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Keywords : Guarino Guarini,
 Giacomo Del Duca, Baroque
 architecture, façade design,
 proportional ratios

A Neglected Harbinger of the Triple-Storey Façade of Guarini's Santissima Annunziata in Messina

Abstract. The triple-storey façade, one of the most original inventions of the Baroque period in terms of form and proportion, arose in Sicily and quickly spread throughout Italy, to Europe and beyond. Guarini's design for the façade of Santissima Annunziata in Messina paved the way for its general acceptance. The roots for the concept, however, may be found in the work of Giacomo Del Duca.

Fig. 1. The parish church in Randazzo, Sicily, showing the bell tower

A new triple-storey schema for the church façade, defined both in its proportions and in its intrinsic structure, appeared in the late Sicilian Baroque. This triple-storey façade – with its top storey often used as belfry – is considered one of the most amazing inventions of that period. Extraordinarily fitted to its functions, both practical and symbolic, this architectonic form would soon find widespread acceptance in Central Europe as well as Central and South America. For this reason – although without good grounds – it is sometimes claimed to have arisen from Iberian and/or Austrian-Hungarian origins. However, the exact history leading up to the definition of such a façade, a very common model for the late Baroque churches in the South-East Sicily, is difficult to reconstruct because documents tracing intervening influences have been lost, both because of negligence and because of the recurring seismic catastrophes [Tobriner 1996].

It is a fact that there are bell towers (fig. 1), built in correspondence to the main entrance of churches during the twelfth and thirteenth century, related to a French-Norman tradition (see the “Clochè à mur” structures common in the South of France). But it is the only extant work of Guarino Guarini in Sicily that laid the foundations for all the future development of the triple-storey façade of the late Sicilian Baroque. In fact, with his strong reputation and his writings, Guarini guaranteed the cultural milieu for the architectural experiments of others, above all, those of Rosario Gagliardi.¹ However, Guarini's invention for the façade of the Theatine church of Santissima Annunziata in Messina is in fact unique in his production. To be precise, the design for the earlier (?) façade of S. Maria in Lisbon, a scheme that clearly shows the influence of Borromini, bears some resemblances to the design of the façade of Santissima Annunziata, although such analogies tend to disappear when one attempts to guess its elevation. A certain formal affinity can also be recognized in the later design of the tabernacle in “San

Niccolò” in Verona. Following Harold A. Meek [1988], one can also notice the sign of the telescopic system which is also present in the other, not executed and likely later, Messinian work: the Church of the Padri Somaschi. Notwithstanding these analogies, the Santissima Annunziata façade remains an exception in both the corpus of Guarini's own architecture and in the panorama of his times.² Without a doubt, Guarini “invented” the façade to solve problems generated by the context. First, the body of the church is a pre-existing work. Second, an intervening alteration in the direction of the neighbouring street had resulted in axis of the church no longer being orthogonal to the street.³ Last but not least, both the Theatines and Guarini nursed ambitions of creating a strong competitor to the Jesuits' Church and College (*Primum ac prototypum collegium*) built to a design of the Messinian Natale Masuccio. The Church of the Jesuits was a double dado surmounted by a dome: it stood out because of its mass (see fig. 2). In contrast, in Santissima Annunziata the dome was far from the street and the axis of the church itself was skewed, as mentioned before.

Fig. 2. S. Giovanni Battista and Jesuit College by Natale Masuccio. Engraving by F. Sicuro, 1768

The architectural design of the churches and their placement were obviously instruments of propaganda. With his invention, Guarini solved the problem: in some sense, the third level of the façade was the projection of the dome over a parallel to the street plane.⁴ In fact, Guarini rotated the façade of the church, thus concealing the rotation of the major axis and obtaining, at the same time, the space required to insert the octagonal bell tower which is partly hidden behind the façade (see fig. 3). The façade of the nearby college of the Theatines, with its original arrangement of windows, completed the setting: the affinity with the earlier work of Massuccio for the Jesuits cannot be ignored.

Fig. 3. Santissima Annunziata and Theatine College by Guarino Guarini.
Engraving by F. Sicuro, 1768

In my opinion, all these aspects are the main sources of this work of Guarini's. However, I believe that it is possible to underline – unfortunately only by means of inductive analogies – a path linking the façade of Santissima Annunziata with a series of previous attempts dating back to Michelangelo and the Mannerists, a series that starts from Vitruvius as interpreted by Cesariano. If confirmed, this conjecture would underline Guarini's sensitivity to the suggestions coming from the places he visited. Like any other great architect, Guarini is inventive not only because of what he imagined but also because of the hidden paths he unveiled.

During Guarini's stay in Messina, the city was full of cultural and architectural activity. As underlined by Meek, Messina was at the peak of a process which by that time dated back some centuries, a process cut short by the Spanish repression in 1676. The city's leading citizens, for the most part rich entrepreneurs, had pursued a greater and greater independence. Architecture was a medium used by the city Senate to represent civic pride. To this aim, the best artists of the day were summoned, although not all of them answered the call, put off by Messina's reputation as a provincial city in spite of the wide activity of its port.⁵ The architectonic activity was further increased by the undertakings of the new religious orders, above all the Jesuits, who opened the first Gymnasium in 1548, which straight afterwards became the University; in 1604 it was located in the building designed by Natale Massuccio.

Notwithstanding some difficulties, especially the provinciality mentioned above, in the second part of the sixteenth century, Messina's Senate was able to commission famous architects to supervise construction of public buildings. All the architects appointed to oversee building sites in the second half of the century were directly

influenced by Mannerism and especially by Michelangelo. More precisely, Andrea Calamech was a pupil of Ammanati, while Giovannangelo Montorsoli and Giacomo Del Duca were pupils of Michelangelo himself.

The first urban planning in Sicily since Federico II can be attributed to Montorsoli: it is the planning of the Piazza del Duomo in Messina (1550). Andrea Calamech executed a wide range of sculptures together with important examples of civil architecture, which were lost during the 1908 earthquake. These included the Palazzo Grano, the ground floor windows of which were adorned with a motive that recall the pediment on the third storey of the façade of Santissima Annunziata (figs. 4 and 5). However, Del Duca is the architect most interesting for the object of this paper: Baglione defined him as having a *spirito gagliardo*, a vigorous spirit [Baglione 1649: 54]. He is characterised as popularist, emotional, heterodox, and a follower of Michelangelo. When the classicist tradition came to be criticised, his work sank into oblivion. Yet it is precisely with Del Duca that Mannerism reaches a transition point towards Baroque. Even Borromini was influenced by Del Duca's work.

Fig. 4 (left). Window from Palazzo Grano, by Andrea Calamech, after [Basile 1960]

Fig. 5 (above). Schematic drawing of the third storey of Santissima Annunziata (drawing by the author)

Del Duca collaborated with Michelangelo above all as a sculptor for the tomb of Pope Julius II, but his last collaboration for Porta Pia was the one that most influenced his future architectural activity. Actually, the extent of Del Duca's contribution to the design of Porta Pia is still unclear, although it may be more prominent than usually assumed [Ackerman 1961: 125-126]. However, in the general plan of Porta Pia the influence of the models appearing in Cesariano's edition of Vitruvius's *De Architectura* can be recognized. Painter and architect – we do not know much about his work – Cesariano was the first to publish an integral version of Vitruvius's work and his edition was the most widespread in his times. Cesariano's knowledge of classical architecture was rather approximate, so his reconstruction of Vitruvius's drawings owes more to his imagination and the culture of northern Italy, which was still more attuned to canons of the Middle Ages than to the analysis of Roman architecture. Still, the book's success bestowed the status of canons on Cesariano's hypotheses. Proof of this is the diffusion of

Cesariano's interpretative schemes even in much later times.⁶ Among Cesariano's hypotheses there is one for the temple *in antis* for which two alternatives are proposed: the first one is based on the classic tympanum, the second one calls for a minor order superposed on the first order, joined by means of two semi-tympanums – which can be straight or volute shaped – and culminating with a small tympanum (fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Two hypotheses for a temple *in antis* by Cesariano [1521: bk. III, ch. i, 52r]

Such a structure seems reminiscent of late Romanesque forms and is clearly a licence taken on the part of Cesariano. However, this model can be recognized in Porta Pia. I think that it had a role in the subsequent definition of the system of a façade based on three orders, a definition that Guarini conceived a century later, most likely via Giacomo Del Duca. Not a few elements are shared between Cesariano's proposal and the architectural solution by Michelangelo for the façade of Porta Pia that faces the city. Beside the overall scheme, one may compare the coat of arms in Porta Pia and its decorative apparatus with the sarcophagus depicted by Cesariano, as well as the great *oeil-de-boeuf* in the second order of the temple *in antis* with the disc in the second order

of Porta Pia (fig. 7). Later, in his church of Santa Maria in Trivio in Rome, close to the Trevi fountain, Del Duca explicitly declared his debt: one can clearly discern an interpretation of the model by Cesariano (see fig. 8).

Fig. 7. Porta Pia according to Faletti [Benedetti 1973]

Fig. 8. S. Maria in Trivio, Rome, by Jacopo Del Duca

Fig. 9. The church of the Priory of the Knights of Malta by Giacomo Del Duca

The church was built between 1573 and 1575, nine years after the completion of Porta Pia. Del Duca came back to Sicily for the first time in 1575, although he continued to work in Rome up to 1592, the year in which he was elected to the chair of First Architect of the Messina Senate, at the age of 77. Although he had somehow fallen out of favour in Rome, in Messina the new charge brought him to the apex of his fame. At that time he was given the commission for the modification of the Senate palace and the construction of the headquarters and the church of the Knights of Malta, the latter dedicated to San Giovanni Battista. The church was a demanding project, both because of its renowned commissioners and because its apse was to have housed the chapel in honour of the martyr San Placido and his companions; San Placido's relics had just been found (1588) and the Pope immediately designated him Messina's patron saint. The façade of the *tribuna* clearly displays the results of Del Duca's experience in the work for Porta Pia. He pushed the syntactic decomposition already present in Porta Pia to its extreme (see fig. 9). This only existing urban evidence of Del Duca's work appears as a true façade dramatically marked by strong chiaroscuro effects. It also contains a wealth of stylistic solutions. This led Anthony Blunt [1968] to consider Del Duca's contribution as decisive for the formation of Sicilian Baroque. Remarkable is the use of the giant Doric pilaster, which is hollowed out to "put in evidence" the brick structure. This motif will be used frequently in the Sicilian Baroque from Massucco's work on. Guarini himself uses it in the façade of the Collegio dei Teatini in Messina. In subsequent years, Guarini used it for the pilasters of the second order in Palazzo Carignano in Torino. This motif is also present in Castellamonte's Piazza San Carlo in Torino (1638), although without the prominence that it enjoys in Del Duca's work. However, it is not likely that Guarini was aware of such works at the time of he was working in Messina. He might, however, have seen the motif in Rome in the works of Del Duca himself, such as for example Villa Rivaldi, the Mattei Chapel at the Aracoeli or in the hint of a pilaster in the rear façade of the Porta San Giovanni. In works of other architects – Alberti's Sant'Andrea in Mantova,

Bramante's San Satiro in Milan, Amadeo's Colleoni Chapel in Bergamo – the pilaster is hollowed out but the recess is essentially aimed to create space for the insertion of a decoration in relief, rarely for the bare treatment we see in Del Duca's style. Exceptions are evident in the frame of some windows, as the those in Palazzo Vidoni-Caffarelli in Rome.⁷ The *tribuna* of the Maltese Priory by Del Duca is the only one still standing and, in my opinion, at the time of Guarini would have been sufficient to provoke the interest of the generic observer too. Moreover, it shouldn't be forgotten that Guarini spent the years of his novitiate and architectural education in Rome, at a time when Borromini was active there. The presence of Del Duca was also still discernible in other works of his that could be seen then: Villa Mattei at the Celio (no longer existing), the Orti Farnesiani (today partially destroyed), Porta San Giovanni, the drum, the dome and the bell tower of S. Maria di Loreto, the garden of Villa Bomarzo and that of Villa Farnese in Caprarola. For this reason I think it is likely that Guarini was not unaware of Del Duca's works, and that perhaps he even studied them. Some indications to this effect are present in his work, such as the heads of the cherubs decorating the consoles of the tambour in the church of San Lorenzo in Torino (fig. 10), which are similar to the ones of the ribs-panels in the final steeple of the lantern in Santa Maria di Loreto (see fig. 11) and those of the Tabernacolo Farnese.

Fig. 10 (left). The cherubs' heads from the drum in the church of San Lorenzo in Torino by Guarini

Fig. 11 (right). The cherubs' heads in the lantern of S. Maria di Loreto by Del Duca

Actually, in the Tabernacolo Farnese the heads decorate the console and do not hold it.⁸ Again in Torino, the portal of the stairs that lead to the Chapel of the Holy Shroud form an evident analogy with the window system in Messina's Palazzo Senatorio. Further, in the portal to the Chapel of the Holy Shroud, the two abstract herms on either side of the upper window are reminiscent of Del Duca's peculiar cubic and metamorphic motives.⁹ Another of Del Duca's signature stylistic motifs is the keystone that continues in the frame. Such a solution appears in the windows of Santa Maria di Loreto (see figs. 12, 13, 14).

Fig. 12 (left). Guarini's entry portal to the Chapel of the Holy Shroud from the Cathedral, Torino [Meek 1988]

Fig. 13 (right). Engraving of Messina's Palazzo Senatorio by Del Duca

Fig. 14. Window of S. Maria di Loreto by Del Duca [Benedetti 1973]

It is said that in Messina Guarini was in contact with Jesuits, having found in some of them a greater cultural agreement: a possible consequence of this might have been the opportunity for further close examination of Del Duca's architecture. Not only were the

Jesuits Del Duca's mentors, commissioning a number of buildings from him,¹⁰ but they also insisted that he should write a treatise about architecture, although his death prevented its publication [Del Duca 2004].

Nothing is known about the places that Guarini visited during his stay in Sicily. On the basis of the previous observations he might well have visited the places where Del Duca built his works. It is possible for instance that he saw the façade of the Parish Church of S. Agata in Ali, a small town atop the hills near Messina where important families of the Messinian aristocracy spent their summers (fig.15).

Fig. 15. Façade of the Church of S. Agata in Ali

This façade has been repeatedly attributed to Del Duca, although there aren't documents testifying to this.¹¹ It is known that that construction work had begun on it in 1582 and that the church was almost finished in 1641. In my opinion, one detail not taken into consideration – at least to the best of my knowledge – up until today can be useful to support the attribution of the church to Del Duca. As mentioned earlier, in 1588 the relics of San Placido and his companions were recovered, and Del Duca was commissioned to build the *tribuna* of the church of the Maltese Priory to house their relics. During the construction, the relics were temporarily housed in the Mother Church of Ali, 25 kilometres away from Messina. It is highly unlikely that at that time this particular a solution would be accepted over other, simpler solutions in a city full of churches and monasteries unless the architect directing the works in the apse, namely Del

Duca, was the same architect who in those same years was working in the building yard for the façade of S. Agata in Ali. Obviously, stylistic aspects also suggest this attribution: i) the trenchant drama of the layout, with the thickening of the angular pilasters (like in the apse of the Maltese Priory); ii) the strong overhang of the cornices, the small windows “hung” to the cornices over the two lateral doors, in analogy with the memorial tablets in the façade of the Apse in Messina but even with the windows of the Apse of San Pietro in Rome; iii) the tendency to keep the two-colour aspect even in the absence of the brick veneer – there were no quarries of clay around Ali – by using two different types of stones: pink limestone for the wall and grey “colombina” (another limestone) for the rest; iv) the “stressed” volutes placed by the two sides of the second order – they are a probable invention by Del Duca;¹² v) the “cubist” brackets over the pilasters, again in the second order¹³ (see fig. 16) – some decorations in the Apse of the Maltese Priory and in Porta Pia have the same “cubist” tendency, the swags for example.

Fig. 16. Brackets on the pilasters of S. Agata, Ali

However, the most interesting characteristic of the façade of the church in Ali is its subdivision in three levels. Such a choice is not coincidental, considering that the proportional relationship between the first and the second order is in the ratio 8:5. This ratio is far removed from the tradition of the late Renaissance, nor does it appear during the Roman Baroque, where the 9:8 ratio was preferred. This squatness of the second storey, which, in passing, we meet again in the façades of R. Gagliardi, made it possible to insert the third storey. To recount the historical chronicles correctly, it is necessary to mention that the last order collapsed in the 1783 earthquake and was reconstructed after 1855. Some scholars claim that the reconstruction was very close to the original [Pergolizzi 1971]. However, there are no documents showing the original aspect of the church, the only exception being a painting by Letterio Subba – found in the same church – where the damaged front is visible, but the drawing is so imprecise even in the undamaged parts that it cannot be considered a reliable document. Indications about the existence of the subdivision in three levels arise from the façade of the church of S. Maria delle Stelle (1722-1741) in Militello in Val di Catania.

Fig. 17. Façade of S. Maria delle Stelle in Militello in Val di Catania

Fig. 18. The brackets on the pilasters of S. Maria delle Stelle

Notwithstanding its Baroque exuberance, S. Maria delle Stelle displays in its façade many analogies with the one of S. Agata in Ali: i) the rhythm of the pilasters (fig. 17); ii) the proportional system of the design; iii) the tendency of the central window at the second story to “break” the attic basement – such a breaking takes place in the church of S. Agata in Ali;¹⁴ iv) above all, the strange “brackets” located just below the capital of the pilasters of the second level, like those mentioned previously (fig. 18). These brackets are not present in the other churches of the Sicilian Baroque. Only Del Duca was free enough transfer them from the models of windows by Michelangelo to the primary

partition of a façade. The unknown architect of S. Maria delle Stelle” appears to have considered the church in Ali as a model. In actual fact, Gagliardi’s drawings for the façade of another S. Maria delle Stelle, the one in Comiso (see fig. 19), also display strong analogies with Del Duca’s experiment. But, here, the projecting central bay, from the portal to the belfry, is quite new. Other references should be considered: for example, the church of the Santi Vincenzo ed Anastasio in Rome and the façade of the Cathedral of Enna. However, all these works are later than that of Del Duca. It is also interesting that such a version of Santa Maria delle Stelle in Comiso exists only in Gagliardi’s drawing. The actual façade is so far from the original idea that, according to Stephen Tobriner, it isn’t a work of Gagliardi at all [Tobriner 1996: 148].

Fig. 19. Gagliardi’s drawing of the church of S. Maria delle Stelle in Comiso [Tobriner 1996]

There is a peculiar aspect in Del Duca’s *formativity* which is very simple but completely original: the sequence “second order–pediment” is substituted by the alternative sequence “second order–third order–pediment”, which is an extension of Cesariano’s hypothesis. This substitution and the aim of maintaining a harmonic proportional ratio require, as we saw earlier, a reduction of the height of the second order so that the third order can be inserted without appearing to be a simple addition. The choice of a square proportional grid links Del Duca’s experiment to the Renaissance and is also the reason for the strong diminution in the 8:5 ratio.

Fig. 20. Hypothetical guidelines for the façade of S. Agata in Ali. Drawing by the author

Fig. 21. Hypothetical guidelines for Santissima Annunziata dei Teatini. Drawing by the author

In Guarini's Santissima Annunziata the proportional grid is hexagonal and recalls Borromini's experiments. Such a choice makes possible the ratio 7:5, which will become canonical. However, analogies with the façade invented by Del Duca are clear (figs. 20, 21): i) the use of the last order to receive the statue of the saint to whom the church is dedicated; ii) the large window that, together with the decoration below, interrupts the attic basement of the second order, but this feature is present only in the drawing published in 1737; iii) the organization in three quite distinct and proportioned levels, as mentioned repeatedly.

The absence of documents makes it arduous to go further for the moment. However, I believe that the remarks discussed above provide indications for a deeper investigation into the influence exerted by Giacomo Del Duca – an architect with many ideas, although he was not among the highest masters – on the genesis of Baroque architecture, and not only in Sicily.

Notes

1. Gagliardi's first dated drawing of a triple-storey façade dates back to 1744 (S.Giorgio in Ragusa), seven years after the publication of Guarini's *Architettura civile* [1737].
2. The façade of Santissima Annunziata didn't appear in *Disegni d'architettura civile...* [1686] but only in the posthumous *Architettura civile* [1737].
3. The Jesuits' ability to condition urban planning to their own advantage is well documented; cf. [Aricò & Basile 1998].
4. Actually, by carefully observing the organization of the third level it possible to imagine Guarini's intention to recreate the structure of a lantern projected over a concave surface: the dome is suggested only by the broken tympanum which rises from the attic at the third level. Guarini could refer to many examples (Brunelleschi's lantern in S.Maria del Fiore, the lanterns by Borromini), but it is a work by Giacomo Del Duca, namely the quasi-Baroque lantern in S. Maria di Loreto (see fig. below) which seems to be the closest model. This church will be discussed further on in this paper.

Axonometric projection of the lantern of S. Maria di Loreto by Giacomo Del Duca. Drawing by the author

5. See, for example, the vivid sketch given by Cellini in his *Vita* (vol. II, p. 92): "...eglino furno

tanto arditi che e' mi richiesono all'andare in Sicilia, e che mi farebbono un tal patto che io mi contenterai, e mi dissono come frate Giovanagnolo de' Servi [Giovannangelo Montorsoli, Servita] aveva fatto loro una fontana, piena ed adorna di molte figure, ma che le non erano di quella eccellenza ch'ei vedevano in Perseo, e che e' l'avevano fatto ricco."

6. Consider, for example, how much Borromini's style owes to the "ad triangulum" structure described by Cesariano.
7. The windows at the ground floor of Porta Pia have been suggested by them.
8. The rediscovery of winged head of the cherub is due to Del Duca, probably under the influence of his uncle, a priest, the author of a treatise about the angelic hierarchies. This priest was a friend of Michelangelo and pushed hard for the transformation of part of Diocleziano's *Thermae* into the church of S. Maria degli Angeli, built to a design by Michelangelo.
9. See the discussion of the Medici's coat of arms at Porta Pia in [Benedetti 1973: 52-53].
10. Del Duca was the first architect to design the project for the Jesuits' "Collegio laico".
11. The first attribution dates back to 1894 and is due to the painter Adolfo Romano. Recently, Francesca Paolino suggested, with due caution, that Del Duca was influential in the project of the external aspect of the Mother Church in Ali; cf. [Paolino 1995].
12. This stylistic signature can also be found in the decoration of the courtyard of the Palazzo Piceni in Rome and in the fountain of Neptune in "Villa Mattei", also in Rome.
13. One may conjecture that they were suggested to Del Duca by some drawings of windows by Michelangelo.
14. Del Duca had already used this unorthodox caesura on the interior cornice in S. Maria in Trivio.

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