



Renovation of the Praetorian Palace in Koper - conservation problems

Sonja Ana Hoyer

MZVNKD Piran, Trg bratstva 1, Si - 6330 PIRAN, Slovenia

Sonja-Ana.Hoyer@gov.si

Abstract

The relevant monument protection service has already been involved in the restoration of the Praetorian Palace in Koper for several decades. The building, which is among the most important examples of formal urban architecture created in the area of north-western Istria under Venetian influence, is also the most important historical and architectural monument in one of the most beautiful Mediterranean urban sites in Slovenia. Although the building is situated in the very heart of the town, it was empty for a number of years, and in 1972, was even threatened with destruction, so it was then fundamentally restored structurally and its main facade renovated. One of the main problems of the renovation of the palace has been the search for a suitable function which could ensure the revitalisation and renovation of the palace. The creation and building development of the Praetorian Palace in the central town square is connected with its historical administrative and formal functions. Only a similar role and function and a suitable place in the renovation of the buildings surrounding the square can ensure successful renovation. The Inter-municipal Institute for the Protection of the Natural and Cultural Heritage Piran (MZVNKD Piran) produced conservation documentation which provided the basis for preparing project documentation for the renovation of the Praetorian Palace for the needs of a Town Hall. The author summarises the content of the monument protection reports and highlights various kinds of research work, including historical, archeological, architectural, exploratory restoration and art history which MZVNKD Piran has conducted since the beginning of the 1990s. The results of this research have enriched historical knowledge about this very important Koper cultural and historical monument. The historical development of the architectural complex of the palace and its important historical layers have been demonstrated by important architectural finds and so, on the basis of the results of the research work, establishing a monument protection strategy of renovation has enabled the monument protection service creatively to understand and prepare project documentation, which means an interpretation of the monument substance, on the basis of Venetian gothic formal architecture for today's needs.

Introduction

A presentation of the conservation problems of the renovation of the Praetorian Palace in Koper means first an analysis of its spatial setting in the building surround of the central town square, bearing in mind its overall urban planning value in the development of the town. At the same time, it is also a survey of its historical importance in the life of the town, its architectural growth, the artistic value of its appearance and the degree of preservation of the materially proven architecture.

There are therefore various stages of the conservation procedure which, in the final conservation documentation, support the conservation bases or starting points by means of defining the monument protection strategy of renovation of the monument, and they provide a valuable basis for preparing the project of renovation. The production of good renovation projects, namely, is made possible above all by study of substantiated conservation documentation and creative dialogue between conservators and project planners. Only with the cooperation of the two professions can there be successful revitalisation of cultural monuments, which in current monument protection practice is also often called creative conservation.

The main facade of the Praetorian Palace in the central square closes the southern side of the square, which is considered to be one of the highest quality urban sites in the north-western area of Istria under Venetian influence, and is ornamented by the most important cultural monuments in the town: the Praetorian Palace, Foresterija, Armerija, the cathedral with town tower and the Loggia. The Praetorian Palace plays the most important role among them, both in the history of the town and creating the sides of the square.

Mestni trg, the Town Square, Platea Communis, together with Brolo, forms the clear medieval groundplan of a town core with the typical two main squares in the town. In an almost rectangular groundplan, the square dominates as the central town space, and also in the original plan of the municipal arrangement, it has played the oldest and most important role in the history of the city. Through it ran the main traffic arteries of the town's cross-shaped groundplan. It is distinguished by a closed, courtyard character of official city functions, while Brolo is an open, airy, fairly uncharacteristic market space for the Mediterranean ambient.

The constructional growth of the complex of the Praetorian Palace, which includes in addition to the palace the building tissue between the palace and New House (Investbiro) in the area of the original episcopal palace, is recognisable on preserved land register maps which, excepting the fairly schematic presentation of Fini's schematic plan of 1619, are dated 1819, 1887, 1913 (new episcopal palace), 1953 and 1993 (New House, Investbiro in the place of a demolished baroque building).

Before analysing in more detail the chosen methodology of work for preparing the conservation documentation, an attempt will be made to answer the question of what, more exactly, the conservation treatment of a monument or monument area means. First of all, this is the subject of various professions

(history, archeology, architecture and urban planning, art history, etc) with a conservation orientation. Normally a conservator-art historian coordinates the various findings from which the historical stratification of the monument is most easily interpreted, provides an assessment of its monument properties and establishes starting points for renovation. Only on the basis of well prepared conservation documentation is it possible to speak about various types of renovation or different methodological approaches, from the strictest restoration-conservation renovation to reconstruction, replacement building, or redesign of the cultural monument with the highest quality creative approach (Šumi¹).

MZVNKD Piran has produced a number of monument protection reports for the area of the square (Conservation programme 1987, Supplement I, 1990. Supplement II, 1993), and in 1993, protective investigations of the building complex of the Praetorian Palace requested in the first report were carried out. On the basis of the results of this research and findings during reconstruction work at the time of the structural restoration of the Praetorian Palace in 1972, under the project plans of Stojan Ribnikar, the monument protection concept of the renovation of this most formal of palaces in Koper was defined (Hoyer²).

Conservation research

One of the basic intentions of conservation research is deeper knowledge of a cultural monument. We therefore first look at what kind of monument substance the conservators met with during research work at the beginning of 1993. The exterior of the Praetorian Palace, which reveals the stylistic characteristics of Venice of the 15th century, was structurally restored in 1972. On the basis of exploratory investigations of the various layers of plaster, a new facade coating was made, and at the same time, the stone plaques and coats-of-arms were cleaned and documented. The renovation of the stone external gothic staircase, which was not carried out in 1972, is now taking place, and a restoration conservation project has been prepared for the renovation of the main facade (Restoration Centre of Slovenia, Ljubljana, 1993). In 1998, the facade was renovated, the stone coats of arms were replaced with copies and the originals preserved in Koper Regional Museum. We know the most about the original organisation of the interior from the oldest plans of its adaptation known to date, from 1804, which are preserved in the Trieste State Archives; in them is shown the function of the interior spaces by floors, which still applied at the time of Venetian authority. The interior of the Praetorian Palace prior to the investigatory works in 1993 showed on the first floor the construction state of the structural restoration from 1972, with uncovered fragmentary finds of older partitions on the walls and painting revealed on the ceiling beams of the main hall. At that time, the painted ceiling of the groundfloor space was discovered in the floor of a chamber on the first floor; it was also established that the ceiling had been newly reconstructed at the time of the last adaptation, on the pattern of the original. The groundfloor of the palace had been fundamentally redesigned by the architect Edo Mihevc for the needs of the Capris restaurant. In addition to a



newly constructed kitchen on the site of the former cistern, in the interior of the groundfloor there had been a kind of decorative simplification of some of the older building elements and, here and there, inappropriate citation of architectural details, transferred from various architectures, perhaps even from the palace itself. The plans from 1964 were unfortunately not found; according to oral evidence of the project planner, Mirko Blaznik, then a student at the Ljubljana school of architecture under architect Edo Mihevc, prior to the commencement of work, a thorough copy of the existing state was made. In the conservation starting points for the renovation of the palace of 1993, the space was negatively evaluated and it is necessary to redesign or harmonise it with the overall renovation of the palace.

The entrance part of the groundfloor had been reconstructed in recent times, in place of the former Loggia; functional annexes were removed in 1993, whereby the architectural frame of the Loggia, which can be traced on this site from the creation of the palace onwards, was revealed.

Before explaining the historical stratification of the Praetorian Palace, connected with its administrative function, which also at the same time signifies one of the most important protection bases of renovation, the chosen methodology of work for preparing the conservation documentation will be set out. The conservation programme of 1987 for the entire area of the the Town Square, which included inventory and evaluation of the current state of the materially proven architecture, determined the site and type of exploratory research. According to this initial conservation programme, in addition to archive research of earlier adaptation projects in the Trieste State Archives and a review of older Italian literature, the following protective investigations were carried out in the complex of the Praetorian Palace: archeological exploratory excavations, architectural exploratory research, precise measurement and drawing of the architecture, and drawing of the finds. On the basis of comparative analysis of the results of the finds, monument protection starting points were graphically and verbally depicted, with guidelines for the further preparation of project documentation. The next stage of the conservation process was the production of conservation projects, which already means a presentation of the architectural finds to a suitable scale, and a graphic and textual presentation of the level of monument protection of the historical architecture, highlighting those parts of the architectural renovation which allow, or suggest, the reworking of the cultural monument with contemporary design language.

Results of the research - finds

The protective research of 1993 was conducted over the entire complex of the Praetorian Palace, which also included the residential buildings by the entrance part to the building and the original courtyard by the western part of the palace.

Of most interest were the results of archeological exploratory excavations in the western part of the Praetorian Palace, on the site of the demolished kitchen constructed during the adaptation of the groundfloor in 1964. A cistern is

marked here in older projects (Trieste State Archives 1836), and after exploratory excavations, we documented a clay basin and fountain which has been traced in historical data from the 13th century onwards. Exploratory excavations on the eastern side of the Praetorian Palace, with the course of the foundations of the walls, together with the walls on higher floors, showed some novelties in relation to the extent of the original plan of the palace on this site. An innovation in research work here was the use of non-destructive methods in surveying the ground in the former Capris restaurant, which provided sufficiently exact guidelines for classical archaeological investigation. By means of exploratory architectural research (Ličen Krmpotić³), since actually the building itself provides some kind of historical source of the stratification of various historical and stylistic periods, architectural finds often enrich understanding of a monument and enable its most thorough, scientifically profound renovation (Polichetti⁴).

The results of architectural exploratory research provided some important data about the building development of the total complex which, in combination with the results of other research, confirm individual phases of the creation of the palace. Among the most recent results of architectural research are the very important remains of older stylistic periods in the residential buildings beside the eastern part of the palace. They are residential buildings which rested against the Praetorian Palace in the 15th century. Despite the numerous adaptations in more recent stylistic periods, some important original building elements were discovered during the research work, which enable restoration-conservation reconstruction of the residential architecture of Venetian gothic times. Among these buildings, on the basis of the preserved gothic interiors on the first floor and elements on the exterior, the building at Čevjarska 3 stands out. In the baroque redesign of older building elements of the building at Čevjarska 1, we could make out two gothic elements during the research work. One of them, by the southern facade of the palace, forms the gothic house, Galli, which has a still older building plan. In addition to the already familiar gothic exterior, Galli house is ornamented on the groundfloor with open wooden painted gothic ceilings and preserved traces of what were probably gothic semi-storey heights, with preserved fragments of wall border paintings.

Traces of the gothic plan of the building at Trg 2 are only preserved in fragments on the exterior (traces of a gothic biforium, remains of a painted facade, gothic portal), while in the interior is visible an older semi-storey height which has a painted margin with renaissance motifs immediately below the ceiling beams.

It was also easier to interpret the previous understanding of the building development of the Praetorian Palace in the context of the discoveries of gothic residential architecture, and to link it with fragments of earlier building phases on the first floor documented during the protective research work of 1993.

Of most interest were discoveries of to date concealed exteriors, in places which had been covered by the buildings leaning against the palace, or their later reconstruction. With the removal of the plaster on the southern, eastern and western facades, individual earlier building elements were discovered, which

are important documents of the older building phases from the 13th and 14th centuries. In the rear part of the building, with the demolition of the kitchen of the former Capris restaurant, arcades with partially preserved capitals and bases were opened. We were aware of them from archive documents of rebuilding during the Austro-Hungarian period. In addition to the newly revealed exterior of the palace, among the finds on the groundfloor the most important is the again visible architectural groundplan of the original Loggia with preserved wooden ceilings. The open facade in the former Capris restaurant, and especially in the original communications with the rear part of the palace and in the underpassage which leads to Čevljarska ulica (architectural exploratory research is still taking place here), also provided some important data.

Among the architectural finds, or fragmentary remains, of the earliest stylistic periods, the first floor is the most uniform. Here is the chamber of the great council, with antechamber, and the chamber of the lesser council. The chamber of the great council, which is reached by means of the external gothic staircase from the middle of the 15th century, was created at a time when we can already talk of the Praetorian Palace in today's groundplan. Thus, on its western walls, are found remains of openings in the original exterior facade. In the chamber of the great council are preserved only traces of painting on the roof beams, while the refashioned walls and floors have not retained their original appearance. In view of the gothic window openings and simplicity of similar chambers of the period of Venetian Gothic, it would be possible in the renovation of the palace to consider some sort of reconstruction on the basis of analogy with similar chambers in the Venetian and Venetian influenced area.

The appearance of the other two chambers and the antechamber, along with a renaissance quadriforium, to which a baroque staircase leads through a renaissance portal, is somewhat different. These rooms are characterised by baroque portals, more recent treatment of the walls, gothic roof beams in the antechamber, fragments of earlier wall paintings and newly discovered biforiums from the 14th century on the south and western facades. The stylistic intermixture and poor preservation of individual building elements, and their rarity, testifies to the disunity of stylistic expression of the entire storey, in which the chamber of the great council plays the central historical role, which is also represented by the stylistic richness, despite the numerous decorative elements on the facade of the gothic-renaissance exterior. From the rear - western chambers on the first floor, the praetor's official rooms were connected with private ones, which we tentatively set in the rear of the palace. The palace was linked to the Foresterija, which was intended for guests and the temporary residence of the praetor, by means of a terrace above the portal, Porta della Corte (1507)(Hoyer⁵).

In the basic research work for preparing the conservation documentation belongs also the production of architectural photographs of the existing state of individual buildings and the entire complex, to a suitable scale with groundplan, facades and cross-section in those places which are important for researching the building's development. This is a special methodology of photographing architecture and drawings which is important for studying the historical



development of a building. Precise architectural photographs are also a valuable basis for preparing project documentation. The drawing of historical architecture with special graphics which show individual parts of the architecture and building links necessarily requires for conservation the specialisation of architects-conservators, those studying the building growth of cultural monuments.

Historical development of the Praetorian Palace

Comparison of the results of the archaeological and architectural exploratory research and architectural documentation with archive sources and historical statements in older Italian literature has enabled us a better grounded understanding of the building development of the complex of the Praetorian Palace from the first plans in the 13th century to the most recent adaptation.

Among Italian historiographers who have dealt with the historical development of the Praetorian Palace, we should mention the still active Koprian, Francesco Semi who, in his book "Capris, Iustinopolis, Capodistria" (Trieste, 1975), chronologically links historical data on the building development of the palace and also cites in the notes all the other, earlier writers of history of the 18th - 20th century who dealt with this theme (Semi⁶). All the authors mention data on the existence of two palaces in the 13th century. And on Morosini's plaque from 1269 (today in the Regional Museum in Koper) we know that provincial governor and captain, Mariano Morosini, in addition to other works in the city, had constructed an open Loggia, called Lobia vetus, between the two palaces. The Loggia can be seen today in the underpassage of the palace which links the square with Čevljarska ulica.

For the moment we can only guess the extent of the two palaces: Palazza potestas Justinopolis and Palazza marchionis (or potestas regaliae), which stood in this place at the time of the authority of the Aquiliean patriarchs. It is known that the municipal palace was connected to the town tower: traces of a door opening and the beds of beams for a hanging bridge are still today visible on the bell tower. Some authors claim that the final arc of the quadriforium on the facade of the Paetorian Palace is composed of the stone surrounds of former doors which connected the palace with the tower by means of a viaduct (Del Bello ⁷). In older Italian historical writings, the question remains open about both the location and name of the two palaces. More fundamental analysis of the results of all research will in the future assist a clearer grasp of the groundplans of the two palaces from the 13th century. For the moment, on the basis of the results of the archaeological explorations on the eastern side of the palace, it can be suspected that the basis framework of the municipal palace extended also into the area of later residential buildings, which is possible to interpret from exploratory excavations in the groundplan course of the connections of the bearing walls.

There is a great deal of historical data from the 14th century about fires and reconstructions, as well as the commissions for the building of the new palace. In 1348, the palace was burnt during the revolt of the Koprians against Venice



and from that year onwards, there is a great deal of archive data about money which Venice sent to the Koper provincial governor for the repair of the palace (Senato misti⁸). In 1380, at the time of the Chioggia war, the Genoese attacked Koper, and the town palace was again burned. Archive corroboration is provided by data which speaks of work on the new palace from 1386 onwards (Senato misti⁹).

Which of the two palaces was burned in the 14th century and then reconstructed cannot for the moment be exactly determined, it is only certain that one can speak of the creation of a new palace of unknown extent or the redesign of the two palaces. If an attempt is made to date some of the most recent finds (1993) on the exterior of the western side of the Praetorian Palace, the well preserved biforium on the southern facade and the fragmentarily preserved biforium on the western facade, it appears that they can be set in the 13th and 14th century. Similar traces of older building elements were also found during exploratory research of the architecture on the southern facade of the eastern part of the palace (Del Bello¹⁰).

The architectural appearance of the Praetorian Palace from the 15th century is materially attested by archive data on the new building of the palace, or merely its reconstruction, in which the Venetian gothic building elements still today predominate in its stylistic classification (De Franceschi¹¹). Some important data is preserved in the palace itself: the date 1471, with the initials of Antonio Marcelo above the underpassage; work on building the new palace was then started. That it was at the time the joining of two building units is also testified by the creation of the chamber of the great council and the external gothic staircase from 1477, at the time of the provincial governor Domenico Diedo, which is documented on the base of the supporting pillar of the staircase balcony (Semi¹²). Historiographers report that the chamber of the great council, above the Loggia on the ground floor, was completed between 1452 and 1477 (Caprin¹³). Nicolo del Bello, in a description of the fittings of this chamber, gives valuable data about the today only fragmentarily preserved treatment of the walls and ceiling with individual paintings and canvases of well-known authors (Del Bello¹⁴). He stresses that they were severe and fairly uniform fittings, typical of that period, and continues that, for example, the scene of the Crucifixion and the Madonna for the chamber were painted by the Koper painter, Marin Clerigin, or at least that he was paid for this. Guisepppe Caprin states that a lost picture of the provincial governor, Nicolo Donato, by the well-known Venetian painter, Domenico Tintoretti, son of the famous Jacop, hung in the chamber (Caprin¹⁵).

On the exterior of the Praetorian palace there is yet another piece of data: about the door and window openings from 1481, which provincial governor, Giovanni Vitturi, had placed in the western half of the palace. The exterior of the palace still then consisted of bare stone, unplastered, as Marin Sanudo reports in his "Itineraries" (Alisi¹⁶), although they had already begun to place on the facade inscribed plaques and portraits of Koper praetors, among whom were also numerous Doges of Venice (Caprin¹⁷).

The stylistic expression of 15th century Venice has not been preserved only

on the exterior of the palace but can still be recognised in the basic features of the groundplan, in the arrangement of both the groundfloor and the first floor. The 15th century is also the period in which other buildings were created in the square which, despite baroque modifications, still bear the stylistic seal of 15th century Venice.

After the middle of the 17th century, the provincial governor, Vincenzo Bembo, (Caprin¹⁸) "modernised" the facades of the Praetorian Palace, whereby they probably retained the overall measurements of the earlier originals and at that time only renovated them (Semi¹⁹). From the time of the baroque adaptation, which extends to the start of the 19th century, in the interior are preserved the portals between individual rooms, as well as some fragmentarily preserved parts of the treatment of the walls and ceilings. The baroque staircase by the western facade of the Praetorian Palace, on the first floor of both buildings, also belongs to the period of the baroque treatment of the buildings in the square.

After the fall of the Venetian Republic, the interior of the Praetorian Palace was several times adapted to the needs of the Austrian and French administrations. The result of this adaptation, and the reorganisation for the needs of a court in 1923, as well as the structural repair work of 1972, is the present state: a relatively "bare" first floor interior today which, in comparison with the picturesque Venetian gothic exterior main facade on the square, retains only modest material remains of its rich history, especially from the time of the most important reconstruction in the 15th century.

Conclusion

In summarising the conservation problems of the renovation of the palace, we must most stress its spatial, historical and architectural-conservational importance.

The basic conservation starting point was that the renovcation must play the leading role in all renovation work in the square, that the building again be given a formal function in the town administration. The most sensible decision was thus that it be given the role of town hall.

Similarly, in connection with the location, the second crucial conservation starting point was set, that is respecting the historical stratification or historical significance of the palace, which is not entirely in accordance with the level of its preservation or the architectural value of the cultural monument. In this regard, it is necessary to bear in mind that, despite the most recent adaptation, 15th century Venetian Gothic is the stylistic period which must be respected in the presentation of this architecture.

The task of the project planner, conservator, in fact, raises the question of how to once again to harmonise, unify, Koper's most important formal architecture which has retained the monument quality of the main facade, individual historical building elements on the newly revealed side facades and the rear, south facade, but a relatively "empty" interior.

The monument protection strategy of renovation thus respected a



methodology of work with defined architectural elements that must be restored and conserved, and identifying those parts of the architecture to which it is necessary to give a new contemporary interpretation. With the renovation of the Praetorian Palace, in other words, there is a combination of classical, philosophically clear restoration-conservation renovation with contemporary creativity that must supplement the historical architecture. Contemporary architectural details in this case should appear in such a way that it is possible to distinguish the original elements of Venetian Gothic from those which signify a new interpretation of this style.

References

1. Šumi, N., Prenova Ljubljane, Spomeniškovarstveni postopki pri izdelavi sanacijskih načrtov, p. 15 -17, Ljubljana, 1978.
2. Hoyer, S. A. et al., Dopolnitve Konservatorskega programa za prenovo Platee Communis - Titovega trga v Kopru II, p. 21-36, MZVNKD Piran 1993.
3. Ličen Krmpotić, M., Sondiranje kompleksa Pretorske palače v Kopru, Koper, February 1993,
Ličen Krmpotić, M., Poročilo druge faze dodatnega sondiranja, rušenja in usklajevanja najdb na kompleksu Pretorske palače v Kopru, Koper, June 1993.
4. Polichetti, M. L., Il palazzo di Federico da Montefeltro, Urbino 1985.
5. Hoyer, S. A., et al., Dopolnitve konservatorskega programa za prenovo Platee Communis, Titovega trga v Kopru I, MZVNKD Piran, October 1990.
6. Semi, F., Capris - Iustinopolis - Capodistria, p. 136-137 and 154, Trieste 1975.
7. Del Bello, N., Capodistria, la Piazza del Comune nel secolo XV., Pagine Istriane, III, Capodistria, novembre - dicembre 1905, n. 11 - 12, p. 136, 258
8. Senato misti, Atti e memorie della societa istriana di archeologia e storia patria I., a.V, vol. IV, f. 1-2, p. 99, 120, 138, 142, 145, Parenzo 1888.
Senato misti, Atti e memorie della societa istriana di archeologia e storia patria I., a. VI, vol. V, f. 1-2, p. 28, Parenzo 1889
9. Senato misti, Atti e memorie della societa istriana di archeologia e storia patria I., a. VI, vol. V, f. 3-4, p. 267-269, 271, 274, Parenzo 1889
10. Del Bello, N., Capodistria, la Piazza del Comune nel secolo XV., Pagine Istriane, III, Capodistria, novembre - dicembre 1905, n. 11 - 12, p. 256.
11. De Francesci, C., Alcuni cenni storici sui palazzi comunali di Capodistria, Pagine istriane, I, p. 83 - 90, Capodistia, 1903.
12. Semi, F., Capris - Iustinopolis - Capodistria, p. 153, Trieste 1975.
13. Caprin, G., L'Istria nobilissima I - II, p. 222-223, Trieste 1905; Del Bello, N., Capodistria, la Piazza del Comune nel secolo XV., Pagine Istriane, III, Capodistria, novembre - dicembre 1905, n. 11 - 12, p. 257; Semi, F., Capris - Iustinopolis - Capodistria, p. 138, Trieste 1975.
14. Del Bello, N., Capodistria, la Piazza del Comune nel secolo XV., Pagine Istriane, III, Capodistria, novembre - dicembre 1905, n. 11 - 12, p. 257.
15. Caprin, G., L'Istria nobilissima I - II, p. 227, Trieste 1905.
16. Alisi, A., Il Palazzo Pretorio, La loggia, Il municipio di Capodistria, p. 10,



Capodistria 1910, Bolzano 1932.

17. Caprin, G., L'Istria nobilissima I - II, p. 229-231, Trieste 1905.

18. Caprin, G., L'Istria nobilissima I - II, p. 223, Trieste 1905.

19. Semi, F., Capris - Iustinopolis - Capodistria, p. 138, Trieste 1975.