

THE INTERVIEW

Renzo Piano **“We bring beauty to hospitals”**

From Athens, the great architect speaks about his projects in Greece creating spaces that bring a human dimension back into healthcare.

by our correspondent Raffaella De Santis

ATHENS

Renzo Piano comes across as an excited 84-year-old young man—not the great architect who has filled the world with museums, schools, and extraordinary architectural works. “Hospitals are the new frontier. We are at a turning point; we must know how to seize the spirit of the times.”

Perhaps this is the secret: eyes that light up. Perhaps only those who have this light can design visionary works. He is smiling, like Don Quixote had he too learned to measure his dreams. We sit down for the interview in the ‘Lighthouse,’ a large space under the roof of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, the project he achieved here in Athens during precisely the years in which Greece was experiencing a devastating economic crisis. The view is breathtaking, with the dazzling city surrounding us. “We start again from here, from where it all began, from the heart of European civilization.”

On a coffee table before us is the scale model of the hospital to be built in Komotini, in the northern region of the country. There will be a further two, one in Thessaloniki in Macedonia, and one in Sparta in the Peloponnese. Preceding those was one with Emergency in Uganda. “We are designing another in Palermo, while in Bologna we are finishing a children’s hospital, then the big hospital in Paris will follow.”

Did you decide to design hospitals before the pandemic? Had you realized beforehand that this was the new frontier?

“We are faced with an epochal change. As such it was understood that humanity must once again be placed at the forefront of health care. Over the last seventy years, hospitals have lost touch with people, becoming cold healing machines even when they are centers of excellence.”

Why specifically in Greece?

“In this small country live the roots of democracy. As we know, the word *politics* comes from the word *polis*. Think of the speech of Pericles to the Athenians: ‘Our administration favors the many instead of the few. Here in Athens we do this...’ Moreover, in ancient times politicians swore before the citizens that they would return the city of Athens more *beautiful* than they had received it. *Kalos* was the word and it referred to an ethical dimension.”

Could the word “beauty” be misleading?

“In fact, I use it sparingly, almost modestly, and in doing so I certainly do not allude to something superficial but to a deeper beauty. In ancient Greece, as I mentioned, the beautiful and the good, *kalos kagathos*, were intimately bound. This is also the case in Africa, in the Swahili language. Beauty is an exploration of the truth as demonstrated by the ancient *asklepieion*, which were healing temples. The hospitals should bring to mind those places, that original beauty which precedes medical science—respecting it, of course.”

Does architecture always have a political soul?

“All architectural works concern the *polis* and the people living there. We must be able to recreate a new humanism, and the hospitals are the outposts of this revolution. For this reason, even when they are privately funded—in this case entirely by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF)—they must remain public. With Umberto Veronesi we often spoke of the need to bring a human dimension back into health care.”

The idea is almost Renaissance-esque. Do you believe our present times, plagued by disease and war, allow it?

“Moments of crisis are the most opportune for trying out new approaches. Changes always occur in periods of transition, during which we are called upon to make a decision, which is the etymology of the Greek word *krisis*. We attempt to do this by creating buildings immersed in nature. To see trees outside of a window while hospitalized can make a difference. Hospitals are a place of *pathos*, of passion and anxiety, they exist in a suspended time and dimension but, like nature, they are also places of rehabilitation. This is why communal spaces, transparency and light are important, these are all elements which build a sense of community.”

The book *Atlantis*, written with your son Carlo, tells of your site visits prior to each project to familiarize yourself with the surroundings.

“Each place has its own *genius loci*, but to discover what this is you must know how to listen. Greece is a land of breezes and winds. And of bright light. The location is important. I remember one day with Gino Strada; at a certain point he gathered a fistful of clay from the ground. Had we not been there, had we not seen and touched, perhaps the hospital would have been different. Think of the cinema. The great directors of neorealist films possessed a talent for observing reality. Without this ability one falls into the trap of taking an academic approach and losing the connection with moods, sounds, and voices. In Nouméa, New Caledonia, I spent hours sitting on the tree trunks listening to the trade winds.”

Is this also a path to achieving sustainable architecture?

“I am from Genoa, I grew up in the Mediterranean, Greece is a land that is part of me. The three hospitals of Komotini, Thessaloniki, and Sparta will be built using wood, a sober material, beautiful and suitable for seismic zones. We source it from the forests in Bulgaria, where we then replant more trees. The challenge is to create zero emission buildings, which do not consume energy and respect the land that hosts them. I am as excited as fifty years ago.”

Do you feel like the same young man who designed the Beaubourg?

“At that time, I was living in London. Those were the years of the Beatles, of concerts standing in the streets. There was a contagious effervescence. We were free, perhaps reckless. With Richard Rogers we designed an open museum, the opposite of a mausoleum. Now I feel like I did then. We can break a taboo once again. This is how the world changes.”

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Renzo Piano was born in Genoa in 1937

Above, three images of the Komotini Hospital project