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Publisher: FeDOA Press- Centro di Ateneo per le Biblioteche dell'Università di Napoli Federico II  
Registered in Italy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:  
<http://www.serena.unina.it/index.php/eikonocity/index>

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To cite this article: Petrucci, E. (2020). *The civic tower of Arquata del Tronto: a symbol of rebirth from earthquake ruins*: Eikonocity, 2020, anno V, n. 1, 47-61, DOI: 10.6092/2499-1422/6288

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6092/2499-1422/6288>

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# The civic tower of Arquata del Tronto: a symbol of rebirth from earthquake ruins

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## Abstract

The article deals with the problems of post-earthquake reconstruction in the areas damaged by the events that developed between 2016 and 2017; in particular, the Civic Tower of Arquata del Tronto, a small village located in the internal areas of the southern Marche is considered as a case study. On the tower was built the Monument to the Great War Fallen which expressed significant symbolic qualities, recognized as an identity value by the community.

## La torre civica di Arquata del Tronto: un simbolo di rinascita dalle rovine del terremoto

L'articolo affronta le problematiche della ricostruzione post sisma nei territori danneggiati dagli eventi che si sono sviluppati fra il 2016 e il 2017; in particolare, viene considerata come caso studio la Torre Civica di Arquata del Tronto, un piccolo borgo localizzato nelle aree interne delle Marche meridionali. Sulla torre era posto il monumento ai caduti della Grande Guerra che esprimeva significative qualità simboliche, riconosciute come valore identitario dalla comunità.

**Keywords:** Earthquake, symbols, identity, reconstruction.

Terremoto, simboli, identità, ricostruzione.

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Received October 29, 2019; accepted March 30, 2020

## 1 | Introduction

The recent seismic events have caused extensive damage to cultural heritage in the inland areas of the Marche region, showing the extreme fragility of the territorial system, with strong consequences on the economic and social contest, inhistoric villages, the high seismic vulnerability of the building has caused the most significant damage; it's particularly complex to apply regulations and design tools aimed at protecting and preserving historical-cultural values and the strategies of re-building are very complex. Therefore, it's necessary to start again from an expansive knowledge of the historical system in the area of the central Apennines, mostly unknown, to identify recurrent types and techniques through which the foundations and subsequent development of the building were laid.

The monuments to the Fallen during the First World War in Arquata del Tronto, a small Apennine town in the Marche Region, on the border between Lazio, Umbria and Abruzzo, provide an opportunity to illustrate the difficulties experienced by the territories which were so severely affected by 2016-2017 earthquakes. Arquata is set in the center of a great territory that includes several villages, almost all of which were severely damaged by the earthquake. The Apennine landscape is dotted with the smaller villages joined by a weak infrastructural network and an axis that has played a decisive role in history: the Salaria road of Roman origin. The community has always maintained a strong link with its assets of identity that represent its intangible and tangible heritage. The intangible heritage, a reflection of the community's vitality, is made up of all the knowledge, artistic expressions, social practices, religious rituals and traditional techniques of craftsmanship. Traditions have continued to mark the lives of populations, as an expression of

the adaptation and use in the environment where they have always lived and in which they would like to continue living. Both the intangible and the tangible heritage express a concrete manifestation of the spirit of the community, whose preservation can only represent an instrument for a sustainable rebirth. For this reason, it is necessary to understand how this community has been able to respond to the disastrous event, modifying both its habits and its perceiving ways, to strengthen its capacity for resilience. Within this scenario, a capacity for reaction in response to changing circumstances has manifested itself, prioritizing a wide-ranging consultation, to create a sense of sharing in the decision-making process aimed at building a strategy for the rebirth of the area of Arquata del Tronto. The complexity of the district already in major crisis before the seismic events, has been analysed, highlighting a series of issues for the reconstruction of the local identity.

## 2 | The significant value of Arquata del Tronto and the main architectures

There is no definite information on the origin of Arquata; some scholars identify it with the ancient *Surpicanum*, located between the two *Statio* of the *Peutingarian* Table. It is commonly agreed that Arquata has, from its origins, represented one of the most important stop stations of the Historical Road between Ascoli Piceno and Rome. Its first mentions date back to the 11th century, in 1255 it was spontaneously subjected to Ascoli, from which it received a large amount of autonomy in return [Galiè, Vecchioni 2006, 45-56]. During the fourteenth century it had enjoyed relative independence from Ascoli until 1429 when Pope Martino V ceded it to Norcia, under whose dominion it remained until the eighteenth century. With the French invasion of 1809, the Prefecture of Norcia was abolished and Arquata was subjugated to Spoleto; a permanent garrison will be assigned to it and the third fortress of the Department of the Trasimeno will be declared [Cecchi 2005, 11-40]. After the fall of Napoleon, the Papal Government of the Restoration gave Arquata to Umbria and incorporated it into the delegation of Ascoli Piceno, where it became part of the Pretoriale Jurisdiction in 1832 [Bucciarelli 1982, 27-30].

The territory includes twelve hamlets, all at high altitude dispersed over a large wooded area; they crown the high eastern slopes of *Monte Vettore* and *Sibillini* chain. The administrative centre of the area Arquata *Capoluogo* is characterised by a slew of evidence to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The architecture forms an urban structure that is articulated around the main Umberto I Square. The square, an example of a strongly-polarised space, was the vital heart of the village, not only for its architectures, some of which were important, but also for the large number of activities that made it a socially-relevant place [Ferrero, Mandolesi 2001, 54].

This square, with its elongated shape defined by irregular wings of buildings belonging to different periods, was dominated by the ancient civic tower. Archival research shows that the town of Arquata was surrounded by a solid wall system, except for the south side which was protected by the natural shape, in it, there were some access gates and at least five or six defence towers, located at strategic points along the ancient transit roads, and which were able to counteract enemy invasions; the civic tower, also called *Bell tower* or *Public bell tower*, was the most important, connected to the stronghold located at the highest point of the village, from which control could be easily exercised and which looked over the surrounding region [Carfagna 1996, 59-63]. Originally, the tower had a crenellation on the top but later it assumed the shape of the typical *campanile*, with a round arch for the bell dating back to the mid-sixteenth century; at the beginning of the twentieth century the other three sides were added, forming a proper belfry to better protect the ancient bell, to which in 1661 a second one was added [Lalli 2017, 23-25].



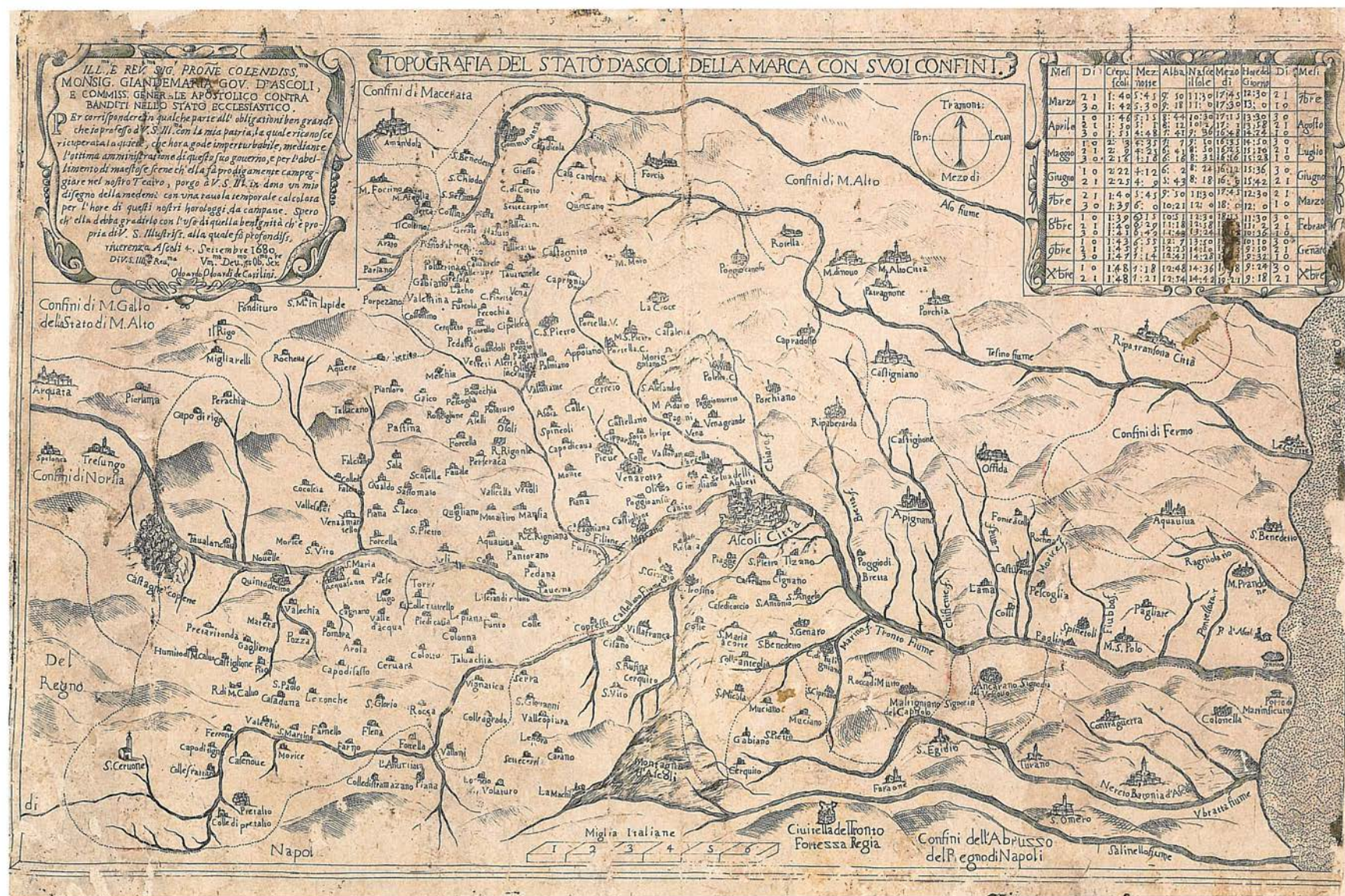


Fig. 1: Odoardo Odoardi de' Catilini, *Topografia dello Stato D'Ascoli della Marca con suoi Confini*, 1680. Roma, Archivio di Stato, Collezione di Disegni e Mappe, I, cart. 6, n. 247 (Cartoteca Storica delle Marche, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060509131607/http://www.sistemamuseale.provincia.ancona.it/galleria%20immagini/serrasanquiroco/cartssquirico.htm>).





Fig. 2: Cadastral evolution of Arquata and main places of interest (by the author).

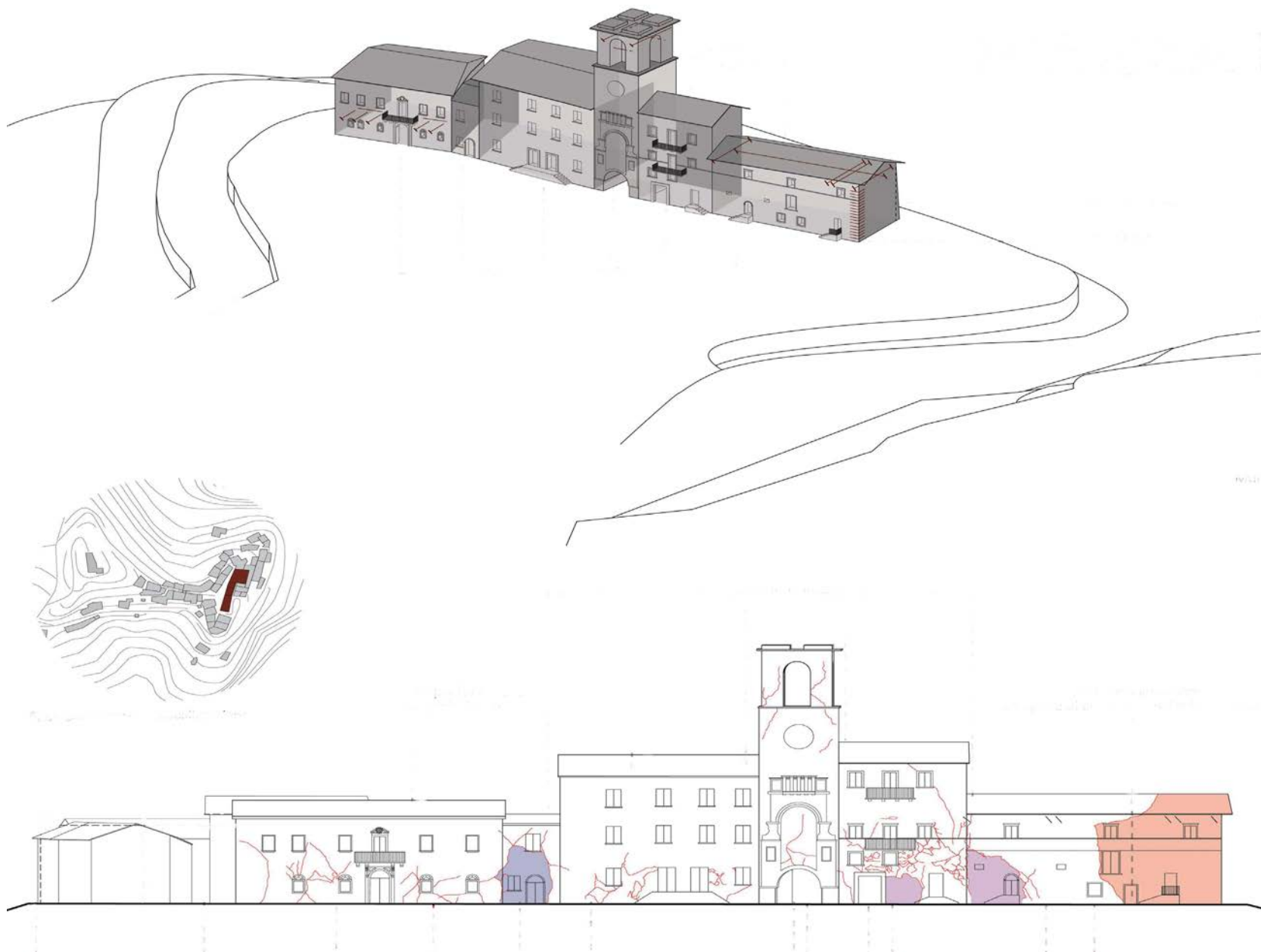


Fig. 3: Umberto I Square in the center of Arquata after the earthquakes (by the author).



Fig. 4: Cataloguing of the memorial monuments in Arquata del Tronto, still present after the earthquakes 2016-2017 (by the author).

The tower, with a square floor of 4 metres on each side and around 19 metres high, was made of local sandstone; the high wall structure was crossed in the base part by a round arch in worked stone blocks that led to a steep ramp which descended towards the Tronto river and was reunited with the Salaria road. The tower had been damaged during various earthquakes, including the one in 1672; in 1703 the strong shocks that had hit the central Italy, with epicenters and intensities which were like the recent earthquakes, had again ruined the bell tower. The chronicles report information on the situation recorded in Arquata, where the churches were “weakened”, the bell tower and the Rocca “indemnifiable”, while many houses had collapsed and those which remained were considered unusable. The tower was promptly restored, and about two centuries later the decision was taken to build a memorial plaque dedicated to the Fallen of the First World War on its north wall. The territory had left many soldiers on the battlefield during the Great War, being a border area where very intense fighting had taken place. For this reason, in the various hamlets, numerous memorial plaques and monuments had been made in memory of those sad events<sup>1</sup>.

For the construction of the most important memorial monument of the territory was chosen the main square of Arquata, reference point for the Community, in 1925, an invitation to tender competition was published, in which it was planned to build the monument under the medieval fortress at the highest point of the town. Some personalities were invited to take part in the competition, including, the sculptor Arcadio Ferranti, professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, the architects Cesare Bazzani and the architect Vincenzo Pilotti, both involved in the design of some public buildings in the nearby main town of the Piceno area. Vincenzo Pilotti (1872-1956) one of the most important Italian architects of the first half of the twentieth century, among the most prolific exponents along with Marcello Piacentini, Cesare Bazzani and the

<sup>1</sup> *Census and cataloguing of monuments to the Fallen of the Great War*, Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation (<http://iccd.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/428/progetto-grande-guerra-censimento-dei-monumenti-ai-caduti-della-prima-guerra-mondiale>, visited in July 2018).



brothers Adolfo and Gino Coppedé of the eclectic style in Italy. He was born on February 13th, 1872 in fraction Marino del Tronto of Ascoli Piceno. Its production, documented by beautiful drawings almost all made with pencil on glossy paper, ranged from urban themes to residential themes developed for the upper middle class of the Marche Region.

He presented his own projects for the town hall of Rieti, the school buildings of Iglesias, Città di Castello, San Benedetto del Tronto, Grottammare, Vigevano, Pratola Peligna, Città Sant'Angelo, Atri, for the high school-gymnasium of Teramo and many other buildings public throughout Italy and abroad. Noteworthy for Pilotti's career is the Pescara season which between 1927 and 1935 saw him involved in the design of the major public buildings: the Government Palace, the Duomo, the Bishopric, the Court, the Town Hall, the Liceo Ginnasio D'Annunzio, the Chamber of Commerce and many others [Gabrielli 1956, 34-40]. He worked with equal commitment in Ascoli and Teramo where even here he built the major public buildings such as the *Muzzi* palace in Teramo and the *Tarlaszi* palace and the Sacred Heart church in Ascoli. Despite his extensive production, Vincenzo Pilotti still awaits a thorough critical study and undoubtedly holds a piece of the twentieth-century Italian architecture mosaic that perhaps has always neglected him for the "provincial marginality" of his creations [Neri, 2003, 15-19]. Vincenzo Pilotti had designed the war memorial for the city of Grottammare in 1924, a travertine obelisk surrounded by braziers and votive flames and the one for the nearby Porto San Giorgio in 1925, on top of which is a bronze statue depicting the Dea Roma Vigilante.

On 1 May 1925, the organising committee sent a letter containing the invitation to participate in the competition for the creation of a «targa con sottostante ara votiva, [...] sulla scogliera che sostiene la torre bassa della Rocca Medievale», in the letter, it is specified that the designers were given free rein in carrying out the theme, but that the monument should not have a "funerary character" and above all it was important that «the design fits in with the austerity of the location chosen as a site». Each designer was required to present drawings and a plaster model in 1:20 scale, to submit it to the judgment of a special commission<sup>2</sup>. On 31 July 1925, Vincenzo Pilotti sent his project, declaring that he wanted to confer a high monumental value on his work., in a letter, dated 31 July 1925, Sacconi writes that he wanted to give the monument «l'espressione di una viva esaltazione di quegli eroi che seppero immolare la loro vita, per il bene e la grandezza della Patria [...]». Le linee generali e le sagome architettoniche del monumento in travertino verranno eseguite con grande semplicità per modo che l'insieme dell'opera riesca in armonia alla severità della rocca sovrastante [...] nutro quindi fiducia di aver corrisposto ai desideri di codesto On. Comitato»<sup>3</sup>. On 3 October 1925, after examining all the sketches, the Pilotti project was declared the winner, thanks to his experience in the design of this type of work. Although it was already in an advanced state of implementation, doubts remained about the location of the monument, as the site was considered unsuitable.

As can be seen from the correspondence of 1926, the location of the monument was definitively modified, moving it to the central piazza Umberto I, on that civic tower that already represented the symbolic building of the old village.

The physical place in which to commemorate the deaths of the Great War was thus to coincide with the main urban space, in which the symbolic representation of death was added to the testimonial value of the public tower, a reminder of the independence of the Free Municipality, in the new project of Pilotti, the vertical exploitation of the existing tower was foreseen, to affix a commemorative plaque in white Carrara marble with dimensions of 4.25 x 8.20 square metres that developed upwards, also incorporating the basal arch in the composition.

<sup>2</sup> Ascoli Piceno, Archivio di Stato (ASAP), Fondo Pilotti Vincenzo, Commissioni pubbliche, 1925-1928, b. 2, fasc. 27, f. 12 r-12v.

<sup>3</sup> ASAP, Fondo Pilotti Vincenzo, Commissioni pubbliche, 1925-1928, b. 2, fasc. 27, f. 24r-25-v.

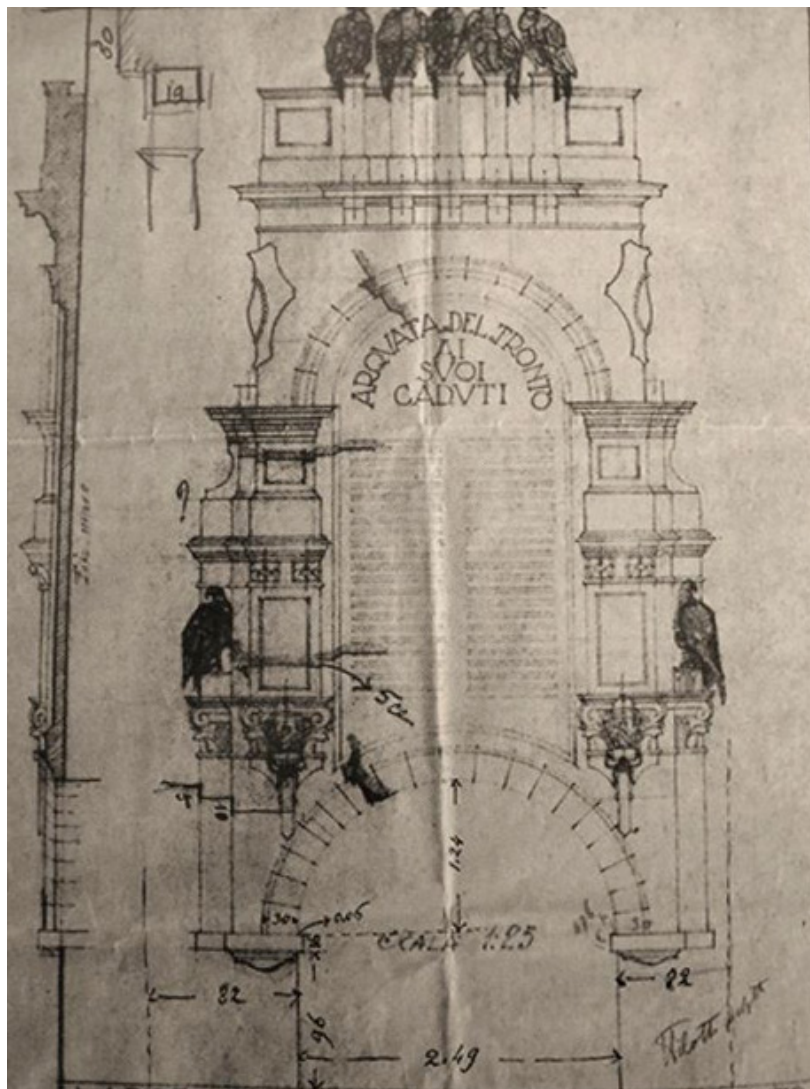


Fig. 5: Vincenzo Pilotti, Project for the War Memorial in 1926-1927, ASAP, Fondo Pilotti Vincenzo, Commissioni pubbliche, 1925-1928, b. 2, fasc. 27.



Fig. 6: The monument to the Fallen of the Great War before the seismic events 2016-2017 (photo by the author).



Carved elements and mouldings constituted the frame of the central headstone, containing the names of the fallen and surmounted by five corbel supporting bronze eagles. The sculptor of Florence Enrico Brunelleschi realizes the eagles depicted with wings closed, the central one looked forward with a fierce expression, while the others looked to the side. Brunelleschi states that «With this arrangement a harmonious and well-matched whole could be obtained». Under the corbels were the coats of arms of the Municipality, two helmets decorated the capitals while on the ring of the arch, other symbols were placed that recalled the events of the war [Lalli 2017, 91-92]. The masonry was built with blocks of local sandstone and showed at the 4 corners of the square corners, in the lower part, the building had the central opening of a round arch, functional for access to a small staircase that guaranteed the connection between the interior of the village, the Tronto river and the ancient *Salaria* road, in ancient times, you entered the square from a passage that communicated with an adjacent building, perhaps a probable institutional site, in more recent times, it was possible to enter from a trap door that opened below the arch vault. On the main façade of the tower, facing the square, there were, until the day of the collapse, starting from the bottom: the round arch, the War Memorial, the clock stopped at 3:36 am on 24 August 2016, the belfry with the main bell dating back to 1585, the minor bell, from 1661, placed on the top together with an iron cross and a wind vane. This composition of elements corresponds to the arrangement that took place in the year 1928. On the top, 5 shelves supported as many eagles cast in bronze, affixed there as an allegory of Victory, represented with closed wings and brought closer to the sides, with the eyes turned and oriented in different directions. Only the central eagle stared ahead.

Over the centuries, the civic tower of Arquata has undergone various changes that have undermined its resistance, through the opening of gates, the closing of windows with unsuitable walls, the changing of the floors and the super-elevation, making it particularly vulnerable. Pilotti's own project had created considerable weight in the structure where some cracks had already occurred, in 1988, the Administration started a series of preparatory studies for carrying out a restoration to improve the structural whole, which had already been weakened by previous earthquakes<sup>4</sup>.

Fig. 7: The War Memorial of Arquata del Tronto with the five eagles in bronze, that represent an allegory of Victory before the seismic events 2016-2017 (photo by the author).



<sup>4</sup> Arquata del Tronto, Archivio Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio delle Marche, AP. 9, *Lavori di restauro della "Torre campanaria" comunale, Relazione tecnico illustrativa dell'intervento di restauro*, 1988.





Fig. 8: Arquata after the first seismic events, August-September 2016 (photo by the author).

### 3 | The seismic events and the prospects for reconstruction

The territory of Arquata del Tronto was severely hit by the seismic sequence that affected central Italy in 2016, with two significant episodes (24 August - magnitude 6 and 30 October 2016 - magnitude 6.5) that caused significant collapses, undermining the consistency of the architectural heritage in the small Apennine villages.

After the shock of 30 October 2016, all the buildings around piazza Umberto I have collapsed; even the civic tower, which was already particularly vulnerable, has not held up to the violence of the earthquake and has collapsed, carrying with it the great memorial plaque to the Fallen of war. The citizens immediately strived to save the only recognisable testimonies of the monument, namely the bronze eagles and the ancient bell placed on the top of the tower. This event demonstrates how, in the event of a crisis, the population turns its gaze to those comforting artefacts, now an integral part of daily life, to rediscover the spiritual connection which, although weakened, remains to mark the terms of a strong identity character.

The area affected by these events is in a very active seismogenic area, already characterized in the past by phenomena of considerable magnitude; the main events that occurred in the past are those of 1328, 1703, 1730, and 1859 [Boschi et Al. 1995]. During the twentieth century, minor damage occurred, such as the 1915 earthquake that destroyed Avezzano, causing several collapses even in the Arquata area [Nimis 2009, p.24]. After the 1997 earthquake, the area did not suffer significant damage, although some interventions were done, following the procedures identified by the Marche Region, mainly oriented to a seismic improvement of the structures, especially for those of significant historical-artistic value. As some recent Italian earthquakes have highlighted, many historic buildings, particularly those of monumental significance, while having a significant role in the formation and expression of the urban image, are extremely vulnerable and present risks not only for material security but also for the collective memory. They represent social values, shared over centuries of history, which manifest themselves through tangible signs in the territory [Zampilli, Brunori 2018, 28-31].

The tragic seismic events developed in the inland areas of the Marche Region, have brought out, with greater force, phenomena that were already underway for some decades: depopulation and abandonment, economic decline and consequent construction degradation, both in the production of new architecture and in the restoration of ancient buildings, in the case of some urban settlement within the seismic zone, we witness a scenario of almost total devastation, which requires not only a reconstruction but a real new foundation [Cipolletti et Al. 2019, 55-70].



Fig. 9-10: Collapse of the buildings in the piazza Umberto I of Arquata del Tronto after October 2016 and detail of one of the fallen eagles with other sculpted fragments (photos by Sante Corradetti).

Fig. 11: Reconstruction project of the Memorial Tower in Arquata del Tronto, December 2016 (render by Consuelo Malta).



It was necessary to impose a strategic-planning order, so that the new foundation could respond to predetermined goals. For a re-foundation of the Apennine historic centers devastated by the earthquake, it is possible to assume new interpretative paradigms, starting from the spaces of connection-aggregation and from the symbolic monuments [Petrucci 2018, 45-64].

The monument to the Fallen in Arquata del Tronto, placed in its main square, has represented over the centuries a strong symbolic and identity reference for the local community. Its value requires a reconstruction according to a rigorous method which must capture the complexity of the theme, in some cases it may be proposed a recovery strategy, according to the famous saying “where it was, as it was”, repeatedly called in recent years about the areas destroyed by the earthquake; it is based on the need to integrate a “menomata espressione”, linking the authenticity of the monument with its formal completeness and the absolutization of some architectural elements, such as, the shape, the geometry or other aspects. From this type of approach, it can result a historical distortion in interpretation.

For this reason, a design methodology is proposed; this method is based on an ability to combine contemporary architectural languages, with a careful historical-critical reading of the monument, before the collapse caused by the earthquake. This allows to identify tools and methods oriented to an intelligent and historically aware reconstruction, an act of critical reinterpretation through new semantic codes. More than a conceptual conservation or a pseudo-mimetic reproduction, a global protection of the “places civilization” is pursued and an active enhancement, in which tradition and innovation, ancient and new architectures can converge towards a renewed local identity, also through a possible welding between the sphere of artistic production and the procedures of restoration.

The project uses the materials of the local building tradition to create new contemporary artistic forms. The remains of the collapsed bell tower, in particular the cast iron eagles, are set in a new spatial configuration. The body of the civic tower is broken down into thin blades which allow, as it once was, to appreciate the landscape behind it, represented by the lower hills of the Sibilli-



ni Mountains. The wind wedges itself inside the cracks and generates particular sound effects. The reconstruction of the Memorial represents a symbol of rebirth, a “beacon of memory” not only to remember the war dead, but also the losses due to the disastrous earthquake.

#### **4 | Conclusions**

For a conscious reinterpretation of the inland areas affected by the 2016-2017 seismic crisis, some reflections are needed: one of the most complex questions concerns the relationships between the ruins that must be rebuilt and the new architectural language that must be declined. The most complex issue is that of identifying the tools for an intelligent and historically aware reconstruction, in this case, rather than an abstract conservation or a pseudo-mimetic reproduction of the urban context and its main monuments including the civic tower destroyed by the earthquake, a project has been proposed that inserts the signs of the local identity into a new modern configuration. As Marc Augè observes, we find ourselves today in front of the city which is understood as an immense ruin where historical and current debris coexist; for this reason we need to free our imagination towards “small utopias”, rejecting the grandiose visions of a “total planning”, instead proposing a “collage city”, where we can activate gradual processes of regeneration and timely adaptation of what remains, favouring progressive adaptation paths focused on some significant public spaces as the main square of Arquata del Tronto.

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