



1. Trees burst out from the site's orthogonal industrial setting, enough to absorb as much as 200,000 litres of carbon dioxide an hour  
2. (Opposite) the steel columns are covered by Corten tree-trunk cut-outs, with branches out of which the plants appear to grow

**25 Verde,  
Turin, Italy,  
Luciano Pia**

# GREEN TORINO

Luciano Pia enlivens industrial Turin with his playful tree-house apartments





**REPORT**  
**JON ASTBURY**

This is the year of the garden, or so we are told. Plants are no longer to be symbolic afterthoughts halfheartedly potted on balconies or stuck to facades, but the paragons of a healthy, sustainable and community-building architecture. Bosco Verticale by Boeri Studio in Milan and One Central Park by Jean Nouvel in Sydney have both been praised for their application of plant life, yet considering the structural gymnastics involved in planting trees some 20 storeys in the air, both are surprisingly anodyne towers with little to offer the street.

In the UK, debates around green architecture have been rekindled recently by the Green Building Council's publication of the *Demystifying Green Infrastructure* report which aims to help architects view vegetation as more than a 'fluffy optional extra'. However the drive for more greenery in our cities has led designers to some strange feats - think Ole Scheeren in Singapore (AR April 2015) or Ken Yeang's oeuvre. Like proximity to water, trees often inspire misguided urban tomfoolery - before long

we will likely see proposals for something ridiculous like a £170m garden bridge over the Thames ... oh, wait a minute...

In Italy in 2009, 20 fibreglass mouldings of the Fiat 500C appeared on Milan's Via Montenapoleone - high-end boutique territory. The piece by Fabio Novembre, entitled *Per fare un albero* or, *To make a tree*, used each model car as a giant plant pot, a bizarre interplay between two elements which are constantly vying for city space enacted amid luxury shops. Around 120 kilometres west in Turin, something even greener has sprouted out of Fiat's historic heartland. A stone's throw from the River Po and Turin's rolling green hills in a former industrial area, Luciano Pia's 25 Verde sits opposite the first extension to Fiat's workshop. The car manufacturer's origins can be found nearby off the Corso Dante Alighieri, the site of its first administrative centre before moving to Matté Trucco's Lingotto factory of rooftop test-track fame.

Pia's work has over his career produced some varied responses to the city of Turin. Close to the centre, his Casa Hollywood squares up to the Royal Gardens with a triple-skin glass facade, and the University of Turin's

**3. In full bloom during the hottest months, the central courtyard's trees create a green oasis that shades the pathway below**  
**4. Corten fittings and larch shingles have weathered to take on a bark-like aesthetic over time**  
**5. Shaded glimpses through the external grid reveal little of the lush interior**  
**6. (Overleaf) staggered balconies allow the trees to grow upwards between apartments**

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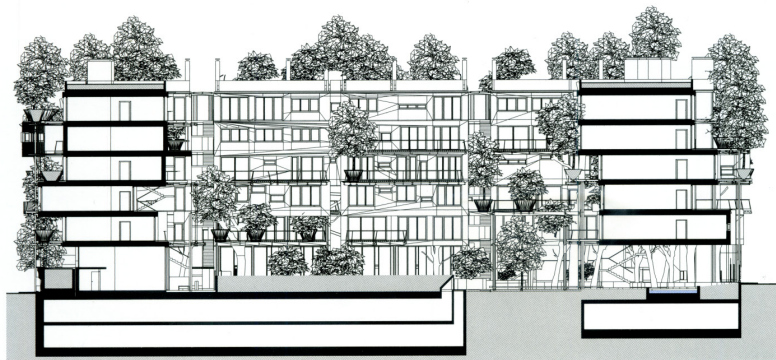
Molecular Biotechnology Centre is as serious as its namesake: an almost monastic insertion into an unassuming street. They are all rich exercises in placemaking that share an interest in layers, but also plant life.

None is as explicit as 25 Verde. Pia's desire was to draw the nearby green hills (seldom visible from street level save for occasional glimpses through the orthogonal streets) into the apartments themselves. Although Pia does not acknowledge any strong response to the area's car-building history, the Corten harbours a sense of industrial-chic, and it is fitting that 25 Verde absorbs approximately 200,000 litres of carbon dioxide an hour in the birthplace of one of Italy's most popular car manufacturers.

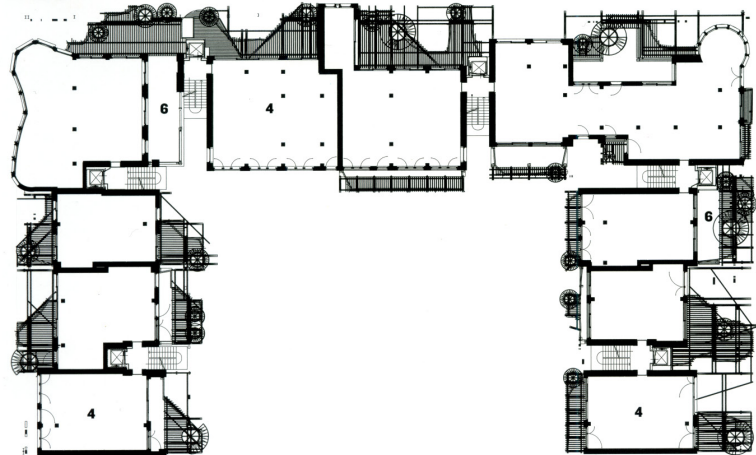
First conceived in 2007 it is a scheme that, despite its playfulness, shows a rigour that is still hard to come by when architecture and plants meet. Not only does it embrace the many pragmatic benefits of incorporating plants into buildings, but it does so in a way which inspires the child-like sense of wonder evoked for many by tree houses.

Despite its exuberance, Pia describes the apartment complex as 'inverted' - a building more suited to appreciating its own

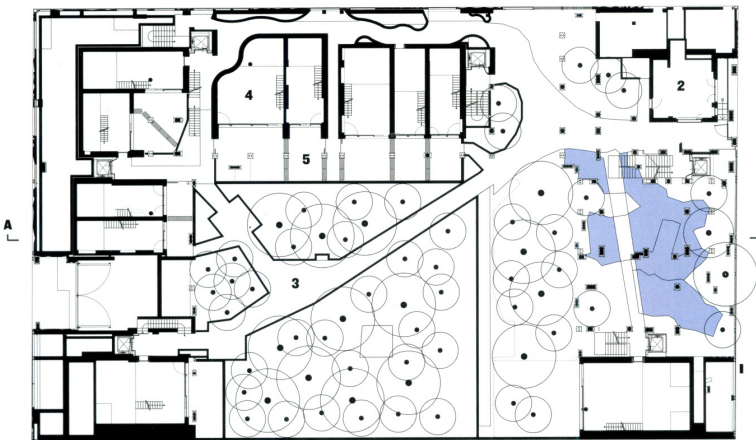




section AA



fourth floor plan



ground floor plan



- 1 entrance
- 2 reception
- 3 central walkway
- 4 apartment
- 5 private garden
- 6 balcony



7. Alongside the entrance, shallow pools reference the nearby River Po  
8. A dug-out path, complete with Corten handrail and seating, connects one side of the complex to the other

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insularity than looking out at the surrounding office blocks. Its balconies and terraces provide ample opportunity to gaze out at the Alps to the west and hills to the east, but the real action happens on the inside, where residents can gaze out across a green oasis.

Without the rigid definitions provided by the site's surroundings, 25 Verde's interior appears deceptively large, the trees blending with the distant hills to create a continuity that goes beyond the external skin. In the centre, a raised garden teeming with birds is cut into to create a path through to the apartments. The weight of the concrete, under the shade of the trees throughout most of the day, exudes a cool air. The intimacy of this space is dependent on the season, but a mixture of deciduous plants and evergreens ensures shade in the summer and greater light penetration during winter. When I visited, the gardening team had just finished their winter break, and had begun pottering around, leaf blowers and brooms in hand, a reminder of the upkeep the place requires.

In effect the scheme employs an extremely porous double skin, reminiscent of the arced layering so apparent when walking through Turin. The apartments, arranged into

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blocks and articulated in places by curved corners as if they were treetop lookouts, sit nestled in an outer skin of steel through which trees defiantly climb or leisurely dangle. It is in every sense the antithesis of the ordered concrete and brick blocks it faces out onto.

Some of these features are delightfully kitsch: the complex sits atop a plinth into which the tree's roots can spread, held in with concrete coated in a rocky sand texture punctuated by irregular translucent openings that would not be out of place within a children's zoo. From out of this base burst giant Corten tree-trunk stencils attached to structural beams that support the outer grid and balconies. Somehow these cookie-cutter shapes work – the sun through their steel branches echoes the mottled sunlight brought in through the trees, an effect that marks the steel itself as it weathers at different rates.

This affinity for Corten comes from both



its natural resistance to the elements as well as its bark-like skin of rust and, of course, its tree-trunk colour. Throughout the scheme Corten dominates, in balustrades, doors, benches and the giant plant pots sitting upon the external frame. Depending on its setting, the steel's shade ranges from a bronze-grey to a rich brown, all slightly dusty to the touch.

The plants themselves, sustained by rainwater collected by the building, have been chosen and positioned dependent on their solar requirements. Maple shrubs and bamboo enjoy the afternoon shade of the interior, while on the south facade, trees are granted day-long direct sunlight.

Entering between two steel trunks, the unpredictability of the exterior gives way to a shaded porch space, accompanied by the trickling of water into shallow pools. Beyond, a space has been turned into a miniature allotment for growing strawberries, in keeping with a fruit-growing theme that runs through Pia's work regardless of whether the building is overtly 'green'. Here, the residents have started to make their own jam.

The apartments, built from steel and concrete, are clad with over one million larch shingles, split naturally along the wood's grain

to improve their resilience. It also means each shingle is unique, the product of 10 months spent setting each one individually. All but a few of the apartments have two balconies, one facing into the green oasis, the other out to the street. Inside, the layout of the rooms is left to the owner, choosing whether they want to embrace an introverted tree house or see the contrast of the gritty street below. One resident, not wanting their balcony space to be visible to neighbours, has closed it off entirely with sticks of bamboo, but for most their staggered positioning fosters convivial communication between residents. All of the residents use messaging service WhatsApp to maintain a shared conversation, making impromptu rooftop barbecues easier than ever. For them living in this green haven has become the norm, just as the wider architectural community is deciding this sort of thing *must* become the norm.

For residents of Turin, natural splendour is remarkably accessible. A few hours away in one direction are the Alps, and in the other the Mediterranean: stiff competition when it comes to keeping people in the city, meaning many leave at the weekend and for holidays. At 25 Verde, however, they stay.



**9.** The Corten's colour gives the steel the mottled appearance of bark  
**10.** The pots range in size depending on the tree they house, these are given room to grow by the shape of the balcony above

## 25 Verde, Turin, Italy, Luciano Pia

**Architect**  
Luciano Pia  
**Structural engineer**  
Giovanni Vercelli  
**Landscape architect**  
LineeVerdi  
**Photographs**  
Beppe Giardino

