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The architecture of university chapels: town, spaces, liturgy

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In the Italian university of the third millennium it is possible to find some places of worship? This study looks for an answer considering different aspects of architectural knowledge. From the (scarce) literature on the subject emerges the problem of the definition of 'university chapel', intendibile both as building and as community of believers. An initial normative specification (furnished in appendix from a regesto of the ecclesiastical documents taken in examination) helps to understand the articulated reality of the chapels and above all the institutional reasons of their meager spread in Italy. The study intends to provide if not the answers at least the bases in order to answer to questions that arise spontaneously: why today to foresee a place to pray in college? Who determines the construction of it? The chapels meet the established norms regarding the liturgical order? Why in some universities they are realized and not in others? Which are the decisive factors in such sense?



Chapel in university's history: on the left the Collegio di Spagna in Bologna; on the right an axonometric cross-section of the church of S.Ivo alla Sapienza (in PAOLO PORTOGHESI, *Francesco Borromini*, Milano, Electa, 1990, p. 160)

To address these issues, it has been necessary to look at the history of the university institution and of building for superior formation. It's been established a periodization based on historical-institutional and historical-cultural criteria associated to architectural types briefly illustrated with cards of some significant examples. To better orient in the building panorama of the Italian university it was decided to analyze the structure of the university system on an urban scale, to descend then to an architectural scale with close examination of some known cases in the architectural literature and in the handbooks. The international examples, works of architects of large critical luck belonging to different periods of the twentieth century and to different religious confessions (as the M.I.T. non-denominational chapel by Eero Saarinen, the Evangelical one of Otaniemi or that of the Seattle Catholic University by Steven Holl), were selected to provide a framework within which to insert the analysis that is the heart of the search, that of the Italian chapels.



Two American examples: on the left Eero Saarinen's M.I.T. chapel and on the right Philip Johnson's church of St.Basil

In the Italian university there are basically two opposing phenomena, for which if from a side in most university campuses there is no place for the worship from the other in some rare cases (as to the Sapienza in Rome, to the Bocconi in Milan or in the scientific campus in Parma) finds space the chapel.

These two extremes, however, do not exhaust the complex world of university chapels designed as a community, located mainly in existing churches but also within

religious institutes, hospitals (linked to the faculties of sanitary address) or within historic homes of the university itself. In considering the relationship between the Church and the University in the expression of the chapel, was made reference to a particular and significant reality: the universities of the Church.

Despite the importance of the phenomenon, there have been notable difficulties in identifying sources to study the architectural shape of the chapels.



Interior of the San Ferdinando church in Milan, the Bocconi University's chapel

In the conclusions it's been underlined the specificity of the liturgical problem (inspiring aspect of the work), noting that the university chapels are place of particular relationship with the sacraments, great invitation to concentration and meditation as well as occasion of architectural experimentation on themes like, for example, the use of the light, the organization of courses, the liturgical adaptation. In the wake of the mainstream of research proposed by the supervisor, it's tried to enrich the historiographical and critical picture on the relation architecture-liturgy.

What is emerged from the search is the great complexity of a multiform reality and not affrontabile if not 'case by case' and the lack of information for an architectural typology that instead deserves the whole attention of the criticism for its cultural value.

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