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Une statue gigantesque. Visibility and meanings of the dome of the Parisian Panthéon between degradations and urban image

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Abstract

The Panthéon holds value of memory and its dome is an important element of Paris' urban identity. The study of the archival documentation relating to the third and fourth decade of the nineteenth century ascertains the strong relationship between the continuous restoration interventions and the conscious choice to make the dome of the Pantheon a strong symbolic element in the city skyline and, also, the depositary of the national and collective memory.

Une statue gigantesque. Visibilità e significati della cupola del Panthéon parigino tra dissesti e immagine urbana

Il Panthéon parigino ha sempre assunto un significativo valore di memoria e la sua cupola rappresenta un importante elemento dell'identità urbana. Lo studio della documentazione archivistica, relativa alla terza e quarta decade del XIX secolo ha appurato la stretta interdipendenza tra gli interventi di restauro che si sono protratti nel tempo e l'intenzionalità di fare della cupola del Panthéon un forte elemento simbolico nello skyline della città, depositaria della memoria collettiva e nazionale.

Keywords: Panthéon, domes, restoration, Sainte-Geneviève church, Paris, historic urban landscape.

Pantheon, cupole, restauro, chiesa di Sainte-Geneviève, Parigi, paesaggio storico urbano.

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The wide media coverage of the recent restorations of the Parisian Panthéon deciphers clearly the meaning that the monument dedicated to the *grands hommes de France* has always had in the imaginary and in the representation of political opportunities.

The *échaufaudage monumental* realized for the first phase of the interventions carried out at the drum and at the dome has made clear the French government's contemporary intention and commitment to preserve and highlight the Parisian monument. The Panthéon has been defined a *monument d'exception*. The wide intervention programme, starting from 2014, directed by the *architecte en chef* Daniel Lefèvre, in relation to the metallic elements, has been stated that «étant pour la plupart insérés dans les maçonneries et donc invisibles, il était difficile d'en évaluer l'état». The project has addressed the preliminary treatment of the 'visible' elements, the replacing of those which are too corroded and finally the insertion of strengthening components. In any case, the iron of the pierre armée continues its corrosion raising conservative issues both as regards the technical matter and other issues relating to the authenticity of the monument.

In the past, as in the present, *le dôme* had a strong concentration of different values: during its life-span the alternation between the religious and the political values helps us to realize the importance given to the *coupole* and to its 'appearance' on the scene in the French capital. In addition, as we can gather from the projects of its author, Jacques-Germain Soufflot (*Mémoire sur l'architecture gothique*), the dome represents an incubator of architectural elaboration [Petzet 1961]. In fact, it is an expression of the metabolic process of mediation between the classical figurative values and the French historic tradition; and it was to be the example of lightness and constructive *hardiesse*.

In particular, the story of the Panthéon dome is framed in that historical moment in which the relationships with ancient architecture intertwines with the evolution of science and its application to the vaulted structures. This connection is evident in the *Encyclopédie Méthodique. Architecture* of Quatremère de Quincy where he argues on the *partie historique*, the *théorique* and, afterwards the *didactique*, and the *pratique* of architecture. The art of construction is considered as a whole and all the relationships between the sciences of calculus and the knowledge of antiquity are underlined. It is not by chance that this last part of the Quatremère's *Encyclopédie* was written by Jean-Baptiste Rondelet who consolidated the building after Soufflot's death. Rondelet was at that time «inspecteur de la nouvelle église de Sainte-Geneviève, connu par ses connoissances pratiques & théoriques dans l'Architecture & la construction, la mécanique & les sciences du calcul, & dont l'académie de Lyon vient de couronner un mémoire sur la théorie des voûtes» [Quatremère de Quincy, 1788, I, vii].

Relating to the Saint-Geneviève Church, in the intention of the architect from Lyon, the dome had to have the main role in relation to the plan's layout. The dome resolves, in a decisive way, the spatial envelope: its creation had to correspond to «une *espèce* de croix grecque, composée de quatre nefes qui se réunissent à un dôme placé au centre».

The transformations undertaken in the project for Sainte-Geneviève's church also express the meanings gradually assumed by the dome. In fact, in a drawing from 1757, Soufflot's section shows, in addition to rectangular windows above the architectural order, a double and hemispherical dome, with figurative affinities to the baroque language. Next, the shape of the inner shell is extended and the previous architectural characteristics are mitigated. However, it is from about 1770 onwards that the triple shell appears.

As far as the exterior is concerned, the dome is configured through a high drum, windowed and with columns articulated according to different intercolumni. The outer shell, instead, namely the *dôme*, works as a cover for the underlying structure as it is invisible from the inside. Subsequently and simultaneously the idea of the triple shell, the curvilinear part on the outside, becomes an important element but it is also autonomous, so that the drum, the vault and the lantern constitute an assembled system of evidently classical references [Marino 2012^a, 102 and following].

Three vaults, therefore, of which the inner and the intermediate one were made in stone from Conflans, whereas the outer vault was made of Vergelé stone. From the description of Rondelet's *Mémoire historique sur le dôme du Panthéon français* the dynamics of the composition that Soufflot had put in place can be easily perceived: the first shell is opened at the center by a large oculus that leads to the views of the intrados of the second upper shell - frescoed by Antoine-Jean Gros – which is illuminated by the windows which are open above the colonnade.

But especially the urban dimension plays, we could say, an almost genealogical role in the realization of the new church and, specifically, its dome. The new church of Sainte Geneviève was part, just like other monuments, of that 'monumental net' which had precisely the purpose of providing an image of that absolutism which, a few years afterwards, would collapse after the Revolution.

Sainte-Geneviève, in other words, together with the statue and the square of Louis XV, the Ecole Militaire, the Madeleine, the Champs-Élysées, had to provide Paris with monumental episodes; and the future Panthéon had to be among the main precious gemstones [Patte 1765]. From the point of view of its urban image, the Panthéon presents itself as a key case to un-

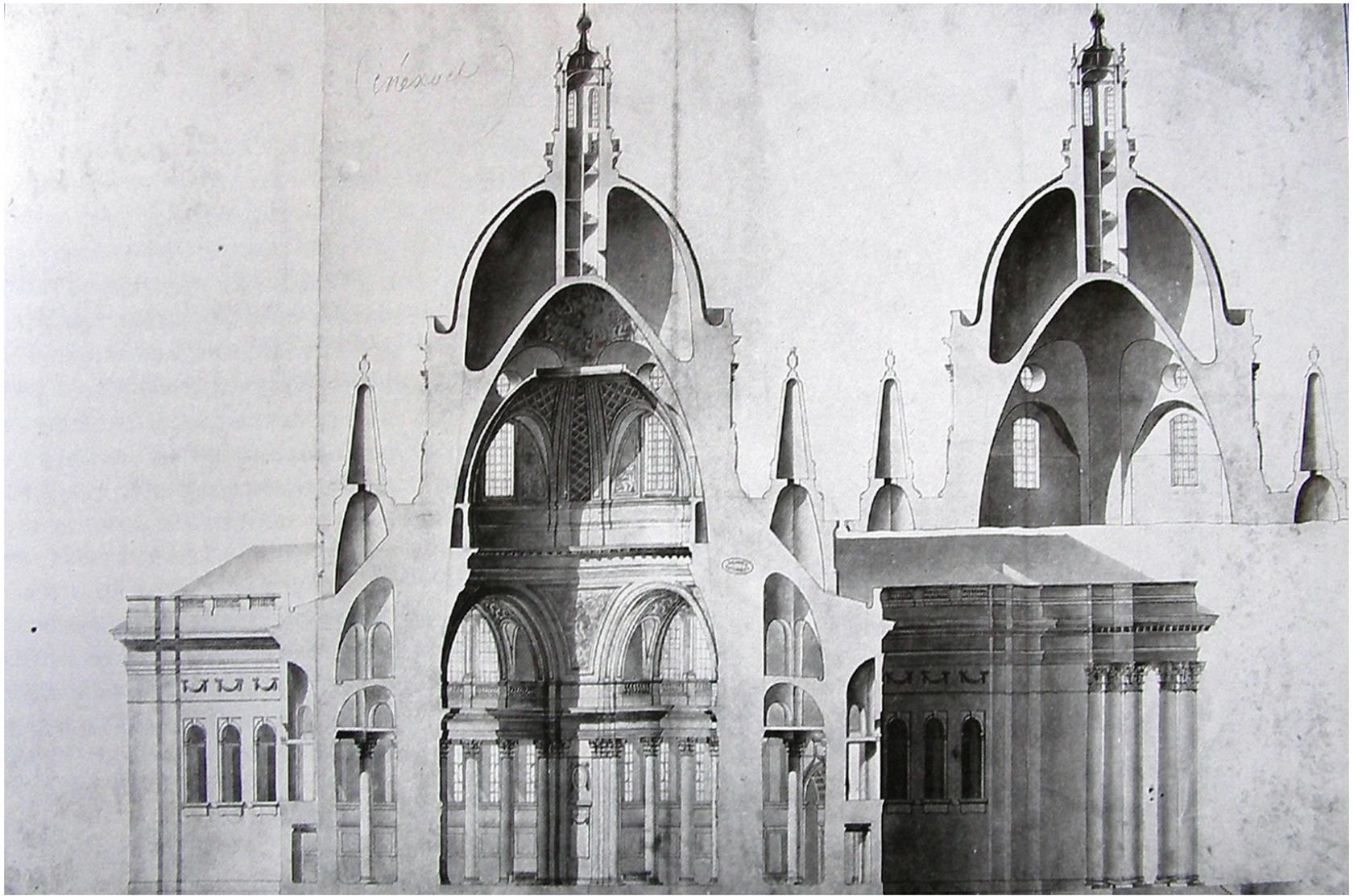


Fig. 1: Jacques-Germain Soufflot, Church of Sainte-Geneviève, diagonal section, c. 1770. Paris, Archives nationales [Marino 2012].

Fig. 2: Pierre-Antoine de Machy, *Le Panthéon*, c. 1792. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, RESERVE FOL-VE-53 (H). General view with the *statue colossale* designed by Quatremère de Quincy.



derstand the relationship of the ‘dome’ structure and the multidimensional meanings that it develops, also providing particular interpretative and critical parameters that inevitably affect the restoration work.

In the meantime, the story that characterized the life of the church of Soufflot allows us to read several passages and the related values assigned to the dome’s architecture; this is in relation to the urban image and its ability to affect the collective imagination. In fact, the destination changes – the church became the Panthéon in 1791, only to be again re-consecrated a church in 1821, to again be converted into the Panthéon from 1830 to 1853, and from this year until 1885 it was again destined for religious worship and, finally, it was reconverted into the Panthéon definitively in 1885. This provides a significant key to understanding the ability of the dome structure to become a place of condensation and concentration for cultural tensions and hidden meanings. During the last decade of the eighteenth century, Antoine Chrisostome Quatremère de Quincy, a key figure in the events that affected the Panthéon, set up a wide intervention program. This, partially carried out and explained in *Extrait du premier rapport présenté au Directoire*, had to transform the church which, after the Revolution, was to have to play a lay function. In particular he envisaged a downsizing of the function of the lantern, defined as «petits belveders que la stérilité de la mode a si inconsidérément multipliés sur toutes les coupoles» [Quatremère de Quincy 1792, 11]. With regard to this, in place of the statue of Saint-Geneviève to whom the church was originally dedicated, Quatremère proposed, around 1793, to allocate the symbol for the new religion, this new symbol being more suitable for the temple of the new glory. He designed a



Fig. 3-4: Louis-Pierre Baltard, *Projet de croix pour le couronnement de la lanterne de l'église de Sainte-Geneviève*, 1822. Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives nationales; on the right, Edmond Destouche, *Projet pour l'installation d'une statue colossale de «L'Immortalité» par Cortot sur la lanterne du Panthéon*, 1842. Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives nationales.

colossal statue, namely the *Renommée*. Its role had to be the emblem of an almost mythical story, whose echo can be seen in an article of the *Journal de la Montagne*: «Un Panthéon s'élève au milieu de la commune centrale de la République: ce monument de la renaissance nationale est aperçu de toutes les frontières; qu'on l'aperçu donc aussi du milieu de the Océan» [Deming 1989, 135]. The work was conceived in lead because it was economically unsustainable in bronze and, also, it would be too heavy because of the load, when the questions regarding the instability of the *piliers* and consequently the crisis of the entire dome system came up again, the idea of the colossal statue was abandoned.

As is well known, from 1796 to 1806 the debate on how to restore the *piliers* and therefore the dome was deeply felt [Marino 2012^a; Marino 2012^b; Ottoni 2012], so much so that some, among those who intervened in the *querelle*, even proposed to demolish and rebuild it. The demolition was proposed by Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste-Guy de Gisors. In every instance, the debate carried out interesting observations and some of these were based on the recognition of the important relationship between the monument and the urban context [de Gisors 1799].

The urban value and, in the same way, the political-symbolic meaning, lays the basis and finds confirmation through the comparative analysis of the different architects responsible for the monument who came after each other: i.e. Jean-Baptiste Rondelet had remained *Inspecteur du Panthéon* until 1801: later Louis-Pierre Baltard (1813-1832), Louis-Nicolas-Marie Destouche (1832-1850), Simon-Claude Constant Dufeux (1850-1871), Louis-Victor Louvet (1871-1879), Edmond Deschault (1879-1902), Henry-Paul Nénot 1902 with Louis-François-George de Roux of the gardens of the ancient convent of Sainte-Geneviève, a precise intention emerges; the building must have the meaning of an urban 'monument'. Both the building and the dome were the subject of continuous works and the transition from Baltard's management to that of Destouche is significant.

Baltard, even from 1829, while he was completing the interior of the dome, was discussed intensively for his direction: the *Direction des Travaux de Paris* accused him of «faire passer des intérêts très secondaires, or même contestables» and requested from him quotations for arranging the exterior, specifically the *grille d'enceinte*.

In this period there was one more passage from the religious to the secular destination (August 26th 1830). Guizot, as Minister, expressed his preference for Baltard's project regarding the Panthéon which, with its terracing works, was «important d'entreprendre sur le champ afin de procurer une nouvelle occupation à la classe ouvrière». Meanwhile the growing interest of the government in national gothic architecture, which was evidenced by the politics of which Guizot himself is one of the protagonists, shows how the effects of the French political and economic troubles, affected the Panthéon. Also the demolition of the two towers called «des modernes ruines [...] d'un effet désagréable et forment un disparate choquante avec l'architecture sévère de ce magnifique édifice»¹, gives a measure of the attention paid to the urban dimension of any intervention concerning Soufflot's church. The same consideration of the urban value is therefore grafted onto the initial premises of completion and the aménagement of the Panthéon's surroundings. This is the context in which Quatremère's idea of a statue is taken up again.

Napoleon's 1807 decree had started the demolition of the ancient medieval abbey dedicated to Sainte-Geneviève with the aim of creating a series of accesses according to the four different cardinal points (rue Soufflot had been enlarged). «Le plus beau de tous les temples de la capitale» had to have an impressive context [Bergdoll 1989, 191]. On the other hand, during the Restoration period, the program of conversion to religious worship and the realization of a decorative program aiming at the elimination of revolutionary symbols and at «créer, sur le point le plus éminent de la

¹ Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives nationales, *Lettre du Chef de Division*, Panthéon F/13, dossier 1145.

capital, the Vatican des Gaules» [Bergdoll 1989, 199] represent an even more explicit reference to the importance of the urban meaning of the building.

A series of projects for Sainte-Geneviève's statue were carried out by Baltard, that, however, had not been accepted. A more explicit symbol was preferred, referring to religion and, in order to escape any kind of ambiguity, the cleric requested a simple cross to be placed on the lantern. The extensive documentation of the Parisian Archives nationales gives an account of the relevant activity of Baltard as an architectural inspector for the Panthéon. These projects had a remarkable impact on the urban context which, with the advent of the management of Destouche, were somehow taken up in the following years, even though with considerable downsizing, for economic as well as political reasons.

The Panthéon, in any case, with the construction of the Library by Labrousse of 1838-1850, with the construction of the facade of the municipal building in the 5th arrondissement by Hirtoff and Guénépin and, finally, with the Ecole de Droit by Soufflot, was surrounded by a context that fully possessed his monumental individuality. During the first anniversary various clashes occurred in 1830, and so the Panthéon became even more the symbol of the Revolution, associated also with the consecration of the Bastille Square as a place of political worship. Both the places were reference points for republican glory and, together, as permanent signs of the urban landscape, were later visually linked to the Haussmannian Boulevard Henry IV [Bergdoll 1989, 204]. The Thirties, however, represent the period where one tries to assign figurative and paradigmatic meaning to the French monument. And beyond the achievements of the decorative elements, of the impediment and of the internal architectural partitions, in those years there was a particular interest in its urban visibility in connection to the historical-political significance for the French nation. The further change of destination and the takeover of Destouche as being responsible for the Panthéon see the launch a series of initiatives. First of all there is the project of the "colossal figures" as evidenced by various *devis*, and also the countless other operations² to undertake the new course and the different image of the building.

In 1833 proposals involving different figurative solutions and a structural set for the dome alternate. Following the long report by the Director of *Batiments Civils*, Edmond Blanc, at the *Ministre du Commerce et des Travaux Publics* aesthetic issues are addressed. Just two months later it was proposed to replace the massifs supporting the dome. There was proposed, in other words, the «restauration du Panthéon dans sa première splendeur»³. The previous consolidation solving a technical-static problem in the dome had imposed the large section of the *piliers*, and this was considered incompatible with the lightness of the Corinthian columns designed and made by Soufflot. The proposed technique was daring and provided the use of cast iron in the inner part of the columns overlapping modular elements and, externally, the cladding in stone. Simultaneously, in the same month, we find a document dealing with the way to make the cast bronze *Statue Colossale*. The statue was commissioned by Destouche and designed in bronze by Cortot⁴. This involved the *Immortalité* and it had to be placed on the lantern. For its installation the use of the Greek technique to achieve fullsize statues - «du Sphyrélaton, en cuivre, des grecs, c'est-à-dire la moulage au marteau de ce métal» - was proposed. Initially the statue's name was *Immortalité*; later the different name *Renommée*, was requested by the Minister Thiers⁵.

The intention to realize a «figure en bronze doré, sur la boule»⁶ also occurs in the following year. The construction site was complex and increasingly intertwined with political tensions and changes, in a period in which the attention of the administration was more focused on arranging the exterior and on keeping the costs down. This is also confirmed by the 1834 documentation,

² Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives nationales, Panthéon F/13, dossier 1145.

³ Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives nationales, *Restauration du Panthéon dans sa 1ère Splendeur*, par M. Omont, 6 juin 1833, Panthéon, F/13, dossier 1145.

⁴ Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives nationales, *Observations sur le projet de faire couler en bronze*, Lettre du 27 juin 1833, Panthéon F/13, dossier 1145.

⁵ Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives nationales, *Visite de M. le Ministre le 27 septembre 1834*, Panthéon, F/13, dossier 1145.

⁶ Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives nationales, *Statue en bronze doré, sur la boule et les changements au couronnement de la lantern*, Panthéon, F/21, fasc. 1606, Indication de travaux, Budget du Panthéon, 1834.

where, in relation to the dome, we can find the mention of the work to repair the *soubassements* of the columns outside the drum. In the following years the construction site was a very animate place: i.e. repairs, changes, the completion of the figurative apparatuses. All of this was in pursuit of what the monument had to represent: i.e. a religious symbol, then a symbol of the revolution and finally, with the effort and politics of Guizot, the synthesis of a moral and religious significance. The examined archival documents return to the chronicle of the construction site and of the intentions of power. In 1836 Destouche argues in favour of new interventions being carried out for the dome, that is: «Le dôme du Panthéon qui domine toute Paris sera surmonté d'une statue dorée; il conviendrait pour accroître l'effet qu'elle doit produire, de dorer les côtes de ce dôme et ajouter quelque décoration».

The iconization of the Panthéon continued during the 1840s with other projects for the installation of the *statue gigantesque*. The evidence of its monumentalization can also be read through an entrepreneur's patent for a machine to install the colossal statue at the top of the dome¹².

The significance of Soufflot's dome is evidenced even today. It is considered a symbol to mark the capital's landscape and the gilding of the ribs was part of the objectives of the latest restoration works in the case the archival surveys had confirmed the presence of the dome's *dorure*.

⁷ Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives nationales, *Mémoire descriptif du brevet d'invention du levier Magny*, N. Magny, 22 décembre 1837-11 février 1838, Panthéon, F/21 1606.

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Sitography

<https://www.monuments-nationaux.fr/Espace-Decouvertes/Pantheon-Paris>