

The Architecture of Injustice

Eight years ago the local government in Palermo announced that the Immigration Office would be moved. For decades it has been housed in a seventeenth century aristocratic villa, formerly of the Ventimiglia family, in the San Lorenzo neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city. Certainly not a neighbourhood where many recently arrived immigrants live, it often takes people several hours on public transport to arrive there. The immigration office has also always had an approach that enforces people to turn up at the gates at 8.30 am, meaning that often people have to wake up at 5 to get the buses and ensure they arrive on time; some people from outside of the city have to arrive the night before. The new offices were announced to be part of the 'Cittadella della polizia' in the neighborhood of Boccadifalco – still in the suburbs but much better connected to the center of the city, with a nearby tram stop. More importantly, the whole structure would be a new build: rather than trying to adapt the spaces of a dilapidated baroque home to the needs of the police and the communities renewing their documents, everything would be designed from the ground up.



Immigration Office Palermo, Photo: Richard Braude

The immigration office in Palermo deals all of the foreigners in the city and a section of the province, which we could estimate at around 50,000 people, and as well as being the place where everyone must come for appointments to renew and be issued with their documents, has also in the past been occasionally used as an improvised 'hotspot', back when there were still migrant boat landings in Palermo (a practice which was essentially stopped after 2018 when Salvini came to

power, for fear of creating a political conflict between him and the pro-migrant mayor, Orlando). In these instances, hundreds of people were made to sleep on the floor of the courtyard. A different and more long-standing emergency was, of course, the Covid 19 pandemic; in this period the police decided to no longer allow anyone to wait in the shady courtyard each morning, but instead forced everyone to crowd along the narrow pavement between the main gates and the busy road, without anywhere to sit – children, old people, pregnant women. After the covid emergency ended, this practice continued. The combination of forcing everyone to come at the same early hour, massed up outside the gates, as well as a chronic lack of staff – most of all interpreters – creates an environment that encourages conflict, both among the people waiting, and between them and the police agents. Conflicts that are then easily misinterpreted, in a racist manner, as somehow

indicative of a national or ethnic characteristic, when in reality anyone in a similar situation would act in the same manner.

It was thus very welcome news that there would be a new building, one with the space necessary to avoid conflicts, built for the purpose, with appropriate spaces for waiting. But, perhaps predictably, this isn't what happened. A few months ago, after years of construction, the new 'Cittadella' and the new immigration office finally opened. While there are certainly some improvements – a few stone benches on the perimeter; a small car park internal to the complex – the police have somehow managed to nevertheless repeat the situation of pointless waiting and insufferable crowding. Everyone still has to come at 8.30 am, and crowd around a few temporary fences in the corner of the building, to pass their appointment papers over to the agents. Hands waving bits of paper over the bars, as if in a prison or a detention centre; officers barking orders, children crying. No numbers for people to take, no board to see when your turn comes up, no rows of seats: nothing of the most basic conveniences that would make for a peaceful situation. As if all of the rules and regulations of Italy's racist immigration system weren't enough, the whole physical and organizational environment simply underlines how little respect is given to foreigners. And this time around, apparently everything was designed this way.

Richard Braude, Arci Porco Rosso

Palermo, 20.05.2024