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Might not Just Be Another Pile of Old Stones

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Might not Just Be Another Pile of Old Stones

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Abstract

This contribution examines the challenges of understanding an archaeological site and explores how various factors impact the public's ability to comprehend the original use of a spatial configuration that no longer exists. It focuses on the remains of the Arch of Titus at the Circus Maximus in Rome and analyses how the lack of adequate explanations obscures the original context of the site, despite its historical significance; the dispersion of scattered stone fragments, along with several modern and contemporary interventions, further complicate the perception of the arch's original structure.

This situation creates an incomplete experience for the visitor, who is confronted with a landscape full of remnants but with a fragmented understanding of their historical and architectural value.

In today's highly technological world, it would be possible to create a performative activity at the Circus, such as a modern chariot race, incorporating virtual and augmented reality systems to enhance the experience with historical information, allowing diverse audiences to engage with the archaeological site in a way that closely mirrors its original use.

Keywords: Performing Heritage, virtual space, augmented reality

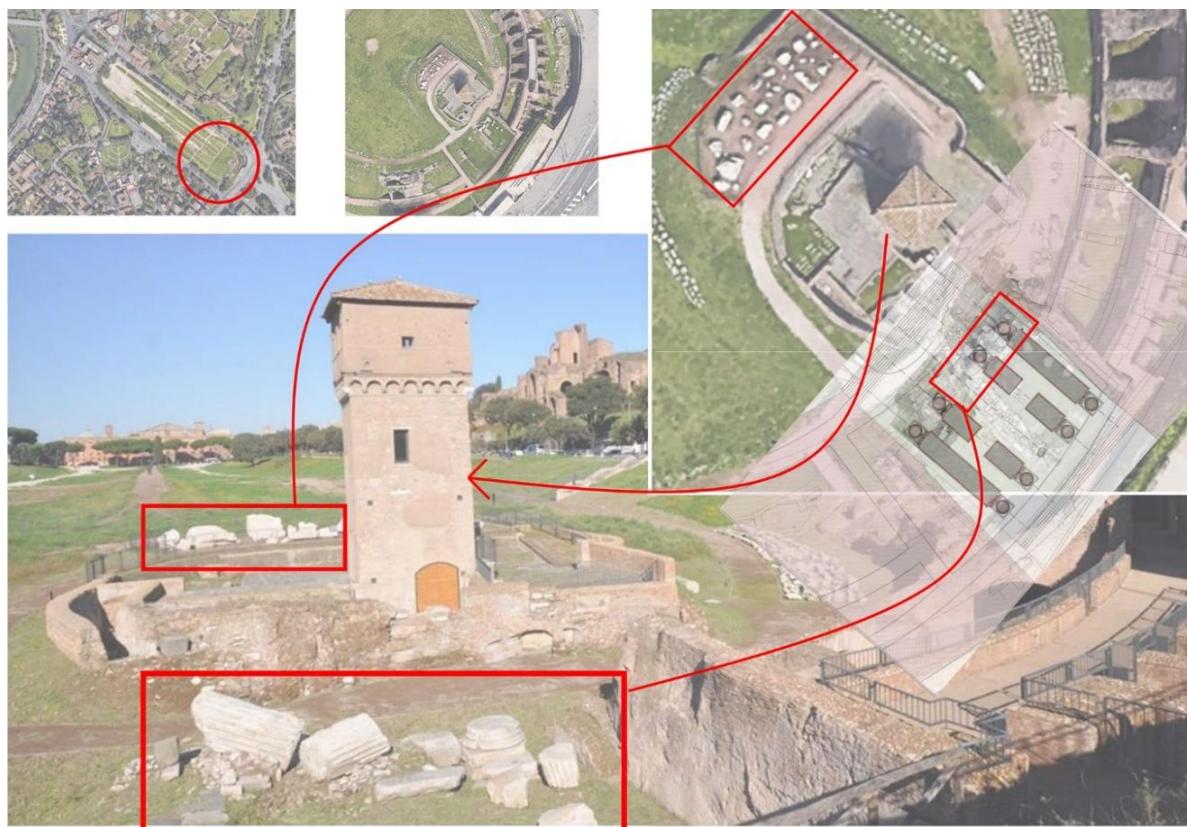
Might not Just Be Another Pile of Old Stones

The starting point of this contribution is the limited perception of an archaeological site. The complexity of the monument or the site needs to be observed in the complexity of its original state. This contribution also focuses on how the divulgation of cultural heritage could be improved or adapted; to ease the way a person could perceive not only a monument, but a spatial configuration that no longer exists.

In this context, it can be said that, understanding the archaeological site of Circus Maximus, without a deep prior knowledge of the monument and its historical context,

remains quite complicated. In particular, it is difficult to understand how and where the Arch of Titus was and stood. Neither the route that the museography of the site provides, nor the placement of the remaining fragments are helpful in this matter. Some of them are arranged according to catalogue order, laying on the floor without any other criteria, such as their original orientation or their belonging to one architectural element or another. The sole aim was to create an image of effect, which has little didactic or informative value. The only ones that are directly related to their position in their original configuration in the monument are a series of bleachers, which are arranged following what would have been the footprint of the space occupied at the time by the stands. Its understanding is thus limited to those scholars who are familiar with, and who have studied the monument in advance.

Figure 1
Current state of Circo Maximo archaeological site.



In Figure 1 you can see an image of the archaeological site, with the superimposition of the hypothesized complete graphical bidimensional reconstruction of the arch, based on the fragments found in situ during the relative archaeological campaigns.¹ In this image it can be observed that the arrangement of the fragments found has no relation to the original

¹ The archaeological campaigns took place from 2012 to 2016 and all the discoveries and work done in this matter have been published in 2017 (see Coletta 2017).

position of the arch which they belong to. The medieval Moletta tower stands between the column bases found in situ and some other fragments of the arch, neatly arranged, and there is no evidence of how this place was when it was in function. Hence, it becomes difficult to imagine how it was used at the time.

Heritage Enhancement

The collective imaginary of how such spaces were used is primarily shaped by films, but it is challenging to directly connect what is perceived in these visually enhanced portrayals with the reality found at the archaeological sites.

In this matter, in the recent years, some initiatives have been developed aimed at enhancing heritage by using innovative approaches. In fact, since May 2019, after the above-mentioned research project was finished and published, a project of virtual reality has been developed, giving a new perspective to the visit of the archaeological site of Circo Maximo. The enhancement project uses interactive visualisation technologies such as immersive visors and stereo headsets which, in some way, help visitors to immerse themselves in some of the different historical phases through which this building-monument-open-air space has been through². Although a virtual reconstruction of the original Circus Maximus can be seen when using the display made available to the user when visiting the archaeological site, there is not a real superimposition of images that would make it possible to evidence a direct relationship between the current reality and the images in the video on display. A real temporal reconstruction in situ, such as a film set, could help a better interpretation and interaction between the user and the archaeological site. (Figure 2).

This virtual reality experience is not the only initiative showcased in Rome in recent years.³ Technological advancements have led to highly realistic digital tri-dimensional reconstructions, that allow an overall view of space as it once was but, as they all recreate an unreal situation and are reproduced on screens or digital displays, the use and interaction

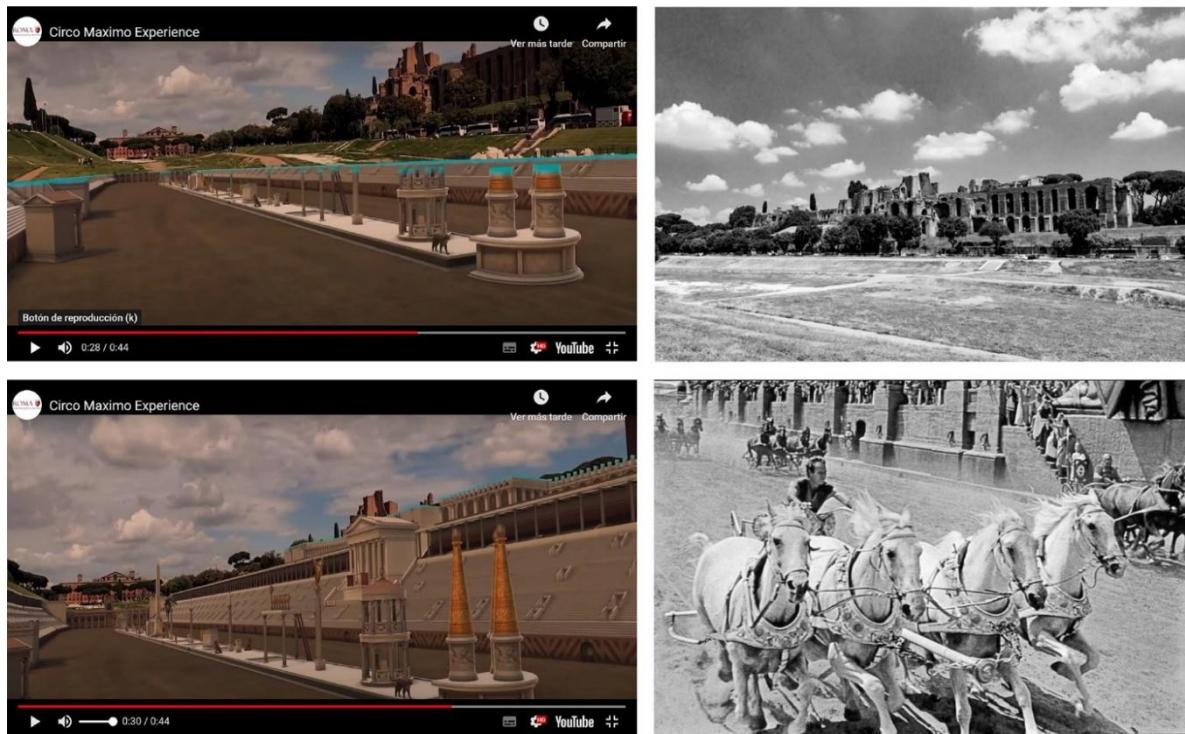
² Circo Maximo Experience. *La nuova prospettiva del passato. La storia attraverso la realtà aumentata e virtuale* (<https://www.circomaximoexperience.it/en/>). The new perspective of the past. History through augmented and virtual reality. The eight historical phases of this initiative include: the Valley and the Origins of the Circus; the Circus from Julius Caesar to Trajan; the Circus in the Imperial Age; the Cavea, the Arch of Titus; the Botteghe (*tabernae*); the Circus in the Medieval and Modern Age; and finally A Day at the Circus.

³ Some of these initiatives displayed in Rome are: L'Ara com'era (<https://www.arapacis.it/es/>). (The Ara (Pacis) as it was). An augmented reality history of the Museum of the Ara Pacis (14 October 2016 -30 Decembre 2019; Viaggio nei Fori (<https://www.viaggionefori.it/>, (Journey through the Forums), a seasonal experience on the forums of Caesar and Trajan still active since 2017 every summer to this day; also, since the end of 2017, Caracalla IV Dimensione (<https://corporate.coopculture.it/en/article/case-history-caracalla-fourth-dimension-project/>), Using a virtual reality viewer, you can see the spa environments as they once were.

with those spaces remains limited. Immersiveness is not really achieved and the role of the spectator is always limited to that of a mere observer.

Figure 2

Circo Maximo experience. Fiction, virtual reconstruction, and reality?



Performing Heritage

One way to achieve this direct association between the archaeological site and the way it was used would be to adapt the performative display from films or virtual three-dimensional reproductions to the real space and combine both of them with actions in the space itself.

The appropriation of heritage for theatrical performance and performative archaeological recovery is not a new concept and the examples of the Athens and Epidaurus Festival (<https://aefestival.gr/>) or the International Roman Theatre Festival of Mérida (<https://www.festivaldemerida.es/>) are just two of the most obvious and immediate classical examples that can be mentioned. If one is looking for more specific examples of representation and recreation of historical moments with an immersive approach to the spectator, one can also include the experience of Puy du Fou⁴ (<https://www.puydufou.com>).

In today's highly technological world, it would be very easy to develop a performative activity at the Circus⁵, combining some of these concepts, and maybe recreate a modern

⁴ Tist is a theme and show park in France, comprising a strong theatrical and scenic component, which recreates different historical events using actors, special effects and sound. It also includes augmented reality and other technological advances. For more information, see the references.

⁵ Lots of concerts and events take place at this archaeological site nowadays.

chariot race, on site, as a thematic attraction, with the incorporation of systems of virtual and augmented reality that would add and combine historical information to the real experience. In this way, it would offer audiences the experience of the archaeological site in a similar way to how the original space was originally used.

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