Amidst the tall mountains and shallow fields of Ticino, Switzerland exist single-family homes that are characterized by their unique appearance. Bold and impressive in form, the houses embody the stylistic elements of modernity while paying tribute to the architects that established them.

INTERVIEW BY RYAN YOON
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“MEN LIVE IN A SPACE THAT SHAPES THEIR ACTIVITIES DURING THE DAY AND ALLOWS A CONSTANT RELATION (BY DAY AND BY NIGHT) WITH THE SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT.”

Window cutouts manipulate light in a fashion that is similar to the work of Louis Kahn, while simple, geometric shapes echo the daring edifices of Le Corbusier. The houses exhibit a seemingly effortless harmony between the built and natural environments in a manner that celebrates the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

While numerous architects can testify that the masters of the modern movement have inspired them, a limited number have actually had the privilege of benefitting directly from their masters’ teachings.

Swiss architect Mario Botta, who designed the Ticino houses, is one of the lucky few who had this learning opportunity.

Taught by Carlo Scarpa and mentored by Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn, Botta clearly embraced the influence of these masters in his early work. However, he experimented with their methods and eventually established his own approach to architecture that has rendered him unique in his own right. He has since won numerous awards, and has been praised by many as a master synonymous to the architects that preceded him.

In Ticino, the surrounding environment is the Swiss landscape; and through the design of his early houses, Botta set the stage for an architectural relationship with nature that will undoubtedly prevail for the remainder of his career.

In his 1971 and 1976 designs of single-family homes in Riva San Vitale and Ligornetto, Ticino, Botta establishes this relationship with nature through geometric form. Here, he attempts to diffusae the barrier created by the walls of a structure in order to establish a sense of continuity between the indoor and outdoor spaces. He says, "The house itself indicates a sort of limit, a wall beyond which lies the open countryside. A powerful geometry simplifies the dialect between the man-made product and the forms of the surrounding nature." At Riva San Vitale, the home is a solid vertical tower that mimics the monumentality of the mountains around it. Geometric voids on the façade allow natural light to enter the home, while a suspended metal bridge connects the entrance of the freestanding home to the landscape adjacent to it. The home in Ligornetto contains similar geometric voids, with a long and narrow form that is echoed by the horizontal lines on its surface.
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Underneath these strong forms exist core elements that embrace the concept of family. Botta’s Ticino houses encourage a healthy family dynamic while reinforcing the values that are central to domestic relationships. They are a haven for families where individuals can spend time together and create memories while recovering from their everyday lives. Their visual strength inspires strength in the families that inhabit them. Likewise, their connection to the landscape allows families to experience the beauty, richness, health, and clarity that can accompany an experience with nature.

This interest in geometry and passion for the natural landscape persevered in the large majority of Botta’s ensuing work. Although he has completed several projects in Switzerland, he has also accepted commissions in Italy, South Korea, Germany, Tokyo, San Francisco, North Carolina, and more. He has pushed beyond the concept of the single-family house and has applied his exquisite use of geometry in museums, libraries, churches, bus stations, casinos, and office buildings worldwide. To him, simplicity is the key to architectural impact; and while his geometric forms challenge the clean lines of conventional modernism, they convey strength through their minimalism, monumentality; and overall lack of excessive ornament and décor. As Botta explains, “I believe that the simpler a space, the stronger it is.”
This geometric strength is immediately visible in the 1992 Church of San Giovanni Battista in Mogno, Switzerland. Its exquisite design of marble and granite, consists of a cylindrical shape sliced diagonally across the center. Inside, endless lines alternate between black and white in color, creating checkerboard patterns and an optical illusion of endless diminishing space. Light creeps in through the roof, illuminating a crucifix that sits monumentally above the altar. Constructed on a site where a religious structure was destroyed by an avalanche, Botta was determined to achieve a connection between the meaningful landscape and his new edifice. As he explains, "The approach to this project was... the fruit of a meditation upon the relationship between the building, as an expression of man’s daily labor and his presence on the land, and the boundless power of nature."

Strong, geometric, and sensitive to its landscape, the Church of San Giovanni Battista exhibits the distinct architectural approach that has become characteristic of Botta’s work.

In 2009, Botta completed the design of the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art in Charlotte, North Carolina. One of his few commissions in the United States, the museum houses the work of artists including Picasso and Andy Warhol. Through its rectangular floor plan and projecting roofline, the museum conforms to Botta’s signature play between geometric figures and cutout voids. Over the course of 2014, an exhibition titled, “Mario Botta: Architecture and Memory”, occupied a portion of the museum, celebrating the achievements of the architect through a collection of wooden models, sketches, and photographs.

In addition to his architecture, Botta works as a professor at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, Switzerland. Founded in 1996 by Botta himself, the position has allowed him to inspire a new generation of architects in a fashion that mimics his own experience learning from Scarpa, Le Corbusier, and Kahn. Here, Botta seeks to encourage in his students the confidence and skills necessary to cope with the challenges of the profession, just as he was taught some fifty years ago.

From the permanence of his designs to the influence of his teachings, Botta’s work will continue to challenge modernity in new and exciting ways, while connecting families to the natural environment through unique geometric designs. The following interview discusses elements of his background, commissions, influences, and inspiration; Botta emphasizes, “It is necessary to live one’s job as a passion.”

Shannon Moore: You designed your first building when you were only a teenager. Can you explain when your passion for architecture first emerged, how it developed, and what inspired you to begin working at such a young age?

Mario Botta: At the end of primary school, at 15 years of age, I did not want to continue my studies. I saw school as an abstract world, distant from the problems of life. So, I decided to learn a job and I worked as a draughtsman apprentice with an architectural practice in Lugano. After a few months, I matured the conviction that this job could also be my passion. To see two lines transform into a real wall kindled my enthusiasm and my passion for architecture. From that moment, everything became so easy and purposeful that, at the end of the apprenticeship, I resumed my studies at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia. In the meantime, I was continuing my first experiments in the design and the construction of small buildings.

Shannon Moore: One of your first designs was a family house in Ticino, Switzerland. What brought about this design, and why did you want to design a house for a family? Have you completed any residential projects since then?

Mario Botta: Some friends, who knew my passion for architecture, asked me to design their house. That was when it started the successful series of single-family houses I built in Ticino.

Shannon Moore: In your opinion, what role does family play in the experience of a structure? Was the concept of family interpreted in your early Ticino designs? Does family influence the design of a space?

Mario Botta: The idea of the house has been one of the distinctive themes of architecture over the centuries. Men live in a space that shapes their activities during the day and allows a constant relation (by day and by night) with the surrounding environment: it is a "full-time" space where man recovers himself and the strength to cope with the upcoming days. From this interpretation, it is obvious that the concept of family has a key role in the planning of a house where, sometimes, different generations must live.

Shannon Moore: You have worked with Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn, and it is believed that you have been greatly influenced by their work. What role, if any, did these modern masters have on your development as an architect?
Museum of Modern Art in Charlotte, North Carolina, USA, photography by Enrico Cano
Petra winery in Suvereto, Italy (1999-2003), photography by Enrico Cano
The great masters of the Modern Movement — Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, and Carlo Scarpa (my professor in Venice) — gave me the extraordinary opportunity to experience their hopes. They were epic characters, who witnessed the changes in the 20th century culture, who fostered the achievements of the Avant-Gardes and placed themselves in the wake of the new revolutions, the ones of the electronics and of the globalized world. Their teachings and their ethical behavior have profoundly influenced my choice to undertake this extraordinary job that transforms a condition of nature into a condition of culture.

Many of your designs are expressive, and are characterized by strong and unique geometric shapes. What is the role of geometry in your work? What inspired this trademark, and does it have a deeper, underlying meaning?

Indeed they are. I love to use primary and simple geometric shapes. I think geometry is an effective tool to control the effects of light within the spaces. Besides, primary shapes can be easily read even from limited points of view: the single part allows to recognize the whole. A powerful geometry simplifies the dialectical relation between the man-made product and the forms of the surrounding nature. The quality of the spatial relation often originates from this contrast (or comparison). Moreover, geometry is an extraordinary tool to the architectural composition as it enables to release the tectonic forces to the ground. The overriding meaning of geometry is rather instrumental than symbolic.

Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn are both known for their strong, geometric houses, such as “Villa La Roche” (Corbusier) and “Esherick House” (Kahn). Did their work on residential or family projects inspire you? Did you embody any of their residential values in your own work?

Many of your designs are also rooted in religion. Your project for the Church of San Giovanni Battista in Mogno, Switzerland, is equally expressive of your geometrical style and religious influence. Why do you enjoy designing religious structures, and what do they mean to you? In your opinion, how does architecture influence the experience of faith or the practice of religion?

Architecture bears in itself the idea of spirituality. It is a discipline that addresses the spirit and the hopes of man. My experience with the sacred spaces led me to recognize and to deepen the primary aspects of the architectural creation — the concept of gravity, the light as a generator of space, the threshold as the space of transition between the inside and the outside, the walls as limits but also as keys to the readings of the infinite. For this reason, I believe that the simpler a space, the stronger it is, especially compared to the complexity of other contemporary issues. Architecture cannot influence the religious practice but it can promote a contemplative attitude.

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The work I’m more interested in is always the next one. I see architecture as a job, but also as a service the architect offers to society. I’d like to begin anew every project, but, above all, I’d like the possibility (also impossible) to verify more solutions and their relation with the context. What I like about architecture is, more than the project, the capacity of entering the recesses of the real (its geographical, social, economic, and political aspects). The completed work enriches the effort of those who took part in its realization while the unrealized work conveys more power than the simple project.
SM: Your commissions outside of Europe and Asia are very limited. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is one of your only commissions in the United States. Why have you engaged in so few projects on the Western side of the world? Are there any cities that you would like to design for that you haven't already?

MB: In the USA, I have recently built the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art in Charlotte, North Carolina. But, it is true that the majority of my work is in Europe and, in the last years, Asia. A wound, and at the same time, mysterious prerequisite of the job of the architect is the fact that he cannot choose what and where to build. It is the society that, often incomprehensibly gives him or her the opportunity to deal with the most different themes: the architect can only decide whether to accept or to refuse the commissions. My curiosity towards new themes pushed me to work in unknown places. Over the last years, I have been working on many projects in China and Korea: the LASA University Campus in Shenyang, the library and the museum of the Tonghua University in Beijing, a cathedral in Namyang, another museum in Nanochang...

SM: Your architecture exhibits a modern aesthetic in a unique way: it utilizes brick and concrete as opposed to the common industrial glass and steel. What inspired the use of this material? What drew you to work with natural materials such as stone, bricks, concrete, and also the tight comparison of different materials within the spaces.

MB: I like to use natural materials (stone, bricks, concrete) and give them expressive forms that show their nature and potential. Besides, the work of architecture always conveys the idea of gravity (for example the fact that the weights can be released to the ground). The inevitable conclusion is that architecture expresses strength and establishes a dialogue with Mother Earth. I like to think that architecture grows from the earth rather than stands on it. The stone or brick walls contrast very well with the glass and steel surfaces. Architecture is both the contrast between the man-shaped environment and the natural one, and also the tight comparison of different materials within the spaces.

SM: You have won numerous awards, have been internationally celebrated and also the tight comparison of different materials within the spaces. MB: Throughout the 50 years of my career, I have taken the chances I was offered. In most cases, I could not choose what to design, but I have always tried to do my best. A little known prerogative of my job is that the architect doesn't choose personally what to do but has to follow the clients' requests. He bears the responsibility for the accomplishment of the work. I'd like to cope with themes that, apart from the technical and functional requirements, give the architect expressive liberty: I think of the scared spaces, the exhibition spaces, the libraries (cases of memories), and, in general, the collective buildings for the welfare and the cultural improvement of men. In this period, I'm working extensively in China.

SM: What do you see as crucial to the future of architecture? Are there any cities that you would like to design for that you haven't already?

MB: The teaching in the schools of architecture is, above all, an extraordinary occasion to learn. We can only offer some decades of practice, but the young students have on their side the hope of life. In the young people, I see the enthusiasm, the passion, and the commitment necessary to cope with the increasing difficulties of a job that nonetheless, can still produce emotions. The course of study at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio focuses on finding the problems rather than the solutions; a school where people should find a new centrality without being overwhelmed by the technical and functional requirements.

SM: What do you hope to achieve in the upcoming years? Are there any particular projects that you are excited to complete, or commissions in new cities that you are willing to discuss?

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