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Sacred atmospheres

A baroque church in a market as a case study*

1. Introduction

All space has characteristic aesthetic values which may be a source of identity. Although architecture has often granted a key role to the geometry-based Cartesian space and to the visual paradigm, the aesthetics of atmospheres – understood as an enquiry into the relationship between environmental expressive qualities and subjectively registered conditions – it is able to offer further theoretical perspectives to the history of architecture. Obviously, the main difficulty of investigating ancient spaces in terms of atmosphere consists in retrieving perceived aspects of daily and urban realities that no longer exist. Therefore, this study necessarily presumes to focus not only on the “perceived” but also on the “conceived” (the theory of space) and “lived” (the spatial imaginary) aspects of the past ambiance¹.

My hypothesis is that the aesthetics of atmospheres can integrate the traditional point of view of the history of architecture and the history of art. To demonstrate this, I will examine the church of the *Immacolata Concezione al Capo* (Palermo, 1604-1738), because its original ambiance is not entirely compromised. This building is set in one of the historical markets of Palermo; consequently, it is a useful case study to investigate the sensory contrast between ordinary and extra-ordinary, mundane and sacred space.

By mixing local literature², international studies, and the direct analysis of the monument in its context, the paper aims at grasping the “common language, consensus, and code”³ of that time and, subsequently, at investigating the particular sensory configuration of this church.

* The idea of this topic comes from a talk to the architect Valeria Viola who I thank for all the information about the architecture of the church and its iconography.

¹ H. Lefebvre, *The production of space* (1974), Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 40.

² I have used coeval sources, such as the writings by the Marquis of Villabianca (1720-1802), and later ethnographic studies, such as the rich written legacy of Giuseppe Pitrè (1841-1916).

³ Lefebvre, p. 40.

2. Theoretical background: ambiance and aesthetics of atmospheres in sacred buildings

From a few decades, Aesthetics – which was previously restricted by the idealistic and romantic tradition to the philosophy of art – has been extended to other disciplines and towards others fields of enquiry. Some concepts, such as “ambiance” and “atmosphere”, have thus emerged and may now offer new and interesting insights, giving a central position to the perceiving body.

The concept of “ambiance” spread in the French culture during the nineteenth century. It arises from the debate on the idea of *milieu* triggered by Taine’s theories, and it implies not a physical or geometrical space but rather a sort of ethereal substance which can be perceived and felt in the environment: a lived space⁴.

The concept of “atmosphere” is the ground of a new philosophical movement, which finds its roots in twentieth century Phenomenology. It draws upon both the line of thought, linking Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenological Anthropology of Rothacker, Klages, and Hermann Schmitz⁵. Within this framework, Gernot Böhme’s aesthetics of atmospheres was outlined⁶. While taking up Alexander G. Baumgarten’s eighteenth century project of the foundation of Aesthetics as a science of sensitive perception⁷, Böhme employed the concept of “atmosphere” in order to prove the fundamental function of sensory and bodily aspects in the perception of space⁸.

On this theoretical base it is possible to identify the appropriate aesthetic categories in order to connote the perceived, conceived, and lived space of a sacred building; consequently, the hypothesis of Henri Lefebvre, that space is produced and that each mode of production has its own

⁴ Today there is a lot of bibliography on “ambiance” and “atmosphere”. To find more information see some websites: <https://ambiances.net/>; <https://atmosphericspaces.wordpress.com/>. For some initial studies see: K. Michaëlsson, *Ambiance*, in “Studia neophilologica” (1939-1940), pp. 91-119; L. Spitzer, *Milieu and ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics*, in “Philosophy and Phenomenological Research” (1942), pp.1-42; H. Nilsson-Ehle, *Ambiance, Milieu et Climat*, in “Studia neophilologica” (1957), pp. 180-191; M. Piron, *Sur l'évolution d'ambiance*, in “Mélanges de grammaire française offerts à M. Maurice Grevisse”, Editions J. Duculot, Gembloux, 1966, pp. 271-280.

⁵ T. Griffero, *Atmospheres. Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, (2010), Routledge, London, 2016.

⁶ G. Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, Bloomsbury, London-Oxford-New York, 2017.

⁷ A.G. Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. by K. Aschenbrenner and W.B. Holther. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1954 and *Aesthetica*, [1750-58], Georg Olms, Hildesheim & New York, 1970.

⁸ G. Böhme, *Ästhetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München, 2001.

peculiar space, encourages us to investigate the historical spaces through a research of past atmospheres⁹.

In the history of architecture, a special place has always been assigned to the sacred space, in which it is possible to identify typical aesthetic categories and experiential qualities. In this regard, even a rational theorist as Leon Battista Alberti is fully aware of the expressive qualities of buildings and of their ability to affect human souls. In his treatise of architecture, *De re aedificatoria* (1452), he provides a full set of precise instructions on how to achieve what one would today call the ambiance of a sacred building. According to Alberti, a feeble light around an altar in an apsis without windows will trigger the fear of God and favour religious concentration more easily: “The awe that is naturally generated by darkness encourages a sense of veneration in the mind; and there is always some austerity about majesty”¹⁰.

In Alberti’s words, the category of sacred can be connected to what Rudolf Otto named “numinous”¹¹. A category of this kind cannot be rationally defined, as it may only be understood through a feeling sprouting from sense perceptions. In the Old and New Testament, the numinous is perceived through what is burning, irradiating, and blowing. The shiver on the skin while facing Yahweh’s anger, the bewilderment and admiration for divine Greatness, the passion and vitalizing energy of ecstasy are all atmospheric modes characterising the religious experience.

Describing the numinous characteristics Otto highlighted two with specific atmospheric value, that is to say obscurity and silence. As stated in the biblical Psalms, these elements and their opposites, notably light and chants, are what eminently define the experience of the sacred. The semi-obscurity, livened-up by light effects, is crucial to create a mystical atmosphere. For that matter, light has always played an important symbolic role in the theory of cult architecture. In western patristics, light is taken to be a constructive element in order to achieve festive atmospheres, whereas the absence would turn the house of God into a cold place. Equally important are the chants allowing the solemn and joyful participation of the community of believers. However, at the most numinous stage of a mass ceremony, sacred music lowers all the sounds and lets silence express the mystery of transubstantiation.

The category of numinous elaborated by Otto, like the “ineffable” conceptualized by Le Corbusier or the “immensurable” by Louis Kahn, indicates:

⁹ Lefebvre, 1991.

¹⁰ L.B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building in ten Books*, [1452] trans. by J. Rykwert, N. Leach, R. Tavernor, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA-London, 1988, p. 223.

¹¹ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, 1958.

moments in which architecture is being transcended: a building's geometric proportions turn into shivers, stone into tears, rituals into insights, light into joy, space into contemplation, and time into heightened presence (or absence). They are talking of an architecture that has removed the "opacity" hiding life's meanings so that we can catch a momentous and revelatory (even if unsettling) glimpse.¹²

Although the numinous is, as we have seen, an atmospheric category, sight has always had a greater importance in sacred architecture. However, the aesthetics of atmospheres can give new meanings to the viewing experience that is never separated from the other senses.

3. The church of the *Immacolata Concezione*: a sacred building in a market

The term "atmosphere" is particularly appropriate when it comes to the interpretation of sacred buildings. In this sense, the church the *Immacolata Concezione* does represent a significant case study, because the traces of the past sensory environment, though partly compromised, persist inside and outside the building. Of course, we don't have a direct testimony of the original atmosphere, but the investigation of what remains and of what is described through different sources can contribute to an understanding of how people interacted originally with this ambiance.

The church is set inside one of the historical markets of Palermo, in an area called *head* (*caput* in Latin, *capo* in Italian). Similar to an Arab *souk*, the market extends into the street with stalls loaded with fruit and vegetables. Above the stalls, the colourful awnings impede the sight of the sky and protect fresh food from the dazzling summer light and the heavy winter rain. The colourful awnings accompany the polychromies of fruit, vegetables and spices. Furthermore, it has been recently noted that, in the past, other decorative elements could have been added by individual sellers, according to traditional customs or personal creativity¹³. Even if this use is sadly vanishing, it is still possible to see green seaweed mixed with fish, ears of wheat in baskets full of snails, and sometimes red flowers ornating fresh swordfish. These were not mere decorations but rather signs indicating the freshness of the goods.

In addition to these chromatic effects, the market produces other sensations to the visitors: strong smells coming from the combination

¹² J. Bermudez, *Introduction*, in J. Bermudez (eds.), *Transcending architecture. Contemporary Views on Sacred Space*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 2015, p. 3.

¹³ S. Bonanzinga – F. Giallombardo, *Il cibo per via. Paesaggi alimentari in Sicilia*, Dipartimento Beni Culturali Università di Palermo, Palermo, 2011.

of fresh fruit, meat and fish displayed in the open air, as well as street food sold by itinerant vendors. We can consider all these sensations very similar to those that people perceived in the past. The whole show aims at attracting any potential buyer; therefore, the vendors often let people taste the products, involving also the sense of taste.

The scenario is completed by a “soundscape”: in addition to the buzz of the buyers, the sellers advertise their goods in loud voices in a sort of singsong. As it was already noticed by the anthropologist Giuseppe Pitrè in the late nineteenth century, in the context of a permanent market like the *Capo*, these old cries (*abbanniate*) have a concise rhythm and use short formulas, concentrating on the qualities of their goods or promoting low prices¹⁴.

The atmosphere is joyous and vibrant, and, in the past, it would have been the same. In the eighteenth century, in fact, Francesco Maria Emanuele Gaetani marquis of Villabianca wrote in one of his manuscripts that both merchants and clients met in the market not only to sell and buy but also to participate in the “entertainments that usually went on in these assemblies”¹⁵. This feasting atmosphere of Sicilian markets has been connected not only to commercial activities but also to religious ones. This idea is supported by the fact that markets take on different configurations during feast days or religious ceremonies, changing colours or moving stalls in different positions even now.

Even though today the market has changed following the transformation and needs of the modern city, it is still possible to catch traces of its past atmosphere through its multisensory stimuli.

In this context, today as in the past, the severe church façade appears to visitors suddenly among colourful awnings. The main doorway separates the inside from the outside and represents a confine between mundane and sacred dimension.

4. Between ordinary and extraordinary

As Gernot Böhme has highlighted, the art of the “stage set” could be considered as a paradigm for the aesthetics of atmospheres¹⁶. The stage set is central to all aspects of the Baroque culture and may constitute a

¹⁴ G. Pitrè, *Usi e costumi, credenze e pregiudizi del popolo siciliano*, (1870-1917), Forni Editore, Bologna, 1967.

¹⁵ F. Vergara Caffarelli, *Introduzione*, in O. Sorgi (eds.), *Mercati storici siciliani*, Officine Grafiche Riunite, Palermo, 2007, p. 13.

¹⁶ G. Böhme, *The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres*, “Ambiances”, available online at: <http://ambiances.revues.org/315> 2013.

particularly significant key in the terms of the aesthetics of the atmospheres of the church of the *Immacolata Concezione* and its urban context. The whole profane market can be seen as a kind of open-air dramatization, a starker but no less fascinating counterpoint to the celebrations that took place in the church.

Even if the austere facade does not allow one to imagine the splendour of the decorated interiors, the walls inlaid with polychromatic marble (*marmi mischi*) draw an obvious comparison with the colourful market¹⁷. It would not be rash to attribute the colourful aspect of the inside to a strong influence from the outside, where food of all colours (fruit, vegetables, spices, meat and fish) seem to create a picture that changes according to the seasons.

In both contexts the aesthetic reasons are accompanied by functional ones, in one case it is the ritual, in the other trade. We must make a careful comparison, because if the ambiances of the church and the market are similar in some exterior way, they are also very different and even contrasting in their meaning overall in the past.

We can also consider the acoustic difference between inside the church and the outside market. The church litanies recalled and contrasted with the chants of the sellers (*abbanniate*): between the two we can find the analogy of a repeated strophic scheme, but, on a semantic level, the invocation prayer is opposed to the licentious language, sometimes allusive and even raucous calls of the vendors. Even in terms of taste, the wine and the consecrated bread contrasted with the outside wine and food of the taverns¹⁸. Finally, on a representative level, the church was the venue of a rite culminating in the Eucharistic adoration, whereas outside there was the ritual of the cleaning and cutting up fish and meat¹⁹. Consequently, the atmosphere of the market is a counterpoint to that of the church in respect to the entire range of senses.

If a church is generally perceived as a refuge to pray where we can enjoy calm and quiet reflection, inside the church of the *Immacolata Concezione* this idea is reinforced by the contrast between the external and internal space. On an acoustic and olfactory level, the church produces a shock on the visitor entering from the colourful and lively market outside also today. There is a piercing clash between the outside, where the

¹⁷ S. Piazza (eds.), *I marmi mischi delle chiese di Palermo*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1992.

¹⁸ Available for tasting, there are still now a wide range of dishes: entrails roasted or boiled beef, boiled beef cartilage, remnants of fried beef slaughter in fat, marinated fish.

¹⁹ According to Sergio Bonanzinga (*Il teatro dell'abbondanza. Pratiche di ostensione nei mercati siciliani*, in O. Sorgi, eds, *Mercati storici siciliani*, CRICD, Palermo, 2007), the exposition of lambs and kids at Easter time assumes heightened significance ritual alluding to the sacrifice of Christ.

strong spicy smell is pervading, and the inside, where incense mingles – especially before modern electricity – with the scent of lit candles. As Juhani Pallasmaa highlights, these are important instruments able to create the atmosphere of the sacred: “A mere candle suffices to create a drama. Due to its fluttering character, candle light is especially tactile; it seems to finger objects and surfaces like a gentle massage”²⁰.

The acoustic contrast was equally remarkable: outside voices, cries, noises, sounds of animals (especially poultry), whereas inside there was the sublime power of silence.

Thanks to such a sudden transition between two very different atmospheres (the secular and the spiritual), we can recognize that the perception of space is not extraneous from the emotional tones of its experience and that the expectations of the users contributed to modify the perception of space.

5. The church: architecture and iconography

The church the *Immacolata Concezione* clearly shows that the sacred space was conceptualized according to a rational and visual point of view. The interior was conceived as a path towards the altar and as a virtual line that gradually reveals the truth²¹. The plan is simple and relatively common for female conventual churches. It is made up of three parts: an entrance (overhung by the nuns’ choir), a single nave and a chancel. The simplicity of the plan underlines a gradual path designed for worshippers from the mundane dimension of the busy market to the still atmosphere of prayer inside. The first passage consists of the huge wooden portal on the front of the church. This austere facade could not be more distant from both the lively exterior and the colourful interior. Its design might have been inspired by the necessity of a mental pause, useful to separate two heterogeneous environments²². Further on, the passage towards the altar is signed by two other thresholds and a few steps, through which the worshipper ascends to the level of the altar. This sort of ascension was (and partly still is) a walk towards light²³. The semi-dark passage below the choir frees the mind from the noise of

²⁰ J. Pallasmaa, *Light, Silence, and Spirituality in Architecture And art*, in J. Bermudez (eds.), p. 24.

²¹ V. Viola, *La Chiesa dell’Immacolata Concezione al Capo. Dal contesto alla spazialità interna*, in A. Di Bennardo et al. (eds), *La chiesa dell’Immacolata Concezione. Paràdeisos di marmi e luci*, Abadir, San Martino delle Scale (Palermo), 2005, pp. 26-30.

²² Viola, p. 22.

²³ Viola, p. 24.

the external environment and prepares devotees to embrace the sudden light and magnificence of the *naos*. The sides of the nave are articulated through a double order of composite pilasters, that frame three shallow chapels and one door on each side in the first order and hosts grated openings from which nuns could follow the celebrations from the former adjacent convent in the second order. From the high windows cut into the lunettes of the barrel vault, the nave became flooded with natural light that reflected itself on the shiny marble. In the past the light was made to come equally from both sides, but now the northward windows have been closed up. A modern residential building replaced the convent in the 1950s, and the grated openings on the other side of the church have been modified as windows, so that the light comes in only from the southern side. Since the beginning, in addition to the side windows, a huge Diocletian opening has existed, in the upper storey, which are cut into the eastward facade. In substitution to the traditional window above the altar, this huge arched opening increases the amount of light towards the end of the nave and the altar, guiding the worshippers' path. At the end of this walk along the church the chancel rests in the western extreme. This last level is only for the celebrant, though people could see ahead, penetrating the central perspective of a former marble depiction of the Virgin Mary (*paliotto*²⁴) that was on the altar: the last target of the linear walk.

Confirming the predominance of the visual paradigm during this slow approach to the altar, the guiding role of the Madonna is underlined by the iconography. The inlaid flooring is marked in its progressing to the chancel by two alternating Marian symbols: the Rose of the Winds and the Morning Star, usual tools that guide mankind on the Earth and in the Sky²⁵.

Following a linear point of view, the whole artistic project has to be seen as a progression to the altar²⁶. This progression starts under the choir, where the entrance hosts three frescos glorifying Jesus, Mary and the Holy Spirit, so that worshippers can begin the path under their protection. Next to the entrance, there are four pictures made of mixed marble, that symbolize the titles of the Madonna as mediator of God: the font and the door, the mirror and the tower²⁷. Along the nave the worshipper

²⁴ From Latin *pallium altaris*.

²⁵ C. Scordato, *Per una lettura estetico-teologica*, in A. Di Bennardo *et al.*, pp. 89-151.

²⁶ Viola, p. 33.

²⁷ *Fons vitae* (font of life) from which the devotees can drink (*bibete ex eo omnes*) and *Janua coeli* (door of the sky), through which they can enter (*libenter ingredimini*); *Speculum veritatis* (mirror of truth) and, consequently, *Veritas sine macula* (truth without stain-sin) and, finally, *Eburnea turris* (ivory tower).

is guided by eight statues of saints. In the decoration of the chancel, the repeated topic of the fight between the eagle (Mary) and the snake (the Devil) prepares the worshipper to the truth of the Immaculate Conception, finally expressed in Pietro Novelli's painting above the altar.

6. The ambiance of the *Immacolata Concezione*

Despite the predominance of visual effects it is worth taking into account that in the baroque cult-related architecture sacred images acquire great scenic value, based on the aesthetic idea that the spiritual message can more easily reach the soul through the seduction of senses²⁸. Consequently, it is worth highlighting that in the church of the *Immacolata Concezione* the abundance of polychromatic marble produces a festive atmosphere. The inlaid floral designs and the figures of angels singing and playing stimulate olfactory and auditive perceptions, that are unreal and imaginary. This particular ambiance wraps the believer into an atmosphere of devotion.

The theory by Pierre von Meiss reinforces the hypothesis that an iconographical project would have a role to create an atmospheric space. According to him, the image, be it sculptural or pictorial, would exert a "field of influence" in the space of a sacred building²⁹. Therefore, the image is not simply placed in an environment, but rather takes possession of the whole environment. It is possible to feel something emanating from the image, that comes towards the observer and influences the perception of the environment. The relation established between the sacred image and the viewer is particularly compelling in the church of the *Immacolata Concezione*, where the homonymous painting by Pietro Novelli is the pole attraction of the physical-spiritual path of the observer.

In the cultural and devotional context of the seventeenth century, the believer was summoned by these symbols to start off on a journey, a physical and spiritual one, culminating in front of the main altar. The mystery of Eucharist was celebrated here against the background of Pietro Novelli's painting further emphasized by the light coming from the above dome windows. Thanks to these light effects Novelli's *Immacolata Concezione* was enveloped by the luminous aura described by the biblical sources

²⁸ In this regard, Gianlorenzo Bernini's work is exemplary: pathos is expressed through tactile and chromatic illusions, stone looks as soft as wax, and dynamic and colour effects are added to the point of fusing the three visual arts together. See Y. Bonnefoy, *Roma 1630. L'orizzonte del primo barocco*, Istituto editoriale italiano, Milano, 1970.

²⁹ P. von Meiss, *Elements of Architecture. From Form to Place*, Van Nostrand, London, 1990, p. 93.

(*Apocalypse* 12,1; *Song of Songs* 6,10). In this ambiance stimulating senses and imagination, the *Immacolata Concezione* becomes a numinous presence creating a feeling of devotion.

If, as Seasoltz affirms, “in any liturgical space there are three different rhythms that need to be properly orchestrated: a visual rhythm (what we see), an aural rhythm (what we hear), and a kinetic or motor rhythm (how we move about or act)”³⁰, in this church the painting of the Immaculate Conception by Novelli is transformed into the pole attraction of the atmospheric space, orchestrating at least the visual and kinetic rhythm. While orienting the perception of the believer in a vertical movement (from the entrance to the main altar dominated by the painting) and an ascension movement (from the Virgin, who is looking up, to the dove depicted in the vault), the Immaculate Conception guides the believer, through the Holy Spirit, to the Glory of God. Therefore, the church of the *Immacolata Concezione al Capo* stood (and partly still stands) for a distinctive mystical ambiance, linked to the cult of the Virgin Mary. In this emotional and motor space, the Virgin, mediator of the relation between man and God, plays the role of *Hodegetria* through the field of influence of Novelli’s painting.

In history of Art the psychagogic power of images is generally explained using visual paradigm. However, once acknowledged that the perception of a sacred image takes place in a synesthetic ambiance, it is clear that the whole complex of solicitations – not only visual, but also tactile, acoustic, olfactory, and motoric – influence the impression exerted by the image. Consequently, the representation (be it sculptural or pictorial) can not be cut off from the atmospheric space, that surround the image as much as the observer.

In a church the sacred atmosphere prepares us to listen to the word of God. The architecture turns into a metaphysical strength also thanks to the spiritual concentration and emotional expectation of the worshippers. As Walton highlights, prayers and chants express the common sense of the sacred: “the call to prayer; the hymn at key points in a service; a sung reading; a musical interlude by organ, brass, bells, or orchestra; a chant that rallies believers; a repeated tone as the background to meditation”³¹.

Even if not directly related to the church in the *Capo*, it is worth underlining that there were many coeval novenas and poems in honour of the Immaculate Virgin Mary³². The contribution of music, albeit less docu-

³⁰ K. Seasoltz, *The Christian church building*, in J. Bermudez (eds.), *Transcending architecture. Contemporary Views on Sacred Space*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 2015, p. 125.

³¹ Th. Walton, *Exploring transcendence*, in J. Bermudez (eds.), p. 265.

³² Among the compositions, Bonanzinga recalls the ancient *novena pri la festa di Maria*

mented than that of visual arts can also be partly retraced. It is known, in fact, that the Benedictine rule included the Divine Office and, therefore, the reciting and singing of the *Liturgy of the Hours*. Consequently, the choir might have been used daily by the nuns, whose singing would have been improved by the shape of the nave and its barrel vault³³. In respect to the accompanying music, it also seems obvious to consider the two pipe organs in the balconies, near the choir, even if one of the two is definitely a fake and built just for the sake of symmetry. In all likelihood, the other one originally worked, given that well-functioning pipes have been found behind the wooden ones in the front. This festive atmosphere must have been particularly solemn during the Assumption (on 15th August) and the Immaculate Conception (on 8th December), two Marian feasts in which the church of the *Immacolata Concezione* was involved³⁴. However, the festive atmosphere produced by these sounds could not be separated from the imaginary acoustic stimuli coming from some psalms exalting the singing and the music that were inscribed on the balconies (*Jubilate Deo in voce exultationis* and *In psalterium decemchordium psallite illi*).

Taking these considerations into account, we can understand that the ambience of a sacred space is not produced by singular elements. On the contrary, the devotional atmosphere arises from the smell of incense, the natural light setting effect or the candlelight tactile effect, the power of silence or the songs, in other words, it comes synaesthetically from an emotional space.

7. Conclusion

The architecture of the church was conceived on the base of a rational and visual paradigm and the iconography follows a linear point of view from the main door to the altar. Nevertheless, the “conceived space” can not be separated from the “perceived space” – that is the multisensory

Immacolata, still sung in Palermo in the ‘70s of the twentieth century with the accompaniment of guitar and violin (S. Bonanzinga, *Tradizioni musicali per l’Immacolata in Sicilia*, in D. Ciccarelli-M.D. Valenza, eds., *La Sicilia e l’Immacolata: non solo 150 anni*, Biblioteca Francescana Officina di Studi medievali, Palermo, 2006, pp. 80-81); among the poems, Valeria Orlando cites the *Viridarium Seraphicum* celebrating the Virgin and written by Bonaventura Stabile between 1644 and 1648, namely just after the *Immacolata* became patroness of Palermo in 1643 (V. Orlando, *L’Immacolata nella poesia di Bonaventura Stabile OFM Conv.* in D. Ciccarelli- M.D. Valenza, eds., pp. 333-335).

³³ On the relation between baroque churches architecture and acoustics, see R. Orłowski, *Acoustics and Architectural Form*, in D. Howard- L. Moretti (eds.), *Architettura e musica nella Venezia del Rinascimento*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2006, pp. 41-52.

³⁴ I. Grippaudo, *Produzione musicale e pratiche sonore nelle chiese palermitane fra Rinascimento e Barocco*, (PhD thesis), La Sapienza, Roma, 2009, p. 68.

ambiance of the church itself and that of the market outside – because the contrasting multisensorial stimuli strengthens the sacred atmosphere. Furthermore, the perceived space can not be separated from the “lived space”, that is the different feelings of devotion people can experience. A church is a contemplative and un-ordinary space, where everyone behaves according to a feeling of transcendence that, through sacred images, music, songs and rituals, makes the believer feel part of a community. Taking into account these different kinds of space is useful to integrate the rational point of view of architecture because a building can not be separated from its atmosphere.

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Sacred atmospheres A baroque church in a market as a case study

Although architecture has often granted a key role to the geometry-based Cartesian space and to the visual paradigm, the aesthetics of atmosphere – understood as an enquiry into the relationship between environmental expressive qualities and subjectively registered conditions – is able to provide further theoretical perspectives. The paper highlights that the aesthetics of atmospheres, taking into account all the senses, should be considered as a valid interpretative tool to integrate the traditional point of view of the history of architecture. To demonstrate this, the paper will focus on a case study: the baroque church of *Immacolata Concezione al Capo*, set in one of the historical markets of Palermo.

KEYWORDS: Baroque architecture; sacred architecture; ambiance; aesthetics; atmosphere