

Architecture of the university chapels. The Italian case study

La arquitectura de las capillas universitarias. El caso de Italia

Flavia Radice · Politecnico di Torino (Italia)

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RESUMEN

University chapels are evangelization outposts offering the possibility to give evidence on the presence of the Church in places otherwise not reached from the ordinary pastoral action. In most Italian campuses there is no place for worship. Indeed, Italy presents a variegated phenomenology of university buildings and related chapels, understandable looking at their history. The liturgical problem arises noting that university chapels are places of particular relationship with the sacraments, great invitation to meditation and occasions of architectural experimentation. Helped by some international examples, this search means to enrich the historiographical and critical outline of the architecture-liturgy connection.

ABSTRACT

Las capillas universitarias son puestos avanzados de evangelización que testimonian la presencia de la Iglesia en lugares no accesibles a la pastoral ordinaria. En la mayoría de los campus italianos no hay lugares para el culto. De hecho, Italia presenta una variada fenomenología de edificios universitarios y sus correspondientes capillas, algo comprensible observando su historia. El problema litúrgico aparece cuando nos damos cuenta de que las capillas universitarias son lugares de especial relación con los sacramentos, una gran invitación a la meditación y una ocasión de experimentación arquitectónica. Con la ayuda de algunos ejemplos internacionales, esta búsqueda se propone enriquecer el perfil historiográfico y crítico de la relación entre arquitectura y liturgia.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Chapel; University; Liturgy; Pastoral Action; Italy.

KEYWORDS

Capilla; universidad; liturgia; pastoral; Italia.



Fig. 01. Matteo Giovannelli, Chapel in the Collegio di Spagna, Bologna, 1356/67.



Fig. 02. Francesco Borromini, St. Ivo alla Sapienza, Rome, 1642/60.

University chapels, beyond the specific architectural shape, are essentially evangelization outposts that offer the possibility to announce the Gospel and to give evidence on the steady presence of the Church in places otherwise not reached from the ordinary pastoral action.

To understand the presence and shape of the chapels in Italian universities we must necessarily look at the history of the university. If in the beginning (XI century) there aren't real venues, the first stable presence in the university within the city walls consists of the establishment of ecclesiastical colleges that always host a chapel¹ (Fig. 01).

In the fifteenth century appear the university palaces that enclose in one building all the *Schools*. They are called *Palazzi della Sapienza* (which means Palaces of Wisdom) and are a secular institution. The *Palazzo della Sapienza* of Rome became famous for its chapel built in 1632 by the architect Francesco Borromini (Fig. 02): the church of St. Ivo (for this reason called *alla Sapienza*).

For university building things start to change with the Council of Trent, the emergence and spread of the Society of Jesus and the indications given by St. Charles Borromeo. The latter founded in 1561 in Pavia, the Borromeo College for which are both realized a chapel inside and *exploited* the Romanesque

church of San Giovanni in Borgo, adjacent to the southern side, to meet the pastoral intention turned to the external population².

The institutional model of the colleges/universities will not survive the modern age. From the seventeenth century starts a slow process of decay of the Italian academic world, recovered with the eighteenth-century reforms of Enlightenment mold that leave out the religious aspect in the academic world.

The turning point for the entire ecclesiastical real estate happens in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Following the outbreak of the French Revolution, the suppression of religious orders involves in fact the confiscation of properties, leaving empty and available many convents, monasteries, churches. With the process of national unification, then, the cultural setting of Italian universities shows a considerable opposition in relation to Catholicism, also because of the strong influence of positivism and philosophical rationalism. The unitary state inherits most of the buildings and the more widespread practice becomes the localization of the fast-growing university in the old convent seats.

Thus there is a bizarre exchange: whereas in the new universities there are the old monastic or convent churches, they are abandoned or, at best, turned into *aula magnas* or conference rooms (Fig. 03).



Fig. 03. Study room in St. Felice Monastery Chapel, Pavia, 760 (restored several times in XV and XIX century).



Fig. 04. Uffici Tecnici dell'Università, Salerno University Chapel, Fisciano, 2006.

In describing what is today the panorama of the university chapels, it's necessary to point out that almost all universities are not concentrated in a single building, but occupy urban areas. Indeed typical of our tradition are the cities with university vocation, normally those that home to the most ancient universities, such as Bologna, Pavia, Padua, Pisa or Urbino. In recent decades, however, the phenomenon of decentralization is catching, so that many universities create branches in smaller cities. Very rare in our country is the phenomenon of the university campus outside the city, although in some cases it has been realized.

Very often in Italian cities do not exist university chapels legally erected. Although there is no place for worship, it doesn't mean a lack of an *environment pastoral*, which often, ironically, it's called *University Chapel*. People involved in campus ministry —whether diocesan representatives, members of associations or movements or simply spontaneous aggregations of students— take possession of the most diverse spaces, creating chapels *in fact*. This fact opens to a picturesque landscape: chapels in hospitals for medical schools; chapels in buildings belonging to religious orders related to academic life; more or less congruous rooms used for worship within faculty buildings (Fig. 04). And, last but not the least, the most widespread reality, that is the election of churches of different ages, shapes and dedications³.

Otherwise, it's not possible to generalize saying that places of worship somehow related to the academic world are necessarily *minor* or with poor architectural quality work, nor that they are confined to the historical heritage. Indeed, the international university chapels sometimes are contemporary architecture works of great critical acclaim. Suffice it to mention a few examples such as the chapel at Otaniemi in Finland (1957)⁴, by the Siren, with the beautiful stained glass window that opens the presbytery on the virgin forest surrounding the building (Fig. 05), the MIT Chapel by Eero Saarinen (1950/55)⁵ (Fig. 06), the eccentric chapel of Houston University (1996/97) by Philip Johnson⁶ (Fig. 07), and the chapel of St. Ignatius (Fig. 08) at Seattle University by Steven Holl (1994/97)⁷.

In Italy there are only four university chapels designed and built specifically with this function, and this is due to the fact that these facilities are all located within a campus, whether they are urban or placed outside the towns.

The first temple was designed by Marcello Piacentini, author of the new masterplan for the University City of Rome (1932). The church of the *Divina Sapienza* (Divine Wisdom)⁸ (Fig. 09) was built between 1947 and 1952 at the entirely expense of the Holy See. The request to have a chapel in the university was forwarded to Pius XII by the Rector, since the



Fig. 05. Kaija and Heikki Siren, Aalto University Chapel, Otaniemi (Finland), 1957.

Fig. 06. Eero Saarinen, Kresge Chapel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge (USA), 1950/55.

Fig. 07. Philip Johnson, St. Basil Chapel, St. Thomas University, Houston (USA), 1996/97.

Fig. 08. Steven Holl, St. Ignatius Chapel, Seattle (USA), 1994/97.





Fig. 09. Marcello Piacentini, Divina Sapienza Church, Rome, 1947/52, drawings.



Fig. 10. Ferdinando Reggiori, St. Ferdinand Church, Milan, 1961/62.

original plan did not envisage any place of worship. The building has an ovoid shape polycentric in plan, covered with a dome. Around the central compartment takes place a low porch above which runs a gallery. Today it still homes the chapel of the *La Sapienza* University.

The church of St. Ferdinand in Milan⁹ is commissioned in 1962 by Donna Javotte Bocconi in honor of her father-in-law, founder of the Bocconi University. The architect Ferdinando Reggiori creates a central body clad in brick to which juxtaposes a façade characterized by massive stone cladding (Fig. 10). The internal space consists of a hall. An image of the sixties shows how it has been adapted (Fig. 11) with the insertion of an altar advanced than the original presbytery, flanked by a *pulpit*. It is also interesting the different arrangement of the benches that forming a sort of ellipse orient the faithful to the altar. A sort of women's gallery closes the space surrounding the mosaic *tiburio*. Artificial light is entrusted to a pendant circular chandelier suspended on the center of the hall.

After the Piacentini experience, in the new millennium a second university chapel is provided in Rome. It's the Tor Vergata University one, located in the Roman countryside and dedicated to St. Thomas Aquinas¹⁰. Strongly desired by teachers and students, it is realized between 1999 and 2002 by the architect

Vittorio De Feo (Fig. 12). The interior is marked by a succession of vestibule, lobby, nave and the presbytery. The different angles are mediated by a continuous balcony that wraps almost completely both the aisle and the presbytery that welcomes, as a unique platform, altar, tabernacle, cross, seat and ambo.

The university chapel in the city of Parma (Fig. 13) is located within the campus of the technical-scientific faculties. Responsible for the renovation project as a place of worship is the architect Pietro Pedrelli, a professor in the Faculty of Architecture at the same university. The presence of a chapel is planned from the beginning of the eighties in the development plan of the campus, but the decision to build it was an initiative of the diocese, at the request of faculty, students and staff. The chapel is owned by the university but ordinary expenses are covered by the diocese. Consecrated in 2007, it shows a very humble appearance.

As it can be seen from the images, university chapels don't have peculiarities compared to other buildings for the Catholic worship, for which is understandable the use of any church as university chapel. Also under the liturgical aspect there seems to be no specific needs. Stand out, perhaps, some elements such as the focus on the tabernacle, the space for the choir and sometimes a sort of *women's gallery* space overlooking the hall (as at Bocconi and Tor Vergata) and an inter-

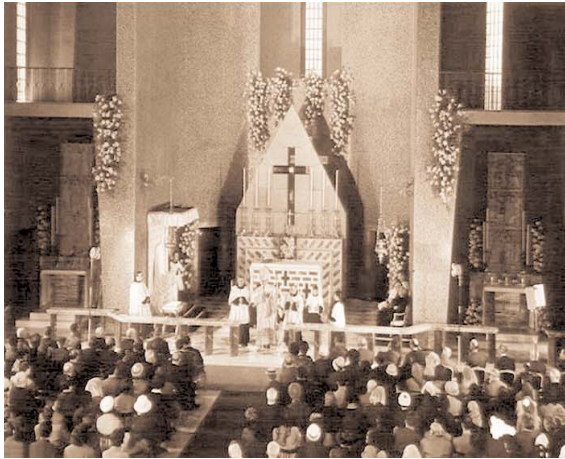
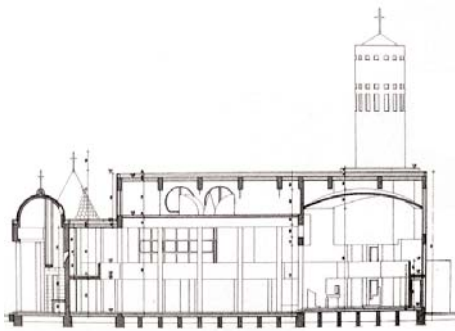


Fig. 11. Ferdinando Reggiori, St. Ferdinand Church, Milan, 1961/62; interior in the sixties and nowadays.
 Fig. 12. Vittorio De Feo, St. Thomas Aquinas Chapel, Tor Vergata, Rome, 1999-2002.
 Fig. 13. Pietro Pedrelli, University Chapel, Parma, 2006/07.



esting relationship with the visual arts, especially painting. E.g. in the chapel of *La Sapienza* in Rome, on the wall behind the altar dominates the large canvas with Divine Wisdom and patron saints (Fig. 14).

Eminent characteristic of the university chapels, however, is that of being places for meditation, silence, dedicated to personal prayer. This is what mostly guides the architectural design. The need for intimacy, tension to the infinite, facilitates, if I may say so, the construction of buildings that evoke the theme of the sacred. It is in these cases a sacred *cultured*, invoked by using point features such as lighting.

Considering the limited diffusion of new university chapels (at least in Italy) and their anonymity in the panorama of religious architecture, it is legitimate to ask: There is still need to build a place to pray at the university? Steven Holl described his design experience in these words: «When I realized the Chapel of St. Ignatius, it was really exciting to think about how many people who, although neither Catholic nor Jesuit, would go inside even just to sit and meditate, to being in a space that can reconcile the reflection. It is a primary human need»¹¹. Within the academic world, with his increasingly frantic, the chapel is a *garrison*, a presence that recalls another Presence. The simple fact of being queries consciences. It is a *monument*: something that that reminds, refers to something else.

The university chapels thus represent an opportunity on many fronts, they are a order for new evangelization as well as space of confrontation for a new architecture for worship. As Sandro Benedetti wrote: «Like the cathedral for the city, the chapel for the university becomes a sign and proposal. It is a sign for those who constitute a knowledge of Christian inspiration and profess their Catholic faith; it is a proposal to those who are *distant* or indifferent with the practice of life of believers and a knowledge appropriate to the teachings of the Gospel. To communicate the importance and specificity of such a *locus* of the sacred, which gives a sacred value to the entire complex, there are architectural forms whose type and beauty must be able to demonstrate what is meant by them»¹².

PROCEDENCE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Author's Archive.

NOTES

(1) Cf. Gian Paolo Brizzi, «Studenti, università, collegi», in *Le università dell'Europa*, ed. Gian Paolo Brizzi et al., vol.4 (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 1991), 196.

(2) Cf. Adriano Peroni, «Il collegio Borromeo. Architettura e decorazione», in *I quattro secoli del Collegio Borromeo di Pavia: studi di storia ed arte pubblicati nel 4. centenario della fondazione, 1561-1961*, VVAA (Pavia: Collegio Borromeo, 1961), 111-131.

(3) Cf. Flavia Radice, *L'architettura delle cappelle universitarie: città, spazi, liturgia* (Thesis, Politecnico di Torino, 2012).

(4) Cf. George Everard Kidder Smith, *Nuove chiese in Europa* (Milan: Comunità, 1964), 60-65; María Luisa Borràs, *Arquitectura finlandesa en Otaniemi: Alvar Aalto, Heikki Siren, Reima Pietilä* (Barcelona: Polígrafa, 1967); *La Cappella di Otaniemi. Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino* (Treviso: Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche, 2009).

(5) Cf. Allan Temko, *Eero Saarinen* (Milan: Saggiatore, 1964), 22-26; Jayne Merkel, *Eero Saarinen* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005), 113-120; Pierluigi Serraino, *Eero Saarinen: 1910-196, espressionista strutturale* (Köln: Taschen, 2006), 37-41.

(6) Cf. Peter Blake, *Philip Johnson* (Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1996); Jeffrey Kipnis, *Philip Johnson recent work* (London: Academy, 1996); «Chapel of St. Basil», accessed October 8, 2013, www.stthom.edu/About/Catholic_Identity/Chapel_of_St_Basil.aqf.

(7) Cf. Kenneth Frampton, *Steven Holl architetto* (Milan: Electa, 2002), 302-320; Andrea Longhi, *Luoghi di culto: architetture 1997-2007* (Milan: Motta, 2008), 318-322.

(8) Cf. Sandro Benedetti, *La cappella della Divina Sapienza nella città universitaria di Roma* (Rome: Gangemi, 1998).

(9) Cf. «Rettoria San Ferdinando», accessed October 8, 2013, www.sanferdinando.org.

(10) Cf. Vittorio De Feo, *La cappella di San Tommaso D'Aquino a Tor Vergata* (Rome: Clear, 2002); Idem, «Chiesa universitaria di San Tommaso d'Aquino. Tor Vergata, Roma 2002», *Casabella* 712 (2003): 54-67.

(11) Carola Vannini and Massimiliano Valli, ed., *Saper credere in architettura: sessantuno domande a Steven Holl* (Napoli: Clean, 2005), 36.

(12) Benedetti, *La cappella della Divina Sapienza*, 12.



Fig. 14. Giovanni Brancaccio, Christ the Divine Master and Saints, Divina Sapienza Church, Rome, 1948.