

PALERMO

TREASURE MAPS

Twenty Itineraries
Designed to Help
You Explore the
Cultural Heritage
of Palermo and
its Province

Soprintendenza per i Beni culturali
e ambientali di Palermo

THE 19th CENTURY

THE NEW CITY AND ITS THEATRES

by **Sandra Proto**

REGIONE SICILIANA
Assessorato dei Beni culturali
e dell'Identità siciliana



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The 19th Century: the New City and Its Theatres

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THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF PALERMO AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TEATRO POLITEAMA AND THE TEATRO MASSIMO



TREASURE
MAPS

THE CITY

The events leading up to the construction of two important theatrical complexes in Palermo in the second half of the 19th century are interesting indicators of the social and the economic climate of the era and permit a deeper understanding of the urban and social dynamics of the period. The creation of a theatre is evidently a fact of extreme importance, both because a community represents itself in theatre, reproduces its traditions, its connections with other cultural environments, its

ambitions, and because theatres represent large public structures which alter the urban layout of a city and define its architecture. It is necessary to remember that city planning and the reconstruction of Palermo in the second half of the century took place in a particularly difficult economic context: the city was going through a period of recession and economic stagnation caused also by two cholera epidemics in 1866 and 1867, which not only reaped a high death toll but also resulted in the isolation of the centres hardest hit, eliminating all commercial trade.

1
"Plan of the city of Palermo and its suburbs, dedicated to HRH the Prince of Salerno, in 1818 by his humble servant Gaetano Lossieux"



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2

*The Teatro Massimo
with its monumental
stairway on Piazza
Verdi*

The city was in an extremely precarious hygienic and sanitary state: not only was there a lack of drains and drinking water but there was also a shortage of housing, hospitals, schools and an efficient system of roads. However, the city council considered the realisation of these new theatres of preeminent importance both for their symbolic and collective significance, and because the investment of public funds would create new jobs, thereby helping the economy, apparently extremely depressed but still vital thanks to the presence in Palermo, of entrepreneurs of the international stature of the Florios, the

Whitakers, the Inghams and the Pojeros. After the Unification of Italy, Naples and Palermo were the two major cities of the Kingdom of Italy, notwithstanding their depressed economic situation.

To this should be added that after the Unification of Italy, the aristocratic and upper-class feels the need for the creation of adequate stages for the celebration of their social rituals in the Theatre, considered to be the layman's celebratory temple, on a par with those in Paris and London. Solid commercial relations had been built up with these cities, touchstone for the newly emerging class of entrepreneurs





and the basis for the development of the entire Island itself. However, in order to understand the reasons for the simultaneous construction of two Theatres in Palermo (one of which will be amongst the largest in Europe), it is necessary to turn the clock back to the beginning of the 19th century and take into consideration both the dramatic social changes taking place and the urban transformations, heavily influenced by the former.

It is, in fact, important to remember that Palermo and all of Sicily in the first half of the 19th century is characterised by political instability and strong social tensions that resulted in repeated uprisings against the Bourbon domination, initially with the upheavals [moti carbonari] of 1820 and 1821 and continued with the 'revolution of Palermo' in 1848, which, with the support

of both France and England, resulted in the creation of an independent State lasting 16 months, subsequently crushed by a bloody repression by the Bourbons. However, the experience of 1848 leads to political ferment and an idealism that lives on long after the end of the brief life of this government: the revolutionaries who survived the crackdown, some of whom took refuge in northern Italy, Paris or London, pave the way for Garibaldi's Expedition of the Thousand in 1860, which leads ultimately to the Unification of Italy. All these events contribute to the realisation of something even more ambitious: the construction of a new popular identity, based on non-religious and Risorgimento ideals and asserted also through the redrawing of the urban layout. In fact the 'Strada della Libertà' [The Freedom Road] had been

3
The Teatro Politeama with its imposing triumphal arch over the entrance

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4

The cover of a booklet with souvenir postcards of the National Exhibition of Palermo

opened in 1848 as a symbolic legitimisation of revolutionary power. It was the extension of the 'new road', nowadays known as Via Ruggero Settimo, which runs in the direction of the Piana dei Colli across the Piano delle Croci and the Radaly estates of the 'firriato Villafranca', which would host the pavilions of the Universal Exhibition at

the end of the century.

At the start of the century, from an urban point of view, Palermo had registered important growth, characterised by a double urban expansion: to the South in the direction of the river Oreto and to the North towards the plains. To the South the extension of the Via Maqueda—an artery

built under Spanish domination, which had had important repercussions on medieval Palermo, creating the four 'Mandamenti' [quarters] grouped around the symbolic fulcrum of the 'Quattro Canti' [officially Piazza Vigliena]—permits the mapping out of the major highways outside the perimeter of the old city walls and crosses over the river with the construction of new bridges. To the North, the extension of the Spanish arterial road, started in 1778 by the magistrate Antonio la Grua Talamanca, Prince of Regalmici, leads to the building of a new 'Crossroads', (still known locally as the 'Quattro Canti' of the countryside), where the aristocracy intends to recreate with new and adequate buildings, the glories of the Baroque city.

It is well known that the expansion of the city to the south had a lesser effect on the urban area than that effected to the north: for the technology of the time the presence of the river created a not insignificant interruption, notwithstanding diverse bridges were already built, including the bridge delle Teste [of the Heads], that of the Guadagna and the most heavily trafficked, the Ponte di Mare, built in the 16th century at the behest of the Viceroy Marcantonio Colonna. The land in the area was heavily cultivated and very productive, which made the real estate investment even more expensive.

The major part of the new constructions are concentrated north of the walled city. After the creation of the intersection of Regalmici, carried out by Nicolò Palma, the Palermitan Senate architect—where the extension of Via Maqueda intersected the main road of Ventimiglia, nowadays via Stabile, that

connected the plain of San Francesco di Paola with the fishing village of Santa Lucia—the urban expansion looks to the market gardens of the Plain of Sant'Oliva (nowadays Piazza Castelnuovo) in the direction of the plain of the Colli, one of the exclusive areas for the summer residences of the city aristocracy.

In this moment of continuous change the *Plan for Reform and Expansion* of 1860 was promulgated by the city Administration to define the shape of the expansion outside the city walls. This Plan, later judged as 'grandiose' and on which Giovan Battista Filippo Basile collaborated, did not remain an isolated case: both the *Piano Giarrusso* in 1885 and the realisation of the National Exhibition in 1891-1892 helped Palermo to expand northwards, and in the direction of the Plain of the Colli, initiating a movement that would be ratified by the Regulatory Plan of 1939.

It is interesting to note also that the construction of a new collective identity post Unification is pursued not only through the creation of new public buildings but also through means of a meticulous redefinition of the names of the roads, squares, public buildings: in 1861, the Mayor, the Marquis Rudinì creates a commission for the reform of the toponymy, renaming all the scenes of Garibaldi's exploits, with the intent of exalting their symbolic value and leaving a reminder that would be both commemorative and educational for the populace.

The Commission also takes the opportunity to rename the existing theatres, which means that the Teatro San Ferdinando in Via Merlo is dedicated to Prince Umberto.

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5

Palermo, Museum of the Risorgimento. A sketch of the stage curtain of the Teatro Garibaldi (1863) by Giuseppe Bagnasco, depicting Garibaldi in Piazza Pretoria during the May days of 1860

THE THEATRES

The theatres play an important role in this construction of the popular identity by means of the consolidation of the collective memory; in 19th century Palermo there were already a series of establishments of a certain importance, including: the Teatro dei Musici di Santa Cecilia, the Real Teatro Carolino, the Teatro San Ferdinando, and the Teatro Garibaldi.

The Teatro di Santa Cecilia, the historical theatre of the Palermitan aristocracy dating back to the Baroque era, was founded in 1692, restructured several times between the 18th and 19th century and was considered the city's most important theatre before the construction of the large theatres at the end of the 19th century.

The 18th century Real Teatro Carolino, later dedicated to Vincenzo Bellini, although architecturally of interest, had insufficient space for all the new public wanting to

watch the great operatic performances, which did not fit onto the small stage, unable to accommodate the more demanding scenographies.

The Teatro San Ferdinando (later renamed Teatro Nazionale San Ferdinando and successively Teatro Principe Umberto and then in 1878, Real Teatro Umberto I) was built in 1801, in Via Merlo 8 in under a year. Unfortunately, the bombing during the Second World War destroyed the building, leaving only the entrance standing. The sign outside is still visible.

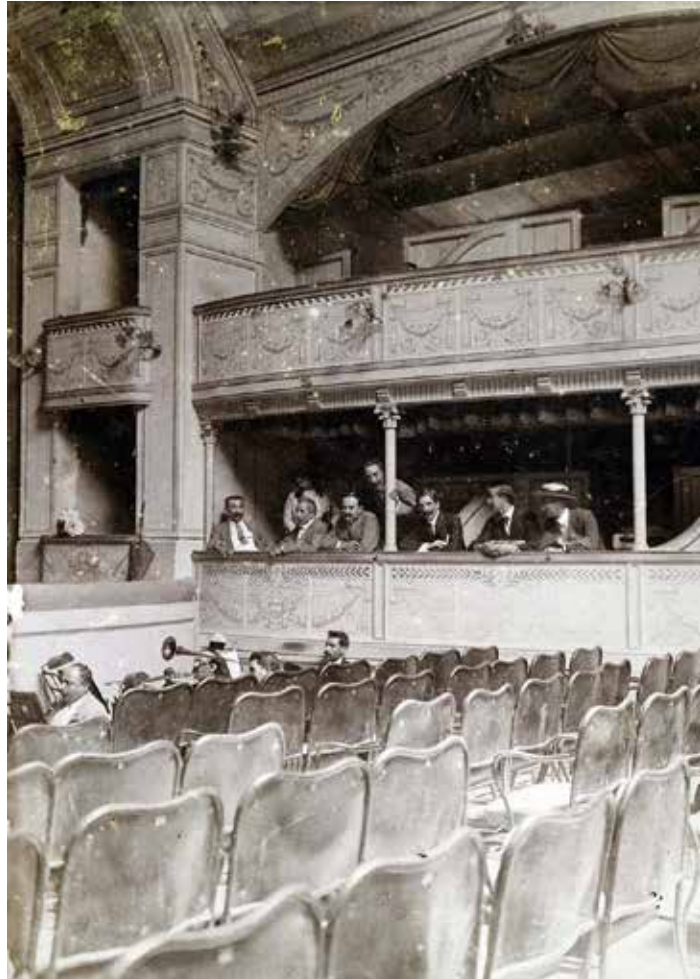
In 1862 the new Teatro Garibaldi was built near piazza Magione, commissioned by Maestro Pietro Cutrera, a well-known Palermitan composer and a former director of the National Theatre.

It is interesting to read that Cutrera had received in November 1860 an injunction forbidding him to "produce in any kind of theatrical representation anything to do with Garibaldi" from the Superintendent General of the Theatres and Shows of the time, the Marquis Rudini, who several years later, when he was Mayor, created a Commission for the reform of the city's toponymy, dedicating to Garibaldi and his men all the places touched by the Thousand. The building is constructed in the surviving portion of the gardens of the Ajutamicristo Palace (later known as Moncada). The pilasters of the entrance gate, incorporated into the body of the building, are still visible. The impresario's intentions are to supplement the structural deficiencies of the Teatro Carolino (later Bellini), but above all to create a place with a strong symbolic value, dedicated to the fight for the liberation of the populace conducted



by Garibaldi, the hero of the Two Worlds and dedicated to him in the memorable inaugural evening, in his presence, who held a passionate oration to promote the expedition to Aspromonte and the conquest of Rome.

Cutrera commissions the decorations from Carmelo Giarrizzo, who together with Onofrio Tomaselli and Enrico Cavallaro, paints on the ceiling the *Apotheosis of Garibaldi kissed by Glory* and in the intrados of the proscenium arch, the face of Anita surrounded by ten plaques with the names of the places and the dates of the General's battles. The stage curtain, decorated by Giuseppe Bagnasco, of which the original sketch still exists, is officially presented to the public the evening of 14th September, 1863, on the occasion of the staging of the drama *Garibaldi and the battle of Volturnus*. These buildings were supplemented by other smaller, private ones in which musical and theatrical events were presented for the entertainment of an educated, aristocratic public. Documentation from the mid-19th century exists for the Teatro l'Oreto, realised inside the Empire style *Casena* belonging to the Filangeri, Princes of Cutò, an isolated building on several floors built on the area in front of the Marina near the harbour of Sant'Erasmus, opposite the entrance to Villa Giulia and which was then, at the end of the 19th century, incorporated into the Institute known as the 'Casa di Lavoro e Preghiera' of Father Giovanni Messina, which still exists. The nature and the history of the construction of the two Palermitan theatres, the Massimo and the Politeama, are very different, even if they are closely intertwined: the Politeama starts life as a



6
The Teatro Carolino. The inside

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7

*Salvatore Coco.
Wooden model of
the design for the
Teatro Massimo by
G.B.F. Basile, made
for the International
Competition of 1864*

popular theatre, able to put on any kind of production, including daytime shows, whilst the Massimo is built for the enjoyment of the aristocracy and the upper classes of Palermo, who desire an opera house to rival those in the other European capital cities. Two very different solutions are chosen by the city administration for the building of the two theatres: the Teatro Massimo, destined to become one of the largest opera houses in Europe, is the subject of an International invitation to tender, published in September 1864 by the Mayor Antonio Starabba, Marquis Rudinì, whilst the construction of a multifunctional theatre for the staging of popular shows, is awarded

to the Technical Office of the city council, headed, at the time, by the excellent architect Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda (1834-1911) from Campania.

The two sites chosen for the two theatres are very different from each other. The site for the Teatro Massimo, located just inside the city walls, requires widespread demolitions and gutting, resulting in the destruction of significant vestiges of the old city. The new Politeama, on the other hand, sited in the area allocated to the new expansion, conditions the eventual layout and influences its architectural skyline, becoming the underlying factor of the new urban design, which starting from



the square in front of the Theatre itself, positions the most prestigious buildings along the 'Strada della Libertà', the main artery of the city post-unification. The construction of the Teatro Massimo, with the resulting demolition of the religious buildings, was part of a symbolic self-assertion by the upper class and the aristocracy, facilitated by the State policy aimed at the dissolution of the religious Orders and Fellowships and the subsequent confiscation by the State of the property of these suppressed Institutions. The demolitions were therefore justified by a situation decidedly unfavourable to the religious communities, during which

legislation was passed—later considered to have been eversive—expropriating ecclesiastical property and abolishing the privileges and immunities previously granted to the clergy.

8
The vertical cross-section shows the layout of the various volumes with the high tambour of the dome and the precise stereometry of the fly tower



THE TEATRO MASSIMO

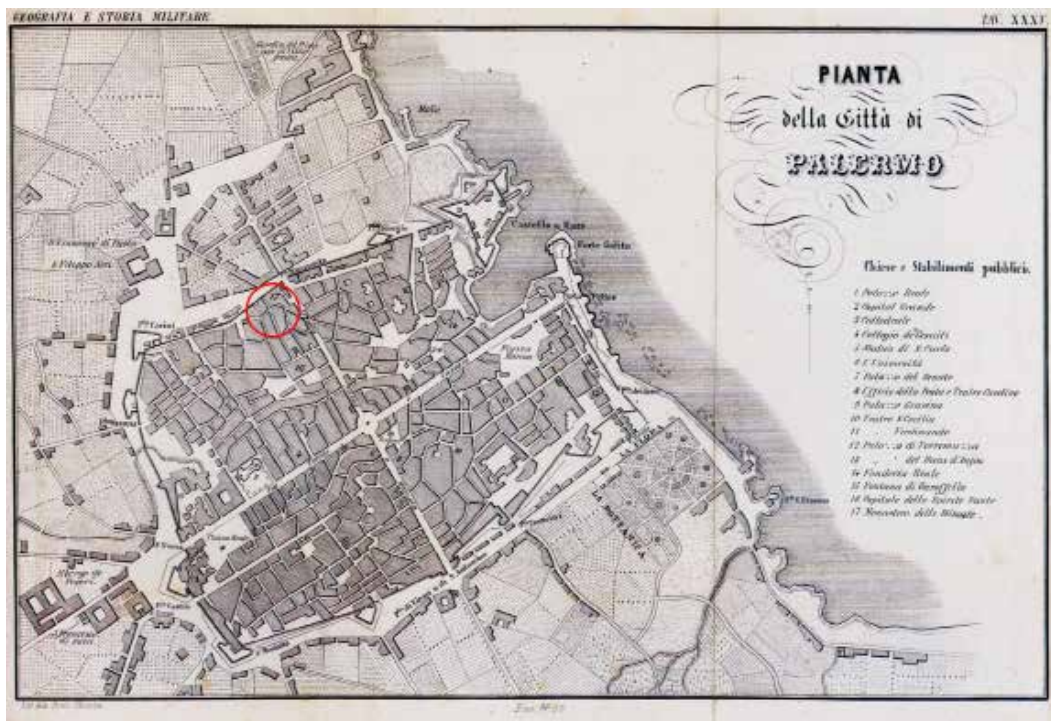
9
Early 19th century plan of the city [Palermo]. Evidenced is the site of the future demolitions needed for the building of the Teatro Massimo

THE HISTORY OF ITS CONSTRUCTION
The Mayor of Palermo, Antonio Starabba, Marquis Rudini, publishes an International Invitation to Tender in September 1864 for the construction of the Teatro Massimo, and 35 architects submit bids, including 12 foreigners.

The building programme for the new theatre requires massive demolition and gutting works necessary for the creation of sufficient new urban space, previously densely occupied by religious buildings and large tracts of the 18th century city walls. Thus the Church and the Monastery of the Stigmata of San Francesco, the Church

and Convent of the Theatine Virgins of the Immacolata Concezione, the Church of Santa Marta and the Church of Sant'Agata li Scorruggi [drinking bowls used to drink the water on the Saint's feast day] delle Mura are all pulled down together with portions of the 18th century city walls, for a total of some 25,000 sqmts.

This extensive demolition programme causes almost no stir in public opinion, externalising the widespread anti-clerical sentiment of the period, during which there was a reduction in the privileges accorded to the clergy and the expropriation of large parts of their real estate assets.



10

The Teatro Massimo. Aerial view

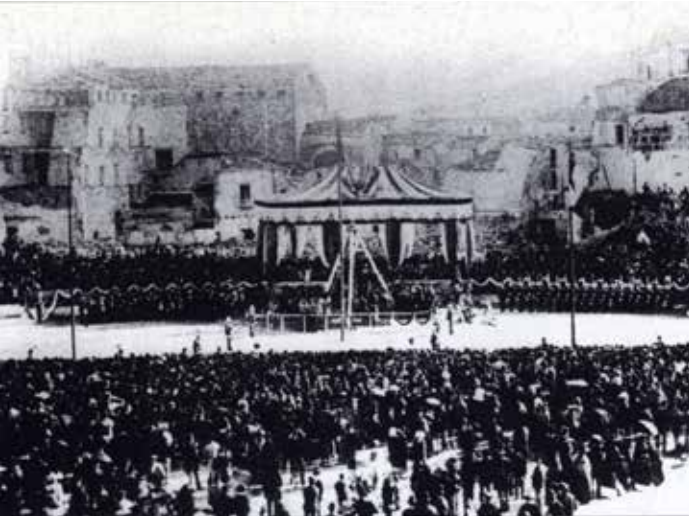
Giovan Battista Filippo Basile (1825-1891) as well as Damiani, tender for the privilege of designing the project. Basile is one of the principal exponents of the Sicilian Romanticism architectural style and had already designed the blueprints for the Giardino Inglese [The English Garden] and Villa Garibaldi in Piazza Marina. The architect Gottfried Semper, an internationally famed university professor and theorist, who had designed the Opera House in Vienna, is nominated president of the adjudicating Commission, which includes, amongst others the Florentine Mariano Falcini and the Palermitan Saverio Cavallari.

A short time later, in 1865, work starts on the construction of the Politeama, which proceeds with alacrity, offering work and economic sustenance to the local artisans, during the economic depression of the time, which was further aggravated by successive outbreaks of cholera in the city. The adjudicating Commission is likewise occupied, examining the projects entered into the competition, some of which are accompanied by scale models of excellent quality. Basile submits one illustrating his proposal, which is still on show in the *foyer* of the Theatre. The competition is not concluded until 1868, with the publication of the final classification consisting of 5 different designs. The first prize is awarded to Basile, the second and third to two Neapolitan architects, the fourth to Damiani Almeyda and the fifth to an architect designer from Brescia. The outcome of this verdict results in a phase of open controversy between the two Palermitan architects until the new Mayor,



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Emanuele Notarbartolo, puts an end to all discussion in 1875 by awarding the contract for the design and the direction of works of the new Theatre to Giovan Battista Basile. Begun on the 12th January 1875 with a solemn ceremony of the laying of the first stone, the construction is interrupted in 1882, when the new Mayor suspends work on the Theatre and revokes Basile's mandate as Director of Works, due to heavy cost overruns financed by the city council. This is the start of a period of profound difficulties and fierce battles for Basile, who is forced to defend himself in the national press and by means of his own publications, from the accusations made by the local councillor for public works, Fortunato Vergara. The affair reaches a climax in 1885 when the

11

*The Teatro Massimo.
The ceremony of the
laying of the first stone
(January 12th, 1875)*

12

*The Teatro Massimo
under construction.
Of note is the delicate
metallic structure of
the dome*





Town Council deliberates to award to the Piedmontese Architect Alessandro Antonelli, designer of the famous ‘*Mole*’ [in Italian a building of monumental proportions] of Turin, the contract to Supervise and finish the building of the theatre, altering, if necessary, the original design. Subsequent to Antonelli’s refusal by reason of his age—he was already 80 years old—and to successive attacks and continual changes of opinions by the various bodies

involved: the Mayor, the City Council, the Order of Engineers and Architects of Palermo, as well as the National Press, the contract is re-awarded to Basile in 1889. However, Basile severely tested by the various attacks on his name, is unable to complete his greatest work. He dies June 16th, 1891, at the age of 65.

A huge black flag is placed on the façade of the Theatre in his honour, as a sign of mourning by all the workers on the building site.

13
Piazza Giuseppe Verdi. Of note the wrought-iron railings, the cast-iron lamp-posts and the chiosco Vicari [kiosk], all designed by E. Basile

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14

The Teatro Massimo. View of the north rotunda characterised by the wide archways at ground level for carriage access

By unanimous decision the City Administration decides to award the contract for the completion of the project to Basile's son Ernesto (1857-1932), already an international figure, who follows his father's original design, adding a personal touch in the style of the internal decoration and furnishings.

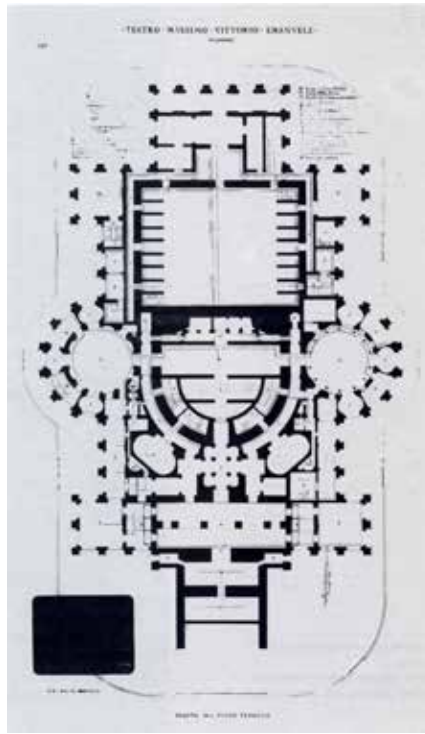
Ernesto also designed the layout of the Piazza in front of the Theatre, adding lamp-posts, two *chioschetti* [small kiosks] known as the Ribaldo and the Vicari and

the pedestal of the bust of Giuseppe Verdi, placed in the Theatre garden. Although not entirely finished, the Massimo is inaugurated the evening of May 16th, 1897 with Verdi's *Falstaff*, after 22 years of building works, interrupted, restarted, as well as contrasts and heavy criticisms. The opening of the new Theatre, second in size only to the opera houses in Paris and Vienna, is a social event of International importance.

THE ARCHITECTURE

The construction of the Theatre is part of a programme of urban renewal, concentrated for the most part, due also to the National Exhibition of 1891, to the north of the city centre, which with the new road known as the 'Strada della Libertà' form, for many years to come, the guidelines of the new urban town planning as well as the direction of its expansion.

The south side of the new urban space in which the Teatro Massimo is located was terminated at a later period and contains important buildings such as the Utveggio



15

*The Teatro Massimo.
Ground floor plan of
the theatre*

16

*The Teatro Massimo.
The iron dome is
covered in bronze 'fish-
scales' and surmounted
by a monumental
'fleuron'*



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17
Via Maqueda. The stretch in front of the Teatro Massimo. Of note the cast-iron lamp-posts made by the Oreteca Foundry of Palermo

Palace, the cinema Massimo and the Provveditorato alle opere Pubbliche. The building externally appears as if it were the union of two large structures of differing sizes: a circular dome tops the cylindrical hall whilst a sloping roof covers the quadrangular tall fly-tower. Basile himself, in the specifications of his design had stated that *“to contain the main building in a single parallelepipedon covered by a single roof would have been damaging to the quality of the air, to the penetration of natural daylight and would have increased the overall cost due to its gigantic proportions.”* A long staircase leads up to the entrance porch with six ribbed columns surmounted by Italic-Corinthian [composite] capitals in white Cinisi stone, sculpted by Mario Rutelli.

Either side of the main building are rotundas created for carriage access with

a *‘porte-cochère’* created for the purpose of allowing the public to await their carriages under cover.

Written in forged bronze letters on the architrave is the epigraph *“Art renews the people and reveals their life. The enjoyment of the shows is empty where its purpose is not to prepare for the future”*, usually attributed to the Palermitan Camillo Finocchiaro Aprile, at the time Italian Minister of Justice.

The stone from the Sòlanto quarries is utilised to realise the façade, conferring on the interior a luminous golden yellow glow. Along all the outside of the building there is a row of semi-columns with Italic-Corinthian [composite] capitals surmounted by a continuous frieze.

The design of the capital is the result of a re-elaborated version by Basile of a Corinthian-Italic capital characterised by acanthus leaves and floral motifs, based on his profound knowledge of classical architecture and a remarkable botanical expertise.

It is in fact important to remember that Basile, during his formative years, had maintained a close relationship with the scientist Vincenzo Tineo, at the time Director of the Botanical Gardens of Palermo, and who had introduced him to the study of Botany.

The design of the façade is characterised by a series of large arched windows, some of which are false so as not to alter the continuity and rhythm of the openings.



18

*The Teatro Massimo.
The southern façade.
Of note the dominant
semi-columns cladding
the entire external
theatre perimeter*

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19

The Teatro Massimo. The hexastyle pronaos characterised by columns decorated by capitals and from the original drawings by G. B. Basile



THE DECORATIONS

The theatre is remarkable for an important artistic intervention that involves every part of the building offering the visitor a continuous story starting from the architectural details continuing onto the large wall paintings and the important sculptures, glorifying, with the work of the most important artists active in Sicily and throughout the Italian nation, the symbolic values and the communicative capacities of the entire endeavour.

Two allegorical statues in bronze, representing Lyric Poetry and Tragedy, sculpted respectively by Mario Rutelli (1859-1941) and Benedetto Civiletti (1845-1899) stand either side of the monumental stairway leading to the portico, guarding the entrance to the theatre.

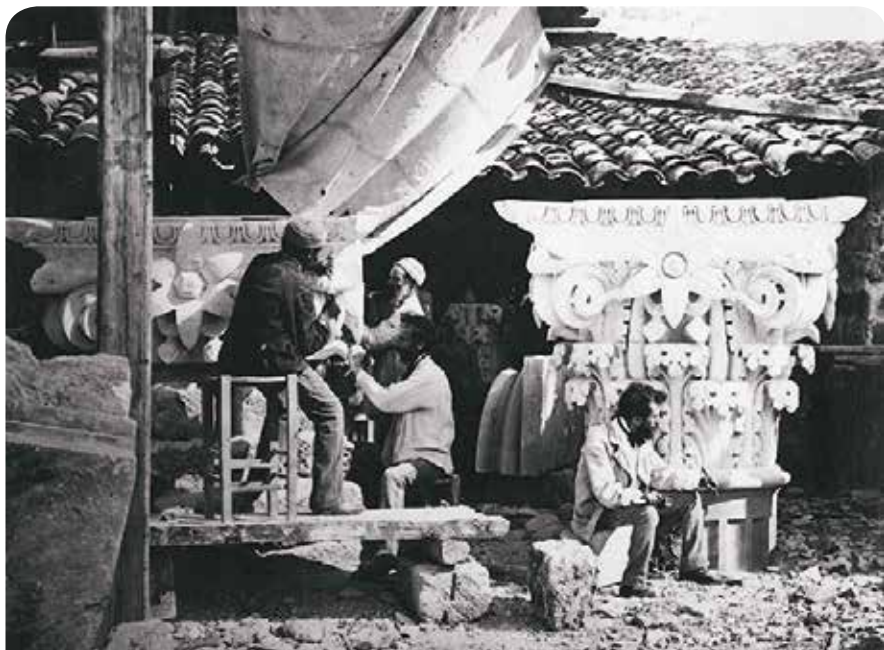
To the right of the portico (a hexastyle pronaos), on the ground floor is the 'Caffè' [Coffee House], decorated externally with floral motifs and internally with paintings by Enrico Cavallaro. The portico has a coffered ceiling with sculpted decorations and candelabra in the niches made by Gaetano Geraci and Antonio Ugo.

Inside, the ceiling of the *Grand Foyer* is decorated with paintings by Rocco Lentini. A series of galleries run the length of the upper floor. To the right is the bust of Giovan Battista Basile by Antonio Ugo: opposite the entrance the bronze relief by Rutelli, depicting the *Apotheosis of Victor Emmanuel*. Five doors open onto the great vestibule. One of these, opposite the main entrance, gives directly onto the 'Sala degli Specchi' [Mirror Room] from which two staircases with wrought-iron balustrades lead to the boxes.



20
*The Teatro Massimo.
 Statue depicting 'Lyric
 Poetry' by Mario
 Rutelli*

21
*The Teatro Massimo.
 Statue depicting
 'Tragedy' by Benedetto
 Civiletti*



22
*Mario Rutelli and
 'artisans' helping him
 carve the capitals*

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23

The Teatro Massimo, the central façade. On the architrave is engraved the epigraph attributed to Camillo Finocchiaro Aprile

The grand auditorium, covered in fine gold, is designed to offer maximum visibility and the best possible sound experience.

The walls are vertical and over the ceiling, sloping down to the proscenium for improved acoustics, is a sound chamber as large as the entire parterre.

A thin metal curtain, decorated to the design of Rocco Lentini by the painters Luigi Di Giovanni, Michele Cortegiani and Ettore De Maria acts as the ceiling to the hall and is formed by eleven 'petals' that can open out like a sunburst to allow for fresh air ventilation. There are five tiers of

boxes, whose parapets were decorated with paintings by Rocco Lentini. At the top are the galleries [the gods] and a large terrace for the public from which it is possible to admire the majesty of the bronze cupola decorated with garlands of flowers and acanthus leaves.

On the summit of the dome there is a large fleuron, 7 metres high, also in bronze over an iron framework. Coming back down into the theatre it is possible to walk through the boxes, covered in red velvet and preceded by small withdrawing rooms, elbow shaped so as not to allow the lights or noise from the



24-25

*The Teatro Massimo.
The horseshoe shaped
auditorium, five tiers of
boxes and a stepped gallery*

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*On the next page: The Teatro
Massimo. The ceiling divided
into eleven painted moveable
elements that open out like a
sunburst*

corridors to disturb the main auditorium. Wooden side doors permit communication between the various boxes. The corridors offer various corners for conversation, furnished with sofas and armchairs. The enormous Royal box, three times as large as the other boxes and twice as tall, is preceded by the Sovereign's drawing-room, decorated in mahogany and covered in damask, embellished with large mirrors and floral paintings by Ettore De Maria. A second antechamber, next to the box, has two niches decorated with bunches of flowers and joyful putti, by Francesco Padovani.







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27

*The Teatro Massimo.
The Stage curtain,
tempera on canvas
painted by Giuseppe
Sciuti 1894-1896*

The sculptures in the Royal Box, together with the ones in the main auditorium as well as those in cement and marble in the *Grand Foyer* were created by Salvatore Valenti to a design by Ernesto Basile. The two lateral halls, with excellent acoustics, are known as 'degli Stemmi' [the Armorial room] and 'Pompeiana' [the Pompeiian Room], the latter is covered by a translucent lowered dome with superimposed concentric decoration bands. At the bottom the candelabra are similar to the lamp-posts in the square, further up, in

the transoms, there are painted chimeras; a higher layer is decorated with putti with musical instruments whilst the top layer is a frieze in relief of white stucco on a red background. Above the frieze, the dome is divided horizontally into two zones: one layer depicts 28 medallions decorated with male and female profiles and a circular white canvas on which De Maria painted a string of dancing Naiads. On the summit of the dome there are 14 wedge shaped backgrounds [petals], decorated with allegorical figures, whilst all round the





28

The Teatro Massimo. The Sovereign's Drawing-room, covered in mahogany. In the ceiling the 'lacunaria' were painted by Ettore De Maria Bergler

skylight there is a crown decorated with floral motifs and faces of young girls. In this environment it is possible to perceive an extremely particular type of resonance, obtained by the architect through the use of a very minor asymmetrical arrangement of the auditorium so that if one stands exactly in the middle of the auditorium the sound of one's voice is perceived as extremely amplified. The stage curtain of the Teatro Massimo in Palermo was painted by Giuseppe Sciuti between 1894 and 1896 and represents 'King Roger II leaving the Royal Palace for his coronation in the Cathedral'. In this depiction of the 'Norman myth and its courtiers celebrating the great Roger' it is possible to envisage the metaphorical portrayal of the great Palermitan families at the end of the century, such as the Florios, the Whitakers and the Inghams, participating in the splendour of the City.



29

The Teatro Massimo. The boxes, with communicating anti-chambers, are all decorated with brightly coloured paintings by Rocco Lentini

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32

*The Teatro Massimo.
The circular
Pompeian Room has a
special resonance effect*

30

*The Teatro Massimo,
the Royal Box. A
niche decorated with
garlands of flowers and
putti*



THE TECHNOLOGY

The Theatre presents architectural and technological aspects of great interest and shows original constructive solutions. The use of iron is no longer limited to hidden areas in the building but is used in the large empty spaces of the underdome and the stage.

A large circular room with ribbon windows, to be used for rehearsals in the original plans, fills the underdome. The covering of the room leaves the metal framework visible, a choice very much in line with the nascent industrial architectural style.

The fly tower, 40 meters tall, hosts a complex system of structures and machinery able to move the large backdrops and scenery into the fly lofts through a system of grid decks originally made with wooden rails on a metal structure for the entire length of the proscenium. A series of fly galleries, stairs, winches, and mechanisms

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*The Teatro Massimo,
the Royal Box.
Extremely large it is
three times the size
of the boxes in the
auditorium and twice
the height. The décor
in wood and stucco is
covered in fine gold*





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*The Teatro Massimo.
The inauguration of
the Theatre May 16th,
1897*

of every kind behind the decorated wings show the industrial nature and the technical rigour required by a stage machinery of this size. Even the air-conditioning system of the building was studied with the most modern techniques in mind: the heating was assured by a large furnace under ground and a well designed system of brick channels inside the walls assured the transmission of heat via a series of mobile grilles hidden in the walls. The architect Basile designed an advanced system of natural ventilation, dividing the curtain which acts as a ceiling for the room, in eleven mobile elements that opening out fanwise like the petals of a flower enable

the hot air to flow out, permitting a natural exchange of fresh air internally.

There was also a mechanism built to lift the orchestra pit up onto the stage in order to use the entire space for special events. A similar system was also studied to make the floor of the parterre horizontal, which actually slopes gently down towards the stage. Neither of these two mechanisms was actually ever realised.



THE OPERA SEASONS

The evening of May 16th 1897, at 9 pm, although the theatre is not yet finished, the first season of the Massimo is inaugurated with Verdi's *Falstaff*, directed by maestro Leopoldo Mugnone.

The press writes of a theatre full of elegant operagoers, who acclaim Ernesto Basile before the start of the evening, paying homage to the memory of his father also. Amongst the operas scheduled for the season, other than *Falstaff*, are *La Gioconda* by Ponchielli and Puccini's *La Bohème* and amongst those making their début is a young tenor destined to go far, Enrico Caruso. There are many firsts for Palermo: *Tosca* in 1901, with Puccini himself in the audience and Mascagni's *Iris*.



In 1902 there is the first production of *Zazà*, with the composer Leoncavallo in the audience. Palermo enjoys its best season thanks to the support of the entrepreneurial class both active and very social with the Florios, the Inghams and the Whitakers to the forefront, often hosting in their salons the major exponents of the monarchies and many illustrious members of the international aristocracy.

In two occasions, between 1906 and 1918 and then between 1923 and 1926, it is the Florio family who take over the running of the Theatre. There was a memorable evening in honour of Prince Umberto and Maria José of Savoy, with Mascagni's *Iris*, directed by the composer himself on April 25th, 1932. In the same year in occasion of

34
The Newspaper recounting the inauguration of the Theatre. The sole edition

35
The Teatro Massimo. The playbill of the inaugural season



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Playbill of 'Tosca' presented for the first time in Palermo in 1901

Lucia di Lammermoor by Donizetti, for the first time Palermo's radio station transmits, directly from the Theatre, the opera to the entire country. In 1936 the Ente Autonomo Teatro Massimo is created.

During the war the operas are initially performed in the afternoons but in May 1942 the Theatre closes down. It reopens in 1943 under enemy occupation and in December of the same year it is requisitioned by the allied troops who run it for almost a year.

Organised by the American I.B.S. Special Service, a restricted concert season is held and later a season of opera in collaboration with the Ente Autonomo and with the new

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The opera season in 1930 and 1931 was programmed by the Impresario 'Minolfi and Co.'



Superintendent Filippo Ernesto Raccuglia. The performances are held mainly during the afternoons and on Sundays at affordable prices within the reach of all Palermitans. On June 5th, 1944 the Massimo is returned to the city and the administration to the Ente Autonomo. After the war the Massimo once again enjoys a period of splendour with many of the most important opera singers performing: Maria Caniglia, Beniamino Gigli, Mario Del Monaco, Gino Bechi, Tito Gobbi and in 1949, Maria Callas. The '50s bring about a change in how people view the opera; more attention is paid to the staging of the production and to the recital of the singers. Thus some of the most brilliant film directors such



as Visconti, Zefferelli and Bolognini are involved in the stage direction of the opera, which meets with great success from the public and excellent press from the critics. The Superintendent in those years is maestro Simone Cuccia and it is thanks to him that Palermo hosts some of the most important conductors including Serafin, Gavazzeni, Celibidache and von Karajan and some of the most famous singers such as Di Stefano, Stella and Simionato. At the end of the 1950s the Hungarian choreographer Miłosz revolutionises the Palermitan ballet scene, collecting around himself great names in the field of music such as Dallapiccola, Casella, Petrassi, Rota, Bussotti, Berio and Musco together with the

contribution of noted artists in the guise of scenographers including Casorati, de Pisis, de Chirico, Severini, Mafai, Afro, Guttuso, Caruso, Cagli and Morici.

In the '60s there are several great first performances of works as well as the staging of little known works together with a restaging of the traditional repertoire. A temporary closure of the Theatre decided in 1974, in order to update the machinery turns into a very long pause for restorations that are drawn out over 20 years, so that the Theatre does not open again until 1997 offering the city new seasons of opera and symphonic concerts.

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The Teatro Massimo, outside. Antonio Ugo, Bronze bust of Giuseppe Verdi (1902), on a marble pedestal designed by E. Basile

THE POLITEAMA

39

Via Libertà. View from Piazza Mordini (Crocì) at the beginning of the 1900s

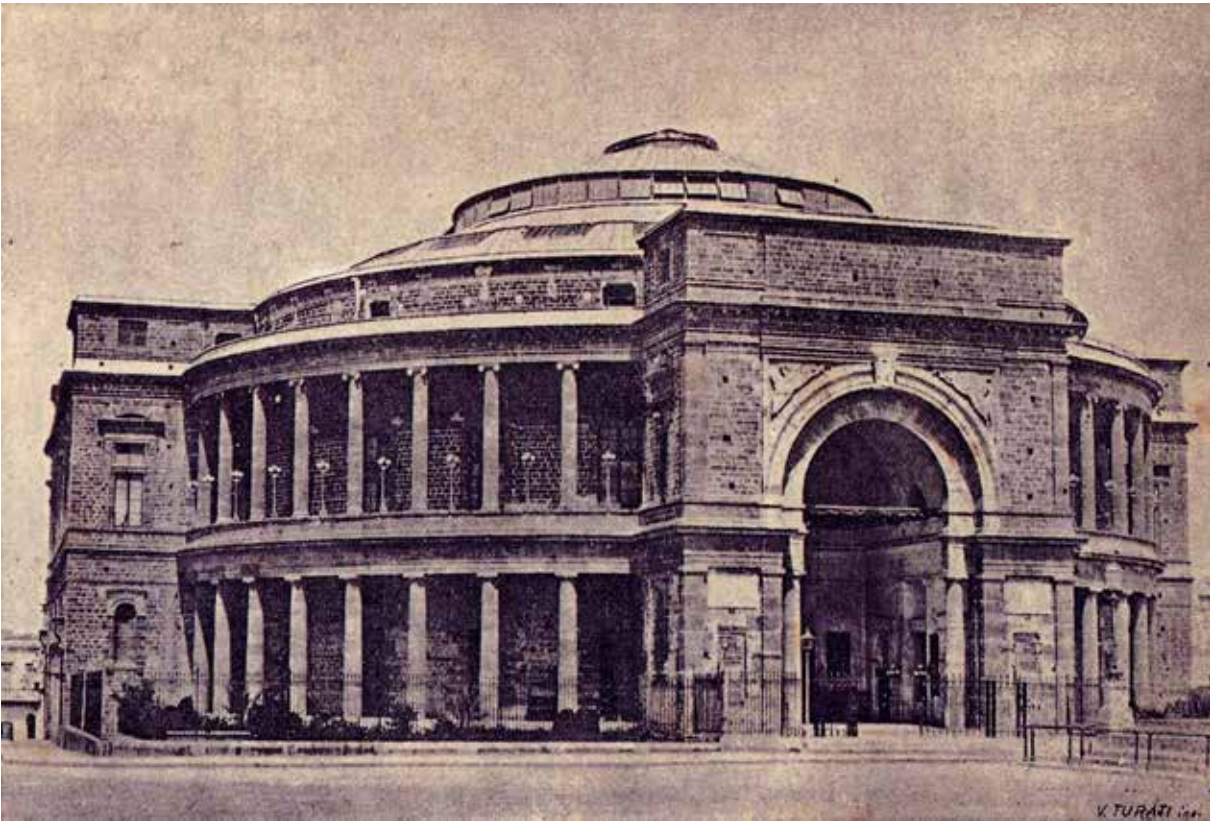
THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The decision to build a multifunctional theatre in Palermo dedicated to the production of popular entertainment was taken by the City Council in 1865 and was part of the urban plan known as the 'Plan for Reform and Expansion', drawn up by the Administration in 1860 to outline the urban expansion outside the city walls.

In the second half of the 19th century the city was in a period of stagnation and recession, and the citizens of Palermo, perhaps because of this dramatic economic

situation, enjoyed going to watch popular entertainment: there were exhibitions of circus gymnasts and acrobats, held in the square by the port [nowadays Piazza Marina], where the Circus of the French Guillaume brothers was pitched for a long time, given the appreciation shown them by the public of Palermo. In 1865 these conditions suggested to the Administration that it would be a good idea to include in the Urban Plan for Reforms the possibility of creating a temporary theatre. This was realised as an ephemeral structure in 1890,





in the gardens of Palazzo Villarosa, near Via Ruggero Settimo and dubbed 'the Mangano amphitheatre'.

For the construction of the new Politeama, initiated in 1867, a contract was stipulated with the Piedmont banker Carlo Galland, after Damiani Almeyda's proposal won the competition for the design architect open only to the collaborators of the city Municipality.

Galland committed himself, with the stipulation of the contract, to build "a Politeama according to the designs and overall plans prepared by the Technical Office, as well as 'three markets following the designs of the architect Damiani.'" (*Specifications on the agreement drawn up between the City Authorities and Mr. Carlo Galland, from Piedmont, for the construction of the markets and the Theatre, 1866*).

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The Teatro Politeama. The Theatre appears devoid of both sculptural and pictorial décor which are not completed until 1891, but has already its metallic roofing, completed in 1877

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41
The Teatro Politeama.
Aerial view

THE URBAN LOCATION: THE SQUARE AND THE CITY

In contrast to the Teatro Massimo, whose siting inside the densely built up area of the historic city required the demolition of many existing buildings as well as part of the 16th century city walls, the Politeama was sited in an unoccupied peripheral location known as the Spiazzo of Sant'Oliva, along the extension of Via Ruggero Settimo, which was intended to become a new Square and where the Politeama was to occupy the northeast side.

The diverse urban contexts of the two theatres also determined a diverse relationship between the building and the public space: in the case of the Massimo the character of the urban space was defined by the building occupying it, but in the case of

the Politeama, the new building contributed to the overall design of the new square, of which it was one of the extremities.

The Sant'Oliva area, given its position at the beginning of the new 'Strada della Libertà' was proposed in 1864, by Damiani, as the site for the erection of the monument to Ruggero Settimo, characterised by a tall pedestal and an exedra as a backdrop.

Two years later, in 1866, in the theatre drawings, the monument was given a precise collocation, confirmed later by its actualisation opposite the theatre's façade. It was to be framed by the triumphal arch, the building's principal façade, whilst the drawing of an arcade delimited the new urban space.

For the Politeama, Damiani did not limit himself to the drawings of the building



42
*Piazza Politeama and
Via Emerico Amari in
the 1930s*

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The Teatro Politeama, inside the auditorium. Over the proscenium a colonnade with a bust of Garibaldi at the centre

but also furnished indications for the space in front of the Theatre: the new square assumed a civic value, both as a meeting place and for the symbolic references placed in it, to the extent that it became a place equal in importance to the new multifunctional building itself. The new square and the Theatre, its

protagonist, played an essential role in the design of a city on the edge of a new century: the new urban space constituted in fact a connection between the buildings erected on the kitchen gardens of Carella, which from the crossroads of Regalmici, the so-called 'quattro canti di campagna', went right up to Borgo Santa Lucia and the urban expansion

out towards the new 'Strada della Libertà'. Again, very different from what happened in the case of the Teatro Massimo, the new public building and the square initiated a round of real estate creation, which resulted in the investment in the nearby 'firriato Villafranca', originally with the National Exhibition and then later with the building of new neighbourhoods.

Although very different the two squares in which the two Theatres were built both presented a new urban characteristic: the square was no longer an empty space carved

out of the mediaeval fabric, but rather a monumental hub revolving around the new civic building which was reflecting collective values.

In the second half of the 19th century along the axis created by the 16th century via Maqueda and its extension Via Ruggero Settimo, two new squares were built, containing two new civic buildings, both theatres: the Teatro Massimo was at the edge of the walled city and the Politeama at the opposite end, near the new area of expansion.

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The Teatro Politeama. Auditorium horseshoe shaped, 2 tiers of boxes and a stepped gallery



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45

The Teatro Politeama, the frontal façade. Of note the triumphal arch extruding from the circular body of the main building

THE BUILDING: THE PROJECT, THE ARCHITECTURE AND THE DÉCOR

The architectural typology of the Politeama, a multifunctional theatre for the production of all types of performances, from circus to popular theatre was relatively common in Italy at the end of the 19th century and there were examples in Pisa, Florence, Leghorn, Naples, all well known to Almeyda, who however did not have any need to copy contemporary

buildings, as he was a great connoisseur of classic architecture and used the Roman amphitheatre as his model. A circular floor-plan bordered by wide arcades and a seating-area [cavea] either open-air or else protected by a velarium [awning], was the classic design and could be adapted to fit the needs of a modern 19th century multifunctional theatre. This was also due to the possibilities offered by new studies on metallic structures, offering audacious





46
The Teatro Politeama.
 The vestibule with
 a coffered ceiling
 ('lacunaria')

47
The Teatro Politeama.
 Detail of the
 triumphal arch

solutions for the support of the wide span of the roof coverings.

The type of building was similar to that of a circus-theatre and was inspired by the *Hoftheater* designed by Gottfried Semper, built in Dresden a few years earlier. Scrutinising the technical drawings of the project, it is possible to observe the rigorously symmetrical design of the building characterised by a semi-circular construction on which the vestibule is inserted, together with the triumphal entrance arch surmounted by the equestrian sculptures on the façade. The body of the stage is the width of the maximum diameter of the auditorium. The stage goes right back onto via Isidoro La Lumia and finishes with two wings that enlarge the façade



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Aerial view of the Teatro Politeama and of the spaciousness all around it. Of note the statue of Ruggero Settimo by Benedetto De Lisi (1865), positioned directly in front of the Theatre entrance



and encompass the two rectangular structures that halfway down connect the 'public' area of the auditorium and the boxes with the 'technical' area of the stage. The architect inserted into this perfect symmetry, without in any way penalising its functionality, the side entrances, the bar and the foyer.

The auditorium, designed to hold almost five thousand people, has two tiers of boxes and a semicircular gallery on the top floor. Notwithstanding the fact that there is a semicircular gallery, the auditorium is horseshoe-shaped for functional reasons and this complex structure made the design of the roof extremely complicated.

However, Almeyda resolved the problem brilliantly, to the extent that he earned the praise of the scientific community and later that of the Palermitan public.

The cylindrical volume is interrupted by a triumphal arch, markedly extruding that leads into the elliptically shaped *foyer* and is the backdrop of the *Piazza Castelnuovo* and *Ruggero Settimo*, which together are known colloquially as '*Piazza Politeama*'. On June 7th, 1874 the '*Teatro Municipale Politeama*', renamed the '*Politeama Garibaldi*' in 1882 after the death of Garibaldi, was inaugurated,



49
The Teatro Politeama.
The roofing consists of two superimposed vaults, supported by thin cast-iron columns

50
The Teatro Politeama.
Two rows of stepped galleries

51
On the following page: the dome of the Theatre decorated by Gustavo Mancinelli







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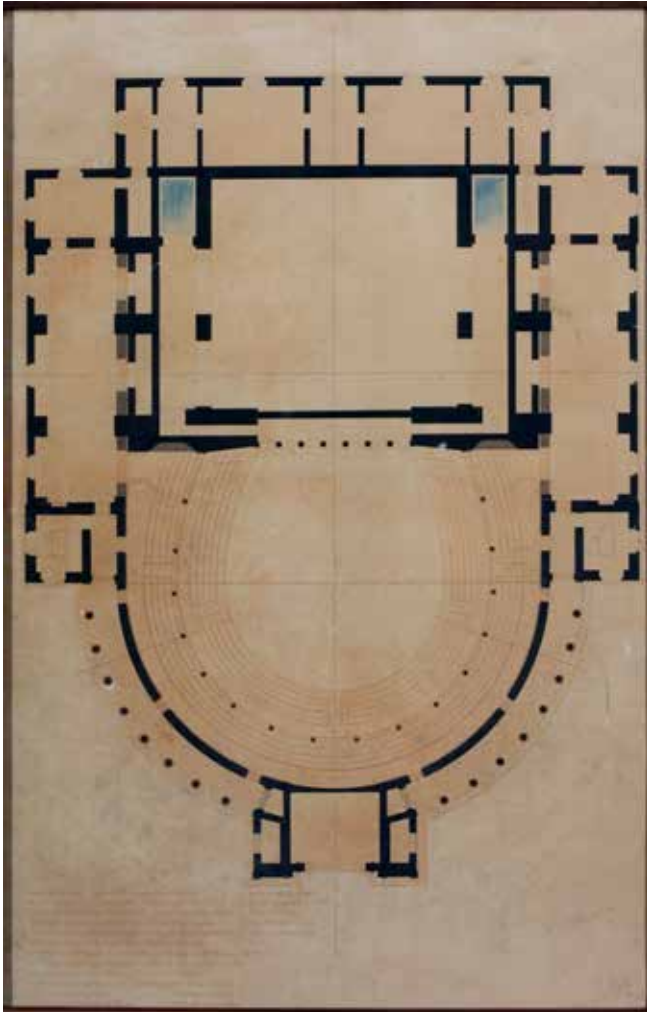
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52

*The Teatro Politeama.
Plan of the ground
floor of the Theatre,
1879*

although incomplete and without a roof, with the production of *The Capulets and the Montagues* by Vincenzo Bellini. It remained for more than twenty years the focal point for

opera in Palermo. In 1875, new economic resources permitted the city Authorities to commission Almeyda with the roofing of the theatre, already presented in six of the drawings approved in 1866. It was built by the Foundry Oretea in November 1877. The structural solution combined elegance with functionality: from the summit of the gallery sixteen cast-iron pillars each anchored onto the perimeter walls by two trusses, support a flying buttress (defined as '*grua*' in the original design); on the polygonal structure that connects the '*grue*' are loaded the 'large arches' lightly cambered, which converge onto the central ellipse, which in turn supports the skylight. Damiani created two superimposed vaults by this





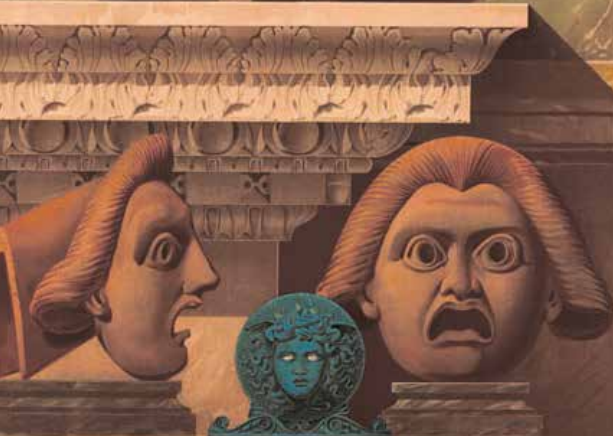
method: the lower one was relatively rigid whilst the higher one was light and elastic. The lower structure, even though it was supported by the walls, did not in any way transmit a thrust that could jeopardise their stability, thanks to a system of diagonal ties, known as 'crosses of St. Andrew'; the upper structure with the large arches, tied to the underlying polygon by fine, mobile 'hinged' stays, finishes in the elliptical skylight which terminates the roofing. Natural daylight floods the auditorium from above, highlighting the colours of the décor and reinforcing the perception of the stalls as if they were in an open air space, an essential character of a Roman amphitheatre, the model of all the European Politeamas in the 19th century. This building is the ultimate in inseparable continuity between architecture and decoration, which bursts into polychromy

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The Teatro Politeama. Detail of the roofing solution adopted by G. Damiani Almeyda

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Piazza Castelnuovo and Piazza Ruggero Settimo (1875). The Politeama is still undecorated externally and a protective canvas supplies the roofing. At the start of Via Libertà one notes the grounds of the 'Firriato di Villafranca'



55

Plates from the book by Damiani Almeyda, 1890 'Ornamental illustrations taken from the ancient and the modern' in which he studies the polychromy in both classical architecture and in 'Pompeian style' decorations



in the frescoes and paintings adorning every element in the building, from the grandiose backdrops to the minute details of the construction itself. Almeyda was, in fact, a profound connoisseur of the research carried out by Hittorff and the French architects of the *Prix de Rome*, who had discovered in the architecture of Selinunte, the polychrome nature of Greek architecture, removing it from the cold rigidity immortalised in the works of Winckelmann and Canova.

Moreover, Damiani, though born and brought up in Campania, did not ignore the best of the experiments carried out previously in Sicily by architects such as Léon Dufourny, the first to introduce Neoclassicism into Sicily, or Venanzio Marvuglia, who collaborated with him and then continued his work in the Botanical Gardens in Palermo. The polychrome pavilions cannot have escaped the notice of the architect from Campania, together with

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The Teatro Politeama. Details of the frescoes decorating the second tier of the stepped galleries

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*The Teatro Politeama.
Details of the colonnade of the second
level with the Ionic
columns*



57-58

*The Teatro Politeama.
Details of the frescoes
decorating the second
tier of the stepped
galleries*

the graceful greens and blues dominating Villa Belmonte all'Acquasanta, also the work of Marvuglia.

Adopting the system of decorating 'a fresco' over the ample plastered surfaces, the architect found the perfect answer to the need to exalt the civic value of the monument and depict symbolic values common to the entire community, without overstepping the bounds of economy and simplicity required in a theatre that was intended to be for the common people. The internal and external décor is entirely created by Damiani as recorded on the







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Yellow room

commemorative plaque, placed inside the vestibule between the cornice and the transom in polychrome glass that leads into the auditorium: “S.P.Q.P. – this building built for the production of a variety of recitals has been suitably decorated by its architect Giuseppe Damiani de Almeida by decree of the city council February 1st, 1891 – Mayor Emanuele Paternò of Sessa on the solemn occasion of the National

Exhibition of 1891-92”. Several Sicilian artists participated in the decoration of the Theatre: Nicolò Giannone, Luigi Di Giovanni, Michele Cortegiani, Giuseppe Enea, Rocco Lentini, Enrico Cavallaro, Carmelo Giarrizzo, Francesco Padovani and Giovanni Nicolini.

A colonnade on two levels runs the entire length of the outside of the building: Doric columns on the lower level and Ionic

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*The Teatro Politeama.
The frieze depicting the
cycle of the Eleutherian
Celebrations*

L'OTTOCENTO

La città nuova e i suoi teatri



62-63

*The Teatro Politeama.
The bronze 'Quadriga'
with 'The Triumph of
Apollo and Euterpe'*

columns on the upper level, separated by an entablature; the double gallery, with a coffered ceiling is painted in sky blue on the lower part and yellow on the upper part with a frieze at the summit on a red background, in the Pompeiian style painted by Carmelo Giarrizzo, depicting foot races on the Ionic level and horse racing on the Doric level. The triumphal arch is

decorated by an entablature—between the architrave and the crowning cornice—with a bas-relief by Mario Rutelli depicting a line of putti playing musical instruments, singing and dancing. On either side of the main entrance of the Theatre, behind the two large candelabra in cast iron, there are two commemorative plaques with the inscriptions dictated by Isidoro La Lumia

and above, the two bas-reliefs depicting 'Phemes' by Giuseppe Pensabene.

The bronze sculptures dominating the summit of the triumphal arch are a monumental work of art by Mario Rutelli and depict *La Quadriga* [four horses pulling a chariot], known also as the *Triumph of Apollo and Euterpe*, protectors of the arts and poetry. Either side of this are two equestrian statues by the Sicilian sculpture Benedetto Civiletti. The two horsemen hold the symbols of

the Olympic games: the crown of laurels (victory in loyalty) and the palm (peace). For the realisation of this great work, Rutelli studied the anatomy of horses and their movements, gaining first hand experience in the stables of the Marquis Pasqualino. The complex (800 cm x 350 cm), made of painted cement was installed in 1890 but it was not until 1930 that it was fused in bronze in the Chiurazzi Foundry in Naples. On this occasion, taking advantage of the



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*The Teatro Politeama.
Detail of the bronze
Quadriga*

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*The Teatro Politeama.
Frontal façade of
the Theatre during
the erection of the
Quadriga statue,
fused in bronze
not until 1930. In
the foreground the
band-stand, created in
1875 by the sculptor
Salvatore Valenti*

collaboration of his pupil Silvestre Cuffaro, he decided to open up the chariot so the divinities could be seen in all their glory and gave the horses a slight incline so that their movements could be better appreciated from below.

The vestibule, with a decorated ceiling with lacunaria, is characterised by masks and symbols recalling Selinunte traditions whilst the frieze recalls the figurative heritage of the mosaics in Roman houses, which had recently been found in the excavations in Piazza Vittoria.

The halls used for access or during





intermissions, like the large Sala degli Specchi [Hall of Mirrors] and those on the upper floors (the *Sala Rossa* [the Red Room] and the *Sala Gialla* [the Yellow Room]), which once housed the Civic Gallery of Modern Art, are decorated with paintings by Giuseppe Enea, Rocco Lentini and Enrico Cavallaro, who again used a Pompeiian inspired polychromy with a play on sky blues and reds in these areas. Inside the auditorium, in the front of the stage, is a colonnade with the bronze bust of Giuseppe Garibaldi in the centre, flanked

either side by the allegories of *Tragedy* and *Comedy*. The stage curtain (four hundred and fifty kilos in weight and 14 m x 13 m in size), depicts a theme linked to the classics and mythology, that of the arrival of Aeschylus in Syracuse, presenting the Aetneans to Hiero. The work of Gustavo Mancinelli, maestro of the Habsburg Academy of Naples, the stage curtain was restored for the first time in the 1930s and then retrieved by the Soprintendenza regionale ai beni culturali di Palermo in 2009, from the storerooms of the Teatro Massimo, in the district of Brancaccio,

66
G. Damiani Almeyda,
cross section of the
Theatre, 1879

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The Teatro Politeama, the stage curtain. 'The arrival of Aeschylus in Syracuse, presenting the Aetneans to Hiero', by Gustavo Mancinelli

where it had been conserved for over 50 years.

With a solution of notable effect, Mancinelli creates an illusion of fluid architectural continuity with the actual architecture of the auditorium, thereby appearing to prolong the curve and the vertical rhythm of the partition walls created by the boxes. Mancinelli also decorated the dome with the fake sky blue and ochre curtain included

inside a decoration depicting the cycle of the Eleutherian Games, the Festivals of Freedom celebrated in ancient Greece in honour of Zeus Eleutherios [Zeus 'the liberator'] in memory of their victory over the Persians. The depiction is connected to the figure of Demeter, goddess of the Harvest, who gave man grain and taught him how to cultivate it.

Once these decorations were terminated,

68

The Teatro Politeama, G. Damiani Almeyda. Detail of the capitals, 1879 exhibiting his profound knowledge of classical architecture and his passion for drawing





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the theatre was reopened in October 1891, on the occasion of the inauguration of the National Exhibition, with an *Othello* ecstatically received, interpreted by the famous tenor Francesco Tamagno, in the presence of his majesty Umberto of Savoy and his wife Margherita. As the Teatro Massimo was not yet completed, the Politeama became the star attraction of the entire Exhibition with a varied playbill of performances aimed at entertaining the fashionable aristocracy and the wealthy upper-class entrepreneurs visiting the Exhibition.

From 1910 and for almost a further hundred years, the *Ridotto* [foyer] was home to the Civic Gallery of Modern Art of Palermo, created by the strong will of Empedocle Restivo, to whom it was dedicated.

The housing of the Gallery in the Politeama was supposed to be temporary as space was limited, but for a variety of reasons, not least economic ones, the Gallery remained in the Theatre until December 2006, when it was transferred to the recently restored 17th century complex of the Franciscan Convent of Sant'Anna, annexed to the Church of the same name, and the Gallery was renamed GAM.

In 2000 the restoration of the Pompeian polychrome decorations of the gallery was initiated and in the summer of 2001, that of the posterior façade of the theatre. The theatre, which as a result of the temporary closure of the Teatro Massimo from 1974 to 1997 staged numerous seasons of opera, has, since 2001 become the home of the Sicilian Symphony Orchestra and is nowadays used principally as a concert hall.

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