



Yale University, School of Architecture

Architecture and Morality: An Interview with Mario Botta

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Architecture and Morality: an Interview with Mario Botta



I would like to take this opportunity to confess that I always return to Ticino because here I find that exciting climate I lived through in the 1930s and 1940s, during the great battle for a new architecture. I consider that in Ticino one can truly find a new center for architecture. Above all, I regard Mario Botta as the link between our ideas of decades ago and today's architecture. He is not an *imitator* of things past but a *continuator*. I am not in the habit of gratuitously paying compliments to anyone at all. In my youth, I did my best in order to generate polemics. Nowadays, I am not polemical anymore for I rarely find the reason to be so.

As a teacher, I always failed the student who would imitate my drawings; conversely, the student who would be able to capture the spirit of my work would always gain my highest note of appreciation. In Ticino, Mario Botta as well as some other of his local colleagues—but Botta in particular—is consistently capturing my attention. He is the continuator of an architecture that is certainly not dead, and that definitely did not fail. In my opinion, rational architecture has not reached its fullest expression yet. "Rational" is a word with no intrinsic value in itself, it carries no historic value. Rational is simply a word necessary for cataloguing a particular movement. All good architecture has always been rational. Nevertheless, we can still rely on the term "functional-rational" for the purpose of classifying the architecture of Mario Botta, as well as that of his Ticinese comrades. In this context Botta plays the role not only of an animator of architecture but of geometry as well. When I spoke about Mario Botta's most recent built project, the Casa Rotonda, I said that he is the "transfigurer of geometry," for I consider that geometry *is* architecture. I find that evolution as a concept does not apply to architecture; in our profession there is only metamorphosis. Architecture must always be of the avant-garde, as it was of the avant-garde architect who built the Parthenon.

Alberto Sartoris

Livio Dimitriu

Your work is now receiving a great deal of attention in the United States. To what do you attribute this?

Mario Botta

The interest in my work is due to the fact that it is a very primary architecture and therefore very easily receivable. My buildings are quite often very simple, this being a characteristic which relates them to a regionalistic tradition. I believe that not only in America, but everywhere, there is a need for simplicity. Architecture is a primary fact, a language for man. We must recognize the basic needs accompanying the fact of habitation. An architecture such as mine gravitates toward the essential, and relegates to a lower priority the decorative and mundane elements. Perhaps this is why the images seen in magazines are strong and thus easier to receive.

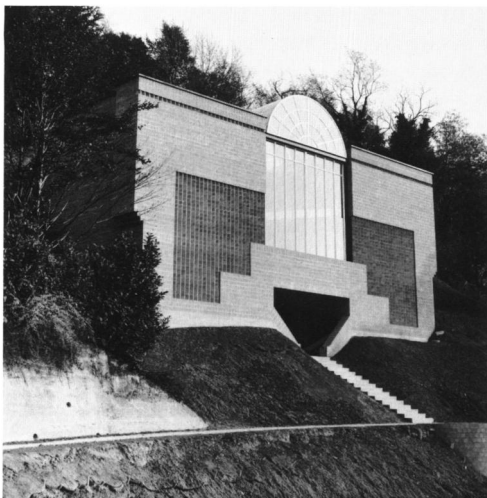
LD

Yesterday, on the construction site, we spoke of the appeal your houses are able to generate, despite the fact that you use exclusively in their making very low cost materials, such as concrete blocks. In my country, the use of such "poor" materials is restricted to industrial structures, warehouses and the like, especially when no exterior finish is applied, as is the case with your buildings. I wonder what the impact of this architectonic expression would be on the population of the well-to-do in Long Island, for example?

MB

To answer this you must ask the rich, for I can only ask my own clients, people of relatively restricted means. All of my houses were, until now, geared to a very modest market. I would not call it poor, because still today we live in a world which does not allow the poor man to build. The use of materials in my houses is simple, or perhaps better described as humble. In Ticino, the use of these materials is not a tradition. Here, houses are often made with luxurious materials as an expression of status. I, for one, employed bricks and blocks because I simply had to make houses on economical budgets. However, I do believe that any material, if handled properly, can assume the dignity equal to that of marble or gold. I did use a different class of materials in the project for the Fribourg Bank, marble for instance, but with extreme restraint and discretion. A material in itself is an instrument. It all depends on how one uses it. Even with common materials one can make good architecture. In fact, good architecture is always made with such materials. The use of rich materials is an exception to the rule. They ought to be used only on special occasions, in order to be meaningful as conveyors of symbolic or religious values.

In my opinion it is necessary that architecture reflect to some degree the history of its own time. There is a very beautiful definition which I enjoy recalling every now and then, namely that architecture is the formal expression of history. Today we live in an epoch where there are materials which by themselves are not noble. It is our duty, our work as architects, to make these materials speak, to make them become the highest expression possible for our time.



1
House in Viganello, 1980.



2
House in Pregassona, 1979.

LD

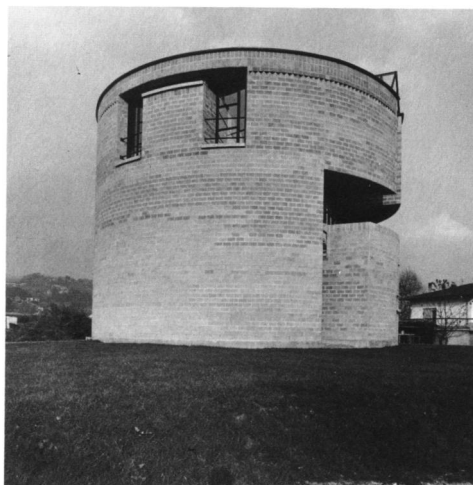
How was your work received in your own country until now? What are the problems you had in the past, and what are the problems you believe you will have to confront in the future?

MB

I must say that it was received on two different levels. At the international level it was received quite positively, which flatters me, as well as concerns, and surprises me. The few works which I execute and publish are always generating interest and discussion. However, at the local level difficulties still exist, either from a bureaucratic point of view or with public opinion. This is seemingly a result of a closed mentality which doesn't receive innovation easily. The exceptions are those who inhabit my buildings, who are very content with them, and a few friends. Viewing the exterior, my buildings sometimes appear to be *disturbing* objects. In reality, they respond in a very simple manner to exigencies of our time and of our landscape. The architecture I make is perhaps not very "cultured," but it is very closely related to nature. It would please me if my architecture is perceived to be rooted in and tied to the culture of my native land. The making of architecture signifies transforming reality. I am attempting to transform this reality, which is always unique. Every single house is a "unicum" which communicates with a particular landscape, which in turn has its own history, its own culture, and possesses its own stratification to be consolidated and transformed. Making architecture signifies above all the search for a new equilibrium between man and his surroundings. We inherited a certain tradition, but today we also have different needs and new aspirations. By means of architecture, we can and must, as is our duty, search for these new modalities of organizing the space of everyday life so that we can be in harmony with our life and time. I must admit that my architectural proposals are only partially agreed with immediately, because at first sight they appear to be shocking. Initially they appear to hurt the public sensibility. Only in time one realizes that they are not as "ugly" as one may have initially thought. Instead, as time elapses they perhaps come across as less disturbing than the enormous number of small interventions which are made merely in order to hide one's lack of quality. The result of this operation is a surrounding fabric without any quality of its own. It is inherent to architecture to be a counterpoint to nature, to be a dialogue with nature. Architecture must be by definition other than nature. Architecture is an artificial fact. The only manner of paying our respects to nature is precisely by opposing it, confronting it, by conversing with it while fully aware that architecture is but an artificial element created by man. Only from a dialogue with the natural element can quality arise. If there is to be an instrument capable of measuring the quality of architecture, it must quantify the intensity of change between an original natural condition and the new condition of culture, inside which architecture intervened and created a new space.



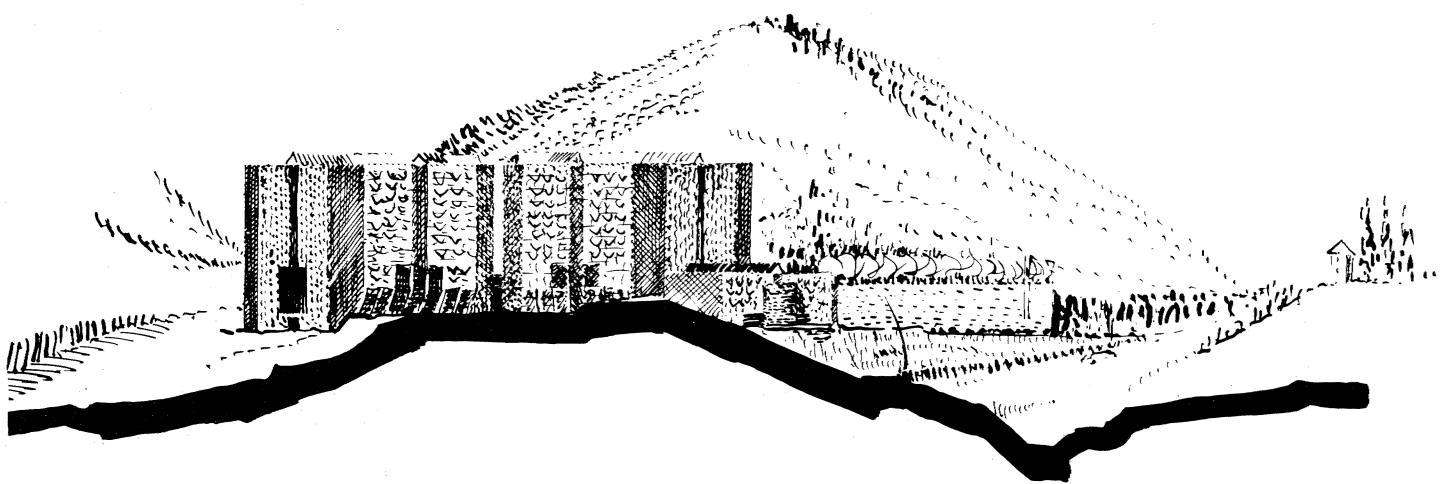
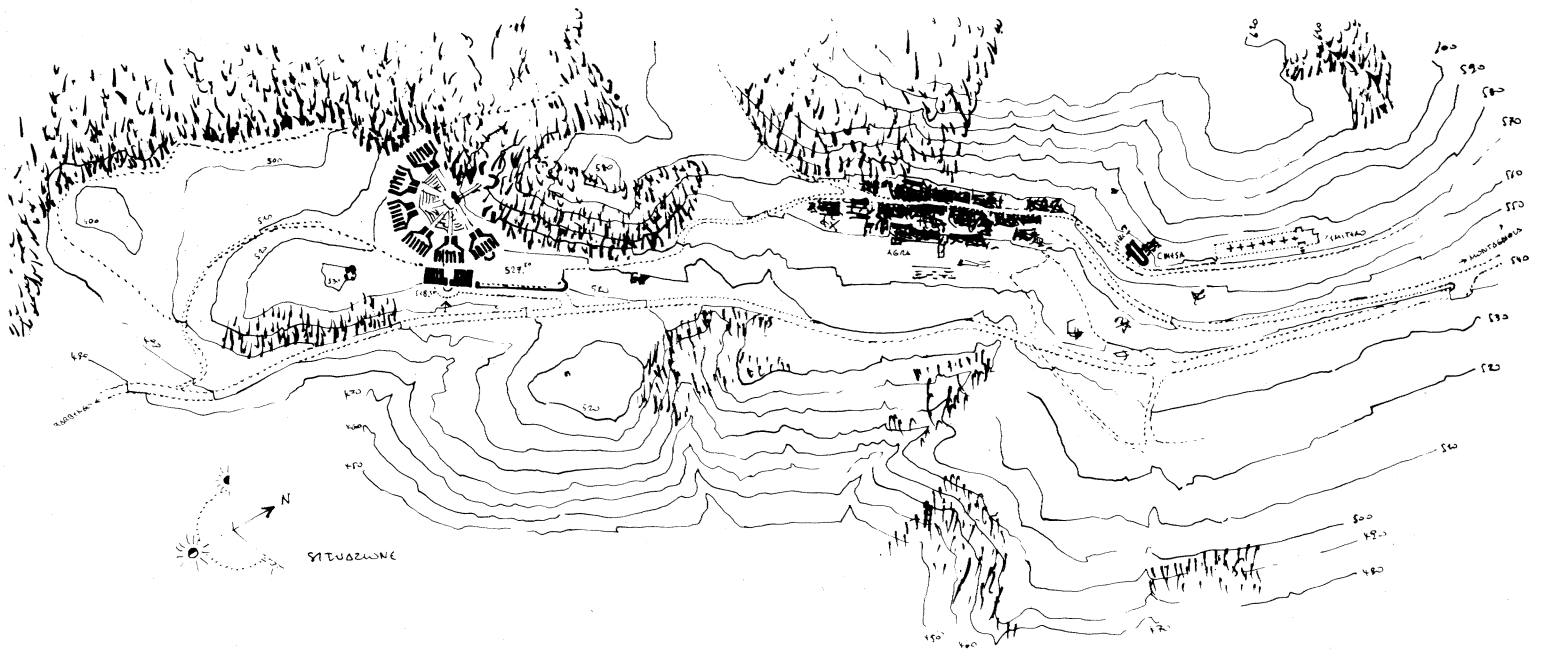
3
Fribourg Bank, 1977-82, interior
of banking lobby.



4
La Casa Rotonda, 1981.

5
Agra Competition, 1980,
site plan.

6
Agra Competition, 1980,
perspective sketch.



LD

When you spoke of your work as “disturbing,” I supposed that you were referring to the local perception of it. I don’t believe that in the U.S.A. your work is disturbing to the eye and mind of the viewer.

MB

Yes, perhaps.

LD

You were referring to Switzerland, I would think.

MB

Yes, Switzerland. Your intuition serves you well. I was referring to the local perception. Because I propose new forms, people regard my houses with a certain degree of curiosity. It is only a matter of a short time before people become aware that my buildings are perhaps forms which better respond to today’s needs.

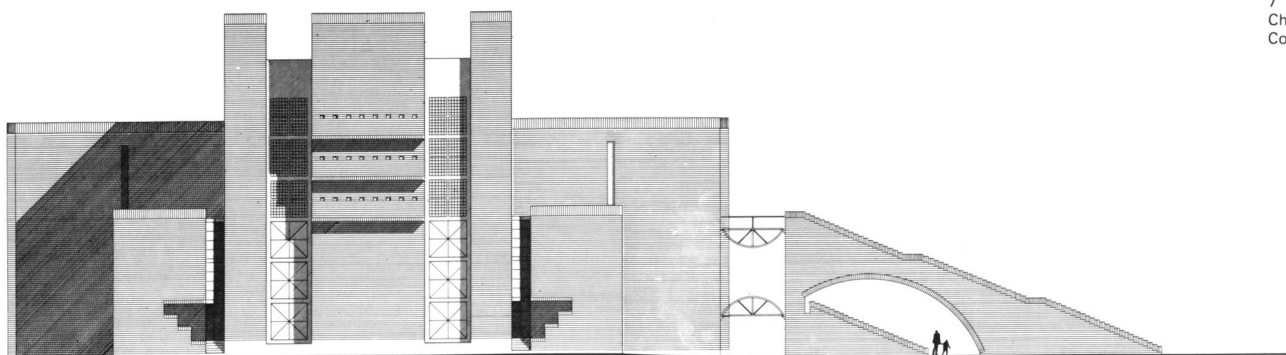
LD

It is striking to me to hear you say, even in passing, yet no doubt with intention, that your architecture is not cultured. What exactly do you mean when you make this statement?

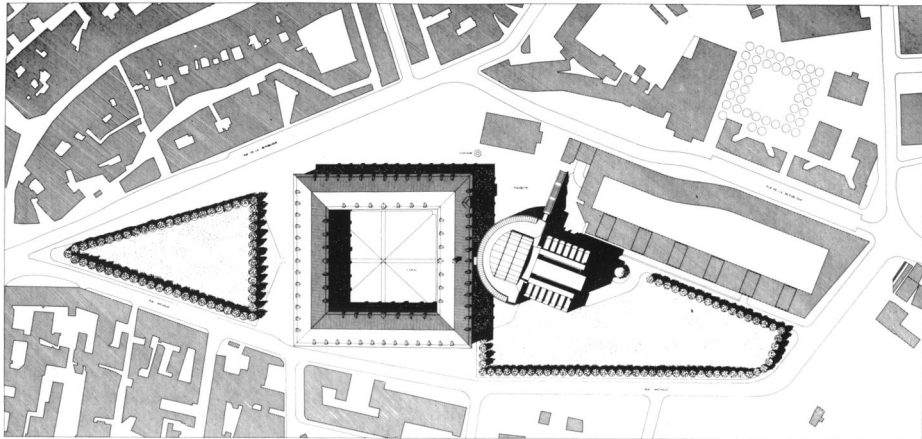
MB

I said that *perhaps* it is not “cultured.” In fact, it is an architecture which is measured by the yardstick of man’s needs, and thus it becomes “cultured.” It is cultured in that sense. It is not cultured in the sense that it is not a literary architecture.

I would like to make an architecture which responds to real needs. Today, I see real needs as a series of elements which place man in relation with the earth itself, with the trajectory of the sun in the sky, with the awareness of the passing seasons. Thus one may recapture, via the notion of dwelling, the initial values for which the dwelling was built. The dwelling as the repository of mankind, must offer a micro-climate of life to enhance social communication, as well as eating, sleeping, love-making, and working. The role of these needs has been somewhat distorted and modified by the International Style, and by consumer oriented architecture, through the proposal of lavish artificial paradises. For example, in the part of the world where I practice, it is perfectly useless to use air conditioning. Even though air conditioning was considered one of the great conquests of the 1960s, I believe that one can live in better harmony with one’s surroundings without a mechanical device which renders everything sterile and aseptic and which imposes the lack of change as a condition of life all year round.

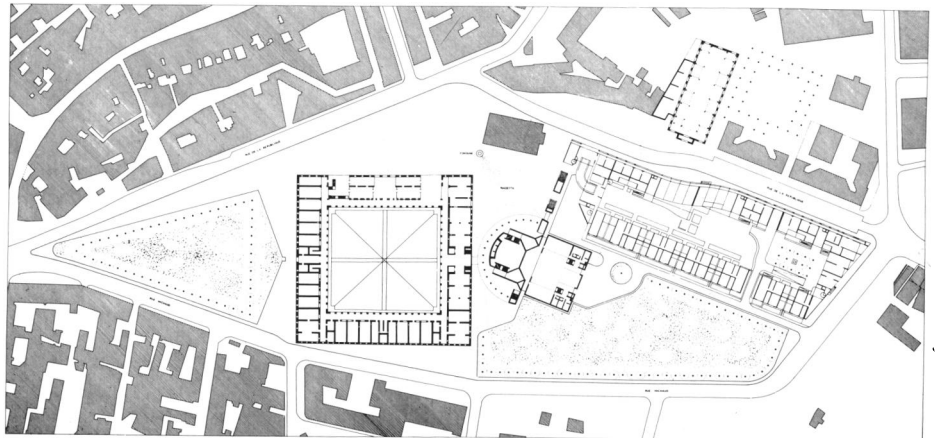


7
Chamberg Theater
Competition, 1981, elevation.

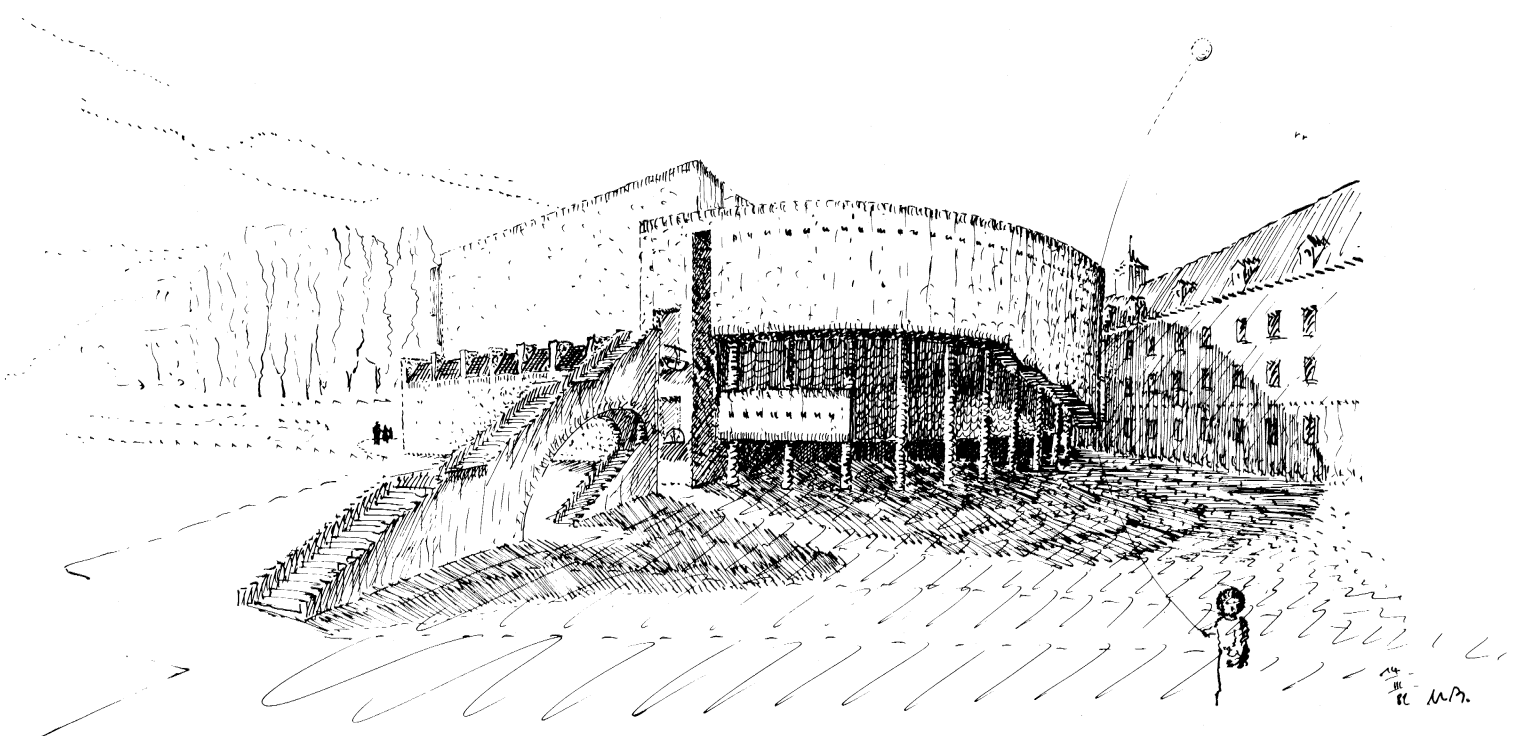


8 Chamberg Theater Competition, 1981, site plan of building mass.

9 Chamberg Theater Competition, 1981, site plan at ground level.



10 Chamberg Theater Competition, 1981, perspective sketch.



LD

One of the “myths” surrounding your work is that it was strongly influenced by the great masters with whom you came in contact, directly or indirectly, during your formative years. I am referring specifically to Carlo Scarpa, Louis Kahn, and Le Corbusier. I am taking the liberty of using the word “myth,” for all too often I find the architects and critics reacting rather superficially to your work, and using the names as rather comforting clichés to be applied as labels to a quite “disturbing” work via its novel interpretation of past and often forgotten lessons. By the way, which is the order you prefer among the names I mentioned, if you indeed accept them as valid, and why?

MB

These influences were perhaps fictionalized by some critics, but in reality they are substantially true, for I do have a great cultural debt. The three names you mentioned are great personalities to whom I owe a great deal.

LD

Forgive me for attempting to further clarify this point. In discussing “cultured” architecture, you were referring to its relationship to the landscape, and its being in harmony with nature. When you said, “It is perhaps not cultured in the literary sense,” I could not help thinking that you implied by the use of this term either a direct reading of built-in narratives in your architecture—which for me is quite evidently present in your work—or an architecture of quotation, explicitly or implicitly, vis-à-vis the oeuvres of the masters you acknowledge. I must come back to this point, for I do see your production as “cultured” in the best sense of the word.

MB

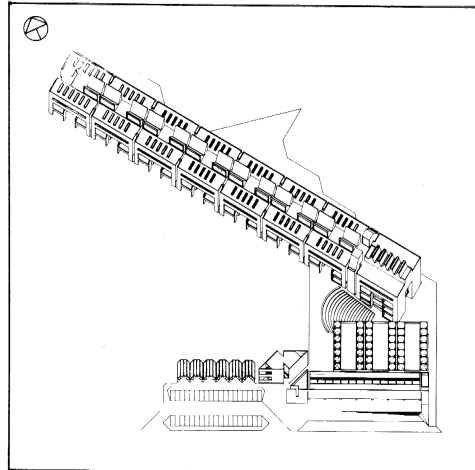
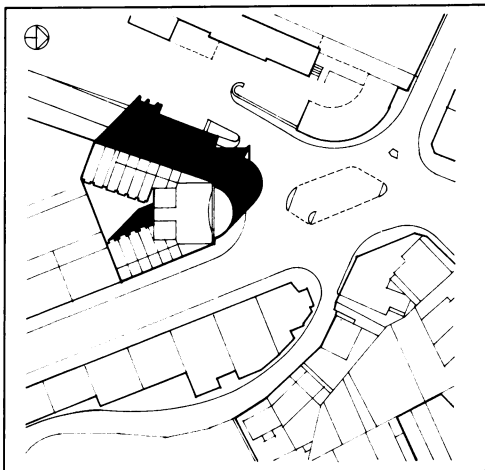
Yes, from that point of view, but architecture does not exist if not by means of work completed, belabored, received and executed by the preceding generations. There are two manners of appreciating the architectonic fact. One is the rational approach with which I identify. I cannot think but through experiences, through work, through the cumulative culture of preceding generations. One is not born an architect, one becomes it. The work of the Modern Movement in my particular case established a cultural substratum as well as a cultural ceiling on and under which I operate. This rational approach includes all the aspects which we are able to communicate with words, such as the problem of the crisis of the city, the loss of identity and value through consumerist architecture, and so on. A more sensitive aspect with which I identify when speaking of architecture is the secret, more autobiographical side. More difficult to express in words, it is able to survive because it is the poetic fact, the intuitive dimension inside the rational process. I hope to recover through the teachings of these three masters a fragment of the rational, as well as accommodate the irrational side of the process of making architecture.

To answer the second part of the question concerning the three architects, Carlo Scarpa, Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier, Kahn would place first. We had a series of meetings in Venice on the occasion of the Palace of Congress project. Even though we had relatively little personal contact—I would like to say that paradoxically Kahn is the one I knew least among the three—he gave me the most regarding an approach to architecture. I am very interested in Kahn’s capacity to go to the origins of the problem, to organize the space surrounding man, and put it in a form which is almost archetypal, always leading by way of transformation to the primordial needs of man. “A school,” he says, “is a tree under which men speak to one another.” The capacity Kahn had to always go to the origins of problems helped me very much.

Next is the appreciation I have for Carlo Scarpa, for his sensibility for and extreme love of materials. He was a great poet of materials. Scarpa offers a great lesson in freedom through the manner in which he used and abused all materials as well as the manner in which he organized spaces. However, he never did

possess a great creative plastic force in his work but he was endowed with an extreme sensibility related to the use of all materials. He knew how to make stone speak, yet he was also able to make drawing paper sing. I would be very happy indeed to think that I have assimilated even partially Scarpa's great love of materials.

Of course, we are all indebted to Le Corbusier. He willingly became practically the essence of the history of the Modern Movement in architecture. He was a man who for fifty years stood for an architecture ranging from neoclassic, to modern, to postmodern; a man who with his activity and generosity influenced all of us. It would indeed please me to be understood as a student of these three masters.



11
Fribourg Bank, 1977-82,
exterior wing.

12
School at Morbio Inferiore,
1972-77, site plan.

LD

The *Electa* catalog concludes with the project for the Fribourg Bank, the first large scale project you made. It is with this project that the American public's perception of your work concludes as well. Your aficionados in America await with a mixture of interest and anxiety news about this particular project. The explanation of this questioning mood is the fact that the bank is, in the context of your work, on a radically different scale of intervention, and also because it is a strongly contextual urban work. What are your enthusiasms, reservations, and personal revelations about this project?



13
Fribourg Bank, 1977-82,
exterior corner.

MB

The Fribourg Bank is a project which occupied a great deal of my time since 1977, and is about to be completed. Undoubtedly, there will always be those who are disappointed, just as there will be those who are satisfied. I must say that the bank is a project through which I learned many lessons. As you know, the bank is the first large scale project I have executed in a densely urban context. The earlier project for the school in Morbio had 70,000 cubic meters of built volume, which is roughly that of the bank, but it was, of course, on a rather rural site. In the case of the Fribourg Bank, I dealt with problems inherent in the city context, a highly historic one at that, as is often the case with urban situations. It is an interesting project, because it is one of the first done after the economic euphoria of the 1960s when the destruction of the cities was the order of the day. There are two positions possible: one builds *for* the city, or one builds *against* the city. The Fribourg Bank is a project built *for* the city. It comments on the history, the typology, and the morphology of the city. It is not an obnoxious project. It refuses to make the grand gestures characteristic of the interventions in a more open context. Rather it assumes the laws of historic stratification, in particular the laws of the nineteenth century city block. The Fribourg Bank attempts to employ this sensibility through the instruments pertinent to these laws. During the 1960s, the corners of city blocks were usually destroyed in order to put up a tower. The tower was often representative of an open structure, one that could be used anywhere for any reason. Instead, I proposed a project articulated in three parts each very different from the other. The two lateral wings repeat the morphology



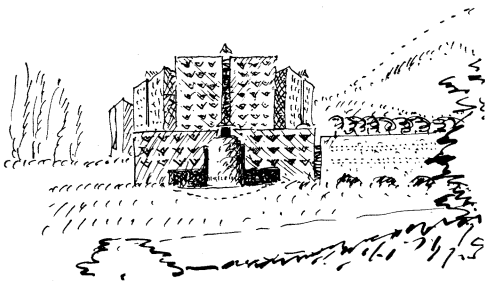
14
Fribourg Bank, 1977-82,
exterior wing.

of the contiguous buildings existing along the boulevard and thus, by playing façade against façade, it consolidates the boulevard. The bank is intended to reinforce the structure of the city and not go against it. It is symbolically engaged in bringing the beginning of the boulevard into a dialogue with the head volume. This volume is in turn responding to a different space, namely the piazza in front of the railroad station. The building itself, by way of its articulation, assumes the laws of the city, interprets them, and restates them spatially in order to obtain a new organization. From this point of view the intellectual gamble involved in the project for the Fribourg Bank was very interesting to me precisely because at that time I began to feel like an orphan. The last examples of interventions made to consolidate the urban structure were the Michaelplatz of Adolf Loos and the Postsparkasse of Otto Wagner, in Vienna. Afterwards modern architects always worked towards the destruction of the urban fabric. In this context the Fribourg Bank is a project attempting to recapture history and urban form, but not by great gestures nor by a contemporary language. In this sense it is an operation which can appear very modest from a linguistic point of view, yet still be capable of providing a topic for reflection on the subject of building in the city. For example, take the topic of constructing a window in the context of a nineteenth century urban texture. The window there is a hole in the wall. What does it mean to make a window today? We have lost the awareness of the meaning of window because, as it can be seen in the head element and the adjacent sides, the window does not exist as such. It becomes instead a panel, or a strip. When one confronts the theme of the façade against the façade of cut stone, the window becomes a theme itself. Consequently, one attempts to rethink the theme of the window with the instruments available today. The window can also be the light hitting on a mullion—a mediator between an internal and an external space. By way of this exercise, one can rediscover the whole history of architecture.

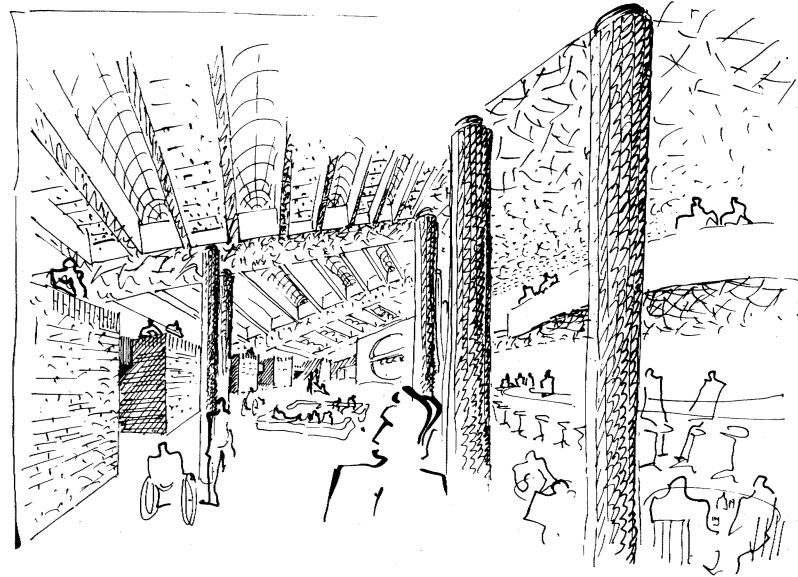
The problem of the window in the Agra project is very different from that of the Fribourg Bank and its explanation is very simple. The rooms are deep, and the spaces are oriented towards a valley as the building is sited on top of a mountain with an extraordinary view. Through the use of a triangle, the window took a configuration which maximized the opening above. The project is for a recuperative spa with many handicapped people in attendance who are afforded the possibility of perceiving the landscape below. Simultaneously they are given the impression of secure containment by the narrowing of the opening near the floor. It is this solution which determined the concept of space and then in turn determined the configuration of the window. It was not the window that determined the space.

15
Agra Competition, 1980, site
model.





16
Agra Competition, 1980,
exterior perspective sketch.



17
Agra Competition, 1980,
interior perspective sketch.

LD

Now that you are building increasingly more projects in urban contexts, and I am specifically thinking of the corner office building on Lugano's main piazza, as well as the recently won competition and commission for the cultural center and theater in Chambéry, France, could you please elaborate on the topic of building in the landscape as opposed to cityscape and illustrate with a few examples.

MB

The will of the architect is to intervene inside the city. I trust that it is a legitimate desire, similar to that of the painter who aspires to exhibit in a museum, as the collective locus par excellence. An architect such as myself, who has always worked in the open landscape of the countryside, becomes more stimulated, and is exposed to more suggestions, by the contradictions and the tensions of working in the urban context. The architect finds himself working more willingly and ambitiously with his models. I believe, though, that there is no fundamental difference between urban context and rural context in so far as the process, the problem solving procedure, goes. I always deal with a reading of the context, identifying some negative or positive priority setting elements which will enrich the making of the new project.

The design determinants for the Morbio school were the presence of the forest and the church as well as the desire to engage the presence of the new school with that of the church. This established a context which I willingly locked myself into. In the context of Fribourg, the reading of the history of the city itself determined the elements of play and my response to these elements. Thus the procedure is analogous. Evidently that which changes is the content. If one must confront the problem of the corner in a city block this is certainly different from operating in open country. In the case of the Lugano corner building, I dealt with the privileged situation of a site overlooking one of the main town squares and the two adjacent corners were subservient, merely framing our site. In Lugano, the very idea of consolidating the city block, and yet producing a commentary to an open space, determined a composition which made the apex corner the dominating element of the geometric and spatial composition. This is a solution I would not adopt or accept, were we to deal with a city block somewhere else. It would be too strong a gesture and too rhetorical. The solution followed naturally from the opposition of the piazza and the corner of the block. To answer your question, the elements of reference change, but the type of reference, which in my opinion is always that of discovery through a perpetually critical reading of the context, remains. One selects that which is positive, as well as that which is negative, with respect to the organization of space. Then one produces a speculation. The architect always makes speculations of a critical nature and also of an ideological nature. He therefore always needs pretexts for enabling him to intervene inside this reality.

LD

One of the revelations I personally experienced during our visit together to various projects built or under construction was the appropriateness of scale between the architecture and the landscape. I find, in so far as I can judge, there is a great difficulty in expressing this intimate dialogue via architectural photography. The monumentality of your rather small houses resides in their relationship to the landscape and not in the architectonic object itself. The other side of the coin is the Fribourg Bank which one can say elaborates on the notion of monumentality both in its scale and its commentary on the urban context, down to its minutest detail of execution. This brings the question around to the significance of the word "monumental" in relation to your chair prototypes for *Alias*.

MB

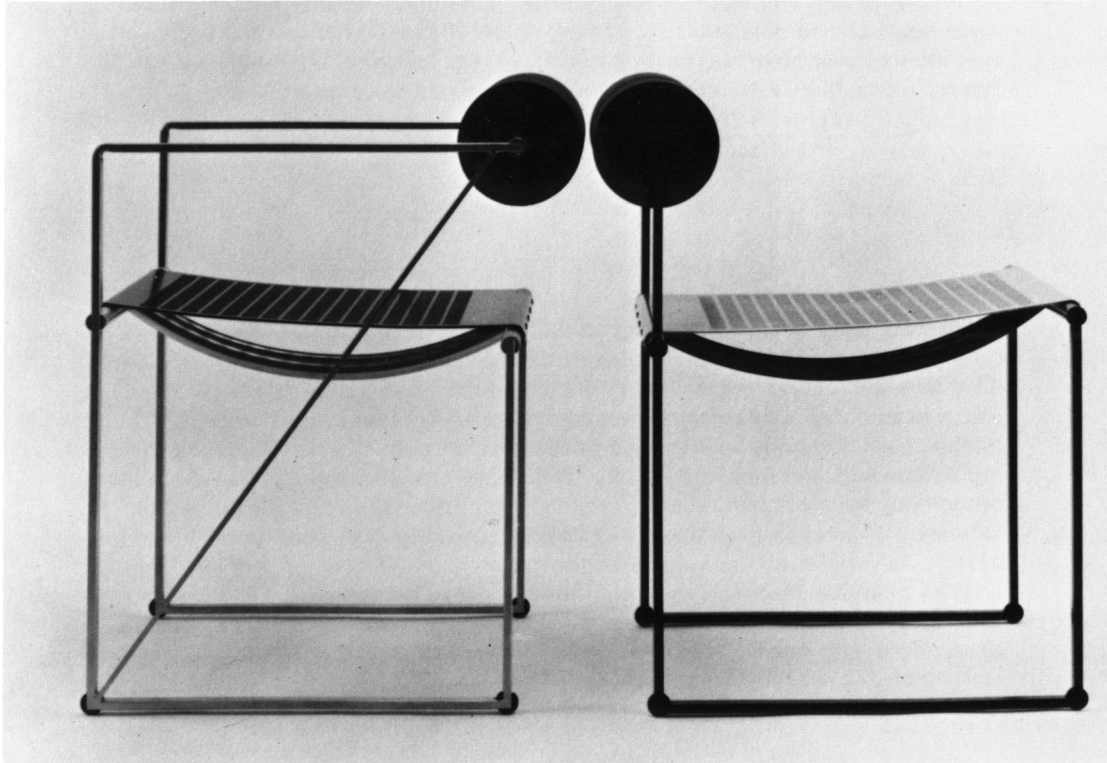
I believe that architecture is monumental by its very nature. From the moment that architecture is defined as the transformation of a natural condition, it becomes the manufacturer of an artificial condition. This is the principle underlying the architectonic gesture, the work and the transformation of the place. Also this happens to be the very principle governing the life of the monument. The monument is the celebration and architectural expression of something previously unsaid, unmentioned, perhaps scandalous, thus connoting a taboo. The monument, as an expression of taboo and a reminder of things past, becomes a rather negative statement. Architecture is self-referential in the sense that it celebrates and affirms the needs it contains, and thus it becomes monumental in a positive sense. One can then say that architecture is monumental by vocation. I believe the monument to be a negative element, but also believe that to make a small house recall and possess the dignity of a monument is a positive endeavor. If one could make a chair monumental, a fact which you so generously implied in your question, I would be very happy. In this acceptance the monument is the affirmation of the value of human labor. Thus, the monument.



18
Design for a corner building in
Lugano, 1982, model.

19
School at Morbio Infiore,
1972-77, exterior.





20
Chair design for ICF, Inc., 1982.

LD

Your new bilingual volume in English and Italian on *La Casa Rotonda (The Round House)*, is already available in America but ironically, at the time of this interview, not in Europe—at least for the moment. In the U.S.A. this volume will doubtlessly be perceived as a natural extension of the *Electa* volume if only because chronologically the *Electa* precedes it. What is your premise for this new operation?

MB

This book came about in a quite peculiar way. It was generated from the very simple idea of producing a catalog for our show in Brussels. Beginning with this idea for an exhibition catalog, I refused to rely on the notion of an all-inclusive publication of my work. I proposed to the curator of the exhibit, Robert Trevisiol, something along the lines of, "I will give you one of my latest projects—you choose one—but we are going to present it in an exhaustive manner."

At this point, and you have to forgive me, I believe one must make a strong criticism of the publications on architecture. Usually, one publishes images frequently forgetting that they represent merely an instrument for arriving at architecture. Very often today, and I refer to the architecture of the *Strada Novissima* of the last *Venice Biennale*, one makes architecture only in support of the architect's drawings. One represents through architecture one's own drawings. I believe the opposite: the drawings are instruments in support of architecture.

LD

Forgive me, but if I am not mistaken, you refused to participate in the Biennale?

MB

Yes, I had no time to organize the team, and therefore I was forced to decline the offer to participate. At that time, of course, the refusal was not a critical choice, for I had no idea what was going to happen later. To return to the notion of the

book . . . the idea was born to make a book focusing on one object only, but in great depth . . . somewhat as if one were to chronicle the history of a project. It was my intention to present how a house is born, by going through a series of observations, questions, sketches, and their subsequent erasures.

LD

In other words, a diary of work.

MB

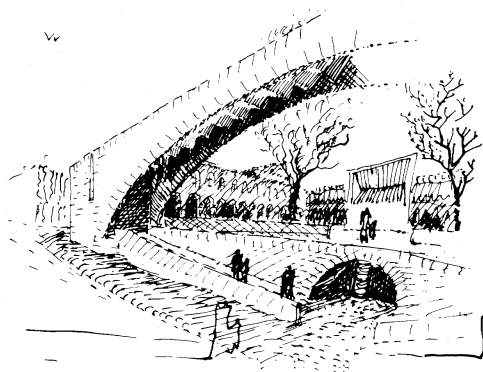
Precisely, a diary of work. It happened that the choice fell on the *Casa Rotunda* (The Round House). It is a point of curiosity, because normally a house is square. It became interesting to see why a house is round. In this particular case the shape establishes a clear formal relationship with the landscape through openings and closures with respect to the environment. This is necessary, for the immediate surroundings are visually rather poor and ill defined. Thus, the history of the book has not been preprogrammed. The volume came about as a natural extension of an exhibit catalog. Only later, in speaking to the editor, did it become a book. As well as my drawings and photographs of the built project, we included a series of critical discussions putting the project in perspective. The authors are Alberto Sartoris, Rob Krier, Pierluigi Nicolini, Robert Trevisiol, the poet Eduardo Sanguinetti, and myself.

LD

You are an Italian in Switzerland by way of your elective affinities with the Comacina architecture. The critical essays accompanying the *La Casa Rotunda*, place you, among other personalities, in the company of one of the great Italian masters, Alberto Sartoris. Can you please elaborate?

MB

My being Ticinese immediately suggests the Lombard culture, in particular, and Italian culture in general. For example, I am much more interested in what is happening in Milan than events in Zurich. I am also an outcome of our strong local tradition of an architecture confronting a specific climate and a particular landscape. In this landscape, south of the Alps, one finds a rather Mediterranean light and an ambient condition completely different from that north of the mountains. From the point of view of tradition, I feel in the company of, and I have a series of references to, the architects from the region around Como. Terragni's architecture is five minutes by car from my house; Alberto Sartoris, whom you mentioned, is an architect and architectural historian with whom I entertain a warm friendship, not only because he lives in Switzerland, but he is also Italian by nationality. My cultural formation is indebted to Italian culture. The great Italian cultural effort made during the last few decades and particularly during the last few years has fascinated and absorbed me. Conversely, there is the advantage of being connected to a certain Swiss pragmatism under whose governance things must be done—and done well at that—because in Ticino we have not only the cultural tradition, but also the building tradition which is an important given.



21
Guernica Competition, 1981,
perspective sketch.



22
La Casa Rotunda, 1981.

LD

You live in a region of Switzerland, Ticino, fortunate to have a relatively great abundance of young talents, or so at least goes another of the myths about Ticino. You are obviously part of this unusual generation; you contributed to it, and continue to do so. How do you yourself perceive your colleagues, and those younger than yourself?

MB

The story of the talents is, as I mentioned to you on other occasions, a story. They say that there are these talents, and I certainly wish that it were true. The relationship with my colleagues is very simple: friendship and collaboration. I believe that I have a reciprocal relationship of give and take, based on mutual esteem and respect, which is at its best when the architectural expression of our work is most different.

LD

Such as with Livio Vacchini?

MB

Yes, with Livio Vacchini I have this reciprocal relationship precisely because the architectonic language is very different. In addition, both of us concentrate our efforts on certain relationships and elements we identify as important. There is the stimulus to do well, which if shared by many can be very exciting. It is not a form of competition and stimulates camaraderie at its best. To have as many of us as possible producing good architecture is also a part of the great building tradition of our region and is perhaps reflected by our work. From this part of the world came masters such as Carlo Maderna, Lucio Fontana, Borromini. The Ticino landscape is perhaps another factor in our development. Rafael Moneo said recently when he visited my projects, "Now I understand why you all are good architects here—because you have the lakes, the mountains—it is because you already have a portion of space defined for you. A portion of the environment is already built." How can one react plastically to a flat surface? Architecture becomes an easier task if one is confronted with an articulated three-dimensional landscape. For us, in Ticino, "three dimensional" is a part of the air one breathes from birth. These geographical conditions do not by themselves insure one's being a good architect, but they certainly can be stimulating. If one understands what it means to have light at sundown bounding off the side of the mountain directly in your living room—as you commented this evening on your way home—this light can become a form of natural architecture.

To go back to your question regarding the relationship I have with my younger colleagues: I must say it is a relationship of attention, but also of concern. Very often they are impatient, they want to do everything quickly, right away, without being in possession of a consistent critical attitude sedimented through time. Consequently, they often get burned as well as burn themselves out. So many of the ideas which for us were the fruits of years of belaboring a problem are adopted by the younger architects with a minimum of understanding, and love. In any case, there are many among the young who desire to contribute in the true spirit of our tradition. I am very happy that they are coming up because, in my opinion, there are never enough. So I tell them, welcome, so that we can be many.

LD

Am I mistaken, or do you seem to refer to a notion of architecture and morality: the need for an absolute morality in architecture?

MB

Yes, yes, yes. I believe that one of the principal conditions for making architecture is the existence of extreme professional ethics, if not morality. This is true for all artistic expressions, isn't it? I believe that from truthfulness grows the expression

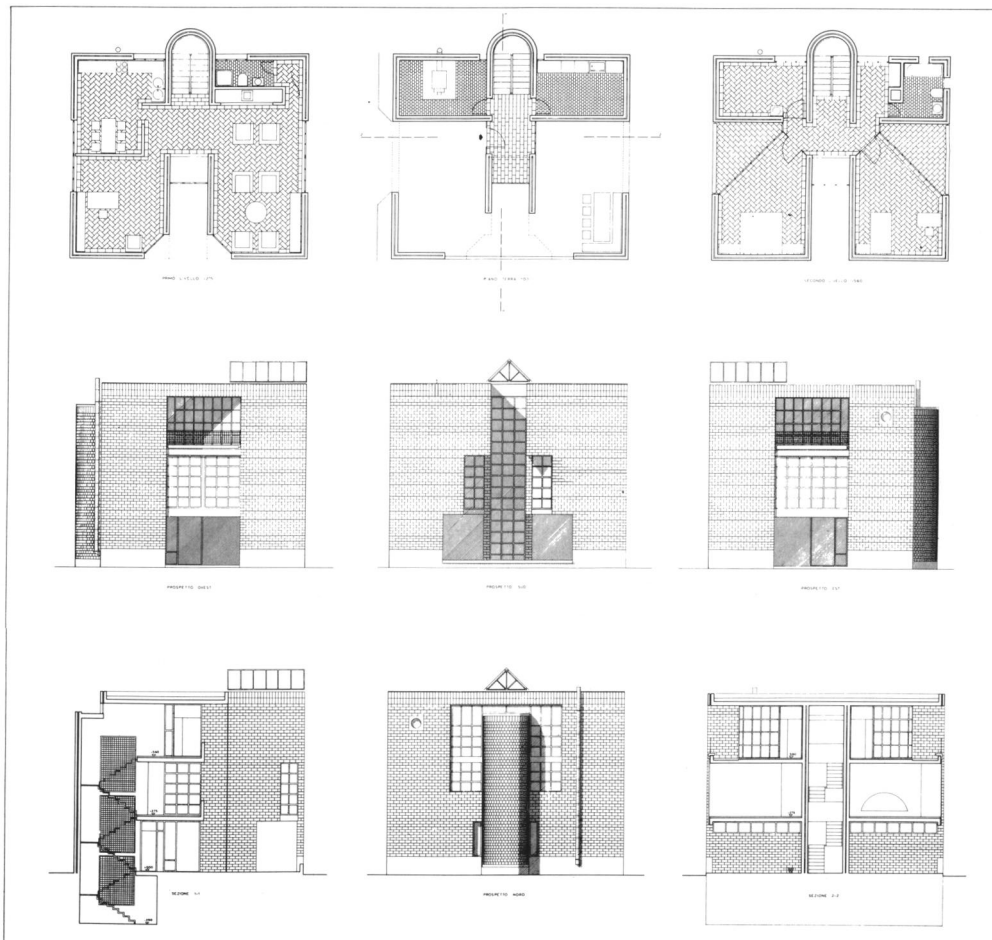
of joy and of life for man. I believe that any artistic expression is an act of giving, a maximum aspiration which one must have in order to resolve, perhaps with a "lucid" sense of pleasure, the problems one confronts. Everything must include this act of generosity and this morality.

LD

Inevitably, for us Americans, it is impossible not to ask your comments on postmodernism. I do this despite the fact that so many among us, for various reasons, would rather believe this phenomenon does not exist. Every once in a while, I hear voices of postmodern persuasion, and at times innocent souls saying, "My God, is postmodernism touching Mario Botta as well?" What do you think?

MB

I will start by addressing the last part of the question. I hope not to have been touched by this contagious disease called postmodernism. Why? Because I believe that it is a cultural fashion lacking true values. Postmodern architecture proposes a superficial concern with history. Postmodern architecture is predicated on a confusion between style and history. History is not a column, not a capital, and not the reuse of a form borrowed from the past. History, in its profound meaning, is an entity to which we are all indebted, but from which we must all attempt to free ourselves in order to be able to respond to the needs of our times.



23
House in Pregassona, 1979,
plans, elevations, sections.

LD

Very Palladian, if I may say so. One must look at history, yet do the opposite.

MB

It pleases me to hear that I am in good company; it is truly so. I react very critically with respect to postmodernism. To be *after* the Modern Movement is a historic condition, and in this sense it is quite natural. Nevertheless, this codification in forms, and moreover in surface forms of façade only, is a problem of structural and spatial organization in function of context. This does not interest me. In my opinion, after all the disasters in recent architecture, we have gained three important awarenesses in the last few years: first, an appreciation for the value of the urban texture; second, an awareness that architecture belongs to culture and to the earth and to the landscape within which it operates; and third, the awareness that without the act of building, architecture does not exist. Therefore, architecture is above all, the science of construction. "Architecture is, above all," in the words of Alberto Sartoris, "knowing that a column's place is under the roof and not above the roof as the postmoderns are doing . . ."

LD

Sartoris?

MB

Yes, because they asked Sartoris what he thinks of postmodernism, and he said, "Well, I don't know, I see them putting columns over the roof, but I always thought that it was better to put them under . . ."

Let us return to the previous arguments: first, the awareness of the city and the need to consolidate the city; second, architecture is the awareness of the place. I must quote a sentence which I have come to like, and which I use every once in a while, "Architecture is an instrument for not building *in a place*, but for building *that place*." Architecture becomes thus part of a historic and geographic condition of place, and through its presence completely transforms that place. The third of the previous arguments is that we confront a building condition which should include the building knowledge—lost in the advent of the International Style and with the arrival of industrial architecture. I am not able to find these three conditions in postmodern architecture. Therefore, this architecture does not interest me. The postmodern operation of cutting things out of the past and pasting them up in the presupposed form, is founded on a presupposed new exigency: "End of the prohibition," as Portoghesi has said. I believe, instead, that today we must be even more rigorous than at any time in the past. We cannot afford to assume "the end of prohibition" attitude, and we need to learn how to build before we can afford to permit everything. So, in this sense, I have a very critical attitude.

Of the *Strada Novissima* in Venice, I must say, paradoxically, the participating architects involved themselves once more in the act of drawing as art only to prove that ultimately drawing is not an instrument for arriving at architecture. I used to place a great deal of faith in drawing, for I thought that through drawing one could recuperate some of the instruments needed for making architecture. When the architects of the *Strada Novissima* had to make architecture, it was done as if architecture was simply an instrument for arriving at one's drawings. The proposed façades were copying and repositing, what?—the very drawings of these architects. This becomes a vicious cycle. Precisely on this account one must take a critical standpoint. The true needs of man are of a spatial and not of an epidermic nature. The sociological escape that architects engaged in during the 1960s, for example, did not constitute a true alternative. One understood that with sociology it was not possible to build projects. Today, one must understand that by way of stage design we simply do not have sufficient elements to make architecture.

LD

Various code restrictions, very specific requirements regulating the height, the construction, the relationship to open space, constitute every so often formal parameters for your work. Many times I see critics pronouncing formal speculations on your production, without understanding that your choices are often directly the result of dealing with construction and code limitations. Can you succinctly present some of these parameters and how they influence your projects?

MB

There is a perpetual fight against regulations. We attempt daily to interpret them in order to understand the spaces within which the regulations allow us to operate. The very notion of regulation is against the nature of architecture. A regulation is based on existing models. New architecture tends to alter, to force the status quo, and is therefore in a perpetual battle with the codes. It is a continuous love-hate relationship between the regulations and the architects. On the one hand, the code is a structure which offers one set path, and may, therefore, have a positive effect. On the other hand, one takes risks because there are creative needs related to the organization of spaces, but they tend to violate regulations. Understanding the limit one is to operate within the codes becomes the crux of the problem. When regulations become too tight, architecture is smothered. When regulations become too open-ended, extremely all-inclusive, one is not provided with clear elements of reference, which, for better or for worse, simplify the travails of an architect. I feel that as an architect, I must be against regulations and codes of any kind. I attempt to break them every time; but I am grateful in a sense, because given the regulations, I know the limitations within which to work. I always attempt to operate beyond the letter of the law, both by respecting as well as by escaping it. I enjoy the game of breaking out of an established norm or convention, so that architecture forces and alters its dimensions and structure. I did a project recently where I realized that my building was completely inside the code. I became very upset. As a consequence, I made the house a bit taller in order to fall outside the code. It is in this way that I extract my pleasure by interpreting the code through forms. To follow the code and to be inside the norm means to end up in banality. The forcing of the code, instead, may give one the feeling of forcing the established standard, the conventions. Therefore, in a certain sense, one obtains a method of measuring, or dealing with a set of new exigencies.

LD

Could you please speak of more concrete examples. Which regulations in particular are you talking about? And how did you pull off having a building higher than the code permitted?

MB

The height, in Switzerland, is a very shocking imposition. It is measured from the lowest point of the building, on the slope. Because our terrain configuration is usually very steep, we are forced to excavate quite a bit inside the hill and use the high side of the project as the measuring point so that the building height limitation does not make the project a practical impossibility. The current regulation is absurd because it was fixed at about twenty-five feet in terms of a flat site. Ironically, in our country, more often is the case that the geographic configuration imposes that we work with sloped sites. Precisely because the regulation is so stupid, I take great pleasure in fighting it. Whenever possible, I love to steal every inch available.

LD

It appears that you are becoming more and more involved in building, competitions and projects outside of Switzerland. Do you see this resulting from increased interest in your work outside Switzerland, or as a difficulty in finding substantial work within your own country?

MB

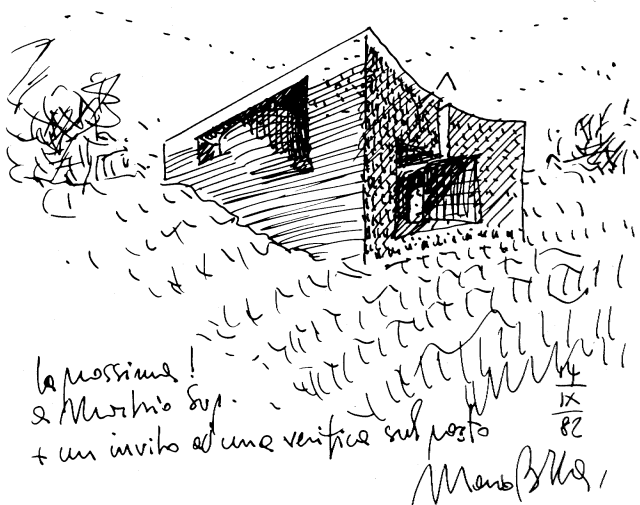
The architect must go wherever there is work.

LD

Should not the work come to the architect?

MB

That would please me very much, but I believe the procedure is precisely the reverse. It is, for example, contrary to the painter's endeavor if he works outside of his atelier, but the architect must step out and meet reality. This reality must often be found quite far away geographically, because the architect needs the money to make his houses, he needs constraints, and he needs new situations. By its very nature architecture takes him to far away places. I would like very much to be able to work in my home region. Home is where man can offer his best, because he knows his culture, his roots, consequently he can perhaps have insights into his neighbor's most secret aspirations. It is always a pleasure and only natural to work where one is born. Regretfully, though, I live in a very small country and, in particular, in Ticino which has a population of only 250,000. I am therefore obliged to move around, by way of entering competitions, or through outside commissions. I have also a great uneasiness due to the desire to make. There are architects who are content to make one project well at a time. I need to have many projects going simultaneously to feed this hunger of mine. This desire does not allow me peace as an architect, and I am continually forced to look everywhere in order to be able to make. I do not pretend to say that this is a badge of honor, for God's sake! But, without quantity there is no continuity. I believe that experimentation is necessary and I also believe that work is necessary. To me, it seems that it would be impossible to think that Picasso could do only twenty paintings during his life. Picasso made twenty thousand paintings and he is Picasso for this reason.



24

Sketch for Livio Dimitriu, upon the occasion of the interview.