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Invisible City: the Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents

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The narrow streets of ancient Naples are like the bottoms of chasms that meet at right angles. Once past shops and market stands, or the kitchen chairs and laundry outside the door of the ground-level apartments (*bassi*), there are long stretches of narrow streets flanked by high, unarticulated walls to either side, streets sinister because of their silence, the gloom of the dark stone (*pozzolana*) walls, and their isolation. One can imagine mysteries behind those walls, but from the street there is little hint of what they might be, or what is contained within those impenetrable and vertical stone surfaces. There are moments, however, when the doors to a convent church or access to a cloister are open, and the dark and almost threatening world outside breaks open into a paradise of pleasures, to cloisters of green grass and palm trees, or to churches decorated like ballrooms, to worlds, in short, of natural and man-made beauty that take your breath away. This is the world of monastic life in Naples.

Some of the sensation of narrowness and oppression of Neapolitan streets has to do with the ancient Greek city plan, and especially with the constrained dimensions of its north-south *viccoli*. But Helen Hills's recent book, *Invisible City: the Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents*, reveals that the tight channeling of urban space also has a lot to do with its monastic foundations, which were numerous and enormous, and which rose high above the streets as mute walls of stone. So our sense of Naples as

mysterious, hidden and impenetrable is not only the result of the city's ancient roots, grid plan, and the dark volcanic stone used for building, but comes also from its particular interpretation of the monastic vocation for women, whose great convents were planted in the very heart of the city, and whose walls are like those of fortresses or prisons.

The number and proportion of monastic establishments in Naples is quite extraordinary, and was a phenomenon harshly criticised by seventeenth-century contemporaries, who found that the convents created precisely the kind of urban environment that can be unsettling today. Hills quotes Francesco Paolo Caracciolo describing the city as 'indicated by big black palaces, high walls similar to those of fortresses which hide convents and gothic churches'. Convents went to considerable lengths to acquire entire city blocks so that their establishments could not be overlooked, or compromised, by contact with the rest of the city. Small streets were swallowed up to make larger complexes and, as Hills notes, the convents (and of course many male monasteries as well) 'turned their backs disparagingly on city streets ... declaring institutional indifference to the cities that sustained them'.

Hills's study concentrates on the development and change of conventual architecture in Naples after the Council of Trent. She situates her work in the context of the family and economic structures of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century viceregal Naples, and particularly within the framework of family strategies for the maintenance of prestige and preservation of aristocratic patrimonies. Her remarkable book is an 'unpacking' of the role and character of aristocratic women's religion in baroque Naples. Her meticulous and dense analysis of family and economic structures, and the social relations between old nobility, new nobility and the viceregal administration, provide an extraordinary narrative on how national, class and family politics in the kingdom created a particular environment for women religious. Women's monasticism was entirely aristocratic, yet the aristocracy was deeply under threat because the kingdom had become a Spanish colony, the old aristocracy trying desperately to assert its prerogatives against the Spanish administration and its henchmen (viewed as *arrivistes* and opportunists), and the complicated and often disastrous finances of the feudal nobility. Above all, monasticism in Naples was particular because of the relationships between families and the units of local government (the *Seggi*) to 'their' convents, in some of which, as Hills has noted, generations of women from the same family, nieces, aunts and great-aunts, lived together. The vertiginous rise in dowries for daughters, and the resulting dispersion of property, made the consecration of 'surplus' daughters to a monastic profession an imperative element of strategic 'family planning' for the aristocracy of Naples, yet the possible discomforts of these arrangements were mitigated by the familial environments of the institutions. The *nouveau riche* and recently ennobled aristocracy could also programme social ascendance through the placement of daughters in certain prestigious convents, reframe the parameters of social mobility by founding new houses, or lavishly patronise and thus 'co-opt' important older monastic establishments. So the proposition was twofold: on the one hand, it provided a solution for excess daughters in order to preserve patrimonial estates; on the other, it created the public aura of familial virtue through the strategic placement of daughters at convents of ancient tradition and prestige.

The author interprets the entrance into, and patronage of, convents within the political structures of Naples, above all the *Seggi*. The *Seggi* of Naples had been intimately tied to the religious establishments within their jurisdiction from the Middle Ages onwards, and the close connections between the nobles of each *Seggio* and the monasteries and convents of their zone is a central fact of Neapolitan monasticism. Here, however, one might observe that the *Seggi* also had equally powerful roles in relation to male monasticism, for, at least in the Middle Ages, a select group of the nobles from the *Seggio di Montagna* controlled the finances of the Franciscan house of San Lorenzo, and the elite *Seggio di Nido* held its meetings in San Domenico, over which it also had considerable authority of different kinds. This brings out a central issue with Hills's study, for it may be that the focus on female monasticism alone suggests a level of patriarchal concern that may not have been unique to women's houses. The reader yearns for some comparative evidence of how specifically women's monasticism, its support structures and its patronage differed from that of male institutions, or that of hospitals and orphanages.

Hills's analysis of virginity (chapter 2) and part of the conclusion ('Virginity fortified') is especially interesting in relation to the prescriptions of the Council of Trent. As she notes, the Council had run out of

steam when it turned its concerns to the issues of women's monasticism, and to a large extent it simply reiterated the strictures of Boniface VIII's bull *Periculoso*. But Carlo Borromeo's *Instructiones et suppellectilis ecclesiasticae* of 1577 had much to say about the positioning of choirs and the separations between women religious and the clergy and lay public. The convents of Naples were modified accordingly, and in particular with the extraordinary phenomenon of raised upper choirs on the far side of the altar. A fine (though now modified) example is Giovanni Guarini's new church and convent of S. Maria Donnaregina, built between 1620 and 1649, where the choir was a deep raised space above and behind the main altar (it was truncated in the twentieth-century restorations of the medieval church directly behind it, but still exists in abbreviated form).

Is Hills correct, however, in stating in chapter 6, that the choirs directly above and behind the altar permitted the nuns better to watch the Mass 'from up above, unimpeded by columns and aisles'? My own experience of those upper choirs is that it is difficult to see the altar at all without pitching one's head over the balustrade and looking straight down, something that is difficult for a group of nuns to do, physically impossible when the original screens are in place, and in any event, undignified even when they are not. It is true, of course, that the *gelosie* (openings in the upper walls along the flanks of the nave) permitted views of the side altars and lay worship down below, but the *collective* and above all *visual* participation of the nuns of the Mass, and especially the Elevation of the Host, from their upper choir behind the apse, is hard to imagine. The author provides no longitudinal sections of the buildings discussed in this volume, a mode of architectural description essential for any reader not personally acquainted with this material (for Donnaregina these are easily available in Rosa Anna Genovese's *La Chiesa Trecentesca di Donna Regina*).⁽¹⁾ Sections of churches such as the seventeenth-century church of Donna Regina reveal that at least some of the choirs were directly above and behind the altar, too close but also too far above it to be able to provide any vision of the Eucharist. In this matter, Queen Sancia of Mallorca's convent of S. Chiara, founded in 1310, was by far the most effective solution, for there in the medieval plan the choir was behind the altar but at *exactly the same floor level* so that there was a direct line of sight from choir to altar.

Nevertheless, Hills's observation of the elevation of the choirs as signifying the 'aristocratisation' of conventual spaces is certainly correct, and the unique character of this kind of disposition to southern Italy and particularly to Naples is striking. In this regard one might be tempted, however, to make analogies here with much earlier precedents, such as the convent churches of Gernrode or Essen, or even with the social stratification implied by the palatine chapel at Aachen, though it is also true that in all these examples the upper choir is facing, not behind, the altar. In Naples, in addition, the lavish decoration of these spaces, and their 'halfway to heaven' position in relation to the clergy and lay public, certainly must have been profoundly important: though now difficult to re-experience as the numbers of nuns are so dramatically reduced and most of these churches have no monastic communities present at all any more, the 'angelic' voices of the choir, raised and invisible, would have been a powerfully evocative aspect of these spaces.

In relation to the author's discussion of the aristocratisation of conventual space, her reflections on social status and sanctity are deeply interesting. Blue blood was in some way 'holier' blood, and the aggregation of aristocratic blood-lines in a conventual house meant many things, among them the greater sanctity of the life led there, and thus the greater efficacy of the intercessory prayers of the nuns for the afterlife of its patrons.

Aside from bringing to our attention a series of striking buildings that have never before been considered as a coherent group, one of Hills's major contributions is her archival work and her fascinating analysis of convents in the context of urban life and the social and economic structures of seventeenth-century Naples. The discussions of property acquisition and the expansion of conventual complexes, and the ways in which these projects reflected negotiations for power between monastic institutions and their surrounding urban environment, including other convents, is compelling. Her observations on the way in which patronage was a form of preserving privilege and status, often through the use of the nuns' own private resources (*vitalizi*), is central. With such rich documentary information, the reader might desire a little more analysis of the decorative programs that, integrated with the architectural settings, were intended to convey such status, and to whom. The author's stimulating remarks about the meaning and function of the raised choir, or the 'viewing screens' (*gelosie*), might have been enhanced by a longer discussion of the iconographic themes

presented in the decorative programs of these choirs and the other private spaces of the conventual communities.

The author of this marvelously interesting book was not served well by her editors in relation to the images. The figures are often muddy and fuzzy. Is it reasonable to expect a reader to get out a magnifying glass in order to follow the author's descriptions of plans? Could these not have been redrawn so as to be legible and visible? Frequently, the argument is undermined by the paucity of the visual documentation, or the poor quality and small scale of the images. It would have been one thing if these monuments were well known to the general public and could easily be called to mind, like, say, St. Peter's Basilica. But adequate and rich illustration is especially important for monuments that are often difficult of access (many of these churches in Naples are closed, or opened only on a few weekends in May designated as *Chiese Aperte*). Many of the convents are not even known to Neapolitans who have spent their lives in the city. The choirs richly decorated by major artists deserve to be illustrated with plates and figures that do justice to their splendid decorative programmes. Interior views, plans and sections could have been coordinated in order to assist the reader, rather than setting up fairly intractable barriers to the comprehension of the author's descriptions. It would have helped greatly to have the plates in the text. This book, subtitled the 'The Architecture of Devotion,' is, after all, a study of buildings. Indeed, Hills is writing about startlingly beautiful monuments unknown to most readers, and it seems extraordinary that Oxford Press could not do greater justice to the subject by a less 'anorexic' approach to the visual documentation.

None of this, however, is to diminish Helen Hills's very important accomplishment in this volume. *Invisible City* is architectural history close to its best: it is a 'thick' history that considers monuments in relation to urban context and social structures. Although here and there theoretical issues seem to take precedence over the buildings themselves, and although this reader, at least, wanted a little more by way of description and analysis of specific sites as well as a summary catalogue including the names of the architects, painters, and a list of the decorative programs and their iconography, Hills's broad theoretical and social frame also does much to illuminate the particular perplexities and the contradictions of the fate ? or the choice ? of many religious and *many not so religious women* in early modern Naples.

Notes

1. Rosa Anna Genovese, *La Chiesa Trecentesca di Donna Regina* (Naples, 1993), plate 34.[Back to \(1\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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