

PALERMO – MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA

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PART I - ORIENTATION The old city of Palermo conforms to a beautifully simple urban plan; the medieval city, once enclosed by the enormous city walls, is now defined by a modern barrier, the inner ring-road which follows almost exactly the line of the old fortifications. The city is then dissected by two arrow straight roads; the first, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, runs straight up from the sea, the second, Via Maqueda is parallel to the sea and exactly perpendicular to Corso Vittorio Emanuele. These two roads cross at the very centre of the old city, creating a perfect cruciform in plan and thus defining the four quarters of old Palermo; La Kalsa, Capo, Vucciria and Albergheria. It is an urban plan of bold simplicity, dominating the otherwise chaotic street layout and giving a fixed reference for orientation for those unfamiliar with the city.

This urban concept is articulated at the intersection of the two axes by Il Quattro Canti (the four songs). Built in 1608 by the architect Giulio Lasso, it consists of four facades overlooking the cross-roads, each identical except for the statues that appear on the outside of each of the three floors. Each facade represents the quarter of the city in which it stands with statues of the patron saint and patron king of Spain (it was commissioned by the ruling Spanish monarchy) of each quarter, on the first and second floors respectively. On the ground floor of each is a statue and fountain representing one of the four seasons; summer, autumn, winter and spring. Il quattro Canti is both the literal and symbolic heart of the old city.

Beyond the relentless logic of the cruciform, Palermo is a labyrinth; a maze of meandering streets, narrow alleys and irregular squares. It is as if it rebelled against the tyranny of its cruciform axes. Centuries of largely unplanned building have left an almost un-navigable and incomprehensible street plan. Natural routes are blocked; monasteries and municipal institutions occupy large swathes of the city unbroken. The narrow streets are enclosed by buildings often 4 or 5 storeys high; it is dark and enclosed and there are no vistas or views out of the city. Despite being by the sea, the city does not look out, rather it turns in on itself behind high walls.

As well as being a labyrinth, Palermo is a ruin; just behind Il Quattro Canti, in the Albergheria quarter, a square is surrounded entirely by utter ruination; rubble is strewn into the street, and the windows in what remains of the facades reveal only empty shells. The deserted buildings are covered in the unmistakable pink graffiti of Palermo FC but this is not a building site or area earmarked for development but bomb damage from the Second World War. These buildings, in the centre of the city have been standing in utter ruination for over 60 years.

Much of Palermo gives the same impression: many areas are completely derelict above ground level, many buildings completely destroyed. In La Kalsa, the Arab quarter, an area the size of two football pitches has been completely razed except for a Romanesque monastery with 1m thick walls that stands defiantly but awkwardly in a space for which it was not originally intended. Nearby, a sufficient space has been cleared for an impromptu shanty town which clings to the ancient city walls.

It is an astonishing combination of deteriorating centuries old architectural gems and informally and hastily constructed rubbish. On one square, two sides of a baroque





church have been destroyed leaving half an interior exposed to the elements including the altarpiece in fine stucco. At ground floor, the space has been filled by garages; knocked together in concrete blocks and corrugated tin. This kind of infill construction provides much of the still habitable buildings in the city although the quality of the work is exceptionally poor.

What really sticks in the memory however is the general condition of all the buildings that are still standing. The colour has been washed out of the render and it is peeling and cracked lending a deep sepia tinge to the whole city. The tight streets that already received scant daylight are further obscured by the wooden scoops that catch falling and loose masonry and the scaffolding that spans the gap between buildings in a complex mesh offering mutual structural support to unstable facades. Road signs, lamps, soil and rain pipes, cables and shop signs are attached unfussily directly to the buildings, metal balconies hang bent and twisted from bricked-up openings. Palermo offers a remarkable vision of a crumbling, decaying and in some cases devastated city. To a northern European accustomed to well maintained and 'preserved' historic city it is an astonishing but beguiling sight. But how did Palermo become like this?

PART II - HISTORY At the end of the 19th century, Palermo was one of Europe's great cities, a centre of art and trade for the entire Mediterranean and one of the main destinations of an embryonic European tourist industry. Recently restored as the capital of semi-autonomous Sicily after years as an annex of the Neapolitan Royal family, the city had grown rich on the lemons and citrus fruits grown in the fertile plains to the south and exported to America and Northern Europe. Aristocrats were beginning to move out of their Palazzos in the crowded old city to new villas lining the Via Ruggiero stretching west of the city. Magnificent new civic buildings and hotels were constructed on the new grid laid out away from the city walls.

The old city itself was a cacophony of architectural and social forces; the product of an intense 'Manhattan' effect. Churches, brothels, palaces, slums, monasteries constricted together by the immovable constraints of the city plan and walls laid out in the 15th century. Norman, Moorish, Baroque, Renaissance, Neo-classical buildings sat jowl-by-jowl in its labyrinthine streets. Palermo had grown for centuries within these limits and was only just beginning to expand beyond the fortifications as the threat of attack subsided following Garibaldi's unification of independent Italian states. This 'Manhattan effect' - an incredible density of land value and human activity created by a scarcity of useable land - had produced one of the most extraordinary urban landscapes in the world. A city of incredible complexity and density not just architecturally but also socially; princes, aristocrats, men of the cloth, artisans and streets urchins lived in almost inconceivable proximity in a city of operatic street life.

Visited and documented by Goethe in 1788, Palermo was also a crucial destination on The Grand Tour journeyed by young aristocrats from the emerging industrialised northern European powers drawn by the exquisite art that filled its churches and its unique architectural heritage as well as the sophisticated and cultured aristocracy that still ruled the city. It was also a destination in an emerging version of tourism that had more to do with the pursuit of pleasure than knowledge. Hotels and elegant promenades faced onto the sea, a view not yet interrupted by the coastline highway.

Outside the city in the Conca d'Oro, the fertile plain that surrounds Palermo, grew the primary source of Palermo's wealth; large citrus groves which were responsible for a large proportion of the world's orange and lemon production. The citrus groves were a high yield and high profit enterprise but equally, they were rather delicate and extremely vulnerable to damage and it was this situation that provided the conditions for the emergence of the most significant force in modern Sicilian history; the Mafia.

The Mafia emerged from the protection rackets exerted on the citrus owners and growers in the Conca d'Oro. Absent landlords and a poor and ruthless peasantry combined to create the perfect climate for organised intimidation. It was, and is, an organisation based around an unflinching and rigid loyalty from its members (once sworn in, you are always 'a man of honour') and it insists on a murderous ruthlessness from its mafiosi. Its strength is in its utter disregard for human life (including that of its members) which means it can eliminate anyone that threatens the continuing success of the organisation. The mafia is driven not by personal wealth but by power; money made is generally reinvested in bribing politicians and bureaucrats. Although the popular myth, partly perpetrated by the organistaion itself is that it the mafia is a continuation of a form of self-governance that emerged during Sicily's long history of foreign rule - it is nothing more than a malign and powerful criminal organisation that has exploited and suppressed the Scilian population for over a century.

The rise of the mafia, perhaps not coincidentally, coincided with Palermo's general decline as an artistic and economic force and from this point on, Palermo and Sicily's histories would be inexorably entwined with the activities of the malign and all-pervasive mafia.

The expansion of the city in the early 20th century was the chance for the primarily rural mafia to urbanize themselves, transferring their protection rackets from the citrus groves to the construction sites. The mafia's growing influence is palpable in the increasingly frustrated city grid as the city expanded to north and north-west. The mafia began to work their way into the politics of Palermo, working on the principle that everyone is corruptible, they bribed and threatened politicians and bureaucrats and judges. This has been the difficulty for all those who have tried to rid Sicily of the mafia; that almost everyone is either complicit in the affairs of the mafia or else too afraid to speak out.

Palermo suffered significant bomb damaged during the second world war due to its status as an important naval port and the need for post-war housing for the homeless population gave the green-light for one of the greatest acts of urbicide in history known as the 'sack of Palermo'. The mafia, combined with corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, began a frenzy of dangerous and shoddy construction around the periphery of the city that acted as a screen for large-scale embezzlement of Italian and American money sent in good faith to help try and rebuild the city. The old city was willfully neglected as Palermo sprawled in all directions. As a result, of the 700,000 resident Palermitans, just 30,000 now live within th-e old city. Simultaneously the mafia were emptying Palermo's churches and museums of countless masterpieces, most of which have never been recovered. Rarely has a city been so successfully exploited by a criminal organisation. The mafia continue to stifle development in old Palermo; sabotaging or intimidating contractors and developers who attempt to build there whilst contactors under their direct control simply disappear.

Of course many of the problems in Palermo have their roots in the extreme poverty of the city and the island. Once the citrus trade collapsed, Palermo had no other industry that could take its place and with the mafia becoming ever more embedded in the society and politics of the Island, investment from Rome and,

later Brussels was merely siphoned into Mafia funds. The tourist trade that might have saved the island was quashed by fear and by the continuing disappearance and neglect of Palermo's great artworks and architecture. The signs of poverty are still obvious in the city; many families live in single rooms directly off the street and the infamous Palermitan street urchins still pester and pickpocket. Some areas of the city are filled with shanty-like dwellings, informally constructed shacks.

Statistics bear this out; Palermo's unemployment rate is close to 35%, a figure more common in the third world than in Europe. It indicates also a strong black market and underground economy. GDP per head is also very low – around 11,000 Euros per year – similar to Eastern European countries such as Latvia and Poland. On education too, Palermo exhibits third world statistics – just 17% have further education qualifications. Of Europe's major cities, only Naples ranks consistently lower on key economic indicators (another city dominated by organised crime).

Socially, Catholicism still dominates the culture. People marry young and live in large family units. The lack of opportunity sees a drain of young talent to the mainland and Europe which leaves a demographic dominated by the elderly and the very young.

Of course the poverty is closely linked with the influence of organised crime. It suits the Mafia to keep the population poor and uneducated. Successful businesses receive an additional layer of unofficial taxation stifling growth and opportunity and public projects are often hijacked by mafia-run construction companies. There are infamously many roads and railways in Sicily that never quite reached their intended destinations as funds disappeared. Even the much-discussed suspension bridge that would span the straits of Messina and put an end to the unreliable sea crossing and underwater cabling which can still be disrupted by bad weather leaving the entire island without power, communication and essential supplies for weeks has been shelved largely due to the fear of mafia involvement.

PART III – MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA Clearly Palermo has been subject to a unique and harrowing urban history; an act of what can only be described as urbcide having been committed against it during the 20th century by the Mafia and its corrupt politicians. As a result of this, its history is visceral and immediate, visible not only in the complex layers of architectural styles from Sicily's many invaders and rulers, but in the ruins and scars of various catastrophes – bombs, earthquakes, murders and street battles. Empty plots, rubble, bullet holes and general neglect reveal Palermo's tumultuous and sometimes painful history. It creates an urban landscape of enormous character and intrigue; a crumbling but complex ruin.

Palermo appears all the more remarkable because of what has happened and is happening across the rest of Europe. Historical city centres and centro storico's are being relentlessly restored and renewed. Conservation and preservation groups are increasingly powerful as lobbyists and clients in urban planning and building. UNESCO World Heritage sites are multiplying - often covering entire city centres – Salzburg, Graz, Vienna, Bruges, Dubrovnik, Prague, Strasbourg, Potsdam, Budapest, Rome, Venice, Naples, Siena, Verona, Genoa, Amsterdam, Krakow, Porto, Toledo, Salamanca, Berne, Edinburgh, Bath are all under the protection of the organisation who oppose all modern development within the area and sometimes outside it. Conservation areas are also being implemented on a more local level stifling contemporary development in historical areas. The notion of these cities as being untouchable becomes ever more deep-rooted.

In one example; Weimar, the cultural capital of Germany and a hugely significant place in the history of modern Germany was largely destroyed in the second world war and subsequently neglected by the East German communists. Anointed European Capital of Culture in 1999 and made a UNESCO world heritage site in 1998, it has since been systematically restored to its 'original' 19th Century splendour. Many of the town's buildings have been completely rebuilt in their original form, others have had a series of extensive facelifts but nearly all appear 'brand new' in the freshness of the paint and sharpness of the render. Clearly, Weimar has an important status in Germany's cultural history as the home to both Goethe and Schiller (as well as the Bauhaus) and has received an enormous amount of investment to help restore its buildings. It has also been something of an icon in the restoration of Eastern Germany following reunification.

In Berlin, that other urban emblem of a reunited Germany; the Palast Der Republik (the former headquarters of the communist party) is still on death row without much hope of a last minute pardon – its demolition delayed only by the discovery of yet more poisonous physical material. The

plan currently is to replace it with a replica of the 18th Century Stadtschloss, destroyed partly by allied bombing and partly by the communists. The idea of returning this part of the city to its 18th century form does not seem to have a great deal of ideological opposition in the public at large and is being pushed through with heavy political support both locally and nationally despite it's projected cost topping half a billion Euros.

It echoes the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche- Dresden's cathedral destroyed completely by savage allied bombing. It was recently rebuilt using a combination of original material salvaged from the rubble newly cut stone. It received huge public support and its quarter of a billion Euro construction cost was mostly raised through private donations and much of the work was carried out by volunteers. The political and financial support for this type of reconstruction is astonishing despite the huge costs involved.

On an urban scale - Prague, another city emblematic of reconciliation and rebuilding following the expansion of the EU the facades of the medieval city have been systematically restored after years of neglect, despite the fact much of what lies behind them is in utter ruin. It creates a typology of pristine street facades concealing hollow and rotting ruins.

Venice is a different case in that is mostly still standing in its original form (except for the bell tower in St Mark's square which was subject to an earlier reconstruction in 1912) but the cost of the cities maintenance and renovation is staggering – exacerbated by its unique geography and likely to become ever more difficult if sea levels rise. Venice is regarded as one of the most important pieces o-f urban heritage on the planet and the support for its protection is truly global. Like Prague, much of the restoration work is entirely superficial.

Viewed as being representative of regeneration and reconciliation, the concept of the city as a pristine historical artefact or replica has taken an ideological grip over planners and politicians throughout Europe. Tourism plays an enormous role in this approach to the development of the city – many of the cities mentioned above rely on tourism as one of, if not the, most important part of their economy. Tourism is now the world's largest economic sector having recently outstripped industry and can generate huge wealth for those cities which successfully market themselves as essential destinations. Tourism helps to sustain the continuing restoration – financially and ideologically by promoting powerful imagery of picturesque urban vistas and cityscapes. This imagery – driven by the holiday snap and picture postcard has an enormous impact on the perception of cities and they strive to meet the desires of holiday makers and tourists by creating the perfect backdrops.

But the revival of the historical city is not about memory – a desire to preserve the history of a city but about a pervading nostalgia. Most will be ignorant of the meaning of the shapes of the windows on a townhouse or the origin of a streetplan but will appreciate the impression of a nostalgic and atmospheric streetscape whether it's the narrow alleys of Siena or the boulevards of Paris. This idea perhaps has origins in America where Disney and Vegas created enormously successful incorrect replicas of Europe's urban identities – polystyrene facades concealing burger bars and blackjack tables. Europe now tries to imitate the success. Development/preservation is no longer based on the relative merit of existing buildings but on a desire to preserve a historical and

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crucially, nostalgic version of the city. Consequently, many of these cities have sacrificed their contemporary identity and continuing development to become nothing more than tourist villages. Venice's permanent population has steadily fled the tourist hordes and now numbers just a few thousand – it no longer operates as a functioning city, merely a picturesque stage-set for the ambling visitors – a museum piece.

Cities abandon the idea of being continually evolving and developing entities to become static artefacts. As European societies become increasingly dynamic, diverse and transient, our buildings and cities become ever more important as the embodiment of our cultural heritage. This view has become so embedded in our collective psyches infact that it is astonishing to us that this view is not universally shared. In Japan – one of the oldest and most continuous societies on earth – they do not share our sentimentality for old buildings and despite their long and complex history – few buildings are more than a century old.

In Hiroshima, the one building that was left standing after the atomic bomb has been retained, untouched as a memorial of the terrible event. Rebuilding our ruins – the Stadtschloss and the Frauenkirche as well as entire cities – Weimar, Venice is not reviving a memory but obliterating one. Few living people would remember these buildings in their original incarnation and to rebuild them is an act of collective amnesia. In the case of Berlin – whatever the feelings towards Berlin's 44 years as a divided city, it happened and by replacing the Palast der Republik is a thoughtless and arrogant act of misplaced historicism.

Palermo reveals its contemporaries to be a sham; its ruins and unregulated development are more evocative and honest to its history than the tourist enclaves of Prague and Verona. Its unfortunate economy and politics – dominated by corruption and poverty have quashed nostalgia and sentimentality leaving a devastated but enigmatic urban landscape.

The consensus is that the mafia may finally be losing their grip on the island thanks to the courageous efforts of a few public prosecutors. This should lift the shackles on development in the old town. Palermo is therefore in an almost unique position in having the opportunity to revive itself almost from scratch. Ominously, the university has produced a tome of an inventory, with detailed drawings of the original occupants of every ruin and empty plot in the city. Already some Palazzos have been rebuilt – gaudy and kitsch against the backdrop of the crumbling sepia of the rest of the city. But we should hope that Palermo does not seek to emulate the rest and obliterate its history in a thoughtless series of replicas and facelifts. ➡