

CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL

# El Modernismo en el Arco Mediterráneo

Arquitectura, Arte, Cultura y Sociedad

**CIMA**2016



Universidad  
Politécnica  
de Cartagena





# CIMAM 2016

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# LAS OBRAS EN HIERRO EN LAS VILLAS Y EN LOS JARDINES DE LA PALERMO LIBERTY

THE IRON WORKS IN THE VILLAS AND GARDENS OF PALERMO'S LIBERTY

Tiziana Firrone, Carmelo Bustinto

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## RESUMEN

*El hierro, material emblema de la innovación tecnológica del XIX siglo, ayuda a enriquecer la escena urbana suave de Palermo, ofreciendo su gran ductilidad material para la construcción de estructuras en equipamiento de casas, jardines públicos y privados. La entrega es el resultado de uno estudio conducido en el Departamento de Arquitectura de la Escuela Politécnica de la Universidad de Palermo, vuelto a identificar, censar y catalogar las obras de arquitectura en hierro hechas en Palermo entre los siglos, con una atención especial a los pabellones, invernaderos, miradores, jardines de invierno, todavía presentes en las áreas verdes de la trama urbana de Palermo; esquinas de paraíso que preservan el ambiente de la época que los han visto nacer y sigue siendo un buen ojo puede captar a dejarse llevar, aunque sea por unos minutos, para el periodo extraordinario que vio Palermo una de las ciudades más representativas de la Belle Époque.*

*Palabras clave: hierro, Liberty, Palermo, decoración urbana*

## ABSTRACT

*Iron, emblematic material of era's technological innovation, enriches the gentle urban scene of Palermo Liberty, offering its large ductility even for the construction of structures adorning villas and public or private gardens. The contribution is the result of a study carried out at the Department of Architecture of the Polytechnic School of the University of Palermo, aimed at identifying, reviewing and cataloging the works of iron architecture made in Palermo at the turn of the century, with particular reference to pavilions, greenhouses, gazebos, winter gardens, still present in the green areas of Palermo's urban fabric; heavenly corners that preserve the atmosphere of the time they were born, carrying away, even for a few minutes, to the extraordinary period that saw Palermo one of the most representative cities of the Belle Époque.*

*Keywords: Iron, Liberty, Palermo, urban furniture*

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

**T**he city of Palermo owes to the activity of several engineers and architects, mostly students of architect Ernesto Basile, the early century elegant middle-class look, still clearly recognizable in the high executive and formal quality of art nouveau architectures and works, representing the most interesting cases of widespread diffusion of modernist culture in Sicily.

A new style not just in its soft and fluctuating decoration, but also in its peculiarity to show up a new appearance without erasing historical and local matrices. The magnificent synthesis of harmony and beauty of the cele-

brated era of Liberty is also expressed in the wise use of modern materials of the era, iron, glass, concrete, combined with the traditional ones, stucco, ceramic, stone, alabaster. Iron, emblematic material of era's technological innovation, enriches the gentle urban scene of Palermo Liberty, offering its large ductility even for the construction of structures adorning villas and public or private gardens, devised as independent entities or part of larger complexes (like parks or estates), designed to meet the owner's aesthetic and philosophical issues (sometimes also the utilitarian ones) or just with a decorative function.



Figures 1-2. The greenhouse of the Botanical Garden built in place of the "Maria Carolina Stove". Photo C. Bustinto.



Figures 3-4. Details of the greenhouse of the Botanical Garden. Photo C. Bustinto.

The theme of small metal construction belongs to the picturesque and romantic stream which protracts for the entire 1800 until its natural landing in the Liberty style. But the sophistication of the language expressed by these slender structures is closely linked to the knowledge of the peculiarities of new materials and technologies to these applied. The characteristics of the iron lay the basis for new production systems linked to modularity and the prefabrication that are the result of industrial development in this area and essential feature of greenhouses, verandas, kiosks, gazebos, canopies.

### 1. THE GREENHOUSES<sup>2</sup>

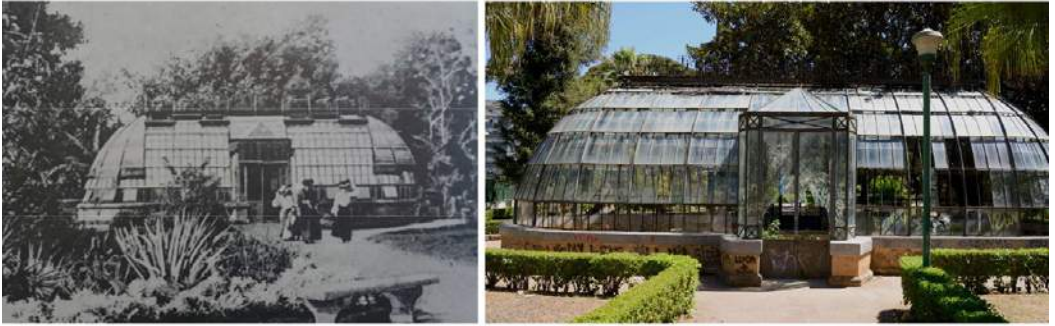
The passion for collecting exotic plants rises in England in consequence of the intensification of travels and at scientific explorations during the 19th century<sup>3</sup>. Botanical collecting turns soon into a fashion and spreads in Europe, along with the construction of greenhouses made of iron and glass, necessary to ensure the acclimation of plants. England were already in the forefront in this area thanks to the Anderson's patent (1808) on heated stoves and to the publication of Loudon's Treaty on greenhouses (1818).

Palermo also feel the effects of this trend, mainly due to favorable climate to the mainte-

nance of the exotic species that embellish public and private villas. So the garden gets a lead role in the urban scene of 19th century city.

The "Maria Carolina stove", (about 1820), marks the beginning of the season of the first iron architecture in Sicily. This is a greenhouse, probably built in England and originally destined to the Royal Garden of Caserta. The structure had an iron skeleton and wooden shutters and developed on a rectangular plan, with a long side 18 Sicilian canne (about 36 metres). The danger of vandalism by the revolutionaries, rebelled against the sovereigns in 1820, led the Queen Maria Carolina to transfer the greenhouse in the Botanical Garden in Palermo.

Because of the high costs for the recovery of the structure, which was destroyed by a storm, in 1857 Carlo Giachery, engineer officer of the Botanic Garden, was charged of replace the greenhouse with a new fused iron frame. The new construction was ordered from firm Le febvre in Paris, at the cost of 12,000 ducats. The works was completed in 1862, owing to difficulties in assembling the structure that was sent to Palermo dissected into several parts. The "Maria Carolina stove" is perhaps the first example of prefabricated system realized in Palermo in those years.



Figures 5-6. The English Garden's greenhouse in the early '900 photo. On the right the structure under current conditions. Photo C. Bustinto.



Figures 7-8-9. View of the English Garden greenhouse, interior view and construction detail. Photo: C. Bustinto.

The new greenhouse, with a rectangular-plane, rises from masonry base. Three steps lead to the entrance where there is a bath with marble Dolphin. On the sides there are the plants and the paths. The structure is covered with a pavilion on top of which stands a compass with arrow to the wind. A metal ladder allows access to coverage for the maintenance of the roof. The greenhouse still makes a fine show in the grounds of the Botanical Garden.

The English Garden's greenhouse is located inside of the homonymous garden, designed in 1851 by the architect G. B. Filippo Basile. The garden was built according to the new trends of the time who see in informal planning the best suited solution to the exhibition of botanical rarities and curiosities. The garden also takes advantage of the natural soil pattern, with winding and articulate paths and is divided into two areas: the "Forest" and the "Parterre".

The greenhouse is located in the "Forest" and was built in the last quarter of the 19TH century, probably by Filippo Basile, son of G. B. Filippo Basile. The rectangular plan with apses is 14.00 metres long and 5 metres wide and stands out from a masonry base consisting of two rows of limestone and a molded stone billiemi.

Iron uprights of the metal structure depart from the ground until they reaches the top in

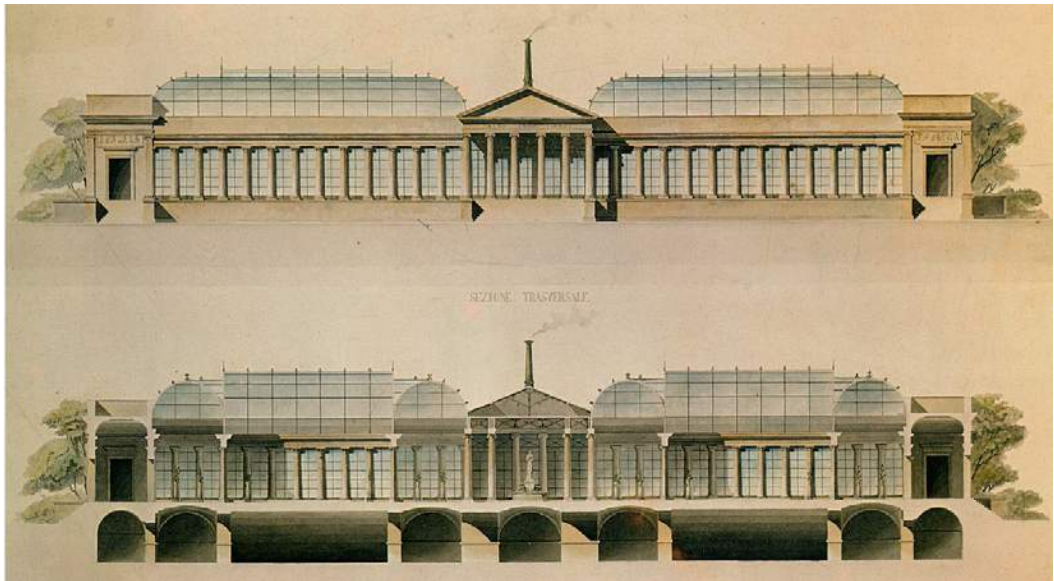
billiemi from where the glass and iron structure depart and ends with a vaulted arches. The long sides are interrupted by two lateral groins that act as entrance to the covered space. Inside develops a masonry platform on which arrange the plants collections in pots. The metal structure is composed of flat irons with angular reinforcing and irons T. Wooden shutters were also destroyed by time and neglect. In the late 20th century the greenhouse was restored with a restoration of the damaged parts and replacement of glass. But despite that the greenhouse is now in a complete state of carelessness and it has been repeatedly the subject of vandalism.

In the Park of Villa Lanza di Trabia at Red Earth, there are two great greenhouses in glass and wrought iron, designed by Giuseppe Patricolo in the last quarter of the 19th century. This structures were made to preserve exotic plants and a collection of about three hundred specimens of orchids. The villa is one of the most significant examples of the interest for exotic flora of the Palermo's gardens in this period and it boasts almost 2800 species, spread over 60,000 square meters of the Park.

Both greenhouses develop on a rectangular plan that stands out from a masonry basement with ventilation grills for the underground utility rooms. One of them has an emicycled fore-



Figures 10-11. Greenhouses of Villa Trabia.



Figures 12-13. Giuseppe Damiani Almeйда Stove project table.

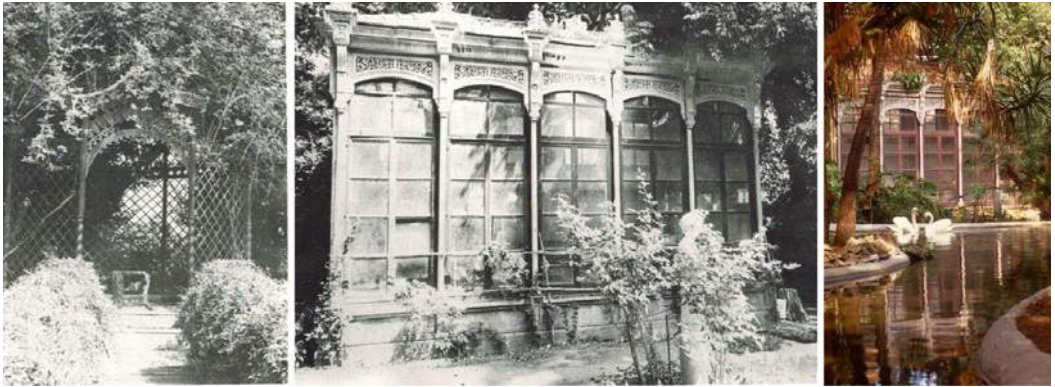
part entry and a pavilion roof. The second, near the boundary wall of the Park, has a half-barrel cover and is served by a service ladder that leads up to the top of the structure. Along the open side engages an iron penthouse. Small flower-beds enrich the structure.

A greenhouse never built is designed by Giuseppe Damiani Almeйда, prominent figure in the artistic panorama of Palermo of the 19th century. In the project the canons of classical architecture blend with the modern glass and steel building techniques. The project, which can be dated between 1854 and 1859, is depicted in two plates which demonstrate the plant, the prospectus and the sections of the “stove”. The greenhouse is placed on a pedestal. A staircase,

flanked by ionic columns leads to the main entrance.

The central compartment, colonnade, is decorated with a fountain with sculpture, placed in the middle. An exedra surrounds the chimney of the stove. On the sides there are two colonnades spaces where are arranged plants and walkways. These can be accessed by two secondary entrances located along the short sides of the greenhouse.

The entire building is covered with a thin glass and iron structure. But while the main building is surmounted by a pitched roof with metal trusses, the lateral sides are covered with barrel vaults made of iron and glass. The glass is also featured in the closing system of arcades.



Figures 14-15-16. Gazebo and greenhouse in Villa Tasca, located on the edge of the historic centre of Palermo.



Figures 17-18. Winter garden and veranda of villa Whitaker.

Below the ground level there are deposits, visible only in section.

## 2. WINTER GARDENS AND GAZEBOS<sup>4</sup>

The fashion for greenhouses and exotic plants spread to such an extent that even the private gardens, the hotels and the houses of the nobility and of the new entrepreneurial middle-class enriched by gazebos, winter gardens, pavilions. All these little architectures were made of iron and glass and embellished with furniture realized with printed cast iron or with curved flat iron, crafted and decorated with themes taken from nature. There were delicious bamboo and wicker lounges.

Among them deserves special interest the garden of Villa Tasca of Tasca D'almerita Count, where you can admire, among other things, a stove and an iron gazebo made in the second half of the nineteenth century. The stove has a rectangular plan with traditional plastered masonry, pavilion roof and South-east façade in

iron, cast iron and glass. The gazebo with a pagoda was built on the hill of the garden and has an octagonal plan defined by cast iron columns. The perimeter is surrounded by a frame with a grid iron. The decorations are made of iron.

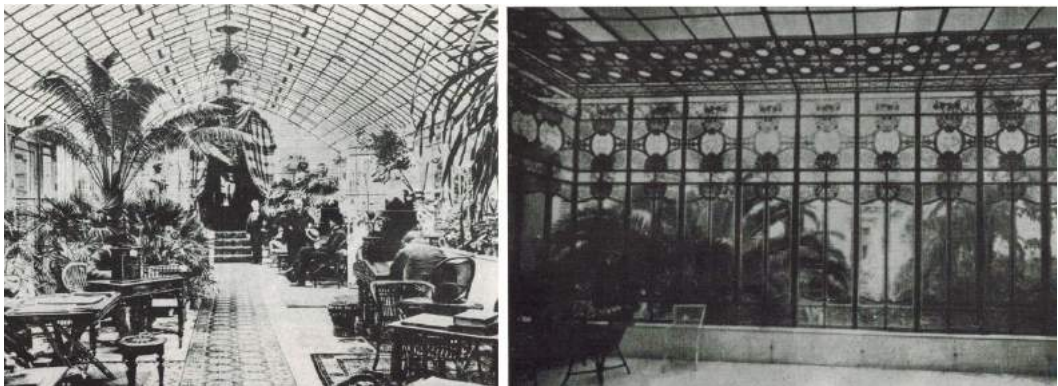
Roof-gardens and winter gardens furnish too Palermo's hotels that host the aristocracy during pleasure trips for which Palermo is considered a fixed leg.

Guests of Trinacria hotel (housed in a building adjacent to the one of the principles of Butera to Piazza Marina), could enjoy a magnificent garden, taken on the terrace overlooking the Passeggiata delle Cattie, full of potted plants and embellished with statues and cast iron furnishings. Around the 1880s, was added a gazebo with fabric cover, while inside the building was realized a winter garden with glass and iron roof.

Others winter gardens were built at the Hotel de France, founded in 1821 by family Giachery and at the Grand Hotel et des Palmes.



Figures 19-20. A pinture postcard of Trinacria Hotel and tha winter garden in a photo from the early 19th century. (Coll. Di Benedetto).



Winter garden and veranda of the Hotel et des Palmes in a photo from the early 19th century. (E. Caracciolo).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the 19th century the middle-class euphoria celebrated during the National Exposition of 1891-92 is already a distant memory. In the decade between '800 and '900 notable architecture works are few.

The new modernist language continues to be expressed in the design of the iron works designed and realized by architects, artists and excellent workers adhering to new instances and new language of international culture. Curved lines, dynamism, flexibility of structural and decorative elements become the expression of a "smaller architecture" belonging to the happy season of Liberty and that always reaches excellent results.

#### NOTES

- 1—Author Tiziana Firrone
- 2—Author Tiziana Firrone
- 3—Thanks to the innovation of "Ward box". Glass box sealed and easy to carry. A miniature greenhouse that provided the plants the microclimate necessary to overcome the long sea voyages.
- 4—Author Carmelo Bustinto
- 5—Author Carmelo Bustinto

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