

From Treatises to Late Baroque Architecture in Val di Noto: Survey and Geometric Analysis of Sinusoidal Façades

Abstract

Val di Noto is an area geographically corresponding to southeastern Sicily and it is arranged as an integrated context. Within the Baroque in Sicily, it is necessary to remember the earthquake of 1693 which ravaged the area across, destroying lots of populated centers. After the earthquake, a lot of urban centers were rebuilt transforming the area around Val di Noto into a big building site. The research develops a critical methodological investigation of the works of the period concerning church architecture with sinusoidal facades. The instrumental survey is particularly suitable to draw comparisons with the treatises known at the time. The present study refers to the ichnographies of Mazza collection by Rosario Gagliardi, prominent figure of the Sicilian Baroque. The adopted methodology highlighted analogies and formal geometric differences between the model represented by Gagliardi's ichnographies and the churches previously identified. The chapter provides a useful instrument for the research of a technical, scientific and geometric point of view.

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Introduction And Research Objectives

The territory of Val di Noto stands as a connective tissue which links large and inextricable architecture with strong material, structural and geometric connotations. In particular, this work¹ deals with the religious buildings which are a testimony of how models of a larger cultural context were assimilated in the local one. In this case, when there are no documentary historical records, they can be read and decoded like a written text, real documents made of stone on which it is possible to investigate backwards: from the built-up areas to the geometric references, meant as cultural supports able to transmit building practices.

The applied methodology was structured as an open system of data acquisition about the investigated object; the selected works, whose artists are often unknown, stimulates through the recognition of proportion similarities and geometrical measures, an interdisciplinary debate which can suggest structured hypotheses starting from the stylistic and formal influences.

The research develops a critical approach based on the extrapolation of the underlying geometry in order to provide hypotheses for the contaminations and influences in the planning of this area in south-eastern Sicily after the catastrophic 1693 earthquake, which destroyed at least seventy cities, from Catania to Noto.

The fatal event actually became a great opportunity of reconstruction: a lot of urban centers were rebuilt, sometimes in areas different from the original ones, transforming Val di Noto in a big building site. The earthquake was so violent that it created a seamless transition in the history of those places, clearly visible in the cityscape where, in most cases, a great deal of the existing architectural heritage disappeared. The language of architecture of this large urban environment, after the great operation of intervention in the territory, represents the culmination and final flowering of Baroque art in Europe (according to UNESCO criteria for the selection of eight cities of this area for the World Heritage List)² whose formal expressiveness according to the new stylistic canons determined a caesura with the architecture of the previous century. "Pyramidal conformations, curvilinear sections with strong central convexity and with linking concave dihedrals, free columns, volutes among decreasing levels represented, as it is known, revolutionary linguistic and formal parameters at that time in Sicily" (Sutera, 2013, p. 395). Actually, such architectural fervor assumed a *modus facendi* which became popular in a large area and which soon invested the surroundings, involving smaller towns as well (Avola, Buccheri, Ferla, Sortino, Melilli, Buscemi and others) (Valenti & Paternò, 2018).