A necessary restoration for the traditional and historical buildings in Volla plain (Naples, Italy)

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Abstract

Volla plain, a strip of plain sited between Naples and the Vesuvius, in the past was ploughed by the waters of the Sebeto river (no longer existing) and by many other water courses; it has always presented all the typical aspects of a swamp, and a great fertility. This plain has always been used by men for several activities: agriculture, which produced mainly vegetables, was flourishing; watermills for the production of flour increased to a very lucrative industry; game was plentiful (in XVIII century this area was a hunt reserve for the king Ferdinand of Bourbon). For centuries (between the XIII and the XX) reclaiming operations have gone on, trying to control the waters that flowed from the numerous subterranean sources and aquifers, to gain more land to agriculture and to defeat mortal malaria. But only in the last 50 years has this area completely lost its original aspect, because of the quick and absurd urbanization of the oriental Neapolitan hinterland, the partial industrialization of traditionally rural lands and most of all because of the huge water pick-ups from the subterranean sources and aquifers which fed the water courses vivifying the plain. Nevertheless, the site still keeps many elements of an environmental and cultural value that would be worth preserving and improving for a sustainable development of the whole area: among them a lot of traditional and historical buildings, mostly farmhouses but also some remarkable monuments, which are in a state of complete decay and ruin. Nobiliary mansions, a XVI century building and also a XVIII century royal hunt lodge are presently completely neglected.

Their restoration and their adaptation to new uses of a receptive kind, could be part of a larger plan of recovering of this area, not only from an environmental and cultural, but also from an economical and social point of view.
Structural Studies, Repairs and Maintenance of Historical Buildings

Introduction

Volla plain is an area sited to the east of Naples which historically has always been swampy: it was characterized by many aquifers which originated rivulets and channels running to Sebeto, mythical river of Naples that afterwards disappeared.

Because of its unhealthy and swampy features, for centuries the place has been the natural border for the eastern expansion of the city, at least until the beginning of the 20th century, when reclaiming operations were definitively over, leaving place to a fertile land soon invaded by the wild and unruly urbanization which involved all Neapolitan hinterland at the beginning of the 20th century and mainly soon after the Second World War.

So during the 20th century all the original features of the eastern outskirts of the city were completely twisted in the name of a presumed progress and of a presumed industrialization process that instead didn’t constituted a real economical development for the city and that as a consequence didn’t bring any real benefit to the local population.

As for the original area’s characteristic and qualifying features, presently remain some significant examples of them, among which some historical and remarkable buildings left in a state of complete and guilty decay running to their definitive ruin. This must not be allowed, but it’s necessary the recovery of these ancient, valuable buildings, giving them a new function that could restore their former dignity.

The settlings

Although the eastern area of the city were swampy, and so naturally insalubrious, unhealthy and afflicted by malaria, it was inhabited ever since very ancient times; in fact it was a very fertile land and so it was used for agricultural production, which caused the natural development of some settlings. Some archaeological discoveries found in Ponticelli attest how the area was inhabited at least ever since the 3rd or the 4th century, but very likely the area was populated even before, as probably the Romans took from here the agricultural products to satisfy the city’s demands.

For sure already in ducal time (10th and 12th centuries) in this area it was certified the presence of many hamlets and villages: obviously they were very small settlings, little houses’ rural agglomerates mainly rose along the principal roads or around the main taverns and farms.

With the proceeding of the reclaiming operations, the gradual living conditions’ improvement and the richness of the agricultural production, these little settlings grew and some others rose, so that some of them included inside their territory the nearest ones [1].

Volla was constituted as a unitary settling only in the 20th century and mainly after the demographic boom displayed by Naples in the second post-war period; formerly it was an agricultural area characterised by several loose hamlets concentrated along the main road (Tavernella, Fornonuovo, Taverna della Noce
and Cappella Curcio) and around the main farms (La Preziosa, Tavernanova) and nobiliary mansion (Lufrano).

The reclaiming operations were carried out at different times from the 13th to the 20th century. They were begun by the Angevins, continued by the Aragoneses and incremented in viceroyal times, but the most significant and consistent reclaiming interventions were not carried out by the royal authority, but by the very inhabitants of the swamp, who autonomously dug ditches and channels to irrigate the fields and to canalise the waters. A new impulse to the official reclaiming operations was given in the 19th century, when several reclaiming interventions were carried out, bringing to the realization of a channel net long altogether 43 kilometres; the reclaim was declared concluded in 1895, but other interventions were still carried out afterwards, so that it can be said that it was concluded only in 1917, with the institution of the Naples, Volla and surroundings’ reclaiming maintenance Consortium [2, 3, 4].

The study of the settlings and of the buildings rose in the swamps during all this period is complicated by the cartographic uncertainties and lacks, so that it has been carried out by the historians mainly on the base of archive’s documents. In fact the representation of the city in its expansion toward east usually stopped to Magdalena bridge, which until the beginning of the 20th century was the border of the urban area: to the east of this point a kind of “hic sunt paludes” was drew, not allowing to represent further. In the 16th and the 17th centuries some cartographic representation of Campania were made, showing the main villages at that time, but it must wait until the 18th century to have the first representations of Naples complete with its surroundings, showing the cultivated fields, the farmhouses, the mills and the water channels.

**Traditional productive activities**

The water richness in the plain allowed the carrying on of multiple productive activities, mainly very remunerative. So many mighty feudatories, rich monastic orders and noble families had some possessions in this area, either mansions or mills or simple farmhouse, even if their land was usually rented to farmers to cultivate them, and so the real owners didn’t effectively resided there. No wonder then if in this corner of the world, once fundamentally rural but presently twisted by abusive building, suddenly some valuable building with historic and architectonic quality emerges standing aside.

Traditionally the productive activities carried on in the plain were flax and hemp retting in special pools called “fusari” (as much as the swamps were also called by this name), skin tanning and paper and iron working; but the main and more lucrative activities were agriculture, especially for what concerns vegetables production, and wheat milling; this was so necessary and essential to Naples city, to feed its constantly increasing population, that it was often put even before water availability from the city’s aqueduct, as essential as it also was. In fact it was preferred to use the swamp waters to work the mills’ grindstones than to feed the aqueduct’s net.
Thanks to its water richness Volla plain had also great abundance of spontaneous vegetation and game, particularly aquatic birds, and the absolute purity of its waters allowed the presence of a rich ichthyic fauna; so also hunting and fishing were traditional activities in the plain, with the consequent development of many taverns and inns along the main road that crossed the plain, whose cooking was renowned.

Figure 1 - Volla's valuable buildings.

So, in spite of the dangerousness of this area, highly malarial, the local population enjoyed a large income. According to Lepre [5], already in the 18th century it
belonged to one of the well-offer categories in the rural sector. Certainly Martini [3] in 1925 affirmed with satisfaction that these lands were intensely cultivated and that their income made them classify among the most fertile in Italy as much as producing five harvest a year.

The historical and architectonical valuable buildings

All the buildings considered in this study belong to Volla municipality’s territory or lie very close to its border with the neighbouring municipalities (fig.1), except for Magdalena bridge, which belongs to St. Giovanni a Teduccio territory, municipality of Neaples, that has been all the same considered here as it integrates the buildings serving the swamp, as it marked the outlet of Sebeto river.

It’s not exactly known which was Sebeto’s course or outlet in ancient times, but is sure that in Middle Age it had its outlet out of the town, and it is as certain that it existed a bridge called *pons padulis*, to be most certainly identified with the most quoted *ponte Guizzardo*. In 1555 the viceroy Bernardino de Mendoza, Filippo II’s general lieutenant, who governed Neaples only for eight months, replaced it with Magdalena bridge, called so after a church with an annexed hospital for poor invalids built in the nearby around 1330 and dedicated to Maria Magdalena. The bridge was “put into a better shape” between 1586 and 1595 by Miranda count and was enriched again in 18th century, when the two votive aedicules in black volcanic stone facing each other were added: one presented the statue of St. John Nepomuceno, protector of bridges, and the other the statue of St. Gennaro, Neaples’ patron, built in 1777 after Vesuvius’ eruption [6].

This bridge (fig.2), which always marked the river outlet, in 17th century’s representations appears as a long, asymmetrical construction with several barrel-vaults, in yellow Neapolitan tufa and bricks, on which lent a crowd of buildings; this construction, got free of the adjacent buildings but oppressed by the port’s railway tracks, is still existing, but so deteriorated to be unrecognisable.

Another remarkable architectonical presence is constituted by the Water House (fig.3), built in the nearby of the main water source among the ones which vivified the plain, the one that in fact gave its name to the whole area: Volla source. The Water House was built to share the source’s waters between Bolla aqueduct and the swamp, thanks to a suitable marble device, and the major of Neaples was the exclusive owner of its keys [7]. The building appears for the first time in the *Happy country* representation by Paolo Petrini dated at the beginning of 18th century, but it was built in the 16th century to settle the questions arose between the population of the city and the population of the swamp, each of which claimed more water.

It’s a little squared building nowadays belonging to Casalnuovo municipality, near the border with Volla; it is made in yellow Neapolitan tufa, once plastered, and it’s presently decaying: unroofed, losing its plaster and with a little buttress on a side to avoid from ruin.

Another noble and valuable presence in the plain, mainly ignored also by historians, is constituted by a Bourbons’ hunt lodge built in the 18th century in
Lufrano locality (fig.4). It appears for the first time in the Topography of the Neapolitan country with its surroundings by Giovanni Antonio Rizzi Zannoni dated 1793 by the name of “Patrizi’s lodge” in a zone called “Royal hunt”, which certifies that this zone was destined to the king’s venatorial activity; it appears again in the Topographic and hydrographic map of Neaples’ surroundings dated 1817-1819 by the name of “King’s lodge”. Little is known about it: probably it belonged to Patrizi’s, Lufrano counts, and it was used by Ferdinand of Bourbon; in fact since not a long time ago it still preserved the Bourbons’ bearings and insignia, afterwards stolen.

It is a complex of several two-floor buildings in yellow Neapolitan tufa with cornices in black volcanic stone, with a St. Michael’s chapel annexed, plastered in white with cornices in black volcanic stone (fig.5). The whole complex is in very degrading conditions: in spite of its being inhabited, it lacks of the simplest and easiest maintenance, while it has been victim of some abusive intervention.

Volla plain is then full of manor farmhouses dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries; they are large two-or-three-floor buildings in yellow Neapolitan tufa, originally with tiles roofs almost always collapsed, and plastered; often they presented a cellar and a private chapel, and they were brightly coloured also in the interiors (mainly with intense azure). They are greatly neglected: unused and deserted, or integrated with abusive interventions and lacking of ordinary maintenance.

Some of them deserve to be quoted. Patrizia farm (fig.6), characterized by wide arched openings, presents some valuable decorative details; it had an annexed chapel with a portal provided with an inscription (fig.7); it is abandoned and its courtyard has been transformed in an abusive dump. Forty bushels farm (fig.8), along a highway never come into operation, is a squared building with an annexed little body; it presents a higher central part partially still covered with its original roof and two lateral terraces crowned with the scallops of the chimneys.

De Carolis farm (fig.9) is characterized by an irregular shape and by a wide cellar below; it had a fine chapel, already seriously damaged, definitively collapsed in 1999 (fig.10). Baroni farm (fig.11) in Filichito road, between Volla and Casalnuovo, is the widest: it is constituted by several buildings and can be reached by two private paths, one of which present an elegant access body (fig.12); this is the only one which is in good conditions, as it has been restored in 1999, recovering its roof and its functionality.

But also other farmhouses, formally more banal, are deign of conservation as historic testimonies and bringing forward traditional and cultural values; among these the lined farmhouses in Filichito road, D’Aniello farm, presently inhabited, and other little rural abandoned buildings spread all over the municipal territory pointed out in this study.

Moreover farmhouses are not the only remarkable architectonical presence in Volla plain: once there were also many mills, whose origin is very ancient. The first mills it’s known about dates back to 10th century, and others are certified also in 11th and 12th centuries and so on [8, 7].

Carlo Celano in its “News about the beauty, the ancient and the funny in Neaples city” dated 1692 affirms that along the course of Sebeto there were 10 mills.
According to an estimation of the second decade of 18th century they were 28. Maiuri, in its report "About the reclaiming of Neaples' swamps" dated 1858, counts 37 of them. Melisurgo in its "Subterranean Neaples" dated 1889 counts only 11 of them. The engineer Giovanni Giulio Martini, director of the Neaples, Volla and surroundings' reclaiming maintenance Consortium, in his report dated 1925 talks about 35 mills. Anyway from the cartography dated between 1750 and 1878 emerge only 29 mills. It's not known how many of them remain, as during the centuries they have been greatly transformed and cannot be easily identified.

At last, in the plain remain a lot of wells through which the local population picked up the drinking water, many of which are still in function. It's calculated that there are not less than 70-80 km of them per square kilometre [9].

Figure 2: Magdalena bridge in B. Stopendael's map.

Figure 3: The Water House.

Figure 4: Ferdinand of Bourbon's hunt lodge.

Figure 5: St. Michael's chapel.
Figure 6: Patrizia farm.

Figure 7: The access to the chapel.

Figure 8: Forty bushels farm.

Figure 9: De Carolis farm.

Figure 10: The collapsed chapel.
Which future for the buildings in Volla plain?

The historical buildings in Volla plain are in a neglected state that can be defined in no other way than absurd and unjustifiable. Indeed it's not comprehensible how such ancient and noble buildings, bringing forward traditional and cultural values, are not protected by the Superintendence but lay in an absolute oblivion, ignored by the historians as well as by the local population.

In a degraded environment as the Neapolitan hinterland, where administrative chaos, the omission of a rational urban planning and the building abuse reign, the still existing historical buildings, moreover in a still partially rural environment, are a rarity that should be preserved.

These buildings' restoring, together with their regular maintenance, would allow a piece of our past to survive, and maybe even to promote a certain development of this area.

In a society ever more advanced and technological as ours, with extenuating living rhythms and stressing and polluting elements always on their way, the desire of spending leisure and relax moments in contact with the nature is ever more pressing. Green tourism and agricultural tourism are nowadays phenomena, even ever increasing.

Then including these buildings restoring inside a wider project for this area's improving, keeping its agricultural inclination and indeed potentiating and promoting it, the ancient farms and mills could be turned into receptive functions, becoming an economical development potentiality for the whole plain.

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