The Church at Mogno-Fusio
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# The Church at Mogno-Fusio

*Mario Botta*

As a first principle, I consider the work of the architect to be the product of a *metier.* The *metier* is a distinct institution of man, distinct from the world of professionalism that has come to dominate the creative endeavors of our time. Today, most of man's activities have been embraced by the professions. Because of their nature, the professions are inherently limited in the way they manifest man's ambition. The professional provides solutions to specific demands, and is therefore engaged in the provision of a service. The engineer is a professional concerned with the resolution of certain technical questions posed to him by a client. The biologist is a professional engaged in the development of very specific procedures and methods defined by the world of need. In this sense, the profession is highly standardized within the prevailing system of production. It is a direct consequence to a technical fact. In a certain way, we could say that through the profession, specific solutions are requested.

The *metier,* on the other hand, constitutes an interpretation of the necessities and desires that are present within a community. As a member of this *metier*, one addresses not only a technical but a moral responsibility. The *metier* carries within its processes not only the necessary technical data to arrive at a solution, but the historical conscience of its activity as well. The *metier* is tied to a knowledge which is inherited; it has its own atavic depth.

The professional is not prepared to find out what happened before him or what will happen after him. The *metier*, on the other hand, involves a knowledge that goes beyond the executor. There is a sensitivity in the *metier* through which one may face the problems of our age. The operational technique, however, is something different, something quite deep, a technique that man carries as an inheritance. The *metier* constitutes a discipline which offers conditions fundamentally problematic with regard to modern life. In effect, the *metier* offers more problems than solutions.

Good architecture is an architecture that interrogates us; that is, it evokes a problematic of modern life. From this point of view, I consider architecture as an instrument to resist the banalization of the modern. Architecture, by nature, offers something beyond man's life. It charges itself with values that existed before man. I believe that architecture is one of the few

human activities that can be witness to the great past while retaining the capacity to become the barometer of the sensitivity of its own era. It becomes witness to the desires of its own time. I believe that all creative activities have as their objective the recuperation of the great past. As a resistance to today's banality and in order to be witness to tomorrow, we must, paradoxically, pursue the atavic values of the past; the values of memory and the archetypal structures that architecture carries within itself. Because of this, I believe that architecture should be easily recognized. Architecture cannot be anything that responds to the solely ephemeral, or to the modern, or to the contingent. The architecture I speak of carries within itself the idea of man's habitation.

I use this introduction to link the objectives of the *metier* to the character and ambitions of my studio. I see myself as an artisan. My atelier is one of artisans. An atelier of artisans means that at each problem you start all over again. There are no recipes or systems or mechanisms available to you to solve these problems. Each time you begin you have the magic and mystery of a white sheet of a paper on the desk and a new problem to attack.

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My attitude is that knowledge of the site is essential to draw even the first line. I believe that the critical reading of the site is the first design gesture. To understand a certain condition of site means that it is taken in, or absorbed, so as later to be transformed. To make architecture means to transform reality; it requires that one find a new balance or equilibrium at this place of intended construction. One must continually question the site as to its potential for transformation. I believe that every site already contains the latency of its own transformation. Landscape is not a static thing; it is constantly undergoing transformation both perceptually and temporally such that it contains the potential desire to become something different. It remains the architect's responsibility to interrogate this potential.

I have discovered that to return to the site during construction represents a confrontation with this responsibility. The site always offers unmerciful verifications of the project. When the solution is correct, the site

will be ten times better than anticipated; when the solution is poor, the site is fifty times worse. In this way, the site offers awesome trials; it does not forgive. The site suggests possibilities that could not have been seen on paper. The reality of light, sun, or any actual condition will be brought to the surface, demanding attention through some slight modification or correction. But the site will also show, without pity, those aspects of the project that remain fundamentally incorrect, aspects that speak of its essential nature as architecture. Being as yet free of the specificity that its inhabitation will inevitably bring, it attests to some other presence, some other manifestation. This presence may not be seen again until the building is abandoned. In this way, the site carries within itself the idea of its own ruin. It does not yet contain all of the small contingencies of use tied to a specific time. It is architecture in its being born and in its dying. You are, at that moment, confronted with the essence of what you have done, with only very limited means to affect it. This is a moment of coming to terms with the work.

In this way, the site is of a very different nature than the program in shaping the reality of a project. I begin with the premise that the program must always be interpreted, because the program, *per se*, remains something abstract, something ideological. It does not truly exist. The program is transitory, and therefore cannot be inextricably tied to the building's nature, to its physical presence or to its material. The program is only a conceptual diagram of the functioning of the building. I consider the program to be only a pretext that links the building to the necessities of its life at a specific time. But the architect must transform these pretexts into the objectives that he has prefigured. The architect must provide the program with a configuration – a space, a light, a matter – to make concrete its abstract nature.

There is a very simple check of this issue. Instead of executing our work as intended – instead of seeing our work through as *building* – we could, alternatively, make only full-scale models of these constructions. Such constructions might possess every aspect of the diagram, every *conceptual* aspect of the program as it has been defined by need. These models, however, would never be architecture. They would never confront material or light or the site of their containment. They would remain solely in the realm of the abstract.

Let me speak of the Church at Mogno-Fusio.

It is very meaningful, the process by which this project has been born. Last year, a very slow avalanche destroyed this seventeenth century church - the vast and central structure of this particular village – along with five or six nearby houses. This represents a very natural fact that, in the history of these mountains, has happened many times before. One reads of such events in the literature of the mountains; we hear of them in the stories and in the histories of many such villages. Nevertheless, this event affected me as I could not have predicted. When I was told of the destruction of the church - of the descending mass of snow that finally caused the bells of the church to ring for the last time, slowly erasing the work of man – I felt something new. My feeling was this: Even as a man of the twentieth century, I am witness to an extraordinary event. A small manifestation of nature has cancelled out the work of man. This has happened not in history, not in literature, not in a pre-industrial nineteenth century, but today, when we believe that with advanced technology we can control the organizational capacity of the world. This is not something that has happened as the pioneers struggled in their conquest of the mountains. It has happened as we have helplessly watched it on television. This suggests to me that the struggle of man against the mountain remains constant. We cannot suffer any delusion that because of television there may no longer be avalanches. This destruction has occurred because nature shows an extraordinary violence towards everything made by man.

A few months after the avalanche, the inhabitants of this village began to clear out the rubble, and immediately set to work rebuilding their houses. At one point I was asked to rebuild the church. I accepted with great enthusiasm, despite my belief that these people did not really have a need for such a church. The idea of the church has changed very radically in the life of this village. At this point in history it may be captured and expressed through many means other than architecture. But these men could not accept that nature would want to sweep away their fathers' work. They would not allow nature to erase the sign of an atavic work. They have asked me to

bear witness to future generations that a church has existed here. I am interested in this because here the idea of building re-proposes the concept of the atavic struggle between man and nature. This is the deepest and most religious meaning of the rebuilding of the church. I do not know whether these people believe in God, but it is clear they believe in man. This is enough to move me for their cause, to participate in this necessity to preserve the built space against the will of nature.

This is the message I would like to communicate through this new architecture: the will of man to resist in time, to bear witness to what existed before, to build for an eternity. Between the need for infinity and the awareness of one's own limitations lies the space where the architect operates.

With this understanding, I felt that the church must be placed against the moment through its own gravity. It must possess a weight sufficient to resist the banalization of the moment, a density sufficient to absorb the atavic nature of its rebuilding. It must appeal to this weight in its struggle against the mountain. I felt, initially, that to express effectively this concept required the use of only a single material. I could not imagine such a construction in composite terms because any such construction composed of many materials is, by nature, weak. I chose a stone – a local stone that one sees in the mountains around this village – with the expectation that with this one material we could do everything: the foundation, the floors, the walls, the buttressing arches, the door. Such an appropriation of stone suggested to me another aspect of this meeting of human intention and the will of the land.

The space of the church is defined by an ellipse placed along the axis of the old church, incised by a rectangular volume set entirely within. The ellipse has two centers, representing the signs of man's finding roots on earth. I gave strength to the thickness found between the inside and outside wall, excavating that thickness in order to obtain the secondary spaces necessary to the church. There is nothing on its periphery except a very small piazza. The entire form is conceived so as to offer the least resistance to the forces of the mountain.

The ellipse has been angularly cut in section so that a perfect circle is formed at its terminus. The will of the church, then, is to transform two *terrestrial* points of geometric construction into a single *celestial* point. By this transformation we obtain something that cannot truly be considered either a facade or a roof, but solely an opening toward the sky. There are two huge buttressing arches that define the central span and provide support for an enclosing structure I will call the roof.

I worked very hard on this roof, thinking for a long time that it must be of stone. Eventually I understood that the roof must be a structure of our own time, since the true aspiration of this church is to be without a roof. The roof is then the ephemeral element that may change with time. Again, this is a link to the medieval church destroyed in the avalanche. We know that such medieval churches had many roofs throughout the centuries they remained in use, being rebuilt periodically as was required by their condition. In this way, the roof becomes the element that may point to different times in history, while the walls, the plan, and the spatial structure aspire to an eternity. Without the roof, the building is reduced to a ruin, which is the condition by which it was born. This convinced me to make the roof of this church entirely of glass – fully detached from the masonry structure below – as an element that is capable of being replaced in future centuries.

These are the elements and materials of the church. They are intentionally few, so as to make explicit the intensity and conviction of their use. They are not asked to represent every ambition, every circumstance, every moment in the life of the church and its congregation, but simply to manifest the will of an atavic work to survive.

Within the complex of this village the church will be read as a large structure confronting the trees and the houses around it as a huge signal. I hope and anticipate that in the year 2000 – when all built work will be consigned to ephemerality and more and more open to consumption – there will be in this church a form of resistance, a force in the opposite direction, aspiring to be for an eternity. This is the program for the church. You can understand how its spiritual and religious meaning becomes a sign in itself.

**Today the architect is a citizen of the world. There are no geographical boundaries capable of containing the contradictions of our time. I believe that the architect must feel the problems of the world, must elect to take charge of all that confronts this world. I confess to feeling responsible for even the conflicts I can do nothing about. This is the condition of today's living, where there are no longer geographical, ethnical, or historical entities of sufficient isolation to remain closed within themselves. We live in a time where every man is responsible for the condition of our world. I am equally moved to hear of violence and suffering in the third world as I am to learn of the catastrophe at Chernobyl. It does not concern me that in the face of today's mundanity I will appear such a moralist. We are at the point where we either work for man or we work against man. I believe that architecture is not an aesthetic fact, but an ethical one.**