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editors

# D-SITE

Drones - Systems of Information on Cultural Heritage  
for a spatial and social investigation



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# INDEX

## PREFACE

SANDRO PARRINELLO, ANNA DELL'AMICO

Drones and Digital Innovation: a new scenario in Digital Dimension

16

## CONFERENCE PAPERS

CATERINA PALESTINI, ALESSANDRO BASSO, MAURIZIO PERTICARINI

3D modeling from UAV for the reconfiguration of oxidation systems in Abruzzo.

The case of the tower of Forca di Penne, an immersive archival resource for the lost Historical Heritage

28

RAMONA QUATTRINI, RENATO ANGELONI, BENEDETTA DI LEO

Data integration and optimization for Cultural Heritage fruition. The case study of the Rail to Land Project

38

ANDREA PIRINU, RAFFAELE ARGIOLOS, NICOLA PABA

Design models and landscape form of Sardinian IIWW Heritage. The Simbirizzi Lake in territory of Quartu Sant'Elena

48

MARCO SACCUCCI, VIRGINIA MIELE, ASSUNTA PELLICCIO

UAVs for the analysis of geometrical deformation of fortresses and castles. The case study of Sora Castle

58

RITA VALENTI, EMANUELA PATERNÒ, GRAZIELLA CUSMANO

UAS applications for the protection of archaeological heritage. From the interpretative complexity of the absence to 3D visualization of euryalus castle

66

GIOVANNI PANCANI, MATTEO BIGONGIARI

The aerial photogrammetric survey for the documentation of the Cultural Heritage: the Verruca fortress on the Pisan Mountains

76

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| ELENA MADALINA CANTEA, ANNA DELL'AMICO<br>Application of fast survey technologies for knowledge, valorization and conservation:<br>the case study of Rondella delle Boccare  | 84  |
| PIETRO BECHERINI, ROLANDO VOLZONE, ANASTASIA COTTINI<br>A 3D model for architectural analysis, using aerial photogrammetry, for the digital documentation<br>of the convent of Santa Maria da Insua, on the northern boarder between Portugal and Spain    | 94  |
| ALBERTO PETTINEO<br>Videogrammetry for the virtual philological reconstruction of the Scaliger fortifications in the territory of Verona.<br>The case study of Montorio Castle   | 104 |
| GIULIA PORCHEDDU, FRANCESCA PICCHIO<br>Close-Range Photogrammetry for the production of models and 3D GIS platform useful for the documentation of<br>archaeological rescue excavations  | 112 |
| FABRIZIO AGNELLO, MIRCO CANNELLA<br>Multi sensor photogrammetric techniques for the documentation of the ruins of Temple G in Selinunte  | 122 |
| GIANLUCA FENILI, GIORGIO GHELFI<br>Conservation and enhancement of Cultural Heritage using UAVs. New perspectives for the preservation<br>of some case studies   | 130 |
| CATERINA GRASSI, DIEGO RONCHI, DANIELE FERDANI, GIORGIO FRANCO POCOBELLI, RACHELE MANGANELLI DEL FA'<br>A 3D survey in archaeology. Comparison among software for image and range-based data integration   | 138 |
| GIORGIA POTESTÀ, VINCENZO GELSOMINO<br>Experience of integrated survey by drone for archaeological sites. Documentation, study, and enhancement of the<br>Italic Sanctuary of Pietrabbondante  | 146 |
| CÈLIA MALLAFRÈ-BALSELLS, DAVID MORENO-GARCIA, JORDI CANELA-RION<br>Photogrammetric comparison between different drone survey methodologies: dry stone as a case study  | 156 |
| DIEGO MARTÍN DE TORRES, JULIÁN DE LA FUENTE PRIETO, ENRIQUE CASTAÑO PEREA<br>Scars in the landscape: photogrammetry and analysis of the trenches of the Spanish Civil War  | 168 |
| SALVATORE BARBA, ALESSANDRO DI BENEDETTO, MARGHERITA FIANI, LUCAS GUJSK, MARCO LIMONGIELLO<br>Automatic point cloud editing from UAV aerial images: applications in archaeology and Cultural Heritage  | 176 |
| CORRADO CASTAGNARO, DOMENICO CRISPINO<br>Drone flight as a knowledge tool for Cultural Heritage  | 184 |
| ELENA GÓMEZ BERNAL, PABLO ALEJANDRO CRUZ FRANCO, ADELA RUEDA MÁRQUEZ DE LA PLATA<br>Drones in architecture research: methodological application of the use of drones for the accessible intervention<br>in a roman house in the Alcazaba of Mérida (Spain) | 192 |



|  |     |
|--|-----|
| LORENZO TEPPATI LOSÈ, FILIBERTO CHIABRANDO, ELEONORA PELLEGRINO<br>UAS photogrammetry and SLAM for the HBIM model of the Montanaro Belltower   | 202 |
| FABIANA GUERRIERO<br>Methodologies for the protection of the Portuguese architectural heritage   | 212 |
| CARLO COSTANTINO, ANNA CHIARA BENEDETTI, GIORGIA PREDARI<br>UAV photogrammetric survey as a fast and low-cost tool to foster the conservation of small villages.<br>The case study of San Giovanni Lipioni | 220 |
| LUCA VESPASIANO, LUCA CETRA, STEFANO BRUSAPORCI<br>Experience of Indoor Droning for Cultural Heritage Documentation  | 232 |
| RICCARDO FLORIO, RAFFAELE CATUOGNO, TERESA DELLA CORTE, VICTORIA COTELLA, MARCO APREA<br>Multi-source data framework: integrated survey for 3D texture mapping on archaeological sites                     | 240 |
| VALERIA CERA, MASSIMILIANO CAMPI<br>Evaluation of unconventional sensors for the photogrammetric survey of underwater historical sites   | 250 |
| DJORDJE DJORDJEVIC, MIRJANA DEVETAKOVIC, DJORDJE MITROVIC<br>Regulatory and controlling mechanisms on UAV/UAS that influence efficient architectural heritage praxis:<br>actual situation in Serbia        | 260 |
| ANTONIO CONTE, ANTONIO BIXIO<br>Privileged documentary observations of surveying of “fragile heritage” in emergency conditions:<br>the case studies of Pomarico landslide and of Montescaglioso abbey      | 270 |
| MARCO CANCELANI, MARCO D’ANGELICO<br>A methodology for survey, documentation and virtual reconstruction of historical centers in a seismic area:<br>the case study of Arquata del Tronto                   | 280 |
| RAISSA GAROZZO, DAVIDE CALIÒ, MARIATERESA GALIZIA, GIOVANNA PAPPALARDO, CETTINA SANTAGATI<br>Integration of remote surveying methodologies for geological risk assessment of masonry arch bridges          | 294 |
| FAUSTA FIORILLO, LUCA PERFETTI, GIULIANA CARDANI<br>Aerial-photogrammetric survey for supervised classification and mapping of roof damages  | 304 |
| RAFFAELLA DE MARCO, ELISABETTA DORIA<br>The processing of UAV 3D models for the recognition of coverages at the technological scale:<br>opportunities for a strategy of conservation monitoring            | 314 |
| QIUYAN ZHU, SHANSHAN SONG, LINGYUN LIAO, MARIANNA CALIA, XIN WU<br>UAV survey for documentation and conservation of Han City in the UNESCO mixed heritage site<br>of Mount Wuyi, China                     | 324 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| ZHUOWEI LIN, MARIANNA CALIA, LINGYUN LIAO, XIN WU<br>Digital survey of the Cliff-Burial sites with consumer-level UAV photogrammetry: a case study of Mt. Wuyi  | 334 |
| ANNA SANSEVERINO, CATERINA GABRIELLA GUIDA, CARLA FERREYRA, VICTORIA FERRARIS<br>Image-based georeferenced urban context reconstruction in a BIM environment: the case of the Crotone Fortress                          | 344 |
| ANDREA ARRIGHETTI, ALFONSO FORGIONE, ANDREA LUMINI<br>The Church of San Silvestro in L'Aquila. An integrated approach through TLS and UAV technologies for the architectural and archaeological documentation           | 356 |
| SILVIA LA PLACA, FRANCESCA PICCHIO<br>Fast survey technologies for the documentation of canalization systems. The case study of the settlement "Il Cassinino" in the Naviglio Pavese surrounding                        | 366 |
| TOMMASO EMLER, ADRIANA CALDARONE, MARIA LAURA ROSSI<br>Fast assessment survey for protected architectural and environmental site  | 376 |
| MASSIMO LESERRI, GABRIELE ROSSI<br>Salento baroque spires survey. Integrating TLS and UAV photogrammetry  | 386 |
| SARA ANTINOZZI, ANDREA DI FILIPPO, ANGELO LORUSSO, MARCO LIMONGIELLO<br>Toward a virtual library experience based on UAV and TLS survey data  | 396 |
| GENNARO PIO LENTO<br>UAS applications for the survey of monumental architecture. The case study of the Royal Residence of Aranjuez in Spain   | 404 |
| ORNELLA ZERLENGA, GIANFRANCO DE MATTEIS, SERGIO SIBILIO, GIOVANNI CIAMPI, VINCENZO CIRILLO, ET AL.<br>Open source procedure for UAV-based photogrammetry and infrared thermography in the survey of masonry bell towers | 412 |
| TOMÁS ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CHAO, GIUSEPPE ANTUONO, PEDRO GABRIEL VINDROLA, PIERPAOLO D'AGOSTINO<br>Image-based segmentation and modelling of terraced landscapes  | 422 |
| ALESSIO CARDACI, PIETRO AZZOLA, ANTONELLA VERSACI<br>The Astino Valley in Bergamo: multispectral aerial photogrammetry for the survey and conservation of the cultural landscape and biodiversity                       | 432 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| RAFFAELA FIORILLO, ANGELO DE CICCO<br>The Port of Fiskardo: architecture, history and innovation  | 442 |
| GIUYE LIN, PABLO ANGEL RUFFINO, LU XU, ANDREA GIORDANO, LUIGI STENDARDO, RACHELE A. BERNARDELLO<br>Application of UAV photogrammetry technology in the process of architectural heritage preservation   | 450 |
| EMANUELE GARBIN<br>On phenomenology of remote vision: the panoramas of the first lunar probes   | 458 |
| FRANCESCA GALASSO, ALESSIA MICELI<br>The documentation of the decorative system of the Ark of Mastino II in Verona.<br>Comparative analysis of photogrammetric data obtained from UAV systems   | 468 |
| VALENTINA CASTAGNOLO, ANNA CHRISTIANA MAIORANO, REMO PAVONE<br>Immersive environments and heritage digitization. The virtual image of a medieval cathedral  | 478 |
| LUCA FORMIGARI, VERONICA VONA, MARCO ZUPPIROLI<br>Towards an “allround” control of the restoration project: 3D modelling as a real-time monitoring system for the design outcome  | 488 |
| DAVIDE CARLEO, MARTINA GARGIULO, GIOVANNI CIAMPI, MICHELANGELO SCORPIO, PILAR CHIAS NAVARRO<br>Immersive virtual model accuracy and user perception: preliminary results of a case study with low cost photogrammetric survey method by drone | 500 |
| HANGJUN FU<br>UAV survey for 3D printing digital modeling for the representation and enhancement of Nativity Church on the urban and architectural scales   | 510 |
| CHIARA RIVELLINO, MARCO RICCIARINI<br>Testing the reliability of mini-UAVs acquisition campaign on detailed bas-reliefs.<br>The case study of sculpturing elements of Donatello’s Pulpit  | 518 |
| ANDREA CAMPOTARO<br>Documenting the evolution of a Lilong neighborhood in contemporary Shanghai through mini-UAV-based photogrammetry surveys   | 528 |
| CRISTIANA BARTOLOMEI, CECILIA MAZZOLI, CATERINA MORGANTI<br>The Woodpecker: virtual reconstruction of an abandoned discotheque in the Adriatic Coast  | 536 |
| YLENIA RICCI, ANDREA PASQUALI<br>From UAV photogrammetry to digital restitution, new process for the preservation of Cultural Heritage  | 544 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| REMOTE SENSING IN AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY   | 556 |
| CLAUDIO SPADAVECCHIA, ELENA BELCORE, MARCO PIRAS, MILAN KOBAL<br>Forest change detection using multi-temporal aerial point clouds  | 558 |
| RAMIN HEIDARIAN DEHKORDI, MIRCO BOSCHETTI<br>Exploring the relationship between soil organic carbon and crop water stress across century-old biochar patches within agricultural fields by combining UAV thermal, multispectral, and RGB images  | 564 |
| GIORGIO IMPOLLONIA, MICHELE CROCI, ANDREA MARCONE, GIULIA ANTONUCCI, HENRI BLANDINIÈRES, STEFANO AMADUCCI<br>UAV-based remote sensing to evaluate nitrogen and irrigation effects on LAI and LCC dynamics combining PROSAIL model and GAM        | 570 |
| CARLOS CARBONE, MULHAM FAWAKERJI, VITO TRIANNI, DANIELE NARDI<br>Photorealistic simulations of crop fields for remote sensing with UAV swarms  | 576 |
| BIANCA ORTUANI, ALICE MAYER, GIOVANNA SONA, ARIANNA FACCHI<br>Use of vegetation indices from Sentinel2 and UAV in precision viticulture applications   | 582 |
| FILIPPO SARVIA, SAMUELE DE PETRIS, ALESSANDRO FARBO, ENRICO BORGOGNO MONDINO<br>Geometric vs Spectral content of RPAS images in the precision agriculture context  | 588 |
| GIOVANNA SCARDAPANE, FEDERICA MASTRACCI, ANTONELLO CEDRONE, LILIAN VALETTE<br>T-DROMES®, Drone-as-a-Service solutions for Smart Farming  | 596 |
| FRANCESCA GIANNETTI, GIOVANNI D'AMICO, FRANCESCO CHIANUCCI, GHERARDO CHIRICI<br>UAV forest application supporting sustainable forest management  | 602 |
| GEOLOGY AND UAV: RESEARCH, EXPERIENCES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES   | 608 |
| ALBERTO BOSINO, NICCOLÒ MENEGONI, ELISA FERRARI, CLAUDIA LUPI, CESARE PEROTTI<br>Art and Drones: retracing the paths of Torquato Taramelli 100 years later   | 610 |
| NICCOLÒ MENEGONI, DANIELE GIORDAN, CESARE PEROTTI, ENRICO ARESE<br>Uncrafted Aerial Vehicle-based rock slope stability analysis of Baveno granite quarry area: the tailing and waste rock extractive site of Ciana-Tane Pilastretto (Montorfano) | 614 |
| DAVIDE FUGAZZA, MARCO SCAIONI, VALERIA BELLONI, MARTINA DI RITA, FABIANO VENTURA, FABRIZIO TROILO, GUGLIELMINA ADELE DIOLAIUTI<br>UAVs in cryospheric studies: experiences from Alpine glaciers  | 620 |

|  |   |     |
|--|---|-----|
| MARCO LA SALANDRA  |   |     |
| Application of UAV system and SfM techniques to address the hydro-geomorphological hazard in a fluvial system        |   | 622 |
| DANIELE GIORDAN, MARTINA CIGNETTI, DANILO GODONE, ALEKSANDRA WRZESNIAK   |   |     |
| Structure from motion multi-source application for landslide characterization and monitoring                         |   | 626 |
| FABRIZIO TROILO, NICCOLÒ DEMATTEIS, DANIELE GIORDAN, FRANCESCO ZUCCA   |   |     |
| UAV observation of the recent evolution of the Planpincieux glacier (Mont Blanc)                                     |   | 628 |
| MARCO DUBBINI, CORRADO LUCENTE, GIACOMO UGUCCIONI  |   |     |
| Photogrammetric monitoring by drone of San Leo landslide (Rimini)  |   | 630 |
| <br><b>AERIAL, GROUND AND UNDERWATER ROBOTICS FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE</b>  |   | 632 |
| MATHEW JOSE POLLAYIL, FRANCO ANGELINI, MANOLO GARABINI   |   |     |
| UAV for environmental monitoring   |   | 634 |
| DANILA GERMANESE, DAVIDE MORONI, MARIA ANTONIETTA PASCALI, MARCO TAMPUCCI, ANDREA BERTON                             |   |     |
| Exploring UAVs for structural health monitoring  |   | 640 |
| BENEDETTO ALLOTTA, ALESSANDRO RIDOLFI, NICOLA SECCIANI   |   |     |
| Autonomous Underwater Vehicles for Underwater Cultural Heritage:<br>some experiences from the University of Florence |   | 644 |
| FABIO BRUNO, ANTONIO LAGUDI, UMBERTO SEVERINO  |   |     |
| Autonomous Surface Vehicles to support underwater archaeologists in survey and documentation                         |   | 648 |
| FABRIZIO GIULIETTI, EMANUELE LUIGI DE ANGELIS, GIANLUCA ROSSETTI, MATTEO TURCI                                       |   |     |
| High-range/high endurance rotary wing aircraft for environmental protection and Cultural Heritage valorisation       |   | 652 |
| <br><b>AFTERWORD</b>   |   | 658 |
| SALVATORE BARBA, ANDREA DI FILIPPO   | DICIV - Department of Civil Engineering |     |
| <br><b>SPONSOR</b>   |   | 664 |



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Cultural Heritage documentation, Databases comparison, DJI Mavic mini, Donatello's Pulpit, Bas-reliefs.

### ABSTRACT

The need to achieve a complete three-dimensional database has seen an increasing use of UAV systems in architectural surveying. In particular, special types of drones -mini-UAVs- are increasingly being used for surveys within historical centres or in critical areas. Through the case study of the documentation of Donatello's Pulpit at Cathedral of Santo Stefano in Prato, the paper aims to evaluate the acquisition's reliability by mini-UAV of an architectural element characterized by a high level of detail. The evaluation is carried out comparing the results obtained by drone with those obtained by proven techniques of terrestrial laser scanner and photogrammetric survey.

# TESTING THE RELIABILITY OF MINI-UAV'S ACQUISITION CAMPAIGN ON DETAILED BAS-RELIEFS. THE CASE STUDY OF SCULPTURING ELEMENTS OF DONATELLO'S PULPIT

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main objectives behind an integrated three-dimensional survey is the reliability of the results obtained from the management and processing of the collected data. For this reason, surveyors tend to use digital surveying tools of well-established reliability and geometric-morphological accuracy - TLS<sup>1</sup> - which, however, alone do not provide all the data needed to describe the surveyed object (Carnevali et al. 2018). This problem has led to the increasing use of UAVs<sup>2</sup> in architectural surveying for Cultural Heritage conservation. In particular, among the different remotely piloted instruments used in surveying campaigns, mini - UAVs, characterized by ease of manoeuvrability, low weight and low cost, have enjoyed considerable success in recent years; these characteristics allow mini - UAVs to be used in contexts that are often prohibitive for other drones and within historic centres (Parrinello, Picchio 2019). The versatility that characterizes these tools, however, must reckon with the reliability of the database derived from them, particularly with regard to architectural objects characterized by considerable formal and decorative complexity.

This contribution aims to verify the reliability of 3D databases from mini-UAVs - DJI Mavic Mini - comparing them with those from survey tools considered reliable - TLS and digital cameras-. The point clouds and mesh models on which the comparison is made concern the case study of Donatello's Pulpit of Santo Stefano's Cathedral in Prato.

## 2. CASE STUDY: DONATELLO'S PULPIT

Donatello's Pulpit is a particular architectural element located at the intersection of the West and South elevations of Prato Cathedral at a height of approximately 3 metres above the ground; for this reason, it is the ideal case study to test the validity of using mini-UAVs as an integration to a survey carried out with TLS instruments (Figure 1). Using drones, it is indeed possible to perceive

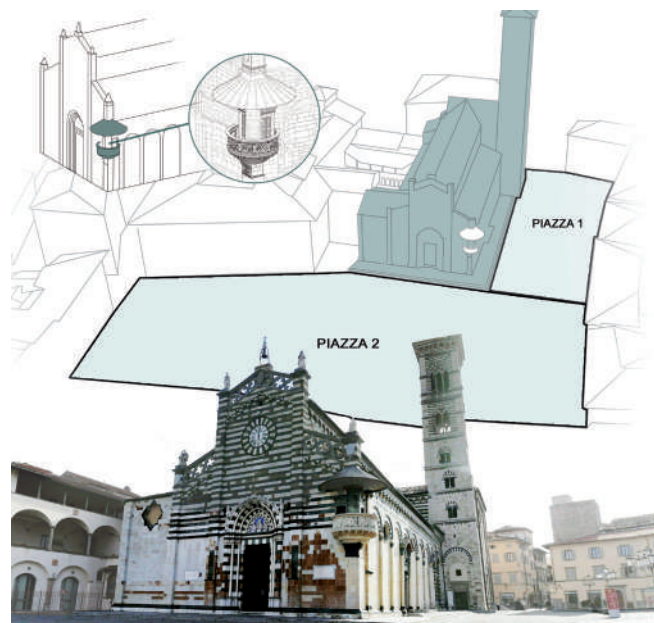


Figure 1. Contextualization of Donatello's Pulpit and Cathedral of Santo Stefano within the urban context of Piazza Duomo in Prato.

the morphological and material complexity of the surveyed object in its entirety (Galasso, La Placa 2020). Donatello's Pulpit (1428 - 1434) is a sculptural masterpiece composed of several elements, each richly decorated. Shelves with volutes and concentric finials, decorated in classical style and with mouldings, support a circular balustrade; this is divided into seven panels alternating with paired pilasters depicting a dance of angels (Guasti 1887)<sup>3</sup>. The balustrade is covered by an umbrella canopy, placed at a height of about 6 metres from the ground. The pulpit visible today on the facade is actually a copy of the original, preserved in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo (Figure 2).

The presence of a rich decorative apparatus that characterises the morphology of the pulpit made it necessary to use photogrammetry techniques to supplement the data obtained from the terrestrial laser scanner in order to study and accurately survey the entire sculptural apparatus. The acquisition of the metric and photogrammetric data for the creation of a three-dimensional database is carried out during a survey campaign in the first week of August 2021. In addition to the laser and photogrammetric instruments on the ground, the documentation activities involve



Figure 2. Donatello's Pulpit and detail of balustrade's decorative apparatus.

the use of two different types of drones, all from the company DJI. (Figure 3) In particular, the use of a mini-UAV allows the detailed photogrammetric acquisition of the object, while the UAV instrumentation provides a general restitution of the entire complex's exterior of Prato Cathedral and the Piazza del Duomo, allowing the pulpit to be placed in the historical and architectural context of the public space in front of it.

The use of drones in the survey stems from the need to integrate not only the decorative apparatus of the pulpit, but also the canopy and church roofs respectively, in order to obtain a single integrated three-dimensional database.

### 3. DOCUMENTATION AND POST-PRODUCTION OF THE DECORATIVE SYSTEM

#### 3.1 RANGE-BASED AND IMAGE-BASED ACQUISITION METHODOLOGY

The detailed acquisition phase of the decorative devices of the external pulpit involves the use of the DJI Mavic Mini<sup>4</sup> drone which, thanks to its light weight and small size, allows the operator to safely approach the object and obtain high-resolution images. The planning of the acquisition phase sees the use of an 's'-shaped flight plan, dividing the balustrade and the decorative rings below into three horizontal bands with a certain margin of overlap between them (Figure 4). This scheme allows the complex decorative apparatus to be acquired from all perspectives, trying to obtain as complete an image database as possible. At each position, a single image is acquired while keeping the inclination of the camera axis perpendicular to the element. Within the same horizontal acquisition band, a certain percentage of overlap between contiguous images is considered, in accordance with the general principles of photogrammetry (Aicardi et al. 2016).

Photogrammetric acquisition also involves the use of a telescopic rod, the 3D - EYE. This, given the possibility of extension up to 9 metres, makes it possible to obtain





Figure 3. The Different types of instruments used by the Dada-Lab Research Laboratory during the acquisition campaign. From left: FARO CAM2 S150 terrestrial laser scanner, 3D-EYE, DJI Mavic 2 and Mavic Mini.

close-up images of the decorative elements (but without the possibility of reaching the highest parts or the umbrella roof). The acquisition phase with this tool again involves the use of an 's' pattern, dividing the decorative complex into 3 horizontal bands (Figure 5). In addition, for each position, the camera takes 4 types of photos: the first keeping the axis of the camera perpendicular to the element, while for the others the entire pole is rotated to the right and then to the left and finally the camera is tilted downwards.

A more general photogrammetric acquisition of the pulpit and roof portions of the cathedral is carried out using the DJI Mavic 2<sup>5</sup> drone. The spiral flight plan allows the acquisition of all necessary data that cannot be detected with laser scanners (Figure 6).

On the other hand, the range-based acquisition is carried out with a terrestrial laser scanner<sup>6</sup>. In particular, nine colour and high-density scans are carried out for the pulpit alone.

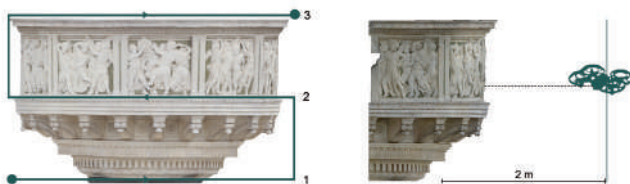


Figure 4. Acquisition scheme of the balustrade with DJI Mavic Mini.

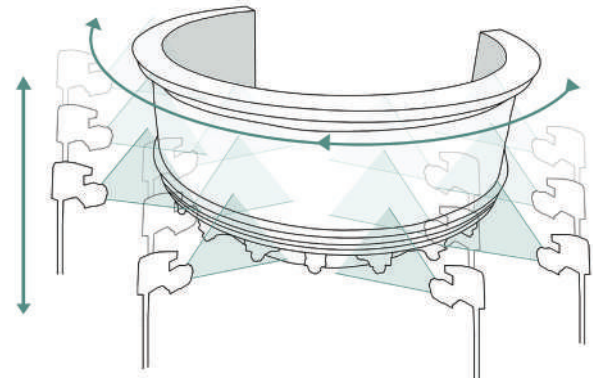


Figure 5. Acquisition scheme of the balustrade with 3D-EYE.

### 3.2 PROCESSING OF PHOTGRAMMETRIC DATA

The data management and processing operations, with the aim of obtaining textured three-dimensional models of Donatello's pulpit, are conducted using Agisoft Metashape software for photogrammetric processes. The software is based on the sequence of several processes in succession. The first step consists in the alignment of the images, guaranteed by the overlapping margin between contiguous shots; then, a sparse point cloud is generated, which defines the volumetry of the surveyed object. From the sparse cloud is created a dense cloud on which the mesh and final texture are elaborated (Figures 7 and 8). For the



Figure 6. Spiral acquisition scheme of the Prato Cathedral complex and square with DJI Mavic 2.

present case study, 70 photographs from the DJI Mavic Mini, 360 photographs from 3D - EYE and 394 images from the DJI Mavic 2 are processed. In particular, the images coming from the DJI Mavic Mini are treated obtaining a model composed of 3,470,574 points and a mesh of 694,144 faces, those coming from 3D - EYE generated a model composed of 29,004,034 points and a mesh of 5,806,545 faces and finally those coming from the Mavic 2 141,432,585 points and 28,286,481 faces. All point clouds are aligned using morphological and architectural homologous points to those derived from the TLS point cloud. The model of the DJI Mavic Mini has an alignment error of 0.005 metres, that of the 3D - EYE of 0.002 metres and finally that of the Mavic 2 of 0.017 metres (Figure 9).

### 3.3 COMPARISON OF MODELS

Due to the decorative complexity that distinguishes Donatello's pulpit, it is decided to focus attention on the low-relief decorated surfaces of the balustrade and the decorative rings, making comparisons between the three-dimensional photogrammetric models obtained from the different instruments and those obtained by drone (Figure 10). In particular, the comparisons carried

out are of different types: a first qualitative comparison within the Agisoft Metashape software, which allows us to understand the decorative reliability of the models generated by the data obtained from the mini-UAV; at the same time, a second comparison is carried out in the Geomagic Design X software, which permits to calculate the average standard deviation of the meshes. Finally, a metric comparison is carried out within the Leica Cyclone software, which allows to understand if the point clouds obtained from mini-UAV are metrically reliable compared to those obtained from the TLS.

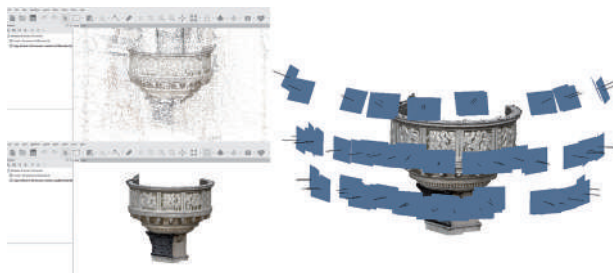


Figure 7. Point cloud processing through Agisoft Metashape software of the data acquired by Mavic Mini. On the left, the processing phase starting from the creation of sparse cloud to the dense cloud on which to build the mesh model. On the right, the acquisition positions of the images.

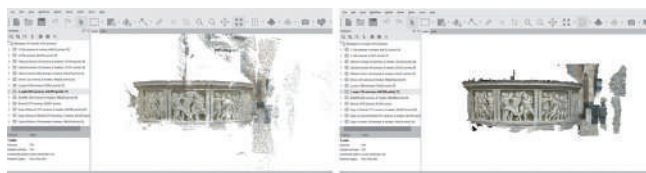


Figure 8. Point cloud processing through Agisoft Metashape software of the data acquired by 3D-EYE. Above, data processing from the sparse cloud to dense one; below, the final textured model.

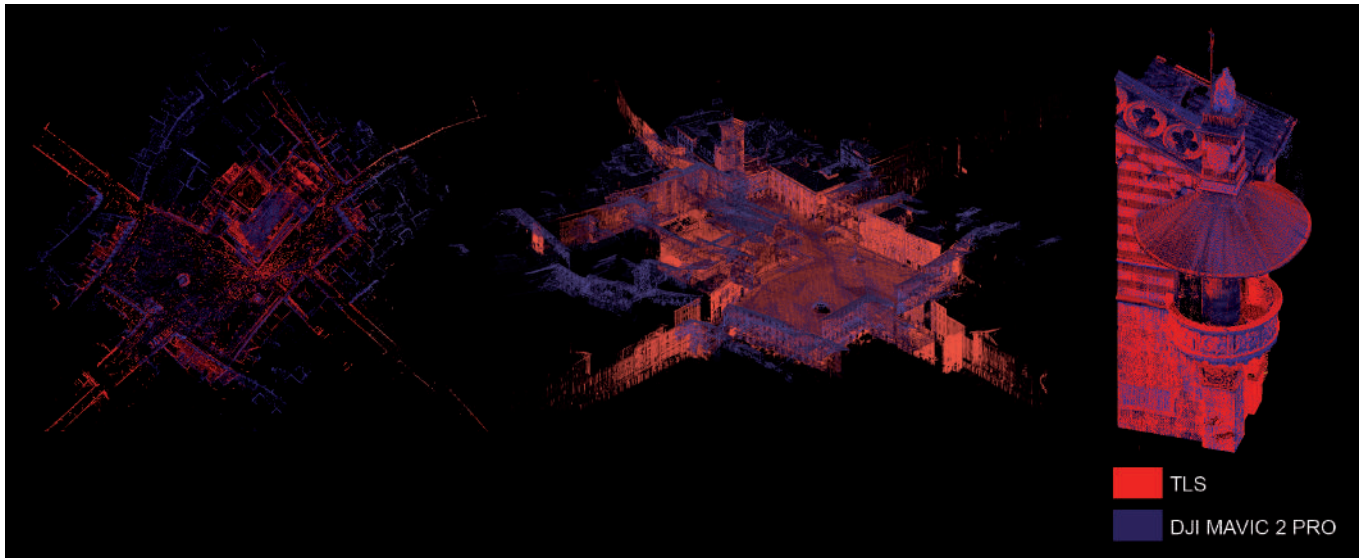


Figure 9. Overlay of point clouds generated from data acquired by FARO CAM2 S150 terrestrial laser scanner (red) and DJI Mavic 2 UAV (blue).

### 3.3.1 VISUAL COMPARISON: 3D - EYE VERSUS DJI MAVIC MINI

A first visual and qualitative comparison is made by comparing the mesh model obtained from the photos taken by 3D - EYE and that obtained from the data acquired by the DJI Mavic Mini. The comparison permits considerations to be made on the level of detail of the mouldings detected. In particular, the decorative elements are clearer and more readable in their shapes in the model obtained from the 3D - EYE than that obtained from the mini drone. However, the floral decorations between the scrolling shelves of the mesh model obtained from 3D - EYE reveal some problems - e.g., lack of data - (Figure 11). The difference in accuracy is due to the fact that with the telescopic pole it is possible to observe the decorative details more closely; in fact, the drone acquisitions are taken from a more distant position, in order to avoid excessive proximity between the mini-UAV and the decorative apparatus of the pulpit. However, the chosen distance ensures that a

good level of GSD<sup>7</sup> is maintained (Draeyer, Strecha 2014). Furthermore, the final image of the models depends on the number of polygons that compose the mesh: 5,806,545 faces of the 3D model - EYE versus 694,144 faces of the drone model. A high number of polygon faces corresponds to a greater possibility of obtaining models with a high degree of detail.

A second type of comparison is carried out within Geomagic Design X software. In this case, the two mesh models are aligned by points and then compared using the Mesh Deviation tool, which permits analysis of how far the surfaces deviate by setting different ranges of tolerance values.

The deviation study is done on visual information interpreted by a colorimetric scale where adhesion areas are in green, out-of-plane deformations in red and inward displacements in blue (Figure 12). The analysis shows good congruence between the models in the capital portion, while areas of inaccuracy are concentrated within the concentric volutes and corbels, with a maximum error between 5 mm and 15 mm.



Figure 10. Composition obtained by merging three-dimensional databases coming from different instruments.

### 3.3.2 METRIC COMPARISON: TLS VERSUS DJI MAVIC MINI

In addition to the visual comparison, a metric one is made by comparing point clouds obtained from ground-based laser scanners and DJI Mavic Mini.

The analysis of the deviation between the two clouds is conducted with the Leica Cyclone 9 software.

In particular, the point cloud of the mini-UAV is aligned considering the one obtained from the TLS as a reference. Then a section plane is inserted into it; in the frontal view, it is possible to calculate the distance between the two clouds at different points and thus understand how reliable the cloud from the data obtained with UAV systems is. In general, the analysis shows a good congruence between point

clouds; the verification allows us to assess the deviation by measuring the distance between them by defining two points and using the measuring instrument.

It is verified that the error tends to increase close to architectural elements characterised by more complex shapes, where the drone cloud discretizes the information more. The error also increases near the decorative rings of the pulpit, where a loss of geometry is visible. In addition, the cloud obtained by drone in these areas generates "swipes" of points, creating noise (Figure 13).

The inconsistency error interval is instead due to a previous error of cloud drone's reference to that coming from TLS.

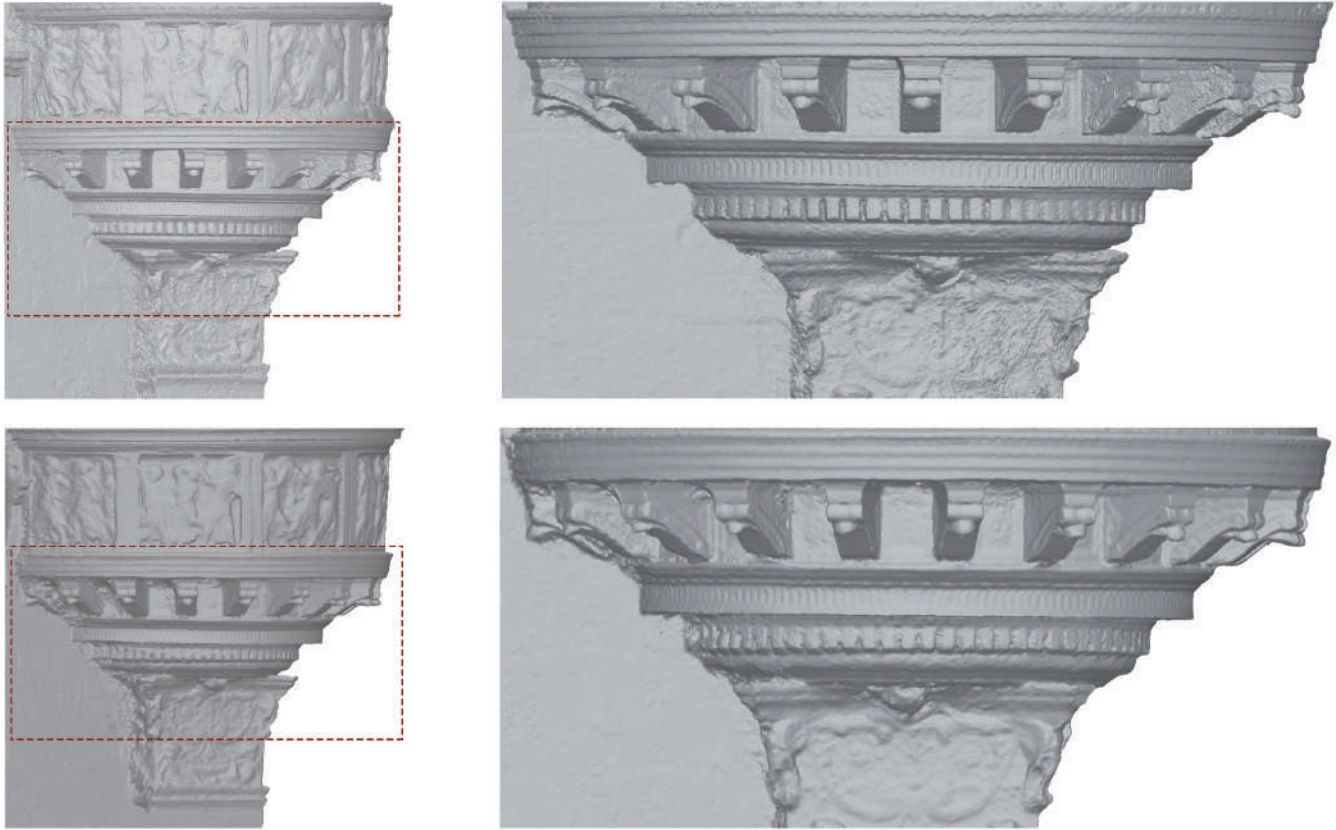


Figure 11 . Visual comparison between photogrammetric models. Above, the model obtained from Metashape software by processing data obtained from 3D-EYE. Below, the model from Mavic Mini.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The article analyses the reliability of the use of mini-UAVs in the context of an integrated investigation aimed at the knowledge and documentation of an architectural element characterised by a complex decorative apparatus.

The results obtained highlight two fundamental aspects of the use of mini-UAVs in the documentation of Cultural Heritage. Firstly, the work carried out on the case study demonstrates how the use of

the drone within a survey allows us to obtain a complete database focusing on the decorative and plastic aspects, especially if positioned at heights where ground-based instrumentation alone (range and image-based) cannot be effective. On the other hand, the work emphasises the potential of using mini-UAVs in architectural surveys, especially in areas where flight regulations are restrictive. The visual comparison, but especially the metric one, highlights the qualities of these drones in terms of reliability and accuracy of measurements.



Figure 12. The model deviation coming from data acquired with 3D-EYE compared with that from DJI Mavic Mini acquired data. The tolerance value is set at 5 mm on a maximum deviation of 30 mm. It can be observed that the surfaces are fitted in the lower part, while the deviation values increase in the upper one.

Future research developments see the possibility of implementing acquisition methods with these particular instruments at altitude, in order to obtain final results that better match the goals set by the documentation.

### CREDITS

The research project on Donatello's pulpit in the Cathedral of Santo Stefano in Prato, scientific responsible Prof. Francesca Picchio, has been developed within the research laboratory DAda-Lab of the University of Pavia (responsible Prof. Sandro Parrinello) within a joint activity with the Department of Architecture – DIDA - of the University of Florence, and the Museo dell' Opera del Duomo of Prato.

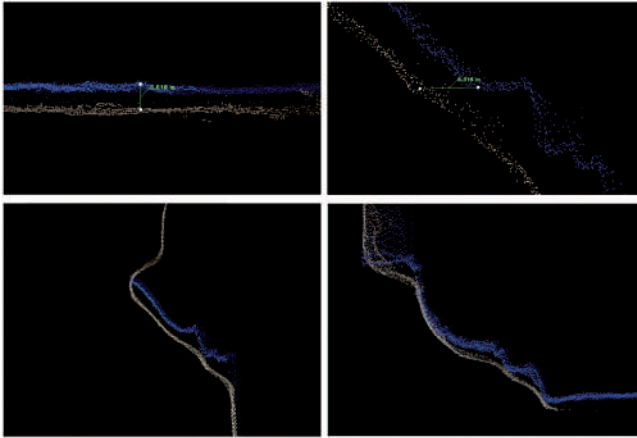


Figure 13. Above, metric comparison between point clouds obtained from TLS and Mavic Mini. Below, geometric deviation of the point cloud obtained by drone to that obtained by terrestrial laser scanner. The discretization of information obtained from drone is relevant.

## NOTES

1 Terrestrial Laser Scanner.

2 Unmanned Aerial Vehicle.

3 For an in-depth reading on the historical and constructive aspects of Donatello's pulpit, see Bonsanti, Giorgio (2000). *Il pulpito di Donatello*. In *Donatello restaurato. I marmi del pulpito di Prato*, pp. 11-30. Pistoia: maschietto&musolino, 2000.

4 The main features of the DJI Mavic Mini: weight less than 249 grams, open dimensions with propellers 245×289×55 mm, upward speed 1.5 m/s - 4 m/s, downward speed 3 m/s, flight time 31 minutes, 20 MP camera, 35 mm lens, f/2.8 aperture, shutter speed 4 - 1/8000 s (for additional information see <https://www.dji.com/it/mavic-mini/specs>).

5 The main features of the DJI Mavic 2: weight 907 grams, open dimensions with propellers 322×242×84 mm, upward speed 4 m/s - 5 m/s, downward speed 1 m/s - 3 m/s, flight time 30 minutes, 12 MP camera, 35 mm lens, aperture f/2.8-f/11, shutter speed 8 - 1/8000 s (for additional information see <https://www.dji.com/it/mavic-2/info>).

6 The range-based acquisition is carried out using a FARO CAM2 FOCUS S150 terrestrial laser scanner. The point clouds obtained from this instrumentation are aligned and recorded through the use of SCENE software, produced by the same manufacturer of the laser scanner. In particular, the maximum referencing error obtained in the registration phase of the total cloud is 0.0042 metres.

7 Ground Sample Distance.

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***TESTING THE RELIABILITY OF MINI-UAVS ACQUISITION CAMPAIGN ON DETAILED BAS-RELIEFS. THE CASE STUDY OF SCULPTURING ELEMENTS OF DONATELLO'S PULPIT***

L'architetto CHIARA RIVELLINO è l'autrice dei paragrafi:

- ***2 CASE STUDY: DONATELLO'S PULPIT***
- ***3 DOCUMENTATION AND POST-PRODUCTION OF THE DECORATIVE SYSTEM***
- ***3.2 PROCESSING OF PHOTOGRAMMETRIC DATA***
- ***3.3 COMPARISON OF MODELS***

il Dottore di Ricerca MARCO RICCIARINI è l'autore dei paragrafi:

- ***1. INTRODUCTION***
- ***3 DOCUMENTATION AND POST-PRODUCTION OF THE DECORATIVE SYSTEM***
- ***3.1 RANGE-BASED AND IMAGE-BASED ACQUISITION METHODOLOGY***
- ***3.3.1 VISUAL COMPARISON: 3D - EYE VERSUS DJI MAVIC MINI***
- ***3.3.2 METRIC COMPARISON: TLS VERSUS DJI MAVIC MINI***
- ***4. CONCLUSIONS***

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Firenze, 21 giugno 2023

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