

Visitor center in Ani

Design of human pathways

Ani is a ruined medieval Armenian city-site on the East Anatolia, plateau, situated about 42 kilometers east of the Turkish province of Kars, on the border between Armenia and Turkey. As the old capital of Armenia, Ani was one of the most impressive settlements of the Middle Ages, a political, cultural and economic center. Nowadays it is abandoned and lies on Turkish territory. The ruins of Ani occupy an approximately triangular site between the Arpacay River, which forms the border between Turkey and Armenia and one of its small branches called Alaca or Ani stream.

The history of Ani is very long and impressive. During the analysis the story has been divided into six stages. In the analysis it was found that these six stages can be divided into „Foundation“, „Golden age“, „Desolation“, „Oblivion“, „Rediscovery“ and „Modernity“. Until recently the city was declared closed military area and tours were prohibited but as of now it is open for visits.

From the parking lot a sloping ramp leads to the surface. The ramp is leading right to the entrance of the visitor center. The visitor thus has two options: Either he can go directly to the lookout tower, or visit the Visitor Center first. The top of the tower reveals a unique insight into the city and the countryside. The windows in the tower are cut in a manner which offers several view points: the landscape, the mountains and the city of Ani. It was most important to preserve the structure and inventory of the city, and to cause as little damage as possible. This was especially taken into account in the positioning and design of the building complex.

The Centre is located outside the city walls on one of the lowest planes of Ani. As a result, all buildings (except the observation tower), were constructed very low, so that they remain unnoticed from the highest viewpoint of the city. By using such a construction approach, a merging between building and landscape is achieved.

The roof of the visitor center is designed in fashion that gives the impression as if it floats. Thus, the roof is a cantilevered construction. The rooftop of the visitor center is situated 3 meters above the ground. Thus, the upper edge of the finished floor of the research facility and the visitor center amount to -1.5 m. The research and visitor center are connected by a courtyard. The visitor center is accessibly designed. There is a ramp, which disabled visitors can use to enter the center. There is an elevator in the center itself.

In the Research Center, which has also two stories, there is another courtyard. The purpose of the research center is the investigation, preservation and restoration of exhibits. The exhibits themselves are on display in the visitor center. The basement of the visitor center serves as an exhibition hall for archaeological findings. In addition, the room has an underground connection to the observation tower. On the first level slots are arranged in the floor in a manner which allows the visitor to view the exhibits that are on display in the basement below. The roof surface also has openings through which light gets inside the museum. The roof is based on cores that are formed out of rooms.

The ground floor houses adjoining rooms and a media exhibition. The media exhibition extends over a path on the first floor, where visitors experience the history of the city. This path represents a sort of „time travel“. Lines of Corten steel, engraved with the most important events and dates, tell the story of the city. While wandering through this path, the visitor will encounter rooms at each side where a film is being shown. Each room symbolizes a historical stage of the city. Thus, the person travels from „Foundation“ to the modern times. There are two particular rooms where it is not possible to show exhibition material as there is virtually nothing that has remained from that period. The areas are called Desolation and Oblivion. Here, the rooms themselves are the exhibit. By using this exhibition concept, it was possible to represent the remarkable history of Ani. In the process of designing the research and visitor center, it was most important to make the building as invisible as possible, as not to interfere with the view of the imposing walls of Ani, and to preserve the structure of the city.

Apart from the research and visitor center, elements are also inserted in the city's infrastructure, using corten steel as the core material. The elements are 3 objects (A viewing platform, a city district and a bridge), plates with information, a storage system and a sun protection element. All objects and elements were designed with the idea in mind, that the elements, instead of appearing as foreign substances, will seamlessly integrate into the city. The first object, a bridge, is located on the site of the only old bridge of Ani. Here, a platform will be integrated into the ruin. The platform is hanging in the air above the Ahurjan flow and above the border between the two countries. At the city district, a web was designed so that the visitor can view the district from the top and take long walks without harm to the historical substance. Further on the road is the last stop - a viewing platform. The platform is partly hanging in the air. On the platform the visitor is presented with an amazing view of Armenia. The information panels are positioned horizontally to interfere as little as possible with the historic landscape. Another element are the storage systems which are located near major buildings. The storage systems are constructed like shelves, ensuring that stones of the building can not be carried out in bits and pieces and thus be stolen. The basic idea is to present the people a clear insight into the city without any restrictions.

In summary it can be said that for me the biggest influence for the project came from the city of Ani with her centuries-old history. The project involves a delicate implementation of various elements into the structure of the city, as well as the design of a visitor center that is integrated into the landscape of the city.