

ARCHITECTURE FOR THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPES OF THE INNER BALKANS. NARRATIVE SEQUENCES IN THE RE-DISCOVERY PROJECT OF MUNICIPIUM S IN MONTENEGRO/

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Abstract. The theme of architecture for archaeology is at the center of a heated debate, within which recent orientations seek a response that tries to combine design, heritage and landscape, in order to re-signify forgotten archaeological fragments through the addition of a contemporary mark. The proposal to rediscover the countryside of Pljevlja moves from these premises: it's a city in the north of Montenegro, characterized by an extractive vocation but with also interesting archaeological fragments under excavation, that refer to the Roman settlement of Municipium S. The design intervention aims to create a system of territorial relations within which new centralities stand out and constitute a possibility of economic-cultural revival through the care for local heritage. The first intervention involves a new gateway to the area, a visitor center that crosses a stream and projects itself towards the excavations, constituting a path towards knowledge through a first rectilinear block behind which other two volumes takes place, creating an introvert yet public central space. The path within the archaeological park proceeds towards the excavation area, where the architectural sign is minimal but recognizable, driven by the intent to make the area accessible and understandable to the visitor, who can rediscover the settlement by recognizing its peculiar traits. To conclude the sequence, there is the landscape arrangement of the necropolis, which acquire new relevance thanks to an archaeological walk articulated on terraces. The intervention does not exclude the addition of a small pavilion and a structure that, developing in height, configures itself as a landmark. What the project seeks to do is to rediscover the ancient history of Municipium S through the dual lens of archaeological excavation and design action, in order to find a new yet ancient identity for the local populations, which roots in a past that emerges from forgotten soils.

Introduction. Reflecting on the theme of architecture serving archaeology is not only a conceptual but also a practical and operational action, at the centre of an ongoing debate that originates from the now consolidated Western view of ruin as the tangible result of architecture's passage through time, simultaneously both absence and presence (Settis, 2004) [1], a dynamic representation of history and collective memory (Franciosini, Casadei, 2016) [2], not a mere and mute heritage.

Recent trends aim to find a design approach that combines built space, nature and history, providing a response to present needs and offering a new perspective on the ancient through the addition of a contemporary mark, on whose modes there is currently a lively debate. It is believed that architectural intervention achieves greater effectiveness when, rather than contributing to the isolation of the ruin, it creates connection

strategies between the architectural and urban project (Di Palma, 2014) [3], which collaborate to the overall regeneration of the intervention site and its surrounding area for public use of archaeology (Volpe, 2021) [4]. This is exemplified by successful projects such as the musealization of the archaeological site of Praça Nova in Portugal, by Carrilho da Graça and Gomes da Silva, or Lola Domènech's intervention on the Forum of Empuries in Spain, which, though working with minimal and recognizable acts of reconfiguration of space, restore an archaeological landscape enriched by pathways and internal crossings, where contemporary actions and functions unfold, breaking the idea that ruins require isolation. In fact, it appears rather true that isolating a monument to ensure its preservation in reality only contributes to giving it an idea of marginality in relation to the urban context, in some cases even relegating it to the role of rubble (Augé, 2004) [5], neglected and forgotten remains, incapable of telling the ancient stories of the urban settlements that once existed.

This is precisely the condition of the archaeological landscape examined in the present article, which was the subject of a master's thesis at the Department of Architecture (DiARC) of the University of Naples "Federico II", forming part of a bilateral project between the Institute of Heritage Sciences (ISPC) of the National Research Council of Italy (CNR) and the Historical Institute of the University of Montenegro (HIM-UoM). The site, named Municipium S, located in the inner Balkans, lies scattered in what Capuano would describe as a "ruined landscape", (Capuano, 2014) [6] where the ruin is not integrated into urban enhancement circuits, and where public space is virtually nonexistent. The strategic aim of the project is, therefore, to promote and integrate the ruins with contemporary needs, where active protection of landscapes moves in parallel with the conservation of the archaeological artifact and the development of the urban area in which it is located.

An unknown archaeological landscape. The area of interest is located in the peri-urban countryside of Pljevlja, a province in the far north of Montenegro at the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, a territory contested from a geopolitical standpoint but unexplored by an audience beyond its strong industrial vocation, which is still changing its character. The landscape of Pljevlja undeniably possesses natural power, yet is contrasted by the extractive plants that increasingly erode the territorial morphology, dominating the surroundings with the towering presence of chimneys and cooling towers, a constant reminder of what for many of the inhabitants is the sole defining identity. In this damaged, almost brutalist landscape, forgotten archaeological remains lie in the subsoil, partially uncovered since the 1970s and still under excavation, pointing to the unity of an ancient Roman settlement of the 4th century, renamed Municipium S in reference to its political status – a municipium, an autonomous province of the Roman Empire – and to the initial letter of the name found on one of the numerous tombstones uncovered in the necropolises. Situated near the Vežišnica River and mount Velika, probably recognized as strategic defensive boundaries for the initial founding nucleus, today the archaeological settlement is surrounded by the rural village of Komine. The archaeological remains revealed so far are scattered fragments in the landscape, comprising structures such as defensive towers and a block

consisting of a small basilica and various craft shops, renamed Edificio Termini (Mircović, 2012) [7]. Alongside these remains, which suggest the presence of a town centre and city walls, two extramoenia necropolises from different phases of the city's development have been found, dated to the 4th century A.D. It is assumed that the settlement was much larger than what has already been uncovered, but as it lies on private land, the rediscovery of the site is proceeding with less invasive methods, such as geophysical surveys, which have so far revealed the presence of other square blocks similar to those found in other archaeological areas of Montenegro, but the research prospects are broad and still open.

Nodes and sequences in the territory. Beginning from the reading and interpretation of such a fragmented territory, the proposed project aims to provide a form of care for both the local heritage and the landscape, which is currently at high risk, both in relation to its potential destruction and its possible oblivion or erasure. The archaeological remains, in this case, due to their fragmented nature, become the occasion to build an extensive system of territorial relations that integrates the built heritage with the landscape and the local history.

If, as Tortora asserts, ruins speak while rubble is mute (Tortora, 2006) [8], the project's aim thus becomes to return a historical interpretation to the forgotten archaeological remains, giving them new meaning through the dialogue with contemporaneity, ensuring that the area, in this case the inland Balkans, gains a new perspective, aimed at a cultural rediscovery that echoes over the long term. The proposed intervention aims to achieve this by creating both spatial and programmatic sequences (Tschumi, 1983) [9] that traverse the area, reconstructing the territorial and historical patterns that have been loosened by events, and to give a place lacking prospects a new identity rooted in the past. Building urban continuities, even partial ones, becomes the main goal of the project, to integrate the archaeological fragments with the city and the surrounding urban areas (Miano, 2014) [10].

The proposed relational system, tasked with narrating the features of the area through specific sequences (Barthes, 1977) [11], is materialized by new centralities, nodes of connection, and intersections that constitute attractive places for visitors and provide additional opportunities for development and identification for the residents. The sequence of nodes defined by the project begins with a reflection on the relationship between archaeology, open space, and new insertions, thus generating dialogue among these elements. In addition to the need to intervene on the two archaeological areas uncovered, there was also the urgency to define a third project node, responding to the need for attractive features, which would function as a visitor center, serving as both the beginning and the end of the tour, a recognizable centrality within a sequence (Di Palma, Ottavino, 2024) [12]. The design network will be conceived as a closed, circular spatial sequence, therefore, capable of continuously referring to its internal spaces but also opening outwards towards the territory—such as adding insertions on mount Velika to provide a new viewpoint on the archaeology, or the definition of a riverside park near the Vežišnica river—maximizing the potential for new “events and movements” [9] for the visitor. (FIGURE 1)

Three project for the archaeological landscape of Municipium S.

The first intervention concerns a new entrance to the site, a visitor center that crosses the river and projects prospectively towards the excavations, creating a tangible and physical pathway towards knowledge, through an open courtyard composition that occupies the triangular plot of intervention, delimited by a strengthened westward road axis and by the hydrological mark to the east, studying and proposing different mobility solutions within the visitor center's grounds. The new visitor center addresses the theme of sequence through the compositional tension primarily between the architecture and the context (Purini, 2000) [13], as well as within the three blocks of intervention. The first block takes on a linear shape to continue the main pedestrian path, acting as an infrastructure to pass through, and at the access, welcomes voids and variations at the thresholds. Behind it, volumes are arranged in a way that creates a central, sheltered but always passable space at ground level, where public functions and those oriented to the community are projected inward, while secondary services and activities are placed at the borders or in the rear. The functional autonomy of the various blocks meets the need for functionally enclosed spaces, addressing a broad range of users, from visitors to workers, archaeologists and residents of nearby communities, yet connected by suspended shelters and projecting elements at an upper level, directing specific flows through semi-public or even private areas located on the first floor (FIGURE 2).

The visitor center's functional program is vast and includes both museum and laboratory spaces, as well as reception functions and accommodations for archaeologists, so that the excavation site can be continuously experienced by those working on it, while also responding to the limited cultural offerings in the city of Pljevlja. A more detailed focus was placed on the museum area inside the visitor center, conceived to be the first of the exposition rooms installed, both internal and external, scattered throughout the project area, aiming to spread awareness and knowledge of a currently forgotten site. The museum in the visitor center's function is to narrate to the user what they will visit spatially afterward, aiming to do so through the display of finds discovered during excavation campaigns of the necropolis, including valuable inscriptions and sculptural stone artefact's (Colosi, 2020) [14].

The path through the archaeological park then proceeds to the excavation area, where the architectural sign becomes minimal but always recognizable and stated, driven by the intent to make the area both accessible and comprehensible to the visitor, who can rediscover the ancient settlement, recognizing its distinctive features and moving through various pathways within the topographical consistency that shaped the locations. At this node, the project aims to present itself as a formal prefiguration, since the context we are working in is the on evolving excavations, where future campaigns might lead to further discoveries and consequently to the removal of architectural additions. The intervention conceptualizes the excavation of the Edificio Termini as a sequence of “outdoor rooms”, defined by insertion elements such as podiums, walkways, metal sheets, and exhibition walls, which highlight the characteristic typological features, but without aiming to be a definitive or

rhetoric intervention. The setup of this open-air archaeological space thus provides an opportunity to propose a new part of the city, aligned with the principles of reversibility, which are perfectly integrated into the urban transformation era we live in (Branzi, 2002) [15] (FIGURE 3).

The excavation will be crossed by a dual system of pathways: an external one, accessible to users of all mobility types, which follows the natural slope and circumnavigates the finds, and an internal one, which cuts through the two excavated sectors, retracing the road that originally separated them, and even descends into the nave where it is assumed there was an entrance portico, as evidenced by the column bases incorporated in this facade. Complementary to this reasoning is the addition of a semi-covered pavilion near the first of the two defensive towers: the base of the pavilion is a podium imagined as a platform that lands near the tower and serves to overcome the height difference on which the excavation stands, while also emphasizing the strategic role this element plays in defining a programmatic sequence that connects the two archaeological nodes to the architectural and urban one of the visitor center. On the podium stands an element with a strong linearity, an exhibition wall, carved and engraved to be an additional narrative and architectural device, but capable, like the insertions in the Edificio Termini, of evoking ancient archaeological presences through a contemporary language (FIGURE 4).

The overall intention of the project was to make architecture and archaeology dialogue, as well as the past and the present, also prefiguring the future developments of the intervention. Thus, it considers potential additions, such as temporary, modular, and dismantlable pavilions, to support the excavation and offer privileged use for archaeologists, providing them with shade, water, refreshments, material storage and artefact conservation. Once the excavation is complete, these structures could remain as a testament to the campaigns that already took place, symbolizing the rediscovery of the place's past and its reinterpretation in contemporary terms, and could become additional resting areas for visitors.

The sequence of narrative locations in Municipium S ends with the intervention on the ancient necropolis, which is reached via a direct path starting from the two defensive towers. In antiquity, this route likely held symbolic significance as it was the path leading from the city centre, the city of the living, to the city of the dead outside the walls, the so-called Via Sacra. However, today, it appears as an indistinct line of tombstones directly placed on the ground, exposed to the elements, completely neglected and unappreciated, situated in the midst of the rural fabric of the village of Komine. The intervention arises from the need to propose a landscaping solution for the necropolis tombstones, enhancing the terraced topography of the area and offering a reinterpretation of the site based on the extraordinary historical finds uncovered here. However, the intervention does not exclude the addition of an architectural element with accommodation and resting functions, composed of a low building – a foundation that adapts to the elevation difference, measuring it – and a rotated block that, rising in height, serves as a landmark, constantly guiding the user through the various stages of the visit route. This new structure also references and reinterprets the archetype of the tower, which permeates the spirit of this place both in its ancient, archaeological sense,

and in its contemporary, industrial context (FIGURE 5). Access to the site is provided through this small visitor center – replacing the current archaeological depot, which was designed to blend in with the local homes – and as an endpoint, it aims to engage in dialogue with the intact tombs that close the path. In this case as well, the theme of the sequence is explored through new architecture made of elements in tension with each other, defining a compulsory passage to archaeology, but especially through new paths that circumnavigate the remains, sometimes getting close and nearly touching them, crossing a variable topography (FIGURE 6). The archaeological walk is enriched not only by the artefacts, carefully set up in specific categories, but also by their display cases, which can either be thickened portions of the pavement at different levels of the terraces, preserving the picturesque image of the site, or special display boxes attached to the embankment, which will protect and highlight the most valuable finds. These display cases will also serve as guardrails for the upper level of the terrace and as informational elements with engraved or raised inscriptions, ensuring a three-dimensional visiting experience for a wide variety of users.

Conclusion. Therefore, the proposed project aims, through all its components, whether urban or architectural, to integrate into the rural and peripheral context of the city of Pljevlja, directly responding to the implicit demands of the territory, and defining differentiated experiences for the local community through a spatial and programmatic system – the sequence – that is capable of designing both space and time (Molinari, 2018) [16]. What currently appears as a neglected area, which has spontaneously evolved without services, would, thanks to the architectural intervention, become an attractive part of the city, full of opportunities for learning, provided not only by the rediscovery of the excavations but also by the numerous activities possible in the spaces supplied by the project, constantly alternating between the ancient and the new, the private and the public. The creation of an archaeological and urban park could become a real driving force for the entire surrounding territorial structure, narrating a new feature of the city, strongly cultural, which would complement the industrial and extractive face given by the thermal power plant that dominates the landscape and the local economic panorama.

The approach followed here, although deeply rooted in the history of Municipium S and the current characteristics of the city of Pljevlja, represents a methodology of broader validity, which sees the rediscovery of ancient and forgotten settlements at risk as an opportunity for territorial enhancement through the dual lenses of archaeological excavation and design action, but also as an instrument of economic and cultural revitalization for the local populations. This will allow them to find a new identity that is rooted in an ancient Mediterranean and European past, a past that emerges from hidden soils, tasked with shaping the present and foreseeing a new future for the affected territories.

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Figures.

FIGURE 1 - Design atmospheres of the narrative sequences

FIGURE 2 - Drawings of the visitor center project

FIGURE 3 - Design atmospheres of the intervention on the archaeological excavations

FIGURE 4 - Drawings of the intervention on the archaeological excavations

FIGURE 5 - Drawings of the intervention on the necropolis

FIGURE 6 - Design atmospheres of the intervention on the necropolis

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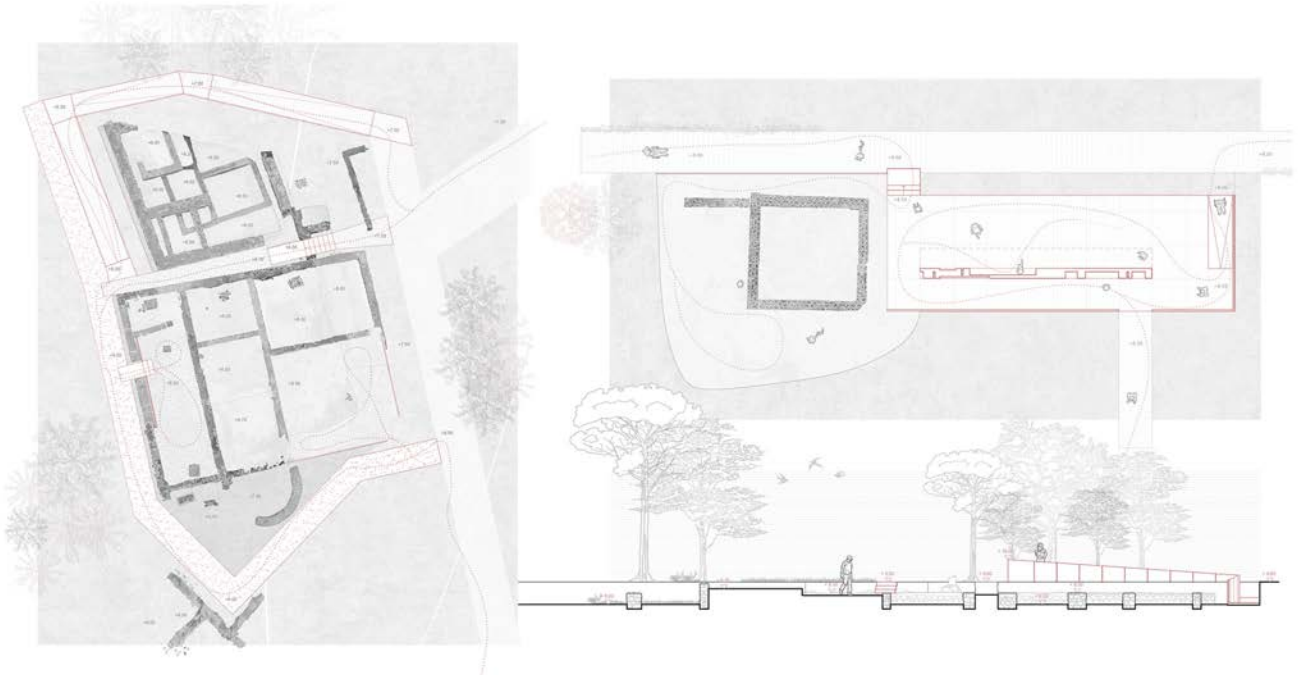
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