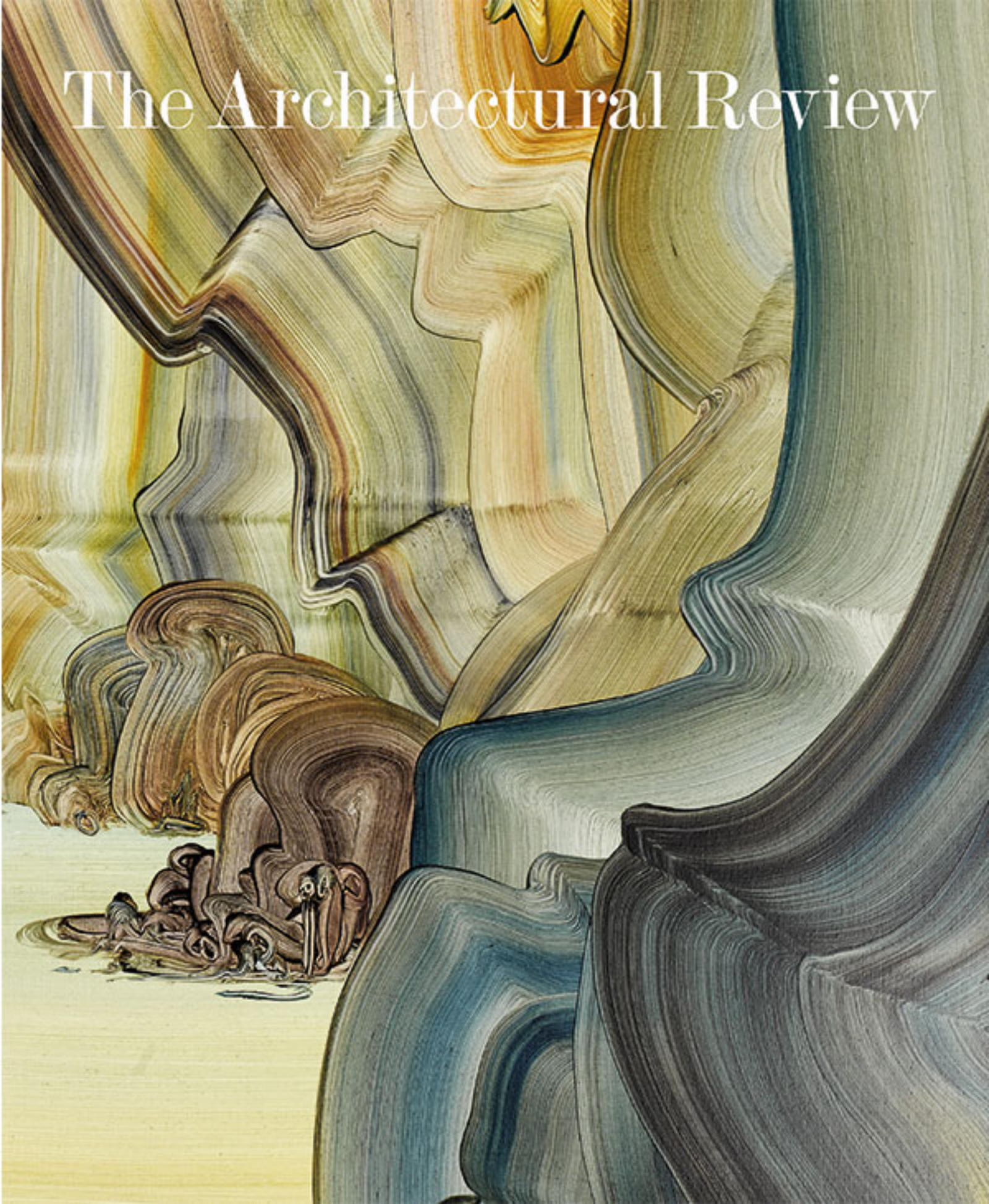
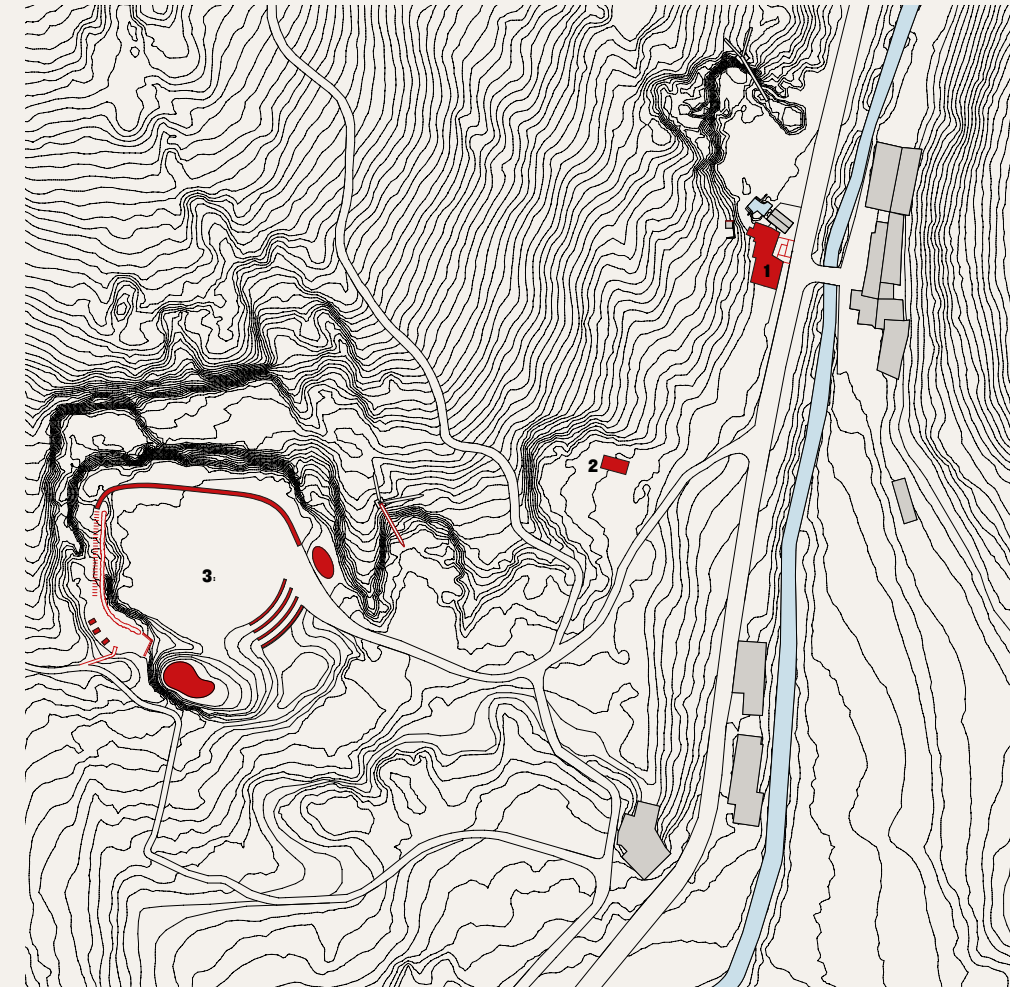


# The Architectural Review



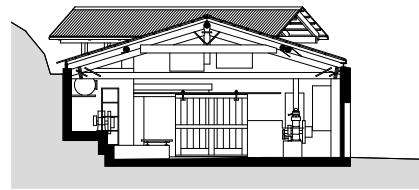
# Marble city



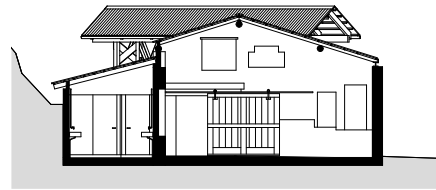
- 1 workshop
- 2 public toilets
- 3 amphitheatre

Enrico Sassi's  
reorganisation  
of the marble quarries  
in Arzo allows a new  
kind of life following  
five centuries of  
extraction, writes  
*Daide Tommaso  
Ferrando*





section AA



section BB



workshop floor plan

The disused sheds where the marble used to be processed along the main road (below) have been put into new use, the original openings have been filled with marble blocks. The ramp leading to the shed (right) was influenced by Dimitris Pikionis's pathways at the Acropolis from the 1950s

- 1 marble cutting demonstration area
- 2 loading dock
- 3 exhibition space
- 4 entrance
- 5 covered area for cutting marble
- 6 engine room
- 7 well



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**P**atriziati are traditional institutions of the Swiss canton of Ticino: 211 groups made up of local families who own and manage several commons such as rivers, woods and mountains, which overall account for 70 per cent of the region's land. Since the 14th century, the *Patriziato* of Arzo, a small town near Mendrisio, has been responsible for the extraction of six varieties of marble that comprise the underground strata of a 12-hectare site at the foot of the San Giorgio mountain. The site is geologically significant: Arzo marble is a sedimentary rock originating from the depths of a Triassic ocean once located between the Eurasian and African continents, whose tectonic clash formed the main chain of the Alps, and pushed to the surface a great wealth of fossils. For this reason, the San Giorgio mountain was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2003. Well known for their red and grey veining, between the 16th and 19th centuries Arzo marbles were adopted for the construction of many civil and religious buildings on both sides of the Alps. If you have been to Milan Cathedral, for example, you have surely walked on them. The marble is also present in St Peter's Basilica in Rome - a Baroque 'must'.

Nonetheless, after being the area's economic engine for almost 500 years, in the 1930s marble production slowed down and finally stopped in 2009, when the firm that had held the extraction rights for six generations was forced to close due to lack of demand. After two years of inactivity at the quarry, and no sign of interest from other firms, the five families running the *Patriziato* of Arzo decided to intervene in 2011 and redevelop parts of the site no longer in productive use.

Aldo Allio, the president of the *Patriziato*, contacted Enrico Sassi, a local architect, urban planner and landscape designer. In close collaboration with the *Patriziato*, Sassi defined the project brief, which gravitated around three main axes of intervention: the conversion of a shed structure where the marble used to be processed into a workshop and exhibition



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‘Sassi’s subtle spatial devices have the rare ability to almost disappear at the moment they participate in the *mise en scène* of the site’

space; the opening of a landscape trail connecting the old quarries scattered across the mountain; and the transformation of the large quarry, Cava Caldelari, into a natural amphitheatre to stage cultural events. The project was designed so that it could host a diverse public programme while still maintaining its productive nature for whenever production might restart. Another part of the quarry briefly reopened in 2017, the same year the park opened to the public, but closed again in 2019.

When an architect is asked to intervene in a territory already so full of material, historical and cultural value, the design strategy must, on the one hand, be capable of preserving and reinforcing the character of what is already an extraordinary place, and on the other, must not renounce the possibility of expressing architectural bravura. In this case, Sassi’s approach is based on a system of subtle spatial devices that have the rare ability to almost disappear at the very moment they participate in the *mise en scène* of the site. The idea of an architecture that is visible and invisible at the same time, is reminiscent of Alexander Tzonis’s description of the path to the Acropolis designed by Dimitris Pikionis in the 1950s: an architecture ‘of movement, encounter and dialogue between objects and landscape’, which was characterised by a ‘powerful presence despite its invisibility’.

The small ramp leading up to the shed structure is much more than a simple reiteration of the path to the Acropolis: it is a sort of architectural re-enactment. Sassi brought photographs of Pikionis’s work to the site one day, showed them to the masons, and ‘tried to reproduce them’ using reclaimed stone scraps from the quarry. Selection and disposition of the scraps followed two simple rules: a regular sequence of parallel ‘lines’ defining the main framework of the whole composition (a rule deduced by analysing Pikionis’s project in detail); and ‘thematizing’ parts of the ramp through particular ‘families’ of stones – dark stones, bright stones, small stones, stones with inscriptions, broken stones. Apart from that, realisation of the ramp followed an empirical process of trial and error guided by the shape, size and texture of found materials. Based on a subtle interplay of rule and improvisation, the making of the ramp was like the execution of a jazz song.

The ramp connects the cantonal road to a shed structure whose configuration is the result of a careful process of cutting and grafting a pre-existing cluster of shacks. The most impressive feature of the shed is the treatment of the front elevation. The original wall, built by stacking different cuts of marble blocks extracted from the quarry, had a few openings that Sassi sealed with slabs of the same marble, transforming the



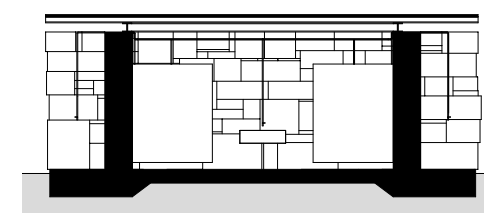
The shed structure (above) has been adapted into a workshop (right) with a transparent polycarbonate roof that allows light to filter inside, while the toilet (opposite), with a dichromatic marble floor, has almost sacred overtones



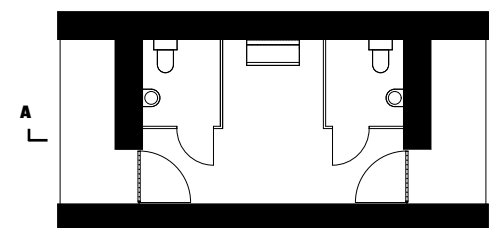
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section AA



public toilets floor plan

**Further into the woods, Sassi has created public toilets from discarded marble blocks from the quarry (this spread). The pink marble gravel, also from the quarry, forms a kind of stand for the structure, and a fine polycarbonate roof hovers ethereally above**

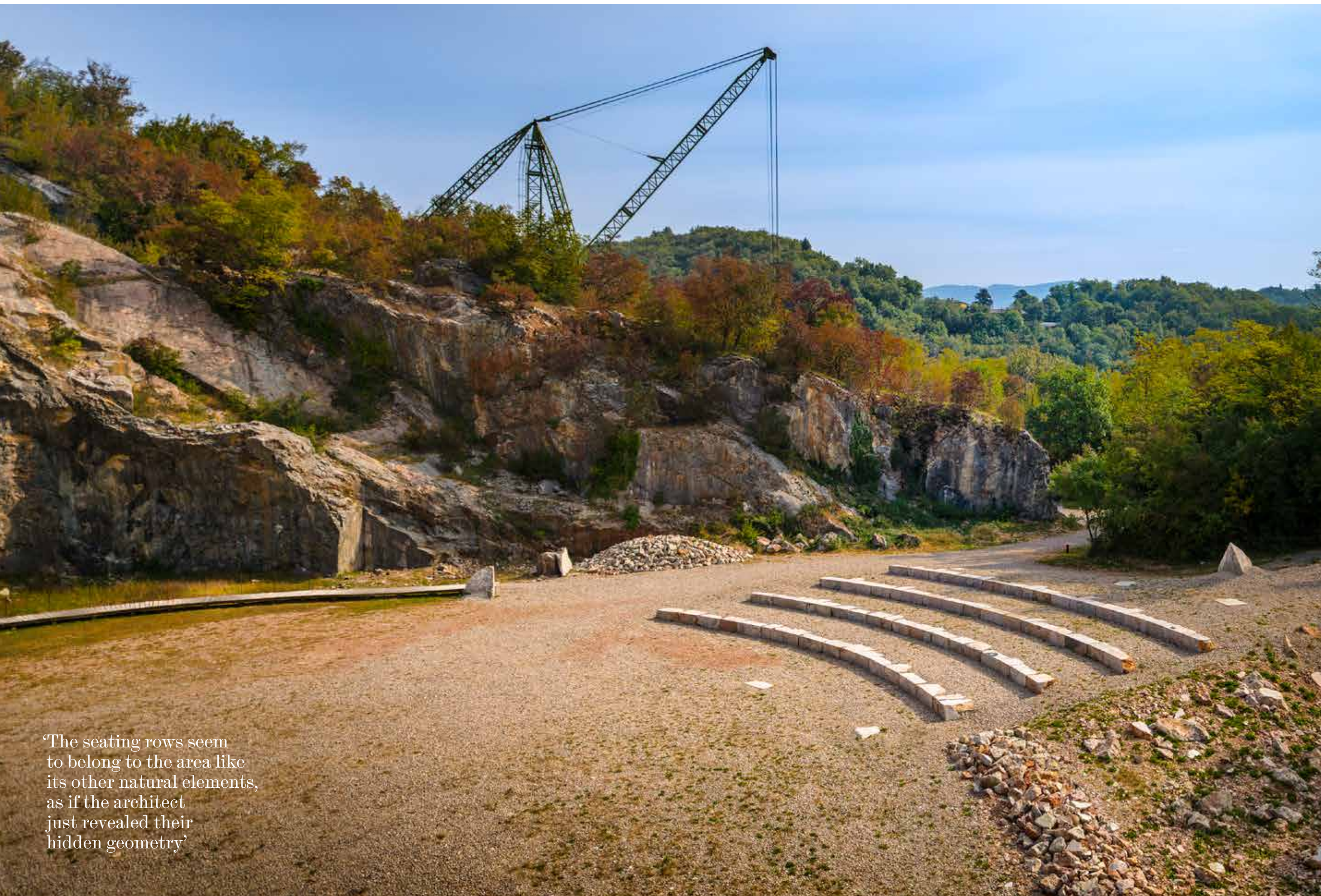
facade into a mute canvas activated by the movement of its own shadows. Natural light enters the shed through a new transparent roof made of polycarbonate sheets, the edge of which has been set back from the marble facade, not only to better exhibit the facade, but also to let water drip on its marble blocks every time it rains, to naturally enhance their colour. 'Marble should always be wet', Sassi explains, which is good reason enough to design a roof that, instead of protecting the wall that it rests upon, exposes it to atmospheric agents.

Inside, the original state of the shed has been left as unaltered as possible. The few elements that had to be added for structural and functional reasons - two doors, a lintel and two roof trusses, all in oxidised steel - seamlessly blend with the building, as if they had always been there. The only volume designed from scratch is the toilet: a collaged space where references from both sacred (the dichromatic marble floor, the holy water stoup, the zenithal light) and profane imaginaries (the rubber hosepipe, the exposed concrete wall and the oxidised steel toilet compartments) meet - not without irony.

Temples and toilets return in the most exciting piece of the project: a *naos*-like cell hosting a public toilet for the visitors of the landscape trail, reached by a small path running through the woods away from the main road. On top of a concrete platform - the texture enriched by the use of crushed marble in the mixture - stand two massive stone walls, again erected using discarded blocks from the quarry, 'the strangest blocks we could find', according to Sassi, 'each one telling its own story'. Perfectly aligned on the inside, from the outside the arrangement of the marble blocks - all different in shape, texture and colour - composes a spatial essay on the stoniness of stone.

While contemplating it, in silent delight, I couldn't help recalling memories of archaic wall fragments seen while ascending to the Acropolis. Gently floating on top of the walls, a thin steel roof covered in transparent polycarbonate provides the interior space of the toilets with natural light, without compromising the volume's abstractness. All around, a gravel made of crushed pink marble, also from the quarry, covers the ground of the small clearing where the structure is sited, isolating and highlighting it as a sort of flat pedestal.

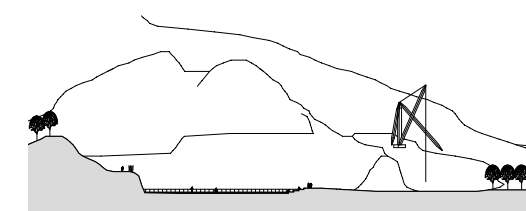
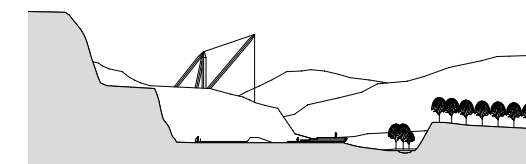
Leaving behind the 'imperial baths', as Sassi jokingly calls them, and venturing further into the woods, the monumental void of the Cava Caldelari, a natural amphitheatre formerly used to stock quarried detritus, suddenly opens up. Delimited by a concave rock face of imposing dimensions, the Cava Caldelari is the host of a fragile ecosystem, which is why its redesign was developed in collaboration



‘The seating rows seem to belong to the area like its other natural elements, as if the architect just revealed their hidden geometry’

with nearby environmental engineering firm Oikos 2000. Besides clearing the area and preserving its biodiversity, the intervention provided the amphitheatre with stone seating for public events and a lifted wooden walkway (also working as a bench), which connects the area with a path to a belvedere. In concert with the rest of the project, the seating was obtained by excavation and displacement of found marble blocks, which were arranged in four semicircular rows on a gentle slope at the eastern border of the amphitheatre. The position of the exact centre of the imaginary circle, from which the position and orientation of the seating blocks were calculated, was again defined directly on site, through an empirical process of trial and error. Quite remarkably, when observed from the belvedere above, the seating rows seem to belong to the site like its other natural elements, almost as if the architect just revealed their hidden geometry.

According to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the old literal sense of the word ‘masterpiece’ indicates the ‘earliest attainment of masterhood’ in an author’s work: ‘the date when a man leaves off his formal schooling’. From this point of view, I believe that Enrico Sassi’s work at the Arzo quarries can be considered his first masterpiece. Indeed, this project marks a turning point in his career, because of its relevance, complexity and overall quality, and especially because it gave him the occasion to use an original design method, the influence of which can be seen in his other recent works, such as the stairway in Gandria that tumbles down to Lake Lugano, and the bee-keeping education pavilion on a farm in Balerna. This method depends on Sassi’s understanding of the beauty of the humblest *objet trouvé*, and on his capacity to reorganise their perception by doing apparently nothing. He quotes the famous sentence from *The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa: ‘We changed everything, so that everything could stay the same.’



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