Chapter 4

Pride and Prejudice: The Murattiano–Modernism

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ABSTRACT

The first building of the Murattiano district fell in 1954. Since then, a constant devastation, that between 1963 and 1964 alone counts more than 200 building replacements. Maybe the deterioration of the Murattiano district had already been decided in its birth certificate. Still, has the example contained in their best works truly disappeared or can we recognize nowadays its effect in some pieces of architecture that have most recently been built in Bari? Before expressing a judgment about quality, it is necessary to identify a list of all those cases that during the second half of last century and the first years of the new one and therefore in very recent times witness the innovations that were introduced in the local architectural culture. Innovations that concern the culture of the project and the styles of expression. Finally—through the search for the “ordinary” quality to build—the discovery of an unsuspected continuity between the compositional rule of the Murattiano neoclassicism and the experiences of the “Modern Murattiano.”

INTRODUCTION

The architecture events in Bari in the second half of the twentieth century were affected by two extraordinarily important events: numerous and fast constructions in the fifties, and sixties and a development of an urban plan designed by Ludovico Quaroni in 1976. Two facts were highly correlated and were the reasons Quaroni’s development plan failed to be realized. The critics considered it the last Italian
urban untold story, one of the most mature expressions of urban design (Ferrari, 2005). It was his ambition to shape an urban expansion which had previously been entirely ruled by greed for property money: this expansion supported the previous plan developed by Calza Bini and Piacentini (1950). The first building in the Murat district fell in 1954. Mauro Scionti writes in The History of Bari. The twentieth century: “An endless disaster which only between 1963 and 1964 counts more than 200 building constructions, based on the common view that nothing is to be protected in Murat by the city walls, as there are no real historical, artistic, aesthetic reasons” (Scionti, 1997).

In 1965 the city of Bari consulted two of the greatest Italian architects and urban planners to entrust them with the study of general variations to the city development plan: Giuseppe Samonà and Ludovico Quaroni. Samonà (who knew Bari very well as he had previously designed the Trauma Hospital of Inail next to the Fair, and had taken part in the national competition for the construction of Public Work building along the promenade in 1931) was bewildered by the extent to which the situation was compromised. Quaroni, on the other hand, decided to accept the challenge. However, as the approval of the project was dragged for a decade, the Murat was being rebuild on the nineteenth-century ruins.

The city is slowly collapsing - we read in the magazine “The Progress of Bari”, May 1962 – it crops up with taller, more modern (more beautiful? Sometimes yes, many other times no) and more comfortable buildings day by day... But for tens of thousands of Bari citizens the buildings are inaccessible because of high rents. They represent only the dream of a new, dignified home. One cannot “plan” the face of a city but try to avoid, before it is too late, that it will become the new Harlequin home....

A large number of companies born from nothing turned only few skilled builders into big enterprises. In order to have a concrete idea about the extent of the phenomenon where the historical construction companies were unable to manage it, some data come in handy: from 1919 to 1945 approximately 800 properties a year were built in Bari; from 1946 to 1960 the average increases to 6,700 properties per year; from 1960 to 1970 14,500 properties a year. It is in this climate of 1962 that the revolt of the building bursts (Martino, 1984).

Years later Bruno Zevi will be forced to describe the Murat district as “disfigured by illegal business of speculation, until the widespread vandalism is finally visible in the most flamboyant postwar construction which is the Motta skyscraper” (Zevi, 1979). But the degeneration of the Murat district was perhaps already determined in its very beginning. While the late nineteenth century marks the first authorized
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