

## an interview with Mario Botta

- *"Why does your architecture look the way it does?"*
- *"It is a human artifact posed against the landscape."*

*Leonard Kady is a graduate of University of Toronto, School of Architecture.*

**Leonard Kady :** I was interested in your statement in this morning's lecture that "architects talk about the modern movement ungratefully." This period seems to have ended abruptly and we are at a critical point now. Could you expand on your statement?

**Mario Botta :** For me the modern movement is a part of the history of architecture. It is not the only part of history that is relevant for the understanding of architecture, but it is a major part. For architects of this generation, it is important to understand the positive lessons that may be extracted from this movement and not to only bring out the negative aspects. The modern movement has been criticized lately for its negative aspects which are degenerations of the architecture of the modern movement. The modern movement has given us many positive aspects. The movement believed in the opportunity for man to change his space of living. The fault of the movement was that industry and the establishment at that time could not realize this change. Our generation has now been able to see the mistakes or defects of the modern movement. All of a sudden now there is an increased awareness of the city, memory, and history. These are all elements that were forgotten in the modern movement. Another observation is that the movement is often criticized as a unitary movement. The movement was composed of very different personalities: Le Corbusier, the master of the modern movement, Mies, Alto, Erskine, etc. It is a mistake to consider all of these architects, or the movement of the Bauhaus for that matter, as comprising a certain group, because all these architects had a special language of their own and were very different characters. For my part, if one considers Louis Kahn, the last of the modern movement architects, then I am very happy to be a descendent of his.

**Kady :** At the time you attended university there were

mounting student revolts and there was a reassessment of architectural education. Many schools are still recovering from this period, and others are returning to a more traditional approach to architecture. How do you feel about the educational system today?

**Botta :** It is important to consider architecture, or the moment of the making of architecture, as an expression of our society and to have the humility to recognize that with architecture it is not possible to change the structure of society, but to also be conscious that with architecture it is possible to change architecture. Thus with an architectural education it is a moment where one can become conscious of a long project that will be realized in the span of a lifetime. Personally, I have never gone very willingly or happily to school. I prefer a relationship with reality. The problems are harder, but they are more honest and sincere. And the confrontation with reality is the real knot to solve in architecture. The teaching of architecture is only a part, for some more important, for others less, but it is only a very small part of the making of an architect. Essentially, architecture is the confrontation of

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*is not architecture."*



reality. So architecture is only a tool in order to prepare oneself in order to be able to face reality. I believe that in teaching it is almost like a closed circle, and this is very dangerous for the discipline itself. One consumes architectural experiences before these really can be tested. So what schools tend to do most of the time is pose the question and solve it within the context of the school itself without ever testing it with reality. This is very dangerous because it detaches oneself from society.

**Kady :** Is paper architecture then a dangerous phenomenon?

**Botta :** Paper architecture is not architecture. Louis Kahn once said at the beginning of a lecture, "first of all I would like to announce to you that architecture does not exist. What exists is the work of architecture." Paper architecture is a surrogate; it is a non-product that does not express anything but an intention. I am very critical of architects that only draw and realize their ideas in drawing. Drawing is only one tool in order to get the architecture. When those architects that only draw and exhibit get to build, they consider architecture a tool to justify their own drawings, and this is very serious.

**Kady :** Your collaborations with Ticino architects such as Casloni, Galfeti, Ruchat, and Snozzi seem to have been successful. How do you feel about practicing architecture collectively?

**Botta :** I believe it is useful on the critical level. But is useless on a practical level. All these operations or collaborations solve themselves with a synthesis of an image that just resolves itself on paper.

**Kady :** So those collective projects just don't have the strength that you are suggesting an individual may express on his or her own.

**Botta :** Certain things that you do individually are just not possible collectively. In the act of creation, personal intuition plays a very important role in the project. The project is never a result of a cause and effect process. It is never a logical sequence. Very often the act of creation is the result of an illogical contradiction or of a logical contradiction. Thus it always stays impulsive and personal.

**Kady :** How would you see complex buildings of a grand civic nature being realized?

**Botta :** Rather than large scale projects, I have come to the conclusion that small projects are better. I prefer the smaller projects because the architect must have full control of the work he is doing, not only in terms of time, but also in the process. Therefore, they are more immediate. I don't believe in projects that take ten or twenty years to be built. I believe reality is much stronger than our ideas as architects. I only believe in those projects that an architect can solve in his life-

time. It is more important for the collective and for the architect to do the projects that do not take too much time.

**Kady :** Given your experience as a juror on the Paris Opera House Competition, how does a group of architects with such different opinions on architecture come to a conclusion?

**Botta :** It was difficult. In a jury of twenty people, it is impossible to settle on one idea, and the only way to come to a solution is to vote.

**Kady :** Are competitions the only occasion for architects today to discuss architecture publicly?

**Botta :** It is one possibility, but it is a very interesting one, because the confrontation is on a concrete level. I have learned a lot on juries.

**Kady :** Do you feel groups such as CIAM, or Team 10, etc., are still important for furthering architectural dialogue?

**Botta :** They were important when there was an identity, or somehow an understanding, or concern, about the same problems. They were beyond a national meaning when compared with a local group. Today there is too much media, too much information to have a group that relates ideologically, or have a tendency.

**Kady :** Do you feel that too much of the discussion between architects is confined to the magazines?

**Botta :** I feel very close to people that might be physically quite distant through an affinity or a certain understanding of each others work. Magazines do not do much for architects. They are more interesting for editors because they can sell them. There are too many magazines in order to carry on a dialogue. One cannot read them all.

**Kady :** Why does it seem that in your larger institutions, for example the school, there is a simple multiplication of your house type—a module?

**Botta :** It is true. I have a need to establish a module that there is a greater possibility of controlling space in relationship to man, the scale of man. Therefore, it is much easier to avoid falling into the trap of designing monumental scale projects, or to this elegy of monumentalism. The module is interesting too, because when it multiplies the module itself changes, and the sum of the types that are multiplied also assume a different meaning. Both the module to be repeated is different, and the addition of those are different.

**Kady :** The large openings in your buildings, especially in your houses, tend to monumentalize them. Is that your intention, and if so, why?

**Botta :** Yes, maybe this is true. It is something that I have not thought about before. The nature of architecture is to be monumental. It is the fight of man against nature or with nature, in order to affirm an artifact, to affirm the work of man. It is the transformation of nature into culture, and therefore, this is the positive essence of a monument. I am against the monument when it becomes a celebration. I consider it possible when it is an affirmation of the positive things about man, about his culture.

**Kady :** Do you find it difficult to organize your houses after you have divided them in half, particularly with a skylight?

**Botta :** The skylight is the only relationship the house has with the sky. Light is the true generator of space. Without light there is no space. So the use of zenithal light, or the light from above, is an incredibly important element to organize the space. Then it can become an element that is part of a game of how to reconnect the parts that have been split. So it enriches the dialogue between the parts. I like zenithal light because it is the only element that enters the house that reconnects man to the cosmos.

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**Kady :** The theme of your architecture as it relates to the city finally confronts reality in your project in Fribourg. Here you are very interested in the problem of the urban corner. Can you comment on your interpretation of the corner as it relates to past historical solutions to the same problem?

**Botta :** The theme of the corner is a very interesting theme. It is a very difficult theme because it confronts two streets, two corners, with two ways of how to deal with these different elements. The problem of the corner is not what is in front, but what is behind it. So the corner becomes almost a sign; it describes what is behind it. It is like the tip of an iceberg. The more precise the corner is, the more clear the concept is in relation to the corner. The way I am reproposing the theme of the corner in the city is a way of reacting to the international style: where everything was the same, where there were no hierarchies, where there were no priorities, and where a building did not relate to its place, where it could have actually been anywhere. The theme of the corner somehow ties back to the place of the city, of the urban context. This is a new understanding, or consciousness, that our generation has acquired again—today we build against the city, not for the city—the theme of the corner is understanding that you can build for the city instead of against it.

**Kady :** The use of green steel and stone in the Fribourg Bank recalls the Vachini Office Building in Lugano.

**Botta :** Yes, it is the same stone.

**Kady :** Why does your new bank project in Lugano, which is a very close neighbour to Vachini's building, not use the same vocabulary?

**Botta :** The theme of green granite really relates to Fribourg, because Fribourg was built with a special type of stone, all the same colour, a very cold colour that would reflect the light in a very cold way. Lugano has a different light

and a different climate. The volumes that I am creating for the bank in Lugano are modulated in four parts and have a much warmer light, or reflect the Lugano light in a warmer way.

**Kady :** This tends towards a more massive appearance.

**Botta :** Yes, I don't believe a building should be light, as a rule. Each building has a presence and should affirm its presence. The fact that it affirms its gravity and its heaviness is a positive thing.

**Kady :** Can this be achieved in a curtain wall? The panels in the Fribourg bank are rather thinner and tend to be lighter looking.

**Botta :** I would have liked the Fribourg bank to have been much heavier, but it was not possible.

**Kady :** There is a changing attitude towards materials in your work. Your later buildings have a richer surface treatment. How did this develop?

**Botta :** I wish to ask a lot of materials. I think materials are very important. I want each material to give as much as it can possibly give.

**Kady :** In the Ligornetto house, the striping is an overly decorative treatment of the wall and the wall begins to have an aesthetic interest of its own, apart from the fact that it is also a delineated cubic mass with large openings. Is the striping purely decorative or is it to help measure the volume?

**Botta :** The two colours have two functions. One is that of introducing the idea of decoration as it was in the old rural house, where the houses of man were coloured in order to be differentiated from the houses that were for the animals. I believe this is a sign for man's great love and appreciation for a man's habitat. And I wanted to reintroduce this idea because it is also an inexpensive idea. With a striated system I am also making the volume much more artificial. And I want to affirm the artifact as artificial against nature. Then the relationship with nature becomes much stranger by contrast.

**Kady :** Emilio Batisti has explained the language you use with a classical sense. For instance, when he described your Marbio Infeviore Scuola project.

**Botta :** I consider the classical language a very logical one, and I do not react critically to my work being described in those terms.

**Kady :** After visiting towns such as Gubbio, and Assisi, I see a strong affinity between your work and that of the Romanesque.

**Botta :** I believe that Romanesque Architecture, architecturally speaking, is the highest peak in architecture. I find the Romanesque a very intense and dense expression of a language and loaded with meaning. And I am very much fascinated by this period, by this attitude, the Romanesque.

