



# From Amalfi to Pompeii: Utopia of the Twentieth Century Sacred. The Architectural Epithelium for the House of God

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## Abstract

In the regional context of Campania from the second half of the Nineteenth century and for the following hundred years appears very conditioned by the use of architectural languages recalling the past. Despite the use of modern technologies for the building site, the final finishing layer of the architecture is inspired by the recovery of ancient ways and figural renditions of the architectural surfaces. Finishes in marble, entire wallsplastered with stucco imitating selected types of stones, soffits vaults decorated with frescoes, apses decorated by mosaics, paving made inspired by inlays with stones, roofs decorated with gilding, all these elements display an image of architecture conditioned by formal values directly derived from the past. The paper intends to examine some Neapolitan experiences to highlight technical skills and competences recovered from the more traditional technical culture of the Territory.

## Keywords

Amalfi • Pompeii • Nola • Bologna • Firenze • Napoli • Sacred architecture in nineteenth century

## 1 The Nineteenth Century: Religion, Homeland and Monuments

With the birth of the Italian state, following the struggles of independence, which allowed the creation of a unitary state in 1861, a new sensitivity in interpreting the ancient monuments of the nation also developed. In Italy, there is a strong movement of recovery and reworking of the ancient

churches where the antiquity of construction was celebrated through restoration work.

The same restoration work was then supported by the widespread nationalist ideology aimed at claiming the important role of the new unitary State and with it of the individual local communities.

The attention that in the European context is dedicated to the historical revaluation of the Middle Ages, in Italy allows to focus attention on the spiritual value of religious architecture. Similar attention to the constructive capacities of the Middle Ages also appears for civic buildings such as Towers and Public Residences that define the cultural season that Italian historiography calls “Municipal Age”.

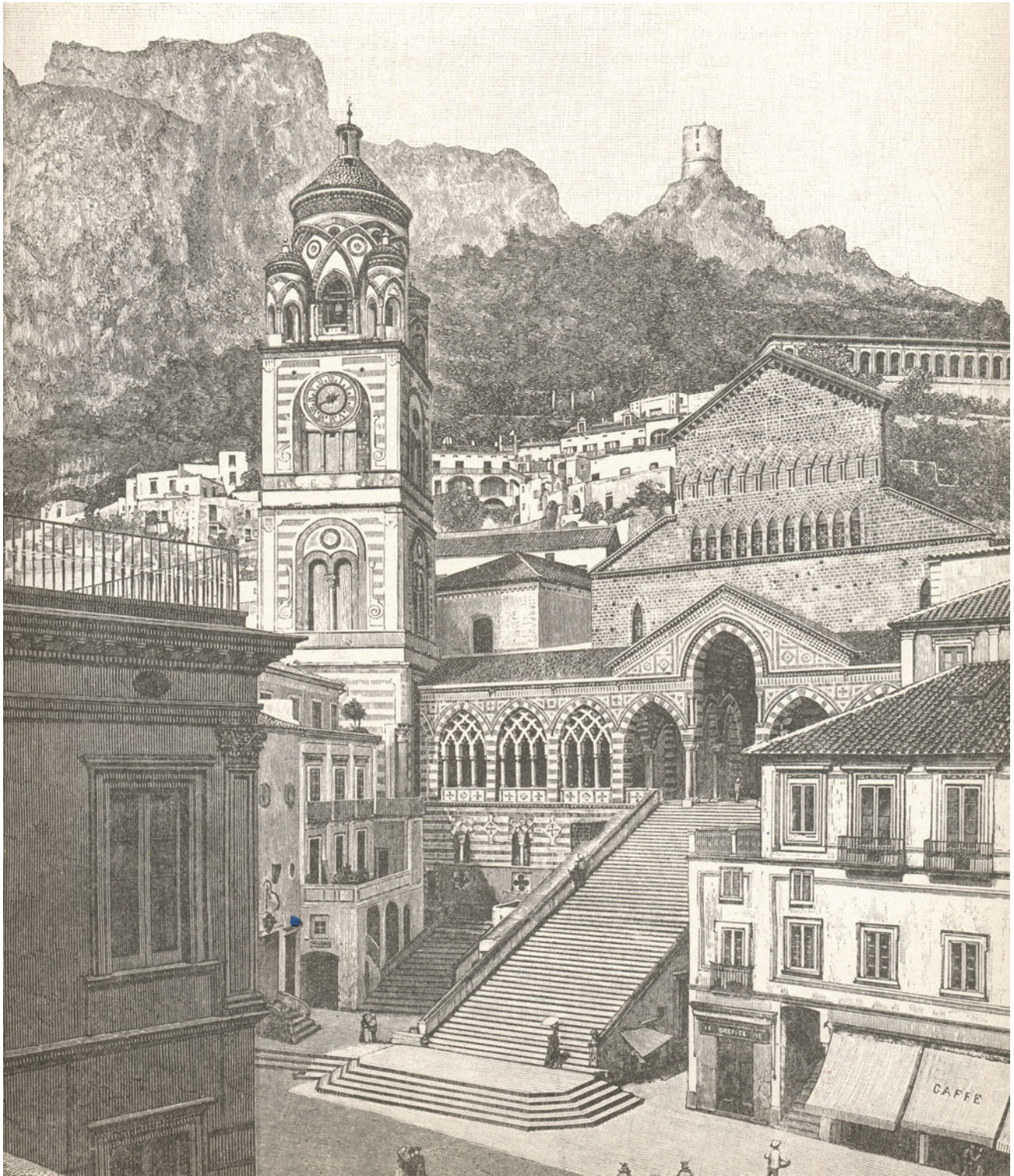
In the regional context of Campania, some cities during the nineteenth century carried out an interesting job of recovering their civil or religious history with the explicit intention of claiming a modern role to be assigned to the single city within the framework of the new configuration that the territory assumed (Fig. 1).

## 2 The Facade of the Cathedral of Amalfi as a Monument of the Identity of Its Community

The case of Amalfi is very interesting precisely because of the great value that is attributed to the history of the city in relation to its ancient role as a maritime republic (Abbate et al. 2001). The rebirth of the Middle Ages for the coastal city becomes an occasion to remember its international role and its status as a historical city of considerable value that saw it compete, centuries ago, with cities like Genoa, Venice and Pisa (Fig. 2).

The ancient role for Amalfi of being one of the Four Maritime Republics, in the historical context of the Italian nineteenth century, was an interesting premise for a new future full of important expectations of prosperity. In this scenario the city had to identify, in a representative building,

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**Fig. 1** Amalfi, Sant'Andrea church, new facade under construction (1899)

the load of the history that allowed it to legitimize its role as an authoritative and prestigious community (Camera 1999).

The painful circumstance of the collapse of the portico of the cathedral in 1861 with the death of an elderly lady,

offered the original reason to undertake the restoration of the frontispiece of the Cathedral. The particular environmental condition of the church, situated on a rocky outcrop with an altitude of about twenty meters above sea level, allowed to



**Fig. 2** Amalfi, a panorama of the coast (1899)

define a new and more scenographic condition of elevation of the whole environment.

In the future capital of elite tourism there is an important series of conditions that allow for the creation of an urban landscape of great scenographic value, such as receiving the immediate success of popular consensus (Fiengo 1994). A new city shows itself to the men of the new century, the twentieth century, the century of modernity, despite the orographic condition of the site making it difficult to reach the city by land. The city also, with its choice to create a new façade for its most famous monument, identifies in its landscape—and in its landscape seen from the sea—the promotional tool of its future economy.

The cathedral of Amalfi with the construction of the new portico and the construction of the new facade designed by Errico Alvino chooses to consecrate in that monument, the symbolic image, and synthesis of itself (Fiengo 1991) (Fig. 3).

The stylistic elements of the medieval tradition are used to represent the greatness and historical value of this interesting architectural work. The Amalfi Middle Ages are not limited to recovering forms of the past, it invent new ones; is a language used in the composition of elements and forms of

architecture that recall the relationships that the city has had with the East. Elements of Arab and Mediterranean culture are proposed in newly designed or restored buildings within the city and territory of the Amalfi Coast (Carillo 2018).

In the same years in which the restoration was carried out, according to stylistic languages of the cathedral of Amalfi, other important interventions were carried out in Italy over historic monuments of the nation. In nearby Naples, for example, the Cathedral of the city, by the same architect Alvino, is given a new façade that will complete the works to expand the new urban road that passes in front of the Duomo (Fiengo 1993).

Among the important national cases for the commitment of historical sacred architecture, we must mention the Cathedral of Florence, the cathedral of Milan and the Cathedral of San Petronio in Bologna (Zucchini 1933) (Fig. 4).

Along with this widespread interest in sacred architecture, a new sensibility also develops that reads, in these operations, a value of utopia for a renewed image of the city. Within European culture, a mode of attention to historical architecture is developed both in terms of identity and in the utopian perspective of the new planning for the future.



**Fig. 3** Bologna, San Petronio, facade

New phenomena, even from a social point of view, are on the horizon. New expectations for the weaker social classes reveal new dynamics in relationships.

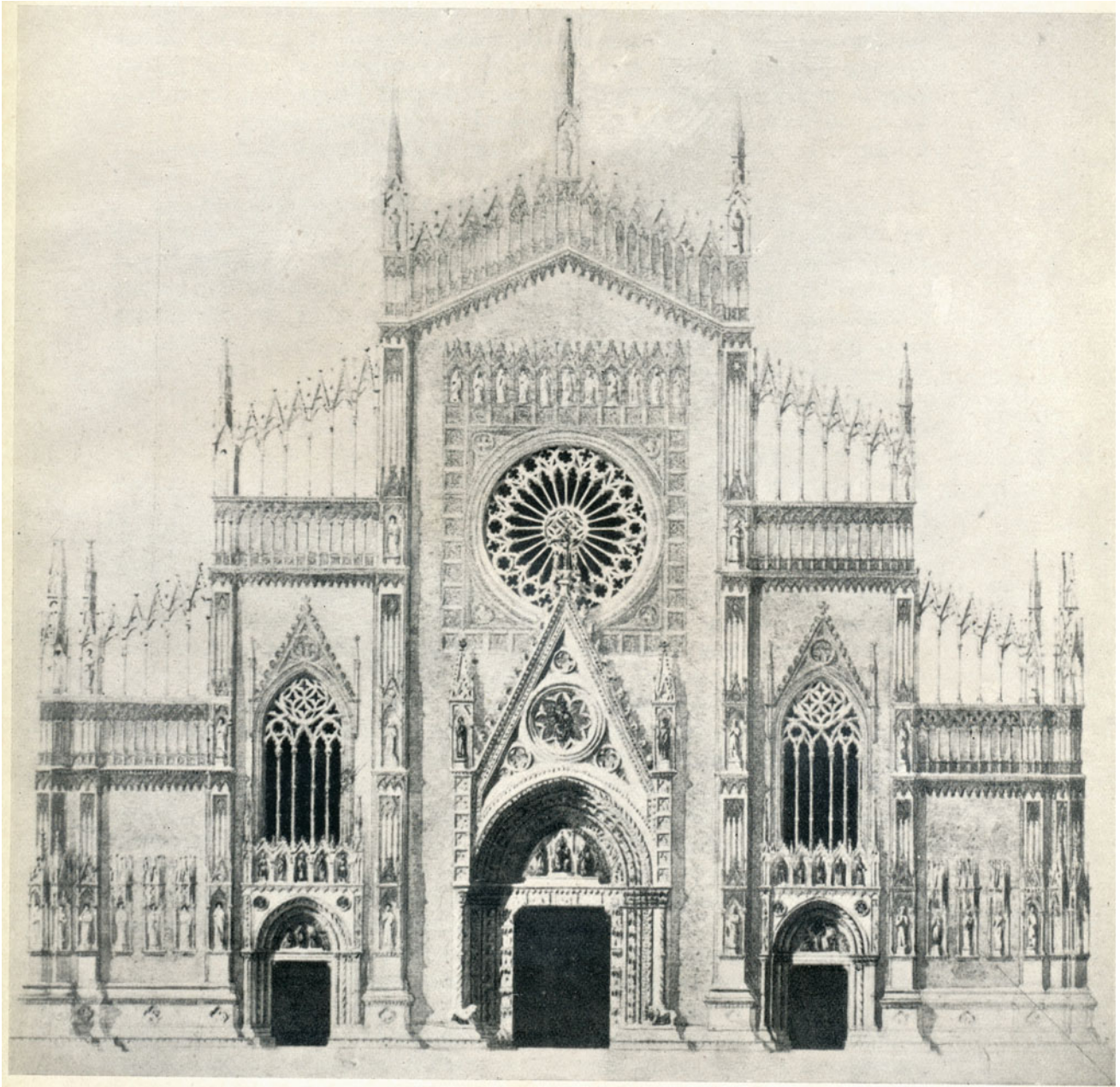
Sacred space seems to represent one of the architectural themes that best incorporates the contents and expectations of the new social utopias that are being defined.

Events considered exceptional, as the apparitions in the grotto of Lourdes, generate renewed interests for the spiritual datum, as well as historical research on ancient Christian foundations of the apostolic age, generates archaeological research and feeds the design vocabulary for the new figurative languages.

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### **3 The Reconstruction of Nola Cathedral Following the Unification of Italy Is Exemplary**

Built on an area characterized, since Roman times, by a specific cultic vocation, it was destroyed by arson in February 1861. The incident caused such a stir that, just four days later, the King's Lieutenancy for the southern provinces issued a decree for the reconstruction of the building (Carillo 1989).



**Fig. 4** Bologna, San Petronio, project a new facade (Rubbiani, Collamarini)

The interest of the new unitary state for the Nolan church is difficult to understand both for its substantial extraneousness to the southern events and the hostility to the Catholic reality (Toscano 1998).

At first, the work was entrusted to the engineer Francesco Giordano, who, as has been widely documented (Carillo 1993), designed a three-nave basilica with six bays in each aisle, one more than the ancient monument.

The fire that had destroyed the Cathedral of Nola assumed, therefore, a clear political meaning, to be connected with the conflicts that had generated, in 1861, the new

State Organization. The architectural consideration for which no surviving element had been recovered from the ancient building, destroyed by the fire, allows us to consider how, with the help of public funds, in a time of extreme crisis, the city intended only to acquire a new religious monument. In this way the city of Nola, the site where the philosopher Giordano Bruno was born, inaugurated a new path of life open to modernity (Jannelli 1998).

On the architect's death in 1878, the assignment passed to Oscar Capocci, a professor and very active patriot, who was preferred to the Neapolitan designer Gerardo Rega Angelini,

proposed by the Supervisory Commission. His experience was quite limited: he decided to abandon the vault and cover the central nave with a trussed roof and a coffered ceiling, an idea already proposed by the Academy of Fine Arts of Florence in 1862, taking into account the seismic nature of the area (Fig. 5).

However, in the course of the works, disturbing injuries occurred in the columns of the side aisles, as shown by the correspondence of the same architect, so it was necessary to proceed with the consolidation of the works already carried

out. The same architect was held responsible by public opinion for having neglected the completion of the work, because he was simultaneously engaged in other building sites.

Therefore, in 1884, he was sent, as a trusted technician of the Ministry of Grace and Justice, to the most prestigious Italian architect of the time, Pio Piacentini, who exonerated Capocci from accusations made against him.

The works, however, remained almost blocked due to lack of funds, until in 1891 a third phase began, with the

**Fig. 5** Nola, Santa Maria Assunta, facade



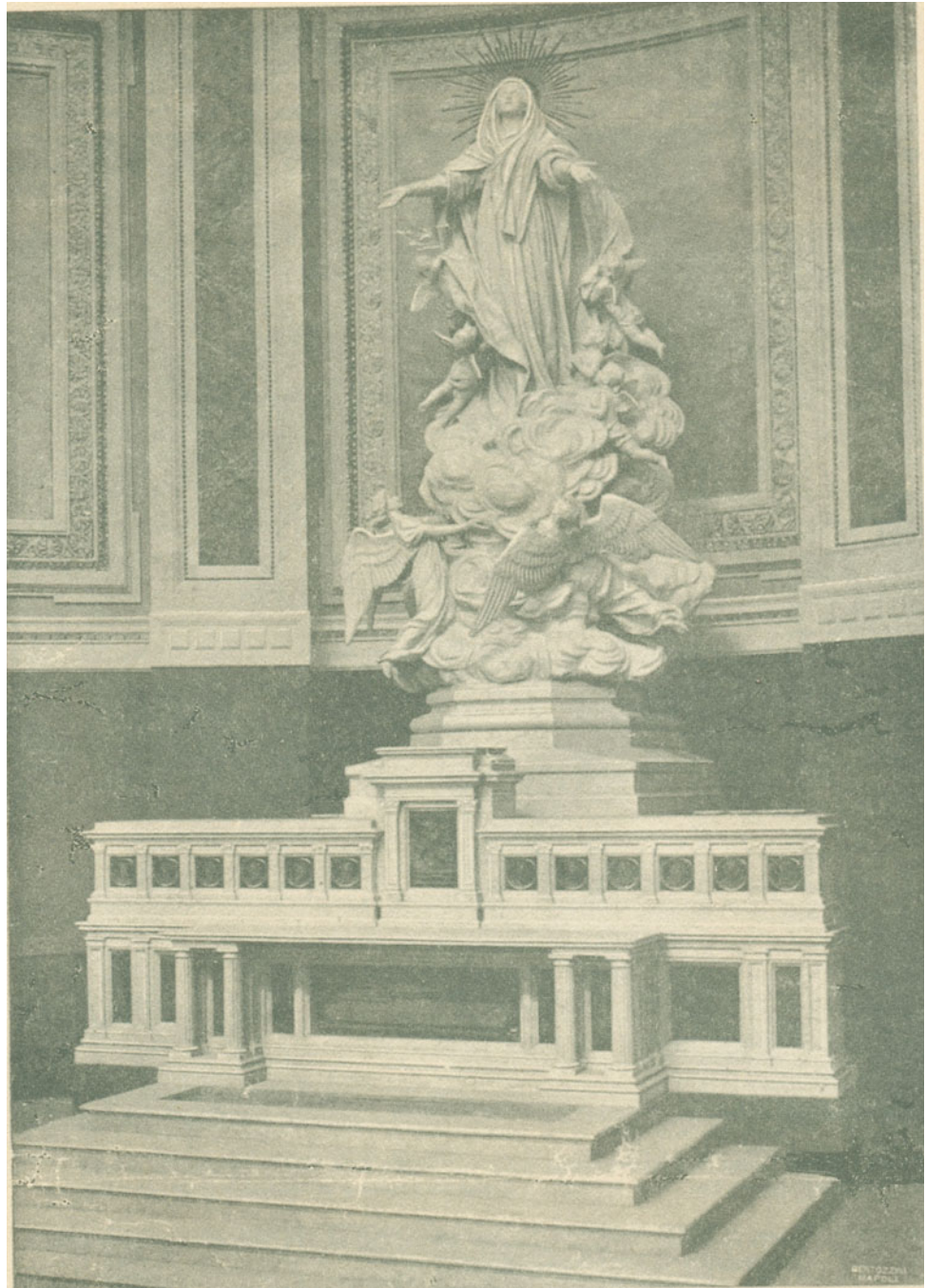
appointment of Nicola Breglia as head of the construction site. The success of the Breglia project is due to several factors, including the keen interest of the municipal authority that it interpreted «l'operazione "cattedrale" quale occasione per trasformare la città e, soprattutto, lo spazio antistante l'edificio» (Carillo 1993: 368) (Fig. 6).

The result was a building typical of the Vesuvian environment of the nineteenth century, characterized by a direct rereading of the ancient, with the result of an understanding

and acquisition of the formal characters and an attention to the historicized image of the same (Carillo 1998).

The cathedral of Breglia has an exquisitely neo-Renaissance taste, with a basilica plan with three naves, preceded by a portico. Each chapel is designed volumetrically as a square-based prism with an approximately double-height development, topped by a barrel vault, with the lacunar intrados. The transept connects the aisles, but also carries out a distributive task between the existing

**Fig. 6** Nola, Santa Maria Assunta, high altar



structures—Immacolata Chapel and SS. Apostoli Church—and the new accessory rooms, the main sacristy and the staircase for the dome and the roof (Jubilate! 1909).

Although the Breglia project is conditioned by the surviving structures—in addition to those mentioned, the crypt of S. Felice and the bell tower located to the south—the architect's main concern is to define a unitary image of the architecture. The ancient crypt was very transformed (Campone 1998) however it is also true that the style chosen by Breglia allowed the conservation of important sculptures of the XV and late Renaissance which were present in the ancient basilica.

In order to distinguish the work done by the architects, the planimetric organization of the Cathedral must be ascribed to Francesco Giordano. The completion of the construction with the neo-Renaissance style finishes were carried out under the direction of the architect Nicola Breglia (Carillo 1993).

The decorative elements (moldings, cornices, friezes, squares) immediately highlight the recovery of the ancient and, in particular, of the Pompeian model, which Breglia knew well, since, during the years of its formation, between 1858 and 1860, it had studied and inspected, for the Pensioner of Architecture (today we would say Ph.D.), the Pompeian city.

Recovering the local decorative traditions, Breglia uses papier-mâché as a decorative element that, if necessary, takes the form of “noble” materials such as marble, bronze, wood, so that the monumental sculpture of the apse, by Salvatore Cepparulo, is made in papier-mâché.

Through the intervention of Breglia, the stylistic restoration, freeing or completing of the antique, renders, at the same time, the history docile to the needs of contemporary everyday life. So the papier-mâché is used not only for its flexibility and lightness (for example, for the coffered) or for the ability of local workers to work it or for its long local tradition, but also because it can be easily aged, so that the material becomes medium communicative of the ancient (Figs. 7, 8 and 9).

#### 4 The Shrine of Pompeii: Utopia of Spiritual Rebirth of an Archaeological City

The shrine of the Virgin of the Rosary in Pompeii was born in the last decades of the nineteenth century on the initiative of an Apulian lawyer who, after years of practicing atheism, following a religious crisis, committed himself to creating a cult place dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Gambardella 2012). An important aim of the work that the founder of the sanctuary aims at is the social redemption of the poorest strata of the rural population of the Neapolitan territory



Fig. 7 Pompeii, casts of bodies found in the ancient archaeological city

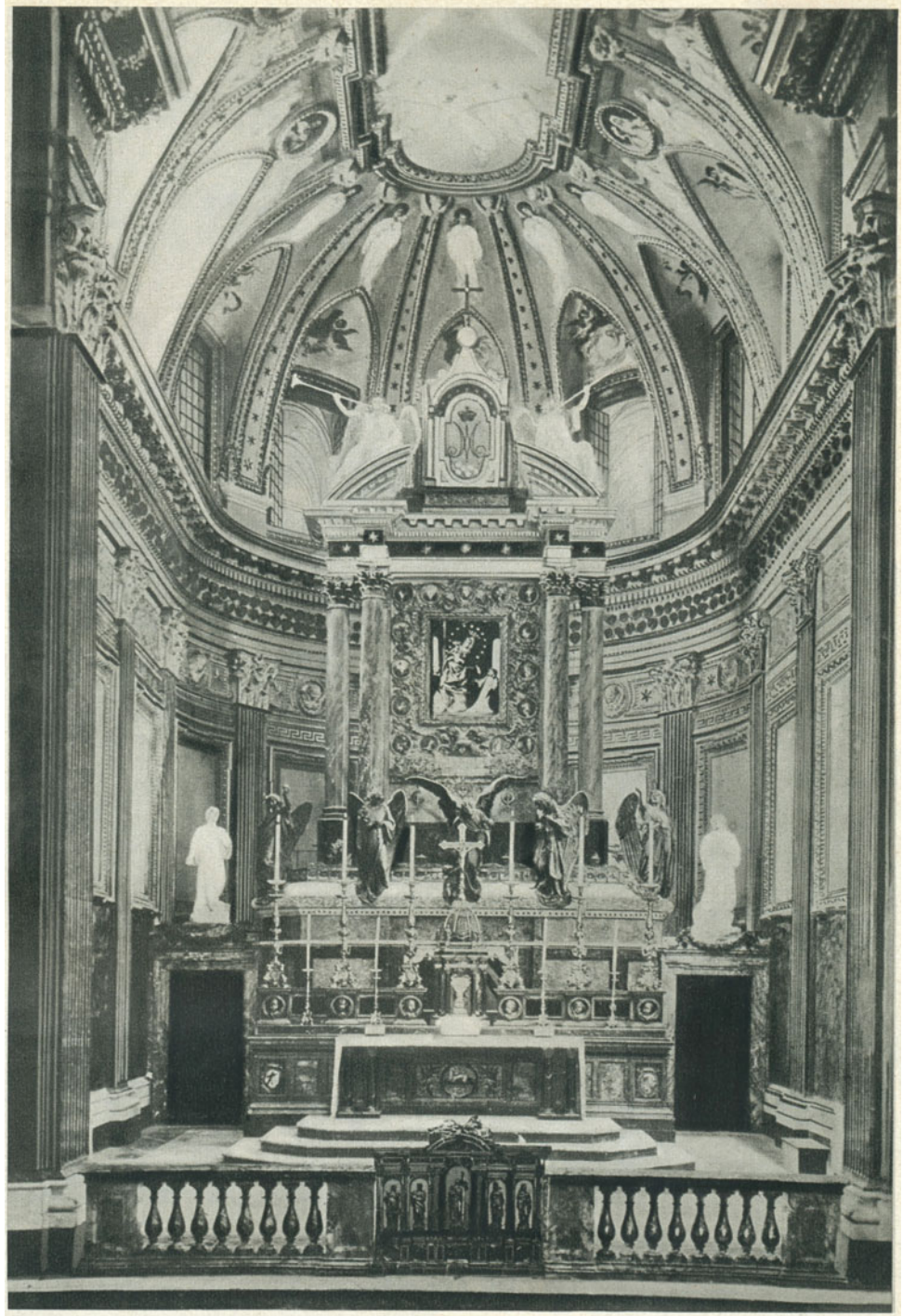
(Carillo 2001). Another aspect of the lawyer's commitment, concerns the opportunity to recover the children of prisoners through job training supported by participation in an educational activity at least at the elementary level.

Following his commitment the lawyer, Bartolo Longo, in the wake of other Italian Catholic thinkers such as the Veneto industrialist Alessandro Rossi, formed a nucleus of workers' houses in Pompeii almost reviving a social fabric that was not present on the territory (Iuliano and Federico 2000).

In the same years, the archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli, experimented in Pompeii with the technique of “casts”; pouring into the voids, that were found in the city buried by the eruption of Vesuvius, liquid chalk that, upon consolidating, restored the bodies of the inhabitants of the ancient city.



**Fig. 8** Pompei, apse of sanctuary of the virgin of the rosary





sario, attraverso questi quadri e brevi note, ben lo conoscerà chi ci si ripiega con la mente e più col cuore. E così tutti, ammirandone la bellezza e allietandosi al profumo, si persuaderanno che il nostro entusiasmo è doverosa riconoscenza e filiale amore. Glielo porgiamo al 35° anno della sua morte, questo fascio di rose a nome di tutta la «Famiglia Pompeiana» del mondo e anche a nome tuo, caro amico, che leggi.

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**Fig. 9** Pompeii, monumental facade and bell tower

Following this interesting experience, Longo commits to repopulate the territory that, inspired by the religious belief, will lead to revive the city that had been destroyed by the terrible natural event 1800 years prior. Longo's commitment, with the collaboration of the Neapolitan nobility, allowed the creation of an important religious center that philosopher Benedetto Croce called the Italian Lourdes (Fig. 10).

The expansion of the sanctuary of Pompeii is an exemplary story for the influential personalities involved and the reflection on the sacred art of the period (Carillo 2013).

The growing influx of pilgrims necessitated an intervention entrusted to Spirito Maria Chiapetta, a Lombard architect, who became a priest in adulthood (Carillo 1999). The style chosen was the baroque style, to confirm the adherence to the sacred Neapolitan tradition, in a place symbolizing

paganism. At the same time, this taste satisfied the expectations of the Neapolitan nobility, who had supported the construction promoted by Bartolo Longo.

However, the designer's choice lies in a particular historical moment for architectural reflection, which, on the one hand, was controversial towards the Baroque figurative culture, and on the other, censored the stylistic completions in buildings (Carillo 2014). Thus, Croce defined the Baroque: «il barocco è una sorta di brutto artistico, e, come tale, non è niente di artistico, ma anzi, al contrario, qualcosa di diverso dall'arte, di cui ha mentito l'aspetto e il nome» (Carillo 2000: 168).

In solving the problems connected with enlargement, the intellectual dynamism of the Church of Pius XI stands out.

Chiapetta's project has preserved the nave of the small church, so as to recognize the value of "ancient", as can also be seen in the judgment of Gustavo Giovannoni,



**Fig. 10** Pompeii, new apse of sanctuary of the virgin of the rosary

Academician of San Luca and founder of the Higher School of Architecture in Rome: «Arduo The theme is indeed complex and complex, as we propose to dare worthy and wide form in a great sanctuary of our faith by grafting into a pre-existing construction such as the current church, which must be preserved in its essential lines as the nucleus of the new sacred building» (Carillo 2000: 166).

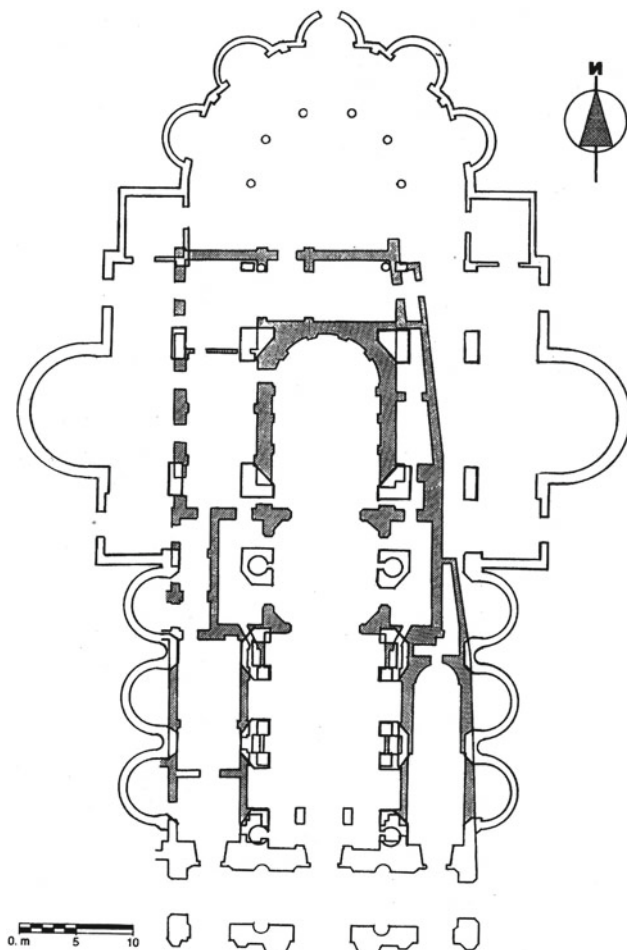
The architect, using modern materials, transforms the narrow church into an impressive three-nave basilica with three large transepts and a very functional presbytery area, even if it is weak in plan.

Thus, for example, since the previous dome constituted a strong element of environmental appeal, the designer, while replacing one with a changed position, re-proposed the

landscape and urbanistic role, highlighting the profile of the sanctuary projected against that of Vesuvius (Carillo 2008).

Chiapetta manages to create a unitary organism, as can also be seen in the external appearance, where a basilical composition of clear Roman derivation emerges, as a probable homage to the Apostolic See, to which the complex was donated in 1906 by Bartolo Longo (Carillo, Sepe & Petillo 2010).

The “subversive” character of this experience is singular, whose designer, despite his “gothic” vocation, decides to adopt a neglected and criticized style, continuing the construction “in style”, while respecting the unity of the whole (Fig. 11).



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**Fig. 11** Pompei, enlargement of the shrine (1933–39), plant

## 5 Conclusions

The synthetic exposition of the cases of historical sacred spaces subjected to transformation and restoration interventions during the nineteenth century, shows the utopian aspects, conditioned by religious values, which the Italian social context has realized after the National Unity.

These new buildings that recovered the ancient memories of the civilizations of Italian history gave an opportunity to show the ferment of novelties through which the new generation of Italians confronted the future and modernity of the new times.

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