

VALGUARNERA-GANGI PALACE: A HISTORICAL-CULTURAL URBAN STRUCTURE IN PALERMO

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Abstract: *Valguarnera-Gangi Palace: A Historical-Cultural Urban Structure in Palermo.* This paper presents in short, in a descriptive manner, a representative structure from Palermo, the capital of Sicily; it is about the Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi, an important monument from the local cultural Italian heritage. The paper starts with a synthetic presentation of Palermo, for then to be focused on the presentation of this palace, illustrating both the history of this monument and its cultural details in terms of its inside landscapes, architecture, paintings and other cultural features that offer identity to this cultural monument.

Rezumat: *Palatul Valguarnera-Gangi: o structură istorico-culturală urbană în Palermo.* Lucrarea de față prezintă pe scurt, prin filtrul unei abordări descriptive, una dintre structurile culturale distincte ale orașului Palermo, capitală a Siciliei. Este vorba despre palatul Valguarnera-Gangi, important monument din cadrul culturii italiene. Lucrarea începe cu o prezentare sintetică a orașului Palermo, pentru ca apoi să fie prezentată istoria palatului precum și alte caracteristici culturale referitoare la peisajele interioare ale monumentului, la arhitectura, picturile și alte elemente culturale care construiesc identitatea culturală a acestui monument din sudul Italiei.

Key words: *Valguarnera-Gangi, baroque style, cultural features Palermo.*

Cuvinte cheie: *Valguarnera-Gangi, stil baroc, trăsături culturale, Palermo.*



1. INTRODUCTION

Palermo is the capital of Sicily and is situated on the north-west coast of the island in a beautiful location by the sea. It has always been a centre for commerce and a crossroads of cultures coming principally from other Mediterranean countries. The surrounding territory has a mild climate and fertile soil and was the objective of various conquerors in the past. These different proud, vigorous peoples finally settled in the area, leaving it with a heritage of cultural, artistic and linguistic contamination, one superimposed on the other. Luxuriant Palermo o Balerm, as the Arabs named it, spreads out across the plain called the Conca D'Oro with its many waterways and citrus orchards (introduced by the Arabs), dominated by Mount Pelligrino. Ziz –the Phoenician city of flowers, Pánormos for the Greeks, the ‘all-port’ city in close symbiosis with the sea, became a large cosmopolitan city and during the Arab epoch was the residence of the Emir. The ancient, sovereign, intellectual city of Frederick II of Swabia changed aspect over the centuries. This versatile, vain capital city, assumed a baroque style with its eighteenth century, Spanish-epoch, mansions and villas, only to change identity again through the bizarre follies of artist-architects such as Ernesto Basile, who made Liberty style the characteristic that distinguished the ‘happy’ Palermo of the *bell'époque*. In recent decades Palermo has been characterised by progressive urban growth leading to it expanding over great part of the surrounding plain and a continuous linear, urban development along the coast. The town plan (fig. 1) has the same cruciform appearance of the first decades of the 17th century, created by the two orthogonal axes which form a ‘baroque cross’ of streets intersecting in Piazza Vigliena, also called the Quattro Canti (the four corners); behind each

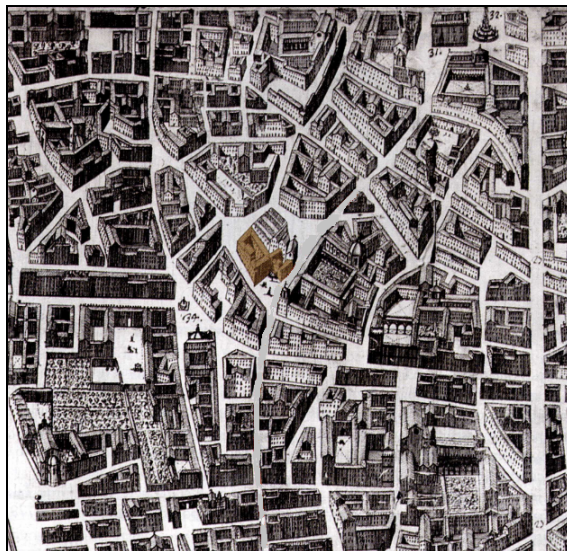


Figure 1: Plan of Palermo and original nucleus of Valguaneri-Gangi Palace
(Gaetano Lazzara, 1703)
(source: Piazza, S., 2004)

of these corners there are four quarters originally called the **Albergheria**, the **Loggia**, **Seralcadi** and the **Kalsa**. Nowadays each of these four quarters is home to one of the historical city markets, the best known and most characteristic of which are the **Vucciria**, **Ballarò**, the **Capo** and **Lattarini**, that play both an economic and social role. Palermo is the heart of Sicily where the annals of the oldest families are concentrated. However, Palermo also represents a negative phenomenon: the Mafia. A disease corrodes civil and political life and ruins the reputation of the city and the island. There are numerous aristocratic residences that enrich the city, but we will refer here to only one dwelling.

2. THE HISTORY OF THE PALACE

The 18th century Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi is located in Piazza Croce dei Vespri in the heart of the Kalsa (the chosen), an area full of imposing noble residences. The mansion is one of the most successful examples of late Sicilian baroque architecture, with a splendid main staircase, frescoes and interior furnishings and fittings. Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi, is therefore an 18th century mansion which owes its present aspect to the restructuring of the original building by don Pietro Valguarnera. He inherited the family title on the death of his older brother Francesco Saverio, Prince of Valguarnera, marrying the latter's deaf and dumb daughter Marianna, who was much younger than him and then undertaking a building programme which aimed at completing the family villa in Bagheria and totally transforming the mansion in Palermo. The plans to restructure and enlarge the old city residence had two main objectives which reflect the tastes and most up-to date tendencies of the city at that time:

- the scenic exploitation of the line formed by the entrance – courtyard – stairs, through the creation of a new main staircase in line with the main entrance and a completely new treatment for the further wall of the courtyard;
- an enlarging of the space dedicated to the public reception rooms adding new areas for receptions, including three new antechambers, a banqueting hall and a large gallery.

To carry out this plan, besides the reconfiguration of the two existing family dwellings, it was necessary to acquire more space. To this end, between 1755 and 1759, don Pietro Valguarnera bought the warehouses on the western side of the main building of his residence, successfully gaining possession of practically the whole block.

The first documentary references referring to works in the mansion date back to May 1756 and concern a payment made to Andrea Gigante, the architect from Trapani, for 19 undefined columns in Trapani stone. It cannot be excluded that such a large number of columns was necessary due to the contemporary works to be carried out in the villa in Bagheria. It is not clear when the works set in motion by Pietro Valguarnera were completed, but it can be established that towards the end of the century the decorations of the mansion were practically finished. Don Pietro Valguarnera was certainly aware of having created something very important, particular to which his name would be perpetually linked. This awareness clearly emerges in his will dated 1768. Pietro Valguarnera died in 1779 and his last wishes were only partly respected. His son, Giuseppe Emanuel Valguarnera, going against the wishes expressed in his father's will, tried to renew the appearance of the mansion while leaving the most important aspects of his father's project

unchanged: the main staircase, the gallery and the vault of the large ballroom. Today, the magnificent mansion is the largest 18th century aristocratic residence in Palermo whose fundamental features are still intact. Heraldic records date the Sicilian branch of the family back to Simone Valguarnera, coming from the *contado de Ampurias* (Catalonia) in 1282 in the retinue of Pietro D'Aragona, from whom he received the estates of Godrano, Vicari and Vallelunga. At the end of the 14th century, which brought to an end the period of political crisis suffered by the Aragonese in Sicily, the Catalonian brothers Simone and Vitale Valguarnera were rewarded for their loyalty to the king, Martino, receiving the prestigious barony of Assoro, thus founding a new branch of the family.

In effect, during the 18th century the Valguarnera d'Assoro family were one of the last noble families of 13th century origin still present in Parliament. They asserted themselves, therefore, as representatives of the triumphant pro-Aragonese party, and took advantage of the favourable political circumstances, to accelerate their strategy of strengthening their territorial position with the acquisition of the Caropepe fief between the years of 1398 -1404. In 1551 Giovanni Valguarnera founded a new agricultural town on this territory (the present-day Valguarnera-Caropepe, Enna), thus obtaining a second parliamentary seat at the beginning of the 17th century.

Alongside their territorial politics, a careful matrimonial policy was strongly in favour of important social unions and further territorial acquisitions. A decisive factor was the marriage which took place in 1685 between Giuseppe Valguarnera d'Assoro and Maria Anna Gravina (1672 -1733), by means of which the Valguarnera d'Assoro stock acquired the principality of Gravina and, as a consequence, yet another parliamentary seat. As part of Maria Anna Gravina's dowry Giuseppe also received a 'large house in different parts and members' near the plain of Mercy, which then became the town house of the Valguarnera d'Assoro family, being transformed into the present-day mansion in the mid -18th century. During the first half of the 18th century, after the abolition of the feudal laws in 1812, the further abolition of the practice of *fidei commissum* and the Deputation of the States, and finally the law passed in 1824 which permitted the compulsory assignment of funds to subjugated creditors, many feudal, noble families found it necessary to dispose of a large part of their patrimony and, not least, the family mansion, a situation which obviously determined the end of an epoch. Moreover, it should be remembered that Palermo was hit by an earthquake in 1823, which seriously damaged the Valguarnera mansion, making it unfit for use and it was not lived in again until 1828 when it was confiscated by the pawnbroker's and afterwards by the Commander of the Mansion.

Nevertheless, only a few years after being confiscated Palazzo Valguarnera was reacquired by a member of the family, thanks to a fortunate marriage. In 1842, Giovanna Alliata Moncada Valguarnera (1806 – 1855) widow of an uncle, Girolamo Valguarnera, prince of Gangi, married Giuseppe Mantegna an important member of the wealthy Palermitan bourgeoisie, which was rapidly rising both economically and socially, who bought back the property of the whole building for the sum of 4000 ducats, setting in motion the necessary restructuring works. The descendants of Giovanna Alliata and Giuseppe Mantegna are still the owners of the mansion. In present times Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi is an example of one of the most majestic and characteristic styles of imposing aristocratic residence. Cloaked in, and guardian of, its own centuries-old memories, the courtyard of the Palace opens up in a double row of columns, which surround the courtyard with the ecstatic solemnity of a cloister. It is caressed by the green of the banana trees and giant *Kentia* palms and in the background the great wrought iron glass with its exquisite 18th century taste

gives access to the building. Wagner and Rubenstein, to name the most famous, passed through it, the English royal family were guests a few years ago, and it should not be forgotten that this magnificent building was used in the making of Visconti's film 'Il Gattopardo'. The double stairway, judged one of the most beautiful that can still be admired in an eighteenth century mansion, draws attention to the balanced harmony that distinguishes Sicilian Baroque. Entering the lobby, one enjoys the sight of the sober grandeur of the salons: the 'oval' salon original both in shape and the immaculate vivacity of its colours; the 'red' salon full of works of art; the 'light blue' salon, enlivened by the enamels of priceless Chinese and Japanese pieces of art; the ballroom where it is possible to imagine echoes of the 18th century, delicate musical harmonies and the movements of minuets and gavottes.



Figure 2: A detail from inside
(source: Piazza, S., 2004)



Figure 3: Paintings from inside
(source: Piazza, S., 2004)

However, the room which brings together reality and dreams (fig. 2 and fig. 3), pomp and poetry, is the 'mirror' room, where the magic of the atmosphere created by lights and colours that shimmer in the wide spaces of the ceiling, seems to slide on the surface of the mirrors, confusing shape and line, recreating the atmosphere of a life that has been crystallised in time, enclosed here so that poetry can outlive history.

3. CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to draw the reader's attention to a well-known historic house located in Palermo, in order to let the theme of the preservation of historic houses resurface. Although often neglected, the historic houses represent the second most significant element

of cultural heritage after the religious buildings. They have been often described as the "back stage" of the city, but above all they have been considered as real "archives in stone" because looking at them it is possible to infer the art, the architecture and the taste of the society who produced, transformed and distorted them. A widespread public awareness is by far the best mean to preserve cultural heritage: its memory and knowledge are of value to the public interest, and it is an attraction for new tourist channels. This function of promoting public awareness has been carried out extremely well by the Italian Historic Houses Association (ADSI). It has always provided the owners with advice and with legal, administrative, fiscal and technological assistance for the preservation, conservation and management of historic houses. It maintains relationships with relevant public bodies and publishes a magazine, originally intended only for members, but today distributed on newsstands. The work of the ADSI Sicily section was first of all to recover the relationship with the territory, reopening the palaces to the city of Palermo. It started by opening these houses to children, facilitating the three-year project "the school adopts a monument". Then it proceeded to open the houses for European Heritage Day. It used them as sites for citizen representation at the UN conference and for major European meetings. ADSI Sicily has entered into collaboration with the Chair of Cultural Anthropology of the Faculty of Architecture, for carrying out research and cataloguing. It tackled the problem of theft, creating (in Italy only) on the web-site of the city of Palermo a page called "Who has seen them?" with images of stolen works of art. In conclusion, if on the one hand the purpose of the association is to permit the owners to live as satisfactorily as possible in their own homes, on the other hand it is also to revive and to recognize this heritage, and to restore it to the urban fabric, to the population and to the society. In this way the institutions realize the value of their "cultural heritage".

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