RUINS, MEMORY, AND THE MUSEALIZATION OF ABSENCE: THE CASE OF POGGIOREALE

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Abstract. In the heart of western Sicily, Poggioreale lies as a suspended town, abandoned since the 1968 Belice earthquake. Among its ruins, abandonment becomes a form of evidence: fragments of domestic life, traces of interrupted routines and the slow sedimentation of time. This condition places Poggioreale within a wider geography of impressive ghost towns such as Craco, Pripyat and Kayaköy, where catastrophe has transformed architecture into testimony and absence into material memory. The purpose of this research is to move beyond the traditional musealization of absence and explore how Poggioreale can generate new forms of interpretation and design through the notion of regenerative memory. Rather than treating the ruin as a fixed relic, the study examines how fragility, incompletion and erosion can become active components of cultural and territorial regeneration. The methodology draws on extensive fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2025, integrating walking exploration, sensory observation and collaborative photographic documentation. This embodied approach reveals how atmospheres, material traces and spatial discontinuities contribute to a layered reading of the site that cannot be captured through archives alone. The principal results show that Poggioreale operates as a counterpoint to the failed modern utopias of the Belìce Valley. Its suspended state preserves spatial legibility and demonstrates how abandoned settlements can be understood as living systems, where time acts as material and memory continues to shape form. Its suspended state allows the ruin to operate as a living system, where incompletion and erosion acquire the dignity of form and suggest alternative ways of understanding resilience. Rather than concluding with a definitive model, this reflection opens a space for possibilities: a way of approaching fragile territories through attention, slowness and care, shaped by walking the site, listening to its traces and observing how memory persists in the silence of the ruin.

Keywords: Ruin, Memory, Care, Museography, Regeneration

Introduction

In Terry Gilliam's 1995 movie 12 Monkeys, humanity is forced to live underground to escape a contagion that has exterminated 99% of the population. Prisoners sent to the surface encounter a world crystallized in the moment of exodus, where nature has reclaimed the urban landscape, a haunting metaphor for the coexistence of ruin and rebirth. A similar, though painfully real, experience occurred after the earthquake that struck L'Aquila in 2009. During my early inspections as part of the city's reconstruction, I encountered a landscape frozen at the very instant of catastrophe: coffee cups left on tables, paintings hanging askew, carpets dangling through the ruptures of collapsed floors. A pale dust veiled everything, muting sound and time alike. Such landscapes, at once metaphysical and apocalyptic, possess a dark fascination that powerfully affects both perception and collective imagination. They reveal how tragedy can transform ordinary places into mnemonic and aesthetic spaces, where destruction itself becomes a form of storytelling. If those sites risk turning into monuments to their own demise, they also develop unique museographic and cultural potential. Their evocative power lends them easily to reuse as spaces for artistic representation, cinematic, theatrical, or memorial (Augé, 2004).

Within this framework, the paper aims to analyze the town of Poggioreale in Sicily, abandoned following the Belice earthquake, as a potential case of interest for cultural enhancement and revitalization through tourism, also considering its proximity to Alberto Burri's Grande Cretto, located on the site of the other earthquake-stricken town of Gibellina Vecchia.

Case Studies

To introduce the research topic, we intend to present three case studies which, for different reasons, illustrate how abandonment has acted as a trigger for a very specific form of tourism, turning ghost towns into hubs of attraction with potential not only related to simple visitation, but also to cinematic and artistic uses.

Craco

Rising from a clay hill in Basilicata, Craco appears like a stone labyrinth overlooking the valley, dominated by a Norman tower and surrounded by the eroded calanchi. For centuries, it was a living village, yet the ground beneath it was unstable. In the 1950s and 1960s, landslides intensified due to the clay-rich soil and unsustainable agricultural practices. The situation culminated with the 1963 Irpinia earthquake, which rendered the town unsafe and triggered a gradual evacuation. By the early 1980s, following further collapses caused by the 1980 quake, Craco had become a ghost town. For decades, silence and decay defined its landscape. Over time, however, its spectral beauty began to attract artists, scholars, and filmmakers. In the 2000s, the Municipality of Craco and the Fondazione Craco Ricerche launched a conservation and musealization project, securing paths, stabilizing structures, and creating guided visitor routes. Access are now regulated through the Craco Card, allowing safe exploration while protecting the ruins. Craco's haunting appearance made it a symbolic and cinematic site that became a perfect set for movies like Christ Stopped at Eboli (1978), The Passion of the Christ (2004), Quantum of Solace (2008) or Basilicata Coast to Coast (2010). In 2010, the World Monuments Fund listed Craco among the world's endangered heritage sites. The subsequent creation of the Museo Emozionale di Craco (MEC) established a cultural and interpretive framework that narrates its history through immersive exhibitions and research initiatives. Today, Craco is not simply a ruin but a living scenography, a natural theatre where time itself performs. It embodies a new paradigm of heritage as process, where decay becomes narrative and memory a form of presence.

Pripyat

Founded in 1970 as a model city for the workers of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, Pripyat represented the Soviet dream of technological modernity. With nearly 50,000 inhabitants, it boasted schools, theatres, and an amusement park scheduled to open on May 1, 1986. On April 26, 1986, that dream ended abruptly when the No. 4 reactor exploded. The radioactive cloud rose like a second dawn. For thirty-six hours, unaware of the danger, residents continued their daily routines until the government ordered an evacuation. Within four hours, the entire city was emptied, its people told they would return in three days. They never did. Pripyat became an inaccessible ghost city within the 30 kilometre Exclusion Zone, visible only through myth and imagination. Since the 2000s, the Ukrainian government has permitted regulated tours, marking the rise of dark tourism, though in this case, the term is more appropriately replaced by documentary pilgrimage. Visitors move through decaying schools and apartments, witnessing a city preserved in the instant of disaster. Nature, reclaiming space, now shelters foxes, deer, and wild horses. Pripyat functions as an involuntary museum, an archive of human error and ecological recovery. Its image has inspired films, documentaries, and video games as Chernobyl (HBO, 2019), S.T.A.L.K.E.R., and Chernobylite. Pripyat endures as a memorial landscape, a space where silence articulates memory and where architecture becomes a cautionary narrative about the fragility of human ambition.

Kayaköy

The history of Kayaköy, known in Greek as Levissi, reflects a different form of abandonment, born not of nature or technology, but of politics and exile. Located in the hills near Fethiye on Turkey's Aegean coast, Kayaköy was a thriving Greek Orthodox settlement during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where Christians and Muslims coexisted peacefully. This coexistence ended with the Greco-Turkish Population Exchange sanctioned by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which forced Greek Orthodox residents to move to Greece and Muslim Turks from Greece to settle in Turkey. The displaced Greek community left behind their stone houses and churches, while the resettled Muslims, unable to adapt to the mountainous terrain and architecture, abandoned the village soon after. A devastating earthquake in 1957 sealed its fate, leaving behind hundreds of empty, roofless houses. In recent decades, Kayaköy has been preserved as a historic open-air museum, where visitors walk through its silent streets, guided by light and memory. The site offers not desolation, but reflection. Each ruin speaks of displacement and coexistence lost. Declared a protected heritage site by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and recognized by UNESCO as a "World Friendship and Peace Village," Kayaköy has escaped speculative development and stands as a monument to intercultural memory. Its evocative aura inspired Louis de Bernières' novel Birds Without Wings, which fictionalizes the village as a microcosm of shared humanity and historical fracture. Today, Kayaköy is not merely a ruin but a living classroom of remembrance, demonstrating how heritage can mediate between loss and reconciliation.

Across these case studies, a shared narrative emerges: the redefinition of ruins as spaces of cultural continuity. Whether born from natural catastrophe, political exile, or technological failure, these sites demonstrate that heritage is not static but processual. An ongoing negotiation between time, identity, and representation. The musealization of abandonment transforms decay into dialogue. It is both an act of preservation and of translation: translating material silence into cultural meaning. Each of these sites illustrates how architecture can persist beyond use, becoming a medium through which societies process trauma and imagine resilience. These landscapes remind us that the ruin is not the end of the story, but its language. Through careful conservation, interpretation, and artistic engagement, spaces of loss can become monuments to endurance, turning memory into a creative force that bridges past and future. Ultimately, the musealization of absence reveals a paradox at the heart of contemporary heritage: that to remember, we must sometimes preserve what is no longer there.

Theoretical and conceptual framework: from ruin to regenerative memory

Building upon these case studies, the following sections expand the reflection from the musealization of absence to regeneration as a critical and design framework. Ruin has long held an ambiguous place in architectural theory, oscillating between fascination with decay and the will to restore. Beyond this dialectic of loss and recovery, the ruin can be read as a temporal device that condenses different moments, revealing how traces of the past continue to act in the present (Benjamin, 1999). It performs continuity through interruption. Poggioreale exemplifies this layered temporality: not the residue of catastrophe, but a landscape where duration, erosion and recollection are crystallized into form. Within this framework, fragility itself becomes a form of resilience. Heritage is not a fixed deposit of authenticity but a cultural construction evolving through reinterpretation (Choay, 1992). In Sicily, this process takes tangible form in an architectural fabric shaped by recurring cycles of destruction and rebirth, earthquakes, migrations, reconstructions, each reconfiguring the previous layer. This continuous transformation embodies what has been described as a poetics of the fragment, a creative principle that reconciles ruin and invention (Margagliotta and Tuzzolino, 2013). In the Belice Valley, such a condition becomes radical: vulnerability, seismic instability and social dispersal turn into a productive paradigm. The ruin is no longer a wound to heal but an open framework for regeneration, where fragility becomes material for design. From this perspective, the concept of regenerative memory marks a shift from preservation as fixation to conservation as transformation. Memory is understood not as a static archive but as a dynamic process that translates recollection into creative continuity, aligning with contemporary discourses on regenerative design that view sustainability as renewal rather than equilibrium (Trigg, 2006). Poggioreale's exposed textures, silence and slow temporal sedimentation embody this logic. Here, resilience coincides with adaptability, the capacity to absorb change while maintaining meaning. The ruin operates as a living system, open to new narratives without erasing its past. In this sense, Poggioreale becomes a laboratory of resilience, where architecture moves from creating form to caring for memory as a continuous process.

It reflects a design ethic rooted in time, accepting incompletion and fragility as integral to transformation, where heritage is not protected from time but continuously shaped by it (Figure 1).

Methodological Approach: Walking, Observing, Recording

The investigation of Poggioreale was developed through direct engagement with the site rather than from archival distance. Walking through the ruins became a form of spatial inquiry, a way of producing knowledge through bodily experience. Walking connects places and transforms mapped space into lived geography (de Certeau, 1984). In Poggioreale, each step crosses multiple temporal layers, from the rational grid of the eighteenth-century plan to the irregular patterns shaped by collapse and vegetation. Moving through this landscape allows the observer to perceive not only the morphology of decay but also its atmosphere. These sensory elements turn observation into a kind of listening. Photographic documentation followed the same experiential logic and was carried out collectively by the authors with a professional photographer[1]. The camera was used not as an objective device but as a means of phenomenological interpretation, guided by a shared process of movement and observation. The images do not merely record decay; they mediate between matter, light and time, capturing the unstable dialogue between presence and absence. Photography thus becomes a critical instrument that registers temporal instability rather than freezing it. The act of photographing is a way of inhabiting the landscape, founded on attention and care rather than possession (Ingold, 2011). Each frame, shaped by motion and delay, contributes to a visual narrative that renders silence visible. The methodological framework also included comparative observation of other ghost towns. This broader perspective situates Poggioreale within a network of suspended settlements where catastrophe has turned architecture into testimony. Yet Poggioreale differs because its urban structure remains largely intact, allowing its spatial logic to be reconstructed through walking and observation. In this context, walking, observation and photography form an integrated method for reading the site through movement, duration and image. Overall, this methodology unites direct experience and critical reflection. The ruin is understood not as an isolated object but as a living space where physical presence, sensory perception and historical awareness intertwine with the act of design. Recording Poggioreale therefore means listening to its silence as a way of knowing and turning walking into a means of understanding architecture through time (Figure 2).

The Belice Landscape: From Modern Utopias to Deserted Modernities

After the earthquake of 1968, the Belice Valley became the scene of one of the most radical urban experiments in post-war Italy. What had once been a constellation of small agricultural towns Gibellina, Salaparuta, Poggioreale and Montevago was reimagined through the optimistic language of reconstruction. The disaster was seen as an opportunity for rebirth, a tabula rasa on which to build a new society. Architects such as Quaroni, Portoghesi and Purini, together with artists like Consagra, Pomodoro and Paladino, were called to translate this aspiration into form. Yet later analyses revealed a deep tension between the monumental rhetoric of reconstruction and the absence of a living community (Pellicano, 2020). The new towns, Gibellina Nuova and Poggioreale Nuova, were conceived as urban utopias meant to heal the memory of destruction through formality and scale. Half a century later they remain largely uninhabited, their vast spaces absorbed by silence. This condition exposes what can be called the desertification of modernity. The belief in progress, detached from the social and environmental realities of the territory, produced a landscape of empty geometries and unfulfilled expectations (Emiliani, 2016). The new cities failed to recreate the intimacy of the ancient settlements, replacing lived space with abstraction (Scaduto, 2020). The modern vocabulary of porticoes, esplanades and monumental axes did not express the continuity of the pre-earthquake villages but generated symbols for a community that no longer existed (Zandri, 2016). Over time, economic stagnation and depopulation turned these towns into ruins of modern optimism, monuments to an idea of progress that had lost its human scale and sense of belonging (Messina and Nicosia, 2024). Against this backdrop, Poggioreale Antica appears as a counter-landscape. While the modern towns have aged into monuments of distance, the old Poggioreale abandoned yet legible in its urban structure retains a quiet vitality. Its streets, partly reclaimed by vegetation, preserve traces of coexistence, and its roofless houses reveal the domestic order beneath the ruin. Here the fragment becomes more authentic than reconstruction, and incompletion acquires the dignity of truth (Carocci, 2023). The landscape of Poggioreale resists the totalizing logic of modernism by embracing erosion and time as agents of meaning, a landscape discrepancy where absence and transformation redefine identity and place (Messina and Nicosia, 2024). Crossing the Belice Valley today means moving through two temporal dimensions: the modern utopia turned desert and the ancient ruin turned archive. Between these extremes lies a mirror in which architecture confronts its limits, the inability of form to sustain life and the persistence of life within form's decay. Poggioreale reverses this narrative, turning catastrophe into continuity and proposing a different idea of resilience, where time, rather than technology, becomes the true material of design (Infranca, 1993).

The Case of Poggioreale: Between Memory and Regeneration

Founded in the early seventeenth century in the province of Trapani, Poggioreale was once a typical rural Sicilian settlement. Its economy was primarily agricultural, based on wine, wheat, and fruit production. It was a vibrant community, with a well-established social fabric and a consolidated urban structure, including a nineteenth-century theatre and several churches. During the night between January 14 and 15, 1968, a sequence of earthquakes culminating in a violent 6.4 magnitude shock devastated the Belice Valley. While neighbouring towns such as Gibellina and Salaparuta were razed to the ground, Poggioreale suffered extensive

[1] Fieldwork in Poggioreale (Trapani, Italy) was conducted through multiple site visits in August 2020, July 2021, and June 2025, complemented by broader explorations of the Sicilian territory carried out during the intervening years. The surveys included walking explorations, photographic mapping, and visual documentation undertaken by the authors in collaboration with photographer Mauro Fontana.

damage: more than 80% of its buildings were cracked or collapsed, largely due to the construction techniques of the time, particularly the use of tufo masonry (Figure 3).

The abandonment of Poggioreale was not the result of an immediate flight but rather a decision imposed by the authorities. After the earthquake and subsequent collapses, access to the ruins was prohibited. The old town was declared unsafe, and the cost of reconstructing it on site was deemed uneconomical. The historic centre was therefore evacuated, and the inhabitants were forced to live for months in tent camps and, for years, in temporary tin shelters the last of which were dismantled only after thirty-eight years (Figure 4).

A new settlement, Poggioreale Nuova, was subsequently planned and built a few kilometres away, according to modern urban principles. The population was relocated there. However, despite the wider streets and modern layout, the new town never won the affection of its inhabitants. It lacked the character and identity of the old village; many residents never felt "at home" and chose instead to emigrate elsewhere in Italy or abroad. Poggioreale thus underwent a very different process from that of nearby Gibellina, located only two kilometres away. While the population of Gibellina was also displaced, the abandoned village was transformed into a monumental artwork by Alberto Burri, who conceived and executed the Grande Cretto, turning the earthquake-stricken site into a memorial of the Belice tragedy. The old town of Poggioreale, by contrast, remained untouched. Never rebuilt or restored, it has endured as a time capsule: eroded by nature and decay, transformed into a haunting ghost town whose evocative ruins have become a destination for a form of dark tourism and, occasionally, a setting for film productions. Indeed, the ruins of Poggioreale Antica have drawn the attention of several filmmakers. Giuseppe Tornatore shot scenes there for Nuovo Cinema Paradiso, L'uomo delle stelle, and Malèna. The town also served as a backdrop for television series such as La Piovra, Cefalonia, and La guerra di Cam by Laura Muscardin. This phenomenon is not isolated. Across the world, many places share similar fates – abandoned by disaster, yet revived through the lenses of memory, art, and tourism. Poggioreale stands among these as a particularly striking example of ruins becoming cultural landscapes. Its evocative power has even reached popular culture: for the second season of One Piece, the streaming platform Netflix used the ruins of Poggioreale as visual inspiration for the fictional island of Whisky Peak. The promotional poster depicts the protagonists arriving among digitally reworked fragments of the town, embellished with exotic vegetation to suggest the wildness of the island. Though digitally altered, the essence of Poggioreale remains unmistakable. Its spectral presence now resonating in global imagination. Today, Poggioreale is the focus of an ambitious urban regeneration and musealization project, aimed at transforming it into a cultural hub and open-air museum. This initiative seeks to enhance local heritage resources and create a sustainable future for the community. In July 2025, the site came alive again through immersive installations, public talks, workshops, and artistic performances, as part of the initiative "Memorie di Poggioreale: Un viaggio tra memoria, arte e comunità" ("Memories of Poggioreale: A Journey through Memory, Art, and Community"). The project brought together anthropologists, artists, institutional representatives, and citizens in a shared reflection on the legacy of the Belice earthquake. By September 2025, work had begun on developing an illuminated access path to allow for evening visits, symbolically reconnecting the town to contemporary life. The urban regeneration project, promoted by the European Union and the Italian Ministry of Culture with PNRR funding (approximately €1.6 million), includes not only structural interventions within the old town but also initiatives for the development of cultural activities and creative enterprises. Beyond the musealization of the site, the plan envisions the opening of artisan workshops, hospitality structures, and gastronomic spaces, fostering a living dialogue between memory and innovation. The ultimate goal is to revitalize the abandoned village, reconnect the community with its historical and cultural heritage, and trigger new processes of local development. Poggioreale thus becomes a model project, a paradigm for the regeneration of "ghost towns" affected by depopulation, demographic ageing, and youth migration. Through its transformation, it embodies the possibility that places of loss may be reborn as landscapes of collective memory and laboratories of cultural resilience (Figure 5a, Figure 5b).

Designing the Abandonment: Poggioreale as a Model for Regenerative Heritage

The regeneration program "Poggioreale: Vecchio e Nuovo Centro", launched in 2025 within the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), reopens the debate on inhabiting ruins without erasing their silence. This far-sighted proposal by the Ministry of Culture, includes minimal and reversible actions: securing buildings along Corso Umberto, artistic lighting, and converting Palazzo Agosta into a visitor centre. Further initiatives involve craft workshops, residencies and cultural events connecting the old settlement with the modern one (Pace, 2025). The project's aim is not reconstruction, but the reactivation of a fragile ecosystem of memory and matter, positioning design as both operative tool and interpretive medium (ICOMOS–ICCROM, 2024). Unlike earlier interventions in the valley, such as Burri's Grande Cretto in Gibellina or the modernist cityscapes of Quaroni and Portoghesi, Poggioreale adopts a language of care and lightness. It does not rebuild but accompanies the ruin, without neutralizing its patina of time. This approach follows the idea of distributed musealization, based on limited, reversible and community-oriented use (Carocci, 2023). The plan defines Poggioreale as a regenerative heritage landscape where conservation, creativity and participation coexist. Regeneration here proceeds through small gestures and seasonal programming that preserve authenticity. The guiding principle is care-based design, grounded in listening, maintenance and temporal continuity, aligned with recent studies linking care to environmental awareness and participatory renewal (Lucchi, 2023). Resilience emerges through empathy, sustaining the dialogue between decay and renewal. Poggioreale becomes a prototype of cultural resilience, where abandonment itself frames design and where preservation meets the aesthetics of time. Within international research, the project contributes to the discourse on regenerative design as a process integrating environmental, social and symbolic dimensions. Its transforma-

tion relies on collective memory as a design tool, linking conservation, adaptive reuse and territorial awareness. Designing the abandonment means working within decay, turning care into an operative form of architecture. The new Poggioreale does not rebuild what was lost but choreographs what remains, allowing heritage to evolve as a living and regenerative process.

Conclusion

The Belice Valley reveals the limits of post-war reconstruction when architectural form is conceived as a substitute for social life rather than as its support. The modernist utopias built after the 1968 earthquake, grounded in abstraction and monumental rhetoric, produced durable forms but fragile communities. Their current condition as largely uninhabited landscapes exposes a critical paradox of modernity: the persistence of architecture in the absence of belonging (UNESCO et al., 2010). Against this background, Poggioreale Antica offers a radically different lesson. This study argues that its value does not lie in preservation as restoration, but in its suspended condition, where incompletion, erosion and temporal depth become active agents of meaning. Rather than representing failure, abandonment is understood here as a form of spatial intelligence, capable of preserving legibility, memory and relational traces beyond functional use. The main contribution of this research lies in framing Poggioreale as a model of regenerative memory, in which time, rather than technology or formal reconstruction, becomes the primary material of design. Through walking, observation and interpretive documentation, the ruin emerges not as a static archive, but as a living system, open to transformation while retaining its internal coherence. From this perspective, resilience is not achieved through renewal by replacement, but through continuity within decay. Poggioreale thus challenges conventional approaches to post-disaster reconstruction and heritage management, proposing an alternative paradigm in which care, slowness and temporal awareness guide design practices in fragile territories.
By shifting the focus from rebuilding form to sustaining memory, the site becomes not only a case study, but a critical lens through which to rethink architecture's responsibility toward loss, time and inhabitation. In this sense, Poggioreale does not present abandonment as a solution, but points to the need for careful and responsible forms of engagement, where change is gradual and reversible, and where time is approached not as an obstacle to overcome, but as a condition to work within, allowing memory and meaning to emerge through the site itself.

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Figures.

Figure 1 – View of the ruins of Poggioreale Antica / Francesco Leoni, 2025.
Figure 2 – Stairway connecting the Mother Church to Piazza Elimo in Poggioreale Antica / Mauro Fontana, 2020.
Figure 3 – Remains of the former Municipal Theatre of Poggioreale Antica / Mauro Fontana, 2020.
Figure 4 – Interior of the abandoned hospital of Poggioreale Antica, evacuated immediately after the 1968 earthquake / Mauro Fontana, 2020.
Figure 5a – Film still from Malèna (dir. Giuseppe Tornatore, 2000), shot in the central square of Poggioreale Antica.
Figure 5b – Piazza Elimo, the central square of Poggioreale Antica. Photograph by Mauro Fontana, 2021.

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THE VOID THAT INHABITS THE CITY. THE REDISCOVERED TEMENOS OF AUGUSTA EMERITA AND THE WRITING OF THE URBAN PROJECT

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Abstract. Faced with the new permanent climate conditions, urban voids – palimpsests of memory and possibility – emerge as privileged areas for environmental measurement and modulation and, at the same time, as guardians of shared formal and cultural identities. These spaces embody the city's ability to reflect on and regenerate itself, offering surfaces where the past and the questions of the present intertwine. In this context, José María Sánchez García's project for the Roman temple in the ancient colony of Augusta Emerita (now Mérida) takes the form of an act of historical and symbolic reconciliation: a ritual of 'liberation' of the ancient monument, achieved through the precise definition of its boundaries and the deliberate incision of the void that surrounds it. By precisely tracing the boundaries of the enclosure, the architectural intervention reaffirms the sacredness of the temenos, translating the current needs related to systemic regeneration – circularity of resources, climate adaptation and urban resilience – into an urban gesture of a ritual nature. The void thus disciplined is not mere absence, but an operational area for environmental mitigation and cultural renewal: a space in which the re-emergence of ancient forms and values becomes an opportunity for collective awareness and the reconstruction of historical memory.

Restored to the dignity of a threshold, the 'rediscovered' temenos in the ancient heart of Mérida regains its original meaning: that of circumscribing its most important figure (the temple), allowing its intrinsic roundness to resonate in the new enclosed space, disciplining the gaze from every side. In this evidence, 'regenerative' design manifests itself as an urban sign: a form that connects past and future, nature and culture, fragility and durability, in a single, shared breath.

Keywords: urban archaeological void, temenos, architectural design, boundary and threshold, memory and urban identity

From urban void to archaeological scene

In the heart of cities, archaeological areas appear as paradoxical presences: not simple absences or indistinct fragments, but voids that emerge in contrast to the full mass of the contemporary fabric. The excavation is like a negative that thickens at the consolidated edges, a discontinuity that interrupts urban continuity and at the same time highlights it, showing the limits, finiteness and compactness of the buildings around it. This condition has a dual significance: on the one hand, it is a «wound» (Ricci, 2006), because it interrupts established flows and relationships and generates cultural alienation; on the other, it is a revealing opportunity, because it makes historical stratification legible and offers inspiration for new configurations of meaning. It is precisely this ambivalence – both injury and revelation – that constitutes the theoretical and operational node that design practice must address: not simply healing or closing the wound left by the 'void', but mediating this formal and temporal discontinuity, transforming it into a threshold capable of hosting meaning, a 'place' capable of bringing together contemporary life and practices.

Franco Purini's interpretation [1] contributes decisively to clarifying this distinction: the dichotomy between 'place' and 'void' is not merely an aesthetic value, but the measure by which the capacity of a context to accommodate a particular culture of living is determined. According to this perspective, place is what offers stability and cultural recognition, while emptiness remains suspended in transience, lacking the completeness that makes human permanence possible. It is precisely on this threshold – between reassuring fullness and fragile transience – that design practice must measure itself: understanding how the archaeological void, despite being formally disconnected from the urban density, can be redefined as a place capable of 'coexisting with' and enriching the present city.

In this context, it is worth noting how archaeology comes to the city through a radical gesture: a presence that opens up and at the same time tears apart more or less consolidated urban areas. These vestiges, emerging from the interstices of time, often do not follow the alignments and rules of the modern city; on the contrary, they appear foreign, sometimes in conflict with the order and relationships that organise the city on the surface. This gives rise to two intertwined questions: on the one hand, the loss of continuity in urban life with respect to that past appear, and on the other, the need to rethink, in terms of design, their reintegration. What, then, is the horizon of meaning that we can attribute to an archaeological fragment or inserted into a fabric whose rules are different? How can we restore vitality and function to what, in terms of form and history, appears to be an interruption?

To answer these questions, it is useful to recall, albeit briefly, the reflection that links the boundary to the becoming of space into place. Aristotle, in Book V of Metaphysics, defines the limit as the extreme that separates the inside from the outside, the frontier that establishes what belongs and what remains beyond. Martin Heidegger (1976), taking up and rethinking this legacy, shifts the emphasis to the role of the limit as a condition for space to become place, that is, a human sphere capable of recalling life and meaning. These passages suggest that emptiness, understood as ephemeral discontinuity, is not immediately suitable for habitation, precisely because it lacks the formal completeness that allows a place to accommodate bodies and shared practices. Applied to urban archaeology, this lesson suggests that, in order to become a place, excavation requires devices that rethink its boundaries and turn them into thresholds, forms of architecture capable of harmonising different times and materials. Thinking in these terms means conceiving the excavation as an opportunity to construct a sequence of passages that make citizens and visitors aware of the transition from ordinary life to the sacred place, reconnecting the fragment to its context and restoring it to the condition necessary to continue to be a source of knowledge.