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Revisit: Castelgrande, in Bellinzona, Switzerland by Aurelio Galfetti

29 APRIL 2022 | BY GIOVANNI CORBELLINI | REVISIT



Galfetti's treatment of time at the historic Castelgrande, in his home town of Bellinzona, considers geological as well as more recent history

Aurelio Galfetti was born in 1936 in the mountainous region of Ticino, Switzerland, living and working in Bellinzona until he passed away last year. The small town hosts several of his

works, including the Casa Rotalinti (completed in 1961), the impressive bathhouse (designed in 1967 with Flora Ruchat-Roncati and Ivo Trümpy), and the Biomedical Research Institute realised in 2021. His most famous work, however, is the renovation of the Castelgrande, part of the medieval defence system that still dominates the city. It would turn out to be an endeavour spanning two decades, and is among Galfetti's greatest achievements.

The renovation of the lower castle, which had long been decaying atop a rocky hill in the town centre, was in fact sparked by another architect, Mario Della Valle. In 1980, he endowed a hefty sum to Bellinzona which came with two conditions: a project to give 'new life' to the castle should be undertaken by the city; and it had to be approved before the end of the following year. A commission of experts was swiftly set up to work out a programme that would make the medieval building complex economically sustainable.



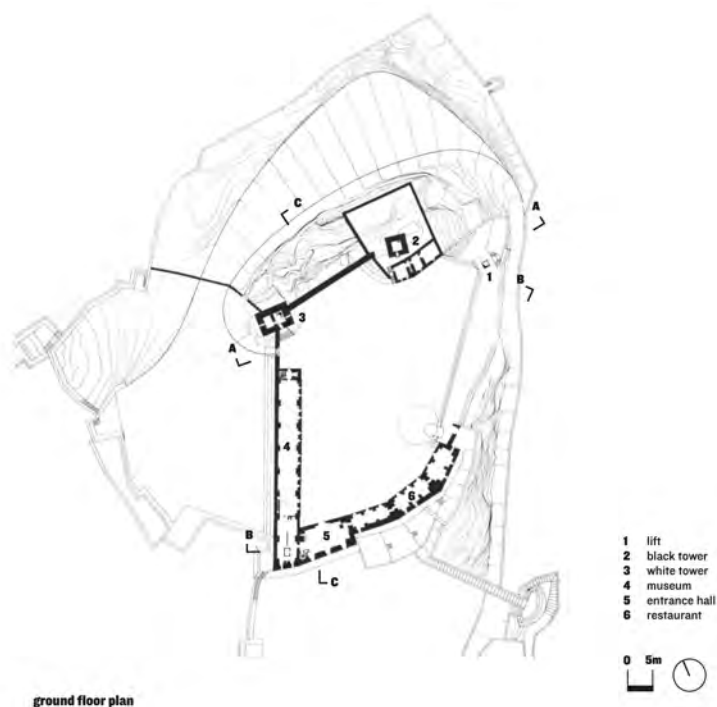
The medieval Castelgrande sits on a rocky hill in Bellinzona in Switzerland. Credit Derya Duzen / Alamy

By the time Galfetti was appointed as the project's lead architect in February 1981 (the fast process didn't allow for an architectural competition), the new functional organisation of the castle – museum facilities, meeting rooms, restaurants, and a lift to connect it with the level of the town – was already devised and approximately tailored to the available space. Today, the resulting restoration is the outcome of the rapid decision process demanded by Della Valle, which favoured a transformative attitude rather than a cautious consideration of the building's heritage.

Galfetti was less interested in the entangled complexity of the local urban fabric, and more concerned with providing a clear link to the surrounding territory; Bellinzona is one of several scattered settlements within the Ticino valley's Alpine topography. One of Galfetti's first moves was to focus on the site's temporal dimension, challenging the static, conservative idea of architectural restoration with a dynamic, transformative vision. The temporal lens he used encompassed the geological formation of Bellinzona's rocky hill and the glacial erosion of the valley floor – vast processes which have determined the town's history, from the first Neolithic settlements to its grand medieval development, and from the castle's subsequent decline to its present state.

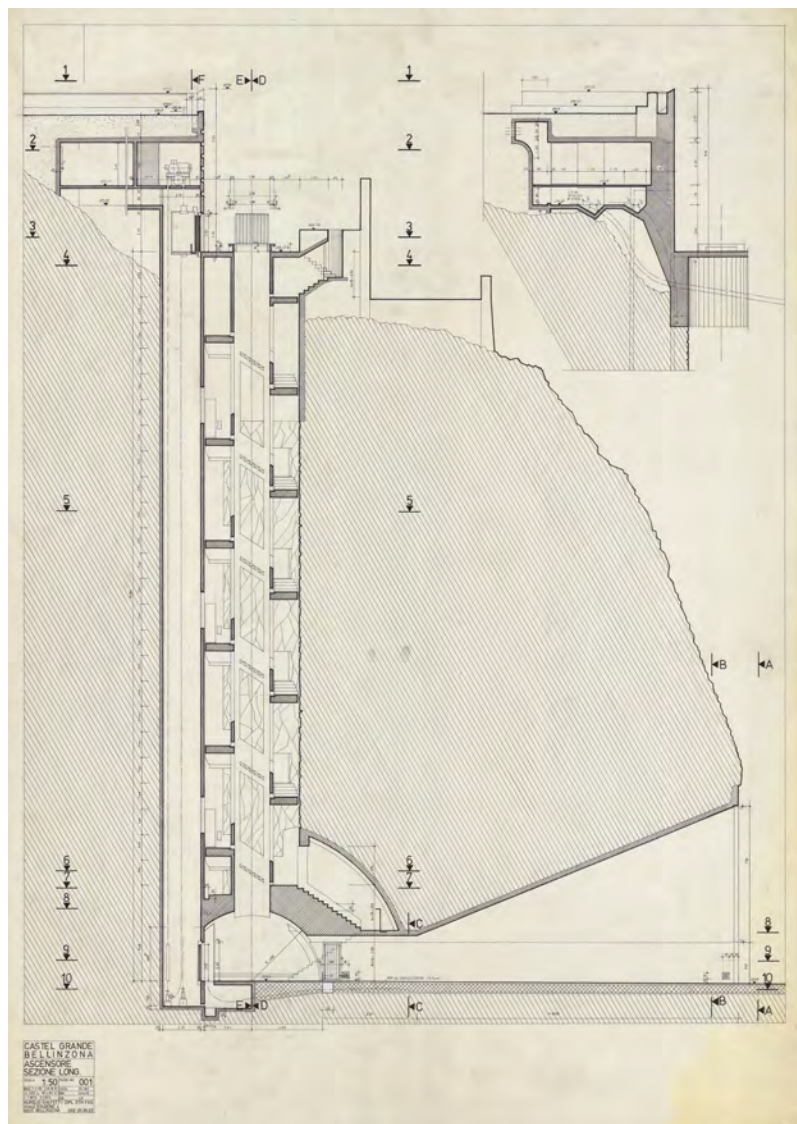
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In this way, Galfetti understood the Castelgrande as part of a system of relationships, which he expanded from the initial building-oriented brief to include an open space with a new urban park to enliven the town. In Galfetti's view, the castle was the result of successive, often contradictory interventions over time, all of which had responded to unique historical exigencies.



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Galfetti mostly designed in the negative, digging rather than constructing. The network of concrete passages buried in the exceedingly thick walls of the ‘houses’ comprising a new museum wing are an example of this attitude, focused on the contrast between new and old, smooth and rough, artificial and natural. Visitors encounter these passages at the end of a path that was created to connect the city to the castle, starting where the city wall meets Castelgrande’s cliff. Here, a long corridor dug into the mountain gives way to a domed hall and a vertical shaft with two lifts and a staircase. It is also here that Galfetti concentrated his design efforts and where his most personal architectural gestures appear. For example, the tall scar inflicted on the rock is ‘sewn’ together with in situ concrete, resolving the transition between the broken stone and Galfetti’s intervention, and providing a monumental entrance: its solemn symmetry and rough materiality are reminiscent of a scaled-down Mycenaean tholos.



Section of the life shaft at the Castelgrande, displayed at the *Beton* exhibition at the Swiss Architecture Museum 20 November 2021 – 24 April 2022. Credit: Archivio del Moderno, Fondo Aurelio Galfetti

This rigid composition resurfaces above, where the stairs and lifts land outdoors, on the upper level. The concrete facade of the lift tower confirms the mismatch between the rhetorical, almost mystical form and the rather prosaic function it serves. From here, a ramp climbs to the castle's inner square, along a new rectilinear stone retaining wall that supports a lawn with views of the surrounding landscape. Galfetti changes register at this stage, abandoning the weird underground admixture of chthonic symbolism, elementary geometry and brutalism for a less muscular solution, with the facades encircling the inner square, now housing the restaurant and museum, finished in two shades of white plaster and punctuated by a regular rhythm of openings. This kind of refined, Jugendstil elegance anticipates the mood found in the museum's interior. A common entrance hall connects and provides access to the

restaurants, the halls and the museum.



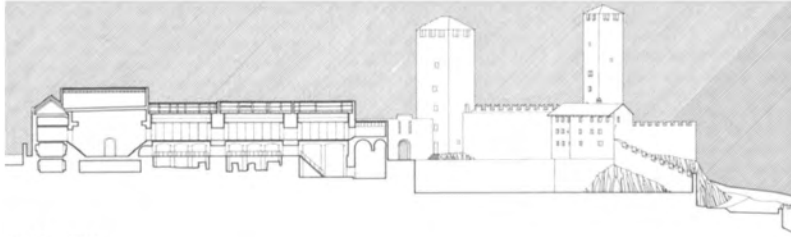
**The facades of what is now a restaurant and the museum are clad with plaster.
Credit: AGF Srl / Alamy**

Galfetti carefully considered what to conserve and what to erase. He acknowledged the paradoxical need of human memory to work as a sieve – remembering by discarding – and created a project mostly based on selection and subtraction. At that time in the 1980s, Bellinzona was already undergoing a similar process, with the demolition of houses that lined the city wall and the rock around the Piazza del Sole, just below the castle – part of an ongoing process since the 1970s. The new/old landscape that materialised as a result helped Galfetti to pursue a radical visual and conceptual simplification for the Castelgrande renovation. The choice, for example, to remove the vegetal layer off the cliff strengthened the geological and constructive bond between the castle and the mountain. The stripped rock became something of a decontextualised ready-made, affirming its presence in the cityscape.

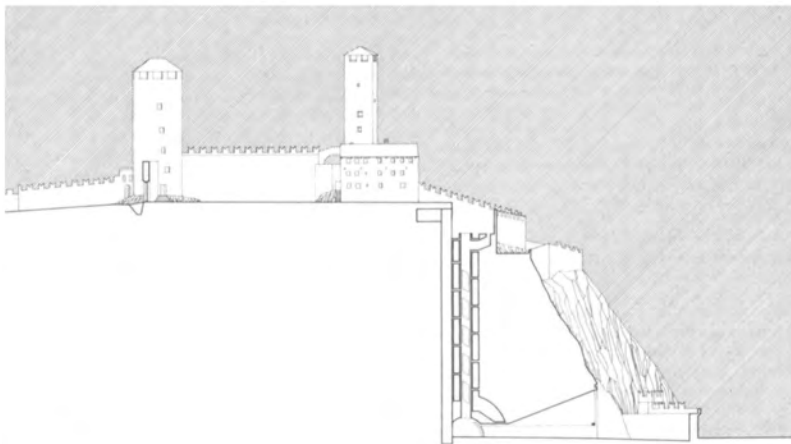
Other ‘natural’ elements of the Castelgrande – which are the outcome of millennia-long geological and human processes – underwent a similar treatment of reduction and artificialisation. A machine-mediated geometry informs the landscaping of the site and all its constituent elements. Lawns were conceived as flat, uniform surfaces, drawn with the straight contour lines of bulldozers and mowers, and vineyards, which were already present on the south-facing slopes of the mountain, were rectilinearly rearranged with tensioned wires according to contemporary cultivation methods. ‘Controlling’ nature in this way interpreted restoration as an ongoing act of maintenance: an attempt to withstand entropy and guarantee longevity.



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This geometrised nature is a perfect stage for the mineral drama performed by the untamed, randomly emerging bedrock and the stone walls layered on top of it. Reversing the gaze, these features also provide a balcony over the valley. Lonely trees – the few that survived Galfetti’s desire for compositional purity – stand amidst the simple, circular or orthogonal figures he introduced in the plan and elevation. Together, they complete the peculiar, contrived feeling of the castle’s open spaces: a surrealist, dreamlike atmosphere.

Galfetti was in his mid-forties when the Castelgrande commission arrived; his architectural language was marked by the use of exposed concrete and an obsessive exploration of the axial, centred, self-contained geometries of the circle and the square. His was a simple, rigorous, and deftly mastered design

toolbox: the highly symmetrical Bianco e Nero (black and white residential blocks, built in 1986 while the Castelgrande was under construction), give a nod to the Castelgrande looming above – which features both a black and a white tower.

‘Galfetti mostly designed in the negative, digging rather than constructing’

Revisiting Castelgrande more than forty years after its conception, and with Galfetti having recently passed away, offers some critical distance to assess the hypothesis and solutions put forward by the architect. The venue is still a success, used by locals and visited by tourists. Its functions work according to the premises: its restaurants and museum are open and events are regularly organised in the halls. The programme of landscape maintenance (lawns, vineyards, unvegetated rocks) has endured, making the hill a good place to live and to look at, although the ambition for formal and material durability is undermined by the degraded, leaking concrete of the lift shaft.

Most strikingly, the Castelgrande renovation still stands out as an example where the struggle between the architect’s vision and the resistance of the old walls inform a wide array of design choices. Almost nothing of the medieval complex remained in its original condition: masonry and roofing were extensively fixed, engaging stone and mortar in an ongoing dialogue of textures, colour, and light. Galfetti always took care to make the Castelgrande’s materiality present, even in the plastered facades of the inner square, which reveal their stone structures under sidelight. In this way, he skilfully managed the transitions from one surface to another, setting up an abstract interplay whose powerful tactile quality remains deeply moving, viewed from afar and as well as experienced up-close.

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