

The museum of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Catania: its relationship with a socially and economically deprived neighborhood

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Abstract

The University of Catania, founded in 1434, today has 15 museums, which were planned in 1997 and gradually opened over the following decade. The museum of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, known as the Museo della Fabbrica del Monastero dei Benedettini (Museum of the Benedictine Monastery Building), is housed in a section of the monumental complex of the Benedictine monastery, construction of which began in the sixteenth century. It is home to a small collection of objects which "narrates" the history of the monastery.

The monumental complex accommodates the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy. This building represents, in line with the cultural policy pursued by the faculty illustrated in this paper, the cultural heritage that is to be preserved, exhibited, communicated to and "shared" with the Catanese population. Thanks to this cultural policy of openness towards the public, which was introduced just a few years ago, the Faculty's premises have become a vibrant museum, especially for those people living in the adjacent socially and economically deprived urban area called Antico Corso. The program for this neighborhood consists in the organization of events that aim at museum education and promote forms of social aggregation linking the university museum and the city: seminars on the development of the former Benedictine monastery, guided tours of the monastery for school pupils, exhibitions of their drawings related to these experiences, as well as further cultural events and educational programs. This new cultural policy has received an enthusiastic reaction from the citizens of the Antico Corso, who previously had contested the presence of the academy in the monastery building and had been totally unaware of its high cultural value.

The initiative taken by the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Catania to open the doors of its own museum to the public in recent years, and in particular to the socially and economically neglected neighborhood known as Antico Corso in which it stands, is part of a cultural policy recently adopted by the faculty, the aim of which can be understood if we consider that Sicily is certainly rich in cultural heritage, but also one of the poorest regions in Italy. The decision of the staff of the faculty to establish relations with the residents of the Antico Corso neighborhood was not easily made and comes after decades of difficult relations between the faculty and the neighborhood.

As an instrument for establishing relations with the neighborhood's community, the faculty chose to make use of the cultural heritage it has at its disposal, represented by its own museum and by the monumental complex of the Benedictine monastery (of which the museum is part), and which is also the home of the faculty. Since 2004, this cultural heritage has been communicated and "shared" with the inhabitants of the neighborhood who were hitherto unaware of what was housed within the walls of the university institution just a few steps from their homes: since 2004, the use of the former monastery (and its museum) has changed radically.

To understand then what is happening today in the Faculty of Letters we have to look far back in time, with the aim of showing how the role of this university institution has changed over the years. The University of Catania is the oldest in Sicily, receiving the *placet* for its institution in 1434 from Alphonse of Aragon and, following the Papal Bull of Pope Henry IV in 1444, for centuries it was the only Sicilian university. Indeed, the Catanese *Studium generale* – apart from the period running from the end of the sixteenth to the second half of the seventeenth centuries was the only Sicilian institution which granted

degrees up to the first decades of the nineteenth century.¹ Initially there were three faculties (law, arts and medicine, theology), which were essential for the exercise of power of the social classes who had greatest influence over university policies: the clergy and the nobility.²

Catania's geographical position, at the foot of Etna, an active volcano, has always influenced the life of the city in all its aspects: volcanic eruptions and earthquakes have in part destroyed the city over the centuries, and the city was reconstructed several times, on each occasion adopting a new appearance. The volcanic phenomena have meant both the presence in the academic field of a strong interest in volcanology and visits to Catania made at various historical moments by eminent scholars of volcanic phenomena. Such visits certainly contributed to strengthening links between Catanese scholars and foreign scholars, which proved important for the socio-cultural growth of the Etnean city.³ The composition of the society out of which most of the collections of the Catanese university came, involved the presence of the clergy,⁴ the aristocracy and the middle classes; these last, from the beginning of the 1840s became more present in the political and scientific life of the city (GIARRIZZO 2005: 19) and it is to the middle classes that we can ascribe the formation of the majority of the university's collections.

We have to distinguish between the formation of the collections of Catania university and those of the current university museum structures itself. Indeed, as we will see, almost all of the museums that today house the collections were set up just a few years ago as part of a project called Catania-Lecce,⁵ while the collections existing today, on the whole, were formed many years ago, over a long period of time, from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, during which culture was seen above all else as an element belonging exclusively to an elite environment, and not – as happens today – something accessible to the public at large. The Catanese university's collections are for the most part the fruit of acquisitions made by the university from private collections or collections established through the initiative of one or more university teachers.

The collections present today in the University of Catania's various museums consist of multiple types of objects: rare and ancient books, manuscripts and souvenirs relating to the history of the university, ancient coins and archaeological finds, animals, plants, paleontological finds, petrographical-mineralogical-volcanological specimens, eighteenth-century etchings, town plans, instruments used in the fields of physics and meteorology between the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s,

¹ Prior to the institution of the University in Catania, the Sicilians attended the universities of Bologna, Ferrara, Padua, Pisa, Siena, Roma, but not to nearby Naples because there, before the arrival of King Alphonse of Aragon, the islanders were not welcome. In Palermo, Trapani and Messina there were already some subjects taught at a higher level, but they could not grant degrees because they did not have the *jus doctorandi*. In 1548 the city of Messina obtained a *Studium* through a bull issued by Paul III, and in 1591 came the *jus doctorandi*; the *Studium* functioned from 1597 and was split into two branches: literary, theological and philosophical subjects, and mathematics. The University of Messina was effectively operative only up to the second half of the seventeenth century, because it had to pay for the results of the revolution against the Spanish dominators (1674–1678). The University of Messina was definitively instituted in 1838. Palermo was instituted only in 1805 (CATALANO 1934: 5–7).

² For an essential bibliography of Catania university, see CATALANO et al. 1934; GIARRIZZO 1991; NICOLOSI & LONGHITANO 1995; DOLLO 1999: 227–292; COCO 2000.

³ For example the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) met Giovanni Alfonso Borelli (1608–1688), the scientist known for his study of the Etnean eruption in 1669, or the naturalist Deodat de Dolomieu (1750–1801) who had relations both with Prince Ignazio Paternò Castello di Biscari (1719–1786), founder of the Biscari museum, famous throughout Europe, and Cavaliere Giuseppe Gioeni (1747–1822), creator of the Gioenia collection that later became property of the University of Catania. Regarding Athanasius Kircher's journeys to Sicily, see MORELLI 2001: 179, 186; regarding the relation between Prince Ignazio Paternò Castello di Biscari and Deodat de Dolomieu, see PAFUMI 2006: 50–51, 129, 131.

⁴ The clergy always had considerable impact on the life of the city: the post of chancellor of the university was filled by the Bishop of Catania until 1819; works on reconstructing the city in the 1700s following the 1669 lava flow and the 1693 earthquake were commissioned by the *curia* of the Etnean city.

⁵ See below note 13.

and building materials used in the construction of some historic buildings that today belong to the University of Catania.



Fig. 1 - Aerial view of the Monastery. Photo F.M.C. Santagati

Some of these collections are housed in university museums in historical Catanese buildings that are in themselves of great historical-artistic and archaeological interest. These are often home to individual faculties departments to which the university teachers in charge of the museums belong.⁶

The museum of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, called the *Museo della Fabbrica del Monastero dei Benedettini* (Museum of the Benedictine Monastery Building), is located in Catania within – as we have mentioned – the monumental Benedictine monastery complex (Fig. 1), founded in the sixteenth century.⁷ The museum consists of a part of the monastery that has a surface area of some 1,500 square meters (of which some 500 linear meters constitute the visitor's route through the museum) and it carries evident traces of the intricate and stratified architectural development of the building from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. The museum is organized

⁶ The only site chosen to house a museum that is not in Catania is a section of the zoological museum located on a small island of volcanic origin that is part of a marine reservation; monitoring this area is one of the tasks of the Department of Zoology of the University of Catania. The island is called Lachea and it used to belong to Marquis Luigi Gravina, who granted it to the university in 1896 for scientific research (BLANCO 2007).

⁷ The monastery was founded in 1558, but was partly destroyed by the 1669 eruption and the 1693 earthquake. From the beginning of the 1700s, building work began once again, making it even more imposing and rich than it was initially, to the point where it became a monumental complex true and proper. The Benedictine monk Vito Amico (1697–1762), who taught Civil History at the University of Catania, was the founder of both the library connected to the university and the Benedictine Museum. It housed collections of archaeological finds, statues, paintings, natural history items, which in 1868 were acquired by the Municipality of Catania and subsequently relocated at the Castello Ursino Civic Museum. Also important was the Benedictine abbot Placido Maria Scammacca (1700-1787), intermediary in the context of the antiquities market in Rome, between the 1740s and '50s, for the Benedictine museum and the more well known museum of Prince Ignazio Paternò Castello di Biscari. Emiliano Guttadauro (1759–1836), another monk from the monastery, created a botanical garden that was to be a model for the Etnean city in the first decades of the 1800s. With the state's acquisition of religious properties in 1866, the monastery was looted and subsequently housed school institutions (the Regio Istituto Tecnico, later Gemmellaro Institute) and a military barracks. In 1977 the monastery was ceded by the Municipality of Catania to the University of Catania (apart from the parts of the S. Nicolò l'Arena church, the annexed rectory and the rooms housing the Ursino Recupero library). Regarding the library of the Benedictine fathers see Paladino 1934: 248–249. Regarding the museum of the Benedictine fathers, see GIARRIZZO 2001, 24–40. Regarding Placido Maria Scammacca see SALMERI 1980: 261; PAFUMI 2006: 57.

on two levels, one of which, the largest, is underground; it is therefore a “mysterious” and fascinating space which reflects the history and the restorations of the monastery.

The museum “narrates” some significant episodes in the history of the monastery, and thus also the various uses to which it has been put since it was built by the monks in the sixteenth century. The exhibition integrates both the collection of objects preserved in the museum and the architectural and geomorphologic elements that the museum features. The collection itself consists of objects that are either building elements used by the monks to construct part of the monumental complex⁸ or instruments installed in the monastery by teachers of the university Geophysical Laboratory, by the staff of the Meteorological Office,⁹ and the Royal Technical Institute,¹⁰ i.e. by staff from the various public structures that over the course of time were present within the Benedictine monastery. Given



Fig. 2 - View of Catania during the 1669 eruption © F.M.C. Santagati

the *extra ordinem* nature of the museum space that is in part subterranean and characterized strongly by the geomorphology and the architecture of the site, we have to mention the geomorphologic elements in the museum that “narrate”, as do the other objects in the collection, the history of the monastery and constitute an integral part of it: the bank of lava from 1669 (Fig. 2-3), which the monks had to deal with by rebuilding the part of the monastery that houses the museum, and the underground river, the Amenano. Its waters are today a most effective

instrument for museum teaching since they refer to the physics experiments carried out here from 1891 to 1919.¹¹ The exhibition of other objects excavated in the underground part of the museum is planned, and this will constitute the historical-teaching section of the museum structure. One part of the museum is used for temporary exhibitions.

The museum of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy is a new museum, institutionalized, like most of the Catanese university’s current museums, via the coordinated Catania-Lecce project, which takes its

⁸ In the museum, animal bones and refuse from the furnaces used as fill for the vaults have been exhibited.

⁹ Professor Annibale Riccò directed the Geophysical Laboratory, the Astrophysical Observatory and the Meteorological Observatory. The university was able to locate them at the Benedictine Monastery thanks to a grant and modification of certain spaces (the kitchen area and a heightening of the dome above the ante-refectory) that Professor Pietro Tacchini obtained from the Municipality of Catania in 1885 (LEONARDI 2005: 31). The instruments from the office are the following: a sunshine recorder, a marine chronographic chronometer, a Fortin barometer, a thermohygraph, a swinging pluviograph, an anemograph, an evaporigraph. The Astronomical Observatory and the Institute of Astronomy were located in the monastery’s kitchens and its connected rooms from the 1890s up to the mid-1960s (LEONARDI 2005: 8, 30).

¹⁰ The instruments of the laboratory are the following: a Caillet machine, an Atwood machine, a vacuum pump, a Ramsden electric machine. From 1875 onwards, the school was housed in the kitchen and refectory areas, which had been transformed respectively into a drawing room and a laboratory for experiments on building materials (LEONARDI 2005: 8, 13).

¹¹ The Geophysical Laboratory was located here from 1891 to 1919 (see above note 10). The underground river’s water level was observed to measure the effects of rain and seismic shocks (which could have affected the flow). Even today, visitors can view the well through which the river flows.

name from the fact that it is linked to the universities of Lecce and Catania.¹² For both universities, the project's main aim was to create or rebuild museums and research centres; in Catania's case a total of fifteen museums were built or renovated,¹³ with the intention of expanding knowledge of the university's heritage.

The university collections have as yet not been studied systematically, but thanks to the Catania-Lecce project, many of them are currently being catalogued and displayed in the various university museums in Catania. The Catania-Lecce project certainly represents the shift in academic cultural policy which follows a change in society¹⁴ and therefore the context in which universities "live". As well as safeguarding and adding value to the university's heritage, creating databases,¹⁵ training in new competences and professions linked to cultural heritage,¹⁶ another of the Catania-Lecce project's aims is indeed to widen the use of the university's heritage not only for "specialists", but also for the public through the creation of services for museum teaching.

The faculty's seat was moved to the Benedictine monastery in the Antico Corso neighborhood in 1977. Plans for the restoration and conversion of the monumental complex were entrusted to the architect Giancarlo De Carlo and his collaborators. He set about transforming the building into a university faculty and a museum (the old kitchens and the underground rooms on the northern side of the monumental complex). De Carlo restored the monastery through the installation of flexible solutions that do not disrupt the identity of the monumental complex in its new purpose. He even planned a garden open to the surrounding neighborhood which is today cared to by the Municipality of Catania, which has become a potential point of contact and communication between the university institution and the city, a space in which students and teachers mingle with people from the neighborhood.¹⁷

¹² The coordinated Catania-Lecce project is financed by the European Community and the Italian Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning; this project is organized with two financial tranches, the first of which was concluded in December 2001, while the second is still in course.

¹³ The fifteen museums are: Biblioteca del Seminario Giuridico (Library of the Juridical Seminar), Archivio Storico dell'Università di Catania (University of Catania Historical Archive) Museo dello Studio (Catanese University Museum), Archivio Ceramografico (Archive of Antique Ceramic), Museo Archeologico (Archaeological Museum), Museo della Fabbrica del Monastero dei Benedettini (Museum of the Benedictine Monastery Complex), Museo di Zoologia (Zoology Museum), Orto Botanico ed Herbarium (Botanical Garden and Herbarium), Musei di Scienze (Science Museum), Città della Scienza (City of Science), Laboratorio e Museo della Rappresentazione (Laboratory and Museum of Architecture), Laboratorio di Tecniche Non Distruttive (Laboratory of Non-destructive Techniques), Servizio per l'Acquisizione e l'Elaborazione Elettronica dell'Informazione (Service for Electronic Information Gathering and Processing), Laboratorio Multimediale e di Simulazione [Multimedia and Simulation Laboratori], Infrastrutture di Fruizione e Servizio (Infrastructures of Use and Service). They are considered to be museums as defined by Art. 2 of the ICOM Statutes. Regarding the Catania-Lecce project, see CARCHIOLO 1999; FINOCCHIARO & ALBERGHINA 2007; Progetto Catania 2007.

¹⁴ The European Museum Forum's conference entitled *The European Diaspora*, held in Prato (23th–25th October 2003), emphasized how much and just how European society is changing thanks not only to ICT support, but also due to the huge presence of ethnic communities coming above all else from the East; furthermore the conference brought to light the important role played by museums in the processes of communication through which Europe on the one hand introduces itself to the new inhabitants from non-European countries and on the other ought to preserve the culture of the new residents on the European continent. These themes appear in the document of the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe in the context of the Sub-Committee on Cultural Heritage and have also been discussed at the 2nd Annual Ename International Colloquium (22th – 25th March 2006) under the title *Who Owns The Past? Heritage Rights and Responsibilities in a Multicultural World*. On those topics see: Committee Culture, Science and Education 2003, Ename Center 2006.

¹⁵ A single archive has been created which brings together data from the various archives related to the different collections present in the museums; the structure of the archive has taken into account the norms issued by national and regional bodies with regard to cataloguing. Unfortunately, this database has not yet been made available on the internet. Currently, only intranet access is provided.

¹⁶ Parallel to the Catania-Lecce project, an annual high-level training course was set up for "experts in museum mediation and communication" in the year 2000, subsidized by the Italian Ministry for Universities and Scientific Research (MIUR). Students on the course were graduates resident in southern Italy, notorious for being the poorest part of Italy. The course, set up by the University of Catania with MIUR's approval to train specialized personnel useful for the Catania-Lecce structures, bore in mind that in Sicily the concentration on cultural heritage to be valorized is particularly high, as is the rate of unemployment among graduates.

¹⁷ On Giancarlo De Carlo's plans for the Benedictine Monastery see BRANCOLINO 1988; DE CARLO: 90–91; ROMANO 2001: 22, 68–73.

The objective to enliven contact with the inhabitants of the neighborhood (from 1977 to 2003) remained for many years unfeasible, because both the inhabitants of the area and those who



Fig. 3 - Rooms on the lower floor previously used by the Geodynamics Laboratory, in the foreground the 1669 lavaflow © F.M.C. Santagati

frequented the faculty had adopted – albeit unofficially – a policy of mutual distrust that provoked a state of “mutual exclusion”, and if we consider that contact opportunities for meetings for both “actors” were virtually inexistent, then it is evident that the two parties (faculty and neighborhood) had no contact at all. The absence of relations derived from the fact that the social and cultural contexts that characterized on the one hand the faculty and on the other the neighborhood were completely opposite: the faculty was seen by the inhabitants as the “fortress” of an “alien” culture, while the Antico Corso neighborhood was considered by the faculty an impenetrable stronghold of social and cultural degradation. The faculty’s view derived from the fact that the Antico Corso area has extremely low per capita income and literacy levels as well as a high rate of crime committed by locally organized groups.

Since the institution of the faculty in the neighborhood, prices for housing have increased enormously, which has made life very difficult for the original inhabitants of the area. Some inhabitants with a reasonable level of literacy organized into a

neighborhood association (Comitato Antico Corso),¹⁸ which is very active and from the very beginning opposed the university’s presence. The faculty’s work therefore has not been easy – teaching and non-teaching staff have been affected strongly by this climate of almost “urban warfare”, but from 2004 onwards the faculty’s management decided on a new policy of operating and moved from an attitude

¹⁸ The Comitato Antico Corso is studied today by a group of sociologists working on participative planning (LANZA, PIAZZA & VACANTE 2004: 12, 23–26).

of “defense” to one of openness and communication with the world outside by hosting events in the monastery that constitute moments of social aggregation and opportunities for meeting others.

The reasons behind this change in the faculty’s *modus operandi* from 2004 onwards are to be found in the “new approach” set up by the dean of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Catania, Professor Enrico Iachello, who has put strong emphasis on the fact that the faculty museum (and the entire Benedictine complex) belongs to the civil community. He considers it in relationship to its “territory” and as being “obliged” to provide services to the public. On the basis of this consideration, the university museum can no longer maintain the role of an inaccessible ivory tower of culture, especially in an urban area like this, in which there are no other public institutions that propose cultural initiatives for the neighborhood or which voluntarily provide a forum for the inhabitants of the neighborhood to discuss their problems.

The decision to use the museum and the Benedictine complex as an instrument for establishing relationships between the faculty and the neighborhood was born from the realization that the Comitato Antico Corso has an interest in the cultural heritage of the area. The Antico Corso committee’s interest was to maintain *in situ* the archaeological areas of the zone external to the monastery and managed by the Municipality of Catania. In order to resolve the controversy, the faculty consulted academics who were experts in archaeology. They confirmed the need to leave *in situ* the cultural heritage in question as requested by the committee. Following this first important step which was welcomed by the committee and the neighborhood, the faculty has established contact with the heads of the Comitato Antico Corso to discuss problems relating to the neighborhood (parking, house prices, etc) and has invited the committee to participate in a round table together with representatives of the Municipality of Catania, which in general had had no direct relations with the committee.

Thanks to these positive meetings and discussions organized by the faculty, a decision was taken by the faculty in 2004 to approach the three schools located in the neighborhood. Their headmasters were contacted directly and initially only informally in order to invite groups of schoolchildren to the monastery. This consideration immediately became a priority, given that education regarding cultural heritage during school years is felt to be fundamental.¹⁹ It was decided to include the participation of the neighborhood schools in a program aimed at communicating knowledge of the past, specifically the classical world, to the entire Catanese population. The decision to deal with the classical world was made not only because in Sicily (and in the Antico Corso neighborhood itself) traces of the classical past are evident and influence local culture greatly, but also because the classical period is one of the subjects most studied in faculties of Letters and Philosophy in the south of Italy. Drawn up during the summer of 2004 by faculty teachers, the developed program was called *Fuori dall’aula, dentro la città* (*Out of the teaching room and into the city*). The cultural meetings within the program were organized on the basis of the idea that university teachers were to move out – metaphorically – from the university’s teaching rooms to communicate to the “world outside” topics related to the themes of classical culture (generally only dealt with in the academic context), but rendering them more attractive and understandable through the consultation of communication experts. These helped the university teachers to hold unpaid *lecture-shows* on classical culture.

In the academic year 2004/2005, agreements with the schools in the area were made official, so that the schools were able to participate in the special section – *Cartoons per l’Antico Corso* – of the program *Fuori dall’aula, dentro la città*. For this section, the pupils of the neighborhood’s schools were

¹⁹ As can be seen in the essay by Bourdieu and Darbel, those who love art and willingly visit museums are prevalently those who in their school years had already begun to visit them thanks to their schooling (BOURDIEU & DARBEL 1972). On school teaching that begins with cultural heritage and art, and which takes into account the developments across the rest of Europe, see COSTANTINO 2001; BRANCHESI, CRISPOLTI & DALAI EMILIANI 2001. On the need and the advantages of receiving an aesthetic education see QUINTANA CABANAS 1996: 101–107.

invited to the Benedictine Monastery to watch animated cartoons on a classical subject: Hercules and Ulysses, chosen because, as previously mentioned, the theme dealt with in the program *Fuori dall'aula dentro la città* was antiquity and because school teachers would not have been able to prepare their young pupils in time (as is the norm in schools in Italy) for what they would see at the monastery, especially what they would see at the museum.

Having come to the monastery to watch the *Cartoons per l'Antico Corso*, the pupils naturally visited both the faculty and the museum; the pupils' contact with these spaces – until then unknown to them despite the fact that they are very close to their schools – was so evocative that it influenced the drawings they made.²⁰ With the present author, they organized an exhibition in the former monastery building open to anyone who visited the monumental complex. The decision was made to produce a catalogue of this exhibition which was published with faculty funds by one of the oldest and best known Italian publishing houses (Giunti),²¹ and it was subsequently widely distributed both on a local and national level. The parents of the schoolchildren who had created the drawings in the exhibition were invited to both the exhibition and the presentation of the catalogue (at the monastery).

This approach taken by the faculty towards the schools is explained not just as an attempt to bring the academic world (and its cultural heritage) to a socially and economically highly degraded environment, but also as an original idea for bridging the gap between school and university that is often complained of in the south of Italy. The initiative gave the impulse for many inhabitants of the Antico Corso to visit the Benedictine Monastery for the first time. This cultural policy has received an enthusiastic reception from residents in the neighborhood, and their frequentation of the monastery – a piece of cultural heritage of great importance, known to them previously as an “unknown and enemy” place – is growing. During the academic year 2005/2006, the faculty decided once again to invest its energies above all into the relationship with the young generation present not just in the neighborhood but also in other areas of the city, and thus has initiated programs aimed at becoming familiar with the “other” or the “different”.²² This theme, represented by the *Radici, identità (Roots, identity)* program, has been presented to an adult public in the Benedictine Monastery, at cultural events held in the evenings, naturally free of charge: guided tours of the building by volunteering students, exhibitions, films, concerts, *lecture-shows*, open to all the city's inhabitants, on topical themes linked to local cultural history. All these emphasize the multiethnic aspect of Catanese society and therefore of Mediterranean society.²³

The success achieved through these initiatives that are open to the neighborhood derives from the ability to find the right channels for a dialogue with the inhabitants of the neighborhood: the members of the Comitato Antico Corso, the headmasters of the schools, the schoolchildren and their parents. In all cases, those concerned are residents or people who frequent the neighborhood and who have a certain influence within the community of the Antico Corso.

²⁰ The idea of producing drawings following a visit to the museum derives from the desire to promote knowledge of cultural heritage through the use of different communicative techniques, stimulating curiosity, creativity and developing the pupils' critical sense. The Sicilian Regional Government, the Superintendency of Cultural and Environmental Heritage and Public Education in fact ran several editions of the competition *Conosci il tuo museo* (Get to know your museum), an initiative that aims, through the creation of graphic work by pupils, at educational promotion of Sicilian cultural heritage (Assessorato Beni Culturali 2007).

²¹ See SANTAGATI 2006.

²² The “other” and the “unknown” come from a far off country, but are also something that has always been near us, but which has never been “known”. The choice of this theme not only provides an incentive for becoming familiar with the monastery, but is also justified because of the new multiethnic composition of the neighborhood. Indeed, some of the inhabitants, as in many cities, come from countries beyond the European Union, which is reflected by the number of non-EU pupils present in the schools in the Antico Corso neighborhood. The importance of this choice has already been noted, see above note 15.

²³ The archive of the proposals formulated in the academic years 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 by the faculty and aimed at the city unfortunately is not available on the internet anymore, there is only an intranet link.

A suggestion for improving these experiences in the future might be to coordinate museum activities with the initiative *La scuola adotta un monumento* (The schools adopt a monument), which each year is promoted by local schools and thanks to which, for a few days each year, pupils work as guides at the monument that their school has *adopted*. In our case, we propose therefore that one or more schools of the neighborhood *adopt* the monastery and the museum, so that the pupils become protagonists and narrate the history of a building that is part of the cultural heritage of their neighborhood.

One difficulty will certainly remain: the difficulty of maintaining this policy of openness and neighborhood involvement, given that the entire operation depends on the enthusiasm of university teachers who, beyond their institutional duties and outside of their working hours, have developed topics and the necessary means to *attract* a part of the population that belongs to economically and socially disadvantaged social strata.

Concluding on this experience, we can say that the Benedictine Monastery, thanks to the Faculty of Letters' work, has been transformed from being a bastion of elite, exclusive culture and respecting an image that goes back to the 1700s²⁴, into a meeting place where academics invite the city to make contact with a culture that is accessible to everyone, propose topics of common interest, and make local residents protagonists of events in the monastery (as, for example, in the exhibition of schoolchildren's drawings). The Museum of the Benedictine Monastery Complex is increasingly becoming the instrument through which to this story, this history of the monastery and the city of Catania is given a voice. We hope to be able to continue this success in the future.

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²⁴ I refer to the cultural policy adopted in the monastery by the Benedictines and which many years later (1846) the publication of Francesco Bertucci's guide to the monastery sought to change, to modify the relationship between the monastic community and the scientific community, between the monastery and the city of Catania, to create "[...] the 'new' role of the Monastery and its community" (Giarrizzo 2001: 97).

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