

## The concept of copy in Arts and its application in architectural projects. Rebuilding proposal of Villa Deliella in Palermo.

The dissertation investigates the concept of the copy, its ideological and aesthetic value in current architecture. The focus is on the theoretical and practical discussion of the question, if, after western modernity's rejection and postmodernity's reconsideration, the architectural copy is rehabilitated today. In which context, under which conditions and interventions does the copy of a past lost building seem to become a model for the future? While acknowledging the existence of diverse notions of the copy across different cultural, social, and political contexts, this project confines itself to analysing and advancing the theory and practice of the copy in a contemporary European context. It aims at filling a theoretical and methodological gap that has resulted in an often-polemical controversial surrounding individual reconstruction projects, e.g. the City Palace and the Schinkel's Bauakademie in Berlin, the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia, etc. Ultimately, the research aims to explore the theme of imitation in an attempt to find a general design theory of reconstruction, which can mark the guidelines and be the foundation in cases of lost building design, in the realm of complex urban situations, where the development of the city must consider the architectural heritage. This design theory will drive the practical part of the PhD thesis, that will consist in a specific architectural design project.

The project idea starts from **the case of Villa Deliella in Palermo** (1). Designed in 1906 by Art Nouveau architect Ernesto Basile, the Villa was located in the nineteenth-century district. It was an important testimony of the architecture of the Palermo Belle Epoque, built at the time of the Florio dynasty, a period in which the Sicilian city, economically and culturally advanced, was able to compete with the main European capitals. However, in 1959 the City Council, in an obtuse and aggressive system of urban speculation typical of those years, with a bureaucratic trick authorized its demolition to let construct a multistore building, never realised. It was the period of the so-called "sack" of Palermo, a devastating action carried out by a certain political-economic class, colluded with the mafia, which upset the urban and territorial planning of the city. Innumerable important historical architectural testimonies were erased and huge anonymous buildings were built in their place. Since its demolition villa Deliella physical memory has been completely erased, and, in the urban void that has been determined (2), not a single table has ever been placed to remember its brief existence and its sad end. Despite the fact that the Municipality of Palermo has a project by Mario Botta, carried out in 1989 for the construction of a contemporary art space (3), just in the area where the villa once stood, which could be updated and built, today the reconstruction of Basile's work is in great demand. The project of the Swiss architect was conceived in a contemporary style, without any formal or typological citation to the pre-existence, and, precisely because of this total absence of references, its hypothetical realization would probably contribute to the definitive oblivion of the previous lost architecture. Villa Deliella has become the symbol of the wounds and damage caused by the "sacco", and in 2015 were collected more than 100 signatures from intellectuals and artists to rebuild it. The politic administration is currently actively working to carry out the acquisition of the area with the aim to realise a museum.



Using original drawings and vintage photos it would be possible to make a replica very faithful to the original, even if not identical. But of course, the possibilities, regardless of the degree of similarity of the new work to the lost model, are various: in addition to a facsimile of the lost villa, one could design a contemporary building indifferent to the historical pre-existence, or one that instead recall it. The existing void could be also left unaltered, or emphasized by creating e.g. an empty underground space or a garden. Another possibility would be a permanent art installation. But is possible to establish **which would be the most correct way to rebuild the villa today?** Probably there are no universal rules and every case of rebuilding, as generally every architectural project, is unique and specific in its place and in its time. But it is undeniable that reconstruction projects in particular, as well as restoration projects, must have a strong component of historical testimony and should objectively appear as replicas that cannot be confused with the originals. The causes of destruction of artistically relevant architectures of the past are always linked to anthropic or natural facts that are worth witnessing and remembering, such as earthquakes; wars, tyrannies, etc. The main motivation that leads to the decision to reconstruct a building is to recount and try to revive a part of the events of a place and a community that had been erased. In this sense the reconstructed architecture plays the role of a monument, from the Latin verb *monere*: which has the double meaning of remembering and admonishing. In the case of villa Deliella, e.g., the new architecture should witness the actions it has undergone in a given historical period and at the same time warn future generations to protect their cultural heritage. It is clear that a totally new building, which does not present any kind of typological, stylistic, formal reference to the pre-existing one, doesn't have the possibility of performing this dual "monumental" function; but probably not even a facsimile of the disappeared villa would be able to do so, also because it could be confused in time with the original. Its new fake facades would not transmit any evidence of the vicissitudes of its predecessor, they would not stimulate any reflection in this sense in the observer, on the contrary they would help to erase the memory of a serious crime, which instead must be remembered and firmly denounced. In this sense, perhaps paradoxically, the current void is even more eloquent than a replica! From these reflections starts the research whose results will converge into an architectural proposal for the area where villa Deliella stood.

**The first theoretical part of the thesis** is dedicated to the in-depth study of the lost villa, its author and its context. Particular attention is paid to Basile's poetic, with reference to his conception of copying and reconstruction; this not so much to try to imagine how he would reconstruct villa Deliella if he were still alive, but to understand if the ideas he expressed on the specific theme of reconstruction contain valid general principles that can give inspiration and contributions to the research. One of the most specific aspects of his design method consisted in borrowing elements from the repertoire of tradition and recomposing them, using a modern language. A constant of his buildings are the quotations and references to the medieval and renaissance Sicilian architecture, combined with the free schemas and floral forms of the Art Nouveau. On the subject of reconstructions of lost historical architectures, to him it was necessary to intervene using a modern language that objectively differentiated the new buildings from the old structures. In 1907 Basile, referring to the reconstruction of the collapsed San Marco Bell Tower in Venice, had declared: "it is indeed indispensable and honest that the work, without falsity, without hypocrisy, appears for what it really is, new." In the same occasion he emphasized the position of those who would have liked to build the new tower in a contemporary style, which would not copy the ancient forms of the lost building. In 1910 he was a member of the commission for the reconstruction of the medieval cathedral of Messina, which had been destroyed by the earthquake of 1908. His idea was to consolidate and restore the surviving walls, leaving them in a state of ruins and incorporating them into a new church that he proposed to build adjacent to the old one. For the reconstruction of the old neoclassical town hall of Reggio Calabria, that had been destroyed by the same earthquake, he decided not to make a replica of the disappeared building, but designed a new palace in Liberty style. The new design reflects his functional and modernist architectural vision. In the first version of the project some details, however, recall the pre-existing architecture.

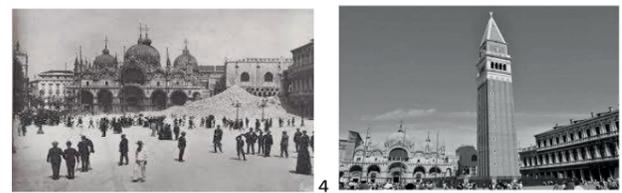
**In the second part of the dissertation** the evolution of the notion of mimesis is being investigated, starting from the philosophers of antiquity until the contemporary aesthetic reflection. The etymology of the word copy comes from the Latin *copia*, that means "abundance"; the term has an absolutely positive origin and, for millennia, copying was the main process of producing artworks. The artistic copies were used in the past with specific functions: they served the artists to practice and to educate the apprentices, spread the artistic culture and uniformity of style, diffused the knowledge of irremovable models even to very distant geographical areas. Just think of ancient Greece where the invention of the architectural orders and the codification of building types generated architectures that resembled all each other. With a sort of coding and copying system it was possible to export, also in the far colonies of Magna Graecia, temples, theatres and all sorts of buildings, all very similar to those of the Hellenic cities. In ancient Rome it was considered normal and it was usually accepted, to make copies of Greek sculptures, paintings and architectures, attributing to them the value of authentic artworks. Also in the literary field the Romans copied fables, comedies and tragedies. The authors, to create new works, drew inspiration and used those of the classical



tradition, whose contents they recognized the universal value. They identified the models, selecting them among those most akin to their own artistic thinking, and later reworked them. It is well known e.g. that Phaedrus rewrote Aesop's fables or that Seneca recombined and transformed Euripides' *Medea*. Arno Reiff explains the imitation of Greek literary models by Roman writers, according to three different methods: *interpretatio*, *imitatio* and *aemulatio*. The *interpretatio* is the faithful translation; the *imitatio* is a free and superior version of reproduction whereby, by borrowing elements from a model, one tries to improve it and adapt it to the present, thanks to the originality and sensitivity of the copyist; while the *aemulatio* implies a creative competition that the artist can undertake with the reference model, trying to overcome it, and to be independent from it, after a deep assimilation of its characteristics. Moreover, the *aemulator* introduces in his work also new elements taken from different sources. This categorization relates to literature, but today is also applied to figurative arts. Roman artists essentially drew ideas and contents from the enormous reservoir of the Greek art reinterpreting and adapting them to the tastes and contexts of their time.

Continuing the investigation through the centuries, up to 1800, the ideas expressed towards imitation by various writers, architects, philosophers have been analysed; the three categories of Reiff have always proved to be a valuable key that has allowed to find similarities between all of them. The conceptions of imitation that emerge from the writings of personalities such as Aristotle, Quintilian, Phaedrus, Petrarch, Politian, Vasari, Quatremère de Quincy, although they have been expressed in very different eras, fields and contexts, all share the same principles. Two fundamental aspects emerged: on the one hand, each of them attributed to the purely imitative copy above all a pedagogical function and the ability to spread and transmit the cultural values of the various civilizations; on the other hand, all of them somehow claimed that emulative copies have instead determined the creation of art works which, while remaining in a relationship of continuity with tradition, have contributed to the evolution of styles. The evocation, re-elaboration and updating of models of the tradition essentially represent the driving force that determines the development of Art in history. The following quotation from the "copy" entry in the *Dictionnaire Historique d'Architecture* of Quatremère de Quincy, may clarify what has been stated above: "What differentiates he who imitates preceding works from he who is but their copyist, is that the first knows how to read in the inventions of others the maxims or the inspirations which produced them, and having studied the paths through which their genius passed, he learned to tread similar paths; while the other repeating borrowed ideas in servile works, crawls behind, instead of walking by himself. (...) There is perhaps no other art whose teaching requires more the practical application of this distinction, than the art of architecture."

A key work specifically dedicated to the copy is the Walter Benjamin essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. According to him, every art copy is devoid of the *aura*, the here and now of the original. No mechanical reproduction process can reproduce the authenticity, consequently, copies have a lower artistic value than the original. Actually, he does not exclude a priori the value of imitations, but only affirms that their status and functions have changed with the modern accelerated development of technology. Originality is probably just an abstract concept. The research starts just from the hypothesis that the absolute original does not exist, because the creation of every artwork is, and has always been, influenced by processes of imitation of other artworks or of nature. Any artist, voluntarily or unconsciously, has always borrowed from other authors models, or parts of them, and then, after an operation of assimilation and reinterpretation, used them by creating new artefacts, expressing the actuality of their present. If we could retrace in time and space all the passages that any work of art has gone through, following backwards its direct or indirect references, we would probably arrive at models that date back to prehistory, like the imprints of human hands (in turn copied from the nature) in some cave of the Palaeolithic. Returning to Benjamin, the new technical possibilities of reproduction free art from auraticity and open it up to availability. The end of the sacredness of the artwork, seen as an idol to be venerated, happens precisely through the loss of its aura; the new works reproduced in series, mercified, contribute to politicise art, giving it the task of educating the masses against all totalitarianism. But what kind of copy has this communicative capacity? The exact replica? In the essay he referred mainly to film and photographic reproductions, and from the text it can be deduced that he considered them as unfaithful, reinterpreted copies of other works. The Faust e.g., translated into film, is a non-auratic rewriting of Goethe's drama. The director reinterprets, re-designs, re-enacts a work born from the theatre with new means, distancing it from tradition and projecting it towards the emancipation of art. In this sense the execution of a 1:1 copy of a work would be the re-proposal of a new anachronistic fetish to adore; art, on the other hand, according to Benjamin, evolves with evocative but reworked reproductions. In the case of an architectural reconstruction, a replica, made in a vain and illusory attempt to restore the lost aura of the disappeared building, could not play the role of historical testimony (which only authenticity can give) and would lose its "exhibition value", annulled by the nostalgic cultic value sought. The aura is not an intrinsic property of the work but is linked to the relationship it establishes with its context, at a precise moment. If a facsimile of the villa Deliella were made today, it would clearly clash with the current situation of the place. Following Benjamin's logic today, a new aesthetic subject should be created, capable of evoking Basile's work and dialoguing with the new space-time context. In this sense the new emulative work would "actualize the reproduced subject" that is, through its expressive power, it would make the atmosphere of the lost work and its site accessible to the citizens, stimulating their "involuntary memory". Somehow Benjamin's aura theory presents points of continuity both with the authors of the past mentioned and with Basile's ideas. According to Reiff's parameters, in the dissertation reconstructed architectures of various historical periods are analyzed, trying to identify the compositional processes that determined them and their degree of dependence on reference models. Some of the works taken into consideration are: the replica of the San Marco bell tower in Venice (4, 5), resulting from an *interpretatio* of the lost model; the restoration of the Arch of Titus, whose presumed original image has been restored through a process of *imitatio*; the reconstruction of the alle Grazie bridge of Florence (6, 7) in which Michelucci used the technique of *aemulatio*, creating a contemporary work that evokes the previous one; the rebuilding of the church of Longarone, where Michelucci himself ignored any reference to the existing building.



**The design tools** will be those typical of architectural and artistic design. In line with the premises and results of theoretical research, the project will focus on the emulation of the disappeared villa, which will be considered as a model to be rewritten. Its silhouette and volumes will be evoked in a simplified style, using contemporary language, materials and technologies. In the conception process, stimulating and useful elements will obviously be identified and borrowed from other architectures and/or artistic installations, which will then be recombined and adapted to the new organism in order to express new contents. One of several possible significant references could be Venturi's Philadelphia ghost houses (8). The sources will be clearly mentioned in the written report and will be made evident as much as possible in the project, in addition to intellectual honesty, especially to emphasize the process of emulation design as an experimental application of theoretical research. The new aesthetic subject will attempt to make the lost aura of the Basile villa reappear in the void left by the demolition, modifying the current urban context with its expressive and evocative force. The result sought is a "monument" that remembers and pays homage to Basile and its work and that serves as a warning for the future against all the mafias.

