

Two project experiences for the rural landscape of the Sicilian backcountry

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Abstract

This paper poses questions on the conservation of the characteristics of the Sicilian rural-pastoral landscape by understanding its possible role in contemporary architectural design. Taking moves from Grand Tour travelers' interest in the rural landscape of the Sicilian backcountry, the paper retraces some key phases and theoretical opinions to understand the relationships and influences of rural architecture on modern and contemporary architecture. The goal is to prove that the future of the rural landscape is tied to not only the physical conservation of past historical evidence but also – and maybe, especially – contemporary design's spiritual capacity to interpret and actualize the distinctive settling characteristics of territories.

Keywords: Rural landscape, agro-pastoral architecture, contemporary vernacular architecture.

Introduction. From the Grand Tour to the research of Giuseppe Samonà

Sicily has long been the most desired destination for Grand Tour travelers. Over the whole 18th and 19th centuries, the island represented the last and maybe the most important leg of young European architects' and intellectuals' journey to discover the classical world and the myth of the Mediterranean (Maglio, 2009). Many of these travelers stayed for a long time on the sites of great coastal classical archaeology: Agrigento, Syracuse, Segesta, and Taormina. Others continued their travel toward the island's heart to discover its rural and pastoral landscapes and study its vernacular architecture.

Even more than classical architecture itself, Sicilian vernacular constructions significantly influenced the research activities conducted by the architects-travelers after returning to their homelands. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that many design concepts of the so-called “modernity” – such as the “principle of form simplification” and the idea of the derivation of modern architecture from Mediterranean architectural features – originate from the reflections elaborated during these travels.

Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier – who, however, never visited Sicily – would have never theorized some principles of “modern housing” if Gottfried Semper (and others before him) had not reflected on these aspects when just before Sicilian vernacular architecture.

In particular, Semper's journey, between 1830 and 1833 ca., included a relevant stop in the farmland of Aragona, near Agrigento, testified to by a “survey” the architect performed on a small rural courtyard house with porches on the two sides, drawing both the floor plan and a perspectival

view. That building has essential volumes, expressing and anticipating some paratactic design principles of modern space.

Gottfried Semper's discoveries in Agrigento's farmlands actually occurred some decades later than those by his conational Karl Friedrich Schinkel. After his arrival in Syracuse in 1803, the great German architect's journey does not end at the famous archaeological sites of the Greek-Roman period, which still make this city one of the most desired Sicilian destinations. Schinkel stopped for a long time to meditate on a small agricultural house built just outside the city, toward the backcountry, which revealed to him "the secrets" of Mediterranean culture (Cometa, 1990). Indeed, the *Italienisches Landhaus* drawn by Schinkel is a typical Sicilian rural house with pergolas, terraces, and external stairs, drawn at the edge of a woodland, near a valley floor. As highlighted by the architect, its volumetric characteristics produce a strong visual relationship between the house and the surrounding rural landscape.

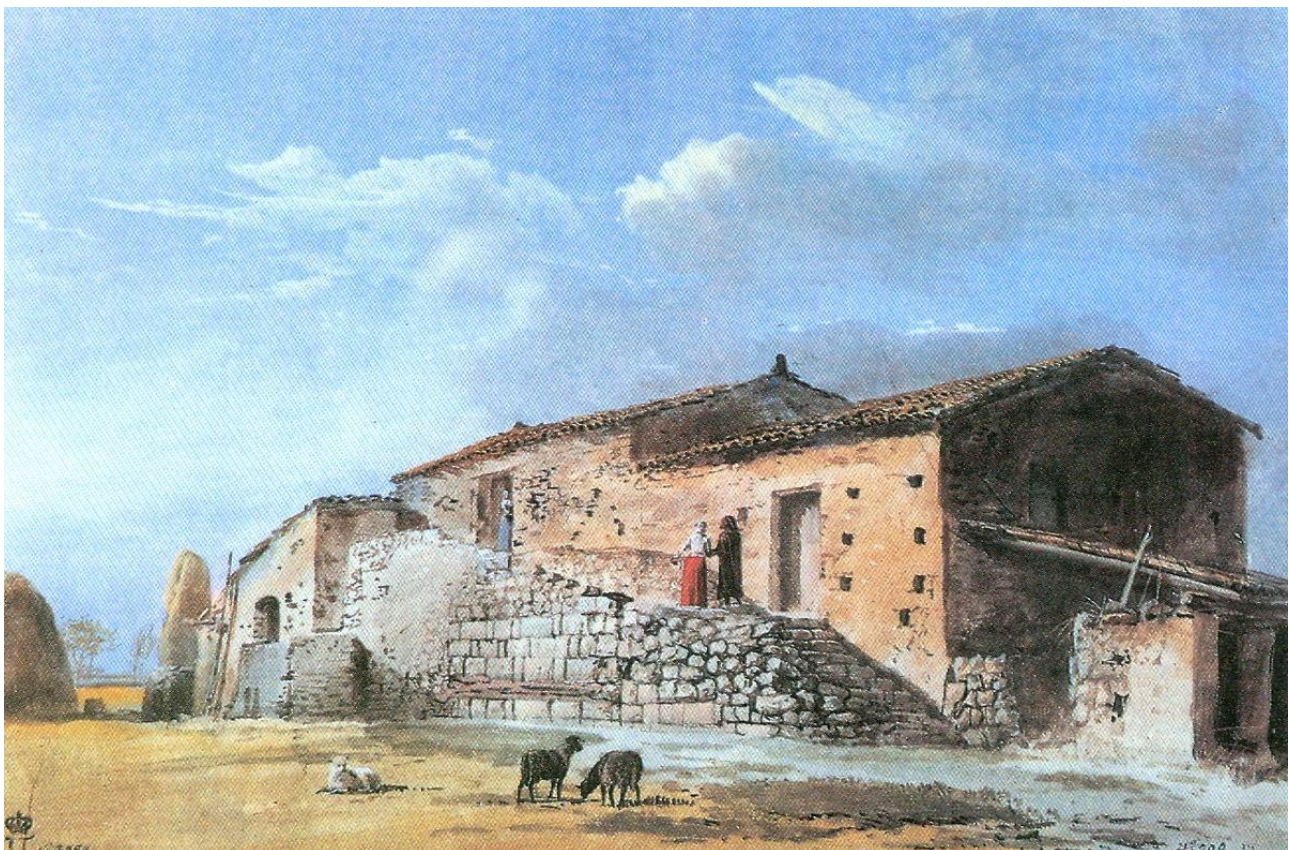


Fig 1. Jean-Pierre Houël, Rural architecture of the Sicilian land, 1776

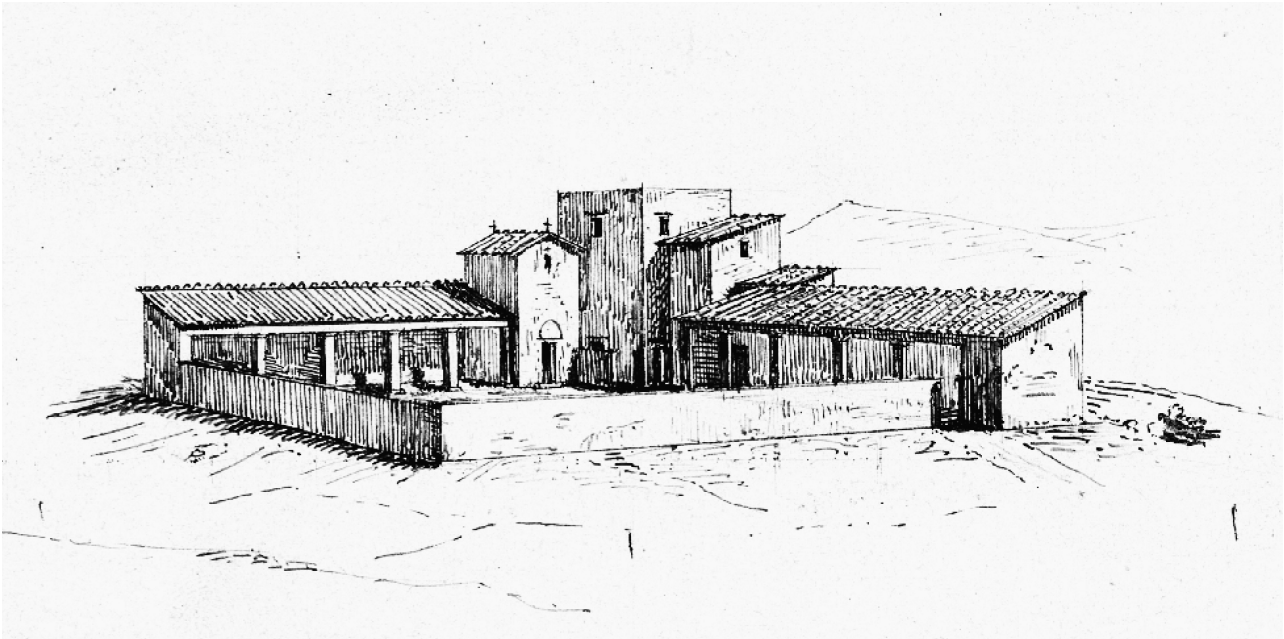


Fig 2. Gottfried Semper, Rural house in the countryside of Aragon, 1831

The interest in the Sicilian vernacular and rural landscape does not only appear in 17th-century and 18th-century architects' travel diaries but also in intellectuals' and scholars'. For example, in his well-known *Italian Journey* (1787), Johann Wolfgang Goethe recounts his visit to Sicily. He describes the contrast between the hills' sour beauty and the valley floors' richness, focusing on the harmonious presence of small rural houses scattered on the farmlands' ridges.

During the 20th century, the rural landscape of the Sicilian backcountry kept revealing its charm to architects, illustrators, and writers engaged in study trips to discover the myth of the Mediterranean. Among the many images and descriptions, the famous view of Calascibetta realized by Alvar Alto in 1952 from Enna's Panoramic Viewpoint is worth mentioning. This drawing allows understanding the Finnish architect's keen eye in grasping the expressive force of the system of agricultural terraces on the ridge of the small hamlet on the Erei Mountains. Those terraces influenced Aalto's projects in the following years, which were often based on a refined "lyrical transmutation" between natural and artificial elements.

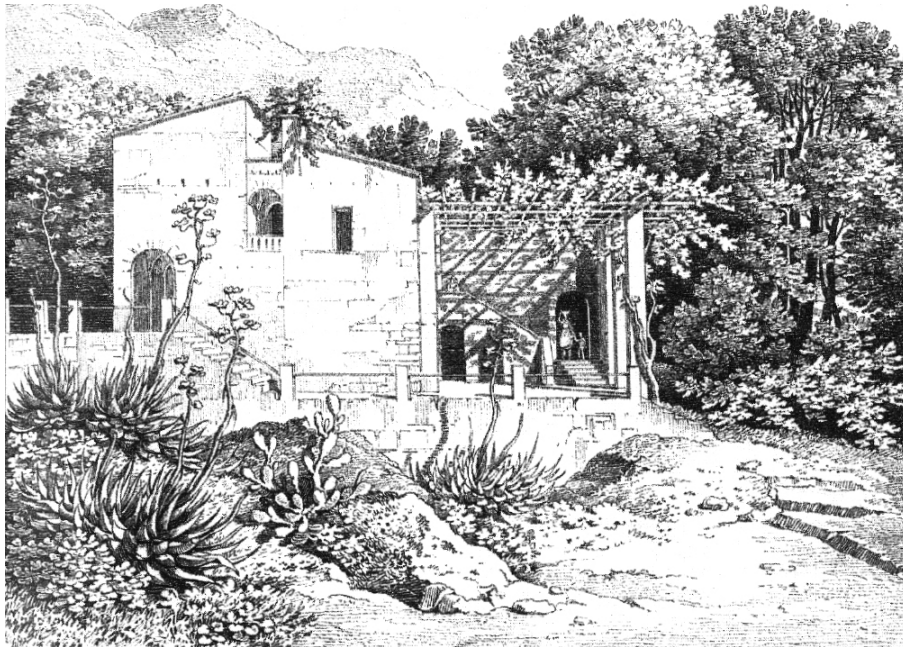


Fig 3. Karl Friedric Schinkel, Italianisches Land-house in Syracuse, 1803



Fig 4. Alvar Aalto, Agricultural terraces on the slope of Calascibetta (Enna),1952.

During the 20th century, vernacular architecture significantly influences several Italian architects' research. Above all, a greatly significant study was coordinated by Giuseppe Pagano around the '30s, established on a national level through several regional workgroups, concerning the individuation of the various typologies of vernacular architecture in Italy. This investigation resulted in the famous exhibition *Italian rural architecture* at Milan Triennale in 1936, which anticipated by almost 20 years Fernando Tavora's research in Portugal, with the famous *Inquérito à Arquitectura Regional Portuguesa*, which started in 1956.

In Giuseppe Pagano's research, it is interesting to highlight the architect's statement on the importance of vernacular architecture for contemporary architecture, reported in the exhibition catalog. He writes: «The contemporary architect should subject their artistic fantasy to the laws of utility, technicality, and economics by studying rural architecture». The rural world expresses an «immense value of pure, non-stylistic, and functional construction» (Pagano-Daniel, 1936, p.8). According to Pagano, the modern architect cannot overlook a careful analysis of vernacular architecture, which is necessary to understand its cause-effect relationships and its “design reflections”, which has often been overlooked by the exam of only “stylistic architecture”.

Therefore, Giuseppe Pagano's reflections are truly important, as he does not analyze vernacular architecture as a mere “documentation of the past” to be simply preserved; instead, he sees it as an emblem of the good construction principles to be applied to modern architecture. In practice, Pagano invokes the conservation of the settling principles of vernacular architectures, rather than their material principles, for the sake of modern architecture's very future.

Again, in the Italian context, and specifically concerning Sicily, very significant studies and surveys have been carried out by Luigi Epifanio between the '30s and the '40s of the 20th century, synthesized in a publication entitled *L'architettura rustica in Sicilia* (1934) (Rural Architecture in Sicily), recently republished by Maria Giuffrè and Paola Barbera. These surveys also influenced some projects for the construction of small rural hamlets planned by the Fascist regime and densely scattered in the Sicilian territory following a relevant regional agrarian reform. These hamlets have huge architectural value; yet, unfortunately, now they are often in a miserable conservation state.

Extremely significant reflections have been elaborated by the Palermitan architect Giuseppe Samonà, the famous re-founder of the prestigious architectural school of Venice (IUAV), and summarized in the document *Architettura spontanea: documento di edilizia fuori dalla storia* (Spontaneous architecture: evidence of buildings outside history). In this document, Samonà synthesizes the risk associated with the referential use of vernacular architecture in purely formalistic contemporary design. On this topic, Samonà writes: «The critical observation of these “historical evidence outside the known history” can only be profitable as long as it overlooks formal commemoration, turning the analysis toward an in-depth study of the real-context connections tying the natural environment and the community to the structures created to fulfill settlement needs and perform a mediation between people and the land where they live» (Samonà, 1954, pp.6-10). This affirmation shows a clear and shareable standpoint, which allows overcoming that latent «manneristic historicism», mostly based on «nostalgic accents of past virtues», rather than on the critical evaluation of the intrinsic characteristic of rural architecture. Indeed, these qualities lie in the organic relationship between structure, materials, communities, and landscape within these artifacts, which are synthetically expressed in the territory's aesthetical qualities.

Samonà's objective and still agreeable standpoint favors the conservation of settling principles to the physical conservation of vernacular documentation and the repetition of its forms. Instead,

Samonà's definition of vernacular architecture as "a-historical evidence" does not seem entirely commendable. Excessive trust in the modern world's progress and revolution, related to the cultural context where the architect operates pushes him to improperly define the history of rural architecture and minor centers as "concluded": to him, they stand as a trace «of a tradition that is entirely enclosed in the stational empiricism of secular practice, which piles up without integrations and evolutionary enrichments» (Samonà, 1954, pp.6-10). According to Samonà, it is the scene of a tragedy with predictable acts, where contemporary people can «only be spectators, and never again actors».

A research project on the agro-pastoral landscape of Enna

This short excursus narration precludes to the introduction of a personal research work conducted between 2009 and 2019, synthesized in the book *Vita dei Campi. Dieci progetti per il paesaggio agricolo dei Monti Erei* (Country life. Ten projects for the rural landscape of Erei Mountains). It is an investigation aimed at recognizing the vernacular characteristics of the rural landscape of the Sicilian backcountry, conducted through photographs, surveys, and projects that record the relationship and the settling principles of ancient rural architecture in the province of Enna.

The investigation "Vita dei campi" has allowed the recognition of three typologies of settling strategies in the analyzed territory. They are three "invariants" characterizing rural architecture. The first invariant belongs to the "valley floor" settlement system, with its buildings being located near the main traffic routes and connected to large-scale intensive production systems. The second invariant is represented by the "mid-hillside" settlement system, whose buildings are exposed to the sun and protected from the winds. The last one is the "ridge" settlement system, which in this case is related to pasturing activities. These three settling strategies appear in mostly abandoned buildings worth regenerating.

However, which main questions allow understanding the objective value of these vernacular architectures? For a contemporary architect working on a project, do these buildings only have value as "evidence" and "documentation" of a past culture? In addition to their value as historical documentation, is it possible to attribute these architectural objects a "design value" influencing the choices and language of contemporary architecture, regardless of their material quality and technological level? In other words, what can contemporary architecture learn from these modest buildings, realized by farmers and shepherds, with the materials they recovered in the surrounding areas?

Evidently, the value of vernacular architecture must be mainly identified in its settling capacity, that is the clarity and precision in settling in the territory by exploiting the characteristics of the places, solar exposure, and their protection from the wind. These architectures must be preserved especially for their immaterial (such as the settling principle) rather than material characteristics. Today, rather than their construction technique, which is often inadequate toward – for example – the seismic problems of Sicily, but, instead, we can update their "settling technique".

Therefore, the research "Vita dei campi" aims to "rewrite" the settlement invariants recognized in the vernacular architecture of the Sicilian backcountry, proposing ten contemporary projects. These ten interventions are connected to the territory like ancient vernacular constructions.

In particular, the settlement system of rural dwellings has been investigated by rewriting the "valley floor", "mid-hillside", and "ridge" typologies. Then, projects have been elaborated: a farm project

based on a wide and articulated spatial relationship between its constitutive buildings; then, a project for a system of wheat storage silos and agricultural warehouses; finally, two projects for small country sanctuaries. Hence, the contribution of this text to the seminar dedicated to vernacular architecture and its future is paradoxically represented by the presentation of two contemporary projects. Indeed, we are convinced that the value of vernacular architecture must be recognized in its capacity of being contemporary. The characteristics of vernacular architecture must emerge through their actualization in contemporary architecture. Vernacular architecture can exist in the future as long as its underlying principles can be actualized. Otherwise, we will have to settle for artifacts' restoration and conservation, as far as they can be objectively important. However, the most significant thing in architecture has always been its possibility of generating "more architecture". That is, "history" nourishes the "present" rather than the latter merely imitating the former in exclusively formal terms.

Two projects of contemporary re-writing

The rewriting projects proposed by the research "Vita dei campi" are not simulations of vernacular architecture but contemporary interventions that look at it, testifying to its territorial settling capacity. These projects express a possible and concrete answer to the question: "What is the future of vernacular architecture?"

Among the various projects realized throughout this research work, two are the most significant, concerning their demonstrative value in an international seminar dedicated to the future of vernacular architecture.

The first is a project for a rural building to be realized on the urban outskirts of Enna as a completion of a monumental complex of Byzantine origins. The second one is for a small country church requested by the shepherds in the territory of Enna to substitute an ancient church demolished after constructing a large methane pipeline.

The construction of the rural building is planned near the monumental complex of the Sanctuary of the Holy Cross of Papardura, a mid-hillside site South-West from Enna's upland, characterized by ancient rock caves excavated by Byzantine monks, a church founded on an arched pier beyond the watershed line of the ravine, and the ancient public lavatory of the city, used until the first half of the 20th century.

The intervention includes realizing a volume whose ground floor is used as a warehouse while the street-level floor hosts a porch. This is counterpointed by a closed-courtyard farm, which allows delimiting the area of the washhouse tanks in the South. The new farming facility guarantees to control and manage the suburban vegetable gardens stretching to the valley floor. Along the porch, the project places free agricultural markets, which were once present in this area due to soil fertility and water abundance.

This contemporary project indeed aims at "completing" a monumental context, ensuring its conservation and the preservation of its vernacular nature.

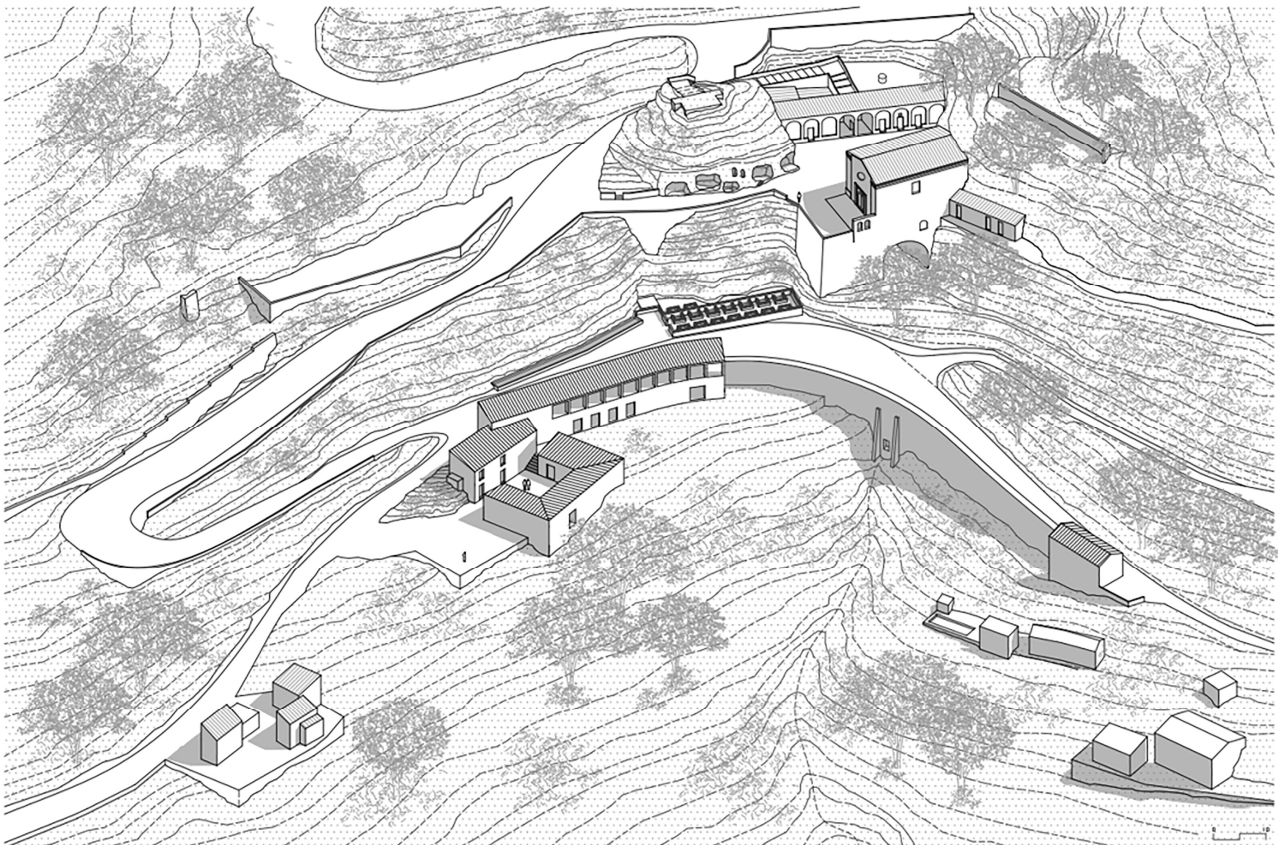


Fig.5 Redevelopment project of the monumental area of the Sanctuary “SS.Crocifisso di Papardura” in Enna [Drawing by Fabio Guarrera, 2020]



Fig 6. Church of Santa Maria dei Pastori near Enna [Foto Fabio Guarrera, 2019]

The second project, for the church of Santa Maria dei Pastori, in the farmland East of Enna, on a land plot adjacent to the A19 highway, is inspired by the small valley floor sanctuaries of the Sicilian tradition. As mentioned above, the designed building replaces an ancient rural church demolished after constructing a large methane pipeline. The shepherds had a strong connection with that place; hence, they requested a project for a new church, recalling the previous one, without repeating its forms. The building is sided by grazing land for herds, making it a sacred space where local shepherds can pray during pasture hours. The small church emerges on the landscape through a tower prelude to the presence of an external patio, where the holy water stoup is located. The aisle can be accessed toward a portal leading eyesight on Virgin Mary's statue, transversal to the presbyterium. Illuminated by a double-arched window, the aisle is plain, without decorations, and paved with Etnean basalt blocks. External walls are covered with exposed local stone, laid in opus pseudo-isodomum, recalling local wall construction techniques. Instead, internal walls have a lime plaster covering.

Conclusions

Both projects, realized within the author's professional and research activities, testify to the possibility of continuing vernacular architecture through contemporary architecture. Vernacularity belongs to the places' identity beyond specific forms and materials. Above all, as stated by Giuseppe Samonà in the excerpts mentioned just above, is a way of relating with the territory. It is a "settling capacity", expressing the comprehension of places' physical characteristics and different cultures. For this reason, it is necessary to preserve them and actualize it to our days. Hence, contemporary architecture can be considered vernacular if it does not imitate past forms but rather past settling logic.

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