



The history of Santo Stefano di Ventotene

2020:

- in January, Silvia Costa is appointed Government Commissioner to "boost the project and coordinate the administrations"
- on 3rd June, the signing of the MIBACT/INVITALIA Agreement brings the project into operation
- on 4th June the Institutional Board approves the 2020-2023 Operational Plan and Timetable
- on 12th November, the project of "urgent measures for securing the prison" of the Panopticon begins

2021:

- on 8th February, Ventotene Town Council approves the project master plan drawn up with experts
- on 15th March the call for tenders was published for the awarding of the contract for the "urgent measures for securing the complex" at the former prison (work to begin in October)
- on 4 May the TIP approved the feasibility study
- 30th June sees the publication of the international design competition (deadline 23 September) for the former prison

We thank the Associazione per Santo Stefano in Ventotene ONLUS for its collaboration.

Under the patronage of:

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Location, architecture and structure

The island of Santo Stefano, located about a mile away from the island of Ventotene, was a place of harsh imprisonment for criminals and political dissidents for almost two centuries. During the Bourbon Era, at the end of the 18th century, King Ferdinand IV commissioned a "penal bath" in Santo Stefano. The architect Francesco Carpi designed it, reproducing the hemicycle structure of the San Carlo Theatre in Naples, inspired by Bentham's Panopticon: the horseshoe-shaped layout was intended to ensure constant surveillance of all cells by prison guards from a single point, also as a deterrent element.

It was built in a short time, and at a low cost, thanks to the manual labour of a hundred or so deported prisoners and was completed in 1797: on an internal perimeter of 207 metres, there were 99 cells of around 16 sqm each, spread over three floors or sections identified as hell (cells on the ground floor, without slits), purgatory and paradise (on the third floor, with a small slit from which one could see a piece of the sky). There were no cells with a view of the sea. The cells were initially intended to contain about 370 inmates, but the capacity was later increased to 600 inmates. Reserved for the most violent inmates, the ground floor which also included two windowless cells for punishment, was easier to supervise. On the second floor was the infirmary.

At the far ends of the hemicycle, a building with two turrets housed the surveillance and medical staff. The building included warehouses, a canteen, administrative offices and a chapel in the centre of the courtyard. With the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy, the prison underwent several structural changes, including the division of the cells by a masonry partition and the opening of a new door replacing the window inside the exedra. This resulted in 64 single-occupancy cells per floor to implement the system of continuous solitary confinement. The fourth segregation section was built in a new circular structure outside the ground floor, with 78 new cells to house mainly political prisoners and prisoners in detention and six solitary confinement cells with forced restraint beds. The number of inmates stabilised at around 250. Between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, other external buildings were constructed: the largest was used as accommodation for the director, chaplain and administrative staff; then came the bakery, the new chapel and the laundry. A small cemetery collected the remains of inmates not claimed by their families. The last intervention in 1960 was the inappropriate construction of a reinforced concrete canopy on the top floor of the hemicycle, which put the structure's static stability at risk.

From lifers to distinguished prisoners

The cells were first occupied by about 200 inmates used as labourers to complete the building. With the Neapolitan uprisings of 1798-99, the prison eventually held almost 1000 inmates, half of whom were politicians and revolutionaries.

After a brief closure following the mass escape organised in 1806 by Fra' Diavolo, the prison was once again used for the rioters of 1820 sentenced to life imprisonment and for the revolutionaries of 1848. Luigi Settembrini, a supporter of the Risorgimento uprisings, shared a cell with Silvio Spaventa and took detailed notes on prison life and population.

In 1860, a prisoners' revolt led to establishing the "Republic of Santo Stefano", which was nipped in the bud by the Savoy troops. The Savoy dynasty, which succeeded the Bourbons with the Italian unification, also used the facility to imprison dissidents, intellectuals and revolutionary "brigands" such as Carmine Donatello Crocco and Giuseppe Musolino.

Among others, the anarchist Gaetano Bresci was confined in Santo Stefano. He assassinated King Umberto I in Monza in July 1900 and was found dead in his cell the following year under unclear circumstances. This same cell was occupied by Giuseppe Mariani, convicted of the 1921 attack on the Diana Theatre in Milan and the leader, together with Sante Pollastro, of a famous revolt in November 1943.

During the Fascist regime, Sandro Pertini, the future President of the Republic, and Umberto Terracini, the future President of the Constituent Assembly, were imprisoned in Santo Stefano. At least 800 anti-fascists were confined on the nearby island of Ventotene, including Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi and Eugenio Colorni, along with Ursula Hirshmann and Ada Rossi, authors of the "Manifesto for a Free and United Europe". During its last years of operation, from 1945 to 1965, the penal institution was only used for ordinary inmates sentenced to life imprisonment or a long prison term.

The "revolution" of Eugenio Perucatti

Between 1952 and 1960 the new director, Eugenio Perucatti, in the name of Christian principles and Article 27 of the recently approved Constitution, humanised prison life, re-education and organisation, anticipating the prison reform by 20 years. Perucatti wanted to restore dignity to prison conditions, which were truly humiliating, by enhancing personal relations with prisoners and promoting many activities on the island aimed at their recovery (agricultural and craftwork, education, religious practices, sport, relations with family members). Perucatti's work remained emblematic but incomplete, because in 1960 he was transferred to the Turi prison on the pretext of two prisoners having escaped.

From prison shutdown to the recovery project

1965: the prison is closed permanently, and the building is handed over to the State (the rest of the island is currently privately owned) and since 1992 has been entrusted to the care of the municipality

1987: the penitentiary is declared an Asset of Major Interest by the Ministry of Culture and Environment

1997-1999: the Marine Protected Area and the Ventotene and Santo Stefano Islands State Nature Reserve are established

2008: the entire island of Santo Stefano is declared a National Monument by the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano

2016: after a half-century of abandonment, the Italian Government allocates significant funding as part of the Culture and Tourism Plan for the restoration and enhancement of the prison

2017: the Inter-Institutional Development Agreement is signed between eight public administrations, with Invitalia as the implementing party
