

From the hypogeum culture to cities of the future: Ars Excavandi¹

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The Project

The Ars Excavandi international exhibition, created by ETT S.p.A. (International Creative and Digital Industry) for the Matera 2019 Foundation and curated by architect Pietro Laureano (a UNESCO consultant), opened the celebrations in Matera as it became European Capital of Culture 2019. The exhibition highlights the importance of underground art culture and investigates art and excavation practices that brought about architecture, civilisation and rocky settings over the centuries. The visit, linking the National Archaeological Museum "Domenico Ridola" and the hypogea of Palazzo Lanfranchi in Matera, takes visitors on a journey ranging from the Palaeolithic to the present, stimulating them to consider how topical the cave world is when designing future models of human progress. The route is in chronological order, with references at the bottom of the timeline, and continuous timeless analogies are present on the walls with art, craft, traditions, folklore, music and rituals. The exhibition is a space-time tunnel going from Matera to the cities of Petra and Jericho, from the first excavations to a model for future bio-architecture. Visitors, through the use of sounds and scents, projections, backlit walls, videos, and a gaming station, will be catapulted on a journey taking in the past and the present, making all past civilisations seem modern.

The museum route

The exhibition was arranged as a space-time tunnel within the National Archaeological Museum "Domenico Ridola" in Matera. The steel tunnel, together with the lightbox fabric built specifically for the exhibition, was designed as a break from traditional museum spaces. As a result, visitors go through the tunnel into a dimension, not of this time and space, and are lead along a path of sound, smell and visual suggestion that helps them to discover the art of excavation from which architecture, civilization and rocky settings derived over many centuries.

The exhibition is organised in five stages, each of which is characterised by an element (air, fire, eros, water and earth), by a colour (yellow, red, ultraviolet, blue and green) and by a series of sounds and fragrances that guide the visitor through the multimedia journey; all revealed to their eyes and ears, one stage at a time:

STAGE 1 - In the brain cavern

The first stage of the exhibition focuses on the importance of caves, places without dimension that lead to a reflection on the illusion of the concept of time. Entering the room, visitors pass a light source projecting their shadows onto the wall opposite. The projection of visitors' shadows sets off a series of back-projected images that float – as if suspended – and are connected to the myth of Plato's cave. The projection changes, depending on the number of people in the room, demonstrating that the way things are seen and interpreted changes according to our perception.

STAGE 2 - Alliance and symbiosis

The second stage deals with the theme of human evolution, not to be understood as a linear progression but rather as one consisting of a series of divergences and contaminations. In this evolutionary line, the invention of fire represented a fundamental step for humanity, as can be seen also from the monitor in the room that shows a video on the discovery of fire. There is also a projection in the room during which, from the darkness, Prometheus the hero appears in shadow, hiding a hollow steel rod in his hands, with fire to give to men. In another projection, an image is shown that reproduces a rupestrian Lascaux painting, dating back to 15,500 BC, testifying that wall art was already developed in the Palaeolithic era (Fig. 1).

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Fig. 1 A lightbox and the projection of stage 2 Lascaux paintings

STAGE 3 - Creative sound

The third stage focuses on the relevance of primordial sound as a metaphor for the meaning of time and of becoming. A series of monitors are located in the room where visitors, by touching a panel placed next to each one, can play musical instruments, such as a lyre, a flute or a drum, which then emit primordial sounds. The sounds change according to how visitors touch them (Fig.2).



Fig. 2 Monitors reproducing sounds in stage 3

There is also a projection in the room that shows a black screen, followed by the Big Bang and the expansion of the Universe, with its lights and galaxies.

STAGE 4 - Water labyrinth

The fourth stage deals with the theme of water as a vital principle. It is a creative and destructive force, fundamental when creating the first settlements. There are two projections in the room, the first of which is a map showing the diffusion of Neolithic culture and focusing on the principal settlement sites such as Jericho, Murgia Timone, Stonehenge, Dilmun, Troy and Knossos. The second projection reproduces a waterfall. The theme is also enriched by an in-depth video on the symbiosis between the cities of Petra and Matera.

STAGE 5 - Matera Matrix

The final stage of the journey deals with the importance of the underground world, linked to the symbolism of vegetation and rebirth. In the room, a projection shows a series of underground images, which then pans out to a panoramic view of Matera and continues outwards until Mars comes into view.

The multimedia exhibit also includes a gaming station, stimulating visitor curiosity through a series of questions, the answers to which may be found during the visit. There is also a VR station located in the hypogea in Palazzo Lanfranchi in Matera, giving visitors a virtual visit experience in underground spaces. Using viewers, 360-degree video can be watched, making those areas enjoyable to all.

We accepted the challenge of creating an unsettling place, with projections, lightboxes, monitors, sounds and smells, in which visitors are no longer passive users, but prosumers; interacting with technology and actively participating directly in the multimedia exhibition. They generate sounds and shadows, also letting themselves be guided by smells and by the visual suggestions evoked by the images shown.

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