

THE STADIUM OF OLYMPIA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIALOGICAL ARCHITECTURE

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After the boom in sporting events and the renaissance of the Olympic Games during the 19th century, stadium architecture changed rapidly during the 20th century. The changes had mainly to do with construction, techniques and materials, but broadened to affect everything connected with performance in sports and standards of play, including the management of movement by spectators and adaptation to contemporary means of communication. As the stadium changed, so too did its relationship with the cities nearby which stadiums are located. « At present, international stadium architecture is gaining markedly in significance. Around the world, internationally renowned architects are being commissioned to design stadia that have the potential to become immutable symbols of their respective cities ... ». (Ahlfeldt and Maennig, 2010). Very often these symbols are reduced to an iconic “technical object” with limited “aesthetic distinction”. They remain isolated from the history, from the territory and from its own significance. (Muntañola-Thornberg, 2002)

Our communication will address the concept of the Olympian stadium in relation to its location and to the built environment, presenting a possible reinterpretation of this stadium “as part of a city at large”. Our approach is based on an analysis of the relationship between the stadium and the site of Olympia during the Hellenistic Period as paradigmatic cultural case.

The site of Olympia includes the entirety of the Altis (sanctuary) and the Stadium that had been part of the Altis. Later, owing to the secularization of the Games and the great interest people had in the Games as a spectacle, it was relocated outside the Altis. The stadium at Olympia is an important reference point for many writings about sports and the historical development of sports facilities. The establishment of the stadium of Olympia outside the sacred rectangle of the Altis is often interpreted as a departure that opened up the stadium to a course of development that would be all its own, in a space that was all its own.

The ultimate stadium of Olympia is part of the late Classical period and the Hellenistic Age (rebuilt during the 1st century AD), when Olympia was the spiritual capital of the empire of Alexander the Great. The Hellenistic period is of particular interest because it was marked by cultural diversity, inspiring the dialogical philosophy of Bajtin and the architectural dialogical concept.

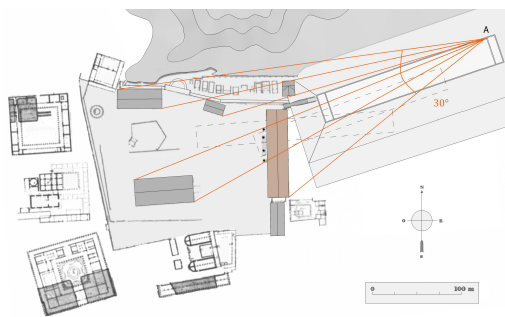


Figure 1

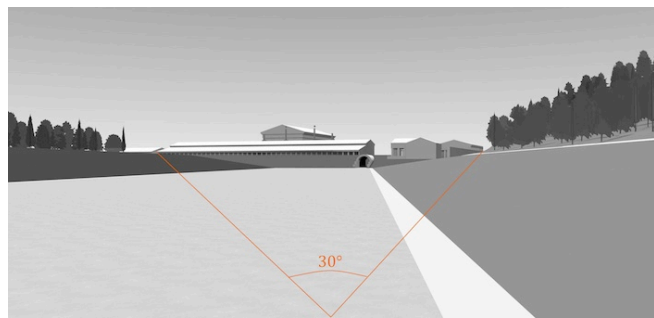


Figure 2

The late Classical stadium and the Hellenistic stadium are well known thanks to historical and archaeological writings. Our study is based on this data insofar as the analysis of the space of the stadium is concerned. Analyzed plans are Luckenbach (Romano, 1993) and Curtius & Adler (Doxiadis 1972).

The space of the stadium was the object of visual studies from the point of view of the sporting event. We present the results of a visual study and dialogical interpretation of elements. The visual study is in accordance with principles of composition and perspective that had been established by Doxiadis (1972, p.72). In his description of the Altis of Olympia, Doxiadis explains how the position, orientation, and distance of the buildings from important points, as for example the entrances, “are determined on the basis of the 30° angle”

Taking account of the basic principles identified by Doxiadis and the description of the sanctuary site (Doxiadis, 1972 p. 84) and that visual studies had been applied in the stadium (Romano 1993) we can make an interpretation of the mechanism of composition of the stadium, its spatial characteristics, the role of functional elements, the athlete's routes and the perceptions, the place of architectural elements and buildings, as references of dialogical architecture, emphasized during the Hellenistic period. This space is determined by the willingness to reflect the values of one's epoch and to be a place for meeting people and for remembering. (Kiuri, 2009).

This makes us choose the (starting) line in the eastern part of the stadium as a significant location. At this point the athletes have before them the finish line as a distant point in perspective, either at the start, or before the final race. (fig 1) and (fig 2).

In its historical development the stadium of Olympia became independent relative to the sanctuary for functional reasons and because of its progressive secularization, but it remained linked to the site of the sanctuary through a dialogical language of architecture: composition, perspectives, built and natural elements, routes and perceptions. In paying homage to its religious origins, it moved forward in time, responding to increasing technical demands of sport and the popularity of the Games. The space of the stadium dialogues not only with its natural, but also with the built environment, at the same time highlighting specific functional (sport) points within the stadium.

In our study we adopt the hypothesis of Romano (1993) that mathematical and visual studies were possible as early as the Archaic period. It is also known that Olympian stadium space was the object of visual studies from the point of view of the sporting event and we suppose that visual perceptions were also possible. The analyses of Doxiadis show that the Altis was designed in accordance with principles of composition and perspective that had been established through a visual study, that we also apply to the stadium space.

This suggests that the message left by the antiquity concerning Olympian stadium consists in the permeability between stadium space and the built environment by the visual composition and dialogical architecture.

The emplacement outside of the Altis, the distance and orientation of the track of the 3D Olympian stadium, was probably a result of a visual composition, related to sport activity. Dialogical elements and buildings conceived later are coherent with this idea to create dialogical spaces. The stadium at Olympia is probably one of those cases where the interaction between immobile space and bodies in movement are best taken into consideration.

The stadium remains in communication with the build environment, present in the stadium through the scenographic effect of its monumental silhouette. The stadium at Olympia left us a model of the enclosure of a sporting event, a lesson about the integration of a stadium in the manner of an architecture of the void.

The space conceived for the Olympic event is symbolically configured space that gives the identity of the whole stadium. It is connected with the landscape and with the built environment, tangibly expressing the synthesis between culture and nature.