

A mountain theatre through art and faith: how to improve fruition of Sacro Monte in Varese?

Giuliana Cardani | giuliana.cardani@polimi.it
Politecnico di Milano, Italy

Abstract

The case of Sacro Monte in Varese is here presented, which became a World Heritage Site in 2003, together with other Sacred Mountains in a confined area between the regions of Piedmont and Lombardy, built between the 15th and 18th centuries. The Sacred Mounts are a splendid example of integrating architecture into the surrounding landscape, particularly on a mountainside. The case of Varese is particularly evocative, built according to a single plan in full Baroque style, with its 14 chapels, all different.

Like many other places of pilgrimage, it is very inclusive and increasingly addressed to pilgrims different from those of the Catholic faith, to whom it was originally targeted. Though well-preserved, managed and enhanced by the authorities in charge, this place continues to present critical issues that require special attention. An educational experience with international students, belonging to different religious faiths, provided an understanding of today's value of this world cultural heritage, confirming the importance of raising awareness of the issue of protecting this heritage

Keywords

Sacred Mountains, territorial cultural landscape, critical issues, educational experience, improving fruition

Introduction

Sacro Monte in Varese became a World Heritage Site in 2003, together with other Sacred Mountains in a confined area between the regions of Piedmont and Lombardy, North-West of Italy (Varallo, Crea, Orta, Varese, Oropa, Ossuccio, Ghiffa, Domodossola, and Belmonte Valperga); they were built between the 15th and 17th centuries and dedicated to various aspects of the Catholic faith^{1 2}.

The phenomenon of Sacred Mountains began in 15th century with the aim of creating places of prayer in Europe, located in the foothills of the Alps, a peaceful instrument against the Protestant Reformation and as an alternative to the Holy Land, which became more and more dangerous and so difficult for pilgrims, owing to the rapid expansion of Muslim culture. The purpose thus became to offer the faithful a path of meditation and prayer that would unfold through the representation in images of the Life and Passion of Jesus; other times the devotional

¹ whc.unesco.org/en/list/1068

² unesco.beniculturali.it/allegati/37/Documenti/ABE2003-37_SacriMonti.pdf

path is dedicated to the Virgin and the "mysteries" of the Rosary or the lives of saints such as St. Francesco; path of faith but also of history, art and nature. The Sacred Mountains are a marvellous example of integrating architecture into the surrounding landscape, particularly on a mountainside, near forests and lakes, which becomes a territorial cultural landscape. In all Sacred Mountains, the greatest Piedmonts and Lombard artists of the period created paintings and sculptures, constituting a remarkable artistic heritage: an evocative way to tell the sacred history and to canalise and educate popular devotion.

Having made nine sacred mountains a world heritage site together has the advantage of having created an important network among them, thanks also to common initiatives and websites³, which tell their history and promote their individual initiatives (Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti⁴). Some Sacri Monti then lie in an area included in the Sesia Val Grande⁵ geopark recognized by UNESCO in 2013 and since 2015 part of UNESCO Global Geoparks, the new priority program, on equal to World Heritage, Biosphere Reserves and Intangible Heritage.

The role of chapels route in Sacro Monte of Varese

The Sacro Monte di Varese⁶ is particularly striking, built according to a single plan between 1604 and 1698, in Baroque style, thirteen of the chapels were finished by 1623 and after the interruption due to the plague of 1630–32, the decorative work on the chapels continued and the work was completed in 1698⁷. Giuseppe Bernascone, named il Mancino, designed 14 chapels along the path, all different, to be walked along a steep 2 km-long path (Fig. 1), all in cobbled stone, full of suggestive viewpoints and leading to the top of the mountain, nowadays within the regional Park of Campo dei Fiori and where there is a small historic village with a sanctuary, containing the last chapel. The chapels are each a little gem of architecture; the small temples, surrounded by porticoes, demonstrate the influence of the Renaissance masters, like Raphael's small temple of the Marriage of the Virgin, but also of contemporary artistic currents in Lombardy, such as the Ticinese sculptor Francesco Silva, who realized the wonderful and enormous sculptures.

The chapels are skilfully located along the **route** according to a precise architectural and spatial theory and divided into three moments separated each by an arch and a big fountain, with drinkable water, that mark the transition between the three moments of Christ's life: the three Mysteries of the Rosary. Architecturally and artistically, chapels differ in shape, size and materials, according to the different wealthy patrons that funded their construction. The scene of Jesus Christ's life is constructed in a way to be seen from the outside rather than the inside. The chapels, always closed, are full of truly engaging pictorial and statuary works of art that make use of scenic tricks, such as fake perspectives (Figs. 2-3) and deformed statues, 2D paintings that end with 3D parts, to appear even more realistic, when observed from the main viewpoint, outside. Like many other pilgrimage places, the place is very inclusive and increasingly addressed to pilgrims, but today different from

³ www.sacrimonti.org

⁴ www.sacri-monti.com

⁵ en.unesco.org/global-geoparks/sesia-val-grande

⁶ www.sacromontedivarese.it/

⁷ PIERO BIANCONI ET ALII, *Il Sacro Monte sopra Varese*, Milano, Electa, 1981

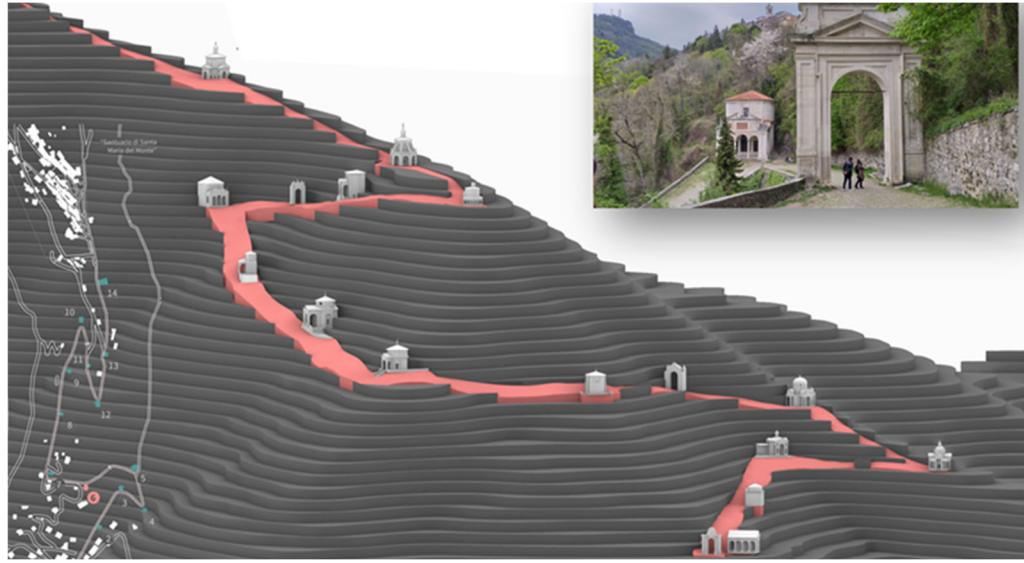


Fig. 1 Sacro Monte di Varese: the map of the path from the 1st chapel on the bottom till the Santa Maria del Monte village on the top. The whole image shows the Digital Terrain Model (DTM) view of the path along the mountain with the 14 chapels and the 3 arches. In the top right frame, one of the views of the landscape, arch, chapel X and the village on the top.

those of the Catholic faith, to whom it was originally targeted. Therefore, they need to be able to keep up with new trends, meeting all interests but without being strangled by new demands for fruition, thus losing their original spirit.

The uphill walk is certainly an exceptional pedagogical experience, which through slow mobility, still accompanies the pilgrim to evoke his or her own experiences, to rethink them and to find, in solitude or together with a group, the hope to return to everyday life, full of problems, with enthusiasm and serenity. But when the walk is also enriched with 'beauty', whether architectural, artistic or scenic, then the experience becomes even stronger and more effective. And this is exactly what the Franciscan friars, returning from the Holy Land, wanted when they created the first Sacred Mounts at the end of the 15th century, and what St. Charles Borromeo grasped later on, favouring their realisation and calling these paths of devotion the 'New Jerusalem', in place of the dangerous pilgrimages to Jerusalem. In the 16th century, it also proved to be a peaceful political tool against the Protestant Reformation that was running rampant in Europe, being located just a short distance from the border, at the foot of the Alps. Today, this tool, as demonstrated by all the various historical and devotional itineraries scattered around the world, is increasingly successful, thanks to its skilful mix of religious tourism and rediscovery of the cultural and environmental values of the territories it passes through, and is therefore still an extremely important tool, also from an economic point of view.

Current condition of Sacro Monte di Varese

Although a well-preserved and managed by the authorities in charge, able also to involve the local people, who really feel the area as their own, this place continues presenting critical issues that require special attention.



Fig. 2 Fresco on the dome of Chapel 8. View from the external opening in the façade (the main point of view from outside). The circular openings seem not be placed following the rhythm of the architectural partition but to better direct light into the chapel.

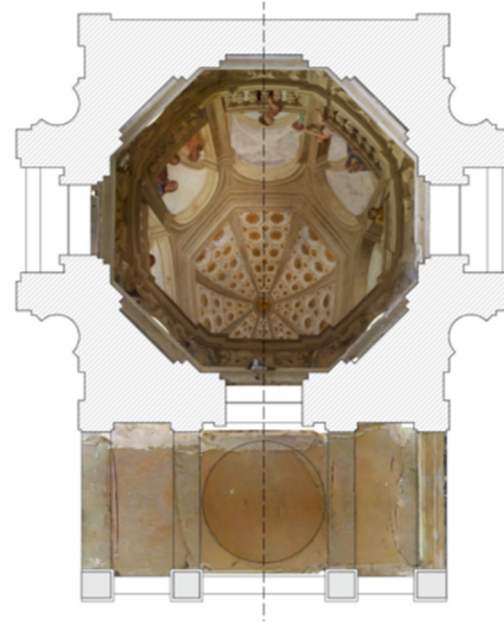


Fig. 3 Projection of the ceiling on the plan of Chapel 8. The center point of the painting is not in the center of the dome. This creates an optical illusion from the external point of view that makes the real height of the interior 1,5 times higher.

With funds made available under Law 77 of 20.11.2006⁸, EU Project⁹, Italian Ministry of Culture and Piedmont and Lombardy regions, an overall local organization supervises and organizes the safeguard of the Sacred Mounts, the visits and the different activities on site¹⁰. The management system is completed with a Permanent Centre for Studies and Documentation¹¹, dealing with research and information retrieval. The Sacro Monte of Varese, thanks to Fondazione Cariplo, Fondazione Paolo VI per il Sacro Monte di Varese and the Milan diocesan curia, was able to restore the Sanctuary and the chapels in the second half of the 20th cent¹².

The path is highly frequented and open H24, without gates or doors. The chapels are always closed. During the 20th century, it was necessary to protect the interior of the chapels by inserting glazed windows behind the wrought iron grating. Gratings were from the beginning the only form of closing the openings. Predominantly anthropogenic decays (graffiti, vandalism, etc.) require ever greater and more technologically advanced attention than in the past, but this should not prevent the enjoyment of this inclusive architecture, as it unfortunately is now. The presence of the glasses causes reflections, dust deposit and during the day it is very difficult to see and appreciate the beauty of the inside and the scenic representation created by the statues, leading pilgrims to

⁸ Law 77 of 20 February 2006, Special measures for the protection and use of Italian sites and elements of cultural, landscape and environmental interest, inscribed on the 'World Heritage List', placed under the protection of UNESCO.

⁹ EU Interreg project "MAIN10ANCE" (ID 473472), Interreg Italy-Switzerland Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 with the project called "I Sacri Monti: Patrimonio comune di valori e laboratorio per una gestione sostenibile degli interventi conservativi".

¹⁰ www.sacrimonti.org

¹¹ <https://www.sacrimonti.org/en/il-centro-di-documentazione>

¹² CARLO ALBERTO LOTTI (a cura di), *Il Sacro Monte di Varese: La Quattordicesima Cappella e La "Fabrica" del rosario*, Milano, Ed. Pizzi e Banca Popolare di Milano, 1990

overlook a very important part of this complex. With the intention of protecting the delicate wooden statues in particular, the opposite effect has been achieved: closed windows altered the natural air exchange inside the chapels, and humidity increased, severely damaging the wall paintings that necessitating restoration of the chapels in the 1990s, but moisture spots and salt efflorescence are still evident and, in many chapels, the pictorial decoration is no longer recognizable.

In addition to physiological superficial degradations, there are some critical issues that depend on the fact that today the way of enjoying these places has changed and extra facilities are required. Among observed critics: 1) improve the accessibility of the site; 2) There is no lighting along the way, which makes browsing in the twilight and evening difficult, 3) There are only two restrooms at the top and at the foot of the mountain, after a 2 km-long walk; 4) There are only a few simple stone benches along the trail for resting; 5) People are no longer allowed to drink the water from the fountain, which was part of the original designed elements, 6) There is a switch for operating the internal timed light, but it does not work in all chapels and is not sufficiently illuminating.

The resolution of the above critical issues would improve the enjoyment of the path, but they certainly do not indicate a worrying state of conservation. The construction quality of the chapels and the maintenance work that has taken place over the centuries, thanks always to the lively attention of pilgrims, have shown that this is a cultural heritage that can still brilliantly overcome other centuries of pilgrimage and adapt to the ever-changing and varied needs, such as those of non-believers. Since chapels do not require internal fruition, since they are not located in areas at risk of expansion and/or transformation, due to their isolated and uncomfortable location, and since they are not subject to dangerous natural hazards, such as earthquakes, the Sacred Mounts of north-western Italy enjoy a special facilitated condition that can preserve them over time more than equally important architectural heritage. However, it is necessary to keep the appeal of visitors/pilgrims always alive. Disinterest on the part of pilgrims and, above all, the surrounding human communities, would be the first sign that would lead to the end of their service life cycle of a building.

The conservation challenges within and around the chapels: an educational experience

An educational experience was carried out in a preservation course, within the Ms. degree program in Architecture at Politecnico di Milano. The lessons followed by international students, belonging to different cultures and religious faiths, combined training on fundamentals with a practical experience on a built heritage, as Sacro Monte di Varese. Students have demonstrated a clear understanding of today's values of the subject and have identified how to improve the full enjoyment of this world heritage, according to the expectations of the younger generation, along with the critical issues mentioned above. The immersive experience focused on the enhancement of the main route of Sacro Monte and on making the visit of chapels more alluring, resolving the critical issues mentioned in the previous paragraph. and highlighting the necessity of information panels dedicated to each chapel contains additional information that makes the stay more fascinating (Fig. 4). The panel can



Fig. 4 Improving fruition of Sacro Monte di Varese: some of the ideas proposed, such as the new ramp, the info panels and the terraces with new seats. By scanning a Qr code, the app also can provide audio introductions in different languages, introducing each chapel.

emphasize sculptures and ceiling paintings, which are difficult to locate without being mentioned. A special app. of Sacro Monte is proposed to facilitate the knowledge of the site and its history, easy reachable from smartphone and able to connect to info panels, [widening the forms of access to this cultural heritage](#). The app. may also provide audio introductions and detailed description of each chapel in different languages, [downloadable and usable even in the absence of an internet connection](#). In addition to offering data to the visitor, the app could also collect quantitative data on the number of individual visitors, type, age, nationality, comments, and any other statistically useful data for the management of the site, in addition to those that are already collected by the numerous guided tours and those recorded following important visits, such as bishops and popes.

Conclusions

A very special Italian architecture was here presented: the Sacro Monte of Varese, a Unesco World Heritage Site, whose particularity lies in being a territorial cultural landscape, where faith, art and nature should meet again. It is a cultural heritage, inscribed on the 'World Heritage List' since 2003, that has brilliantly stood the test of time, preserving authenticity of shape, design and setting, thanks to constant maintenance and repairs over the centuries and which today follows a preventive conservation and maintenance plan, in accordance with modern conservation principles. But there are still critical issues that could be solved. An educational experience with students of foreign and heterogeneous nationalities is a valuable tool not only to make them familiar with, touch a world heritage and teach them a methodology to protect cultural heritage, but it allows them to grasp many complex aspects with freshness and innovation, which can actualise cultural heritage and make it more usable and thus closer to the youngest. Moreover, such experience on a world heritage improves the awareness in architecture students that they will become future defenders of cultural heritage, not only in their own country but worldwide.