



Mario Botta – Sacral Spaces

19 March to 31 May 2019

- Press tour:** Monday, 18 March 2019, 10am
- Speakers:** Mario Botta, Adolph Stiller
- Official opening:** Monday, 18 March 2019, 6.00pm (by invitation only)
- Curator:** Adolph Stiller
- Venue:** Ringturm Exhibition Centre
Schottenring 30, 1010 Vienna
- Opening hours:** Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)
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WIENER STÄDTISCHE
VERSICHERUNGSVEREIN

Premiere at the Ringturm: as part of its Architektur im Ringturm series, Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein is staging the first comprehensive exhibition focusing on Mario Botta to be held in the German-speaking countries.

Mario Botta was one of the key figures behind “new Ticino architecture” in the 1970s. It was in the canton of Ticino – Switzerland’s Mediterranean soul – that Botta made his first foray into ecclesiastical architecture, with the construction of a small chapel at the Bigorio Capuchin monastery. Although still a student in Venice at this point, Botta’s preference for materials such as stone, brick and concrete – as well as clear forms with interrupted lines – was already in evidence, and has endured to this day.

Born in 1943 in Mendrisio in the Swiss canton of Ticino, Botta has designed more than 100 structures around the world over the past five decades – including a family home in Switzerland, libraries in Dortmund and Beijing, banks in Athens and a museum in San Francisco. In a life devoted to architecture, religious buildings have been his passion: Botta’s works include Catholic chapels and churches in Austria (in Tyrol’s Zillertal valley), France, Italy and Switzerland, as well as a synagogue in Israel. Three more religious buildings – a mosque on China’s border with Mongolia, a Catholic church near Seoul in South Korea, and an Orthodox community centre in Ukraine – are currently under construction.

Traces of some of the great masters of modernism – from Le Corbusier and Kahn to Michelucci and Scarpa – can all be found in Mario Botta’s style. The Swiss places particular emphasis on the notion of “spazio del sacro” or “sacred space”. Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein’s latest exhibition centres on the acclaimed international architect’s designs for religious spaces, and presents a striking cross-section of the Swiss “church builder’s” oeuvre. The show also highlights Botta’s professional development over the decades, as he seized the opportunity to work in a variety of different landscapes. Taking Botta’s religious buildings as an example, it appears as if planning and constructing sacred spaces inspires a kind of radical exploration of the sense and meaning of architectural endeavour.

Constructed silence¹

This exhibition explores 22 of Botta’s buildings, some of which were created several decades apart, from the small chapel in Ticino, Switzerland from 1966 (mentioned above) to the Chapel of St. Francis in Sorgho-Lugano, which was only completed a short time ago. What all of Botta’s religious buildings have in common is the theme of the sacred, which manifests itself emphatically. For Botta, this theme shapes the identity of all of his designs, irrespective of their religious affiliation. In Botta’s eyes, architecture gives rise to the mysticism of a space – the church is a place in which the Last Supper can be experienced and not just dramatically represented.

¹ This text is based on the observations of Ciucci Giorgio. The full text can be found in the *Architektur im Ringturm LIV* exhibition catalogue: *Mario Botta – Sacral Spaces*.

Of saints and architecture²

Each piece of architecture featured in this exhibition at the Ringturm on sacred spaces tells its own story. By way of clarification: designs that were ultimately left unrealised are not featured, with the exception of the draft for a chapel at Milan's Malpensa Airport. Mario Botta firmly believes that only completed works can express the spirit of those who commissioned them and the communities they serve, as well as the spirit of their time. The solutions in the designs shown in the exhibition stem from specific circumstances; they are the result of an approach born of a multi-faith environment and a secularised society in which the architect found inspiration for his work in aspects of the sacred.

Although in stark contrast to everyday life, elements of "sacredness" – prayer, silence and contemplation – emphatically underline those aspects which give architecture its *raison d'être*. Botta cites light and shadow as being among these, alongside weightiness and lightness, walls and transparency, paths and thresholds, the infinite and finite, and the power of built space, which is ultimately a living environment with which its inhabitants come into contact on a daily basis. Constant critical scrutiny is required if these essential and fundamental values are to be recognisable. Taking the principles of the architect's vocation as a starting point, finding new ways of thinking and acting is imperative.

Places of worship in a secularised society

Globalisation has led to the homogenisation of values and ways of life, and also to a great levelling of living space – in cities and the countryside alike. This has seen the previously central role of places of worship recede into the background. At best, they are interpreted as a memento, or as a service provider that has the same value as other elements of the urban fabric. With few exceptions, architecture is floundering, offering insufficient answers when it comes to reinterpreting religious buildings. One reason for this cited by Botta is the overly casual way that clients and planners address technical and functional questions. Within the space of just a few decades, it appears that the values, ideals and motivation for what he refers to as "the patient search" have been lost. Here, Botta calls to mind the great architects of the modern era – Le Corbusier, Niemeyer, Aalto, Michelucci, Saarinen, Tange, Utzon and Kahn – as well as Rudolf Schwarz and his special friendship with Romano Guardini. They interpreted the expectations of their time and created places of worship that served as examples of how to organise living spaces.

The notion of the sacred – an intrinsic aspect of architecture

The first step when putting up any edifice is to define the building line. This "sacred act", the separation of the interior and exterior, gives rise to a new architectural reality. Botta talks about a transformation of the natural state into a state of culture, and refers to the true purpose of construction: creating a new spatial relationship between the artefact and its environment. Besides the building line, the threshold provides symbolic proof of this transformation, acting as a differentiator between two realities and a link between the inside and the outside. The reality of the interior space moulds a new image in the place of worship, a "finite" state for silence, contemplation, transcendence and mystery. It is only through demarcation of a finite architectural space that its users can experience the state of infiniteness.

The land of reminding

With greater ease than other everyday buildings, architecture gives religious structures shapes, spaces and light that coalesce with their function as places for contemplation and reflection. Consecrated sites point towards the deeper values of communal life. They are reminders – modelled in stone – of original values. Humans strive for infinity and the mysterious, which Le Corbusier's "ineffable space" is still able to evoke.

²These observations are based on Mario Botta's thoughts, which can be found in full in the *Architektur im Ringturm LIV* exhibition catalogue: *Mario Botta – Sacral Spaces*.

Selected religious buildings by Mario Botta



Photo: Mario Krupik

Granatkapelle chapel, Penkenjoch, Zillertal, Austria (2011-2013)

Project: 2011

Construction: 2012-2013

Client: Josef Brindlinger, Christa and Georg Kroell-Brindlinger

Artist: Markus Thurner for the wooden mosaic of Blessed Engelbert Kolland

Plot size: 600m²

Floor space: 40m²

Volume: 750m³

The chapel takes its name from the mineral granite, which is naturally dodecahedron-shaped. The Granatkapelle is located on a mountain peak and faces north, overlooking the Zillertal valley below. Set as a rhombic dodecahedron on a concrete plinth, it comprises a timber structure with weathering steel cladding. Steps lead from the concrete plinth to the building's interior, where the regular form of the geometric space can be taken in at a single glance. Light spreads from a single overhead light source at the highest point above, bringing to life the regular surfaces of the rhombuses, which are clad with timber battens. The magic of the space is emphasised by the light, which creates different effects on the regular walls depending on the time of day.



Photo: Enrico Cano

Church dedicated to Pope John XXIII, Seriate, Italy (1994-2004)

Project: 1994/2000

Construction: 2001-2004

Client: Parrocchia del Santissimo Redentore

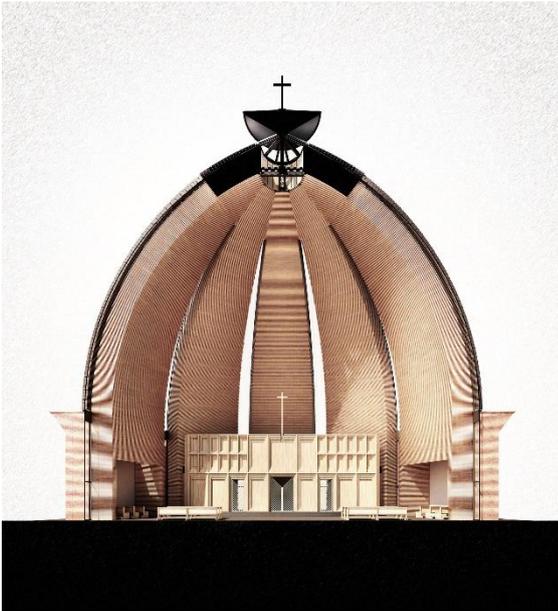
Sculptor: Giuliano Vangi

Plot size: 26,300m²

Floor space: 2,100 m²

Volume: 16,500m³

Dedicated to Pope John XXIII, this church is located a short distance from the 18th-century San Alessandro Martire church in Seriate, a town south of Bergamo in Italy. The complex consists of the cuboid church building in the centre of the site and a longer, stretched construction, which contains cloakrooms and the parish centre, surrounded by an arcaded walkway on both sides. The exterior is fully clad in red Verona marble, accentuating the complex's uniformity. The interior of the church is a single space enclosed by the exterior walls, while natural daylight enters the building via four skylights. The high dado and liturgical installations inside are made of polished Verona marble. Above, the walls are clad with horizontal wooden battens covered with a fine layer of gold leaf. The chancel is defined by two apses featuring a number of beautiful bas relief works by the sculptor Giuliano Vangi.



Monastery and Greek Catholic church, Leopoli, Ukraine (construction started in 2011)

Project: 2011

Construction: 2014 (monastery); church under construction

Client: Don Egidio Montanari on behalf of the Don Orione religious community

Rendering: studio MARIO BOTTA ARCHITETTI

As part of its work to create a “missionary” centre to support the poor and young people on the outskirts of Leopoli, the Don Orione religious community decided to build a small monastery and community space on the site. Construction is due to take ten years. In addition to the simple monastery, which was completed in 2014, a Greek Catholic church is currently planned: it features a central layout and a large dome that covers a unique angular space divided by the iconostasis.



Cymbalista Synagogue and Jewish Heritage Center, Tel Aviv, Israel (1996-1998)

Project: 1996

Construction: 1997-1998

Client: Paulette and Norbert Cymbalista

Floor space: 800m²

Volume: 7,300m³

Photo: Pino Musi

In this project, a single building fulfils two different functions. Two structures emerge from a square base, rising upwards and transforming into a pair of cylinders. In each element, the skylights take the form of four semi-circular openings – created by inserting the roof square into the circular perimeter – which channel daylight down onto the interior walls. Outside, the building is clad in Verona marble (Pietra di Prun), while the interior is in golden sandstone. The square base is used for communal activities, while the two main rooms inside form a precise spatial configuration. The fit-out of both rooms, which are otherwise identical, matches their different functions.

Catalogue

Architektur im Ringturm LIV: *Mario Botta – Sacral Spaces*, Adolph Stiller (ed.), numerous colour and black and white pictures, approx. 200 pages. **Price:** EUR 30