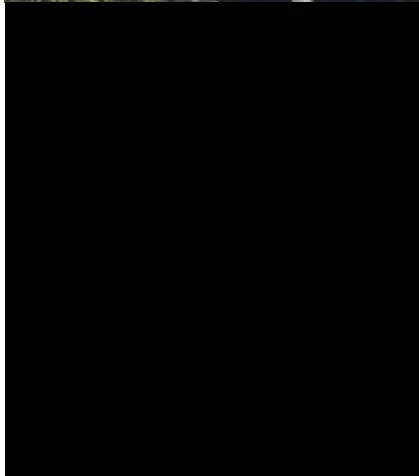




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© Aina Peréz. COAC correspondent in Turin

One of the things I most enjoy about the area I live in in Turin is that every day when I leave home I pass in front of the Faculty of Biotechnology building, one of the most impressive pieces of Turin architecture of the last few years, designed by the city's most interesting architect of the moment: Luciano Pia.

Pia (1960) is a Piedmont-born architect who has worked for many years on important projects to restore historic buildings, operating from Paris between 1990 and 2000 in an architectural firm in collaboration with Andrea Bruno. In 2000 he returned to Turin and decided to open his own practice in the city in collaboration with DE-GA S.p.a, a leading construction firm. This

allowed him to work in a very local micro-context with which he is very familiar and where he is best able to plan his works.

This is an architect who, as he himself remarked in an interview with Casabella magazine, works in a windowless room in order to concentrate and builds very little because, literally: *I can only manage to work on one project at a time. I oversee the project development and site management personally, from start to finish. It's a personal constraint I place upon myself.*

Even so, he is the most well-known and acclaimed architect among the people of Turin.

According to the figures from the first Open House held in Turin during the second week of June this year, some of his works were among the most-visited contemporary buildings: Casa Hollywood (944 visits) and 25 Verde (900 visits). The long queues to see these and many other works—a total of 111 buildings, both public and private—open for viewing and a final figure of 38,000 visits represent a huge success for the organization, which did not expect this kind of reception. However, above all, and very importantly, it shows that the city's inhabitants are very interested in their architecture, sending a message that should be heard loud and clear by the local authorities: people are concerned about the city's heritage and the new construction taking place there.

But let's get back to Pia's architecture, which in his curriculum he describes as a poetic formulation based on nine points:

1. Attention to and respect for context (genius loci). Recognizing that every place is special, which needs to be conserved and communicated in its formal characteristics
2. First and foremost the functions, and then the project. The organization of activities as a primary framework on which the architecture is to be modelled. In other words, architecture at the service of what is going on inside it.
3. Valuing the relationship between interior and exterior. Making the 'inside-out' relationship fluid, poetic, suggestive and rich in expressive possibilities, and above all ensuring that those who live in the building are aware of it.
4. 'Green' planning. Vegetation needs to be considered organically along with the use of the building, and must be organized according to its seasonality and nature.
5. The sustainability of the project should be its primary value. The best possible outcome possible with the minimum impact. Sustainability from an energy, environmental, economic and usability perspective.
6. Building within the built. This pursues the principle of 'retrofit'; in other words, interventions in built spaces to make the best possible use of weight-bearing structures, floor slabs and roofs to optimize construction costs and reduce the pressure on unbuilt land.
7. Understanding and experiencing the materials. Using and interpreting materials as they are without disguising them or concealing them, accepting their deterioration over time.
8. The details are not in a single detail but in the project. The precision of the project is not a detail.
9. Reducing the distance between the initial project and the finished construction. Despite the power of digital representation, trying to eliminate the distance between this representation and the built result.

In addition, he adds a last 'no point' which says that if, after following all these rules, the result is terrible, you have to start again from the beginning, put it back on the table and

change your mind if you see that the solution is not the right one.

Having read his principles for tackling the execution of a project, you can understand why each of them has such a different formal outcome. In the case of the Faculty of Biotechnology, which I mentioned at the beginning of this article, we find an institutional building of clean volumes with a great contrast between empty and occupied spaces, between the self-compacting exposed concrete and the huge glass surfaces that give way to leafy inner courtyards. When you see the building you get the feeling that everything is in the right place and that every space is very well defined.

Standing very close to this building in the same neighbourhood is another very different project, the '25 Verde' apartment building. In this case the apartments are literally invaded by vegetation, and it seems the intention was to recreate a little section of the historic Valentino Park, which is located very close to the housing complex. Housing within a park, within a city of parks. The whole evokes the fantastical idea of living in that tree house we all dreamed of when we were little.

The attention to the context of each building and the vegetation, the façades treated in a very sculptural way, always with a significant play of light and shadow, of full and empty spaces, of materials that seem alive, all make us realise that the two works actually have more in common than it might initially seem, despite their very different formal appearance.

Each building has been treated with great care and total dedication by the architect who, following his very individual planning process, imbues every one of his works with a unique and characteristic image. In this way he manages to get the inhabitants and users of the building, and more generally the citizens of Turin, to make these buildings their own and feel a certain pride in them. And this, I believe, is the great triumph of Pia's work.

Aina Pérez i Verge. COAC correspondent in Turin, Italy. November 2017.

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