The Architecture of Mario Botta
Narrowed Gates in an Expanded Field

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With the intention of reorganizing architecture in a more profound or inclusive inquiry, a few individuals and schools of thought disagree such limited definitions. They are looking at a prescription for the discipline of architecture as a source, not with the postmodern propensity for images or motifs, but for its underlying continuities. The essential element which distinguishes this approach from historical revision is the reinterpretation of the idea of type as the manifestation of archetypes of human interaction, with their common form, a key word ideal of the construction of the city as a place of public social interaction. The means for the reconceptualization and archetypes is geometry, the primary vehicle by which man orders his perception. While this may appear a fractal set with potential, it also has its perils, negotiating a fine line between geometry as the means to end and geometry as an end in itself.

In contrast to the previous Hines exhibitions, Botta's work is introduced as representing the "reanimation of modern architecture" (1) through the work chosen to illustrate it, and as the means to bring life to the buildings. The definitions clearly grow out of a modern agenda to reflect Botta's admitted debt to his mentors: Louis Kahn, Le Corbusier, and Carlo Scarpa. The influence of Botta and the Ticinese School (including Tito Cini, Carlo Mollino, Giottino, Gianni Flora, Raffaello Sarno, and two Trumpy) have often been traced to the Italian Neo-Rationalist Tendenza, retaining the faith in abstraction and rational geometric order, while reconnecting to the history of the city as a source for analogous interpretation.

On one level, we can identify an almost archetypal obsession with the forms of his predecessors, drawing on the characteristics of their work. On another level, at least in the terms in which he discusses his work, the legacy of his masters is evident, notably in the continuity of an architecture grounded in human experience. In this respect, he continues the modern critical program against the superficial manifestations of the dominant culture by seeking to stretch the limits of its conventions. It is in this marginal area, where conventions are redefined by interpretation that one must confront one's deepest values.

I seem to have more and more a sense of the existence of certain hidden but profound demands -- which I recognize as part of the heritage of the modern movement's masters -- demands which reassert man as the focus of interest of architecture. These profound exigencies, the need for memory, the need for archaic suggestions, the need for mythic forms, the need for the between understanding and cosmic values, the need for the great ideas of the past, are all, in fact, the real movements which have sustained the need for expression and testimony in every epoch.

I would like to make an architecture which responds to real needs. Today, I see real needs as a series of elements which place man in relation with the earth itself, with the trajectory of the sun in the sky, with the awareness of the passing seasons. Thus, one may recognize, via the notion of dwelling, the initial values for which the dwelling was built. The dwelling as the repository of mankind must differ between the life to enhance social communication, as well as eating, sleeping, love-making, and working. The role of these needs has been somewhat distorted and modified by the International Style, and by consumer-oriented architecture, through the proposal of trivial architectural paradigms. (2)

Order, the Matrix of all Artifice
By the good fortune of having had the opportunity to build, Botta is constructing a research of his exploration in built, rather than verbal or drawn, form. The pace of his production is impressive; in light of an approach fraught with potential, however, it also raises questions about his ability to keep pace in his exploration of the form to within his vocabulary of expression.

For one attempting such lofty goals as those described above, Botta builds from a minimal palate: an obsession with geometric order and elevation, as extruded form in three dimensions, an abstract interplay of solid and void (reasoned form), and, introducing a precarious tension to the enclosing wall in its erosion as an inverted prism of the intersection of a floating plane. The geometric orders at the center of Botta's work are the linear projections of the circle, the square, and the triangle: the cylinder, the cube, and the prism.

The architectural paradigms may be found in the late work of Kahn, in the conjunction and serial repetition of simple geometric orders; of Le Corbusier, in the abstraction of his modification of the geometries and, more specifically, the urban strategy of freeing the ground plane (literally and visually); and of Scarpa, in the love of the material and craft of construction.

An architecture of such minimal articulation demands one of two strategies: the discovery of the geometry through the exhaustive investigation of the clear expression of the represented human institutions (the genius of Kahn) or the limiting of informative input ("restricting traffic at the gates of perception"). The development of Botta's work in time suggests, with a few exceptions, a progression from the former position (house at Riva St. Vitale, the School at Morbio Inferiore, the Zurich Railway Competition), with obvious roots in both the ideology of the Tendenza and the teachings of Louis Kahn, toward the latter (the Casa Rotunda and subsequent houses, the Housing at Torin, the Gallery at Tokyo) in which a facile play of geometries and paradigmatic forms appears to take precedence. Botta discusses his work convincingly in Kahnian terms, though the few sketches offered as well as the real innovations of certain singular quality of the buildings (in more ways than the stronger, symmetric forms of and Western accompany text) imply a more narrow focus. Such a progression affirms the precariousness of the line between geometry as a means to an end and geometry as an end in itself.

The early houses at St. Riva Vitale (1973), and Ligornetto (1976) also achieve this dual role, the first in its dynamic section, and the second in its transformation. In the making of the bridge a particular urban act of crossing, the tower one of marking) and articulation of multiple volumes within the coherent whole. At Ligornetto, the bipedal conception bridged within affords the construction of the city. Botta is at one scale exploiting the isolated object in the landscape, while at the larger scale addressing the construction of the city solely as transformation by extension when confronted specifically with the context.

By contrast, the Casa Rotunda and the House at Pregassona (1979) represent architectures of the form of the enclosing wall, configurational rather than spatial, stretching over a structure, sectional development, or the exceptional event, yet retain an empathetic power in their simplicity, particularly in light of the more baroque sensibilities of the following.

The search for the variation in later houses leads into an attempt to modify the pure geometry through the introduction of other recognizable shapes, as in the houses at Breganzona (1984) and Morbio Superiore (1983). The geometries which brought meaningful order to the first conceptions have been reduced to shapes, the powerful formal moves, such as the central capture, reduced to signs of their origins, diminished yet elaborated to a state of willful play. From geometry as the order which transforms nature into culture, we have proceeded to an autonomous geometry, signifying only its own existence and to which all institutions of dwelling submit. That this is a conscious act (seeking the "zero degree" of

Single-family house, Sterino, Ticino, Switzerland, 1980, Mario Botta, architect

Taking Possession of the Site
As the organization of the exhibition reflects, it is necessary to consider the houses separately from the urban projects. The similarities of language and expression mask radically different intentions. The houses represent defiant monuments set in contrast to the landscape, while the urban projects typically prepare (with subtle modifying) the historic pattern. Instead of an architecture which at all scales is about the construction of the city, Botta is at one scale exploiting the isolated object in the landscape, while at the larger scale addressing the construction of the city solely as transformation by extension when confronted specifically with the context.
meaning in spite of his public statements may be evidenced by the recent tendency to include images of the architect in the drawings, completing the self-referential cycle.

The Modification of the City

Two early projects, the school at Morbio Inferiore (1972-1977) and the Artisan Center at Balerna (1977-1979), may be identified as successful explorations of the use of ordering geometries as a means of revealing archetypes of the construction of the city: both sit in sympathetic opposition to the surrounding landscape while prefiguring an urban condition in the construction of a civic space in suburbia. The serial repetition of the constituent elements of the institution works in concert with the unique event - the monument - to create a legible urban analogy.

While using similar formal devices, the recent urban projects are rescued on one level from the conceptual arbitrariness of the recent houses by a respect for the discipline of urban conventions, but they fall as critical works by their unquestioning acceptance of the conventions. In the work in historic urban centers, Botta explores the possibilities in the tension between the abstract geometric order and the traditions of conventional city making, his "prowess of the old and the archaeology of the new." The "new" in this case goes little further than the abstraction of the language and the maintenance of whole geometric figures within the limits of complex urban contexts.

By contrast, in the housing at Pregassona (1985), one of the few urban projects generated out of typological concerns, the urban, street-defining row-house type is subtly transformed through the interlocking of a bridge-like element into an architecture parlante of the interdependence of civic life. Here the geometry is dependent rather than causal through the introduction of the interpenetration of two recognizable types - the bridge and the row house conjoint to form a new, yet familiar order.

The obsession with the inverted ruin or the viaduct which appears in many projects (with sources in Kahn's Venice project of 1969 and Ross's Guatarrarone) emerges as the vehicle for the transformation of the conventional street model for the Urban Housing at Turin (1985). Its genealogy lies in the marriage of the megastructure to the street and superblock. A similar operation to that at Pregassona, the balance has been shifted away from the type which has the possibility to order the streets. As an urban enclave, it unfortunately inherits an urban scale that renders repetition monotonous, streets without definition through the freeing of the ground plane, and housing types of indeterminate lineage. The location of the circular civic space at the exact center reinforces one's suspicions of the reappearance of an arbitrary geometric determinism (plan into shape), an attitude toward the construction of the city truly conceived through narrow "gates of perception."

Surfaces in Light

Each of the power of Botta's work lies in his ability to use common available material such as concrete block, which is appropriate to the modest budgets of many of the clients, in a way that both exploits the modular properties of the block as it may be revealed in light, and its density as an enclosing wall. However, in articulating the order of both his houses and urban works, Botta's use of materials and disregard of structure reifies the emergent self-referential quality. Unlike Kahn, who consulted bricks before using them, Botta is interested in the textural, sensuous qualities of the surface rather than the representational value in the structural properties of masonry, and will support them as necessary (without comment) to achieve the desired abstract play of solid and void. This is merely a recognition of the tendency toward the singularity of meaning of the elements of his palette, rather than a demand for structural expressionism, a direction which is precisely the opposite of what one would expect of repeated investigations in a narrowly focused field: the charge of multiple meanings by the disciplined exploitation of the manifold expressive qualities of the medium.

Many of the qualities for which Botta's work has been praised are well-represented in this exhibition: the desire to "build the site," the relationship to vernacular Ticinese traditions, the tension between contextual relationship, and the identity of the new construction (particularly in historically rich urban settings), and the succinct clarity of the objects. Increasingly, as the body of work expands, one is struck by the seemingly arbitrary appropriation of geometric and formal devices, applied without evidence of a consistent or coherent meaning. The compelling investigations of his best work are diminished by the formulaic reification of the results in subsequent projects. In becoming increasingly reliant on a geometric and formal determinism, the critical argument of the work - central to its position in the "revitalization of modern architecture" - is lost as the generating idea detaches itself from its highest function, the act of the construction of the city. This speaks of the need to return to the generative principles: to push the limits of the vocabulary without resorting to arbitrary elaboration, ordering perception in the service of higher ideals rather than conceiving of order as an end in itself.

Notes
2 Stuart Wouds, wall text of the exhibition.
3 Kenneth Frampton, "Mario Botta and the School of Ticino", Oppositions 14, Fall 1978, p. 2.
5 Perspecta 20, p. 124.
7 Ibid., p. 67.
8 Ibid., p. 69.
9 Frampton, p. 9.
10 Exhibition catalogue, p. 68.