

From Light to Shadow, Shadow to Light

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Showing Alison around Il Teatro Sociale di Camogli was to share an emotional tie to a theater my ancestors helped build. Now after decades of neglect, the theater is about to be restored. The floodlights will once again light the stage. It was this personal connection and a professional commitment to historic preservation that led me to campaign to save Il Teatro Sociale di Camogli.

Alison is a photographer who lives in Paris, but we met at the Palazzo Spinola in Genoa, the museum I direct. I soon discovered that Alison had been coming to Camogli for years for extended visits. Since Camogli is where I live we ended up seeing each other and a friendship grew. And so, wanting to share an interest that I hold dear I suggested to her that we visit the Teatro Sociale di Camogli together.

Like many local denizens, Alison was familiar with the theater's façade but had never been inside, the interior being closed to the public because of safety hazards. More importantly she was unaware of the theater's peculiar history. Il Sociale was built at the end of the 19th century by a group of prosperous shipbuilding families from Camogli who had acquired their wealth through sea-faring ventures, but also frequently funneled their wealth into social projects for the common good. Thanks to its private donors Camogli was endowed with a hospital, an orphanage, the naval training school and the world's first maritime insurance organization. It was these families that took it upon themselves to restore the Chiesa dell' Assunta; it was through their act of devotion and thanksgiving that the Santuario del Boschetto was given a core collection of extraordinary sea-farers' ex-votos; and it was these families who wanted to build a theater, to create a place for social and cultural enrichment. This enlightened bourgeoisie wanted an authentic Italianate theater with a horseshoe floor plan and four tiers of boxes, a theater that would hold its own against the prestigious Teatro Carlo Felice in nearby Genoa. To this day, for many in Camogli, because of the theater's historical background, it is viewed as a communal landmark. On a personal note, I am moved when I think that, despite its sad state of abandonment, this monument is home to some of my own family's roots.

With these ties in mind, and providing a potted history as we went Alison and I visited the theater together. Knowing her, I wasn't surprised by the ease with which she embraced the subject, or how she allowed herself to be drawn into the theater's shadowy past. I was mildly surprised when she proposed not just to take a few shots, but to stay on, to take them while closed up for whole days, alone in an empty, tumbledown theater.

The initial intent was to document, frame images that would recall what the theater looked like before it was restored and opened to the public, and filled once again with noise and life, losing in the process the dignified silence that reigns today. Alison's original intent to simply document an architectural space, gradually evolved into something else.

During the long, solitary and silent hours Alison spent in the theater she found another way forward that went beyond the historical anecdotes or anything I could evoke for her. It was her own intimate response to the space. A thought process—perhaps even a meditation, that gave birth to a series of highly personal images of the Teatro Sociale. These are images that cross mental thresholds.

Solitude, silence, emptiness; the theater is an all- encompassing space but a closed one. Alone yet surrounded by an animated town whose muted sounds reached her, hours slipped by. I can imagine the theater transforming itself into a welcome refuge. Alison's original intent to simply document an architectural space, gradually evolved into something else.

Recalling those hours, those days, Alison evokes the metaphor of a sundial, in which light marks the passage of time. Even in the silent emptiness of the Theater, light became for her the only sign of life; light falling on things, progressively illuminating different areas, bringing forth unseen spaces from the shadows, drawing lines, and revealing objects, details, and decades- old dust. In her images your gaze follows the movement of light as it pulls things out of the shadows, gives them form, breathes life into them, but equally, through its inevitable progression, recedes, so that things return to a world of shadow and then disappear.

The theater hasn't been used for years, yet there are objects scattered around like the flotsam and jetsam of a past life: a music stand, curtains, and a glass. Alison stops to look at them, she see them slowly emerge out of the shadows, to then fall back into shadow. And she pauses to take a photograph to keep this eternal return at bay.

Looking at Alison's photos we are led into the silence and feel the emptiness. But we also imagine things taking form, the theater returning to life.

Shadow, light, again shadow and once again light: a path that leaves you thoughtful, but also inspires hope, for the life of the Theater, and... for us.