

Sara Protasoni

The green element and housing in the quarantined city

Abstract

The article addresses the issue of the new demand for a relationship with nature in and around our homes that these months of pandemic have put back at the centre of housing behaviour. The aim is to search for lines of continuity, fractures, radical transformations and unexpected returns within the disciplinary culture in relation to the dialectic between innovation and tradition and around the possible resilience of the modern project (understood as based on the continuous questioning around its own instruments and its role on an ethical and political level) in the face of changing conditions. In addition to Luigi Figini's decades of research in the field of Italian Rationalism, it examines the contribution of Pietro Porcinai and the work of Leberecht Migge in Germany.

Keywords

Urban greenery — Garden — Modern project

In recent weeks the word *cure* (but more precisely the English word *care*, which indicates not only the *cure*, but also the attention and concern for something (Tronto 2015) – has acquired a central role in the public debate:¹ not only as a task of the State with its apparatus and a priority objective for political action, but also as an individual responsibility that must inform the complex system of our relations with other human beings, with all living and even non-living within the places where we live. An approach to the project that can be ascribed to the paradigm of care has long been practiced and theorized by some of the most interesting landscape architects (Clement 2012, Corner 1999, Mosbach 2010), for whom care as action is based on one hand on the close observation of the elements present in a place; on the other on the choice of strategic interventions, which derive from the strict application of that principle of economy proper to the traditional techniques of landscaping. Leaving things as they are or how they could evolve as much as possible, presupposes a project based on the study of reality and critical judgment with respect to the conditions and timing of the transformations taking place. A project capable of triggering processes that do not tend towards unattainable completeness but rather articulate decisions (to be understood as the assumption of responsibility within an approach that is essentially a negotiating and adaptive one) and actions (which include the problem of construction, management and maintenance techniques) related to the stretched time of the transformations of a place, between nature and culture. A project capable of working even with the unexpected.

In relation to these new commitments, it becomes central to retrace the structures and figures of the spatial imaginary that, as architects, we are

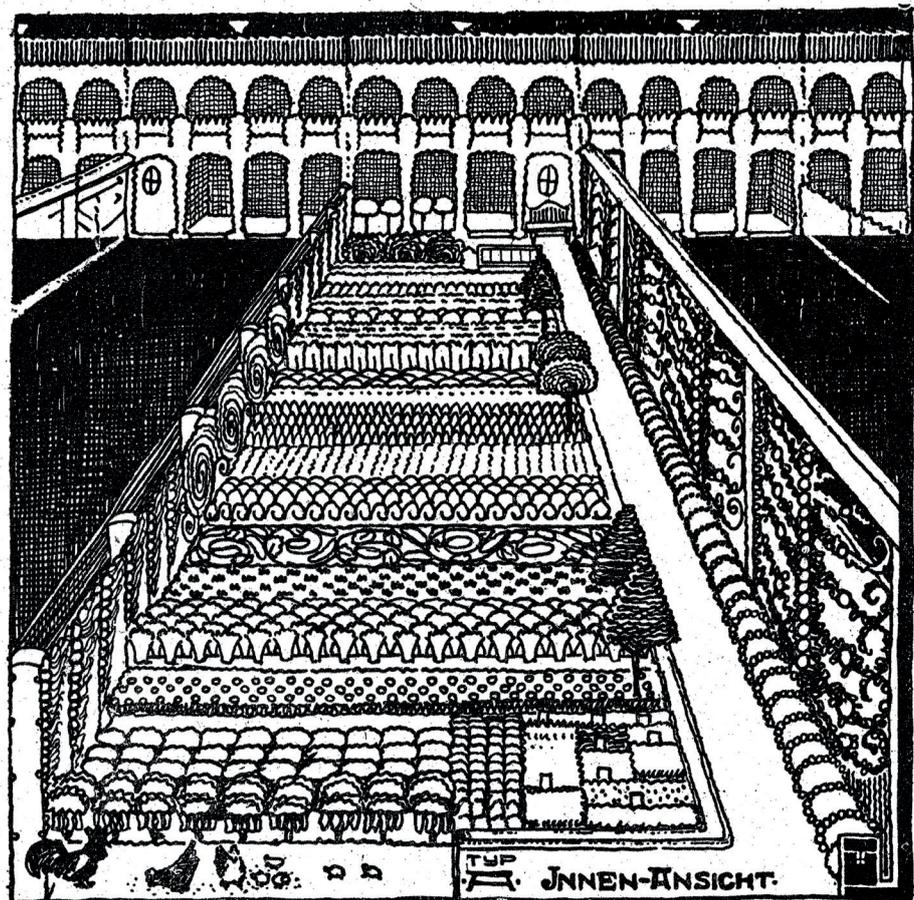


Fig. 1
Leberecht Migge, Scheme for the Kleinsiedlungen, the rear garden. Image taken from the booklet "Jedermann Selbstversorger", Jena 1918

called to delineate and make fully understandable in public discussion, with particular regard to the dimension of *naturalness*, between the individual sphere and the system of collective and public relations. But it also becomes essential to specify the lexicon that, in relation to this commitment, is a fundamental tool to make the disciplinary contribution in the public debate effective. As architects, the pandemic has confronted us with the awareness that the places where we live are a small portion of the entire planet and the definition and evaluation of the transformations for which we are responsible can only cross different scales, from the microscopic scale of a virus or micro-organisms responsible for essential biological processes such as biocenosis, to the macroscopic scale of architecture, city and land. Alexander von Humboldt (Wulf 2017) had already understood this dialectic two centuries ago, coming to represent for the first time our Earth as a large living organism where everything is connected in a dense network of dependencies to be investigated at multiple scales (von Humboldt 1845).

The responsibility from which we cannot escape is to recognize, highlight and prevent some very dangerous drifts: trivializations (for example, rethinking the design of public land as a mechanical transcription of the geometry of the spacing); hyper-technological leaps forward (which feed the infatuation for digital technologies regardless of the social, cultural and above all spatial implications of their pervasive application); simplifications of the complex biological and symbolic relationship between nature and architecture (how to propose plant, green or flowery separating scenes, regardless of the appropriateness with respect to places and the possibility of an effective care and management of plants).

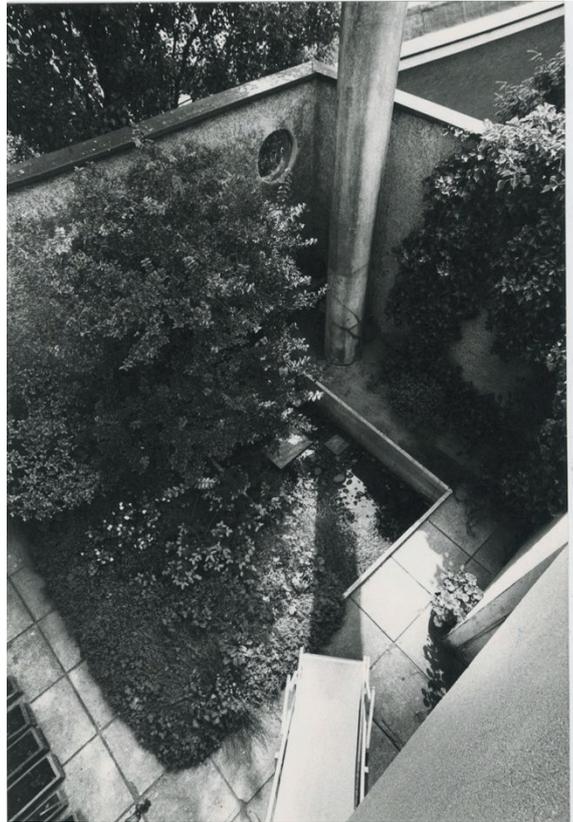


Fig. 2

Patio on the roof-garden of the Figini house in the journalists' village in Milan, 1933-35.

Two metaphors: the garden and the forest

Paradigm of this virtuous interaction between man and the environment based on the values of *care* is undoubtedly the garden, understood both as a complex construction that is generated by the slow settling down in a place of intentional transformations and maintenance interventions affecting the shape of the soil, vegetation and equipment; and as an aesthetic construction (literary and figurative) with many meanings, connected to the idea of space in architecture and its relationship with the space of nature (Grimal 1974). With the new awareness that, as Gilles Clement (2012), reminds us, the first garden is the food garden snatched from the forest, born with the sedentarisation (Pollan 1991) of mankind. In this view the forest is a myth: a quintessence of nature not influenced by man, a space of uncertainty in which anything can happen, as opposed to the city, culture and history.

Today the reflection is moving beyond this oppositional vision. The contemporary crisis and revision of the representations of the natural world and the study of the stratifications of natural systems in the context of ecological processes (both along the time line of transformations and in the depth of the possible sections that cross competing systems) has made it possible to understand how the interaction between non-anthropogenic and anthropic factors is one of the main causes at the origin of some characteristic biotopes, in particular forests (Küster 2009). The new centrality assigned to the paradigm of care has highlighted the need to rethink our way of being present and active in the processes that modify our habitats. Human beings transform the world to inhabit it. But so do other living beings, both plant and animal. In one of his recent essays, Emanuele Coccia (2018) proposes a *phenomenology of the medley*, of living beings of which the plant world (and the forest in particular) is a metaphor, suggesting that the world should be thought of as a design work for other species in which territoriality, cohabitation, mutual adaptation are the dynamics that preside over



Fig. 3
The park of Villa Fiorita in Saronno by Pietro Porcinai, 1952-58

transformation and impose a radical revision of the ethical and technical dimension of design.

Leberecht Migge, Luigi Figini, Pietro Porcinai

In the face of these demands, never more than at the moment it is necessary to reiterate the centrality of a project idea which, even in the field of landscape architecture, does not renounce questions about its tools and its role on an ethical and political level, especially in relation to the dialectic between innovation and tradition in the face of the changed conditions caused by the pandemic. To achieve this aim I believe it is important to return to reflect on some architectural texts of modernity in order to search for lines of continuity, fractures, radical transformations and unexpected returns within the disciplinary culture. With the conviction that architecture, with respect to the ecological challenge, cannot renounce what Tomàs Maldonado called *critical awareness of technical process* (1970) In the following are a few ideas.

Leberecht Migge (1881-1935)(Haney 2010), working in Germany on the design of the *Großsiedlungen* in Frankfurt am Main and Berlin with leading modern architects of the time², took up some of the results of research conducted in the world of nature sciences (in particular the contribution of Raoul Francé³) to outline a biotechnical approach to the design of new settlements integrating homes and gardens through innovative infrastructures. A new approach to the planning and design of open spaces at different scales based on a circular biological model that outlines new possible interactions of the inhabitants with land, water, air and light for food production and waste management that is a strong precursor of the issues currently on the agenda (Migge 1919).

Migge's technical-scientific and poetic approach is also at the basis of Luigi Figini's reflections (1903-84) published in the «Domus» *L'elemento verde e l'architettura*, recently printed by Ornella Selvafolta (Figini 1950). Conceived as a repertoire of references and technical solutions in a series

that, due to the sectorial nature of the themes proposed, is in a strand that can be traced back to manuals, the volume is proposed as a true manifesto of a different idea of the relationship between nature and architecture. Figini works around an idea of the garden as a space for reconciliation between man and nature and identifies the physical and symbolic form of the hortus conclusus as the ideal solution for addressing the question of a re-founded relationship between the green element and the home. For Figini – after rationalism – «painting and poetry of our time echo the twofold motif of this invasion of external greenery into the interior of man's home, of this evasion of “interiors” into the external vegetable/greenery “medium” in houses – houses in the green» (Figini 1950, p. 25). The house in the Journalists' Village, which Figini designed and built for himself between 1933 and 1935, represents the manifesto work of this poetics of domestic architecture focused on the relationship, both physical and symbolic, between architecture and nature.

In Pietro Porcinai's work (1910-1986) (Treib, Latini 2010) technique and art provide as well the operational tools for a design capable of measuring itself against the different scales of the landscape, from the close scale of the object and the texture of the materials to the wider scale of the landscape. After World War II Porcinai was invited on several occasions to discuss with architects and town planners the importance of garden and landscape design in the construction of the contemporary inhabited world. In his writings and public speeches he strongly advocates the need for collaboration between the arts and sciences for the formation of landscapes in which a synthesis between beauty and utility can be fully achieved, in keeping with Ernesto Nathan Rogers' well-known formula, «to the extremes of their tension, where architecture can be defined as the Usefulness of Beauty or the Beauty of Usefulness» (Rogers 1953, p.312).

Notes

- ¹ Among the many contributions it should be noted: Giorgia Serughetti, *Democratizzare la cura / curare la democrazia*, Nottetempo, Milan 2020.
- ² Among others: Ernst May, Bruno Taut e Martin Wagner e Martin Elsaesser.
- ³ Francé has had a considerable influence on many exponents of the Modern Movement, as highlighted in Detlef Mertins, “Living in a Jungle: Mies, Organic Architecture and the Art of City Building”, in Phyllis Lambert (a cura), *Mies van der Rohe in America*, CCA-Montreal, Whitney Museum of American Art-New York, Hatje Cantz Publisher Montreal 2001, pp. 591-641.

Bibliography

- CLÉMENT, G., (2014) – *Manifeste du Tiers paysage*. Editions Sujet/Objet, Paris
- CLÉMENT, G., (2012) – *Breve storia del giardino*, Quodlibet, Macerata
- CORNER, J. (1999) – *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J.
- COCCIA E., (2018) – *La vita delle piante. Metafisica della mescolanza*, Il Mulino, Bologna
- FIGINI L., (2012) – *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione* (ristampa anastatica dell'edizione 1950 edited by O. Selvafolta), Libraccio Editore, Milan
- GRIMAL P., (1974) – *L'arte dei giardini. Una breve Storia* (1974), Donzelli, Rome
- HANEY D. H., (2010) – *When Modern Was Green: Life and Work of Landscape Architect Leberecht Migge*, Routledge, Londra
- VON HUMBOLDT A., (1845) – *Kosmos, Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*
- KÜSTER H., (2009) – *Storia dei boschi*, Bollati Boringhieri, Milan
- MALDONADO T., (1970) – *La speranza progettuale*, Einaudi Turin
- Detlef Mertins, (2001) – “Living in a Jungle: Mies, Organic Architecture and the Art of City Building”, in Phyllis Lambert (a cura), *Mies van der Rohe in America*, CCA-Montreal, Whitney Museum of American Art-New York, Hatje Cantz Publisher Montreal 2001, pp. 591-641
- MOSBACH C., (2010) – *Traversées/Crossings*. ICI Consultants, Paris 2010
- MIGGE L., (1999) – *Der soziale Garten. Das grüne Manifest* (1919), Mann (Gebr.), Berlino
- POLLAN M., (1991) – *2nd Nature. A gardener's Education*, Grove Press, New York
- ROGERS E.N., (1953) – *Struttura dell'architettura*, in «aut-aut», n. 16, pp. 310-319
- SERUGHETTI G., (2020) – *Democratizzare la cura / curare la democrazia*, Nottetempo, Milan
- TREIB M. e LATINI L. (edited by) (2015) – *Pietro Porcinai and the Landscape of Modern Italy*, Routledge, Londra
- TRONTO J. C., (2015) – *Who cares?: How to Reshape a Democratic Polititics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY
- WULF A., (2017) – *L'invenzione della natura. Le avventure di Alexander von Humboldt, l'eroe perduto della scienza*, Luiss, Rome.

Sara Protasoni, is an associate professor in Landscape Architecture at the Politecnico di Milano and coordinator of the master's degree course in Sustainable Architecture and Landscape Design at the Politecnico di Milano - Polo di Piacenza, within the AUIC school of the Politecnico di Milano. She graduated in Architecture in Milan in 1988. After attending a Masters in the USA at Syracuse University, in 1997 she obtained a PhD in Architectural and Urban Design in Milan. She has taught at the Politecnico di Milano and the luav in Venice. She has collaborated with various trade magazines, including DOMUS and CASABELLA and was editor of the RASSEGNA magazine directed by Vittorio Gregotti.

At the Politecnico di Milano, he combines his teaching with intense design and theoretical research on landscape architecture. She is the author of several monographs and more than one hundred essays, published in volumes and magazines of the sector.