

Drawings as a form of knowledge

Re-presenting Gjirokastra

PhD. Loris Rossi

Senior Lecturer - Manchester School of Architecture (UK)

PhD. Laura Pedata

Lecturer - Sheffield Hallam University (UK)

268

This paper introduces the relevance of using drawings, notations, and diagrams in analysing, observing, and reinterpreting shrinking cities. This year the 35th cycle PhD workshop was centered on the case of Gjirokastra (Centre, 2021) one of the main cities in south Albania with a high risk of depopulation. In the 1990s, more than a quarter of large cities worldwide shrank, and the phenomenon of urban depopulation has been studied and analysed worldwide with different theories on possible interventions (Hollander, 2018). Drawing a timeline around the concept of shrinking cities is quite complicated due to the different shrinkage typologies. Nevertheless, the research "Shrinking Cities" developed between 2002 and 2008 by Philipp Oswalt (Oswalt, Rieniets, & et al., 2005) gave a valuable contribution, and it was adopted as a background reference in several later investigations. In general, urban depopulation is caused by multiple factors like suburbanisation, deindustrialisation, and post-socialist change. In the architectural field, such factors can overcome their negative acceptance and become an opportunity to address Urban

landscape design strategies.

One of the topics arising from this phenomenon is linked to the fact that any shrinking process leaves behind visible and invisible traces. The abandoned fields and buildings, and the Urban and social degradation are visible. The new vacant status of the urban system is also visible, and it can stimulate new informal uses and functionality, denoting a clear expression of City's and citizens' new needs. One of the characteristics of visible traces is the fact that they can be read and translated into data and drawings. On the other hand, the invisible traces are unattainable and illegible, like the white canvas of an artist waiting to be painted. The task of an architect, especially the task of a PhD researcher, should be compared to the work of a sharp observer capable of reinterpreting the visible and the invisible traces through theoretical and practical tools. In the PhD workshop the traces left behind by population shrinkage have been investigated through drawings¹,

In his 1992 Essay on "Drawing and Making in the Landscape Medium", James Corner observes how drawings are "intermediary and translatory medium(s)", and hold the

¹ / For an interesting point of view on the matter of drawings as an alternative way of knowing see: Ray Lucas (2019). *Drawing as Being: moving beyond ways of knowing, modes of attention and habitus*. In S. E. Igea Troiani, *Visual Research Methods in Architecture* (pp. 76, 94). Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA: Intellect.

² / Talking about the three distinct qualities of landscape and architectural drawing - namely "projection, notation, and representation", he explains how in architecture and landscape, projection drawings (the plan, the elevation, the section, and the axonometric) are the projection of a shape on a flat picture plane (CORNER, 2014, p. 170); notations systems (such as measured projection drawings, and written specifications) specify the properties of a building or landscape in a way that makes them transmissible and reproducible without ambiguity (CORNER, 2014, p. 174) (they enable us to consider the simultaneity of different layers of experience); while "representational drawings aim to re-present a given landscape or building, seeking to elicit the same experiential effects but in a different medium - to give the same effects again", they can attempt to reproduce a graphical impression, a perfect imitation of reality (CORNER, 2014, p. 175).

possibility of being projective, notational and representational at the same time². (CORNER, 2014, p. 184)

With this in mind, apart from being investigated as an example of shrinking City, Gjirokastra has been studied using drawings to produce new knowledge fragments within a fragmented city. Untold aspects of Shrinking cities can be found in all the leftover urban patterns where the absence of a meaning is studied using a set of line drawings, diagrams and notations. Drawings were used to reconnect Gjirokastra's leftover urban space with a range of new possibilities capable of renewing the city image. Therefore, in this PhD workshop, the practice of drawing is employed as a tool to see Gjirokastra through new lenses.

The above concept can be better explained using the words of Stan Allen when he talks about Architectural drawing as notation: "Architectural drawings also work notationally, and can be compared to musical scores, text or script. An architectural drawing is an assemblage of spatial and material notations that can be decoded, according to a series of shared conventions, in order to effect a transformation of reality at a distance from the author. The drawing as artifact is unimportant. It is rather a set of instructions for realising another artifact" (Allen, 2000, p. 32).

Stan Allen built a series of definitions whereby mapping the unmappable became a sort of manifesto, to transpose ideas rather than translate reality. His work highlights the specific capacity of "architectural drawing to work on

reality from distance". By using Nelson Goodman's theoretical framework, his idea was to include the concept of drawing in architecture as allographic art: "Allographic arts are those capable of being reproduced at a distance from the author by means of notation" (Allen, 2000, p. 33).

Therefore, the meaning of notation introduced by Stan Allen acquires an enigmatic sense translated through a series of keywords such as anticipation, invisible, time, collective, digital diagrams. Each word is an attempt to build a relationship between the 'abstract' and the 'concrete', addressing urban and architectural ideas through the experience of drawings. An abstract drawing can convincingly inform a project proposal; in the same way, a project can give a clear response in a specific context. Drawings, diagrams, and notations are essential tools capable of changing reality through lines and signs, suitable to signify a new urban and architectural space. (Fig. 1)

Drawing and thinking

The experience of drawings addressed during the PhD workshop finds its relevance in the above investigation, in two different moments. During the site visit, when hand drawings and sketches were a fundamental instrument to experience Gjirokastra's design journal. The City was observed through a site visit journey, walking, and mapping the primary urban experience linked to the Urban Shrinkage process. The City's space was explored and the capacity of abandoned areas to offer further design reinterpretations

was observed. The second moment where drawing was crucial was during the workshop, when specific drawing approaches served as a theoretical device to build a new urban scenario. Line drawings, diagrams, and notations developed by each PhD group achieved a high definition and were presented in a sequence of design strategies linked to a specific unfinished or unsolved urban status.

Drawings in this context are not used merely for reflection and analysis, but rather as generative mediums "producing agents" or "ideational catalysts". (CORNER, 2014, p. 162) Referring to Duchamp's powerful *Genre Allegory* (George Washington) (1943), James Corner defines a drawing he refers to as re-presentational; because "it doesn't simply represent a world already in existence, a quantity we already know, but rather it tries to re-present the world in ways previously unforeseen". (CORNER, 2014, p. 181) This means not only that in practical terms there are drawings, like architectural plans, which reveal otherwise hidden aspects of buildings (or things that are only visible from an airplane, a satellite, or when we observe ancient building ruins that reveal the plan layout of a building) but also that through representation and notation we can imagine and transmit unnoticed and hidden aspects of a place and suggest possible futures.

One of the workshop's main objectives was to deliver work capable of producing new knowledge on the existing Gjirokastra urban tissue. The relationship between the unsolved city patterns and a new urban narration was explored by the PhD students through a series of topics such as:

- Urban Museum-Flow-Identity-Art Loop-Knots&Sprawl
- Accessibility-Abandoned Spaces-Urban hubs
- Morphology-grid-urban energy-water-paths-regeneration
- Experience-collaboration-diversify

Along the above topics, the idea of mapping the unmappable was supported by a double-action. First, by introducing a series of arguments contemplating the possibility to realise a new Urban agenda for Gjirokastra, and second, by defining a set of drawings with the aim of revealing a hidden frame from historical urban Patterns. The achieved outcomes can be described as a drawing toolkit, where the negative experience of urban depopulation is converted into a catalogue of new opportunities. The use of specific drawings transformed the afore

mentioned topics in a field of conditions capable of reconnecting the solved urban areas with the unsolved ones. The PhD students produced different approaches, and a number of suggestions on how to reinterpret the Urban void left behind by the shrinkage process.

In some cases, line drawings were used to trace over and give new hope to the existing urban structure. The dynamics of art in the urban space acquired a strong meaning; architecture form is linked to a new perception of time explored through performative art and installations. The City is conceived as a cultural platform; some abandoned buildings work as performative pixels regenerating the surrounding area. The idea to use axonometric drawings to redraw the existing buildings shifted the perception of abandoned structures, transforming them into works of art, a showcase to exhibit in some sort of open-air museum. The line drawings suggested a regeneration of Gjirokastra through a performative itinerary whereby the inhabitants behave like water flowing between different interrupted city structures. (Fig. 2)

In some other cases, the drawing notations produced during the site visit were reformulated as an abacus of design actions. Gjirokastra city patterns were redrawn as an archipelago of urban hubs ready to generate new realities, answering to the new needs of the city. The entire City form can be reactivated through the rehabilitation of urban landmarks such as points, lines, and objects. In this case site annotations introduced an interesting approach whereby the city can be drawn starting from its fragments, rather than by an overarching masterplan. (Fig. 3)

A further attempt consisted in using drawings as a morphological experience. Tracing the lines of the territory became an opportunity to find a new city trajectory. By observing Gjirokastra from above it was possible to redraw and select specific orographic and hydrographic trajectories. The drawing as an experience of tracing and selection brings back to our mind the act of highlighting a meaningful word or sentence in a written text. The act of redrawing on a given map is a critical investigation to learn from, or an act to produce new knowledge. The drawing elaborated by the PhD students tries to take on a new type of investigation assigning a new trajectory to the direction of the city. By following the morphology of the site, the projects highlight a transversal

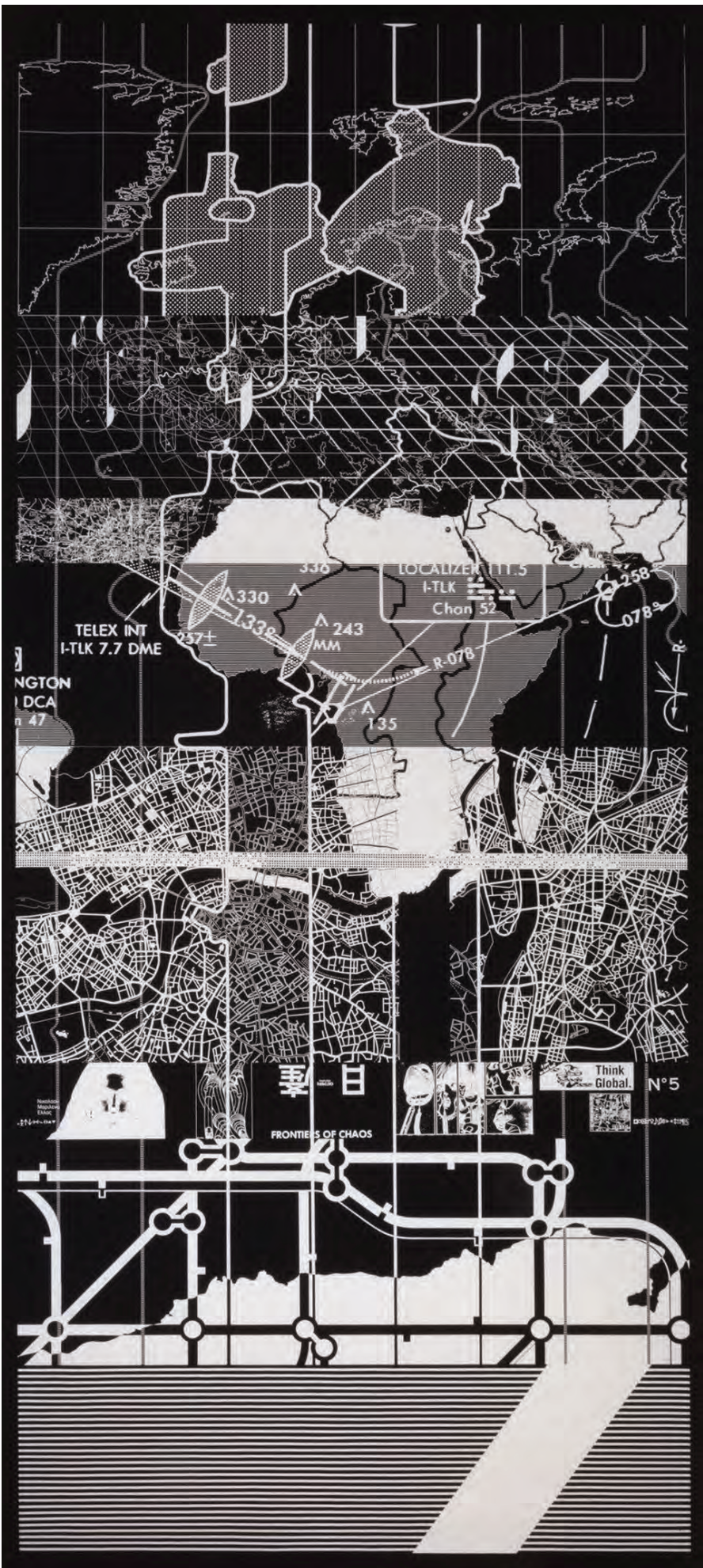


Fig. 1 / Stan Allen and Marc Hacker. Scoring the city 1986.
Sources / http://web.mit.edu/wdmc/Public/StanAllen_MappingTheUnmappable.pdf

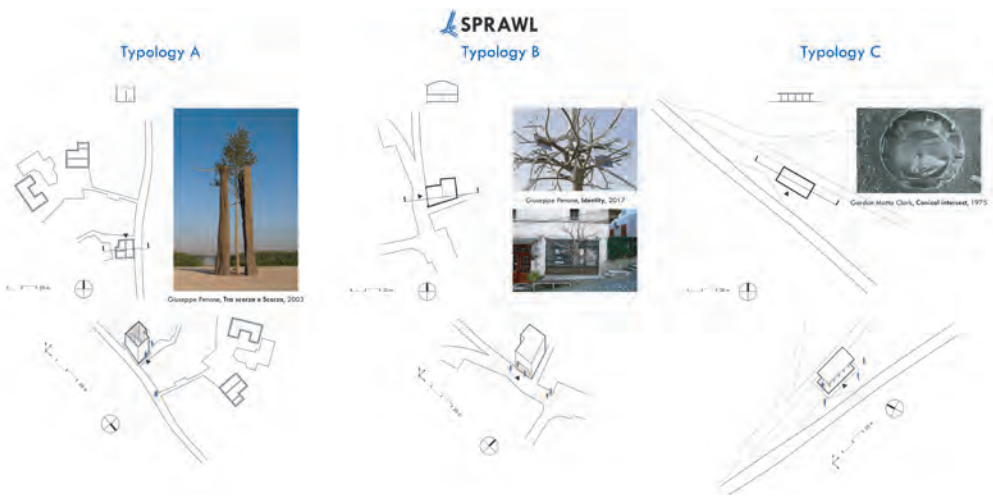


Fig. 2 / Drawing by Eleonora Baccega, Stefano Romano, Nicola Tasselli



Fig. 3 / Drawing by: Edi Duro, Marco Negri, Xhoana Kristo

"fascia", linking the historical city of Gjirokastra with the new development. (Fig 4)

The story of representation is subject to social and programmatic activities. In the last example, Gjirokastra city patterns were used considering their potential to offer an integrated system between Urban Morphology and new functionality. The use of diagrammatic drawings reflects a pragmatic approach focused on an alternative way of reading the shrinking process through a programmatic use of the abandoned spaces left behind, ultimately proposing the addition of a health related functional layer to the city. Drawings, in this case, were used to reconnect the abandoned areas through a new program.

Conclusion

This paper intended to recognize the

importance of drawings, diagrams and notations as form of knowledge. Building on the concept on Stan Allen's theoretical framework - which defines drawing as a tool capable of conveying a design project from a distance - the same concept of distance, understood as physical disconnection from Gjirokastra's urban reality, was applied by the PhD students in their proposals for a transformation of reality at a distance, transposing through drawings and notations their ideas about the city's abandonment process.

Drawings have the capacity to represent the world as it is, and to imagine what it could become. At the same time, drawings should be considered for both their speculative (devising possible futures) and demonstrative function (tools of composition and communication). "In

STRATEGY DIAGRAMS

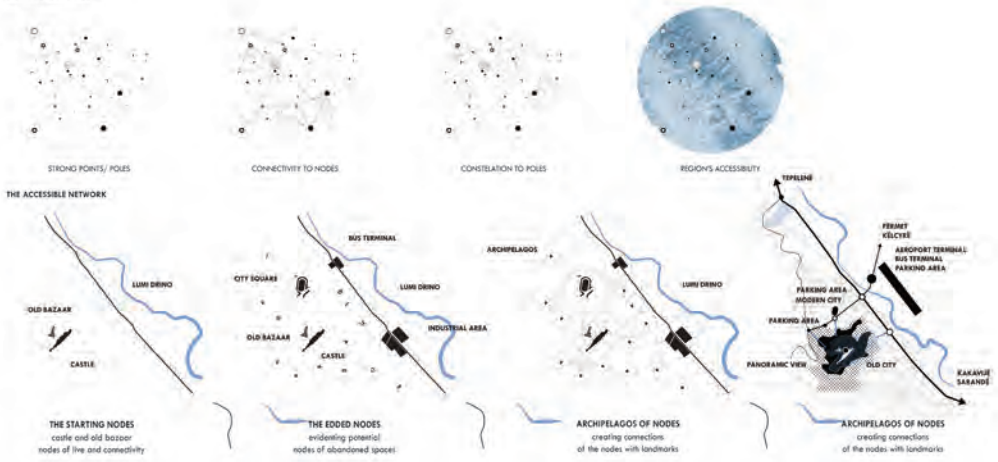


Fig. 3.1 / Drawing by: Edi Duro, Marco Negri, Xhoana Kristo

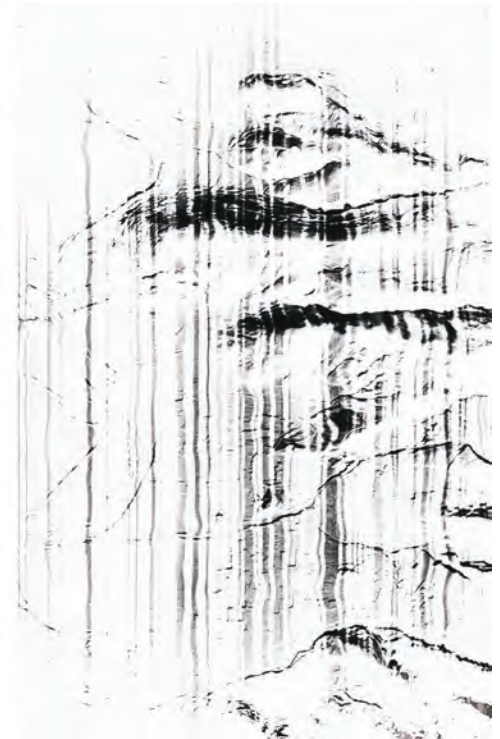


Fig. 4 / Drawings by: Dasara Pula, Alberto Grando

the first, drawing is used as a vehicle of creativity, and in the second, drawing is used as a vehicle of realization." The above distinction is what defines the difference between producing an image and or "drawing as work or process", namely a creative act. (CORNER, 2014, p. 184).

Going even beyond the speculative field and into the practical demonstration of how to realize the project, there are drawings, like Carlo Scarpa's where the overlaid plan drawings, sided by construction details and overall views, demonstrate the design intent of the executor. They are not "scientific tools for presenting a future reality", or transmitting a result, but actual demonstrative drawings were "the representation of space is one with the space of representation". (CORNER, 2014, pp. 188-189) (Fig. 5)

Keeping all the above in mind, representational techniques were used by the PhD students to propose different approaches aimed at inverting the city's shrinkage trend through Art and performative itineraries repopulating the urban context; design actions aimed at reactivating the city starting from its fragments; new urban growth trajectories drawn starting from the city's morphological characteristics; or following a purely programmatic approach.

Drawing as a form of knowledge underlines the importance of drawings in architectural research, regardless of the execution time and technique. Drawings are equally important as written text, capable of being read, translating reality, and devising future scenarios.

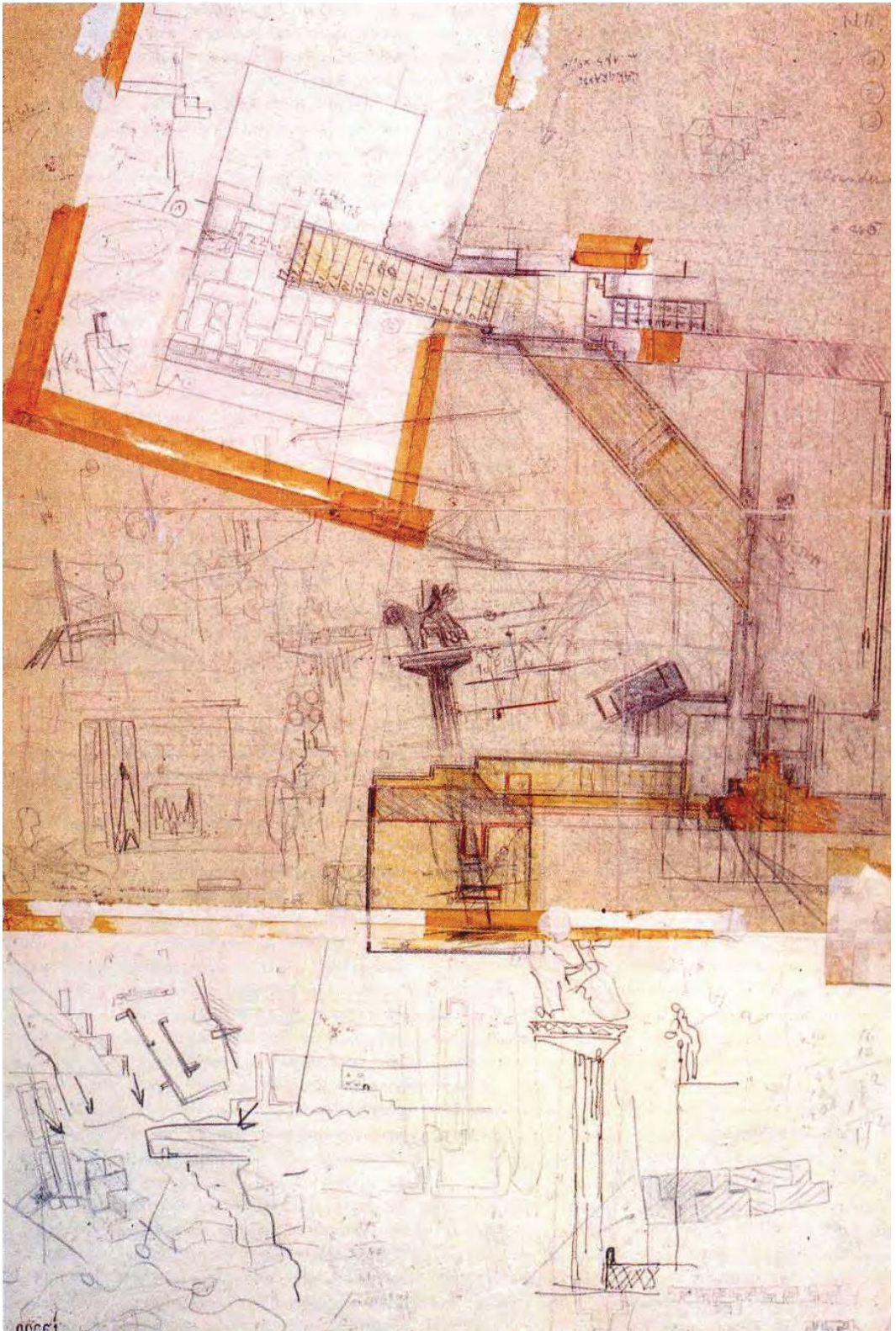


Fig. 5 / Cangrande drawings, Castelvecchio, Verona Carlo Scarpa. Source / <https://unitgblog.wordpress.com/2014/03/02/unit-g-ice-station-tutorials-9-monday-3rd-march-10am-unit-space/>

Bibliography

Allen, S. (2000). Stan Allen essays. Practice architecture, technique and representation. London: Routledge.

Centre, U. W. (2021, June 06). Historic Centres of Berat and Gjirokastra. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/>: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/569>

CORNER, J. (2014). Drawing and Making in the Landscape Medium (1992). In J. CORNER, & A. BRICK HIRSCH, The Landscape Imagination: The Collected Essays of James Corner 1990-2010 (pp. 160-195). New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Hollander, J. (2018). A Research Agenda for Shrinking Cities. Cheltenham U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

Lucas, R. (2019). Drawing as Being: moving beyond ways of knowing, modes of attention and habitus. In S. E. Igea Troiani, Visual Research Methods in Architecture (pp. 76, 94). Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA: Intellect.

Oswalt, P., Rieniets, T., & et al. (2005). Shrinking Cities - Volume 1: International. ostfildern - ruit (DE): Hatje Cantz Verlag.