The “archaeological park” being created on the site of the ancient Roman villas of Stabiae (modern Castellammare di Stabia) is in the process of becoming one of the largest archaeological projects in Europe.¹ From its first proposal has existed at the interface of archaeology, architecture, urbanism, politics and commerce. All must work together to make the undertaking succeed, and they must work together with the other Roman archaeological sites of the area to create an interconnected panorama of several vividly preserved aspects of Roman culture in the first centuries B.C. and A.D.

The was excavated first from 1749 to 1782, reburied and forgotten (though plans were published in 1881), then rediscovered and partly re-excavated from 1950.² The RAS Foundation was launched in 1998 under the University of Maryland and the American Academy of Rome, and produced the Master Plan for the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei (now Pompei and Naples, SANP) in 2001, and then from 2002 became a new type Italian non-profit foundation with international board representation from the Soprintendenza, the University of Maryland School of Architecture, and a group of local supporters called the

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¹ The site of Stabiae above modern Castellammare di Stabia: above view looking north; below, plan, yellow: structures exposed in the eighteenth century and still reburied; red: structures re-excavated post 1950.
Committee of Stabia Reborn. Major excavations and construction have been under way since 2006/07. The Foundation Foundation is a new type of cultural non-profit ("onlus"), the first one created under law D.lgs 368.98 which allows the Foundation to receive and spend both state and private funds from Italy and abroad, and it was created to assist the Superintendancy in the long term coordination of work and eventual management of certain activities on the park. It was created as a permanent foundation, not an excavation or conservation or construction project alone.

One of the first issues that had to be dealt with in proposing a major archaeological excavation and park at a site like Stabiae was that the international archaeological community has generally agreed to a ban on any new excavations in the Vesuvian area. In famous sites as Pompeii and Herculaneum there is already more material exposed to the elements than can be preserved. It is asserted that as much as 80% of the frescoes which were visible in Pompeii in the 1930’s simply no longer exist: bleached, spalled off the walls, vandalized. Opening new excavations adds a permanent maintenance cost to the Republic of Italy. Is doing so really justified at a large fragile site like Stabia? Does it really add something to the overall scientific knowledge and cultural patrimony? Opening up more of Herculaneum or Pompeii would simply repeat the discoveries already made. Does Stabiae offer significantly different discoveries? Can it be self-sustaining, either directly, or indirectly by supporting the local economy?

The site of ancient Roman Stabiae is the largest concentration of well-preserved enormous villae marittimae in the entire Mediterranean world. It lies only 4 km. from Pompeii, 17 km. from the peak of Vesuvius, and was buried in the same eruption that entombed the two famous cities on the 24th of August, A.D. 79. Pliny the Elder spent the night of the eruption at one of the villas of Stabiae (we don't now which one) and died on the beach the next morning in the last pyroclastic surge.

It is amazing that this site has not attracted more attention from the world of archaeology and the world of cultural tourism, and it is rather difficult to say why. Perhaps it is simply too close to the famous town sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum, too much in their shadow. It is every bit as well preserved, thanks to the Vesuvian eruption: frescoed walls are preserved to 3-4 m., in some cases even with upper floors preserved.

One of the principal justifications for opening new excavations here is that the site is in fact very different from the “entombed” town sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum. It is in fact not a town site at all (with the exception of the "pagus," or village, of Stabiae at one end): it is nothing but a concentration of at least six enormous panoramic villas, up to 22,000 sq.m. each, built one next to another along the edge of a high sea cliff for a distance of c. 1.8 km.
These were almost certainly not the villas of the provincial Campanian elite or the Roman colonists moved in by Sulla in 80 B.C.; this was very probably a “suburb” of the senatorial and equestrian elite from Rome itself.7

This was not a “playground of the rich and famous” in the modern sense of indulgence in and display of extreme wealth. These villas were seats of power, “power-houses,” in Andrew Wallace-Hadrill’s terms,8 just as much as were the senatorial domus near the Forum in Rome. In the summer months of the first century B.C. the capital virtually moved from Rome to the great senatorial villas of the Bay of Naples. Some of the most important events of the later Republic and early Empire occurred in the great villas around the Bay. In A.D. 27 the capital actually did move there when Tiberus withdrew to Capri for the rest of his reign.

The villae marittimae of the Bay of Naples are therefore places of pivotal importance in the political history of Rome, not to mention the history of Roman art and architecture. The site of Stabia was not the most important center of senatorial “otium” in the Bay of Naples—the main villas of Caesar, Sulla and Cicero were up north at Cuma and Baia—but it is the only place where they are well preserved, thanks to the Vesuvian eruption.

It is also the only place where archaeology has any hope of recovering the full relationship of the panoramic villas to their entire environment. The site is largely unencumbered with modern buildings, and so is unlike Herculaneum or Oplontis, which are over-built with modern constructions which restrict the possibility of widened excavations. At Stabiae, it is possible to excavate entire villas in their totality.

Most unusual, from the top of the cliff (“costone”) overlooking modern Castellammare di Stabia, the Stabia villas site preserves the panoramic view of the sea to the north directly from the the villas. The other large well preserved maritime villas—Oplontis and the Papyri—are in deep, disorienting excavation pits, surrounded by modern sprawl, and give no sense of the original relationship to the sea.9 Also, to the rear (south) of the Stabiae villas the terrain is still preserved as open agriculture land, thanks to the creation of the protected archaeological zone in 1957, and the villas still have clear views of the nearby mountains of the Sorrento-Amalfi peninsula.

The great maritime villas of the Bay of Naples of the first centuries B.C. and A.D. created the most powerful relationship between architecture and environment that, arguably, the world had ever up till that time seen. As a building type, they were probably “invented” very quickly after 89 B.C., in the environment of the intense political competition of what was to become the last generation of the Roman Republic. The crucial new element was the architectural exploitation of the spectacular pleasures of nature of the Bay of Naples. As Madame de Stäel said, “Nothing...gives a more voluptuous idea of life than this climate which intimately unites man to nature.”10 Statius’ and Pliny’s discussions of the villas at Sorrento and
Laurentum make it clear that the manipulation of sensations of nature was deeply felt in the generations when the villas were built.\textsuperscript{11}

Only at Stabiae can one stand in frescoed \textit{triclinia} and enjoy the breezes and the views of the sparkling sea and verdant mountains (admittedly somewhat diminished by the sprawl of modern Castellammare...but on can still see the sea!) just as one could in the first century A.D. Only at Stabiae can archaeology come close to recovering the total environment of these villas of the Roman elite.

Because of these features of the site, the idea of opening new excavations at Stabiae has not been highly controversial, despite the passionate opposition to new excavations in the Vesuvian area shared by most archaeologists. But exploiting this aspect of the site requires not just excavation, but a coherent approach to preserving and presenting the entire environment of the existing remains: in other words, a true “archaeological park.”

First of all, what is a workable definition of an “archaeological park” for a project such as this, as opposed to ruins with a fence around them?

The concept of an archaeological park may go back—in part—to the American National Parks (Yellowstone, 1872), and perhaps surprisingly, the American Civil War Battlefield parks,\textsuperscript{12} and then to the large areas of Rome laid out along the Via Appia after 1870.\textsuperscript{13} The idea seems to be to preserve not just an ensemble, but to create something of an all-enveloping coherent environment, archaeological or natural, something of an immersion into another period. The American War Department, ironically enough, had a highly practical “archaeological” reason for preserving some of the great battlefields of the Civil War: the training of officers in battle tactics. When the overall terrain of a battlefield, for which there are precise accounts, is preserved, with its areas of open field and closed forest preserved as they were—the hills which mask views or create overlooks, and the lines of roads preserved—one can much better appreciate the technical details of large scale human organization that the battle involved. One can much better appreciate the totality of the interplay of environment and the acts of history.

For the purpose of the RAS-Stabiae Master Plan, an archaeological park was defined as:

- a site with a coherent character and one which represents a significant phenomenon of history;
- a site with fairly well preserved remains, remains which are, or can be made, “legible” to attentive visitors;
- a site largely which is unencumbered or dominated by modern buildings or other intrusions from outside the period.

To the archaeologist the site of Stabiae has a long history, but the main period of the remains is very limited and focused: the period of the great villas from 89 B.C.
(when Sulla destroyed the town of Stabiae) to the eruption of A.D. 79. It is obviously incredibly well preserved, and represents a very distinct cultural phenomenon from the town sites of Pompei and Herculaneum. And the fact that is a protected archaeological site means that entire villa complexes can be excavated in their entirety.

An archaeological “park” might be very remote, and be visited by few people, and match these criteria, but for a park which intended to manage a large visitor flow, it must also:

- be accessible, or be made accessible;
- have a concentration of activities on the site.

And finally, the site should (like the Civil War battlefields) orient the visitor to the original environment. This remains one of the most unique potentials of the site of Stabiae.

Orienting the visitor to the original site in the Bay of Naples area is distinctly a tall order, which is one of the most intimidating and disorienting environments for the new comer in the world: urban sprawl, illegal building, the huge silting which conceals the original coastline; the disorienting tangle of highways and streets. Even for most Italians it is a very daunting and disorienting place to visit. Very few tourists ever acquire much sense of the original relationship of the villas and the towns to the environment.

The Master Plan approaches these issues in the following ways:

First, the site of Stabiae is developed as part of a “cultural panorama,” both scientific and touristic, representing at least three critical poles of the culture of the later Republic and early Empire in Campania: the famous provincial town sites; the “villa rusticae” (productive farms); and the social apogee of the power elite found at the great villas such as those at Stabiae. This coordination of sites has the potential of
radically changing the nature of the touristic visit to the Pompei area. At present the average visit of the 2.5 million tourists who visit Pompei stay for little over two hours and leave the area immediately. By developing this coordinated range of sites one has the potential of extending the touristic visit, and encouraging the development of good accommodation in the area, and thereby making archaeology the key to the economic and cultural revival of a depressed region. Pompei will always draw the bulk of visitors, but sites such as Herculaneum and Stabiae, if provided with easy access, could accommodate 150,000-250,000 visitors a year, visitors who seek a more focused and contemplative visit.

Second, the Circumvesuviana commuter railroad passes directly underneath the site—under the Villa Arianna—and this invites the construction in some fashion or other to create an access—funicular, escalator, etc.—at that point. A funicular or other mechanical access structure directly on an archaeological site presents distinct technical challenges, but is key in order radically to improve access. Tourists could leave the hot, crowded streets of Pompei and in ten minutes be strolling along the cliff edge at Castellammare di Stabia, enjoying the breezes, distant views and a focused visit to the environment of the Roman elite.
Third, the site is actually quite visible, if you know where to look, but could be made to be more visible, even from Pompeii, by certain accoutrements of archaeological parks. Both Pompeii and Stabiae are promontories which originally framed the bay of the Sarno estuary, and in antiquity the crest of the Stabiae sea-cliff was a crown of shining marble stuccoed porches and tile roofs, highly visible from Pompeii and beyond. A ring of pine trees (or whatever species would be appropriate) around the site would make it the largest visible feature from Castellammare, as seen from a distance, and so too would lighting on the modern roofing structures along the crest of the hill at night.

Fourth, the excavation and the site presentation should attempt to recover the original spatial experiences of the villas and their relation to the Campanian landscape. Because of the deep overburden, the excavated villas are some 4 m. below the surrounding ground. It was proposed (and now has been executed) to enter the villas by means of a ramp which descends from modern ground level to an ancient street, and from there into the original entrances. Because of the deep overburden, the perimeter of the excavated areas offer the equivalence of a viewing platform for the entire excavated area when one walks around the outside of the secure excavation area.
7. Projected path along the site behind (S. of) the Great Peristyle garden of the Villa Arianna, tourists at modern ground level looking down into the excavations. RAS/Chris Grubbs

8. The two spatial experiences: left, the modern park-created overview and orientation to the overall landscape; right, the Roman spatial experience of focused views to the landscape.

Hence the presentation of the site offers two spatial experiences: one is “observational,” a slightly distant overview of the excavated villas with clear views along the brow of the hill, which gives an orienting view of the entire landscape and the villa buildings in the landscape; and the second is the descent into the emersion of the powerfully controlled cross-axial spatial environments and framed "Durchblicke" views of nature characteristic of Roman architecture.
Next, the overall organization of the site focuses on excavating only two of the large villas, the so-called Villa San Marco and the Villa Arianna, and creating there two “nodes,” and organizing the site in six parallel zones from the cliff edge to the S. perimeter. These two villas are those which are the most exposed today, and hence furthest along toward total excavation. These would form the two “nodes” of the site, each with landward entrances and parking. The Villa Arianna lies directly over the point where the commuter rail passes under the plateau and hence suggests the principal “node” for access from below, and it is visible from the autostrada which enters Castellammare. The RAS Foundation has been investigating since 2000 a joint commercial/Superintendancy development of some property at the foot of the plateau which could serve as the launching place of the funicular access to the site above. Ideally the node of the Villa Arianna offers the best location for the main concentration of activities on the site.

It is foreseen that the entire edge of the front of the plateau should be an open area of the archaeological, connecting the two fully excavated villas. This is “zone 2”, the zone in which almost all of the remains of the villas appear to lie, and since the architecture, natural topography and spatial sequences of the villas should dominate the archaeological park, the presentation of this area should be kept to a simple minimum. It should be possible to arrive at either villa or “node” and walk to the
other on a path that would proceed along the edge of the cliff edge where the villas are not excavated, providing strongly orienting distance views of the Bay of Naples, and then loop behind the open excavation areas of the Villas San Marco and Arianna, in effect providing a viewing platform of the villas at those points.

12. Agricultural on private land area within the park behind (S. of) the Villa San Marco

Service structures and “concentration of activities” on the site would be in the next zone back, zone 3, adjacent to but not interfering with the experience of the archaeological remains. The area behind this, zone 4, is still within the legal area of the archaeological park where building is not permitted, but most of this will be left in private hands, and in the type of cultivation which is typical for the Sorrento peninsula. The area just outside the park (zone 6) would be a logical zone for private development of lower cost tourist accommodation. Most of the area of the park would have public paths through it, from front to back, from this outer zone to the seafront, rendering the park “permeable” to the movement of the city rather than being a barrier of a large block of closed land in the middle of the city.

13. Visitors’ Center, Villa San Marco. RAS/G. Longobardi, architect, G. Valanzano, engineer

Other aspects of the Master Plan deal with details of architecture. The architecture must be distinguished from and not compete with or “imitate” the Roman constructions. To achieve this simple goal the service and visitor buildings are to be a variety of light frame structures with shed roofs, and of necessity for an
archaeological site, have shallow foundations (sleeper beams not descending more than .2-.5 m. below modern surface,) and have at least the “look” of impermanence.


16. Proposals for viewing platforms and scaffolding representing tentative reconstructions of collapsed terraces using scaffolding. (RAS/TK architects; RAS/Chris Grubbs)

One suggestion for the use of light structures is that the vanished terrace substructures of the Villa Arianna, which were originally huge, and a major part of the appearance of the villas, might be tentatively reconstructed with scaffold structures. The effect would not falsify the level of knowledge and uncertainly of the original terraces but would be rather more like “sketching on the landscape.”
17. Use of light structures to create theatrical areas on or near modern historic sites: Colosseum, c. 2000; Rome, Teatro Tasso; Ravello, Villa Rufolo.

The cliff edge open areas have already been quite successfully used for summer concerts since the 1990’s. The vocabulary of light structures could easily extend to the virtuosic temporary theaters built with scaffolding which are so common in Italy.

A site such as Stabiae is very rare in world archaeology. Most archaeological sites are much more modest in their public appeal; this is a site which easily arouses great public interest: spectacular frescoes: amazing state of preservation; the aura of power, wealth luxury. It is the rare kind of site that has the potential of attracting enough tourism to become financially self-sustaining once major excavation and conservation is over. It is a site well worth the cost of creating an “archaeological park” here, but to do so requires an unusual synergy of politics, archaeology, architecture and urbanism. It is working at Stabiae so far because the success of the project is to the mutual advantage of everybody.
18. The Villa San Marco, digital reconstruction of the Upper Peristyle. RAS/Studio Capasso
Notes:

1 Initial estimate in 2001 was approximately €140 million. This included several major excavations, an on site museum, administrative and storage buildings, landscaping, land purchase, and urban connections.


6 The Villa San Marco, as demonstrated by 2002 geophysical work by the RAS Foundation and 2006 sondage by the Soprintendenza.

7 It remains controversial the extent that one can identify the type of owner or his or her social class from the remains of architecture or art alone. The Stabiae villas, from size and general quality of artwork seem generally well above the scale of the other luxury villas of the area, with the exception of those which are—tentatively—identified with senatorial or imperial owners (Villa of the Papyri; so-called villa of the Poppaei, or of Poppaea, Oplontis). On the functions, and hence potential types of owners, see G.W. Adams, *The Suburban Villas of Campania and their Social Function, BAR International series*, 1542 (Oxford, 2006), 9-24.

house; at once the supreme symbol of the individual’s power, resources and ability to control the environment and its population, and the place where that power was actively generated…”

9 Only recently has geophysical work at Oplontis, organized by Prof. John Clarke of the University of Texas, demonstrated for certain that Oplontis too was also directly on the sea front, built on a low cliff overlooking the Bay.

10 Madame de Stâel, Corinne; or, Italy (London, 1894), book xi, ch. i.

11 Statius, Silvae, 2.2; Pliny t.Y., 2.15; 5.6.


14 The Master Plan 2001 consists of contributions of many persons, coordinated by the author in 2000-2001, particularly based on the previous work on property expropriation, likely costs, and conservation by the Superintendancy architect, Bruno Sammarco and the past and present site directors, Annamaria Sodo and Giovanna Bonifacio; research into the urbanistic context of the villas by architect Leonardo Varone for his M.Arch thesis at University of Maryland School of Architecture; and the overall site master plan by landscape/land use architect Tom Leader, Tom leader Studios, San Francisco. Prof. Richard Etlin of the University of Maryland School of Architecture was the director of the Restoring Ancient Stabiae project at the time.