



THEME AND VARIATIONS. Mario Botta

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REVIEWS



Theme and variations

The exhibition of Mario Botta's work at the AA in January celebrated the completion by this young architect of a period of unique experimentation, using the building form of the single-family house. In the twelve years following 1970 he designed and built nine of these, the drawings for which comprised the greater part of the exhibition. In them he has developed a set of variations on remarkably consistent plastic themes and spatial investigations. Many of the principles he has thus evolved are currently being applied by him on a much larger scale in urban schemes either recently completed or in construction, for example the Fribourg bank or the Lugano offices. In retrospect the houses can be seen as exploratory models for these. They can also be considered in their own right as a com-

pleted set of smaller works, a series, executed during a period when many earlier large-scale projects remained unbuilt.

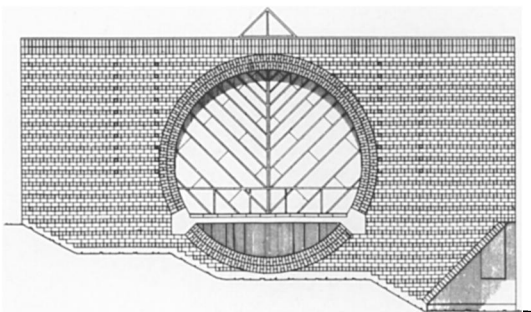
The drawings themselves, mostly already familiar through publication, are additionally impressive when assembled in an exhibition for their quality of being so consistently explicit. They reveal Botta as an architect totally addicted to building, and their purpose before any other is to explain, fully and unambiguously, the built object and to enable its complete exploration. They are in no way impressionistic or evocative; simply exact and literal. This is not to detract, for their very attraction is that of conveying such precise information about their subject that it is thereby given the status of existence. This characteristic is apparent, whether the drawing is a

free-hand sketch giving the broadest information about a location, or a straightforward working drawing giving matter-of-fact details of the setting-out of blockwork. Most comprehensive and spectacular perhaps are the axonometrics: their subjects are shown from above, from below, or in sets showing a progressive removal of levels, in order to ensure a total explanation. There is for Botta no distinction between the drawing done for presentation or for building; either is an elegant explanation of purpose.

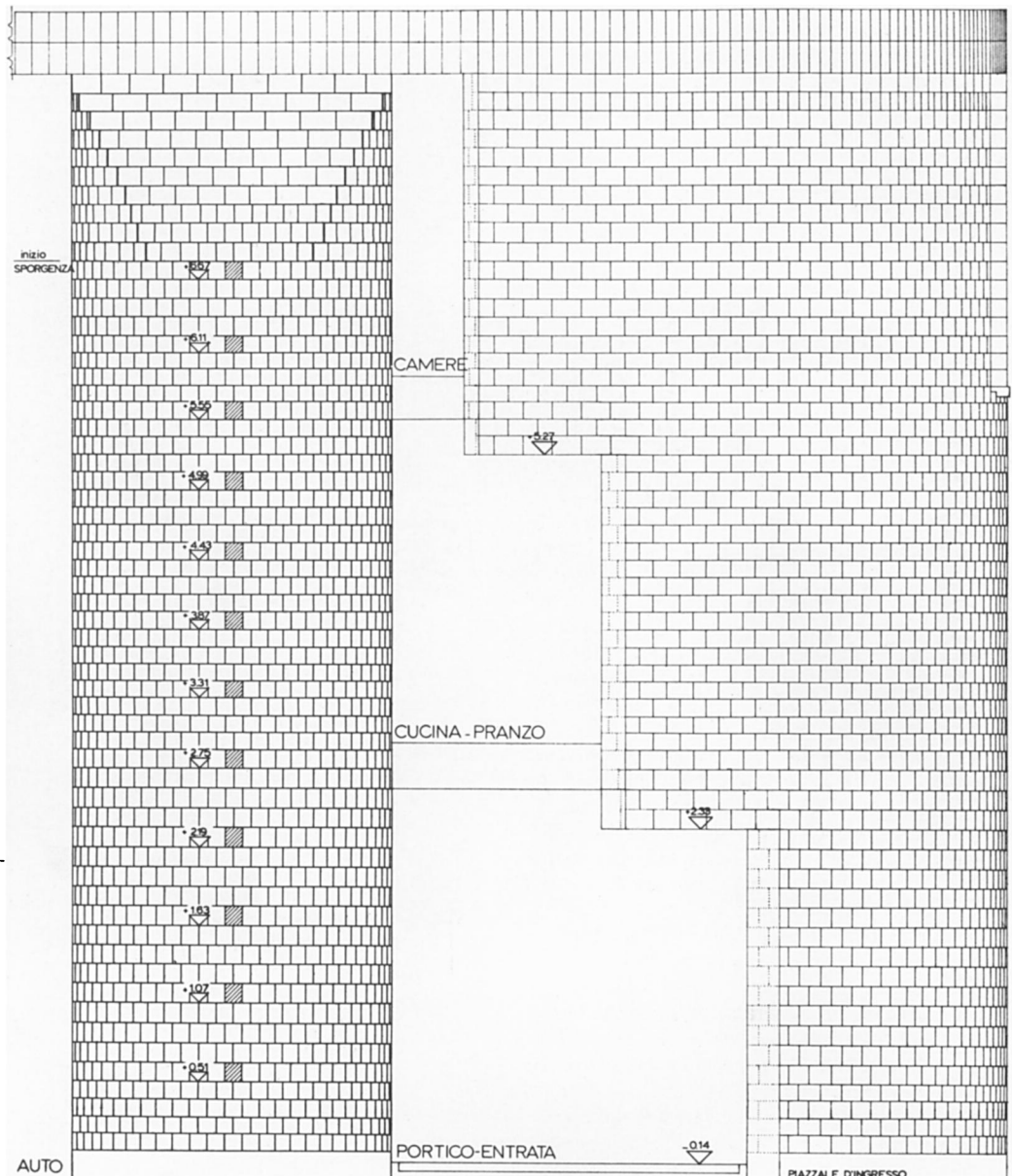
The theme common to all the houses is that of defining a basic geometric solid which (with the exception of the Casa Rotonda) is rectilinear or square on plan, and then to erode this volume. This is done in such a way as to enable the occupants to move in and out of the interior



Sketch showing relationship of House at Ligornetto (1975) to countryside.



House at Massagno, 1979: Elevation.



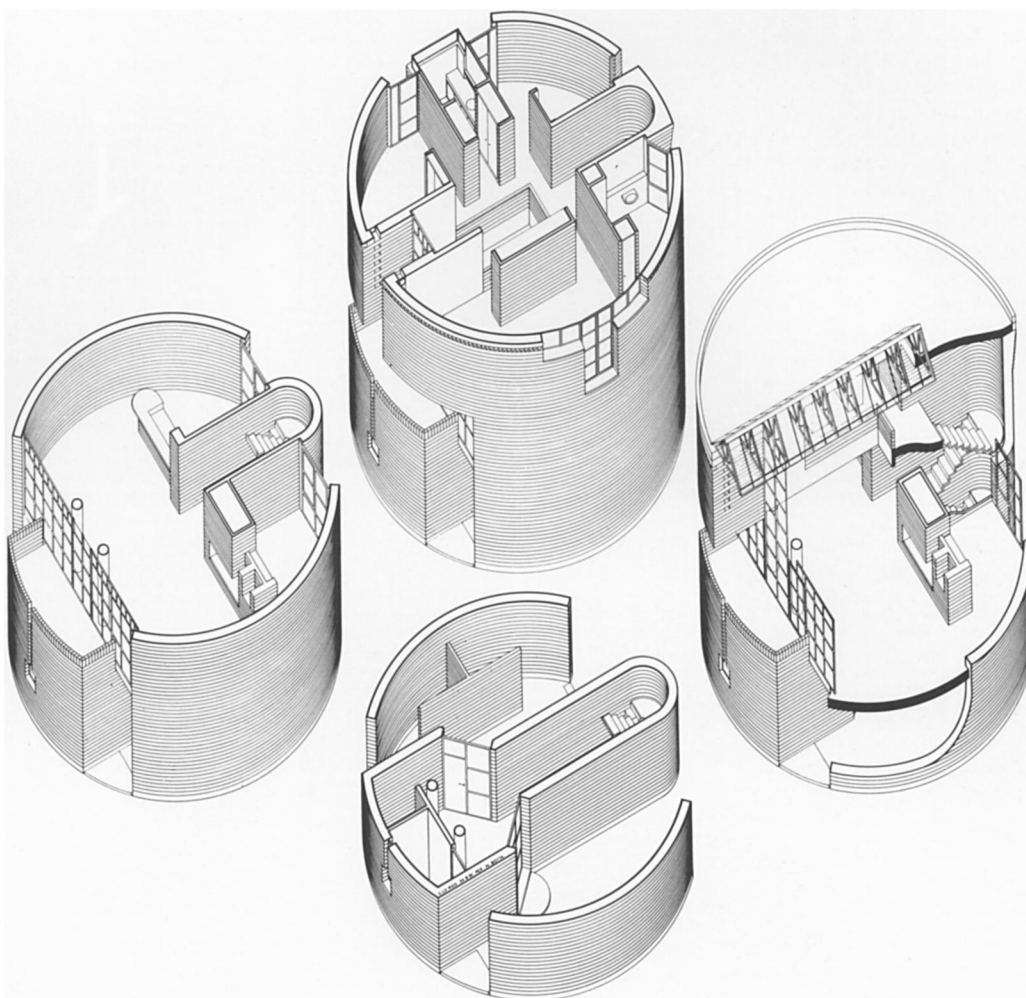
La Casa Rotonda, 1981: Detail drawings of the stairwell.

spaces onto terraces or balconies which remain within the envelope of the master volume. This may also be pierced by other voids rising from ground level. A specific control of outlook or orientation from the principal spaces of the house is achieved by the technique of partial enclosure. Few windows (and these generally only of secondary or even decorative importance) appear on the surface of the primary form, which is thus modelled almost entirely by voids — to highly dramatic effect.

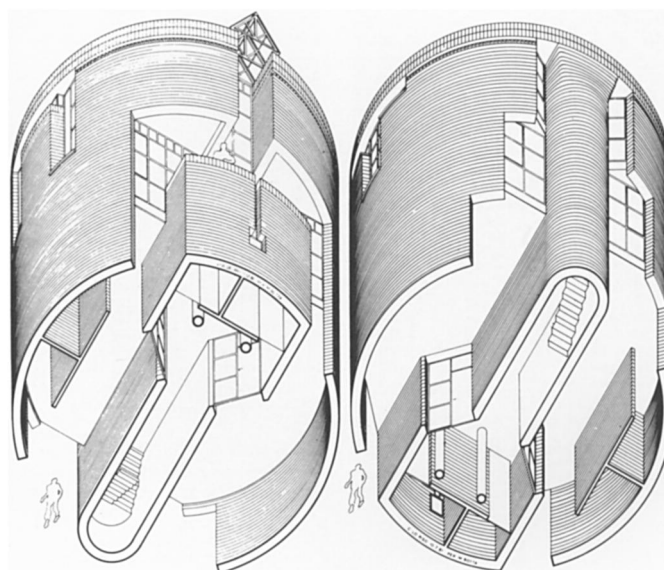
This broad pattern of solid and void is further emphasized by techniques of surface decoration and articulation. Broad bands of different-coloured concrete blockwork, or blocks set at an angle to the main face in order to give dentil courses or panels of serrated surface, are variously used. The origin of these effective techniques of elaboration of simple facade design have been attributed by Botta to local Ticinese precedent; but reminiscence also runs not only through the obvious classical parallels of rusticated or variegated stone or brick coursing but also, via Loos's house for Josephine Baker (1928), on to other models such as Aalto's Wolfsburg auditoria or many Wrightian examples of texture and striation used as emphasis of form. All of which merely illustrates Botta's clarity of attitude to his materials as enclosers of space. Here blockwork, elsewhere stone, marble or metal are treated by him with equal reverence, in an appropriate, buildable manner.

After the 1975 house at Ligornetto, in the remainder of the series — which comprises the majority — the containing volumes being manipulated become basically symmetrical, with the exigencies of domestic planning being accommodated by a witty counterpoint of asymmetrical internal divisions and external variations. In a number of the houses, a narrow central slot of void space penetrates the layers of the building from above, where it is capped by an emphatic skylight. Sometimes this axial slot is carried outwards to an external face of the building, where the rooflight meets vertical fenestration. In several of the houses (Pregassona, Massagno and Stabio) this dramatic central punctuation of the volume is the projection of the well of an axially arranged staircase, thus giving a perception of the whole spatial arrangement of the house (as well as of its location) as one moves upwards through the building's levels. At Massagno the outlook of the occupants is focused across the landscape, from all levels of the interior, through a giant three-storey oculus, as if from the interior of a camera. This opening can be closed by a great pair of sliding glazed doors to form a sheltered winter garden. In doing so the sculptural characteristics of the building are radically varied, and the chevroned fenestration pattern of the doors is calculated to emphasize the transformation.

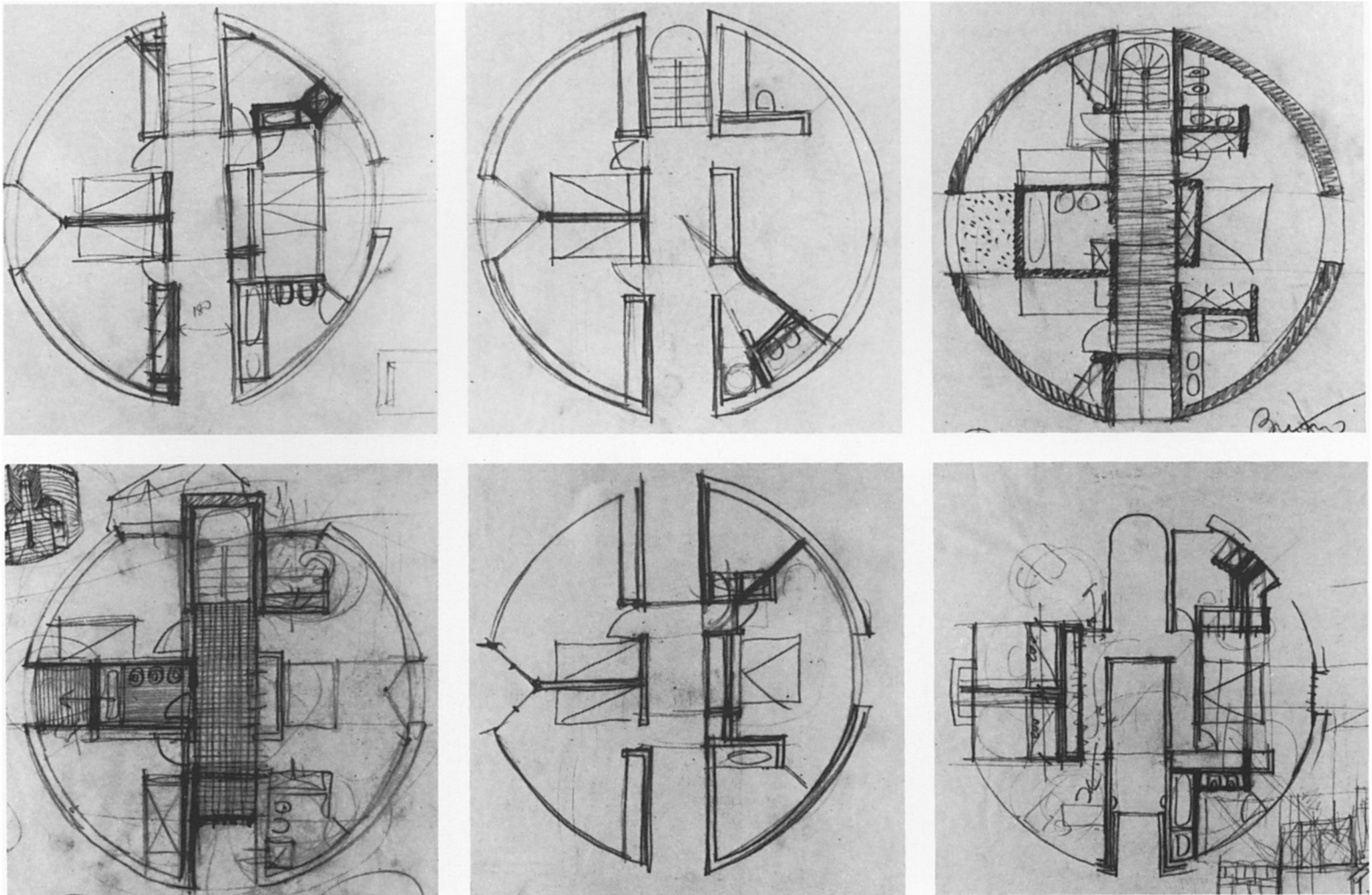
Perhaps the apogee of the series is the Stabio house (the 1981 Casa Rotonda). The planning of a house convincingly, within the confines of a cylindrical volume, is treated as a *tour de force*, a virtuoso performance managed with apparent



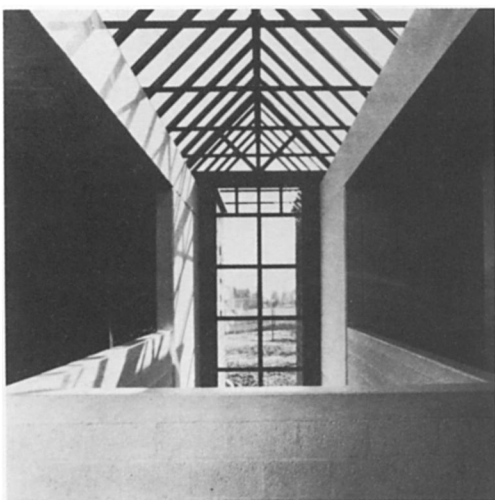
La Casa Rotonda: Axonometric vertical sections through the ground, first and second levels showing the courses of the cement blocks to be used for building.



La Casa Rotonda: Axonometric views of the north and south elevations from below.



La Casa Rotonda: Sketches exploring the arrangement of the bathroom and shower-room on the second-floor (bedroom) level.



La Casa Rotonda.

ease. Its development, illustrated by a series of intermediate-stage plans, is of particular interest, and especially revealing is a progression of sketches illustrating the search for a workable plan for the upper floor which at the same time would not compromise the general spatial concept.

What reasons lie behind the evolution of the archetype for these houses, which with all its variations sustains one common factor, an apparently alien form virtually independent of the immediate site, with its ground level plan accommodating only an introspective entrance and maybe service spaces, garage and so on? To Botta, describing Stabio, it is a rejection of 'today's urbanistics' and a response to a wider context. Of the site: 'We have (in the village) a

depository of houses with all the bad taste and petty ambitions that have motivated them. The building is scattered, episodic and unconcerned with the qualities and peculiarities of the site'; and then of this house: 'A building thus articulated justifies its existence in the space between the land (to which it is attached by its perimeter) and the sky (onto which the roof opens vertically through the skylight).' The house provides a 'habitat as a place for man's protection and defence in a unique environmental situation'; and the symmetry perhaps betokens an order missing in the surroundings. All of which principles are transferable, with little revision, from the prototype to a larger scale of city building.

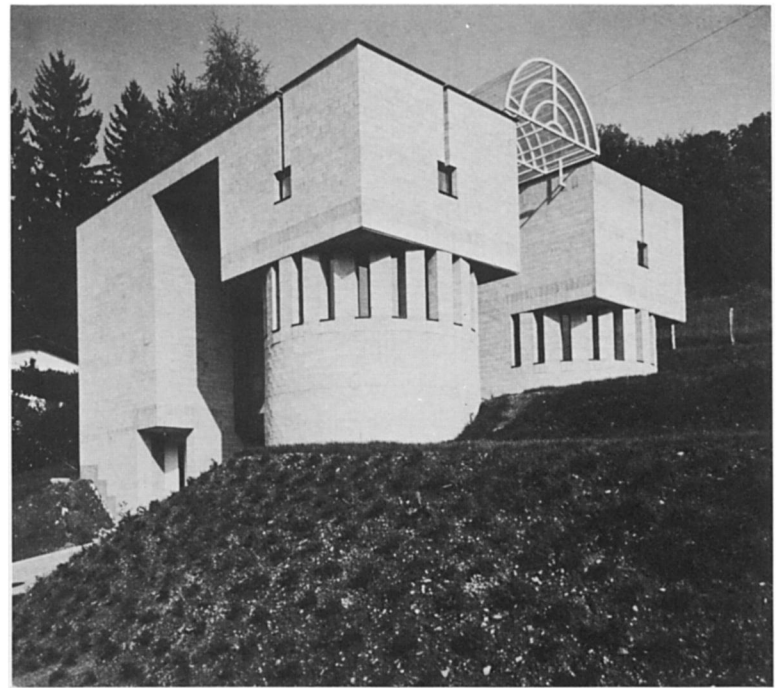
Finally, what of Botta's evident appeal to the younger generation of architects? Is it perhaps

that in a period of turbulent and conflicting architectural ideologies — or fashions — he provides evidence of continuity, of a pedigree? That he proves that the art has still (unlike the mule) a pride of ancestry and a hope of posterity? That he combines many of the characteristics of his past associates — the fastidiousness of Carlo Scarpa, the sculptural assurance and proportional concerns of Le Corbusier, the formal structuring ability of Kahn — with his own architectural and urban convictions, and is thus, without recourse to trivial quotation or superficial borrowing, able to build with freshness and originality, and with an evident disregard of the current battle of the styles.

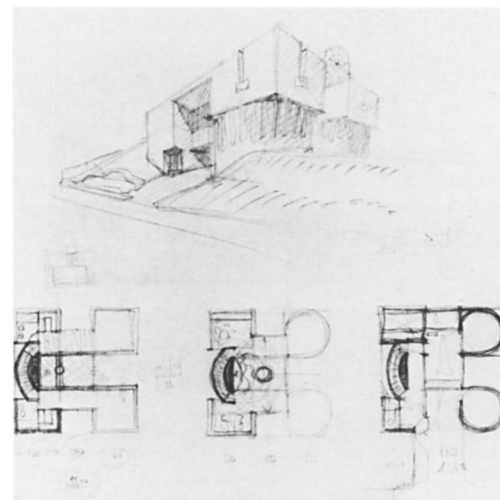
David Gray



House at Riva S. Vitale, 1972.



House at Origlio, 1981.



House at Origlio: Preparatory sketch.