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**MODUS HABITANDI OF THE “TABARKAN NATION”  
ANALYSIS OF THE SETTLEMENT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FOUR  
“NEW LANDS” BUILT ALONG THE MEDITERRANEAN COASTS**

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**IL MODUS HABITANDI DELLA “NAZIONE TABARCHINA”.  
ANALISI DEI CARATTERI INSEDIATIVI DELLE QUATTRO “TERRE  
NUOVE” REALIZZATE LUNGO LE COSTE DEL MEDITERRANEO**

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**Abstract**

*The study of the events related to the so-called “tabarkan nation”, in particular of the four settlements located along the Mediterranean coasts created over the course of four centuries by coral workers from Pegli (Genoa), has made it possible to recognise and highlight the extent and the mode of transmission of some common characteristics of the way of living in the Mediterranean area.*

*The analysed locations – Pegli, Tabarka, Carloforte, Calasetta and Nueva Tabarca – are the material outcome of complex historical circumstances, due to which the population of Pegli had to migrate in the 15th century to the Tunisian island of Tabarka, and from there to the islands of San Pietro, Sant’Antioco and Isla Plana, “carrying” with them the traditions and technical knowledge, that lead to the founding of the Tabarka (1540), Carloforte (1738), Nueva Tabarca (1769) and Calasetta (1770) settlements.*

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*Lo studio delle vicende legate alla cosiddetta “nazione tabarkina”, in particolare dei quattro insediamenti localizzati lungo le coste del Mediterraneo realizzati nel corso di quattro secoli dai lavoratori di corallo originari di Pegli (Genova), ha consentito di riconoscere ed evidenziare l’entità e le modalità di trasmissione di alcuni caratteri comuni dell’abitare mediterraneo.*

*I centri analizzati – Pegli, Tabarka, Carloforte, Calasetta e Nueva Tabarca – sono l’esito materiale di complesse circostanze storiche che hanno visto parte della popolazione di Pegli migrare nel XV secolo sull’isola tunisina di Tabarka e da lì verso le isole di San Pietro, Sant’Antioco e Isla Plana, ‘trasportando’ tradizioni e conoscenze tecniche e fondando gli insediamenti di Tabarka (1540), Carloforte (1738), Nueva Tabarca (1769) e Calasetta (1770).*

**Keywords:** Cultural Heritage, integrated survey, intangible heritage, tabarkan settlements, tabarkan home



**Figure 1**  
*Pegli and its “colonies” in the Mediterranean Sea.*

### **Historical introduction: the events of the “tabarkan nation”**

In the middle of the 15th century the Genoese obtained commercial control of a large part of the northern African coast [1], obtaining from the *Bey* of Tunis the privilege that allowed them to fish and sell coral along the coast [2]. Following this concession, in 1540 it was established a colony of fishermen from Pegli (Genoa) on the small island of Tabarka, in front of the Tunisian coast (fig. 1). The inhabited settlement, initially composed of a few houses arranged around the church and a small fortification, expanded starting from the following century, thanks to a massive colonisation by the population of Pegli [3].

The island, under the Spanish protectorate from the first half of the 16th century, became a strategic place of fundamental importance throughout the entire military campaign, undertaken by King Charles V of Spain, to repel the Muslims beyond their borders [4].

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the restrictive measures aimed at tackling the overpopulation of the island, combined with the economic difficulties that followed the commercial competition of Tunis and Bizerte [5], the depletion of the coral reefs and the increasingly frequent pirate raids [6] forced large groups of Tabarkan people, supported by Charles Emmanuel III of Savoy (King of Sardinia), to migrate to the island of San Pietro (Carbonia-Iglesias), founding in 1738 the settlement of Carloforte [7] [8] [9] [10] [11] [12] [13].

The contemporary destruction of part of the settlement of Tabarka by the *Bey* of Tunis and the consequent conversion into slaves of the remaining population in the original colony, marked the

beginning of thirty years of tensions between the ruling Tunisia and the numerous exponents of the European nobility who worked for the solution of the “Tabarkan matter”. Only in 1768 after the agreement between the King of Spain Charles III and the *Bey* of Algiers, who in the meantime had taken possession of Tunis, allowed the ransom of the prisoners who, embarked for Alicante, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1769 and started the colonisation of the “*Insula Plana de San Pablo*”, founding the town of Nueva Tabarca.

The following year, thirty families still remaining on the Tunisian island, favoured and supported by the House of Savoy, migrated to the Island of Sant’Antioco (Carbonia-Iglesias), in front of the Island of San Pietro, founding the settlement of Calasetta [14].

In the context of the Mediterranean area, the story of the “tabarkan nation” represents an interesting case study to ascertain the extent and the manner in which a “minority” culture was able to export its architectural and urban models. Starting from the events that led part of the population of Pegli to migrate to the Tunisian island of Tabarka, and from there to the islands of San Pietro, Sant’Antioco and Isla Plana, the investigation was therefore aimed at verifying the actual transmission, re-proposal and reinterpretation of the distinctive features of each settlement in the subsequent colonies. If from a social and historical point of view, the research on the Tabarkan events had already allowed scholars to trace, in an exhaustive way, the historical, social and economic dynamics, finding a continuity in the so-called “intangible” traditions, the same had not been yet verified in the architectural and urban field [15] [16] [17] [18] [19].

## Materials and methods

The integrated survey of some significant passages of the urban fabric of the centres under analysis has allowed to deepen the knowledge of the material heritage, giving a detailed documentation of the types of buildings adopted, the construction techniques used and the materials used in the construction of the colonies [20] [21] [22].

The integrated survey campaign carried out in Carloforte involved a substantial portion of the fabric – included among Via XX Settembre, the civic museum, the sea and the church – and the rural settlement of “Le Tanche”, recognised as an almost intact prototype of the original settlement. It was also carried out a systematic survey of the buildings in Pegli in via Carloforte, the historical centre of the Genoese village. At the same time, the other Tabarkan settlements (Tabarka, Nueva Tabarca and Calasetta) were analysed in detail, by integrating the data taken from the existing literature with the verifications and the analyses conducted on site.

The architectural survey was essential for the analysis of the urban and building characteristics common to the centres under examination. Given the complex articulation of the four locations the survey was based mainly on the use of phase shift panoramic laser scanners, which offer great accuracy and speed of acquisition of metric data.

At the same time, in order to ensure the correct registration of all the laser acquisitions realised, it was carried out a topographic survey using a total station (Leica TC 706), designed in a functional way to the intervention of the scanner. The topographer, in fact, limited himself to framing in a rigid network the system of targets connecting the different sockets of the scanner, in order to provide a fixed structure for the complete referencing of the survey.

The digital survey has been integrated with direct surveys of the interior spaces of particularly significant buildings. The goal of the research was also in fact to identify the typological

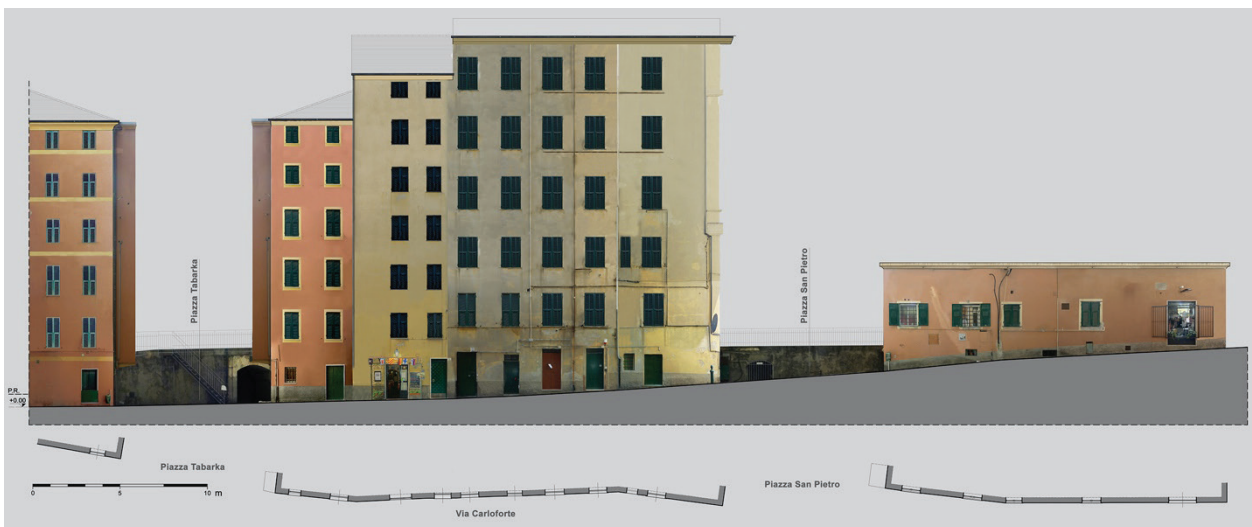


characteristics of the housing units, the dimensional ratios of the rooms and their distribution within the environment, as well as the arrangement of horizontal and vertical connections. Therefore, they were carried out some studies in order to frame the building typology of the area and its evolution throughout the history.

To complete the measurement operations, it was carried out a complete video-photographic campaign to document both the architecture – as a support for its subsequent graphical reconstruction – and the survey operations themselves.

The simultaneous use of active and passive sensors according to well-established integrated survey procedures has made it possible to obtain 3D reality based models, morphometrically and perceptively adhering to the urban areas analysed.

The subsequent operations were aimed at the drafting of two-dimensional graphics of the traditional type – such as plans, elevations and sections – necessary to describe the architecture, and the extraction of photomaps capable of realistically describing both the material and the chromatic data of the building (fig. 2, 3).



**Figure 2**  
*Pegli: photomap of a front on via Carloforte.*



**Figure 3**  
*Carloforte: photomap of a front on Corso Tagliafico.*

## Results

The analysis was conducted starting from the analysis of the urban fabric, and then descending gradually down the scale, until reaching the single cell that constitutes the housing unit.

The starting model is Pegli, the place of origin of the first Tabarkan settlers, whose layout is formed by a dense urban fabric composed of a series of narrow alleys with different slopes, characterised by stairways and archivolts [23] [24] [25] [26] [27] [28]. This construction method is typical of the Ligurian people, who were able to exploit a narrow strip of land confined between the sea and the mountains.

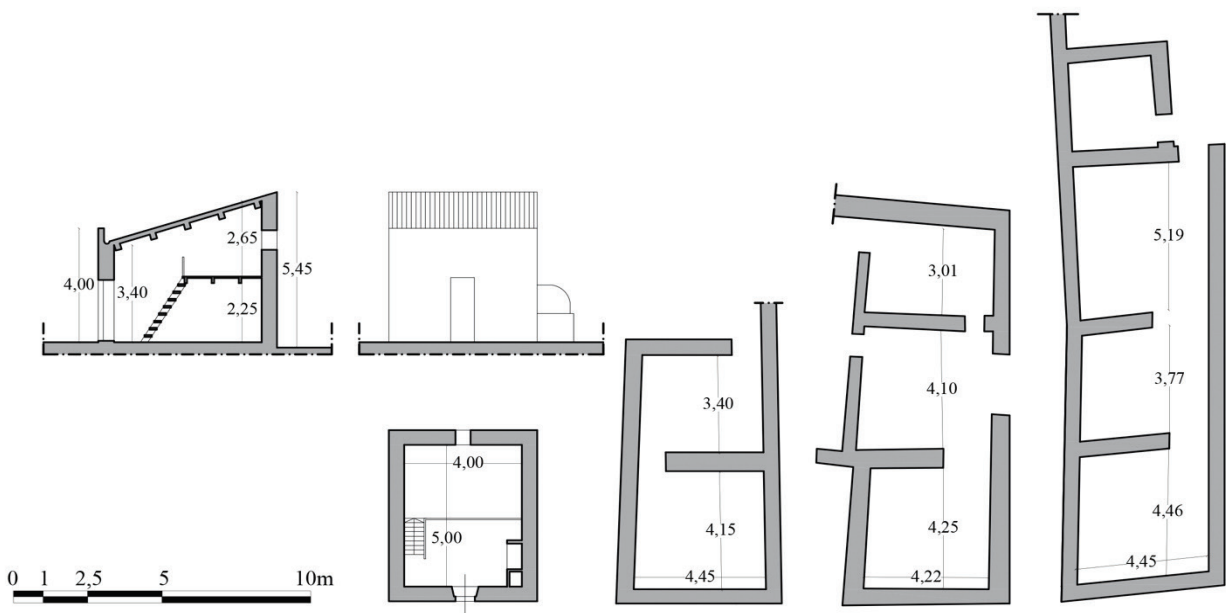
The only colonial settlement that maintains, in part, this characteristic pattern is Carloforte in the area situated close to the first city walls, where the conformation of the land imposes narrow streets with steep slopes. The houses are very close together and form a dense aggregate, with narrow alleys that allow to use rationally the little building land available.

This characteristic is not found in the towns of Nueva Tabarca and Calasetta: this is probably due to the different orography of the land (Nueva Tabarca is a completely flat island and Calasetta is built on a slight slope) and to the different design concept at the base of the settlement (they were designed by military engineers at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century).

Both settlements have an “Hippodamian” type urban structure, with straight streets that cross orthogonally. This type of planning, often re-proposed in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, has nothing to do with Ligurian cities, but it was introduced by the military engineers from Piedmont (in Calasetta) and from Spain (in Nueva Tabarca) at the service of the houses of Savoy and Bourbon.

The Tabarka settlement has no similarities with Pegli, or in general with the Ligurian territory, nor with the colonies previously analysed. Although the distribution of houses on the surface of the island may seem random, it is actually closely related to the position of large water collection tanks, arranged in different sites on the island to meet the needs of the population, since it is an area where water resources are scarce. Each tank could satisfy a limited number of inhabitants and this determined the number of houses that could be built in the surrounding area, certainly not comparable with the high density of the Ligurian residential districts.

Analysing the blocks, it is clear that the colonies are very different from the typical distribution of the Genoese cities. The causes, as already highlighted, are many: from the different orographic characteristics to the lower number of inhabitants to host, to the imposition of new spatial criteria, imposed by the typical rigour of military culture derived from the designers involved (fig. 4).

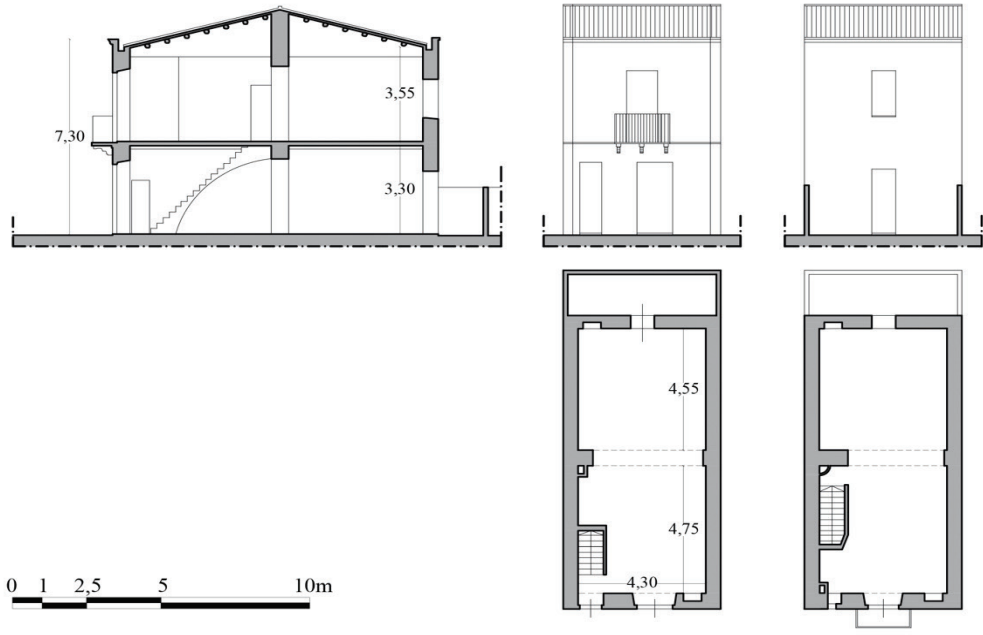


**Figure 4**

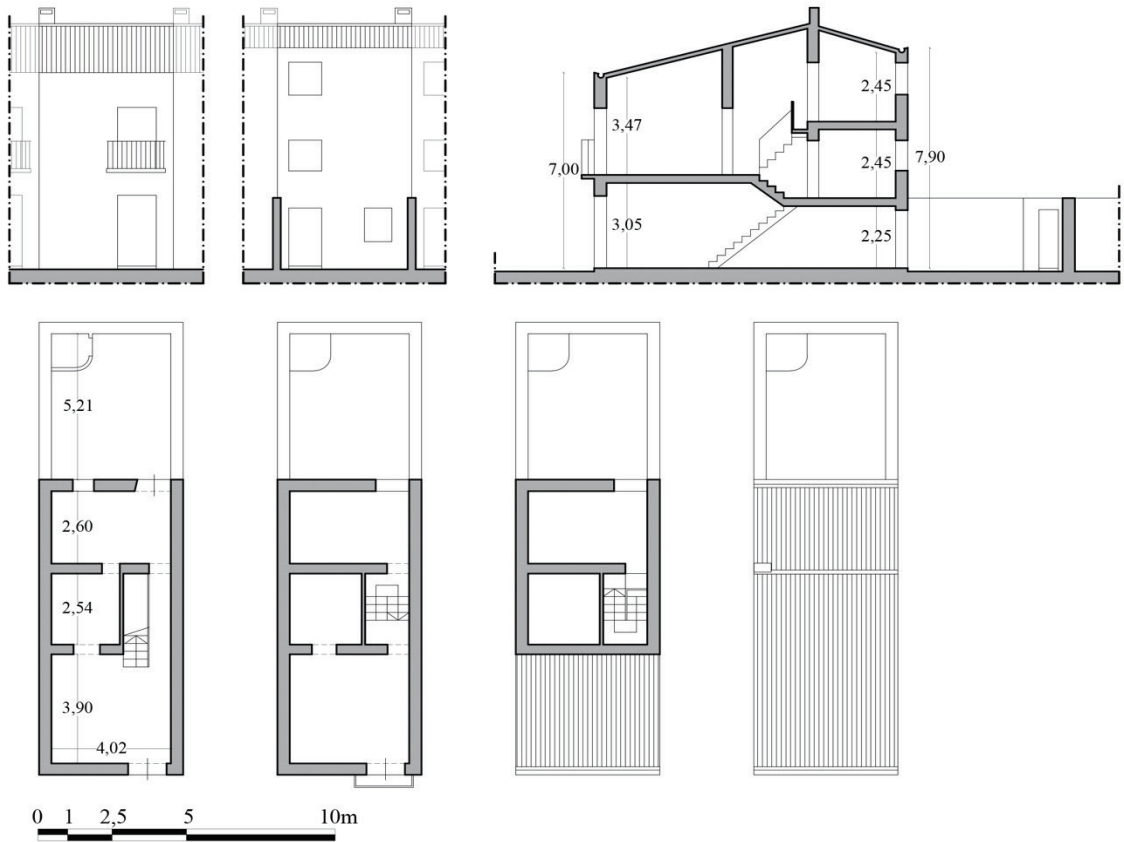
*Identification of the cell-type (on the left) in what remains of the residential building of the Tabarka settlement.*

If the first settlement of Carloforte had installation characteristics that tended to follow the morphology of the land (and in this case, similar to the Ligurian coastal centres), the second expansion of the building is characterised by very wide and isolated roads, defined by the intersection of almost orthogonal roads, creating a rectangular shape. In Calasetta and Nuova Tabarca this subdivision becomes even more rigorous and rational: the blocks are rectangular with a proportion of 2:1 for the greater side on the smaller one (50m x 25m in Nueva Tabarca, 60m x 30m in Calasetta).

In the settlements of Carloforte and Nueva Tabarca, within the blocks the subdivision into lots follows a similar logic, where the units have constant dimensions (4-5m x 10-15m) in order to make the most of the available building area by saturating it with a series of terraced houses. However, if in the Sardinian colony the houses overlook all four sides of the block, in the Spanish colony the fronts are on the two long sides of the block, giving rise to main streets, characterised by the alternation of main facades and secondary streets with perimeter walls without openings (fig. 5, 6).

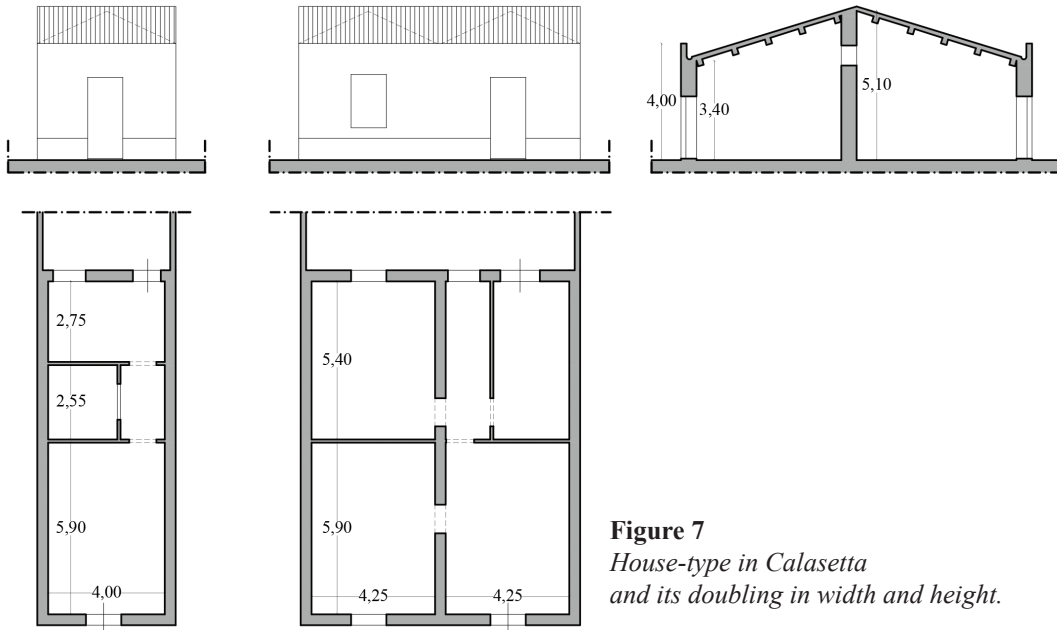


**Figure 5**  
House-type in Carloforte.

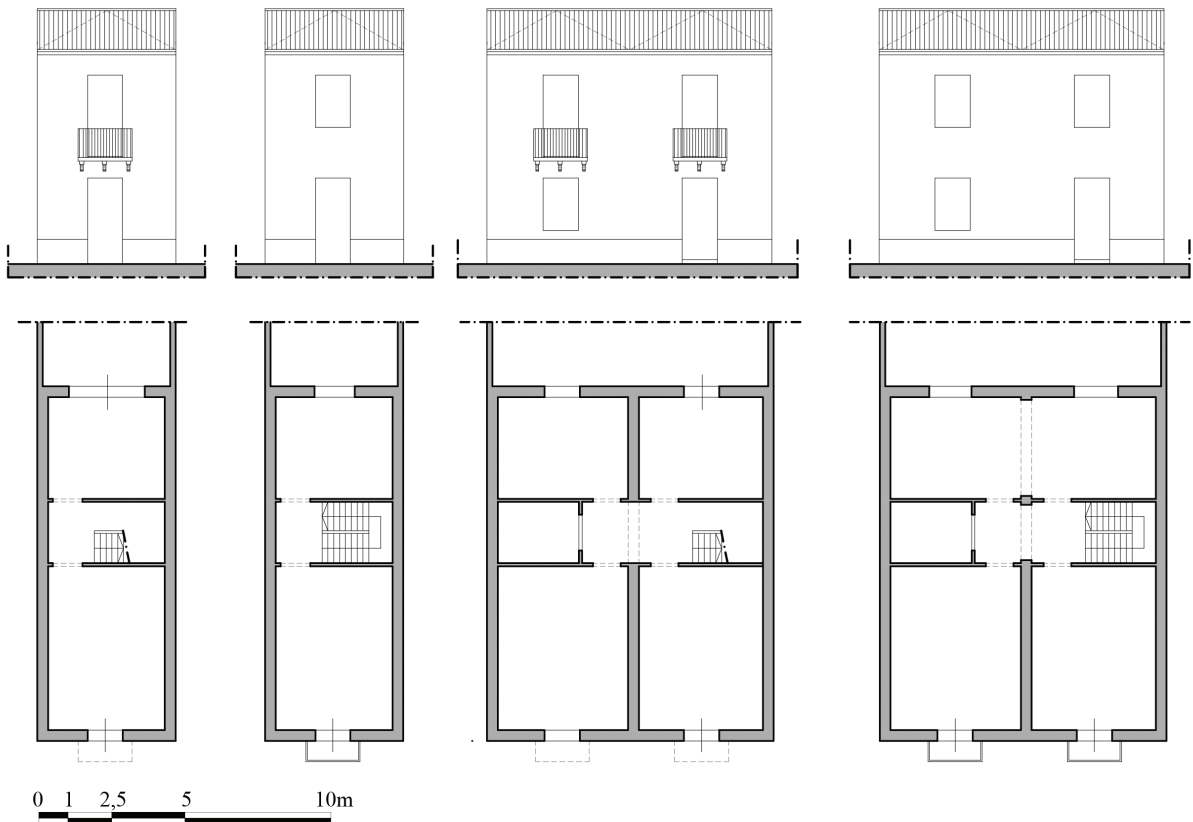


**Figure 6**  
House-type in Nueva Tabarca.

In Calasetta each block is divided into three lots of much larger dimensions (20 m x 30 m), within each of them is built a single real estate unit. This establishes a hierarchy of the road axes: the main ones, wider, overlooked by the building fronts, and the secondary ones, alternating with the previous ones, overlooked by the facades of the back of the buildings (fig. 7).



**Figure 7**  
*House-type in Calasetta  
 and its doubling in width and height.*



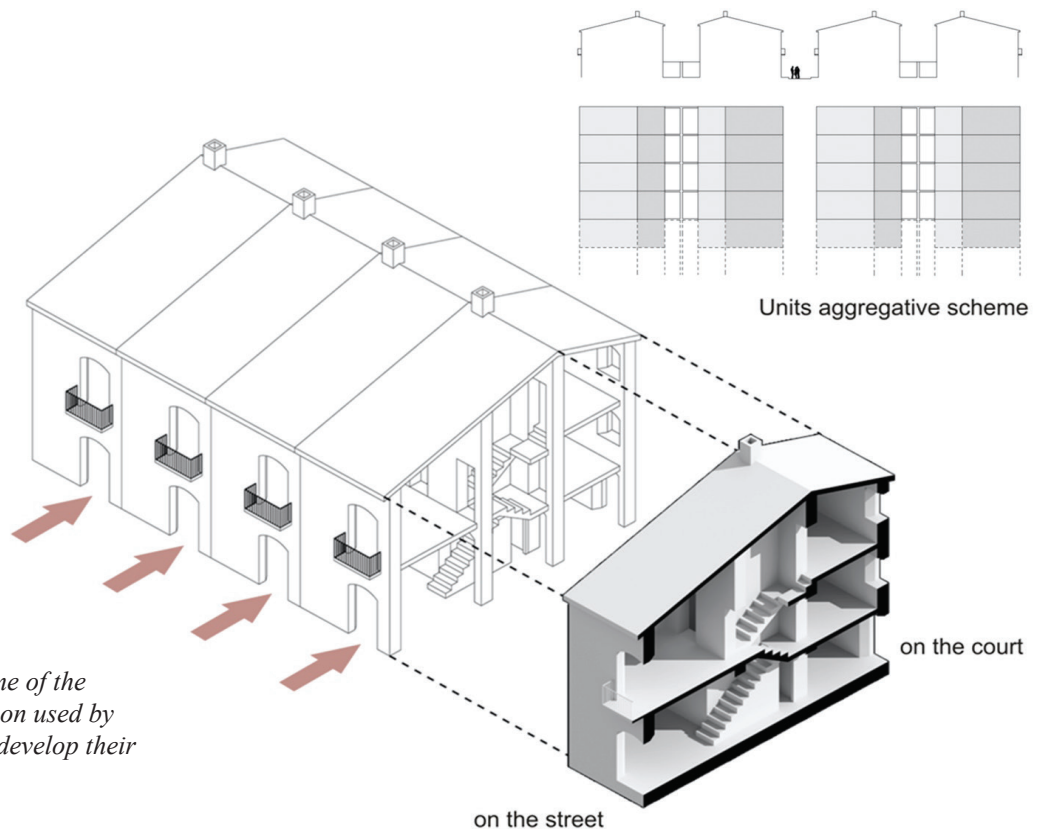
Considering the building structure, it is possible to identify a close relationship between the type of housing coming from the island of Tabarka and the “*baracca* from Carloforte”.

The integrated survey of the complex of “Le Tanche”, in the western hinterland of the island of San Pietro, has made it possible to document its peculiar characteristics and then compare them with those of similar farmhouses found in other colonies, tracing their undeniable similarities.

Most of the examples of “*baracca*” still existing on the island of San Pietro are unicellular buildings with a quadrangular plan, with one access in the facade, a mono-pitched roof and a wooden loft dividing the internal environment between the living area, generally located on the ground floor, and the sleeping area located on the upper floor. In the lot of relevance, fenced by a small wall, there is an underground tank that collects rainwater conveyed from the roof through eaves and downspouts, which is also accessible from the inside of the house, through a well. Conceived as a unitary and self-sufficient building, in some cases it has been paired with another *baracca* or, as in “Le Tanche”, in a series of *baraccas*.

The re-proposal of this typology in an urban environment has required some necessary variations, whilst preserving most of the distinctive features (fig. 8). Over the years, each colony has then developed its own identity and the primordial housing typologies have undergone slow and gradual changes, while maintaining those invariants that still today associate them:

- the use of a single dimensional module (4 or 4.5 meters inside),
- the existence of a single flight of stairs connected to the side wall of the house,
- the use of unicellular space without the use of internal partitions,
- the arrangement on the facade of a few openings strictly necessary from a functional point of view,
- the mono-pitched roofing solution,
- the presence of a rainwater collection tank.



**Figure 8**  
A reconstruction scheme of the original housing solution used by the Tabarka people to develop their settlements.



## Conclusions

The survey conducted has made it possible to document, using the tools belonging to the disciplines of drawing and surveying, the existence of constants and variables in the process of formation and transformation of the Pegli, Tabarka, Carloforte, Nueva Tabarca and Calasetta settlements, unequivocally imprinted in the conformation of the urban fabric and in the buildings typology found in those locations.

Even if it is not possible to prove a direct derivation of the “basic” Tabarkan building types located in the colonies that follow the Pegli model, the analysis carried out have allowed to assert the existence, at least originally, of a relationship between the housing types of the colonies. The characteristics highlighted in the investigations, concerning the building structures of the four urban centres, connect the urban residences to the rural prototype of the “Tabarkan house” in its original form of single-cellular construction in stone, with a square plan and a mono-pitched roof, which although apparently has little in common with the typical Ligurian home, it shows, to a deeper analysis, that the technical and cultural transfer made by the inhabitants of Pegli has found its attestation in the four colonies of Tabarka, Carloforte, Nueva Tabarca and Calasetta.

Despite the diatopic mutations of the same building typology or the use of different solutions in relation to the different orographical and geographical context, it is possible to identify the will, in the urban environment, to characterise the settlements through the repetition of a pre-established scheme, and the use of some identity-related invariants that still today associate the building structure.

## Credits

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