

# *CREATIVITY* and REALITY

THE ART OF BUILDING FUTURE CITIES

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## *CREATIVITY* and REALITY The art of building *future* cities

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# A new Silent Spring. The creation of an autonomy of women's thinking in the project of open space and urban landscape

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open space | urban landscape | garden | women | thinking

## ABSTRACT

*The women, for a long time, have worked in the field of artistic creation and scientific research, in almost total heteronomy. The reflection proposes a survey on women's ability to operate in partial independence and free thought through the design space, especially the open space. One area in which women seem to find an aesthetic and ethical cohesion is related to the project of the modern and contemporary city, in its collective places and more broadly, in the urban landscape. The sudden move towards the "outside" is what characterizes writers, poetesses, architects, landscape architects, photographers, artists in a broad sense and even women scientists, who were chosen to generate a feminine aesthetic in relation to the idea of open space.*

*This sharp and sudden movement can be tracked in the 'live action' unexpected and impetuous of which Roberto Calasso speaks and which is brought to men and women by Nymphs in the form of madness-possession. Calasso refers to the true teaching of classical knowledge that sudden gushes and with "The madness that comes from the Nymphs" he turns the foundations of Western culture: it does not date back to the male Olympian gods but to the Nymphs, divinities of springs and trees.*

*Apollo and Dionysus, Calasso writes, would have usurped the merits and creativity of the Nymphs.*

*Reason for which must be re-modulated a mythology on the relationship between knowledge and nature linked to the women. The live action and controversial always reappears: in the Renaissance we find it in the sudden movement of the hair of Botticelli's Venus.*

*Today, for the authors proposed in this paper, the creative freedom appears to be coming right through the living gesture to go outside, outdoors. Moving away from the house, even just in the garden, taking care of it, and from there discovering an external private and public, it appears, for women, as a true form of rebellion. Exit out of the confines of a comfort zone, which is often determined by others, was the live action of the two forerunners Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackeville West, who used nature as a metaphor for freedom. The works here reread, belonging to different individuals and even far apart, are all linked by the metaphor of the open space, the natural place and of the anthropized nature.*

*The list of scholars is very long, among them: R. Carson, R. Solnit, D. Scott Brown, T. Way and for the UE Muf Architects, P. Pera, Resta and Bonesio, E. Morelli, Stephanié Buttier.*

Women, for a long time, have worked in the field of artistic creation and scientific research, in almost total heteronomy. This reflection proposes a survey on women's ability to operate in partial independence and free thought not only in the theoretical field but also in physical open space. One area in which women seem to find an aesthetic and ethical cohesion is the one related to the planning of the modern and contemporary city, in its collective places, and, more broadly, in the urban landscape. The sudden move towards the "outside" is what characterizes writers, poetesses, architects, landscape architects, photographers, artists in a broad sense and even women scientists, who were chosen to generate a feminine aesthetic in relation to the idea of open space. The works analyzed here pertain to different personalities, quite far apart between each other, but all tied to the metaphor of emptiness, nature and environment.

During the days of isolation, in which interaction between us and everyone else has been precluded, together with the enjoyment of nature but also streets and urban squares, we've been isolated in our home dimension, it's quite likely been easier to understand how these women lived for centuries, locked in circumscribed universes.

During the pandemic, we understood the limits posed by the globalization model and the phenomenon of climate change. Our way of living can't keep up with the contradictions of our capitalistic and consumerist system. Before of this universal lockdown, a very young activist by the name of Greta Thunberg became iconic for representing this global unrest. Through Greta and the teenagers that marched with her for our future, the public realized the danger that humanity is facing due to the foolish abuse of Earth's resources. The women of this essay, just like Greta, all share a vision for the future, where our personal destiny loses its individuality to become a shared future: the subordination to a patriarchal system is very similar in form to the way mankind dominates nature. The awareness of this situation of disparity has been initially shared through writings like poetry and novel and later on scientific papers, but slowly it also surfaced with direct actions and finally projects and constructions that, through gardens, parks, squares and public spaces, provide women with the possibility to generate more space and freedom.

### *Opening a gap in the walled spaces: novels and English gardens.*

England was the first nation in Europe to make women aware very early on about their rights, and the wish for freedom has been the focal point of many writings, novels and poems, that helped women to develop independent thought tied to nature and space. Virginia Woolf, in her *A room's for One's Own*, tells us how Jane Austen wrote most of her novels in her living room; Such was the space allowed for women's intellectual work. Virginia explains how, sadly, until women managed to conquer more suitable workplaces, They had to only write Novels, no theater, no essays and no treaties. Women had to earn both the space and the authority to deal with more challenging matters.

Even though Jane Austen had to write confined in a room, continuously bothered by the house personnel and guests, her novels tell us about external places, describing with great care parks, gardens and the countryside of her time. Virginia Woolf is not the only one to write about Jane Austen's remarkable skills: the Italian landscaper Emanuela Morelli, in her *Il giardino inglese attraverso gli occhi di Jane Austen. Tra Wilderness e Shrubbery* highlights the ability of Jane Austen to overcome the limits of unlikely love stories in order to present us an undercurrent of great transformation going on in England, through gardens: "from the description of the landscapes and the dialogues of landowners in Jane Austen's novels emerge some of the heavy changes started by the agrarian revolution to the English countryside between the XVIII and XIX centuries"<sup>1</sup>. Jane Austen, like her novels' protagonists, know the countryside pretty well because she saw it, a very rare occasion of breathing open air for women. During that time, the formal garden was turning into an informal style, the change from classical geometry to a more organic scheme broke the confinement of the park, to allow us to look into the infinite horizon, opening up a breach in the wall of isolation that confined English women. Jane Austen's protagonists always lived open spaces and nature as places of freedom, where time and history meet and mix "the protagonists, through

their movements and crossed space, determine the flow of time and the happening of events in the story”<sup>2</sup>. Through novels and the reality of that time we can see how gardens become dynamic and kinetic places.

The transformation from classical to modern of those gardens happened in a certainly long time span and it wasn't always linear, with a heavy contribution from poets, philosophers and even politicians. In the garden the English liberal thought fought against the French authoritarian and absolutist model, by “denying the geometries imposed by nature, freeing it in a sweet, softer form that looked casual on the surface”.



*Fig. 1*

*Ecofeminism:  
Women, Culture,  
Nature,  
by Karen J. Warren*



Jane Austen made her characters live those spaces that were transforming: all of her heroines walked through the countryside, the parks and the gardens, and here their readings and strollings became a mean for their inner path, a research that gives “character and depth to their way of thinking”. In *Pride and prejudice* the protagonist develops her love for Mister Darcy through the beauty of his mansion: “Elizabeth, as they drove along, watched for the first appearance of Pemberley Woods with some perturbation; and when at length they turned in at the lodge, her spirits were in a high flutter. The park was very large, and contained great variety of ground. They entered it in one of its lowest points, and drove for some time through a beautiful wood, stretching over a wide extent (...). She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. They were all of them warm in their admiration; and at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!”.

#### *From Virginia and Vita to the Muf Architects*

The informal garden would see many variations of itself in England, among them there is Virginia Woolf’s little garden. When she visited it for the first time, she noticed that Monk’s House was a wild place, the house had little rooms and she felt a distinct lack of comfort in them, but each and every attempt to give an objective evaluation to the place had to “give way to the great delight inspired in her by the size, shape and fertility of the garden and its fresh, wild air” Vita Sackville-West, a friend of Virginia, poet and lover of gardening, already owned a garden, which is still visited as of today for its remarkable beauty and care<sup>3</sup>. This natural place, divided by rooms, was overwhelmed with the colour of its vegetation and flowers, in contrast with the informal garden of the previous century, which was mostly green. Literature and the garden are, then, the tools through which women, as we saw, can open a breach for the construction of their thought. Jane Austen’s protagonists begin to feel freedom, even though their nature is still to identify it with marriage. Thanks to Virginia and Vita, many breaches would open in history, they helped fight gender stereotypes, acting as full-blown intellectuals, with the help of their love for gardens, to the point where Virginia made *Orlando*<sup>4</sup> say “nature nature, I’m your bride, take me as I am”. Concerning the contemporary age, the Muf Architects are a collective of women, architects and artists, they work as researchers in the field of public space, like in Dalston 2009, a block of East London. They produce relational space and shapes.

#### *The endless practice of American Women*

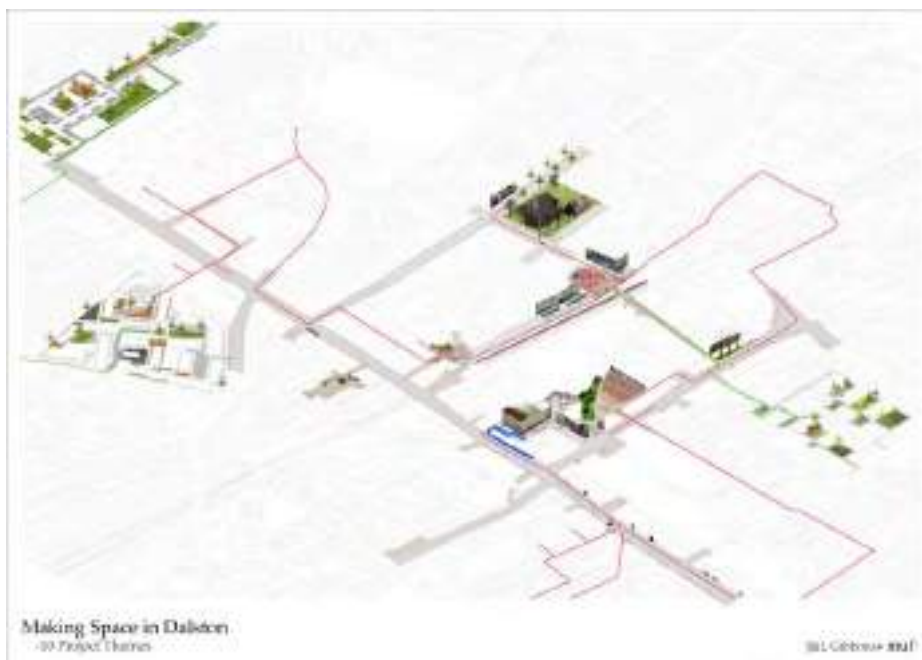
Stepping away from home, even if it means just the garden, taking care of it, and from there discovering public and private exterior spaces, from the environment to the city, is a true form of rebellion for women; it is the act of stepping out of a comfort zone that too often has been decided by someone else, this was the “gesto vivo” (alive act) of Virginia and Vita. Oversea is where nature becomes a metaphor of fight.

“Because Rachel Carson’s landmark book offers undeniable proof that the power of an idea can be far greater than the power of politicians” wrote Al Gore in his introduction of *Silent Spring*. Rachel Carson, a marine biologist, in the early ’60s, noticed how pesticides would eventually shut down all the beautiful noises of spring, killing every insect, bird and living being and polluted the water and the earth. No organic life form would have survived. Her cry has been more powerful than any political act, and then, from that day in 1962, the ecologist movements were born. The DDT pesticide has been banned since then. It is quite likely that Rachel Carson didn’t expect that Her complaint of a world less subordinated to profit was about to start a claim that would not stop at pesticides but cross over and be welcomed by not only the environment movements but also women in general, that saw a similarity between the way mankind dominated the environment and how men dominated women.



*Fig. 2*

*Marian Cruger  
Coffin  
(1876-1957)*



*Fig. 3*

*Making Space in  
Dalston -  
Muf Architects*

We had to wait until 1990, when Karen J. Warren started talking about “a real ecological revolution”<sup>5</sup> for women, using the term “ecofeminism” that was created in 1974 by Françoise d’Eaubonne. Karen J. Warren explains that by ecological feminism she means “the existence of important connection – historicals, experiential, symbolic, theoretical – between the subordination inflicted to women and the domination over nature, and it is crucial to understand them both for feminism and for environmental ethic”. Feminism was historically set to abolish subordination of the “weaker” side, the women, and now, ecofeminism wanted to expand this concept with the issue of oppression of the environment and the planet. Karen J. Warren writes that “ecofeminism extends the philosophical attention of feminism to nature”, where nature is seen as a conceptual framework, in order to pry open the patriarchal framework that, in the western societies, “allowed the twin domination of nature and women”.

“The ecofeminist philosophies argue that the oppressive framework” is always characterized by three “aspect of any other oppressive framework”. 1: women are identified with nature and the reign of physicality, while men are identified with the mental aspect and the human aspect; 2: anything that is identified within the reign of nature and physicality is to be considered inferior to anything that belongs to the mental and human aspect; 3: therefore, women are inferior to men, or vice-versa, men are superior to women. In parallel with the debate opened by historical feminists, women started to produce work in the field of architectural planning and landscaping, in the form of texts and spaces for the outdoor life: Thaïsa Way overturned the idea of nature being inferior, she wrote a book about her endless practice, where she gathered many projects created by women landscapers of the past century<sup>6</sup>: “I chose to consider the women who exercised the profession emerged in the public sphere” as well as “if we want to develop a new vocabulary for architecture and landscape, as Elizabeth Meyer challenged us to do, we have to begin to describe the spaces and the practices that are ‘in the middle’; the places of overlapping; and the relations to nature, earth and practice”. Denise Scott Brown worked profusely on public spaces between volumes, like the long road that crosses Las Vegas. Only recently she published *Having words* feminist confessions of a woman architect, only after the passing away of her famous husband Robert Venturi. Rebecca Solnit, after a long career of critique and theory of art, with on her side the publication of a famous text about the history of walking as an act of creative thinking and collective spirit<sup>7</sup>, she felt compelled to publish a book with an unequivocal title: *Men explain things to me*, reflections about oppressing males.

### *The great mother of Mediterranean spaces*

Concerning the western countries, where does this male rule over female thinking come from? An interesting hypothesis comes from Roberto Calasso, with his *La follia che viene dalle Ninfe* (the madness that comes from Nymphs) (Adelphi books), he described how everything concerning the western culture, Our ancestors culture, from the male olympic gods and the birth of creative thinking, all of this, in reality, is just usurpation. Calasso writes about how the sudden movement of the lateral thought, differently from the linear thought, is comparable to an alive act, unexpected and impetuous, comparable to the “going forward” of some creative women, and is brought to humans by the ancient Nymphs in the form of possession-madness. Calasso traces back from the classical culture to the modern days in a “sudden” way, the spring of a gush which is here the personification of the Nymphs, goddesses of springs and trees. Apollo and Dionysus sneakily usurped the merits and creativity of the Nymphs.

This is why we can think about a re-modulation of the link between knowledge and nature tied to the female world and the mythology born from it. The alive act and its controversy reappear often during our history: during Renaissance we can find it in the sudden movement of the hairs of the Venus of Botticelli (Aby Warburg), or we can see it in the authors proposed in this essay, where creative freedom happens through the alive act of going forward, by the open air, as Carson did to study the Seas and Thumberg did in order to cross the ocean with a boat.

Even the Italians that wanted to work with gardens and open spaces had to struggle for it. Lidia Soprani taught Landscape Discipline at the school of Architecture in the Roman University “La Sapienza” through many many courses, from live drawing to arrangement of landscaping, she was a pioneer of this teaching together with Vittoria Calzolari, and she promoted the professional figure of the Landscaper Architect. Her relationship with the landscape is one of militancy, started halfway through the '60s and lasted for over fifty years.

The time period after her graduation, during the '60s, is fundamental in order to understand her thought: she was young and engaged, and together with Manfredo Tafuri she supported the “continuità ideologica” (ideological continuity) inside the modern movement, a theoretical current that wanted to insert the themes of architecture and urbanism into the political talk by the use of social pressure. Since then, she proposed a study in her methodology and didactic that was deduced from the great infrastructures like highways or informal English gardens, which she researched for a long time, applying the methodology of observation and perception through the description and critical evaluation of the environment. What is she requiring us to look at? Even before we intervene and remodel a landscape in order to make it a more comfortable habitat that is useful to mankind, she asks us to look with a critical eye to the landscape, the trees and dendrophobia, the amount of deforestation with still a critical lack of pastures, and finally the uncontrolled growth of forestation. Understanding the beauty of the landscape, like in the case of the “foliage” is important in order to denounce the danger we are putting nature into. The young activist of the '60s, that used to support avant-garde battles was never truly gone, she just found new companions, new battles: “here, look at those trees!” she urges us. The philosophers Caterina Resta and Luisa Bonesio



*Fig. 4*

*Borderline1 (2012)  
by Stéphanie Buttier  
and Sophie Larger*

have been very active in the battle for denunciation, during the '80s and the '90s with Their studies on Geophilosophy and the Protoecologist thought that have been recovered by Aldo Leopold, They propose a new way to inhabit the Earth, which they call “Matria”, and to “think like a mountain”.

A battle fought with the aid of writing and nature has been brought on by Pia Pera. With Pia Pera, we recovered that link between narration and action that we saw with the English novel writers: the garden and the vegetable garden are places where one raises its own awareness, and her own vegetable garden is even a master. In the vegetable garden, rebellion thoughts are born and they become ecological thoughts and beauty thoughts. Pia uses Fukuoka, the master of non-action that constantly denounces the greed of the evolved and cultured man. To those that “create ugliness” she answers with the beauty of nature: “I wished that the hedge had that kind of beauty that no one wanted or designed, happened by mere chance at the edge of the petty work of a scraper and that It wouldn't interrupt the landscape like one of those laurel walls, or even worse, Arizonian cypress that are rigorously squared; instead, I wanted it to remind of the edge of a country road, one of those mixed hedges that no one has planted, that grove spontaneously by itself that mixed essence and co-essence, leaving the Earth to do its work”. Pia Pera believed that knowledge is movement – course – research, like how it was for the women of Jane Austen. And even when her life was taking its course and was about to end (Pia suffered from ALS), she felt like the first living being to hear about this should have been her space of nature, and so she used a poetic verse from Emily Dickinson in her posthumous book: *I haven't told my garden yet*.

### *Conclusions*

Our conclusions can be entrusted to a French landscaper named Stephanie Buttier, who graduated at the National Superior School of Landscape at Versailles: Stephanie, with her “Borderline” made a true avant-garde and artistic gesture out of the breach. At the Biennial Parkdesign of 2012 at Bruxelles, dedicated to the development of public spaces, Stephanie Buttier, together with Sophie Larger, made a contemporary garden out of an abandoned lot, playing with the idea of a soft border. They proposed flexible barriers made out of elastic cord that We can cross through: the idea is to question the condition of these limits in order to change the look and habits of the residents located in those neglected places. The works here presented belong to different individuals, and even though. They are far apart in time. They are all linked by the metaphor of the open space, the natural place, and of the anthropized nature.

### *ENDNOTES*

<sup>1</sup> Morelli E. (2018) *Il giardino inglese attraverso gli occhi di Jane Austen. Tra «wilderness» e «shrubbery»*, Pontecorboli Editore, Firenze.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cakegardenproject.com/?fbclid=IwAR3k8PYDGIsk7yjaBUHsdMK->

<sup>4</sup> Woolf V. (2012) *Orlando*, Feltrinelli, Milano.

<sup>5</sup> Warren K. J. (1997), *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

<sup>6</sup> Way T. (2009), *Unbounded Practice. Women and Landscape architecture in the early twentieth century*, University of Virginia Press, USA.

<sup>7</sup> Solnit R. (2014), *Wanderlust. A History of Walking*, Granta Publications, London.



*The field of knowledge defined by the terms “creativity” and “reality” may be considered the permanent framework for a reflection on innovation and the transformation of architecture and cities. However, it should be noted that in current decades, creativity as the engine of human invention and reality as a response to human needs have had, as their dominant field of application, technological innovation rather than the development of new city images. In recent times architecture and world cities have been especially “designed” by neoliberal, global and urban policies following the realization of mega-events, shopping malls, gated communities, large scale facilities, urban villages, spectacular architectural objects, territorial infrastructure and immaterial networks.*

*Moreover, while the urban transformations of the European cities are still designed according to the tradition of the last two-centuries, the challenge to design within informal contexts emerged as an inevitable need to match and support the cultural and social identities of the enormous “informal” and “illegal” communities, to deal with inequalities and “expulsions”, to improve living conditions and make urban space more democratic, technological and dialogic. Within this framework of “Plural Urbanism” rethinking the concepts of Creativity and Reality can be an important contribution to the construction of an “open city” in which sympathetic imagination, realistic and bold innovation will still be considered the architect’s principal means and can still feed the art of building the future city and architecture according to its actual realities, needs, emergencies, for pursuing a widespread human wellbeing and tackling the forces hidden in the global changes.*



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