

OBR

Dialogue with Michel Desvigne

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Michel Desvigne
Paolo Brescia
Tommaso Principi

PB We would like to start from the idea of outdoor space in our contemporary age. The *park* is a nineteenth-century concept, basically invented to compensate the high density of large cities. Parks were originally intended as natural oases as opposed to urban settings. Contemporary city parks instead emerged as attractors, as urban life nodal points with novel purposes in terms of frequentation, meeting, and exchange, spaces that are almost more urban than the cities themselves. Parks are not antithetic to urban spaces. On the contrary they can become odes to the city. After all, when we worked together at the Central Park of Prato, you always said that those three hectares cleared by the demolition of the old hospital could not be considered a void but rather a space in continuity with the urban structure.¹ Working with you we have understood how much the contemporary outdoor space may rise to become a super-urban place, where anything can be and happen, perhaps even more so than in the city.

MD As architects, you have a certain distance from the *métier*. You are not landscape architects, so you ask questions that surprise me and force me to think, and I like that. For a long time in Europe, city administrations were subject to compartmentalization: the department in charge of green areas was separate from the department in charge of mobility—that is, of streets and squares. And this already explains much of the problem. In such a framework a space can either be a park or a street, there are no nuances. This distinction has historically produced caricatures of the nineteenth-century pseudo-naturalist parks in European cities. Things are different in America: on college campuses, for example, an intermediate typology has been conceived. We can all picture Harvard, with its lawns, trees, zigzagging paths, and its constant human presence—those are authentic urban public spaces. But we can say that they represent an intermediate typology: they are both squares and garden. And I find this very interesting.

For the last twenty years with my work, I have been trying to offer intermediate typologies. I must say that architects, on the other hand, often activate a kind of automatism that prompts them to work only with the square typology. But that

does not always work, especially in newly built neighborhoods, where squares remain desperately empty. Yet even a garden alone would not suffice, because it would not host the activities one would expect. Therefore, we must promote the study of intermediate typologies, as we are doing together in Prato: spaces defined by urban design but also by the presence of nature. After all, we are always working on urban spaces experiencing a transformation: former industrial, commercial, and port brownfields, areas that are increasingly being abandoned, becoming urban reservoirs. This is where the public spaces of tomorrow will be born. Time is important in these transformation projects: we are talking decades, and we must support these changes with public spaces. The idea of process is key here, and the definition of these spaces is connected to their becoming of a part of the city. This is what is going to happen in Prato: urban traces accumulated over time that live through the transformation of public space. It is also the case of what I call *préfiguration*. The redevelopment of Île Seguin, a project we carried out with Jean Nouvel where the Renault plant once was, involved the development of a public space with a ten-year construction site. During this time, we created a “garden of prefiguration” that worked with the traces of history, inviting the public to discover this place and its past. These *préfigurations* are precisely what activate the transformation of the mental picture we have of places, and thus also of their function. The introduction of vegetation to this site was carefully thought through. One may ask what the meaning is of introducing nature into a public space that is undergoing transformation. As you rightly pointed out in your question, this is a very different process from the creation of nineteenth-century nature parks: what we are talking about here is the transformation of a public space set inside an urban fabric. On Île Seguin I refused to adopt the romantic gaze projecting the “good” nature reconquering the “bad” industrial city: this is a pointless cliché. I was interested in inhabiting the existing platform, that concrete foundation preserving the memory of the industrial production once inside the city. So we filled the large industrial basins with vegetation, which precisely due to its temporariness, was important because it did not

stand as a reconquest but as an ephemeral reality. Another project working with traces of memory is the University of Luxembourg in Esch-sur-Alzette, set in a former steel furnace. We designed the public spaces. Here too it would have been naïve to deploy a romantic salvific nature opposed to an industrial dimension. Instead, we decided to create small urban forests set in a mineral soil composed of a terra-cotta brick flooring. Furthermore, we wanted to reference the complex water circulation system that was used to cool the old furnace by introducing large pools with aquatic vegetation growing in them. For the students of the Cité des Sciences, we didn’t envision a bucolic space but rather an exciting space with a character reflecting the pathos of industry, of construction, with also a vegetation corner section, but above all capable of highlighting the ground. The bricks do not constitute a covering but rather form a geography: that is why they are set directly into the sand, a technique like the one used for the historical paving of Siena.

Ground is also key in the redevelopment of Marseille’s port that we designed with Norman Foster. It is a large-scale project that is not only about the port but also about a concatenation of public spaces in the center of the city. While rethinking the old port, I couldn’t envision trees. And after all, in the entire port area we found only one old fig tree, which of course we kept, that was surviving on the water leaking from a public toilet. Apart from that specific tree, we decided not to plant any other trees in the old port area: to think of turning that huge space—with the geographical structure of a stone quarry—into a simple park would have been too “mannered.” I have always read that area as an absolutely mineral space: white, hot, and bright. Those arriving at the port of Marseille are struck by its dazzling light, the scorching heat: that is its beauty.

Since the project includes not only the port but a network of public spaces across the city, we proposed a large-scale system of parks, whose length is equal to that of the port. So going back to your question: where is the park in Marseille? The park in Marseille is not the nineteenth-century park, but it is a concatenation of parks: it is a piece of geography meandering into the port area, it is an “amplified geography.”

So, in short: first, we are foolishly conditioned by administrative structures, boundaries that can be trespassed. Then the cliché of nature within the city is not apparent, and so for me nature must really become part of the urban fabric. Lastly, I mentioned the ground, a theme that is of fundamental importance for me. Milan is a city that fascinates me: I think of the large granite slabs embedded in sand as a component of the city’s heritage. I like the fact that the stones remain, that people accept them, even if they are certainly not practical... This kind of ground is not a covering, but a geological soil, a geography.

PB Listening to you, one could think that the common notion of *park* is inadequate to express what you are describing. To me the word *park* refers to an area governed by a set of dos and don’ts, often fenced in, with opening times and a code of behavior. It reminds one of a nineteenth-century idea. Don’t you find, on the other hand, that the notion of *garden*, despite being more romantic and perhaps slightly offhand, encapsulating an idea of ritual, of practice, of cultivation, of tending, of gardening, of “taking care,” would be more apt to represent the conceptual foundations of the *res publica*, of the common good—in short, of public space?

MD That of the landscape architect is a recent profession: in the postwar period it began with architects such as Michel Corajoud. For our generation, gardens were unmentionable, because they were exactly what was expected of us. The landscape architect did not carry an urban vision. He was only required to design the “pretty garden,” the small plot of nature inside the city, with a fence and a bench: an object. Just like for you to think of architecture as an object is something terrible, because it contradicts your vision of the city. Think of Renzo Piano’s work: if he is commissioned a building, even today, he will still draw the neighborhood, he cannot help but set the single building within an urban or landscape perspective. Somewhat symmetrically, for me gardens were banned. For those of my generation, driven by a desire to participate in the transformation of the city and its territory, gardens were seen as a middle-class, lesser thing. That is

why I have always admired and been influenced by the great American park systems, which comply to geological features—with rivers for example. Like Manhattan's Riverside Park or Olmsted's Central Park. It fascinates me how in America they have been able to recognize the intensity and importance of natural geography, which becomes territorial structure. The ultimate archetype of my work is Thomas Jefferson's orthogonal grid. In my large-scale projects on the territory, I have always tried to read natural geography as a framework for the city. We work in a different historical context than Olmsted, of course: he was building cities, we are transforming places.

So, for a long time, no gardens, they were taboo! However, nowadays my interest in land transformation does not stop me from thinking about gardens. As you said, the garden is connected to a practice. When I think of a garden, I think of ancient Egypt, or Roman gardens, which in French we call *jardin vivrier*, where food essentials are grown: vegetables, fish in water tanks, an orchard. A garden is also a place of hard work: the land must be plowed, fertilized, irrigated, vegetables must be planted again every year, fruit trees must be picked. This is a garden where practices must be put in place. For me, a garden is a place of action. I must admit that gardens fascinate me these days. During the lockdown I have been fantasizing about my ideal garden: it would be a small universe where with these practices one could live independently.

PB Your words about gardens remind me of a passage from *Collection of Sand*, in which Italo Calvino makes a memorable description of Katsura's garden, underlining how the paths are composed of 1716 stones, which require 1716 steps, and 1716 points of view: "Each stone corresponds to a footstep, and at each step there is a landscape [...] at each step one's gaze meets different perspectives."² But what happens if we juxtapose the structuralist gaze of the 1970s Calvino to the twenty-first-century vitalist gaze? We would probably discover that our idea of movement has changed from an *energetic* understanding of movement—read as the application of a force on a point of origin or of support—to a more *rhizomatic* one—seen as something joining a pre-existing energetic flow. Let's consider contemporary sports, for instance (surfing, hang gliding, sailing), which require entering into a pre-existing wave, with the person placing herself inside it and offering as little resistance as possible—and not really operating as a source of any effort. In practice, Calvino's *discrete* garden as opposed to the contemporary *continuous* garden. Or even, if we want to go for a Gilles Deleuze interpretation,

as Pierluigi Nicolin suggests in "I due giardini" ("The Two Gardens"), a new field of immanence articulated by a heterogeneous language in which to feel part of a whole.³ Could this be a key to understanding contemporary landscape?

MD I will try to answer your question with the concept of different scales for the same phenomenon. I would like to use as an example the project we developed with KPF at Ōtemachi, in Tokyo. Ōtemachi is a financial area of the city with high-rise buildings not far from the Imperial Palace and its large gardens. Recently the city plan has allowed an increase in population density, provided that a primary forest area was inserted in the urban context. At first, I wasn't sure what that meant, but then I learned that in the 1980s the Emperor of Japan, in understanding that Tokyo was to expand tremendously to the detriment of its antique forests, decided to transfer parts of these primary forests inside the gardens of the Imperial Palace. They literally transferred all that could be moved—trees, soil, roots, microorganisms—replanting them all in the gardens of the palace. Whatever project is developed in Ōtemachi today must do the same: re-create the natural environment of the primary forest that once surrounded Tokyo. This applied to our project of demolition and reconstruction of a tower in Ōtemachi, and we had to plant out almost one hectare of forest. Since the project was due to take years, we decided, working with the botanists of the Imperial Gardens, to take advantage of the extended duration of the project by precultivating this small forest in the mountains outside Tokyo and prefiguring the entire garden, with every tree positioned according to the final layout. Then we moved everything to the center of Ōtemachi in one day: at the foot of this new tower, close to the Imperial Palace, there is now our primary forest. What does this mean? It means that the small public space we worked on is correlated with the great gardens of the Imperial Palace, which in turn are correlated with the surrounding landscape: it may seem a purely theoretical observation, but that is actually how things are, because we are talking about tangible matter. In fact, from an ecological point of view, we can say that these forests represent "Japanese steps," to use Calvino's metaphor, on a different scale: the biological scale of living beings—insects, birds, humans—circulating from one garden to the other. After all, Japanese gardens reveal a deep understanding of the territory: think of Kyoto, where the gardens belong to a network of monasteries connected by paths and where the large scale of the territory is evoked inside the gardens themselves. Japanese gardens simultaneously contain different scales: a miniature landscape paired with the real landscape above and beyond the wall.

Another project that lends itself to talking about scales, which are part of the answer to your question, is the project of Saclay, near Paris, on which we have been working for several years with Belgian urbanist Xaveer de Geyter, with an assignment regarding large public spaces also inside the urban structure. At the beginning I was limited by my predilection for an amplified geography: I wanted to give greater width to the existing woods, but I could not find other perspectives. A few years later we realized that we had to add a structure to the territory, a spine. Town planners thus designed neighborhoods that were more compact and connected by a seven-kilometer-long system of parks. But I realized that was not enough. It needed a smaller scale of actual public spaces. After thirty years of work, I understood how there is not a homothetic relationship between the different scales of landscape: what makes sense on the scale of the territory does not automatically make sense on the scale of a park system, or on a public space scale. They are almost independent correlations. It is not about the large becoming small or vice versa; they are different scales that require different types of attention, precision, and languages. But a mutual relation between different scales of landscape does exist. For example: we meet in a public space, we walk inside a system of parks to reach the university, and then we take the subway in the amplified geography of the territory to get back home. A landscape must therefore have a coherence on all its scales: the latter express a certain permanence of the territory. I accept the idea that a building may have a reduced life or that a bench must be replaced every ten years, but I cannot expect a geography of a territory to radically change. When I lived in the Villa Medici in Rome, I was fascinated by the thought that the floor of my studio at Muro Torto was two thousand years old. I was seduced by the perception that that floor had always been there. The idea that a project is determined by the permanent transformation of traces, of the preexistent, or better, of the persistent, is great. This is what we are doing together in Prato.

TP Let's move on to a more specifically urban subject. We are very interested in your concept of *lisière*, border, boundary: it is a concept you started to define when you began studying the shift from urban to agricultural spaces. A *lisière* is not simply a park, but rather a structured system composed of vegetable patches, greenhouses, ponds. Do you think that this system can redefine the connections between the agricultural and urban dimension to prevent urban sprawl?

MD Today we observe the damage caused by the urban sprawl that has been occurring since the postwar period, especially in France, where the idea that everyone had to own their house has produced irreparable damage: almost half of the French population lives in small *pavillons* out of the city, far from shops, schools, and offices. This is a serious problem, characteristic of complex societies. In France on the one hand, we have metropolises with a long-term urban vision based on the transformation of industrial and commercial areas, and on the other we have the urban sprawl that remains a social hazard: just think of the *gilets jaune* situation. When these areas were built, luckily there already were regulations and precise limitations in place governing the relationship between the city and the countryside. But the result today is the total lack of public and collective space: it's all a sum of small private objects, devoid of a collective dimension, with no sense of pride in belonging to something bigger.

We need to find solutions. I am not referring to political solutions, but to tools that we have as architects and landscape designers. The idea of *lisière* cannot be applied to infrastructures or the residential areas that have become too consolidated and too costly to transform. Where we can operate more effectively is along the borders, between the agricultural world and the urban world, creating a new intermediate scale. Sprawl came about with the industrialization of agriculture, with the formation of those huge expanses of cultivated land required by mechanization. The result is that there is no relation between the countryside and the city. But by transforming the agricultural practices along the boundaries of the city, an intermediate scale can be created, a public space at the right scale. It does not necessarily have to be a square: how many new squares remain uselessly void in city suburbs! On the other hand, this tamed and usable countryside can be converted into new public space. There are houses, schools, pedestrian routes, sport areas, collective orchards and vegetable gardens. It is an intermediate landscape, with urban functions and environmental services, such as areas for rainwater management, phytoremediation ponds, biomass production. We are applying this vision in Saclay, a large engineering science campus that has become a great laboratory. There are rainwater basins, all the environmental compensations required with the construction of a new district, experimental areas for schools, public spaces, and small areas dedicated to agriculture. With this approach you build avoiding the council housing syndrome, the syndrome we cultivated in France during the 1970s by building enormous

edifices next to empty fields. I am sure that this could even become a social project: working in Grand Paris, the metropolis that connects Paris to its 130 surrounding towns, we have identified hundreds of kilometers of *lisière* where we can intervene.

PB For us this idea of *border* is almost a manifesto: your urgency to conceive a project on a geographic scale to redefine the boundary between the rural world and the urban periphery for us provides the occasion to affirm that we need to start again from that border, from the city outskirts. The “thick border” you propose reminds us of Stephen Jay Gould’s ecological distinction between two types of margins, the *boundary* and *border*: a boundary would be a closed margin that allows a species to preserve itself from intermingling, while a border would be a porous margin where different groups can interact and exchange proliferate. The boundary marks an end, while the border creates a relation. But if we think of a border as a limit, in the classic sense of the Latin word *limes*, that border becomes the beginning—and not the end—of something, and we could work out a possible approach to enhance the exchanges between the urban and agricultural worlds starting from the outskirts, the thick border of the city.

MD In another life I would like to be a geographer. I realize that it is very hard to see reality: our mental construction of reality often makes us blind. What is the outskirts-to-city ratio? Today we would say it is almost 80 percent. Take Paris, for instance: it has two million inhabitants, but its recently formed urban surroundings have ten million inhabitants. We are so dazzled by the center that we almost forget about the outskirts. So when you say that it is on this limit that the city begins, you are right: that is where we should work.

I would like to tell you about something that happened to me during the COVID lockdown. I’ve been living on Île Saint-Louis on the Seine in Paris for a year. During the lockdown, the riverside was obviously empty. To me, in the absence of a human scale, that had become a landscape with no limits. Once the lockdown was over, the area rapidly repopulated. The fact that people returned to it so easily made me think that public space does not require that much programming. After the lockdown people were happy to be outdoors, meeting by the river. I must say that in those days I did something I had never done in the twenty years I had been living in Paris, that is, ride my bike up the river for 50 kilometers. While crossing the Île-de-France I realized that the riverbank is not always seen as public space but at times also as

a backyard of the most desolate places on the city outskirts.

Progress has been made in Paris: the mayor Anne Hidalgo has eliminated car traffic in favor of public space, but we are still a far cry from the American system of geologic parks or of the “amplified geography” we mentioned earlier. For me this is a project that should be undertaken straight away: to give space to landscape for tens of kilometers along the river can generate a park system and a potential *lisière*.

We need a geographical vision and an interest in public space. This way the backyard can become a new front yard. This is what we have done with Christian de Portzamparc for the Louvre in Lens: we have reversed the city, starting from the rear.

TP In Milan we have the exact opposite situation, but it is not working anyway. The cycle lane that starts from the center of the city continuing along the Naviglio della Martesana, for example, crosses a series of small urban centers, such as Cernusco sul Naviglio and Gorgonzola, whose main front overlooks the Naviglio canal. Sadly, however, getting there by car one does not appreciate the historical and naturalistic aspect. This is because the Naviglio no longer serves the purpose of transporting people and goods, and the motorway has inverted the mechanism. But going back to your poetics and in particular to how you relate the living dimension of the landscape, I remember when we first met in Paris in 2002. Among the many things we talked about in that café at Centre Pompidou, I remember you said that your takeaway from the period you collaborated with Renzo Piano was the idea that a project is a process that is never finished, that must be accompanied and taken care of even after it has been realized. In our case, an architecture project is built, but in your case, a landscape project is made by time, and with time comes change. It is a perennial becoming.

MD Working with vegetation, with living beings, clearly and inevitably implies the time factor that is necessary to see plants grow: a newly made garden is different from a garden with history. The *organic* aspect is unquestionable when you deal with a material that is alive, but this dimension is at play even in processes: if there exists this awareness of time that works on the growth of a place, it becomes impossible to design everything in one single passage. We must conceive the project considering the temporal dimension: therefore not as a finished drawing but as an open and adaptable one.

To clarify: if you make a garden where trees will grow, you must consider this growth. We must proceed in layers from topography to vegetation:

the project is not a fixed image but a process. Even the city is not fixed but rather is in constant evolution. And this is true for both territories and buildings: the *organic* dimension is pervasive. Therefore, we must dedicate more attention to our awareness of transformation than to permanence. We might think of it as frustrating to completely lose control of the process, but for me it is almost more stimulating. I enjoy the pleasure of observation, of the unexpected that shifts into the awareness that not everything can be controlled. At the same time there is a paradox: topography—like geography—also retains a certain permanence: the orientation of the sun, the water that follows a slope, top and bottom, north and south. These are absolute elements that maintain a certain stability in the process of transformation. As I said, I could not stand a city that did not have some form of permanence.

Therefore the landscape projects are projects with a double dimension, of both transformation and permanence, with means working on the invariants, but also leaving space to variables, accepting nonlinear, unpredictable, changeable evolutions.

TP In Iceland, Roni Horn has worked specifically on the meaning of time stratification, as we can see in her *geology* images, the *outcrops*...

MD Yes, I believe that you need a certain sensibility in order to observe a territory. Every site has a specific magic to it: something that is not connected to rational thought but to being able to feel the scale, to sense the proportion, to understand what it is about. Perceiving the roots and the elementary characters of a territory requires this sensibility: these aspects that are rather taboo in the theory of our work. But on the contrary, I think this sensibility is key and requires attention and practice. A project may be more or less beautiful, but a beautiful drawing in the wrong scale is simply stupid. It may look good in a photo but for me it has no value.

TP I find the juxtaposition of your design process to painting and sculpture very interesting. Trees, grass, water, and floorings are elements that with variations can generate infinite landscapes. Aiming for lightness, exact definition of scale, and the turning down of completeness seem some of the premises from which the elements of your projects unfold. Are there other founding principles?

MD The fact of having few elements but infinite combinations is an aspect also at play in living environments, where recurring elements can be endlessly combined. So if we are speaking

of landscape, in the end we understand that it can be made with little and therefore the project, which ultimately is a drawing, is even more important. Our drawings are not like those done by architects. There is no full or void. We work with a more complex matter, with a variable porosity and density, even if it is always about space and proportions, that are the variables that interest me the most. In architecture—but also in landscape design—there are spaces that due to their proportions generate a physical pleasure or a particular emotion. Ultimately, it’s simply beauty. It’s difficult to talk about it. While discussing about it with my friend and aesthetics philosopher Gilles Tiberghien, I realized this is a taboo, a bit like that sensibility we mentioned earlier. There are spaces where there is *something*, and other spaces where that *something* is not there. When you recognize that *something*, the pleasure is immense.

We have just concluded a project at Le Havre, a reconstructed port by Auguste Perret. Perret had an extraordinary control of proportions; the beauty of the city that he rebuilt is precisely connected to this perfect sense of proportions of his. Our intervention consisted in a quay: 1 square kilometer of grass, tarmac, and cement. We worked eight years on this project and I am very pleased with the result: each element is in a relationship of scale with the port, the sea, and the city. The proportion is right; the design is precise. I keep on practicing my understanding of proportions: I try to understand how far a mountain is, how tall a building is, how wide a river, or how distant the opposite shore of a lake is. It is a permanent measuring exercise. I use this library of references to understand what space will be produced in a project, making comparisons. It is a constant training of the eye. Nowadays with computers and photographs we risk losing this gaze. At our studio, for example, we have developed an automatism: we systematically use Google Earth to compare the project we are developing with squares of similar size. We get some indications, which however do not correspond to the physical perception of the space, and that is why I always return on-site, to hand-draw and get back in control of perception. This awareness and this control of proportions are ultimately what determines beauty. Renzo Piano now talks a lot about beauty: not in a commercial way, but with respect and honesty, and I think this is an important lesson.

Then if I think of the project we are developing together for the Central Park of Prato, we both know that there is more work to be done on proportions: we have come up with a system of “rooms” following urban traces, and this works, but we should verify the proportions on-site. In Switzerland, for example, before erecting a new

building it is mandatory to position a set of stakes re-creating what will be the final volume, a kind of volumetric ghost that allows everyone to be fully aware of the visual impact, and possibly take a position against the project. Being able to observe in advance a real simulation of the volume about to be built is essential. This is what I would like to do with you in Prato, like when in the eighteenth century in England picturesque gardens were designed, simulating the project on-site using poles and fabrics to perceive its spatial quality. Designing the project in 1:1 scale, directly on the ground, would be a good practice for us, too. We often work too much in the abstract. We need the real. This is why I am interested in the relationship between reality and its representation. To control the spatial emotion.

PB What you say introduces a subject that is very important to us architects: that of vision and its representation. When we start a new project, we meet around the same table and together we start to elaborate a certain vision. Since it is a collective, dialogic process based on reciprocal listening, the results are generally more interesting than the original individual expectations. Then when it comes to representing that given vision, we start to register a certain distance between what you want to say and how you say it, between the *what* and the *how*. We are still too bound to a canonic vocabulary of representation of architecture that is no longer able to represent reality, especially if the reality you are investigating is that of the future. What we are looking for is a coincidence between the vision and its representation, a bit like an artist would do, who thinks and makes his artwork. For this reason, we say that the architect must be an expert of reality that is not only what is, but also what will be. In this way, architecture will be “already there, since forever.” I mean an architecture that belongs to our time but that is perceived as if it had always been there, overlapping the present to the past and future.

MD It seems to me that all representations are wrong but necessary: models, perspectives, plans, sections—we need them all, but we must combine these tools, and I insist we must find the way of working more on-site. We must work with flexibility, because every site has surprises in store. The way the world is organized today, maintaining a certain degree of flexibility is not so simple. There is certainly a greater efficiency, perhaps due to digital technology or to our thinking, which is indeed more organized, but also more crystallized.

PB A few years ago, we participated in a competition for a residential complex in Milanofiori, whose objective was to create a sense of living

in a setting that still wasn’t urban at the time, on the southern outskirts of Milan.⁴ Our choice was to draw a sense of living from the specificity of that particular place, characterized by a small wood that for us was a paradigmatic example of that indefinite area between the city and the countryside. So we thought of creating a symbiosis between architecture and that specific landscape, a synthesis of artificial and natural elements that would generate that quality of living and a sense of belonging in the inhabitants. The field of application of this synthesis is the facade understood as a space open to public-private exchange. Basically, the facade no longer operates as a simple shell but rather takes on a third dimension—depth—becoming a space of transition from indoors to outdoors, where fragments of landscape can become part of the indoor space while also extending new ways of living into the outdoor space. In other words, a facade that no longer is a two-dimensional vertical layer but a buffer that dilates, becoming a three-dimensional inhabitable space. Today we can say that that facade is a space that is alive, containing winter gardens as well as living space. It inspires the sense of *taking care*, that ultimately is the deepest meaning of *dwelling*. Which brings us back to what you were saying about the practices taking place in a garden. The sense of *dwelling* conceived as *taking care*, which is similar to what you apply to landscape, could perhaps apply not only to homes and gardens but even to cities, if you think about the concept of *common ground*. I must confess that we started formulating these hypotheses after we met, understanding the *taking care* attitude toward landscape.

MD The concept you talk about, of the facade becoming an in-between indoor-outdoor space is fundamental for me, and I believe that, as of today, it has not been explored enough. In many projects today the indoors-outdoors shift is very poorly handled, with holes in walls with no transition whatsoever. Your concept of a buffer as an expansion of the facade reminds me of some Asian architectures, Japanese architecture for example, where the public-private and outdoors-indoors interaction is assured by a series of progressive thresholds between landscape and architecture. I like your idea of a facade like a thick border of the building. It is an approach that can be extended to the city.

PB Over time we have developed an idea of living that has more and more to do with a practical, active, substantial dimension, so we try to shift our focus from the house-object to the subject inhabiting that house. The best way to

express this concept, I believe, is by establishing the equation that the dweller stands to his dwelling as the gardener stands to his garden (Dweller : Dwelling = Gardener : Garden). Just like the gardener is kept inside his garden (which without the gardener’s work would be scrub), the dweller is called on to intervene in his own living space (which requires tending from its inhabitant, otherwise it would be a hotel room). How do you see this correspondence between dweller and gardener or between a dwelling and a garden?

MD I think that this should be the core of a progress in the field of architecture. We have generations of French architects fascinated by facades, but they are just following trends, producing merely stylistic solutions. Today the concept of sustainability produces a new academicism, but I see little intellectual generosity toward the subject we are facing. There are admirable examples of 1970s French architecture, such as that by Jean Renaudie, who proposed large open spaces in continuity with the geography and topography of places. Other times you can find a good indoors-outdoors interaction in vernacular architecture, like in Ticino where I am now. Here I found interesting historical situations where the generations that have inhabited these places have progressively added a small roof, a courtyard, a loggia, expanding this relation between outdoors and indoors, something that is often lacking in contemporary architecture.

TP Michel, we would like to conclude this conversation starting from the idea according to which in the modern age we have envisioned Earth as a space that humankind could take advantage of drawing from its resources and making the highest profit, as if its exploitation could last forever. Now it seems that the Earth is rebelling against this situation: glaciers are melting, weather disasters are becoming increasingly frequent; you work with landscape, a living space, so you must come to terms with a living reality that is *other* from man. What should be done?

MD I am almost certain that, starting from my masters, such as Michel Corajoud, and my colleagues, we have all worked and are working in the right direction, always considering the environment, without necessarily going with the flow of the catastrophic pessimism preannouncing the end of the world. The pleasure of living in a certain harmony with the environment is part of our job as landscape designers, although the reality is slightly different and full of contradictions. To mention one small anecdote, I recently received a message from Air France announcing that with their flights I have been to the Moon and back.

It is paradoxical to think that I have traveled so far to plant hundreds of thousands of trees! I hope this will make my ecological footprint a little less disastrous. I am joking now of course, but there clearly is a contradiction at the core: I totally agree about the environmental situation and therefore I am working in the right direction, but my lifestyle on the other hand is absurd and totally inconsistent. The feeling of being inhabitants of the world is extraordinary and we should not give up on that, because first of all it means getting to know different cultures. Some maintain that globalization impoverishes cultures: this is certainly a terrible risk, but if one enters into local specificities, as we architects often do, the experience can be a valuable one. So we certainly have to improve our behaviors, but without giving up relations. I have great faith in human cognitive intelligence and creativity through which we will be able to find new ways of living. What I fear rather is pessimism: fear of catastrophe provides no guidance. We need creativity to rethink our ways of living, adapting them to the environment. When I started teaching at Harvard more than twenty years ago, I noticed that youths had a creative approach to ecology because they did not consider it a system of protection but rather pragmatically as an opportunity for development. Their vision wasn’t ideological nor moral but rather creative. Now this is happening here too because we have developed a better relation with ecology, which has become part of our projects. I believe this is the key: no prohibition, no morality, but creativity. This means doing things. Doing them well.

1. Central Park, Prato, p. 134.
2. Italo Calvino. “I mille giardini,” in *Collezione di sabbia*. Milan: Garzanti, 1984.
3. Pierluigi Nicolini. “I due giardini / The Two Gardens,” *Lotus International* n. 88 (1996).
4. Residential Complex, Milanofiori, p. 16.

12 Central Park Prato

Project team:

OBR, Artelia Italia,
Michel Desvigne Paysagiste

OBR design team:

Paolo Brescia and Tommaso Principi,
Paola Berlanda, Francesco Cascella,
Andrea Casetto, Paride Falcetti, Chiara Gibertini,
Manon Lhomme, Elisa Siffredi,
Edita Urbanaviciute, Marianna Volsa

OBR Design manager:

Paola Berlanda

Artistic direction:

Paolo Brescia and Tommaso Principi

Client:

Municipality of Prato
Mayor Matteo Biffoni
Councilor for Public Works Valerio Barberis
Service Executive Massimo Nutini
Historical Monumental Building Service
Executive Francesco Caporaso

RUP:

Michela Brachi

Location:

Prato

Typology:

urban park and public pavilion

Size:

site area 33,000 sqm
built surface 4,209 sqm

Chronology:

2019 detailed design
2017 concept design
2016 preliminary design
2016 design competition (first prize)

Awards:

2019 RIUSO, Milan
2017 Premio Urbanistica INU, Urban Promo,
Triennale Milano

Prato is an ever-evolving city experiencing major social and cultural changes. The Central Park of Prato reflects this condition, reverberating the vision of the Prato Contemporary City developed by the city administration as a workshop of ideas and creative energies.

The project we conceptualized with landscape architect Michel Desvigne is the result of an international competition called by the municipality, whose jury was chaired by Bernard Tschumi, regarding an area close to the medieval walls, cleared by the demolition of the former Misericordia Hospital. Working with Michel, what struck us about Prato was the highly regular quality of its urban grid, based on the Roman Cardo and Decumanus orientation. From the historical center to the industrial and agricultural suburbs, the orthogonal grid is persistent and deeply rooted in the landscape, expanding in a spatial and temporal sense. It still dictates the structure and sizing of the land parcels, defining a highly legible urban network. It was clear from the outset that in order to regain the measure of this area, the three hectares freed from the demolition of the old hospital within the city walls could not become a void but would need to be integrated into the urban layout of Prato: the only exception in the scale of public spaces in the historical center was to be the large medieval Piazza Mercatale.

The aerial views of Prato show a continuous series of buildings and vegetation. Michel extracted their geometries, reworked their rhythm, and deciphered their shapes. Inspired by the historical fabric of the city, the research underpinning this concept of landscape investigates the urban configuration of Prato, underlining the archaic role of the landscape in prefiguring the future scenarios of the territory, starting from the memory of the territory itself. According to this approach, the park becomes the place where we can understand the scale and structure of the historical city. Working on the original urban traces, the design of the park offers an abstract and contemporary take on the great values of classical Renaissance gardens composition, punctuated by hedges multiplying perspectives and vanishing points, defining spaces whose dimensions are comparable to those of the squares of Prato's

historical center. The hedges act as theater wings punctuating the park along the axes parallel to the Roman Cardo. The multiplication of gardens obtained with the use of hedges allows the display of plant collections chosen not only for their botanical characteristics but also for their formal qualities, colors, and exuberance. The park is then dominated by a tall tree layer—consisting mainly of existing trees—that overlaps freely the geometric pattern of the park's urban matrix.

Along the old city walls, a shallow pool of water reflects its surrounding as if in a baroque setting, visually doubling the heights of the walls and emphasizing their monumental quality. The park becomes a space for open-air art complementing the artistic programming of Prato's Center for Contemporary Art Luigi Pecci.

It is with the objective of finding intra-muros synergy with the cultural dynamics of the city that we came up with the idea of the art center pavilion as the core of the park, a contemporary hub for artistic and cultural production. We envisioned it as a space of intensive interaction, capable of activating new urban energies within the park, a social condenser aggregating multiple activities throughout the year, throughout the seasons, during the day and during the night.

The all-transparent pavilion is a permeable presence inside the park, softening the indoor-outdoor threshold transition. The large projecting roof outlines a large collective space that can totally be reconfigured indoors with an open-plan space that can welcome artists' ateliers, workshops, an auditorium, a multifunctional hall for theater performances and temporary exhibitions, a coworking area, a restaurant, and a cafeteria: a large urban laboratory where young artists and creative entrepreneurs can work side by side in synergy.

We envisioned an art center participating in city life, rediscovering the urban function of the park bringing life to the city: a new contemporary square for Prato, an ode to the city made with public space.

Following page: the urban park and the public pavilion.
(125)





Aerial view of Michel Desvigne's park in the historical center.
(126)



Michel Desvigne's "punk" hedge system.
(127)

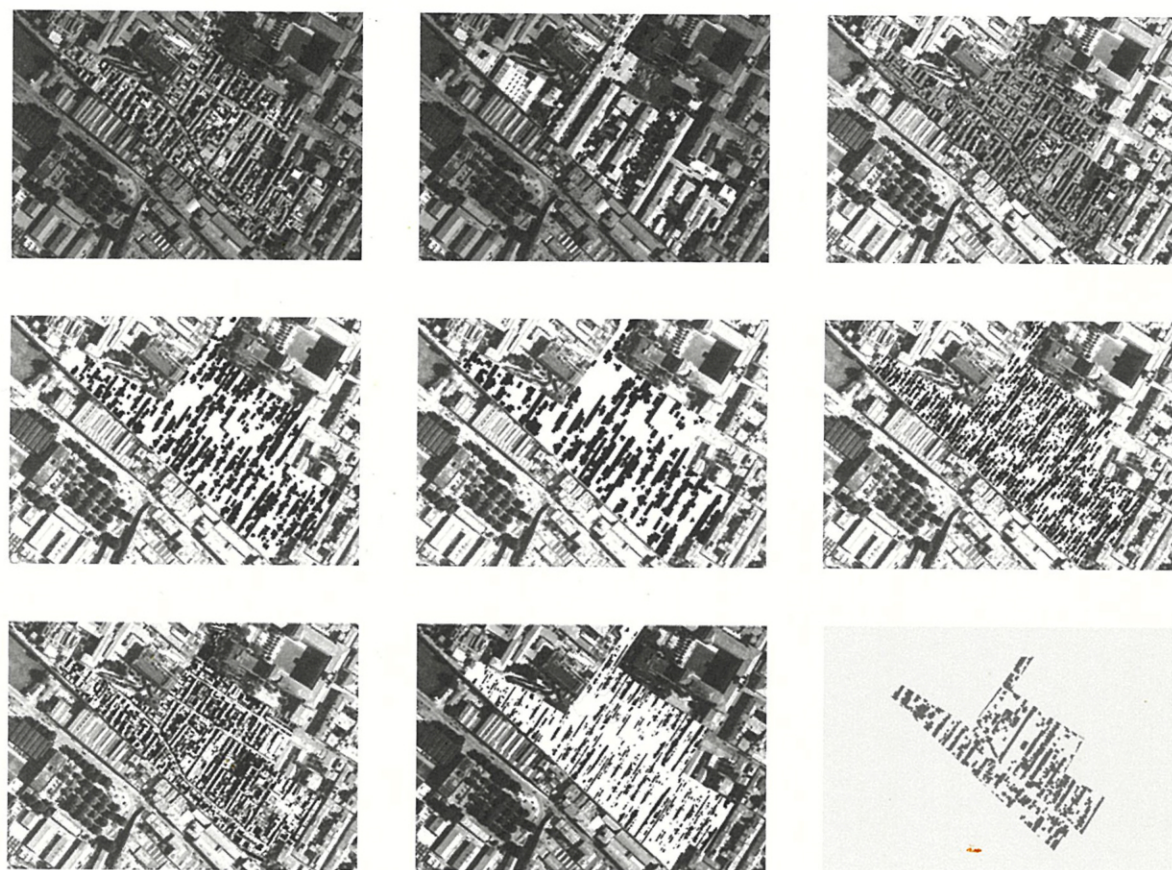
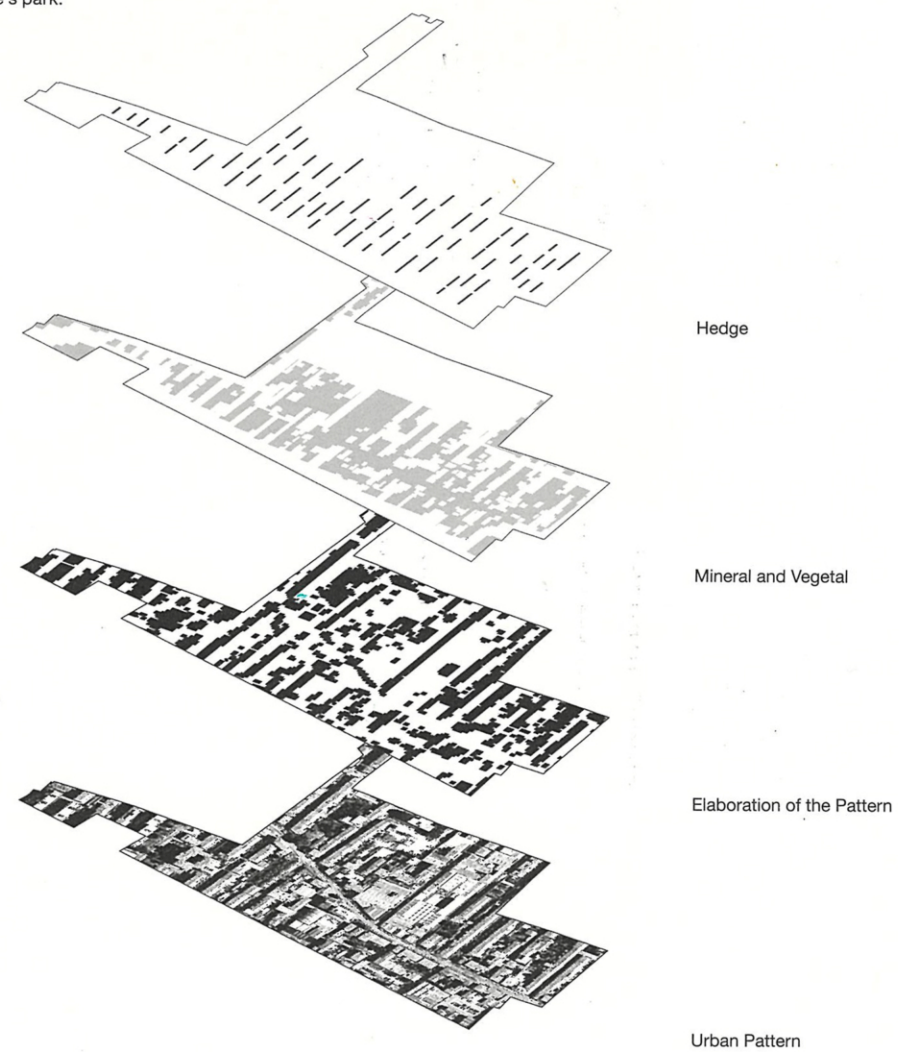


Inside the pavilion looking toward the park.
(128)



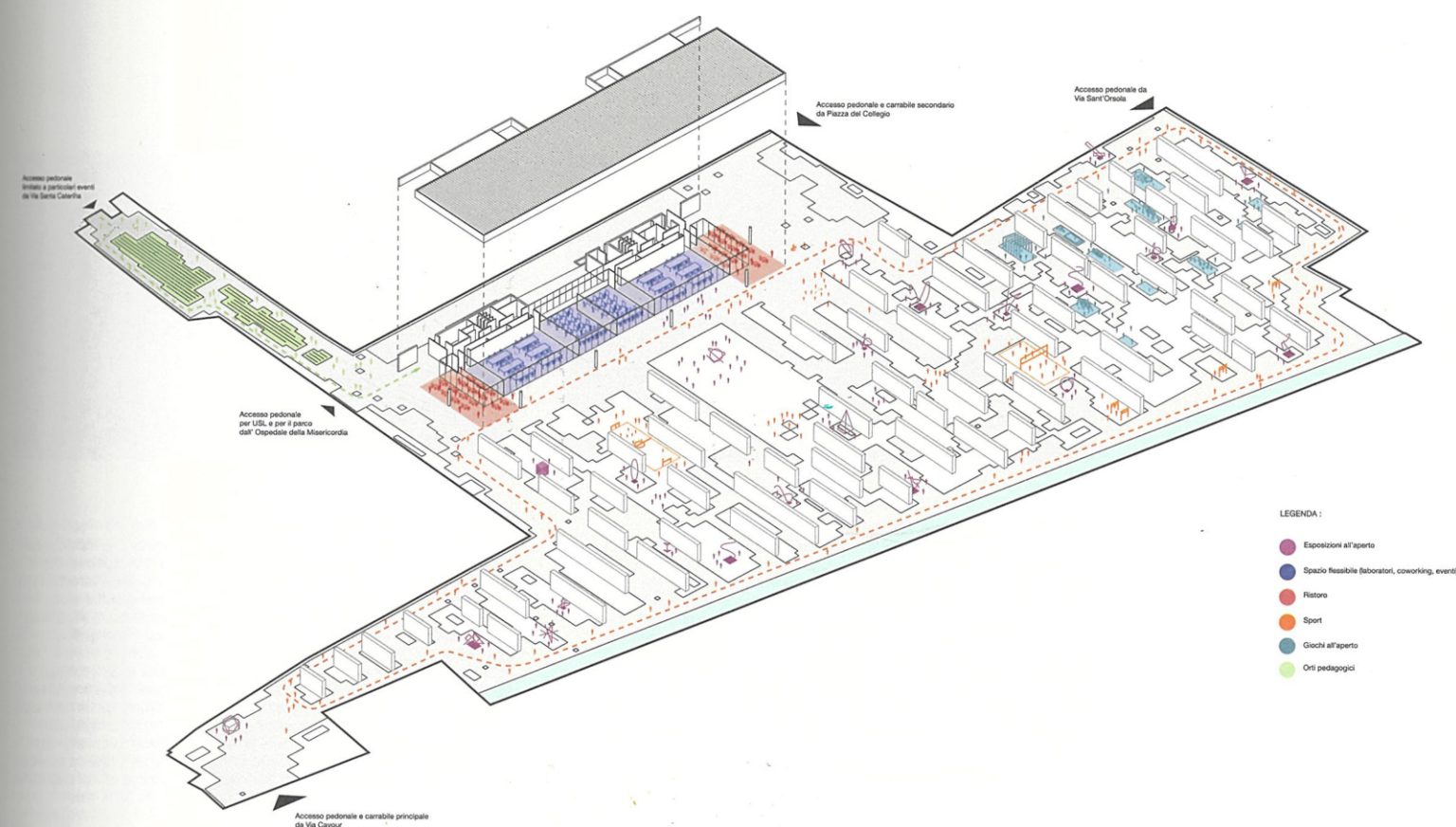
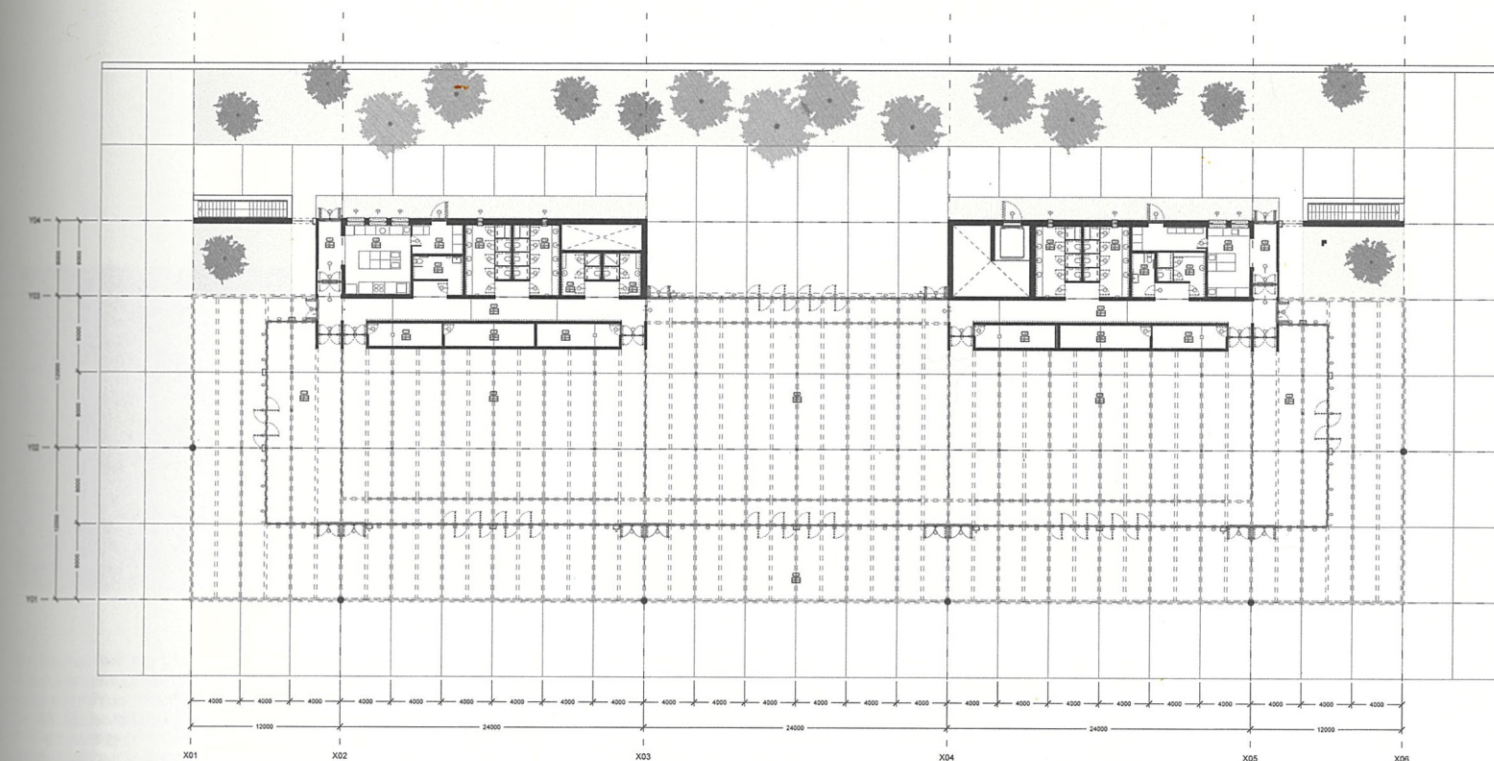
The pavilion seen from inside the park.
(129)

Layer genesis of Michel Desvigne's park.
(130)



Michel Desvigne's park pattern processing
diagram starting from Prato's urban layout.
(131)

Pavilion plan.
(132)

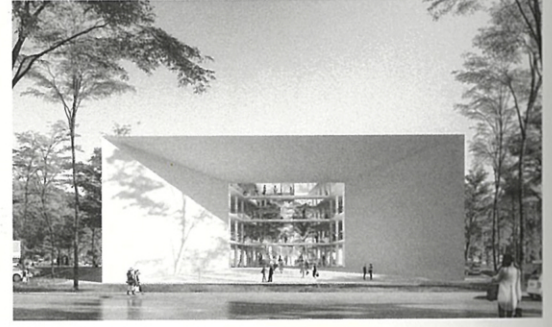


Functional diagram of the park.
(133)



121. Metropolis, Malta

Project team: OBR, Milan Ingegneria, Transsolar KlimaEngineering, Michel Desvigne Paysagiste
 OBR design team: Paolo Brescia, Tommaso Principi, Paola Berlanda, Francesco Cascella, Chiara Cassinari, Chiara Gibertini, Joanna Maria Lesna, Manon Lhomme, Elisa Siffredi, Giulia Zatti
 Client: HB Group
 Location: Malta
 Typology: residential, offices, commercial, public square
 Size: site area 5,600 sqm; built surface 72,707 sqm
 Chronology: 2016 design competition (second prize).



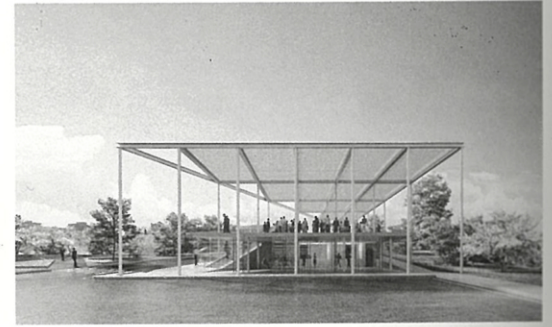
122. Max Mara, Stabio

Project team: OBR, Intertecno
 OBR design team: Paolo Brescia, Tommaso Principi, Andrea Casetto, Paola Berlanda, Francesco Cascella, Chiara Gibertini
 Client: Sequoia Real Estate SA
 Location: Stabio
 Typology: offices
 Size: site area 6,700 sqm; built surface 5,200 sqm
 Chronology: 2016 preliminary design.



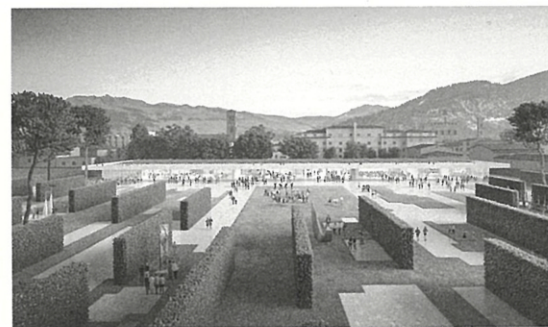
123. Riviera Airport, Albenga

Project team: OBR, Milan Ingegneria
 OBR design team: Paolo Brescia, Tommaso Principi, Andrea Casetto, Paola Berlanda, Francesco Cascella, Paride Falcetti, Michele Marcellino, Marianna Volsa
 Client: AVA S.p.A., Clemens Toussaint
 Location: Villanova d'Albenga
 Typology: airport
 Size: site area 915,000 sqm; built surface 76,700 sqm
 Chronology: 2016 pre-feasibility study; 2018 preliminary design; 2019 concept design and detailed design (first lot); 2021 end of construction (first lot).



124. Railway Stations Area, Varese

Project team: OBR, Arcode, Milan Ingegneria, Systematica, Studio Corbellini, Franco Giorgetta, Marco Parmigiani
 OBR design team: Paolo Brescia, Tommaso Principi, Andrea Casetto, Anna Graglia, Michele Marcellino, Paola Berlanda, Pietro Bliini, Gabriele Boretti, Francesco Cascella, Paride Falcetti, Chiara Gibertini, Nayeon Kim
 Client: Municipality of Varese
 Location: Varese
 Typology: city park, public promenade, senior center, covered market
 Size: site area 48,000 sqm; built surface 5,330 sqm
 Chronology: 2016 design competition (first prize); 2017 preliminary design and concept design; 2018 detailed design; 2019 start of works.



125. Central Park, Prato

Project team: OBR, Artelia Italia, Michel Desvigne Paysagiste
 OBR design team: Paolo Brescia, Tommaso Principi, Paola Berlanda, Francesco Cascella, Andrea Casetto, Paride Falcetti, Chiara Gibertini, Manon Lhomme, Elisa Siffredi, Edita Urbanaviciute, Marianna Volsa
 Client: Municipality of Prato
 Location: Prato
 Typology: urban park and public pavilion
 Size: site area 33,000 sqm; built surface 4,209 sqm
 Chronology: 2016 design competition (first prize) and preliminary design; 2017 concept design; 2019 detailed design.



126. Sports Center, Tenero

Project team: OBR, A2BC
 OBR design team: Paolo Brescia, Tommaso Principi, Edoardo Allievi, Anna Graglia, Francesco Cascella, Paride Falcetti
 Client: UFCL Swiss Confederation
 Location: Tenero
 Typology: sports center
 Size: site area 104,791 sqm; built surface 6,696 sqm
 Chronology: 2016 design competition.