Mario Botta
in conversation with
Laurent Stalder

Diploma review, IAUV, 31 July 1969
From left: Mauro Lena, Giuseppe Samonà,
Carlo Aymonino, Constantino Dardi,
Carlo Scarpa, Valentino Pastor, Gian Ugo Polesello,
Ignazio Gardella and Mario Botta
Courtesy Mario Botta archive

For a Swiss, interviewing Mario Botta is really quite daunting. In many ways he is the father of modern Swiss architecture, personifying the beginning of the new, widely celebrated design culture born out of the Ticino Tendenza of the 1970s. As a student, his houses were shown endlessly in our university lectures as part of classes on autonomy and later regionalism, long before these became international labels within architecture's official historiography. Botta was also Switzerland's first international star-architect, opening up a whole new world to an architectural scene that until then had been characterised mainly by its provincial and local audience. As a result, with Botta, Swiss architecture found its way onto the front pages of newspapers and magazines, becoming part of a broader public debate. Through him, even politicians came to realise that architecture – and not only art or design – was a cultural practice (and one that they could rather conveniently export as a national product). Complementing his professional standing, Botta is also widely known and respected as the father of the Accademia in Mendrisio, an institution that within ten years of its founding had established itself as the admired alternative to the ETH in Zurich and as one of Europe's leading schools. An intimidating figure, then, but equally a highly beguiling one – his sympathy quickly expressed as charm when he insisted that I use the informal French *tu* form for our conversation. My first question – timorous masquerading as forthright – was therefore simply eluded in order to open up the discussion. And so our interview progressed, through my sometimes failed attempts to keep it to the path I had anticipated.—*Laurent Stalder*

LS *What are you working on right now?*

MB Well, in this business we don't do as we like but only what we are commissioned to do. Personally, I have never had much choice. I've always dealt with whatever landed on my desk. Sometimes I've been able to turn down certain projects because of too little time or a lack of cultural affinity. In a certain sense I'm a victim of a society that one moment commissions me to do a museum, then a library, or an archive, a church or a house. But at the same time I'm convinced I'm doing the kind of work I deserve. It's a mysterious process. On the whole you do what you deserve to do. You build a house because you deserve to build houses, or you do supermarkets or churches because you deserve them. We do what we are commissioned to do, only to realise in the end that we do what suits us.

LS *How is work organised in your office?*

MB For me, that, too, is a little mysterious. If there's one thing I'm incapable of it's organisation. I deal with whatever turns up. And with each commission I feel I lack the structure to actually accomplish it. In this sense I'm still a craftsman. It's a bit of a paradox. In the office, there are about 20 of us in all, although at certain points during the year we might have a few more. I've been working this way for 40 years now, although I am never totally happy with the organisation. But, still, this is how we've always worked, and this is how we've somehow managed to realise our projects.

LS *And you've always had a large number of projects?*

MB Yes, but we have a very artisanal way of realising them. For example, I don't have a dedicated workspace at the office. I produce sketches on my travels and then at the office I do nothing from dusk till dawn except run around fixing projects. In a sense I have 30 different workspaces. I'm incapable of delegating. My signature is on every drawing that goes out, so all of them are checked by me. It's like a big studio. I'm present at every stage, from the very beginning, through revisions, to the implementation or cancellation of a project.

LS *But how does this artisanal approach work in a global practice such as yours?*

MB I deal with everything pertaining to the project's image. Then we try to realise it through local technologies. For projects abroad – in China, Korea or Italy – I always collaborate with independent local support offices. They take care of the implementation phase, which is to say of everything concerning the project's industrial, artisanal or administrative aspects, so each time we are obliged to adapt to the local culture and technology. Let me give you an example. We are currently building a library in Beijing. The interior courtyard is an inverted cone, clad in timber slats. I thought I was helping China by choosing to use wood. But the local contractors no longer have the necessary know-how, and so instead they suggested we use a very advanced timber-based technology – hollow fibre-board slats – which in fact we ended up doing.

LS *Are the implementation plans then returned to the office for monitoring?*

MB Yes. We first make provisional plans, and then give them to our partners on site who adapt them to local technologies. Then we revise them once again. That's how we work.

LS *And do you then oversee the actual work on the construction site?*

MB We monitor it or put up with it. It's normally quite difficult to change the course of construction. Sometimes you can change the colour of a wall, but at other times one has to simply accept whatever is being done. Evidently, we don't have the same amount of control abroad as we do in Switzerland or Italy. Here craftspeople we personally know deliver a building that resembles the one we designed.

LS *How do you go about getting commissions?*

MB Well the whole thing is actually a bit of a catastrophe. Really, I mean that. I have work on my books for the next three to six months, and an office that costs me three million Swiss francs a year to run. For 50 years I've been asking myself how I can stay afloat simply till the end of the year. It's a mystery, but that's life. The Good Lord said that even the birds in the air don't know how they fly and yet somehow they always manage. But nowadays, the thing that makes this profession increasingly difficult is that even when an architect gets a commission, he is often only given responsibility for one small part of the project.

LS *And what kinds of clients do you have?*

MB I've never had clients give me two, three, four or ten commissions. Most of the projects I've been able to realise transpired from competitions. I have won around 30 competitions in my life. And in order to find work I still take part in four or five competitions a year, every year. Last week, for example, we entered a little competition that I would dearly love to win: for the pulpit of Santa Maria del Fiore, beneath Brunelleschi's dome in Florence. The parish has wanted this pulpit since 1360. But it has taken until now for it to be planned. It is a small commission that will cost perhaps 10,000 Swiss francs to build yet it will cost my office 50,000 Swiss francs in labour. Besides this design we are currently preparing a major competition entry for the campus at the University of Lugano.

LS *And these are competitions by invitation?*

MB Some are, others are open. I have no choice. I've been working in Lugano for 40 years. Not once has the city of Lugano given me a commission. Never. The fact that I have an office here and employ 30 people has never once been a consideration. Apart from a small collaboration on a bus station project, all the other commissions I've worked on in Lugano – from the Gotthard Bank through to the

Ransila Office Building – were private competitions. Moreover, our canton of Ticino occupies a marginal position in relation to the rest of Switzerland. Zurich, for instance, is off limits – it is simply impossible for us to work there. Zurich's banking networks and financiers form a kind of protective wall. Similarly, with Geneva – the city only gives its commissions to architects based there. And it's the same story in Italy, where I have good relations even if I am still considered a foreigner. The city of Milan, for example, couldn't give me a commission even if it wanted to. Ticino's location near the border is, however, also something of a privilege. It forces us to reflect on other things. No commission is routine; they all become important, from the tiniest through to the grandest. Even when dealing with a small object – be it a pulpit or a house – the issue is always to transform a commission into architecture...

LS *... which is the architect's profession in a nutshell.*

MB Yes, but a prerequisite of pursuing our activity as a profession – a fundamental premise – is the knowledge that the architectural profession belongs to the realm of ideas. There is a speculative dimension to every creative act. Le Corbusier said it already – the architect is above all a thinker.

LS *So what does the architectural profession consist of?*

MB Obviously, the purpose of our profession is to organise the space in which humankind lives – living space indoors, living space in the city and living space on a regional scale. Architecture is first and foremost a tool to organise the environment. It is not an object in and of itself but is always an object set in relation to its surroundings. In this way architecture extends beyond the profession itself while always remaining rooted within it. Only by adopting this premise can you begin to think about the profession; only when you know that any house, however small, can deeply affect how people relate to the lake, to the environment, can you make that same little house part of the landscape.

LS *Is there anything specifically contemporary about the notion of the profession as you understand it?*

MB I think that being an architect today is very different now from how things operated at the turn of the twentieth century. Today the architect works in the realm of memory. It is this dimension that connects us to a glorious past. And given that architecture always outlives the architect, it should provide a symbol for future generations and at the same time draw nourishment from history. Without memory there can be no creative act. This is something that every avant-garde artist knew only too well. Without the dimension of memory Picasso's knowledge is non-existent.

LS *Does this quest for remembrance not contradict a global practice such as yours?*

MB No, there is no contradiction. It's true that on the one hand we are called on to work under conditions imposed by globalisation, while on the other hand globalisation obliges us to strengthen this aspect of remembrance. To be truly universal one must be profoundly local. If antibodies derived from our own culture and identity are not there to nourish us, then we cannot possibly resist globalisation. Faced with the forces of an ever-expanding world I need to feel that I am Swiss, to feel that I am Ticinese, to feel that I am part of this territory, of this history, of this landscape. It is thanks to this consciousness alone that I am able to rediscover my own identity.

LS *But what about addressing this dimension in a foreign country?*

MB It's really not that difficult. Sometimes it's actually more difficult to work with the familiar – to enter a valley in Ticino and feel the pressure and full force of having to intervene there. No, to bear witness to history is a value implicit in architecture. Our business is transformation. Whatever object we create, we shift the balance. And the memory of a place is not only a literary device but also a real instrument, since the architect transforms nature into culture through that memory. This transformation will in turn be a legacy for future generations. Let me give you an example. When you ask people which city they would like to live in, they usually say Venice or Modena or Parma. In their opinion these cities offer a better quality of life than Rotterdam, for example. For sure, Rotterdam functions better than Modena from a technical point of view. But people prefer Modena – because life there has a metaphorical and symbolic dimension. We feel at ease in Modena because there we find a part of human history that we know and that belongs to us. But I admit it is also somewhat paradoxical because Venice, Parma and Modena are all cities of the dead.

LS *Really? Dead cities?*

MB Not technically dead. I mean, instead, that these cities were accomplished by previous generations. Of course, one could say that Venice thrives today thanks to consumerism, and that it has become a huge supermarket, perhaps, but it still functions as a city. Every generation has left its mark on Venice, even our own in this globalised era.

LS *But they are also historical cities. Is this recourse to the European city as a model more a form of resistance than a solution?*

MB Oh yes, it's definitely a form of resistance. But the form of resistance I have faith in is ethical rather than aesthetic, even if this position today doesn't seem to be the winning one.

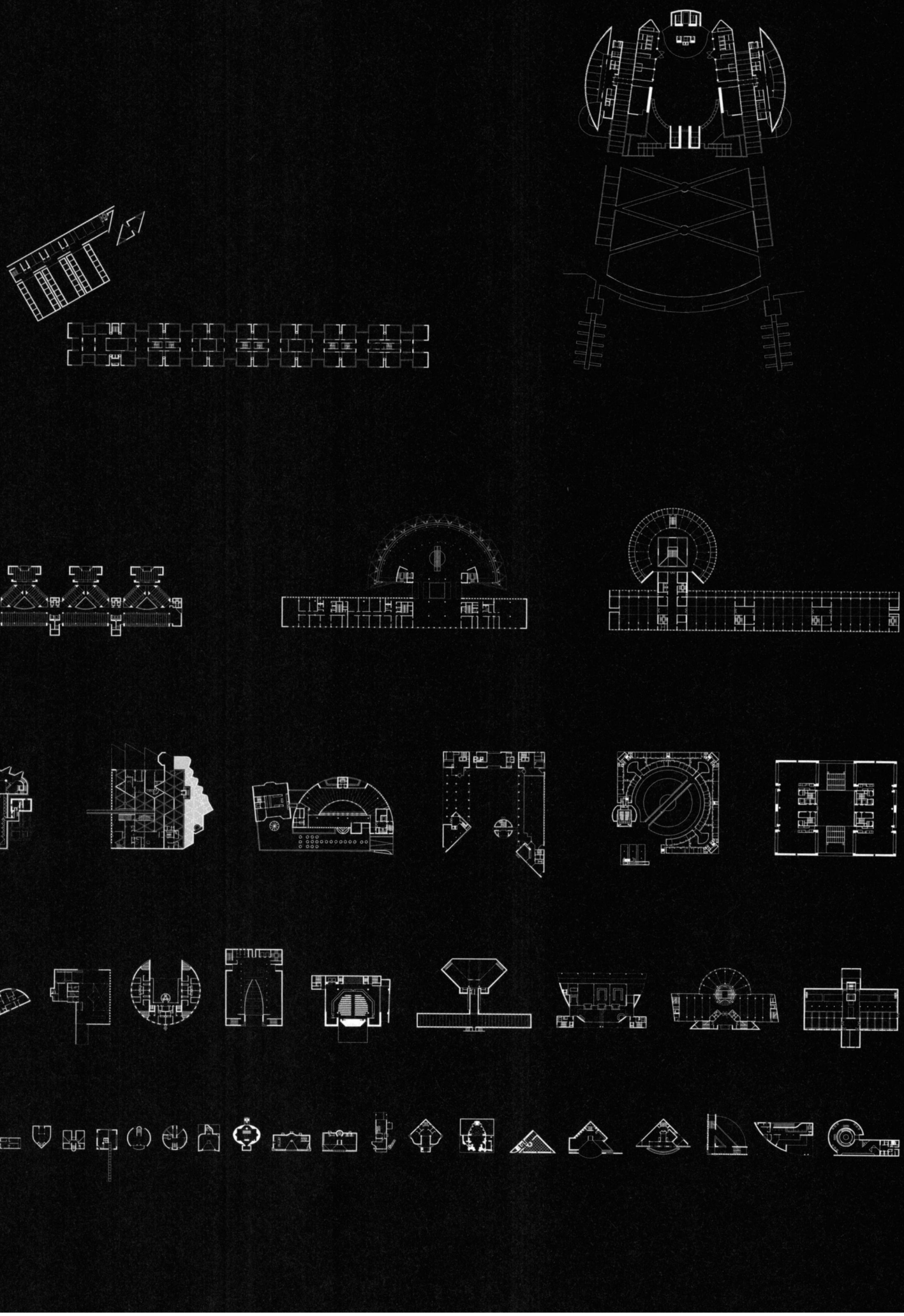
However, it's important to take the debate even further. The city is the most evolved form of human or social aggregation. And I believe that the European city is the best model we know – it is the most complex, the most intelligent, the most effective form of human aggregation humankind has ever known. If I compare it with the American city or the Asian city it seems to me to be the richest of all, thanks to its historical layers. I feel at ease in Parma or in Venice. I recognise a part of my own identity there. Faced with the potential for destruction that is implicit in globalisation, we have to tread carefully. The European city with its wealth of historical stratifications is perhaps the final antibody, the final form of resistance. For the architect it is the ultimate reference. Any intervention in it transforms its spatial relations, functional relations and visual relations. The city belongs to us as an expression of our culture. It would be stupid to destroy it.

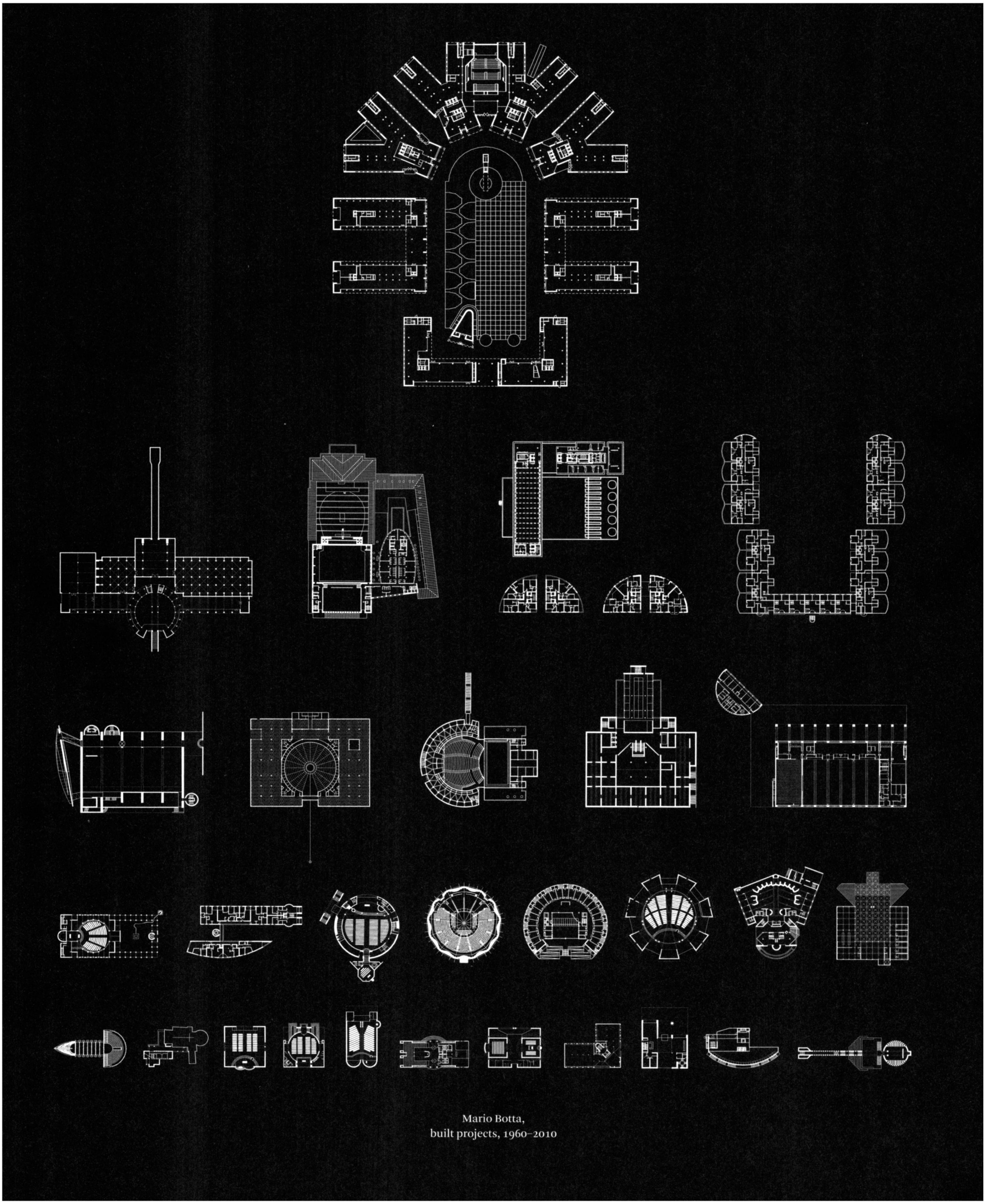
LS *Certainly, the examples of Modena or Venice reflect an accomplished image of the ultimate European city, but given the pace of suburbanisation they also offer highly idealised images.*

MB The city is based on two simple principles. It has a centre and a limit. Without them, there is no city. Today, the city is in crisis at its centre and at its limits, largely because of their proliferation. The contemporary city has several centres – a commercial centre, an infrastructural centre and a historical centre, which is now a museum. And at the same time, there is no longer any limit between the countryside and built-up areas. Faced with the increasingly diluted form of the European city – the centralised city – the duty of future generations is therefore to give back a unique identity to its various parts and neighbourhoods.

LS *But this thesis, which was first formulated in the 1960s and 1970s, seems to me to be more a symptom of the crisis of architecture with regard to contemporary town planning than a real solution.*

MB You can build with the city or against the city. You have to make a choice. Personally, I decided to build with the city, to reweave





Mario Botta,
built projects, 1960–2010

the threads, to make sure that any sign, any trace of humankind becomes a component of the historical fabric. That is what I try to do. In the European city, even an intervention on the scale of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin is determined by the remnants of history – the old Potsdamer Strasse, for example, or the traces of canals and boundary lines. The new urbanisation has to take account of all that. The old European city has great potential for resistance. This is quite different from the American city, where whatever exists is demolished, where lots are razed for every new financial scheme. This is another reason why I'm opposed to the architectural object. The architectural object can be built anywhere.

LS *Let me just go back to your early days as an architect. You've often spoken about the influence of Louis Khan and Le Corbusier on your education in Venice in the late 1960s, but you never mention historians such as Manfredo Tafuri who was teaching at the IUAV when you were a student there.*

MB It's true, I very rarely speak about them. For me, Venice was the point of departure for the Ticino group of architects that emerged at the time – for the friendship, respect and mutual appreciation that bound together young architects like Luigi Snozzi, Aurelio Galfetti, Tita Carloni, Livio Vacchini, Flora Ruchat and myself. Everyone came to Venice in the early 1960s, to the teachings of Leonardo Benevolo or to Le Corbusier, who was then working in the city on his hospital project. All these young architects had studied at the ETH in Zurich. That was their technical education – an apprenticeship in constructing a window or a door. In visiting Venice, by contrast, they discovered that architecture was a way of life, a question of cultural and spatial relations. Their background had been in a practical architectural education, but thanks to the historical texts and the debates there, they discovered history, theory and culture. This broader horizon was something that I too discovered in Venice, where I fell in love with architecture, as much as I established links with different Ticinese cultures and personalities.

LS *And what in particular were you interested in? Was it the projects by architects such as Carlo Aymonino or Giorgio Grassi?*

MB The true masters were Benevolo with his history, Alberto Samonà with his theoretical approach and Aldo Rossi with his theory of the city. The three of them combined to produce a really very fruitful conception of architecture, and one that also incorporated a social and political commitment, as in the work of Giancarlo de Carlo. Grassi, Aymonino and the rest were secondary figures attempting to apply these theories. The real focus was elsewhere.

LS *One of the major contributions from the Italian discourse of the 1960s for Switzerland and for Ticino in particular is the notion of autonomy. What do you understand by this term?*

MB In 1968 architects thought they could use architecture to change society. There existed this great utopian hope that we might transform life through a superstructure. Later, and here lies the crucial difference, we understood that the only thing we could change through architecture was architecture itself. Walter Benjamin said that the political value of a literary work is its literary value. In a similar vein, one can say that the political value of an architectural work is its value as architecture. As an architect, to commit oneself to a political agenda is possible solely within the discipline. Seen from this perspective, the whole ideological macro-structure constructed in Venice in the 1960s falls apart. This affirms the autonomy of the architectural work as well as the collapse of the theory of autonomy. In effect, architecture is nothing but the formal expression of history. Architecture gives shape to history. One recognises a building from the 1960s as distinct from another from the turn of the century or another from the nineteenth century. It is merciless. Architecture is truly the most honest and uncompromising form of expression of any era. For this reason I think that a built work, with all of its limitations, is much richer than any project only imagined by the architect. Kahn used to say that architecture doesn't exist; what does exist is the architectural work, since it alone must face politics, the economy and society.

LS *The first major project to develop this position was one you worked on with the Ticinese group for the EPFL in Lausanne.*

MB I had graduated from Venice in 1969 and returned to Ticino. There I started working on my own projects at home, but when Carloni was invited to take part in a competition in Lausanne for the EPFL we formed a team with Galfetti, Ruchat, Vacchini, Luigi Snozzi and Ivo Trümpy. Because the others were then working in their offices, whereas I was by myself, I worked on the competition and the others came by once a week to discuss it. For the first ten years of my career I lived like a prophet. But the project we produced for EPFL was really a very productive experience; it proposed a kind of realisable utopia but at the same time was completely out of this world.

LS *Yet it already displayed a number of important themes.*

MB It was basically a manifesto.

LS *Nevertheless, the decidedly geometric bias that from then on would define all your work was already evident in this project.*

MB When it comes to geometry, I can offer an answer on several levels. The first is the conceptual level – a simple form is easy to read. Martin Heidegger once said that man dwells from the moment he has an opportunity to orient himself within space. I find that a fine definition of habitat. To orient yourself, you need to identify clear points of reference such as can be found in the geometries of the Pantheon, or of the Basilica Palladiana, for example. I prefer simple forms, since they seem to allow us to relate to our environment more easily.

At a second level, inherent in geometry is the notion of a certain kind of monumentality. The rapport with the landscape becomes all the more powerful because geometry underscores the distinctions between architecture and nature. There's the contrast between the organic features of the landscape and the rational element of that which is built by the human hand. It is in this sense that I use geometry. I think the history of architecture is characterised by a tremendous amount of ambiguity towards nature. When architecture began to merge with nature it immediately started to destroy it, without knowing how to consolidate the geometric space inherent in human culture. And finally, I use geometry also because it allows me to use light to generate space. I work with an idea of light, which I imagine in space. Geometry helps me provide a sense of balance. And I'm not afraid of geometry. Many architects are afraid of it. Yet I know there exists both good and bad architecture based on geometry – there's Palladio on the one hand and Albert Speer on the other.

LS *Isn't that a very classical, very Latin vision of architecture?*

MB I am well aware that this is not the only principle. We all must do whatever suits us best. Alvar Aalto introduced organic elements, which had a powerful impact on his architecture. But even Wright, who is considered the maestro of organic architecture, worked on the basis of geometric shapes. Personally, I favour a more Mediterranean notion of architecture. For me, the intensity of the landscape lies in the contrast between an organic reality and a rational, constructed reality.

LS *Do you mean in the contrast between architecture and its environment?*

MB Yes, or rather, architecture is the act that transforms a natural condition into a cultural condition.

LS *Yet this contrast no longer has any space in which to exist. Actually, a large number of your projects – from your first houses on – are located in the suburbs, where no nature whatsoever exists. In this context is geometry a way to organise space?*

MB Yes, and a form of resistance in terms of the disorderly environment. Even a bell tower in a village centre is a sign in which one can recognise the work of human hands – a geometric sign, a sign of intelligence.

LS *Other than your work as a designer, the other, more political way in which you displayed your commitment to architecture was your role in founding the Accademia at Mendrisio.*

MB The foundation of the Accademia was possible thanks to certain favourable historical circumstances. In 1991 Flavio Cotti, a member of the Federal Council, and Roland Crottaz, president of the two Swiss polytechnics, asked me on behalf of the Swiss government to give some thought to the matter of architectural education in Switzerland, given that the number of students enrolling for courses at the architecture faculty in Zurich had risen dramatically. They asked me five questions. I didn't answer them. Instead, I told them it was vital to maintain the ETH in Zurich – for the school has a particular history and identity. I said it was equally vital to maintain the EPFL in Lausanne, which has a more sociological and semiological profile. On the other hand, I told them that the school of architecture in Geneva, which was then in the process of closing down, had indeed lost its identity. Crottaz knew that too. And, finally, I told them I thought there was a need for another school in Switzerland, with a different profile. And then I sketched out the profile of the Accademia di Mendrisio, a school where the humanities would be more important than science and technology. Put like that, it sounds simple enough. But the proposition turned the teaching of architecture completely upside down. Technical subjects at the ETH – computer sciences, logic, mathematics and so on – were multiplying at the time. For Mendrisio, I thought we should rethink this approach, and teach philosophy, the history of ideas, art history, the history of architecture and of the landscape, and introduce ecology as human ecology. An architect actually has no real need of mathematics, he just needs sufficient grasp of mathematical concepts to be able to talk something through with an engineer. Anyway, this was the profile of the school I drafted. As the federal authorities were then in the process of closing down the school in Geneva and cancelling its budget, the project disappeared into a drawer. Two years later, Ticino's Cantonal Council began to intensify its efforts to found a new Italian-language university in Switzerland. But they didn't have a clear idea of what they wanted. When I heard about this, I took my project for a school of architecture back out of the drawer. For historical reasons, I always felt that this school could be nowhere but in Ticino. Buffi, the head of the department of cultural affairs at the council, showed an immediate interest in it. Then they asked me to make a feasibility study. So I compiled a list of all the large vacant properties in Ticino. The project had all the more chance of being taken seriously since Berne, as central government, had already approved it. There was actually no way that Berne could have rejected it – if the project had been considered good two years earlier, nobody could now say that it was bad.

LS *So you were able to inaugurate the Accademia in 1996.*

MB We had declared the previous year Year Zero and began with some lectures. At that time we didn't have anything, not even a mailbox. The mail came to my architectural office. And every Sunday morning we held a meeting there with Mauro dell'Ambrogio, Secretary-General for Education and Culture in Ticino. We also met with the scientific committee – Pier Luigi Nicolin, Werner Oechslin and William Curtis – every two months. And once the project was ready we went to Berne, and Buffi said that with or without Berne's money we are going to do this. But in order to become the cantonal university we needed a minimum of three faculties. So the Accademia ultimately incorporated a faculty of economics and also a faculty of communication sciences, which were created thanks to a foundation set up by the city of Lugano.

LS *Who was the first director?*

MB I asked Snozzi, who didn't want the post, and then Carloni, who wasn't interested, and then finally Galfetti, who accepted. But we worked for a good year and a half without knowing who would be the director.

LS *The name of the school – Accademia – also indicates a certain stance.*

MB Yes. And we had a battle on our hands, for the government wanted to call it a faculty of architecture. From the start, we didn't want it to be a faculty but rather a school, one with its own library, its own modern archives and its own museum of architecture. And we called it Accademia in order to distinguish ourselves from the polytechnic and its type of training. I admit it is somewhat forced, but it helped us establish our own profile.

LS *Do you mean a profile distinct from that of the polytechnics and from the architecture they foster?*

MB For me, contemporary Swiss architecture has the advantage of deriving from a Bauhaus and post-Bauhaus culture, one that is characterised by rigour and a construction ethic. I appreciate that. It encompasses very minimalist forms of expression – motivated in part, perhaps, by the economics of labour – which are all generally very positive. On the other hand, I don't always find the same attention being paid to urban issues. Pragmatism resolves certain problems. But it does not have the critical consciousness, the intelligence that enables one to make each building become a piece of the city.

LS *So your relationship to the rest of Switzerland remains ambivalent, at a cultural level as much as an architectural one?*

MB I have friendly relations with people I admire in French-speaking Switzerland, such as Vincent Mangeat, or in German-speaking Switzerland, such as Ernst Gisel. But I realise that in the rest of Switzerland I am viewed with a certain degree of suspicion. It's true that my gaze is drawn to the Mediterranean, and theirs to Berlin or the Anglo-Saxon world. Yet the richness of Swiss culture lies in such differences. However, my Mediterranean orientation gives me a hope that I find less apparent in northern climes. The Mediterranean region is a source of knowledge, of culture, of art and of extraordinary paintings, one that continues to exist despite its limited means. This is a wealth that old Europe has lost. It seems to me that Italy possesses extraordinary resources with which to counter the tendency of globalisation to level everything. And for that, if nothing else, I am extremely grateful.

Translated from the German by Jill Denton, Berlin
This interview is part of a series conducted
by the department of architecture at the ETH Zurich