

17



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**PAD. Pages on Arts and Design**

International, peer-reviewed,  
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via Festa del Perdono 1 – 20122 Milano – Italy

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info@padjournal.net – editors@padjournal.net

**Publisher****Aiap Edizioni** – via A. Ponchielli 3 – 20129 Milano – Italy

aiap@aiap.it – www.aiap.it

PAD © ISSN 1972-7887

#17, December 2019

[www.padjournal.net](http://www.padjournal.net)

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# **DOCUMENTS ARTISTIC PROJECTS FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA**

# Becoming Garden.

## Notes on the Creation of a Planetary Garden

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### Keywords

Social Art, Participation, Coexistence, Climate Change, Mediterranean Landscape.

### Abstract

The creation of a Planetary Garden in the ZEN district of Palermo represents a challenge on different levels and at different scales, which affects the nature of the city and the human vision of nature in the city.

On the basis of a series of consecutive workshops, carried out before and during Manifesta 12, a garden was born and at the same time a community of gardeners, passionate about transforming an abandoned, empty space, out of the institutional management. The experience of this collective work for the construction of the common good reveals both the operational capacity and effectiveness of spontaneous groups, as well as the difficulties in finding synergy with the community.

Through the constant involvement of local citizens, the project aims to take care of a place, to find resilient and lasting solutions for a long-term impact, to create soil fertility conditions in the changing Mediterranean climate, to host biodiversity and to reveal the natural ability of plants to inspire solutions for contemporary habitat. Will it be possible to continue experimenting with this planetary garden? What prospects are available for the future of this garden? Do they allow you to create a method, a series, a network? What does it mean to become “planetary gardeners” and to conceive, collect and maintain a new idea of shared space?



Figure 1. The poster of the work in progress during the opening period of Manifesta, June 2018.

## 1. Introduction

From June to November 2018 Palermo hosted the twelfth edition of Manifesta, the European Nomadic Biennial of Contemporary Art. In spite of its condition of geographical and economic marginality and proud of being a border town – between East and West, the gateway to Europe, the port of arrival and departure for migratory flows – Palermo was not only the venue but the real subject of the event, capable of representing the most current issues of politics and social dynamics.

More than an exhibition of art objects, Manifesta catalyzed the experiences and animated the actions with a marked civic and militant character.

It found in Gilles Clément's book *The Planetary Garden* (2015) not only the title but the vision, inspiration and theme of the whole exhibition.

It was therefore natural that he and the atelier Coloco were entrusted with the task of creating a real garden in the form of an artistic installation, in an abandoned lot in the ZEN 2 district, addressing the historical social difficulties of the inhabitants: three simultaneous challenges to take up through vision of the Planetary Garden.

The planetary garden theory states that the planet can be considered a garden for three reasons: planetary mixing, anthropogenic coverage, the definition of the word garden.

Even before humans appeared on the planet, plants and animals traveled. The wind, the sea currents, the fleece of the sheep carry the seeds of species that are believed to be permanently settled but that actually travel. Human activity has only hastened this natural process.

The first welcome territory for travelling species is the very first garden of the first sedentary society that ceased its nomadic activity. From that moment on, it was necessary to “import” the plants that were once collected in their place of growth and plant them in a protected area, a fence, a garden. The garden is first and foremost food. For instance, the tomatoes and potatoes that we grow everywhere come from the Americas. Species often imported for their ornamental value have gained new territories corresponding to their biome (soils and climates compatible with them) in order to create emerging ecosystems and to settle. While traveling on the planet, one realizes that a large number of species previously known as originating in a specific region are comfortable elsewhere when the soil and climate adapt to them. Like in a garden. Mankind is everywhere on Planet Earth as the gardener is everywhere in his garden. His accompanying prostheses (cloths, transportations, air conditioners) allow him to live in all climatic zones. Monitoring and analysis technologies allow people to know what is happening elsewhere, where they are not. The same happens to the gardener: he knows his land and the beings who remain there even in the uncomfortable recesses in which he does not intervene.

The word garden originally means fence. Territory of life whose enclosures are intended to keep predators away. The garden stages and protects the best, the most precious: food, a way of life ... The planet welcomes life within the limits of the biosphere, it is a fence. We do not know if this enclosure is intended to protect this place of life from attacks by potential extraterrestrials (possible predators) or if the way of life



of human beings in their “Great Garden” is a miracle or a disaster. Anyway their vital territory is a space with well-defined limits: a fence.

When we define the planet as a garden, we define all the inhabitants of the planet as gardeners. They play a role in soil, air and water management, they contribute to the spread or rarefaction of the species, they intervene on the substrates of life and on life itself. Aware or not, they are gardeners.

The purpose of experimentation at ZEN 2 is to allow inhabitants to measure and appreciate their role as gardeners by being creative.

In addition to the construction in space (landscape work) and the implementation of a great diversity of species (naturalistic observation), the experience of Palermo addresses the question of global mixing without explicitly mentioning it, by the original logic of the garden. The sung voice and the joyful cry of the children seem to say “yes, the planet is a country without a flag, and here the plants come from all over the world.”

Manifesta in Palermo made a clear curatorial choice by inviting the artists to highlight or install works in unusual places, often abandoned or neglected, and thus rediscovering a potential for hospitality and urban vitality in those places.

This operation gives value to certain spaces, sometimes rediscovering a forgotten meaning or past, and visitors are invited to go there and find out what these places tell beyond the works.

A biennial of contemporary art is ultimately the meeting point for a network of professionals and amateurs that influences the art market.

At that precise moment, political, architectural and social positions related to urban marketing clash, which has become a fundamental element in the competition between metropolises, in charge of finding new content in order to highlight the qualities of cities and the advantages for foreign investors. Manifesta feeds on this speculation but at the same time has the ability to economically re-evaluate the city where it is hosted thanks to site-specific artistic interventions and exhibitions which, however, are short and ephemeral most of the time.

The assignment of an intervention in a place like ZEN 2 in Palermo as part of a biennial, therefore with the extemporaneous modality of an exhibition, posed a challenge that was carefully evaluated before being accepted. Because the creation as intended by the atelier Coloco, takes time and the essence of the work lies in the way it takes place rather than in a complete and defined shape.

The commitment was accepted when it was clear that the people on the field, in particular those who work with the local association *Laboratorio ZEN insieme*, had the desire and dedication to carry out this project in a collaborative way. And even when, talking with the curators for a long time about what the atelier is doing, about the beliefs and intentions, the means and the time for the action, we were able to establish that the garden was not a job to be delivered for the opening of the event but a work in progress to be transmitted at the end.



**Figure 2.** Test field during the first workshop with the community, March 2018.



**Figure 3.** The construction begins during the opening of Manifesta. The first drawing was made directly on site with the excavator, June 2018.

## 2. The context

To effectively describe the importance of the project, it is necessary to identify the geographical area of intervention. ZEN 2, an acronym for North Expansion Zone, is a district of Palermo, in the extreme northern suburbs of the city, entirely made up of social housing buildings. The 2 indicates its construction contiguous in space and subsequent in time to the first social housing intervention in the 1960s. This has a certain number of anonymous and heterogeneous towers in terms of shapes and colors but not by typology. Public spaces are undefined, nevertheless the neighborhood has some services and facilities.

On the contrary, the ZEN 2, then simply called IACP residential district (*Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari*) for 20.000 inhabitants, had a different fortune: the result of a competition in 1969, designed by a team of architects led by Vittorio Gregotti, was realized only several years later, never finished and illegally occupied before many apartments were completed and before facilities and public services were built.

Incomplete primary urbanizations, unrealized services, unasigned and illegally occupied dwellings. Observing the current situation, among the 17 blocks of houses (called *Insule*), several urban voids that should have housed the neighborhood services are easily identifiable.

In this situation, the association *Laboratorio ZEN insieme* has been working in the neighborhood for 30 years. Its activities start from the concept of urban resilience, thus enhancing a community that wants to design innovative social, economic and environmental responses to its own inconveniences,

believing that the participated and the bottom-up processes contribute to environmental awareness to education for coexistence and active citizenship.

This remarkable “architectural cyst” constitutes a striking uniqueness in Palermo, a distinct construction material, created in absolute discontinuity with the landscape of the plain on which it was established, which was also accomplished and eloquent, and with the rest of the modern city which was growing quickly. In other words, a “foundation periphery”. It seems that the choices of politics and administrations, the management of social aspects and the architectural project wanted to conceive it this way.

Unfortunately, the images struggle to represent its complexity and, then the gaze or any other representation gives us an extremely simplified vision, made up of spatial homogeneity, segregation and poverty which, however, are all in the design of the neighborhood. In fact, the more minute scale of diversity disappears against the more evident repetitiveness of the buildings, the apparent absence of open spaces and vital urban activities, the distance from Palermo center.

Today ZEN 2 is the district with the highest index of social and material vulnerability in the city. If the whole complex responds to the logic of urban segregation typical of post-war social housing, both by location and form, it follows that, in most cases, the inhabitants of the other neighborhoods have never visited the ZEN, they have not a reason to cross it or live it and this contributes to consolidate a prejudice.

Only recently the Urban Planning has received the association's requests by changing the class of one of these empty spaces in “public green”. Manifesta12 has become the unexpected and



out-of-the-ordinary project opportunity for the transformation of this void. A professional assignment would have taken a long time and the inhabitants would have been only spectators. We approach the project only indirectly, first, recognizing the rectangle of ground as the rest of an unfinished planning. The goal is not only to make a garden, but to reverse the process of abandonment, to get that area out of the list of wrecks – and there are many around it – to speed up the change.

The creation of a garden leads to take care of their own living spaces, inviting all the inhabitants to become gardeners and to actively participate in the evolution of the project.

With a garden, a dimension of sharing is created spontaneously which facilitates its existence and survival and, by sharing the creative process, the question of appropriation is overcome and a process based on mutual trust is started. In a neighborhood where the inhabitants have developed over time forms of disgust, depression and lack of trust, which easily become cultural immobility, it is necessary to enhance the human capital of the inhabitants as a response to existing social emergencies, as well as an instrument of promotion of active participation. The metaphor represented by the garden is an opportunity to strengthen the sense of community and the importance of active citizenship.

### 3. Invitation to the work

The relationship dynamics (with the place, among the people) established as a working method, balancing the interventions of Coloco and *Scuola del Terzo Luogo* during the three intensive workshops, and the constant gardening and the follow-up

carried by the local gardeners, Ground Action and *Laboratorio ZEN insieme*, with their guests and all the people who collaborated, even randomly.

The invitation to the work contemplates the pleasure of participating each one at his own pace, taking the time to meet, discuss and learn each one's stories. This shared pleasure is the "common good" built together, the reason to come from afar - artists from all over the world have visited it - or to leave the house, like the neighbors, and take care of this ever-changing garden.

This garden is not designed, or rather, it is not designed *a priori* to realize a preconceived thought but to reveal the possibilities, analyzing the soils, the topography, the water availability, to understand what is allowed to be done with very limited means and with a constant concern for the economy. Limiting expenses, optimizing effort, experience in field gestures that should become a global philosophy.

The site chosen was a 17 by 80-meter-long rectangle made up of a sterile substrate of waste accumulated over time. The reconquest of this space was carried out in different stages in a process of participation in which construction has always had an educational. The garden construction site was the installation itself and was habitable from the beginning.

It is a team work, in which everyone brings their experience and their point of view, the mix of gardeners becomes a guarantee of fertility. Every day it was necessary to learn to let things go, to accept the ideas that hybridize between engineers and improvised do-it-yourself, between qualified landscapers and farmers.

In Palermo, this culture of difference and complementarity has been transformed into quality for centuries, to the point of becoming the very identity of this territory.

Becoming a Garden is a story of construction in which art serves the action. Creating a garden here helps to learn the biological flow, the human movement, is a school of patience and tolerance. Facing the harsh climate of Palermo, it is necessary to understand and adapt the botanical choices and cultivation methods and according to the character of the Palermitans it is necessary to propose, invent and not impose: “Do with and not against” Gilles Clément taught us.

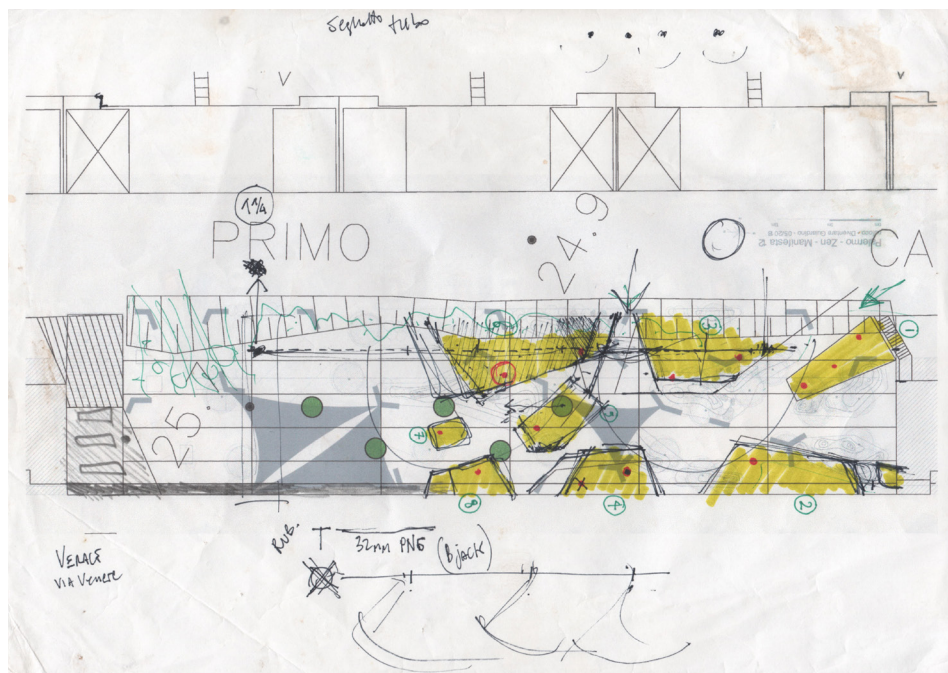
The project took place in three main workshops, the first in March 2018, the second in June on the occasion of the opening of Manifesta and the third in November for its closing. During the first workshop, a one-week meeting just before the beginning of Spring, it was decided to occupy a limited portion of the area where to plant the first five “islands” and test some usual plant clusters made up of typical Mediterranean species (*European olea*, *Punica granatum*, *Ceratonia siliqua*, *Pistacia lentiscus*, *Rosmarinus officinalis*, *Myrtus communis*). Two benches above the ground were used for a small educational garden with vegetables and herbs. In the center, a self-made round table was the first tangible element of conviviality to return to living in this space.

The days before the operational phase that mainly involved the inhabitants of the neighborhood with the support of volunteers, citizens, and other collectives such as *Orto Capovolto* were used in a constant ritual cleaning of the whole area and some training workshops dedicated to children.





**Figure 4.** The creation of the dunes as a tool to fertilize the soil, June 2018.



**Figure 5.** The first construction drawing is an approximate survey of the first excavation operations, June 2018.



**Figure 6.** The state of the garden at the end of the second workshop, June 2018.

The second workshop, which took place over two intense weeks in the early Summer, radically changed the lot first of all by eliminating the fence and reusing it for other purposes, then intervening on the topographical transformation. The “islands” have evolved into a dune system modeled with the sterile soil found on the spot and the new fertile substrate. Plant clusters have become much more complex with the introduction of alien plants that are not strictly local.

The question deserves reflection: the same choice of plant species and their association respond to the climate change that the Mediterranean area and Sicily in particular are experiencing, becoming more subtropical year by year. Just before the last workshop and the closing of Manifesta, the eastern Mediterranean experienced the first hurricane in modern history called *Medicane*.

The change is evident in the common perception, in meteorology as well as in agriculture which first recognizes the need to reduce if not abandon traditional crops such as orange (*Citrus × sinensis*) to be replaced by plants from Central America, Africa and Asia.

The future green system in Sicily, its landscape, hybrid, syncretic and changeable by nature, is prefigured in this garden which is structured according to a gradient ranging from the olive tree (*European Olea*) to the mango tree (*Mangifera indica*). These two weeks have seen the participation of many neighborhood neighbors, volunteers, visitors, artists and activists led by Coloco, *Scuola del Terzo Luogo* and Ground Action. During the summer, which coincided with the main program of Manifesta, the garden hosted a certain number of meetings



dedicated to maintenance, irrigation, visits led by the children themselves and the volunteers of the association *Laboratorio ZEN insieme*. Also a series of movie screenings in the garden for which a screen had been painted on a perimeter wall. Seeing it grow and, above all, using it safely have meant that in a short time the garden entered the daily life of the neighborhood and at the same time in the geography of a city that barely located ZEN.

The third workshop in Autumn allowed to expand the planted areas and to colonize maybe the most problematic part, the roadside border. A disused boat that has been parked between cars was finally donated by the owner to the garden and re-used as a playground for children.

#### 4. Conclusions

The garden and its collective construction respond first of all to an existential need and to the need for expression of a nascent community.

The Planetary Garden is a story capable of representing this exceptional reality because it is configured as an un-designed project that imagines and describes a space of relationships rather than a physical space, an ecosystem in which the vegetable part constitutes only the most visible aspect.

The Planetary Gardener who works on it and who cultivates these relationships is the demonstration of a radical paradigm shift in the transformation not of public spaces – whose definition opposes them to private spaces for a matter of mere ownership – but of social spaces.

He shifts the center of gravity of his role from being a “designer” to acting as a “maker”, actively intervening in the

development of an environment, tracing its trajectory in an active, participatory, performative way.

In the planetary garden, the passages that traditionally identify the phases of the project fade due to its intrinsic formal and functional dynamism, so that the conception, execution, management, use and maintenance merge into a single swirling flow.

Those who had the option to live the first months of the garden life were able to experience how much trust was the raw material necessary to generate that latent social fertility and how much all the first energies were spent in making both the community and those 1.400 square meters aware that they really needed a garden!

The matter of trust becomes crucial when a green space like this is designed to produce positive effects from the moment of its creation.

So, the setting itself becomes the garden, far from being a product prepared and delivered to the city when it's finished. Moreover, in a context in which the promise of concrete actions and the gratuitousness of the most varied theoretical (political and architectural) solutions have produced only disappointment and diffidence.

On the contrary, the acupuncture choice led to a new garden in the form of an artistic project, in the way in which art must be today, social, environmental, capable of producing information.

Contradicting the rhetoric of nature as an instrument of pacification, Becoming Garden is a project based on conflict, not to be intended in its negative sense when it is a reason for

growth and improvement. Taking a certain action in a specific context reveals the hidden issues, the contradictions are made clear, the dormant energies are awakened and the potential resources emerge.

The process itself went on through continuous clashes that led to inevitable choices.

The hard and arid soil has been forcibly split and fertilized, the remains of a fence – laid years earlier to protect who knows what intrusion – have been folded and readjusted to accommodate new crops and needs. Certain furnishings continue to wander, to disappear and then return, in the search for a better location that verifies all the conditions of the case, the seasonal conditions, the needs of the visitors.

Plants of the Mediterranean and tropical areas from all around the world are living together in this new favorable climate and experimenting with a new configuration. Something survives, something else does not, something else still unexpectedly appears. Among the sufferings of adaptation, between pruning and flowering, there has been the appearance of an innumerable variety of spontaneous plants, their migration through the garden and the creation of unexpected plant associations.

So the garden draws itself. Gardeners have the task of recording their movement with a scrupulous census of plants, the posterior measurement of freehand traced geometries, the relief of new topographies and new soils, observation of the behavior of its new inhabitants.

In this scenario, the worst opponent those who have built up a certain kind of individual wellness. Somehow unaware of the real quality of their condition, they consider changes are a threat to this unstable balance which seems to be antagonistic

or incompatible with the achievement of collective wellness. On the contrary, the best ally can be the discomfort of those who have little or nothing and are willing to take risks to improve their condition.

“You can what you do” – inverting the terms of the quote – is the winning strategy of this experience which is invested with the responsibility of transformation and which is called to be a model that can be replicated as it is spontaneously malleable. The Planetary Garden simply fits, like its gardeners. At this point the garden is proving to be an instrument easy to understand and communicate and that gives results both in the immediate and in the long term.

What was proposed in Palermo, in the ZEN district, seemed another impossible challenge but one year after the closing of Manifesta 12 we can say that the garden is not “dried up” and continues to live above all in the friendships, relationships and knowledge that gave birth.

Becoming Garden has confirmed that a garden can be built anywhere, even where the ground at the beginning appears hopelessly arid and resources are few, thanks to the collaboration between various skills in a playful atmosphere of sharing.

If all this happens before the eyes and with the hands of the residents and their children, every single action will have a good chance of leaving a mark, if not a physical one – we do not know whether and for how long the garden will survive – then at least in their memory. It is primarily a matter of care, affection and watching things grow. Care stimulates affection and a feeling of ownership. Watching things grow is a gripping experience that makes people feel an affectionate apprehension.



**Figure 7.** Care and maintenance are an educational practice in order to consolidate the relationships with local neighbors and gardeners, July 2018.





**Figure 8.** Learning by doing, it is a challenge and a game at the same time, August 2018.

Then there are other essential levels of experience. In looking after something you learn.

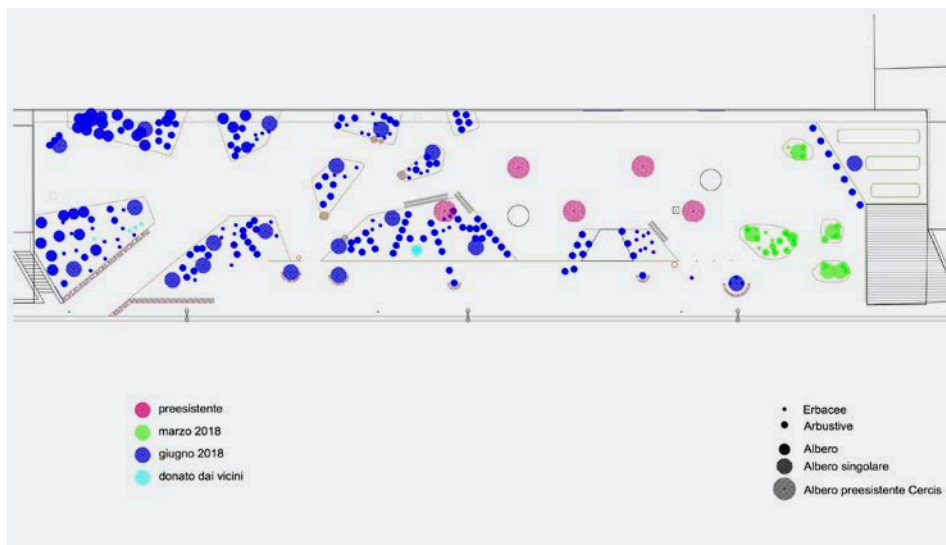
Learning by doing is a game as well as a challenge. Imperceptible changes taking place daily over the span of eight months become evident variations in size, shape and color; buds, flowers and fruit follow one another and the scents and their mixtures can be perceived. Care, play and understanding strengthen the desire to look after things.

It will be an ornament without being an ornamental garden: it is not a municipal garden, it is a kitchen garden: there are carobs, almonds, pomegranates, peaches, olives... associations of plants that grow well in a group, and a very small vegetable garden. Here the concurrent actions of shaping and taking shape have been interwoven, the effect of small gradual choices, commencing with those made out of necessity. The field of action has been restricted and, little by little, the garden has begun to occupy the third dimension, with its transparent and luminous volumes. The goal is emulation, an evolutionary rivalry. The multiplication of ZEN gardens is a difficult prospect, but not so unlikely. Could this analogue garden go viral? (Collovà 2018, pp. 122-127)

Meanwhile in the garden the plants are more alive than ever today and this is the result of the work of a group built by indigenous and foreigners, who overcomes mistrust and gains trust thanks to the attendance and continuity of their actions. The garden passed positively the first summer thanks to the care that the Palermo people did not miss in the warmer months, keeping alive, besides the plants, above all the relationship with the neighbors.

The Palermo context appears to be very lively, competent and receptive on the theme of the landscape and several gardens are springing up in the city, thus becoming places of reference for various realities, often peripheral, which acquire awareness, thanks to the meeting and exchange with similar experiences, to belong to a single planetary garden.

Looking at the future, the challenge raised by those who claim that the ZEN garden will be completed when the neighborhood and its inhabitants independently take over its management must be taken up. We all work with the desire that one day every citizen will feel the need, together with his neighbors, to take care of the public space of his neighborhood directly. To achieve this goal, a Policy is needed made by all the actors of the social, economic and cultural fabric, which imagines new models of city management and which is capable of translating them into understandable tools, simple rules and resources accessible to all citizens.



**Figure 9.** The plan is the result of the survey after planting. It made possible to understand, monitor and transmit the work, September 2018.



**Figure 10.** The third intensive workshop at the closing of Manifesta, November 2018.



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Member of Coloco, an independent collective born in 1999. Since 2006 it formally constitutes a landscape firm that brings together landscape architects, urban planners, botanists, gardeners, artists who collaborate with a vast network of experts, from botanical activism to ecological engineering. Over time, the experience has led to discussions with professionals, local authorities, associations or singular personalities with the aim of creating and supporting integrated projects, bringing together public services, associations, activists and volunteers to explore new relationships in reflection and collective construction. Coloco also plays an important role in broadcasting and teaching in the form of seminars,

or both academic and informal public conferences. Exploration, strategy, activation, construction, transmission are the phases of Coloco's projects in order to support the relationship between people and the places where they live, all unique and all together. Situations and requests vary indefinitely, but commitment is the same: creating places whose quality is measured by their ability to accommodate the enormous diversity of life.

<https://www.coloco.org/>

### Tommaso Listo

Master degree in Philosophical Sciences at the University of Milan. Specialized in Digital Humanities at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Research fellow in Design at Iuav University of Venice. From 2019/2020 PhD in Architecture, History and Project at Polytechnic of Turin.

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### Michele Loiacono

Scuola del Terzo Luogo was born and developed during several editions of Incontri del Terzo Luogo, moments of research on the "undecided" spaces of the city, spaces in which not everything is totally chaotic and wild, but where not everything is already planned. Starting in the fall of 2012, an informal group of people started a journey within these spaces that has facilitated comparison, actions on public space, experimentation, relations with the context and various forms of life with special regard to the topic of the garden. The reference place that gave life to this path, supporting it with its own resources, is Manifatture Knos, an undecided space in the city of Lecce, that has been recovered after a long period of abandonment and returned to the city as an independent cultural center. Scuola del Terzo Luogo wants to deal with new forms of pedagogy by challenging conventional teaching models, where giving political dignity to indecision becomes the modality of intervention on the common good, or the practice through which we take care of places.

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She is currently working on the correspondence and on the publication of the sculptor Vico Consorti (1902-1979) at the University of Siena, following the assignment for the research project *Siena anni Trenta: ipotesi per una mostra* (2017). In 2016 she joined the national project *Diffondere la cultura visiva: l'arte contemporanea tra riviste, archivi e illustrazioni* (Progetto Nazionale FIRB 2012). In March 2016 she received her PhD at the University of Florence with a thesis titled *Le immagini al potere, le immagini del potere. La rappresentazione fotografica dell'architettura contemporanea nelle riviste italiane di settore (1928-1943)*. Graduated in Contemporary Art History at the University of Siena in 2011 with the thesis *Adrian Paci. Da Albanian Stories (1997) a The Encounter (2011)*, she is also specialized in video art. She is interested in the architecture of the Sixties in Italy and Europe, a theme that she has treated in her research *L'architettura pneumatica. Ricerche negli anni Sessanta tra avanguardia e utopia* (2007). Her recent research interests include new media in relation to visual arts, with special reference to architectural communication in Italian, French and German magazines in the Twenties and Thirties and in relation to power and totalitarianism.

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Member of Ground Action, a collective of experts in the field of architecture, landscape and art, which is inspired by all those collective, active and participatory practices of space making such as, for example, the international experiences of the operational workshops. Its activity is configured as an on-site and open air research atelier, aimed at triggering or accelerating the re-evaluation processes for peculiar places, claiming the performative value of the action in the public space and in the landscape. It promotes sustainable design by using recycled materials and the direct and concrete realization of the installations using impromptu ways and forms. According to its method, Ground Action helps to create the opportunity for a dialogue with administrations, other local institutions and all those subjects active in the area capable of providing specific support and knowledge.

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Architect and Associate Professor at Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, she teaches Interior Design Studio at the School of Design and Design Research Context and Resources at the PhD Programme in Design. Director of the specialization Master IDEA\_Exhibition Design, she mainly deals with Design for Cultural Heritage in terms of museography and exhibition design, communication and enhancement of local areas, new models and narratives of cultural experiences, the relationship between design, humanities and arts.

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**PAD. Pages on Arts and Design**

International, peer-reviewed,  
open access journal  
ISSN 1972-7887

#17, december 2019

[www.padjournal.net](http://www.padjournal.net)



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