
Making Gibellina Nuova

EURAU'12

ABSTRACT. The 1968 earthquake destroyed the Sicilian town Gibellina. The citizens were then moved into a New City drawn by the Institute for Social Building Development ISES in a plain formerly used only for agriculture.

How to give identity to an urban infrastructural system spread between fields?

Quaroni and Anversa, who were commissioned to construct the building of the main church, combined the necessity of identity with a symbol of the city's rebirth project. The dome of the church is a spherical structure, recognizable in this way from close-up as well as from far away.

"To make the city" it is necessary to embed the church into a context through the design of public space. Only then, Quaroni's intent of building the well visible and accessible "Stadtkrone" can be explained.

The submitted project proposes a definition of the actual void around the church in order to keep the sphere as sole focus.

KEYWORDS: public space, contemporary city, identity, citizenship, place of worship

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Introduction

The urban design project for the surround of the Mother-Church in Gibellina Nuova (Sicily) has been developed as part of a PhD in Architectural Design¹.

The Mother-Church was an opportunity to re-establish and build Gibellina's identity through the urban design and the contribution of art. This intention fits coherently into the overall foreshadowing of Ludovico Corrao, the director of the Gibellina reconstruction.

The dialectic between the original idea and the current state of the sites orients the new proposal presented below. This project, as a probe, experiencing specific actions focuses on some more general questions about "making city" in uninhabited and unbuilt landscapes, but that are full of signs, shapes and characters to recognize and interpret.

1. New Town in rural landscape

The 1968 earthquake destroyed Gibellina. Alberto Burri, who manipulated the ruins giving them the shape of a crevice, has been fixing the memory of that moment in the eternity of art. The city's reconstruction resulted in the transfer of the population 18 km from the old town. The picturesque structure of the old town remained in the memory of citizens who were moved into a rarefied city drawn by ISES (Institute for Social Building Development) on the example of the garden city.

The new urban settlement overlaps in an indifferent way to the former agricultural warping. This new urban system is "humanized" according to Corrao's plan since 1971. He wants to establish continuity with the existing (the countryside) and past (people's life before the earthquake). At the same time he supports a revolution focused on progress, equity and modernization. For example, the plow as a tool to till the land becomes Arnaldo Pomodoro's work of art; the fields, in Ludovico Quaroni and Luisa Anversa's eyes, are landscapes with aesthetic value, recognizable in their diverse and spectacular nature by comparing them with pure geometric figures.

2. Imageability and Ecosymbol

How to give identity to an urban infrastructural system spread between the fields?

Corrao knew that Ludovico Quaroni and Luisa Anversa² could have combined this necessity with the symbol of the city's rebirth project. The dome of the church is a sphere "in the highest point of the city" (L. Quaroni, *Project Report*, 1971) and due to its shape and position it is conceived as a *Stadtkrone* (B. Taut, 1919). The sphere is recognizable from near as well as far away, so that in any scale the impact of the unique form remains the same. It gives the place an evocative image, referring to the "imageability" quality (K. Lynch, 1960) and also to ancient examples, which transmit a "sense of the city" to the inhabitants (L. Quaroni, *La torre di Babele*, 1967).

The church stands on the elevation like a sculpture, in front of an open background. The horizontal fields are a necessary condition for recognizing the spherical emergency. The sphere provides a "symbolic order in the landscape" (Donadieu,

1998). But the current condition of the Mother-Church's surround obscures the original intentions. This place, also to be habitable, must have the possibility to be crossed and benefited. The missing completion of the urban projects proposed since 1970 (G. Samonà, O. M. Ungers, L. Quaroni, P. Nicolini)³ in fact condemns the surroundings of the church as being practically abandoned.

Quaroni and Anversa's idea was not to build a self-monument rather, to "make city" the urban plan by ISES, the church shall be embedded into the context through the design of public space. Only then, Quaroni's intent of building the *Stadtkrone* can be explained: when it is visible from any point and hence accessible from anywhere.

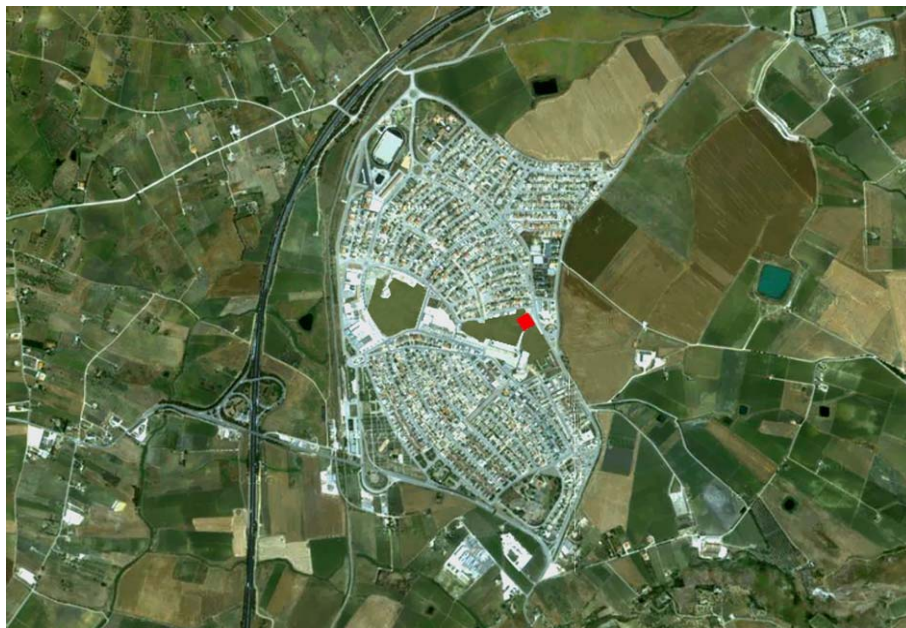


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

3. Between architecture and urban planning

Gibellina is the place where Quaroni's reflections about the *town design* interlace with those of Giuseppe Samonà about "architecture and urban planning unity" (Samonà, 1975). In Italy, at the beginning of the 70's⁴, the disciplinary study on *forma urbis* and buildings' morphology was extended to the shape and the substance of the open space⁵. The attention to the shape was the constant issue. The open spaces (squares, streets and the countryside) are potential fields whose qualitative properties are defined by the edges and content (architecture and works of art)⁶. By utilizing architectural projects it is possible to recognize and interpret the sites therefore, emphasizing the anisotropic character of the countryside and of the gaps between the buildings.

However, the case of Gibellina shows that not only the buildings and numerous works of art are sufficient to achieve this goal, despite being filled with monumentality and urban significance. The relationships between the elements must be supported by a ground design that guides the displacements and "put on stage" the landscape and the city highlighting the symbolic elements (Smets, 2001).

The urban design of the church's context at a scale intermediate between architecture and urbanism, was ignored and only sketched. It can be found in the executive drawings of the building, but the surrounding space is only prefigured around the representation scale to a maximum of 1:400.



Fig. 3

4. Downtown or emptiness residue

Every plan for the completion of the Civic Center provided to contextualize the church. In 1971 Samonà proposed terraced structure with a monumental boulevard

entrance to the church (Elimi avenue). But in the early 80's the parish-complex was built rotating 45° compared to the initial project. Thus, Quaroni's design team thought of another relationship between the built environment and the location. Paths were then added that would have departed from the centre of the parish complex. In 1982 Ungers proposed a large base with bastions. In 1991, Nicolin thought of densifying only the lower part of the height, maintaining a free space around the church. None of these assumptions have ever been realized. Construction has been limited to some rather random buildings, while the permanence of the void between the volumes suggested alternative possibilities.

Nicolin in the early 90's had the idea of ruralizing some of Gibellina's internal areas and overcoming the separation between New Town and countryside⁷. However, nothing has ever been cultivated agriculturally inside the perimeter of the butterfly.

«It needs a particular attention of the local administrators in order to admit, as it happened in Saint-Herblain near Nantes, that the [...] downtown could [be] a green empty space» (P. Donadieu, 1998)⁸. The hill in Gibellina has importance inside the urban context because it allows the church to be recognized as a monument. Such that it could become a guaranteed clear area preserved by the state as an open space. On the contrary, this space currently evokes a place available and unattended, recognizably shapeless, nor having an accepted meaning. Ultimately, openness is a promise of becoming: a white sheet on which future generations will write freely their tracks, an area where the vegetation will grow gradually.

5. Making Gibellina. A project

The proposed project compares archival sources and the current condition of the site to define the void around the church. This space, conceived as a free background, on the contrary has been gradually occupied by new housing and it is dominated by the presence of Consagra's theater. The project assumes that the transformation should be done without adding new bodies in order to keep the sphere as the sole focus. Therefore, it shall furthermore expand the driving force of the dome over the whole hill.

To understand how, it is necessary to focus the attention on the original ground attack of the building, which anchors the architecture into the surface of the hill. In Quaroni's idea the almost quadratic parish-complex embeds the sphere in its centre. Now white, despite being a brilliant blue in the original idea, the dome is smooth as well as sharply defined structure outstanding, symbolic of the transcendent. The other rough and fragmented parts of the building shall represent the immanent, mediating the relationship between the sphere and the ground. The *cavea* and outdoor terraces that cover the classrooms for catechism and the rectory can be articulated accordingly to the surroundings. In fact, these could be designed in continuity with the external hypothetical public space: the ground of the hill.

Walking levels are manifold and are lowered gradually approaching toward the centre of the composition, as shaped by the force of the weight exerted by the sphere. The new project is conformed by that force of the sphere.

The garden-project around the church has been inspired by the water of a pond into which a stone was thrown, causing orbital, rippling, gradient waves. The soil, accordingly shaped with its system of paths, relates hence to the parts of the city: from frowning closer to the church and relaxing towards where the terrain is flatter. This establishes a symbiotic relationship between the ground and the marked paths encompassed, which radiate from the centre of the parish-complex. In particular, the margin church/hill has been redrawn and enhanced by three routes: 1. Church

- City Hall; 2. Church - Palazzo Di Lorenzo; 3. Transverse crossing of the hill (north residential area of the Civic Center - system of Purini Thermes' squares). Therefore, the remaining piece of countryside shall become the connective fabric in the city, offering different perceptual experiences of the church, of the sculpture "Sequences" by Melotti, Ungers' Houses and of the Palazzo Di Lorenzo.

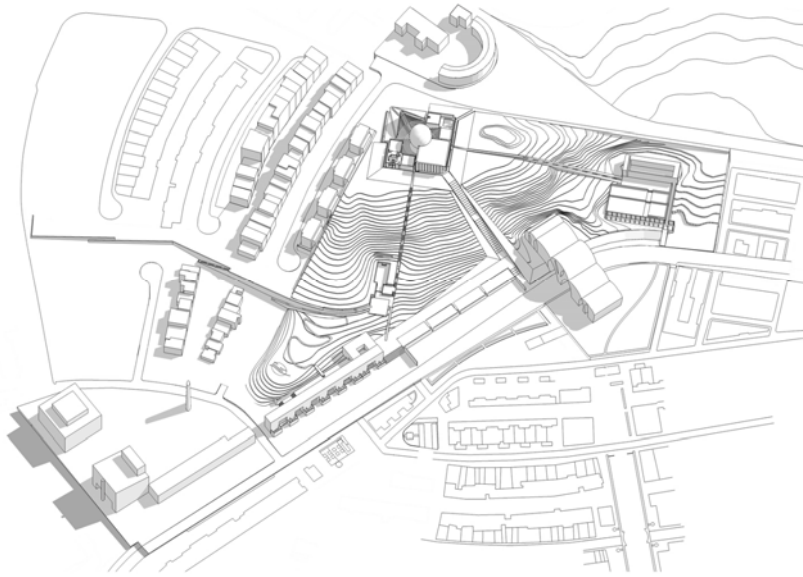


Fig. 4

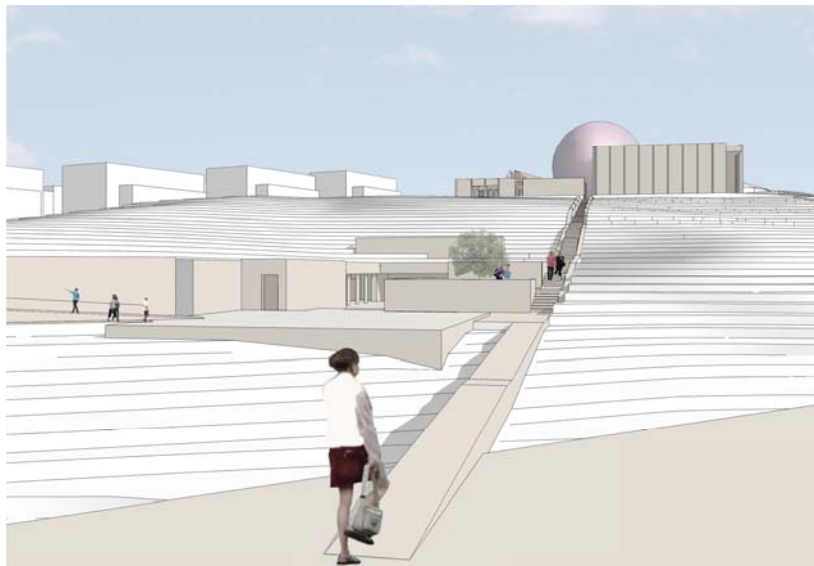


Fig. 5

The ground vegetation covering the hill has been designed to follow the difference in elevation, which in some points acquires depths and shall be populated. In particular where the gradient is stronger, the paths intersect among them giving a special meaning to the site. This character is further amplified by the presence of a new square that serves to host an *ecclesia sine tecto*.

A discovered-basilica-church (Dyggve, 1951) rises very slightly from the earth surface which seemed to provide the most suitable solution for strengthening the church's liturgical program and extends the existing symbolic presence of the hill. This intermediate step between the parish-complex and Town Hall Square shortens the perceptive distances and motivates further the displacements.

The new worship space is ideal for summer harvest, but it is also a part of an overall urban design that extends the boundaries of Quaroni and Anversa's project, far beyond the physical perimeter of the parish-complex. The proposal is also an exhortation to governments to promote the protection (in the most critical and operational sense) of individual monuments⁹ and deny the possibility of fencing them in any way.

6. The need of designing the emptiness

A comparison between the proposed project and one of the originals remains unimplemented finds a match between the position of the *ecclesia sine tecto* and an amphitheatre, envisaged at one stage of the original project. This plan was successively found in Luisa Anversa's archive. Such a coincidence shows how much the monumentality of the architecture has guided the design and brought out in what ways the church has been neglected. It shows where action is needed to explain the original idea of Quaroni of making Gibellina Nuova.

The constant presence on the hill of an "urban hinge" at an intermediate position between the church and Town Hall, be it the amphitheatre or the *ecclesia sine tecto*, can be an instrument of intentions of the designers and extent of the existing knowledge - an attempt to collimate buildings and environment.

The proposed project, respecting the original intentions of the designers, radically alters the floor of the hill keeping it untilled. The only added element, the *ecclesia sine tecto*, configured more as a part of the ground project, with an addition of an autonomous volume. In this way looking at the church from the neighbouring town Salemi, or closer, from the Di Stefano's Houses, the surrounding is basically detected as a hill covered with vegetation. This open space marks the "right distance" (Secchi, 2004) between the church and the rest of the city, but at the same time it meets the requirements that the monumentality of the church requires: the ability to reach the monument from several directions, to view it from different and chosen points, exalting it as a single emergency.

The planning process has gradually offered more and more essential solutions in terms of shape and together stronger rooting in the site mother-church, new basilica and paths. For those accustomed to working with full volumes and confined spaces describing and designing gaps is a slow conquest. In this case, for example, while the project had been drafted, it had realized that in order to restore the church the object to transform was not the church itself (among other recently completed) but the void that surrounds it. Sidewalks, small seams, steps, fences, a square and a refuge in the open air (the discovered *ecclesia*) may aid and characterize the void redeeming Mother-Church: «the empty urban space, such as the spaces and the silences between the words, allows you to read and understand»¹⁰ (Donadieu, 1998) the sphere's presence as a powerful polarity.

Notes

¹ University of Palermo, PhD Architectural Design - XXII cycle, coordinated by prof. C. Ajroldi, Thesis "Il Restauro del Moderno. Il complesso parrocchiale di Gibellina Nuova", tutor prof. A. Sciascia, cotutor prof. F. Cannone, Ph.D. L. Macaluso.

² Gibellina's Mother-Church is designed by Ludovico Corrao and Luisa Anversa Ferretti, with collaboration of Giangiacomo D'Ardia and advice on the structural aspects advisory of Sergio Musmeci. Construction manager: arch. Vincenzo De Pasquale.

³ Cfr. MARINONI G., *Metamorphosis of the city center. The case Gibellina, 'Lotus'*, n.69, p.74.

⁴ Mother-Church has planned in 1970. About events relating to Mother-Church's construction it can be seen the PhD thesis cited above.

⁵ L. Quaroni, *Urban Design Principles in Italy during the 60s and 70s*, «Casabella», 487-488, January-February 1983, p. 82.

⁶ Camillo Sitte had already offered a topological analysis, although empirical, in *The Art of building the city*, Vienna 1889: A. Corboz, *Have you said "space"?*, «Casabella», 597-598, 1993, p. 20.

⁷ P. Nicolin, *Interview with Nicolin. Palermo 31 october 2008*, in "Il Restauro del Moderno. Il complesso parrocchiale di Gibellina Nuova", p. 258.

⁸ P. Donadieu, *Campagne urbaine*, Donzelli, Roma, p. 60. Cfr. E. Pasquier, *Jardiner en ville*, in «Annales de la recherche urbaine», 1997, pp. 103-12.

⁹ DARC Sicily (Department of Architecture and Contemporary Art, Sicilian Region, Department of Heritage and Culture and Education) with the Decree of the Director General 056/Dir 2007 has just protected the Mother-Church of Gibellina. Today attention of the Administration is directed exclusively into the build.

¹⁰ P. Donadieu, *cited...*, p.60.

Legend

Fig. 1 Orthophoto of Gibellina Nuova.

Fig. 2 Mother-Church on the hill (current condition of the site).

Fig. 3 Gibellina Nuova.

Fig. 4 The proposed project of the void around the church.

Fig. 5 The proposed project: a route from Unger's House to Mother-Church.

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