



IMG. 5.52 — Palazzo Pepoli, Museo della Storia di Bologna, Italy. Restoration project by Mario Bellini Architect(s). Exhibition design by Mario Bellini Architect(s) with Italo Lupi. Scientific Director Massimo Negri. The foyer with “the tower of time.” Courtesy of Mario Bellini Architect(s) and Genus Bononiae.

Palazzo Pepoli–Museo della Storia di Bologna

Bologna City History Museum, Bologna, Italy

Palazzo Pepoli, Museo della Storia di Bologna is the city history museum of the city of Bologna, in Italy. It was inaugurated in 2012 as the final step in a project started in 2003, called Genus Bononiae–Museums in the City. Genus Bononiae is a project under the management of the Bank Foundation CARISBO intended as a civic cultural network of historic buildings and cultural centres spread throughout the urban area, with the aim of creating synergies among museums, libraries, galleries, and other local cultural centres and initiatives. “To better describe and understand the genus and stock of the Bolognese people from yesterday and today, Genus Bononiae–Museums in the City follows a path through the city and narrates its history, life, arts and dreams; it uses the streets of Bologna as corridors and the buildings and churches as rooms, blending into the existing institutional structure, and ensuring a full link with other museums, art galleries, as well as the other cultural, economic and social initiatives which animate the local community” (from the Museum website).

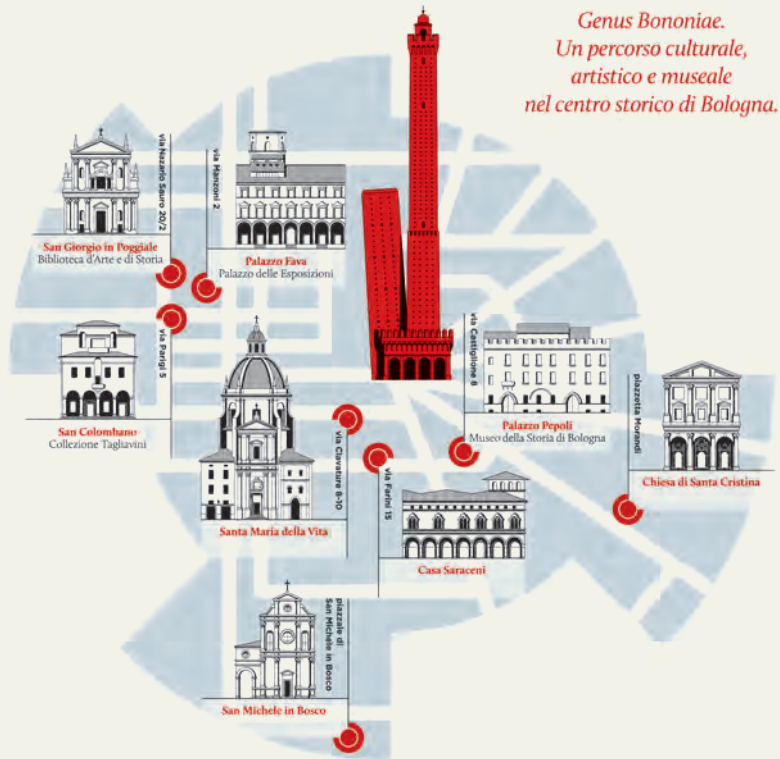
On the one hand Genus Bononiae is based on the exploitation of the already working system of civic and cultural institutions of the city, on the other, it is directly involved itself with eight historic buildings which have been renovated and rehabilitated for public use, each of which has an inherent historical and artistic value and hosts a cultural centre. The Biblioteca d’Arte e di Storia di San Giorgio in Poggiale (Art and History Library), is hosted in a deconsecrated 16th century church owned by the Bank Foundation and restored in 2009 by the architect Michele De Lucchi to turn it into a library. The library houses the collection of art and history books of the Bank Foundation, a newspaper and journals archive and a photographic archive. San Colombano is a historical holy complex comprising a range of buildings aggregated over the centuries, beginning from the

7th century, which was purchased and restored by the Bank Foundation in 2005. Besides the historical and artistic value of the church itself and its decorations, since 2010, the site has also hosted a collection of ancient musical instruments, a specialised library and several musical events including performances using instruments from the collection. Santa Maria della Vita is a monumental site dating back to the 13th century and includes a hospital, a church, a sanctuary and an oratorio. The complex is currently owned by the local healthcare centre and is one of the most important examples of Baroque architecture in Bologna. Moreover, it hosts several important historical works of art and the Museum of Health. The Palazzo Fava, one of the most important historical palaces in Bologna, is today used as an Exhibition Centre. It is also possible here to admire the frescoes by the Caracci and part of the collections from the CARISBO, as well as exhibitions from other important public and private collections. The network also the Casa Saraceni, a Renaissance palace that today is the headquarters of the Bank Foundation and whose ground floor is used for art exhibitions and other cultural events; the church of Santa Cristina which was inaugurated and opened to the public in 2007 to house an art collection and be a centre for music; San Michele in Bosco, a large, historic “belvedere” overlooking Bologna, managed by the bank Foundation since 2007; and finally, the Palazzo Pepoli, the city history museum, which is the core of this project.

→ CONTENTS–OBJECTS–DISPLAY: A BALANCED EQUILIBRIUM

The Bologna city history museum was inaugurated in 2012 and, unlike most of city museums, especially in Italy, is a private museum, run by the CARISBO Bank Foundation. It is housed in a medieval palace dating back to the 13th-

IMG. 5.53 — The Genus Bononiae network.
 “Genus Bononiae, a cultural, artistic and museum itinerary in the historical center of Bologna.”



IMG. 5.54 — Palazzo Pepoli. Exterior view of the historical palace restored and transformed into the city history museums.



14th centuries, which has been restored and transformed into the city museum. The restoration took seven years and was the project of Mario Bellini Architects, who designed and put in place the museum exhibition in partnership with the architect Italo Lupi, who curated the graphic design, the multimedia design studio Studio Base 2, and Massimo Negri, who was entrusted with the museological and scientific side of the project.

In 2003, Mario Bellini won the competition to design and build the museum, including the restoration and interior design. The restoration work focused firstly on the implementation of measures to strengthen the building, several ceilings, Gothic arches and rooms. Consequently, special attention was devoted to the restoration of each room and its décor which had been damaged by time and later additions. The whole project, according to Bellini's working method, aimed at preserving and enhancing the ancient building, and creating a synergy between the historic building and the new use to which it would be put, along with the related facilities. The most important new structure is the central glass and iron tower, located in the inner courtyard, which has been covered so it can be used as an entrance hall and connecting hub along the exhibition paths. The tower includes the stairs and elevators needed to connect the different floors for a coherent visit flow.

The museum is on two floors of about forty rooms in total organised into several sections, which tell the story of the development of the city and its culture from the Etruscans to the present day. On the ground floor are the reception facilities and the first exhibition rooms. Passing through the central tower, metaphorically interpreted as a tower of time—the time of the visit, the time we are exploring the museum, and time as a scientific and philosophical field of exploration for many major Bolognese historical scholars—the exhibition continues on the upper floor, while the mezzanine contains offices, educational rooms and temporary exhibition spaces.

The narration is chronological, using key epi-

sodes, symbolic figures and anecdotes, and occasionally interrupted by some cross-cutting themes designed to represent a particular feature of the city in a diachronic way. Examples are, among others, the thematic room devoted to the “Forma Urbis”—the urban historical development of the city and its morphology—where a portion of an original Roman street is displayed with a reconstruction of a portion of Bologna's porch and old city shop signboards; the the city of water room—an immersive installation evoking some of the underground sections of the Aposa river and explaining audio-visually the relationship between the city, its economy and culture and the local water system; or the “City of Languages” section—devoted to the development of the Bolognese dialect, its evolution, preservation and relationship with Italian languages and other languages and dialects. In one of these thematic rooms, a series of selected daily news items from local newspapers are displayed and collected in a database which may be browsed via touch screens. This is one of the few references to the city's everyday life, together with the last three rooms of the exhibition: “Your museum”—where citizens can temporarily display their own small collections associated with a memory, a special moment or an emotion; “The people of Bologna speak”—where it is possible to listen to talks from a number of distinguished Bolognese figures from the contemporary worlds of politics, culture and sport; and Sentimental Journeys—where a computer terminal provides access to a geo-tagged blog called *Percorsi Emotivi* (in the blog site members can express a thought, a suggestion, or a memory connected to a certain place in the city) and where a city map, designed to be used to attach comments to about beloved places in the city, ultimately functions as a kind of visitors' book.

The entire narration is made up of a combination of objects, images and multimedia elements. Actually, the museum collection mainly includes objects already owned by the Bank Foundation and therefore is not particularly large. The curator made thus the choice to set up what he describes as a “narrative museum,”

IMG. 5.55 — The room devoted to “the coronation of Carlo V.” © Francesco Radino, courtesy of Mario Bellini Architect(s), Massimo Negri (Genus Bononiae).

An ancient line-drawing frieze depicting the honour parade for the coronation of King Charles V, has been reproduced on free-standing tempered safety glass elements through a film treated with silk-screen printing. Using projections, sounds and other tools drawn from scenography and theatre language, here the visitor is immersed in the historical event, which is not literally reproduced, but rather suggested through metaphor and a dream-like experience.



IMG. 5.56 — The “Forma Urbis” section. © PaoloRighi, courtesy of Massimo Negri (Genus Bononiae).



IMG. 5.57 — “The People of Bologna Speak” section. © Francesco Radino, courtesy of Mario Bellini Architect(s), Massimo Negri (Genus Bononiae).





IMG. 5.58 — “The City of Water” section.
© Francesco Radino,
courtesy of Mario Bellini
Architect(s), Massimo Negri
(Genus Bononiae).



IMG. 5.59 — The central tower called “the tower of time.” © Paolo Righi,
courtesy of Mario Bellini
Architect(s), Massimo Negri
(Genus Bononiae).

The tower consists of a steel varnished structure with glass wall-plugs. These glass walls are covered by a film treated with silk-screen printing, which is progressively dense from the bottom up. Therefore, the tower's ground floor is transparent, while the highest level is coloured white and very bright, thus giving an idea of the dematerialisation of the entire structure.

IMG. 5.60 — A display case in the section “Bologna on stage: the secular life.” © Francesco Radino, courtesy of Mario Bellini Architect(s), Massimo Negri (Genus Bononiae).



IMG. 5.61 — A display cases in the “After Unification of Italy” section. © Francesco Radino, courtesy of Mario Bellini Architect(s), Massimo Negri (Genus Bononiae).



focused on storytelling, rather than being collection-oriented. In this way, the exhibition display and the graphic design play a fundamental communication role, filling information gaps and contributing to building and conveying the messages. The museum uses different communication tools, drawing on theatrical languages and scenography, creating immersive spaces and historical reconstructions, using the exhibition apparatus and graphic communication to visualise concepts and integrate information, and implementing messages through the use of ICT and multimedia devices. The museum's storyboard, curated by Massimo Negri, has been developed alongside the interior, graphic and multimedia design of the exhibition, in a successful partnership, where all the different competences have been mutually influential and have contributed to implementing and shaping the museum's contents.

The exhibition apparatus fits in the existing spaces, detached from the walls and composed of self-bearing elements which include all the necessary technical facilities, including the electrical and lighting systems; they are stand-alone elements, custom designed for the museum by Mario Bellini and freely placed in the space according to a different geometrical and spatial grid from that of the building. The exhibition elements are based on different variations of the initial concept of a three-dimensional cage made up of a squared white glazed steel frame hosting the collection's objects and the related information panels (designed by Italo Lupi using texts, drawings, images and other graphic communication tools).

These "cages" host the artworks and give them their own individual space, isolating them within the narration and, at the same time, drawing attention to them. In the final part of the exhibition, where the narration is very dense and temporally compressed, the need to highly synthesise these contents and also display several very heterogeneous objects—including pictures, newspapers, comics, photos, fabrics, and much more—led to the design of a different version of these same cages, which here dilate within the space, becoming a sort of "room in-

side the room" where objects and graphic supports are displayed. Throughout the exhibition some backlit double-faced panels, framed by the same steel cage, report the general historical narration through texts and images; they are more than just a label, and are capable of dialogue and creating a communicative unit with the other elements of the exhibition. This exhibition design system creates an intimate unity between the objects and the communicative support (images and texts) as a visual tool devoted to storytelling. At the same time it is flexible and reversible, and guarantees both the respect of the historical context (the palace's room), and an optimal illumination and preservation environment, custom designed for each specific object.

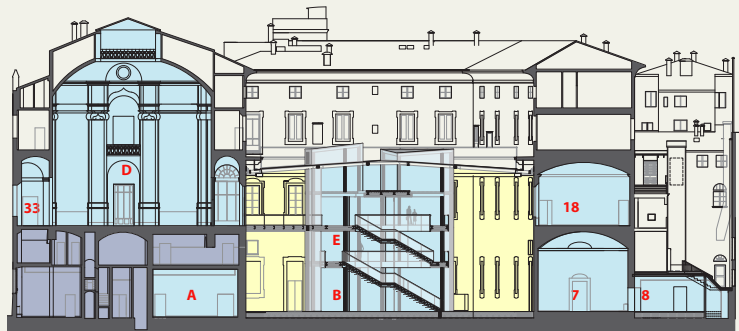
Palazzo Pepoli, as far as its narrative approach is concerned, is a traditional city history museum, whose organisation follows a linear timeline from past to present. It does not deal with contemporary city issues, such as the urban or social development of Bologna, it hardly reaches contemporaneity and talks little about, or with, Bologna's multifarious inhabitants. It rather stands out among other newly restored city museums around Europe due to its exhibition design and its organisational structure.

The whole narration of the museum is grounded in visual communication, whether based on original objects, reconstructions, replicas, texts or images. The visit to the museum and the transmission of its contents are meant as a mental, physical and emotional experience, and the collection's objects are intended to be nodes in the complete narration, a narration which provides them with a context and which is, in turn, validated by the objects themselves. The link between the story told and the objects themselves, is entrusted to the museum's communication and conveyed by the display. The result is a coherent exhibition design, characterised by a well-balanced combination of information, objects, multimedia installations and traditional exhibits, capable of being exhaustive but also of leaving space for personal interpretation.

A further innovative aspect of this museum

IMG. 5.62 — Ground floor and first floor plans and longitudinal section. Courtesy of Mario Bellini Architect(s).

- Exposition
- Facilities
- Offices
- Distribution



Ground floor

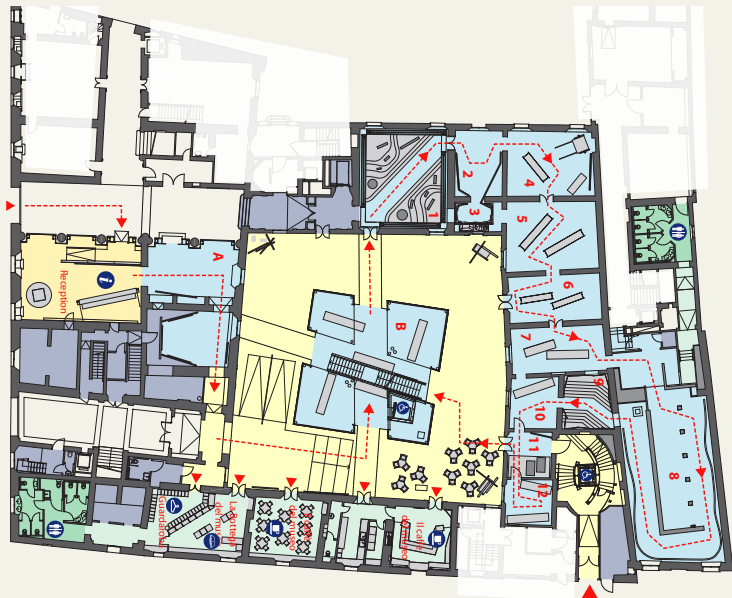
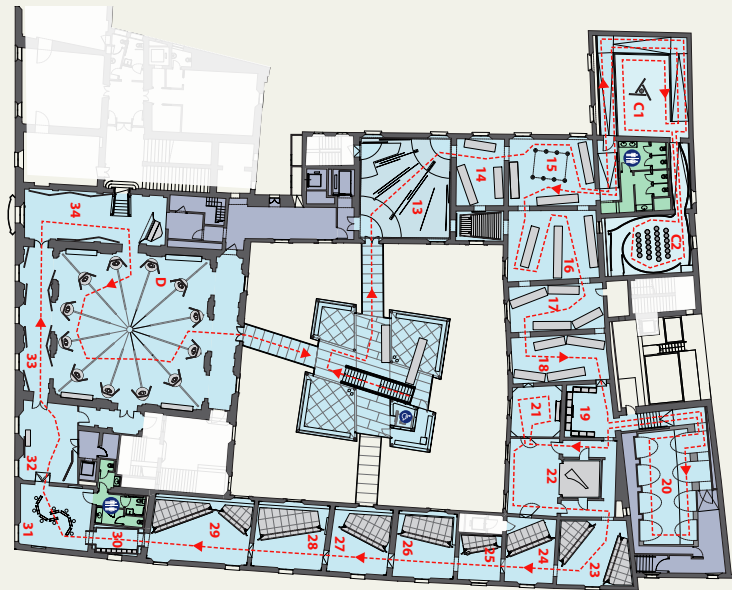
- A. Entrance. The painted city
- Courtyard
- B. The tower of time
- 1-2-3. Etruscan Bologna
- 4. The via Emilia
- 5. The stone and the word
- 6. Medieval Bologna
- 7. The protagonist
- 8. Forma urbis
- 9. the Battle of Fossalta
- 10. "The stolen bucket." Wars among the families
- 11-12 the Bentivoglio

Mezzanine

Space for temporary exhibition and educational activities

First floor

- 13. The coronation of Charles V in Bologna
- 14. The Council in Bologna
- 15. Bologna on stage: the sacred
- C. Multimedia Space
- D. 3D Virtual Theatre
- 16. Bologna on stage: the secular life
- 17. Bologna the "learned": the arts
- 18. The science
- 19. Literature
- 20. The city of water
- 21-22. Music
- 23. The arrival of Napoleon
- 24. 1848-1861
- 25. After Unification of Italy
- 26. 1898: Emilia Ars
- 27. Futurist in Bologna
- 28. Marconi and modern industry
- 29. Neither near, nor yet so far
- 30. Your Museum
- 31. The people of Bologna speak
- 32. Sentimental Journeys
- 33-34. City of languages
- E. Room of Culture



is the relationship between the museum and the city, including the link between the museum and its venue, the other building of the Genus Bononiae Network, and the entire historic city centre. The Genus Bononiae project states its aim thus: “[...] to tell the history of the city through a variety of instruments: direct acquaintance with the places of the city, permanent expositions and the integration of the physical witnesses of the past and the present, through a continuous and structured programme of activities.” The city museum is thus the core of this narration, and, at the same time, its very collection is virtually enlarged by including the palace hosting the museum, the buildings of the Genus Bononiae network, and the city as a whole with its cultural resources and physical places. These links result both in programmatic and curatorial aspects as well as in physical and museographical solutions. The palace’s rooms, for example, have not been modified and have been carefully restored in order to make the building itself part of the museum’s collection – the historic columns at the entrance, enclosed by light glasses incipiently underline the building’s pre-eminent role. The Palazzo Pepoli, unusually for a new museum, does not have many of the facilities which today characterise most of the new and renovated museums. Indeed it has no conference room or library, and very little space for temporary exhibitions; this is because all these functions are hosted in the other buildings of the Genus Bononiae network, coherently with the idea of creating a museum of the city within the city.

In addition, the museum also seeks to create cultural links with the city, through “educational activities” carried out in cooperation with the various city museums, “loans” of works and finds, and “scientific cooperation initiatives” launched by the many museums and cultural entities of the city of Bologna. These links are established not only through the museum’s programmes and activities but also within and by the exhibition itself. Particular attention has been paid, in fact, to graphic communication, in order to create a link with Bologna through references to places—such as maps and pic-

tures – and through cross-references with other museums of the city dealing with specific topics mentioned in the exhibition—such as some “video points” which present those civic museums connected to a given theme, and graphic signals called “balloons” which highlight several temporary events in the city which are related to a given museum topic.

This networking method, its communication strategies, and its dual aim of creating a cultural system both for the people of Bologna and for the promotion of tourism in the city via beneficial partnership among various agencies – including both private and public sectors, different kinds of museums, and other local cultural institutions and resources – transform this into a both stimulating and highly suggestive project.

Francesca Lanz