













Barely a soul wanders the streets of Gibellina Nuova, the new Gibellina. An aimless stroll will reveal a few bars, the odd shop, and a few inconspicuous clues to the businesses tucked away in the modern concrete buildings. The orderly rhythm of the terraced houses is unfamiliar to Sicilians more used to sitting in a chair outside their homes to chat with the neighbors. Even the avenues feel foreign, as wide as French boulevards, with no central square to bring people together. A violent earthquake destroyed the old city 55 years ago, along with the municipalities of Poggioreale, Salaparuta, and Montevago in northwestern Sicily. Local inhabitants were forced to move en masse from the original site after the Italian State banned reconstruction due to the ongoing seismic risk. Gibellina was never rebuilt, as Davide Camarrone recalls in his book *I Maestri di Gibellina*. A new urban center was created twenty kilometers away, on the territory of Salemi, a different town whose name derives from the Arabic for peace.

“I remember that we slept in the car for several nights,” recalls entrepreneur José Rallo, who runs Sicilian wine company Donnafugata alongside his brother Antonio in Marsala. “I was just a child and yet this dramatic story of an entire population losing its roots remained alive inside me for a long time. When Gibellina Nuova was finally built, with its strong focus on art, my family and I went immediately. That year — it was 1983 — the *Orestea of Gibellina* was staged for the first time, a Sicilian trilogy that the artist Emilio Isgrò adapted from the tragedy of the same name by Aeschylus. The sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro created the set, these monumental metal sculptures that gleamed among the ruined houses. That was the beginning of the annual Orestiadi theater review.”

The visionary architect behind both this initiative and the rebirth of Gibellina was Ludovico Corrao, a highly cultured mayor who led the city on different occasions for over twenty years. The choice to transform it into the largest open-air museum in Italy is owed to him. To do so, he called on some of the leading Italian artists and architects of the time (and even some from outside Italy) to collaborate. The first to respond was the sculptor Pietro Consagra, who in 1981 created *Porta del Belice*, the large steel star that greets visitors at the entrance to the city, like a comet indicating the new birth: “Contemporary art in the heart of deep, rural Sicily,” proclaimed Corrao. Consagra contributed numerous other works to the urban fabric, including *Meeting* in 1976 — the first building of what he called the “frontal city,” arranged in front of the spectator, like a target to be hit — and *Teatro* in 1984, an unfinished, inhabitable sculpture which is currently involved in a tender for redevelopment, thanks to architect Mario Cucinella. Architects Franco Purini and Laura Thermes designed *Sistema delle Piazze*, perhaps inspired by certain De Chirico paintings, while Ludovico Quaroni and Luisa Anversa designed the *Mother Church*, or the “ball church” as local residents call it: a stone cube diagonally crossed by a large white sphere, reminiscent of the Arab domes present in Sicily, but with an approach borrowed from Utopian architecture. Carla Accardi, Fausto Melotti, Alessandro Mendini, Mimmo Paladino, Francesco Venezia and Nanda Vigo have also created sculptures and palazzos.



“If you go to the MAC today, the Gibellina Nuova Museum of Contemporary Art, you can watch videos of Toti Scialoja teaching the city’s children to paint. Ludovico Corrao has created a truly beautiful connection with the population,” José tells me excitedly. The works are actually a joint effort that combine the creativity of the artists and the manual skills of the Gibellina locals who grouped together in cooperatives and founded workshops during the reconstruction years. Just like in Renaissance Italy. But let’s not forget that people lived in huts for a long time, with no certainty about what would become of them. “Many people left in those years, leaving Gibellina Nuova underpopulated today,” reflects Gabriella, José’s mother and a pioneer of female viticulture. She and her husband, Giacomo Rallo, the fourth generation in a family with over 170 years of experience in the wine world, founded Donnafugata in 1983.

Furthermore, the butterfly-shaped city plan was completely alien to local tradition. It was drawn up by the ISES (National Institute of Social Housing) under the direction of Marcello Fabbri, who was inspired by the Anglo-Saxon Garden City model, which advocates moderate inhabitant density and houses surrounded by gardens and tree-lined avenues. In the old town, however, as some residents remember with nostalgia, they would chat to each other from their balconies: You just had to knock on the wall to get your neighbor to look out. Riding a wave of popular discontent, Ludovico Corrao labelled the Gibellina Nuova project “the State’s Plan,” not without contempt. His intention was probably to rework memories of the past, transforming the city into a “civic art factory,” as critic Achille Bonito Oliva defined it. He did the same in the old town, where Alberto Burri spent from 1985 to 2015 building his *Cretto*. Not the artist’s first, but certainly his largest: White cement seals the piles of rubble that once were houses, creating an eternal monument to the inconsolable pain of the locals. “We wanted to give the old city a burial. What’s the first thing you do with a dead person in Sicilian tradition? Cover them with a white sheet,” explained Franco Messina, one of Corrao’s closest collaborators. The *Cretto* seen from above, which is how it should be seen, resembles a dried-up puddle, proof that there used to be water there, or life. “I am fascinated by it now, but at first, I was a little shocked. I’ve had to go back several times over the years and walk through it. Then I began to understand it,” admits Gabriella. It was the same for other former residents who perceived the creation of the *Cretto di Burri* as a violent action. They would visit and say: “My house used to be here, but I no longer remember where it is.” Or: “It was here, but I can’t say exactly where now.”

With Gibellina Nuova, it was different, the art of Consagra or Fausto Melotti was not traumatic in any way. Today, the works scattered across the city are silent presences, monuments blackened by the years, corroded by the sun, and exposed to the wind and bad weather. The artists have made this place a totally imaginary and authentically metaphysical space. “It will take some time,” acknowledges José. And he’s right — a city is built over years, over centuries. And this is just the beginning of the road for Gibellina.



