

Segantini (C+S Architects): architecture has the responsibility to translate the time in which we live
Interview with Stefano Calicchio CALTALKS

For Caltalks we interview Maria Alessandra Segantini. Together with Carlo Cappai she is the founder of C+S Architects. Maria Alessandra Segantini was invited by the Order of Architects of Trieste to hold the Lectio Magistralis titled *Conversations*, on the seminar "The city I would like". An event (Trieste, 1 and 2 February 2024) and at the same time food for thought on the urban regeneration of large, abandoned areas, organized for the 100th anniversary of the Order of Architects. The seminar involved institutions, universities, schools, and citizens.

Caltalks collects and shares with readers the points of view of personalities, innovators, decision makers and opinion leaders to understand the issues and choices that are changing the world. The format aims to offer analysis and collect ideas relating to the facts and trends that are changing society from an economic, social, environmental, technological, political and institutional point of view.

What is the philosophy that guides your approach to urban regeneration and how is it reflected in C+S Architects' projects?

Italy (but we could extend this topic to any part of the world today) is a country rich in history and beauty, but it is a fragile Country. We have inherited from the past monuments, spaces and landscapes which we have not taken care of after having expanded the cities, crumbling them into suburbs, sprawl cities without spaces for aggregation and exchange. These choices put our very lives on Earth at risk. Therefore we think that working on urban regeneration projects, brownfields, is fundamental to building a **planetary ethic** that can save the Planet. On various work occasions we were faced with the regeneration of parts of forgotten cities (disused military or industrial areas) which nature had magically reappropriated, almost as if to suggest that it was necessary to rethink a new balance between built and nature. They are projects made for public bodies or private developers and the latter are precisely the most important subjects to develop the potential of our work. The market, as the only true global force, must believe in and finance the development of **a new planetary ethic** that allows the rebalancing of nature and constructions... and of all the beings that live there. Our projects of Tervuren, Sant'Erasmo or Pordenone, the abandoned industrial areas at the Ex-Manifattura Tabacchi in Venice or at the Conterie on the island of Murano, the urban regeneration of the GAMeC museum area in Bergamo, the judicial offices in Trento work on themes of densification, 'building on the built', the relationship with nature, public space as 'common ground' available to citizens. In all these projects our approach to urban regeneration is activated with the construction of a backbone of public space, green or mineral, which allows citizens to strengthen the sense of community, to enjoy open, free, actionable space available, despite the increasingly compressed dimensions of the accommodation. The city therefore becomes that available space that **rebalances social inequalities** and builds a **multi-ethnic and multicultural society**.

How have Trieste's history and unique identity influenced your urban regeneration projects in the city?

We have not yet had the fortune of working in Trieste, a city that we know well for its proximity to Venice (we are Venetians) for the analogy of their role as important ports on the Adriatic Sea, for the common fate during the Austrian Domination which we have explored when working on the drawings of the KriegsArchiv in Vienna and much more... we are waiting for an opportunity!

Could you describe the role and importance of public space in C+S Architects' projects?

We are architects. **Every work we design is public**. Unlike other disciplines, architecture has the responsibility of translating the time in which we live, its culture into durable physical space, but also open to being reinvented by communities, a kind of available infrastructure. This is the concept of the Piazza del Cinema, which transforms the actors' red carpet (used for only 3 weeks a year) into a 'white carpet for all people', a square for mothers with prams, for skaters, for elderly people who can sit in the shade and

watch the sea.... Our projects transform the world by becoming the scenes where life happens. I'm not just talking about the lives of women and men, but of that of all living beings who right at the Lido continue to inhabit the park and build the biodiversity necessary to sustain the life of the Planet. And this is a great responsibility. A responsibility that allows us, through urban regeneration projects, to 'repair' the mistakes of the recent past, of excessive growth driven by globalization, putting built and nature back into balance. The technique is in our hands to avoid consuming further land or available resources if we want to continue to inhabit this Planet because at the moment it is the only one we have. We work to build durable buildings and public spaces that can offer the potential for change of use or, conversely, projects that can be dismantled and recycled at the end of the building's life with zero impact on the environment, such as our recent **prototypes of 'circular schools'** which we like to define as **'the squares of the suburbs'** precisely because of their great value as a 'network of local collective spaces available to citizens beyond school hours'.

Can you tell us about the biggest challenges you encountered in planning the regeneration of the Former Royal Cavalry Barracks at Tervuren and how you tackled them?

The area is located within a beautiful park fifteen minutes from Brussels and connected to the Capital by one of the most poetic tram lines in Europe surrounded by greenery. When I visited it for the first time during the design competition (which my studio won in 2018 and which is now under construction with the expectation of being completed next year) I was struck by the majesty of the park's nature, which had recovered part of the abandoned buildings and which was in the heart of the small center of Tervuren, once the home of the infamous King Leopold. A sequence of four lakes dotted the landscape and then poured into the large basin which also overlooks the African Museum, recently designed by the Belgian architect Stephen Beel. How was it possible to invent a system that preserved and strengthened that landscape and those monuments that we had inherited from the past? The first sketches report these reflections. We imagine two backbones for the intervention: one parallel to the sequence of water basins completed by the design of a fifth lake surrounded by greenery and a transversal one built by a new sequence of pedestrian public spaces that start from the cathedral, cross the large square of horseshoe-shaped weapons, to then arrive at a new square at high altitude (which restores the original positions discovered thanks to the study of archive drawings). This last square reconnects with the park and the new water basin and goes up to the end of the surrounding wall where we maintain a well-preserved brick 'casemate'. Once the competition was won, conversations began with the Superintendencies of Monuments and Landscape which still continue today because we are absolutely convinced that an architectural project is a space/time shared between all the actors who 'with love' are imagining building the future legacy of that place. The challenge was precisely to build a conversation while avoiding lowering a project from above...

What is your vision for the future of urban architecture and how do you think the role of architects will evolve?

We are absolutely convinced that the role of the architect in society will be increasingly powerful. First, architects are almost magicians, they imagine and transform the world and are therefore responsible for the ethics of these actions. To stick with the metaphor, we can be Harry Potter or Voldemort... A new ethic that must keep the market, the environment, and the community together. A planetary ethic which, although our work is absolutely local, must have a global outlook and impact. Our projects can contribute to rewriting the laws, as happened with the Italian schools which contributed to rewriting the Ministry's guidelines. The choice not to waste land, to build on the built, to use recyclable materials and not to waste energy reflects an idea of technique capable of being simultaneously at the service of profit and committed to restoring a new environmental and social balance, a new balance between built and nature and a new mutual respect between all the inhabitants of the Planet. As creatives, challenges always turn into opportunities for us to build a better world.

Having worked on projects both in Italy and abroad, what experiences could be applied in the Italian context?

The Northern European approach is simultaneously shared and pragmatic. I am referring to the Belgian projects because we currently have five construction sites underway in this Country. Each of them was developed with long sharing processes between all the stakeholders involved. All sitting around open working-tables where the project and the themes I have already spoken about were at the center: the limitation of land consumption, the use of resources, the added value for the community, the monumental and landscape constraints, the feasibility economic and financial nature of the operation, urban planning constraints, social expectations. I was simultaneously teaching and reinventing the Master in Architecture at the University of Hasselt which had this sharing work as its cornerstone. In Hasselt I had incorporated the added value of work on concrete issues of territorial transformation and so we had set up discussion tables with some local administrations, with communities, with sustainability and circularity experts. A beautiful experience that I was experimenting with in the studio's work in parallel. We had also attempted it with fluctuating participation in the Venice Lagoon (in Sant'Erasmo and in the Piazza del Cinema project on the Lido of Venice) and which has now instead become a practice of the studio in the recent projects of GAMeC and the Trento court. A great satisfaction when the financial stakeholders also asked to sit at the table because they were interested in this work process.

Pragmatism is the second challenge, once shared and approved the project is implemented according to the defined criteria. There is no going back in decisions, despite the administrations changing.

What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities in urban regeneration today?

Over the last thirty years we have witnessed unprecedented development, cities and territories have been transformed, forests have been destroyed, raw materials have been plundered and new cities have been built. On a social level we have gentrified entire neighborhoods and created monotonous cityscapes where brands follow one another the same in every corner of the Planet, where in the squares of globalization it is no longer possible to sit on the floor, write with chalk or dance... The data tells us that today not only we cannot go back, but that instead a reversal of direction is fundamental if we still want to inhabit this Planet, which up to now is the only one we have. Unlike other animals, the evolution of man is not only generated by instinct and the ability to adapt, but we are also capable of deciding freely and reacting creatively to the challenges that arise before us. And for this reason, thanks to technique (Prometheus is no longer chained), we have been able to face unimaginable challenges. Today, technology and the market feed themselves and produce the fragility of the Planet. But if we manage to change these, which are perhaps the only truly global ones, we will be able to build **a planetary ethic** to still have a world in which new generations can grow. Women, who are mothers as well as architects, have a fundamental role in this scenario, because by instinct they are born to grow future generations.

Finally, how do you think architecture can positively influence communities and the environment?

In every project the architects are suspended between two poles: customer satisfaction and the gift of public space to the community. Respecting the budget and using sustainable environmental solutions. Alongside the project they develop for the customer and his satisfaction there is a 'personal agenda', ethics which is the added value of our work. Not least the production of beauty and the balance between buildings and landscape: in other words, architects can build the future legacy of generations to come.