

# AN ASPHALT TERRARIUM. THE HIPPODROME OF TOR DI VALLE

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AN ASPHALT TERRARIUM

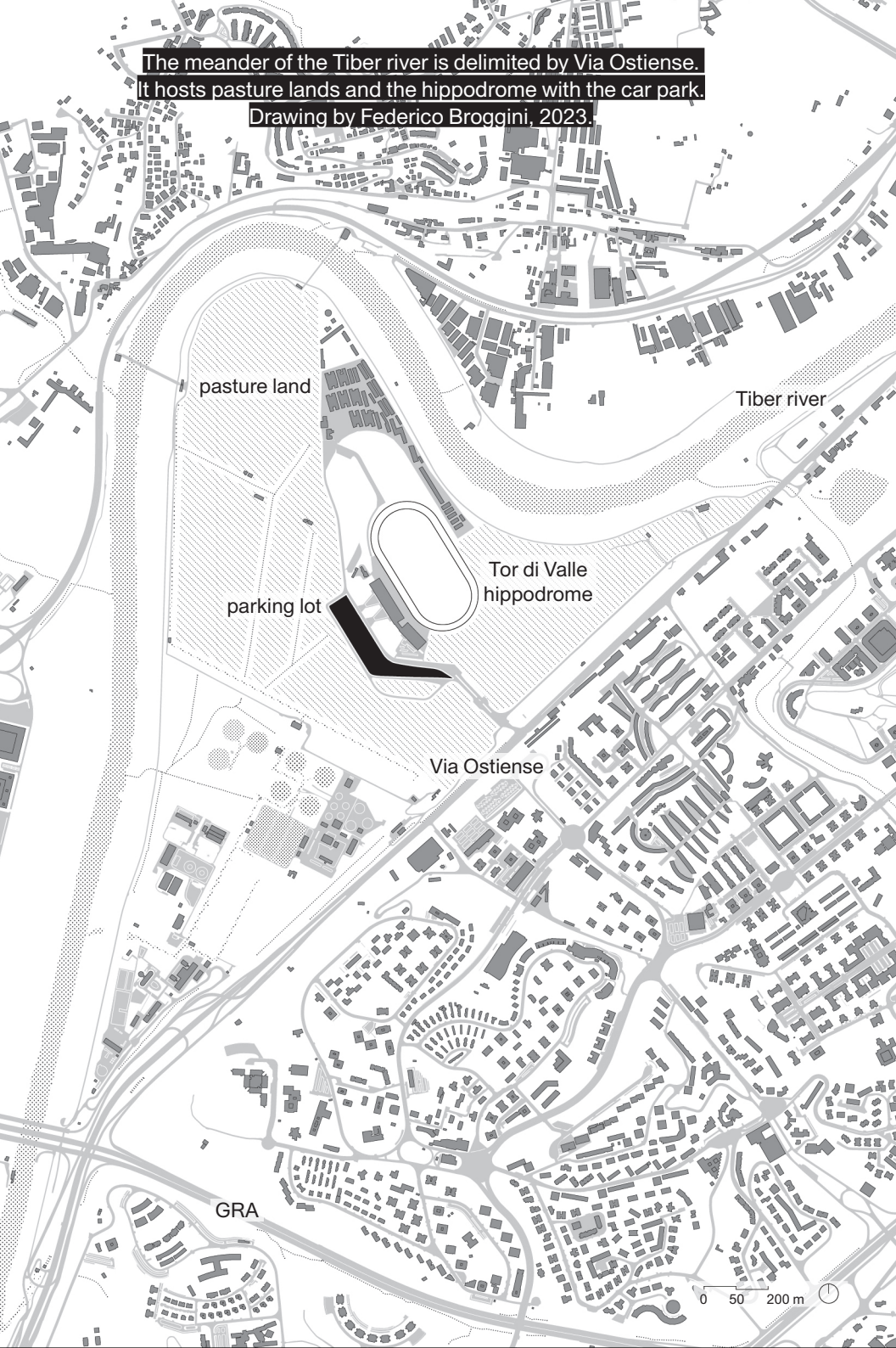
On a meander of the Tiber River in the south of Rome lies a vacant land, once the hippodrome of Tor di Valle. The horses and the humans who respectively used to race and work there ceased their activities in 2013, fifty-four years after the architect Julio Lafuente designed the entire complex. Once I entered the site from Via Ostiense, the feeling of suddenly being immersed in the Agro Romano was intense: the hippodrome lays on a vast sweep of pasture land that is still present in the meander and extends around and inside the complex. The alternation of different soils conditions characterises the site. There, pasture lands, tree plantations, stabilised soil for the racetrack and asphalt co-exist side-by-side. Walking down the main street towards the grandstand, the first encounter is with the asphalt mantle of the parking lots that extends over 60.000 m<sup>2</sup>. At first glance, it is difficult to recognize it. In ten years, the asphalt started to undergo through pedogenesis processes as a geological layer: weathering, accumulations, erosions, breaks, moss formations, growing of grasses, shrubs, and trees. Nowadays a lush garden is growing from the asphalt.

Tor di Valle racecourse manifests itself as a *terrarium*, an environment isolated and separated from human interferences. But, as a *terrarium*, it is also a hybrid and ambiguous entity that, through separation, makes human entanglement in the world explicit: its capacity to transform and interact with other organic and inorganic matter and, vice versa the way it is influenced by them.

In July 2023, three people entered the racecourse by making their way through the wilderness. They removed one square metre of asphalt from the car park and ploughed the ground underneath. Under 5 centimetres of asphalt and 8 centimetres of substratum a red soil emanated immense heat accumulated throughout the day, one of the hottest of that scorching summer. The soil and stones were hard to hold so much was the heat. The roots of pioneer plants such as *Daucus carota* and *Inula viscosa* sank their roots into the cracks in the asphalt until they reached the ground. A second, very dense system of tiny roots separated the upper asphalt layer from the substratum, making it easier to break up the surface. Asphalt is also a living soil.

The removal of bituminous rock and soil tillage accelerates the processes of pedogenesis. Like the racecourse car park, the square metre of reddish soil is another terrarium ready to display the entanglement of lives and matter.

The meander of the Tiber river is delimited by Via Ostiense.  
It hosts pasture lands and the hippodrome with the car park.  
Drawing by Federico Broggin, 2023.

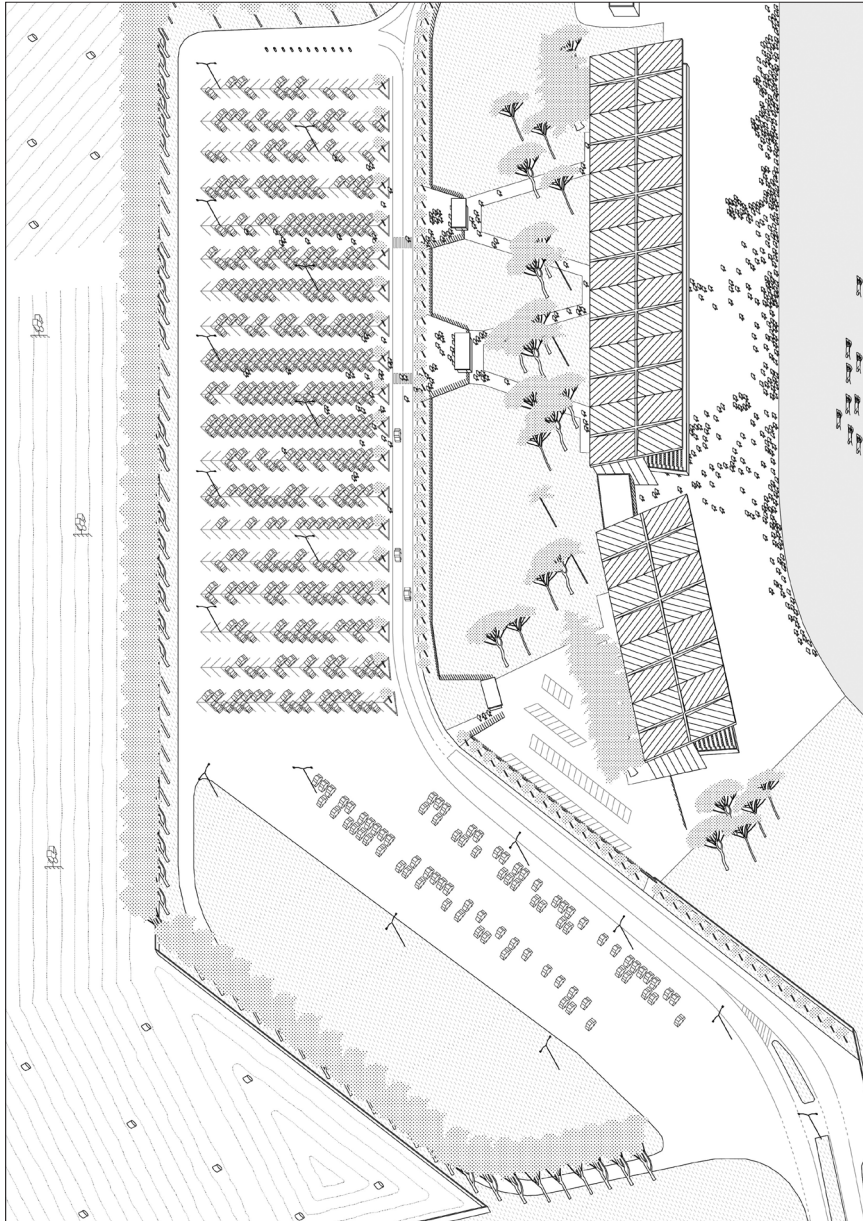


View of the stratigraphy of the asphalt mantle and  
the vegetation growing through it.  
Photo by Federico Broggin, 2023.

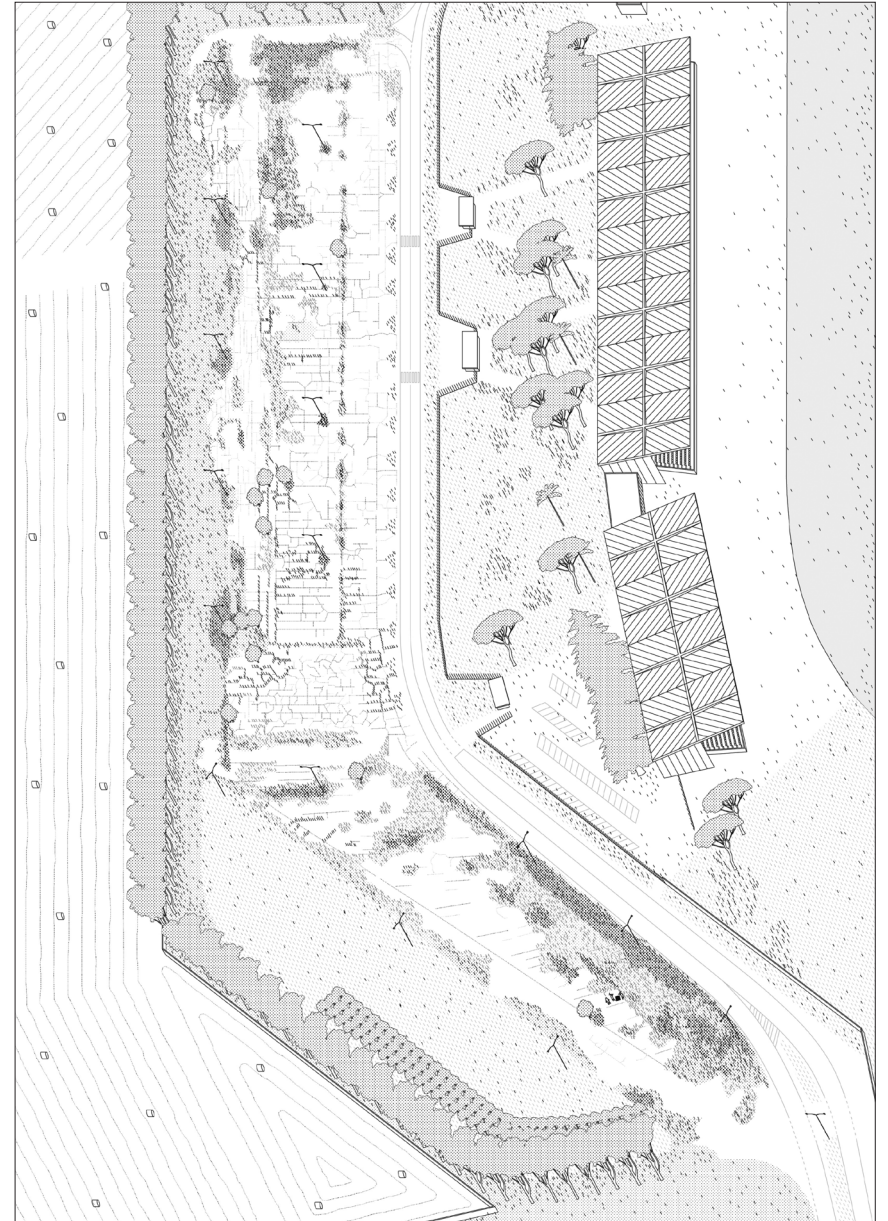




The hippodrome ceased operation in 2013.  
The drawing depicts the functioning of the car park during horse racing activities. Drawing by Federico Brogini, 2023.



After abandonment, the asphalt surface began a new process of pedogenesis. The drawing shows where the breakage, erosion, accumulation and growth of vegetation began. At the bottom right, three people remove 1 sqm of asphalt from the car park.  
Drawing by Federico Brogini, 2023.





One square metre of asphalt before being removed.  
Photo by Federico Broggini, 2023.



One square metre of asphalt is removed.  
The bituminous rock and part of the soil underneath are  
accumulated aside. Photo by Federico Broggini, 2023.

