

# THE HOUSE OF BRANCIFORTE AND THE CULTURE OF DWELLING OF THE SICILIAN NOBILITY IN THE MODERN AGE

STEFANO PIAZZA

Università di Palermo, Dipartiment di Architettura

stefano.piazza@unipa.it

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2143-816X>

Texto recebido em / Text submitted on: 29/10/2024

Texto aprovado em / Text approved on: 04/02/2025

## Abstract

The essay focuses on the modern-age residences of the House of Branciforte, one of the most influential of the feudal aristocracy of Sicily, with the aim of highlighting the transformations in the living culture of the Sicilian nobility between the 16th and 18th centuries. The analysis focuses on three historical phases:

1. The gradual transition of the landed nobility's residential interests from the feud to the capital of the Kingdom, which took place during the 17th century;
2. The great building season of the 18th century, within which the city's main noble residences were built, under the banner of sumptuousness and amplitude of the representative spaces;
3. The advent, between the last decades of the 18th century and the early 19th century, of new housing criteria aimed at greater functionality and comfort of dwellings.

The research makes use of new studies, currently in progress, on the Branciforte di Butera palace, the residence of the main branch of the family, to be considered the largest noble residence built in Palermo, capital of the Kingdom of Sicily.

## Keywords

Culture of dwelling; Sicilia Nobility; Modern Age.

## **Introduction**

During the modern age in Sicily, the House of Branciforte assumed a prominent socio-political role, as a leading member of the so-called 'Barons of the Kingdom' – the narrow elite of the feudal nobility constituting the military branch of the Sicilian parliament -whose voting rights were related to the number of populated fiefs they owned.

At the peak of their prestige, marked by acquiring the principality of Butera – the kingdom's foremost title, granting them exclusive privileges prominently displayed in court ceremonials – the Branciforte family also made a significant impact in the realm of architecture between the 17th and 18th centuries. They funded major construction projects, which included not only their grand residences but also the creation of entirely new urban centers.

In recent decades, architectural historiography, backed by thorough archival research, has produced in-depth studies centered on the construction initiatives led by prominent figures or branches of the Branciforte family. These studies have significantly helped to fill major knowledge gaps regarding the family's extensive and complex building activities.

The essential in-depth studies on individual works or key figures now pave the way to broader analytical approaches, guided by two fundamental assumptions:

1 – For families of such stature, each building initiative was part of a wider system of residences, spanning feudal, urban, and suburban domains. These structures, from a historical perspective, are key evidence of the feudal nobility's relationship with the land, centers of power, and the evolving elitist lifestyle over time.

2 – Every building program undertaken by different branches of the Branciforte family not only reflected the cultural climate of its era but was intricately linked to the family's overall architectural legacy. These projects were expressions of the Brancifortes' societal role, aspirations, and the use of architecture as a powerful tool to celebrate their prestige and influence.

This essay aims to contribute to the intricate web of connections between the various building endeavors of the Branciforte family, drawing upon new research, including studies on the Butera Palace in

Palermo, the family's primary urban residence and likely the largest aristocratic residence in the kingdom's capital<sup>(1)</sup>.

The analytical approach, while necessarily limited in scope given the vastness of the subject, concentrates on the urban residences in Palermo. Here, current knowledge allows for a clearer identification of the main architectural expressions of the aristocratic *modus vivendi* and how it evolved between the 17th and 18th centuries.

key phases in the evolution of residential architecture among the Sicilian nobility, within which the role of the Branciforte family can be examined, have been identified:

1. The gradual shift in residential focus from rural estates to the capital of the Kingdom, a process that unfolded throughout the 17th century.

2. The major building boom of the 18th century, during which the city's most prominent noble palaces were constructed, characterized by the grandeur and expansion of the representative spaces.

The emergence, from the late 18th century to the early 19th century, of new architectural principles prioritizing greater functionality and comfort in noble residences.

## **From feud to city**

It is well established in historiographic context that the progressive urbanization of the Sicilian feudal nobility was a gradual process<sup>(2)</sup> significantly delayed by the crown's policy of «re-feudalization». This policy encouraged the foundation of new agricultural centers to boost the island's cereal production. Notably, this phenomenon, already significant by the late 16th century, reached remarkable levels during the 17th century with the creation of 108 new agricultural

---

(1) Research on the palazzo is being carried out in collaboration with Claudio Gulli, whose studies focus on the paintings, whom I thank for sharing the results of his archive research. I would also like to thank architect Giovanni Cappelletti, curator of the restoration work carried out between 2017 and 2023, and the owners of the palazzo, Francesca and Massimo Valsecchi, for their constant availability.

(2) From an architectural point of view, the topic has been specifically addressed in Piazza 2005b; 1997.

centers, about half of which were established during the Thirty Years' War period<sup>(3)</sup>.

As a result, the economic resources of the great aristocratic families were largely channeled into rural territories, minimizing their investment in urban residences.

A significant point of reference for examining the Branciforte family's urban transition can be derived from cross-referencing two key sources: Domenico Li Gresti's study on the families represented in the Sicilian Parliament in 1599 and Vincenzo Di Giovanni's manuscript *Palermo Restored*, written around 1615. Di Giovanni's work provides a meticulous street-by-street description of Palermo, considered highly reliable for its time<sup>(4)</sup>.

By 1599, the Branciforte family ranked among the top five most powerful families in Sicily, divided into three branches – Butera, Cammarata, and Raccuja – with 10 parliamentary votes and approximately 30,000 vassals spread across their various feudal centers. Despite their significant influence, however, Di Giovanni's manuscript records only one urban residence associated with the family: that of Fabrizio Branciforte, Prince of Butera and Pietraperzia, Count of Mazzarino, and first titular of the kingdom. Fabrizio, who controlled five large fiefs with 12,400 vassals, resided in a modest house in Misericordia Square (Di Giovanni 1989: 142). This structure, now identifiable as part of the Campofiorito Palace, lacked many of the prestigious features typical of grand noble residences, such as an internal courtyard or a prominent elevation, and was integrated into a block alongside other houses.

The urban residence of the Prince of Butera was, in fact, much more modest than those of urban patrician families such as the Ferreri, Del Castrone, and Di Gregorio, who occupied a less prominent social position. It is clear that, at that time, even one of Sicily's most powerful nobles did not see the need to display his prestige through grand architectural statements in the capital. Further evidence of this can be

---

(3) The increase is substantial if we consider that between 1421 and 1521 only 22 foundation licenses had been issued. On the subject of new foundations, Giuffré, Cardamone (1979-1981) are still valid. The Sicilian phenomenon was then contextualised in an international context in Casamento 2012.

(4) Ligresti (1995), Di Giovanni's manuscript, kept in the Municipal Library in Palermo, was published by Mario Giorgianni and Antonio Santamaura: Di Giovanni 1989.

found in the life of Fabrizio's eldest son, Francesco Branciforte e Barresi (1575-1622), Marquis of Militello.

Francesco, whose residence in Palermo was an unidentified palazzetto in Piazzetta Montevergini, married Giovanna of Austria (1573-1630) in 1603. Giovanna was the illegitimate granddaughter of Emperor Charles V and the daughter of Don Giovanni of Austria, a cultured noblewoman accustomed to the courts of Naples and Parma. Despite the social elevation the marriage provided, celebrated with great pomp in Palermo Cathedral, Francesco and Giovanna chose to move to the rural fief of Militello, near Catania<sup>(5)</sup>. There, Francesco embarked on an ambitious architectural program, including public works, religious institutions, and an extension of the family castle, although only faint traces of this transformation remain today.

Signs of growing interest in Palermo's residences began to appear in the early 17th century, especially among the other two branches of the Branciforte family, the Counts of Raccuja and the Princes of Scordia. While still heavily involved in the creation of new agricultural centers and the revitalization of existing ones - seen as key to enhancing the family's power and socioeconomic status - these branches increasingly turned their attention to urban residences in Palermo. Alongside other important feudal families, they participated in a new trend of residential architecture in the city.

The origins of the Raccuja Palace<sup>(6)</sup> can be traced back to 1550, when Nicolò Branciforte Moncada acquired a property in Palermo, likely with the sole intention of establishing a family residence in the capital. At the time, Nicolò was focused on the construction of the agricultural center of Raccuja, for which he secured the title of Count in 1544, along with a parliamentary vote.

His son, Giuseppe (d. 1596), marked a turning point for the family's urban presence. After marrying Agata Lanza, daughter of the Prince of Trabia, in 1593, Giuseppe became the first Branciforte to run for the position of town praetor, signaling an unprecedented engagement

---

(5) The story is reported in the manuscripts of Francesco Maria Emanuele e Gaetani, Marquis of Villabianca, published in the 19th century by Gioacchino Di Marzo: Emanuele e Gaetani, Francesco Maria (ms. XVIII sec., 1873-74), vol. IV, 123, vol. V, 295.

(6) The present Palazzo Branciforte houses the Chiazze Foundation. All information on this building is taken from Montana 2014.

with the political life of Palermo and boosting their interest in urban architecture.

The reconfiguration of the Branciforte residence, known as the «casa grande al Piliere» (Montana 2014: 96), ultimately resulted in a still modestly sized palace. It was organized around a central courtyard, with a single wing featuring a portico on the ground floor and a loggia on the noble floor<sup>(7)</sup>. This loggia, a raised space characteristic of stately homes since at least the 15th century, served as the landing for the main staircase, offering a privileged view of the courtyard and providing access to the master's main apartment.

It was Nicolò Placido Branciforte Lanza (1593-1661), the son of Giuseppe and Agata, who gave the palace its decisive expansion. As the holder of the lineage since 1613, Nicolò Placido Branciforte Lanza continued the family's policies of consolidating and expanding their feudal power. In 1622, he founded the town of Leonforte, acquiring the title of prince and an additional parliamentary vote. There, he began constructing a grand palace, establishing a new center of personal authority, which included an exceptionally large stable measuring 16.50 by 84 meters, designed to accommodate up to a hundred horses.

It's important to note that the architectural investment in stables, common in feudal endeavors of the time, served not merely practical needs but also played a significant role in signaling social status. The ownership of horses was a distinctive prerogative of the Sicilian noble class, rooted in the lingering medieval legacies of the feudal system. In that system, the importance of a feudal lord and the corresponding military obligations owed to the sovereign were directly tied to the number of horses they could muster. Although this system had largely transitioned into monetary contributions, the number of horses assigned to a fief remained a distinctive indicator of a noble family's status<sup>(8)</sup>.

---

(7) On the palace at this stage, in addition to Montana 2014: 100-105; see Piazza 2018: 118.

(8) For a numerical reference, the principality of Butera, recalling the main title held by the house, provided the 'military service' for 109 horses, i.e. it annually covered the expenses required to sustain 109 horsemen for three months (Piazza 2005a: 174-175).

In 1651, Nicolò Placido further strengthened his political influence by obtaining a third parliamentary vote through the purchase and elevation of the fief of Santa Lucia to a duchy.

Despite his significant involvement in the feudal sphere, Nicolò Placido also made considerable strides in establishing the Branciforte family's presence in Palermo. He not only secured the office of city praetor in 1613 - a position his father had aspired to without success - but also left a lasting mark on the city's urban landscape by expanding his residence, which achieved its nearly definitive form between 1616 and 1661.

Through the amalgamation of several building units and a narrow urban street, the Palermo residence of the Counts of Raccuja and Princes of Leonforte transformed into a substantial palace with a distinct cubic volume, a rare feature in the densely populated and stratified city of Palermo at that time. Although the compositional style reflected the modern classical palace ideal, the ideological underpinnings of this architectural endeavor in the Palermo context likely drew inspiration from the cubic forms of the 14th-century Chiaramonte and Scalafini palaces. In a city that had seen few new noble building initiatives, these outstanding architectural examples from the past, emblematic of the feudal nobility's significant role, must have served as a vital reference point for those who sought to maintain their connection to that legacy.

Three uncovered spaces, including the original 16th-century courtyard, were incorporated into the newly expanded residence. The main wing, constructed from scratch, was dedicated entirely to new representative areas on the noble floor, featuring a large picture gallery that housed an impressive collection of artworks (figure 1)<sup>(9)</sup>. On the ground floor, a spacious stable with 40 horse stalls was added, making it the largest stable within a palace in the city (figure 2).

---

(9) On the Raccuja Palace Gallery see Montana 2014; Piazza 2018; Abbate 1990.

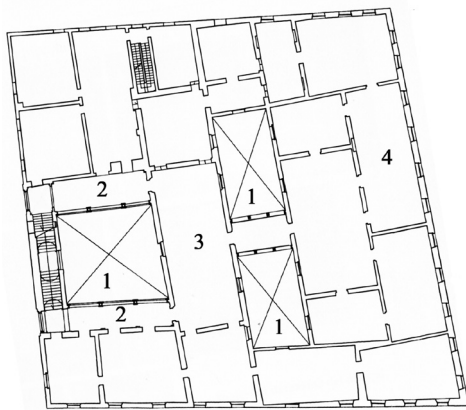


Figure 1 – Palermo, Raccuja palace, Piano nobile: 1. courtyards, 2. logge, 3. hall, 4. gallery.

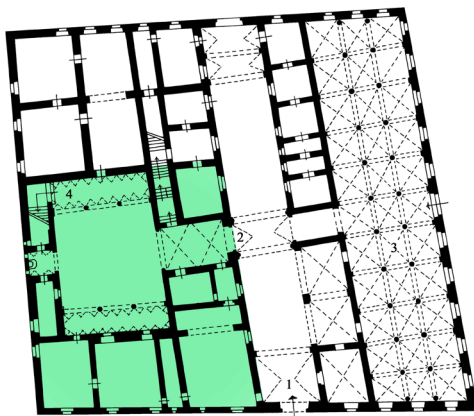


Figure 2 – Palermo, Raccuja palace, ground floor: 1. main portal, 2. Sixteenth-century entrance, 3. stable, 4. main staircase; green, the previous plan (sixteenth-century).

This architectural choice effectively transferred the ‘measure’ of magnificence associated with horse ownership from the feudal estates to the urban setting, seamlessly integrating it into the palace’s design. This approach distinguished Nicolò Placido’s residence from other earlier or contemporary examples, notably the residence of the Dukes of Terranova, where the large stable was relegated to a lower structure adjacent to the main building (Piazza 2005a: 171; Vesco 2010).



The progressive expansion of the Branciforte family residence in Palermo during the 17th century also reflected the settlement strategy of the Branciforte di Scordia branch, progressing through stages similar to those of the Raccuja branch. The original core of the palace, previously the residence of the De Gregorio family, was purchased in 1589 by Ercole Branciforte Settimo (1555-1620), the first Duke of San Giovanni and Count of Cammarata<sup>(10)</sup>. Although the nobleman initially resided in Cammarata, where the deed of sale was executed, and later in San Giovanni, acquiring this stately home underscored his desire to establish a dignified presence in the island's capital, even if it did not rival the grandeur of feudal palaces. Throughout the first fifteen years of the 17th century, additional buildings were integrated into the original structure, resulting from the extensive urban redevelopment taking place to create the new Via Maqueda axis<sup>(11)</sup>. The expansion was largely driven by Ercole's new wife, Agata Lanza (circa 1573-1616), the widow of Giuseppe Branciforte, Count of Raccuja. She played a pivotal role in financing and commissioning the construction of a new wing featuring a seven-light façade along the strata nova (Chifari, D'Arpa 2019: 45). The project was entrusted to the Senate architect Mariano Smiriglio, who was also involved in the construction of Palazzo Raccuja.

Once again, the decisive impetus for the construction of the palace came from the next generation. While Agata's eldest son from her first marriage, Nicolò Branciforte Lanza, focused on the monumentalization of the Raccuja palace, her second-born son, Ottavio Branciforte Lanza (d. 1646), who was pursuing an ecclesiastical career, undertook a more extensive extension and reconfiguration of the family palace starting in 1622. This parallel development suggests that the two building projects were fueled by a reciprocal spirit of emulation, if not outright competition<sup>(12)</sup>.

Ottavio's palace, situated in a more central urban area and characterized by an irregular lot, presented challenges that shaped his architectural vision. Unable to create an isolated quadrangular block, he instead sought to achieve a distinctive architectural feature: a

---

(10) Information on this palace is sourced from Chifari, D'Arpa 2019.

(11) For insights on the relationship between the construction of new roads and the noble palaces, refer to Piazza 2002.

(12) This competition can also be traced within the politics of feudal affirmation. The 1622 foundation of Leonforte by Nicolò Placido Branciforte was indeed succeeded in 1626 by his half-brother Antonio's establishment of the principality of Scordia.

large courtyard surrounded on all sides by porticoes (figure 3)<sup>(13)</sup>. Such four-sided porticoes were likely quite rare within Palermo's palaces at the time, as they posed significant challenges in execution due to the irregularity of urban lots and, more importantly, because they required a considerable use of space, which came at the expense of covered volumes.



Figure 3 – Palermo, Scordia Palace (Mazzarino), courtyard.

As of the current state of research, it can be concluded that during that period, within the realm of noble residences, only one other courtyard entirely surrounded by porticoes had been constructed: that of Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi<sup>(14)</sup>. However, this earlier example featured more modest proportions and dimensions, not to mention the four-story designs of the aforementioned Palazzo Chiaramonte and Palazzo Sclafani. Upon the completion of the building site, the new courtyard of Palazzo Scordia would have stood out as a new record of magnificence of aristocratic living in Palermo.

Following Ottavio's death in 1646, the palace was inherited by his brother Antonio (1603-Messina 1658), the founder and first prince

---

(13) Chifari, D'Arpa 2019: 44-47. For a survey of the courtyard and informations on the palazzo's previous owners, see Nobile, D'Alessandro, Scaduto 2000.

(14) For information regarding the Vanguarnera-Ganci palace refer to Piazza 2021.

of Scordia<sup>(15)</sup>. Under Antonio's leadership, construction began on an expansive feudal palace modeled after the one built by the Raccuja branch in Leonforte. Despite the grandeur of the Palermo residence, Antonio, along with his son Ercole (d. 1687), did not reside there permanently, preferring their homes in Scordia and Messina, of which no traces remain today.

However, the most innovative architectural solutions implemented by the Branciforte family – such as the monumental isolated block with the large three-aisled stables at the Raccuja Palace and the expansive four-sided portico at the Scordia Palace – did not lead to immediate follow-up. These designs were likely difficult to realize. In other ambitious 17th-century projects identified so far, including the Terranova, Cattolica, Geraci, Villafranca, and San Marco palaces, the focus shifted towards creating new, grand façades of unprecedented length and monumentality. This was achieved by progressively amalgamating different residential units<sup>(16)</sup>, masking a somewhat disjointed collection of mostly pre-existing structures and modest, irregular open spaces. Only at Palazzo Cattolica, owned by the Bosco Counts of Vicari, was there an effort to harmonize the extended façade with an organic reconfiguration of the buildings behind it, centered around a porticoed courtyard. However, this 17th-century project remained incomplete throughout the century.

It was only during the major building boom of the 18th century that the design innovations anticipated in the Raccuja and Scordia palaces were fully embraced and further developed.

Interestingly, the most prestigious branch of the Branciforte family, the princes of Butera, displayed a marked indifference toward urban residences for much of the 17th century, instead prioritizing their connection to direct territorial control.

The key figure driving architectural advancements during this period was Carlo Maria Carafa (1646-1695), a somewhat peripheral figure within Sicilian society. The son of Neapolitan noble Fabrizio Carafa, Prince of Roccella, and Agata Branciforte Branciforte, Carlo inherited the main line of the Branciforte family through his mother.

---

(15) Previously mentioned in footnote 12.

(16) For an overview of seventeenth-century palaces in Palermo, see Piazza 2005a; 2010.

Residing primarily in the Mazzarino palace and staying in a modest palace in Piazzetta Montevergini during visits to Palermo, Carafa made his mark in 1693 following the devastating Val di Noto earthquake.

He initiated the complete reconstruction of his agricultural hub, Occhilà, renaming it Grammichele (Piazza 2005b: 26-28), which included the creation of a 'palazzo-reggia.' This project was a bold statement, competing with the efforts of other nobles involved in post-earthquake rebuilding, such as Ferdinando Francesco Gravina, Prince of Palagonia, who commissioned a new palace in Francofonte, and Ignazio Paternò Castello Gravina, Prince of Biscari, who expanded his palace in Acate.

Set within a rectangular area of 24,400 square meters, the residence (figure 4) was designed as a grand complex organized around five courtyards. Its central section dominated a vast square, measuring 180 by 90 meters, flanked by service buildings. The commissioner, along with the unknown architect, clearly aimed to create an avant-garde project that would assert a level of magnificence unrivaled among noble residences in the kingdom. Carafa's exposure to the courts of Naples, Rome, and Madrid, coupled with his prolific work as a political writer – published through his Mazarin-based printing press run by the Flemish printer Johannes Van Berge – reveal his wide-ranging intellectual and cultural interests. His connections with prominent artists such as Giacomo and Teresa Del Po, and Jacques Blondeau, further highlight his role as a sophisticated patron, open to an expansive cultural horizon.



Figure 4 – Axonometric plan of Grammichele, on the right the palace of the Prince of Butera (oil on canvas, Filippo Giarrusso, 1735, Palermo, Butera palace).

The project for the Grammichele ‘royal palace’, known through three depictions<sup>(17)</sup>, surpassed traditional models of feudal and aristocratic residences. Instead of the conventional rectangular block with a courtyard - sometimes fortified - the project embraced contemporary debates around grand monarchical palaces. It drew inspiration from structures like the Escorial and Versailles, and was likely influenced by the architectural programs of the Savoy family, as illustrated in the engravings of *Theatrum* (1682)<sup>(18)</sup>, particularly those of Valentino Castle, the Queen’s Villa, and the Venaria Reale. The Grammichele palace can be seen as an original synthesis of these monumental projects.

At the turn of the century, Carlo Maria Carafa’s palace project represented the height of feudal nobility’s celebratory ambitions. However, his untimely death in 1695, combined with his heirs’ shifting focus toward urban developments, meant that the palace was never realized.

During the same period when Carlo Maria Carafa was immersed in his grand feudal projects, another member of the Branciforte family, Girolamo Branciforte Colonna (1660-1716), Duke of Branciforte and a relatively marginal figure from a cadet branch of the Counts of Cammarata, embarked on a more modest urban project. In 1692, he acquired a pre-existing building near the city walls and the seafront in Palermo and began transforming it into his own town residence (Grasso 1980). As we will explore in the following section, this small building, reconfigured according to designs by the «Crocifero» architect Giacomo Amato—documented through three drawings (figure 5)<sup>(19)</sup>, would later become a key element in the Branciforte family’s architectural endeavors during the 18th century.

---

(17) A plan on slate in the town hall of Grammichele, an axonometric plan, dated 1735, preserved in Palazzo Butera in Palermo, and an engraving from the late 17th century, first published in Dufour, Raymond 1994.

(18) *Theatrum Statuum Regiae Celsitudinis Sabaudie Ducis ...*, Amsterdam 1682.

(19) The drawings are housed at the Regional Gallery of Sicily in Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo. They were first published in Grasso 1980. See also de Cavi 2017: 310-312.

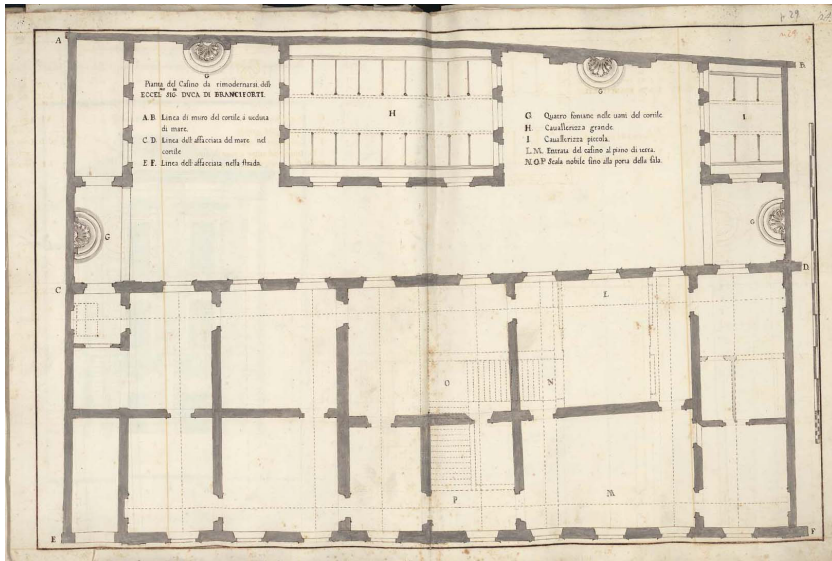


Figure 5 – Giacomo Amato, «Pianta del Casino da rimodernarsi dell'Eccl.mo Sig.re Duca di Branciforti» (Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis).

## The great eighteenth-century season of noble palaces

The rise of the Branciforte family, driven by a strategic marriage policy and significant investment in founding new agricultural centers, led to the establishment of four distinct noble branches during the 16th and 17th centuries: the principal branch of the Princes of Butera, the Counts of Cammarata, the Counts of Raccuja, and the more recent branch of the Princes of Scordia.

However, from the late 17th century, both an endogamous strategy of keeping noble titles within the same family and a series of fortunate events led to an unusual concentration of the vast feudal patrimony in the hands of just two family members. This consolidation marked a significant shift in the family's fortunes. The beneficiaries of this process were, in chronological order, Nicolò Branciforte del Carretto, Duke of Santa Lucia (1651-1727), and Ercole Michele Branciforte Gravina (1693-1764), the son of Girolamo



Branciforte Colonna, who had commissioned the modest palazzo on Palermo's seafront.

Nicolò Branciforte del Carretto, initially a cadet of the Count of Raccuja, had been granted the parliamentary title of Duke of Santa Lucia. However, in 1697, following the death of his elder brother without heirs, he inherited three parliamentary titles (Raccuja, Leonforte, and Pietraperzia), along with the large Raccuja palace. It is likely that he moved into this palace, having previously resided in a house adjoining that of Girolamo Branciforte<sup>(20)</sup>.

Nicolò Branciforte's fortunes improved once again in 1705, following the death of Giulia Carafa, the heir of Carlo Maria Carafa, who also died without issue. Nicolò inherited a vast collection of titles, including the fiefs of Butera, Mazzarino, Militello, Barrafranca, Niscemi, and Grammichele, bringing his total to ten parliamentary votes. From this point, the Raccuja Palace was renamed the Butera Palace, becoming the official residence of the kingdom's leading noble. It is unclear whether the palace underwent any significant transformations at this time. Given the lack of space for further expansion, any changes were likely limited to the internal configuration of rooms. However, the palace's new name was short-lived.

Upon Nicolò's death in 1727, nearly all of his patrimony<sup>(21)</sup> was passed to Ercole Michele Branciforte Gravina, his son-in-law and husband of Nicolò's daughter, Caterina, whom he had married in 1718.

Despite inheriting the vast Branciforte fortune, Ercole Michele chose to continue living in the more modest «Palazzetto alla Marina», which was thereafter permanently elevated to the status of the principal residence of the Princes of Butera<sup>(22)</sup>. This decision is intriguing, as the two residences were hardly comparable in grandeur at the time.

Girolamo's palace «alla Marina» was originally conceived as a «casino», a term typically used for country residences, rather than as a formal palace. This designation, found in Giacomo Amato's design drawings, reflects the building's layout: a three-story rectangular structure housing the manor's main rooms, alongside lower wings for

---

(20) Archivio di Stato di Palermo (A.S.Pa), Trabia fonds (f. Trabia), series A, vol. 404, c.28

(21) Excluding the titles of Prince of Leonforte and Prince of Pietraperzia.

(22) For a brief summary of the history of the palace see Grasso 1980; Zalapì 1998; Gulli 2022.

stables and service areas that enclosed a «baglio» (a sort of courtyard), a configuration typical of suburban estates. The stables designed by Amato were modest, consisting of two sections, a larger one and a smaller one, accommodating a total of 24 stalls. This is in stark contrast to the grand three-aisled stables of the Raccuja Palace, supported by monolithic Billiemi stone columns and cross-vaulted ceilings, which could house 40 horses.

The same disparity applied to the main floor. The «casino alla Marina», accessed by a narrow staircase without a landing loggia, contained only 12 rooms, while the Raccuja Palace featured no fewer than 20 rooms. These included an expansive hall nearly twice the size of that in Ercole Michele Branciforte's residence<sup>(23)</sup>, a large reception hall, and an impressive picture gallery.

The only notable advantage of the 'palazzetto alla Marina' was its location. While the Raccuja Palace, though noble in isolation, was surrounded by narrow streets and situated in a relatively marginal area of the city, removed from the main routes of urban ceremonies and festivities, the Marina residence offered a more favorable position to Ercole Michele's *casino*, on the other hand, occupied a prime location, overlooking the stately San Nicolò street on one side, which stretched between the large Kalsa square and via Toledo, the city's main thoroughfare. On the other side, it offered a spectacular view of the sea and commanded the long promenade of *Strada Colonna*, a central hub of Palermo's social life and the starting point for major court ceremonies. This strategic position not only afforded the residence an enviable prominence in the city's social and ceremonial life, but also provided access to clean, healthy air – an important advantage in a city like Palermo, where streets were frequently strewn with rubbish, producing a constant stench.

In contrast to the unsanitary conditions in the densely packed urban areas, Ercole Michele's residence benefitted from its seaside location, which mitigated the foul odors that plagued other parts of the city. The unsanitary state of Palermo's streets had a significant impact on the behavior and *modus vivendi* of the city's elite. Ground floors of noble palaces were rarely used for family or high-status guests, as

---

(23) The first measured approximately 20 metres by 7, while the second measured 9.50 by 7.50 metres.



walking through the city's streets was considered beneath the dignity of Palermo's aristocracy. The streets, theoretically maintained by the «mastri di mondezza» (street cleaners), were often left in disarray, a situation perversely encouraged by the nobility because it made the surfaces softer and more comfortable for carriage travel. Moreover, the foul-smelling miasmas of the urban environment contributed to the widespread belief that plague epidemics were caused by the putrefaction of the air, a view commonly held by medical experts of the time (Cancila 2023: 39).

After acquiring the titles of the Butera branch, Ercole Michele Branciforte undertook significant modifications to his residence to enhance its grandeur. Archival records highlight three key interventions in particular. The first was focused on upgrading the «Camerone di dormire», which, along with the entrance hall, was one of the main reception rooms in an aristocratic residence. This space served as a transitional area between the antechambers - used for the more public aspects of palace life - and the rear chambers, which were reserved for private life. The «camerone» typically included an alcove with a grand parade bed, used for special occasions such as the birth of a family member or for high-ranking guests. Ercole Michele entrusted the redesign of this important room to Ferdinando Fuga, who was residing in Palermo at the time, before moving to the Neapolitan court<sup>(24)</sup>.

The second intervention involved the pictorial and stucco decoration of the vaults and walls of the main reception areas (Grasso 1980: 35). This renovation appears to have been inspired by the coronation of Charles of Bourbon in Palermo in 1735, an extraordinary event for the viceregal city. The coronation, which was accompanied by a series of grand festivities and ceremonial rites, placed Ercole Michele, as the holder of the kingdom's premier title, in a position of prominence within the Sicilian nobility. A publication dedicated to the coronation, printed in 1736 (La Placa 1736), included an engraving of the prince's palace, showing the temporary decorative structures erected on the façade facing the seafront (figure 6), which was part of the urban landscape from which the coronation procession made its way to the cathedral (figure 7).

---

(24) The documents related to the new Camerone and Fuga's project date back to 1728-1729. Grasso 1980: 35.

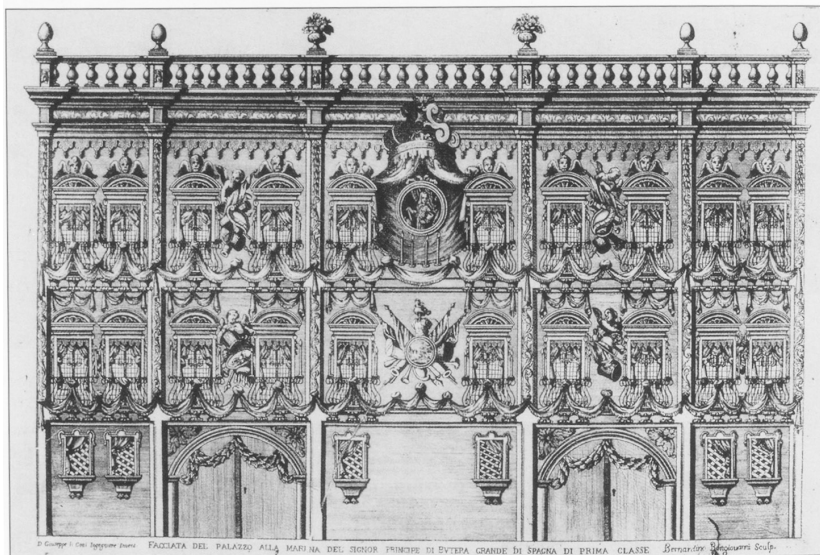


Figure 6 – «Facciata del Palazzo alla Marina del Signor Principe di Butera Grande di Spagna di Prima Classe» (La Placa Pietro 1736).

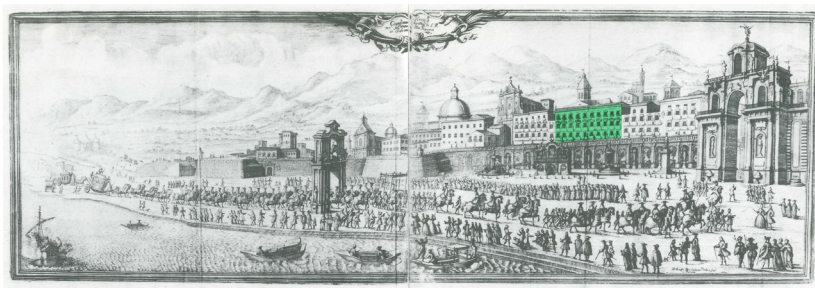


Figure 7 – King Charles's coronation procession on Strada Colonna, Palermo (La Placa Pietro 1736). Green, Butera palace, waterfront facade.

The third phase of construction, spanning the years 1748-1758, was the most ambitious and transformative. It involved the completion of the second noble floor's architectural structure and the total reconstruction of the «cavallerizza» (stables) and the lower sections of the palace<sup>(25)</sup>. These

(25) A.S.Pa, f. Trabia, serie A, vol.404; serie H, voll. 25,26.

new structures were laid out in a C-shaped plan, framing a large courtyard measuring 36 by 13 meters. However, due to the constraints imposed by the city walls bordering the sea, to which the palace was attached, the new stable hall had to be designed as a long corridor, slightly sunken below the courtyard level. This solution, while practical, fell short of the aristocratic standards of the time and was considered a compromise.

Meanwhile, by the mid-18th century, Palermo had entered a period of intense construction activity, driven by a desire to completely reconfigure and expand aristocratic residences. This architectural boom, the socio-political causes of which have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Piazza 2005a: 67-81), lasted for about fifteen years and played a crucial role in shaping the main noble palaces that now constitute Palermo's historical heritage. The new architectural trends of this period focused on two key elements aimed at enhancing the grandeur and visual impact of representative spaces:

1. the enhancement of the entrance-courtyard-staircase axis, and the consequent rethinking of the back wall of the courtyards with the introduction of monumental staircases leading exclusively to the noble floor;

2. the expansion and extension of the representative rooms through the creation of longer *enfilades*; a key element of this trend was the new placement of doors in the center of the walls, a departure from the long-standing tradition of positioning them on the sides, as seen in earlier plans by Giacomo Amato.

This arrangement emphasized the visual depth of the space, enhancing the scenographic impact.

The size of the representative rooms was also increased by adding more antechambers, while between the last antechamber and the «camera di dormire» (parade chamber), a large hall known as the «camerone dello strato» or «stirato» was introduced, serving as the main venue for grand festivities.

In addition, where space allowed, a gallery was often added. Traditionally, these galleries were intended to showcase the owner's most valuable collections of art and objects, but by this time, they were increasingly conceived as additional ballrooms, further enhancing the palace's capacity for social and public life<sup>(26)</sup>.

Certainly, Ercole Michele Branciforte, observing the rapid start of construction of new and more opulent residences such as the Villafranca,

---

(26) On the transformation of this environment between the 16th and 18th centuries, see Piazza 2018.

Cutò, Valguarnera, Bonagia, and Celestri Santa Croce palaces, soon realized that his own palace at the Marina had become inadequate in comparison. A pivotal event presented the prince with an opportunity to modernize and elevate his residence to meet the latest standards of aristocratic grandeur: on November 11, 1759, a devastating fire ravaged the palace, likely sparing only the ground floor with its stone vaults.

In response, Ercole Michele seized the chance for a complete reconfiguration. In November 1760, he purchased the adjacent palace owned by Francesco Rodrigo Moncada, Prince of Paternò<sup>(27)</sup>, allowing him to expand and redesign his residence entirely. On the first noble floor (figure 8), two separate apartments, or «quarters», were created in line with contemporary aristocratic practices. The «quarto grande» housed the main, most prestigious rooms, while the «quartino» or «quarto piccolo» served as a smaller, more intimate living space, typically used by one member of the couple. The second noble floor was likely designed for his heir, ensuring a continuation of the family's legacy in the new, enhanced palace.



Figure 8 – Palermo, Butera palace, plan of the first Piano Nobile (digital reconstruction by Giovanni Cappelletti and author).

«Quarto grande»: 1. hall, 2. first antechamber, 3. Second antechamber, 4. third antechamber, 5. «camera di stirato», 6. «camera grande di dormire», 7. first rear chamber, 8. camerino, 9. second rear chamber, 10. third rear chamber, 11. Fourth rear chamber, 12. fifth rear chamber. «Quarto piccolo»: A. second antechamber, B. third antechamber, C. fourth antechamber. Green, the previous plan.

(27) A.S.Pa, fondo Notai defunti (fund of deceased notaries), notary Francesco di Miceli, inv.44, room III, minute, vol.4768, f.1282.

Due to the physical limitations of the site, Ercole Michele could not adopt the grand entrance-courtyard-staircase axis that characterized other major city palaces of the period. Instead, he focused on expanding the enfilade of representative rooms by arranging the two quarters sequentially along the same façade.

The new addition to the palace was designed to significantly enhance its grandeur. It was entirely devoted to an expansive new antechamber, the «camerone dello stirato» (figure 9), and a new «camera grande di dormire» (grand bedroom), while the former main bedroom was downgraded to serve as a secondary antechamber. To further improve the palace's entrance, three rooms from the old mansion were merged to create a large and impressive entrance hall. Once the renovation was completed, the front of the building facing the sea would boast a remarkable enfilade of rooms: six antechambers leading up to the large hall and the grand bedroom, forming a continuous axis of 76 metres. This design was second only to Palazzo Santa Croce, which extended just over 80 metres.



Figure 9 – Palermo Butera palace, «camerone dello stirato» (Sandro Scalia).



Ercole Michele also sought to elevate the palace's stature by adding a new noble staircase (figure 10). He demolished the original staircase and the small entrance hall, creating a full-height room where the new flights of stairs, supported by a unique columnar system not commonly found in the city, would be installed<sup>(28)</sup>.



Figure 10 – Palermo, Butera palace, main staircase (Author).

Unfortunately, Ercole Michele did not live to see the completion of his ambitious project. He passed away in 1764, at the age of 71, while construction was still underway<sup>(29)</sup>. The work was then taken over by his son, Salvatore Branciforte Branciforte (1727-1799), although progress was slow, partly due to Salvatore's relocation to Naples in 1766, where he became actively involved in court life under King Ferdinando<sup>(30)</sup>. Meanwhile, his son and heir, Ercole Michele Branciforte Pignatelli (1752-

---

(28) For an in-depth study of the new staircase see Piazza, Nuccio 2022.

(29) In that year, the new staircase and room had already been completed, while the documentation indicates that work on the new rooms took place between 1765 and 1766. A.S.Pa., f. Trabia, series H, vol. 27.

(30) A. S. Pa., fondo Notai defunti, Notary Francesco di Miceli, inv.44, room III, minute vol.4784, ff.125-126. On Salvatore's role in the completion of the palace see also Gulli 2019.

1814), continued to live in Palermo. After marrying Ferdinanda Riggio, he resided for several years in the former Raccuja palace at the Piliere, which remained in the family's possession.

Eventually, in 1781, following his father's decision never to return to Palermo, Ercole Michele moved with his wife to the first noble floor of the Marina palace<sup>(31)</sup>, where he continued overseeing the completion of the ongoing works<sup>(32)</sup>.

At the turn of the century, the political turmoil brought about by Napoleon forced the Branciforte family to reconsider their settlement strategies. Between December 1798 and January 1799, Salvatore Branciforte made a hasty and permanent return to Palermo, following King Ferdinand and his court, after the Bourbon army's catastrophic failure to stop the French advance<sup>(33)</sup>. In just over a month, on February 1799, Salvatore passed away in his palace at the Marina. The responsibility of maintaining direct ties with the king and overseeing the ceremonial privileges of the household fell to his son, Ercole Michele Branciforte. On 18 August of the same year, Ercole Michele hosted an evening of grand festivities for King Ferdinand of Bourbon and his family<sup>(34)</sup>. This event marked a significant moment, as the palace – by then completed, at least in terms of its first noble floor – solidified its importance in Palermo's social and political scene.

## **The new culture of dwelling**

Count Michel-Jean Borch's observations during his 1777 trip to Sicily provide valuable insights into the evolving culture of dwelling among the Sicilian nobility. Borch (1753-1810), a nobleman of Polish origin but deeply influenced by French culture, points out the contrast between the grand, yet impractical, majesty of the aristocratic residences and the emerging trend among wealthier families, who had traveled abroad and

---

(31) The inventories of furniture and wall hangings drawn up on this occasion were crucial in reconstructing the layout of the noble floor for those years. A.S.Pa, Trabia fonds, series H, vol.86, vol.35, ff.1266.

(32) Well documented between 1784 and 1796.

(33) The prince's escape from Naples, along with all his possessions, is thoroughly documented. A.S.Pa, f. Trabia, series H, vol. 54-55.

(34) A. S. Pa., f. Trabia, series H, vol.55, ff.361-364; vol.56, f.287.

were incorporating the comforts they encountered in foreign countries. These families began combining spacious salons, typical of Sicilian tradition, with smaller, more intimate apartments in the French style<sup>(35)</sup>, reflecting a newfound desire for *comodités* and convenience.

This shift in living habits, whose traces are fragmentary in archival sources, signaled a deeper transformation in the utilization of spaces, by the resizing of rooms and the diversification of their purposes<sup>(36)</sup>.

Accompanying these functional tendencies was the influence of Orientalism<sup>(37)</sup> and the rise of neo-styles, which began to disrupt the long-standing dominance of classicism in aristocratic circles.

For the Branciforte family, a tangible example of this transformation came in 1784 with the construction of two «stanze delli bagni»<sup>(38)</sup> (bathrooms), one for the prince and one for the princess.

Ercolo Michele Branciforte's embrace of the new culture of living is well-documented in family archive, despite the extensive transformations his palace underwent in the 19th and 20th centuries, which left only remnants of his innovations. In 1799, the nobleman commissioned an exclusive «quartino» (a personal, modern suite) within the area of the «retrocamere» (rear chambers) of the main noble floor, with windows facing the street. The *quartino* featured a «sala a mangé» (dining room), decorated entirely in a «bersò» style, meaning it was adorned with paintings simulating a pergola entwined with climbing plants, remnants of which are still visible today in the room's vaulted ceiling. Additionally, a «camera etrusca» (Etruscan room), created from the reconfiguration of a second rear chamber, and a «camare alla cinese» (Chinese room) were among the suite's highlights. One of these spaces may correspond to the «camera del divano» (couch room) mentioned in archival records. The suite also included a bedroom, a «camerino dei bagni e retret» (a small bathroom and retreat area), and a «stufiglia», a small veranda outfitted with sofas, likely intended as a space for relaxation and conversation, built over an existing balcony<sup>(39)</sup>. The furnishings further reflected Branciforte's eclectic tastes, including chinoiserie, Etruscan vases, and even leopard and tiger skins.

---

(35) The passage is reported in Tuzet 1988: 339.

(36) In the Sicilian context, the theme was first explored in Piazza (2005a: 199-204).

(37) With a particular focus on Chinese decorative culture. Cf. Palazzotto (2007).

(38) A.S.Pa, f. Trabia, series H, vol. 40, ff.170-174, vol. 41, ff.391-404.

(39) A.S.Pa, f. Trabia, series H, vols.55, 56, 57, 58; series N, vol.160.



Despite this embrace of modernity and comfort, Ercole Michele did not fully abandon the tradition of noble ostentation. The uncertain yet significant presence of King Ferdinand in Palermo, which had suddenly elevated the city to the status of a royal capital, prompted the prince to expand his palace even further. In line with the mid-century trend of grandiose scenography, Branciforte sought to enlarge the ceremonial spaces, ensuring that his residence reflected the highest standards of pomp and magnificence, in keeping with his prominent role in the court.

Between 1802 and 1811, Ercole Michele Branciforte significantly expanded his residence after purchasing the palace from the Duke of Benso<sup>(40)</sup>. He added a large new gallery that extended the existing enfilade, bringing the seafront elevation to an impressive length of over 110 meters (figure 11).



Figure 11 – Palermo Butera palace, waterfront façade (Sandro Scalia).

However, this period of architectural ambition coincided with a dramatic shift in the historical context that would ultimately undermine Ercole Michele and his household.

---

(40) A.S.Pa, f. Trabia, series H, vol.61, ff.1562-1568.

In 1812, under increasing pressure from the English protectorate, the sovereign compelled the Sicilian parliament, which Ercole Michele chaired, to vote for the abolition of the feudal system. This landmark decision dismantled the long-standing privileges that had upheld the power of the Sicilian baronage. As a result, the prince of Butera lost his ten parliamentary votes, a devastating blow to his influence and authority. He passed away in 1814, acutely aware that the continuation of his lineage – reliant solely on the survival of the family name – was in jeopardy. The strategic endogamous policies that had once consolidated power within the Branciforte family now backfired, leading to the extinction of various branches of the House and concentrating authority in a single representative. The family legacy and its patrimony were destined to be transferred to Stefania Branciforte Branciforte's husband, Giuseppe Lanza di Trabia (1780-1855), a rising figure in the Sicilian nobility. By 1815, King Ferdinand had returned to Naples, relegating Palermo once again to a position of subordination within the kingdom.

## Bibliography

- Abbate, Vincenzo (1990). "Quadrerie e collezionisti palermitani del Seicento", in *Pittori del Seicento a Palazzo Abatellis*, catalogo della mostra (Palermo 31 mar-28 sett. 1990). Milano: Electa, 58-64.
- Cancela, Rossella (2023). *Palermo, giornate cruciali, secc. XVI-XVIII*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.
- Casamento, Aldo (ed) (2012). *Fondazioni urbane. Città nuove europee dal medioevo al Novecento*. Roma: Edizioni Kappa.
- Chifari, Luisa, D'Arpa, Ciro (2019). *Vivere e abitare da nobili a Palermo tra Seicento e Ottocento, gli inventari ereditari dei Branciforti principi di Scordia*. Palermo: University Press.
- De Cavi, Sabina (ed.) (2017). *Giacomo Amato. I disegni di Palazzo Abatellis. Architettura, arredi e decorazione nella Sicilia Barocca*. Roma: De Luca.
- Di Giovanni, Vincenzo (1989). *Palermo Restaurato*, pubblicazione del manoscritto del XVII sec., Mario Giorgianni e Antonio Santamaura (ed.). Palermo: Sellerio.
- Dufour, Liliane, Raymond, Henri (1992). *1693. Val di Noto, la rinascita dopo il disastro*. Catania: Domenico Sanfilippo editore.

- Emanuele e Gaetani, Francesco Maria, marchese di Villabianca (1877). *Palermo d'oggiorno*, (ms. XVIII sec., 1873-1874), in Gioacchino Di Marzo (ed.), *Biblioteca storica e letteraria di Sicilia*, voll.III-V. Palermo: Luigi Pedone Lauriel
- Giuffré, Maria, Cardamone, Giovanni (ed.) (1979-1981). *Città nuove di Sicilia XV-XIX secolo*. 2 voll.. Palermo: Vittorietti editore.
- Grasso, Santina (1980). "Il palazzo Butera a Palermo: acquisizioni documentarie", *Antichità viva, rassegna d'arte*, a.XIX, 5, 33-38.
- Gulli, Claudio (2019). "Gaspere Vizzini, un pittore del Settecento fra Napoli e Palermo", *Prospettiva.Rivista di Storia dell'arte antica e moderna*, 173, 82-90.
- « — » (2022). "Una storia di Palazzo Butera alla luce dei restauri (2016-2020)", in Curzi Valter (ed.), *Musei italiani del dopoguerra (1945-1977). Riconoscizioni storiche e prospettive future*. Milano: Skira, 347-367.
- La Placa, Pietro (1736). *La Reggia in Trionfo per l'acclamazione, e coronazione della Sacra Real Maestà di Carlo*. Palermo: Antonio Epiro.
- Ligresti, Domenico (1995). "Mutamenti nella composizione interna della feudalità parlamentare siciliana (sec.XVI)", in Francesco Benigno, Claudio Torrisi (ed.), *Città e feudo nella Sicilia moderna*. Caltanissetta-Roma: Sciascia, 73-92.
- Montana, Sabina (2014). *Una committenza nobile in Sicilia tra Cinque e Seicento. Le architetture dei Branciforte di Raccuja (1552-1661)*, Ph.D. thesis, Dipartimento di Architettura dell'Università di Palermo, tutor Stefano Piazza.
- Nobile, Marco Rosario, D'Alessandro, Giovanna, Scaduto, Fulvia (2000). "Costruire a Palermo. La difficile genesi del palazzo privato nell'età di Carlo V", *Lexicon*, n.0, 11-38.
- Palazzotto, Piefrancesco (2007). "Riflessi del gusto per la cineseria e gli esotismi a Palermo tra rococò e neoclassicismo: collezionismo, apparati decorativi e architetture", in Santina Grasso, Maria Concetta Gulisano (ed.), *Argenti e cultura rococò nella Sicilia centro-occidentale, 1735-1789*. Palermo: Flaccovio editore, 535-561.
- Piazza, Stefano (1997). "Strategie insediative della classe dirigente nel secondo Cinquecento a Palermo", in Aldo Casamento, Enrico Guidoni (ed.), *L'urbanistica del Cinquecento in Sicilia*, numero monografico di "Storia dell'Urbanistica", Sicilia / III. Roma: Edizioni Kappa, 218-226.
- « — » (2002). "I palazzi di via Maqueda a Palermo tra Seicento e Settecento", in Maurizio Caperna, Gianfranco Spagnesi (ed.),

- Architettura: processualità e trasformazione*. Roma: Bonsignore editore, 469-474
- « — » (2005a). *Architettura e nobiltà. I palazzi del Settecento a Palermo*. Palermo: L'Epos.
- « — » (2005b). *Dimore feudali in Sicilia fra Seicento e Settecento*. Palermo: Caracol.
- « — » (2010). "I Palazzi del Seicento a Palermo, in una raffigurazione pittorica della collezione Alba di Siviglia", in *Lexicon. Storie e architettura in Sicilia e nel Mediterraneo*, 10-11, 41-48.
- « — » (2018). "Dalla quadreria alla cineseria: lo sviluppo della Galleria di palazzo nella Sicilia del Seicento e del Settecento", in Vincenzo Cazzato (ed.), *La "galleria" di palazzo in età barocca dall'Europa al Regno di Napoli*. Galatina (Le): Mario Congedo Editore, 116-125.
- « — » (2021). *Palazzo Valguarnera Gangi a Palermo*. Palermo: Caracol.
- Piazza, Stefano, Nuccio, Gaia (2022). "L'impiego delle strutture colonnari negli scaloni dei palazzi nobiliari del Settecento: la scala di palazzo Butera a Palermo (1760-1765 c.)", in Valentina Burgassi, Francesco Novelli, Alessandro Spila (ed.), *Scale e risalite nella Storia della Costruzione in età Moderna e Contemporanea*. Torino: Politecnico di Torino, 319-338.
- Tuzet, Hélène (1988). *Viaggiatori stranieri in Sicilia nel XVIII secolo*. Palermo: Sellerio.
- Vesco, Maurizio (2010). "Un cantiere barocco a Palermo: il palazzo di Diego Aragona e Tagliavia, duca di Terranova (1640-1642)", in *Lexicon. Storie e architettura in Sicilia e nel Mediterraneo*, 10/11, 98-102.
- Zalapì, Angheli (1998). *Dimore di Sicilia*. Verona: Arsenale editrice, 126-136.