



ORTI GENERALI* THE COUNTRYSIDE COMES TO TOWN



A city park in Turin's southern suburb of Mirafiori- Italy

The project stems from a community-based participatory process started in 2010. In 2018 Orti Generali was officially entrusted by the city of Turin with 3 hectares of land to create a social enterprise model in the city park located in the southern Mirafiori suburb. The transformation of the residual agricultural area required indepth historical landscape research and a grassroots participatory design process. From the outset, the intention was to include a heterogeneous social component through the involvement of volunteers and third-sector organisations along with scientific commitment and technological innovation. Restoring to the citizenry a park that had been abandoned for many years and was characterised by squatting and degradation enabled more than 250 families to experience urban horticulture as an opportunity for social and cultural integration. Particular attention was paid to the quality of the landscape by maintaining traces of pre-industrial agricultural systems, first and foremost the 17th-century canals that served as the irrigation system for the gardens of the ancient Mirafiori castle (now almost completely disappeared). Biological management, digitisation of the irrigation system and the online dissemination of data make Orti Generali a model that is replicable in other residual agricultural areas. The transformation, together with cultural events, educational activities with schools and avenues for social inclusion, has inspired a renewed sense of community and sensitivity to the concerns of combating climate change, first and foremost the conscious use of the soil.

^{*} The name Orti Generali is inspired by the wholesale fruit and vegetable markets. Meant to be more than a gathering place, it is a meeting and sharing point for practices, experiences and skills related to urban cultivation, experimented directly in the field and in an inclusive way.

< Left: Gino, the Highland calf (© Giuseppe Moccia 2022).



















DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The end of the industrial model that characterised the development of entire districts in Turin has resulted in an urgent need to profoundly transform areas of the city. Initially, the focus was on the central and residential areas, but recent years have seen a strong focus on redeveloping green and residual areas. Orti Generali emerged from research-action work started in 2010 to complement the urban-environmental transformation of areas with an agricultural element in the Mirafiori district. The aim was to create a large agricultural park suitable for diverse uses, subjects, practices and geographical situations, creating synergies between the city and the countryside so that, instead of jeopardising the future of these lands, their proximity to the city would add to their value.

Within this framework, Orti Generali is a first stage of an extensive park where social agriculture inspired by values of inclusiveness and participation is being tested and where agricultural production is combined with the provision of cultural, social, educational, training and employment services.

To enhance the public character of the park and encourage its use by all citizens, the vegetable gardens occupy a little more than half of the area (12,000 square metres out of 20,000), while the remaining area is designated as public green space.

The vegetable gardens are of four types:

- Family gardens, urban horticulture creates ideal conditions for the sharing of knowledge. The cultivation of a small plot in contiguous spaces creates social dynamics of openness to others and fosters awareness of food and environmental sustainability issues.
- Collective vegetable gardens, this semi-public space is open to all. The area includes horticultural cultivation plots to support the kiosk activities as well as demonstration plots for specific horticultural projects, such as permaculture and synergy. The activities of the volunteers are supervised by an agricultural technician.
- Educational vegetable garden, this space includes several wooden boxes that facilitate play and educational activities for the youngest children and perimeter beds for growing aromatic herbs and flowers. The vegetable garden is central to the activities that Orti Generali offers to the schools of Turin, and the activities are supervised by the educator in charge of the involvement of volunteers and gardeners.
- Rehabilitation/therapeutic gardens, these areas are managed in collaboration with associations for socially useful projects. The inclusive element becomes a practical tool to facilitate the restoration of the individual's social and professional role.

< Left: Photos of the sites of the future agricultural park in 2011. During the tour, the gardeners of the squatter vegetable gardens were interviewed and photographed. In the Mirafiori Sud neighbourhood, these gardens represent a living historical remnant of the city's Fordist period; the squatter gardens are closely linked to the social housing neighbourhoods of the post-World War II period. (© Giuseppe Moccia 2011).





MAIN OBJECTIVE OF THE PROJECT

Orti Generali was established to build a social enterprise model based on ecological sustainability and social equity for the transformation and management of residual agricultural areas in the metropolitan area of Turin. Currently, the main objectives are to:

- return to the community a city park that was previously characterised by degradation and squatting so that the local community can experience and participate in it;
- include in the regeneration process a diversity of participants, particularly those living in conditions of socio-economic fragility;
- propose a landscape structure that enhances traces of the pre-industrial agrarian landscape and that reintroduces the planting system of the Po Valley, characterised by willow and mulberry rows along the canals;
- not place a heavy economic burden for the management of green spaces on the public entity but rather provide scenic, economic and social value through co-partnership with a private, thirdsector entity;
- integrate city gardens into green areas to avoid the traditional allotment model of repetitive honeycomb design and allocate a substantial portion of the park to shared spaces, preserving vistas and ensuring broad access to park users;
- encourage 250 families in the area to produce their own healthy, consciously grown, locally sourced food;
- pursue a scientific approach to landscape and vegetable garden management through academic collaborations.

ACHIEVED RESULTS

Among its accomplishments, Orti Generali has:

- renovated a building as a refreshment area for gardeners and park goers and as an additional revenue source for the project itself;
 - created 160 vegetable gardens of 50, 75 and 100 square metres for personal/family use;
- established a community garden for social inclusion activities and an educational garden for schools and family workshops;
- created within the park a garden dedicated to pollinators and an apiary for honey production that may also be used for educational activities with schools;
- offered courses with 26 teachers in horticulture, pruning, beekeeping, permaculture, sustainability and green design;
 - organised numerous local activities.
- < Left: Before and after the renovation of the building now used as a restaurant area (© Giuseppe Moccia 2022).















INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

Already in the planning stage, the need was identified to make the experience of transforming and collectively managing the space an opportunity for the inclusion of individuals with social and economic vulnerabilities. The very allocation of the gardens by means of precise economic management of the requested contributions represents an internal redistribution mechanism designed to provide access to the land to citizens of diverse tax capacities and ages. Solidarity gardeners are those who have fewer economic resources, pay a symbolic sum for the use of the garden and, in return, donate 10 hours monthly to the management Orti Generali, a system inspired by time banks. Half the project's internal resources (staff) are dedicated to accompanying vulnerable subjects on specific paths that range from social reintegration to job placement, from training to positive self-experimentation, in particular through the creation of a welcoming and non-competitive environment. The group of volunteers, trainees, civil servants, solidarity gardeners, interns and users involved in various capacities in habilitation paths constitutes a hard-working community that engages in practical and productive activities

The idea is that diversity itself is a tool of transformation and opportunity to establish places not defined by structural factors, such as income or lack of property, but by interests, such as the social demand for nature that has long been expressed by the population of the urban periphery.

The following entities support the inclusion and diversity aspects of the project:

- the Health System Authority's (ASL) addiction service through the cultivation of the collective vegetable garden and maintenance of the farm and park with volunteers at two fixed weekly times;
- the Interdistrict Offices for External Criminal Execution (UIEPE) and the Court of Turin through the probation and work in the public interest of persons judged fit to serve their sentence outside prison;
- conventions with nine organisations for the implementation of apprenticeships, work bursaries and internships for disadvantaged groups; numerous inclusion and learning paths have been established for an average duration of six months each.

The produce of the collective garden is distributed to various territorial entities that support people in difficulty, such as:

- Mirafiori Solidale, a project promoted by the Mirafiori Foundation that distributes unsold goods to people in economic difficulty; Orti Generali contributes fresh, locally sourced food;
 - Casa Farinelli, a reception centre for asylum seekers;
- the San Vincenzo De Paoli Association of the Parish of San Barnaba, which redistributes food in the neighbourhood.
- < Left: Images of the Social Passata; lessons open to the public; a course on wild herbs; an event on circular economy and sustainability in collaboration with Slow Food; volunteers at work; the insect hotel; the charity gala (© Giuseppe Moccia 2022).





SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT

The project gave particular attention to environmental and landscape redevelopment. Rubbish and fences restricting access to the area were removed, and, inspired by the French *parc potager*, the design created a broad vista for park users without renouncing the patchwork characteristic of family vegetable gardens. The park restores and emphasises the historical landscape patterns of the *bealere* (irrigation canals), offering newly planted fruit trees of ancient varieties, long rows of mulberry trees (typical of Po Valley landscaping) and herbaceous corridors that promote greater plant biodiversity and encourage the presence of pollinating insects.

The Orti Generali project has created for the city of Turin, particularly the suburban district of Mirafiori Sud, a modern agricultural park in a previously underused area characterised by squatting and neglect. The project removed decades of waste along the banks of the Sangone River (although this operation is not yet complete). Over the next three years, a collaborative project with the city of Turin, supported by a philanthropic organisation (the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation), will finish reclaiming and reforesting the banks so that the park can regain its relationship with the stream.

The project enhanced the landscape through the conservation of historical features, in particular the *bealere* that have organised the agricultural landscape for the past five centuries. Although it has not been possible to restore them to use, they have been enhanced as a landscape feature by suitably orienting the layout of the vegetable garden plots, planting ancient apple and pear tree cultivars and leaving the grass unmown to nurture pollinating insects. To minimise their ecological impact, the fences and sheds have no concrete bases and are made of chestnut wood that was cut and processed by a social cooperative in the province of Turin. The tannins in chestnut wood prevent rot, making it durable and weather resistant, for which reason the park's benches and picnic tables are made of the same material.

The absence of concrete and plinths allows the removal of all the gardens' elements, thus not preventing any future agricultural use of the land. Cities and land use evolve quickly, so every effort must be made to preserve for future generations the precious surviving fertile soil in the urban fabric. Part of the transformation, termed Nature Base Solutions, has been financed by the European project proGIreg (productive Green Infrastructure for post-industrial urban regeneration) (https://www.progireg.eu/).

< Left: Before and after photos of the area occupied by squatter vegetable gardens. The redevelopment recruited several dozen volunteers to remove all the improper materials accumulated over the years by the vegetable gardeners, many of whom were involved in the reclamation and continue to cultivate their plots today. To encourage continued use, we have granted them the status of solidarity gardeners, and they are also involved in the maintenance and care of the park. (© Umberto Costamagna 2018 and Giuseppe Moccia 2022).</p>















EXEMPLARY VALUE

The project emerged from two master's theses on the Mirafiori district by the founding members (one from the Ecole du Paysage of Versailles and one from the Faculty of Sociology of Turin) and from the desire of a Community Foundation to contribute to the urban transformation of the district. The area's characteristics resemble those of many other suburban areas, and the project can be replicated in many residual agricultural areas in the vicinity of cities.

The implemented good practices include participatory place-making and grassroots land transformation. The project was conceived and articulated in collaboration with stakeholders and incorporates extensive research in the European field that embraced the French parc potager and English urban farms. The transformation was realised thanks to the support and help of volunteers and active citizens in the neighbourhood. The organic management of cultivation is exemplified by the digital irrigation system that reduces waste and copes with drought episodes. To conserve water resources, all 160 vegetable gardens are equipped with an automatic irrigation system connected to an advanced weather station that detects soil moisture in the middle of the gardens; when the soil is dry, the system connects to the internet and activates the irrigation solenoid valves only if there is less than an 85% chance of rain. The same weather station records temperature, wind, humidity, precipitation and leaf wetness. These integrated data are processed by a computer system using specially designed algorithms to prevent plant diseases. Depending on climate status, the diseases potentially present in the garden at that time appear on the Orti Generali open-source website along with information on how to recognise them and how to treat them organically.

PUBLIC PARTNERSHIPS

The project's design emerged from cooperation between a public body, a community foundation and a third-sector organisation. From the outset, all the design and implementation phases were determined by consensus with the public entity, which for the first time defined ad hoc regulatory instruments for the creation of this unprecedented project. The project was made possible by the substantial contribution of a national initiative for proposals (Smart Cities and Communities and Social Innovation) and several funding lines of European initiatives in the city of Turin, where Orti General is a third party. Due to its innovative features, the project is studied as an example in several cases of strategic planning for the management of urban agricultural areas, such as the city of Turin's green infrastructure strategic plan. Numerous international delegations have visited from places such as France, Switzerland, Germany, Norway and South Korea, and the project features scientific collaborations with universities (in the fields of architecture, economics, biology, agricultural sciences, veterinary science, gastronomic sciences and cultural heritage).

< Left: Images of the course on wild herbs; citizens in the park; a cooking class; visiting students; the greenhouse in winter; the Scottish cow, Baboo; and the collective apiary (© Giuseppe Moccia 2022).





AWARENESS RAISING

The park's transformation inspired a renewed sense of community and environmental awareness among the Mirafiori neighbourhood's citizens. Many of the former squatter gardeners on the banks of the Sangone have actively participated in cleaning the area and creating Orti Generali, making their vegetable gardens and time available to various projects and workshops with schools and associations. Numerous volunteers devote time to kiosk activities and routine maintenance of the park. In 2021, a video was produced as part of the European Union's Erasmus+ project, *Mediactivism. For the Right to the City.* The video is used to support the city's candidacy for the European Landscape Award, as it represents the area's transformation from its beginning and, above all, because its interviews show the values that move people to take an active part in a project of care and transformation of the landscape (https://mediactivism.eu/).

The project's wide-ranging educational offer on environmental issues includes awareness-raising activities aimed at young people and children, which in 2022 alone involved 75 schools and 1,241 participants. Experiential and playful workshops aimed at families on the same themes are offered at weekends.

Orti Generali's open-source website provides free guidance on how to manage a vegetable garden and how to care for plants organically; for the less digitally literate, three printed guides have been produced to support cultivation.

EVENTS

Orti Generali offers programming consistent with the themes closest to its mission, paying particular attention to inclusiveness and active participation in the neighbourhood as well as the fight against climate change. As a welcoming place for families and all visitors, the project hosts a number of events open to citizens throughout the year.

The programming over the past year, for example has included a festival of short films related to environmental sustainability; a masterclass with an aperitif, led by the University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo, that taught participants how to use waste in the kitchen and reduce food waste; open lectures on the theme of food forestry; a long weekend of sharing for the community featuring the passata of tomatoes as a means of social gathering; a charity gala at which gardeners and citizens gathered to share dishes cooked by the gardeners themselves; and a Scottish feast to celebrate the birth of Gino, the first calf born in an urban park. The events on the theme of food and circularity are funded by the European project *FUSILLI*, *Urban Food Planning* (https://fusilli-project.eu/).





SUMMARY

INCLUSION

105 course weekends and 750 participants

kiosk opening weekends over 3 years

> 1.000 students involved in tele-trips in covid period

school groups from preschool to secondary

5 universities involved

doctoral dissertations on the experience of Orti Generali

postgraduate training workshops

international delegations

popular events and seminars, including 2 film festivals

6 meetings of citizen territorial animation

charity galas with 6000€ raised

website, 15.000 website visitors and 2 social profiles

print publications

job grants and internships for inclusion per year and 2 training internships per year

users of the Health System Authority addiction service involved in horticultural production

probationers providing community service work

civil service pathways implemented

people on waiting list for the allocation of a vegetable garden

9 solidarity purchasing groups (namely, gruppi di acquisto solidale, G.A.S.)

LANDSCAPE

garden park of 20.000 square metres, 12.000 for agricultural use and 8.000 for public space

vegetable gardens cultivated with automatic irrigation, of which 25 are offered at a subsidised rate for persons under 35 years and 15 at a solidarity rate for disadvantaged persons

wooden tool sheds

community garden maintained by 336 yearly hours of work

teaching garden and 3 vegetable gardens assigned to third-sector entities

1 collective compost bin

360 trees planted

1 pollinator garden

> 1 urban apiary

10.000 square metres urban pasture

Highland cows and 1 baby calf born in the park

2,5 tons of vegetables donated to families in need and 1ton intended for the kiosk

building redeveloped into a barn, stable and tool shed

weather station with 9 sensors

greenhouse for nursery production

greenhouse for convivial use

of honey produced per year

REDEVELOPMENT

40.000 square metres of parkland returned to the community

1.308.250€ in public and private contributions

158 quintals of waste stored and disposed

square metres of building renovated and converted into a multifonctional space

building converted to a barn, stable and tool shed

volunteers and 5 scout groups involved in the clean-up of the park

6400 kwh of renewable energy generated by solar panels in 2 years

> 2000 metres of windbreaks

access road to the park

58 benches and 24 tables made of chestnut

greenhouses for recreation and training

l bugs hotel

> 1 orchard

lamps illuminating the paths in the park

park garrison rooms

chicken coop
with 12
pedigree hens
blonde piedmont, 1
capon, 1 rooster, 1 harco hen,
1 limousine hen,
1 livornese hen

feline colony

< Left: Bird's eye view 2019.





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