

Potsdam School of Architecture
Master of Arts 2025| 2026

"SIRACUSA: City as palimpsest"



Attilio Zuccagni Orlandini, View of Syracuse in Sicily, 1854



"Italy without Sicily makes no image in the soul: here is the key to everything"

Johann Wolfgang Goethe

The topics

The master's project of the *Potsdam School of Architecture* is dedicated to the architecture of the European city and focuses on various major cities with the aim of designing effective strategies for the further development of the European city in different cultural, political and economic contexts. After Genoa, Belfast, Hamburg, Turin, Madrid, Marseille, Palma de Mallorca, the Hanseatic cities of Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck and Stralsund, the Berlin-Brandenburg metropolitan region, Trieste and Porto, in the coming year 2025-2026 we will be focusing on the harbour city of Siracusa in Sicily. The aim of our project is to potential conflicts, develop and discuss alternative design concepts and propose solution strategies in a historical and theoretical context.

The city

The city of Siracusa is located on the east coast of the Italian region of Sicily in the estuary of the rivers Anapo and Ciane. With a population of 116,247 (as at 31 December 2023), it is the fourth largest city in Sicily after Palermo, Catania and Messina. In ancient times, however, Siracusa was the largest and most powerful polis in Sicily and its cultural centre for several centuries. Marcus Tullius Cicero described it in his speeches against Verres as "the largest and most beautiful of all Greek cities".

The centre of the old town is located on the 40-hectare island of Ortygia. It lies between two natural harbours (the Porto Piccolo, the small harbour to the north, and the Porto Grande, the large harbour to the south) and is only from the mainland by a narrow passageway over the Ponte Nuovo and Ponte Santa Lucia bridges. In 2005, UNESCO Siracusa and the necropolis of Pantalica on its World Heritage List.

The Sicilian city always a mild climate, with January and February being the coldest months at 7 degrees. It gets very hot here in summer: temperatures in July and August often exceed 30 degrees. Small rain showers can in autumn. With 94 mm of rainfall, November is the rainiest month of the year.

Siracusa, founded around 734 BC by Corinthian settlers on the island of Ortygia, quickly developed into one of the most powerful cities in the ancient Greek world. Early urban planning was strongly influenced by the topographical island location: compact buildings, clear defence lines and a clear separation between public and private spaces. The *agora* was located in the centre, temples such as that of Athena dominated the cityscape - integrated into a hippodamian grid, which was later also transferred to the mainland (New Town).

The name "new town" can lead to misunderstandings here, as is no such thing as "new". After there no more space for further buildings on the island of Ortygia, the city was extended around the mainland as early as the 5th century under the regent Gelon of Syracuse. Ancient architectural traces can be found here. These include the Teatro Greco, which is one of the largest surviving Greek theatres with a diameter of almost 138 metres.

Under Roman rule, the basic structure was preserved, but new infrastructural elements such as aqueducts, thermal baths and an amphitheatre were added, giving the urban fabric a more axial structure. The connection between Ortygia and the mainland was fortified, which enabled a denser settlement in today's city centre. In the Middle Ages, the

Residents

The city returned to the island of Ortigia due to pirate attacks. The urban structure became narrower, more organic, with a structure protected by alleyways and walls. Churches and palazzi from the Norman and later Baroque periods were superimposed on ancient buildings, often in the sense of an architectural palimpsest strategy.

After the earthquake of 1693, large parts of the city were rebuilt in the Baroque style, especially Ortigia. The result was a remarkable urban structure: sculpturally shaped squares, flowing sequences of spaces and architecture that uses lava and limestone in rich contrast. Piazza Duomo was as a baroque square: a slight curvature creates spatial depth and movement, framed by symmetrically placed palazzi and the imposing façade of the cathedral (integrated into the Temple of Athena). Street spaces were deliberately monumentalised, but the alley system remained largely medieval. The result was a superimposition of Baroque representation on a medieval structure - typical of the reconstruction of many Sicilian cities.

With the decline of Spanish rule and the transition to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, a calmer phase began: extensions were now increasingly carried out outside Ortigia, especially along the mainland (Borgata Santa Lucia). Neoclassical administrative buildings and villas were built, often orientated towards the coast or monuments. The new neighbourhoods were laid out in a grid pattern, with wider streets, public gardens and a regular block structure - typical of the urban expansions of the 19th century.

Between 1900 and 1960, Siracusa was increasingly developed from the mainland, partly according to functionalist models: The so-called Borgata was densified and blocks of flats were built - albeit without a consistent urban planning vision. During the fascist era, classicist-inspired administrative buildings were added (Rationalismo). In the 1970s and 80s, Ortigia was in danger of falling into disrepair: many buildings stood empty and the old town centre's infrastructure was outdated. Since the 1990s, Siracusa, and Ortigia in particular, has been experiencing a renaissance: the preservation and conversion of old buildings (e.g. into hotels, cultural centres or residential space) have characterised urban development. Urban planning measures are aimed at sustainable densification, traffic calming and the interplay of monument preservation and contemporary architecture. The Ortigia master plan emphasises public space reuse, small-scale interventions and the reclamation of water features (e.g. promenades, piazzas by the sea).

To this day, the city retains a close connection between built space, the sea and history, making it an ideal object of study for dealing with archaeological layers in contemporary urban planning. In this sense, Siracusa is an urban palimpsest: Greek foundations, baroque staging, modern functional buildings and contemporary revitalisation merge.

Siracusa's urban layout and the individual buildings clearly show the close and necessary relationship between architecture and urban form, in accordance with the different periods and the associated growth models. This relationship is the source of the unity and diversity of the cityscape, as well as the richness and contradictions in the relationship between public and private space, which is an integral part of urban life.

The master's project offers the opportunity to deal with the topics of urban repair and urban transformation within a multi-layered city that has retained its character despite growth and transformation and is exemplary for understanding the dynamics of a European city and for contemporary urban development in the 21st century.

Organisation

The two-semester Master's programme is based on a specific topic and a real location. The Master's project with 30 to 35 students is carried out by a fixed group of lecturers each academic year. In 2025-2026 these are: Prof Jan Kleihues, Prof Dr Silvia Malcovati and Prof Dr Markus Tubbesing. The project is flanked and supported by architectural theory and accompanied by project management.

The Master's thesis consists of an analytical research phase (type - morphological knowledge of the city and reflection on the relationship between the city and architecture) in the winter semester and an individual design project in the summer semester. The Master's thesis is the result of the synthesis of both phases.

Schedule

07.05.2025 at 9 am	Master presentation on Zoom
15.05.2025	Start of the application period
15.06.2025	Application deadline
20.06.2025	Selection interviews for Master's applicants
22.-30.09.2024	Block seminar in Potsdam
24.-25.09.2025	Presentation of the master theses 2024-2025
01.10. 2025	Course presentations in Potsdam
13.-17.09.2025	Compulsory excursion to Siracusa+ Lectures on site
End of January 2026	Completion of 1st part / presentation of the
atlas work at the end of September 2026	Final presentation of the Master's
thesis	