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CONSTELLATIONS OF IMAGINATION

KONSTELACJE WYOBRAŹNI

Abstract

This essay examines the terraced forms as a compositional grammar of space, where the technique intertwines with the construction of the imaginary. Adopting a diachronic perspective, it captures the nature of this trans-historical and trans-scalar element, whose effectiveness endures in Mediterranean rural landscapes. The study highlights how the type, as it traverses memories, geographies, and various uses, continues to provide valuable tools for the invention of architectural design.

Keywords: composition, architecture, theory, type, terraces

Streszczenie

Esej analizuje formy tarasowe jako gramatykę kompozycyjną przestrzeni, w której technika splata się z kreacją wyobrażeniową. Przyjmując perspektywę diachroniczną, autorka bada naturę tego transhistorycznego i transskalarnego elementu, którego siła oddziaływania wciąż ujawnia się w krajobrazach śródziemnomorskiej wsi. Studium podkreśla, że typ architektoniczny, przemierzając pamięć, geografię i różnorodne funkcje, wciąż dostarcza cennych narzędzi dla twórczego projektowania architektonicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: kompozycja, architektura, teoria, typ, tarasy

1. GRAMMARS OF A TYPE

If history provides the objective account of events, memory is not the passive transcription of the past but – following a Benjaminian perspective[1] – the liberating and subjective act of unveiling that, by deciphering symbols, elements, and materials, reconnects them to the present. History and the process of memory, by shaping and transforming the past, play a fundamental role in architectural design. As Ernesto N. Roger argued, they are inseparable from imagination and invention, from the necessary construction of an imaginary intended to generate new forms and meanings[2]. Every culture has developed ways to engage with nature, turning necessity into architecture and technique into language. Some of these, due to their fundamental power, endure through the ages as key figures of the collective imagination[3].

[1] W. Benjamin, *Angelus Novus. Saggi e Frammenti*, Einaudi, Torino, p. 80.
[2] N.E. Rogers, *Continuità*, "Casabella continuità" 1953/1954, no. 199, pp. 2–3.
[3] A. Rossi, *L'architettura della città*, Marsilio, Padova 1966, pp. 30–32.

Terraced forms belong to such constellations [4]. They have generated configurations that exceed mere agronomic functionality[5], inscribing into matter a sense of order, of equilibrium with the environment, and of shared symbolism. It is within this tension between technique and imagination that terraced forms can be understood as a type[6]. Following the definition proposed by Quatremère de Quincy, the type is not a model to be replicated but a generative principle – an archetype that returns across places and times, capable of adapting and renewing itself while preserving an invariant and recognisable core[7]. We therefore assume the type not as a rigid model but as an operative invariant able to traverse historical and geographical variations.

From this perspective, the terraced form can be read as a ground choreography – plane, level, and path – acting as a compositional device that sediments memory and use within urban space. This essay, therefore, focuses on the construction of the imaginary that terracing has conveyed.

In a diachronic itinerary, proceeding according to a typological logic, terraced forms are read as operative invariants that move across times and places while taking on different functions. From their origins, through their Mediterranean declensions, to the modern perception of the Italian landscape, terracing is taken as aesthetic and cultural icon. This methodological choice brings to the fore the persistence of the type and its capacity to adapt to diverse contexts.[8]

Adopting this perspective means reading, in the materiality of terraced grounds, the long cultural process that has made them bearers of values, images, and visions. They offer themselves as a lens through which to observe the relationship between landscape and civilisation, highlighting continuities and discontinuities, permanences and reinventions. On this terrain – woven of memory and design – the type of terracing sinks its roots and can still generate new design possibilities.

An upright posture binds us to the ground, transforming verticality into spatial measure and bodily orientation; the invention of language binds the ground to the world through the symbolic power of the word, which establishes a collective imaginary. In both cases, these are foundational acts in which survival intertwines with the need to construct relationships – to share experiences, images, and thoughts among ourselves and with places.

Through a slow transformation, shaped by our relation to space, the body raises its gaze, measures differences in level, and turns distance into path.

At the architectural scale, this passage translates into the invention of the horizontal plane and the ability to regulate level differences; at the urban scale, into the organisation of walkable tiers and networks of movement. With this passage, the perception of landscape changes: no longer a mere natural backdrop but a practicable field articulated into planes and gradients to be traversed. This new perception also becomes a capacity for transformation:

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[4] *Terrace* [in:] H. Douglas, Online Etymology Dictionary, http://www.etymonline.com/word/terrace (access: 20.09.2025).

[5] N. Pevsner, J. Fleming, H. Honour, *Dizionario di Architettura*, Einaudi, Torino, pp. 652–653.

[6] G.C. Argan, *Progetto e destino*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1965, pp. 75–81.

[7] A. Quatremère de Quincy, Dizionario Storico di architettura, Marsilio, Venezia 1992, pp. 271–273.

[8] C.M. Arìs, Tipo [in:] L. Semerani (ed), *Dizionario critico illustrato delle voci più utili all'architetto moderno*, CELI, Faenza 1993, pp. 183–194; see also: C.M. Arìs, *Le variazioni dell'identità. Il tipo in architettura*, CittàStudi, Milano 1994.

to modify the landscape itself and rewrite its forms anticipating the cultural construction that would become an explicit theme of architectural reflection in the twentieth century.

Thinking and communicating presuppose a shared lexicon. Communication is not possible without familiar words, just as there is no thought without already-elaborated images. In other words, thought and language begin from what we know. The genesis of an idea never proceeds in a straight line: it opens to multiple paths, finding in the project's imaginary its generative matrix. It is the imagination that makes alternatives possible, intertwining what we know with what we imagine.

Constructing the imaginary is not ancillary; it is foundational. This construction unfolds within the specificity of the theme at hand, according to two registers that continuously dialogue with one another.

At the architectural scale, terracing appears as a plinth that stabilises the ground, as a step that measures ascent, as a ramp that turns rising into narrative. Section guides movement; the cell or room orders use; the architectural skin mediates light and shade; and technique – drainage, cladding, construction systems – makes the form practicable.

At the urban scale, the same elements are amplified into esplanades, civic terraces, streets, porticoed wings, and ground infrastructures that structure axes, squares, and landscapes.

The terraced type is born from the primordial contact between body and ground, but it reaches its completeness when that elementary grammar – step, platform, ramp – becomes an ordering principle of architecture and of a portion of the city. In this passage, individual experience transfigures into a collective palimpsest, transforming an elementary gesture into a shared structure of memory and design.

2. NOMINATIONS AND FIGURES

The act of establishing a plane is not merely a technical solution; it is also a symbolic gesture: to separate while at the same time connecting earth and sky, to generate a place that produces vision and returns as image. With the invention of the first terraces, the imaginary is translated into matter, and the idea takes shape as embodied form.

Architecture can be narrated as an adventure that begins with the ground, with the primordial gesture of raising the earth and arranging it into planes: a platform emerging from the plain, a step taming the slope, a ramp making ascent practicable. Within this elementary grammar lies the promise of the type. The code of platform, step, and ramp recurs across times and places, as if history had identified a mother form for the expression of worship, power, memory, and landscape. Different civilisations, distant in space and time, share this fundamental framework. In the construction of successive planes and in the passage between different worlds, the logic of terracing remains unchanged. What changes is its relationship with ritual, with memory, and with the representation of power.

In the great archaic and riverine civilisations, terracing was the principal device of monumentality. Equally significant is the observation that in other contexts of the Near East and surrounding regions, variations of the same theme were produced.

In the great rock-cut sanctuaries, such as Abu Simbel, the horizontal threshold in front of the cliff – the terrace – is not an added volume but a mediating platform separating river and mountain, instituting a ritual plane for worship. In the Great Bath

of Mohenjo-Daro in Pakistan, the infrastructural system of masonry terraces, platforms, and large foundations controls water and organises community space as order, hygiene, and rite. The sequence of platforms at Erebuni is a proto-urban model in which the natural slope, rewritten into enclosed planes for dwellings, storerooms, cult places, and defences, becomes multi-level architecture. At Persepolis, a colossal platform supports palaces, treasuries, and audience halls, with a monumental double stairway, where the type becomes a city-podium.

In this oscillation between detail and territory, the same typological phrase – platform, step, ramp – may be spoken by a temple, a funerary complex, or an entire urban esplanade.

Three urban and symbolic bodies reveal the metamorphosis of the terrace, its transformation into urban fabric. No longer terracing as an exceptional episode, but as a spatial choreography capable of governing the city: emancipated from its mere supporting function, and through continuity across scales, it discloses its formal and inventive genealogy. Planes ramps, and thresholds multiply, defining networks of movement and scenarios of vision, until they constitute genuine ground infrastructures in which typological logic becomes a collective device.

In Jerusalem, the sacred platform of the Temple Mount is an artificial ground capable of connecting cult, city, and power: a collective plane structuring access, thresholds, and processions. The Acropolis in Athens – with its sequence of ramps, terraces, temples, and altars in a choreography of thresholds and views – makes evident that ascent is not only to reach the temple but to experience a path alternating compression and openness, ramps and landings, glimpses and belvederes. The natural slope is transformed into a *promenade architecturale*: a ritual path that establishes the horizontal plane as a gradual conquest, threshold after threshold, culminating in the great summit terrace. Here, terraces are no longer topographical necessities but instruments of perspectival orchestration.

Pergamon, with its porticoes, *stoai*, enclosing spaces and tracing horizontal lines that mark the rhythm of the terraces, is a city that can be read as a sequence of constructed planes, where walking becomes narrative and level is language. The compositional logic that Greece bequeathed to the Mediterranean articulated an urban landscape of planes, paths, and visions. This finds a striking parallel in the Italian terraced countryside, where slopes are cut by walls and embankments, each step becomes a cultivated area, and every change in level is mediated by a stair or a ramp. Just as the pilgrim ascended successive stations toward the summit sanctuary, so the peasant moved across the slope from one cultivated plane to another. In both cases, terracing is not a mere technical artifice but a ground choreography, a way of transforming natural inclination into a sequence of practicable spaces. The difference lies in purpose – worship or cultivation – but the composition remains the same.

In the Imperial Fora, platforms, podia, and stairways orchestrated processions and assemblies, while retaining walls and terraces mediated between the hills and plains of Rome. The *Tabularium* on the Capitoline Hill is a monumental base regulating a change in level, transforming containment into architecture of representation. The terrace-city is not only a ceremonial centre; it is also a technical infrastructure where aqueducts, cisterns, and drainage systems exploit level differences to regulate the flow of water. Even the terraces of suburban villas, such as at Tivoli, translated slopes into walkable gardens, promenades, and belvederes.

3. PERCEPTIONS AND SYNTACTICS

Latin vocabulary makes it clear: area, the flat space, *gradus*, the step, the level, and *podium*, the base-terrace, are not ornamental terms but operative words of city-making. The horizontal plane is never neutral.

This same ground choreography, or codification, easily extends into the rural landscape. Agricultural terraces are the productive version of the same type: cultivation planes, walls and embankments, ramps and mule tracks, canals and cisterns – where worship becomes cultivation and design coincides with the habitability of the slope.

It is precisely the Italian landscape – from the Ligurian coasts to the Apennine slopes, from Mediterranean terracing to hilltop squares – that provides the material for constructing the imaginary. The Italian landscape offers a true library of ground: horizontal planes established against gravity, governed gradients, and paths weaving together houses, fields, and cities. It is a repertoire of forms that nourishes both gaze and hand, at the architectural scale as well as at the urban scale.

Over time, terraces – once agricultural or religious tools – have become cultural landscapes, an archive of spatial devices. In the twentieth century, architects and artists encountered this archive as a compositional source, translating terraces into active memory. Not mere recollections, but a lexicon of forms and figures from which to draw when designing elsewhere.

Alvar Aalto's *Terrace Houses* project (1937) is not a house on the ground but a house that creates ground, repeating with local variations the same logic of rural terraces that generates a type rather than a stereotype. In the Säynätsalo Town Hall (1949), a montage of levels institutes the city as civic scale, as a succession of artificial horizons in which the community recognises itself on a shaped ground. In the Experimental House at Muuratsalo (1952), a miniature terraced countryside is composed of edge, threshold, plane, and light. In the Cemetery of Lyngby (1951), a city of the dead is organised through planes and thresholds, according to the same logic of Mediterranean landscapes that the architect observed and translated into a civic rite. Finally, the Church of Santa Maria Assunta at Riola (1966), resting as a small podium of light, rewrites in modern terms the lesson of elevated churchyards and Italian hillside squares.

From the viewpoint of architectural composition, the lexicon Aalto derived from his travels in Italy can be summarised as follows. At the architectural scale, the terrace is an inhabitable threshold; the ramp is a promenade; walls are retaining structures that hold the plane; light is treated as horizontal surfaces illuminated. At the urban scale, the city is a ground infrastructure; courts are raised; podium-squares are steps measuring civic ritual. At the landscape scale: as in rural terracing, the project uses the same rule – module and variation – to generate compositions.

The order imposed on the landscape – the terraces built through repetition and variation of parallel lines and clear contours, with steps as the metric of the slope – offered artist Martin Escher a model. In his Italian lithographs, the mountain becomes a narrative of stations: each change in level is a chapter, each landing a pause, each ramp a transitional phrase. His space is compositional before it is pictorial. Rather than focusing only on geometry and illusion, what matters here is that his visions speak the same language as terraces, elevating them into an imaginary key. Perspective and paradox result from a sensitivity to plane-level-path, matured on the ground through his travels across Italian hill towns.

Even when the optical device misleads, as in *Waterfall* (1961), its underlying alphabet remains one of levels, thresholds, descents and ascents, repetition, rule, and deviation. The aqueduct is a paradox of level that simulates the hydraulic choreography of terracing, bent into a gravity-free cycle; the towers mark the verticality of thresholds; the wheel is a technical device that translates level differences. The abstract work is rooted in a concrete experience of planes, water, and paths: ingredients that, in Italian terraced landscapes, compose a ground infrastructure. In other words, the imaginary feeds on a real lexicon acquired in places where topography has been domesticated into practicable planes. Gardens and terraces, agricultural labour, surveillance from above: these are the terrestrial lexicon that renders the impossible believable.

The compositional phrase – plane-level-path – read as an action of design, was recognised, for example, by Bernard Rudofsky in his drawings of Mediterranean landscapes, which reveal the technical apparatus of terracing: stone as structure, earth as a resource to be retained and drained, water as the designer of planes. The terraced landscape is not a postcard scenery but a soil laboratory, whose compositional intelligence is made of dry-stone walls taming slopes, ramps and steps drawing trajectories, hilltop squares and churchyards projecting as platforms over valleys. This intuition became public discourse in *Architecture Without Architects* at MoMA (1964), demonstrating that there exists a culture of ground capable of responding with elegance and economy to climate, water, and gravity.

4. TOPOLOGIES

Making a plane is not a mere technical expedient but a compositional choice: to construct artificial horizons, to govern differences in level, to choreograph movements.

In Behrens, from the sacred podium to the terraced model, the practicable plane becomes the true *proiectum*: an alphabet of ground able to traverse functions, scales, and landscapes. A clear example is the Crematorium of Hagen (1905) where the platform, together with the grand stairway, is not a neutral base but the inaugural act of ritual. The same discipline of the ground is strong enough to produce a typological contagion in the Villa Obenauer at Saarbrücken (1905), where the slope is not denied but turned into narrative matter. Access from the street axis compels a circumambulation of the fundamental cube, leading to a threshold that is not an ornamental terrace but architectural ground – a habitable platform. The introduced model transforms the incline into figure and gives form to the change in level.

The leap to type becomes evident in the *Terrassenhaus* by Behrens at the Stuttgart *Weißenhofsiedlung* (1927), where the volumes recede in stepped tiers, turning roofs into practicable spaces. This is not the English terrace, made of identical juxtaposed units, but a hierarchical set of planes that organise light, use, and views. The practicable plane here becomes a model: from episodic solution to a typological matrix of modern dwelling. This trajectory continues in the Villa Gans at Kronberg (1928), set on a slope, whose volumetry decomposes across multiple levels of loggias, balconies, and terraces, constructing a chain of thresholds open towards the landscape. Movement is both vertical and oblique: short level shifts articulate functions, while the section becomes the true narrative of dwelling.

Programs change – worship, dwelling, memory – but the logic remains: constructing horizons, governing levels, orchestrating movements. It is the same language we recognise in rural terraces: cultivation planes instead of platforms, walls and embankments instead of monumental containments, ramps, stairways, and mule tracks as networks of movement; and once again, water as the technology of the plane.

With Jože Plečnik, the theme of making the plane becomes city design. Rather than opposing the new form to topography, in Ljubljana, he follows the slope and translates it into a sequence of public platforms. The river is not a margin but a linear platform; bridges are not only passages but open-air rooms; embankments are not hydraulic works but terraces from which the city gazes at the water. The result is a great inhabitable section. This orchestration of planes is the way Plečnik Mediterraneanises Ljubljana.

The Triple Bridge (1932) makes this method explicit: not one more bridge, but multiple levels of crossing on the same threshold, where movement is distributed and expanded. Along the banks of the Ljubljanica, Plečnik designs quays on several levels, with parapets and steps giving measure to descent: the city does not merely face the river; it descends to touch it. The Central Market (1939) extends this logic into architecture through a continuous loggia-terrace bending over the watercourse: colonnades and porticoes as repeated thresholds, shops as cells beneath a public plane. Always thinking in sections: a plane equipped for walking, an edge that contains level, a network of passages translating slope into use. Likewise, at the scale of the building, the National and University Library (1941) replicates the same discipline.

Seen through the lens of Architectural Composition, Plečnik systematically worked with the triad plane-level-path. At the architectural scale, detail is a tool to make the plane practicable; retaining walls are not technical backdrops but figures that hold and display the level. At the urban scale, the project focuses on continuous planes of embankments, bridges, markets, and squares that transform natural gradients into infrastructures of life. The Italian and Mediterranean tradition is not cited here; it is recomposed within a Nordic lexicon that translates the terrace into civic rule before image. Buildings rest on the plane; they institute it, they multiply it.

The consistency of this method also explains the durability of his work. As in rural terraced landscapes, he uses repetition and variation to build continuity: the same metric, step, tread, and column module applied to different situations – pause, crossing, outlook. Water too is not decoration; it is geometry of plane, level, threshold, edge. The result is a city made of artificial horizons that do not negate the ground but educate it.

In conclusion, terracing is an architectural type in the strict disciplinary sense: not a mere technique but a trans-historical compositional device that translates functional and symbolic necessities into practicable planes. The ground choreography – the triad plane-level-path – is the minimal lexicon through which architecture and city institute collective space. The cycle worship–city–cultivation, in which the type is born in the sacred, urbanised in Greece and Rome, ruralised in agricultural landscapes, and re-emerges as compositional repertoire in the twentieth century, shows the strength of this type. Its transferability across scales, contexts, and functions provides the operative imaginary with an archive of forms that can still nourish contemporary design practices.

Ill. 1. *Costellation of a type.* Collage by Claudia Battaino 2025

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