

# The Bohob Collective's Research on Catania: 'exquisite corpse'

Laura La Rosa, Luigi Pellegrino, Matteo Pennisi

## Abstract

*The paper investigates the research that the Bohob Architecture Collective is conducting on the city of Catania through two parallel paths: the Drawing of the city and the Minimum projects, held together by the drawing of architecture as a crucial tool in the discipline of architecture.*

*Sebastiano Ittar's 1832 Topographical Plan of the City of Catania depicts a city in which a new plan is undermined by the persistence of ancient fragments. This is the theoretical basis on which the Bohob collective's Drawing of the city is "founded", with the aim of elaborating a plan in continuity with Ittar's idea, proposing a minimal but decisive advance.*

*The Minimum projects arise from the need to build urban places near the archaeological areas in the centre of Catania, currently perceived as marginal. They consist of a "family" of precious shrines elaborated through the triptych, a drawing method that simultaneously holds together three scales: the 1:200 plan, the scale of the city; the 1:50 plan, the scale of the building; the 1:10 section, the scale of the architectural construct.*

*To the triptych, as a necessary appendix, is added the view, not so much the simulation of a future reality but the evocative representation of the idea behind the project: the city, archaeology and the minimal project on the threshold between the two.*

*Keywords: archaeology, city, project, Catania, drawing.*

## Foreword

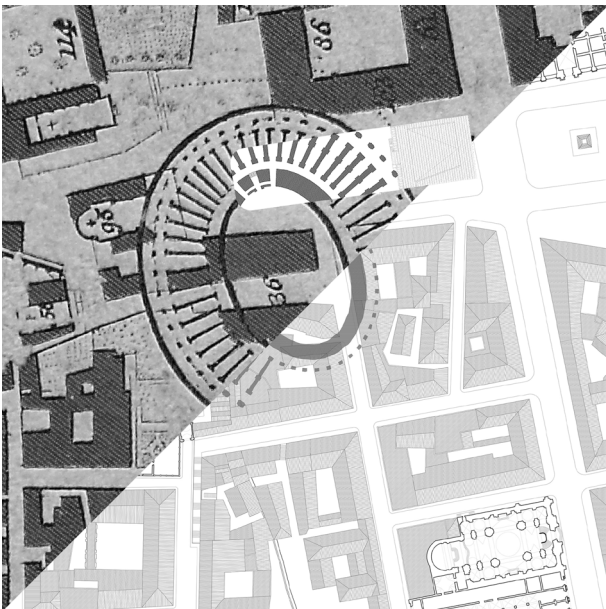
Drawing the city as architecture in order to design architecture as city.

This is the purpose with which the Bohob Architecture Collective is conducting research on the city of Catania along two parallel tracks, one centred on the reading of the current city and the other on the design of certain specific areas: the *Disegno della città* and 'the minimal projects'. The common element is the use of architectural drawing as a tool that elevates critical thinking into an operative working method (fig. 1).

The idea is that the city is a complex construction of fragments capable, albeit belonging to different eras and often by 'pure chance' [Simmel 2017, p. 37], of composing a single whole. This is the common condition of every

historical city, stratified for millennia on the same site, accumulating 'thickness' over long periods of time [1]. A process curiously analogous to the Surrealists' game of the exquisite corpse born in Paris around 1925, which involves a group in which each person draws without being aware of the previous player's entire drawing, but only of the points of contact to which he or she must connect. An analogy that clearly allows us to read a complex and millenary phenomenon: the city as an 'enormous exquisite corpse' in which so many players build 'autonomous' parts, because they respond to their own principles, 'but not independent', because they are bound by the fragments of the previous players' parts that are not entirely comprehensible (fig. 2).

Fig. 1. Bohob Collettive, Manifesto, 2021.



Catania is an exceptional city and it is located in an area that can be transformed in a very short time by violent events. Lava flows from Mount Etna and earthquakes over time make fragments of what until a few moments before were still buildings. Destructions due to natural cataclysms and, at the same time, the decision to rebuild the city each time on the same site have produced an exceptionally complex reality built from the fragments of several buried cities [Holm 2003] with which the next city is necessarily forced to establish a relationship.

In order to measure Catania's exceptionality on an ideal level, one might consider, purely by convention, that ordinarily a historical city rises an average of one millimetre every year. The lava flow that struck Catania in 1669 produced a rise of about ten metres in the three months that the lava encircled the city. Based on what has ideally been quantified for the slow growth of the historic city, it can be said that ten thousand years of lava flowed into Catania in three months, an abstraction that clearly restores the measure of what can and has happened in this city.

How does one draw such a complex reality and how is it possible to continue to transform it?

The city as an architecture of fragments and architecture as a fragment of a city.

### The 'drawing of the city': the city as an architecture of fragments

*The 1832 Mappa Topologica della Città di Catania by Sebastiano Ittar*

Almost two hundred years ago, architect Sebastiano Ittar had to ask himself a similar question, answering it with a drawing that is fundamental in the iconography of the city of Catania and, in general, in urban iconography *tout court*, albeit little known and studied: the 1832 *Mappa Topologica della Città di Catania* (fig. 3). In this work, all the skills and techniques acquired by Ittar in the course of a 'wandering' life [Neri, Carchiolo 2018] spent, during his formative years, in various places in the Mediterranean converge in an admirable synthesis [2].

Upon returning to Catania, Ittar found a city entirely rebuilt following the 1693 earthquake that razed it to the ground along with almost all the urban centres of south-eastern Sicily [3]. The eighteenth-century city was entirely rebuilt on the original site with a layout of wide, straight streets as opposed to the previous layout of narrow, winding roads,

resulting in an extremely rare event in the history of cities: a modern city implanted on top of an ancient one. Ittar must have been well aware of this extraordinary fact to decide to represent it for the first time in orthogonal projection, taking about seventeen years to survey and draw it, from 1806 to 1823, as ascertained by Gallo [Gallo 1999, p. 172]. Drawing up the first scientific drawing of Catania in the first half of the 19th century meant fixing it “putting it on display” at the moment between the 18th-century reconstruction, now definitively complete, and the subsequent transformations, which had not yet almost taken place, considering the few punctual 19th-century interventions as negligible [Boscarino 1966].

However, having drafted the first scientific drawing of a city that until then had only been represented through bird's-eye views, a “subjective and deceptive” point of view [De Seta 2011, p. 309], is not the only change compared to the state of the art made by Ittar: the advancement in representation technique is accompanied by that in the idea of the city. Ittar does not merely complete a neutral planimetric restitution of the city, which would probably already have been sufficient to make it the fundamental plan of Catania in any case; he intends to represent, in its actual measurements, an idea of the city in which the fragment affects the form of the whole.

The blocks of the new layout are determined by the new layout of rectilinear axes but also by the permanence of the ancient streets that are as if ‘trapped’ within them. ‘Public buildings’ stand and mark the nodal points of the plan while at the same time being affected by the ancient settlements. ‘Ancient fragments’ fit into the blocks and between the public buildings, conditioning their immediate surroundings and overall form. Through these three elements Ittar represents the shape of a new city undermined by the persistence of ancient fragments and, equally, ancient fragments held together by the layout of a new city (fig. 4). Compared to this idea expressed by the *Pianta*, the block appears as the only element of the three if not contradictory at least weak in relation to the underlying thesis. The full-empty block cannot be assimilated as a ‘fragment’, if by this we mean an element endowed with such unity that it is irreducible into smaller parts. At the scale of approximately 1:6,000, which the *Pianta* is, and with the surveying instruments available at the time, it must have been an unavoidable choice for Ittar to draw the city by blocks. Whatever the reasons, it is in this ‘gap’ left open by the Plan that the Bohob Collective’s paper intends to fit.

Fig. 2. Man Ray, *Exquisite Corpse*, 1928.





*Il disegno della Città di Catania by the Bohob Collective*

The Bohob Collective places the idea of the *Pianta* at the basis of its research, consequently accepts 'public buildings' and 'ancient fragments' as elements of the representation and, on the contrary, renounces the grid of blocks. The aim is to elaborate a drawing that is apparently different and, precisely for this reason, profoundly related to the chosen reference [4] (fig. 5).

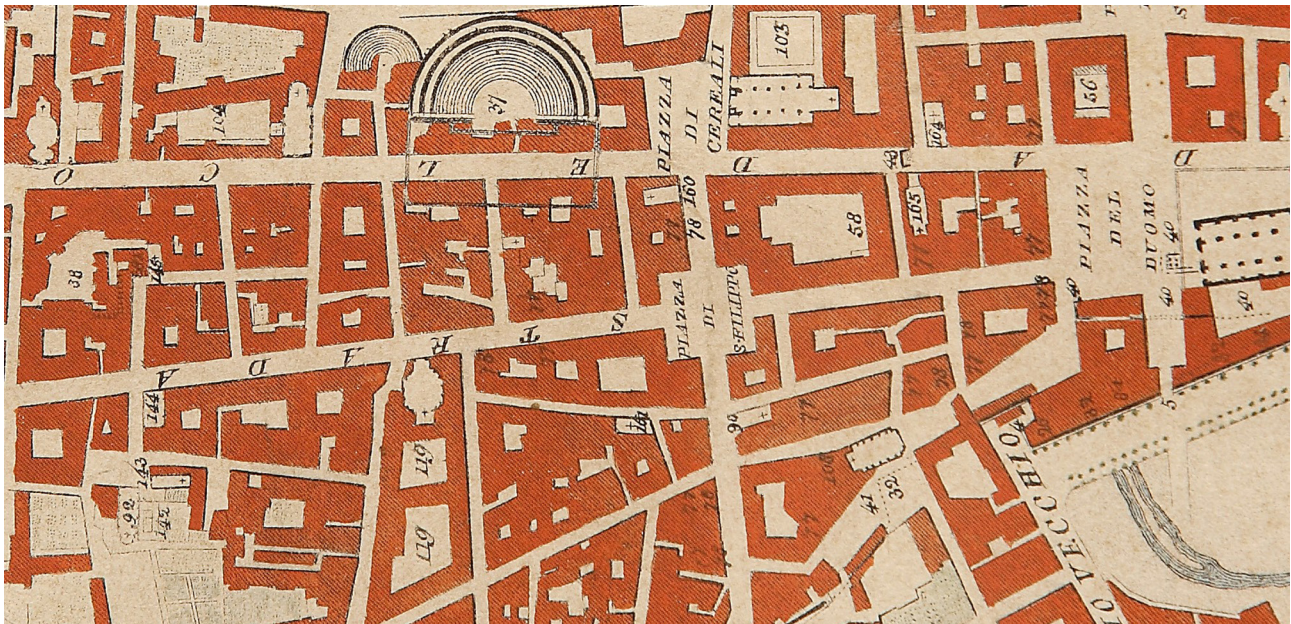
A minimal but relevant advance is proposed: the drawing of blocks is replaced by the drawing of roofs. While it is true that a set of roofs is capable, like the block, of describing the urban texture, the full-empty relationship, it is also true that of the two only the roof is capable of conveying the density of the built fabric. For example, two blocks of equal size and shape would appear identical in a full-empty drawing, even if one identifies a single isolated building and the other a dense agglomeration of small houses. The block of flats is the result of individual building acts that can no longer be traced in it; the roof, on the other hand, is capable of restoring the density and measure of the built-up area. If one assumes the roof as a 'fragment', as a single

building unit, and considers that the Ittar's Plan is based on this concept, one can say that drawing the roof and not the block is a choice more consistent with the idea of the Ittar than its own plan. The Collective takes up the baton deposited by Ittar as a guide for a new investigation into the potential of drawing in the urban context (fig. 6).

It is worth dwelling on the meaning and methodology of the drawing of roofs and the other two elements, public buildings and ancient fragments.

The word 'roof', in the context of this research, is not to be understood as a building component in itself but as an element of representation. It should be made clear, in fact, that the drawing of roofs does not consist in a mechanical re-proposition of the current state but in a critical re-interpretation of the state of reality. This operation aims to reveal the density of the built-up area and to define the urban form through their juxtaposition. In order to achieve this, it is necessary that each building corresponds to a roof. The widespread fragmentation of the building units makes it particularly complicated from a bird's-eye view to trace the size of the individual units [5]; overcoming this

Fig. 4. Sebastiano Ittar, *Pianta Topografica della città di Catania* (detail), 1823.



obstacle is an unavoidable step, firstly with respect to the objectives set and secondly because of the particular history of the city of Catania [6]. The critical observation *de visu*, by which individual units can be more easily identified, is supplemented by consultation of historical cartography in order to have a more complete diachronic view [7]. While it is true that this is not a mechanical redrawing of the current condition, it is also true that it does not consist of the hypothetical reconstruction of a past and lost condition, since the object of representation is still the current city: the drawing of the roofs aims to make evident, through small 'falsifications' of the representation, a *forma urbis* still in existence in the city, albeit latently.

With few exceptions, Catania does not consist of buildings that represent particular spatial innovations in architecture [8]. The choice of which buildings to represent in plan as 'public' buildings lies, therefore, not in the intrinsic quality of the space but in the potential ability to persist on the site by continuing to prejudice the shape of the city even when they cease to be architecture and begin to be archaeology:

Fig. 5. Bohob Collettive, *Disegno della città di Catania*, 2023 (in progress).



'future archaeological fragments'. Similarly to roofs, again the plan involves a critical operation of interpretation, that is, drawing only the most enduring parts that mark the building's ground footprint while omitting the temporary ones.

The ancient fragments are the only colour element of the drawing, the sepia within the section signals the resisting on the same site to "catastrophes and middle ages" [Barengi 1995, p. 340]. All the ancient fragments among those chosen, those that manifest a strong relationship to the form of the city, are drawn in their exact physical consistency, renouncing any reconstructive hypothesis of the original form. Considering only what remains responds to two main reasons: first, to highlight the material that has resisted the erosive action of time; second, to bring out the precipitous 'incompleteness' of the archaeological fragment that tends to 'complete itself' with the addition of the new. The *Disegno della città di Catania* aims to establish a dialectical relationship at a distance of two centuries with a drawing, the Ittar's *Pianta*, in which it finds a still fertile

Fig. 6. Bohob Collettive, *Disegno della città di Catania* (detail), 2023 (in progress).



'seed' to be investigated. The idea of the Ittar city, indeed, is an 'ancient' idea: every historical city has built itself over time on its own fragments, seeing its form affected by their persistence. The Ittar's *Pianta*, not considered in its own documentary value but as a manifesto of an idea, is a key of extraordinary clarity for accessing and investigating a condition underlying every historic city.

### The 'minimum projects': architecture as a fragment of the city

#### *The 'excellent bricks' and an 'elegant parapet'*

Nowadays, there is a split between functionality and spatial quality with regard to what might be called 'urban housing interventions'. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the resolution of a problem, or at any rate the response to a practical need, did not in itself imply the impossibility of that object to build space. This view is supported, at least with respect to Catania, by the presence of some urban arrangement interventions that took place between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries motivated by a need but at the same time capable of contributing to the construction of space; among these, the most useful case for the reasoning proposed in this paper is the project of the excavation of the Amphitheater in Piazza Stesicoro [9]. As the designer himself writes, the project consists of a work of urban decorum: "there would be given a more artistic appearance not only for the exhibition of the first order of our Roman amphitheater but also for the decorum of the works to be built: made the excavations the walls of the road's back-fill, they would be covered with excellent large bricks of ancient appearance and with elegant parapet of Roman character" [Fichera 1904, p. 7]. These words clearly show how still in the early 1900s an attempt was made to hold together the response to a functional need with the definition of a high urban character. Today this intervention is incontrovertibly manifested as the response to a need for decorum expressed and constructed in a form fully afferent to its era.

Starting from this consideration, the 'minimum project' goes against the current trend by attempting to reconnect with this long tradition. The chosen field is that of archaeological excavations within the historic city, probably the most emblematic cases of this split in which it appears evident that the only objective is to secure the excavation without any consideration of the character of the element

being added. In truth, they seem to be objects designed precisely not to establish a relationship so much with the content of the excavation as with the urban surroundings. The 'minimum project' aims at the resolution of the same needs faced by archaeological enclosures by deliberately refraining from entering into the debate about the accessibility of archaeological sites or even the meaning of excavating archaeological areas within the dense city. These issues, though of considerable interest and around which it is good that there should be an increasingly active discussion, are beyond the scope of this research since the 'minimum project' investigates the possibility that it is the how and not the what that builds urban space. The proposed interventions address the same problems and functional needs faced by conservation institutions when they are in the presence of an archaeological excavation (the height difference with the city, securing the excavation, etc.); the difference is that the 'minimum project' attempts to establish a relationship as much with the material contained within as with the city outside.

#### *A family of precious shrines*

A number of areas within the center of Catania have been identified that share the presence of an archaeological fragment. Today these exceptional fragments live a condition of marginality and abandonment, presenting themselves as *objets trouvés* that emerged accidentally in the heart of the city. The purpose of the 'minimum project' is to restore decorum to areas that currently have none by building a "family" of new fragments placed in relation to ancient ones. Each project consists of a precious shrine of white stone identifiable by a clear geometry set at the fracture between the present city and the archaeological elevation. The project 'merely' emphasizes through matter and geometry a condition that is already in place [Venezia 2011] by reversing a condition of accidentality into one of exceptionality: two distant worlds unexpectedly confronting each other. Recognizability arises from the elaboration of a unified method that takes the form of a drawing, or rather a way of drawing that can guide the process (fig. 7).

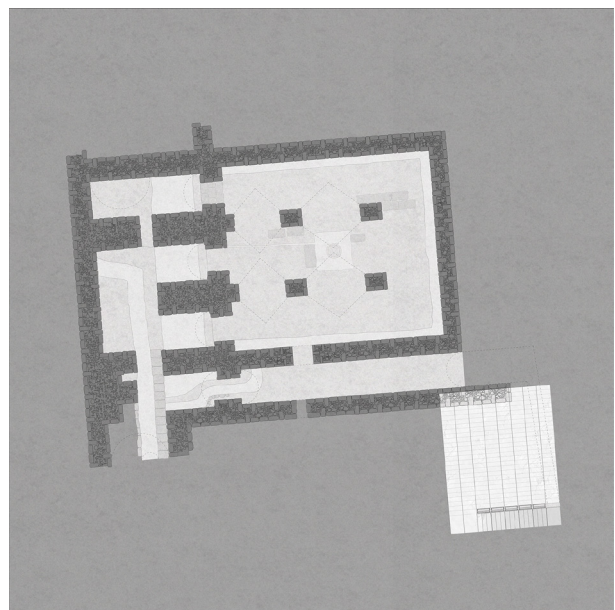
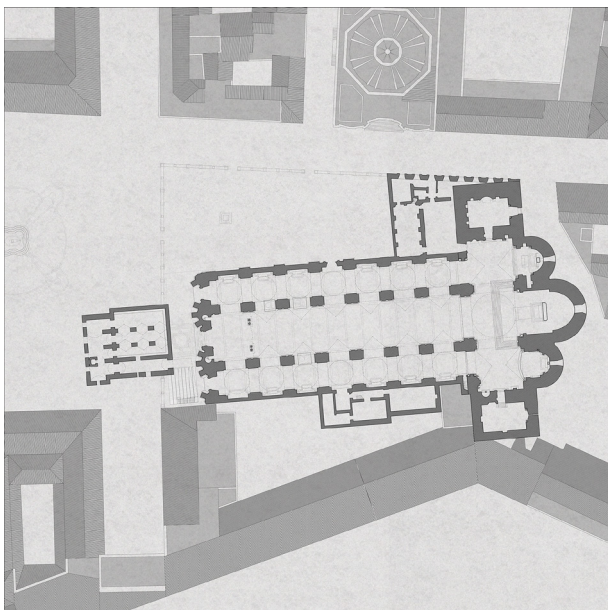
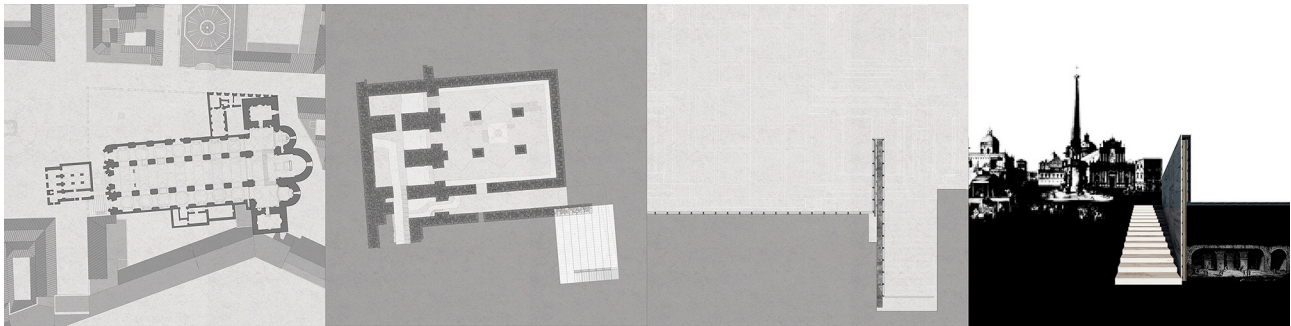
#### *The triptych*

A drawing method has been developed in which three scales aim to simultaneously hold together the vast measure of the city and the minute measure of detail. This representational method is as valuable as a means as an end; it is useful in controlling the project and simultaneously

Fig. 7. Bohob Collettive, Minimum design of the Achillee Baths, 2023 (in progress).

Fig. 8. Bohob Collettive, Achillee Baths Triptych (detail 1:200), 2023 (in progress).

Fig. 9. Bohob Collettive, Achillee Baths Triptych (detail 1:50), 2023 (in progress).





representing the idea. Architectural drawing possesses the ability to make method what initially consists of a point of view about the city and urban space, in this case what underlies 'minimum project', and similarly the 'drawing of the city', is the assumption that the fragment builds the city. The project is seen as a "new fragment" capable of fitting into a complex reality by establishing relationships with the existing. The need to control both the urban scale and the scale of detail leads to the development of a representational method consisting of three drawings at different scales: the triptych. The scales are not bound by a successive consequentiality, none consists of an enlargement of the other, but by a simultaneity whereby each expresses its own specific issues: 1:200, 1:50 and 1:10. Consider the minimum design of the Terme Achille, a thermal building below the Piazza Duomo, located just to the west in front of the facade.

The 1:200 scale plan represents the scale of the city and the relationship that the 'minimum project' establishes with respect to the urban surroundings in which it fits [10]. What emerges in this first drawing is the position that the

object occupies in the urban space; the existing city is represented in projection except for the elements with which the project establishes a more direct relationship. In this case, the Cathedral and the Achillee Baths are sectioned precisely because the project interposes itself in the hiatus that separates them and consists of a paved plane, on the Cathedral's forecourt, and a staircase necessary for access to the archaeological site (already currently open to the public), (fig. 8).

The 1:50 scale plan represents the scale of the building, that is, the direct relationship between the archaeological remnant and the 'minimum project'. The urban surroundings disappear to focus on the close comparison between the scale of the two fragments. This drawing clearly tells that the project intends to confront archaeology by contrast, opposing the large stones eroded by the time of the ancients with the precision of marble slabs juxtaposed together: the rigor of geometry in the face of the erosion of the archaeological remnant. A slight overlap anchors the two fragments to each other on a totally ideal plane, as there is physically no direct contact between the project

Fig. 10. Bohob Collettive, Achillee Baths Triptych (detail 1:10), 2023 (in progress).

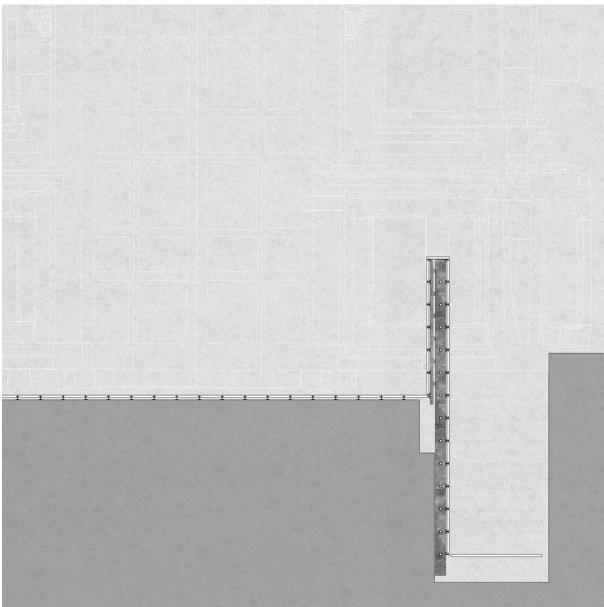
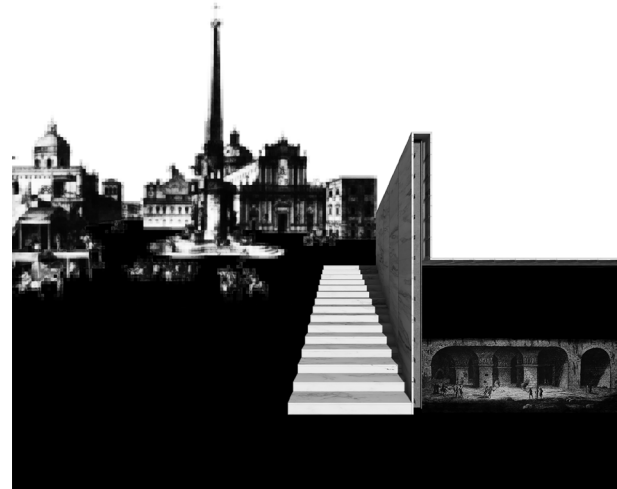


Fig. 11. Bohob Collettive, Achillee Baths Triptych, 2023 (in progress).



and the baths, but the abstraction of the drawing allows the deeper meaning of the project to be expressed (fig. 9). The 1:10 scale section-elevation represents the scale of the architectural construct, the vertical relationship between the current and archaeological levels. The syntax of the construction is revealed by showing that for both the pavement and the parapet, the architectural construct is the same. An attempt was made to work out an elastic construction method capable of shaping itself not only in several elements of the same project, as in this case, but also in the different sites chosen. The method, as can be seen, involves a metal structure shaped on the elevation accidents covered with marble slabs slid into this grid (fig. 10). To the triptych, at the end and as a kind of necessary appendix, the view is added. Nowadays it is common to narrate a project through photographic manipulation that aims to return as accurate an image of the project as pos-

sible once it is built. The photorealistic render has become part of the methods of representation in architecture. With the 'minimum project', a different use is attempted from the generally more widespread one, aimed at maximum verisimilitude with the realized project. Beginning with the realization that a two-dimensional image can never render the perception of a space, the view proposes another objective that, on the contrary, has been the basis of representation for a very long time: how can we represent not so much a future reality as an idea of reality? The view does not show the actual proportions of the project in relation to the city, unlike the triptych, but aims to tell the sense of the operation and the underlying idea behind the project. A view-manifesto that clarifies the elements in the field: the city, the 'background noise'; archaeology, the fragment of time; the 'minimum project', on the threshold between the two (fig. 11).

## Notes

[1] An "artefact, relict of a previous rootedness, is taken up as substrate by a new rootedness process. [...] This principle makes us realise that the temporal strata constituting a city are autonomous but not independent: the layer of the Middle Ages is organised according to its own logic and principles, but retains points of contact with the layer of Antiquity" [Gerosa 1999, p. 32].

[2] Sebastiano Ittar was born in Catania on 18 May 1768, the son of one of the most active architects of 18th century reconstruction, thanks to whom he frequented the most important building sites from an early age. In Malta, he drew up his first topographical map, the *Map of the Port and Fortress of Malta (1792-1797)*. In Rome between 1795 and 1797, he portrayed the ancient ruins [Neri, Carchiolo 2018, p. 29]. Between 1800 and 1803 on the Acropolis in Athens, he surveyed monuments on behalf of the 7th Earl of Elgin [Buscemi 2008, p. 13]. In 1803 in Alexandria, he portrayed the main ancient monuments in pencil. In 1804, he returned to Catania where he lived until his death in 1847. For more on the figure of Sebastiano Ittar, see: Buscemi 2008, Gallo 1999, Neri, Carchiolo 2018.

[3] The strongest earthquake ever recorded in Italy [Rovida 2022]. "1693. A nove gennaio, Venerdì, ore 5 di Notte. Li Coccodrilli Tremuoti col dorso scossero li Valli di Nemore e di Noto. La mattina del Sabato al comparire il gran

*Pianeta Solare mandava lugubri raggi, l'Aria obnubila. Si vide il fatto sconcerto nelle fabbriche delle Chiese e Monasteri, Conventi e Palazzi, Campanili e Torri, tutte vulnerati, con aperte cicatrici. Giunta l'ora 21 della Domenica 11 Gennaro. Ecco all'improvviso replicò fiero e gagliardo il terremoto, durando per lo spazio d'un De Profundis. Cadde tutta la Città di Catania rovinata e distrutta, divenne un aggregato di pietre. [...] Restarono dei Viventi, circa sei mila, ed incontrandosi l'uno all'altro, collacrimavano come novi al Mondo, con dolcissimi amplessi, respiravano nel vedersi vivi" [Fichera 1925, pp. 3, 4].*

[4] An ongoing study consisting of a plan measuring 5.60 metres per side that frames approximately the same portion of the city depicted by the Ittar. As can be deduced from the dimensions, the scale of representation differs from that of the Ittar being approximately twelve times larger. The scale of 1:500 was chosen as the last in the architectural field and "the first" in the urban planning field, the most appropriate, therefore, to represent the "city as architecture" and to perceive in a single drawing the overall form distinguishing its individual parts.

[5] "This dualism no longer presents itself with those same sharply marked geographical boundaries that had characterized the eighteenth-century urban structure into areas of poverty and misery [...] and areas of wealth and privilege [...]. For indeed the condition of social

marginalization of the subordinate classes today lurks in all real estate and practically runs through the entire so-called "historic center," in all directions: in the building superfetations of baronial palaces, in the arches of the hallways transformed into mezzanines, in the perennial permutation of rooms intended for workshops into living quarters, in the exasperated subdivision of real estate" [Dato 1983, 165].

[6] "The innovative character of the eighteenth-century city, in our view, is not to be found in the architectural definition of individual buildings, but in the free relationship that is established between its urban layout and building typology. The Duke of Camastra's plan composes a grid of public spaces so wide-ranging that within the blocks any typological episode, from the aristocratic palace to the convent, from the public building to the terrane house, can be borne, without detracting from the overall formal and functional balance of the city. [...] Given this freedom of composition of individual buildings [...] the Baroque criteria of unitary control of pieces of the city through uniform designs or the artificial construction of "urban theaters" begin to unhinge. Hence the coexistence, within the eighteenth-century city, of building fabrics unitarily conceived (see, for example, the uniformity of the elevations of the palaces around Piazza Mazzini) with others fragmented by the modest terrane houses or composed of single or several buildings endowed with their own morphological individuality" [Dato 1983, 163].

[7] In addition, of course, to Ittar's *Plan*, the theoretical and practical reference of the drawing, other maps prove particularly useful: the Angelica's Map (1584), the most precise on the pre-earthquake city; the two eighteenth-century views (Vacca's of 1760 and Orlando's of 1761), the first and most precise to depict the reconstructed city; cadastral

maps and in particular the 1876 Cadastral Map of the Urban Center, for precision in the subdivision of the building unit.

[8] "Excluding some original contributions by G.B. Vaccarini, Francesco Battaglia and Stefano Ittar in the spatial organization of some churches and baronial palaces, the architectural landscape of the aristocratic and ecclesiastical city is normalized in building typology and relatively homogeneous in form" [Given 1983, 163]. They were joined in the nineteenth century by Sebastiano Ittar; as Dato himself writes shortly afterwards: "Only Sebastiano Ittar tried to overcome this typological uniformity by inventing new architectural organisms and new urban forms" [Dato 1983, 164].

[9] Although the first excavations date back to 1748 at the behest of the Prince of Biscari, the most recent excavation campaign conducted by architect Filadelfo Fichera is from the early 20th century. In 1902 the Amphitheater was in such an undignified state that it was decided to intervene, proposing three objectives: the valorization of the monument, the hygienic rehabilitation of the area and "the 'decorous' arrangement of the square" [Treccani 2010, p. 171]. The work, which originally involved the expropriation and demolition of all houses falling within the area occupied by the monument [Treccani 2010, p. 172], was reduced to excavating only the portion of the monument inscribed on public land, the western part of Piazza Stesicoro.

[10] Understanding the 1:200 scale as the 'scale of the city' is consistent with the idea behind the research that is urbanism and architecture co-exist simultaneously. This scale, addentrous to the so-called "architectural scales," extended to a sufficiently large portion of the city (a square of 160 meters on a side) makes a small project (8x10 meters) legible in its close surroundings.

## Authors

Laura La Rosa, Scuola di Specializzazione Beni Architettonici e del Paesaggio, Politecnico di Torino, lauralarosa3@gmail.com  
Luigi Pellegrino, Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture, University of Catania, luigi.pellegrino@unict.it  
Matteo Pennisi, Dipartimento di Ricerca e Innovazione Umanistica, University of Bari Aldo Moro, matteo.pennisi@uniba.it

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