

THE RURAL VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE OF ITALY

Authors of studies generally speak nowadays of "rural architecture in Italy" and not of "Italian rural architecture", because of the great variety of forms and structures to be found in our rural buildings. The origins and development of such architecture can be understood only if we place its principal aspects and problems within a general historical perspective.

On the basis of a variety of physical and climatic features we can divide the country into three types of regions, namely, the Alpine chain and a part of the Appennines, both of which are characterized by very steep slopes and harsh winters, the plains and the low hills where the type of agriculture practised exerts an indirect influence, and Southern Italy and the islands with their long and arid summers.

The materials habitually used for rural buildings — stone, tufa, brick and wood — are those deriving ultimately from the soil on which the buildings stand. Technological differences, though largely dependent on economic and social disparities, are also partly the result of differences in the materials employed.

Basically Italy belongs to the area in which the dominant features — rectangular ground-plans and pitched roofs — are those of Southern Europe. However, Central European and oriental forms (flat roofs) also occur within the political frontiers of the country, as well as sporadic examples of atypical structures (such as round huts with conical roofs). But the three fundamental "Italic" forms, which are the single-unit dwelling, the house built round a central courtyard, and the composite house, all belong to Southern Europe. Mention should also be made here of those buildings of the southern part of the peninsula and of Sicily in which a series of units have been merged to form a single compact whole.

The similarities and differences between town and country and between urban centre and rural suburb oblige us to look into the historical origins and common roots of the two. Rural architecture contains within itself the expression of an almost uninter-

rupted body of experience which is certain to endow even the humblest building with the dignity of a monument designed to defy the passing of time. Hence for enlightenment on the phenomenon we are examining we must look back to the complex world of popular traditions and popular culture.

The rural architecture of the Roman period now belongs solely to the realm of the archaeologist. In the Middle Ages the architecture of the countryside reverted to the typical form of the *castrum* or fortified agricultural village. But the growth of the cities was closely tied up with the new rush to "colonize" agricultural land, and the outcome of this process is the specifically urban origin of almost all the forms of rural dwelling built in the period between the 11th and 14th centuries in Central Italy. The imprint of urban on rural society is revealed in the single-unit dwelling with more than one floor, the "tower" house, and other closed-in forms. In the period that follows we witness on the one hand the beginning of an autonomous development in rural building, and on the other the first attempts to achieve the earliest versions of what was to be the typical Renaissance dwelling; and here, according to Leon Battista Alberti, country houses are precisely those which pose the lesser problems. For rural architecture, the better to adapt itself to its functions in agricultural production, was shaking off the influence of the traditional urban styles.

In the 16th and 17th centuries there came "refeudalization", as a result of which agricultural landscapes came to reflect sociological divisions with ever greater fidelity. The turning-point was the development of the big crop-growing farms of the 18th century: the rural dwelling ceased to be an imitation of the model set by the ruling classes and became something deliberately planned to suit the agricultural set-up. The vernacular architecture of the countryside loses its derivative character when there emerges a genuine agricultural proletariat which no longer aspires to a "superior" culture imitating that of its employers.

The 19th century carries the contradiction between form and function to its logical conclusion, as can be seen, for example, in the "planned" projects for homes on reclaimed land. The architectural design adopted remains a lifeless decorative element, a



deliberately "vernacular" imitation of the rural houses of the past.

The new rural architecture of the present day is strongly influenced by urban building. Technological progress and ease of transport have facilitated the use of building materials hitherto unknown in some regions. Moreover, new materials — iron, concrete, brickwork, wire-drawn steel and, more recently prefabricated units — are constantly being introduced.

III

The Alpine region possesses every variety of rural dwelling that could derive from the mingling of the different cultures — the Latin and the Germanic. In general the wooden house with roof sloping towards the north represents an adaptation of the dwellings of the mountainous areas of Central Germany, while the brick house with roof sloping southwards belongs to the cultural sphere of the Roman world. The use of wood — excellent as an insulating material — is widespread. The single-unit building with farming premises and living accommodation under one and the same roof is typical of mountainous country, though there is no lack of "composite" houses.

It should be observed that the Alpine population lives for the most part in close-knit villages which have retained their original layout. This compactness reflects at once the tendency towards community living and solidarity in the face of a hostile environment and the need to economize arable land to a maximum.

The buildings of the sheep-farmers are complex structures designed to accommodate human beings, flocks and farm products. They have gable roofs

and are often built of unplastered stone laid with lime-mortar.

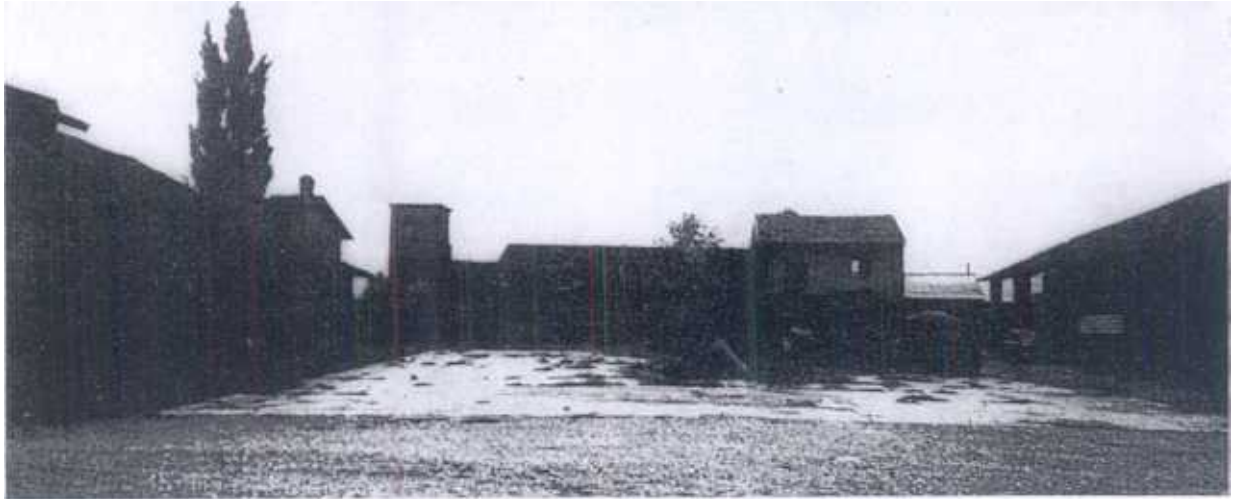
IV

In the Appennines the search for hill-top sites (less frequent today as a result of land-reclamation) can be promoted by very different factors. In the northern and central parts of the Appennines one finds the typical "Italic" brick house, built on two levels with a rectangular ground-plan, a lightly-pitched gable roof and an outdoor staircase; it houses both farm-premises and living accommodation, so that it may as a general rule be qualified as a single-unit dwelling. The roof is covered with slates or flat tiles and there is a water-butt. Such houses are also known as "slant" houses because of the way they are designed to adapt themselves to the physical features of their site. The ground floor is used as a barn and tool-shed, or to house the livestock, while the upper floor contains the kitchen and bedrooms. In mountainous areas materials such as field-stone or rubble are used; frequently, too, one finds dry walling without mortar. The stone buildings are almost always left unstuccoed. In the vicinity of clay soils mudbrick, baked or unbaked, is also used.

In the Appennines one finds all sorts of temporary shelters, among which we should mention the charcoal-burners' huts.

V

In Piedmont the commonest type of rural house is easily the *cascina* or farmstead; this is composed of two juxtaposed buildings, one housing living quarters with a loft above, and the other constituting the *cascina* proper and housing the livestock, as well as a hay-loft reached by the outside staircase and



nestling under a roof with somewhat projecting eaves. Outbuildings include repair shops for carts and implements. Such are the typical homes of the small-holders or tenant-farmers.

There is no lack of "courtyard" houses in the country, though they are most prevalent in Lombardy, Emilia and Veneto. The form emerged between the 16th and 18th centuries as the logical reflection of the sociological position of the owners of landed property at that period. Its socio-economic basis is essentially to be found in the relations between the landlord or tenant-farmer and his hired workers and the marked complexity of the agricultural operations. The most significant and characteristic internal feature of the courtyard dwelling is its open space, which may be completely or almost completely surrounded by farm-buildings or walls with doors in them, and may in addition be encircled — or rather rounded — by a live hedge. The main elements invariably present in this type of rural homestead are the landlord's house and the houses of the hired workers, which form an unbroken series under one long roof, the stables and cow-houses with their hay-lofts, and, lastly, the store-houses, sheds and barns and other single-storey farm buildings. There are one or two doorways, one leading out to the street and the other leading directly to the fields.

Another kind of courtyard dwelling forms the central nucleus of a small agricultural settlement inhabited by small-holders, tenant-farmers and even

hired farm-hands. Architecturally, one is struck by the simplicity and the clearly functional division between the buildings housing the living quarters and the stables, cowsheds, etc.; these, with their lofts, form either distinct units or juxtaposed series. A high wall or hedge along one or two sides of the open space gives the place its "courtyard" structure.

The houses one finds in the areas bordering the lower reaches of the Po, Adige and Brenta present a variety of features characteristic of these areas ever since man first settled there. The types of rural dwellings most frequently encountered are either completely isolated or grouped to form small settlements; they are traditional in style and built in two or three storeys, with kitchen and one or two storage areas on the ground floor, and with an indoor staircase leading to the sleeping quarters and the loft. The kitchen hearth with its high mantelpiece is built against the front wall; there is a pitched roof, with the gables on the shorter sides of the building, and relatively wide windows opening on to inside walls of baked brick. There are also invariably two large outhouses with lofts adjoining the house, which accommodate livestock and farm implements. The roofs of these are steeply pitched and have projecting eaves reaching almost down to the ground.

On the plains of the Po Valley with their clay soil the basic material used for rural buildings is clay mudbrick, sometimes unbaked. In the hilly areas



mixed brick and stone walls are frequent. Laterite is widely used for arches and vaults, and roofs are generally tiled.

v

In Central Italy (Tuscany, Umbria the Marches, Latium), one mostly finds rural houses of the "Italic" type of which mention has already been made. These houses date back to remote origins, belonging to a type which, as is shown by old drawings, has tenaciously survived. They are single-unit dwellings with more than one storey, with rectangular ground-plan and gable roof; the ground floor is occupied by the farming premises and the living quarters above are reached by an outside staircase. Much more rarely, one finds somewhat similar houses of one kind or another with a square ground-plan and indoor staircase, ground-floor kitchen and rooftop dovecote.

Another type of rural dwelling common in Central Italy, especially Latium, is, the "Roman plain" farmhouse. This type of building is the outward expression of the constricted economy of the 14th to 16th centuries which could not afford to neglect the demands of defence. There are other cases in which a massive but compact building directly adjoins a more simple one with which it practically forms a single-unit structure; the ground-plan may be square or form an elongated rectangle. And one also finds complex farmhouse buildings with ex-

tremely irregular ground-plans. But this type of dwelling is now rapidly disappearing.

In Southern Italy the prevalent type of dwelling is the single-storey rural home. Very common in Campania, Basilicata and Calabria, this consists in a single ground-floor room, often above or below street-level.

The *trullo* or conical dwelling of Apulia, is a descendant of the circular single-room day shelter with roof of stone slabs. In its most common form the *trullo* is a single-storey independent building with a rectangular ground-plan and a conical roof above each internal division. It is thus the outcome of the merging of a series of round buildings with tapering roofs designed to serve as living quarters or as farm buildings. In one version of it there is a separation between the area serving as barns or sheds and the living quarters. Another type is distinguished by the substitution of domes in ogival sections or of "saucer" domes for the usual conical roofs, owing to the relative scarcity of limestone slabs. The affinity between these simple forms and those of the natural environment is evident.

As a result of the abundance of sunshine in the south and the consequent desire for outdoor life, combined with the need to keep the house as cool as possible indoors, many houses are provided with porticoes, terraces, roof-gardens or pergolas. All of these features lend themselves to the essentially geometric

finement.

Tufa is widely used in Naples and Bari. It may be suitably used for walling, within a framework of reinforced concrete, provided the climate is mild, snow and heavy rain are rare and the soil rests on a limestone deposit or is very permeable and of volcanic origin.

In view of the existence of a dry season — especially in the south and on the island — the storage of water is a necessity. This explains the fairly wide use of the typical flat or vaulted roof, which is certainly a basic feature in the designing of rural houses intended to allow of optimum adaptation to arid climatic conditions. Even barrel vaults are frequent, especially over barns and sheds.

In the course of the last few decades the Italian agricultural landscape has undergone considerable change. The most outstanding phenomenon is "de-ruralization", deriving to a large extent from the abandonment of lands and homes by agricultural workers forced to seek other occupations and better means of livelihood elsewhere. There are also many other factors such as the expansion of industry, the general depopulation of the countryside, the absence of any effective plan or programme for agricultural

resources, the speculative use of agricultural lands for their picturesque value, etc.

We therefore find ourselves having to deplore the fact that not only is much of our heritage of rural architecture in a disastrous condition, if not on the road to total destruction, but the same also applies to our soil, water, air, flora and fauna, which are gravely imperilled in the present day state of the country.

The future of our rural architectural heritage is clearly bound up with the country's choice of economic and social policy. In our own view, the objectives of any plan must include stabilization of population figures through increased job-opportunities in the primary sector and the development of modern social services and of the infrastructure making for improved living conditions throughout the countryside; at the same time emphasis must be laid on the need for preservation and reassessment of our natural and historic environment in the interests of ecological balance. Special importance is attached to the instruments of planning which must be devised, the effective measures adopted, and the commitments and safeguards connected with the protection of the natural environment and the man-made visual environment bequeathed by history, with particular reference to the criteria for practical use of the rural buildings which survive today.

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RESUME

La grande richesse des structures et des formes données aux bâtiments ruraux, en Italie, ainsi que la grande variété de leur architecture extérieure, attestent que diverses influences se sont exercées lors de la formation de ces types de construction.

L'architecture rurale de l'époque romaine présente surtout un intérêt archéologique. L'architecture rurale médiévale se développa du XI^{ème} au XIV^{ème} siècle, avec la formation de nombreux types de maisons, en Italie centrale. Les constructions locatives urbaines apparurent au début de la Renaissance. Le XVI^{ème} et le XVII^{ème} siècles sont caractérisés par des villas construites dans la campagne. Au XVIII^{ème} siècle la villa se transforme en ferme. Au XIX^{ème} siècle, les types de construction traditionnels sont abandonnés et l'on en vient à de médiocres imitations des maisons rurales anciennes.

La maison rurale contemporaine réunit dans le même bâtiment l'habitation et l'exploitation agricole.

Du point de vue géographique, on distingue plusieurs zones:

— Dans la zone alpine, le bois est généralement utilisé. Les maisons ont une large toiture, qui regroupe le logement et l'exploitation agricole.

— Au nord et au centre des Appenins, la "maison italienne": bâtiment en brique, à deux niveaux, avec un toit à deux pentes fortes et un escalier extérieur menant à l'étage.

— Dans le Piémont, la ferme comprend deux bâtiments juxtaposés, l'habitation et l'exploitation agricole.

— Dans les basses vallées du Pô, de l'Adige et de la Brenta, les maisons ont deux ou trois niveaux, avec cuisine et une ou deux pièces au sous-sol pour les chambrées et les étables à coucher à l'étage.

— En Lombardie, Emilie et Vénétie, les différents types de maisons rurales se sont formés entre le XVI^{ème} et le XVIII^{ème} siècles.