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THE PARADIGM OF A GARDEN. TRADITION AND MODERNITY

PARADYGMAT OGRODU. TRADYCJA I NOWOCZESNOŚĆ

Abstract

The meaning of tradition is more modern than modernity itself, it is a challenge that has produced works sensitive to history and context, where a rigorous vision of architecture is combined with a capacity for formal innovation of absolute intensity, where the process has a value and each gesture has a meaning and an its legitimacy. In order to deal with a so endless theme in the history of modernity, the essay investigates the theme of the garden, in which a clear idea of architecture is manifested, with an high capacity for revealing a theory and a poetics, deepening a project by Gianugo Polesello that encloses and transmits a knowledge that crosses time and builds a link between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: tradition, modernity, garden

Streszczenie

Znaczenie tradycji jest nowocześniejsze niż sama nowoczesność; jest wyzwaniem, które doprowadziło do powstania dzieł uwrażliwionych na historię i kontekst, w których rygorystyczna wizja architektury jest połączona ze zdolnością do formalnej innowacji o bezwzględnej intensywności, gdzie proces jest wartością, a każdy gest ma znaczenie i zasadność. Aby zmierzyć się z tak nieskończonym tematem w historii nowoczesności, w eseju analizowany jest motyw ogrodu, w którym przejawia się czytelna idea architektury charakteryzującej się wysoką zdolnością ukazywania teorii i poetyki. W tym celu zgłębiany jest projekt Gianugo Polesello, który obejmuje i przekazuje wiedzę wykraczającą poza czas oraz buduje związek między tradycją i nowoczesnością.

Słowa kluczowe: tradycja, nowoczesność, ogród

The theme of the relationship between tradition and modernity, addressed with depth and articulation by many scholars on many occasions, is proposed as a field of investigation that constantly renews its relevance. We know that the meaning of the word *traditio*, in Italian *tradizione*, comes from the Latin *tradere* which refers to transmit and to betray at the same time. The concept of tradition should not be considered antithetical to innovation: tradition implies the passage in time of a heritage of rules that always underlies the invention of a new system of rules with which a tradition is continued, maintained and renewed. The meaning of tradition is more modern than modernity itself, it is a challenge that has produced works sensitive to history and context, where a rigorous vision of architecture is combined with

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a capacity for formal innovation of absolute intensity, where the process has a value and each gesture has a meaning and an its legitimacy.

In this sense, modernity has a meaning that runs through the whole history, which is renewed in the twentieth century with the Modern Movement until the deconstruction of the 1980s, in which the traditional core values are replaced by the simultaneous production of differences in the mixture and contamination of architecture with other arts.

To deal with such a vast subject, the essay investigates the theme of the garden: in the history of modernity, the garden has been the subject of infinite interpretations, linked to the simplicity of the functional program and its relative freedom. As a result, it follows a clear idea of architecture, which has a high capacity for revealing a theory and a poetics.

The theme is explored in a project by the master Gianugo Polesello (Giardino piazza Udine 1989–1992), built in a place not far from a public housing estate and large urban public sports facilities².

In Polesello's vast architectural and theoretical production dedicated to the theme of the city, it may seem partial to dwell on a single project, but the question underlying the complex theme of the garden is perfect to investigating the fundamental principles of its compositional technique and the special relationship with the land from which he comes, the Friuli region.³

The Giardino piazza project is obviously a reflection on the "first garden". The term garden derives in fact from the German word *Garten*, which means fence: it protects "the most precious good (...) what with the passing of time will continue to seem to us the "best" (Clément 2012). For Polesello, the most precious asset is the void, the most important and sensual element of all his projects.

The concept of the void, understood as a physical reality, a form of definition of a space and the boundary as the border of an identified space, form the basis of the architecture. Void refers to a static condition of space, with the boundary referring back to fluid space. The character of the void allows the fruition of the built area, in keeping with the 'city's architectural finish', its *limitatio* "where ideas and projects which can fix images find their space and the realisation of the common place". The issue of "large civic structures to be tied to the concept of place-space or void-built", the identification of "formally concluded environments, characterised by the joint presence of both the finite and infinite, the general and the particular, multilateral, multi-scale"(Polesello 1989).

The special task of its architecture is to determine the quality of the spaces of relationship and contact between things. In the internal and external areas of the city, his attention to the quality of architectural spaces is focused on the relationships between new elements, existing elements and context, through the form of the void: voids are an operational category of the project, and boundaries are necessary to the movement in space and time between places; they belong to the *con-figuration* of things arranged by nature, to the *con-tour*. *De-lineation* of voids and boundaries is a constant in the case of Polesello, implying a predisposition to change, the interest in the *frag-mèntum*, from the Latin word *frangère*, that refers to that which is hard and which is broken and at the same time to the part of something which has been

² The author collaborated on the project during his collaboration at the studio in via Mazzini in Udine, between 1990 and 1997. He recalls the exciting discussions on the project which were explored in: C. Battaino, *Natura e città*, PhD thesis, IUAV Venezia 2004.

³ This text has been rewritten and expanded based on the content of the essay "L'architettura del vuoto margine", published in: *Gianugo Polesello Attraverso le architetture* edited by L. Monica, R. Neri Architettura Civile n.15, Milano 2015.

preserved and which contains the sense of continuity, therefore to that which is more fragile and in perpetual change, and to the remains that require the power of recomposition.

Polesello's geometries are not a formal or self-referential game, the gratuitousness of the signs is not contemplated: his sober and rational geometries are an invisible tool for generating the forms of empty space, and converting the elements present in a given context into ordering elements. "To see this as a theme, as a question appropriate in the context of composition, means emphasising the connection between architecture as a language system and as an operation to be achieved through architecture" (Polesello 1992).

All his architectural projects are aimed at drawing relationships between things, composing the geographical scale and the rural territory one with the urban one. In the voids thus delimited, the repetition of pieces and the positioning of elementary figures are described by clearly contextualized geometries, capable of activating unexpected relations.

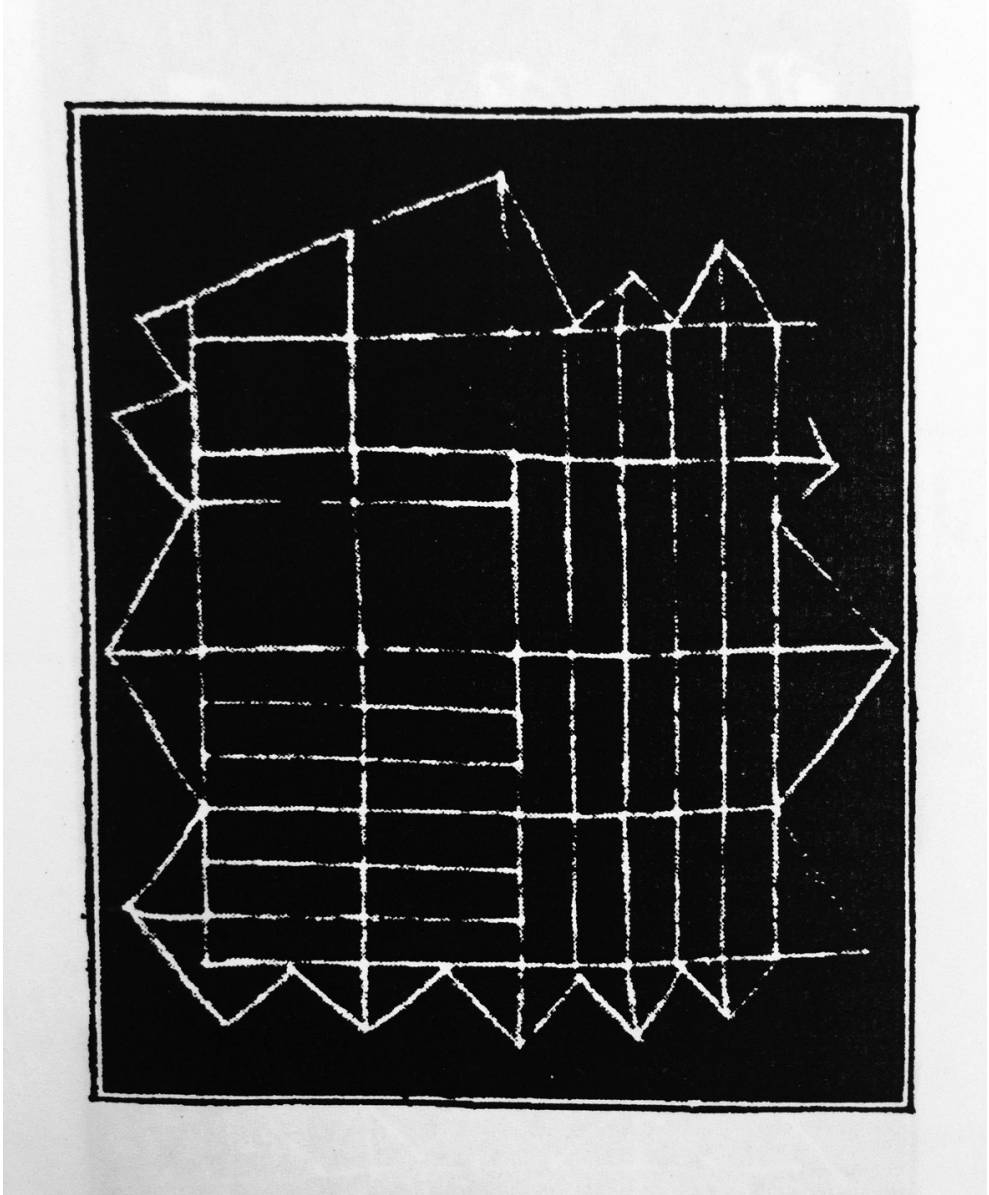
The garden-square is a project obsessively based on the fence and the measure.

In the fence, the void is converted into a generating and ordering element of the structure of its limits. Polesello's clear and rigorous composition establishes the hierarchy between the different spaces in relation to the context, according to a combination that is both closed and open, transparent and fractional: to each space he gives a precise identity – the covered square, the open square, the colonnaded enclosure, the tree-lined enclosure – to each part he gives his own expression and beauty in relation to the form of the void. Polesello does not mention Perelle's *gravures* of Versailles or Dezallier d'Argenville's treatise, or Palladio's rustic villas or the example of Villa Adriana – the ancient ways and ancestral principles of thinking about architecture – but we know how important they were for him in the relationship between artifice and nature, in the set of rules and in the complex character of the individual parts. In the measured void he defines a series of views, organizes a series of behaviors, outlines colonnades, open-air rooms, doors and walls that, as in a garden, protect from the winds, allow the accumulation of heat, accommodate the climbing vegetation with changing colors. The project of these walls is accompanied by the experimentation of a new orderly forest in which each element, artificial or natural, is designed in relation to the type, arrangement and orientation, of others. Polesello's project evokes and reinvents archaic types and figures, the order and emptiness of the garden-model that so fascinated Le Corbusier in his education in the "denatured vision" (Wrede and Adams 1988), the gardens of the Friulian countryside, the "roccoli", the architecture of the vegetable fences that dot the rural territory, the *centuriatum* that design the landscape (Thulin 1913).

Since the very first planimetric study drawing for the Giardino piazza, we can see how the project is defined by an elementary composition and a precise relationship between volumes, pure elements – line and square – in combination with known figures taken from classicism, positioned as measuring elements.

If we look well, Polesello's project does not correspond at all to the geometric image of an ordered painting: the composition does not adapt to the subtle irregularities of the lot, the arrangements and rotations of the volumes are imposed according to the openings and closures of the views, etc. in a constant search to tension the different spaces.

The place-crossing is defined by a covered square, surrounded by arcades: disheveled septa draw the entrances, a series of parallel walls construct the main volumes and direct some paths and the rotation of some elements is not random. This square is divided into parallel bands, crossed perpendicularly by a sort of boulevard, a traced line, along with some trees that seems to be the only clue to the presence of nature: Polesello does not separate between



Ill. 1. Centuriatum: C. Thulin, *Corpus agrimensorum romanorum* 1913

natural and artificial aspects, “the border is immediately solved and therefore unsolvable itself” (Cacciari 1992).

The “place” is a total artefact – Polesello does not yet reveal the relationship between architecture and nature, which is so intrinsic to his architecture. The zenith view of the model of the project is an internal void delimited by a limited number of elements: pure composition of elementary architectural pieces, well-known “phrases”, which interact with each other at

the different scales. The spatial composition is laconic in its simplicity, with rows of columns and trees giving a visual measure to the void.

The green part of the project is characterized by a square of 112 meters x 112 meters, within which is rotated a second square of e 96 x 96 meters.

Polesello proceeds in its special reinterpretation of the tradition of the hortus conclusus, in a continuity that crosses time and from which all the gardens descend: he defines the relationship between the central space and the residual spaces through alignment, sorting, cadence, distance between planes, perspective. Within a knowledge that requires the transmission of a knowledge, Polesello reinvents timeless architectural modules: he proceeds to the transposition of the porticos and the invention of the doors at the edge of the central void, in the interstices between the figures.

It is “in the spaces between” that one discovers the play of parts and visual sequences, in the peculiar relationship between shadow and light that characterizes the image of the different combinations on site. The different types of pergolas, made up of columns and metal beams arranged in an orthogonal grid, act as a support for a green sky of vines and trees.

As in a large urban garden, the square garden also includes places of protection and forcing: the greenhouse, the walls and the counter walls, innovate the closed rooms and the classic pruning that are also part of the tradition of the modern garden.

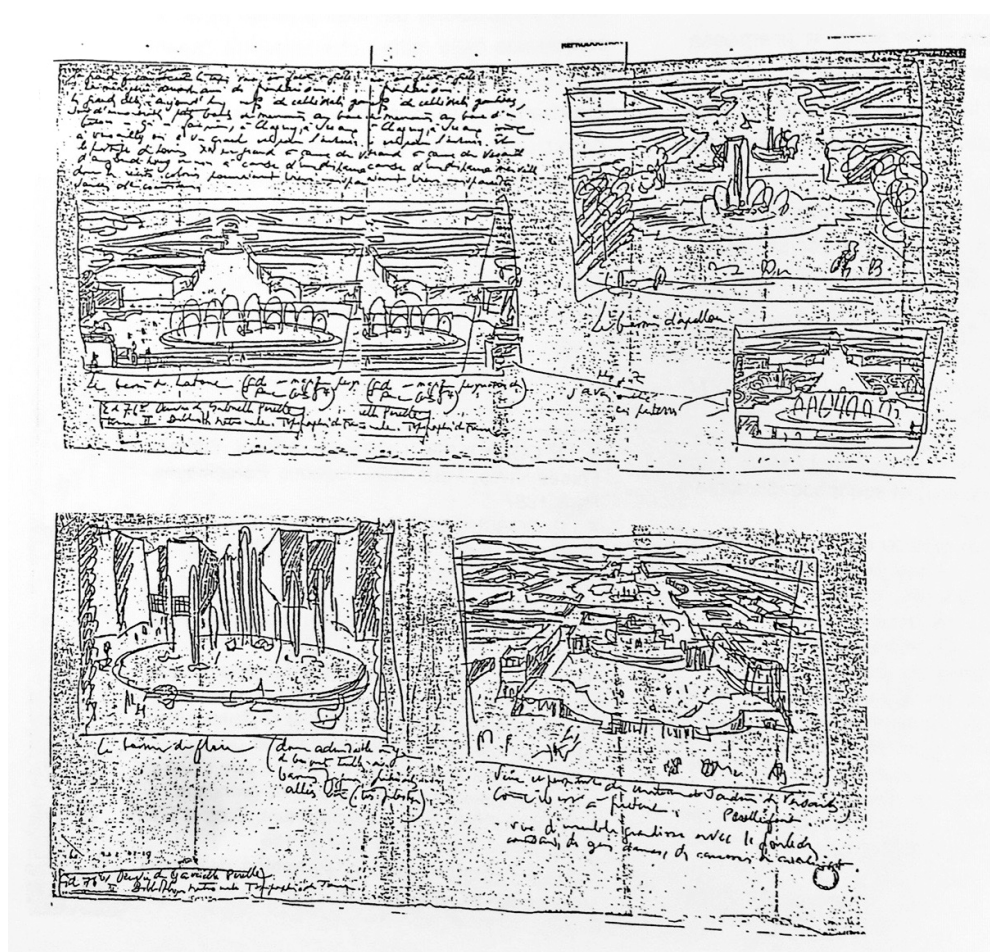
Between the garden and piazza there is a precise element of water, a fountain, a large sloping surface that he thought should be decorated with the tiles of a mosaic, renewing the Roman tradition of Aquileia, from which descends the great tradition of the School of mosaicists in Friuli region.

The architecture as realised is only one part of the original project. As mobile observers we cross the garden. Our vision selects the frames as in a film sequence. The elements predetermined, the rhythm of the arcades, the thin frame of the pergolas, the long walls covered with green, the idea of divisions in cement, the cover with the triangular section lattice girders compose a variable prospect depending on speed and distance. Variations and rhythms, precise selections, details such as the mutual relationship between the forms, partitions of the elements, and the minimum which is the compositional aspect, all brought together in an integrated research. Centrality of the void-boundary for setting up architectural relationships: Polesello’s architectural composition is something very closed to Alberti’s “concinntas”, beauty conceived as the “harmony between all the limbs, the unity of which they form part, founded on a preciser law, so that nothing can be added, removed or changed except for the worse”. Urban construction as selection, “thinking in a profoundly architectural way”(Polesello 1980) means the coincidence of architecture and city, architecture and detail, both consisting of the mounting of minimum elements. Designed through composition, the detail is revealed by Polesello with no mediation. The relationships between function and beauty, mathematics and creation, are quite clear. Materials and elements of the composition are composed through a geometric rule. The Cartesian structural grid with six meter pitch, adopted in the plan and elevation, defines the dimensions of the architecture. The minimum units, the vertical elements – columns, pillars, wall divisions – and the horizontal elements – floors, roof truss, catwalks – are determined by the plan’s space lattice.

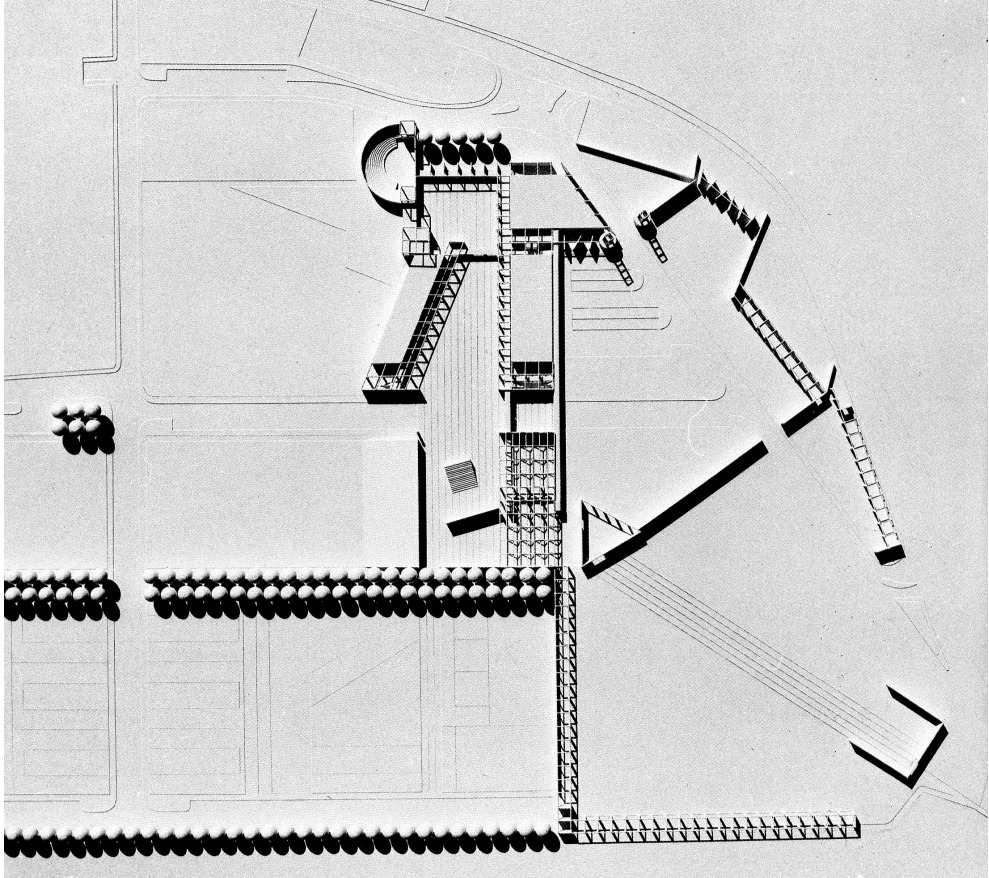
In this architectural structure, the mono-textural walls, *centuriation* devices acting as a counterpoint to the light canopies *en plein air*, the changing seasons emphasise the colour of the concrete or become coloured screens, setting a limit recognized by the building volumes arranged irregularly within. The detail of the border and the relationship to the various scales,

from the urban to that of the individual components, define the quality of the architecture. In the limited repertoire of components, Polesello distinguishes the load-bearing elements – the galvanised steel profile frames used for the pergolas, the cement columns of the arcades, the concrete of the partitions and walls – from the transparent or semi-transparent buffer elements – the piazza canopy, the industrial mesh panelling used in the electro galvanized walkways and stairwells – textural / structural / functional components which are the finite elements of a relationship governed by specific rules.

The “assembly” is method of composition and construction technique: the frame structure is exposed, the horizontal lines (beams), vertical (partitions) and points (columns) determine the type of joint, by juxtaposition of a pure use of materials. Polesello’s architecture is based on the implementation of the necessary elements, a elementariness in order to say what you have to say, what Cacciari called the “principle of economy (...) *Simplex sigillum veri*”. Composition of precise formal and constructional elements, separated from one another and intact.



III. 2. Le Corbusier Sketches from Perelle: FLC B.2.20



III. 3. Giardino piazza di Udine: Gianugo Polesello Architetture 1960–1992

Elemental composition, geometric rigour, modularity, clarity of construction. Operations put in place to define the place – moving, traversing, connecting, seeing – correspond to the limits seen and unseen. Polesello’s spaces multiply and interact with one another. Parts with a different nature and meaning construct the space of the garden, a large surface intersected by a paved platea, where pavilions direct one’s gaze and frame the landscape. The architecture consists of relationships between the parts, bound by rules, like a scene in a play. Polesello’s geometries are the game revealed, which generates spaces and vistas in relationship to new boundaries, the garden-square as a part of the city.

“A design procedure that investigates on the one hand the object, and on the other the context, the object being placed within a learnable construction, partial yet finite, de-limited, a place which is space” (Polesello 1987).

The prospect of the garden “relocates nature within the architectural and urban design, as the theme in Olmsted’s vision of “landscape into cityscape” (Fein 1967) or as a project for the city through the use of natural elements” (Battaino 2004).

Dense and porous, open, closed, limited, unlimited, simple, complex, are pairs of opposite terms, a list to describe a place which is urban on the inside. The intertwining of arte-



Ill. 4. Current view's of garden's pergola: C. Battaino 2015

fact and nature, the theme of the dialectic interpenetration between architecture and nature acts as urban operator. Nature as a structural element of architecture, nature affirmed as a constituent part of the city, corresponds to the morphology of the new build, which has memory of the images of the Venice's gardens of "isolario" (Coronelli 1696–98) or the artificial agricultural landscape of the Roman land reclamation. The surveyor design technique "involves the use of a square shape, not necessarily bounded by buildings as sides of the square but rather by coordinates and key focalpoints (...): the square thus becomes a place common to the natural aspect of the place and at the same time to the artificial to which it relates" (Polesello 1987).

This interest in the architecture of the garden recalls Le Corbusier's search for a harmony "*qui met en rapport précis des quantités exactes*". The manipulation of the elements, the same compositional procedure of montage borrowed from cinema, design a new nature, a nature made up of artefice.

The natural elements, set in distance and size and governed by the same rules which are at the base of the general composition, derive from a closely studied repertoire. Borders of *quercus robur* and *tilia argentea*, arranged in rows, or inserted in the repeated rhythm of the columns, isolated specimens of *quercus robur*, imagined as monument points within the pavilions, pergolas shaded by wisteria, wall-partitions covered in various colours of creeper, give the measure of the limits of a space from changing perspectives.

What can we learn from this Polesello's project?

Despite the failure of the urban project in Italy, Polesello teaches the need for an architecture as *ars combinatoria*, the economy of the architectural gesture as the use of the most suitable media in terms of quantity, cost, recyclability, as an alternative to assembling specialist or fashionable solutions. The non-distinction between natural and artificial as a new dimension of the city, an architecture, to use his words, “explicitly civil, an architecture external to architecture taken in its linguistic and technical autonomy (...) linked to social demand (...) to the responsible performance of a professional role”.

Successive overlays of heterogeneous elements, without any apparent logic, have not compromised the character of this ‘inside’ of the city. On the other hand, as pointed out by Cacciari, Polesello’s “dynamic space” accepting the undefined”, was able to transform itself “to give shape to the multiplicity. We cannot but wonder how the garden piazza of Polesello might have turned out. Applying the principle of the geometrical divisibility of space in relation to elementary types, modifying a peripheral context into a broader urban space, is a generative principle for living the present and the future of the city. His radical architecture has taken root.

The principle of void has protected the most precious good.

It can only be discovered by entering the large current garden-fence: its minimal design, its impracticable edges, its porticos, its oversized passages, have a clear, geometric, smooth, still subversive aspect.

This place is able to adapt to the needs of ecological living and if the forms of untreated architecture are incapable of surviving and destined to ruin, inventive nature, organized according to precise relationships, shows its evolution. The giardino-piazza of Udine, with the changing of time, continuously changes its shape, so we are faced with a work that encloses and transmits a knowledge that crosses time, history, context and builds a link between tradition and modernity.

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