

Architectures for downshifting: design research and teaching for shrinking territories

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Calabria, now primarily traversed along its longitudinal axis, preserves a layered palimpsest of connections that testify to its historical role as a Mediterranean crossroads. During Greek colonization and later Basilian monasticism, settlement patterns developed along transversal routes. Though now fragmented, they once enabled exchanges among diverse cultures, connecting settlements like beads on a rosary across a landscape that offers both refuge and isolation.

The isthmus route between Sybaris and Laos connects three distinct landscape units: the Sybaris plain; the Campotenese mountain plateau, and the narrow Lao valley, where nature remains largely untamed. This corridor has hosted a continuous sequence of settlements, including Neolithic villages, Italic necropolises, Greek cities, Roman statio, Byzantine monasteries, Basilian sanctuaries, and medieval fortifications. Although the path itself is largely invisible today, it still reveals a persistent settlement structure through a network of inland towns, many now in decline, forming a fragmented and often overlooked cultural heritage.

Within this research, the Sybaris–Laos palimpsest is understood both as a material substratum—a repository of historical settlement dynamics—and as a field condition shaped by ongoing processes of transformation. This perspective supports a renewed narrative that connects places through shared environmental and landscape conditions, as well as related social practices. These sites can be interpreted as transfigurations of archetypes, reflecting a complex dialogue with contemporary spatial and socio-economic challenges, and calling for new design interventions.

The Sybaris–Laos isthmus route has been explored within the international research framework of MedWays and implemented as a “research by design” educational experiment. Conducted in the Thematic Studio of the MSc in Architecture and Urban Design at Politecnico di Milano, in collaboration with TU Delft (MsC Studio Architectural Design Crossovers), the research-by design project (2020–2022) involved over thirty design proposals developed by student teams in close interaction with the teaching staff.