

Stone, Light, Mountains: Mario Botta's Churches In Ticino, Switzerland

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"The chapel is a stone nail in the mountain. It was born of the need of man to possess the mountain" (Botta in Dupre 2001: 12)¹

Mario Botta describes his mountainous architecture as influenced by "two points of interaction: the exterior with the landscape; the interior with the domestic".² In this study I examine how his design of two churches in Ticino, Switzerland addresses the dissonance between the stoic exteriors of the mountains and the touch of human scale inviting the worshipers to their essential solitude. I analyze Botta's mountainous churches of the Chapel of St. Mary of the Angels, built in Monte Tamaro, 1990 -1996 (Fig. 1); and the San Giovanni Battista Church, Built in Mogno, 1992-1998 (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Mario Botta's Chapel of St. Mary of the Angels, Monte Tamaro, Switzerland



Fig. 2: Mario Botta's Church of San Giovanni Battista, Mogno, Switzerland (1992-1998)

The two churches exemplify the challenges of designing a house of worship for small parishes within breathtaking nature. The first challenge addresses the design solutions in the context of remote areas in the Alps Mountains. These locations evoke in themselves a spiritual experience, and the issue is how architecture contributes to the desired spiritual solitude. Second, both buildings were built from local stones linking them to their specific sites, expressing monumental qualities, and adhering to the spiritual qualities of the space: "Although the landscape is immense, the insertion of even a small object changes the scenery"³. This solution brings with it the idea of architecture as transforming the landscape that in turns stimulates the spirit of man. Third, in each of the churches light is treated to enhance spiritual transcendence and to illustrate the divine presence. Furthermore, these churches may be perceived as part of the continuous attempt of humans to build their cosmos pillars from stone as a sacred link between earth and heaven, and as an expression of possessing the mountain.

Mountains

Mountains are perceived as Gods' dwelling and as a spot where the sacred manifests itself: "Now Mount Sinai was altogether in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly" (Exodus 19, 18). Moreover, the echoes of the surrounding mountains are perceived as the voices of spirits⁴. These spiritual experiences inspire humans to erect their own 'sacred mountains'. See for example, the story of Jacob who set the stone up as a pillar and poured oil on its top to establish a sacred vertical axis (Genesis 28:18). These sacred structures often imitate in stone the form of mountains, or are built on top of a mountain.

Botta's two churches are a good example for both of these approaches. The chapel in Monte Tamaro stands on top of the mountain and "detaches' itself from the mountain to form a new horizon, the starting point of an ideal viaduct"⁵. The external horizontal axis of this chapel creates a sacred path offering new glimpse of the mountains as a continuation of the worshiper pilgrimage infinite path for meditation and thought⁶. Botta claims, that building the chapel was a sign of man in the landscape encompassing "the tension between man and nature"⁷. The Church in Mogno was constructed as a vertical "pillar" becoming the focal point of the valley's skyline, where two points in the valley are bridged to transform the landscape. This vertical axis expresses the spiritual *axis mundi* of the village, standing "as a bulwark for the village, in defiance of the mountain"⁸. Indeed the church in Mogno was built in a place of avalanche that caused death and loss. The location requested by the residents of the village who said, "We want to construct a new church because there used to be a church here"⁹. Thus, the driving force underlying the project was maintaining the collective memory of the community. Botta's design "brings with it not only the geography, but also the memory, the culture, the history of that very place"¹⁰.

Stone

The use of locally quarried stones in the design of these churches expresses the specificity of the place as well as permanence and human longings for eternity¹¹. Stone is part of the layers and colors of earth as shaped by winds and tide and reveals earth sacredness¹². In a poetic way stone is a gift of nature that illustrates the soul of the earth¹³. Botta believes that putting stone on earth is a sacred act of architecture and signifies the possession of the earth. This act "strives to evoke the deepest values suggested by the language of stones. Their symbolic and metaphoric meaning becomes an extraordinarily current message that involves the architect beyond the religious sphere"¹⁴.

The chapel in Monte Tamaro is constructed from reinforced concrete faced with rusticated porphyry (Fig. 1). This stone façade makes the chapel blend into the rocks of the mountain and transforms the mountain's peak into a new height. Botta introduces us to a temporal visual experience with an outdoor procession on top of the chapel/the mountain. The stone of this chapel is facing the exterior only; the interior concrete is painted black and white to enhance the interplay of light and shadow and to create an intimate place to showcase contemporary liturgical art (Fig. 3). Plastering the walls for displaying art resembles the fresco chapels in history.



Fig. 3: Interior of Botta's Chapel of St. Mary of the Angels, Monte Tamaro

In contrast, the church in Mogno is built of alternating courses of gray Riveo granite and white Peccia marble outside and inside that reminds us of some of Tuscan Romanesque cathedrals (Fig. 4). As such it continues a long history of church construction and creates a statement of permanence. The stone in this church demonstrates Botta's mass architecture and enhances the transformation of the geometry of the building from a square plan to ellipse and then to a circle.



Fig. 4: Natural light in Mario Botta's Church of San Giovanni Battista, Mogno

Light

While stone construction is a sacred act of architecture representing earth and permanence, light becomes the soul of this act by introducing heaven. Eliade stated: "Even before any religious values have been set upon the sky it reveals its transcendence. The sky symbolizes transcendence, power and changelessness simply by being there. It exists because it is high, infinite, immovable, powerful"¹⁵. Light enhances the meaning of materials, forms, lines, and colors and beautifies the building. The visual experience in sacred settings contributes to the connection of the human with a higher order of things, with the essential, and with the immutable truth¹⁶. The heavenly light in sacred settings illustrates the divine presence and is perceived as an attempt to enrich the inner spiritual experience of God as Light¹⁷. This in turn fulfills human's desire to be closer to the Divine. Moreover, light creates the temporal ambience of the sacred since it is "the visual sign of the relationship that exists between the architectural work and the cosmic values of the surroundings"¹⁸.

Interestingly, Botta treated this relation of light to the cosmos differently in the two churches. The chapel at Monte Tamaro, which is located below the outdoor crucifix, under the walkway on top of the mountain, is dimly lit like a grotto. Natural light penetrates through very small windows in the bottom of the circular sidewalls and through slits from a skylight. This light effect and the space's strong linear path draw our attention to the artwork at the apse (Fig. 3), and diminish the invitation for meditation inside a protective 'cave' in the mountains.

In the Mogno church Botta introduced the ever-changing patterns of light and the relation to the cosmos through a circular glass roof (Fig. 4). The sky opens up beyond the glass roof and brings the worshiper closer to the Divine. Two granite buttresses pierce the envelope of the building, arch over the interior and create an axis that aligns with the nave's axis of the destroyed historic church. The light coming from above highlights this connection to the past and eternity. It also demonstrates Botta's transformational geometry in stone. This in turn creates interplay of stone layout, natural light and shadows (Fig. 4). In this church Botta used light to capture the passage of time and establish our relationship with the solar, seasonal cycles, and the eternal.

Discussion

From my visits to the two churches and the literature review of his work, it seems to me that Mario Botta was not consistent in solving the dissonance between the majestic landscape of the mountains and his church architecture. His design of the exterior of the Monte Tamaro chapel stemmed from the surrounding mountains, and is thoroughly site specific. This design is grand as the mountains and follows Botta's claim that the landscape dictates his architectural solutions. However, the design of the chapel's interior is alienated from the specific place and has more relation to the art display than to the site. While the chapel's exterior evokes spirituality and a feeling of 'Oh', the interior seems to be a small art gallery rather than a sacred space. Though, I can see how the liturgical symbols of the artwork by Enzo Cucchi (guided by Padre Pozzi) may lift the human spirit. Still, this artwork does not necessarily transcend the interior space.

Although the church in Mogno serves as the focal point of the village and resembles some lines of the background mountains, the building does not seem to rise from the earth and represent the site specifics. Indeed, the cylinder bulky design became Botta's unique style, which he used in other projects in different locations. However, this church's interior is the powerful part of the design. The work of stone, the temporal changes of light that fall on the stone, the transformation of the shape, the size and proportion, and the link to the sky - all create a sacred permanent space that anchors the church to its place. The space becomes a shelter for spiritual meditation and solitary, uplifting the spirit of the worshiper and the visitor. It brings them to experience the inner light combined with the outer light that pours into the church through the glass roof.

In summary, Botta's mountainous churches and their details in stone and light illustrate a differentiated design approach to sacred architecture. The experience of the spiritual transcendence between the sacred building and nature-God's creation is at times associated with the exterior (the Chapel at Monte Tamaro) and at times is the interior (the church in Mogno).

Notes and References

- ¹ Interview with Mario Botta by Dupre, Judith (2001) in her book *Churches*. Trans. New York, Harper Collins; pp. 8-12.
- ² *Ibid*; p. 15.
- ³ *Ibid*; p. 12-13
- ⁴ Hale, Elizabeth (2007) *Sacred Space, Sacred Sound*. Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House.
- ⁵ Botta, Mario in http://www.botta.ch/Page/Sa%201996_188_Tamaro_en.php
- ⁶ You can reach the chapel located 5141 feet above sea level by cable car or by a one and a half hour journey on foot.
- ⁷ Interview with Mario Botta by Dupre, Judith (2001), p12.
- ⁸ Botta, Mario in http://www.botta.ch/Page/Sa%201998_113_Mogno_en.php
- ⁹ Interview with Mario Botta by Dupre, Judith (2001) in her book *Churches*. Trans. New York, Harper Collins; pp. 12-13
- ¹⁰ Interview with Mario Botta by Dupre, Judith (2001) in her book *Churches*. Trans. New York, Harper Collins; pp. 8-12
- ¹¹ In Catholicism, the need for a permanent sacred building allows only stone houses of worship to be consecrated by the higher levels of clergy.
- ¹² Tabb, Phillip (2007) 'Semantic Cosmologies of Ronchamp and Rothko Chapel' in Eynaten, K. C., Hutchins Kate, and Don Quaintance (eds.) *Not Seen: Search for Understanding: The Rothko Chapel Art Series*. Houston, TX: A Rothko Chapel Book, pp. 89-99.
- ¹³ Wright, Frank Lloyd (1928) 'In the Cause of Architecture III: The Meaning of Materials - Stone', *Architectural Record* 63, no.4 (April 1928): 350-356
- ¹⁴ Botta Mario (2005) *architetture del sacro: prayers in stone*. Bologna : Compositori. p.191.
- ¹⁵ Eliade, Mircea (1958/1996) *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, New York, NY: Sheed and Ward Inc. 1996 edition published by University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska.
- ¹⁶ Geva, Anat (2011) *Frank Lloyd Wright's Sacred Architecture: Faith, Form, and Building Technology*. London: Routledge (forthcoming in September)
- ¹⁷ Geva, Anat. 2009. "Light and Darkness in Sacred Settings." *2A – Architecture and Art Magazine*. Autumn 2009 Quarterly 12: 56-59.
- ¹⁸ Mrio Botta (2003) in Gabriele Cappellato (ed.) *Mario Botta: Light and Gravity, Architecture 1993-2003*. Munich, Germany: Prestel.