
Beyond
usable space
What value can spaces we do not occupy generate?
il prisma
DESIGN HUMAN LIFE

Living has always been about more than the space we occupy

We almost always measure the value of space according to what can be occupied. Usable floor area, capacity, density and yield describe a project through the efficiency of walkable square metres. Everything that escapes this logic - heights, interstitial spaces, margins, voids, roofs and surfaces that are difficult to reach - tends to be treated as residual: space without value because it cannot stably accommodate a body or a function. Usable floor area is a necessary measure, but when it becomes the only criterion, it reduces architecture to what can be quantified.

And yet **architecture has never coincided solely with the surface available.** It has given form to beliefs, hierarchies, belonging and ideas of the future. A dome, a courtyard, a threshold or a distant opening were not always accessible, yet they fully contributed to the experience of a place: they oriented the body, created anticipation, protection or wonder, and made a political, religious or collective order visible.

Written by:

Luca Mustacchi, Workplace & Innovative Experience Strategist - Il Prisma

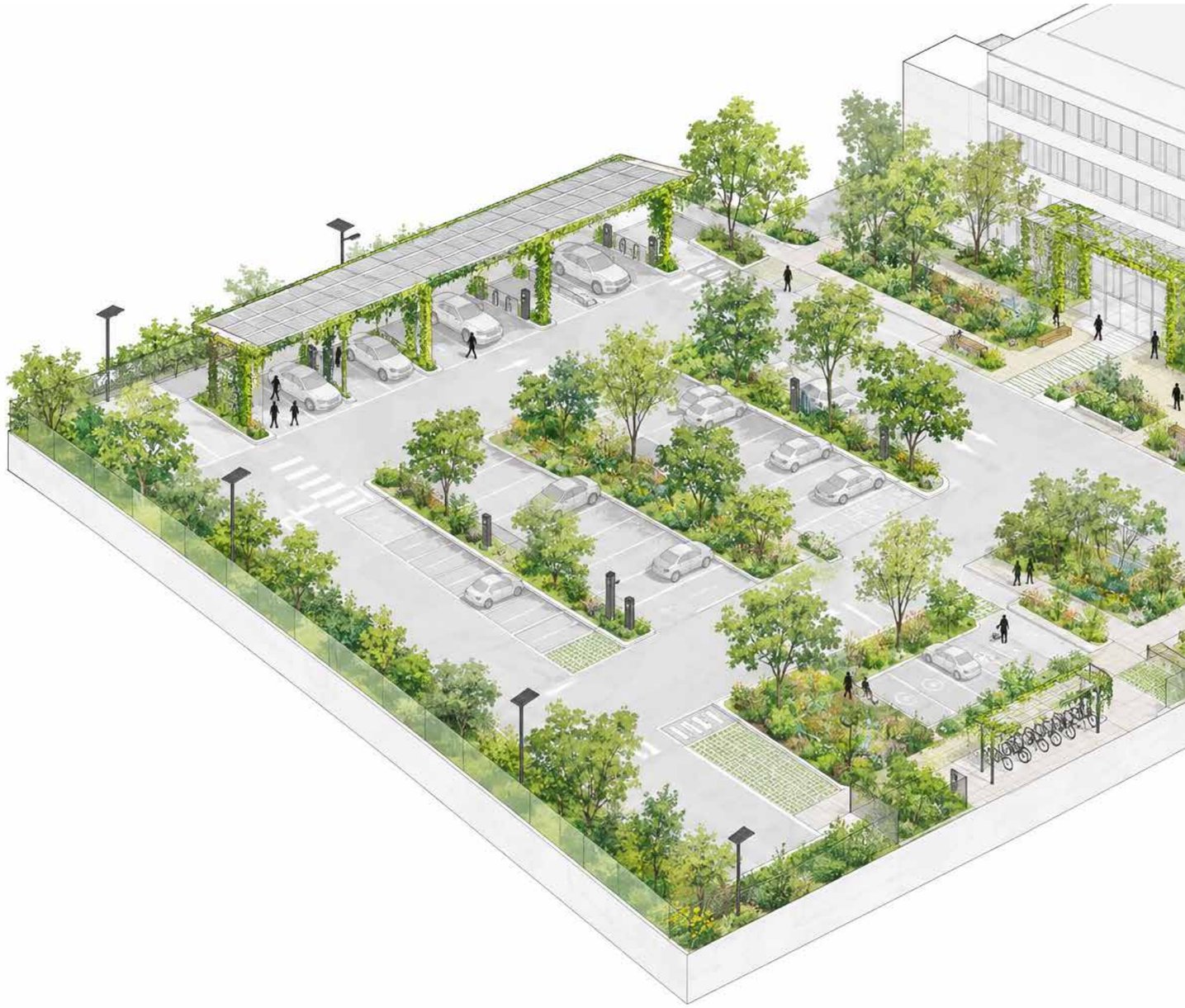
We have always inhabited through sight, sound, light and imagination as well. Perceived space is larger than the space physically available: it includes what we see beyond a window, the sky above a courtyard, the depth of a garden we cannot cross, and the presence of something that changes over time.

The problem arises when this complexity is assessed only in terms of use. When usable floor area becomes the main criterion, it also directs investment and relegates everything that is not directly accessible to the background, even though it continues to affect the quality of the surrounding environments.

The question, then, is not how to make every surface occupiable, but whether design can also assign value to what it deliberately leaves outside direct use.

Looking at these spaces differently means recognising that **what appears unproductive today may already have a role to play.** A visible roof, an inaccessible courtyard or a green edge can improve work environments, help a building manage water and heat more effectively, and make it more recognisable to the people who experience it.

We define a space as non-occupiable when its value does not depend on its ability to stably accommodate a person or a function. It does not necessarily have to be unreachable: it may be passable, visible only, or reserved for maintenance. In every case, it acts on the environments around it.





Bodio Center, Milan - Il Prisma

Our hypothesis is that what remains outside direct use can contribute to the quality of occupied space.
A void, a distance or an inaccessible surface becomes an active component of the experience when it creates depth, orientation, wellbeing, imagination or recognisability.

Greenery can give value to what normally remains at the margins. This does not mean turning every unused surface into a garden, nor assuming that adding a few plants is enough. Vegetation, light and the seasons introduce life and change. They make a space perceptible even when we cannot enter it, transforming a passive surface into a presence we can relate to.

A lightwell can become a landscape room observed from the spaces around it. A technical roof can become a fifth facade. The margin between a building and infrastructure can become a visual and environmental filter. Even a car park can be conceived as a landscape crossed by cars rather than as an expanse of hardscape.

In these cases, greenery does not add usable floor area. It acts indirectly: it changes views, orientation, perceived depth and the quality of the environments that overlook it.

We have always designed what could only be looked at, too



Hi Green, Rome - Il Prisma

The idea is not new. Today, however, it needs to be defended within a design culture dominated by the measurement of usable floor area.

In Chinese and Japanese gardens, borrowed scenery - *jie jing* in China, *shakkei* in Japan - incorporates elements beyond the garden boundaries into the composition: a distant mountain, the canopy of a tree, the outline of a temple. The garden becomes larger not because it owns that landscape, but because it constructs the viewpoint from which it can be perceived. The boundary does not interrupt space: it connects it to what lies beyond.

In the eighteenth-century English landscape, the *ha-ha* produces a similar effect through an almost invisible device. A ditch separates the garden from animals without interrupting the continuity of the view. The space appears open precisely because the physical boundary is removed from perception.

Courts and courtyards also belong to this history. In Mediterranean and Italian architecture, they are not simply surfaces to cross: they bring light, air, sky, orientation and a sense of scale into the heart of the building. Sometimes they are spaces of use; at other times, central voids viewed from loggias, windows and circulation routes. In both cases, their value exceeds the surface they make directly available.

These examples share a precise choice: using a boundary to build a relationship. The same principle can guide the design of contemporary residual surfaces. The boundary ceases to be merely a separation and takes on a spatial role. Greenery is one possible material because it brings distance to life and makes change visible.

A space begins to act even before anyone moves through it

Before we use a space, we perceive its openness, depth, light and possibilities for orientation. This reading also includes what we cannot reach: a view or a distant surface can alter our experience of an environment without becoming a destination.

Stephen and Rachel Kaplan described how certain natural environments support the restoration of directed attention. One of the four restorative qualities in their Attention Restoration Theory is extent: the sense that an environment is sufficiently broad and coherent to be mentally explored. The breadth of an experience therefore depends not only on the square metres we can move through, but also on the depth and continuity suggested by the space.

Roger Ulrich's studies on views from hospital rooms and Kate Lee's research on breaks of just 40 seconds in front of a green roof show that what lies beyond a physical boundary can influence stress recovery and attention. In workplace settings, Marlon Nieuwenhuis's three experiments found greater satisfaction, better perceived concentration and higher productivity in offices enriched with plants. The 15% increase observed in one of the trials remains a specific result and cannot be generalised.

This evidence does not demonstrate that greenery directly increases perceived space. It does, however, support an essential step in the hypothesis:

> a surface can influence the experience even when it is not accessible.



Allianz via Oglio, 12, Milan - Il Prisma

Nature is not an image: it is matter, time and relationship



Allianz via Oglio, 12, Milan - Il Prisma

The word nature itself risks becoming an abstract category. In The Eight Mountains, Paolo Cognetti contrasts the generic term with words that name precise things: woods, pasture, stream, rock. The distinction is useful for design as well. It is not enough to declare the presence of nature; we need to say which elements, cycles and relationships it is made of.

Here, greenery does not refer to an indistinct image of nature, but to concrete elements: vegetation, soil, water, shade, habitat, seasonal variation, growth and decay. These elements can produce perceptual, environmental and temporal effects even when they cannot be directly used.

Biophilic design has brought this relationship back to the centre of design practice, studying how direct and indirect contact with natural systems can support wellbeing. Here the question is more specific:

can a natural presence located outside occupied space create value within it?



LVMH Beauty Italia, Milan - Il Prisma

Stephen Kellert identified three ways in which nature enters the built environment: direct experience, indirect experience, and the experience of space and place. The third category includes qualities such as prospect and refuge, organised complexity, transitions, attachment and identity. What matters is not only how much nature is present, but also the spatial configuration that makes the relationship possible.

Value therefore does not reside in the plant as an isolated object, but in the relationship between natural presence, distance, framing, light, the observer's position and the duration of exposure. It also depends on the frequency of contact and the number of environments that benefit from the same natural presence.

↗ A surface gains value when it performs on multiple fronts



Bodio Center, Milan - Il Prisma

An intervention on a non-occupiable space involves both initial and management costs: structure, waterproofing, irrigation, maintenance and technical access. To justify it, it is not enough to say that "greenery is good for us". We need to identify what performance it delivers, for whom, and for how long.

The return can be assessed on three levels. The first concerns people: quality of views, attention restoration, stress reduction, satisfaction and the recognisability of place. The second concerns the building: water management, heat mitigation, surface protection, biodiversity and reduced impact from technical or hard-surfaced areas. The third concerns the asset and the organisation: attractiveness to tenants and talent, property differentiation, ESG goals and certifications.

The investment becomes stronger when the same surface responds to multiple needs. A roof that only improves the view is a difficult cost to defend. If it also retains water, reduces overheating, supports habitat, contributes to a certification and improves the experience across several floors, it becomes part of the building's infrastructure. The business case comes from the accumulation of these effects over time, not from a single benefit.

In some cases, this combination of performances has been quantified. According to a cost-benefit analysis by the U.S. General Services Administration, a green roof on public and commercial buildings has an average **payback period of 6.2 years and an ROI of 224% over 50 years.** The same source reports peak runoff reductions of up to 65% and delays of up to three hours. These figures refer to the U.S. context and depend on climate, build-up, scale and maintenance. They are not a universal benchmark, but they show that the return comes from overlapping performance benefits.

The market is not asking only for more space, but for spaces that can do more

This idea of performance also appears in workplace research.

The Gensler Global Workplace Survey 2024, conducted among 16,040 workers across 15 countries and 10 industries, makes this shift explicit: workplace performance depends both on the ability to support work and on people's experience. The data does not show that greenery creates value on its own, but it confirms that the emotional response to space is now one of the dimensions used to evaluate a workplace.

For HR and leadership, workplace quality is not defined solely by what people are able to do. How they feel while working, and the relationship they build with the place, matter too. Spaces that are not directly occupied contribute to this experience: they can offer visual relief, support orientation and make the organisation's culture more recognisable. This becomes a concrete issue when the office needs to give people a reason to choose it, not simply to use it.



Sorgenia, Milan - Il Prisma

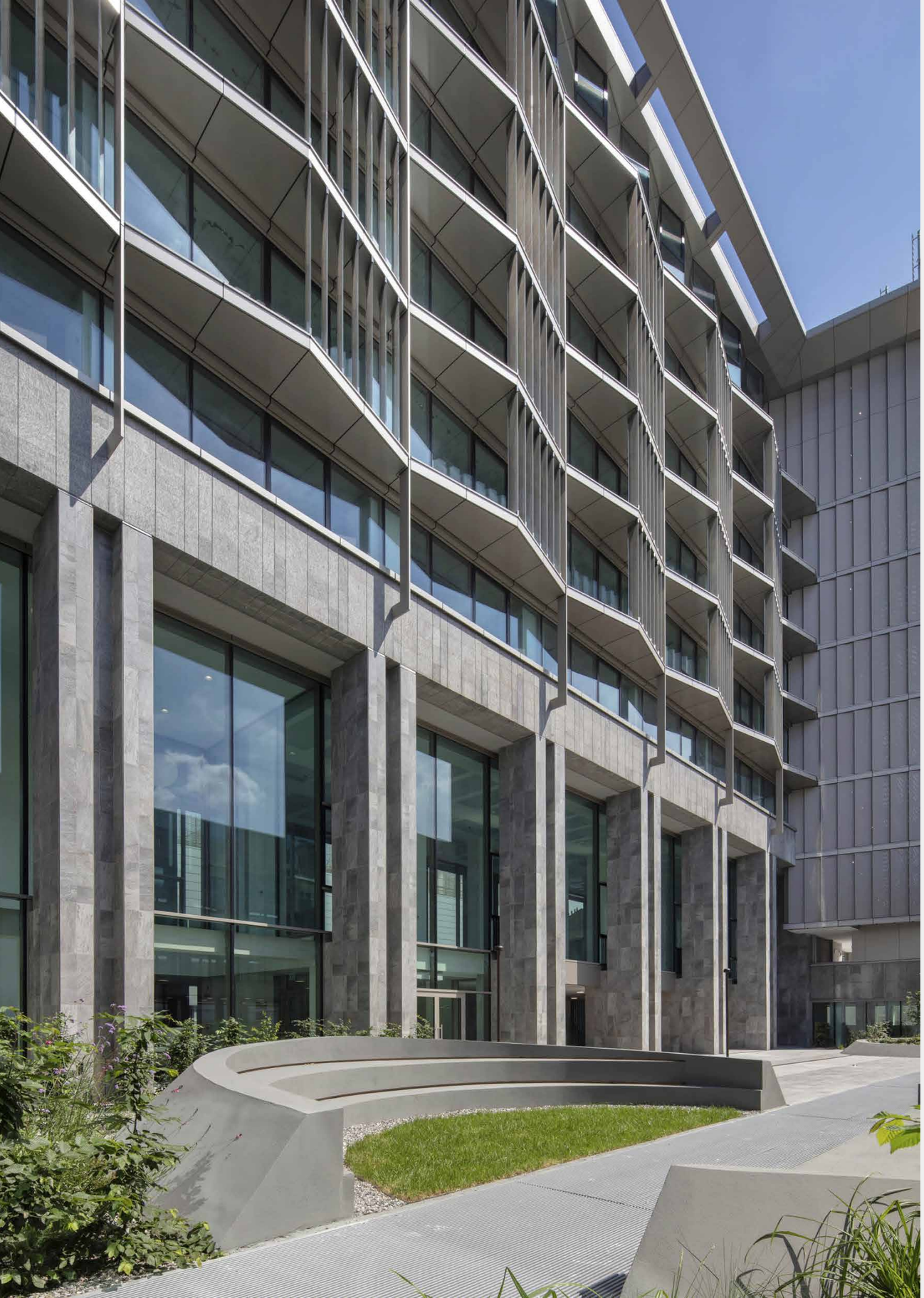
Il Prisma Live, Milan - Il Prisma

The same shift is visible in the real estate market. According to JLL, offices with environmental certifications achieve higher average rents, with premiums ranging from **7.1% to 11.6%**. In most of the markets analysed, however, certified buildings already account for more than 50% of Class A stock. Sustainability is therefore moving from a differentiator to an entry requirement:the premium may shrink, while the risk of a penalty for non-certified buildings increases. The data nevertheless concerns the overall sustainability of the asset and does not allow the contribution of greenery to be isolated.

To evaluate a building, then, available floor area is not enough. We also need to consider its effect on surrounding environments and its contribution to the asset's overall performance. Between what we look at and what we use lies an entire spectrum of possibilities.

The shift from efficient floor area to quality of experience does not generate a new standard type of space. Il Prisma's projects instead allow us to observe how the relationship between use, perception and performance changes according to the degree of accessibility.

For Il Prisma, design starts with what people see and do every day: where their gaze falls, how they find their way, where a break, an encounter or a moment of concentration takes place. From there, we can understand whether a marginal surface can improve the work experience while also contributing to environmental performance and asset value.



Extending the landscape beyond the building perimeter means turning the edge into a relationship. In Bernina 7's Open Landscape, roofs and outdoor areas become green squares, terraces and gardens that anticipate, within the asset, the future landscape of Scalo Farini. Even when use is intermittent, visual continuity makes the workplace feel part of a broader urban transformation.

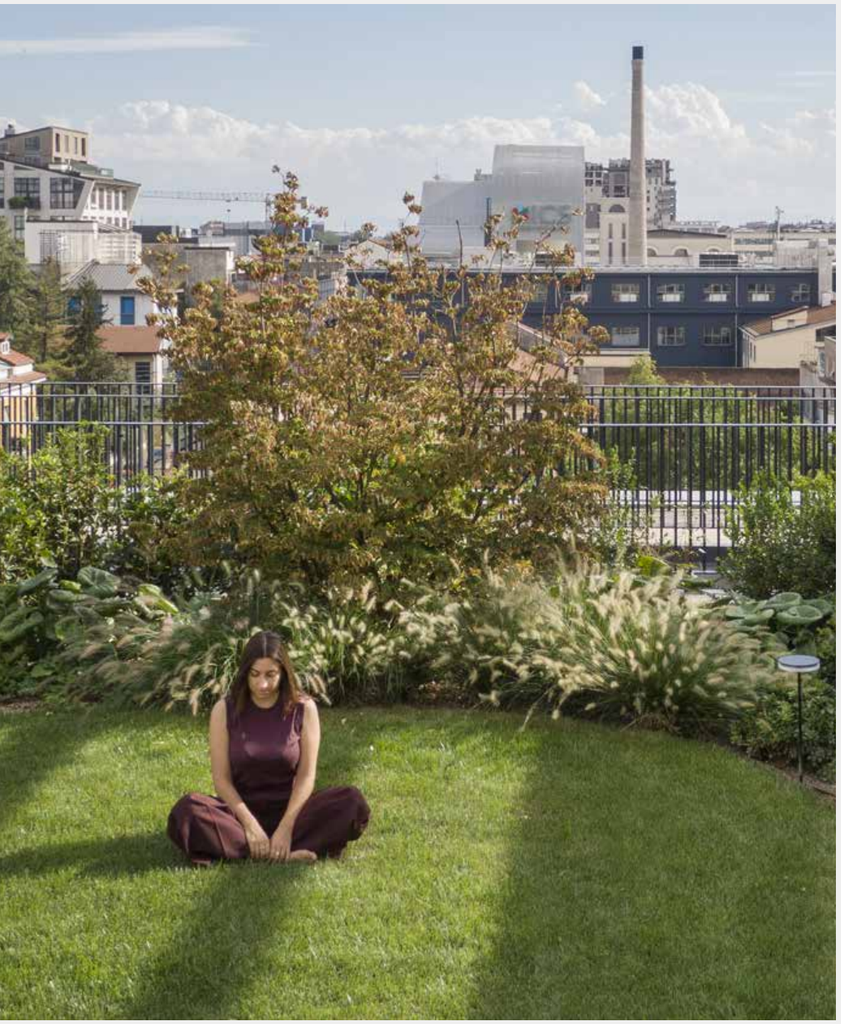


Bernina 7, Milan - Il Prisma

Transforming technical ground

allows performances that are usually considered separately to come together. At Via Oglio 12 for Allianz, greenery does more than screen the car park: trees, aromatic vegetation, pergolas and permeable surfaces change its hierarchy. Mobility, water infiltration, heat mitigation, quality of views and outdoor work are concentrated on the same surface.

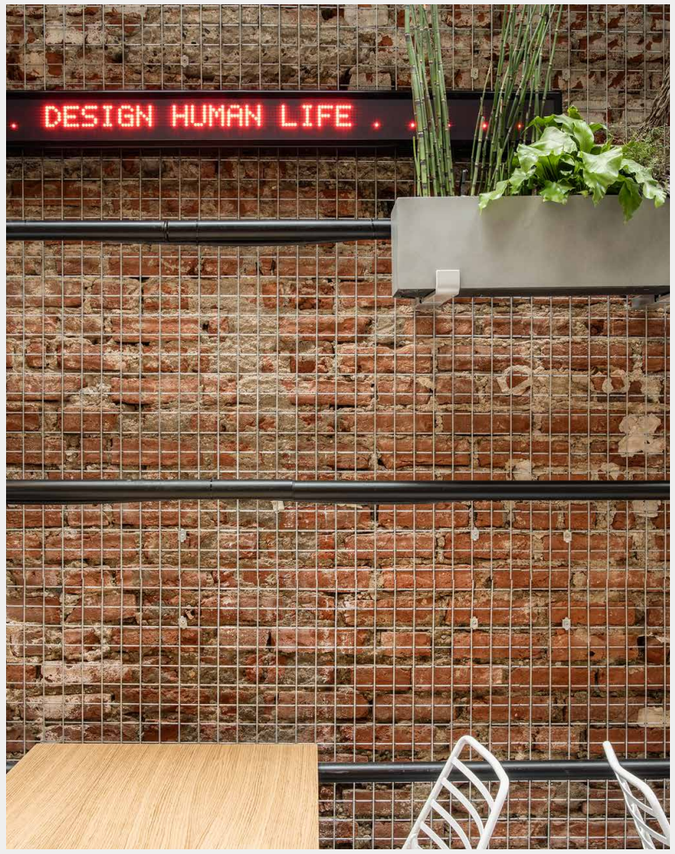
Allianz via Oglio, 12, Milan - Il Prisma





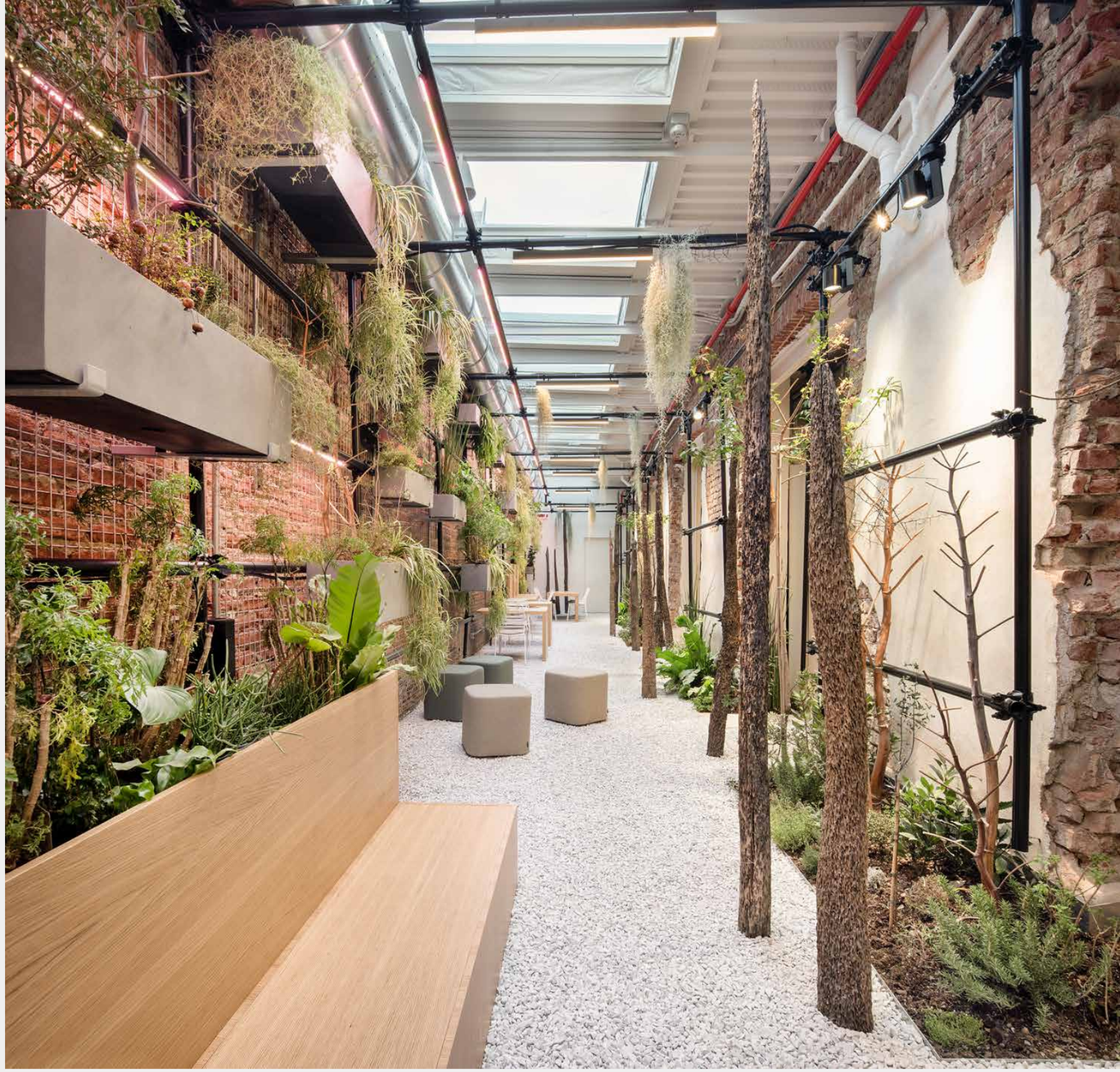
LVMH Beauty Italia, Milan - Il Prisma

To make the landscape genuinely workable, the image alone is not enough. On LVMH Beauty Italia's approximately 2,000-square-metre terrace, the Sensorial Garden, Biodiversity Garden, Event Garden, Secret Garden and Working Garden make it possible to work, meet and pause. Curves, shade, transparency, planting and seasonal variations extend the experience indoors as well. The project demonstrates a concrete condition: without shade, protection, suitable furniture, connectivity and power, outdoor space remains a promise.



In other cases, value emerges without adding a new destination.

Il Prisma Live's Serendipity Garden enriches a circulation space with Mediterranean plants, scents, tactile materials, light, words and a soundscape made from recordings of European forests. Moving through it can become a short pause, an unplanned encounter or a moment of informal work. Here, biophilia is not limited to vegetation: it gives quality to time that would normally be considered residual.



Il Prisma Live, Milan - Il Prisma





Sorgenia, Milan - Il Prisma

Distributing this relationship throughout the building

can be more effective than concentrating it in a single garden. In Sorgenia's workplace, greenery accompanies all five floors through views of vegetation, green walls and suspended elements, while the Energy Surface physically and conceptually connects the departments. Nature is not a single destination to reach, but an everyday presence that supports orientation, identity and connection.

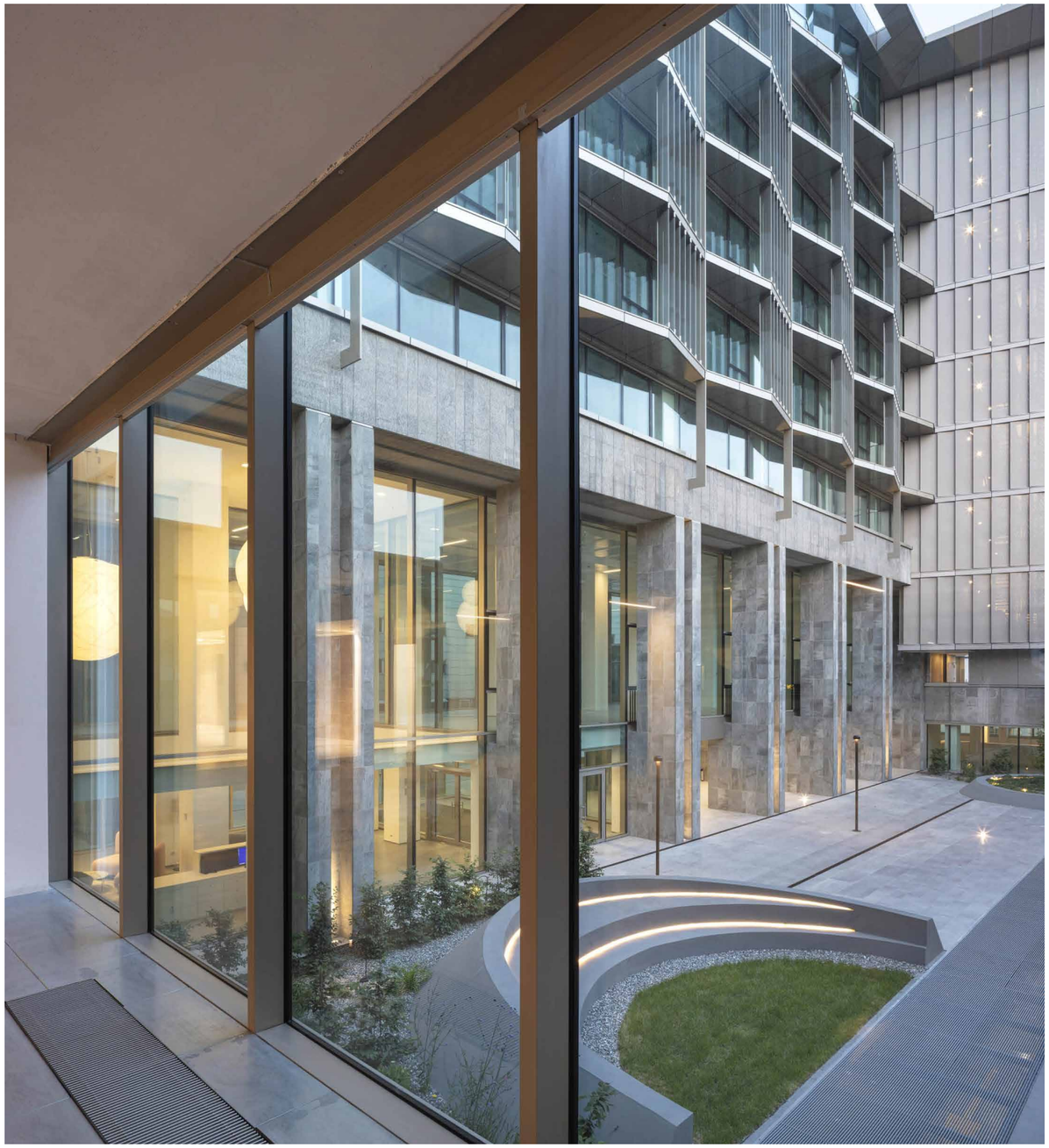


Reducing floor area, on the other hand, does not mean giving up quality.

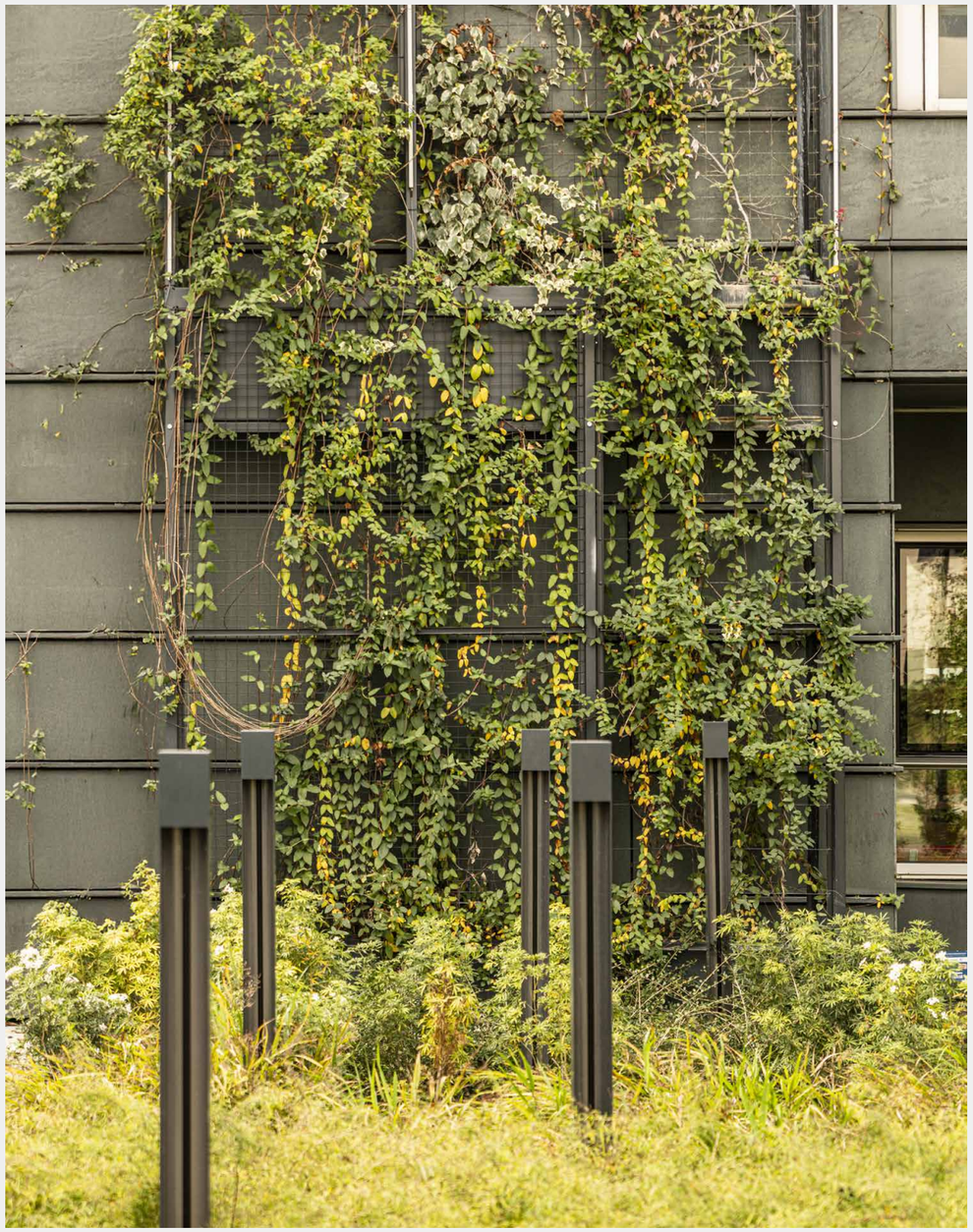
Following the shift to smart working, Editoriale Domus's historic complex in Rozzano - around 17,000 square metres - had become oversized. The project did not attempt to fill every space again; instead, it redefined the environments that were needed and the identity created through their relationships. Domus's feature on the new headquarters designed by Il Prisma presents it as "A space that feels, thinks and designs": collaboration, sustainability and beauty define a workplace whose value depends on the relationships between environments, not on their quantity.

This shift also has an economic dimension. According to Annalisa Calastretti, BU Director Worksphere at Il Prisma, interviewed by Officelayout in 2026, before the pandemic outdoor areas accounted for an average of 3-4% of the overall budget; in refurbishment projects for Class A properties, the share rose to 5-6% and can reach 10% with tenant-requested customisations. This is not a general market benchmark, but a figure observed in design practice: it shows that the cost of outdoor space is accepted when it contributes to experience, work, identity, environmental performance and ESG goals.

Five recurring design approaches emerge across these projects: extending the landscape beyond the perimeter, transforming technical ground, making an outdoor space workable, giving quality to circulation, and distributing natural presence throughout the building. The choice depends on what is actually needed: direct use, visual continuity, orientation, water management, shade or biodiversity.



Bernina 7, Milan - Il Prisma



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What is difficult to measure is not therefore without value

To support its value, however, we need to be able to observe it. There is no need to reduce it to a single index. Surveys and post-occupancy evaluations can describe wellbeing and the quality of experience; view analyses, surface temperatures, retained water, biodiversity and maintenance costs make environmental and economic performance legible. The picture emerges from this body of evidence, not from a single metric.

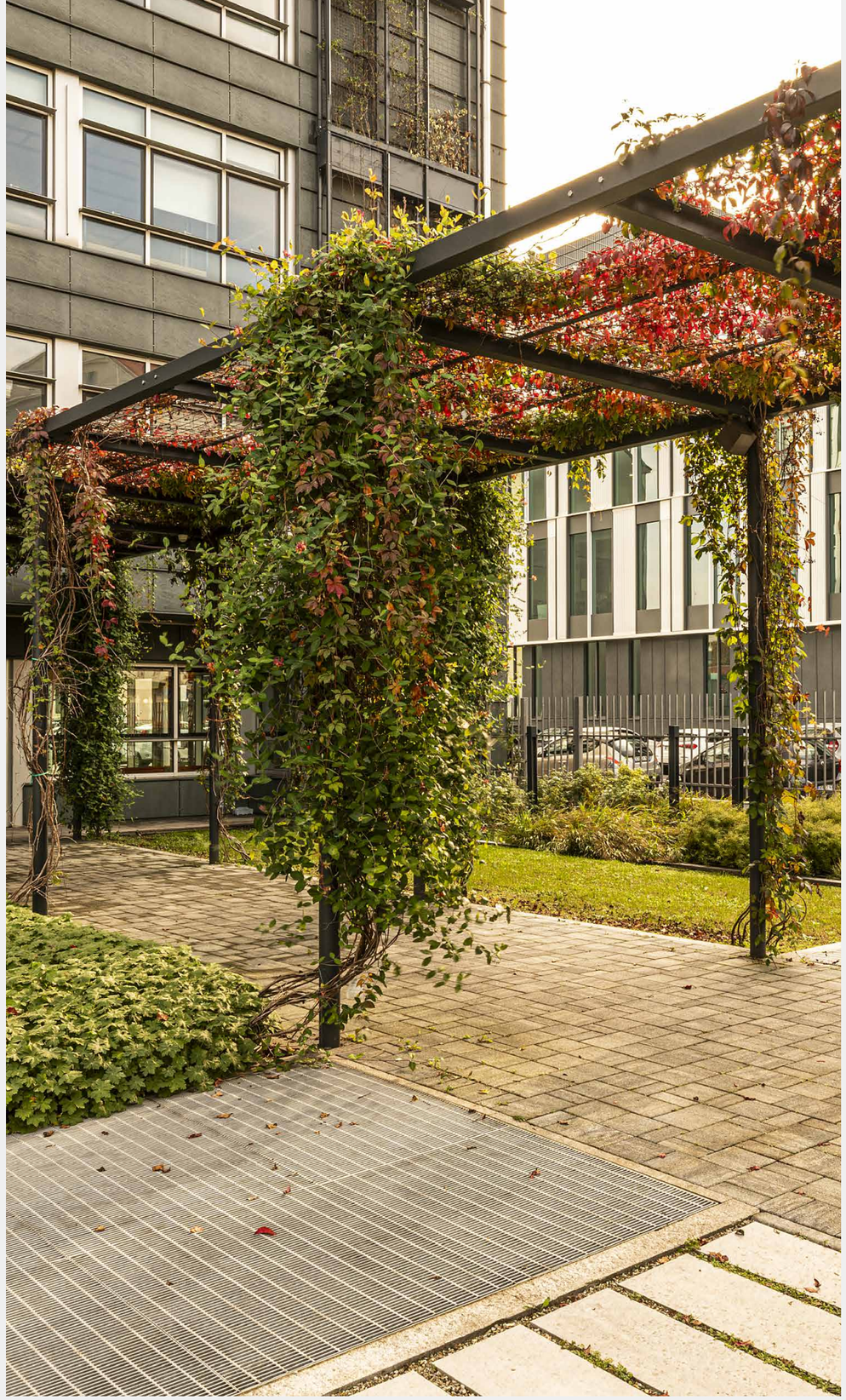
Certifications help make some of these outcomes legible. WELL and LEED translate issues such as views, access to nature and environmental performance into verifiable requirements; the Living Building Challenge connects ecology, biophilia and beauty. They are not the goal of the project, nor do they reward greenery in itself. They do, however, provide a common language through which owners, tenants and investors can discuss its benefits.

What remains outside can change everything that happens inside

A non-occupiable space creates value only when its effects are intentional, perceptible and verifiable over time. Vegetation alone is not enough. The design must recognisably improve the surrounding environments and deliver performance that justifies its cost over the life cycle.

For owners, companies and real estate operators, the point is to broaden the scope of design without necessarily adding new floor area. For HR and leadership, it means recognising that the work experience also depends on what people see, move through and perceive every day. Roofs, courtyards, car parks, edges and passageways can support wellbeing, express corporate identity, aid climate adaptation and contribute to asset value. Before treating them as residual, it is worth asking what they could offer the building and the people who experience it.

We have always inhabited more than what we could walk on. We also inhabit what we see, what orients us and what makes a relationship possible. Design does not end where access ends. It ends where the relationship ends.



Allianz via Oglio, 12, Milan - Il Prisma

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Contacts

For more information please contact:

Serena Rossetti, Business Developer

srossetti@ilprisma.com

Il Prisma is an international architecture and planning firm with Italian origins, designing spaces and experiences for the human being. The company has offices in London, Milan, Rome and Lecce, and is divided in 3 Business Units: Cityscape, Worksphere and Destination.

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