



Benedetta Tagliabue

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Benedetta Tagliabue studied architecture at the Istituto di Architettura di Venezia (IUAV and currently acts as director of the international architecture firm Miralles Tagliabue EMBT, founded in 1994 in collaboration with Enric Miralles, based in Barcelona, Shanghai and Paris.

Among her most notable projects built are the Edinburgh Parliament, Diagonal Mar Park, the Santa Caterina market in Barcelona, Campus Universitario de Vigo, and the Spanish Pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo which was awarded the prestigious RIBA International “Best International Building of 2011” award.

Current studio projects include the Business School of Fudan University in Shanghai, office towers in Xiamen and Taichung, public spaces of HafenCity in Hamburg Germany, and the metro station Clichy-Montfermeil in Paris, France (1st prize in competition), the Naples Underground Central Station in Italy, among others.

Her studio works in the fields of architecture, design of public spaces, rehabilitation, interior and industrial design. Her poetic architecture, always attentive to its context, has won international awards in the fields of public space and design.

In the teaching field, she has been a visiting professor at Harvard University, Columbia University and Barcelona ETSAB, lecturing regularly at architecture forums and universities, and is part of jurors around the world, e.g. the Princesa de Asturias awards and since 2014 she is part of the jury of the Pritzker Prize. In 2004 she received an honorary doctorate from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland.

Her work received the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2005, the National Spanish Prize in 2006, the Catalan National prize in 2002, City of Barcelona prize in 2005 and 2009, FAD prizes in 2000, 2003 and 2007.

She received the 2013 RIBA Jencks Award, which is given annually to an individual or practice that has recently made a major contribution internationally to both the theory and practice of architecture. And in May 2019, she received the Cross of Sant Jordi granted by the Generalitat of Catalonia for the excellence of her professional practice in the field of architecture worldwide.

She is also the director of the Enric Miralles Foundation, whose goal is to promote experimental architecture in the spirit of her late husband and partner Enric Miralles.

Luis Palmero: *First of all, we would like to thank you, Benedetta, for attending this interview. We met personally a couple of years ago in the Italian city of Matera on the occasion of a master conference that took place there about your work.*

At that time, I told you that I knew Salvador Gilabert with whom I have a friendship of many years, in addition to parallel careers at the Universitat Politècnica de València and I allowed myself the audacity to insist on the possibility of interviewing you.

The purpose of interviewing you in Vitruvio is to add value to our journal, edited by the digital platform of the Polytechnic University of Valencia, to disseminate technology and sustainability in the field of architecture and engineering with important international dissemination. For Vitruvio International Journal of Architectural Technology and Sustainability is an honor to be able to count on you.

This year we celebrate the tribute to your husband Enric Miralles (1955-2000), since last year due to the pandemic there was no possibility, but in these months, from May to December we have seen that there is a very important activity with very interesting programmed events where the work of Miralles and yours will be shown descriptively, as well as various exhibitions, publications, conferences, etc... I am interested in asking you how are you living this event from your personal perspective? Why all these events organized by the Enric Miralles Foundation also represent a return to the cultural activity of the city, in this case, Barcelona, it is very important and necessary.

Benedetta Tagliabue: I'm delighted to hear how Vitruvio magazine is, I'm sure that since it's your wish, you do it personally with the sole desire to do something of the highest quality.

I think this is perhaps a bit useful to answer how we live this year Miralles, isn't it? The foundation is the headquarters of the Miralles events, and we want to do it. After all, we are passionate about it, because we have grown up with Enric. For many people in the firm, he is still like a master from whom we are still learning. We think it is important to make known this character who had an impressive strength. In fact, we keep the archive alive from the studio because keeping the archive may seem a simple thing, but an archive of this dimension is very complicated. Let's say, to keep it alive you need to spend a lot of effort. The archive is huge and we try to keep it active with the strength and momentum of our studio so we can open it, do exhibitions and other events.

The studio's archive is something that Enric himself always took great care of. The drawings he made, the collages, the memories, everything he kept very well. We have always taken care of it as he did. He used to say: I don't know if this drawing has value or not, the important thing is to keep it stored and in twenty years we will see.

Well, what we can see in each of the exhibitions, both in those that are already scheduled and those that are still to come, is a collection of drawings, plans, models, photographs, designs, collages, and furniture. But, above all, I think we can see more than anything else the complex personality of an artist who expressed himself above all in architecture and who was very complete. He was an architect who used any idea related to art for his creative process. It has been very nice to be able to divide the exhibitions into several of his facets.

We have convinced the City Council and the Generalitat, who have also been enthusiastic about the subject, and we thought it was nice, not only to show some of his architecture, so we have mounted several different exhibitions



Figure 1 | Santa Caterina Market. Barcelona, Spain 2005. Photo: Roland Halbe.

on his work. In the most architectural one at the Tinell museum, four projects are presented, where they look like impressive documents, it is overwhelming the amount of material that is displayed. In the Arts Santa Monica museum, we have been able to explain photography as that process that Enric used to show that reality is a reality that you could see from many points of view. In the next exhibition to be held at the Disseny Hub, we will show the furniture that Enric had never thought to be reproduced. We have never been designers, it was really like making pieces for specific places and especially for our house because the house was our place of experimentation. Now we are fortunate to be able to reproduce some of the furniture at home and realize that the only fundamental thing was mobility, that all the pieces designed have the possibility of having more than one position and of being elements of great practicality. This moving in space, being

one thing but also being something else, is a constant that Enric always liked.

Then there is Enric's facet as a teacher, which was a constant since he was still a student. He taught as a student and continued teaching as a learning process, not only from him to others but also from himself learning from the students. He always loved this.

The last exhibition is at the Foundation, which is the continuity in the studio, what we have managed to do thanks to Enric's strength that we carry inside. And this is also a bit of hope for the other generations. How much can we continue to learn from him in the future?

LP: *Certainly, for me, he was a person who was ahead of his time with a timeless design as with that multi-practicality*



Figure 2 | Holistic and Wellness Center. Adeje, Tenerife, Spain 2019. Photo: Paolo Fassoli.

of the furniture for example, and always with an exquisite taste.

On the other hand, I wanted to ask you what the continuation meant, that is, to carry out the important works in execution and that were a little, let's say stopped in time after the disappearance of Enric. In the case of the Santa Caterina Market or the Scottish Parliament, where with great determination you were finally able to bring them to a good end, right? I suppose it must have been a very difficult process. In addition, then you started a personal journey where we can find very interesting reflective and architectural concepts. And a second question would be about this already personal path, do you think internally, that your work in the way of projecting individually has a certain "opposition" to the project concepts that Enric had, or, on the contrary, they are united to yours in a unique discourse?

BT: I think it is a conversation, I have always seen our studio in conceptual continuity. It's having a conversation with Enric, even though he is no longer with us physically.

But reading his notes, remembering him, you can follow the conversation.

We indeed have this new structure that sets us apart. But I think he would have been amused, for example, to see all the theme that we have been dealing with these years about fabrics, like natural wicker and now with this experiment that we have taken to the Venice Biennale, a project with artificial fabric. I am sure that these themes are arguments that Enric would have liked ideologically and who knows how many things he would have taken from there.

LP: Yes, for sure. And talking a bit about your latest works, we can find a great technological and expressive development through materials, and with a coherent vision on sustainability. To give some examples we can cite the Naples station project, the metro station in the Clichy neighborhood in Paris, or the Tibetan health center in Tenerife. Using the predominance of the material as you have already demonstrated in an evident way in the case of the pavilion of the Shanghai Expo with the treatment



Figure 3 | Fudan Campus Business School. Shanghai, China (under construction). Photo: Shen Zhonghai.

of wicker. A very important and innovative project, with emphasis on the discourse of interaction between tradition and contemporaneity.

We have seen that this begins to be a constant in your work, by reusing not only the traditional materials of a place, such as the use of wood as a fundamental element of the project. Another clear example of this is the ceramics that has always been in your palette, a clear example is Santa Caterina, a reference project and that I present in my classes as an example of the concept of the recovery and enhancement of the material, not only for the color, shape, texture, but also of course for the reinterpretation of the value of ceramics in our culture. In 2015 in Valencia, I was the director of the International Congress on reuse in architecture and we fully agreed that the discourse of recovery, reuse, and reinterpretation of materials is fundamental and necessary.

BT: It is nice to use all this series of materials and above all to get closer to the issue of sustainability, these are things that develop little by little. For example, Enric said

at the beginning: I am experimenting one by one with the materials as I go forward with my career. For example, in the pergolas he built in Parets del Vallès, he experimented with the steel structure and a little with wood. Then he began to introduce the subject of concrete, and I think that, for a time, he didn't know how to use wooden structures. He didn't like plywood very much at first, then we started with Santa Caterina; making timber in a very specific way with beams and curved purlins. We made it piece by piece in a very special way, it was really nice because nobody knows, but the wood pieces, which are each different, were made in a small artisan workshop. The couple's name was Fermín and Fermina, the work took up their entire atelier for a year, and the most curious thing is that they named each of the pieces with their name: the duck, the horse, etc

With ceramics, it happens that now it seems to be a renewed classic, but in 1997 it was not. It was in those years when we met Toni Cumella, in our studio he showed us what he was doing in Park Güell with Elías Torres to replace the ceramic bench in Park Güell. Toni, had this

desire to do more things in architecture, not only rehabilitation, also new ones, so we started with him doing things in the Diagonal mar park project... a pity that Enric could not see finished any of the works we started with Toni. Then we collaborated in Santa Caterina which we finished later in 2005 and I think Enric would have loved it, it was another of the materials where he was starting to work with great commitment.

Then the presence of Salva Gilabert in the studio has been important to introduce issues of sustainability, how to make houses and ecological buildings at a more direct level and it has been a lot of fun. We have also worked with Ove Arup engineering in this sense for several developments. For example, that project you mention in Tenerife is a project where we have collaborated with Salva and in which the theme of reusing pre-existences has been key. We have combined the structures in ruins with local and natural materials, this has been fundamental in the regeneration. In other words, we did not throw away anything we found. On the contrary, we tried to keep everything, but yes, we transformed it and tried to make it sustainable. Something that seemed impossible with the ruin we found. Actually, if you see the images of what the place looked like when we found it, you will see that it was awful.

So the use of wood has helped a lot in the fact of reusing and combining materials and giving it value, redoing the topography, putting more soil from other demolitions, adjusting the wrong levels, etc.... It has been a fantastic job.

LP: *I have seen that you give a lot of importance to the encounter of architecture with the place, it is interesting the way of taking advantage of the environment, of understanding it.*

Salvador Gilabert: In this project in the coastal area of Adeje, in addition to taking care of the architecture, the regeneration of the urbanization has been important, at the local and urban levels. The impact of the project has been impressive, how the whole neighborhood or even the town has been enriched by this action. This action is not only a use of sustainable materials in architecture, but it is also acting on the social side that has achieved the reactivation of cultural and economic activity in the surrounding area.

We have all done our bit, but in the end, this global regeneration is a way of working that Benedetta is developing, which I believe is fundamental. Another example is the Clichy metro station and social buildings project in Paris, where they have worked on the regeneration and integration of a degraded environment. I want to say

that Benedetta is putting a lot of emphasis on integrated regeneration. But this is best explained by Benedetta.

BT: I love how you have explained this.

In Paris we follow a strategy that does not only encompass the station itself, but transcends to what are the surroundings in an issue that is not only architectural, but is intimately linked to the social, and, were to raise these questions, is fundamental. This is an indivisible part of the project and architecture cannot be designed without taking into account the environment and social conditions. It seems to me that they are key.

We have to take into account that we are in one of the most socially complicated places in Paris. That's where all the protests started in 2005 on the outskirts of Paris. It's a place where the social situation was particularly hard because this place outside Paris was planned as a Le Corbusier city and linked to the fantastic network of connections. But, only the blocks were built and the whole communication system was abandoned. Moreover, let's say, the public space and its relationship with the social part was abandoned, thus creating a ghetto for many years.

Now, with all this great performance program "Le Grand Pari", Paris is doing a pharaonic work to connect all the suburbs. But if you don't also go to a more micro level, intervening in the different social and economic facets of the places where these connections will be made, the pharaonic work would not be useful either. Let's say that these actions are the beginning to later give way to social improvements in each of the places. So the subway stations have to be an excuse so that, around them, the whole urban fabric begins to improve, that squares are generated, meeting places, that the activity works, that there are new houses.

We are with one of these stations in this neighborhood, which is a project where we are also experiencing all the complexity of the bureaucracy in France; everything is very complex. In addition, we have won the Masterplan for the station's surroundings where we are working with public spaces, housing, and all these issues that, together with the metro station and its connections, really have to be elements of social transformation.

LP: *So it is an architecture resulting from observation. It is a sincere architecture because there is no brand pattern.*

There is a work of architects who are already very well known, identitarian. We can be anywhere in the world and observe the brand of certain buildings. But your architecture is very varied and I think that is an architecture that



Figure 4 | Directional Center of Naples. Naples, Italy (under construction). Photo: Paolo Fassoli.

shows a lot of honesty. That is, in the sense of adapting to a place, trying to understand what is happening, observing, knowing and then reflecting. And well, this is like everything else, sometimes it will be more or less to the liking of some or all. But I think it is to highlight this quality that you imprint in your proposals.

BT: Well, I think this comment is wonderful. On the subject of tastes and preferences, I once gave a lecture to a group of neighbors there in Clichy, and luckily it was already online, all happy, I was very sincere in explaining the project and I received strong criticism from the neighbors. But at the same time, it was also nice because you see that they are very feisty people and they also need a little bit of explanation. Because all new things are strange at the beginning and it is difficult to accept them if they are not understood, no matter how well studied they are, they have to be explained. You have to say that you really do it sincerely or at least try to do it and then we will see. I don't know if it will work later or if they will set fire to everything we have done.

LP: *Let's hope not.*

BT: I don't know, at the moment you can't tell.

LP: *Going into other topics, I'm interested in your way of acting on space, I've seen a design of yours for a lamp that is like a magnificent ceiling. It inspires me to look at it, because it made me travel suddenly to a dome. And this is magnificent, to feel the architecture in this way, the truth is that I really liked to see it.*

On the other hand, we are seeing that now that the studio has projects with a priority client, as is the case of China, is it casual or intentional? Because well, indeed, the situation we went through in Spain was really hard and a few architects like Vicente Guallart, Manuel Monteserín and others, have also undertaken many commissions there. The question is, where do you see the future of EMBT studio, after this repositioning in China, could it be that your way of designing or dealing with issues that were previously dealt with in Europe will change?

BT: Well, no, I have never seen that we are working in China because we don't want to be in Europe, on the contrary. Let's say that this openness towards China is also because I have a very special attraction towards China. When I was 18 years old, my uncle took me and my cousin on a trip China, to communist China. At that time nobody went there and it was an amazing experience for me. I fell in love, it was the China where everyone rode bicycles, everyone wore a bellboy uniform, with the same cap and the red star. It was also noticeable that there was a millenary background there and that here in Europe, we were like beginners compared to them in some subjects. Then and now China has always attracted me. It is true that I was lucky enough to win the Spanish pavilion at the Shanghai Expo in 2010, a moment of crucial and important change, and this transition we are making seems to me like an adventure.

Enric said that he always taught at the university, because for him learning was the main reason to be an architect. And I think that for us it is also, let's say, what interests me most is through our profession, to learn. With China we can learn first of all because it is an awakened people, then because it is a nation of enormous size for us.

We in Europe have a lot of valuable experiences that we can transfer to China. We have the experience, what we do not have are these huge dimensions. The Chinese numbers are something else, it is fantastic to be able to go through this experience, but, on the other hand, we are not sure that this can work for these conditions. It's a very different situation, proportions and size that we have never experienced, so I like it, I'm interested.

I am excited to be able to participate at a time when a nation as powerful as China is waking up, developing, and learning at an incredible speed. And what you were saying before about technology and sustainability as one of the fundamental issues, well, now, at this moment everything we are doing in China is based on technology, sustainability, and urban or territorial regeneration, it is really interesting. They always ask you to be at the highest level, they always ask you for more. It is not very difficult that when you are doing a project in China they tell you, oh how nice, wonderful, and immediately after they tell you: but we want a little bit more, we want you to be a little bit more creative. This is something that is almost never said to you here in Europe.

I mean demand also from the creative point of view. They ask you to do your best, and this is very exciting.

LP: Yes, I was in China and the truth is that the sensation was amazing. When you see a four-story building with bamboo scaffolding, they are giving you a lesson, they

are telling you that they know the material and that they are capable of doing this kind of thing with full knowledge of the facts. When you get closer and see how they have been able to do it, you understand their technology and their respect for tradition. This was not more than 5 years ago, that is to say, that in a full constructive vortex of skyscrapers one finds these things. It seems a great opportunity and it is true that sometimes we may have a slightly distorted image. We need to get to know their culture better and understand that they are very powerful people who want to do things well, and they do.

BT: Yes, and they have already done it, they have made a great transformation. I went back to China in 2002 when I participated as a juror for the competition of the Olympic Stadium project, it was a luxury jury, and it was a very interesting process. It was incredible, then I came back in 2007 and for the Olympic Games, and it was already another China, it had already changed. During the Expo years there was another evolution, from 2010 until now, the evolution in everything related to architecture and urban planning has been incredible.

LP: Yes, there is huge planning, I was told that in the city where I was there were four million inhabitants, but in two years there would be nine and this is incredible. This means that urban planning is transformed every little while with a population and exponential increase where new infrastructures of all kinds have to be built.

BT: Yes, look, we have won a competition in Shenzhen to build the Conservatory of Music complex within the University campus, we have a client that is the University, but then there is the City Council with important people behind, you notice when we have a meeting with the Planning Bureau that has great teachers there. They are very well prepared professionals who know very well how to manage the growth of a megacity and it is very interesting.

The bad thing is that I have to get up at 3 a.m. to attend these meetings, and you end up saying good night to China and almost at the same time I have to say good morning.

LP: Going into another subject that interests us, you run a studio with many collaborators and many young people. And I've been teaching students for many years, always in the first year. So you realize that these students, and I suppose your collaborators, in the same way, bring us a lot of spontaneity, a lot of freshness, and also a lot of willingness to learn and do things. I wanted to ask you if you understand this, because sometimes they make me reflect, for example, on some teaching methodology and they say to me: hey, and this, couldn't you explain it this

way or this other way? And we realize that time goes by and as they say, it is necessary to renew or die. Because sometimes, we are not aware of that fresh, renewing idea that someone who is receiving the classes from the other side can transmit to you. In your studio, does it happen that someone arrives from China, Norway, Italy, or elsewhere and brings new ideas to your projects?

BT: Yes, of course, it doesn't happen so much to tell you, but we have them here, so it's a continuous learning process. That's one of the things that excites me too, to have the young people, the people of the new generations coming here to learn, but at the same time, we learn. Obviously, that's a fantastic thing. I think this evolving thing is happening without me realizing it, but it's happening through them. For example, in the way we transmit information to each other, how we communicate. It's reciprocal work and I learn from them, almost without them realizing it.

LP: *I also see that you are generous and that there are many team members. You indeed work in a multidisciplinary way, which increases the number, but they are teams of people, well, I don't know them personally, but from the photos, I've seen they are very young teams. I understand that when you are 25 years old and you are part of the realization of a project it gives you personal satisfaction and reward.*

BT: It's very nice, I think it's also very useful to be the oldest because age gives you confidence, it helps me to transmit security and experience.

LP: *Sure, sure. BT: Very nice. Well, if you feel like telling us anything else, I'm done. I really wanted to thank you for these minutes we have spent chatting, and also Salva because he is a great friend with whom I share many things.*

BT: Salva, you have mounted this exhibition of Enric Miralles Photos & Collages within the events of Enric's anniversary. It's fantastic, it's like an extension of his thesis and we've gone back into our archives that were closed since the 90s. Lucky what we found. The little things had all disappeared, but we were able to organize it, we had so much fun to see it, to discover it.

SG: The fun is that it is a real privilege and a marvel to be able to see all these original documents in person. And in that sense Benedetta is very generous with everyone; with the city, and with all the people who are passionate about Enric and architecture in general. With me in particular, because this process of finding the original and unpublished photographs and collages in the archive has been exciting. Also with the whole

academic world for exposing those hand drawings, the original plans and all the models that are now shown in all their value. It is impressive and really exciting to see it live, because with these projects we have learned and taught the students architecture, to be able to see it live, the texture of the pencil, the color, the photography, the models, to see it there, in front of them, is a real privilege.

LP: Well, I hope to be able to visit all the exhibitions soon and greet them in person. It will be a pleasure.

LP: Thank you very much, Benedetta and Salva.

BT: Thank you very much Luis and good luck in the adventure of your magazine.

Luis M. Palmero Iglesias

Salva Gilabert Sanz