The hermit
The architectural trip between objective visualizations and imaginary.

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Abstract – *The architect is a sailor on a drifting boat, searching for the missing architectural form, a fragmentary manifesto that is placed before him at the beginning of his research. Sailing, alone like a hermit, he continually searches for a white whale, drawing fictitious shapes on long white sheets, as if to imitate the object of desire, trying to imagine and recreate his shapes sometimes in an obsessed way. On the bow of the boat, the scholar refines his vision day after day. He leans out over an empty ocean, every silence and ever denser color, in search of a new horizon, a limit to overcome. The Omeric journey that the architect undertakes, along the lines of that conducted by Ulysses in the Odyssey, in search of the perfect form, is described through blocks of notes and hidden images of mental maps to navigate the north of the tables. In both stories, we search for a home or a version of it that we keep in our memory, moving from a physical to an imaginary conception of it. Thresholds, borders, and states are crossed to recreate or imagine the possible transformations that occurred in the place of origin. Ulysses finds Ithaca different; the architect imagines the changes that can happen in a place. The mental image and theories that we can find in our drawings during a journey are an undisputed source for the imagination, creating possibilities through the hybridization of what we observe and what we know. The Pustec region gives us the challenge of imagining a utopian reality and the possibility of a new way of colonizing new territories.*

Keywords - Memory, Palimpsest, Architecture, Landscape.

A retroactive narrative

During the international workshop of the double PhD program between Polis University in Tirana, Albania, and the University of Ferrara in Italy, a three-day trip took place in the southeastern Albania region of Pustec.

The focus of this tour was, as per the title of the workshop, "Intersecting Landscapes: Finding New Spatial Visions for the Cross-Border Region of Prespa Lakes and the Case of Pustec Municipality - Albania" to question the possibilities and potentiality that cross-border regions have in terms of developing and future attractive projects and visions (fig.01). To reflect on these questions, it becomes imperative and of fundamental importance to resume the tradition of the Grand Tour expeditions through Italy and the Mediterranean regions of classical antiquity as a final step in the education of European architects. For Charles-Eduard Jennaeret, later known as Le Corbusier, the voyage across Italy and the Mediterranean region was fundamental to his understanding of architecture. Later on, he completed the tour by a second route 'journey to the east' of 1911, an auto didacticism period exploring more natural and wild lands to find new spatial exploration missing at the time in the western region of the world. Le Corbusier relates his journey through a variety of sketchbooks, photographs, and letters (Figs. 02, 03). A selection of these works, along with two essays composed in 1914 about Mount Athos in Greece and the Parthenon, were later published posthumously as Voyage d'Orient in 1966. In our case the same concept, even if in a different scale, becomes a point of reflection to investigate the contemporaneity defined as "a singolar relation with your time"[01] and the possibilities of the architecture of the near future by searching for the new lands available exploring new possibilities. A journey, in which learning and theorizing are no longer sought in antiquities but rather in those places that have not yet been seen and undergone radical transformations, but which at the same time are searching for new sustainable spatial solutions. Explorers who experiment with theoretical research for the first time and who travel through diversified worlds and landscapes, physically and culturally intertwined places united

by geography defined by the natural element of the lake. This is seen as a body of water generating reflections and potential projects capable of developing and involving the triptych of states that share this natural element.

In this article, we will investigate pieces of literature that deeply reflect on the act of traveling, exploring, and searching for a point. It is important in this specific case to assert that the narrative and descriptive approach of this writing is retroactive, which means, it is produced 'at posteriori' of the trip to the region investigated and is therefore based on memories and mental images and maps that reconnect the architectural tour approach to the of the expedition in search of a distant treasure.

This way of thinking gives us the power to generate more versions to use the new lands the region offers and to improve the scenario for new architecture or livable machines.

Which imaginary?

Herman Melville begins his journey from the crazy Mhanattan, a rapidly changing peninsula around which all the city's commerce develops, from the dizzying trend of verticalism which is increasingly a dominant figure in the composition of the metropolis, defined in the famous Delirious New York by Rem Kohoolas with the term 'Manhattanism' .

With this term, the author describes the tendency to obscure the delirious architectural approach in the peninsula during the 1920s, which aims to create a consciousness around the architectural object in question by treating it as the only means capable of defining a new identity in the territory.

Within it, the quadratic organization of the peninsula defines a scheme, or ecosystem, where necessary and inevitably leads to the sea, later understood as a potential water infrastructure.

In the same way, we escaped from the growing Tirana and its vertical matrices of skyscrapers, seeking new tangents that could link "landscape" and "architecture", new ways to make matter and context dialogue, reading the region in which

Lake Prespa resides through devices capable of reactivating its architectural organism.

The journey to the land of Prespa, once called Liqenas, starts from Tirana, the Albanian Manhattan. After we cross the mountainous horseshoe that protects Tirana, travelling eastwards, finding on our road the city of Elbasan and then Pogradec, which overlooks its lake, that of Ohri, three hundred and forty-nine square kilometers of fresh water, where the citizens improvise as fishermen and an architectural walk on its banks becomes a physical threshold where a transition of state takes place: from urbanised to natural, from possession to "Empty oceans (locked up inside millions of windows)" [02].

Once arrived in the Prespa Region, the cadets were amazed by the landscape, a succession of rolling hills illuminated by the sun, lost in an almost infinite body of water. This lake, which looks like a sea, hides every secret, protects stories, myths, and legends.

Considered almost like a divinity, Lake Prespa protected its inhabitants by giving food and work, but then, suddenly, an earthquake happened. The lake retreated ten meters, leaving only an ephemeral trace of its ancient limit, while a new land emerged from the underground, ready to be occupied. A new relationship deserves to be built, and new avenues to explore with different architectures.

Thus, we open the discussion dedicated to the trip to the Pustec region, a small municipality in the south-east of Albania, made up of nine urban settlements: Cerje, Goricë e madhe, Goricë e Vogel, Glloboçen, Leskë, Pustec, Tuminec, Shulin, and Zërnovskë. The villages are located in a network made up of three main elements: water, immature infrastructure, uncultivated fields, and above all, a ring of new lands that separates the urban settlement from the lake. The access to the region in question is via a single state road, this one with two lanes, one in each direction, and the region presents itself to travelers after a curve on a hill, opening up the view to the mountains, where the large mirror of water, an abandoned infrastructure, appears. Although there are substantial economic differences between

NORTH
MACEDONIA

PRESPA LAK

ALBANIA

Water infrastructure
International road
Borders
Prespa reagion
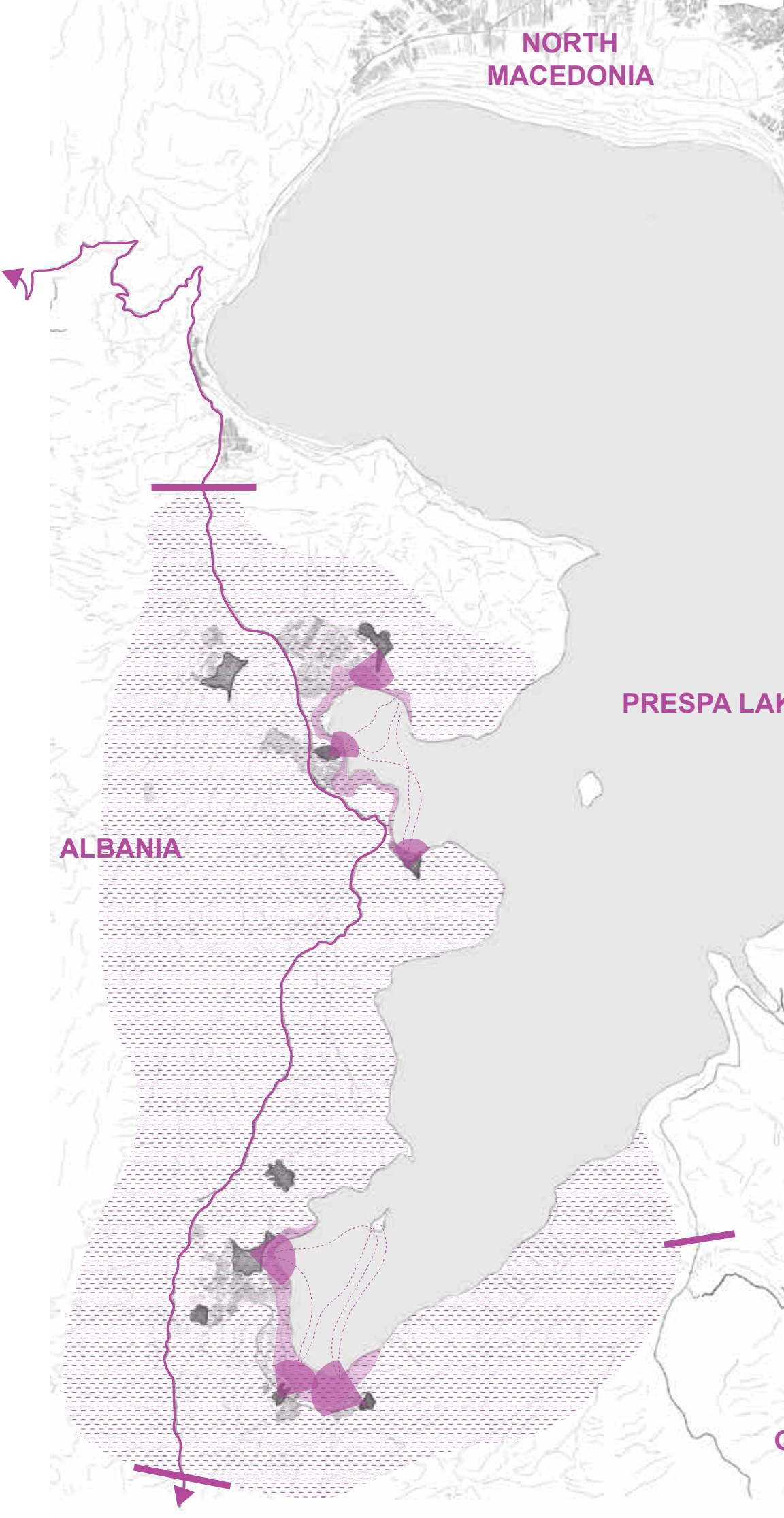Lake shrinking

KE

SMALL
PRESPA LAKE

GREECE

Fig 1/ Prespa reagion drawing

source/ author (2023)

Fig.02 - 03 Drawings by Le Corbusier, taken from his third sketchbook in the Voyage d'Orient collection (1911)

the three states, the potential is the same; on paper, the territorial qualities do not change, the only difference is how these are exercised and pushed towards their potential.

The territory, part of a buffer zone generated spontaneously around Lake Prespa, becomes a lodestar for all three states that circumnavigate it: Albania, Greece, and North Macedonia. This aquatic system which is the main source of sustenance breaks the political rules and generates various parallel worlds in which the three states are no longer separated, they visually communicate with each other like dispersed brother and the nine villages that overlooked the lake in the Albanian region are now inland, and even if they still see it, they are no longer able to touch it. The relationship between urban settlement and natural elements, as the inhabitants knew it, is now missing, requiring a total reorganization by seeking new projects for the new landscapes available. (Figs. 05-06)

The retreat of the lake changes the rules of the game and generates at the same time crises, new needs and opportunities: defining new thresholds, expanding the lands to be welcomed into the urbanized landscape and outlining new possibilities by re-adapting to coexistence, re-establishing the limit and balance between man and nature, home and landscape.

According to Sara Marini in *Nuove Terre, Architettura e paesaggi dello scarto*, there are three points of tangency between architecture and landscape capable of redefining this relationship. A first point of tangency is defined by the interpretation of the place through the device of the human eye which records nature, a second emerges as a result of the interest in the geometries of places and finally the third point of tangency resides in the temporal scansion where the modification of the object over time becomes the material of the project [03].

Melville embarks on a journey to discover a world made entirely of water, where every space expands, the convention of the north becomes just a star in

the sky, and the hope that it indicates the correct path towards a place that in our imagination becomes home is the only encouraging thought. Shelters that we find in their primordial form, as in Chris Rainier's 1996 images in New Guinea, or as we find explained by Simone Gobbo in *Fuori Registro*:

"The Greek word domus, from which the Latin domus derives, has the meaning of the most basic human habitation, an enclosure, that which protects. Making architecture, in this sense, means identifying an area, a place, carrying out a tracing action [...]" [04].

In the case of the improvised sailor, it will be a shared cot in the hold, defining a new limit to the minimum architectural space-trace or outline of a safe place, where the sense of architectural ownership is maximized.

Or like the iconography on the cover of *Essai Sur l'architecture* by A. Laugier, where in the first pages it explains that the beginning of architecture, as we know it today, is a derivation of the initial archetype or the hut, born out of necessity more than by intention.

Minimal architecture, the reference to Aldo Rossi's Cabine d'Elba project automatically comes back to us, who states in his famous *Scientific Autobiography*:

"With The Cabins of Elba, I wanted to reduce the house to the values it has in the seasons. The small house is not merely a reduction of the villa in scale; it is the antithesis of the villa. The villa presupposes both infinite interiors like labyrinths and gardens, however small they may be, and a locus. The small house, on the other hand, seems to be without place, because the locus is inside, or is identified with whoever lives in the house for a time—a stay which we know may be brief but which we cannot calculate" [05].

The settlements in the Pustec region, although at first glance they may appear simple, rural, and lacking a defined urban tradition, reveal—through careful graphic analysis—distinct characteristics closely tied to their relationship with local infrastructure. This includes not only the road network but also the lake system, which acts as a generative and organizing force for settlement morphology.

In the case of the village of Pustec (fig. 07), for example, we observe an organic fan-shaped development, where the dwellings follow the main road and then open toward the lakefront.

It is also essential to identify internal or secondary rules—often implicit—that subdivide and self-regulate public and private spaces. As a result, three primary settlement matrices emerge, shaped by two fundamental elements: the lake and the road infrastructure. These elements act as spatial devices that structure and regulate the organization of the settlement.

As shown in the diagrams (figs.08), the settlements emerge in a seemingly spontaneous—or spontaneously guided—manner along the road, which represents the only access route to the region.

Nevertheless, the orientation of the houses appears to be directly influenced by the pull of the water, a second crucial infrastructure that supports the

community through fishing and other functions.

In summary, the settlements take shape along two main vectors—both infrastructural—that correspond to two essential needs: connectivity and sustenance. The infrastructural device, therefore, not only connects but also regulates how the village grows, profoundly influencing the form and spatial organization of its built environment.

When one of the two infrastructures is absent, it becomes difficult to define a clear rule. However, we can hypothesize that by following the two vectors, it is possible to envision a potential layout for newly emerged or available lands.

In a context like this, the practice of densifying available areas cannot follow a top-down or entirely imposed approach. Instead, it must consider the objective tendencies inherent in the context and align itself with the existing logic and modes of action already present on the territory.

This naturally raises a key question: what is the most appropriate approach to implementing a new settlement? *What actions should be taken to ensure its growth respects the internal rules already in place, while simultaneously attracting culture and tourism?* Which devices must be activated to make this process both organic and productive? And ultimately, what is *or can be a device in architecture?*

When we consider devices capable of managing and organizing new land, we can imagine them as machines that bring together two worlds: the material one of built architecture and the geometric one of the natural context. The device must act as a hinge between landscape and site, between geometry and architecture.

To engage with the built palimpsest means to interpret it as the interaction of different elements that come together to define an image—that of the city itself [06].

Architectural systems and machinery are described like the white cathedrals by Le Corbusier who in the book dated 1937 argues the European territory and in particular its cities as a *'New world. White, limpid, joyful, clean, clear and without returns, the new world blossomed like a flower among the ruins"* [07].

The white cathedrals that Le Corbusier researched can be associated in our case with the definition of what a device is, as a mechanism capable of connecting. Giorgio Agamben tries to interpret this concept starting from Foucault's reflections, deducing the device as a technique described by three characteristics: 1-A network that holds together a heterogeneous system composed of different elements, linguistic and non-linguistic 2-It must have a strategic function 3-It can describe relationships and/or balance between situations of knowledge and power [08].

Methodology and New Lands
New lands, waste architecture and landscapes.

Sara Marini writes an essay dedicated to reflections on the themes of the palimpsest, of the variations that this word contains within it, and of the architectural gestures that try to coexist with the landscape that welcomes them.

A series of chapters that dig into and subsequently fill in the material gaps that emerge through this gesture, it strongly defines the three-dimensionality of the landscape, which must not be limited to a two-dimensional vision but be considered as an object with depth, which preserves different energies and layers.

Almost an archaeological parallel is that of Sara Marini, who defines palimpsest, stating: *"If you place a cloth over a surface, it adapts to it in form, but there is no other channel of communication between the two elements. Furthermore, the term 'palimpsest' evokes an action not foreseen in the term stratification, indeed it represents the opposite, which is precisely scratching the surface, erasing the found text and then introducing a new story that has no mediations, no relationships with the present' "* [09].

New lands for new layers, devices for new layers, exactly like during the third International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, where in 1985 Daniel Libeskind staged three *'Memory machines'* defining the possibility of architecture becoming a machine, a gear with the power to bring man and nature back into balance by re-establishing a finite result to the initial equation.

The new lands require new projects even sometimes those are already *"spaces whose fate is already sealed"* [10], an imagination capable of deciphering the needs of the contemporary, and an architecture that does not limit itself to existing but that responds to increasingly labile and changing needs as well as the time they go through.

In The City and the Territory, Giancarlo de Carlo has this aspect very clear; already in the first pages, he questions *"What is the city? What is the territory?"* .
Then he continues by arguing that there is a lot of confusion about these two terms, which are often interchanged, in attempting to generate an answer he proceeds with an excursus of systems and trends referring to settlements with classic systems, referring to the case of Thermi, the island of Lesbos he states: *'the city is no longer conceived in terms of buildings, houses, and streets, but the city is conceived in terms of contexts which are relationships between street spaces or square spaces and the spaces built on their edges"* [11].

When continuing with the narrative he comes to define the most interesting characteristics of medieval settlements, in the second lesson, he manages to identify when the city actually becomes architecture: *'The city thus becomes architecture, and the territory amazes, and descriptions of incredible places begin to circulate, at the limits of the known world"* [12].

In the contemporary imagination, it is therefore imperative to take wonder into account, as well as mere function. For reactivating the lands in the Prespa Lake region is not enough to make the project eternal, but rather, we must generate wonder to see the territory in a new way.

But when can we say that the project truly lives an eternal life? When does it not just represent an ephemeral response but become an integral part of the territory on which to found cities?

And again: *"Which works, which books, which objects, which tools, which strategies, which spaces, which places, which stories, which architectures deserve eternal life, and which ones truly correspond to the memory that defines them within us, the opposable thumb of the first monkey who used it to use a tool deserved eternal life and is still ours as we write the memories that are only minimally ours"* [13].

The Pustec region generates different questions, in our specific case, we need to give strength to the eternal life of the already active settlements, not necessarily expanding, unifying, or making them a continuous façade or a new urban area to build in but at the same time don't assume all this shouldn't happen. To activate those settlements, we need to unify their relationship with the aquatic infrastructure and, at the same time, guarantee some degree of liability, with the hidden world full of possibilities that it offers. The rehabilitation of the buffer zone that the receding lake has generated is the answer to making the project eternal, because the landscape that is generated within the territory becomes eternal.

In 1982, the French government organized a competition for one of the last free spots in Paris,

Fig.04 Prespa's natural trajectories.

source/ author (2024)
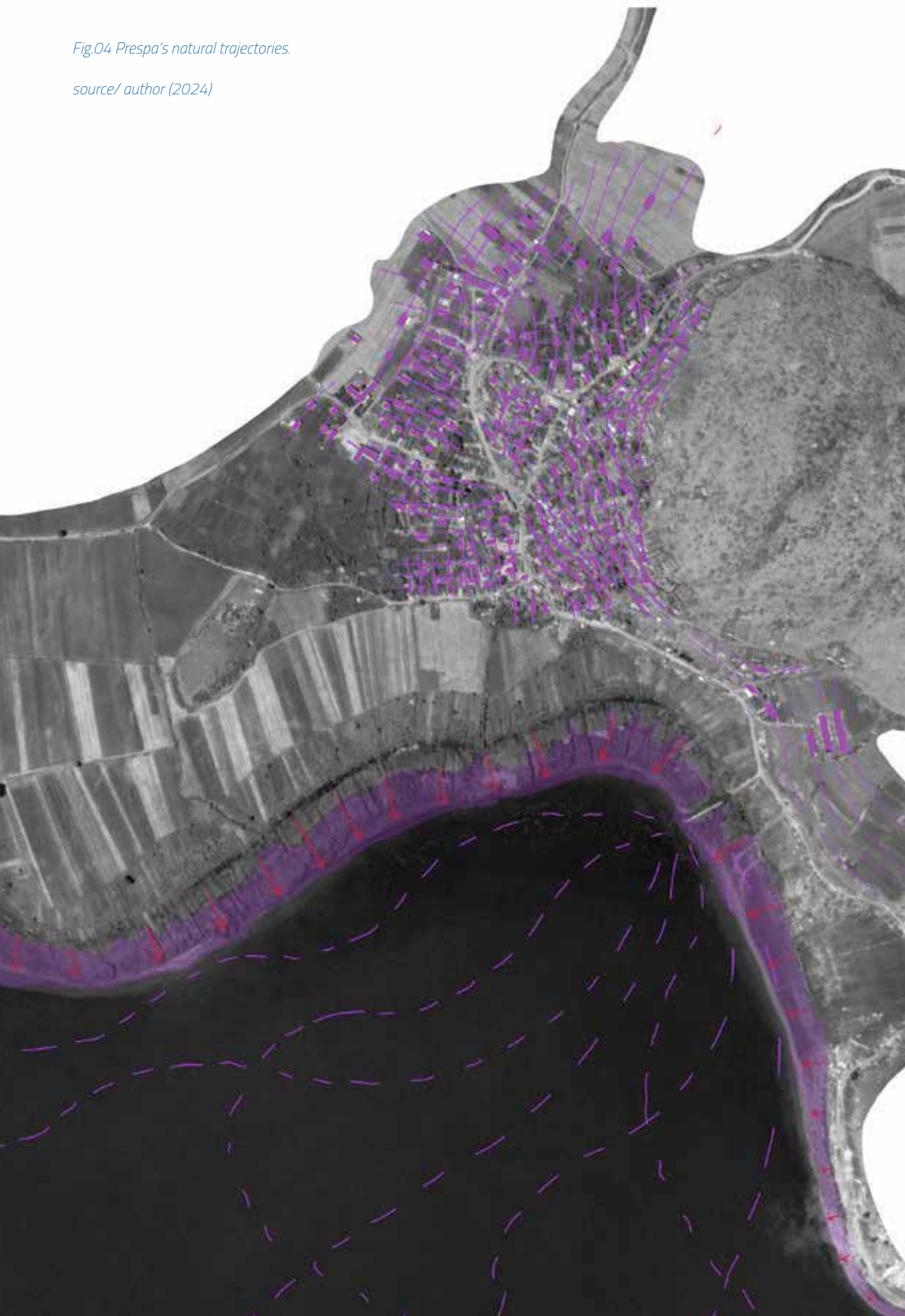
Parc de la Villette. Bernard Tschumi was selected by over 470 international architects to develop his proposal made by several dispositives able to rehabilitate and establish on the site a different program compared to the classic one. The "urban park for the 21st century" developed a complex program of cultural and entertainment facilities, what Tschumi did in la Villette was to deconstruct all the functions that we used to have inside a cultural center in several small architectures and put them in a rigid grid that could cover the site, creating a complex system of multifunctional architecture-machines able to push up the economy and generating a new attractive poles

Bernard Tschumi's Folies project, located in the Parc de la Villette in Paris (1982–1998) [14], stands as a quintessential representation of deconstructivist architecture and serves as a critical examination of

Fig.05 Prespa's natural trajectories.
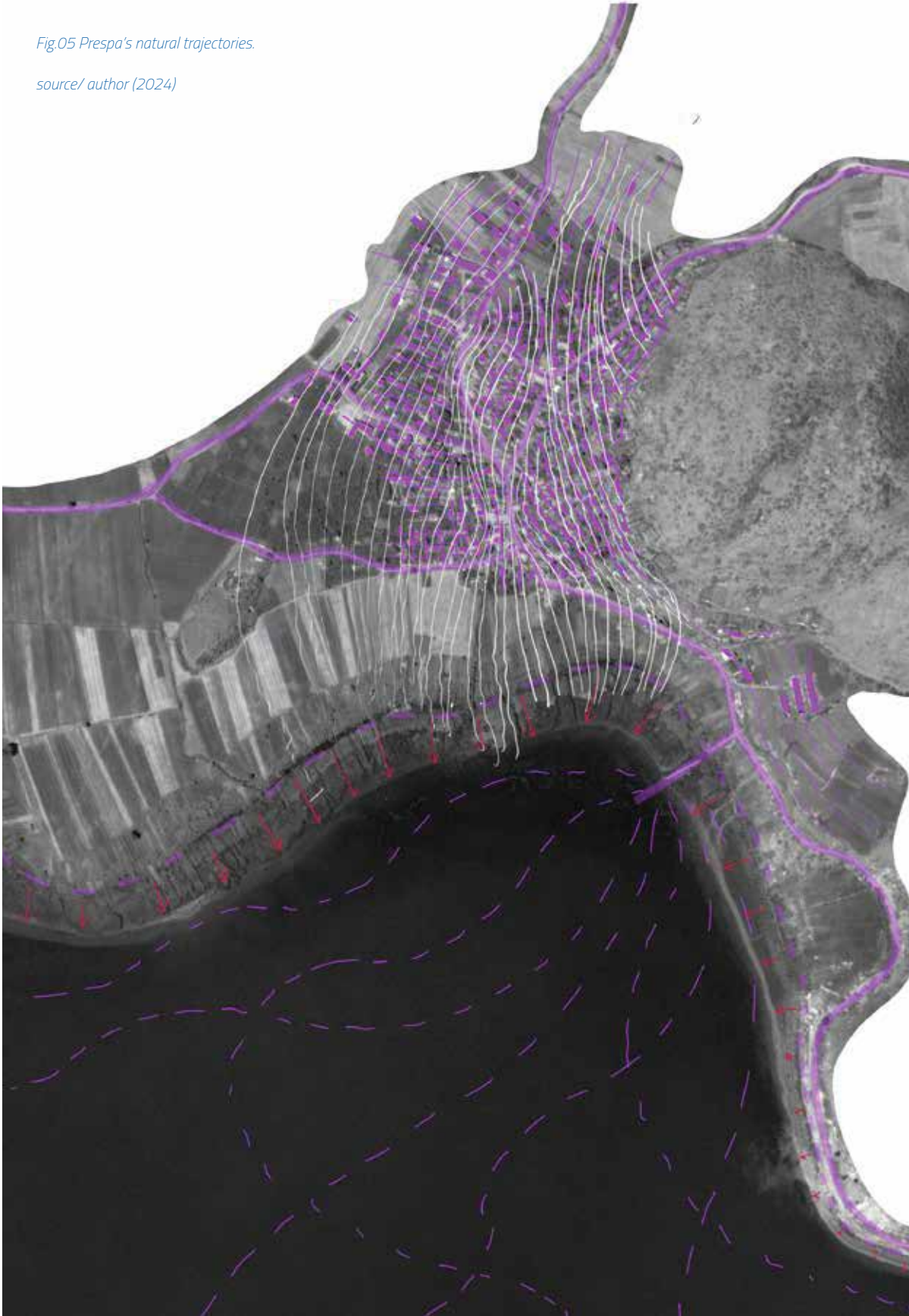
source/ author (2024)

Fig.7/ Pustec village tendences   source/ author (2024)

urban spatial organization. The Folies consist of architectural elements distributed in a systematic grid throughout the park, designed to question conventional norms of form and function.

The strategy is founded on the layering of three independent systems: Points, red dispositives juxtaposed in the net interactions. Lines as pedestrian promenades and Surfaces transformed in open spaces for cultural and recreational activities. The Folies project represents Tschumi's interpretation of 'disjunction' between form and function, contesting the established link between space and its application. Influenced by deconstructivism and Jacques Derrida's philosophy, Tschumi suggests an architectural approach that refrains from imposing meanings, instead facilitating them through the arrangement of self-sufficient systems. In this regard, the Folies act as 'conceptual machines' that inspire fresh perspectives on the perception and use of urban spaces. A more contemporary project to expose in this paper is the vision of James Corner with his project of the South Bay Sponge in California. Shows how an innovative model to improve, adapt, and develop urban coast areas shapes an imaginary where nature, buildings, and technology work together for a more sustainable development, improving resilience and soil consumption due to climate change. 'The San Francisco Bay' is considered a very vulnerable community, which is growing rapidly and showing the need for a proper housing strategy. To answer this need, the 'sponge' model adapts ecological infrastructures able to connect nature and new urban areas, creating a healthy synergy between the models. This is able to filter water and allocate the rise of water due to storms into the urban settlements' layout (Fig. 09-10).

The sponge metaphor represents a strategy of accommodating water through processes of absorption, filtration, and gradual management, as opposed to traditional approaches that seek to resist or divert it. This method prioritizes ecological systems—such as restored creeks, wetlands, and vegetated corridors—over rigid infrastructure, fostering adaptability and long-term resilience. In this way, we can envision a return of Pustec's settlements to a more direct and dynamic relationship with water, where the natural landscape once again becomes an active part of the urban and cultural fabric.

To achieve this, it is essential to implement wetlands, parks, and green spaces that are capable of storing, slowing, and filtering stormwater and rising lake levels. This would be supported by a decentralized network of *"sponges"*—including retrofitted infrastructure, shared public areas, and water-sensitive private developments—that collectively manage water across multiple scales, integrating natural processes into the everyday life of the settlement.

So, even in Pustec, architects and sailors need to imagine new solutions that can be used for more than just a single function. But the devices must be able to be moved, deconstructed, and reimagined continuously, without end, changing and mobile, they can be repositioned and reinterpreted every season, from work machines to culture machines, punctual connections, like landmarks that every person can refer to in everyday life, but it. It can't be just about new architectures; managing the soil and providing a general scheme are also needed to avoid speculation and soil consumption, while taking care of the lake's resilience.

Epilogue

The contemporary world demands contemporary architecture, grounded in innovative approaches, not merely in monumental gestures or invasive building models. Lake Prespa is for Albania a rare opportunity to rethink territorial rules, prompting new ways of inhabiting the edge, or the limit.

By integrating the projects of Bernard Tschumi and James Corner within the Pustec region and the rules we investigated through the diagrams, we can imagine strategies for the expansion of

settlements based on their respective spatial and conceptual frameworks. Extending public spaces and establishing a direct connection to the lake are essential steps toward reactivating the territorial system and rebalancing land use. These interventions not only enhance ecological integration and accessibility but also aim to create a more dynamic, inclusive public realm.

As architects, we must respond to this challenge by adapting our imagination to something as fluid and transformative as the lake itself.

If the emerged land from Lake Prespa can serve as a connecting system between three nations, it may also represent a new architectural and territorial model capable of overcoming borders through design.

By viewing the palimpsest as an opportunity—and combining it with innovative visions—we begin to understand the potential of designing a new floating landscape. Within this context, architecture becomes a total interaction between stratification and spatial organization.

Here, the sites of intervention are no longer seen as static or purely functional containers; rather, they become conceptual deformations—not of form, but of meaning—capable of accommodating human needs while connecting the territory to symbolic, manifest, or landmark narratives.
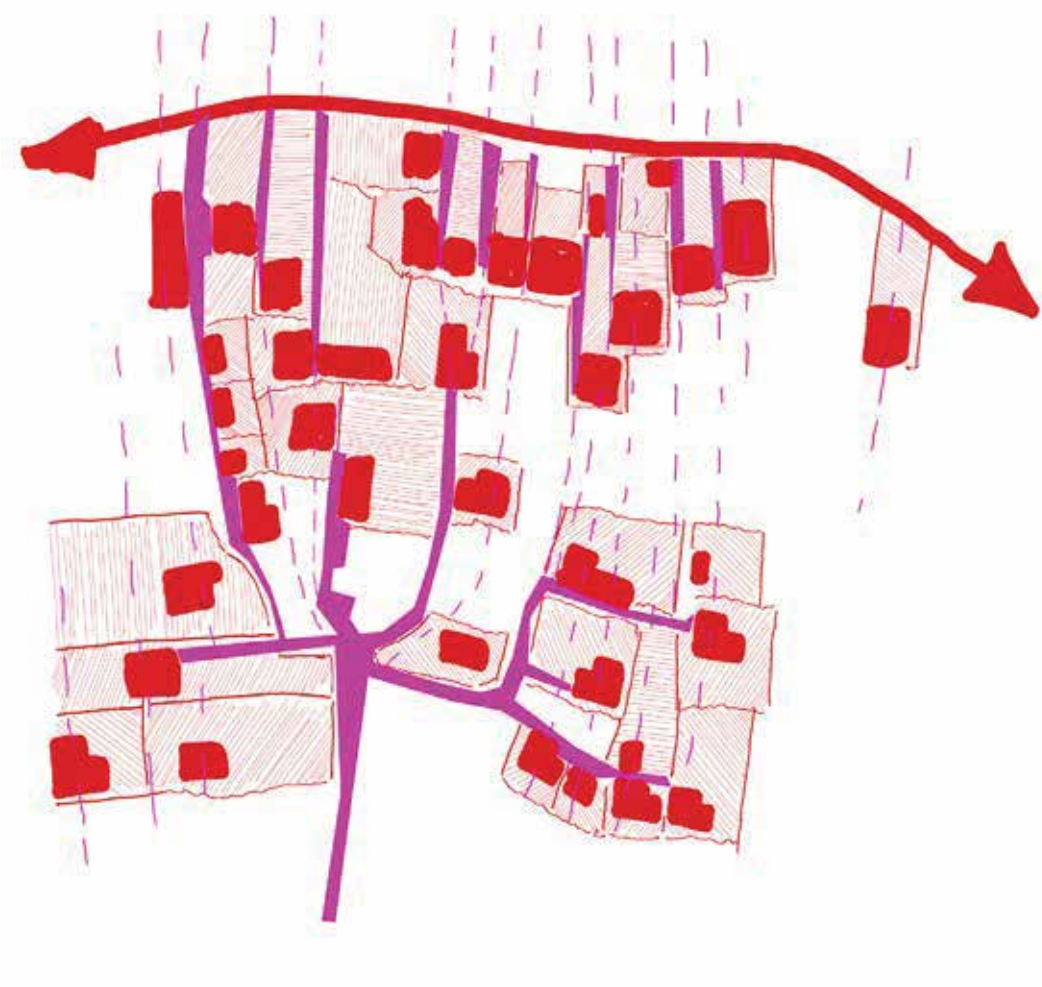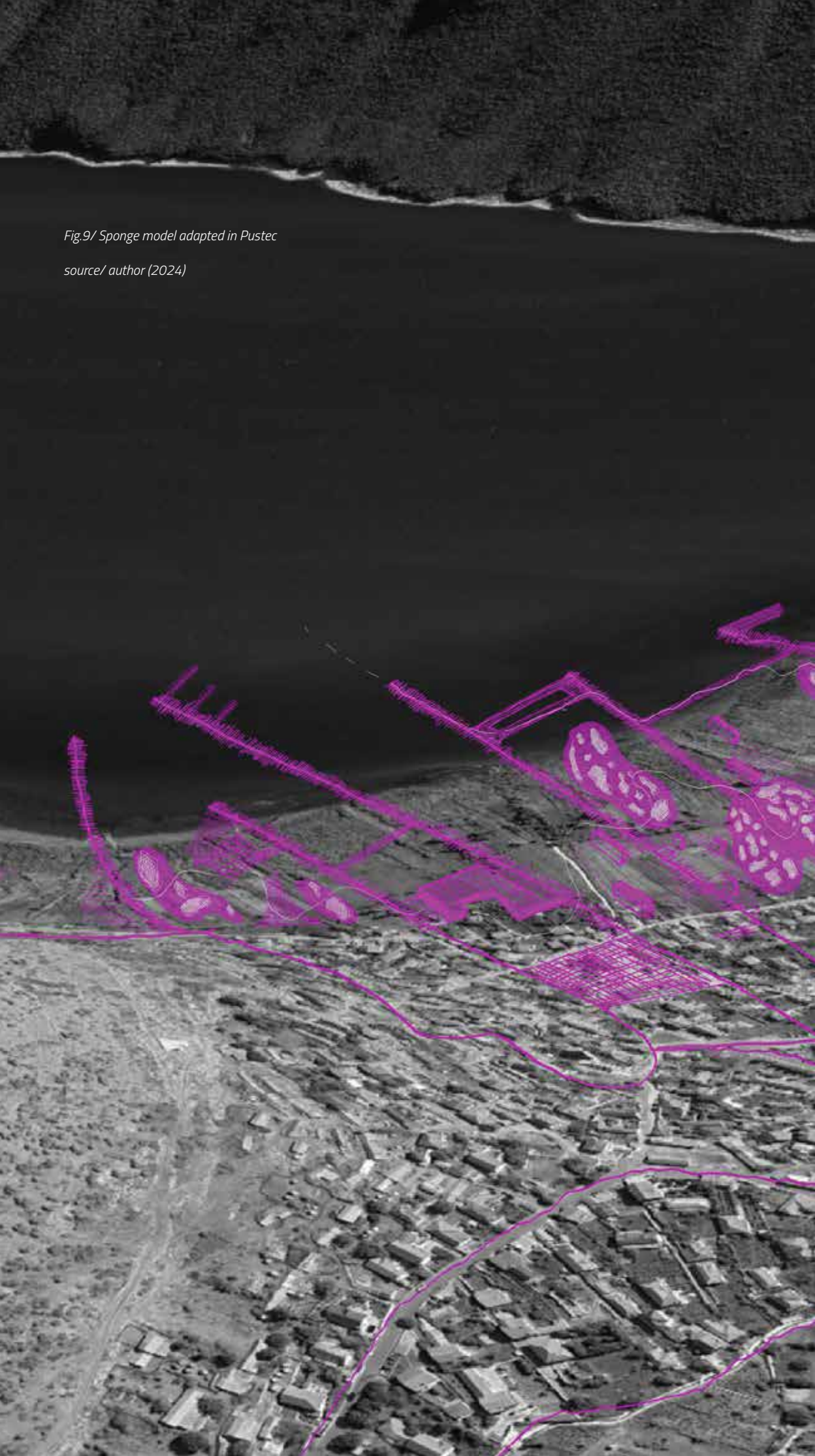
Fig.9/ Sponge model adapted in Pustec
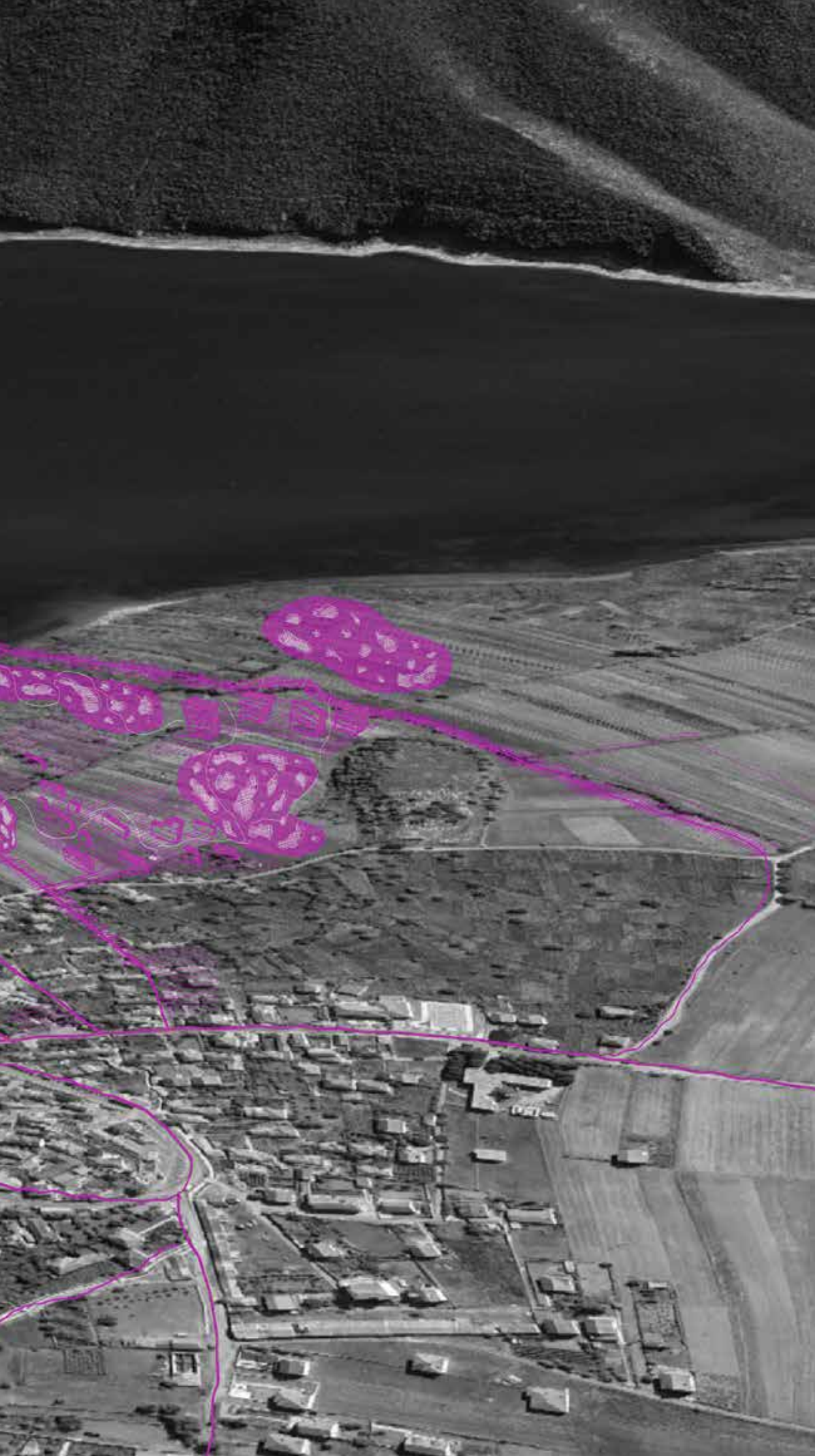
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