

Architectural Design and History

**Spaces of Memory.  
Commentaries  
on 21st Century  
Buildings**

edited by Luigi Spinelli

**FrancoAngeli**

The Bookseries *Architectural Design and History* intends to explore the relationships between architectural design and the contemporary city, with a particular focus on the contexts where urban transformations relate to the preservation and promotion of historical heritage. By intersecting various theories, techniques and practices, the contributions aim at unfolding the complex identity of the architectural culture, fostering connections and exchanges among different disciplines, and enhancing a strategical and evolutionary conception of architectural heritage.

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**Ricardo Bak  
Gordon.  
Architecture as  
Inhabited Space  
Between Past  
and Future**

Christian Campanella

Meeting and working with Ricardo Bak Gordon has been at the same time an enrichment and an incentive. This opportunity materialized in the occasion of an international design competition, which led us to deal with a pre-existing structure connoted by a special importance, not only related to historic or artistic values, but also to the meaning it had once conveyed, the urban footprint of the existing volumes, its position and its lost relationship with the city.

This enrichment resulted from the direct acquaintance, the dialogue and the acknowledgment of a «different» methodological approach, which highlighted commonalities and differences – even though these were never too wide. The incentive ensued from the curiosity to explore new strategies, solutions, architectures and visions, especially those nurtured by and pertaining to historical places – such as the military structure at the core of the competition, which throughout the centuries has shaped the border of the old city of Padova, while at the same time isolating itself from the urban centre.

Ricardo Bak Gordon is part of the latest generation of a distinctive Portuguese community that has had a privileged position within the international architecture scene for years. His formation started at the prestigious School of Porto, under the supervision of Fernando Távora and Álvaro Siza, and afterwards was nurtured by the collaboration with Paulo Mendes da Rocha, the «chromatic» awareness of Luis Barragán, and the spatial and material sensibility of Pedro Cabrita Reis and Anish Kapoor.

Bak Gordon's work results from the coalescence of the personal vision of the architect and the acknowledgment of the international cultural context he interacts with, drawing on a focus on permanence, which «allows man and time to inhabit these spaces, always in different ways»<sup>1</sup>.

Proceeding from the tradition of the School of Porto, in his practice he takes full advantage of the use of drawing, employed as a strategical tool for investigation: the time dedicated to life drawing of the city, the people and the buildings, has taught him to linger and look at the world with a deeper attention, and thus has helped him to develop a special sensibility towards the observation of places and to understand of architectural design as a practice which needs to address a certain level of continuity with the existing context.

«Thinking around the drawing means going to the roots of architecture, to seek the essence rather than the appearance, and to accept its inner, immutable rules»<sup>2</sup>. This is certainly true for the design of a new building, but it is even more valid for the architectural interventions operating on a pre-existing building, if applied to the survey of the form, the materials and the proportions of historical stratification (which is never predictable, and somehow makes it authentic). In my opinion, to deeply understand the value of drawing and of the survey project is the most appropriate way to understand the character of a building, which needs to be recognized within its context, and subsequently pursued in the architectural design practice. A consistent intervention on a pre-existing structure must build on the comprehensive analysis of its identity features, shaped by its construction as well as by time. Such buildings ground their testimonial strength and eloquence on authenticity, ensuing from the merging of the metamorphoses that occurred throughout history.

Mirroring the lesson of the Portuguese School, Bak Gordon's philosophy draws on the capability of the architect to constantly dialogue with the pre-existing context, and in particular with the heritages it contains, without shying away from the responsibility to add his own contribution.

The intervention method is based on the understanding of the project as an opportunity to enhance the site and its meaning, moving away from self-referential and ephemeral architecture. As explained by Ricardo Carvalho commenting on Bak Gordon's approach, this vision is generated by the Portuguese «reality principle», referred to a culture which has evolved far from any utopian tendency, and is expressed by an architectural practice that has local origins but a universal value, and thus interprets everyday places within the framework of the desire to open up to new horizons.

To think about architecture as an inhabited space, choosing the most suitable tools for its representation (as they become instruments fostering analysis, interpretation and thought) is the action at the base of the methodological approach which Bak Gordon consistently pursues: it results in a continuous relation with the place and with history, and facilitates the design of spaces that are able to provide users with a proper comfort, also through some essential elements of



the composition. This comfort is strictly connected with the proportions and the measures of the specific space, and beyond repetitions and standardized stereotypes it participates in the architectural design process and in the search for a peculiar atmosphere.

«I think that those architects who place a certain emphasis on continuity, and on such processes intertwining the addition and the continuation of the meanings of the constructive realm, are well-balanced, in contrast to those who eagerly seek the invention. I am not one of those. I like to sense that continuity and aim to develop this dialogue, by adding small elements that will be gradually integrated in the process of time. That is what I value the most»<sup>3</sup>.

In the design activities focused on the relationship between new and pre-existing architecture, the prominent elements are the compositive and functional tasks (the typology, the footprint and the relationships with the inhabited places); hence the material (the existing one) becomes a secondary matter.

«I trust continuity very much. And continuity ensues from an attentive observation of the context, that lead you to discover which are the questions you need to answer in order to become an active part of the processes that transform the world you are living in, adopting a sensitive approach, one that does not aim at showing off with totally invented proposals. [...] If someone can come up with an “invention” in architecture, capable of enhancing the possibility to answer complex questions, it’ll be welcome, but I don’t think anyone can do it. So I’d like to address a message to the new generations and tell them that what an architect has to do is to find enthusiasm in being a part of the process of continuity»<sup>4</sup>.

Bak Gordon’s works range from a large number of single-family houses – the project of which is focused on the search for the domestic comfort home, such as those in Quelfes, Pousos, and Santa Isabel, Lisbon, and the two that were built in Casa Queimada – to the renovation of few schools in Lisbon and Porto, as well as in Switzerland, to the design of remarkable buildings in Portugal and abroad – such as the oil mill in Oliveira da Serra, the Albarquel Park in Setúbal, the Roman Theatre in Lisbon, the waterfront FACIM in Maputo in Mozambique and the Portuguese Embassy in Brasilia, in cooperation with

Paulo Mendes da Rocha. This is a long time relationship, which continues to nurture their work with inspiration and an ideal strength, to unfold new questions about the role of architecture as a collective instrument for contemporary society, thus to encourage the exploration of various scales (not intended in dimensional, but functional terms) and especially to mediate the passage from private to public, which coalesce the different needs related to dwelling.

In this text I will bring to the attention of the readers three works that specifically focus on the enhancement of pre-existing buildings; although they refer to very different contexts (and they are characterized by different scales, functions, relationships with the surrounding situation) it is possible to find a common matrix, which can be summarized by the recurrent keywords that can be associated to each project: *critical analysis, innovation, dialogue between old and new, continuity*.

I will start from the intervention on the *Escola Secundária Dom Dinis* in Chelas, in Lisbon (2008). This site, realized in the 1970s, had a representative value as it was the prototype of the ten-year program dedicated to the modernization of Portuguese school buildings, aimed at providing them with new spaces that could enhance the quality of teaching activities and boost the cultural development of its users. This issue oriented the renovation project towards the conservation, improvement and integration of the existing assets.

Bak Gordon was responsible for the transformation of three Portuguese schools; in all these cases, although specifically developed, he adopted an approach based on the enhancement of collective spaces. In the Dom Dinis School, this strategy is fulfilled through the creation of new meeting places intended to improve the students' life.

The intervention draws on the insertion of a new volume at the center of a cluster shaped by the pre-existing independent buildings, and precisely within the space of the old courtyard, thus enhancing the connection between the satellite pavilions. Although they had been recently built and were not characterized by high architectural quality, these buildings set the rules of the new project, dictating its height, proportion and the simple style. The volume designed by Bak Gordon is a sort of hinge that takes its shape, colour and alignment from the surrounding structures; at the same time, it is recognizable as a new

insertion, due to its peculiar cladding and the sinuosity of its rounded corners. Its iconic form ensues from the use of concrete walls, covered with a white corrugated sheet. The use of standardized and low-cost components is part of a logic that Bak Gordon constantly implements, based on the appropriateness of the means of expression in relation to the specific circumstances and to the available resources, which in this case included the adequate management of economic assets and a certain speed in the execution. At the same time, the formal layout of this new pavilion — which is designed as if it did not have a starting nor an ending point — generates a contrast with the regular geometry of the pre-existing buildings, which enhances the distinctiveness of the new intervention.

As described by Ricardo Carvalho<sup>5</sup>, walking through this intervention can be compared to a visit to a city, traversing libraries, auditoriums and computer rooms, treading through ramps that follow the topography, between movement and rest areas, under a flat roof that regulates and connects the height of the rooms. Along this «road to learning»<sup>6</sup> — as Bak Gordon himself defined the path crossing the new building — despite its scale, the concept of the centrality of man who needs public spaces reappears in reference to the important role of collective areas where the community can meet and interact, and to the necessity to design them by maximizing their liveable functionality, as a leading aspect of the architectural project.

In the proposal for the requalification of the Roman Theatre in Lisbon (2016), Bak Gordon combines the tasks related to the conservation and valorization of the archaeological remains and the issues pertaining to their relationship with the city. The new protective structure is inserted in the narrow space framed by the surrounding streets and buildings, hence managing a complex urban theme. At the same time, it reorganizes the introverted space dedicated to the exhibition of the traces of the ancient theatre, by improving the quality of this important cultural venue (also through the addition of new facilities) and its compositional, spatial and visual interplay with the context.

Today the remains are only partially visible, as they are embedded in the stratified city. The aim of the project was to redevelop and reconfigure the area, by redefining the relationship between three co-

vered spaces and strengthening their consistency and recognizability, without downgrading their specific identity, position and connection with the place.

The design process initially focused on the management of the pedestrians and vehicular paths that intersect and define the plot, with the aim to maintain the public practicability and the fluidity through the implementation of a solution that would not turn the new volume into a foreign or disturbing presence. The correct solution came from the observation of the place, and in particular from the visual relationship between the higher point of the «central core», in the building along *Rua da Saudade*, and the «southern core», where a direct view of the Tagus river opens up. This alignment suggested the creation of a new public square located above the archaeological remains, in one of the natural panoramic viewpoints that shape the steep topography of the Lisbon hills, also providing shaded spaces for rest. The square adds further information to the local palimpsest: it produces a new layer that overlaps the Roman theatre, as if it was a section of the city surface rising to reveal it.

*The central core.* Bak Gordon proposes to introduce a third museum space in the current context, to be located in the northern core of the area — the Museum of Lisbon - Roman Theater, which intends to establish itself as a multi-polar body organized around the central core and its public square. This peculiar condition allows for a unitary fruition of the complex and heterogeneous urban context, populated by variously characterized buildings, which find a programmatic integration in their use. The new intervention relates with the existing block through a morphologically coherent integration. This design strategy is based on the capability of the central element to control both the urban conditions and the contained functions. The resulting architectural outcome indeed ensues from the necessity to point out the presence of an important content, hence to arise curiosity, but also to avoid the full revelation of the remains. The building thus becomes a surprising urban element, catching the eye of all those who gravitate around it. The access system that allows pedestrians to reach the ruins of the Roman Theater especially enhances the south-east side of the area, at the intersection between *Rua de São Mamede* and *Rua da Saudade*, and it is meant to renovate the most important entrance to

the museum (in the point where the main access to the Theatre was). This entryway, leading to a small reception room, is shaped by a large protruding metal door that announces the presence of the exhibition site to the city. The roof of this nucleus embraces the new public square, which can be accessed directly from *Rua da Saudade*, and to the south-east is completed by the cafeteria severing the museum. The metal structure of the building is supported by five stands only; the closure of the vertical margins is realized through braided expanded metal panels, which also allow for air permeability.

*The north core.* Compared to the central core, this building has a completely different nature; it was designed to guarantee a continuity with the surrounding volumes, although it is also intended to provide specific functional uses. Actually it is an open but covered space, where air and light circulate freely throughout the structure. Entering the triple height hall, it is possible to observe the ruins, climb the stairs that give access to the first floor, or enter the auditorium. The building is made in concrete, that was chosen for its structural and plastic properties; it is the only material that remains visible in the public area of the museum, and it appears as a sort of great ruin that contains the real remains.

*The south core.* In this nucleus, the intervention is limited to the architectural reconfiguration of the existing situation, hence maintaining the functional hypotheses. The main transformation consists in the realization of a single translucent cover in alveolar polycarbonate, which allows for the access of natural light in the large archaeological area, and in an opaque metal structure, expanded on the terrace to protect visitors from the rain. The new vertical surface is characterized by the structural rhythm of the metal pillars that support the roof and the metal panels that fill up the interstitial spaces.

Finally, I'd like to reflect on the *Piave Futura* Project, ensuing from the international restricted procedure competition promoted by the University of Padua in 2018 for the construction of the new campus of the Social and Economic Sciences School.

The project site was originally occupied by the St. Augustine Convent, that was built outside the city walls, on the banks of the Bacchiglione river. In the 16th century, the complex was integrated within the

enlarged urban perimeter, and transformed into a military structure. The convent almost disappeared: the church was demolished, and the residential building containing a large cloister was heavily modified due to its adaptation for military uses.

The first condition for the development of the proposal concerned the possibility to reshape the relationship between the area and the historical city, in particular inverting the logic of the closed enclosure, and opening up this space for its future enhancement. This task set the basis for the design of a new place, aim at constructing a morphological continuity with the city centre, and at recreating an *Hortus Magnus*, i.e. a school capable of functioning as catalyst for the enhancement of the aggregation between the scientific community and the citizens.

The intervention draws inspiration from the urban structure of Padua; in particular the design approach is based on the local system of voids, that is assumed as a matrix in the redefinition of this part of the city, not only concerning the new university facilities but also including squares, porches and gardens.

Following the guidelines of the international call, the proposal ensues from the elaboration of the footprint of the existing buildings, and its expansion to connect to a sequence of porches operating as a hinge between the new and the old volumes, at the same time managing the distribution of the plants. This system was inspired by the arcades that characterize the city of Padua, and is intended to accompany, protect and generate the new built and open spaces.

This choice also refers to the idea of fragmenting the area to avoid the densification of the built volumes and the addition of new spaces through superimposition or excavation, rather defining unique places of great urban significance.

The main buildings, both the new and the existing ones, are arranged in a dialogical sequence within the perimeter of the project site, spaced out by squares and gardens, which generate an interesting and somehow ambiguous interplay between «positive» and «negative», that enriches the quality of the urban space. The resulting complex environment – coalescing the kind of uses associated to collective public space and the «slower» ones pertaining to dwelling – aim at reinforcing the bond and the exchanges with the city.

The proposal for the new university campus consists of three specific interventions: the renovation of the existing buildings (including their restoration and adaptation to house different functions), the construction of new buildings (accommodating classrooms, the Auditorium and the Library/Learning center) and the realization of the peculiar spatial system which includes the Portico/Aqueduct.

As previously mentioned, the latter is configured as a technical and technological infrastructure, but also as a thin architecture that joins, accompanies, envelopes and defines various spaces and volumes. It is realized by a set of pre-shaped elements, emptied and opened towards the sky, fixed to a sequence of prefabricated concrete pillars which constitutes, at the same time, the covered porch, the technical gallery that gathers all the infrastructures, and the connective tool binding all the buildings together. The space used by the infrastructure is partially covered by an extension of photovoltaic panels which, thanks to the occupied area, ensure the sustainability and energy autonomy of the campus. The prefabricated concrete elements are meant to be pigmented and «washed» to acquire a finishing compatible with the atmosphere of the historical centre. The geometry of the pre-shaped elements creates a rhythm, based on the sequence of openings which connotes the façade of the new buildings adjoining the Portico and the related sets of rooms and windows.

Among the interventions on the existing buildings, the works on the convent focus on the recovery of the cloister, and in particular on the relationship between the perimetral corridors, previously compromised by heavy structural transformations, and the central courtyard, through the addition of a light, thin crowning, thus recovering a long-lost atmosphere. Partly compromised by the changes carried out when the complex was used as a military barrack, the interior spaces were remodelled to recover the «original» layout, the vaults, the surfaces and the masonry; this redevelopment was carried out also considering the certain level of «freedom» in the reconstruction or transformation of historical elements due to their loss resulting from the major alterations they had gone through over time (especially the floors, ceilings, vertical connections, installation of plants, circulation areas). The same philosophy is adopted in the renovation of the other buildings, i.e. the *Cavallerizza* and the large guesthouse.

As far as concerns the new buildings, the construction system is inspired from that of the external porch, so as the height and configuration of the façades. The roof of the Library/Learning centre consists of a water basin, aimed at improving the thermal control of the interior spaces and at revealing an unusual overview of the campus, as seen from the higher buildings situated along the perimeter. The geometry of the external porch expands towards the inner space through the creation of a suspended roof made in metal mesh, which frames the aerial infrastructures.

Because of its programmatic content as well as its exceptional location in the campus, the Auditorium (*Aula Magna*) extraordinarily develops on two floors: the ground floor is configured as an extension of the porched system, while the upper floor, although prosecuting the geometry of the lower level, is characterized by a lighter materiality. The Auditorium is in fact the symbolic element that materializes the link between the remote past and the future of the new campus; for this reason it takes the shape and the place of the lost church dedicated to St. Agostino – which used to be the core of the community, whose assembly gathered around scientific, artistic and cultural knowledge (once relying on religion) – hence ideally reconstructing it. This building operates as a hinge between the historic city and *Piave Futura*, and a metaphor for the whole project of the new campus.



1 R. Carvalho, *Un modo di osservare il mondo*, in F. Tranfa (ed.), *Bak Gordon. Architetture abitate / Inhabited Architectures*, Electa, Milan 2015.

2 F. Tranfa, *Introduzione*, in R. Bak Gordon, *Disegni di case*, Libria, Melfi 2008.

3 J. Hill, *Past Present Future II: Ricardo Bak Gordon*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.world-architects.com/en/architecture->

[news/film/past-present-future-ii-ricardo-bak-gordon](https://www.world-architects.com/en/architecture-news/film/past-present-future-ii-ricardo-bak-gordon) (last accessed on January 30, 2019).

4 Ibidem.

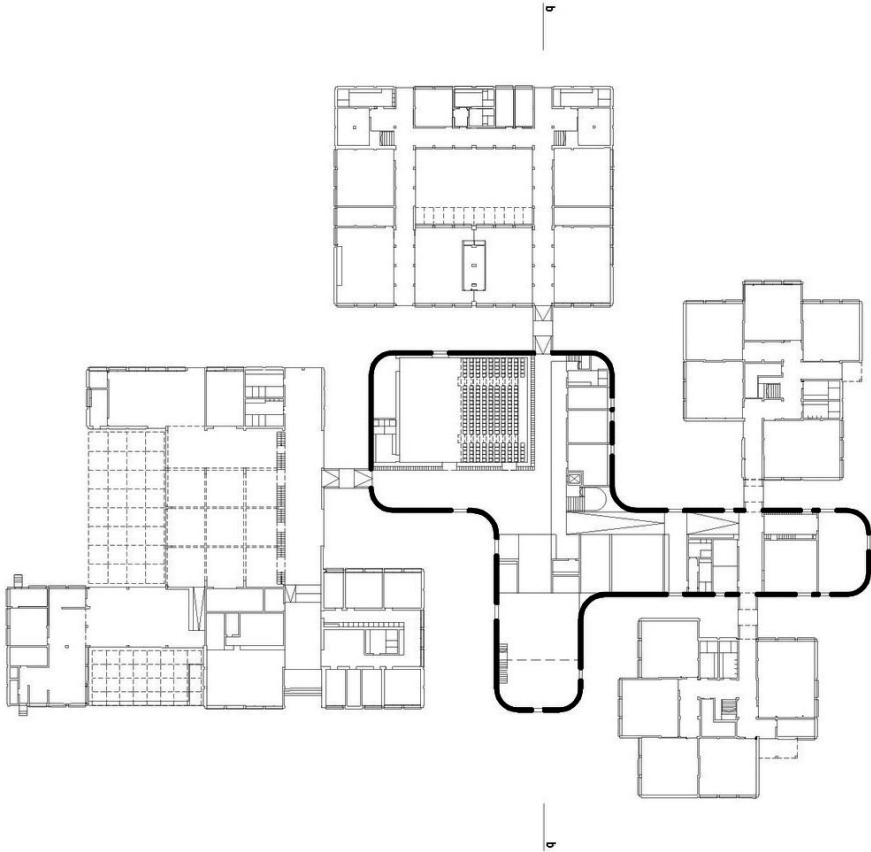
5 R. Carvalho, «Ruinas invertidas. Notas sobre el aquí y el ahora», *2G, Bak Gordon*, 64, 2012, p. 13.

6 B. Gordon, «Escuela secundaria Dom Dinis, Lisboa», *2G, Bak Gordon*, 64, 2012, p. 96.

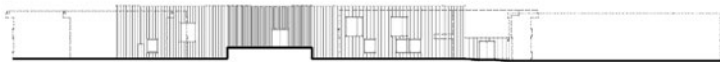


Ricardo Bak Gordon, *Escola Secundária Dom Dinis* (Chelas, Lisbon, Portugal 2008).

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The intervention  
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Ground floor plan  
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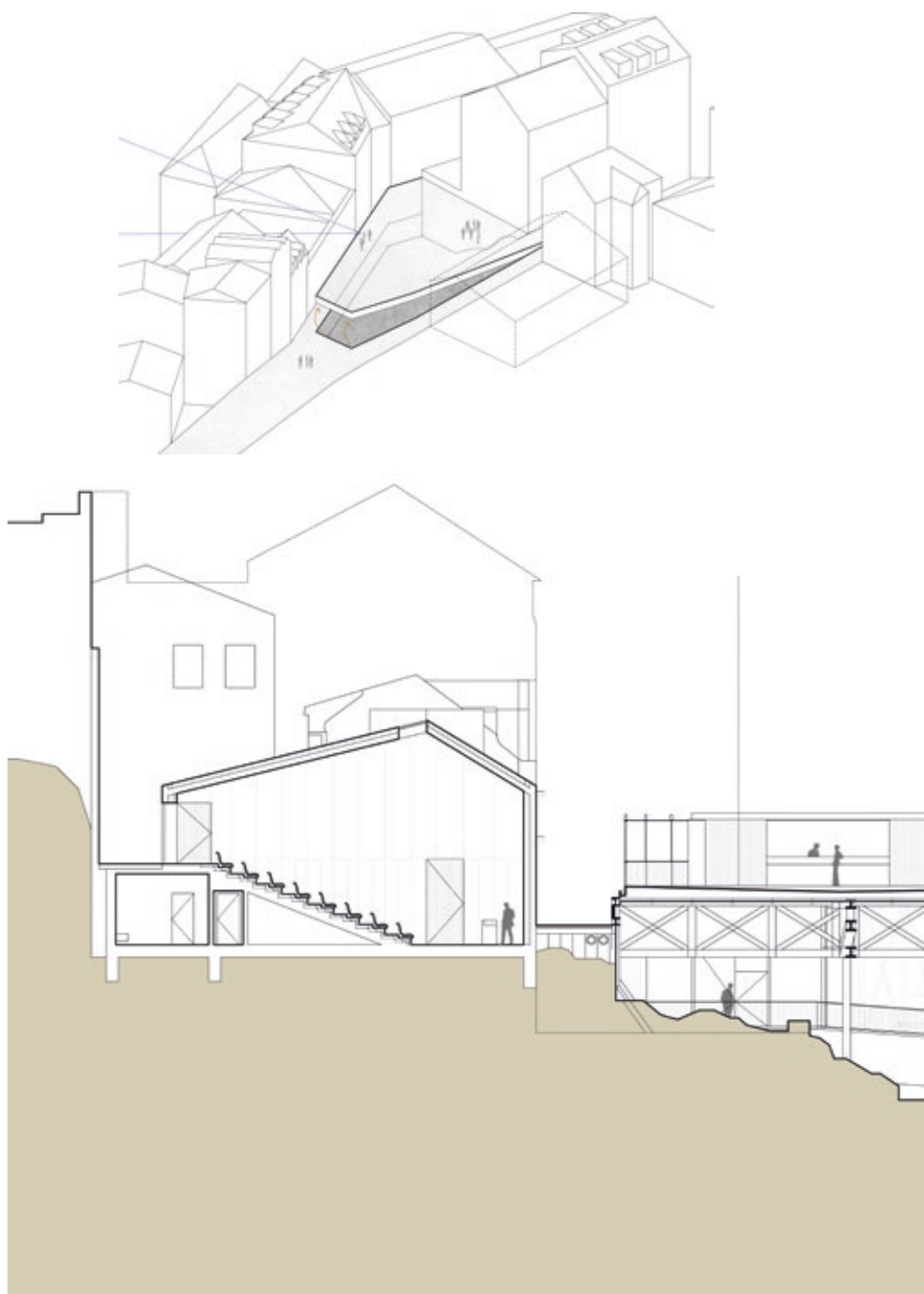


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Fronts © Bak Gordon  
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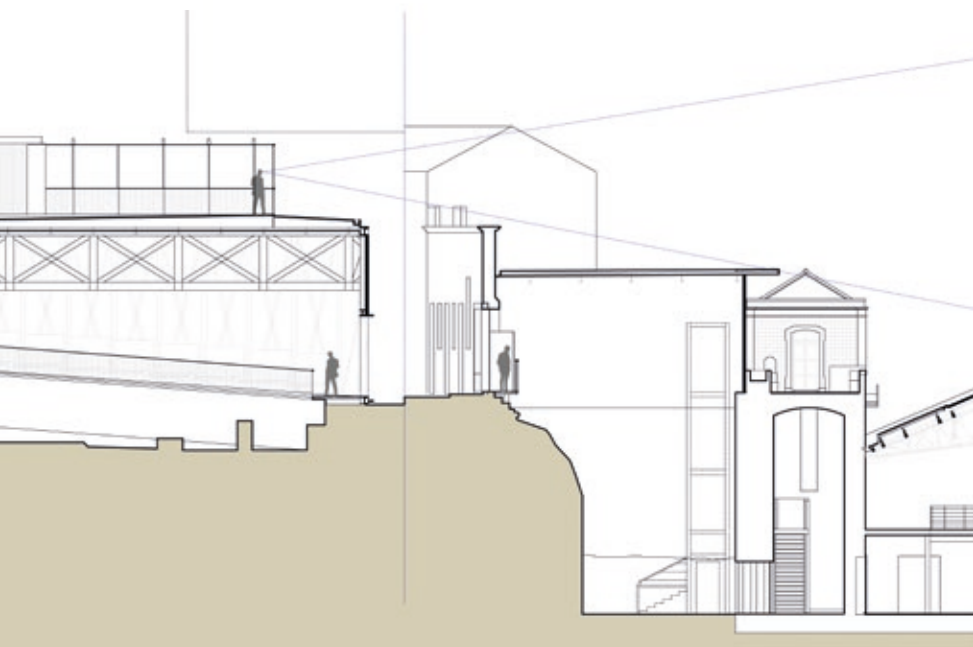
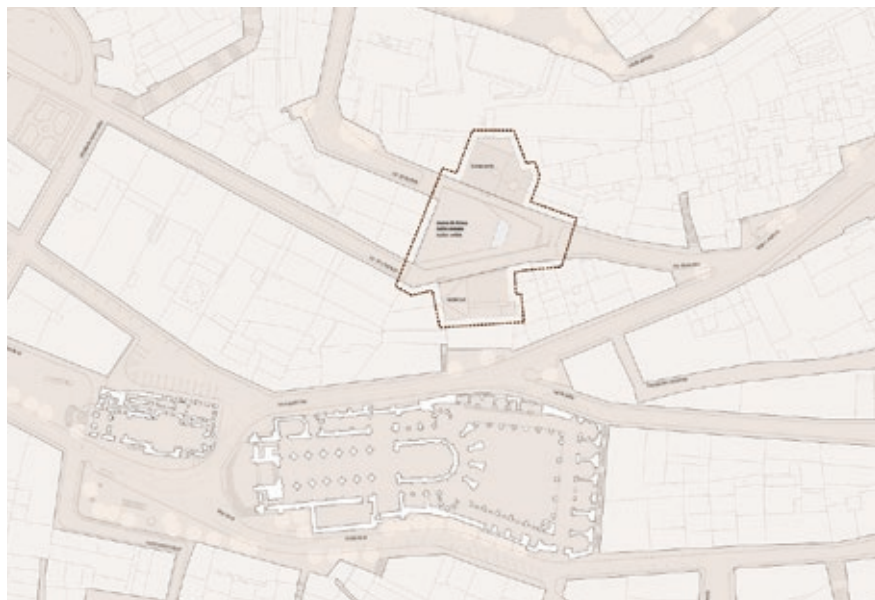
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Interior spaces  
© Bak Gordon Arquitectos.



Ricardo Bak Gordon,  
Renovation of the *Roman  
Theatre* area (Lisbon,  
Portugal 2016).

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Axonometric view and  
longitudinal section  
© Bak Gordon Arquitectos.



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Site plan © Bak Gordon  
Arquitectos.



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Exterior and interior views of  
the site, in its present state  
© Bak Gordon Arquitectos.





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Provisional views of the site  
after the intervention  
© Bak Gordon Arquitectos.



Ricardo Bak Gordon, *Piave Futura* Competition (Padova, Italy 2019).

**178**  
General plan and sections  
© Bak Gordon Arquitectos.



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Provisional views of the site  
© Bak Gordon Arquitectos.

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The sixteen essays explore the work of a selection of contemporary architects who have developed different interpretations and uses of memory: Andrew Berman, Renzo Piano, José Ignacio Linazasoro, Paolo Zermani, Alberto Campo Baeza, Guido Canali, Pierre-Louis Faloci, Philippe Prost, Elisa Valero Ramos, João Luís Carrilho da Graça, Miller & Maranta, Ricardo Bak Gordon, Tabuenca & Leache, Tony Fretton, Renato Rizzi, Eduardo Souto de Moura and Álvaro Siza Vieira.

The authors are part of the scientific community running the international Master of Science at the Mantova Campus of Politecnico di Milano; the selected works refer to the many protagonists of contemporary architecture who have lectured within the *MantovArchitettura* programme — a cultural project organized by the University to foster the exploration of the relationships between *Architectural Design and History*.



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