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# Rereading the past to interpret the present. A chance for the Straits Region conserved at the IUAV project archive

This article explores the role of the architectural archive as a repository of design memory and a tool for critical analysis, reinterpretation, and preservation of architectural and urban thought. By collecting drawings, photographs, models, and written documents, the archive reveals not only the technical and visual aspects of projects but also the underlying design process, highlighting the deep connection between representation, project development, and the transformation of urban and natural landscapes.

Drawing, understood as a key form of architectural knowledge and communication, plays a central role in interpreting the relationship between vision and design.

Supported by digital technologies, which overcome the limits of traditional analog techniques and enabling two and three dimensional modelling the representation of architecture becomes a tool for explor-

ing the design process in greater depth. This theoretical framework is tested through the case study of the projects for the Strait of Messina, developed between 1960 and 1969 by Giuseppe and Alberto Samonà and the Sicilian Urbanists Group (GUS). Preserved at the IUAV Project Archive, these drawings represent one of the first examples in Italy of a territorial-scale design vision. Rather than offering a purely technical solution to connecting Sicily to the mainland, they imagine a "future metropolis" where the city becomes an archipelago of interconnected settlements integrated with the geography of the Strait. Through digital drawing and reinterpretation, these projects are revisited not only to retrace their original principles but also to demonstrate the potential of the archive to inform contemporary design thinking and address current urban and environmental challenges.

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#### 1. THE ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVE AS CUSTO-DIAN OF DESIGN MEMORY

The architectural archive is not merely a repository of documents, photographs, models, and drawings, but a true depository of design memory (Moltemi, 2018).

It preserves the traces of the thinking and work of architects and urban planners, essential tools for understanding the genesis of an idea and the processes that led to the realization of buildings and settlements. Each document, photograph, and model testifies to an era, a vision, and a methodological approach that has influenced the transformation of the urban and natural landscape.

The value of these materials lies not only in their documentary function but also in their ability to reveal the creative process and the cultural context in which they were produced, allowing for a deeper reading of the design techniques that have helped shape the identity of cities and territories over time. From this perspective, the archive becomes an active laboratory, where the dialogue between past and present generates new design perspectives. Through the analysis of the traces left by the masters of architecture, it is possible to uncover the design choices, reflections, and tensions that characterized their thought.

Drawing, in particular, is not limited to representing a form or a structure; it becomes the privileged means through which the intellectual and creative process that led to the transformation of reality is made visible. In this sense, the archive is not a static repository but a dynamic resource that stimulates new readings and reinterpretations of design heritage, offering valuable insights for rethinking the great ideas that have shaped the urban environment in which we live.

### 2. DRAWING AS A TOOL FOR INTERPRETATION

Drawing has always played a fundamental role in architectural design practice, acting as a

bridge between abstract thought and its translation into signs.

Traditionally, it has been the medium through which architects communicate their vision, express ideas, and outline design solutions.

Drawing accompanies the entire design process, assuming a dual function of representation and depiction, with that notational and symbolic value for which Leon Battista Alberti encouraged his students to learn to draw as one learns to write (Amistadi, 2022).

However, traditional techniques sometimes imposed a simplification of complex content, as in the case of scale limitations in territorial representation or perspective distortions in depicting intricate spaces.

The advent of digital technologies has profoundly transformed this scenario, offering new tools for more precise and articulated modeling. In particular, digital drawing enables a critical re-examination of masterworks, allowing every element to be deconstructed and reassembled in order to better analyze the relationships between form, function, and context.

Digital modeling both two and three dimensional allows for the exploration of every aspect of a project: from formal composition to spatial organization, and the relationship between architecture and landscape.

In this way, digital drawing is no longer merely a representation of the world (whether built or imagined), but becomes a tool of critical analysis, enabling the reinterpretation of the traces left by designers and offering new interpretative perspectives.

This process of "stitching back together" design traces through digital means takes on the role of cultural renewal: it reveals overlooked aspects and brings new life to ideas that, due to technical limitations or historical contingencies, were never fully realized.

In this sense, digital drawing becomes indispensable for deeply understanding the design heritage of the past, activating a fertile dialogue between representation and reality, between the built city and the imagined one.

## 3. THE POST-WAR PERIOD AND THE BIRTH OF NEW IDEAS OF THE CITY

The post-World War II period represents one of the most significant moments in the history of Italian architecture, marked by intense cultural ferment and the urgent need for reconstruction. In this context, the city became an experimental laboratory where past experiences confronted the pressing needs of a traumatized present, shaped by unprecedented demographic growth. Reconstruction was not merely a technical matter, but a complex process involving the recovery of historical memory, the reinterpretation of traditions, and the adoption of new design methodologies. The urban concepts that emerged during this time aimed to overcome the limitations of traditional models, proposing solutions capable of addressing the challenges of rapid expansion and the need for greater integration between built form and landscape. In this scenario, the practice of archiving design experiments conducted within architectural studios took on a crucial role: it not only preserved the evidence of the work carried out, but today also serves as a valuable source of inspiration for contemporary design. The cultural tensions and reflections that had animated the post-war debate were transmitted through drawings, writings, and documents, forming an invaluable body of knowledge for future generations. From this perspective, the archive takes shape as a critical space where memory and innovation intersect, offering the possibility to reopen a dialogue with historical projects and reinterpret the cultural tensions that shaped architectural and urban thought in the second half of the twentieth century [1] (Bodrato, 2023). The richness of projects and ideas produced in that period was accompanied by a strong drive for innovation, aimed at building a city capable of responding to new social and economic needs. However, the exclusive use of analog tools as means of representation imposed certain limitations, sometimes reducing the complexity of design thinking to simplified and partial signs.



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# 4. THE STRAITS TERRITORY AS A PRIVILEGED FIELD OF EXPERIMENTATION

Among the most significant experimental explorations of new urban ideas developed in Italy during the second half of the twentieth century, the work of Giuseppe and Alberto Samonà between the 1960s and 1980s stands as a central reference, today almost entirely documented in the Samonà Archive at IUAV [2]. At the heart of this experience lies the designers' shared belief in the possibility of inscribing the Straits territory (fig. 1) within a single comprehensive design in which the idea of a "city in extension" corresponds to the geographic unity that hosts and shapes it. Following nearly a decade of research initiated with the General Town Plan of Messina in 1960 –

where the concept of a "Biport" (fig. 2) was first introduced – in 1969 the Samonàs participated in the International Ideas Competition [3] for a permanent connection across the Straits, presenting their project for a Future Metropolis of the Straits (fig. 3), articulated in 10 design boards (Cardullo, 2016). The proposal was met with great interest, demonstrating that the issue of connection could be addressed in a radical and visionary manner. Among the 144 submissions, 12 were awarded (Cardullo, 2006), highlighting the plurality of solutions capable of reinterpreting the relationship between city and territory and managing ongoing settlement processes.

The proposals by the Quaroni-Quistelli group and, most notably, that of the Samonàs stood out for their integrated approach to the theme of connection, understood not as an isolated infrastructural problem but as an opportunity for urban and territorial transformation.

The bridge was thus conceived not as an autonomous structure, but as the focal point of a broader plan capable of redesigning the entire Straits area, integrating technical, settlement, and landscape dimensions. The idea of connection merged with that of urban regeneration: Messina, Reggio Calabria, and Villa San Giovanni were reimagined as a unified settlement system, able to engage with the natural morphology and to overcome long-standing geographical and infrastructural discontinuities by uniting these entities in one grand master plan (fig. 4).







Fig. 2 - The Straits Cities with the design of the Biport (PRG 1960). Distribution of urban structures. Graphic elaborations by the author.



Fig. 3 - The design for the Straits Future Metropolis (1969). Distribution of urban structures. Graphic elaborations by the author.





Fig. 4 -The project for a Future Metropolis of the Straits. Masterplan. Graphic elaborations by the author.

### 5. THE DESIGN OF A GEOGRAPHIC CITY. THE FU-TURE METROPOLIS OF THE STRAITS

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From this perspective, the project by Giuseppe and Alberto Samonà takes shape as a true manifesto for settlement renewal, in which the traditional infrastructural response is surpassed by an integrated vision capable of redefining the entire territorial structure of the Straits.

The Future Metropolis is not limited to hosting a bridge [4] that links two shores, but proposes a new idea of the city where architecture, landscape, and social functions merge into a unified and coherent system. Abandoning the hypothesis of the "Biport" put forward in the 1960 [5] General Town Plan of Messina and now deemed inadequate to represent the territory's complexity, the Samonas identify the large roadstead between Villa San Giovanni and Reggio Calabria as the natural fulcrum of the new settlement structure. Infrastructure, from the bridge to the railway and road networks, takes



Fig. 5 - Messina. The plain and the blocks. Graphic elaborations by the author.



Fig. 6 - The linear city along the coast between Messina and Cape Peloro. Graphic elaborations by the author.

on a dual function: beyond physically linking the two shores, it becomes a generator of new urban nodes capable of redefining the distribution of "urban clusters" throughout the territory. The project thus aims to merge economic, social, and spatial regeneration into a single vision: the city rediscovers in the form of the land its etymological matrix (Arís, 2007), and in geography the dynamic field of its expansion.

The Future Metropolis is conceived as an archipelago city, composed of autonomous vet interconnected settlement units, capable of engaging with the orographic and environmental specificities of the context. Each architectural "island" maintains its own identity but is harmoniously integrated into the urban system, helping to define a constructed landscape in which the relationship between built form and nature becomes a generative element of territorial identity.

The proposed solutions range from courtyard structures to linear buildings and pavilions,



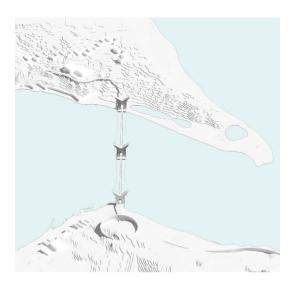


Fig. 7 - The slopes and redents. Cape Peloro and Punta Pezzo Graphic elaborations by the author.

adapted to the site's morphology but unified by a single compositional principle: the construction of a cohesive, resilient urban fabric in dialogue with modernity.

Messina is réimagined as a "theater-shaped" city, lying along the curvature of the coast and developed on terraces that rise to the slopes of the Peloritani mountains (figs. 5, 6).

This configuration enhances the relationship between city and landscape, adapting to variations in the terrain seasonal rivers, protrusions, natural terraces and hosting a curtain of buildings that encloses the settlement toward the mountains, marking the rocky ridge with a scenographic sequence of stepped edifices. Villa San Giovanni assumes a linear development, with large courtyard buildings facing the Straits (fig. 7), while Reggio Calabria is articulated along terraces through a sequence of parallel bars and large semicircular volumes that define the threshold between city and nature (fig. 9).

Between these two urban poles lies the Straits' harbor-roadstead, planned in the vallevs between Gallico and Catona: an infrastructure designed to accommodate the maritime traffic generated by a new settlement of over half a million inhabitants (fig. 8). Another innovative element is the network of "service containers": regular, cube-shaped volumes in plan (300 meters per side), articulated on twelve floors to a height of sixty meters, and connected by a metro-railway line.

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In these multifunctional spaces cultural, administrative, commercial, social the idea of a polycentric city takes form, structured by nodes of aggregation capable of sustaining a new urban fabric that is efficient and sustainable. In this synthesis of infrastructure and morphology, technology and geography, the Samona pro-



Fig. 8 - The sparse harbor between the valleys of Gallico and Catona. Graphic elaborations by the author.



Fig. 9 - Reggio Calabria. The city by terraces. Graphic elaborations by the author.

ject acquires the status of a visionary yet concrete proposal: an alternative model of territorial regeneration, capable of responding to contemporary transformations through a new idea of urban form.

#### 6. THE VALUE OF MEMORY AND THE RECON-STRUCTION OF THOUGHT

The recovery of archival materials represents a crucial step in reconstructing architectural thinking and understanding the major ideas that shaped the twentieth century.

Through the analysis of drawings, models, and preserved documents, one can trace the decisions, tensions, and contradictions that animated the creative process of architects.

Drawing, as the privileged language of architecture, becomes a tool for reading the past, capable of revealing details and nuances that often remained hidden behind the inevitable limitations



of a necessarily synthetic representation, tied to the medium on which it was produced.

The critical redrawing of archival materials thus becomes an exercise in historical and conceptual recovery, in which the confrontation with the past is facilitated by the new possibilities offered by digital technologies.

The practice of drawing, which has always mediated the relationship between theoretical thought and reality, is today enriched by the ability to analyze and reinterpret design traces in greater detail. This dialogue between memory and innovation not only enables a reassessment of the contributions of past authors but also offers

valuable insights for addressing the challenges of contemporary design, where sustainability and settlement quality play a central role.

The case of the Straits area is emblematic: Giuseppe Samonà's demographic forecasts, presented in the first of the ten competition boards, have come true, and yet the cities have progres-



Fig. 10 - The Future Straits Metropolis. Study model. Graphic elaborations by the author.



sively drifted apart, effectively rejecting the metropolitan dimension that had been proposed at the time, along with the idea of form that could have governed them. On the one hand, then, the issue of territorial and geographical unity remains unresolved; on the other, the need to connect Sicily to the mainland via a bridge has once again been recently raised but without a design and territorial framework, it appears as a hollow and alien work, disconnected from its context. The forms of the Samonàs' project for a Metropo-

li Futura dello Stretto stage the coexistence of different themes that intersect within the proposal through a continuous exchange between the urban and architectural dimensions: an interrelationship between architecture and territory, between urban design and the history of places, between geometry and geography, to use a Gregottian definition (Berlingieri, 2018).

The forms thus become spaces that interpret the nature of the places, turning into a representation of an idea of archipelago-city extended to the

geographical scale a vision still deeply needed by the cities of Villa San Giovanni, Reggio Calabria, and Messina (figs. 10, 11).

The project constantly and necessarily maintains, in the background, the integration between architectural design and urban planning, understood as a single, broad discipline capable of governing the construction of the city.

Ideologically, for the Samonàs, it was unthinkable that the bridge alone, in its isolation as a large infrastructure, could reorganize settlement pat-

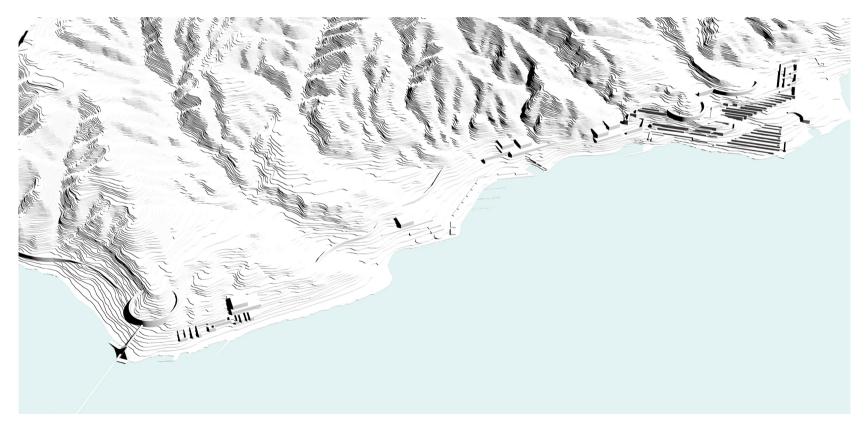


Fig. 11 - The Future Straits Metropolis. Study model. Graphic elaborations by the author.



have undergone.

terns; on the contrary, the power of such an intervention should have shifted the focus toward the territory or rather, toward the changes and transformations that the entire region should

This vision for the cities of the Strait, extended



Fig. 12 - The project for a Future Metropolis of the Straits. The territorial room as a unit of urban project. Graphic elaborations by the author.

to the geographic scale, long remained for the Samonàs the most suitable solution to address the social, economic, and urban problems and to redeem these territories from the state of neglect in which they languished, relying on architecture as a resolving science, capable of inducing transformation.

In a conference organized by InArch in 1971 in Messina, Giuseppe Samonà stressed the need to found the city of tomorrow through the morphological unity represented by the cities of Messina, Reggio Calabria, and Villa San Giovanni (fig. 12), hoping to "eliminate the shortsighted administrative rivalries of both regions and municipalities, to look instead toward a European dimen-

sion of the regions, abandon narrow ideas and stubborn traditions, and have the courage to face large-scale problems appropriate to a new future" (Samonà, 1971).

The practice of "getting things done" and of human action affects even the best intuitions: so it was for the Samonas, whose final project for the Straits area linked to the commission for drafting the General Urban Plan (P.R.G.) of Villa San Giovanni, presented in three versions between 1962 and 1977 reflects how even the strongest ideas, perhaps because detached from everyday practice, clash with the logic governing the transformation of the built environment. In the final version of the 1977 P.R.G., in fact, there is no longer room to propose a vision of the Straits area in its geographical extension, nor any hypothesis on settlement forms; the will to unify the territorial system is gone, as is the intention to redistribute balances by completing the area's functional needs through the construction of the porto-rada. The plan merely identifies following the usual practice of urban planning new homogeneous territorial zones, proposing a conventional and predictable urban expansion by development areas. In 1982, Giuseppe Samonà would return one last time to speak of the Straits city-region, radically revising the wholly negative judgment expressed in the 1960 report for the P.R.G. of Messina on the city built by Borzi after the earthquake. He instead defined Messina as "a city of elegant character thanks to the Borzì Plan, which preserved both the medieval layout of the old city and the grid structure of the new one, renouncing abstract models imported from beyond the Alps" (Samonà, 1982), thereby formulating a series of new proposals. He revived the idea of service clusters to be placed at significant points along the Peloritani hills' frame, to redesign with an alternation of full and empty the mountain profile [6]. For the Calabrian coast, he proposed a hilly landscape to be artificialized with port infrastructures: "A plan that, in its broad outlines, would position Messina on a platform of interventions that enhance its refined quality, especially in its relationship with the sea, and instead, on

the opposite shore, would create a very modern structure by artificializing the hilly landscape, with a combination of port infrastructures, container facilities, other services and commercial centers, all appropriately arranged according to an expressive iconography, in a formal whole that could be of great significance" (Samonà, 1982). In this speech, Giuseppe Samonà once again reaffirmed the strategic value of locating a major Mediterranean porto-rada in the area between Reggio Calabria and Villa San Giovanni, as an infrastructure capable of fostering the development of the Straits region.

The final act of reflection on the Straits area is entrusted to Alberto Samonà who, in a 1986 article, did not rule out the possibility of constructing the bridge but simultaneously stated that it should be seen as only one of the infrastructural elements within an organic project.

A project that must also include the porto-rada to relaunch port activities, the strengthening of connections between the two shores particularly between Messina and Reggio Calabria the rethinking of services between the two Straits cities, and the redesign of the bridge's junction points.

A revival of the Metropoli Futura dello Stretto proposal, this time starting from the sea, the true space of nature within the Straits landscape, combining attention to the overall design of the two coasts with the detailing of the small parts that compose it.

#### CONCLUSIONS: A LEGACY FOR THE FUTURE

The project for the Metropoli Futura dello Stretto, as envisioned by Giuseppe and Alberto Samonà, represents a fundamental contribution to the architectural discourse of the twentieth century. It is not merely a technical solution for connecting Sicily to the mainland, but rather an urban utopia that intertwines architecture, landscape, and society (fig. 13). Preserved in the IUAV Project Archive, this vision introduced an innovative approach to reimagining the urban fabric and addressing the challenges posed



by a constantly evolving territorial context. Today, as issues such as urban sprawl, environmental sustainability, and regeneration dominate public discourse, the call for a design practice that engages with both natural and cultural dimensions becomes particularly compelling. This urgency applies not only to the specific context of the Strait but also more broadly, in response to the contemporary urban crisis – what Koolhaas (2006) termed Junkspace - in which our built environments drift without identity. The relevance of the Samonas' vision lies in its capacity to span innovation and tradition, to operate across geographic and urban scales, and to connect memory with forward-thinking design. The Metropoli Futura dello Stretto stands not only as an engineering feat but as a symbol of regeneration and aspiration, a beacon guiding the way toward a future city where innovation is in dialogue with tradition, and design becomes a shared language for shaping transformation. Ultimately, the long and complex process that led to the development of such visionary proposals underscores the enduring power of archival memory and the pivotal role of drawing, both traditional and digital, as a bridge between past experience and future potential. More than ever, the imperative is to let the past converse with the present, harnessing archival knowledge to inspire new projective visions attuned to a society in continuous transformation. Far beyond its technical dimensions, the Metropoli Futura dello Stretto must be seen as an ideological and cultural manifesto. It calls on us to revisit and reinterpret the great ideas of twentieth-century architecture in the light of today's pressing challenges.

The project, documented within the IUAV Project Archive (Cortese, Corvino, Kim, 2003), stands as a testament to an age of ambitious experimentation, an enduring source of inspiration for architects, urbanists, and scholars committed to rethinking the role of design in shaping the built environment, blending sustainability, aesthetics, and functionality. The legacy of the Samonàs, coupled with the

richness of the archival materials, constitutes a heritage of great value, one that continues to foster critical reflection on the future of cities. As urban transformation becomes increasingly conditioned by the need to reconcile technological advancement, environmental responsibility, and spatial quality, the demand for an integrated vision of architecture and territory becomes ever more urgent. Concepts once conveyed through a few sketches and fragments now acquire renewed energy through digital instruments, which make it possible to examine and reinterpret the design process in its full complexity. This extended jour-

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ney, interweaving memory with innovation, and utopia with realism, encourages us to perceive architecture as an art capable of reshaping the destiny of places. Today, more than ever, we must draw from the past to envision the future, nurturing design strategies that are responsive to the dynamic needs of contemporary life. In this spirit, the project for a Metropoli Futura dello Stretto re-emerges not simply as an infrastructural proposal, but as a powerful vision of renewal, a lighthouse illuminating the path toward a city of the future, where tradition and innovation coexist, and drawing becomes the universal medium through which to govern change.



Fig. 13 - The project for a Future Metropolis of the Straits as a new urban utopia. Graphic elaborations by the author.

#### NOTES

- [1] The architectural archives proiect was launched in the late 1990s by the Directorate-General for Archives, with the aim of ensuring the proper preservation, understanding, and accessibility of these sources, which are of particular importance for the history of architecture and urban planning. They are essential for reconstructing the work of designers and their creations, and thus for understanding the transformations of the built environment and the territory, as well as serving as an accurate reference for restoration interventions.
- [2] The IUAV's project archive houses the Samonà Fund, which has about 120,000 pieces of drawings, plans, writings and photographs related to the professional activities of Giuseppe Samonà and his collaborators, covering a time span from the 1920s to the 1970s. Specifically within the fund it is possible to consult the files. "PRG: Messina," "Territorial plan of the Milazzo-Messina industrial belt." "Strait of Messina: competition." and "Villa S. Giovanni," which contain the drawings that provided the documentary basis for these graphic edits.
- [3] Ministerial Decree 384/1968 financed studies related to the road and rail link between Calabria and Sicily over the Strait of Messina, authorizing ANAS and FF.SS. to announce an international competition of ideas for the "Stable Road and Rail Link between Sicily and the Continent." The International Ideas Competition sponsored by the Ministry of Public Works and announced in February 1969 had a large response in terms of participation and national and international public interest: of the one hundred for-

- ty-four participants, twelve groups were awarded ex aequo, six for first prize and six for second prize.
- 41 Focusing on the Suspension Bridge, the subject of the competition, the Samonas devote only two tables out of ten (only table four and table five respectively "the Bridge as a Structure" and "the Bridge as Architecture" are dedicated to the technical problem of stable crossing) the other tables are intended to describe the development of the future Metropolis from the demographic forecasts (the subject of tables two and three) to the characteristics of the urban layout (the subject of tables six and seven) to the building types (developed in table eight) and studies related to the realization of a roadstead port (in tables nine and ten). The first table, on the other hand, hosts two extraordinary perspectives of the project drawn by Giuseppe Samonà himself.
- [5] After the General Regulatory Plan for the city of Messina, other experiences such as the Milazzo General Regulatory Plan (1962). the Villa San Giovanni General Regulatory Plan (1963), the Scilla General Regulatory Plan (1964). and the Industrial Nucleus Regulatory Plan of the Province of Messina (1964 P Territorial Plan of the Tyrrhenian Consortium or the Milazzo-Messina Industrial Area), represent occasions to reaffirm and carry forward a single design useful for the formulation of the idea of the city-region of the Strait as an organic project.
- [6] The relationship between Giuseppe Samonà and Sicily is constant over time, even during his long period as director of the IUAV (Airoldi, 2014).

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