

Milan, a history in recreational spaces

Abstract

Milan can count in its attractions one of the most ancient public parks in Europe, the 'Giardini Pubblici' (Public Gardens) opened in 1784 by Austrian Government to bring in Lombardy the Vienna's grandeur. It was a success and can be reported as the first recreational public open space in Italy. After almost 200 hundred years, Milan started to face with the problem of the loss of its green structure overwhelmed by the continuous growing of the urban fabric. The answers were two wide parks devoted with the idea of reforestation that created a new definition of the outskirts of the Lombard metropolis: Boscoincittà ('Wood-in-the-town') coming out from the requalification of former agricultural fields and Parco Nord Milano (Northern Milan Park) renovating the brownfields left by heavy industry. Both of them were and are devoted for the recreational use and improved the quality of life of the people living in Milan. At the end of the XX century a new series of parks, at a quarter scale, replaces some former derelict industrial areas, left in various places inside the historic urban context of Milan. Finally in the last ten year Milan regenerated itself changing its skyline, but this kind of 'revolution' brought a quantity of new parks and opens spaces really devoted to recreational use at various scales, always in direct connection with the built environment both dedicated to residential or office use. The paper illustrates this time line reporting and discussing how the perception of recreational open spaces has changed in Milan, the un-expected green growing city.

Keywords: Milan – Public Gardens – Urban Parks – Requalification – Regreening

An introduction

What kind of city is Milan? How is Milan alike? Actually most part of the people says Milan is an industrial and trade town, with an austere appeal that gives it the perfect nick-name of 'Grey City'. This could be also related and the fact that Milan lays in one of the few places where in Italy one can experience the continental weather, with rainy autumns and springs and cold winters, and also because the most part of the ancient buildings are constructed in grey stones... But we are here to prove that Milan had always a green heart and that its nowadays' post-post-modern conditions (no more industries within the city borders, and all the economy moved by trading, services and culture) brings the capital of Lombardy to be one of the greenest cities in Europe.

In November 2016 the authors will held the 4th edition of a international university course titled 'Milan, the unexpected green-growing city'¹, where they show both by lectures and visits Milan in its greenest potential.

Milan, whose origins are back of millennia, had always a green-structure in its heart still readable in the toponymy of some of its streets as 'Broletto' that means 'little horticultural garden' or 'Verziere' (a place where the caulis were cultivated). More, always inside its medieval and renaissance palazzos' courts there was enough space for a garden, some of them reflecting themselves on the water of the Naviglio water-canal that surrounded the city till the end of the XIX century². But for the most part of the cases these green spaces, related to churches, monasteries and then noble palazzos or new bourgeois buildings, were never open to the public. It's just at the end of the XVIII century that happened this little, but important revolution. The opening of the first green

public space just dedicated to individuals' recreation.

Giardini Pubblici

Milan can count in its attractions one of the most ancient public parks in Europe, the 'Giardini Pubblici' (Public Gardens)³ opened in 1784 by Austrian Government to bring in Lombardy the Vienna's grandeur. It was a success, and can be reported as the first recreational public open space in Italy. Still now is possible to see the access to the Gardens from the very centre of the town, called Via Marina. This is an alley planted with a double line of trees where pedestrians and horse-drawn carriage could pass avoiding the traffic of the road heading to the Gate of Venice. This alley, even more that the Public Gardens in themselves, become the 'place where to be' to see and to be seen, walking or driving. The success of this place offering a common meeting place 'to all' was sudden and it was possible as the social structure of Milan was changing. Instead of private gardens and private parties, the growing of the city as an important pole both for commerce and new-coming industry permitted also at the common workers to access to this public amenity: walking through the Via Marina alley and then spending time with friends or people just know inside the Public Gardens. The

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Gardens that are still now there, with the same function and the same design that arch. Piermarini wanted in the late '700. Together with its later companion Parco Sempione⁴ (Simplon Park, just behind the Sforza Castle), Giardini Pubblici were the two biggest recreational spaces for the Milanese inhabitants for a long time.

Milan in fact almost 'forgot' to renovate or make wider its green public spaces, actually dedicating most part of the last 200 years in transforming its rural fields that were at the city outskirts in industrial and logistic zones before, during, and after the two World Wars. A kind of sprawl mechanism that was blocked only when the post-industrial crisis knocked at the door, at the end of the XX century.

Blind thanks its success as an industrial town, Milan had its last General Master Plan in the '60s of last century, going on with little arrangements that, time to time, more than planning the future of the city, just transferred on the paper the territorial transformation that was taking place.⁵

By the way, however the City of Milan didn't find a way to promote the preservation of its green territories, the Region Lombardy did. Two regional parks, one at the Northern side of Milan (Parco Nord Milano) and the other at the Southern side (Parco Agricolo Sud Milano), were established in the '80s to save a 'green' lung around the great metropolis. At the same time a cultural institution as Italia Nostra ('Our Italy') decided to promote the Centre for Urban Reforestation, obtaining from the City of Milan to recover some hectares of abandoned farmer areas present at the Western outskirts of the town. This last project is known as Boscoincittà (Wood-in-town). All these three new realities become new public parks offering several recreation activities to Milanese citizen.

Three Big Parks

Parco Nord Milano⁶ (Milan North Park) despite its extension it's a real urban park that connects greenery coming from different heritages. Derelict industrial areas, a former airport area, and country fields combine create a complex and various park connected thanks a wide series of pedestrian and bicycle connections. Meadows and woods find place together with horticultural gardens, light sport activities services and wild life sanctuaries over a surface of XXX hectares, completely surrounded by one of the densest urban fabrics of Europe. Highly used during the weekdays, it become a real recreation basin during the weekends. Parco Agricolo Sud

Milano⁷ (South Milan Agricultural Park), as its name tells, was founded by Region Lombardy to save from the urban sprawl a fascia of agricultural land, a kind of green buffer zone between Milan and the others commons. This park is the widest of Milan and it's the less structured as its reason is to maintain near the metropolis a green ring devoted to cultivations (as the ancient rice-fields) otherwise condemned to disappear. The interaction with the visitors happens through wandering paths that permit to experiment the country life at less than 30 minutes walking from the centre of Milan. Boscoincittà⁸ (Wood-in-town) has another 'name-programme'. The idea was to offer a few minutes from Milan centre the experience of a real wood, created with the reforestation of former agricultural areas abandoned by years. This very simple programme had a sudden success that brought at the expansion of the initial Boscoincittà in a greater complex of parks devoted in giving new life to derelict areas: Parco delle Cave⁹ (Park of Pits) and Parco dei Sentieri Interrotti (Park of the Broken Paths). This system permits to offer different recreation activities, from the most 'urban' as the real vicinity park to the wild emptiness of the prairie, just in a walk of few kilometres.

The successful parks, giving new sense at the request of recreational activities by the citizen of Milan, but none actually supported by the City of Milan administration. In fact, even the times for a change were right, Milan took time to understand that an era was finished: at the end of the '80s of last century the town was all in all a post-modern city.

Post-Modern and Post-Industrial, a new approach for the recreational areas.

(a little bit of theory)

Going through a general view on the landscape history, the characteristic of urban-, industrial-, agrarian-, and natural landscapes are

Il. 1. A view of Via Marina, the ancient access to Giardini Pubblici (photo: LMF Fabris, 2016)

Il. 2. The Giardini Pubblici of Milan, the first public park in Italy (photo: LMF Fabris, 2016)





Il. 3. Parco Nord Milano (photo: LMF Fabris, 2016)



Il. 4. Boscoincittà (photo: LMF Fabris, 2015)

being discussed. Insight into ecology and the new environmental awareness are increasingly influential with regard to the design of gardens, public squares and landscapes. From late 1980s: revitalisation, industrial wastelands, former mining regions and urban voids between housing developments and highways are re-designed by landscape architects: Michel Desvigne and Christine Dalnoky plants small birch forests between the houses in a Paris housing development, and on the urban edge of Montpellier they create a “Landscape that lasts two minutes” by planting pines along highway. The French horticultural engineer, landscape architect, and gardener Gilles Clément, who gives the definition of “Abandoned Space” in his theory, which defined the “Abandoned Space” as one of the three types of spaces of the “Third Landscape”, which having the potential of preserving biodiversity. Facing the post-industrial transformation, the idea of developing abandoned spaces into valuable environmental-friendly living spaces, which gives us a lot of potentiality in balancing the environmental issues and urban development concurrently. The Parc André Citroën in Paris, realized from 1988 to 1992 by Gilles Clément, and Alain Provost on the site of a former car factory, is a playful design which is different from other Parisian gardens with obliquely arranged, rectangular lawns, a white and a blue garden and a square where children can run through water fountains. Architectural elements, water features and plants form the park as a poetry of severity and wit. Just few years later in Germany, in the landscape park Duisburg Nord, designed by Peter Latz, or in the Lausitz near Leipzig, abandoned coal mining regions have been revitalized through reforestation and garden design, which is very much inspired by Land-and Minimal Art.

If we move our focus from Europe to the USA, the Gas Works Park in Seattle, Washington, which was designed by Seattle landscape architect Richard Haag – who won the American Society of Landscape Architects Presidents Society of Landscape Architects Award of Design Excellence for the project – is an unusual public park located on the site of a former coal gasification plant, on the shores of Lake Union opposite downtown Seattle. The 19-acre site was acquired by the city in 1962, seven years after the plant shut down, and opened to the public as a park in 1975. The park incorporates much of what was left of the gasification plant — the boiler house was converted to a picnic shelter complete with tables and fire grills, while the exhaust-compressor building was transformed into an open-air play barn, housing a maze of brightly painted machinery for children. Gas Works Park is studied in every survey of twentieth-century landscape architecture as a modern work that challenged modernism by engaging a toxic site and celebrating an industrial past. Haag’s work with ecologists and soil scientists in his landscape remediation and reclamation projects opened new areas of inquiry into the adaptive reuse of post-industrial sites. As a way to describe his design philosophy...Haag encapsulates the correct approach to design in just six words: ‘Space-Scale-Circulation-Earth-Water-Plants’,

Il. 5. Parco delle Cave / Park of Pits (photo: LMF Fabris, 2010).

Il. 6. Rubattino Parco (photo: LMF Fabris, 2012)





Il. 7. OM Parco (photo: LMF Fabris, 2012)



Il. 8. A view of the former Maserati Industries area at the Portello Park (photo: LMF Fabris, 2015)

combining the generative power of Nature with the volitional nature of all human activity... (Luca MF Fabris, 2010)

Another American project which is non-negligible is the High Line designed in the beginning of XXI century. Which arises the idea that "Former industrial sites are now not only reasonable areas to build parks, but desirable places for parks. "This has influenced landscapes designed in North America as well, where industrial artefacts once deemed eyesores are now traces of the past to be considered as lost. Consider the High Line, a 10-meter-high abandoned rail-line that weaves through 22 blocks of Manhattan's west side. People's appreciation of this industrial structure's raw poetry and the desire to transform it with new life as a landscape park is increasing with a fantastic picture of the future.

To go back to the environmental issue, for Clément, the emphasis is on utilising the energy spontaneously produced by nature, working with, and never against, nature. The environment is conceived as an integrated system within which humans must establish themselves in a balanced relation to the forces of nature.

Milan Parks from the end of XX century

Have Milan learnt anything from these lessons? It seems so. When some central former industrial areas finally were ready to be integrated in the urban fabric, it was clear that after years of abandon the wild greenery has transformed these areas from the inside. Nature operated over these derelict areas with a power and a smartness that human beings cannot have. To understand the sense and the beauty present in

what the Germans call the 'Industrienatur' is the first step to be ready to interact with the past and manage to perform the present, defining the new future for this areas. In Milan was decided to intervene on some post industrial areas taking count of what Nature did in years, maintaining part of them as "memory" of the past, and renew the rest.

The results of this are some new residence settlements having their recreational spaces where new landscape architecture merges with the Industrienature, a living heritage of the past.

The Rubattino Park¹⁰ and the OM Park¹¹ are the best example of this new way to realize recreational spaces in Milan. Due to their dimensions they are really suited a local interaction, and well solve the necessity to respond to the recreations needs of families and elderly people.

Milan Parks from early XXI century

All changes again with the new millennium. Milan has to face not only the change from post-industrial to post-post industrial town, but also the recession of the economy that crossed all the world during the last decade. This picture in motion contains also other elements. The City of Milan manages, finally – after 50 years – realize a new General Master

Il. 9. CityLife Park (uncompleted; photo: LMF Fabris, 2016)

Il. 10. Giardini Franca Rame (photo: LMF Fabris, 2016)





Il. 11. The Unicredit Tower by Pei and (right) the Vertical Forest by Stefano Boeri Architetti and the area waiting for the “Library of Trees” (photo: LMF Fabris, 2015)
 Il. 12. “Liquid Milano” a research on the future of Milan by Lorenzo degli Esposti (courtesy of AUFO/Lorenzo Degli Esposti)

Plan for the town that approaches green and open space as an important feature of its urban fabric. More in 2015 Milan becomes EXPO City, embracing sustainability, agriculture and food-culture as its credo. These new ingredients modify ‘on the rush’ the city structure of a town that wants to change also its life-style, not only committed on fashion and economics, but also on the quality of untouchables features as wellness and happiness.

This new stream of the Milanese vision of life is possible to be seen in the new recreational spaces as the CityLife Park¹² (when it will be completed, the mayor public park in inner Milan), the Portello Park¹³ (just completed this summer), and the just started ‘Porta Nuova Area Park’, now called with the new name of ‘Library of Trees’¹⁴. All these new parks are part of re-qualification processes. All these projects integrate different district zones in the most valuable parts of Milan. They are so wide that their potential is wider than the parks of the late ‘90s. All these are actual town parks where recreational areas merge with new residential and office buildings and new infrastructures (as metro lines) that give them a new importance. In fact, both Portello Park and Porta Nuova Area (even if not ready yet!) are nowadays the centres of the new Milanese life-style.

And what happens in the outskirts of the town? Even here the way to approach derelict areas has changed. Due to the building sector crisis, some of the new settlements thought to compact the town in the periphery didn’t start, creating a void in the fabric and avoiding any solution of continuity between the new housing blocks. Open a new chapter for his history, the City of Milan decide to bet on the potentials present in this forgotten and betrayed place, transforming it in a great park, called “Giardino Franca Rame” (Garden Franca Rame)¹⁵. A simple and well designed green structure that offers new recreational spaces for a part of the town actually in lack of open and green areas.

But Milan is also the city of architectural research, and if one side we can report the Stefano Boeri’s Vertical Forest that

brings the most intriguing recreational feature, the garden, to become the direct private dépendance of the owner apartment, there other researchers as Lorenzo Degli Esposti¹⁶ that proposes a new Milan transformed completely by the green and the water. A new liquid metropolis as a common playground where recreation time has no limits.

ENDNOTES

¹ The authors have been participated since 2014 at the Athens Programme, an exchange programme led by Paris Tech University participated in Politecnico di Milano together with other 14 European Universities. In each edition, 30 international students. The weekly course (Director: prof. Luca MF Fabris) was based on a series of morning lectures held by various experts and teachers and afternoons dedicated to guided visits of Milanese locations where the students had the possibility to see the practical results of the notions and the design projects explained during the morning classes. The lectures touched topics as ‘history of gardens and parks in Milan’, ‘Milanese contemporary urban and peripheral parks’, ‘new parks derived from former industrial areas’, ‘horticultural garden system in Milan’, and ‘green strategies applied in the new financial Milanese downtown core’. Teachers and invited experts know that the audience is completely detached from the basis of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Environmental Design to implement the students knowledge about architectural, landscape and environmental design theory we propose them a sort of literature even if reduced ‘in pills’ and we underline frequently during the lectures the principal meaning and contents of these subjects, actually using them as a mantra during the afternoon visits to the historical parks, to the new parks developed from former industrial areas, to the 40-years-old reforestation areal of the ‘Boscoincittà’, to the new extension of the Parco delle Cave (Park of Pits, Milan) or to the new quarters recently built in the Milan centre where we finally visit the skyscraper ‘Bosco Verticale’ (Vertical Forest, Studio Boeri Associati, 2014), to observe its hanging gardens. Asking the Athens Programme students what they would have brought home from this experience we were enthusiastic in listening to them reporting that they had comprehended that landscape –doesn’t matter what’s it like – is part of their life and should be supervised, protected and bettered by themselves without waiting for others to do it for them and that Environmental Design, Architecture and Landscape Architecture are very complex and multifaceted issues that could be easily interfaced with the subjects they are now studying.

² As one can see nowadays passing through Via Senato: the actual road covers the water-canal formerly facing the gardens, used as patronal entry to the palazzos, once accessible by boat (as it still happens in Venice).

³ The 'Giardini Pubblici', now dedicated to the journalist Indro Montanelli, covers an area of 17,8 ha.

⁴ Built during the XIX century, the Sempione Park covers an area of 38,6 hectares.

⁵ See also Fabris, Luca MF, "Mediolan obala mit stale rozrastajacego sie miasta – Milan and the myth of the ever growing city", in *Czasopismo Techniczne Architektura*, vol. 1, zeszyt 1, rok 109, Wydawnictwo PK, Krakow, 2012.

⁶ Parco Nord Milano covers a 680 hectares area; website: www.parconord.milano.it

⁷ Parco Agricolo Sud Milano covers an area of 46.300 hectares, website: www.parcoagricolosudmilano.it

⁸ Boscoincittà covers an area of 110 hectares; website: www.cfu.it

⁹ Parco delle Cave covers an area of 135 hectares.

¹⁰ Parco Rubattino (former Maserati Industries area) covers 27,4 ha, but it's not completely built. Project by Andreas Kipar, Land Milano.

¹¹ The 'Parco delle Memorie Industriali'(Industrial Memory Park) known better as OM Park (in the area there were the OM Industries) covers 31,4 hectares. Project by Andreas Kipar, Land Milano.

¹² The CityLife Park will cover when completed an area of 17 hectares. Project by Gustafson Porter.

¹³ The Portello Park covers an area of 7 hectares. Project by Andreas Kipar, Land Milano and Charles Jencks.

¹⁴ The Library of Trees will cover an area of 9 hectares. Project by Inside-Outside (Petra Blaisse).

¹⁵ The Garden Franca Rame covers an area of 6,2 hectares. Project by Studio Franco Giorgetta.

¹⁶ Lorenzo Degli Esposti is director of Architectural & Urban Forum, a Milanese think-tank group. Please, visit www.auf.it for details.

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