

VITALIANO POSELLI

AN ITALIAN ARCHITECT IN THESSALONIKI

Biography

Vitaliano Poselli was born on June 7, 1838 in Castiglione, Sicily. Soon after his graduation, he moved to Rome, where he probably started his studies in architecture. There he was offered his first job in 1867 by a catholic priest, named Don Bosco. It concerned the erection of the church of Santo Stefano in Istanbul.

Poselli after living for some years in the Ottoman capital, was sent in 1886 to Thessaloniki by the Ottoman government in order to build the "Idadié" school of the city. In 1888 he married Luisa Sanchioni from Perugia and settled in Thessaloniki. He continued collaborating with the Ottoman authorities and designed the most important public buildings of the city. At the same time, foreign agencies and missions as well as wealthy traders and bankers entrusted him with the creation of several communal, commercial and private buildings. He was honoured for his work by the Sultan Abdul Hamid II, Vittorio Emanuele II and the Catholic church.

Vitaliano Poselli died in 1918. One of his 8 children and several of his grand-children are still living in Thessaloniki. Their testimony was of a great help with my further research.

The Imperial College "Idadiè"

This is the first building designed by V. Poselli in Thessaloniki and it was inaugurated in 1887-1888. Known under the name of "Idadié", this school was intended to prepare students for the university and to form state officials.

A series of extensions and modifications have altered the original aspect of the building which is still standing today and houses the Philosophy department of the University of Thessaloniki.

The Governor's House.

The new Governor's House was built on the emplacement of the former "Konak", demolished in 1891¹. Its construction ended in 1894 and the new building was referred to as a masterpiece of contemporary architecture in the city². Today, after the inadequate addition of a fourth floor in 1955, it is occupied by the Macedonia-Thrace Ministry.

The Military Headquarters

Situated on the former location of the infantry encampment of "Champs de Mars", the new Headquarters of the 3rd Imperial Corps were inaugurated on August 19, 1903 on the occasion of the 29th anniversary of Abdul Hamid's enthronement³. The installations, in addition to the main building include a number of pavilions symmetrically built around the parade grounds.

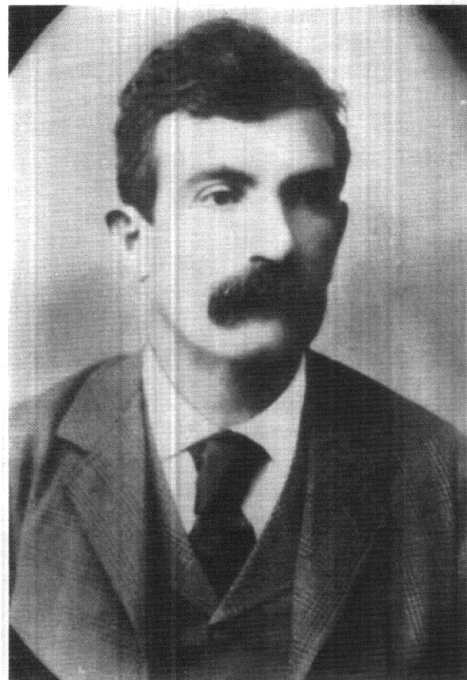
Since 1912 it has belonged to the 3rd Military Corps of the Hellenic Army.

The Catholic church of the Immaculate conception

In 1897 Poselli designed a Church of the Immaculate Conception

In 1897 Poselli designed a church for the Catholic community of Thessaloniki. The new church was located on French street in the vicinity of St. Paul's Hospital and of the French Mission. The belltower, 40 m. high, was considered to be Poselli's major achievement in the construction field and the clock

VITALIANO POSELLI



placed at its top was visible from all over the city. The church was bombed during World War II and its barrel vault was replaced by a concrete ceiling.

The New Mosque (Yeni Çami)

Built in 1902 for the Deunmeh community⁴, Yeni Çami is the first identified work of Vitaliano Poselli in Thessaloniki. In 1925, after the departure of all Muslims, the mosque was slightly modified in order to house the newly established archaeological museum of the city. At present it is used by the Municipality as an exhibition hall.

The Armenian Church

It was inaugurated in 1903 thanks to the contribution of the Armenian community of the city as well as of those of Egypt and Europe. It is a church of minor dimensions laid out behind three imposing belltowers, highly influenced by Armenian religious architecture.

The Synagogue of Beth Saul

It was built in 1898 with funds given by the Modiano family and was the only Jewish temple in the Hamidiye district. It was destroyed by the Germans in 1943.

The Ottoman Imperial Bank

The new building of the Ottoman Imperial Bank in Thessaloniki was erected in the French Quarter next to St. Paul's Hospital. The inauguration took place on June 20, 1904⁵ and the building was mentioned among the sights of the city in all touristic guides of the time.

After having changed use several times, it houses at present the National Conservatory.

The Bank of Salonica

The Bank of Salonica was originally established by the Allatini brothers in 1888. In 1906 V. Poselli designed its headquarters in the French quarter, in proximity to the Ottoman Bank and all the other important commercial establishments of the city. The Bank of Salonica opened its doors to the public in December 1908, and the clock on its baroque pediment has marked ever since one of the busiest streets of Thessaloniki's commercial

sector. The bank was closed in 1940 and the building subsequently suffered several modifications in order to be used for a variety of commercial activities.

The Lombardo Arcade

The "Passage Lombardo", situated at the angle of three streets and opposite the Ottoman Bank, was one of the most representative examples of iron architecture in the city. It housed several commercial and financial agencies as well as the architect's own office.

Poselli also designed a commercial arcade for Saul Modiano, known as "Cite Saul". It was completely material, concerning that building, is available. It was reconstructed in the twenties by the engineer E. Modiano.

The Allatini Mill

The first steam mill in Thessaloniki was built in 1854 by Darblay de Corblay in association with the Allatini brothers. In 1882 the latter acquired the exclusive ownership of the mill and after its total destruction during a fire in 1898 they entrusted the designing of the new building to V. Poselli.

The inauguration of the new mill which was mentioned as the "largest mill in the whole of Orient", took place on September 19, 1900. Since then it has been modified several times and it is still in operation to this day, providing Thessaloniki's skyline with one more powerful landmark.

Villa Allatini

Built in 1898 for Charles Allatini, it was one of the largest and most luxurious mansions of Thessaloniki. In 1909 it was bought by the 3rd Military Corps in order to be used as prison for the ex-sultan Abdul Hamid II, who remained in the villa until the liberation of the city in 1912. Since 1979 it has housed Thessaloniki's prefecture.

Villa Ida

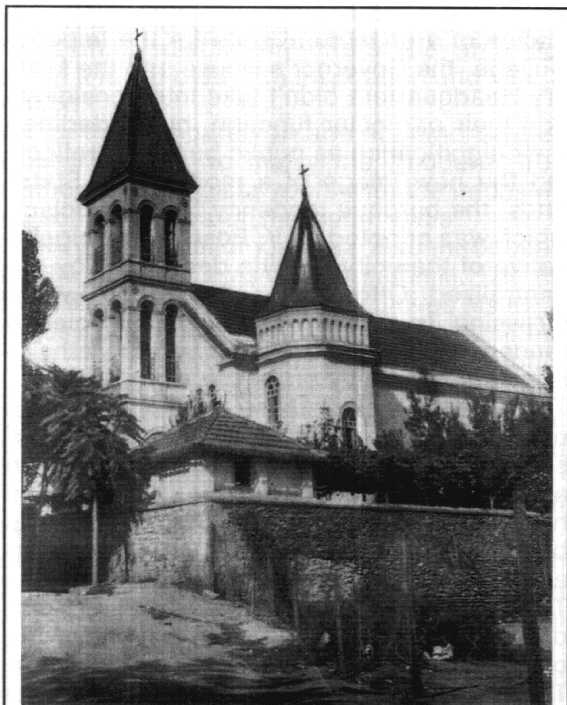
Built between 1886 and 1890, it was the residence of the banker Levi Saul Modiano and was named after his wife Ida. In 1890 it was the most costly villa of Thessaloniki and very famous among the foreign visitors of the city. As mentioned by a British officer "the Modianos used to entertain a good deal and with the Allatinis were perhaps the best known among us"⁶.



THE GOVERNOR'S HOUSE



THE MILITARY HEADQUARTERS

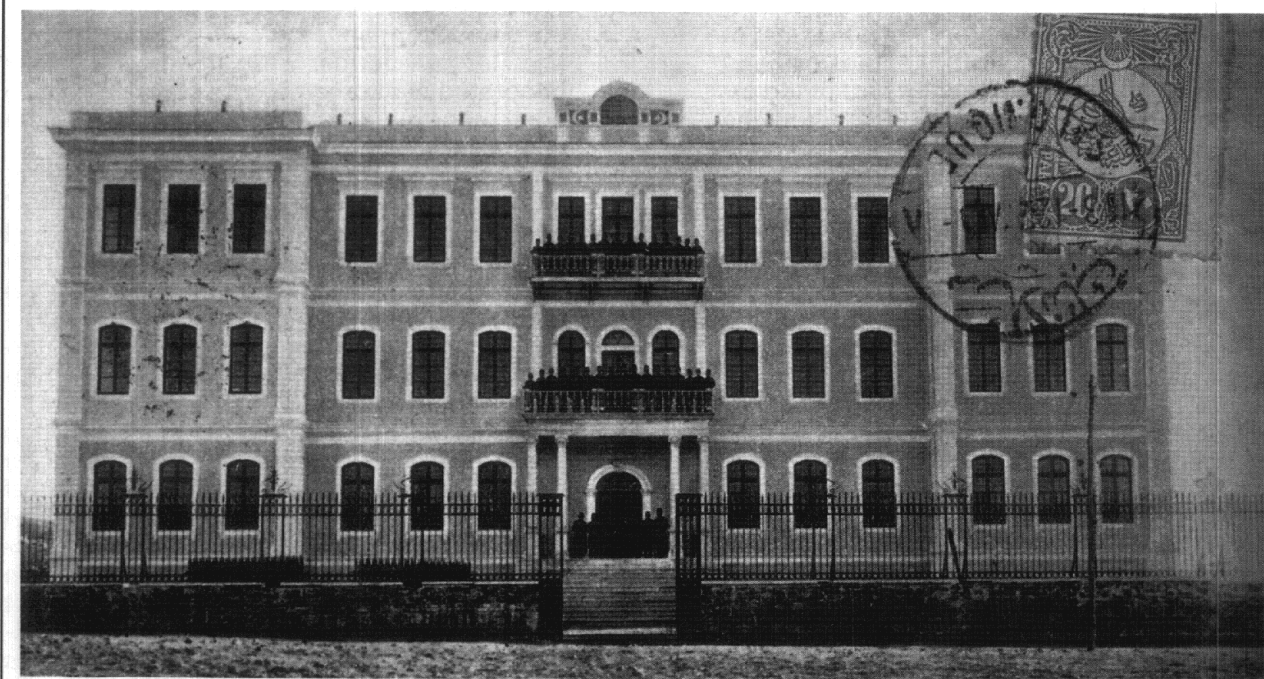


THE ARMENIAN CHURCH



THE LOMBARD ARCADE

THE IMPERIAL COLLEGE



In 1911 the villa was bought to the former Major of the city Houloussi bey who sold it in 1921 to the Italian State. During World War I it housed the Turkish consulate and subsequently the Italian school "Regina Margherita".

After having changed use several times, it was demolished in 1959-1960.

Samuel S. Hassid mansion

It was designed by V. Poselli in 1907 for the Hassid Family. After having changed tenants and owners many times, it was finally demolished in 1961.

Nesimbé's apartment house

It was built in 1909 for Nesimbé hanoum, at the corner of two of the most important streets of the Hamidie district, and was one of the rare examples of an apartment house (apartiman hane) in Thessaloniki. It was demolished in the sixties.

The Tanzimat era offered the Ottoman State many opportunities for modernizing. On the urban level, the reforms entailed a series of interventions aimed at the modernisation of city functions.

In Thessaloniki these interventions included the demolition of a large part of the city walls, the opening of new streets, the construction of railroad stations and of the port, the creation of infrastructure networks and of utility services and finally the extensions and the possibilities for redesigning part of the urban fabric. The Ottoman State erected the first public buildings to house the services that were being established or reorganised. At the same time, the foreign communities of the city proceeded to construct their own administrative buildings, schools, charitable institutions and hospitals, while the Municipality, established as an authority in Thessaloniki in 1869, led modernization efforts.

The urban landscape changed; new sizes created new correlations between the extent, the scale and the image of the city. It is during those times that V. Poselli arrived in Thessaloniki and started designing the first public buildings in the city.

"All these buildings are quite modern and have nothing characteristically Turkish, about them save a look of neglect and premature decay"⁸.

Poselli's public buildings, besides differing from previous types and forms, presented an

impressive morphological similarity. The choice of architectural style for the Imperial College, the Governor's House and the Military Headquarters didn't take into consideration their particular function, but underlined their significance as public buildings reflecting the new image of a modernized State. Thus, the baroque tendency for eclecticism, which was adopted by V. Poselli, was significative of the unity of style demanded by the centralized Ottoman administration, while stressing its differences from other eclectic tendencies favoured by the various ethnic-religious communities of the city⁹.

The gigantic size of these buildings was not only the result of the increasing number of services which they housed, but also an answer to the concept that the citizen should have of the greatness of a State which has been reorganized according to contemporary european models.

The places of worship that V. Poselli built for different ethnic-religious communities of the city didn't produce any new type of building. Their form was simple and their morphology followed stylistic archetypes which were imported from each community's metropolis, while their symbolism was strictly connected to the needs of each cult. Nevertheless Yeni Cami constitutes an exception to this rule. The New Mosque was due to the initiative of the Deunmeh community and it was considered as the apogee of eclecticism in Thessaloniki. It combined the mosque type of the late Ottoman period with Renaissance and Baroque forms, while it was graciously decorated with ornamental details related to contemporary artistic movements and the use of precious materials.

The 19th century was the century of state, municipal, communal, but also of "private" public buildings. Banks, hotels, commercial arcades and department stores were the temples, of the new civilisation which obeyed the laws of the commercial city. Their function dictated the adoption of new construction methods, while the use of the iron framework became generalized.

V. Poselli introduced a new type of Bank into Thessaloniki's architectural panorama. Its main characteristic was the organisation of space round an interior glass roofed hall which assembled and distributed all functions and movements and set up the cashier's desk as the heart of the credit establishment. Both the Ottoman and Salonicca Bank are representative examples of this type of building, while their morphological

particularities are proof of the variety of solutions that eclecticism offers the architect when it is handled with inspiration and imagination.

As for the Lombardo arcade, it demonstrates Poselli's ability to marry the "modern" iron framework and glass roofs with the imposing eclectic facades of the outer walls.

New types of buildings were also introduced by the new factories of Thessaloniki. The Allatini mill designed by Poselli proves his awareness of the relationship between architectural composition, needs associated to functionalism and production, new construction methods and working conditions. In that case eclecticism's contribution is restricted to the decoration of some details of the construction materials, or the emphasizing of the horizontal and vertical divisions of the facades. The monumental character of these "industrial palaces" made of them new powerful landmarks in Thessaloniki's skyline.

Poselli's work in the field of residential architecture was limited. Nevertheless the four cases we have identified and presented here, are indicative of the variety of types

and forms, through which a talented architect could interpret the private architecture: a luxurious italianate mansion for Ch. Allatini and Levi Modiano, a two storey dwelling for S. Hassid and an apartment house for Nesimbé hanoum.

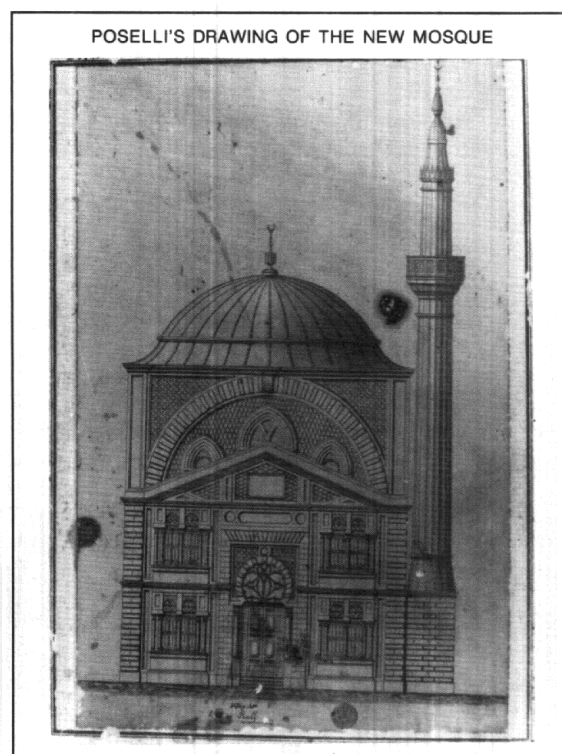
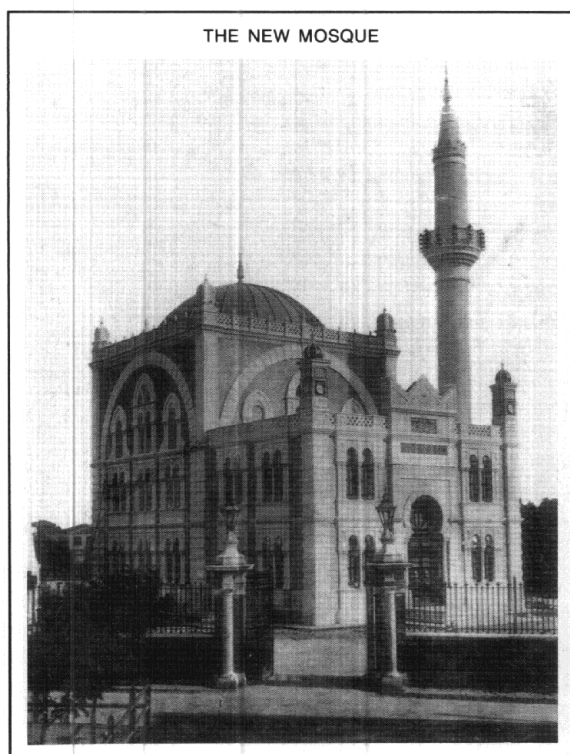
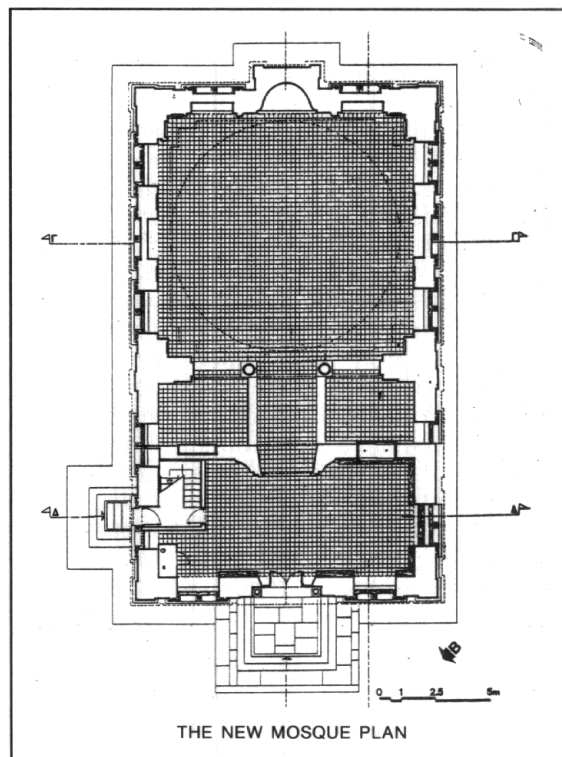
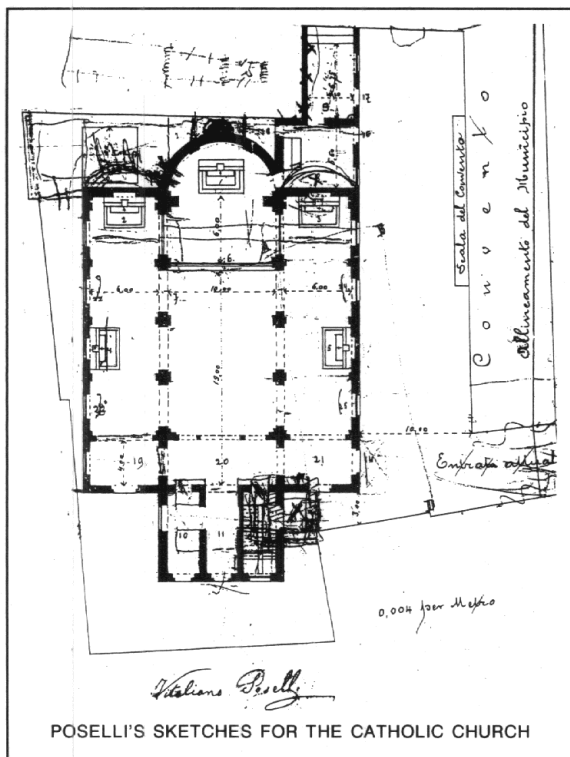
When strolling along the "Boulevard des Campagnes", the main artery of the newly planned Hamidiye district, one was impressed by the discrete use of apparent brickwork in the case of the Villa Allatini and the wise handling of its volumes. As for the Hassid family house, which was inspired by the italian baroque villas, one could easily appreciate the succesful articulation of the ornamental details of the structure of the building.

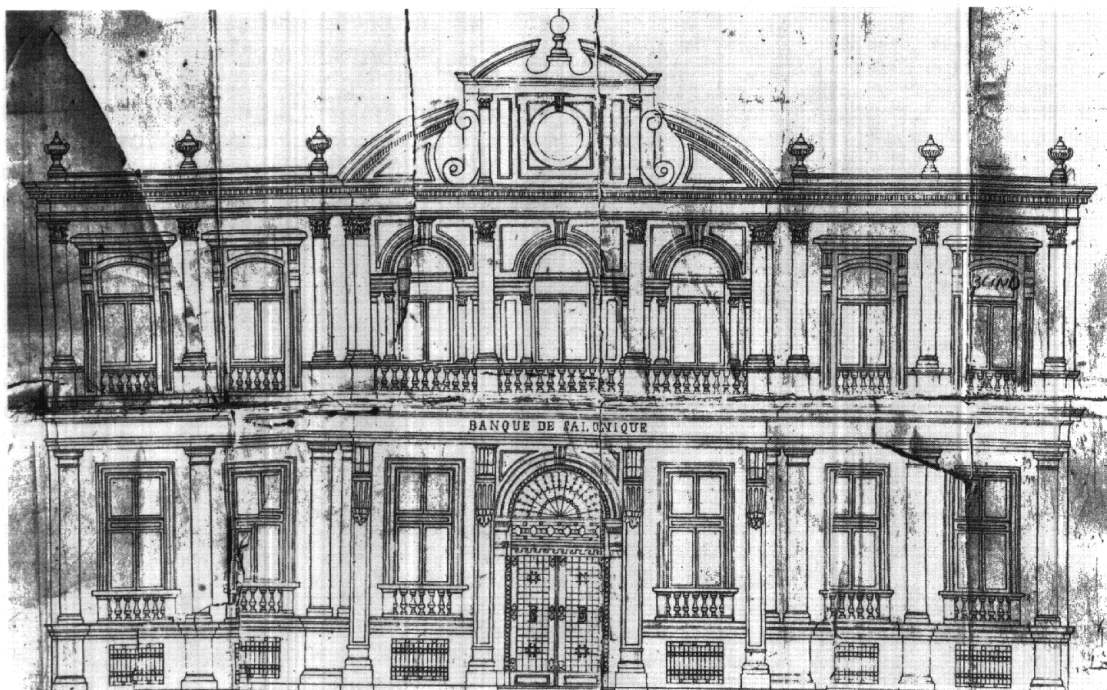
At the neighbouring apartment house of Nesimbé hanoum, the coexistence of a neoclassical and strictly symmetrical facade and an ottomanized tower was significative of the building's location at the intersection of two important streets of the Hamidiye district, while Villa Ida was indicative of the taste that the Jews of the city demonstrated for contemporary European models inspired by the italian villa as well as by the Swiss

NESIMBE'S APARTMENT HOUSE



'Εξοχική ὁδὸς Θεσσαλονίκης
Rue de la campagne Salonique





THE BANK OF SALONICA ORIGINAL DRAWING BY POSELLI (12.4.1906)

THE ALLATINI MILL





chalet and colonial revival architecture. Vitaliano Poselli's professional ability in all fields of architecture, his knowledge of new construction methods and materials and his competence in handling the classical rules, made of his works the masterpieces of Thessaloniki's contemporary architecture of that period. He followed all the basic principles of classicism, such as the symmetrical plan, the tripartite division of the building (basement, main block, entablature), the organizing of facades according to main or secondary axes of symmetry, but as all architects of his time he was also influenced by European contemporary styles. Eclecticism, the "international style" of the 19th century was his favourite, while one could easily perceive the influence exercised on his work by the Sicilian and Roman baroque.

In his works the morphological elements borrowed from different styles, were relieved of any ornamental excess due to their systems of reference, stylized and homogenized, and programme and took on a particular symbolic value representing the commissioning agency.

The bringing together of all these morphological elements in relation with the structure, the architectural composition and the alternation of solids and voids (solid and void parts), orderly develop the facades, emphasize the axes of symmetry and contribute to the expression of the desired symbolic character of the building.

Eclecticism's endless repertory granted both architects and patrons the freedom to choose that which best expressed their aims and vision. Thessaloniki's ethnic and religious multiformity, its continually increasing importance as a commercial center and the variety of historical and cultural references in the cityscape created the appropriate conditions for eclecticism to blossom not just as a movement and methodology of architectural practice, but also as an ideology for those dealing with architectural production.

Most of Poselli's works, erected during that period, can still be seen in the contemporary city, while their impressive silhouettes remain the most significant landmarks for the image of the city at the turn of the 19th century.

Vassilis Colonas

References

Unless otherwise indicated, all historical elements are taken from the monography of the architect, written by Vassilis Colonas and Lena Papamatheakis: *The architect Vitaliano Poselli, his works in Thessaloniki towards the end of the 19th century*, Thessaloniki, 1980 (in greek)

¹ *φάρος της Μακεδονίας*, 20.7.1891

² *Op.cit.*, 13.11.1893.

³ *Αλήθεια*, 19.8.1903.

⁴ Jews converted to the Muslim religion.

⁵ *Αλήθεια*, 22.6.1904.

⁶ *The Balkan New*, 2.4.1917.

⁷ As it is mentioned in the ottoman land register of 1909.

⁸ G.F. Abbott: *The tale of a tour in Macedonia*, London 1903 p. 14.

⁹ About eclecticism in Thessaloniki's architecture, for details see Vassilis Colonas: "Eclecticism as an architectural style for the modernization of Thessaloniki towards the end of the 19th century", *Architecture in Greece/24*, Athens 1989, pp. 72-78.