The Phytoremediation Garden

G124 is the identification code for a room in Palazzo Giustianni in the Senate assigned to Renzo Piano, architect and senator for life. Immediately on his appointment, he decided he would give a new meaning to his public office by initiating a major project for Italy: the suburbs, the city of the future, the city we will leave to our children. These projects are for the Repair of the Suburbs. The word “repair” recalls the old practice of taking special care to avoid wastefulness, to mend the divisions that split our community, a care that heals the wounds of living conditions. This experiment explains how small and timely interventions can attempt to begin the process of urban and social renewal, with the spirit of providing the necessary conditions for these to increase and become autonomous. G124 is a working group made up of young architects (all under 35 and paid with Senator Piano’s salary), who are coordinated by tutors and assisted by other professional figures (among them sociologists, anthropologists, economists, critics, urbanists etc.); they have the task of producing studies for this repair of a suburb in one year of work.

In 2016, day by day for over a year the G124 team explored Marghera, gathering ideas, suggestions and desires. It visited the length and breadth of the area in search of sparks and positive experiences that could trigger a virtuous cycle of rebirth. Above all, the group listened, and in this way planted the seeds of repair: architectural in substance, but also social.

The goal of the year’s work developed along two parallel tracks. One track led to the renewal of some of the town’s strategic sites, starting with the former Edison Volta vocational high school, which had been left abandoned for nine years but is now home to a municipal gymnasium, a Caritas dormitory, and 12 cultural associations that bring together young people for language courses and workshops. Of a total surface area of approximately 5,000 square metres, 2,000 have already been restored. The rest is still in a state of decay, but it may become an important cultural centre, not only for Marghera but also for other nearby areas.

Then there is the environmental challenge. Again, land recovery is a possibility by means of small phytoremediation processes. These decontaminate the soil by planting new “seeds of life” in the form of vegetation that is capable of stimulating regeneration. All of this can only be achieved through a close relationship with local citizens, which entails listening and a continuous exchange of views. This is the basis on which the ORMA (Officina Riuso Marghera, Marghera Reuse Workshop) project was founded, one of the first efforts that G124 carried out in the area. Marghera Reuse Workshop has become a coordinating network for associations working in the area, a new tool for active citizenship, community development and the restoration of unused public assets.

The first planning action held indispensable was to map common assets in a state of decay and abandonment that the community considers to be potential starting points for urban regeneration. This is how the photographic project “Imagine... Frame... Photograph” arose an invitation to use photography to document “renewable” Marghera. G124 group distributed cardboard frames among the residents to use for framing an area or building that could be transformed to increase the quality of residential or commercial life. The photographs taken were then collected in a photo archive that was testimony to the residents’ widespread participation in this first example of empowerment to improve the quality of their own urban environment. Indeed, great attention was paid to the residual areas whose owners are often unknown, buildings that by now have entered the collective imagination as abandoned places or neglected green spaces, yet are potentially ideal for hosting constructive public functions. In short, elements within the urban fabric that often go unnoticed and on which planning attention needs to be focused. The use of photography was further augmented by shared mapping, presented during “Participation Boulevard”, an event organised by the Marghera Free and Thinking Committee with the goal of presenting the current state of Maghera’s associations to the citizenry. During the event, G124 group set up a prepared satellite map of the Municipality, which was used as a base for inserting coloured pins to indicate the common assets under investigation. Citizens who were present at the “Participation Boulevard” also had the opportunity to express their opinion by leaving a pin on the map, and thus contribute to building an image of the position and number of areas and buildings the community would like to transform.

LARGE-SCALE CLASSIFICATION OF MARSHERA

A Peri-urban agricultural areas
B Industrial zone
C G124’s area of intervention
   The peripheral zone of Marghera district, close to the harbour and the industrial area
D Railway

Marghera is one of the reclamation sites of national interest

PROJECT PLAN IN URBAN CONTEXT

1 An abandoned municipal area in need of environmental remediation
2 The Phytoremediation Garden, educational experimentation
3 Pre-existing communal gardens
4 The abandoned San Francesco d’Assisi school, a potential cultural centre for the south of Marghera
5 Bottesino tram stop
6 New natural agro, a collective space with a special focus on cultural and musical activities