

The Old Town of Taranto: Architectural Reading of the Historic Urban Form for the Correct Methodology for Restoration Project the Built Heritage in the Island.

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ABSTRACT

The contribution is based on an architecture analysis , which took place through a series of campaigns of relief carried out during 2013 throughout the urban fabric of the old city of Taranto. This analysis interest morphological and typological aspects of some important buildings located along the principal axis of the ancient Taranto, highlighting and updating each case , the structural and technological problems of each building . In recent times, the critical situation of total decay of the old city of Taranto, caused the collapse of an entire complex of buildings, especially in the lower part of the urban area, and whole sections of the ancient city are closed through infill walls along the principal roads. The analysis of the typological systems, of the urban form and technological systems of the island's buildings, would fill a scientific gap caused by the lack of a systematic study on the urban fabric of the old city and its architectural potential It is necessary and urgent to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the old town of Taranto, in order to provide a methodological and updated tool, aligned with the most modern techniques of diagnosis and relief on buildings, which could direct future interventions of urban regeneration and of enhancement of historic / architectural centre.

KEYWORDS: Taranto, Urban Development, Urban Form, Restoration in historical Mediterranean centre, Architectural heritage.

1 INTRODUCTION

The architectural restoration of the Old city of Taranto turns out to be , now more than ever, a central theme to re-think economic development and a sustainable growing of the urban territory of the whole Ionic Arc: the only alternative vision to the heavily industrial character that has characterized the town since the early years of the nineteenth century and which has irremediably compromised the original facies of the city and the surrounding area. The city of Taranto, since its founding, was designed to have an extraordinary relationship with the natural surroundings, and every study on the “urban form” and about architectural character of the historical buildings must consider the complexity of the surrounding environmental morphology: the first Greek foundation core was enclosed in an isthmus that juts out longitudinally in East-West direction. The urban fabric is developed, over the millennia, on a 15 meters high rock, bathed by the sea on three main fronts. The peninsula became a real island in the Aragonese period , after the "cutting" of the peninsula during the construction of the mighty moat of the castle. The city is known as "Città dei due mari " , is in fact surrounded by Mar Grande along the external coast of

semicircular bay form, bounded on the North West from Punta Rondinella and on south from Capo San Vito. The above wide bay is characterized by the presence of two islands: St. Peter and St. Paul (respectively far from Taranto 6.3 and 6.1 Km), which constitute a small archipelago, the Cheradi (in Greek *Choiràdes Χοιράδες*), which closed the south-west front of Mar Grande basin. In past there was also another small island of San Nicolicchio, now disappeared due to construction of industrial area and to the enlargement of the trading port.

The current configuration of the old city is a result of continuous and disorderly overlap of interventions and alterations made, often, with the re-use of the old architectural remains. It is enclosed entirely within the fortified perimeter of the island and presents many interesting features for various reasons: it has escaped from real estate speculation and is still substantially intact in its urban historical layout, and therefore retains a wealth of different architectural styles that can underline the development and the transformation through the centuries of urban pattern. The layout of the old city probably retraces ancient Magnogreek Acropoli and then the Roman/Byzantine grid, growing and progressively occluding spaces around Via Duomo. This street presumably is the old route of the ancient Via Appia¹, which crossed the island from East to West, dividing it into two parts: the upper part (on average 15 meters above sea level), facing to Mar Grande, characterized by valuable palaces and important monumental and ecclesiastical complexes, including the Cathedral of St. Cataldo, convent of San Francesco, the complex of St. Dominic and St. Clare, all built from the Middle Ages until 1700. The lower part, overlooking the old harbor (Mar Piccolo) is mainly composed of popular neighborhoods with residential typology of row-houses, pseudo/row-houses or tower-houses, with narrow and elongated floor plans and preeminent developing in height (also 3-4 levels). Archaeological findings seem to avail the hypothesis of the founding of Taranto at the end of the eighth century BC, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, who says that in 706 B.C. Spartan colonists settled on the island. In this area, the defense was secured to the north and south by high cliffs and on the east by a fortification wall preceded by a moat. Archaeological excavations carried out in 1931 in Via Duomo confirm the presence of a street that crosses the Acropolis in the longitudinal direction. In these excavations have unearthed two slices of road superimposed, one of the Byzantine age and one of the Roman age. Archaeological findings also confirm the hypothesis of the religious rule of the site: the ruins of the Doric columns embedded in the Trinità Church, remains of stereobate under the church of San Domenico; remains suggesting the presence of a sacred area and a temple under the Church of St. Augustine. The island was then destined to the Acropolis: this area was the more representative of the city and has the oldest sacred buildings and a huge quantity of monuments. The limit of the Greek and Roman city was supposed to be just on the natural difference in height visible today along Via di Mezzo. In fifth century Taranto was engaged in continuous conflict with Iapigi and Messapians: a tough defeat in the 473. C. determines the urban transformation as well as political, with the construction of a real Neapolis in the area occupied by the cemetery. In the first half of the fifth century BC, the city underwent a profound transformation planning. In fact, was built a new defensive wall and was extended the monumental area, which reached its importance with the construction of an imposing Doric temple on the Acropolis². During this period, the city had about three 300.000 inhabitants. The historical events of the third and second century. B.C. see the Greek city of Taras turn slowly in the Roman Tarentum. As a result of the war of 272-282, Taranto is submissive and waives to

¹ Cfr.: Maria Grazia Rocco, Survey and comparison of plans in the urban plan of Taranto and in the territory of the upper Jonio, in *Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre XX year*, Corcelli editrice, Bari 1984

² For the configuration and construction of roads in the acropolis magnogreca see F. G. Lo Porto, Topografia antica di Taranto, in *Taranto nella civiltà della Magna Grecia, Atti del X Convegno di studi sulla Magna Grecia* (Taranto 4-11 Ottobre 1907), Napoli 1971, pp. 343-383.

the leadership of the Magna-Greece. The situation is aggravated by the Second Punic War (209-123 BC.):the city progressively lose their political identity and their ethnic consciousness throughout the Roman period, with a substantial decline in rich and population. At this stage the limits of the Acropolis had to settle on 'current path of Via di Mezzo, which coincide with the jump of the natural rock. The walls of the ancient city walked from east to west on the actual ridge of the rock, and this is confirmed by the findings of isodomic blocks in accordance with the textures of the first settlements, but also by significant re-use of Greek architectural elements in this area in medieval period³. As underlined by the report Spilotro, the level of the sea, two thousand years ago, was two meters above the current level and therefore the bay on Mar Piccolo consisted, at that time, in a narrow beach near the top of the cliff. The same rock has, in that period, an high average of eight meters and therefore there was a small harbor for boats with possibility of shelter very close to the natural ridge. On this natural limit, exploited with the walls of the Acropolis, began to born many residential areas in connection to the port and to the related activities. These agglomerations, progressively, displace the original limits of the ancient city: in fact, were built a series of guard positions in defense of the new gates next to the port of the city, created in correspondence of the terminal part of the parallel ascent streets (Postierle) that cut the new districts, connecting the low with the high part. The connections between the various Postierle, led to the birth of a new street identified in the current Via di Mezzo. (Figure 3). The first development outside the original Greek walls, almost exclusively interested the saturation of the empty areas, defining new edge of the city made of an unified front-curtain of the buildings, creating a spontaneous and uneven defensive walls, that makes the all city moved in this direction. The urbanistic reconstruction of the medieval city is very difficult, due to the lack of archaeological and historical evidence. Anonymous sources, documenting a city sometimes alive and commercially active, sometimes resized in its importance and its demographic consistency. At the beginning of the greek-gothic war in sixth century, the acropolis at the top is re-fortified dwellings that surround closely, while the east of the isthmus became a rural area. The passage the Byzantines and the Long bards today leaves no visible architectonic traces, except for any traces of walls and foundations, never documented, visible below some of the palaces of Via Duomo, and no monuments or evidence of early Christian places were found during any archaeological excavation. Even the Saracen domination, which lasted from 840-880, leaves no urban and architectural evidence. The particular shape of the minute urban fabric layout, with the presence of narrow alleys, and cul de sac at the end of some private street, is associated more with Byzantine castra rather than with Muslim settlements, although we can found unequivocal signs of Islamic influences in the introverted design of the urban pattern and in the hierarchical structure of the network of street and in the progressive privatization of the urban context:

- 1)The main arteries (Via Duomo, Via Di Mezzo, and now Via Garibaldi), with predominantly public - commercial, with wider road section for the transition wagons and goods, the almost straight course and overlooking the main floor and craft shops.
- 2) The cross-streets or Postierle, placed in perpendicular way respect to the first, with a semi-public character, characterized by a narrow section of road, paths, sometimes steep slope and non rectilinear (passable only on foot) and representing the streets of connection between the lower part of the island (harbor) and high (shopping and sacred area).
- 3) finally we have a great number of small streets purely for private use, which flow in small plazas or cul de sac.

³ Cfr.: Luigi Oliva, *I quartieri dei vicoli sulla Marina di Mar Piccolo nella Città Vecchia di Taranto. Genesi e configurazioni del tessuto edilizio storico. Risanamento e valorizzazione* in Kronos n.7, 2004 Lecce

The conquest of the city by Basil I the Macedonian, take the first clear signs in the urbanism of the city. Between the 880 and the 927 is built the Byzantine "Rock" in the place where now stands the Castello Aragonese. This defensive structure will not save her from total destruction Taranto on August 15, 927 caused by the Muslims troops of the Slavic Sabir . The city remained in ruins until 967, when the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus II Phocas , yielding to the repeated pressure of the survivors, decided to rebuild the city⁴. According to tradition, an engineer, also called Nicephorus, destroyed what remained of the acropolis, re- perimeter the area with a high wall, interspersed with towers to the east and reinforced with a fortress, rebuilt all the buildings destroyed, built on a canal bridge of 7 arches connected to via Appia and did fill the coastline along Mar Piccolo advancing 40 meters around the perimeter of the coastal to facilitate the return of many fishermen migrated in the decades of previous wars and destruction : In this period born, therefore, the public square, the current configuration of via di Mezzo , the Via Marina, and the postierle that connect the lower city with the upper city.

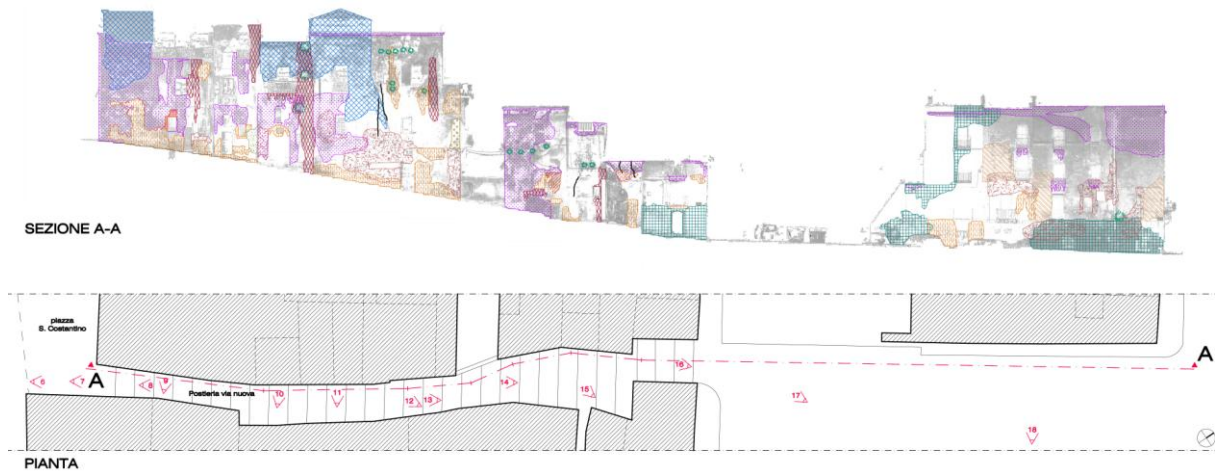


Figure 1: Postierla Via Nuova: Section A-A' with the map of degradation of the facades and planimetric section (Arch. Fragasso G., 2009)

This area is still perfectly recognizable by the presence of long, narrow blocks , separated by alleys perpendicular to the sea . Via di Mezzo will become an important urban axis of division between the neighborhoods of the high part of the city (and Pittaggio Baglio and Pittaggio San Pietro), and those of the lower part of the most recent formation (Pittaggio Torrepenna and Pittaggio Ponte). We ascribed to this period, the construction of the churches of Saints Cosmas and Damian, the church of St. Nicola sotto la Cava and those of San Marco e Lo Spirito Santo , with Byzantine influence , all attested on Via di Mezzo. They were attractive poles around which are formed corresponding urban block, by the progressive occluding of empty spaces in the urban tissue around the church. Over the following centuries, will be the gradual urbanization of the entire area of the fledgling navy on Mar Piccolo, and the end of formation of the curtain of continuous urban residential facade (the typical residential building is the palazzata or domus palatiata and can be even 3-4 levels) interspersed with narrow street, sometimes not more than 70 cm wide. Urban design of this blocks are similar to a 'comb ' : the sea fronts are never more than 15 meters (the space between two Postierle) and the block has longitudinally a length of approximately 40 meters . As we say, the paradigmatic typology of building that characterizing the entire lower part of the island, is the Tower-houses or Palazzata houses (Domus Palatiata) articulated in the ground, first and second floors (each developed a minimum of one room up to three), connected by a

⁴ Cfr. N. Oikonomides, Les listes de prèseance byzantine des IX et X siècles, Paris 1972, p. 327, e V. Von Falkenhausen, La dominazione bizantina nell'Italia meridionale dal IX all'XI secolo, Bari 1978, p.132.

single ramp with a steep slope in the longitudinal wall or in L shape. The ground floor was intended primarily to shop, warehouse, but often is dwelling minimum-residential space well-known as "basso". The topographic reconstruction of Norman- Swabian Taranto can only be assumed, since the urban construction of this period has almost completely disappeared or was incorporated in the building of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries . The morphology of the city is changed significantly in the early eleventh century , mainly due to a policy that allows the coexistence of Greek institutions , Jewish and Latin. These populations strengthened their presence in the city through the construction of churches and monasteries, of which the most important example is represented by the Cathedral of San Cataldo. How is confirmed by the geographer Idrisi⁵ , the Normans had already found prosperous city and commercially active port , built on the ancient acropolis and still littered with large buildings and palaces. The Norman and Swabian morphology, not much different from the current one, will remain unchanged over the centuries. It was characterized for the division of the island into four pittinggi , both organized into four vicinii, according to the two main roads corresponding to the Via di Mezzo and the postierla via Nuova : pittinggio St. Pietro , characterized by a valuable housing , and pittinggio Baglio , near the castle , are both on the Mar Grande side, the pittinggio Ponte, near the bridge , and the pittinggio Turripenne , characterized by the Jewish ghetto, looking Mar Piccolo. Archaeological discoveries may confirm the hypothesis of the construction of a domus for the Emperor Frederick II , near the church of San Domenico Maggiore. In Angevin period, Raimondello Orsini Del Balzo , son of Niccolo Orsini, builds the " Citadel " or Tower of Raimondello (1404) : a massive square tower and fortified watched the entrance to the city from the bridge of Porta Napoli (PHOTOS). The Franciscans and Dominicans mendicant orders erected in this period two impressive buildings in the upper part of the island : the convent of St. Francis of Assisi and the convent of San Domenico , which dominate the urban space at the ends of the axis of the main road, influencing, with their Gothic loggias , balconies and the battlements, of the surrounding buildings. Giovanni Antonio Orsini Del Balzo, reordered pittinggi Baglio and Turripenne, expanded the public square with the demolition of many buildings. During the Aragónese - Spanish domination we have significant changes, both in civil and in ecclesiastical buildings, in addition to the fortification of the city: it starts from the demolition of the Byzantine "Rock", to obtain the necessary space for the new castle designed by the architect Francesco di Giorgio Martini, and proceed at once to the excavation of a trench in the position of the ship canal , following which the peninsula becomes an island. The City instead takes charge of the construction of a fortified wall and reinforced with towers along the perimeter of the city. On the western side of the island instead , the Tower of Raimondello is reinforced with two smaller towers and expanded with a courtyard in direction of the city. The significant transformation of the city, however, are attributable in particular of ecclesiastical building, whose religious structures serve as a gathering place. The ancient report about the visit to the institutions carried out by the Archbishop Monsignor Lelio Brancaccio between 1576 and 1578 , bear witness to the urban location and the architectural features of many religious structures that currently do not exist anymore . In 1600-1700 there was a massive restructuring of the existing religious structures and the construction of new monasteries. Was restructures the convent of San Domenico and San Francesco d' Assisi , major changes was make to the Cathedral of San Cataldo, was built the Sanctuary of Monte Oliveto, and was reconstructing the convent of the Jesuits , the convent of St. Paschal Baylon , the monastery of Clarisse nuns, was builds the staircase of San Domenico Maggiore, and was extended many smaller churches. Even in civil construction, there were many transformation and great palaces were built along the main axis of Via Duomo, which still characterize the upper part of the ancient town. The construction of the great palaces often occurs through the incorporation of pre- existing smaller buildings, and a few times involves the complete demolition of the previous building. Between '600 and '800, in pittinggi Baglio San Pietro , were

⁵ Cfr. M. Amari e C. Schiaparelli (1883) *L'Italia descritta Nel "Libro del re Ruggero"* da Edrisi. Testo arabo pub. con versione e note

built some of the most valuable buildings like Pantaleo Palace, Amati Palace, Galeota Palace, Ciura Palace, d' Ayala Valva Palace, Carducci Arsenio Palace , Troylo Palace, Ulmo Palace, Gallo Palace (Figure). These buildings were erected on the tracks of existing structures and often were located over vast areas hypogean result of excavation, took place in Greek, Roman and Byzantine periods throughout the rock of the Acropolis: to raise the building material, was excavated the limestone (175,000 years of geological dating) and were realized large underground rooms used in various ways over the centuries



Figure 2: Front, section and picture of the courtyard of Carducci Palace (Arch. Occhinegro U.)



Figure 3: Front of Zigrino Palace (Arch. Occhinegro U.)

One of the most famous is the complex of underground rooms site under Palazzo Beaumont Bonelli Bellacicco. These significant transformations of urban space, determine the demolition of entire neighborhoods and the subsequent expulsion of the inhabitants, who were constricted to overpopulate the

few spaces still remaining in the lower part of the island, operating divisions and indiscriminate elevations on the pre-existent buildings. This overpopulation had seriously affect the living conditions and hygienic and health. The topographic reconstruction of Taranto in nineteenth century is in relation with the improvement of the strategic role of the port and with the dismission of military fortification that, for centuries, prevented the urban development outside the city walls. When nel1865 the city was declared open and free from military servitude by a royal decree of King Vittorio Emanuele II di Savoia, it was decided to destroy all the walls and fortifications, including the same " Citadel " . In recent years, the Old City has very marginal role in the urban development of the city, which expands wildly in the Borgo Nuovo over the moat, transformed into a waterway crossed by the new swing bridge. At the beginning of the twentieth century, living and sanitary conditions became much worse, because of the elevations and the divisions made indiscriminately by the poorest people. The rehabilitation began in the twenties with the demolition of some religious structures : the church of St. John the Baptist in front of the church of San Domenico Maggiore, and the Celestine convent in Piazza Castello. In 1931 Mussolini pursues a reorganization plan under which intend to reclaim areas hygienically dangerous demolishing everything that was not a church or a significant testimony of the past. Thus, between 1934 and 1940, while in Borgo Nuovo will inaugurate the Government Palace and the Palazzo delle Poste, in the lower part of the island were built new blocks in series instead of the old districts. The imminence of the Second World War, however, stop the demolition work . After the war , a new general plan sees in the building and demographic thinning the only solution to environmental degradation of the ancient town. The realization in the sixties of " IV Metals Italsider Center " and the gradual population growth overall , has caused the displacement of many families to new homes in the Borgo Nuovo, resulting in the fast depopulation of the island. In 1969, the City relies Arch. Franco Blandino the task of drawing up the plan of restoration is still in implementation , with which it is proposed for the first time the entire preservation of the architectural heritage, intervening only with partial thinning and with the restoration and recovery. Excluding some special plans for recovery and restoration of the property (the restoration of Via Cava , Piano Vicoli 1 and Vicoli 2 lanes and some restoration of historic buildings and churches that were too mild and sporadic and isolated , the recovery of the historic fabric of Taranto operation is still far from over. The discussion over the methodology of intervention in the old town had moments of great controversy between the proponents of the bulldozers, that considered worthy of being preserved only single monumental emergencies, and those who fought for its total preservation. The demolition of the Bellando-Randone palace next to the railing on Mar Grande represented the highest point of this confrontation. In response, on 22 November of '69 was organized a conference titled "A monument in Italy on save Old Taranto" and attended by the intellectual elite of the time, who sided unanimously for the its preservation. The art historian Giulio Carlo Argan, invited to speak, will say on that occasion: "The question of the historical center of Taranto is a matter of national importance and not just local. Retain It is a monumental complex that affects the entire country and to the conservation of which the whole country has to contribute." Approved by the Region in '73, Blandino's plan for the restoration of the old town was awarded in '75 in Amsterdam on the occasion of the European Year of the architectural heritage, but only in '77 start the first intervention in Via Garibaldi, which was followed by others in later years. Of particular importance is the work carried out by the CIPE program in the eighties, thanks to which it was possible to restore a large area. The years after 2000 saw a revival of interest , even private , for the extraordinary architectural heritage of the island. However, as in fact already happened several times in the past decades , several buildings that have been restored thanks to funding from the floor of the Community Initiative URBAN II, still waiting for a coherent intended use, despite the passage of several years.

Today we have to put a strong dual theme of the conservation and protection of the entire housing stock of the island, and the design of spaces which must be comfortable and attractive for a new type of people, very different, for the uses and way of life, from the original residents. The condition of the buildings is today in total abandonment: over 70% of the buildings has been gradually confiscated and acquired by the Municipality for static reasons and to secure the inhabitants. Since 2010, the collapses of buildings has multiplied, caused by the subsidence of the wooden horizontal elements and the continuous infiltration of moisture that cause the deterioration of the wall surfaces. Currently living on the island only a thousand of people, humble class, socially marginalized situation from the rest of the city. Is therefore necessary, in order not to lose irretrievably the traces of a remarkable past, a total rethinking of urban vision in Taranto, that put the center of economic interests, production, tourism and housing in the old town and that allows, through a serious methodology of public intervention, the re-appropriation and restoration, by private citizen, of the buildings, according to a standard and codified methodological approach.

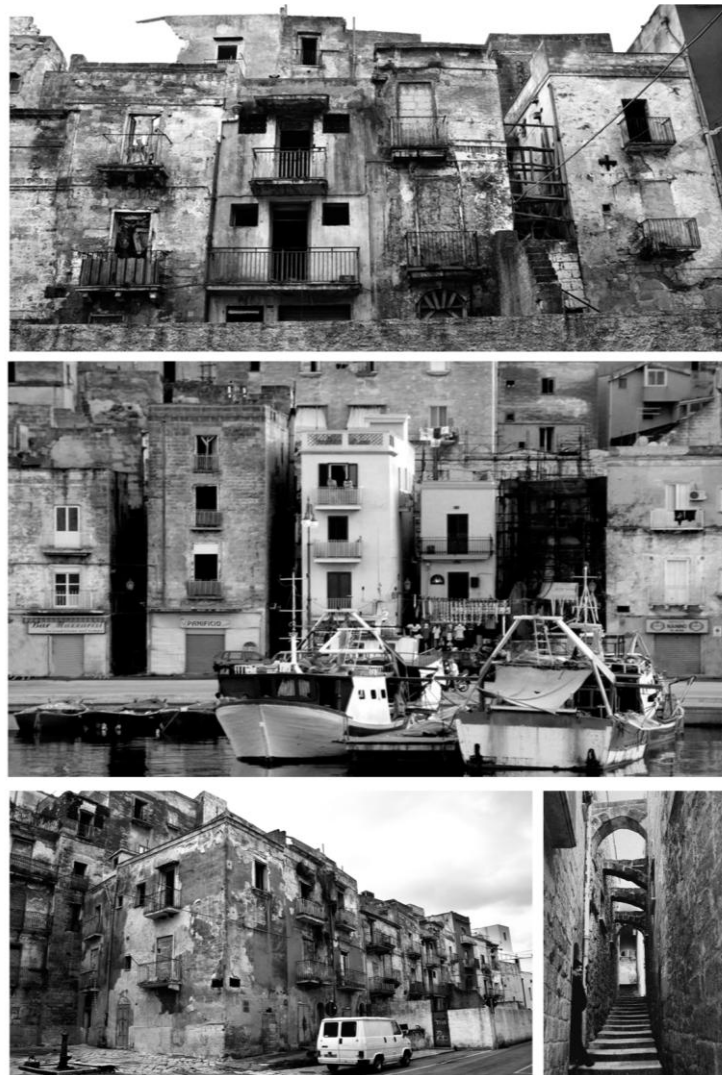


Figure 4: Photos on the lower part of the island. From the upper to the bottom of the page : the curtain of buildings - wall of Via di Mezzo; buildings in front of Mar Piccolo's port, interrupted by several postierle; Situation of decay of the pittinggio Turripenne; a view of a Postierla. (photos by S. Sgura)

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