

Function versus Form.

The Dancing Venue *La Bussola* and the Challenges of Conserving Modern Architecture

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Abstract

The dancing venue *La Bussola*, built in Marina di Pietrasanta between 1946 and 1948 by Baroni, Tempestini, and Porcinai, is an emblematic case of post-war leisure architecture. Originally conceived as a seaside facility, it quickly became a symbol of Italy's entertainment society under Sergio Bernardini, gaining immediate cultural and social recognition. Architecturally, however, the building underwent radical transformations that compromised its original layout, allowing function to prevail over form and preventing an effective process of heritagization. Through archival research, this paper reconstructs the design phases and highlights the modernity of the original project, while underlining the paradox of its progressive alteration. The case demonstrates how historical knowledge remains a necessary condition for safeguarding the twentieth-century heritage.

Keywords

La Bussola, Heritagization, Leisure Architecture, Archival research.

Introduction

The dancing venue *La Bussola*, built in Marina di Pietrasanta between 1946 and 1948 to a design by the studio *Lungarno Corsini* ⁶¹ – Nello Baroni², Maurizio Tempestini³ and Pietro Porcinai⁴ – stands as an emblematic case of leisure architecture in the post-war period, a season in which this specific field of design took on innovative and experimental forms⁵. Born as a seaside bathing establishment, within a few years it was transformed into a symbolic place of the entertainment society, thanks to the management of Sergio Bernardini⁶, until it became a true cultural brand, capable of redrawing the very geography of Versilia and expanding its social and cultural boundaries.

From a cultural and social perspective, Bernardini's *La Bussola* left profound and lasting traces⁷, while on the architectural level the process of recognition appears more complex: the radical transformations it underwent over time ended up distorting the original design, allowing function to prevail over the work itself. In the case of *La Bussola*, heritagization came late and in a distorted form – or, more accurately, it never truly arrived: while the venue immediately enjoyed social and cultural recognition, the architectural project remained on the margins, progressively losing its original qualities.

This contribution seeks to reflect on this discrepancy, focusing in particular on archival documents that record the project of the three Florentine architects and the subsequent alterations that reshaped it, leading up to its current condition as a commercially oriented venue. *La Bussola* thus represents a borderline case, in which recognition occurs without knowledge⁸, function prevails over form⁹, and the patrimonial process never translates into architectural protection. It stands as a paradigmatic example of those architectures which, despite having left a deep mark on collective memory, have not been able – or perhaps not been allowed – to attain an effective patrimonial status.

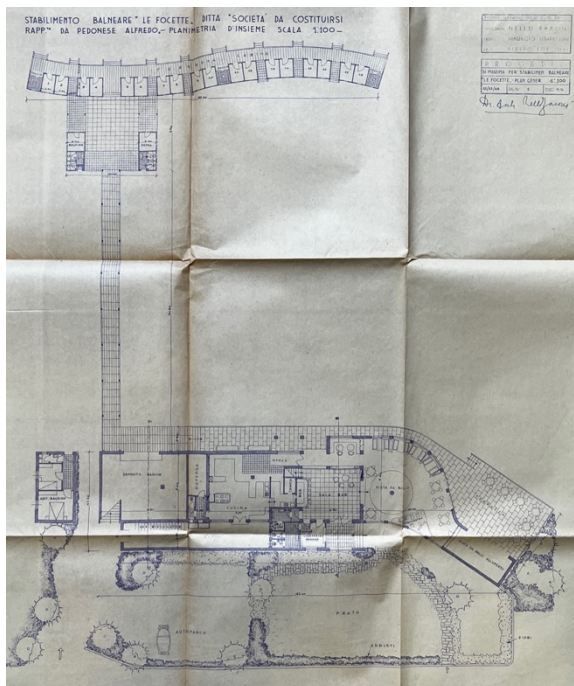


Fig. 1 Studio Lungarno Corsini 6, *La Bussola*, preliminary design, general site plan, scale 1:100, 1946 (ASCP, *Arenili concessioni demaniali, Concessioni arenili – Pedonese Alfredo*, loose papers).

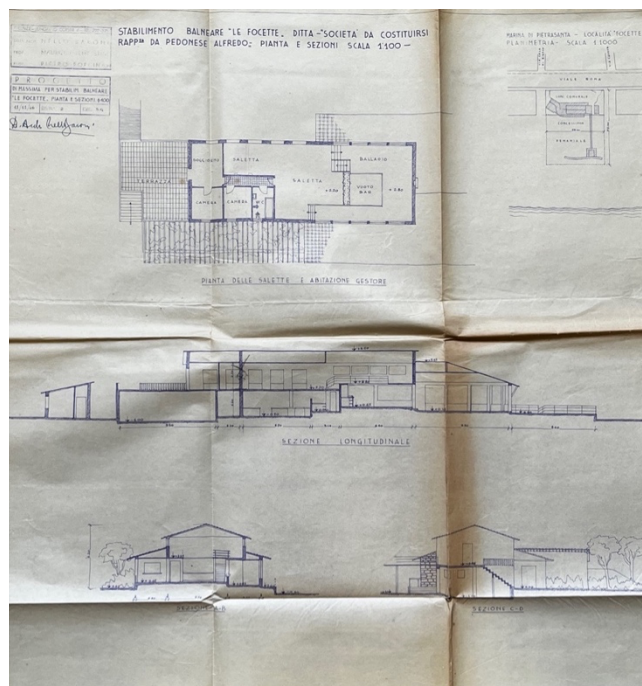


Fig. 2 Studio Lungarno Corsini 6, *La Bussola*, preliminary design, plan and sections, scale 1:100, 1946 (ASCP, *Arenili concessioni demaniali, Concessioni arenili – Pedonese Alfredo*, loose papers).

From Ritrovo sul Tirreno to *La Bussola* di Bernardini

If *La Bussola* di Bernardini left numerous and indelible traces thanks to its *cul pop* fame, the bibliography concerning the architectural project is far less abundant¹⁰.

To reconstruct the historical events of this building, an in-depth archival investigation was therefore required. The unpublished documents are scattered across different archives, not all of them accessible and not always complete. Today, however, it is possible to piece together a coherent reconstruction of the architectural and constructional history of *La Bussola*¹¹.

As evidenced by a document dated October 4, 1946, preserved in the Historical Archive of the Municipality of Pietrasanta¹², Alfredo Pedonese had been the concessionaire since 1943 of a stretch of beach at Marina di Pietrasanta, in the locality of Focette, along Viale Roma, precisely between Via Cavour and Via Cola di Rienzo.

The concession was granted exclusively for agricultural use for the duration of the war and, once over, could be renewed in favor of the concessionaire on the condition that he committed to building a chalet using wood, concrete, and rope. Pedonese therefore, with this communication, undertook – together with a company to be established, in which Alpo Benelli was also involved¹³ – to submit the project no later than October 1946 and to complete it by May 1947.

From the aforementioned document it is clear that the studio commissioned to design the *chalet* was the one formed by Nello Baroni, Maurizio Tempestini, and Pietro Porcinai. The studio thus delivered four drawings that illustrated the preliminary design in its main features. Attached to the drawings was also a report describing the dancing venue and the design intentions of the three professionals¹⁴. The architects organized the complex in a functional way, maximizing the



Fig. 3 Le Focette, Marina di Pietrasanta, *La Bussola*, exterior view: the dancing venue and the open-air dance floor seen from the elevated walkway towards the mountains, 1948 (ASFI, Fondo Baroni, Archivio fotografico).



Fig. 4 Le Focette, Marina di Pietrasanta, *La Bussola*, interior view: the dance hall seen towards the piano bar, 1948 (ASFI, Fondo Baroni, Archivio fotografico).

available area while keeping an appropriate distance from the road to ensure the privacy of the establishment. The spaces included a garden, a parking area, and rooms for dining, dancing, and leisure. The cabins were conceived closer to the beach, connected by an elevated walkway that also led to a sun terrace. The authors emphasized that the entire complex was designed to enhance the landscape and the surrounding natural elements, such as the sea and the mountains, by using «fresh and innovative materials, such as natural stone, whitewashed bricks, and floors in terracotta and ceramic». The preliminary design was presumably approved, and on January 9, 1947, eleven drawings were submitted to the Municipality of Pietrasanta, describing in detail the executive project¹⁵. In the general site plan, Porcinai's contribution can be clearly recognized in the meticulous specification of the tree species to be planted in the area facing the main façade, serving as a filter between the parking area and the entrance.

Despite numerous setbacks,¹⁶ the restaurant-café-dancing *La Bussola* was inaugurated on July 10, 1948, as reported in two newspaper articles preserved in the Baroni collection at the State Archives of Florence¹⁷.

The dance hall, however, as envisioned by the Florentine studio, lasted only a few years: by 1952 a large covered dance floor was built, saturating the rear space of the building. The project, as explained in a report submitted to the Royal Superintendence of Monuments for the provinces of Pisa, Lucca, Livorno, and Massa Carrara, aimed «to accommodate the numerous and select clientele during the important summer parties organized there, which had shown serious inconveniences on rainy or stormy evenings»¹⁸.

The first two projects submitted were not approved by the Superintendent at the time, Piero Sanpaulesi¹⁹, instead, a third project prepared by the technical office of Gino Barbanti was approved, which provided for a removable Eternit roof supported by a framework of iron tubes²⁰.

On December 20, 1954, Alpo Benelli proposed to Sergio Bernardini that he take over the venue. The intention was to relaunch the activity of *La Bussola*, while at the same time ensuring an increase in the value of the surrounding land, still owned by the Benelli family. The decision to involve Bernardini matured after the entrepreneur's long familiarity with



Fig. 5 Le Focette, Marina di Pietrasanta, *La Bussola*, exterior view: dancing venue and covered dance floor, 1982 (ASCP, Arenili II, Comune di Pietrasanta, Piano particolareggiato degli arenili, Rilievo fotografico stabilimento balneare "La Bussola", TAV. 4b, conc. no. 3).



Fig. 6 Le Focette, Marina di Pietrasanta, *La Bussola*, exterior view: elevated walkway and the volume built to enclose the sun terrace, 1982 (ASCP, Arenili II, Comune di Pietrasanta, Piano particolareggiato degli arenili, Rilievo fotografico stabilimento balneare "La Bussola", TAV. 4b, conc. no. 3).

his establishments and in light of their remarkable success – success that had eluded *La Bussola*, penalized by its distance from Viareggio and by the competition of *La Capannina* in Forte dei Marmi²¹.

Benelli's intuition proved not only correct but also entrusted *La Bussola* to history as one of the most renowned venues devoted to entertainment.

No further documents have been recovered regarding the subsequent transformations, yet a photographic survey carried out on September 3, 1982, makes it possible to observe several changes the dancing venue had undergone in thirty years²². The sun terrace, accessible from the sea via the elevated walkway – one of the pivotal elements of the project by Baroni, Tempestini, and Porcinai – was covered and incorporated into the addition of a block visibly out of scale and leaning against the building. Other spaces were saturated with the insertion of small accessory volumes, while the surfaces were finished in a manner different from that chosen by the three designers in 1946.

After Bernardini's death on October 4, 1993²³ *La Bussola* changed management several times, repeatedly closing and re-opening. To this day, the venue has maintained its function as a place of entertainment for bathers during the day and as a dancing venue – or rather a discotheque – during the night.

Conclusions

The history of *La Bussola* highlights how knowledge is an indispensable step in initiating any process of heritagization²⁴. On the one hand, the venue immediately obtained social and cultural recognition, tied to the events of the entertainment society and to the name of Sergio Bernardini; on the other hand, the architectural history of the complex remained long on the margins, eventually dissolving into the transformations that progressively compromised the original design.

The documentary reconstruction now makes it possible to present a coherent picture of the project by the three Florentine architects, revealing its surprising modernity: the attention to the relationship with the landscape, the innovative use of materials, and the functional distribution of spaces in part anticipated those guidelines that would only many years later

be formalized in urban and landscape planning tools²⁵. The radical alteration of the complex, also facilitated by a legislative void and by the lack of architectural recognition, shows the risks of a process in which function – if not governed by instruments of protection – ends up prevailing over form, and heritagization does not translate into preservation²⁶. *La Bussola* thus becomes an emblematic case of how collective memory and cultural recognition are not sufficient without historical knowledge capable of grounding effective practices of conservation.

In this sense, historical research does not merely seek to reconstruct the past but becomes a necessary condition for the future of twentieth-century heritage, restoring dignity also to those ephemeral or marginal architectures that have profoundly shaped the collective imagination²⁷, even without attaining an effective patrimonial status.

¹ The studio's activity began in Florence on January 1, 1938, initially as a collaboration between the architect Nello Baroni and the landscape architect Pietro Porcinai. Three years later, with the entry of the interior architect Maurizio Tempestini, the group moved to Lungarno Corsini 6, cfr. LUIGI ZANGHERI, *Presentazione*, in Claudio Cordoni, *Firenze, Lungarno Corsini 6: lo studio Baroni, Tempestini, Porcinai*, Firenze, Edifir 2017, p. 5. The three professionals combined their skills to offer integrated services in architecture, interior design, and garden planning, distinguishing themselves through a comprehensive approach to architectural projects. Active mainly in Florence and Tuscany, Baroni, Porcinai, and Tempestini were probably selected for their ability to address commissions at different design scales. Moreover, the group had already established contact with two of the company's clients, designing for them two villas: Villa Benelli in 1939 and Villa Vassallo in 1942. CLAUDIO CORDONI, *Firenze, Lungarno Corsini 6: lo studio Baroni, Tempestini, Porcinai*, Firenze, Edifir 2017, pp. 40-41 e pp. 64-65. For further details on the work of the studio, cfr. CLAUDIO CORDONI, *Firenze, Lungarno Corsini...*, op. cit.

² CLAUDIO CORDONI, *Nello Baroni architetto (1906-1958): inventario dell'archivio*, Firenze, Edifir 2008.

³ CLAUDIO CORDONI, *Maurizio Tempestini interior architect (1908 - 1960): con inventario analitico dell'archivio*, Firenze, Edifir 2010.

⁴ LUIGI LATINI, *Pietro Porcinai, une biographie critique*, «De l'art des jardins de papier», 2024, pp. 188-191; ALESSANDRA CAPANNA, *Pietro Porcinai*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 85, Treccani 2016.

⁵ For an in-depth discussion of similar typologies cfr. BRUNELLA GUERRA, *Fra il Tirreno e le Apuane. Ristorante Dancing La Bussola (1946-1948)*, in Simone Barbi, Lorenzo Mingardi (eds.), *Lezioni dagli archivi di architettura. Luoghi per il tempo libero del Novecento in Toscana*, vol. 3, Firenze, Didapress, currently in press.

⁶ Sergio Bernardini (1925-1993) was a successful entrepreneur and a pioneer of cultural entertainment in Italy. Before acquiring *La Bussola*, he managed already highly successful venues in Versilia, such as *La Capannina* and *Il Gatto Nero*. Even today, his name remains tied to the golden age of Versilia, when this region was one of the main centers of attraction for artists, intellectuals, and celebrities from all over the world., cfr. SERGIO BERNARDINI, *Non ho mai perso la Bussola*, Milano, A. Vallardi 1987; ALESSANDRO VOLPI, *Sergio Bernardini*, Pisa, Pacini 2013.

⁷ There are numerous accounts of the events connected with *La Bussola di Sergio Bernardini*. The most significant for the purposes of this research are noted here: the autobiography of Sergio Bernardini, the biography edited by Alessandro Volpi and the 2023 docu-film *Mr. Bussola, il collezionista di stelle*, directed by Andrea Soldani, written by Simone De Rita and Giuseppe Scarpa, with music by Ugo Bongianini. From April 12, 2024, to September 29, 2024, the exhibition *Divismo, Spettacolo, Cultura. 1950-1980. La Bussola di Sergio Bernardini* was held at Palazzo Mediceo in Seravezza, curated by Andrea Tenerini and Alessandro Volpi, with exhibition design by Mario Bernardini and art direction by Andrea Soldani. Cfr. SERGIO BERNARDINI, *Non ho mai perso la Bussola*, op. cit.; ALESSANDRO VOLPI, *Sergio Bernardini*, op. cit.

⁸ SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *Connaissance et reconnaissance. Il restauro tra documento, interpretazione, techne*, in Stefano Musso, Marco Pretelli (eds.), *Restauro Conoscenza Progetto Cantiere Gestione*, Roma, Edizioni Quasar 2020, pp. 79-84.

⁹ SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *Le nuove metamorfosi ovidiane del restauro*, «Restauro Archeologico», vol. 27, n. 2, 2019, pp. 4-11; SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *L'enigma del patrimonio nel campo di Atamante: tra pubblica utilità e insano collezionismo*, in Susanna Caccia Gherardini, *L'eccezione come regola: il paradosso teorico del restauro / The Exception as the Rule: The Paradox of Restoration*, Firenze, Florence University Press 2025, pp. 113-132.

¹⁰ *Ritrovo sul Tirreno*, «Domus», n° 236, maggio, 1949, pp. 8-10; CLAUDIO CORDONI, *Firenze, Lungarno Corsini...*, op. cit., pp. 90-91.

¹¹ For an in-depth discussion of the construction developments of *La Bussola* cfr. PIERPAOLO LAGANI, *Il dancing La Bussola (1946-1948). Ritrovo sul Tirreno*, in Simone Barbi, Lorenzo Mingardi (eds.), *Lezioni dagli archivi di architettura. Luoghi per il tempo libero del Novecento in Toscana*, vol. 3, Firenze, Didapress, currently in press; BRUNELLA GUERRA, *Fra il Tirreno e le Apuane...*, op. cit.

¹² Historical Archive of the Municipality of Pietrasanta, hereafter ASCP, *Arenili concessioni demaniali, Concessioni arenili – Pedonese Alfredo*, loose papers.

¹³ The company in question does not appear in any document in an 'official capacity'. However, from the reading of archival records and correspondence, it is possible to reconstruct the recurring names that emerge during the various design and construction phases: Alfredo Pedonese, building contractor and concessionaire of the beachfront, and Alpo Benelli, an industrialist from Prato already active in Marina di Pietrasanta with various enterprises and investments. Among the documents relating to the works, although only occasionally, the name of Dr. Vassallo of the eponymous firm also appears, though his role in the matter is not clearly defined.

¹⁴ ASCP, *Arenili concessioni demaniali, Concessioni arenili – Pedonese Alfredo*, loose papers.

¹⁵ ASCP, *Arenili concessioni demaniali, Concessioni arenili – Pedonese Alfredo*, loose papers.

¹⁶ As often happens, the realization of the project encountered several setbacks. In particular, a dispute arose with the Ministry of Public Education which, through the Superintendence of the province of Florence, Prato, and Pistoia, in a letter dated June 25, 1947, accused Baroni of having acted in violation of the zoning regulations of the Municipality of Pietrasanta. PIERPAOLO LAGANI, *Il dancing La Bussola...*, op. cit.; State Archives of Florence, hereafter ASFI, *Fondo Baroni, Documenti*, loose papers.

¹⁷ *La «Bussola» segna le Focette*, «Il Mattino», 10 luglio 1948; *S'inaugura la «Bussola»*, «La Nazione», 10 luglio 1948. ASFI, *Fondo Baroni, Documenti*, loose papers.

¹⁸ Document dated January 2, 1952, preserved in the Archives of the Superintendence of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape for the provinces of Lucca and Massa Carrara, hereafter ASABAP-LU, 1952 – *Copertura pista da ballo "La Bussola" – Società immobiliare "Torre Antica"*.

¹⁹ Piero Sanpaulesi (Rimini, January 8, 1904 – Florence, March 9, 1980) was an architect, a scholar of architectural history, and a restorer. A central figure in the field of restoration in the second half of the twentieth century, he served as Superintendent at the Royal Superintendence of Monuments for the provinces of Pisa, Lucca, Livorno, and Massa Carrara from 1943 to 1960, cfr. FRANCESCO PISANI, *L'archivio privato di Piero Sanpaulesi: una fonte per la storia del restauro del Novecento*, PhD dissertation, University of Florence, 2023; SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI (eds.), *Memorie di un restauratore. Piero Sanpaulesi. Scienza e arte del restauro*, Firenze, Didapress 2019; SAMUELE CACIAGLI, *Piero Sanpaulesi*, in *Dizionario biografico dei Soprintendenti Architetti (1904-1974)*, Bologna, Bonini University Press 2011, pp. 544-550; ARIANNA SPINOSA, *Piero Sanpaulesi. Contributi alla cultura del restauro del Novecento*, Firenze, Alinea 2011.

²⁰ Drawing "La Bussola" – Le Focette – Prop. soc. Torre Antica – Progetto di copertura smontabile per la pista da ballo – Scala 1:100. ASABAP-LU, 1952 – *Copertura pista da ballo "La Bussola" – Società immobiliare "Torre Antica"*

²¹ ALESSANDRO VOLPI, *Sergio Bernardini...*, op. cit., p. 6.

²² ASCP, *Arenili II, Comune di Pietrasanta, Piano particolareggiato degli arenili, Rilievo fotografico stabilimento balneare "La Bussola"*, TAV. 4b, conc. n. 3.

²³ CHIARA CARENINI, *È morto Sergio Bernardini il «Leone» della Bussola*, «l'Unità», 4 ottobre 1993.

²⁴ SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *Connaissance et reconnaissance...*, op. cit.

²⁵ At present, the Municipality of Pietrasanta is governed by the *Piano Strutturale* (PS), adopted with Municipal Council Resolution no. 46 of September 24, 2004, and approved with Municipal Council Resolution n. 34 of July 10, 2008, available at: <https://www.comune.pietrasanta.lu.it/it/documenti_pubblici/piano-strutturale-approvato> (last accessed August 22, 2025).

²⁶ SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *L'eccezione come regola...*, op. cit.

²⁷ On the subject of the recognition of minor heritage, among the numerous publications cfr. SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *Patrimonio lasciato in strada. Riflessioni sulla conservazione delle architetture per la mobilità*, «Firenze Architettura», n. 1, 2017, pp. 72-81; SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *Architettura in movimento - Architecture in motion*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS 2009; SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *Le sale cinematografiche*, in Maria Adriana Giusti (a cura di), *Viareggio la città nata dal mare. 200 anni di storia*, Viareggio, IDEA Books 2020, pp. 126-132.