

Foreword

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FOREWORD

by Christophe Girot

The Santa Gilla experiment was organized jointly by the Institute of Landscape Architecture of ETH in Switzerland, under my direction, and the Faculty of Architecture UNICA of Cagliari, Italy, under the direction of Professor Cesarina Siddi. The studio was organized in three stages. The first stage was a preparatory seminar held in Zurich to analyze the historic and existing site conditions of the 5000 hectare lagoon located in front of Cagliari. The second stage was a one week international design workshop on the Santa Gilla Lagoon hosted by the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Cagliari. The third stage was the synthesis and production of a landscape proposal for the Santa Gilla Lagoon back in Zurich. The result was produced within a single semester by a core team of seven ETH students: Bianca Brici, Jung Min Choi, Anne Femmer, Kirstyn Lindsay, Olivia Martin, Marc Pancera and Jasna Strukelj, with the active support of three teaching assistants of the ILA Design Lab: Isabelle Duner, Alexandre Kapellos and Frédéric Rossano. The result demonstrates what practical applications a large-scale approach to landscape architecture can have on sustainable environmental design. The Santa Gilla Lagoon is a very flat and difficult area with a topographic variation remaining under one meter over the 5000-hectare site. Because of the full southern exposure to the dry Sirocco winds coming from North Africa, the Romans created a salt industry on the flats that prevails to this day. The salt marshes of Santa Gilla have become the home of the largest colony of pink flamingos in Europe. The birds have also become the main emblem of Cagliari. After the War an industrial port was built at the heart of the lagoon, disrupting

the entire local economy and an ecosystem that had been in balance over millennia. It is this mix of both social and environmental considerations that defined the special appeal of working on the Santa Gilla Design Studio. Could the ecological and economical challenges be brought together under a single landscape vision for the future? Students of the ETH worked on a preparatory analysis of the site to develop the basis of a design hypothesis. In this hypothesis, the existing site conditions and dysfunctions of the Santa Gilla Lagoon were questioned and prioritized in terms of long-term sustainability, diversity, as well as urban economic and recreational potential. The hypothesis was formulated based on the postulate that the industrial port had not only produced a major obstruction in the lagoon, but that it was no longer economically viable to maintain. It was now necessary to reconsider the future role of this industrial infrastructure within the broader context of the lagoon and city, looking both at its river and its beach. The challenge of the workshop was to bring a large number of students from various cultural and educational backgrounds together. After an intensive week of teamwork, difficult multilingual discussions and choices, each team produced a clear design hypothesis. Despite the great differences between the teams, the design results of the Santa Gilla workshop were very clear and synthetic. Each project stood on its own merit as an example of large-scale landscape design, using microtopography and hydraulics as the basis of landscape design thinking. The precise level of landscape design and observation resulted in an extraordinary palette of possibilities for the Santa Gilla Lagoon.

Upon returning to Zurich, seven ETH students continued the task and discussed aspects of each of the proposals developed during the workshop at Cagliari. A sketch proposal of the definitive landscape project for Santa Gilla was finally established. The project was phased over the next 25 years, with the main priorities being the treatment of waters of the Mannu River in phytoremedial ponds and the rehabilitation of the entire beachfront. Attention was also given to the industrial port, changing it into a new water-based city at the heart of an exceptional natural environment. Can a single landscape design studio solve the planning problems of the Santa Gilla Lagoon in Cagliari? This is doubtful, but the precision and seriousness of the work achieved with advanced landscape visualizing and modeling techniques, makes the debate over the priority of a large-scale landscape initiative for this area very credible. After showing the public of Cagliari the extraordinary economic and ecologic potential of the Santa Gilla Lagoon, it will be difficult for local authorities to ignore the pressing need for an overall landscape vision and plan any longer.