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Architect hero of the month: Carlo Ratti

Posted in: [Design](#) | October 31, 2014 at 3:00 pm



We want to celebrate each month one Italian studio and/or distinguish architect which contributed to showcase the Italian talent around the world. With “Architect hero of the month” series, our blog will pay an homage to the best architects, designers and related creative minds who have an Italian heritage and are recognised worldwide.

This October 2014 let’s start with the Piemonte region and let’s talk about an originally Turin-based studio which was established exactly ten years ago in 2004. **Carlo Ratti Associati (CRA)** is a fantastic architectural practice with branches located in Boston and London.

If you google his name, the Italian architect Carlo Ratti shows a deep connection with the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**, as he teaches at MIT in Boston, USA and directs the **MIT Senseable City Lab**, a research group that works on new technologies’ pervasiveness in cities’ bodies. He has also create a research centre in Singapore sprung out as an MIT initiative on the Future of Urban Mobility.

Working on every scale of intervention, the work of the studio focuses on understanding and acting out the impact of new technologies in our environment and daily lives. The CRA designers look into creating a more sustainable future for us all. And we can’t but thanking them for this sustainable sensitivity. Ratti was inside the “Smart List: 50 people who will change the world” in *Wired Magazine*. Over the past years digital and networked technologies are heavily present in most aspects of our lives, from the way we work to how we communicate to each other and gain knowledge.

Along this line, Ratti developed a series of art project. **Real Time Rome** was a project which occupied an entire pavilion at the 2006 Venice Biennale of Architecture, counting the real time dynamics of a megalopolis through mobile data.

The “architecture that senses and responds” in the smart cities

If always smaller digital technologies are “wiring” us into networks, therefore changing the interaction between our species and the environment, as nowadays buildings and objects “talk back to us”, Ratti reflects on how it will be possible in the cities to use new kinds of sensors and electronics that are changing completely the way we can live and move around the urban environments, from street grids to plumbing and waste systems. Using data gathered from sensors, Ratti is able to actually design fascinating and sustainable buildings and objects, objecting the prevailing bottom-down philosophy surrounding the smart cities. He focuses instead on the potential in new technologies to promote bottom-up real social empowerment.

Past projects

Among the most recent projects, CRA boasts the design of the headquarters of the Trussardi fashion house in the centre of Milan, Italy. Here a green vertical canopy lye suspended on a crystal box.

The **Cloud** for the London 2012 Olympics proposed an observation deck, connecting visitors to both “the whole of London and the whole of the world, immersing them in euphoric gusts of weather and digital data” as you can read in the website of the project. Everyone around the world could contribute to the Cloud, visiting or either sponsoring an LED, “helping to keep the London lamp aflame”.

The Digital Water Pavilion at the 2008 World Expo in Zaragoza, Spain is amazing as well. This latter project, which we will be talking at large in the last section of the article, was declared by the Time Magazine the “Best Invention of the Year” in 2008. On a more humanitarian scale, the studio developed 1000 Tsunami-safer houses in Sri Lanka to remark its ethical values and commitment to help tackle environmental issue.

What on the horizon of this amazing practice and its leader? Certainly the next year will be exciting: the studio has been creating new cities’ design for the Gulf region, Russia and Central America. In 2014 the team was engaged also in creating experimental furniture for

↳ **Cassina Spa** with “Our Universe”, exploring the evolution of production processes thanks to the new technologies. The changing habits of interacting with different devices and the physical integration of technology with furniture were focal points as well of this project. CRA is currently working on the **Future Food District project** to be seen at **Expo Milano 2015**.

Zaragoza's Digital Water Pavilion: a fluid vision

The Digital Water Pavilion by Carlo Ratti Associati stands proud in Zaragoza, one of the most interesting town of Spain as regard as the new architectural trend. Designed for the Zaragoza Expo 2008, the project meant to enchant the visitor by the lifting idea lied in its architectural form and its geometry. The building literally reacts to visitors by parting a stream of water to let them visit.

A rectangular shape dominates the landscapes: here two “boxes” are respectively performing as an information point and a tourist centre. What is peculiar and interesting about it? The fascinating use of the water as an architectural element, which was the main theme of Expo 2008.

Digitally controlled water droplets are in the walls, and those devices can create writing, swirling patterns or enter spaces. It results in a space where interactive and reconfigurable activities are possible. Each wall can be accessible, becoming in turn an entrance to the complex or vice versa an exit. The internal partitions could change as the number of people grows or diminishes. The roof is like a curtain and can move vertically or flatten to the ground, in this way “deleting” the presence of the pavilion.

The DWP is undoubtedly one of the novel answer to the pressing problems of our modern age regarding the consistent presence of digital media in our environment, from public space to private ones. Carlo Ratti Associati and the Boston MIT Senseable City Lab pose the questions in a very striking way and tried to give us a suitable solution which deserved to win the Time Magazine “Best Invention of the Year”'s prize in 2008. We can't agree more with the judgment!







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