



Giancarlo Mazzanti

Photo: Juan-Pablo-Gutiérrez



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Giancarlo Mazzanti, (Barranquilla, Colombia), is one of the best architects on the current scene. Founder of El Equipo Mazzanti, his architecture promotes the values of development and social equity with projects that generate transformations and positive effects on the community. His work is multidisciplinary, ground-breaking, and multifunctional. He has developed and built educational, residential, urban improvement and social projects of great power and attractiveness, making him a reference architect on a global scale.

Dear Giancarlo, first we would like to thank you for your availability and attention towards us and our journal. Since 2015, Vitruvio, International Journal of Architectural Technology and Sustainability, has been promoting and disseminating research activities in the fields of sustainable construction and cultural heritage conservation. Today, we would like to talk to you not only about building materials and technologies, but also about the visions, emotions, feelings, and concerns that they are the ones who give importance also to the technical issues.

Luis Palmero: *You have been academically trained with a degree in architecture and a master's degree in industrial design in Italy. You have developed your professional activity mainly in Colombia, a country with strong social disparities and conflicts. It is also a country with a people endowed with great generosity and optimism, which are also the hallmarks of your architecture. Did you have a teacher in your training who inspired and guided you? If you hadn't had the generosity and optimism of your people, would you have had the same vision of architecture?*

Giancarlo Mazzanti: I trained in the '80s, from about '83 to '88. It was the time of postmodernism and let's say that a great teacher was Aldo Rossi, who was in Colombia at that time, "The Architecture of the City", a scientific autobiography of Rossi with the whole discussion around the typology of memory etc. was compulsory reading for all of us. I also had influenced by some professors of the Cooper Union in New York, who were, in a way, disciples of John Hejduk, but who had also collaborated with Koolhaas at that time. One of them was Germán Martín who collaborated on some drawings of Koolhaas' book *Delirium of New York*. So, my training is a bit of a two-hander: on the one hand Rossiana, very close to the whole Italian trend of

the '80s; on the other hand, there is also the whole theory of the nine squares that is part of John Hejduk's training at Cooper Union. I had also an interesting relationship with Koolhaas' theory through Germán Martín who was our teacher at the time. In Colombia, we basically had an education very centred on Aldo Rossi and Manfredo Tafuri theories. At that time, we had a very strong approach to things that, I think, have become part of my way of working, like the idea of type, the idea of a typology of an element that remains over time, an element that is able to remain while things change, an archaic and disjunctive form in many senses and approaches that have to deal with the idea of the city in general terms. Ultimately this is all part of my academic training in the '80s.

LP: *Once when I was preparing a lecture I came across, let's say by chance, a picture of the **Santo Domingo library in Medellín**, and I was struck by the originality of the design. Three large blocks on the top of a hill in a natural setting of great beauty but also extremely vulnerable to erosion and runoff. Despite the adverse environmental conditions, the three buildings burst in with their grandeur to form a new built landscape. The buildings create a new space of coexistence and rapprochement with the population which generates social interrelationships. I liked that a lot. Do you follow as an original idea in the project that architecture must generate personal and neighbourhood relations?*

GM: For me, to make architecture is to work in the perspective mentioned before. Basically, you make architecture with the elements that make it up, you build architecture from there. But the value of architecture cannot depend only on itself, on the language of form, type, and permanence, but on what it can

produce in terms of behavior, relationships, and actions. Architecture could encourage forms of behavior and human relationships. I think that it's the real challenge. They taught us at university that architecture is form and function. I believe that architecture is also action, and it is action to the extent that it propitiates, generates, activates, connects, life situations. This does not mean that we intend to control them, but, on the contrary, it is like starting a discussion. I think much of the research today is focused on what we might call use and function from this perspective, that is, more understood as a critique derived from function as a problem of efficacy and connectivity. I think the question we are interested in asking is why we keep thinking of building plans as a problem of connectivity and efficiency diagrams. So, how can we promote other ways of relating in space that are not just based on efficiency in a society that nowadays seems to be all about productivity? How can we introduce other ways of working that are more attentive to human needs? Examples of this kind of thing are our projects such as the **Santa Fe Hospital in Bogotá**, a hospital where we introduce a series of "anomalies" as we call them, places to rest, places to exercise, a butterfly garden, a botanical garden by means the rethinking of the idea of an architectural plan. Other examples are all the educational projects we do, where the value of the educational spaces depends on the building ability to predispose or propitiate ways that have to do with acts of learning. The important thing is not how to get from one classroom to another through a corridor, but how to wander through different spaces where children can relate in other ways to generate an educational space. For example, in the **Social Garden La Ilusión** project we take a corridor and what we do is we turn it around into an endless space. Our aim was not to connect two points in the most efficient way. We were interested in this case in allowing the children to move around the space in other ways.

LP: *Your architecture is meant to be used, or more appropriately, to be experienced. I think this should be the main design objective of any architect. The **Cazucá covering** is a very interesting project because of the versatility of the spaces, which can be used as a sports field or a dance floor or a neighbourhood meeting place. What can you tell us about the versatility of the spaces?*

GM: Yes, we must consider the present moment and the place where we are. I think we can no longer over-specialize spaces in terms of function. Architecture should be understood as a strategy, a system, that allows construction to grow over time and adapt to changing needs. The value lies not so much in the composition of the object but in the arrangement of the elements that will allow it to grow or adapt. As stated before, the aim of the **Cazucá**

covering is to have not hyper-specified spaces, that can be used for many things. Architecture must be able to understand the moment we are living in and the dramatic climate change. Things cannot be forced in an extreme way to get what you want, but on the contrary, it is better to create basic, simple situations so that architecture can adapt to a wide variety of uses or situations. **Cazucá's** project proposes a more open, more contemporary architecture that is not made for a specific use. And the possibilities of use that can be generated in that place are activated by the users.

LP: *A peculiar feature of your architecture is the "module", a simple geometric figure that is repeated to form a network interconnected with the context, a permeable building in which empty (open) spaces are as important as complete volumes. As you yourself have stated on several occasions, architectural design is not a matter of composition but of arranging spaces that must adapt to the needs of natural and social contexts. By analogy with living organisms, the module is a molecule in a system that adapts to change. Yours is a living architecture in which there is no end time, only a beginning. What role does co-creation play in your architecture?*

GM: There are basically two issues in one. The first is related to the architecture as a system, which I mentioned in the previous question, an architecture connected to a place and able to adapt to different conditions, an architecture that is never finished and that lends itself to being integrated with other parts. In the **Biomedical Campus in Rome**, we propose a strategy for the growth of the university campus over the next 25 years. We don't give the client a building, we give him a system. We give options to grow or change the elements as the years go by. Architecture is a strategy with a series of protocols, where you give instructions to others who will be able to implement them. The **Mazzanti Arquitectos** architecture studio works with the **Fundación Horizontal**, a research centre on education and public participation, with which we devise co-creation models that use games to define the context of the project. For the **Marinilla School** project, we invited the community to play, drawing notes that showed what they thought was important. Through this game we learned that the religious theme and the relationship with nature were the most important to the community. This is a place near Medellín where life tends to take place outdoors, with chairs outside, hammocks, etc., and there is a custom of giving plants to each other. So, we thought of a project that, in addition to being a school, would serve the community to grow plants, vines, flowers. The school would become a kind of large greenhouse, a place full of vegetation. Sometimes we succeed on our intentions, sometimes we don't. In most cases we participate in



Figure 1 | Interior view of Marinilla Educational Park, Marinilla, 2015. Photo: Rodrigo Dávila.

public tenders, and we don't have the opportunity to work with the community. It's not a question of trivially asking: "What do you want?" or "What do you imagine?" In Colombia the answer is a football field or other things that are not necessary. Through play we try to understand the real needs and by our projects we try to help the community to progress.

LP: Yes, the transition from *homo faber* to *homo ludens*, using play in co-creation, was one of the questions we wanted to ask you, and you have already answered it.

Graziella Bernardo: I would like to go back to our first question, which is related to the rediscovery of the value of play and to the role of triggering positive things that you give to architecture, which is stripped of its monumentality and becomes a driver of change. If you had not been Colombian, if you had been of another nationality, have you had your joyful and generous vision? It is a vision that makes you even go against the tide, against all egocentricity, to donate your art to the Mazzanti team, and not

only to them, but to all those who will then continue your architecture in some way.

GM: Architecture is an optimistic profession by nature and that's the big difference. I don't know any architect who says we don't do, we destroy. We are always with something that is beautiful which is optimism and to be optimistic you need to be enthusiastic. Without this enthusiasm, which is a fundamental part of this profession, we would not be able to accept living with limited economic means, in general terms, because architecture is not a profession with which we will get rich, nor will we live ostentatiously. Regarding my origins, I am a mixture of many things, I am the son of an Italian French man, half of my family is Italian, the other half is French, the other half is Colombian. I am Colombian from the Caribbean, but in my house the presence of the 19th century Italy is very strong, my grandfather was a 19th century man, and the meanings of homeland and nationality are very present there. Basically, I think I'm the product of a mixture of various origins, from the Caribbean to the Andes, from an Italy that is very present in my life constantly, from a



Figure 2 | General view of the Marinilla Educational Park,, Marinilla, 2015. Photo: Rodrigo Dávila.

Colombia where I live, my origin and my culture comes from all that. Last week I was in Italy giving a lecture and someone said to me: “what you say could not be done in Italy”. And I said: “the problem is not that it cannot be done in Italy, the problem is that we do not imagine that it can be done in Italy”. Marina Mercé, a Catalan philosopher talks about imagination and its power and how we have devalued imagination in our way of thinking. Imagination makes the absent present, which is what we architects are constantly doing. When we study history, we make it present in a project, when we design and make drawings,

we make present an absence of something that will be in the future, and imagination could be the first ability of architects. With an added difficulty, the imagination of a child is considered wonderful, the imagination of an adult is frowned upon by society.

The great strength of architecture is its living condition. It is one of the few professions that mark life in the future. What excites me about materials is that they can have a future as matter, the condition of ageing, of getting dirty, of being filled with that patina of time that is very



attractive and beautiful. In the field of philosophy, the idea of becoming has been a subject of study and inspiration for various authors. In the field of architecture, the theme of becoming has not been so common. But architects imagine and realize in our drawings what can happen in a building. Architecture has a very beautiful exercise of frustration and enthusiasm at the same time, we can achieve enthusiasm and leave aside everything that designing a building implies. These days I realised that in my studio we make models all the time. These models are almost like a sexual fetish. It is the only way we have to realize

our projects. When I make the model, I somehow have this sort of fetish that allows me to be more relaxed. I have the need of the architect to control the project, the quite unhealthy need to control everything, each detail of the construction and every changing over time. I would do many projects in this condition, like for example the Rome project. The Biomedical Campus is the project I love the most, it was a private competition that also won the Lilly prize.

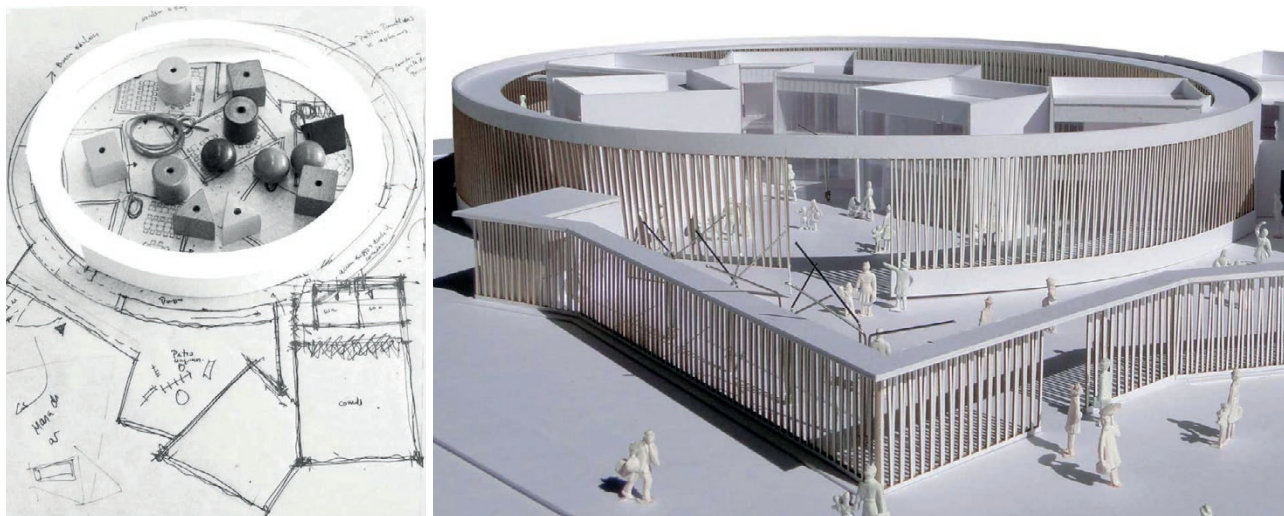


Figure 3 | Sketch and model of Systems for Bogota Kindergartens: El Porvenir Kindergarten, Bogotá, 2009. Source: *El Equipo Mazzanti*.

LP: *The Mazzanti team is already a model of multidisciplinary work in the manner of other large, important teams of architecture firms. What skills are required to be part of your team? What emotional disposition must the professional or young graduate have to be part of your team? Is enthusiasm the main requirement?*

GM: In my office, the most important thing is enthusiasm and desire, the will to learn. A very beautiful sentence that I think is from a book by Andrés Perea says that “architecture is not just an accumulation of knowledge, but the construction of a creative and innovative attitude”. In this difficult time with the covid pandemic, the studio has divided into many small pieces, since I don’t live in Bogotá but in Medellín, in the countryside, my main studio is in Bogotá, I have a part in Madrid with a partner who lives there, another part of the studio in Cali. I meet with all of them using screens and tablets. We have learned not to lose our enthusiasm, despite the lack of contact, which I miss a lot. Building enthusiasm is the key-factor.

LP: *We have seen in the photographs that in your studio the walls are full of projects models like a sort of decoration. Is this the evidence that the project always becomes something material, tangible, real?*

GM: There are models of the process and models of the end of the project. These latter one are those fetishes I was talking about that excite me deeply and allow me to overcome the frustration caused by the fact that in many cases they will not be realized. Now we are making the model for a velodrome, and I feel happy, I have no idea if we can win the competition, but I am making a model that I am

not asked to make but that gives me the emotion of the creation process. Many of the things we do in the studio are done because making them is an act of passion.

GB: *Two more questions. The first one concerns the centrality of the module in your architecture. When you imagine a project, do you think about the single module or about the whole construction? The second one is about materials. How much are you conditioned in your design by the choice of materials?*

GM: Regarding the first question, I’m interested in knowing how the modules work, and when I say how they work I mean an exercise in trial and error, like the way a plant grows, the way a flower can open. We try to understand the program, the relationships and to find the system to realize what we want to do. So, we are interested in the performativity of the material, I call it “formal intelligence”, which is like a plant that has a specific intelligence in relation to how it acts when the sun rises, how it moves. There is an intelligence of form, which allows me to think about how it acts. There is no specific formula with which we choose materials. In our projects the materials change a lot with the conditions of the place where we are working, with the costs, most of our projects are done with public works and the budgets are scarce and we almost must dig to find the materials we want. In the case of the **Fundación Santa Fe**, I had a little more freedom and budget in the extension of this hospital, which was in brick, so it was essential to continue with the same material, with the brick reading, and we opted for a brick in the curtain wall. Brick is a load-bearing material that works in compression, but after a first floor it stops working in compression



Figure 4 | Modular Systems for preschool in Santa Marta; Timayui, La Paz, Bureche. Source: *El Equipo Mazzanti*.

and it becomes a problem to build a skin of the façade. We chose another approach, to make it really work as a skin. We made brick work in the opposite way, namely in tension. In Barcelona there are very interesting examples of very fine clays, with very singular uses. In our case, putting the brick curtain in tension gave me great freedom of use. It was also conceived as a module because I can remove the modules of the façade and make windows in the future and this idea of becoming, of what happens, comes back. Today, the hospital is designed in a certain way and has certain windows, but I can connect, remove certain pieces, and make new windows in another part of the building, because hospitals can also change their use.

LP: *The study program of architecture schools suffers from a certain obsolescence, a kind of immobility that is ill-suited to the changes in the contemporary world. In your opinion, what kind of knowledge should be provided in an architecture degree course?*

GM: We need useless knowledge, as Nunzio Ordine, an Italian professor from Calabria says in one of his books. We cannot continue to produce technicians who specialize in one thing, we must be able to build a broader, more horizontal vision, who know how to see reality in all its

complexity. We, sometimes in Colombian schools, overvalue the architect's capacity to be a manager and forget the theories, the useless knowledge as Ordine puts it, such as the knowledge of poetry or philosophy. But we cannot become sociologists or something else, because in the end we are architects and we must know the tools and techniques, but we must be able to contaminate it with another way of thinking. I believe that horizontality in teaching is fundamental, but with great care, because I saw it in the United States where sometimes architects become more sociologists than architects, and this is neither black nor white, but it is an intermediate point that we must understand.

GB: *I would like to thank you once again for wanting to share your thoughts with us. Like everyone else, I am afraid of ending up in hospital for some illness. If that happens, I want it to be like the hospital in Santa Fe. You have managed to alleviate the suffering of those who unfortunately have to stay there, opening up the architecture to the city thanks to the external brick skin that gives the feeling of being a bit outside, of not being condemned inside. There is a permeability to the context of the city, the hospital is not a closed space.*

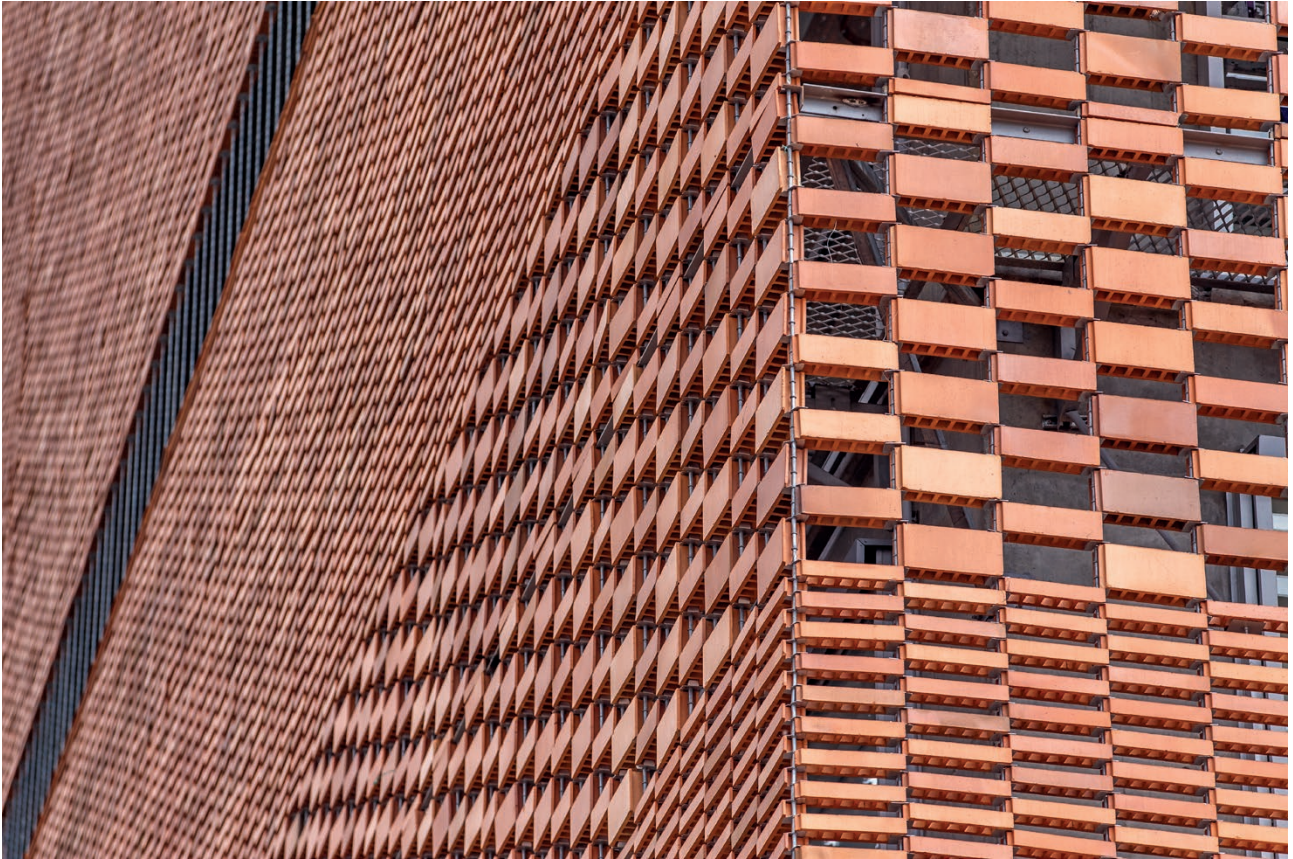


Figure 5 | Façade detail, Fundación Santa Fe, Bogotá, 2016. Photo: Alejandro Arango.

GM: Staying in a hospital is not an abnormal situation, because it is part of life and the hospital is part of the city. This beautiful book I'm reading, *Careless Times*, is about the need to be cared for, to be looked after. We all get sick at some point and being sick is not about isolating yourself from the world, it's about being in a hospital that connects with other things. Regarding permeability, what happens in most of our work is that we work in a specific condition, which is the climate of the "Caribbean", a mild climate that facilitates the permeability of the internal-external boundary. The same could happen in most of Italy, in Rome in our project for example, with the provision of intermediate spaces just like the Romans had in the past. We have parceled out Roman architecture and southern Italian architecture, when in fact it could be much more intermediate, as it was in the Roman era.

GB: *You have designed many educational architectures. They are always open constructions, with permeable boundaries and anomalies that are an invitation for the whole community to enter the school.*

GM: This has to do with what we were talking about. Buildings cannot be designed for only one use or function, but they are open to community use with places of sale, market. So the building has to play multiple roles and not just one function for which it was designed.

GB: *In these days the umpteenth tragedy of emigration is taking place along eastern boundaries of European Union. I am ashamed of the indifference with which we accept these actions devoid of humanity. As an Italian my acceptance is even more deplorable. We Italians have been emigrants to all parts of the world. I was thinking about your vision of propitiatory architecture. Do you believe that architecture can help to open the borders between peoples and to give back to humanity the charity and solidarity that it has lost today?*

GM: It's a very complex question. I don't think we architects can solve the problem, but we can design buildings that can better accommodate immigrants. In Europe, although we have designed many things, we have not built anything. I have worked a lot in Kosovo, a place



Figure 6 | Interior view, Fundación Santa Fe, Bogotá, 2016. Photo: Alejandro Arango.

with a very strong emigration problem, we have designed schools that could be used to educate and welcome and give well-being to migrants too. In Colombia we have a lot of migrants from Venezuela. In general, this is a topic that offers opportunities. We can't solve the problem of emigration, but we can design spaces to a better quality of life for emigrants.

GB: *To conclude, if you had to define sustainability, what would you say about it?*

GM: Architecture in its essence is sustainable as it is made to last. I believe that today we pursue other more complex values. Instead, we should do things simpler, use fewer resources and produce less waste. We need to use new technologies not only to save energy, which is also a very good thing, but we should also use them to design architectures that can have more uses and more lives. We should design essential, basic architectures, but not as an aesthetic problem, like minimalism, but as an ethical problem in some way.

LP: *Well, Giancarlo, we are very happy and grateful to have a talk with you. We've learned a lot from you and your architecture. Our readers will surely be thrilled with this interview. Once again, our sincere thanks for your availability and kindness.*

Looking forward to a new occasion, (in front of a good plate of pasta or paella), we send you a big hug and our best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Luis Manuel Palmero Iglesias

Graziella Bernardo