

Any visit to Naples, Italy, is unforgettable. It is a hectic, frenetic city—thrilling, exhausting, vibrant, delicious, and intriguing. It is also full of architectural surprises, among them the Real Albergo dei Poveri, or Royal Almshouse. The Albergo is a building that stands out, firstly, because of its sheer size, and, secondly, because of what it has to say about the ambitions of its creator. It is also a building at a crossroads, seemingly out of sync with the city and in desperate need of a purpose. The building has its proponents, however, who have spent the better part of two decades shoring it up in hopes of finding for it a suitable reuse. It is an extravagant undertaking, not unlike the building of the Albergo itself.

Begun in 1752, this behemoth of a building was commissioned by Charles III, the Bourbon King of Naples and Sicily—and later King of Spain—one of the eighteenth century's more enlightened despots. Charles was an ambitious man and Naples at that time was an affluent and important city, much larger and more prosperous than Paris or Rome. It was also home to an estimated 8,000 destitute citizens.

BOURBON RENEWAL

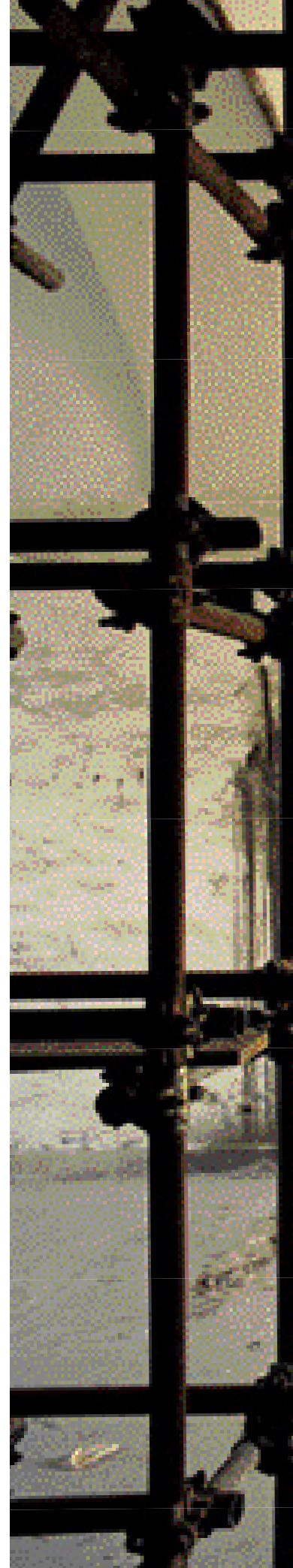
Built as a visionary institution to serve the poor, Naples' Real Albergo dei Poveri is poised for a new life...if only it can find one.

by JENNY MCCREADY

To tackle this problem, Charles launched a visionary social program that produced the Albergo, where he could benevolently provide the indigent with food, shelter, and work—three elements deemed by contemporary Utopian society as vital to solving the problem of the poor. Destitute residents would also know their place in society, out of trouble and hidden away from Charles' otherwise thriving city. At the time of its construction, the Albergo was about a kilometer outside the city on one of its main thoroughfares. In time, however, Naples expanded such that the building now stands at the heart of the city.

The Albergo's façade stretches more than 300 meters. It has seven palatial-scale stories above ground and two equally palatial levels of basement. There are 103,000 square meters of floor space and a volume of 750,000 cubic meters. It is said to be the second-largest public building in Europe, and this is the pared down version, 40 percent smaller than originally envisioned. Unmissable in its presence, the Albergo offered as a double message—look how powerful, rich, and generous the king is and, remember, work hard, be prudent, or you, too, might end up in here.

The building's first residents were ex-prisoners from the Galera Grande, the





THE MASSIVE VAULTED CORRIDORS OF THE REAL ALBERGO DEI POVERI IN NAPLES UNDER PAINSTAKING RECONSTRUCTION FOLLOWING THEIR COLLAPSE IN THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1980.



A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW SHOWING THE THREE PARTLY COMPLETED QUADRANTS, ABOVE, GIVES THE clearest SENSE OF THE PANOPTICON CHURCH PART CONSTRUCTED IN THE CENTRAL COURTYARD. THE GRAND SQUARE WITH RADIATING STREETS IN FRONT OF THE ALBERGO IS NOW ALL BUT CONSUMED BY NAPLES' ANARCHIC ROADS.

main city jail. Some were forced to go there. Others entered voluntarily and the Albergo did provide perhaps welcome relief for many of the city's beggars, invalids, and elderly. Residents worked either within the building or outside of it. Wages, however, were not provided; nor was choice. Charles' idea for an almshouse, although initially benevolent, effectively was that of a prison.

The design imposed control and authority on the residents in other ways. Key to the working of the Albergo was the separation of occupants so that they never met. Families entering the Albergo were split up into four groups: men, women, the elderly, and the young, although children were allowed to stay with their mothers.

There are three courtyards—females in one, administration in the next, then a block for men. Extremely limited interconnections between the three parts ensured that inmates from different groups could not accidentally meet. They were physically prevented by an absence of connecting doors, shared staircases, or communal entrances. Their paths simply did not cross.

Even at the point when the Catholic church committed some funds, stipulating that a large church be built at the very center of the Albergo, there was to be no mixing. An unusual panopticon plan, the church was to have five separate naves in a star shape leading on to a single altar; one nave each for the four types of inmates and one for public use.

The church was to draw together residents from the whole building and, while still preventing them from meeting or mixing, it was the only physical space in the building that the inmates could share. It was conceived some years before Jeremy Bentham designed his panopticon prison and new ideas about social control were developing across Europe. The Albergo's central church would have allowed the celebrant to see all, and reinforce the regime's and church's view that God sees all, helping to control the inmates' psyches as well as their bodies.

Work started on the church but was never finished, and the walls only reach a few meters above ground level.

The overbearing architecture and sheer scale of the building reinforce Charles' vision, and even today it is an imposing and powerful place. It is impossible to see into the building from the street; the front façade and main entrance sit high above the pavement level. And seeing out is equally problematic. The dormitories, for example, are enormous halls with ceilings more than eight meters tall and windows set too high in the walls to be reachable. At Charles' insistence, the imposing façade was built at rapid

speed. Once up, however, when passers-by could no longer see what great work was being done, the king lost interest in the project. His money ran out and he handed the building over to other wealthy citizens of Naples. Such was his haste that the façade was not even connected adequately to the structure behind; vaulting not keyed-in properly contributed to the partial collapse of the building in a 1980 earthquake.

The building's lowest point was between 1932 and 1980. A small number of people were living there when the earthquake struck, causing the collapse of the front western corner and tragically killing several elderly residents. It became imperative to do something with the building before the rest of it and its users were even more compromised. In 1995, Naples' historic center was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and support from World Monuments Fund through its Samuel H. Kress program has boosted the building's wider exposure and funded research into how to set about reusing it.

On entering the Albergo the space, coolness and silence immediately contrast with the bustling city outside. The interior is at times unbearably formal and at others unfinished with staircases that lead to nowhere and vegetation sprouting where incomplete masonry yields to fresh air, wind, rain, and sunshine. Large areas exist where one can imagine getting lost for quite a long time. It is a fairy-tale landscape, contrasting sharply with twenty-first-century Naples outside.

With European Union support and various Italian funds, work has begun to restore and strengthen parts of the building. A section of the front has been thrown sharply into focus with its new pink façade—a statement of the bold and brave undertaking to save this building. However, it also serves to show just how much else needs to be done: collapsed vaulted ceilings and floors rebuilt, roofs put back, holes in walls repaired,



IMAGES FROM TOP LEFT CLOCKWISE: SEEN FROM THE COURTYARD, THE ONLY PUBLIC ENTRANCE TO THE ALBERGO. THE FRONT FAÇADE BEFORE THE CENTRAL SECTION OF THE EXTERIOR WAS COMPLETED. A VIEW OF THE CENTRAL COURTYARD. A NAVE OF THE PANOPTICON CHURCH.





windows and doors returned—as well as the heating, plumbing, and electrical services required as a bare minimum by any end-user.

The architectural team involved in rehabilitating the Albergo today is trying to interfere as little as possible with the building's original circulation. Architect Stefania de Medici of the University of Naples explains that it is easy to put in new vertical accesses but the horizontal connections are proving difficult to resolve. Navigating the building is thus time consuming, its sheer size magnified by this deliberate restriction of movement. Its design, a tool of the experiment in social control, is making reuse of the building all the more difficult.

The work is painstaking, indeed loving, and interventions where required are as “light” as possible. Fallen vaults are being rebuilt in traditional methods by constructing a framework of temporary timber arches, then erecting the tufa stone vaults above. Care is being taken not to make changes that are out of keeping with the building and which would be impossible or difficult to undo should a future reuse require it, so as to be as true to the building in terms of materials, style, and design as possible.

The work—not least because of the huge scale of the building—is expensive. An estimated €400-500 million has been spent to date, and this budget has only been for stabilization. The project is mammoth in its scale and difficulty.

Yet, all this work has been taken on with no end-user in sight. Two other large alberghi were built in Italy—one in Genoa in the mid-seventeenth century, which is now used as a museum, and another in Palermo also commissioned by Charles and built ca. 1732, which is periodically used for large special exhibitions. Neither, however, reflect the size and difficulty of adapting for re-use as the Albergo in Naples. It is simply too big for most organizations, and at first thought it would seem that a range of different activities and users would be the answer.

Research led by Gabriella Caterina of the University of Naples Federico II Archi-



A CORRIDOR ON THE TOP FLOOR, TOP, HAS A NEW TIMBER ROOF. PARTS OF THE BUILDING, ABOVE, HAVE BEEN BRACED TO PREVENT COLLAPSE. RIGHT, VAULTS ARE UNDER CONSTRUCTION, FOLLOWING THE TIMELESS TECHNIQUES OF TIMBER VAULTING AND USE OF LOCAL VOLCANIC TUFA STONE.





texture Faculty has focused on developing a methodology for approaching the problem of how best to reinhabit the building. Caterina sees it as a problem of knowledge, and is seeking to provide tools for understanding what is possible and what is not. Research by her team—Maria Rita Pinto, Stefania De Medici, Pasquale De Toro, and Katia Fabbri-catti—shows that it is not as simple as putting in a multiplicity of different users—as they all require different elements, and dividing the Albergo up to suit a broad range of users requires dramatic changes to the building.

Caterina also sees an opportunity for a new way of thinking on a grand scale to match the dimensions of the building. For her, the future of Naples could be influenced in a major, positive way by taking advantage of its location. The Albergo could be used for a function larger than Naples, Campania, or even Italy can devise. She suggests that a pan-Mediterranean organization could be housed in the Albergo to work for and benefit the entire region.

Whatever the conclusion to the next chapter of this building's history, some things are certain. It is a very important place in the memories and minds of the people of Naples, and an unmissable landmark. It is a valuable resource and already the spin-offs in research, training, and skills have been rich. It is a building around which intentions have been benevolent and humanitarian. Even today, part of the building is used for temporary social housing for the very poor.

But it is also a dysfunctional, incomplete building that requires an extraordinary investment. The difficulties faced in finding an end-user mean the building is carrying on its remarkable history of being incomplete and apart, while still in the heart of the city. Yet an intriguing precedent of what to do with such an enormous site could be set. It is potentially an enormously exciting and ground-breaking project with valuable benefit for quality of life in the neighborhood, the city, and even perhaps beyond.

Standing on the balcony of this vast, silent building, looking down over the bustle of historic and modern Naples with Mount Vesuvius in the distance, both the past and present are visible. History and continuity are important, and the Albergo's team is trying hard to advance this project with a firm grip on both while looking to the future. The legacy of King Charles III is an edifice that until now has been unfinished and out of sync with the city. He has left them a difficult task—but they are meeting it with sensitivity, care, and a grand ambition that matches Charles' own. ■



THE NEWLY RESTORED CENTRAL SECTION OF THE FRONT FACADE, TOP, AND ONGOING RESTORATION WORK, ABOVE.