



Studio GPT incorporated nearly extinct varieties of corn and the ubiquitous poplars in the design at iLand, one of Italy's most exciting new landscapes

PHOTOGRAPHS: Clive Nichols WORDS: Clark Lawrence

ITALIAN FUSION

Studio GPT has made a break from the old-school Mediterranean style with compelling designs that have won admirers at home and abroad



ABOVE & BELOW
One of the practice's completed residential projects near Milan, with swimming pond and mass use of grasses



"IF THERE ISN'T ROOM FOR A POOL, THEY'LL INTRODUCE WATER WHEREVER POSSIBLE, ARGUING: 'THE MORE WATER, THE BETTER'"



ABOVE AND BELOW
The garden of historic Palazzo Calepio in Bergamo stretches over several terraces with shallow soil depths



After Edith Wharton's 1904 book *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, and through the mid-20th century heyday of Russell Page, wealthy English and American gardeners and architects flocked to Italy to learn their trade. Nowadays, the trend has reversed, with aspiring Italian designers fleeing their country to study abroad. Some never look back, and the ones who return continue to look abroad for inspiration, to the UK and America. They bring that northern, grassy, prairie or 'natural' look back home, where it often receives a "looks like weeds" tepid welcome.

While interviewing the leaders of landscape practice Studio GPT in Bergamo, my suspicion of an exodus of young talent is confirmed. "Nearly all of us leave, sooner or later," explains designer Lucia Nusiner. And let's be honest – when you think of compelling contemporary gardens, sustainability and the latest trends in landscape architecture, Italy is not the first country that comes to mind. But it is here, in a lovely town at the foot of the Alps, that this exceptional team of Italians has broken away from old-school Mediterranean gardening and invited people back to Italy to see – and do – something new and exciting.

As Studio GPT, Nusiner and partner Maurizio Vegini design private gardens, public parks and commercial landscape projects; and as part of

the non-profit cultural association Arketipos, they also organise the biggest annual conference of garden and landscape professionals in the world, *I Maestri del Paesaggio*, which in 2016 celebrates its sixth year. Founded in 1992, their practice is made up of three agronomists, one architect and one secretary, and stands for *Giardini, Paesaggio, Territorio* (Gardens, Landscape, Territory).

Restful elements

Whenever they put their minds to something, it shines – in almost every garden they design, you'll find water. They specialise in natural swimming ponds, but if there isn't room for a

pool, they'll introduce chemical-free water wherever and however possible, because they have a most convincing argument: "The more water, the better, and the more restful the garden will be."

Both Nusiner and Vegini are technically agronomists from a not-so-distant past when landscape architecture and garden design weren't even courses offered at Italian universities, and the word '*paesaggista*' was unheard of. They are passionate about nature, naturalistic gardens and healthy ecological approaches to shaping the land around them, but are the first to admit "a concern for the environment has been slow to catch on here".



Maurizio Vegini

Agronomist Maurizio Vegini works as a landscape architect for both public and private spaces. He is president of Italy's Natural Swimming Waters Association and administrator of *Piscine & Natura*, which designs and builds natural swimming pools. He is also president of *Arketipos*, which runs the annual *I Maestri del Paesaggio* event.



Lucia Nusiner

Agronomist and landscape designer Lucia Nusiner designs gardens, pools and public parks. After teaching several landscaping courses, she is now focusing on healing gardens. As well as *i.land*, she recently designed the temporary gardens of *Piazza Vecchia* in Bergamo.





ABOVE Richard Meier's sculpture *Mutated Panels* at i.land alongside wild apple trees and benches built with thin, high-endurance concrete. Behind are waves of hornbeam, recalling 'roccoli' used locally for bird hunting **BELOW** The entrance garden gives space to and highlights the rib vault of the building, and features 'green drops' of grasses and perennials.

ABOVE The community kitchen garden at i.land is cultivated by a social enterprise and backs onto the *Kilometro Rosso* wall by Jean Nouvel **BELOW** The lower courtyard features *Fraxinus ornus* set out like a chessboard with *Deschampsia cespitosa* beneath



The natural garden is beginning to find more Italian admirers in the middle ground, however. The chaos of unkempt nature is not going to take Italy by storm, but people are starting to see the patterns and beauty in a more relaxed, natural environment – places where 'natural' looks very clean and peaceful, designed to never look abandoned. It's a philosophy and style that Studio GPT has mastered. After seeing their work, it comes as no surprise who Nusiner looks up to. "I like the garden designer Pietro Porcinai for simple design with harmony; Arend Jan van der Horst for the contrasts between formal and informal; and I like Dan Pearson MSGD and Sarah Price for their wild gardens."

A delicate touch

The studio recently did a project for an urban garden in Bergamo that was laid out on the series of terraces and shallow hanging gardens attached to the 16th-century Palazzo Calepio. "We had countless restrictions, and less than 50cm of earth to work with," Nusiner explains. The traditional geometric design of the garden was maintained in order to stay in keeping with the classic facade, but the feeling

of the terraces was softened with a new pastel palette of pink roses, lavender, Japanese anemones, colchiums and society garlic; a delicate touch to complement the hard lines.

Elegant paving stones of light grey Pietra Serena (a sandstone used in the palace ornamentation and as paving throughout Bergamo Alto) are laid into gravel beds to echo the steps they lead to. The attention to detail and *buon gusto* is evident not only in the plant choices, but also in the furnishings and lighting. When something modern is added, it is done with extreme care. "We knew we didn't want to see any lighting fixtures by the stairs, but we needed to illuminate them to make them safe," says Nusiner. The elegant solution was to insert LED lights into a cleverly sculpted cavity in the bottom of the stone handrail.

Only a few miles away, but on a totally different scale and setting – this time industrial and contemporary rather than residential and classic – Studio GPT collaborated with the American architect Richard Meier to create one of Italy's most exciting new landscapes. Called i.land, it is the ornamental and agricultural park of cement company Italcementi. →

“Meier is an archi-star, so imagine how delighted we were to be collaborating with him,” says Nusiner. Delight changed to concern, however, when the US firm suggested planting the American native *Liriodendron tulipifera*, perhaps unaware that their client Carlo Pesenti is a passionate outdoorsman, who would prefer local trees. After reflection, the idea was dropped in preference for the native beauties of Lombardy: tall, shimmering poplars. “At first, we began by offering just a few planting suggestions,” Nusiner explains, “but the client was happy with them and wanted more.”

Blending past and present

Using local trees and plants didn't stop with the poplars. The team also sculpted European hornbeam hedges into soft waves, and planted once common but now rare heirloom fruit trees, as well as the plant Nusiner studied in depth at the University of Milan – maize. “The National Corn Cultivation Research Group (*Unità di Ricerca Nazionale per la Maiscoltura CRA-MAC*) was already experimenting with antique varieties of local corn on a property nearby,” she explains, “so I couldn't resist the temptation to include it in our project.”

In this way, Nusiner brought the past to the present and the outside landscape inside the park. She applied a most important rule of landscape design – carefully consider everything around you before doing anything – to an extraordinary modern building and a once agricultural but now industrial setting.

The result is a melding of local crops and international ornamental plants. The large expanses of glass and the white ‘sails’ of Meier's building couldn't find better companions than white Japanese anemones, *Gaura lindheimeri*, clumps of Mexican feather grass and *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Morning Light’. The architect's white sculpture shimmers in reflections of water and is put into a peaceful context through the use of lakeside aquatics.

One of the best and simplest features of the park, however, is a humble, once-typical field of Italian wildflowers – seldom do we see so many bright flowers in this heavily built-up area of northern Italy. Visit in spring to experience a sea of poppies, buttercups and blue cornflowers, in front of a contemporary work by one of America's most famous living architects. Beyond this lies the equally unforgettable work of another architectural star, Jean Nouvel's *Kilometro Rosso* – a shining red aluminium wall, 10 metres tall and exactly one kilometre long; and above all this, the distant snow-covered Alps. This must be one of the most spectacular 21st-century landscapes Italy has to offer – and is exactly the sort of work that should entice errant Italian designers back home, to join the revolution. ○

Find out more about Studio GPT at www.studiogpt.it. This year's International Meeting of the Landscape and Garden (I Maestri del Paesaggio) on 'The Wild Landscape' takes place in Bergamo from 7-25 September 2016. See arketipos.org for details.



ABOVE At i.land, industry meets agriculture, and modern style meets heritage planting

LANDSCAPE PLAN OF I.LAND

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| 1. Entrance Garden with turf grass | Mutated Panels on natural pond |
| 2. 'Green drops' made of ornamental grasses, perennials and bulbs | 8. Orchard with antique apple and pear varieties |
| 3. Waves of <i>Carpinus betulus</i> hedges | 9. Local raspberries |
| 4. Auditorium roof garden | 10. Meadows with Italian wildflowers |
| 5. Internal courtyard | 11. Nearly extinct varieties of local corn |
| 6. Area for events | 12. Community kitchen garden |
| 7. Richard Meier sculpture | |

