

## **Palaces of the Nobility between 1600-1800 in the old city of Taranto: Architectural Survey for Urban Fabric Restoration**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The contribution is based on the study of noble palaces in the historic centre of Taranto, built between 1600 and 1700. These large buildings often impose their profile on already occupied terrain, incorporating existing houses in a new, unique palace. The survey and the comparative study of the architectural features has highlighted the characteristic any foundational elements of the architectural composition of these buildings. The palace projects had often a series of invariants related to the presence of paradigmatic elements such as, for example, a particular care in the design and setting of monumental portals, the constant presence of a courtyard or distributional atrium, experimentation in the design of staircase module. The analysis 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 20 important noble palaces located along the principal axis of the ancient Taranto, highlighting and updating each case, the structural and technological problems of each building.

Case of study of this paper is Taranto, more precisely, the historical center of the city, enclosed within the perimeter of the peninsula (now island) where was built the Spartan Acropolis of Taras, and where, in Roman period, a new Tarentum reborn around the route of the new Appian Way, after the total destruction of the Greek Polis. Today this part of the city appears like a dead city: in complete state of disrepair, the island is lived only along the outer perimeter, where there are still a few shops related to the port on Mar Piccolo and a few families of residents (about 1,000 people on a potential 35000-40000 inhabitants). Although locate in geographically central position, today seems to be totally isolated from the urban context for both natural caesura represented by the Navigable ditch and the ditch Porta Napoli, and, simultaneously, to the artificial boundary represented by the large perimetral freeway, built during the fascist age, which made the whole island like a huge roundabout for all those who need to enter or leave the city.

The abnormal developing of Taranto in XX sec. lead the growing of a vast urban area on the two opposite part of land facing the island (200,000 person in 2001), in consequence of the barbaric heavy industrialization which has been targeted by the city of Taranto from strategic developing plan for Meridional cities in the '60s and '70s. The old town, overcrowding and unhealthy, has suffered almost total depopulation over the last 50 years that has caused the total abandonment of the entire historical contents inside. Urban fabric, the design of the streets and the masses of the buildings, the shape of solids and voids, the extraordinary building stratification (today completely intact and readable), the architectural and artistic witness of his many religious and civic monuments which are the hallmark of the succession of the different cultures that have built the identity of the city, are now at risk of being lost forever due to neglect and abandonment. Beginning the study of the ancient center starting with the enumeration of the most important palaces, is therefore necessary because there is no comprehensive study on this subject, and because such buildings, often abandoned, are now at high risk of collapse resulting in irretrievable loss of the architectural object. During the course of 2013 have been carried out a series of studies that provide architectural direct relief and photo - rectification and catching of a

selected number of historic buildings in order to reconstruct, even with virtual three dimensional models, the original facies and history of each artifact<sup>1</sup>. It has been outlined a path parallel study on the history of each buildings, the constructive techniques , materials, workers, forming a essential frame of reference for in a field apparently restricted. Despite the frequent difficulty to found a certain date of construction for many of those historical buildings in Taranto, the period of interest begins with the objective consistency : the upper part of the Old Town , overlooking the side of Mar Grande, where are located most of the palaces case of study , has undergone several changes in his urban fabric, but it is always structured along Via Duomo (founding street of the historical city that takes the same route of the Via Appia ) . It develops, in the present configuration, can be date between 1600 and 1700, when begins to impose a new social noble and aristocratic class made of rich landowner and traders , even coming from Naples and Lecce , which begins to made an impressive urban transformation along Via Duomo and Via Paisiello, building new large palaces with cultural and artistic feature taken from Naples.

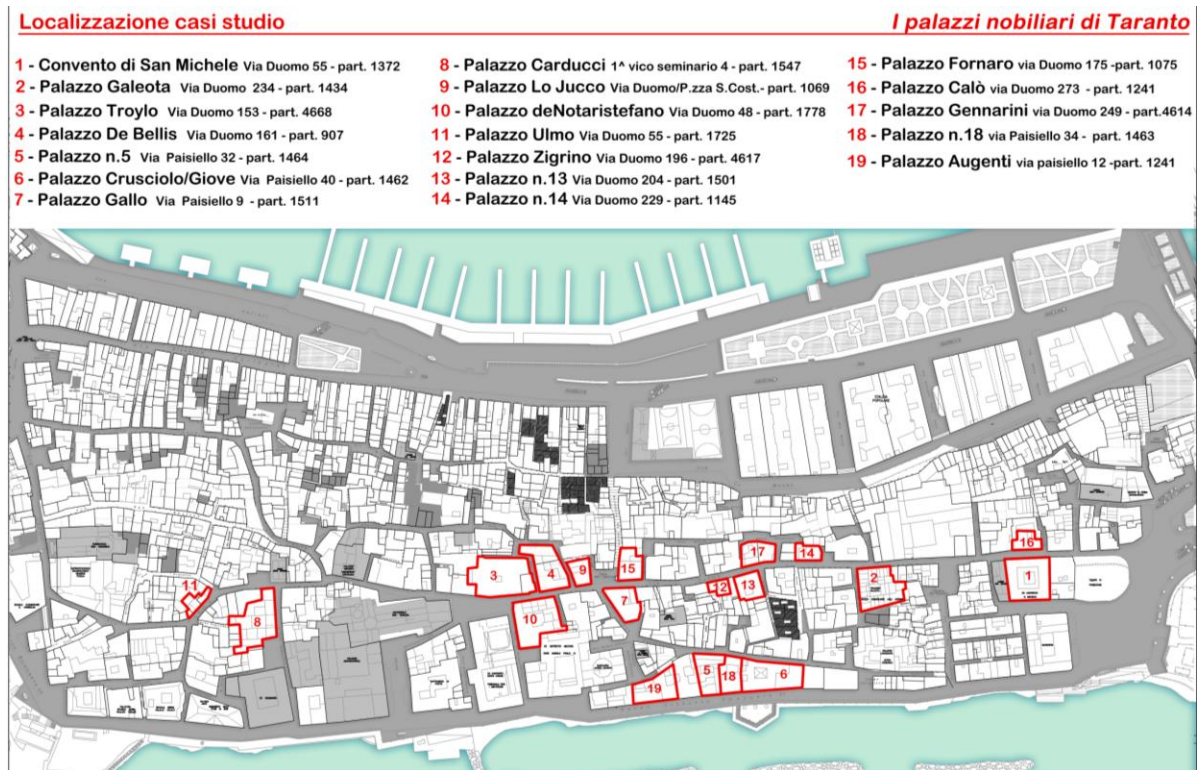


Figure 1: Localization of the historical Palaces studied during the *Redrawing Taranto Workshop*

These large buildings often impose their profile on already occupied terrain , incorporating existing houses in a new, unique palace. The survey and the comparative study of the architectural features has highlighted the characteristic any foundational elements of the architectural composition of these buildings. The projects had often a series of invariants related to the presence of paradigmatic elements such as, for example, a particular care in the design and setting of monumental portals , the constant presence of a courtyard or distributional *atrium*, experimentation in the design of staircase module.

## 1 MONUMENTAL STONE PORTALS

The monumental portal is always imposed on the principal road as main attractor for shape, size , material, decoration, inheriting from antiquity a strong symbolic meaning , which refers to the Roman *Arc de Triomphe* <sup>2</sup>. In Taranto historic palaces, the portal is the first element in a continuous spatial sequence

<sup>1</sup> The studies and the relief on the palaces are included in the *REdrawing Taranto*, Workshop made for A,A 2013/2014 with the students of the Course of Drawing of Architecture. Teacher Arch. Ubaldo Occhinegro.

marking the transition from a public space (the street) to an increasingly private context (the house). It is an element that, with its size, shape, material and decorations, invades the street taking the attention of the passerby. From the constructive point of view, portals are grouped into two main structural systems: the trilitic system architrave and archivolted system, which is divided in various forms and types according to the profile of the arc. In the context of Taranto portals have different curvilinear profiles, as often said, of clear Neapolitan influence: mainly, low arches, round arches, arch three-centered arches or polycentric “*anse de panier*” or mixtilinear arches. Next to the building system, the formal declinations of the portals are enriched with a great numbers of architectural variations related to the order and the decorative architectural plastic and formal type, with endless combinations and experiments in the entablature, in the pediment, in the brackets, in the pilasters side etc. Generally, the portal is framed by one or more concentric moulding surrounding the opening, often treated with complex curvilinear design, and decorated with elements borrowed (and reinterpreted) by the classical *Ordine Architettonico* (*Palazzo Gallo*), or with decorative slotted, with floral or geometric patterns in high relief or low relief (*Palazzo Galeota*), or even with a rusticated treatment (*Palazzo De Bellis*), of various kinds and forms. A distinctive feature of the portals is the strong *stereotomic* approach in the use of complex surfaces of the design. Portals is often, in fact, characterized by strong rectilinear/concave splay (*Palazzo de Bellis*) or convex splay (*Palazzo Carducci – Arsenio, 1650*) or even curved-surfaces splay that follow the curvature of the gap by creating complex surfaces with double curvature surfaces cut from the portal itself (*Palace Ulmo*).



Figure 2: Monumental Portal of Palazzo Ulmo (XVIII sec.) with a stereotomical double-curvature surface, and the Portal of Palazzo de Bellis (XVII sec.) with a rusticated treatment of the stones.

Most of this monumental baroque portals were made of *carparo* or *tufa*, compact and dark in color. In general, only in very few historical buildings with architectural importance is note the year of construction and the name of the author: in most cases we can distinguish only the century of belonging and attribute the work to local workers, the where art amply testifies of a tradition of craftsmanship that combines formal fantasy to the deep knowledge about the drawing and the cutting of stone in complex surfaces.

A great variety of architectural stone elements assume that the local craftsmen and designers had a strong influence from the French and Spanish architectural trends in 1600-1700. In addition to monumental portals, we remember the variation in form and technical feature of the vaults of the rooms on the ground

floor of the palaces, variously realized like *Leccese star vault*, *pavillon vaults*, *nails vaults*, and, in the the staircase rooms, we can find several original spatial solution alternating oblique-arches vaults and rampant-arches vaults.

The stereotomy<sup>3</sup> is a complex science, which includes deep knowledge of mathematics and geometry (the theory of surfaces and their intersections), materials and their static behavior and structural engineering practice and building management. The first spread publications is in the sixteenth century, when the scientific culture when geometric design in orthogonal projection becomes an important and scientific instrument to control the entire design process from idea to realization on site. It becomes really a science based on projective geometry and construction sciences, focusing on cutting blocks for the realization of complex surfaces, thanks to the publication , in 1567, of the *Traité d'Architecture* by Philibert de l'Orme<sup>4</sup> which marks the end court of this fundamental shift, followed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by a remarkable amount of other treatises on the same subject (especially French and Spanish).

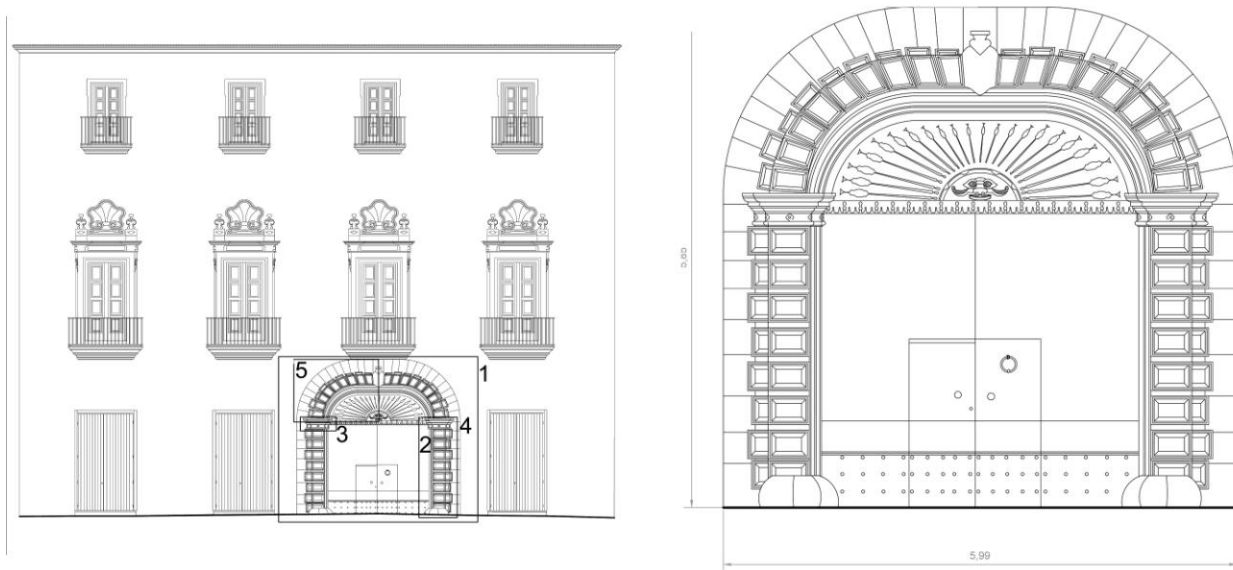


Figure 3: Relief of Palazzo de Bellis with detail of the Portal ( XVII sec.). Arch. U. Occhinegro.

## 2 THE ENTRANCE HALL, THE COURT AND THE SCALE

The scenic conception is typical of Italian Baroque, and also the planned alternation of light and darkness seems to play an important role in the design of these noble palaces: in close connection with the road, the portal and the sequence of light-twilight-light (series of road-hall-yard) attract the eye of the passer-by who, having passed the entrance hall, runs in an intimate space, the indoor hall (sometimes small courtyard), a reservoir in the open space where, in the most of Taranto's building, is located the *open staircase*, often placed in frontal position eye-connected to access in order to visually seduce the passer. The alternance of rampant stairs and a variety of vaulted structures, creates different and variously articulated typologies of staircases, that create a strong spatial dynamism. In some cases , the facade of the stairs follows the open space , and the atrium is then transformed into a multidimensional perceptual context which begin with the portal, example of which is the staircase of Troilo Palace or Palazzo Pantaleo . Derivation of the Neapolitan's fifteenth century Palaces , the open stairs of the eighteenth century organisms and are characterized by an unique architectural and spatial volume with a complex architectural structure that manifests itself through the dynamic alternation of vault-covered ramps and a continuous changing perception of views. The lights and shadows created by the perforated walls,

<sup>3</sup> For an exhaustive history of the Stereotomy cfr. Amédée-François Frézier, *La théorie et la pratique de la coupe des pierres et des bois pour la construction des voûtes et autres parties, ou traité de stéréotomie à l'usage de l'architecture*, Parigi-Strasbourg, 1737-1739, 3 vol. J.M. Perouse de Monclos, *L'architecture à la française*, 1982. See also Jean-Baptiste Rondelet, *Traité theorique et pratique de l'Art de Bâtir* ,1802-1817

<sup>4</sup> Cfr.: De L'Orme P., 1567, *Le Premier Tome de l'Architecture*, Paris

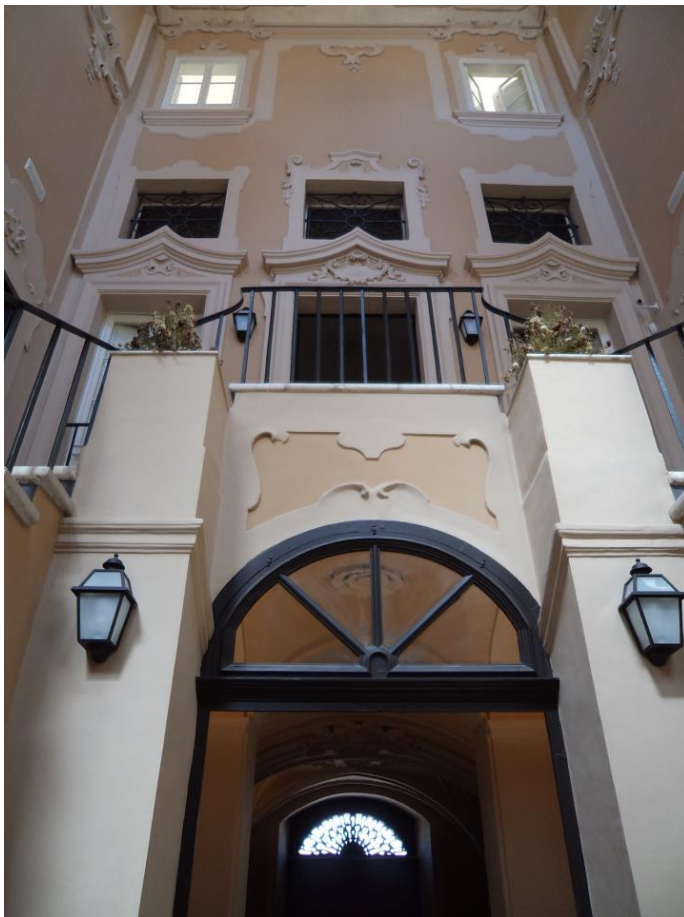


Figure 4: Courtyard and Entry-Hall of Palazzo Carducci-Artenisio, Palazzo Pantaleo, Palazzo Galeota

constitute a *plus - value* for the project to trigger a spatial continuity between the courtyard, where is a scale (internal) and the road from where the staircase is detected via the fornix of the hall (outside).

In this sense , the open staircase in Neapolitan style is a architectural reality that has the function of vertical connection but, at the same time , it is a space in which there is a synthesis of several factors that are realized in. Among the Neapolitan models of open staircase in eighteenth century the ones that stand out are the work of Ferdinando Sanfelice (or its affiliate): in Sanfelice the model of open stairs is an invention able to rewrite the elements language and the structure using an ingenious invention capable to interpret the wall of the courtyard (opposite the street and hiding the body scale ) as a sudden dramatic front and which combine to pierce through a system of ramps and vaults with a clever use of materials and colors. The inner courtyard, as well as giving light to the main rooms of the palace, has an important functional distribution: in fact, many palaces of Taranto are based on the outdoor balcony typology, opened onto the inner courtyard which is the only horizontal distribution element for the upper floors . Documentate and communicate all the complex aspects discussed here, according to the methods of the inquiry, means integrating methods, techniques and tools of architectural significance and methods of graphic representation with digital photography, infographics and modeling. In this experience of these analysis, an experiment was conducted on the methodologies of the architecture, albeit still in progress and the results are not yet conclusive: the recourse to the use of new programs for digital photography (Autodesk 123Catch ) have made possible , through the union many pictures of the object , to obtain a detailed three-dimensional model ( mesh surfaces ) of each building studied , thus managing to represent the complexity of the spatial complex, but at the same time also the state of conservation of the single artefact .



Figure 5 - 6: Palazzo Troylo (XVII) Scenographic staircase. Barbato (?) Palace (XVIII ?) Scenographic staircase.

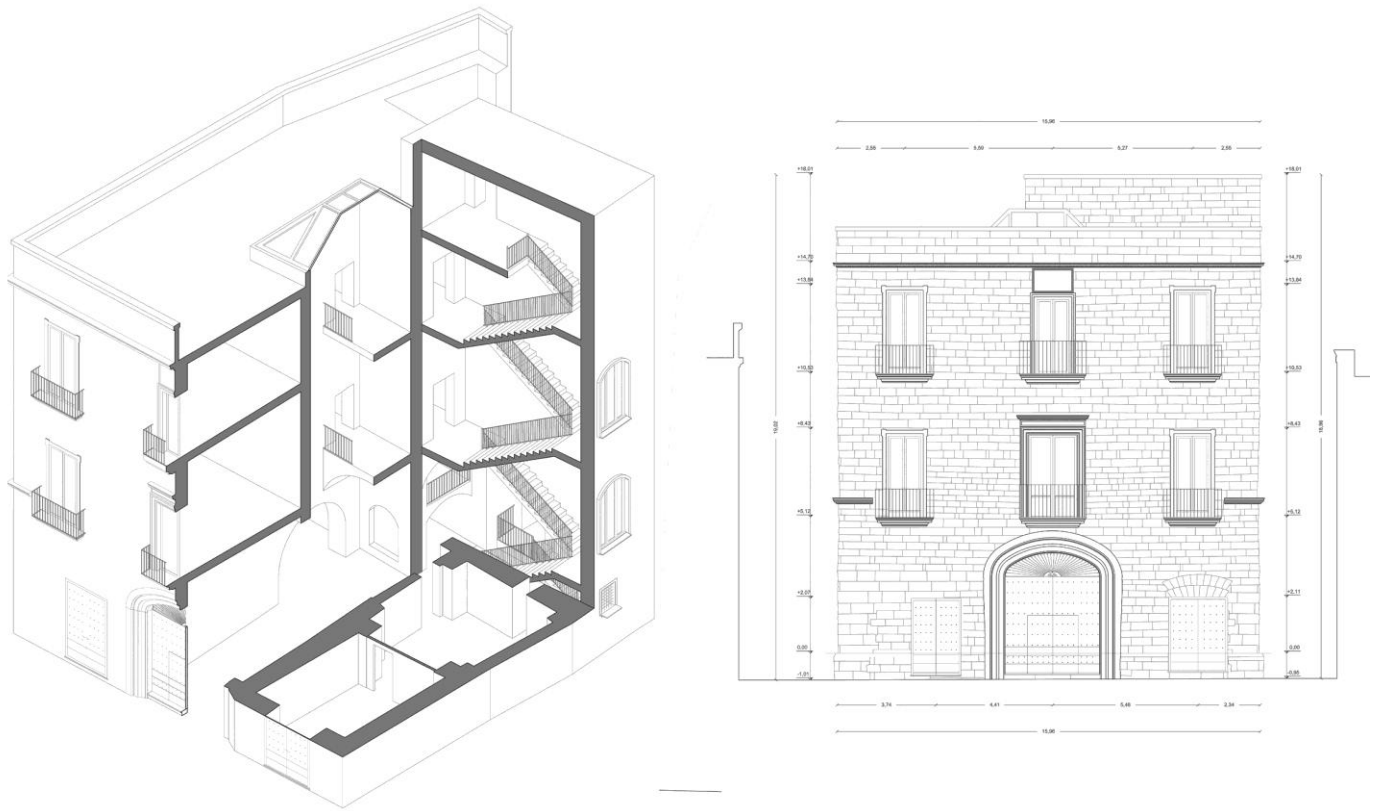


Figure 4: Palazzo Fornaro (XVIII sec.) Axonometric section. Front.

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