

URBAN DESIGN IN CISTERNINO

by Norbert Schoenauer.

Fleeing from persecution in the East, Basilian monks founded a monastery upon a hilltop in Apulia, in the 8th century A.D. Named San Nicolo di Patara cis-Sturninum, the location of this monastery was identified by the term cis-Sturninum which referred to its nearness to the ruins of an ancient town called Sturninum. From cis-Sturninum evolved the present name of Cisternino.

During the early Middle Ages, monasteries

- not unlike fortresses - attracted many lay people who settled outside the walls both for protection and for trade opportunities. Viable communities often arose around monasteries and this was also the case with Cisternino. Although during the Dark Ages foreign incursors destroyed both the monastery and the early medieval settlement, a second medieval community was eventually established on the top of the ruins of the earlier settlement. From historic documents, it appears that this second community became the fief of the bishop of Monopoli. This feudal tenure began in the 12th century and continued until the beginning of the 19th century when feudalism in southern Italy was abolished; however, it may be of interest to note that the title of Baron of Cisternino is used by the bishops of Monopoli even today.



The physical location and form of medieval Cisternino was primarily determined by defence and climatic considerations. Sited on top of a knoll, the old town, or *borgo vecchio*, was built to be compact so that its built-up area had a reasonable circumference that could be easily defended as well as enclosed by defence walls. The location on top of a knoll overlooking the Itrian Valley gave an obvious advantage for defence and a clear view over the surrounding



countryside to detect possible enemy forces on the march.

Originally, the old city had only two entrypoints, while the Porta Granda has long since been modified, the Porta Piccola is still a typical medieval city gate and has the characteristic right-angle bend just within the portals preventing a direct view from the outside down the main street. The two city gates are linked to each other by a primary though narrow spine street, which in the centre of the town widens into a market and meeting place, a piazza. Beyond this primary spine, access to the rest of the town is provided by secondary narrow streets and tertiary alleys or cul-de-sacs, the latter too narrow for vehicular traffic. The maze-like street pattern of the borgo vecchio as well as the bent spine street were not only confusing to potential invaders of the

city, but the narrowness of the individual streets also served to block the advance of large numbers of incursors. The many flying buttresses and arched superstructures bridging streets and alleys made communication at roof level from one city block to the next relatively easy, and also made it possible for citizens to counter-attack by hurling missiles on the invaders from above. Since walls and roofs were built of stone the invaders could not depend on fire to frustrate the defence manoeuvres of the residents.

The hilltop location of old Cisternino was also advantageous from a climatic point of view. Not only was this elevated town site airy and cooler, but its greater distance from low-lying marshes offered some protection against malaria fever which was rampant during the medieval period. Moreover, the slightest breeze



could be captured and funnelled through the gates of the town crowning the knoll, while the winding and irregular street network dissipated the less pleasant through draft. Even on calm days, air movement was induced in the compact city through the pressure differential created between the sun-drenched piazza and the narrow, shaded side streets; as warm air rose from the piazza, cooler air was drawn from the side streets ensuring constant air circulation. The close-knit building mass as well as the whitewashed surfaces of buildings minimized the adverse effects of sun radiation, and the effects of day and night temperature fluctuations were balanced in individual dwellings by the storage capacity and delayed heat release of the massive stone structures. Finally, the reflective quality of whitewashed walls also added a particular charm and warmth to Cisternino's narrow and shaded streets.

In Cisternino, most ground floor space adjacent to main streets and piazzas is devoted to commercial use, for shops and workshops, while the upper storeys are generally residential. The bishop's palace and the church were not located at the main piazza, but were sited adjacent to the principal entrance to the town, at the

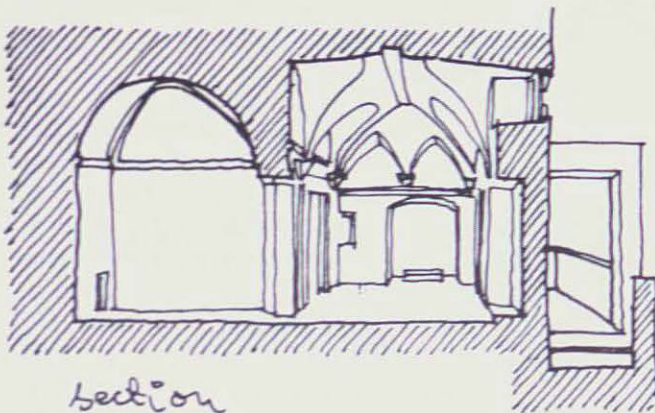
Porta Granda; the former was gutted during the revolt of 1667 and never rebuilt. Along sidestreets housing is dominant, lower units having access to gardens or patios at ground level and upper dwellings having access to roof terraces, which often have a summer kitchen in the shape of a vaulted alcove on the roof. An intrinsic feature of all dwellings, whether lower or upper, is their direct access from the street, the former frequently from a recessed semi-private bay off the street or alleyway and the latter through an open or covered staircase with the front door usually visible from the public right-of-way. Less consistent is the availability of cross ventilation in dwelling units, although it does exist in the majority of upper units.

The front door in a typical dwelling unit leads directly into a large multi-purpose room, a living-dining room that also contains an open fireplace used for cooking, a so-called *cucina a terra*. From this main room, one enters into one or two bedrooms or, on occasion, through ladder or stair onto a mezzanine used for sleeping. A special feature of all dwellings is the vaulted ceiling which ranges from a simple barrel vault to

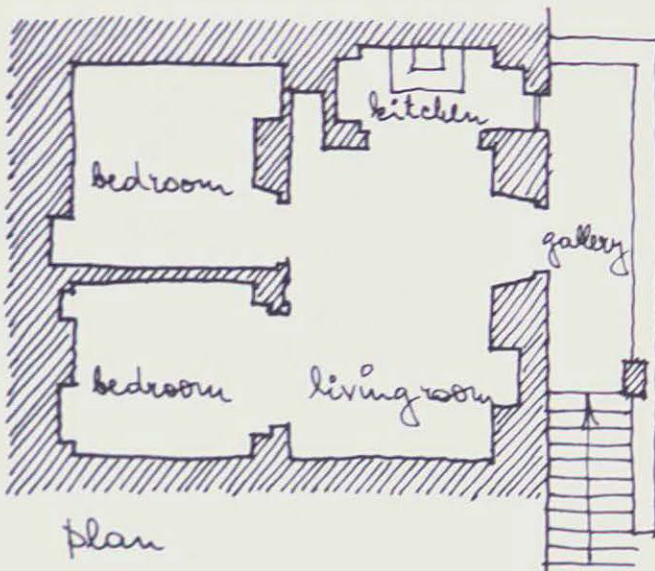


elaborate and ornate crossvaults. The windows are generally small, but so-called french windows are now and then used for multi-purpose rooms; the latter are protected by a simple railing and resemble narrow balconies just wide enough for a row of potted plants. Stone brackets to support a pole at lintel level and projecting about 20 centimetres in front of the window were once used for curtains that shaded the window without interfering with natural ventilation. Several homes have generous arched loggias overlooking the street at the second or third floor level.

The use of uniform building materials,



Section



plan

Second-floor dwelling
after Edward Allen

uniform construction methods and uniform design concepts throughout the borgo vecchio of Cisternino may suggest a monotonous urban environment. In reality, however, this is not the case, since a pleasing balance between uniformity and diversity is achieved that is indeed very human; and just as individual people are similar but unique, so the buildings of this town are similar and different at the same time, because the building elements such as doors, windows, staircases and vaulted loggias vary slightly in design and in their juxtaposition. An important lesson in urban design can be learned from Cisternino, namely that with only a few building elements as variables, a rich living environment can be created provided that these variables are not regimented in a monotonous arrangement. Of course, the potted plants and flowers as well as the ever-present panoply of laundry drying in the sun add a lived-in touch to the urban ambiance that in its informality enhances the human scale of the borgo vecchio of Cisternino.

Many other quaint and picturesque medieval towns have ceased to be viable urban entities in the traditional economic sense and have instead become tourist centres or outdoor museums, but Cisternino remains a service centre for its surrounding countryside. Although some tourists are attracted to Apulia and Cisternino, they have not yet changed the traditional lifestyles of their inhabitants. Cisternino's citizens still gather in the early morning hours in the piazza in front of the bulletin board to learn of the latest local events; most people still go about their daily affairs in the time-honoured routine which includes a long siesta in the early afternoon. Judging from the proliferation of tv antennas on the roofs and the many cars parked in the streets, it is easy to see that the people of Cisternino live in the present. However, they have found a way to adapt modern conveniences to a traditional living environment, which seems to prove that old and new can be compatible. □