



Habitat Television Broadcast

Lorenzo Ciccarelli

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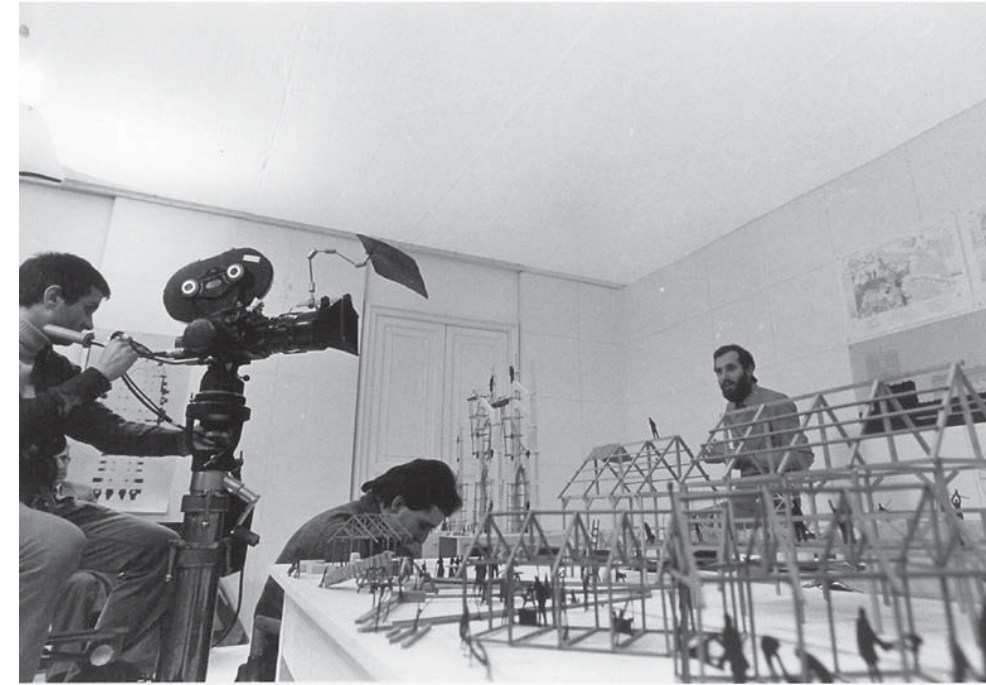
Involvement of the future users, responsiveness to the needs of the inhabitants and the innovative use of materials to make housing flexible and customizable over time: these are the threads unifying a series of proposals and projects that Renzo Piano developed in the late seventies with Peter Rice and a handful of collaborators. Moving beyond the great adventure of the Beaubourg, inaugurated in 1977, there followed years of change and reflection. At that time Piano was spending more time in Genoa, where he devoted himself to curious experiments, such as the collaboration with Fiat on an experimental vehicle, the project for small-scale prefabricated housing for reconstruction after the 1976 earthquake in Friuli Venezia Giulia. Or the search for a lightweight approach to construction experimented with Neighborhood Laboratories in the district of Otranto, Burano and Genoa in collaboration with UNESCO. Then there was the subject of this text, a TV program for RAI (the Italian public broadcasting service).

Significantly titled *Cantiere aperto* (Open Building Site), it took the form of a feature in ten episodes, edited by Renzo Piano with texts and screenplay by Magda Arduino, broadcast by RAI in 1979 as part of Habitat, a well-known program by Giulio Macchi (1918-2009), which was the first in Italy to deal with the environment and ecosystems. The films conceived by Piano and his collaborators sought “to restore the relationship between users and those who build.” It was an educational cycle of visual lessons that proposed “to demystify obscure and incomprehensible descriptions of construction techniques for non-specialists.” It dealt with the construction sites of the medieval cathedrals, the ingenious use of materials such as wood and steel, the different ways of benefiting from excavations in the ground or the construction of roofs, and

Foto 1_The employees of the Piano & Rice office in Genoa under a grid structure of wooden poles and aluminum joints, assembled during one of the episodes of *Cantiere aperto*, 1979.

Foto 2_Renzo Piano during recording of one of instalment of *Cantiere aperto*, 1979.

Foto 3_Renzo Piano and Noriaki Okabe during the recording of one of the episodes of *Cantiere aperto*, 1979.



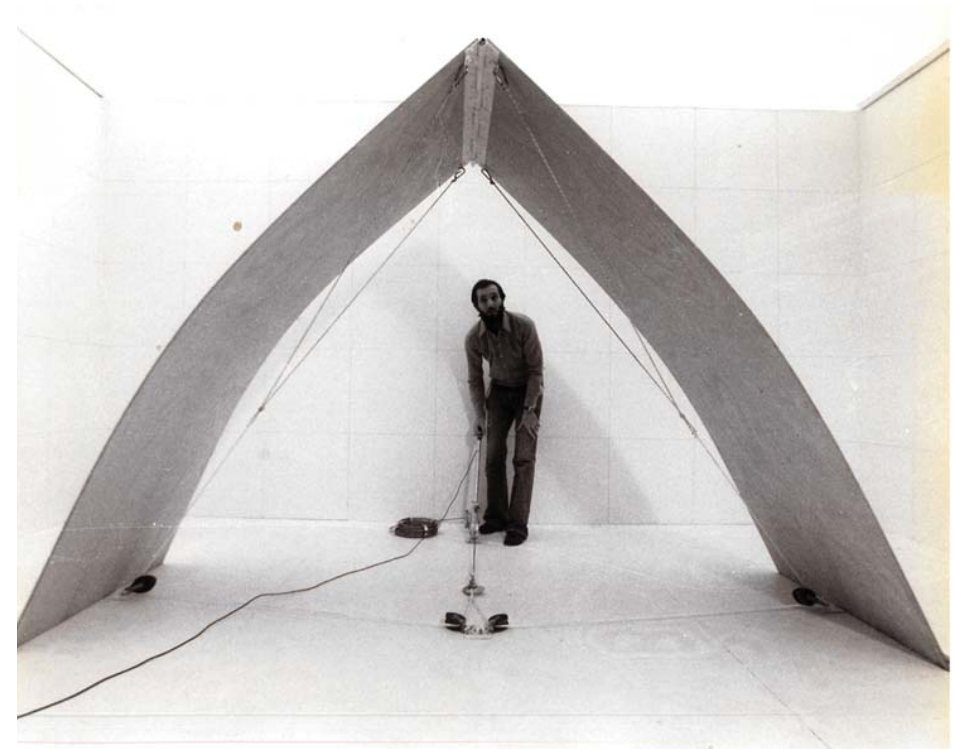
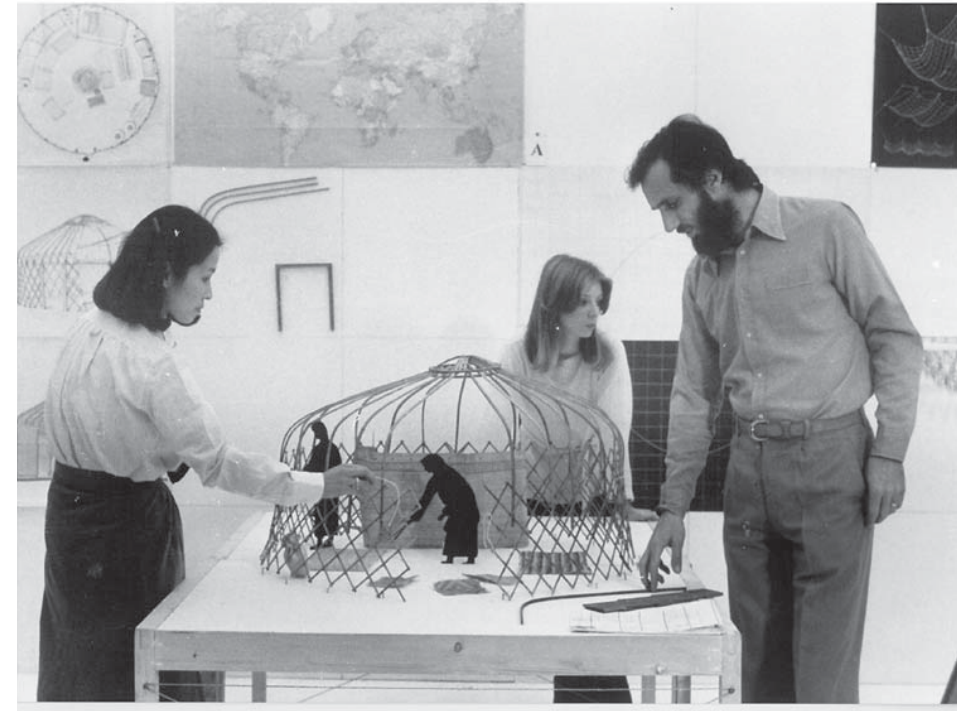
finally the idea of evolutionary space. Explanations of the elements of building, the sourcing of materials, their fabrication and jointing were regularly accompanied by demonstrations on models or building prototypes performed live by his partner architects, Shunji Ishida and Noriaki Okabe, and collaborators Sugako Yamada and Manuela Bonino.

“We need to recombine the skills,” Piano stated, “to recover an idea of architecture that has been lost over the centuries; architecture as design, construction, invention of production processes and even the tools of work, not limited simply to the packaging of aesthetic products.” In this respect, the construction of the medieval cathedrals offered a model rich in meanings, interpreted as “a place where no distinction was made between intellectual activities and manual activities,” where spatial ideation and constructional ingenuity were fused and the master mason was often called on to invent tools and machines for handling materials. Piano constantly stressed the principle of construction as the fruit of scientific research and the experimental method by working on models during the episodes of the program. They were displayed, for example, with the construction of an innovative truss that replaced every wooden element in tension with slender steel cables, or with emergency housing built out of two sheets of plywood suitably stiffened by induced stresses. With these prototypes, Piano sought to show how “research in construction does not necessarily mean large instruments or sophisticated systems,” and the unconventional use of poor or leftover materials could lead to the construction of innovative, ready-to-use structures.

The tents of desert Tuaregs or Mongolian yurts provided clear examples of this approach. The Tuareg’s house is a tool,” stated Piano, “an instrument for nomadic living.” In the same way,

Foto 4_Sugako Yamada Ishida and Manuela Bonino at work on the model of a yurt, 1979.

Foto 5_Renzo Piano applying tension to two plywood sheets for an emergency shelter, 1979.



the yurt was interpreted as a tool-house made up of standardized components. Light and portable dwellings, they were easy to assemble and modify depending on the changing needs of the users, structures in which there was nothing superfluous. Piano would reconstruct in the studio a model of the yurt or the balloon frame building system used by the American pioneers, a rapid composition of wooden planks and nails, both prefabricated and easy to transport on wagons. He insisted “on the quality of lightness in construction, synonymous with correctness and simplicity in the use of materials, ease of assembly, economy and appropriability by the user.”

All these ideas were given a systematic form in the conclusions of the last installment of *Cantiere aperto* devoted to the evolving dwelling, the idea of a free and flexible living space, which Piano was simultaneously experimenting with in Umbria and which, a few years later, would inspire the construction of Il Rigo housing estate at Corciano. Faced with the prototype of one of these homes, assembled for the TV camera, Piano concluded that “the skills of specialists, science and technology have to be brought to citizens so that they can use them to solve their problems and improve their living conditions.”

Foto 6_Sugako Yamada Ishida at work on the model of a yurt, 1979.

Foto 7_Model of a Tuareg tent, 1979.

Foto 8_Manuela Bonino at work on models of the balloon frame construction system, 1979.

Foto 9_Sugako Yamada Ishida at work on the model of a Gothic cathedral, 1979.

Foto 10_Shunji Ishida at work on the model of a shell structure, 1979.

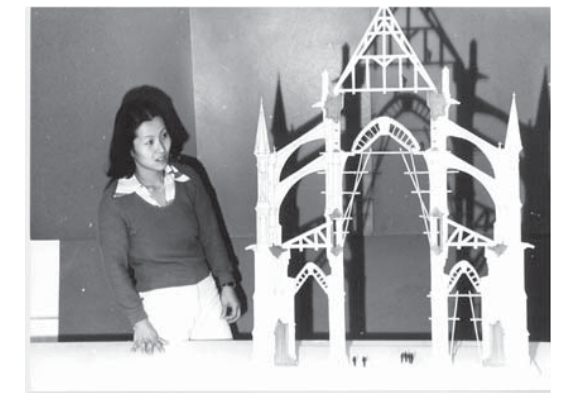
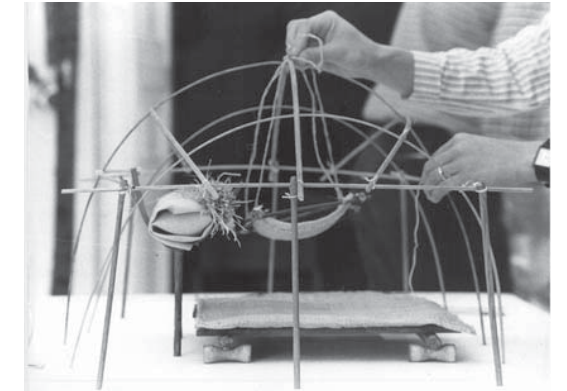
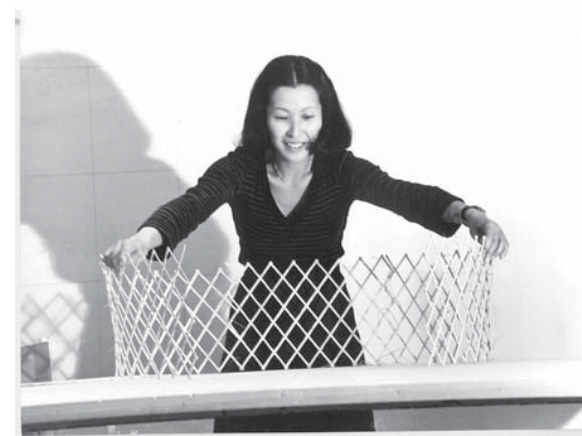


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Photo 2, pag. 3_Renzo Piano during recording of one of instalment of Cantiere aperto, 1979.

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Photo 3, pag. 3_Renzo Piano and Noriaki Okabe during the recording of one of the episodes of Cantiere aperto, 1979.

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Photo 4, pag. 5_Sugako Yamada Ishida and Manuela Bonino at work on the model of a yurt, 1979.

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Photo 5, pag. 5_Renzo Piano applying tension to two plywood sheets for an emergency shelter, 1979.

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Photo 7, pag. 7_Model of a Tuareg tent, 1979.

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Photo 8, pag.7_Manuela Bonino at work on models of the balloon frame construction system, 1979.

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Photo 9, pag. 7_Sugako Yamada Ishida at work on the model of a Gothic cathedral, 1979.

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Photo 10, pag.7_Shunji Ishida at work on the model of a shell structure, 1979.

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