
Quarries, water, stone walls and groves regenerating the identity landscape of Comiso, Italy

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Abstract. The awareness of cultural specificity and geomorphologic and ecological singularities provides the instruments for an evolution capable of transforming the perception of the place and of recovering its memory. The design process is therefore centered in revealing character defining elements that time and indifference have blurred. A plan is then envisioned to create synergy between all these elements in order to capture the mosaic that in space and time has shaped the identity of this place to allow people to reconnect with it. The design restrains itself from a globalized language to adhere to this terrain and these traces through visual suggestions capable of weaving layers of memory to become present.

1. Awareness as root for memory

The shift from the presence in a place to the relationship with the place is experienced through the taking on of cultural specificity and geomorphologic and ecological singularities, which wave its identity conditions. It is the critical observation that exposes what appears to a new light and that can provide the instruments for an evolution which is not necessarily a change of the material data, but instead a new awareness, capable of transforming the perception of the place and of recovering its memory. The first contact in this relationship is the search of those meaningful signs through which places could be recognizable as such. Once the relationship is established the issue arises of its persistence and the processing of its defining characteristics.

When attention is directed only towards individual monuments it is easy to think of a kind of conservation centered on the protection from incongruent elements.

Even in the debates on historical towns the discussion has dealt mostly with the impact of new additions over the original system, often neglecting the process of identification of diffuse monumentalities. In the search of protection of memory the attention has been therefore centered on the new elements of change.

When we look at places in their completeness of spatial organizations, of visual relationships, of structures and open spaces, we can instead think of an enhancement of the memory founded on the acquisition of awareness of the places, on the discovery of the elements that define them, on the recognition of traces no longer manifest.

In the absence of this awareness, indeed the memory of places can disappear because of the adding up of small actions sprang from indifference, or because of the absence of necessary actions. The awareness of the place is the foundation of its permanence. In this context it is

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requested to the design project the activity of understanding the place, of seeding elements which would make the comprehension possible, which could be traced back to be then displayed in their evolution.

2. A place of neglected traces

The town of Comiso, in Sicily, Italy, is placed at the bottom of hills where centuries of traditional agriculture have designed an intricate network of stone walls, and terraces covered with almond groves, fig.1, fig.2, fig.3.



fig.1



fig.2



fig.3

It appears at a first sight as a compact urban fabric of small scale old buildings, with monumental churches standing out, surrounded by a recent periphery overflowing indifferently on the adjacent land, canceling old relationships between topography and urban structure, and prevailing over the rest of the image, fig. 4.



fig. 4

But the town would have much more to reveal, both in its built area and in its landscape context. Historical pre-Roman, Roman and medieval layers are found in ruins and layout, next to a baroque monumental core, surrounded by 19th and 20th centuries expansions.

The town is bordered on one side by the Ippari River, now a small concrete channel within abandoned land, fig.5.



fig.5

Despite its current appearance, the river holds a significant historical past as a navigable waterway in Greek times, within a fertile cultivated floodplain, with boat landings and commercial activities. The occasional visitor with no knowledge of ancient history has now no visual clue either of an historical place, or of an ecological feature. The river site waits to take back an image recognizable as a “river”, so that by this retrieved landscape, suggestions could be perceived of its former state.

On the other side the town faces the steep edges of the hills, which have been quarried for centuries for their highly demanded stone for structural and decorative use. To provide stone blocks and plates the town developed a tradition of stone sawing. Industrial sawing machinery dotted the surroundings, expanding into the landscape the imagery of the quarries. The quarry landscape was not only the extraction site, but became the entire everyday environment that everyone could see and relate to, fig.6, fig.7.



fig.6



fig.7

3. Quarry workers, stone artists

Enhancing the decorative use of the stone the town produced highly skilled workers, whose carving craftsmanship was of sculptural quality, engaging even more people in a direct relationship with the quarries. Quarrying has been the main source of income for the town for decades. All related activities therefore were perceived as the town's signature, giving identity and pride to its inhabitants.

With time the quarries were abandoned and only one operation is now active in this area. Still the quarries represent a highly significant element in the history of the town and have taken on a relevant landscape value. In contrast the town seems to turn its back to the quarries, ending towards them with a crumbled edge, or at times with incongruent additions and illegal shacks, which are an obstacle to visual and functional enjoyment of this space.

4. Built and quarried spaces

These quarries retain the unusual condition of being not an isolated piece out in the landscape, which would lead to a reuse as an individual recreational park, as in many other examples. These quarries are fully urban. The quality of their space as a "built void", at a different scale, is similar to that one of squares and urban corridors, where the "built", rather than buildings, is rock walls.

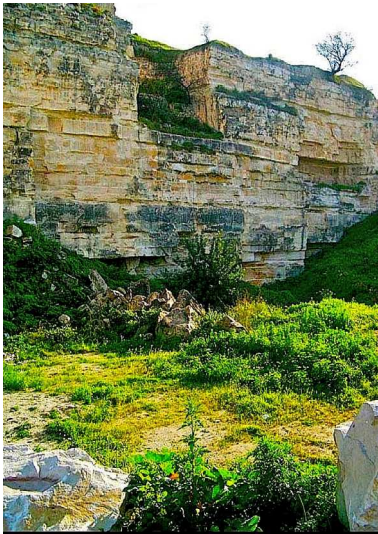


fig. 8



fig. 9

The relationship with the quarries will be stronger if they could be perceived as a connected system, as that part of the urban fabric which carries those specific meanings and memories, as the churches system carries other ones.

4. Tracking back the signs

Examination of the nearby hills showed lines of water that in time disappeared under the city's surface.

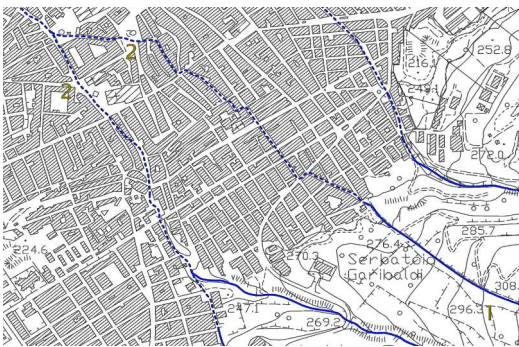


fig. 10

An analysis of archeological sites, medieval street alignments, historical documents, revealed possible alignments of waterlines. Although the waterlines are not currently perceived as flowing, people are very attached to some water points as fountains.



fig. 11

fig. 12

A perception, real or conceptual, of the waterlines can link the historical memories of the town's Roman thermal baths and fountains and of the flowing tributaries of the ancient Ippari river, to the more recent memories of the quarries, to the cultural landscape of walls and groves of the hills, and to the natural system of the river.

5. A strategy to mark the cultural historic system

A plan therefore is envisioned to create synergy between all these elements in order to capture the mosaic that in space and time has shaped the identity of this place to allow people to reconnect with it. The design proposes a broad system made of:

1. a "quarry park" joining the urban areas characterized by the cliffs
2. a "river park", to restore the historical Ippari river
3. "linear urban connections" following the traces of the hidden water or joining key urban elements to highlight

The design proposes a continuous space that discloses and makes accessible the entire base of the hills on the south of downtown, where the quarries are located, and where the rivers flowing from the steep hills meet the urban area.

On the northern side of town the plan aims to bring back the channelized river and restore the landscape on the floodplain. The challenge of the design is here to keep a balance between the reality of a new intervention and the ethic obligation of not to overcome the ancient history of the

place. The two systems will then be linked through town by the design of linear spaces, which underline the hydrological system or lines of water, and mark the cultural historic system.

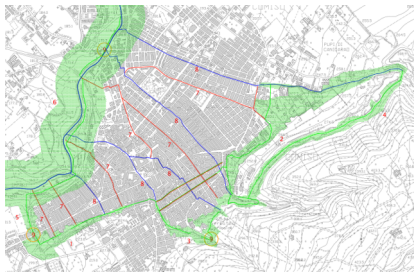


fig.13

Key characteristics of the proposed design are:

- a. the continuity of the system, which unfolds as a greenbelt at the edge of the city with no interruption;
- b. the integration with the urban fabric, picking up alignments and views;
- c. the links that join the greenbelt system with historic and naturalistic pathways in the surrounding countryside, shaped by a culturally significant landscape of stone walls and almond groves.

The approach of the design is therefore centered in revealing character defining elements that time and indifference have blurred, and in creating opportunities for the establishment of a closer relationship with the place.

A greenbelt, shaped by joining the different recovered spaces, controls the spreading of the periphery, and visually has the effect to mitigate the recent image of the edge, so that the key monuments can hold their visual prevalence.

A loop within it contains the points of access of the extra-urban roads; it functions as pedestrian and bicycle path and as a route for alternative transportation electric small buses, to take close to the historical core. Going through it the visitor has the full perception of the design elements set at different points to compose the memories of the place.

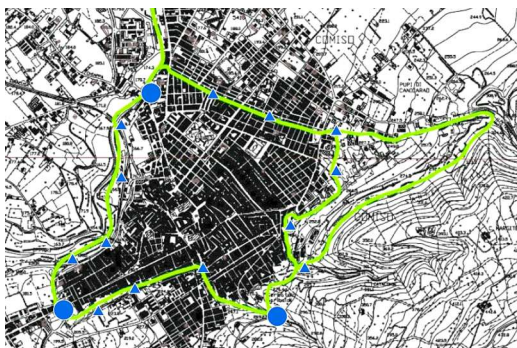


fig. 14

6. A design of perceptual suggestions

The main entrance to the first quarry area is also the link to the roads entering town from west and south. At this node is a terrace overlooking a panorama of the redesigned valley comprised between the urban fabric and the rock wall, with green rolling slopes on the town side in contrast with the dramatic sharp lines of the quarry rock walls on the opposite side.



fig.15

Two paths depart from this terrace; one runs at the elevation of the town edge buildings and is part of the continuous system of alternative transportation. The other one is instead exclusively pedestrian; it goes down on a gentle slope to the bottom of the valley to a little square at the base of the rock wall. An amphitheater of grass and stone laid on the natural slope defines a space which frames dramatically the verticality of the rock which becomes itself the scenic backdrop of the theater.



fig.16

Natural elements will be highlighted with compatible forms of performances. The singularity of the site offers the possibility of integrating forms of land-art, temporary exhibits, ephemeral installations of contemporary art.

Then the path enters in a narrower valley where the design suggests locating elements which belong to the history of the quarry, the big metallic stone saws, revisited almost as art pieces.



fig.17



fig.18

Newer working saws have replaced in the surroundings the old ones, which are now at risk to be scrapped, causing the loss of significant industrial archeology artifacts. With small modifications the characteristic old saws will be transformed into catwalks from which it would be possible to observe the rock wall from close, and at the same time, to have the views of the town with its monuments, and a glimpse of the distant landscape.



fig. 19

Then the path goes up again and a short connection leads to the next quarry.

The second quarry area is currently completely separated from the urban fabric and visually in decay. The lack of awareness of the quarry system has made possible that, piece by piece, the space of this quarry has become hidden by a curtain of careless buildings. The main goal of the design is to integrate it visually and functionally with the rest of the town and the other quarries. Possible entrance points from the town are identified. For some of them appropriation by the city will be necessary, since these will be key to integrate this part with the urban fabric and to make it more accessible from the town.

A path takes to the highest part of the site, place of a proposed Mediterranean garden rich of scent, planted with local traditional species, pomegranate, citrus, jasmine, once present in every town's courtyard and now disappearing from the urban environment. From the heights of the garden the only remaining quarry activity below could be observed. The path connects to other paths towards the countryside, and then to the rest of the system.



fig.20

In the lower area the design proposes the naturalization of the Porcaro creek where in the past it had been forced into an artificial channel. The Porcaro, and other creeks where possible, will be returned to the natural flowing alignment that a creek in that condition would normally have, with meanders and vegetated river banks. The naturalized creeks will then connect with the naturalized Ippari river. This design action, beside providing high ecological service, will return to clarity the perception of the natural system of the local rivers and their connections with the urban layers, adding an important piece to the imageability of the town.

The third quarry area is an important connection link of the park system. Inside it there are very significant landscape elements, two Ippari River tributaries, stretches of rock walls in continuity with the quarry walls but currently not easily perceivable, and ledges with panoramic overlooks towards the town. This is also the connecting point between one of the roads entering town and the continuous park system.

At this entrance a shady terrace is placed to offer panoramic views over the countryside and a terraced slope makes possible a connection with the adjacent creek. A path, part of the path linking the entire system, climbs to another terrace from which an exceptional panorama of the town and the countryside could be seen. Following more quarry walls the space opens on the valley of another tributary. The design proposes the naturalization of this creek with the flowing alignment it used to have and which could still be recognized from several sign on the site. With careful grading of the floodplain, retention basins can be created, which in dry times will be rocks and grass bottom ovals with an almost sculptural image, while during storms will function to contain water to slow down peaks of a possible high flow. The restoration design will mark the water elements at their intersection with the town, at the points where in the past they were buried and forgotten, to highlight now the perception of their routes, fig. 21.



fig. 21

Within town linear landscapes are created which make connections between the opposite sides of the greenbelt, between the two histories of the river and of the hills. In their route they grab and display other place's memories. Some will daylight buried creeks, reestablishing the original proximity of landscape and built features, a condition that urban congestion had disregarded. Some, where the daylighting of the creeks may be impractical given the current conditions, will reveal them as suggestions in a variety of design features. Other linear landscape will design connections between historical and cultural key places.

Conclusion, a language of continuity

The design brings new spaces in and around town, yet the framework is not of addition, of a juxtaposed image, as it could be proposed in a different context.

The design here restrains itself from a globalized language to adhere to this terrain and these traces, in a framework of disclosure of the continuity of the place through visual suggestions capable of weaving layers of memory to become present.