

THE ARCHIVE SPEAKS VOLUMES

THE THEATER LA FENICE IN VENICE

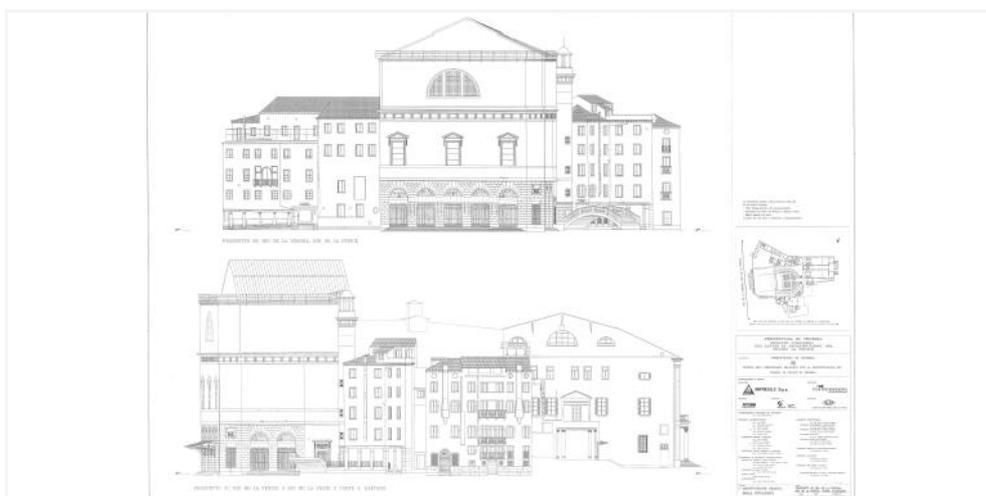
Life, death, rebirth

January 29, 1996 is coming to an end, with three hours left until midnight.

Darkness envelops the lonely district of San Marco and the humidity rising from the canals can be cut with a knife. It is like this every single day of winter in Venice, bitter cold with no tourists in the streets.

A light, in the opalescent darkness, suddenly comes to life amid streams of bitter smoke and crackling. Something is burning a few meters from St. Mark's Square: it is the roof of the La Fenice theater, attacked by flames, which eat up wood, furniture, papier-mâché, textiles, and decorations in no time at all.

At first light, only the walls remain of the elegant temple of opera, built by Giannantonio Selva and inaugurated in 1792. Walls that saw the greatest composers pass by, such as Rossini, Verdi, and Stravinsky.

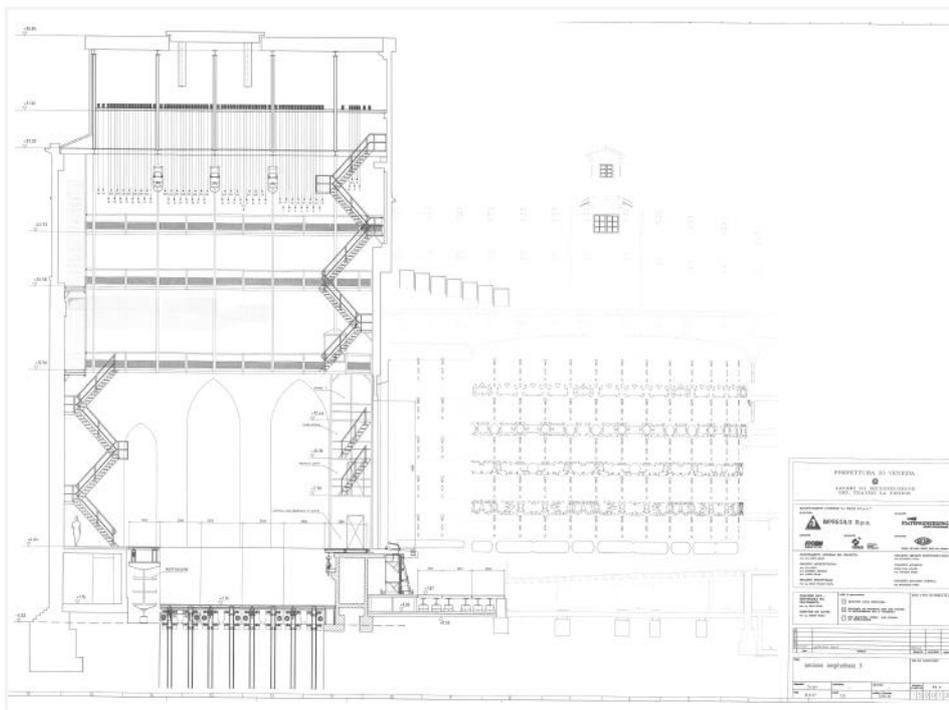


The cheating and cynical fate seems to be returning to center stage which the theater has carved as an omen with its name: a mythological figure, in the guise of the multicolored firebird revered by the Egyptians, capable of being reborn from its ashes after death.



Indeed, another fire engulfed it in flames, sparing only the perimeter walls and part of the entrance. It was December 1836, but already the following year La Fenice was shining again, more welcoming than before, thanks to a celebrated architect of the time, Giovanni Battista Meduna.

This time, almost two hundred years later - and after a series of long delays due to the release of the construction site (since the fire was found to be arson), the securing of the perimeter walls and the removal of the rubble - the reconstruction falls to a foreign firm, who wins the tender with a design by Milanese architect Aldo Rossi.



But the aforementioned fate, cheating and cynical, intervenes again on La Fenice. Aldo Rossi dies a few months later at the age of 66 in a car accident, and his project, yet to be developed, is taken over by the firm Rossi Associates.

Furthermore, the restoration work is proceeding at a slow pace, which is why, having ousted the inadequate firm, a new call for tenders is issued and won by a consortium of Italian companies, with the Rossi design always at its center.

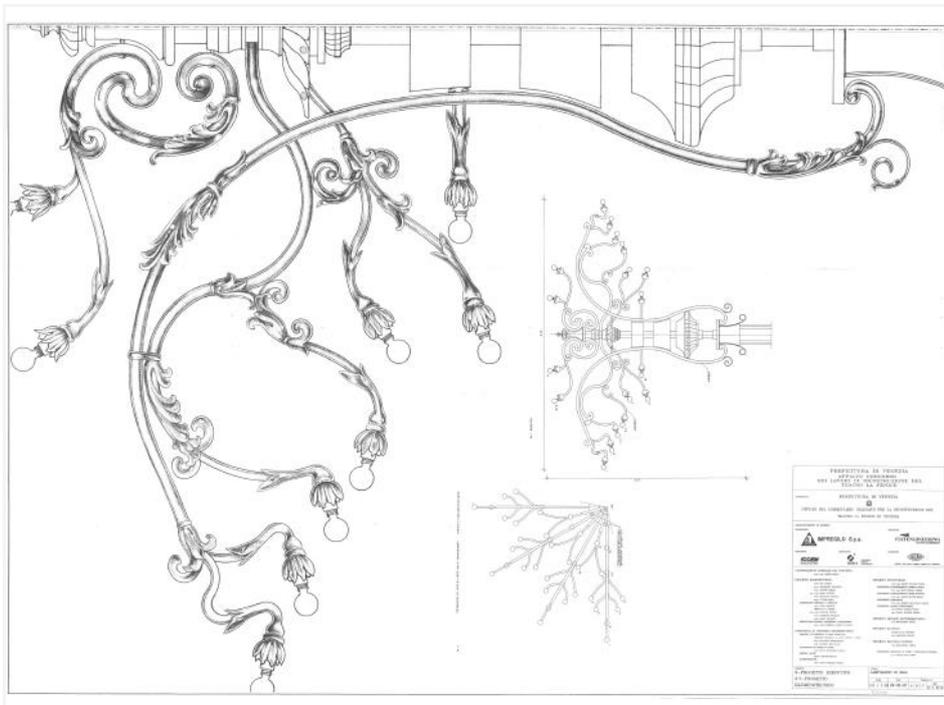


We have now reached the end of 2001. La Fenice is still waiting to be reborn.

The notice guidelines do not provide strict provisions on how the reconstruction has to be carried out, “which must at least resemble La Fenice as it was before the fire.”

Therefore, the central idea of the Rossi project is to return to the theater of Meduna by working with the different constraints and freedoms in the sections that define it.

For the Apollonian Rooms, which are reached by the grand staircase, there is an overall conservative intervention and in particular a philological reconstruction with the use of traditional materials and techniques, an “act of love toward the surviving fragments,” as Rossi himself says, so that a historical reading of the structure is always possible.



The Theater Hall, totally destroyed by the flames, is reconstructed on the rule of “as it was, where it was,” also on the basis of painstaking photographic research related to the decorations in papier-mâché and wood, the latter chosen and treated for better acoustic performance. An immense amount of work is spent



studying and understanding the style, carried out with the supervision and advice of a set designer (Meduna himself was a set design architect.)

Greater freedom of design can be encountered in the north and south wings where it triumphs, particularly in the New Hall, now dedicated to its designer, which is characterized by the scenic interior backdrop that mimics a fragment of Palladio's basilica in Vicenza and can be used independently with an entrance from the calle near the Rio de la Fenice.

The modification of the escape route system and the upgrade of the facilities also makes it possible to provide over 1,000 seats from the 840 that existed before the fire.

A human miracle of genius, art and craftsmanship that, in the face of cheating and cynical fate, now shines more brightly than ever among the theater's ornate plasterwork, gold and velvet, for the joy of Maria Callas, perpetually on display in one of the rooms to relive her years in Venice.

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