

From Restoration to Interpretation: Historical Memory in the Architecture of Renato Rizzi

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Abstract: This article analyzes one of the key debates in 21st-century architecture—the integration of contemporary architecture within historical urban fabric and the relationship between cultural heritage and modernity—through two projects by the Italian architect Renato Rizzi: “*Casa Museo Depero*” (1992–2008, Rovereto, Italy) and the “*Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre*” (2004–2014, Poland). Although functionally different, both projects are united by Rizzi’s conceptual approach, which is based on a critical dialogue with the material and immaterial layers of the past. In the first case, the research examines the restoration and adaptation of interior space within an existing medieval structure, while in the second case it explores the abstract reconstruction of cultural memory on the site of a former Elizabethan theatre. The study demonstrates that for Rizzi, historical architecture is not a static heritage object or a museum artifact, but a living process that generates new architectural forms and meanings through interpretation. The comparative analysis reveals that in both projects historical metaphors are synthesized with contemporary technologies and architecture. As a result, Rizzi’s architecture is simultaneously contextual and contrasting, transforming historical reference into a contemporary spatial narrative. The “*Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre*” integrates three fundamentally different systems: the architectural interpretation of historical memory, technologically driven architectural form, and open urban space designed for social and cultural interaction. The research concludes that Rizzi rejects superficial historicism and formal imitation, proposing instead an interpretative architectural strategy in which history is understood as a living text. Through rereading and translating this text into contemporary architectural language, his projects establish architecture as a mediator

between past and present, memory and innovation, tradition and modernity.

Key words: Historical urban fabric; Cultural heritage; Reconstruction; Poetics of space; Architectural concept

Introduction

One of the most important topics in 21st-century architectural debates is contemporary architecture within historic urban fabric and the integration of cultural heritage buildings with modernity. The synthesis of architecturally and temporally distant spaces through a contemporary language is a challenge both for the city and for professionals, as it requires from the creator a deep knowledge of innovative technologies and philosophical vision. Therefore, the topic is highly relevant, since the spatial and artistic image of any city is formed through temporal intervals, which determines its diversity, growth, and continuous development. The aim of this article is to explore the relationship between the new and the old in connection with the physical world and cultural memory through the discussion of specific objects. During the research process, another no less important issue emerged, related to understanding the visible and invisible instruments that shape architectural form. The direction defined by our research is concentrated on the work of the Italian architect and theorist, Professor at the University of Venice (IUAV), Renato Rizzi. Our interest in his work is driven by two factors. First is the architect’s attitude toward contemporary architecture, about which he states: “*Contemporary architecture is losing its voice; it speaks the language of the market, not of memory*” (R. Rizzi). In other words, Renato Rizzi’s architecture is not commercial.

Second is the form of dialogue he initiates with space, place, and history, which is connected to phenomenology and the poetics of space, and is therefore highly individual. In interviews regarding the restoration of cultural heritage monuments, Rizzi notes: *"Reconstructing history does not mean reproducing an old form unchanged; rather, it requires rereading and interpreting it. Only in this way can we integrate it with contemporary life"* (Rizzi, 2015, public lecture, GTS archive).

Research Methodology. The present study is based on qualitative, comparative–conceptual analysis. The research methods include spatial-formal analysis of architectural objects; interpretation of historical-cultural context; analysis of visual materials (photos, plans, and sections); examination of primary and secondary sources: interviews with the architect, lectures, essays, and academic literature. The study relies on a phenomenological approach where architecture is considered as spatial experience and a material form of cultural memory. Comparative analysis allows the identification of Renato Rizzi's conceptual strategies in the context of contemporary architecture integration into historical environments.

Theoretical framework: the architectural interpretation of place, space, and form as a dialogue with the built environment and history. Within this context, two works by Renato Rizzi are examined the reconstruction of the "Casa d'Arte Futurista Depero" and the Shakespeare Theatre.

Main Part

"Casa d'Arte Futurista Depero" (Figures 1,2) opened in 1959 in a former bank and exchange building located in the historical center of Rovereto, Italy, at the initiative of Italian Futurist artist and designer Fortunato Depero, based on the multidisciplinary concept of the "house-studio" he developed in 1919–1920. Since 2009, after reconstruction, Depero's house reopened as a Futurism museum. The reconstruction was carried out according to the project of architect Renato

Rizzi. His concept was based on conveying the idea of constant movement of Futurism while preserving the building's authentic appearance and updating the museum interior functionally and technologically.



Fig. 1



Fig.2

For Rizzi, the Depero Museum is not only an exhibition space but also an "energy machine," which transforms the relationship between time and space into an architectural form. The architect preserved the historical façade and continued Depero's aesthetics in the interior: decorative system, theatricality of space, and color philosophy (sharp, contrasting, resonant, and dynamic). Rizzi used geometric forms and color ratios in the interior, predominantly authentic white as a counterpoint, red-black, and blue. This solution continues Depero's idea of creating an illusion of "acoustic dynamics" with color tonalities. Moreover, through functional transformation of the interior, the two-story building was turned into an eight-room museum without violating the scale and exterior appearance. At the same time, the reconstruction created an "illusion of

movement" inside, evoking a Futurist experience for the visitor. To develop Depero's idea of "moving art," the interior was divided into modules, allowing dynamic rotation of exhibitions. Thus, the museum became not a historical memorial, but a living Futurist experiment combining two eras. This shows that for Rizzi, restoration is not only a technical or functional act but a philosophical one: not "returning to the past" but "continuously moving toward the future." Rizzi's approach treats history not as "restorable material" but as an initial idea that must be recreated in any era.

Discussion. Thus, Rizzi seeks a critical interpretation of Depero's Futurist movement through newly created spatial layers (two additional levels), which establish a tense dialogue with the old spaces. The new spaces (halls) create transitional spaces in time. Rizzi's intervention approaches theatrical and stenographic thinking and conveys Depero's Futurist atmosphere. In doing so, it emphasizes that new architecture must engage in active dialogue with the old—through rethinking history rather than through stylization. Nevertheless, Rizzi's attitude toward old, historical architecture is contextual. From this perspective, he approaches the vision of Carlo Scarpa, though in a completely different manner. A comparative analysis between interventions carried out in different epochs—within Italian heritage spaces of the 20th and 21st centuries—may seem paradoxical on our part. However, the analysis reveals that Carlo Scarpa interprets the historical context not as a direct response in form or material, but as an integration with history at the level of detail, time, and spatial articulation. His reconstruction of the "Castelvecchio Museum" (Verona, 1959–1973) offers a solution in which new forms interact with historical "layers" with masterful precision. The focus is on the poetry of detail. Scarpa preserves the old and artistically, carefully, and poetically connects it with the new. In contrast, Rizzi creates a new geometric dynamism through spatial modeling. For both architects, the dramaturgy of space, the movement of visitors, and the historical-cultural context are of

fundamental importance. Renato Rizzi, through the restoration of the Casa d'Arte Futurista Depero, created a new type of museum in which history and contemporaneity do not simply complement one another, but are transformed into a new architectural form. Comparative analysis shows that, despite certain shared tendencies with Carlo Scarpa's approach to restoration, Rizzi's reconstruction differs in its philosophy and brings it closer to expressive, Futurist thinking. He succeeded in preserving the energy of Futurism and created a space that functionally, technologically, and aesthetically responds to the museum requirements of the 21st century. Rizzi not only physically restored a historic building but also created an architecture of time and movement—a transitional space between art and time.

The **Shakespeare Theatre** in the city of Gdańsk (Poland) is one of Renato Rizzi's (co-author: Jerzy Limon) most interesting, realized projects, in which the author's cultural and philosophical vision is clearly revealed (Fig. 3).



*Fig. 3. Shakespeare Theatre in Gdańsk.
Architect: Renato Rizzi*

Historical Context. In the 17th century, Gdańsk possessed a rich theatrical tradition. It was an important port and cultural center throughout the Baltic region. An open-type English so-called "Elizabethan" public theatre was located here (Gdański Teatr Szekspirowski, 2016, official statement). It

was one of the first spaces in Eastern Europe where Shakespeare's plays were performed. Ideologically and typologically, it corresponded to London's Globe Theatre.

Theatre Concept. The Shakespeare Theatre opened in 2014. It is located on the site where, in the 17th century, an open wooden stage—the so-called Elizabethan stage—once stood. From an urban planning perspective, the new theatre is positioned between the medieval city and the contemporary urban fabric (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Shakespeare Theatre on the boundary between historic and contemporary development

The foundation of Rizzi's architectural approach is the idea that "the reconstruction of history should not occur through the transfer of old forms, but through rereading and interpretation, which will be synthesized with contemporaneity and speak the language of contemporary architecture" (2013–2015), as he himself notes in interviews, lectures, and architectural essays. The theatre explicitly employs the principle of the urban artifact as a materialized embodiment of the city's history and collective memory. Consequently, it represents a part of the contemporary city's urban structure space for socio-cultural dialogue and historical reconstruction. The massive, geometric, horizontal, smooth black volume metaphorically evokes a "fortress." This is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a semiotic architectural sign. In terms of scale, the theatre does not disrupt the city's urban silhouette and respects the historical context. Its spatial and volumetric composition, as well

as architectural forms and details, are inspired by the brick Gothic style of 14th–15th century Gdańsk. It responds to the city's historical symbol and dominant landmark, the Basilica of the Crown (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Shakespeare Theatre against the background of the historic city. Closed and open roof

Within the "walls" of the theatre, the inner surface of the building contains perimeter "paths" or "streets" that create spaces allowing anyone to move through them without entering the theatre's interior. Through this solution, a new type of public space was created, serving as a continuation of the historic city's urban fabric. Visitors find themselves between historical memory (the medieval space) and contemporary theatrical spaces. From these paths, extraordinary views of the city unfold. (Figs. 6, 7).

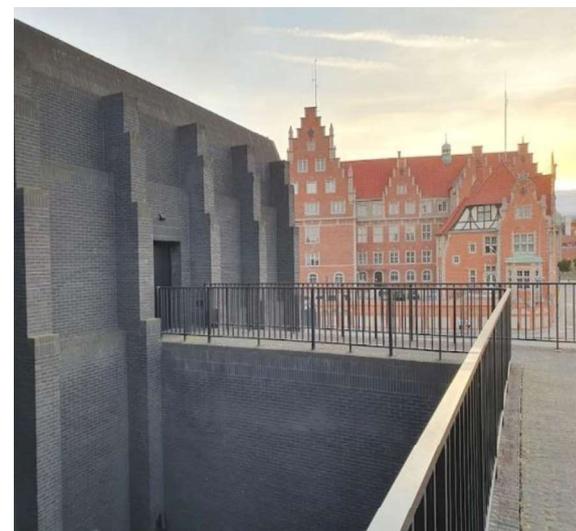


Fig. 6. Panoramic views of the historic and contemporary city from the paths



Fig. 7. Inner paths recreating a medieval atmosphere



Fig. 8. Transformable roof

The black color of the façade contrasts radically with the theatre interior. The interior is much warmer, more social, and dynamic. It directly reflects the spatial archetype of the Elizabethan theatre. The multi-level wooden galleries, together with staircases, create spaces resembling “streets” and “squares,” evoking the image of a small town. The most important innovation is the movable roof, which can open and close within a few minutes, allowing the theatre to function under the open sky (Fig. 8). In this way, the tradition of XVII century open-air performances restored. Also noteworthy is the modular and transformable stage system, which directly relates to the Elizabethan stage typology and becomes multifunctional. The stage adapts to Gdańsk’s cultural events (Fig. 9). Performances are held in three formats: under an open roof (Elizabethan style), in a traditional format, (audience seated facing the stage), and in an arena format (audience seated around the stage).



Fig. 9. Multifunctional, transformable stage space

The Gdańsk Theatre is a flexible theatrical laboratory that transcends the limitations of classical theatre. It combines historical metaphor with contemporary technologies and the building’s geometry. Accordingly, the project stands out both through formal contrast and its engagement with historical context, making it an independent architectural phenomenon.

Discussion. The theatre’s architecture transcends any classical theatre type, as the building itself becomes a place of interaction between space, city, and people. However, the space surrounding the theatre building—enclosed by walls—is isolated from the outside world. It is self-contained and assigns semantic meaning to the structure of the historic city. Its location, form, and scale create a detached yet integrated artifact that mediates between the layers of the old city and contemporary requirements. It is not a nostalgic replica, but an interpretation. The building responds to key principles of urbanism: flexibility as an essential quality of cultural infrastructure; openness as a form of accessible public space; integration as a mechanism for deepening the city’s social fabric; reinterpretation as a continuation of historical texture. The theatre can be understood as a symbolic bridge between the city’s historical past and its contemporary cultural future. It successfully unites architectural interpretations of memory, technological innovations, and urban synthesis. Rizzi’s approach can be associated with the theories of Aldo Rossi. Like Rossi, Rizzi embraces the rigor of form and transforms it into a structure that transcends time. Rossi viewed the city as a carrier of collective memory and architecture as the material embodiment of memory. His buildings connect to the city’s historical layers. Rizzi’s Shakespeare Theatre is constructed on the same principle: it symbolically connects to the history of the “place” and responds through a massive volume, the “emptiness” of interior spaces, minimalist details, and contemporary technologies (the movable roof) that react to the world. The theatre is not merely a “typology,” but a “process.” Thus, Renato Rizzi’s Shakespeare Theatre is based not on

replication of history, but on interpretation: the theatre is not a reconstruction of a 17th-century theatre, but an architectural response to the city's historical memory. With this work, Rizzi opposes the dominant formal experiments in contemporary architecture and openly declares: "*Architecture can be a theatre for the soul—a stage where a person remains alone with oneself.*" For him, architecture is a space of thought that speaks to us. A building does not merely occupy territory and space but creates an urban narrative that gives the city a new cultural identity. The new building, constructed at the beginning of the 21st century, is considered a physical, cultural, and semiotic dialogue with the historical artifact that existed in 17th-century Gdańsk and with the contemporary demands developing today in the field of theatrical architecture.

Conclusions

Thus, in the present article, we analyzed two buildings designed by the Italian architect Renato Rizzi: the "Casa Museo Depero" (1992–2008, Rovereto, Italy) and the "Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre" (2004–2014, Poland) within the context of historical memory. The first involves restoration within an existing medieval architectural framework, with the adaptation of interior spaces; the second represents an abstract reconstruction of cultural memory on the site of an Elizabethan theatre. Both projects are united by Rizzi's conceptual approach: creating spaces through dialogue with the material and immaterial layers of the past, which simultaneously reflect history and contemporaneity. The comparative analysis includes historical approaches, spatial and material strategies, urban roles, and conceptual narratives. The research demonstrates that for Rizzi, historical architecture is not a static heritage, but a participant in a living dialogue that generates new forms and meanings. His architectural language rejects superficial historicist imitation, while at the same time remaining rooted in local identity. For Rizzi, "history is not a static museum remnant, but a living text

whose "reading" and "translation" create a new layer of interpretation". (Rizzi, 2015)

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