

### ***The evolution of the building and its connections with the landscape***

*With its imposing bulk, the airship hangar at Augusta dominates a rich landscape characterised by a multiplicity of man-made, often monumental, works, each a bearer of relevant historical, economic and cultural values. The destiny of the area of Augusta has been profoundly marked by the form of the natural landscape which, from the foundation of Megara Hyblea in 729 BG, has seen the broad roadstead the theatre of massive changes carried out to facilitate landing and at the same time to protect the port. Although for long centuries after the destruction of Megara the prevalent image was that of the mare mortuum on account of the coastal marshes which would become vast salt beds- now, justly, a Site of Community Importance- Frederick II began the era of defensive works with the construction of the castle, recognising the strategic value of this location within the Mediterranean area, at the same time a busy trading place and a frontier of civilisations.*

*The construction of the airship hangar in the geopolitical context of the early 1900s fits, therefore, into the picture of the centuries-long role of the territory. Begun in 1917 as part of a necessary programme for Italian air defence and built, in part, with the contribution of Austrian prisoners, the airship hangar was, however, only completed after the end of the war and inaugurated in 1920. Designed to house the massive airship 'NI'; the hangar in fact housed the smaller O. S. and No. 2.*

*The process of military build-up at the hangar site began in 1925 when the existence of the aerodrome became the premise for the establishment of the seaplane facility in the area between the airship manoeuvre space, on the hill dominated by the hangar, and the coast. Two new, metal hangars for seaplanes, notably smaller in size, a headquarters building and accommodation were constructed, together with certain fixtures, which were, located within the monumental airship hangar itself.*

*The structure did not suffer serious damage during the Second World War and, after the Allied landings, was occupied by the British and subsequently the roadstead was used by British Overseas Airways Corporation within an overall plan for the development of the air routes between England and the Middle East. The BOAC presence quickly became an important source of revenue for the area since the Augusta airport became an important international transit point with the volume of traffic constantly increasing.*

*The obsolescence of seaplane technology led to the decline of the seaplane facility, which began with the departure of BOAC and the consequent employment crisis. After a brief period of support for the activities of Soccorso Aereo Italiano, the definite closure came in 1958, just as RaSiOM (Raffineria Siciliana Oli Minerali) arrived at Augusta. Heavy industry hastened, with massive, new works, to transform the landscape of the bay yet again.*

### ***The original technological and constructive features***

*The plan of the airship hangar was drawn-up by the engineer Garboli, from Brindisi. Since it was a building destined to house a dirigible of considerable size, the "M" type, the hangar enclosed an internal space 98m in length, 26m in width and 31m in height and stood out against the landscape, rising from the ample space, 500x400m, designated as the manoeuvre area for the airships.*

*The hangar is carried on a structure characterised by a succession of frames in reinforced concrete supported by a succession of reticular, external spurs curving out from the wide base and slender outline, whose sequence gives the side profile of the hangar the shape and monumental character of a modern, lay cathedral.*

*Fifteen horizontal ribs mounted on vertical pillars are surmounted by a wide barrel-vault while the external infill is in brick.*

*The front elevation, directed towards the sea in a south-easterly direction, is defined by a high, encased truss which has the curvilinear profile of a wave and, with lines typical of the*

early 1900s, interprets the classical idea of a gable. From this beam is hung the huge access door, which is equipped with an automatic opening and closing system activated by electric motors. The motors drive an immense set of bellows consisting of fourteen steel elements clad with metal panelling and 31 metres high. Today, however; this fascinating mechanism no longer works due to the very little use to which it has been put over the years and to the total lack of maintenance for many decades.

The great interior space has remained intact, despite the later changes, which have tended over time towards fragmentation once the original use had lapsed. Slender pilasters which are evenly spaced around the first level of the side walls delineate this. Above, narrow metal walk-ways run all around the internal perimeter; accessed via a stairway situated in a vertical, enclosed space located at the centre of the rear facade, which also connects at that level with the space below the barrel roof thanks to a central walkway within the large concrete beams. Light enters through rectangular windows topped by flattened arches positioned between the pilasters of what one could define the 'second level' of the interior space and, much higher-up, just below the sequence of tie-beams which hold the roof in place, through a regular line of small, square windows placed between one buttress and the next and very evident from the outside view. The "first level" of the hangar has been spoiled by partitions subsequent to the original plan.

### **The present situation and current plans**

A fundamental step towards the exploitation of the historical patrimony of Augusta was the creation of the Museum of the Piazzaforte in 1986. Founded by the Augusta town authority and opened to the public in 1990, the museum has gathered together a rich collection of items from different epochs and links these exhibits in a visual itinerary replete with views, historical maps and photographs. The reconstruction of the events concerning the fort thus becomes the account of the historical process of the development of the area.

In 2002, the Hangar- Team of Augusta, was created with the specific task of pursuing the protection and exploitation of the hangar, of pressing for studies and projects and of obtaining funding. This dynamic group of citizens obtained their first important result: the concession, in 2004, of the hangar area by the Provincial Ministry of Finance to the town authority. The area had been reassigned to the State in 2000 while the area of the former seaplane facility was allocated to the Navy.

The project underlying the concession is that of improving and fitting-out the eucalyptus woods around the hangar; turning it into a large Town Park. This step should constitute the preamble to the - extremely costly- restoration of the architectural structure to its ancient splendour. There is no lack of hypotheses of re-use, put forward by local 'experts', degree theses and studies, helped by the activity of the Hangar Team who have carried out a survey and the redrawing of plans, elevations and sections of the hangar and the construction of an accurate model in balsa in the scale 1:200. In addition, the Association has presented a programme for the recovery and exploitation of the Park, which was presented to the population in 2003. Unfortunately, the nature and cost of the activity necessary for the recovery of the area mean that the existence of 'a backdrop of programmes and rather wider agreements which support at provincial and regional level the efforts of the local institutions is indispensable, over and above the grassroots movement. And this within the context of a reflection on the possible development of the entire district which needs to take into account the scenario of a progressive decommissioning and conversion of the industrial complex.