

A place called “Il Gualdo” (1965)

An account of the "Il Gualdo" project at Punta Ala

ROBERTO MAESTRO

Abstract: The project – the Gualdo – was among those of greatest interest, at the beginning of the 1960s, to the nascent public awareness of environmental issues. This tourist village, situated in what was the most pristine part of the Maremma at the time, consisted in a vast fabric of private homes served by collective functions and enriched by common spaces. The project was initially contested by those with the future of the natural environment of the Tuscan Maremma at heart; this contrast was resolved precisely by Quaroni, commissioned with its design. His underlying idea and that of his collaborators was to experiment with a nucleus marked by an urban quality and conceived by comparing reflections on the Mediterranean habitat with the rapid social dynamics of coeval Italy. The author, involved from the outset in the design and construction of this settlement in the pinewoods of the Maremma, takes us directly into Ludovico Quaroni’s workshop.

Keywords: Mediterranean habitat, environmentalism, private home fabric, Tuscan Maremma.

Whenever I take another look at the Gualdo project, I start remembering all the mistakes that were made. This does not mean that I think the project was wrong in itself, but I reckon that, by some strange alchemical reaction, the series of mistakes produced an architecture that is interesting and pleasant to live in. I am speaking from personal experience: I bought one of the apartments and my family and I spend a large part of our summer holidays there. Things don’t always work out this way, where designers grow to like the houses they have designed; when I paid a visit to the Siedlung Halen in Berne, I found that the architects who had designed it no longer lived in their apartments, preferring to rent them out to tourists and live in normal houses. I wondered if the defects in the Gualdo project cancelled themselves out, like when a flaw in an organism leads to a reaction that produces a capability which compensates for the defect. I prefer to believe, however, that it was the continual changes made to the original design that led to the results we can see today.

Would the project have turned out better if we had abided by the original idea, or rather, ideas? We have to take on board the fact that many of the initial ideas were mistaken, and we became aware of this

immediately. One of the units of twelve houses (unit H) was built on a provisional basis, as a test case. That being so, we had the means to correct the defects. There is no doubt that certain of the changes, which were carried out at a later stage, were an improvement on the initial design, especially when we could still maintain a degree of control. Other defects escaped our notice and can be considered a real disfigurement, one from which our project needs to be strongly protected.

But let's take things in order: the original position assigned to Ludovico Quaroni was as a temporary planning consultant. The Punta Ala company had been censured by environmentalists after a building had been constructed to the designs of Vito Sonzogni, an architect from Bergamo.¹ The urban plan drawn up by engineer Valdemaro Barbetta envisaged, for the area of Gualdo (one of the few areas under cultivation) a series of condominium buildings up to seven storeys high, which were supposed to create what was called 'a city-effect' in a region that was practically a desert. Rather than a 'city-effect', the construction of this huge condominium produced an 'earthquake-effect': work on the site was stopped and the original designers were replaced by Ignazio Gardella, and Ludovico Quaroni for the planning.

The whole Punta Ala operation underwent radical changes; we understood that what was supposed to be 'billionaires' bay' or 'paradise for sale' had to be adapted for a clientele of lesser means. Maybe we realised that billionaires do not like living together on top of one another in a sort of housing estate, be it ever so luxurious. The new Gualdo project was the outcome of all this re-thinking. The houses were no longer to be separate villas, should not be more than 100 m² in area, and should be congregated in some kind of vague 'village'. Naturally the Punta Ala company would accept no reduction in the volume of the site, as set out in the original design. On paper it was decided that this volume (the cubic volume) could be achieved with lower houses, of one to three storeys, arranged, as it was called at the time, to form a 'pattern'. This solution had in any case been put forward by many architects of the time, such as Candilis, Libera, Mies, and others.

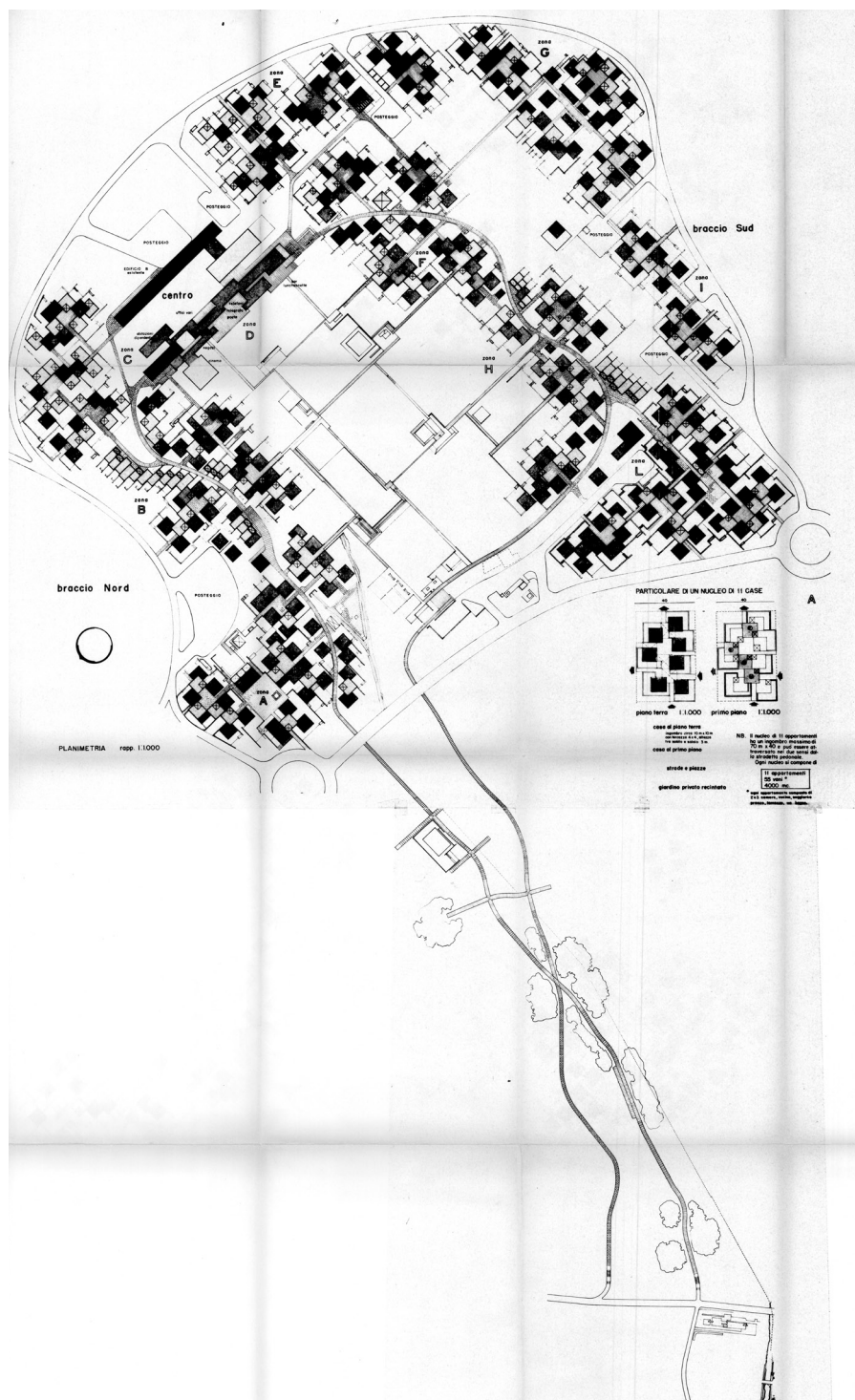
1. 'Cronaca storico-tecnica dell'intervento' by Walter di Salvo. Subsequently the Quaroni group were also allocated the architectural design of sections.

We both had designing experience in Africa: Quaroni in Tunis and myself in Bizerte. We knew the limitations of the traditional type of habitat there, with houses arranged around courtyards – out of the question in Italy, especially in a situation like this one. People who go to the seaside for a holiday do not want to be shut up within four walls. Even in Tunisia under Bourguiba, this housing model came under critical review. Yet if one tried to suggest designs that modified the internal arrangements of the traditional houses, there was hell to pay: people refused to live in them. Even if the Tunisian leaders were trying hard to make their country resemble as much as possible the countries on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, it was difficult, or even pointless, to attempt to change the ingrained habits of the inhabitants by altering the design of their houses.

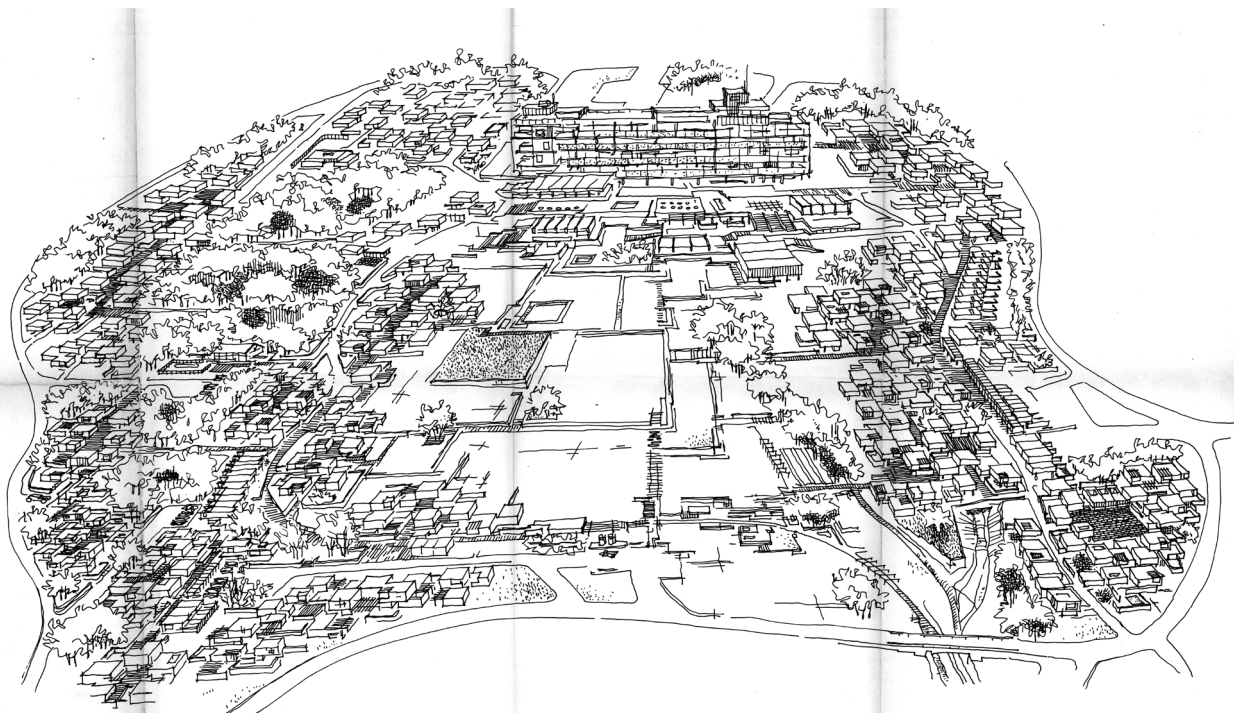
Tunisia was the place where Quaroni and I strengthened our ties of friendship and exchanged information on our work. I was thinking of a grouping of several single-family houses, joined together and facing on to a communal space, a kind of piazza open on four sides. I must have kept somewhere the notes I had made in Tunisia, as well as those I took during working sessions with Quaroni. I remember his ideas about keeping the model repetitive, to simplify the work of the builder, and the need to personalise each house so that its owner would recognise it. This he managed to do by giving the outside of each house a different colour, and different arrangements of terraces and gardens. I also remember his ideas on the number twelve, which he felt was the ideal number of families needed to form a mini-society. Perhaps he was thinking of the miniam, the smallest number of adults necessary to make up a prayer group, according to Jewish tradition.

Quaroni had an idea about architectural design that derived from his experience in the Rome film-making school. Team work involved a clear division between each member's area of expertise, and he saw himself as somewhere between director and scriptwriter. I have written about this elsewhere and don't want to repeat myself. When it came to the architectural design (put simply, at a scale of 1:50), he let me get on with it, apart from then stepping in to deal with the designing of details.

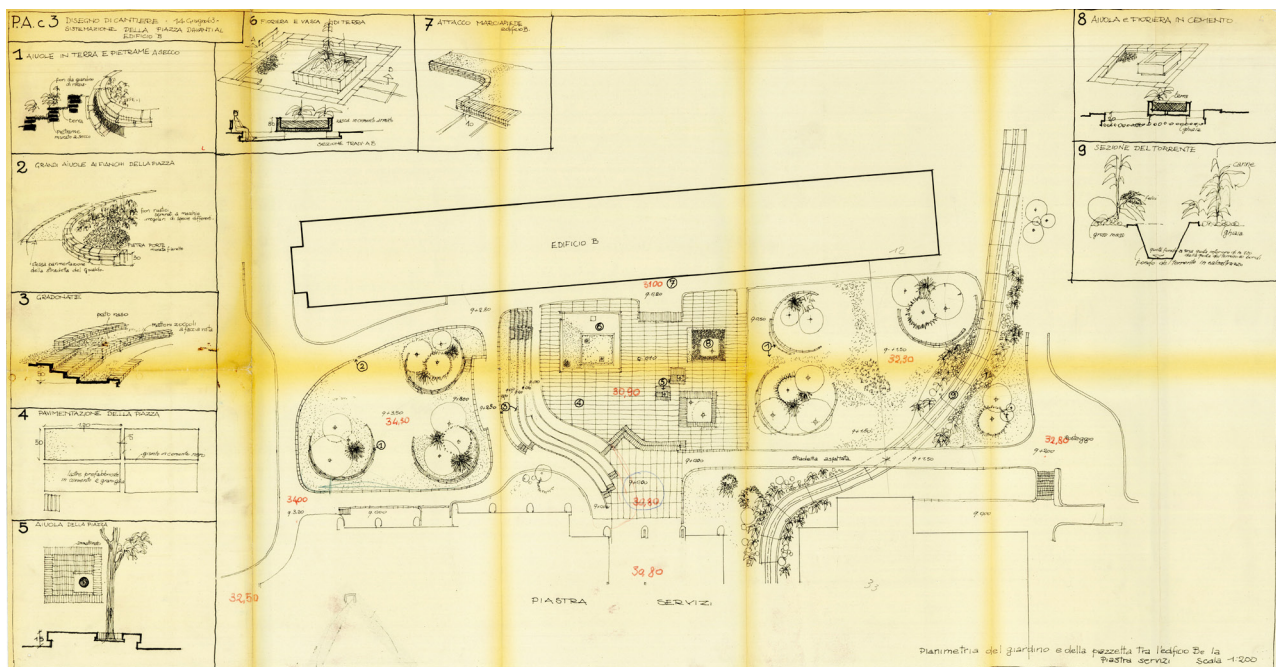
He wanted to choose his collaborators in the same way as a film



Planimetric drawing of Gualdo (zone H in the center). Courtesy of Roberto Maestro's private archive



Birdview of Gualdo. Courtesy of Roberto Maestro's private archive



Detail drawings of one dwelling at Gualdo. Courtesy of Roberto Maestro's private archive

director chooses a certain actor for a part in a film, without asking for anyone's opinion. I recall that I didn't like this very much at the time, and in particular I didn't share his fondness for the 'neo-liberty' style. I was more inclined towards a simpler architecture, much more 'Mediterranean'; in other words, closer to the Tunisian architecture that had been our original inspiration, rather than that of Gabetti or Isola. For the Gualdo project he assigned the designing of the details to Gilberto Orioli, a very capable architect from Emilia who had recently been one of his graduates.

After all these years I have to acknowledge the fact that one really couldn't offer a brand of 'poor architecture' to someone wanting to buy a house on one of the most elegant places on the Tuscan coast.

Yet I remember being irritated by all that twisted ironwork and the affectedness of certain of the details in prefabricated concrete. I realise now that I had an idea of architectural design that was a bit 'rougher'. In the Gualdo project I wanted to make everything square, which was a shape that somehow fascinated me (both squares and cubes). Something of this 'style' of mine can still be seen at Il Gualdo, submerged by all the alterations introduced by the residents over the last fifty years.

What has not survived is the idea of a compact city organised around square courtyards; the housing units are scattered at a distance from each other. The loggias that were supposed to overlook the central piazza have been closed up by awnings and dense climbing plants; this is also due to the fact that a condominium of twelve people is hardly an ideal community. As was said at the time, it didn't work with Jesus and his twelve apostles either. At a certain point Quaroni had one of his frequent second-thoughts: he decided to replace the units of twelve apartments with groups of terraced houses, and he had the idea of assigning the effective design of them to other people in the studio (also because I didn't agree). In other words it appeared that the original design had come a cropper when faced with people refusing to go and 'live in a souk' – "too introspective, no privacy", and so on. However, people's tastes, luckily, change over the span of a few years. This was almost 1968 and people were beginning to be aware of another style of living, more informal and less individualistic. The children of those

house-owners who had fought so fiercely in their condominium meetings ended up befriending each other. These ties of friendship still exist after all these years and have made living together less insufferable. Yet that informal community of friends that we thought we were creating at Il Gualdo never happened. A good example of this can be seen in unit H1, the first to be built: in the middle of the condominium piazza a flower garden had been planted with a circular bench where one could sit and chat in the shade of a weeping willow (*salix babilonica*). The willow had been replaced by a dense hedge, so the only way you could sit on the bench was to sit with your back to it.

I know Quaroni was considered a 'master of doubt' (a definition I personally did not like), but in the case of Il Gualdo, I expressed my doubts on, or rather my criticisms of, that original model in a letter I sent to him asking him to correct, if he saw fit, those things I regarded as errors. But he laughed it off and let the Gualdo project go ahead more or less as I had designed it, apart from the necessary adjustments requested by the purchasers, or which were from time to time added by the site supervisor. If we had adopted Quaroni's method, the list of those who had collaborated on the project, like in the cinema, would have included many more names than I am able to remember. Some of them certainly had a role in the project equally important to my own – Walter di Salvo for the 'service platform', Francesco Piemontese, who directed the work on the housing units, not to mention Aldo Ponis, Gabriella Esposito, Silvia Paoli and other friends who took turns working with us in the studio in Via Nizza in Rome. Nowadays I try to understand, without false modesty, what role I played in the projects of the Via Nizza Studio. Also because an examination of the original design could bring to light a list of errors, great and small, that would be even longer than the one I had compiled in my letter of criticism. I remember that when I commented that Il Gualdo was too 'built up', too 'walled in', Quaroni replied that I wasn't picturing the effect that the trees and plants in all the gardens would have. He was right there: at least as long as the people charged with creating the gardens were capable and intelligent and didn't plant trees like thujas or firs or even more exotic vegetation that would be totally out of place in the Tuscan landscape.

I ask myself if Il Gualdo was a illustrative example of Quaroni's

idea that an architectural project should be a team effort, where each person involved is personally responsible and free, within certain limits, to work out his own ideas. Can we really say that the experiment was completely successful? Personally, I think that what was missing in the project was, in fact, firm leadership. Leadership could be replaced by teamwork, but Quaroni, as I have said, preferred to divide up the tasks and let his collaborators work unimpeded, apart from replacing them when he wasn't happy with their work. He gave himself the job of screenwriter, or maybe we could say of a benign prompter for a screenplay where he often lost track of the plot. If the associate was in tune with his ideas, the work went well, or was even improved; otherwise, a botched job was the result, a muddle that Quaroni was the first to consider unsatisfactory.

Gualdo took many years to build and entailed several changeovers in management and among the different construction companies involved. The control wielded by our Rome studio over modifications to the project, some of which were indispensable, was considerably slackened after a setback in our relationship with Pesenti, who had become the owner of the Punta Ala company.²

From our original designs there remained the overall housing plan based on a grid of squares measuring 10.5 metres per side. The area was marked out in full with pegs on site, to pinpoint prominent trees and plants and correct the position of the houses accordingly. The twelve-house unit was modified to save the vegetation. We understood at once that apartments on the ground floor had to have bigger gardens, and could not face exclusively on to the courtyard of the condominium.³

The number of floors, which should have increased progressively from one to three so as to cover the Delfino condominium, stayed at two, as in the original unit. It was decided to reduce the impact of the 'Delfino' by limiting its height⁴ and building a shopping centre in front in the form of a double structure on two floors. This is a model of orga-

2. Carlo Pesenti, the proprietor of Punta Ala decided to sever connections with Quaroni.

3. The thinning out of the housing units and the reduction in height caused a reduction in the overall cubic volume.

4. The fact that the construction site was discontinued was the reason behind the broken skyline of the Delfino condominium.

nising space that I have subsequently had the opportunity of investigating on other projects. The pedestrian road serving the units runs into the building, consisting of shops on two floors; these shops were originally devised as being allocated one to each unit. The new arrangement has made the 'service platform' the centre of the composition and the place where all the residents of Gualdo pass through and meet each other, and has created that 'city' effect that the designers were asked to produce right from the beginning. We mistakenly believed that the underground level would be big enough to park all the cars, but we realised immediately that a space four times as large was needed. So the car parks were put inside the central area, which was supposed to be a pedestrian-only public garden. This central area is perhaps the part that was subject to the most alterations. I believe that the present placement of two tennis courts, reducing the available space by half, was not the happiest of choices. However, the construction of a condominium building has quite recently been sidelined; the swimming pool with bar further down has been recently transformed into a restaurant, which has filled the pool basin with earth and planted trees.

I realise today that we Italian architects, accustomed to living in ancient cities, underestimated the impact of the car when it came to redesigning new cities. Il Gualdo, in our view, should have remained a pedestrian-only zone, like the villages and towns we loved and which we used as models. In the residential area, the cars were camouflaged somehow, in among the housing units, but this was not possible in the commercial section; if you are out buying things, you want to have your car nearby so as not to walk too far with bags of shopping. In the US, sure enough, you don't see cars parked in the streets of the more elegant residential districts, because every house has its own covered garage, and in the shopping centres, there are vast underground multi-storey car parks. However, I don't want to harp on any more than is necessary about the mistakes to the detriment of the good points. It has to be said, though, that not all the good points are due to the intelligence of the designers – some choices were forced on them as times changed. There came a time when it was no longer politic to flaunt excessive wealth, and we had to say goodbye to ideas like 'billionaires' bay'. Incidentally, I remember the panic caused when a group of Sardinian shepherds arrived who were

of a mind to graze their flocks on the golf course. The luxurious, isolated villas had become a too-easy target for thieves and other undesirables. Il Gualdo was a kind of labyrinth full of interconnecting pedestrian walkways where it was easy to get lost (even for the finance police).

There remains one question to which I would like to try to give an answer. How important were my ideas on the choices that were made in the Via Nizza studio, and, especially, why did these ideas hold sway over the ideas of other designers who were much more experienced than I was? I was without a doubt a very good designer, but my designs were not better than those of Antonio Quistelli, who was much more skilled than me in defending his ideas. Today I think it was because, when I wanted my proposals to be accepted, I presented a 'scale model' (or more than one) which was usually more convincing than a hundred drawings. These were models constructed rapidly out of Bristol cardboard, cut with a cobbler's knife. Even when we presented the project for the Turin Business District, for the publication Quaroni preferred Quistelli's designs to mine, which he considered too futuristic. Yet the idea, which won the public competition with the title 'Acropolis Nine', was mine, even if it was altered by Quaroni who wanted the skyscrapers all at the same height. The same went for the Casilino project and others that we designed in those years. Quaroni used to laugh at us Tuscans when we over-used the word 'thing' and its derivatives, like 'thingummy', 'thingamajig', et cetera, but in that situation, a 'thing' (the scale model) ended up getting the better of thousands of other ideas. 'A thing is done, there's an end to it', it once was said, and this is true even when it happens that the things done have no ends, nor beginnings. Could this be true even for this 'thing' born more than half a century ago?

Today I think I can say that a project is valid only if it is founded on a sound constructive idea that allows it to put up with all the variations that may be imposed on it at a later stage. The type of city we had in mind at the time and which we took as our model was the medieval city.⁵ A city made up of houses that were very much alike, based on a simple design, where the inhabitants could find ways of enhancing

5. Quaroni believed the medieval city to be the ideal form of habitat, which had never been surpassed.

the configuration of their houses with alterations, additions and inventions which broke the monotony of the whole. Unfortunately in today's world, people have been seduced by what is offered by the market and the media. To avoid possible exaggerations and grotesque additions, Quaroni thought of providing the house-owners with a kind of catalogue of architectural details and external decorations, designed by our studio or selected from those mass-produced on the market, which could be added to the existing architecture. But this idea never saw the light of day either (like many others we thought up at the time).⁶ All things considered, from this angle the Gualdo project can be considered a success: the subsequent alterations and additions have not distorted the urban setting, which is still visible today; this proves that one can build a residential district or even a piece of a city which is governed by a single 'design'⁷, without descending into the monotony so evident in so many of the planned housing projects constructed in recent years. Above all – and to me this is what is of prime importance – with Il Gualdo we architects invented one of those 'places' that we have always tried to create within a modern urban context, which almost always takes the form of a certain number of houses. Even with all its defects, Il Gualdo is not a 'place with no qualities'. The young people from the Philippines, India and other parts of the world, who work for Italian families, have made the central garden (even though reduced to a third of its size) into a place to hang out together on Sundays. These are law-abiding, quiet people who have chosen Il Gualdo quite naturally as the only possible place to spend their free time. And this is also true for their employers, the 'ladies and gentlemen', who get tired and bored of living in their villas and find the central space a place where they can meet each other, have a coffee, have a chat with acquaintances. Nothing very special, but something that is more and more difficult to find in today's cities. Maybe this is all it takes to show that the idea that guided the designing and building of Il Gualdo is still a valid one.

6. The Via Nizza studio had never had the experience of Ignazio Gardella in the field of industrial design.

7. The word 'design' is used here in the sense of 'a project guided by a single objective'.

