public green area, including parking spaces. The total cost was estimated at around 250 million lire.

The jury, chaired by then Mayor Antonio Mancini, was composed of Giovanni Iannucci, president of the Province, by Pasquale Carbonara, for the National Council of Architects, by Augusto Angelini, architect of the Regional Superintendence, by Camillo Michetti for the National Council of Engineers, by Master Giovacchino Forzano, playwright and director,¹¹ and by engineer Ilari for the Municipality.

Among the thirty-two projects presented, the Commission proclaimed project “G” by architects Mariano Pallottini, Antonio Cataldi Madonna and Filippo Marinucci as the winner, and it was awarded a prize of one million lire. The project “Adriatico Selvaggio,” by the groups of Maria Bompiani, Cecilia Varetti, and with the collaboration of Carlo Bompiani, was awarded

⁵ Original quotation: “dai comuni monumenti commemorativi, per concretarsi in una grandiosa opera di interesse pubblico.”

⁶ Original quotation: “balneare-climatico.”

⁷ Original quotation: “presso il parco all’estremo limite verso del mare una grande area [...] perché vi sia costruita la sua villa quando il grande fratello ritornerà in patria.”

⁸ See also Bianchetti (1997: 68).

⁹ The essay in Verazzo (2019) is republished here, with the necessary modifications and additions.

¹⁰ The Provincial Tourism Board was led by lawyer Giacomo Pierantozzi, to whom the genesis of the project in the 1930s can be traced back: from the correspondence found in the Vittoriale archive, the president of the Board begged architect Moroni to design the project, in such a way as to lay the “first stone” on March 12, 1937, on the occasion of the anniversary of the poet’s birth. The prolonged wait, due to his numerous commitments at the Vittoriale, forced architect Moroni to decline the assignment, and he invited Pierantozzi to provide otherwise, to avoid further delays (Fiadino, 2019: 97).

¹¹ Master Forzano, a well-known author of opera plays for Leoncavallo, Mascagni and Puccini, had highlighted some reservations relating to acoustics for all the projects presented, with the exception of a project excluded for “compositional reasons.”

the second prize of 500 000 thousand lire, while the project “Le Pleiadi,” by architect Robaldo Morozzo della Rocca with the advice of engineer Aldo Assereto, the third prize of 250 000 lire.¹²

All the projects were published¹³ in *L'Architettura. Cronache e storia* of 1958, attesting at least partial recognition by Bruno Zevi of the winning project, perhaps due to the absence of a monument to celebrate (Carbonara, 1958: 322-327). There is no doubt that the projects were fully inserted in the spirit of the time: the 1950s represented a significant step in the history of building, in which the convergence between engineering and architecture seemed to be finally able to be realized, also thanks to the research carried out in the field of structural research. The technical experiments allowed the designers to abandon linear geometries, preferring bent or wavy shapes, shells, slender cantilevered or suspended structures (Iori e Poretti, 2016: 8-52).

In this respect, the Pescara competition constituted an interesting cross-section of contemporary architectural research even if, compared to the other participants, the winning project¹⁴ is the most predictable. Perhaps by incorporating the ideas present in the outdoor scenes employed by d'Annunzio himself (Valentini, 1993; Isgrò, 1993), it proposed, in fact, a quarter-circle cavea carved into the ground, with a raised balcony on coupled frames, half-height accesses and services close to the embankment that closed the structure at the top. The theater was equipped with an orchestral pit and stage, without equipment, only providing for the use of mobile structures. The stepped cavea, oriented on a northwest-southeast axis, overlooked the sea, as well as the adjoining cultural center. A panoramic tower, 50 meters high, was placed on the southern front of the theater: the triangular reticular structure, inside which an elevator was inserted, allowed the creation at the top of a panoramic point with a view of the surrounding landscape. A fenced-in area for outdoor d'Annunzio celebrations was included in the public park and was served by a parking system (Figure 1).

The Bompiani-Varetti group, which came in second position in the competition, in line with the guidelines for the contemporary theater, aimed instead at the integration between stage and spectators. In fact, it envisaged “through the abolition of the proscenium, [...] the possibility of enveloping the proscenium within the parterre, in order to create a continuous ring of spectators for choreographic performances, allowing the possibility of playing with the appropriate elevations on the stage in the cases of lyrical and dramatic performances”¹⁵ (Carbonara, 1958: 324). The closed shape of the steps of the cavea, divided into three levels with different inclinations and protected on the outside by panels, was meant to ensure good acoustics. Inside the structure, spaces used as a museum and dressing rooms were provided, thanks to the special attention paid to the distribution of spaces, while two reinforced concrete towers, placed on the sides of the basin, supported the reflectors (Figure 2).

¹² The Commission also assigned a reimbursement of expenses, equal to five hundred thousand lire, to the projects of: Francesco Palpacelli, with the advice of Sergio Musmeci, Ezio Caizzi, Giuseppina Frazi, Giovanni Bernardi; Tito Varisco Bassanesi, Mario Zavelani Rossi; Paolo Cercato, Paolo Ghera, Mario Stara.

¹³ Although not among the classified projects, the project by Mario Coppa and Marinella Ottolenghi was also published.

¹⁴ Mariano Pallottini (1911-1998), graduated in Architecture in 1937, and continued his theoretical training in the urban planning field, publishing in 1950 *Profili di Storia dell'Urbanistica*, in which he analyzes the urbanization phenomena of the Marche region. His professional activity was marked by the participation in various Architecture competitions, such as the one for the square in front of EUR (1941), for the new Termini Station (1948), for the Auditorium at Borghetto Flaminio in Rome (1950), for the new national library in Rome (1952), in addition to other projects carried out, such as the API thermoelectric plant in Falconara (1956), the Provincial General Hospital of Ascoli Piceno (1962), the extension of the cemetery of Carassai, Ascoli Piceno (1979). In 1955, he assumed the role of university professor in Urban Planning at the University of La Sapienza in Rome, where he contributed to the first didactic experiments of territorial plans.

¹⁵ Original quotation: “mediante l'abolizione della boccascena, [...] la possibilità di avviluppare il proscenio entro la platea, così da creare, per gli spettacoli coreografici, un anello continuo di spettatori, e da poter invece giocare con opportune elevazioni sul palcoscenico negli spettacoli lirici e drammatici.”

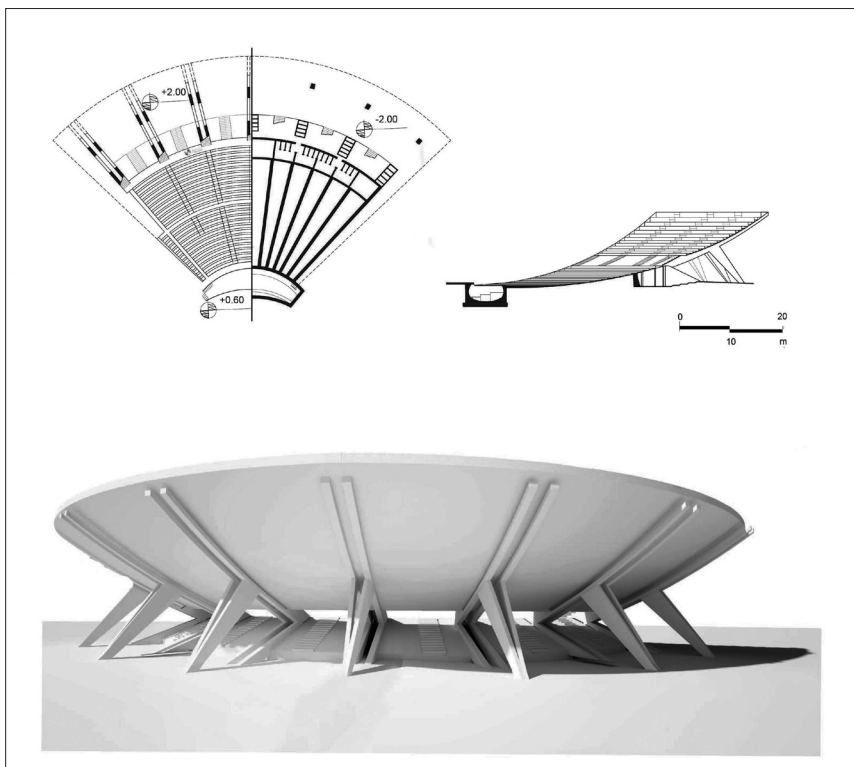


FIGURE 1. GRAPHIC RE-ELABORATION OF PROJECT "G" BY MARIANO PALLOTTINI, ANTONIO CATALDI MADONNA AND FILIPPO MARINUCCI. Winner of the competition for an open-air theater in Pescara. *Drawing: I. Adrakta, 2014.*

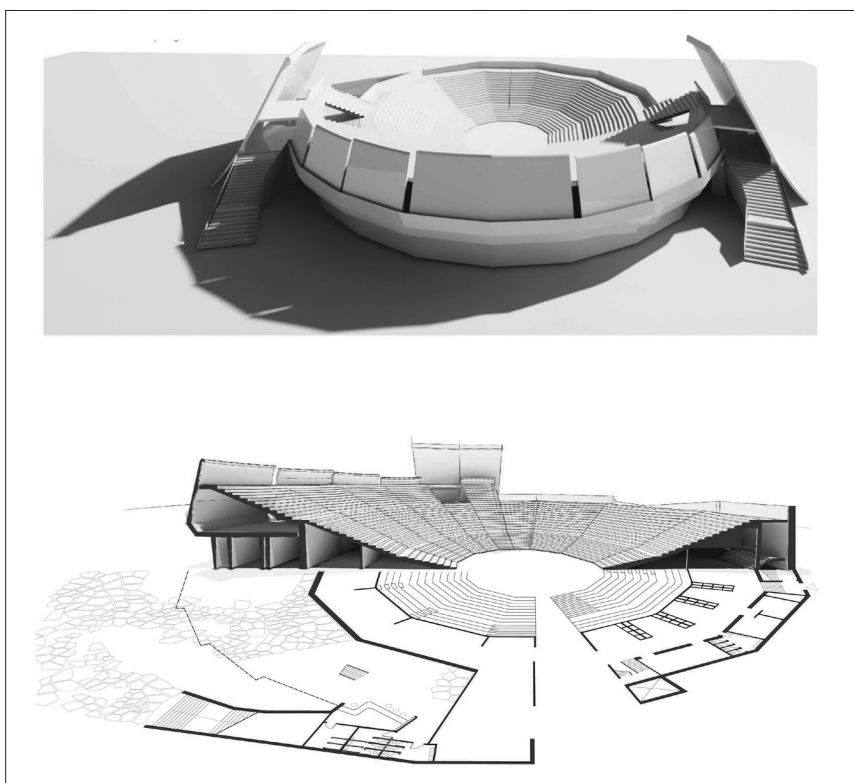


FIGURE 2. GRAPHIC RE-ELABORATION OF PROJECT "ADRIATICO SELVAGGIO" BY MARIA BOMPIANI, CECILIA VARETTI, WITH CARLO BOMPIANI, ENGINEER. *Drawing: I. Adrakta, 2014.*

The third project, by Morozzo della Rocca¹⁶ and Assereto, had the shape of a “stylized shell” (Carbonara, 1958: 325), made with a stepped quarter circle, divided into nine equal sectors, supported by V-shaped trestles, producing a general effect of great lightness. The acoustics, entrusted to direct sound waves, were ensured by the shape of the staggered wedges. The stage appeared suspended, while the theater machines were located in the underground area (Figure 3).

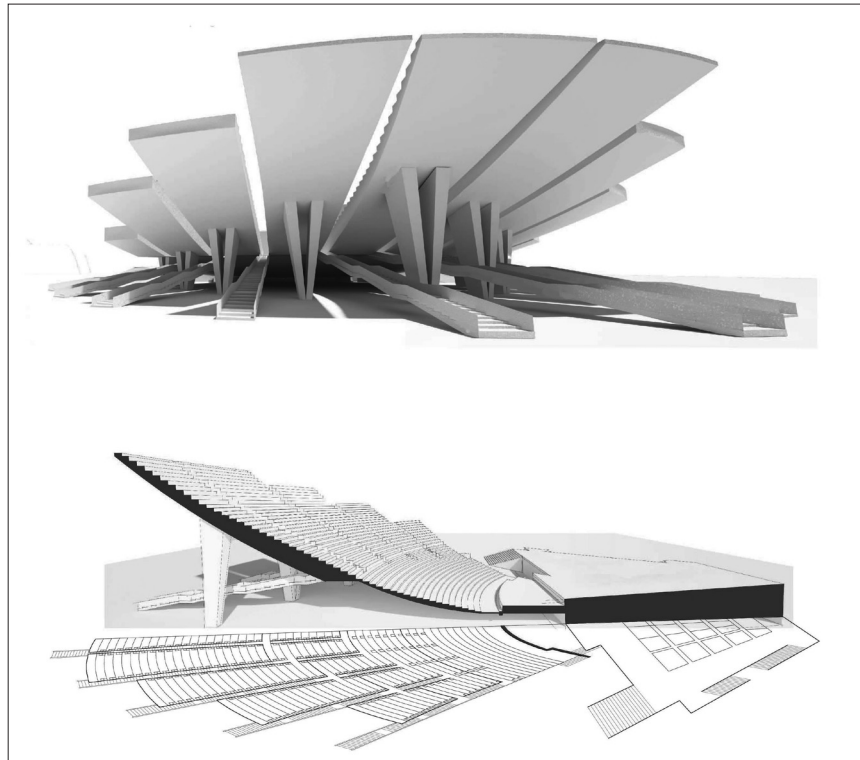


FIGURE 3. GRAPHIC RE-ELABORATION OF PROJECT “LE PLEIADI,” BY ROBALDO MOROZZO DELLA ROCCA, WITH ALDO ASSERETO, ENGINEER. *Drawing: I. Adrakta, 2014.*

Among the published projects, that of Franco Palpacelli and Sergio Musmeci is noteworthy, for its inventiveness that can be fully traced back to the research of the great structural engineer, whose participation has never been analyzed in depth. The theater consisted of a truncated cone open towards the upper side, of 76 meters in diameter, supported by two series of crossed reinforced concrete paraboles. At the base, there were administrative offices, rehearsal rooms, and storage rooms. The structure, in reinforced concrete on a concrete plate, was divided into twelve radial partitions. The stage, formed by a revolving scene, had theatrical machines below the floor. If done, the work would have anticipated many of Musmeci’s experiences, in particular the “tent church” of Villaggio del Sole near Vicenza (1960) and in general his reflections on thin vaults (A.C.D., 1962).¹⁷

¹⁶ In his youth, Morozzo della Rocca (1904-1933) gave life to a lively group of cultural innovation together with other Genoese architects. The group participated in the 1933 Milan Triennale with the design of a steel pavilion. The beginnings are linked to rationalism, with the enrollment in the MIAR and is part of the controversy that arose around the themes of modern architecture.

¹⁷ The Pescara competition does not appear in the lists of works by Musmeci, who already in 1951 had designed a fish market and a maritime professional school for the Adriatic city, in collaboration with S. Boselli. See the list of works in Giovannardi (2010). The drafting of the contribution was made possible thanks to the consultation of the Musmeci Zanini archive located in the Maxxi Museum in Rome. For further information, see the essential bibliography reported in the Maxxi Museum Archive, Musmeci, Sergio [https://www.maxxi.art/musmeci-sergio/] (accessed on 16 December 2019).

Despite the completion of the competition, the funds from the state needed for the construction of the monument were not disbursed, as can be seen from the documents in the historical archive of the Chamber of Deputies (A.C.D., 1962). Nevertheless, in April 1963, thanks to an initiative of the municipal administration, together with the major public bodies and a subscription by the private sector (A.C.D., 1964), the works began. These were entrusted to Vicentino Michetti's company which, in less than three months, built a part of the winning project. The changes were substantial: the size of the auditorium was reduced to about 1,306 seats, the orientation was changed to face inland instead of towards the sea, due to the acoustic problems posed by the location that had been reported several times; the practicable tower was replaced by a less prominent obelisk or stele, about 63 meters high.¹⁸ Also, both the stage and the dressing rooms were made of wood, as temporary and removable works. The inaugural session of the theater season took place on July 28, 1963, for the centenary of the birth of d'Annunzio, despite the provisional nature of all the service spaces¹⁹ (Pozzi, 2003: 42-43).

Since the first theater performances, with a succession of major companies, with a large audience, there was heated controversy regarding the construction of the structure, first of all, for the choice of the site, exposed to strong winds and humidity. But the main accusation concerned bad acoustics, attributable not only to environmental problems, but above all to the shortcomings of the architectural project which, as had already been pointed out during the competition by Maestro Giovacchino Forzano, did not allow for good sound perception. The supporters of the work recalled the free access of the site and, above all, stressed the inappropriateness of discussing the functionality of the theater, as the stage, dressing rooms and cavea had not been completed: hence the lack of development in height and width of the structure, which determined an unsatisfactory sonority (A.S.Pe., 1963b).

But it is starting from the 1970s, after the transfer of ownership of the theater to the Authority for Manifestations of Pescara in 1966,²⁰ that the national and local press highlighted the failure to complete the works, emphasizing the ineffectiveness of the entire operation (Giannini, 1970; Vuolo, 1970; d'Alessandro, 1970). In fact, the auditorium was expected to be completed in order to reach the expected 3 000 seats, thus obtaining the necessary acoustic improvement, together with the installation of a shell cover, the completion of the stage and the construction of the dressing rooms. Outside, it was considered necessary to refurbish the area surrounding the theater, aimed at strengthening its urban role, with the creation of a public park of 10 000 square meters, including playground areas for children and an area for artistic events that could be used all year round, as well as an adequate number of parking spaces.

¹⁸ From the correspondence found in the archive of the institution, it is possible to reconstruct the direct assignment to the company of Vicentino Michetti, dated April 8, 1963. In the letter, the Mayor, president of the Committee for the Centenary of d'Annunzio, lawyer Vincenzo Mariani, in conferring the task, reiterates "the commitment on the part of this Company to build the main elements of the cavea and the stele for July 15, in order to allow the representation of shows by the summer of this year". On May 22, 1963, due to the "disconcerting slowness with which the work continues," the company was asked to "immediately start two shifts of work (I would say three!) In order to honor the commitments made" (AEMP, 1963a).

¹⁹ As can be seen from the archive images that portray Eduardo Tiboni, vice president of the Pescara Committee with Vicentino Michetti and the journalists during the construction of the theater and the commemorative stele (A.S.Pe., 1963a).

²⁰ The formal ownership of the work is a rather complex issue. From the cadastral certifications it can be inferred that the constructions of the area shown on map sheet 29, parcels 1 and 332, are registered at lot 33738, and registered in the name of the Authority for Manifestations of Pescara together with the State Property "each for their own rights" still in the 1980s, despite the purchase request made by the Authority to the State Property, after decommissioning of the area on which the theater stands and, as an alternative, the rental concession (A.S.Pe., n/d a).

Thus, once set up, the theater was to become a cultural complex open to the landscape of the pine forest, the sea, and the adjacent hills, placing itself at the southern end of the urban expansion, at that time in full activity (Bianchetti, 1997: 68). Perhaps due to its ambitious scope, the completion of the project has represented, over the years, one of the problematic issues of the municipal administration, which in 1972 set up a special commission for the restructuring of the Authority for Manifestations of Pescara. This was done with the aim of removing the incomplete work from its exposure to time and climate. On hundred and fifty million lire were allocated, divided between the areas involved (Municipality, Province, Chamber of Commerce, Hotels and Tourism) (A.S.Pe., n/d b), but the programmatic and financial objectives remained only on paper. At the end of the 1980s, in a Technical Report undertaken by commission from the Authority for Manifestations of Pescara, the consistency of the architectural structures at the end would still have been reduced compared to the forecasts of the initial project. The theater was required to have a single sector of twenty steps, divided into three wedges, for about 1 400 seats; a stage of 424 square meters and a proscenium of 26.50 square meters; eight dressing rooms, two storage areas, and restrooms (A.S.Pe., n/d c).

It is only with the disbursement by the Abruzzo Region of a contribution of 3,800 million lire that the Authority for Manifestations of Pescara²¹ was able to launch a new project, for the completion –this time definitive– of the theater-monument, designed in 1988 by Mariano Pallottini, now 78 years old, and Antonio Vanni (A.S.Pe., n/d c).²²

The project envisaged the expansion of the auditorium, with the inclusion of 750 more seats than the existing ones, whose accessibility was guaranteed by four stairways on the seafront and two external ones placed on the sides of the pre-existing structure. Below the auditorium, three rooms were set up for exhibitions and temporary exhibitions of about 170 square meters each, connected to each other in order to allow, in case of need, the creation of a single area. The rooms, accessible from the two external stairs, obtained below the slope of the cavea, were closed by a counter-slope covering, on which a ribbon window was inserted. The main front was punctuated by a portico on the ground floor, with a small bar in the center, while the rear front housed the entrance to the storage areas, electrical substations, and restrooms.

The work plan also contemplated the architectural and functional arrangement of the stage, the side walls of which were partially closed with mobile panels and covered by a reticular tensile structure with a sliding polyester membrane. The existing proscenium was extended by about 2.50 meters, as was the stage platform (Figure 4).

The construction of an auditorium for cultural activities to be held throughout the year, with a capacity of about 800 seats, strongly desired by the institution, completed the new project. It was a circular building volume with a total area of about 650 square meters, plus 150 square meters of balcony, developed on three levels, with a ground floor porch, foyer and reception spaces on the first floor. The façade was characterized by the overhang of the upper floor and the conical roof in laminated wood, which was then actually built. Overall, the project responded with dignity to the client's requests, but introduced some elements of imbalance towards the pre-existing parts, such as the new volume of the auditorium (Figure 5).

²¹ Reference is made to public funding with the C.I.P.E. 3.8.1986 relating to the update of the three-year development program for Southern Italy 1988-90, pursuant to Act no. 64 of 1986 and of the T.U. of the Leggi sul Mezzogiorno n. 218 of 1978 (A.S.Pe., 1989a).

²² From the consultation of the archival sources, it is clear that with respect to the design group that won the public tender, the task for the executive design is entrusted only to Mariano Pallottini, assisted by a Pescara technician, architect Antonio Vanni, with the collaboration of R Pallottini, L. Polizio, S. Betelli, and A. Di Pierdomenico.

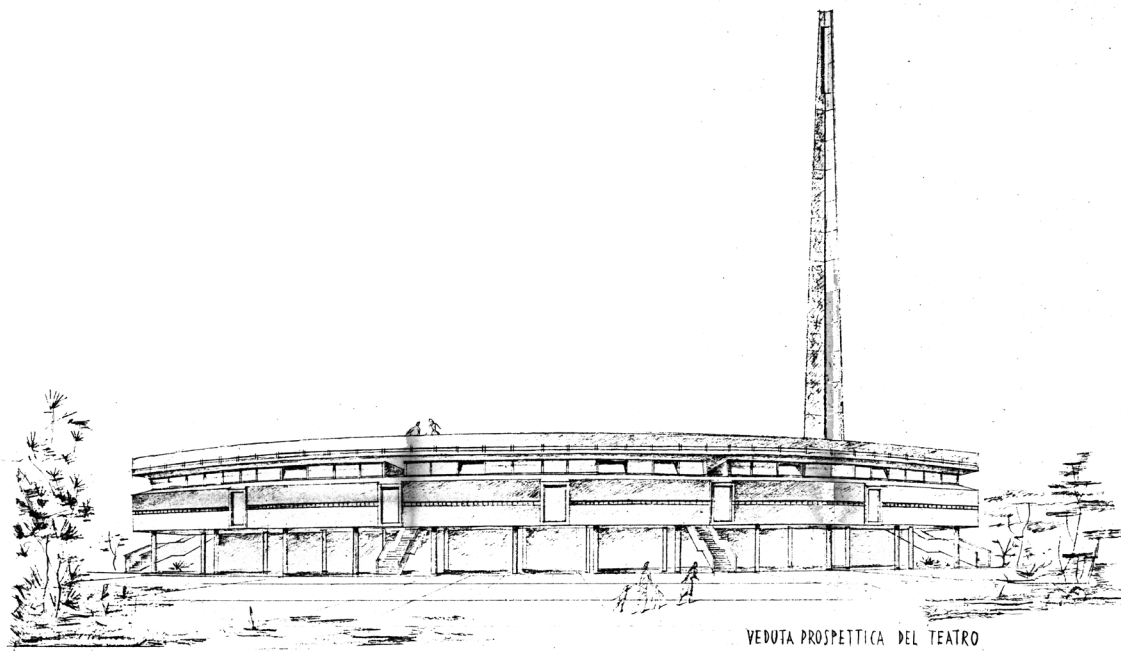


FIGURE 4. PERSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE D'ANNUNZIO THEATER, DRAWING SCALE 1.100. *Image: A.S.Pe. Teatro monumento "G. d'Annunzio", b. 4175.*

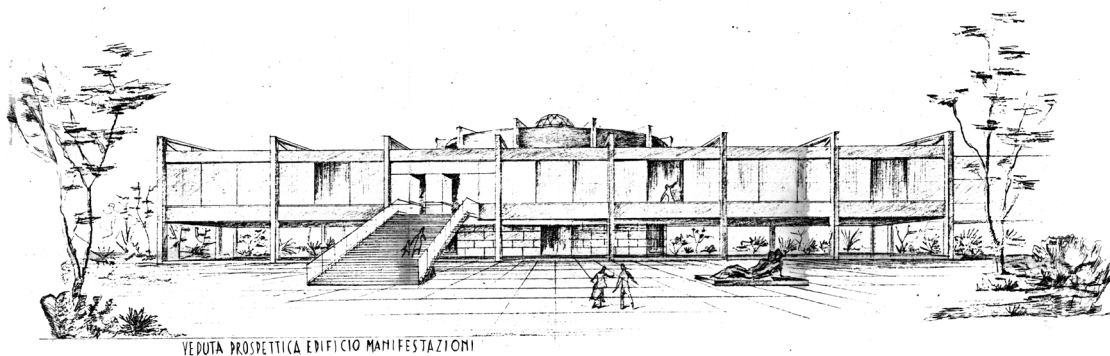


FIGURE 5. PERSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE D'ANNUNZIO THEATER, DRAWING SCALE 1.100. *Image: A.S.Pe. Monument Theater "G. d'Annunzio", b. 4175.*

With the resolution of December 28, 1989, the Authority obtained the building permit, but above all, the allocation of regional funds, effectively starting the extension and complete works of the monumental complex in the early 1990s. By reading the archival documents, it is possible to determine the state of the architectural works actually built, compared to the project presented by the Authority, and those still in the implementation phase. In enlarging the existing parts, “a stepped ring, capable of accommodating another 950 people, for a total of about 1 900 seats”²³ was added to the cavea; the intermediate floor used as exhibition halls was built, while on the ground floor, in addition to the portico, the service and refreshment blocks were located. Adjacent to the open-air theater, construction work began on the circular auditorium, whose inauguration was scheduled for the summer of 1995 (AEMP, n/d a).²⁴ The building –named after another great from Pescara, Ennio Flaiano– was officially opened in the second half of 1997 (AEMP, 1995),²⁵ and subsequent modifications have greatly simplified the original aspects.

The lack of further funding²⁶ did not allow the realization of the ancillary works envisaged, especially regarding the improvement of the use of the cavea, with the provision of seats on the steps and the arrangement of the outdoor spaces. Today the entire complex –owned by the Municipality of Pescara, but managed by the Authority for Manifestations in Pescara– is in a state of neglect and underutilization, repeatedly reported by the local press (Figure 6).

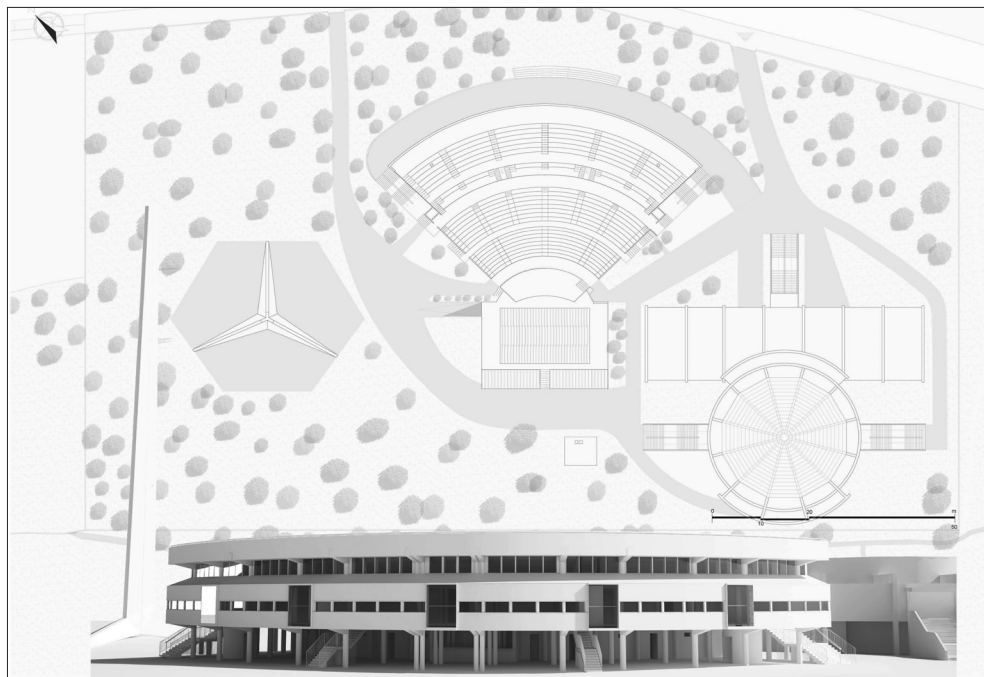


FIGURE 6. ELEVATION OF THE GROUND FLOOR AND OF THE MAIN FAÇADE. *Image: I. Adrakta, 2014.*

²³ Original quotation: “un anello a gradoni, atto ad ospitare altre 950 persone, per un totale di circa 1.900 posti a sedere.”

²⁴ Document with no place and date, but referable to the first half of 1993, year of submission of the request for funding for the Programma Operativo Plurifondo [P.O.P.].

²⁵ From the graphics, the auditorium was designed by M. Pallottini, R. Pallottini, L. Polizzo and A. Vanni. The improvement proposals pursuant to art. 24 lettera b Legge 8.8.77 n. 584 is signed by architect Gaspare Masciarelli. The executing parent company, under the direction of the works of A. Vanni, is Furlanis Costruzioni Generali S.p.A., while the principal company is Alfonso & Eusebio Recinella s.r.l.

²⁶ The financing had to come from the P. O. P., legge regionale n. 11/07/1991 and later modifications.

Between the earth and the sky: the stele

The most important element of the complex is certainly the stele, which is now a distinctive and symbolic city landmark. Based on monumental obelisks commemorating illustrious personalities, the stele replaces, as mentioned before, the triangular tower of the competition of 1955-1956 (Figures 7 and 8). Its construction pragmatically followed a simpler path. In fact, a reinforced concrete structure was built with a triangular star floor plan. It is about 63 meters high, "that is completely exceptional compared to normal buildings that reach, in Pescara, at most half the above-mentioned figure"²⁷ (AEMP, 1966), closer to the type of an obelisk than to that of the tower proposed by Pallottini. In fact, the stele takes up previous and contemporary monumental models dedicated to illustrious personalities: an example is the one created in the Eur district in Rome by the Carrarese sculptor Arturo Dazzi to celebrate Marconi's exploits; it was commissioned in 1937 by Mussolini, but only completed in the 1950s. The Pescara stele owes its aesthetics to reinforced concrete, since it has a marked tapering that comes from three reinforced concrete "roots" that seem to protrude from the ground. Nor should it be overlooked that the project involved the installation of a lighting system in the thin final opening –almost the eye of a needle– with a signal lamp with tricolor lights, thus also adding the function of a lighthouse, albeit stylized and symbolic.

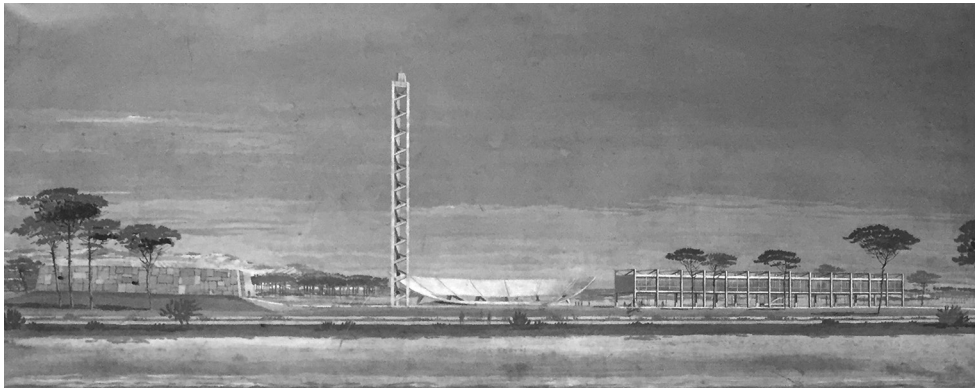


FIGURE 7. PERSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE WINNING PROJECT OF THE COMPETITION. The stele presents a triangular reticular structure with a conclusive panoramic point, 1.100 scale drawing. *Image: A.E.M.P., "G. d'Annunzio", Drawings, 1956.*

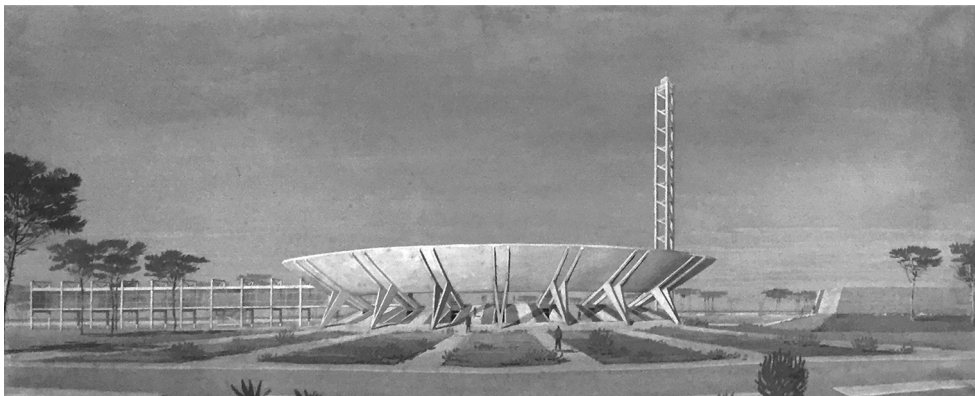


FIGURE 8. PERSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE WINNING PROJECT OF THE COMPETITION, SCALE DRAWING 1.100. *Image: A.E.M.P., "G. d'Annunzio", Drawings, 1956.*

²⁷ Original quotation: "cioè del tutto eccezionale rispetto alle normali costruzioni che raggiungono, in Pescara, al massimo la metà della cifra suddetta."

In elevation, the stele is tapered upwards to about 1/10 of the base section, with faces sculpted, or rather, engraved with abstract geometric motifs, symmetrically specular with respect to the central axis. The management of the work is attributed to Vicentino Michetti²⁸ (Biancale, Paloscia e Maraventano, 1975), a builder and artist, especially following World War II, who appears in the documents during the execution phase (AEMP, 1963b). However, it should be noted that the drawings of the stele, with their accentuated geometric character, constitute a *unicum* in Michetti's artistic production, centered on an altogether traditional figurativeness,²⁹ which may have been joined by another author, not currently traceable. The figures are divided into panels that were to celebrate, according to the client's instructions, both the heroic life of the poet and the universality of his theatrical works, but have a strongly abstract and symbolic nature.

The structure of the celebratory monument embodies the synthesis between form and function, between modernity and symbolic rhetoric. References to the work of Pierluigi Nervi appear, both in the general conception, which recalls the Maratona tower of the Florence stadium, and in the star-shaped plan: the basic triangular scheme and the accentuated tapering, which make it a work of some interest in the contemporary scene.

The geometric engravings are made undercut, thanks to the adoption of special formwork that required particular care also in the arrangement of the reinforcements and in the execution of the castings. The cages, of considerable size, about 10 meters, were mounted at considerable heights and anchored to each other by tying them. The impossibility of making them on site led to the installation of "iron by iron and stirrup by stirrup,"³⁰ as indicated in the executive project, which was particularly onerous. Just think that the round iron for reinforced concrete. It amounted to about 307.5 quintals, with diameters ranging from 30 to 6 millimeters –with the prevalence of larger diameters (20 millimeters)– for a total cost of 5 227 333 lire.

To overcome the obstacles faced by carpenters to achieve the exact position of the formwork and for their gradual tapering, additional compensation was introduced, which also included "hardboard linings to make the plane of the 'sides' in absolutely smooth wood,"³¹ as a guarantee the perfect regularity of the cast (AEMP, n/d b). The use of hardboard masks for tracing abstract decorations, as well as the subtle bush-hammering of the entire surface for about 65 meters from the ground level, and the chiselling of the bas-reliefs for an average depth of 3-4 centimeters that had to be done by hand by "highly-specialized workers,"³² which was the subject of specific considerations and specific fees (AEMP, n/d c).

As can be deduced from the filed documents, the construction of the artifact required particular expertise also in the preparation of the "remarkably complex 'Innocenti' type frames, grouped in three towers connected to each other at various heights and made stable by bracing with steel cables moored to specially cast concrete blocks"³³ (AEMP, n/d c).

²⁸ Vicentino Michetti (1909-1997), born in Calascio, but from Pescara by adoption, coming from a family of masons, leaned at an early age towards the art world, becoming a sculptor. After the war, he had some exhibits in Rome and Paris. He is the author of numerous art works in the city of Pescara, among which the *Elephant* and other bronze sculptures in Piazza Salotto, the *Bambina giacente* in the gardens of the Museo Paparella-Treccia-Deplete and *Grazia, la marinara*, conserved at the City Hall. He is also the author of the first projects to link the two sides of the Pescara river, which pre-date the bridge at the mouth of the river, forerunner to the current Ponte del Mare. The project foresaw a fully functional bridge for cars, with the most arched part located exactly at the mouth of the river.

²⁹ It is probably the exceptional nature of the work created for the theater-monument, which supported the hypothesis of external influences in the design of the stele. On several occasions Arturo Dazzi has been reported as the creator of the Pescara work, created a few years before his death, as per interviews with Dr. Eduardo Tiboni, whom we thank here. Cf. Il Centro (2011) and Edmondo (2019).

³⁰ Original quotation: "ferro per ferro e staffa per staffa."

³¹ Original quotation: "fodere di faesite per rendere il piano delle 'sponde' in legno assolutamente levigato."

³² Original quotation: "di carattere superspecializzata."

³³ Original quotation: "incastellature di tipo 'Innocenti' notevolmente complesse, raggruppate in tre torri collegate tra loro a varie altezze e rese stabili mediante controventature con cavi di acciaio ammarati a blocchi di calcestruzzo appositamente gettati."

The state of conservation

The open-air theater complex, which, over the years, has hosted major artistic events related to theater, dance, and music,³⁴ has been marked, as we have seen, by tortuous events since its conception. The unity of the winning project of the 1950s was never fully realized, giving rise, instead, to a set of fragmentary and dissonant architectural elements, also in relation to the surrounding landscape.

The state of incompleteness is also at the origin of growing degradation phenomena evident already in the seventies, that is, a few years after the first construction. *A stillborn project* or *The stele is crumbling apart* are just some of the different headlines that circulated in local and national newspapers in those years.

Even today, there are several problems that emerge from the functional and structural analysis of the monumental complex. As reported by Maestro Forzano during the competition, the winning project, while presenting a semicircular shape borrowed from the Greek-Roman theaters, does not ensure satisfactory conditions of either visibility or, above all, good acoustics; on the contrary, they generate phenomena of dispersion and reflection of sound that prevent the voices of the actors to reach clear and distinct up to the most distant positions. The very low position of the stage does not allow the sound to be reflected several times between the stage and the seats, and the reduced inclination of the reinforced concrete steps does not manage to cut the low frequencies that inhibit the ability to hear the buzz of the audience or the environmental noises. Add to this the failure to create sound-absorbing barriers both along the lateral closing walls and along the top ring of the auditorium, which exacerbate the phenomena related to interference and distortion of the sound coming from the noises produced by vehicular traffic: a particularly intense phenomenon during the summer season, coinciding with the unfolding of the various theater and musical events.

Another issue concerns the actual use of the structure. The rooms below the auditorium are completely unused, conceived to host temporary exhibitions and events. The same happens with the ground floor premises intended for restaurant services. Furthermore, the impossibility of using the surrounding green area, of about 1 300 square meters, outside of the activities planned for the theater, seems to endorse the poor maintenance and management of the tree species. Not even the construction of the auditorium, which was intended to allow the use of the monumental complex in the winter months, has fulfilled its task, due to the small number of events that take place in it. The new volume has, in reality, only upset the initial project. Despite the clearance obtained by the Consultative Commission for Environmental Heritage and by the Regional Council of Abruzzo, pursuant to act no. 1497 and of the Decree by the President of the Republic of July 24, 1977, n. 616 (A.S.Pe., 1989b), the building creates a bulky backdrop, which contrasts sharply with the open-air theater, irremediably changing the context and effectively erasing the image of the natural landscape that surrounded the auditorium.

The effects of the lack of a routine maintenance program for reinforced concrete structures, subjected to the natural decay of the component materials, also attacked by the surrounding environment and incongruous interventions, attributable to poor restorations, are particularly worrying. Superficial deposits, fractures and cracks mark the supporting structures of the cavea. The greatest damage, however, can be seen on the stele, due to the phenomenon of carbonation, which associated with the probable thinness of the concrete cover in correspondence with the decorations, is at the origin of the outcrop of the metal reinforcement bars, with a partial detachment of different portions of superficial cement conglomerate

³⁴ Over the last few decades, the structure has become a permanent venue for *Pescara Jazz*, one of the most important annual events of its kind in Europe.



FIGURE 9. STELE AND CAVEA OF THE OPEN AIR THEATER. Image: Clara Verazzo, Pescara, 2018.

(Figure 9). The material decay spread over the entire structure, with the loss of some sculptural fragments and the fear of the decrease in overall structural strength, imposed, in 2012, the prohibition of access to the stele, at the beginning of the 21st century, conservative restoration interventions had been approved in the annual list of Public Works 2004-2006, for a chapter of expenses equal to 200,000 euros, which unfortunately were never undertaken.³⁵

The episode is part of the many public initiatives that revolve around the monument, without actually finding an agreement, both in economic and in administrative terms. Several missed opportunities for the completion of the 1950s project, such as the funding of 15 million euros for the theater of the 20 assigned to the city of Pescara for the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy, due to the evident administrative difficulty in fund management. And again, in 2012, the exclusion from the three-year program of public works 2012-2014, despite reports on the conditions of decay and the closure of the stele to protect public safety emerged in the municipal assembly called in view of the preparations for the 150th anniversary of the birth of d'Annunzio (A.C.Pe., 2012a).³⁶ In the following session, with the unanimous vote of the 26 councilors present, an expense item relating to the consolidation and restructuring of the stele equal to 270 000 euros (A.C.Pe., 2012b) was included in the Three-Year Plan for public works. Such funding never arrived, because it was removed from the list of works deemed priority by the subsequent administration (A.C.Pe., 2012c).

Projects for the future

Contributions to the conservation of d'Annunzio's complex comes from cultural foundations and citizens' associations. In 2016, the conference *Il Teatro Monumento a Gabriele d'Annunzio a 50 anni dalla costruzione. Un'opera da preservare e completare*, by the Edoardo Tiboni

³⁵ The design of the assignment was entrusted to architect Claudio Francano, as per the managerial determination number 247/BR dated 22.10.2004 (A.C.Pe., 2004); see also A.C.Pe. (2007).

³⁶ See in particular, the report by director Paola Marchegiani who denounced: «la fatiscenza della cavea, con le poltrone danneggiate e scolorite, il cemento armato disgregato, il palcoscenico instabile strutturalmente: mentre la stele 'cade a pezzi', richiedendo l'intervento dei Vigili del Fuoco, costretti a recintarla per evitare problemi di incolumità» ("the dilapidation of the auditorium, with the damaged and discolored seats, the disintegrated reinforced concrete, the structurally unstable stage: while the stele 'falls to pieces,' requiring the intervention of the Fire department, forced to fence it to avoid safety problems."

Foundation, became a first step³⁷ to hypothesize a project for the recovery and enhancement of the monumental complex, which satisfactorily meets the requirements of art. 10 paragraph 3, letter *d*) of the 2004 Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape. This precisely provides for the recognition of the cultural value of things “that are of particularly importance due to their reference to the political and military history, with literature, art, and culture in general, or as a testimony to the identity and history of public, collective, or religious institutions.”³⁸

A first problem relates to the preparation of an extraordinary maintenance program for the entire theater complex and the stele, with the elimination or containment of the most widespread forms of degradation: phenomena of capillary rising damp, swelling, and biological patinas, present especially along the fronts of the cavea and attributable to the saline atmosphere and the humidity load present in the site; fractures and cracks in the cementitious material; surface treatment, marked by superficial deposits, detachments of the paint film, and lacunae of surface layers.

But the conservation measures should be part of a broad program that includes a new management of the spaces intended for exhibitions and temporary exhibitions of the cavea, together with the creation of didactic classrooms and play areas, which really allow the use of the architectural complex even during the winter season, transforming the theater into a space that is always open and in service to the community. To this end, the elimination of architectural barriers is essential, with the creation of elevators serving both the auditorium and the exhibition spaces, and the creation of the park in continuity with the d’Annunzio Pinewood Reserve, marked by pedestrian and cycling paths.³⁹

However, even the recent interventions of 2018 do not seem to take these issues into consideration, opting only for the redesign of the sea fronts, without providing for a more complex project, such as to include the theater, the stele, and the auditorium. Indeed, the municipal administration has repeatedly reiterated the strong tourist impact that the redevelopment project of the Pescara-Porta Nuova Riviera will have, with the “ability to attract more people [...] so that it can be frequented [...] regardless of programming of the Flaiano and d’Annunzio theaters.”⁴⁰ And again “in front of the Teatro d’Annunzio and the Flaiano auditorium there will be a square facing the sea.”^{41, 42} No mention is made of the inclusion in the urban-scale redevelopment project of the south promenade, a subsequent descent to the building scale, including the entire monumental complex. Yet another fragmentary vision of the city, all directed to seaside mass tourism, which effectively excludes cultural activities related to pre-existing architectural structures. And the temptation to cover up the theater often arises in the city debate, distorting its function and its relationship with the context, in the face of considerable expenses⁴³ (Figure 10).

Among the few interventions carried out, in 2016, we should point to the project on the internal part of the stele, which after years of closure was completely blocked by guano, dirt and debris, making the staircase inaccessible. The intervention, proposed by the municipal administration for safety reasons, provided for the restoration of the signal lamp for aircraft placed on top

³⁷ Varagnoli e Verazzo (n/d).

³⁸ Original quotation: “che rivestono un interesse particolarmente importante a causa del loro riferimento con la storia politica, militare, della letteratura, dell’arte e della cultura in genere, ovvero quali testimonianza dell’identità e della storia delle istituzioni pubbliche, collettive o religiose.”

³⁹ The design hypotheses debated during the work of the conference were exhibited in the documentary exhibition Pescara un secolo di invenzioni e dissipazioni, curated by Edoardo Tiboni (23 April-31 May 2014, Mediamuseum Pescara).

⁴⁰ Original quotation: “capacità di attrarre più persone [...] perché possa essere frequentato [...] a prescindere dalla programmazione dei teatri Flaiano e d’Annunzio». E ancora «dinanzi al Teatro d’Annunzio e all’auditorium Flaiano sorgerà una piazza rivolta verso il mare.”

⁴¹ Original quotation: “dinanzi al Teatro d’Annunzio e all’auditorium Flaiano sorgerà una piazza rivolta verso il mare.”

⁴² See Redazione Cityrumors (2017).

⁴³ See for example the project by the studio architetti associati D&R in Bene (2015).



FIGURE 10. OVERVIEW OF THE ARCHITECTURAL COMPLEX WITH THE OPEN-AIR THEATER, THE AUDITORIUM AND THE STELE, FROM THE MUNICIPALITY OF PESCARA. *Image: Progetto di riqualificazione del lungomare sud, 2019.*

of the stele. Following the clearing of bird droppings in the internal area, the internal spiral staircase was made safe, reintegrating the missing steps. To avoid the recurrence of damage caused by bird guano, bird-scapes were installed along the outer walls of the stele.⁴⁴

Last in this chronology, there is the allocation of funds by the Municipality for the recovery and consolidation of the stele. It corresponds to 270 000 euros, included in the list of expenses of the three-year plan for public works 2018-2020,⁴⁵ the conclusion of which was to be registered by the first half of 2019.⁴⁶ The intervention, as inferred from the technical-descriptive report, had to aim at restoring the superficial parts degraded by the corrosive action of atmospheric agents, especially in the bas-reliefs, which showed “a different roughness than the supporting structure”⁴⁷ in reinforced concrete.⁴⁸ The structural verification of the work, both in static and dynamic conditions, to verify the global degree of seismicity resistance, would have completed the executive project. Unfortunately, the much-desired recovery and consolidation intervention did not follow the initial phase of the cognitive investigation, recording yet another postponement.

Conclusions

The reconstruction based on unpublished sources of the long story that led to the construction of the monument to d’Annunzio in the 1950s, highlights how the architectural complex is the victim of a condition of marginality and degradation, the result of a lack of recognition by the citizens and institutions, in other words “the work of art is only potentially a work of art” (Brandi, 2005: 48). Its recreation did not take place in the community, which continues to complain about the lack of a stable theater, but which actually has a first-rate theater structure, albeit outdoors, which is largely underused. A public work that has been absent from strategic plans on an urban and territorial scale, but also expelled from maintenance and restoration programs: a destiny shared by the stele, for which restoration based on scientific criteria is still awaited.

⁴⁴ See Martella (2016). The Ludovico Martella Company in Montesilvano (Pescara) executed the project.

⁴⁵ For more information on the expenses, see Comune di Pescara (2017).

⁴⁶ See Il Centro (2019).

⁴⁷ Original quotation: “una rugosità differente rispetto alla struttura”.

⁴⁸ See Comune di Pescara (2019).

Not even the uninterrupted use of the architectural complex, which could have favored its good conservation, as claimed by all the conservation charters, has in fact preserved its structural and functional aspects.

Yet, the theater participates in a naturalistic context among the most significant of the Adriatic coast and in an urban environment in which environmental and architectural episodes linked to the tourist vocation and sporting and cultural events of international level are concentrated, which have contributed to the birth and development social and economic of the province of Pescara, giving a strong identity imprint to this piece of the Abruzzo coast throughout the 20th century.

There are therefore innumerable public interests and cultural components, even of an extraterritorial nature, to be recognized and considered in the context of any operation that proposes interventions for the transformation of this area on an architectural and urban scale: it is not possible, in fact, to overlook the value assumed by the monumental theater of d'Annunzio, also as an entrance to the nature reserve of the d'Annunzio pine forest from the seafront, and in the tourist-cultural-sporting network of Pescara-Portanuova, which is intertwined with other important nearby buildings such as the former Aurum and the Adriatico stadium Giovanni Cornacchia (Varagnoli, 2019: 7-12; Pezzi, 2019: 123-128).

A broader vision of the issue is hoped for, both on an urban and a building scale, on the basis of an enlarged participation by citizens and an interdisciplinary approach that preserves the landscape values of the site. The theater could be open throughout "a season of better use," perhaps returning to the original setting of classical or prose theater, together with a campaign of restorations capable of mediating contemporary needs with the values of a very recent and still significant past.

The cultural potential of the monumental complex would thus be enhanced, which could represent the driving force for activities distributed throughout the year, as well as during the summer season. In other words, it is a question of having a broad vision of the project, which tries to systematize the architectural and formal aspects, with the functional ones linked to the world of theater, but also of music and cinema.

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