

*Review paper*

## **NARRATIVE STRUCTURES IN ARCHITECTURE: CASE STUDY OF THE MUSEUM OF APOXYOMENOS**

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### **Abstract**

*Narrative architecture aims to communicate meanings through spatial qualities by actively engaging users as both readers and participants in storytelling. This paper investigates narrative structures in architecture through a case study of the Museum of Apoxyomenos in Mali Lošinj, Croatia, using a qualitative methodology that combines a short literature review with a single-case study analysis. The museum serves as an empirical model to examine how spatial design holds and transmits layered narratives in contemporary architectural practice, employing spatial reading, sequential spatial analysis, and the study of spatial experiences to deepen the understanding of architectural narratology within museum typology. Particular attention in the case study is given to the integration of outdoor areas, transitional thresholds, and framed views, which are recontextualized as distinct narrative scenes, emphasizing their role in generating emergent spatial meanings. The Museum of Apoxyomenos employs a hybrid narrative form that weaves multiple, overlapping stories into a unified spatial experience, presenting a broad background narrative encompassing diverse layers of meaning. The applied narrative structure positions visitors as active participants in the unfolding story, requiring interaction not only with the exhibition structure but also with the broader urban and cultural context. The findings of this study encourage a reevaluation of museum architecture, proposing that design should be understood not merely as a physical construct, but as an active communicative medium capable of shaping perception and conveying complex narratives.*

**Key words:** *Narrative Architecture, Narrative Structures in Architecture, Museum Architecture, Phenomenology of Space*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture can communicate meanings, histories, and cultural values through spatial experience. Interdisciplinary debates throughout the past decades have seen the notion of architecture as narrative medium increasingly explored, and by theories of narratology, spatial theory, and phenomenology. Narrative structures in architecture go beyond symbolic signification, and involve the structuring of spaces, articulation of in-between spaces, and orchestration of sensory experience to inform user perception. Understanding space through its narrative capabilities, primarily by interpreting “architecture as a text” and recognizing architecture as an active agent of space, he defines spatiality, materiality, and the transformation of spatial meanings.

This paper investigates how architectural form can integrate narrative structures in architecture to enhance experiential engagement, as analyzed in the case study that follows theoretical framework. It highlights the role of both sequential and symbolic aspects of space, viewing narrative architecture not as a simple translation of text into form, but as a dynamic space where practice, perception, and interpretation are constantly negotiated.

The research methodology integrates a short literature review of narrative architecture and narrative structures in architecture along with a single-case study analysis. The case study of the Museum of Apoxyomenos in Mali Lošinj, Croatia provides an empirical model to examine how spatial design holds and transmits layered narratives in contemporary architectural practice. Spatial reading of architecture, sequential spatial analysis, and spatial experiences have been used to analyze the architectural narrative structure of space. This approach aims to deepen the understanding of architectural narratology in museum typology as a key element in architectural design.

## 2. NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE: FROM MEANING TO FORM

Narrative architecture aims to communicate meanings through its spatial qualities by actively engaging the users of the space, simultaneously as readers and participants in the narrative storytelling. As Željka Pješivac notes: “Narrative requires both a narrator and a reader in the same way that architecture requires both a design and an observer” [1]. Exploring this relationship between architecture and narrative, the built space plays a significant role, as “the connection between engaged storytelling and its culmination is found in the spatial articulation of architectural form” [2]. Various architectural theorists have explored narrative, both through their architectural practice and within architectural theory – Roland Barthes, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Peter Zumthor, and Juhani Pallasmaa. Their works investigate how architecture, through its form, materiality, spatial organization, and ambiance, communicates with its users. Additionally, the integration of meaning, memory, and emotions can be read and interpreted in a way that space becomes a medium for architectural storytelling.

Marshall McLuhan states that “the medium is the message” [3] which characterizes architecture as a hot medium, delivering a direct and clear message, while Nigel Coates argues that architecture should instead be understood as a cool medium [4], due to its possibilities to layer meanings, to transform, and interpret them. According to Coates, “architecture operates through associations, continually reflecting and distinguishing spaces

in the observer's mind — such architectural space must therefore be returned to the human" [4].

From a semiotic point of view, one may regard architecture as signs within code systems that communicate meaning. As Umberto Eco would argue, such codes are not fixed but change through reinterpretation of its reading, understanding of complexities of different contexts, individual perceptions, and cultural backgrounds [5]. Architecture is in that way functioning within a semantic field, where meaning is not static but created in the process of interaction.

Contemporary architectural practice inherently involves engagement with architectural narratives. However, architecture narrative does not merely connote the physical realization of written texts. Commenting on the constraints of events and their underlying narrative, Bernard Tschumi compares and contrasts architectural form with the events housed within it [6]. These comparisons and contrasts are open to manipulation and reordering, the preliminary terms being established by the architect's spatial imagination. Therefore, space and time are sublimated into one structure, which is "defined by loose connections between them" [6].

Critical interpretation of narrative structures in architecture requires knowledge of the narrative itself. Although narrative can be treated as an objective entity, it is experienced subjectively through cognitive interpretation and spatial dissection. Lack of awareness of narrative may result in misinterpretation of spatial intention and reduced knowledge of the experienced architecture. Nevertheless, architectural design is fundamentally the spatial articulation of notions and concepts, producing complex spatial logics.

### 3. NARRATIVE STRUCTURES IN ARCHITECTURE

This research investigates the concept of architectural narrative through a cross-disciplinary approach, combining narratology, spatial theory, and architectural phenomenological discourse. While narrative models are well established in fields such as literary theory, film studies, and cultural analysis, their application to architectural theory is relatively under-explored. To address this knowledge gap, the research engages with theoretical models outside the mainstream architectural discourse, highlighting the need to conceptualize built environments as dynamic meaning conveyors. Within this framework, architecture is approached not merely as a physical construct but as a communicative medium through which social, historical, and ideological narratives are encoded and transmitted—thus enabling the reading of space as a form of narrative text. In this sense, narrative structures in architecture can be understood as a way to integrate both the tangible and the imagined layers of memory embedded in the ground, forming a new spatial motif that amplifies inherited values while simultaneously accommodating those that are speculative or absent [7].

In support of this view, Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu argue that the concept of narrating space positions narrative as an object of representation, whereas spatializing narrative refers to the spatial context as the medium through which narrative is physically deployed [8]. This dual perspective further underscores the architectural potential to both embody and generate narrative, reinforcing the interpretive depth and communicative capacity of spatial design.

Narrative structures in architecture can be understood as the trajectory of sequential spatial experiences that unfold through movement, perception, and interaction within the built

environment. It refers to how architecture organizes and stages space over time, guiding users through a meaningful sequence that evokes interpretation, emotion, and reflection. As Roland Barthes posits, “to understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in ‘storeys’, to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative ‘thread’ on to an implicitly vertical axis” [9]. This conceptualization of narrative as a multidimensional construct, both linear progression and vertical layering, offers a critical framework for reading spatialised narrative as architectural text in its phenomenological discourse. It invites a reading of space not only through its sequential experience, but also through the symbolic and structural depth embedded within its spatial composition. Adding to that, Susan Stanford Friedman’s “spatial reading” of narrative [10], an approach similar to Barthes of horizontal axis - the plot, and with different understanding of the vertical axis - consisting of other intertextual dimensions (author-reader, literary-historical considerations, and intertextual allusions). By bridging Barthes’ and Friedman’s frameworks, one can develop a methodological lens attuned to both the spatial and discursive dimensions through architectural narrative structures.

Tricia Austin’s narrative environments theory addresses how space can be imagined to communicate stories through spatial, sensory, and material elements [11]. Spaces as interpretative active elements that create spatial meanings, Austin points out that material, physical, and sensory elements that are spatially designed have the capacity to add meaning and impact the experience of the person utilizing the space. This model is applicable to those spaces that have a strong cultural or historical background that needs to be conveyed to the users. Moving on from this, the Museum of Apoxyomenos illustrates how a designed spatial experience is created through the use of architectural narrative structures.

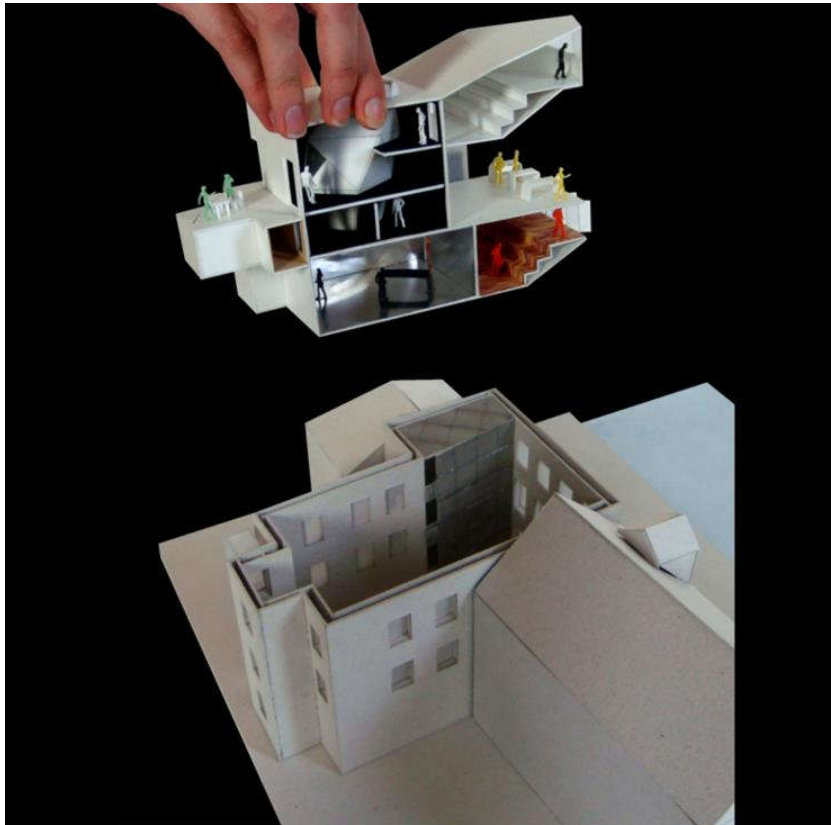
## 4. CASE STUDY: MUSEUM OF APOXYOMENOS

### 4.1. Conceptualisation and realisation of museum

In 1996, Belgian tourist René Wouters discovered a bronze statue of a young athlete on the seabed near the islet of Vele Orjule, close to the island of Lošinj. The discovery was reported to the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia in the autumn of 1998, and the statue was retrieved from the sea in 1999 [12]. It was named Apoxyomenos. The statue is one of the conventional subjects of ancient Greek votive sculpture; it represents an athlete caught in the familiar act of scraping sweat and dust from his body with the small curved instrument called a strigil. Apoxyomenos is a standing nude figure of an athlete in contrapposto, leaning on the right leg, the head and shoulders are slightly tilted, the left knee bent, and the leg slightly raised [13]. Following its discovery and restoration, it was decided that Apoxyomenos would be permanently exhibited to the public in a newly constructed museum in Mali Lošinj, housed in the former Kvarner Palace.

To design a proper house for the artifact, an architectural competition was held in 2009 and the Croatian architectural duo consisting of Idis Turato and Saša Randić emerged as winners of the competition. The authors posed the challenge - “how can such a perfect sculpture be presented in a space that exists outside any temporal or physical context, while also ensuring that the architecture is both engaging and educational” [14]? The spatial structure that allows a unique exhibition to be integrated within the existing museum is enabled by the concept of “house within a house” (Figure 1). Within this space, the authors

defined nine spatial scenes, guiding visitors through a spatial experience with a carefully constructed architectural narrative that follows the story of Apoxyomenos. The spatial elements integrated into the exhibition provide the historical context while also engaging visitors in the story. Through this layered narrative approach, architecture becomes a storytelling medium.



*Figure 1. Architectural model illustrating the concept of "house within a house," designed by Turato & Randić for the 2009 competition project, source: <https://www.idisturato.com/blog/project/muzej-apoksiomena/> (used with permission of the author)*

While the core narrative and spatial intentions remained largely the same in the competition project from 2009, the realised 2016 project refined these elements, translating the original vision into a more tangible and accessible architectural experience. The competition proposal for the Museum of Apoxyomenos conceived a scenographic spatial story, realized by a distinct, autonomous architectural volume inserted within the historic Kvarner Palace. "The exhibition layout is composed as a fragmented, spatially complex structure that defines a curatorial scenario of passage through nine temporally and spatially differentiated scenes. Each scene is defined by a specific room, a space that narrates one of Apoxyomenos's stories" [14]. However, while this vision was integral to the initial design, the realised 2016 project refined and materialized these conceptual ideas, introducing specific details and elements that transformed the experience of the space. These adjustments not only enhanced the sensory journey but also addressed practical concerns, such as accessibility, which were conceptually outlined in the competition proposal. Despite these

improvements, certain challenges persist in the realized project - such as spatial fragmentation, dominant architectural features that compete with the display, and limited accessibility for people with reduced mobility [15]. As a ship-like contrasting volume, the intervention emphasized tactile, acoustic, and olfactory properties to guide the visitors to the final encounter with the statue.

The ultimate 2016 project [16] maintained this conceptual strategy but grounded it down into a finished material and spatial existence creating an immersive museum environment that fulfills the original vision of its architectural narrative structure. It is important to highlight that the principles of universal design were addressed by ensuring accessibility for all through two elevators, as indicated in the initial competition documentation. However, the use of the elevator disrupts the intended spatial trajectory of the narrative journey. As a result, when elevators are used instead of the stairs as originally intended, the space is experienced as fragmented and incoherent, undermining the spatial experience that was meant to be emphasized by the seamless transitional zones between rooms.

The Museum of Apoxyomenos and its architectural design was recognized worldwide. Among the many nominations from 2017 up to today [17], "in 2019 the museum received the European Museum of the Year Award for the most creative and innovative exhibition design, specifically for the presentation of the sculpture. With its curatorial concept and architectural approach, it stands out as a unique museum institution not only in the Republic of Croatia but also across the Mediterranean" [15].

## 4.2. Architectural narrative structure of the museum

Azaryahu and Foote identify four strategies for configuring stories in space: (1) point, (2) sequential, (3) areal, and (4) hybrid narratives [18]. This paper focuses on the use of hybrid forms of narrative embodiment, explored through a case study. Such spatial storytelling emerges in contexts that serve as the locus of multiple, overlapping narratives - such as those examined in this case study. They define the sequential narratives as "linear arrangements of narrative content along trails or paths with chronological progression", and areal narratives used "for stories extending over large areas or encompassing stories that involve long periods of time".

The Museum of Apoxyomenos employs a hybrid narrative form that emphasizes multiple, overlapping stories. Presenting a broad background narrative that encompasses diverse layers of spatial meanings unified within a single museum structure, alongside the statue as a work of art, its discovery in the sea, and the search for a museum space, the subsequent architectural competition redefines urban space. Even though the exhibition itself is organized as a sequential narrative, moving through separate rooms with point-based storytelling and transitional spatial zones, the museum's overall narrative embodiment extends beyond the building. It stretches from the sea, where the statue remained hidden for centuries, to the restored villa of significant cultural heritage that now houses the museum, and further to the architectural exhibition, which employs a striking and uniquely spatial form of storytelling. This complex layering represents the *diachronic metanarrative* of the site integrating historical depth, spatial transformation, and cultural reactivation. This complex layering represents what Mitrović and Kocić define as "the *diachronic metanarrative* is an autonomous, coherent, and self-reflective narrative structure, capturing the synthesis of layered narratives over time" [19].

Turato and Randić, in their 2009 competition project, defined nine scenes that narrate the story of Apoxyomenos, referring to the future museum as a “central event generator for the town of Mali Lošinj” [14]. The complex use of narrative in architectural practice necessitates an analysis of all components that spatially construct an architectural narrative structure. However, the authors did not address the surrounding context of the Palace Kvarner, which houses the Museum of Apoxyomenos. They articulated the nine scenes integral with its transitional zones (Figure 2).

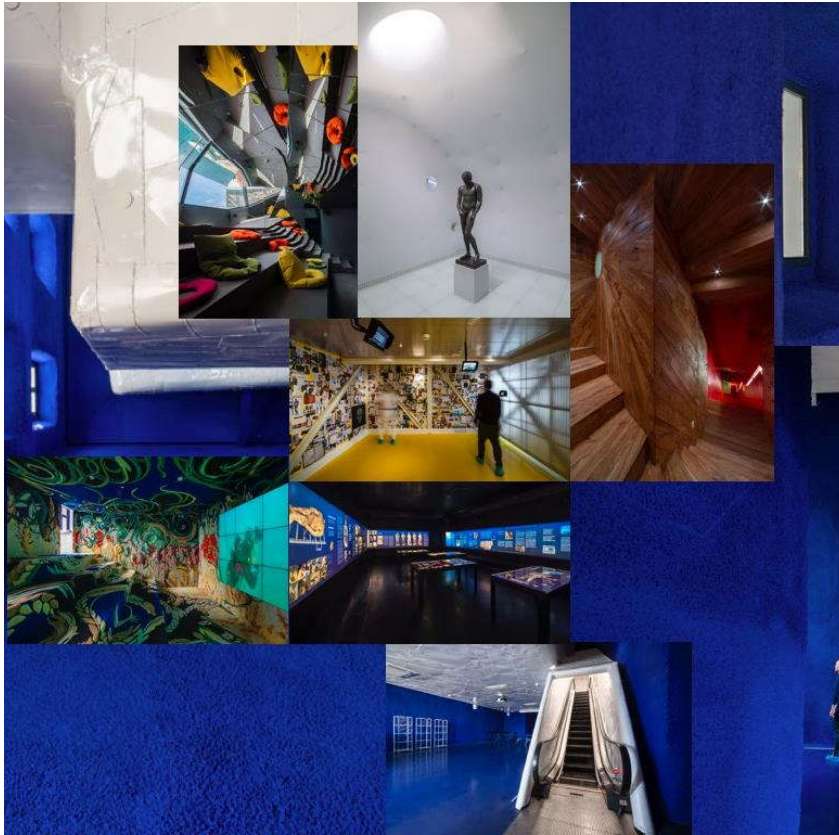


Figure 2. Spatial collage of the main scenes structurally arranged for the Museum of Apoxyomenos, 2016, source: <https://www.idisturato.com/blog/project/muzej-apoksiomena-2016/> (used with permission of the author)

For the purpose of analyzing narrative structures in architecture, these transitional elements should be considered distinct spatial statements within the museum's overall narrative. Rather than being treated as integrated components, they should be viewed as separate sequences, due to their capacity to generate and convey new meanings in the spatial experience.

This study identifies and articulates the key components of architectural narrative structures, situating them within the framework of architectural phenomenology discourse, in the following order:

1. **Urban Surrounding:** Villa Kvarner and its immediate urban surroundings serve as the starting point before entering the museum. The transitional entrance space, defined by the villa's first-floor terrace, acts as an intermediate zone between the street front and the museum interior. This marks a Roland Barthes' idea of projecting

a horizontal narrative onto a vertical axis of symbolic meaning [9]. The villa's reconstruction was preserved almost entirely, with one notable change: the embedded blue eyes above the museum entrance, embracing Umberto Eco's semiotic codes that function as visual mnemonic device.

2. **Room 0:** Visitors enter the museum through an open, public ground floor that welcomes them. The inserted white exhibition structure appears to float within the blue interior space, symbolizing the seabed where the statue of Apoxyomenos was once lost. The foyer space acts as a "cool medium" [4] that invites interpretation where the user, now a narrative participant, begins decoding this layered visual and symbolic contrast.
3. **Transition 1:** The escalator marks the first transitional zone. A white tube, integrated into the inserted museum structure within Villa Kvarner, leads visitors to the first exhibition room. According to Tricia Austin, narrative environments rely on sensory cues to convey meaning [11]. The escalator narrows focus, slows movement, and heightens bodily awareness, a spatial equivalent of a narrative prologue.
4. **Room 1:** The black rubber room presents the statue's historical narrative on display tables, accompanied by an informational image strip along the walls. A distinct spatial-acoustic atmosphere emerges from the echoing sounds of both the speakers and the visitors within the space. It materializes horizontal axis (plot development) of architecture narrative structure while creating vertical atmospheric depth via sensory disorientation.
5. **Room 2:** The following rooms are arranged in an enfilade sequence: a small amphitheater covered with a handwoven merino wool carpet, patterned like the sea floor, where a film about the history of the Apoxyomenos statue is projected.
6. **Transition 2:** The next transitional zone, extending from the amphitheater, is a narrow red staircase with integrated water sound effects, leading visitors to the next room. Dramatic change in color signifies a shift in narrative tone, while the ascent physically mirrors Barthes' narrative acceleration. Material contrast reinforces a moment of narrative tension and bodily reorientation.
7. **Room 3:** The "media room" presents a space where the story of Apoxyomenos is conveyed through collaged media reports on the walls. Additionally, through a frog's-eye view via an opening in the ceiling, visitors catch their first glimpse of a segment of the statue.
8. **Transition 3:** The following space is a transitional stair zone, lined with wooden-clad walls and featuring another opening that frames a portion of the statue—from torso to head. These transitional spaces, previously marked by red and wooden finishes, are connected to the entrance of the media room. A demarcation line, defined through a shift in materiality, separates the spaces according to their distinct narrative roles.
9. **Room 4 (Narrative Climax):** An airy space with rounded white walls and a skylight follows, where filtered light subtly illuminates the statue of Apoxyomenos. This moment marks the narrative climax of the Azaryahu and Foote's sequential narrative [18].
10. **Room 5:** After visiting the statue room, visitors enter the "town's kaleidoscope room," which features an amphitheater and a reflective ceiling. Here, mirrors function as spatial devices that reintroduce the context of Villa Kvarner into the interior through



immaterial means. In this nuanced way, the space of Mali Lošinj once again becomes an integral part of the exhibition. The triadic visual presentation of the statue is complicit with the opening in the wall offering a bird's-eye view of the statue's head.

11. **Transition 4:** The staircase connecting the amphitheater in the "town's kaleidoscope room" (Room 5) includes a window that symbolically and representationally frames the sea. As Eco suggests, meaning shifts through context: the sea here is not just origin but reinvention. This spatial moment completes the *diachronic metanarrative* arc [19].
12. **Room 6:** Visitors exit the "town's kaleidoscope room" and enter the vertical circulation area leading back to the ground floor. The bifurcated staircase and elevator, clad in coarse black materials, stand in stark contrast to the blue-white palette of the ground floor, symbolizing the conclusion. The space marks the transition from story to reflection, from immersion to exit.

The key distinction between the Turato and Randić's architectural narrative structure of the Museum of Apoxyomenos (9 scenes) [14], and the structure proposed by the author of this paper (12 scenes) lies in the treatment of the museum's internal and external spaces. Here, the outdoor zones, transitional thresholds, and framed sea views are redefined as distinct scenes due to their narrative significance and the generation of new spatial meanings. This revised reading demonstrates how the Museum of Apoxyomenos activates spatial narrative not only through its rooms, but through their sequencing, material shifts, and symbolic resonance. Certain scenes act as narrative nodes that guide the visitor's perception and emotional progression, such as the blue-white entry contrast, the red staircase, or the mirrored amphitheater, each contributing to the dynamic unfolding of meaning. These spaces are not isolated moments but integrated components of a broader narrative strategy that elevates the visitor from observer to participant. The museum thus exemplifies a hybrid narrative form that integrates sequential, point-based, and areal storytelling [18], structured as a diachronic metanarrative that fuses history, memory, and embodied experience.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The contribution of this paper lies in understanding the complexity of narrative structures in architecture as a tool for spatial storytelling. Furthermore, it offers insight into the exhibition design of the Museum of Apoxyomenos, where transitional spatial zones and representational spaces of narrative are recognized as equally valuable spatial units as the areas containing exhibited artifacts. The broader theoretical focus of this paper is "the space occupied by the text itself, and, especially, the spatial form of the text, as its core concerns" [9].

Building on the theoretical overview that follows, narrative architecture and narrative structures in architecture both represent the possibility of integrating narrative into space through spatial sequencing, along with the integration of spatial meanings. This spatial constellation results in the transmission of cultural meanings, collective memory, and ideological frameworks to the users of the space through an experiential encounter. Analyzing the narrative structure in architecture in the case study of the Museum of Apoxyomenos provides a simpler way to understand the complex spatial meanings. These

meanings have developed over time, as demonstrated in the case study. The Museum of Apoxyomenos employs a hybrid narrative form that emphasizes multiple, overlapping stories, presenting a broad background narrative that encompasses diverse layers of spatial meanings unified within a single museum. Alongside the statue as a work of art, its discovery in the sea, and the search for a museum space, the subsequent architectural competition redefined the urban narrative of the town of Mali Lošinj, Croatia. Even though the exhibition itself is organized as a sequential narrative, moving through separate rooms with point-based storytelling and transitional spatial zones, the museum's overall narrative embodiment, through the user's perception and interpretation, extends beyond the exhibition's space.

The primary difference between the architectural narrative structure defined by Turato and Randić and the proposed structure in this paper lies in the treatment of the museum's internal and external spaces to convey a story. This paper demonstrates that the integration of outdoor areas, transitional thresholds, and framed views are recontextualized as separate scenes, emphasizing their narrative importance and the creation of emergent spatial meanings. The applied narrative structure at the Museum of Apoxyomenos positions visitors as active participants in the unfolding story, where interaction with both the exhibition structure in the interior and the museum's broader context is essential. The findings of this study encourage a reevaluation of architectural design within museum typology, viewing it not merely as a physical construction, but as a communicative medium for its audience.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research has been supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation (Contract No. 451-03-137/2025-03/200156) and the Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad through project "The integration of contemporary practices, innovative approaches, and results of scientific research and artistic work in advancing the processes of dissemination and teaching through the application of the digital gallery in architecture, urbanism, and scene design" (No. 01-50/295).

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