

Time to Travel

EMPAFE team

Paola Lattuca

Department of Architecture, University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy

Emanuela Papia

Department of Architecture, University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy

Felicia Manasseri

Department of Architecture, University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy

CAMPUS_Asia::SUAE_Asia 2021 - Program_Summer School online-Workshop

Sommerfrische in the Alps region of Lower Austria



Paola Lattuca

Emanuela Papia

Felicia Manasseri

INRODUCTION

The summer workshop “CAMPUS_Asia::SUAE_Asia, 2021 Summer School Workshop, Pusan National University, Korea” brought to the attention of 12 teams and 5 Universities the challenge of contemporary architectural design of a visitor center in the mountains of Lower Austria that respects the site of great naturalistic importance. The project area is in fact located in the Alpine region of Lower Austria, in particular on the Semmering mountain, where a space for rest and recreation for visitors and a meeting point for the local community will have to be designed, guaranteeing a close link between nature and the surrounding landscape. In the design of the buildings, no height or surface limit was placed and maximum freedom was left in the organization of the functional program. The only constraint is the creation of sustainable architecture, which respects nature and the landscape in which it takes place, a vernacular architecture that knows how to reconcile with the surrounding environment with a minimum carbon impact on the territory. The keywords to keep in mind should be accessibility, inclusion, resilient design, urban design and development.

THE VISITOR CENTER

A visitor center can perform several functions, it can provide information to visitors at a specific location for example, in a park or a national forest they can be provided information such as hiking and camping maps, staff contacts, toilets, natural or cultural history of the place, etc. It is often used a movie or other multimedia display. If the site has permission requirements for guided tours, the visitor center is often where these come from coordinates; it can play the role of a tourist information center, it providing to visitors to a place information about area attractions, accommodations, maps and others elements relevant to tourism. Often, these centers are managed at the airport or other place of entry, by the local government or the chamber of trade. A visitor center of this kind can be termed more properly as an information center; it can be configured as a corporate visitor center, offering visitors one easily accessible window on the company.

Originally, the visitor centers provided fairly basic information on the venue, company or event they were celebrating, acting primarily as an access to a place. The role of the visitor center has evolved rapidly over the past few 10 years to become a real experience and tell the story of the place of the brand it represents. Many have become full destinations and experiences title. Basically it is a place of passage for tourists, a hub of tourism organization, but at the same time it could become a point of also a reference for those who live in that area, as a social and meeting place for families and young people. In this sense, a visitor center can represent a springboard for the development of the surrounding area, but at the same time not go to disfigure the characteristics of the place and ensure respect for integrity of the territory. It can be evidence of the importance of culture as a tool for the enhancement of a place, whose architecture is entrusted with the task of implement a process of sustainable enhancement through the combination of nature, culture and tourism. Essentially it becomes a fundamental means of reviving the territory. For this to happen it is important to make these architectures livable throughout the year and not just at the time of the visit or during the summer. Furthermore, useful functions must be included, not only for the passing tourist, but a the whole community, in order to serve more services to the local population, such as educational workshops, conference rooms and commercial spaces, which contribute to make these places livable, avoiding their deterioration.

THE HISTORY OF THE PLACE AND THE NATURAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

In the last decades the main center of interest for architecture has been the city with a consequent abandonment of rural areas, difficult to reach due to the lack of infrastructure. There is a turning point around the middle of the nineteenth century as, following the rapid economic and social development, we are witnessing throughout Europe and in particular in Austria, the construction of roads, railways and a growing industrialization that led to the development of an intense construction activity. Great names in the history of architecture such as Otto Wagner, Josef Hoffmann, Joseph Maria Olbrich, Adolf Loos, Josef Frank have left their mark mainly in rural areas. Fundamental to counter the phenomenon of depopulation in the Austrian countryside was the construction of a railway line that crosses the Semmering mountain, making the Alpine area one of the most popular meeting points for high society, nobility and intellectuals in Europe, and thus becoming the meeting point of a new generation of nature lovers, a place of recreation where high society retired in search of a summer "cool". Hence the name Sommerfrische, a German term that refers to the seasonal transfer of nobles from the city to the countryside.

In recent years it has become one of the main destinations for summer holidays, and thanks to digitalization, many families have been able to move to the countryside for several months. Due to the covid-19 pandemic, we have understood the importance of finding a balance between contemporary life, culture, landscape and nature, and digitalization and the presence of infrastructure have shown us how today it is possible to work almost anywhere. To encourage tourism in the Semmering mountains, to alleviate costs and to overcome steep sections faster, it was decided to build a new tunnel for long-distance trains while the old line, which has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1998, it will remain open for tourists only. There is therefore a growing interest in the revaluation of rural areas and small towns, for which this project area immersed in the Austrian Alps was chosen to encourage greater cooperation between nature, architecture and man.

«Heritage is a broad concept and includes the natural as well as the cultural environment. It encompass landscape, historic places, sites and built environments, as well as biodiversity, collections, past and continuing cultural practices, knowledge and living experiences. It records and expresses the long processes of historic development, forming the essence of diverse national, regional, indigenous and local identities and is an integral part of modern life. It is a dynamic reference point and positive instrument for growth and change. The particular heritage and collective memory of each locality or community is irreplaceable and an important foundation for development, both now and into the future»¹.

¹ Definition from "International Cultural Tourism Charter, Managing Tourism at Places of Heritage Significance" adopted by ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) at the International General Assembly n.12, in Mexico 1999.

THE SITE

The challenge proposed an idea for a Visitor Center on the Mountain of Semmering, a town in the Alps of Lower Austria. Semmering is located in the district of Neunkirchen, very close to Vienna. In 1854 in Semmering was built one of the first railway in the Alpine mountains, and in 1998 the Semmering Mountain Railway was declared UNESCO world heritage site. The Grand Hotel Panhans also represents a symbol of the locality, as one of the first architectural structures built in the area, it is an example of the traditional architecture of mountain hotels, conceived as large residential complexes, a meeting point, a place for *loisir* and sport.

Due to the spectacular and natural landscape of the “magic mountain” we propose a sustainable and removable architecture, in order to have minimal impact on the territory and respecting the environment and surrounding landscape.

«Genius loci is “the spirit of the place”. The architect’s task is to create meaningful places to help man to live.»

Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci. Landscape, Environment, Architecture*, 1979.



Fig.1. Map of Semmering location EM-PAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

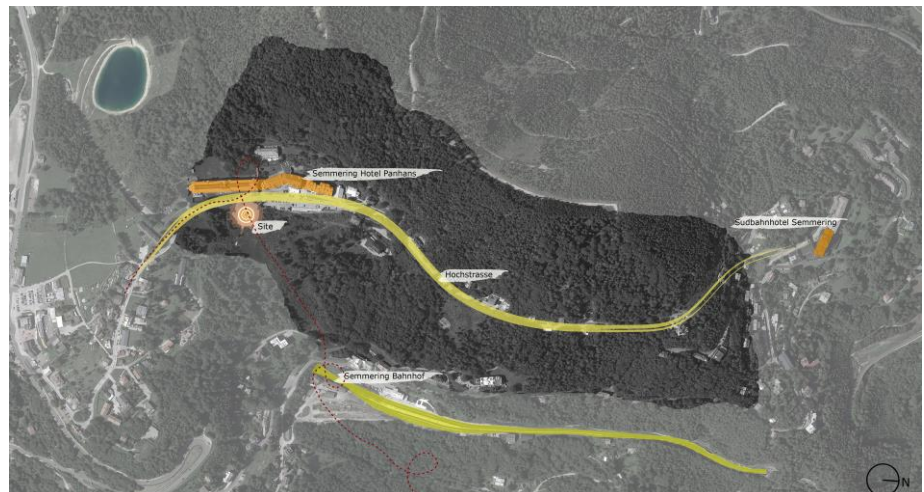


Fig.2. Site plan and interest points (Google maps)

The project site it's easily and directly accessible from the main street Hochstrasse and visually connected to the Grand Hotel Panhans and the old Semmering railway (UNESCO World Heritage site). The relationship with the Hotel Panhans and the skyline of the mountains on the horizon is always constant. The design is thought as a large cover to make shadow, but its main function is to look at the *panorama*, following the *geometric modus* used by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in the representation of the “*Panorama of Palermo*”². It is a building to be looked, but also to look out.

² K. F. Schinkel, *Panorama of Palermo*, 1806.

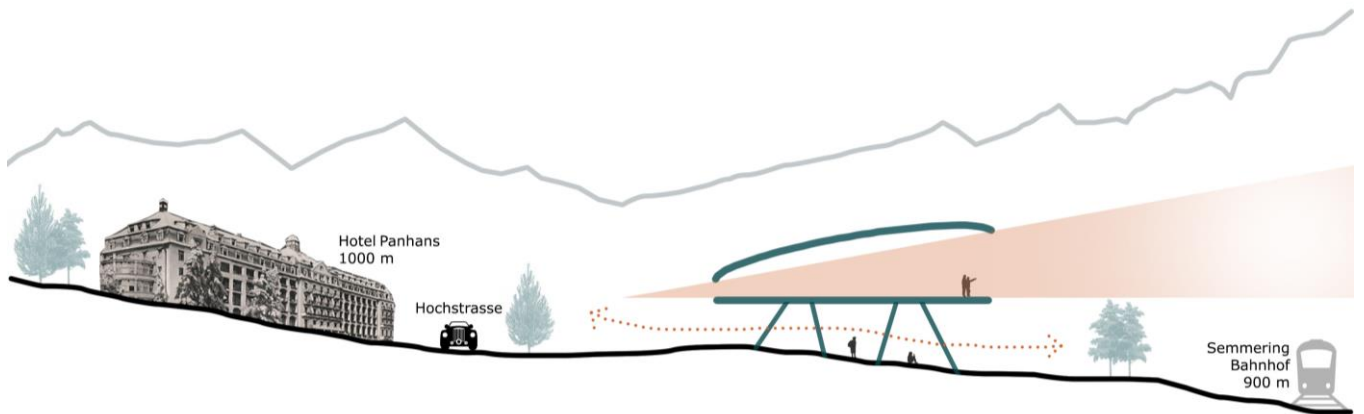


Fig.3. Conceptual section, EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

THE STORYTELLING

The magical mountain of Semmering, has always been a destination for artists and intellectuals, so we suppose a space-time spacecraft from the future, to lands in Semmering.

Starting from a research on the old posters of the Semmering mountain, we have inserted the modern and futuristic element of the spaceship to open up new imaginaries that allow us to better understand the philosophy of our project.

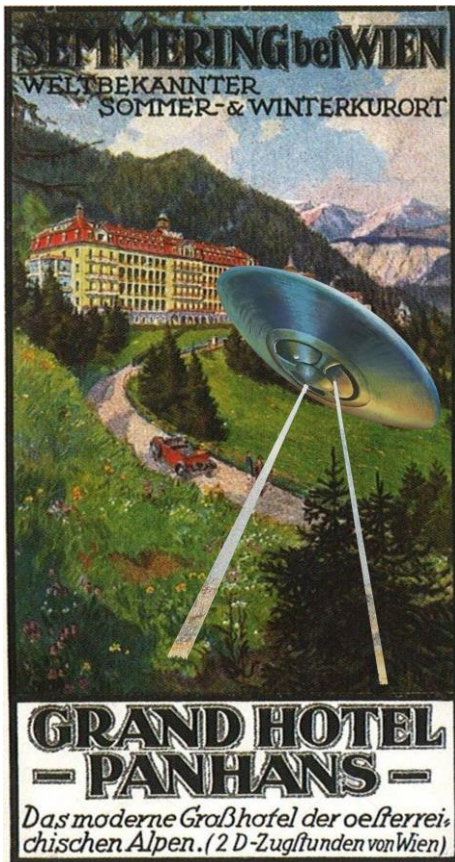


Fig.4-5. Semmering old poster (summer and winter), EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

The spaceship is the home of a painter who, nostalgic for the past, returns to Semmering to find inspiration for his works in the surrounding nature. He paints the landscape around, which becomes the ideal giant masterpiece he created.

The spacecraft becomes a "house of art" for all travelers, where forms are a painting metaphor; whether it is an easel of a painter or a limb of an animal, the traveler plants his home in the unspoiled nature.

The spacecraft takes root on the ground but overlooks the view like a bird in flight that could hover at any moment. The spacecraft is not only made to be looked at but also to look out: flooded by light, it relates directly to the blue sky that frames it.

The painter finds in the mountain everything that modern society has denied him, regains inner balance and mind serenity. His mission is to revive these same sensations to all time travelers.

So it's ***Time to travel***, and we hope that this can happen again as soon as possible in a post-pandemic period, with the same nostalgia as the painter.



Fig.6. Time to Travel (concept design), EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

The trip and the nostalgia are the main themes of the project, and other micro-themes will be managed in the design. That are the ecology, the panorama, the light, the landscape, the ground and the cover.

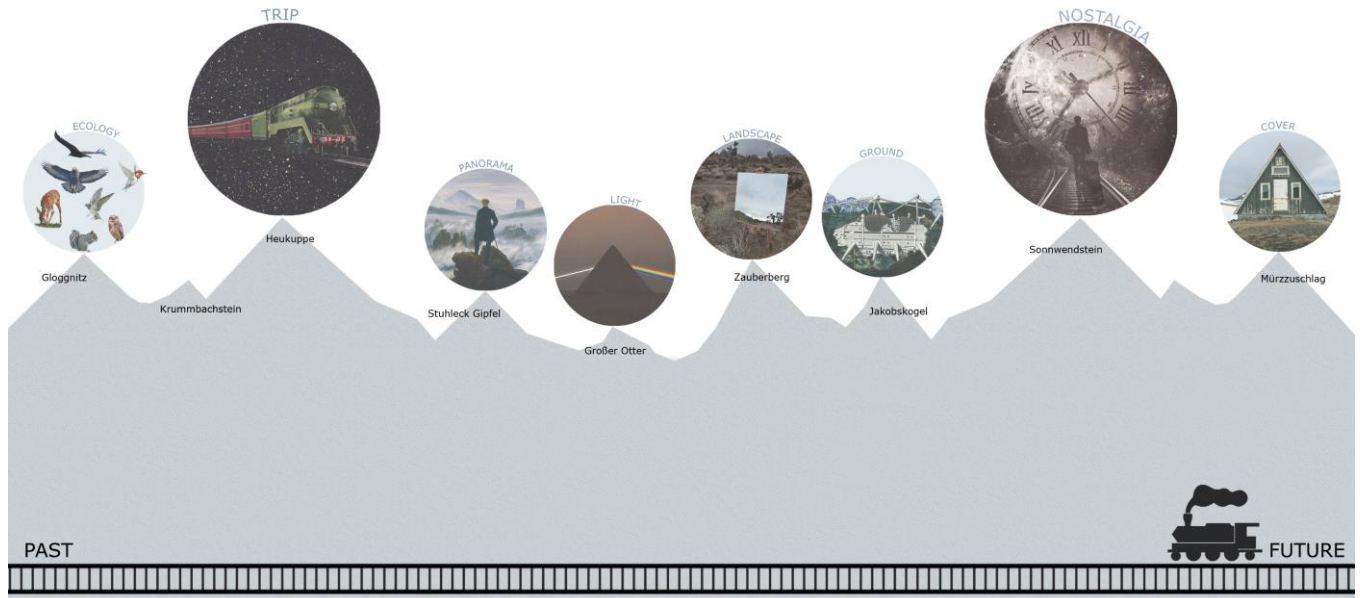


Fig.7. Time to Travel (themes of project), EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

Ecology: deals with the relationship with the flora and fauna of Semmering, a central theme within a naturalistic site of great importance.

Panorama: represented by the painting by Caspar David Friedrich "The wanderer on the sea of fog", 1818, in which a man from behind is depicted who, after so much effort, overlooks a boundless and beautiful panorama, which, seen from above, fills the heart of pure and timeless happiness.

Light: a refined theme in the use of glass walls that reflect and let the sun's rays penetrate, and in the roof that becomes transparent at night to look at the sky.

Landscape: represented by a mirror that reflects the surrounding nature, because it is a lookout building that can be seen but above all sees what is around it.

Ground: the relationship with the soil is represented through Archigram's project for the "Plug-in city", 1964, with the image of a city with feet and extendable arms that connect it with the land and the sea. Similarly, our building rests on the ground on feet that keep the structure suspended.

Coverage: it is an important theme for mountain buildings, it will be inclined to resume the vernacular architecture and to facilitate the flow of rain and snow.

THE PROJECT

The concept of the building starts from the desire to tell the journey through time of the painter who, having arrived in the mountains of Lower Austria, lands with a spaceship which, breaking down into two flying saucers, rests horizontally on the site. The idea is to have an alien building, but respectful of the place and consistent with the surrounding landscape.

Our proposal for a visitor center moves away from the classic idea of mountain architecture and dialogues with the surrounding environment: the building is an alien that stands out on the mountains of Semmering with respect and lightness. The small building, immediately visible from the main road of Hochstrasse, declines the relationship with the Hotel Panhans through the theme of the pedestrian path in the mountain slope.



Fig.8. Sensitive map of the site, EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)



Fig.9. Perspective view (Google maps) with project, EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

The wooden walkway, suspended on light steel feet, through a rest area, connects to the Hochstrasse road and winds through the mountainous territory leading the visitor to the building. Upon reaching the building, the visitor, immersed in the natural landscape, has a direct view of the valley and the Semmering station. The red color of the walkway refers to the architecture of the master Oscar Niemeyer³.



Fig.10. Reference: Museum of Contemporary Art, Oscar Niemeyer, Tokyo, 1997.

The building is made up of a circular plan generated by the intersection of three concentric and offset circles with diameters of 24 m, 18 m and 14 m. Starting from these intersections three spaces are generated: the external panoramic terrace (A), a ring for services (B) and a central square (C). The plant is not interrupted by central pillars, but the structural system consists of a steel mesh placed along the perimeter. The building is integrated into the Semmering skyline without affecting the naturalness of the site, resting on the ground it rests on the slope, never directly meeting the ground, it is immersed in the trees, while remaining visible and easily accessible by visitors. The building consists of a circular central square for welcoming visitors, while on the side there is a cafeteria, an info point and related services.

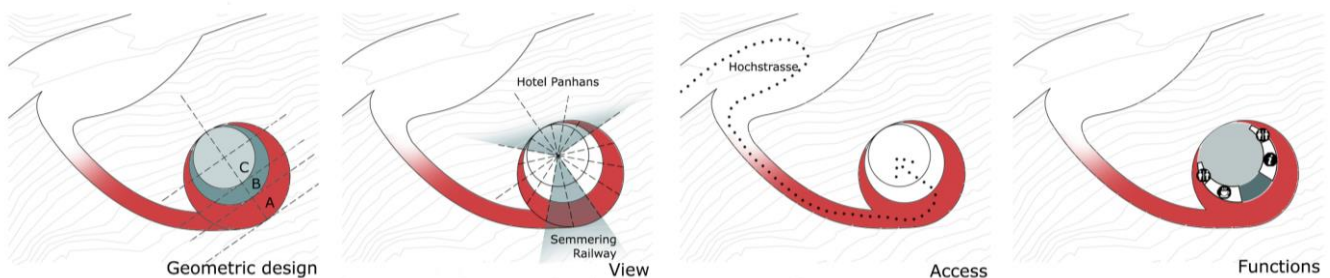


Fig.11-12-13-14. Scheme of project, EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

³ Museum of Contemporary Art, Oscar Niemeyer, Tokyo, 1997.

The structure rests on the suspended ground, with stainless steel legs and a central glass body that allows perfect interpenetration with the outside and a direct view of the hotel. It is a temporary and demountable pavilion as it is made of sustainable materials such as steel, glass and wood; it is also an autonomous building because it absorbs external energy through the pneumatic roof equipped with photovoltaic cells. The steel structure is topped with an air-supported hollow roof covered with a translucent rubber fabric that provides filtered natural light by day and glows at night. The coverage refers to the United States pavilion built for the Osaka Expo⁴. The building has a minimal environmental impact on the environment and is ready to accommodate the numerous visitors who, thanks to the sports activities practiced in the surroundings, flock annually to the area: trekking, cycling and skiing, as well as lovers of nature walks who here they find a great variety of flora and fauna. The suspended platform allows visitors to enjoy the shadow generated by the building and be able to find refreshment.

The building can be divided into three parts:

- the ground connection, which allows you to keep the building suspended, it without foundations is light and can be dismantled, temporary in construction but permanent in use;
- a central volume, which is accessed via a panoramic walkway that leads the visitor to the glass volume with a maximum height of 6m and a minimum height of 4.5m;
- the sloping cover like mountain architecture, ecological, sustainable and translucent.

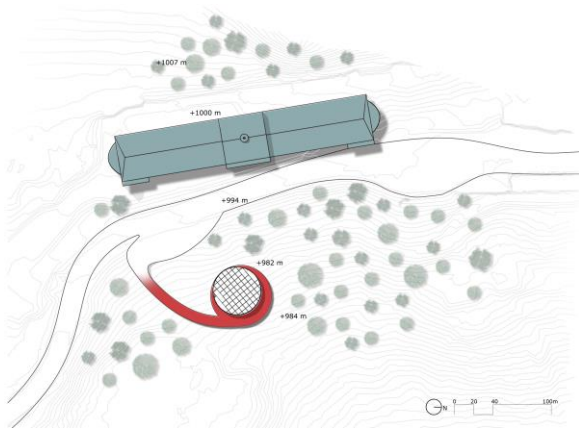


Fig.15. Site plan, EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

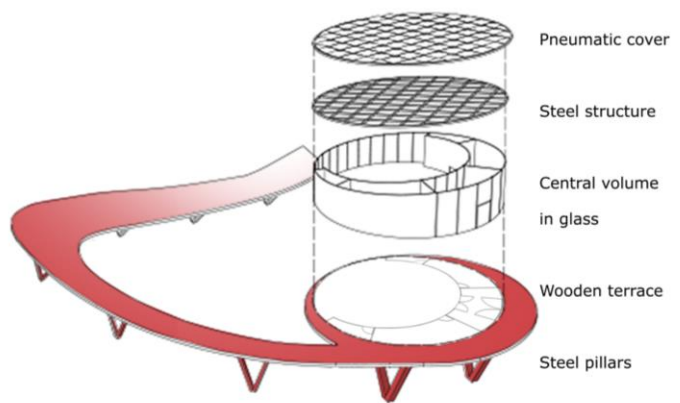


Fig.16. Exploded axonometry of structure, EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

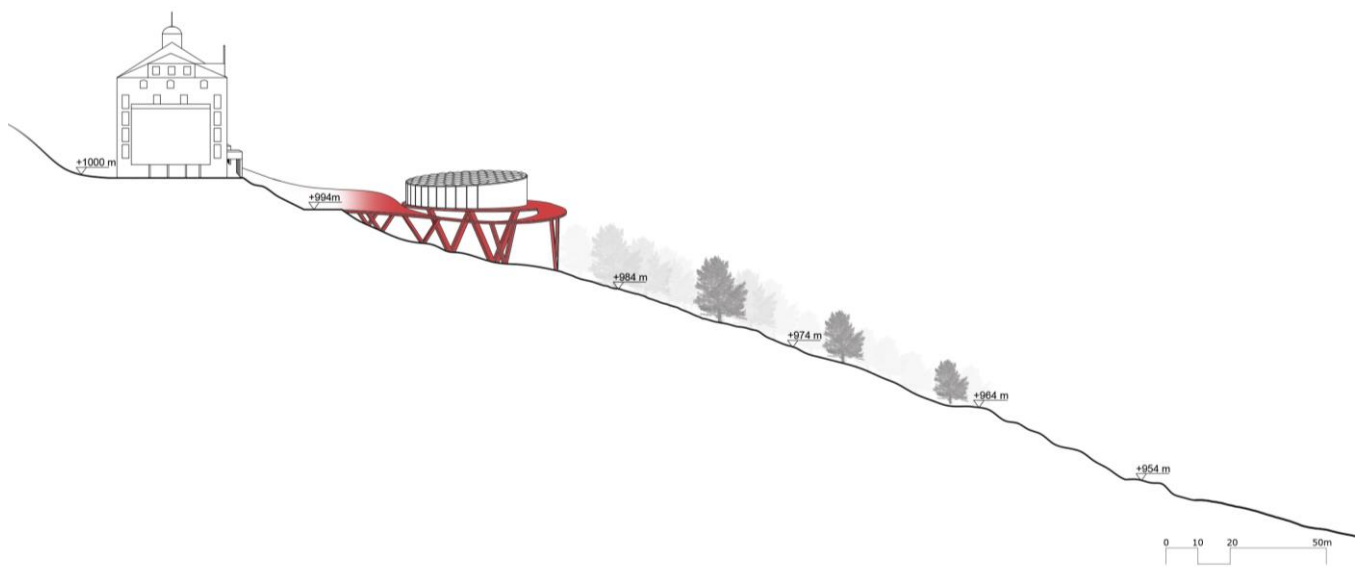


Fig.17. Section of the site, EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

⁴ UnitedStatesPavilion-ExpoOsaka70, DavisBrodyBondandCharmayeff& Geismar,Osaka,1970.

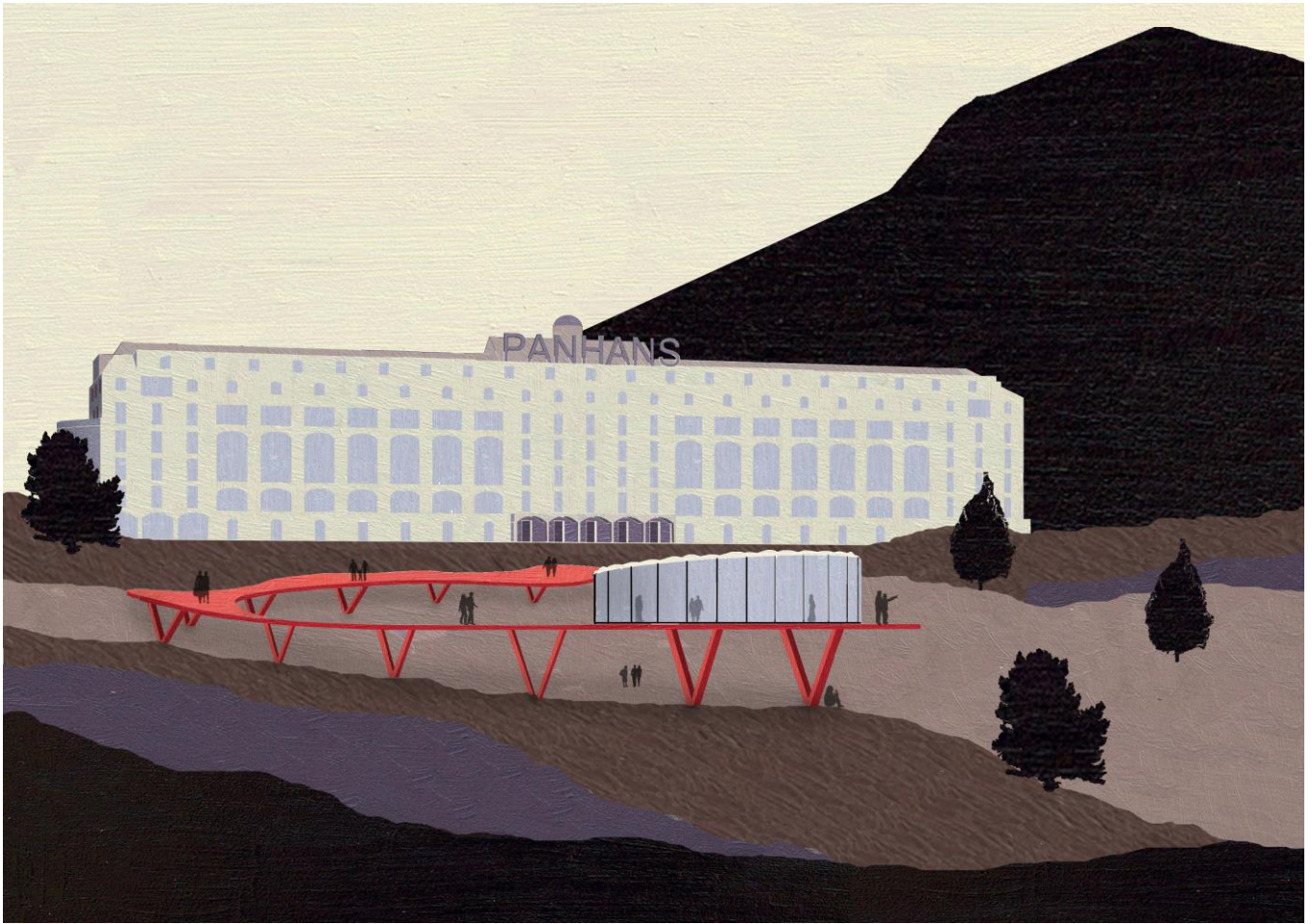


Fig.18. Poster, EMPAFE team (DARCH-UNIPA)

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