Naples vertical

“Deep holes” in a porous city

Mappa topografica della città di Napoli e de’ suoi contorni del Giovanni Carafa duca di Noja, anno 1775 (Det.)
https://maps.biblhertz.it/map?fn=napoli/noia-dewarp-lzw-tiled.tif

The history of art and architecture in Naples is marked by a constant overriding - even more so than in Rome or other cities founded in antiquity, because the city since the late Middle Ages has been continuously (albeit under very different political dynasties) the 'capital' of southern Italy. In consequence of this fact in Naples have been produced exceptional urban structures and buildings as well as decline through overpopulation. In addition, it has been plagued several times by catastrophic earthquakes that shaped the form and identity of the city to this day. Instead of a linear historiography, a different approach wants to examine the structure that has developed over centuries based on the neighborhoods of buildings and monuments. The innovative aspect of this method is in particular to metaphorically dig 'deep holes' at carefully selected places of the grown city, in order to analyze the historical interaction of buildings and social spaces and the particular urban structure of the city.
With the concept of a city as a grown organism, a fundamental methodological rethinking is connected: Instead of a monographic treatment of individual buildings, which are in seemingly empty space, this study proceeds from the power of the historical built-up space in which new projects are inserted. The overarching project is a monograph of the city, which is based on the thick description of exemplary junctions of urban space. To give an example: Near the ancient forum (todays Piazza San Gaetano) with the baroque church San Paolo Maggiore (built on the foundations of the antique temple of the Dioskuri), the gothic (angevine) mendicant church San Lorenzo Maggiore (built on the foundations of an early christian basilica) and humble modern apartments in the ruins of the roman theater - the juxtaposition of buildings shows a continuous process of references, overrides and negotiations which are still in evidence today.

To analyze the stratification of Naples is particularly attractive at present, because the concrete deep holes in the underground construction of the last decades, numerous new finds have come to light. In particular the effects of the "risanamento", the major renovations of the 19th century, now can be evaluated in detail. In a large historical framework from the remains of the ancient founding to the artistically outstanding metro stations of recent years, topographically - and in terms of spatial networking ‘topologically’ - preceding the grown identity of the city will be explored.

The research is embedded in the context of three projects currently being carried out at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Max Planck Institute for Art History:
1) The annotation of the map of Naples by Giovanni Carafa Duca di Noja with the legend of the plan itself and with text passages from De Stefano, Napoli sacra, Naples 1560 (https://maps.biblhertz.it/map?fn=napoli/noia-dewarp-lzw-tiled.tif&mo=pic)
2) the analysis of the space designed by Flavio Biondo in his "Italia illustrata": Historical spaces in texts and maps - A cognitive-semantic analysis of Flavio Biondo's "Italia Illustrata" (http://www.biblhertz.it/en/research/research-projects-of-the-institute/historical-spaces-in-texts-and-maps-biondo-project/)
3) Moving through time and space. Naples digital archive. This study and thematic elaboration of the historical iconography of the City of Naples pursues the creation of a complex digital map based on different temporal layers. In collaboration with CIRICE
The aim of the stay at the IAAS was the work on the theoretical and methodological foundations of such a conception of urban history: Obviously a digital map of the Naples enables us to better understand the neighborhoods and to visualize historical stratifications. However, the knowledge forms of the map(s) must be considered carefully. In addition to the concrete work on the map, one major practical-technical as well as fundamentally methodological problem is to be solved: the connection of historical maps with current ones in a way that the historical space does not rise in today's, but preserves its specificity. To ensure this guidebooks of Naples since the 16th century have been consulted. After the selection of characteristic sites their different historical descriptions can now be compared. With the help of qualitative and quantitative linguistic analyzes, the reception, representation and conception of individual places and especially spaces will be examined.

For the preparation of several lectures on ‘porous Naples’, the concept of porosity became the focus of my attention, because porosity is currently on the rise in urban planning and studies of Naples. In urbanism, the term, which goes back to Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, is almost universally used in a positive way and means something like improvisation in urban space, which should be promoted by city planners. In research on Naples it is used to describe the adaptability of Neapolitan architecture as well as that of the Neapolitans themselves. In some contexts, porosity is also associated with the city's stratification, so it seemed particularly appropriate for my project. Porosity, however, turns out to be a treacherous category in the literary text itself, which in turn has to be historicized in order to understand its meaning properly.

Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis introduced porosity as a specific Neapolitan quality in a text called Naples, that was published in 1925. It was a first step in a movement of other sociological miniatures which all were produced after a group of distinguished intellectuals (Adorno, Bloch, Kracauer, and Sohn-Rethel), had met on Capri and then incidentally had succumbed to the fascination of Naples and the 'South'. Subject of the so-called „Denkbild“ 'Naples’ is a seemingly loosely sequenced series of observations of social life in urban space, whereby fascination and repulsion alternate. The methodological approach of Benjamin and Lacis (in the footsteps of the sociologist Georg
Simmel) is of wider interest because they combine observations on urbanism and architecture with those on the social behavior of the Neapolitans.

To give an example:


„Porous like this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in courtyards, arcades and stairs. In everything, you preserve the scope that makes it possible to become the scene (a theater) of new unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definite is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts it "thus and not otherwise“. This is how the architecture, this most concise part of communal rhythms, comes into being. Civilized, private and ordered only in the large hotel and storage buildings of the quays - anarchic, convoluted, village-like in the center, into which forty years ago large streets were only cut into. And only in these the house in the Nordic sense is the cell of urban architecture. In contrast, inwardly is the block of houses, that is held together with iron clips at its corners by the murals of the Madonna.“

Porosity, in itself a geological quality of stone (as tuff), is here metaphorically transferred to the permeability of urban and social structures. Only the new quarters of the 19th century are civilized, private and ordered. In the center of the town are rural structures and anarchy, held together only by faith (the murals of the Madonna). If one wants to grasp the porosity described here positively, then it will only succeed if one understands it against the background of the city dwellers at the beginning of the 20th century. They here admire, in the spirit of Orientalism, the exotic ‘other’ that they in their own cities (like Berlin) can not find anymore.
Another quotation:


„Distributed, porous and interspersed is the private life. What distinguishes Naples from all the big cities is the Hottentottenkral: Every private attitude and activity is flooded with streams of communal life. Existence, the most private affair for the Northern European, is a collective matter here as in the Hottentottenkral“

Hottentotten is not an innocent term. In colonial times in its ethnic sense, it had developed connotations of savagery and primitivism. Benjamin/Lacis must have used it consciously, but is is not certain that they put it as a critique of the "philistines" who, unlike themselves, could not face the chaotic and collective reality of the southern city - (as Christina Ujma said). In what respects however, a collective existence that succeeds in penetrating no outsider is an ideal of southern life, needs to be discussed.

Porosity in Benjamin/Lacis acts as a thoroughly ambivalent feature of Naples. The authors have a special eye for the urban stages and their constant use by the Neapolitans. Their theatrical performances fall under the label 'improvisation', but while the many architectural threshold spaces are used individually in the end all the actors re-emerge again in an image under anonymous direction. Under porosity also falls the temporal and spatial penetration of the urban space with music that spills from the holiday into everyday life. And finally, it's about the penetration of the private and the public or better the collective.

Talking about porous Naples, we should be aware of the ambivalent features of this iridescent term, which aptly describes some of Naples' particularities, but also contains those prejudices of the chaotic and unapproachable that need to be further questioned.

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