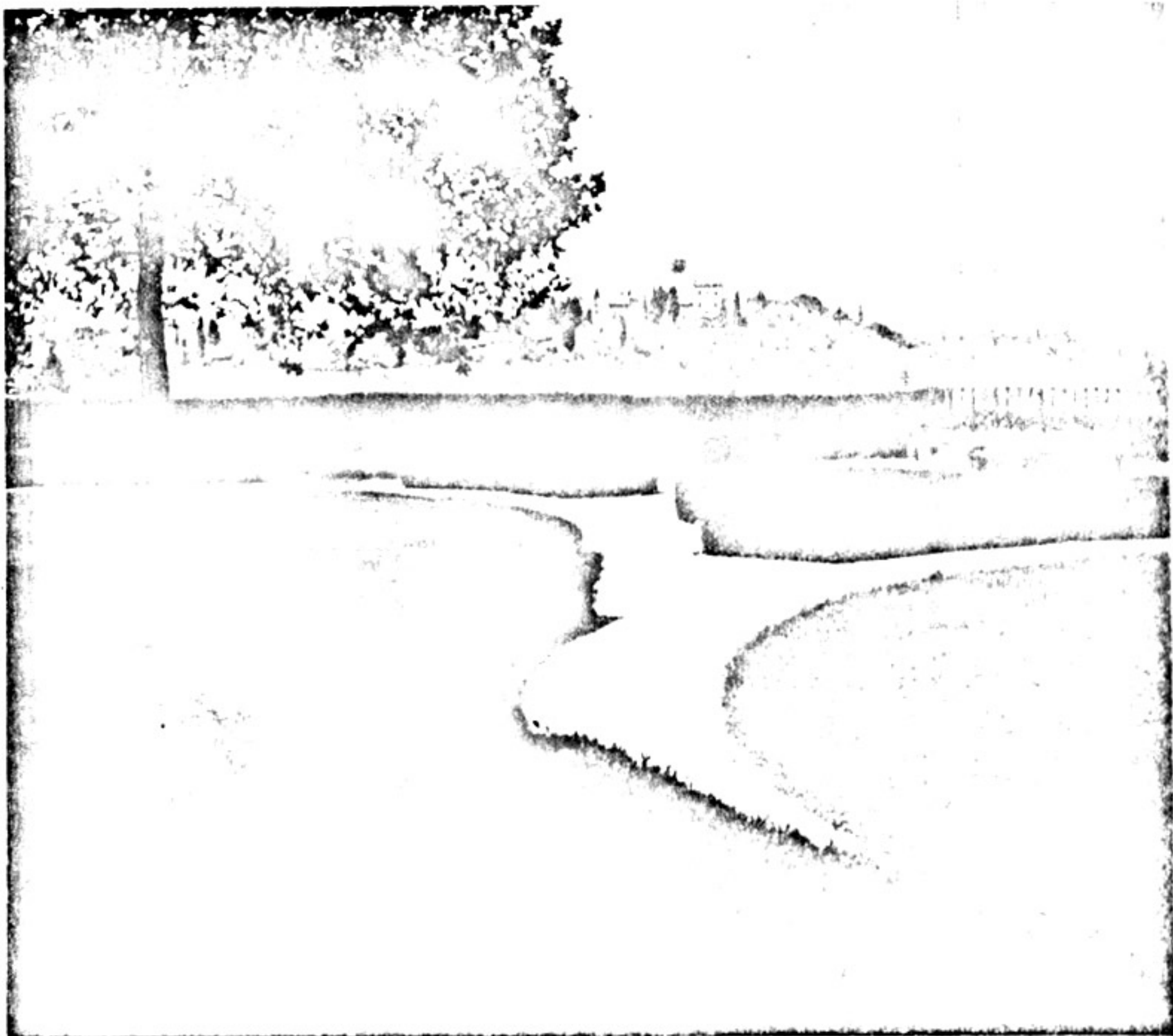


PORCINAI'S RENAISSANCE OF THE ITALIAN GARDEN



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Villa Il Roseto: the "giardino pensile" has a view of Florence, thanks to Porcinai's use of a garage for its base. The shell-dome construction directly influenced the patterns of grass, boxwood and plane trees atop thin, thicker and column support areas, respectively.

PROFESSOR PORCINAI'S STUDIO. The Villa Rondinelli, lies below the gardens of the Villa Medici on the steep slopes of Fiesole. The Villa Rondinelli was a Medici guest house in the 16th century and possesses a fine nymphaeum by Bernardo Buontalenti. Below the villa, Porcinai has reconstructed a *giardino segreto* around a small fountain and pool. In the gardens above the villa, a series of greenhouse studios are built into the terraced slope, offering spectacular views of Florence.

The villa is an appropriate setting for Porcinai's successful practice. Over the past 30 years, he has led a renaissance in the art of garden design in Italy. But the villa also represents the disappointment in his professional life. The lines of greenhouse studios stand empty; the great educational project for which they were built is unrealized.

Each morning, Porcinai's arrival at his studio is marked by a series of verbal explosions. Three or four employees — two architects, a student landscape architect and an administrative assistant — are already at work. The professor greets them with a series of questions and exhortations in rapid fire. At the age of 73, despite a heart problem, he runs his international practice with a mixture of authority and charm. Landscape architecture, he maintains, is a high calling requiring rigorous training and uncompromising standards. "The future needs architects... who are courageous upholders of the *arche* and who, armed with all aspects of the *tekne*, operate as authentic masters."

The Practice

Porcinai's education in landscape architecture began early, for his father was in charge of the gardens at the Villa Gamberaia. As a youth, he studied horticulture at technical school and after graduation worked in Germany and France. The first design commission came when he was 18 years old — the creation of an "Italian terrace" at Furstenstein Silesia for the Prince von Plesz. The ambition to become a designer led him to enroll as a mature student in the University of Florence architecture program. There he substituted botany and ecology for engineering, adapting the program to meet his requirements as a landscape architect. He began to practice as a garden architect in 1935, with aristocratic Italian and foreign clients such as King Zog of Albania.

The postwar economic reconstruction of Italy produced a new moneyed class of industrial entrepreneurs, textiles manufacturers of televisions, textiles and soap, and executives in growing petroleum and technology empires. These became Porcinai's clients. He contributed articles to *Domus* and other architectural magazines. The Italian practice of holding design competitions for public projects provided more visibility for his expanding practice. It was a logical step from designing private gardens for industrialists to site planning for factories and offices; notable examples include the Mondadori center, Segrate Milan (in collaboration with Oscar Niemeyer) and the Brion Vega plant.



Casa Fioratti's stone table invites the owner, an antiques dealer, and his guests to sit in the shade. At the top of the steps, a sculpture garden for display.

Caselle d'Asolo, Venice. A growing reputation for swimming pool design led to commissions from hotels, including the Hotel des Bains, Venice Lido and resort complexes such as the Club Mediterranee in southern Italy.

In the 1970s, public parks and urban design projects became an important part of Porcinai's practice, with an increasing number of commissions outside Italy. Major projects included plans for parks in four Saudi Arabian cities (in collaboration with Albini, Helg and Partners), the Place Beaubourg in front of the Pompidou Centre in Paris (as consultant to Piano and Rogers), a plan for Parco

Sempione in Milan (with Vignato), and Parco Favorita in Palermo, Sicily. Recent projects include a quarry reclamation scheme for Italcementi in Trentino (1979), the pool and grounds of the Sheraton and E.U.R. Rome (opened in 1983) and a town park for Medina, Saudi Arabia (in progress). But the focus of the practice remains private gardens. Of several hundred projects realized over the past 30 years, more than half are gardens.

Garden Philosophy

Porcinai makes no apology for concentrating on gardens; on the contrary, he is critical of landscape architects who have abandoned the garden, thereby creating a void into which environmental sculptors and other artists have stepped. The garden, Porcinai argues, occupies a unique place in humanity's thought. "Philosophy, art history, architecture, ecology, psychoanalysis and anthropology question each other on the profound significance of the garden."

In his book on the history of the idea of the garden (*Giardini d'Occidente e d'Oriente*, written with Attilio Mordini in 1966), Porcinai distinguishes two ideas represented by the Greek terms *gortos* and *paradeisos*. "Gortos" is the productive garden, the focus of horticultural science and of continuing importance throughout history. "Paradeisos" is the garden as symbol, a place for meditation and relaxation — an idea recognized in some cultures but neglected in others, including our own. Porcinai quotes the following from Italian philosopher Rosario Assunto: "Hostility to beauty, a consequence of the adoration of utility, is characteristic of our time, in which we produce to destroy, and destroy to again produce, refusing the enjoyment of contemplation which doesn't destroy because it doesn't produce, but creates."

During the Florentine Renaissance, the philosophers of the *Accademia Platonica* strolled in the "Orti Oricellari." It is the atmosphere of tranquility and well-being in those Tuscan gardens that Porcinai seeks to recreate. He does so by using similar patterns, garden rooms open onto distant views, sunlit spaces are linked by dark passages, a structure of evergreens frames bursts of color, and water splashes in fountains and pools. But Porcinai's designs are not copies of the past as were Victorian Italian gardens. Instead, his gardens represent a rethinking of the Tuscan tradition.



At Casa Servadio, the water garden is a living contrast to a swimming pool beside the house.

to meet the requirements of the 20th century.

Porcinai's work defies neat summary. Each garden reflects the individuality of site and client, but it is possible to recognize consistent themes. Three of the most important are: the relationship between garden and wider landscapes, the use of natural plant associations and the integration of the swimming pool into the garden. Porcinai's solutions will be examined in a selection of four gardens. Three are in or near Florence, the other is near Perugia in Umbria.

Villa "Il Roseto"

This garden, designed in 1965, is one of Porcinai's most famous works. Designed for a historic villa, the boldness of the engineering solution rivals great works of the past. In the Quattrocento, the layout of a villa garden was ordered into a rectilinear geometry by theories of proportion and perspective. On steep slopes, a series of *giardini pensili* were created by the construction of massive retaining walls. From each terrace, views opened to the wider landscape in accordance with Alberti's principles. Porcinai revives this tradition but adapts it to mid-20th-century functionalism.

The site for the new garden was a piazza, used primarily for parking, with a large holm oak (*Quercus Ilex*) but few other plants. It offered some views, but to the east—away from Florence. Porcinai designed a *giardino pensile* approximately four meters above the original piazza. The garden provides a 360° vista including the roofs and towers of Florence and Brunelleschi's dome. Beneath the garden is a covered court for about 20 cars, but here is no ordinary garage. One enters through a vine-covered pergola into a space that owes something to Gaudi's Parc Guell. The roof is a series of shallow domes formed in mass concrete. The pebble mosaic

floor reflects this pattern of circles and the free-standing outerwalls are curvilinear. It is a space suitable for lavish entertainments and can be used as an elegant ballroom. At the far end, a fountain plays at the bottom of a well of light filtered by strands of ivy. A suspended octagonal stair of stone and steel leads to the garden terrace and an entrance to the villa (relocated to this upper level). Here, circles of grass and sweeping curves of box follow a formal geometry, but one which responds to the underlying structure. Two plane trees planted above supporting columns frame the views. To one side, the old holm oak breaks through the structure in a grill designed to accommodate growth.

This is a very aristocratic garden, a *giardino pensile* with a formal geometry and distant views. But many of Porcinai's commissions come from clients who have purchased a farmhouse for a country residence rather than an aristocratic villa. For the *casa colonica*, the relationship between garden and wider landscape has been rethought.

Casa Servadio

This garden, designed in 1975, incorporates many features typical of Porcinai's approach to the *casa colonica*. Here, instead of standing aloof, the geometry of the architectural elements has been interwoven with the freer patterns of the agricultural landscape.

The house, a traditional form with open loggia, stands on the crest of a low ridge lined with terraces of olives. Around the house sweeps an open lawn, falling to olive groves on two sides. On one side of the ridge the falling ground allows an entry and garage court to be sunk below the lawn. A tunnel provides access to the house: it emerges in the center of the ground floor. On the other side, the slope conceals a gymnasium below a grassy terrace. A swimming pool is linked to the back of the house by a glass-enclosed terrace that is shaded by tropical vines. The pool, a simple rectangle, passes below sliding glass into the open air, where it joins a water garden curving between olives and tamarisks. At a distance from the house, a tennis court is reached through olive groves. The fence around this court is suspended from cables in catenary curves to complement the view to the hills beyond.

Porcinai uses several strategies to integrate architectural elements with

agricultural patterns. He modifies the rectilinearity of tennis court, pool and terrace, while giving a certain formality to the olive groves. The latter are seen as sculpture gardens, gnarled forms silhouetted against undulating turf. With great ingenuity he uses slopes to conceal some elements, linking them to the center below ground. This recalls the Tuscan preference for a secret entry to the garden instead of a Roman baroque stair. Security was and is an important consideration, but more important is a love of drama and surprise. At the Casa Servadio the stairs to the gymnasium are concealed behind an aquarium on the swimming pool terrace.

Casa Fioratti

This garden also is developed around an old farmhouse and retains ancient olive trees. It was designed in 1972 and illustrates Porcinai's interest in plant ecology. For his inspiration here, he reaches beyond the agricultural landscape to the native plant association of uncultivated land—the *macchia*. A study of the *macchia* reveals the "happy marriages" among plants, but the occasion is not to be copied: plant materials, like building materials, must gain new life in the hands of the architect.

One enters the Casa Fioratti from a narrow road screened by a high hedge of holm oaks. Beside the house a terrace provides a setting for the owner's collections of antique marbles and for outdoor dining. A path of



Porcinai's Medici-era studio reflects his own nature: easy-going and relaxed, but representative of a heritage of design excellence.

stepping stones set in grass leads down between banks of germander (*Teucrium fruticans*) and lavender into the olive grove. There, the terraces are separated by banks of fragrant shrubs, gray foliage contrasts with the bright carpet of grass.

This is no longer the *podere* of a peasant farmer, but the garden possesses a rural charm. One is surprised, therefore, to find hidden within the grove, on a terrace of terra-cotta, a swimming pool with a view to Florence overlooking that from the terrace of the Villa Gamberaia.

A Dependence of the Villa Palmieri

Water in fountains, cascades and pools occupied the focal point of the Renaissance garden. In the modern garden, the swimming pool provides relief from summer heat, but too often it appears an alien element, a hygienic tank separated from the rest of the garden. Porcinai wants to integrate the swimming pool into the garden and to end its isolation. Biochemistry is at the heart of the problem. Porcinai opposes conventional chlorination, preferring electrolytic processes, and is interested in the development of new disinfectant and filtration systems. Although the recirculating water in the pool must be kept separate from other water bodies in the garden, Porcinai always provides a visual connection. Cascades tumbling down hill-sides appear to enter his pools, or lily ponds extend their area. Plants are brought as close as possible to the edge of the pool. Also important is a continuity of hard surfaces: the rim of the pool matches adjacent paving; handrails are avoided or treated as sculptural elements. Steps are shallow, inviting entry. The forms of his pools are as varied as the sites and the clients for whom they are designed, but the refinement of these details is his trademark.

In the small courtyard of a dependence of the Villa Palmieri, the pool is a simple rectangle occupying about one-third of the space. Between the house and pool, a surface of white pebbles reflects the light. A path of gray slate runs to the pool steps, and on each side an arbor in the shape of a peacock, overgrown with ivy, provides shade. Sacred lotus (*Nelumbo speciosa*) and umbrella plant (*Cyperus alternifolius*) line the edge. This side of the pool is surfaced in white pebbles; the other edges are in gray slate. A narrow path separates one end of the pool from a lily pond, beside which stands a dining table of polished slate. The table can be screened by a canvas sail suspended from a corner of the house. On the far side of the swimming pool, a bank of

bamboo encloses the garden and hides a sunken garage and service area beyond. This bank continues at the far end of the pool, above a suite of buried changing rooms. The use of dwarf bamboo (*Arundinaria pumila*) allows a view to the hills.

The garden is an elegant composition of rectangles of water, plants and paving. On a hot summer day, it has a luminous stillness, awaiting the imminent splash.

Villa Rondinelli

In 1979, the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts awarded Porcinai its environmental medal. The unusual citation, which referred to Porcinai's lost battles, pleased him. He prefers to



The roof of the Villa Palmieri underground service area is a garden, featuring a pool edged on either side with lotus and bamboo. The bonsai adds an oriental touch.

talk about what he has failed to achieve than about his successes.

Porcinai strongly believes in the need to apply the lessons of the garden to the ecology of the city.

"Most architects have abandoned — out of cowardice or for money — the world of things built in harmony with nature, giving way to the birth of ugly ville and horrible suburbs. It is the task of the landscape architect to find a way of remedying this. But it requires a landscape architect who knows how to think before acting."

For many years, Porcinai has been an outspoken critic of the modern city. In an article entitled "Urbanite

de L'urbanisme" (*L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, February 1965), he attacked the arrogant imposition of architectural theory on the city. But he does not confine his criticism to the architectural profession; he is prepared to indict modern society for the twin evils of materialism and collectivism. (For example, see the proceedings of the Eleventh Biennial Congress of IFLA, Montreal 1968.) The solution must lie in a process of education — in his words, "a task of evangelization." Frustrated by architects' domination of design education in the Italian universities, Porcinai resolved in the 1960s to establish an educational center at the Villa Rondinelli. The villa would become in the 20th century what the neighboring Villa Medici was in the Quattrocento — a meeting place for artists and philosophers. The new studios were constructed in the villa garden for this program.

Unfortunately, the dream faded in the 1970s. It was frustrated by the conspiratorial nature of Italian politics, which seems to have changed remarkably little since the days of the Medici. Although Porcinai had acquired clients among the new elite, he also had made enemies. A period of enforced exile, during which he opened an office in Beirut, undermined the financial basis of the educational center.

The ambitions have not been realized, but each year the professor welcomes visitors (particularly students) from various parts of the world. They come to see his works, but he is anxious to explain his ideas. "The meaning of the 'Cantico delle Creature' of St. Francis should be explained in all departments of architecture in the world; so should Virgil, Homer, Dante and Shakespeare for their marvelous descriptions of nature and of man as gardener."

At these times, as Porcinai and his guests stroll along its terraces, the Villa Rondinelli fulfills its true function as a Renaissance garden. □

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All unattributed quotations are from letters written by Pietro Porcinai to the author.