# Memory of the Ephemeral. Towards an Italian Baroque Theatre and Scene Digital Archive

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## Abstract

At the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century, Venice opened its first public pay theatres, but this seemed to presage a history of failure, judging by the Michiel and Tron families' profits, because the success of a sequel interrupted for some 57 years began to barely see in 1637, with the reopening of the San Cassan Theatre, which moved away from the recited comedy genre and embraced melodrama set to music. The spectacle culture imposed itself in the lagoon and by the end of the century the city was hosting about 15 musical theatres, of which, unfortunately, no tangible traces remain.

The essay traces the trajectories for the construction of a digital archive, capable of connecting a heterogeneity of sources useful for the reconstruction of the theatres, the machines and the scenes that animated them, by means of 3D models that are configured as performative digital spaces of a memory from which to extrapolate the dynamics of its actualisation.

In this way, the material and immaterial traces of the architecture, sets and machines that characterised the origins and conditioned the subsequent development of public theatre become the paradigms of a new idea of the performing arts scene, understood as an image of the world.

Keywords: theatre, scenography, perspective, 3D modeling, Venice.

#### Introduction

"The assembling of phenomena is the affair of concepts, and the division effectuated in them by dint of the discriminating intellect is all the more meaningful in that, through one and the same operation, it achieves a two-fold result: the salvation of phenomena and the presentation of ideas"

[Benjamin 2019, p. 11]

The Baroque scene studies, which are mainly Italian in origin, often lack an organic nature of academic research aimed at returning the centrality, firstly European and then global, of this fundamental aesthetic and political event.

Recovering the documents of the institution of public theatre that developed in Venice in the seventeenth century, along with its constitutive reasons for representing and interpreting the world, means broadening the field of

the relevance of the study and the social understanding of this subject. This aim goes through studying and reconstructing spaces offered to the public in cultural and virtually visual terms, basing the research on often unpublished or undervalued sources and writings. This makes it possible to redraw a credible removed map of modernity. But even if the very concept of archiving is at the limit of surpassing an oxymoron, if it refers to practices that by their very nature can be counted among the ephemeral domains, the performing arts, which for many centuries have negotiated their own raison for existence in the *hic et nunc*, constitute the testing ground for this dissertation, which articulates its convictions by extrapolating them from the variable territories of immateriality.

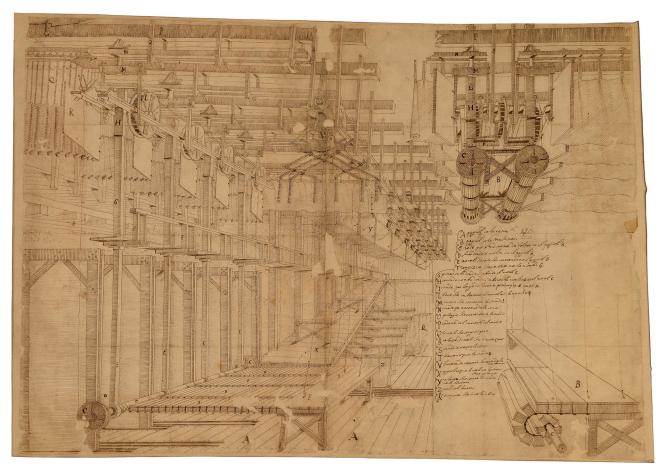


Memory can be translated into an imaginative and didactic transposition of a pre-existing architecture. Or in the interpretation of the transformation traces of an artefact, whose original configuration you can attempted to deduced. As tale of a life the staging is temporary and leaves ample room for manoeuvre to glorify its posthumous absence, especially when it has occupied the illusory spaces of a vanished theatre that imposed the 'game of life' in the musical and sung form of melodrama. This is what happe-

ned in Venice in the seventeenth century and the evidence of it can be found in the drawings collected in travel notebooks, documents, albums, texts, booklets, and manuscripts kept in famous European libraries and archives, but also through the cultural reception: in treatises, Lenten books, and academic speeches (fig. I).

A huge heritage, largely hidden and fragmented, therefore, constitutes a valuable whole of knowledge to be updated and delivered in all their benefit to the wider community.

Fig. 1. Giovanni Battista Lambranzi, drawing of the San Salvador Theatre stage machine, 1675. Complesso monumentale della Pilotta, Biblioteca Palatina, Parma [Ms. Parm. 3708, c. 6].



Starting from this premise, it is worth noting that the debate on open access to information over the last twenty years has involved digital archives and universities, with a view to an increasingly flexible dissemination of research results, to the point of formulating a European manifesto in support of it [1].

At the same time, the consolidated institutional contexts, dedicated to the orderly collection and preservation of documents, have completely devoted themselves to dematerialisation processes, transferring a good part or all their contents to the web. But these, for some archivist experts, in the "server or in the clouds bubble with obsolescence, tending to dissolve along with the facts of which they are the product and testimony. Digital archives are a fluid, tangled skein. Unravelling it means handing over the present to the future. Digital documents fly away as soon as they are produced; they must be tamed to make them tangible memory" [Valacchi 2018, p. 23].

Perhaps, then, the problem lies in the renewed meaning of document term, which today takes on a plurality of meanings, also by function of the narratives that can be constructed on it, in the return journey of a forgotten or removed history.

The performing arts, in fact, problematise its value, considering it as an episode of a totality.

Since the logic of the spectacle, in its making and becoming, involves a set of subjectivities and actions, for which it may be difficult to recompose the dynamics a posteriori. In this context, archiving becomes an operation of collecting fragments and, being able to classify them by type, images assume a preferential role in clarifying their complexity [Kihm 2015].

# Archives of the ephemeral

"Between the language (langue) that defines the system of constructing possible sentences, and the corpus that passively collects the words that are spoken, the archive defines a particular level: that of a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements"

[Foucault 2004, p. 146]

In 2007, the non-profit organisation *Perspectiv* [2] was founded with the aim of mapping the theatres of Europe. Its main actions are to encourage the conservation and restoration of historic theatres, to support research projects and to make this extraordinary cultural heritage known to the public. Hence the need to census it through

a database that monitors theatres all over the world, including those that have been partly transformed or have completely disappeared over the centuries.

European Theatre Architecture [3] is structured in the form of an open archive, within which the user can implement the contents by registering in the digital platform with his or her e-mail address. The information mainly concerns the architectures and performance sites that are geographically located; however, the collected materials draw on free internet resources and, in several cases, present some inaccuracies in dating and attribution of authors.

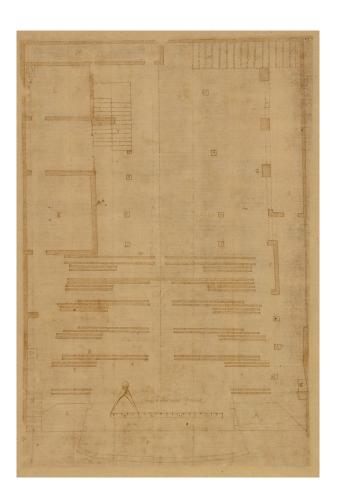
More generally, it can be noted that databases dedicated to mapping the performing arts in Europe, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, can be grouped into two distinct categories: those oriented towards theatrical architecture, as we have just seen, and those that privilege the events produced in it. In any case, recent studies have shown that these experiences —in which Italy is almost non-existent—are largely the result of academic research projects financed with temporary funds that, once concluded, are abandoned to their obsolescent presence in the web boundless space [Baptist, Noordegraaf, van Oort 2021].

It is clear that the sustainability of a 'living' archive depends on the continuous updating of data and the software used to manage them, also by launching collaborative and par-

Fig. 2. Print of La Deidamia. Exterior of a palace with characters. Set design by Giacomo Torelli, Novissimo Theatre, Venezia 1644. Fondo Povoledo, Istituto per il Teatro e il Melodramma, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia (inv. 56\_024).



Fig. 3. Giovanni Battista Lambranzi, stage plan of the San Salvador Theatre, 1675. Complesso monumentale della Pilotta, Biblioteca Palatina, Parma [Ms. Parm. 3708, c. 27].



ticipatory projects, capable of involving real research infrastructures animated by scholars, foundations, public and private institutions.

It is precisely in this direction, with the idea of developing innovative forms of digital archiving, that was launched the research project INCOMMON. In praise of community. Shared creativity in arts and politics in Italy (1959-1979) [4], which investigates the performing arts of the 1960s and 1970s in Italy, with the aim of studying, preserving, and enhancing the interactions between theatre, music, visual arts, cinema, and video art, in an inclusive perspective according to which it is precisely the performing arts that manifest their will to the common [Campbell 2009].

As far as studies on the Italian Baroque scene are concerned, the Venetian archive of the Giorgio Cini Foundation's Institute for Theatre and Melodrama [5] offers a wealth of catalogued materials, mostly from donations (fig. 2).

The Elena Povoledo fund, for example, is the result of a very rich multi-year collection of playbills, photographs, drawings, engravings, and stage sketches collected by the scholar, presenting itself as a fundamental resource for the theatres study and reconstruction, stage designs and machines that gave rise to public theatre in the 17th century.

# Aesthetics of melodrama in archive

"The space of creative experience is never just individual, not only because the context defines who or what counts as creative, but because the same construction of the process occurs from the beginning as a relationship"

[Melucci, Fabbrini 1994, p. 30]

The relationships that defined the birth of Baroque theatre, understood in its typological configuration determinant the institutional spaces that characterise it, cannot be separated from the morphological, social, and political context in which it was born, Venice.

The prodromes of this fundamental adventure can already be seen in 1580, when Alvise Michiel had a theatre for comedy built in the parish of San Cassan, which debuted the following year together with the neighbouring theatre of Ettore Tron.

Francesco Sansovino informs us that the first had a semi-circular cavea, while the second had an elliptical shape, in any case both were equipped with several tiers of boxes [Sansovino 1581].

Their success was short-lived, both in terms of revenue. due to a series of bad investments, and the lesuit censorship that disapproved of 'lewd comedies'. However, following several fires that marked the sad history of the Tron Thetare, in the carnival of 1637 the family of the same name inaugurated the new San Cassan musical theatre, with the Andromeda, a melodrama written by Benedetto Ferrari and music by Francesco Manelli [Galvani 1969]. This was certainly an event of fundamental importance for the evolution of musical opera. The patron was replaced by the impresario, who in turn received the theatre on rent from the owner, almost always a nobleman, eager to increase his own capital with a lucrative investment" [Zorzi, Muraro, Prato, Zorzi 1971, p. 511.

Success was ensured by the production of spectacular events that, in the urge of competition, perfected the illusory art of accelerated perspectives, in sets made up of moving backdrops whose rapid changes took place completely on sight and were supported by the special effects of the machinery. So, the spectator could see singers appearing suspended in the clouds, sea monsters emerging and juggling in the swirling waves, and be amazed at the credibility of magic.

An intense cultural activity animated the Serenissima which, at the end of the 17th century, counted on the presence of fifteen musical theatres, now disappeared.

The protagonists of this innovation, described in the literature in terms of scenes and machines inventors, engineers, stage masters or painters, are those who contributed to building a model of opera house, also known as all'italiana, offering a desirable archetype to export abroad [Ciammaichella 2021].

Their names often do not appear in the opera librettos, and this is also recorded by the library collections, institutions and archives that document their prolific activity through sketches, stage designs and architectural surveys, as e.g., in the case of the San Salvador Theatre [6].

Here, in the years between 1673 and 1676, Marquis Guido Rangoni III held the charge of impresario and likely, before returning to Parma, commissioned a drawings album illustrating his three-year artistic production, now kept in the Palatina Library [Ms. Parm. 3708].

In particular, the plan drawn in Venetian feet [7] delimits a proscenium 8.42 m wide; the stage was 17.36 m wide and 24 m deep. Moreover, historical sources attest that the horseshoe-shaped cavea had 5 orders of 29 boxes, 28 of which at the 'pepiano' [8] [Mancini, Muraro, Povoledo 1995].

Fig. 4. Massimiliano Ciammaichella, reconstruction of the San Salvador Theatre floor plan, 2021.

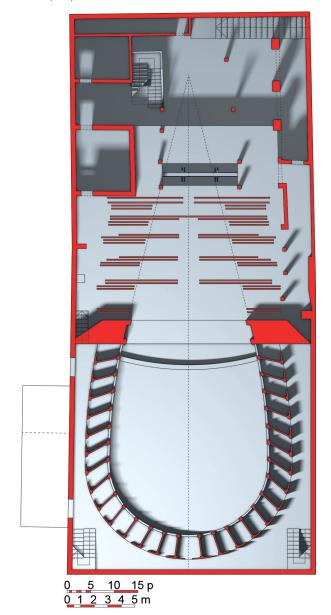
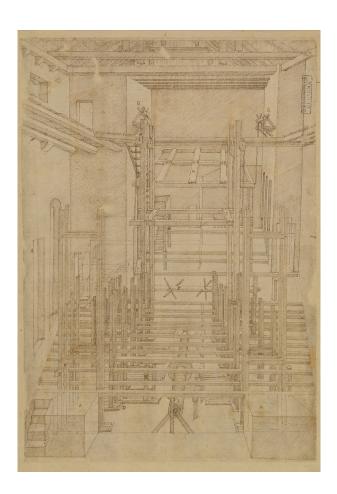


Fig. 5. Giovanni Battista Lambranzi, perspective drawing of the San Salvador Theatre stage, 1675. Complesso monumentale della Pilotta, Biblioteca Palatina, Parma [Ms. Parm. 3708, c. 2].



Access to the theatre was from a side courtyard and not from today's entrance to the Goldoni Theatre, located in *Calle del Teatro or de la Commedia*, because an archive document shows a wooden box, measuring  $30 \times 10$  feet, which served as a ticket office with an adjoining kiosk for the distribution of food and drink [ASVe 1768].

What is surprising is the ability of set designers and architects to expand the boundaries of the performance space, according to the spectacles produced. In effect, the inventor of the 'long scene', Giacomo Torelli, made his debut at the Novissimo Theatre —which he built in wood, in the Cavallerizza area—[9] on 27 January 1641, with *La Finta pazza* by Giulio Strozzi and music by Francesco Sacrati [10]. The following year, for the staging of *Bellerofonte* [11], he worked with the same composer and the librettist Vincenzo Nolfi, but for the great staging "the friars granted that the building be enlarged by 12 feet and the rent be renewed for a year at 300 ducats" [Bianconi, Walker 1975, p. 415].

The drawing contained in the Parmesan manuscripttogether with the reconstruction of the San Salvador Theatre planshow a similar situation: the stage expands to include portions of rented houses, used as warehouses, guest quarters and artists' dressing rooms, whose overlooks and entrances with stairs are internal to a theatre that expands itself on the city (figs. 3, 4). The perspective sketches, on the other hand, allude to the functionality of complex machine that animates the spectacle.

As far as the under-stage is concerned, two rotating cylindrical trunks, orthogonally arranged, collect the ropes that allow the translating motion and the removal of the painted sceneries; the massive trusses system, instead, holds a big central winch on which to hang the theatrical wings, the curtain, the backdrops, and the equipment for the flying exploits of the stage protagonists (figs. 5, 6).

The album also contains sketches of the machines and sets of two shows, whose comparison with the spatial descriptions, contained in the librettos of the operas, allows us to identify them as *Eteocle e Polinice* [12] and *La divisione del mondo* (1675) [13], informing us of the author's name. He is the quadraturist painter Giovanni Battista Lambranzi, who was already an active stage designer in the early Sixties, when he collaborated with Ippolito Mazzarini to the realization of the shows at the SS. Giovanni e Paolo Theatre, owned by the Grimani family.

Also, under the Rangoni management, in his last year in Venice activity, two other dramas in music debuted at the San Salvador Theatre in 1676: Adone in Cipro [14] and Ger-

manico Sul Reno [15]. The librettos do not mention the scenes authors, and according to some historians they may been the Gasparo and Domenico Mauro brothers [Brugnoni 1992]. The first one was a skilled machines inventor and had served at the Arsenal, acquiring the knowledge of naval engineering to be transposed into the production mechanisms, the second, however, was a talented scene painter.

The sketches of these two works are kept in the *Bibliothèque de l'Opéra* in Paris [Lambranzi? 1675], revealing what is hidden behind the amazing and sudden variations of the sequences. For Germanicus' entrance, the first act opens with the circular motions of a large, suspended wheel and, all around, in the whirlwind of clouds, we witness his triumph (figs. 7, 8).

The narrative and stylistic register displayed in both drawings' collections, however, suggests that the author is still Giovanni Battista Lambranzi.

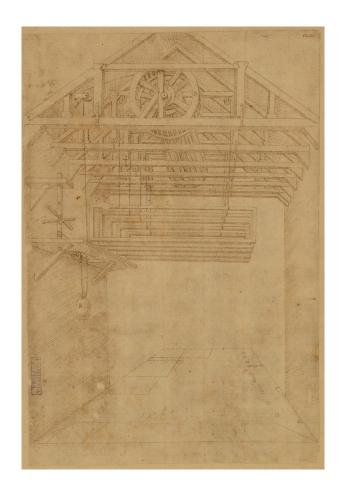
"There are about sixty sheets, forty of which depict 'scenic appearances', i.e., mainly scenes but also images of glories, appearances, and apotheosis. They are not sketches ready for production, but preparatory drawings for a memorable edition of the four performances in the form of illustrated scenarios' [Mancini, Muraro, Povoledo 1995, pp. 247, 248] (fig. 9).

# Prefigure the archive

"Memory, history, and archive, while maintaining distinct if unstable definitions, have long engaged in a dance of changing relationships and power" [Caruso Haviland 2018, p. 63]

The case study described is significant for the richness of the materials and sources that bear testifies to both its active presence and its transformative processes, dictated also by the choices to remodel the stage extension and the machinery, in function of the shows performed. However, it is still a documentary heritage located in the premises of various Italian and foreign organizations and institutions that, for the most part, have not digitised and made it public, except under the specific request of scholars for research finalities, as can be seen from this discussion, which highlights its importance. Therefore, the premises for the construction of an open-access archive of the Italian baroque scene which collects this precious cultural heritage are based on the idea of assuming the theatre as the main subject from which to draw the information that

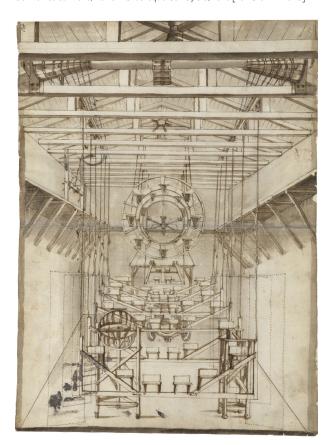
Fig. 6. Giovanni Battista Lambranzi, perspective drawing of the San Salvador Theatre stage, 1675. Complesso monumentale della Pilotta, Biblioteca Palatina, Parma [Ms. Parm. 3708, c. 32].



determined its reasons for being and production. Here, it is conceived as a sort of interrogable and interoperable device: a 3D model that presents itself as a container to record the stratifications of its history and from which to extrapolate the librettos of the programmed operas, the sketches of the sets design and machines that defined their cinematics, the consequent spatial mutations, and the chronicles of the time (fig. 10).

Furthermore, the stage reconstruction of San Salvador's theatre philologically followed the indications offered by the precious drawings contained in the aforementioned man-

Fig. 7. Giovanni Battista Lambranzi, machine for the introduction and triumph of Germanico sul Reno, 1676. Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, Paris [Lambranzi? 1675].



uscript of Parma, particularly about the planimetric based on Venetian feet and the central perspectives. These reconstructions were subjected to perspective restitution processes to verify certain inconsistencies in the scale ratios of the depicted props, whose corrective factors are dictated by the comparison with textual and iconographic traces found in historical documents and volumes [Mancini, Muraro, Povoledo 1995]. The obtained digital model can be dynamically explored through 3D web algorithms implemented, such as those used in video games that contemplate the interactive exploring environments in virtual reality.

Fig. 8. Giovanni Battista Lambranzi, set design for the introduction and triumph of Germanico sul Reno, 1676. Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, Paris [Lambranzi? 1675].



This is today possible, thanks to the introduction of the Aton open-source framework [16] that "defines an important distinction between collection and scene concepts. A collection is a set of items -including 3D models, panoramas, audio sources etc. - that we intend to use to create an interactive 3D presentation or space [...]. A scene on the other hand, is an arrangement of collection items, with hierarchical organization and transformations offered by scene-graphs. A scene may indeed include specific viewpoints (POVs), keywords, semantics, soundscape, and much more" [Fanini, Ferdani, Demetrescu, Berto, d'Annibale 2021, p. 87.

The possibilities offered are considerable and allow one to quickly interrogate every single element that makes up the simulated scene, making it an activating subject of the most diverse multimedia contents. Therefore, significant vertical sections can be obtained from the 3D model, describing the geometric and spatial complexity of the performing spaces for melodrama in music (fig. 11), or, for example, it is possible to relate the scenic machine perspectives with the correct points of view from which to view the sketches and sets reconstructions (fig. 12).

Finally, the semantic models thus produced could be integrated into the already structured European Theatre Architecture data-

Fig. 9. Giovanni Battista Lambranzi, set design representing the Temple of Juno, Germanico sul Reno, 1676. Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, Paris [Lambranzi? 1675].



Fig. 10. Massimiliano Ciammaichella, reconstruction of the San Salvador Theatre stage machine, 2021.

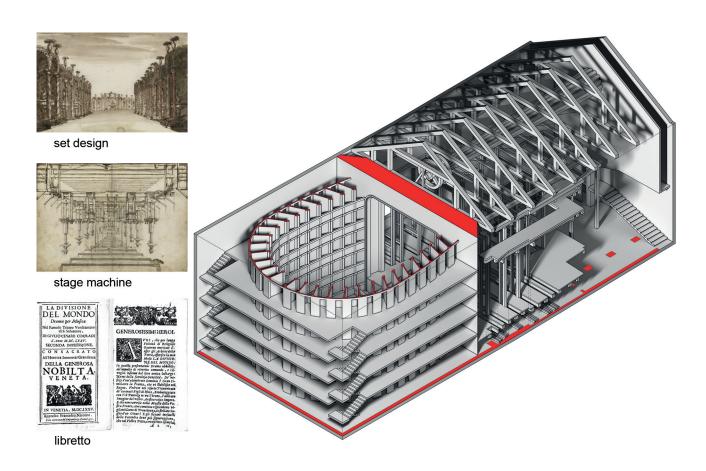
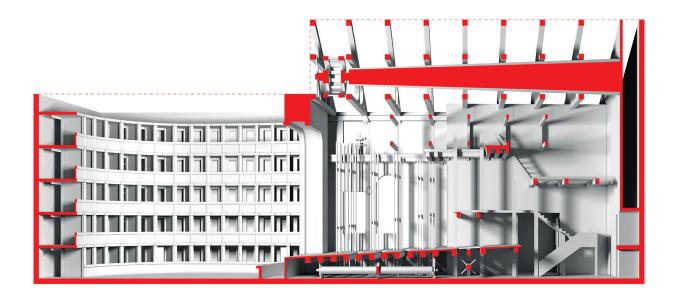


Fig. 11. Massimiliano Ciammaichella, San Salvador Theatre, perspective sections, 2021.



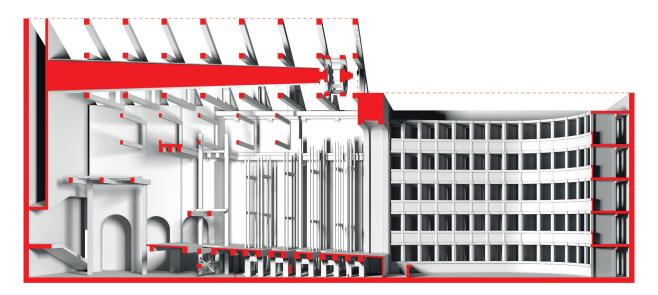
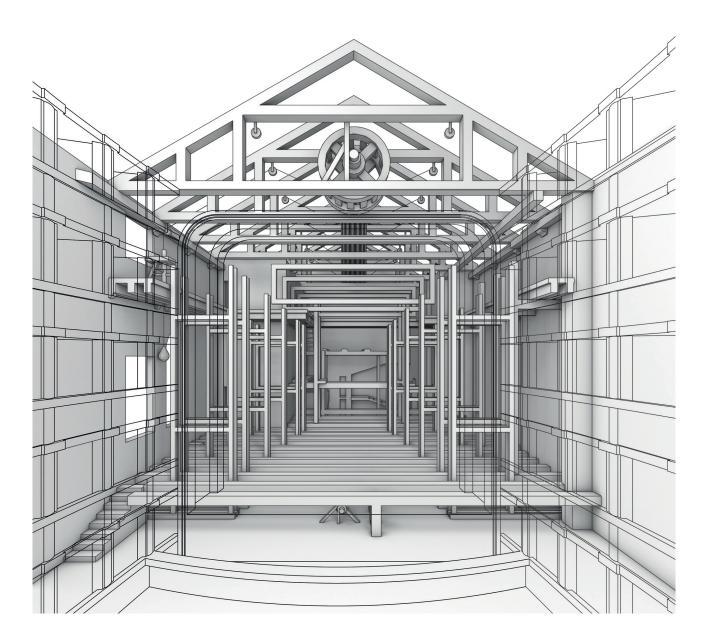


Fig. 12. Massimiliano Ciammaichella, San Salvador Theatre, isometric axonometric section, 2021.



base, activating forms of collaboration with the organizations and institutions involved, in the firm conviction that archives must now evolve into real digital collaborative platforms.

# Conclusions

The events narrated here delved into the history of the San Salvador Theatre, of the Vendramin family. The chosen case study exemplifies the idea of putting together a sources heterogeneity from several institutions, even on a global scale, preserving and activating them within a collaborative platform composed of reconstructions of  $17^{th}$  century theatres, in three-dimensional models that can be interrogated and interoperated.

By taking advantage today's digital archiving technologies, it is possible to implement responsive interfaces for data visualisation in virtual and immersive environments, as is the case offered by Aton. In this way, the places of a memory that has been removed or forgotten are once again the protagonists of the cultural and political scene of the seventeenth century: the one that, starting from Venice, developed and exported Italian theatre abroad, thanks to the inventions of architects and set designers of the calibre of Tasio Gioancarli, Giuseppe Alabardi named Lo Schioppi, Alfonso Rivarola also known as Il Chenda, Giacomo Torelli, Giovanni Burnacini, Francesco Santurini named Il Baviera, Gasparo and Domenico Mauro, Ippolito Mazzarini and, finally, our Giovanni Battista Lambranzi.

#### Notes

- [1] BOAI. Budapest Open Access Initiative: <a href="https://www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org">https://www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org</a> (accessed 2022, February 6).
- [2] PERSPECTIV.The association of historic theatres in Europe: <a href="https://www.perspectiv-online.org">https://www.perspectiv-online.org</a> (accessed 2022, February 20).
- [3] EUTA. European Theatre Architecture is a database produced with the support of the European Union Culture Programme and the Ministry of Culture Czech Republic: <a href="https://www.theatre-architecture.eu">https://www.theatre-architecture.eu</a> (accessed 2022, February 20).
- [4] ERC Starting Grant 2015, principal investigator: Annalisa Sacchi: <a href="https://www.in-common.org">https://www.in-common.org</a> (accessed 2022, March 2).
- [5] Istituto per il Teatro e il Melodramma: <a href="https://archivi.cini.it/teatrome-lodramma/home.html">https://archivi.cini.it/teatrome-lodramma/home.html</a> (accessed 2022, March 2).
- [6] Also known as Vendramin Theatre, by the name of family that opened it in 1622. It stood on the same parcel as today's Carlo Goldoni Theatre.
- [7] The Venetian foot measures approximately 34.7 cm.
- [8] Pepiano: ground floor. The term derives from the Venetian dialect pe-

piàn, a syncratic neologism between 'foot' and 'floor'.

- [9] The theatre occupied a plot of land annexed to the convent of the Dominican Fathers of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, now part of the Civil Hospital. Horse races were held in this area, hence the name 'Cavallerizza'.
- [10] Giulio Strozzi, La Finta pazza, music by Francesco Sacrati [Strozzi 1641].
- [11] Vincenzo Nolfi, Bellerofonte, music by Francesco Sacrati [Nolfi 1642].
- [12] Tebaldo Fattorini, Eteocle e Polinice, music by Giovanni Legrenzi [Fattorini 1675].
- [13] Giulio Cesare Corradi, La Divisione del Mondo, music by Giovanni Legrenzi [Corradi 1675].
- [14] Giovanni Matteo Giannini, *Adone in Cipro*, music by Giovanni Legrenzi [Giannini 1676].
- [15] Giulio Cesare Corradi, Germanico sul Reno, music by Giovanni Legrenzi [Corradi 1676].
- [16] ATON: <a href="http://osiris.itabc.cnr.it/aton/">http://osiris.itabc.cnr.it/aton/</a> (accessed 2022, March 4).

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