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Helen Hills

Invisible City: The Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, xii + 268 pp., 10 color and 44 b/w illus. \$65, ISBN 0-19-511774-3

Imagining the sexuality of nuns has been a perennial preoccupation in Western literature. Boccaccio treated it, memorably, at the end of the medieval period. In *I promessi sposi* (1842), Alessandro Manzoni based his horrific description of forced monacation (and its consequences) on the sensational historical figure of Suor Virginia, the “Nun of Monza.” That documented case of love, betrayal, murder, immuration, and forgiveness mostly transpired behind the porous walls of the convent. In another notable literary description of a nunnery—the imaginary convent of the Petit-Picpus in Paris—Victor Hugo (*Les misérables*, 1862) provided a detailed account of the asperities of monastic life and, in this case, even their dilapidated architectural setting. Ever aware of the emotive capacity of architecture, Hugo described the convent’s buildings and spaces as embodying the psychology of the cloistered.

Helen Hills’s well-researched book on aristocratic Neapolitan convents aims to do that too, but it also provides a different view of life inside and around such “sacred fortresses” of female virtue, a view sometimes radically at variance with the classic fictional accounts. Arguing that female monasticism needs to be looked at more sociologically, she examines how the nuns’ sexuality was expressed in architecture and urbanism in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Naples. Her approach seeks to expose the socioeconomic realities of female monastic culture. Even in the post-Tridentine environment of supposedly rigorous enclosure, the porosity of walls is again a major factor. Her point is that forces outside the convent were at least as important for female monasticism as was any governing rule or spiritual aspiration. Furthermore, these external

factors, which sought to control the sexuality of nuns, emerge in the architectural design, ornament, and urbanism of the major convents. Most intriguing of all, Hills looks to these material components of the cloister for reflections of the sexuality of nuns as understood by themselves individually, in their corporate identity, and by their secular families.

She argues that Naples presents a special case because of the density of monastic construction, which surpassed even that of Rome. This, in turn, was a function of a feudal system not only still in place but also reinvigorated by primogeniture and entail, especially after a 1595 vice-regal decree excluding female feudal inheritance. In the face of economic pressures and new competition from a rising professional class at the end of the sixteenth century, old aristocracy aimed to preserve its patrimony by allowing only one son to marry and sending excess daughters to convents. At the same time these families sought to maintain family status by assuring a protected and appropriately grand setting for their chaste female progeny. This trend added enormously to the growth and wealth of aristocratic monasteries. In its own turn, a new nobility (engendered by an emergent Spanish bureaucracy) in competition with the older families attempted to place its daughters in those convents of highest social status, just as it sought marriage alliances with the elite nobles. Skyrocketing dowries and *vitalizi*—and hereditary claims on some convents by individual families—guaranteed the exclusivity of the institutions and relegated the less well-endowed to the social periphery. These socioeconomic factors generated a boom in convent construction and expansion. This justifies Hills’s focus on Naples.

The background to Neapolitan female monasticism has been well researched by a number of Italian economic and social historians, and Hills makes good use of the secondary literature, extracting from it valuable data for understanding those phenomena relevant to architecture and urbanism. Not surprisingly, as old convents expanded

and new ones struggled for space to build, many conflicts arose, not only between monastic and nearby secular proprietors but also among religious institutions. Where monastic wall abuts palace façade or, especially, when two conventual institutions touch stone to stone or even visually interface—campanile to cortile or portal to portal—bitter power struggles sometimes ensued, leaving a paper trail of ecclesiastical petitions and civil suits. Perceiving the value of such documents, Hills has labored diligently in the Archivio di Stato in Naples and brought forth fascinating detail on which she bases her interpretation.

This is the realm of power politics and Hills’s work demonstrates how cloistered nuns were able to assert themselves effectively in what might otherwise be seen as a predominately male arena of competition. She focuses on the arguments litigants brought forward to support their respective positions and she sees these as being particularly revealing of unspoken ambition and hidden anxiety.

Conflicts could turn acrimonious and even violent, revealing just how passionate was the impulse to aggrandize or how fearful was the perceived potential for optical domination or even physical violation. As an instance of the first, Hills cites the nuns of the Santa Casa degl’Incurabili, who in 1728, in a startling reversal of gender roles, broke through the walls of a neighboring male institution to stake their claim on the property. They refused to leave the conquered territory until physically threatened with clubs by soldiers brought in to set things aright. In the end, though, the nuns got what they wanted.

Of special concern to convents were cases of the second instance. A neighboring window, belvedere, or campanile might allow visual access into a cloister, passageway, or dormitory and expose a nun to the secular world. Such a casual sighting in the case of the “Nun of Monza” led to the breaching of the walls of the convent and, ultimately, the virtue of the Suor Virginia.

Hills’s research, however, shows that nuns were just as aggressive in defending

their views out toward the city or the Bay of Naples when some neighboring property owner threatened them with a higher wall or expanded belvedere. Aristocratic nuns felt entitled to see out, but without being exposed to the view of others, and they exercised power to defend their interests, including calling to the cause all family connections. As Hills demonstrates, the cords of power relationships and aristocratic privilege—if not the eyes of neighbors—easily traversed monastic walls.

Readers will be grateful for Hills's concrete treatment of the particular architectural form the aristocratic nuns' sense of entitlement created. Here we can also see how the expectations of "lady nuns" could give shape to interior spaces. The convent church had to be both open to the public and at the same time visible to the nuns. It therefore formed a connector between the secular and spiritual worlds—to see without being seen. Hills gives much attention to grills (clerestory *gelosie*) and grates, including an impressively spiked one in the convent of Santa Chiara, but her exceptional contribution is the analysis of the elevated nuns' choir, which received special attention in Naples. Traditionally located behind the high altar wall, the nuns' choir assured privileged visual access, through grates, to the Eucharist, while at the same time separating the professed from the secular worshippers in the nave. In several Neapolitan convents (S. Gregorio Armeno, S. Maria Regina Coeli, S. Maria della Sapienza, S. Giuseppe dei Ruffi) the choir levitated above the clerestory. This afforded a commanding view of the church, if not the altar, while protecting against undesired exposure from below. Most spectacularly, since the vault of the choir was open to view from the nave, the sound of disembodied angelic voices easily resonated throughout the church, creating a mysterious and compelling spiritual effect to the advantage of nuns and laypersons alike. A further practical benefit accrued to the nuns, who now could enter the choir at the same level as their cells, without the inconvenience and risk of

descending to the mundane world. Hills is effective in emphasizing just how such architectural arrangements added to the prestige of nuns, whose secular families, it should not be forgotten, were frequently in attendance below.

Here and there in the text the reader may wish for a more extended analysis of the visual and graphic material reproduced, which is frustratingly meager. The latter concern may be the result of an editorial limitation, and the interpretive astringency in the handling of the imagery presented is perhaps a principled commitment to avoid explaining too much. In that case Hills has left plenty to the reader's imagination, making for a stimulating—if occasionally difficult—book.

More challenging for some readers will be the theoretical framework within which Hills fits her analytical methodology. Here she employs the concept of the *habitus* (from Pierre Bourdieu): "Architecture constructed the *habitus* which connected common interest groups" (7). A *habitus* is a social practice tacitly recognized by its adherents—in this instance the aristocratic consciousness of the nuns and their families as articulated in their treatment of the chaste female body. Hills sees this in convent architecture and makes a good case for it throughout the analytical sections of the book. Here architecture is the synecdoche of the masked female body as observed in the nuns' dress and in the austere exteriors of conventual architecture—thus, "invisible city." Architecture is therefore material expression of the *habitus* of aristocratic nuns' sexual identity.

Surprisingly, in the conclusion, Hills pulls back from the initially stated position and substitutes metaphor for *habitus*: "Convent buildings were a metaphor for the virginal upper-class female body" (174). Just when one is prepared to accept the analogy between social practice and social body as concretized in the physical realities of architecture, the argument takes a rhetorical turn. Still, readers will be appreciative of Hills's persuasive combination of solid archival research and sociologically oriented in-

terpretive strategy. It has produced an innovative study worthy of the best recent scholarship on the visual culture of female monasticism, one that unmasks the raw social forces that—scarcely hindered—operated through those famously porous walls of imagined enclosure.

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Olga Medvedkova
**Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond,
Architecte 1679–1719. De Paris à
Saint-Pétersbourg**

Paris: Alain Baudry et Cie, 2007, 360 pp., 108
illus., 1 app., €65 (individual), €80 (institutional),
ISBN 978-29528617-0-0

This solid book derives from an even more substantial two-volume thesis submitted to the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in 2000 and devoted more broadly to French influence on eighteenth-century Russian architecture. Its author, Olga Medvedkova, who came to Paris from Russia in 1992, previously coauthored with the historian Wladimir Berelowitch an excellent general history of St. Petersburg.¹ Medvedkova's new book, which she prefers to call a simple biography rather than an art historical monograph lest she appear to exaggerate its subject's importance (19), is a mature work of scholarship, one that combines the vigorous cataloging typical of Russian art scholarship with the edgy analytic verve of French cultural history. It is a delight to read, a feast of fresh detail and fine provocations.

The book's title says much about its contents. Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond moved as a rising young architect from Paris to St. Petersburg and there died when only forty years old. What kind of legacy can he have left behind, and where? He worked in Russia for less than three years, helping Peter the Great create St. Petersburg (founded in 1703) and suburban Peterhof (1705), Peter's Versailles on the Baltic. Most of the structures he designed in Russia—those that have not been obliterated—have been more or less radically altered,