

RECOVERING “THE GODS OF THE CITY”. A PROJECT FOR SYRACUSE/

Claudia Angarano - *University of Naples Federico II*

claudia.angarano@unina.it

Abstract. The paper reflects on the relationship between transformation, memory and heritage through a project for Syracuse. The project concerns three distinct places and assumes three different scales: the first and most extensive place, the Epipoli plateau, geographically defined by the rocky leap on one side and sloping towards the sea on the other. Here the ancient city was built of which traces of the Dionysian walls garrisoned by the Euryalus castle can still be partially read; the site of the Neapolis with the ancient architectures that define the archaeological park, located at the foot of the Epipoli crag, between the plateau and the later urban expansions and in relationship at a distance to its original horizon towards the sea; the third area concerns the eastern edge of the island of Ortigia, for years occupied by the Talete parking lot, a formal break between the historic city and the sea. Three different areas in which the autonomous “pieces” of the project work in system according to common objectives: to make it possible to read the extension of the city, providing collective spaces and connecting the fragmented parts perceived as distinct and distant and to give new formal definition to some places built incongruously over time or left unfinished, recovering or specifying new constituent relationships with the sea and its landscape, the two elements that have always identified the city and its architecture. Not only common objectives but also a general mode of intervention that, discarding everything that clutters the visual field and prevents the possibility of understanding the city, interprets the traces of the ancient and the formal characters of the orography of the places and, as in an archaeological excavation operation, tries to enlighten its constituent reasons by proposing a new design, analytical and synthetic at the same time, that connects in a unified whole the scattered fragments as an opportunity – also for the design of the modern city – to rediscover, according to Italo Calvino, “the gods of the city”.

Introduction/A point of view on the tie between the heritage and the project. A quality that can be traced in many of our cities, especially in the Italian territory, is the extraordinary formal richness that characterises them, and which derives, to simplify, from two fundamental issues: the “nature” of the place and the variety of contexts in which cities arise on the one hand, and the history of settlements, in some cases thousands of years old, on the other.

These two major issues shape the physical manifestations of a “heritage”, the notion of which is to be understood, in this sense, in reference to both historical-monumental and environmental elements.

However, when does this complexity represent a positive value and when does the vastness of material accumulated over time become a random collection of materials?

If an image is too full, one can no longer see anything; each piece of information is worth the other, without distinction or hierarchy, with the consequence that the capacity for understanding it is drastically reduced. To this complexity, in order not to be subjected to it but to be able to govern it, one can respond, on the contrary, by carrying out operations of simplification, which, with an intentionality, discard the superfluous from the image through a principle of selection, to highlight instead the elements considered of value and on which to rely. It is necessary to look at reality with “*the gaze of the archaeologist*”[1], on the past as well as on our present, bringing into play something that was taken as consolidated, going back but to produce an advancement from a precedent, to better jump. Through “excavation”, discovering the place, detecting and revealing those measures from which to build the future. [2]

«Heritage, in this way, does not only take on a value linked to memory and its role as testimony, but also to the potential connected to its possible renewal and re-signification, deriving from its being, first and foremost, “form”. [...] To take on “transformation” as a tool for conservation and valorisation it is therefore necessary to propose a new point of view that is capable of recognising the “orders” underlying the existing form and take them on as relational ‘structures’ for the definition of new orders and the attribution of new meanings at the same time necessary for the renewal and reinforcement of the identity of what we recognise as Heritage and corresponding to the aspirations of our time». [3]

Starting from this way of facing the problem of the relationship between the pre-existing and the new, between memory and invention, the contribution draws attention to a design and research experience conducted within the “Siracusa - Palazzolo Acreide” design seminar that involved several PhDs in Architectural and Urban Composition from major Italian universities. The project described below concerns three different areas of the city of Syracuse. Extraordinarily important places, since ancient times, both in terms of urban value and location, but which have currently lost their centrality and are asking to be redefined in order to return to the centre of the dynamics of urban transformation. With this in mind, it is proposed to give an answer in terms of form to the theme of the relationship between heritage and project, declaring a position on the need for the project in restoring value to the past, against the idea of its musealisation or conservation at all costs, in favour of its “transformation” according to a sensibility that characterises Italian design culture – just look at the stratification of our cities where architecture has always been “built on the built” – and that is part of a certain *identity* that belongs to our architecture.

Ruins of a heritage to be re-composed. Notes on the nature and the architecture of the city. The city of Syracuse, the oldest of the *poleis* of the Western Greek world according to Timaeus, boasts a history stretching back thousands of years and owes its fortune and importance from ancient times to its special geographical and orographical situation.[4]

The Corinthian colonists of Syracuse chose for the foundation of their city a place that was close to the southern branch of the ancient east-west route of the Mediterranean and as a bridgehead gave on the one hand security and on the other the possibility of dominating the hinterland.

Added to these favourable conditions are the natural characteristics of the place. Towards the interior, the plateau of the Monti Iblei slopes down towards the sea and forms the system of hills that, extending to define the sea coast, gives shape to the system of limestone plateaus that informs the Syracuse landscape: the plateau of Epipoli – divided into two parts by the drop in elevation that corresponds to the Akradina crag and the Temenite hill –, which constitute the most important embankment of the city's orographic system, overhanging the sea to the north and east and, on the southern side, connected by a strip of land sloping down to the plane of the so-called island of Ortigia, the site of the city's oldest altar, on which the historic city was subsequently built. The latter defines with the ancient Plemmirio – the tip of the limestone block of the Maddalena Peninsula to the south – the gulf of Porto Grande. Behind the harbour, the immediate hinterland largely hosts the alluvial plain, which is part of the system of mouths of the river Anapo and the course of the Ciane: the ancient *Lisimelia* marsh, an important wetland area of the city where the salt pans of Syracuse are located.

This particular conformation of the orographic substratum constructed in antiquity a discontinuous urban condition, defined by the system of crags that constituted veritable natural theatres, facing the landscape, mountainous on one side and towards the open dimension of the sea on the other, in which it was possible to measure the extent of the great polis by means of sight. In this system, the settlements of the *pentapolis* (*Epipoli*, *Neapolis*, *Akradina*, *Tyche* and *Ortigia*), with their primary elements, were made identifiable and recognisable, distinct and held together by the natural interval between the parts. The ancient architecture of the city thus assumed discontinuity, already inherent in the landscape, and topological location as necessary values for the definition of its significant places. Beginning with the 19th-century expansions, the polycentric urban design of ancient Syracuse gradually lost its recognisability in favour of an alleged unity that led to the progressive cancellation of all specificity, until reaching total unrecognisability in the present day. A few traces remain of the ancient urban order, more explicit in the area of the archaeological park and others latent, partly in the area of the ancient Neapolis and partly along the site of the ancient Dionysian walls guarded by the Euryalus Castle on the Epipoli plateau.

Starting from the traces of this heritage, today massacred and reduced to ruins by uncontrolled building, indifferent to the history and nature of the place, the project attempts, through recognisable urban figures that stand out in the Syracusan landscape, to clarify the parts and recompose them in a renewed order that establishes new relationships and, as in an archaeological excavation operation, to rediscover in the founding elements – built and natural – of the place the cornerstones for future urban development.

The project for Syracuse insists on three different areas: the Dionysian walls, the Neapolis, and the Talete car park on the north-eastern edge of the island of Ortigia. Three autonomous projects, which nevertheless should not be looked at in terms of the intervention for its own sake, but rather in the relations they intend to establish between them and with the site, in order to generate new values from this relationship.

The parts of the project work on three different scales, but according to a common objective: the definition of the limit, to make the extension and the form of the city legible, through the construction of collective places that restore the relations between the parts that are continuous but perceived as fragmented, built over time in an incongruous manner or left unfinished, and in this way give a new formal definition. In this rewriting of an urban order and the form of certain parts of the city, the project takes its measures from the ones of the place to re-establish lost relationships with its primary elements, the sea and its landscape: the two elements that have always identified and informed the construction of the city and its architecture. FIGURE 1.

Measures arising from measures. The first and largest project site is the plateau of Epipoli, where the ancient city was built.

Almost triangular in shape, this area is geographically defined by the rocky drop in elevation along the long sides and by the sea along the short side to the east. This geographical condition provided natural protection to the urban settlement, further guaranteed by the presence of the Dionysian walls, within whose perimeter the city was included. At the western summit of the plateau, the point of access to the city from the land, the walled system was garrisoned by the Castle of Euryalus. Built to defend Syracuse from the onslaught of the Carthaginians, they gave shape to the city's defensive design which, together with the island and its fortifications, made Syracuse an extraordinary fortress city, defensive from land and offensive from sea.

Once their defensive role had ceased, the traces of this part of the city's history were largely obliterated, although – thanks to their construction as an offshoot of the natural lines of the terrain – a few brief portions can still be traced along the ancient development, ending with the castle, which coincides with the most intact part of the Dionysian defence system.

The project starts from the hypothesis of reconstructing the unity of the plateau from which one can enjoy a privileged view of both the coastal and the mountainous landscape. Following the route of the walls, the project envisages the development of a linear park traversed by a pedestrian and bicycle path, which connects, at certain notable points that coincide with those of the ancient walls, the highest elevation with the lowest. At these points are small artefacts for resting, refreshment and leisure, which, through the use of recognisable and repeated figures, rhythm and measure the extension of the long territorial park that embraces the modern city and culminates in the Euryalus Castle and the neighbouring museum.

In this way, on the one hand, the legibility of the ancient city form is regained and, on the other hand, a unique heritage of historical testimony is placed at a higher value than the modern city.

The extraordinary archaeological site of Neapolis, the centre of the Greek city, is one of the remarkable sites of the system – the most important together with the castle – of the Dionysian Wall Park and the second application point of the project. It contains some of the most outstanding architecture of the ancient city: the Greek theatre facing the sea, the ancient Altar of Hieron and the later Roman Amphitheatre.

In this area the project has a single but complex objective: to recover the relationship, both visual and physical, of the archaeological park with its original horizon, the landscape sloping down to the sea to the south-east, well represented by the architecture of the theatre. FIGURE 2.

The operation is to some extent similar to the one carried out for the walls, but this time with a single architecture, a “bridge-architecture” that connects the archaeological area with the coast, to the point of building a new landing place. This architecture defines with its course the unity of the site, specifying its limit and enlarging the area, which thus becomes available to other possible excavations: a true bridge connecting the ancient city to its landscape, gaining privileged viewpoints along its development. FIGURE 3.

In this sense, the activities related to vehicular accessibility, the current caesura between the Neapolis and the neighbouring city, are placed in a lowered area further south, along Viale Paolo Orsi, deviating from the private Via Giuseppe Agnello. The ticket office and services attached to the archaeological park, directly connected to the car park, define a long and narrow porticoed square that excludes the busy Viale Orsi from view.

This becomes the starting point of the elevated path, a kind of long *aqueduct*, which bypasses the avenue itself and delimits the new green areas containing the ancient remains of the circular Hieronian temple. The long corridor consists of a masonry building housing services on the park level and a superimposed porticoed path interrupted only near the station. At this point it redesigns and defines the new tree-lined station square. FIGURE 4.

From here it gradually gains lower altitudes, protects the ancient Roman gymnasium and reaches the beach to give access to the sea. This area, originally occupied by the alluvial plain, is freed of the incongruous constructions occupying it and returned to nature in the form of a large park extending to the mouth of the rivers Anapo and Ciane. In this way, through its development, which finds its measure and topological reason in the shape of the ground and in the relationship to be established with certain elements of the ancient and modern city, this architectural element, which can be traversed at elevation and crossed at the level of the tax plane, specifies, on the one hand, the limit of the central ancient part of the city, and on the other, that of the modern city, distinguishing with its own figure the built part of the city from the part returned to nature.

The third project area concerns the eastern edge of the island of Ortigia, occupied for years by the Taletè car park. A building with no quality, both architecturally and in terms of its urban value, with respect to the relationship with the historic centre built behind it and with respect to the sea that the city overlooks, which, precisely because of the presence of this building and the traffic artery of the Lungomare Vittorini, is unable to have any relationship with the sea that laps it. Acknowledging, however, a certain “usefulness”, the project confirms the presence of the Taletè car park, with the aim, however, of defining the unfinished edge of the historic city and the 19th-century blocks towards the sea, starting from the surviving bastion of the ancient walls to Porto Piccolo. Once again, the measure of the intervention is the relationship with the traces of history, more recent in this case, but from which the project draws its definition.

The general hypothesis is to reconstruct a walled boundary on the site of the ancient Aragonese walls, to give shape and identity to both the interior and exterior areas, absorbing the difference in elevation between the city and the sea in such a way as to establish a new relationship with the water element that strongly characterises the city, especially on this side. FIGURE 5.

On the inside, towards the city, a double inhabited wall opens up with commercial, restaurant, service and collective activities that define minute squares and internal gardens in relation to the existing blocks. In the development of this new “enclosure”, there is also space for elevations leading to a higher level, where a continuous promenade allows for views towards the open sea, the marina, the coast and the city. Here is a linear roof garden, a theme strongly felt in Syracuse; a collective place of nature for the city of stone, which bypasses the road and the car park and in this way physically links the city to the waterfront. From this there is access, gradually descending towards the level of the sea, to a new urban lido, organised with shady promenades, pergolas, refreshment areas, loggia courtyards, services and piers extending to the sea, which, again, recovers but transforms the old image of the city at this point and the ancient and lost relationship between the city and its sea. FIGURE 6.

Conclusion. Taking a step back and returning to what was said at the beginning, with the awareness that, especially in the contexts in which Italian architecture operates, one often finds oneself coming to terms with history, the project for Syracuse declares a clear position with respect to the idea of a positive relationship between heritage and project. Not a conservative or mimetic relationship but one that selectively chooses the elements to refer to in order to set about modifying them. In this sense, this relationship can certainly be found in the elements of the city, both built and natural, elected as elements to lean on, from which to take measures in order to set the future, but also and especially in terms of the city’s principle of order, ancient but still valid for the construction of the places of the modern city.

«[...] In the presence of the elements of history, the fundamental question is, with the project, to find the right critical distance, which calls into question the problem of disposition [...]. What [...] sustains the relationship with the past are the settlement structures, that is, the rules of disposition of buildings». [5]

Without a nostalgic look or reverential fear, only by putting in place a principle of selection, which identifies what to relate to while distinguishing through forms that must be recognisable and appropriate to the time to which they refer, is it possible to shape an idea of continuity in the construction of the city.

«Every city has its own implicit “programme” that it must be able to rediscover every time it loses sight of it, on pain of extinction. The ancients represented the spirit of the city [...] by evoking the names of the gods who had presided over its foundation. [...] A city may pass through catastrophes and middle ages, see different lineages succeeding one another in its houses, see its houses change stone by stone, but it must, at the right time, in different forms, find its gods again». [6]

Attributions. The project was carried out by a working group belonging to the IUAV Doctoral School in Venice and led by Professor R. Neri with C. Angarano, S. Binetti, A. Cerri, M. Cukaj, L. Landi, F. Lucchi, C. Musella, F. Pavan.

References.

1. I. Calvino, “Lo sguardo dell’archeologo”, in Id., *Una pietra sopra*, (Mondadori, Milano, 2016), pp. 320-323.
2. «Non esiste una rottura nella complessa fenomenologia della storia e in quella dei simboli che essa ha prodotto nelle tre dimensioni; perciò i monumenti e i paesaggi eccezionali debbono essere considerati solo come emergenze nella visione temporale e spaziale della realtà che non presenta soluzioni di continuità. Il problema dell’inserimento nelle preesistenze ambientali potrà, dunque, essere più o meno sentito a seconda delle circostanze, ma una volta posto [...] diventa una delle implicazioni essenziali dell’interpretazione artistica, in ogni momento e in ogni luogo». E.N. Rogers, “Il problema del costruire nelle preesistenze ambientali”, in Id., *Esperienza dell’architettura*, (Einaudi, Torino, 1958), pp. 311-316.
3. R. Capozzi, F. Costanzo, F. Defilippis, F. Visconti, “Nota dei curatori”, in Id., *Patrimonio e progetto di architettura*, (Quodlibet, Macerata, 2021), p. 11. [translation by the author]
4. on the landscape of Syracuse refers to: H-P. Drögenmüller, *Siracusa. Topografia e storia di una città greca*, (Tyche Edizioni, Siracusa, 2018), pp. 11-20.
5. A. Di Franco, *Conversazioni con Luigi Snozzi*, Maggioli Editore, (Santarcangelo di Romagna, 2016), p.117. [translation by the author]
6. I. Calvino, “Gli dèi della città”, in Id., *Una pietra sopra*, (Mondadori, Milano, 1995), p 344. [translation by the author]

Figures.

FIGURE 1 - A project for Syracuse. General masterplan.

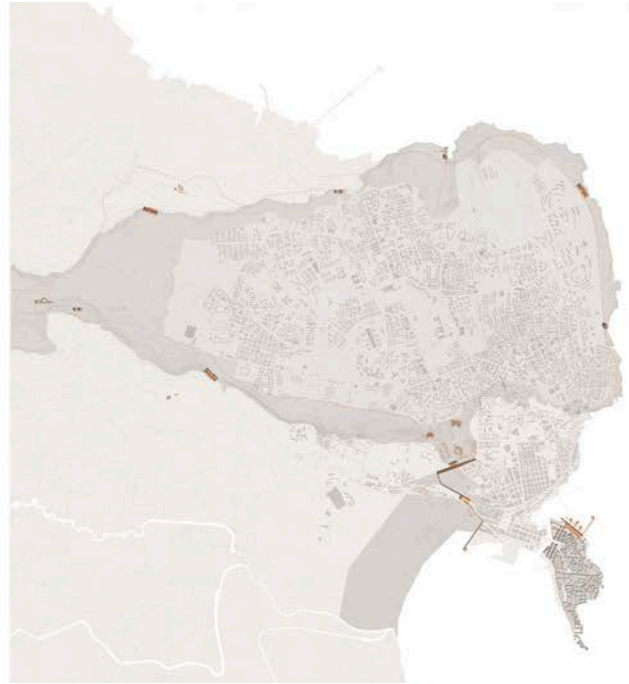
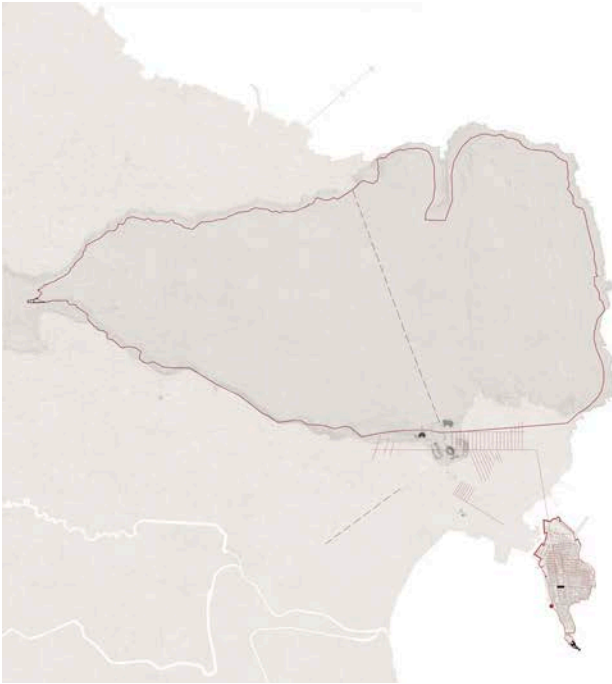
FIGURE 2 - Bird’s eye with the elements of the city “heritage” and the project

FIGURE 3 - The archeological city and its scenery. The new *aqueduct* of Neapolis, volume plan and main facade

FIGURE 4 - The archeological city and its scenery. The new *aqueduct* of Neapolis, ground plan and view of the project.

FIGURE 5 - The ancient city and the sea. The new waterfront of Ortigia island, volume plan and views of the project.

FIGURE 6 - The ancient city and the sea. The new waterfront of Ortigia island, ground plan and urban sections.



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