



Carlo Ceschi and the Restoration of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome

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Abstract. The article ‘Carlo Ceschi and the Restoration of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome’ is part of the research project carried out in Rome, under the guidance of Professor Dr. Claudio Varagnoli from G.D’ Annunzio University. Carlo Ceschi, architect, played a leading role in restoration works throughout Italy during the 20th century, working in the regions of Liguria, Puglia and Lazio. The Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo, built in the 5th century, is considered one of the most important of the Paleo-Christian period, and also one of the two fundamental monuments of religious architecture in Europe and also the masterpiece of restoration carried out by the architect. Its oriental influence and its original form are valued in its importation. The article aims to present these characters, Carlo Ceschi and the Church and, based on the theme, address the main issues that involved the restoration and understanding of its symbolic value.

Keywords: Restoration · Carlo Ceschi · Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo

1 Introduction

This is an article resulting from a post-doctoral research, conducted in Rome under the guidance of Professor and architect Dr. Claudio Varagnoli from the Università degli studi G.D’ Annunzio. This work addresses the encounter between the architect Carlo Ceschi and the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo, in Rome, for its restoration.

The architect’s experience and importance in the field made him the author of several restorative interventions, such as the buildings destroyed by the War in Genoa and Bari, and other historical examples, such as the Arch of Titus, among many other monuments that could be cited.

However, his encounter with this important Christian temple from the Middle Ages made it his most complex work due to the grandeur and symbolism of the Church, the conceptual importance of the research and, finally, the union between European institutions and countries for the completion of the work.

It was decided to structure the article by dividing it into three chapters. The first covers the recognition of the architect and his professional trajectory; the second chapter deals with the description and importance of the Church, and finally, the third chapter expounds on the architect’s encounter with the work. It shows the solutions presented for understanding one of the most important interventions in Christian buildings of the

twentieth century: Carlo Ceschi and the restoration of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo.

The methodology and the technical and theoretical framework valued the primary sources, resulting from visits to the archives in Rome and to the Church for surveys and photographs.

The final considerations indicate the legacy of the architect's work and his investigation, involving all aspects of the church, from its construction to the moment of restoration.

2 The Architect Carlo Ceschi

The work of the Italian architect Carlo Ceschi (1904–1973) was marked by restoration interventions in Italy after the world wars, interconnecting the theoretical and constructive aspects of the interventions. Some words in the architect's quote bring a greater understanding of the theme (CESCHI, 1962).

We know well that the problems concerning artistic heritage are undoubtedly many and complex. They would provide vast material for multiple considerations not only on the prevailing cultural, scientific, and artistic level, but also at the most contingent level of political, social, and economic situations; especially reflected in the particular climate of our time and in the strange, fickle, and contradictory sensibilities of our present-day society.¹

The citation of the architect Carlo Ceschi in 1962 keeps the topicality of those who recognise the importance of the Preservation of Cultural Heritage and all its relationships. In addition to culture - art and science - it regards, as an integral part, the political and economic situation and the role of society.

His academic background was completed in 1923 at the University of Rome (*Università degli Studi di Roma 'La Sapienza'*), and from an early age, Ceschi demonstrated his interest in archaeology and restoration. In his early years, he participated in archaeological excavations in Malta and Albania alongside Professor *Luigi Ugolini*.²

From 1933 he was selected by the Superintendence of Assets and Monuments, working in the regions of Puglia, Liguria and Lazio, standing out in the restoration of buildings in some cities of these regions, such as Genoa, Bari and Rome.

In 1952, the architect assumed the position of Superintendent of Assets and Monuments of Lazio. He remained until 1964, working in Rome and other centres of the Region on important works that reaffirmed his recognition in the science of Restoration.

Just to name a few interventions, there are the restoration actions of the Arch of Constantine, the Church of *S. Maria in Cosmedin*, proposals for rehabilitating the *Tor*

¹ Sappiamo troppo bene che i problemi riguardanti il patrimonio artistico sono indubbiamente molti e complesso. Essi fornirebbero ampia materia per molteplici considerazioni non soltanto sul piano culturale, scientifico ed artistico sempre dominante, ma anche su quello più contingente delle situazioni politiche, sociali ed economiche; specialmente si riflesse nel particolare clima del nostro tempo e nella strana, volubile e contraddittoria sensibilità della nostra società attuale. (Author's translation).

² Luigi Maria Ugolini (1895–1936) - Italian archaeologist.

di Nona neighbourhood and *Via Appia*, both intended to defend and enhance the urban and rural landscape.

In fact, it can be said that Carlo Ceschi was one of the first in Italy to protect monuments and landscapes to curb the disorderly and savage occupation attempts of these sites.

Finally, the study and work that crowned his career: the restoration of Santo Stefano Rotondo, an example of great cultural, historical, architectural, and religious interest, was recognised beyond Italy as a Cultural Heritage.

3 The Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo

The Basilica of St. Stefano Rotondo on the Caelian Hill (as it is also known) was built in the fifth century and is considered one of the most important of the Paleo-Christian period, and also one of the fundamental monuments of religious architecture in Europe.

Some quotes at different times revere it as “the last masterpiece of the Paleo-Christian era and the most beautiful circular church in the West” (JUHAR, 1963).

More than being the last masterpiece, “it can be considered as the last great monumental architecture built at the end of antiquity in Rome in its tradition of great imperial basilicas, whether profane or Christian” (CARRATÙ, 2014).

Its grandeur can be seen in Fig. 1 where the encounter between the circular space and the great ceiling height can be seen, both flooded by the light of the windows that value the medieval aesthetics of the building.



Fig. 1. Interior of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo. Source: Photography by the author Maria Clara Amado Martins

The Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo carries some primacies from its inception, such as the fact that it was the first church in Rome to have a circular plan, as seen in Fig. 2. It was consecrated by Pope Simplicius I (468-472-483) to the first martyr Saint Stephanus as indicated in the *Liber Pontificalis* and as quoted by the author KAUTREHEIMER (1935), which reinforces the sense of primacy, since Stephanus is considered the first Christian martyr to die for his faith in 35 A.D. The first circular church, the first Christian martyr.

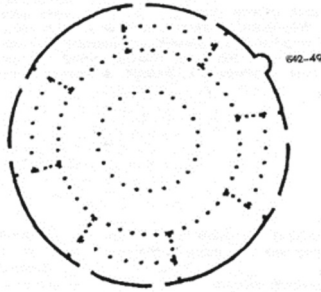


Fig. 2. Original plan of the Church of S Stefano Rotondo (5th century). Source: ICCROM - Centro internazionale di studi per la conservazione ed il restauro dei beni culturali. “With permission of ICCROM Archives”

The Church bears the values that linked it to the East since its foundation, which is compared with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, built in 335 AD under Emperor Constantine’s instruction and has a circular plan. This relationship is not surprising since Rome hosted numerous Greek religious colonies, which may be a path to understanding Eastern influence.

Located on the highest part of Caelian Hill, the building stands out in the landscape and imposes itself on the route as a focal point from the walker’s perspective, whichever direction he chooses to reach it.

The building is an authentic Paleo-Christian building from the fifth century and is not an adaptation of a previous Roman building or an ancient Christian church. Below the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo are the remains of a Roman house with a planimetric solution very different from the Church, which for many years brought doubts about the origin of the Church.

The plan and its three concentric rings, the simplicity of the roofing, the scheme of the Greek cross and its four chapels are elements that were probably taken from Eastern Christian architecture.

However, from the fifth century to the Modern era, the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo underwent some formal changes, although none of them changed its circular typology. These changes were restricted to their internal configuration and, in some cases, with changes to the original dimensions.

The interventions took place under the determination of the pontiffs, and the two most relevant took place by Pope Hadrian I in the eighth century and by Leon Baptista Alberti in the fifteenth century, as an appointment from Pope Nicola V.

In the intervention carried out by Leon Baptista Alberti – 1453, the architect suppressed the outer ring with three arms of the Greek cross, reducing the diameter from 66 to 46 m, incorporating the columns and arches of the second ring into the perimeter wall, closing numerous windows and inserting the remaining Renaissance grids that gave the church a new appearance and new spatial and structural characteristics, which remain to this day.

4 Carlo Ceschi and the Restoration of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo

The architect Ceschi returned to Rome in 1952 to assume the Superintendence of Assets and Monuments of Lazio and came across the influential Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo in an absolute state of degradation, with structural problems and closed to the public.

Original documents of the Monuments Superintendence were found in files such as “minutes, technical reports, quotations and graphical surveys” (primary source) that prove the need for intervention, as demonstrated in Ceschi’s communication to Rev. Tandoi³, dated November 19, 1955, as shown below in Fig. 3:

In this document, Ceschi emphasises the need for a first stage of services “including the recovery of roofs, the recovery of structural damage and windows, as well as the recovery of plaster from the dome drum, highlighting that only after these measures, the other stages of restoration must be initiated” (ICCROM, 1955).

According to the document, the sequential restoration actions included “the execution of new paving, recovery of the frescoes, the two chapels, the entrance span and, eventually, archaeological excavations in parts of the building to make it to the original aspect”.

For the architect Ceschi, an archaeological investigation was needed in the building to decide about the various versions of the origin of that temple. Only after the result of these procedures, the solution to be adopted would become credible. The theoretical basis of his research brings to light the importance of a comprehensive study of architectural work for the best conceptual decision.

And that’s what happened. While the building was structurally supported and received the first conservation actions, excavations also took place.

And in fact, his excavations brought to light the foundations of an original liturgical arrangement, a long transept passage in the shape of a ‘T’ with a liturgical function, installed in the central room of the church on the northeast-southwest axis, on which transverse walls were grafted to the northeast, delimiting the area of the presbytery. The remains of this layout are still discernible and were highlighted by the new floor.

It is important to note that the excavations conducted by Ceschi in the 1950s and 1960s unveiled doubts about its formal origin, correcting old versions that supported the pre-existence of a pagan construction on that site. Under the tutelage of Ceschi, theories that the temple was already born Christian were proven, and thus, the historiography of the building’s architecture was definitively corrected.

³ Rev. Father Michele Tandoi is the Procurator of the Pontifical Germanic College Ungaric, to which the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo is linked.

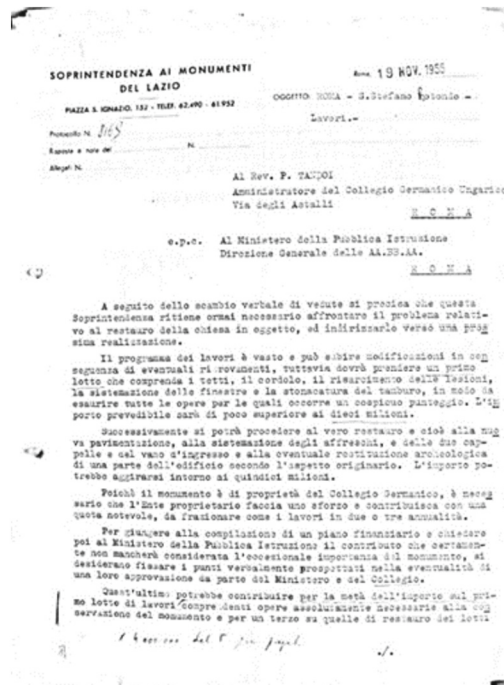


Fig. 3. Letter from Carlo Ceschi to Rev. Tandoi signed in 1955. Source: ICCROM - Centro internazionale di studi per la conservazione ed il restauro dei beni culturali. "With permission of ICCROM Archives"

For the architect, the 'Unity' of the Christian temple needed to be recovered. He understood that after many interventions, the Church had lost its original characteristics.

In this period, in addition to the documents already mentioned, restoration plans and photographs of the excavations were found in different periods of the twentieth century with the presence of Carlo Ceschi, which can also prove the close relationship between the architect and the building, as shown in Fig. 4.

But considering the relevance of the Church, the voluminous work to be done and the expenses that would result from the interventions, this restoration became one of the most important of the twentieth century in the Christian world. The structural solutions initially taken were measures to protect the asset, but there was still much to be done. The work became very expensive, and a question arose: who would finance such a complex work?

Ceschi argues that because it is the monument owned by the Germanic Ungaric College, it is necessary for the 'owner entity' to make an effort and contribute with important quotas, being able to fraction them into two or three annuities.

He also proposes "that a financial plan be compiled in order to request the Ministry of Public Instruction to contribute given the exceptional importance of the monument". The architect suggests the possibility of financial division between the institutions mentioned above.



Fig. 4. Photograph of the archaeological excavations of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo, 1970. Source: ICCROM - Centro internazionale di studi per la conservazione ed il restauro dei beni culturali. “With permission of ICCROM Archives”

Here began a Christian movement never seen before for the union of efforts that led to the restoration of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo.

Since then, many letters have been exchanged, in which the high cost of supporting the church is evidenced until the foundation of the International Center for Renewal/Restoration of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo in 1962.

At this point, new characters emerged. The participation of the ‘Centro internazionale di studi per la conservazione ed il Restauro dei beni culturali’ (ICCROM) is consolidated, and a great worldwide effort is perceived through the accession of other countries to raise the necessary funds for the restoration and not just shoring works.

It is decided to involve three institutions and their respective representatives: the Superintendence of Assets and Monuments of Rome with Prof. Carlo Ceschi, the German-Ungharic College with Don Giuseppe Juhar and ICCROM with Dr Harold J. Plenderleith. The International Centre of Studies for the Restoration of Santo Stefano Rotondo is born from this union.

Scientific, financial and propaganda committees were formed. The architect Carlo Ceschi was presented as an honorary member of the scientific committee.

With the worldwide efforts, other disciplines involved in restoring the Church emerged, such as Music. The celebration date of 1500 years of the Church’s existence is also approaching, and several events take place for discussion and fundraising.

In the year 1963, interdisciplinarity is evidenced by the article published in the periodical *Il Messaggero* by *Don Giuseppe Juhar* with the title “Santo Stefano Rotondo – A new symphony”, when the creation of a symphony specially composed for the Paleocristian church by the Hungarian composer *Sándor Veress* is announced, with the title ‘Symphony on Santo Stefano Rotondo on Monte Celio’ to commemorate 1500 years

of that “which is considered the most beautiful circular church in the West” (JUHAR, 1963).

The composition of the symphony was thus explained: “The composer of the church drew in space. The three times of the composition will correspond to the three circular spaces, which in their concentration condense the light towards the centre” (JUHAR, 1963).

The article brings at its heart the importance of the creation of the International Restoration Centre of Santo Stefano Rotondo for the mobilisation of various countries of the world for the restoration of the Church, recognised as a treasure of sacred art.

The creation of the Centre brings new actors to the scene and, like the composer Sándor Veress and his symphony, reaffirms the values of the cultural, spiritual heritage represented by the church of Santo Stefano Rotondo, which becomes a necessary symbol for ecumenical strengthening through its restoration.

Throughout the research, the documents found well express this religious feeling that was impregnated in the world by the restoration of Santo Stefano Rotondo.

For the first time, the city and the world have the concrete hope of reclaiming this hidden and abandoned treasure of art and its current state of affairs. However, its restoration should be evaluated from a different point of view than a romantic case.

The restoration of the Church reflects the life, the need of the spirit and the activity of the human soul, which perceives the centres of divine strength in the sacred environments. Therefore, it aims to place the Caelian Hill church in the place it deserves on the scale of the values of our world’s spiritual and artistic heritage.

5 Final Considerations

It was possible to verify that the involvement of the architect Carlo Ceschi with the restoration works of this church lasted about 20 years, more specifically, from 1952, when he assumed the Superintendence of Monuments of Lazio, until 1973, when he died.

This is because, even though he was no longer a member of the Superintendence, his experience made him remain in restorative activities as an honorary member of the Scientific Committee.

The architect, who was already a professor at the University of Rome, simultaneously with the restoration, becomes one of the teachers of the ICCROM Cultural Heritage course, along with other teachers such as *Leonardo Benévolo*, *Robert Brichet*, *Brian Field*, among other names that reverberated as references in the scenario of teaching and practice of Cultural Heritage.

In the research about the lessons of the architect, it was possible to observe that his curriculum included the applicability of the restoration of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo in assignments for students, which denoted the importance of this restoration for his life.

Surveys and studies on the solutions defended by Carlo Ceschi were found in the literature. It is important to remember his defence of the Unity of the work and the return of some layers of time that placed it again as an example of medieval architecture.

His theoretical search found support in names such as Camillo Boito and Cesare Brandi, who defended at different times the minimal intervention in the building.

While Boito (1836–1914) defended the demolition of elements added over time that differed from the original style of construction, Brandi (1906–1988) argued that restoration should re-establish the potential unity of the work of art whenever possible.

Such conceptual positions converged to Ceschi's understanding at that time, although they can be reinterpreted at any time, considering restoration to be a subjective matter.

At the time of his death, the work of the Church was still going on. So, Ceschi was not alive to see its whole accomplishment. Nonetheless, he, indeed, intensively experienced the restoration.

About this work, we read by some authors of its extreme complexity and that this restoration crowned the work of Ceschi, as the quotation of Giorgio Rosi (1973) below:

When completing this last work, which would have splendidly crowned his career as a scholar and technician, Carlo Ceschi suddenly disappeared, leaving almost finished a work of exceptional historical interest.⁴

The subject "Restoration" is subjective, but Ceschi's decision to seek Unity and the appreciation of his medieval time as a symbol of a Christianity affirmation moment finds conceptual support, not only for the theoretical positions but also for the strenuous search for each stone he found in the excavations.

The fact is that studies show that all other professionals who later worked on its restoration seek the sources and research of the architect.

Today, although open to the public and with liturgical acts, there are still excerpts in excavation marked by the architect in his studies. Therefore, when entering the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo, the visitor feels that Carlo Ceschi is there, present.

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⁴ Al momento di concludere quest'ultimo lavoro, che avrebbe splendidamente coronato la sua carriera di studioso e di tecnico, Carlo Ceschi è improvvisamente scomparso lasciando quasi ultimata un'opera di un interesse storico eccezionale (Author's translation).

Arquivos e Bibliotecas

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