

**The Brion-Vega Factory,
St Vito, Northern Italy
An industrial landscape by Pietro Porcinai**

From Landscape Australia 1/1993 pp 57-60.



South façade of factory, with clerestory windows to avoid glare. Note trachyte blocks in fan-paving.



Carefully framed view of Aolo castle. Low mound in foreground 'introduces' background hill.



View north west to lake, bamboo and sculpture in meadow grass.

Where the wide, dull plains of the Veneto meet the great massif of Monte Grappa and the Altopiano di Asiago, there is first a line of gentle hills, green, fertile, facing south. To the east of the Brenta and Bassano del Grappa, Asolo crowns one of these hills, and to the west, Marostica, with its old castle walls climbing upwards; two of the prettiest towns in the Veneto. Between them, many of the finest Venetian villas are placed with care half up the hill-slopes, backed and flanked by fine trees, facing the sun in winter, but a little cooler than the oppressive plains in summer; they are sited with an understanding of all the best, age-old principles of environmental design.

This string of pearls is threaded by an old road (the Bassano-Montebelluna Road) at the base of the hills, where the long plain begins, once a Roman road, planted with plane trees by the Austrians a hundred years ago, and with a ribbon of factories and new houses and shops by the Brave New World of the

last twenty years. Richly endowed by nature, cherished and enhanced by man for two millennia, it might have been zoned and protected as a landscape of rare quality. It is now too late, and the road, like so many of the roads in the Veneto, resembles nothing so much as the landscape of a Third World Country scrambling recklessly into industrialisation without regard for its environment.

I am reminded especially of Taiwan, and a little of South Korea - although the comparison is unfair to South Korea, where there is a well-established profession of landscape architecture and some good university programs.

Italy has neither.



Set back to the south of this brutally ugly road, now choked with traffic, the fate of all ribbon developments which ignore the first principles of transport planning, there are two developments which show how the Veneto might have gone about the business of industrial growth without destroying its landscape. Both belong to the Brion family; one is a factory, designed by Marco Zanuso, the architect, and completed by [Pietro Porcinai](#), one of the very few Italian professionally trained landscape architects.

Porcinai worked both in Italy and outside it: he had a well deserved international reputation, perhaps not adequately recognised in his own country. The second example is the tomb of the Brion family, designed by Carlo Scarpa with the help of [Porcinai](#) (see *Landscape Australia*, 13 (1) pp. 37-39 and 13 (2) pp. 146-153). The tomb complex, with its canals, ponds and garden, with the repetitively crystalline anfractuosités of its built components and its perfection of workmanship, is very well known to architects, a place of pilgrimage. Because of its unique design and function, it is less relevant to the planning needs of contemporary society than the factory, and very much less productive, but both complexes have much to teach, and they share some features in common.

What they have in common above all is orientation, a new orientation reflecting technological change, but right for today, when the ways of supplying heat and light have changed. Instead of facing south, both these complexes face north; the factory uses the softer northern exposure, which gives light without glare and avoids the overheating of a southern exposure in summer. Both are sheltered from the south, the factory by a great informal hedge of *Quercus ilex*, the evergreen oak of the Mediterranean, and the tomb complex by a high wall.

It is more important to avoid overheating in summer on the plain than on the hill slope, and the factory is used in all seasons, unlike the great villas, which were to some extent migratory, with their warm rooms and their cool rooms. Both complexes enjoy views to the north, and best available view today - the view from the tomb is an integral part of the design, and it is important that it should be conserved.

The main architectural features of the factory are its simplicity, utter clarity in design, lack of any pretension or attempt at extraneous ornament, and its generous and flexible internal space, superbly lit with soft natural lighting. It was built for the assembly of household electrical goods, although production ceased a few years ago, and it has had diverse uses over the last few years.

The main features of the landscape correspond with the building: simplicity, clarity and attention to detail. For instance, there is a low ditch and a clay bank at the base of the wall of *Quercus ilex*, so that the bank of foliage seems to rise directly from the ground. There is a kind of parterre between the factory and the southern boundary, but one that adapts an old formal tradition to modern needs. There are a couple of pre-existing pear trees, a rough meadow on an ample level platform, and a simple geometrical area of Crepe Myrtle

(*Lagerstroemia indica*), formally pruned to a straight trunk and a rounded crown.

The pears are the remnants of a former orchard, and the regular planting of the Crepe Myrtle retains the form of the orchard, but without the heavy maintenance. It is an allusion to an orchard, in an allusive landscape. The meadow between the trees - so labelled, 'prato', in Porcinai's plan - is of the natural meadow grasses of the area, and scythed a couple of times a year.

The car-parks are sunk half the height of a car, and further concealed by low hedges and trees. The turning spaces and the parking bays are simply but clearly marked by changes in paving (the main circulation system uses small trachyte blocks, very Venetian in character). The geometry of the car-parks shows a professional understanding of functional needs, which is surprisingly rare in Italian car-parks, and the sequence of entering and also of leaving the car-parks is calculated to give pleasure to the eye, both the dip into the lower plane, and the rise from it, with a new view and then the turn north.

The choice of plants is good: the low hedges of *Lonicera pileata* and *Ligustrum ovalifolium* are under-planted with *Hypericum calycinum*, which gives the effect of embroidery with its bright yellow flowers. The eastern boundary wall is sumptuously planted with *Wisteria sinensis* and *Rosa* 'Mermaid' (La Sirena) which grows vigorously, has dark green, glossy and healthy leaves, and large single pale yellow flowers in profusion, with a long flowering season. Most of this landscape is planned to require only a modest level of maintenance, but it seems to have had too little for some time.



North elevation of building looking west. Note glass walling for soft lighting.

The worst problem is that the low hedges which are used everywhere for definition have been heavily invaded with *Equisetum* (scouring rushes) - an interesting and very ancient plant, but out of place here. However, most of the landscape is intended to look relaxed, almost a farm landscape, and heavy maintenance would be out of character.

The factory is sited a few hundred metres south of the road below the foothills, and this, of course, is where the new industrial parks might have been zoned, with a new connecting and arterial road system, leaving the lovely old road with its plane trees as a kind of gentle parkway for the pleasure of the increasing population of the area, now very ill served by open spaces and parkland. It is sad that such a fine example of post-war design should be so ignored and neglected. Both this main east-west road, and the road running south from it, forming the western boundary of the factory proper, are now very noisy, but the atmosphere within the grounds is remarkably tranquil - the heavy boundary planting excludes both sight and sound.

There is one visual break in this green wall, and through it one can see Asolo and its old fort; and in the foreground there is a low man-made hillock - another allusion - which was designed to display a piece of sculpture, now gone. There are other visual surprises and delights in this landscape; for

example, a large shallow pond with a few water lilies and a great bank of feathery bamboo, a simple but sumptuous effect. But the abiding impression is one of harmony and a relaxed, easy character that enhances the tranquility.

Plant List

<i>Acer palmatum</i>	<i>Liriodendron tulipifera</i>
<i>Albizzia julibrissin</i>	<i>Lonicera pileata</i>
<i>Bambusa viridi-glaucescens</i>	(<i>Chamaecerasus pileata</i>)
(<i>mitis</i>)	<i>Mahonia aquifolia</i>
<i>Berberis verruculosa</i>	<i>Nerium oleander</i>
<i>Cedrus atlantica</i>	<i>Osmanthus delavayi</i> (?)
<i>Celtis australis</i>	<i>Parthenocissus tricuspidata</i>
<i>Cotoneaster sp.</i>	<i>Pittosporum tobira</i>
<i>Cotoneaster franchetii</i>	<i>Potentilla fruticosa</i>
<i>Cotoneaster lacteus</i> (?)	<i>Prunus laurocerasus</i>
<i>Deutzia scabra</i>	<i>Punica granatum</i>
<i>Diospyros</i>	<i>Pyrus</i>
<i>Feijoa sellowiana</i>	<i>Quercus ilex</i>
<i>Festuca ovina glauca</i>	<i>Rubus Burbank</i>
<i>Forsythia intermedia</i> (?)	<i>Rhus typhina</i>
<i>Hedera helix</i>	<i>Rhus typhina laciniata</i>
<i>Hibiscus syriacus</i>	<i>Rosa 'Mermaid'</i>
<i>Hypericum calycinum</i>	<i>Rosa chinensis mutabilis</i>
<i>Kerria japonica</i>	<i>Salix alba</i>
<i>Lagerstroemia indica</i>	<i>Salix babylonica</i>
<i>Ligustrum ovalifolium</i>	<i>Wisteria sinensis</i>
(<i>sinensis</i>)	

**The names in brackets appear on the Porcinai studio plan.*

Note on the planting

Although the plant list is quite long, this is misleading. The key feature of the planting is its clarity and simplicity. The hedges are long and of one species only for each hedge, generally small-leaved privet. There are tall hedges of *Prunus laurocerasus*, a generous use of *Lonicera pileata*, and a great bank of *Quercus ilex* to the south. These hedges make up the framework of the garden, along with a few tree species, and the bank of *Bambusa viridi-glaucescens* that makes such a graceful and rich background to the lake in the north-west corner.

The two most common trees are *Lagerstroemia*, the small tree planted out in the form of an orchard; and *Albizzia julibrissin*, exotically flowering, which is used for shade and colour in the eastern third of the grounds. The other trees such as *Liriodendron tulipifera* provide occasional accents, but they are never dominant, and although they provide seasonal colour, the garden (or rather,

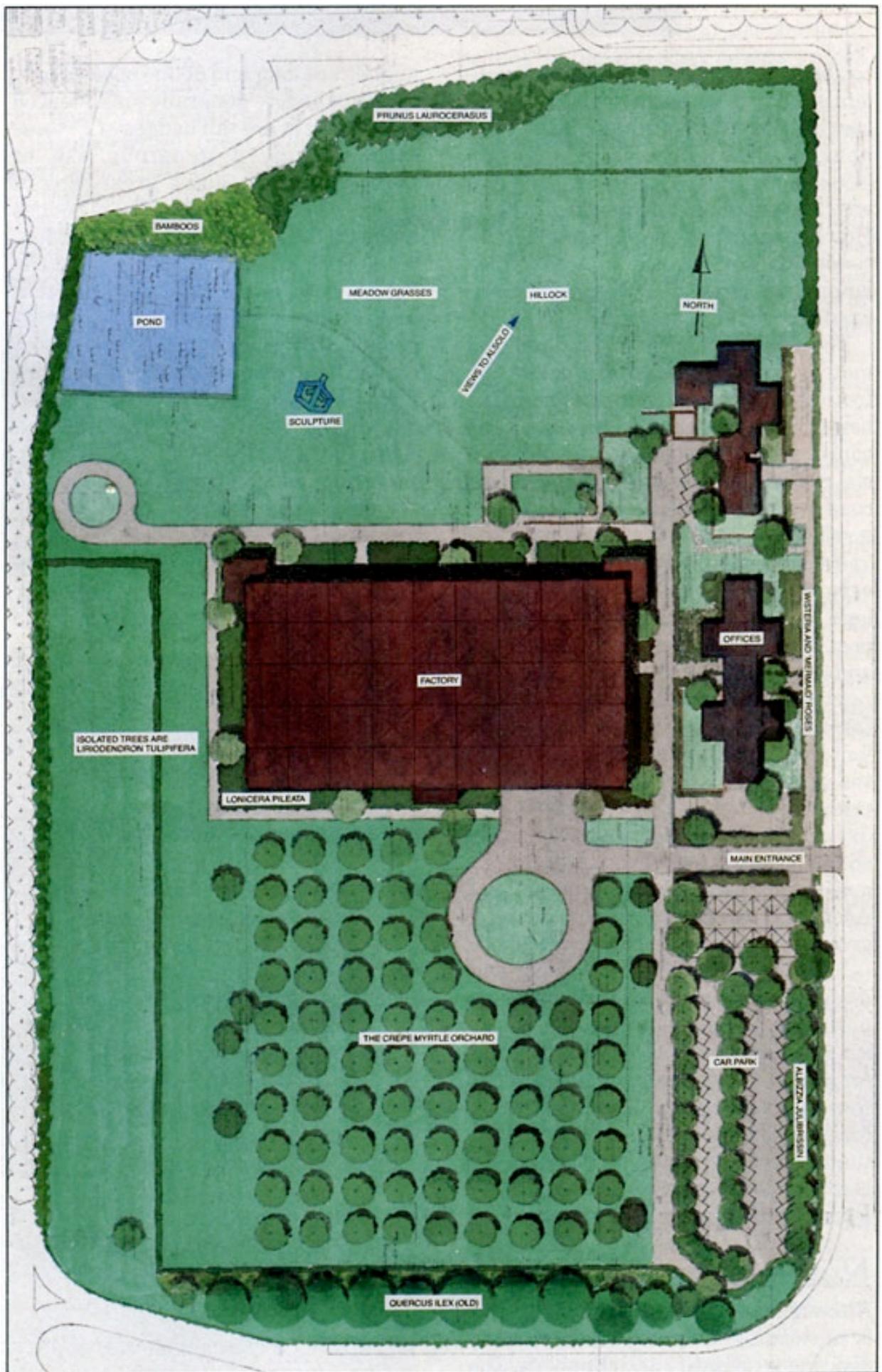
landscape) `works' through its subtle control of spatial experiences, and the harmony of its varying greens, rather than by attempting to call attention to itself with garish colour, unlike nearly all its more recent industrial neighbours. The effect is extraordinarily peaceful, without ostentation or preciousness; the control of levels to exclude the external noise of a busy neighbourhood is well thought out and unobtrusively efficient.

The plan prepared in Studio Porcinai shows work begun in 1966, and is stamped to show that it was varied or further refined twice in November 1966, six times in 1967 and twice in 1968. The last date shown is 22.2.1968. The work as implemented follows this plan fairly closely.

The list of plants used is given for several reasons: it is historically interesting, in that it gives Porcinai's typical palette; horticulturally interesting in that there is no supplementary watering after establishment, so these plants are more or less self-maintaining in that climatic zone, which has hot and fairly dry summers, but quite cold winters, with occasional snow on the ground - roughly equivalent to Hobart; and also of design interest, in that this is a `naturalistic' landscape in Porcinai's terms, accepting exotic plants, as Europe has done for centuries, but ones that are ecologically compatible. This is a very different understanding of `naturalistic' to that generally accepted in Australia.



The gravelled car-park with Albizzia julibrissin, very naturalistic.



Acknowledgements

I 'discovered' this industrial landscape in the company of two good friends from Bassano del Grappa, Claudio Gasperotto and Dante Andretta. They were my mentors in the Veneto, and I owe much to their knowledge of and enthusiasm for all the best productions of that endangered treasure-house. Andretta located the Porcinai studio map for me in Florence, and organised the photographic illustrations, which are the work of Image International, Tombolo, PD.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The accompanying coloured plan began as a photo-copied version of the Porcinai studio plan in black and white, with indecipherable lettering. We hasten to add that we are very grateful to the author and those who helped him, for the plan was essential to the article, and such plans are difficult to obtain at any time. However, we thought it desirable to aid the readers' comprehension by converting the plan to a 'colorised' version. We also added the *Quercus ilex*, which we couldn't find on the original, but which dominate the southern boundary.

There are some risks in such a procedure. No one seems to like 'colorised' old movies, and we suspect historians would criticise us for tampering with Porcinai's plan. We must also warn that, because the plan was hard to read, we may have got some of the details wrong.