



Photography: Fernando Zanusso

Stefano Boeri

My inside city

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words

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Architecture can give shape to buildings, ideas, even the eco system itself. All it takes is the brilliant mind of a true visionary, such as Stefano Boeri. The Milan native that not only thinks outside the box, but doesn't even see a box to begin with.

What was your favourite space, growing up?

The small single-family house that my mother Cini Boeri designed in Sardinia, at La Maddalena island: a small masterpiece of architecture called "the bunker" because, by protecting itself from the winds and the gales, it allows a selective and formidable visibility on the panorama of the bay in which it is inserted.

But the bunker was also, in a symbolic way, the family's shelter. In that architecture there is all of my mother, her idea of cohabitation and freedom.

What do you remember from your childhood in Milan?

One memory that I cherish involves my brother Tito: We used to play soccer in the churchyard of the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio. Having two atheist parents, that was our way of attending church: without going inside.

How did your mother, a famed architect herself, influence you in your calling?

If I had to choose one episode that left its mark on me as a person and as an architect, it was visiting Louis Kahn's Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, with my mother when I was 18. Salk Institute is a study centre on the ocean where, surprisingly, you never quite see the sea, but you perceive it always and very strongly; an architecture that makes something that is not there feel present. Because of that visit, I chose Architecture. It was not easy to follow in my mother's footsteps, she was always there as an example and a limit, even an obstacle in a way. Term of opposition, term of comparison. But the drastic choice, which was also the decisive one, was to never work with her. On the one hand, I used the opportunities and knowledge she could offer me without being foolishly picky; on the other, I never worked in her studio. The same thing my son, an architect, is doing.

In politics, we tend to enter as idealists and grow up to become pragmatists or even cynics. Have you grown tired of fighting for your beliefs?

Since I was 16 years old, I was involved in the movements of the extra-parliamentary left and I marched in the streets protesting in Milan - not about issues such as ecology and environmental sustainability but rather about the great problems of social inequality, the right to education, of "imperialism". Yet in Florence during those same years, there were some young architects and artists in their twenties and thirties who were committed to the culture of protest. One of them was Gruppo 9999, who began to think about the relationship between trees and humans in cities and build extreme and radical visions of the urban future, images of urban settings

filled with forests and woods permeated by architecture. But even their vision, so strong and radical and disturbing, has fallen into the indifference of the dominant culture within the Italian and European intellectual left.

The great passion I have for politics came out strongly also in more recent years, when I had the chance to devote myself totally to it as Councillor to Culture, Fashion and Design in Milan [where he initiated projects that are still going on today, such as "Piano City Milano" and "Book City Milano"]. It was an intense experience that taught me a lot about the contradictory relationship between architecture and politics. Both deal with spaces to be modified, managed, reformed. Indeed, the power of architecture in anticipating the future conditions of a space is often used by politics to garner immediate consensus, regardless of the actual will to realize those same visions. Both require great openness in listening to the most diverse opinions, perspectives, ideas. Both require, along with the ability to include the infinite possibilities of the world, the need to decide, sometimes very quickly, often in solitude, between different scenarios and alternatives. But there is more: doing politics means tolerating in some cases that the balance between reason, tactical rationality and emotionality can be suddenly upset; that from one day to the next an ally becomes an opponent and an opponent a fellow traveller. But temporarily abandoning architecture as a profession did not mean moving away from architecture as a point of view on the world. This is what I tried to bring to politics and, in a certain way, political engagement towards global themes (environmental challenges, regenerative urban development, enhancement of living nature in cities) is what I bring into Architecture. This is why today I believe in acting as a politician more than I did ten years ago.

What makes Milan so special to you?

Milan is my city, the city where I grew up, and, I think in a certain way my "inside city": the measure of all other cities in the world. When I am involved in projects in Europe, Asia or America, I always look at cities, somehow taking Milan as almost like a measuring unit - its proportions, the heights of its buildings, the dimensions of its streets. Although it remains a geographically small metropolis, it is extremely dense with excellence, a concentration unique in the world. And, also thanks to Expo in 2015, Milan has recently been capable of generating unexpected accelerations in its evolution, with projects that have chosen to establish a relationship with their urban context based on a principle of discontinuity. Milan is the city of innovation, a true laboratory of architecture that generates rupture; but now it must succeed in maintaining this particular inclination that makes it capable of both formidable creativity and tireless generosity towards its own territory and other parts of our country.

What is your favourite space in Milan?

The San Siro Stadium. Not for its questionable beauty, but for its presence in the collective imaginary. Besides being a symbol of the city, with the iconic towers and red protruding beams, it is also a place to which I am emotionally connected, being a huge football fan. Then, for sure Triennale Milano and Bosco Verticale are, in different ways, extremely important to me.

You have been praised for your Vertical Forest, two residential towers built on the notion of urban biodiversity, in Milan. Why don't we see such attempts more often?

The increasingly worrying environmental crisis we are facing - just think about the terrific heat waves hitting cities all over the world last summer - forces us to take action urgently. In many countries, including Italy, plans and projects are being developed to implement living nature in urban contexts. What we are facing, with Vertical Forest and urban forestry projects all over the world, is how the expansion of these interventions depends on coordinating direction with a public-private dialogue that supports both the actual implementation and the operational management by municipalities and cities. This coordination is actually taking shape more and more often and I believe our cities in the future will be much greener; at least because we, as human beings, finally understand how trees and plants are not only an effective way to absorb fine dust pollutants and CO2, regulate humidity level and microclimate, provide shading in public spaces, but also a real benefit to the lives of all citizens.

You have cited "The baron in the Trees" by Italo Calvino, as a fundamental reference.

I read this book when I was a boy, and it became a fertile obsession that worked inside me for years. Cosimo, the young [12-year-old] protagonist, lives a full and adventurous life in the trees, among the branches of holm oaks, cork oaks, olive, beech and chestnut trees. In the imaginary world that Calvino invites us to share, fantasy becomes plausible and realistic because it is endowed with rules, rigour and precision. From above, through the leaves and branches, he leads us to share a different perception of space, social relations and history. Hence my obsession, which is not an ecological passion but rather a precise obsession with trees: the idea of looking at the world through the filter of the branches.

Today I am happy to see how the obsession - such as mine, ours - for a generative botany in architecture has been able to have effects in the real world, even if otherworldly and even if in a different time than expected; when and where we least expected it...

When you started in this business and dreamed of something unusual, that didn't yet exist, how easy was it to get your clients to trust you?

I would like to take as an example the genesis of the Bosco Verticale, a unique idea that had to be presented with a certain amount of convincing. Early 2007 in Dubai, I was teaching at Harvard GSD. I was in the Emirates, following the frantic construction of a city in the desert consisting of dozens of new towers and skyscrapers. All clad in glass or ceramic or metal. Glass and mineral skins in an increasingly artificial and mineral city. At that time, I was starting the design of two towers in the centre of Milan and suddenly it occurred to me to create two biological towers, covered not in glass but in leaves - of plants, shrubs, but especially the leaves of trees.

To convince my clients - the Italian branch of Hines, a multinational American real estate company - I asked a journalist friend to publish a picture in an Italian newspaper showing the two towers covered with trees and a compelling title: "the first ecological and sustainable tower is going to be created in Milan". I added in that article - which was so successful as to push my clients to take this little "quirk" seriously - that in addition to carbon dioxide, the leaves of the trees would also absorb the pollutant micro-particles created as a result of urban traffic and so would help clean the air in Milan, as well as producing oxygen in turn.

In the following months, together with the architects in my studio, we wrote a "Manifesto for the Vertical Forest" which promoted the idea of a living and sustainable architecture that would reduce fuel consumption and therefore the human impact on the environment. There was a lot of scepticism: how can a tree grow a hundred meters high? What happens in high winds? All questions that I answered together with botanists and structural engineers. It was a matter of insisting.

We need, as architects, someone who is trusting, who bets on an idea to support its realization, but it is the strength of the idea itself and, above all, how much you believe in it, that shifts the balance and convinces clients.

What do you see as the most important problems of the city of Milan?

After the Expo2015 experience, the city was overwhelmed in just a few years by transformations, accelerations and turning points in terms of construction and architecture that, in normal times, would have taken 10-15 years to achieve. Today we are experiencing a different kind of acceleration.

Milan is now a powerful city, which has acquired an absolutely primary role in southern Europe. The risk, however, is for Milan to become a very beautiful but overpriced city, without a social housing component - which will be one of the main challenges of the future - unable to accommodate the most economically fragile segments of the population such as students (we host more than 200.000 students in our 9 Universities) and young people, whom we are in danger of losing due to an out-of-control housing market.

To reverse this trend, we must first recognise that we are a university city, where the student component should not be underestimated. In addition, we must recognise that there has been a change in the demographic DNA of Milan: the city has grown, but this growth has also been dictated, unfortunately, by the loss of a share of its citizens - about 400,000 outgoing citizens, with, however, 500,000 in-coming. Finally, there is an issue of re-centring the relationship between spaces and society, which needs to be reorganised and rebalanced in Milan: of recognising this network of collective and public spaces, such as archipelago-like pedestrian areas surrounded by flowing mobility and integrated green systems - connecting the agricultural parks on the edge of the city - for example. So the main idea is to unite the three forces that characterize the city and make it unique in Italy and beyond: businesses, families and the third sector, which, working together, will be able to bring about an even more significant change in the city.

What was the inspiration behind La Résidence, the upper level of Milan's Maison Cartier?

La Résidence, realised with my studio, Stefano Boeri interiors, inside the new boutique in Milan, is a new, modern space surrounded by greenery, in which the interior gets blurred with the external part between the apartment and the terrace. In these spaces we have played with vegetation until it is transformed into an irrepressible and implicit protagonist. This project came up from a very deep reasoning on the relationship between sumptuousness and minimalism, Milanese architecture's two main characteristics. The challenge was on the one hand to find this meeting point between high luxury style and the characteristics of traditional Milanese interiors, and on the other hand to provide a functional answer. The space is made of three different areas: the terrace, the living room and the kitchen, conceived as usable together but also independently, thanks to a very flexible system of movable elements. We wanted to re-create that feeling of elegance, without

arrogance, of a typical luxurious Milanese home, with echoes of French style and nature. With great rigour in formal expression, the choice of materials was a determining element of the project, employing marble and grafts of Italian Serpeggiante, silks and velvets, mirror panels. These are all elements that represent points of encounter with the philosophy of high luxury, but also with the code of a part of modern architecture that is typically Milanese, if we think of masters such as Gio Ponti, Piero Portaluppi, Luigi Caccia Dominioni, and Vico Magistretti, who worked with materials of great preciousness according to a logic that was not purely decorative.

What is your favourite motto?

Right now, the phrase that resonates most in my head is Trees Towards Cities, Humans Towards Forests. It is the subtitle of our recent publication (Stefano Boeri Architetti, Green Obsession) published by Actar in 2022.

Favourite spots in the city?

The Renata Tebaldi Garden in Piazza Tommaseo. The square dates back to 1893, and in 2017 it was replanted with the creation of the garden of magnolia soulangeana, a deciduous magnolia, a special hybrid species created by an officer of Napoleon's cavalry, with the characteristic of blooming earlier than other plants. And the "Cedrus Atlantica," the tree that stands in the middle, was desired by the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Milan, which supported and financed the project to repopulate the city with butterflies.

I like to pass by the garden when I am in Triennale, but also stop further on, at the Biblioteca Comunale in Parco Sempione, Ico Parisi's old pavilion for the tenth Triennale; a unique piece of architecture, almost a jewel hidden in the park.

When you wake up every morning, what do you see outside your window?

At the moment I am temporarily residing on the ninth floor of the Vertical Forest. The perspective, I must admit, is quite interesting: every morning I see my city, Milan, through the leaves and trees, through nature.



Photography: Giovanni Gastel