
The rural architecture of the Duce: the villages of Sicilian latifundium.

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ABSTRACT

At the end of the '30s the Italian government, a regime of absolute and conservative approach guided by *Il Duce*, Benito Mussolini, carried out an attempt of regeneration of rural areas: the Colonization of Sicilian Latifundium. The system was based on the *rural city* of Edward Caracciolo, the father of local town planning. Caracciolo's planning had spread into a network of houses with its farms and services concentrated in rural villages, where schools, churches, police stations, the doctor's surgeries, etc. may be also be found.

Despite the government's efforts to reorganize the region, it was not particularly effective for a variety of historical and social reasons, none bigger than the start of World War II which diverted attention and resources from the program. However, today we can find various rural towns in Sicily with many houses that, because of their low use, still retain the architectural and construction features of the period.

The author has been conducting scientific research on this topic for several years. He started with the archive "Ente per la Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano" (now called Ente Sviluppo Agricolo) to review the original designs, contracts with companies, ledgers and other administrative documents. Lately, he has been reviewing the personal archives of designers involved in the building program, finding original drawings, letters, sketches, etc. He has also conducted an architectonic and technical survey of the most relevant buildings, studying the possibilities for their reuse.

The work is particularly relevant when you consider that the local government has instructed the allocation of structural funds for the refurbishment of these rural villages. It is believed they represent a strategic resource of development of the rural area of Sicily.

INTRODUCTION

From 1922 to the end of the World War II, Italy governed by an authoritarian regime, headed by Benito Mussolini, *Il Duce*.

Owing to the poor origins of his family and his membership the Socialist Party's ranks as a youth, his approach in national politics was based on a strong support of the farmers' class, he carried out with numerous attempts to regenerate rural areas, in many regions of Italy¹; in addition to this social goal, it was a pragmatic approach: to increase cereal production.

Sicily was a region isolated, from geographic point of view, and backward, from an economic one, compared to the other parts of Italy, as in parts you can see still now. Here, the intervention measures were carried out at the end of '30s, with the start of the Colonization of Sicilian Latifundium program: a blend of economic and social standards designed with the purpose to fight the latifundium setting of internal, rural areas².

If you consider the origin of Sicilian Latifundium in only a few words, you have to go back to the Roman age, when Sicily was a province of the Empire. In that time they formed really big estates, the *latifundium*. Their constancy was preserved by the successive centuries because it was related to the profits of the ruling class, the nobles. Nevertheless during the XX century the meaning of the term latifundium was not longer related exclusively to the extension of the area. The latifundium's area were characterized by two specific factor: extensive farming and *gabella* tenancy³. So you had under utilization of the production capacity of the land and super-utilization of human labour. There you had large semi-desert land holdings, without houses or trees "where the man gives shade to himself"⁴.

¹ The principals of them was in Emilia Romagna, Latium, Apulia and Sardinia (see PENNACCHI). Mussolini also has carried out a series of plan in the Africans colonies, as Libya, Ethiopia and Somalia (see ORTENSI, p. 550; p. 580).

² See SAPIENZA, 2011, p. 15.

³ The *gabella* was a form of tenancy, very diffuse in the arable areas of southern Italy; it was particularly oppressive (see GALATI, p. 76).

⁴ See ACCASCINA, p. 192.

In the opinion of the economists of that age, this type of organization has been the principal reason for the economic and social underdevelopment of Sicily.

The colonization that was attempted during the Fascist era, which will be treated in the prosecution of the paper, was only a short but really significant part of the very long and tormented agrarian reform in Sicily. Infact it was the era where the most important events of recent history, such as the Illuminist vice-regency of the marquis Domenico Caracciolo, or the rising of Fasci Siciliani, or the proposal of Francesco Crispi and many others events⁵. In the post-war era the events have had a further continuation with the push of Autonomist Movement.

THE SICILIAN LATIFUNDIUM COLONIZATION

Although Mussolini fought strongly for the large conurbations, he built nearly 150 of villages and cities, in various regions of Italy⁶; his plan for Sicily was one of the most interesting and innovative.

The Sicilian Latifundium Colonization, was based on the "rural city" of Edward Caracciolo (the father of local town planning). The unit of his plan has been formed by the colonial house with the farm attached to it. They have been spread in the country and have been related to a network of rural villages, of different dimension, where they could have found the basic social services (school, church, police station, the doctor's surgery, etc.). The distribution of the buildings has been based on the size of the farm, related to the sustenance of an average family. The rural villages have been situated on the nodes of a squared mesh, formed by the division of the land. The design has been studied to balance the number of public buildings

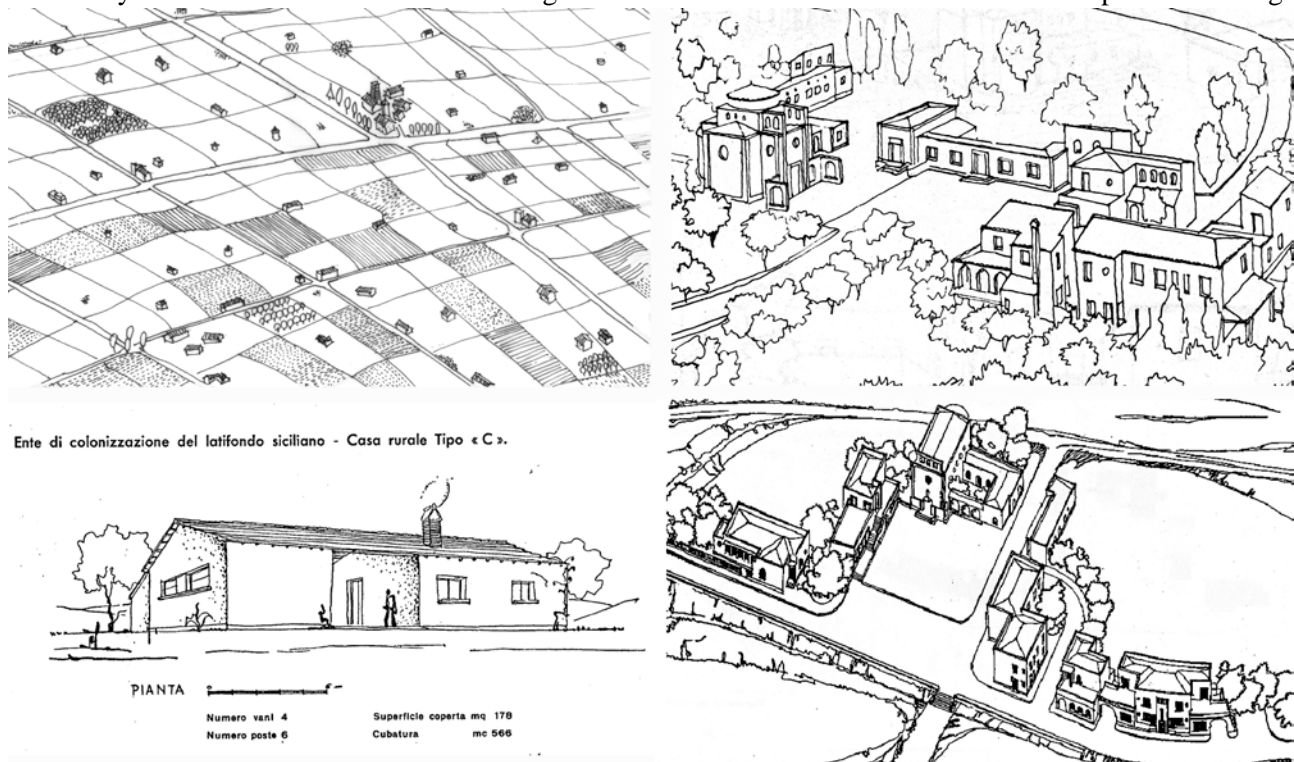


Fig. 1: On the left: the Rural City of Eduardo Caracciolo (above) and the design of the colonic house (below). On the right the rural village, Borgo Ferrara, near Palermo (above) and the rural village, Borgo Fazio, near Trapani (below).

with the consumers, considering the compatibility with the pedestrian distance⁷. The basic motivations have been very easy and pragmatic: the farmer spent a large part of its day's work in the walk from his home, in the little town, to the work place, in the countryside; moreover he could not take advantage of the assistance of his wife and of the sons that remained at home. From this argument it was necessary to locate the farmer's house in the land.

The theme of the design of the new cities is very recurrent in the modern architecture history. In particular both fathers of Modern Movement, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, have defined a plan similar to the

⁵ See FINLEY, MACK SMITH, DUGGAN, p. 206.

⁶ See PENNACCHI. Generally the settlements followed land reclamation. The best known example was developed in Agro Pontino.

⁷ See FARO, p. 69.

Caracciolo's one. In fact *Les Trois Établissements Humains* and *Broadacre City* are an attempt to solve the contraposition between city and country, industry and agriculture, conurbation and landscape, exactly as the Sicilian Rural City.

The program of colonization was realized when law n° 1 was approved by the Italian parliament in 1940⁸. According to this law, the owners of the estates were obliged to arrange the division of their lands, to build colonial homes and to rent some of the lands with contracts of 10 years. To support the residential plot, assigned to the private initiative, the Government pledged itself to build the rural villages; that were divided in three categories, in accordance to the type of the building and cost.

With the same law the Agency Sicilian Latifundium Colonization⁹ was founded to supervise and planning the territorial transformation. This Agency drew up a three-year program, to built 53 rural villages (23 larger and 30 smaller ones) and 20.000 colonial houses. During the first year of activity eight villages were built and more than 2000 houses, spread in rural Sicily. The start of the building works, from 20th October 1939 to 18th December 1940, were praised by the national press, as part of the propaganda campaign that was used by the regime to contrive the meeting of the minds. In the 1941 they started to build another seven rural villages. Then the Agency activity was interrupted from the war.

The rural villages are the most prominent component of the rural city designed by Edoardo Caracciolo. The Fascist regime engaged the intelligenza of the island for the design of the works: Giuseppe Marletta, Francesco Fichera and Luigi Epifanio (to name only the most famous ones) represented the perfect mix between the erudite and designer, the architect and the town-planner, the traditionalist and rationalist. For this reason, many buildings have points of interest for urban setting, architectural image and construction technologies.

THE URBAN AND ARCHITECTURAL SETTING

The architectonic language of the buildings is the result of a mediation between the opposite trends that are found in Italy and in all Europe in that time: the simplification of lines and volumes, from *Deutsche Neue Sachlichkeit*, and emphasis and monumentalization, from *New Tradition*¹⁰. For the particularity of the theme, you have to add other trends: the stoicism and the vernacular language. All this themes, softly mixed, are found in the buildings Sicilian rural villages.



Fig. 2: Perspective of Borgo Schirò (Palermo).

As its well known in this period Italy was autarchic. In fact, for the expansionist war against Ethiopia, the *League of Nations* had assigned to her strong censure. Then the economic embargo had brought a scarcity of imported goods, and in particular steel for building. So the necessity to renounce structural steel works and the parsimony of use of reinforced concrete, reduced the expressive power of the designers commissioned by the ECLS. They had to eliminate the projecting features, had to use wooden pent roofs than the flat ones and, for the porticos, the masonry arches than the pillar-beam system.

⁸ See law n° 1 of 2/1/1940, entitled “The Colonization of Sicilian Latifundum”.

⁹ In Italian language it was called “Ente per la Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano” and it was indicated with the abbreviation ECLS.

¹⁰ *Deutsche Neue Sachlichkeit* was the initial core of the Modern Movement. The *New Tradition*, showed from Sigrified Gideon (see GIDEON) in Italy was called “Littorio Style”. It was typical of the public buildings as you can see at Fori Imperiali Street or at EUR neighborhood, both in Rome.

In the urban planning a central role is carried out from the square, in which you have the façades of the principal buildings. The square is a protagonist in the urban planning of all Sicilian cities, in the large and in the small ones. The interpretation of the theme is different for each rural village; it depends from the intentions of the designer to have a regular and closed space or to simulate the disorder and asymmetric disposition of the nature.

TECHNOLOGY SETTING

The buildings of the Sicilian rural villages are exclusively in stone masonry. You have a large variety of masonry types, depending from the different areas of the isle. In each village you can find the use of local stone with the related texture, in according to the shape and dimensions of the material.

The floors are in general precast; the more common used type is *without provisional reinforcement* (it was indicated with the abbreviation SAP), a patent of a historic Italian pre-cast factory, the RDB¹¹. It is formed by pre-assembled beams, completed in situ with a concrete cast. The beams are the tile-lintels, modeled with slots suitable to fix the steel rods. The tile-lintels have been designed to be collaborative, to minimize the metal reinforcement. Moreover, you have the advantage from the more rapid works executions and from the lack provisional structures.

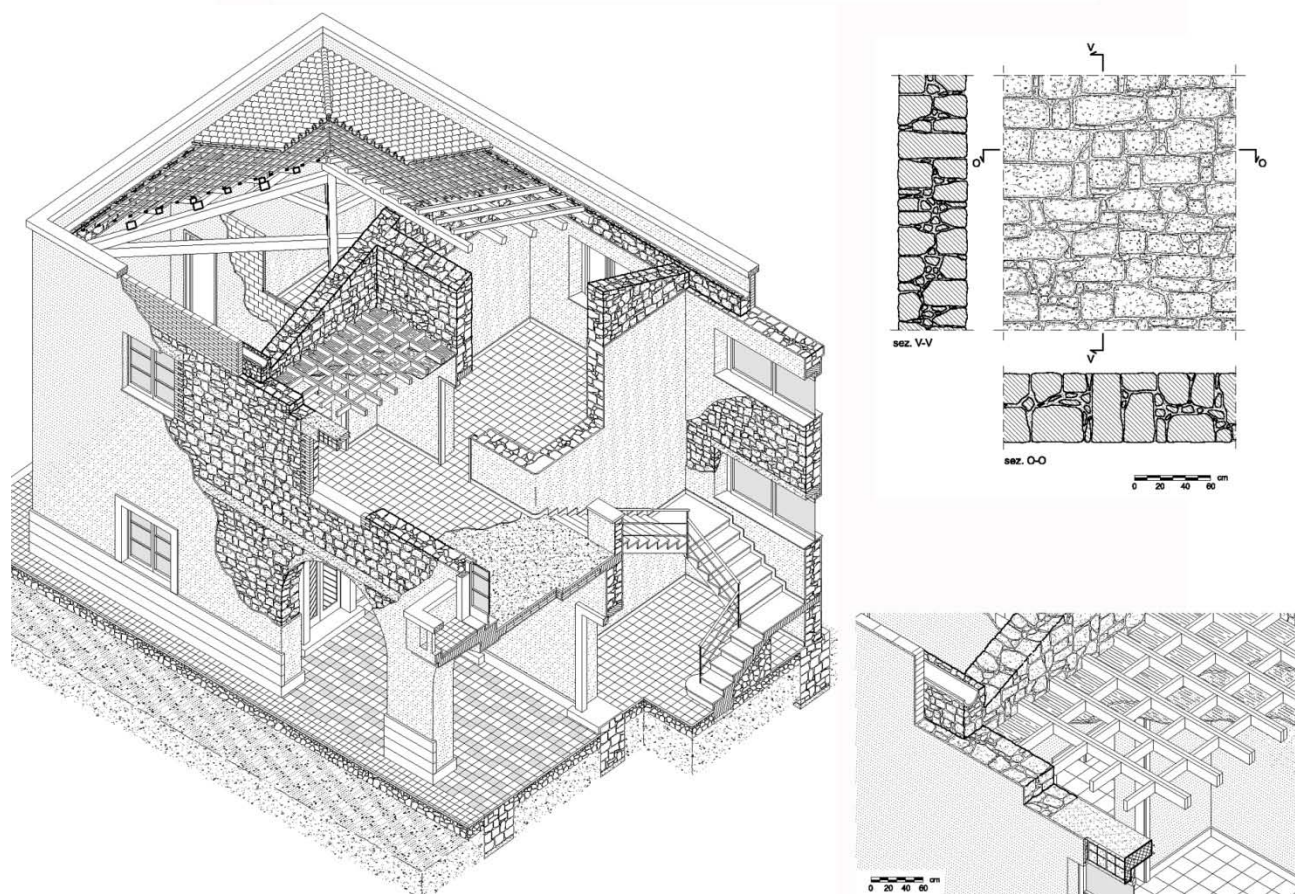


Fig. 3: Construction survey of Casa del Fascio of Borgo Giuliano (Messina); cutaway isometric (left), masonry type (top right) and detail of the roof (below right).

The roofs are in large number constructed from wood, with two pitched roofs, covered with plain tiles (Marseillais), more expensive than the traditional ones (tiles and canals).

Plaster is the finish type more variable; the prevalent colors are yellow ochre and brick red, in keeping with the shades of the surrounding landscape.

There are a few different buildings for example, the churches which have a structure formed by reinforced-concrete portals (usually five); the walls, that keep a little static role, are stone masonry, also for the considerable height.

¹¹ RDB was founded in Piacenza in 1906. Nowadays it is a multinational; in its catalogue you have a large number of building products.



Fig. 4: Different types of masonry; from left Borgo Giuliano (Messina), Borgo Guttadauro (Agrigento), Borgo Caracciolo (Catania), Borgo Cascino (Enna).

THE ABANDONMENT OF THE VILLAGES OF SICILIAN LATIFUNDIUM

Unfortunately, the rural city was an immediate failure; some villages and many colonial houses have not even started to work. The reasons of this were various. It is certain that the principle reason was the World War II; in fact its start diverted attention and resources from the regeneration program. So it is not possible to make a global judgment on the Colonization, considering that it wasn't completed. But, is possible to weigh some aspects.

In particular, it is plain that the settlement model had some limitations that prejudiced the possibility of success. In fact, Sicilians preferred to live in the city than in the countryside, for secular traditions. Other problems have been the restricted budget, the limited cubing of the colonial homes, the delay of creating infrastructure and the insufficiency of the staff of the rural villages.



Fig. 5: Some Rural Villages of Sicilian Latifundium; from top left to below you have Borgo Petilia (Caltanissetta), Borgo Lupo (Catania), Borgo Schirò (Palermo), Borgo Borzellino (Palermo), Borgo Rizza (Catania), Borgo Cascino (Enna).

THE CONSERVATION

The deplorable conditions of the villages in the Sicilian latifundium are a result of several causes. Two are the most important : the choice of inadequate locations and the absence of maintenance.

The urgency to show a concrete result, useful for the propaganda, lead to the building on sites which had a high water table. Moreover the characteristics of the soil was made worse by the lack of sewage network that contaminated and further waterlogged the ground.

But the more serious cause and directly related to the damage of buildings, was the absence of maintenance. Until the 1960's the Agency had attended to them frequently, to rebuild, almost completely, the more damaged buildings¹². Sometimes the works have been connected to the enlargement of the villages or to

¹² See SAPIENZA, 2012.

conform to new uses. After this time these places have been left completely neglected. The deterioration of the facade has exposed the building elements to a fast impairment that, not adequately impeded, has led to partial collapses. Small damage, not immediately addressed, has led to drastic consequences.

In many cases you have to consider that a large number of buildings show damage which was not serious and so their refurbishment would not have been difficult, because the degradations depend from the disappearance of the protection from the finishes. The fundamental role of the abandonment in the deterioration of the buildings, is confirmed by this fact: at the moment a few rural villages are working¹³ and their conservation is largely better than others. So the rehabilitation of the finishings, in a large number of cases, is enough to solve the bad conservation. The works might take advantage by the linear simplicity of the architectures, not any particular type of protection.

CONCLUSION

The villages of Sicilian Latifundium represent a very important resource, from different points of view: historical, cultural and environmentally; and it must not be squandered.

The historical aspect is very strong. In spite of disadvantages highlighted (in order to the settlement model and to the inadequate sites), it must be said the villages still retain the architectural and constructive features of their period, in the non-urban version. The failure of the rural city and of the rural villages, its most prominent component, reducing their usage have favored consequently their conservation; in fact the changes, according to the different uses, has been very limited.

Furthermore, their historical and documental value is very high, if you consider that these buildings are a concrete symbol of considerable part of the modern history of the island; an intricate mix of class struggle, social utopias and political actions, known as “agricultural reform”, that joins the southern Italy to many other parts of the world.

Finally, they represent a very important environmental resource. In fact, a large percentage of them, are situated in strategic areas, *id est* areas of low density housing, without surrounding development. The Sicilian latifundium has survived, still now, around the rural villages. But nowadays it makes for a charming landscape. In the past a place without infrastructures has been synonymus of hard work, desolation, difficult communications, malaria and other illnesses. In the present age it appears as a peaceful place, where you are able to discover a direct link with nature.

The re-utilization of the villages of the Sicilian Latifundium, is technically possible and socially suitable. However it is facilitated by certain measures under the regional funding programs, that would enhance a major portion of the historical and cultural heritage of Sicily.

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All draws and photographs have been realized by the author, except the followings.

Fig. 1 (below down): see ORTENSI p. 525. Fig. 1 (top right): see ORTENSI p. 511. Fig. 1 (below right): see ORTENSI p. 518. Fig. 4 coming from ECLS's Archive in Prizzi (Palermo).

A special thank to Gianni Heath for reviewing the translation.

¹³ This rural villages are illegally occupied (see SAPIENZA, 2011, p. 139), or partially utilized.