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NEXT ISSUE

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The architecture of the Tropical City in the Subsaharian Africa
edited by Manlio Michieletto

The objective of the call is to solicit a critical investigation of the design experiences of tropical modernism in Africa with particular reference to the sub-Saharan region. The relationship between architecture and the city is analyzed over time and space. Regarding the time, it's intended before and after Independence, which for many countries took place in the 1960s, and regarding the space it's targeted a geographical area where the architectural project is inextricably linked to the context above all regards the sometimes extreme climatic conditions.

The architecture of the tropical city is substantially the architecture of the city composed by the tropical modernism given that many of the buildings considered historic can be placed in that architectural chapter of the 20th century and that today we can define permanence in the midst of the urban delirium that afflicts the construction of the city. These urban artifacts literally take shape and are structured through urban plans aimed at re-establishing an architecture-city relationship not forgetful, as mentioned, of the tangible and intangible

environment. Therefore, the call aims to stimulate reflection on the architectural project through the declinations that this language has been able to assume in the tropics of the African continent both in reference to individual buildings and to the urban composition. Architects, architectures and cities, therefore, which could only exist in those places, as Hassan Fathy taught us, and which tell us an urban story whose reading begins with its planning or with the knowledge and conception of the city as a project.

In the introduction to the first volume of the *Ouvre Complete 1910-1929*, Le Corbusier publishes a letter sent in 1936 to a newborn group of modern architects in Johannesburg, the Transvaal group, expressing all his astonishment at the architectural commitment profuse in seeking a new sensitivity away from Europe. A little less than two thousand years earlier Pliny the Elder, in the *Naturalis Historia*, quotes the Greek proverb according to which something new always arrives from Africa (*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*). Pliny tells of the discovery of a metaphor of nature, the African one, always made of the same elementary things, however composed according to different methods because they are suited to another context. The call aims to collect contributions that investigate the rhetoric of tropical modernism, an architectural language that translates into the rediscovery of elements of the indigenous art of building as neologisms of a common knowledge translated to different latitudes. British architects Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew are notoriously considered the proponents of this language thanks to the work carried out in the former British colonies of West Africa. In fact, the research for an architecture connected to climate and place will bring the language of the modern movement into line with the context. A language that reinvents or rather rediscovers the modern in a tropical key, giving it local but not necessarily vernacular connotations. The identity of the place is found expressed in the artifacts through the use of materials and with the epiphany of an architectural grammar composed and regulated by a few but precise principles capable of providing adequate protection. These principles are also pretexts for preparing an apparatus of construction details aimed at optimizing the use of the two natural elements, the sun and the wind, to which must be added the relationship with local tradition. Vitruvius himself remarked how the place had an effect on the conformation of the building and how, conversely, the construction influenced the surrounding site. The most relevant aspects of the project and of the construction concern, in the words of Vitruvius, the choice of the place, the microclimate and the landscape.

The architecture of sub-Saharan Africa has been linked, since its inception, to the issue of place and to the issue of building the city in an environment not accustomed to being urban. The cities built at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries are sometimes real foundation projects that from small agglomerations and even in some cases individual outposts, are transformed into metropolises that have now risen to the urban chronicle at the rank of uncontrollable megalopolis. An emblematic case such as Kinshasa, or known by the name of Leopoldville until 1960, represents the evolution of a village located along the banks of the Congo river which in little more than a century becomes the capital of a new country until it becomes megalopolis where by now the *polis* disappears to become just *megalos*. From the projects of the pioneers, through tropical modernism to the unbridled eclecticism of the last decades, this type of city has lost its identity and consequently its recognizable and transmissible form.

**66/
67**

**The evocative force of
architecture.
Design competition for a
Monument-memorial**

by
Gentucca Canella

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Motto Plan Oblique

Architectural project Mattia Baldini
Laura Mucciolo

Sculptor Francesco Filiberto Tonarelli



Mattia Baldini, Laura Mucciolo,
 Francesco Filiberto Tonarelli (Sculptor)
Plan Oblique

Abstract

The design exercise on the theme of the memorial-monument identifies in the choice of the “closed field” of Climat de France a terrain for reflecting on the role of the monument, detecting and revealing, through a “subversive” strategy, incongruities, limits, strains of the symmetrical layout. An oblique, walkable blade, rotated with respect to the symmetry of the monument’s enclosure, slices through the inner space of the “square of two hundred columns” as if it were a large wound. The aim of the traversable memorial is the exit from the fence and the use of the square as a part of project made by shadows. The adoption of the “*puntello*” as the “shown” part of the memorial contributes to making the design as “sculpture” and the sculpture as “technical” matter, exchanging the parts and roles that the areas have usually occupied over time.

Keywords

Fracture — Oblique — Puntello

Climat de France¹, originally situated in the Climat de France district, now Oued Koriche, refers to a public housing complex. It was intentionally named with geographical-political homonymy during the French colonization of Algeria to affirm France’s necessity, if not indispensability, in the political and daily choices of the country. Built during the years of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962)², it was conceived as a “civilizing” project to provide homes for the Muslim populations (then referred to as *indigene* in French) overcrowding the shantytowns of Algiers. Climat de France employed design strategies such as structural rigidity, serial repetition of elements in compositional syntax, the closed form of the “enclosure,” and an urban scale mismatch, assertively shaping the resolution of a space that accommodates living out of necessity, assigning civic tasks to architecture that surpass private ones.

From these premises, the project of a *memorial within the monument* emerges, reflecting a desire to engage with the strategies outlined in the project. This paradoxical approach aims to reveal incongruities, limitations, and constraints within the symmetrical structure. An oblique and walkable blade rotated concerning the symmetry of the monument’s enclosure (Fig. 1), cuts through the internal space of the “square of two hundred columns” (also known as *meidan*) like a great wound, allegorically attempting to represent the difficult and conflictual relationship between Algeria and the Muslim populations. The goal of the inhabited and traversable memorial is to exit the enclosure, use the square as both shade and conquer the horizon, both celestial and chthonic, in opposition to the static composition of the facade and thus the entire architecture of Climat de France.

Fig. 1

On the previous page: Marble model in its final version. Axonometric view.



Fig. 2
Planimetric Overview of the Climat de France, Algiers.

The Existing: the Monument

Within the square of two hundred columns of Climat de France, the stone colonnade unfolds with a one-meter module, while the internal facade, made of red bricks and featuring openings, is structured on a sixty-centimeter module. The spans of both reconnect every three meters. From the square, the rhythm of the bricks triumphantly emerges above the stone colonnade. Pouillon has reactualized other ancient composition systems. This is not negligible, as it provides a free source of architectural and urban quality improvement (Sayen 2018, p. 31). As confirmed by Catherine Sayen's words, the compositional tactics of the monument resurface, highlighting the architectural value of the enclosed space, including its contemporary relevance.

The square of two hundred columns, though conceived with private intentions, is the empty part of Climat de France that constructs both the project and the public part of the construction. Paradoxically, if one were to consider erasing the enormous project, it would result in the annulment of a secondary system of squares, accesses, spaces, and typological-morphological variations that anchor themselves to exist. It is the destiny of a public building to become a monument for these reasons, i.e., for the degree of relationship it imposes on the surrounding design relationships. Climat de France establishes another curious paradox, admitting, within its space of existence, a percentage of domestic everyday life that opposes, by nature, the monument:

The monument 'Climat de France' was born. It encompassed thirty hectares. What to think today of this composition? Is it a success or a failure? I could not say... Nevertheless, I am certain that this architecture was without contempt. Perhaps for the first time in modern times, we have installed human beings in a monument (Pouillon 1968, p. 207).

The internal space, the *paysage intérieur* (Pouillon 1968, p. 207), becomes the center of Pouillon's reflection: the large square conceived as a space of interaction, two hundred thirty-three by thirty-eight meters, turns out to be



Fig. 3
Design Collage of the Internal Memorial at the Climat de France, Algiers.

dominated by the horizontal dimension, drastically restricting the inhabitant's perceptual field, enclosing them within a highly regulated perimeter. The extremely precise geometric proportions, based on the numbers one, three, five, seven, establish, for the courtyard of Climat de France in a limited rectangle, as described by the author himself:

The composition of this monumental "meidan" of the humblest settlement in the world can be described by the numbers 1 to 9... 1 was the side of the columns and the height of the base. 2, the space in between the columns. 3, the dimension of the monolithic lintel. 4, the width of the portico. 5, that is multiplied by 8, the dimensions of the square. 6, that is multiplied by 40 (the dimension of the square) the length. 7, that is multiplied by 40, the overall length. 8, the height of the columns. 9, the height of the portico (Lucan 2003, p. 26).

Climat de France is also an architecture of numerology and therefore properly monumental: the two hundred columns contrast with the four thousand five hundred housing units³, the two meters in height of each interior, and the fifteen thousand square meters of the square translating into overcrowded domesticity hidden within the "Ottoman"⁴ fortress in Algiers. In the idea that the symbol-monument has civic functions, Climat de France goes beyond this univocal definition and admits public and domestic presence in the monument, downgrading its authority and simultaneously elevating its uses. According to Pouillon's words, calling the residential area a monument, a fundamental countertendency emerges, undermining Climat de France's main characteristics: the domesticity of the anti-monument. The hung white sheets, the parabolic antennas for television signal reception (almost one for each of the two hundred columns), the structure of a network determining the end of an ideal temporary football field set up inside the square, and the numerous cars contribute to the disruption of the solemnity of an inhabited monument. These internal paradoxes within the monument project have contributed to outlining the moves for the design of a memorial (Fig. 2) that insisted on the square and attempted to bring out, even in harmony with reality, the same short circuits.



Fig. 4
Design Section of the Internal Memorial at the Climat de France, Algiers.

To the Oblique: a Memorial

A few years ago, with this phenomenon not yet existing – author Claude Parent refers to the phenomenon of crowd migrations – the small closed worlds of the agora, the forum, and the public square were sufficient to contain the crowd. There was discipline in space. Currently, the crowd overflows. Its daily or seasonal deployment must not and cannot be obstructed. Channeling it is a temporary makeshift solution, absolutely unacceptable and insufficient under the pressure of popular dynamics (Parent 1978, p. 65).

Parent’s imaginative words contribute to building an imaginary reference for the “memorial” project. Consolidated urban spaces, such as the square, will need to exceed their capacities with the increasing population. Parent argues that the square, as a space that blocks rather than opens, becomes an obsolete urban configuration, even as a social model. Similar conditions have also affected the square of two hundred columns, currently used as a private storage space by the inhabitants, who do not use it as a square, probably also due to the absence of shade conditions. In 1970, Parent supported the idea of pedestrian circulation as the new main engine for inhabiting space, especially urban space. Extending circulation, and therefore urban exploration as well as living on facades⁵, allows considering urban space as a territory completely controllable, where, with no other tools but one’s body, it would have been possible to go, know, and possibly live.

The most interesting consequence of this space contraction is to allow finding the CALM of the linear path of the pedestrian while still within possible travel times, less than half an hour. Speed is no longer the essential vector of our cities. Movement can be LIVED again and not JUST endured as a fate, as lost time (Parent 1978, p. 69).



Fig. 5
Draft of the Physical Marble Model in the Laboratory, Massa (IT).

The memorial proposal embraces Parent’s considerations by identifying in the obliquity of the walking plane, in the exploratory use of the body, and in the reinterpretation of existing architecture as a “traversable” tool the key points of the reflection on the square of two hundred columns of Climat de France. An oblique plane, rotated fourteen degrees concerning the longitudinal symmetry axis, crosses the entire square’s length, reaching the summit level reached by the horizontal arm of the enclosure facing west. The oblique plane, besides extending along the entire length of the square, establishes a horizontal crossing of the ground at the southeast-facing angle, working the section with excavation, thus defining exploratory subterranean spatial coordinates (Fig. 3). From the roof plane, the oblique and rotated blade sharply contrasts with the monument’s rigorous compositional articulation, almost touching the sacred enclosure. From above, the memorial reveals something of its antithetical compositional nature:

Fig. 6

Measurement Phase of the Physical Model.



a walkable pedestrian surface starts from the ground level of the square to reach the neighborhood's summit level, while, conversely, also starting from ground level, a pedestrian path five times smaller than the above-ground one reaches the subterranean level and anchors to the sky through an oculus, which in plan becomes the ideal head of the silent *cadavre exquis* lying inside Climat de France. The reaching of the sky, its conquest, and the construction of alternative points to reach the blue become the project's pretext for the composition of the walkway.

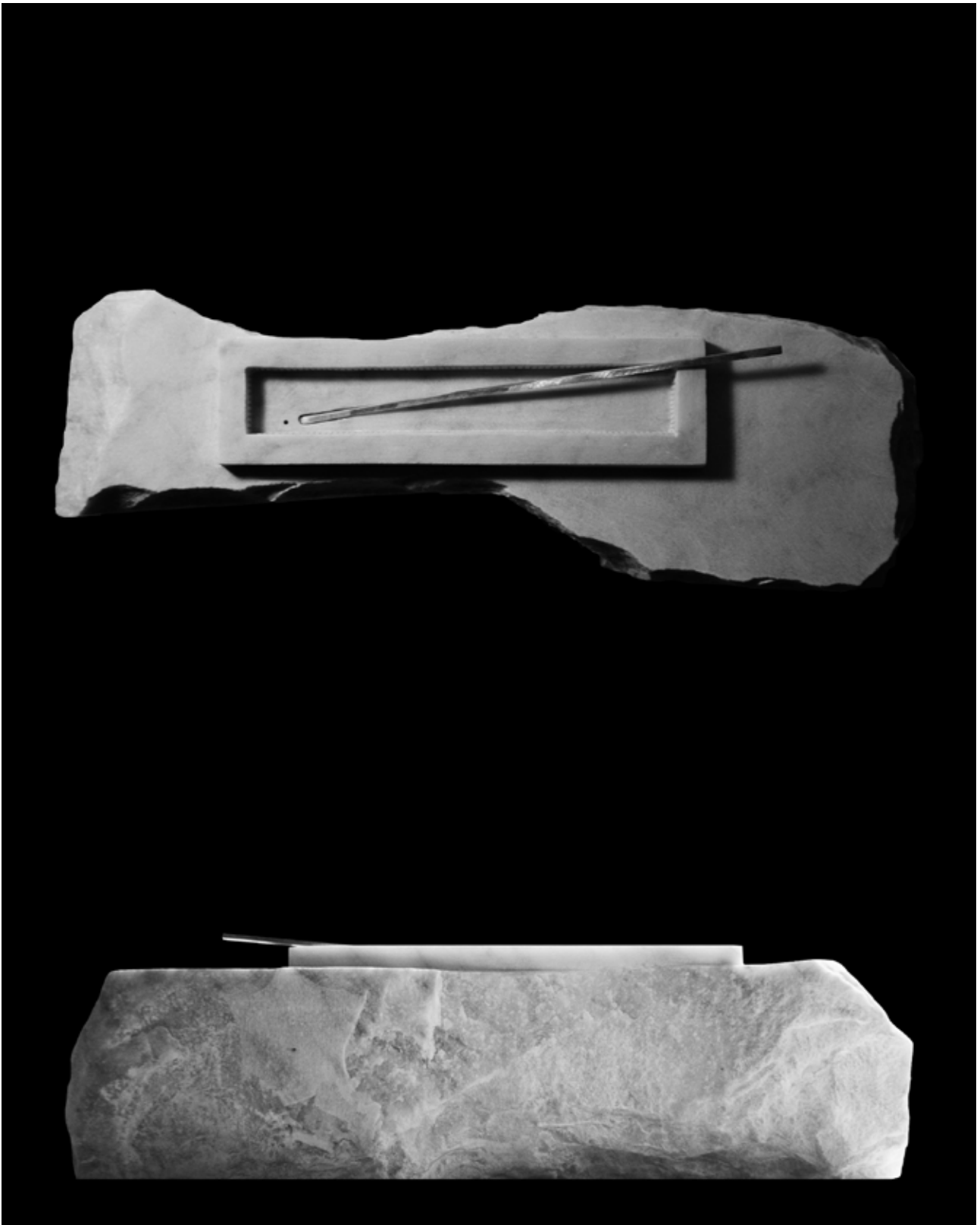
The plan, drawn on the repetition of a constantly tripartite module based on the number three, cuts through the internal space like a large wound, allegorically emphasizing both Algeria's definitive independence from France and the contradictions and conflicting dynamics within the Algerian and Muslim community.

The above-ground walkway, consisting of a walkable and flared "C" –profile metal structure, is opacified and reflective: it continuously reflects life inside the building, the surrounding colonnade, and the sky. This structure is interrupted exclusively at the exit holes towards the outside, constantly reminding of the divisive function of the colonnade, which, contrary to its original purpose, effectively reduces to an impermeable wall. The ascent to the top is slow and obstacle-free, the slope is gentle, the path is gradual. Once the summit is reached, beyond Climat de France's imposing walls, the view towards the outside is regained, rediscovering the relationship with the natural element, the external space. On the opposite side, however, the walkway intercepts the ground level, identifying a ground crossing and reaching a chthonic space, which, like the Nuragic well of Santa Cristina, unfolds a section that reflects through the water deposited at the bottom, the sky.

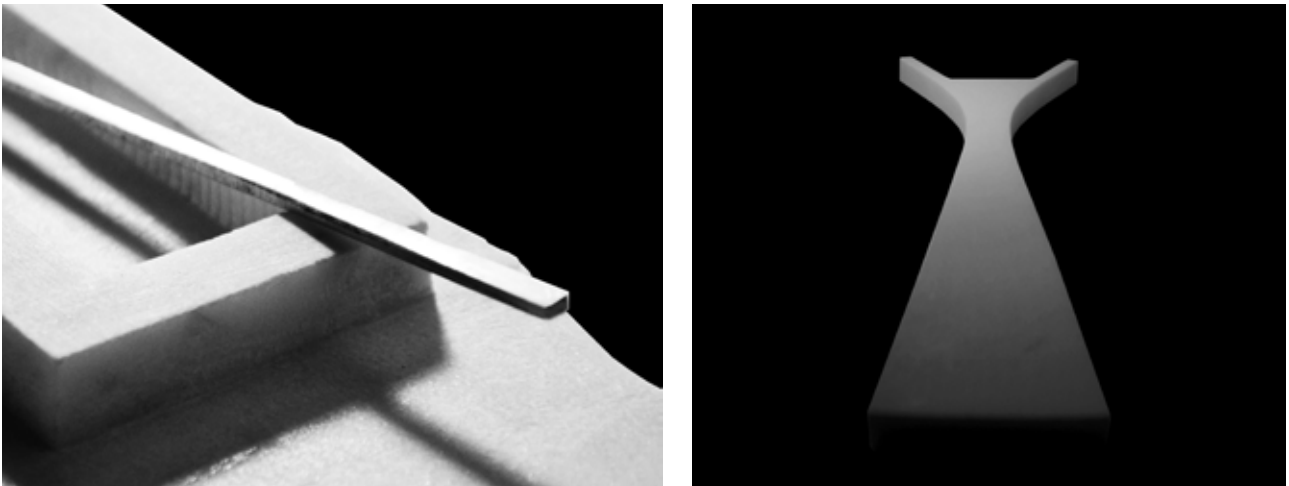
The memorial, fitting into a vast enclosure that excludes everything outside, through its obliqueness attempts to denounce the fall of such an obsessively precise and schematic system.

Sculptural *Puntelli* as Architectural Technique

The support system governing the walkway and enabling its existence are conceived from the use of sculptural props. The *puntello*⁶, the idea of an autonomous part in marble made up of deliberately left excess material for



Figg. 7-8
The Marble Model in its Definitive Version. Zenithal view, front elevation.



Figg. 9-10

Memorial's Marble Model in its Corner Detail; view of the structural *puntello*.

support and masked (see the hand touching the knee in Myron's *Discobolus* or the drapery in Bernini's *David*) or left exposed (as in Praxiteles' *Hermes with Dionysus*), becomes the technical component allowing the walkway's support. The props take on a Y-shaped form in elevation, through a broad support base that, in the central body of the prop, narrows almost to strangulation and widens again towards the top, accommodating the walkway's silhouette inside. The rhythm of the *puntelli* in plan is dictated by the technical support needs, generating a curious case of random rhythmic alternation unrelated to Pouillon's design. The *puntello*, thus freed from the need to become a mask for something, reveals its technical component through architectural application. Sculptural supports, long ignored by sources as such or camouflaged even in the name, have often tended towards invisibility, to «rettificare l'immagine dell'opera» (Anguissola 2018, pp. 596). The *puntello*, supporting the walkway, ideally connects the ground with the inclined plane, making the square's ground an integral part of the memorial. The adoption of the support as a visible and “shown” part of the memorial contributes to making the project “sculptural” and “sculpture” technical, exchanging the parts and roles that the fields have usually occupied over time.

*In memory of Alessandro Mosti “Indian”.

Notes

¹ Geographic coordinates of the project area: 36.78409840917006, 3.0470636861083786.

² The cultural events that affected the independence of Algiers and the conflictual relationship with the Muslim populations and with the French regime were represented by the director Gillo Pontecorvo in *The Battle of Algiers* (1966).

³ French journalist and anti-colonialist critic Albert-Paul Lentin provides an accurate description of the units: «deux pièces à plafond bas (2 m de haut), l'une de 2 x 3 m, l'autre de 3 x 3 m, une cuisine minuscule, un cabinet d'aisance, des fenêtres étroites» (Lentin 1963, pp. 146-147).

⁴ The scale and relationships between the Algerian architecture built during the Ottoman domination became a design reference for Pouillon (Pouillon 1968, p. 205).

⁵ Also note: «L'habitant, circulant sur la ville, sur les façades, non seulement n'est plus canalisé, mais bénéficie de connexions si directes qu'il peut choisir la voie piétonne sans être handicapé, car le temps de parcours diminue» (Parent 1978, p. 69).

⁶ «Puntello. Bastone o trave di legno da puntarsi, ossia mettersi a contrasto per l'UNTA, cioè per ritto, onde serva di sostegno (v. Puntare)» (Pianigiani 1907, voce puntello).

Also: «Puntello. Sbarra di legno o di metallo, opera muraria e, in genere, elemento ad asse verticale, o anche inclinato alquanto rispetto alla verticale, che, fissato a un solido punto d'appoggio, serve come sostegno di strutture (muri, armature di gallerie, scavi ecc.), soprattutto quando esse si trovino in condizioni statiche incerte, usato anche in nautica.» Enciclopedia Treccani online, consulted on 15/07/2023.

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Francesco F. Tonarelli is a versatile artist who has engaged in both painting and sculpture. He graduated from the renowned Marble School P. Tacca in Carrara, and furthered his studies at the sculpture workshop of Mosti Alessandro “Indian,” refining his skills and acquiring traditional sculpture techniques. The artist personally oversees all stages of sculpture, primarily utilizing Carrara Marble. He has participated in numerous exhibitions locally and currently showcases his work titled *David-19* at the Moco Museum in Amsterdam.

