
Archaeological remains within historical centers: the Naumachia at Taormina (Italy). Conservative approach and urban regeneration.

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ABSTRACT

In the proposed contribution, this issue is examined through the experience gained by the authors on the so-called *Naumachie*, one of the greatest archaeological remains in the historical center of Taormina (Italy). The original plant of this building dates back to the Greek, but it is mainly a massive Roman building 120 meters long and 7 high, which has taken over time the value of urban lot on which an incessant building activity has developed until today.

The ancient structure, probably used as a cistern for water supply during the Roman period, actually acts as the foundations for more recent high-rise buildings. This has caused deep degradation processes of materials and, actually, partially denies the use, causing management problems between public and private sectors.

The intervention on *Naumachie*, for these reasons, requires design choices aimed not only to preserve the artifact, but also looking for a new balance with the urban context. The conservation planning may act as a first step in a broader process, within which to recover archaeological meanings from a perspective of urban regeneration.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS OVER THE TIME.

Ancient cities, over the centuries, have often had to deal with archaeological remains, which, in many cases, have played an important role in the processes of urban development. Beyond the widespread practice of *spolia*, for both practical and ideological reasons, there was often the reuse of existing archaeological structures within the settlements: Roman temples arose over previous Greek artifacts; many early Christian basilicas originate from the transformation of Roman Temples; more generally, the topography of cities evolved along previous ancient paths and in the presence of ancient urban structures. Moreover, in many cases, old communities capitalized unearthed antiquities to show its past grandeur, or simply to include them in new buildings for aesthetical issues, according to cultural references of the time. However, in both cases, it can be noted that the relationship with the past was always based on an idea of “continuity”, believing that archaeological remains could be susceptible to new interpretations, conceiving interventions as “architecture on pre-existing structures”¹.

From the second half of the 19th century, especially in the intellectual climate of European *Grand Tours*, a new season of archaeological interests opened, thanks also to the contribution of new concepts and philosophical categories. As is well known, this new orientation represented a key moment also for the conservation of cultural heritage, as it laid the groundwork for the modern discipline of restoration. The idea of continuity with the past, in fact, was abandoned for a new guideline, no longer based on practical or ideological issues, but on cultural, historical and scientific reasons.

However, during the 20th century, and particularly during the Fascist period, the relationship with the past came back to ideological and propagandistic purposes; archaeological remains, both those excavated and those already visible, assumed a true urban role in many Italian towns. The most effective way to pursue the ideological representation of the ancient and glorious past was to “highlight” archaeological remains, through excavations and demolition of less ancient portions of urban fabric. Once brought to light, a plot of extinct roads was imposed on cities and historical centres, producing a random and even controversial relationship with existing settlements².

¹ See DE ANGELIS D’OSSATI 1978, pp.51-68.

² See TRECCANI 2010, p.9.

At the same time, traditional archaeological research was directed primarily at identifying monumental traces of the Greek and Roman past, removing other historical phases from its objectives, and focusing only on aesthetic and formal analysis which were aimed to reconstruct the origin, spread and evolution of ancient art³.

We can note how, more recently, this orientation, in some ways, is still widespread, as it can be associated with the trend of the “museumfication” of archaeological remains within the urban context, common in many European cities. This approach usually leaves out the culture of the context in which the fragments are found and causes, in many cases, the loss of perception of the role they have played in the processes of urban transformation and development. The growth of world tourism and the advent of globalization have certainly contributed to the spread of univocal ways to interact with places, which risks promoting imagines which are simplified and detached from specific cultural contexts. A conservative approach to archaeological remains, instead, should aim to understand the meanings they originally had and, in later times, within the urban context, to explain their changes and adaptations to the cultural and economic needs of all ages.

THE NAUMACHIA.

Ever since the European *voyageurs* showed their interest for its beauty during the 20th century, the city of Taormina (Italy) has found an important economical resource in tourism⁴ (Fig.1). However, tourism development has caused an intense, relentless urban development till the present day, often at the expense of protecting pre-existing historical architecture. This has also undermined the possibility of a clear interpretation of the transformations which the historical centre has undergone during its long history.



Fig. 1 – View of Taormina.

³ See BROGIOLO 2011, p.35.

⁴ See RESTIFO 1996.

Taormina's origins are, in fact, uncertain, but some sources report that the site was probably inhabited even before the Greek colonization of Sicily⁵. The orography of its territory made the city a focal point for the control of the surrounding area and the commercial traffic in the east of Sicily, from the Imperial period until the late Middle Ages⁶. The incessant layering of cultures and styles is today evident in the actual historical centre, where there are traces of every historical period set in and between modern buildings. However, the promotion of this tourist centre, has always focused primarily on a few isolated monuments, among which, to cite only some archaeological examples, the Greek Theatre, the Odeon and the Roman Baths. The high value and complexity of the town's stratification, would require, instead, greater attention to the urban area as a whole and some analysis regarding the close relationship between architectural and archaeological heritage and the actual configuration of the urban form. From this point of view, the study of the so-called *Naumachia* is emblematic: it is a massive Roman building, 116 meters long and 7 in height, which has taken on, over time, the value of an urban lot, with incessant building activity over the structure, up to today⁷. Its visible façade runs parallel to Corso Umberto, the main road axis of the historical centre, at a distance of about 18 meters, and consists of a succession of eighteen apsidal niches interspersed with smaller rectangular niches (Fig.2).



Fig. 2 – A view of the Naumachia.

The original function of this building has given rise to several hypothesis, although recent studies tend to favor only some of them⁸. One hypothesis is that the location might have been used for re-constructing naval battles, during the Roma Imperial age, from hence, the name “*Naumachia*” (naval battle): this wrong interpretation, formulated in the 18th century, has entered into the collective memory of tourists and inhabitants and continues to give rise to misunderstandings. From the second half of the 18th, to the early 20th century, some travelers noted this monument and, in some case, represented it with drawings and engravings⁹. Among the diaries of these travelers we can find some descriptions that can clarify true situation of the structure in a precise moment in time. In particular, we can observe the drawings by the duke of Serradifalco and Houel that show the layout of internal spaces, where a line of columns can be seen dividing the area into two naves¹⁰. These drawings do not give information regarding the covering; however, we can hypothesize that the distance between the walls and the columns leads to suggest a solution with a vaulted system instead of a wooden structure (Fig.3).

⁵ Diodoro Siculo testifies that in 753 BC when the Greeks of Chalcis in Euboea landed to found Naxos in Taormina bay, the *Siculi* were already living in a permanent fortress of Taormina. See *Historical Library of Diodorus Siculus* (1820), pp. 260 et seq.

⁶ See PACE1935-49, p. 450.

⁷ The outside development of the building brick is of 115.44 ml but the presence of a vaulted room in the north end of the area of the insulation coating, whose inside plaster has several anomalies in the flatness of the surfaces, let assume that the original front could perhaps extend even beyond the environment which is actually covered with vault.

⁸ This paper is the first presentation of the results of research on the ancient topography of Taormina, which provided morphological ** and * ortho photo of the building relief, materials * and * decays relief, the stratigraphic survey of the external surfaces . (** Conducted by the authors of this paper together with G. Romano and A. Kweder *; conducted by the authors together with A. Kweder)

⁹ See COLT HOARE 1819, pag 437.

¹⁰ See HOUEL 1784; DE SAINT NON 1785.

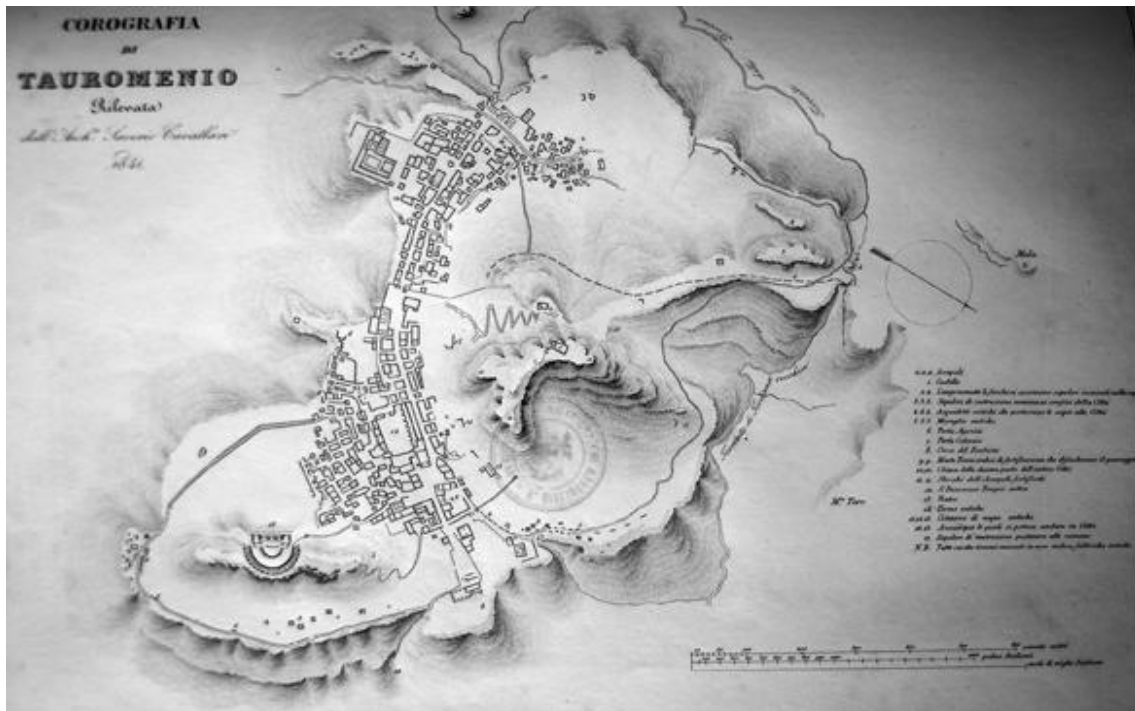


Fig. 3 – Map of Taormina in 1841. (Cavallari, 1841)

Looking at the position of Taormina, we can also hypothesize that water tanks must have been an important resource for the community as we have information on at least another three tanks nearby. The inhabitants probably used these water resources over several centuries, as it is known that Taormina resisted long sieges during the Middle Ages¹¹. The location of these tanks around the bottom slopes of Monte Tauro, leads to the hypothesis that the *Naumachia* might have been used as a secondary water supply as proposed by several architectural historians¹². Observing the *Naumachia*'s representation by Saint Non, we can realize that in the second half of 18th century, many buildings occupied the space over the roman building yet (Fig.4).



Fig. 4 – The Naumachia in the 1785. (Saint Non)

Today, in the southern part of the monument, there are six building cells with three or four floors up to heights between 19 and 26 meters from the base. It is interesting to note the correspondence between the new transverse cell's walls and the internal roman columns (Fig.5).

¹¹ See AMARI M., (1881);

¹² See RIZZO P., (1927), pagg. 27, 28; ORSI P., (1931), pagg. 4-6;

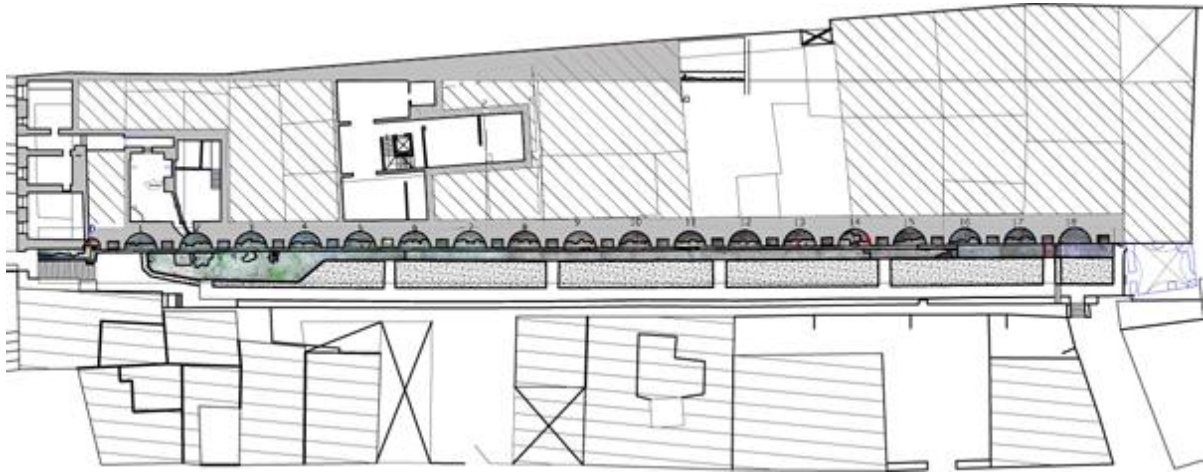


Fig. 5 – Plant of the Naumachia. Note that we can see only any rooms because it is not possible to visit all the building. (drawing of autors with Kweder A.)

The base of the *Naumachia* seems to be the most ancient part of the monument. It consists of two massive steps of limestone on which the brickwork characterized by the niches rests. The southern part of the base has a third step and is slightly projecting than the rest. As has already mentioned, the brickwork is configured alternating niches with basin, 5,80 m high on average, and smaller rectangular niches placed at an height of 1,75 m from the ground.



Fig. 6 – The southern part of the *Naumachia*.

This masonry represents a clear identifiable phase, thanks to the presence of very large bricks, characterized by uniform size but different materials. It is conceivable that at least a part of them was probably reused¹³. During one of the several restoration/maintenance not documented, this structure has undergone a massive reintegration with bricks similar to Roman ones, but distinguishable by the different nature of the clay used.

¹³ Apart from the considerations that may be inferred from studies that have focused on these objects, note that not all the scholars are agree about the building of the theatre by the Greeks; see LUGLI 1955, p. 96.

We can also note many transformations, as, for example, a lack of material near to the first niche in the southern part of the monument, which seems an attempt to set up an additional niche. This lack on the brickwork shows another kind of masonry perpendicular to the monument; it is constituted of stones and presents plaster in some parts. This could indicate that this masonry is earlier than the Roman one, as it is apparent from the drawings by the duke of Serradifalco¹⁴ (Fig.7).

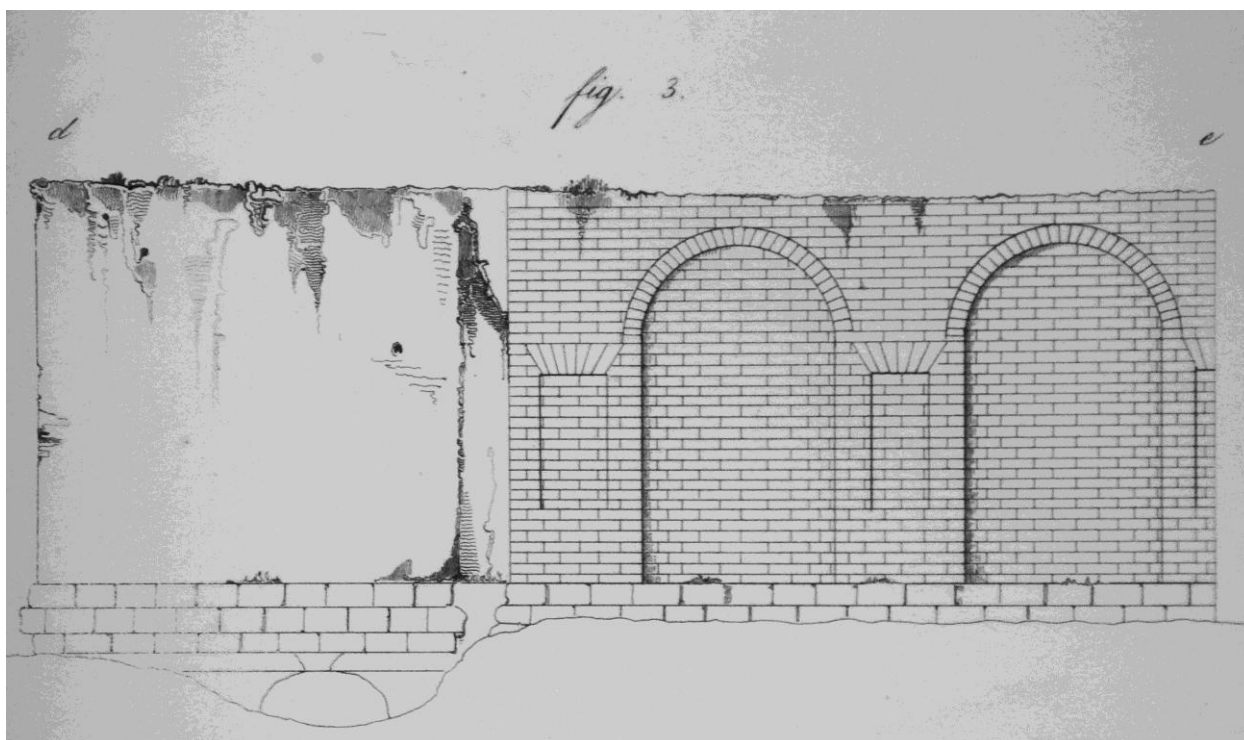


Fig.7 – A drawing by the duke of Serradifalco. Notice the wall characterized with mortar surfaces on the left of the brickwork.

The presence of plaster makes impossible a complete survey; however the Roman phase extends approximately up to 7 meters high. We can observe many reintegration made in different period, in several point of the brickwork; some of these have changed the original configuration of the niches, in which we can note holes characterized by the presence of calcareous concretions. These elements could be probably drainage channels for the houses over the monument.



Figg. 8-10 – Different types of brick stamps.

Parts of the façade between the niches are characterized by the presence of blocks of limestone, probably originating from the dismantling of the third step of the base. Another special feature of the facade is the presence of a considerable amount of brick stamps, which have a dozen different types (Figg.8-10). The presence of different brick stamps, may indicate a reuse of elements from another building, or may provide more information on issues related to the construction site of the monument¹⁵.

¹⁴ See LO FASO PIETRASANTA 1842.

¹⁵ See LUGLI 1955, pp. 93-96.

CONSERVATIVE APPROACHES AND URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY.

Over the past thirty years the traditional methods of archaeological research have been replaced by urban archeology. In 1974, Biddle, introduces, in fact, a new vision of archaeological research in urban areas: "urban archeology seek as the center of interest, the city itself, the urban phenomenon, rather than any period in the history of the city or some aspect of its business". As it is known, the earliest urban archeology in Italy, date back from the late '60s, when the team of Titian Mannoni performed excavations on the hill S. Silvestro in Genoa. The theorization of urban archeology was completed after the meeting held in Rapallo in 1979, which was followed by a series of excavations that brought the quality of archeology to a new and higher level¹⁶. The excavations of the Balbi Crypt in Rome, the excavation of the abbey of S. Giulia in Brescia, excavation related to the third line of the Milan subway and those of the judicial offices in Verona, have changed the way people think about urban archeology. Since that moment the focus has expanded to the entire historic center, attributing the same value both to the ruins and to the structures that have survived with their archaeological complex sequence, and to those underground. The concept of the archaeological park consisting of unique but out of context pieces, has been replaced with the City Museum one.

The urban archeology, as Daniel Manacorda wrote, "does not coincide with the practice of archaeological excavation in the city", but has, as its overriding objective, the "understanding of the development of an urban settlement over time (birth, growth, decline and transformation, functional analysis of space, residential types, consumption), is therefore an archeology of the city". Urban archaeology have substantially increased the knowledge about the phases of the city and the urban history places the archaeological material and evidence in a strict chronological sequence and integrates, with the written sources, archaeological informations. It also uses the tool of the plants of different stages of reconstructive history of the city, on land or photogrammetric base, to return dimensionally layering bi-millennial history of the city. The intent is to reconstruct, through the reading of the historic facility, the history of the settlements in a conservative optical constant¹⁷.

In recent decades there was an increase in the number of archaeological research carried out in multi-layered urban areas, in order to acquire more in-depth historical knowledge of individual cities. It has introduced the notion that cities are complex layers, and attention can not be paid only to one period of their existence, for example, the Roman or medieval but to the whole. Through the excavation of Verona, for example, it was possible to reconstruct all the urban transformations of the investigated area, from Roman times to the fourteenth century.

In the case of Verona, when excavations were started the renovations in private homes avoided the archaeological controls; moreover controls on the work for the restoration and upgrading of urban infrastructure were not accomplished (sewers, electrical lines, gas, etc.). Starting 90s, however, new challenges have emerged to practice more rigorous procedures: a series of excavations around the Roman forum have shown, through small surveys, that it is possible to reconstruct the form of large Roman monuments. The different findings occurred, led the Superintendency to draw a map of archaeological risk, according to whom each building project, both private and public, involving an excavation deeper than one meter from the current level of the ground, must be reported for evaluations and checks. All this has pointed to the attention new datas to determine the location of one of the two branches of the Roman aqueduct for the both evolution and history, and nature, and location of changes between the third and fourth centuries b.C., the Republican city walls (about 50 a. C.). Moreover, the depth coordinate of the Roman roads has been clarified in various parts of the city, in order to have a complete view of the ancient topographical structure. In Verona, in various areas, archaeological remains have been measured and stored as in the case, for example, of Lions Gate or Piazzale delle Erbe (the ancient Roman forum). A series of works made in this area have succeeded in tracing the remains of important monuments, such as the Capitoline temple, the cryptoporticus, the Curia, the rally and a series of workshops. These structures were exposed and are now visible in shops, restaurants and garages¹⁸.

The complex of Balbi Crypt, in particular, represents one of the most notable example regarding to the interdependence of urban archeology and urban history. The complex is identified with a block of the historic center of Rome in Campo Marzio in Roman times there persisted a front porch on three sides of Lucius Cornelius Baldo's theater built in the 13 a.C. This porch, still present in modern isolate, is spotted with a reconstruction of iron arches. In the opposite side of the auditorium of the theater has been brought to

¹⁶ See AAVV 1979.

¹⁷ See MANACORDA 2004.

¹⁸ See CAVALIERI MANASSE 1989, pp.49-57.

light monumental exedra between private homes and palaces of the block Mattei. One can recognize the excavation in the historical center of Rome, the qualities of a single schedule of more than two thousand years of urban development, from Roman monument, the stratigraphic sequence shows the baths and the early medieval limestone, houses and palaces of Middle Ages, the transformations of the block during the Renaissance, then expanded in the 19th century¹⁹.

NEW PERSPECTIVES OF URBAN REGENERATION.

The above examples suggest survey methods that could certainly be applied to *Naumachia*, in order to investigate aspects related to its role in the transformation processes of the ancient city and also to make its testimonial value more comprehensible to the local community and to the visitors. The monument is currently located in a narrow space, a sort of corridor less than 6 meters wide, which separates it from recent buildings. A proper fruition is not guaranteed by the limited space, but also by the presence of buildings over and around the monument. The private parcelling of the structure caused the heterogeneity of architectural solutions and the impossibility to visit the interior. However the surveys of some buildings cells adjacent to *Naumachia*, allowed us to verify the transversal section of the monument. In particular it was revealed that the wall of the artifact is placed against the ground to a height of about three and a half meters. Its considerable overall thickness of about 3.70 meters allowed the brick to absorb the weights, which for centuries have been increased as a result of subsequent buildings, and to withstand significant seismic forces. Today, in addition, we have to note how the framework of needs of small and picturesque tourist town of Taormina, has moved further towards a city aimed at the development and consolidation of leadership in tourism and culture in the global market. As in many other historical centers in Europe, this process involves the risk of homogenizing effects of globalization, which tend to eliminate the variety and erase the memory built in each local area. Recent studies have shown that urban space can be considered a place where the risks outlined can be mitigated by enhancement of strong local character. Globalization paradoxically increases the "local" identity: on the one hand, we are witnessing a growing importance of the levels and processes of local and global, on the other, a decrease of national importance because of the growing process of decentralization of government. The term "glocalization" was coined to indicate the phenomenon of interaction of the space of places (local) with the space of flows (global)²⁰. The cities take on the dual function of simultaneously embodying the local identity and community and openness to the global world. The challenge of development is formed by the interaction between processes that occur at great distances and local characteristics: thus, the culture of a place can become crucial to the role that a city can play in global processes. In this sense, the archaeological heritage of Taormina could play a crucial role in the construction of the local identity. The understanding of urban transformation through the permanence and enhancement of the physical stratification, in fact, can strengthen the sense of belonging of the community; moreover the archaeological remains, with which it identifies the memory of the ancient past, take an unequivocal social. The history and culture make to understand the relationship of the parties and the community they belong, and the symbol, which identifies the memory of the past, assumes an unambiguous value of social aggregation.

As we have seen, archeology has moved its interest from individual finds to the history of the city as a whole, investigating the processes of organization, development of contraction that have occurred over the time. From the perspective of urban regeneration, the interventions should be related to this concept and should be aimed to "narrate" the urban space, from the survivals of ancient plants, to the overlapping levels of use as an essential element for the understanding of the whole topographical structure. This concept could be referred to several tools: the illustration of urban form, the exposure of archeology, the narrative of the history of the city presented to visitors and inhabitants.

The *Naumachia* could be inserted into a virtuous cycle of urban archaeological heritage management, referring to experiences of urban regeneration undertaken in other contexts, whose purposes is the "design for all". In order to the accessibility, we have to note that the monument is set at a lower level than the two access points. Therefore, the presence of stairs denies the possibility of fruition to disabled.

In the case of the *Naumachia*, the quality level of fruition that characterizes other archaeological sites in the town of Taormina, has to deal with the difficult relationship between public and private property. There is no doubt that the objectives of urban regeneration, seen as the conservation both of the artefacts and the cultural identity, will be reached only through virtuous legislative and social practices.

¹⁹ See MANACORDA 1982.

²⁰ See DE MATTEIS 1997, pp.37-43.

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