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FIRST TREES FIRST. The Subasio Park Gateway Project in Assisi

The project to transform the former 'Olive trees' sports centre in Assisi into a gateway to the Subasio Park (a protected natural area involving the municipalities of Assisi, Spello, Valtopina and Nocera Umbra) is characterized by an organic design that, in order to validate its sustainable vocation, avoids any replication of the accommodation typologies proper to religious tourism, where the volume is concentrated in a single large building. Most importantly, to ensure the psycho-physical and social well-being of users – even before they enjoy the benefits guaranteed by the park's forest habitat – the project safeguards the existing trees (olive trees and tall oaks) by the integration, if necessary, with undergrowth plants. So, the project confirms the void of the former stadium as a topographical memory and distributes the new buildings (designed according to the principles of bio-architecture) in compromised areas as well as in residual spaces of the olive grove. The result is a truly soft-tech hamlet in the midst of nature in which the former bleachers, suitably reshaped, become as many suspended pedestrian paths that branch off into and link up with the park's nature trails. In addition, they provide a widespread supply of places to rest and socialize allowing both sports practices (such as trekking and mountain biking) and the reaching of Subasio summit prairies as well as the location of natural take-off points for paragliding and hang-gliding.

Assisi; Subasio Park; eco-tourism; project; tree conservation

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«The smell of a felled tree trunk is the smell of its corpse. [...] Felling, making a vertical body horizontal, is a violent, cruel, ferocious, epic action that interferes in the life cycle of other beings» (Penone, 2021, p.154, author's translation).

ASSISI: CONSERVATION AND REBIRTH

When the Municipality of Assisi entrusted me, as scientific coordinator for the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering of the University of Perugia, to lead the design group involved in the project to transform the 'Olive trees' sports centre (*centro sportivo degli Ulivi*) into a gateway to the Subasio Park [1], I felt very uncomfortable. It seemed unwise to wipe out a sports facility full of memories, where generations of Umbrian athletes have trained (especially swimmers because the outdoor swimming pool in Assisi was for a long time the only Olympic pool in the Region) [Fig. 1]. Moreover, in the era of environmental sustainability and in the birthplace of St. Francis, it seemed unwise to cut down the many valuable trees dotting the slopes of Mount Subasio (olive trees and tall oaks). Not merely, my discomfort also stemmed from the knowledge that the 'Olive trees' sports centre claims prestigious paternity. Its location in the *Fossa Caroncia* area can be traced back to an intuition of Giovanni Astengo, formalized within the framework of the 1957 General Development Plan (*Piano Regolatore Generale*). The Detailed Development Plan No. 2 (*Piano Particolareggiato n. 2*) was dedicated to the outward expansion of Porta Nuova [2], while the Olympic swimming pool and the football stadium (named after Enzo Boccacci, mayor of the Municipality of Assisi from 1973 to 1975) were built in the early 1960s according to the project drawn up by Annibale Vitellozzi and Silvano Ricci [Fig. 2]. The original project was sensitive to the genius loci as had the ability to minimize the environmental impact of a sports area that, according to the general plan (but also as suggested by the project's name) looks like a panoramic *cavea* within the Assisi-Spoleto olive grove (Vitellozzi, Ricci, 1962). Thus, the artistic installation *For Forest*, created by Klaus Littmann in 2020 with the aim of planting more than three hundred trees in Klagenfurt's Wörthersee Stadion (Waldner-Petutschnig, 2019) [Fig. 3], particularly inspired the project. I was long tempted to make a *coup de théâtre*, fascinated by the idea of counterbalancing the felling of trees (somewhere required by the new public facilities envisaged in the functional program) with the planting of a real forest in the residual void of the former football stadium. However, according to the guidelines provided by the Municipality of Assisi which foster integration and social cohesion thanks to the activism of sports, cultural and environmental associations [3], I chose a more coherent path with the objectives of the assignment. First of all, the design proposal marked by the motto *Alberi*, drawn up by Vittorio De Feo for the 11th edition of the *Tercas Architettura Competition Award*, in which «the volumetrically lighter connection of the large hall with the sequence of the other functional spaces [...] insinuates itself tortuously among the greenery, so as to preserve its entire consistency, with the effect of persuasive coexistence between the old trees and the new building volumes by configuring a single environment» (De Feo, 1997, p. 57, author's translation) [Fig. 4]. Then also the project drawn up by Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal for the participation in the *International Competition for the redevelop-*

Fig. 1 - 'Olive trees' sports centre, Assisi (Pg), overall view

Fig. 2 - 'Olive trees' sports centre, Assisi (Pg), football stadium.

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ment of Monteluce in Perugia, announced in 2006 by BNL Fondi Immobiliari in synergy with Europa Risorse and curated by Luca Molinari. A project that, in order to minimize land consumption as well as to enhance the naturalistic component, preserved «the remarkable trees, and more generally green areas that characterize the place, but also [...] low walls, outside stairs, points of view, topography of the site», realizing buildings that «can have linear directions, following the level curves, avoid the trees, inside the trees, making a sort of very thin cut line in the vegetation, or even taking some trees inside», at the point to make Monteluce «a huge and magnificent garden, offering from every-place balconies toward the landscape» (Lacaton & Vassall, 2006, p. 2). However, above all, I thought back to the permanence of the oval geometric form of those Roman amphitheatres that, in our country, have ensured typological recognizability and the continuity of identity, carrying through urban facts as diverse in their formal outcomes as they are similar in their constituent processes. Likewise in Arezzo, Lucca, Venafro and Assisi too, where «form persists and comes to preside over a built work in a world where functions continually become modified; and in form, material is modified. The material of a bell is transformed into a cannon ball; the form of an amphitheatre into a city; the form of a city into a palace» (Rossi, 1981, p. 1, author's translation) [Fig. 6]. Aldo Rossi's point of view sets off the design spark by claiming, once again, the project not only as an instrument of safeguarding, but also - and above all - as an instrument of rebirth. Because, on closer inspection, safeguarding and rebirth can be combined in the sign of the project: as expected by Giovanni Astengo (Astengo, 1958a) and theorized by Aldo Rossi (Rossi, 1966).

Fig. 3 - Klaus Littmann, *For Forest*, 2019, perspective view.

Fig. 4 - Vittorio De Feo, *Alberi*, design proposal, 1997, overall plan.

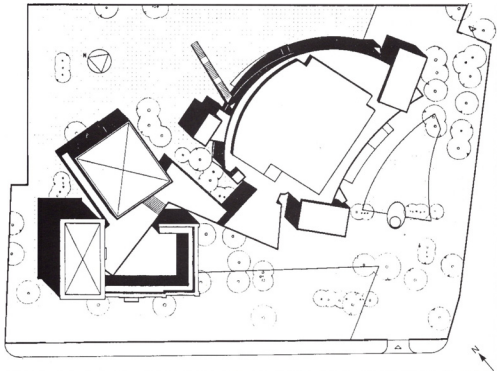

Fig. 5 - Roman amphitheatre, Arezzo.

SUBASIO PARK

The Subasio Park was established by the Region of Umbria with Law No. 9 of March 3, 1995, and which comprises a protected natural area of about 7,200 hectares. It consists of a mountain system whose peak reaches almost 1300 meters above sea level and whose «fertile coast» (Alighieri, 1321, III, c. XI, v. 45, author's translation) separates and at the same time unites, as a natural frame, the municipal territories of Assisi, Spello, Valtopina and Nocera Umbra. Even if it is dotted by pre-Franciscan hermitages of ancient origin (Grohmann, 1989, p. 28), Mount Subasio has not always been the wooded relief that today serves as a backdrop to the Umbrian valley. Either because it is characterized by significant superficial karstic phenomena, sealed by the Mortaro Grande doline, or else because it has been subject since ancient times to strong anthropic pressure, aimed at pro-

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viding timber for construction as well as ensuring free areas for grazing and agriculture. More specifically, during the late Middle Ages the anthropic pressure resulting from population growth and urban intensification reached the point that Mount Subasio was almost completely deforested. This is testified to as much directly by the late medieval communal ordinances, which forbade the cutting down of oaks near the Carceri hermitage (*Eremo delle Carceri*) to ensure the survival of the monastic friars. As depicted by Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes dedicated to the salient episodes of St. Francis's life, the Mount Subasio is portrayed as a barren and bare massif. It was a critical condition that lasted until World War I, when the Municipality of Assisi countered landscape degradation and hydro-geological instability by resorting to the labour of Austro-Hungarian army prisoners held in the Carceri hermitage [4]. It began a reforestation effort that had its greatest impetus in 1926, when the Kingdom of Italy -on the occasion of the Franciscan centenary- promoted the terracing for hundreds of kilometres of the slope between Assisi and Spello. As a result, more than four million plants of various species have been planted, particularly pioneer conifers, including black pine (*Pinus nigra*), and native broad-leaf trees with a predominance of turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*), hornbeam (*Ostrya carpinifolia*) and downy oak (*Quercus pubescens*). All of which has returned a diverse mix of forests, pastures and cultivated land in which an equally diverse fauna is lodged. For while wolves (*Canis lupus lupus*) and golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) are reported only occasionally, there is a strong presence of birds of prey in Mount Subasio, including buzzards (*Buteo buteo*) and sparrowhawks (*Accipiter nisus*), as well as picidae, including green woodpeckers (*Picus viridis*), great spotted woodpeckers (*Picoides major*) and nuthatches (*Sitta europaea*). As well as, beyond the very present wild boar (*Sus scrofa majori*), there are numerous specimens of fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), badger (*Meles meles*), weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) and common hare (*Lepus europaeus*). However, Mount Subasio represents an ideal setting for sports activities such as trekking and mountain biking rather than free flying with hang-gliding and paragliding. It is a valuable environmental resource that is subject to a complex management plan aimed at maximizing its ecological and socioeconomic functions, including through an appropriate policy of promoting and accommodating ecotourism flows [5].

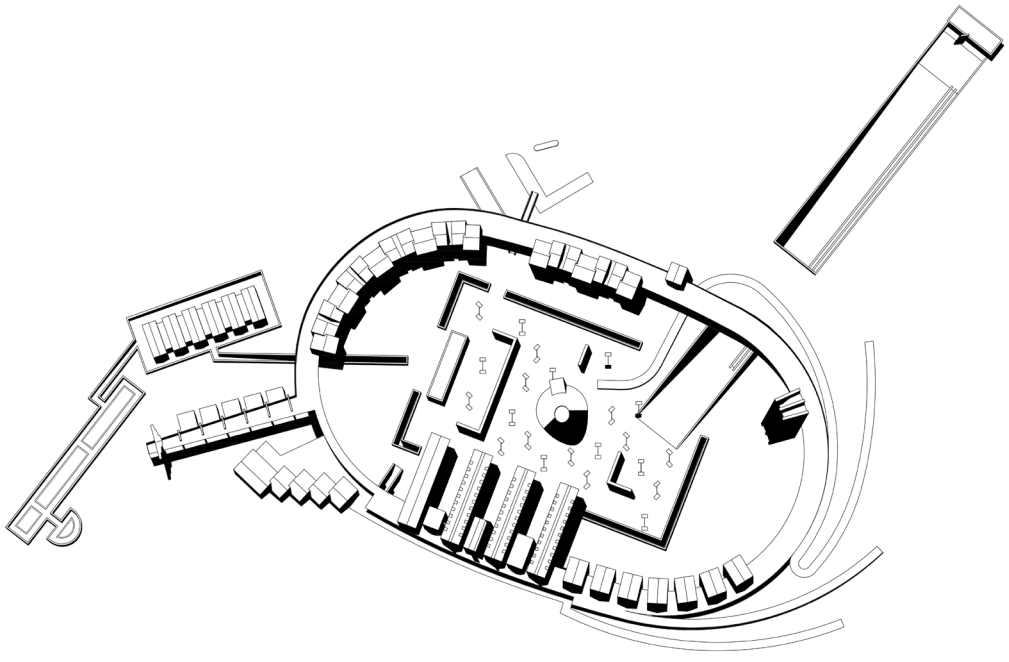

Fig. 6 - Paolo Belardi, Matteo Scoccia, Felice Lombardi, Margherita Maria Ristori, Subasio Park gateway project, Assisi (Pg), 2021, overall plan

THE SUBASIO PARK GATEWAY PROJECT

The transformation of the 'Olive trees' sports centre in Assisi [6] into the gateway to Subasio Park (Belardi, Scoccia, Lombardi, Ristori, 2021) is characterized by an organic design that aims to combine the compositional strategies proper to contemporaneity (specifically, zero-volume architecture and parasitic architecture) with the urban dimension of Italian tradition [Fig. 6]. In order not to consume neither soil nor memory and -most importantly- not to risk the cutting of existing trees, the project activity was preceded by an accurate architectural and environmental survey supplemented by the cataloguing of the existing tree and shrub essences within the area. All of which returns a highly articulated architecture, which cannot be perceived statically from a few prefixed points of view, but can only and ex-

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clusively be perceived dynamically, because it is open, multi-purpose and multiple. Rooted in a deep knowledge of the place, the architecture validates its sustainable vocation by avoiding any replication of the accommodation typologies proper to religious tourism (where the volume is concentrated in a single large building) scattering a series of small housing units facing the square. Most importantly, to ensure the well-being of users even before they enjoy the benefits guaranteed by the forestry habitat of Subasio mountain park (Meneguzzo, Zabini, 2020; Meneguzzo, Zabini, 2022), the project safeguards the existing trees (olive trees and tall oaks) by the integration, if necessary, with undergrowth plants. So, the project confirms the void of the former stadium as a topographical memory and distributes the new buildings in compromised areas as well as in residual spaces of the olive grove [Fig. 7]. The new architectures are designed according to the principles of bio-architecture, by using natural materials that are easily disposable and/or recyclable (wood, stone, hemp, cellulose fibre). The result is a truly soft-tech hamlet in the midst of nature, in which the former Olympic swimming pool and the former children's preparatory pool are converted into a wellness centre, according to the strategic goals set by the Municipality of Assisi, while the former stadium destination field becomes a large pedestrian plaza, manned by the *cannon-Lumière* of Lecorbuserian memory. It houses the sports equipment shop/workshop, punctuated by a swarm of photovoltaic street-lights and bordered almost seamlessly by the scenic backdrop of the accommodation facilities [Fig. 8]. At the same time, the former bleachers, suitably reshaped, become as many suspended pedestrian paths as possible that branch off into a paths *diverticulum* of that linking up with the park's nature trails [Fig. 9]. In addition, they provide a widespread supply of places to rest and socialize allowing both sports practices (such as trekking and mountain biking) and the reaching of Subasio summit prairies as well as the natural take-off points for paragliding and hang-gliding [Fig. 10].

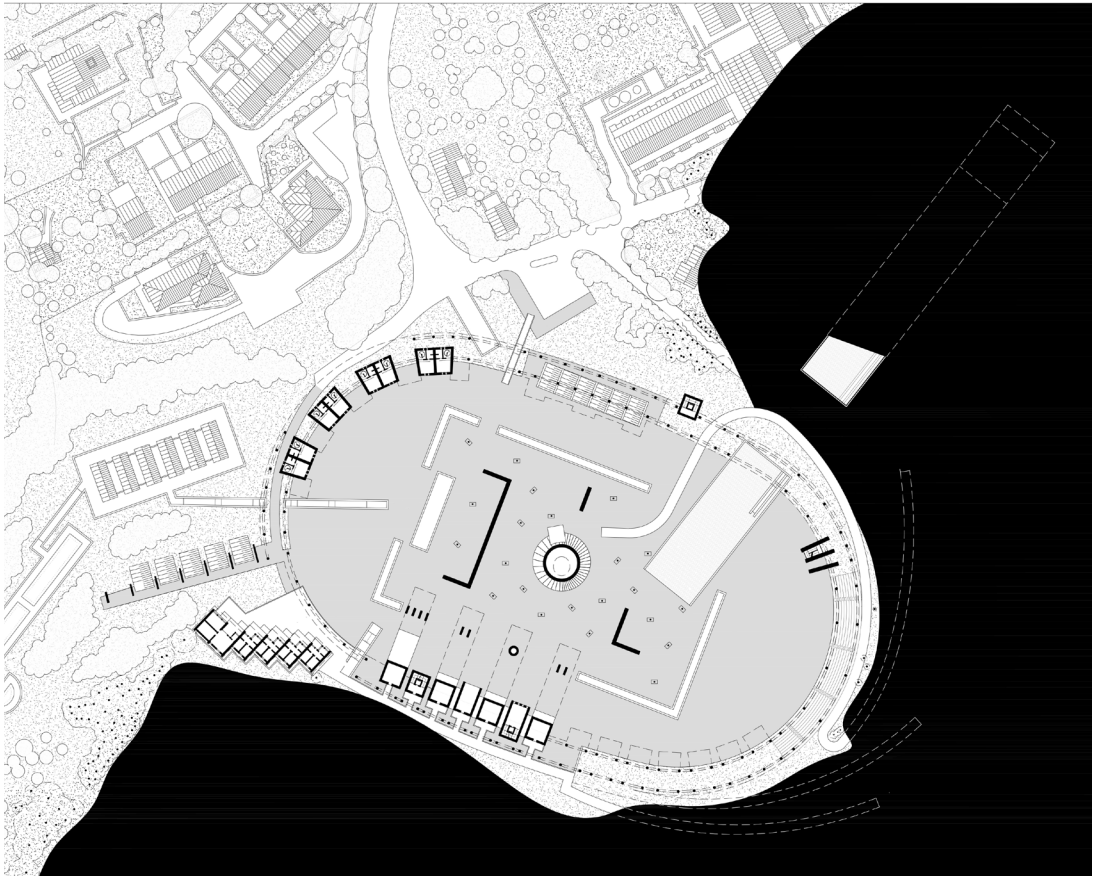

Fig. 7 - Paolo Belardi, Matteo Scoccia, Felice Lombardi, Margherita Maria Ristori, Subasio Park gateway project, Assisi (Pg), 2021, plan at the plaza level.

CONCLUSIONS

The design concept, aimed at enhancing environmental pre-existences without erasing them, demonstrates that sustainability is not only a quantitative issue, referring to energy saving rather than reducing carbon dioxide emissions. In fact, sustainability is also a qualitative issue, related to the preservation of memory and beauty.

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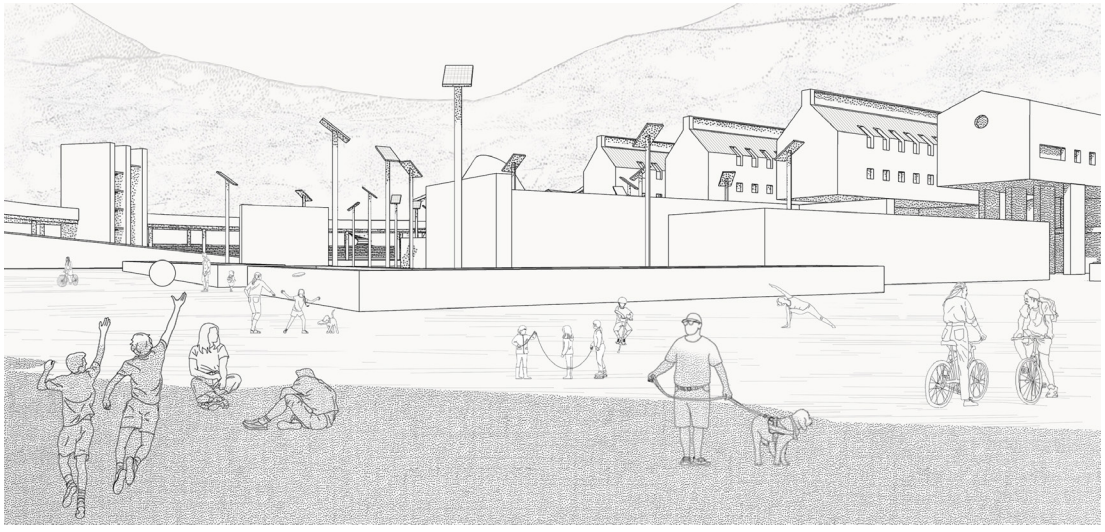

Fig. 8 - Paolo Belardi, Matteo Scoccia, Felice Lombardi, Margherita Maria Ristori, Subasio Park gateway project, 2021, perspective view from the plaza.

Fig. 10 - Paolo Belardi, Matteo Scoccia, Felice Lombardi, Margherita Maria Ristori, Subasio Park gateway project, Assisi (Pg), 2021, scale model.

Fig. 9 - Paolo Belardi, Matteo Scoccia, Felice Lombardi, Margherita Maria Ristori, Subasio Park gateway project, 2021, perspective view from the

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NOTES

[1] The relationship between the Municipality of Assisi and the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering of the University of Perugia was regulated by the agreement titled *Ideational Study for the Architectural Recomposition of the 'Olive trees' Stadium and Municipal Swimming Pool Area*, signed on December 1, 2020 (Archive of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering of the University of Perugia).

[2] The Detailed Development Plan No. 2 (*Piano Particolareggiato n. 2*) provides a series of actions including «the formation of public gardens and, particularly, of a large natural park that from the Mezzo Road goes up to the second core, including the adjacencies of the Madonna dell'Ulivo and the 'boschetto' areas and allowing pedestrian walks among rocks and oaks. There are plans to adapt the natural cavea of the 'boschetto' area as an open-air theater, with some stone steps, which can be used both as a place of rest for neighborhood residents and tourists, and as a place of outdoor performances for songs or cinema during summer» (Astengo, 1958, p. 127, author's translation). In the General Development Plan (*Piano Regolatore Generale*) of the Municipality of Assisi, drafted in 1957 by Giovanni Astengo and approved by Decree No. 1696 of March 30, 1972, the 'Olive trees' sports centre, classified as a *Public Green Zone - Existing Sports Field and Extension Zone* (Art. 40 of the Technical Implementation Rules) takes on a very important role from the environmental point of view.

[3] «The potential of the 'Olive trees' Sports Centre is generated by its location, not far from the Historic Centre of Assisi and already placed within the Subasio Park. For its redevelopment, it is considered necessary to provide a coordinated system of facilities and equipment, which expresses great attractiveness, both to residents and tourists, through the provision of services that are not exclusively seasonal, capable of making the Complex active all year round. The pursuit of this objective requires that the sports dimension be accompanied by others, referring to sociality, wellness and tourism. To this end, the following two scenarios are assumed: 'Scenario Zero', a redevelopment of the Sports Complex based on its adaptation to the new needs of sports practices and including some new activities; 'Scenario 1', the creation of a new Complex in which sports characterization opens up to activities other than the current ones, integrating with activities of a socio-recreational type and also with cultural and sports activities aimed at the Subasio tourist system» (Stanghellini, 2020, p. 14, author's translation).

[4] Three marble plaques commemorating Austro-Hungarian prisoners captured during World War I and detained between 1916 and 1919, it is displayed at the Carceri Hermitage in Assisi. They were involved by the Municipality of Assisi for the reforestation of Mount Subasio. Specifically, the epigraph says: «The city of Assisi in memory of the prisoners of Austro-Hungarian war who in the years 1916-1919 reforested this sacred mountain in occasion of the VIII centenary of the birth of Saint Francis XIV September 1989 Austria Day».

[5] The goals of Subasio Park are pursued through three operational instruments: the General Development Plan, which defines the general organization of the area concerned; the Subasio Park Regulations, which regulate the criteria for management and the exercise of activities in the area concerned; and the Subasio Park Pluriennial Economic and Social Plan, which is the strategic instrument aimed at promoting the sustainable development of the area concerned.

[6] As designed in 1962 by Annibale Vitellozzi and Silvano Ricci, the 'Olive trees' sports centre consisted of a soccer field with locker rooms, a six-lane athletics track, two tennis courts, an outdoor Olympic-size swimming pool, and an outdoor preparatory pool for children with attached facilities. While currently the sports area consists of a soccer field, a five-a-side soccer field and a tennis court, as the athletics track, Olympic-size swimming pool and outdoor preparatory pool for children were decommissioned in 2013.

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