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From Hypogeum to Empyrean. Architecture of the Palimpsest and Phenomenology of Light on the Via Appia

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Abstract

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The project interprets the archaeological heritage of the Via Appia Antica, in the suburban area of Rome, as a dynamic cultural landscape and an active palimpsest. By intervening in the area adjacent to the hypogea of the Hunters and of Vibia, the objective is to redefine the hypogeal identity of the territory, inverting it into a spatial experience of ascension towards the light, inspired by Dante's Paradiso. The methodology combines a morpho-typological investigation of the historical fabric with the architectural translation of the spiritual journey, employing pure volumes that reject stylistic mimesis. The results materialize in a path structured in three lots: six introductory pavilions, a tower as a metaphor for the Seventh Heaven, and a swirling ramp culminating in the Empyrean.

In conclusion, the contemporary insertion, engaging in a dialectical dialogue with history, generates a new phenomenology of the landscape, transforming stratified memory into a lived and identity-defining space.

Keywords: Palimpsest; Phenomenology; Ascension; Appia; Sequence.

1. Introduction

Contemporary debate on architectural intervention within archaeological landscapes increasingly questions how new architecture can coexist with historically stratified contexts without resorting either to stylistic imitation or to museographic neutrality (Brandi, 1963; Cervesato et al., 2024; Choay, 1992). In this context, the notion of territory as a palimpsest—where multiple temporal layers overlap and continuously redefine spatial identity—becomes fundamental for interpreting complex heritage sites (Corboz, 1983, 1985; Gregotti, 1966; Machado, 1976). The challenge is no longer limited to conservation alone, but concerns the possibility of generating new spatial narratives capable of activating memory through contemporary architectural languages.

The Via Appia Antica, one of the most important infrastructural and cultural systems of the ancient Roman world, represents an emblematic case of this condition. Inaugurated in 312 BCE by the censor Appius Claudius Caecus, it originally connected Rome to Capua, but was later extended toward southern Italy, becoming the principal axis linking Central and Southern Italy. Today, the Via Appia preserves an extraordinary concentration of archaeological remains, funerary monuments, catacombs, and hypogeal complexes that testify to centuries of religious, social, and spatial transformations (Ferdani et al., 2024; MacDonald, 1986; Spera, 2003). In particular, the suburban sector investigated in this research—corresponding to the area surrounding the Hypogeum of the Hunters and the Hypogeum of Vibia—reveals a dense network of subterranean funerary architectures associated with early Christian burial practices and Roman necropolises. Traditionally, these spaces evoke an imaginary associated with death, darkness, and descent into the subterranean realm, often tied to the poetics of enclosed and buried spaces (Bachelard, 1958/1994). This research proposes a radical reinterpretation of this paradigm through the architectural translation of an opposite journey: not a descent into the underworld, but an ascent toward light. The project *“From the Hypogeum to the Empyrean: Architecture of the Palimpsest and the Phenomenology of Light along the Via Appia”* investigates how architecture can transform an archaeological funerary landscape into a spatial instrument of physical and spiritual elevation.

The project's theoretical framework is deeply connected to Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, particularly the *Paradiso* (Alighieri, ca. 1321/1972). Dante's celestial journey is interpreted not only as a literary and theological narrative, but also as a sequence of spatial, atmospheric, and phenomenological conditions capable of generating architectural forms. Whereas the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* are characterized by materially defined and geometrically recognizable environments, the *Paradiso* progressively dissolves matter into light, movement, and perception. This transition became the conceptual foundation for the architectural experimentation developed within the project.

The research therefore investigates the following questions: how can contemporary architecture establish a meaningful dialogue with a deeply stratified archaeological landscape? How can literary and phenomenological references be translated into spatial experience? And how can light become an architectural material capable of redefining the perception of memory and heritage?

Through a system of interconnected architectural interventions, the project proposes an experiential path structured around the symbolic ascent through Dante's celestial spheres. This narrative shift explicitly challenges the conventional reading of archaeological sites as static repositories of the past, redefining them as dynamic fields of contemporary spatial action where the visitor is not merely an observer of ruins, but an active participant in an ascending phenomenological journey.

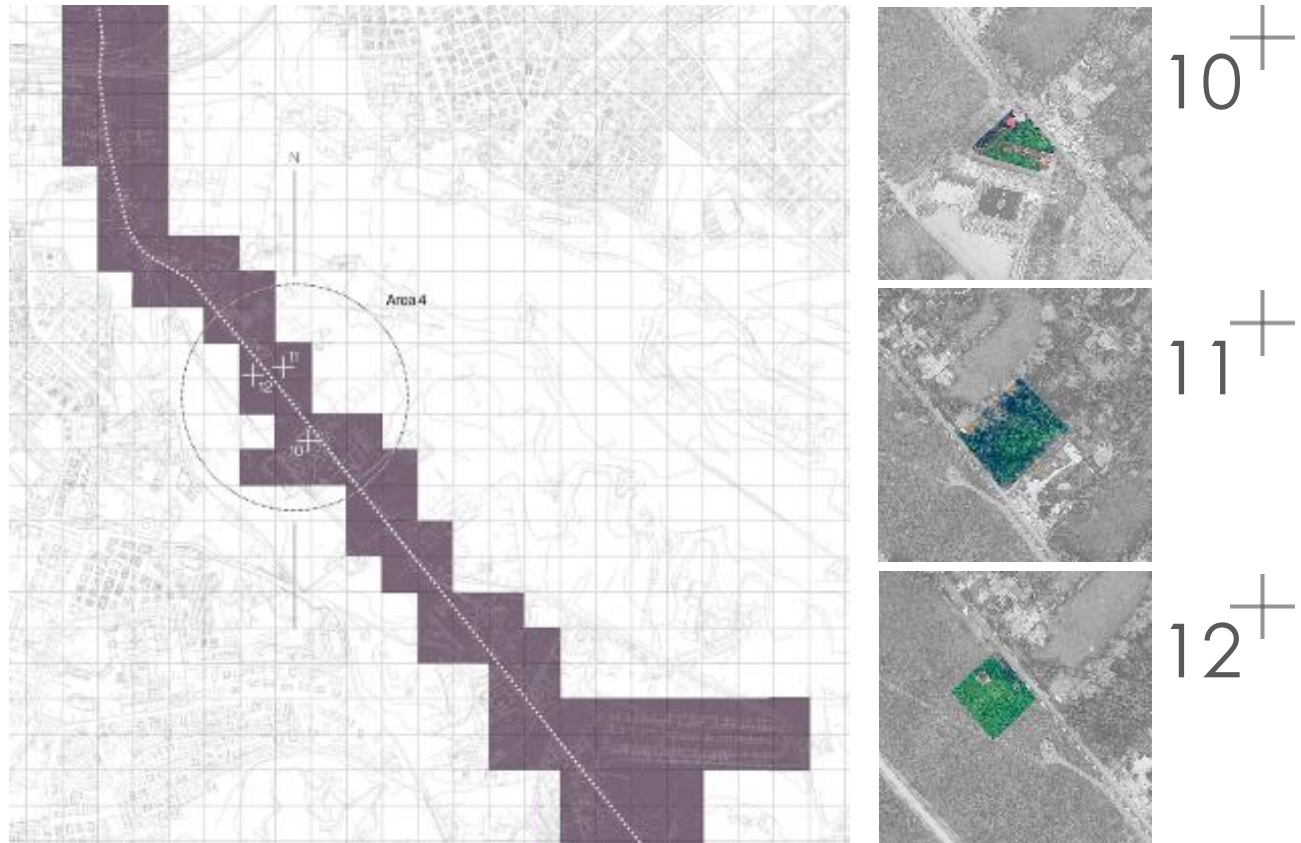


Figure 1. Territorial context, Via Appia Antica, Rome, Italy. Lots 10,11,12.

2. Materials and Methods

The research was developed within the framework of an intensive architectural design workshop held at the Department of Architecture and Industrial Design of the University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli. The methodological approach combined architectural design research, phenomenological investigation, and morpho-typological analysis in order to explore the relationship between contemporary architecture and archaeological heritage.

The intervention area is located along the Via Appia Antica in the suburban sector of Rome, within a landscape characterized by significant archaeological stratification. The site includes the Hypogeum of the Hunters, the Hypogeum of Vibia, and several funerary complexes and catacombs dating from the Roman and Early Christian periods. The area presents a strong coexistence between natural landscape, archaeological remains, and infrastructural traces, constituting an emblematic example of a territorial palimpsest.

The first phase of the research consisted of a territorial and historical analysis of the Via Appia system, focusing on the relationship between road infrastructure, funerary architecture, and the broader "genius loci" or landscape morphology (Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Sereni, 1961). Particular attention was devoted to the study of the hypogeal dimension and the spatial symbolism associated with funerary architecture in Roman and Early Christian culture. This preliminary investigation was not limited to historical mapping, but included a rigorous mapping of the existing environmental factors: the incidence of solar radiation throughout the seasons, the prevalent wind directions, and the acoustic characteristics of the site. Understanding the sensory baseline of the Via Appia was crucial before introducing any new architectural element. The mapping revealed a striking dichotomy: the ground level is dominated by the horizontal, heavy presence of stone and the horizontal vector of the ancient road, while the vertical axis remains completely open and undefined, offering a spatial void perfectly suited for an architecture of elevation.

The second phase concerned the development of a theoretical and visual framework based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, particularly the *Paradiso* (Alighieri, ca. 1321/1972). Literary references were analyzed not as narrative illustrations, but as generators of spatial atmospheres and perceptual conditions. The research integrated visual studies derived from Sandro Botticelli's illustrations of the *Inferno*, the celestial representations of Gustave Doré, and *Jacob's Ladder* by William Blake, together with J. M. W. Turner's investigations into light and color. These references contributed to defining a

phenomenology of light understood as the project's principal compositional and experiential element (Plummer, 2009; Zumthor, 2006). From a design perspective, the methodology adopted a process of abstraction aimed at translating literary and spiritual concepts into architectural form through pure geometries, controlled sequences, and spatial transitions (Gelvi, 2023; Purini, 2000). For instance, the structural rhythm of Dante's *terza rima*—the interlocking three-line rhyme scheme—was translated into the structural grid of the pavilions, establishing a mathematical proportion that governs the placement of pillars, the dimensions of the openings, and the modulation of the pathways. This rigorous geometric control prevents the architectural interpretation from becoming arbitrary, grounding the atmospheric design within a disciplined tectonic logic. The masterplan was organized into three interconnected intervention areas corresponding to the different stages of Dante's ascensional journey: the first six heavens, the seventh heaven of Saturn, and the three upper heavens culminating in the Empyrean. The compositional strategies privileged elementary forms and a minimal material vocabulary (Fathy, 1973; Rapoport, 1969; Rudofsky, 1964) in order to avoid stylistic imitation of the archaeological context. At the urban scale, the project sought continuity with the Late Antique landscape through geometries measured at ground level and controlled visual integration (Benevolo, 1994; Pagano & Guarniero, 1936). In elevation, however, the architectural language intentionally assumes a contemporary character through vertical tensions, abstract volumes, and immersive spatial devices. Particular attention was also devoted to the material and constructive strategy of the intervention, conceived as a system of temporary and reversible architectural installations. Given the archaeological sensitivity of the Via Appia site and the presence of significant subterranean remains, the project intentionally avoids invasive foundation systems or deep excavations that could compromise the historical substrata. The methodological constraint of "zero excavation" forced the design to explore alternative structural paradigms. The pavilions are conceived to rest lightly upon the earth through a system of adjustable micro-piles and widespread load-distribution platforms that adapt to the uneven topography of the ruins without piercing the archaeological strata. For this reason, the primary material adopted throughout the intervention is timber, chosen for its lightness, reversibility, and reduced environmental impact. The use of prefabricated timber structural systems allows the architectural elements to be assembled and eventually removed without permanently altering the existing landscape. Engineered timber products, such as Cross-Laminated Timber (CLT) panels and Glulam beams, were selected not only for their mechanical properties but also for their haptic qualities. Unlike the cold, hard surfaces of ancient basalt and concrete, wood introduces a tactile warmth and an organic resonance that softens the transition between the natural landscape and the architectural artifact. In specific structural and expressive components—particularly within the vertical circulation systems and light installations—steel elements were introduced to ensure structural stability and spatial continuity. This constructive approach reinforces the project's theoretical position: contemporary architecture operates as a temporary and respectful layer within the archaeological palimpsest, capable of coexisting with historical heritage without physically damaging or obscuring it.

The experiential dimension of the project was investigated through drawings, physical models, collages, renderings, and sectional studies, with particular attention devoted to the manipulation of natural light, tactile movement, and multisensory perception (Pallasmaa, 2005; Tavoletta, 2021). The architectural sequences were conceived as narrative devices capable of transforming the visitor's bodily experience into a progressive ascensional journey from darkness toward immateriality.

3. Results

The project translates its theoretical framework into an articulated architectural system composed of three interconnected interventions distributed across plots 10, 11, and 12 of the masterplan. Together, these interventions construct a progressive experiential path inspired by Dante's ascent through the Paradiso, transforming the archaeological landscape of the Via Appia into a phenomenological sequence structured around light, movement, and perception.

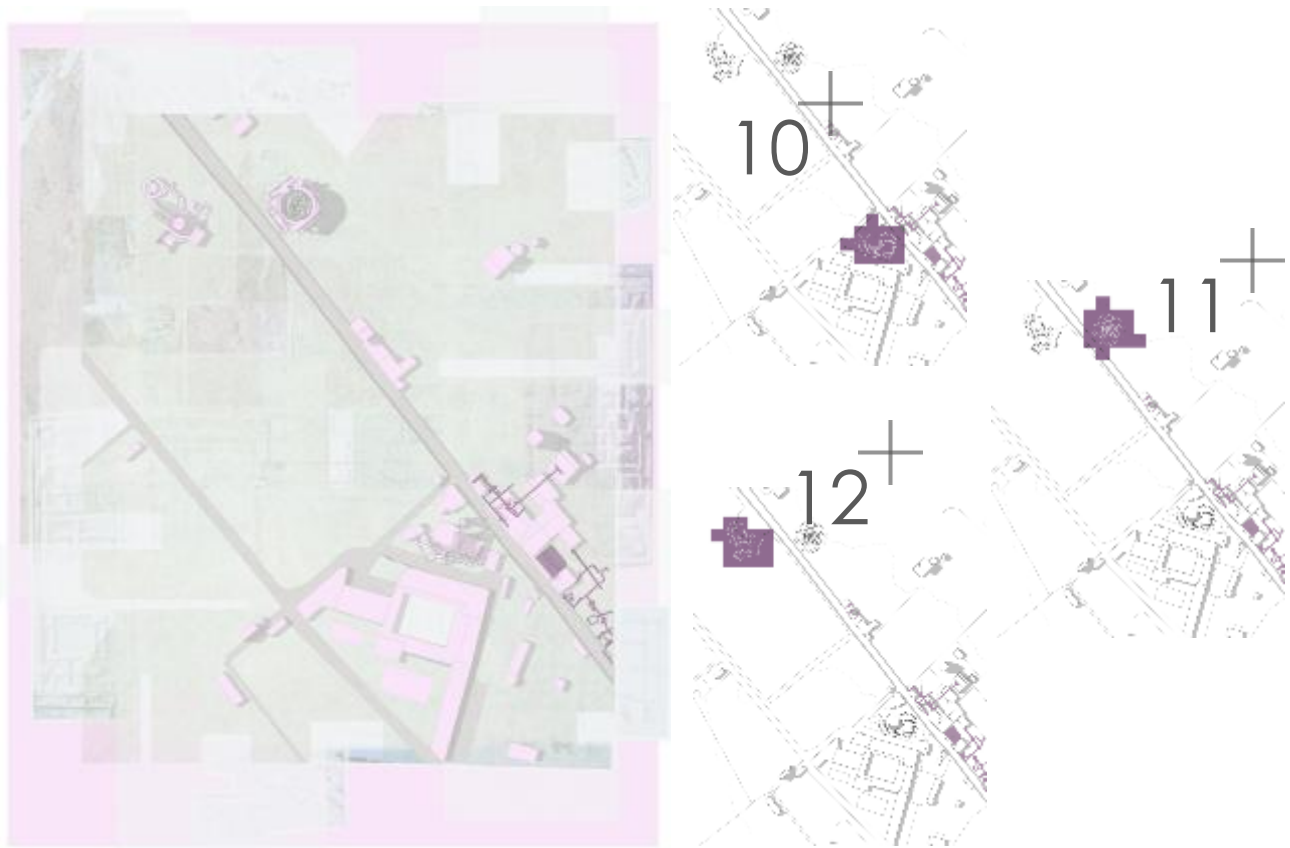


Figure 2. Project Masterplan; Keyplan lots 10,11,12.

The first intervention, located on plot 10, materializes the first six celestial spheres of Dante's *Paradiso* through a sequence of six pavilions corresponding to the Heavens of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, and Jupiter. Each pavilion is conceived as an autonomous spatial device, characterized by a specific atmospheric and perceptual condition. The project transforms the visitor's movement into an experience of gradual ascent, where architecture becomes a medium for sensory and symbolic immersion.

The Heaven of the Moon introduces the path through a trapezoidal mirrored corridor, where fragmented reflections evoke the instability and immateriality of Dante's souls. The architecture physically narrows, forcing the user into a highly compressed spatial condition. The ground plane here is intentionally left untreated, allowing the uneven terrain of the Appia to dictate a slow, deliberate pace. The interplay of mirrors erases the boundaries of the structural walls, creating a deliberate visual disorientation that marks the definitive detachment from the ordinary perception of the landscape. In the Heaven of Mercury, vibrating metallic surfaces and golden pillars generate a dynamic environment dominated by reflections and luminous reverberations. Wind-driven kinetic panels are integrated into the facade, translating the invisible atmospheric currents of the site into an audible and visual rhythm. The architecture here acts as a sensory amplifier, dissolving its mass into pure light and motion. The Heaven of Venus adopts a radiocentric spatial configuration that immerses the visitor in a swirling ascending movement. Curved timber walls envelop the user, while indirect, warm-toned sunlight bounces off the wooden surfaces, creating a profoundly intimate and protective atmosphere that directly contrasts with the vast exposure of the Roman Campagna outside. The Heaven of the Sun is defined by a rigorous geometric order centered on zenithal light and by a circular colonnade symbolizing divine wisdom. This pavilion functions as a vast sundial. A precise oculus in the roof structure projects a sharp beam of light onto the floor, constantly tracing the passage of time. The architecture here imposes absolute clarity; the geometric perfection of the circle offers a moment of intellectual pause and rational contemplation before the ascent continues. In contrast, the Heaven of Mars introduces a more static and vertical spatiality through a tower structure crossed by a luminous fissure recalling Dante's cross of light. The materiality here shifts to denser, darker timber treatments. The intense compression of the walls is violently interrupted by the cruciform skylight, which cuts through the heavy roof mass. This stark contrast between deep shadow and blinding light produces an aggressive, highly tectonic phenomenological experience. Finally, the Heaven of Jupiter culminates in an amphitheater where the distinction between spectator and performer dissolves into a collective spatial condition. The pavilion opens outward, visually reconnecting the visitor with the horizon line of the Via Appia. The stepped timber seating embraces the sky, finalizing the first sequence of the journey in a celebration of communal space and panoramic awareness.

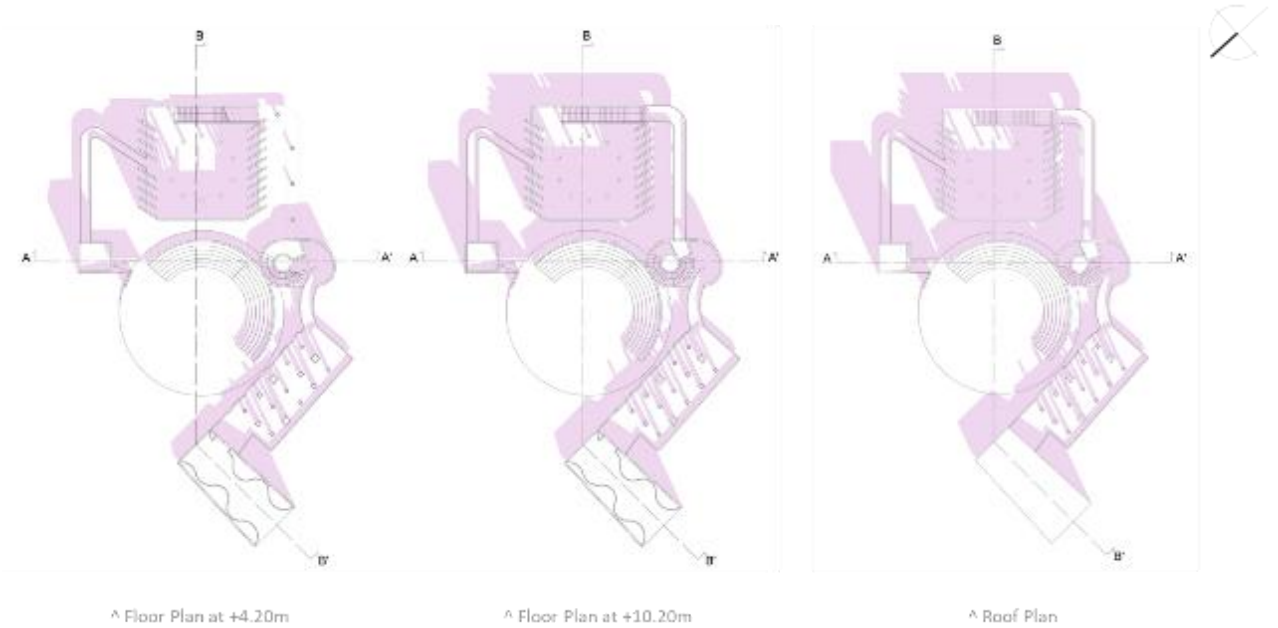


Figure 3. Dante's first six heavens. Project plans.



Figure 4. Dante's first six heavens. Sections.

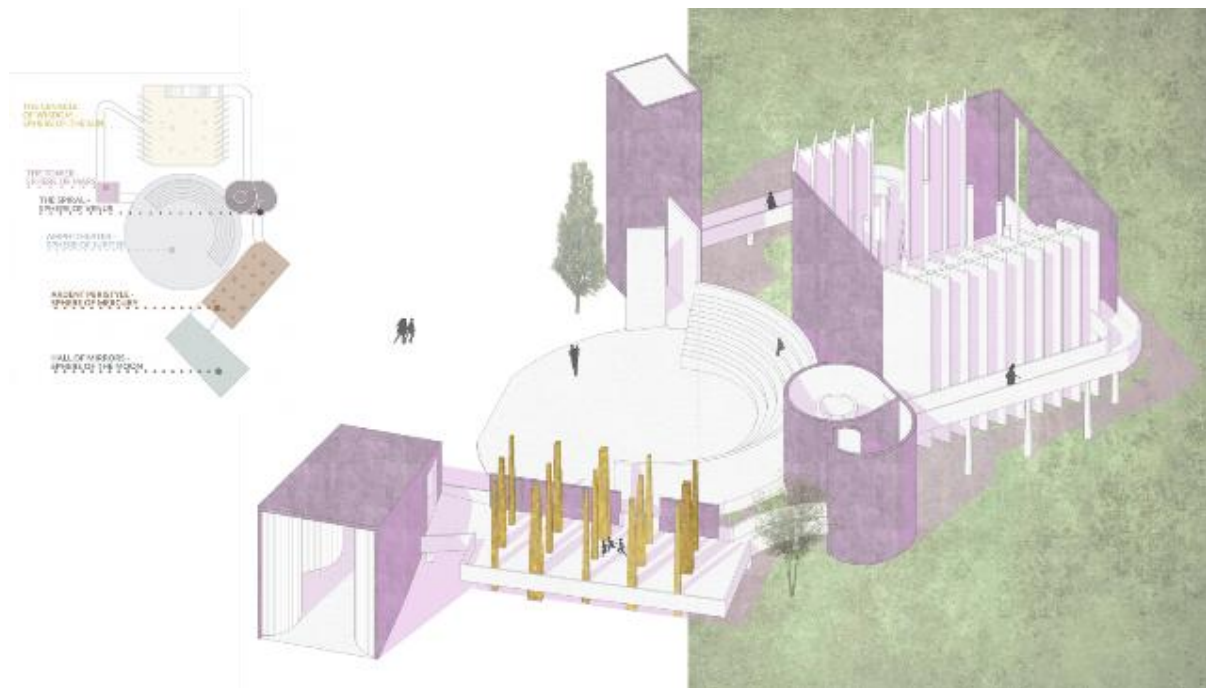


Figure 5. Dante's first six heavens. Functional Keyplan and Axonometric View.



Figure 6-7. Dante's first six heavens. Rendering.

The second intervention, corresponding to Plot 11, represents the Seventh Heaven of Saturn and marks a radical transition within the experiential sequence. Separated from the previous pavilions by the crossing of the ancient road, the tower establishes a condition of isolation and contemplative silence. From an architectural perspective, the project takes the form of a vertical ascensional machine composed of spiral ramps organized around a central golden installation inspired by Dante's "Golden Ladder." The continuous upward movement transforms the tower into a meditative path in which the visitor progressively detaches from the surrounding landscape, approaching a state of abstraction and introspection. As the user ascends the ramps, the acoustic environment changes drastically. The dense outer shell of the tower acts as an acoustic baffle, gradually silencing the ambient noise of the modern city and the wind of the Campagna. The physical effort of climbing the steep spiral forces a hyper-awareness of the body, while the visual focus is forced entirely inward toward the glowing central core. External vertical screens extend upward beyond the architectural envelope, visually projecting the structure toward infinity. These screens lack horizontal cross-bracing in their upper sections, allowing them to vibrate slightly in the wind and visually dissolve against the sky, blurring the boundary between the built artifact and the atmosphere.

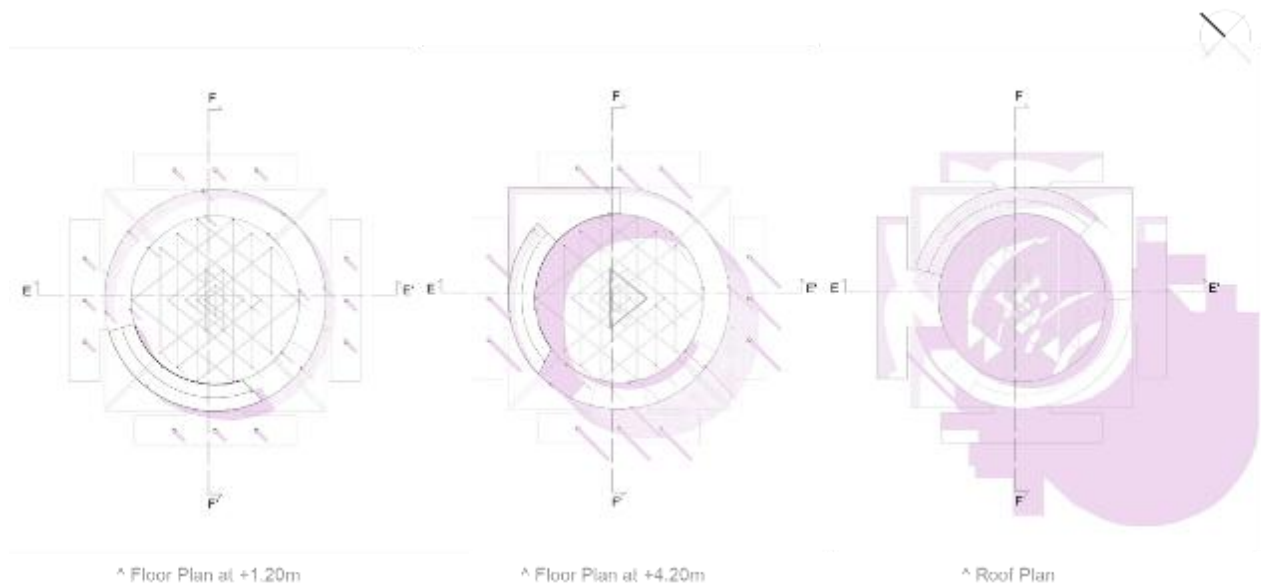


Figure 8. The Seventh Heaven of Saturn. Project plans.



Figure 9. The Seventh Heaven of Saturn. Section.

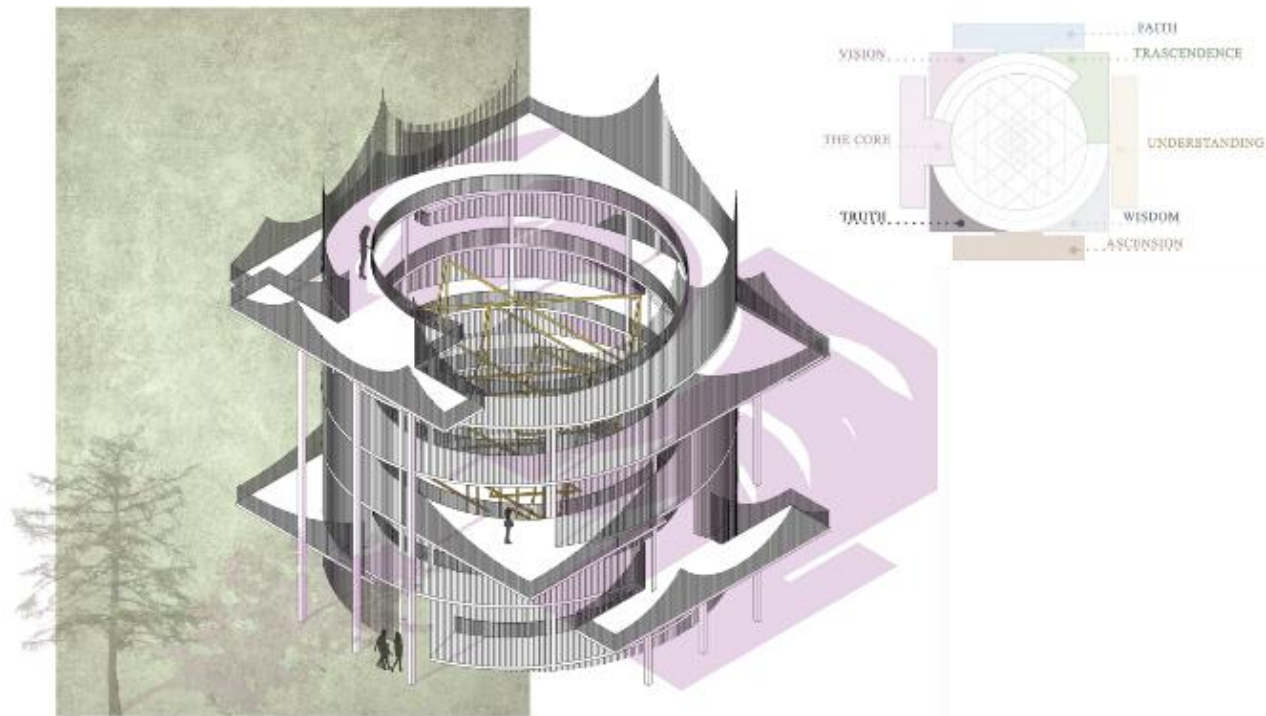


Figure 10. The Seventh Heaven of Saturn. Functional Keyplan and Axonometric View.



Figure 11-12. The Seventh Heaven of Saturn. Rendering.

The final intervention, located on Plot 12, culminates the ascensional narrative through the architectural interpretation of the three highest celestial spheres: the Fixed Stars, the Primum Mobile, and the Empeyrean. The path begins within a

dark and enclosed volume, perforated by zenithal openings that generate concentrated beams of light, simulating celestial constellations. This space operates as a massive *camera obscura*. The sudden deprivation of sweeping views forces the pupil to dilate, heightening sensitivity to the intricate patterns of light piercing the heavy envelope. The experience then evolves into a vortex-like ramp symbolizing the absolute motion of the Primum Mobile. The geometry of the ramp is mathematically derived from the Fibonacci sequence, creating a spatial acceleration that destabilizes the user's earthly balance and suggests an infinite, uncontainable velocity. Before reaching the final space, visitors pass through a dense forest of golden pilotis representing Dante's "river of light." This architectural filter acts as a physical threshold of friction. The closely spaced, highly polished columns force the visitor to navigate slowly, their own reflections fracturing across the golden surfaces, simulating the dissolution of the ego before the final revelation. The journey concludes within the Empyrean: an enclosure of pure geometric forms containing a suspended golden sphere illuminated by zenithal light, symbolizing divine unity, the Mystic Rose, and the ultimate dissolution of matter into light. The Empyrean is designed as an architecture of the void. The massive structural efforts required to suspend the golden sphere are entirely hidden from view, leaving the visitor in a space where gravity appears to have been defeated. The light flooding the space from the invisible zenithal source eradicates all shadows, resulting in a condition of total, overwhelming immateriality.

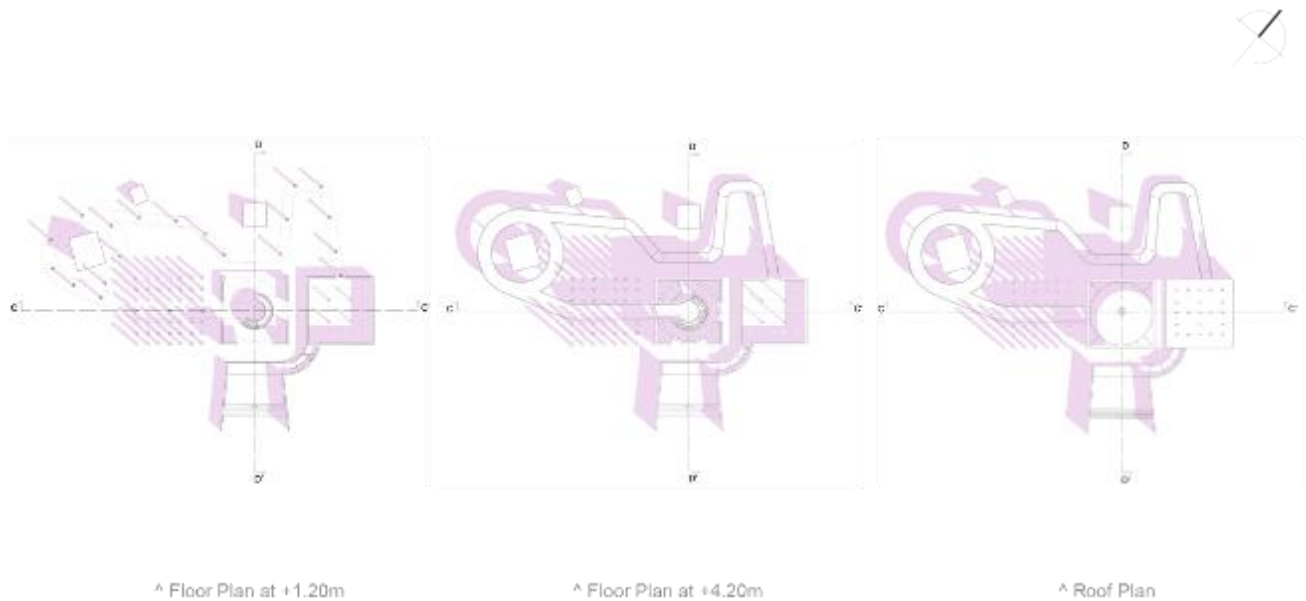


Figure 13. Dante's three Highest Heavens. Project plans.



Figure 14. Dante's three Highest Heavens. Sections.

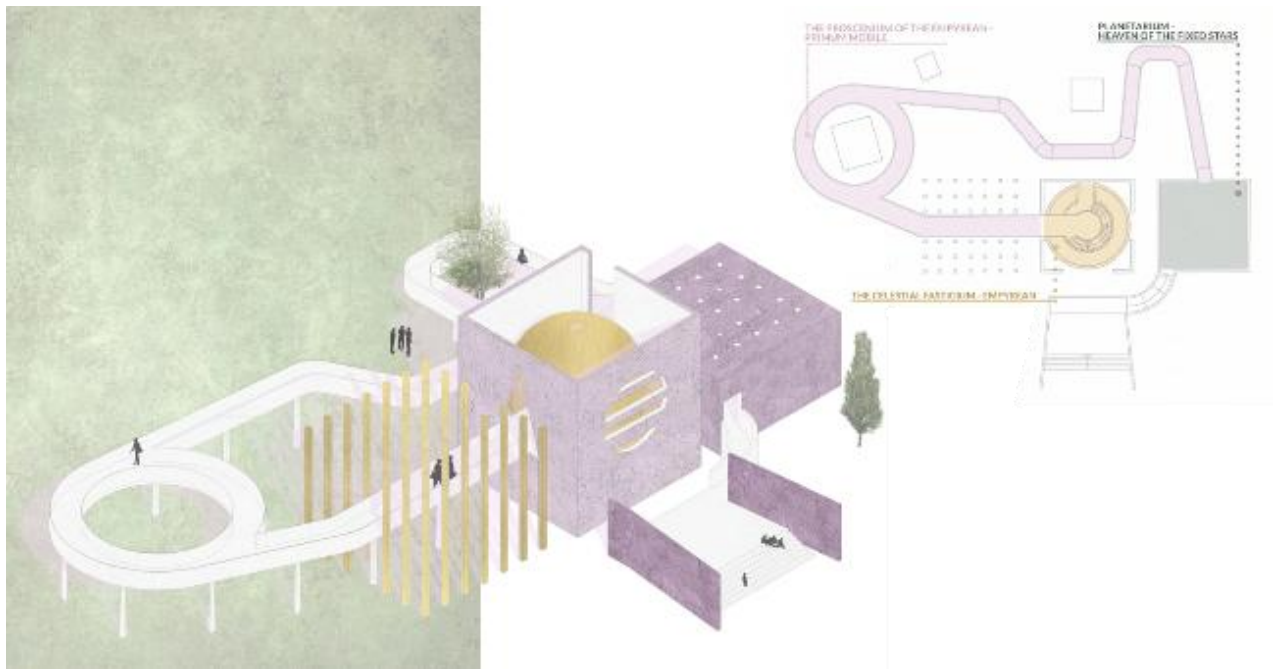


Figure 15. Dante's three Highest Heavens. Axonometric View and Functional Keyplan.



Figure 16-17. Dante's three Highest Heavens. Rendering.

4. Discussion

The project demonstrates how contemporary architecture can engage with archaeological heritage through interpretative and phenomenological strategies rather than through literal reconstruction or formal imitation. In the case of the Via Appia Antica, the intervention does not aim to reproduce the language of ancient ruins, but instead establishes a dialectical relationship between permanence and transformation, materiality and immateriality, navigating the specific "age value" of the ruins and the necessity to reinvent spatial narratives without erasing the past (Gambardella, 2020; Riegl, 1903/1982). Riegl's conceptualization of *Alterswert* (age value) suggests that the ruin possesses an intrinsic aesthetic power precisely because it displays the irreversible passage of time. Any attempt to "complete" the ruin through stylistic mimicry ultimately destroys this value, creating a false historical narrative. By introducing a radically distinct, ephemeral timber infrastructure, this project strictly preserves the age value of the Appia. The contemporary intervention acts as a highly legible, contrasting layer—a physical manifestation of the present moment—that engages in a critical dialogue with the enduring permanence of the antique masonry. The concept of the palimpsest becomes central to the interpretation of the site (Corboz, 1983, 1985). The Via Appia is not considered a static archaeological object, but rather a dynamic landscape continuously rewritten through different historical, religious, and cultural layers. By explicitly recognizing the territory as a palimpsest, the designer is liberated from the paralyzing anxiety of absolute preservation. The addition of the Dantean architectural sequence is theorized not as an invasion, but as the legitimate, contemporary inscription upon the latest layer of this historical parchment. Furthermore, the introduction of parallax views—where the perception of the ancient ruins shifts dramatically depending on the user's position within the elevated contemporary structures—creates a dynamic kinetic experience of the heritage site that static observation cannot provide (Holl, 2000). The architecture forces the visitor to look at the old through the frame of the new. The project therefore contributes to the broader disciplinary debate on adaptive and narrative approaches to topographical heritage (Leatherbarrow, 2004), proposing architecture as a medium capable of generating new meanings while simultaneously preserving the symbolic depth of the existing context.

A fundamental aspect emerging from the research concerns the role of light as an architectural material. Rather than functioning exclusively as a technical or atmospheric element, light becomes the primary generator of spatial experience and symbolic transformation. In an archaeological context traditionally defined by the somber heaviness of tufa, brick, and basalt, the structural deployment of light serves as a potent tool for dematerialization. The careful calibration of zenithal openings, mirrored reflections, and filtered sunlight across the various pavilions actively dictates the rhythm of the visitor's ascent. It translates Dante's theological abstraction into a tangible, haptic reality. As the user moves from the fractured reflections of the Heaven of the Moon to the blinding clarity of the Empyrean, light transcends its purely visual function to become the actual spatial boundary, replacing solid tectonic walls with luminous thresholds. Through controlled illumination, reflections, shadows, and zenithal openings, the project translates Dante's immaterial cosmology into perceptual architectural conditions. This approach allows visitors to experience the transition from darkness to abstraction as a bodily and emotional process, reinforcing the relationship between phenomenology and spatial design.

The project also highlights the potential of literary references within architectural research. Dante's *Paradiso* is not treated as a decorative narrative apparatus, but as a conceptual structure capable of influencing geometry, circulation, rhythm, and perception. The transposition of literature into architecture demands a rigorous process of abstraction; it is not the literal illustration of a text, but the extraction of its spatial parameters. Dante's text provided a precise operational matrix regarding hierarchy, luminous intensity, and emotional resonance. By utilizing literature as a design generator, the project breaks free from purely functionalist or formalist approaches, injecting deep semantic value directly into the tectonic forms. The translation of literary imagination into architectural space opens new possibilities for interdisciplinary design methodologies in which literature, art, and architecture converge in the construction of experiential environments.

From an urban and territorial perspective, the intervention proposes an alternative approach to archaeological sites, which are often characterized by passive conservation strategies or musealization processes disconnected from contemporary spatial life (Augé, 1992). By introducing new experiential pathways and public spaces, the project reactivates the landscape as a place of collective interpretation and cultural participation (Rossi, 1966). The pavilions do not function merely as viewing platforms for the ruins; they are autonomous cultural destinations. By superimposing a new functional and symbolic layer over the Via Appia, the project mitigates the risk of the site becoming a "non-place"—a sterile, highly regulated zone dedicated solely to tourist consumption. Instead, it transforms the archaeological park into a living piece of urban infrastructure, capable of fostering new social interactions and contemporary aesthetic experiences.

5. Conclusions

"From Hypogeum to Empyrean" proposes an architectural reinterpretation of the Via Appia Antica through the concepts of palimpsest, phenomenology, and ascensional experience. By transforming an archaeological funerary landscape traditionally associated with darkness and descent into a spatial narrative oriented toward light and elevation, the project redefines the relationship between contemporary architecture and historical heritage. This inversion of the traditional spatial vector—from the hypogeum to the sky—serves as a powerful metaphor for the discipline of architecture itself, suggesting that our engagement with the past must ultimately be oriented toward the construction of an elevated, enlightened future. Furthermore, this theoretical inversion challenges the long-standing romanticization of the "ruin" as a symbol of inevitable decay, a concept deeply rooted in the post-Enlightenment Grand Tour tradition. For centuries, the Via Appia has been consumed visually and culturally as a melancholic landscape of death, freezing its narrative potential in a perpetual state of mourning. By re-coding this space through the Dantean framework of the *Paradiso*, the architectural intervention acts as a mechanism of cultural resuscitation. It argues that the true essence of heritage conservation lies not in the obsessive preservation of physical decay, but in the continuous, deliberate layering of new human experiences over

the ancient topography. The pavilions become temporal anchors, bridging the gap between the eschatological beliefs of the Roman and Early Christian worlds and the phenomenological needs of the contemporary subject.

However, the research also presents certain limitations. The project was developed within an academic and speculative context and therefore remains primarily theoretical. Further investigations would be necessary to assess technical feasibility, material performance, conservation constraints, and visitor management within an archaeological environment. Specifically, detailed structural engineering studies would be required to validate the behavior of the lightweight timber frames under wind loads, particularly for the towering structure of the Seventh Heaven. Additionally, a comprehensive environmental impact assessment would be crucial to guarantee that the temporary foundations and the increased pedestrian flow do not inadvertently compress or damage the unexcavated substrata surrounding the pavilions. To move this project from the speculative realm to physical implementation, a highly sophisticated geotechnical survey would be mandated. This would involve employing non-invasive diagnostic technologies such as Ground-Penetrating Radar (GPR) and Electrical Resistivity Tomography (ERT) to meticulously map the subterranean voids, catacombs, and unrecorded hypogea beneath Plots 10, 11, and 12. Only through a micro-topographical mapping of the subsoil could the exact placement of the adjustable micro-piles be guaranteed without risking structural collapse or the destruction of hidden artifacts. Furthermore, the material performance of the Cross-Laminated Timber (CLT) in the specific microclimate of the Roman Campagna requires longitudinal study. The cyclical variations in humidity, the intense summer solar radiation, and the biological risks associated with proximity to a dense vegetative landscape demand advanced wood-preservation technologies, such as thermal modification or natural resin treatments, to ensure the structures maintain their aesthetic and structural integrity over their intended lifespan without introducing toxic leachates into the protected archaeological soil. Visitor management also poses a critical logistical limitation. The phenomenological sequence relies heavily on isolation, silence, and highly controlled light transitions. In a high-traffic tourist destination like the Via Appia, maintaining this intimate, contemplative atmosphere would require stringent carrying-capacity models, timed-entry ticketing systems, and carefully choreographed circulation routes to prevent overcrowding from shattering the sensory illusion of the celestial ascent.

Despite these limitations, the project demonstrates the possibility of rethinking funerary and archaeological spaces through an architecture capable of generating emotional resonance, symbolic depth, and new forms of interaction between past and present. It proves that architectural intervention within sensitive contexts does not need to be invisible or apologetic to be respectful. Bold, contemporary forms, when guided by rigorous phenomenological intent and strict material ethics, can significantly enhance the legibility and the emotional impact of a heritage site. The introduction of stark, abstract geometries creates a necessary visual tension that forces the observer to truly "see" the ruins again, combating the visual fatigue that often plagues traditional archaeological parks. When historic stones are contrasted against the precision of modern timber and steel, their texture, weight, and historical gravitas are suddenly magnified. The ephemeral architecture thus becomes an optical instrument—a lens through which the antiquity of the Via Appia is brought into sharper, more profound focus. This methodology completely dismantles the museographic neutrality that has dominated late 20th-century conservation theory, advocating instead for an architecture of "strong interpretation." It asserts that respect for the past is best demonstrated through active, creative dialogue rather than passive, fearful silence. More broadly, the work suggests that archaeological landscapes should not be considered exclusively as spaces of preservation, but also as active cultural environments capable of accommodating new narratives and contemporary forms of spatial experience. From this perspective, architecture becomes a tool for reactivating memory, transforming historical stratification into a lived and perceptual condition. This shift has profound implications for the socio-economic and cultural management of vast territorial heritage networks. By transitioning from a model of passive observation to one of active bodily immersion, sites like the Via Appia can be reclaimed by the local community as vital public spaces, rather than being relegated to the status of open-air museums catering exclusively to transient tourism. The Dantean sequence of pavilions provides a programmable infrastructure capable of hosting contemporary cultural events, theatrical performances, educational workshops, and civic gatherings. In doing so, the project directly combats the proliferation of Marc Augé's "non-places" within the urban periphery, re-establishing the historical landscape as a deeply rooted, highly specific "place" of identity and social cohesion. The palimpsest is thus kept alive; the contemporary layer does not merely observe the ancient layers beneath it, but actively contributes to the ongoing history of the site.

Future developments of the research could further explore the relationship between architecture, narrative, and sensory perception within cultural heritage contexts, expanding the role of phenomenological design as a strategy for contemporary intervention in archaeological and cultural landscapes. By continuing to investigate the intersection between literature, ephemeral construction, and the phenomenology of ruins, future design research can establish robust, scalable methodologies for intervening in complex palimpsests worldwide, ensuring that our architectural heritage remains a vibrant, evolving component of the contemporary human experience. A highly promising trajectory for future research involves the integration of this physical phenomenological framework with digital and augmented spatial technologies. While the current project relies entirely on analog architectural devices—light, shadow, materiality, and geometry—to evoke the Dantean ascent, future iterations could explore "mixed-reality palimpsests." This would entail mapping immaterial digital data, such as the original polychromy of the ruins or localized acoustic reconstructions of ancient rituals, onto the contemporary timber surfaces. Furthermore, the methodology developed for the Via Appia—translating a culturally significant literary masterpiece into a site-specific spatial sequence—could be systematically applied to other endangered or stagnant archaeological landscapes across the Mediterranean basin. For example, one could envision translating the nautical and topological themes of Homer's *Odyssey* into a network of temporary, sensory architectures along the ruined coastal outposts of Magna Graecia, or utilizing the mythological metamorphosis described by Ovid to inspire adaptive reuse strategies for abandoned industrial heritage sites. Ultimately, the "From Hypogeum to Empyrean" project establishes a foundational protocol for spatial storytelling. It proves that the future of heritage

conservation lies in the courage to design *with* the ruin, viewing the fragmented past not as a boundary, but as the ultimate foundation for contemporary architectural imagination.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study did not require ethical approval as it did not involve human or animal subjects.

CRedit Author Statement

Cherubino Gambardella and Efisio Pitzalis: Supervision; **Concetta Tavoletta:** Project administration; **Vittorio Vernazzani:** Investigation. **Francesca Morelli:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing-original Draft, Writing-Review & Editing. **Chiara Diomaiuto:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology. **Federica Cecere:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology. **Alessio Ricciardi:** Visualization. **Sara Iannotta:** Visualization. **Agnese Montone:** Visualization. **Sara Vallifuoco:** Visualization. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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