



INTERVIEW WITH MARIO BOTTA

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY LILY PRIGIONIERO

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.



ABOVE AND RIGHT Botta's structures evolve from the modernist tradition and reflect his apprenticeships under Carlo Scarpa, Le Corbusier, and, most profoundly, Louis Kahn. Though retaining modernism's rational, geometric forms, his buildings find their deeper roots in ancient archetypes, ruins of the past, and the striated stonework of the Tuscan Romanesque, such as that of the remote twelfth-century Chapel of San Galgano near Chiusdino, Italy, interior and exterior views of which are depicted here.



throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas. In 1996, under the auspices of the Swiss Italian University, he founded the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, Switzerland, a school offering a five-year, accredited program in architecture based on humanistic criteria. He has been honored internationally with numerous honorary doctorates, fellowships, and museum exhibitions.

JUDITH DUPRÉ: In your native Ticino, the mountain meets the lake and north meets 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 world, an internal culture, and the south, an external culture. In the north, in the Alps, the idea of a house is that of a structure that in a most profound sense gives protection—it is made of wood, it is warm. It is the culture of the interior. In Italy, the Mediterranean, the house evolves from the concept of the outdoor, external piazza. Here, we know the tectonic of the northern world, but also the great light of the Mediterranean.

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

MB: You can never know a place that well. Every time I go to an old place, I discover new things. It's 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 profound or banal.

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

JD: Yes, and the landscape has defined that building.

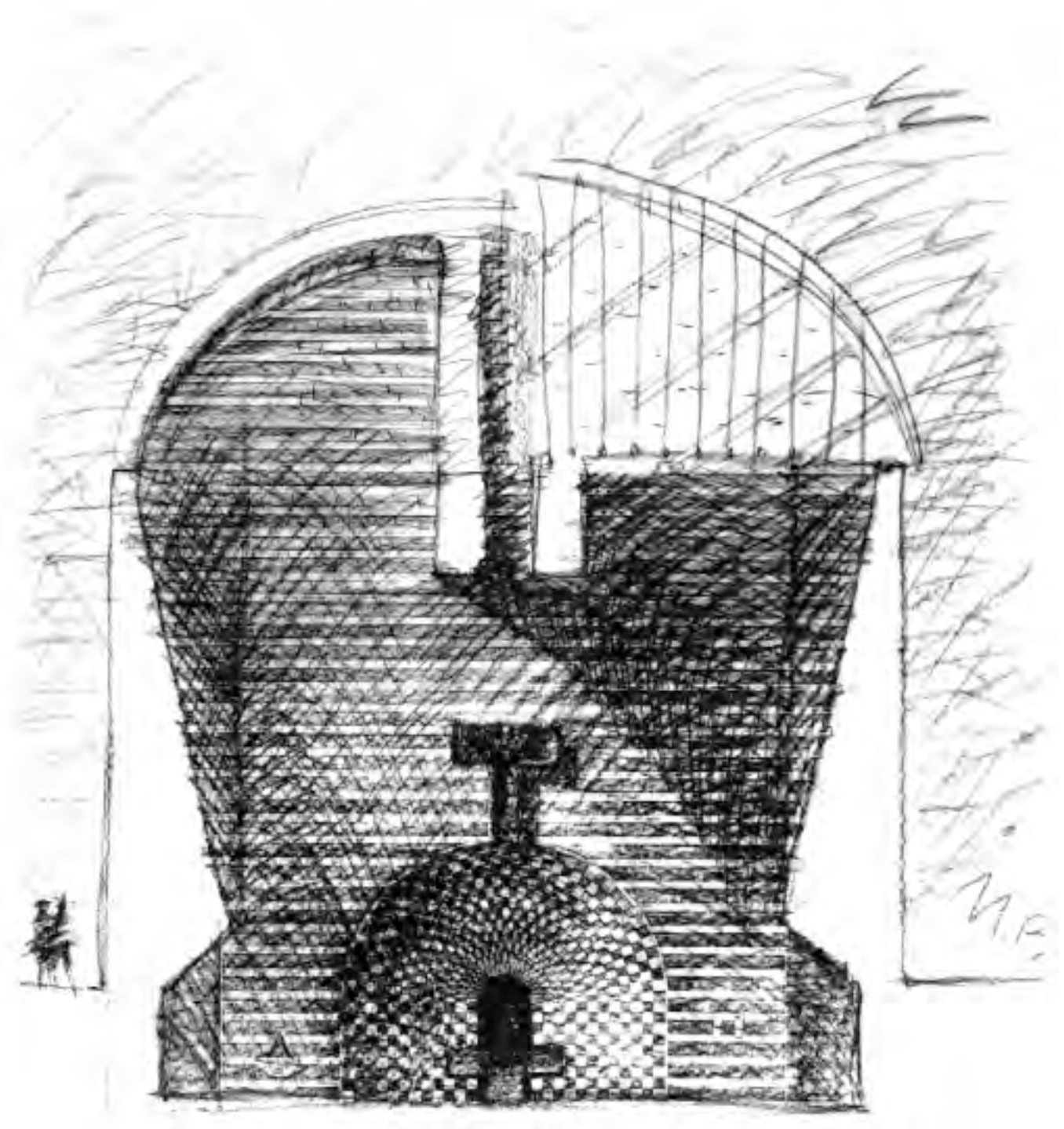
MB: That's true.

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

MB: 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.

RIGHT Conceptual sketch, Chapel of St. John the Baptist, Mogno (1992–96).

PAGES 10–11 The Chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, Monte Tamaro (1990–96), located in a ski resort in the Swiss Alps, 5,141 feet (1,567 meters) above sea level, is accessible only by cable car. The chapel was commissioned by Egidio Cattaneo, the resort's owner, as a memorial to his late wife Mariangela. Made of reinforced concrete faced with rusticated porphyry, it is a hybrid design that combines the shapes of a viaduct, church, amphitheater, and tower. Botta extended a path leading from the mountain via a processional walkway 213 feet (65 meters) long that is on axis with the rising sun, and that appears to emerge from the mountain and terminates in a belvedere that overlooks, and constructs a new relationship with, the magnificent panorama below. The chapel itself is located below the crucifix, under the walkway, and can be approached from descending staircases on either side.



Ring is inviolability. Neither beginning nor end exist in it, it begins and ends everywhere. . . . The ring becomes the form of cohesion, of girdling, of embrace. 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 INCARNATE, 1938



LEFT The chapel on Monte Tamaro is dimly lit like a grotto. The theme of hands informs the interior painting program. These primitivistic images were executed in inlaid mortar by Enzo Cucchi with the liturgical guidance of Padre Giovanni Pozzi. Monumental hands in a gesture of prayer adorn the apse behind the altar. Smaller images of

hands appear in a Marian litany, a series of painted prayers of praise to Mary, that are rooted in a medieval, agricultural, intuitive understanding of the world. The paintings—some of them are shown in larger detail on this page—are located over twenty-two embrasured windows set at floor level that give visitors a view down the side of the mountain.

*Silence is to 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 light)*

—Louis Kahn, THE NOTEBOOKS AND DRAWINGS OF LOUIS I. KAHN, 1973



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.



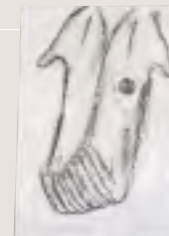
The Shadow is Mary, in which the afflicted and infirm find relief from the fierce heart of adversity.



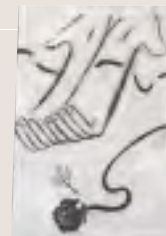
The Sea is Mary, beyond measure by reason of all the rivers of grace which run into her, inexhaustible for her distribution of the rains of plenty, unfathomable in her liberality and transparency.



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.

It's a way of possessing the earth. It's a fundamental act, a sacred act. It separates the microcosm of construction from the macrocosm of the world.

Architecture automatically brings to itself the sacred. The act of making architecture transforms a condition of nature into one of culture. This transformation evokes the spirit of man. It is man's conscious thought that differentiates him from the animal.

Architecture always roots itself to a specific place. Every building is different from another. If I move a house by only a few meters, I have another spatial consideration, another rapport with light, another sun, another orientation. My architecture is born from the earth itself. I like to think that it hasn't been placed on the earth, but rises up from the earth as a natural condition of a specific place. It brings with it not only the geography, but also the memory, the culture, the his-

tory of that very place. The architect possesses a piece of the land, but this geography has a preexisting history and a memory. For this reason, architecture needs to incorporate memory because it stems from the mother earth that generates it. A building is not a mobile home or a sculpture that you can move around. Every building refers to a unique landscape. 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.

JD: You have often spoken of the mutual dependence of structure and site, and said that "the quality of the architectural endeavor hinges on the intensity of this exchange." It seems to me that your monumental buildings are not in dialogue with the landscape, but dominate it.

MB: To me, this is not a negative criticism but a positive fact. The nature of the landscape is that even a small bell tower can dominate it. It's a sign of man in the landscape. There's no need to be afraid of the presence of man's mark. When there are two points in a valley, and I find the bridge between them, this bridge is what constructs 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 part of human expression and constructs the human landscape. When I built Monte Tamaro, it was an act of artifice: the mountain never had a chapel. The chapel is a stone nail in the mountain. It was born of the need of man to possess that mountain. From the beginning, architecture has always encompassed the tension between man and nature.

JD: Your new projects are located all over the world—Syria, Israel, India, Korea, Germany, Holland, Japan, and Italy. What is the process of understanding a foreign landscape?

MB: I am not able to draw a line if I haven't seen the situation. I have never made an abstract project. I need to feed myself with a specific landscape. I try to interrogate 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 Ronchamp. There is an individual question as well as a collective question. The architect's client is part of this equation, saying, "I need a pilgrimage church on this hill." Le Corbusier interrogates and investigates the landscape, which gives his chapel its essential gesture. This sign of man was a need that already existed in the landscape.

JD: What will be, has always been.

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

answer, must respond in the context of his own time. But the answer of any given time has a great historical memory. I maintain that for every creative person, not only architects, but all artists, their research is the great past. Picasso is the primitive man, Paul Klee is the child in every one of us, Henry Moore is modern but archaic. Paradoxically, with every creation, it is not the future the artist is thinking of, but the past. It is the same with architecture. Louis Kahn said, "The past is like a friend."

I like the dimension of man. I want to see how man moves in the landscape. I try to understand two things: first, how the sun moves in a twenty-four-hour period and second, how the seasons change. I observe how the landscape expands and contracts. I see how a place lives in the arc of a day, and imagine the various seasons. I find that in Ticino where I live, the mountains define a completely different space in the winter than they do in the summer. The highway, lake, and plants all change. There are things I see in the winter that I don't see in the summer. To answer your question, I like to verify the dimensions of man and imagine the relation of this space to the new object I am going to introduce. Although the landscape is immense, the insertion of even a small object changes the scenery. Therefore, I try to understand the elements of nature—the sun and the seasons—and I like to imagine the history of that place, whether there are traces of man or not.

The political history is insignificant compared to the history of the landscape. When I do a project, I would like it to be eternal, even though I know it will only last for maybe fifty years. This is another important aspect of architecture: architecture began before civilization and will continue after my death. Architecture has the power to survive. Its potential for memory exists in its ability to endure. History and memory are fundamental to architecture, not its function. That can change.

It is the light entering the Pantheon that is important. Over its history, it has been a temple, a market, and a church, yet, what remains important is not its function, but the light entering through its oculus. The Pantheon is a work of genius and intuition. It is so simple. When you enter the Pantheon, you understand its space in its entirety at once. With its single light source and simple geometric shape, I can draw it from memory.

JD: Tell me about the act of drawing.

MB: Even for me it is mysterious. When trying to understand a new situation, I am aware of the very different responses I have from one project to the next. There are some happy projects that are intuited quickly, and there are other projects that have a difficult path. I can't generalize really. It often happens that I have an idea to insert a house in a mountain and after drawing multiple variations of the original idea, the final form of the house comes full circle and is very close to the original thought with just slight modifications.

I use drawing not as a representation, but as an instrument of research. The drawing helps me understand the problem. This is why I don't work on a computer. The computer is mute. When I make a sketch, it has hope. When I see a computer drawing, it seems like a caricature. It has no hope. It's dead. It's only a representation. The sketch is not a representation, but an instrument to understand the problem. Therefore, I often think with the pencil.

JD: You have said, "In designing churches I have discovered the primary reasons to make architecture."

MB: I began to construct churches when there was an avalanche that destroyed the old church of Mogno. When I went to the site, all I saw was the staked-out area where the church and cemetery had been. It made a deep impression on me. To think that while I was watching television, a mass of snow, 30 meters [98.4

Mario Botta's generous vision—evident in his compelling need to teach, the profusion of his ideas, his expansive use of rich 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—feeling the earth fall away in a sea of deep alluvial crevasses, seeing the desolate rock houses below defiantly clinging to their small part of the mountain, passing over a solitary, hopeful cross at the top of one peak—reveals the highly specific landscape that has inspired his work and confirms his insistence that he is merely unearthing that which has always been.



ABOVE *The Chapel of St. John the Baptist, Mogno (1992–96, 1998) is an intimate space constructed of alternating courses of locally quarried gray Riveo granite and white Peccia marble that recall the lyrical masonry fronts of Tuscan Romanesque churches. Two granite buttresses pierce the building envelope and arch over the interior and appear to embrace the structure protectively, as if defying the mountain to encroach upon the church. Both ceiling and window, the circular roof admits ever-changing patterns of light. Coupled with the plan's evolution from square to ellipse to circle, the light intimates the possibility of transformation.*

feet] high, came down slowly, five kilometers an hour, and destroyed ten houses and the old church. Zero. Four hundred years of history annulled. When I arrived at the place, I was very surprised. This wasn't an event that happened in the distant Third World. It was just a few miles from where I lived. Nature has the power to annul cultural conditions.

My first reaction was, "I don't know why you want to build the church again." It's a small village, with no year-round inhabitants, there are only summer residents, so there wasn't a functional or liturgical motive. Another motive existed. The people of the village said, "We want to construct a new church because there used to be a church here." It was a way of not letting the mountain conquer them. This project 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 resist, that will last." In order to resist the mountain, I couldn't make a glass church, a cardboard church. I had to make something that could last a thousand years. I took the quarried stones and brought them to Mogno. I put in a glass ceiling because the roof is the "soft" part of the church. Nearly all the roofs of the churches in your book have been transformed because they have come down, or have burned. The glass roof is a sign of contemporary technology. It's a roof that in fifty years can be changed.

At Mogno, I rediscovered a sense of gravity, a sense of light, a sense of the sun's movement over twenty-four hours. Every day I made a different drawing of the path of the sun, using the drawings like a magical instrument—a geometric instrument like a sundial.

JD: Would you say the transformation of the Mogno plan from a square into an ellipse into a circle is a metaphor for humanity's potential spiritual transformation?

MB: Yes, it's been interpreted that way. Art historian Rudolf Arnheim has written very nice things about that church. Every once in a while he would write me letters asking, "Is it true that the axis of the circle falls on the crucifix?" I would go to my drawings and make calculations and see that it was true, but it wasn't something I had done purposely. There were many coincidences like this. Or he would say, "Have you thought that the twelve concentric arches of the apse represent the twelve apostles?" I did the arches to demonstrate the great depth of the walls and didn't consider whether there were eleven or twelve arches. Although many symbolic and metaphoric values come through the reading of the building, that was not my original motivation. Before Mogno was an ecclesiastical invention, it was an architectural invention.

JD: For me the apse recalls the deep vistas formed by the horseshoe arches at the Great Mosque of Cordoba in Spain, which imply the passage of time.

MB: That is a beautiful interpretation. However, when I did this, my concern was more with how to cut the stone.



On April 25, 1986, the alpine village of Mogno was engulfed by an avalanche. The snowslide demolished the community's focal point, a seventeenth-century church dedicated to St. John the Baptist. The metal spine running down the center of the roof of the new chapel is exactly aligned to the nave of the former church. Botta has said the design arose from his "determination to resist the mountain, and the need to bear witness to something greater than one's own life, and overcome the sense of loneliness that permeates modern society."





ABOVE *The imposing, square facade of the Church of St. Peter the Apostle (1987–95) in Sartirana, Italy, is animated with decorative, multipatterned brick cladding that showcases Botta’s incomparable use of stone. The square plan encloses a circular central space—the intersection of these two primary geometries being a central theme of Botta’s work. The church appears to be windowless, but in fact the nave is flooded with natural light filtered through perimeter skylights.*



ABOVE *The Parish Church of the Blessed Odorico (1987–92) in Pordenone, Italy magnifies the circle-in-a-square formula developed by Botta at St. Peter’s. The plan consists of a rectangular, colonnaded courtyard that frames a central conical bell tower, the terminus of which is cut on a diagonal and completed with a slanting circular skylight, iron belfry, and cross.*



ABOVE *The Parish Church of the Blessed Odorico has an encompassing circular nave lit by a round skylight inset with Botta’s trademark herringbone-pattern mullions. The exterior colonnade reappears inside, this time following the perimeter of the nave and reinforcing the ideas of protection and communal strength.*

In the end, it was a miracle even for me.

JD: In replacing what was destroyed at Mogno, you are, through the act of creating the building, putting yourself in a continuum of history. Its demise is implied—at some point that building will be gone.

MB: But that’s part of the history of man, which is very small compared to the history of the universe. It impresses me to see an ancient fossil. I bought a spiral-shaped fossil that is millions of years old, which I keep as a sculpture. In a million years the pyramids will probably not be here anymore. That which is man-made is ephemeral. This is our condition, to have brief moments. If we think of the Romanesque cathedrals, a thousand years old, it’s a very small amount of time. My grandfather lived a century. Just think, the medieval age was only ten grandfathers ago. Everything is relative, obviously, but I like to think that architecture lasts more than the life of man. This is the measure of a man’s life and his mark.

The statue of the Virgin at Mogno is a thousand years old. We found it in an antique store. I’d like to think that this Madonna—made for a church but then stolen perhaps, held in private hands, shown in a museum, and finally sold—in the end found its way home back to a church.

JD: When speaking of Mogno, you have described the need to transform the “most intense emotions in life into spaces.” This church took ten years to construct. What was the genesis of the project and the community’s reaction to it?

MB: In addition to architecture’s aesthetic aspect, there is always an epic tension. People can feel architecture’s power. At this small church in Mogno there were a lot of controversies. I understood only later that the controversies were proportionate to the power of the project; small endeavors do not cause controversy. Mogno is about the push and pull between the mountains and man, and so it brought up some very fundamental issues. In a supermarket, even the most extraordinary one, people sense the emptiness behind it, while even the smallest church can make you aware of the tremendous energy emanating from it. People aren’t stupid. They don’t need a big, spectacular space. The small paintings of Paul Klee can hold their own next to other, larger paintings. It is good to know that people sense value. We need to listen to the people, listen to what they believe in. People know that they are born and that they must die. This mystery of life needs expression.

JD: A church embodies, in its purest form, the fundamental elements of architecture: light, threshold, and the concept of passage both physical and metaphysical. Could you discuss this in terms of the cathedral at Evry?

MB: I’m going to make a little digression. My culture is an ecclesiastical culture in the sense that the history of architecture that I know—90 percent—is the history of architecture of churches: pagan temples, medieval, renaissance, baroque, neoclassical churches. My models are ecclesiastical models, not civil or military ones. So even as a layman, I am very indebted to the history of ecclesiastical architecture. The challenge of designing a church is that in order to express spiritual values, you have to express corporeal values as well—physical and material values. A work well done has its own spirituality. I have never worried about symbolic values. I don’t trust them. First, a church has to have a material value—it has to work in terms of construction, light, tactility. The material is a sensual factor. It’s not plastic. All these aspects, if they are well done contribute to its symbolic value.

I don’t trust those who start out saying, “I think I’ll do the Trinity.” Generally, I prefer to make a triangle and then have others interpret it as the Trinity.

In the case of Evry, they called me and said, “We want you to build a cathedral.” A cathedral! That’s something that was done in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Today it’s still possible to make a cathedral. There’s something magical about the word cathedral. I remember what Le Corbusier wrote in *When Cathedrals Were White*. In that book, he was referring to a time when cathedrals were new, when men still believed, when mankind still had hope. Le Corbusier was the first to understand the modernity of the cathedral. He brought back that which was considered historical as a possibility for contemporary expression.

At Evry I had a problem. I was frightened by the word cathedral. So I thought of the two great Christian traditions: the centric plan of the Eastern Byzantine church, and the Western Latin-cross plan. I attempted a synthesis of these two cultures, to reunite the Eastern and Western traditions, in the spatial plan at Evry, which has a central plan with a longitudinal orientation. For the rest of the cathedral, I tried to express the values of an artisan. The bricks are from Toulouse, brick-laying being a great French tradition, and are precisely laid.

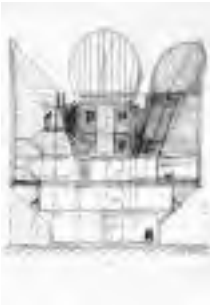
JD: The metaphor of darkness is so critical to understanding the medieval cathedral. The shadows of the upper reaches, transepts, and apsidal chapels, for example, become a metaphor for incomprehensibility. Your church spaces, in contrast, are clearly articulated, well lit, and easily understood.

MB: At Evry, I worked against the tradition of the French cathedral by using a very strong overhead light, which negates the tradition of medieval stained glass. I had problems with the committee because they wanted stained-glass windows. They said that in people’s minds a cathedral was the stained-glass windows. I responded that the nature of stained-glass windows was to have darkness, not light. Chartres is powerful because you enter into darkness and then the light is revealed through its windows. At Evry, windows didn’t make sense because there is overhead light. So there was a conflict.

I wanted to make a cathedral that was an important presence in the city, even for those who didn’t believe. This is a discussion I had with the bishop, and he agreed that to build a cathedral in a new city carried responsibilities that went beyond religion. When the bishop asked me to do this project, he came to my studio and said, “Make me something that becomes a point of reference for the city, because when I go into the town I don’t know where to go. There isn’t a commercial street, there isn’t a piazza or a gathering spot.” Since then, other things have been constructed, but when I built the cathedral there was nothing in the city that joined the people. In this strange landscape I made an element that provided the city with a central image, a point of reference. It is a place for the faithful, but for the nonbeliever, too, it’s a presence, a place of silence, a place for meditation that is available to everybody.

It’s a bit like a theater. The theater is also for those who don’t go to the theater because it’s a place of collective imagination. It’s a place where people go to buy a ticket to dream. People think, “My city is rich because it has a theater—even if I don’t go to the theater.” A church is a rich addition to a city, even for those who don’t go to church. It becomes a human institution like a library, a bank, a stadium. So I tried to give that kind of significance to the cathedral. For the faithful, there is even more value, but even for the nonbeliever, it’s important to have a cathedral in his or her city.

JD: Many believe that a crucial function of architecture is to provide visual orientation: the reassurance of



ABOVE *A preliminary sketch of the Church at Malpensa Airport, Milan (1998, construction to begin 2000), illustrates its tripartite design, which was inspired by the petals of a clover. One hundred two feet (31 meters) high, the project consists of four levels that house the chapel, offices, and multipurpose rooms. The exterior and portions of the interior will be clad in red stone from nearby Verona.*

A church is the place, par excellence, of architecture.



ABOVE *A “magical eye,” an oculus opening to the sky, provides the focal point of the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco (1989/90–95). The windowless, brick-clad building has a fortresslike, totemic identity that is appropriate to its function as an art shelter. Its monumental, horizontal geometries also are a means of visually asserting its presence in the densely built Yerba Buena district. Because they preserve values in a society lacking them, Botta considers museums, churches, and libraries the critical structures of our time.*

building types that are recognizable for what they are—a school, a power plant, a library. From the exterior, your churches do not “read” as churches. What is the obligation of the architect to provide visual landmarks?

MB: I think that in the chaos of today’s city, good architecture has to become a point of reference. Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher, said, “Man lives when he has the possibility of orienting himself in the interior of a space.” Therefore, to live is to be capable of orienting oneself. All the great architecture of the past has provided this orientation. I go into a castle and pretty much am capable of knowing where I am. I go into Chartres, and even if the space is not entirely



ABOVE *St. Cecilia, carved from marble in 1600 by the Ticinese artist Stefano Maderno, succinctly expresses the fundamental characteristics of Mario Botta’s work. First and foremost, the idea of the gestating, female animus—Mother Earth—that births the deep, internal, domestic space, provides the impetus of his works, whether private or public. His buildings are invariably clad in stone that is precisely cut and placed to emphasize their surfaces as well as their volumes. This show of stone, like the elegant gesture of Cecilia’s fingers, points back to its creator’s virtuoso performance as a master of materials. Botta’s buildings are imbued with a sensuous hermeticism: like the sculpture, they seductively turn away from the viewer, presenting a barrier—Botta’s sacrosanct wall—that paradoxically conceals and reveals the internal space. Because the face is hidden, it is a universal and timeless portrait: existing in the present by virtue of its animated, objectified beauty; necessarily implying the past; and addressing with both mystery and candor the future that awaits each of us. Similarly, Botta’s archetypal, hybrid forms realized in stone acknowledge the past, assert the present, and defiantly endure into the future.*

apparent, I have the capability of grasping the whole. This is what makes architecture livable. I would like this communal house that we call the city to have these points of reference to permit people to orient themselves. This is the opposite of what contemporary architecture represents as it reduces structures to labyrinths—cities in which people have to follow arrows and signs because architecture has lost its capacity to provide orientation. This is a value that we have to recover.

In downtown San Francisco I made a small building that becomes a point of reference, like a magical eye, that describes what its function is. That was my intent as well at Evry: not to construct just another building, but to make a structure that also was a sign.

JD: The interiors of your buildings differ greatly from their exteriors. There is a dissonance there. The exteriors are stoic. It is in the interior where you touch the human being.

MB: This is true. However, the scale of the building responds to the surrounding landscape. There’s a monumental aspect to architecture that I think is a crucial part of architecture. There are two points of interaction: the exterior with the landscape; the interior with the domestic. In the city I like to play with these two aspects as well. The monumental scale confronts the city and the landscape. I think of the exterior of my buildings as faces, or totems, like the architecture of the past—Renaissance palaces, for example, which have very dignified facades. It’s a form a resistance to the banalities of the new.

JD: Let’s discuss the relationship of photography to architecture.

MB: There is a rapport between the two because photography is a form of expression. We cannot think, however, that photography represents architecture. Photography can approximate, but architecture bases itself on the changing of light. Light is the generator of space. Without light, there is no space. If we closed these windows, this room would disappear.

JD: A photograph can never capture the movement inherent in a building, its relationship to its site, the materials used. Your buildings are strikingly different in person than they appear in photographs.

MB: With every representation of architecture that I see, I try to imagine what the building is like in reality.

Photography is necessarily limited, just as a woman is different in a photograph than she is in real life. A photograph is only an approximation.

Before I saw the Salk Institute in San Diego last year, I had only seen it in photographs. In these photographs, I could not see the rapport between the mountains and the sea, but that is the essential theme of that building: the passage between the mountains and the ocean. Even discussions of architecture are like that. What we are saying today is a dialogue held in order to understand what an architect thinks. But it is not architecture. I love architecture. I also love all the things about architecture that I cannot express about it.

JD: Some have interpreted your stark, minimal structures as a resistance to beauty. Please discuss the role of ornament in a church, and the lack of ornament in your own.

MB: Architecture brings with it the idea of gravity in the sense that architecture is space organized within and by the forces that bring it to the ground. When I make a building, I like to feel that it is bound to the ground. An airplane flies; it has another beauty. But for me, architecture has its roots in the earth. The idea of ornamentation is secondary to this. I like to think that people can feel the nature of my spaces, that they are not distracted by decoration. “Ornament is a crime,” said Adolf Loos.

JD: Says Mario Botta!

MB: The wall itself becomes an ornament. Mogno is made from drawn stone. It is not spartan or austere. Beauty is not a secondary thing; it is a primary thing. When I see the texture of the walls at Mogno, I know it is not secondary, it is not decoration. It is structural. I love this essential aspect of architecture because it is not superfluous, it is necessary. It is like the beauty of a woman without makeup.

When painter Enzo Cucchi came to Monte Tamaro he did not want to hear the word decoration. “I’m not coming to decorate the church, I am coming to make my mark on the church.” His marks are immediate, like graffiti, which I like very much. It is not decorative painting.

Architecture, church architecture, describes visually the idea of the sacred, which is a fundamental need of man. Mankind has been capable of creating for itself this very particular kind of space. There is great mystery in a church. For me it is a great privilege to be confronted with the design of a church, because it shelters the most powerful themes of humanity: birth, marriage, death.

After I designed the windows at Tamaro, I realized that an image should be there. I asked Cucchi to make these paintings, which are based on the prayers of the Virgin that were provided by Padre Giovanni Pozzi. Cucchi wanted to paint faces, but then in Germany I saw an exhibit of his work that depicted hands that I really liked because hands make a gesture of prayer: hands open to give, hands open to receive.

At Tamaro, hands became a leitmotif for the metaphoric illustrations of the Madonna: Mary as a boat, as a flowering almond during the confines of winter, as an olive, as a cloud, as the moon, as the sea, as a circle, as the city on the hill, as the sun, as a rose, as a pomegranate rich with gracious seeds, as a column, as a restorative herb for our dry hearts, as a tall pine tree, as the queen’s road, as a fortress, as a lighthouse, as a shadow, as an illustrated book that discovers the wonders of the word.

Padre Giovanni was given the grace to guide Cucchi in creating these ancient images, which are



ABOVE *The design of the Cymbalista Synagogue and Jewish Heritage Center (1996–98), located on the campus of Tel Aviv University in Israel, synthesizes the building’s two functions: a house of worship and a cultural meeting place. An interior view of the synagogue shows Botta’s refined use of stone and wood, and the overhead illumination that is a hallmark of his religious buildings.*

derived from the great oral tradition of the Madonna. They are painted prayers. They are sacred poems of great profundity that are based on a primitive culture, far removed from the present day, the culture of the farmers who saw the Madonna in the moon, in the grass. It is very beautiful.

The interior at Tamaro was painted black to negate space. The light enters from small, low windows, like the light in a cave or a grotto. The light highlights Cucchi's paintings. It is not a celebration of space, it's a non-space. When people go outside, they see the mountains and the vista, but inside they must return to their essential solitude.

Tamaro's design is intended to control the form of 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 as if it's a correction 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. What was attractive was the development of an external, horizontal pathway that leads to the kernels of the project, the chapel itself. I like to walk on top of the pathway and feel the emptiness underneath.

JD: When will construction start on the chapel at Malpensa Airport?

MB: Construction starts this year. It's all made of red stone, even the floor, which I chose deliberately to contrast the international style used in airports. It will be a place where you can feel the culture of the region. I'd like to think that when people enter the chapel, they will find a place of light and stone.

JD: Airport chapels used to be a standard fixture, and now that air travel is so common, they are disappearing. Your project at Malpensa is an anomaly.

MB: The airport chapel interests me because models from the past do not exist. A church in the middle of an airport is a curious entity. But the chapel is not just another service provided by the airport. I intend it to be a presence. It is a place for travelers and for people who work at the airport. If someone has two hours, instead of reading the newspaper, they can find a place of silence. It is designed as a flower with three petals. Between the petals you can look out the windows and see the airplanes. It will have two spaces: one a place with biblical quotations; the other, a space for the altar, so people can decide for themselves which part of the church is most appropriate for them.

JD: How do you move beyond the image of the traditional church—its plan, orientation, symbolism—which is so deeply ingrained in our collective memory and has been for at least a thousand years, to create something new that is still meaningful?

MB: This is very difficult. I think the new has to be full of memory. The new symbolic values have to be rooted in the great past. Le Corbusier described it beautifully when he put the cross in Ronchamp, saying "The cross is a sign for all Christianity. When I saw the cross come into the church, which was brought in by the workmen, I knew the work site was finished. All of humanity, at that point, took possession of the church." It is difficult to decide where to place a cross on a church because the cross is such a potent symbol of Christianity.

JD: You have said that memory is the territory of the

architect. What have you taken from the past and what have you left behind?

MB: When I do a house, I would also like it to be the cave of a primitive man. When I'm tired, when I'm bored, the house becomes the ultimate refuge. But the house is not only mine; the house also encompasses the myth of the group, the collective—the family and society. The house connects with history and memory. The house has a very strong social role. It enables communication, because man only lives in context with others. In primitive societies, the house coincides with the idea of a collective life. There wasn't just one, there were two, there were three. This collectivity protected one's privacy, yet allowed one to feel part of a group. This sentiment survives in the subconscious of man and this is an important value to retain.

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

MB: Our first encounter when we enter a church is with silence, and then with a return to memory. A church is impossible without memory, a church is the location of memory. In a church, a person is confronted with the immensity of the world. In a church a person always feels very small. This is a magical aspect of a church. The church is a house that puts a believer in a dimension where he or she is the protagonist. The sacred directly lives in the collective. Man becomes a participant in a church, even if he never says anything.

JD: A church, of all building types, is a place where you stop and look. In a house or a bank, you move through without looking.

MB: Yes, the church is the archetype of architecture. When I design one, I have a special responsibility. When I design a bank, I have to resolve the bank's problems. When I do a theater, I must deal with the theatrical machine. In contrast, a church is simple. The essential rite, the liturgy, can happen on a field. It's not complicated. It is the communal house, the house of the faithful. When you go into a church, you have to look around. It's not a theater where you wait for something to happen. When you enter a church, you already are part of what has transpired and will transpire there. This is extraordinary.

When I was a child, I would go to Como with my mother. She was a religious woman and she would go into the churches she would find along the way. She would light a candle and pray. I would sit there in the church and dream. The light well at the San Francisco Museum of Art comes from my childhood experiences in churches. I'd look up at the cupola, at the sky, and the angels painted up there would come down to me. It was fantastic.

It's true, when you go into a church, you look at the architecture. Where the church is located, the place of the faithful, is much more important than its function. The function exists in an arc of time that is very limited, but the church remains. For this reason, I respect the location of churches. I have a great esteem for places of different religions, of all religions, because religious places provide testimony and have extraordinary symbolic value. The church preserves sacredness in its very location. This sense of the sacred cannot be found in a bank, a library, a theater.

JD: Your round stone buildings recall the ancient kivas, the worship spaces of the American Indians. You should build a church in the American Southwest. There, your monumental forms would find their perfect home.

MB: If I could construct only churches, I would let go of everything else. Churches are the ultimate theme for architecture. The more you work with this theme, the more depth you can realize with it.

RIGHT *The Cathedral of the Resurrection (1988–95) at Evry, France, is located just south of Paris in what was a new, non-descript development. Botta's unique cathedral broke with all stereotypical notions of monumental ecclesiastical architecture and, in doing so, provided the city with a symbolic and literal center. A truncated cylinder, the cathedral is 111 feet (34 meters) at its highest point with an exterior diameter of 126 feet (38.4 meters). It is made of reinforced concrete clad inside and out with some 800,000 red bricks from Toulouse, an homage to the artisans of the medieval French cathedrals and the local masonry tradition. The sloping glass roof is inset with an equilateral triangular whose shape defines the three light sources that illuminate the interior. A ring of lime trees, like a green halo, marks a walkway along the upper reaches of the church.*

BELOW *Overhead skylights flood Evry's interior with light. The lack of internal shadow and stained glass—hallmarks of the medieval cathedral interior—proved controversial. Botta designed the wood furnishings, marble altar, and the circular baptismal font inserted into the steps rising to the altar.*



I like proposals but I like the realization of a project a hundred times more. An unrealized project exists only in the world of my imagination, in my ideas, theories, and poetry. But the realization of a building means that the world in my head has become a reality. If I had just imagined the Mogno Chapel, it would have stayed in a drawer with no meaning. I like to see people there, see them continue to go there. I ask myself, "What are these people looking for?" Did you see the photographer there today? What was he looking for? The weather wasn't good, it was a bad day to photograph. It is a big mystery. It's nice to see a work of art realized and to be part of its continuing reality. The finished work is a place of confrontation.



ABOVE *The Evry Cathedral does not have an easily identified front entrance, much less a heroic facade. This feature, common to many of Botta's buildings, forces a confrontation with the building's three dimensions. In fact, the only part of the structure that can be construed as facade is the inclined plane of the roof, another instance of Botta's subverting expectations. The cylindrical shell is punctuated with bands of diminutive keyhole windows that emphasize rather than diminish the solidity of the wall.*

JD: I feel that way when I finish a book. You have no control over who picks it up, when they open or close it, or how they are affected by it.

MB: Louis Kahn said, "Architecture doesn't exist, what exists is the making of architecture." Building is architecture. The rest of it is theory, history, poetry.

JD: When people ask me how to become a writer, I tell them, "If you want to be a writer, you have to write." For some, it's shocking news.

MB: The last time I saw Louis Kahn, in Venice, he said, "You can become a good architect, but you have to work, work, and work."

JD: You have worked hard.

MB: Leave me some time! I am not through working yet. For me, the construction site is very emotional. When you are actually making the building, it is the most beautiful time. When it's done, it doesn't interest you any more.

JD: A final question: Are you finding God?

MB: I have not found Him yet. I am searching for Him.