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# Mazzucchelli promotes urban nature

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## **The Italian designer speaks to Jackie Bennett about her city gardens and geometry-based approach**

Milan-based designer Cristina Mazzucchelli is a well-known name in Italian garden and landscape circles. Spanning commercial, private and events, her work has grown steadily in the 20 years she has been in practice. Although a member of Italy's professional body AIAPP, she did not come into garden design via a conventional route.

A biologist with a PhD in Molecular Genetics, she was working in France as a researcher when she first began to develop her own garden. Moving back to Milan, and with a sound base in plant physiology, she began to build her practice, motivated by a desire to link architecture to the natural

world. She became best known for turning bare terraces in built-up Milan into green spaces – something she believes city dwellers desperately need.

What makes Mazzucchelli stand out from others is her underlying approach. Describing her plans as “always linear or geometric” she is adept at keeping geometry and volume in balance. “Terraces are an important link between architecture and garden design. They give people the chance to experience nature first hand – and you don’t need a large space to do that.”



‘Air Grasslands’ is a sky meadow on 15cm of soil. **Photo:** Cristina Mazzucchelli

Italians, according to Mazzucchelli, are pre-programmed to recognise aesthetically pleasing things. She knows that in Italy, as elsewhere, clients who are able to hire a garden designer are a cultural elite. Her public work redresses that balance and is a chance to reach out to larger numbers of people.

“One of my favourite projects was at a children’s nursery,” she says. “I wanted to break down the division between outdoor and indoor, so that children would be aware of the exterior, even when they were inside eating their lunch. I wanted to send a strong signal that plants are an important part of everyday life, not something you just see when you leave the city.” The problem was, in a limited space, how to allow the children to play and not trample the plants – raised beds succeeded in bringing the plants close to the children, and the ‘roof’ structures create a hanging garden. “I find that actually children do respect planting, they don’t need to be told,” she says.

One of her more interesting projects outside of Milan was a garden created from a landfill site at Eboli, in Campania in the south of Italy, A Window on the Mediterranean, where she worked with sculptor Stefano Prina. Their brief was to revitalise a section of old Eboli and in doing so, conjure up the connection with the sea and its underwater vegetation. Using Mediterranean plants and local stone was a way that Mazzucchelli could import the vernacular into the garden. “If you use local materials, you are almost guaranteed that the colour, texture and characteristics will be in harmony with the place,” she says.



‘A Window on the Mediterranean’ . **Photo:** Cristina Mazzucchelli

Her method of working is characterised by collaboration – and particularly with her technical collaborator Igino Marchesin, who realises her designs with CAD, model building and, where appropriate, film and mixed media. Otherwise, the phases of her work will be recognisable to any designer: the planning phase when she inspects the site, does preliminary drafts and costings; the executive phase, selecting the plants from nurseries, choosing contractors, sources and materials; and implementing the design on site.

Maintenance of the projects is also crucial to her philosophy. At a cascina (old farm) run as an agritourism business, she deliberately made a garden that would be virtually maintenance-free in spring and summer, when guests need privacy. “I wanted to avoid having to have lots of gardeners around, so there is no grass to mow, no irrigation systems – it’s all down to the choice of planting. All the work of cutting back and replanting can be done between October and February, which is the low season.”



Her 2012 Chaumont installation 'Genius is Everywhere'. **Photo:** Cristina Mazzucchelli

She likes to revisit her projects once or twice a year, and mostly clients are happy to pay for this. "They recognise that the shape of a garden evolves and that the balance of volumes and voids will not remain in harmony without some intervention." For the past two summers, parts of Italy have experienced serious drought, and that has created new opportunities for plant selection. "I study what works and what doesn't. Without this plant knowledge, a garden design is just that – a design – not a true garden.

"However, I do prefer plants with small foliage and flowers, like *Spiraea thunbergii*, which is one of my favourites at the moment. I like plants that have transparency. I only use big, architectural specimens as focal points – they are too tiring for the brain and make the eye work too hard. That's not what I am trying achieve."



‘Stairway to Heaven’ roof garden. **Photo:** Cristina Mazzucchelli

Creating a garden requires long-term vision, but Mazzucchelli enjoys contributing to shows or doing installations (a garden at Chaumont was one of her more avant-garde works). An installation may be for a few months or just a week, as at The Milan Furniture Fair. Here, she created ‘Fermati e Respira!’ – literally ‘Stop and Breathe!’, in a courtyard of the Rossi house in Corso Magenta. “This is a chance for me to have some fun and not think about the long term, so I created an outdoor living room, which also had a serious intent, using flowers and perfume to entice people to take a breath.”

She worries that Italian public spaces are falling prey to a lack of imagination. “The knowledge about botany and ecology in our public administration is very low. I am working on a piazza in a touristy area of Lake Garda, which has always relied on brightly coloured annual bedding to please the visitors. I want to convince them that it’s okay to use perennials. They are so afraid of criticism – that someone might say they don’t like it and visitors would no longer come. Yet this annual planting requires changing four times a year, which is hugely expensive. It is very difficult to make people understand that not everything can be in flower at once.”

But Mazzucchelli is not at all downhearted. “I love a challenge. I will always keep trying. And things will change. Nature is my accomplice, and my inspiration.”



‘Liquid Green’ courtyard. **Photo:** Cristina Mazzucchelli

*Cristina Mazzucchelli will be speaking at the SGD Autumn Conference on 17 November on the theme of geometry, alongside Christopher Bradley-Hole FSGD, Ian Kitson FSGD, Kate Cullity of TCL and Alex Hanazaki. Book tickets now at (<http://www.sgd.org.uk/>) [www.sgd.org.uk](http://www.sgd.org.uk) (<http://www.sgd.org.uk>)*