

## Projects of therapeutic landscapes

Adriana Ghersi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *POLIS Department, Landscape Section  
Faculty of Architecture, University of Genoa, Italy, aghersi@arch.unige.it*

**Keywords:** landscape architecture, projects, therapeutic landscapes

### Introduction

The dichotomy between human society and landscape determines different lacks and aridities in everyday life of most people. This distance between landscape and us, where landscape no more represents a fundamental element for people sustenance, causes a progressive abandonment and a consequent landscape decay. But nature capacity to influence on human wellness is well known, from ancient time (from the Egyptians, cited by Prof. Bruschetini, the Greek temples dedicated to Aesculapius, to the medieval monasteries with gardens of curative herbs, ..): today, more than yesterday, we need to re-build a connection with landscape, to find out an equilibrium, to purify our organism and our mind from phrenetic metropolitan life. We express this need, also in an unconscious way, when we search “exotic” places for holidays, to find in “other” landscapes a contact with nature, the contact that is denied in our ordinary life. Tourism can be seen as a search for (natural and cultural) landscape and for free time, to take care of ourselves recovering an armonious relationship with the external world. For some patients the relationship with nature is not only important under the therapeutic point of view, but also as simple source of pleasure and joy. If we re-discover landscape as a resource, we probably will return to take care of it, finding new and old motivations and links with our culture, our cultural roots and our soil. The landscape project can assume this significance:

to arrange a network of existing elements, to build itineraries, to re-invent new meaning of landscape, to let us re-discover the old ones.

### The role of Landscape Architecture in the design of therapeutic gardens: some famous examples

The park or the garden in our society has no more the value of a common patrimony: it is important for the individual reaction that it is able to stimulate, particularly in therapeutic contests. The design of the garden suggests some “simple actions, like sitting under a tree”, walking along a path, looking at forms and at the graphics created by the shadowing of the foliage on the ground, re-establishes a link with nature and “gives energy, hope and psychological stability” (Mac Griswold, mentioned by Cooper and Taylor, 2000, p. 116). Some of the most famous examples of therapeutic gardens created by Landscape Architects are the result of a team work: the Landscape Architect assumes the role of mediation, translating the expressed (by doctors, assistants or patients) needs of the therapy into the design. In the Therapeutic Garden for post-trauma stressed Children (Wellesley, Massachusetts), by Douglas Reed, the interaction between the designer and Doctor S. Santagostino was the recipe for success. The aim of the garden was to help children to get conscious of their problems, using the garden as an instrument, a place to feel safe but that can be

explored. The water stream is the main theme of the garden: it passes through different sites, corresponding to different phases of the therapeutic travel. There is a protected grotto, a gorge, a little pond and a clearing (opened to the sun), a grass-covered hill (to be climbed), a mountain, a bridge, an isle and a wood on a hill (to let the children explore).

A park conceived for people affected by huge diseases must be characterized by delimited inter-linked spaces, in which protection must be felt, where a single patient or his family can feel an intimate sensation of a private meeting with nature. Richness of biodiversity helps to get in touch with nature, even if a sense of order and serenity must remain. The meditation garden of the Norris Cancer Centre in Los Angeles (USA), designed by Topher Delaney, also presents some medical plants and curative herbs. The Landscape architect, who was affected by a cancer and lived on her skin the problems of that huge pathology, thinks it is useful to understand where the curative principles are coming from. In her works Topher Delaney builds spaces to help people by the observation of natural processes of growth and renewal to get a spiritual comfort to the body and the mind. The elements of her designs are useful to meditate, there are symbolic meaning, such as water, like in the fountain in the middle of the garden in the Marine Cancer Centre, representing a source of life, a hope for recovery and many references to art in a quiet environment, underlined by plants. Many of her therapeutic gardens are created thanks to private donations, voluntary service and gifted materials. For the children's garden of San Diego Hospital she worked to create a stimulating, joyfull garden, where coloured walls, attractive plants for insects and butterflies, shapes of animals change by the moving of the shadows and of a windmill, to let children imagine a wider life than the present one, inside the hospital.

Hundreds of therapeutic gardens has been created, from the nineties on, especially in USA and Canada, but also in Europe (especially in Holland and Belgium) and Italy (some of them have been shown in the conference), some are dedicated to special illness or disability (Alzheimer gardens, gardens for HIV affected people, gardens for blind people or disabled on wheels-chairs, ...), other simply for the patients of an hospital or other sanitary structures. A special attention is given also to the gardens of prisons (as shown by A. Lindemuth), where therapy and recovery are both very important: the courtyards of the penitentiary of Nieuwegein, (Holland, 1999-2004), designed by Petra Blaisse (Inside Outside, Rotterdam), shows how a different nature of a space can be created by the use of innovative materials, even when laws and security rules limit the possibility to insert trees and plants.



Fig 1 – The diffused image of Liguria at the beginning of last century.

### From the garden to the landscape: healing people taking care of landscape

The interesting element of the conference held in Genoa is the enlarging of the view, from the therapeutic garden to therapeutic landscapes. The most fitting element to realize this passage is Horticulture Therapy: if nature can activate reactions, this can be basic for a dialogue between patient and therapist, the idea of working and cultivating strengthens this relationship and brings also the concept of group working and community therapy. From some horticultural gardens, the important experiences showed that people can get self-confidence and self-esteem by producing something from the earth... And the successful experimentation helped to move from gardens to farms and rural landscapes, where it is easier to get in touch with nature, because of the context. Another interesting experience is that of Nature Therapy, where the natural setting is the most important element of the therapist's action. Socialization and community sense can be achieved by groups of people (whatever disturbed or normal people).

If therapeutic gardens and horticulture help to re-discover the perception of our body and of our "Self",

where products from nature give us the possibility to re-build our balance, re-integrating physical well-ness, therapeutic landscapes mean new possibility to perceive ourselves and the other people, in a social condivision, getting confidence not only in our personal capabilities but also in the possibilities of a group, where confrontation and relationship can be experienced. For many different groups of people, healing the landscape means the re-discovering of the sense and the values of social life by re-habilitation programs.

The sense of community can be found in the terraced landscape of the Ligurian “5 terre”, where the different specialised stones (such as the ones to rebuild angles in the dry-walls or steps, ..) were kept and looked after by different families, to be ready to take care of that special landscape after damaging events such as strong rains: the actual situation is the loss of that community and the landscape is more and more abandoned and ruined.

Therapeutic landscapes are a new key to interpret landscape, it's a new challenge for designers, tourist operators and administrators to create a new model of reception, connecting different resources with a network of facilities, helping people to reach nature. This can mean to develop pet-therapy centres, nature-paths for disabled people, rehabilitation structures opened to landscape. In this contest we can think to different possibilities, from something special for children to working-stages for the recovery from toxico-dependence, till equipped places for aged people.



Fig. 2 – The abandoned park around the Costarainera sanatorium, seen from the cultivated property at its back: it is possible to recognize the central axis of the formal park, with exotic plants, and the patch of olive trees on terraces, on both sides of the upper part of the central main way.

The landscape importance has to be reconsidered in our society as a whole, where we need new meaning options for a better life, in which affectivity, cure and responsibility are basic elements.

Educative programs can help to show the importance of a contact with nature, beginning from schools: in our towns we can plan different open green spaces and many ways to help people to get in touch with their landscape. In diverse situation this programs can be arranged by the qualification of existing spaces, especially where the suburban low quality tissue meets the rural areas: new “urban countries” (Donadieu, P., 1998) can be designed, to put in evidence some resilient elements of the past, such as a farm, a portal, or some rural or semi-natural elements, such as an old tree, to show them under the new light of a new meaning for these sites, to better the quality of our life. New or ameliorated relationship can be constructed between scholars and their grand-parents, involving these last in teaching agricultural techniques and landscape respect. From land art to art-therapy, we can learn how interesting elements can be used to underline a place, giving new significance to it: some interesting experiences can be led with the help of artists, making them work with ill people in open areas and special landscapes.

Other projects can evaluate the abandoned landscape, at the limits of urban areas, re-designing useful places and facilities to let people move from the town to the surrounding landscape, with links from the urban green system to landscape connective structures, re-shaping the “in between” spaces.

### Therapeutic landscapes in Liguria

From the beginning of the eighteenth century, many travellers visited Liguria to find a nice climate, to cure illness in winter (see Calcagno Maniglio's text).

It was considered important to stay in sweet and regular climate station, such as San Remo, famous after the “Doctor Antonio”, by Giovanni Ruffini, firstly edited in English in 1855.

The doctors sponsored the efficacy of sea-bathing and together they recommended to pass some time in a park, taking care of flowers or resting under the shadow of a tree, reading or painting.

Many hospitals and healing structures have been built, in Genoa and along the Ligurian coast, with wide parks around them: the main Genoese hospitals constitute today real green oases in the urban tissue, with their patrimony of trees, but are strongly affected by the degradation of being more a parking area than a healing park, but some ipothesis of recovering have interested some of them (like the competition for S. Martino Hospital). Near the Gaslini Children's Hospital, in the park of the ancient villa Quartara, in Quarto

(Genoa), the Gaslini Foundation is realizing the project for a welcome structure, with a garden designed by Francesca Neonato (PN studio) and arch. Giampiero Buffoni, with a therapeutic garden where a “sensorial experience playing path” is dedicated to children.

Many structures for the cure of mental diseases have recently been reconverted to other uses, some of them (closed after the Italian law n. 180/78, by the psychiatrist F. Basaglia) are abandoned, with wide parks around: there are many projects on their destination, and maybe they can become tassels of a new healing network in Liguria, where structures and facilities for rehabilitation are lacking.

In some cases we have wide complexes built, in the years '20ies and '30ies, to heal phthisis and tuberculosis, such as the sanitary complex of Bussana (see its park on the cover) and the sanatorium of Costarainera (Imperia): the last one is a large complex with an abandoned building, an existing park of exotic plants and a backward cultivated property (following the principle to build independent isolated complex, with a rural wide

property, to feed all patients, doctors and attendants), that consists of a series of terraced areas. These rural properties still remain undivided (also in Bussana): this is a great chance to change it into a therapeutic landscape, where medical plants and biological products can be cultivated, and Horticulture experience can be led. Some students of the school of Genoa (attending the Landscape Architecture Degree Course) last year made a survey of the existing park (also thanks to the contribution of CARIGE Foundation) and tried to propose some intervention on the garden of Costarainera sanatorium and on its surroundings, in connection with the coming seaside promenade (from Ospedaletti to S. Lorenzo al mare, along 24 Km. of the dismissed railway), and to the rural contest. Many interesting ideas, from the connection to the seaside promenade by a lift, to the opening of the formal garden to the public, till the re-styling of the image of the rural contest by the painting of the circular water reservoirs (made of concrete) like a land art installation were presented in S. Lorenzo's little theatre, on March 2006.



Fig. 3 – The proposal by the student G. Morello, showing interventions to link the park to the rural area around the Costarainera sanatorium (“Urban parks” LAB 2005-2006, teachers: A. Ghersi, A. Kipar).

## References

- Berger, R., McLeod, J. 2006. Incorporating nature into therapy: a framework for practice. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, Vol. 25. N° 2
- Chermaz, A. 2003. *Terapia orticolturale*. Civico Orto Botanico Trieste. Trieste
- Cooper, G., Taylor, G. 2000. *Giardini per il futuro*. Modena
- Cortesi, I. 2006. *Public Space in Motion 2000-2004*. Firenze
- Donadieu, P. 1998. *Campagnes urbaines*. Arles
- Ferrini, F., Trombettoni, E. 2000. Un bisogno ancestrale. Acer 3
- Heat, Y. 2004. Evaluating the effect of therapeutic gardens. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementia*. vol. 19. n. 4
- Ingrao, P., Stradella, P. 2000. Giardini del benessere. Acer 6
- Mori, F., Valle, P., Fabbri, M. 1995. *Il giardino Alzheimer. Manuale teorico-tecnico per la progettazione e la realizzazione di spazi verdi per anziani affetti da demenza*. Provincia di Milano, Assessorato ai Servizi Sociali
- Valle, P. 2000. *Architettura e giardini per l'Alzheimer. Il progetto come strumento terapeutico*. Provincia di Milano, Assessorato ai Servizi Sociali
- Nash, H. W. 1999. *Our aging brain: changing and growing*. Burlington NC
- Neonato, F. 2002. Il giardino delle stagioni. Acer 1
- Relf, D. 1999. The Role of Horticulture in Human Well-being and quality of Life. *Journal of American Horticultural Therapy*. Vol. 9
- Vandelli, M. 1988. *Giardini d'inverno. Esperienza di animazione nelle case protette*. Milano
- Zaza, C. 2000. Il giardino delle sorprese. *Gardenia*. n. 198
- Zaza, C. 2003. L'arte si fa natura. *Gardenia*. n. 233