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ILDEBRANDO CLEMENTE
ORCID: 0000-0003-3098-1906
University of Bologna, Italy

THE POWER OF EXPERIENCE

SIŁA DOŚWIADCZENIA

Abstract

This paper explores the connection between architecture and the uncanny experience, using the Semerani House in Conconello (Trieste) as a primary case study. Through a phenomenological and philosophical inquiry, the study draws on the Delphic maxim *Know Thyself*, as well as Platonic, Socratic, and Nietzschean concepts, to analyze how architectural space influences self-awareness. Research shows that the house acts as a symbolic threshold and an oracular space where spatial movement fosters inner transformation. It follows that the experience of architecture serves as a revelatory force that redefines human identity.

Keywords: *architectural theory, oracular site, Semerani House, uncanny space*

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje problem związku między architekturą a doświadczeniem niesamowitości, wykorzystując Dom Semeraniego w Conconello (Triest) jako główny przedmiot analizy. W ramach dociekań fenomenologicznych i filozoficznych w badaniu wykorzystano delficką maksymę „Poznaj samego siebie", a także koncepcje platońskie, sokratejskie i nietzscheańskie, aby przeanalizować wpływ przestrzeni architektonicznej na samoświadomość. W wyniku badań udało się określić, że dom służy jako symboliczny próg oraz przestrzeń o charakterze wyroczni, w której ruch przez przestrzeń sprzyja wewnętrznej przemianie. Wynika z tego, że doświadczenie architektury pełni funkcję siły objawiającej, która na nowo określa ludzką tożsamość.

Słowa kluczowe: *Dom Semeraniego, miejsce wyroczni, przestrzeń niesamowita, teoria architektury*

1. THE SEMERANI HOUSE: TOPOGRAPHY, ARCHITECTURAL PROMENADE, AND RHYTHMIC EXPERIENCE

There is a house in the hills of Trieste, in a village called Conconello, that exudes a certain allure which I believe is key to understanding some of the connections between architecture and experience. The house was built in the late 1960s by the then-young architects Luciano Semerani and Gigetta Tamaro for Semerani's parents. In my opinion, this house manages to penetrate our mental and emotional world, making itself felt as a presence capable of offering us a unique life experience: an estranging experience.

First and foremost, I believe that the architecture of the Semerani House inspires us to strive for the recognition of the reality of architecture. In other words, it shows us an opportunity to organize a range of material and spiritual possibilities – to bring them together

and transform them into the object known as *home* – and, consequently, to engage with it in the pursuit of an authentic experience. This involves something that goes beyond mere objective data, something that compels us to embrace and internalize a poetic dimension of architectural experience. What is poetic about the Semerani house? Home is a constant up and down, back and forth, above and below, from one side to the other: a continuous series of ascents and descents along trails and stairways that wind in a linear and meandering pattern. In other words, it is as if there were a mental process of continuously defining space in relation to one's own movement, and at the same time, this movement seems to be fueled by the desire to transcend the boundaries it establishes from one moment to the next.[1] It is this rhythmic vitality that makes the Semerani house a place where the intensity and energy of a foreign presence are palpable. What contributes to the perception of this enigmatic energy?

The Semerani house is situated on a sloping lot, within a plot shaped like an inverted T. The building is positioned at the intersection of the two arms of the T and divides the lot into three distinct areas: a first area, where the staircase leading to the main entrance is located, and two areas situated further down, which for convenience we can call the *ancient garden* and the *original garden*. Given the unique topographical conditions of the lot, the design of the staircases plays a crucial role in the overall design concept. In other words, the staircases do not merely serve to connect the different levels of the house in relation to the slope of the hill; they are also treated as a genuine visual element. Overall, then, this arrangement of staircases creates a true architectural promenade capable of evoking a ceremonial atmosphere, much like a path carved, step by step, into the solid mass of karst rock. As can be seen from the images, each staircase, when considered as a standalone figure, never unfolds completely in a linear fashion. It is as if each staircase were endowed with its own landscape and, at the same time, actively contributed to the creation of a broader, more complex landscape capable of evoking a playful or pseudo-liturgical journey. Furthermore, when viewed as a whole, the composition of the staircases is reminiscent of both a work of land-art and the structure of a primitive topographical landscape. In other words, the system of staircases reveals itself as a simulation of experience, as the rediscovery of an ancient and mysterious pre-existence. It is a presence brimming with energy that suddenly draws us in. In this way, in addition to serving a practical function, the staircase's design also takes on symbolic significance, transforming the home and its surroundings into an almost mythical and archaic place.[2]

The simplicity, immediacy, and potential for the upward and downward movements to simultaneously reverse – characteristic of staircases – are, according to many authors, undoubtedly the basis for the ease with which humans have used the image of the staircase to express metaphors linked to the desire for transformation and elevation of their own experience and existential condition.

Certainly, the imagery of the ladder in Jacob's dream (Genesis 28) offers us an opportunity to grasp the symbolic aspect of the image of the ladder. Along Jacob's ladder, we observe the angels coming and going, ascending and descending, between this world and

[1] On the connections between space, body, spirit, and the experience of architecture, see: I. Clemente, *Toccare lo spazio*, [in:] C. Gandolfi (ed.), *La questione architettonica del suolo. Seminari di Valserena*, Mimesis, Milan 2025, pp. 98–109.

[2] See: I. Clemente, *IL cuore di Medusa. La casa a Conconello di Luciano Semerani e Gigetta Tamaro*, Bologna University Press, Bologna 2026.

the next. The ladder is the connecting link that unites earth with heaven, immanence with transcendence. So, in a way, Jacob's ladder tells us that the downward movement and the upward movement are one and the same. The descent or fall into darkness and hopelessness cannot be separated from the feeling of joy and the ascent toward the light. In other words, Jacob's ladder rejects the canonical dualistic metaphysical speculations regarding the soul and the body and the idea of exclusively elevating one's soul to God. In these pseudo-Platonic perspectives, the primacy of the intellect over the body – and of the spirit over matter – is in fact posited. On a symbolic level, however, the angels' comings and goings between the world above and the world below reveal and bring to life the power of the coexistence of spirit and matter. The image of the ladder shows us, quite simply, that matter is in and of itself spiritual. Matter and the body constitute the primary and indispensable vehicle of the spirit. The staircase is thus a symbol that links the plane of immanence with that of transcendence. This is another reason why, throughout human history, staircases have always been associated with the sites where initiation rites took place, such as the Orphic or Mithraic mysteries. I have often reflected on the image of the staircase, on this powerful architectural form. Adolf Loos has restored to us the symbolic, familiar, and theatrical presence of the image of the staircase. Loos's staircases, along with Le Corbusier's promenades, perhaps represent what architecture still allows us to experience as divine and effortless in terms of an extraordinary experience. I recently tried to capture this mysterious energy in a project for a contemporary art museum in Panama. The result bears witness to the wonder of stairs as something that reveals the power of their silent interplay of matter vibrating before our eyes and beneath our feet.

2. THE MEDUSAN CAVERN: ARCHITECTURAL ESTRANGEMENT AND THE CONCEPT OF THE *UNHEIMLICHE*

Now, from the combination of the path system with that of the Semerani house's exterior envelope, a sort of articulated, complex, and *estranging* figure emerges, one that is, at the same time, unexpectedly familiar. It looks like a picture of a path leading to a strange natural cave. With a little imagination, the overall appearance of these cave-like staircases seems almost like the head of a Medusa. In Greek and Roman architectural tradition, it was customary to place an image of the Gorgon in front of a house's entrance. Her face was also placed as a gable ornament along the eaves of the roofs. Images of Medusa, which adorned temples and homes – as evidenced, for example, by the many houses in Pompeii – served as talismans. In other words, they served to keep dangers away from the house and its inhabitants, especially the danger of falling victim to criminals. But there is still something that needs to be added regarding the analogy of the Semerani house as a den, a cave, or a Medusan cavern. And so, let us return to the connection between architecture and the experience of estrangement. *Deinós pélor*, "terrible monster," is the description that Hesiod gives of Medusa.[3] Taking the epithet *deinós* as his starting point, the philosopher Umberto Curi has highlighted a conceptual dimension of the Gorgon that I would now like to revisit in relation to the theme of the invention of the home and the experience of estrangement. *Deinós* refers to something that inspires fear, but also reverence – something that repels and attracts at the same time.[4] *To*

[3] Hesiod, *The Shield*, [in:] *Works*, UTET, Turin 1977, pp. 223, 322–323.
[4] U. Curi, *Lo sguardo di Medusa*, [in:] U. Curi, *La forza dello sguardo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin

deinón, Curi continues, drawing on Martin Heidegger's arguments, is itself an *unheimlich* (unsettling) word that in some way points to the *Unheimliche* (the unfamiliar). So, something unsettling that makes us feel out of place in our own existence.[5] The *Unheimliche* must therefore be understood as that which is not home, something unfamiliar within the familiar. In a way, this means that what is unfamiliar within the familiar is out of proportion, boundless, and lies beyond the limits of the known. Here, the Semerani House seems to me to evoke the same effect. The house comes across as both familiar and yet strange: unsettling, welcoming, and yet disorienting. This is the effect created, for example, by the combination of the staircase, the large thermal window with an inverted arch, and the unusual staircase, which is located within the structure of the house but outside the domestic space. At first glance, these unusual aspects are, in fact, the very ones that threaten the familiarity of the traditional house's forms and our sense of peace in relation to them. And this otherness, which in some way undermines the recognizability of the home – its boundaries, its real limits, and its perceived ones – does not come from the outside but is a constitutive and integral part of the home itself. In other words, the unusual, the foreign, the other – that which throws our standards into disarray – unsettles us and yet, at the same time, concerns and involves us.[6] From this perspective, the home itself is the to *deinón* – a source of unease – a restless place and by no means a space of certainty. It is something that can be an expression of what is most foreign to us and what is most personal and intimate to us. When we look at the Semerani House, what leaves us speechless, then, is not only the use of a formal repertoire that is, shall we say, strange compared to our everyday world, but also the fact that in its forms, we see our own enigmatic human condition reflected.[7] A home designed in this way reshapes the connections between thought, feeling, and experience through ritual. The ritual of knowing and recognizing oneself.

3. FROM DELPHI TO NIETZSCHE: THE HOME AS AN ORACULAR THRESHOLD OF SELF-AWARENESS

Another image can clarify this connection between the cavernous architecture of the house, the estranging experience, and self-knowledge. It is an image of Zarathustra sitting on his rock in front of his cave dwelling. I am referring to the first chapter of *Part Four* of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, titled *The Sacrifice with Honey,* in which Nietzsche has the wise old man utter the famous maxim: *Become who you are*! [8]

However, the web of symbols and analogies is so beautiful and extraordinary that it allows us to place Zarathustra's maxim alongside the venerable saying from the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: *Know thyself.* Among the ancient sayings destined to be repeated in the

2004, p. 68.

[5] On the Freudian concept of the *Unheimliche* – something uncanny – as it relates to architectural design, see: A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1992.

[6] J-P. Vernant, *Death in the Eyes: Gorgo, Figure of the Other*, [in:] F.I. Zeitlin (ed.), *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essay*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991, pp. 111–138.

[7] For more information on the connections between experience and uncanny masks, see: L. Amistadi, *John Hejduk. La guarigione dell'uomo / The Healing of Humankind*, Clean Edizioni, Naples 2026.

[8] F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Adelphi, Milan, 1996, pp. 275–277.

West for centuries are the maxims carved on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: *Know thyself* – and – *Nothing in Excess*. These oracular voices invite us to seek a golden mean in all things and, in other words, urge us to view every form of experience as a quest for awareness and self-awareness. Plato refers to these two venerable sayings in several of his works. In the *Phaedrus* [244a –b], Plato distinguishes between what we might call *pathological madness* and *divine madness* – moderate *mania* – placing the Delphic oracle among the highest spiritual gifts bestowed upon humans by the gods.

In *Alcibiades Major* [133a–d] Plato revisits the importance that the Delphic oracle attaches to the relationship between temperance and the need to take care of oneself in relation to the virtue of the soul.[9] In the dialogue between Alcibiades and Socrates, it is carefully argued that in order to know ourselves, we must look within our souls, that is, at the divine within us. The soul, then, is the coexistence and experience of knowing and thinking. What does that mean? Perhaps it means that in order to know something, you must love something you don't yet know? What still eludes you? So, you drift along, at the mercy of lack and absence. But this absence stimulates you, excites you, and gives you energy. That is why you need geometry, measure, number, and rhythm, so you don't lose your mind. The wisdom of the soul says: experience life and love according to measure, number, and rhythm. Are you seeking yourself? You must realize that, above all else, knowing and thinking are acts of love. Among the relevant passages in which Plato introduces the idea of self-awareness of one's own limitations in relation to the divine world, it is worth noting the argument in the *Theaetetus* [176a–b] in which Plato does not say that man can become a god – which would be a naive illusion or *hýbris* – but that he must strive to resemble the gods within the limits of his mortal condition: *as far as he is able*. With Plato and the dawn of logical-speculative thought, the Delphic maxim – whose origin and formulation remain unclear – takes on the meaning: *Know the divine within you*. However, the true conceptual leap beyond the Delphic maxim is achieved through the reflections of Friedrich Nietzsche. In *The Gay Science* (Book III, aphorism 270) the classical injunction is transformed, as already mentioned, into the famous imperative: *Become who you are*. In Nietzsche's view, the Delphic-Socratic injunction risks devolving into a static, almost sterile, and paralyzing form of introspection. On the other hand, the imperative *Become who you are* drives the human spirit to seek an identity that is not content merely to look within.

It is an unfixed identity: not an essence to be passively contemplated, but a dynamic, creative movement of imagination and self-construction.[10] You – says Nietzsche – have incredible and extraordinary potential that you don't even know you have yet. So, you must track them down, flush them out, and then pour them all out of your soul. The question is: how can you do that? How can we come to this realization? First and foremost, it can be seen in our desire to understand the world around us. Also, because once you've understood yourself – once you've grasped everything inside you – that's when you can also detach yourself. Make yourself a stranger to yourself. Become the Other. And so, you'll see that the whole world is just like you, and that everyone has extraordinary and wonderful potential to love

[9] On the topic of self-care, the soul, or the immortal and divine part of human beings, see G. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2016. On the connections between self-care and the saying "Know thyself," see: M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2005.

[10] R. Dionigi, *Il doppio cervello di Nietzsche*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2000.

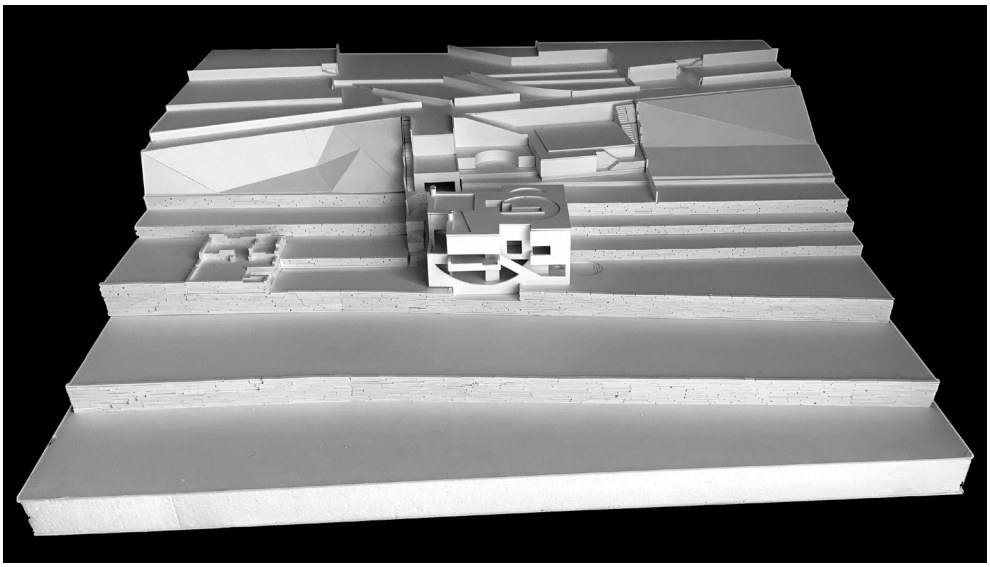
and share. Thus, knowing oneself is like knowing everyone else. There is no other way than to confront the gaze of the Other.[11]

And what role does home play in this journey toward self-awareness? In this journey, guided by the spirit of the famous Delphic saying, the home – as mentioned above – ceases to be a closed refuge and becomes an oracular place. What is an oracular site? In the ancient world, the *oraculum* was not simply a specific place where the future was predicted in a deterministic manner. But, like Delphi, it was a place that evoked empathy, a symbolic center that compelled people to reflect on their own divine and immortal nature. The Semerani House, our home – the home that we are – in short, the home itself, becomes the place where processes of awareness are triggered regarding our experiences, our emotions, our perceptions of ourselves, and the relationships we establish with the world and with architecture. Here, we feel empathy for our limitations. Here, we can accept and love even our limitations. Just as the Oracle of Delphi said, *Know thyself*, and the prophet Zarathustra proclaimed, *Become who you are*, so too does the home ask us to embrace our own mysteries. The home: the threshold between inside and outside, between the conscious and the unconscious, between who we once were and who we are becoming. It is the place par excellence where our desire to understand who we are and what we truly want is transformed into the energy needed to be reborn into the known. And so, it presents the present as a possible form of its future. The house is the embodiment of a primordial energy, the decisive starting point of a profound and crucial quest.

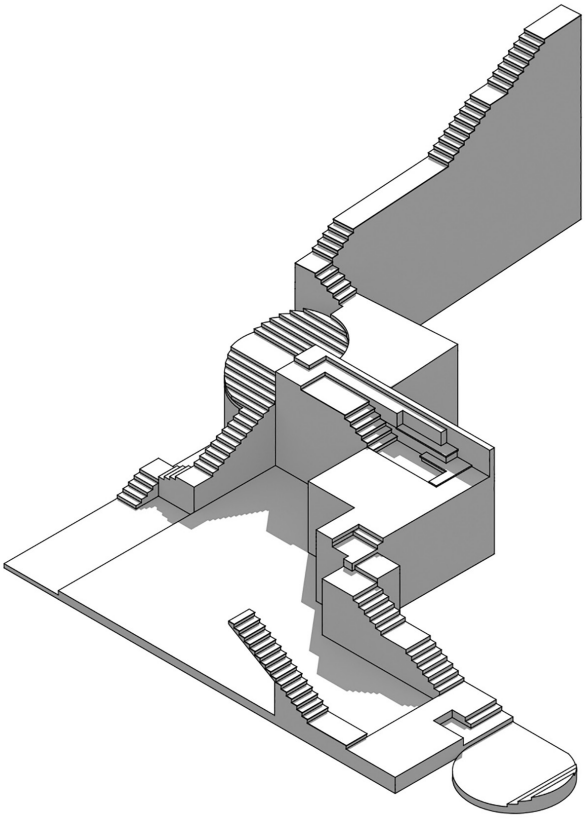
Is the Semerani House an oracle house? A place where every stone and brick and every room give tangible form to the evolution of the spirit of those who love and live there? Let's get to know the boundaries of our home so we don't get lost; let's tear down the walls that suffocate us so we can become who we are; and let's explore its veiled corners and hidden foundations so that our home may become our most precious, intimate, and secret oracle. The only place in the world where the dialogue between who we were, who we are, and who we want to become can finally come to light. Walter Benjamin wrote that experience is, above all, an act of rupture, a revolutionary force.[12] It is the strength of the heart that says yes to life, a force that, before establishing something new, cannot help but destroy any experience used as a mask to assert arid principles of authority aimed at the sterile preservation of the status quo.

[11] C. Vasoli, *La nascita dell'Umanesimo e gli inizi del Rinascimento*, [in:] C. Vasoli (ed.), *Le filosofie del Rinascimento*, Mondadori, Milan 2002, pp. 1–25.

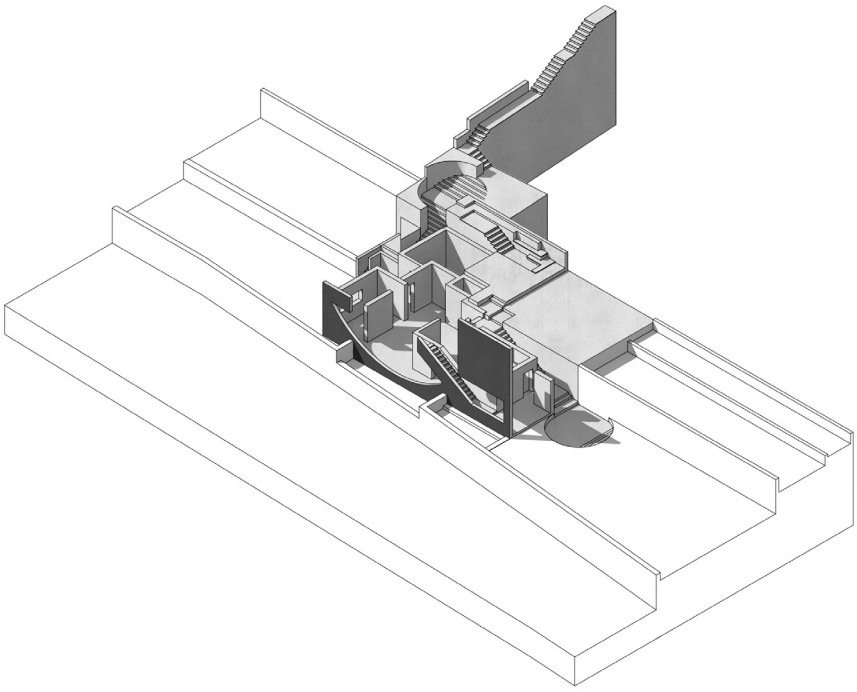
[12] W. Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*, [in:] M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, G. Smith (eds.), *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, *1931–1934*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1999, pp. 731–736.



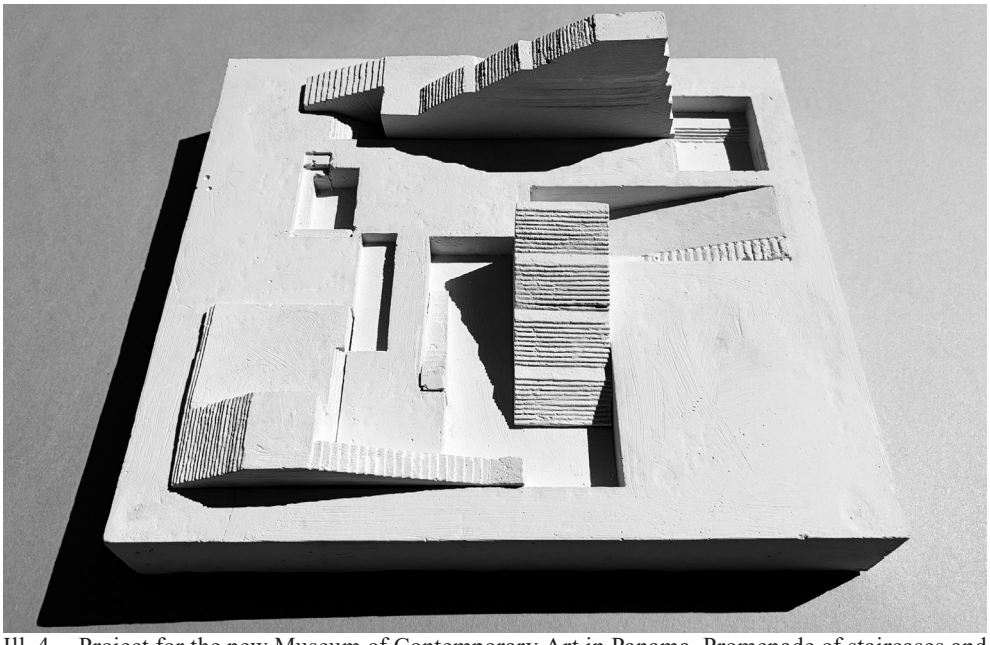
Ill. 1. General view of the Semerani House (photo by author)



Ill. 2. The promenade of staircases (photo by author)



Ill. 3. The staircase promenade reaching the thermal window façade with an inverted arch (photo by author)



Ill. 4. Project for the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Panama. Promenade of staircases and archaeological landscape (photo by author)

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[10] Nietzsche F., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Adelphi, Milan 1996.

[11] Vasoli C., *La nascita dell'Umanesimo e gli inizi del Rinascimento*, [in:] C. Vasoli (ed.), *Le filosofie del Rinascimento*, Mondadori, Milan 2002, pp. 1–25.

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Author's Note

Assoc. Prof. Ildebrando Clemente, PhD, Architect

Associated Professor in Architectural and Urban Design at the University of Bologna. His research focuses on the relationship between the theory and techniques of architectural composition in relation to the sphere of urban phenomena.

ildebrando.clemente@unibo.it