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Settlement strategies of the Dominicans in Palermo from the Middle Ages to the late Baroque

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Abstract: This paper proposes some reflections on the settlement strategies pursued by the Dominicans in Palermo between the founding of the first conventual settlements, from the 13th century to the transformations of the 17th and 18th centuries as a result of expansion and renovation projects imposed by the Counter-Reformation. The research analyzes for the first time the dialogue between the architecture promoted by the Dominicans and the becoming of the city over the centuries through the continuous and articulated design traces and construction relating to different locations pertaining to enforcement, male (San Domenico and Santa Cita) and female (Santa Caterina and Santa Maria della Pietà), planted in the city center or at least in strategic places adjacent to the changing historical locations at civil, religious and municipal levels. The resulting monumental reconfiguration, by means of the building of different contiguous cloisters and grandiloquent churches, ended up renovating an entire portion of the city. The changed orientation of Dominican ecclesiastical facades – already documented in a project phase – and the different location of the main views in relation to the changing urban configurations, testifies of a mutual dialogue between the Order’s architecture and the developing of the city over the centuries.

Key words: Dominican Order, convents, urban transformations, Palermo, XIII-XVIII century.

The settlement choices

The presence of the Dominicans in Palermo has been testified since the end of the 13th century. The settlement choices of the Order were made by the numerous donations, including the lavish Testament of vast properties belonging to aristocracy to be allocated to the male and female monasteries.

In 1270 the Mastrangelo and Santo Fiore families had donated to the Order a garden located outside the city walls in the neighborhood of Amalfitani where there was a small church dedicated to Sant’Orsola. From this place adjacent to the Cala, the ancient port of the city, the Dominican Fathers, who arrived between 1290 and 1330 (Randazzo, 2012: 14), founded the first nucleus of the male convent. The Mastrangelo Testament of Welcome (1311) instead had a substantial inheritance to the foundation of the female convent dedicated to Santa Caterina (D’Arpa, 1991: 47). The new complex occupied a large block at that time constituted by the Mastrangelo family residence and other properties along the central area of

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Cassaro, at that time one of the oldest and most prestigious of Palermo.

The foundations of two other monasteries, respectively, male in Santa Cita and female in Santa Maria della Pietà, were situated in Modern Age and in full bloom of the oldest Dominican monasteries (Figure 1). The Order had initiated the acquisition of additional already existing properties deployed in other important contexts of the capital.



Figure 1. Urban location of the four Dominican convents in Palermo (clock wise from bottom left): Santa Maria della Pietà; Santa Caterina; San Domenico; Santa Cita (N. Bonifacio, map of Palermo, 1580)

The settlement reasons still followed targets of centrality and ancient prestige even in the choice of the architectural structure that it was occupying. Since the beginning of the first Medieval foundations, the Dominican Fathers had housed the Inquisition Tribunal of the island within the premises of the convent (up to 1503) (Cucinotta, 1986: 360) setting itself up as one of the major centers of religious power in the city.

In February 1428 an area approximately 80 steps from the first location was obtained by the Archbishop Mensa to allocate a second convent unit. The acquisition included land, orchards and gardens, the small church of Santa Cita and a hospital (Mongitore, 2009: 202). The aim was to implement an unusual doubling of independent structures, dormitories, cloisters, churches, oratories, guest quarters and dining halls to oversee a substantial slice, an isolated place within the walls of the city and the old port, transforming itself over the next three centuries.

In 1526 the Nuns took possession of the 15th century *domus magna* by Francesco Abatellis, magistrate of Palermo and Portulano of the kingdom. The prestigious residence was

designed and built by the famous architect Matteo Carnelivari. The Dominican Nuns occupied– and controlled - another important area of the city, ennobled by the presence of The Steri dei Chiaromonte, then the seat of the Viceroy, the Inquisition, and situated between the sea and the beginning of Via Alloro, one of the more privileged axes of the urban elite as a place of residence between the 14th and 16th centuries.

Architecture and the city: expansion, movement, overturnings

Between 1480 and 1560, the Fathers of San Domenico rebuilt the church. In the convent, however, work was initiated in the second half of the 16th century and lasted more than a century, while from the 14th century structure only the first cloister remained (Nobile, 2012: 16-23). The immense constructive campaign endured a sudden acceleration through the launch of a new phase of renewal, the one that was imposed by the Counter-Reformation, forcing a third reconstruction of the church in monumental forms starting from the 1640's.² In fact the operation had already been undertaken at the beginning of the century by other religious congregations, especially those born within the Counter-Reformation, such as the Jesuits, the Oratorians and the Theatines. Their social role aimed to achieve the consent of the aristocracy and therefore its economic livelihood, which had to be more effective than the old mendicant orders, and by reflection the Architectural presence in the city. From this the third reconstruction of the Dominican Church in Palermo arises, however, as the final chapter. The result was, in fact, to raise a church that for columnar amplitude was only second to the cathedral. This new leading construction process led to an upheaval in pre-existing medieval perimeters and around the surrounding urban context according to projects that were never contemplated although ambitious plans by builders of new religious orders were mentioned. At first the reform of the church foresaw a 180° reversal of the orientation of construction in the 15-16th century, opening the new facade to the east towards the sea, along Via Bambinai-Squarcialupo, and as implemented by the other adjacent religious buildings included in the circuit of some of the major religious processions in the city. The poor ground resistance and the ambition to create an enormous structure, forced the facade to be turned back directing it towards the center of the city and shifting the body of the church up to intercept the cloister, thus sacrificing a portion. The exorbitant proportions of the new construction compared to the previous medieval structure are intuitive through a late 17th century drawing (Figure 2) (Sutera, 2012: 24-49).

The long and complex construction site allowed the Dominicans in Palermo to build the façade only in the first decades of the 18th century through a new project that exceptionally provided for the creation of an "imperial square" in front of the church (Grönert, 2002: 463-468; Piazza, 2012: 50-67) (Fig. 3-4).

Starting in the 1540's also the Dominicans of Santa Cita, which had reached a large number of followers, began the construction of a new convent opened on the road Magna di porta San Giorgio (Vesco, 2007/2008: 55). The enclosed courtyard, which formed the northern head of the block, was built in the first decade of the 17th century on the Benedictine

² Research was funded by the Fondazione Salvare Palermo by providing a scholarship for a period of two years and aimed at the publication of a collective volume on the complex of San Domenico in Palermo as part of the series "Conoscere e tutelate" from the title *La chiesa di San Domenico a Palermo. Quattro secoli di vicende costruttive. Palermo: Fondazione Salvare Palermo.*

model implemented in the complex of San Martino delle Scale, in Palermo and in San Nicola L'Arena in Catania. Due to the proportions and number of pillars a kind of cloister was inaugurated that was raised on high monolithic columns which gained a lasting fortune in the following religious sites of the capital (Sutera, 2008: 57-58). From 1586 until the early 1640's the third reconstruction of the church was launched taking advantage of royal donations and implementing the continuous campaign of demolition.

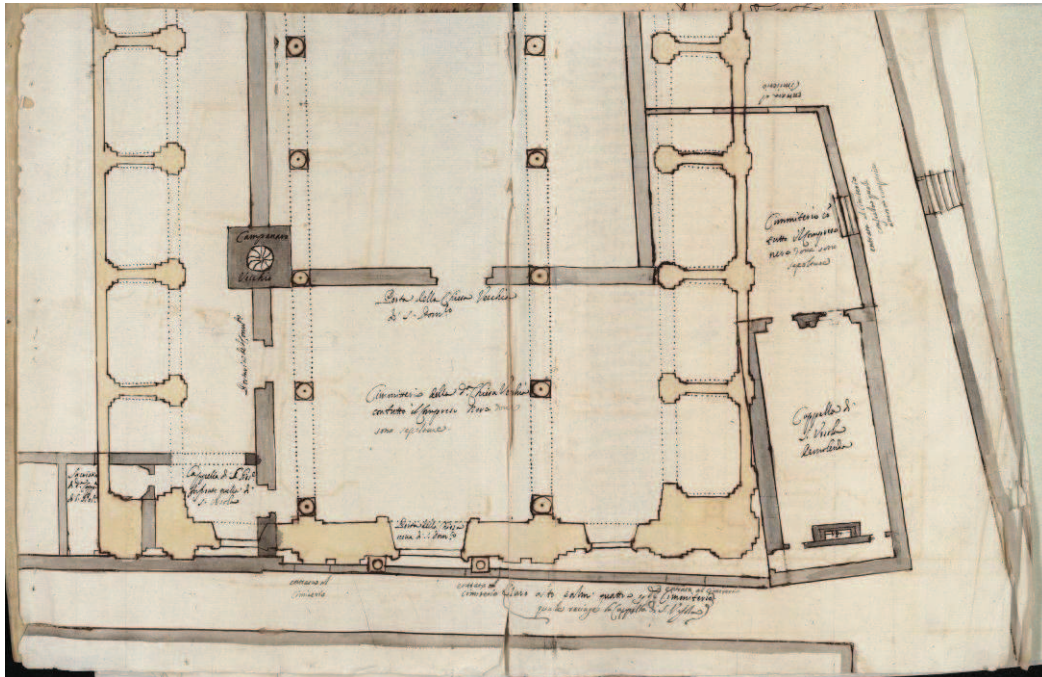


Figure 2. A. Cirrincione Partial plan of the old and the new church of San Domenico, 1666 (Sutera, 2012: 31)



Figures 3-4. Area occupied by the convent of San Domenico in Palermo (left); facade of the church (right). Photo by A. Ardizzone

In 1567, the Dominican Sisters of Santa Caterina, through the urban planning of the "Deputazione strate Cassari", "pro ampliacione, decorazione et celeri expeditione of the pubblica via", acquired an additional portion of the block, which was already partly occupied, to widen the monastery that would have a new front on the Cassaro (D'Arpa, 1991: 47-49). The strategic importance of the site was unexpectedly increased by the opening in 1574 of Piazza Pretoria, embellished by the famous Florentine fountain and the Renaissance municipal building had opened the main prospect in this direction. Soon the square was bordered by the Strada Nuova, or via Maqueda, the second most important road axis of Palermo. The properties the Dominican Sisters thus found themselves bordering the one side of the square constituting the western front and assuming an important urban role not originally planned (Piazza, 1998: 223). The new structure influenced the design of the church and monastery which, in the intentions of eighty Nuns who lived there at that time, intended the contrary to make themselves known to the city through the prestigious and monumental architecture. In fact, from the urban role point of view it benefited exceptionally with three views of the most representative places of the capital (Fig. 5). The church, completed in 1598, opened to the main entrance to the ancient Pretorio square (today Piazza Bellini) which held at the time the exclusive view. The front extensive space was not guaranteed by the main opening onto the new city square. Instead the Dominican nuns opened along the square the western side that became one of the closed sides. As shown in one of the paintings in the collection Alba of Seville, from the high value and datable documents to the first decade of the eighteenth century, an entrance was, however, opened on Piazza Pretoria through a late 16th century door. Only in 1750 (Fig. 6) did the Sisters start on the work of embellishment on the western facade with carvings and stucco, together with the reconfiguration of the desired connection between the body of the chapels and the volume of the nave and the erection of the dome (Mazzè, 1997: 87-93).



Figure 5. Area occupied by the convent of Santa Caterina in Palermo

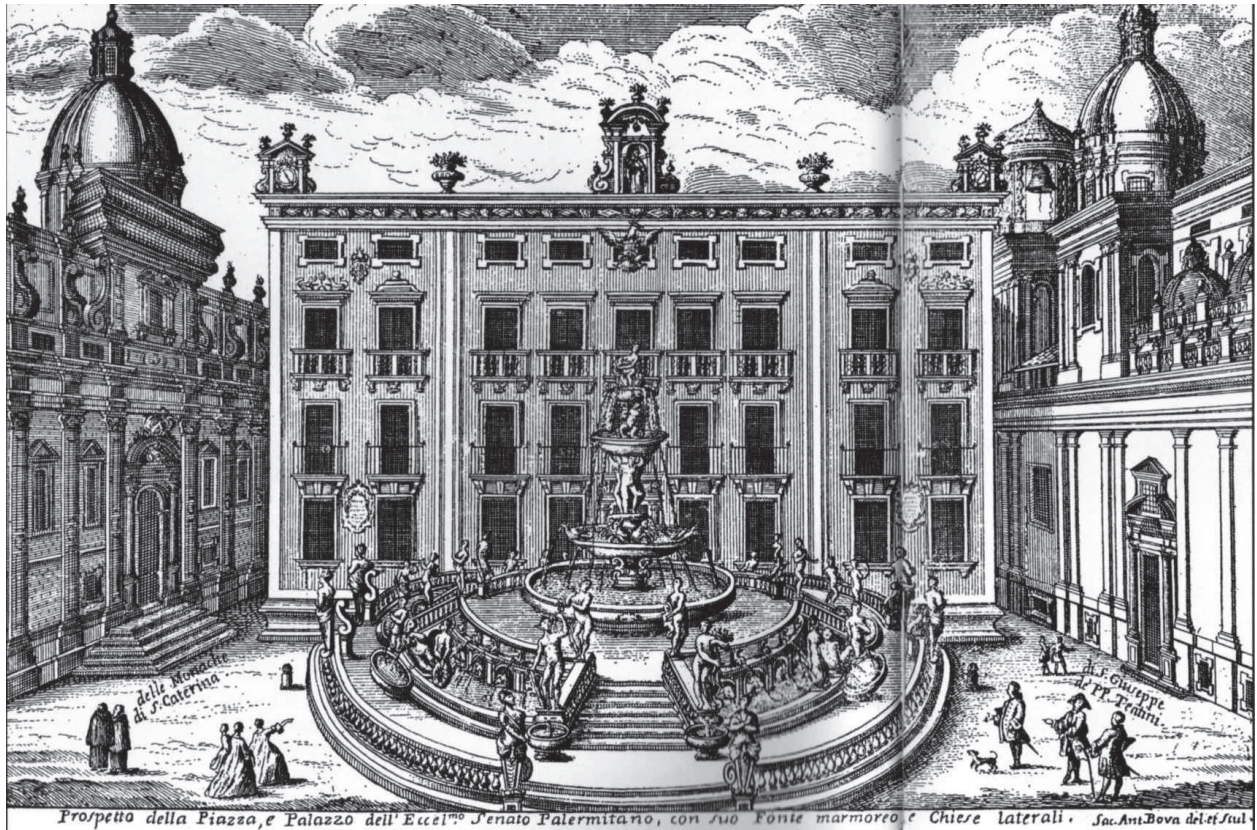


Figure 6. A. Leanti, *Prospetto della Piazza, e Palazzo dell'Eccellmo Senato Palermitano, con suo Fonte marmoreo e Chiese laterali*, 1761; on the left side of the church of Santa Caterina

The fellow sisters of the Monastery della Pietà found themselves, between the 16th and 18th centuries, in front of two neighboring churches (Fig. 7-8). The first, known as the church of the Portulano as it was built according to the will and testament of Abatellis in the same building, was completed, as was the case for the rest of the high sites mentioned, even before the Counter-Reformation, from 1535 by the famous maestro Antonio Belguardo (Vesco, 2007/2008: 52-53). The project inaugurated a hall-type church preceded by a choir and columned vestibule below what would become a prototype for all other female religious sites, beyond the order to which they belong. Due to lack of space a second church was built starting in 1678. The side of new structure was placed on via Alloro, and the front along the adjacent via Torremuzza, at that time involved in a project of general urban reconfiguration conducted through the opening of additional civil and religious buildings by the Architect Giacomo Amato. Amato was called on to draw the design of the façade of the church of the Dominicans. Amato realized the first "Roman" front of the capital in 1689 that is characterized by a strong plasticity conferred by the frame of freestanding columns (Tusa, 1992). The matter was therefore another first achieved by the Dominicans: it was no accident appearing in a fascinating and enigmatic painting, and also belonging to the collection of Alba Seville, who wanted to show the modern Architecture of Palermo at the turn of the 18th century (Sutera, 2009: 72-75).



Figures 7-8. Convent of Santa Maria della Pietà at Palazzo Abatellis and Portulano Church on Via Alloro (left); facade of the new church of Santa Maria della Pietà on Via Torremuzza (right).

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