

Reconfiguring Multilayered Temporality of Renovation. Museo del Novecento in Milano, Italy

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines Museo del Novecento through the concept of multilayered temporality, proposing that renovation functions as a spatial reconfiguration of temporal coexistence. Rather than framing renovation as preservation or functional conversion, it is understood as an architectural act that sustains and reorganizes distinct historical orders within a single physical framework. The analysis is structured through three dimensions: structural, experiential, and urban temporality. The preserved rationalist framework anchors the building historically while accommodating a reconfigured interior spatial order. The spiral ramp reshapes perception through movement, unfolding space sequentially and generating temporality through perceptual afterimages rather than chronological narration. In its urban condition, the interior and the Milan Cathedral coexist within a shared visual field, revealing calibrated degrees of overlap and distinction. The study argues that renovation does not resolve temporal differences but spatially reconfigures and sustains it within historically layered urban contexts.*

KEYWORDS – *Experiential movement, Multilayered temporality, Renovation, Structural temporality, Urban context*

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Renovation of Museo del Novecento as a Temporal Question

The renovation of Museo del Novecento neither replaces its original architectural form nor preserves the building as a static monument. The rationalist structure planned in the late 1930s remains physically intact, while the interior has been reorganized to accommodate contemporary exhibition programs. As a result, the building presents a spatial condition in which different moments of formation coexist within a single architectural framework. Such a condition suggests that renovation can operate not merely as a technical intervention but as a spatial negotiation between different temporal layers.

This situation cannot be sufficiently explained as either preservation or functional conversion. Instead, it raises a more fundamental question: how can different temporal orders be organized and made perceptible through architectural intervention? In this sense, renovation may be understood not only as a spatial transformation but also as a reconfiguration of temporal relationships within architecture. This question becomes particularly significant in a context where architectural form, spatial experience, and historical surroundings intersect within one coherent urban setting. Examining this condition allows renovation to be interpreted not simply as a change of form or function, but as a spatial process through which multiple temporal layers are articulated within a single architectural framework.



Fig. 1. museo del novecento and milan cathedral within piazza del duomo

1.2 Concept of Temporality and Analytical Framework

In this study, temporality refers to the coexistence of different temporal orders within a single architectural structure. Similar theoretical approaches have framed temporality as a spatially constructed condition emerging through perception and engagement rather than as a purely chronological sequence [1]. It is not defined by age or material decay, but by the condition in which past and present spatial orders remain perceptible within the same physical framework. Temporality emerges when an existing structure is retained while accommodating new spatial systems.

To analyze this condition, the study proposes three dimensions: structural temporality, concerning the continuity of the physical framework and interior reorganization; experiential temporality, generated through movement; and urban temporality, formed through the building's relationship with Milan Cathedral and Piazza del Duomo. Through these dimensions, the research examines how renovation organizes multilayered temporality.

II. HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATION OF MUSEO DEL NOVECENTO

Museo del Novecento occupies the Palazzo dell'Arengario, which was constructed between 1936 and 1956 as part of the monumental reconfiguration of Piazza del Duomo [2]. Originally conceived as civic architecture defining the public center, the building later served administrative functions after World War II.

In 2009, renovation works began to convert the structure into a museum dedicated to twentieth-century art, opening in 2010 [2]. While the exterior was conserved, the interior was reorganized to accommodate exhibition programs, including the introduction of a spiral ramp connecting the metro level to the upper galleries. Across these transformations, the physical framework remained largely intact, while spatial organization and function were redefined. This historical transformation provides the temporal basis for the following analysis.

The renovation project was designed by architects Italo Rota and Fabio Fornasari, whose approach focused on inserting a new spatial system within the preserved architectural shell rather than altering the historical façade of the Palazzo dell'Arengario. Their design aimed to establish a continuous spatial sequence that guides visitors through the museum while maintaining visual connections with the surrounding urban context of Piazza del Duomo. A key element of this strategy is the spiral ramp that organizes circulation across multiple levels of the building. Through this intervention, the project integrates movement, exhibition space, and urban views into a coherent spatial experience. The renovation therefore preserves the historical architectural framework while introducing a new spatial order that supports the museum's contemporary program.



Fig. 2. historical transformation of Museo del Novecento

III. MULTILAYERED TEMPORALITY IN MUSEO DEL NOVECENTO

3.1 Structural Temporality as Reactivation of the Physical Framework

In the context of this study, structural temporality does not refer to structural systems in a technical sense. Rather, it concerns how renovation preserves an existing physical framework while reorganizing the spatial order within it. This condition forms one layer of the multilayered temporality articulated in Museo del Novecento. In this sense, structural temporality emerges when an existing architectural framework continues to operate while accommodating new spatial organizations introduced through renovation.

The exterior massing, symmetrical composition, and monumental façade of the Palazzo dell’Arengario remain largely intact after renovation. The building continues to define the southern edge of Piazza del Duomo, maintaining its civic presence within the urban context. The original physical structure therefore anchors the building to its historical moment. However, the interior spatial logic was fundamentally transformed during the 2009–2010 renovation [2]. Former administrative spaces were reorganized into exhibition environments, shifting the building’s operation from bureaucratic function to public display. This transformation did not replace the past framework but reactivated it under a new program, allowing the existing architectural order to support a different spatial and institutional role.

Structural temporality emerges from this reactivation. The preserved architectural shell allows the past civic monumentality and the present museum function to coexist within the same physical form. Renovation thus becomes a process that sustains and reorganizes temporal layers rather than erasing them, establishing the structural foundation for the building’s multilayered temporality.



Fig. 3. preserved rationalist façade



Fig. 4. façade revealing reactivated interior

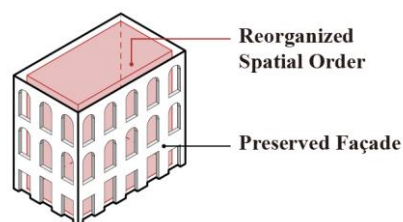


Fig. 5. structural layering over the existing rationalist framework (Figure credit: Author)

3.2 Experiential Temporality as Perceptual Afterimage Through Movement

In Museo del Novecento, temporality is not articulated through chronological narration but through the structure of movement. The spiral ramp inserted during the 2009–2010 renovation does not merely connect different floors; it reorganizes the perceptual order of space [2]. Rather than presenting the interior as a fixed totality, the ramp unfolds space gradually and continuously, situating the visitor within an ongoing spatial process. Circulation therefore becomes not only a functional device but also a perceptual mechanism through which spatial relationships are progressively revealed.

Along the circulation path, interior spaces, structural remnants of the original building, and framed views toward Piazza del Duomo and the Milan Cathedral intersect in shifting constellations. As the visitor moves, previously encountered spatial scenes do not disappear completely but remain as perceptual afterimages that overlap with newly emerging views. Here, the afterimage does not refer to a purely optical effect but to a perceptual trace in which previously experienced spatial scenes linger in memory and interact with the present visual field. Through this accumulation of perceptual traces, multiple spatial moments become layered within a single experiential sequence.

Because of this perceptual accumulation, the spatial elements encountered along the ramp are not experienced as isolated fragments. Earlier impressions persist in memory and interact with subsequent views, allowing different spatial conditions to be understood in relation to one another. These elements are therefore not

arranged according to a linear historical sequence. Instead, their spatial and historical relationships are continuously reconfigured through changing vantage points and the accumulation of perceptual traces.

Movement does not narrate time chronologically; rather, it produces evolving alignments between interior space, architectural residue, and the urban scene. Temporality here emerges through the perceptual afterimages generated along the circulation path, where different spatial layers are experienced as overlapping impressions rather than as a fixed historical order.

Movement therefore operates as an experiential structure that organizes multilayered temporality [3]. In this sense, renovation is experienced not as a mere visual transformation but as a spatial mechanism that continually rearticulates temporal relationships through the accumulation of perceptual afterimages. The temporal experience of the building thus unfolds through movement itself, where spatial relations are repeatedly reconfigured as visitors progress through the circulation path.



Fig. 6. spiral ramp circulation

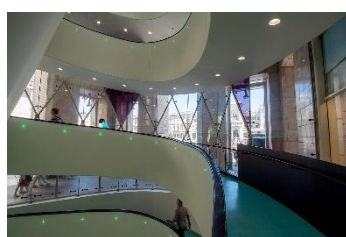


Fig. 7. circulation across superimposed urban layer

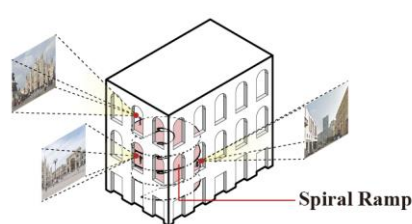


Fig. 8. shifting spatial relations through movement

3.3 Urban Temporality as Modulated Juxtaposition

Urban temporality in Museo del Novecento does not arise from a simple contrast between interior and exterior, nor from a seamless fusion of past and present. Rather, it becomes perceptible through a carefully modulated juxtaposition of different temporal layers within a single visual frame.

At several points along the upper-level interior, the preserved stone arches of the original Arengario structure frame views toward Piazza del Duomo and the Milan Cathedral beyond the glazing. Within this framed condition, multiple temporal layers become simultaneously visible: the rationalist stone framework of the 1930s building, the contemporary interior environment created through renovation, and the historic Gothic cathedral that defines the urban square. These layers do not collapse into a single image, yet they are not completely separated either. The stone arches and the Cathedral share material and tonal continuity, producing a softened visual alignment between two historical moments.

At the same time, distinctly contemporary elements remain present within the frame. Dark metal window mullions, artificial interior lighting, reflections on the glazing, and the moving silhouettes of visitors introduce visual cues that belong unmistakably to the present. As visitors move through the space, the framed view is continuously reconfigured: reflections overlap with transparency, interior illumination interacts with daylight from the square, and the Cathedral alternates between distant urban landmark and immediate visual counterpart to the interior frame.

Urban temporality therefore emerges from varying degrees of overlap and distinction operating within the same perceptual field. Renovation does not dissolve historical layers into homogeneity, nor does it stage them as rigid oppositions. Instead, it modulates their relationships so that different temporal orders remain simultaneously perceptible while retaining their individual identities. In this way, the window functions as a mediating device through which the city becomes integrated into the interior spatial experience.

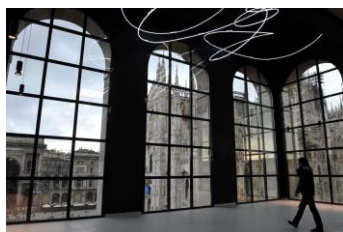


Fig. 9. temporal layers from the interior



Fig. 10. historic structure and contemporary framing

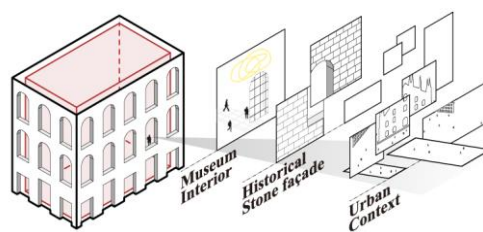


Fig. 11. visual superimposition of interior, façade, and urban context (Figure credit: Author)

IV. CONCLUSION

This study interpreted Museo del Novecento through the perspective of multilayered temporality and explored how temporality becomes spatially articulated through renovation. Rather than understanding renovation as a binary between preservation and transformation, the case demonstrates how different temporal orders can coexist and operate within a single architectural framework.

Through the reactivation of the existing physical structure, the building maintains material and formal continuity on the exterior while reorganizing its internal spatial order. Through circulation, space unfolds not as a reconstruction of historical time but as an experiential structure that organizes perception. Within its urban condition, interior space, the architectural frame, and the Milan Cathedral are neither fully contrasted nor completely merged; instead, they are layered through calibrated relationships. These three dimensions—structural continuity, experiential organization through movement, and urban layering—do not function as separate elements but intersect within a single spatial experience, forming multilayered temporality.

Multilayered temporality, as proposed in this study, does not refer to an abstract notion of historical depth. It emerges when preserved frameworks, newly inserted spatial systems, and urban historical elements operate together within a shared spatial condition. In this sense, renovation does not eliminate temporal differences but becomes an architectural mechanism that organizes the coexistence of different temporalities. Museo del Novecento demonstrates how architecture can sustain continuity while simultaneously producing new experiential conditions. As visitors move through the building, the same urban scenes and architectural elements repeatedly appear in shifting positional relationships, allowing temporal layers to be perceived not as a fixed historical sequence but as changing spatial relations.

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