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Proceedings of the 19th International Docomomo Conference



Multiple Moderns: Climate, Community, Creativity

Los Angeles, 2026

Archiving Late Modernism: The Museo di Sant'Agostino in Genoa

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Abstract. This paper presents the initial results of an ongoing Ph.D. research project at the University of Genoa, supported by Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan and developed in collaboration with the Municipality of Genoa and Docomomo International. The research aims to promote knowledge and valorization of contemporary architectural heritage by creating a digital archive dedicated to the city's post–1945 public works, using the Museo di Sant'Agostino as a pilot case.

Designed by Franco Albini and Franca Helg, the museum is a significant yet understudied example of late-twentieth-century Italian modernism, now approaching an imminent renovation. Conceived in 1962 and completed in 1985, the work involved the restoration and reconstruction of a centuries-old convent ensemble severely damaged during World War II. As part of a broader municipal plan for the regeneration of the historic center, it reflects the ambitions of Italy's postwar museographic season, in which modern architectural language and technical experimentation became instruments of material and cultural reconstruction.

Drawing on extensive archival research, the study retraces the museum's long and articulated design and construction history, clarifying the sequence of decisions, revisions, and constraints that shaped its built form, as well as the subsequent alterations and maintenance issues, which provide essential insights into the vulnerabilities of late-modern architectural heritage and the complexities of its conservation.

The fragmentation of documentary sources—largely paper-based and dispersed across public and private archives—emerges as a general and key challenge. This research responds through a systematic survey, critical selection, and digitization of materials, aimed at reconstructing the museum's full life cycle while making it accessible to scholars, professionals, and the wider public. To this end, the development of an interoperable digital platform is intended to support research, guide informed and coherent interventions, and offer a replicable model for documenting and communicating late-modern architectural heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

Designed by Franco Albini and Franca Helg between 1962 and 1985, the Museo di Sant'Agostino in Genoa provides a key reference for exploring the conservation challenges and documentation strategies of late-twentieth-century architecture. This study is part of an ongoing Ph.D. project at the University of Genoa (UniGe), supported by Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), whose broader goal is to promote knowledge, preservation, and public engagement of Genoa's post–1945 public architecture through the creation of a dedicated digital archive.

Unlike other Italian cities, where universities and foundations have long undertaken the collection and digitization of modern and contemporary architectural archives, Genoa still lacks a comparable, systematized resource. The new archive prototype, jointly developed by UniGe and the Municipality of Genoa, seeks to consolidate dispersed and largely paper-based documentation and to provide an expandable foundation for future acquisitions, thus serving as an initial testing ground for a wider university-led initiative aimed at progressively collecting digital fonds on postwar architecture at urban scale, in collaboration with Docomomo International.

Over the past two decades, the Italian Ministry of Culture (MiC) has fostered growing interest in the study and preservation of postwar architecture, culminating in the launch of the "Census of Italian Architecture from 1945 to the Present" platform (Direzione Generale Creatività Contemporanea 2022). In Liguria, this effort was coordinated by UniGe's Department of Architecture and Design and resulted in the publication *Architetture in Liguria dopo il 1945* (Franco and Musso 2016).

Building on this context, the Ph.D. research focuses on Genoa's postwar museums, emblematic of Italy's museographic season and the dialogue between modern design and historical context. The Museo di Sant'Agostino was selected as the pilot case for developing the digital archive prototype, as it remains one of the least studied examples of the period and is now entering a major phase of renovation. This condition makes it particularly relevant for understanding how conservation and enhancement strategies can be aligned with the functional and regulatory demands of contemporary use.

Drawing on unpublished documentary sources, this paper focuses on the methodological contribution of the research, presenting the first outcomes of the archival investigation and their translation into a digital environment. By retracing and interpreting the museum's evolution, it demonstrates how digital archiving can serve not merely as a technical process of data management but as a critical framework for supporting research, informing conservation strategies, and guiding future interventions.

2. THE ITALIAN POSTWAR MUSEOGRAPHIC SEASON

2.1 The "Musei dei Maestri"

The Museo di Sant'Agostino offers a compelling lens through which to understand how postwar Italian architectural culture addressed the restoration, reuse, and musealization of war-damaged historic complexes. In the aftermath of World War II, modern language and technical experimentation became tools for rebuilding the country's cultural institutions, both materially and socially, transforming museums into instruments of reconstruction and symbols of democratic rebirth.

Architects, working alongside progressive art historians, replaced the prewar period-room model with a modern museography grounded in perceptual, scientific, and spatial principles. Collaborations such as those between Franco Albini and Caterina Marcenaro in Genoa (Palazzo Bianco, Palazzo Rosso, Museo del Tesoro, and later Sant'Agostino); Costantino Baroni and BBPR at the Castello Sforzesco; Carlo Scarpa with Giorgio Vigni at Palazzo Abatellis and with Licisco Magagnato at Castelvecchio mark the apex of the Italian museographic golden age, when restoration became a creative act rather than a merely philological exercise.

The postwar museum also assumed a civic and pedagogical mission. As Albini noted, architecture had previously "sought relationships with the works on display, but not with the visitor," advocating a language attuned to the sensibility of "the modern man" (Albini 1958). Museums were now conceived as public services fostering cultural awareness and collective participation, where light, transparency, and industrial materials shaped perception and public engagement.

The "Museums of the Masters" (Tinè and Pinna 2019) of the Italian modern movement embodied an absolute coherence between form and content, every element contributing to a unified aesthetic and functional whole. Yet this very coherence makes them a fragile heritage, often altered over time by regulatory or exhibition needs. As these works confront today's demands for safety, accessibility, and sustainability, their integrity increasingly depends on historical knowledge and archival documentation to orient conservation planning.

2.2 The Museo di Sant'Agostino in Genoa

The long design history of the Museo di Sant'Agostino unfolded within the broader reconstruction of Genoa's historic center, heavily bombed during World War II. The museum marked the epilogue of the city's museographic season and of the cultural renewal promoted by Caterina Marcenaro, head of the Municipality's Fine Arts Office. Set in the oldest core of the city, at the foot of the Castello hill, the Augustinian convent ensemble comprised two cloisters (a late-medieval triangular one and a seventeenth-century quadrangular one) together with the adjoining church (**Fig. 1**).

Plans to convert Sant'Agostino into a museum date back to 1859, but systematic restoration began only in 1926 under Orlando Grosso, Marcenaro's predecessor. The museum opened in 1939, yet soon closed due to the war, during which the seventeenth-century cloister (then used as a Carabinieri barrack) was almost destroyed, and the church lost its apse vault.

The rebirth of the complex was led by Marcenaro, who in 1959 proposed transforming both cloisters into a new museum and, in 1962, commissioned Franco Albini, later succeeded by Franca Helg. As Albini's last Genoese museum and final collaboration with Marcenaro, the project aligned with Ignazio Gardella's *piano particolareggiato* for the nearby San Silvestro and San Donato areas, sharing the aim of reintegrating historic structures into the urban fabric by balancing preservation and renewal (Helg 1979).

Work began in 1977—the year Albini passed away—and comprised the restoration, reconstruction, and completion of the damaged buildings. Where possible, ancient structures were to be preserved, while missing parts were reinterpreted using modern design and techniques.

In the quadrangular cloister, new reinforced-concrete foundations support underground storage and, at ground level, spaces for services and temporary exhibitions. The upper floors are defined by an exposed steel frame with 30-meter spans (**Fig. 2**) and trusses clad in expanded-metal sheets. The reconstructed colonnade is enclosed by continuous frameless glazing, enhancing transparency between interior and exterior, while a dark-painted steel ramp with white Carrara marble treads provides vertical circulation.

Completed in 1981 and opened in 1984, the quadrangular cloister was followed by the triangular one, finished in 1985 and inaugurated in 1987. Here, surviving medieval elements were restored and consolidated: alternating black-and-white columns received reinforced-concrete cores, and damaged brick vaults were repaired. The entrance on Piazza Sarzano passes through the portico—now an urban passageway—and continues to the church, later converted into an auditorium by the same Milanese firm (1987–92).

The main facade combines exposed steel and glass with masonry typical of Ligurian building tradition, featuring *arenino* plaster and slate roofing; a white-marble stringcourse marks the ancient walls preserved from wartime destruction.

Albini and Helg reinterpreted the site's layered identity through a continuous spatial promenade, where sculptures and architectural fragments are suspended from slender steel cables or placed on light metal stands and solid slate blocks (**Fig. 3**). The result is an architectural organism that allows visitors to experience the dialogue between historical substance, modern intervention, and exhibited objects.

3. THE MUSEO DI SANT'AGOSTINO THROUGH ARCHIVAL SOURCES

3.1 Sources and methodology

Existing publications on the museum—primarily monographic studies (Botto 1984; Botto 1989; Prina 1992)—provide essential context but capture only a snapshot of the work at or soon after its completion. They overlook the complex, iterative nature of its design process and construction phases, as well as the later transformations that shaped its current condition.

To address these gaps, a literature review and on-site verification were combined with an extensive analysis of unpublished archival materials. The investigation was conducted across several municipal departments,[1] the Superintendence of Archaeology, Fine Arts, and Landscape in Genoa, and the Franco Albini Foundation in Milan, retrieving a large corpus of unpublished drawings, sketches, correspondence, minutes, technical reports, and photographs.

This integrated approach enabled the reconstruction of a long, fragmented history, clarifying design intentions, construction phases, subsequent changes, and the issues that shaped its current condition.

3.2 Design challenges and project evolution

Archival evidence offers a deeper understanding of what "restoration" meant in postwar Italy, revealing how Albini and Helg's work moved beyond philological reconstruction toward a new reinterpretation of the bomb-damaged convent. Their design negotiated between rebuilding and selective conservation, integrating historical fragments within a modern architectural logic.

For instance, the first-floor colonnade of the quadrangular cloister was rationalized by regularizing the spans and aligning the structural grid with the piazza front to facilitate the assembly of the steel superstructure. Most of the surviving columns were replaced due to inconsistencies in their dimensions and profiles, while only the corner elements retained. These operations exemplify the hybrid nature of the intervention: neither pure reconstruction nor autonomous invention, but a critical synthesis of preservation and modern design.

The study also clarified the authorship of the work. Although Albini and Marcenaro corresponded directly in the early 1960s, Helg's contribution cannot be ruled out, as she had been a partner in the firm since 1952. Albini's death in 1977 transferred to Helg—within the newly formed Marco Albini-Franca Helg-Antonio Piva Associati—not only the technical responsibility for execution but also the task of adapting to heritage protection requirements and structural constraints.

The design of the triangular cloister was initially conceived as a single-story portico with a roof-terrace promenade and connecting ramps, but later modified: the ramps were suppressed, and the terrace abandoned following concerns about the bell tower's stability. Subsequent archaeological surveys in the Sarzano wing revealed masonry coeval with the church, prompting Helg's final revision. The realized scheme conserves the ancient walls and interrupts the continuous steel-and-glass facade originally planned by Albini, creating a clear distinction between old and new.

Despite limited documentation, the investigation has also shed light on the museum's exhibition design. Since 1962, Albini worked closely with Marcenaro to define the general display logic, refining circulation and spatial hierarchy, while the later collaboration between Helg and Ida Maria Botto established its chronological and didactic layout. Around 1979–1980, Luciano Grossi Bianchi[2] was informally involved in the design process, as evidenced by drawings found in the museum archive. These contributions confirm the museum's plural authorship, shaped by evolving interpretations of preservation and museography within late-modern architectural practice.

3.3 Transformations and maintenance issues

Archival and on-site analyses reveal how successive interventions driven by regulatory and functional requirements progressively altered the coherence of the original design. The building no longer fully reflects either Albini's initial concept or Helg's realized version, but bears the marks of continuous adaptation. The most substantial modification occurred on the ground floor of the quadrangular cloister, where the glazed ambulatory, conceived as a flexible exhibition space, was subdivided into laboratories, disrupting its spatial continuity. Over time, uncoordinated changes to the display layout, including new supports and partitions, further fragmented the intended unity.

Maintenance records show that structural and technical issues emerged soon after the 1984 inauguration, including overheating, humidity, and recurrent failures of the delicate steel-and-glass system, followed by corrosion and material decay. The museum ultimately closed in 2019 after the collapse of a large glass panel on Piazza Sarzano.

The forthcoming renovation, announced in May 2025, will address these issues through upgraded mechanical and climate control systems, improved accessibility, and a reassessment of the exhibition layout. Sant'Agostino thus embodies the challenges of conserving late-modern architecture: the fragility of its experimental materials and techniques, the persistent tension between heritage protection and functional adaptation, and the need to reinterpret modernist design within today's social and environmental conditions.

4. DIGITAL ARCHIVING

4.1 From archival reconstruction to digital interpretation

Starting from the digital archive prototype developed for the Museo di Sant'Agostino, the project aims to establish a methodological approach for documenting and disseminating postwar architectural heritage.

The prototype's structure has been shaped by a broader investigation into current archival practices: a survey conducted through questionnaires and interviews with national and international institutions working with modern and contemporary architecture helped identify shared standards for digitization, metadata, and licensing, ensuring that the prototype aligns with the most up-to-date frameworks for interoperability and long-term preservation.

Although conceived as a scalable system, the platform's development focuses on post–1945 architecture, whose representational practices, administrative procedures, and construction techniques form a relatively coherent field of investigation. This focus also reflects the aims of the broader research program: to document a materially fragile and often legally unprotected built heritage, and to foster greater awareness of works whose cultural value, given their recency, is not yet widely acknowledged.

The prototype extends the research on the Museo di Sant'Agostino from the historical to the digital domain, transforming the results of the archival reconstruction into an interpretive environment designed to reach different audiences.

4.2 Structure and potential of the prototype

The prototype is being developed as a web-based digital platform that combines technical and narrative modes of navigation, enabling both specialists and non-specialists to navigate the documentary corpus through structured paths or open-ended queries.

The technical mode reflects the original hierarchy by holding institution, with each record described through standardized metadata enriched with attributes specific to architectural documentation. Cross-collection exploration is supported through keyword- and tag-based searches, allowing results to be filtered and combined and encouraging multiple readings of the same records. For instance, users may search for a specific space of the museum, a construction phase, or a design element, and access related drawings, photographs, reports, and correspondence across different archives.

Reconnecting dispersed sources within a unified repository enables a comprehensive reading of the museum's evolution, offering new perspectives on questions of design integrity, authorship, and material continuity. In this sense, the archive is conceived not only as a space for document preservation but also as a tool for knowledge production, supporting research activities and informing responses to current conservation challenges.

The narrative mode opens Sant'Agostino to a wider audience by presenting its transformation over time through curated pathways and accessible multimedia content, designed to convey its cultural and urban significance. These thematic itineraries guide visitors through selected documents, images, and short interpretive texts, allowing non-specialists to engage with the site's layered history without requiring prior technical expertise.

The platform is thus conceived not only to bridge physical and digital preservation and to support informed decisions on future interventions, but also to foster new forms of public engagement with late-modern architectural heritage.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The research on the Museo di Sant'Agostino demonstrates that conserving late-modern architecture increasingly requires a dual approach: the informed preservation of its material integrity and the construction of its digital legacy. Archival reconstruction reveals the museum as a work in constant negotiation—between ruin and reconstruction, design integrity and plural authorship, experimentation and decay. Its long gestation exposes the porous boundary between original design and subsequent transformation, showing how each phase, from Albini's conception to later modifications (**Fig. 4**), redefines the meaning of authenticity itself.

Within this perspective, the museum becomes a critical laboratory for understanding the vulnerability of modern materials, the tension between conservation and adaptation, and the evolving role of exhibition design in mediating past and present.

The development of a digital archive prototype translates these findings into both a methodological and operational tool for documenting and disseminating postwar architecture. Conceived as a replicable model, it combines archival documentation, metadata structuring, and public access, while positioning the Museo di Sant'Agostino as the core of an integrated digital ecosystem for Genoa's postwar public works. By linking past design processes with future renovation strategies, the digital environment bridges historical knowledge and architectural practice.

Beyond its technical function, the archive aspires to become a narrative platform connecting research and civic engagement, promoting open and collaborative knowledge. Its progressive expansion to other case studies will strengthen Genoa's role within the international dialogue on the preservation and digital communication of modern and contemporary heritage.

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Notes

1. The municipal archives consulted comprise the Historic Archive, the Photographic Archive - DocSAI Center, the Directorate of Property and Heritage, the Directorate of Public Works, and the Museo di Sant'Agostino. A complete list of consulted documentary units is available upon request from the corresponding author.
2. Engineer Luciano Grossi Bianchi was co-author, with Cesare Fera, of the exhibition design for the Museo d'Arte Orientale Edoardo Chiossone, a work by Mario Labò, as well as of other temporary exhibitions commissioned by the Municipality of Genoa.

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Biographies

Elena Geria graduated with honors in Architecture from the University of Genoa in 2020. After working in architectural publishing, exhibition design, and communication, she completed an advanced course in Marketing and Communication for Architecture at YACademy in Bologna and joined Open Project as a communication strategist. In 2023, she received a PhD scholarship in Architecture at the University of Genoa. Her doctoral research focuses on enhancing late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century architectural heritage through the development of a digital archive of public works in Genoa. She is currently a visiting researcher at TU Delft, where she collaborates with Docomomo International.

Giovanna Franco, architect, PhD, is a Full Professor of Technological and Environmental Design of Architecture at the University of Genoa. Her research fields include the conservation, renovation, and enhancement of built cultural heritage, including climate change mitigation and energy efficiency improvement, and the compatibility between architectural values and technological innovation. As a member of Docomomo, she has been involved in several national and international research projects on twentieth-century architecture. She has been scientifically responsible for the Regional Census of the most valuable contemporary architectures in Liguria and is currently leading a LIFE New European Bauhaus project on sustainable construction.

Wido Quist is an Associate Professor in twentieth-century building materials and adaptive reuse of modern heritage at TU Delft, where he leads the Heritage & Architecture section at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment. He is Secretary General of Docomomo International and Chair of Docomomo Netherlands. Since 2022, he has been, together with Uta Pottgiesser, editor-in-chief of the SCOPUS-indexed *Docomomo Journal*. His research and teaching center on the preservation and adaptive reuse of the built legacy of the twentieth century, connecting specialist disciplines and linking historical knowledge of modern building materials with strategies for conservation and reuse.



Figure 1. Museo di Sant'Agostino, aerial view of the complex. Source: Photographic Archive - DocSAI Center, Municipality of Genoa, ca. 1985.

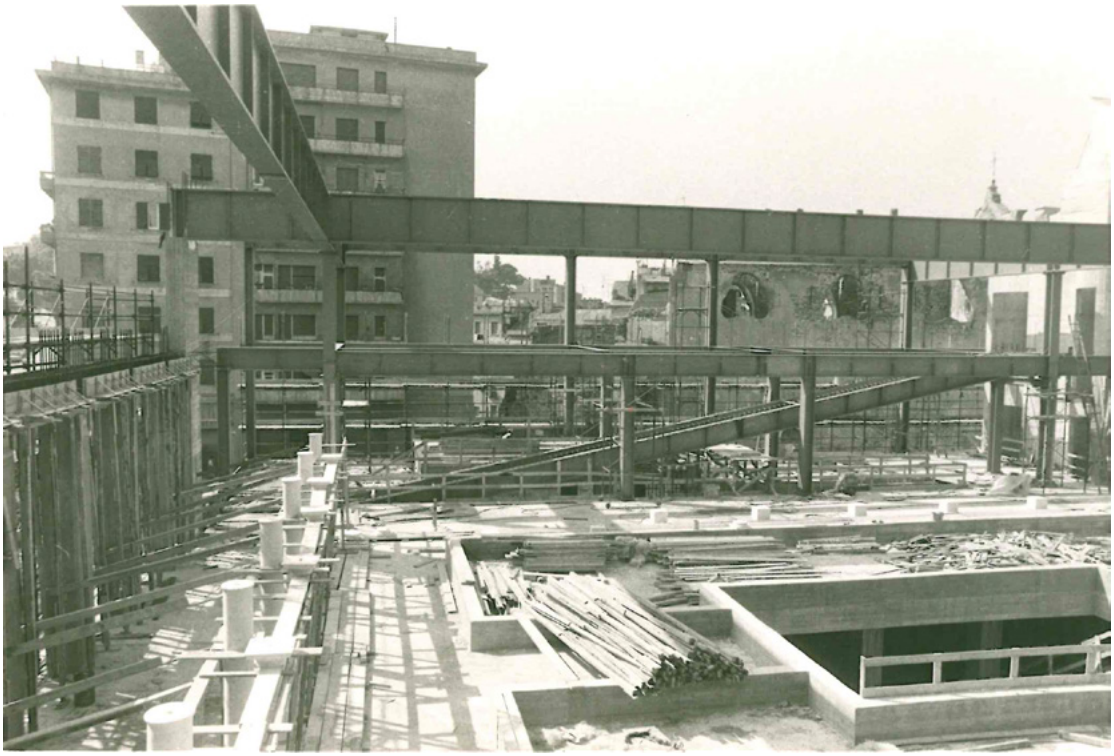

Figure 2. Museo di Sant'Agostino, construction site. Source: Archive of the Museo di Sant'Agostino, Municipality of Genoa, 1978.



Figure 3. Museo di Sant'Agostino, exhibition layout. Source: Photographic Archive - DocSAI Center, Municipality of Genoa, ca. 1998.



Figure 4. Museo di Sant'Agostino, current condition of the quadrangular cloister. Photograph by Elena Geria, November 2025.