

# A REGAL LEGACY

## REGENERATING THE PLAIN OF CASERTA

The plain of Caserta, situated on the outskirts of Naples, is home to one of Italy's 33 World Heritage Sites, the eighteenth-century Caserta Complex, which was inscribed in 1997. Over the last 200 years, a system of ten quarries has been dug into the hills that encircle the plain, encroaching on its natural and built heritage. In 2000, the Department for the Environment, Heritage and Arts of Caserta and Benvenuto and the Neapolitan City Council commissioned two feasibility studies aimed (in different ways) at exploring options for the re-use and the regeneration of the quarries, which would improve rather than degrade the health of the World Heritage Site. Ecosfera s.p.a., a Rome-based economic, urban planning and environmental consultancy, is leading the teams that are now completing both studies. **Alessandra Floriana**, Head of Urban Planning and Regeneration at Ecosfera s.p.a., reports on the philosophy behind the proposed regeneration measures that have emerged from this process, and outlines each of the planned interventions.

Since 1800, when the Maddaloni quarry was first dug, the plain of Caserta has been home to a system of quarries which has had a major impact not just on the area's historic environment and natural heritage, but also on its economy - just two of the quarries today account for 80 per cent of all cement production in the Region of Campania. The quarries, which are located within the areas of three separate local authorities (Caserta, Casagiove and Maddaloni), have progressively and fundamentally encroached on the natural landscape and a particularly rich built heritage, which includes the complex of historic buildings and monuments at Caserta.



particular significance is the way in which the man-made structures are integrated into, rather than imposed upon, the natural environment. The whole of the complex was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997.

Charles III's vision for the site was not just to construct a Royal Palace to rival his ancestors' homes at Versailles and Escorial, but also to provide the Kingdom of Naples with a country seat of government that was more secure against the artillery attacks of potential enemies. The plain of Caserta, known to the Romans as the *campania felix* (the 'blessed country'), offered fertile soil, a mild climate and plentiful water, from the river Volturno. (In the medieval period, the area became known as the *Terra di Lavoro*, from the Latin *Terra Leboriae*, or 'land of the

Leborini', the ancient tribe that lived there before the Roman conquest.) In addition, the plain was almost entirely free of fixed human settlement, with the ancient village of Caserta (now Casertavecchia), up in the nearby Tifatini Hills, being the only such dwelling place for miles around. The plain of Caserta, therefore, provided an ideal location for realising the ambitious vision of the Bourbon King, and was duly nominated as the site for development.

The genius of Vanvitelli was to realise this vision not just in the architecture that reflected the power and stature of the Kingdom (especially the 62,000-square-metre Palace with 1,008 rooms), or in the surrounding parkland (which aspired to 'encyclopaedic coverage' of European garden traditions). Critically, it was in the creation of an urban development that took its cues from the land itself and, using the Royal Palace as a fulcrum, resulted in a landscape in which the built and the natural - function and form - are in perfect balance.

The natural landscape frames the site along a perspective axis formed by the great tree-lined avenue that leads to and from Naples, through the elliptical piazza opposite the Reggia, across the Telescope Gallery of the Royal Palace, into the avenue that leads through the park, to the long waterfall that connects the town and the new urban

### A regal legacy

The Caserta complex was commissioned by the Bourbon king, Charles III of Spain (King of Naples in the mid-eighteenth century) and designed in the baroque style by southern Italy's greatest architect, Luigi Vanvitelli, between 1751 and 1774. This collection of monuments is exceptional for the way in which it brings together the sumptuous Royal Palace (the last great building of the Italian baroque) and its park and gardens, as well as the natural woodland, a number of hunting lodges, an aqueduct, and an industrial establishment for the production of silk. Of

landscape to the nearest levels of the Monti Tifatini.

The functionality of the site is clearly reflected in the 38-kilometre aqueduct, built to supply fresh water to the new settlement, and the irrigation system implemented at the waterfall in the park. It is also to be seen in the buildings designed specifically as administrative, manufacturing, leisure and cultural centres - integral elements of the new Royal 'city'. Typical of this is the (unfinished) project of San Leucio, a product of the social 'utopia' envisioned by Charles' heir, Ferdinand IV. He had the idea for the development of a silk-producing city, founded on the principle of equality and built to accommodate harmoniously the silk factories, schools, churches, and homes of the citizens, as well as a Royal residence.

This sympathetic relationship between the built and natural landscapes of the Reggia di Caserta was gradually but irrevocably eroded by progressive infrastructural works including a rail link, opened in the mid-nineteenth century, which cuts across the main access road into the Reggia, and property development on the Caserta plain, which has gone largely unregulated over the years. This encroachment was eventually and dramatically capped off with the development of the quarries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## Planning for regeneration

In 1999, a Steering Group convened by the Ministry of Culture and chaired by the lead local authority in the Reggia, was tasked with identifying development options that would secure the future of the Royal Palace. Critically, high on its list of priorities was a programme of natural landscape remediation, the clear implication being that the environmental context of the broader destination is an indivisible element of the heritage complex. This bold statement was tempered with a healthy dose of pragmatism and a realisation that the reclamation and redevelopment programme should not be driven by nostalgia: instead, the Steering Group would identify the interventions required to marry the desire for restoration with the search for new functions and qualities that derive from a more heavily developed urban context.

The two feasibility studies were the instruments through which the client and its consultants sought to identify a 'post



industrial' natural landscape in the stretch of the Monti Tifatini foothills that acts as the buffer between the plain (with its conurbations of Casagiove, Caserta and Maddaloni, as well as the Royal Palace), and the natural resources of the surrounding hills and mountains.

This new natural heritage asset would need to hark back to the underlying philosophy of Vanvitello's vision, capable of restoring the linkages, in terms of form and function, between the 'developed' plain and the 'natural' upland. The regeneration and re-use of the quarries therefore became an opportunity to resolve the ongoing conflict between the built and natural heritage. At the same time it afforded the opportunity to transform at least some of the brownfield sites into visitor destinations capable of complementing or supporting the World Heritage Site, the town of Caserta, the Monti Tifatini (where environmental tourism is encouraged), and the entire Neapolitan metropolitan area.

On this basis, the two separate studies (commissioned by separate client groups) were delivered jointly, under the single direction of Ecosfera s.p.a. This highly coordinated approach allowed the various development options that emerged throughout the course of both studies to fit neatly together within the ambit of a single, integrated regeneration project. The project envisions three main areas of intervention.

A first set of interventions will have direct impact on the World Heritage Site. Two of the existing quarries (to the north and north-west of the park) will host a set of new services:

- The 'Porta a Monte' (Gateway to the Hills) of the Reggia, incorporating tourist services and a 'contemporary garden'.
- A research centre and nursery developed in partnership with the Faculty of Agriculture at the University

of Naples, designed to help preserve and maintain the heritage landscape of the park.

- The base and starting point of a network of nature/heritage trails and footpaths that extend into San Leucio, the oasis of San Silvestro, and Mount Tifata.

The second set of interventions focuses on a restructuring of the gateway into the natural park, with a series of visitor-oriented developments spread over four of the five quarries considered in the studies. In addition to exploring the physical and financial feasibility of these projects individually, the interdependence between them was recognised in a unified management model for their development and implementation.

A third and final set of interventions focuses on the main bed of one of the quarries and the development of a cluster of science and technology firms, laboratories and institutes linked directly to the University's Faculties of Engineering, Architecture and Environmental Sciences. These would benefit from easy and immediate access to a formidable 'open air lab' for instruction and experimentation in the cultivation, regeneration and reclamation of disused quarries - a 'post industrial' theme and niche that offers significant potential, particularly in the immediate area (25 quarries in the vicinity of Caserta and 109 in the Region of Campania), but also throughout Italy and abroad.

Taken together, these development options constitute a regeneration 'package', developed in concert by the project Steering Group (including the local authorities concerned, the regional government, the University of Naples, and the owners of the major quarries) and its professional advisers (led by Ecosfera s.p.a.), which is not only sensitive to the needs and limitations of a World Heritage Site, but is also supported by rigorous study into its technical, environmental, political, legal, economic and financial feasibility. Through the proposed package of measures, we believe that the original vision of Vanvitello has found modern expression. While Charles III's creations live on as magnificent monuments to a bygone era, Vanvitello's legacy is an ongoing appreciation of the need in the planning process for a balance between form and function, nature and urbanity, history and modernity.

*Images courtesy of ICOMOS Documentation Centre, Paris*