



Book of Proceedings



7th ISUFitaly International Conference | Naples, 19-21 February 2026

CITY RENEWAL AND URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY

The morphological values of city traces



ISUFItaly
International Seminar on Urban Form
Italian Network

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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS



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Kos. Composing with the Ancient

Recomposition of Order and Re-signification of Space

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Conference theme: Urban design for urban archaeology. Urban archaeology and public space

Abstract. The project "Kos. Composing with the Ancient", developed in 2018 at the Polytechnic University of Bari, explores the relationship between the ancient and contemporary city within the stratified contexts of the Mediterranean, taking the island of Kos as an emblematic case study. Its aim is to systematise the various archaeological layers through a critical recomposition of the urban landscape, capable of establishing a dialogue between memory and design. The research adopts a dual approach: on the one hand, photography and *flânerie* are used to investigate the perceptual and spatial dimension; on the other, a paratactic decomposition of urban components is employed to understand the city's compositional matrix. The architectural project is conceived as an act of spatial regeneration and re-signification, in which the past becomes both material for design and an opportunity to redefine collective identity. In this perspective, the intervention on the ancient agora of Kos does not seek to reconstruct the lost architectural order but to critically evoke it through a new contemporary spatiality. The design action, limited to a few controlled demolitions, reconnects into a single urban system the central acropolis, the gymnasium – palaestra complex, and the agora, thereby restoring legibility to the ancient fabric. The new agora is articulated through three elements: the eastern stoa is reinterpreted as a secret garden, the western retaining wall as a reliquarium, and the differences in level between excavation areas become a shaded passage – a symbolic threshold between temporal dimensions. Architecture thus emerges as an interpretative and identity-forming instrument, capable of linking signs, values, and images in a continuous dialogue between memory and contemporaneity.

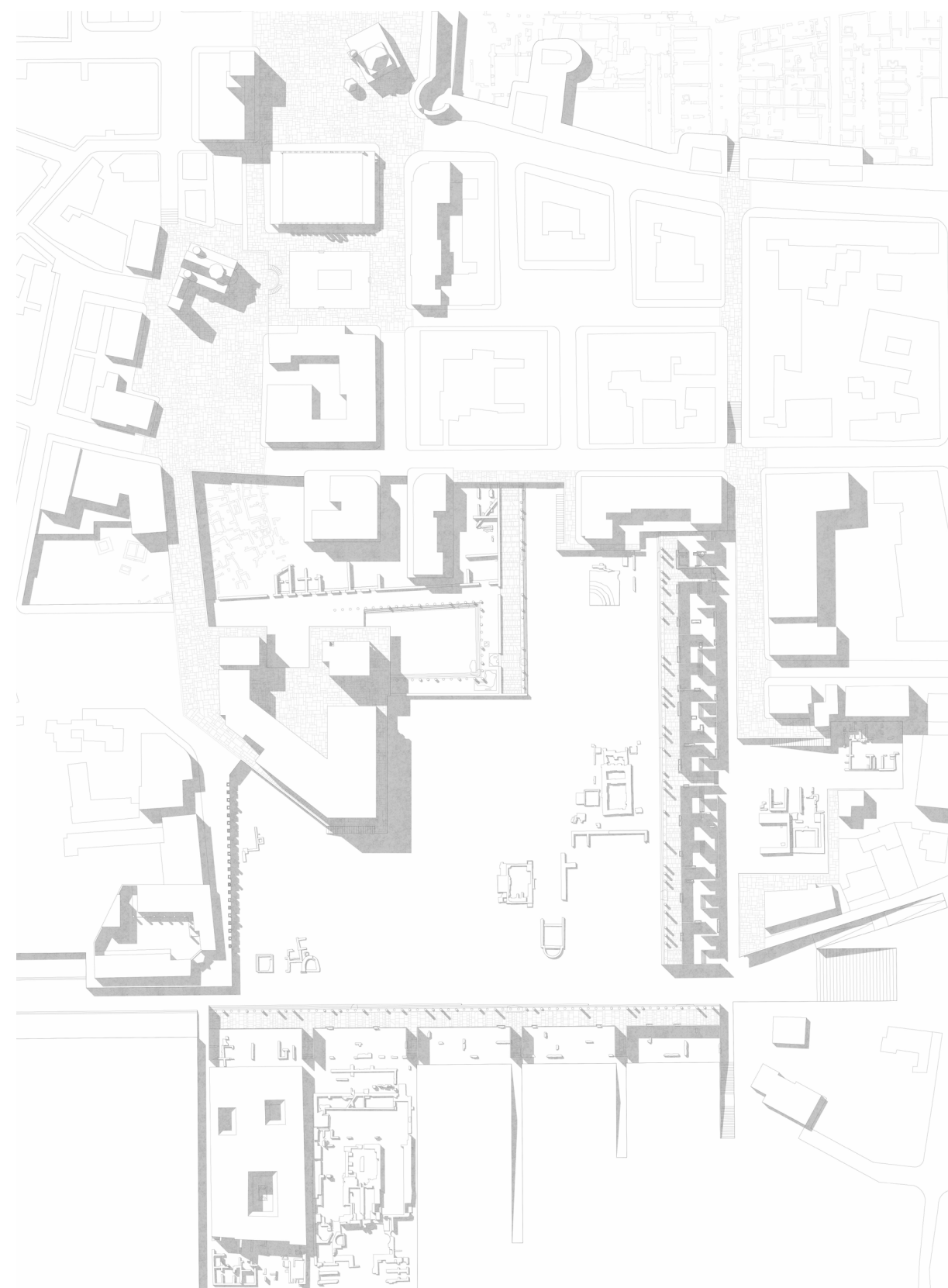


Figure 1. Project. Plan.

Introduction

A critically informed architectural culture is grounded in the capacity to understand the forces that shape form, meaning, and permanence. Design, in this sense, does not simply entail inserting a new object into the city, but interpreting a field of pre-existing historical, morphological, symbolic, and functional relations and transforming them into a spatial configuration capable of holding memory and contemporaneity together. Within this framework, the contemporary landscape cannot be reduced to a mere image of the present. It must instead be understood as a stratified construction, produced by long-term processes of superimposition, persistence, rupture, and transformation, in which antiquity is not a passive residue but an active component of urban structure. Stratification is therefore not simply the chronological accumulation of traces, but an epistemic and design condition requiring engagement with multiple temporal regimes and their spatial translation. Architectural design thus becomes both a form of critical requalification and an interpretive device: it does not merely preserve, but reactivates the urban and social significance of place. Mediterranean archaeological cities constitute an especially significant testing ground for this approach. Here, the coexistence of different temporalities cannot be reduced either to a strictly conservationist logic or to an exclusively transformative one. The issue is not only the protection of remains, but how to restore to them an urban and public role in the present without neutralizing the historical distance from which their value derives. When this mediation fails, antiquity is either musealized as a detached scene or absorbed by the functional indifference of the contemporary city, which acknowledges archaeological sites merely as constraints or interruptions within the urban continuum. The case of Kos makes this tension particularly evident. A historically stratified urban structure, a strong archaeological identity, and a selective modernization driven by tourism and infrastructure coexist here in unstable equilibrium. Despite planning instruments and a long-standing tradition of scholarship, recent transformations have often occurred without a coherent framework capable of reconnecting the ancient and the contemporary. The result has been a progressive loss of intelligibility in the relations among the city's principal historical systems – the port, the acropolis, the agora, and the main public complexes – together with an increasing separation between archaeological areas and everyday urban life. Against this background, Kos – Composing with the Ancient is advanced not as a merely formal proposal, but as a critical device through which to test a theoretical and operative hypothesis: that architectural design can act as an interpretive practice capable of reactivating spatial and narrative relations among urban stratifications, thereby reconstructing civic continuity. The aim is neither to reconstruct a lost order nor to monumentalize the ruin, but to render the historical system newly intelligible within the contemporary city. The central claim is that the quality of intervention in Mediterranean archaeological contexts does not depend on reconstructive fidelity, but on the capacity to critically recompose relations, transforming stratification into an active public infrastructure. In this perspective, archaeology and architecture are not separate disciplines: the former provides interpretive depth, while the latter translates that depth into spatial devices capable of reactivating meaning, accessibility, and civic agency within places of antiquity. The research stands within an established genealogy of studies, especially those reactivated since 1986 by the Italian Archaeological School at Athens under Antonino Di Vita. In this trajectory, the work of M. Livadiotti and G. Rocco has been decisive in reconstructing the knowledge framework and reorganizing the available evidence, while the topographical programme launched in 1990 redefined the archaeological plan of the city and the structuring role of the port and the acropolis.



Figure 2. Sequence of Plan. Contemporary Kos. Kos II sec. d.C.

Kos: Urban Topography, Developmental Phases, and the Genealogy of Studies

The urban development of Kos represents a significant case of historical superimposition, in which different civilizations, cultures, and settlement models were continuously brought into relation between East and West. Owing to its position in the Southern Sporades, near the Anatolian coast, the island functioned not merely as an insular entity but as a strategic node within Mediterranean trade routes, acquiring central economic and cultural importance from antiquity onward (Egidi, 1927). The scientific rediscovery of the ancient city occurred only in the late nineteenth century, through the work of Rudolf Herzog and Iacobos Zarraffis, whose research laid the foundations for the modern understanding of Hellenistic Kos (Egidi, 1927). The unified urban configuration of the city originated in 366/365 BCE with the synoecism, namely the political and territorial reunification of dispersed settlements into a new polis organized according to rational principles (Livadiotti and Rocco, 1996; Baldini and Livadiotti, 2015; Calì, 2012). Planned according to Hippodamian criteria, the city was laid out on a rigorous orthogonal grid of major plateiai and secondary stenopoi, enclosed within a wall approximately three kilometres long (Morricone 1950; Livadiotti and Rocco 1996, 96-102). At its centre stood the agora, one of the largest in the ancient world, functioning as the monumental hinge between harbour and inner city and in symbolic relation to the sanctuary of Asclepius (Livadiotti and Rocco, 2011). Later transformations, especially after the earthquake of 198 BCE, reflect the city's prosperity and monumental development (Rocco, 2013). Under Roman rule, Kos retained the status of *civitas libera et immunis*, preserving

substantial institutional and monumental continuity, even as bath complexes, an odeion, and hydraulic infrastructures redefined parts of the urban fabric (Vallarino, 2008; Livadiotti and Rocco, 1996). The Early Christian period marked the beginning of contraction and reuse, while the rule of the Knights of Saint John and later the Ottomans produced a more compact and defensive urban form, distant from the regularity of the classical layout (Baldini and Livadiotti, 2015; Egidi, 1927; Martinoli and Perotti, 1999). A new phase began with the Italian occupation in 1912. Under Mario Lago, urbanism became both a political and cultural instrument, while archaeological activity – promoted by the FERT and scholars such as Maiuri and Laurenzi – sought to isolate the classical vestiges from the Ottoman fabric (Laurenzi, 1931; Livadiotti and Rocco, 1996; Livadiotti and Rocco, 2011). The earthquake of 23 April 1933 then enabled the drafting of Rodolfo Petracco's 1934 master plan, which merged modernization and archaeological enhancement through a Mediterranean architectural language, integrating excavated areas into a new urban structure and green system (Livadiotti and Rocco, 1996; Livadiotti and Rocco, 2011; Martinoli and Perotti, 1999). The present urban structure still largely follows this framework, although it is now subject to the pressures of mass tourism and ongoing growth. Hospitality infrastructure has altered the relationship between the built environment and archaeological spaces, generating administrative and perceptual tensions. Yet the persistence of large archaeological voids and slow mobility routes continues to preserve strong social and urban value, making Kos a rare example of a city in which historical stratification still remains in dialogue with contemporary everyday life (Livadiotti, 2017; Martinoli and Perotti, 1999).

Interpreting the Archaeological City: A Theoretical Framework

To assume the archaeological city as an object of design requires an epistemological shift: from the artifact understood as an autonomous entity to the palimpsest conceived as a relational structure. From this perspective, archaeological evidence does not coincide with a set of emergences to be preserved in isolation, but with a stratified configuration of traces, voids, thresholds, permanences, and discontinuities extending across the entire urban and territorial field (Caliò, 2012; Livadiotti and Rocco, 2008). It follows that the form of the ancient city can neither be understood nor transmitted through the juxtaposition of fragments, but only through a critical reconstruction of the morphological and symbolic relationships that once sustained its coherence (Lynch, 1964; Livadiotti and Rocco, 1996). Within this framework, archaeological sites may be read as lieux de mémoire in Pierre Nora's sense: places where memory has crystallized not because living tradition preserved them spontaneously, but because a collective will has invested them with meaning (Nora 1984). The site is therefore not a neutral archive of the past, but an active node of identity negotiation, in which material stratification intersects with layered meanings attributed over time. A decisive operational consequence follows: design is not called upon to restore an original order, but to interpret stratification as an active condition of the present. Intervention in archaeological contexts is therefore not legitimized as mimetic restitution, nor as the museographic neutralization of the ruin; rather, it is configured as an interpretive practice capable of reactivating interrupted spatial links, rendering temporal differences legible, and producing new regimes of public accessibility and traversal (Schnapp, 2020). The past is thus not approached as an image to be replicated, but as critical material for contemporary composition (Grassi, 1993 and Linazasoro, 2015). If, as Nora argues, the lieu de mémoire emerges when the milieu de mémoire disappears, design cannot compensate for that loss through simulation; it must instead work through it critically, transforming discontinuity into a condition of meaning (Nora, 1984).

Within this horizon, conservation moves beyond an exclusively protective definition and is redefined as the projective care of the meaning of place, that is, of the relationship between trace and use. This requires a precise ethical and compositional stance: restraint of authorial gesture, rejection of formal spectacularization, control of the figurative density of intervention, and recognition of the lacuna not as a deficit to be filled but as a form of knowledge in itself (Dezzi Bardeschi, in Ranellucci, 2009). Architecture thus operates through selective subtraction, tension, and re-signification, avoiding both iconic arbitrariness and false historicist continuity (Moccia, 2012 and Linazasoro, 2015). The opposite risk – identified by Nora in the commemorative drift of lieux de mémoire – is museification: the place ceases to be a living space and becomes an identity fetish rather than a critical device for working through the past (Nora, 1984). The effectiveness of intervention must therefore be measured by its capacity to construct conditions of legibility without saturating the site, while keeping explicit both the distance and the co-belonging of heterogeneous historical times (Hartog, 2022). The theoretical focus consequently shifts from the archaeological enclosure to stratified public space. When heritage is separated from urban life, it tends to become either didactic scenography or a specialist enclave; when conceived as cultural infrastructure, it can once again operate as a civic device, that is, as a place of collective orientation, interpretive conflict, and shared production of meaning (Capuano, 2014 and Faro Convention, 2005). In this perspective, the very notion of lieu de mémoire should not be understood as static, but as a field of tension: a site of memory is not simply what has been preserved, but what a community continues to recognize as its own through practices of use, civic rituals, and shared narratives. Hence the need to read the archaeological area not as a frozen form of the past, but as a field of mediation among memory, practices of use, and contemporary design (Livadiotti and Rocco, 2008; Schnapp, 2020). The perceptual and narrative dimension is therefore not secondary, but structural to the method. The stratified city becomes intelligible not only through typological and morphological analysis, but also through situated devices of observation – walking, framing, sequencing, montage – which critically recompose the relationship between physical form and urban imaginary (Lynch, 1964 and Grassi, 1993). Design interpretation is thus both material and symbolic: it organizes spaces while recalibrating images, values, and modes of collective recognition of place (Norberg-Schulz, 1980/2023). It is within this experiential dimension that the vitality of the lieu de mémoire can be measured: not in the physical integrity of remains, but in their capacity to orient the collective imagination and to produce, through the body and movement in space, an active experience of historical time (Nora, 1984; Lynch, 1964). At this point, the relationship between archaeology and architecture assumes decisive importance. The two disciplines cannot be conceived as separate phases in a linear process in which the former produces data and the latter merely gives them form. In stratified contexts, they operate in complementarity: archaeology reconstructs historical sequences, topographical structures, permanences, and discontinuities; architecture translates this interpretive depth into spatial configurations capable of reactivating accessibility, orientation, and collective use. Such complementarity is not a mere juxtaposition of competencies, but an epistemological and operative condition of the project itself. In this respect, the positions advanced by Manacorda provide a crucial theoretical reference, insofar as they insist on the need to remove the archaeological site from the logic of the self-referential enclave and to return it to the field of the city and its social practices. The point is not to attenuate the distance between past and present, but to make that distance operative within urban space, so that temporal difference becomes a principle of design rather than an obstacle to transformation. A central thesis follows: in Mediterranean contexts of high historical density, the quality of



Figure 3. Photo. Archaeological area "walled city".

intervention does not depend on reconstructive fidelity, but on the capacity to establish a new pact of legibility between ancient traces and present urban life. Archaeological design, in this sense, is both a form of spatial knowledge and a political practice of public space: it does not merely conserve, but interprets; it does not merely exhibit, but reactivates; it does not monumentalize the past, but renders its legacy productive in present time (Hartog, 2022; Schnapp, 2020; Linazasoro, 2015).

Finally, this approach may be further specified through a semiotic perspective. To restore memory does not mean reconstructing a lost totality, but reactivating an interrupted process of signification through a system of signs capable of making temporal depth legible in the present. In this sense, the memory of antiquity does not refer to a figurative repertoire to be reproduced, but to an open text, in the Ecoian sense, in which traces continue to generate meaning through practices of use, paths, thresholds, and spatial relations. Temporal distance inevitably produces a gap between the original meanings of the artifact and those it can convey today; such a gap must be neither filled by mimetic restitution nor neutralized through museographic reduction. On the contrary, the task of contemporary design is to reopen the semiotic chain, establishing new relations between trace and urban life so that the architectural image may continue to produce dynamic and deferred meanings. Heritage, from this perspective, is not a collection of objects to be fixed once and for all, but a field of interpretations continually renewed through collective experience.

Project Proposal: Reconstructing Urban Legibility in Kos

The work presented here for Kos constitutes the design outcome of a research trajectory developed within the Department of Architecture at the Polytechnic University of Bari. It has been

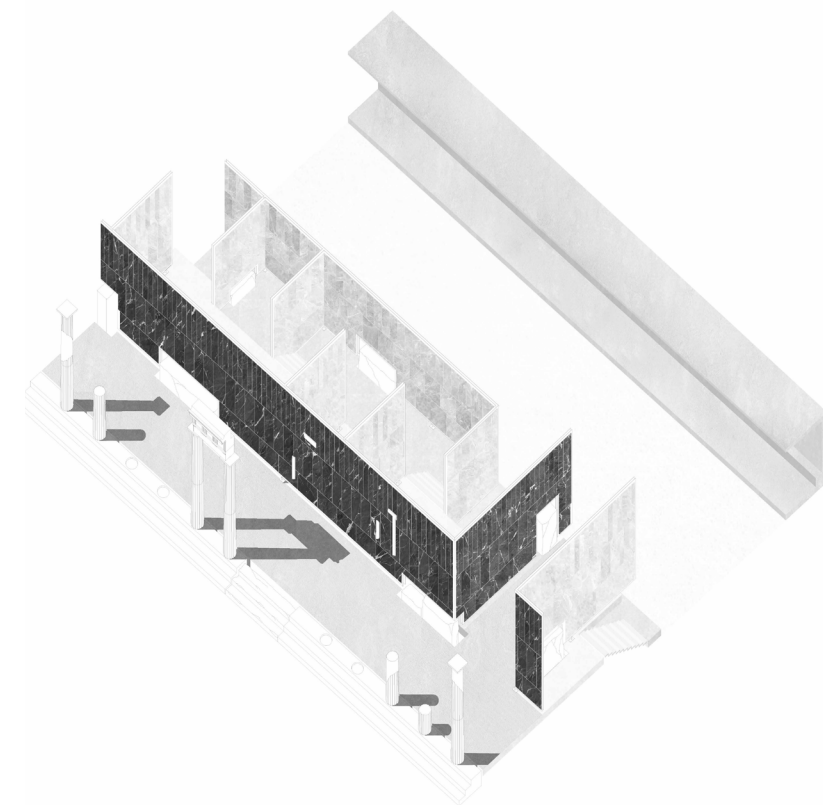


Figure 4. Axonometrical view of the project. Stone garden.

constructed through a critical re-reading of a genealogy of projects and theoretical-operative positions extending from emblematic twentieth-century cases – such as Giorgio Grassi's theatre projects – to major Roman competition experiences, including the Prix de Rome competition for the Imperial Fora and the competition for the arrangement of the Mausoleum of Augustus. This comparative trajectory functions not as a mere repertoire of references, but as a methodological grammar through which intervention in places of antiquity may be understood as a practice of urban composition, where new form is legitimized not through autonomy, but through its capacity to engage with the *longue durée* of the city and with the legibility of public space. In Kos, the possibility of re-establishing contact between the contemporary city and its Greek and Roman antecedent is enabled by the presence of the archaeological ruin, whose centrality the intervention cannot ignore. The proposal is grounded in the assumption that the archaeological city should be read as a relational palimpsest; consequently, the project cannot be limited either to the passive conservation of remains or to the production of a new autonomous order. Rather, it works through the critical reconstruction of interrupted spatial relations, treating the ruin as an active design device. The issue is not to complete the ancient, but to render its urban structure legible once again within the contemporary city, without erasing the historical distance preserved by the ruin. The ruin must therefore be understood not as the end of architecture, but as the evidence that architecture endures through its own ruination. As Giambattista Piranesi's work suggests, the ruin carries an identity-bearing value: architecture cannot be reduced to pure construction or pure *technè*, because the ruin

also represents *mémoire*, memory of Order, though in fragmentary form, as an unfinished form placed in relation to the loss of Order. Understood in these terms, the ruin is not an object to be stabilized in separation, but a critical presence that renders visible the relation between permanence and loss. It makes possible a contemporary pact of meaning while avoiding two recurring drifts in archaeological contexts: totalizing philological reconstruction and neutral musealization. The intervention instead works with the ruin, assumes its epistemic limits, amplifies its narrative capacity, and reinserts it within an urban system. This condition proves particularly fertile in Kos. The city constitutes one of the most significant examples of an archaeological city, owing to the multiplicity of remains and excavations that still coexist within the modern city, not least as a consequence of the Italian investigations. Yet this richness of knowledge and material evidence coexists with a structural difficulty of perception and use. The contemporary configuration of the settlement no longer corresponds to the ancient one, in which a large inlet on the northern headland of the island formed the fulcrum of the principal systems of urban voids – the agora, the fish market, the gymnasium, the palaestra, and the stadium – separated from one another by the slight rise on which part of the settlement stood. The harbour established a radial order in relation to these spaces and to the urban fabric which, moving away from the sea, followed the contour lines through a grid of elongated residential *insulae* (approximately 31 × 94 m). The present configuration, by contrast, obscures these relations and weakens the intelligibility of the historical urban matrix. The fragmented character in which the excavations now present themselves produces a perceptual framework inadequate to restituting the ancient urban system in its entirety. Despite an extensive historical and archaeological body of knowledge, the present condition of the archaeological areas does not allow a full appreciation of the complexity and extent of the ancient civic spaces. In particular, the study area, once occupied by the city agora, is now divided into sectors of different size, chronology, and configuration which, also because of the difference in level between the ancient and contemporary city, fail to convey the wholeness of the original space. The result is a structural contradiction: in the face of advanced topographical and archaeological knowledge, spatial experience returns only a partial image. The proposal arises precisely in order to reduce this gap between historical-topographical knowledge and urban legibility. The design strategy is founded on recognizing the value and meaning that these parts of the city once possessed as a system – that is, as a set of topographical and perceptual relations before being understood as a sum of individual artifacts. Action on the site is therefore conceived not as the redevelopment of an archaeological void, but as the recomposition of a broken urban structure. The project takes the agora as the primary node of this recomposition and works to reconnect the central rise and the great structures of public voids that once organized the ancient layout, countering the fragmentation produced by heterogeneous fabrics and the episodic reading of the excavations. Hence the use of limited and controlled demolitions of buildings lacking urban value, not as an abstract act of liberation, but as an instrument for reopening interrupted continuities, re-establishing fronts, restoring visual depth, and reconstructing minimum conditions of spatial recognition. The generating principle of the intervention consists in reconstructing the agoral system starting from its founding corner, identified at the intersection of the East Stoa, the South Stoa, and the eastern edge of the east – west processional route. This point is not taken as a simple geometric reference, but as a tensional device capable of reorganizing the entire precinct: it is here that the project concentrates decisions of orientation, measure, and hierarchy, assuming the corner as the node from which to derive both the legibility of the agoral enclosure and the re-stitching of its relations with the surrounding permanences. The agora is thus treated as an urban space to be reconstructed in its spatial logic rather than as

an excavation surface to be delimited. Within this framework, the archaeological fragment is not treated as a relic to be contemplated, but as generative material. The search for Greek-Roman *mémoire* centres on the archaeological remnant as an architectural fragment capable of evoking the ancient Order rather than re-establishing or replicating it. Anastylis constitutes one of the instruments through which this position takes concrete form: where the consistency of the findings allows it, the reintegration of ancient elements does not aim at completeness, but at restoring relations of scale and measure weakened by fragmentation. Where the evidence is lacunary, the intervention avoids simulating the lost Order and instead introduces new architectures capable of evoking the proportions, alignments, and spatial hierarchies of the original layout without reiterating it. The operative logic is one of critical consonance rather than imitation. Modern refunctionalization is thus understood as an instrument for reconstituting ancient spatiality. In the case of the eastern stoa, the labyrinth-garden is not an autonomous episode, but an operative figure working on the experiential density of movement and on the recomposition of internal relations among court, portico, and routes. The new volume is called upon to render historically documented relations intelligible once again: between the peristyle and the pteron of the eastern portico; between the Roman north – south *cardo* and the front of the stoa; and between the agora court and the colonnaded façade as the civic and visual limit of public space. Material and chromatic hierarchies are likewise assumed as elements in the construction of legibility: the distinction between the rear wall in local black stone (*sideropetra*) and the colonnade – replaced in the imperial period by a white marble peristyle – is treated as a spatial grammar to be rendered perceptible at a contemporary scale without becoming mere quotation. The difference in level between the archaeological city and the contemporary city is not neutralized, but assumed as a structural theme of the project. The reconnection between levels – with the modern city lying approximately between +2 m and +4 m – is conceived as a sequence of thresholds capable of transforming the altimetric gap into urban experience. Ramps and stairways construct a system of entrances and viewpoints that reorient the perception of the area, reinstating the relationship between the ancient routes and the contemporary city. The principal devices of descent and ascent are located along the ancient east – west *plateia* and in relation to the course of the ancient *cardo* – almost coincident with today's road toward the Walled City – so that entry into the excavation coincides with entry into a legible urban structure. Within this framework, the archaeological fragment is not treated as a relic to be contemplated, but as generative material. The remnant is understood as an architectural fragment capable of evoking the ancient Order rather than re-establishing it. Anastylis, where possible, serves not to produce completeness, but to restore relations of scale and measure weakened by fragmentation. Where the record is lacunary, the project avoids simulation and introduces new architectures able to evoke proportions and spatial hierarchies without imitation. Modern refunctionalization is thus understood as an instrument for reconstituting ancient spatiality. In the eastern stoa, the labyrinth-garden works on movement and on the recomposition of relations among court, portico, and routes. The new volume restores the legibility of documented spatial relations, while material distinctions – such as that between local black stone (*sideropetra*) and the later white marble peristyle – are treated as elements of spatial order rather than quotation.

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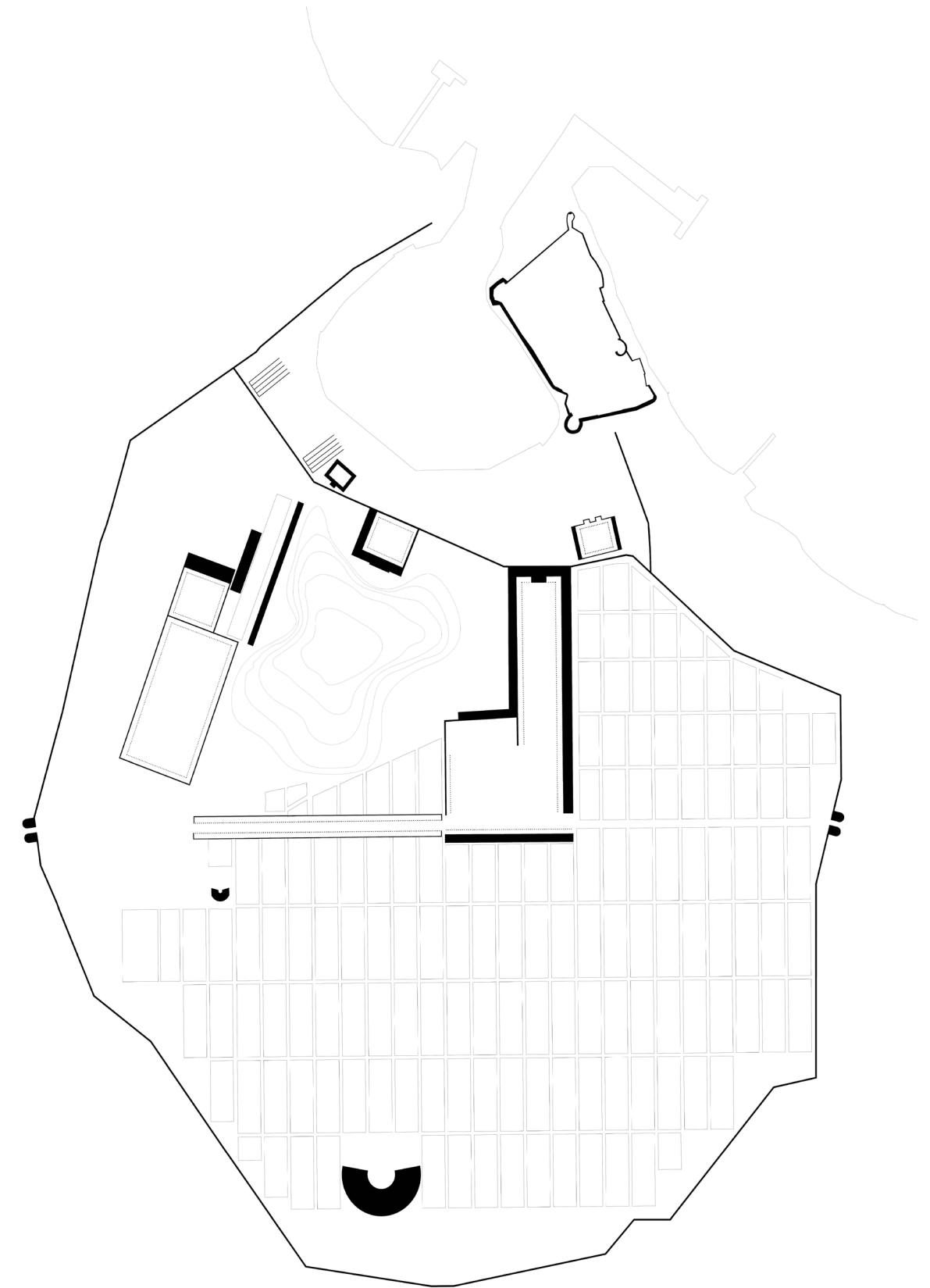


Figure 5. Ideogram. Settlement patterns.

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