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Mario Botta, Ticino architect

# Prophet, except at home

There are more than 1,200 publications on the Ticino architect, Mario Botta, ranging from technical books, through special editions of magazines to bulky volumes of pictures, not counting the thousands of newspaper articles dealing with him and his work. In Japan and the USA, for example, hardly any other European architect is now so fully treated and discussed at the architecture faculties. Ever since the Museum of Modern Art in New York showed Botta's complete works at the end of 1987, this Italian-Swiss architect could, if he wished, spend the rest of his life travelling from lecture to lecture.

## Designing against the stream

But Mario Botta does not want only to talk about what he thinks, what he plans to do and what he has built, but he also wants to go on building. «If I were to realise everything I have in my head, I would have to live to be 200 years old», he said recently.

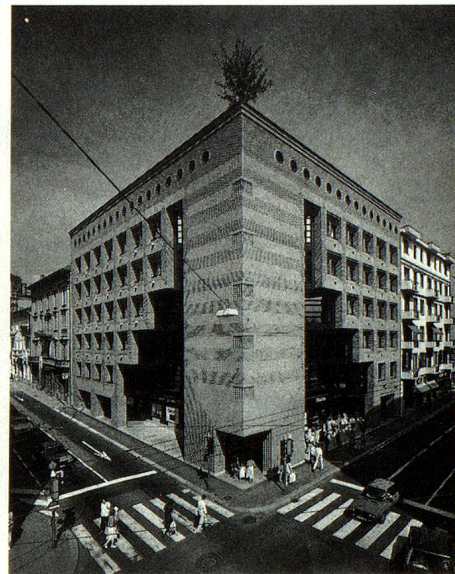
If, however, one compares this publicity fanfare and the spate of «Botta literature» with the buildings that the architect has actually built, they look like a desperate little accumulation of indeed beautiful but rather lost individual properties. This has very

much to do with the fact that Botta – like a few other Ticino architects (Snozzi, Galfetti, Carloni, Gianola and others) – has already been designing «against the stream» for more than twenty years – buildings very often far removed from the reach-me-down constructions with which large parts of Switzerland have been plastered.

One has already tried to pigeonhole the buildings of these Ticino architects as «new Ticino architecture» but had to realise that this led nowhere because they have nothing in common that could be defined as a particular «style» or as a specific «architectural school». In the end, all they have in common is the will to struggle against bleak unimaginativeness and the architectonic line of least resistance. They have over the last three decades entered countless architectural competitions (Lausanne Polytechnic, Zurich main station and other large projects) and have failed to qualify, unwept and unsung; in many cases because they at once intimated that the project specifications were all wrong, and they designed something other than expected.

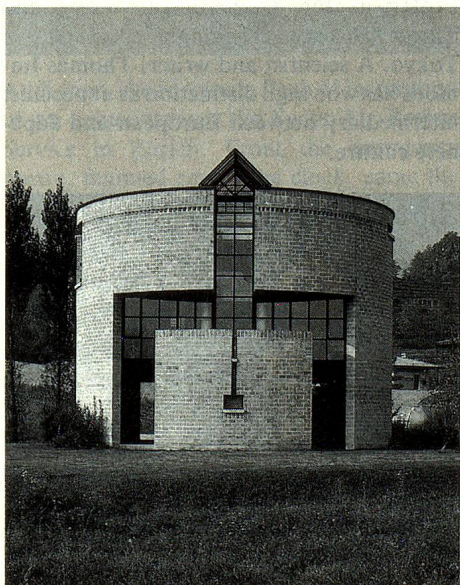
## Not to create illusions

Even Mario Botta, the world-famed wunderkind among these architects has worked very hard for the waste paper basket. As if to confirm the old adage that a prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, his project for rebuilding the old Ticino state bank was only recently turned down. Although Botta had indeed observed the stipulation that the old facade on the Piazza Collegiata be preserved, he interpreted it in a highly individual, self-willed manner. Instead of the required refurbishment – new wine in old bottles – he left the facade intact only as a shell perforated with open windows and placed an entirely new rotunda in the middle of the empty, hollowed-out building. By this, he wanted to arouse awareness that to preserve facades makes no sense if this be done merely for aesthetic reasons, just for the look of the thing, when, within such facades a completely new life takes place that has nothing to do with the original substance of the building. Thus, with the trick of the «see-through» facade, behind which the new building is visible, he wanted to show quite clearly that although



The «Ransila I» building in Lugano which houses, among others, the Union Bank of Switzerland. (Photo: A. Flammer)

old and new can indeed be made to adapt to each other, one should not create delusions. Botta has always aimed at building *a place* and not *at a place*. He is an impassioned opponent of an architecture of mere adaptation to the countryside or to an existing order (or disorder). Of course, a prerequisite for this is that the newly-emerging architecture shall be «strong» and shall emphasise certain features, just as in earlier times the church towers rising above the roofs of the houses focused the attention in a landscape. «Good architecture», he says, «has never yet conformed to an earlier cultural balance but has always set itself against such, in favour of a new»; indeed,



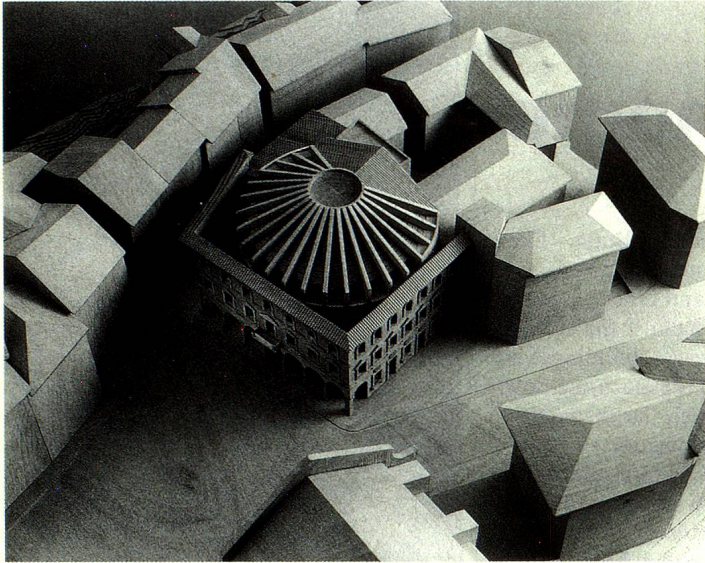
The world-famous Casa Rotonda in Stabio. (Photo: L. Bianda)

## Consulting

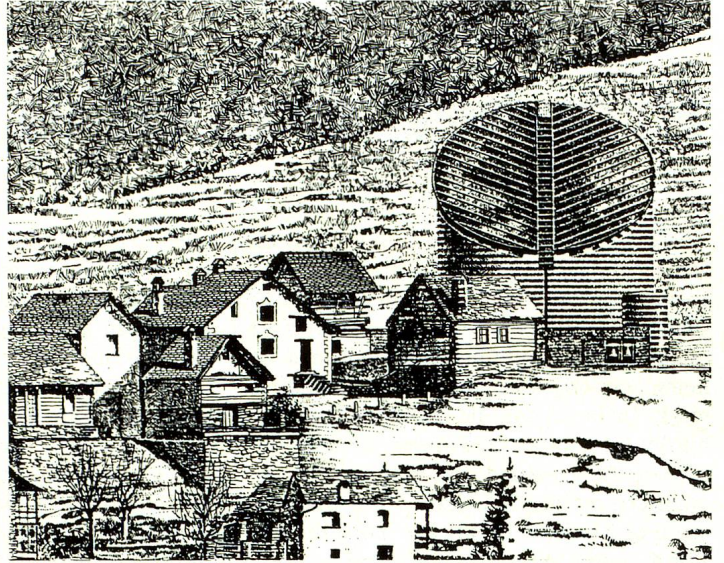
on the division  
of estates according to Swiss  
inheritance law:  
Inventory, financial plan,  
estate division contract,  
powers of attorney,  
taxes, company law



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*A project rejected: the Staatsbank in Bellinzona.*



*Botta's controversial design for a church in Mogno at the far end of Valle Maggia.*

one of his own most famous works, the Casa Rotunda, stands in the middle of a conventional housing estate on the outskirts of Stabio, south of Lugano.

#### Row about a church

This radical way of thinking became even plainer in the case of a project for a new church in Mogno, a hamlet in the remote Val Lavizzara. In April 1987, a landslide destroyed the old part of the tiny village which included the church. Architect Botta offered to design a new church for Mogno, free of charge. Great enthusiasm – until the

plans were submitted. The cross-sectional ellipse, whose roof becomes a circle, triggered violent defensive reactions. The opponents, including very many inhabitants of the valley, took up the cudgels against this «giant screw» which would ruin the beautiful little alpine village. Others joined forces with them, especially those objectors who, although they had nothing against Botta's architecture, feared that Mogno would become a sort of architectural place of pilgrimage that would entice visitors (and their cars) up into the narrow valley. Feelings have still not calmed down. Whether the church will ever be built remains written in the stars. For the prophet in his own country...

*Gerardo Zanetti*

be sold at the favourable overall price of SFr. 444.– for the cloth-bound edition and SFr. 744.– for the de luxe edition. The work can be obtained through the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad.

#### Japan-Swiss honoured

Thomas Immoos, member of the Bethlehem Missionary Society at Immensee, wins the 1988 Culture Prize of the Canton of Schwyz. Born in 1918, he studied theology and philosophy. In 1962 he was appointed Professor for German Literature and Theatre History at the Sophia University in Tokyo. A scientist and writer, Thomas Immoos has won high distinction as a specialist intermediary between European and Japanese culture.

## Telegrams

■ The Swiss-born architect, *Bernard Tschumi*, has been appointed head of the architecture department at Columbia University in New York.

■ Appenzell novelty: the two half-cantons now have a *Biblio-Bahn*. This library-in-a-railway-carriage houses a public library containing a good 2,000 books, and every week makes stops of each half a day in different communes.

■ The well-known Swiss character actor *Sigfrid Steiner*, who lived in W. Germany, died in Munich at the end of March.

#### Ars Helvetica

Towards the end of 1987 the first two volumes of a series of out-of-the-ordinary art books came out: «ARS HELVETICA. The Visual Culture of Switzerland», a comprehensive portrayal of Swiss art from its beginnings to the present day (twelve volumes and an index volume). Under the patronage of former Federal Councillor Alphons Egli, the Pro Helvetia cultural foundation initiated the publication of this fundamental work as a «birthday present» for the 700 years of existence of the Swiss Confederation. The heavy subsidy allows the work to

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