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Review: Il Trionfo Della Miseria, Gli Alberghi dei Poveri di Genova, Palermo e Napoli

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1- *Andrea Guerra, Elisabetta Molteni, and*
1's *Paolo Nicolosi*

1- **IL TRIONFO DELLA MISERIA. GLI**
1- **ALBERGHI DEI POVERI DI GENOVA,**
1- **PALERMO E NAPOLI**

1- Introduction by Brian Pullan,
1- Documenti di Architettura, 84: Milan:
1- Electa, 1995, 223 pp., 183 illus.
1- £ 55,000. ISBN 88-435-5135-3.

Since Michel Foucault's seminal essays on the asylum, prison, and hospital in the Age of Reason, architectural historians have begun to examine these major public institutions in the life and pathology of the early modern city. This volume extends the disciplinary focus to public assistance and monumental housing for the poor, which was often closely related in ideology and building type to asylums, prisons, monasteries, and hospitals. Foucauldian intellectual history and urban history, with its concomitant interest in vernacular traditions, converge in this comparative study of Genoa, Palermo, and Naples during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Who better to introduce the problem than Brian Pullan, a pioneer in the historical study of poor relief in Renaissance Venice? Setting out the historical premises for this volume, Pullan traces the origins of early modern Italian poorhouses in form and function to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century civic hospitals, such as the famous Santa Maria della Scala of Siena or Filarete's Ospedale Maggiore for Duke Francesco Sforza in Milan. One might add to Pullan's examples the often overlooked cross-axial cloister plan of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence, the model for Filarete's monumental Renaissance prototype for the early modern hospital, or Brunelleschi's more centralized, classical courtyard plan of the Ospedale degl'Innocenti for the silk guild of Florence. As the three essays show, these public reform institutions attempted to address the many pressing social and spiritual dilemmas of the early modern city, while representing the city as an ideal "sacred space," a "Christian community of the saved" embracing rich and poor. The imagery masked the many conflicting power interests of patrons and clienteles who promoted and occupied these buildings in three diverse but interrelated cultures.

Il trionfo della miseria opens windows into Italian culture and society during what the historian Eric Cochrane called “the forgotten centuries.” The essays integrate technical, stylistic, and iconographic evidence from the existing buildings, with preliminary project drawings, commission documents, urban views, and contemporary debates on poverty during the late Counter-Reformation and Enlightenment, while cross-references between the essays produce a coherence uncommon in collaborative anthologies. Elisabetta Molteni places the Albergo dei Poveri of Genoa within the context of a public response to the devastating plague of 1656, which decimated the population of Liguria and terminated a series of major urban projects initiated between 1625 and 1650, including the Molo Nuovo, the Arsenal, the grain magazines of Portofranco and Abbondanza, and Nuove Mura. Such an ambitious urban program, Molteni maintains (17), resulted from the establishment of the reformed Genoese Republic of 1576, in which new noble families, such as the Balbi, Brignole, and Durazzo, were inscribed into the Libro d’Oro, giving vitality to the old noble Genoese Republic of 1528. These new family groups entered the political arena during a critical phase in the history of this major port and banking center, caught between their alliance to the declining Spanish Hapsburg Empire and the rising power of France.

Molteni properly stresses the site of the Albergo dei Poveri, located prominently above the city, between the inner ring of the city walls, built between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the Nuove Mura. The building took advantage of its site, altitude, fresh air, and visibility above the harbor to proclaim a new image of the city and the munificence of the republic (19). The author might make an even stronger case for a reformed republican style through the many interconnections between the Albergo dei Poveri and the “Alessian city” of mid-sixteenth-century Genoa, joining the Bramantean domes of the cathedral and Sta. Maria Assunta in Carignano and the axial palace street of Strada Nuova to create a Roman “antique” image of the aristocratic republic, with a triumphal, axial approach to the Albergo from Via Balbi and Piazza Annunziata, just to the south.

Genoa, Naples, and Palermo were cities of strong noble family factions and weak

communal governments. Private patronage shaped public policy; as a result, the *alberghi dei poveri* of the three cities share many similarities and interconnections of influence. For Genoa, the first of these monumental projects, Emanuele Brignole, of the rising new nobility, became the principal promoter (in Molteni’s view) of a baroque “palace-church-city of the poor” above the medieval-Renaissance commercial port city. Influenced by Counter-Reformation and Jesuit ideas about poor care, religious education, and charity, the Albergo dei Poveri centralized social and spiritual functions. Brignole’s design united a domed longitudinal church above a cross-axial cloister plan and a scenographic palace front.

All three authors relate their buildings to the Escorial in Spain (68), while citing the influence of complexes combining hospital, poorhouse, orphanage, and asylum in late sixteenth-century Protestant Holland and Catholic France (12). Civic centers such as the Burger Weeshuis (or Orphan’s Asylum) of Amsterdam (not mentioned in this study), the Hôtel Dieu in Paris or Nôtre Dame de la Charité in Lyon set the stage for this Italian study with its implicit expansion of Foucault’s French purview. The international reputation of these mixed-use buildings—which make the modest term *alberghi dei poveri* somewhat of a misnomer—lasted into this century. Roy Elston’s *Cook’s Traveller’s Handbook to Holland* (London, 1926) describes “The children from the Weeshuis, frequently seen in procession through the streets, [who] wear a curious parti-coloured costume, red and black vertically divided. There are dozens of these institutions. The Dutch are very kind to the poor, and it is said that Charles II [of England], on being informed of Louis XIV’s projected attack on Amsterdam [in 1672], stated that Providence would protect a city which showed so great charity to the poor” (135).

Competition between royal Bourbon and local noble family power takes center stage in Paolo Nicoloso’s and Andrea Guerra’s studies of the *alberghi dei poveri* of Palermo and Naples. In 1734 Charles Bourbon conquered Naples and Sicily and gained international recognition for his Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1735. According to Nicoloso and Guerra, the French ruler was influenced by the Modenese priest

and social reformer Ludovico Muratori, who promoted Enlightenment ideas of monarchy, social reform, poor care, and manufacturing (one thinks of Ledoux in 1770s France). Local, feudal noble families allied with the church supported opposing ideals of poor care and redemptive work rooted in Jesuit spirituality. These competing ideas and social interests, according to these authors, shaped the development of eighteenth-century civic institutions.

While the plans of communal architects for the Albergo dei Poveri in Genoa (as well as for those in Rome, Turin, Modena, and other centers) were consulted in the design of the Palermo and Neapolitan *alberghi*, Nicoloso and Guerra discern a more individualistic design process. In Palermo, competition between the austere and decorative styles of Orazio Furetto and Giovanni Battista Vaccarini (described as “andante o reale” in the documents) defined the artistic and political conflict between local aristocratic families (Filingeri, Bonanno, and Gioeni, who supported Furetto’s “simpler” design “consistent with local tradition and the poverty of Christ”) and royal authority in Naples. Intervention from Rome with the review in 1745 of Furetto’s model by Ferdinando Fuga and the Academy of St. Luke promoted Vaccarini’s richer alternative, playing out a fascinating architectural version of the debate of 1636 between Andrea Sacchi and Pietro da Cortona on the “classic” and “epic” styles of painting (Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600–1750* [Baltimore, 1969], 171–173).

Comparing Fuga’s Albergo in Naples of 1751 with Furetto’s in Palermo shows the balance and mutual influence between these two styles and the political forces they represented in the complex interplay of the Bourbon kingdom. Hovering between the medieval monastic tradition of enclosure, poverty, work, and devotion, and Foucault’s Panopticon of pervasive social control, these civic buildings enhanced the power of the nobility in Sicily and of Bourbon royalty in Naples. The magnificence of local nobility was implicit in Furetto’s design, situated above Palermo as the new northern terminus of the Roman grid and the sixteenth-century Spanish Via Toledo, the processional street to Monreale. Here, patrons had exclusive rights to the central nave of the church, while the poor (“uomini

bestiali” in the documents) were relegated to the grated (caged) transepts, galleries, and confessional booths with wards on the sides. And Fuga’s Albergo dei Poveri de-

finied a monumental Berninesque-Borrominesque palace-church façade on the entrance road to Naples from Rome and the Via Appia, part of the “teatro di città”

and “carità organizzata” of early modern Europe, worthy of comparison to Caserta.

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