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Flowscapes Graduation Studio

Healing Landscapes

A laboratory of well-being in an
ex-psychiatric hospital in Florence

Reflection

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Introduction

When I was thinking about the theme of my graduation project, I was confused because on the one hand I was fascinated by abandoned landscapes in the urban realm, on the other hand there was a push in the back of my mind to ask myself, what is architecture, what does it give, how does it contribute to the world? And that was when I discovered the field of 'Healing Architecture'. Diving into it, I found myself deeply convinced that our discipline can be a transformative engine for change. The first examples of healing architecture I found, were interventions in poor countries which improve healthcare buildings, but I was looking for something different, that we could apply in our cities.

It is already well known that every built environment has an effect on our health, and it is common to hear that contact with nature promotes relaxation. Not all the designers though are conscious about the importance that our work can have in the healing processes of people or just in the conservation of humans' physical and mental well-being.

It represents an urgency also for the condition of architecture today. In an age where the aim of the major architects is to show the greatness of their technique, I feel the necessity to find a new meaning for the discipline of creating environments, where to put our energies and skills for a beneficial role. The first example that pops up in our minds when we think about "places that heal" applied to the spatial scale of landscapes, we think about *healing gardens* or *therapeutic parks*; but besides these direct translations of the connection between the two worlds, I believe in the necessity to experiment on a larger scale, meaning through invisible connections or ephemeral visualizations, if it is possible to intervene as landscape architect in order to endorse welfare, and in a successful scenario, to heal.

With this research I investigated in the possibilities we have as designers, to imagine healthier landscapes, and to promote the importance this way of thinking about design should have.

Choice of the site and first theoretical studies

In parallel with these thoughts, I had two possible locations for the project: the first, the old sanatorium Banti, a completely abandoned old hospital, really valuable for its architectural and landscape characteristics, located on a hill in Florence. The second one, the ex-psychiatric hospital San Salvi that from the maps looks like a miniature city in the city, not

only for the walls around it, but also because besides the decaying buildings, there is a church, a bar, offices and schools.

Decisive in the choice of San Salvi was the definition of the problem and questions I had about the double-sided dependency between architecture and health, starting from the realization that since we as human beings are constantly immersed in a certain environment, we constantly perceive and therefore receive stimuli which affect our state of mind. Applying this thought to urban realms, and in my case thinking about the city of Florence, it is clear that what some parts of the city convey to its citizen is not beneficial.

For the realization of the importance the environment, and so the planning of it, has for humans, I have to thank my mother, neurologist specialized in Psychoneuro-endocrinology (PNEI), a discipline in the field of medicine, that besides the impossible name can be really inspiring for designers. The acknowledge of the main principles of this subject was crucial for the narrowing down of the aim of the research, that is how to merge health and landscape architecture for the design of healthier landscapes.

After this, an explanation of the verb "to heal" for this specific research was necessary: "health" has been defined by the World Health Organization (1948) "not merely (as) the absence of disease or infirmity, but (as) a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being", an overall condition, that considers the humankind as a whole entity of body and mind, immersed in a physical space and in constant osmosis with it, as exchange of information and influences.

The location of San Salvi seemed to fit the aim of the project also because of the problem of fast city expansions we face nowadays. In the case of Florence for example, anonymous skyscrapers and huge malls are popping out on the edges of the city, appearing way too far from the original meaning of architecture, when it was just a shelter, the "primitive hut" for the man as depicted in Laugier's frontispiece of *Essay on Architecture* in 1755, longing to show off the techniques we acquired with technology to create the most performative buildings which do not consider the impact on humans. The need of space is real though, but then what is proposed in this research is to start from what we already have but lack of value. It is mainly a financial problem, but also in the mentality of the municipality, not willing to invest in a derelict zone.

Besides this, the fast city's expansion also caused the loss of the importance that gardens have in the "recuperation of the soul", paradoxically in a city like Florence, famous for the beautiful gardens scattered on the hills, theatre of many medieval poems. And this loss is reflected in healthcare facilities, expression of the disconnection between mind and body in the treatment of diseases. This problem does not belong only to the field of medicine, that is witnessing a development from the last 20 years, but is also rooted in common people's life.

The relationship between research and design

With all this in mind, it was difficult at the beginning to formulate an appropriate method to find answers. The first attempt, the construction of a tool box of principles summarized from the literature about design of healing gardens in healthcare facilities, was the expression of the desire to be as scientific as possible, but it resulted to be strongly systematic and strict, that blocked the design process for the limitations it was imposing. What gave a turn was the zoom-out from the specific results of the tool box, focusing on the discovery of a main simple but guiding framework that could structure the design and allow more creativity. That was when the Reasonable Person Model by Kaplan & Kaplan came into play, which functioned as a framework that opened the possibility for a project that could combine the design of healing landscapes with the essence of the specific location chosen as experiment. Besides this model, the background knowledge involved also the fields of humans' evolutionary aesthetic preferences theories, neuroscience and immunology, which clarified the role of the landscape for interior well-being, starting from the definition of both to understand how people are affected by the first. In the field of Landscape Architecture, the overview of the use of outdoor space for restoration throughout history was important to understand the difference between a healing garden and the product of this design.

For the study of the location, the method developed by the Chair of Landscape Architecture for landscapes analysis revealed to be a useful tool. The complexity of the nature of San Salvi and the goal sought for the design required a very diverse analysis from the investigation on

the biography of the location, to its role in the urban flows today, to the emotions perceived during the exploration of its routes.

The experiential sequence was a fundamental input for the design, since it started from that. Before the spatial translation in fact, the masterplan of emotions was created to trigger the way of designing described in the Methodology chapter: starting from planning what wants to be conveyed to the visitors. At that point, it seemed that the two assignments of regeneration of San Salvi and of healing landscapes were in conflict, or at least separated: like in a dichotomy, they were two parts of a whole; what belonged to one, did not reside in the other one, and together they would be complementary. What was missing and initially sought for, was the whole they hypothetically belonged. After further reflections, I realized that I was not facing a dichotomy, since they were actually connected and grounded on the nature of the location. The aim of the project is to create a healing landscape in the first place, and San Salvi is the location chosen because it used to be a psychiatric hospital, an example of what healing landscapes were during last century, and the fact that is abandoned is only a consequence of social dynamics and historical events, and for the project it represents a case study.

The fact it is vacant then, offers the possibility for the experimentation of different spatial configurations to test the findings from the literature study. The design location serves as case study to investigate on the translation of spatial design principles into a place designed to heal contributing to the site-specificity of the design, but also is represents an example for the application of the same findings in other areas of the city.

The relationship between landscape architecture and the design

The role of the landscape architect is crucial for the goals of this research. With the skills acquired during the Master, it was possible to analyze and understand the complexity of the location, recognizing the connections between the spatial characteristics of it with its history, and the causes of the problems that affect it, which reside in social, economic, political, cultural and ecological aspects. The initial understanding and the theoretical background is processed and translated into design, with the aim of renovating the location into a place that heals. Necessary for the accomplishment of the design in the case of San Salvi is the consideration of the citizens. Because of the general lack of concern about the whole area, and from the municipality, and from the citizens, it is fundamental to propose how their idea and image of San Salvi could change and be finally accepted and integrated in the urban flows, again having a full overview of its complexity and potentials.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

The urgency and relevance of the design, is reflected in the design location and in the theme of healing landscapes. The location represents a hole in the realm of the city that suffers from it because it has to hold it not to let it completely fall apart. Besides this more visible aspect, also the history of the place has to speak out loud among the inhabitants of the city: a painful and violent past that denied freedom and dignity to thousands of people has to be known and become part of the cultural background of the common conscience.

The design of healing landscapes then is an attempt to spread the awareness among architects about the effect that environmental and spatial characteristics have on the interior balance of people. It can be a guide in the design process and contribute to the ground of the future design of space, aiming to the presence of healthy landscapes in our cities, beneficial for our mental well-being and therefore precautionary for eventual illnesses.

What I learnt

At the beginning of the design, the aim of the project was the creation of 'healing landscape' through the analysis and the spatial translation of human needs, in order to decrease stress level and guarantee interior well-being. Going through the process of the project though, I understood that for the design of these landscapes, it is important to consider the spatial characteristics of the environment, analyzing the shapes of all the elements and the psychological effect they might have on people; but that is not enough. To create a healing Landscape, instead of a healing garden, it is necessary to connect those spatial features with

the flows of the surrounding, and in the case of San Salvi, of the city. The flows include the historical aspect, crucial in the design location; the relation between the new functions of the pavilions and the outdoor space around and between them, still keeping vivid the memory of the previous functions. And on the bigger scale, the effect that the design has on the society, trying to imagine if it will be beneficial for it or stay uninteresting. So, a healing landscape to be site specific and connected to the larger urban fabric, it cannot be designed only following the theoretical guidelines about neurological preferences, but it has to consider those invisible fragments that make the place be what it is.

As regards as the tool box, in this project it appears quite defined and its translation direct. Nevertheless it could be applied also in other contexts, where the conditions and the functions are different. What is important, is to keep a variety in affordances, offering possibilities for different behaviors, which as studied in this research, are possibilities for Exploration and Understanding, Restoration and Meaningful action (Kaplan&Kaplan, 2005) to contribute to the maintenance of interior well-being. Therefore the Reasonable Person Model (ibidem) constitutes the backbone for the design of healing landscapes, and it is then enriched by other elements on different scales, from the type of setting, of nature, to the details of materials and shapes, on the one hand descending from studies of neurological and psychological theories, and on the other according to the characteristics of the location. Consequently, in the project of renovation of San Salvi, in order to transform it into a healing landscape, what is crucial is the presence of nature, and the 3 different outdoor settings, for their functions and possibilities they offer to the users. What is open to interpretation instead, is the spatial translation of Aesthetic and Neurological preferences, and of the principles concluded from Evidence-based design.

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