

Palazzo Lanza dei Principi di Deliella. From Ernesto Basile's Archive Drawings to Virtual Reconstruction

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Abstract

The paper investigates Ernesto Basile's unbuilt project for Palazzo Lanza dei Principi di Deliella in Palermo, through the study of the original drawings (1895-1897). These consist of 15 graphic documents containing 5 plans, 6 elevations and 4 perspective views, representing four versions of the project with different solutions, each of which can be found in fragmentary and incomplete documentation, attributable to different ideational periods.

The paper traces, through the redrawing, the path taken by Basile from the first to the last version and graphically tells the evolution of the building's plan: from the symmetrical courtyard layout of Palladian matrix of the first version, to the "L" configuration of what is presumed to be the final version, the threshold of the modernist turning point.

Monge's projection redrawing of the plans and elevations held in the Fondo Basile of the Department of Architecture at the University of Palermo and the three-dimensional digital reconstructions, accompanied by graphic readings, describe Basile's architecture, revealing his design process. The analysis carried out was useful for understanding the evolution of the distributive characteristics of the plans and the compositional balance of the elevations. The 3D models allow to visualise the spatial peculiarities of the design solutions analysed and return the image of a hypothetical fragment of the city that was never realised.

Keywords: virtual reconstruction, archive drawings, digital model, Ernesto Basile.

Introduction

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, Ernesto Basile established an intellectual and cultural dialogue with his father; Giovan Battista Filippo, his university teacher, on the theoretical principles of architecture and the search for a "new style" [Sessa 2010, p. 7] [1]. Following in his father's footsteps, he interprets this research "nell'arco temporale compreso fra il tramonto dei neostili e del romanticismo e la maturità dell'ecllettismo. Di quest'ultimo lo stesso Ernesto Basile sarà uno dei più interessanti protagonisti italiani nella stagione di transizione verso il modernismo" [Sessa 2014, p. 29].

The Italian architectural contribution to the renewal of the arts and architecture seemed unable to compete with the European protagonists, but, actually, the figure of Basile

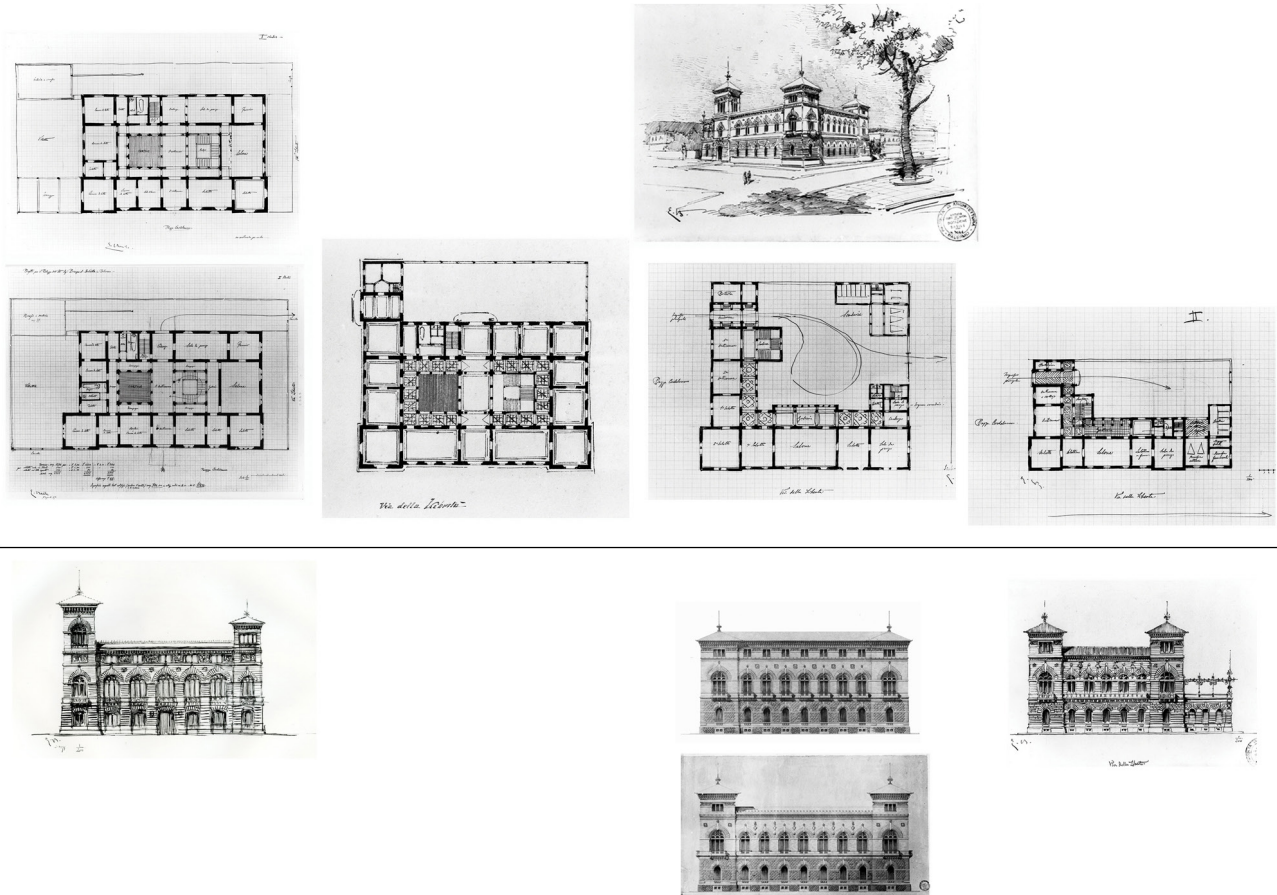
appears to be of great importance and comparable to that of the masters of his time, because "il suo approdo al modernismo può essere considerato frutto di un'autonoma, profonda ricerca che parte da lontano ma che è proiettato al futuro, condannando sempre la volgarità dell'imitazione del passato" [Sessa 2002, p. 7]. For Basile it is important to find a new style that has an identity, because he disapproves of the tendency of his contemporaries to uncritically copy architectural elements of the past.

While Art Nouveau develops in Europe, Basile's research appears slower and more difficult due to the socio-cultural context in which he works, resistant to any change [Sessa 2010, pp. 7, 8]. His studies are therefore an expression of his era, in relation to the international and Palermo con-

text, of which he was an undisputed protagonist in the artistic and architectural fields. From the second half of the 19th century onwards, Palermo experienced a particularly lively, economic and cultural climate. The city grew exponentially towards the North, continuing the axis of Via Maqueda, beyond the Quattro Canti [Ingria 1987, p. 37]. It was the period of the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, the Florio, Ingham, Whitaker families, who made the economy prosperous and built prestigious residences.

Ernesto Basile achieved an unprecedented professional success in the history of 19th century Sicilian architecture, experimenting with a personal formulation of a "Sicilian way" to Art Nouveau, which led him to move away from the traditionalist language [Sessa 2010, p. 10]. The dual internationalist and regionalist nature of Basile's cultural line made possible the spread of modernism throughout Sicily and the creation of a real architectural branch with echoes at a national level.

Fig. 1. E. Basile, drawings of the four project versions for palazzo Deliella (Fondo Basile).



Palazzo Deliella

Ernesto Basile was commissioned by many of the leading figures of Belle Époque Palermo, including the Lanza di Deliella Princes to build their own home.

The building was to have been built on a prestigious plot of land at the corner of Via Libertà, the city's new northward expansion axis, and Piazza Castelnuovo, where Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda's Politeama Garibaldi Theatre had recently been completed.

The lot was the initial part of an area of about 130.000 square metres, owned by Prince Radaly, on which Ernesto Basile had already built temporary pavilions for the National Exhibition of 1891-1892. After the Exhibition, the area was involved in a vast parcelling plan and in 1893 Count Ignazio Testasecca bought some of the plots, including the one on which Palazzo Deliella was to be built, and probably began negotiations with Prince Lanza for the sale [Persico 2010, p. 65].

The land, which initially had a quadrangular perimeter with a side of about 45 metres, was later divided into two parts by the insertion of a road, giving rise to two rectangular lots [Persico 2010, p. 65].

The building's design process is illustrated by the original drawings (1895-1897), kept in the Fondo Basile of the Department of Architecture at the University of Palermo (fig. 1). The analysis of the drawings, which will be discussed later, has allowed the identification of different design phases, due to the changing size of the lot, but also to the evolution of Basile's thinking and the changing needs of the clients.

Palazzo Lanza di Deliella represented the dawn of Basile's modernist turning point [Sessa 2002, p. 7], an exercise in style on the theme of the residence that led him to move away from pure eclecticism and traditional building layouts [Mauro, Sessa 2006, pp. 49, 50]. The reflection on the historical typology of the urban palace became necessary for Basile due to the intolerance "dell'alta società palermitana per le forme residenziali delle grandi dimore della villeggiatura e dei sontuosi e ingovernabili palazzi urbani di età umbertina" [Sessa 2002, p. 131].

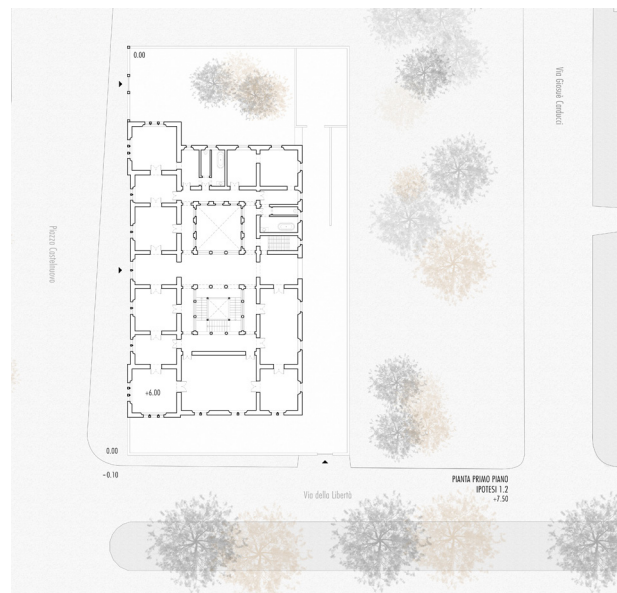
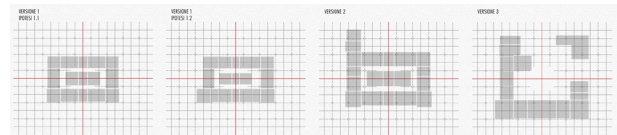
The studies of Jean Nicolas Louis Durand and Archimede Sacchi on the compositional rules for drawing the plans of residential buildings were important to Basile. Sacchi had theorised the Palladian method, in which the plan is rigorously organised with respect to axes of symmetry, the English method, which sacrifices regularity in the pursuit of comfort, the polygonal method, in which several regular

symmetrical figures are combined, the reticulated method in which a square mesh network is used, and the axes method, which takes account of perspective views [Sacchi 1874, pp. 30-44] [2].

To draw the plans for Palazzo Deliella, Basile used graph paper as described by Archimede Sacchi, when he introduced the square mesh method (fig. 2). "Molto usato è questo metodo, perché col mezzo di fogli di carta quadrettata riesce facile scompartire egualmente le parti di una pianta, ed è assicurata sempre una buona disposizione nell'insieme. [...] Esso aiuta nella collocazione dei muri e delle stanze, per determinare addirittura le spessezze e l'andamento dei

Fig. 2. The four project versions. Compositional hypothesis on a grid based on the method theorised by Durand (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).

Fig. 3. Plan of the first project version, second variant (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).



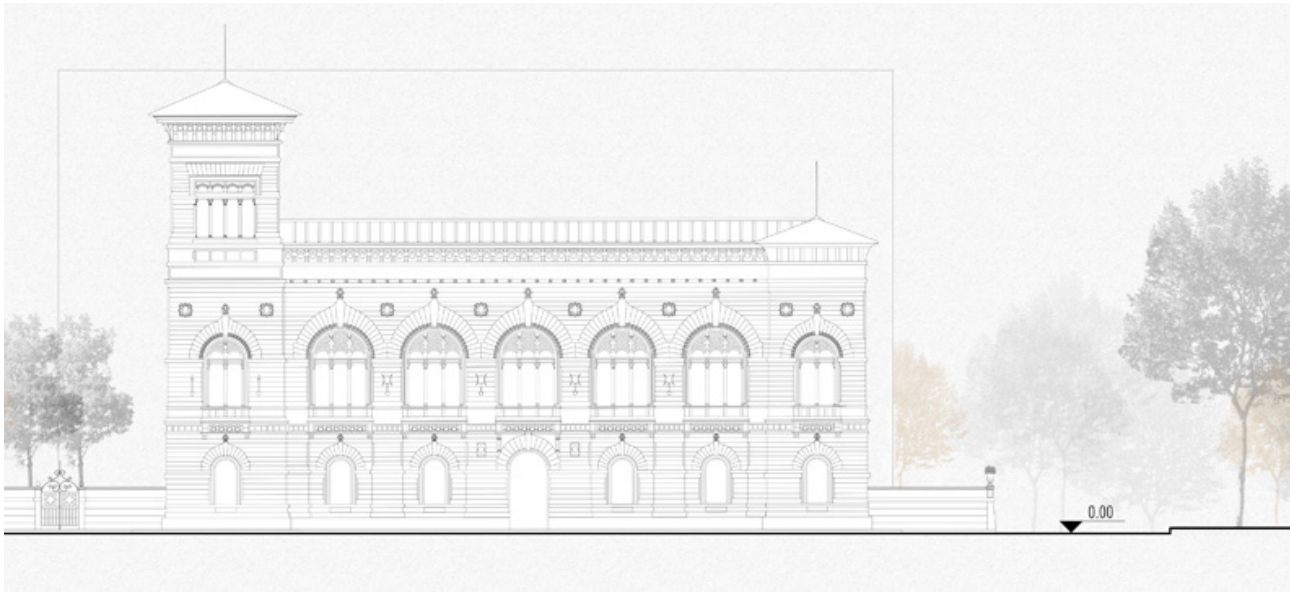


Fig. 4. Front on piazza Castelnuovo of the first project version (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).

primi, le dimensioni della pianta delle seconde; gli schizzi sono ottenuti così in una scala, o in un rapporto col vero, e nel fare in seguito i disegni delle piante, rifinite in tutte le loro parti, è ben difficile che si abbiano a riscontrare alcune disposizioni difettose" [Sacchi 1874, p. 37].

The façades of Palazzo Deliella, in Neo-Renaissance style, show a very rigorous division of the openings in the central body, delimited by two corner towers. Decorative elements are limited to the attic cornice with merlons and the radial ashlar of the openings, without resorting to floral elements and sinuous shapes typical of Art Nouveau. If, in designing the elevations of Palazzo Deliella, the difficulty emerged of completely moving away from a traditional layout, linked to the appearance of Renaissance palaces, in studying the plans, Basile started from a symmetrical courtyard plan in the style of Palladio, to arrive at a solution that recalls the empirical distribution of English matrix [Sessa 2002, p. 133]. However, the client preferred to give up the initial idea of the nineteenth-century aristocratic home and opt for the villa, a modern residential typology that was closer to the transformed housing needs and the

new models resulting from international changes [Mauro, Sessa 2006, p. 59]. This was also designed by Basile in 1898 and completed in 1907. It was built in Piazza Croci and demolished overnight in 1959, with the intention of carrying out a property speculation in the vacant area [Zevi 1960].

The original drawings

The collection of drawings in the Fondo Basile consists of 5 studies of plans in pencil and ink (3 of the ground floor and 2 of the main floor), 4 of which on graph paper; 6 studies of elevations in pencil and ink (2 on Piazza Castelnuovo, 4 on Via Libertà), one perspective ink sketch of the building seen from Piazza Castelnuovo, one perspective of the corner tower in pencil and polychrome watercolour; one perspective detail in ink of the three-mullioned window on the main floor in the corner tower; 1 perspective sketch of the entrance gate in ink [3] (fig. 1). The plans of the first version are represented at a scale of 1:100, those of the second at a scale of 1:400, those of the third and fourth

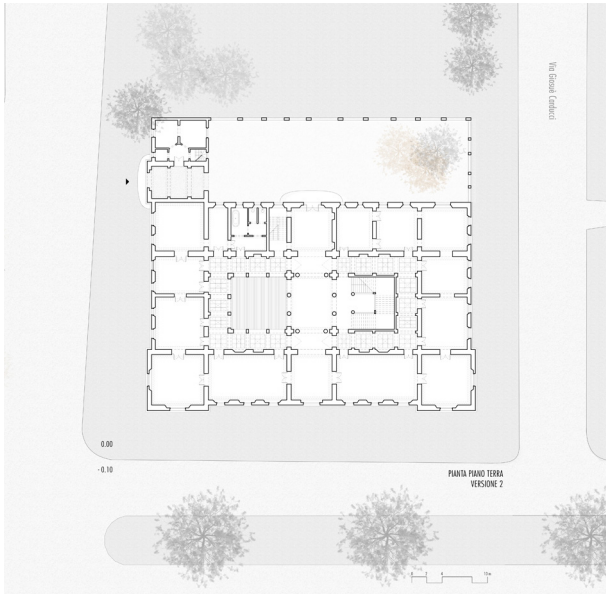


Fig. 5. Plan of the second project version (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).



Fig. 6. Plan of the third project version (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).

at a scale of 1:200. The studies of the elevations are at a scale of 1:200.

Since only two of the drawings bear the date (August 4, 1895 in an elevation on Piazza Castelnuovo and April 5, 1897 in the second version of the first plan study), it is not possible to reconstruct the design process with certainty. However, according to Ettore Sessa [Sessa 2002, p. 133], from a study of the original drawings it is possible to recognise a process, characterised by rethinking and variations, distinguished by three phases: a first phase with a Palladian courtyard layout that obeys precise laws of symmetry, a second phase in which the layout undergoes a few minor variations, and a third phase in which the building is arranged along the perimeter of the lot, articulating itself towards the inside.

The first version of the project shows a closed, rectangular layout, in Palladian style, organised along the axis of transversal symmetry and around a central core. This consists of two voids of equal size which house the monumental three-flight staircase and the courtyard, separated from each other by an antechamber and circumscribed by an

ambulatory which disengages the perimeter rooms, with the exception of the corner ones. The plan represents the main floor: the wing along Via Libertà is occupied by the rooms for social life (antechambers, lounges, living room, smoking room, dining room and sideboard), the other wing houses the private rooms. The larger side, with slightly protruding corner towers, overlooks Piazza Castelnuovo, towards which the entrance opens. A second variant sees the slippage of a corner tower; due to the insertion of a gallery between the living room, and the staircase and the addition of a third sitting room along the side facing Piazza Castelnuovo, which would indicate the client's request to satisfy more modern living needs (fig. 3). The drawings of the two elevations, kept in the Fondo Basile, showing the central entrance, could refer to this version of the project [4]. The first, drawn freehand, shows the central body with three elevations (ground floor, main floor and mezzanine) with five openings per floor and two towers, one of which is taller than the other, with four openings, one per floor (fig. 4). The second elevation, drawn with a ruler and compass, differs from the first in having only two elevations in

the central body and three in the tallest tower. The second tower maintains the same height as the central body and has only one mullioned window on the main floor.

The second version of the project, which occupies the entire square plot, has some minor variations on a general grid derived from the first version. The plan shown is that of the ground floor, which has been rotated to bring the main elevation onto Via Libertà (fig. 5). Basile does not give any indication of the end use, but it is possible to assume that the floor houses the representative rooms. The regularity of the symmetrical rectangular layout is partially disregarded with the addition of the porter's lodge slightly forward along Piazza Castelnuevo.

The third version, which once again insists on the entire square lot, represents Basile's true design turning point, abandoning the rectangular plan, organised around the central nucleus of courtyard-antechamber-staircase (fig. 6). The rooms are arranged along Via Libertà and Piazza Castelnuevo in an 'L' layout, and are separated by a long ambulatory opening onto the inner garden, which expands at the living room to become a large gallery, a filter between inside and outside. The plan represents the ground floor, into which the representative rooms (antechambers, sitting rooms, living room, gallery, dining room) move. The main carriageable entrance, on Piazza Castelnuevo, is at

Fig. 7. Fronts on piazza Castelnuevo (top) and via Libertà (bottom) of the third project version (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).



the far end of the building, in a slightly projecting position with respect to the line of the façade, and forms, in plan, a square block together with the porter's lodge. This leads first to the grand staircase and then to the ambulatory which ends at the opposite corner of the house, in which the dining room/sideboard block is located, considerably smaller than the previous versions, and the service rooms with the secondary entrance on what is now Via Carducci. The living room, the most representative space, "si offre alla vista della piazza antistante sfumando i contorni di un evento privato in una sorta di messaggio pubblicitario. La politica dell'immagine era chiara: dimostrare l'aggiornamento dei principi di Deliella e la vivacità economica [...], confermare l'appoggio all'esponente più autorevole dell'architettura siciliana moderna" [Persico 2010, p. 147].

The corner tower jutties out more than the line of the elevations, affirming the importance of its strategic position "anche da un punto di vista sociale, dal momento che l'angolo turrato di un isolato sarebbe stato visibile (ed identificabile con il proprietario) da grandi distanze, amplificando quel senso di individualità che sarebbe stato difficilmente attuabile con un palazzo inserito in una cortina edilizia" [Persico 2010, p. 105]. Basile rethinks the outdoor spaces, designing the carport and stables, which are located in a corner of the garden, and also tracing the manoeuvring path from the main entrance to the secondary one.

The perspective view from Piazza Castelnuevo could represent this version of the project, since it shows the same number of openings on the fronts and has a third taller tower at the entrance hall, marking the main doorway. Two axonometric sketches, part of a private collection, show the same layout.

Three drawings of the elevation on Via Libertà could be ascribed to this version of the project. They all show a symmetrical layout, with seven openings per floor in the two-storey central body, basement and two equal and symmetrical three-storey corner towers. One solution is drawn twice, freehand and with a ruler and compass, and differs from the other version, also drawn with a ruler and compass, in that the towers are taller than the central body. All the elevations show a definition of the ashlar or isodomic ashlar facing (fig. 7).

What should be the fourth and last version of the project derives from the contraction of the third, probably made necessary by the changed size of the lot. The plan shows the ground floor with the representative and service rooms (fig. 8). All the rooms are reduced, the main entrance re-

mains on Piazza Castelnuovo, the staircase changes, becoming two parallel ramps and maintaining its position near the main entrance; the stable and coach house are moved to the end of the wing along Via Libertà.

The façade on Via Libertà is therefore remodelled, according to the contraction of the central body and the presence, at the far right, of the stables with a terrace on the first floor. Basile draws an ink and freehand version, which shows some discrepancies with the plan in the number of openings in the service building.

The modification of the layout in the third and fourth versions denotes a change in thinking which comes close to modernism and which will also influence later projects, such as villino Monroy, casa Basile and villino Deliella itself [5].

Virtual reconstruction

The collection of drawings of palazzo Deliella kept in the Fondo Basile concerns the four versions of the project with different solutions, of each of which there is fragmentary and incomplete documentation (studies of plans and elevations, perspective, sketches and details of the exteriors, no sections or other information on the interiors), which can be traced back to different design periods (fig. 1).

The available drawings are not sufficient to describe any project version in its entirety. Of each variant, Basile drew only one plan, usually the one that included the representative rooms, i.e. the one that was to arouse the greatest interest on the part of the client, who wished to demonstrate his prestige through the building.

The process that led to the elaboration of the 3D model consisted of 4 distinct study phases: 1) identification and organisation of the drawings relating to the individual versions of the project; 2) deduction of the dimensions from the analysis of the plans on graph paper; 3) identification of modules and proportions, functional analysis (figs. 9, 10); 4) vector redrawing in Monge projections of the original drawings (figs. 3-8).

The discrepancies between the various original drawings have made it difficult to relate the plans, elevations and perspectives of the different versions, which do not always match exactly. This mismatch is the evidence of a troubled process that was never completed, suggesting that Basile must have been very keen on this project, which he returned to several times, with second thoughts and new insights, leading to his modernist turning point.

The quantity of drawings and project versions documents the importance of a building that was to be built on a very prestigious lot, where Basile had already intervened with the design and construction of the Pavilions for the National Exhibition of 1891-1892. Palazzo Deliella was to be the key element in the access to Via Libertà, and Basile was to leave his mark on an expanding part of the city representing the Sicilian aristocracy and upper middle class with their respective desires for visibility.

The use of graph paper for the plans, the representation of the graphic scale or the indication of the representation scale (1:100, 1:200 or 1:400) made it possible to easily determine the dimensions. The identification of modules in the plans and elevations made it possible to relate some drawings and to define alignments and symmetries (fig. 9). The functional analysis was useful to understand the evolution of the distributional characteristics of the plans and the compositional balance of the elevations (fig. 10).

Fig. 8. Plan and front on via Libertà of the fourth project version (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).



Having only the original drawings of some plans and elevations available, the digital model virtually reconstructs the volume of the building and the fronts –with wall partitions and decorative apparatus– on Via Libertà and Piazza Castelnovo (fig. 11). The latter constituted the building's public skin towards the town, its outward appearance to which Basile attributed great importance. It has not been possible, however, to virtually reconstruct the interiors and elevations on the courtyard, due to the absence of original drawings and other information.

The version of the project chosen to make the digital model is the third one, the solution most investigated by Basile, the one that was probably the most convincing for him, for which he drew several drawings, including a perspective from Piazza Castelnovo. Careful reading of this and of two axonometric sketches showing the entire building, the position of the openings in the plan, and the alignments with the configuration of the elevation on Via Libertà have allowed a conjectural reconstruction of the drawing of the elevation on Piazza Castelnovo, which has not been found among the documentation in the Fondo Basile (fig. 7) [Luna 2021].

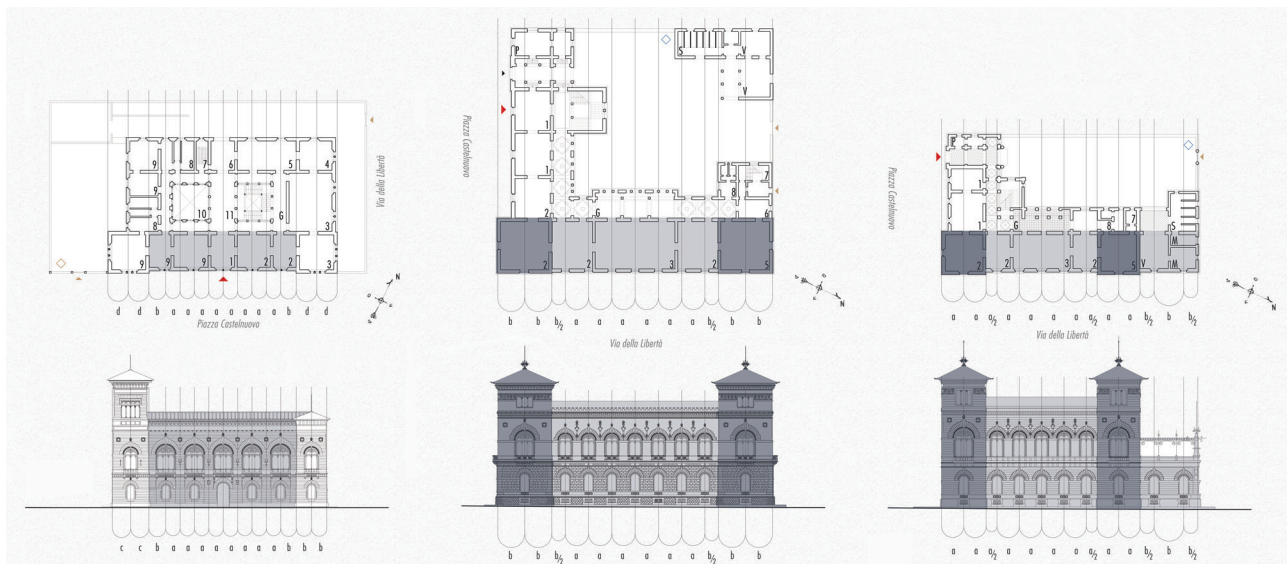
The 3D model

The digital model simulates an architecture that never existed, it virtually reproduces a design intention and as a copy it is not affected by influences, related to the contingency of external factors that occur during the construction process. "The construction of the model is not the construction of a simple image, operation often carried out for the project's representation, but it is the hermeneutic and critical result of the drawing tending to the formal analysis, true object of 'imitation'" [Maggio, Vattano 2017, p. 451].

The redrawing leads to a further level of knowledge of the project. The elaboration of the 3D model of Palazzo Deliella, as described in the previous paragraph, was preceded by the vector redrawing in Monge projections of the original drawings (figs. 3-8). The orthogonal projections are, in fact, the instrument through which it is possible to verify the project and make it visible in the absence of its realisation, they are the means through which the compositional rules are made manifest.

The definition of the model takes place in two distinct phases: the digital realisation, using specific software, and

Fig. 9. Study of the modules of the first, third and fourth project versions (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).



the communication phase, in which the representative choices are made and the images are extrapolated. Basile's original drawings give no indication of the finish of the elevations, so a monochromatic treatment was chosen for the views extrapolated from the 3D model. "The unbuilt projects indicate the idea of architecture, and not its construction; they are manifest, and as such should be represented. In the model, surfaces do not show material because it is never defined in those projects in which the graphic indicia are few but express, at the same time, the architectural idea in its most real completeness" [Maggio, Vattano 2017, p. 454].

The perspective and axonometric views extrapolated from the digital model of palazzo Deliella reproduce the image of the architecture in its real context. A perspective view and a safe point of view at eye level have been chosen to describe the perception of the built volume from Piazza Castelnuovo (fig. 11). The representation of the urban fabric, its spaces and volumes, its solids and voids, in its current configuration and with the insertion of Basile's intervention, has been entrusted to the axonometric view (fig. 12). The virtual model is added to the external reality to provide new images of it.

Conclusions

The virtual reconstruction of unbuilt architectures, carried out on the basis of archival drawings, is now a well-established practice in the panorama of research on the digital representation of architecture [6]. The extensive literature available concerns the redrawing, graphic analysis and creation of virtual models which, according to Migliari, are useful tools for the study of architecture because they 'build' projects that have remained on paper [Migliari 2006, p. 198]. This study is part of a line of research –the results of which will be included in a digital database– that has already seen the conjectural reconstruction of some of Ernesto Basile's unbuilt or demolished architecture, starting with archive drawings [Agnello 2013; Avella 2016, 2019, 2020; Garofalo 2016; Girgenti et al. 2020].

Making architectural ideas visible through mind's eyes other than those of the designer, generates a process of understanding that is not a mere reproductive act. It implies coming into contact with the philosophy of the project, in harmony with the thought and language of its author.

The redrawing is a critical tool for understanding Basile's

Fig. 10. Functional analysis of the four project versions (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).

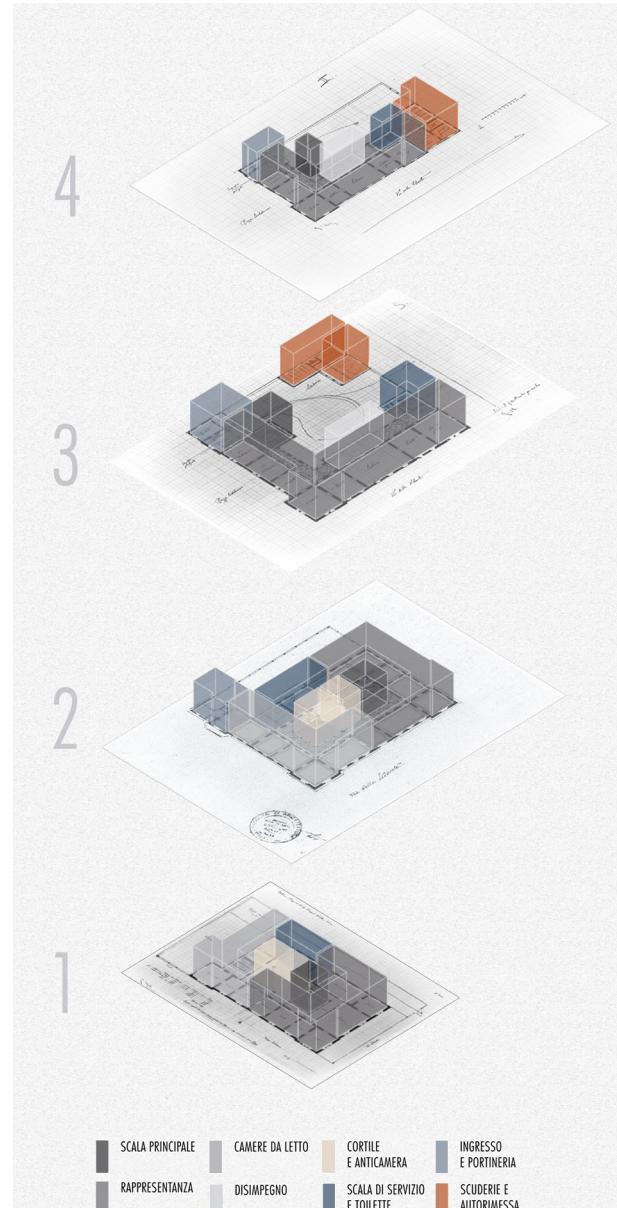


Fig. 11. Virtual reconstruction of the third project version (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).

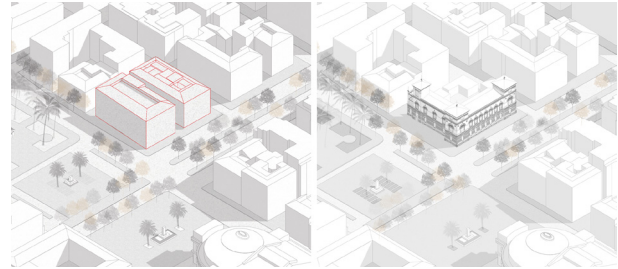


language, architecture and its evolution. The digital model provides a new reading of the architectural work, verifying the design intentions. In fixing an ideational moment, however, one assumes the responsibility of making a choice, obviously subjective, of marking the direction of a fragmentary and articulated design path, which does not necessarily correspond to Basile's intentions.

The process of analysing and graphically reading Basile's original drawings was intended to add a useful piece to the understanding of a complex design process and to the knowledge of an architecture that was never completed. The digital model, the final product of this process, and its virtual insertion in the current urban fabric have made it possible to restore the image of a hypothetical fragment of the city that was never realised, making virtually visible the relationship that would have been established between

the palazzo and Piazza Castelnuovo, Via Libertà and the surrounding urban area (fig. 12) [7].

Fig. 12. Axonometric view of the current urban fabric (left) and insertion of the digital model (right) (graphic elaboration by E. Luna).



Credits

This contribution is the result of collaboration between the authors who shared objectives, methodologies and results. The paragraphs *Introduction*,

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Notes

[1] For a biography of Ernesto Basile, see the texts cited in the references list: Mauro, Sessa 2000, 2006, 2015; Ingria 1987; Caronia Roberti 1935.

[2] The reticulated method is a compositional system theorised by Durand and based on reference grids that were used to compose the elements of architecture [Durand 1802].

[3] The list and reproductions of the drawings can be found in: Mauro, Sessa 2015, pp. 158, 286, 287, 348, 394, 395. The descriptions of the drawings, compiled by M. Milone, can be found in: Mauro, Sessa 2000, pp. 130-136.

[4] The plans and elevations reveal, however, some discrepancies: in both plans of the main floor the towers have three-mullioned windows and the central body has two-mullioned windows, while in the elevations Ba-

Palazzo Deliella and *Virtual reconstruction* are by Elisa Luna. The paragraphs *The original drawings*, *The 3D model* and *Conclusions* are by Vincenza Garofalo.

versity of Palermo, for having kindly facilitated the images retrieval, for his availability and his accurate reflections.

sile draws two-mullioned windows in the towers and three-mullioned windows in the central body.

[5] For a detailed analysis of Basile's design process and language, see [Persico 2010].

[6] Among others see: Dotto 2012; Maggio 2011; Palestini 2016; Sdegno 2015; Spallone 2017. Some disciplinary contributions are collected in the database created for the UID project: Drawing in Architecture Archives: <<https://www.unioneitalianadisegno.it/wp/archivi/>> (accessed 2022, February 25).

[7] The two rental buildings Agnello Briuccia and Benfratello were built in place of the palazzo Deliella [Persico 2014, pp. 223, 224].

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