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OLD BUILDINGS AND NEW FINALITIES

DAWNE OBIEKTY I NOWE CELE

Abstract

To talk about the theme that this seminar has adopted, I am going to refer to a finished work, namely, the project to restore the Austrian fort of Colle delle Benne at Levico Terme, spotlighting some of the underlying ideas and compositional themes which steered it.
For me, a restoration project in which old buildings indisputably predominate is essentially architectural in nature, and as a result, getting to know the monument, its architecture, history, structure, essence and substance, through a critical analysis of the entire complex, location, and landscape, is a fundamental issue. That said, the analytical aspect never suffices and does not directly provide the project's method, since this requires imagination. Whether it concerns the restoration of an existing building or a new build, an architectural project requires identification of a theme, an idea that supports it.

Keywords: *composition, mise-en-scène, restoration, sensations, utility and beauty*

Streszczenie

Aby omówić temat przyjęty w ramach niniejszego seminarium, autor odwoła się do ukończonego dzieła – projektu renowacji austriackiego fortu Colle delle Benne w Levico Terme – naświetlając wybrane koncepcje oraz motywy kompozycyjne, które nim kierowały.
Według autora projekt renowacji, z wyraźną przewagą dawnej zabudowy, ma w gruncie rzeczy charakter architektoniczny. W konsekwencji kluczowe stają się: poznanie zabytku, jego architektury, historii, struktury, istoty i materii poprzez krytyczną analizę całego kompleksu, jego lokalizacji oraz krajobrazu. Niemniej jednak sam aspekt analityczny nigdy nie jest wystarczający i nie wyznacza bezpośrednio metody projektowej, gdyż ta wymaga wyobraźni. Niezależnie od tego, czy chodzi o renowację istniejącego budynku, czy o nową realizację, projekt architektoniczny wymaga określenia motywu przewodniego – idei, na której się opiera.

Słowa kluczowe: *kompozycja, mise en scène, renowacja, użyteczność i piękno, wrażenia*

To talk about the theme that this seminar has adopted – "Architecture and Experience" – I am going to refer to a finished project to restore a former Austrian fort (now in Italian territory) dating to the late 19th century.[1]

[1] The Austrian fort *Werk Colle delle Benne* or *Forte San Biagio* is located at Levico Terme (Trento), in Northern Italy. The intervention was part of a development project sponsored by the Province of Trento aimed at the recovery, study, knowledge and valorisation of assets related to the First World War and has taken the name "The Great War Project".

I would like to start with a question I was asked some time ago at a conference on the subject of restoring fortifications, namely: "How do you deal with pre-existing fortified buildings".[2] For me, a restoration project in which old buildings indisputably predominate is essentially architectural in nature, and as a result, getting to know the monument, its architecture, history, structure, essence and substance, through a critical analysis of the entire complex, location, and landscape, is a fundamental issue. That said, the analytical aspect never suffices and does not directly afford the project's method, since this requires imagination. Whether it concerns the restoration of an existing building or a new-build, an architectural project requires identification of a theme, an idea that supports it.

The project should therefore be backed by a theme, an idea, which allows one to decide on and choose the project's modus operandi, which is certainly not resolved by a summation of analytical data that lead to a result. In architecture, thematisation distances itself from *functionalism* and raises the question of the character and finality of the buildings in question. A building lacking a particular theme, character, and theoretical foundations is a piece of architecture devoid of sense and meaning, serving its function and no more**.** In fact, *character* is what constitutes the evocative and emotional part of a design invention. More specifically, architecture responds to *finalities*, and not only to *goals* (the function) – finalities which are the *raison d'être* of its being architecture, that is, which represent its meaning. It is essential to be aware of the nature of things and to try and represent them.

The architectural project is therefore about the implementation and staging of these values.

Projects stage an idea of architecture through the themes chosen and it is precisely in the staging of the sensations it is intended to evoke that the narrative dimension of projects is expressed. Moreover, a monument must last over time; its ability to evoke and recall must never wane and that "block of sensations" which bolsters it, made visible by the form, must continue to be evocative.

Without pretending to construct a universally valid theory, but for those who believe in an idea of rational architecture, it seems to me that E.L. Boullée in his *Architecture. Essay on Art* identified the central question, in his recognition of an "emotional nucleus of reference"[3] that steers a project and the search for the appropriate forms to represent it.

The moment of formalising the theme or themes of a project is part of the mental and ordering process, that is, the *composition*. Like any other architectural project, a restoration is therefore about the architectural composition. The objective of composition is the production of form. The space of the architectural composition is a concrete space of figuration, where diverse elements are given order. As Le Corbusier stated in the *Défense de l'architecture*, "Architecture is a phenomenon of creation which follows an order. Whoever talks of ordering talks of composing".

To answer the question posed initially with greater precision, I will therefore refer, as already mentioned, to the restoration project of the Austrian fort of Colle delle Benne at Levico Terme, which I recently completed, spotlighting the underlying ideas and compositional themes which steered it.

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[2] *InFORT – architettura fortificata e progetto contemporaneo: tutela, composizione e restauro*, a cycle of meetings, supervised by: Mariotti C. and Pintus V., with Giannattasio C. and Ugolini A., 2020.

[3] A. Rossi, *Introduzione a Boullée*, [in:] É.-L. Boullée, *Architettura saggio sull'arte*, Marsilio, Padova 1967, p. 15.

The *Werk Colle delle Benne* or *Forte San Biagio* is located on a natural terrace overlooking Levico Terme, its lake, and the *Werk Tenna*; these two forts constitute the 'Tenna Barrier' and control access to the city of Trento from the Upper Sugana Valley. Of the same type as Fort Tenna, it was built in the same years, between 1884 and 1890; a plan of the fort dated 1889 establishes the probable end of the works. It underwent a profound revamp and modernisation between 1900 and 1914, and then, in 1915, considered inadequate against the power of modern artillery, it was definitively decommissioned and at the outbreak of the Italo-Austrian conflict was used as an observatory and depot.

It was designed following the techniques, criteria and architectural solutions of mountain fortifications, the *Gebirgsforts*, which characterised the third phase of the Austrian fortifications built between 1883 and 1900 in Trentino. These mountain forts are identified with the creator of this type, Colonel Julius Vogl, who established the design invariants by defining a type of compact and unitary fortress (*Einheitswerk*) of an impenetrable character, aimed at responding, in the first instance, to the needs posed by the new military defence systems of that time.

These forts all have a unitary layout in which the various parts and the formal and functional elements that create the unity are easily identified. They are characterised by flexible construction solutions (such as the use of rough stone found on site) and are defined through a composition of spaces and fixed themes that can be adapted to the most diverse conditions: the casemates for the troops and those for the cannon, the *poterna*, the pillbox, and other spaces were redesigned each time in relation to functional, strategic, and topographic requirements.

Let us now digress to look at the question of *type*. Reasoning on the type is necessary but in itself not sufficient, especially if it concerns indicating a modus operandi for the project. If the recourse to type means getting to know the building by comparing it to a group of works of architecture that can be traced back to the same type, then these lines of reasoning are welcome. As we know, the most important issue when dealing with a project involving "old buildings" is to be thoroughly familiar with the monument. In his teachings, Ambrogio Annoni indicated a direct interrogation of the monument as an interpretative key: the monument as a structural fact, before being a historical document and an expression of art. Specifying the monument as "the master", he then introduced the "case-by-case" theory,[4] highlighting the uniqueness of the buildings involved. The reasoning on type is necessary, even if each building is "unique".

In this case, the Fort is a casemated work and has an irregular pentagonal ground plan with a deep moat surrounding it on all sides. It is formed by the juxtaposition of two buildings, the first being identified with the casemates for lodgings to the west, the second with a space for armoured casemates housing cannon to the south.

At the point where the two buildings meet is the staircase, the real pivot of the site plan. The top storey of the two buildings then describes a triangular courtyard.

The heavy stone walls, of varying thicknesses, are made from schist (found on site) with irregular ashlars, as are the lowered barrel vaults, which describe the roofs of the casemates. Some important details of the façades are in porphyry (such as the jack arches of the windows and main door), while some of the coping is in granite. The sloping casemates of the gun emplacements featured iron shielding and are still protected by a wall surfaced in square granite ashlars.

[4] A. Annoni, *Scienza ed arte del restauro architettonico. Idee ed esempi*, Framar, Milan 1946, p. 76.

The frontal protection consisted of hemispherical metal armour, covered on the outside by large granite ashlars arranged so as to reveal only the thickest portion around the loophole. Two revolving armoured domes for mortars were placed side by side behind the façade housing the cannon.

The project took the building as a monument, intended, to quote Ernesto Nathan Rogers, as being any work created by man "where a reconciliation of utility and beauty is achieved".[5] A "real monument of the landscape", where the "fascination of the monument becomes the real compositional and cultural pretext". In line with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's thinking, the monument-fort is proposed in a way as to arouse sensations; the project seeks to understand the nature of the monument as a "block of sensations".[6]

For me, the identification of a "block of sensations", of an "emotional nucleus" as Boullée indicated, should be the fundamental issue for a project; what sustains it, precisely because a monument is also expressed through narration and fabulation.

Consequently, one thematic issue is the relationship of the monument to today's landscape.

Due to its geographical position and architectural form, this Fort has always represented an outpost to control the landscape. Restoring the Fort also meant re-establishing its meaning and keeping alive the feeling, while caring for the places and the landscape through a material symbol. The Fort could thus become, from an apparent and obsolete military machine, a defence mechanism for the landscape and the memory of the places it symbolically defends, welcoming visitors and steering their gaze towards the forms of the horizons it frames. It is undoubtedly a formidable example of architecture, a military machine, a structural fact of great value in representing an exemplary model of stereotomic construction and which therefore deserved to be rebuilt, given its former state of preservation.

Indeed, it was in a condition of severe degradation but essentially intact in its volume: the powerful stone wall structure that characterises it was sufficiently complete, despite some collapses and localised fractures. The fallen stone blocks also seemed to be calling out with their presence at the site, as if disposed to be reused for reconstruction.

In fact, these blocks had not fallen due to any bloody events; the Fort is a "celibate" machine; it has never "fought", it has not suffered any "wounds" other than those due to neglect and abandonment. War wounds cannot be erased, but neglect can be remedied without erasing the traces of time and history.

The project staged an idea of architecture and landscape that was expressed through the theme of "seeing without being seen", as Ildebrando Clemente had already written about this project: "In the staging of this sensation, the narrative dimension of this restoration is expressed […] The theme of hidden architecture, of an architecture that becomes invisible, is one of the main characteristics of military architecture (…)"[7] for the Fort "we can speak of an invisibility directly proportional to the power of observation that its position incorporates and disposes of with respect to the surrounding landscape".

These themes (the suggestion of the monument, its stereotomic nature) present compositional aspects which the project strove to define. A clarification of the severe and impenetrable character of such a "stone fortress" was intended to be appropriate to the nature of the building and its reinterpreted reality. The Fort has been covered and protected by a metal

[5] E.N. Rogers, *Esperienza dell'architettura* (2nd ed.), Skira, Milan 1997, pp. 164–179.
[6] D. Deleuze, Guattari F., *Che cos'è la filosofia*, Einaudi, Torino 2002, pp. 166, 201.
[7] I. Clemente, *Un blocco di sensazioni*, (unpublished text at the press).

apparatus, similar to the way it was protected before the original covering was removed; the roof, in addition to protecting the walls from water, underscores and substantiates the idea of "seeing without being seen".

The idea of the metal armour evokes "the problem of concealing a military building", which at the same time was intended to be seen as an unassailable place, and also highlights its recognisable "Fortification Form". The reconstructed Fort displays its stereotomic nature, the strength of the construction being even more evident inside where the plaster has flaked off. The sensations obtained from these walls that have acquired a new life identify yet another theme.

Particular attention focused on respecting a perceived atmosphere (*stimmung*). The walls, materials, and spaces (both inside and outside) have taken on that peculiar beauty created by time, by adversity, and by multiple human emotions, as Marguerite Yourcenar observed[8] when speaking of other "walls" (portraits of Piranesi's walls) that seem to have impregnated these very stones with themselves. The weather and chronological time have left significant stratifications; the restoration has not erased these traces, trying to preserve the "romantic" aspect and its expressive force. Preserving an atmosphere also means (formally) conserving the hard, essential, severe, austere character of the place, which also affected the choice of materials to be used.

The architectural and structural complexity of the Fort led the design to adopt a principle of clarity in the use of different building materials that would integrate well with both its external and internal appearance, using material and formal restoration for some of its almost completely intact parts and material and formal analogy for others wherever the original form was no longer verifiable.

The Fort was also covered and protected by a metal roof, similar to how it must have been before this was "taken away". The roofing system is ventilated and consists of a finishing mantle in titanium zinc laminated sheets.

The armoured domes, the armoured emplacement, the searchlight platform and the chimneys have been reconstructed through a principle of abstraction, to yield an evocative image.

Inside the Fort, the collapsed parts were rebuilt and consolidated, while both the walls and the lowered stone vaults were stuccoed and cleaned; the plasterwork has not been restored: the strength and form of the stereometric construction is thus shown in all its essence and beauty. The missing floors have been partially rebuilt where necessary to allow visitors to walk through the spaces of the Fort again and in the spaces where displays are planned. Meanwhile, as far as the windows and doors of the building are concerned, these try to restore a plausible imagery deduced from historical photographs of contemporary buildings.

The gun emplacements, closed by steel and glass windows, can become observation points of the landscape by means of telescopes.

In the courtyard is a new staircase which allows visitors to walk across the roofs and ends above the armoured emplacement, to become a privileged observation deck. For the staircase and the elevated walkway, a simple structure was created from steel sections.

The western exit of the riflemen's gallery was restored and then protected by a turret, as it "might have been". Its truncated cone shape refers to known architectural figures. The

[8] M. Yourcenar, *Un baule e un imperatore. Storia di un libro*, [in:] M. Yourcenar (ed.), *Ad Occhi Aperti*, Bompiani, Milano 1989. p. 120.

turret is conceived as a "temporary" construction and has been made using a steel structure, filled with wooden slats then clad and protected by metal sheeting.

The toilets and a service room have been placed at the entrance to the Fort area. These are located in a small stone building with a wooden and zinc sheet roof of simple rational shapes, which stands at the intersection of two of the stone retaining walls.

Aside from the reconstruction of the collapsed parts, the restoration work on the Fort necessarily followed a principle of analogy and not some unconvincing attempt to reconstruct the missing parts in the name of "how it was and where it was". The restoration project adhered to the "case-by-case" theory, the only theory that considers the building – the monument – first and foremost a structural fact and document to be respected, from which to learn and with which to relate (as Ambrogio Annoni advised) over and above any ideological choices and regulatory constraints.

Once the reconstruction had been decided, we were presented with a very tricky task: to represent the life inside the fort. It was a complex and "slippery" theme which we addressed through a theatrical artifice, namely, transforming the casemates into "miniature theatres". The attempt was to reproduce (stage) slices of everyday life, in fragments, in some symbolic and significant glimpses. These interiors act as memory machines, referring to a story through some fixed scenes in which the spectator-visitor participates in a performance: places where the world of imagination begins and active memory work becomes possible.

Even the telescopes that we have placed to match the openings, where the cannon were originally positioned, help to highlight that already mentioned sensation of "seeing, without being seen".

The restoration of Forte San Biagio was a unique opportunity for a recovery aimed at the typological conservation and enhancement of this important example of fortified architecture. This monument should be visited to try and grasp first of all its construction history and then, through the installations, to corroborate the defence techniques and operations of daily life that must have taken place inside the Fort.

The project therefore seeks to fuse a reasonable and sensible restoration and a reconstruction of defence techniques and daily life, as it must have been lived inside the Fort. The exhibition proposes a place where objects and reconstructions are shown through the mediation of theatre, a theatrical fiction, without altering the architecture of the interiors since the latter are an unadorned monument to material culture, an architectural and structural fact of enormous value.

Forte delle Benne is to be visited for what it is, for what it represents, thus transcending the ambiguous concept of repurposing.

These are the founding aspects of the project that sought to define its nature and clarify its identity. The issues which interest and ultimately fascinate me most when I find myself working on a new project – be it a new building or an old building – concern the identification of a theme, an idea; the fine-tuning and clarification of the inherent character. After all, it is the idea that keeps a building alive over time.

Therefore, it is the question of finality that is central to compositional-design choices, as Kant wrote: "Beauty is the form of the finality of an object, in so far as this is perceived in it without any representation of a purpose".[9]

[9] I. Kant, *Critica del Giudizio* (8th ed.), Laterza, Bari 1995, p. 65.

This is a kind of research in which the idea of architecture with an evocative value, a rediscovered architecture, expands the intelligibility of the work and opens up further avenues of interpretation through the analogical dimension of projects capable of proposing an alternative to reality, through imagination.

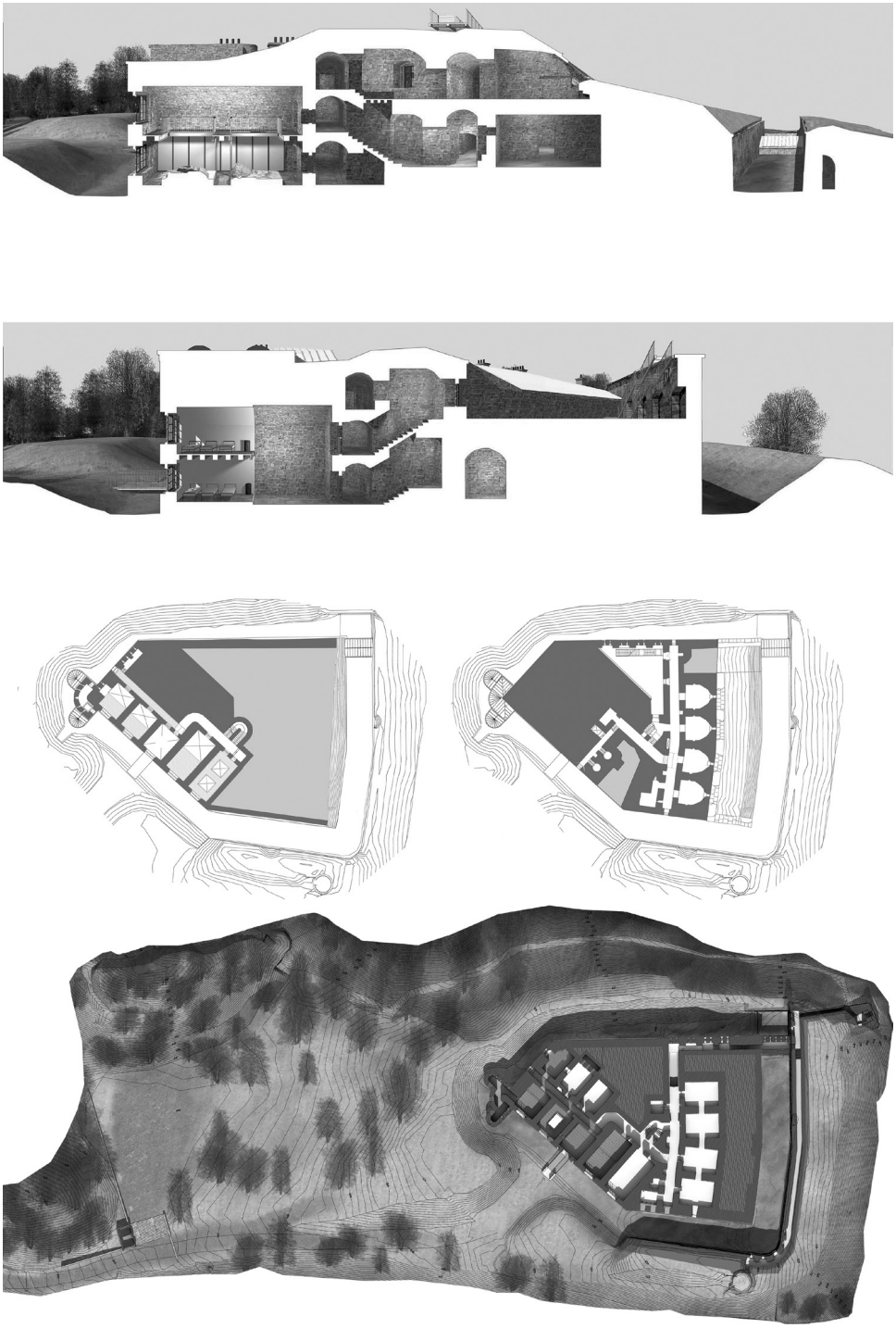
The predefined objective which accompanies my research and becomes the common denominator of my projects is always the same: to respond to needs, while pursuing the construction of a useful beauty.



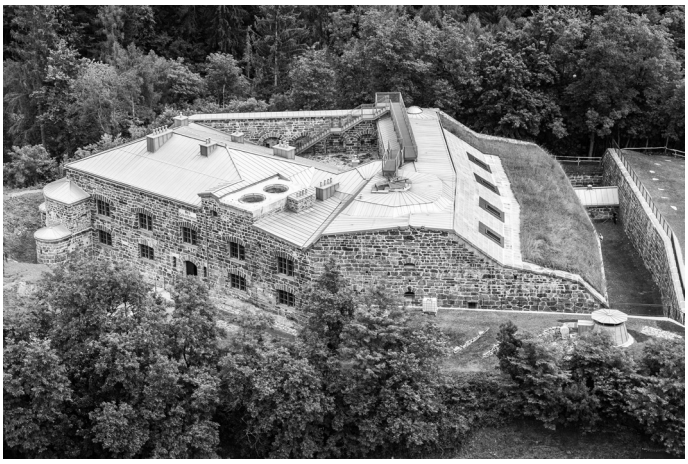
Ill. 1. Photomontage of the gun casemate converted into an observation point



Ill. 2. Aerial view from the north, with Lake Levico and the Valsugana Valley in the background (photo: Studio Rensi)



Ill. 3. Perspective sections; first and second floor plans; ground-floor plan (site plan)



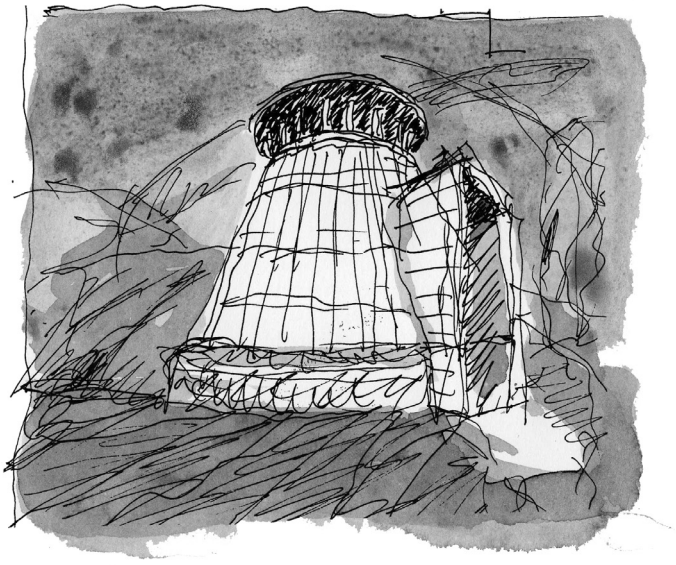
Ill. 4. Aerial view from the west (photo: Studio Rensi)



Ill. 5. View of the roofs towards the panoramic walkway (photo: Daniele De Lonti)



Ill. 6. View of the roofs from the panoramic walkway towards the Alpine landscape (photo: Daniele De Lonti)



Ill. 7. Study drawing of the turret at the end of the rifle gallery



Ill. 8. The reconstructed rifle turret (photo: Gino Malacarne)



Ill. 9. View from the south (photo: Daniele De Lonti)



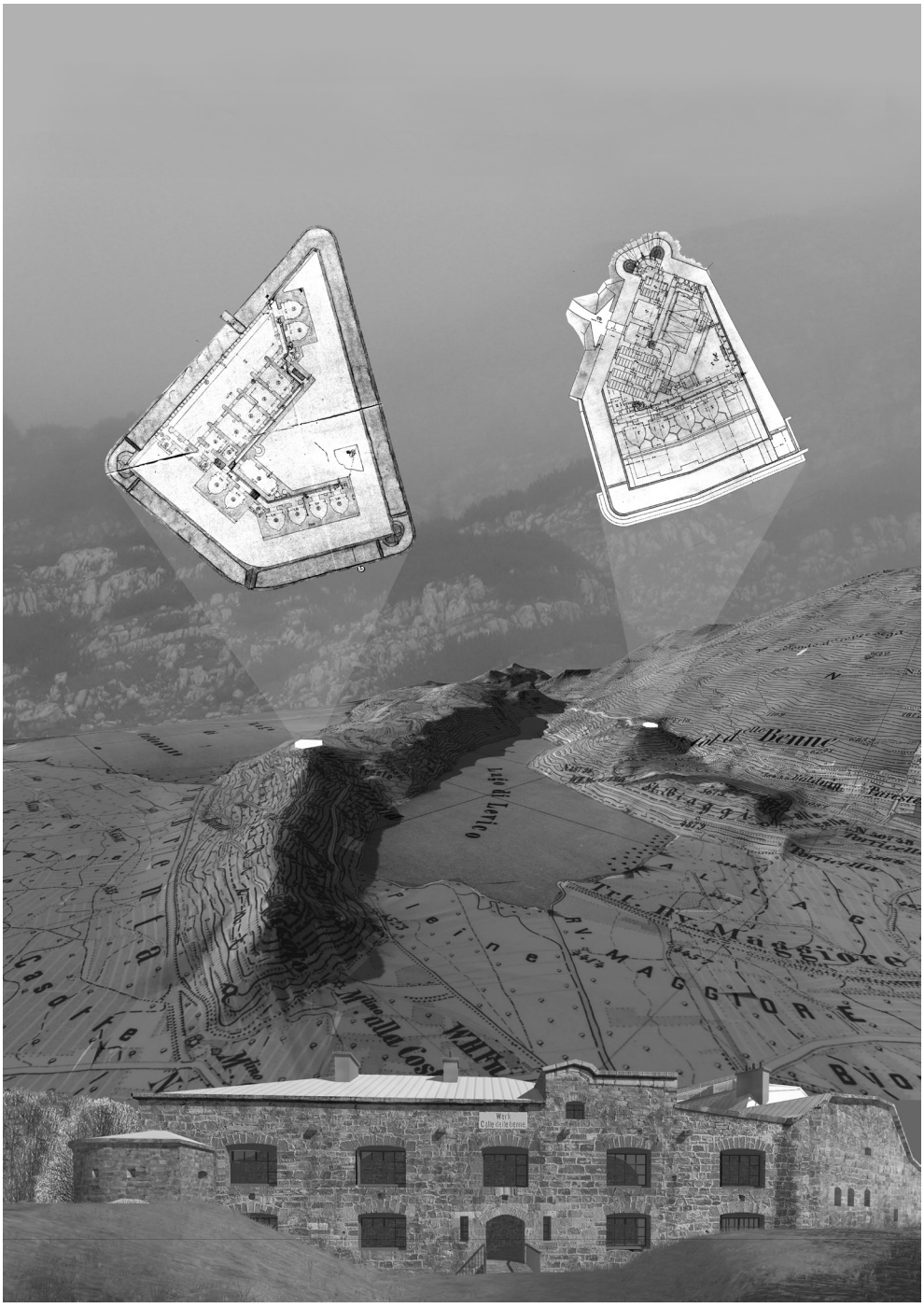
Ill. 10. Exhibition installation inside an armoured casemate (photo: Gino Malacarne)



Ill. 11. Theatrical installation inside a casemate used as troop quarters (photo: Daniele De Lonti)



Ill. 12. Exhibition installation inside a casemate (photo: Daniele De Lonti)



Ill. 13. Composition: Lake Levico viewed from the south (from the Valsugana Valley), with Forte Tenna on the left and Forte delle Benne on the right; below, the entrance facade

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[1] Annoni A., *Scienza ed arte del restauro architettonico. Idee ed esempi*, Framar, Milan 1946.

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[8] Yourcenar M., *Un baule e un imperatore. Storia di un libro*, [in:] M. Yourcenar (ed.), *Ad Occhi Aperti,* Bompiani, Milano 1989.

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