



IN AN ITALIAN LIGHT

A portrait of Italian architect Raffaella Bortoluzzi

Venice-born architect Raffaella Bortoluzzi has a penchant for spare interiors that manage to be warm and richly layered, while using new techniques and sustainable materials. K magazine caught up with her at her New York studio.

On Pomellato's first foray into America in 1997, *The New York Times* journalist Herbert Muschamp quoted Victorian essayist Walter Pater: 'Art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass.' He added, 'Fashion, in this sense, is occasionally a kind of art, and jewellery a viscerally compelling form of it.'

Muschamp had first encountered the *maison's* tiny boutique on Capri and marvelled at how the translucent, rippled cut of the gems captured the quality of the light-dappled water in the island's rocky bays.

A decade after the opening of that first counter in New York, at Bergdorf Goodman, Sergio Silvestris, Pomellato's long-time creative director, sat down with architect Raffaella Bortoluzzi to plan a new, stand-alone store in New York.

If jewellery is a viscerally compelling form of art, Bortoluzzi's Labo Design Studio was a fortuitous choice. Schooled at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura in Venice and at the Columbia University graduate school of architecture, she worked with Richard Gluckman, whose Gluckman Mayner did the expansion of the original Whitney Museum in New York. She then teamed up with Rafael Viñoly, notably on the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

Reflection

These experiences were formative to tackling a retail project. “Museum work makes you collaborate with a lot of people – lighting, curators, donors,” explains Bortoluzzi, “with particular attention to lighting and ceilings. The main difference from other types of projects is that the architecture has to disappear so that art can be the only protagonist.”

From museums, she went on to design homes for art collectors, though Bortoluzzi’s designs hardly disappear. Drawing inspiration from the site, they adorn the landscape with bold, abstract forms rather than blend into it, combining a diversity of stylistic influences. One house in the Caribbean towers like sails on a bluff. Another, in Hampton Bays is a collection of coloured blocks. She envisions buildings as pathways that lead you through different experiences, going, say from inside the shelter of a tunnel out into the openness of a courtyard.



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“I presented three different layouts elaborating the use of materials, forms and light,” she says of the meeting with Silvestris. “He liked the option that had a clear articulation of interior space, exterior space and a sort of ‘in-between’ space characterised by a large chandelier that was visible from outside the store.”

Light and its reflections are a major design element. But so are the flow and separation of space, and the abstraction of form, elements that the *maison* and Bortoluzzi have in common, and which became the vocabulary of their collaboration, from New York to stores around the world.

"Sergio always liked the idea that Pomellato stores would be characterised by a different design from each other, though we agreed they should always be contemporary. He liked a thread linking them but the *genius loci* should be the drive for the design. I think that is incredibly important in a shopping culture that is becoming more about 'destination stores'."

Light fitting

In all the boutiques, horizontal wood-slatted screens evoke Venetian blinds and create gradations of privacy, first from the street and again for the private selling areas. "The Italian tradition of jewellery stores is to create privacy with little curtains to hide who is buying what, where and for how much," explains Bortoluzzi.

That traditional approach is mixed with a contemporary reinterpretation of materials and interior volumes. In Rome, what appears to be a wooden backdrop is actually Murano glass in a fabric-like patchwork. In London, two huge eggs break up the long narrow floor plan while communicating between the upper and lower floors. One contains a mirrored chamber for customers to see how the jewellery looks on their body; the other serves as a staircase with displays for the brand's showstoppers. In Los Angeles, the stairs become part of the furniture; the risers turn to become benches and presentation platforms.

A cascading, Murano-esque chandelier marks the entrance to the New York store. But in Rome and Venice, the whole, high-ceilinged space is transformed into a lantern. "Sergio wanted opulence in Rome," explains Bortoluzzi, who created "a chandelier without a chandelier." So the room itself is a light fixture with glowing Plexiglas cylinders in the upper part, recalling the tubes used by Venetian glassblowers, something which Bortoluzzi has recycled as lighting fixtures in her own home.

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Lasting glow

Talking of homes, "More and more clients are asking for a sustainable approach to their projects," says Bortoluzzi, "not so much for the use of recycled materials, but more for the use of renewable energy systems." In villas on Mustique and in the Hamptons, Bortoluzzi has used passive energy

and structural, insulated panels made of reprocessed materials and fast-growing poplar and aspen, which helps preserve old-growth forests.

In Pomellato's new Paris store and at the La Rinascente shop-in-shop in Milan, Bortoluzzi used Tiikeri, a composite wood made of sorghum grass. "One challenge with materials is the research among the vast variety available."



As the jewellery house expands its presence around the world the cultural dimension becomes another challenge. Introducing a brand to new markets means finding a language that is consistent, yet relevant to its local context. The Madison Avenue store's double-height wall of exposed brick and its sharp, reflective planes are very New York. But Asian markets were less excited about overtly local references, such as lacquered

surfaces, preferring a more distinctly Italian aesthetic.

As novelist Italo Calvino wrote in *Invisible Cities*, "The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born."