

FROM THE DARKNESS OF THE UNDERGROUND TO THE HEAVENLY LIGHT. A PROJECT FOR THE ACROPOLIS OF ATHENS/

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Abstract. The essay intends to address the theme of interdisciplinarity and the “intersection” of knowledge by examining a competition and research experience involving the Acropolis of Athens. The unequivocal contribution that the Greek experience makes to the world of architectural forms can be described in the balanced link that holds together the propensity for “convexity” – manifested by the properly architectural dimension found in the “world above” and here restored by the sculptural modelling of volumes in space – with the most ancient forms of the earth – the “world below” – that is, the “concave” dimension excavated and carved in solid matter, which is proposed as nourishment for architecture that in turn holds the aspirations of human life. But when an architecture loses its function, its form and even its material, when stasis crystallises what remains by regressing architecture into archaeology, how can man rediscover in that inert matter the human reasons and values still intimately belonging to our time? The Call of the *Piranesi Prix de Rome e d’Athènes*, organised by the *Accademia Adrianea di Architettura e Archeologia onlus* in 2022, is taken as an opportunity to reflect on possible ways to put these ancient relationships back into tension, to hold archaeology and nature together again through the addition of a new formal configuration that aspires to celebrate, in the past as now, the myth and beauty of this extraordinary place.

Introduction. Archaic culture, it is well known, recognises in the space that nature constructs within the mass of the earth the possibility of a transition from natural to anthropic form, to be dedicated not to the transient of the human condition but to the eternal faces of the deities. Thus, this profound “osmosis” – between the forms of the architecture of the city of Athens and those of the land – would seem to be intimately linked to its mythical origin, namely the foundation of the city by Cecrope. In the eulogy to the Attic landscape offered by Dimitris Pikionis – through the well-known drawings belonging to the Attica series – it is indeed possible to trace a first attempt, on the part of modern man, to re-read the now-lost connections between the monuments of the Acropolis and the adjacent Philopappus Hill. At the same time, however, as the author himself eloquently confesses in the painting, who calls for a necessary and immediate return to the founding condition of the Athenian landscape, denouncing the laceration and betrayal caused by the most recent urban expansion. In the drawings of the Greek architect, we glimpse a few characters populating the scene in the foreground while, from the background, the forms of physical geography are revealed, which, together with the ancient monuments, not only represent the landscape but make it “manifest”, still belonging to a community that recognises its value. In particular, the founding relationship mentioned earlier, that which the forms of geography interweave with the forms of architecture, can be traced back to the pres-

ence, in many of these drawings, of the serpent: a sacred animal linked to Cecrope, the first mythical king of Athens, as well as the materialisation of the figure born from the earth, who emerged from the deep and arid soils of Attica to guide the city towards its most prosperous destiny.

Reflecting on stones. Following the route travelled by Pausanias [1] in the 2nd century A.D., one arrives in Athens from the sea, hence from Piraeus. Nevertheless, it is the Acropolis that has always captured the attention of architects and scholars because of the “mysterious” organisation of its architectural space [2]. Indeed, the extraordinary hill of the Acropolis offers itself as a plateau for the summit construction of the most important monument for the Athenians, the Parthenon (Temple of the Virgin), bathed in the light of Homer, which also irradiates the multiple architectural artefacts that populate the monumental hill, also guardians of the profound sense that guides, through form, the action of man intent on changing the face of the world. A rich world, the one rendered by the forms of classical architecture, sensitively grateful to its eponymous goddess – Athena – ready from the outset to support her mortal constituents [3] even accepting their anxieties and frailties as such. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Greek goddess of wisdom and strategy in battle, in other words, of the art of governing, would build with «*Noús kái daimónia*», intelligence and sensible reasoning» [4] a “dense plot” [5] of institutional and social relations that would guide citizens in solving the intricate problems inscribed in the “meshes” of everyday life. A life profoundly marked by numerous religious and cultic practices, in which it is possible to discern the breadth of the Greek gaze, now turned to the metaphysical world where the divinities dwell, now instead directed towards more empirical and factual values.

The protopolis [6], to use Plutarch’s term, was born from the political and administrative union of several villages and communities, previously isolated and scattered in the arid landscape that, despite everything, welcomed, favourably or even hostilely, its inhabitants. Reunited under the light of the legend of Theseus, the mythical cadence innervated the urban space with the well-known phenomenon often referred to as “synecism” (literally “union of houses” [7]). From a strictly urban point of view, the “wheel-shaped city” – as described by Herodotus when describing the pre-Persian walls – pursued a pattern of radial development, inscribed within the new walls erected by Themistocles, which were larger and more powerful than the previous ones, and which in a concentric pattern around the Acropolis encompassed both the Athens of the origins (on the banks of the river Ilisos) and the subsequent urban modifications of the classical and later periods. It was precisely the development, not always coherent [8], of the city over the course of time that contributed to strengthening the role of the Acropolis, elevating it to “part of the city” – to use an expression used by Leo von Klenze on the occasion of the urban project for modern Athens – a permanent compositional pole for the entire area, as Cesare Brandi felt in more recent times: «[...] from Piraeus, going up to Athens, nothing changes, the houses never stop: only the traffic becomes more intense, and the buildings, little by little, grow one storey higher. At a certain moment we are inside Athens, without knowing how, when, at what point we entered it, and where we left the suburbs. But one thing is known, and it has never

been out of sight, it has not been absent for an instant: the Acropolis» [9]. Sometimes “tampered” with by the continuous transformations carried out from the beginning of the 19th century to the present day, this extraordinary monumental elevation (Figure 1) continues to nourish and guide any artistic form produced by Western thought, attracting us with a seductive yet “elusive glow” [10], capable of ‘making the whole building sway’ and shaking even the most relaxed of human souls.

Although veiled by multiple treacherous interventions, it is still possible today to peer into that ‘hidden’ order that holds together and governs the positioning of the elements on the sacred rock. Therefore, as demonstrated by the studies of Konstantinos Doxiadis [11], perhaps that sense of secrecy, that “mysterious” order underlying those stones is, if anything, exacerbated by our lack of aptitude to know how to “see” the rules, arrangements and distribution of forms in space capable of producing, as Karl Bötticher lucidly notes, “complete clarity of consciousness”.

Impose order on stones. The plasticity of the rocky space of the Acropolis, once characterised by carvings and substructures that identified singular points observed by “obligatory” gazes, is to be reaffirmed through the interpretative action of the project, which finds in the space of the fill, in correspondence with the southern portion of the Pelasgian wall, certain compositional modalities that reveal the way in which man has inhabited this extraordinary place over time. Precisely in correspondence with the “Persian rubble”, it is possible to recognise, on the one hand, the relationship between the substructure and the natural form of the plateau while, on the other, the different strata that in succession demonstrate the different formative events of the Acropolis itself. In this place rich in history, it was imagined to carry out an excavation operation to reach the rocky substratum and the archaeological remains of the previous retaining walls (Figure 2). In this way, a hollow space is generated whose shape is not random but draws its rules from the presence of the Parthenon towering above it, determining a place of shade where one can admire the magnificent presence of the stereobate.

By contrasting the concretion of the Parthenon with the tectonic elementarism of the new “museum/shelter” (Figure 3), a hypostyle hall is determined, punctuated by a theory of stiloï, concluding with an uncovered patio half the size of the cell of the temple consecrated to the goddess. The grammar and canonical syntax of the peristasis of Iktinos become the chosen references for the definition and positioning of the elements of the composition, which take on metrics, geometries, alignments and dimensions precisely from the critical reading of the monument that faces it: indicated as a precise formal field to which the form, consciously, refers.

To describe the project for the new Acropolis Museum in detail, we would like to refer to two combinatorial and archetypal compositional logics – the covered boundary and the excavation – from which we derive the necessary conditions to return to Mother Earth and, at the same time define a partial closure/exclusion to the outside world.

The principle of delimitation is identified in the ability to construct a place where it is possible to take in a broader reality, the archaeological one, i.e. it represents the place where the human experience of dwelling takes

place. In this case, the spatial configuration is intentionally called upon to detect human beings’ actions and forms when they dwell: delimiting and covering. In this way, the formal and material properties of the elements that delimit the space allow the recognition of the symbolic value they carry, announcing the space in front of the stereobate that can thus be revealed. Thus, the partial and controlled delimitation of the ground, which works dialectically with the roof punctuated by columns (Figure 4), allows the definition of an absolute scene in which a system of relations is shown which, yes, holds the space but does not bind the continuity between exterior and interior. In these terms, the delimitation of space appears to be an elementary but necessary condition for the re-sacralisation of the archaeological site, thus determining a kind of “cosmogony” [12]. As for the second compositional technique – excavation – it is configured as the subtraction of the Tellus Mater, as a fundamental condition for “freeing” the ground and preparing it to receive the compositional elements with which the formal and typological structure is attested. The possibility of defining, at that point, a space of concave nature is by no means accidental. The limestone boulder on which the forms of human life have taken root through architecture already contains formal properties in itself, internal spaces of the cavity that are predisposed to continuous interpretation by the architecture itself. As Martin Heidegger argues, «space, to make space as space, requires man» [13], and this concept is particularly apt in describing the bond that holds space and social equality together, tormentingly sought after in the homeland as well as in the rest of the Greek world. In this way, man has regained not only a relationship with light, declared by the convexity of architecture, but also with darkness, the womb of the Earth from which everything is born and takes shape. This possibility of form, intimately linked to the ancient sense of inhabiting the earth, wants to be interpreted and re-proposed in the project, subordinating the delimitation, as it is believed to be able to hold and at the same time show the essence of things while evoking, in the penumbra, the telluric dimension of the same earth that gave rise to the myth and architectural forms (Figure 5). The interventions proposed for the sod in front of the Parthenon can therefore be traced back to this primordial dimension of “formativity” – excavation, delimitation and modelling of the ground [14] – which is still enduring and capable of generating new architectural forms that aspire to theatricalise the archaeological fortress and to value the ancient testimonies that animate it on the summit (Figure 6).

In conclusion, the chthonic space, obtained by excavation and delimitation, allows the tactile presence of the Parthenon’s foundations to be exalted by gaining, subsequently the top of the tableaux lit by the sun and “played” by the columns «still standing [offered] to the wind [like] the strings of an invisible lyre» [15] whose “sound” stretches out into the surrounding landscape, now perhaps only heard by the escaped gods, now perhaps also felt by the new civilisation, to suggest, once again, form and measure to the dwelling of its citizens.

Conclusions. The architectural project for ancient “heritage” [16] offers the possibility of experiencing and investigating not only the spatial dimension, but also, and above all, the temporal dimension, by simultaneously pouring a documentary value and a morphological significance into

ancient remains. The attribution of a morphological value to the forms of the past inevitably leads the project for archaeology within a point of view where it is necessary to identify questions of a general order relating to architecture so that the latter is not exhausted in its technical dimension but is capable of unfolding and commenting on the theories of “formativity” that have presided over the construction of form. One of the central questions within this point of view is the possibility of bringing the fragments of history into tension by introducing a new urban compositional principle capable of making ruined architecture “react”.

When, however, this ambition is motivated mostly by mere empirical emergencies, then the risk is to fall into an impasse that overwhelms the cardinal objectives of the practice of architecture: that is, to ensure a modern, civil and democratic instrumentation through which to understand, preserve, re-elaborate and carry forward the discourse on form, not abdicating to a generalist idea of archaeology – a concept that seems to convey today’s strategic choices instead – so that the transfer of these forms to contemporaneity is fully realised. However, the methodological significance attributed to the project is not aimed at providing irrefutable and defining answers, if anything, on the contrary, it poses the right questions aimed at unveiling and understanding ancient places: what is the need and the value, that an intervention technique has to orientate the knowledge and transformative action of the project? What is the relationship between this general modality and its articulation with respect to the complexity and richness that the territory offers each time? In the specific case, briefly described, the re-attribution of meaning aspires to be produced by means of a “synthetic” hypothesis capable of orienting the project in its dual role – of knowledge and transformation – in a relationship that does not question these terms in a merely separate manner, but is capable of indissolubly linking them by nourishing, with the project, a relationship of a circular nature. In other words, with this contribution we would like to try to support the hypothesis in which the relationship between knowledge and project is not at all of a consequential nature, but rather circular, where knowledge feeds the project and the latter collaborates to make it intelligible to a vast public, in fact telling of the very circularity of knowledge: «knowledge is only memory, never true immediacy. [...] But immediacy is at the origin of memory and presides over knowledge» [17].

Attributions. The Accademia Adrianea di Architettura e Archeologia has launched the International Design Call for the Acropolis of Athens as part of the Edition of the Piranesi Prix de Rome 2022. The author participated as a collaborator in the design group of DiARC - Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II - composed of: R. Capozzi, G. Fusco, F. Visconti, F. Stella (coordinators), C. Orfeo, M. Zucchini, M. Antoniciello, G. Di Costanzo, C. Sansò (architecture), E. Buondonno, L. Boursier, L. Mauro (agronomy and landscape), G. Greco (archaeology), A. Cesaro (Philosophy of the Social Sciences), A. Bossi (museography), B. G. Marino, R. Amore (restoration), F. Capano (history).

References.

1. Pausania, Guida della Grecia, Libro I. L'attica, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milano 1982.
2. T. Wiegand, Die archaische Poros-Architektur der Acropolis zu Athen, Leipzig 1904.
3. Athena, perhaps as a gift of thanks to women for the vows they had received, instilled the art of weaving in women. As Homer states «[...] women are weavers of

cloths; to them Athena gave in the highest degree to do beautiful works and to have a wise mind». Omero, Odissea, VII, pp. 103-111.

4. J. Hillman, Figure del mito (Adelphi, Milano, 2014), p. 63.
5. « mistress of the art of weaving - following Hillman again - Athena's art [is revealed in] the systematic interweaving of all the threads; and just as her person is a combination of reason and necessity, her combinatorial art produces a compact fabric». Ivi, p. 55.
6. F. Turato, La crisi della città e l'ideologia del selvaggio nell'Atene del V sec. a.C. (Edizioni dell'ateneo e Bizzarri, Roma, 1979), p. 31.
7. The expression *synoikismòs* (*synecism*) refers to “higher” values of both an exquisitely topographical and juridical nature, in that all the natives of the extensive territory covered by Attica now represented a community of “cohabitants” “united” in the city-state of Athens. See A. J. Toynbee, Il mondo ellenico (Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino, 1967), pp. 42-51.
8. As Paul Valéry warns: «No less than some who will visit it in the future, those who have recently returned there will not have been able to avoid noticing how the appearance of the Acropolis has changed considerably compared to what could be admired only a few decades ago. Even if the works undertaken since the second half of the 1970s to preserve the monuments and make them more accessible are pervasive, even if they are conducted at a moderately sustained pace, it is inevitable to note that the peculiarity of the events of which they are the bearer does not make them substantially different from those that have marked the Acropolis' past, but rather the most recent, neither unprecedented nor definitive, chapter in its history, yet another demonstration that history while 'justifying anything, teaches absolutely nothing'». P. Valéry, Sguardi sul mondo attuale (Adelphi, Milano, 1994), p. 36.
9. C. Brandi, Viaggio nella Grecia antica (Bompiani, Firenze-Milano, 2007), p. 30.
10. M. Heidegger, Soggiorni. Viaggio in Grecia (Ugo Guanda Editore, Parma, 1997), p. 46.
11. C. A. Doxiadis, Architectural Space in Ancient Greece, (The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1972), pp. 29-38.
12. M. Eliade, Il Sacro e il profano (Bollati e Boringhieri, Torino, 1976), pp. 26-28.
13. M. Heidegger, Corpo e spazio, osservazioni su arte-scultura-spazio (Il Melangolo, Genova, 2000), p. 37.
14. The actions of “covering” and “limiting” can be understood as cornerstones for architectural design. As Ludwig Hilberseimer points out, architecture «[...] constitutes a problem of space (and that) we cannot experience a space without limits” because architecture “[...] is situated in space and at the same time encloses it to itself». L. Hilberseimer, Mies van der Rohe (Theobald, Chicago, 1956), trad. it. A. Monestiroli (a cura di), Mies van der Rohe (CLUP, Milano, 1984), p. 45.
15. M. Heidegger, op. cit., 1997, p. 49.
16. R. Capozzi, F. Costanzo, F. Defilippis, F. Visconti (eds), Patrimonio e progetto di architettura (Quodlibet, Macerata, 2021).
17. G. Colli, Filosofia dell'espressione (Adelphi, Milano, 1969), p. 35.

Figures.

FIGURE 1 - Planimetry of the Acropolis of Athens and its surroundings

FIGURE 2 - Planivolumetry of the plateau. In red the design solution, in black the ancient monuments.

FIGURE 3 - From top to bottom: Excerpt of the plateau plan highlighting the structure of the new museum (in red); Cross-sections of the new museum against the background of the ancient monuments (in black)

FIGURE 4 - Perspective view from the east of the Perserschutt (“Persian rubble”)

FIGURE 5 - Perspective view of the southern portion of the Pelasgian wall

FIGURE 6 - Perspective view from the courtyard of the new museum.



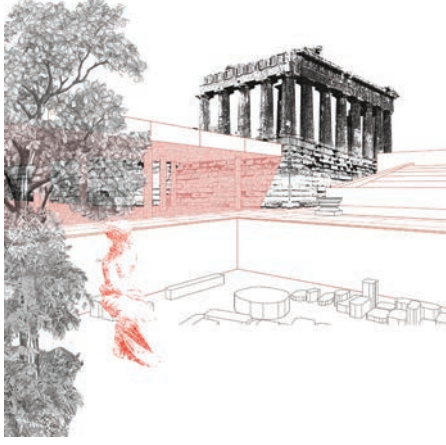
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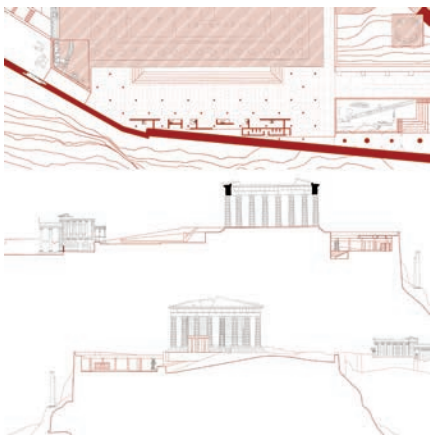
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