The Architecture of Mario Botta Narrowed Gates in an Expanded Field



Mario Botta

he Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture Program, a series of exhibitions beginning with the work of Leon Krier and Ricardo Bofill, in its new exhibition focuses on the work of Mario Botta. Having opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in November 1986, the exhibition will arrive at the Farish Gallery in Anderson Hall, Rice University, on 3 March. With photographs, models, and drawings, Botta's buildings and projects are well represented and displayed, providing the opportunity to study them as well as one can short of visiting Switzerland. The accompanying text and catalogue by Stuart Wrede elucidate Botta's ideological stance.

In the mid 1970s a group of young architects practicing in the Swiss canton of Ticino began to attract attention for their work, which sought to overlay a modernist formal vocabulary with a distinct regional sensitivity. Powerful objects in the landscape, abstract representations of timeless archetypes formally rooted in the vernacular types of Ticino and expressing their materiality in built form, they offered a fresh vision. At the center of the group was Mario Botta, whose small "disturbing" houses and challenging civic buildings were beginning to appear in the valleys and on the mountainsides in the suburbs of Como and Lugano. After a decade of tremendous production by the still-young architect, a body of work rather than a few isolated projects can be discussed, tracing the development and discovering the limits of a narrowly focused formal investigation. In addition to the houses, larger commissions in nearby urban centers provide a new subject for critical evaluation, placing the generative ideas of the early work in a new light.

The Modern Legacy

In the absence of the perception of a coherent ethos at this stage in our cultural development, contemporary artists, architects, and writers find it necessary to define themselves by their relationship to "modernism." These stances range from reaction, as in "postmodernism," typically by setting up a functionalist or aesthetic straw man as the representative of all aspects of modernism, to an aspiration to continuity, building on threads of inquiry not yet exhausted. While a reaction to an oversimplification tends to generate an impoverished response, the narrow focus on single threads suffers in its privacy as exclusive

William Sherman

With the intention of regrounding architecture in a more profound or inclusive inquiry, a few individuals and schools of thought disavow such limited definitions. They are looking instead within the discipline of architecture as a source, not with the postmodern propensity for images or models, but for its underlying continuities. The essential element which distinguishes this approach from historical revivalism is the reinvigorating of the idea of type as the manifestation of archetypes of human interaction, with their common timeless ideal in the construction of the city as a place of public social interaction. The means for the reconnection of type and archetype is geometry, the primary vehicle by which man orders his perception. While this represents an approach fraught with potential, it also has its perils, negotiating a fine line between geometry as the means to an end and geometry as an end in itself.

In contrast to the previous Hines exhibitions, Botta's work is introduced as representing the "revitalization of modern architecture." That phrase and the work chosen to illustrate it demand definition. The buildings clearly grow out of a modernist legacy, reflecting Botta's admitted debt to his mentors: Louis Kahn, Le Corbusier, and Carlo Scarpa. The ideological foundation of the work of Botta and the Ticinese School (including Tita Carloni, Aurelio Galfetti, Ivano Gianola, Flora Ruchat, Luigi Snozzi, and Ivo Trumpy) have often been traced to the Italian Neo-Rationalist Tendenza3, 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 archeological obsession with the forms of his predecessors, drawing on characteristic details and plan forms. On another level, at least in the terms in which he discusses his work, the legacy of his masters is present ideologically 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 invention, 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 our profession. These profound exigencies, the need for memory, the need for archaic suggestions, the need for mythic forms, the need for the confrontation between man and cosmic values, the need for the great ideas of the past, are all, in fact, the real motivators which have sustained the need for expression and testimony in every epoch. 4

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 recapture, via the notion of dwelling, the initial values for which the dwelling was built. The dwelling as the repository of mankind must offer a micro-climate of 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 consumeroriented architecture, through the proposal of lavish artificial paradises. ⁵

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

For one attempting such lofty goals as those described above, Botta builds from a minimal palette: an obsession with geometric order as shapes in plan and elevation, as extruded form in three dimensions, an abstract interplay of solid and void (masonry and glass), and introducing a precarious tension to the enclosing wall in its erosion as an inverted ruin or its disjuncture as 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 pure 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"6). 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 Turin, 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 increasingly singular quality of the buildings themselves (in more ways than the stronger symmetries noted in Wrede's accompanying 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.



Single-family house, Stavio, Ticino, Switzerland,

Taking Possession of the Site

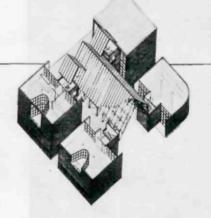
As the organization of the exhibition reflects, it is necessary to consider the houses separately from the urban projects. The similarities of language and expression mask radically different intentions. The houses represent defiant monuments set in contrast to the landscape, while the urban projects typically support (while subtly modifying) the historic pattern. Instead of an architecture which at all scales is about the construction of the city, Botta is at one scale exploring 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 that

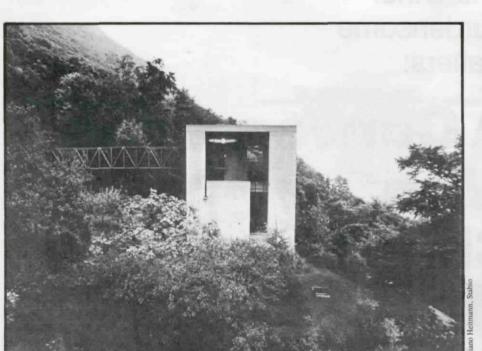
The early houses at St. Riva Vitale (1973) and Ligornetto (1976) also achieve this dual role, the first in its dynamic sectional relationship to the site (the making of the bridge a primary urban act of crossing, the tower one of marking) and articulation of multiple volumes within the coherent whole. At Ligornetto, the bipartite conception bridged within affords a simultaneous unity and discontinuity, as well as its legibility as a fragment of an urban wall.

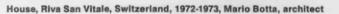
By contrast, the Casa Rotunda and the House at Pregassona (1979) represent architectures of the form of the enclosing wall, configurational rather than spatial, untensioned by structure, sectional development, or the exceptional event, yet retain an empathetic power in their simplicity, particularly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

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 rupture, 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

Right: Artisan Center, Balerna, Switzerland, 1977-1979, Mario Botta, architect. Far right: House, Breganzona, Switzerland, 1984, Mario Botta, architect

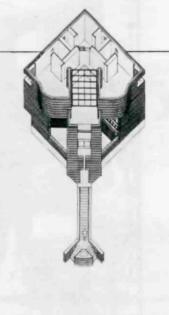


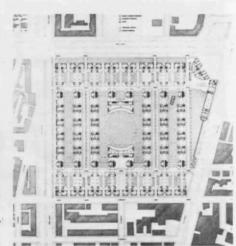






Administration and commercial building, Lugano, Switzerland, 1981, Mario Botta, architect

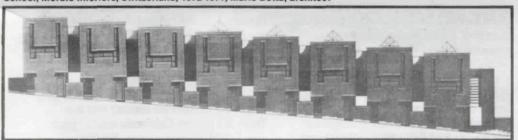




Urban Housing, Turin, Italy, ground floor plan, 1985, Mario Botta, architect



School, Morbio Inferiore, Switzerland, 1972-1977, Mario Botta, architect



Row Housing, Pregassona, Switzerland, 1985, Mario Botta, architect

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 fail 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 "newness of the old and the archaeology of the new."8 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.

This approach, in contrast to his early work, represents a movement away from the ideology of the Tendenza: substituting geometry for analogy and form for type. The geometries represent values unto themselves in defining "type" in terms of shape: round house, triangular house, square house with circle. As opposed to a typological expression of the underlying orders of our cultural life, Botta's recent work is approaching a disciplined archeology of the forms of recent cultures. In moving away from the idea of type - by which the architecture may connect to the culture and its history, according to the precepts of the Tendenza and into the abstract manipulation of pure forms within traditional urban conventions, Botta is indeed continuing a legacy of modern architecture, but at the expense of the critical power of the sources of his early work.

This evolution is evident in the commercial projects: the State Bank at Fribourg (1983), the office buildings in Lugano (1985, 1986), and the Gallery in Tokyo (1985). All are extremely wellbehaved in respecting the continuity of the urban fabric while retaining a geometric purity. Skillful use is made of the geometry to articulate the planarity of the façade (Tokyo, Library at Villeurbaine), the monumental imperative of the corner, or the repetitive nature of the urban wall. A closer look at the plans, however, reveals the extent to which geometry controls, instead of reveals, relegating the perceptual and occupational experience to one of dependency rather than causality.

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 conjoin 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 Rossi's Gallaratese9) 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 inhuman 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 snape), an attitude toward the construction of the city truly conceived through narrow "gates of perception."

Surfaces in Light

Much 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 10 reinforces 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 wellrepresented in this exhibition: the desire to "build the site," the relationship to vernacular Ticinese traditions, the tension between contextural 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, however, 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 reapplication 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

- 1 Mario Botta in interview with Livio Dimitriu, Perspecta 20, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1983, p.
- 2 Stuart Wrede, wall text of the exhibition.
- 3 Kenneth Frampton, "Mario Botta and the School of Ticino", Oppositions 14, Fall 1978, p. 2.
- 4 Mario Botta in interview with Stuart Wrede in exhibition catalogue, Mario Botta, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1986, p. 67.
- 5 Perspecta 20, p. 124.
- 6 George Kubler, The Shape of Time, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962, p. 124.
- 7 Ibid., p. 67.
- 8 Ibid., p. 69.
- 9 Frampton, p. 9. 10 Exhibition catalogue, p. 68