



## Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino

XXVI Annual Award, 2015

**Maredolce-La Favara, Palermo**

### Citation

The Scientific Committee of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche has decided unanimously to dedicate the twenty-sixth International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens to *Maredolce-La Favara*, a site in the heart of the Brancaccio district of Palermo that conserves the memory and tangible evidence of what landscape represented to the Arab and Norman civilization in Sicily, in the wider context of the area that would later become known as the “Conca d’Oro”, and which, in the course of recent transformations, has seen its distinctive character become obscured, if not lost altogether.

Maredolce-La Favara is today a vast depression in the ground, what in the past was a huge reservoir, with a still recognisable, irregularly shaped island at its centre and a magnificent palace standing between the edge of this concavity and the ranks of houses that over time have been built around its perimeter to the north-west; within the hollow, in an area covering about twenty-five hectares, lies a complex system of structures, hydraulic devices and an enormous citrus orchard, telling signs of the great cultivated space it was from its origins.

The place stood guard over Palermo, intercepting anyone who came in from the sea or by land from the Tyrrhenian coast, and was an area of first-rate agricultural land after the water that sprang from the foot of a mountain was harnessed and channelled here. The area was settled by the Romans, and then by the Arabs and the Normans; it acquired the name Favara in the X century, an Arab word that means an abundance of spring water; and then from the XIV century it became Maredolce, in celebration of the extraordinary “lake” that was so large that it bore comparison with the nearby sea. Over time the confusion of springs and marshes was transformed into the organic order typical of cultivated land using irrigation techniques that combine the ancient hydraulic expertise of the Romans with the innovations introduced by the Arab agricultural revolution. Gardens full of palms and citrus trees, extensive plantations of sugar cane, vineyards and olive groves were all watered from a huge reservoir, with an island at its centre, whose wonders were celebrated by poets and travellers, both Arab and Norman. And on the island, a royal residence, which Roger II, the king who transformed the site, referred to as his “sollazzo”, by which he meant not only the pleasure he derived from its gardens, the water and hunting but also the experience the place offered as a meeting point of different cultures – Byzantine, Arab and Norman – in its architecture, life styles and landscape, and in the exchange of ideas with the scholars and thinkers of the age. All this in Palermo, in the great island at the centre of the Mediterranean, a confluence of the biological and cultural diversities of three continents.

For these reasons, Maredolce-La Favara and the long process that has led to what we see today, bear witness to the importance of cultivating landscape and the urgent need to recognize its role in our day: in relation not only to the historical evidence embodied in its buildings and its configuration but also to the presence of the great open space of its garden, which together with the stones, the water and the artifices of man expresses the importance of care and responsible stewardship on the part of institutions and of the community which here feels a sense of belonging to a violated landscape.

Enclosed by the tall screens of image-distorting buildings, the edge of a motorway and the boundary wall of the citrus orchards, the place seems miraculously to have survived the actions that have more than once attacked the time-honoured equilibrium of an agricultural landscape and the dignity of an urban life-style that the district of Brancaccio, to the south

of the city, still evinces in various ways. For a considerable time forgotten in topographical descriptions, scarred and unrecognizable, no longer perceptible to its inhabitants, Maredolce seems nevertheless to be holding out despite its now discontinuous perimeter, the indifference of the city that is crushing it, colonizing its outlines and eroding its essential points of connection.

Like the head of a wedge pushing through the tangle of old and new roads in the outskirts of a city that has sprawled right up its verges, we recognize in Maredolce the outpost of a close-knit spray of surviving landscapes stretching southwards beyond the River Oreto between the slopes of Mount Grifone, the roads of Ciaculli and the coast, a striking patchwork of cultivated land which is all that remains of the Conca d'Oro, a concatenation of tended tracts that here take the name of "garden".

Following its creation by Roger II in the first half of the XII century and various changes of use and ownership, accompanied by a gradual reduction in the water coming from La Favara, Maredolce endured a number of assaults on its integrity and the erosion of its intrinsic milieu. Cultivated land has replaced the reservoir and the island and now links up towards the south-east with the still present citrus groves laid out in the XIX century. And during the second half of the XX century, the place was swallowed up by the expanding city and sank into silence. But in the palace itself and its immediate surroundings, surviving spaces and other remains have recently been the subject of historical research and restoration and the renewed care and attention of many. Maredolce is beginning to reveal itself to its inhabitants as a place they recognise as being part of their culture, with a rediscovered approach to landscape and a prospect for the future.

What we see today – rooms returned to their original dimensions and functions, the walls consolidated and the buildings restored, the areas unearthed by archaeologists, the studies carried out – present us with an invitation to continue the work of investigation and research, especially with a view to achieving a unitary understanding of the place, of its value and of the relations with the evidence that belongs to its cultural position, to its life today. Relations that refer to the Arab-Norman buildings and what remains of their gardens in Palermo as a whole and to the more extensive and scattered system of citrus groves, connections that in turn relate to the analogous cultural heritage that the Arab world has bequeathed us. This includes the Agdal Gardens in Marrakech, the place to which the eleventh International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens was dedicated in 2000.

This landscape bears the marks of history and change that tell of a social milieu "condemned" to unsparing censure: Ciaculli and Brancaccio are districts connected with unspeakable crimes such as those associated with the "mafia dei giardini" and the heroin refineries, but they were also home to anti-mafia heroes such as Father Pino Puglisi. The Prize is hopeful of a possible resolution between the life of the neighbourhood and a far-sighted vision in which the city, in this part of its territory, recognizes the signals of a reconciliation of the contradictions of recent development with the living presence of its surviving landscapes. It is concerned about what remains of the Conca d'Oro landscape; and about the Mediterranean cities – of which Palermo is an acknowledged symbol – that cannot afford to cede more terrain to cement. It looks at the conjunction of diversities exemplified by Maredolce as an opportunity to reactivate the fruitful interplay of nature and culture that underlies so much that is great in the history of the Mediterranean Sea – "mare tra le terre".

On the shores of this same sea, on the same island, the 1999 Carlo Scarpa Prize, the tenth in the series, focussed attention on a quarry-site, *Le Cave di Cusa*, and a man, Vincenzo Tusa, that together bear witness to the sense and the value of a cultural achievement and a civil commitment which once again, in Palermo, lie at the centre of our work.

Maredolce, this precious fragment of a lost mosaic, a silent witness of a bygone culture, awaits recognition and placing in a wider context that reveals its full significance and establishing a sound relationship between what has been saved, what is still to emerge, and the life, no longer indifferent, of the community around this place.

Outstanding amongst those now working for Maredolce-La Favara is the working group set up by the Superintendency of the Cultural and Environmental Heritage of Palermo, under the guidance of Maria Elena Volpes, to which the Scientific Committee of the Foundation expresses its profound appreciation of the experience and commitment it brings to the task, in recognition of which it has decided to entrust the group's coordinator, Lina Bellanca, with the Carlo Scarpa Seal as a token of affinity and support for all those who, in their different fields, are working in a far from easy urban and social context to underline the importance of a public good in ongoing need of care, attention and defence of the exceptional values and diversity it continues to embody.