

# The Construction in Progress of a Private Archive

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## Introduction

A few years ago, from an idea born in 2015 on the occasion of a specific study on the professional activity of women architects in Palermo [1], Dacia and Sabina Di Cristina, daughters of the architect and university professor Luciana Natoli (fig. 1), born in 1936 and passed away too early, in 1978, at the age of 42, started to 'build' their mother's archive.

Natoli's young age might suggest a modest size of the archive; in fact, the opposite is absolutely the case. It was in fact the sheer quantity of rolls, files, heliographic copies, drawings on tracing paper and sketch paper, photographs, correspondence, books and magazines that for so many years prevented her daughters from ordering this great mass of content. Luciana Natoli was an inte-

gral architect whose interests ranged from architectural design to the design of city and the territory, from the design of objects to interior renovation.

The archive is not only composed of the graphic outcomes of these interests.

Books, journals, papers written in her own hand, university exercises, degree theses and student work are part of the archive. Luciana Natoli was in fact a brilliant lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo from 1965, the year in which she won the competition for assistant professor of Architectural Composition [2].

The opportunity of a funding obtained for a project entitled *Archivi delle donne Architetto nel Novecento* (Archives of Women Architects in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) [3], coordi-

*This article was written upon invitation to frame the topic, not submitted to anonymous review, published under the editorial director's responsibility.*



Fig. 1. Luciana Natoli with Alberto Samonà in an exam commission (Luciana Natoli Archive).

nated by the archivist Antonia D'Antoni under the scientific responsibility of Paola Barbera, presented in 2017 by the *Fondazione Salvare Palermo* to the General Directorate for Archives (DGA) of the Ministry of Culture, allowed the cataloguing of the archive material to begin. The work has made it possible to catalogue, at present, 382 archival units consisting of 457 rolls, 33 volumes, 116 envelopes, 224 files, 2 folders, 5 binders, 1 box, 1 notebook, 3 address books and 1 diary [4]. This quantity allows us to understand the activity carried out by Luciana Natoli during her career.

The biographical notes show that an interest in study and research characterised her intellectual approach as early as his formative years at the Faculty of Architecture. Already in 1959, a year before graduating, on behalf of the Director of the Faculty's Institute of Urban Planning, she collaborated with the Superintendency of Antiquities for Western Sicily on the interpretation of Solunto's urban layout [5]. The excavation campaign in Solunto, which began in 1825, is still going on. Her fascination for archaeology, probably stemming from the classical studies she pursued at the Garibaldi High School with Giusto Monaco [6], led her to the elaboration of her thesis on a project on the slopes of the Doric temple of Segesta. Luciana Natoli's propensity to tackle the project at various scales, from the spatial scale to the construction details and the design of the furnishing elements intended as an integral part of the designed spatial *unicum* [7], is already evident in her thesis.

### An academic project

A university paper from 1959 prepared for the Composition Course held by Professor Vittorio Ziino [8] concerning the design of a hospital for polyomelitics was found in the archive. A number of heliographic copies concerning the general plan, elevations and a 1:50 scale detail of the floor plan of the ward block were found in an A4 file (fig. 2).

From the few documentary indications, it was possible to digitally reconstruct the project in order to understand both Luciana Natoli's approach to the subject of hospital architecture and the language adopted.

The exercise was not assigned a specific location, so it is a project that combines the compositional exercise on space and the functional component.

This 'imagined' place was predominantly flat, with a steeper slope towards the north side, as can be seen from the orientation indication in the general plan and the ground line in the elevation drawing.

The complex consisted of six buildings of different heights; four of these were connected to each other while the other two, the administration, pharmacy and training block and the one for the headmaster's residence, remained isolated (fig. 3).

The ward block, the services block, the medical care block and the contagious ward were shaped like two

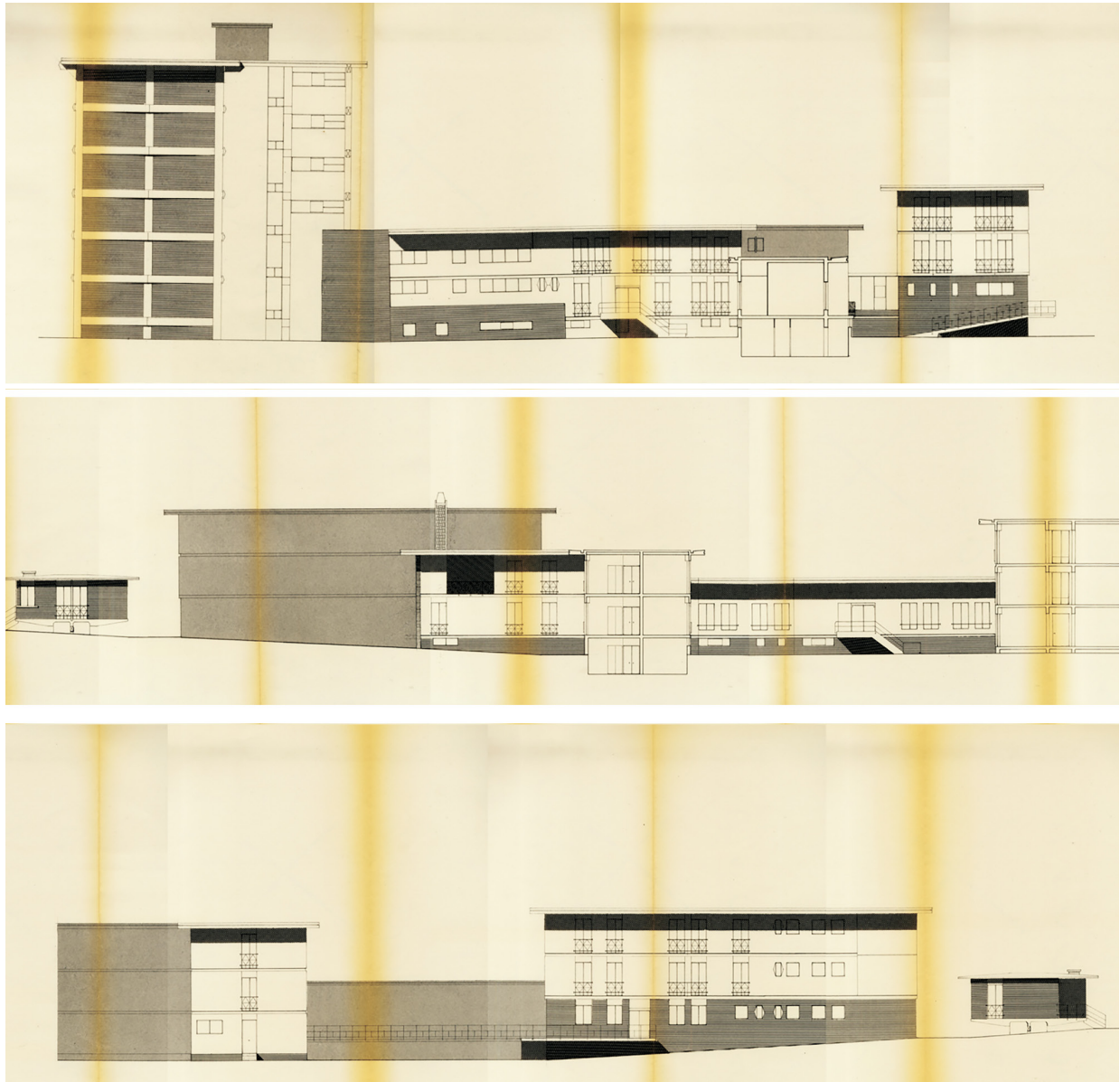


Fig. 2. Elevations of the Hospital for poliomyelitics, 1959 (Luciana Natoli Archive).

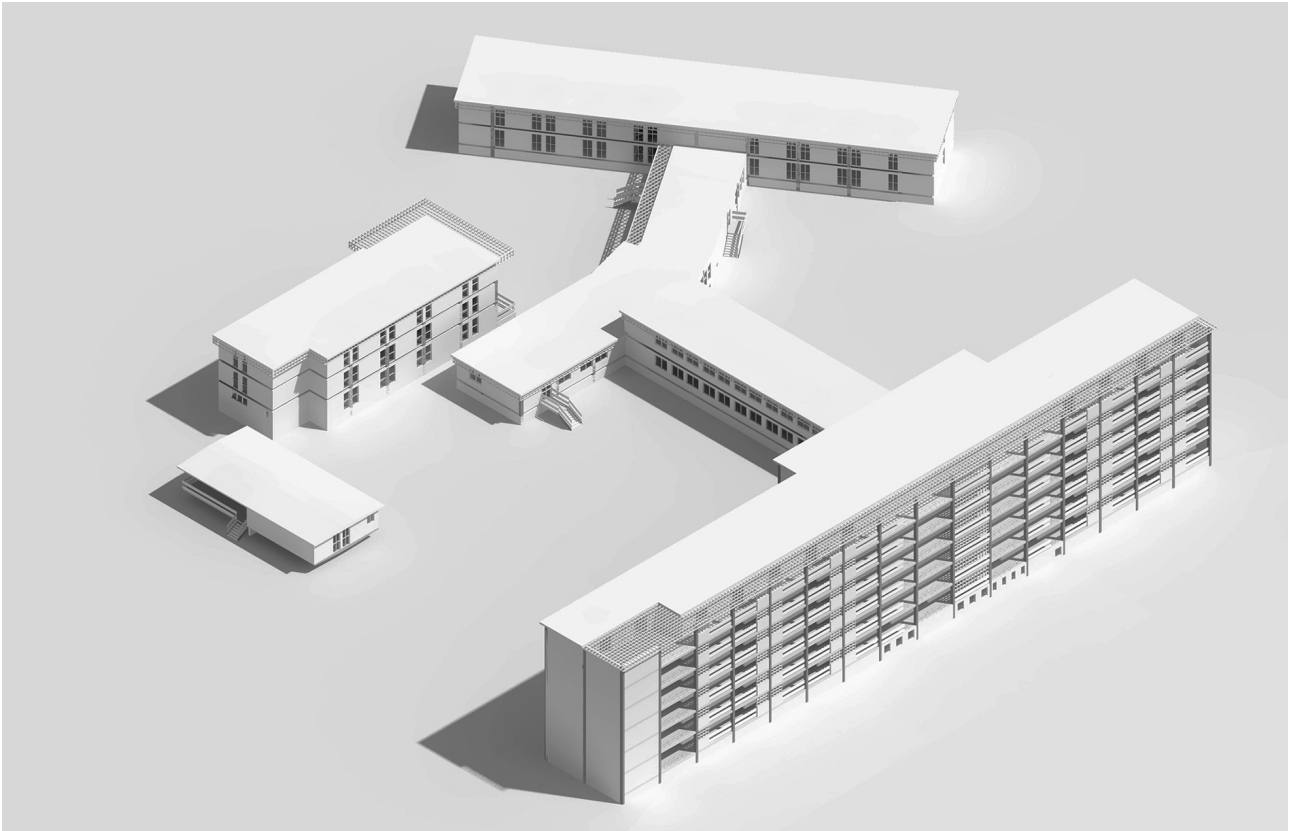


Fig. 3. Axonometric view of the Hospital for poliomyelitics (graphic elaboration by Eleonora Gelardi).

inverted “T”, rotated towards each other. This system finds a compositional logic in a general scheme consisting of two squares slightly offset from each other which define the rigidity of the layout, which is contrasted by the smooth design of the garden.

From the drawings found in the archive [9], it was possible to redraw the design idea of the project through the ‘construction’ of three-dimensional images that allow the logic of the project to be read more immediately.

The entrance to the hospital complex was probably from the south-east in a space, a hinge between the

service-degentry block and the medical-contact block, where functions for both staff and patients and visitors were sorted.

The six-storey high in-patient block, in addition to the ground floor, contained fourteen rooms per floor for a total of 336 patients in the entire block. This calculation was possible from the double interpretation of the plan detail at a scale of 1:50 and from the elevations and is assumed to be a number close to that requested by the course lecturer.

The façade on the north side is marked by deep loggias punctuated by *brise-soleil* (fig. 4), while the south-facing

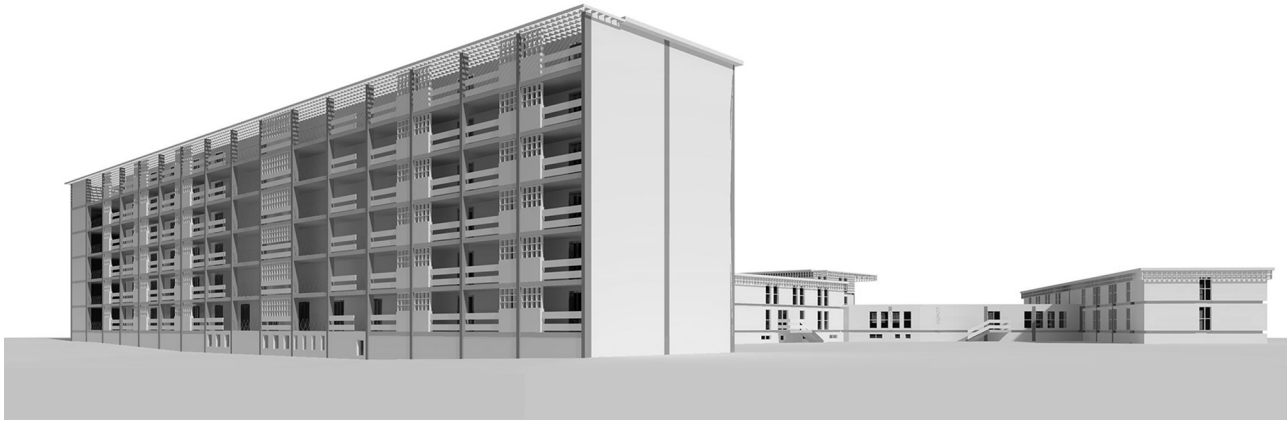


Fig. 4. Perspective view of the service-degentry block graphic elaboration by Eleonora Gelardi).

side is punctuated by large square windows and ribbon windows where the wards block intersects with the services block.

Trusses marked the crowning of the buildings or highlighted the access parts. The plinth, the *brise-soleil* of the wards, the lattice-work iron railings in the loggias or with a rhombus design and the crowning, hint at timid signs of adherence to the neo-liberty language that would instead be more disruptive, six years later, in the project for the “GH” building designed together with Umberto Di Cristina, that would win the regional IN-ARCH award in 1966.

### The first realization

As it is almost always the case for a young architecture graduate, the first client is very often a relative or friend. This was the case for Luciana Natoli.

In 1961 she designed the holiday home for his uncle’s family. It is a small house of 84 square metres on one level that can be considered a small jewel of a synthesis of her skill. In fact, the architect pays attention to every detail, from the landscaping to the architecture and the interior design.

The house, located close to the sea, is in a coastal location in the province of Messina not far from Marina di Patti. The house is situated between the road and the

beach between which there is a difference in height of about 3 m.

Luciana Natoli’s project, unlike the neighboring houses, is organized on one single floor, so that only the roof can be perceived from the street and the architectural volume becomes part of the landscape.

The house is accessed via a small driveway, located orthogonally to the SS113 road, which leads to a subterranean widening used for car parking.

The layout, very simple and in load-bearing masonry, is formed by a rectangle divided into two parts of different sizes; one, square in shape, contains the living area with the living room and kitchen, the other, destined for the sleeping area, houses three bedrooms and the bathroom. A lower volume, towards the street, contains the secondary entrance and the room for a possible guest. The roof of the two volumes is flat and characterized by an overhang of approximately 50 cm, made of fair-faced reinforced concrete, around the entire perimeter (fig. 5).

The real particularity of this small house is the treatment of the masonry. Luciana Natoli designed an exposed brickwork with a stylized joint for three quarters of the elevations, leaving the part immediately below the roof plastered in white. A heliographic copy of the details, measuring 99.2 x 148.6 cm, informs us of the attention to detail paid by the architect, who designed a very particular corner solution by alternating the bricks

Fig. 5. House in Marina di Patti, plan (graphic elaboration by Eleonora Gelardi).

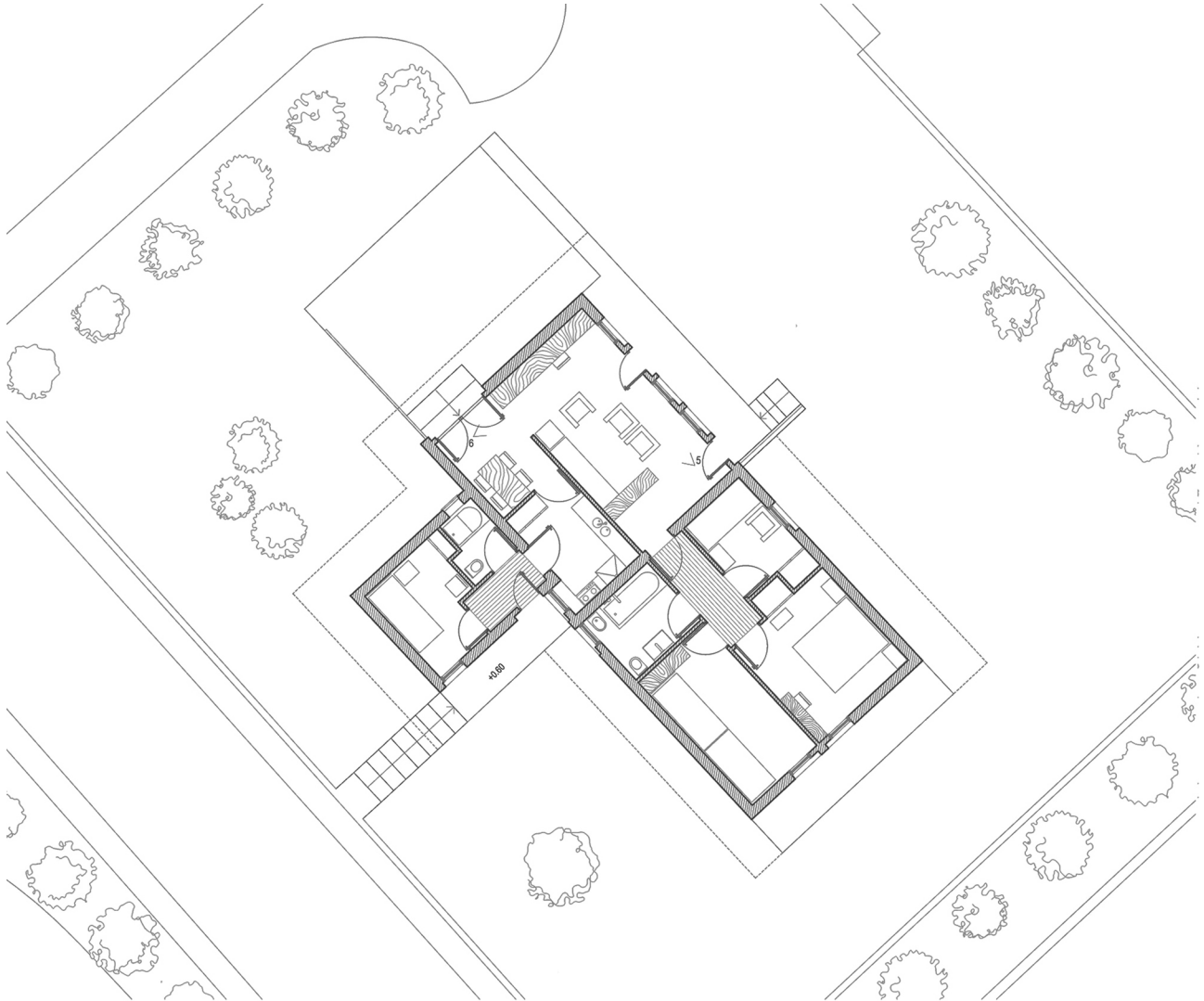


Fig. 6. House in Marina di Patti, construction details (Luciana Natoli Archive).

Fig. 7. Historical photo (Luciana Natoli Archive).

with an overhang that gives plasticity and three-dimensionality to the corner itself (figs. 6, 7).

High sunshade walls, made of perforated bricks, mark the entrances to the dwelling, which opens towards the sea through large rectangular openings, while at the back, towards the street, it remains tightly closed except for the presence of two small windows.

### An unrealized house

In 1977, Luciana Natoli designed a single-family house for the Modica family to be built in Mondello on land belonging to the Consorzio Strade Fondo Anfossi destined for large-scale subdivision. A place close to the sea and not far from the city that began to develop in the Sixties when citrus have grown and the countryside gave way to fine single-family houses inhabited by the Palermo bourgeoisie.

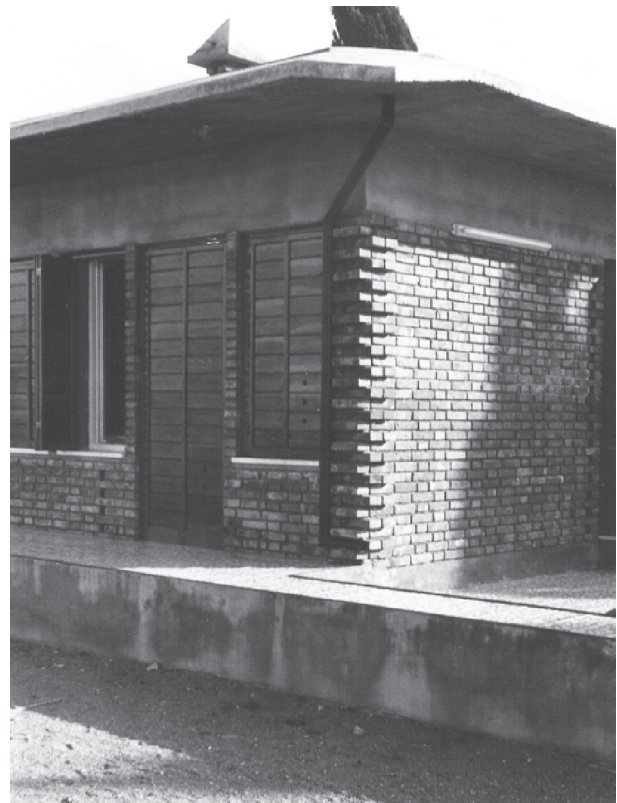
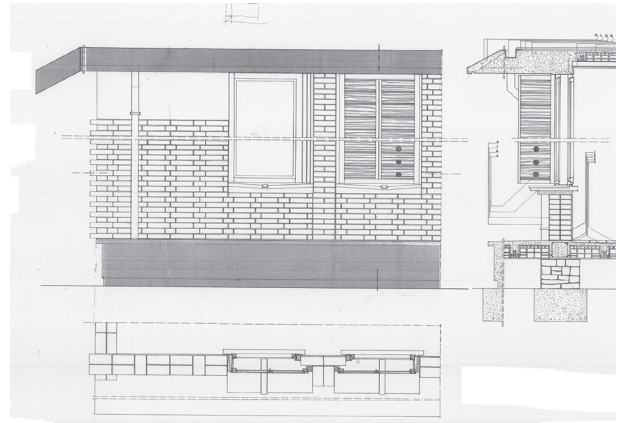
In the archive there is a file containing three folded heliographic copies, all 55 x 29.7 cm in size, relating to the plans on a scale of 1:100 and several freehand study drawings on light sketch paper relating to the elevations and sections (fig. 8).

From these drawings, it was possible to digitally reconstruct the house and return three-dimensional images that inform the possible formal configuration of the house.

The element on which the project is articulated is the central square patio located at - 2.50 m, onto which the basement and ground floor rooms and the first floor terraces overlook. The latter has a lower cubature than the levels below, and the rest of the area, corresponding to the roofs of the first floor, is designed by Luciana Natoli as a series of garden-roofs at different heights which follow the heights of the rooms below.

The ground floor, in fact, is developed on three different heights: the one of the entrance (0.00 m), the one for of the raised basement (+ 0.84 m), on which the sleeping and living areas are arranged, and a third height (+ 1.30 m), corresponding to the kitchen.

Two different stair systems allow access to the ground floor from the basement. Another C-shaped staircase,



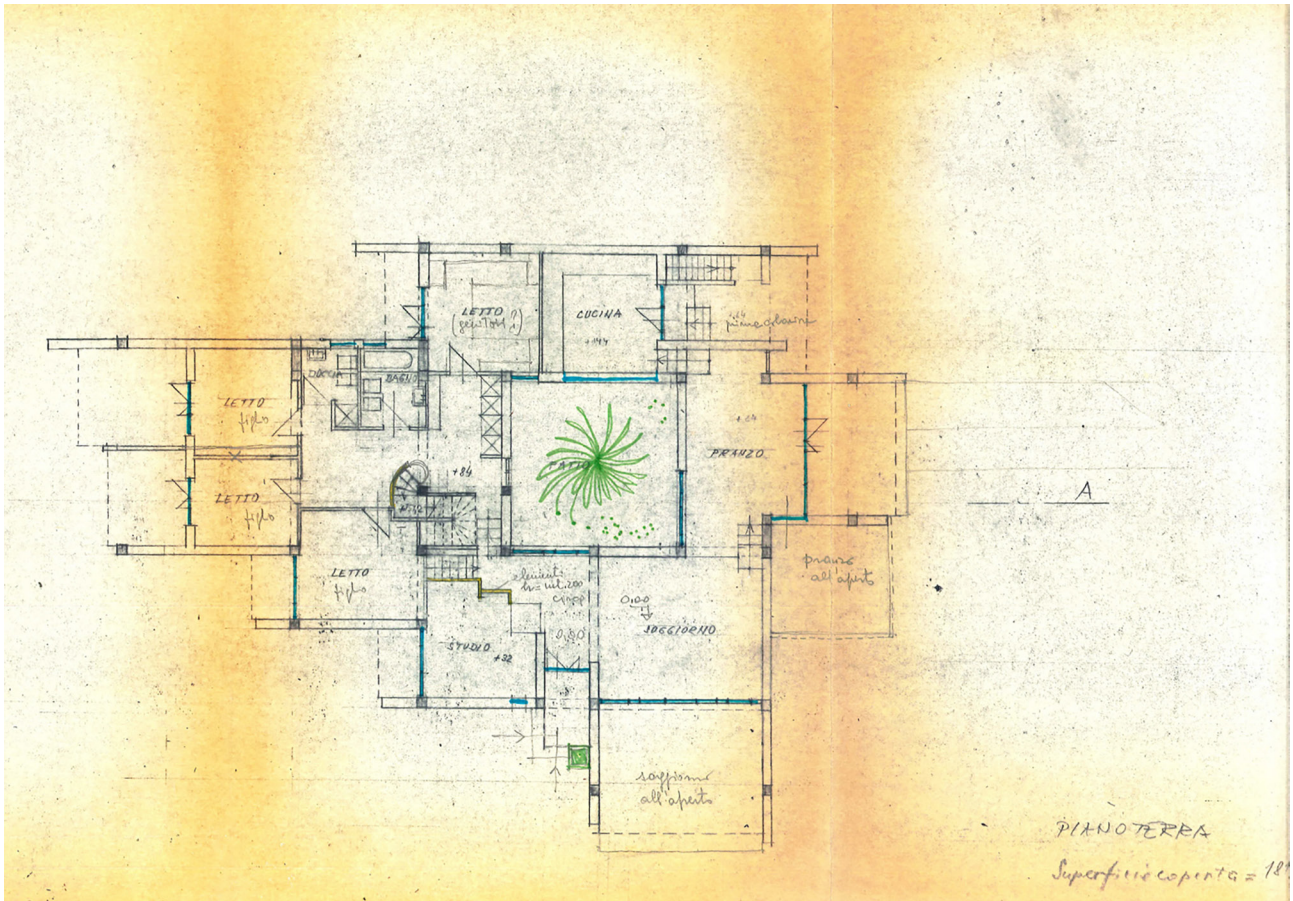


Fig. 8. House Modica, 1977 (Luciana Natoli Archive).

characterized by the first curvilinear ramp, leads to the first floor where two more bedrooms were planned. The form of this staircase anticipates, in a certain sense, Luciana Natoli's second design phase characterized by the use of the curvilinear form which, especially in interior design, takes the place of the more elementary forms used in the first phase of her professional activity. Architectures composed of rigid volumes are replaced by more complex architectural texts generated by the juxtaposition of several elements that never lose their

final formal unity. In this project, the juxtaposition of volumes of different sizes generates an articulated volume strongly characterized by the shadows determined by the presence of deep loggias that draw the elevations (fig. 9). The representations found in the archive only indicate a rough idea of the possible future construction. In this sense, it is not possible to describe the material aspect of the project, although, by analogy with others, it can be assumed that the walls were intended to be partly plastered and partly in fair-faced concrete.





Fig. 9. House Modica, perspective view (graphic elaboration by Eleonora Gelardi).

This project lacks the elements of detail that characterizes Luciana Natoli's work, but the multi-scalar attitude can still be glimpsed in the design of the C-shaped staircase, which heralds themes that will later become clear in the interior architecture project as, for example, in the Fardello shop in Palermo.

### Interior architecture. The Fardello shop

Interior design was one of Luciana Natoli's assiduous activities. The focus on small-scale design was already evident in her graduation thesis on an *Antiquarium* in Segesta for which she designed mobile exhibition panels, technical tables, bookcases and seats.

An analysis of the archival fonds shows that, with regard to furniture designs, there are 44 archival units consisting of 44 rolls, 2 envelopes, 15 files and 1 folder that refer to the architect's production from 1962 to 1976.

These include the interior design of the Fardello shop in Palermo, which can be considered a synthesis of the Natoli's design experience. The shop for furniture and household articles was completed in 1976 and it no longer exists today. However, the architect's drawings and photographs (fig. 10) remain, which have made it possible to reconstruct the form and understand the spatial layout.

The commercial activity consisted of three levels: the ground floor (fig. 11), which was used for display and sales, the first floor, where the offices were located, and finally the basement, which housed the storage of goods. The building in which the shop was located has a rectilinear development with two different layouts forming an angle of approximately 150°.

The ground floor of approximately 250 m<sup>2</sup> straddled the two locations and had an elevation difference of 43 cm between one part and the other. Access to the shop was from both Viale Regione (elevation - 0.43 m) and Via Scobar (0.00 m), streets onto which the shop windows faced. The space was designed by Luciana Natoli as a single display area, with no intermediate partitions, and was characterized by alternating concave and convex lines. In fact, curved walls housed both the displays and the flower boxes, and the staircase, bordered by a curved concrete wall, became a true sculptural element. Attention to detail was also evident in the design of the flooring, which was extremely innovative. The two-tone black and pink of the two types of material used (50 x 50 cm pink granite slabs and absolute black marble) predominated. Steel elements for the treads between the two differences in height of the room and concrete elements for the tread anticipated the spiral staircase leading to the office floor. The latter, with a smaller surface area than the exhibition space below, housed two offices for the Fardello: the secretary's



Fig. 10. Fardello shop, historical photo (Luciana Natoli Archive).

Fig. 11. Fardello shop, ground floor plan (graphic elaboration by Eleonora Gelardi).

Fig. 12. Fardello shop, graphic construction of the shop sign (graphic elaboration by Eleonora Gelardi).

room and a meeting room, as well as services. Access was either via the condominium staircase or via the staircase described above, which led to a rectangular open space. The rooms were separated from each other by sliding panels made of natural leather, testifying to the modernity of the architect's design attitude.

In this project, the use and alternation of concave and convex forms generated the dynamism that is a distinctive element of Luciana Natoli's second design phase in which architecture becomes more complex and it's emphasized through a predilection for curves.

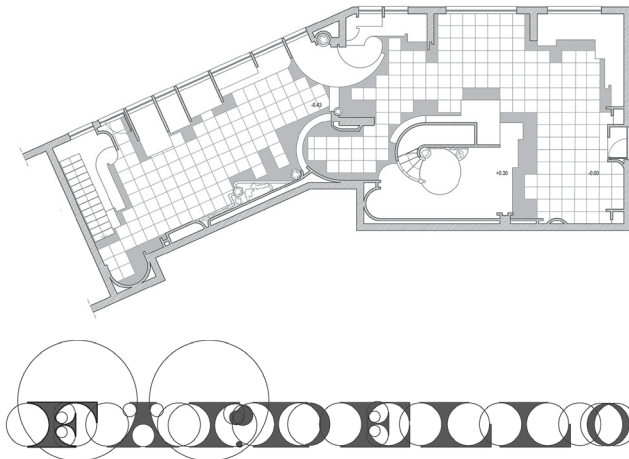
Luciana Natoli's multi-scalar attitude is finally evident in the design for the shop sign designed with geometric constructions in which the circle is the generating element (fig. 12). It is precisely through this last element that one can fully understand the complexity of the work, so rich in details, that contain clear compositional logics from the careful study of the design condition.

### Conclusions and possible developments

An archive of architecture can be built with a double register; the analytical register of filing, an operation that archivists carry out with great meticulousness, and another one, hermeneutic, relating to the comprehension of the sign, which is an activity that must be entrusted to those who practice design at any scale.

The interaction between these two figures makes it possible to create the chronological iter of the graphic documents held in the fonds when there is no temporal reference in them, or to construct the design history from sheets that find different locations in the archive. It is indeed possible to recognize, for example, in the series of an archive fonds, some graphics belonging to another series especially if there is no written notation in these drawings. The dual work of an archivist and an architect could overcome these possible problems.

The Luciana Natoli archive naturally does not only contain architectural projects. A large part of the fund is



made up of urban plans, outcomes of professional assignments or competitions [10].

Luciana Natoli's interest in planning certainly stems from her collaboration with Edoardo Caracciolo. In 1961, a year after graduating, she founded the *Gruppo per l'Architettura e l'Urbanistica Siciliana* [11] that operated in Palermo in the early Sixties. The members, all trained at the Faculties of Architecture and Engineering in Palermo, some of them also professors at the same, were united by the same stimulus to commit themselves, and in turn to commit public administrations, the professional classes and public opinion, to the city's Regulatory Plan as the only valid instrument for urban planning discipline. It was precisely for this reason that they emphasized certain shortcomings in its formulation, suggesting some revisions that were also a consequence of the advances in urban planning culture recorded in the years following its drafting.

If the redrawing of Luciana Natoli's projects has made it possible to reconstruct architectural spatiality, a new

direction in archive research is desirable, one that investigates the Palermo architect's thinking on urban issues.

Such a study would also make use of all of Luciana Natoli's texts, both published and unpublished, on town planning, which constitute a fundamental part of the archive because they witness the thought of an architect [12] who can be considered one of the first protagonists of the Modern Movement in Sicily, at that time a difficult context especially for a woman.

But not only would it be interesting to take an in-depth look at Luciana Natoli's urban and territorial visions, which, when observed carefully, seem to anticipate themes subsequently dealt with by more well-known figures on the national architectural scene [13], but it might also be interesting to analyze and repropose, through redesign, the entire production relating to furniture and furnishing projects [14], which testifies to the breadth of her multi-scalar gaze that can be understood as a true teaching of a way of proceeding.

### Credits

While sharing the positions expressed in the article, the result of common elaborations, the paragraphs *Introduction*, *An academic project*, *The first realization* and *Conclusions and possible developments*

are to be attributed to Francesco Maggio, while the paragraphs *An unrealized house* and *Interior architecture*. *The Fardello shop* are to be attributed to Eleonora Gelardi.

### Notes

[1] The idea of studying the figure and work of Luciana Natoli essentially arose from the friendship that has linked Francesco Maggio, one of the authors, to Sabina Di Cristina for almost forty years. With Sabina and Eleonora Gelardi, a young student at the time, we began this work between 2015 and 2016, which materialized in Architect Gelardi's degree thesis entitled *Luciana Natoli. La Teoria e il Progetto* (Luciana Natoli. The Theory and the Project) that constitutes the germ of a work in fieri.

[2] Between 1961 and 1964 Luciana Natoli was Volunteer Assistant to Prof. Edoardo Caracciolo, then Professor of Urban Planning. In 1965 she won the competition for Ordinary Assistant to the Chair of Architectural Composition. In 1967, he qualified as a free lecturer in Elements of Composition and in those years, at the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo, he took over the courses Interior Architecture and Furniture and Decoration. In 1971 he qualified as a lecturer in History of Urban Planning.

[3] In February 2017, the *Fondazione Salvare Palermo* –in full agreement of intent and purpose with the owners of the archives– submitted a request to the DGA for funding for a specific project relating to the *Archivi delle donne Architetto nel Novecento* (Archives of Women

Architects in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), identifying three archival fonds of three female professionals who worked in Palermo from the 1960s onwards. The archives in question were the *Anna Maria Fundarò* archive, the *Tilde Marra* archive, and the *Luciana Natoli* archive. The DGA, in a note dated 28 June 2017, included the project among the winners of the selection and signed an agreement with the *Fondazione Salvare Palermo*. Paola Barbera (scientific head), Antonia D'Antoni (coordinator) and the archivists Caterina Bellomo and Rosalia Vinci collaborated on the project. For the *Fondazione Salvare Palermo* the project manager was Renata Prescia, President of the Foundation.

[4] These collected data, provided by Sabina and Dacia Di Cristina, indicate the current state of the archiving process of the material in their possession.

[5] Solunto is an ancient Hellenistic city on the northern coast of Sicily, on Mount Catalfano, about two kilometers from Santa Flavia near Palermo. According to Thucydides, Solunto was, together with Panormus and Motya, one of three Phoenician cities in Sicily. In reality, excavations show that the hypothesis that Solunto was a town of Phoenician origin still lacks adequate archaeological support and points to Sicilians as its authentic founders. Excavations began in

1825 at the interest of the Commission of Antiquities and Fine Arts and on that occasion a statue was found depicting Zeus enthroned that is now preserved in the Antonio Salinas Regional Archaeological Museum.

[6] Giusto Monaco, a Latinist, was born in Syracuse in 1915. His father is an official at the Ministry of Finance and is periodically transferred, as was customary for officials assigned to delicate tasks such as tax collection. He attended high school in Trapani and the Garibaldi Lycée in Palermo, where he returned to teach in 1947. In Palermo, Monaco followed developments in local university life and in 1955 he obtained a professorship in Greek and Latin grammar, which he began teaching at the newly founded Faculty of Magisterium.

[7] In her graduation thesis, a project for an *Antiquarium* in the archaeological site of Segesta, Luciana Natoli showed her aptitude for design that would later distinguish all her work. The thesis supervisors were Luigi Epifanio, Edoardo Caracciolo, Gino Levi Montalcini and Domenico Lo Cascio. Luciana Natoli's multi-scalar gaze is already evident in this project, which inaugurates a compositional method to which future elaborations belonging to the first phase of her professional activity will refer, in which the architectural organism fits into its surroundings in a harmonious dialogue that refuses any attempt at mimicry.

[8] Vittorio Ziino (1910-1980), a pupil of Salvatore Caronia Roberti, is to be considered one of the leading exponents of the Modern Move-

ment in the Sicilian cultural panorama. His convinced adherence to the Italian rationalist current is already evident in his early projects.

[9] These are three heliographic copies folded in A4 format whose dimensions are: general plan 70.5 x 58.4 cm, elevations 422.6 x 29.7 cm, detail of the ward block 55.8 x 29.7 cm.

[10] The archive contains 55 archival units consisting of 98 rolls, 1 volume, 50 envelopes, 48 files and 1 box.

[11] The *Gruppo per l'Architettura e l'Urbanistica Siciliana* (GAUS) was made up of Antonio Bonafede, Benedetto Colajanni, Umberto Di Cristina, Luciana Natoli, Gianni Pirrone, Salvatore Prescia and Nino Vicari who were joined by Archimede Mignosi and Alba Guli in 1962 and Carlo Doglio in 1963.

[12] On the use of the female 'architect' see Zarra, G., Marazzini, C. (2017). «*Quasi una rivoluzione*». *I femminili di professioni e cariche in Italia e all'estero*. Firenze: Accademia della Crusca.

[13] Reference is made to the themes treated by Vittorio Gregotti and Aldo Rossi [Gregotti 1966; Rossi 1966].

[14] As far as the furniture projects are concerned, the archive currently contains 44 archival units composed of 44 rolls, 2 envelopes, 15 files, 1 folder, while for the furniture projects 4 archival units composed of 4 rolls.

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