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Dialogue with Renzo Piano from the Children's Hospice in Bologna for the Seragnoli Foundation

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We decided to dedicate an in-depth article to the Hospice for Children in Bologna, promoted by the Seragnoli Foundation, entrusting the project to Renzo Piano. This decision resulted in the following conversation with the Genoese architect.

When it succeeds, architecture is always healing: through the senses, it speaks to our desires. The project of the Hospice for Children in Bologna - a design theme that makes your wrists shake - succeeded in this extremely, very difficult challenge. How did this idea come about?

Yes, it is true that it is an intervention that makes your wrists tremble because, for better or worse, an architect always manages to identify with those who live in architecture. You have a school; you have been to school. In this case, we had problems. I always try to do this exercise, but this case was different. Everything there is done so that children do not suffer, and with

them, parents too, who are young, almost children. The idea of lifting and putting the structure in the trees also comes from this. The hospital is a place of suspension, a place of passion, in this sense, a bit like putting yourself in an apnea that can last years, dramatic. Through this suspension, in some way, you enter that world; you enter the leaves of the acacia forest, which we found there.

The tree canopy is one of the most loved ancestral places by children. In the 1970s, researchers discovered an innate preference for the African Savannah landscape. Acacia is the key figure in that landscape. His project seems to refer to this ancestral memory children guard without knowing. What do you think of this assonance?

That's a coincidence, of course. It is certainly no coincidence that the cyclic nature renewal, the passing of the seasons, the loss of leaves, and finding them again are a metaphor for healing. Although there is no healing in the Hospice, this gesture was meant to bring beauty to a place of suffering. I'm not talking about a frivolous beauty, but the primary one, the Greek kalos. I didn't want to create a black forest with trees but a happy wood. Acacia has light leaves, so the light is not heavy. It's a luminous wood. By realizing three hospitals in Greece, I had the opportunity to carefully observe their history. In ancient Greece, the hospitals – the Asklepeion – were places of environmental, built, and natural beauty. The Greeks, lo and behold, also asked for help to beauty to heal. This is because hospitals, beyond clinical efficiency, must be places to regain the human dimension. You don't need superficial beauty but a profound beauty that concerns light and nature.

Neuroscience itself is proving that kalos kai agathos, that is, 'beauty is good'.

Medical excellence is fundamental, I repeat. But the idea of restoring quality in hospitals is also fundamental. Always rambling, when Gino Strada called me to build a hospital for Emergency in Uganda, he gave me the shortest brief I have ever received. Gino said to me, 'I want a scandalously beautiful hospital'. That's right. In these two words, scandalously beautiful, there was already everything. It was a scandal because it did not only bring clinical excellence but also beauty. Because many people think that when you make a gift, all the more to the so-called third world, it is enough in itself. Gino thought of a profound beauty linked to nature, the beauty of solidarity, the beauty of being together. When Isabella Seragnoli asked me to make this building, the theme of beauty, a pale attempt to alleviate suffering, came out. Then it is not

difficult to imagine why we have lifted the building off the ground, why it is in the middle of the trees.

In addition to regulating the release of serotonin and melatonin, mitigating stress, and promoting sleep, light also has the power to give rhythm to time. The atmospheres created by light are varied, depending on the season, the colour of the leaves, the sky, the morning or the afternoon.

The rooms have a winter garden, a double skin, and a space of 90 centimetres, with slats that open and close. There's not only a window. This allows us to play with light. Of course, the machine of light is the one of the leaves of the trees that, coincidentally, when there is a need for shade, put on the leaves that disappear when there is a need for sun. When there is light, the leaves crush it, creating a scattered light. It is not a violent light; in fact, it is also dosed by the curtains in the double skin. Finally, the changing of seasons – which unfortunately are few for these poor creatures – still changes it. Each bedroom, moreover, above the bed, has a porthole that looks at the sky, with a disc that rotates to open or close it. It's not such a stupid idea, is it? Because a creature lying there pushes a button and lets the sky appear and disappear. The bedrooms, in the middle of the trees, also have solar panels above the roof. We are close to zero emissions. It's a very wise building, and this is also part of the journey. I have always thought architecture needs the contribution of necessity to find serious handholds that are not in fashion. The stronghold of this century is certainly the fragility of the planet.

The view of the trees allows you to feel the tactile sensation of the wood bark, as, beyond the glass, the silent movement of the foliage, shaped by the air, brings to mind the sound of the wind. How were the natural materials and colours used in this project?

When you say, 'nature is a metaphor for healing,' you don't just say something that is a wish. It's something that exists. Clinical research cannot be abandoned, but the quality of space is important. The 800's pavilion hospitals, often with parks and separate buildings, had a certain dignity. Hospitals in the 1900s have gained a lot on the clinical side, of course. It's that these barracks have completely forgotten about the physical person. They forgot that the hospital is a place of suspension.

Neuroscience and architecture. What do you think of this relationship?

In New York, for Columbia University, for Professor Richard Axel and Eric Kandel, I realized the Institute of Neuroscience: there are 900 researchers. Among them, a group works on the relationship between the brain and the perception of nature. Neurons are about 85-90 billion, and among them are those working on perception. It would be foolish to deny that there is no empirical relationship between nature and the human body. It would be scientifically wrong. And what you're telling me is supported by scientific research because today, science, with nanotechnology, can come down to the molecular level. There is evidence. It isn't any interpretation of some crazy guy.

One last curiosity. Looking at the project, I was reminded of Italo Calvino's Barone Rampante of Italo Calvino. The little Cosimo escapes among the tops of the trees and never returns to the ground. Knowing your attention to Calvino literature, I wonder if it's entirely random. What do you think?

You got it right. One thing is certain. I am a great Italo Calvino's lover. I was also a friend of Italo; my age gives me this privilege. He came to the construction site in Beaubourg, Paris, to have great chats. He had written the Baron Rampante ten years before. Yes, yes, Cosimo climbs a tree and never comes down again. There is something poetic about this idea of suspension. It's part of the things that are and are not present in the project. The buildings stand on legs, and when the trees have grown enough, the foliage goes up to 18 meters. On the ground, you move into a landscape of legs, trees and buildings. Yes, you also end up doing poetry because you have to put poetry there. What the hell can you put as an architect? You put functionality in it, but you must also put a little poetry in it.

To conclude, this one from Bologna for Isabella Seragnoli, could you say, echoing Gino Strada, that it is a scandalously beautiful project?

The word beauty has been stolen. When you use the word 'beauty', people look at you badly; they don't understand. When you use the English word 'beautiful', people think you're talking about a beauty salon. There's nothing you can do. It's just that. Also, in French, 'beauté'. In Italian, it is already different. In Greece, it is another thing. Working in Uganda, in Swahili, there is no word 'beautiful' separated from the word 'good'. The ending '-nzuri', which refers to a person, not only means beautiful but also good. However, even if this word has been stolen

from us, and we must be careful how to use it, beauty is fundamental; it is the fundamental dimension of our life, and it is something that accompanies us in every moment of the day. It concerns everybody.

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The Children's Hospice in Bologna, designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop, is a building for care, not cure, that offers supportive palliative therapies to sick children and their families. Among other spaces, its eight apartments are spaces of support at the end of the child's life, offering atmospheres of peace and tranquillity in a natural setting.

The building is suspended between the trees, to be at the level of the tops of the acacias and thus get closer to touching them. The different spaces merge with nature, and the limits between them are blurred, so one lives inside the forest, levitating above the ground. With this positioning, the regenerative power of nature is achieved, which connects the person directly with our ancestors' natural landscape, and our brain still recognises it as a known and reliable environment. This is how the building becomes a safe, pleasant space that embraces children and families, caring for them to find a quiet and calm stay that accompanies the entire family in a conscious ending.

The interior environment is as important as the exterior. Being able to enjoy the natural surroundings, with lots of natural light, nature and contact with clean air, helps the body feel in tune with natural rhythms and avoid temporary imbalances. Being in contact with unpredictable, different, and fun spaces, which are directly related to the outside environment, promotes sensory stimulation and positive thoughts, even in the most dramatic situations.

Patients, being children, are much more sensitive to sensory stimuli than adults since they are in a stage of development where greater brain plasticity occurs. Consequently, they are more vulnerable to stressful stimuli, and external environmental factors influence their brain more directly. The interaction between the child and space is a powerful tool to promote a good stay, contributing to a state of calm and emotional state, both for the children and their families.

The feeling of being locked in a space, or of being in spaces designed for adults, should be avoided. This is why it is important to base the design on the affordances that spaces offer, since each child has a different degree of cognitive and sensory development, a different progression of disease, and each family faces the end-of-life situation in its own way. The challenge is to create safe

environments where they can choose how to spend their stay, by continuing the activities of their daily life, playing with other children, spending time with their family, or being alone in moments of reflection.

Only by being aware of the impact that the environment can have on people, can we make the correct decisions about how it should be designed, even in extreme situations of suffering of the human condition.

(text by **Clara Rius, Giulietta Boggio Bertinet**)

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Drawings: Renzo Piano Building Workshop. RPBW archives

Sketches: Renzo Piano. RPBW archives

Models: RPBW archives

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