

## IMPELLIZZERI PALACE: ENHANCED CULTURAL HERITAGE

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**Abstract:** *Impellizzeri Palece – enhanced cultural heritage.* This paper aims to focus on the Impellizzeri Palace, one of the most significant noble house in the historic centre of Syracuse (Ortigia). It is located in via Maestranza street, which is by far one of the oldest and charming street of the area. The palace is the current seat of the Faculty of Architecture, as well as the seat of several contemporary art exhibitions. This study aims as well to highlight the historic context in which it was created. The palace which is dominated by a singular frame of human and grotesque faces, topped with floral motifs, is indeed the result of all the efforts made after the 1693 earthquake.

**Rezumat:** *Palatul Impellizzeri și consolidarea patrimoniului cultural.* Această lucrare este centrată pe una dintre cele mai reprezentative reședințe din centrul istoric al Siracuzei (Ortigia). Este situată în strada via Maestranza, care este, de departe, una dintre cele mai vechi și mai fermecătoare străzi din această regiune. Palatul găzduiește în prezent sediul Facultății de Arhitectură. Studiul de față încearcă să reconstituie contextul istoric în cadrul căruia această structură rezidențială a fost creată precum și evoluția sa din perspectivă istorică. Palatul este dominat de elemente și detalii arhitecturale distincte cu motive diferite, modul sub care acesta se prezintă în prezent fiind rezultatul eforturilor umane desfășurate după puternicul cutremur din 1693.

**Keywords:** Baroque, Syracuse, Impellizzeri Palace, via Maestranza street.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Baroc, Siracuză, Palatul Impellizzeri, Strada via Maestranza



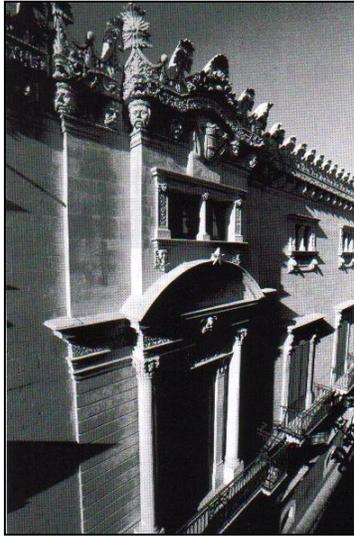
## 1. PALACES IN ORTIGIA

Ortigia is the oldest part of Siracusa that extends. It is a peninsula and is full of historic buildings. Despite the fact that the monuments of Ortigia have been obscured due to subsequent changes and earthquakes it is still possible to recognize parts of them hidden in part of several buildings. These have changed their original appearance and character over the time. It is not difficult to observe, walking along the streets, medieval elements incorporated in buildings dating back to a later period.

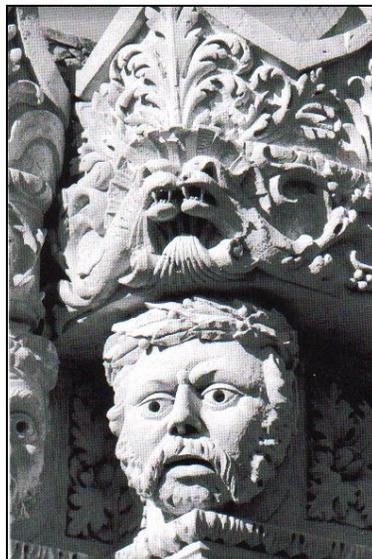
One of the buildings where it is possible to see the typical architectural expression of the medieval period is Palazzo Bellomo due to the severity of the lines of the system and the solemnity of its structure. It is an expression of palazziale federiciana architecture, characterized by the coexistence of two construction phases: the Swabian phase and the fourteenth- fifteenth century phase of the upstairs floor. The exterior of the palace has lost its original appearance after the 1693 earthquake. Another building of medieval origin is Palace Gargallo. It belonged to the Gargallo's family since the eighteenth century. Nobody knows who was the family that commissioned it, probably in 1400. Its exterior has been so highly altered by the restoration work carried out in 1939 by the architect Fichera that identifying its original aspect is quite difficult. On the ground floor there were the facilities while on the upper floor there were the apartments and the boardrooms. Nava Palace, according to Agnello dates back to the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. The building underwent a baroque reconstruction losing its original appearance, especially in the prospectus. Another example of this transition is visible in the Daniele-Abela Palace. Here the powerful severity of the manor house has been mitigated by elements of Spanish influence. The original prospectus has been distorted by the Baroque changes. The Queen's Chamber Palace dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the seat of Parliament set up in 1302 by Frederick and chaired by Constance of Aragon. There is a clear reference to the Catalan residential model. One of the most prestigious medieval buildings is the Mergulese-Montalto Palace with its scenic windows: a mullioned window with two lights, a mullioned window with three lights, and a mullioned window with a single light. The decoration is rich and valuable.

The Chiaramonte Palace at via Landolina street dates back to the fourteenth century and represents an interesting example of the architectural style of the powerful Sicilian family. It is a compact building with a clear defensive function. The building is contemporaneous with the Montalto Palace although it differs from the latter for the fact that its apparatus is simple and without decorative excesses. Even the Lanza Palace in Piazza Archimede's square, despite widespread alterations, owns a medieval aspect, which is recognizable due to the presence of narrow lancet windows and slender columns. The Bank of Italy Palace located in Piazza Archimede's square too, also known as House of the Ursulines, owns an original medieval structure visible in the wall of the court and in the two ramps staircase of Catalan origin located in the internal courtyard.

The Abela palace at Via Cavour street dates back to the fourteenth century and it still boasts two arched windows, while its original entrance no longer exists because it was eliminated after the Baroque alterations. Finally, even the Greek Palace in Ortigia has medieval structural elements, which are the porch and the interior of the porch. Surely, Impellizzeri Palace at Via Maestranza street is by far one of the most interesting among all the mentioned palaces, especially for its architectural features (photo 1, photo 2).



*Photo 1: Impellizzeri Palace  
(source: Famoso, 2011)*



*Photo 2: A detail of the facade  
(source: Famoso, 2011)*

## **2. IMPELLIZZERI PALACE: TYPOLOGY AND STRUCTURE**

Today Impellizzeri Palace at Via Maestranza street in Ortigia, represents a good example of how the historic center of Siracuse have been enhanced. The Special Technical Office for Ortigia has been engaged to achieve this objective. The building is located at the bottom of the Maestranza street, which was the ancient axis of the Greek, Roman and medieval city. The craft shops which filled up the street up until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, were gradually replaced by palaces built on both sides of the street and belonging to the nobles of the city (perhaps from the 1542 earthquake): the Rizza, the Blanco, the Bufardecì, the Zappata Gargallo, the Spagna, the Bonanno, the Buccheri Cassone, the Impellizzeri. The building, next to the sea, owns a thick series of pinnacles that claw at the sky. The observer should get closer to appreciate better the great crowning cornice made up of a series of frowning warning masks. The façade is composed of five sections, whose central is slightly forward. The date of 1894 is dispersed in a redundant decoration full of symbolic elements, even Masonic, that characterizeS the interior of the palace. The doorway flanked by two columns supporting the central balcony, is characterized by the arc with the family coat of arms surmounted by the eagle. The palace has a "C" shaped plan, overlooks Via Maestranza street and owns a courtyard with a beautiful drawing of flagstones and pebbles on the floor. The body of the building at Via Maestranza street, has five rooms and is composed of five floors: a basement, a raised floor, the noble floor, another mezzanine, a second floor and an attic with neo-mediaeval windows divided by a central column. The basement rooms are arranged in pairs on either side of the hallway. On the main floor there are three halls connected to each other. The main hall occupies the last two eastern sections overlooking via Maestranza street, and is oval shaped. The top floor presents the same structure of the main floor. The ground floor housed stores (for the storage of foodstuffs), stalls and shops; the other large sized rooms, with no communication between them, but accessible from the atrium, were used as stables and warehouses (some had wells dug in the rock below to collect water). The main floor was used for public occasions and was also reserved for the family, while the mezzanine floor and the top floor to the servants.

## **3. THE HISTORY OF THE BUILDING**

The history of the building is particularly complex. The research has allowed us to infer that the structure of the ground floor dates back to the second half of the thirteenth century, while the first floor dates back not beyond the first quarter of the fourteenth century. The arched loggia on columns shows deep restoration work, in part following the earthquake of 1542. The columns with Ionic capitals of extraordinary workmanship, built before the upper gallery is unique. It seems that the facade of the rooms to the west of the court dates back to the Seventeenth century, while many other parts of palace date back to the eighteenth-century. This should be the result of the restoration works carried out after the earthquake when the palace itself seems to lose almost every representative function.

The great works of the nineteenth century totally reconfigured the building: the facade, the staircase, the addition of the two eastern buildings, the new internal layout, the oval of the main hall. Giovanni Impellizzeri, mayor of the city, restructured the old walls completely in order to give himself a residence suitable for the role and the function he has; he added lots of Masonic symbols both inside and outside the new palace.

#### 4. IMPELLIZZERI FAMILY

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the life of one of the most important families of that era, Impellizzeri family, was lived in the elegant building at Via Maestranza. This family arrived in Sicily at the end of the fourteenth century, as king Martin's train. Initially it established in Noto, and only later it moved to Siracusa. Among its most illustrious members it is worth mentioning the Baron Paolo Impellizzeri, the eldest son of Giuseppe Emanuele Impellizzeri and Lucia Brancica Nava, born in 1785.

During the severe days of cholera in 1837, the Baron ruled the province of Siracusa, as Superintendent. Despite the crisis besetting the city of Siracusa, he did not abandon his role as other authorities of the time did, but he did his utmost to restrain the anger of the people who believed that the Bourbon government spread a cholera poison to shrink the too numerous population. He did his utmost to give recommendations and provide the necessary for the expansion and the effective efficiency of the health service. He was a wit man, interested in history, literature and Latin. He also wrote fine poems in Latin. In the last years of his life he donated his book collection to the archbishop's library to allow young scholars to improve their knowledge. He died at age 75, in Siracusa, on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1860.

The archival documents consulted, document that from the 700 onwards, the construction of the Palace was linked to the history of the noble family and to its inevitable decline. The erection of the Palace was not commissioned by Impellizzeri. It was bought later, since it was next to the original residence at via Matrarua street. The purchase took place with high probability before 1763. This belief has been reinforced by the fact that the plant of Siracusa plastically drafted by Costa, in which the coats of arms of the owners of the buildings in Ortigia are report, indicates that the building at via Maestranza street belonged to the Impellizzeri family. The palace was bought to express and symbolize the power and the social role of those who lived in.

Originally, its plan might have been larger than the current. There were about thirty rooms, including boardrooms, bedrooms, bathroom, storage, and studies, in which the Baron Giuseppe Emanuele Impellizzeri kept his collection of books. After the death of the Baron, the entire building was divided into apartments for his heirs. The noble floor, corresponding to the first floor of the Palace Impellizzeri, was assigned to the eldest son Paolo, who along with his mother lived there for a long time. From this division it is evident that the most representative part of the House was the one overlooking Via Maestranza. This part that still bears the name of the family who owned it. The noble floor, reflected the typical mansion, whose heart was in the lower central hall, "camera di compagnia", illuminated by the road and communicating with the lateral rooms through internal openings. It is worth mentioning that the devolution of the palace on heirs caused division, alteration and enlargement of the structure. The documents show that at the end of seventeenth century the Baron Giuseppe Emanuele Impellizzeri, had the House improved and it is likely that this was a real restructuring dictated by the need to clean up some parts, perhaps damaged by the earthquake. Changes and embellishments were also determined in the following century, after his death, especially due to his universal heir Baron Paolo Impellizzeri and his mother Lucia Francica Nava. In 1862 the Palace at Via Maestranza inherited by the Duke of San Filippo, Paolo's son, acquired a new planimetric configuration, determined by the annexation of the room to the right of the entrance gate. Unlike the Mastrarua's rooms, which were modified by the time, divided and reduced in part to crumbling buildings, and whose owners

are unknown, Palazzo Impellizzeri at Via Maestranza still maintains almost unchanged the original configuration. The desire to update the external architectural image, at the end of the eighteenth century, must have coincided with the intent to renovate the building and the prestige of the family "Impellizzeri", since the proximity of its decay. The facade of the Palace shows the date 1894 and was probably commissioned by the owner at that time Baron Luigi Impellizzeri, who wanted the large masks on the frame to have the faces the most important figures of the time or the Masonic fellows. With the new century the economic collapse of the family was inevitable. In the early '30s, the property was purchased by the Bank of Sicily and the rest became the property of Dr. Roman Seraphim. Since 1976 the building became property of the City of Syracuse.

## 5. THE BUILDING CONSERVATION

The cost of embarking on the restoration or renovation of a historic building can be substantial. This is especially the case when the building requires extensive remedial works or the use of specialist materials and craftsmanship to satisfy the conditions of listed building consent. Substantial reconstruction was made at the main block of the building, the main floor, in the eastern areas: large discontinuity lines crossed diagonally the entire wall of the prospectus. Part of the ceiling had even collapsed by slippage of the beams from the walls of the area. All floors of this area were dangerously away from the wall of the building façade and in particular the main hall floor had ten centimeters slope from west to east.

The ceiling of the area immediately behind the main staircase collapsed for a different reason. It was due to the decay of wood for decades subjected to moisture infiltration. Another major structural alteration has been procured in recent times in the west wing of the building the first floor, where to combine the two areas a large hole in the bearing walls has been practiced. The hygienic condition was of great concern for the considerable lack of rainwater disposal facilities because of the faulty maintenance. The joint action of meteorite water (in the last fifty years full of found polluting agent contained in the atmosphere), and the strength of disruptive wind currents triggered and amplified the degradation processes with fast highly corrosive effects on building materials. Large areas of the wall surfaces were deprived of the coating plaster that famously plays a protective role as well as aesthetic. In this case the collapse of the plaster has laid bare the underlying chaotic walls, causing an immediate acceleration of structural degradation. Much concern was also the degradation of the sculptural surfaces of the front: black crusts, thick and rich in chalk. The safety condition of the property appeared as a result of this, by no means insufficient. The first design goal was the rehabilitation of the building. The last floor of the northern building has been demolished and a room above the porch, in order to recover the eighteenth-century volumes. The new floors are all made of wooden beams, planks, sheathing, concrete and pavement. The northern rooms have been fully restored in the recent past, and raised with a reinforced concrete framed structure. The facilities include air conditioning in the multipurpose room and small groups of air in the other areas, in relation to its use. The sprinkler system was placed in one of the rooms on the ground floor of the east wing on the court. The restoration works were aimed at returning the whole organic structure compromised by several reasons: the randomness of the interventions of transformation and integration, earthquake damage, neglect. Nowadays, Palazzo Impellizzeri is in good condition.

## 6. THE CURRENT ENHANCEMENT

The reuse of the historic dwellings of the city (convents, monasteries, palaces), is an indispensable condition in order not to nullify the restoration work. The search for the compatibility of the restored monuments with the new functions of the contemporary city is the major task of the restorer. The new function assigned to the Palace, is not residential but cultural, that was indeed its former vocation. The destination of the Impellizzeri Palace to the cultural life of Ortygia appeared the most suitable for several reasons and above all the citizenship need of having a public space for cultural activities and associations. Polo di aggregazione per dare una casa alle attività culturali e mettere in relazione cittadini animati da uno stesso interesse: un “condominio culturale” costituito da cellule indipendenti aggregate intorno ad infrastrutture comuni. Tale destinazione ha inoltre consentito di limitare al minimo gli adeguamenti dell’edificio alle esigenze della fruizione contemporanea, con uno standard decisamente elevato di sicurezza e comfort, coniugato con il minimo disturbo per l’edificio. This target has also allowed to minimize the adjustments to the demands of contemporary use the building, with a very high standard of safety and comfort, coupled with minimal disruption to the building.

The process of reuse of Palazzo Impellizzeri is inevitably destined to bring together men, with new knowledge, new relationships, new suggestions for that use to interpret social cultural heritage that the law pursues is that it is often so difficult to implement. For these reasons, the City of Syracuse has established that the Palazzo Impellizzeri will be the new home of the Syracuse Society of domestic history, which will occupy two rooms plus one of the largest representation with two small rooms adjoining the entrance, placed in the wing south of the building. The new destination of Palazzo Impellizzeri is going towards being a meeting place and having a social use value intended by the law.

For these reasons, the Municipality of Siracusa established Palazzo Impellizzeri as the seat of the Institute of historical research Società Siracusana di storia patria, reserving two big halls and a third boardroom with two more rooms in the southern wing of the palace. This institute was founded by Giuseppe Agnello in 1955 in accordance with other noblemen from Siracusa after an important session of the City Council. During the council it was ratified as the first cultural organization aimed at the study of the local history of Siracusa. Among its members, together with the founder Giuseppe Agnello there were the most influential personalities of the city : Santi Luigi Agnello, the count of Gargallo and the archaeologist Bernabò Brea. In this new destination the institute of historical studies will host important events as an open space for cultural debates.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The Impellizzeri Palace is located in the scenery of Ortygia and with its façade adorns the place. Refurbished and reused, it is now offered to users who can appreciate its historical, artistic and architectural values.

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