

Editors C. Mileto, F. Vegas, A. Hueto-Escobar, S. Manzano-Fernández

HISTORIC SETTLEMENTS

CONSERVATION, REGENERATION AND MANAGEMENT



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Universitat Politècnica de València

Editors

C. Mileto, F. Vegas, A. Hueto-Escobar, S. Manzano-Fernández

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HISTORIC SETTLEMENTS. CONSERVATION, REGENERATION AND MANAGEMENT

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Preface

C. Mileto, F. Vegas, A. Hueto-Escobar, S. Manzano-Fernández

Research Centre for Architecture, Heritage and Management for Sustainable Development (PEGASO),
Universitat Politècnica de València, Valencia, Spain

The “HERITAGE2025 International Conference on Earthen and Vernacular Heritage: Conservation, Adaptive Reuse and Urban Regeneration” has been organized within the framework of three research projects. The first of these, the research project “**Earth4Future** - Sustainable Reuse of Earthen Architecture and its Lessons for Contemporary Architecture”, is funded by the Spanish Ministry for Science and Innovation (PID2022-139154OB-I00) and directed by the Universitat Politècnica de València. The second research project, “**Re-Habitat**– Restoration and sustainable rehabilitation of traditional dwellings in historic contexts”, is funded by the Department of Innovation, Universities, Science and Digital Society of the Generalitat Valenciana (CIAICO/2022/035) and directed by the Universitat Politècnica de Valencia. Finally, the research project “**ENACT 15mc** Envisioning Neighbourhoods and Co-Creating Thriving Communities in the 15-Minute City” is cofunded by the European Union (through Driving Urban Transitions Partnership, DUT, AEI, PCI2023-145946-2) and directed by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, in collaboration with other associations, bodies, and universities including the Universitat Politècnica de València.

The project “**Earth4Future** Sustainable Reuse of Earthen Architecture and its Lessons for Contemporary Architecture”, with a research team directed by the Universitat Politècnica de València, together with other universities both within and outside Spain, primarily aims to research the energy behaviour and viability of compatible interventions in earthen constructions within Spain. This seeks to identify solutions which increase energy efficiency and reduce emissions without jeopardising cultural, heritage, and social values. This project analyses issues such as respect for heritage values, real economic cost, environmental impact, and energy efficiency based on studies carried out on historic earthen constructions together with contemporary applications of earthen techniques in new constructions.

Furthermore, the project “**Re-Habitat**– Restoration and sustainable rehabilitation of traditional dwellings in historic contexts”, with a research team led by the Universitat Politècnica de València and made up of researchers from universities both within and outside Spain, focuses on the analysis of historic buildings in urban and rural settings. By analysing similar parameters within the Comunidad Valenciana, it seeks to propose guidelines and intervention criteria that are compatible with heritage and are economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and energy efficient.

Analysis on a larger scale features the project “**ENACT 15mc** Envisioning Neighbourhoods and Co-Creating Thriving Communities in the 15-Minute City” directed by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and different collaborators. This project examines the potential of redesigning historic urban spaces and improving quality of life, active mobility, accessibility and social relations, in order to achieve the concept of “15-minute cities”, through case studies such as Trondheim, Gdańsk, Valencia and Oxford.

The three projects are considered complementary, as they all seek to promote sustainable architecture and urbanism linked to heritage, energy efficiency, and community development, always aiming to strike a balance between tradition and innovation. This is a response to critical challenges such as climate change, population loss, the disappearance of traditional crafts, and the need for vibrant, inclusive, and resilient cities. This further highlights the pressing need to promote research, increasing awareness and action in multiple sectors, actively aiding the transition to more sustainable societies in terms of heritage and urbanism.

Given that these research projects display certain commonalities, particularly in relation to the challenges and perspectives for the future detailed above, and offer the potential for joint discussion, the main themes have been combined in the HERITAGE2025 International Conference. The themes established for the conference are: **1. Vernacular architecture** (study and cataloguing of vernacular architecture; study of traditional materials, techniques and construction crafts; mechanisms of sustainability of vernacular architecture; restoration and conservation of vernacular architecture; energy efficiency and sustainable design projects; management and maintenance); **2. Earthen architecture** (study and cataloguing of earthen architecture; study of traditional materials, techniques and construction crafts; mechanisms of sustainability in earthen architecture; restoration and conservation of earthen architecture; energy efficiency and sustainable design projects; management and maintenance), **3. Urban and rural historical sites** (studies of historic urban and rural areas; intervention and regeneration projects; management and maintenance, threats and opportunities in historic areas: tourism, infrastructure and identity; proximity economy and traditional commerce in historic contexts); **4. From tradition to contemporaneity** (contemporary projects inspired by tradition; traditional sustainability mechanisms applied to contemporary architecture; integration of contemporary projects in historical contexts; reinterpretation of traditional techniques for their application in contemporary architecture).

The Scientific Committee is made up of 89 renowned researchers and specialists in the themes analysed, hailing from 25 different countries from five continents. All the contributions to the conference – abstracts as well as final texts – have been subject to a strict peer review evaluation system by the members of the Scientific Committee. Of the 244 proposals submitted, a total of 150 papers written by 328 authors from 30 countries of five continents has been selected for final publication.

The papers selected have been published in three volumes appearing in print and online format and titled *Vernacular Heritage: Documentation, Conservation and Adaptive Reuse*, *Earthen Heritage: Conservation, Adaptive Reuse and Sustainable Design*, and *Historic Settlements: Conservation, Regeneration and Management*.

The “HERITAGE2025 International Conference on Earthen and Vernacular Heritage: Conservation, Adaptive Reuse and Urban Regeneration” was held on 10-12 September 2025 at the Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain. The conference was carried out with the sponsorship of: WHITRAP – World Heritage Institute of Training and Research for the Asia and Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO; ISCARSAH – International Scientific Committee on the Analysis and Restoration of Structures of Architectural Heritage, technical committee of ICOMOS; ICOMOS CIAV – International Council on Monuments and Sites; International Committee of Vernacular Architecture; ICOMOS ISCEAH – International Scientific Committee in Earthen Architectural Heritage; and PROTERRA – Ibero-American Network of Architecture and Earthen Construction. The organization, publication and development of the conference was made possible by funding from the Spanish Ministry for Science and Innovation for the research project “Earth4Future - Sustainable Reuse of Earthen Architecture and its Lessons for Contemporary Architecture” (PID2022-139154OB-I00) and the Department of Innovation, Universities, Science and Digital Society of the Generalitat Valenciana for the project “RE-HABITAT – Restoration and sustainable rehabilitation of traditional dwellings in historic contexts” (CIAICO/2022/035). The Higher Technical School of Architecture, PEGASO - Research Centre for Architecture, Heritage and Management for Sustainable Development, and the Department of Architectural Composition of the Universitat Politècnica de Valencia have also contributed to the development of this conference.

Finally, we wish to thank the authors who have contributed to the quality, range, diversity, and richness of the publication with their papers and studies. We are indebted to all the members of the advisory and scientific committees for their work throughout the entire review process for abstracts and papers. And above all, we would like to thank the organizing committee for their invaluable help in setting up the conference, the style and language reviewers for their corrections, and all collaborators for their inestimable work in the management and organization of each and every phase of the process.

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Holy Spaces, Contemporary Art: Reuse and Conservation in Naples' Churches (Italy)

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Abstract

The article explores the effects of contemporary art on heritage preservation in the adaptive reuse of decommissioned churches, with a focus on the case study of the Rione Sanità in Naples (Italy). The growing secularisation and the progressive abandonment of churches have led to the need to find new uses for these spaces, which were once places of worship. In this context, contemporary art has played a central role in breathing new life into these buildings, transforming them into cultural spaces, art galleries, creative studios, or places of reflection. However, this process is not without challenges. The artistic transformations of churches risk compromising their original meaning and altering their architectural integrity, leading to the loss of significant historical and symbolic value. In the context of the Rione Sanità, the use of art as a tool for regeneration has had a significant impact on the neighbourhood, but the implications of this type of reuse require a more in-depth reflection on its long-term consequences.

Keywords: adaptive reuse; community involvement; urban regeneration; bottom-up approach

1. Introduction

"The function should be a tool, not a goal, of conservation" (Fiorani, 2017, p. 119). With these words, Donatella Fiorani highlights the complex challenge of selecting appropriate functions for decommissioned ecclesiastical heritage. This issue has grown more urgent amid Western secularisation, prompting a broad debate among institutions, Vatican offices, local communities, and scholars on strategies for preserving and repurposing these buildings (Coomans, 2012; Fiorani et al., 2017; Chavardés & Dufieux, 2018; Capanni, 2019; Montanari 2021). Reassigning new functions to sacred buildings requires integrating architectural restoration, conservation methodologies, and urban regeneration, while

also addressing their sociological and symbolic significance (Casiello et al., 2011; Russo, 2018). The abandonment of these structures not only leads to a loss of cultural identity but also affects urban life, contributing to material and environmental degradation, marginalization, and missed opportunities for community engagement.

In this context, art – historically linked to sacred architecture – serves as a strategic tool for adaptive reuse. This study examines ongoing experiments employing contemporary art to repurpose religious spaces, critically assessing their processes and effects, both positive and problematic. Using Naples and the Sanità district as a case study, it explores how these initiatives

balance functional adaptation with the preservation of religious heritage's material and intangible values. Additionally, these projects aim to enhance urban vitality and foster social innovation by involving young professionals, artists, researchers, and vulnerable communities, promoting a sustainable and respectful model of reuse (Cerreto et al., 2020).

2. A framework of strategies

Contemporary art acts as a catalyst for the material and intangible regeneration of disused churches, reinterpreting their values and redefining their role within the community (Fig. 1). Across different contexts, artistic interventions establish diverse forms of dialogue with these spaces, yielding varied outcomes – some fostering integration and renewal, others generating challenges in the relationship between contemporary art and sacred architecture, in both material and immaterial form (Pollone, 2024). To streamline a broad and complex discussion, we can identify, at this stage of the research, four main types of intervention – subject, of course, to further refinement: the commissioning of works by internationally renowned artists to reactivate these spaces, even temporarily (1); the conversion of churches into museums (2); their transformation into creative studios (3); the reinterpretation of the church itself as raw material for a contemporary artwork (4).

1. A widely adopted approach involves the temporary use of site-specific installations to raise funds for the restoration of deconsecrated churches. This strategy brings new vitality to these buildings by hosting an ever-changing array of artworks while also raising questions about the compatibility between the hosted works and the architectural space. In some cases, these initiatives contribute to the implementation of phased conservation projects, often leading to the establishment of dedicated associations to support such efforts. This phenomenon appears globally. Among them

are St. Andrew's Collegiate Chapel in West Philadelphia and the 'ghost church' of St. George in the Czech Republic. In both cases, highly immersive installations have rekindled public interest in the host churches while prompting reflection on their identity. Installation art proves to be a powerful medium for amplifying the spatial and evocative qualities of sacred architecture, creating an immersive, multisensory experience that dissolves the boundary between artwork and environment (Koestlé-Cate, 2016, p. 27). The success of these initiatives, which offer sustainable models with minimal alterations, is also closely linked to the principles of a 'low-entropy economy' – an approach that prioritizes the dematerialization of interventions, considering heritage sites as places for new experiences and, consequently, new uses (Cerreto et al., 2021).

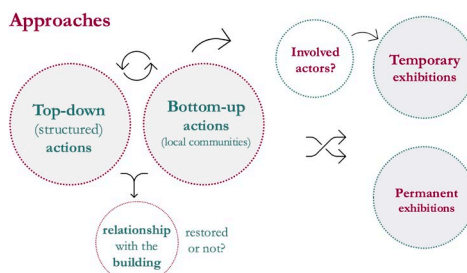


Fig. 1 – Scheme of possible approaches to the reuse of ecclesiastical spaces (Authors).

2. In this case, the transformation stems from a forward-looking vision of the role that sacred buildings can play in contemporary cultural discourse. In many instances, gallerists, drawn to the aesthetic appeal of the building's state of decay, initiate projects to reopen churches as contemporary art centres. Some of these initiatives establish dedicated programs to support the architectural repurposing, while others utilise former churches to house art collections lacking permanent exhibition spaces. Early examples of this approach

- include the JTG Detroit Project, curated by gallerist Paul Johnson in the former Woods Cathedral in Detroit (USA), and the restoration of San Rocco Church in Como, Italy, supported by the Volta Association. In some experiences, the virtual component becomes predominant, as in the Artothèque of Mons, Belgium (Titeux, 2018). Other cases, such as the Church of Sant' Agnese in Padua (now home to the Fondazione Alberto Peruzzo) and Berlin's brutalist Church of St. Agnes (now König Galerie), have undergone significant restorations, involving modifications to their surfaces to accommodate their new function (Dölle, 2018; Trevisan & Peruzzo, 2022).
3. In other cases, deconsecrated churches have been transformed into artist studios – spaces for creative exploration that interact with their architectural setting, either permanently or temporarily. Notable examples include St. Etheldreda's Church in Norwich (UK), which has hosted an artist studio since 1980, and a former church in Harlem (USA) that became a workspace for the artist Julie Mehretu during the production of monumental pieces for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. These spaces are valued not only for their architectural uniqueness but also for their emotional and inspirational potential. In some cases, this artistic repurposing fosters community engagement through bottom-up initiatives. Events such as *Art in Romney Marsh* (AiRM), held within medieval churches in southeast England, and workshops at Berwick Church encourage direct interaction between artists and the public, prompting debate on art, architecture, and community. In this process, contemporary art plays a crucial role – not only as a catalyst but also as a tool for reintegrating places of worship into everyday life. These buildings become hubs for art and reflection.
 4. Finally, a deconsecrated church can itself become an artwork – its structure and surfaces serving as a medium for artistic reinvention. In such cases, interventions often treat the church as an incomplete and malleable entity rather than a finished historical artifact, challenging conventional perceptions of the space. These transformations differ in scope and effect. Notable examples include the Church of San Juan Bautista de Alarcón (Fernández-Cobián, 2015, p. 61–72) and the 'Kaos Temple' in Llanera (formerly the Church of Santa Barbara, Spain) (Fernández-Cobián, 2022), where extensive artistic interventions have redefined the buildings' roles, reshaping them into spaces for contemporary cultural expression without, however, truly considering the value of the pre-existing structures.

3. A perspective from Naples

The historic centre of Naples, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with over six hundred places of worship, presents a paradigmatic case for analysing the phenomenon of the decommissioning and reuse of religious architecture. Alongside the grand ecclesiastical complexes, a microcosm of smaller sacred spaces survives, often overlooked despite their historical and decorative value. The gradual abandonment or inappropriate repurposing of these buildings – converted into commercial spaces, parking lots, or exhibitions with no artistic relevance – highlights a decline in awareness of their value, once a reflection of the social status of their patrons (Russo, 2017).

Approximately 50% of the closed churches in Naples belong to confraternities (Alabiso et al., 2016, p. 49) whose role has diminished over time, depriving these buildings of their primary reason for preservation. This structural crisis, seemingly at odds with UNESCO protection status, has been partially (Russo, 2017, p. 276) addressed by the Curia, which in 2011 launched a call for

proposals to repurpose abandoned sacred spaces for cultural, spiritual, and educational use. These spaces were granted free of charge to associations and institutions with the condition that they be maintained in a safe and accessible state. Initiated before similar interventions in other European contexts, this initiative has led to the reopening of some places of worship, now transformed into artisan workshops, exhibition halls, and conference venues.¹ (Alabisio et al., 2016, p. 39).

At the same time, institutional projects focusing on contemporary art – falling within the first category identified in the previous section – have promoted site-specific exhibitions in churches such as Santa Luciella (Valenti, 2024, p. 114–116), Santissimi Filippo e Giacomo², Carminiello a Toledo, San Giuseppe delle Scalze, and Santa Croce al Mercato. Moreover, since 2021, the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II (V. Russo, S. Pollone, L. Romano) and the TU Delft (M.T.A van Thoor) have been conducting annual international workshops – “Adaptive design for historic churches and their context” – aimed at engaging international students in proposals for the reuse of Naples' unused heritage, in close collaboration with local institutions and associations such as *L'Altra Napoli*.³

3.1. The case of *Rione Sanità*: a bottom-up regeneration model

To explore the positive and negative impacts of contemporary art in disused churches, the emblematic case of *Rione Sanità* is analysed (Giammetti, 2022; Loffredo, 2022, p. 178). This district hosts a wide range of initiatives that allow for a comparative analysis of various interventions within a difficult social context, shaped by a shared approach to heritage conservation and a distinct vision of religious spaces. This setting provides deeper insight into the motivations behind operational choices and their long-term implications.

Rione Sanità represents an exemplary case of bottom-up urban regeneration where sacred heritage has become the cornerstone of a broader transformation process, affecting not only places of worship but also the entire social and urban fabric. Marginalised since the 19th century, the neighbourhood has activated a complex dialogue between tradition and innovation, leveraging art and culture as instruments of redemption and participation (Fig. 2). The regeneration began in the 2000s, driven by the new parish priest of the Basilica of Santa Maria della Sanità and supported by foundations, associations, and professionals. A key early initiative transformed the Church of San Gennaro Extra Moenia –

¹ Smaller and well-preserved buildings have recently been repurposed. Examples include the Arciconfraternita di Santa Maria delle Grazie (2014, Grimaldi bookstore), San Rocco in Chiaia (2012, Fondazione Pietà dei Turchini), and San Nicola a Pistaso (2012, AREN). The Curia also assigned Santa Patrizia (2008, Ambra Restauri), Santa Maria della Luce (2009, Medart), and San Giovanni Maggiore (2012, Order of Engineers). Earlier, the Superintendence supported reuse, assigning Santa Maria di Betlemme (2002, Nuova Orchestra Scarlatti), Santa Caterina da Siena (1997, Fondazione Pietà dei Turchini), and in 1992, Pappacoda Chapel and Saints Demetrio and Bonifacio to universities.

² In an abandoned space of the church, during EDIT Naples and the EDIT CULT program, designer Allegra Hicks presented her work "DIVINAZIONE," a 3.5x2.5 meters embroidered silk tapestry. The piece is a tribute to the church, whose sacredness is tied to the patron saints of silk workers. The space also features other elements made from silk, honoured in both sculptures and textile works.

³ The students' work focused on the churches of San Demetrio e Bonifacio (2021–22), the Church of the Compagnia della Disciplina della Santa Croce (2023), and the Church of Sant'Eligio ai Chiavettieri (2024).

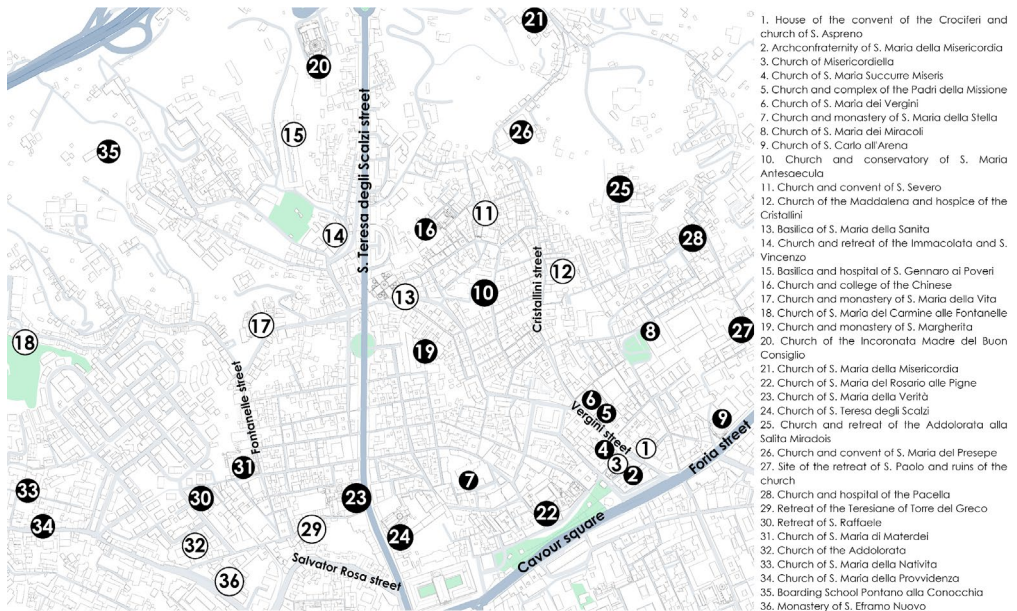


Fig. 2 – Naples, part of Municipality 3, Rione Sanità district. The numbers indicate the historic religious churches or complexes in the area. Specifically, numbers marked with a white circle and black number represent sites hosting social and cultural activities. 1. Jago Museum, 3. Centre for contemporary art – SMMAVE, 11. Recording studio, Headquarters of the Sanitansamble Orchestra, 12. Cinema, Drama school, Business incubator, 13. Business incubator, Fondazione Comunità San Gennaro publisher, 14. Theatre, Business incubator, 15. Space for contemporary art, 17. Disused church; Homeless shelter, Territorial hub for families – La Tenda ONLUS, 18. Occasional artist residency, 29. Disused complex, Social space for civic and collective uses – Giardino Liberato, 32. Disused church, Centre for contemporary art – Casa Morra Greco, 36. Common Good – Ex OPG "Je so' pazzo" (Vitagliano).

formerly a pharmaceutical warehouse – into a space for contemporary art, alongside the revitalization of the Catacombs of San Gennaro (Flora, 2020, p. 164). From the outset, the project extended beyond individual buildings, incorporating surrounding public spaces. Artistic installations and murals created with the participation of children and teenagers helped reawaken a sense of belonging and environmental care (Loffredo, 2022, p. 177).

Initiatives such as *Adotta una piazza* engaged local merchants and artisans, turning them into active players in the regeneration of public spaces and restoring streets and squares to their communal function (Flora, 2020, p. 165).

Regarding disused religious spaces, their gradual reoccupation resembled a form of urban

acupuncture, largely driven by artists drawn to the emotional charge of such architectural settings. One of the most emblematic interventions was led by the artist Jago, after donating *Figlio Velato* to the city of Naples and displaying it in the *Cappella dei Bianchi* of the Church of San Severo Fuori le Mura, transformed the 18th-century Church of Sant'Aspremo ai Crociferi into a public studio, later converted into a museum (Fig. 3). Closed after the 1980 earthquake, the church became Jago's workspace in 2020, just before the onset of the pandemic, and was opened to the public as a museum in 2022. Conceived as an exhibition space for the internationally renowned artist (Flora, 2023, pp. 110–117), the site – currently being restored – provides a fascinating setting for displaying his works, producing a marked material contrast.

Particularly significant was the reopening of a secondary entrance with a 17th-century portal, which, if preserved, could help revitalise the adjacent alley, Vico Crociferi.

Another initiative, with an even greater emphasis on community involvement than the previous one, was the reopening of the Church of Santa Maria Maddalena ai Cristallini (Scotto di Vettimo 2025) (Fig. 4). Sixty young participants took part in artistic workshops led by international artists such as Tono Cruz and Mono González as part of the *Luce al Rione Sanità* project. Their work resulted in a layered intervention, with over twenty shades of blue used to depict local residents' faces, reproduced both as murals and as suspended photographic portraits. A boat, crafted by inmates from Secondigliano Prison, was placed near the altar. The contrast between the new mural decorations and the historic surfaces is striking. Although local community involvement was significant, this approach cannot be considered a replicable model due to the complex and often challenging relationship it establishes with the pre-existing architectural and artistic heritage.

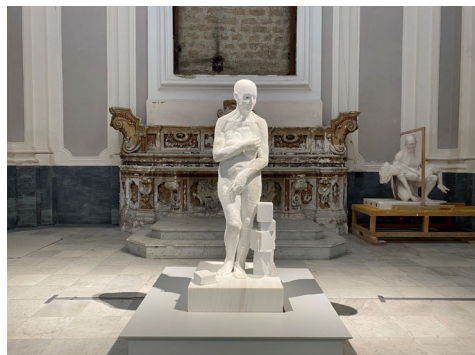


Fig. 3 – Naples, Church of Sant'Aspreno ai Crociferi, now Jago Museum, 2024 (Romano).

A different and more complex case is the long-standing management of the Church of Santa Maria della Misericordia ai Vergini (Fig. 5). In 2015, an agreement between the *Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea SMMAVE* and the Archconfraternity of Santa Maria della

Misericordia entrusted the church's upkeep, recovery, and promotion to the ongoing work of volunteers from the cultural association led by artist Christian Leperino. After years of abandonment, the church has been successfully reopened and transformed into a centre for visual arts and historical research, hosting events and workshops for children and students. The artist managing the space actively engages local youth in various artistic experiences, offering opportunities for creative participation. However, the project initially faced resistance from the local community, which viewed the growing attention toward the neighbourhood with scepticism. A sustainable model for the enhancement and revitalization of the site was made possible solely through sustained dialogue with associations and cultural institutions, notably the National Archaeological Museum (MANN).



Fig. 4 – Naples, Church of Santa Maria Maddalena ai Cristallini, 2024 (Romano).

Finally, several recent interventions have sparked debate over the relationship between murals and historic façades. Among the most discussed are *Resis-ti-amo* by Francisco Bosoletti, painted on the side wall of the Basilica of Santa Maria della Sanità, and the large-scale artwork by Tono Cruz and Mono González, which transformed the exterior surfaces of the bell tower and rectory of the Church of Maria Santissima del Carmine alle Fontanelle.



Fig. 5 – Naples, Church of S. Maria della Misericordiella, 2024 (Romano).

In both cases, the local community played an active role: in the first, by participating in a workshop held alongside the mural's creation; in the second, by helping design during the artists' residency. Here, architectural surfaces were sacrificed to make way for collective artwork aimed at strengthening the neighbourhood's sense of identity. However, the approaches differ: Bosoletti's work, confined to a secondary, blind wall rather than the church's main entrance, harmonizes with the architecture, community, and urban landscape. In contrast, Cruz and González's mural redefined the ornamental framework of the surfaces. Yet, despite its bold visual impact, the decision to retain certain monochromatic mouldings preserves the legibility of the church's architectural registers.

4. Conclusion

The experience of *Rione Sanità* shows how the reuse of churches can drive urban regeneration with significant social and economic effects (Amestoy & Casalini, 2021, pp. 399–401), while requiring reflection on its limitations. Art and culture foster collective participation and reclaim public space, often through universities collaborations in dialogue with local communities (Flora, 2021); yet, religious architectures risk losing their original meaning, becoming neutral containers or artifacts stripped of identity.

While integrating art, community, and heritage confirms the value of a participatory approach, it raises challenges regarding the impact on the meaning and fabric of the spaces. Reuse decisions should result from careful comparison of alternatives, aiming to respect the architecture's original vocation and materials, while allowing shared reinterpretation for its preservation (Russo, 2017, p. 281). Discussion tables should thus welcome diverse perspectives, fostering dialogue between expertise and interests, capable of generating not simple compromises but solutions that reconcile heritage protection with new functions, preserving its past, present, and future meanings.

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