
A NEW ENTRANCE TO THE UNDERGROUND LEVELS OF SAN CLEMENTE BASILICA IN ROME A PROPOSAL TO FACILITATE AND REGULATE ACCESS OF MANY VISITORS TO AN ARCHEOLOGICAL MONUMENT

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Abstract

San Clemente is one of the most significant archaeological complexes in Rome. Here one can visit and see the many different construction phases of an important monument. There is a constant stream of visitors from all over the world who come to visit the Basilica and descend to its underground levels. This large number of visitors makes it necessary to improve the system of access and to provide a route through the various levels; first of all to make the visit easier and safer, while at the same time ensuring the preservation of the monument. The provision of a new entrance is also needed in order to give back to the medieval church its proper dignity and not allow it to be simply a passage way to the excavations underneath. Moreover the present arrangement, where people have complete freedom to wander through the underground area, gives rise to a sense of disorientation, making it difficult for the visitor to understand the spatial and architectural qualities of the monument.

In the last ten years the possibility of creating a new access to the underground levels and of establishing a route to be followed by the visitor to the complex has been widely studied. In addition looking at a particular architectural solution, the project described here pays special attention to meeting general requirements of safety and economy of management, which are essential for the preservation and proper appreciation of this important part of our cultural heritage. Alongside the actual proposed work to be carried out, the project involves the implementation of an organizational plan and an extensive set of teaching aids, creating an integrated management scheme for the monument.

Keywords: archaeological excavations, stratification, conservation project, restoration, architecture

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1. Introduction

1.1. Historical context

The Basilica of San Clemente in Rome is situated in a valley between the Esquilino and Celio hills, not far from Colosseum and Domus Aurea (Figure 1). In this area the urban level has gradually risen considerably over the centuries due to ‘natural events’ or anthropic actions [1]. This has resulted in the building becoming one of the more complex and stratified structures in the city. Due to the continuous use of the complex, we have a continuity of architectural events for two millennia, now visible in three overlapping levels which have been made accessible to the visitor [2, 3].

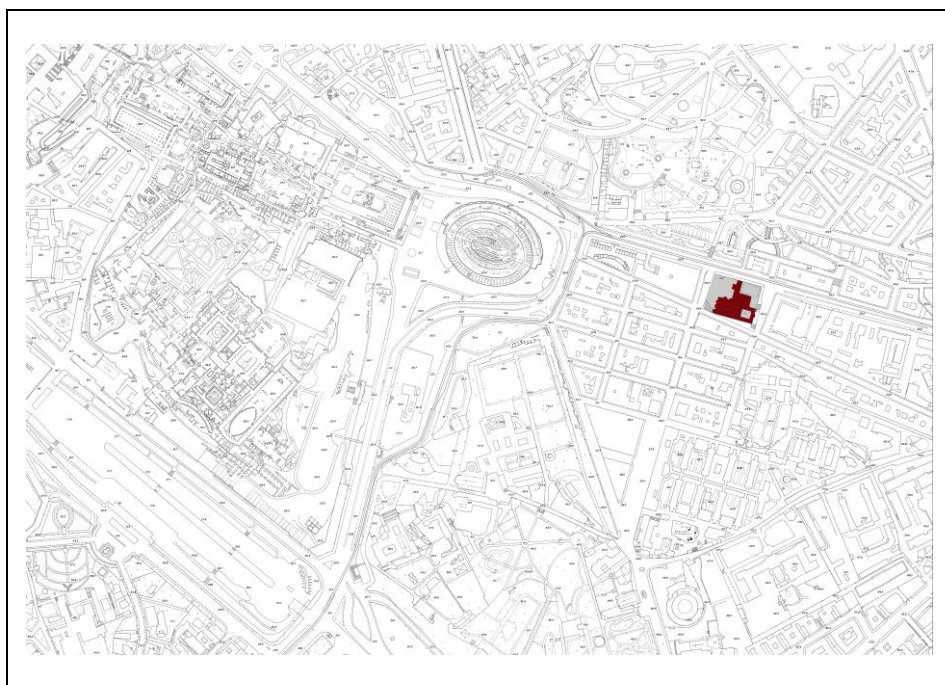


Figure 1. Extract from the aerophotogrammetry of Rome (San Clemente is highlighted).

From the current 12th century basilica (the ‘Upper Church’), which was greatly restored in the 18th century [4, 5], one goes down to the older church (the ‘Lower Church’), this older 5th century basilica was built within an earlier building of the 3rd century.

From the lower basilica one goes down to a third level, where there are two 1st century buildings, separated from each other by a narrow alley. On one side is a *domus* with *cripto-portico* and *grotta-ninfeo*, in which a mithraeum was installed at the end of the 2nd century. This latter was probably used until the construction of the apse invaded the area related to the mithraeum. On the other side of the alley we find a large industrial or commercial 1st century building of

the type known as a *horrea* (Figure 2). There is also indeed a fourth level which is not however accessible. Under the buildings of the first century there are the remains of other structures, destroyed perhaps in the fire of Nero (A.D. 64) [6].

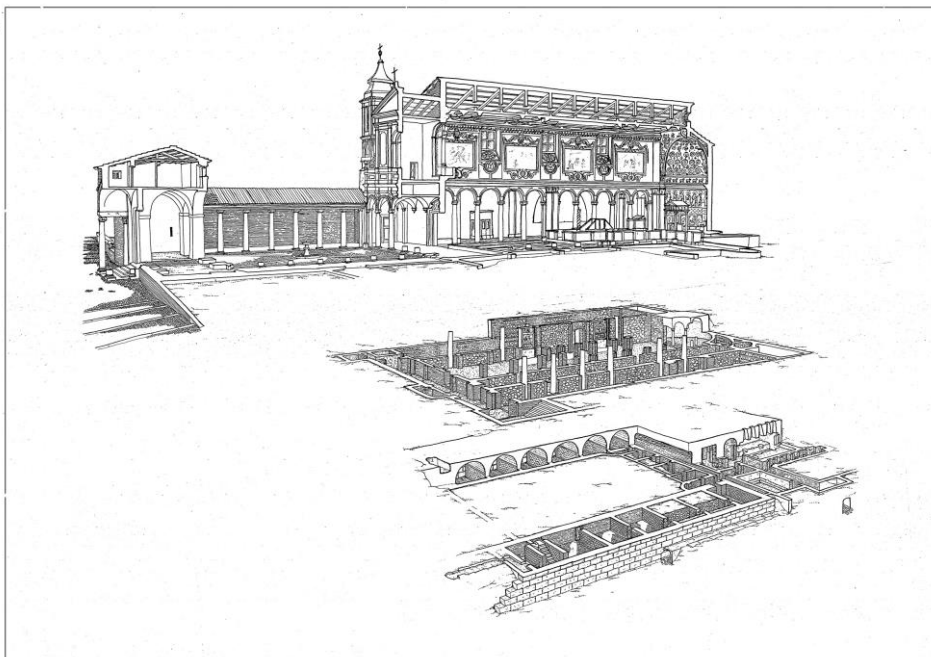


Figure 2. San Clemente: perspective of the three levels (drawing by V.B. Cosentino [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:San_Clemente_Roma_Esploso_prospettico.jpg]).

1.2. Current situation

The size, complexity and considerable depth of the excavations give rise to problems of conservation and access, as well as making it difficult for the visitor to understand and untangle the different phases on construction.

Today the visitor enters the basilica from Piazza di San Clemente through the 12th century atrium (Figure 3). There is also a secondary entrance from via di San Giovanni in Laterano, directly leading into the south aisle of the basilica. From the church one crosses to the vestibule of the sacristy, now equipped as a ticket office and a bookshop, and from there one descends into the lower basilica by a steep staircase, at the foot of which is the narthex, the ancient entrance colonnade, which was once accessed presumably from a 5th century atrium.

From this point on, the visitor is free to roam at will through the underground complex (Figure 4). At the end of their visit they must necessarily return to the same stairs to the upper basilica and finally exit the building.

Apart from this steep staircase there are no other entrances or exits from the underground levels, not even an emergency exit. It is evident that such an arrangement entails serious risks for the safety of visitors should any emergency arise. Moreover the complete freedom to roam in any direction causes

disorientation and lack of understanding of the spatial and architectural qualities of the monument.

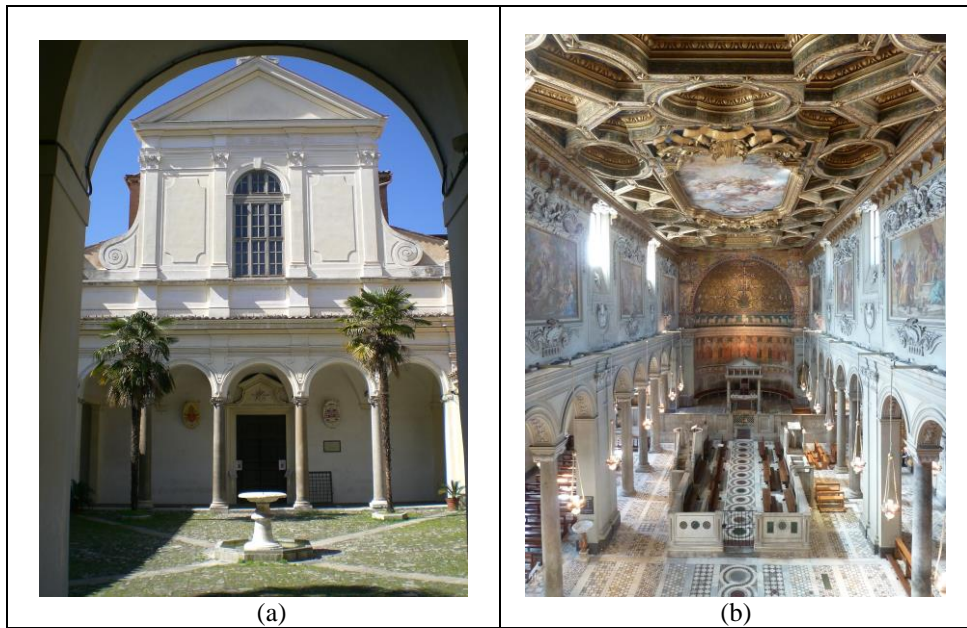


Figure 3. The 'Upper Church' of San Clemente: (a) the façade with the atrium; (b) the nave.



Figure 4. San Clemente: (a) the staircase to the 'Lower Church', seen from the narthex; (b) the mithraeum.

It was precisely such considerations, for the proper conservation of the monument and the desire to help the increasing number of visitors to properly appreciate this unique monument, which led the Irish Dominican Fathers, who have taken care of the basilica since 1677 [7], to propose a study for the reorganization of the entrances and of routes through the complex which would best serve the interest of both monument and visitor.

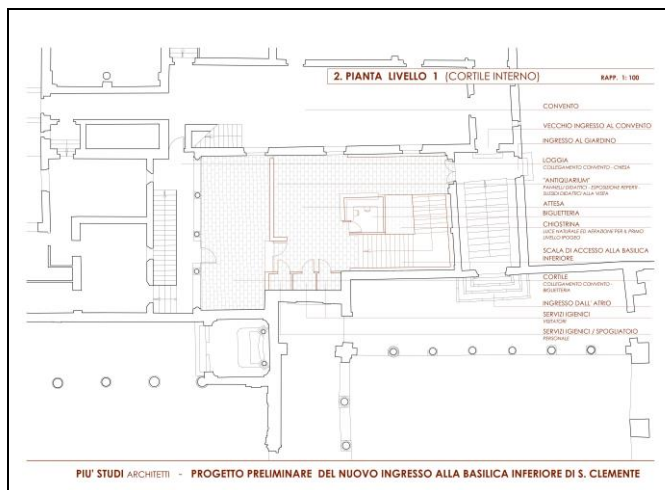


Figure 5. San Clemente, 1st phase project, 2006: plan of the upper level (survey by ICR; drawing by F. Capparella and R. Cerro).

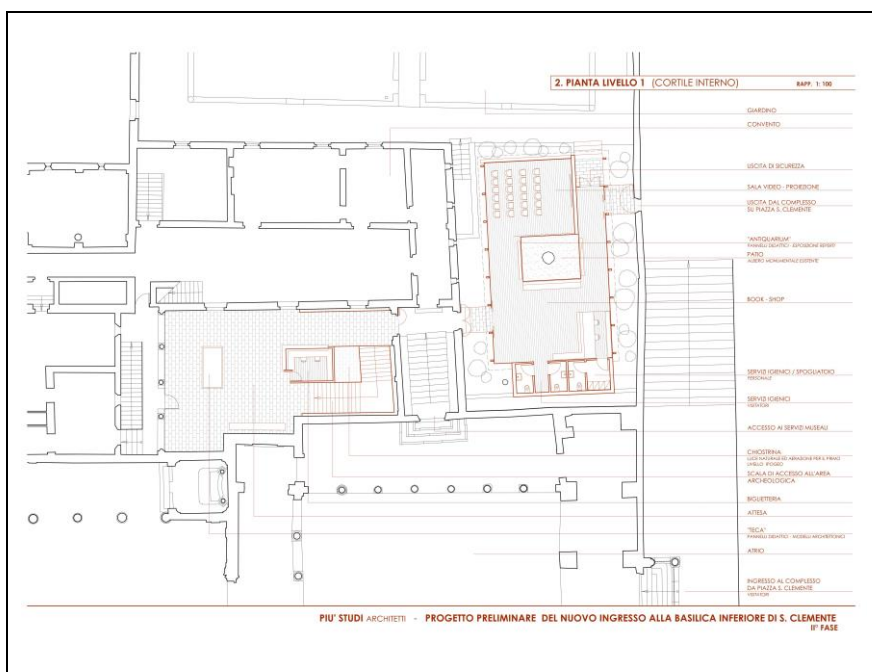


Figure 6. San Clemente, 2nd phase project, 2008: plan of the upper level (survey by ICR; drawing by F. Capparella and R. Cerro).

2. Operational goals

So during the last years we have been investigating the possibility of creating new access routes to the underground levels, of increasing the spaces dedicated to services and of reorganizing the visit of the complex to provide a more coherent and comprehensive reading of it (Figures 5, 6). The project described is the current step of a long journey that has seen many changes and readjustment. Shortly we can recognize three main planning phases: 1st - 2006, in collaboration with F. Capparella (Più Studi); 2nd - 2008, in collaboration with F. Capparella (Più Studi); 3rd - 2012, in collaboration with F. Capparella, V. Leone and T. Tamborriello (Più Studi Architettura).

In addition to look at particular architectural solutions, the project described here, as result of a long period of observation and reflection, pays special attention to meet such general requirements as safety and economy of management, which are essential for the preservation and appreciation of our cultural heritage.

The project provides for two distinct points of entry and exit from the underground levels and increases the number of vertical connections. In fact we saw that it was precisely the access points or the connections between the various levels which give rise to the most critical situations. This is particularly true in the upper basilica, where entrance and exit for the excavations overlap, creating a dangerous and uncomfortable crowding between those entering and those exiting. Moreover the upper basilica nowadays has become a sort of entrance lobby to the excavation. Such a situation helps neither the visitors nor the faithful, nor the monument itself.

3. Outcomes

3.1. Functional program

The proposed solution is to have a separate entrance and exit for the underground levels. One would enter from the Piazza San Clemente entrance, cross the atrium and go up the ancient staircase leading to the convent (Figure 7), to a new structure set in the garden between the convent itself and the piazza (Figure 8).

This new building will house the new entrance to the excavations, complete with ticket office, a bookshop, toilets (now placed in the atrium of the basilica) and a small *antiquarium* where the finds from the excavations will be exhibited. The new structure will benefit from a shady location all year long, thanks to the surrounding buildings and especially to a centuries-old cedar (Figure 9). It will be fully glazed and detached, in a way to fit suitably into that particular context and not restrict the view of the adjacent structures (Figure 10).



Figure 7. San Clemente: the atrium with the gatehouse and the entrance to the convent (the last on the left side, under the northern porch).

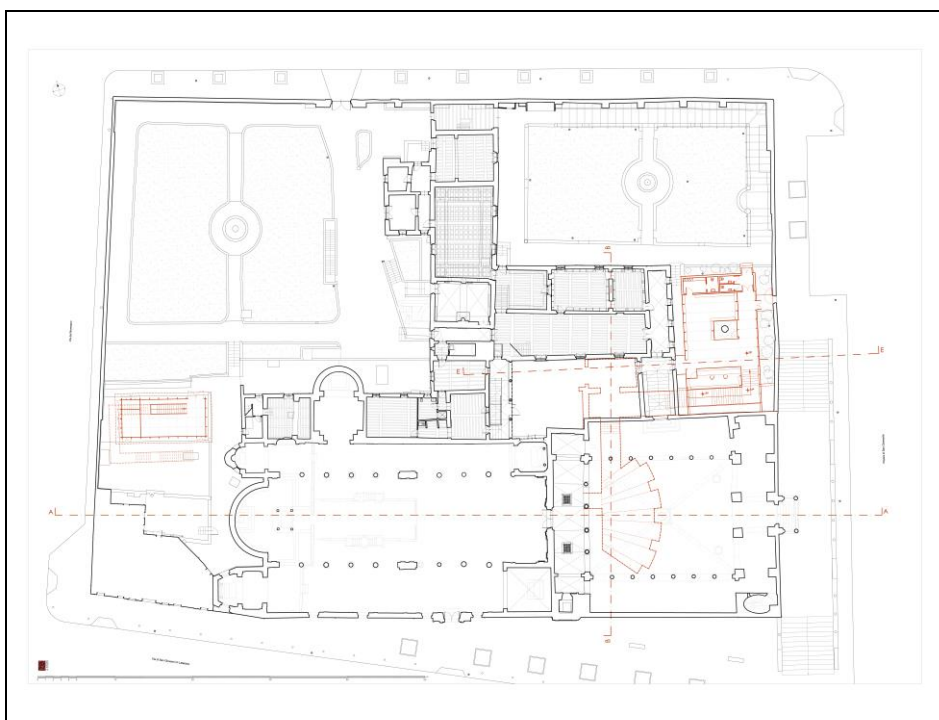


Figure 8. San Clemente ‘final’ project: plan of the upper level (survey by ICR, AZIMUT sas, drawing by R. Cerro and V. Leone).

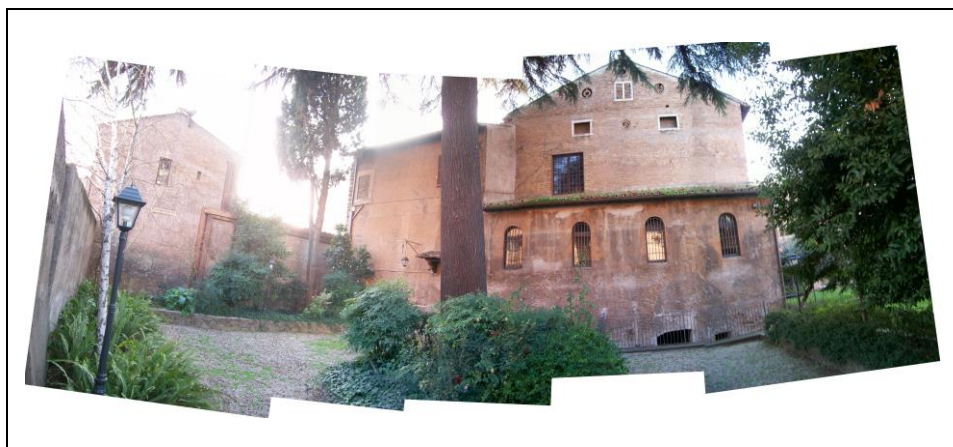


Figure 9. San Clemente, the garden between the convent and Piazza di San Clemente.



Figure 10. San Clemente 'final' project: longitudinal section with the new structure (survey by AZIMUT sas, drawing by R. Cerro and V. Leone).

The area under the garden/cortile adjoining the northern porch of the medieval atrium and exactly corresponding to the early Christian porch will be cleared by an archaeological excavation (Figure 11).

This will be the area of a staircase leading down to the level of the lower basilica, and will in fact be facing the present access staircase. From the foot of this new staircase one will turn south to reach the early Christian atrium that underlies the smaller medieval one (Figure 12).



Figure 11. San Clemente, the inner cortile ('Chiostrina') facing the medieval *loggia* of the convent.

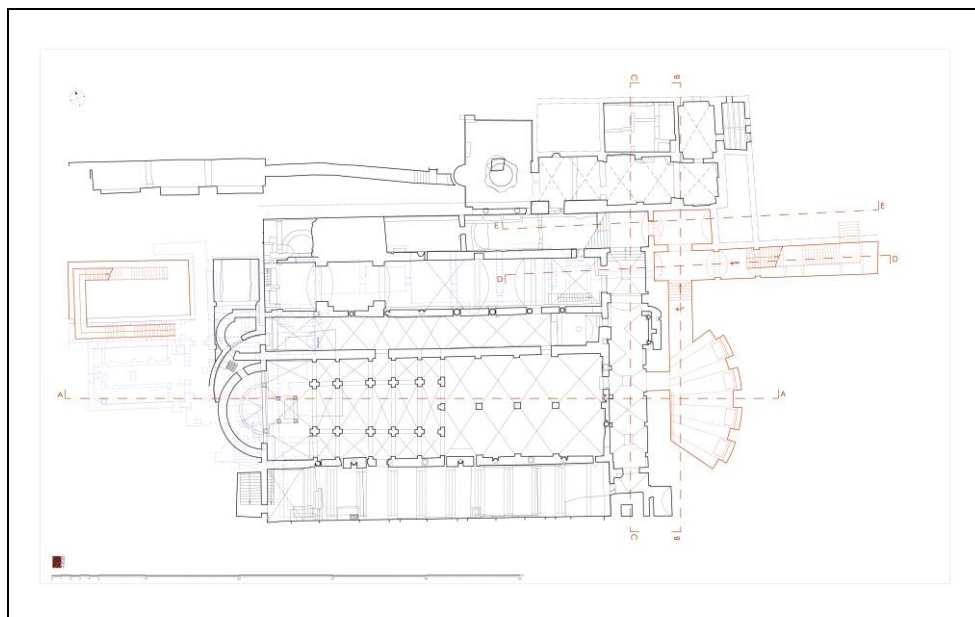


Figure 12. San Clemente 'final' project: plan of the lower level (survey by ICR, A. Gobbi; drawing by R. Cerro and V. Leone).

Here in this large area of the old atrium there is ample space for what is required. The space will play the role of a 'prelude' to the excavations. It will be the place in which to introduce the visit by multimedia teaching aids: models, panels on the latest studies, video projections, etc. (Figure 13).



Figure 13. San Clemente ‘final’ project: cross section with the new underground hall (survey by ICR, AZIMUT sas, drawing by R. Cerro and V. Leone).

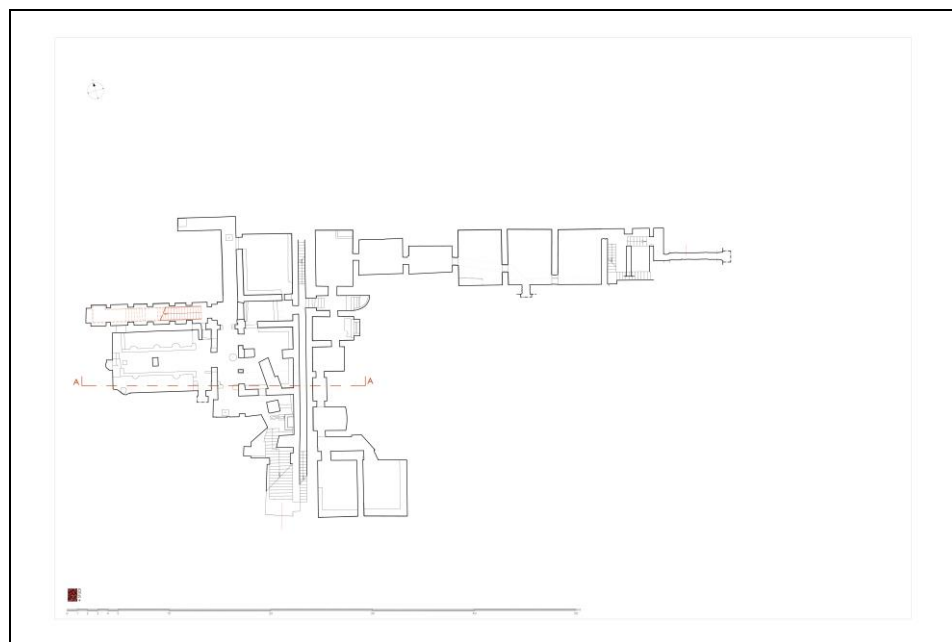


Figure 14. San Clemente ‘final’ project: plan of the lowest level (survey by ICR, A. Gobbi, drawing by R. Cerro and V. Leone).

From this starting point, the path will not be as free as now, but visitors will be led first through the early Christian basilica and then to the lower levels.

At the lowest level, safety requirements demand the creation of an emergency exit directly to the outdoors. So a considerable vertical connection will have to be made using as much as possible the existing passages in the structure. To this end the ancient *cripto-portico* can be used, adapting its modern supporting framework to install a staircase reaching half way to ground level above (Figure 14); the rest of the way will be by way of a similar stairs beyond the northern wall of the *cripto-portico*. This area, lately investigated, will be excavated down to the level of the lower basilica. The staircase will reach the spacious and safe garden west of the basilica. The stairs will be covered by a light structure, which also will hold equipment for the necessary technical systems.

At the end of the visit, the visitor will leave the underground levels using the existing staircase, which leads to the upper basilica, where they can conclude their visit to the complex.

Leaving the basilica through the atrium, where they started, visitors can decide whether to go directly out to Piazza di San Clemente or should they wish, return again the bookshop or the toilets (Figure 15).

The entrance to the basilica from via di San Giovanni in Laterano shall be reserved exclusively for the faithful who attend San Clemente for prayer. The area of the south aisle will be reserved for this purpose.

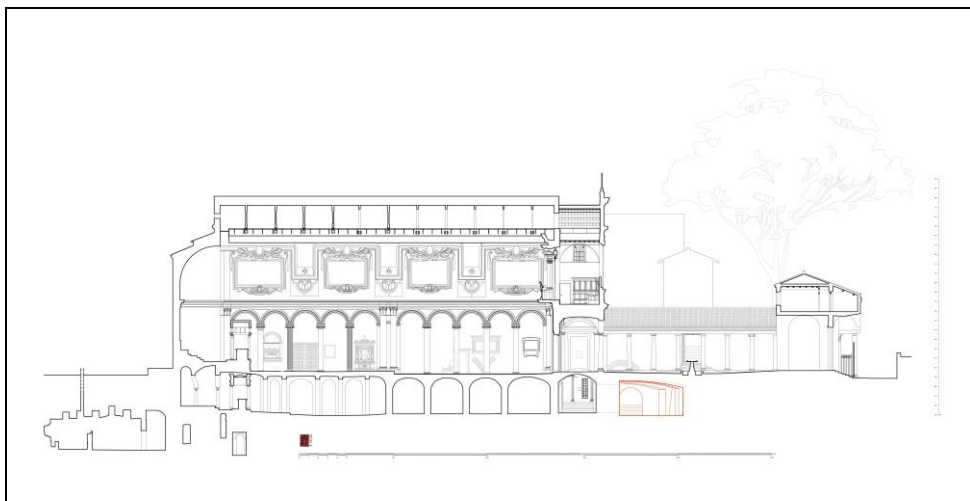


Figure 15. San Clemente 'final' project: longitudinal section with the new underground hall (survey by ICR, AZIMUT sas, drawing by R. Cerro and V. Leone).

3.2. Operational strategy

The work will take place through several development and executive stages that will follow one another, sometimes overlapping.

First phase of the work will consist in structural supports and reinforcements, necessary to prevent causing any instability in the buildings adjacent to the excavation areas and as a protective measure for the monument itself. Only then archaeological excavations will begin in several different areas.

The situation revealed by the excavations will be constantly and continuously monitored in order to check and update the project.

3.3. Architectural traits

Alongside functional features (such as the reorganization of the visitor experience with the separation of the entrance and exit, developing and increasing the range of educational and facilities for the visitor, perceptive and functional rehabilitation of the upper basilica, preservation and restoration of the facades, consolidation of the adjacent structures, improvement of use and safety of the complex), the intervention relies on methodological rigor and particular quality of architectural solutions for its success.

Finally, we must point out that some solutions are determined by management needs and choices expressed by the Community who care for the monument. Among such requirements were: that the number of employees not be increased and that they are not separated by dividing the ticket office from the bookshop; that the employees should not be required to work underground; that the faithful have free access to the medieval basilica; that access be possible to the book-shop from the church so that it is not only for visitors to the excavations.

4. Conclusions

The project described is only the current point of a long journey that has seen many changes and readjustment. It is indeed foreseen that the project will necessarily evolve, especially depending on the results of the excavations.

Probably present rapid developments and the widespread availability of new IT technologies will suggest improvements in the project with regard to further rationalization in the management of the site, and at the same time a significant increase in its understanding.

Despite the impossibility of determining today the final outcome of the project, we have to maintain a global and open view, taking into account many different aspects, considering archaeology, economics and technology all together in the only possible synthesis, represented by architecture; an architecture always ready to listen and to evolve, in dialogue with the other branches of human knowledge.

Acknowledgment

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The project currently awaits further examination of situation and the surveys required for the project's 'fine tuning', in order of its realization.

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