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The Garden-terraces of the Figini House in Milan. The Reconstruction of the Lost Paradise

Anna Martínez
Fabiola Meignen

In the book *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione*, Luigi Figini compiles his life's experience in the garden-terraces of his Milan home.

The house was constructed in 1935 and the book was published in 1950. Fifteen years in which the architect, among the different solutions to introduce green near the dwelling of man, collects and systematizes the terrace-garden. As a conquest of the modern architecture, it will provide to the urban living, the forgotten benefit of contact with the mother-earth: the green, the sky and the water. In these years, terraces became pleasant gardens, and for the architect and his wife were the background of their poetic activity. In his house, Figini reconstructs the lost Paradise. It is the childhood of man, and the infancy of times, rediscovered.



THE GREEN ELEMENT AND THE HOUSE

In 1950, after 15 years living in the Journalist District house in Milan, Luigi Figini published *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione*. In the book, edited by Domus, the author, in a poetic rendering, reviews the history and the relationship between architecture and the elements of nature: greenery, water, the sun and the sky, to finally systematize architectonic solutions for the implementation of green elements in urban housing.

In the Garden of Eden man walked the Earth, his roof consisted of the crowns of trees and the starry sky. There were no seasons, it was always eternal spring "the relationship between man and the natural world had reached perfection: the exterior world was associated with man's house and the man's house with the exterior world". After the original sin, there came the need to take shelter from climate conditions, from wild animals and from his own fellow men. Man constructed his shelter with non-living elements: branches, tree trunks, stones, soil. He had lost his idyllic grip over the elements.

This is how the first house and the first city were born. They were sad, as the rest of man's creations were, representing the penance of "after the sin"². Since then, nostalgia for the happi-

ness, lost in the infancy of man and the world, has accompanied the existence of man. Man has tried to reproduce on Earth, near his habitat where his deserted life evolves, an image of that garden that saw the sun rise for the first time. This includes the Pompeian house, the medieval Orto Conclusus, the Arab Riad, the patio of the popular Mediterranean house.

But in the city, where men are stacked on top of each other "cubicle by cubicle vertically; where a little land is enough not only for one, but for many families, when man builds multiple storey houses and brings these houses closer together to form a city, the historic patio dies"³. In order not to die, the patio can only be transformed into a garden terrace, a conquest of the new architecture for urban housing, which will return to all men, "a concrete benefit: greenery; and the illusion of another benefit: isolation and solitude"⁴ (fig. 02).

Among the images that illustrate the chapter, terrace-gardens are represented by examples in all the geographies, in the work of Le Corbusier, Lurçat, Guevrekian, Neutra, Vietti, or Burle Marx, among others. Four of them correspond to his own house in Milan, ten to the Beistiegui penthouse in Paris: empty spaces, high walls, deep shadows, furniture, fireplaces, hedges, extensions of lawns and flowering trees. The interior is installed outside; the exterior invades the interior space.

A HOUSE SUSPENDED IN THE AIR, BETWEEN THE SKY AND THE EARTH

References to important episodes of the history of architecture and art can be found in this house in Milan, a paradigmatic example of a new era. And even then, it is not a house on the ground floor, attached to the soil, but built in the air, raised on *pilotis*. It is the Roman patio, the medieval vegetable court, the Arab garden, suspended between earth and heaven. Luigi Figini "a passionate man full of poetic impulses"⁵ constructed this house in 1934, and lived there with his wife until 1984, the year in which he died. It is a work of youth, built shortly before his marriage, as a family home in Milan, the architect's hometown, where he studied and built most of his works⁶, in a residential neighbourhood with city-garden ordinances (fig. 03). At that time the building was surrounded by some dwellings, but above all by vegetable plots and fields. This house, a pure prism, white, clearly seeks air light and heat in a misty, rainy climate which is so typical of the Lombard capital, and it has outstanding views -given its high position, on clear days -to the Lecco Mountains on the north, at the foothills of the Alps. Because of this, the building sits on 12 pillars, regularly arranged in the centre of the site, 4.80m above the ground. In this way, the entire land surface is left free, and is used as a garden and a vegetable plot. The occupied area (18x5.5 = 99 m²) is exactly 1/3 of the total plot, that became a green wild garden.

The orientation of the house is practically north-south, with access from Via Perrone San Martino to the northeast. Its program is arranged on two levels, with the regular structure of concrete pillars set back from the facade, and horizontal sliding windows along the facades. An external single staircase section, narrow and steep between the facade and the line of pillars, leads directly to the centre of the main floor. To one side is the single space of the living-dining room, which is open to the terrace; on the other side there are the service rooms. On the upper level, there is a single bedroom with a bathroom and a dressing room in the centre. The rest of the area is occupied by the terraces and the empty exterior space below the lower floor. The height of the two floors is higher than that of the white prism, so that the upper room is set back from three of the facades, except the one from the northwest, where it is set at a lower height (fig. 04).

The house is precise and unequivocal in its approach. The prism, the structure and the openings are ruled by slight adjustments over squared and Golden Rules proportions. On the outside, it looks austere, almost naked; its interiors are beautiful, luxurious

and refined. There are marble floors, steel joinery, and in the living room, bright round pillars, a sideboard that rests on metal legs, from the Villa Studio, and cowhide armchairs also designed by figini himself. Very few objects were visible: some pots with plants and the sculpture of the "Decapitated warrior", a gift from Fausto Melotti to the figini couple⁷ (fig. 05).

THE TERRACE-GARDENS

In this house the terrace-gardens occupy almost as much surface as the interiors. They are located on both levels and in all directions, with different uses and characteristics. There are very few artificial elements -the work of man- facing natural elements: greenery, water, soil and sky. They are enclosed within walls, so that the individual can present himself, in solitude, in conversation with himself and with the Creator.

On the main level terrace, to the northeast, the living room opens to the garden through a large, dark metallic sliding window that is set back from the wall. The interior and exterior merge together spatially, climatically, visually and functionally. Life goes on indistinctively both inside and outside (fig. 06).

An orange tree grows frailly from a squared planting recipient, measuring 55x55x45cm, built into the paved flooring: "A tree in the forest, a thread of water in the torrent are not distinguished; a green tree standing alone in a never-ending clearing, a clear thread of water in the desert sands, can reach our emotions, and even bring us to tears"⁸. According to the architect, with abundant blooming and a quarantine of ripened fruits in the harsh climate of Milan.

The gym is located in the upper floor, where the terrace opens to a double space; it is close to the bathroom, with distant views to the Alps through the façade openings. Ropes, rings and bars hang up from an exterior beam, which was projected for a future extension of the house. On the ground there are sand, grass and a planter, the rest is pavement (fig. 07). A step further in the southeast façade leads us to another terrace, at the opposite side of the prism, which is conceived as a garden courtyard. Here, the 2.6 m high facades are completely solid. This terrace provides access to the main bedroom through a porch, and thanks to its design, only in winter does the mid-day sunlight enter the room below the horizon.

Here we have a sandy area where one can sunbathe, in privacy and sheltered from the wind, a pond, and a substantial grassed area placed 20cm above floor level, where zinnias and anemones grow -and a cherry tree is planted which is "full of blossom in spring"⁹, undoubtedly the focal point of many of the photographs of the house.

The rainwater is collected in an outdoor marble tank, "dead-water, which given its temperature and composition, more suitable for irrigation purposes than tap water"¹⁰.

The vapours and smoke from the kitchen and the boiler are sent up through the pink circular chimney pipe, and conducted far away, above the living areas as "we have to eliminate the inconveniences of the smoke and vapours as much as possible; and give the extractor more of a cared for and aesthetic look, to get away from the typically disorder associated with chimneys"¹¹.

A RECORD OF THE EVERYDAY THINGS

In a meticulously ordered file, Luigi figini keeps his collection of hundreds of his photographs and drawings of the day-to-day of the dwellers of the home, not only of the architect and his wife, but also of the trees, the flowers and the birds in the garden terraces. Far from more important social events, it is the daily activities which mark this album and constitute the architectonical record of the house. Many of them will have been used in collages and other artistic assignments. figini's love of painting and photography -shared with his wife- becomes almost a secret, methodical and

quite personal activity, which evolves over his lifetime, which was practically entirely spent in this beautiful house in Milan¹².

It is these photographs, which many refer to the life of the birds in the garden-terrace, that figini would use to compile a book. To do this, he installed a photographic observatory in the porch, next to his bedroom, where he could freeze the image of the birds as they flew into the terrace in search of insects, water from the pond, or fruits from the cherry tree. Blackbirds, sparrows and robins would peck at the berries, drink from the pond or sip on the remains of watermelon left on a plate. In this silent house, far from the noise of the city, the comings and goings of the birds in the grass, their pecking on the window, their welcome visit in search of crumbs on the patio paving, became the most attractive events in the life of its inhabitants.

The Italian architect also noted -in a small school notebook- different reflections on various aspects of the architecture of the house, which he distinguishes as "aesthetic notes" and "practical notes". Among the first set of notes, he contemplates the idea of converting one of the windows into an aquarium, like live nature show; or the ability of the numerous tiny reflectors to create "infinite direct and indirect variables of light"¹³.

In other pages he drew detailed and sophisticated zinc containers, with inbuilt cleaning and transport mechanisms, to hang in the trees on the terrace. In the bathroom, small lamps reflect light upon the water in the bath making it like a "blue cave". If we turn to the back of the notebook we can find some technical and practical notes in which the architect refers to the growing house, which can adapt itself to the changing needs of the family, and the *thermos* house which aims to control the climate through passive systems, which fill "the house with the cool air from the North in the morning, before closing tightly provided that the temperature inside the house is lower than that outside it", flooding the roof when "it gets extremely hot", or placing small recipients outside on the terrace, in the south so that the sun can heat the water inside them, and to the north with a small waterfall with red fish, aquatic plants, moss and fern"¹⁴

Gegé Bottinelli is the main character of the living pictures, in which the feminine figure is situated together with the natural and handcrafted elements of the Mediterranean culture: clay pottery, starfish. Photography is used as an efficient instrument to register, modify and superimpose images and fleeting compositions, and all this takes place with the terraces of the house in the background. Through these expressions Giuliano Gresleri detects a methodical order, which surpasses the traditional methods of organising clutter based on the Greeks, in search of a formal balance through Dadaist or Purist montages¹⁵.

CONSTRUCTING THE ANTI-CITY WITHIN A CITY

In his report of 1935, figini projects this house as a piece which could form part of an 10, 25 or even 50 floor apartment block, given that "no one should be deprived of a view of the sky and fresh air: a minimum m² per persona, an undefined height, heading to the zenith"¹⁶. It was all

about covering "the minimum materialistic and spiritual needs so that man can feel comfortable in his home"¹⁷. Behind this project, which so well depicted the rational Italian architecture, was the desire of Luis figini to provide each one, in the "anti-barracks home"¹⁸, the possibility of reencountering the individuality and the intimacy lost in the dark and noisy metropolis¹⁹. Constructing the anti-city within the city: "For centuries man has lived in touch with the earth, with rooms stuck to the ground, next to flowers, fruits, trees; with his feet touching soil every day. Perhaps he has once felt happy (or at least, as happy as he would be in our world). The city has separated him from Mother Earth: man has become sad and life has become shorter, and so the myth of Anteaues returns"²⁰.

In his proposal for dwelling, this beneficial and necessary contact with the Earth evolves into the desire to “eliminate, purify, isolate and reduce to human size, to another scale of proportions, the elements of a city”²¹. That is to say, to reverse the percentages of sunlight, of sky and of green -all-natural elements, those from the Creator- with respect to the building, dust, signs... artificial elements made by man.

The garden-terrace is above ground level, opens to the sky, and is surrounded by walls, in the way to minimize the distractions and the “visible elements of a mechanical society”²². To filter, separate, with fabrics, blinds, sliding doors, the views in order to “set the sun, the green, the blue, alone, and introduce them individually into the dwelling of man”²³. The plastic part of the process consists of cutting, separating and superimposing in a different order, in the form of a collage, pieces of the sun, the green and the blue, and introducing them into the dwelling, between walls. On the horizontal plain: grass, sand and water; and on the vertical: the sky, clouds and the sun. Precise and geometric cuttings, which change with the orientation, with the passing of days and with the seasons (fig. 08). Far from the central axis-based composition of the Pompeyian house, the author prefers the more formal freedom of the medieval vegetable plots, the common patios, which facilitate the distribution of these green areas, fountains and ponds, in a more “metaphysical” way, in an abstract way, with relation to the orientation, the visuals, the uses and circulations. With no geometric order imposed, to serve man, in the way to help him find himself once more, in these tiniest elements, a reflection of the greatest dream man has had in all his existence time.

The author refers to “Yadwigha” by Rousseau, or “Interior” and “Interior in a valley” by De Chirico. A divan bed in the tropical forest; chairs, tables and pillars set in an open landscape; a tree, the sea, in a room. In these daily scenes filled with serenity, the interior and exterior of the house co-exist. “Never as today has man felt so alone and so bereft, trapped in a prison built with his own hands (this prison is called home, this prison is called city). And never as today has man felt such a strong need to escape to the kingdom of trees, which is today a lost world of vegetation, in order to return to his roots, and to become reunited with the domestic elements which form part of his day to day life”²⁴.

With the passing of time the stage changed, given the fact that “a garden-terrace is not an abstract expression of dead nature, nor is it an architectural perspective cast in plaster, concrete or marble. It is a living and growing complex with an underlying need to transform itself”²⁵. To the geometric stage, classic, invented by man, overlaps every season, romantic, “the Arabesque woven by nature”²⁶. The laws of nature stream into the house, they move into the day-to-day life of man, who had forgotten them, and offer new ways of life for the body: health, sport, and for the spirit: climate, abstraction (fig. 09).

MEMORIES IN WHITE AGAINST A BLACK BACKGROUND

In the introduction the architect writes in the book, we find the reason behind this almost mythical relationship between the air, the Sun and green. It is a very personal motive which inspires this proposal and is none other than a tribute by the architect to the memory of his father. In this text, figini acknowledges the importance of memories, which remain so neatly recorded in our minds, in white chalk over a black background, as if it were a blackboard. That is where they remain, only to come back, in form of clear and unforgettable marks of a past life, “hours and days, things and groups of things, obsessions, absurd climates and fictional atmospheres, intimate tales and personal mythologies, all gathered together in a fantasy, still protected and untouchable”²⁷. Sealed and indifferent to the others, these memories return to us over the years, often unexpectedly, to show us a new path to take, a new way in thought or in life itself.

Childhood memories of days spent on the terrace of the family home in Milan, where his father had created a hanging garden, with climbing plants in boxes and tubs, fruits trees and bushes. A small vegetable plot set between apple trees, cherry trees, persimmon trees and berries and vines which also provided shade for the rings, ropes and bars installed for morning fitness activities. The paragraph in which the architect describes his mornings in the “kingdom-terrace of the old town”, is particularly attractive: “cycling an old iron tricycle examining all the limits of the terrace. In the hottest summer days, my mother would fill the big zinc tank with water from the well, used to irrigate the plants. The sun would heat the water for our evening bath. A few hours later, we would dine outside, on the green terrace, and my day would come to an end”²⁸. This was a neoliberal building, at that time the only one with a terrace among the dark roofs of the neighbouring houses. The same way in which today, some 80 years later, his house is found, set among these other buildings which remain deprived of sun, sky and green (fig. 10).

Building his own home, for this architect, meant finding himself with the Lost Paradise once more, given that “in the years that were to come, everything would change. Dark and austere houses, rooms facing North with no sun and no terraces would come later. On the horizon of my exile, all I could see were gloomy courtyards, where dishevelled woman would shake the dust-off rugs in the mornings, hang out the washing to dry in the afternoons: there were no geraniums or oleanders in the balconies, just boxes, dead chickens, grey concrete walls, and above all, a feeling of sadness and frustration. The exile in the land of men”²⁹. In his house, the architect managed to create a beautiful place, a private world reminiscing that of his childhood, in which the everyday actions -those of a child of that era, those of the man-architect-painter of the time- became almost sacred, immaculate and pure. The childhood of the man, the childhood of the era, rediscovered.

From the first images -in which we can see a scrawny tree against the background of the white wall- the terraces became, over time and with great care, fresh, pleasant hanging gardens full of flowers, because “the efforts made to plant and look after the garden over time will be duly rewarded”³⁰. The cherry tree continues to grow and blossom, and the architect proudly shows it off in a series of photographs taken over the years (fig. 11).

A strict Catholic, with a profound Franciscan faith, of anti-hierarchical convictions and with a strong desire to return to Paleo Christian roots³¹ (fig. 12), the architect finally lets nature invade the patios as he would affirm in later life: “I myself wanted to be surrounded by a forest. In reality, this house has become a purification ritual. So many geometric architects and engineers have ended up quashing nature through their architecture. I, on the other hand (or at least I have tried to) have let nature rule my architecture. Perhaps “rule” is too strong a word, but gently rule or even warmly embrace”³². It is quite possible that he envisaged the hand of the Creator in the birds that flew in, and out of the plants and trees that invaded his home.

This embrace with nature has been present not only in the architect’s construction of this house, but also as a “new way of living and acting collectively”³³. This work -which at the time was offered as a prototype to be repeated- ended up, in the life and artistic activity of its owner, a sacred place, a temple for the daily practice of poetry, because “The Christian God does not prohibit Man from trying to reconstruct, albeit desperately, innocently or ingeniously, “by heart” (from past memories, as he wants to bring the disappeared beloved into his present life), a provisional ima3, however pale, meagre or untrue may it be, of the Lost Paradise”³⁴.

Anna Martínez Durán

Architect (1989), PhD in Architectural Projects from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia (2008), with the thesis "The House of the Architect". Professor in the Polytechnic University of Catalonia (1991-1998) and the Ramon Llull University (1998- current year) in different educational subjects, linked to composition and design, of bachelor, master and doctorate degrees. She develops her research in the field of architectural projects, in the Investigation of Mediterranean Architecture (IAM), Group of Integrated Architectural Research (IAR).
Orcid ID 0000-0001-7544-3250

Fabiola Meignen Martínez

Architect from the Simón Bolívar University, Venezuela (2010), Master in Structural Analysis of Monuments and Historical Constructions from the University of Minho, Portugal and the Polytechnic University of Catalonia (2014). Master in Landscape Architecture from the Hochschule Anhalt, Germany (2016). Currently a PhD student at the architecture school of La Salle, Ramon Llull University, in the Industrial Doctorate program, in collaboration with the company Mothership, Group "La Casa por el Tejado", carrying out a doctoral project about the implementation of greenery in intermediate spaces of the Mediterranean housing in the city of Barcelona. She researches and collaborates in the Investigation of Mediterranean Architecture (IAM), Group of Integrated Architectural Research (IAR).
Orcid ID 0000-0003-3403-1246

Notes

01. FIGINI, Luigi, *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione*, Quaderni di Domus n. 7 Ed. Domus, Milán, 1950, p. 27.
02. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
03. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
04. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
05. GREGOTTI, Vittorio, "Un prisma di cielo", A.A.V.V, in *Luigi Figini-Gino Pollini. Opera completa*, Ed. Electa, Milán, 1996, p. 23.
06. Although he signed this construction alone, Luigi Figini worked from 1926 - the year in which he completed his studies with Gino Pollini, and both formed part of the Gruppo 7 studio.
07. F. Melotti was the brother of Gino Pollini's wife. A poet, painter and sculptor, whose works can be seen in different works of the Milanese architects: bar Craja 1930, villa-studio for an artist 1933, or the Campari restaurant 1937.

08. FIGINI, Luigi, *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione*, Quaderni di Domus n. 7 Ed. Domus, Milán, 1950, p. 7.
09. FIGINI, Luigi, *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione*, Quaderni di Domus n. 7 Ed. Domus, Milán, 1950, p. 74.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
12. Gegé Bottinelli and Luigi Figini exhibited their photographs at the V Trienal de Milan in 1933, together with ManRay, Hans Arp, Max Ernst, and Moholy-Nagy.
13. Manuscript of the notebook of Luigi Figini, in: DE CARLI, Margherita, "Lo spazio segreto", *Ottagono*, 1993, n. 108, p. 63.
14. ACERBONI, Francesca, in POSTIGLIONE, Gennaro (ed), One hundred houses for one hundred european architects of the twentieth century, Ed. Taschen, Colonia, 2004, pp. 124-127.

15. GRESLERI, Giuliano, "Minnesänger, il cantore d'amore. Prime note sul pittore Luigi Figini", A.A.V.V, in *Luigi Figini-Gino Pollini. Opera completa*, op. cit., pp. 467-482.
16. FIGINI, Luigi, "Appunti per una casa", *Quadrante*, 1936, n. 33, in SAVI, Vittorio, *Figini e Pollini. Architetture 1927-1989*, Ed. Electa, Milán 1990, p. 133.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. In this case -as in many other similar cases- the house that the architect designs for his personal use is used as an example to be repeated on a greater scale, to be use in large-scale housing developments. See MARTINEZ, Anna, *La casa del arquitecto*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Universidad Politécnica Catalunya, 2008.
20. FIGINI, Luigi, *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione*, Quaderni di Domus n. 7 Ed. Domus, Milano, 1950, p. 74.
21. FIGINI, Luigi, "Appunti per una casa", *Quadrante*, 1936, n. 33, in SAVI, Vittorio, *Figini e Pollini. Architetture 1927-1989*, Ed. Electa, Milán 1990, p. 133.
22. FIGINI, Luigi, *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione*, op. cit., p. 73. Richard Neutra also provides written instructions on how to avoid the visuals on mechanical elements, in his book *Mystery and Realities of the Site*.
23. FIGINI, Luigi, "Appunti per una casa", *Quadrante*, 1936, n. 33, in SAVI, Vittorio, op. cit., p. 133.
24. FIGINI, Luigi, *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione*, Quaderni di Domus n. 7 Ed. Domus, Milán, 1950, p. 28.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
31. POLIN, Giacomo, "Five memos for Figini & Pollini", A.A.V.V, en *Luigi Figini-Gino Pollini. Opera completa*, Ed. Electa, Milán, 1996, p. 169.
32. Case che durano. "L'abitazione di un architetto, 1935", *Abitare*, 1978, n. 167, p. 39. Similar thoughts are found in the experience of living, and the relationship with the garden in the house of Tacubaya, by Luis Barragán. See MARTÍNEZ, Anna, *La casa del arquitecto*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Universidad Politécnica Catalunya, 2008.
33. FIGINI, L., "Appunti per una casa", op. cit., p. 133.
34. FIGINI, Luigi, *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione*, Quaderni di Domus n. 7 Ed. Domus, Milán, 1950, p. 8.

Images

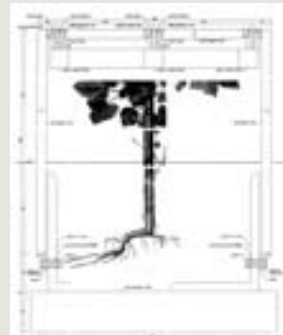
01. Figini House in Milan. The dining room from the terrace.
02. The terrace-garden on the upper floor.
03. Luigi Figini and Gegé Bottinelli in the Villa.
04. The green element and the house.
05. The living room from the terrace.
06. Gege Bottinelli and Luigi Figini on the terrace of the room.
07. The terraces on the upper floor.
08. The garden terrace on the second floor.
09. Cuts of green, water, and sky.
10. Aerial view of Villa Figini.
11. The garden terrace on the second floor.
12. View of the garden terrace from the living room.

13

Nature as a Constructive Experiment. Japanese Pavilion for the 11th Venice Biennale (Junya Ishigami, 2008)

Ángela Juarranz

The work of Junya Ishigami has been a frequent object of study in the context of close-to-nature architecture, an area of interest shared by the constellation of Japanese architects between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. This article looks at the work of Ishigami with a specific focus on nature as a construction laboratory, in line with the dual purpose of pieces to be exhibited in galleries or to be formalized as architecture. This parallel approach allows us to discuss the functionality of strategies that focus on the material implementation of permanent mediums that, however, only reach their goal as a temporary art installation. The case study chosen is “Extreme Nature: Landscape of Ambiguous Spaces”; the project designed by Ishigami for the Japanese Pavilion in the 11th *Mostra Internazionale di Architettura* at the *Biennale di Venezia* in 2008.



BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE; THE BLURRING OF THE BOUNDARY

Extreme Nature: Landscape of Ambiguous Spaces was the installation designed by the architect Junya Ishigami (Kanazawa, 1974) for the Japanese Pavilion in the 11th *Mostra Internazionale di Architettura* at the *Biennale di Venezia* in 2008. The piece by Ishigami, the youngest of the “Japanese constellation”, represented the theme provided by the director of the biennale, Aaron Betsky, “Out There: Architecture Beyond Building”, yet it also proposed spaces that envisaged a new architecture. Four metal and glass structures outside the main pavilion took on the role of greenhouses while also constituting a complementary landscape to the pavilion itself. The pieces contained different ecosystems, so their size depended on the needs of light and growth of the plants. Also, the concentration of vegetation in each of the spaces was such that the density generated inside and outside was equivalent. The photographs of the garden show how the greenhouses, due to their size, material quality, and atmosphere, blurred the boundaries of the volumes and defined a new, unified landscape (fig. 02).