SOIL AS MEMORY. ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION IN THE ERA OF CLIMATE CHANGE/

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Abstract. The climate emergency compels architectural research and design practice to confront issues that can no longer be deferred, particularly those concerning territorial fragility and hydrogeological instability. Within the disciplinary strands that interpret the territory as the cumulative result of centuries of anthropic transformations, the need emerges for intervention methodologies capable of addressing these vulnerabilities through approaches in which form assumes a guiding role. Rather than being treated as a secondary outcome of technical containment systems, form must orient design choices and shape project solutions in a conscious and proactive manner. In this way, regeneration interventions related to territorial fragility may be understood as the outcome of a process of morphological redefinition in which, through an act of cultural reappropriation, the necessity of consolidation becomes an opportunity to define new forms of landscape, meaning, and inhabitation of places. Intervening in the territory constitutes an inherently "violent" act, one that disrupts existing equilibria and rewrites the site's natural configuration. Such transformation entails a "sacrifice" that should be compensated by design strategies able to convert a technical necessity into an opportunity: the creation of new spaces, the enhancement of anthropised environments, and the redefinition of urban relationships. These challenges intensify when interventions occur in proximity to cultural, historical, or archaeological heritage. In these contexts, consolidation must be achieved through solutions consistent with the pre-existing fabric, ensuring not only the resolution of instability phenomena but also the recovery of the legibility of ancient contexts that have been compromised over time. The consolidation works conducted in the late 1980s along the ancient seafront of the Varano hill in Castellammare di Stabia (Naples, Italy) becomes the starting point of the critical-theoretical reflection of the research. Although deemed urgent and technically effective, the intervention compromised the perception of the artificial landscape shaped by the terraced substructures of the Roman maritime villas situated along the plateau's edge. Starting from this case, the research explores alternative strategies for reconstructing a meaningful relationship between architecture and landscape through soil construction, aiming to transcend the merely technical dimension of consolidation and to propose models that restore coherence, intelligibility, and design quality to fragile territorial contexts.

Keywords: Architecture for archaeology, soil, memory, substruction;

The invention of the landscape in the Ager Stabianus. Present-day Castellammare di Stabia is a city located within the geographical context of the Gulf of Naples, to the south of Vesuvius, more precisely at the junction between the Sorrentine Peninsula and the Sarno Plain, in a narrow strip of coastal territory squeezed between sea and mountains that expanded significantly following the eruption of 79 CE. Here, the city was built *ex novo*; of ancient *Stabiae*, which stood above the Varano hill — the third city buried by the Plinian eruption — only fragmentary traces of memory survive today.

From a morphological point of view, the hill constitutes the first escarpment of the orographic system of the Lattari Mountains on the side facing the Gulf, which in antiquity must have presented itself as a true cliff overlooking the sea. Its slope has a vertical development of about 35 metres and is characterized by a steep gradient that in some stretches exceeds 45°; at its summit extends a broad plateau rising above the present-day settlement of Castellammare di Stabia. Along its edge, archaeological remains have revealed a complex system of architectures that includes at least a portion of an urban layout and the presence of five *villae d'otium*, arranged so as to construct the edge almost without interruption over a total extension of roughly 1,500 m (Miniero, 1999). In addition to the so-called "Urban Complex" (B), the various excavation campaigns — conducted systematically from the second half of the eighteenth century — have brought to light the archaeological remains of Villa del Fauno (A), Villa San Marco (C), Villa del Pastore (D), Villa Arianna with the Second Complex (F and E), and Villa del Filosofo (G).

Between the end of the Republican period and the beginning of the Empire (1st century BCE – 1st century CE), the architectural type of the suburban *villa d'otium* constitutes the principal agent of the occupation of the extra-moenia territories around the Gulf; in the countryside surrounding the ancient cities of *Pompeii* and *Stabiae* alone, more than one hundred such villas have been identified (Kockel, 1985; Moorman, 2008). In this context, a new awareness of the relationship between architecture and landscape gradually takes shape: an idea of unitary composition in which artifice and nature concur in defining an organic structure in the making of the territory.

As Amedeo Maiuri (1959) has observed, while it is true on the one hand that the villa type initially derives from that of the *domus*, enriched with elements of Hellenistic architecture, it is also true on the other that it ends up overturning its compositional logic. Beyond the city walls, the architecture of the villa is no longer constrained by the morphology of an urban fabric in which it is inserted, and the arrangement of its architectural "pieces" no longer responds solely to intrinsic conditioning factors, but rather — and indeed predominantly — to extrinsic ones. Thus "a rational process of forms and structures" comes into being,

> "in which from the old and austere Samnite house with compluviate atrium, with all the living and reception rooms arranged around the atrium as the natural centre from which the whole house radiates, one moves to the villas in which the atrium has no more than the function of a grand vestibule, while all the living quarters and the great halls for entertainment and luxury are instead arranged with their entrances and their principal source of light toward the external terraces, along the ambulatories of the peristyle and other secondary porticoes, so as to receive directly from outside the vital current of air, all the light and warmth of the sun, and to enjoy from them the unobstructed view of the sky, the countryside, and the sea" (Maiuri, 1959, p. 295).

To understand the logic underpinning these villas, it is necessary to invert the point of view: their deep rationale is to be sought outside themselves,

in the relationship that the layout is able to establish with landscape views and with the ground, in the mediation between the datum elevation of the villa and the orography of the land. As Paul Zanker notes,

> "the ingenious idea of orienting porticoes, dining-rooms and rooms for repose towards particular landscape vistas demonstrates that Roman patrons and their architects elevated the integration of nature and landscape to a new dimension of pleasure intentionally staged. This represents an extremization of the Hellenistic way of building and, at the same time, something new, something Roman" (Zanker, 1993, p. 41).

At *Stabiae*, the Hellenistic awareness of the form of the soil as a problem of architectural composition (Lauter, 1999, p. 48) is carried into the Roman world and grasped as an opportunity to seek new dwelling forms woven into the relationship between substructure and superstructure. The unstable nature of the slope, combined with the desire to secure a panoramic view and to connect the villas on the plateau to the shoreline below, became the occasion to conceive architectural experiments capable of adapting to the form of the ground and even of rewriting it, effectively reinventing it.

In the maritime villas of Arianna and San Marco in particular, the layout, characterized by an extensive open structure, develops along a broken-line trajectory that follows the natural conformation of the ground, made evident by the contour lines, integrating itself fully into the landscape (Ackerman, 2013, p. 19). The combination of the architectural "pieces" is complex, as they adapt and submit to the profile of the ridge of the hill, escaping the simple application of an intrinsic and unitary logic in favour of a complex syntactic construction, in which the meaning of the whole finds its reason for being in the ensemble of combinatory rules belonging to a compositional logic "by parts".

The steep slopes were built up through sophisticated systems of soil containment and levelling, conceived to convert a static structural requirement into a possibility for space.

The natural morphological profile of the slope is reinvented through a system of overlapped terraces, whose elongated fronts accommodate a sequence of rooms, chambers, cisterns, cryptoporticoes, nymphaea, wells, and *tablina*, distributed along the different levels of the substructural terraces, which are in turn connected by sloping urban paths and internal systems of vertical distribution. The result is a unitary ensemble, conceived as a veritable scenography for those arriving from the shoreline (Sodo, 2001), capable of giving architectural and urban form to a problem linked to territorial fragility and hydrogeological instability.

From a construction point of view, it is worth noting that, in order to contain the cliff-like slope of Varano, "technical and structural principles that were substantially new — and observed in the Vesuvian context for the first time — were deployed, such as box-type substructures and terraces built against the profile of the hill" (De Simone, 1988, p. 232). Indeed, the steepness of the slope — which, it should be recalled, exceeds 100% in some stretches —rendered ineffective any solution previously tested. To counteract the overturning and sliding of the masonry structures, a system of terraces composed of hollow chambers was conceived which, once filled with soil and aggregate, worked by gravity in opposition to the thrust of the ground. However, the poor consistency of the surviving archaeological remains is direct evidence that something did not function as intended.

The consolidation of the ancient seafront of the Varano hill. The sedimentary nature of the soil and the presence of numerous mineral water springs have generated, since Roman times, recurrent hydrogeological instability phenomena. These are responsible for the collapse and downslope sliding of extensive portions of the panoramic rooms of the *villae d'otium* built along the edge of the plateau, together with their substructural systems. Considering only the second half of the last century, three landslide events were recorded: the first in 1961, then in 1969 and finally in 1985. The last of these was decisive in motivating the choice of a stabilization intervention deemed "urgent and non-deferrable", with the dual aim of safeguarding both the present-day settlement that has developed at the foot of the slope and the conservation of the Roman villas above.

Between the autumn of 1987 and the spring of 1988, once the investigative activities had been completed —archaeological excavations, photogrammetric surveying of the remains (De Simone, 2002), and geognostic investigations of the slope — the ancient seafront of the Varano hill was subjected to a massive consolidation intervention, which particularly affected the slope in correspondence with Villa Arianna and the Second Complex. The stabilization of the slope was achieved through the construction of a dense network of micropiles, driven to a depth sufficient to reach the resistant lithological matrix of the soil and connected at the top by reinforced concrete beams in order to increase static resistance and obtain a unitary response to the stresses. To complete the works, a surface layer of reinforced *spritz-beton* was applied over the entire slope, with the aim of protecting the hillside from further washout phenomena (Croce, Zilberstein, 1990).

More than thirty-five years after the completion of the works, returning to reflect on what was done — analysing it from the standpoint of Architectural and Urban Composition — means confronting the topicality of an issue that remains unresolved: the capacity to transform territorial fragility into the construction of landscape. From this perspective, the ancient knowledge of the modes and possibilities of appropriating the ground, evidenced by the villas of *Stabiae* themselves and more generally by the numerous maritime villas in the Gulf of Naples, constitutes a body of knowledge that can be rediscovered and reinterpreted through new research perspectives aimed at identifying "from within" responses to problems of soil instability, using design experimentation as the necessary testing ground. Thus, the question is no longer limited to the technical effectiveness of stabilization, but concerns the possibility of regenerating the Varano front as an artificial landscape, transforming a condition of fragility into an opportunity for cultural reappropriation. The research — developed in greater depth in the author's doctoral thesis (Saldarini, 2023, Ph.D. Thesis) — aligns itself with the traces of this possibility (missed, unexplored, or in any case unrealized), with the aim of rediscovering in the archaic forms of architecture that unfolds between the folds of the earth those dwelling forms understood as the human capacity to give form to places.

Writings in the ground. Form as knowledge and memory of place.
This research understands regeneration as a morphological and cultural operation, grounded in the interpretation of form as knowledge and memory of place, and is situated within a tradition of studies active since 1997 at the Politecnico di Milano, which asserts the role of Architectural and Urban Composition in the cognitive process of archaeological areas, with the aim of attempting to mend that "fatal separation" which has left architects bereft of their roots (Venezia, 2011). Ancient architecture may indeed be understood not only in its objective content — as a work shaped by time as sculptor, endowed with its own autonomous aesthetic condition — but, on the contrary, may be apprehended in its virtuality, that is, in the formal and semantic value expressed by the polyphony of wall fragments that emerge from the earth (Augé, 2004), nourishing the idea of a past that lives in memory and can therefore be continuously investigated, reconsidered, and reinvented (Torricelli, 2022). The complex stratification revealed by excavation, clarified by the archaeological interpretation of the remains, becomes the research field of the study. Here, the study of form acquires an ontological value, capable of revealing the profound reasons of architecture: through form it becomes possible to penetrate history by investigating its traces, fragments, and layers, in an attempt to know and recognize within them the weaves of ancient, stratified orders that now present themselves in a condition of spatio-temporal simultaneity (Ferro, 2020).

In this way, the study of archaeology transcends its traditional role: from a mere field of investigation, it is transformed into a genuine epistemic method, applicable not only to archaeological sites but to the entire anthropized territory (Ferro, 2022). It becomes capable of orienting the reading of contexts, revealing formal stratifications, and bringing to light the immanent forms that structure current morphology. The soil becomes the physical support in which continuous transformations, manipulations, writings, and erasures are recorded: an archive of previous formal configurations, a stratified universe of signs and forms that refer both to natural elements, linked to the geographical conformation of the site, and to artificial ones, traces — more or less evident — of ancient or recent anthropization, intimately connected to the things of architecture, whether an entire city or a single building (Corboz, 1985, p. 23). From it, it is possible to trace the ways in which the memory of antiquity operates in the present, the immanence of formal structures, and the emergence of a specific local connotation of dwelling and building. These aspects can be understood not only as "what has been", but rather as "what can still be". The past does not exhaust its value in itself: through a line of research that goes beyond historical objectivity and philological rigour, it opens up to new configurations of form which, like a genealogical chain, establish a direct relationship with the ancient (Torricelli, 2022).

In the case of the maritime villas of *Stabiae*, the investigative method was articulated in two acts. The first, of an archival-documentary nature, aimed to retrieve the documents needed to reconstruct the complex system of formal stratifications: excavation diaries — from the Bourbon campaigns to the most recent ones — were analysed, and survey plans and sections were redrawn in order to understand the phases of discovery and the logics of transformation of the villas. At the same time, ancient topographical maps, pictorial images, and mosaics provided valuable tools for understanding the original configuration of the site and its stratification over time. The synthesis of this phase takes the form of an interpretative map (Fig. 4), capable of reading the place critically in order to grasp formal correspondences and highlight unresolved issues: the relationship between excavated and unexcavated areas, the relation between the contemporary city and the archaeological precinct, and, inevitably, the question of the Varano front.

The second act concerned direct knowledge of the existing condition. The maritime villas of ancient *Stabiae* were studied through drawing, understood not only as an operational tool but, on the contrary, as a form of direct knowledge of architecture capable of making the reasons of form evident and offering new possible interpretations for research. Drawing — particularly through plan and sectional representation — is in fact an operative form of thought that forces one to discretize the continuum of the world that stands before us, distilling from it only the principles and ideas being sought (Purini, 2007).

The representational work in turn unfolded in two moments. The first can be described as logical–analytical, during which the archaeological fragments of the maritime villas of *Stabiae* were documented in their present state of conservation through the systematization and normalization of different kinds of information: direct field survey, digitization of paper surveys, and the two-dimensional representation, in plan and section, of three-dimensional point clouds. This process made it possible to clarify the complex articulation of the terraced substructural systems through which the artificial invention of the soil is manifested. In the case of Villa Arianna, seven superimposed terrace levels can be distinguished — one of which now lies at the foot of Varano, completely buried by alluvial deposits — interconnected by a ramped path that puts the villas in direct communication with the shoreline below and, figuratively, introduces a system of oblique lines that lends unexpected dynamism to the composition.

The condition of Villa San Marco is different, where the configuration appears more incomplete: in correspondence with the villa, in fact, a recently constructed terracing with buttresses supports the ground, yet overwrites the ancient stratification; in the vicinity of the so-called urban complex, however, it is still possible to clearly read the fragments of the substructural terrace supporting the bath complex, articulated over two levels and composed of a gamma-shaped cryptoportico, a cistern, and a sequence of rooms arranged like a comb, facing towards the sea.

The representational style adopted — which in some respects may seem to betray a preference for drawing *à l'antique* — is necessary in order to combine and simultaneously convey the different aspects of which architecture is composed, offering an overall understanding that, by contrast, a more neutral graphic style would be unable to provide. Orders and geometries, colour and material, solids and voids; shadows, the plastic play of volumes under light, planes of depth, the form of the soil, environmental pre-existences (both anthropic and natural), vegetation. In short, drawing is capable of conveying the character of the place as a perceived landscape, sensibly experienced and not merely measured.

The second moment can instead be described as interpretative–synthetic. In this phase, the case studies are represented according to an interpretative schematization in which architecture and soil are summarized by a single line of separation between earth and sky, into which forms are set like inserts — prelude and suggestion of space in architecture. This moment essentially consists in the synthesis of the research work, through which it becomes possible to highlight the linguistic potential of the local tradition of soil architecture: from the abstract form, one can infer the compositional acts and operative architectural types, the logics of their composition with the site, and the ordering principles underpinning the construction of the landscape. This is consistent with an idea of cyclical knowledge in which research continuously moves between the shore of physical objects and that of universal laws (Popper, 2015). From the former, it derives rules and principles to be deposited "beyond", to constitute a solid theory of design; from the latter, it identifies the immutable principles upon which to weave the concreteness of one's own projects.

Towards the project. A coherent re-composition of Villa San Marco. A first opportunity to test the content of the research was offered precisely by a possible rethinking of the consolidation strategy for the Varano hill front, understood as an experience of design experimentation that forms part of a broader overarching framework aimed at establishing an Archaeological Park of ancient *Stabiae* (Rescigno, Zuchtriegel, 2023). To date, the front constitutes a pronounced divide between the urban fabric of the contemporary city and the archaeological areas of the seaside villas uncovered along the slope, creating an urban void of a dual nature. On one hand, in physical terms, the front takes the form of a large undeveloped space in which the steepness of the terrain and the perimeter of the archaeological site — bounded along Via Grotta San Biagio by imposing walls interrupted only by a few service openings reserved for authorised personnel — establish a clear and impassable limit for the city, effectively preventing any direct passage or connection between the inhabited area and the plateau above. On the other hand, it assumes the character of a semantic void, a *terrain vague* which, in relation to the city, lies awaiting a new civic role and urban significance (de Solà-Morales, 1995). The archaeological areas are therefore accessible exclusively from the uphill side, via the branches of Via Passeggiata Archeologica, and can be reached almost solely by road vehicles. In this way, the vertical system of connection that, historically, the artificial landscape of the Varano front had established, serving as a mediator between the city and the sea, is now lacking.

The proposed solution recomposes parts of the city that are currently disconnected, in order to overcome the condition of isolation in which the archaeological area finds itself and to restore to it an active urban role within the contemporary context. A new archaeological promenade is grafted at the foot of the slope, conceived as a cultural itinerary within the territorial network of the Pompeii Archaeological Park, in line with the concept of the metropolitan museum. The promenade originates at the "Via Nocera" station of the Circumvesuviana railway line; from here, via a new access to the Park opened along Via di Grotta San Biagio, the path reconnects with the traces of the ancient coastal road, climbs the Varano front, and leads to Porta Marina, thus proposing to re-establish access to the city from the ancient seafront as a possible entrance to the Park. The project fully reappropriates what pre-exists it, both physically and otherwise: the latent form of the ancient substructural terrace, belonging to the sector of the urban complex just beyond the walls of Villa San Marco, is seized as an opportunity to re-establish a connection between the ruins of the maritime villas and the ancient shoreline. The new architectural fragment is rooted in the ground by physically reconfiguring the missing portion of terrace corresponding to the bath complex; the juxtaposition of the new "buttress" with the curved fragments of the ancient cistern gives shape to a kind of artificial grotto, a fortuitous atrium that constitutes the entrance to the underground exhibition route. Crossing the threshold, a longitudinal distribution system recovers from theory the architectural type of the cryptoportico, translating it into contemporaneity, and leads to three exhibition spaces obtained through an inversion of the relationship between solid and void. The rooms, in fact, are conceived as if they were modern box-type substructures, but emptied of their fill and thereby rendered available as inhabitable space; in section, the architecture draws on the memory of cistern spatiality and, through an analogical process, reinvents it in a system of truncated-pyramidal skylights that admit light from the roof. Outside the grotto, a light walkway cuts across the buttresses in figurative terms and leads to the staircase rising to the next level. Here, the architecture renounces a complete reconfiguration of the ancient substructure and, instead — embracing the uncertainty of the available data — becomes itself a fragment, capable of virtually evoking the many possible completions of the whole. The second substructural level is thus conceived as a roof, upon which a sequence of open-air exhibition rooms leads to the entrance of the gamma-shaped cryptoportico that unfolds beneath the peristyle of the bath complex; along the way, an ancient staircase leads to Via di Breccia, which in turn provides access to Villa San Marco.

The proposed solution aims to move beyond the methodological problems of juxtaposition, reconstruction, and recognizability of the intervention, proposing instead a new unity — fragmentary, polyhedral, and composed "by parts". The new substructural fragment is woven, as it were, into the ancient architectural score, materializing as a morphologically correct continuation of the ruins: it discovers their immanent forms, derives from them the architectural types, re-establishes their corrupted geometries, and adopts their rhythm of elements. In other words, the project, insinuating itself into the secret of things and within the stratification itself, breaks the existing order to establish a new one, of a higher kind, in which the conformity between ancient and new — the "concordance" between project and pre-existence in Bramante's sense — becomes an almost measurable datum. The new, in fact, does not merely descend from the ancient in deductive terms, but rereads it in the present and, with an inductive attitude, allows for a renewed intelligibility.

Notes.

1. until 2014 within the Department of Architectural Design (*Dipartimento di Progettazione dell'Architettura*), under the scientific coordination of Angelo Torricelli with Luisa Ferro, then in the Department of Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering (*Dipartimento di Architettura Ingegneria delle Costruzioni e Ambiente Costruito*) under the scientific coordination of Luisa Ferro.

2. the establishment of the Archaeological Park of ancient *Stabiae* has been stalled since the 1970s due to issues related to the expropriation of the areas between Villa Arianna and Villa San Marco; the design experimentation described in Figures 5 and 6 forms part of the Master's Degree Thesis in Architecture–Architecture of Constructions (LM-4) (SSD CEAR-09/A), School of Architecture, Urban Planning and Construction Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, authors Diletta Gianfranceschi and Simone Spiteri, supervisor Luisa Ferro, tutor Matteo Saldarini.

3. the concept is expressed in the *Bramanti Opinio*, published in "Archivio Storico Lombardo", in the *Annali della Fabbrica del Duomo*.

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Figures.

Figure 1 - The morphological structure of the ancient *Ager Stabianus* / © Luisa Ferro, Matteo Saldarini.

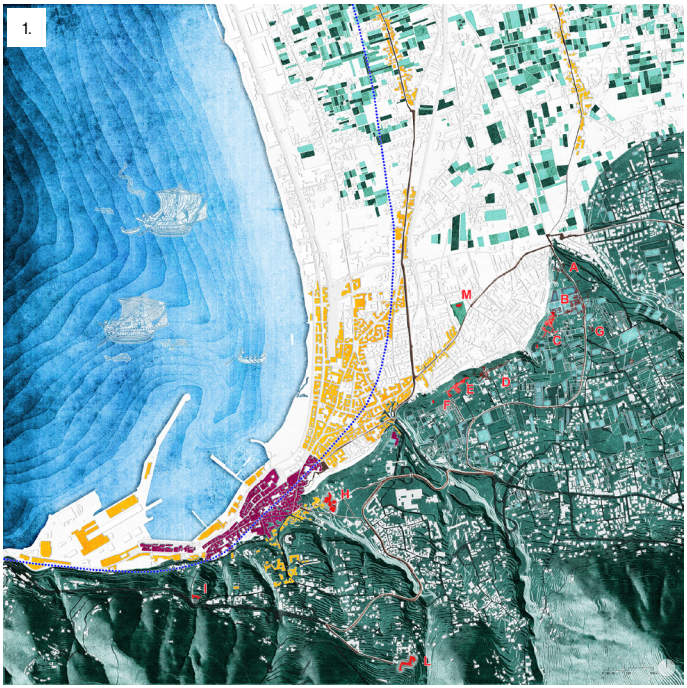
Figure 2 - The consolidation of the Varano hill. Villa Arianna: exemplary section of the intervention / © Matteo Saldarini.

Figure 3 - Formal correspondences and unresolved issues: Villa Arianna and Villa San Marco / © Matteo Saldarini.

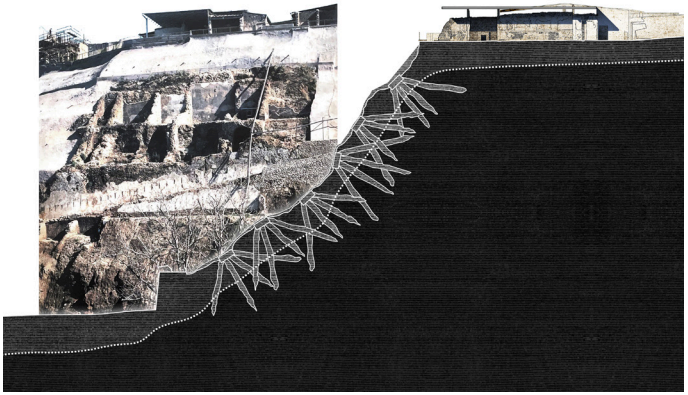
Figure 4 - Soil architecture at Villa San Marco / © Matteo Saldarini.

Figure 5 - A new terrace for the bath complex of the urban layout at Villa San Marco / © Diletta Gianfranceschi, Simone Spiteri, supervisor Luisa Ferro, tutor Matteo Saldarini.

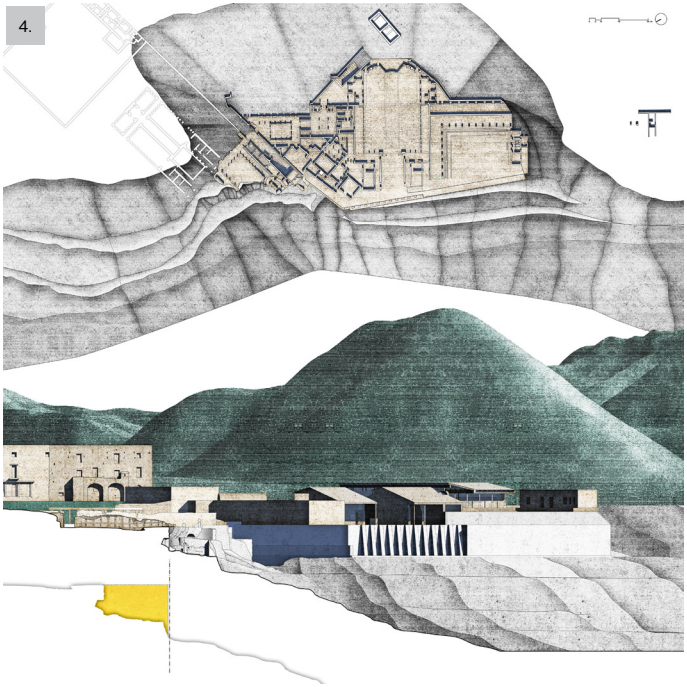
Figure 6 - The fragmentary concordance between ancient and new: types, geometries, orders / © Diletta Gianfranceschi, Simone Spiteri, supervisor Luisa Ferro, tutor Matteo Saldarini.



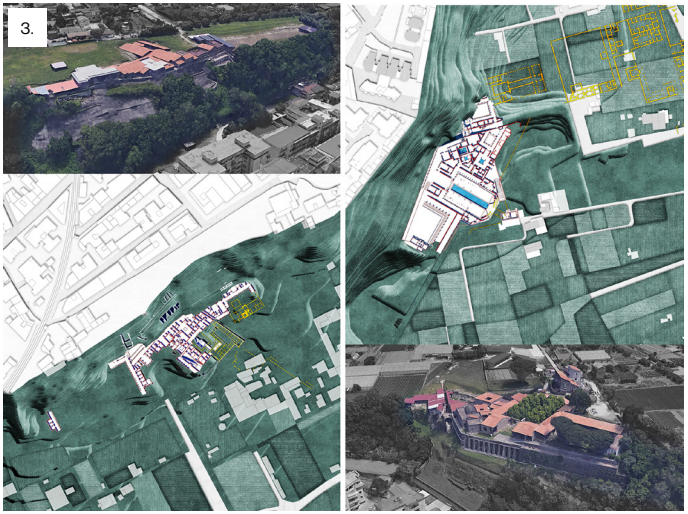
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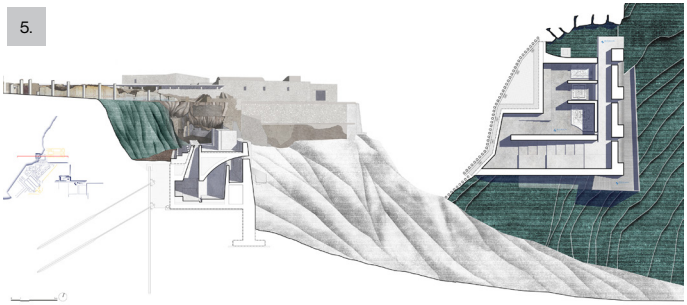
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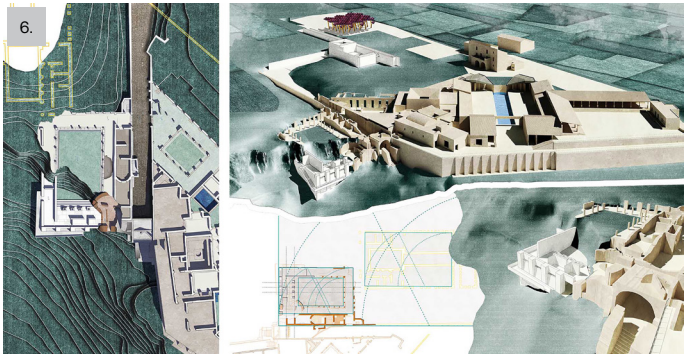
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6.



CULTURAL INITIATIVES AS SUSTAINABLE TOOLS FOR PRESERVING URBAN IDENTITY IN HISTORIC MIXED-USE AREAS/

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Abstract. The dwelling with a shop or workshop represents an emblematic part of urban heritage, portraying not only a defining element in the development of the built environment but also an important aspect of urban identity that has shaped numerous cities over the centuries and still characterises many historical urban centres today. In Bucharest, abandonment, demolition, and inappropriate interventions, combined with a lack of an appropriate protection framework and support, are currently leading to the rapid disappearance of this heritage and a substantial change in the urban landscape, primarily due to a general lack of awareness regarding the value of these buildings. This not only leads to the loss of significant urban identity but has also given rise to vulnerable areas, abandoned buildings, and residual spaces. This paper aims to explore how cultural initiatives can contribute to the preservation of urban identity of historical areas characterised by mixed-use buildings that combine residential and commercial or manufacturing spaces. The study focuses on the valorisation of cultural heritage integrating both tangible and intangible aspects, outlining the strong connection between the interior space and the urban context, the capacity of the spaces to support human interaction and communities, as well as a sense of identity and belonging. Cultural initiatives such as maker spaces, workshops, exhibitions, pop-up galleries, digital archives and social media strategies, cultural events and programs promoting community engagement, local economies, social inclusion, and cultural promotion can have a huge impact on preserving cultural identity and integrating these sites into the contemporary urban life, not only in terms of conservation but actual participation which can re-anchor them into the public imagination. Therefore, they promote low-impact physical interventions, concentrating on the role of social and cultural initiatives, aligning with the view of Agenda 2030' Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG11) on safeguarding cultural heritage, UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation advocating for an integrated approach of social, economic, environmental and cultural aspects, and the Faro Convention, focusing on the value of people-oriented perspectives. The study will draw on national and international literature, as well as case studies from a worldwide perspective, analysing how cultural initiatives can support raising awareness towards urban heritage preservation and ultimately contribute to the reactivation and sustainable development of historic mixed-used areas characterised by dwellings with artisanal and commercial spaces, ensuring the continuity of meaningful cultural identity, and how this can be relevant in the case of Bucharest.

Keywords: cultural initiatives, sustainability, urban identity, historic mixed-use urban fabric, heritage;

Introduction. Historic urban areas are increasingly threatened by rapid urbanisation, real-estate speculation, tourism pressure, and the homogenising effects of globalisation. These dynamics are particularly evident in the historic mixed-use environments, where residential units have long coexisted with commercial and manufacturing activities, and are now at risk of fragmentation, displacement of local communities, and the loss of distinctive cultural identities.

This is also the case of Bucharest, where even though many of these buildings are located within protected areas, current regulations often prove insufficient to safeguard the specific character of the traditional urban fabric. While the original commercial and artisanal activities largely disappeared under the communist regime, many of these structures remain today, testifying to a housing model that has shaped urban identity over centuries. However, new functions often result in the loss of distinctive qualities, subsequent interventions frequently alter the relationship with the urban space, while abandonment and gradual deterioration, together with neglect and a general lack of awareness, lead to the disappearance of an important part of urban heritage.

Despite growing recognition of the value of historic urban landscapes, policies still tend to privilege the physical conservation of buildings and public spaces over the socio-cultural practices that animate them. As a result, the intangible dimensions like craft traditions, community networks, patterns of use, and cultural meanings are often insufficiently addressed. This is especially important in contexts where lived-in cultural practices are essential to the authenticity of a place.

This paper argues that cultural initiatives can play a critical role in bridging this gap, by fostering awareness, reinforcing local identity, and supporting social and economic growth, strengthening the resilience and sustainable development of these areas. They not only support heritage preservation but also help reactivate historic urban environments and ensure the continuity of meaningful cultural identities.

Cultural Initiatives in Heritage Preservation. In recent decades, the concept of heritage has acquired a new dimension, expanding beyond the initial idea of monuments to a more comprehensive one that encompasses both material and immaterial aspects, natural or cultural, analogue or digital, that have emerged over time from the interaction between people and their environment, and that exist within a process of continuous change (Council of Europe, 2014). These elements reflect legacies of the past that constitute valuable resources for present and future generations (UNESCO, 2008).

Culture is understood as a multifaceted concept that generally refers both to the broader domain of the arts and to a way of encompassing lifestyles and collective identities (Marzano & Castellini, 2024). Considering the dual physical and non-physical dimensions of heritage, cultural values are recognised as playing an essential role in urban development, with the built environment acquiring significant symbolic meaning as part of wider cultural frameworks (Fahmy & Thamarat, 2025).

In this context, heritage conservation practices have increasingly shifted towards the social sphere, transitioning from a mostly physical approach to a value-based one that engages diverse stakeholders and acknowledges multiple perspectives (Rosetti et.al., 2022). As a result,