

Thilo Folkerts

Inventing a Public Garden at Maredolce, Palermo

— summary of group work '*orientation and translation*' —

International Workshop
Palazzo di Maredolce, Palermo (I)
26.-30.06.2017

An International workshop, initiated by the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerca, was held at Maredolce in Palermo in June 2017, coordinated by Giuseppe Barbera, of the Università di Palermo and Simonetta Zanon of the Fondazione Benetton. Three interdisciplinary groups of architects, landscape architects, agronomists, archeologists, economists and other were headed by Tessa Mattinei, Thilo Folkerts and the director of the landscape program at the foundation, Luigi Latini.

In 2015 the Maredolce was recipient of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens. On this occasion the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerca had assembled and published a comprehensive amount of information and material on the site. The workshop participants could freely draw from this material and received additional expertise and advice personally on site from different experts.

The group lead by Thilo Folkerts and organized by Francesca Carlotta worked along the keywords orientation and translation. It further consisted of Marianna Lombardo, Cassandra Funsten, Angelo Castrorao Barba, Laura Blanc, Giorgio d'Anna.

The workshop was accompanied by the immense heat of a scirocco, giving the work and experience at Maredolce a distinctly immersive character.



Castello Mareдолce overlooking former lake zone and historic dam.

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The historic site of Mareдолce has only recently been brought back into the living cultural realm of the city of Palermo. The complex essentially entails the dam, the garden and the castle. Featuring multiple and fascinating layers of hidden treasures it is a beacon not only of the Islamic and Norman historic architecture, it is also a site that is at the core of the extraordinary agricultural past of the Conca d'Oro, the fertile basin at the foot of the mountain range that curbs Palermo on the landside. The large garden was in the last five decades mainly used for the cultivation of mandarins. Now the condition of the garden ranges widely from on-going and new use, to abandonment and fallow, ruderal parts. Within the larger complex a great number of individual sites and elements tell rich stories – be they historic, agricultural, hydro-geologic, social and many more, spanning at least 900 years until today.



Historic dam and former lake zone

However, the current state of castle, dam and garden is not fit to accommodate easy public use. Located centrally in the socio-economically difficult quarter of Brancaccio, the site faces the challenges of an ongoing battle against encroaching private use and illegal construction as much as the regular challenges of development and maintenance of a vast and sensible area.

Locus Amoenus

If Maredolce is to meet its potential and become a newly functional part in the quarter and the city, it can only be further uncovered and developed through careful and measured steps. As a public amenity the way how it is dealt with needs to be cultivated, as much as a garden needs to be cultivated. Maredolce will require an amount of care and respect that will forbid to be generally open to the public, but it cannot be closed to public life either. In fact, to us it seems, as if Maredolce should be treated as a public garden, not a park. The ensuing programming of the site will have to involve tourists and visitors as much as become a notable part of Brancaccio's cultural life



Mandarin plantations on the level of the island and on the landfill below

again. However, with all even fragmentary quality of the large site, any visit of castle and garden requires a quality of pleasure and satisfaction. Much of Maredolce is currently not accessible and perceivable in a pleasant and drawing way. A number of simple measures of recognizing Maredolce as a delectable place and of simply 'giving access' could improve such quality.

La Trovatura

Scenarios for making Maredolce better accessible should acknowledge the immense potential of the unfinished. A spirit of active experience, discovery, and on-going development could feature as one of the main attractions of visiting Maredolce. In Sicily there is a historic fascination with the discovery of unexpected riches, traces of history, and even impossible legends. Leaning on this specific, romantic trait of local culture, the so-called 'trovatura', one might enable the atmosphere and opportunity of discovery, presenting Sicilian culture and history here as something hidden, partly veiled ... as a hidden treasure.



Informal houses use the historic dam as a foundation.



Stratae of topography and cultivation: excavation level in former lake area, historic island, landfill with actively cultivated mandarin plantation.

Structurally this could mean that even a partial access to garden and castle could be made part of the experience: Glimpses into rooms, spaces, sites, that are only in the process of uncovering or restructuring; programs could be devised where visitors are made part of creating access, passing through high-grown patches of ruderal reeds; staged tours following narrowly focussed paths.

Ramps and Spaces as Tools

The underlying essential quality and given of the Maredolce is topography. As such the different topographical and historic levels should be made legible; relations between different heights should become notable and – wherever possible – accessible. This could mean to create ramps in a unified formal language where the fine gravel material that is here used around excavations could be applied functionally (as a ramp) and as a signifier (marking a specific interest). Large parts of the wall of the former ‘island’ are not well visible and/or accessible. They could be exposed again and exhibited by uncovering and excavating



Synchronicity of different irrigation techniques.

along the base of the wall, using, again, the gravel material as a paving ground. Larger parts of the areas where some years ago experimental excavations were made for research into the existence of a former lake have been left rough. By levelling at least some of the excavated area, a flat surface could be created, where – instead of a difficult to establish lake – a meadow could be used for periodic events such as open air theatre or concerts. The topographic steps of could be formalized and used to created amphitheatre-like steps.

Much of the garden lacks spatial qualities for visits or events. For example, the mandarin plantations are very dense and low, one can hardly enter between the trees. The canopy is too low to step under them. Accordingly, there is little shadow in the garden. Opening a circular corridor in the dense mandarin plantation at the foot of the island's wall, for example, one could be immersed in the mandarin plantations. One would be able to look into the space below the mandarin trees' canopy. A large part of the circular walk would be pleasantly in the shade.



As for further development of the plantations: we suggest that a new Maredolce could reflect a forward looking, innovative, and experimental role in the agriculture-culture of the Conca d'Oro. New fruit trees could be introduced where currently there are barren patches of land. More contemporary concrete structures and suspended polyethylene tubes should be featured clearly. The topos of water and irrigation could also be made to reach across the garden's walls, out to the quarter. In the workshop we discussed to fit the small garden in front of the castle's entrance with an *abbatoio*, a typical feature of the agricultural landscape of Sicilia.

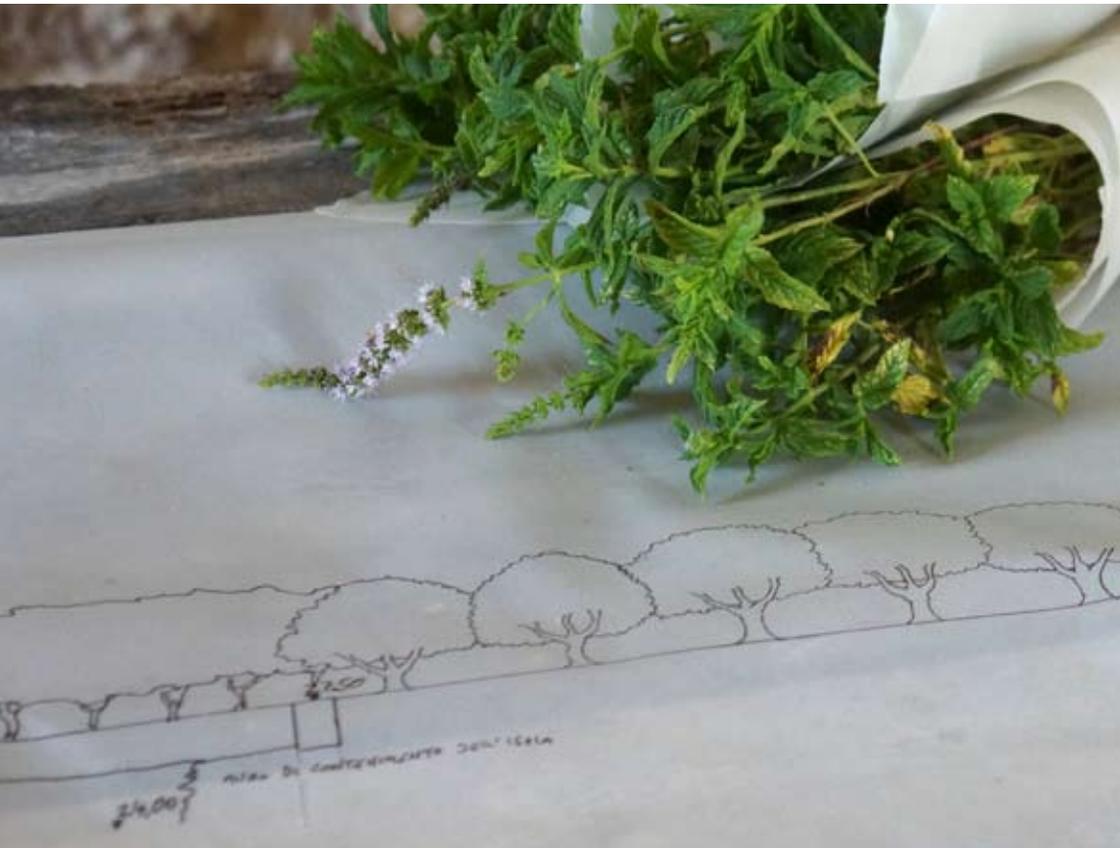
Thinking this theme of productive, beautiful, and sensible spaces further: Wouldn't a column-hall made of date palms, a *dattileto*, be a signifying entrance gesture in front of the castle? Maredolce could present itself to the surroundings through a shadowed public garden with an inviting water feature – a friendly bridge between the historic monument of the castle and the contemporary livelihood of the quarter?

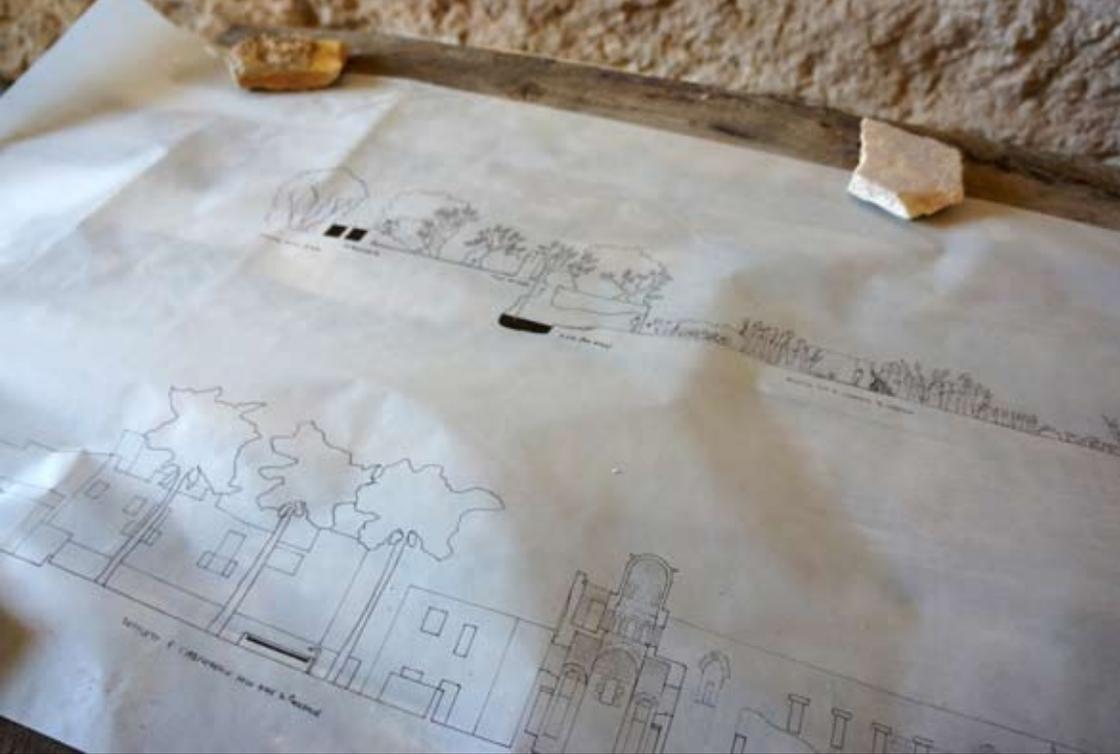
A new Sense of Garden

And last, but not least. Before we enter the garden

We have learned, that Maredolce is a unique place. A castle with a singular garden, that in many ways has no peers in all of the Mediterranean or the world. Accordingly, we imagine that it should also be a unique experience to enter this garden. We imagine that a specific way of visiting could be cultivated. Couldn't one envision an umbrella that visitors receive with the purchase of a ticket? The umbrella would accompany the visitor in the garden, on the way back home, and possibly further-on on other ways. Maredolce could thus also find a new presence in the wider city of Palermo.

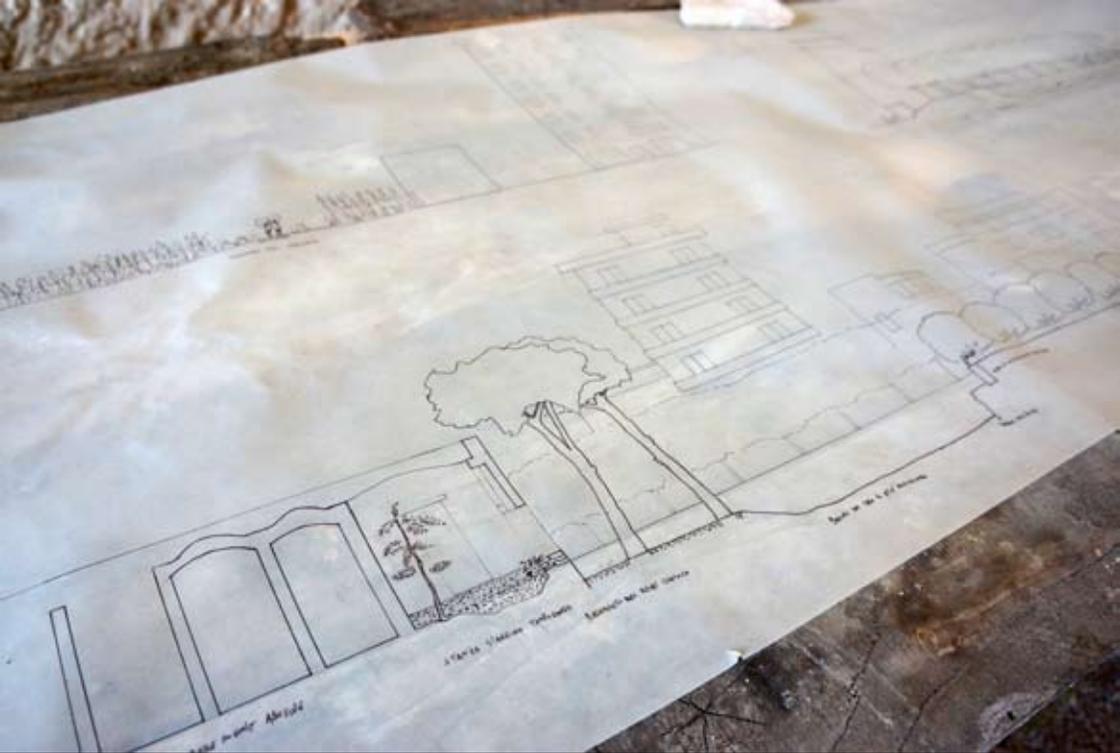
At the end of the workshop, when we presented our little exploration of the possibilities of the Maredolce, we handed the visitors twigs of mint before they entered the garden. A fragrant gesture that changed the visit to the garden even if just a little bit ...





200 Scale Sections

In the foreground: *dattileto* with *abbevatoio*.



200 Scale Sections
Secret garden chamber, topographic relationship between castle, 'lake', and island.



Activating the Historic Structures
Final presentation at the so-called *embarcadero* of Mareolce castle.



