

“Wrapping Ruins Around Buildings”¹

The Roman *Villa delle Grotte*

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Imaginable absences

On the promontory overlooking the Gulf of Portoferraio, on the island of Elba, lie the remains of the Roman domus known as Villa delle Grotte, characteristic example of the luxurious *villae maritimae* of the Augustan era. The building, typically defined by the courtyard which its rooms had to look out, stands on a base supported by a series of apsidal structure, the *grotte*. This podium, still present today, is witness to the link between architecture and landscape.

General issues

The Villa delle Grotte appeared on the list of monumental buildings for the first time in September of 1901 (Alderighi, 2014). In the report the remains of the building were described as follows:

“On the two sides of the road that leads from Portoferraio to Portolongone, on a hill that juts out towards the gulf of Portoferraio there are long stretches of walls of Roman construction *ad opus incertum* and *opus reticulatum*, of vaulted undergrounds, of sections of brick wall, remains of mosaic floors, and other traces of constructions, and marble coverings.”³.

Documentation prior to this date is almost non-existent. Only some views from the eighteenth century and a drawing in the Ciummei manuscript (1786–1791) show us how the Villa must have been before the destruction by the Neapolitans who installed the artillery on the ruins, during the siege of 1799 (Casaburo, 1997). Many of the current knowledge concerning the archaeological area comes from the excavation campaign conducted by Giorgio Monaco between 1960 and 1972, the documents drawn up at the end of the excavations are still one of most complete sources of information on the building. Giorgio Monaco’s diaries and the drawings by R. Pasquinelli describe the state of the archaeological site at the end of the excavations. Interesting is the description of the search for the western boundary of the structures, in this part situated near the street where Giorgio Monaco chose

¹ Scully V. 1993, pp. 3.

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³ Translated from the copy of the document AST 9 Livorno 24 1953-1960- Soprintendenza ai Monumenti e Gallerie per le province di Pisa, Lucca, Livorno e Massa-Carrara, nell’elenco degli edifici monumentali.

not to proceed with the excavations, as if this area was not part of the complex. In this section, known as the *giardino delle essenze*, which was probably once shielded by an arcade (*ambulatio*) towards the South-West, he preferred to create an open space to park cars and tourist coaches (Alderighi, 2014). The situation today is unchanged, at the entrance of the villa, at the point where the visitor could embrace the immensity of the area and its direct relationship with the landscape, there is a parking lot and a small temporary structure for the reception.

During the course of Architectural design and composition of the bachelor's degree in construction engineering of the University of Florence⁴, we asked ourselves how to re-establish the visual and physical link between man, memory and landscape, while maintaining at the same time the services necessary for managing archaeological excavations. Through the example of the villa, and based on the reconstructions made by Giorgio Monaco, small architectures have been hypothesized, capable of establishing relations with the ruins. These relationships are based on the themes of construction measurement, and variable landscape *warping*. The ancient construction is credited with having defined a rule of intervention for this place. Terraces, rooms of passage, fences and *hortus conclusus*, have become the main themes of the composition. Three project hypotheses designed on the basis of the same functional programme are shown below.

Three Ways – Three Different Principles of Relationship

THROUGH – by L. Galletti, N. Lucchesi, U. De Biase.

This project proposal tries to mend the connection between the ruins of the Valeri villa (Pancrazzi, 1995 and Cambi and Pagliantini, 2014) and the landscape that surrounds it. This project defines a path that goes from the Giardino delle Essenze to the sea. The services directly connected to the archaeological area find place inside a small building, an inhabited wall, whose dimensions make it look like a simple wall, which screens the view of the ruins from the street and from the Giardino delle Essenze. Past this new threshold, there is access to the maze of rooms that made up the villa. The descent towards the sea begins through a tortuous path. Placed halfway through the descent, the recreation services and finally, precisely in that contained but deep inlet (perhaps the one painted by Lorenzo Ciummei), a small amphitheatre.

⁴ Collaborators: Arch. Antonella Sedda, Arch. Marianella Stillavato, Arch. Bernardo Criscuoli, Ilaria Borghesi.

Participated Elsa Innocenti, Serena Galerati, Beatrice Cassini, Asia Garrisi, Francesca Rosafo, Astrid Panitti, Andrea Menci, Alessandro Baronti, Matteo Di Ruberto, Lorenzo Cassigoli, Francesco Contini, Francesco Maiorana, Francesco Meozzi, Leonardo Sanesi, Mattia Marchetti, Viola Neri, Viola Tilli, Niccolò Martinetti, Edoardo Cappelli, Mirco Cenni, Lorenzo Pampaloni, Alessandro Trenti, Filippo Pratesi, Gianmarco Falorni, Ayoub Harrat, Lorenzo Senesi, Chiara Fanelli, Filippo Capanni, Denise Frappi, Edilberto Mangani, Filippo Castriota, Giuseppe Latte, Alberina Bibaj, Ilenia Giannini, Sara Melis, Andrea Bonini, Alice Gori, Emanuela Pili, Aldion Shabani, Andrea Zeloni, Edoardo Solenni, Alessia Cresci, Niccolò Bonamici, Edoardo Peruzzi, Arlind Mersini, Andrea Nerini, Marco Longi, Emanuele Porta, Guglielmo Nasorri, Giulia Perugini, Arianna Mauro, Rocio Celestino, Mohamed El Hakimy, Nicolas Alarcon, Chaimaa Khalid, Anna Di Dio, Ilaria Muccio, Nicolò Lucchesi, Umberto De Biase, Lorenzo Galletti, Antonino Gringeri, Giulia Valentini, Chiara Paoli, Francesco Giovannini, Eleonora Roselli, Annalisa Pancani, Maroua Nouri, Gabriele Calabrò, Matteo Sbrolli, Elisa Iaconisi, Francesca Cataudella, Anas Hasbi, Mark Magligat, Koami Moise Agbenowossi, Lorenzo Ciatti, Medon Mustafaj, Sergio Fabian piedrahita Velez, Ilaria Crudo.



Fig. 1. *THROUGH* reworking of the architectural project designed by L. Galletti, N. Lucchesi, U. De Biase.

OVERLAP – by M.El Hakimy, F.Giovannini, N.Alarcon.

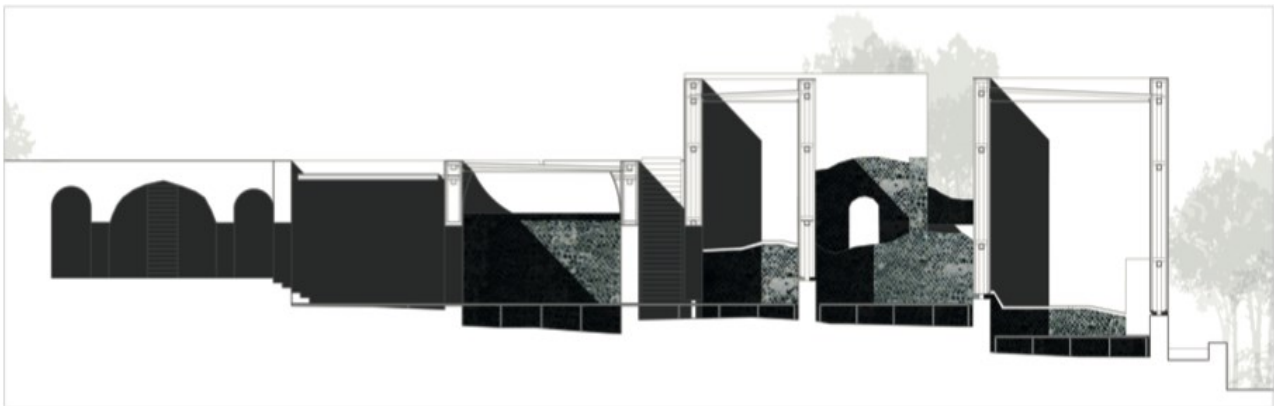


Fig. 2. *OVERLAP* reworking of the architectural project designed by M.El Hakimy, F. Giovannini, N. Alarcon.

This project proposal is developed on the western part of the Villa, among the remains of the thermal baths of the 1st century A.D. These rooms, only partially recovered from the excavations conducted by Giorgio Monaco in the 1960s, are the best-preserved part of the Villa. Based on Carrilho da Graça's idea for the archaeological site of Praça Nova, the project foresees a series of volumes which planimetrically trace part of the ruins and reconstitute the South-West corner of the Villa without any objective reconstruction.

DISTANCE – by G.Perugini, A.Mauro, R.Celestino.

Upon arriving at the archaeological area, before seeing the remains of Villa delle Grotte, the eye is led to look toward the Gulf of Portoferraio, Cosmopoli and the sea. The necessary distance to observe the remains of the Roman Villa is missing, our gaze cannot completely embrace the immense

archaeological area. From the upper Cistern, however, it is possible to truly understand the villa and its relationship with the surrounding landscape. The still existing building becomes the place where it is possible to know the ruins.



Fig. 3. *DISTANCE* reworking of the architectural project designed by G.Perugini, A.Mauro, R.Celestino.

The three projects are very different in their final shape. Although, each one's aim is to solve the critical issues of the project area in its specific way, they are all based on a design process that finds its beginning on the study of important monuments and the changes they have caused to the areas they are placed-in. Once identified, these mutations became the bases of the projects by creating different shapes. The design assumes all the features of the place, gathering the continuity with the past and the tradition. Contemporary architecture can reveal the symbolic and synchronic value of the ancient monuments (Rossi, 1978).

The representation, introducing a certain level of abstraction for the environment and strengthening the lines and traces, exalts the property of each proposal while keeping a common level of reading, useful to allow a proper interpretation and evaluation of the three proposals.

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