Chapter 10

Calabria 1783:
The Orthogonal Grid as a Physical and Ideological Device of Reconstruction

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the reconstruction operations that were carried out in Calabria following the earthquake of the late-eighteenth century. The author connects the physical and ideological role played by the orthogonal grid within the scope of this urban process to Foucault’s concept of the device. Such a working hypothesis makes it possible to highlight the dual-domain in which lies political power, on one hand, and technical knowledge, on the other. This is a duplicity that is not resolved in the supremacy of either one domain or the other but, rather, in their huddle in a dialectical node: the political power that avails itself of the technical knowledge to reinforce itself and the technical knowledge that takes advantage of the political power to legitimise itself.

INTRODUCTION

What happened when the reformist intentions of Ferdinand IV, King of Naples and Sicily, met with the theories and designs of the European grand urbanism promoted, in the sub region of Calabria Ulteriore, by the Commissioner-general of the Kingdom, Francesco Pignatelli? What resulted was “one of the most striking episodes of the eighteenth-century enlightened despotism” (Sica, 1979, p. 201): thirty-three towns designed, and in large part built, from scratch. It introduced a set of generalised and
pervasive urban operations that the Bourbon government put in place following the earthquake that, between the 5th of February and the 28th of March 1783, destroyed, or, at any rate, heavily damaged fifty-three towns.

The multiple aspects of this vicissitude have been investigated in detail from the ample existing literature that ranges, just to name a few view points, from Paolo Maretto (1975) to Ilario Principe (1976); from Augusto Placanica (1982 and 1985) to Nicola Aricò and Ornella Milella (1984); from Clementina Barucci (2002) to Francesca Valensise (2003); these works also feature extensive bibliographies that broaden the framework of references also to a expansive panorama of primary sources.

However, despite the amount, the variety, and the peculiarity of the bibliographical references, it is possible to highlight how many scholars have been inclined to disregard the role that the vicissitude has had for the definition of the purposes and the understanding of urbanism, in other words, for the construction of its models, rules, and language; precisely from this objective other issues can be highlighted for contributing to a more articulated interpretation of the event itself. This paper, written by a planner who does not just address planners, revolves around a core problem: if, on one hand, one of the principle themes is the transposition of the urban theories and of the urban designs planned for the great cities of Europe to the narrow context of Calabrian settlement, on the other, the physical and conceptual device through which their logic is conveyed is the orthogonal grid. In this process, the powerful mediation of cartographic representation or, specifically, the increasingly more precise and detailed utilisation of its material models (plan, map, table, etc.), played a central role that has also remained, for the most part, under-explored.

The scope within which the working hypothesis is expounded that seeks to interpret the role of the orthogonal grid in the reconstruction in Calabria at the end of the eighteenth century through the concept of the device, is represented by the reflections of Michel Foucault (1977), which delineated the concept, and by its more recent interpretations, proposed in the works of Gilles Deleuze (1989) and Giorgio Agamben (2006).

The paper concludes with the view that the experience of reconstruction in Calabria at the end of the eighteenth century formalises two ways of looking at the discipline of urban planning, on one hand, that it overlaps and merges with the linguistic representation (understood in the sense of writing and/or design) of the territory and of the city, on the other, that it is to be understood as an art of government, in other words, as a specific spatial mode of social control. Two ideas that, informing the particular node between technical knowledge and political power, have been at the base of the scientific status of urban planning since the establishment of its core in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that, for many symbiotic reasons, have fuelled each other, stretching until today, linked altogether by a whole intermediate bundle of relations.
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