

## 2. *It Was a Good Journey, After All.* Interview with Ugo La Pietra

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Note 1.  
[Link→](#)



A prominent role in Alberto Seassaro's formation and in his early years of work as a recent graduate is embodied by the architect, designer, artist, and draftsman – or, as he prefers to define himself, a *researcher in the visual arts* <sup>1</sup>, Ugo La Pietra. Almost the same age, their encounter at the Faculty of Architecture at Politecnico di Milano gave rise to a partnership that continued, solid as steel, throughout all their years of study and that ended abruptly and definitively after several years of shared professional activity. The two would then pursue their careers independently, yet each, within his own ambit – Ugo La Pietra in his design practice and Alberto Seassaro above all in the university – would develop that shared research root built during their youth. A root nourished by a fertile humus, constituted, as one gathers from La Pietra's words in the interview that follows, first and foremost by their mutual recognition of being outsiders to a certain social and educational system consolidated in the Faculty of Architecture of the 1960s, but also, certainly, by a common passion, vivid and concrete – almost an obsession – for a practice of design research that we would today define interdisciplinary. A sense of otherness with

respect to the context on the one hand, and artistic and design versatility on the other, led them, still students, to develop bold and visionary didactic projects, which culminated, in 1964, in the degree thesis that presented, in the form of an exhibition, their *morphological research* grounded in the *synesthesia of the arts* [1](#).



1. Ugo La Pietra e Alberto Seassaro, Catalogo della mostra *La Ricerca Morfologica*. [Document](#) →

The experiences shared in those years multiplied, intersecting a dense network of instructors, professionals, and fellow students (and later, studio colleagues), who in various capacities represented some of the protagonists in the history of the Faculty and of Milanese architecture in the last century, in an inseparable weave of stories. Pivotal were the encounters with Professors Vittoriano Viganò, Franco Albini, Cesare Blasi, Benedetto Resio, Carlo De Carli, but also with colleagues Renzo Piano, Milly Cappellaro, Cesare Stevan, Bico Belgiojoso, Carlo Guenzi, Filippo Tartaglia, Gianmaria Beretta, Giuliano Banfi, to name only a few; with some of them they undertook their first professional experiences. The relationship between Alberto Seassaro and Ugo La Pietra was nourished by the social networks and the altogether distinctive cultural climate that enveloped Politecnico di Milano and the city of Milan, a climate that pressed young students to reflect on the civic role and responsibilities of design. Within this world, and for many years, their bond – on both the personal and professional planes – was, to cite La Pietra's words, so *symbiotic* and visceral that it ultimately gave way to a *struggle for mutual acceptance*, producing a clear break, never mended. In short, a complex weave of stories and lives that reveals deeply human dynamics, in which the generative principles of youthful passions and shared interests evolve, over the years, into trajectories and parallel threads.

In the interview that follows, recorded in Ugo La Pietra's studio in April 2025, a testimony to those principles, that climate, that journey.

*Let's start at the beginning: how did the two of you meet?*

We met at university. In 1957 it was easy to get to know one another because there were very few students. At that time practically only the children of architects or entrepreneurs enrolled, and only rarely people without family ties to the discipline. So those like me or Alberto, who had no family tradition behind us, stood out right away. Our little partnership thus arose in quite a natural way.

Alberto had a marked artistic sensibility because he came from the art high school. He was a year younger than I was because that kind of school had allowed him to enroll early. I, for my part, was already a painter: even before enrolling in *Architecture* I had mounted small exhibitions. Among all our classmates, the two of us were closest to the *art world*, and it was precisely this that bound us together from the outset.

And then there was our constant competition with the other students, even if it wasn't sought. We were not *children of the establishment*, like others who could already count on a family background in architecture. We came from another story, and perhaps for that very reason, whenever we were given an assignment, we tried to push further. If thirty drawings were requested, we brought thirty-five. We always did more, and in ever greater complexity. We were living through almost a creative explosion, and our degree thesis, too, was conceived in that spirit.

We lived through many shared experiences as students, even though we never developed a project together, because at that time students worked only on individual projects. Nevertheless, my works often ended up resembling his, and vice versa. I recall an episode at Politecnico di Milano: one day we had to present the scale model of an assigned project. I kept mine hidden under a cloth, so as not to let Alberto see it. When he showed his, it was practically identical to mine... only a bit uglier! I had worked out that project in solitude, convinced it was particularly original, and yet he had conceived a project very similar to mine. In short, there was truly a great attunement between us, which lasted throughout all the years of study and culminated in the shared development of the degree thesis.

In fact, even before the thesis, we had collaborated on a beautiful project, also of historical value, together with Renzo Piano and Milly Cappellaro, who at the time was my girlfriend. For many days we surveyed and drew almost all the *cascine della bassa lombarda* (farmsteads of the lower Lombard plain), with splendid drawings, taken from life. Today I no longer have a single one, because Blasi, who in the meantime had become our professor and then our supervisor, gathered them all up. I never saw them again, except for a single drawing I still keep. Every time I look at it, I think: *wow, we were so talented!* We drew an enormous amount back then, and I went on to do so throughout my life. In Italy, unfortunately, even today *drawing* does not receive

the recognition it deserves, especially in the field of design: it has always been considered a gift to be given to the collector, nothing more. And yet drawing is a discipline in its own right, but it has no market, no collectors, not even a museum. I am a good draftsman – Alberto used to say I was the best – but apart from me and two or three others, no one knows it [23](#).



2. Fotografia di Alberto Seassaro, Renzo Piano, Ugo La Pietra, Milly Cappellaro.  
[Document](#) →

*Your degree thesis was truly out of the ordinary for its artistic import, so anomalous for the Faculty of Architecture at the time, where theses were all devoted to a more canonical compositional project. How did you come up with that idea?*

It is hard for me to say precisely how our degree thesis came into being, because after so many years the reasoning of that time blurs. I do know, however, that at a certain point we arrived at the



conviction that the integration of the arts – or *l'intégration des arts* – had by then been outgrown. The idea of an architecture that merely housed art, setting aside spaces for bas-relief or sculpture, no longer sufficed for us: we felt it was no longer enough to integrate; the arts had to be fused, so as to reconsider their relationship in earnest.

It was from this that the idea of *synesthesia* among the arts was born, the central theme of our thesis. I believe that, at bottom, we aspired to be *synesthetic instruments* ourselves. I myself, at a very young age, lived through a complex period, oscillating among various disciplines: I played in an orchestra (I played from 1955 into the 1990s), I painted, I was studying Architecture. In short, we never felt bound to a single field of study or expression.

For this reason, the hypothesis of crossing boundaries, traversing different disciplinary ambits, and bringing different creative languages into relation seemed to us – first intuitively, then with increasing awareness – to have a profound meaning for *design*.

Moreover, we felt keenly the need to claim, within the university, a space for research, with laboratories in which to experiment, in which to develop experiences, even irrespective of the specific discipline, with the aim of carrying forward true collective research, project experiments, and thus generating new knowledge. This approach to research, in Italy, was not contemplated within the Faculties of Architecture, but from the outset we felt its necessity acutely. I, we, have always felt ourselves to be *researchers*. And probably that thesis of ours, so atypical, arose precisely from there: from the intuition that genuine research had to be founded on the principle of synesthesia between the arts and the disciplines.

And indeed, there was a moment, in the early 1970s, when the disciplines truly began to lose their boundaries. In that period, everything seemed as though it might belong both to the world of *art* and to that of architecture. That vision of ours, almost utopian at the time of the thesis, seemed to take shape. The energy crisis of 1970-1972, and the consequent social and cultural change, had in fact pushed toward a rapprochement among the creative disciplines. Today, by contrast, these disciplines have returned to being separate worlds: the architect thinks of monuments, the designer of consumer objects, the artist works for the art system. We had tried to call precisely these boundaries into question and I, personally, continued along this path throughout my life. I kept faith with that initial intuition, and I still carry it forward today.

*How did your trajectory at the university unfold?*

After graduating, I became appointed assistant to Vittoriano Viganò, also going to work in his studio, and after a couple of years Alberto and I became assistants to Cesare Blasi, both in Milan and in Pescara.

But in the late 1960s Blasi was a figure who was not valued within the landscape at Politecnico di Milano, for political reasons. And yet among his assistants were the best of our generation: Stevan, Belgiojoso, Banfi, Seassaro, Tartaglia, and me. We were a fine group, truly.

Of that period in Pescara I have a strange *blank*. I had a girlfriend and I photographed her often, but I must admit I retain neither images nor memory of the moments spent there with Alberto, even though I know for certain he was there! I do remember clearly, however, setting out from Milan in my Volkswagen – even the very same car Alberto had! – and driving the whole of the *Adriatica* coastal road, town after town, because there was not yet an highway, with the traffic police whistling at you if you exceeded 50 km per hour. And yet I would set off with enthusiasm, because in Pescara one breathed an atmosphere completely different from that of Milan where, in 1969, the climate was deadly and there were shootings in the streets. Down there, by contrast, it was another world. The students were courteous, parents would come to meet the professors, in the evening they would invite you out, they treated you well. It was almost a vacation for me.

After a couple of years, however, things changed and the group around Blasi dispersed: Belgiojoso, Banfi, Stevan, Tartaglia, Guenzi, Sassaro – all drifted away. I was the only one who remained, because I'm sentimental and I had not understood the situation. Alberto, thanks to a friendship between his father and Ciribini – the great technologist – became his assistant, and we lost sight of each other. I, on the other hand, had drawn closer to Vittoriano Viganò: I had collaborated with him on several projects and he held me in high esteem. A project of mine from the second year, developed under his supervision, was particularly appreciated and even sold to the Centre Pompidou.

It was he who made me an assistant straightaway, even though normally one first needed at least ten years as a collaborator. Yet after the experience with Blasi, I did not embark on an academic career: after three or four years, realizing that things were not working, one day I simply left, without telling anyone, walking away from the Faculty.

That was a decisive moment, a kind of cathartic passage. Everyone, in our generation, took their own path, seeking their own mentor, and, at that moment, our paths diverged.

*And outside the university, how did you work together?*

Up to that point, throughout the 1960s, we shared a professional studio. Thanks to Alberto's father's connections, we had secured a major consultancy contract for a new Russian-origin building prefabrication

system: *prefabbricazione semi-pesante con silicalcite* [semi-heavy prefabrication with silicalcite]. We worked on this for years, producing prototypes, houses, claddings. I remember taking home 350,000 lire a month, the same salary as my father, who was a manager in a large firm. By comparison, when I worked for Viganò with a contract no one else had, my average salary was 150,000 lire a month.

Those figures allowed us to do a great many things, even if the work on silicalcite did not excite us. We designed an endless number of things, but it was certainly not our dream. Thanks to my ties with the art world, I also managed to obtain several commissions for our studio. We designed the *Il Cenobio Gallery*, then *Spaggiari's house-gallery*, and even a colossal project for a small residential building, again for Spaggiari, who was a very well-to-do dealer. We designed the building and made a beautiful model that was never paid for. We went to court and even won, but we could not collect anything because the owner was officially indigent. In short, we were swindled and had to cover the costs ourselves. That was how things went then.

Already in the 1960s we tried to move beyond our two-person partnership, which at times was stifling, by bringing together a group of architects to create a broader collective studio. It included Stevan, Belgiojoso, Beretta, Algarotti, Seassaro, and me. Before that it had been just the two of us. Belgiojoso was talented; Beretta was good at keeping the books. We started with a studio in Viale Romagna, then moved to Via Solferino, and finally to Viale Petrarca. But there I lasted very little, perhaps a year or a bit more. And, as is my habit, one day I left without telling anyone. That is how it ended.

That is my story with Alberto. Afterwards, nothing more happened between us. The only episode worth noting is that I opened a studio at Corso Garibaldi 50 and, purely by coincidence – really, it wasn't intentional! – he took an apartment right there. But it meant nothing, because we no longer saw each other or kept company. A few times we ran into each other by chance; I would ask him what he was doing, but without going further.

*What was your professional collaboration, in the studio, like?*

I should preface this by saying that we always collaborated with many people; we were almost never alone working on projects and, beyond

the colleagues in the studio, we also had a network of external collaborators. I remember, for example, a very skilled craftsman on the outskirts where we would have our models made. But there were many others as well.

All the same, though we worked together, we were very different. The real difference between us was that I spent the whole day working like mad, I would *gorge* myself on drawing for hours, whereas he set to work only at night – good heavens! At nine in the evening he would arrive at *Viale Romagna*, where we had the studio, and before coming upstairs he would stop to chat with the prostitutes for a good hour.

Then he would finally come up, when I was already exhausted and on the point of going home grumbling, also because, in addition to work, I was a painter as well, I organized exhibitions, and in the evening I played.

So yes, we worked together, but under very different conditions, both in professional approach and in lifestyle. And so in 1971 I had the courage to say enough.

I left Politecnico di Milano, where I could not find fulfillment; I left the architecture studio, where I worked with partners I could not stand; and I also separated from my wife, a dreadful woman who had trapped me like a witch. In 1971 I was reborn.

*What were the most significant divergences between you and Alberto Seassaro, from your point of view?*

Ours was a partnership that lasted a long time, and we truly shared many moments of life, intimate and everyday. I keep, for example, marvelous memories of the long tables at my mother's house, where Alberto was at home. My mother was a splendid woman, affectionate, warm, welcoming in her home, and probably very different from Alberto's, about which he in fact spoke bitterly. Mine grew fond of the friends I brought home and welcomed them like children. And this way of being, for Alberto, mattered; perhaps he felt a domestic warmth he did not find at his own home. I remember that we shared dinners, parties, tables with *pasta al sugo* and a glass of wine that was never missing.

We were truly symbiotic. And yet Alberto was exactly the kind of person I have always found hard to tolerate. Let me give an example: we often went to Bar Jamaica, an iconic place for artists. Before I had the courage to go in, though, I spent years looking at it from outside,

not daring to enter, because those artists intimidated me. When I finally decided to speak with the owner, Signora Lina, she welcomed me sweetly because I was a shy, slight boy. Alberto, by contrast, was the opposite: he walked in with ease and at once greeted her loudly, *Cara mamma Lina, come stai?* He called her *mamma* straight off. It cracked me up! This was the deep difference between us that put me on the back foot.

And then, on reaching eighty, I discovered something shocking that I had not known before: I am dyslexic. And that, suddenly, explains so many things. Only after many years did I understand a difference in Alberto that I could not abide: for me studying had always been a torment, whereas for him it came very simply and naturally. When we were students, to study a book (physics, chemistry, or any subject), I had to spend three months copying it out in full into notebooks, word for word. I had, in fact, a marked visual memory and I was very good at drawing: when they examined me, I would close my eyes and *see* and *read* my notebook in my mind.

He, by contrast, studied everything in ten days. He did it somewhat swaggeringly, perhaps without delving into everything, but it was enough for him. And this drove me mad. At the time I did not understand why everything was so hard for me while everything was so easy for him. Today I know: I was dyslexic, but no one had ever told me. In

short, as expansive, brilliant, and entertaining as he was, drawing attention to himself, I, by contrast, was withdrawn, a bit

sullen, because I had spent my whole childhood and adolescence feeling like the last, the ugliest, the one who did not understand.

Living alongside someone so different from me, 24 hours a day, was an enormous challenge. We were alike in concepts, but opposite in ways of being. This inevitably generated, in the end, a *struggle for mutual*

3. Videointervista con  
Ugo La Pietra.  
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*acceptance*, a short circuit. It was a relationship that marked me and that, in a certain sense, is still an open question because, at night, I still dream, regularly, of Alberto Seassaro. It was a good journey, after all [32](#).

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