

*Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and
Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and
Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces*



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INTERVIEW

Exploring, documenting and narrating landscapes. An interview about the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens

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Abstract

We present an interview on the experience of The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens, organised since 1990 by the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche and awarded for the 33rd time in 2024.

This Prize is a research project focused on the study and care of places particularly rich in natural, historical, and creative values. One of the key features of this Prize is that it is awarded to specific places recognized for their value, rather than necessarily to iconic objects. The mission of the Prize is precisely to study and communicate the values identified by the Scientific Committee in the selected places. Often, these are landscapes and specific places created through the meticulous efforts of the communities living there (e.g., the Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan in China or the Wild Apple Forests of the Tien Shan in Kazakhstan), or landscapes that exist thanks to a very close relationship between forms of life and forms of land (e.g., the Jardín de Cactus in Lanzarote or the Valleys of Güllüdere and Kızılçukur in Cappadocia).

Reflecting on the different editions of this Prize, we see a selection of positive past and present experiences, many of which are not yet sufficiently recognized as good examples and practices.

After the selection, research, and documentation stages, the activities related to the Prize include two books (usually in Italian and in English), numerous public events, an exhibition, and, since 2014, the production of a documentary film dedicated to the awarded place, its history, and its transformations.

For this reason, this Prize can also be considered as an important platform to reflect on the role of photography and documentary film in shaping a contemporary way of narrating and understanding these challenging landscapes.

Introduction

The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for the Gardens¹, already arrived in 2023–2024 at its XXXIII edition, is a study and care programme centred on a place selected because of its particular 'values of nature, memory and invention', as stated by the first director of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche and creator of this project in 1990, the architect Domenico Luciani.

From the beginning – and still today, as the initiative is curated by Luigi Latini and Patrizia Boschiero – the Prize has been conceived as a research project, as a tool for recognising the values of certain places, going beyond the logic of preservation, repair or conservation, but rather in the spirit of understanding and documenting the transformations of some places chosen for their extraordinary importance and significance in the context of landscape culture.

This Prize is therefore not just an institutional formula, but a multifaceted activity which, through different stages and many tools, allows us to explore – to quote some very effective concepts proposed in the call for papers of this issue of "Sophia Journal" – how cultures, beliefs, behaviours and practices interact with and shape the physical environment of different territories and their architecture, but also to acknowledge contemporary discourses and uses of the concept of landscape.

In each edition, a place is awarded and, during a ceremony in Treviso, a member of the community that looks after it receives a symbolic object representing the Prize. The Scientific Committee is responsible for choosing the site to be awarded and its decision is the result of a process of research, both in the available literature and on the field. For each edition, the committee travels to the site to study it in depth and to confirm or reconsider its preliminary findings. After the fieldwork and the selection of the site, the human and scientific relationships established during the trip are consolidated, as are the lines of research, which are then developed into a book, an exhibition, a conference and many other public events, as well as a documentary that, following a circular pattern of research, collects and organises the work done and itself becomes a source for further research. The Prize is therefore both a research programme and a communication project.

GM: From all these years of work on the Prize – whose general objectives and working methods are linked to other activities of the Foundation, whose research method it has helped to structure and strengthen – what idea of landscape design and memory can be derived?

1 <https://fbsr.it/en/the-international-carlo-scarpa-prize-for-gardens/>

The interview took place in January 2025. In March 2026, the Scientific Committee of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche awarded the thirty-fourth International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens (2025–2026) to Hospitalfield, a place dedicated to art and ideas in the Scottish landscape.

LL: The first thing that comes to my mind is that usually when a foundation makes an award, it makes an award and that's it; usually the award corresponds to the institution and vice versa, the awards are associated with juries, with institutions that only deal with them in a very narrow way. The Carlo Scarpa Prize, on the other hand, was created in a very unique context, within a study centre that sees the Prize itself as a form of in-depth study and exploration that also involves the whole life of the Foundation from a research point of view, both in terms of cultural objectives and in terms of tools. It is a project that shows a specific way of thinking that corresponds to the way the Foundation was conceived from the outset, in its organisation, in its methods of communication, in the materials it uses and, above all, in the way it understands research as an interweaving of tangible relationships between experts rather than as the result of an immaterial place.

At the same time, I would like to say this: the Foundation works in the field of landscape and, in an attempt to explore a subject that was relatively unexplored and pioneering when it was created in the 1980s, it decided to focus on some key themes that have a particular strength in building or renewing a language and a constantly evolving reflection on landscape. The Prize is therefore based on these methods and this way of working, according to which working on a subject that is not a work of art, not architecture, not a literary work, but rather a multiform field that slips through our fingers, is more suitable for a thoughtful reflection on landscape; a landscape understood as a strongly interdisciplinary field, although often seen in a purely historical or purely scientific light. And it is in this context, made up of a convergence of different perspectives, that the Prize's research programme began.

The relationship with memory, then, comes almost automatically. This is because, in general, the Prize deals with living structures that belong to concrete physical places that are the result of consolidated cultures; even if we are talking about the hyper-modern or archaeological, memory is part of the widest range of in-depth studies in the field of landscape. The Prize is thus, in a sense, a non-codified tool that can be used to find a point of intersection in the ambiguity and multiplicity of contributions inherent in landscape research. Hence the idea, already mentioned, to focus the Prize not on an author, not on a work, but on a place: a way to explore and develop research in the field of landscape, overcoming a sectorial vision. Other prizes may, as is often the case, choose certain historical periods or certain categories or even typologies; here, however, we are dealing with places and issues that arise from the tangible nature of our world, from its physical, social and political aspects, from the need to understand the meaning of the historical continuum.

As I said, I think it might be a little strange to 'give a prize to a place'. The prize is not an entity, it doesn't exist as a subject, but it is a way of saying that to talk about landscape it is not enough to have a drawing, or to wave an ideology, or to record a correct plan. To support and transmit the

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content of a Prize like this, a narrative is needed. I believe that this was not clearly stated at the beginning, but as the Prize developed it became a natural and fundamental consequence, and all this regardless of the aesthetic qualities of a place and its evocative power: it resonates with a lived, shared experience, better if not an authorial one, and this is once again a way to reflect on the meaning of landscape and, above all, on the broad meaning we give to the word 'garden'.

Very often the narration of the places has a strongly project-based value. You, Giulia, refer to 'landscape project': in my opinion, 'landscape project' doesn't exist, but what does exist is the equipment that allows us to design the landscape. Passionately setting up a way of narrating is therefore already the beginning of a design approach, because it forces us to be responsibly ready for a transformation, to be already equipped and ready to belong to this landscape and not just to represent or describe it. Extracting the essence of these places, their ways of life, the people, the research, has a strong design-oriented outcome, because it is an invitation to act responsibly, also in the sense of being able to project their evolution into the future, to be 'designers' and not just 'conservators'.

This attitude also allows us to refresh the vision of the Modern, which has always been seen as indifferent to, if not opposed to, the reasons behind the landscape. And I would add that our research, which is methodologically aimed at achieving synthesis – something we also do from a personal point of view, trying to work in a multidisciplinary team – is perhaps, even unconsciously, linked to the search for simplification and synthesis that the Modern has always tried to achieve.

GM: During the period of research that I was able to carry out in Treviso as a fellow in 2024, studying publications and archival material, as well as the Foundation's current "Agenda", I noticed that everywhere, like a mantra, there was a very clear pattern that could be summed up in the motto 'document – research – transmit'.

This pattern describes a circular, not linear, method of research. A research project is not completed with a single repetition of this pattern; but, many repetitions are needed to reach the end of a process that is, in any case, always on-going, with a mindset that today would be defined as 'collaborative' and 'open source'.

In fact, at each stage there is the idea of adding another research circuit and so on: the documentation, which is selected, studied and organised, becomes a wealth of resources that other researchers can consult in the Documentation Centre – archive, image library, map library and library – for the purposes of their research; the research involves numerous people who bring their own specific areas of interest to the project and at the same time learn from it, in a virtuous mechanism that is strengthened in every possible way; the transmission which, thanks to the Editorial Office, takes the concrete form of the curatorship of various products – books, exhibitions and documentaries – which immediately gather the main results of this process,

but which themselves become materials for others to study and learn from, that means 'new documentation'.

How does the Prize, which undertakes a new research project for each edition, manage to make this circular process work for such different places and landscapes?

PB: There is no doubt that the working method – which corresponds to the main features of the research project – is linked to this theme of 'circularity'. The Prize actually works in accordance with this concept.

The first step, the starting point in a way, is that from the very beginning the Foundation has welcomed researchers, external collaborators and, above all, this working group, configured first as the Jury and then as the Scientific Committee of the Prize, composed of professors of landscape architecture, but also of philosophy, architecture, art history, who teach in various universities or who develop landscape projects or who write about landscape: it is the end of the 1980s and in this group there are some of the leading experts on landscape culture in Italy and in Europe.

The starting point is therefore the reflection of this group of experts who travel and 'look at the world', primarily interested in the macro-themes of garden and landscape, collecting reflections, ideas and projects that then become concrete through the choice of a key place. In other words, it is a research that is carried out in the field and not just through personal memories or literature; a research that comes to life through our movement in ever-changing geographical areas.

GM: : Luigi previously used a beautiful image when he said that research is not an abstract concept, but is made up of relationships: it seems to me that the theme of the journey captures this idea very well.

PB: The journeys undertaken as part of the Prize's programme – which bring together different ideas, books, people, stories, geopolitical regions, climates and environments – are fundamental stages, also from a methodological point of view, as are the discussions and site visits, which broaden the collective perspective, also thanks to meetings with the people who live in these places or who have designed or managed them.

This is where the choice is made. After considering the many possibilities, at the end of each journey the working group has to come to a single decision and then, during the same edition of the Prize, the cycle begins again. In fact, after choosing the place, a series of specific activities begins to realise what we can call the products of the Carlo Scarpa Prize: a series of conferences and public meetings, a collective book – which has grown and transformed over time, becoming bilingual, for example, while at the beginning we produced it only in Italian – but also a photographic documentary exhibition and a press campaign.

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This brings us to the issue of spreading the culture of landscape. The Prize is also a communication project and it is therefore essential to reach as wide an audience as possible, one that is sensitive, curious, or interested in the culture of landscape as well as in the value of these places.

Of course, the press campaign also includes the use of images: in order to talk about the places we are awarding and their landscapes, press offices and journalists ask above all for pictures! From this point of view, we have always used both contemporary and historical photography, as well as cartographic documents and other forms of representation. In 2014, while working on the 26th edition of the Award, we decided, as the Foundation, to also produce a documentary film about the awarded place. It's not that we had never used film before; we had, but rather in an extemporaneous way, with short, unprofessional videos made in-house, or using pre-existing material, such as documentaries or short videos produced by others, in other contexts, but which were useful for describing the chosen location.

All these activities will then come together in a series of public events to be held at our headquarters in Treviso, at the prize-winning venue and then elsewhere, in different contexts, in schools and universities, at festivals, in cultural institutes abroad, etc.

GM: It's interesting that within the same edition of the Prize, a multitude of stories can be told, starting from a single specific place. We can look at the two most recent editions: the Espacio Escultórico of the Mexican edition tells a very long story, of the settlement on the Pedregal and the very lively life of the UNAM [Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México]; while the Prize awarded to Natur Park in Berlin narrates the multiple urban natures and a story that is short in time but very dense in historical and symbolic terms, and portraying the transformation of a city but also of a country, and perhaps even of Europe in those years.

PB: A practical example of this polyphonic narrative, built around a place with the book, the seminars, the exhibition and the documentary, an explicit sign of this centripetal and centrifugal force, can be found in the titles of the different editions of the Prize. In fact, in recent editions we have chosen broader titles that don't stop at the name of the place: for example, "Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände and Berlin's urban nature" or "LEspacio Escultórico in Pedregal de San Ángel, Mexico City". This may seem like excessive labelling, but I think this aspect also helps to explain the philosophy of the Prize.

The Scientific Committee's falling in love with a place – I don't use that word lightly, even if it may make you smile – brings with it the relationship of that place to its immediate surroundings, but also to its wider context, in a constant dialogue with other places and other people encountered during the preparatory reading or during the journey. I have the idea that the kind of knowledge we try to have about the selected place is something like meeting someone: if you really want

to get to know them, you have to find out about their background, who their friends are, what they'd like to do in the future, what kind of trouble they've gotten into and what problems they need to solve. Maybe we could talk about topophilia, it is certainly an adventure that is also a process and a project of care.

GM: As we have already mentioned, the production of a documentary film has been part of the Prize's activities now for almost a decade. This film serves as the 'eyes of the public', enabling everyone to engage with the research carried out by the Scientific Committee. At the same time, it communicates, in an inclusive language, the understanding of a particular place. Has this approach raised awareness that photography and film can be both valuable research tools and effective communication tools?

PB: For some time, we had been thinking that we didn't want to simply show our movement in and around the site through videos that were not our own, as we did for the 23rd edition of the Prize, dedicated to the Bosco di Sant'Antonio in Abruzzo, when we came across a beautiful film by Ermanno Olmi entitled "Mille anni", specifically dedicated to the 2012 prize-winning site. Nor did we want to rely on amateur videos and photos taken during the study trip.

Then, in 2014, our wish finally became an investment, albeit a modest one. The Foundation was able to produce a documentary film in collaboration with a specialist chosen for his sensitivity and interest in the subjects covered.

It is also no coincidence that the novelty of producing a documentary coincided with a change in the approach to photographic documentation: at a certain point, it seemed useful and appropriate – and at the same time possible – to involve not only a director but also a professional photographer. So for about ten years now, for each edition of the Prize, we have also involved a photographer for the on-site photographic campaigns.

GM: I'm not sure that 'documentary' is technically the right term, but it is certainly a visual narrative which embodies an insight that has allowed the Prize to reach a wider audience through a medium – video – that we are all increasingly familiar with. It is important to note, however, that this medium complements, rather than replaces, the other forms of media previously used.

DG: Although it didn't happen in the first editions of the Prize in the 1990s, I believe that the decision to produce a documentary was a pioneering insight in line with the work of the Foundation, combining the creative/productive practice of documentary making with the research carried out in the context of the Prize. I think it should be almost compulsory, and I say this not out of self-interest, but with the deepest conviction. Let me explain. As I see it, documentary filmmaking is a reflective practice in which the act of making shapes reflection, and reflection inspires the act of making.

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I think the term 'documentary' is limiting, to say the least. It is certainly a language, a tool that serves the purpose of narration. We could talk about the 'fiction of reality', or the 'cinema of the real', which is a term that has now been accepted. In fact, the term 'documentary' often evokes a perspective that is limited to recording reality with a conservative approach. Sometimes, behind the 'screen' of memory, one could say that the documentary seems to fulfil its function, limited to this and not going beyond it. But I don't think this is the case, because when you make a documentary – and once again I think this is perfectly in line with the work of the Foundation – you are already using your critical thinking about the present, the past and the future, which goes beyond preservation; you are already starting a process of reflection on the identity of the place and of the people who narrate it. The latter are fundamental because they are the voices that allow the place to live; because the place itself, without a language, without insights or creative representations, could not live in a narrative key, but would remain motionless in a documentary dimension. For this reason, it is essential to rigorously 'emphasise' documentation and memory, and to develop a critical reflection on the present, questioning its dynamics and its implications.

Having said that, I believe that the documentary is one of the most relevant creative languages for working on the landscape, accepting the ambiguity of this term, which Luigi mentioned earlier, the documentary fits into the workflow with the same ambiguity. In fact, it is an intrinsically ambiguous and permeable audiovisual tool, capable of adapting to an interdisciplinary and polyphonic research, without renouncing a necessary critical distance.

This is always very exciting in the work I share with Luigi and Patrizia: to see how the paths explored by the documentary can provoke discussion, create an open platform for imagining possible futures for places, and act as a tool for critical investigation.

For me, there is nothing more inspiring than exploring such ambiguous topics as landscape and investigating them in this necessarily diachronic dimension, because it is linked to both history and archives, and aims to tell a story that allows us to deal with aspects that are symbolic and social, as well as technical, of course.

Whether we use a video camera or a photo camera, the aim remains the same: to reach an audience through a narrative that combines scientific rigour with emotional effectiveness, that can be remembered by the widest possible audience beyond the experts, that can offer a serious service, in line with the task that any form of communication should fulfil. This is another challenge: to act as a mirror between scientific research and the wider public, to strike a balance between rigorous in-depth analysis and accessibility, between the complexity of knowledge and the ability to engage people.

GM: I think that the documentary takes part in all three phases of the work 'documenting – researching – transmitting' and not only in the last one, as one might think. Davide, do you also find this circularity in your work? How do you keep all these levels of work together, as well as all the research topics that keep coming up?

DG: It's definitely a challenge every time. The only position I try to take, with as much awareness as possible, is one of declared instability from many points of view. First of all, between not being able to tell everything and trying to find the right narrative dimension. In fact, the story is always more exciting where it's more difficult!

The innate silence of the place, its inability to express itself, is extraordinarily fascinating. It is precisely in this voicelessness that the most stimulating challenge lies: to shift our gaze, to reveal what would otherwise remain invisible. This should be the essential task of cinema: to go beyond mere communication or simple reporting by offering a point of view that can question, evoke and give new meaning. The interesting thing about going to places is that you have to put yourself in a listening position, but it can't be passive listening, you have to interact, provoke situations, approach reality with a critical spirit and be disciplined in trying to have a structure, a hierarchy of thought from the beginning.

This unstable position is necessary, it leads to desire, it leads to curiosity. So it stimulates you in the first phase; then you need to impose a little order, you need discipline, I always say jokingly, almost military discipline.

It's a process similar to writing an academic essay, where you try to organise a structured order, often inspired by the Aristotelian tripartite division between introduction, body and conclusion. As far as I'm concerned, there are actually three phases of writing, even in the audiovisual field: a phase of developing the idea and writing tout-court, a production phase in which the ideas are given concrete form, and a post-production phase in which an attempt is made to bring order to the complexity of the whole process.

In the early stages you go to the sources and start your research, but it's not just about gathering information for its own sake. I think it was Oliviero Toscani who said that life is a bit like driving a car: you look in the rear-view mirror, but in the meantime you have to drive and look at the road ahead. It's a bit like that in all three phases. In the production phase, you look back at the writing phase, but you are already thinking about post-production. And so on and so on...

You have to collect material while thinking about the feasibility of what you want to produce, and at the same time you have to think about how to present it in a language that is accessible to the public: the three stages of writing always influence each other.

So you move in this oscillating position during the writing phase, but also during the production phase – where you obviously try to confirm the insights you have had without making them

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rigid, trying not to 'straitjacket' reality but keeping yourself open to possible surprises – and during the post-production phase, where you try to verify the two previous phases.

In fact, each project is different, so there can't be a standard method. Certainly, the choice of place and the work done by the Foundation's Scientific Committee in the preliminary phase are crucial. It is necessary to have a sensitivity that is not only scientific, but also human and artistic, in order to relate and resonate with the places and the people who inhabit or look after them. All this produces a very interesting creative ecosystem, in which the ambiguity of the documentary language allows us to enter into the gaps of reality and to put scientific research, dissemination and communication in a constant fruitful relationship, at least that's what we hope. It's a really atypical dimension of planning and for that reason I think it's very stimulating and very fruitful!

GM: Has your work over the years brought to light any other interesting considerations, for example about the relationship between some of the key words we have mentioned several times so far, such as 'film', 'research' and 'landscape'?

DG: With regard to the interaction between 'film' and 'scientific research', I can say from my experience that there is often a kind of reluctance, a mistrust, on the part of the world of 'research' towards the world of 'communication', which is seen as a sector that uses sensationalist approaches – which is sometimes true, sometimes not – or approaches that simplify in an extremely synthetic way. Another criticism of the language of film is that places are used as mere decoration, as backgrounds, as maquettes. It could not be otherwise, locations are often part of the ingredients of

cinema and are used to establish different narrative dimensions. However, in the context of my collaboration with the Foundation on the documentaries for the Prize, the locations are the real protagonists of the story, in an attempt to balance the need for scientific rigour with that for solid communicative effectiveness. I believe that the uniqueness of our collaboration lies precisely in this synthesis.

PB: On the subject of landscapes used as locations and sets, the work on the valleys of Cappadocia is an emblematic example. But I'm not talking about cinema, I'm talking about an approach to advertising that leads to purely commercial exploitation and promotes tourism in the most superficial and damaging way to places and their culture, to landscapes – like the one you filmed, Davide, with Gabriele Gismondi, in Cappadocia, with a radically different spirit – and which produces a completely opposite narrative to what our documentary did, taking into account all the research and meetings with a wide range of people on the ground. The same could be said of the image of 'green Ireland' that the Prize presented in the film *Céide Fields*, shot in the middle of winter, in snow and hail, crossing the expanses of peat bogs and Neolithic dry-stone walls, in the freezing wind, together with archaeologists, farmers and shepherds...

DG: Another key word, I think, is 'conflict', or rather 'places of conflict'. Conflict is an ingredient of the narrative and helps to put these places and their contradictions into perspective. Moreover, public spaces are often places of intersection, experimentation and conflict, such as the aforementioned Espacio Escultórico in Mexico and the Natur Park Südgelände in Berlin.

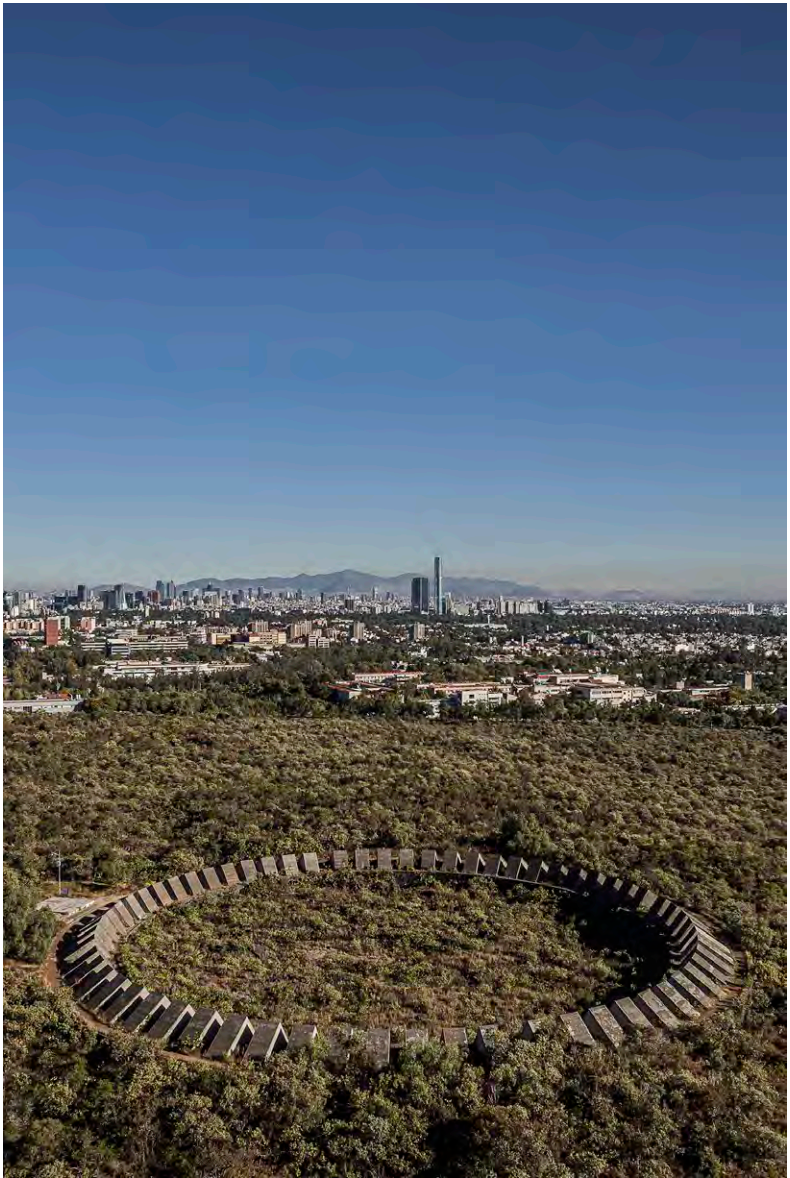
PB: It is also interesting to note that art, as well as landscape planning and design, has played a key role in the history of both places.

DG: It's true! Even from a dramaturgical point of view, art already has a media dimension, and artists have been very important figures in the making of documentaries.

GM: Thank you, because I think it's very significant that we've managed to combine theoretical and methodological issues with practical and technical aspects, starting from a concrete experience such as the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens. I think, and above all I hope, that the observations made and the insights gathered here may soon be helpful and inspiring for other research paths, in a virtuous process of circularity, like the one we mentioned in relation to the working method of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.

[Fig. 1]

Espacio Escultórico in the Pedregal de San Ángel, Mexico City 2023, ph Andrés Cedillo, Courtesy UNAM-FA.



[Fig. 2]

Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände, Berlin 2022, ph Marco Zanin, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.





[Fig. 3]

Espacio Escultórico in the Pedregal de San Ángel, Mexico City 2023, ph Fabian Martinez, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.



[Fig. 4]

Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände, Berlin 2022, ph Marco Zanin, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.



[Fig. 5]
The film crew in action on the site, Mexico City
2023, ph Fabian Martinez, Copyright Fondazione
Benetton Studi Ricerche.

[Fig. 6]
The film crew in action on the site, Berlin 2022,
photo by Marco Zanin, Copyright Fondazione
Benetton Studi Ricerche.





[Fig. 7]

The film crew in action on the site, Mexico City 2023, ph Fabian Martinez, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.

