



THE ARAB-NORMAN CIVIL ARCHITECTURE IN PALERMO: ENHANCEMENT STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This contribution aims to deepen the knowledge of a historical and artistic heritage of the city of Palermo, i.e. the Arab-Norman civil architecture, yet not adequately utilized, despite its importance as a 'World Heritage Site'.

Within the three royal parks (the Old, the New and the Genoardo), the Norman kings built the palaces of Mareolce, Zisa, Cuba and Scibene, always accompanied by water, both as a lake or as a fishpond, whose purpose was primarily hedonistic as well as productive.

The transmission of the architectural heritage to the future presupposes its promotion through the creation of an appropriate strategy helping to spread its knowledge and enjoyment. For example, Sicily has few cases of interactivity, that is virtual reality applied to the architectural heritage through multimedia resources in order to "modernize" the cultural offer and the communication with all targets of audience. In many cases indeed, a monument is soon forgotten when it is restored but not integrated into the municipal system. A new interpretation is therefore proposed, based on the relief together with the story of the restorations and the understanding of the building within its urban context, which is compromised by an idea of protection limited only to the emergency.

Keywords: Arab-Norman civil architecture, World Heritage.

1. Introduction

The study of the Arab-Norman architecture in all its forms is the research area of the working group coordinated by Professor Renata Prescia within the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Palermo. For some years, indeed, attention was paid to the Sicilian factories of the twelfth century through the research carried out in degree thesis and during conferences and study days. The project aims at a multidisciplinary cataloging of historical Arab-Norman evidences, starting from an historical-critical analysis performed on accurate surveys, with high attention to the history of the restorations integrated with the identification of authentic materic-constructive values. The aim is therefore to study such architectures no longer as a mere work of art, isolated and out of context, but rebuilding the relations between the different skills required for their fuller understanding, also with reference to the original urban surrounding (in the preserved residuals) and to the current one.

The Arab-Norman architecture can be classified into two categories: the religious one and the civil one. In particular, this paper aims to be a census of the civil architecture of public initiative in Palermo, on the basis of a renewed 'awareness' of its current conditions by the community, in order to develop a concrete proposal of multidisciplinary archiving for a "networking" of the factories. This analysis is essential in order to ensure a real enhancement through targeted communication strategies using means of knowledge able to attract the greatest possible number of users.

2. The census of the factories

Among the civil achievements of the Norman age, the Royal Park extended in the Plain of Palermo and the buildings built in it, the so-called *sollazzi*, are among the most complex and original creations of civil art and architecture. Built as places of rest and stop in the hunting grounds, they were characterized by fishponds and tanks while their typological peculiarity consisted in the presence of

*ivan*¹ inside the main building. The development of the Royal Park is divided into three periods from which three different names are derived: the Old Park, the New Park and the Genoardo Park.

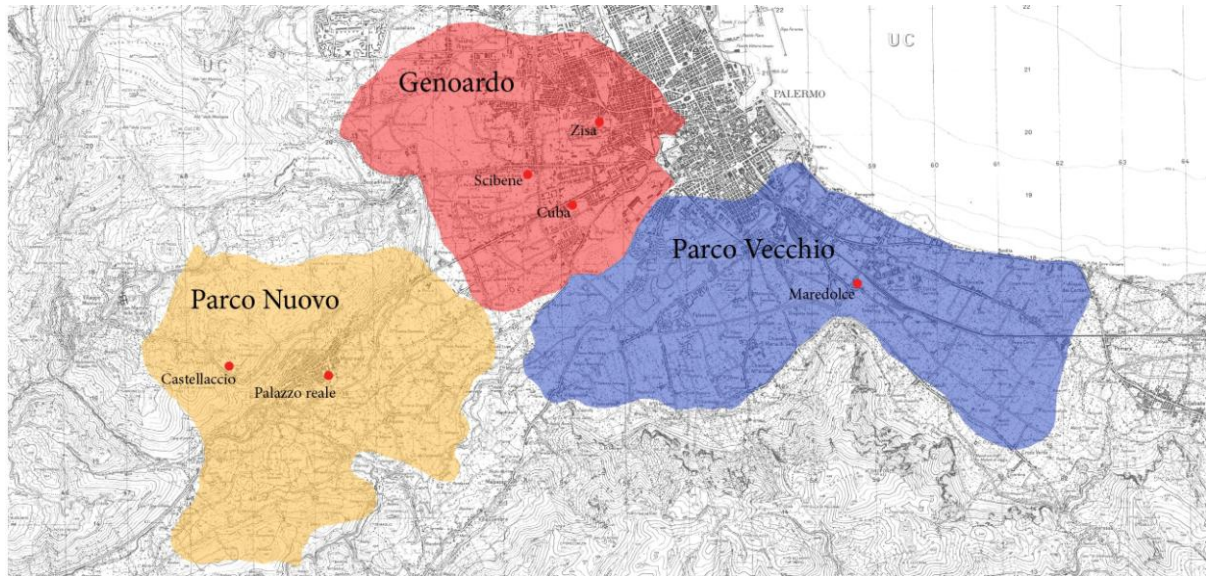


Fig.1: IGM cartographic excerpt , identification of the royal parks.

- **Old Park:** existing prior to the coming of the Normans, it is the first one among the Norman suburban parks in Palermo. It stretched from mount Grifone to the north, up to the city walls including the river Oreto. It housed the palace of **Maredolce**, whose construction supposedly dates back to around 1015, probably wanted by the Kalbid emir Gia'Far (997-1019), and now incorporated within the suburb of Brancaccio.

The restoration work recently carried out by Palermo Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and Environment, which only covered the building and part of the edge of the ancient fishpond², was an extraordinary experience of conservation and development performed through participation.



Fig.2: View of the Castle of Maredolce and the lake basin.

¹ The term *ivan* indicates a room closed on three sides by walls, usually covered with a barrel vault, and entirely open on the fourth side. In Arab-Norman *sollazzi* the *iwans* had a fountain.

² Scognamiglio M., Corselli D'Ondes G. 2000-2005 - Scognamiglio 2010-2011

In effect, the Parterre project (sponsored by the Department of Architecture in Palermo in partnership with other cultural and social components) promoted activities of intervention by residents, aiming at the enhancement of the building of Maredolce through its use and knowledge³.

The general plan for Maredolce complex is not finished to date. Expropriation measures are still being performed on buildings overlooking the edges of the fishpond, aiming at restoring the entire basin according to the plan drawn up by Palermo Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and Environment.

The basis of the proposal, certainly praiseworthy in its intent, although not fully acceptable in its final choices, is a significant attention to the close relationship between the constituent elements of the complex and the landscape, as required by the culture of Arab gardens before and Norman Royal Parks later. The presence of the garden, survivor of the massive urbanization in which the area incurred, turns out to be, in fact, something of inestimable value. The Maredolce complex therefore represents a valuable historical and environmental survival, direct testimony of the so-called "Gardens of Paradise", because of the harmony between vegetation, water and architecture.

Along with this, the single system is created by the still existing relationship between the same vegetation and the other items originally ascribed to the *sollazzo* (the arches of St. Cyrus, the church and the caves of the Giants), now separated by the Palermo-Catania motorway which has severed the former unity of the complex.

Action is, however, still required to improve accessibility, such as the pedestrianization of the area in front of the Castle and the creation of a square providing a direct view of the Castle, now hidden by precarious and abusive buildings.



Fig.3: The square in front of the Palace and Giafar street.



Fig.4: The palace of Maredolce today.

- **New Park**: built as an extension of the Old Park in a wooded area, it stretched from porta Mazzara following the trail of a dirt road, today called Via Brasa, until reaching porta del Giglio, in Altofonte, and then continuing towards the Fig valley⁴. According to the descriptions given by historians, given the presence of many wild species the park was used as a hunting reserve.

- **Genoardo Park**: latest landscaping creation, it stretched between the city walls and the mountains beyond. Made during the reign of the two Williams, it represented the point of contact between the urban gardens and the surrounding countryside. The *sollazzos* of **Scibene**, **Zisa** and **Cuba** were built inside it in the twelfth century.

The palace of **Scibene** was built as a summer *sollazzo* in an earlier period than the construction of the Zisa⁵. The plant consisted of a fishpond, the Chapel, and a pavilion on several levels in which a cross-shaped room with *iwān* served as the center⁶.

³ R. Prescia, D. Trapani, The place of Maredolce. A paradise in Brancaccio. Strategies to qualify the industrial area of Palermo, in "Examples of architecture", on line magazine, September 2012; and R. Prescia, The Norman "sollazzo" on the search for a new paradise, i, a. XXIV, n. 3, lug-set. 2012, pp. 18-22.

⁴ Buda A., The castle of Maredolce between preservation and enhancement, supervisor: Prof. R. Prescia; University of Palermo, Faculty of Architecture, A.A. 2011-2012.

⁵ Spatrisano G., *Zisa and Scibene of Palermo*, Palermo 1982, p. 63.

⁶ The study of the Scibene has been addressed in the Laboratory of restoration of monuments maintained by Prof. R. Prescia. The contributions graphs below were made by studentes Guarnuto, Pirrera and Tarsia.

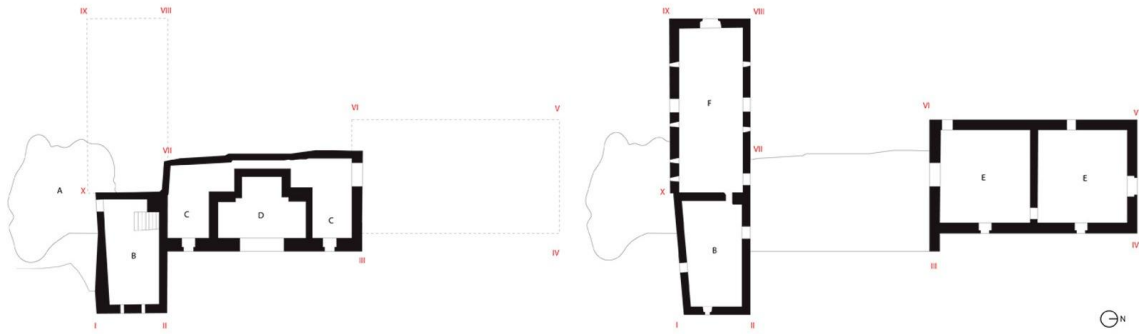


Fig.5: The Palace of Scibene. Plan of level I and II.

Currently incorporated within the Fondo de Caro, it is abandoned and in a state of advanced decay. The system of the front basin and the garden is, in fact, made unrecognizable by private buildings, while the structures of the upper floor, iwan and chapel, are in conditions of severe deprivation.



Fig.6-7: Aerial view and indication of the palace of Scibene.

The last restoration work on the building date back to the first half of the twentieth century, designed by Francesco Valenti in 1929, and Mario Giotto in 1938. In the first case, the interventions involved the structural consolidation of an opening of the west façade and of the roof of the church with a single nave. In addition, following the example of Patricolo in St. Mary of the Admiral, Valenti predicted the inclusion of a toothed belt, made of more or less prominent blocks, indicating the ancient presence of the tower. The intervention of Giotto was merely an integration, made with bricks, of gaps in the masonry of the south façade of the church. Since then, the lack of attention from the community and of a conservation planning has resulted in the state of extreme deterioration the complex faces today.

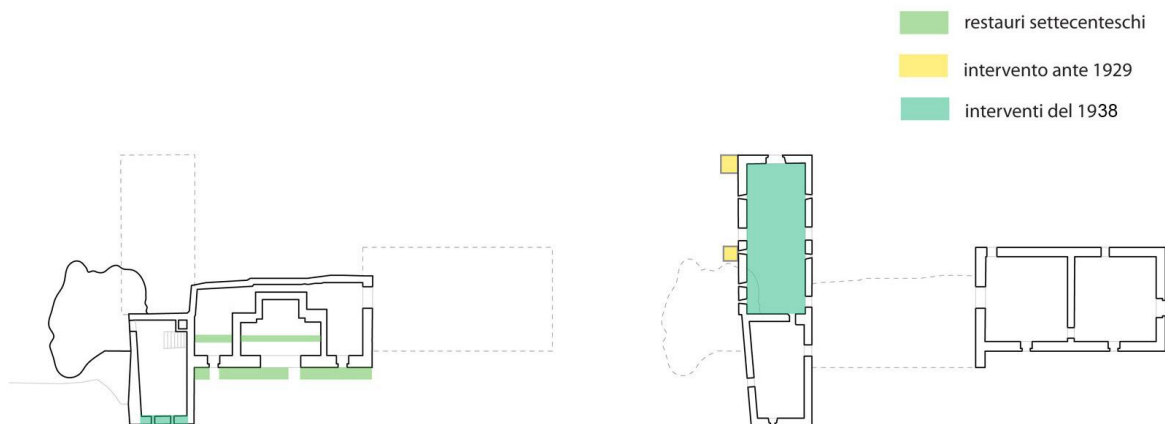


Fig.8: The palace of Scibene. Indication of restorative interventions.

The enhancement of this factory practicable from its recognition requires early action that should contain a program of interventions in three phases: prior acquisition of the palace to State ownership, subsequent restorative intervention and, finally, insertion into a tourist route allowing an easier use of the complex.

The palace of Scibene is currently part of the itinerary *Royal Art of Norman Age: The sollazzi and the royal park*, proposed in the publication *Sicilian-Norman Art* edited by the Department of Architecture of the University of Palermo in 2004⁷.

Built by William I in 1165 and completed at the time of William II probably between 1175 and 1180, the palace of **Zisa** stood near an aqueduct and a spa facility dating back to Roman times. The complex was formed by a garden and a building on three levels with a rectangular plan and two towers at the center of the smaller sides. The rooms are arranged around the central hall with iwan, whose fountain was connected to the outside fishpond through a raceway.

Used between the fourteenth and fifteenth century as a fortified farm house, it was transformed into a manor in 1635 by the family de Sandoval, undergoing numerous changes. In 1951 it was expropriated and handed over to the Regional Demanio.



Fig.9 The palace of Zisa and the park.



Fig.10: The iwan

Following the collapse of the North Wing⁸, which took place on October 12, 1971, the restoration works of the palace were initiated, and completed in 1991. What lacked, however, were subsequent recovery operations putting the building in relation with its context and especially with the elements that made up the complex of the Norman *sollazzo* (the chapel of the Holy Trinity at Zisa, the fishpond, the *gebbia*). The different properties, indeed, have not made possible a real dialogue between the parties, effectively depriving tourists of the possibility of using, and therefore fully understanding, the entire system of *sollazzo*. It is therefore desirable to design a real link between the palace and the garden, for example, through one of the *dammusi* facing the palace: and a link, according to an idea of restoration connecting modern monuments and ancient ones, with the "Cultural cantieri at Zisa", today at the center of the cultural events in the city of Palermo, thanks to the Museum for the exhibition of works especially created by young artists, called ZAC (Zisa Contemporary Art) and inaugurated last December. The "Cantieri" were set up in the Nineties in the halls of the twentieth-century Ducrot factory, south-west of the palace.

⁷ AA.VV., *Sicilian-Norman Art*, Palermo: Kalòs, 2004.

⁸ STAACKE U., *Un palazzo normanno a Palermo: La Zisa*, Palermo: Città di Palermo, Assessorato beni culturali, 1991.



Fig.11 Aerial view.

The *sollazzo* of **Cuba**, finally completed in 1180 by William II, consisted of a large pavilion at one level, surrounded by a fishpond. The small Cuba (also called Cubula), located in what remains of the garden of Villa Napoli, and the Tower Alfaina, also known as Cuba Soprana, whose Norman remains are now incorporated in the Villa, were part of the complex too. Even in the case of Cuba, as for the complex of Mareddolce, the importance of the context assumes a fundamental role.

The site has been affected by many changes due to the different intended uses that have followed one another over the centuries:



Fig.12. Aerial view.



Fig.13 The Cuba.

The building was, in fact, used as an isolation hospital (1575) and barracks (1860) before being reacquired by Palermo Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and Environment (1921), which has taken care of its several restorations. It's now time for a major redevelopment of the buildings erected on the edges of the original fishpond, which don't allow the use of the monument in relation to its immediate context, and the inclusion of the monument, as already proposed for the Zisa, in a journey including the adjacent monuments of the Norman church of Victory and the Royal House of Fools⁹.

3. The Unesco application

The "Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" was enacted in Paris on November 16, 1972, obliging the participating States (Article 4 of the Convention) to ensure the

⁹ Sgrò R. *La difesa della cultura : dalla Cuba alla Real Casa dei Matti alla Caserma della Vittoria: un percorso storico per il recupero urbano*, relatore: Prof. M.T. Marsala, co-relatore Prof. R. Prescia; Università degli Studi di Palermo, Facoltà di Architettura, A.A. 2008-2009

identification, protection, conservation, development and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage situated in the territory.

For this purpose, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), established in 2002 that the inclusion of new sites on the World Heritage List was necessarily conditional to the establishment of a "World Heritage Committee". On the basis of the data provided by each participating State, it was commissioned to design, update and spread a "World Heritage List" (WHL), a listing of the world heritage assets considered to be of outstanding universal value. Subsequently, the Committee had the task of drawing up a list of endangered monuments, indicating the goods which needed protective interventions and maintenance works and for which a Dossier of application and a Management Plan were required.

In the preparation of the Management Plan for "Arab-Norman Palermo and the cathedrals of Cefalù and Monreale" (2012) recently presented by the Regional Department of Cultural Heritage and Environment, the instructions developed by the National Commission UNESCO World Heritage Sites and by Local Tourism Systems of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture were taken into consideration.

The knowledge of a good is the first level of protection: to know is to document and its documentation is an essential support for the protection of cultural heritage.

Therefore, the application of Arab-Norman architecture to UNESCO is undoubtedly an important tool for increasing its knowledge, ensuring its preservation, enhancing tourism and enriching the process of management of proposed monuments within the route winding between Palermo, Monreale and Cefalù.

The monuments of Arab-Norman architecture, object of the Management Plan, are twenty three but only eleven were selected for the establishment of the Arab-Norman itinerary, as the only ones fully retaining artistic and architectural components and showing good conditions, enjoying appropriate protection measures.

The choice then fell on the Royal Palace, the Palatine Chapel and the treasure guarded inside it, the Church of St. John of the Hermits, the Church of St. Mary of the Admiral, the Church of San Cataldo, the Cathedral, the Palazzo della Zisa with the adjacent chapel, the Cuba, the Bridge of the Admiral, the Duomo of Cefalù and Monreale and their outbuildings cloisters. These monuments selected according to the criteria established by UNESCO, so because of their conditions of integrity, authenticity and good preservation, marked the route nominated for World Heritage Site.

4. Conclusions.

The monuments excluded from the Management Plan, although presenting features of authenticity typical of Arab-Norman architecture, suffer from both problems of preservation and, consequently, of fruition at the same time, as we have shown above.

We believe that their "sponsorship" through the inclusion in bibliographic and historiographical routes, of which this paper is intended to be a small part, and in virtual tours, through the creation of multimedia tools dedicated to them, can serve to urge the required restorative interventions.

We also believe that thinking of fruition processes to exalt their relations with other evidences of modernity, rather than freezing them in their compromised or lost native configurations, putting them back into current socio-economic dynamics, can serve more to their conservation through the recognition by the community in a more involved use of the 'cultural heritage' as <<that complex of man's works in which a community recognizes its particular and specific values and with which it identifies>> (Krakow Card 2000).

The need to document through new distribution channels <<cognitive information useful for the management, enhancement and use>>¹⁰ of the monuments is essential to optimize the cultural offer and communication with all audiences. Despite the gradual spread of information technology¹¹, the application to cultural heritage in Sicily is uncommon. In fact, the Arab-Norman heritage doesn't have a support based on devices of augmented reality or geotagging.

Currently, on its website, the Superintendence to Cultural Heritage and Environment provides video describing the history of the factory and of the restorations of the Cuba and the Royal Palace, without giving the user a chance to interact with information. The Sicilian Regional Assembly (ARS) has created a virtual tour of the Royal Palace, where it's possible to explore environments without,

¹⁰ Fiorani D., Restoration and technologies in architecture, Roma: Carocci publisher, 2009, p.98.

¹¹ One of the first cases of computerized documentation, made during the restoration work on Michelangelo paintings in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, dates back to 1986. Since then, the multimedia techniques have been used both as a support to the restoration site (through the use of GIS) and with tourist and educational purposes as in the case of the main museums.

however, any historical support. Finally, the Department of Cultural Heritage and Sicilian identity, Sicily UNESCO Sicily heritage foundation, has produced a CD Rom where it's possible to find information about the application of the Arab-Norman route and charts on its monuments. These, however, while providing data on the history and indicating a territorial scope of reference of the factories, are lacking in the communication of materic-constructive values, use and membership.

Object of this paper is therefore proposing a new type of archiving of monuments, starting from the setting provided by the cataloging of the factories for the Management Plan of the Arab-Norman route, in order to put the focus on cultural values unfamiliar to the users of the service.

The typical chart presented provides an "identity card" of the *sollazzo* of Maredolce accompanied by graphics and thematic maps¹². In addition to the "standard" information such as the location of the complex, legal data or the description of the plant, special attention is paid to the history and, in particular, the history of the restorations, that historical process letting us understand the transformations of the factory such as additions, alterations or interpolations through a critical formation of a history of architecture aimed at restoration and enhancement.

Fig.14: Example of a typical chart

¹²The chart has been drawn on the basis of the processing carried out by the architect Alessia Buda.

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