

WATER, CULTURE AND IDENTITY: THE RECOVERY OF FORMER CAGLIARI'S RACECOURSE AREA*

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Panoramica dell'ex ippodromo di Cagliari.
Fonte: Google Earth.

ABSTRACT

The former racecourse of Cagliari, inaugurated in 1929, occupies an area of about 24 hectares and is located between the Poetto beach and the Molentargius-Saline Regional Natural Park (one of the most important wetlands in Europe). Although the racetrack has been inactive since 2004, the intended use of this site remains linked to equestrian activity, a discipline deeply alive and rooted in Sardinian culture. The research called "Inhabited Ruin", the starting point of this article, examines a place immersed in the heart of a natural context and aims to promote and reveal the original function of the site, leveraging its strategic position within the park. Currently the beach and the park, although limiting, are still two distinct realities given the scarcity of paths and infrastructures that allow these sites to be connected to each other. Re-evaluating this structure and integrating it into the surrounding context, in architectural and program terms, would allow the enhancement of the entire area with a more cohesive and integrated system (beach area, park and horse racing activities).

This project interprets the culture of the game of horse racing in a contemporary key, involving the element of water - so faithful to the site - for its restorative power, studying and taking as a model different places that in history have hosted similar events (for example Italian squares such as Piazza del Campo in Siena, Piazza dell'Anfiteatro in Lucca and Piazza Navona in Rome). The charm and success of these places, demonstrate how the private sphere of residential complexes can be actively involved in public life and entertainment venues become the example and inspiration to recover the existing site and transform it into a new environment that adequately integrates natural elements and built to give a unique character to this area of Cagliari.

KEYWORDS:

Horse, nature, racecourse, recovery, redevelopment, water.

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AGUA, CULTURA E IDENTIDAD: LA RECUPERACIÓN DEL ÁREA DEL ANTIGUO HIPÓDROMO DE CAGLIARI, ITALIA



Vista aérea dell'ex ippodromo di Cagliari.
Fonte: Google Earth.

RESUMEN

El antiguo hipódromo de Cagliari, inaugurado en 1929, ocupa un área de aproximadamente 24 hectáreas y está localizado entre la playa de Poetto y el Parque Natural Regional Molentargius-Saline (uno de los más importantes humedales en Europa). A pesar de que la pista ha estado inactiva desde el 2004, el uso previsto para este sitio aún permanece vinculado a la actividad ecuestre, disciplina profundamente viva y arraigada en la cultura sarda. La investigación llamada “Ruina habitada”, punto de partida para este artículo, examina un lugar inmerso en el corazón de un contexto natural y pretende revelar y promover la función original del sitio, aprovechando su posición estratégica dentro del parque. Actualmente la playa y el parque, aunque limítrofes, son aún dos realidades distintas dada la escasez de caminos e infraestructuras que permitan a estos sitios conectarse entre sí. Revaluar esta estructura e integrarla en el contexto circundante, en términos de programa y diseño arquitectónico arquitectónicos, permitiría mejorar toda el área con un sistema más cohesivo e integrado (área de la playa, parque y actividades de carreras de caballos).

Este proyecto interpreta la cultura de las apuestas de las carreras de caballos en una clave contemporánea, involucrando el elemento agua, muy fiel al lugar, por su poder restaurador y también estudia y toma como modelo diferentes lugares que en la historia han albergado eventos similares, como por ejemplo las plazas italianas de Piazza del Campo en Siena, Piazza dell’Anfiteatro en Lucca and Piazza Navona en Roma. El encanto y éxito de estos lugares demuestran cómo la esfera privada de los complejos residenciales puede ser involucrada activamente en la vida pública y el entretenimiento, convirtiéndose en ejemplo e inspiración para recuperar el sitio existente y transformarlo en un nuevo entorno que integre adecuadamente elementos naturales y le dé un carácter único a esta zona de Cagliari.

PALABRAS CLAVES:

Caballo, naturaleza, hipódromo, recuperación, reurbanización, agua.

INTRODUCTION



Figure 1. Local jockey Marco Bitti brought in triumph from his neighbourhood after his victory at the Palio dei Vicinati (Nuoro).
Source: Michele Ardu.

Fois (2017) stated that “Sardinians are people who pride themselves on keeping their traditions and cultivating them. Too often, this feeling borders on a trite folklore (...) The conjunction point between coherence and paradox is represented by the horse. That creature in which every Sardinian sees himself again. Free, but harnessed. Loyal, but always on the ridge of escape. That silent alliance, that elective affinity tells many things about “sardità” that no Pro-Locho has catalogued. As a child there was no village festival or religious festival, in which equestrian acrobatics were not represented and there was no Palio di Siena in which a Sardinian jockey did not participate, and often won. And this gave us a glimpse of an alternative sense of belonging”.

In fact, between Sardinians and horses there is an indissoluble, profound, ancestral passion: horses have always been present in the Sardinian culture, considered at first as working animals but also as a life partner. This unique link between man-horse has transmit an important tradition of jockeys, involving in sport the whole society and allowing to promote and conserve a specific horse breed known all over the world for her strength and spirit.

It is important to look back in time to identify when the racecourse appears in Sardinia as equipment for the art of horse racing. The Horse Racing Society of Cagliari was formally established on November 14, 1928, with a notarial deed while the Hippodrome was inaugurated by Vittorio Emanuele II on April 29, 1929, with a sumptuous ceremony. The politicians and administrators of the time to grace the local bourgeoisie, decided to develop also in Cagliari the equestrian activities, sports disciplines that fascinated a good number of citizens, now throughout Italy the Hippodromes were built. Between 1921 and 1931 the population increased bringing out many entrepreneurs, traders and military all fascinated by horse racing. The need for a real Hippodrome stimulated the officers of the 16th Artillery Regiment, Giuseppe Bonsignore inaugurated an Equestrian School and from the moment of its inauguration until the beginning of the Second World War, the Poetto Hippodrome lived its most radiant period (Ibidem.) The most flourishing seasons of equestrian events took place in spring as in autumn, periods of the year during which elegant refreshments could be organized in the *parterre* crowded by local people and not, all united by the passion for betting and for horses. These were golden years, so much so that both Sardinian jockeys and horses became known and appreciated in the rest of Italy.

Unfortunately, negative situations have affected the state of the racecourse and therefore its future. Debts, arrears, waste, and empty coffers have triggered this degraded situation. The racecourse sinks and the Equestrian Society, owned by the Municipality, established almost a century ago, in 1928 goes towards liquidation. The president's report, sent to shareholders on 23 July, leaves little hope, too many economic, financial, and structural imbalances and the controversy explodes in the city council (Redazione Cagliariipad, 2014).

Therefore, this article aims to present the values of this equipment, its environment, the problems that overwhelm it and, therefore, a proposal for recovery for this symbolic place in Cagliari. Now the racecourse is in a state of neglect and the Sardinians are convinced that it is shameful that a site, with so much potential, is neglected and wasted by the public administration. Everyone recognizes that the racecourse has made the history of the city and that it should be preserved as a historical memory by redeveloping it and integrating it with the Molentargius Park area for both recreational and competitive activities (Deiana A. & Paracchini R., 1999). It is evident that this structure, thanks to his strategic position, could be decisive for the integration between the park and the beach, and could become a place of interest for athletes, bringing to Cagliari a sustainable tourism that is not only mass/seaside tourism. Thus, the article begins with a historical retrospective on the importance of the horse in urban events of the past because, as mentioned above, equestrian practices are very entrenched in Sardinian culture. Subsequently, the main characteristics of the Molentargius - Saline Regional Park (in Italian: Parco Naturale Regionale Molentargius - Saline), in regional park in Sardinia, since in this area the former racecourse, core of the project, is located The Park was established in 1999 with the aim to protect and enhance a site of international interest, already included in the Ramsar Convention since 1977 because of its number relevance about stopover, wintering and nesting waterfowl bird species (Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, 2004).

Next, the article concentrates on the Poetto Beach since it is an area linked to the urban memory of Cagliari for its multiple historical and natural values: large and beautiful urban beach, eight kilometres of coastline between Cagliari and Quartu Sant' Elena: soft sand, blue sea, relaxation, fun and sport. Despite this, reference is made to the environmental problems that overwhelm the beach due to the lack of environmental preservation work and human activities. Finally, the article closes with the presentation of the most relevant aspects of the project derived from the research and the necessary conclusions that evoke the importance of this equipment that has been forgotten despite having been the scene of an activity strongly consolidated in the culture of the Sardinians, which has immense potentialities thanks to its cultural value and the strategic position within the beautiful natural park of Molentargius.

THE HORSE IN THE URBAN EVENTS OF THE PAST

To design and develop a complex that can maximize visitors' engagement, several locations that hosted similar events were investigated (i.e., Italian piazza - Piazza del Campo in Siena, Piazza dell'Anfiteatro in Lucca and Piazza Navona in Rome). For instance, the space that would become the current square was, at the origins of Siena, a reclaimed land to allow the outflow of rainwater, as a semi-circular head of the Montone valley, between the Santa Maria hill and the ridge that goes towards Porta Romana. Double use of the inner part of the piazza: hosting people during the Palio di Siena and as a free space/piazza for all the other days (see figures 3 and 4).

In any case, all these settings highlight how historically residential structures were actively involved in defining these entertainment places, as many houses served perimeter markers or as bleachers for the audience (see figure 2). At the same time, the site's scale (24 hectares) cannot fail to recall the Circus Maximus complex, so the whole project must also be interpreted as “the remains of a large Arena”.

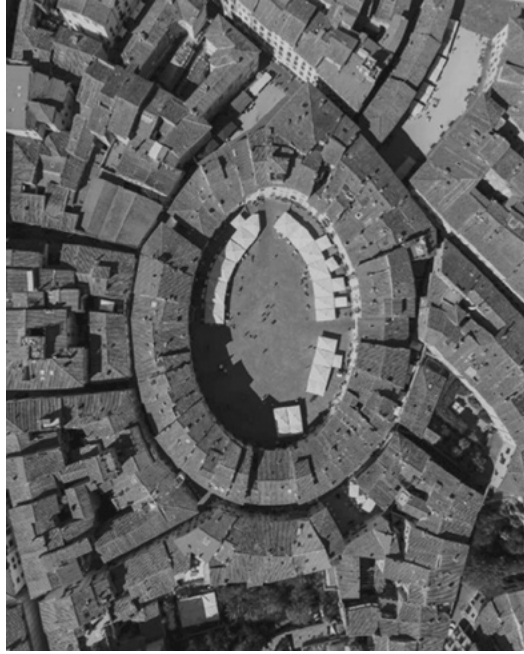


Figure 2. Piazza anfiteatro - Luca
Source: Google Earth, 2021.



Figure 3. Ordinary day in Piazza del Campo
Siena.
Source: <https://www.10cose.it/siena/piazza-del-campo> (2020).



Figure 4. Palio di Siena.
Source: <https://www.radiosienatv.it/palio-del-2-luglio-16-400-le-presenze-in-piazza-del-campo-ecco-i-varchi-meccanizzati/> (2019).

A LOOK AT THE STUDY AREA: THE FORMER RACECOURSE AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

First, it is worth highlighting the importance of the entire zone in where the studied area is located since the Molentargius Saline Regional Natural Park already reveals in its name the leading role assumed by the early salt production system. The tanks, the canals, the hydraulic works, are a distinctive feature of the territory under protection, which is at the same time an environmental asset and a historical memory of work and ingenuity (Piras, 2006).

It can even be said that there is a close relationship between the two aspects, which connects the productive function with the ecological balance: the salt economy has certainly contributed to preserving the naturalistic and landscape value of the site (see figure 5 and Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, 2004).



Figure 5. The pond system of Molentargius and Quartu.
Source: Corsale 2011.

Over the years, several buildings were built not far from the racecourse, especially in the middle of Poetto beach. A brief historical excursus allows to identify that from the end of 1800 and the beginning of 1900 that the beach began to be appreciated and valued by the inhabitants of Cagliari and its surroundings. For almost 40 years now it has become a ghost ruin that occupies that stretch of beach, undergoes the signs of time motionless, while all around touristic life continue. Marino (Casula, 2019). Nowadays, it is defined as the old Ospedale (see also figures 6 and 7). Moreover, the suggestive image of this ruins on the Poetto beach has aroused different opinions on the fate of these constructions that are found in a state of “damage”, currently presents only in certain areas of the perimeter since new constructions have been built to host tourist activities. This is the case of new housing units that were located along the perimeter of the central arena, settled somehow as the Italian piazzas which were exemplified above.

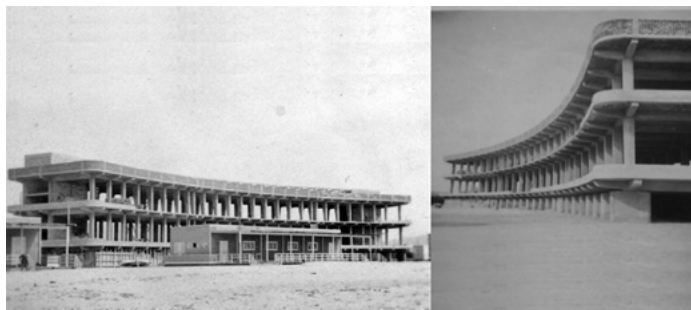


Figure 6. Former Ospedale Marino in Poetto's Beach (Cagliari).
Source: Badas (2012).

As it was stated before, until 1900 Poetto beach was not very popular with Cagliariitans who instead preferred the west side of the gulf, with the beaches of Sa Perdixedda (in Sardinian “small stone”) and Giorigino (Lawrence, 1921). It was during the first decades of the 20th century that people began to appreciate the white dunes of Poetto and that the first seaside resorts (“Lido” and “D’Aquila”), bars and even a colony for children (Ospedale Marino) was built (see figure 8). The deep bond of local people for this beach, a few kilometres from Cagliari, meant that during the summer several *casotti* (coloured wooden constructions halfway between a dressing room and a tiny house on the seashore) were built, imitating the first Lido’s “cabine” (Dressing rooms).

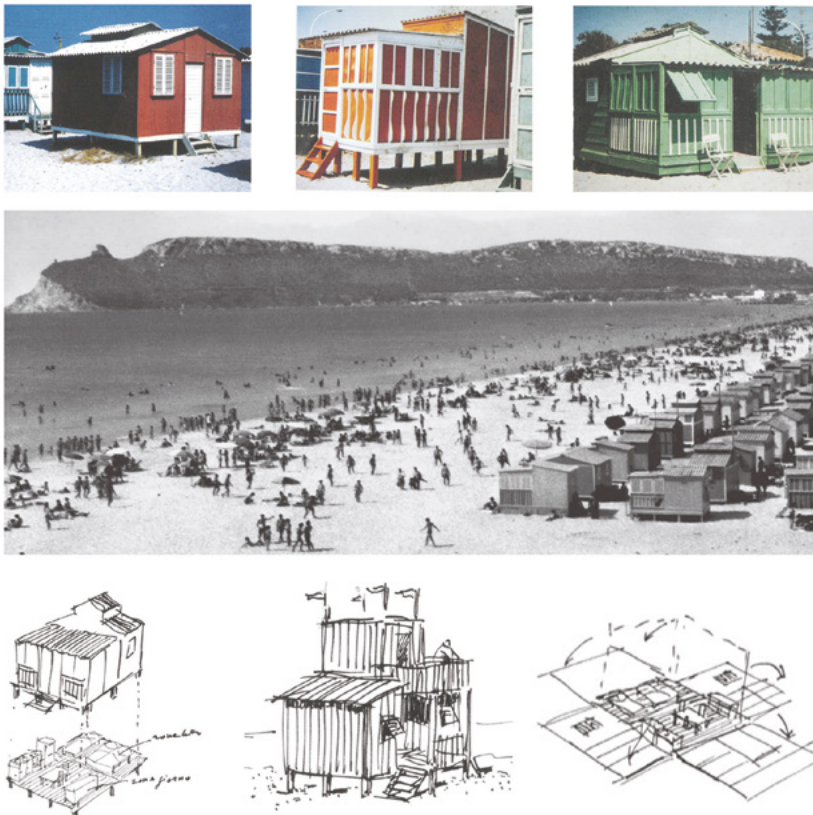


Figure 9. Images of the old-fashioned “Casotti”.
Source: Giancarlo Cao (1998). VerbaVolant Editrice, Cagliari.

The *casotti*, considered as a temporary housing for local people, however, were entirely removed in 1986 for sanitation reasons (see figure 9). Several people still evoke his disappearance with nostalgia, as Giancarlo Cao does: “What interested me, however, while looking at the photographing the “Poetto huts” was to draw attention to these little houses lined up, to their “useful” size, their simplicity and utility, their formal harmony, their colours, their ability to distil a whole series of formal elements from bourgeois villas (tympanum, balustrades and veranda) into a simple coloured and wooden-relief decorations” (Cao, 1998).

In the same line of thought, Ugo La Pietra also infers: “What is hard to describe even today is the range of formal and decorative factors that typified these “dwellings”: bright colours like classical beach architecture, wooden structures like beach huts but with clear allusions to “middle-class” villas and to the private beach facilities (with their rows of sun lounge and umbrellas), often raised on slits above the beach and the water level. Nevertheless, the use of colour in various partitions, the simplification of the villas’ stone “balustrades”, and their way of opening up by folding back the solid doors, with billowy

drapes fixed to long poles in the sand, all make this architecture a unique and fascinating phenomenon” (La Pietra, 2017).

Sandbars and global warming

Appears as a natural response to storm activity. During storms, sand from the visible beach submerges to form sand bars that protect the beach. Submersion is only part of the cycle. During calm weather smaller waves return sand from bars to the visible beach surface in a process called accretion. Some beaches do not have enough sand available to coastal processes to respond naturally to storms. When not enough sand is available, the beach cannot recover following storms (See figure 10).

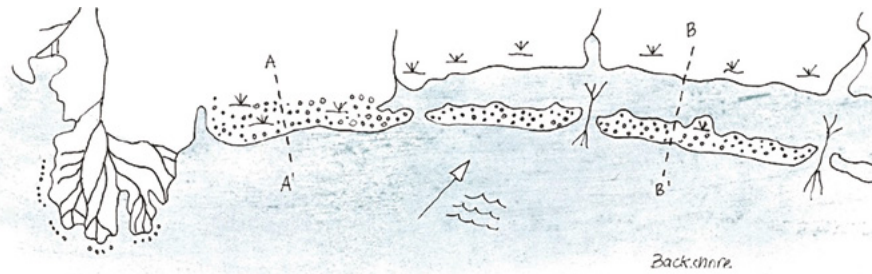


Figure 10. Molentargius water system.
Source: Handmade drawing, Francesca Borea (2019).

Due to Casotti’s removal, the overcrowding, and a lack of effective measures to prevent deterioration, there was gradual dispersal of sand and a fast erosion of the shoreline in the Nineties. Poetto’s beach becomes the common meeting place in the summer months: bathing establishments as “Bagni Lido” and “Bagni Aquila” began to emerge. This area that previously remained out of reach of most citizens, was finally connected with the city centre thanks to construction of routes.

Poetto’s beach saw a gradual dispersal of sand and a fast erosion of the shoreline in the Nineties for the lack of prevention work and human activities as (see figure 11):

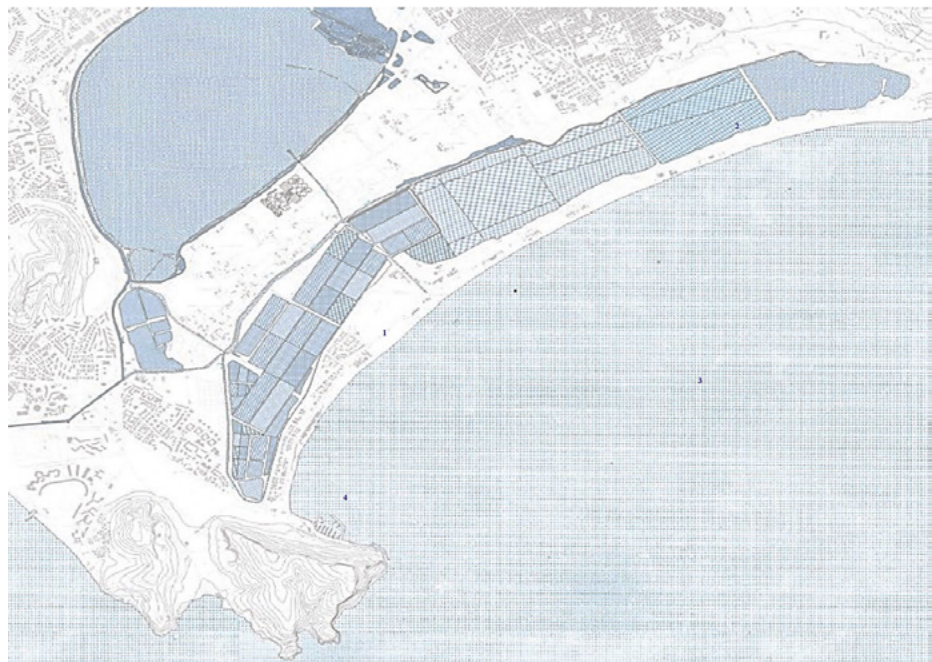


Figure 11. Sand Gradual dispersal causes and consequences.
Source: Francesca Borea’s drawing.

1. Massive sampling of sand (2.000.000 m³) in the Fifties for construction of houses (building speculation)
2. The construction of the “Strada Litoranea” (pedestrian/cycling road along the shoreline) that destroyed the line behind the downs, a range of spontaneous bushes that contained the downs, allowing the wind to sweep away the sand.
3. The dredgers have also destroyed the *Posidonia oceanica*, endemic Mediterranean seagrass, which had the advantage of retaining the sand torn by sea storms, withdrawing the shoreline.
4. Construction of the costal structures (as Piccola Marina harbours, of the long piers of bathing establishments, of “Casotti” and Villas) that compromises the natural attitude/directions of flows (De Muro S., Angelo Ibba A, Simeone S. et al., Simone Simeone 2017).

A clear example of these problems is the current state of the Tower of Carcangiolas, also called Torre Carcangiolu, is on the coast of Quartu Sant’Elena. Now in a state of ruin, due to the movement of the tide began to tilt in the 70s, overturning in the 80s on its side and now it is pouring into the shore. It was erected in the sixteenth century by the Spaniards, it was of the Torrecillas type and when it was built in addition to being about ten meters from the water, it was placed on a small sandstone cliff.

Finally, for this section, it is important to stress, that the influence of man and the reaction of nature itself, have sculpted this territory, leaving elements that will be considered to delineate the project that is proposed and is shortly presented below. Thus, the following illustrations represent the design idea and define the qualitative and functional characteristics of the proposal, making evident the use of the most significant elements of the current landscape.

THE PROJECT

Overall, the project is based on the creation of a new arena subtly connected by two fragments of built “ruins” enclosed by a sloping terrain shaped by earth movements. Temporary areas of life and care for horses, closed spaces formed by various “bathing areas”, enrich the life of the animals and human beings involved. In dialogue with the ruins of the former Marine Hospital on the Poetto beach and with the traces of the old racecourse path, the housing units are located along the boundary of the arena as they were in a state of “erosion”.

A series of dunes - which reflect the typical landscape and vegetation of Mediterranean beaches - defines the rest of the border, recreating the topography of the beaches and facilitating the integration of the complex into the surrounding natural context (see figures from 12 to 17).

Furthermore, occupying such a large area, the complex is conceived and designed as a self-sustainable reality, which includes phytodepuration basins inside the arena to make the structure self-sufficient.

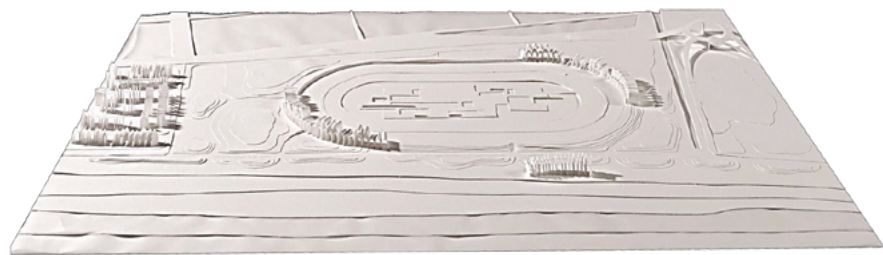
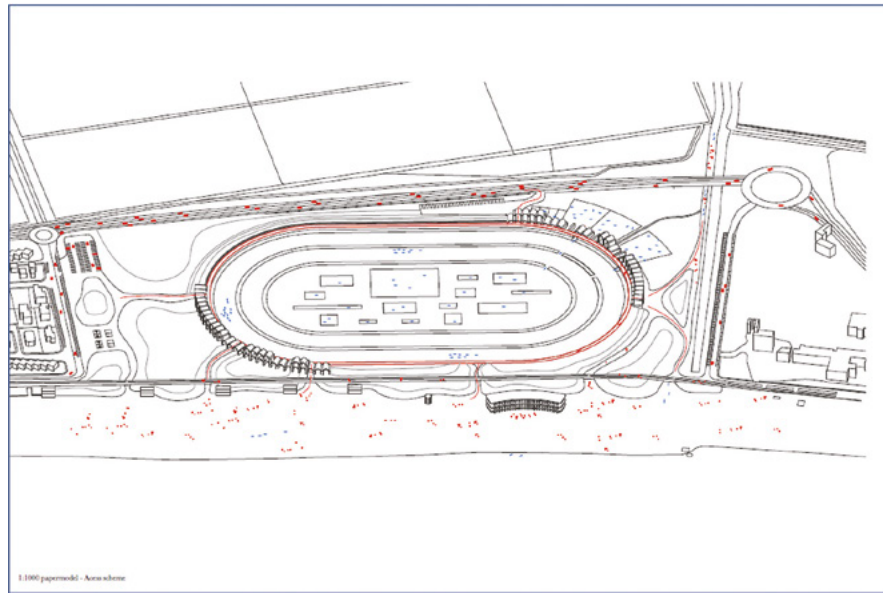


Figure 12. Architectural plan and model for the hippodrome's area.
Source: Francesca Borea (2019).

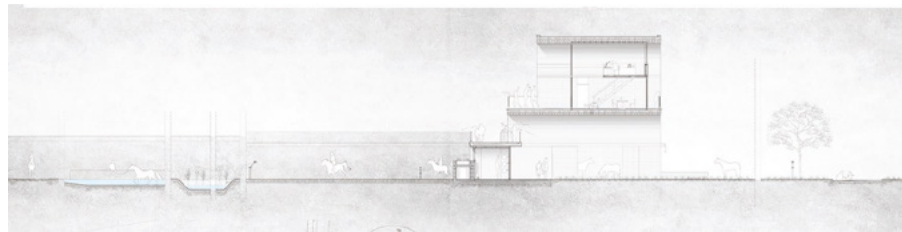


Figure 13. Landscape sections (proposal).
Source: Francesca Borea (2019).



Figure 14. Housing units located along the boundary of the arena.
Source: Francesca Borea (2019) Atelier Grafton.



Figure 15. Perspective and image from the model.
Source: Francesca Borea (2019) Atelier Grafton.



Figure 16. Housing, interior, and exterior images (sections from the model).
Source: Francesca Borea (2019).



Figure 17. Partial view of areas of life and care for horses.
Source: Francesca Borea (2019).

CONCLUSION

Talking about water culture and country design means, first, dealing with the complexity of the “water” element. Colourless and tasteless liquid, origin of humanity dynamic, chameleonic and unpredictable protagonist of the territory, component of the landscape in perennial transformation in borders, in forms, never equal to itself, with symbolic, ritual, and metaphysical values difficult to match. Talking about water culture and country design means addressing the issue of sustainability in ecological-environmental, economic, and ethical terms. It also means to individuate the critical issues and emergencies. Thus, it is important to engage in the construction of a common platform of cognitive references and strategic options, from which to derive indications for the definition of rules and guidelines able to meet the different needs and expectations of local communities, in accordance with the principles of sustainability, development and quality of water places.

This is the case of the old racecourse of Cagliari and its area of immediate influence, an area with great landscape values and with elements strongly linked to the urban memory of the city. Nevertheless, new rhythms of life and new kind of entertainments that has changed the interests of society who no longer practices the passion for the horse riding. Huge structures, once dedicated to horse racing are now abandoned and unused. Especially in warmer countries, where the temperature is harsh during winter, many jockeys travel with their horses to warmer places where they can train in the open air.

Athletes’ requests and needs might find an answer in Poetto’s hippodrome, if it would be considered not just as a structure dedicated to races but even as structures that can host jockeys and horses for training and eventually for injuries treatment during the whole year. As analysed

in the previous paragraphs, Poetto's beach needs an urgent redevelopment project, both for environmental reasons (e.g., erosion), both to reactivate tourism that is not just the seaside one.

Proposing a structure integrated with the surrounding context, capable of responding to all the criticalities of the site, would be able to redevelop a territory - so important for the city that risks being overwhelmed by the sea at a landscape and topographical level. Furthermore, by investing in the promotion of this sport and all related activities (competitions, training, hippotherapy, walks, residences for athletes and related services), it would be possible to enhance and recover the local culture and tradition that otherwise risks being lost.

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