Fig. 1. The courtyard of the castle at the beginning of the works. Image by the author

MY FAVOURITE CONSERVATION PROJECT: IL CASTEL DELL'AQUILA A GRAGNOLA

Gionata Rizzi
Architect, ITALY
gionatarizzi@vodafone.it

To Antonio Baldini, fantastic contractor of the castle and friend, who is no longer with us.

Yes, my favorite conservation project is ... a project of mine!

How haughty and conceited must one be to start with such a sentence; it is quite awkward, isn't it... Yet I have one excuse: it is a project that I never managed to complete.

Partly because of disagreements with the Superintendent's office, partly because of a litigation with the owner (the only time in my professional life), I had to resign in the middle of the works and, just as the most difficult children in a family are often the favorites, this project has become my preferred one.

Try to imagine, twenty years ago, the small village of Gragnola in Tuscany, behind the Apuane Alps where the Carrara marble quarries are located. Beside the tiny railway station there is a small, unpaved, winding street that takes you, through cypresses and wild olive trees, up to the hill that dominated that village; there it is what remains of the medieval Castel dell'Aquila, untouched. Bought by a Lombard entrepreneur who wished to turn it into a retirement house for himself and his wife, the castle was, when we started the works, a hip of crumbling debris (fig. 1).

It was a truly magic place, where you felt the past coming straight towards you, yet for us it took over one year to comprehend what this impenetrable ruin concealed within; one year of excavations, removal of overgrowing vegetation, consolidation and careful observation. I still remember the day when I happened to look at the enceinte wall from the inside and, under a very special light, two levels of crenellation (later walled up) suddenly appeared to me (fig. 2).

Having realized that the building was a real imbroglio architettonico, I felt the need to consult an architecture historian; I needed help to identify the phases and the layers of construction of this very complicated building, in other words, to help me understand its anatomy. I called a friend (that's the advantage of private projects: you can involve people you really respect), Gilles Seraphin, a French "above grade archaeologist" because I believed that an archaeological rather than a purely historical approach would be more useful to me. What I really needed was someone who could decipher the way the building was put together, to read in its walls, in its additions, in its mortar, in its vaults, the history of the building campaigns. I needed someone who worked with an "entomologist's eye" rather than discussing historical categories or stylistic types. The idea proved right because from his research emerged a series of information and hypotheses of which we had had no clue and which offered me, as architect of the castle, many suggestions but also warnings, which made me somehow more precautious.

We realized, for instance, that the wall with the two levels of crenellation was the oldest to have survived

Fig. 2. The enceinte wall seen from the inside: on this beautiful raking light one can see, just below the top portion of the masonry, two dove-tail merlons and, under the line of putlogs, the remains of an older square crenellation. Image by the author.

Fig. 3. The same wall seen from the outside after the re-integration of the large loss in the masonry that made the wall unstable. Image by the author.

and thus we made great efforts to save it. The rising moisture coming up from a cistern located at its base had created an enormous breach on the outside and the wall had become so dangerous that the superintendent considered it already lost and the local buildings' safety department would not give us permission to try and save it. So, we devised a system to "harpoon" the wall from the safer internal side through the existing putlogs and, once the wall made safe, we could tackle the reintegration of the outer surface. Yet, to lower the centre of gravity, we had to take down the upper part of the wall – the one that concealed the dove-tailed crenellation – but the wall was saved and, thanks to a horizontal bracing beam hidden into the walkway we had restored on the original stone brackets, it became strong and safe (fig. 3). After that we put back the three roofs (on the medieval wing where we found the exact places where the original truss rested; on the wing reshaped in post-renaissance times; and on a small XVI century addition), we integrated many of the escarpments and consolidated several structural portions, as the castle stands on a seismic region. We also reconstructed a vault, experiencing a moving feeling the moment we heard it coming to a new life when, once the key-stone was set, it started making sounds under our feet! (fig. 4).

It is now time to speak about the first lesson I learned from this project: how to manage the conflict between the architect and the historian. In our case, the conflict with Gilles Seraphin resolved itself looking at the castle for days, with our different eyes and different points of view, but together. He, having so well understood the nature and history of the building, was prey to too many fears. Nothing would satisfy him. He wanted

Fig. 4. Positioning the first truss of the medieval wing on the original stone brackets. Image by the author.

Fig. 5. One of the castles of the Lunigiana *–the same area of the* Castel dell'Aquila*-with its typical look after conservation work: in my opinion over-restoration is responsible for the somewhat "frozen" look. Image by the author.*

Fig. 6. The main room of the south wing during excavation. Image by the author.

to keep everything he had discovered – architecture is rather like a painting; one cannot have the layer above and the layer beneath at the same time: there are cases when you must reconstruct either one phase or another. He found every option arbitrary and every decision would, in his opinion, lead to a haemorrhage of historical and architectural information.

But for the first time it seemed to me one that this conflict was more genuine, more fertile, more useful because neither of us was concerned about with his own expertise. What mattered for us was only the castle, just as we would care for a woman beloved by us both. We spoke and we argued about the same thing, not about our theoretical principles; with different approaches but about the same thing.

On the other hand, with his typical intellectual honesty, he said to me once: "I feel that the wave length which is necessary for understanding is incompatible with that for deciding; and, when I finally understand how all of the phases of the castle's life are interconnected, I can no longer restore it. I have become so fond of its history that I can no longer keep sufficient distance so as to decide what to reconstruct and what to remove, what to keep and what to throw away".

But let us continue with the description of the project. As the works proceeded, I became convinced that it was crucial to respect the magic of the site; and to do so, it was vital that we should be very light handed in our intervention. To me this meant staying away from any unnecessary re-integration, respecting the fragmentary state of the complex and avoiding too big a reconstruction "as it was", wishing not to end up with the "frozen" image of a reconstructed, castle as many others seen in the region (fig. 5).

This was particularly difficult to do in the south wing, where the main room had almost entirely collapsed and where the keep had been blown up with dynamite during the war by a father seeking revenge on a piece of architecture a stone of which falling from the top, had killed his son (figs. 6, 7, 8).

The main room is a large one (about 6x18 meters), originally covered by a barrel vault of which have survived the springing along the internal wall and the traces of its outline on the transverse wall from which it started. The element was indeed too large to re-integrate ad identicum, but how to build it in a way harmonious to the severe, military aspect of

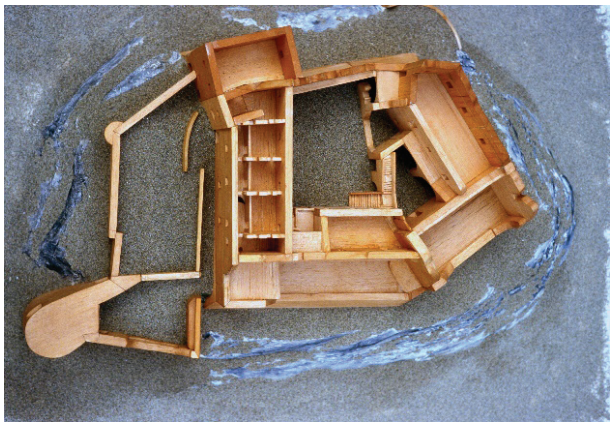

Fig. 7. The wooden model of the castle. Image by the author.

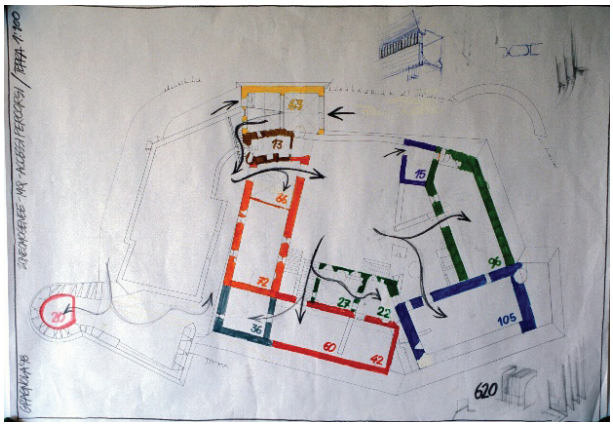

Fig. 8. … and a working plan. Image by the author.

a medieval castle? At first, I thought of going for something metallic (perhaps the rusty looking corten) but then I felt it would have been too much like an installation (which is by definition temporary…). Meanwhile I had found a structural solution that pleased me; six lame arches of steel, resting on one side on the base of the collapsed wall and on the other on the springing of the vault (therefore re-establishing the original conditions of thrust), supporting on their flat extrados the solid screed that would serve as floor for the hanging orchard in front of the kitchen on the first floor. And now, how to fill the gaps among the arches to close the room? The answer came one day while looking at the heaps of loose stones I had asked to be stored when we were excavating the debris of the collapsed portions: why not use the original stones to form a dry wall made of gabions? One problem that remained to be resolved was that of the windows. As they originally did not exist, except for a few loopholes evident in the two surviving main rooms of the ground floor, their addition should actually be planned by law because this would not be, speaking the language of building codes, a conserved space but an entirely new one. (indeed, to have light and air was also functional since this room was to be used as a banqueting hall). In order, therefore, to keep the feeling of an outside wall pierced only by narrow slits for defensive purposes, I designed windows in the shape of very elongated and narrow inverted triangles; these openings, 4 mt. high, were meant to widen towards the top so as to cut out a nice view on the Apuane Alps from inside (figs. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13).

And now the second lesson I learned from this project: when you find the right solution you usually think; "… it was so simple… how didn't it come to my mind before?" Until then, you must not stop searching. There is a point in an architect's work that reminds me of that of a matchmaker: we too have to arrange good marriages, but between shapes and material. It also reminds me of the work of a poet, because he looks for the word that, joined to another one, will create extraordinary and interesting vibrations. In our case we have little to invent (shapes and materials are there) but we have to manage a combination that will make us say: "Here it is! It was so simple…".

Fig. 9. The main room of the south wing: on the right hand side it is visible the springing of the collapsed vault whose geometry can be easily followed on the transverse wall at the bottom. Om the left, above the escarpment, the base of the south wall. Image by the author.

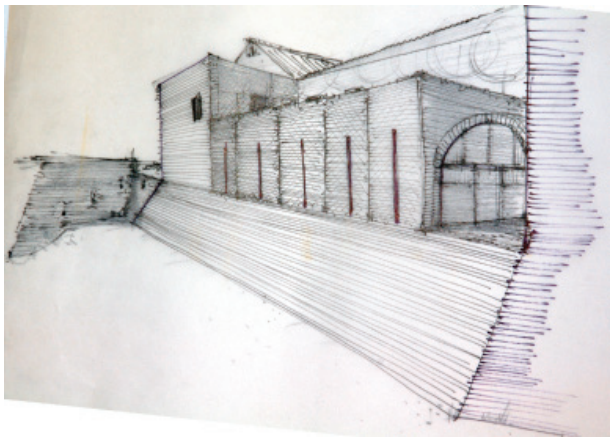

Fig. 10. A sketch of the proposed reconstruction of the main room. Image by the author.

Let us end up by talking about the keep, an element which presented the same difficulties as the main room, but on a larger scale. At first, I thought of treating it as a gigantic pot filled not with flowers but with tall cypresses (figs. 14, 15).

Later, I had to give in, first to the requirements of the owner for more bedrooms, as he needed a B&B which would provide the funds for the maintenance of the castle; and then to the pressure of the superintendent's office who wanted to restore the keep at any cost. After all I could not re-entrench myself behind the absence of archaeological evidence (we had even a photo of it before it was finally blown up). And yet I didn't want to reconstruct the keep as it was. Yes, but how? The stroke which shaped the final design occurred the day a young architect working with me innocently said: "Look… What a beautiful scaffolding they have erected around the keep … don't you think so?" She didn't know what an important contribution she had just made to the design. That very evening, back to my office, I sketched the idea: a permanent wooden scaffolding set within the thickness of the keep masonry remains and as wide as this one (approx. 1.7 mt.) that would serve as a balcony for every room and, at the same time, would conceal their vertical envelope. If you so wish, a declaration of impotence: a working site that becomes permanent for the impossibility to finish the job, as in a minuscule Babel tower. And, speaking of marriages, what I liked most in this proposal was the solid massiveness of the remaining masonry of the base and the lightness of a fish trap in the new structure (figs. 16, 17, 18).

I thought I had convinced my client, it seems, however, only superficially so. Otherwise I would have been able to build the south wing; or I would have at least not found the keep totally reconstructed when a few years later I visited the site with my lawyer for the action against the owner (fig. 19).

I can now finally come up with the third lesson this project has taught me: no matter how painful it is, one must abandon a project when the conditions to do a good job are extinguished. For an architect to recognize that moment is a difficult task since his work

Fig. 11. The proposed reconstructed volume of the main room in the wooden model. Image by the author.

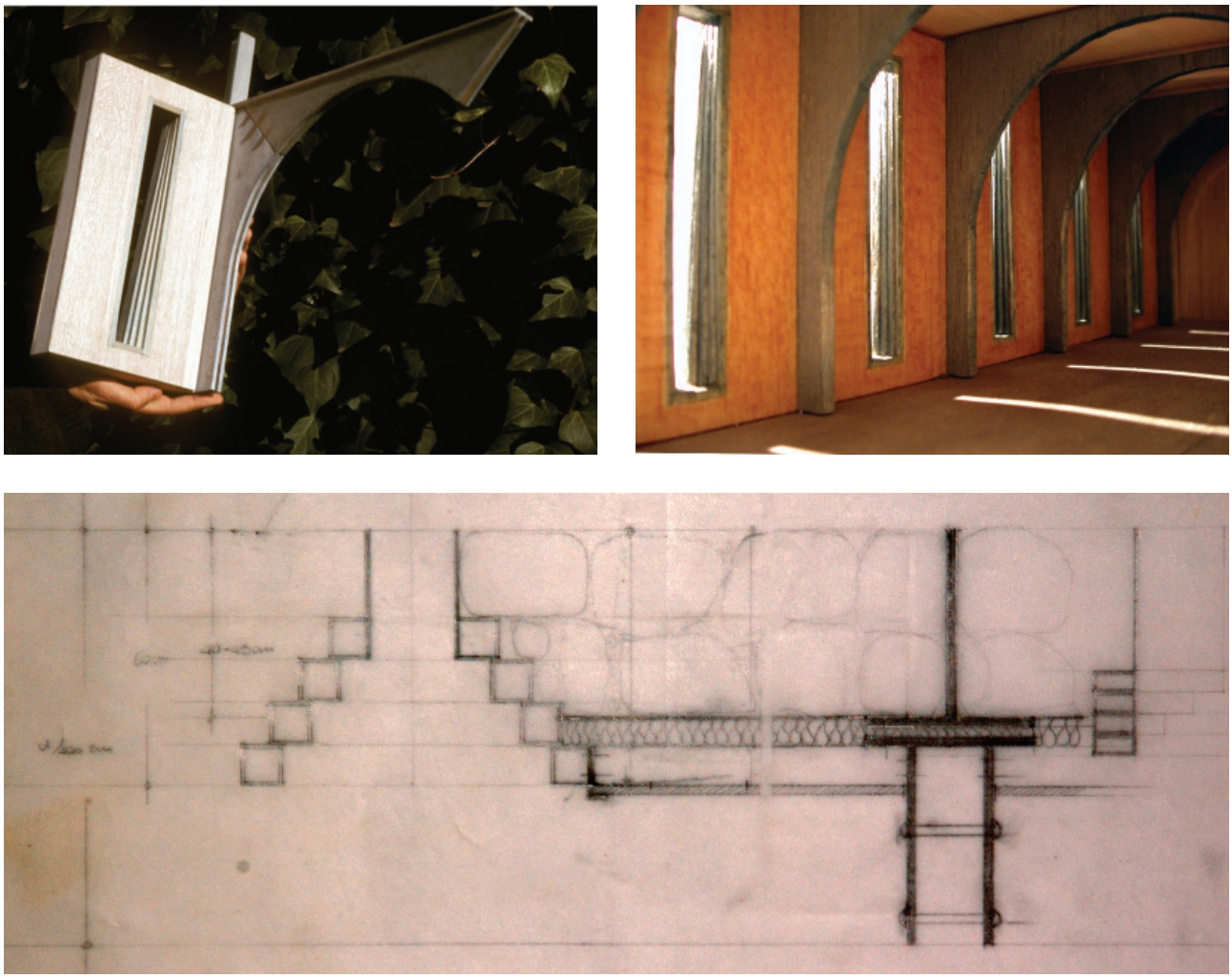

Fig. 12. Above: the structural system lame arch/dry masonry pierced by the slot windows in the wooden model. Below: construction detail of the window and the wall in a working drawing. Image by the author.

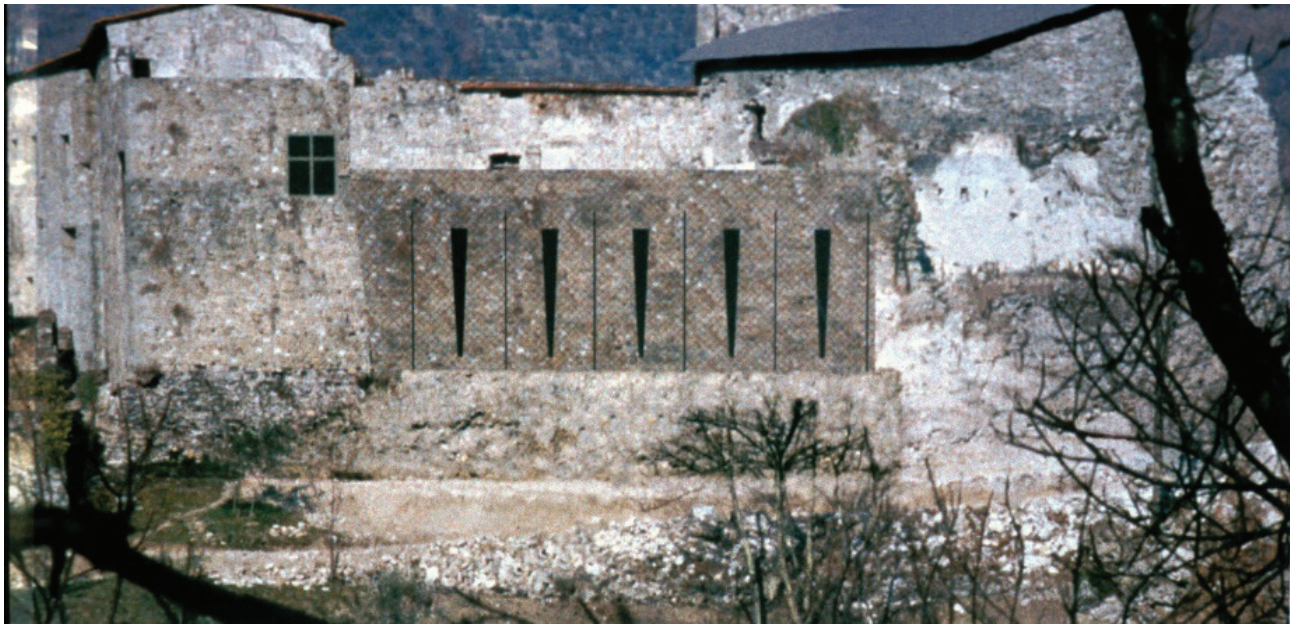

Fig. 13. Above: the structural system lame arch/dry masonry pierced by the slot windows in the wooden model. Below: construction detail of the window and the wall in a working drawing. Image by the author.

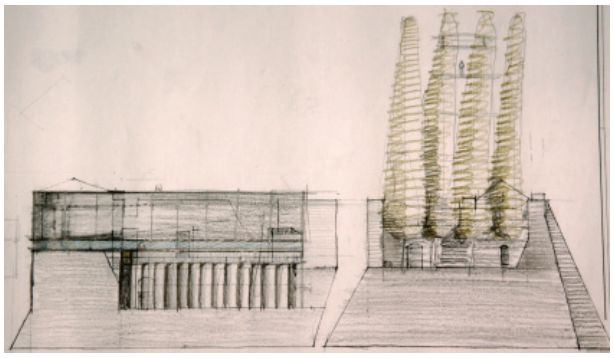

Fig. 14. The first idea for the keep: a cypress grove to evoke its original volume. Image by the author.

Fig. 16. The very image of the keep with the scaffolding that primed the idea for the proposed solution for its reconstruction. Image by the author.

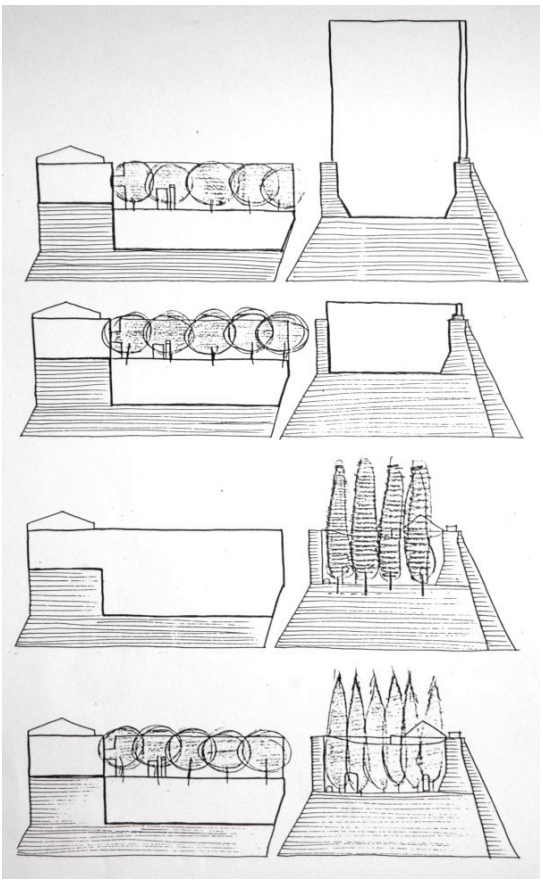

Fig. 15. The first idea for the keep: a cypress grove to evoke its original volume. Image by the author.

is always imbued with compromise and one should never allow the "better be the enemy of the good". And yet, however blurred is its line, a threshold does exist. Although in this case I didn't have to reach it (I was asked to certify that the contractor made many mistakes and even damaged the castle, which was simply not true) the threshold for me was obviously there. The foolish request of the clients made my decision much easier: in hindsight, just one moment before the conditions to do indeed a good job vanished.

Received: 12 December 2018
Published: 30 November 2019

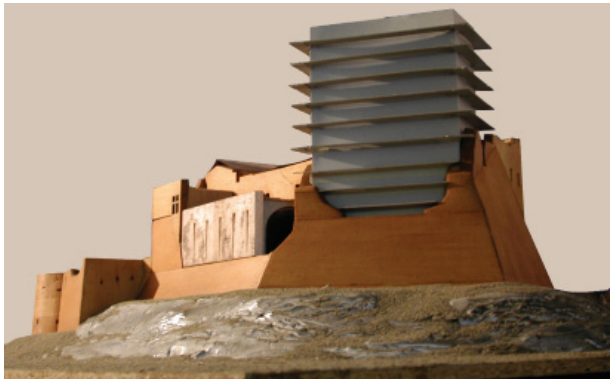

Fig. 17. The model of the south front re-composed. Image by the author.

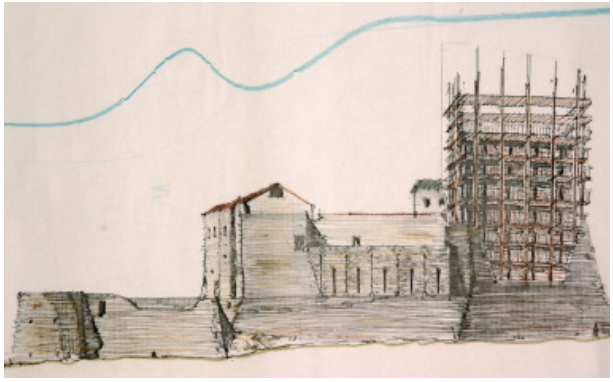

Fig. 18. The project for the south front in a sketch. Image by the author.

Fig. 19. The sign of a lost battle: the keep has been reconstructed. Image by the author.