



REVIEW ARTICLE

THE MODIFICATION OF HYPOGEOUS ARCHITECTURE IN THE ENGLISH GARDEN OF THE ROYAL PALACE OF CASERTA

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ABSTRACT

The research is focused on the hypogeous architecture in the English Garden of the Royal Palace of Caserta. In 1752 Charles III of Bourbon, King of Naples and Sicily, ordered the building a new capital with a palace suitable for his reign, and he chose Caserta since it was located in the inner part of the reign and therefore harder to be attacked from the sea. Four ranks of soldiers surrounded the area of the palace, King Charles, Queen Amalia of Saxony were at the center together with Vanvitelli, probably where nowadays the octagonal room is located, this was the first ceremony for the inauguration of the building of Caserta Royal Palace. In only 20 years the Palace was built, unthinkable for the time to build such a colossal work in such little time. The research ends with a hypothesis of architectonic modification strictly connected to a hypogean architecture and its vegetation context. As well known, the representation of a constructed reality allows us to recognize, select and synthesized the primary and secondary elements defining the immutable characteristics of the architectonic and landscape identity.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1752 Charles III of Bourbon, King of Naples and Sicily, ordered the building a new capital with a palace suitable for his reign, and he chose Caserta since it was located in the inner part of the reign and therefore harder to be attacked from the sea. January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1752 "May this palace and the Bourbons descendants remain until the this rock by its sole force return to heaven", this was the citation Luigi Vanvitelli engraved in Latin on a cubical monolith laid during the laying of the first stone ceremony of the Caserta Royal Palace. Four ranks of soldiers surrounded the area of the palace, King Charles, Queen Amalia of Saxony were at the center together with Vanvitelli, probably where nowadays the octagonal room is located, this was the first ceremony for the inauguration of the building of Caserta Royal Palace. So, the Caserta Royal Palace was built, a construction that covers more than 61.000 square meters with four octagonal plan courtyards 253 meters in length and 200 meters wide, the 5 stories palace is 41 meters tall and it has two underground stories. Inside we find three royal rooms, waiting rooms, chapels, halls and theatres, there are more than 1200 rooms made of travertine and 1742 windows. In only 20 years

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Caserta's urban center and the Vanvitellian Architectural Complex

The old Caserta (Casa Irta), is located on the peak of a hill of the Tifatina range. From it you can enjoy an evocative view; the look gets lost among the fertile fields where Capua appears, famous for its wealth, for the unlucky wars, and for the more fortunate friendship with the Romans; it is possible to see at the horizon an area, in which, nature and ruins reveal the city of an extinct population. There are various opinions about the origin of Caserta, some historians suppose its birth was consequent to the destruction of Sessuola; this is wrong, because monk Erchemperto, who described the fire of Sessuola, talks about Galazia and Caserta as already known towns. The only certainty is that after the destruction of Sessuola in the IX century and Galazia in X century, by the barbarian's raids, the peoples of those towns looked for shelter in the nearby Caserta. Since the name Casa-irta was never mentioned in any writing preceding the Longobardic age, we assume its previous existence with a different name, or the possibility the town was built in the same period the Longobards were spreading across Italy. The latter opinion seems to be more prominent, since no monuments or architecture from the Roman age was ever

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found, so its origin dates back to the year 570. It belonged to: Longobards, Franks, Longobard-Italians, Alemannics, Normans, Svevians, Angioins, Aragones, Spanish, Austrians, and the Bourbon Kingdom. The city was walled with limestone, still nowadays its strong bastions are visible, the old castle and the cathedral, almost entirely preserved still today. In 1734 Charles III of Bourbon was preparing the conquest of the Two Sicilies. At the time the Neapolitan Kingdom was very much desired for the safety of its borders, for its position between the sea and the Papal State, unbreakable stronghold, closed between “salt water and holy water”, as often Ferdinand II would proudly repeat, grandson and successor of Charles III. During his march toward the conquest of the Reign, the young founder of the Bourbon monarchy, (at the time Charles III was only 18 years old), he fell desperately in love with the Tifatini Mountains surrounding as an amphitheater the city of Caserta, for the incredible breathtaking view you can enjoy from, hard to find elsewhere. The first emotions are the ones that lead heart and mind, so we understand the reasons why the King, after many years, decided to build in that location the buildings named the Royal Delight. He also wanted to stay away from the chaotic and loud Naples, to live peacefully, without the daily worries of a monarch, he thought of that location were later Caserta would rise, and he wanted such a magnificent palace to cloud the great palaces of Versailles and Saint Idelfonso, such request was made to show himself and others that he was the greatest of the Great Kings of Spain. So, he called the most requested architect of the time, in fact, he asked the pope for Architect Vanvitelli, who immediately drafted some plans still preserved, an in 1752, on the King’s birthday, with a solemn ceremony, the first stone was laid. It took only 20 years to build the palace in Caserta; a rare fast work if we consider the dimensions, 253 meters for the façade, 41 meters tall, it has 1200 rooms and it is all built in travertine. At the same time they built a park with a surface of 100 hectares. These numbers give the idea of the magnificence of the work. Among the Declaration tables, presented in 1751 to the Kings of Naples, Charles of Bourbon and Maria Amalia, only three drafts, and precisely the table with a layout, and the tables XIII and XIV, two bird’s-eye views, document the real intentions of Luigi Vanvitelli for the garden. In these documents Vanvitelli describes exactly his view of the area nearby the palace, giving a peculiar and detailed description. Despite this precise description the present image of the park is completely different from the original intentions of the Architect and the reasons are not only to find in the interruption of works. In 1759, in the highest peak of works in Caserta, the unexpected news of Ferdinand VI’s death arrived. Charles of Bourbon had to leave Naples to succeed his brother on the throne of Spain. He barely saw the completion of the Valley Bridges. With his departure the dream of a new capital vanished: that city desired by Maria Amalia, built ‘with good direction’, already drafted by Vanvitelli. “The little boy king”, as Vanvitelli himself used to define the new king, Ferdinand IV, was too young to make decisions. Everything was in the hands of Tanucci, who presided over the regency council of the Kingdom and who disliked Vanvitelli.

Everything became very difficult for Vanvitelli. Countless humiliations. Tanucci would find any excuse to reduce the budget, delaying the work. Vanvitelli could only count on the abbot Galiani’s friendship, because everyone was siding with the powerful Tanucci, who preferred Fuga, Tuscan as he was. Tired, bitter, disappointed, Vanvitelli retired in Caserta where he died in 1773. At his death none of his 19 fountains had been

built. His son Charles was assigned to complete the work, who knew exactly what his father had planned and he was in possession of drawings, drafts, layouts. According to Arnaldo Venditti, it would have been easier for Charles not to deal with the heavy legacy of his father and the necessary renewal, imposed by taste and society. And if we add the big difficulties due to the lack of support by the new king, with the consequent lack of budget destined to the building, it is understandable how the completed part of the park does not correspond to the initial idea. It is also clear how Vanvitelli was close to the French model, probably from the readings of Dezalier d’Argonville. On the far end of a lot of land is located the Royal Palace, while across from it, a green exedra acts like a backdrop of the view from the central axis. However, the attention to the nature and the pre-existing features, and the possible uses of those, with consequent remarkable economic implications, did not produce the derivative repetition of a scheme through the simple construction of ex-novo elements. As already observed, some of the areas in the garden of Acquaviva’s Princes, survived to the negligence of time, were inserted in an orthogonal plan, while keeping their peculiarity and irregularity. In the general plan, table I of Declaration, the hunting lodge and the old Wood together with three small gardens and the orchard were aligned symmetrically toward the new Palace. To this pre-existence Vanvitelli intended to add a hall with indoor vegetable porch with English parterre and two sources of Love and Psyche, and another covered with vines with the fountain of Narcissus and Echo, completing and balancing the composition. A clue of the will to maintain the Acquaviva’s pre-existence seems to emerge from 1763 instructions, given to the head-gardeners Martino Bancourt, to respect the formal elements when working in the Old Wood, to replenish with seeds and plants some of the sites. The intention seems to be the one to keep as much as possible the elements characterizing the Acquaviva’s style, the territory around the palace. It is restrictive, though, to imagine that Vanvitelli had the entire planning of the park at the time of the declaration, especially in terms of reutilization and completion of pre-existences. On the contrary, as it emerges from the chronology of the works, it seems that the park was conceived, with numerous meetings with the sovereigns, as Venditti remembers, and also with necessary choices due to the worksite needs.

It is symbolic the decision to move up north, to the Mount Briano, the waterfall show, after finding a source above the level already considered. Besides, some inconsistencies, observable in the Declaration’s tables, seem to show an active study phase during the presentation to the sovereigns. Laura Carnevali, in fact, comparing the two tables, the one from the Declaration, she calls planimetry B, and an older one, she calls planimetry A, notices that Vanvitelli in table XIII uses elements present in both planimetries. In fact a double row of elms follows the curvy buildings on the side of the ellipse closer to the palace (as it is in planimetry A), while two gardens of Flora and Zephir are similar to planimetry B; the central parterre closed by the semi-circular exedra is similar to the one in planimetry A, as the two parterres on the sides. Also in table XIV, it is observable that the road around the elliptical square is surrounded by buildings, while in the other view, it has, on the outside a double row of elms. It is probable then, the final asset of the park was undergoing during the work, despite already drafted, in its main lines, in the Declaration, to give the king a total image of the work. To the result of such image, Vanvitelli worked all his life, so that, in the last years,

even without completing the work, he traced all the layouts of the boulevards, arranged the tree ranges, started the excavations of the basins. His imprint was so remarkable that even though his son Charles, finished the fountains between 1776 and 1779, either for the entire composition or for the architectonic details, he had to follow faithfully the drafts left by his father and already approved by the crown. So, as much as a tradition wants Charles the creator of the fountains in the central axis, since there is no trace of them in the drafts of the Declaration, actually, this thesis is not acceptable, considering that the park and the palace were conceived by Luigi Vanvitelli in an permanent unity, and as much as the representation of the graphics of the project to the factory is a non mechanic operation, it is also true, specifically, that Carlo had collaborated with his father for the executive drafts, in order to have no uncertainties during the work. Of such a strong adherence the fountain of the winds is testimony, in which the correspondence of the wooden model, present in the Palace, and the finished work, shows the faithfulness of the workers to the master project. Nevertheless it is almost impossible nowadays to verify such fidelity, since there is no trace left of the projects, except the wooden model above mentioned. It is meaningful that none of the fountains is cited in any of the drafts of the plan of the Palace, not even the most detailed one.



**Fig. 1. The English Garden of the Royal Palace of Caserta: the survey of the of hypogeous architecture**



**Fig. 2. The English Garden of the Royal Palace of Caserta: the survey of the of hypogeous architecture**



**Fig. 3. The English Garden of the Royal Palace of Caserta: the survey of the of hypogeous architecture**



**Fig. 4. The English Garden of the Royal Palace of Caserta: the survey of the of hypogeous architecture**



**Fig. 5. The English Garden of the Royal Palace of Caserta: the survey of the of hypogeous architecture**



**Fig. 6. The English Garden of the Royal Palace of Caserta: the survey of the of hypogeous architecture**

#### **The modification of hypogeous architectures**

The research ends with a hypothesis of architectonic modification strictly connected to a hypogeous architecture and its vegetation context. As well known, the representation of a

constructed reality allows us to recognize, select and synthesize the primary and secondary elements defining the immutable characteristics of the architectonic and landscape identity. Only after identifying through an evaluation and design the material and immaterial signs engraved in the architecture and nature's plots, it is possible to make hypothesis on a critical reconfiguration in order to clarify the actual reality. The representation of present time, so, through a survey is the synthesis to an accessible future with a design of modification. The design of modification, in fact, by its etymological nature can be placed in those categories akin to measure, in other words, an operative dimension that cannot be exempt from facing at the same time the problem of measure of the hypogeal architecture with the theme of reconfiguration. The architectonic reconfiguration, so, consists in an operation that implies the knowledge reflecting the graphic representation of design and the architectonic pre-existence of the construction. For that purpose, the reconfiguration process requires an individual responsibility toward the complexity of architecture and its relative vegetation system. This responsibility must be faced after a long process of knowledge capable to define, through drawings and relative representation of material and immaterial requisites of the location, a proposal able to reconcile past, present and future. In such theoretical context we place the idea of modification of the hypogeal structure and of the Venus Bath with its relative greenery environment. The Cryptoportico, in fact, seems a completed structure after minimal interventions, on the basis of the acquired knowledge during the representation, and it will leave untouched the beauty of the hypogeal system designed by Vanvitelli. The insertion of two monolithic white grey striped marble blocks, designed after the survey in the central pool, allow the visitor, through a computerized system placed on the surface of the monolithic structure, to visualize with the help of a virtual reality, the structure existing in the English Garden and in the Caserta Royal Palace. There will be instead, a different reconfiguration system for the Venus Bath, where the insertion of a monolithic marble block, with the same characteristics of

the internal intervention, will constitute the Swan's house. A union between the white statue of Venus and the black swan takes place across the artifact in the hypogeal architectonic green context.

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