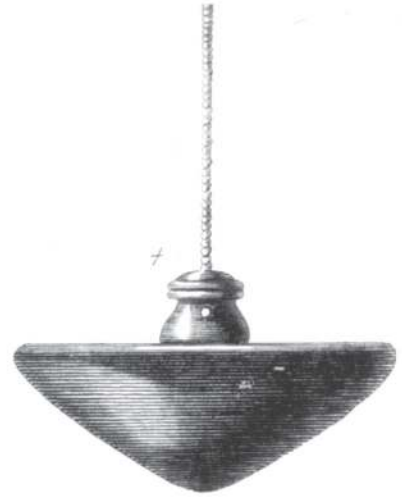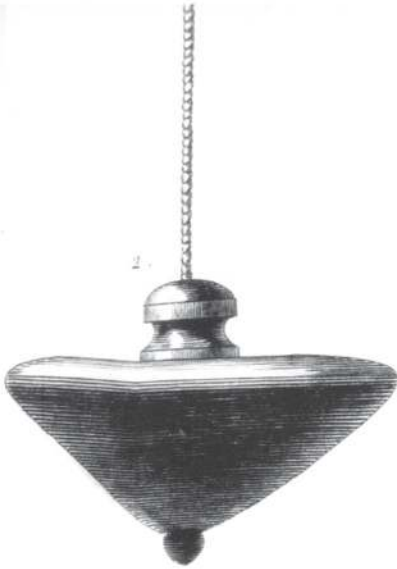Massachusetts Institute of Technology
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thresholds 27
exploration

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A la Recherche du Temps Perdu

Introduction

In an historical city, we discover successive layers of time which coexist without one taking account of the other. "Parallel cities" raise barriers to each other, come into conflict, or mutually ignore each other since each seeks the present-day, real space. (Figure 1) In the centers of many Greek cities, with high levels of urban density, large open spaces frequently coincide with archeological excavations and archeological ruins which have remained amid the dense urban mass. This paper presents a project carried out by the authors at an archeological site in Thessaloniki where the issues of its coexistence with the modern city were the major concern.

The Problem of Interpreting 'Historical Place'

The greatest difficulty in comprehending and interpreting the meaning of "topos" lies in the fact that it contains the concept of time concealed. A place accumulates ruins, symbols, languages, and living memories; it is never the same and thus cannot be subjected to easy typological analysis. One can view a place as a museum preserving all human actions over the course of time.

Reading Michel Foucault, who included the museum and cemetery within his list of heterotopic places, we could say that archeological sites are heterotopic places par excellence, or – especially those located in the historical city centers. An archeological site within the modern urban fabric retains its function as enclosure, as *Abaton*, interrupting the continuity and uniformity of a modern city. The historical city emerges from the past, and its traces are preserved within existing modern structures. This process of development creates a fragmentation of time, a crack in the secession of urban events, a discontinuous system.

In *The Architecture and the City* (1966), Aldo Rossi sought the uniqueness of each urban structure, the "locus solus," among a crowd of disparate uses, transformations events, and symbols, through the course of the city's historical time. For Rossi, the city is the collective memory of its citizens. In this sense, collective memory becomes a thread passing through the entire complex structure of the city, just as memory runs through the entire life of a person.[1]

The idea of city, recorded in the collective subconscious, was also dealt with by M. Christine Boyer, many years later and from a different perspective in her book *The City of Collective Memory* (1994).[2] She claims that the post-modern visualization of space and time exploits history and fragments of the past to build a romantic, misleading perception of the city. Boyer seeks a unifying thread in these fragments of the past to form, "...a continuous urban topography, a spatial structure that covers both rich and poor places, honorific and humble monuments, permanent and ephemeral forms, and should include places for public assemblage and public debate, as well as private memory walks and personal retreats."[3]

The restoration of the monumental or symbolic reading of the city, in addition to its direct applications to the cultural – tourist economy, also includes a series of "heavyweight" issues, political and ideological in character, which in turn lead to divergent interpretations and conflicts.[3] Moreover, the process of conserving and protecting them, entails special and material "sacrifices" for the modern city, which central government or the local community are called upon to make.

Intervening in Archeological Sites within the Urban Fabric

The layout of archeological sites as public spaces integrated into the functional continuity of the city is a modern architectural problems which contains many complicated issues in need of resolution. It requires a major debate about the interpretation and characteristics of archeological sites and touches upon the substance of planning: integration into the modern urban fabric and utilization to create special public uses or fencing off as scattered museum-like interstices.

Intervening in archeological sites and breaking an historical prohibition makes sense to the extent that it raises the problem of the continuity of the city, a continuity capable of transcend-

Figure 1. General View

ing the contrast between Old and New. Archeological sites, located within modern, vibrant cities, should not be dealt with only in terms of "protection" but also in terms of "integration" into modern social, functional, and cultural events occurring within the city surrounding them. The process of integration is the only one which can stem their degradation and gradual abandonment, and convert them into living organisms and not simply well maintained sights. Of course, this presupposes the development of a new view of what the concept of "historical" object means. "Restricting an object to a museum of itself is not a practice which can be extended to an entire city," says Manfredo Tafuri.[4]

Integrating archeological sites into the continuity of the urban fabric, of course, does not entail a negation of the features of those archeological sites as elements in the discovery and exploration of a different place, a negation of their heterotopic identity.

The monuments in the historical center of Thessaloniki and the ruins in their diverse historical stratification directly coexist with the modern urban fabric. Existing spatial relationships between the modern city and the monuments or archeological "interstices" are relationships based on familiarity and directness, but their coexistence is not always harmonious. The monuments of Thessaloniki function as breathers within the urban fabric, provoking a change of scale, human communication and the unexpected discovery of a different environment. Varying symbolisms are at play in urban and social spaces surrounding the monuments of a city: worship, leisure, communication. This fact generates an extremely significant and interesting diversity in the modern urban environment and brings relief from its "esthetic burden."

Redesigning of the Aristotelous Monumental Axis
1st Prize - International Architectural Competition, 1997

The Aristotelous Civic Axis is a succession of public, open spaces leading from the sea front to the Old City, a transverse cut in the otherwise longitudinal layout of the city. Our plan highlights its interesting topography and unifies the high point of the city with the sea. (Figure 2)

The Aristotelous Monumental Axis came into being as a conscious design gesture after the historic centre was destroyed by the fire of 1917. Preparation of the new plan for Thessaloniki was assigned to an international commission led by Ernest Hébrard, director of the French Military Archeological Service in Thessaloniki. The implementation of the monumental axis in the section south of Egnatia Street began uneventfully. However, numerous problems emerged in the other sections. Indications regarding the existence of major archeological finds in the section intended to become the "administrative square" provoked intense reactions about implementing the plan. An
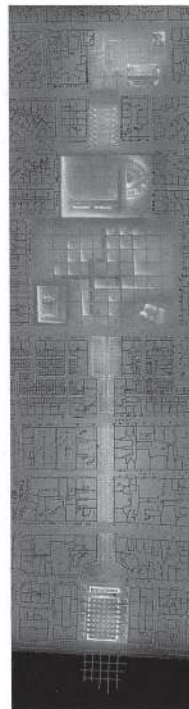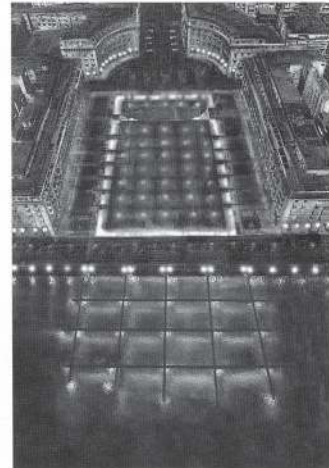

Figure 3. Aristotle Square

Figure 2. Master Plan

international architectural contest in 1924 for the City Hall Building remained on paper since the archeologists insisted on carrying out excavations before any work began. The outbreak of World War II and the German occupation suspended all relevant activities. In the post-war period, during the mid-1950s the areas intended for the stepped gardens in the higher reaches of the axis were rebuilt blocking the view to the old city. In 1956, in order to begin work on the Court Building, excavations needed to be carried out in the area. They eventually commenced in 1962 and brought to light the city's Ancient Agora, a *forum romanum*. Despite the obvious significance of the ruins uncovered, pressure for the erection of the Court Building was intense. However, the reactions by archeologists, the press, and the city's intellectual circles were equally intense. As a result, in 1970 the Courts were eventually being built elsewhere in the city. In 1989 the first restoration works on the Agora commenced, but no effort was made to redesign the monumental axis until the International Architectural Competition was announced in 1997.

All the events surrounding implementation of the Aristotelous Civic Axis and the difficulties of the original plan clearly indicate a "problem" of historical cities coexisting with with multiple strata of development, when the old is revealed to be negating the creation of the new. Our proposal was based on this premise, and responded with a new interpretation about the modern dynamic of the axis which could be based on diversity. Our concerns led us to propose design interventions that place emphasis on the stratification and successive layers of the city, so that all are readable, and yet coexist and contribute to the creation of a modern urban web of public spaces for the city. Using the square grid as a design tool – like the one used in excavations – our proposal attempted to activate a valuable fabric of fine historical and local references along the entire length of the axis. It sought out urban harmonies which preserve deep resonances in collective memory so as to highlight the axis's present-day role as the historical and central public space in the city. (Figures 3-6)
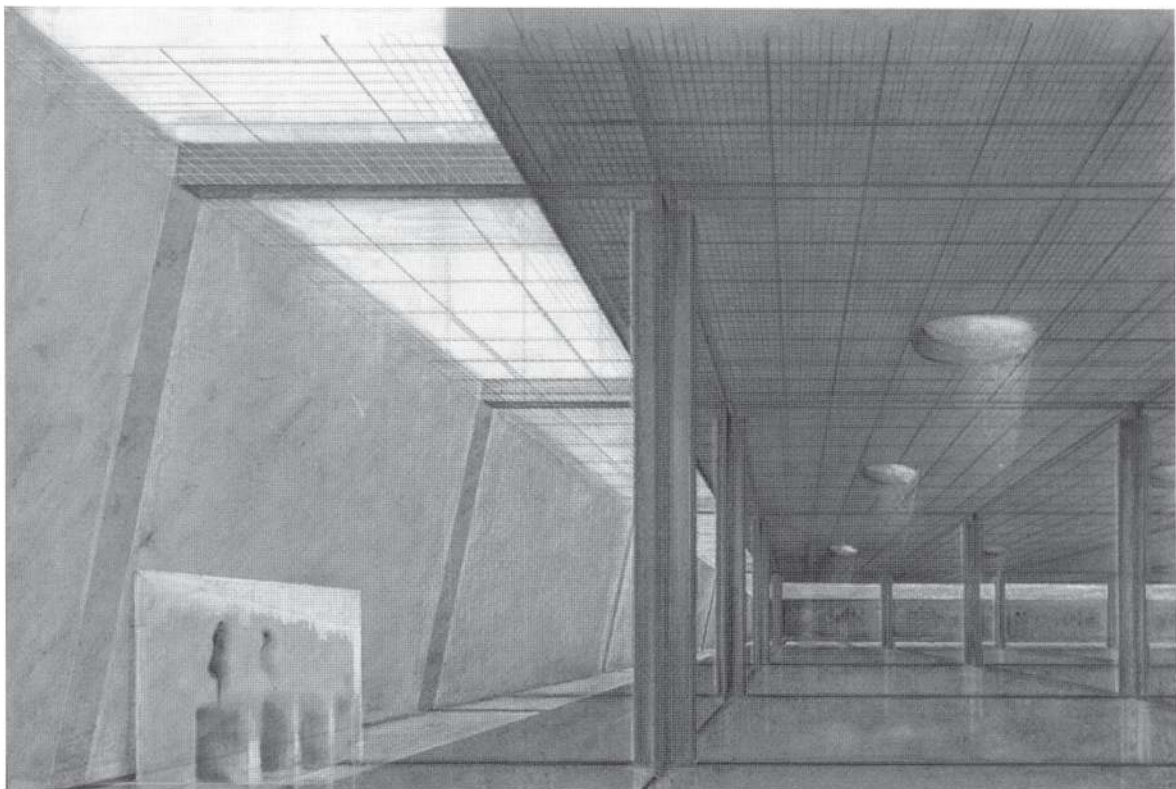

Figure 4. Under the Square

Notes

1. Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della cità*, Marsilio Eclitoria, Padua, 1966.
2. M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory —Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1994
3. *ibid.*
3. Argyro Loukaki, "Greece: Ancient Ruins, Value Conflicts and Aspects of Development" Ph.D. Diss, Oxford University, 1994.
4. Manfredo Tafuri "History, Conservation, Renovation" interview given to C. Baglione & B. Pedretti, *Casabella Journal*, No. 580, 1991.
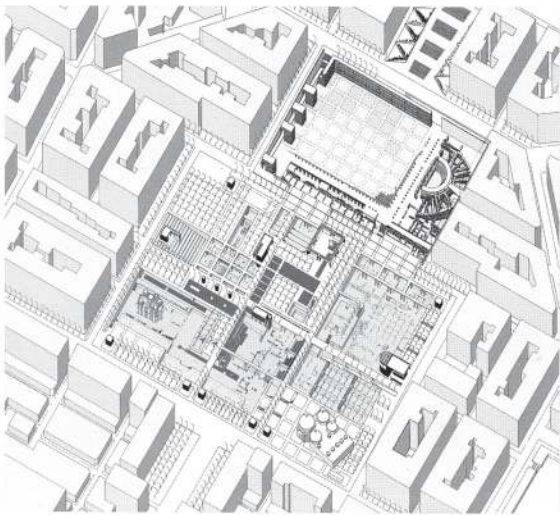
Figure 5. Park

Figure 6. Forum