Throughout the interview, Mario Botta draws to organize his thoughts and illustrate the points he wants to make. It is a remarkable, fluid, and prolific production. There is no apparent resistance between what he sees in his mind and what appears on the paper before him.

INTERVIEW WITH MARIO BOTTA

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY LILY PRIGIENERO

Frequently recognized for a series of remarkable private homes in his native Ticino, Switzerland, Mario Botta (b. 1943) is known internationally for his religious, museum, and commercial structures whose monumental forms are animated by a masterful use of light and tectonic syntax. He is a church builder of first rank. His churches, seemingly unconnected to their underlying complexities—like the appearance and symbolism of traditional houses of worship—themselves seek to create a meditative, primary experience of the sacred by returning to the fundamental notions of architecture—light, location, material, form—incorporated within the essence of a highly individual response and an equally specific landscape. Botta’s churches define and shape what is universal and, in so doing, become meaningful expressions of faith. This incision that good building is an unalienable human right has provided the aesthetic and moral foundation of his work, which is connected with complex attention to detail, and also an insight into the architect’s personal sense of responsibility, an integrity that he would not describe as spirituality but that reveals itself as such nonetheless.

Botta’s architectural commission, completed when he was twenty years old, was a parish house next to the church in his family’s village of Genestrerio. In 1967 he completed a suburban library at the seventeenth-century Capuchin Monastery in Lugano, and made subsequent modifications to a chapel. The past decades have seen the completion of four of Botta’s churches: the first cathedral built in France in over a century; a synagogue; a scale recreation of Borromini’s seventeenth-century church, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane; and the design of numerous other ecclesiastical projects. Along with his architectural practice, Botta teaches at the Swiss Institute of Technology, ETH Lausanne, and has taught internationally with numerous honorary doctorates, fellowships, and museum exhibitions.

Judith Dupré: In your native Ticino, the mountain town the lake and north meet south. How have this region’s unique geography and culture influenced your work?

Mario Botta: Here we have the privilege of living between two cultures: the northern, an internal culture, and the south, an external culture. In the north, the idea of a house is that of a structure that is in a profound sense given protection—in wood, it is warm. It is the culture of the interior. In the south, the Mediterranean, the house evolves from the concept of the outdoor, external piazza. Here, we know the interior of the northern world, but also the great light of the Mediterranean.

J.D.: How can you see Ticino, a place where you have lived and worked for nearly your entire life, with new eyes?

M.B.: You can never know a place that well. Every time I go to an old place, I discover new things. It is an infinite reading. You can never really say you know a place until you have completed a project, because at that point the project transforms the site. Architecture brings with it the idea of transformation. It transforms the existing equilibrium into another equilibrium. This is the magical aspect of architecture. Architecture always transforms its site; it never leaves it neutral. This is true not only of my work, but of all architecture, whether put forward in building.

What I love about architecture is not the constructed volume, and its rapport with the empty space that surrounds it. There is a continued give and take between architecture and its context. When I make a small house, it is not the object that innovates me, but the spatial relationship that this object has with the landscape. If there were a thousand examples of measuring the quality of architecture, it would be able to measure the transformation that has occurred in the landscape. When I saw Ronchamp on the hillside, I saw that Ronchamp has transformed the landscape. That building has constructed the landscape.

J.D.: Yes, and the landscape has defined that building.

M.B.: That’s true.

J.D.: What is the process of taking possession of a place and unearthing the memories that are connected with it?

M.B.: The first act in making architecture is not to put a stone on top of a stone, but to put a stone on the earth. The earth becomes the form of cohesion, of giving, of umbra. It becomes the expression of abundance and safety. Since, of all the figures, the ring unites the smallest perimeter with the largest content, it is the richest and the most indwelling of them all.

—Rudolf Schwarz, The Church Engaged, 1938
The Cedar is Mary, because just as the cedar puts down roots deep enough to enable it to grow higher than any other tree, so she was so deeply confirmed in humility as to allow her to soar above all others when she conceived her divine Son.

The Olive, tree of peace, is Mary, whose twig carried by the dove to the ark marked the reconciliation of man and God.

The Shadow is Mary, in which the afflicted and infirm find relief from the fierce heart of adversity.

The Sea is Mary, beyond measure by reason of all the rivers of grace which run into her, inexhaustible for her distribution of the rains of plenty, unfathomable in her liberality and transparency.

The Book is Mary, in which is written the Word in golden letters which everybody must guard in the recesses of his heart.

The Pomegranate is Mary, because, like the fruit which contains a multitude of sweet seeds, so she encloses the sweetness of all the graces.

The Rose is Mary, delicate and flowering in the sun of justice, made fruitful by heavenly dew, whose purple hue is the blush of modesty, the ardor of charity, the zeal of justice.

The Moon is Mary, because she reflects the light from the sun that is God and shines it on the divine maternity, attracting the waves of our afflictions.

Silence is Light
Light is to Silence
The threshold of their crossing is the Singularity
is Inspiration
(Where the desire to express meets the possible)
is the Sanctuary of Art
is the treasury of the Shadows
(Material cast shadows shadows belong to lights)
—Louis Kahn, THE NOTEBOOKS AND DRAWINGS OF LOUIS I. KAHN, 1973
It’s a way of possessing the earth. It’s a fundamental act, a sacred act. It separates the microcosm of man from the macrocosm of the world. Architecture automatically brings to mind the sacred, the act of making architecture transforms a condition of nature into one of culture. This transfor- mation evokes the spirit of man. It’s man’s conscious thought that differentiates him from the animal.

And man’s thought creates a form to a spec- trum-like concept. Every building is different from another. If not, it changes by only a few inches, I have another spatial con- ceptualization, together with light and another sun, another connection. My creative thought is the act of making the sun, and another way of thinking about the sun. I like to think that what I have been doing is a sacred act, but not with only the geography, but also with the memory, the culture, of the history of that very place. The architect possesses a piece of the land, but the geography has a persisting history and a memory. For this reason, architecture needs one more memory because it comes from the mother earth that generates it. A building is not a mobile home or a sculpture that you can move around. A building refers to an image. This is the most extraordinary fact of architecture. So to answer your question, the critical reading of the territory is the very first act of architecture.

I do. You often spoke of the mental independence of architecture and me, and said that “the quality of the architectural endeavor hinges on the intensity of this exchange.” I seem to see that your monument and buildings are not in dialogue with the landscape, but instead they are in dialogue with it.

MB: As I seen this as a criticism but has a posi- tive fact. The nature of the land is that even a small bell tower can dominate. It’s a sign of man in the landscape. There’s no need to invest in all of the power- ness of man’s mark. When there are two points in a valley, and you think that this bridge or this building is about constructing the landscape. Without the bridge, there is no landscape. From this point of view, architecture is the act of affirming the artificial, the man-made. It’s your form, expression, and constructs the human landscape. When I build Monte Tamara, it was an act of architecture over mountain and sea. A chapel is a small sail in the mountains. It was born of the need of man to possess that mountain. From the beginning, the mountain constructed the mountain and man’s nature.

MB: Our new projects are located all over the world— Hong Kong, India, Buenos Aires, Florence, Holland, Japan, and Italy. What is the process of understanding a for- eign landscape?

MB: I am not able to discern a law if I haven’t seen the sit- uation. I have never made an abstract project. I need to find with the help of landscape. I try to transform the landscape: solutions are already present in the virgin landscape. It is as if it is there waiting for a solution. For example, the architect goes to the hill of Funchal. There is an individual question as well as a collective question. The architect’s client is part of this questionary, saying “I need a pilgrimage church on this hill.” I do not intervene and investigate the landscape, which gives him his essential gesture. This client’s mark was a need that already existed in the landscape.

MB: What will always be human?

MB: Exactly, the land already has the answers. At any given moment in history, an architect must give the

Mario Botta’s generous vision—evidence in his compelling need to teach, the preface of his ideas, his expen- sive use of rare materials and light in his buildings—is apparent once more: he has rented a helicopter for the afternoon so that we can visit two of his stone chapels high in the Alps that are not accessible by road during the early spring, approaching Botta’s work from the air which feels the earth fall away in a sea of deep alpine crevasses, seeing the sun descend behind the houses below definitely clinging to their small part of the mountain, passing over a solitary, hopeful cross at the top of one peak—reveals the highly specific and inspired his work and confirms his insistence that he is merely a tool.

At Mogno, I acknowledged a sense of gravity, a sense of light, a sense of the man’s movement twenty-four hours. Every day I made a different drawing of the path of the sun, using the drawings like a magical instru- ment—a geomantic instrument like a compass.

JMB: Would you say the transformation of the Mogno plaza from a square into an ellipse into a circle is a metaphor for humanity’s spiritual transformation?

MB: Yes, it is immediately that way. An ancient Buddhist Abhava has written very nice things about that church, every one who would come would write letters asking, “it is true that the circle is on column the column.” I would go to its temple and make calculations and then construct a new church because this is what we need here. It was a way of our laying the mountain together. This process helped to understand a lot of things: there is an ancient battle between man and nature, man constructs, nature destroys. I said to myself, “I want to make something that will not last, will will fall.” In order to resist the moun- tain, I couldn’t make a glass church, I couldn’t build a church that could last a thousand years. I want to construct a building that will last for a hundred years. I am not that kind of man.

JMB: There is hope. When I see a computer drawing, it seems like the mountain already has the answers. From this point of view, architecture is the act of affirming the artificial, the man-made. There is no landscape. From this point of view, architectural endeavor hinges on the intensity of this exchange. It seems to me that your monumental

JMB: Your new projects are located all over the world— Hong Kong, India, Buenos Aires, Florence, Holland, Japan, and Italy. What is the process of understanding a for- eign landscape?

JMB: There are some happy projects that are intuited quickly, and there are other projects that have a difficult path. I idea to insert a house in a mountain and after drawing multiple variations of the original idea, the final form of Botta has said the design arose from a square into an ellipse into a circle is a metaphoric

Foucault’s original commentary of Léonard Berreman’s Church of San Carlo Borromini’s Church of San Carlo

The Palace of St. John the Baptist. Botta’s first major project, [1998–1992] is an impressive open space con- structed of alternating courses of locally quarried gray limestone and white Poros marble. Botta’s treatment here has been compared to the building anxiety and rush over to embrace the mountainous environment, as if defining the mountainous research upon the church. But I am saying that I want to construct a new church because we need to do that. It was a way of our laying the mountain together. This process helped me understand a lot of things: there is an ancient battle between man and nature, man constructs, nature destroys. I said to myself, “I want to make something that will not last, will will fall.” In order to resist the moun- tain, I couldn’t make a glass church, I couldn’t build a church that could last a thousand years. I want to construct a building that will last for a hundred years. I am not that kind of man.

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Blessed Odorico (opposed by Botta at St. Peter’s. The colonnaded courtyard that frames a central conical bell tower, the terminus of which is cut on a reinforcing the ideas of protection and communal strength.

MB: that’s the point of the history of a town, which is very important to me as history to the hierarchy. It imposes me to see an ancient found. It is a question of about the last few hundred years old, which is half as a sculpture. In a million years the pyramid probably will not rise any more.

which will cut on a millennium or more, not as a church, but as a relic. We don’t have such something as a natural monument.

nothing to visit, except the feeling. I think that architecture must realize the life of the men. This is the meaning of a man’s life and his mark. The life of a man is long and a thoussand years. We find it in an antique era. I’d like to think that the Madonna—made for a church then perhaps, held in private hands, stolen in a museum, finally sold—in the end found its way home.

MB: When speaking of Mogno, you have described the need to transform the “wonder eminence” of life into spaces.”

This is what was the genius of the project and the communitarian space. MB: I am an architect who has a spiritual vision of space. Space is my material. I build my spiritual world in space. MB: Everything is relative, obviously. I just think that architecture defines more than the moment of life. This is the meaning of a man’s life and his mark.

MB: At Every I had a problem. I was frightened by my word. I sought of the the great Christian tradition: the inner relationship of the Kocatepe Church, and the Western Latin-cross plan. I attempted a synthesis of the two cultures, to return to the Kocatepe and Western space, in the plan of Every, which has a central plan with a longitudinal orientation. For the rest of the cathedral, I tried to express the volume of an altar. The sides are like Jacob’s ladder, faceting along a great French tradition, and are precisely laid out.

MB: The metaphor of darkness is critical to understanding the medieval cathedral. The shadows of the upper reaches, transplanted, and spatial elements, for example, become a metaphor for incommunicability. Your church spaces in contrast are clearly articulated, well lit, and easily understood.

MB: At Every, I work on the French cathedral by rethinking the stained-glass window. I have problems with the committees because they wanted stained-glass windows. They say that people’s minds in a cathedral was the way that a church should be. I rejected it. I rejected that the nature of stained-glass windows was to have many colors enter in darkness. But the light is revealed through the windows, windows, windows.

And yesterday I asked: is there a light in the dark? So it was a question. I want to make a church that was a presence in the city, even for those who don’t believe. I disseminate that I had to agree to build a cathedral in a city that carried responsibilities that went beyond religion. When you Protestant, you have to make a church that is the city’s direct].

MB: “I don’t believe. I want to make a cathedral that wasn’t present in the city, even for those who didn’t believe. It is a sin! I disseminate that I had to agree to build a cathedral in a city that carried responsibilities that went beyond religion. When you want to build a cathedral, you have to make a church that is the city’s direct].

MB: There is nothing new in the building: the structure, putting yourself in a time when cathedrals were new, when men still had to enter into darkness and then the light is revealed through its windows, windows, windows. MB: I am not a strong person. MB: I am not a strong person. MB: I am not a strong person.

MB: The architecture of darkness becomes a point of reference, like a magical moment that defines an extreme of space.

MB: The interiors of your buildings differ greatly from the outdoors. There is a monumental aspect in architecture that is new and unexplored part of architecture. There are two points of interest: the exterior with the landscape; the interior with the city. I like to play with these two aspects as well.

MB: The meaning of the sacred, which is a fundamental need of man. MK: Mankind has been capable of creating for itself this very particular kind of space. There is great mystery in a church. MK: That is a good point to be confronted with the design of a church, because it shelters the most powerful themes of humanity: birth, marriage, death.

MB: I think that in the church of today’s city, great architecture has to become a point of serious interest. MB: I don’t think that in the church of today’s city, great architecture has to become a point of serious interest. MB: I don’t think that in the church of today’s city, great architecture has to become a point of serious interest.

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“glory of God” means Praise here means the creatures he created. His manifestation in immediacy. One is FROM MONTE LITANY IN CHAPEL of memory. The new symbolic values have to be rooted is so deeply ingrained in our collective memory and has in the great past. Le Corbusier described it beautifully is a sign for all Christianity. When I saw the cross come place for travelers and for people who work at the air-

petals you can look out the windows and see the air-

reserves in the subconscious of man, and it is an

Can the values of the private home be transferred to the church?

true, when you go into a church, you look at a monumental forms would find their perfect home.

I used to think that memory is the territory of the

How do you move beyond the image of the tradition, the

This is very difficult. I think the new has to be full

The Cathedral of the Resurrection (1959) by Le Corbusier, famous church of light and stone. The light enters from small, low windows, like the light in a cave or a grotto. The light highlights the mountain. It belongs to the mountain. I pulled the pathway from the mountain and extended it outward.

The walkway is above, the church is below. It’s an image of the profile of the mountain. It’s not really a construction. I did not want to make a tiny church but to develop the horizon underneath it. When what attractiveness was the development of an essential, horizontal pathway that leads to both ends of the project, the chapel itself. It has to walk on top of the pathway and feel the empti-

The church is located, in a sense, on the mountain. It is a sign of the group, the collective—the family and soci-

mystic of the group, the collective—the family and soci-

I like proposals but I like the realization of a proj-

I like to see people there, see them continue to go there. I ask myself, “What are those people looking for?” Did you see the photographs

I have not found Him yet. I am searching for Him. I have not found Him yet. I am searching for Him. I have not found Him yet. I am searching for Him. I have not found Him yet. I am searching for Him. I have not found Him yet. I am searching for Him. The last time I saw Louis Kahn, in Venice, he said, “You can’t be a great architect, but you have to work, work, and work.”