

## Rediscovering tradition through representation: the vaulted house of the Amalfi Coast

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**Topic:** T1.1. Study and cataloging of vernacular architecture

### Abstract

*The Amalfi Coast represents one of the most fascinating examples of the Mediterranean landscape with a unique cultural and natural setting, resulting from its dramatic topography and the evolution of its community. The universal value of the coast, the evolutionary process of human adaptation to its production and exchange spaces, as well as its residential settlements, are very important to preserve. In this regard, the research is focused on the interpretation of these places, and in particular on the typical medieval houses, to find the main features through the representation of ancient and new designers. The observation through the drawing allows to rediscover the essential elements that distinguish and at the same time link the buildings with the Mediterranean tradition. The geographical and economic characteristics that particularized the Amalfi Coast in medieval times and the absence of terrestrial connections inevitably led to isolation towards the hinterland and an opening by sea. The owners of these artifacts were mainly merchants and, coming into contact with different cultures, brought to their territories a miscellany of traditions. Similarly, these houses are made of local stone and are characterized by their vaulted roof extrados that, depending on the type, lead back to a specific historical phase. The study and analysis of the drawings over time, therefore, aims to discover the main characteristic and rediscover the historical, aesthetic, and artistic value of the vernacular architecture of Campania. These buildings have always been a source of inspiration for great artists and architects who, following the Grand Tour along the coast, have characterized their works, and therefore represent an important heritage to be known, protected, and enhanced to safeguard the harmony and splendor of the Amalfi Coast.*

**Keywords:** Heritage; Tradition; Houses; Drawing.

### 1. Introduction

The fascinating territory of Amalfi Coast has always been a source of inspiration for artists and intellectuals. From the middle of the 16th century, in particular, the *Grand Tour* began to spread in Europe and, starting from the 18th century, the myth of Southern Italy began to increase (Cardone, 2017). This phenomenon, therefore, encouraged educational journeys to the cities of Southern Italy; however, the harsh and wild nature of the Amalfian territory excluded the Coast

from the usual itineraries, which was rediscovered only after the middle of the 18th century (Cardone, 2012). In this epoch, some romantic painters, interested in the representation of natural landscapes and picturesque images rather than urban scenarios and monuments, increasingly traveled to the Coast. The abrupt and irregular profile of its landscape and the picturesque image of its villages made it an ideal scenario for these artists (Amodio and Ghiringhelli, 2007), who appreciated the perfect integration between the

morphology of the site and anthropic interventions. This integration was the result of a slow and gradual process of transformation (Caskey, 2004). In fact, over the centuries, the territorial conformation of the Coast was significantly modified to meet the different settlement needs, while preserving the naturalistic features. Thus, the steep slopes became necessary terraces for agricultural activities; in many cases, these were then accompanied by hydraulic systems and a dense network of roads that guaranteed accessibility (Fiengo & Abbate, 2001). The orographic characteristics of the place also influenced the coastal architecture; looking, in particular, at the living space of Amalfi's villages, it is possible to observe how during the medieval period particular and authentic architectural forms were developed, evidently influenced by Roman and Oriental cultures. What particularly distinguishes the coastal residential building, preserved intact until today, is that it is a widespread and popular architecture. Therefore, it represents a heritage to be preserved as a testimony of vernacular architecture in which stylistic features and typical signs are recurring; the architecture that, by the intrinsic beauty of its spontaneous and distinctive forms, has always fascinated travelers. The analysis of some representations of artists, architects, and writers who came to the place represents then a starting point to analyze the peculiarities of rustic and rural architecture of the coast, the "aesthetic value of its functionality" (Pagano and Guarniero, 1936; p. 6) that today, unfortunately, is partly lost or abandoned, overwhelmed by the need to replace the old with the new, apparently, more effective and prestigious.

## 2. The vaulted house and its origins

The Amalfi Coast, in the past, showed a perfect balance between anthropic space and natural space (Sgrosso, 1984): this harmony, in the last years, has been deteriorated due to the work of man, the over construction processes, the expansions – often illegal – of the existing volumes at the detriment of a collective historical, architec-

tonic and cultural heritage. So that these "masterpieces" of popular art, as they have been defined many times, have been damaged, and even if they are punctual elements of the coast, their disappearance goes to ruin the beauty of this portion of the territory of Salerno.

An attempt at preservation, of particular interest, was the development of the urban plan elaborated in 1977 by Roberto Pane and Luigi Piccinato (but made executive only in 1987). It was an important intervention for the protection of civil and urban heritage of the Coast since it tried to deal with the process of over-building that was affecting this territory, with the aim, moreover, of safeguarding the "rustic buildings with vaulted roofs" representative of traditional building (Fig. 1). Preserving the rural houses of the Coast implies conserving the very essence of the territory: they are, in fact, in perfect harmony with the surrounding landscape and express the sense of spontaneous architecture. They are meant as the product of a constructive tradition that, even if not supported by rigorous project elaborations or by careful *ex-ante* studies, produces architectural forms that perfectly integrate with the surroundings. The predominant characteristic of the coastal houses is, as observed, the vaulted roof – barrel, cross, sail, *schifo* – vaults mostly extradosed. Their uniqueness, however, lies also in the spatial organization and construction features that give plasticity, making them a spectacular product of architecture, almost as "an object of clay out of the hands of a craftsman" (Pane, 1936; p. 6). The development and evolution of these buildings are to be found, as often happens, in the socio-economic activities as well as in the characteristics of the territory. Despite the presence of the sea, in fact, the people of Amalfi carried out both the mercantile and agricultural activities, practiced at different times of the year. This interest, and the consequent need to make the land productive and accessible, inevitably led to the redesign of the impervious coastal territory into a well-structured and organized landscape, in which the typical rural houses were built.

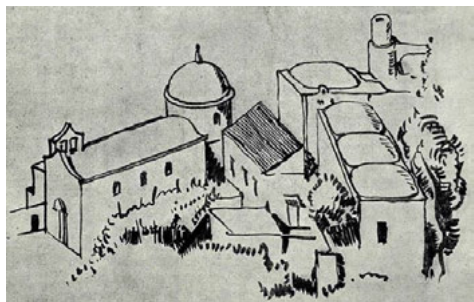


Fig. 1. Pane R., *Positano*. Tav 10 (Source: Pane, 1936).



Fig. 2. Blechen k., *Gebäude, einen Bach überquerend*, May 1829. Sepia over graphite. Akademie der Künste (CC0 1.0).

Of questionable certainty, instead, is the Arabic influence on the constructive housing model: a hypothesis, this last one, that probably derives from the historical past and from the similarity with the Mediterranean houses of Islamic tradition, in which the extradosed vaulted roof in stone appears a typical element. However, as pointed out by Roberto Pane in his book *Architettura rurale campana*, the presence of ruins from the Roman period perfectly adapted and assembled in the farmers' houses, and at the same time the lack of wood as opposed to the abundance of stone material suitable for the construction of vaults (pozzolana, lapillus, volcanic scoriae), suggests the adoption of a building model consolidated locally since the Roman era (Pane, 1936).

### 3. Travellers to the “discovery” of the coastal territory

The interest in the coastal territory during the Enlightenment period is the consequence of an “extension” of the travel itineraries of foreign intellectuals (Mozzillo, 1982). The “discovery” of the

Amalfi Coast with its intact, wild, unexplored landscape determined, started from the second half of the 18th century. The growing number of travelers arriving here were so enchanted by its beauty that they wanted to tell about it with drawings and descriptions (Messina, 2012). The Coast, therefore, became the privileged subject of several artists and writers who in those years stayed in this wonderful part of the province of Salerno (Richter, 1989). Over time, it is also possible to notice an evolution in the interest of travelers towards the environment. Initially, in fact, the attention is turned to the romantic aspect of the coast, impervious and difficult to reach, a mysterious and fascinating territory to be rediscovered and represented. The images produced by draftsmen and painters, therefore, rarely focus on the single architecture. What is captured and depicted instead is the great balance that exists between anthropic and natural space. With time, however, more and more attention is paid to vernacular architecture that, with its simplicity and at the same time austerity, enchants intellectuals and artists from all over the world, also influencing the ideals of various movements of avant-garde architecture.

#### 3.1. The union between building and nature

On 16th May 1787, the Coast unexpectedly appears in Goethe's eyes (1749-1832) who collects his impressions in *Italian Journey* (Goethe, 1816), one of the first literary descriptions of this landscape: a territory rich in light and chromatic shades which generate sensations of harmony, and is able to arouse astonishment to whoever observes it. In those years, writings and representations about the Coast became increasingly widespread, so much so that they attracted famous romantic painters of the time here.

Among the most famous, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), during his first trip to Italy in 1819, reproduced with a few but extraordinary pencil strokes the charm of the Amalfi Coast and the close connection between architecture and landscape. The contribution of

the German landscape painter Karl Eduard Ferdinand Blechen (1798-1840), who traveled to Italy in 1829 and visited the Amalfi Coast, is also interesting. It was during his stay on the Coast that he produced several sepia drawings collected in the famous *Amalfi Skizzenbuch*. Often his views depict buildings with extradosed vaults and not wide landscape views. His drawings particularly underline the simplicity of the minimalist architecture of Amalfi, whose plasticity is dictated by the openings of the windows and of the organization of space: these always explain, with great effectiveness, the strong relationship between the work of man and nature itself (Fig. 2). The documentary contribution of Edward Lear (1812-1888), an English painter, poet, and traveler who, a few years later, made several drawings and watercolors of the Amalfi Coast (Camelia et al., 2017), some of which were dedicated to housing, is also precious. Like the other English travelers of the 19th century, Lear did not focus his attention only on the architectural element itself but generally included the entire surroundings. The result are *en plein air* representations that the artist makes after carefully identifying the “perfect” view to immortalize. In 1844, for example, he painted a view of the town of Cetara where the Torre Sarcena, the dome of the church, and the roofs of the vaulted houses that once dotted the area are clearly visible. The village is surrounded by nature and is made up of simple cores that blend into perfectly with the surrounding landscape. A similar representation, from a top view, can be found in the sketch of Pogerola, also dated June 1844. In this preparatory drawing, on which there are also notes of various kinds, it is possible to notice a composition of extradosed vaults with different geometric configurations (barrel, *schifo*, pavilion, to mention the most evident ones) arranged in an almost linear way (Fig. 3). The space of the houses is generally developed on two levels and the composition of the plant is organized by the combination of several rooms distributed in line.

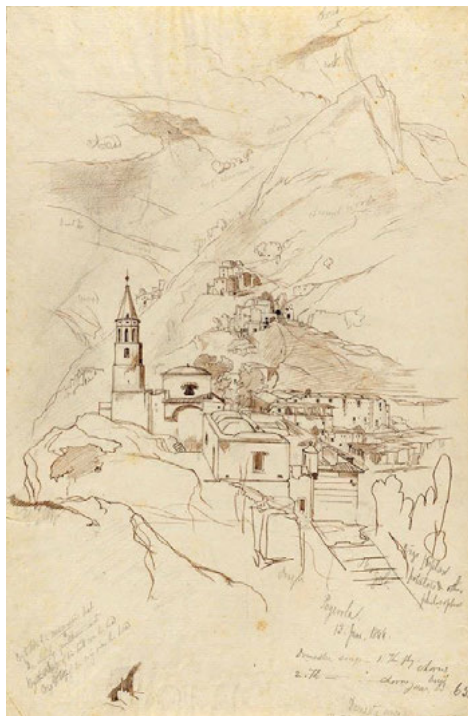


Fig. 3. Lear E., *Pogerola*. 13 June 1844. (65), 1844. Drawing, MS Typ 55.26 (296). Houghton Library, Harvard University (CC BY 4.0).

This layout is necessary to cope with the presence of steep and long terraces that are not very deep and characterized by strong changes in height. The nature of rural architecture, however, generally accentuated by the absence of a unitary project, makes it difficult to date the building precisely: indeed, in many cases, the various nuclei that make up the built space, all very simple, were assembled overtime to meet the needs that arose during the years.

### 3.2. Analysis and properties of the vaulted house

From the early years of the 20th century, the forms of rural architecture, especially in the Mediterranean, seemed to be of particular interest to intellectuals, fascinated by the simplicity and, at the same time, the refinement of the buildings. In particular, artists and architects not only found in these places a romantic setting, but also the inspiration for the development of new ideas. The

vernacular architecture of the Amalfi Coast, together with that of the Island of Capri, thus became an opportunity for the development of new considerations by various avantgarde architects of the 19th and 20th centuries. A careful analysis of Amalfi's rural buildings is, for example, carried out by the neoclassical architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841) who, on the occasion of his journey to Italy in 1803, describes the unusual territory of the Coast and the existence of a great relationship between the buildings and the local environment, climate and culture (Fig. 4). The Prussian architect identifies in these architectures precise sources of design inspiration, focusing on the essentiality of the means used for their realization and on the authenticity of the forms, the building is the result not of careful design studies, but responses to human needs.



Fig. 4. Schinkel K. F., Stadt Amalfi am Golf von Salerno, 1810. Drawing, Inv.-Nr.: SM 1b.33. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (CC BY SA).

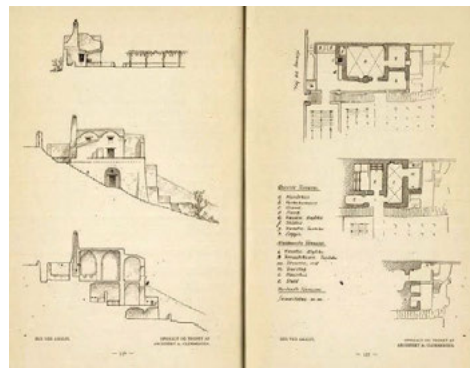


Fig. 5 . Clemmensen A. L., *Hus ved Amalfi*, 1905-1906. Arkitekten.

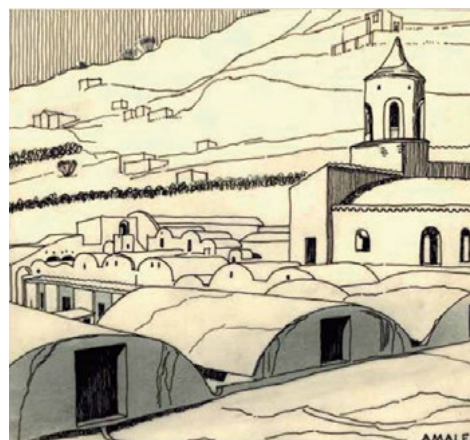


Fig. 6. Garcia Mercadal F., *Amalfi*, 1924. Black ink and pencil on vegetal paper. Private collection, Zaragoza (Source: Vallespín Mune-sia et al., 2019).

A further compliment comes from the Austrian Josef Hoffmann (1870-1956): he also found in the Coast signs and elements that would suggest his architecture and, in general, modern architecture. During the *Tour of Italy*, Hoffmann was struck by the simplicity of the rural houses, without pomp or particular style, but which nevertheless connote the Amalfi territory, making it unique (Sabatino, 2008). The influence of this harmonious laconism on the architect was demonstrated when, on his return from his trip to Campania, he proposed the Capri house as a design model in the prestigious magazine *Der Architekt* (Hoffmann, 1897). In 1906, a subsequent study was published by Andres Lauritz Clemmensen (1852-1928) in the magazine *Arkitekten*

of the Federation of Danish Architects (Clemmensen, 1906). In this short article, the architect analyses a small medieval building located along the road to Conca (Belli, 2019). The structure is built against a rock face and the elevations, sections, and plans are reproduced in detail, accompanied by a descriptive legend of the rooms (Fig. 5). The building is on three levels, with barrel-vaulted and cross-vaulted spaces, and has large, scenic terraces on the outside. The spatial composition, certainly dictated by the orography of the site as well as the essentiality of the structure, gives a harmonious geometry in which functional parts, such as the eaves, are transformed into stylistic elements.

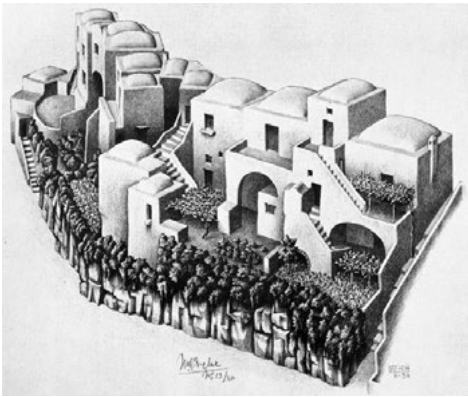


Fig. 7. Escher M. C., *Old Houses in Positano*, 1934.

Regarding the architectural configuration, the author hypothesizes that this is the evolution of a primitive core enlarged in a non-random manner, to respond to a series of needs and consider the coastal terrain. The building technique is also well-known, limestone masonry with lime mortar. Italian vernacular architecture also influenced many Spanish architects; among them, Fernando Garcia Mercadal (1896-1985) is noteworthy. In the early 20th century, he produced a series of drawings needed to study and analyze Mediterranean architecture. During his first year at the Spanish Academy in Rome, the architect from Zaragoza showed great interest in vernacular buildings, trying to grasp their foundations and suggestions for modernity. In a depiction of

Amalfi (Fig. 6), for example, the prevailing element in the representation is a succession of simple buildings covered by extradosed barrel vaults. His drawings from this period show a great capacity for synthesis; the well-defined contours allow us to highlight parallelism with certain characteristics of the modern movement (Vallespín Munesa et al., 2019). These drawings are the result of an initial sketch made on site, a method which nevertheless manages to underline the essential and at the same time peculiar characteristics of these architectures, with their simple volumes which together generate a fascinating view.

The architectural charm of such modest buildings is also captured by Louis Kahn who, during his stay on the Coast, designed a fisherman's house in Conca dei Marini, the only one selected for the annual exhibition celebrated by the Academy of Fine Arts in 1929 (Montes Serrano, 2005). The architect's attention is focused on the contrast between simple volumes and the rocky ground, and the appropriate use of light and shadow allows the geometry of the house to be defined without the need for an outline. Essential, devoid of any form of decoration or redundant elements, the buildings of vernacular Mediterranean architecture express, in their simple archaic appearance, their adherence to necessity and the absence of any superfluous detail. They appear humble before the eyes of the artists, but at the same time, with flowing, elegant lines, perfectly integrated into their environment. They are almost as if they were "a living product of nature rather than of art [...]"; they appear to have been built without the benefit of rigorous geometry, but with a sense of approximation that is perhaps the greatest factor in their picturesqueness" (Pane, 1936; p. 7).

### 3.3. Beyond Real

The representation of the Amalfi Coast and its vernacular Mediterranean buildings did not only influence Romantic painters, landscape

painters, or modern architects, but also artists such as Maurits Cornelis Escher (1896-1972), who also found inspiration for his imaginary worlds in the architecture he admired during his journeys to Italy.

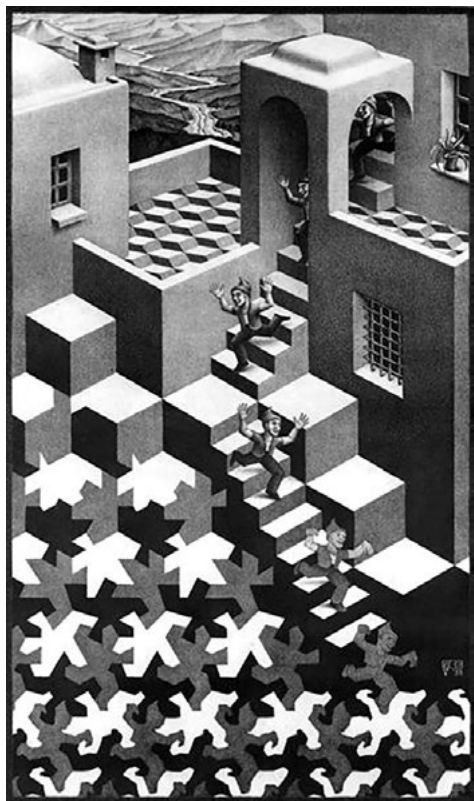


Fig. 8. Escher M. C., *Cycle*, 1938. Lithograph

There are several representations in which the reference to a typically Italian spatial setting is evident. In particular, Escher produced various drawings and lithographs on the Amalfi Coast (Messina, 2014). This is the case of *Houses in Positano*, a lithograph produced around 1934 (Fig. 7). It depicts an agglomeration of traditional vaulted houses connected by external staircases - another typical sign of vernacular coastal architecture, which rarely has internal vertical connecting elements. Although these reproductions belong to the generally more realist period, they are the starting point for the better-known illusionary images and fantastic worlds that Escher presents in, for example,

*Metamorphosis II* (1939-1940). The latter work, in a graphic process that could be defined as morphing, transforms the urban aggregate of the village of Atrani into a game of chess and the tower on the chessboard is a clear reference to the Norman artifact along the coast. The coastal suggestions also return in *Cycle* of 1938 (Fig.8): here, in fact, the buildings depicted reproduce, although in a stylized manner, the forms and geometries of the vaulted houses of Amalfi, whose terraces and staircases are also reproduced, which - as in Costa d'Amalfi - mix and evolve in an endless continuum (Van der Ham, 1986).

#### 4. Conclusions

Camillo Jona, Giuseppe Pagano, Bruno Zevi, and Plinio Marconi are just some of the architects who over the years have focused on the relationship between utility, technology, form, and aesthetics, the origins of which can be found in residential buildings of the past. There are also countless internationally renowned artists and architects who have stayed on the Coast over time to admire, study and draw its vernacular architecture.

The journeys were taken to the South to observe the fascinating territory of the Amalfi Coast - with its vaulted houses set like diamonds in the surrounding landscape - and to rediscover the simplicity and essentiality of the architecture of its villages. These latter aspects, as John Ruskin points out in his writings, are distinctive features of Italian rural architecture capable of giving the building an *air noble* so that "while there is nothing about it unsuited to the humility of its inhabitant, there is a general dignity in its air, which harmonizes beautifully with the nobility of the neighboring edifices, or the glory of the surrounding scenery" (Ruskin, 1878, p. 40). An architecture that, however, too often goes unnoticed today, but which must be strongly protected, also through the knowledge that drawing, and representation help to spread.

## Appendix

Author Contributions: B.M. performed and wrote “Introduction and conclusion”; C.F. performed and wrote “The vaulted house and its origins”; S.M. performed and wrote the “Travelers to the “discovery” of the coastal territory” and its subtitles.

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