

# Inside and Outside the Landscape. Representation as an Interpretative Tool for the Landscape

Maria Grazia Cianci

## Infinite dialogue

“Could it be that the secret of a landscape’s enchantment lies in a certain harmony of forms and light, whose hold over us is as powerful and incomprehensible as that of a fragrance, a gaze, or a tone of voice? Or perhaps it depends on some unknown echo of emotions from primitive humans –those who, here and there, deified the most remarkable objects of nature– springs, rocks, peaks, great trees –and, unknowingly, by isolating them, giving them names, and imparting to them a sort of life, transformed them into true works of art; the most ancient art, that of feeling that an expression arises from an impression, and a particular moment becomes a monument of memory– a sublime gift of a prodigious dawn or sunset, the sacred dread of a forest, the exultation on the heights from which the realms of the earth are revealed?

But if we are unable to reason clearly about such emotions, we must nevertheless acknowledge that we are less inept at reproducing them” [1] [Valéry 1934, p. 35] (fig. 1).

It’s well known that the concept of landscape is a subject of interest for numerous disciplines, and the criteria for its analysis and study vary according to different expertise, methods, and objectives. Roberto Gambino stated that the landscape is simultaneously “a place of interdisciplinary convergence” and “a place of forking paths” [Gambino 1997, p. 27]. This makes the landscape not only an object to observe but, above all, a space, a place where different visions, approaches, and relationships intersect.

The complexity described by Gambino is eloquently expressed in an interpretation by Franco Farinelli, who

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Fig. 1. Anonymous, *Views of the main crater of Etna and Agrigento with the Valley of the Temples* [Cockburn, G. (1815). *A voyage to Cadiz and Gibraltar, up the Mediterranean to Sicily and Malta, in 1810 & 11*, London: Harding 1815].

masterfully captures the intrinsic ambiguity of the concept of landscape. Farinelli asserts that it rests “on a single, unique expedient: on a word –and the case is truly rare, if not unique, in the history of scientific knowledge– that is used to intentionally designate both the thing and the image of the thing. That is to say: a word that simultaneously expresses the signified and the signifier, in such a way that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other” [Farinelli 1991, p. 11] [2]. This inherent ambiguity enriches the concept with meanings while simultaneously making it complex and elusive, difficult to define unequivocally (figs. 2-4). Regarding the concepts of perception and interpretation, Christian Norberg-Schulz already identified orientation and place identification, as well as a sense of belonging, as among the basic functions of dwelling [Norberg-Schulz 1979]. It is precisely with respect to the value of perception as a tool for creating the landscape that the role of interpretation –and thus representation– becomes fundamental. “The eye sees the world, what the world lacks to become a painting, and what the painting lacks to become itself. It sees on the palette the color the painting awaits, sees, once completed, the painting that responds to all these lacks, and finally sees the paintings of others, other responses and other lacks. A definitive inventory of the visible cannot be made, just as it is impossible to catalog all the possible uses of a language or even just its vocabulary and constructions. A self-moving instrument, a medium that invents its own ends, the eye is what has been touched by a certain impact with the world, and it

returns it to the visible through the marks traced by the hand” [Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 58].

“A map of a territory is made to understand it and, consequently, to transform it. But before transforming it, it must be understood, and this understanding is achieved through its representation” [Cozens 1981, p. 98] [3] (figs. 5-8).

It is impossible to discuss the concept of landscape without considering the territory, the city, and the relationships between them. Landscape is a collective narrative, an expression of the nature of its people and their history; it does not exist independently of these elements. It takes shape when it is observed and experienced.

The contemporary city presents itself today as an increasingly complex organism in constant transformation, capable of reflecting and manifesting dynamic changes and crises in various fields, including architecture and society. This mutable and stratified nature requires an analytical and design approach capable of grasping its complexity by integrating methodologies and tools from different disciplines [Berque 1985].

The observation, analysis, and design of urban spaces must consider both the complexity of the subject and the implications of potential transformative interventions. These interventions not only need to meet functional and structural requirements but must also address a growing network of themes related to urban scale, socio-cultural dynamics, and environmental concerns.

In this context, multidisciplinary becomes crucial: understanding the city can no longer be confined to technical or aesthetic domains but must intertwine contributions from social sciences, economics, sociology, ecology, and digital technologies. Every intervention on the urban fabric or the anthropized landscape modifies not only physical space but also human relationships, modes of production, and the cultural identity of places [Raffestin 1977].

Thinking about the city of the future, therefore, requires an integrated and systemic approach capable of interpreting the signs of the present to anticipate needs and challenges, fostering innovative and sustainable solutions. It is necessary to build a vision that reconciles respect for the historical and cultural memory of a territory with the demands for modernization and resilience required by contemporary society.

Significant examples of this cultural vision are evident in many contemporary design experiences. A notable example is the innovative methods for observing and representing the fluid data of the city, as seen in the projects of



Fig. 2. M.G. Cianci: a) City: Anthropized landscape, Rome 2018. Ink pen on paper; b) Countryside: Hilly landscape, Rome 2018. Ink pen on paper.

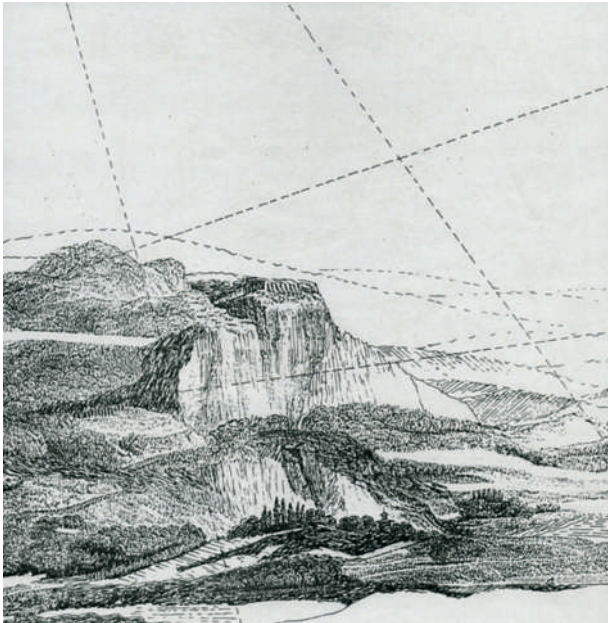


Fig. 3. M.G. Cianci, Order and disorder in the landscape: Natural landscape between hills and valleys, 2020. Ink pen on paper.

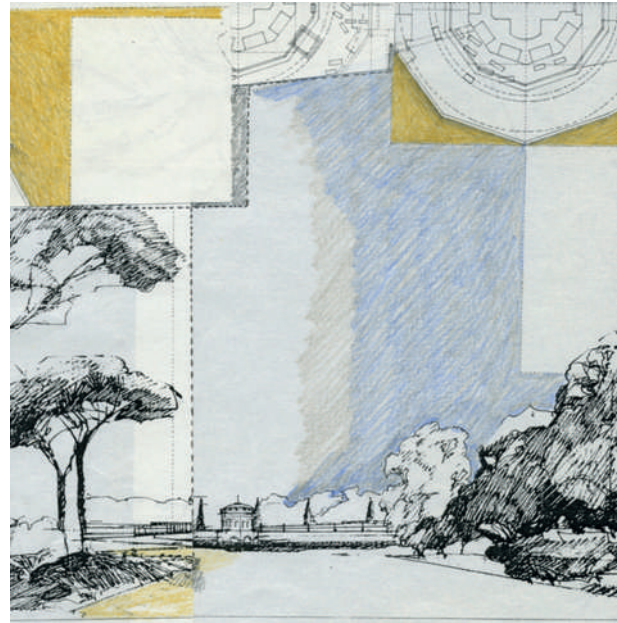


Fig. 4. M.G. Cianci, Landscape of Theodoric Park, Ravenna 2019. Ink pen on paper.



Fig. 5. A. Cozens, *The Various Species of Landscape*, 1771. A blot on vegetative variations no. 1 [Oppè 1952].



Fig. 6. A. Cozens, *The Various Species of Landscape*, 1771. A blot on vegetative variations no. 2 [Oppè 1952].



Fig. 7. A. Cozens, *The Various Species of Landscape*, 1771. Lagoon landscape with trees no. 1 [Oppè 1952].



Fig. 8. A. Cozens, *The Various Species of Landscape*, 1771. Lagoon landscape with trees no. 2 [Oppè 1952].

Carlo Ratti. He describes this methodology as a tool for “systematic exploration and a seed for possible futures” [Bistagnino 2019, p. 14]. This vision is based on the idea of continuous interaction between the analysis of urban phenomena and their projection into future scenarios, opening new interpretative horizons [Ratti, Claudel 2017] [4].

Making the image of the landscape visible is not merely about representing objective data but also integrating symbolic and cultural elements. Creating and representing the image of the landscape thus also means uncovering its deeper identity, attributing to it a significance that goes beyond simple visual description.

Representation becomes a key tool for interpreting the landscape, capable of revealing its complexities, dynamics, and latent potentialities [Schama 1997].

In this context, creative and design processes find a central and indispensable role in representational language, in its most advanced forms. Technological and cultural evolution has enriched the ways in which the landscape is observed, analyzed, and conveyed, making these practices a cornerstone of the contemporary panorama. Representation, therefore, is not just an end but also a means to imagine and construct new narratives of space, offering interpretative tools to guide design and cultural choices toward a sustainable future (fig. 9).

The necessity emerges, therefore, to engage with the complex phenomenology resulting from the interaction between two vast and ever-evolving themes: representation and the urban landscape, particularly concerning the city. This convergence creates a broad and often indefinable panorama characterized by a plurality of languages, methodologies, and visions that intertwine in an attempt to capture the multiple dimensions –esthetic, social, environmental, and technological– that compose the contemporary landscape.

In this scenario, attention is not limited to the mere visual translation of reality but expands into a critical reflection on the very nature of representation: how it interprets, shapes, and, in some cases, redefines our way of perceiving and experiencing urban and landscape spaces. The landscape, as previously stated, is not only a physical reality to be observed but also a system of relationships in which the visible interweaves with the invisible, where historical memory and technological innovation coexist and interact in an endless dialogue [Turri 1988].

The image of the landscape is not merely a snapshot of tangible reality but a dynamic synthesis between the visible

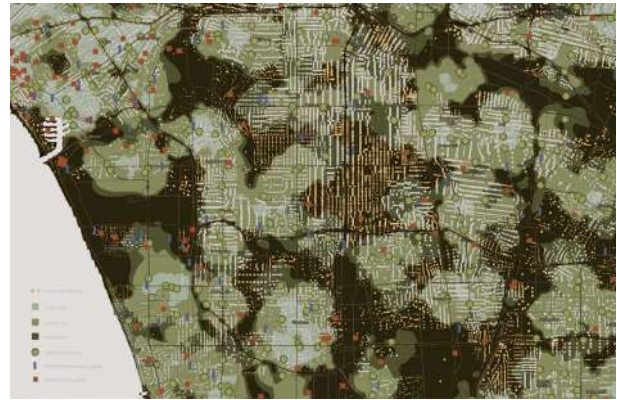


Fig. 9. C. Reed, 2022, *Wild Ways: A Fifth Ecology for Metropolitan Los Angeles*. Mapping analysis of South Los Angeles food desert and butterfly habitat (<[https://issuu.com/igsdharvard/docs/wild\\_ways](https://issuu.com/igsdharvard/docs/wild_ways)>).

and the invisible, between the objectivity of form and the subjectivity of perception (figs. 10, 11).

By taking it to an extreme, we can affirm that constructing the image of the landscape means attempting to reveal its deeper identity, going beyond surface and appearance. This process implies a continuous tension between representation and interpretation: representation does not merely translate reality but becomes an analytical and critical tool, capable of uncovering the complex relationships that connect the elements of the landscape with one another and with those who inhabit and observe them.

From this perspective, the image of the landscape is never neutral: it carries choices, visions, and intentions that contribute to defining the meaning of the landscape itself. Representing the landscape is, at its core, narrating it, attributing a narrative that articulates its essence and designs its possible developments. It is a tool that not only helps us understand what the landscape is today but invites us to imagine what it might become tomorrow, guiding conscious and respectful transformation processes aligned with its identity.

The representation of the landscape –whether aimed at surveying the existing or creating something new– cannot be considered a passive or merely descriptive activity. It is always a design act. Drawing, photographing, and sketching are not actions limited to recording an image; they are productive gestures that already contain the seed of



Fig. 10. G.P. Bagetti, 1825 ca., *Landscape with waterfall*. Turin, Palazzo Reale.



Fig. 11. G.P. Bagetti, 1825 ca., *Wooded mountain*. Turin, Palazzo Reale.

Fig. 12.Y. Brunier, *Landscape with trees* [Brunier 1996].

the project. This 'first glance' of the designer, expressed through initial figures –sketches, graphic notes, drawings– anticipates and prefigures the design process. It is in these original figures that the project's seed lies hidden, the starting point from which subsequent design developments will take shape through the production of further figures (figs. 12-15).

The figure is not merely a technical tool or operational support but the first language of the project, the *medium* through which the designer engages with the context and imagines the future. This concept highlights the central role of representation as the primary language of design invention, a language that, through marks and traces, translates vision into concrete possibilities.

To represent the landscape, therefore, does not mean merely returning its visual image but interpreting and reformulating it through the language of figures. Each figure, in its essence, carries a narrative, a transformation project that reconnects the past, present, and future of the landscape. Drawing thus becomes a critical and creative act, capable of revealing hidden potential, uncovering latent relationships, and constructing new possibilities for interaction within space.

In this process, representation is never an end in itself: it lives and evolves as a continuous translation of meanings, a device capable of giving shape to the invisible and rendering design intentions readable. Through the figure, the complexity of the visible is translated into a web of relationships and meanings that guide the project, transforming every initial glance into a concrete vision and every drawing into a projection of the future.

Thus, observation itself is already a design operation. Looking cannot be an action devoid of subjectivity; inherent in its meaning is the act of selection and interpretation, with the natural consequence of attributing meanings [Turri 2009].

An additional theme that can reveal further facets about the value and importance of representation in landscape design –and which must necessarily be addressed in this text– is the relationship between hand drawing and digital representation. The challenge lies in understanding how these two productive modes can be theoretically interpreted and coherently combined in the design process.

I firmly believe that the duality of these forms of representation is where the future of design invention is shaped, and

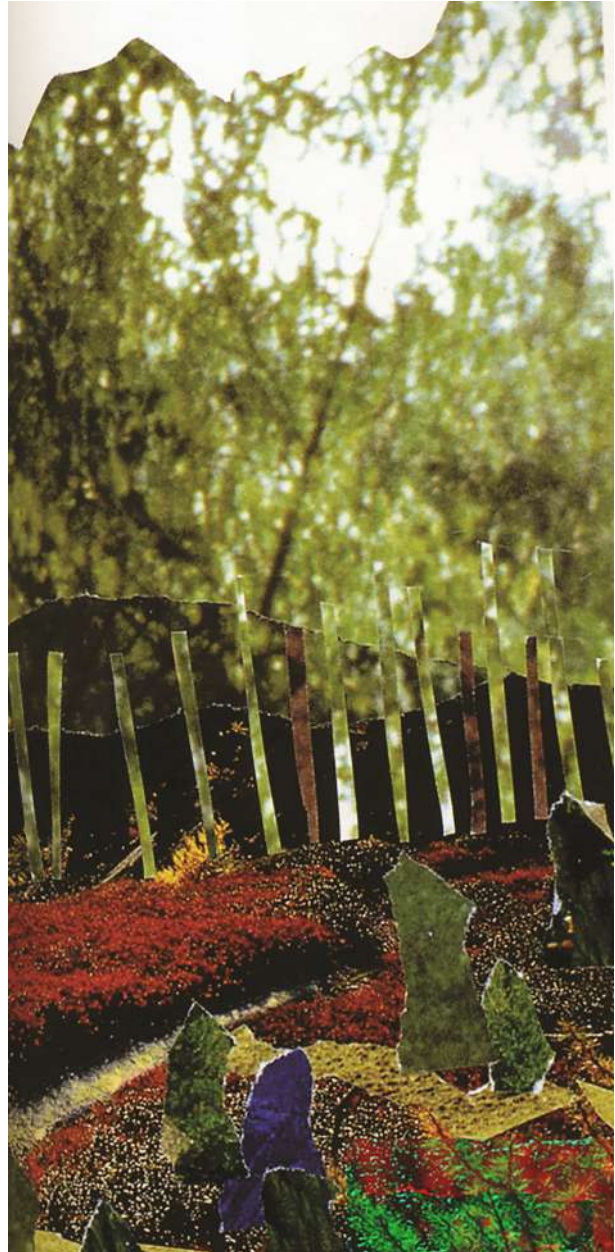




Fig. 13. Y. Brunier, European Patents Office, Photographic montages for the mosaic garden project [Brunier 1988] (from: Y. BRUNIER, Landscape architect paysagiste, Berlino 1988).



Fig. 14. Y. Brunier, Photographic montages and color experiments [Brunier 1988].



Fig. 15. Y. Brunier, Photographic montages and graphic experiments [Brunier 1988].



Fig. 16. Canan Tolon, Experiments on "landscape fragments" (from: Pages Paysages, Distances, no. 5, September 1994).

Fig. 17. Apfelbäume, 1987. Private collection, ph. Gerhard Richter (from: Pages Paysages, Distances, no. 5, September 1994).



Fig. 18. K. Orff, 2019, *Scape, Public Sediment for Alameda Creek* – Press Images, 2019 (<<https://www.scapestudio.com/projects/public-sediment/>>).

much of what has been discussed so far regarding the role of the figure in the design process hinges on understanding these two operational modes, not so much in their current interpretation but in a potential new interpretation. As early as 1996, Franco Purini observed: "In the telematic age, it is possible that the 'historical' drawing will survive only as a sketch, an unrepeatable and decisive moment of invention" and further, "precisely because automatic drawing erases the original, the sketch will gain even greater value. If before it constituted the initial moment of a progression, it now becomes the logical counterpoint of a practice defined in the 'scientific' terms of a

methodological sequentiality, self-verified in a ritual with esoteric tones" [Purini 2008, p. 41]. These words prompt reflection and recall another assertion: "And without a doubt, our age [...] prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, representation to reality, belonging to being [...]. What for it is sacred is nothing but illusion" [Feuerbach 2012, p. 55] [5]. This statement by Feuerbach in the *Preface* to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity* aptly captures the purpose of representations, which are necessary tools for knowledge. As André Corboz also asserted, no landscape or territory can exist without an image that represents it [6].



Fig. 19. Robert Venturi observing the landscape of Las Vegas, photo [Venturi 1977].



Fig. 20. Denise Scott Brown observing the landscape of Las Vegas, photo [Venturi 1977].

Similarly, throughout history, few places have remained undescribed in the notebooks of great travelers. The image of a territory is not merely a mental expression but, above all, a cultural, social, and historical reflection that influences and shapes the perception and relationship an individual has with the surrounding space.

Literature, through the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Michel de Montaigne, Charles de Montesquieu, teaches us to explore and perceive the nature of a place through its structure, sounds, and atmosphere.

During his stay in Italy, Goethe produced significant writings, meticulously describing the landscapes around him [Goethe 1991]. He drew and painted what he observed, striving to uncover its most remote secrets; through drawing from life, he interpreted these places, seeking to grasp their most authentic essence. His drawings and texts embody a perfect union, a synthesis of historical-scientific analysis and interpretative aesthetic analysis [7].

The landscape is revealed, taking shape not only through its constituent elements but also through their relationships and, above all, through the perception one has of them. When the observer looks at an object, the observed object becomes an image, and at that precise moment, the territory becomes a landscape: "A portion of territory, including the sky above it, becomes a landscape when we accept and discover it as a concretely

lived sensory experience, allowing it to act upon us as an impression" [Hellpach 1960, p. 82] [8] (figs. 16, 17).

This statement by psychologist Willy Hellpach invites reflection on the concept of judgment and the moment when the transition occurs from a mere 'generic element' to a true landscape. For Hellpach, the center of this transformation lies in the perceptual moment, that precise instant when, regardless of one's intent, an object transforms into an image. Landscape perception cannot be confined to the visual dimension alone. Simply looking at the landscape is not enough to make it such; one must involve the entire body: hearing, smell, and touch all play a role in the perceptual moment with the same intensity as sight (fig. 18).

Thus, the landscape becomes, according to Hellpach, a complex and dynamic entity, a mirror of our soul, an extension of our thoughts, and it changes based on our experiences. When we look at it, we do not merely observe what is in front of us but immerse ourselves in it, allowing it to envelop us and transforming every element and detail into an impression that becomes ours.

"Before unspoiled nature, before the image of its various details represented to our mind (from the tree to the stream, the sunflower field to the hilly expanse), before its *spiritual physiognomy* responding to the spectrum of our most intimate feelings, we are convinced that there is something surpassing that vast and rich panorama of separate elements. That something, to our consciousness,

takes shape as an enveloping and infiltrating totality, an uninterrupted figuration of emotions and perceptual data, sentimental radiations" [Milani 2001, p. 22] [9]. Thus, the representation of the landscape is much more than a mere aesthetic exercise: it is a cultural act, a profound action, a way to recognize, interpret, and define our place within the world [Turri 1988].

## Notes

[1] The text is a poetic passage by Paul Valéry from 1934, reflecting on the nature of the enchantment evoked by landscapes, comparing them to primitive art and the way human emotions find expression in the forms of nature.

[2] "And isn't it, today, precisely the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of such a distinction the most evident sign of our crisis, the crisis of our capacity for knowledge?" asked Wittgenstein, and the answer is still missing: "What happens if, far away, images begin to waver?" [Farinelli 1991, p.2].

[3] This quote opens last chapter of Cozen's text. The author is Alexander Pope, closely aligned with Cozens' theoretical positions. The entire text explores beauty and its applications; inventing landscape compositions is a complex practice, an operation that must stem from inner sensitivity, which surpasses operational practice in importance.

[4] Since their inception around ten thousand years ago, cities have been one of the most powerful engines of innovation in human history. However, their progress has not been linear: periods of relative stability have alternated with times of profound change, during which the fundamental elements of daily life have been redefined. Today, we find ourselves in one of these transformative phases, driven by major technological and digital revolutions that are reshaping the world of networks and the organization of urban societies. This text by Ratti, based on research conducted at the MIT Senseable City Lab, takes us on a journey to discover the metropolises of tomorrow, where technology and innovation not only change the face of cities and landscapes but also the way we live, work, and interact. Cities and urban landscapes, once seen only as physical settlements, are transforming into dynamic, interconnected systems where data and artificial intelligence play a crucial role in defining new forms of sustainability, efficiency, and inclusion.

[5] "[...] Or rather, the sacred enlarges in its eyes to the extent that the decrease of truth corresponds to the increase of illusion, such that the

Through art, literature, and other forms of expression, the landscape becomes a reflection of human identity, capable of narrating stories and inducing profound reflections. The continuous reinterpretation of the landscape reminds us that our relationship with nature is ever-evolving, shaped by time, culture, and imagination (figs. 19, 20).

pinnacle of illusion is also the pinnacle of the sacred.": Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity* [2012].

[6] An exhibition held in Mendrisio at the Teatro dell'architettura in 2020, titled *The Territory as Palimpsest: The Legacy of André Corboz*, curated by André Bideau and Sonja Hildebrand, highlights precisely this vision of the landscape. The exhibition showcased fascinating materials from Corboz's archive, preserved at the Library of the Academy of Architecture. The exhibition was divided into two sections: *How to Read the Territory* and *Knowledge Production and Historiography*. The materials on display and especially the archive dedicated to him explicitly bring the imagination factor into the study of the territories he examined. Corboz uses montage techniques and visual relationships between real forms of nature and surreal forms, that is, between reality and illusion.

[7] "[...] From time to time, we have splendid days, and the rain that falls intermittently refreshes the grass and plants. Here and there, one sees evergreen trees, so the absence of leaves on others is hardly missed. [...] Here, winter is hardly noticed; in the gardens, evergreen trees are planted, the sun shines brightly and warmly; snow is seen only on the farthest mountains to the north. The lemon trees planted along the walls of gardens are occasionally covered with cane roofs" [Goethe 1991, text date December 8 1787, p. 34].

[8] "Nature becomes a landscape for us only when we accept and seek it without a purely utilitarian purpose, as a concretely lived sensory experience, when we allow it to act upon us as an impression" [Hellpach 1960, p. 254].

[9] In the second chapter titled *What is Landscape*, Milani adds: "It is more than the sum of its parts, the individual fragments of our gaze scattered across the time of sensitivity, more than the attraction of psychic processes: it is the soul of an infinite and magical concatenation of forms. Its idea develops in history but also in the individual, through effects of time and space united in the rhythm of lines and surfaces that man instinctively knows how to compose" [Milani 2001, p. 37].

## Author

Maria Grazia Cianci, Department of Architecture, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, mariagrazia.cianci@uniroma3.it

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