

Restoring an ancient Benedictine Monastery then transformed in a Prison, actually near the UNESCO Arab and Norman itinerary.

An intelligent and functional restoration, capable of restoring spaces and services for students and guests.

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 Benedettini's Street, Palermo, Sicily, Italy

Objectives Restoration of the former Benedictine Home-Prison in Palermo and conversion into a University College with training, leisure and cultural activities (CAMPLUS)

Property Private: Foundation CEUR, COMMAPARTNERS soc. coop arl

Designer General coordinator, designer and site manager:
Arch. SALVATORE CONTRAFATTO

Date 2014-2016



Fig.1: Building complex view after the end of the works. © Arch. Salvatore Contrafatto

Designers:

General coordinator, designer and site manager: Arch. SALVATORE CONTRAFATTO

Collaborations: Eng. SALVATORE ASERO, Eng. GIUSEPPINA CELLINO CAUDO, Eng. SEBASTIANO CUFFARI, Eng. GIULIA LA GANGA VASTA, Eng. SALVATORE RAITI, Arch. ANTONINO SALANITRO

General Contractor: A.T.I CO.SAN. srl – SECAP spa

Systems and services: TELEIMPIANTI spa

Furnitures: LAREDO srl

Background to the intervention

The recovery project of the former *Benedictine Home-Prison* for the construction of a College of excellence with cultural, educational and recreational activities, is part of the general environmental and social redevelopment plan of the City of Palermo. That plan is aimed at the development of Albergheria's district with an enormous functional and cultural potential.

The Institute, since its primary destination in 1749, and under the name of the *House of the Holy Mary of the Abandoned women*, or also of instruction and emendation, was dedicated to the reception and re-education of poor girls, abandoned girls or those who has fallen into the network of dishonesty. Later, it became a women's prison under the name of *Prison of the*

Benedictines to confirm and to remember the linearity (except for very short periods) of the management and intentions by the religious community.

The institute was maintained mainly thanks to charity, especially from Christian people, until the death of the founding priest, in 1774, when the local Government placed the house under his tutelage. It remained actively in operation, over the following decades. It has alternating periods of prosperity and poverty, as well as distancing from the rules and the original address. Several tutors followed and as important facts could be indicated the foundation of an infirmary, inside the Institute, and the creation of a garden through the demolition of small old buildings adjacent to the main complex.

Subsequently, the *Sisters of the Good Shepherd* took over the management, and a great reform of the Institute was done. In that period there was the renewal over time of an agreement with the Government for the maintenance of the "daughters of the House" and for the repair of the old building. In 1878 the management was entrusted to the Benedictines' Order and, later, the complex became the women's section of the Judicial Prison of Palermo until, because of its precarious conditions, the prison was transferred elsewhere.

In recent years the property has been a place of welcome for the neighborhood's homeless people, and then it was abandoned to degradation by time and by occupants.

Description of the building

The entire building occupies a trapezoidal shape between *Benedettini's Street*, *Antonio Mongitore Street* (formerly *Benedettini's Alley*), *Zingari's Alley* and *Zuccherò's Alley*. In a border position with the *Albergheria* district, it stands near *St. Giovanni degli Eremiti Church* and the Normans' Palace (the Royal Palace). To the further North there are *Bonanno Villa* and *Vittoria Square*, beyond *Porta di Castro Street* and to the south the great artery of the current *Tukory Course* that goes down to the sea. The architectural complex develops around the Gypsies' Church, dedicated to Saint Mary that goes to Egypt; it was built in 1680 and it was restored in 1749, the church, over the years, was absorbed by the *institute of education and emendation*.

The entire building over time has been the subject of several large expansions. The plan of the complex reflects, in fact, its evolution: the original nucleus included the Church and the annexed convent building. It was divided into a series of settings, more or less regular and of different amplitudes, around a rectangular inner courtyard. From 1785, additional buildings were built becoming part of the original ones: a small church was erected on the corner of *Gerbasì* resulting space (ex *Gallinaio's Square*) and *Benedettini's Street*; an alley was incorporated in the lot that delimited, to the south-west, the original perimeter of the building and which was transformed into a portico. The plateau facing the South became the garden of the Institute.

The result of this constructive evolution is what we can currently read: a ground floor and two upper floors, which surround the central courtyard. In about 1880, the façade on *Benedettini's Street* was restored and the ground floor underwent important changes, especially in the front part of the church that was transformed into a parlor to keep the inmates in direct contact with the public.

A significant church's transformation occurred when the nave's roof was demolished, above the crowning architectural components, to allow the construction of an intermediate floor that was used as a new dormitory and a work room. The church was then modified, both in height and length, and it was a serious and irreversible damage to the architectural value of the religious building.

The Diagnosis of the building (values and state)

The interventions on the building are the result of several and consistent extensions and additions that have occurred in its historical evolution. From 1785, it had a constant architectural evolution, mainly dependent on the directives of the different rectorates and on the economic state of the *House of Instruction and Emendation of Benedettini's Street*. As for the external facades, the main façade, overlooking *Benedettini's Street*, is characterized by a tripartite inside from which emerges a central slightly projecting element (fig.2). This is vertically punctuated by six ashlar pilasters that, resting on high bases, create a frame of the surface that closes on the top with a large strip without decoration and with a molded frame strongly projecting. Pilasters define regular architectural spans, except for the central one, with a dilated step, containing the portal of entry of the building. This portal is characterized by missing side frames of the parts near the street floor and a frieze without decoration with a molded frame above. The two lateral wings of the façade have no architectural features and they are punctuated only by the holes corresponding to the different levels of the building. These openings are rhythmically repeated throughout the façade and they are aligned respecting vertical axes. The façade facing *Zingari's Alley* is composed of three different parts. The first one presents the same façade's architectural features on *Benedettini's Street*, representing the

corner. The second part consists of two lower buildings, dating back to their subsequent addition to the original complex; on the back of them emerges the apse of the *St. Mary of Egypt Church*. The last part of the façade, finally, is the wall of the interior garden. The façade on *Benedettini's Alley*, beyond *Gerbasì* resulting space, is both in terms of the arrangement of the holes, and in terms of the heights of the different buildings, resulting from building amalgamations operated in the following eras.



Fig.2: Façade's details among *Benedettini's Street*. © Eng. Luisa Lombardo

Restoration works

All the architectural restoration work takes account of the historical evolution of the entire building complex. Changes and historical overlaps that have been made over the centuries and the additions and variations have determined the "unity" of the current building and have been kept unchanged.

During the complex's restoration, some existing structures have been preserved, such as, for example, the grafting, in the large halls on the ground floor and on the first floor, overlooking *Benedettini's Street*. Two orders of Doric style columns, even if they were damaged by vandalism, have been consolidated from the foundations, restored and returned in all their architectural and historical value. The imposing inner bearing arches have been transformed in order to be free from the wall surfaces and they have been put in sight. They have been consolidated and restored as well as have removed the countless building surfaces present throughout the architectural complex that were not functional to the intervention. The same method of restoration has been used for each architectural molding and each decorative and linguistic element of the building (fig. 3-4).





Fig.3-4: Parts' views of the complex before the restoration. © Arch. Salvatore Contrafatto

Particular attention was paid to the restoration of the ancient facade of the church, incorporated in the building by the intervention of 1891; through light wells inserted in ceilings, it has been restored its "view" without interruption; all geometric decorative elements that were found were freed from the plaster that covered them and, thanks to the specialized work of restorers, it was defined their consolidation and figurative reconstruction. After the general static improvement of the building, façades have been made facing plaster with the same nature and type of the original ones, made of earthen powder (*cocciopesto*).

Pilasters on the façade of *Benedettini's* Street, considerably degraded, detached from the masonry structure and partly collapsed, were consolidated and made integral to the back of the masonry through injections of epoxy resins and grafts of

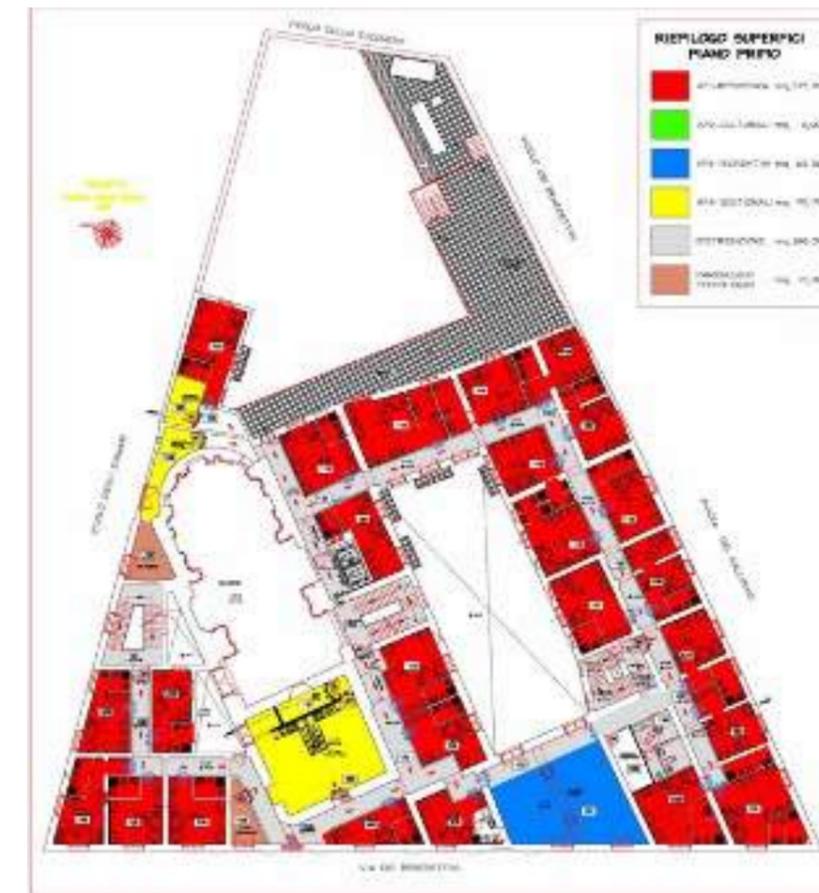
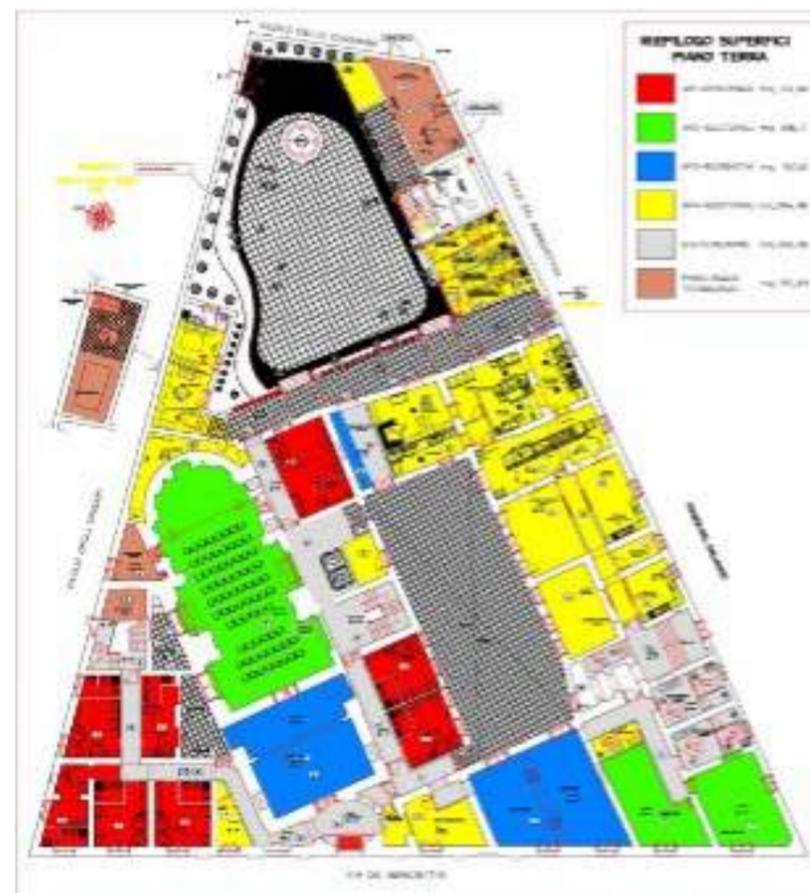


Fig.5a-b: Plans of the complex with indications of new destinations of use. © Arch. Salvatore Contrafatto

glass bars. Through the skillful work of restorers for plaster modeling it was possible to reconstruct the physical and linguistic-expressive integrity of pilasters, relating to the surfaces' morphology and the patient tonal research for veils of their colors.

At the end of the restoration, therefore, the architectural complex develops on four floors above the ground. On the ground floor all the functional areas are concentrated. They house educational and cultural activities (study rooms, auditorium, etc.) (figs.6-7), leisure activities (multimedia room

and TV. Games room, cafeteria, etc.) support, management and administrative services (central kitchen, self-service, canteen, reception, executive offices and various services, such as warehouses and warehouses).

The main functional area linked to the student residence is located, less than a few rooms on the ground floor, on the first, second and third floors. Each unit, which can accommodate one or two students, also disabled, is equipped with all the necessary furniture for a long-term residence, bathroom, as well as a collective kitchen, located on the second floor with the

adjoining dining room.

With these characteristics, a total of 75 rooms have been defined, which can accommodate 135 students permanently (figs.8-9). On the various floors, near collective spaces, there are toilets that can be used both from the internal and external users, and from guests with disabilities.



Fig.6-7: Courtyard and auditorium's views. © Eng. Luisa Lombardo & Arch. Salvatore Contrafatto



Fig.8-9: Room's interiors. © Arch. Salvatore Contrafatto

Assessment of the results

Camplus Palermo is the network of university colleges managed by the Ceur Foundation (European University and Research Center), in which training complements the academic activity of the most prestigious universities, and that is integrated with the residential dimension, offering students a complete life proposition.

Camplus Palermo offers students, in addition to a high-level housing solution, the opportunity to live the university experience intensely cultivating their own talents and bringing out their own personality. The Direction supports each student in his choices through continuous opportunities of discussion. The new collective residence will become a dynamic qualitative pole projected towards a socialization of new social strata capable of improving, polarizing and supporting the development of a significant area of the historic center of

Palermo. The intention and the possibility of extending its socio-cultural activity to the external community, and in particular to the city of Palermo, is a fundamental aspect of the College's interest. In fact, it is equipped with functional and settings spaces, such as the auditorium or leisure areas, which can be used by students, and therefore it is able to satisfy any requests proposed by the community.

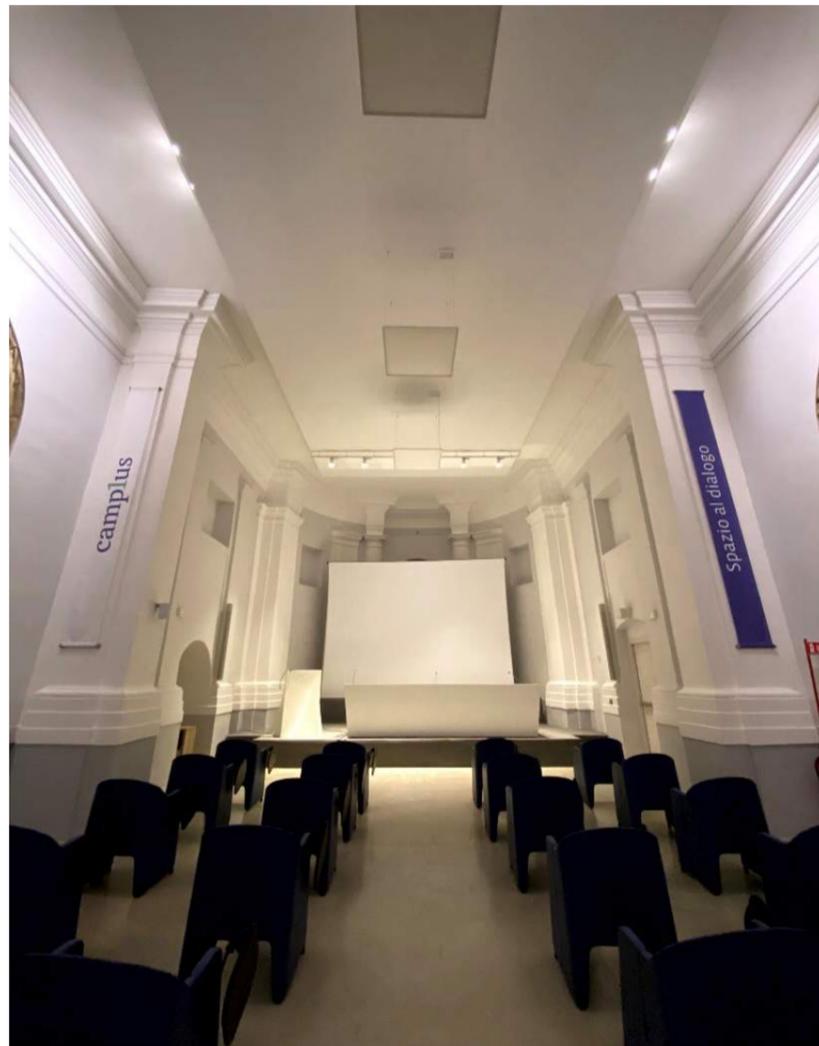


Fig.10: One of the space's details is dedicated to conferences and lessons. © Eng. Luisa Lombardo



Fig.11: Living room's area. © Eng. Luisa Lombardo



Fig.12: View from the panoramic terrace. © Eng. Luisa Lombardo

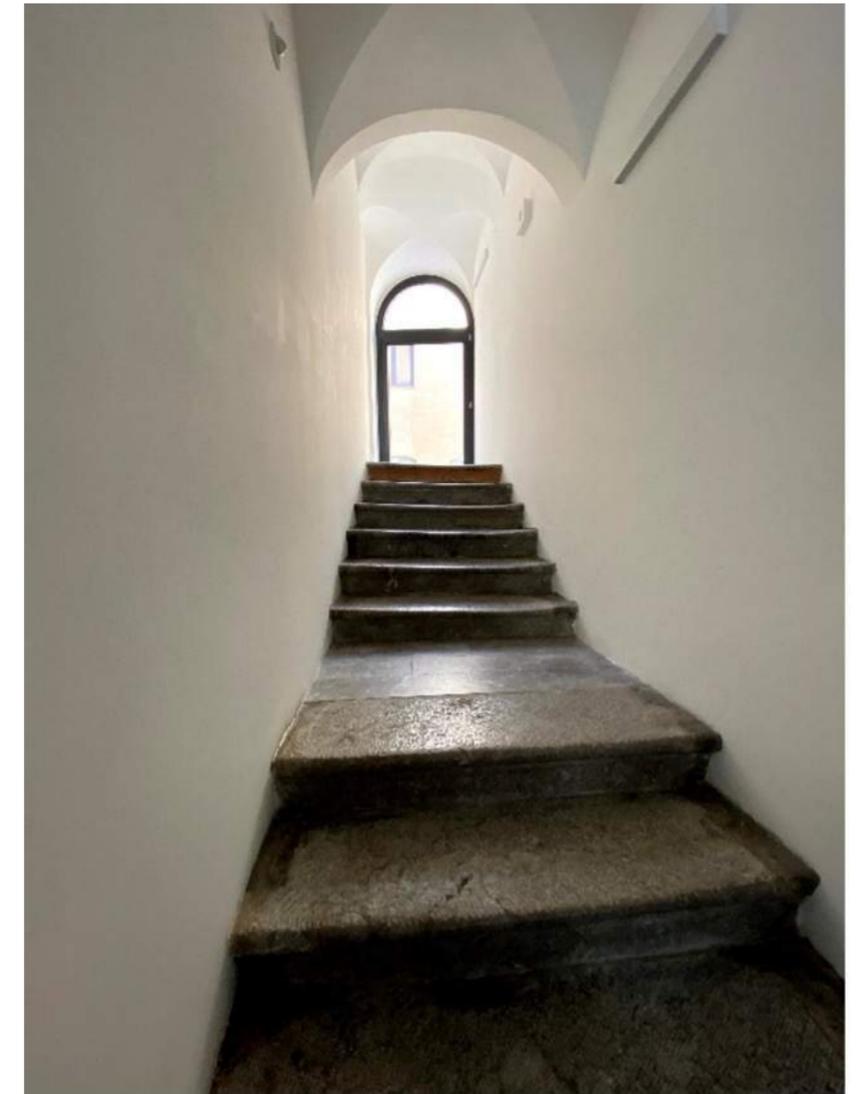


Fig.13: Detail of the original staircase. © Eng. Luisa Lombardo

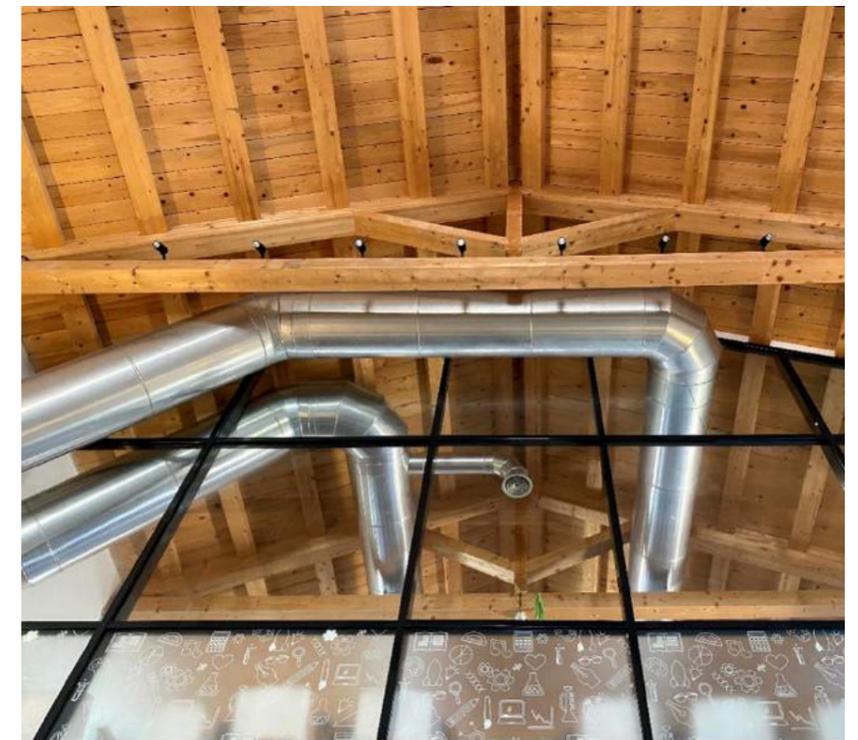


Fig.14-16: View of the roofs above of the former church restored and used as study room and detail of systems. © Eng. Luisa Lombardo

References

All the information contained in this paper is taken from the publication by Contrafatto S., Sanfratello F., Salanitro A. (eds.) titled *CamplusPalermo*.

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