Architectural Experimentations: New Meanings for Ancient Ruins

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Abstract: Starting from the critical premises that underpin the debate between archeology and architecture, some evidence emerges: sometimes, the musealization of buildings, "urban carcasses" and historical ruins—which are our legacy from the past—is even more harmful than that of any other artefact, for the purposes of their real understanding. In a country like Italy, which has archeological presences more than any other, architecture must contribute to overcoming the consolidated aporia that the Contemporary, conceived not only as a period but also and above all as its "forms and functions", is structurally in opposition to the conservation of archeological heritage. *Spatium ad Omnes*, the project presented in this article, is an attempted exercise at "inhabiting archaeology", that is, trying to re-grant inclusive usability to a historical fragment, which has lost the elements necessary for its liveability, paying attention to the reversibility of the project itself. The set of questions, doubts and steps preliminary for the design have been highlighted more than the final "figure" of the project: an essential form directly connected with the primordial principles of its constitution. *Spatium ad Omnes* protects and encourages visiting the complex, trying to offer new perspectives, new narratives and new connections that translate into the possibility of being—for those who visit this place—the protagonists of a unique experience made of history, memory and continuous discoveries.

Keywords: architecture; archeology; project; fragment; ruin; reuse

1. An Open Question between Ancient and Modern

Archaeological presences have always been a widely debated topic in architectural and urban spheres, especially in territories that have always been anthropized, such as the Italian one, which has, more than other contexts, a strong and widespread presence of traces of the past. In Italy, the country with the highest number of UNESCO sites in the world [1], we have always had to come to terms with "the presence of the past", which was also the emblematic title of the first Venice Architecture Biennale in 1980 [2]. Not only cities like Rome or Naples, whose inhabitants trample every day on a surface beneath which there is an "anthropogeographical" [3] stratification so dense, heterogeneous and complex that it very often also becomes an impediment to the works of "those who live above", but the whole Italian peninsula finds itself in a daily situation of potential confrontation and flirtation with the constructed traces of those who came before us. In recent years, the relationship between architecture and archaeology has been the focus of specific research and projects; there has been an accumulation of materials and experiences that have legitimized architecture's contribution to the configuration of archaeological sites [4]. "Hidden are the geometries that draw the contemporary state of each city, buried beneath the time that assimilated it" [5] (p. 14); like a strange form of inverted astronomy, archaeology from time to time broadens the horizon of the past, but it is only architecture that uses this material to make it an integral part of our future social space. If archaeology, through excavation, initiates a discourse on the ancient, it is up to architecture, through the tool of the project, to continue this narrative by offering new meanings for ancient ruins [6].

Hence, it is the disciplines of design (and first and foremost architecture) that can as well as must be enlisted, well utilized and activated to intervene in the "social" character of the archaeological artefacts to be protected or transformed [7]. The 2005 Faro Convention itself, in Article 1, emphasizes that heritage rights are inherent to the right to participate in the wider cultural life; similarly, in Article 4, it is affirmed that every person has the right to benefit from heritage as well as to contribute to its enrichment [8]. What is striking about ruins is their ability to provide a sense of time without summarizing history and without concluding it with the illusion of knowledge, turning into a work of art without a past [9]. As the architect Giuseppe Arcidiacono states in one of his recent works, focused precisely on the relationship between contemporary design and Calabrian archaeology, the construction of the cities derived from the Modern has tried to hide and forget the forms and characteristics of the Magna Graecia centers. However, today we make a project for the contemporary city and of the contemporary city. The widespread intention should be that such a contemporary project should write alongside or at most in correction of what of the ancient remains, conceiving the city as a text [10], "starting from an unveiling of the ancient city, which is not a simple remembering but still a re-knowing, a knowing anew" [11] (p. 63).

In Italy, there are many abandoned archaeological sites; referring to Calabria, the updated list by the National Association for the Protection of National Historical, Artistic and Natural Heritage lists some of them in addition to the archaeological park of the Roman Baths of Curinga (Catanzaro) and the archaeological park of ancient Kaulon (Monasterace), the archaeological park of Sibari (Cassano All'Ionio), the Vicereale Ravaschiera Tower (Satriano), and the archaeological area Occhio di Pellaro (Reggio Calabria). The ideal process of recovery and regeneration of these places would envisage a single intervention strategy that considers the complexity of a network of archaeological sites. Therefore, each project would be site-specific and coherent with the site under intervention. The project path presented below may become one of several examples of all the intervention methods that are possible.

In order to proceed, it is essential to establish the importance of the site and to decide on the most suitable conservation strategies, based on the assumption that the real aim and focus of safeguarding and conservation is to reconstruct the tangible and intangible evidence of a community and its environment [12].

Looking at the contemporary panorama, consisting of the multiple forms through which the project is expressed and relates to archaeological sites, the desire to work in situ is relevant, allowing the context of the ruins to be an integral part of the visitor's experience, as well as a starting point to enter and understand the project. Leaving a work in situ can be seen as a response, a strong stance against the "nefarious epidemic" [13] (p. 395) of disposable exhibitions, which rather than aiming at a real cultural enrichment offer to all intents and purposes a service to customers, in a fetishistic loop of a consumerist nature. It is preferable to prevent the work under scrutiny from being transported, or disassembled and reassembled, despite itself "to a museum, the place where each power becomes immobile, detonated, observable [...] like a taxidermied animal" [14] (p. 127). We can affirm that only together with the context is an architectural work (or what remains of it) truly legible, understandable; architecture has always refrained—for obvious material and functional reasons—from its possible non-locality and imperturbability with respect to a given context. The same frame, so defined and clear-cut for pictorial works, blurs completely and becomes untraceable around a constructed building; where does nature's landscape end, where does man's art begin? The answer is that this fusion and interpenetration of the elements is the true "artifact", exactly what we call the landscape [15], which is a form of a wider and more general "natureculture" [16]. Otherwise, only a sort of disengagement, a paradoxical short-circuit, could arise, which acts as soon as the work is detached from its necessary surroundings, and this estrangement from unexpected detachment that arises is well represented by filmic scenes such as that of the acephalous Etruscan "hanging" goddess in Rohrwacher's recent film *La Chimera* (2023), which is an explicit quotation of the "flying"

Christ in Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960). The architectural fragment assumes the role of trait d'union, between the state of an archaeological pre-existence in its singularity of material fact and a surrounding context (lithic, vegetal and meteorological) that cannot be excluded in any way from the design thinking. "Pilar Carrera, by exploring the concept of the fragment [...], emphasizes its semantic condition proper to a space of emergence of meaning" [17] (p. 88). The fragment, a partial "restanza" [18] of a totality which has been lost, must be considered as a trigger mechanism, a real perturbance for the one who questions it, a basic matrix generating ideas. Each fragment is, potentially, in the hands and eyes of the one who carefully listens to it, an objet trouvé generating a poetic reaction; the imagination is best activated in the waste, in the cracks and gaps of reality. "Many and multifaceted, are and have been the lessons that the ruins impart" [19] (p. 36). The incompleteness of the fragment in the form of a synecdoche (a part for the whole) is a harbinger of ideas, connections and intuitive leaps, because it is by its very nature that, if overwhelmed by information, the imagination dies. "High definition [...] informational does not allow anything indefinite to exist. But imagination inhabits an indefinite space. Information and imagination are opposing forces" [20] (p. 67).

2. Reasons for the Project

This contribution aims to recount a design research experiment that, starting from a specific case study, seeks to define a possible methodology of making architecture among the ruins, keeping the presence of the past at the center, enriching it with new and updated meanings, aggregating new forms and subtracting the superfluous, to define a possible scenario: a future we can no longer look at with the eyes of a twentieth century of excess and extremes [21] and total overwriting of what exists [22], but rather with the gentle gaze of one who wants to write alongside the past. Among the architect's tasks is the care of heritage [23] and its contexts, which need a new narrative that the architectural project can give back to the present and future society [24]. Participation in a competition of ideas, promoted by the municipality of Curinga, in the province of Catanzaro, with the aim of raising public awareness of a heritage currently in a state of neglect, becomes an opportunity to give form to some theoretical hypotheses formulated in the university sphere. The competition was born with the aim of finding original and innovative solutions for the complex of the ancient baths, with the purpose of reopening the archaeological site by making it attendable and "usable" in an inclusive way. The entire design process narrated below seeks to build the basis for defining an operational research method aimed at "inhabiting archaeology".

3. Traces of the Method

Starting from these traces, the project seeks to establish a dialogue not only with the circumscribed object of the thermal ruins, but also with the equally anthropic and artificial but plant-like surroundings (Figures 1 and 2), avoiding the emulation of exhibition experiences in which the ruins are treated not as texts to be interrogated with respect, but as sumptuous sets, as legitimizing frames [15]. This is an attempt to respond to the call made by the architect Francesco Venezia: ruins are "the object of a science that proposes to reconstruct the history and art of remote times through the remains of the past, on which a series of reflections, reconstructions, conjectures are spread, interesting, highly scientific, but absolutely inadequate compared to what life is. [...] The world of ruins has entered a sort of jealously protected reserve that is absolutely separated from the place of architecture" [25] (pp. 16–17). This condition makes it difficult to redesign artefacts that find their reason for relevance solely in the patina of time between their creation and the present [26,27]. Our endemic tradition prevents highly interesting works that, while taking the risks of an unflinching revision of architectural work, make ancient spaces liveable. When a place becomes inhabited again, multiple new dialogues between architecture, human and non-human rise to the surface. The result becomes a place of interaction, not just a purely evocative space but something that leaves the possibility of generating

personal and collective experiences, constantly changing and evolving together with and through the elements that compose it. Architecture plays a social role precisely when it becomes an instrument for the creation and management of a space that is useful not in and of itself—especially in the case of the restoration or functional rehabilitation of old buildings—but insofar as it "builds a roof" over the places of interactions between people, other living beings and things (even only potentially). In a way, the project has to become "profanatory" [28]: profanation indicates the restoration of the use of things that, through consecration, are reserved for deities (conceived in a broad sense) for a very restricted use according to the social status of their users and are thereby removed from the use of all [20]. This does not mean that a more intransigent stance cannot be taken, especially regarding highly significant architecture that deserves a conservation approach; at the same time, the regeneration of artefacts, building complexes and parts of cities that do not have special value, such as to elevate them from building status to architectural status, must be facilitated. In this case, attention has been paid to the reversibility of the architectural gesture, to allow the metamorphosis of spaces over time, while respecting what exists. This is an example of a reversible project which expresses characteristics of temporariness, a rethinking of the building's tradition, a reversibility that, today, is sought as an up-to-date practice with respect to the outcomes of the architectural and restoration debate that originated between the 19th and 20th centuries. From this point of view, the materials made available by the organizers of the competition were extremely useful to us, especially the high-resolution images and the three-dimensional model, both obtained through point clouds generated by photographic shots taken with a drone, a use of new technologies for the study of ancient artifacts in a completely non-invasive manner.
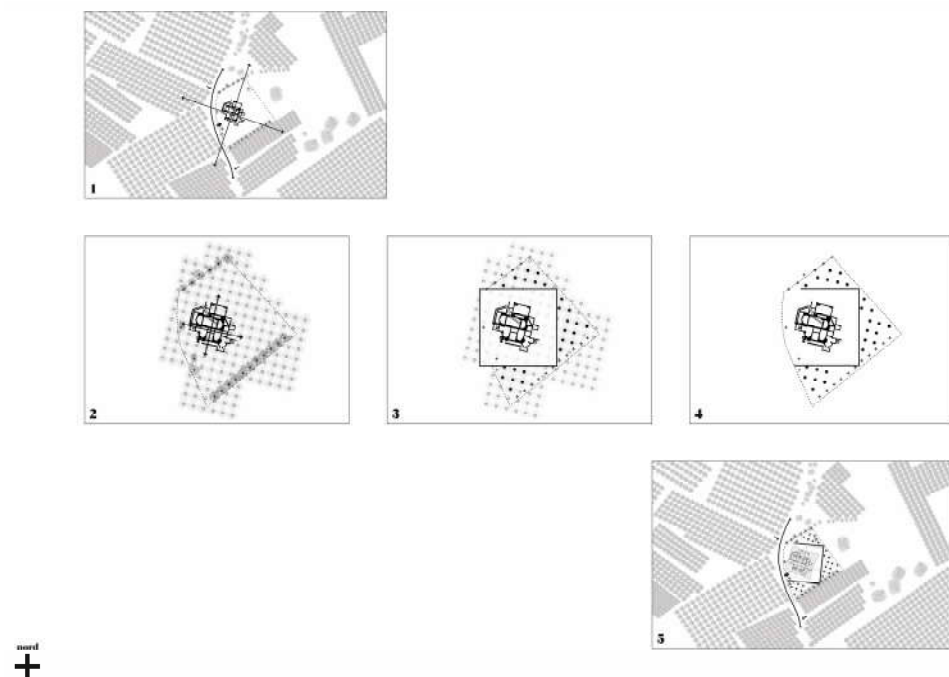

Figure 1. The site and its context.

Figure 2. Project morphogenesis.

4. The Design Process

An archaeological site carries meanings directly related to its original function, but also meanings of an explicitly historical and artistic nature [29]. Therefore, architectural interventions always aim to be based on an interpretative reading of the site's pre-existence and on value judgements about the context in which the project will be inserted. The various debates on the preservation and musealization of these fragile sites leave architectural interventions hanging between the provisional and definitive nature of the same site [30]. This example of design development pursued aims to propose an intervention based on functionality, speed of execution, cost-effectiveness and reversibility; all of these are characteristics that express the need to bear witness to the culture and technical capacity of our own time. At the same time, the project does not merely exhaust its practical function, but aims to establish a poetical dialectic, a relationship with the place, and a cultural transversality in the dimension of time and history.

The project is intended to protect the archaeological plan of the Curinga Baths, facilitating use and accessibility for all categories of visitors. *Spatium ad Omnes* is an open space conceived to involve the users, protagonists of an experiential pathway of an important heritage (Figure 3). The design thinking is confronted with a strategy of sustainable action that involves the reinterpretation of the ruins while maintaining their historical significance. The itinerary starts from a sort of artificial "clearing" that invites visitors to enter the site in orthogonal directions, a *cardo* and *decumanus*, which after a series of contemplative pauses lead to an "open-air theatre" (Figure 4). The square roof, whose openings on the superior surface (its skylights) are defined by the upward projection of the ancient plan, defines the internal spaces and frames the area, bending at the entrances and making them recognizable (Figure 5). The roof is supported by thin pilotis arranged in an apparently random manner, but which evoke the ancient volumes of the internal "rooms" of the baths (*frigidarium*, *tepidarium*, *calidarium* and *natatio*). In the design intentions, this "forest" of pilotis takes up and mimics the surrounding olive trees, which are instead ordered and "set to work"; the artificial covered clearing that is created is thus a sort of inverted mirror of the vegetal surroundings.
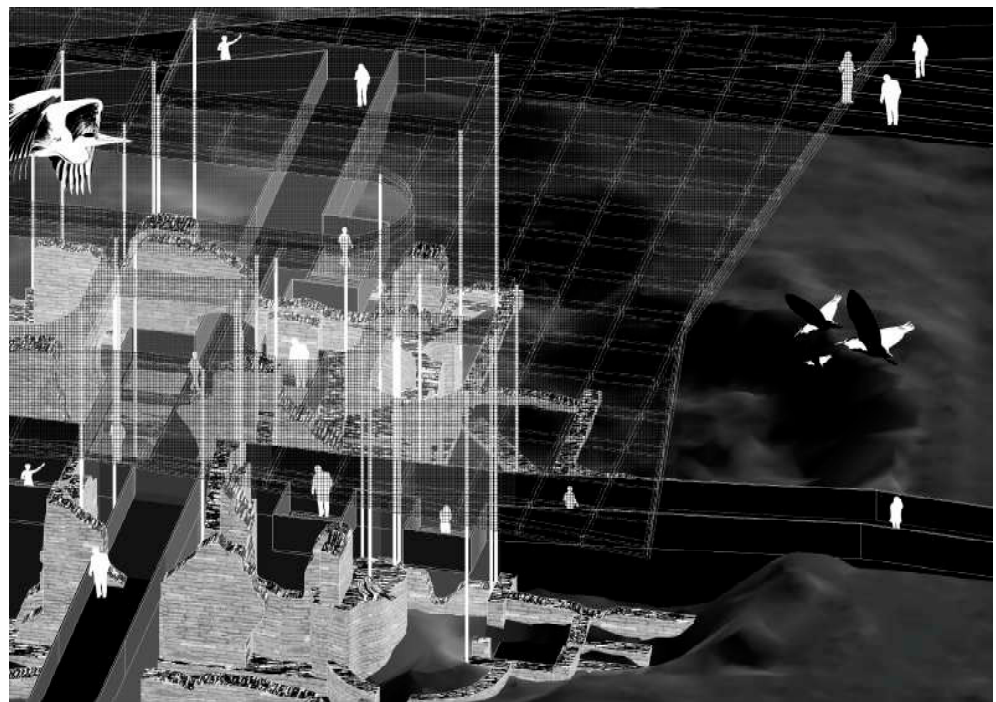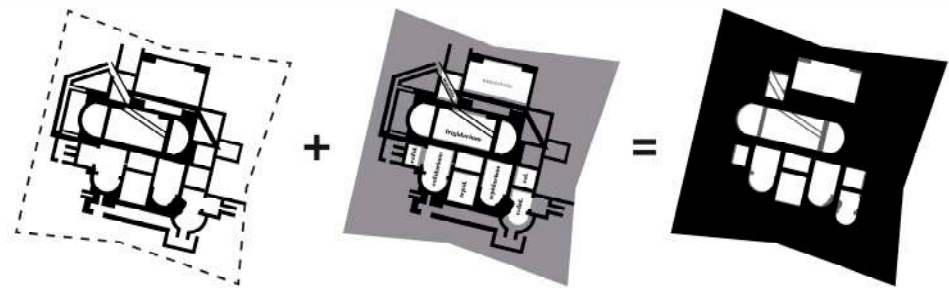
Figure 3. New paths to explore the ancient ruins.

Figure 4. The project in its context.

Figure 5. Morphogenesis of the new coverage.

The vertical load-bearing elements are accompanied by metal meshes that "cover" the planimetric design and evoke the ancient spatiality, echoing in material and purpose some works by the Italian artist Edoardo Tresoldi, like *Simbiosi* (Borgo Valsugana, Italy, 2019) or *Basilica di Siponto* (archeological park of Siponto, Manfredonia, Italy, 2016), which reinterprets and transparently evokes the volumes of the ancient early Christian basilica located close to the existing Romanesque church, which was erected 600 years later [31]. The threshold envelops the visitor and guides him through the various rooms; it is only an apparent and evocative limit, as one can penetrate it with the gaze and sometimes even physically (Figure 6). It is an element which, through the language of transparency, emphasizes the rhythms between fullness and emptiness. The space that is generated can be read from numerous points of view, as it is amplified by light and atmospheric events, coordinated by "permeable", abstract and changeable elements, transformed by the interaction between the human being, architecture and its context. Just like the "Metaphysical Ruin" inherent in the development of the concept of the "Absent Matter" theorized in the works of Edoardo Tresoldi [32], the final space expands beyond the mere contemplation of ruin. The place is thus transformed into a narrative of the original architectural encumbrances and languages, rekindling memory and "contaminating" the surrounding landscape and context. Beams, pillars and wire mesh go beyond their material value, becoming conceptual projections of a remote past that, thanks to the project, becomes present (Figure 7). The correlation between techniques, the redesigning of the ground and the identification of a principle for the reinterpretation of spaces are essential elements of the proposal. It becomes necessary to establish reference points on which to base ideas; these foundations, built through various in-depth studies, help us to enter the tangle of the complexity of the experimentation and present a hypothesis of structure that organizes architecture through an exercise, a strategy that brings together discrete interventions capable of vast changes in meaning. Based on the principles of reversibility, the transformation of space implies planning in advance the possibility of dismantling, involving materials and assembly techniques (Figure 8). Importance is given to the simplicity of the architectural gesture, which makes the two historical moments coexist clearly and comprehensibly, without denying the existence and material value of their difference [33]. In addition to what has been said so far, this is what has been sought in the project presented, that is, to "tune" two different temporalities, two different "scores", starting from the extreme highlighting of their material inhomogeneity (which is a way of reflecting their temporal and cultural diversity). This new union is generated by accepting difference, together with its inherent complexity [34]. The reasons for a project must reveal and not cover, reconnect and not isolate, describe a discourse around preset limits. One cannot maintain an immobile, pre-constructed thought. Design must be carried out in balance, with attention to measure, to relationships, to architectural

organization in the various directions; while remaining aware of the precariousness of this balance, one nevertheless aims to pursue it tenaciously.
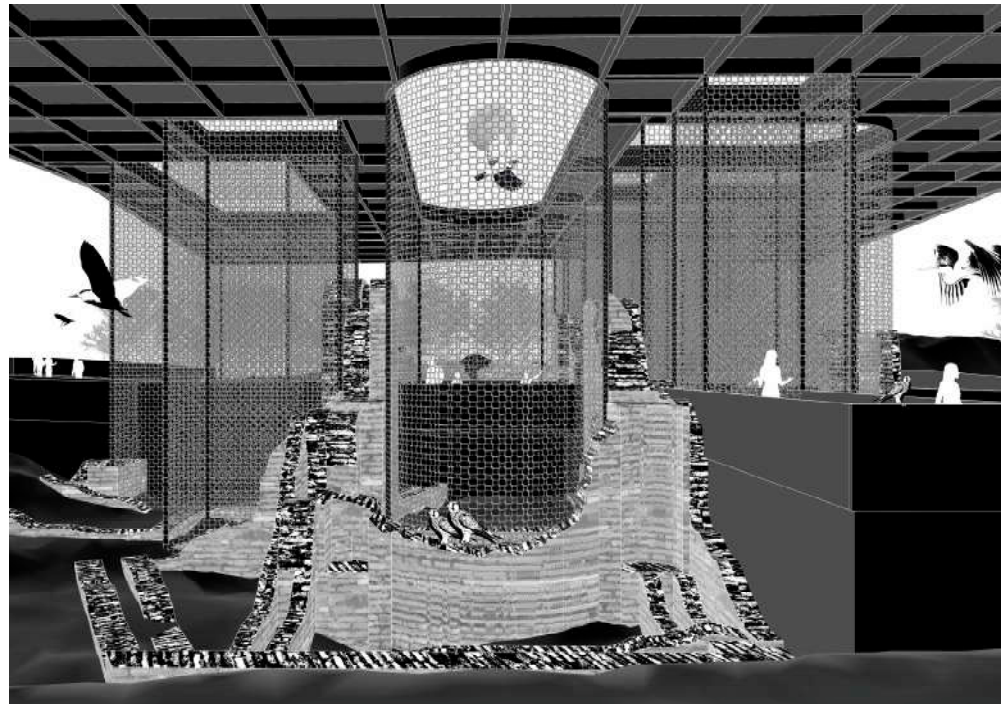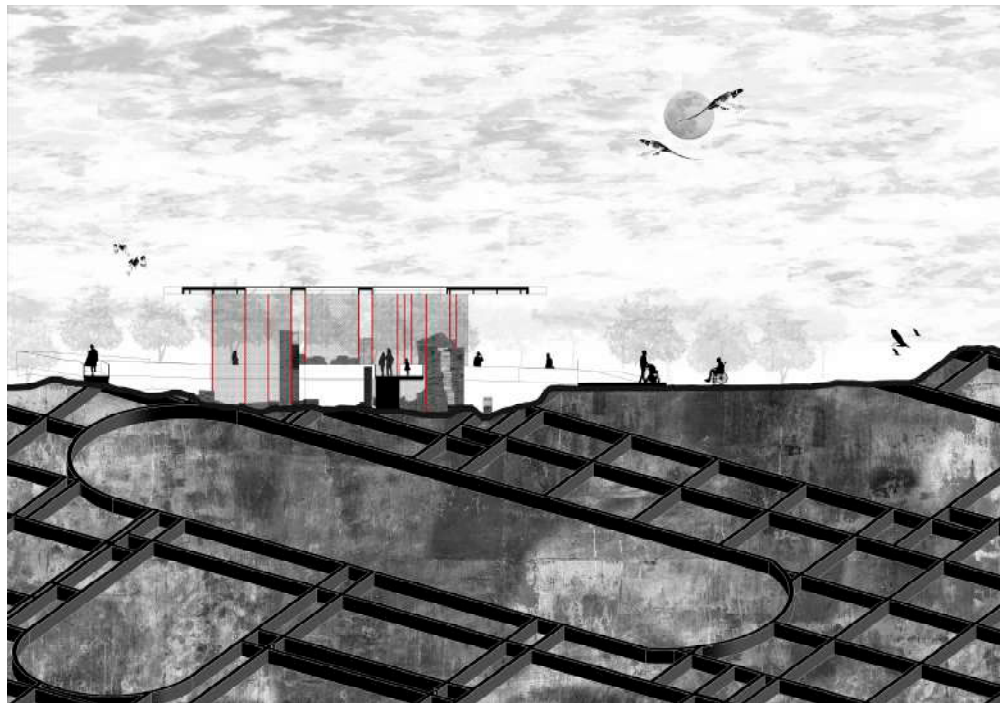

Figure 6. A view of the project.

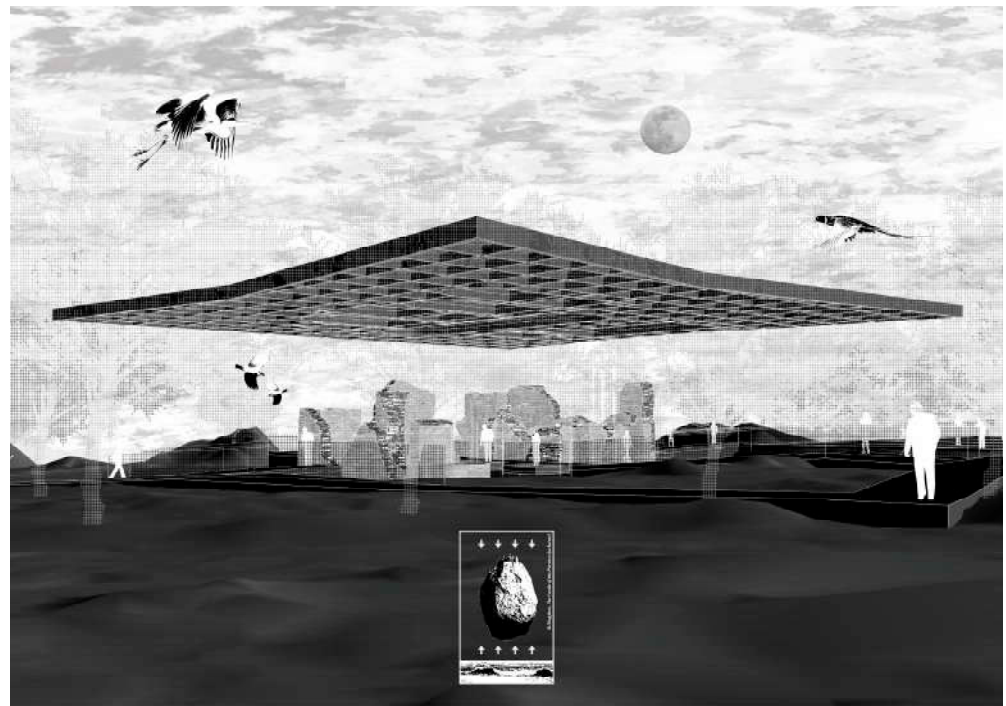**Figure 7.** Project cross-section.

Figure 8. The new roof and the ancient ruins (metaphorical representation of the project).

5. Conclusions

From the critical premises in the debate between archaeology and architecture, a piece of evidence emerges: the museification of building or urban remains of the past is even more harmful, for the purposes of a real understanding of it, than that of any other artefact; this is why contemporary architecture can play a fundamental role in clarifying reasons that are no longer evident or in resuscitating exhausted relations [35]. In a country that has, more than any other, archaeological presences, architecture can help to break out of the established aporia that the Contemporary, conceived not only as time but also and above all as "form and function", is structurally in opposition to the conservation of archaeological heritage [36]. It is wrong to consider an architecture for archaeology as a pre-constituted approach, specialized in certain themes, to which to respond with a predetermined "contemporary style", devoid of any experimental imprint. Instead, it is useful to set out the reasoning for the relationship between architecture and archaeology, starting from the specificity of two disciplines that have often intertwined and for which a ground for dialogue and continuous confrontation has been determined [4]. The project under consideration stands as an attempted exercise in "inhabiting archaeology", that is, trying to rediscover and re-grant a usability (as inclusive as possible) to a historical fragment that by its very nature has lost the elements and spaces necessary for its liveabilty in a broad sense. Faced with a series of archaeological elements, the design of the recomposition is a work of invention that uses an extraordinary material, which itself is memory [37]. Paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze, the design is realized in the opposition between the inactual and the actual, between our time and what is untimely [38]; to do so, we started by attempting to interrogate the ruin both in its presence (actual) and in its absence (inactual), since "the volumetric simplicity of the singular elements, the places-absences [. . .] denoting the ancient city and its surroundings suggest ways of thinking about the future city, show expressive potentialities of space" [39] (p. 9). The outcome appears as a fluctuating cover protecting the archaeological plane that gives habitability to the space, within which the pathway crosses a raised walking surface (Figure 9).
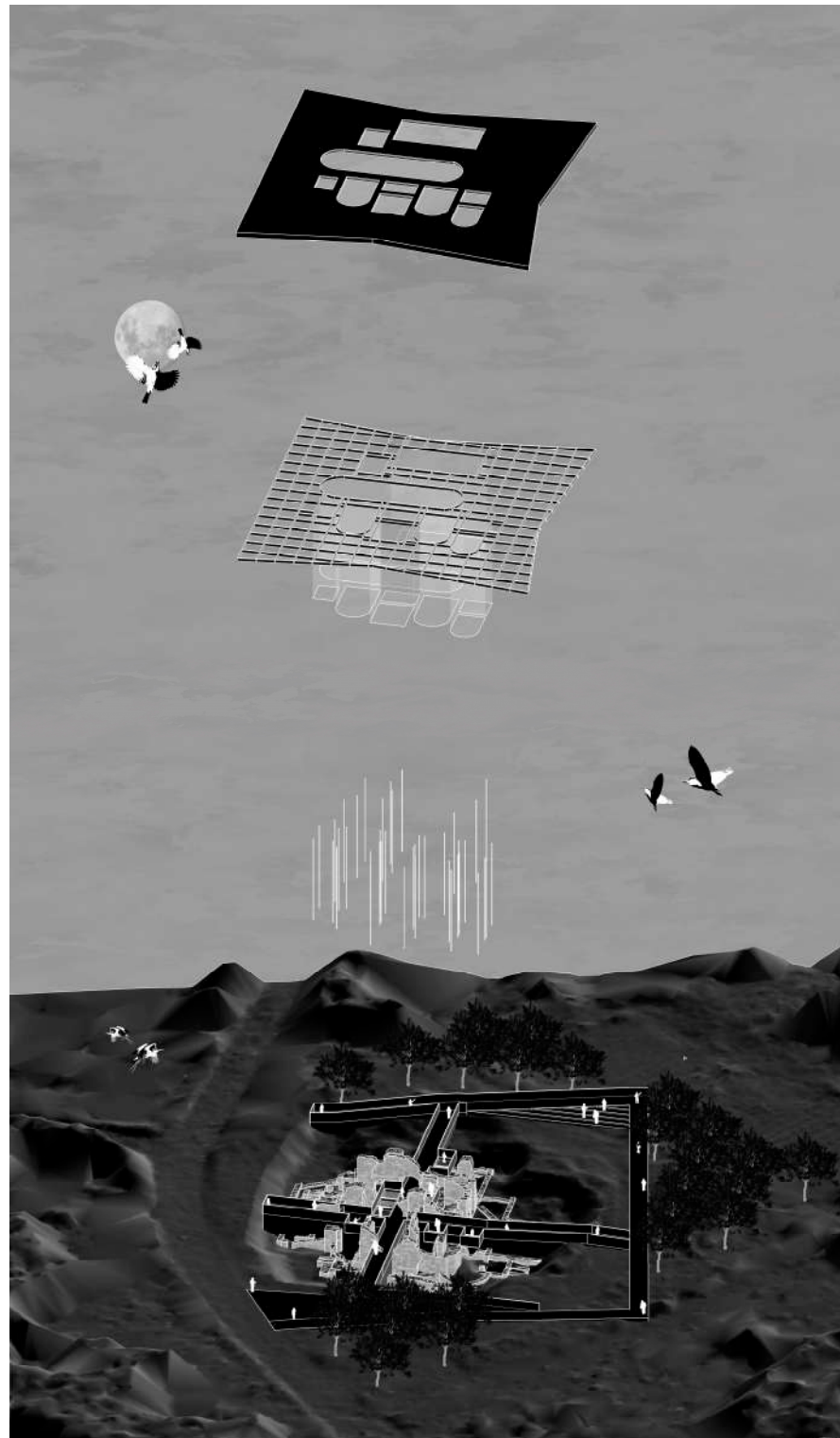
Figure 9. The project assembly.

The themes we focus on tend to emphasize design experimentation through hypotheses and solutions that include the versatility of space, accessibility, sustainability and reversibility of architectural interventions. Archaeological sites are becoming more and more permeable, open and safe, capable of being microcosms of experimentation that can contribute to reminding us of the possibilities and complexity of the time we are living [36]. The process of the research design experimentation presented in this contribution has criticality connected to its having been conceived in a competition of design ideas and,

therefore, unrelated to its technical-economic feasibility, material consistency and detailing on a small scale. Rather than the final "figure", the one presented was intended to be the set of questions, doubts and steps that proved useful in making it appear.

The result is a choice between an infinity of trials, deletions, sketches, hesitations and visualizations. The effect is a form that is essential in all its parts and directly connected to the primordial principles of its own constitution, a project that protects and encourages visiting the complex, offering new glances, new narratives and new connections that result in the possibility, for those who visit these places, to be the protagonist of an experience made of history, memory and continuous discoveries.

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