



**Pietro Porcinai
and the
Landscape of
Modern Italy**

Edited by

Marc Treib & Luigi Latini

ROUTLEDGE


Pietro Porcinai



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Franco Panzini

Sara Tamanini

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Farsetti Garden
Marina di
Petrasanta,
1984.
[Marc Treib]

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Introduction

Finding more than cursory information about the life and landscape designs of Pietro Porcinai in English-language publications will be a difficult task. Yes, a brief entry on this Italian landscape architect appeared—just before his death—in the *Oxford Companion to Gardens*; and yes, stray references appear in certain books on modern gardens—in presentations of the gardens called Villa Fiorita near Saronno or Il Roseto outside Florence. But substantial studies on Porcinai in English are lacking. To provide an overview of the life and work of Pietro Porcinai, and an introduction to his landscape architecture, is the goal of this book.

While the name is not well known, several Porcinai projects may be familiar to those in the design professions. The sloping plaza, or *parvis*, fronting the Centre Pompidou in Paris, was Porcinai's contribution to his collaboration with the architects Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers in the mid-1970s. And Porcinai selected the plantings and other landscape elements for the celebrated Brion tomb by Carlo Scarpa in the cemetery at San Vito d'Altivole during those very same years. Although both these projects have been highly visible, widely published, and continually praised, Porcinai's

contributions to both schemes have remained unrecognized. In reality, Porcinai's practice extended over half a century and produced hundreds of laudable works—at various scales, but especially gardens—that addressed, in Italy and abroad, history as well as the site's physical properties and the personalities of its owners. This relation to the past demanded by the historically managed and constructed terrain of the Italian landscape is an important aspect of Porcinai's designs, and a factor that lent it a particular Italian quality. Indeed, at the beginning of his career the principal question he posed was how to interrogate and invigorate the long-standing ideal of the classical *giardino all'italiana* which had once prevailed throughout Europe.

Porcinai did not rest content with either the adoption or adaptation of classical forms, or to a restriction to the province of the garden. Throughout his life he advanced the causes of responsible landscape management, innovative design, and the professionalization of landscape architects in Italy and internationally. In this last objective he was only partially successful, and even to this day few Italian institutions of higher learning offer complete programs in the field of landscape architecture.

The five chapters that comprise this book introduce the life, design approach, materials, collaborators, and writings of Pietro Porcinai. The [first chapter](#) narrates selected events in his life and sets them against the nature and scope of his practice, the emerging profession of landscape architecture in Europe, and the economic and political situations in Italy during the postwar years. As noted above, history occupied a prominent position

in both his thinking and on many of the sites which he managed or reconstructed. Addressing the fabric of a historical villa seems unavoidable in a country with over two thousand years of landscape transformations; more surprising were Porcinai's professional interventions: his chairing, for example, of the aesthetic committee that managed the transfer and reinstallation of the sculptures at Abu Simbel in Egypt necessitated by the construction of the Aswan Dam.

And just what elements and processes characterize the Porcinai landscape? To realize functioning landscapes on sloping sites often required substantial earth movement, much of which in Porcinai's early years of practice was achieved with the pick and the shovel rather than the bulldozer. Where sufficient level terrain was lacking Porcinai terraced the slopes, and at times even constructed platforms carefully disguised with soil and vegetation. Both excavation and filling were demanded. If the earth provided the platform for the new landscape, vegetation became its prime medium. With an educational background in agronomy, Porcinai possessed a deep knowledge of plants, and his long collaboration with Hilde Neunteufel added to the intelligence and refinement of his plant selections. Plant lists for certain projects ran to ten or more pages, with several hundred species of varying sizes, testifying to the detailed level at which Porcinai conceived his gardens. His connections with nurseries abroad, for example in Germany and Switzerland, brought plants from far beyond the Italian borders, and yet in gardens, parks, and industrial landscapes he relied most of all on native species.

Porcinai's study, ambition, talent—and not least of all his personality—insured professional success. While never an academic as such, he was highly respected and often addressed as "Professore." Born to a family of gardeners, he nevertheless learned to mix well with members of the new Italian, often industrial, bourgeoisie who sought villas and gardens that broadcast their acquired tastes and financial accomplishments. Early on Porcinai, in 1938, formed a studio with the interior designer Maurizio Tempestini and the architect Nello Baroni, understanding that contemporary practice meant collaborative practice. In time, architects as well as clients came to him not only for his talent and intelligence, but also for his charm, cultivation, and willingness to truly collaborate. With little understatement, however, it can be said that they had little choice; Porcinai had no real competition—he stood at a level far above any other designer producing landscapes in Italy during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

As this is the first English-language study on the life and work of Pietro Porcinai—with a restricted page length—there are bound to be both lacunae and areas that merit greater discussion. We trust, however, that as an introduction to the work of Italy's most important modern landscape architect, the book will both inform and please, and perhaps also stimulate an interest and study by those outside Porcinai's native land.

Marc Treib, Berkeley
Luigi Latini, Venice
November 2014

(overleaf)
La Canzone
del Mare,
Capri, 1950.
[Marc Treib]







1-1
Pietro Porcinai in Fiesole,
1970s.
[Archivio Pietro Porcinai,
Fiesole, Italy, hereafter APP]

1.

A Life and its Cultural Context

Luigi Latini

[A TWENTIETH-CENTURY ITALIAN: INTRODUCTORY NOTES]

The productive professional life of Pietro Porcinai spanned more than 50 years, a career that at times required foreign travel of significant length. Despite these extended periods abroad, however, Porcinai's cultural sensibilities and professional development remained inseparable from the city and country of his origin: Florence, where he was born in 1910, and Italy, which provided fertile cultural support during the decisive years of his formation [figure 1-1]. Throughout the twentieth century, but especially in its middle decades, a series of social and economic factors instigated major transformations in both the structure and shape of the Italian city and countryside. At times these transformations, especially those involving the modernization of the land, traumatically disturbed the fragile equilibrium established over

centuries of the very same landscapes so celebrated by eighteenth-century foreign aristocrats making the Grand Tour. A growing awareness of the danger of those losses resulted in campaigns by certain cultural figures who argued for the safeguard of these landscapes against considerable opposition [figure 1-2]. Pietro Porcinai played a major role in these campaigns.

In the field of landscape and garden design, the Italian situation presented a dilemma for Porcinai during his formative years and those during which he sought professional standing. On the one hand, the ossified heritage of the "Italian Garden" appeared to have reached the end of its centuries-long life "by finishing miserably, in Italy and elsewhere, in an eclecticism without style."¹ On the other hand, politics at the beginning of the Fascist era attempted to ideologically recuperate that heritage as a part of a renewed Italian national identity.

Although the landscape was given political primacy no true landscape design culture had emerged, unlike other fields such as architecture and art.²

Among the Italian professionals studying and working in the first half of the twentieth century, Pietro Porcinai was one of the few—perhaps the only—to investigate the role of the Italian landscape within this process of transformation and move beyond mere verbal discussions about how to preserve threatened historical landscapes and their “natural beauties.” Indeed, during a lifetime of solitary battles Porcinai understood how to use the energy within this epochal transformation to develop an Italian culture of garden and landscape design that transcended a nostalgic and elitist evocation of the past.³



This attitude toward change, derived from a new or “modern” look at the traditional Italian landscape, led to an interesting exchange on two fronts during the years of his formation. Despite his disdain for the eclecticism of recent domestic landscape design, Porcinai realized that interest in the classic Italian garden was still alive—and not only among the small circle of Anglo-American scholars living and working in their splendid villas on the Florentine hills. Although he possessed no academic title, his cultural heritage provided him with the necessary authority to emerge as the spokesperson and sensitive interpreter of the Italian tradition in a world that had provided him with the necessary professional and cultural training otherwise unavailable in Italy. The books and journals that accrued in Porcinai’s studio, and the frequent correspondence with European landscape architects, testify to his intellectual explorations, garnering of professional sympathy, and exchange of knowledge beyond the national borders.

On the other hand there also emerged at that time a more visionary bourgeoisie, whose rise accompanied Italy’s own industrial development. In response to this potential pool of clients Porcinai realized the importance of building a recognizable professional identity marked by high technical proficiency. He gained credibility from the early recognition he had acquired outside Italy—as virtually the only representative of a new Italian tradition—and from assembling a convincing strategy of relations that demonstrated his possession of a substantial and refined disciplinary understanding, especially in botany. Although he never earned a university degree,

1-2
The landscape of the
Florentine hills in the 1950s.
[Francesco Rodolico,
Il paesaggio fiorentino,
1959]

Porcinai was almost always addressed as "professor" or "architect," evidence of the respect garnered independently of any titles he actually possessed or of any institutional affiliation. Throughout his life Porcinai consistently followed the same strategy, drawing on a cultural formation rooted in tradition to address how landscape—from its ecological aspects to its artistic design—can express ongoing social change and mitigate the problems produced by the nation's modernization.⁴

The large number of his projects, a vast repertoire of landscapes realized in Italy and abroad, demanded an approach sufficiently flexible; no single manner would have suited the conditions of the varied sites and programs.⁵ When, at the end of the 1930s, the interest in Italian garden culture waned, Porcinai adopted a more natural/humanistic method to develop a design vision based on interdisciplinary work and the emergence of a new landscape profession. Despite being little known in Italy and its official cultural circles until after his death, Porcinai was one of few Italians to address the most decisive issue facing the country: how to pair a critical eye with innovative operational tools to build a sense of a continuity between the historical landscape and the transformations demanded by contemporary conditions.⁶

[THE FLORENTINE HILLS: THE FORMATIVE YEARS, A NECESSARY DETACHMENT]

One particular biographical detail in the life of Pietro Porcinai is often mentioned: he was born the son of a gardener and nurseryman on the grounds of the Villa Gamberaia in Settignano, near Florence, a site that at the beginning of the twentieth century enjoyed a

moment of extraordinary fame [figures 1-3, 1-4]. He took his first steps there, in the environment of a "villa garden," a landscape whose spatial articulation embodied the aesthetic ideals of Florentine humanistic culture. But above all, Gamberaia was a place that expressed itself as a *unicum*: a work to be grasped as a whole, a work in which the ideas of "garden," "landscape," and "architecture" were inseparable.⁷

Intensive practical training and familiarity with the world of the nursery were common among many twentieth-century landscape architects; in this regard one could mention, among others, Porcinai's Danish friend Carl-Theodor Sørensen (1893–1979). Nonetheless, the outset of Porcinai's professional life was rather unique. He was born within a tradition that he soon recognized represented a living culture that belonged to no closed chapter in history. In those years the Florentine hills were home to an active Anglo-American community steeped in garden life and design. The owner of the garden in which Porcinai's father Martino worked, for example, was a Romanian princess who experimented with novel interventions in the design of her historical garden. Among the boxwood hedges and gentle lawns, the strict green architecture executed in yew, and the controlled perspective views to the hillsides, was a *parterre d'eau* in which the eccentric owner had substituted four pools of water for the prior lawn. Here, the century of modernism was announced by contaminating the norms of the historical Italian garden.

At this point we can identify two critical aspects of Porcinai's education that informed both his early and mature practice: first, a hands-on approach enacted



with a thorough knowledge of a botanical world that included considerations of local agricultural practices, and the use of the most recent technology that made a modern garden and landscape possible. His early studies—those until 1928—took place, in fact, in an agricultural school [figure 1-5]. Second was his regard for the “garden as a unity,” as an illustration of a culture manifest in its landscape. This was also the point at which the Villa Gamberaia could be read as the testing of a modern paradigm that viewed the garden as a site of relations, and the expression of a more active culture that endowed the garden with properties beyond visual delight and contemplation.

The cosmopolitan nature that characterized certain new Florentine gardens—an elitist collection of works, as Rudolph Borchardt noted in 1927, “by foreigners for foreigners”—are well represented by the work of the British garden designer and architect Cecil Pinsent (1884–1963). Pinsent’s design for the garden of Le Balze in Fiesole, for example, echoed the terraces and plantings of the Renaissance garden of the Villa Medici which it faced across the lane. Accompanying these efforts by foreigners to test and energize the Italian tradition was a curious initiative mounted by the Italian cultural administration.⁸ In 1931 “The Italian Garden Exhibition” was held in Florence’s Palazzo Vecchio and planned with the specific intent of stimulating innovative design ideas for the Italian garden to thereby reacquire Italy’s leadership in the field [figure 1-6]. The exhibition did not spark a conceptual revolution in garden design or in landscape architecture. Instead, it revealed the

1-3
Villa Gamberaia,
Settignano [Firenze],
sixteenth-century.
Martino Porcinai (*left*)
working in the garden,
1910s.
[Archivio Giulio Porcinai]

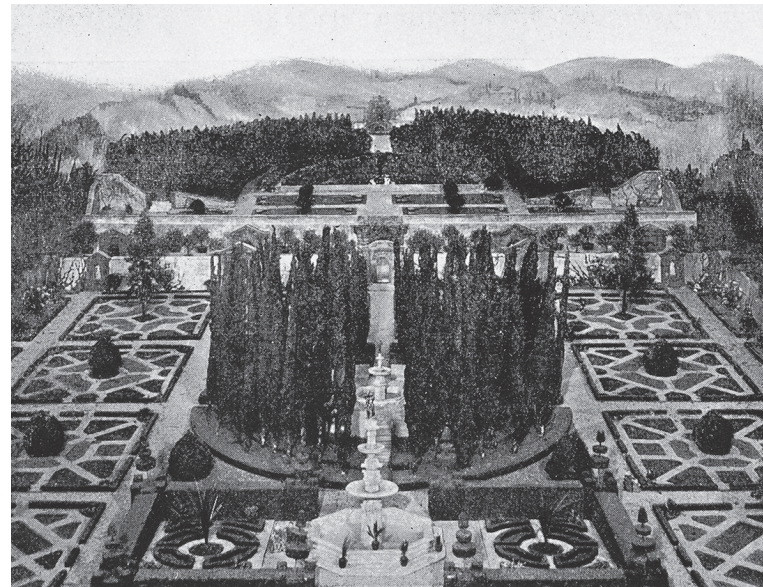
1-4
Villa Gamberaia,
Settignano.
The lawn at the entrance
to the villa.
[Luigi Latini]

contradictions inherent within an official culture that saw itself as the bearer of an illustrious tradition but impotent to develop new forms.⁹ With its established static models, the Florence exhibition anticipated a further separation in Italy between the fields of architecture and garden design, with the latter being relegated to a marginal position both culturally and professionally.

Against the current state of Italian landscape architecture, Porcinai's first explorations after finishing agricultural college—in Belgium and Germany, facilitated by his father's connections—were decisive.¹⁰ Of particular importance was his first, if brief, visit to Breslau in a "reformist" Germany marked in those years by the presence of such figures as Leberecht Migge (1881–1935) and Harry Maasz (1880–1946). There he found an atmosphere that valued landscape both in theory and in practice: not only in the design of the garden, but also in urban planning, sociology, ecology, and the conservation of the national natural patrimony.¹¹ Although not entirely dogmatically, this last concern led to a preference for autochthonous plants and a respect for the original natural context—ideas important to Porcinai's developing vision as a designer. Throughout his career he remained in contact with several of the central figures of German garden culture, Karl Foerster (1874–1970), Alwin Seifert (1890–1972) and Gustav Lüttge (1909–1969), among them.¹² And the presence in his office of German colleagues and friends—Hilde Neuntheufel and Gerda Gollwitzer, for example—played an important role in the evolution of his professional life, especially in his understanding of botany.

1-5
Pietro Porcinai (left) as a student at the Agriculture School of Florence, 1920s. [APP]

1-6
Renaissance Garden model in "La Mostra del giardino italiano" (The Exhibition of the Italian Garden), 1931. [La Mostra del giardino italiano, 1931]



During the 1930s, Porcinai acquired a significant number of books and technical materials from the Teutonic countries. The influence these books exerted on his early designs is obvious, but his contacts and exchanges with foreign landscape architects and gardeners, such as those he met in Paris in 1937 and in Berlin in 1938, also had a significant effect on his vision of the garden in relation to social issues. Although the angular architectural forms inspired by the drawings of Harry Maasz appeared frequently in his early design experiments, social and urban considerations—for example, the theme of the *Volkspark*—infused his early writings and professional attempts to inject those considerations into Italian landscape architecture. In this cultural transference we can detect a certain continuity between the aesthetics of the German *Wohngarten* and certain shapes found in the traditional Tuscan garden. In landscape projects of greater scale, on the other hand, one detects an affinity between the sense of nature that pervaded Germany in those years paired with an Italian sense of belonging to the landscape. Porcinai himself felt this bond quite strongly. Rather than ideological arguments, to him these were incentives for a new manner of design. Porcinai echoed Migge's belief in "Den Himmel als Zimmerdecke" when he spoke of the modern garden as a "large house with the sky for roof."¹³

Fifty years after these initial explorations, and after important projects such as the 1958 Hansaviertel in Berlin, designed in collaboration with Gustav Lüttge, and the 1964 Theobald Garden in Cologne, Porcinai's German trajectory came to a glorious apotheosis in

1979, when he was awarded the country's most prestigious prize in landscape architecture: the Ludwig von Sckell ring.¹⁴ He was the first non-German to receive that honor.

[THE 1930s: SELF-PROMOTION AND THE LAUNCH OF A CAREER]

Having realized the difficulties of winning support from Italian governmental bodies, Porcinai began to employ the tools of mass communication, directing his voice to whomever might recognize his innovative approach to landscape architecture. During the 1930s he also began to collaborate with the Martino Bianchi Nursery in Pistoia, an important horticultural center respected in both Italy and throughout Europe. In this role he was able to consolidate and develop his image as a "garden architect:" indeed, he used this term as early as 1932 when signing his drawings for *Servizio speciale di Architettura di Parchi e Giardini*, a textbook published by the nursery to spread a new vision for modern parks and gardens.¹⁵ During that same period, in 1938, he opened his own landscape design office in Florence, in premises shared with the architect Nello Baroni (1906–1958) and the interior designer Maurizio Tempestini (1908–1960). Interestingly, in this initial phase of his professional career Porcinai attempted to employ every possible innovative tool for promoting the idea of the modern garden within the Italian scene. In writings from those years he introduced the commercialization of new fertilizers, advanced products for automatic irrigation and water treatment, and produced and marked furniture of his own design. In 1940 he founded the Garden Association

1-7

The gardeners of the Società il giardino. [Archivio Orlando Rafanelli, Florence]

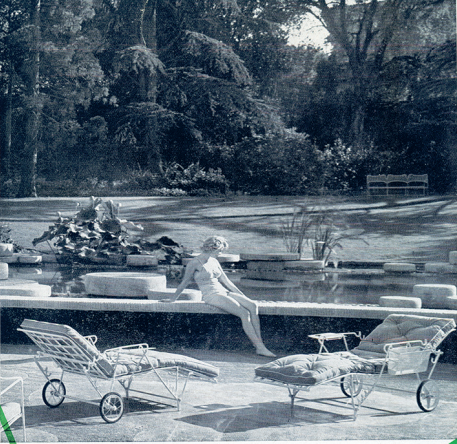


(Società il Giardino), a professional body of experts that would play a decisive role in implementing his landscape schemes [figures 1-7, 1-8]. Porcinai truly believed in the modern garden and he ambitiously proselytized for its adoption; he also seized every opportunity to promote the Garden Association whenever he got the chance. In popular and trade magazines he continuously advertised the arrival of a renewed and qualified landscape profession that he regarded as essential for the creation of the modern garden.

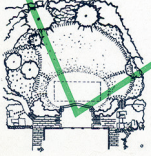
At the end of the decade, when his search for visibility reached its peak, the trust earned from Gio Ponti, the editor of the journal *Domus*, was vital. On the pages of *Domus*, Ponti presented Porcinai as "a rare example of our own garden architects," and on several occasions solicited the landscape architect to contribute articles. In 1937, a collaboration with Maria Teresa Parpagliolo initiated the "Domus Green Campaign" with the intention of keeping the Italian public up-to-date regarding garden design and questions concerning the landscapes of the road, infrastructure and urban greenery—all issues new to Italy.¹⁶ At the same time, several favorable commissions enabled him to try his hand at complex design programs and discuss them in a number of written articles. Porcinai's ability to cultivate personal and professional relationships created a virtuous mechanism for self-promotion that intertwined his activities as publicist and author with his practice as a designer—at times publishing the same article in different magazines and using photographs of his work to illustrate his

FIRENZE - VILLA "C" - GIARDINO E PISCINA - INZ. PIETRO PORCINAI

8-F
ILG



PROGETTISTI-COSTRUTTORI



PER REALIZZARE I GIARDINI DA VOI DISEGNATI
CHIAMATE A COLLABORARE
UN'IMPRESA SPECIALIZZATA
CHE ABBA COMPLETENZA DI INTERPRETARE I VOSTRI DESIDERI
ED ADEGUATA CAPACITÀ TECNICA
LA SCELTA DI UNA BUONA IMPRESA RENDERA PIÙ FACILE
IL VOSTRO LAVORO.

" il giardino " s.p.a.

IMPRESA SPECIALIZZATA PER LA COSTRUZIONE DI PARCHI E GIARDINI - CAMPI SPORTIVI - PISCINE E IMPIANTI DI DEPURAZIONE
IMPIANTI DI IRRIGAZIONE A PIOGGIA - IMPIANTI DI ILLUMINAZIONE.

theoretical arguments. Through this mechanism, images of his gardens traversed the Italian border and after a relatively short time, entered the international arena.¹⁷

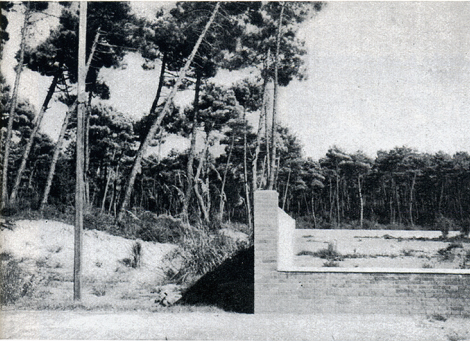
Many of the projects presented in the numerous articles written in the 1930s and 1940s qualified as test cases for design innovation. The Candioli garden in Tirrenia, in addition to its convincingly synthetic design, was an invitation to consider the delicate equilibrium and value of the coastal pine forest into which the garden had been sensitively inserted [figures 1-9, 1-10]. With surprising elegance, the garden at the Villa Maggia on the hills of Turin illustrated an entire vocabulary for the modern garden, its relation to architecture, and its place in the landscape.¹⁸

Earlier, in 1941, the garden at the Villa I Collazzi evidenced one of the landscape architect's first mature reflections on the interaction of architecture and landscape expressed in modern terms [figures 1-11, 1-12]. Here, the architecture dated to the sixteenth century, as a villa set on the crest of a hill south of Florence that overlooked extensive vineyards. On the building's short side, against the majestic backdrop of cypresses that traced the main approach to the villa, Porcinai inserted a swimming pool in the center of a flatland previously occupied by the vine. The design, whose modern simplicity confronted the sobriety of the classical architecture, was radically restricted to only a pair of gestures: the stone-lined edge of the water and the modeling of the surrounding lawn. Key to the success of the design were the studied relationships and proportions that governed the new

1-8
Brochure for the Società il giardino. [APP]

1-9
Tirrenia [Pisa].
Pine trees on the Tirrenian coast at the time of their destruction.
[Pietro Porcinai, *Giardino e paesaggio*, 1942]

TAV. V.



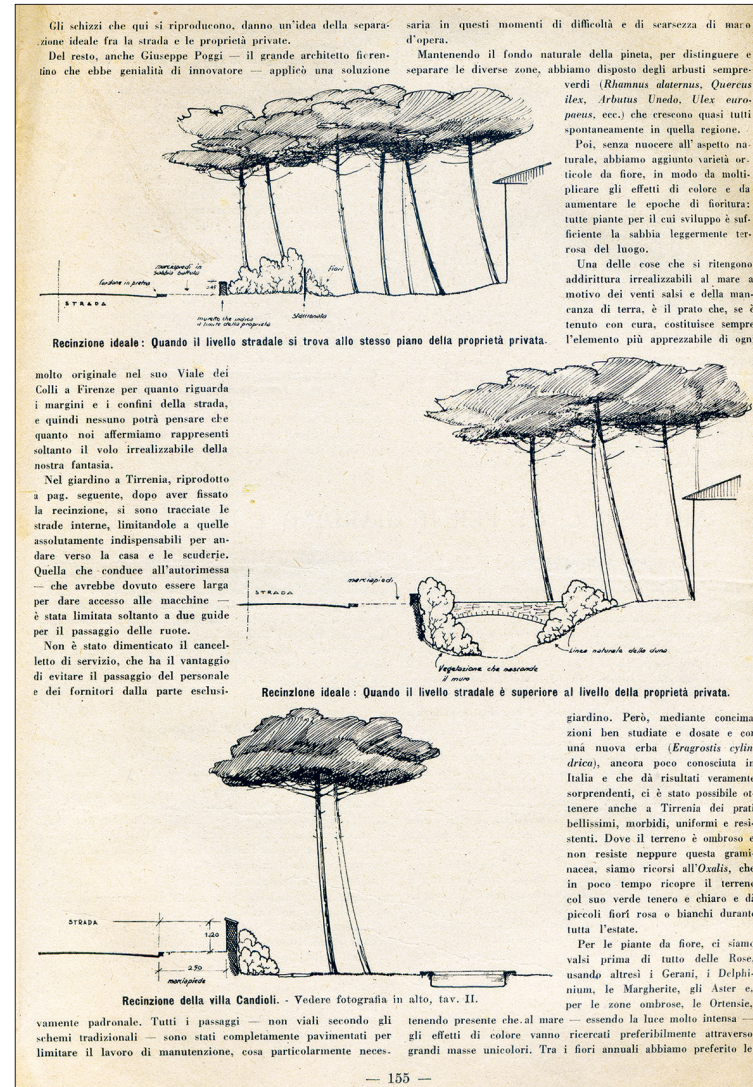
In alto: A Tirrenia, per costruire una casa e un giardino si sono abbattuti tutti i Pini esistenti e sono state spianate le bellissime dune. A sinistra si vede la pineta come era prima; a destra, ciò che ha fatto l'opera dell'uomo.

design, the regard for the greater landscape, and the resolute mass of the villa. Some years later, in an article for the journal *Flora* entitled "The Garden as a Form of Artistic Expression," Porcinai juxtaposed his I Collazzi project with a picture of the Villa Gamberaia and added the brief comment: "We are still in the Italian tradition: no flowers."¹⁹ This was the first of the many attempts by Porcinai to master the art of subtraction as the means to achieve a synthesis.

We can gain further insight into Porcinai's ideas from a 1943 exchange of letters between the landscape architect and Gio Ponti, who saw in the simple garden—although created against a backdrop of wartime destruction and enormous economic difficulties—the mark of a professional capable of contributing a new language for the "reconstruction" of landscape design. "Garden and Landscape," a paper that Porcinai, now just over 30 years old, presented in Florence at the prestigious Accademia dei Georgofili in April 1942, can be viewed as a summation and assessment of the first decade of his often-countercurrent activities.²⁰ In his vision the two words "garden" and "landscape" were inseparable. Supported by images of his work, Porcinai put forward all the arguments he deemed necessary for the awareness and readiness of a nation that will soon have to face, at the end of the war, the process of reconstruction and economic awakening. In those reconstruction efforts, a carefully designed landscape would be a necessity.

1-10

How to create the edge of a private garden in the Tirrenian pine wood. Sketches by Porcinai. [*Il Giardino Fiorito*, November 1942]



**[THE POSTWAR PERIOD AND THE INVENTION
OF A PROFESSIONAL STRUCTURE]**

At the beginning of the Italian economic boom that accompanied the postwar reconstruction of the 1950s, Porcinai refined various aspects of his working method. He first shaped the structure of his practice through local collaborations and prestigious contacts with landscape designers internationally. Secondly, he widened his audience and market through a passionate dissemination of new subjects and ideas. At this time he revealingly described himself as a "propagandist" whose tirelessly educational efforts were intended to keep a culturally backward country up-to-date in the field of landscape design.

Among the more innovative aspects of his approach, the most recognizable was his resolve to develop his craft, not as an individual but as part of a team. In response to this shift in tactic, with Nello Baroni and Maurizio Tempestini, in 1947 he founded the OP—the Organization of Professionals for Collaborative Work—to encourage the collaboration of the various design professions on a single project. This teamwork with other disciplines produced designs with complex themes in which the landscape was the binding element between architecture (Baroni) and interior design (Tempestini). In these projects the shared awareness of landscape concerned more than the private garden. As a team they addressed new lifestyles and contexts: seaside resorts such as

1-11
Villa I Collazzi,
Florence, 1941.
Plan and sections through
the swimming pool, with
rim detail. First proposal.
[APP]

1-12 (*opposite*)
Villa I Collazzi, Florence.
The swimming pool east
of the villa.
[Luigi Latini]

