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RETROACTIVE MONTAGE: SPACE, TIME, AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF EXPERIENCE

MONTAŻ RETROAKTYWNY: PRZESTRZEŃ, CZAS I ARCHITEKTURA DOŚWIADCZENIA

Abstract

This paper argues that montage is a primary instrument through which architecture generates experience, assembling space and time in one compositional act experienced by the body. Developed through practice-based research and demonstrated via a competition project on Lake Ohrid, in North Macedonia, the methodology dissects existing buildings into their spatial elements and reassembles them through selective recombination with the historical archive. Drawing on Thiis-Evensen's archetypes and Rasmussen's phenomenology, the paper proposes that experience is structural, built into the compositional logic of the montage of tangible and intangible spatial components, events, materials.

Keywords: *adaptive reuse, architectural experience, elements, montage, practice-based research*

Streszczenie

Artykuł dowodzi, że montaż jest podstawowym narzędziem, za pomocą którego architektura kształtuje doświadczenie, łącząc przestrzeń i czas w jednym akcie kompozycyjnym ukierunkowanym na ciało. Metodologia, rozwijana w ramach badań poprzez praktykę projektową i zaprezentowana na przykładzie projektu konkursowego nad jeziorem Ochrydzkim w Macedonii Północnej, polega na rozłożeniu istniejących budynków na ich elementy przestrzenne, a następnie ponownym ich złożeniu poprzez selektywną rekombinację z materiałem historycznym. Odwołując się do archetypów Thiisa-Evensena oraz fenomenologii Rasmussena, artykuł wysuwa wniosek, że doświadczenie ma charakter strukturalny – jest wpisane w logikę kompozycyjną montażu materialnych i niematerialnych komponentów przestrzeni, zdarzeń i materiałów.

Słowa kluczowe: *adaptacja istniejącej substancji budowlanej, badania poprzez praktykę projektową, doświadczenie architektoniczne, elementy, montaż*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that montage is not a representational technique but a primary instrument through which architecture generates experience. It holds space and time together in one compositional act, addressed simultaneously to the body of those who inhabit and experiences

architectural space. The argument moves through three registers: a theoretical account of design as movement in space and time; a positioning of montage within the tradition of adaptive reuse, understood as cinematic composition of elements, events and memory; and a competition project demonstrating the methodology at the scale of practice.

The methodology is practice-based research through design, operating within the tradition of "architectural analysis and analytical design" developed at IUAV Venice by Gianugo Polesello, in which the design project is simultaneously the instrument and the outcome of research.[1] Montage is the primary instrument for this approach, grounded in a theoretical framework that informs a design methodology and a replicable procedure in which existing buildings and spaces are dissected into their constituent spatial and conceptual components, then reassembled through selective recombination with elements drawn from the historical archive. Theory and practice are reciprocal: the theoretical narrative provides the vocabulary for reading spatial and experiential effects; the practice tests and extends that vocabulary.

Experience, in this paper, is understood as the full range of the body's encounter with space: simultaneously sensory, haptic, temporal, and spatial. It is produced by individual elements and by the relationships between them, and by the layers of time those relationships carry.

2. DESIGN AS MOVEMENT IN SPACE AND TIME

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced
on the blank page… space as inventory, space as invention.[2]

Georges Perec

This statement is by Georges Perec, taken from his 1974 book *Species of Spaces*, where we can find a taxonomy of the spaces we are living in, from the room to the city and beyond: an analytical dissection that begins with lists and definitions. The list is one of the main descriptive-analytical procedures for producing knowledge, because from an indistinct magma we recognise things, we extract them, we give them an order and we give them a name. This inventory of words, Perec says, becomes an invention (the two words share the same Latin root) that begins with tracing (writing), which is a compositional design act. The word "design" comes from Latin *designare*, meaning mark out, devise, choose. Already in this etymology there is an analytical act: to mark out is to select, to designate this element and not that one, to identify what matters in a field of possibilities. Related words, in the architectural world, deepen the picture. "Technology", from Greek *techne*, which is art, related to *techton*, the carpenter who transforms a material into a piece of art. And the archaic root of the word "art" carries the meaning of to join, which takes us very close to what the carpenter does: joining elements in order to build devices or pieces of art, for a particular purpose.

The project, from Latin *projectus*, from *pro* (forward) and *iactus* (thrown), is the act of throwing forward. But before this, it is necessary to see, anticipate, imagine. As Antonio Monestiroli wrote, "imagination, based on a rational analytical system, can produce architectural projects as a hypothesis of transformation of reality".[3] This echoes the general

[1] M. Iori, *Analisi architettonica e progettazione analitica*, CittàStudi, Torino 1995.
[2] G. Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, Penguin, London 1997, p. 13.
[3] A. Monestiroli, *Aldo Rossi e la Tendenza*, "Casabella" 2013, no. 831, p. 140.

doctrine embedded in the Modern Movement, as pointed out by Alain Colquhoun, consisting of the tension between technical/rational discipline and creative processes based on free expression and intuition.[4] So design, thanks to intuition and imagination, looks towards the future (the transformation of a given reality), but also moves toward the past: any act of design needs a precedent, an origin, a starting point and the past is a magnificent archive to look at. Henri Focillon defined the artist's community of affinities across time as a spiritual family: the artist inhabits a country in time that is by no means necessarily the history of his own time, and may select examples and models from the past, creating from them a new and complete world.[5] And design is an act of invention, which means, as we will see later, finding and using something that already exists, that belongs in and comes from this archive.



Ill. 1. Patrizio M. Martinelli, "Heritage", 2026

Techne as the art of joining is montage: its stratification and overlapping of elements and parts, coming from history or from the designer's personal archive, originate a new reality in which the value, as Karel Teige said, lies in the whole composition more than in the fragments of which it is composed, whether in a composite image (as in a collage, or montage) or in the actual construction of new elements alongside existing ones. The project, as a double look forward and backward simultaneously, is the retroactive operation; the design that throws forward is made from what was already there, latent in the archive. And this is

[4] A. Colquhoun, *Typology and Design Method*, "Arena" 1967, no. 83, pp. 71–74. Republished in: K. Nesbitt (ed.), *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture. An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965–1995*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1996.

[5] H. Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, Zone Books, New York 1989, pp. 134–154.

not a "retrospective" act: while this has the meaning of simply looking back to events, facts, works that were created in the past, "retroactive" has the component of "making," "doing," "acting." This is not a contemplative look but an active, operative attitude that transforms the fundamental moment of analysis and understanding in its formidable consequence: design.[6] And design as the act of marking out and choosing is the analytical phase of the methodology, the first move before any plan is drawn.

3. MONTAGE, ADAPTIVE REUSE, AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SPACE AND TIME

In the context of architecture, the term and concept of montage, often used as a synonym of collage, is relevant and appropriate. Starting from the 1920s, the reading and experience of the dimensions and complexities of the modern city needed a new tool, one that moved beyond the reassuring one-point perspective, traditional photography, literature, and cinema. Montage, in all its avantgarde disciplinary variations, became this new instrument, capable of dissecting and understanding the urban construction and experience, as expressed by Giedion, Döblin, Eisenstein, and Vertov. Montage, from the French *monter*, carries in its original technical sense the idea of "disposition of machine parts in a desired order":[7] it is, from the beginning, a constructive term, recovering the archaic sense of *techne* as joining, appropriate for a modern world informed by mechanisation ("the house as a machine for living in"). In this regard, the Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, an artist who practiced montage, was explicit: "we regarded ourselves as engineers, our work as construction."[8] In Gevork Hartoonian's terms, the disjoint, in architectural montage, as the seam that integrates material and detailing without concealing the fragmented process of construction distinguishes montage from mere composition.[9] The seam is visible and celebrated; the differences and frictions between components (being a Dadaist photomontage or an architectural space or detail) are not hidden but made productive, made into an experiential event.

Aligned with this theoretical and design trajectory, Italian academic and architect Gianugo Polesello argued that construction and composition result from a montage of elements and parts that may belong to different and distinct categories of things, "coexisting in a unitary world of architecture."[10] And heterogeneity is the essential condition of adaptive reuse: the existing fabric and the new intervention (in terms of architectural form and materiality), the trace of former use and the proposition of future occupation. These belong to different temporal orders, and montage holds them together without erasing their difference. Polesello is clear about this aspect when he describes his 1968 project for the renovation of the San Sabba Rice Mill as a museum in Trieste:

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[6] P.M. Martinelli, *Re-inventing the American Modern Interior: Visual Dissections and Retroactive Montages*, "Journal of Interior Design" 2019, no. 44(4), pp. 241–257.

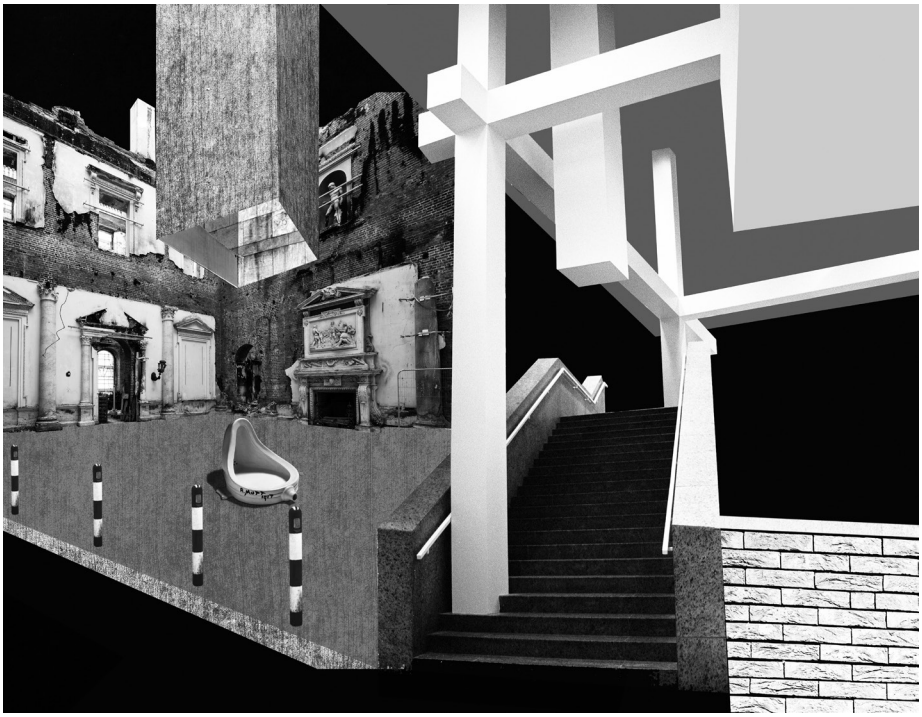
[7] E. Littre, *Dictionnaire de la langue francaise*, vol. 3, Hachette, Paris 1874, p. 614. Translation from French by the author.

[8] Quoted in: H. Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, Thames and Hudson, London 1964, p. 118.

[9] G. Hartoonian, *Ontology of Construction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 27.

[10] G. Polesello, *Il montaggio nella costruzione di architetture*, "Arc. Architettura Ricerca Composizione" 2000, no. 6, p. 2. Translation from Italian by the author.

> The term montage (…) designates the procedure through which every experience is realised. And one can see that montage is the montage of fragments and elements, both simple and complex, identifiable nonetheless in their completeness and in their value as sign. It is the transposition of these elements (from a repertoire that I would like to be increasingly limited) into a specific experience that guarantees their meaning (…). In any case, I insist on this point: architecture as a combination of already given elements.[11]

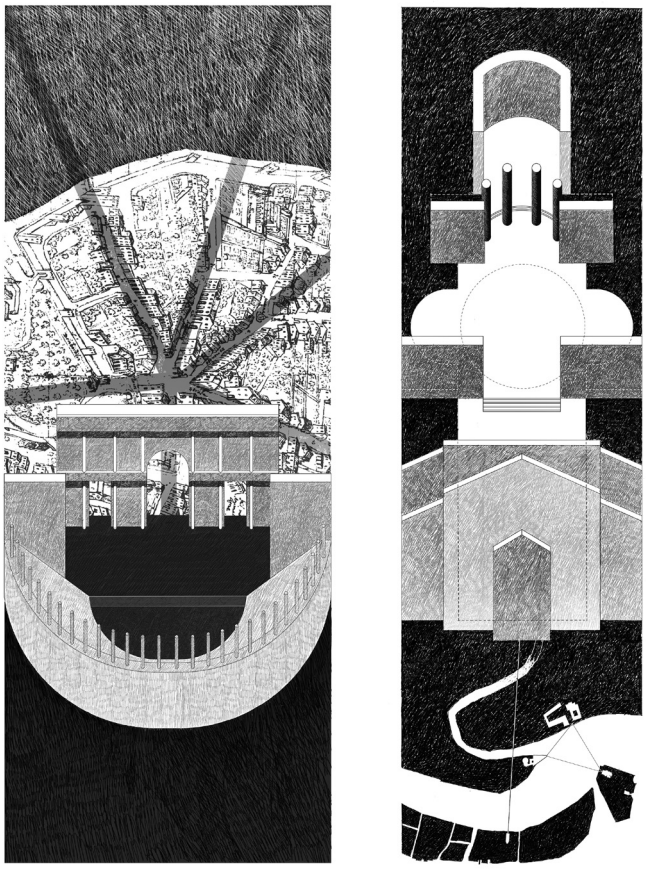


Ill. 2. Patrizio M. Martinelli, "Montage as Construction", 2026

Central to this approach is the concept of *invention* ("space as invention", as Perec would say), understood not as creation from nothing, but in its classical sense of *inventio*: the act of finding, or finding again, what already exists. This resonates with Palladio's design theory: the Renaissance master, in his treatises, never describes his work as *progetti* ("projects") or buildings, but as *invenzioni* ("inventions"), combinations of elements inherited from Roman antiquity, transfigured and adapted to new contexts, meanings, and experiences. Montage recovers that understanding as a design methodology: the architect selects, combines, transforms, reinvents. Montage is the technical and conceptual instrument through which this selection operates. In this sense, invention is reuse, and the implications of that equation extend, in the contemporary discourse, from spatial practice to ethics, sustainability, and cultural memory.[12]

[11] From Gianugo Polesello's description of the project in: C. Aymonino, *Progetto realizzato*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia 1980, p. 120. Translation from Italian by the author.

[12] G. Brooker, *The superREUSE Manifesto.* Routledge, Abingdon 2026.



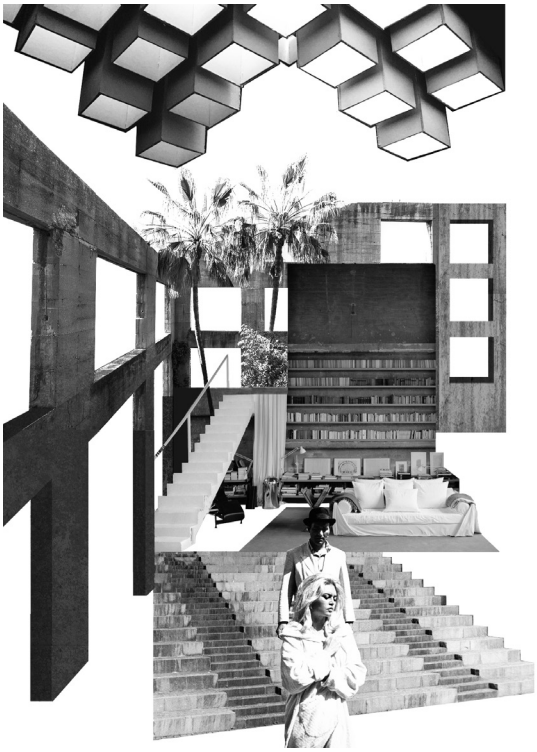
Ill. 3. Patrizio M. Martinelli, “Palladian Inventions”, 2024

What makes montage particularly powerful in adaptive reuse is its capacity to organise experience (as also alluded by Polesello) in time as well as space. Architecture, in an existing building, is experienced through movement in space as a composition of elements, scenes and events that blend old and new, and through movement in time, as the perception and evocation of memories, histories, and traces of the past. These sequences are assembled through what Eisenstein called conflict: “montage is conflict.”[13] Conflict of materiality, scale, volume, depth, of darkness and light, of an object and its dimensions, of an event and its duration; all dialectical tensions integral and intertwined with the essential element of time. The montage of old and new enables a non-linear chronological experience: the simultaneous perception of past, present, and even future. Through the intersection of physical and conceptual layers of time and space, montage is the tool for designing in the already built, where the experience of actual construction intertwines with the evocation of the intangible, the incomplete, and the unfinished.

[13] S. Eisenstein, ‘The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram’, [in:] J. Leyda (trans. and ed.), *Film Theory*, Harcourt, New York 1949, p. 99.

4. THE ELEMENTS OF ARCHITECTURE, THE BODY, AND THE COMPOSITION OF EXPERIENCE

Running through this understanding of montage is the body, and the "phenomena of perceptions", as Von Meiss defines the "pleasure of looking at, listening to, feeling, touching and moving through architecture," all through the elements of architecture.[14] Thomas Thiis-Evensen, in *Archetypes in Architecture*, argued that behind the plurality of historical forms lies a simple set of archetypes: wall, roof, floor.[15] These are formal categories, and at the same time they take into account the experience of the body. Each archetype encodes a primary physical experience of the world, expressed through the kinetic vocabulary of forces felt by the body: weight and support, rising and sinking, enclosure and opening. The floor is the act of standing on the earth, of establishing ground against gravity. The wall is the act of enclosure and defence, of marking the threshold between inside and outside. The roof is the act of sheltering, of standing between the body and the sky. Crucially, Thiis-Evensen shows that our experience of these archetypes is tied to our bodily knowledge of the world: we apply that knowledge to what we see, reading the wall's expression of weight, the roof's expression of support, and the floor's expression of resistance with the same body that has experienced gravity, enclosure, and shelter throughout a lifetime.



Ill. 4. Patrizio M. Martinelli, "The House of Elements", 2022

[14] P. von Meiss, *Elements of Architecture. From Form to Place*, E & FN Spon, London 1991, p. 15.
[15] T. Thiis-Evensen, *Archetypes in Architecture*, Scandinavian University Press, Oslo 1987.

Steen Eiler Rasmussen, in *Experiencing Architecture*, deepened this through a full phenomenological account of the sensory register through which architecture is received: solids and cavities, rhythm, scale and proportion, textural effects, daylight, colour, and hearing.[16] Architecture, he argued, is the art of playing with solids and cavities, and his distinction between solid-minded and cavity-minded design captures precisely the experiential difference between a space carved from mass and one enclosed by surfaces. The haptic, the acoustic, the thermal are not secondary to the visual. Rasmussen was making this argument in 1959, against the increasing abstraction of late modernism: it is no less necessary now.

Montage, operating on Thiis-Evensen's archetypes, read through bodily experience, and Rasmussen's sensory register, produces a specific kind of architectural experience. It assembles elements in space and time simultaneously: and in the adaptation and renovations of sites, contexts, building, the existing, with its material memory and specific history of weight and enclosure and shelter, is brought into productive collision with new interventions that reinvent those same archetypes in unexpected configurations. The body moving through this montaged space experiences a field of layered meanings held in tension, in which the familiar and the transformed are simultaneously present.

5. MONTAGE AS PROJECT: OHRID NAUTICAL CLUB

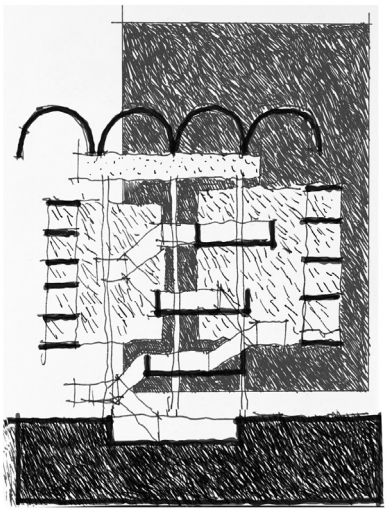
The competition project I developed for the Ohrid Nautical Club, shortlisted as a finalist in an international competition, demonstrates the montage methodology at the scale of architectural practice.[17] The site is a derelict 1950s modernist structure on the shores of Lake Ohrid in North Macedonia. The project reads the existing building as a "Villa Savoye interrupted": a structure resembling Le Corbusier's masterpiece and its principles, but containing within its incomplete skeleton the ghost of a spatial proposition never fully realised. The strategy is rooted in a respectful understanding of the building as it stands and as it was originally conceived, with the goal of reactivating it not only functionally but also in its figurative aspects, through montage of architectural elements drawn from the modernist archive, completing and emphasising what exists, what is missing, and what was incomplete or unrealised in its original inception. The analytical montage, the composite image layering the existing fabric with the spatial ideas latent within it, is the first design act.

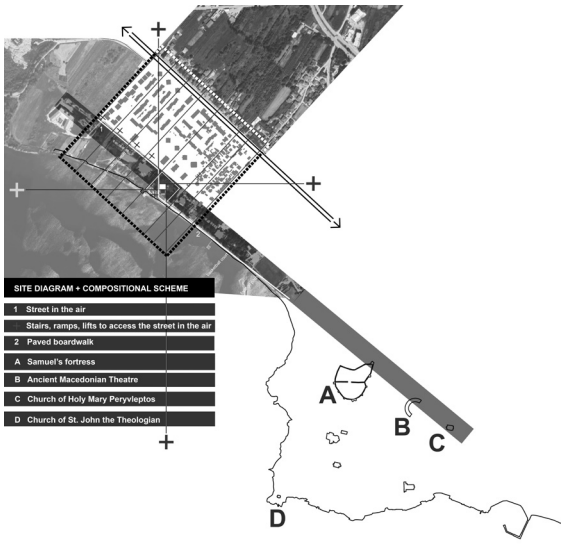
The floor is the first reinvention. The ground floor is sculpted as a bas-relief *Raumplan*, the ground becoming a landscape, reminiscent of Adolphe Appia's stage designs and the conversation pits of Saarinen and Eames. In Thiis-Evensen's vocabulary, this is the floor as expression of invitation and descent, directing the body downward, gathering it into relationship with others and with the earth and the outdoor landscape. In Rasmussen's terms, the solid of the existing concrete slab is carved into a cavity, changing the haptic register of the space as the body stands, seats, and descends. The *plan libre*, enabled by the existing Corbusian Dom-Ino structure kept and revealed, is here a formal principle and a bodily invitation of exploration of space and time.

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[16] S.E. Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1959.

[17] *Savoye Interrupted: Elements/Montage/Adaptive Reuse*, entry for the International Design Competition Nautical Club Ohrid, organised by Terraviva Competitions, 2024.





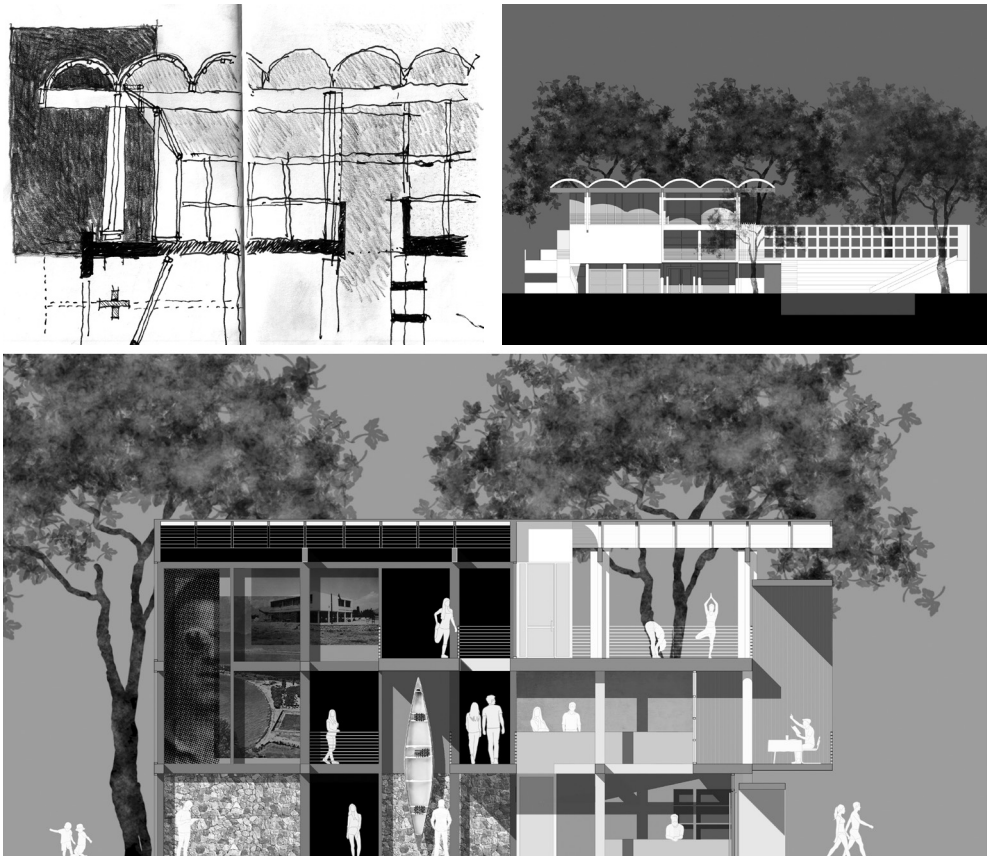
Ill. 5. Patrizio M. Martinelli, "The Elements of Architecture", study, 2023
Ill. 6. Patrizio M. Martinelli, "Nautical Club Ohrid" competition entry, 2024. General plan

The wall is reinvented as an equipped thickness, as a tribute to the explorations of Kahn. Installed alongside the existing stone wall, preserved and celebrated, a three-storey inhabited wall serves as the backbone of the interior experience. Visible from every floor, it functions as a monumental cabinet of curiosities, hosting exhibitions that celebrate the character and history of place, building, and architect. In Thiis-Evensen's terms, this is the wall as threshold made thick: a boundary between interior spaces, a theatrical backdrop for the activities and the images and fragments that it exhibits, a "space-container" in itself. In Rasmussen's terms, the visitor, walking along the wall, reads the grain of the existing stone against the precision of the new insertions, old and new held in productive collision ("conflict" in Eisenstein's terms) at every point of contact. Moving through the building becomes an act of reading and understanding.

The roof is reinvented as a large, detached structure, supported by composite cross-shaped timber columns, sheltering the modern ruin without enclosing it. Inspired by Le Corbusier's early solutions for Villa Shodan, where he reinvents, as a suspended concrete roof, the theme of the Catalan vault, it completes the existing building while reintroducing the idea of inhabiting the roof plane as in Villa Savoye and the Unité d'Habitation. In Thiis-Evensen's terms, the detachment holds in tension two primary experiences of the roof: shelter and release simultaneously. In Rasmussen's terms, the gap through which light falls and air moves, along with the compression/release sequence, is a sensory event, changing the experiential register as the body moves from beneath the timber structure into the open air beyond.

The overall layout follows a pinwheel composition, a hallmark of modernist planning found in Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital and Saarinen's Miller House, generating a centrifugal spatial energy. The body at the centre is always oriented, always aware of its position in relation to the whole and to the natural landscape, its facilities, the lake, and the exterior. Taken together, the sculpted floor, the inhabited wall, and the detached roof are

spatial propositions stated in the language of Thiis-Evensen's archetypes, assembled through montage, and calibrated through Rasmussen's sensory register to produce specific bodily encounters with space and time: the floor as an invitation to descend and gather, the wall as an invitation to move and read, the roof as an invitation to rise and open.



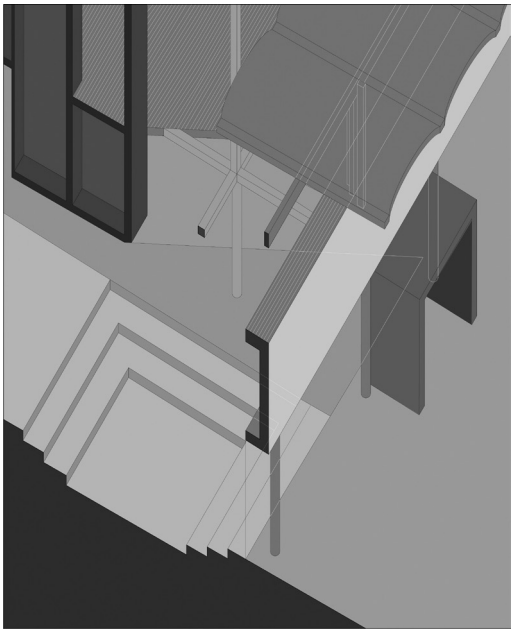
Ill. 7. Patrizio M. Martinelli, "Nautical Club Ohrid" competition entry, 2024. Study sketch
Ill. 8. Patrizio M. Martinelli, "Nautical Club Ohrid" competition entry, 2024. Façade
Ill. 9. Patrizio M. Martinelli, "Nautical Club Ohrid" competition entry, 2024. Section

6. CONCLUSION

The intervention in existing structures, their renovation, adaptation, and reinvention, bears a significant analogy to the compositional strategies of collage, as Fred Scott argues in On Altering Architecture. Scott describes collage as "assimilation of disparate elements into a resolution where the parts work together while maintaining their own identity".[18] As stressed in the preceding discussion, montage is a more appropriate theoretical and design tool than

[18] F. Scott, *On Altering Architecture*, Routledge, Abingdon 2008, p. 137.

collage for describing the practice of architecture and in particular the adaptive reuse of derelict structures. Given the manifold crises we face today, limiting new construction and working on the existing is imperative, preserving and adapting the building stock, from historic heritage buildings to the more banal, commercial, and unlisted structures. Engaging with the cinematic composition of spatial and temporal sequences explored by avantgarde artists, montage strongly refers to elements that are not just physical and tangible, but also evocative and intangible. And grounded in the concept of construction, as expressed by Polesello, in a trajectory that originates from the work and theories of Andrea Palladio, montage relates to the necessity of reusing "what is already there" in the historical and theoretical archive. Now, looking forward, at this critical moment in history, when it is essential to limit new material extraction and production, the architect must also draw on the repository of structural components, building elements, and even finishing materials, that can be disassembled, dissected, reused, repurposed, recycled, and eventually re-assembled in new compositions,[19] as Rotor, Bellastock and Assemble demonstrate in their practice. Montage, in these terms, in both the critical dissection and subsequent re-composition phases, reasserts the irreducible role of cultural memory, compositional judgement, historical intelligence and ethical responsibility, in the celebration of what exists, paired with the making of a new space which is functionally used, contemplated and actively experienced in all its dimensions.



Ill. 10. Patrizio M. Martinelli, "Nautical Club Ohrid" competition entry, 2024. Elements and tectonic figures

[19] "When SuperREUSE takes place, stripping out, clarifying, and sometimes demolishing takes place. However, it is never wholesale and is never without redistribution of its materials, through material passporting and salvaging. Erasure and deletion in the 21st century must address the streams of waste, linearity, and respond to circular economies of processes and working.", G. Brooker, *op. cit.*, pp. 177–178.

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[4] Eisenstein S., *The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram*, [in:] J. Leyda (trans. and ed.), *Film Theory, Harcourt*, New York 1949, pp. 90–103.
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