

## 20th century cinematographs in Catania: memory and oblivion of a heritage to be safeguarded

### I cinematografi del XX secolo a Catania: memoria e oblio di un patrimonio da salvaguardare

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The race to innovate, which has enabled great advances in science, cultural heritage, and other disciplines, has often been the reason behind the abandonment of practices and places that over time have shaped the history of places, traditions, and customs. The loss of the storytelling even of specific parts of our past constitutes the impoverishment and obfuscation of the identity of places that we all identify with. The digital revolution in cinema has involved not only representation in the broad sense of the term, but also the destiny of part of the dedicated historical architectural heritage. The oblivion that encompasses most of the cinemas designed in the 20th century in Catania and its province finds origin in the new sensibility and new styles of expression. The movie theatre, which in the past represented the place of social meeting and exchange, is now an invisible entity. Catania's architecture, abandoned or converted to other uses (shops, restaurants), is now a heritage to be safeguarded and designated for appropriate uses.

La corsa all'innovazione, che ha permesso grandi progressi nella scienza, nei beni culturali e in altre discipline, è stata spesso la causa dell'abbandono di pratiche e luoghi che nel tempo hanno fatto la storia di luoghi, tradizioni e costumi. La perdita della narrazione anche di parti specifiche del nostro passato costituisce un impoverimento e un offuscamento dell'identità dei luoghi in cui tutti ci identifichiamo. La rivoluzione digitale del cinema ha coinvolto non solo la rappresentazione in senso lato, ma anche il destino di parte del patrimonio storico architettonico dedicato. L'oblio che avvolge la maggior parte delle sale cinematografiche progettate nel XX secolo a Catania e provincia trova origine nella nuova sensibilità e nei nuovi stili espressivi. La sala cinematografica, che in passato rappresentava il luogo di incontro e scambio sociale, è oggi un'entità invisibile. L'architettura catanese, abbandonata o convertita ad altri usi (negozi, ristoranti), è oggi un patrimonio da salvaguardare e destinare a usi appropriati.



01.

Urban layout of historic cinemas and the main road network.

#### 1. THE ARCHITECTURES OF CINEMAS, SPACES OF CONTAMINATION BETWEEN DISCIPLINES AND CULTURES

The Italian movie theatre, for a long century, had seen wide distribution across the nation and represented for generations of viewers the space of contamination where architecture welcomes other knowledge associated with technological, functional, social, and cultural aspects. The cinematographic heritage, in addition to being a testimony of past customs, traditions, and society as told through films – fragile resources that narrate the years of creative, economic, and productive fervour of the twentieth century – still preserves, albeit to an increasingly lesser extent, the memory of the architectures dedicated to projections on the big screen. The few movie theatres that have not undergone the effects of modernity and digital innovation preserve, even if often in a state of decay and oblivion, the history of the culture of the first half of the 20th century, in which theatrical representation was accompanied by a new way of enjoying content. Due to the intrinsic characteristics of being a privileged space not only architecturally but also technologically, culturally, and socially, the movie theatre is a testament to the history and socio-environmental identity of a long era, which is why it is essential to recover the memory of the built heritage of the first half of the 20th century.

Sicily, and particularly Catania, responded through the new entrepreneurial class to the demands of the vast public, represented by the middle bourgeois class, for places dedicated to leisure and entertainment. In the first half of the 20th century, a large number of cinemas were born – Eliseo (1910), Olimpia (1913), King (1926, formerly Mirone), Diana (1926), Fisichella (1927), Supercinema Vittoria (1927), Excelsior (1930, formerly Eden), Odeon (1930, formerly Real theatre) – [Fig. 01.] created by the most representative designers of the period – Fr. Fichera, P. Lanzerotti, C. Aloisi, S. Mastrojanni, G. Giandinoto, L. Franco – in neoclassical, liberty, déco, and rationalist styles [Figs. 02., 03.].





02.  
Above, from left to right, cinema Eliseo (1910), cinema King (1926), cinema Diana (1926); bottom, from left to right, cinema Fisichella (1927), cinema Excelsior (1930), cinema Odeon (1930).

These architectures constitute a heritage of high historical and cultural value for the city, often today abandoned or transformed due to technological innovation, the advent of the digital age, and the rise of streaming platforms, which have changed the public's relationship with entertainment and cinema. Many of these buildings have found new functions (restaurants, clothing stores), with reuse projects that often do not reveal their original identity. Through the study of archival sources and digital surveying, as a tool for knowledge and critical interpretation for the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage, as well as for virtual exploration of hidden architectures, the aim is to document the geometric-spatial and stylistic-formal characteristics that distinguish their function and spatiality, in support of any reuse projects that enhance their identity. Cinemas are architectures whose functional specificity is interpreted in various architectural forms, often coordinated with furnishings, graphics, and lighting. They constitute an artistic heritage that, with its spatial distribution in relation to urban aspects, has always marked the fate of urban places, often determining, with its abandonment or even destruction, profound alterations in the socio-environmental context.



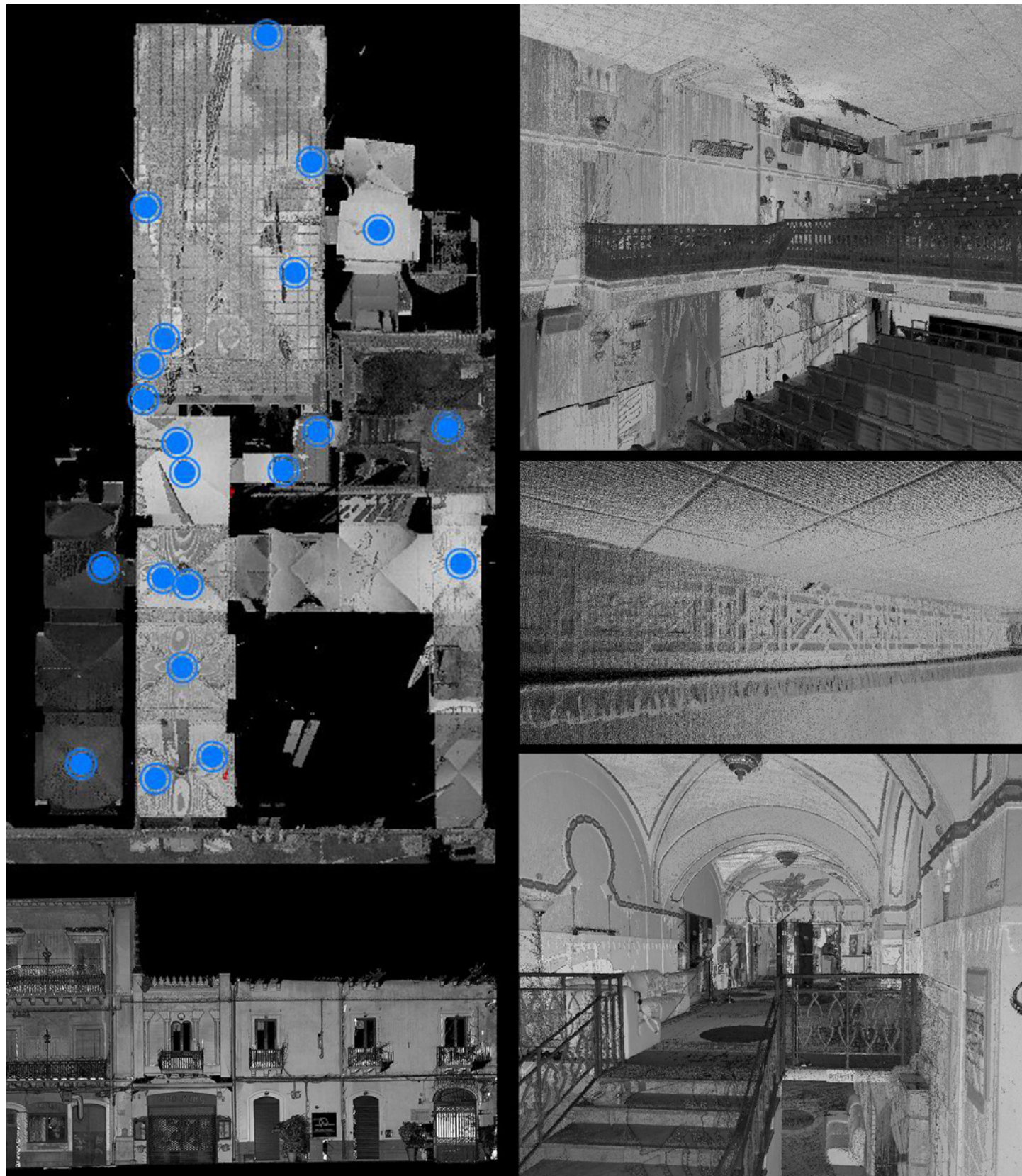
03.  
Above, from left to right, cinema King (1926), cinema Diana (1926); bottom, from left to right, cinema Odeon (1930), cinema Olimpia (1916).

## 2. KNOWLEDGE AND VALORISATION OF CINEMATOGRAPHIC ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE. DIGITAL TECHNIQUES FOR MEMORY REVIVAL

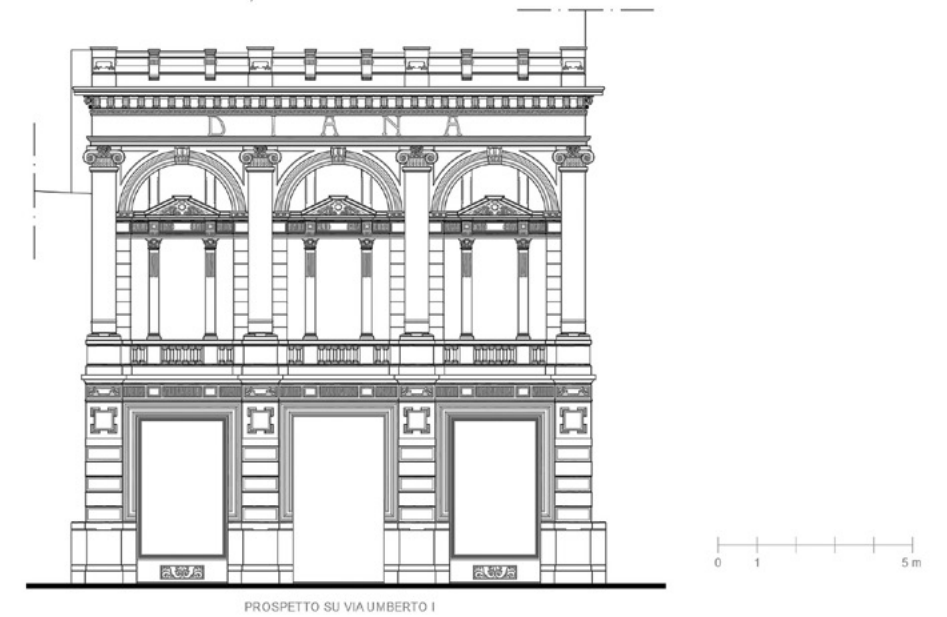
The presence of historic cinemas in the streets of a city holds significant cultural importance for several reasons. Firstly, they represent tangible evidence of the history and social and cultural evolution of the community and the urban structure. Through their architecture and the characteristics that distinguish them, cinemas reflect the artistic trends and architectural styles of specific eras, providing valuable information on the aesthetics and construction techniques of the past. Furthermore, such architectures act as custodians of collective memory, evoking memories and experiences shared by generations of citizens. These places have often been social gathering points, where people from different backgrounds met to enjoy cinematic shows.

To disseminate knowledge of this valuable architectural heritage in the heart of the city of Catania and to increase awareness of its enhancement, our research has focused on the cinemas designed and built between the 1920s and 1930s. These buildings possess stylistic characteristics that render them iconic symbols for the city that are easily recognizable to the passerby, despite many being abandoned or repurposed for other uses, while others continue to serve their original function. The façades and interior formal solutions interpret the stylistic features of the period, from the language of neoclassicism with the design of the classical order (Eliseo, in which slender pilasters and columns vertically scanned the front, which concludes with elegant trabeation), to the plastic forms of decorative detail with flowing lines typical of Art Nouveau (Diana, King and Olimpia, in which the central spatiality of the hall is emphasised by the use of wrought iron in the railings, the friezes on the stringcourses and





04.  
Cinema King. Station points Laser Scanner survey, orthoimage and perspective views.



05.  
Cinema Diana. Orthoimage Laser Scanner point cloud and 2D representation of façade.

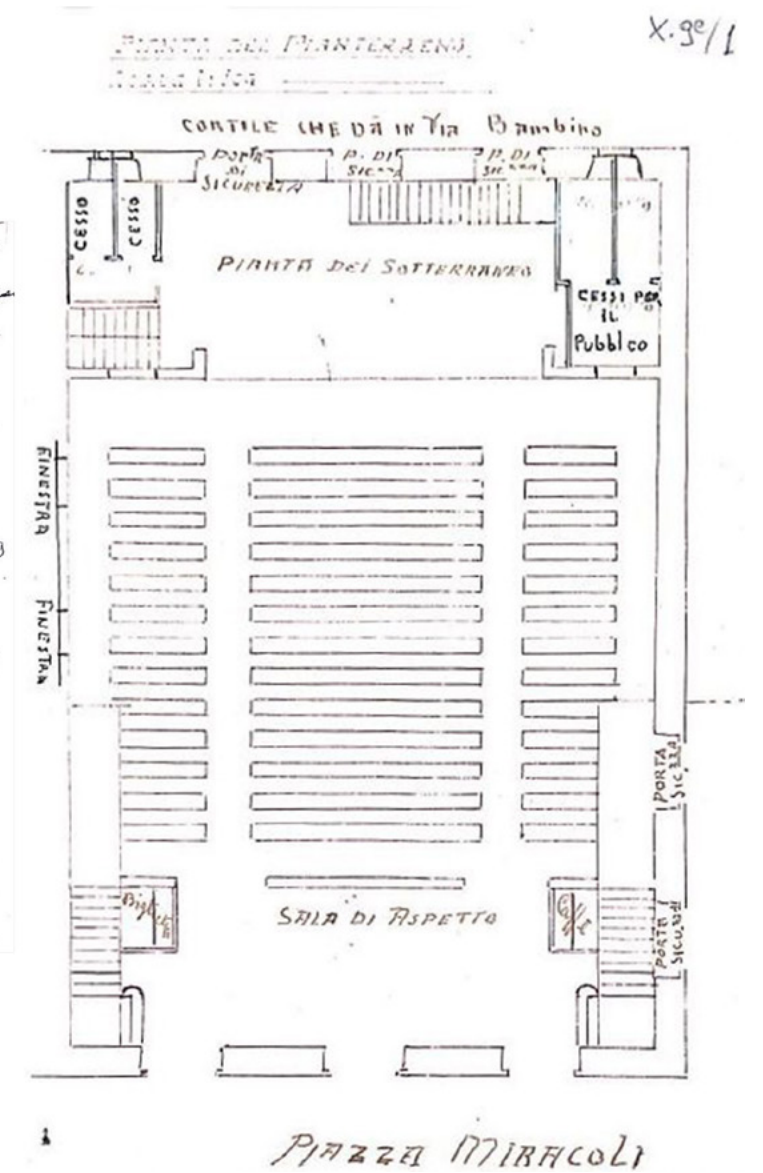
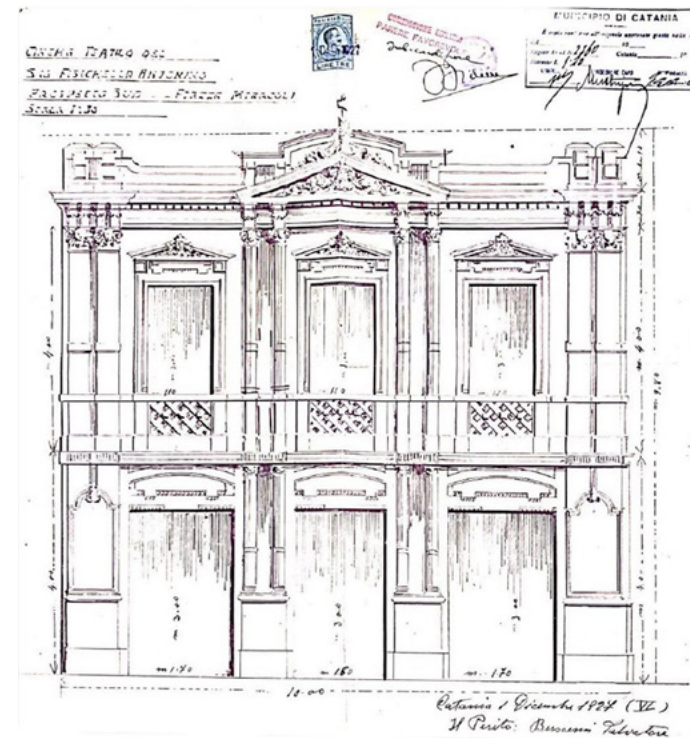
the mosaic cladding, the stucco decorations and the polychrome stained-glass windows), to the more rigid forms of Art Deco language (Odeon and Excelsior, in which a geometric abstractionism reigns with rigid and angular shapes, such as arrows, zigzags, V motifs, sun rays, trapeziums). The architectural and formal characteristics, amply documented in the original projects, have also been traced through architectural drawings, building permits, historic photographs and other relevant documents. The vast and rich archive documentation is of inestimable historical and cultural value and represents an extraordinary opportunity to deepen and understand the history of the cinemas that were built in Catania during that period. For example, the architect Mastrojanni in the project for the Excelsior cinema expresses a variant of Art Deco characterised by a simplicity and minimalism approaching rationalism, particularly evident in the main façade and further accentuated in the hall and access spaces with their rectangular geometries, in evident contrast to the magnificent decoration of the façade and



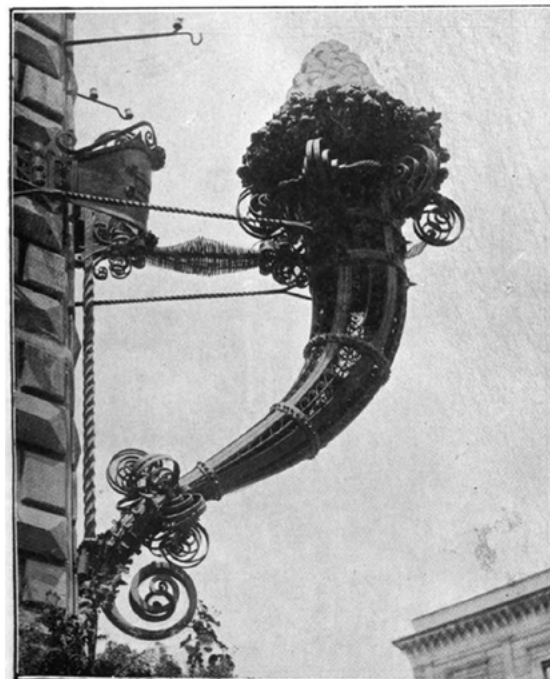
the hall of the nearby, contemporary Odeon Cinema, designed by Carmelo Aloisi. Digital metric acquisition techniques, such as laser scanner surveys and multi-image photogrammetry, along with archival research of the original designs, are fundamental tools for the enhancement and deepening of knowledge of architectural cultural assets, especially when they are in a state of abandonment or have been significantly altered. An emblematic example of this phenomenon is represented by the Olimpia and Diana cinemas (designed respectively by architects Fr. Fichera and P. Lanzerotti), which, although they have undergone substantial modifications over the years, today have a different appearance to that of their opening. These changes have led to a progressive loss of their original identity, culminating in a radical change of use: the first houses a McDonald's Italia restaurant, while the second, from being a bookshop, has since changed its use to become a clothing shop. Although the spatial configuration of these rooms is substantially preserved, only an acute and knowledgeable observer is able to recognise and appreciate the historical and cultural importance of these places, to find himself inside a cinema hall or balcony, capturing the details of the period decorative apparatus still present, but often unfortunately concealed by furniture that obscures its authentic value. The research included an intensive survey campaign, obtaining accurate point clouds of the entire spatiality of the cinemas and photorealistic polygonal models to document the architectural elements characterized by ornaments and decorations typical of the period, as well as the acquisition of 360-degree photographs for virtual visualization [Figs. 04., 05.].

In addition to these digital techniques, complementary archival research through the analysis of historical documents – project reports, period photographs, graphic representations, and other sources – were fundamental in the formation of a more complete understanding of the history and evolution of the structures investigated [Figs. 06., 07.]. The collected documentary heritage allows for the reconstruction of the memory and identity of the places and the creation of virtual tours that enable the enjoyment of environments not always accessible, the navigation of interior spaces, and the visualization of the aesthetic-formal characteristics that distinguish the architectural stylistic period.

Not all the eight historic cinemas have been investigated in the same way, as some are not accessible or have been completely altered from their original layout. The Eliseo cinema, for example, is a closed and totally abandoned structure whose main facade remains unaltered, but presents clearly recognizable additional superstructure, and whose interior has been impossible thus far to access, or the case of the Super Cinema Vittoria, which has been modified internally several times, becoming a discotheque in the last decade. The currently accessible cinemas, namely Olimpia, King, Excelsior, Diana, and Odeon, have been fully surveyed, obtaining accurate point clouds that have allowed a detailed analysis of their spatiality, a thorough investigation of the transformations compared to the original configuration following reuse interventions, and the updating of graphic documentation. This, in turn, proves to be of invaluable use both for potential proposals for restoration and/or reuse, and as a basis for virtual reconstructions that allow for three-dimensional enjoyment of the spaces. Among these, the King and Odeon cinemas have maintained their original function as projection halls to this day and continue to attract audiences interested in watching films in original language or works by emerging directors, with their wide halls and entrance vestibules that still have their original geometric and decorative features. However, the Odeon cinema was unfortunately recently closed to the public. Among these, the King and Odeon cinemas have maintained their original function as projection halls to this day, although the Odeon has recently been closed to the public. Two cinemas remain active and continue to attract audiences interested in watching films in original language or works by emerging directors. A different fate has befallen the Olimpia and Diana cinemas, which have been adapted to house a fast-food restaurant and a clothing store, respectively. However, inside they retain part of the original planimetric configuration and the splendid decorative features that characterized them in the past. The Excelsior cinema, on the other hand, has been waiting for years for a buyer who can enhance its function, as remains for sale until to this day.



06. Cinema Fisichella. Archive project (Approved Projects Fund, Catania Historical Archive.).



CINEMA TEATRO OLIMPIA IN CATANIA. - FARO LUMINOSO. — F. Fichera.



CINEMA TEATRO OLIMPIA IN CATANIA. - SALA. — F. Fichera.

07.

Cinema Olimpia. Historical photos.

The importance of enhancing the structures that housed historic cinemas lies in the fact that they can continue to play an active role in contemporary cultural life, hosting events, film festivals, artistic performances, or, preferably, continuing to perform the role for which they were designed. In this way, they not only preserve the past but also enrich the present, offering spaces where culture can be experienced and appreciated in all its forms.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The integration of digital metric acquisition techniques and archival research offers a comprehensive approach for the enhancement and dissemination of Catania's historic cinemas. These tools allow the documentation, preservation, and sharing of cultural heritage, ensuring that future generations can continue to appreciate these important testimonies of the past. Three-dimensional digital models are essential components of this process, providing the basis for accurate analysis of the geometric-spatial configuration, stylistic features and state of preservation of places, as well as for immersive reconstructions and the assessment of responsible strategies in the relationship between new design and historical legacy, aiming for a sustainable future. It is essential, to avoid their falling into oblivion, to make these spaces alive and usable again, recovering the testimony of the past without drastically altering its DNA. Through difficult but stimulating and fascinating actions for designers, it is possible to bring forgotten and disused places to light through functional and formal solutions that can conform or harmoniously dialogue with the pre-existence, with the goal of minimizing interventions and impact on the work and the urban context. In summary, historic cinemas are valuable not only as architectural testimonies but also as symbols of the memory and cultural identity of a city, capable of promoting dialogue between past and present and contributing to the economic and social well-being of the community.

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#### ARCHIVAL SOURCE

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