



# Daughter of the Wind

An architecture professor shares her love of a remote Mediterranean island with her students, challenging them to design public spaces that reflect a unique culture and history.

By Ellen N. Woods

From above, it looks like a black hole in the Mediterranean Sea. Formed by volcanic rock, the small Italian island of Pantelleria sits between Sicily and Tunisia. On a clear day, the coast of Africa is visible from the island's vineyards and rocky hills.

Pantelleria has no sandy beaches, only treacherous black rocks along its shores. Its name is derived from the Arabic *Bint-al-Riab* (Daughter of the Wind) and dates back to 700 when the island was under Arab domination. A hot steady wind (*sirocco*) from the Sahara blows relentlessly across the island's rugged terrain.

Lavinia Fici Pasquina, associate professor of architecture and planning, first set foot on the island nearly 30 years ago as a teenager when she took a ferry from her hometown of Palermo, Sicily. "I felt a magnet pull my feet to the ground," she recalls. "Never before had I felt an energy like that. Stars above like nothing you've ever seen. You feel the cosmos above you and the pull of the volcano beneath you. The trappings of modern life fall away, and your body and soul begin to speak to each other."

There is much more to the island than the centuries-old lava that has frozen into stone. It just takes time to find it. There are the little white flowers that blanket the landscape — capers not picked by farmers in the dark of night become flowers in the light of day. There is the blue green water of *Specchio di Venere* (Mirror of Venus), a thermal spring within a volcanic crater. The sulfuric mud of the spring has healing properties. Simple stone houses (*dammusi*) need only three walls for they are often built into the rocky hills. Their white domed rooftops dot the landscape — "like scoops of ice cream," says Fici Pasquina. When they crack they are patched with a mix of ground lime mortar, each patch forming a one-of-a-kind pattern. The landscape is shaped by rows of low-lying vines, sheltered from the wind, that produce the Zibibbo grapes for the island's signature dessert wine *Passito di Pantelleria*.

## Island Retreat

More than 15 years ago, Fici Pasquina realized a dream when she bought a dilapidated *dammuso* on the island. Her husband Paul, an American military physician, thought she was crazy. "He saw a pile of rocks," says Fici Pasquina. "I saw the potential for a beautiful retreat."

It took years to transform the tiny dwelling. The first stage of that transformation came in 2003 when Fici Pasquina's new property became the site for Catholic University's summer Spirit of Place program run by Travis Price, a Washington, D.C., architect and University instructor. With that project,



Background illustrations are the architecture students' renderings of wine museums and the pavilion.

she had realized another dream — to make the island she loves a learning environment for her students. Practical application of skills is a hallmark of Catholic University's School of Architecture and Planning. In their studio classes, students often design projects that address real-world needs, both in local D.C. neighborhoods and around the world.

Price's summer program fits that mission, taking students to remote, historic sites to construct environmentally sensitive structures that honor their natural and cultural settings.

In teaching the course with Price and leading the expedition of students with him to Pantelleria, Fici Pasquina's goal was to share her love of vernacular architecture — which she describes as "architecture that has a sense of belonging to a place" — with her students. "I wanted my students to learn the history, culture, and heritage, along with the building techniques that have been handed down through generations. Oh, to see my students working the stone alongside a 90-year-old craftsman!"

Many scholars believe that Pantelleria is the inspiration for Ogygia, the island in Homer's *Odyssey*, where Odysseus is held captive for seven years and seduced by Calypso.

Mythology became the inspiration for the students and their two professors as they built a space for outdoor gathering and meditation. "The property is set in the mountain above the lake that is dedicated to Venus, the goddess of beauty. We imagined a place where she would relax with Bacchus, the god of wine. The students embraced the story of the island, while bringing a touch of the modern."

In the years that followed, she continued to work on her *dammuso*. "I found inspiration from quiet observation," says Fici Pasquina. "I studied the naturally formed arches characterized by layering of rock, the patterns of light at different times of day, the Moorish architecture that influences the island."

Her intricately designed retreat reflected building techniques of the island such as the curved edges of her domed roof to collect water in a cistern and thick walls to keep the home cool by day and warm by night. The outside of the home is the natural dark color of rock, while the inside walls are bright white. She made a table out of a large slab of rock that she "reinterpreted, giving it a new purpose." She wrapped a bench around an olive tree. A stairway, that sprouts arugula from its cracks, was created following the pattern of existing stone. She built an outdoor kitchen in an alcove mimicking the shape of the most iconic arch on the island — *Arco dell'Elefante* (Arch of the Elephant), a rock formation that reaches out over the Mediterranean giving the impression of an elephant dipping its trunk into the sea.

Fici Pasquina's little retreat on Pantelleria is a place she escapes to during the summer with her 11-year-old daughter. Her husband joins them when he can take time away from his work as chair of the Department of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and department chief of rehabilitation at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. She says time on the island "recharges her by nurturing spirit and passions."

"The shoes go away, the schedule goes away, and worries go away," says Fici Pasquina about the time she spends on the island. What does not go away, however, is the architecture professor's imagining of new opportunities for her students.

### Modern Designs Preserve History

In 2014, she seized one of those opportunities when UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) put Pantelleria on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in recognition of its "heroic" agriculture — the growing of grapes in the harshest of climate conditions. It was the first time the international body bestowed the designation on an agricultural practice, recognizing a technique believed to be developed by the Phoenicians when they dominated the island centuries ago and handed down from generation to generation.

The *alberello pantesco* (small tree) system involves digging hollows in the soil where the vines are planted and protected from the harsh wind. These basins also help nourish the vines because they hold the moisture of nighttime humidity to water the crop on an island that gets little rain. The main stem of the vine is constantly pruned to produce branches that fan out to form a low bush. The grapes are harvested by hand. Mineral-rich volcanic soil and the Mediterranean air along with a process that uses a combination of fresh and sun-dried grapes make for a wine like no other. The harvest in July is celebrated by the people of Pantelleria with traditional festivals.

The UNESCO designation means increased world discovery of the island. Fici Pasquina began to share ideas with the mayor, Salvatore Gino Gabriele, and other local officials and wine makers. They talked about the need for an information center at the port of Pantelleria, the entry point for visitors.

This UNESCO pavilion would celebrate the island's history and agricultural practices, and orient visitors to the way of life on the island. A museum of wine to celebrate the unique wine culture of Pantelleria was also proposed.

These two projects would be designed by students in the School of Architecture and Planning in studio courses with elective opportunities to travel to the island.

Fici Pasquina, who has a master's degree in architecture from the University of Palermo in Sicily (1996) and a master's in architecture from Catholic University (2000), is head of the Technology and Media in Architecture and Interiors Program (TMAIn) and leads the Foreign Studies Program. She began teaching at the University 18 years ago, soon after her graduation. Fici Pasquina believes students need to understand and reflect the history and culture of each project, while utilizing the latest technology in design including virtual reality, digital media, and fabrication.

### "Winergy"

The Pantelleria projects began in the fall of 2016 with a European trip that included stops at the University's Rome Center, Sicily, and Pantelleria to study the history, culture, and architecture of that part of the world. In the spring 2017 semester, students in the TMAIn elective course, Advanced Digital Design and Fabrication — with support of the school's IT staff members Hussam Elkhraz and Davide Prete — began work as a group designing the UNESCO pavilion. In the TMAIn Architectural Studio, students worked on individual projects, each designing a wine museum as part of a competition that would result in winning designs selected by local officials and wine makers, with scholarship awards for the top three students provided by the government of Pantelleria.

Dung Hoang, a master's student, was awarded first place for his museum design, Wine-alog. "The museum itself should be an exhibition item," he says.

Hoang, who was a practicing architect in his native Vietnam, says he came to the United States "to learn new technologies." Catholic University's TMAIn concentration was just what he was looking for in his master's degree. "I liked that these were real projects with real clients. I didn't want to be in a program where I would be designing in theory," says Hoang, who was also part of the studio group that designed the UNESCO pavilion.

In his winning design, Hoang was inspired by the *Giardino Pantesco*, gardens embraced by stone walls offering protection from the elements. His museum features a central courtyard for enjoying the wine. The entry to his museum is a long ramp that slowly takes visitors underground to reflect the process of growing the grapes in trenches. Along the walkway are exhibits.

Hoang was not part of the Pantelleria elective study trip, but he felt he came to know the island just the same. "Lavinia shared her passion, her knowledge, and her love of Pantelleria. She has a way of making you feel like you've been there," he says.



Lavinia Fici Pasquina's Pantelleria retreat reflects the island's Moorish style of architecture and naturally occurring shapes and patterns.



Clockwise: Lavinia Fici Pasquina, center, with students and residents of Pantelleria in fall 2016; Dung Hoang's winning design, Wine-alog; Castle Barbacane, where the top three student designs were displayed in August during *Calici di Stelle* (Goblet

of Stars), a summer wine festival; a model of the UNESCO pavilion showing night-time lighting; and a rendering of the pavilion.

"The students in both studios immersed themselves in learning everything about the island," says Fici Pasquina, "including the mythology, the history, the way of life, the celebrations, the composition of the soil, and the method of growing the grapes and making the wine."

The students also spent many hours at the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) Material ConneXion Library to study materials science, specifically in relation to Pantelleria's unique climate and geography.

Dylan Gallagher, a master's student, says that "studying materials at ASID helped us in our decision to introduce a new element to the pavilion design proposal." Instead of the traditional, native heavy stone, the students used corten steel to make two opposing sweeping walls that wrap around an enclosed center, forming an interior space with a roof that serves as a terrace for visitors. The steel is perforated in the pattern of stacked stone that creates openings for views of the port.

Gallagher, who is proficient in Italian, made the fall trip to Pantelleria. "We got to know the people. They shared their love of the island with us. They want to show their culture to the world, and we felt a responsibility to help them do that," he says.

Gallagher was awarded second place for the design of his wine museum *Coltivando Cultura* (Cultivating Culture). He says his museum "is a modern space showcasing the past, present, and future of wine making."

Third-place winner Amanda Ocello designed her museum in three parts to honor the production, the aging, and celebration of wine. "The island of Pantelleria must be found, it is not explicit," she says.

In June 2017, Fici Pasquina was back on Pantelleria with four of her students and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs Judith Meany. They brought with them 10 displays of student-designed wine museums, the design for the pavilion, and informational photographic displays put together by students Ariadne Cerritelli and Sara Gordon. The exhibit of these displays was called "Winery," the blending of the words wine, energy, and synergy. The exhibit was hosted by the wine house of Donnafugata, with particular support from winery staff Baldo Palermo and Ivan Caronna. The winery's stone-walled courtyard was filled with the people of Pantelleria, who came out to celebrate the American students' proposals.

"For me it was a day of love," says Fici Pasquina. "To share my love of Pantelleria with my students, and to see them receive the love of the people who call the island home was my dream." **CU**

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