

# The Castle of Paraggi and its “double life”: evolutions and metamorphosis of a “suspended” architecture

Maria Linda Falcidieno <sup>a</sup>, Maria Elisabetta Ruggiero <sup>b</sup>

Dipartimento di Architettura e Design - Università degli Studi di Genova, Genoa, Italy

<sup>a</sup> falcidieno@arch.unige.it; <sup>b</sup> ruggiero@arch.unige.it

## Abstract

Eastern Liguria, a sometimes harsh and inhospitable place, encompasses some of the most beautiful landscape realities of the region, thanks to the presence of the sea and of an unexpected scenery. In some cases, land and water are connected, clearly showing the challenges that Man had to face in order to dominate Nature. In these cases, these forms of anthropization can turn their constraints into potentials. In this context, in a gulf such as the one between Rapallo and Portofino, outposts arose as observers to protect the neighboring territory, characterized by docks and, consequently, a suitable area for trade and for pirate incursions.

For these reasons, military-style architectural structures arose, both defensive and of sighting, depending on the building site, then, in the sixteenth century coordinated and transformed into a real defensive system, by the will of the Republic of Genoa. Here, then, we can find the castle of Rapallo, the tower of Saint Michael of Pagana, the Castle of Santa Margherita, the Castle of Paraggi and finally that of Portofino, each one with its own identity and events, but connectable to the others, if only for the territorial belonging to an extremely particular site as for organicity and homogeneity.

This is what the study of the Castle of Paraggi underlines, as it was built on the cliff overlooking the sea that has enjoyed a “double life” based on highlighting the latent diametrically opposed potential: born for the defense of the land from sea incursions, later on it was converted into a residence, conceptually transforming its position from a dominating into a reserved one, from an outpost on the sea clearly visible, to a place hidden on the land, from public to private. Over the centuries, the change in the function and life of the castle, has therefore been introducing changes to the facies and the composition of its appearance through the different stages of its evolution.

**Keywords:** Representation, landscape, evolution.

## 1. Introduction

Studying a building is always an exciting event: it is a matter of reconstructing its history, reading its components, understanding, in a word, its “life”. Because it’s actually a matter of life, from the moment of its conception, the commissioning and, then, gradually through the episodes of significant transformations, one after another.

And, as always happens as for the knowledge of people’s lives, it is never enough to limit ourselves to the study of the single element, but it is necessary to broaden the view, to understand the bonds and relationships with what is around, natural or anthropogenic, to interpret its development.

So here is the analysis of the host territory, of other similar buildings, together with the deepening of the historical news, always necessary for a correct approach and for the interpretation of the meaning and the compositional-design value.

Even more intriguing and exceptional, if one pauses for a moment to think that the castle of Paraggi has been enjoying, at least until nowadays, a “double life” or, more precisely, a transition from one life to another, profoundly different and, even, in many respects, incompatible with the previous one: a building born for defense, for military use, has been converted into a residence, conceptually transforming its territorial position from a “dominant” into a “confidential” one, from an outpost on the sea, clearly visible, to a place hidden on the land, from “public” to “private”.

How much does a radical change of life affect an organism? How spontaneous and autonomous is it and how much, on the contrary, is it induced by the boundary conditions? How much does its origin identity weigh on the following transformation and, above all, what is its identity? And finally, a fundamental question, what are its vocation and compatibility with the solutions and the transformations of life that here have taken place?

## 2. The castle of Paraggi as a defense of the territory: a public role



Fig. 1. G.M. Brea, veduta di Rapallo, 1732. We can see the line of defensive castles, among them the castle of Paraggi (14) and the one of Portofino (18).

Everyone, over time, even as a hasty observer, arriving at the small cove of Paraggi, has seen the organic natural port, essentially due to the

depth of the loop, which makes the area extremely enclosed and separated from the rest of the coast, with its close dependence on the steep territory that marks its internal border and that is part of the headland of Portofino; this narrow outlet on the sea of a vast hinterland –which ends the watershed beginning with the eponymous mountain, to continue with the mountain of the “Bocche” and cross the summit of Mount Pollone– on the south side includes the inlet where the monastic abbey of San Fruttuoso di Capodimonte, one of the most important poles in the history of Liguria, is located.

Already the orographic belonging to the same territorial sector makes you guess the possible links and exchanges between the abbey and the small port of Paraggi. These ties are evident when they induce to re-read the historical events of the abbey, linking them with those of the neighbouring territory (Rotta, 1986-1987).

Over the centuries there is a constant preservation of the structure of the headland in territorial units, both from a naturalistic point of view and from the agricultural point of view<sup>1</sup>, a conservation that was made possible, precisely, also by the management of the abbey that, already during the period medieval, had contributed to the permanence of ancient activities, expressions of local vocations. Characteristic of the place, in fact, is to have a wide differentiation of climates, depending on the exposure of the soil; in particular the eastern side is extremely rich in streams and the whole area denotes the effort of human activity to make the most of the soil, according to a continuous research and maintenance, typical of Ligurian crops in steep areas: from “terraces”, to the construction of mills, up to vineyards, olive groves, orchards<sup>2</sup> (Girani, Olivari, 1986). Among the many rich sources that have allowed a thorough reconstruction of the history of the abbey of San Fruttuoso it is not here to report; it is enough to remember that its foundation probably dates back to the sixth century and how the period of greatest splendour is to be attributed to the thirteenth century while in the second half of the fourteenth century an unstoppable, even if slow, decadence began. In 1361 there is the beginning of the construction of the monastery of Cervara, but instead of contributing to the

rebirth of the pole of Capodimonte, its construction marks its definitive decline, grafting a struggle for supremacy, up to 1439 when Pope Eugene IV definitively annexed it to Cervara, even with the preserved title of abbey.



Fig. 2. Commissariato della Sanità di Portofino (M. Vinzoni, 1773).

Even when, from the end of the sixteenth century, San Fruttuoso was transformed into a fundamentally secular pole, its impact on the territory was still felt and this didn't allow the settlement to disappear with the end of the religious use of the building.

The link between Paraggi and San Fruttuoso was, therefore, very close and the most important productions belonging to the hinterland of Paraggi were, in fact, under the control of the Abbot; the natural port of Paraggi was an ideal port for communications and the steep ridge did not allow the construction of roads, except at the cost of considerable work.

The road of communication on land, therefore, passed at a high altitude, at least until the middle of the 19th century, when coastal connections were created for the resorts of Portofino, Paraggi and Santa Margherita; on the contrary, for the past, the natural conformation had favored maritime exchanges, as also demonstrated by the raids of pirates.

Precisely for this reason, the particular orographic shape of coast between Portofino and Rapallo suggested the opportunity to create a real defensive system, consisting of towers and strongholds located in strategic places, ideally and concretely connected, rings of a chain of roads, paths, and ramparts, interrupted only where not necessary.

#### Commissariato di Portofino

Commissariato di Portofino principia a Ponente da Fonosso a mezzo monte e termina a Levante alla Ca- na detta dell'Elci in poca distanza dalla Torre Paga- ra viene guardato da i seguenti Posti	Guardie n. 3 come sopra	114
1 In una Stanza della Chiesa, con l'assistenza d'un Sol- dato Corso	Guardie n. 3 come sopra	114
2 Vitruo	Guardie n. 3 come sopra	114
3 Oliva	Guardie n. 3 come sopra	114
4 Punta del Cozzo	Guardie n. 3 come sopra	114
Concorrono dalle Parochie di S. Martino distante 3 miglie e S. Lorenzo miglie 4, che fanno	Caporali 2	114
Uomini 200		
Restano franchi da una guardia all'altra giorni 20		
Ronde n. 15 due per notte		
5 Calata di Portofino ove si da la pratica		
In Casetta di materia	Guardie n. 3 giorno e notte di Portofino, che fa	226
Uomini 26	e sue Ville	26
Restano in vacanza giorni 30		
Deputato alle bollette il Cancelliere della Commu- nità		
6 Niasca	In Casetta di materia	
Guardie n. 3 giorno e notte	Il presente resta nel territorio di Portofino, quale	
unitamente col seguente Posto n. 7 vengono guar- dati dall'Uomini di S. Maria di Nosogro della	Comunità di S. Margherita e questo di Niasca,	
tutto che situato nella giurisdizione di Portofino	viene custodito da detti di Nosogro, per esser stato	
aggiunto il posto del Vitruo sopra del monte, che	amano quei di Portofino; sono distanti mezzo mi- glio, e fornisce	Uomini 159
Vacanza giorni 27		
7 Nella spiaggia di Paraggi	In Casetta di materia	
Guardie n. 3 tanto di giorno quanto di notte	Il Castello di Paraggi	
In detto Castello	Guardie n. 3 come sopra	
8 Scalo dell'Abbatia della Silvara	In Casetta di materia	
Guardie n. 3 come sopra	Uomini 100	
9 Pedale	In Casetta di materia	
10 Guardie n. 3 come sopra		
11 Guardie n. 3 come sopra		
12 Guardie n. 3 come sopra		
13 Castello di S. Margherita	Guardie n. 3 come sopra	
In detto Castello	Uomini 114	
14 Arze	In Casetta di materia	
Guardie n. 3 come sopra		
15 Torretta	In detta Torretta	
Guardie n. 3 come sopra		
16 Castello di S. Margherita	In detto Castello	
Guardie n. 3 come sopra	Uomini 114	
Vi vengono dalla Parochia di S. Siro, che fa	Caporali 1	
Restano franchi giorni n. 37		
Sono distanti mezzo miglio		
14 Porticello	In Magazzino degli Eredi di Nicolò Quaquaro, piggio- ne L. 17 Panno	
Guardie n. 3 di giorno e di notte delle Borghi di S. Mar- garia e di S. Giacomo, o sia Core, che amano anche	il soprascritti Posti del Castell di Paraggi distante miglie	
2 con strada disastrosa, del Pedale, Scalo della Silvara, dell'Arze e della Torretta a vicenda facendo il torno in	maniera che ad ognuno tocca in 6 Guardie rispettiva- mente ogni Posto.	
15 Degl'Elci	In Casetta di materia situata ne terreni degl'Ere- di del M.co Pietro Cattaneo	
Guardie n. 3 di giorno e di notte	Concorrono da S. Martino di Noceto distante 3	
miglia, che fa	Caporali 1	
Uomini 100		
Restano in vacanza giorni 33		
Ronde n. 16 due per ogni notte, quali visitano so- lamente dalla casera degl'Elci sino ad Arze	Vi sono due Ronde solamente che anno obbligo di	
visitare il posto del Pedale	Due per il Scalo della Silvara	
Due per il Castello di Paraggi, Spiaggia di Paraggi	e Niasca	
In oltre un posto che v'era per terra situato al Ponte	di S. Siro	
Deputati alla pratica n. 14 un giorno per cada- una a vicenda, che risiedono in una Loggetta del	Mag.co Sig. Gerolamo Durazzi gratis sopra la ca- lata di S. Margherita, ove pure stanno due guardie	
di giorno del posto del Castello, e uno si ferma in	detto Castello.	

Fig. 3. Commissariato della Sanità di Portofino - Description of the military organization inside the defensive structures. (M. Vinzoni, 1773).

A system, that is, that provided for the coordination of the individual fortified works and whose milestone points were either population centers (Santa Margherita and Rapallo) or some of relevant economic importance (Paraggi and its hinterland) or, again, that allowed to control a large portion of the territory and sea (Punta Pagana and Portofino).

Clearly, such a project could be implemented in two main ways: on one hand with the construction of garrisons, on the other hand, after it, with obvious increasing difficulties.

In the case of the coastal strip taken into account, the first attempt to organize the strongholds in the system starts from the century following their massive, but unruly construction, that is from the seventeenth century.

The work was not conceived on the basis of a master plan, but was resolved with a series of occasional and non-systematic interventions, now the restoration of ancient structures, now the construction of new ones, deferred over a long period of time (almost a hundred years),

aiming only to protect small areas from the fast and deadly attacks of the corsars.

The result of this process are the towers and castles scattered along the coast between Rapallo and Portofino: fortified sites, able to protect locations in the immediate vicinity or to spot the enemy while he is still far away.

So many defensive cores, therefore, in relation to one another only for the reports –otherwise not always timely– that, generally with fires, the guards made to the other stakeouts.

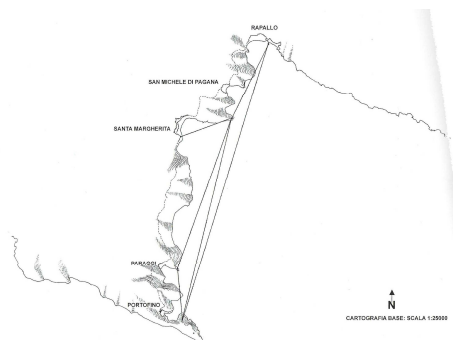


Fig. 4. Commissariato della Sanità di Portofino - Plan of the military organization inside the defensive structures. (M. Vinzoni, 1773).

As for the castle of Paraggi, it is important to underline that matters above all the fact that there were, in isolation, ramparts already in Roman and medieval times and this is precisely the main cause and reason of the conception of a real defensive system, organized, as has been said, when most of the strongholds and towers dominated the capitals and headlands for a long time and some, indeed, were already in disuse.

In the seventeenth century, this strategy, which can be described as “precarious”, was finally abandoned, and this was essentially due to the changed techniques of war, also linked to innovations in firearms and bombs. It was therefore urgent and necessary to reinvent maritime defense and this need was looked at as much on the practical level as on the theoretical one.<sup>3</sup>

It is, therefore, a consideration of the “place”, which for many centuries had been part of the spontaneous consciousness of man and which had led him to “instinctive” choices, based on

experience, on the subject of settlements and journeys; it proposes the construction of outposts still on natural territorial polarities, which enclose in their “physicality” the potential for a good control of space, as happens for capes and headlands, introducing at the same time the criterion that a valid defense does not derive exclusively from the defense of one town, but, on the contrary, is closely linked to that of the whole territory around it.

The works along the coast therefore assume both a function of sighting and reduced defense of the surrounding lands, not only against a generic enemy, but also from the incursions of pirates: the castle of Paraggi, therefore, closes its “first” life as a building born for the defense, for military use, thanks to its “dominant” territorial position: outpost on the sea, clearly visible, “public” defense structure.

### 3. The castle of Paraggi, the origins and evolution in a private life

Water is the oldest and recognized reason for the existence of Paraggi, because the small cove between Portofino and Santa Margherita is a unique place on the eastern coast: from the slopes of Mount Pollone, the streams flow to the sea with such abundance and strength that they have been making Paraggi, since immemorial time, famous for its mills.

There came the farmers to turn the gifts of the stingy soil of the coast and the hinterland, chestnuts, wheat, corn and olives, into products that could be stored for a long time and Paraggi certainly offered easier access even for those who arrived by land or from the sea.

There is no sure data on the origins of its history, but Pliny’s quotation of “Porthus Delphini” and its Roman remains, embedded in the tower of Portofino Castle, suggest a housing settlement even in Paraggi in a very remote era.

In 1162 Paraggi is mentioned for the first time in the January 20 ‘bulla’ of Pope Alexander III who records, as for the monks of St. Fruttuoso, the property of falcons and falconers located “between Rizolo and Paraggi”.

The merchant trades of this part of the coast and

the testimonies of buildings along it make us understand that since the thirteenth century a defensive structure dedicated to it had been necessary.

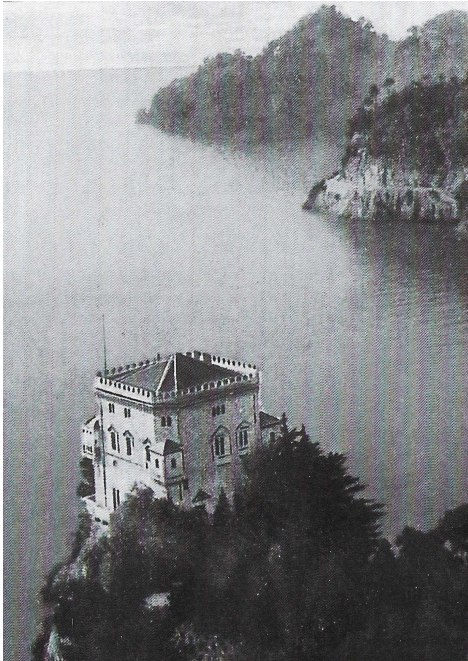


Fig. 5. View of the Castello di Paraggi (twentieth century). It is evident the dominant position on the bay and the visual relation with the castle of Portofino.

In fact, it was in the sixteenth century that Paraggi was explicitly counted among the guard posts of the coast. The threats of the Turkish invasions were alive and looming and in an account of 1531 there are explicit references to the consistency of the defensive record in this part of the coast<sup>4</sup> (Scarsella, 1910; Ferretto, 1907-1915).

Particularly in Paraggi the state of alert had to be spasmodic as the need for Turkish ships to resupply fresh water made the threat of incursions awfully real.

It is therefore with reasonable certainty that we can affirm how, precisely in these years, the “houses” (small stone buildings), with sentinels placed on the tip of Paraggi saw their growing strategic importance and the idea of a well-fortified station began to emerge.

The chronicles continue to offer us events of all kinds set in the inlet at the foot of Mount Pollone. Among them is the one that occurred in 1600: on 18 October, when Maria de Medici, Grand Duchess of Tuscany, married by proxy in Florence with the King of France Henry IV, coming from Livorno to reach the new homeland, arrived at the Gulf of Tigullio, but a storm prevented the royal fleet from doubling the mount of Portofino and so Maria devoted herself to observing the coast deciding to stop at Paraggi until the fleet could leave the bay.

However, to have a documentation with, attached, a real representation of the castle and the bay we must wait for the eighteenth century.

In this sense it is essential to describe in a timely way the context and the reality of the castle of Paraggi.

The description is provided, with incredible details, by the cartographies of Matteo Vinzoni who, in addition to portraying the set of thirty-five active mills on the slopes of Mount Pollone along the banks of the “Alive Water Trench”, finally represent the castle of Paraggi in the already completed form of a Defensive Tower.

The story acquires a visual evidence to which a very important act for the history of the castle is added and the beginning of its second phase of life: in 1796 notary Sebastiano Figari makes his lease where it is established that “[...] Mr. Nicola Poggi may have the castle in use but if it becomes necessary for defensive purposes he must immediately give it back for public use”.<sup>5</sup>

However this period is short-lived, as in 1812 a company of French soldiers occupies the tower and supplies the station with cannons (Stringa, 1989).

There is no news of the return of the Castle from Niccolò Poggi to the Municipality, but one Andrea Repetto buys it by the Municipality of Santa Margherita and sells it in 1872, for five thousand liras to Federico Brown, whose brother Montague had, in 1870, bought the castle of Portofino.

The previous owners had not made any important changes to the military fortification, but

the Brown understands its potentiality as a home of a more important aim and if, at the beginning, he personally plans the transformation from a defense fort into a villa, he soon realizes that he is not up to the task and, also on the advice of two family friends, the artist James Harris and the architect Alfredo D'Andrade, entrusts the project to the engineer Pietro Tamburelli.

The Castle of Paraggi ends here its story as a fortification and begins that of comfortable and fascinating dwelling.

### 3.1 The “new” life of the Castle

The new life of the castle, if on the one hand concludes its public function in favor of a private dimension, at the same time gives it a new reality and it becomes a more obvious sign, on the territory, of the success and tourist vocation of this area.

To recreate the evolutions of this second phase, therefore, there are no more official and public documents, narratives and descriptions with a new “private” dimension.

It is in Alfredo Bertollo's book “English Love in Portofino”, rich in details, that we learn how, at the end of the nineteenth century, engineer Tamburelli introduces the construction of the small lodge still visible, with the presence of running water and the creation of an easier access from the road (Bertollo, 1994).

By means of the analysis of various documents, Alfredo Bertollo manages to revive the atmosphere of the place that, especially for the warm hospitality of its owners, becomes a host for famous figures.

In 1913 the castle is sold and the new owners, the Goretti from Milano, move there, to keep it until 1945. The castle then passes from hand to hand up to Mrs. Anna Bonomi Bolchini.

Throughout this period the charm of this house continues to attract illustrious visitors while spreading on its fame.

Architect Tommaso Buzzi of Milano, in full agreement with the owner, frees the interior from certain superstructures that weighed it down, bringing the central hall back to its primi-

tive square width of “arms’ room” supported by a central pylon sustaining the nimble vaults.

In 1950s the castle undergoes a new restoration and the original seventeenth century structures remain in the square plan, with a spurred base, and the four guards at the top.

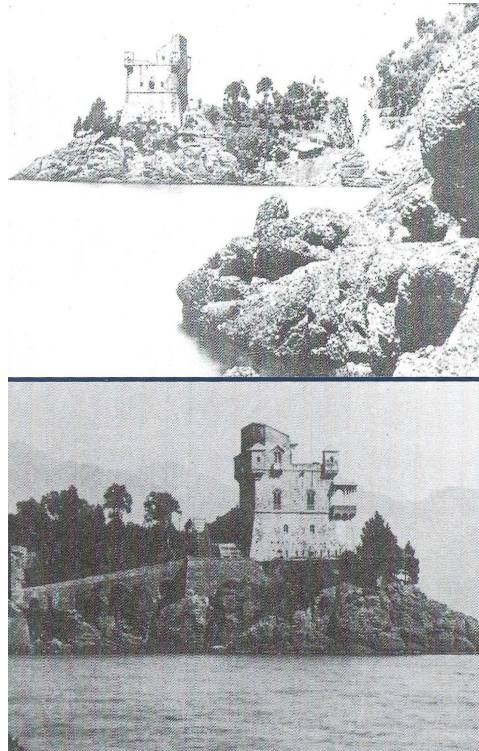


Fig. 6. View of the Castello di Paraggi (twentieth century). We can see the first modifications introduced by the Brown Family. It is still evident the dominant position as defensive structure without trees around. The new loggia on the corner is completed.

### 3.2 The landscape and the garden

The aspect of the coast between Santa Margherita and Portofino underwent a radical change in the second half of the nineteenth century, a change whose origins and consequences, often traumatic for the lack of respect towards the natural landscape, can be still recognized today.

To those who examine Vinzoni's 1773, highlighting a landscape unchanged over the centuries, and compare it with the documents of the

second half of the nineteenth century it is evident that the new infrastructure interventions substantially modified the Gulf of Tigullio. It is during this period that Santa Margherita and later Portofino, are connected to the provincial road between Ruta and Rapallo and the Genoa-Chiavari railway section is inaugurated. The natural beauty of the area loses its character of exclusivity and the landscape changes its characteristics as a relatively uncultivated place. It becomes an area increasingly subject to overwhelming tourist exploitation.

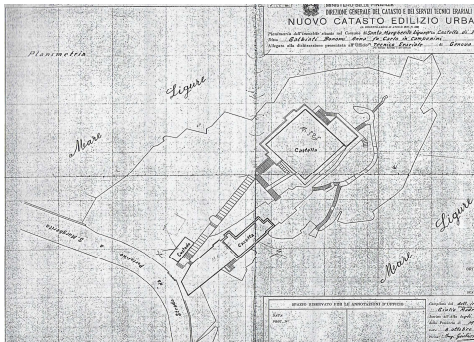


Fig. 7. Planimetry of the garden before the project of P. Porcinai and project for the new garden by the architect P. Porcinai.

During the nineteenth century, in Portofino territory the most important change is the development of the communication routes that make easily accessible a landscape until then isolated and little known.

This goes together with significant transfor-

mations caused by the construction of parks and gardens bordering on villas of extreme importance, usually placed on headlands and ridges.

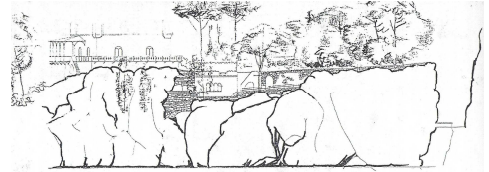


Fig. 8. Sketches made by P. Porcinai for the new artificial rocks added to cover part of the lower structures. The idea is to hide the whole lower volumes as much as possible.

Within a few decades a further change is from an elitarian tourism to a mass one corresponding, despite the establishment of the Park of the Monte di Portofino, to a substantial proliferation of buildings for summer residences with gardens of minor interest. With the construction of villas and second homes, the forms of land occupancy are different together with the roadway, the arrangement of the land around the buildings, the regulation of surface water.

Different types of gardens can be observed, varying from the simplest, sprung with almost rural characters around the old houses transformed into houses, to the richest and most complex ones, together with a huge variety of vegetation, up to some examples of significant project interventions on the landscape.

Despite the heterogeneity of the interventions that have affected the headland, Piero Porcinai's work for the garden of the castle of Paraggi represents a happy example of the union between artifice and nature where the spatial conception of the place is revolutionized, even if the changes to the landscape are so wise that they can be seen only through the careful examination of the preparatory documents. First of all, he immedi-

ately introduces an element of strong modernization: faithful to the concept that the invasion of cars must be curbed even in private gardens, Porcinai backs access on the road, in order to be able to prepare not only a safer entrance, but also of an area to be used as a parking lot, practically invisible because it is made taking advantage of the appropriately expanded spaces of a natural cave. An underground passage will connect to an elevator and the garden.

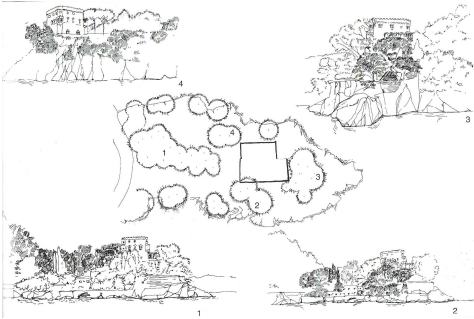


Fig. 9. Studies of the contemporary green volumes around the castle due to the Porcinai project.

The new composition includes lawn-covered areas, hedge-lined paths and the introduction of tree masses where large pine trees dominate the landscape “which should not contain except local plants”, but if the bases of some logs are surrounded by flowers, others are inserted in large circles of stone slabs.

Here it is evident the reference to the figurative arts and in particular in painting where the circle, inserted in the architectural composition of the garden, becomes a two-dimensional graphic motif that, transferred to reality, is caught walking through the garden, introducing the concept of movement, which can be a futuristic quotation, but can be derived by Kandisky and Sonia Delaunay as for the color component, and can recall, for the continual succession of well-composed and constantly changing visuals, to the Japanese “moving gardens”.

At Paraggi Porcinai cares, in a particular way, as his design drawings well highlighted, the rather complex structuring of the paths, made necessary by the multiple terraces carved on the cliff.

Built in previous years following a trend of the settlements of the Riviera, they are well connected to each other and evened with a coating of stones, similar in color and shape to the rocks on which the castle rises, which emphasize and emphasize the colors and flavors of the ancient walls. Study sketches clarify the intervention on the landscape that does not suffer any damage.

## 5. Conclusions

The work related to the events of the castle of Paraggi has highlighted a twofold possibility of exploitation of the place, given its contemporary value as belonging to a site “repaired” and away from settlement areas and a site of clear emergency placed as it is at the conclusion of the minor ridge, almost reaching the sea. In addition, the knowledge of the reasons for the plant, obtained through the knowledge of the history of the place and its surroundings, as well as that of the transformations that have gradually taken place, has allowed the reading of the “whys” of the projects, of the motivations of the choices of the two different phases of the architectural organism. This means that we have given an answer—at least as a cognitive survey approach—to the basic question, that is, to the question of the vocation of the area on which the castle insists and on the compatibility of this vocation with respect to the solutions and the use of the building. In fact, it is clear that a dual and, in many ways opposite, territorial value (*i.e.* a dual possibility of settlement interpretation) are matched with different building responses, able to enhance the qualities of one or the other manner.



Fig. 10. A contemporary view of the castle.



And this certainly makes the transformation of the building into the two different intrinsically contradictory organisms that are understandable and coherent.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first rules to protect the natural heritage of the port of Portofino can be traced back to those adopted by the community of Camogli 500 years ago, as can be seen from the Seminario di studio: *il piano del Parco tra storia e natura* by A. Maniglio Calcagno and F. Balletti.

<sup>2</sup> Girani, Olivari, 1986. The authors describe the complex organization of the productive territory related to the presence of important monasteries.

<sup>3</sup> In parallel with the revolution in the architectural field, a new orientation also characterizes the manuals and treaties of military engineering with the definitive abandonment of the idea of a closed city.

<sup>4</sup> Scarsella, Rollino, 1910. The author is very important for his wide studies about Ligurian Histories and for the description of rural society.

<sup>5</sup> Document preserved at Archivio di Stato di Rapallo.

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