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The Entrancement of Ruins



### A COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF A CITY IRIS CULTURAL CENTER IN ELEUSINA

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# A COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF A CITY

## IRIS CULTURAL CENTER

### IN ELEUSINA

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We may live without her [architecture],  
and worship without her, but we cannot  
remember without her.

John Ruskin



Fig.2 IRIS iconic chimney

### ABSTRACT

The project is about the conversion of two listed buildings of the former paint factory IRIS in Eleusina into a multi-purpose cultural center. Like all abandoned industrial relics in the area, the two listed buildings manifest strong ties with the industrial past of Eleusina and the collective memory of its inhabitants. The repurposing of the buildings by architect Constantine Bouras produces a space for theater, cinema, music, congresses, art exhibitions and other cultural activities, while part of it is home to the Aeschylus Museum.

Eleusina (Greek: Ἐλευσίνα, Elefsina, Ancient Greek: Ἐλευσίς, Eleusis) is a city on the west coast of Attica. Known in ancient times as the site of the Eleusinian mysteries and the birthplace of Aeschylus, it is today a major industrial area.

Archeological sites and industrial plants, byzantine churches and pre-war buildings, vernacular constructions and cultural venues - the old and the new, the modern and the historical, the urban and the rural, the sublime and the humble, all these heterogeneous layers are superimposed around the city, making Eleusina an intense and complex palimpsest that has received multiple structures and ideas over the course of time. All these elements have not been erased; on the contrary, they have influenced the configuration of the place and they are inscribed in its memory. City spaces and architectural landscapes often have been the active systemizers of memory, according to Christine M. Boyer (1994: 137).

Eleusina's historic industrial zone extends along the city's coastal front, within the urban fabric, and is occupied by industries belonging to the first phase of the city's industrialization, from the end of the 19th century to just before the Second World War. Located in this concentrated historic industrial zone are several significant industrial buildings of exceptional architectural value, such as these of the Votrys (Βότρως), Kronos (Κρόνος), Eleourgiki (Ελαιουργική) and Eleourgio (Ελαιουργείο) industries, not in operation any longer, standing in ruins, but exerting a great deal of charm. Among them is the IRIS paint factory which was founded in 1925 and operated until the early 1970's.

From the entire building complex of the IRIS factory, only four structures remain to date: three buildings and the chimney. Particularly interesting examples of interwar industrial architecture, they are indissolubly linked to the industrial past and identity of the Eleusina region and the collective memory of its inhabitants.

As Boyer writes in *The City of Collective Memory*: *"History and memory become variable elements in the art of preservation and restoration. Often invented for specific purposes, history always stands against memory, the one as a constructed or recomposed artifice, the other a lived and moving expression. We travel backward in time through memory and through the recorded imagery of paintings, photographs, the*

*cinema, and architecture. Collected in archives, museums, encyclopedias, and memory theaters, these visual icons once stored and classified are available for the appropriations and recycling of later generations. These collections bracket history from their own point of view, recomposing the artifact's context through a network of references and comparative rereadings that resituate the past in the present"* (1994: 69-70).



Fig.1 IRIS complex

On the occasion of the proclamation of Eleusina as the 2021 (now postponed to 2023) European Capital of Culture, the author did the architectural design for the conversion of two of the remaining buildings of the former paint factory IRIS into a Cultural Center with a multipurpose auditorium and an exhibition space, part of which is home to the Aeschylus Museum. The two buildings to be restored, as well as the chimney, are characterized as listed monuments and are protected by the Ephorate of Modern Monuments of Attica.

The three remaining buildings belong to three different phases of the factory's history.

The first and oldest building belongs to the founding phase [as does the chimney which bears the company logo IRIS]. It is an elongated stone building with three distinct spaces and reinforced concrete slabs at the gabled roofs. It was constructed in 1925 and housed the Administration, the Chemistry laboratory and the warehouse for the resin products. At the back of the building there is a basin



sunk into the ground, probably for storing the resin which was the raw material during the first phase of the factory's operation.



Fig.3 First building, in the foreground

The second building is more recent, built very shortly after the first building. It was used as a warehouse for the products produced. It is a single-story double-height building of rectangular plan, with a load-bearing structure out of reinforced concrete – the use of the material was impressive, especially for that time. A colonnade divides the space into two equal compartments. The roof is made of twin semi-cylindrical concrete slabs suspended from concrete curved beams. The whole roof system is elevated, creating double-sided clerestory windows. The design and structural system of this building are very innovative for the period and of high quality. This particular industrial building typology was implemented in industrialized countries and especially in Germany during the period 1925-1930 and was introduced by the need to bridge as

Fig.5 Interior of the second building



wide an opening as possible. This resulted to a morphological building renewal in industrial architecture.



Fig.4 Interior of the first building

The third building is a three-story concrete structure, with an interior atrium, and it was used to store both raw materials and finished products.

As Walter Benjamin argues in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (1969: 261). Reuse is the best way to give new life to a building with a special history for the local community, as is the case with IRIS, since dozens of workers from Eleusina have worked in the IRIS factory in the past. The juxtaposition between the new design elements and the existing structure, in respect for the monument, was the main design axis in the restoration proposal for IRIS.

Boyer refers to Viollet-Le-Duc's stance on restoration: "[he] proclaimed that restoration must not be restricted in meaning to the preservation of a monument, but might represent a far wider sense. It could subsequently mean that a monument be 'returned' to a state of perfection that may never have existed before, but that could be ascertained through comparative and genealogical study, tracing the lines of its development back to an ideal root. Like other research based on comparative linguistics, a nation's architectural heritage must be studied, analyzed, and understood not



Fig.6 Bird's eyes view of the second building

*in order to replicate these ancient forms, but rather to make a new composite synthesis, a unity of styles, using the best of modern materials and serving the needs of modern times.*" (1994: 273).

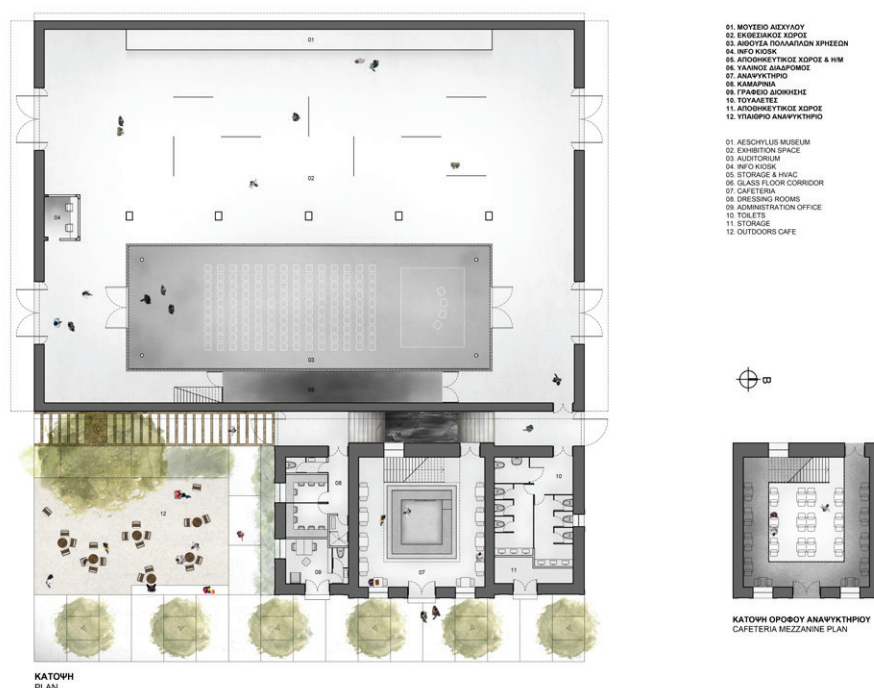
The new architectural elements of the study, such as the multipurpose auditorium or the cafeteria mezzanine, are in contrast, both materialistic and compositional, with the existing shell, so that it becomes clear to the visitor, at first glance and with all sincerity, that these are additional elements which serve the needs of the repurposed building's new use. On the other hand, again in terms of materiality and composition, the new architectural elements of the project are inserted elements in the space and do not compete with the morphology of the listed building. As a result of the new

architectural elements being inserted free-standing, they are self-supporting and do not have an impact on the load-bearing structure of the existing industrial shell, thus making the architectural intervention reversible at any time.

According to Colin Rowe, in *Collage City*: "It is suggested that a collage approach, an approach in which objects are conscripted or seduced from out of their context, is – at the present day – the only way of dealing with the ultimate problems of, either or both, utopia and tradition; and the provenance of the architectural objects introduced into the social collage need not be of great consequence. It relates to taste and conviction. The objects can be aristocratic or they can be 'folkish', academic or popular. Whether they originate in Pegramum or Dahomey, in Detroit or Dubrovnik, whether their implications are of the twentieth or the fifteenth century, is no great matter. Societies and persons assemble themselves according to their own interpretations of absolute reference and traditional value; and, up to a point, collage accommodates both hybrid display and the requirements of self-determination." (1984: 144-145)

The central element of the composition is the multipurpose auditorium which is located in the main building and which will receive uses of theater, cinema, music, conferences, etc. The auditorium is introduced in the concept of a box-in-a-

Fig.7 Project plan





box, a metal and glass construction that does not touch the existing industrial shell, but stands free in the space. The auditorium's geometry refers to the metal containers that are found scattered around Eleusina's landscape - being a clear reference to the industrial character of the city and hence to the genius locus [spirit of the place], to which the particular character and identity of a place is attributed, according to architect Christian Norberg Schulz.

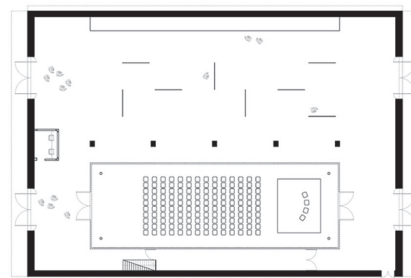
The translucency of the box allows the indirect projection of the events from the inside of the auditorium to the rest of the space. The open floor plan allows for flexibility in the organization of periodical exhibitions with panels, vitrines, pedestals, large-scale installations, but also as a continuation of the auditorium when it expands outside of the box.

The permanent digital exhibition of the Aeschylus Museum is to be found in a wall-mounted show case. The case's semicircular section is a reference to the floor plan of an ancient Greek theater, of which the Eleusinian tragic poet Aeschylus was one of the most important representatives.

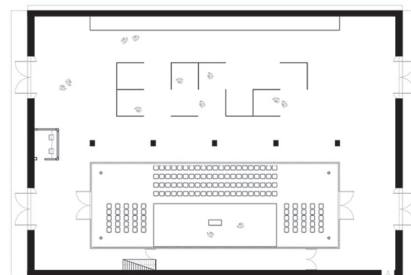


Fig.10 Exhibition space during the day

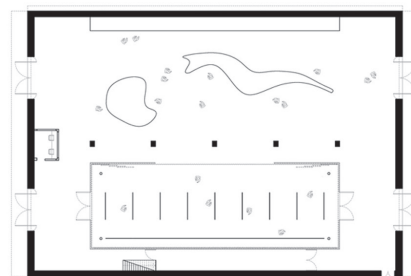
The space of this building resembles a contemporary cathedral, with unobstructed views to the vaulted ceiling and the concrete structural elements. The central colonnade separates conceptually the two programmatic spaces, auditorium and exhibition space, but at the same time it enhances the transparency, the flow and the osmosis between them. The theatricality of the space is emphasized by the light fixtures that hang from the transverse beams.



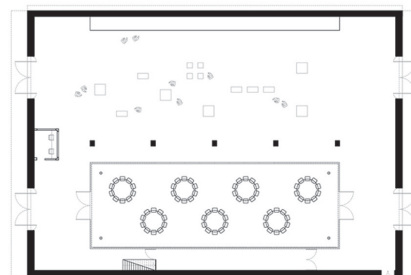
ΠΑΡΟΥΣΙΑΣΗ • ΕΚΘΕΣΗ  
PRESENTATION • EXHIBITION



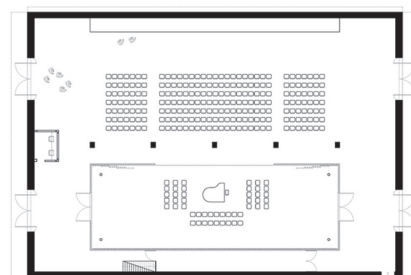
ΘΕΑΤΡΟ • ΕΚΘΕΣΗ  
THEATER • EXHIBITION



ΕΚΘΕΣΗ • ΕΚΘΕΣΗ  
EXHIBITION • EXHIBITION



ΣΥΝΕΔΡΙΟ • ΕΚΘΕΣΗ  
CONFERENCE • EXHIBITION



ΣΥΝΑΓΩΓΗ • ΚΑΘΕΜΕΤΑ  
CONCERT • SEATING

Fig.9 Alternate use diagram

The notion of the palimpsest is now projecting from the city of Eleusina to the building complex of the IRIS Cultural Center itself. The industrial layer is expressed through the auditorium/container, the contemporary through the materiality, while the ancient layer is expressed through the semicircular sectioned show



Fig.11 Exhibition space during the day

case for Aeschylus. The repurposing of the IRIS relics reveals the archeology of the future. The fragmented is composing the whole, across scales and across layers. Through this architectural intervention, space opens up to an endless creative play that activates the forces of life within this area's heterogeneous socio-cultural content. The creation of the IRIS Cultural Center on the site of the old IRIS factory, in combination with the rehabilitation of other infrastructure done within the framework of the Cultural Capital, will upgrade the coastal front of Eleusina and turn it into an area of culture and activities – thus contributing to the emergence of the industrial heritage of the city and its sustainable development.

Fig.12 Interior of the multipurpose auditorium

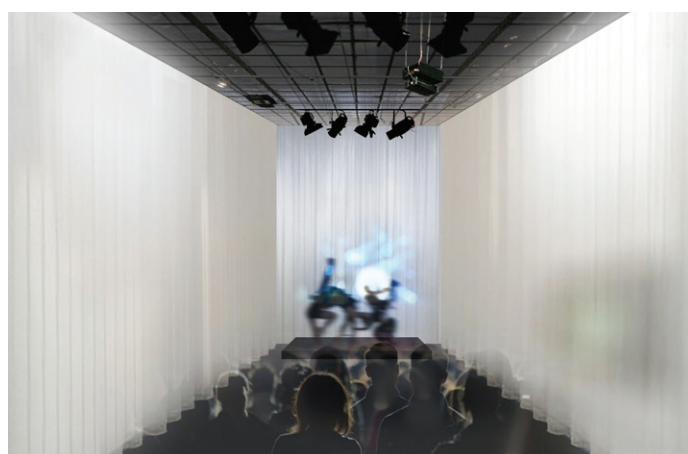


Fig.8 The multipurpose auditorium

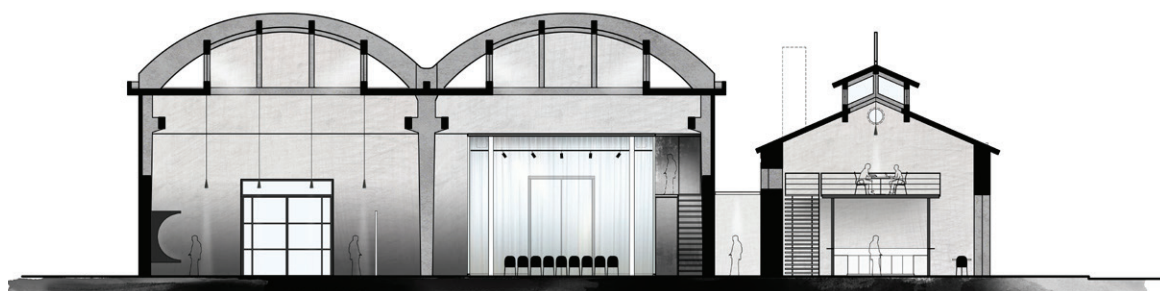


Fig.13 Cross section

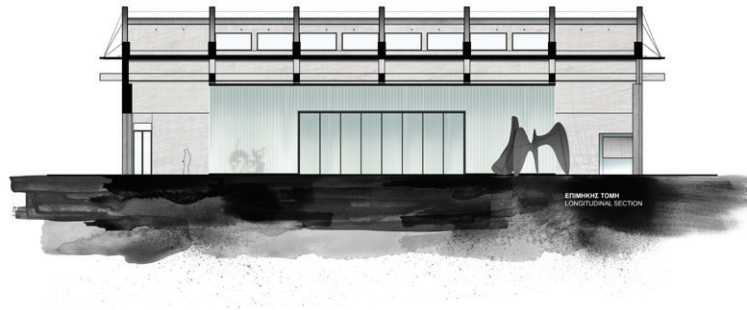


Fig.14 Longitudinal section



Fig.15 South elevation



Fig.16 East elevation



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Is an architect and urbanist. He runs his architectural practice in Athens and is an adjunct Professor at the University of West Attica, teaching design studios. He holds a Master of Architecture in Urban Design degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design and a Master in Architecture degree from the National Technical University of Athens, where he is currently pursuing a PhD. He has worked in architectural firms in Athens, Milan and New York on a variety of project typologies and scales, and was a research fellow for the Mexico City Public Space Authority. His work has been exhibited in Athens, New York, Tallinn and the Toyo Ito Museum in Japan.

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