

From Bigness to Invisibility.

The subsurface as a strategy of fitting in heritage landscapes

Paolo De Marco

University of Palermo, Department of Architecture

Keywords

Underground, Interiority, Displacement, Section, Visibility

Large-scale architecture has long been associated with logics of autonomy, visibility, and formal assertion. Today, especially in heritage landscapes – but not only – this position appears increasingly untenable, while visibility itself becomes a problematic condition, often addressed through surface-based and image-oriented strategies.

Within this framework, the paper proposes to interpret an emerging tendency – minor yet significant – as a possible counter-trend: rather than asserting themselves or mimicking the context, certain interventions choose to conceal themselves within the ground. Through a displacement below ground level, architecture drastically reduces its visible form without renouncing spatial and programmatic complexity. This does not imply a reduction of the intervention, but a redefinition of its measure: a measure of the visible rather than of the built. The reduction of visible presence does not imply a renunciation of form, but a shift of focus toward the construction of interior space.

The recourse to the subsurface does not merely resolve issues of contextual insertion, but entails a profound transformation of architectural conditions. Architecture becomes ground – opaque, massive, continuous – and finds in section and light its primary design tools. Space is constructed through subtraction, excavation, compression, and controlled illumination, producing interior conditions often more complex than those of fully emergent buildings.

Within the XS–S–M framework, this tendency reveals a paradox: large-scale interventions assume a minimal visible presence. The renunciation of form does not coincide with a renunciation of space, but with its intensification. In this sense, the subsurface is neither a technical solution nor a defensive response, but a conscious design strategy capable of withdrawing from the logic of appearances without abandoning architectural inquiry. The paper takes museum architecture as a privileged field of observation, where this tendency becomes particularly explicit, without exhausting its broader implications.