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## Building Blocks

By Michael J. Solender – May 1, 2014

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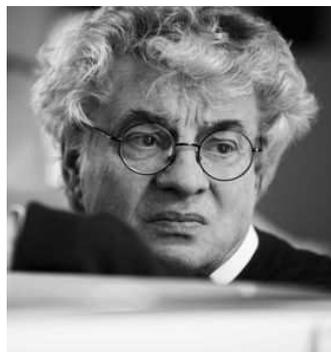


01/30/2014 - In celebration of the exhibition "Mario Botta: Architecture and Memory," which opens Jan. 31, 2014, at the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, modernist, patron and sustainer members of the museum were invited to a preview reception. Honored guests at the event included architect and designer of the Bechtler building, Mario Botta; Swiss ambassador to the United States, Manuel Sager; and Consul General of Switzerland, Andreas Maager.

PHOTO BY WENDY YANG PHOTOGRAPHY

In late January of this year world renowned architect Mario Botta returned to Charlotte to help launch the only U.S. appearance of a very special exhibition at the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. Mario Botta: Architecture and Memory is an engrossing, one of a kind exhibition showcasing this incredible architect's love affair with communities and their public space.

Approximately halfway through its run at the Bechtler, Charlotte visitors can enjoy this show through July 25, 2014. Here they'll discover a compilation of blueprints, drawings, models, maquettes, photographs and ephemera that represent more than 50 years of Botta's respected career.



Mario Botta (Photo Claude Dussex)

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Arguably one of the most influential architects of his time, Swiss native Botta is recognized worldwide as a primary force behind postmodern classicism. His work is noted particularly for regional sensibilities and his buildings' relationships with their setting.

The Bechtler Museum was designed by Mario Botta in concert with the museum's benefactor and close family friend, Andreas Bechtler. It is one of only two buildings (along with San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art) in the United States designed by the highly sought after architect.

### Diminutive septuagenarian, boundless energy

Holding court for more than a dozen media types and local dignitaries at the exhibit opening, Botta is a diminutive septuagenarian with a shock of curly white hair. He took center stage at the briefing sporting designer spectacles and a tidy silk scarf loosely knotted about his neck. Wildly gesticulating, he pokes his slender fingers into the air as he speaks (in Italian) about the exhibit. His enthusiasm and boundless energy are infectious as those gathered hang on his every word.

"When I arrived here early this morning," Botta said through an interpreter accompanying him on his visit, "and saw the sun rising on the museum and the way the light played with the building, it was very emotional for me. It struck me as being much more beautiful than when I left it some time back. I thought to myself, 'My creation survives and lives with society and the city.'"

For Botta, the interaction between his buildings and the communities where they reside lies at the core of his design. Space with utility and function is, of course, the goal of every designer, yet Botta expands on this and brings emotion into play. His work often evokes feelings and sentiment of its inhabitants that serves to enhance their experience.

### Encounters, Libraries, Museums, Theatres and Religious Spaces

The exhibition features more than 200 objects on display, assembled into five themes that play outsized roles in the architect's decades-long career.

Visitors are initially met with 'Encounters.' Here are letters, sketches and other intimate and highly personal work by artists and other architects who have influenced Botta. Viewers also see artwork from the Bechtler collection by artists who have inspired Botta, such as Alberto Giacometti, kinetic artist Jean Tinguely, Alexander Caldwell, most notable for his mobiles and Pablo Picasso.

As visitors weave through the remaining themed areas they enter a realm of Botta's mind as executed in some of the most compelling designs of the past half century.

In describing his approach to designing contemplative space such as a church or a library, Botta acknowledges the need for space that provides respite from the frenzy of daily life.

"My objective is to offer a space in which man can feel himself a protagonist in the silence of his own solitude, and at the same time participate in a collective rite," said Botta. "It is within the complexity and rapidity of current transformations that the architect is called upon to elaborate these new project responses."

Botta's Cathedral of the Resurrection, built in 1995 in Evry, France, is one such space. The drawings depict a sprawling plaza with recessed fountain jets fronting a conical tower, seeming sliced on an angle on its bias; the roof rimmed with trees several stories above the ground. Photographs show the vast interiors of the sanctuary are bathed in sunlight, creating an outside-in experience evoking a calmness that belies the enormity of the space.

The tapered-at-the-base spheroid main building that is Botta's Library of the Tsinghua University in Beijing, China, (2011) demonstrates his affinity for light, large windows and most importantly the relationship and orientation of his building and the surrounding land features. In this case a large garden offer visitors an oasis of tranquility and frame their mindset well before they even enter the building.

During his visit to Charlotte, Botta spoke in reverent terms about the influence his memories

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played in the design of sacred public spaces where knowledge is stored (libraries), where people can dream and create (theatres), worship (churches, religious space), explore creative expression and gain inspiration (museums).

### A celebration of the Bechtler Museum

One museum design that will hold particular fascination with Charlotte residents is the Bechtler itself.

"This exhibition is a celebration of the Bechtler building as the single largest object in our collection," said John Boyer, Bechtler Museum of Modern Art president and CEO. "It is a reminder of the powerful uniqueness of this commission in the United States and an acknowledgement of the important relationship between architecture and other forms of art."

Visitors will be fascinated seeing the museum's origins unfold through drawings, sketches and correspondence regarding what is now an iconic feature of Charlotte's Levine Center for the Arts. His choice of natural terra cotta as the building's exterior reflects not only his love for and propensity to build using natural materials such as brick and concrete as opposed to steel, but it is also representative of the indigenous red clay found in North Carolina.

The friendly outdoor plaza in reminiscent of Italian piazzas, city squares and gathering places where residents exchanged news of the day over a coffee or simply looked out upon the hustle and bustle of street life before them. The Bechtler's plaza evokes the very same feeling and looks out upon not only Tryon Street but one of the city's oldest churches, St. Peter's Catholic, adding a European feel. Its cantilevered top floor juts out over the plaza bringing those inside out, and those outside in, all part of Botta's design to engage his buildings with the community.

Botta: Architecture and Memory is an exhibit that should not be missed.

### More information:

**What:** Botta: Architecture and Memory

**Details:** Through July 25, 2014, The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. For hours, admission and additional information: <http://www.bechtler.org/>.

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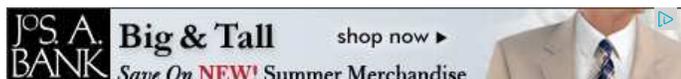
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