



Photo: Adam Garstka

Renato Rizzi

INTERVIEW by PAOLA ARDIZZOLA and JOANNA GRĄDZKA APRIL-MAY 2022

Full Professor in Architectural Design at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura (IUAV) in Venice, he carries out an intense intellectual activity by connecting teaching, theory, research, and practice. Prize of the Italian Presidency of the Republic for architecture 2017, he has delivered seminars and lectures in some of the main universities including Harvard, UIC Chicago, ETH, etc. From 1984 to 1992 he collaborated with Peter Eisenman, New York, on the projects Romeo and Juliet, Verona (1986, Stone Lion, III Architecture Biennale of Venice), La Villette Park, Paris (1986), Monte Paschi, Siena (1988), etc. Among the main international projects: Great Egyptian Museum, Cairo (2002, third prize); MOMA Warsaw (2007, Honorable Mention); John Paul II Center, Krakow (2007, special mention); Torre della Ricerca, Padua (2008, fourth prize, in collaboration with Peter Eisenman); Museum of Judaism, Ferrara (2010, Special Mention). Main projects completed: Ghiaie Sports Area, Trento (1984-1998); Fortunato Depero Museum of Futurism, Rovereto (1992-2008); Gdańsk Shakespearean Theater (2004-2013). His projects are published in the main international magazines such as Casabella, Domus, Architectural Review, Detail, and have been exhibited at the Venice Biennale (1984, 1985, 1996, 2002, 2010 and 2016), Triennale di Milano, Accademia di San Luca, etc. Awards: Fritz Höger, Berlin, 2017; Architizer A, Belgium, 2016; Iconic Award, Monaco DB, 2015; Gold Medal, Milan, 2015, 2009; Golden Compass, Milan, 2015, 2011; Council of Europe, Landscape Award, 2009. Some significant publications: *Il Cosmo della Bildung*, Mimesis 2016; *Unexpected Parma*, MUP 2013; *The Daimon of Architecture*, Mimesis 2014; *John Hejduk, Incarnatio*, Marsilio 2010; *The Divine of the Landscape*, Marsilio 2008; *John Hejduk BRONX, Manual in verse*, Mimesis 2020. He recently founded in Venice the *Nuova Scuola Architettura*, a free school that focuses on the urgency of a new (heretical) gaze at Architecture, a necessity which derives from the cultural abyss of our time. The Accademia Nazionale di San Luca in Rome is currently paying a tribute to his oeuvre in a grand exhibition of gypsum models and maquettes titled "*eden-eden. Renato Rizzi*", which can be visited until March third, 2023..

This interview was made possible thanks to the course "Project, City, and Society" we gave during last summer semester at Gdańsk Polytechnic of Technology in Danzig, Poland. The theatre of Renato Rizzi is a reference icon not only within the urban fabric, but more finely in the cultural milieu of the city. Through the dialogue with the architect, we tried to 'force' him to unveil the invisible of the project. Not an easy task...

On the wings of Copernicus. The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk and other sky's visions

Joanna Grądzka: *Why did you decide to take part in the Shakespearean Theatre competition, especially why Gdańsk (Danzig)?*

Renato Rizzi: The reason is very easy and simple. It was because I consider a new theatre and generally the theatre typology in architecture as extremely interesting – especially how to design theatres today. For this reason, we decided to take part in this international competition.

JG: *And then, did you decide to find a Polish team to collaborate with?*

RR: No, no it was not like this. When we decided to participate to the competition I had already my team in Italy I was working with, more or less between 10 and 15 people. And we decided to take a trip for a whole week, or maybe 10 days to Gdańsk just to see – first of all – the place, to understand the landscape, to read history, go to museums, everything that we could collect to understand better the value of the place. Afterward, we came back to Italy and started to work on the project. The



Figure 1 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. Bird's eye view of the theatre within the cityscape. Photo: Bahaa Bou Kalfouni.





Figure 2 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. The perimeter walking system, privileged outpost to overlook the city. Photo: Bahaa Bou Kalfouni.

competition was open to international teams, but we have been working on our own till the end of the first phase. Then, after many complications, we won the award and received the contract to work on the first phase of this project. In this case, I was obliged to hear Polish engineers and other local professionals because it was impossible to work just with the Italian team.

JG: *Do you remember how long did it take to develop the design process?*

RR: The design process took four years to develop everything and it was not so easy. First of all, we had to overcome the problem between languages. And then it was also a problem with mentality. Apart from this, the first phase was not so complicated. The most complicated aspect was when they decided to start



constructing the building. The design process until the inauguration of the building took about fourteen years, 10 of which, more or less, were dedicated to the construction of the theatre. At a certain point – after four years – the municipality of Gdańsk decided to cut off the contract with the first construction company. Indeed, they had a delay according to the time schedule and that is why the commissioner changed it, so we finished the project with a second company. But

these kinds of problems are recurrent, there are everywhere, therefore it is not a typical phenomenon just for Poland or Italy.

JG: *The design process took four years but how long did the competition take?*

RR: Oh, competition was, I think, 3 months – something like this.



Figure 3 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. The theatre stands between the interstices of time and the city's history.
Photo: Bahaa Bou Kalfouni

JG: Very often, you mention about “casket idea”. Was it your very first thought when you first came to Gdańsk?

RR: No no, it wasn't. First of all, after reading about Gdańsk history and literature, for example Günter Grass who won the Literature Nobel Price, then working with Andrzej Wajda who was one of the jury members in the competition, I wanted to go back and

see his movies and to understand his idea developed in *Man of iron*,¹ an interesting and very important movie. And then we cannot forget that the theatre

¹ *Man of Iron* (Człowiek z żelaza) is a Polish film drama from 1981, directed by Andrzej Wajda. Based on the screenplay by Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski, it is the sequel of *Man of Marble*. The plot is set in 1980 during the August events.



is a Shakespearian theatre or Elizabeth theatre. The typology of Elizabeth theatre is a court without roof, but the competition call required to have a roof. And then the competition had another very complicated requirement, to develop an Elizabethan theatre together with Italian theatre. Thus, it means that the stage in the Elizabethan is the centre of the court, but the stage in the classical Italian theatre is on the back and an infinitive point is the focal point of

this type of theatre. As a matter of fact, there are two different diagrams completely in opposition and it was very, very difficult to combine those contradictions between Elizabethan and Italian stage.

JG: We have one more question about the design process: what was your experience in collaborating with a Polish team? Are you satisfied?



Figure 4 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. The plasticity of the buttress system. Photo: Bahaa Bou Kalfouni.

RR: At the end of the process, I could say yes. We had many difficulties, of course, but the work we did together was very well-done.

JG: *Do you often collaborate with multicultural team?*

RR: If I have a chance – absolutely! We did many competitions abroad – in New Zeland, South Africa, in Russia also.

JG: *We saw your lecture in Moscow...*

RR: Oh, yes! In Russia there is one of my best friends, Aleksander Brodsky. He is an architect, a very great architect.

JG: *Back to our questions, we have a concern about the budget. After all, the building became very expensive. Did the investor try to lower the costs, or push you in making some part of the construction more affordable in economic terms?*

RR: Yes, you are absolutely right. Every client tries to reduce the budget of the project, no questioning. It is the law of life so we also had to face a money problem. But to be honest, nobody told me *we cannot do this because it is too expensive*. My very worry was the roof, the open roof. And I was scared because the only modification could be not to open the roof. It is the most difficult structure to keep alive. But then, we did everything. Of course, there were many discussions about the roof. The roof was the most delicate structure to be built. We described very well in our project how to make this structure. And then, our client changed a little bit the structure to reduce the cost. And then we accepted, we had to accept this reduction but, suddenly, many other problems came up – how to open to roof etc. So, the most important issue was to decide whether doing a construction partition of the roof in three different places, producing the wings in Poland, making an engine in France, and setting a mechanical system for opening in Spain. And I understood the importance of all of this but I was really scared because I had to fly to Toruń, then to French, and to Madrid, so combining these challenges it was quite difficult. But there was one issue, absolutely interesting: when they told me they were going to build the wings in Toruń, I said *Oh my God, this is the death of the project, how is it possible*. But then they took me by car to Toruń from Gdańsk, it is 3 hours driving or so, and when we approached the city, I read the name of the city “Toruń” and under its name there was another name. When I read this, I said *Oh my God this is the best place to build the wings!* The other name was indeed Mikotaj Kopernik...Copernicus! He was born in Toruń and went to study in Italy, to Bologna, Padua, and Ferrara and then

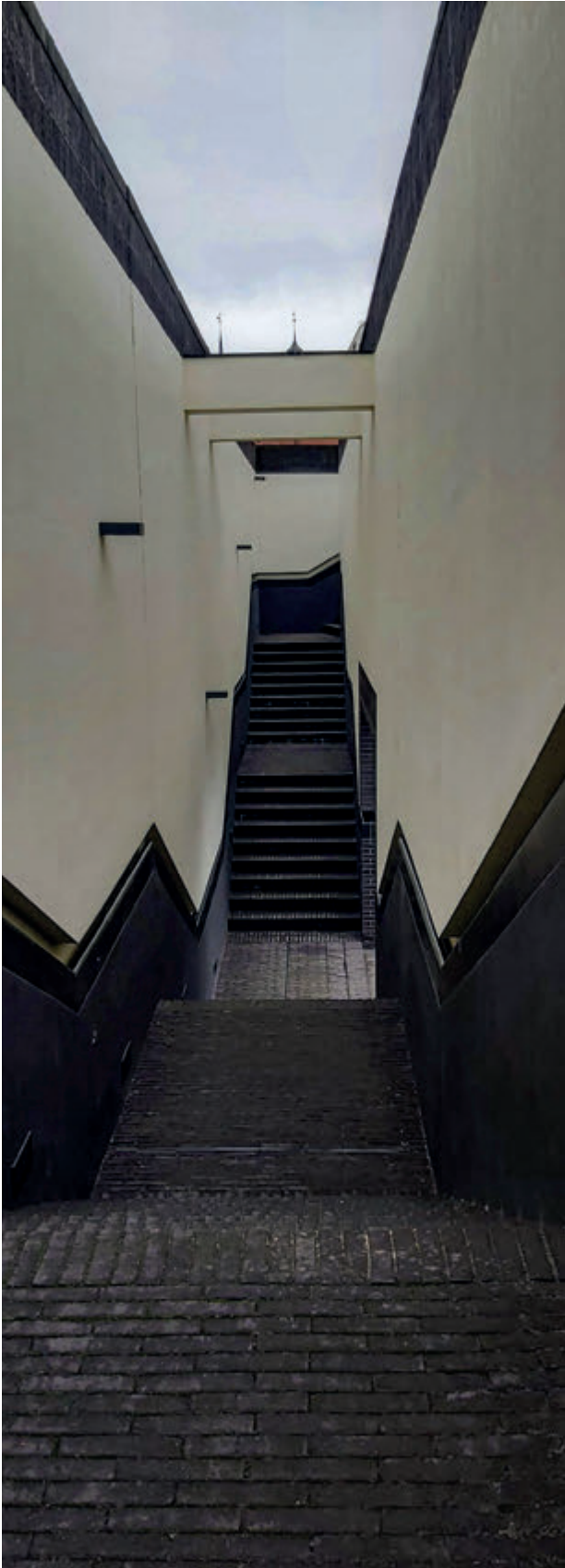


Figure 5A, 5B | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. Sequences of the exterior promenade. *Photo*: Bahaa Bou Kalfouni.



Figure 6 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. Technological detail of the closed roof. Photo: Bahaa Bou Kalfouni.

he came back to Poland, where he made the revolution on how to look to the sky. The wings of the theatre roof are another way to look to the sky so, for this reason, the wings are under the name of Copernicus.

JG: *Amazing, this is great! We have not heard about that!*

RR: This is the conjunction that sometimes happens with the history. I was very worried at the beginning when they decided to do the production there, but it was the best chance to do this out of anybody's will. Because nobody told me *Oh we go to Toruń because Copernicus was born there*. They just found the entrepreneur with enough money so he could do the steel structure of the wings there, that's it. But there is another issue I would like to focus on with you. Why? Because we decided to put the open roof even the competition said anything about it, they just wanted to have a roof. Today you cannot build any Elizabethan theatre without roof because in winter time, when it's raining, it is useless. The question is important because there were no other projects with open roof. Hence, the real question is: why we did it? I am asking you...

JG: *We think it has a strong connection to the past because there was no theatre with a roof, but the Italian one. We already read some of your reasons for this question, but could you let us know once more?*

RR: Do you remember the year of the competition?

JG: Yes, 2004.

RR: And doesn't it mean anything to you?

JG: It was historically an important period due to the general system changes in Poland.

RR: Yes but in this year Poland shifted from Russia to UE, and they entered officially European Union. And that's why this competition was made, because they could get some money from UE. So culturally and politically this shifting 180° was very important - and for this reason the roof is open. And the other reason is that in Gdańsk the Solidarność movement born and when you see any images from strike, the workers were like this [he shows hands raised to the sky and fingers with victory symbol] which is the symbol of freedom. Therefore, the same question came up to deciding to make the roof like this (in V shape). It has nothing to do with the Elizabethan tradition. It is linked to a problem and vision of our time in relation to the whole history. For an architect, it is not enough to be in the time where and when we live. We need to have visions, and to collect all history - from the beginning to the future.



Figure 7 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. The roof wings of the theatre in their state of stillness. Photo: Bahaa Bou Kalfouni.

JG: By doing this, you created a great symbol for Polish people, and for all those who approach the theatre.

RR: Yes, but the symbol has the most important feature in every project. Because architecture is a term composed by two “rules”, determined by *arche* + *techne*. *Arche*: it is something indomitable and belongs to the soul of the people but mainly to the soul of the world. So, it means that we have two gates, two ways of seeing – one is the gate with *techne* – this gate is based in our present time but there is, before *techne*, the *arche*, which is the very wild gaze that is able to see or to comprehend the whole universe. It sounds completely different! But every symbol comes from that horizon, does not come from us - because we are nominative. But if when listening the reasons of *arche* we are dative, we are whom is receiving from our back too, from the horizon of the universe. In this way, we are the receptor. This is completely different because we live in a world which is self-referential, which means “I like or I don’t like, I do or I don’t do” so everything is so indescribable but *arche* is something which is much wider than your eye. It is the most important theory or strategy inside every project that we do, no questioning. And it also there, in the project of the theatre in Gdańsk.

JG: *It sounds amazing and it is definitely something we would be pleased to develop in the future. We also have a question about functionality inside the building. We can observe that some functions, like the restaurant, is a little bit hidden in the building and there is no grand representative foyer or place where people can meet after the show. Was*

it made by purpose to not put so many spaces into places that are traversing?

RR: You should read very carefully the competition program. It is very strange but the main topic was the theatrical space and for example coffee and bar were not really contemplated. They wanted to have a museum space underneath because in that place they found historical remains, but then they decided to build a bar. They did it without asking me to do anything. This was really crazy.

JG: *A personal curiosity about the theatre in Gdańsk: if you could change something, what it would be?*

RR: Nothing. I could say if the project in 100% is your imagination, we reached 70% above it and 70% is really a lot so I cannot complain too much about this.

Paola Ardizzola: Your theatre in Gdańsk reveals a strong syncretistic component: in the new typological form - the conjugation of the Shakespearean theatre with the Italian one - in the use of materials - the solidity of the clinker and the complexity of the technological systems - in the subtle reference to ancient sacred architecture of northern Europe - in the sequence of external buttresses and in the lightness of the openable roof as a pointed arch that rises to an important level - and in the protean metaphors that it implies. This continuous approach with history refers to the concept of tradition in the etymological meaning of the term: tradition comes from the root of



Figure 8 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. The sitting place for the audience and the central stage. Photo: Adam Garstka.

the verb *traděre* and, with significant apparent ambiguity, the word betrayal also has the same root. In order for the architect to be a dreamer on the horizon of history, do you hold to be true that it is necessary to “betray the tradition” as the only authentic possibility of perpetuating it?

RR: I think we should agree on the themes we use. History and tradition are very ambiguous terms. If pronounced within contemporary culture, they have a very narrow and distorted meaning. History refers to a past (glorious? Terrible?) but dead. Tradition to an old, decayed language. This way of seeing and understanding words derives from an increasingly narrow horizon that belongs to Western culture (now globalized). And here we will sink into a chasm of questions. We would be overwhelmed by the same words we use as if they were stones falling from a mountain pediment rolling downstream.

We understand history as linear progress over time, as an arrow towards a better future. And so, tradition too resembles the steps of this hypothetical ameliorative progress (whilst it is violently degenerative).

But things are not like that at all. Just look at what is happening today. There is then another way to look at *history* and *tradition* that completely overturns the dominant vision in which we are paralyzed.

History epitomises the eternal actuality of the present (in which we live). While tradition, with its works, shows the line of the highest peaks of that *history*, which has certainly passed, but which we still admire for its fascination. Enchantment, amazement, wonder (like terror, anguish, pain) are the eternals that are renewed each time in the infinite possibility of the present. And the works, when such, reflect these eternals.

To close a discourse that would last a lifetime, we should be aware that our “I” is not the fulcrum of our arbitrariness (to do or to undo). We are not the *nominatives*, where the “I” prevails (for Carlo Emilio Gadda, the I is the booger of the nose, or the bray of the donkey). But we are the *datives*. Those who receive from the *indominables* of the eternals (from the *arché* of architecture!) the rays that we should reflect as special lenses (our singularity) in the works we design and build.



Figure 9 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. Detail of the roof wings overlooking the central space of the theatre. *Photo:* Adam Garstka.

This is a very long discourse, just mentioned here.

PA: *By its very nature, photography tends to iconify architecture. Do you think it is possible to identify an ideal sequence of photos that can effectively represent the intentions of your project for the theatre in Gdańsk?*

RR: From my point of view, it is very important to give the possibility of understanding the overall form of the theatre. For example, it seems to me an important point to provide an image that relates the silhouette of the theatre to the profiles of the city. The theatre is not a self-referential work, but derives from the political, cultural, landscape history of Gdańsk. Tadeusz Kantor (the actor's priesthood), Lech Walesa with his arms raised and Solidarność, the tin drummer by Günter Grass, the sense of the city walls...

Just looking always at details can confuse or divert anyone's gaze. While if seen with a more acute eye, for example the stone handrail, it can connect the canals of Gdańsk with the *rogge* (small artificial water canals

typical of Northern Italy) of Rovereto (cf. my project for the Depero museum).

The wings of the theatre rise not only by analogy with the Elizabethan theatres (open courtyards), but because they absorb the force of the workers' screams for the dignity of work, of the person. Or also for the cries of Oskar (G. G., *The tin drum*), the child who does not want to grow up and when he screams, he shatters all the window panes... In short, the photos should give a little understanding of all this tension of forces that converge into the form of the theatre.

PA: *The monographic theme of this Vitruvio issue is Architectural Spatiality and Technological Innovation, a theme already extensively investigated but which in post-pandemic times is cloaked in new semantic values, such as "Constructive flexibility in the domestic space" and "Interior design and spatial transformation", etc. Perhaps, however, the risk today is to develop a narrow-minded architecture that claims to give an immediate response without implications of long-term value. Do you share the idea*



Figure 10 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. Mass and void of the spaces in continuity to the theatre. *Photo: Adam Garstka.*



Figure 11 | R. Rizzi, The Shakespearean theatre in Gdańsk, 2005-2014. The stone handrail of the interior staircases as guise of the rogge, small artificial water canals. *Photo: Adam Garstka.*

that architecture is always an “emergency architecture” in some way, and that therefore it is not permissible for the architect, under any conditions and at no cost, to deal simply with functionalizing a space, but rather to remain always firm to the concept of Baukultur?

RR: If the emergency were addressed to the soul of the world as the sum of all the living souls of the cosmos (more or less, this is the meaning of the work of art, of poetry that means producing, of architecture), then the emergency is welcome. While the emergency in our present time is always a delayed and stale response. Always old compared to the dramas of life. Factual needs have forgotten existential destinies. Here it is not a question of being catastrophic, but of denouncing only one point: the role of the universities of architecture is no longer able to educate an architect. They are off axis. Totally. Universities are short-sighted. Indeed, they are blind to the very word architecture: Arché + Téchne. Indominable + dominable (!).

PA: *The last question. Among your works, the theatre of Gdańsk seems to us the most choral and the most humane. Actor Lawrence Olivier, who had played Henry IV in the theatre about 300 times, claimed to have really been Henry IV only once. Paraphrasing the statement, do you think it is legitimate to identify the architect’s work in which he has been freely himself to the end? If so, can we ask you what is it in your case?*

RR: In fact, we have come to your last question. Again. The architect, the authentic architect, has never been “freely himself” (to use your words). As it is commonly understood today. He is freely himself only when he comes to the awareness of being dative. But this condition requires the maturity of a radical overturning of the paradigm of contemporary culture. Of the way of teaching Architecture. Of the way of understanding Architecture also on our part.

It would be enough to reflect on an abused word: to be the subjects. But if the meaning of this word means *sub-jacere*, “being under”, it does not actually mean being under condemnation or punishment. Its meaning is quite different. We are the ones who are under by privilege. In this sense we are the *privileged* (this is the sense of *singularity*). We receive the gifts that the cosmos offers us in abundance and continuously and we should have to “translate” them into the works we should do (design). This is what “the freedom of the architect” would authentically mean. A metaphor valid for all men (term without gender, feminine and masculine). For the redemption *individual, collective, and of the world.*

Paola Ardizzola and Joanna Grądzka