

From a convent to a bank and finally a luxury hotel. Architectures capable to transformation.

A cultured restoration, attentive to details for the synthesis between a compatible respect of the existing & the introduction of new strategies useful to the new hotel function.

Type of intervention

Restoration Rehabilitation / Renovation

Concerned elements on the intervention project

- 1. Foundations and underground structures
- 2. Vertical structures
- 3. Horizontal structures and vertical connections
- 4. Roof and terraces
- 5. Façade and building envelope
- 6. Finishes and completion elements
- 7. Integrate services
- 8. General strategies for building recovery

Site Borsa square & Cartari street, Lattarini district Palermo, Sicily, Italy

Objectives From a religious Convent and a Bank to a luxury Hotel.

Property Private: Giovanni & Salvatore Di Giovanni, Costa degli Ulivi Company

Designer Architectural: Provenzano Associate Architects Studio, Arch. Fausto Provenzano, Arch. Sebastiano Provenzano; Structural: Eng. Giorgio Umiltà; Integrate services: Eng. Alfio Russo; Collaborators: Arch. Federica Omodei; Building works: Iacopelli Costruzioni srl_Do.VIT Costruzioni srl; Site & Security: Ing. Tommaso La Rosa.

Date 2010-2012



Background to the intervention

Fig.1: View of the former Cassa di Risparmio bank, one of the buildings where the current luxury hotel is located. © <https://piazzabor-sa.it/>.



Fig.2: Current view from the top of the ancient Mercadari Scalzi cloister. © Luisa Lombardo.

The church of the Immaculate Conception and the convent of the reformed religious Order of the *Mercedari* barefoot (under the title of the "Immaculate Conception" inside the Cartari district) constituted a religious and monumental aggregate located in the *Lattarini* district, inside the *Kalsa* area of the city of Palermo.

The rebuilding of the structures (the first nucleus used to be a noble palace) was long and laborious, the construction of the new church was divided into three phases: beginning of the chapel in 1680, in the two-year period 1718 - 1720 under the direction of the Architect Agatino Daidone; the building period from 1723 to 1752 with the design of the Architect Carlo Infantolino to repair the damages caused by the earthquake of *Terrasini* of 1st September 1726; the intervention designed by the Architect Filippo Giudice, after the earthquake of Trapani of 23rd July 1751, then completed by the Architect Francesco Ferrigno.

The convent was bordered to the north by *Cartari* street, where its entrance was, to the east by *Cintorinai* street (today *Paternostro* street), from the south and west by the ancient garden and palace of the Prince of *Cattolica*.

After the Unification of Italy and the subsequent emanation of subversive laws which caused the confiscation of numerous buildings of religious property, the structures of the convent housed the offices of the Commerce Chamber, shared with the *Vittorio Emanuele* Bank. In 1895, the church was demolished to build the Borsa square. The Architect Ernesto Basile incorporated part of the square building in a representative bank, according to the Liberty style (1912). *The Royal Middle School of Commerce* was housed in the portion belonging to the *Chamber of Commerce*, established in 1901 and elevated in 1933 to the *Royal Technical Commercial Institute of Luigi di Savoia*, Duke of *Abruzzi*. The educational institution occupied

the site until 1956. Over time, the *Cassa di Risparmio* bank, located in the *Borsa* square, was merged with the *Banco di Sicilia* bank, and then hosted the *Banco di Roma* bank. After a long abandonment, the complex is now reopened with a new use: a luxury hotel under the name of Grand Hotel *Piazza Borsa*.

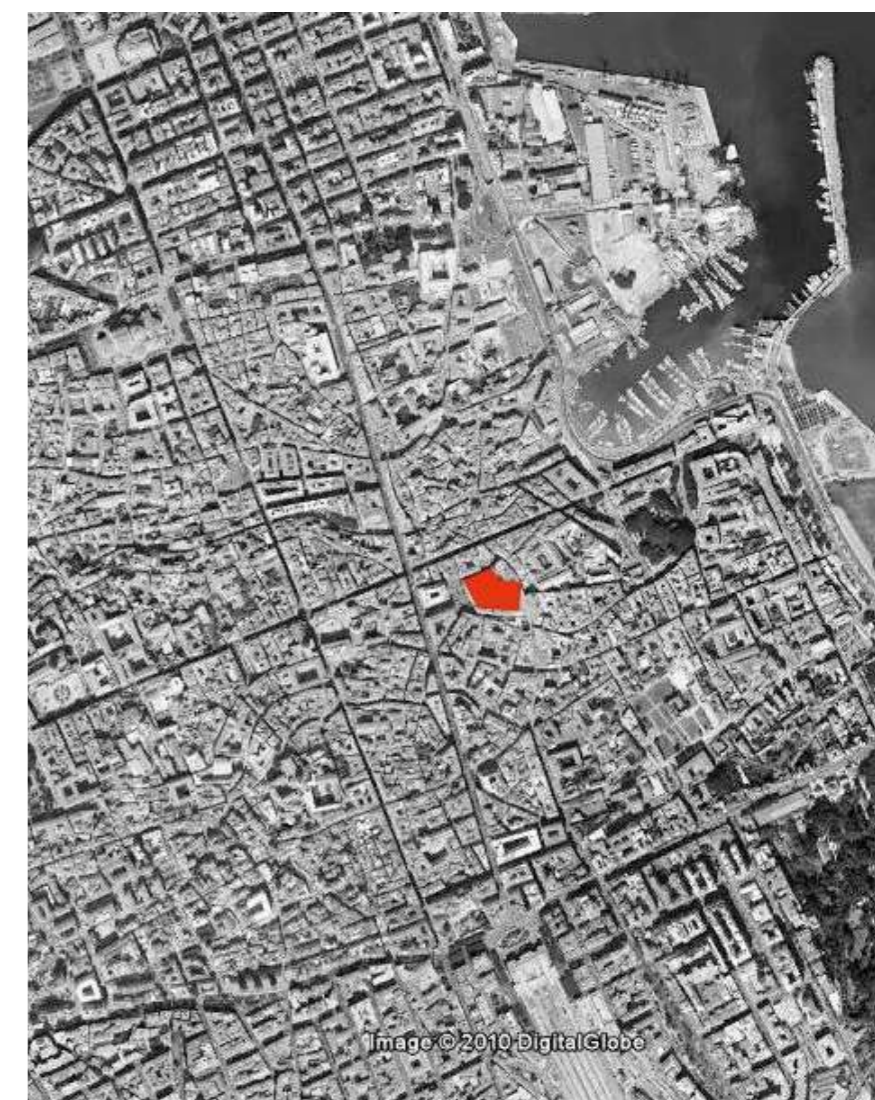


Fig.3: General view of the city and the location of building complex. © Giovanni Cardamone, Il convento dell'Immacolata Concezione dei PP. Mercedari Scalzi nella contrada dei Lattarini a Palermo, in "LEXICON. Storia dell'Architettura in Sicilia", n.0, luglio 2004



Fig.4a-b: Archive images of the cloister of the convent and the access door along Cartari street © Giovanni Cardamone, Il convento dell'Immacolata Concezione dei PP. Mercedari Scalzi nella contrada dei Lattarini a Palermo, in "LEXICON. Storia dell'Architettura in Sicilia", n.0, luglio 2004



Fig.5-6: Current view of the entrance door along Cartari street and exhibition panels inside the luxury hotel explaining the history and evolution of the building - ©Luisa Lombardo & Tiziana Campisi

Description of the building

Among the monumental buildings in the historic center of Palermo that could be converted into a hotel, the attention fell on this immense structure of 12.000 square meters, because unlike others, too beautiful and rich to be transformed, this one despite having a history particular lent itself well to the insertion of new functions, these are the words of Architect Fausto Provenzano, designer and director of the restoration works of the Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa, who had to deal with the long and complex history of the three buildings that, jointly, today host the Hotel.

The central nucleus is, in fact, represented by the convent and the church of the Mercy Fathers (*Padri della Mercede*), a monastic order that had great fame and prestige in Palermo from the end of the 16th century. From that time, the cloister and the monumental staircase still remain almost unchanged. Although some partial renovations over the centuries, they still display the characteristic red marble coming from the nearby *Piana degli Albanesi* town. In the first half of the 18th century, the increased prestige of the priests made them bring the nearby palace of the *Cattolica* princes to be used as a dowry. The distance between the two buildings is bridged by three open passages about twenty meters long and supported by elegant limestone arches supported by columns of gray *Billiemi* marble.

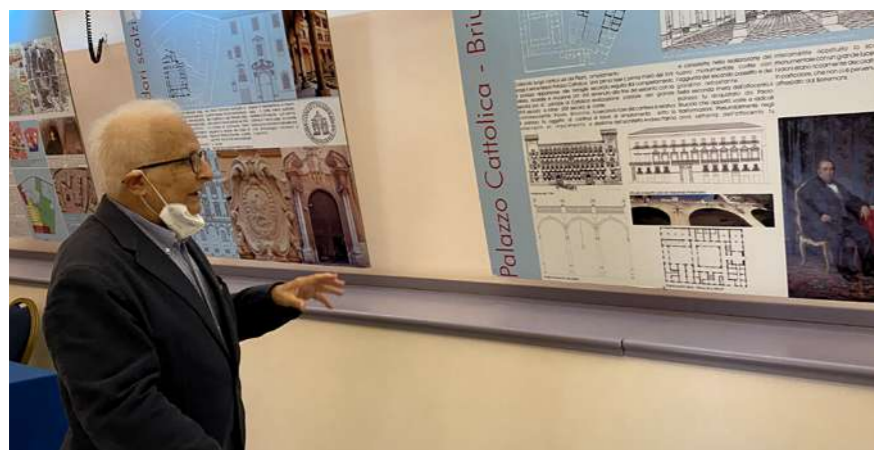


Fig.7: The Architect Fausto Provenzano, designer of the restoration interventions, explains the history of the building and the aggregation of the several parts during the Staff Training Course (C6) of the EU Smart Rehabilitation 3.0 project, Palermo September 2021. © Luisa Lombardo

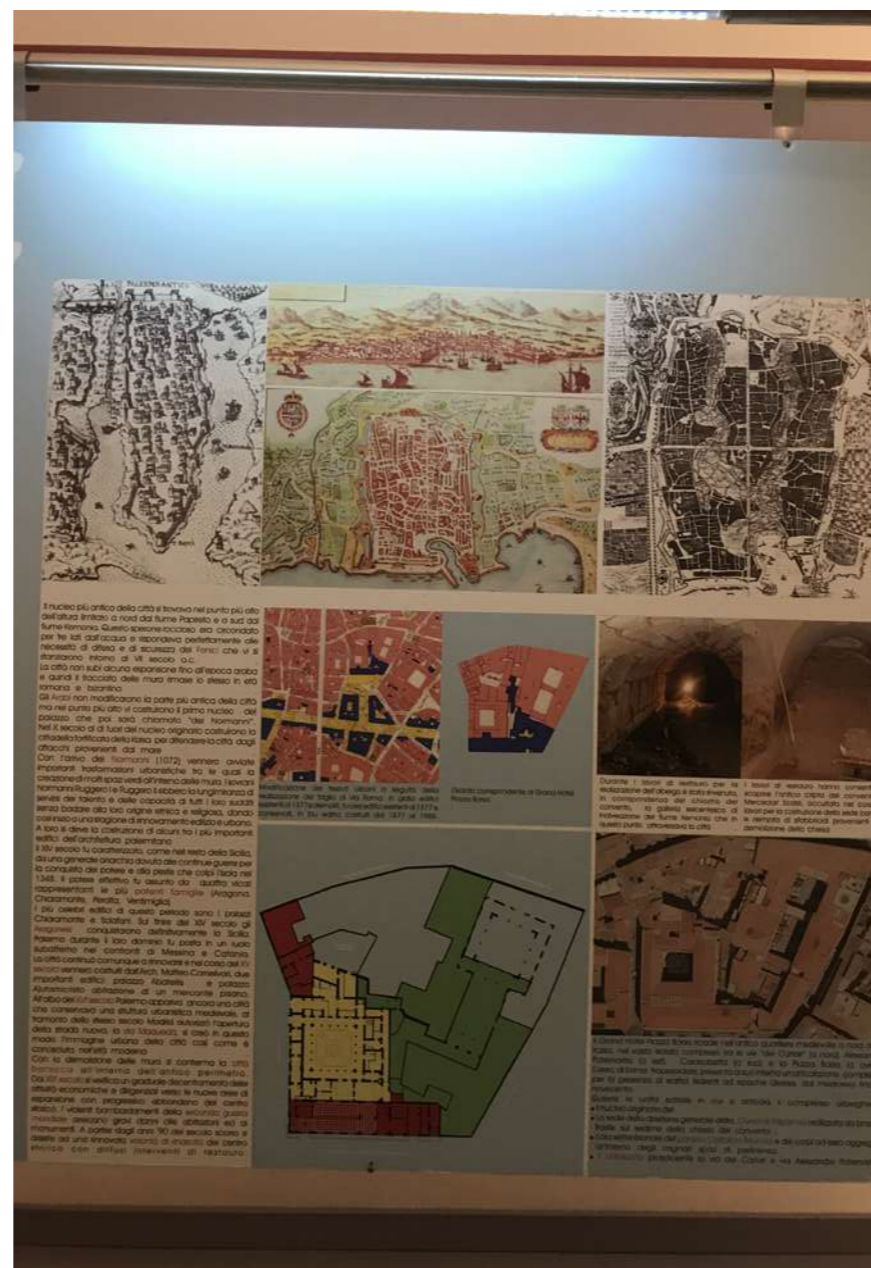


Fig.8-9: Exhibition panels inside the luxury hotel, explaining the history and the evolution over time of the transformations undergone by the building. ©Tiziana Campisi



Fig.10: One of the owners, dott. Giovanni Di Giovanni (on the left), explains the desired general concept of the design for the luxury hotel during the Staff Training Course (C6) of the EU Smart Rehabilitation 3.0 project, Palermo September 2021. ©Francesco Renda

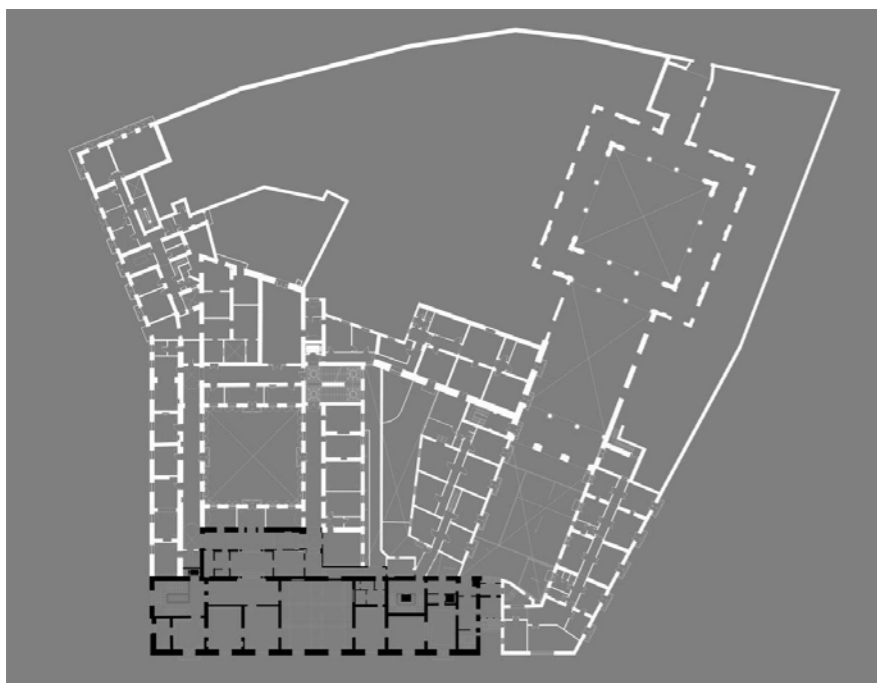


Fig.11a: The portion of the building designed by the architect Basile in the 19th century (black line). ©Provenzano Architects

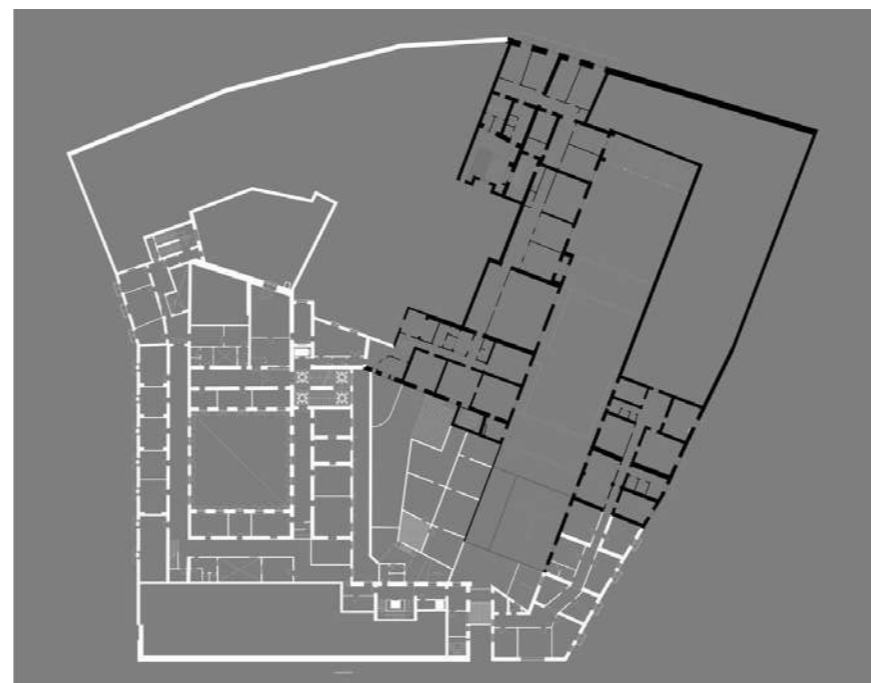
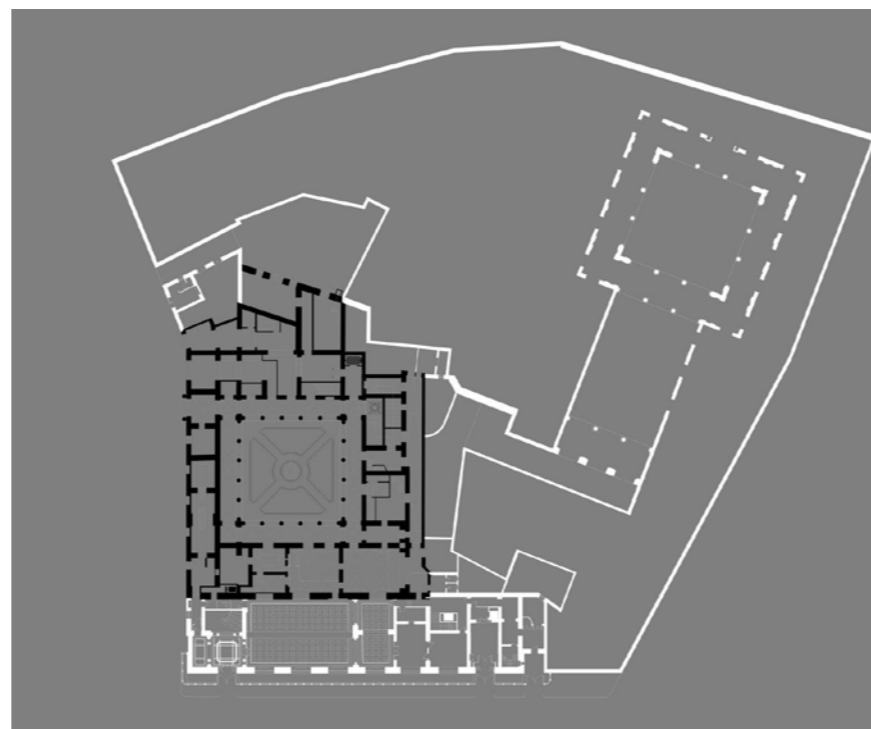


Fig.11b: The courtyard of the convent of the Mercedari scalzi from 1600 (black line). ©Provenzano Architects

Fig.11c: Part of the 19th century Cattolica Briuccia palace (black line). ©Provenzano Architects



Fig.12a: Inside the spacious courtyards, the passages uncovered at high altitude. ©Luisa Lombardo



Fig.12b: Inside the spacious courtyards, the passages uncovered at high altitude. ©Luisa Lombardo

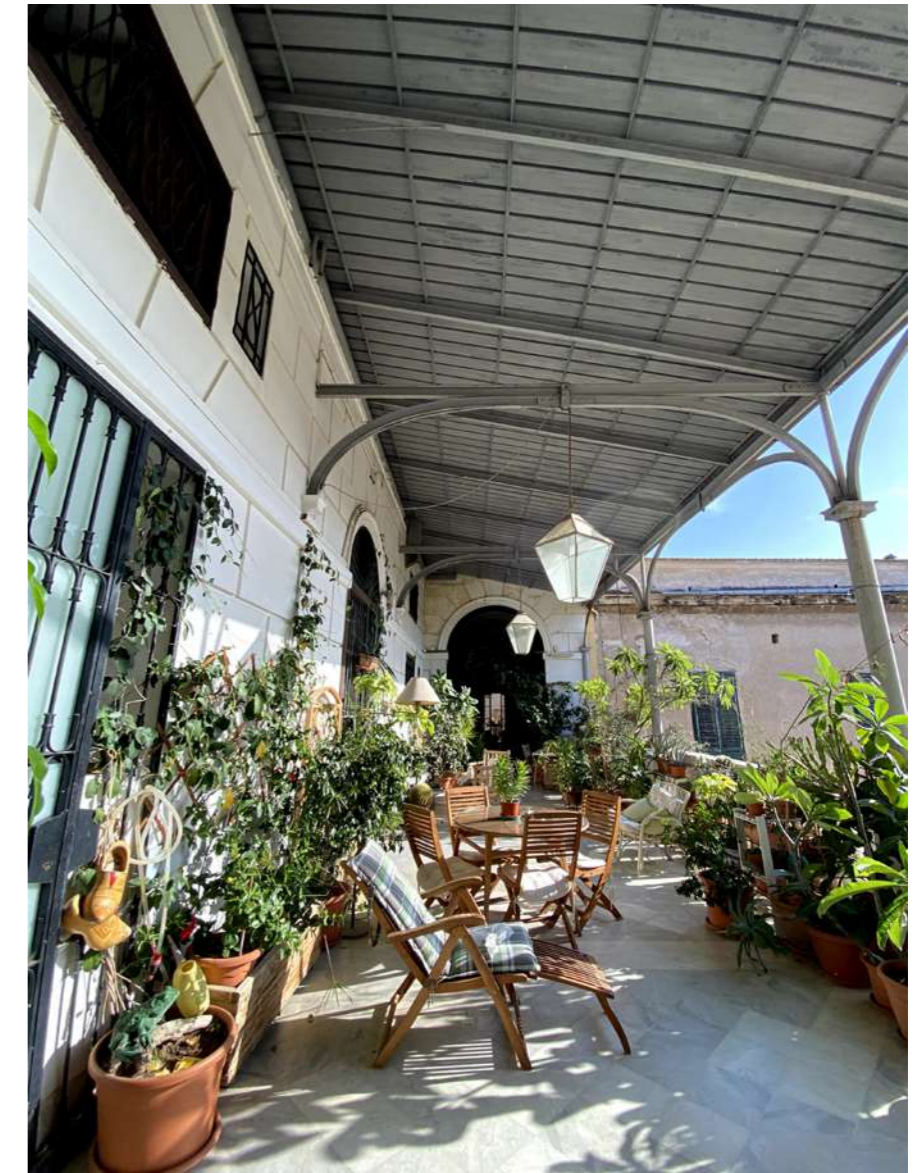


Fig.13a-b: Loggias for residential use but also on the top floor for the hotel as connection between different buildings and uses.
©Luisa Lombardo



Fig.14: The uncovered passages at high altitude, in the concept of the hotel used as panoramic terraces, open living spaces and meeting and rest areas. ©Tiziana Campisi

After the glories of the first two centuries, however, in 1860 the decline of the order of the *Mercedari Scalzi* in Palermo began. Thus a new era started for this structure, which since 1861 has hosted important financial offices of the New Regime. The new financial center, headed by the first King of Italy, *Vittorio Emanuele II*, soon became a bank.

In 1907, the church of the *Immaculate Conception ai Cartari* was demolished, originally built by the Mercy Fathers in the 1600s across the square in front of the convent and annexed to it. In place of the church, the Architect Ernesto Basile erected, also incorporating part of the square, the representative structures of the bank *Cassa Centrale di Risparmio Vittorio Emanuele*. The new bank palace was inaugurated in 1912 also thanks to the prolific collaboration with Vittorio Ducrot, whose Palermo workshops, with a thousand workers, created all sorts

of objects for Basile's pencil.



Fig.15-16: State of the façade along the Borsa square, before the start of the restoration works.
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Fig.17: Permanence of compact limestone pavements enhanced by the skilful restoration project; on the left, the wooden flooring of the ancient cloister, which houses the living room at the entrance of the hotel and a conversation room. © Francesco Renda



Fig.18: One of the monumental stairs of the hotel, after the restorations. ©Luisa Lombardo



Fig.19: Detail of the fine handrail of the same staircase. ©Francesco Renda

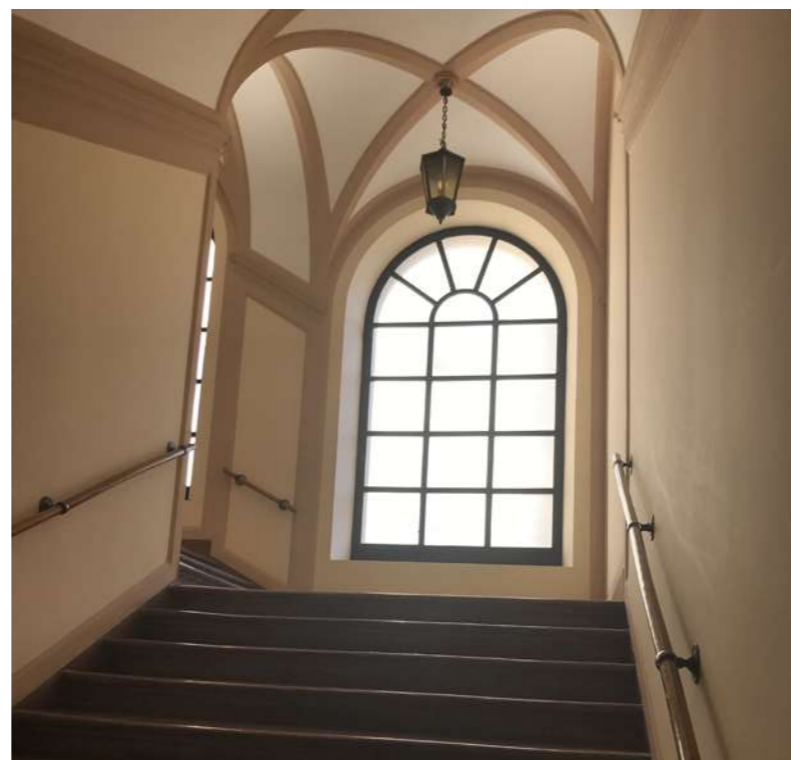


Fig.20: One of the monumental stairs of the hotel, after the restorations. ©Tiziana Campisi



Fig.21-22: The Hotel Restaurant, details of openings and wooden ceiling. © Francesco Renda & Luisa Lombardo



Fig.23: The Architect Fausto Provenzano, designer of the restoration works, explains the design concept of the hotel restaurant (before restoration the front office room of the bank), during the Staff Training Course (C6) of the EU Smart Rehabilitation 3.0 project, Palermo September 2021. ©Francesco Renda



Fig.25a-b: Safe and safety deposit boxes, remains of the ancient bank destination remain in the rooms adjacent to the current restaurant. ©Luisa Lombardo.



Fig.24: All the restoration interventions were based by the respect for the discovery of surviving elements, highlighted and enhanced, without depressing or replacing them, in a system of recognizability. ©Luisa Lombardo

The Diagnosis of the building (values and state)

Before the restoration, the building was in a state of semi-neglect with any decorated walls or valuable floors. The restoration, which lasted almost five years, was aimed at keeping intact or restoring some characteristic features of the original building, before it was transformed into a bank. The building was in good structural condition. In fact, in the course of its history it has undergone numerous changes which, while eliminating decorative values, have preserved the static and structural ones. The only portions of significant decorative interest were present in the facades and in the portion designed by the Architect Basile.



Fig.26: One of the owners, dott. Giovanni Di Giovanni, explains the general decay condition of the complex, before the restorations to the Partners and during the *Staff Training Course* (C6) of the EU *Smart Rehabilitation 3.0* project, Palermo September 2021. ©Francesco Renda



Fig.27: The monumental staircase of the *Cattolica-Briuccia* palace, one of the building that constitute the luxury hotel, with its deterioration and instability decay, awaiting restoration during the *Staff Training Course* (C6) of the EU *Smart Rehabilitation 3.0* project, Palermo September 2021. ©Francesco Renda

Restoration works

An extensive restoration and renovation of the entire block in the historic center of the city assigns a set of distinct and stratified monumental buildings to the accommodation facility.

The intervention privileged the value of the compatibility between the historical characteristics of the artifacts involved and the functional needs for the accommodation.

Among the most prestigious rooms, it is possible to recognize the magnificent entrance hall; the *Ducrot* room (it was the direction of the former bank); the adjacent rooms, used as offices of the Presidency. All the interior spaces declared a

monumental asset, built on the design of the Architect Ernesto Basile, where the original furnishings - built in the famous Panormitan art furniture factory (*Ducrot*) which had formed a prolific partnership with him - coexist with the beautiful frescoes of the early twentieth century, dedicated to the cycle of crafts; the *Kemonia* restaurant (the former room of the *Cassa di Risparmio* bank), open to the public and not the exclusive meeting place for hotel guests, also with frescoed ceilings. Then, up the stairs, it is possible to admire the Baroque cloister from above, and finally, going down to the lower floor, see it up close, walking under the colonnaded portico.

Finally, in 2003, the ownership transfer from *Banco di Sicilia* bank to the *Costa degli Ulivi* Company, a long period of settling, the recovery work of 30 million euros, which lasted five years and half financed with the regional funding, and finally the inauguration of the hotel in 2010. The caveau has been preserved, along with part of the original safes. In the year 2005, the brothers Salvatore and Giovanni Di Giovanni combined a convent, a building and a bank obtaining a prestigious hotel, that enjoys an enviable tranquility in the rediscovered *Belle Époque* atmosphere. The hotel has 127 rooms overlooking glimpses of the city, four lifts, three breakfast rooms, four bars and a spa.

The *Aloe* wellness center – the spa - is an exclusive space of about 150 square meters, in the area of the old convent, immediately above the hotel entrance lounges. The spa can offer a Wellness path, sauna, Turkish bath, massage cabins and much more.

The center of the hotel structure is a spectacular cloister covered in the cold months and air-conditioned, a unique place to have a coffee or to welcome your event with elegance. Center of the entire life of the Hotel as well as a symbol of the renovation project, the cloister of *Mercedari* convent, today lives

a new life by hosting small lounges for hotel guests or passers-by who want to linger in a place rich in history as well as for private events such as weddings, parties, conferences, and dinners.

The meeting rooms of the *Piazza Borsa* Hotel are suitable for any occasion from 280 to 28 square meters. All with natural light, each tells the story of the hotel, from the sumptuous walls to the *Art Nouveau* frescoes designed by the Architect E. Basile and Ducrot.

Particular complexity was generated by the introduction of the equipment and plant without operating with gutting and typological alteration interventions.



Fig.28: Liberty interior spaces of the former *Cassa di Risparmio* bank, after restoration. ©Francesco Renda



Fig.29: Liberty interior spaces of the former *Cassa di Risparmio* bank converted into a conference room. ©Luisa Lombardo



Fig.30: Liberty interior spaces of the former *Cassa di Risparmio* bank converted into a conference room; the large doors presenting a big thickness host the air conditioning and heating systems. ©Tiziana Campisi



Fig.31: Liberty interior spaces of the former *Cassa di Risparmio* bank converted into a conference room; detail of the wall covering, with precious fabrics. ©Francesco Renda



Fig.32: New living & meeting spaces. ©Tiziana Campisi



Fig.33: New living & meeting spaces, also adding wall decorations simulating open spaces. ©Francesco Renda



Fig.34-35: New living & meeting spaces, also adding wall decorations simulating open spaces; the luxury hotel, hosted in the Cattolica-Briuccia palace has a beautiful view outside, facing the St. Francesco d'Assisi church and square. ©Luisa Lombardo



Fig.36: New living & meeting spaces. ©Luisa Lombardo



Fig.37a-b: Details of hotel rooms. ©Luisa Lombardo

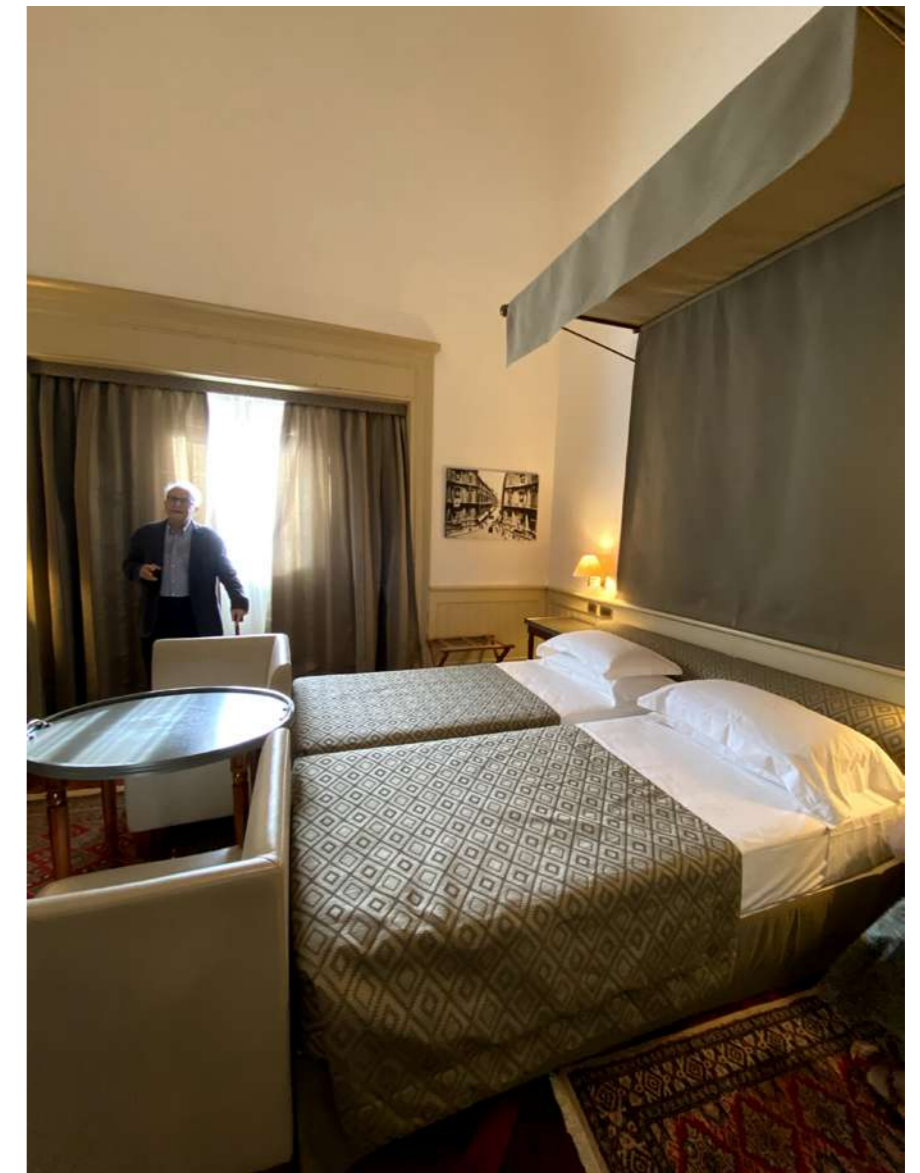




Fig.38: Tradition vs Technological Innovation details of one of the structural glass and steel parapets. ©Francesco Renda



Fig.39: Reinforcement and bracing system of of an interior wall using a wooden frame. ©Francesco Renda

Assessment of the results

The restoration project includes:

- structural interventions aimed at the restoration of existing materials and construction systems and the adaptation to a grand hotel;
- strong plant integration for the conversion into a touristic structure (safety and fire prevention, elevators, heating, cooling and lighting, ...);
- interventions aimed at energy efficiency;
- interventions aimed at design-for-all and accessibility of fragile users;
- technological innovation with the introduction of new materials, in the construction of floors, false ceilings, opening and closing skylight in the internal courtyard, realization of a spa.

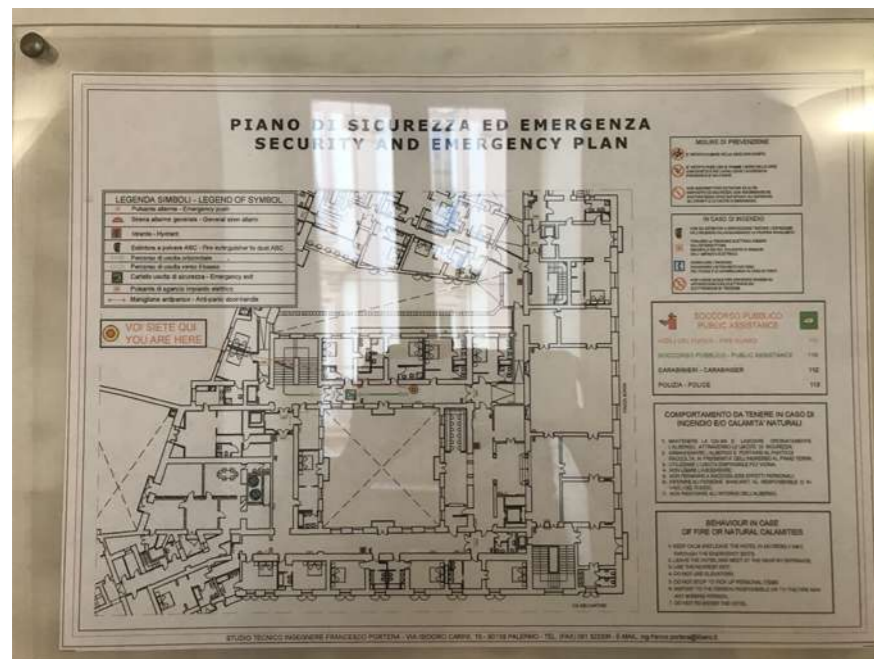


Fig.40: Security and emergency plan, displayed in one of the corridors and hallways of the hotel. ©Tiziana Campisi

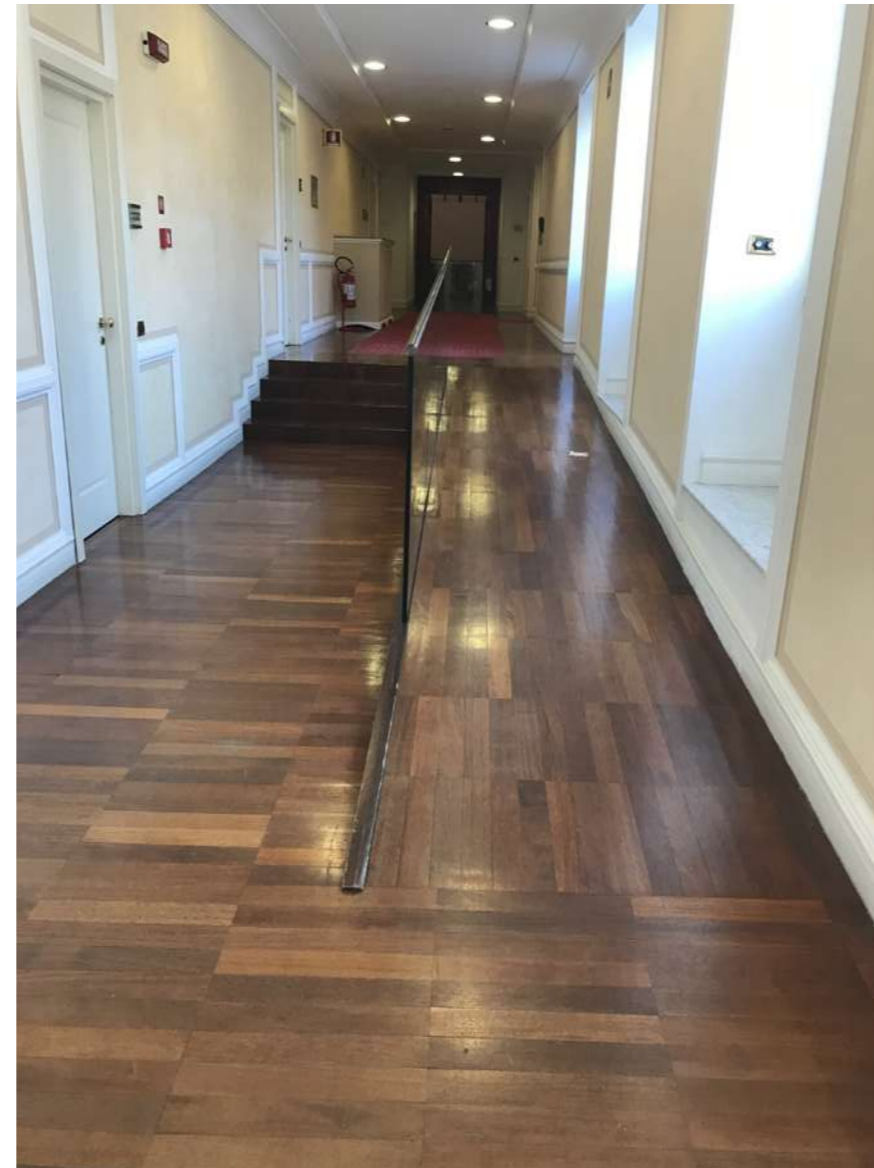


Fig.41: Design for all: new interior ramps, increasing accessibility and the overcoming of architectural barriers. ©Tiziana Campisi

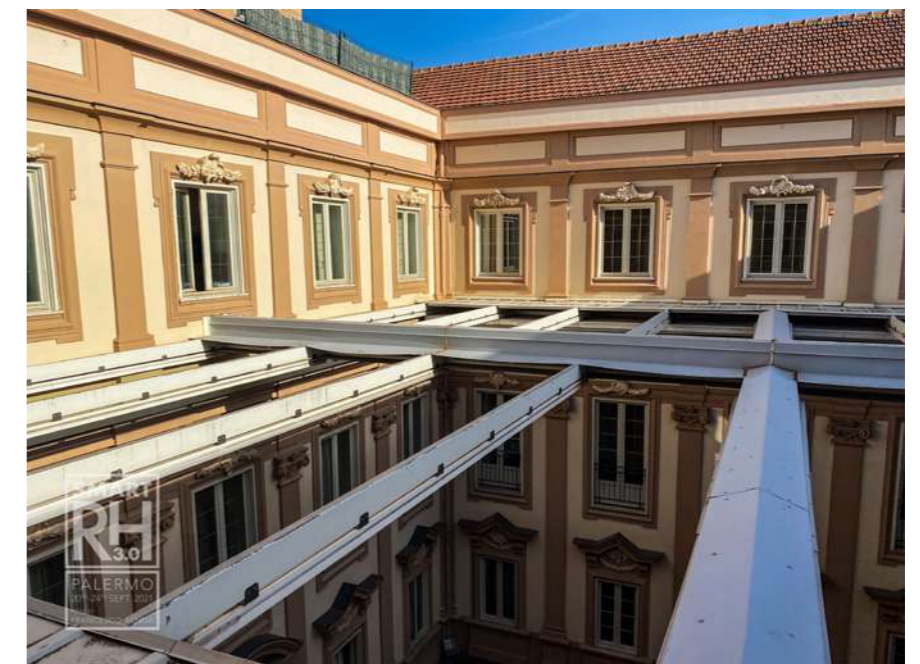
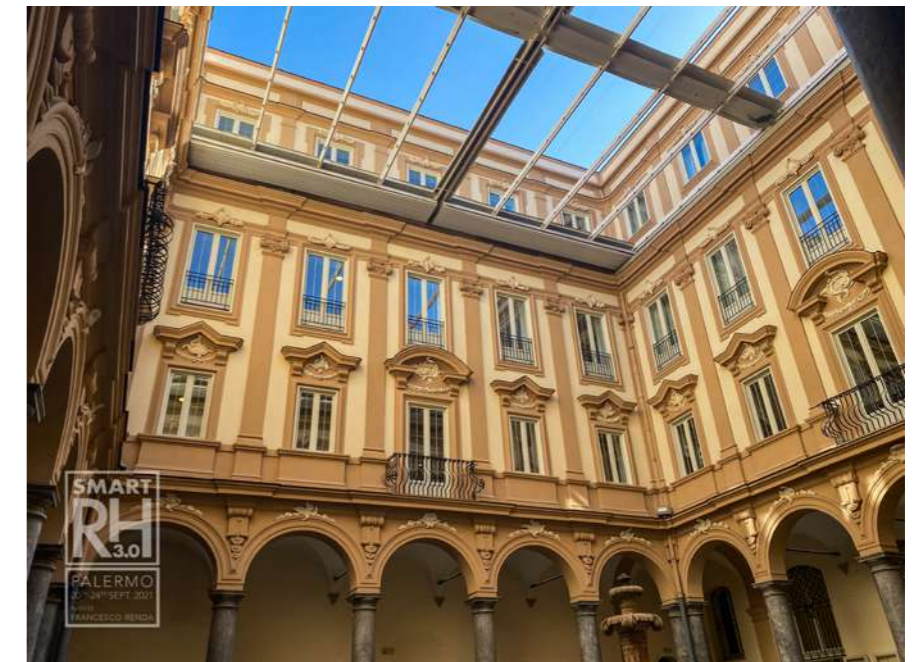


Fig.42-43: Design of the skylight-curtain that closes the ancient portico of the former convent, guaranteeing shade and shelter from the rain and cold temperature, when necessary; details of the open system, which mildly conflict with the perception and quality of the original spaces. ©Francesco Renda & Luisa Lombardo



Fig.44: The same skylight-curtain that closes the ancient four-sided portico of the former convent from above, when it is closed. © Tiziana Campisi

References

We acknowledge the Architects Fausto and Sebastiano Provenzano, the owners of the luxury hotel in the person of Dr. Giovanni Di Giovanni and all the Management Staff of the hotel, for the information and the kind collaboration.

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