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TALKING ABOUT MY REGENERATION

Benedetta Tagliabue is one of the founding partners of EMBT, the architecture firm renowned for its urban regeneration work. She speaks to SIGNED about her projects and the exhibition at HKDI

Top left and bottom: The Scottish Parliament building; top right: Benedetta Tagliabue

While many architects may dream of creating a signature piece as a shining example of their skills, the real test comes when the designer has to consider existing structures, historic sites, politically sensitive spaces and public usage. The finer points of urban regeneration can be complex and full of pitfalls, but that doesn't mean that the result has to be boring. Spanish architecture firm EMBT is an expert in this area and has created some of the most stunning urban structures of this generation, from the Santa Caterina Market in Barcelona to the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. The drawings, sketches and models created by Benedetta Tagliabue and her late partner, Enric Miralles, have been on show in an exhibition called *Urban Regeneration – Past, Present and Future*, held at the HKDI Gallery in Hong Kong.

How does it feel to see such a collection of your work all in one place?

It's really fantastic, I've just seen some of the drawings now. Whenever you do an exhibition it feels like you're showing what you have in your cupboards, in your drawers, your intimate things. But I think it's really fantastic because you have the response of many people to something that in principle is very intimate.

What do you hope visitors will leave with after seeing this exhibition?

I hope they understand our kind of informality and attempt to be natural, though that doesn't mean that it's not organised or not thought out. That's what I like very much when I'm trying to understand our own architecture, I like to have this kind of 'naturalness' in making things, so I hope the exhibition reflects that.

EMBT is known for the environmental sustainability of its projects. How much does this influence your work and is it something you feel more architects are considering these days?

I think this kind of environmental sustainability is very necessary nowadays for architects. We always try to introduce it in our work – to integrate with the environment and learn from it. To try and make the transformation a natural process, as if it's leaves growing on a tree, we'd like every transformation we do to be a little like that.

The Santa Caterina Market remains one of your highlight works. Did you realise at the time it was going to be such a significant project?

No, we were not conscious of that. Whenever you start a process, you're never sure about the ending. Because the ending doesn't depend on you completely, it depends on the reality, the circumstances, the political situation. I've seen lots of projects that have started with a lot of effort and ended in very little, but Santa Caterina was a fantastic moment for us.

What would you say are the most important aspects of any urban regeneration project?

I think there is a very strong transformation happening in this generation. It's not about conserving everything and trying to go back to a hypothetical, fantastical, historical moment. We don't believe in that. But we do believe that





PICTURE CREDIT: SHEN ZHONGHAI KDE



PICTURE CREDIT: ROLAND HALBE



Left to right: Spanish Pavillion for the Shanghai Expo; Hafencity, Hamburg; Santa Caterina Market, Barcelona

for something to work well in a city or a situation, it has to be synchronised with the present and also with the past. So we're trying to make a transformation that has continuity. I hope you can feel that in the exhibition.

Your works incorporate tradition but have you come across any opposition to change in EMBT's projects?

Many, especially during the process of designing a project. A lot of people think they could do it better, or don't agree with you, or think it won't work. It's very difficult to convince everybody to be patient and believe in the process, and to wait for things to manifest and become real. At the end, people don't realise it's a transformation, they just take it as fact.

The Scottish Parliament building, Holyrood, has become a cultural icon in Edinburgh. How much freedom were you given with the project, and were you left to come up with your own ideas?

Not entirely, but I think we were given the opportunity because they needed [an outsider]. They really wanted to have a symbolic building that would be important – and now it receives more visitors than any other building in Scotland. So they required someone to give them something unexpected, but keep the influences very strong. It was very difficult because there was this conservative influence on the existing building and it seemed impossible to transform it. They wanted to make it like a museum, which doesn't correspond to anything. And there was a lot of pressure from the historians, who had ideas in mind, so it was a very complicated project, but also fantastic. My husband and partner died at the beginning of the construction work, on site, and I think he had made one of his most complex projects. He really put his soul into it. That's why I love it very much.

Is the unveiling of a new site still as exciting today as it was in the beginning?

It's very exciting but very scary. I tend not to see it because I feel anguish – I think every architect gets that. You hear stories about the engineer of bridges, jumping from the

bridge on the day of opening, things like that. Because you have the responsibility of bringing into reality something that is heavy, that is expensive, that is useful for a lot of people, so you always feel you're not sufficient. That's why I don't go to see it.

What artists or buildings inspire you?

There are some, but I have very little time to learn from my colleagues. Someone once told me how a person met the great Catalan painter Antoni Tàpies on his way to the Louvre and said, let's go together, and so they went through the great gallery of the Louvre but he couldn't keep up with Tàpies because he was running. You see, when you are creating yourself you have a different view of other people's work. Because it's so close to you, touching you so much that it's attacking your own securities. So you look at it out of the corner of your eyes. I think I have this kind of relation to other people's work these days, kind of through a fog.

You set up an office in Shanghai following your Expo 2010 piece in the city. Is there more room for experimentation in architecture in China than Europe right now?

I always had a pull towards China, mainly because it's one of the most ancient civilisations we have in humanity, and this is terribly attractive to me. I'm fascinated by human history and human construction. I think now is a special moment for China, it's dangerous and beautiful at the same time and I'm very happy to have this opportunity.

What are the complexities of working on public spaces as opposed to private buildings?

When you work on a public space, you have to think that everybody has to feel at home in this space, and everyone has to feel that it's their space, to sit, look and enjoy. So you need to take into consideration how people usually move, what people like and where they are going, because you're creating a space that will be used in the future so you have to give hints and imagine new ways. I think for this reason it's important to be a bit of a daydreamer – daydreams help a lot [laughs].



Tell us a bit about your collection of water projects, how did these come about?

I think sometimes doing competitions becomes a kind of exercise, so even when you don't win them, the experiences are still useful. The exercise has brought you to a way of thinking and you have in mind a solution that you can adapt a little later somewhere else. In the case of Hafencity in Hamburg, and the transformation project, we had some previous experiences in competitions which were similar. It allowed us to respond better, so we could look back and say, let's see what we did when we had a project in the harbour of Frankfurt. In that case we knew that we were not going to build, but it was good practice. After that we did another competition in Bremen, which is near Hamburg, which had a similar brief: a river harbour, far away from the city, which now has to be transformed as a city. So we had other solutions that were much more crazy, but then when we were faced with that same problem in Hamburg, we could respond with all that knowledge. That's why we want to present all of this together.

Left: HKDI Architecture students at a three-day workshop in EMBT Studio, Barcelona

Below: The EMBT exhibition at HKDI gallery

