



PIETRO PORCINAI

**ITALIAN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT
1910-1986**

BY GEORGE SEDDON

In 1986 the Italian Association of Landscape Architects brought out a special number of their journal to honour Pietro Porcinai in the year of his death. The publication(1) is in three sections. The first (Dagli Scritti) assembles a series of short articles written by Porcinai himself over two years, which give a good sample of his thinking, and I have drawn from this collection in the sketch that follows. The second section (Dalle Opere) lists his major works, and illustrates 21 of them with plans, photographs and a brief written account. The third section, fairly short, is a sample of articles written about Porcinai, of which the most useful is by Ian Firth in *Landscape Architecture* March/April 1984, and the least useful by Diana Bell from *The Oxford Companion to Gardens* 1986, a work which does no credit to a great press.

1. *Associazione Italiana degli Architetti del Paesaggio (1986). 'Pietro Porcinai - architetto del giardino e del paesaggio' Architettura del Paesaggio Notiziario AIAP October 1986, No.10, 127 pp.*

PORCINAI was born in 1910, auspiciously in one of the most eminent historical gardens in all of Italy, the Villa Gamberaia outside Florence, where his father was the head gardener. Porcinai grew up there, and thus acquired a strong sense of design and historic continuity, along with much day-to-day experience of horticultural and maintenance procedures at a high level of practical skill. When he decided to train professionally as a landscape architect, he had to leave Italy to do so, since there was not then - and is not now to this day - a full professional course at the undergraduate level, although there is now a graduate program under way at the University of Genoa led by Professor Calcagna.

So he began with the architecture program at the University of Florence, but added the subjects he needed, such as botany and ecology. Later, he went to Germany, to study and work. Again later in his career, he was a visitor at the Institut für Landschaftspflege und Naturschutz at the University of Hanover, one of the most comprehensive faculties of landscape planning and design in the world, with departments that cover the whole range from the natural sciences such as soil science through ecology and horticulture, landscape history, and so to design and social and physical planning. Porcinai was well trained, and in a way it was fortunate that he had to leave Italy, as it translated him early into the international scene.

But his early training was equally important, and it guided his ultimate choice of location, the Villa Rondinelli; built to the instructions of Cosimo I, of the Medici family, who ruled Florence in the 16th century. The Villa Rondinelli lies just below the better known Villa Medici, which it was built to serve as a 'foresteria' or guest house. The site is superb, on the southern flank of that steep hillside just below Fiesole, looking down on the towers of Florence, the great central dome of its cathedral, and the valley of the Arno west towards Pisa. This is one of the great landscapes of the world, rich in natural beauty and in history, enhanced everywhere by the hand of man.

The villa itself and its setting are a typical example of the Tuscan villa, simple as a farm-house, with a series of terraces with olives, tall cypress and *Quercus ilex* linking the gardens with the natural forests of the neighbouring mountains. Within the walls, decked with wisteria and climbing roses, which do so well in Tuscany, there is a 17th century grotto and a 'secret garden' with box hedges, flowers, and a fountain. The Villa Rondinelli became Porcinai's headquarters and his dream. The dream was to make it again what it had been in the 16th century, when l'Accademia Platonica had met there, men like Pico della Mirandola strolling in the gardens, philosophising, finding it a source of

spiritual enrichment. So Porcinai too made it a meeting place, and was host to guests from Italy and from all corners of the globe.

In this informal way, his ambitions were realised, but he had hoped for something more - he had the accommodation and meeting rooms built, and had hopes for an Institute where not only landscape architects but students, architects, painters, writers, musicians - a Renaissance crew of creative spirits - could meet and work. It was a good dream, but it never achieved adequate funding. It had much in common, however, with that of Doxiadis, who succeeded in recreating a platonic academy of creative spirits (not always platonic in their relationships) in Athens some years later.

The Villa Rondinelli was nevertheless the nerve centre of landscape design in Italy, and Porcinai based his very extensive practice there. Outside his own country Porcinai is the best known by far of Italian landscape architects. In an interview given in 1985 (to Alessandra Burigana, AD, March) he claimed, as he was fully entitled to do, that the sun never set on his gardens ("ho avuto occasione di lavorare dal Circolo Polare Artico all' Equatore: posso quindi affermare che sui miei giardini non tramonta mai il sole" - *I have had occasion to work from the Arctic Circle to the Equator: I can therefore affirm that on my gardens the sun never sets*"). He worked a good deal in Saudi Arabia, Iran, right around the Mediterranean, also in Canada, the USA, and Costa Rica - although never, to my knowledge, in the southern hemisphere.



The swimming pool at the villa di Rovero, S. Zenone degli Ezzelini. *Cortaderia* and *Miscanthus* are the background grasses; the other plants are *Rosa 'Clair Marin'*, *Hibiscus palustris*, and *Iris Kaempferi* (white) - a simple but elegant composition

Naturally, however, most of his work was in the Italy he understood and loved so well. It cannot be said that he made a lasting impression on it. The criticisms he made of current Italian garden practice from the late 1930s onwards are still relevant, and the lessons he tried to teach are largely unlearned, other than among a cultivated few. Yet they were simple lessons, based on the strengths of the summer-dry landscapes of rural Tuscany and on its ancient traditions.



The driveway, Villa di Rovero, with cypresses.

He loved the cypress, and wrote a splendid article in its praise, showing almost casually how it should be used: a vertical accent against the horizontal, or used in a gentle curve to define the direction of a road, following the outside of the curve. Plant it young - otherwise it may lose its lower branches on transplanting. Choose a good 'male' form (i.e. *Cupressus sempervirens fastigiata*). Plant it with the olive, whose grey-green canopy contrasts and yet harmonises so well with the black-green of the cypress. Plant it also with the *Quercus ilex*, and *Arbutus unedo*, and *Rhamnus alaternus* and the two common pines of Italy, *Pinus pinea* and *P. maritima*. On no account, however, should one mix any of these with the fir, which is as out of place with the cypress as a Swiss chalet in Tuscany - although both, sad to say, can be seen there today.

Cedrus deodara and *Magnolia grandiflora* are equally out of place in most Mediterranean settings, although both are now immensely popular (p.20). They grow well enough in the Veneto and Lombardy, once forested for the most part with oak and maple, long since gone, and now littered with sombre conifers, most of which, and especially the dull blue-grey of the Arizona Cypress, are hideously alien in this other Italian landscape, so very green. As Porcinai notes, the only conifer that associates naturally with the deciduous trees of south and central Europe is the yew, which goes well even with the fresh green of the lime (*Tilia europaea*). Even the plane which lines so many of the roads in the Veneto is mildly out of place, where there was once a fresher green. The planes were planted under the rule of Napoleon, a symbol of the dusty white roads of southern France.

Thus Porcinai urges respect for regional character, and for the science of phytosociology as the underpinning of a landscape aesthetic. In this he was well trained, with that solid foundation in the botanical sciences, soil science and geomorphology that is characteristic of his experience in Germany.

He was especially contemptuous of current garden taste in Italy, remarking that since the 18th century Italians had created no garden worthy of their past traditions, while the gardens of today are crammed with arbitrary and ill assorted flower beds, 'little oval beds, round ones, unspeakable shapes, broken up by tortured paths and pathways, writhing like snakes in capricious and meaningless curves' (p14). There are also some geometrically regular gardens like those of old, 'but never succeeding in recreating the spirit, the atmosphere, the character of the great gardens of the past'. Porcinai himself did not attempt to reproduce the past - he used it as a source of inspiration to design gardens and landscapes that met the needs of today.

Simplicity was his trademark; he was much closer in spirit, among American landscape architects, to Thomas Church for example, than to a heavily interventionist-constructionist designer like Lawrence Halprin. He never over-designed, and often persuaded his client to do something much simpler than

the client had in mind, although this then greatly reduced his fee. A classic example is the memorial to the three victims of a 'plane crash: Enrico Mattei, the American journalist; William MacHale, and the pilot Imerio Bertuzzi. Porcinai made of the 80m2 site in the open fields on flat rather swampy ground, a memorial of utter simplicity, devoid of rhetoric and bombast. He made a low mound around the site to define it from the surrounding fields, marked the precise site of the crash with great blocks of rough hewn stone, in the middle, three *Quercus ilex* and a stone stele recording the names. There is a modest car-park for visitors, screened by a tall hedge of evergreens. Nothing more, and the simple upkeep - the grass is scythed a couple times a year.



The Brion-Vega industrial site.

The pond with water-lilies and the bamboo in the background are very naturalistic in this swampy ground and illustrate Porcinai's 'ecopark' approach.



A roadside view in the Veneto, typical of the plains of Lombardy, with a row of poplars leading to a distant villa, and the meadow flowers along the verge.

Porcinai respected and tried to conserve this rustic landscape.

Porcinai often used the 'look of the countryside'. At the Brion tomb at S. Vito d. Altivole, he had planned a rough meadow of grass and marguerites rather than the sown lawn that is there now, and at one of his finest industrial estates, the Brion-Vega factory, originally used to make electrical goods, there is still such a rough meadow, planted geometrically with *Lagerstroemia indica* raised as standards (common in Italy) so that they are in the form of an orchard. Two old pear trees from a former orchard have been left to live out their lives, and the meadow and orchard are links with pre-industrial land-use.

To the obsessively neat, the meadow may seem untidy. To me, it seems relaxed. But outside the walls, that Germanic confusion between the neat and disciplined with the beautiful reigns supreme in today's Veneto. Porcinai was not like that. He had farm values, a more friendly man-environment culture from the Tuscan past. He was not at all opposed to the use of flowers and used them well in enclosed spaces, but in the open landscape he relied for his best effects on form and on chiaroscuro, the play of light and shade, and the shades

of green, so often defined by the black-green and the silver-green of cypress and olive.

His enclosed spaces were oases, often shutting out the external world - he points out the etymology of 'garden' in English and the Germanic languages, with a root meaning of shelter and protection - and nearly always focused on water, either a well, a fountain, or a swimming pool. He was rather famous for his swimming pools, as much in demand, partly of course because the wealthy clients who could afford him wanted pools, but also because he integrated them so beautifully into the landscape. In this, too, he had much in common with Tommy Church in California.

There is a pool of great beauty, designed by Porcinai, in the gardens of the Villa di Rovero, S. Zenone degli Ezzelini, which is on the line of gentle hills that marks the northern boundary of the great flat plain of Lombardy (la pianura padana), just above the road from Bassano del Grappa and Montebelluna, north of Padova. The pool is sheltered on three sides, to the north by a pavilion, east and west by trees and shrubs; there is also some simple planting near the pool including two grasses (*Miscanthus* sp. and *Cortaderia sellowiana*); *Rosa 'Clair Matin'*; *Hibiscus palustris*; *Anemone hupehensis*; *Iris kaempferi*. The pool itself is angled to the south-east, the water is a turquoise blue, and it literally meets the horizon, as it is built on a steep hill slope. The water just overflows at the lip, which is how this effect is created, caught below in a tiled gutter or channel and recycled.

But Porcinai worked at many levels. He designed a 'Club Med' village near Cantanzaro in the south. He designed several important industrial landscapes, the Brion-Vega works is one example, and the new quarters for Mondadori at Segrate near Milan is another - he calls it a 'parco ecologico', and it again shows his talent for simplicity, the main elements being a very large, almost rectangular sheet of water, partly surrounding the buildings, closed by an immense plantation of poplars, with a natural and spontaneous understorey of grasses and shrubs beneath the trees and at the water's edge. He also worked on the autostrada that runs from Verona to Austria and Munich through the Brenner Pass, and wrote often, angrily, regretfully, that so few of the highways in Italy, so well engineered, were so little landscaped, citing the care taken by her neighbours the Swiss, the Austrians and the Germans.

In short, although enriched by tradition, he was not bound by it, and was always conscious of today's needs, searching for new ways of meeting them. More than any one else in Italy, he preached the need for 'il verde', green spaces, in the cities of today, and by this he did not mean elaborate parks and gardens, but trees, grass, open space for everyone, where they lived and where they worked. He showed how it might be done in an affordable way, but he convinced few civic and state agencies of this need, so that today's Italy has perhaps the poorest provision of 'il verde' anywhere in Europe, still living on the capital of the past.



Field marguerites, which Porcinai liked to use in rough meadow in preference to lawn - although his clients often chose the latter.