

*Myth, Culture and Landscape:
Classical Identity and Interpretive Design at St. Bertrand de Comminges*

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Abstract:

The ordering principles of the Gallo-Roman city of Lugdunum Convenarum rest dormant within its landscape; the antique city and its topographic orders obscured by time. Yet the continued processes of academic excavation reveal only dusty foundations. Disconnected fragments of classical form, impoverished through autopsy, serve to confuse rather than illuminate. The desire to understand and experience the nature of this fairly modest Roman outpost clearly demands other forms of interpretive engagement than provided by the practices of archeology alone.

The challenge is one of method. This paper investigates the role of theoretical design as a means of appreciating the essential city which rests integral to the charged landscape of St. Bertrand de Comminges. Hypothetically this implicit presence can best be explored through careful intervention and extension. Indeed, perhaps it is only through exploring an imaginary future that the spatial power of the historic city may be investigated; its essential conditions revealed to experience.

This hypothesis will be explored through considering a theoretical master plan for an archeological park. Grounded on substantial archeological field work, this project attempts to bring the implicit principles there discovered to visibility. Systems of order, spatial sequence, and ideals of urban intent are identified and reflected upon through their transformation. This proposes to celebrate the specific nature of Saint Bertrand de Comminges, its classical and medieval attributes, along with the less tangible aspects of its landscape and urban sensibility. By extension the notion of design as a form of research may be considered. In this case the project investigates the ephemeral qualities of a place, and their potential extrapolation within contemporary form.



The Roman town of Lugdunum Convenarum rests dormant within Saint Bertrand de Comminges, a small town of France. Its implicit ordering principles remain hidden; its architectural values cloaked. Yet in spite of the city's Roman structure, and even its pre-Roman foundations resonate within the more visible medieval and perhaps they even direct these later expressions. The resultant combination of a layered architecture in a setting is a magical one, creating a landscape latent with moments of phenomenal significance. In its entirety the site provokes reflection.



St. Bertrand de Comminges



St. Just (detail)

Is it possible to tangibly uncover the spirit and operating principles of this synthetic condition? And if so, what are the appropriate tools? Knowledge of St. Bertrand's history is incomplete, the circumstances of its creation and subsequent inhabitation unclear. Its textual records are fragmentary at best. As a result, the practices of scientific archaeology, while central to exposing the skeleton of the historical city and the sedimented layers, tend not to illuminate issues of architectural intent. Nor do they manifest the antique spatial experience. Modern archaeological excavation risks replacing the town's rich temporal frictions with an impoverished landscape of foundations. Arguably St. Bertrand's special qualities must be inferred through other than these traditional means.

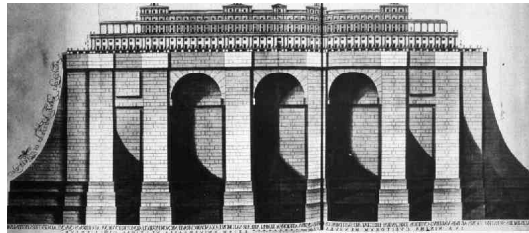


Odysseus and the Sirens
British Museum, London

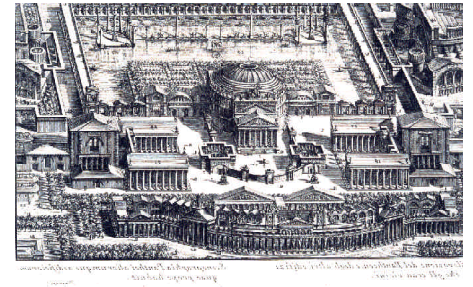


Aeneas Leaving Troy
Vergilianus Vaticanus, The Vatican

In the textual world historical fiction has successfully played such an exploratory role. Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, is an imaginative recreation of Bronze Age Greece, just as Virgil's *Aeneid* reconstructs Rome's mythical history into a coherent (and politically expedient) form. While it might be unwise to read either text as history proper, it



Temple of Solomon, Villalpanda



Campo Marzo, Piranesi

Related architectural efforts tend to follow this textual mode. Their creations can be provocative in their form, as the 'buildings' are primarily graphic, and intended to remain on the page. They support a story rather than construction. Dreams of Solomon's Temple, Pliny's Villa, or ancient Rome itself have provoked architects to imagine complete historic worlds through image. Perhaps the most striking example is Piranesi's Campo Marzo, which imagined away Baroque Rome in order to reanimate its antique predecessor. Though existing classical ruins were maintained, all later accretions are replaced by fantastic constructions of imperial grandeur. These great images describe a classical city more extreme than any historically accurate version, but one congruent with Roman myth. In The Odyssey we are presented with a history perhaps more true than the actual, and certainly more vivid than the actual parallel.

But to publicly construct such an historic vision? Architecturally this seldom succeeds. Partly one is limited by architecture's contextual reality. Due to their practical function and familiar presence buildings, especially public ones, tend to be perceived as both active and 'real' (versus literature for example, and even it suffers similar challenges). Indeed, partly dependent upon their programmes, most buildings do not clearly announce any explanatory or historical narrative. Indeed explicit historical commentary is rare from a building which resides in the world; the notion of architectural historicity is problematic. Would such a work present an artistic construct, reinterpreting the past for contemporary effect, or a version of a dusty and crumbled original remade for cultural or artistic purposes, or simply a touristic misrepresentation of historical reality? All of the above? Given this ambiguous relation between historical fiction and architectural interpretation, the terrain for such architectural intent is a curious one. As a result constructed 'history' is often apologetic, losing any spirit of the original through a fear of misrepresentation. The temple fragment at Glanum, a classical site in Provence is a telling example. Such a construction may be necessary to bring visibility to a rather modest archeological landscape, yet its lack of architectural conviction is readily apparent. It is a sign without any accompanying vision as to what might make such a reference meaningful. The avoidance of historical interpretation, and the associated risk of being wrong, leads to a default image, a generic antique justified by necessity alone. Conversely the opposite extreme may be equally unsatisfactory. Disney's ambitious recreation of Europe in Florida, though clearly fictional, is discomfiting in its misplaced imagistic precision.



Glanum (St. Remy de Provence)

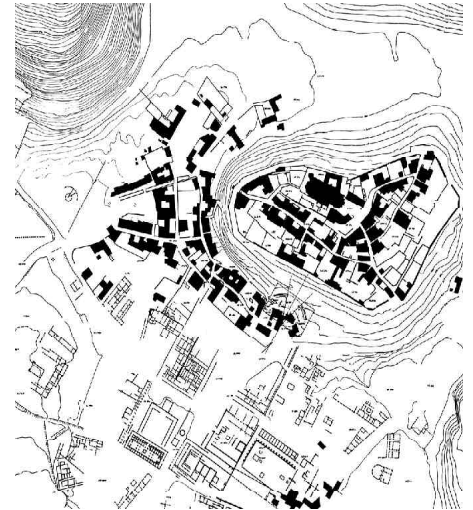
with immediate spatial and experiential effect. Indeed, perhaps it is only through design that the phenomenon of the antique city and its architecture may be fully appreciated. Spatial experience, liberated from the academic reticence of its architectural interpretation, begins to explore the richness implicit in the historical remains: to do so, perhaps paradoxically, as an imaginary future rather than a recreated past.

The Essential City

Saint Bertrand de Comminges is situated in the foothills of the Pyrenees, immediately south of the Garonne. The town marks the meeting of plain and hill, crowning the first small summit with its cathedral. Though not a hill town, its urban construction powerfully projects a centralised elevation over the valley, foreshadowing the larger hill town of Carcassonne. In its own strange microclimate, St. Bertrand is often shrouded in mist and rain. Yet the clouds are rarely so dense that the town's appearance changes by the moment. Part of a transforming landscape, yet always centred on the meeting of valley and hill, St. Bertrand maintains a mysterious presence; one strongly related to the local context.



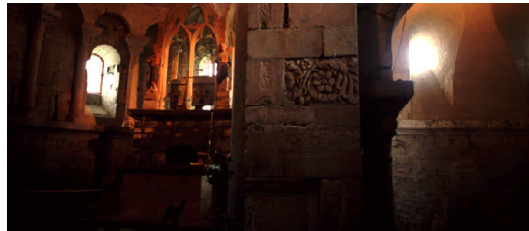
Roman Mask, St. Just



St. Bertrand de Comminges: Plan

The ideals of persistence and transformation, so casually apparent in the landscape and climate, are sequenced into the town's fabric. Its material presence, orientation and urban structure record consistent tendencies over centuries. Seemingly 'organic' medieval streets loosely follow earlier Roman patterns, just as the cathedral incorporates classical temple foundations. St. Just, a small church resting in the plain, renders this historical connection more explicit. Geometrically simple, it internalises the realities of physical and symbolic metamorphoses in the very fabric of its construction. Roman fragments populate the otherwise bare walls; formerly pagan characters repositioned in service of Catholic practice. Its striking setting, earthy character, and mysterious interior enlivened by the magic of rituals render it representational of the special qualities of the town itself.

More cryptically the settlement's earliest foundations persist in its festivals. The summer solstice is marked by "Brandon", a ritualistic burning of a large tree, felled and transformed into a torch. Aerated for a week, the tree virtually explodes when lit, its flames animating the night sky. Marking the setting sun on the year's end also demonstrates an awareness of the coming winter with its ever increasing darkness. The origin of the event is unclear, but its endurance tenacious.



St. Just, Interior



The Brandon

The town's climate, patterned orientation, and historical sedimentation are all verifiable, brought to num through the practices of surveying, cartography, and archeology. Clarifying the historical roles of the e cycles of the days and seasons, or the function of sacrifice and ritual are more tenuous endeavours. Yet the active within the ethereal landscape, and may, arguably be central to the town's existence and continued rei very least they participate in the experience of the place, and provoke reflection. More significantly they n crucial factors underlying its history.

St. Bertrand's Roman name was Lugdunum Convenarum. The title literally celebrates the town as a place the hill of Lug. A beacon in the landscape, Lugdunum was a destination for a coming together of the tri meeting. The rhetoric of communication was central to its very existence. Lug was a Gallic deity, most c with Roman Mercury, the messenger god. A multivalent figure, he was responsible for communicating b and from the gods to humans; a god of agreement and participation. His hill, projecting over the landsca setting for this activity. Arguably the Romans, and the Roman Catholic Church recognised the same quali and their subsequent use of the site follows similar preoccupations.



Lug



Theatre

Myth: Content and Means

Like the ideals of landscape and transformation, this urban quality of directed communication, though so ble, is historically significant. Its meaning to the town is embedded in its very name. The irony is that, discussed earlier, its value the least likely to be exposed through traditional research practices. The cha more suitable means for the investigation of these implicit structures.

One possible guide, associated with murky but significant pasts, is the idea of myth. Hypothetically r qualitative and structural aspects, might direct an appropriate examination of such a landscape, its power

each conscientious retelling has the capacity to assist in its revelation. St. Bertrand's different and success point to the power of such a shared condition. By extension new constructions, by the nature of their engagement with the specifics of the site, might also play a role in illuminating this mysterious quality or ideal. In the case of historically significant archetypes these fresh creations might even be more significant as they would maintain presence and immediacy that a historical reference does not. Here the popular notion of myth, as a mystery to be paired with myth as structure of research. Each aspect potentially justifies design as a means for revealing qualities of a mysterious and essential urban presence, and bringing them to visibility for historical reflection.

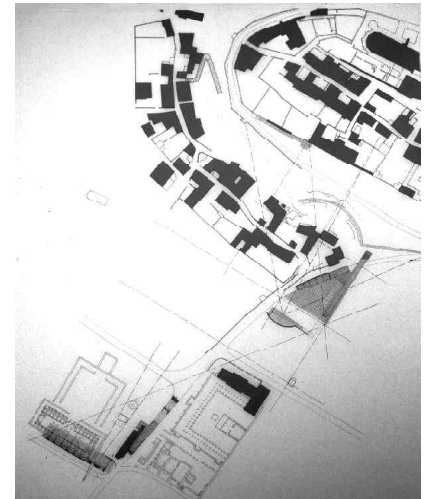
Design Strategies

The project, briefly presented here, explores these notions through the design of an archaeological park. The goal is to create a comprehensive urban order which includes the medieval and Roman cities. It proposes to reassemble and reconnect its parts. More qualitatively the project addresses the ideals of sequential enclosures, patterns of orders are inflected, creating juxtapositions of landscape and building. Different programmes bring specific life to the place, where idiosyncratic events serve as reminders of the town's inner life.

Underlying these decisions is the desire to evoke a sensibility of subtle difference. Slightly uncomfortable is sought, revealing the Roman foundations as distinct characters and provoking recognition that other positions also exist within the landscape. At St. Bertrand Celtic practices underlie a Roman appropriation, and both exist within the medieval constructions. All reside within a shifting ground. Here the attempt is to make this social history tangible. The revelation of this sensibility, along with the chance to celebrate the cultural values, characterize the design intentions.



site plan

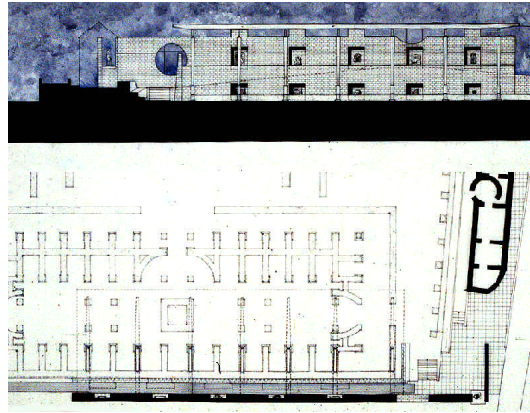


detail site plan

Site

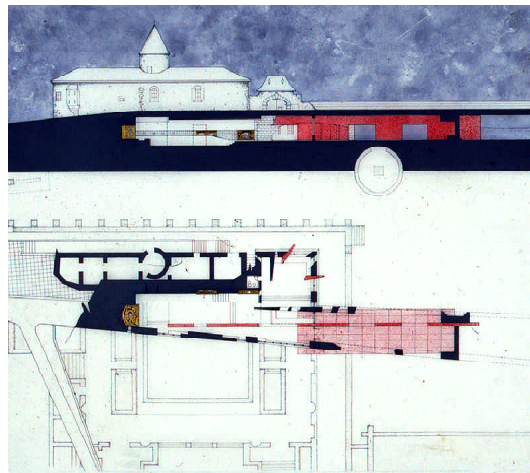
The classical city is outlined as a lower precinct, a variation on the essential Roman practice of enclosure. The design addresses the practicalities of an archaeological park, as well as creating a zone of architectural nature. The goal is to establish sufficient spatial definition for the precinct while still maintaining an appropriately scaled relationship between building and setting. Here the attempt is to subtly define a precinct while also retaining the potential for flexibility. This flexible boundary is structured through fragments, whose different principles of material quality play out to define its edges. Shifts in expectation and ideals collide within a localised plan. The attempt is to establish sensibilities of continuity and transformation, to establish links with the foundations within a set of related parts.

another. Functionally the wall protects architectural fragments, as well as establishing a viewing structure the town's facade.

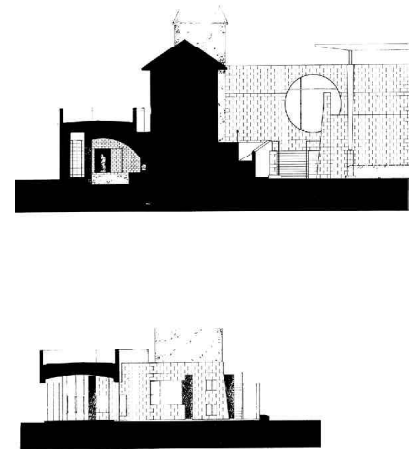


lapidary wall, plan

A descent to the archeological level allows a reconnection of the bisected park. Through excavation the rendered less natural, and inhabitation within, the site of the orientation centre, serves to invert the tradi historical layering. The colliding elements and fragments within perhaps make the space slightly unce dislocated. Its ideals of rearrangement and passage focus inwards, yet also direct attention to the landsca

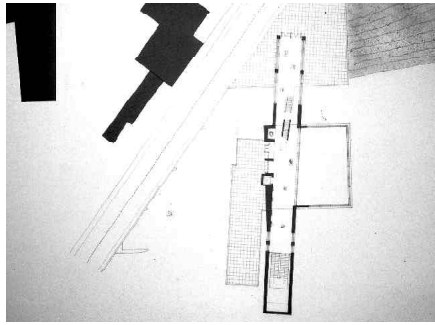


orientation centre

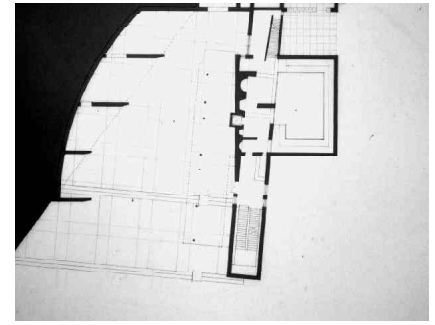


orientation centre

A visitor's residence, music school (related to the annual music festival) and recreation centre extend the a back to the river. This facilitates the creation of distant views, as well as establishing a reconnection to tl founding elements of river, plain and hill. The conversation of landscape elements is reconfigured, thoug attempt to reveal its mysterious qualities.



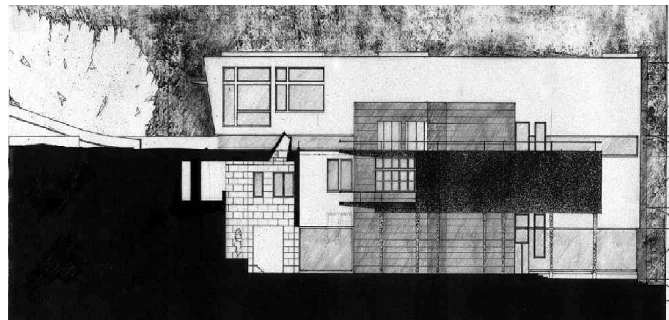
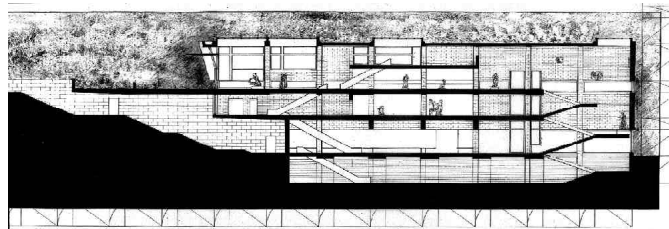
museum site plan



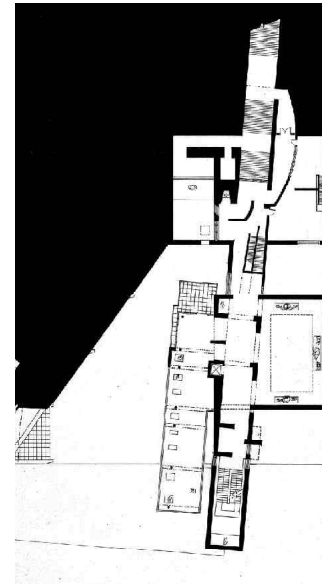
museum ground plan

Museum

These ambitions have been explored most directly in the archeological museum. Situated at the edge of the city, adjacent to the Roman theatre, the museum becomes a significant character within the larger whole. At the urban boundary, it reinforces the theatre district by reforming one wall of its colonnaded precinct. As well as its central role of the theatre in the city, this attempt to reconnect the lower town to the hill, and by extension the medieval city. Visually focus is redirected away from the geometry of the modern road towards the Roman theatre implicit in the town's elevation, with the theatre at its centre. The museum's interior posits a series of spaces animated by journey. Varied paths lead one back to the landscape, which is experienced in different ways positioned in response to these landscape conditions, to render their appreciation, and the perception of the less familiar. Path and edge; object in the landscape and part of the Roman precinct, the museum attempts to shift the experience of the place.



museum elevation and section



museum upper floor plan

spirit of the town its phenomenal aspects were considered, and their spatial significance made tangible. The archetypal qualities of metamorphoses and transformation, as well as the particular attributes of the site, directed investigation of the specific conditions, analogous to the thematic role of human behaviour within the site, the potential links to the past conditions of the city are identified for reflection. Secondly the structure has been identified in its possible relation to the question of design as research in general.

The pairing of an archetype plus its narration evolves over time, and through many different variations. This can, more technically, be understood as a series. In a series, usually a combination of three terms, the arrangement identifies the linking spirit which exists between them. The series 2:4:6 is qualitatively different from the third term these structural differences would remain indistinct. In the case of Saint Bertrand in Comminges - the sequence of Celtic Gaul, Gallo-Rome, and medieval France, - can be further extended, with each term helping to reveal the essential conditions implicit within the series. This open-ended state keeps the integration perceptually alive, just as its absence risks ossification. In the latter case our ability to perceive the site as distinct from its somewhat impoverished historical fact, would be challenged, thereby hindering the development of true historical sensibility.

The notion of series may here be seen as a provocation. Extending the evident layers also demands specific interrelation, in order to imagine other forms of connection and influence. Equally our ideas of the landscape context of our mysterious predecessors, forces us to relate to their ambitions. This imaginary historic context assists in revealing significant aspects of the site and its inhabitation. Possible continuities are discovered through difference. In the end these relationships may be imaginary, but they serve the purpose of redirecting our perceptions, a necessary provocation for productive research.