

# North West Milan: the Cascina Merlata Project

text by Simona Galateo

## Milano Nord Ovest:

### il progetto di Cascina Merlata

Mai come negli ultimi anni Milano si è trovata a essere al centro dei più importanti investimenti, nazionali e internazionali, in ambito urbano del nostro paese. Un cambiamento che lentamente ha modificato il suo paesaggio, il suo intero skyline, i modi e gli usi di un rinnovato e sempre più presente spazio pubblico. Una città che ha trovato nei vuoti dei suoi margini la possibilità di sperimentare e costruire nuovi spazi dell'abitare, come risposta a una pressione immobiliare sempre più in crescita. In questo scenario generale si colloca il progetto dell'area di Cascina Merlata e il suo successo di mercato. In parte esito ed eredità dell'Expo 2015 – sulla cui area presto nascerà MIND, il Milano Innovation District –, in parte una nuova, vera e propria, trasformazione urbana in un brano di città, il progetto è stato pensato all'insegna di una rigenerazione attenta ai temi della sostenibilità, ma soprattutto attuato con un modello di gestione del tutto innovativo.

Situata in una posizione strategica, Cascina Merlata si trova a stretto contatto con l'area di MIND e lungo l'asse di sviluppo Nord Ovest, che oggi rappresenta uno dei campi più intensi di trasformazione territoriale e i cui effetti sono destinati a farsi sentire nell'intera regione urbana milanese, oltre che alla scala cittadina locale, connessa a un sistema di scambi dalla vocazione fortemente internazionale.

Esito di un concorso a inviti, vinto dalla cordata Citterio-Viel, Caputo Partnership e MCA Mario Cucinella Architects, il disegno del masterplan risale al 2008, approvato poi nel 2011 con successive varianti, per una superficie di 55 ettari, e includeva il Villaggio EXPO (ridisegnato in un secondo momento al piano terra dallo studio CZA Cino Zucchi Architetti), pensato per essere riutilizzato e trasformato nell'attuale Social Village. A corredo del masterplan è stato prodotto anche un Piano di Coordinamento le cui linee guida hanno definito alcuni parametri morfologici e tipologici da seguire nel tentativo di garantire una certa uniformità dei singoli interventi al quadro generale del progetto. Lo sviluppo del masterplan fin dalla sua prima stesura è frutto dello stretto rapporto e continuo confronto tra la proprietà EuroMilano, i progettisti, i diversi stakeholders e il Comune di Milano.

L'ambizione era costruire un nuovo brano di città non solo all'insegna dei più recenti dettami della sostenibilità ambientale smart, ma anche capace di essere una nuova polarità urbana, soprattutto per il contesto urbano locale esistente e futuro.

Con questi presupposti, è stato necessario adottare un modello di gestione e di sviluppo dell'area diverso, più simile ai processi di valorizzazione di rendita finanziaria che di semplice vendita al dettaglio dei lotti o degli immobili, una modalità del tutto nuova nel panorama immobiliare milanese.

It is only in the last few years that Milan has become the target of major investments, at the national and international level, in Italy's urban development. It is a change that is slowly altering the landscape and skyline of Milan, as well as the exploitation and uses of a recent and growing availability of public space. A city that has found in the vacant lots of the former industrial plants in its outlying districts the possibility to experiment and build new homes in response to increasing demand. In this general scenario, the Cascina Merlata area project and its success on the market is a good example. In part, it is a product and certainly the inheritance of Expo 2015 – where MIND, the Milano Innovation District will soon be built, bringing a significant urban transformation to a section of the city. The project was developed with a view to regeneration, with attention to such concerns as sustainability, but above all enacted as a model of innovative management.

Located in a strategic position, Cascina Merlata borders on the area of MIND and along the North West development axis that is now one of the most intense districts of territorial transformation, the effects of which will be felt in the entire Milanese urban region, not just in the city proper, and linked to a system of interchanges with a strongly international vocation. The result of a competition by invitation, won by the group formed by Citterio-Viel, Caputo Partnership and MCA Mario Cucinella Architects, the design of the masterplan goes back to 2008, and was later approved in 2011 with subsequent amendments, for an area of 55 hectares (1,360 acres).

Simona Galateo Ph.D. architect and curator, has studied Architecture at the Faculty of Ferrara, Urban Studies at Brighton University, obtained a Master of II level in Urban Design and has completed the doctorate in research in Projecting Architectural and Urban environments at the Politecnico di Milano. She has edited books and written articles for journals, magazines and online, including *Abitare*, *Domus*, *Arquitectura Viva*, *Artribune*, *Il Manifesto*. She has curated numerous exhibitions on the main topics of contemporary architecture, exhibited at the Italian Pavilion of the XII<sup>th</sup> Biennale di Architettura di Venezia as co-curator with prof. Luca Molinari and at the Triennale di Milano. In the last few years she has conducted research on the issues of urban regeneration and landscape. She is the editor of the editorial project Fondazione FOAM by the Foundation of the Order of Architects in Milan.

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Overview of the area, looking at the Community Center in the foreground, and Mind area in the background.  
©Courtesy EuroMilano.

In the following pages:  
The Social Village, one of the buildings.  
©Gaia Cambiaggi, Anna Positano/Studio Campo (left).  
R7 building.  
©Gaia Cambiaggi, Anna Positano/Studio Campo (top right).  
Overview of the central park. ©Francesco Tomasinelli (bottom right).

E in questo modello sono tre i fattori che hanno giocato un ruolo fondamentale sin da subito: il disegno dello spazio pubblico, una certa varietà delle architetture e il public engagement. Nonostante il masterplan abbia subito diversi cambiamenti nel corso dei primi anni, volutamente è stata mantenuta ferma la presenza di un corridoio centrale all'area destinato a parco pubblico, recuperando la cascina storica esistente, già attiva durante i mesi dell'EXPO, e concentrando le volumetrie lungo i bordi dell'area, attraversata solo da percorsi ciclabili e pedonali. Il parco pubblico, sapientemente progettato da Franco Giorgetta e Giovanna Longhi, aperto al tessuto urbano circostante, fin da subito è diventato il cuore pulsante del nuovo quartiere, quando ancora gli unici abitanti erano concentrati solo nel Social Village. I piani terra dei diversi lotti centrali sono stati pensati per essere più permeabili possibili, in una commistione tra spazi privati asserviti a uso pubblico e spazi pubblici, in diretto contatto con il parco centrale e il sistema di viabilità ciclo-pedonale e stradale, che corre lungo i bordi esterni dell'area. A coronare il disegno degli spazi aperti c'è una densità di volumetrie a dir poco ardita, frutto di numerosi concorsi a invito, a firma di alcuni dei più importanti studi italiani (tra cui ZDA Zanetti Design Architettura, Scandurrastudio, Labics, MAB Arquitectura, Citterio-Viel, C+S Architects), destinate a diverse tipologie di residenze (social housing, convenzionata, libera e in affitto) e servizi, per i residenti ma anche per tutti i cittadini. Una certa mixité è stata raggiunta monitorando e adattando usi e funzioni nel corso del tempo, strategia oggi necessaria per la buona riuscita di un progetto urbano di queste dimensioni.

It included the EXPO Village (redesigned later on the ground floor by CZA Cino Zucchi Architeti), intended for reuse and transformed into what is now the Social Village. Alongside the masterplan, a plan of coordination was also produced, with guidelines that defined certain morphological and typological parameters to be followed in an attempt to ensure some uniformity to the individual works within the general framework of the project. The development of the masterplan from the first draft is the product of a close relationship and continuous contact between the owner, EuroMilano, the architects of the project, the other stakeholders and the City of Milan. The plan was to build a new section of the city, which would not only follow the most recent guidelines of smart environmental sustainability but would also provide a new urban center, above all for the existing and future local district.





A completare il disegno del masterplan ci sono anche un plesso scolastico a firma di Onsitestudio e un grande centro commerciale sulla testata dell'area, verso MIND, in via di realizzazione. Tuttavia, è sul fronte del public engagement che l'ambiziosa sperimentazione di EuroMilano ha trovato un nuovo terreno da esplorare, ponendo al centro dell'attenzione la relazione tra spazio e società, e in particolare tra pratiche d'uso quotidiano dello spazio e processi sociali. Attraverso le strategie di placemaking, le dinamiche di community building e un approccio centrato sul social mix, la figura del developer ha assunto un ruolo più attivo e di non facile portata, tenendo conto della tipologia di investimento, della natura e delle condizioni a contorno del progetto (un nuovo intervento in un'area precedentemente non abitata e marginale, prossimo a grandi insediamenti storici e di progetto), con l'obiettivo, nel lungo periodo, di integrare l'intervento al tessuto urbano circostante e produrre quell'"effetto città" tanto voluto da tutti gli operatori immobiliari. A oggi il successo dell'operazione Cascina Merlata lo raccontano i numeri della risposta del mercato, dei suoi utenti e abitanti nell'area, nel modo in cui è entrata a far parte dei percorsi quotidiani della vita dei cittadini, non solo residenti nel quartiere ma in parte provenienti anche da tutta Milano, aprendo forse nuovi scenari all'abitare contemporaneo.

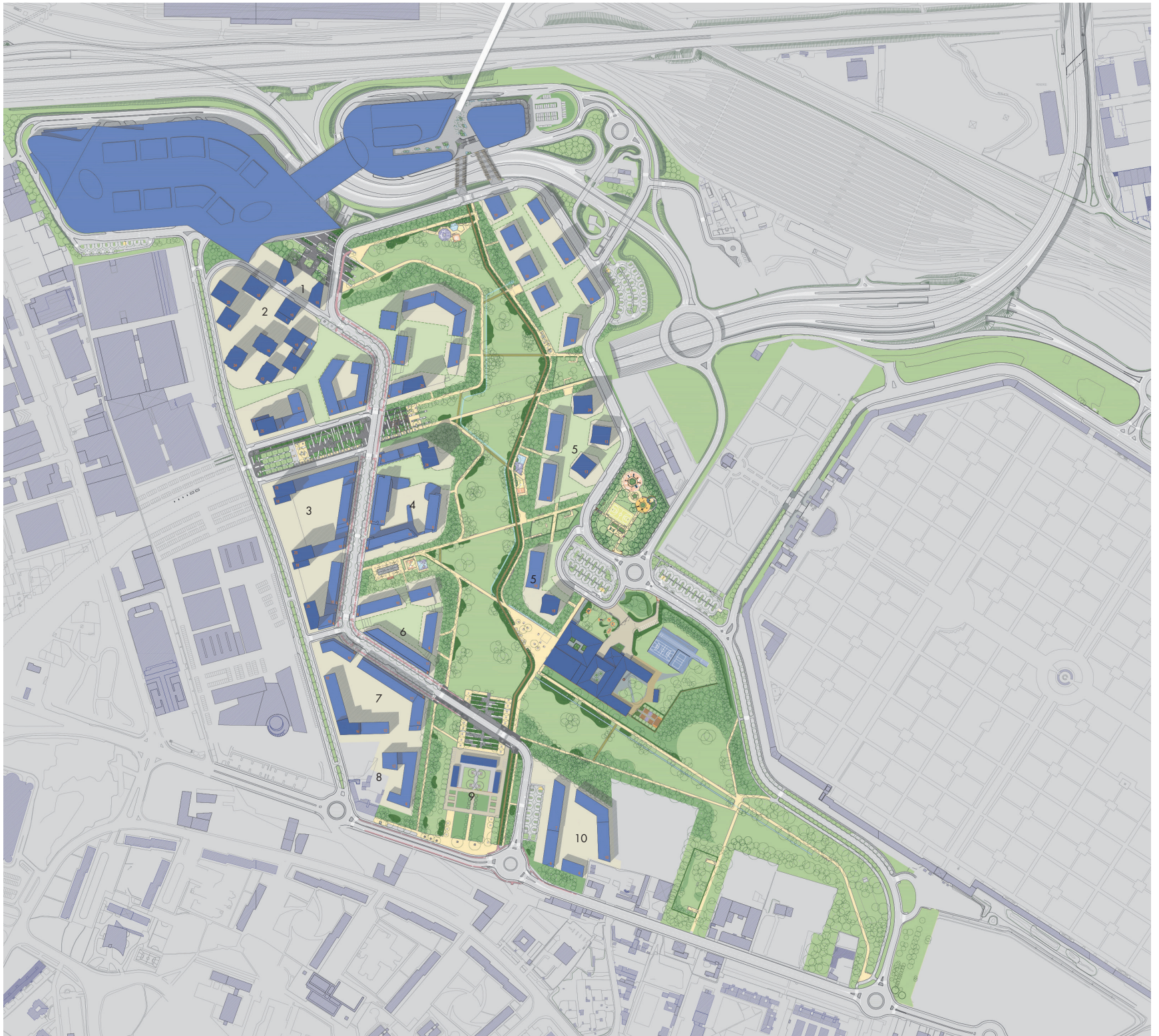
With these fundamentals in mind, it was necessary to apply a different model of management and development to the area, more similar to the processes of valorization of financial income than to the mere retail sale of building lots or houses, an entirely new way of managing the Milanese real estate market. Within this model, there were three factors that played an essential role from the outset: the design of public spaces, a certain variety of the architecture and public engagement. Although the masterplan had undergone a number of changes over the early years, a central corridor was purposely maintained and intended for use as a public park, occupying the area of the existing old farm buildings. It was already a reality during the months of the EXPO and, concentrating all the buildings along the borders of the area, it was traversed only by bike paths and pedestrian walkways. The public park, skillfully designed by Franco Giorgetta and Giovanna Longhi, open to the surrounding urban fabric, immediately became the real heart of the new district, even when its only inhabitants were the residents of the Social Village. The ground floors of the many central lots were meant to be as permeable as possible, in a mixture between private spaces at the service of the public and public spaces, in direct contact with the central park and system of bike paths and pedestrian walkways running along the outer edge of the area. Crowning the design of the open spaces is a density of volumes that we can only call bold, the result of many competitions by invitation, designed by some of the most important Italian architecture firms (including ZDA Zanetti Design Architettura, Scandurrastudio, Labics, MAB Arquitectura, Citterio-Viel, C+S Architects), intended for different types of residential housing (social housing, assisted housing agreements and freely rentable properties) and services, for the residents but also for all citizens.

A certain balance was achieved by monitoring and adapting uses and functions over time, a strategy that is necessary nowadays for the good success of an urban project of this size. Completing the design of the masterplan were also a number of school complexes designed by onsitestudio and a large shopping mall at one end of the area, toward MIND, currently under construction. However, it is in the matter of public engagement that the ambitious experimentation of EuroMilano has broken new ground, placing at the center of its attention the relationship between space and society, and in particular between practices of daily use of the spaces and social processes. Through strategies of placemaking, the dynamics of community building and an approach centered on the social mix, the figure of the developer is by no means an easy one in our time, taking account of the type of investment, the nature and conditions surrounding the project (new settlement in an area that was previously uninhabited and marginal, close to major historical and project settlements), with the long-term goal of integrating the area in the surrounding urban fabric and creating that "city effect" which all real estate developers consider so important. To date the success of the Cascina Merlata operations can be seen from the numbers of the market response, the users and inhabitants of the zone, in the way in which it has become part of the daily routes of city life, not only for the residents of the district but to some extent also coming from the entire Milan area, possibly opening new scenarios for contemporary living.









1. C+S

2. P-U-R-A, B22, CZA -  
Cino Zucchi Architetti,  
Teknoarc, MC A Mario  
Cucinella Architects,  
Luisa Cortese, Antonio  
Citterio Patricia Viel

3. Antonio Citterio  
Patricia Viel

4. MAB Architettura

5. Scandurra Studio,  
ZDA Zanetti Design  
Architettura

6. Labics

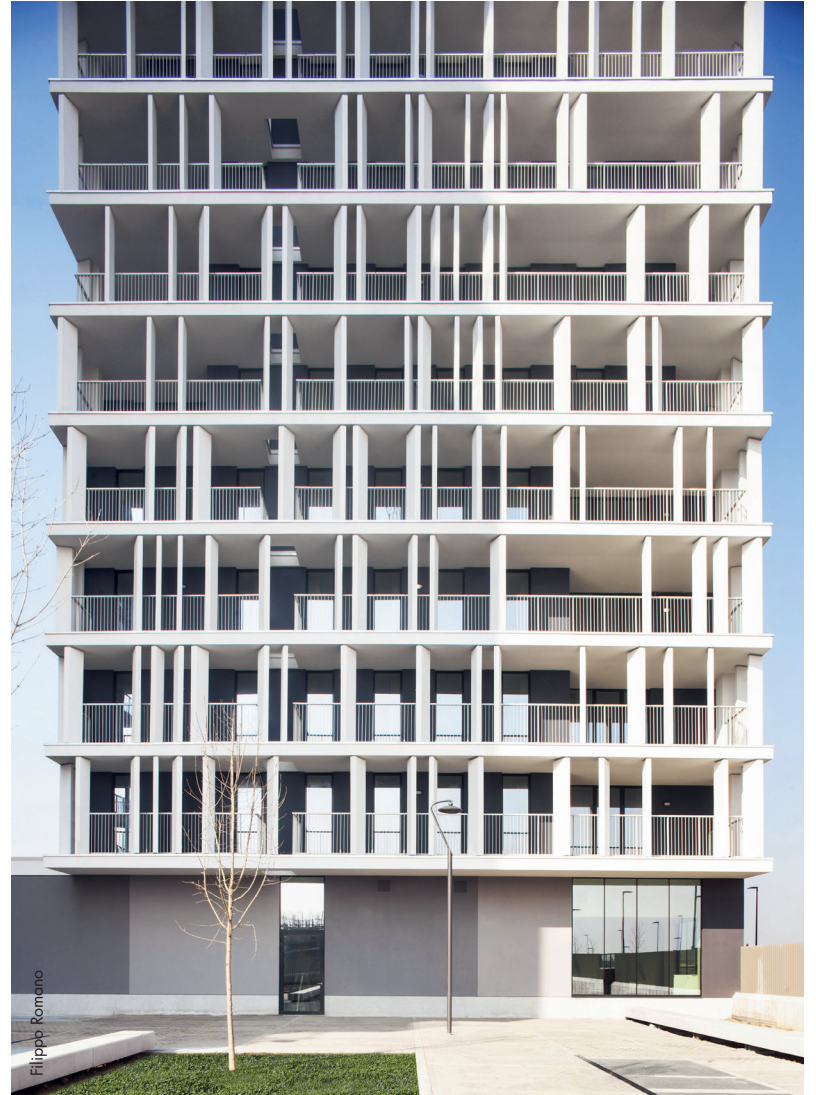
7. Antonio Citterio  
Patricia Viel, UPI,  
Beretta Associati, AR+

8. Antonio Citterio  
Patricia Viel

9. Caputo Partnership

10. MCL engineering





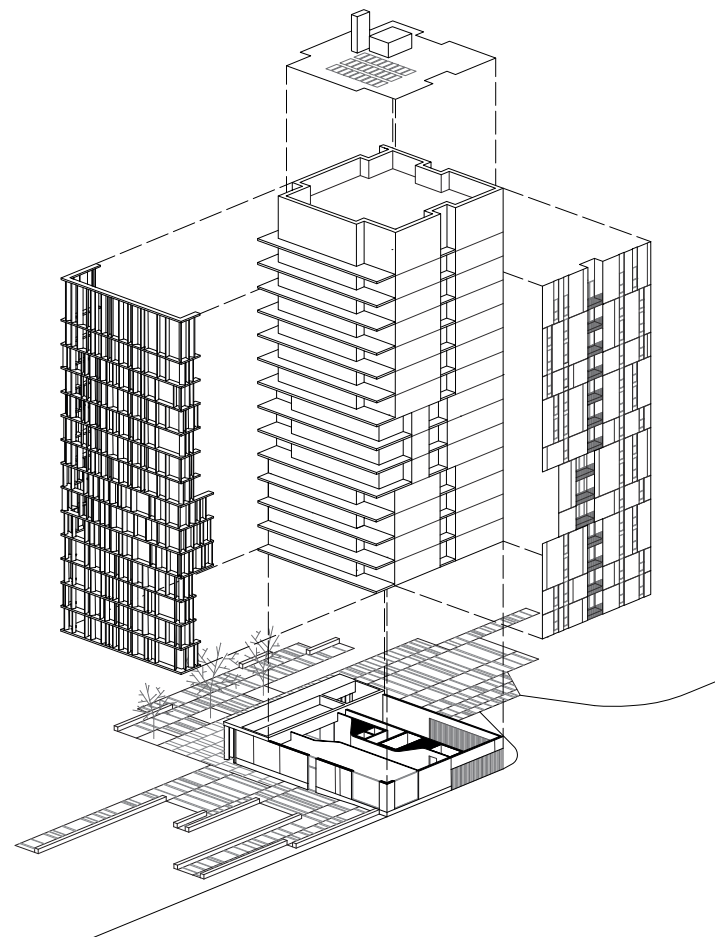
## B22

2013-2015

Built to temporarily host the representatives and the staff members of the countries participating to the 2015 Universal Exposition, the building is part of a dense residential quarter of high volumes alternating with communal gardens.

The building is made of 56 dwellings, on 14 floors. Common facilities for the residents are located on the ground floor. The high rise body, emphasized by an irregular patchwork of different tones of grey contrasting with the dark recesses, extend upwards and dissolves into a white inhabited screen on the South side, where the horizontality of the balconies juxtaposes to the verticality of the bright brise-soleil.

On the west side of the ground floor, a slender porch marks the entrance to the common areas and the dwellings, through a small patio, acting as a buffer zone between the public realm of the city and the private life of dwellings.



axonometric view





## C+S

2019-2021

The plot R11 is located at the northern end of the Highrise Village of Cascina Merlata, bordering the park of the same name. Initially planned as a single volume surrounded by a fence and condominium spaces, the architects proposed to the client to break the plot into two parts to give back to the community a public space and create an urban door between the Village and the Park that creeps and extends within the lot.

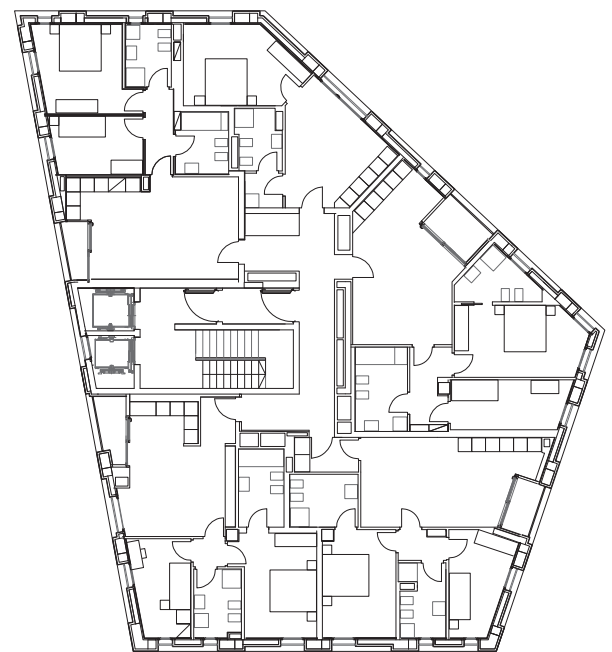
The idea of a clean sheet, of a "Venetian campo" in white stone moved to Milan to design a square, a public space that connects the two residential towers, strengthens their identity of the place designing a place for all people, relates the different heights of the pedestrian space and the park and create a smooth transition between the built and nature.

The project is critical of the concept of 'gated community'. By giving public space to the surrounding community, C+S Architects physically design a square in material and chromatic continuity with the towers, which underlines the importance of sharing the collective space as a key point to strengthen the identity of the community.

The square is a free, durable, open public space, accessible to all (including the visually impaired) that connects the difference in height of about two meters between the park and the street, through a series of ramps. But it is also a fun public space capable of transforming itself into a playground for children or skaters, for rest and play thanks to a series of circular benches that dot it.

The composition of the façade is simple and has a regular mesh on which a series of differentiated stratifications are drawn in depth. The main pattern is determined by the regular design of a grid of large square openings that defines the size of the loggias. The texture is thus characterized by the irregular alternation of loggias, windows and blind parts covered with colors in accordance with the mosaic.

Each material was also chosen for its durability and recyclability over time.



typical floor plan 0 1 3





## CZA - Cino Zucchi Architetti

2012-2021

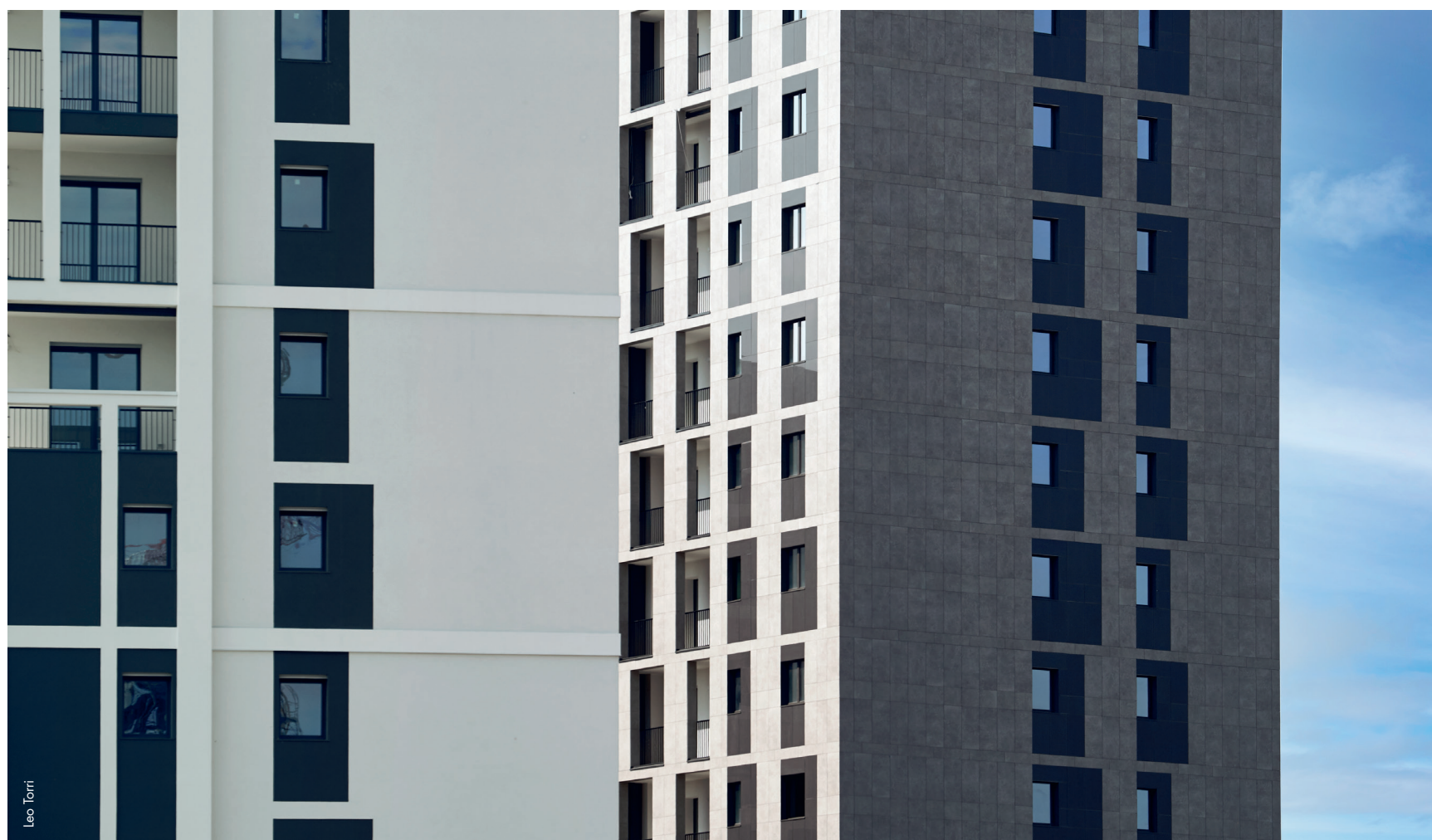
The masterplan for the new Cascina Merlata social housing area proposes a dense residential quarter of high volumes alternated with common gardens. The design of two residential towers and the open spaces interprets this scheme and reinforces its urban character. With high-level energy performances and extremely limited cost and implementation times, the project gives a convincing architectural response to the theme of contemporary "residential buildings", capable of generating a strong sense of domesticity and urbanity, while becoming a "landmark". Two high rise buildings extend upwards to achieve long views over the landscape, reducing their size on the upper floors in a stepped profile that generates a kind of "canyon" between the two buildings; this "canyon" creates an important visual axis for the project and a dialogue between the buildings and the open spaces.

The triangular pilasters – light in color contrasting with the dark recesses – generate a façade motif that includes all the windows, while the balconies are grouped in large figures distinguished by glass railings giving a strong horizontal theme. On the south side, a tall, slender portico connects the two buildings, creating a jagged profile that interacts with the common open space and allows a uniformed distribution of the two buildings.





**Antonio Citterio Patricia Viel**  
2017-2021



160



The design criteria of the masterplan rest on the principle of block settlement with the goal of constructing a highly recognizable curtain of the roadway.

The architectural solution of angular construction, with installation of the stairway for access to the raised courtyard area with its plantings serves for the creation of a highly expressive element of insulation toward the prospect of approach coming from the south plaza, and capable of relating with the character of Landmark achieved with the acquisition of the tower on via Daimler.

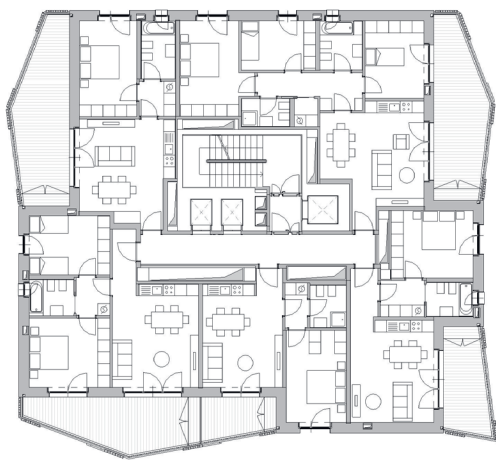
In this point the angled roadway of the Boulevard narrows considerably the perimeter of the land area created by the condition of great urban complexity that well expresses the design figure of the future lots. It is the overwriting of the double height of the vertical pillars that permits us to see the view as the main front on the boulevard; the design of the apertures, suited to the functional complexity of a highly fragmented type of plan, is forced to submit to the chromatic composition of contrasting grays and the graphic treatment in double order of the façade.

The base in stone, when not in glass for the storefronts, determines a unity of relation with the integrating elements of the urban grounding, integrating elements of perimetration of the land and the architectural structures necessary for its control. The vocabulary of these elements, strictly unified in the details and colors throughout the project, reflects the design of the boulevard even more than that of the building.

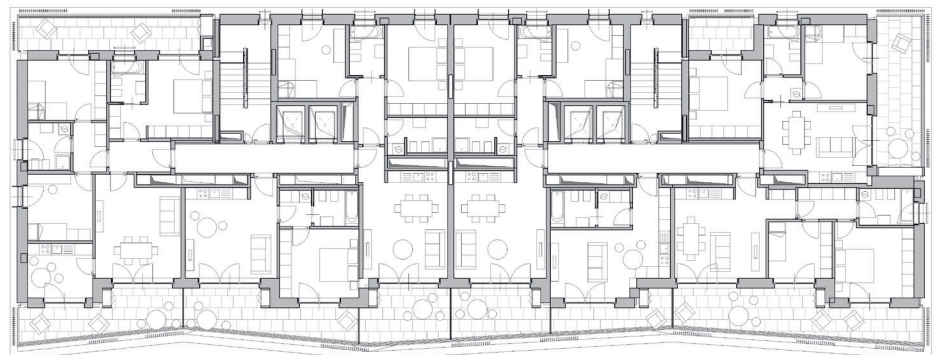




**ZDA-Zanetti Design Architettura,  
Scandurra Studio**  
2017-2019



lot R3 tower building - floor plan



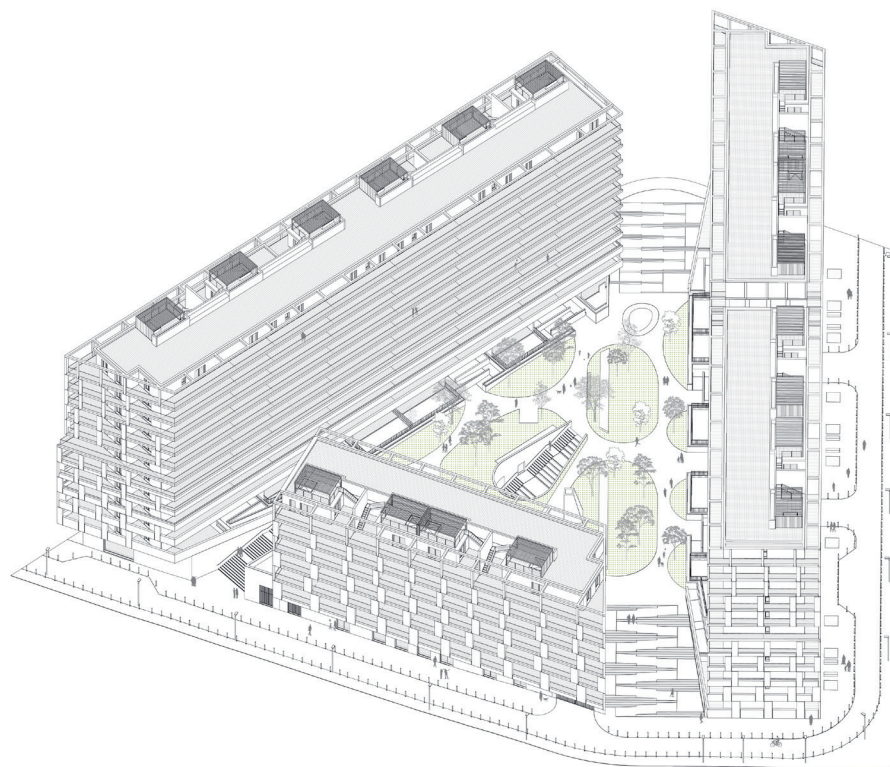
lot R3 line building - floor plan

The masterplan for the “Up Town” residential district includes a total of seven buildings divided into two lots called R2 with 5 buildings, two in a horizontal design and three in tower form, and R3 with 2 buildings, one horizontal and one tower. The composition of buildings of different types, horizontal and vertical, makes it possible to vary both the outline and the cross section of the built landscape so as not to create a continuous line which would act as a barrier to sunshine and natural ventilation while, at the same time, opening outlooks on specific views between the park, the residences and the internal meeting and activity points where people would tend to gather.

The tower buildings are placed mainly on the eastern borders. On the opposite side the choice was made to create a lower backdrop in line with the line of the landscape, which would be aligned with the Park and define its limit. Within lots R2 and R3, a pedestrian walkway proceeds from north to south and connects them, creating a line extended between the two markers of the territory represented by the towers located on the north and south ends and leading through the internal plaza located at the center of R2, around which the five buildings of that lot are arranged.







axonometric view

## LABICS

2018- on going

The reference model here is that of the townhouse, the residential fabric of the early 20th century; that of a very strict architectural design characterized by the continuity of design of the exterior frontage of the block, pursuing a concept of architecture as part of a system and not in its singularity as a building. The exterior views are characterized by a rhythmic succession of panels - horizontal and vertical - that are reminiscent of the archetype of residential architecture, the mansion, though in a more contemporary format.

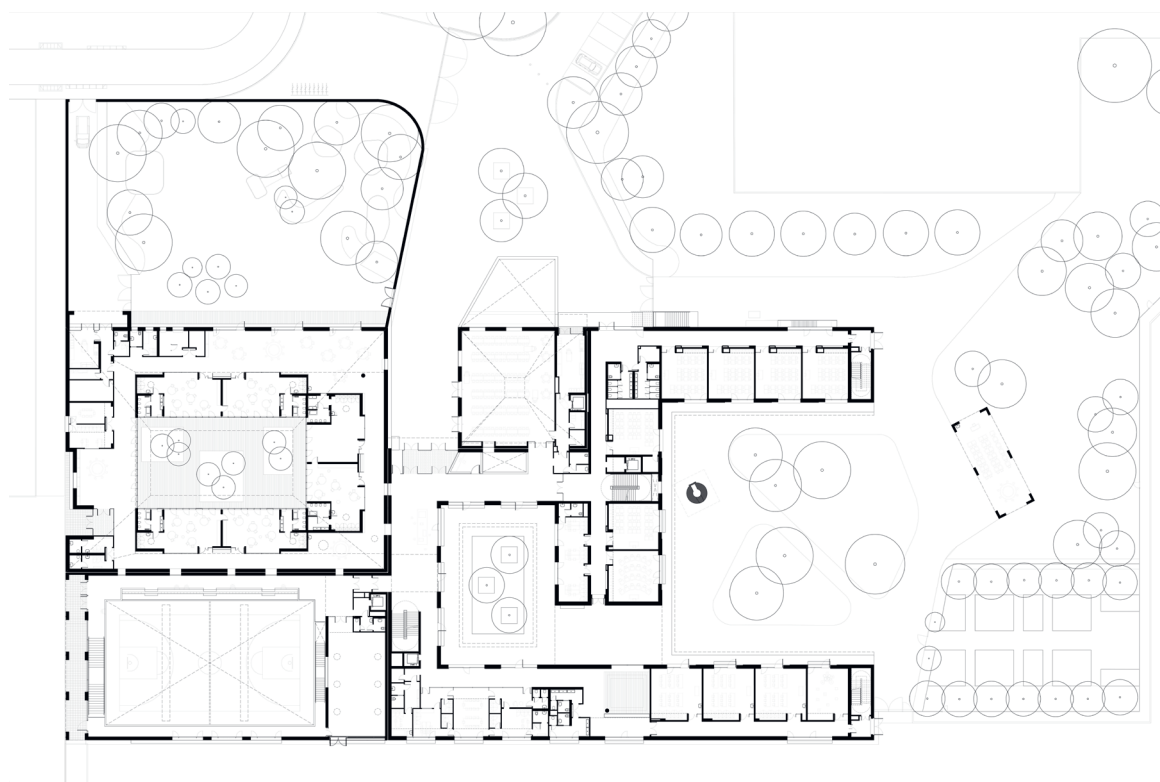
The heart of the intervention is represented by the large courtyard at the center of the block. Located on the first floor and extending over an area of more than 1,900 sq.mt., it is really a garden, but it is also an internal plaza where people can sit or visit their neighbors, with a playground for the children. The court thus becomes a small urban condenser: a meeting place, a place of socialization for the construction of those intangible structures that are at the basis of any idea of civitas.





## Onsitestudio 2022-on going

The school of “Cascina Merlata”, a new neighborhood planned in the western Milan, can be seen as a tribute to vernacular architecture due its capacity of generating a rich relationship between inside and outside spaces. The mainly horizontal building is therefore contrasting with the settlement’s rule of the new town, which is compact, dense and vertical. Unlike the classical linear layout the school complex is designed around three courtyards, two closed and one open towards the city. Such a composition is an attempt to produce a feeling of place and to offer a calm and loose environment. The iconic presence of a chimney is anchoring the building to the past life of the area where production sites and agricultural settlements used to mark a flat and open land. Low brick buildings with large courtyards, pitched roofs and porches combining together very familiar and rather abstract shapes.



ground floor

0 2 10