

*Landscapes of Care: Photography, Film, Modern Architecture
and Landscape Heritage*



SOPHIA
SCOPIO EDITIONS

volume 8, issue 1 | publication year: 2023
issn: 2183-8976 [print] 2183-9468 [online]
isbn: 978-989-53640-5-3
doi 10.24840/2183-8976_2023-0008_0001_13
homepage: <https://www.up.pt/index.php/sophia>

©SCOPIO EDITIONS

VISUAL ESSAYS

Oases in the grid: The gardens of postwar Milanese middle-class housing

Natalia Voroshilova, Giulio Galasso

Abstract:

The essay investigates the Milanese street-front gardens of post-WWII middle-class housing. Spread around the city by hectic developers, these gardens reflect specific cultural, political and social conditions of Italy's industrial capital during the economic miracle.

Street-facing gardens are an essential feature of modern middle-class condominiums. They reflected the modernist urban vision of a park-city and the Milanese tradition of the street facade; they encapsulate the bourgeois culture with its urge for representative decorum and the freedom of architectural experimentation; their image was used as a marketing tool in real estate advertisement but also as an argument in negotiation for the building licence.

In Post-WWII Milan urban nature radically changed its connotation: from a hygienic device, it transformed into a status symbol, and the Milanese started to take care of gardens precisely because of their decorative importance. Even though they are private, they are designed to be looked at from the street, and therefore they make an important part of the everyday urban experience.

Beyond their speculative nature, the gardens of Milanese condominiums transformed the urban landscape, bringing density together with well-cared nature into the city streets.

The essay explores this phenomenon through a series of distant and close-up views as if following a wandering gaze through the streets of the city.

Keywords: architecture, photography, middle-class, regional modernism.

VISUAL ESSAYS

Natalia Voroshilova is an architect and researcher based in Zurich. She studied at Politecnico di Milano and ETH Zurich, and she is currently a teaching assistant in Politecnico di Milano. Her field of research is XX century Italian middle-class housing and, together with Giulio Galasso, she has lectured at Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, Biennale svizzera del territorio, ENSA Paris Val-de-Seine, Politecnico di Torino, Politecnico di Milano and University of Antwerp.

Giulio Galasso is an architect and researcher based in Zurich. He graduated from Politecnico di Milano, IUAV and TU Munich, and he is currently a research assistant at the Chair of Christ and Gantenbein at ETH Zurich. He is recipient of LINA Fellowship for the years 2023–24 and together with Natalia Voroshilova he runs continentale, an architecture firm based in Zurich.

While strolling in the streets of Milan, one can often encounter small oases of gardens interrupting the tight row of XIX-century street facades. Usually, these green voids are created by modernist condominiums that are set back from the street. These gardens include recurrent elements as if belonging to a common project: tall cedar and magnolia trees, low bowl planters, white sphere lamps, fountains clad with azure mosaic and stone-paved paths leading from the street to the building entrance. At the same time, each garden has its own shape and character, which together with architecture creates an individual atmosphere. Present in almost every street of Milan, these private gardens form a network of oases spread all over the city.

Condominiums with street-facing gardens are examples of middle-class housing built by private developers from 1949 to 1971. The housing construction boom was pushed by national subsidies aimed at stabilising the political situation through the expansion of homeownership¹. Differently from the majority of the neighbouring European countries, where the spread of private cars encompassed low-density suburban development, living in a "modern" apartment in the city became the major aspiration for Italian families in the post-war period. This model of "living together, living in the city" defined high-density urbanisation mechanisms in Italy with the condominium as its primary unit². The aspirations of the industrial capital's soaring population overlapped with the urge to reconstruct after the bombings. As a result, the punctually emptied XIX century urban grid was filled by autonomous profit-oriented operations, characterised by a plurality of actors involved in design, construction and transformation processes (large real-estate and insurance companies, private developers and cooperatives, design firms, architects and engineers, contractors and building companies, technicians, city administrators and middle-class families).

The construction of these buildings had to satisfy the diverse expectations of various actors and therefore reflects the spirit of the city at that time: the quest for "modern with the consciousness of history"³. This is why the gardens are grounded in the modernist urban visions of a park-city as well as in the Milanese tradition of representative street facades dating back to Commissione d'Ornato – a planning institution responsible for facade quality in the Napoleonic epoch⁴. These gardens were a fruit of bourgeois culture with its aspiration for

1 Gaia Caramellino and Federico Zanfi (editors), *Post-war Middle-class Housing. Models, Construction, Change* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015).

2 Bruno Bonomo, Gaia Caramellino, Filippo De Pieri and Federico Zanfi (editors), *Storie di case. Abitare l'Italia del boom* (Rome: Donzelli editore, 2014).

3 Gio Ponti, "Paesaggio moderno di Milano", in *Domus*, no. 312, (1955), 7–10.

4 Corinna Morandi, Milano. La grande trasformazione urbana (Venezia: Marsilio, 2015), 19–22.

VISUAL ESSAYS

representative decorum⁵ as well as the professional architectural culture linked with arts and engineering experimentation⁶. The garden image was widely used as a marketing tool in real estate advertisement but also as an argument in negotiation for the building licence due to the common mechanism of agreements "in precario"⁷.

Due to the peculiarity of the post-war Milanese context, the modernist hygienic concept of urban nature totally changed its meaning as it transformed into a cultural phenomenon: the street-front garden became a status symbol of the building residents exhibited for the public view. Like the street facade and the entryway, the front garden became an essential element of the flaunting relationship between the private and the public in the city of Milan⁸.

The gardens are meticulously maintained due to their cultural significance; they represent a collective gift from middle-class residents to the city – a form of donation that enhances the daily street experience while also solidifying the social status of the donors. Beyond its speculative nature, middle-class mass housing transformed Milan into a denser but also greener city, with flourishing gardens adorning its streets, tall trees casting the lace of shadow, softly rippling fountains cooling the hot air and glazed clinker tiles shining on the sun.

These Milanese gardens stand as a precious example of how the modernist concept of a park city can integrate with the urban fabric of corridor-streets. Here, the gardens become an integral part of the continuous street facade, creating verdant niches that enrich urban environment while maintaining the integrity of the street experience. These vibrant, foliage-filled oases, adorned by colorful tiled facades, not only enhance the visual appeal of the streetscape but also improve the street climate. Originally conceived as symbols of middle-class social status, designed to captivate the gaze of passersby, they stand today as valuable human-scale spaces that with their abundant details make the street more attractive and invite residents to go for a stroll rather than relying on cars. Born from a convergence of diverse actors and aspirations, the street-front gardens of post-war Milan serve as a compelling source of inspiration for contemporary city planning.

5 Fulvio Irace, *Milano Moderna. Architettura e città nell'epoca della ricostruzione* (Milan: Motta Editore, 1996), 50–52.

6 Maria Vittoria Capitanucci, *Il professionismo colto nel dopoguerra* (Milan: Solferino edizioni, 2015), 13–23.

7 Federico Zanfi, "Convenzione urbanistiche e il nuovo paesaggio residenziale per i ceti medi a Milano tra gli anni '50 e '70", in *Territorio*, n. 64, (2013), 66–74.

8 Daniel Sherer, "The Discreet Charm of the Entryway. Architecture, art, and design in the Milanese ingressi, 1910–70", in *Entryways of Milan – Ingressi di Milano*, ed. Karl Kolbitz (Taschen: Cologne, 2017), 22–2.

Bibliography

Bonomo, Bruno, Caramellino, Gaia, De Pieri, Filippo, Zanfi, Federico, (editors). *Storie di case. Abitare l'Italia del boom*. Rome: Donzelli editore, 2014.

Capitanucci, Maria Vittoria. *Il professionismo colto nel dopoguerra*, 13–23. Milan: Solferino edizioni, 2015.

Caramellino, Gaia, Zanfi, Federico, (editors). *Post-war Middle-class Housing. Models, Construction, Change*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2015.

Irace, Fulvio. *Milano Moderna. Architettura e città nell'epoca della ricostruzione*, 50–52. Milan: Motta Editore, 1996.

Morandi, Corinna. *Milano. La grande trasformazione urbana*, 19–22. Venezia: Marsilio, 2015. Ponti, Giò. "Paesaggio moderno di Milano", in *Domus*, no. 312, 7–10, 1955.

Sherer, Daniel. "The Discreet Charm of the Entryway. Architecture, art, and design in the Milanese ingressi, 1910–70". In *Entryways of Milan - Ingressi di Milano*, edited by Karl Kolbitz, 22–28. Taschen: Cologne, 2017.

Zanfi, Federico. "Convenzione urbanistiche e il nuovo paesaggio residenziale per i ceti medi a Milano tra gli anni '50 e '70", in *Territorio*, no. 64, 66–74, 2013.

Captions

(Fig. 1-2)

Condominium in Piazzale Bacone, arch. Gustavo and Vito Latis, 1968;

(Fig. 3-4)

Condominium in via Maiocchi, cooperative Ornella Letizia, arch. Paula Arduini, 1967–1969;

(Fig. 5-6)

Condominium in via Monte Rosa, insurance company Toro s.r.l., arch. Vittorio Ceretti, 1967–1969;

(Fig. 7-8)

Condominium in Via Garofalo, anonymous, 1960s.

















