

From Humus to Human:

How Soil Shapes Belonging and Tradition

Research plan - Graduation Studio Urban Architecture

Nino Vogels

You are the greatest and the finest
of all creations.
Always capable of remaining
busy for the benefit of others,
no care for your own.
A great sacrifice more sanctified
than that of martyrs
who laid their lives
for sake of their motherland.

You are the mother to all,
bear all ruthless atrocities
and inhuman activities
without reactions,
people plough you for cultivation,
dig and dig you mercilessly
for all minerals and water,
dump all rubbish on you,
build sky scrappers,
Cut all that you give birth
And nourish continuously,

pollute you with anthropogenic chemicals,
make wars on your body
to turn you into pieces,
and you accept every thing
with an ever quiet heart,
and equal piece of mind,
how you withstand,
what materials you are
made up of,
what is the extent of your forbearance,

how lofty your ideals and philosophy,
how wide, clean and reverent
your thinking and dedication,
I could never understand.
Kindly contribute a fraction
of your peculiarity to man,
my ode to you with folded hands.

Poem by Nabakishore Dash

Ode To Soil

The very origin of the term “human” in Latin is similar to the root of the word “humus,” both symbolizing the concept of earth. Soil and people share a profound connection. Therefore, in this sense, there is no difference between soil and humans, because our bodies are formed from the same components as soil, and one day will return to the soil. The influence of soil on human lives is multifaceted, extending to its role as the primary source of food, sustenance, and fibers for clothing, as well as its vital ecological functions like purifying drinking water. Human civilizations have recognized the important role of soil since ancient times. Soil has found its way into many cultural references and religious beliefs.

In Islamic culture, soil has a strong religious meaning. ‘Turbah’ has a primary meaning of ‘dirt’, ‘earth’ or ‘soil’, identified as the material God used to create the earth and humankind. Turbah also denotes any ground on which one prostrates oneself for prayer, which also leads to its connection with death, the moment when people return back to the earth. Turba (or türbe in Turkish) is an Islamic funerary building in a variety of contexts (Fig.1).

Deceased Muslims are naturally buried. This means that the body of the deceased is washed and only buried in a wrapping of white cloth usually within 24 hours of death to protect the living from any sanitary issues. In Islam the dead are associated with dust: a dead body is given an eternal grave, so the body eventually turns to earth after death. Deceased Muslims are often repatriated to cemeteries in their countries of origin (Fig.2 & Fig.3). But in the last couple of years, Muslims are rethinking to be buried in the country where they live now.

In Belgium are some Islamic cemeteries. Because of the COVID pandemic, Muslims couldn’t get repatriated. This means that these cemeteries are getting fuller with the year causing enormous problems for cemeteries because of the lack of space. Also, identarian and emotional factors play an increasingly important role in this: younger generations feel progressively Belgian and do not want to bury their loved ones far away, they want to visit their deceased relatives in a nearby cemetery (Fig.4).

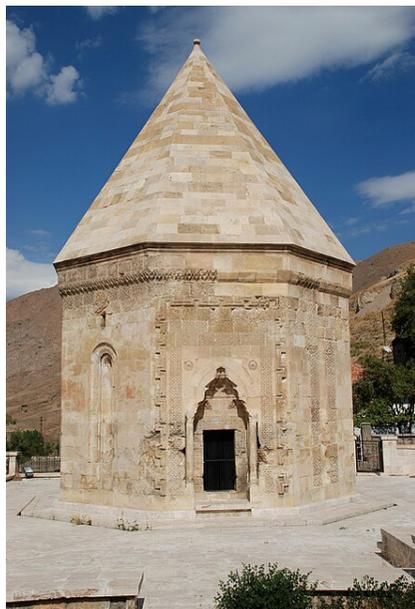


Fig.1
Persian style Türbe in Divriği, Turkey
Image © Bertramz, 2011

‘Grond’ tells the tragicomic story of two young Belgians (brother and sister) of Moroccan origin who take over their father’s funeral parlor and want to modernize it. Instead of repatriating deceased Belgian Muslims to their country of origin to bury them there according to Muslim traditions, they decided to import sacred soil. This way, they can be buried here, with their families. It’s an absurd way of thinking but it explains the importance of soil in relation to someone’s identity, religion, and the relationship with feeling home (Fig.5).

Soil relates to identity, what feels like your home, and where you belong. A 2010 article called ‘Contemporary Nomads: My Home is Where My Coffin Is’ is about the opening of an object exhibition in Brussels by Flemish artist Ann Van de Vyvere that highlights the relationship between refugees, homeless people, and expats in the city. These are all people without a permanent place and therefore the new contemporary nomads. She highlights this to show that Brussels consists of multi-diverse communities. And raises the question if you belong to a place if you don’t have a roof on top of your head. All these people belong to the city, whether they have shelter or not.

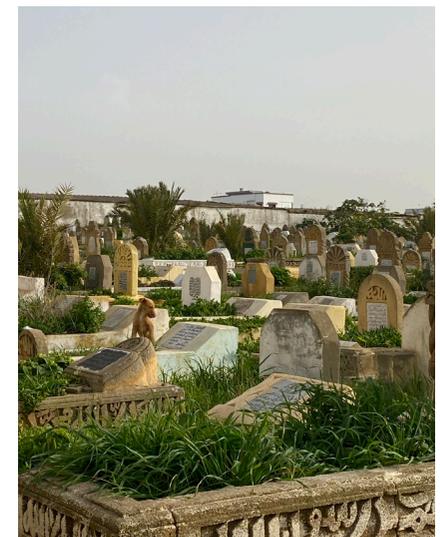


Fig.2
Man in front of ‘Cimetière Sidi Benachir’ in Salé
Morocco,
© own image, 2023

Fig.3
Detail ‘Cimetière Sidi Benachir’ in Salé
Morocco,
© own image, 2023



Fig.5



Fig.4

Fig.4
'Cimetière Sidi Benachir' in Salé Morocco,
© own image, 2023

Fig.5
Screenshot "Brusselse serie 'Grond' krijgt
wereldwijde release op Netflix" © Bruzz

Brussels was born from its natural soil. Situated alongside the unpredictable waters of the river Zenne and surrounded by numerous ponds, this area, while inhospitable to our distant ancestors, proved to be more suitable for habitation compared to other regions. In the beginning of the 10th century, 'Bruocsella', the settlement (sele, sala, zaal) in the swamp (bruoc, broek, meaning marshland that floods in winter) came into being (Van Istendael, 2013) (Fig.6).

The constant movement of the submerged land caused continuous changes in the natural environment. Over the centuries, new vegetation grew and different animals managed to settle in the Brussels marsh. Due to its moving nature, Brussels has always been a place of exchange of flora and fauna.

Nowadays the city is a full built environment with only some rare spots that show these traces of the natural environment. The project site in question, La Friche Josaphat (wasteland or void), used to be a marshaling yard that closed in the 1990s. After closing the terrain, a part of the leftovers was removed, and the field was cleaned and leveled with soil. In the last years, the site itself has turned into a complex ecology of non-human species. Among its inhabitants are more than a hundred species of bird, and one hundred and fifty varieties of wild bees. Biologists and ecologists argue for preserving the area as a nature reserve. Giving land back to nature, to recover lost biodiversity.

I perceive the former role of a marshaling yard as an apt metaphor for the dynamic city of Brussels, a place where narratives and communities find their way back together. Consider the trains in constant motion that regularly halt at La Friche, arriving from various regions in Belgium and even extending into Europe, transporting goods and connecting communities. Could it be that these infrastructural links hold the key to the vibrant natural environment we perceive now (Fig.7).



Fig.6
Map Brussels Jacob van Deventer, 1555
Image © KBR

This reminds me of the 1850s, when the botanist Richard Deakin examined the Colosseum in Rome. He discovered 420 plant species thriving amidst the ancient ruins (Fig.8, Fig.9). While some of these plants were typical of Italy, there were also a few rare flowers whose presence there posed a botanical mystery. They could not be found anywhere else in Europe. Botanists proposed a somewhat improbable explanation: these unusual flowers might have arrived as seeds in the soil transported by animals such as lions and giraffes. Romans had imported these creatures from Africa for entertainment and combat in the arena. As these animals fought and perished within the arena, they inadvertently left their botanical passengers behind, allowing these plants to flourish and eventually take over the structure itself. Soil is the breeding ground for new life.

This fascination with the meaning of soil can evolve into multiple research questions:

How can soil, especially in cultural or religious contexts, express the connection between La Friche and human identity, and what impact does this have on the preservation of flora and fauna?

How can architectural design facilitate a more direct and meaningful connection between individuals and soil, recognizing their shared origins and cultures?

Possible sub-questions:

What is the value of this soil on La Friche?

What hidden stories does the soil have?

Where does the soil come from?

What was La Friche before the marshaling yard?

etc...



Fig.7



Fig.9



Fig.8

Fig.7
La Friche Josaphat, Brussels
© own image, 2023

Fig.8
"The Interior of the Colosseum," c.1775 by
William Pars
Image © The Atlantic, 2017

Fig.9
"Inside the Colosseum" c. 1780 by Francis
Townser,
Image © The Atlantic, 2017

From Humus to Human

The methodology I intend to employ will encompass a blend of various research approaches. Its direction may vary depending on the specific path I choose to follow throughout my investigative process. To commence, I will embark on an exploration of the history of La Friche, aiming to unveil the underlying narrative of the soil of the former marshalling yard. I seek to unravel who once inhabited this site and whether there were animals or residents from Brussels present.

My examination will primarily involve the analysis of historical maps, with cartographers like Jacob van Deventer renowned for their depictions of 16th-century cityscapes. These maps will provide insights into the evolution of Schaarbeek over time and the origins of La Friche. Additionally, I will delve into the realm of Belgian art, where figures such as Jan Breugel, Paul Bril, Kerstiaan de Keuninck, Joos de Momper the Younger, Bonaventura Peeters the Elder and the Younger, Lucas Van Uden, and Jan Wildens occupy significant positions. However, the significance of landscape painting before, during, and after the era of Rubens is often overlooked, I aim to concentrate on the portrayal of the Belgian landscape by artists during Rubens' time. This exploration will provide a deeper understanding of how the marshy landscape of that era was depicted and shed light on the historical religious and cultural significance of the land and its surroundings.

After a deeper diving into the topic

....
....
....
....
....

Maybe use the medium of stop motion animation to tell the story...?

Methodology

Sources & Inspirations

Amsterdams Spul, 2018 - Exhibition at Huis Marseille
by Harold Strak & Willem van Zoetendaal

Exhibition on the collection of remnants found during the construction of the Amsterdam Metro Line, gathered over nine years. Eventually, 15,000 pictures were depicted in Spul: the extensive catalogue of archaeological finds released simultaneously with the opening of the new North-South Line. The Amsterdam Stuff exhibition highlights a careful selection from that cascade of stuff in a different, unusual and monumental way.



Fig.10

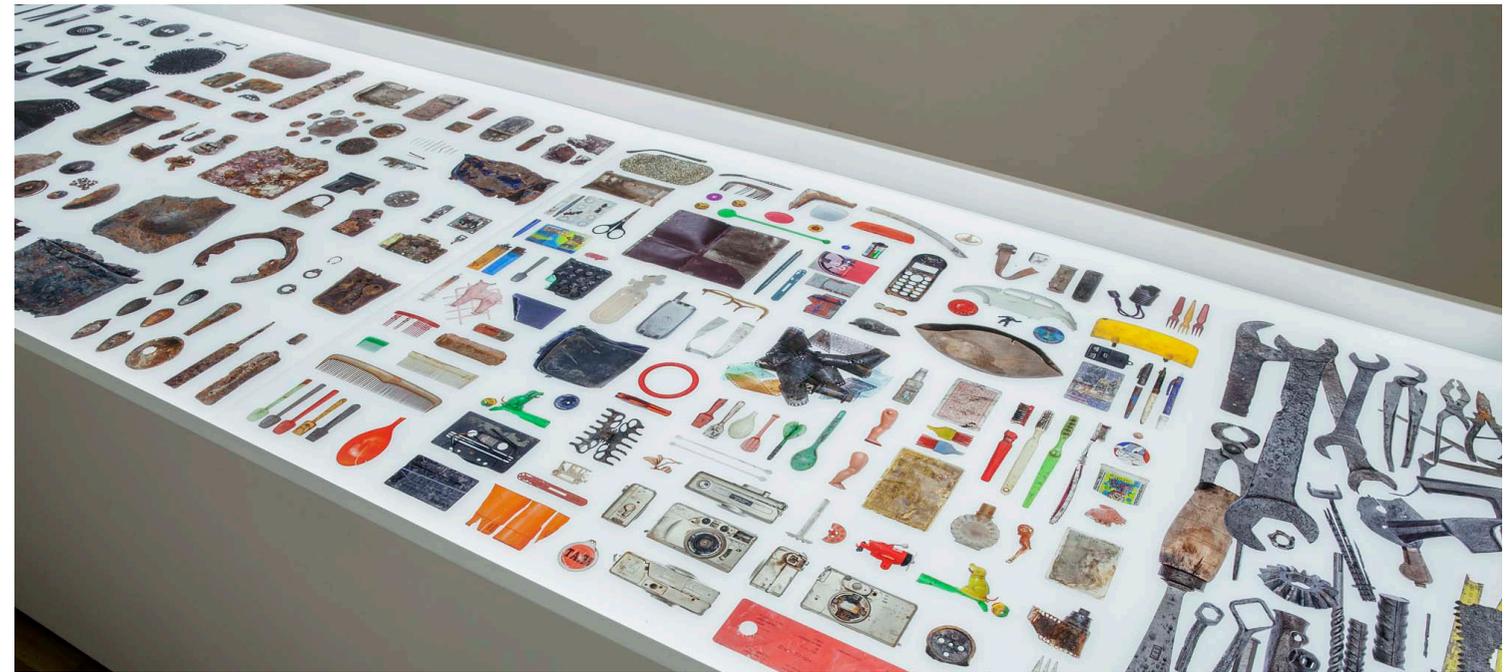


Fig.11



Fig.12

Fig.10, Fig.11, Fig.12
"Amsterdams Spul" by Harold Strak & Willem van Zoetendaal at Huis Marseille, 2018
© own images, 2018

Religious Gardens

The Garden of Eden, according to the Hebrew Bible, was a garden in or equal to the perfect and beautiful paradise where Adam and Eve lived.

Throughout the Renaissance period, gardens and the plant life within them remained significant, serving as religious symbols in art, markers of social standing, and sources of aesthetic delight. In this aspect, there was a seamless connection to the Middle Ages, where gardens and flowers held profound symbolic meanings.

My interest also moves towards the Islamic gardens, different depictions of ‘the paradise’.

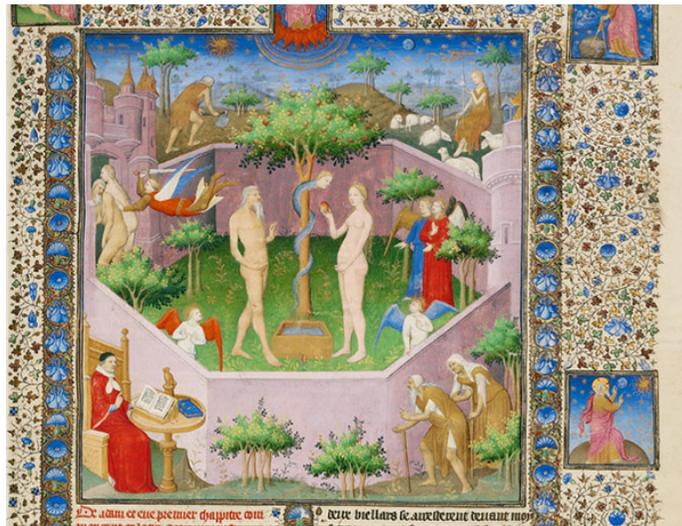


Fig.13

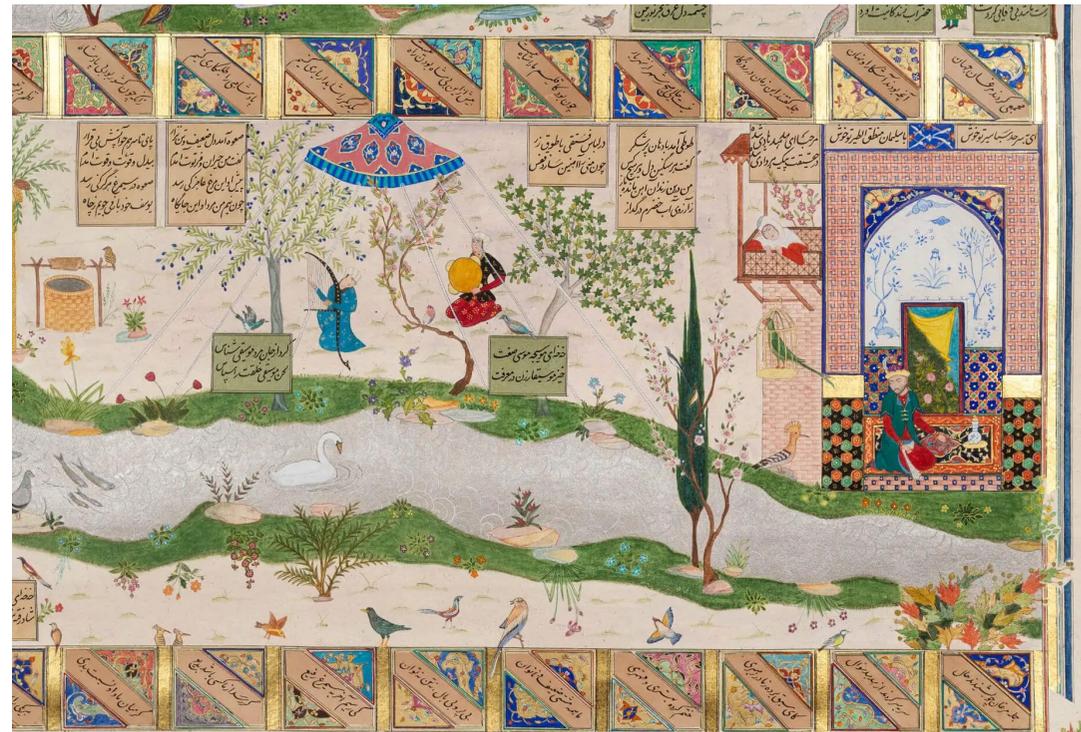


Fig.14



Fig.15

Fig.13
The Temptation of Adam and Eve (detail) in Concerning the Fates of Illustrious Men and Women, about 1415, Boucicaut Master. © The J. Paul Getty Museum

Fig.14
“Image: Farkhondeh Ahmadzadeh ‘Canticle of the Birds – Debating the Journey’, hand-made watercolour with natural pigments; Lapis lazuli, malachite, indigo, gold and palladium, 2020 © Aga Khan Centre

Fig.15
‘Jardin d’Essais Botaniques’ in Rabat Morocco, © own image, 2023

Basilica of San Clemente - Rome

The Basilica of San Clemente is a Catholic church honoring Pope Clement I. Established in the 4th century, it stands as one of Rome's most ancient Christian churches. This site is a component of a captivating architectural complex, where four layers of successive structures have been built over the centuries, with the top three accessible to visitors.

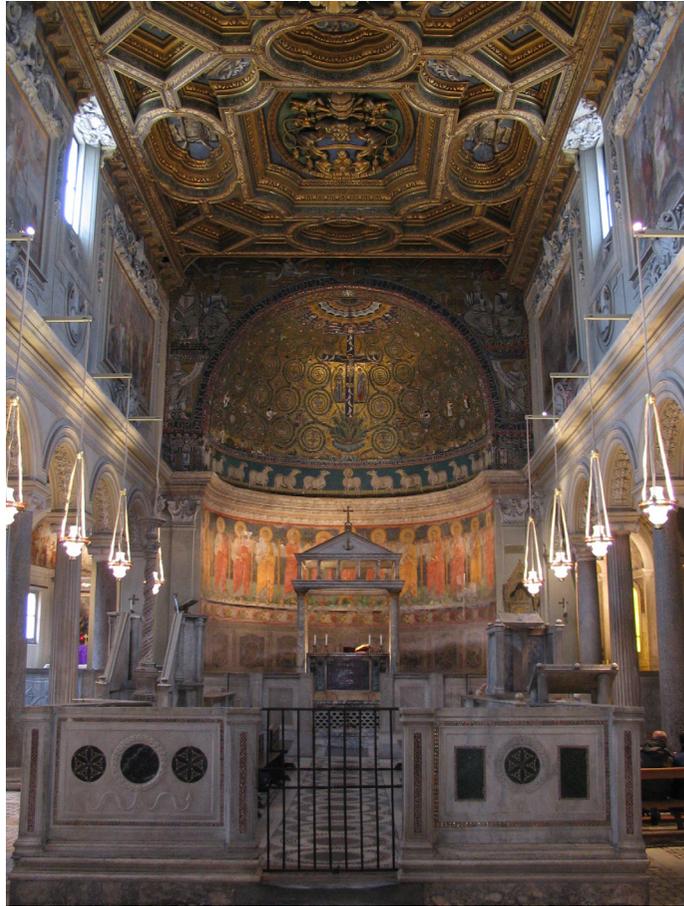


Fig.16

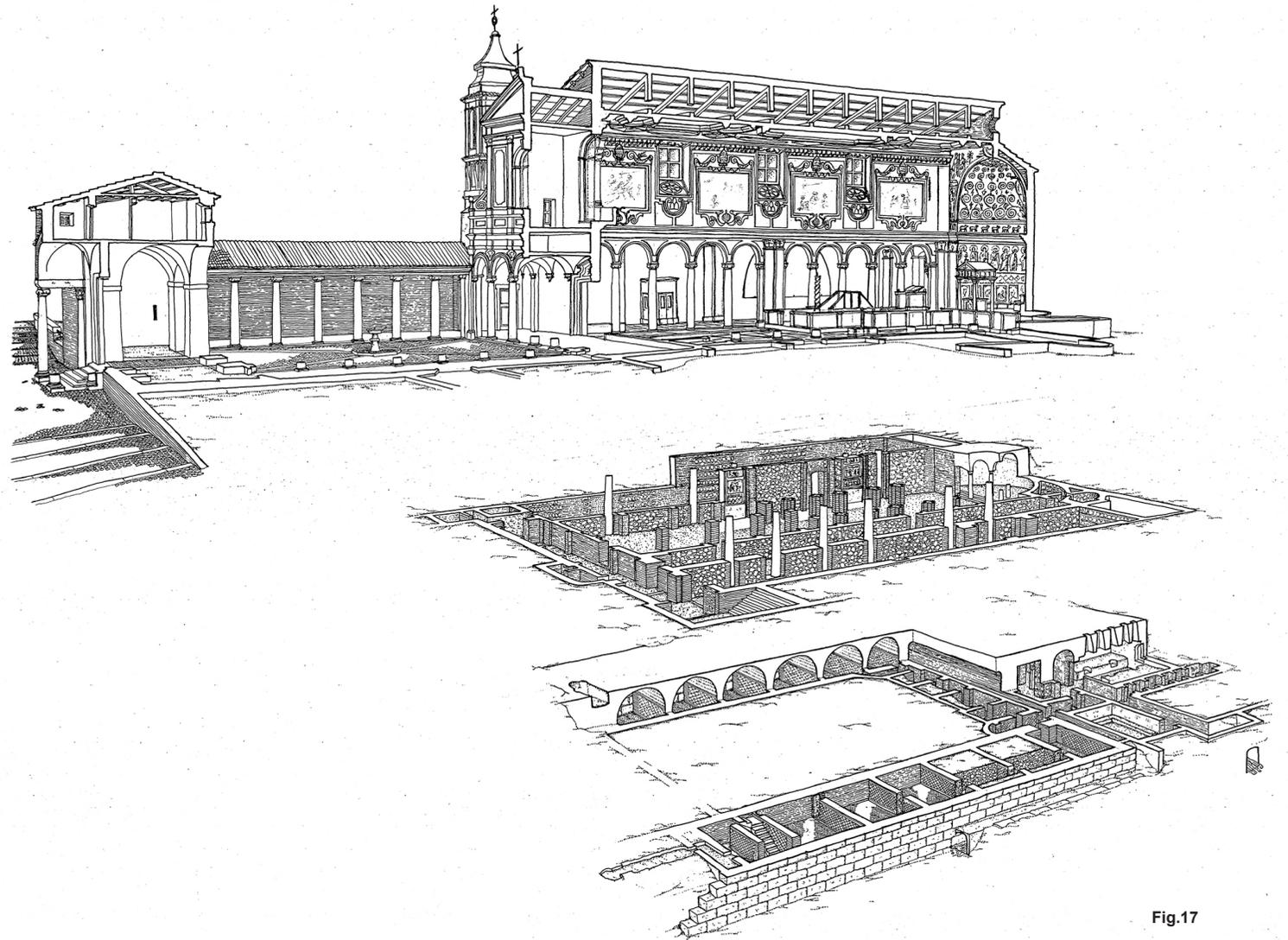


Fig.17

Fig.16
"Interior San Clemente", Rome
© Sixtus, 2006

Fig.17
"Basilica di S. Clemente, Roma Esploso"
prospettico dei tre livelli
© Valerio b. cosentino 1989

Herculaneum - Ercolano, Napoli

Herculaneum (Italian: Ercolano) was an ancient city situated between Neapolis and Mount Vesuvius, which was buried under 19 meters of lava and ash during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD.

The new city of Ercolano is built on top of the old Roman city. This means that only a part facing the sea could be discovered and unveiled. The rest of the city is hidden underneath a massive layer of earth with on top of that new buildings.



Fig.16



Fig.18
Detail on both Herculaneum and Ercolano on top
© own image, 2022

Fig.19
View on both Herculaneum and Ercolano on top
© own image, 2022

