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# THE UNEXPECTED MEDITERRANEAN. THE THEATRE OF OLBIA BY GIOVANNI MICHELUCCI.

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## MEDITERRANEITA' INATTESA. IL TEATRO DI OLBIA DI GIOVANNI MICHELUCCI

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### **Abstract**

*The Mediterranean character in architecture is an approach where place and architecture come face to face and give rise to an entity that synthesizes the characteristics of one and the themes of the other. The creative trajectory undertaken by Giovanni Michelucci to design his last work, the Olbia Theatre in Sardinia, is emblematic of an adherence to the Mediterranean character in architecture. The rocks, the sea, the vegetation, the sun and the wind merge with the needs of the theatre, giving rise to solutions that integrate the elements involved.*

*The design trajectory of the Tuscan maestro here succeeds in condensing the facets of his expressive development. Variability, community, interpretation of nature, organicity, happiness and collective response are the aspects of his thinking best encapsulated in this conceptual approach.*

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*La mediterraneità in architettura è un approccio per cui luogo e architettura si confrontano dando origine ad un'entità che riassume in sé i caratteri dell'uno e i temi dell'altra. Il percorso ideativo che Giovanni Michelucci compie per progettare la sua ultima opera, il Teatro di Olbia in Sardegna, si mostra come emblematica espressione di adesione alla mediterraneità. Le rocce, il mare, la vegetazione, il sole e il vento, si fondono alle necessità tipologiche del teatro dando origine a soluzioni che mettono a sistema gli elementi coinvolti. Il percorso progettuale del Maestro toscano, riesce qui a condensare i punti della sua parabola espressiva. Variabilità, comunità, interpretazione della natura, organicità, felicità, corralità, sono gli estremi del suo pensiero progettuale che si concretizzano al meglio in questo percorso ideativo.*

**Keywords:** Michelucci, theatre, Olbia, the Mediterranean, interpretation

## Introduction

The Mediterranean is an ancient womb where numerous histories and cultures have taken shape and been lost.

It is a ring of land with the sea at its centre, the focal point around which differences among three continents circle in their histories and narratives, moving to the rhythm of antinomies arising from the coexistence of transversality and sectoriality, of inclusion and exclusion, of connections and closures, over time giving life to a kaleidoscopic horizon of meaning.

By virtue of its role as a crossroads of possibility, where exchange, migration, reciprocity, but also opposition, are privileged, it would seem problematic to speak of its identity if not as the simultaneity of situations, ties and relationships capable of creating a variegated narrative koine. Only by reason of this evident complexity does it seem appropriate to define the notion of the Mediterranean character in architecture, to be understood as the underlying heritage in design that, based on common assumptions, adapts to the different specificities of place.

The Mediterranean character in architecture is, therefore, something more than mere nuance, just as it certainly is something much broader than a single dominant trait. The trigger for this quality can be traced back to the eighteenth-century rediscovery of Greek mythology brought about by archaeology. This discovery, subsequently given form in design by that architect-traveller Karl Friedrich Schinkel, seemed to anticipate - in a language that is still rigorous and measured to this day - certain characteristics of this approach that more than a century later would be called *organic*, with landscape becoming a true “brick” in the architecture.

From this moment on, numerous other architects would go in search of the eternal principles underlying classicism, subsequently adapting them to interactions with the light of the sun, colour, material as well as with island landscape archetypes, above all the Italian, which was often taken as a model for its picturesque authenticity. Numerous is the group that from John Ruskin, Josef Hoffmann and Joseph Maria Olbrich leads to Gunnar Asplund and Adolf Loos, that from Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier leads to the Italian and primarily local architects Giò Ponti and Bernard Rudofsky, Raffaello Fagnoni and Adalberto Libera, all of whom were engaged in the search for a language expressive of a true Mediterranean myth.

The Mediterranean character in architecture, considering the works of such maestros, is, upon closer inspection, a quality capable of dismantling customary design approaches based on a set of elements and stylistic features that constitute technical and formal practice, instead evolving in favour of the temper and tenor of a composite approach that is viscerally suited to its environment; which is to say, an architecture born out of a place for a place, fusing with its context in a reciprocity that is not only ideal but often also physical, giving rise to a communion between architecture and its surroundings - until then of secondary importance or altogether new - to an architecture composed of built works mainly conceived in a canonical relationship between form and background.

## Methods and materials

Considering Giovanni Michelucci's design and theoretical process falls fully within this approach. Even if Michelucci seems to address the theme of the Mediterranean in a seemingly spurious manner, the entirety of his design process for the Olbia Theatre embodies his adherence to the Mediterranean character that is as unexpected as it is absolute.

The theatre, built in the late 1990s after the death of the architect in the last day of 1990, is in fact Giovanni Michelucci's final work. Although not a testament to his spirit given the number of modifications the theatre has undergone, many of the themes that the Tuscan maestro pursued with tenacity and passion during his long creative trajectory are present here. It was to Michelucci

that in 1989 the municipality of Olbia gave the task of designing a theatre complex overlooking its beautiful gulf. Olbia, in fact, is one of Gallura's most important cities, that is, one of the most beautiful historical and geographical subregions in the north of Sardinia.

If matters of a political nature concerning this theatre are sadly well-known, marked as it was by extensive bureaucratic and economic limitations that changed the dimensions and final appearance of its architecture, the genesis of its design is still to be examined. When delved into, this genesis seems to constitute a real and decisive piece in the development of Michelucci's thinking, thanks to which the groundbreaking and innovative charge of the Modern triggers the need to anchor innovative processes to their ancient roots, as though Michelucci's assertive and unbridled means of expression needed to be linked to memory to find lasting legitimacy, rendering not only the spontaneity but also the lyricism of minor architectural language.

It is unnecessary to enter into conjectures or even interpretative hypotheses to understand the development of the initial inspiration for the Olbia Theatre project, since Michelucci himself, with the poetic air of his final years, informs us. How was the Olbia Theatre conceived?

*It was conceived out of the promptings given by the place to those thinking about the possibilities of a theatre. That is, a new fact that intervenes to enrich the nature of the place. From the rocks and the sea come numerous clues and these create an idea of what a theatre can be. Because if I take a rock and put a man from Olbia to sing a song on it, I have already created a special theatre. Here then is this immense rock and this man who, for example, sings the praises of Ulysses: I am in awe. So I start to develop something inside me that creates in my soul an orientation among the elements around me: the rocks, the sea, the landscape. At a certain point all these elements acquire movement, connecting with each other, connecting with the forest; all these elements enter into the condition of creating a new fact.*

*Now, it's possible to draw; these are drawings that originate from a place and which come into the world above all from what exists inside the soul.*

*Now, I can apply myself to also thinking about a tower of gold!*

*These drawings can evoke everything, since the familiar world has been abandoned in favour of continuous invention.*

*I define forms after drawing them. I don't think about them first; they are born as they naturally gain meaning... So what happens? What happens is that you want to sing, you want to make music, you want to do many things that are the theatre...[1].*

The sea, the rocks, the landscape are, therefore, the ingredients of a fascinating, yet personal, design trajectory which, starting from the vision of a man singing on the rocks, gains clarity sketch after sketch towards the affirmation of a form that, although born free based on its own assumptions, does not seem to attain a pre-established and definitive form. On the contrary, for Michelucci this theatre had an extremely mutable and variable form, since it remained linked to the variability of the numerous relationships underlying it, and therefore, as he himself was able to affirm numerous times with different works, its form is not predetermined a priori, that is, it is not determined by typological, technological or material conditioning, but is rather "found", thanks to the execution of the project articulated through the drawing.

Only after apprehending that the theatre will be an entity capable of bringing together elements of place and functional necessities can it be designed. Not before, but only after having it clear in one's mind that the theatre - but knowing Michelucci's thinking I would confidently add any other work of architecture - is to be understood as a "condenser" of suggestions from disparate fields and that only due to the architect's mediation will these be able to intersect and give rise to a new fact.



**Figure 1**  
*Giovanni Michelucci, Olbia Theatre, drawing of theatre in environmental context, 1990. Archivio Fondazione Michelucci, Fiesole, Firenze.*

Therefore, the drawing is only a means of bringing to light not only everything already inscribed in a place but also what already exists in the architect's sensibility, naturally revealing what is already there, what has already been formed and which only needs to be uncovered by envisioning the new architectural space; in this case, in order for the place to express its theatrical vocation and for the theatre to express its sense of the place.

If this approach marks Michelucci's poetics until the immediate, post second world war period, stamping itself on all his projects and all his built works, the creative flow manifested on this occasion in Sardinia reveals something of its emblematic nature, thanks to which, rather than results it is the path taken to obtain them that seems to matter more.

The project was to create an integrated complex consisting of a covered theatre, an open-air theatre, theatre workshops and an area equipped for producing custom-made artefacts that serve the needs of theatre life. The site is Sa Marinedda near the district of Poltu Quadu, a tip of land that extends into the southern part of the clear waters of the Gulf of Olbia to form two opposing bays, together with an infinite series of coves and rocky gulfs where rock and water are in constant play.

## Results

As always in the poetics of the old maestro, rich in evocative power and imaginative ability, a path enabling approach to the final ideas appears. With a now uncertain, now definite line, the various sketches reveal, despite the variety of the numerous visions, certain assumptions held in common. These can be traced back to a double reference to nature evident in the interpretation of the subject of trees and shrubs - certainly the olive and the juniper tree - through the rehabilitation of the root, trunk and gnarled branch; naturalistic references that are transformed into the supporting structure of

the buildings and into the skin of the different volumes, but which are also interpreted through a less direct and more allusive manner and which are therefore capable of structuring the entire essence of the project.

If one considers, in fact, the impressive number of sketches that Michelucci executed for the theatre, one sees how the initial idea of a canonical theatre inserted into a precise, compact volume gradually evolves into the rendering of a more fragmented system, comprising of buildings that by degrees tend to detach themselves from the main body and assume an autonomous life. The result is a porous whole consisting of soft, supple elements, open to the views of the surrounding landscape, to the winds and to the sun; a new landscape of artificial *rocks* among natural rocks, comprised of different pieces that model themselves on nature and the features of the coast, which here also has among its dominant elements, together with the vegetation, granite blocks abraded by wind and water.

Alongside such continual literal and metaphorical references to nature stands the equally constant presence of another polarity revolving around the tower. The “tower of gold” as Michelucci writes [2], which is to say, a tower capable of bringing together the sea, the sky, the rocks, the trees, in essence, the entire landscape into which it is built and of which it is the expression, to transform it into a new entity, “a new fact” continues Michelucci [3], in order to recapitulate to himself its sense of context as well as its sense of function: a sense conceived and desired in continuity with what already exists, so that the building belongs to the place, as though it has always stood there, and the place to the building as though they are one.

A circular volume, in fact, appears from the very first sketches and is transformed into different visions, in turn assuming the appearance of a cupola, a pavillion with three spires, a spire, a cone, a truncated cone and even a nuraghe, rendering not only the dream but the island’s spatial and building traditions as well.

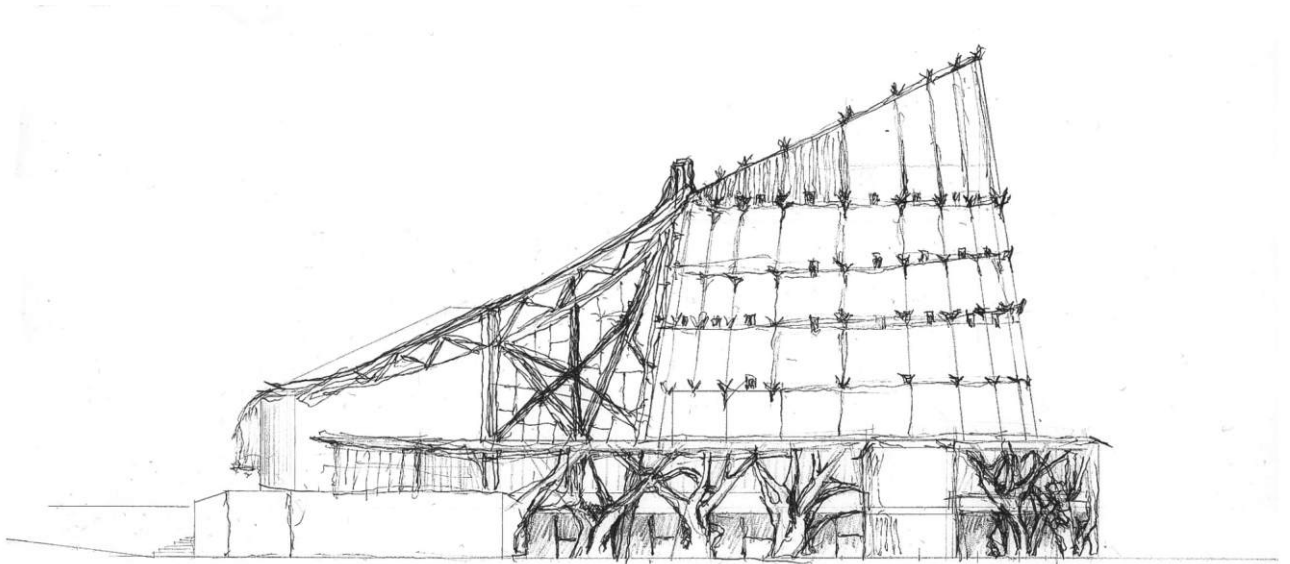
The context is however further formed by one of the most important ports in Sardinia, the port at Isola Bianca, which the chosen site faces. There are cranes in the dockyards that stand out on the horizon, ships that together with the clouds constitute the area’s moving scenery, along with the outlines of the hills and that of a city that is ever expanding in search of new places where human relationships play out. It is therefore the fragile and changing relationships among these elements that weave the fabric where Michelucci outlines his forms, which on closer inspection at this stage produce, rather than solutions, classes of solutions, variations on the theme as well as simple categories of form that testify not only to the transience inherent in any compositional process, but also to the will to consider architecture as a concrete response to the pulse of the infinite bonds on which human life is based.

## Discussion

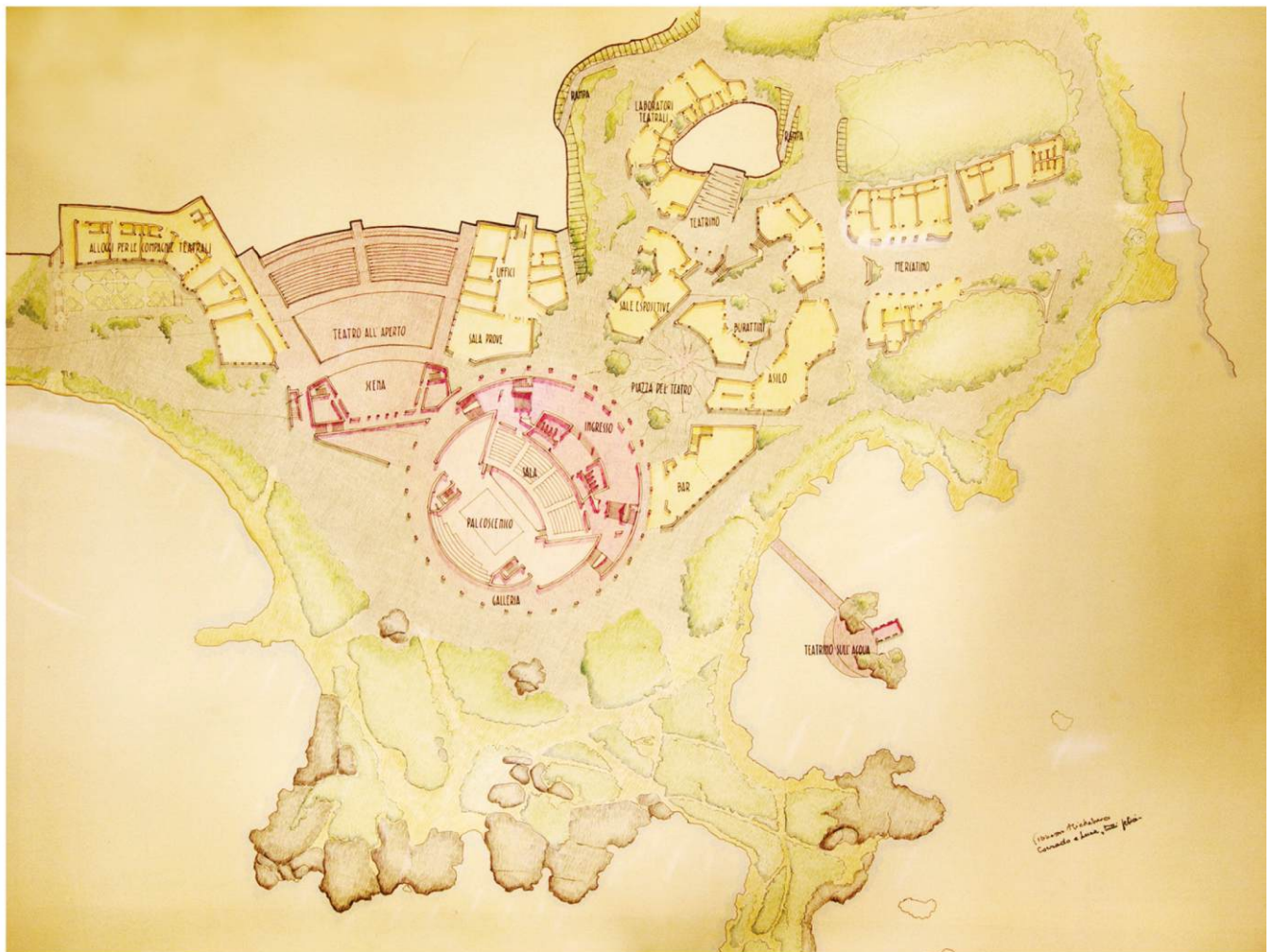
Another recurring feature in Michelucci’s process may be added to these continuities, namely, the predisposition towards openness, an acceptance not only of the vitality of a place’s relationships, trajectories and spirit, but above all of community, of being together. After all, this dimension constitutes the starting point and the finish line of the entirety of his lengthy research and, in this vision of his, the difference among building types counts for little. As a matter of fact, everything is theatre, everything is church, everything is home, everything is city, in this interchangeability of roles that leads to the transformation of the sense of one thing into another, provided that human beings are the true subject-object of every work of architecture, whether built or merely imagined; a human being who is not a spectator but the unconditional protagonist of the space.

At the start of December 1990, the final solution arose from of this collection of sketches, designed together with Corrado Marcetti and Luca Emanuelli, which was then merged with the preliminary plans presented to the city of Olbia only in February 1991, after Michelucci’s death.





**Figure 2**  
 Giovanni Michelucci, *Olbia Theatre*, drawing of façade with stage tower, 1990.  
 Archivio Fondazione Michelucci, Fiesole, Firenze.



**Figure 3**  
 Giovanni Michelucci, *Olbia Theatre*, preliminary floor plans, 1990. Archivio Fondazione Michelucci, Fiesole, Firenze.

Reiterating their interest in the project, city administration decided to entrust its completion to Marcetti and Emanuelli, but the difficulties caused by the immediate limitations to the budget that had been foreseen from the start, as well as the length of time that had elapsed before the project execution was entrusted to Marcetti and Emanuelli are immediately discernible in the first stage of work, which only took place in 1994.

Given the dimensions of the projected complex, it was decided that it would be built in stages, each phase following the other without deviating from the overall plan. It began, therefore, with the open-air theatre, the document centre, the theatre workshops and the service tower, with the construction of the roofed theatre postponed until adequate funding was found in the future.

In November 1999 the first stage of the work was finished and from the resulting clear volumes one might at first be persuaded of the absence of traditional Micheluccian values. These are immediately to be found however through a more in-depth reading of these juxtaposed masses on rock. That is, one immediately realises, in the sunny nature of the place, that in reality the main architect's ideas had not at all been betrayed by lack of funds nor even by endemic bureaucratic fetters, as much as having been, in reality, only boiled down, that is to say, reduced almost to its iconic essence.

To this, we can add that the stripping down of materials to just three - granite, plaster and metal - the reduction to a minimum of every expressive register, together with the disappearance of every ornamentation, captures the ancient forces in the project. If little or nothing remains of the sketches' visionary nature, the open-air theatre's spacious cavea, the workshops' rectangular volume, the more elongated document centre, together with the circular piazza positioned between the two, as well as the squat mass of the tower, pierced by a rhythm of narrow windows that demonstrate the thickness of the walls, express in their absolute simplicity a sort of archaic energy.

And it is an energy that reveals itself in apprehending how this building, more than a maestro's spiritual testament, is in truth the expression of a *happy* collaboration and sharing of intent, a chorus of responses which is the fruit of a multiplicity of contributions, embodied in this, the most authentic of Michelucci's thought. It is a work influenced by events, altered by contingencies, shaped by the construction site, in the vivacity of a living organism that its principal architect would have liked immensely.

After years of neglect and abandon, the reasons for which certainly cannot be attributed to any fault in the spaces, but to poor management and to short-sighted authorities, the Olbia Theatre has for some time been included in an extensive process of urban renewal involving its complete restoration and partial conversion into the first international music library in Sardinia.

If on the one hand this confirms the absolute value of the Tuscan maestro's architecture, almost always fully detached from a limited understanding of space based solely on function, it also testifies to the symbolic dimension of architectural space as something that goes beyond the immanence of form, a much more subtle, at times inexpressible and ineffable value revealed only through its consonance with place, since "this place is already theatre; someone reciting the text of a Greek tragedy on these rocks would be sufficient. We merely have to make this presence stronger" [4].



**Figure 4**  
*Olbia Theatre, completion of first phase, 1999. Photograph by Davide Viridis.*





**Figure 5**  
*Olbia Theatre, current state, view from the sea, 2020. Photograph by Maurizio Bosa.*



**Figure 6**  
*Olbia Theatre, current state, detail of theatre workshops, 2020. Photograph by Maurizio Bosa.*

## Conclusion

This knowledge of how to capture the essence of a place, of how to translate the spirit in a context, of how to interpret continuities, latent qualities as well as character and identity, constitute the fundamental reference points of an authentic adherence to the Mediterranean character.

And the Mediterranean character that nourishes the Olbia Theatre is circulation, contamination, reciprocity, as well as variability and means of expression, which, in migrating, enrich themselves with innovation as well as tradition, circulating as it evolves.

As the genesis of the theatre and the forms that arose from it demonstrate, the Mediterranean character is no other than a place of meaning - hence of the mind - rather than an immanent dimension, demonstrating that in architecture, it is less about adapting to a set of stylistic features with varying interpretations, and is instead a quality of the soul and of the spirit.

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