

Shelly mcNamara

Luigi Bocconi University Project Milan. 2002 to 2007.

Our Milan

We came to Milan in misty October, when time stands still with no light or shade to tell the time of day.

Small observations led to big moves. Observing the stone floor of the city, the rugged solid geological walls of the city, not pretty, but challenging.

On the campus are the heroic buildings of Pagano & Muzio, with Moretti not far away on Corso Italia!

We step from a noisy street into a lush courtyard with an aviary filling the space with birdsong. A city of hard exteriors and friendly interiors.

We begin.

We see that this city is full of 'big spaces...we should make another one...this city has beautiful rooms...la Scala, Stazione Centrale....we should try to make another one....this city is rugged, robust tough defensive solid, we should make a building like this. We have never made a building like the Bocconi building. We would never have thought of making a building like this except in Milan. Half the building carved out of the ground, virtually no windows on the outside and a myriad of courtyards and suspended gardens inside. Solid 'ceppo' walls to the city, a hard stone which does not deteriorate with the effects of pollution. Obviously a good reason why it has been used throughout the years in Milan. They fix the stone directly to the substructure so the joints are tiny and so the ceppo will give the building a weighty monolithic quality. We could not build like this in Dublin, this is a different tradition. We made this choice when two weeks after we had won the competition the client asked "what stone do you want to use?". We said "there is this amazing stone on Via Brera we have never seen a stone like this...it is like a geological concrete". They took out a book of stone and we found our stone and it was 'ceppo'.

They said "but this is ordinary stone, it's all over Milan, we have many beautiful stones in Italy that you could choose from". "But we want this building to feel like a piece of Milan, not an import" we replied. So they put us in a car which took us to the ceppo quarry one hour north of Milan. The quarry was like a mining operation. We were driven through a hole in the mountain into the 'interior' where we found 8m x 8m x 8m columns, 8mx8mx8m voids etc., a space carved out of the interior of the mountain! An extraordinary place. But for us this visit was a confirmation of the sense of 'genius loci' we had felt on the streets of Milan....the connection between the geology of the immediate landscape and the city. Even the forms we had unconsciously made in the building were here. We came back to Milan and said to the client "you know your university building is out there in the quarry, maybe you should just go and occupy it!"

They had to buy the quarry in order to have enough stone to build the building so in a way we will be bringing the mountain to the city.

Later we are told, when we present our project, "you are more Milanese than the Milanese themselves". This is a good moment.

So for us, the ordinary is transmogrified through architecture. Architecture confers significance on the ordinary. The use of the word ordinary suggests the neglect of the beauty of things observed in the gutter, in the hedge, in the alley.

And context? The local is the universal, the local is reality, there no such thing as a universal reality. The perspective of the individual is from the centre looking out. If one reverses this the individual is nothing.