

Fabio Novembre is the wild child of the tile business, creating flamboyant interiors he sees as backdrops for “the theatre of life”. After 12 years he says he’s ready to start making the “big movies” of architecture

Fabio Novembre is showing me round his Milan house, or perhaps I should say his house-to-be. It is at the empty concrete shell stage, but already features its two central elements: a large brilliantly patterned mosaic snake glistening on the outside front wall, and a fat brown tree trunk, representing the famous apple tree in the garden of Eden, rising up right through the entire house. “I wanted to live on the Forbidden Tree because I don’t want to be kicked out of paradise,” explains Novembre suddenly, adding that as a boy he hated that “sense of waiting for something” that was such an intrinsic part of the Christian tradition. Novembre’s house is filled with allusions to this, and also to his interest in the divide between one’s personal space in private and in public. The ground floor will feature a long dining table reminiscent of a refectory (or one might say, with a small leap of imagination, of the Last Supper); the living room has a painting which hides a secret passage that leads to Novembre’s private office; and the glass-encased shower at the top of the second flight of stairs will, Novembre excitedly assures me, allow users “to see everything”. He thinks it will be interesting to see who will actually be brave enough to climb the vertigo-inducing transparent steps, adding that they are a way of making “the house more private without putting in any doors”. Doors are unpopular in the designer’s vision, since his architecture is “about opening views, not about walls and boxes”.

Novembre is sitting back on one of the latest of the mosaic company Bisazza’s offerings: the unexpectedly soft mosaic-covered armchairs and chaises longues by Jürgen Mayer H which are being showcased as part of this year’s furniture fair. Novembre himself is not showing for anyone, and is no longer Bisazza’s art director, a planned move from the start when he insisted on signing only a three-year contract. “A company is a company, to run a company is difficult,” he explains. Instead, and appropriately for someone who likes to remove the boundaries between the personal and the professional, it is his unfinished home that is on show this year.

Entirely different from the rather provocative stage-managed photos of him, Novembre in the flesh is livelier, sexier and less intimidating. What’s more, all the photo-induced gravity make way for an upbeat and charismatic personality. He strides around fast, talks even faster (in fluent, if strongly accented, English) and comes across as self-confident but also very serious; the sort of guy who turns up at appointments on time and expects the same of you; the sort of guy who says that to be free means to be responsible. The fact that he can broach very personal and profound issues at a moment’s notice is slightly disconcerting, but at no point does his enthusiasm and honesty feel rehearsed. In the same way, when at one point he bellows out with evident pride, “I’m having a baby” (the baby is due, aptly, in November) and shakes his fists in the air as if he were a football player celebrating a particularly amazing goal, it comes across as a fresh and spontaneous reaction despite a colleague of mine telling me that he did exactly the same thing with him the day before. Novembre seems able to muster up unbridled enthusiasm and joy for life easily and repeatedly, a quality that cannot be underestimated in what he himself calls “difficult times”.

Rhythms of Design

Fabio Novembre is not a prolific architect or designer. “My timing for creativity has got the real rhythms of life: it takes nine months to make a baby, it takes one year to make a chair!” Or: “I



always talk about semiotic pollution. There are too many signs, too many things, too many objects. When you do something I really think it has to be a piece of your heart, it has to be something so thought, so wanted." He laughs and lists his output thus far: three "furnitures" for Cappellini, and 10 of what he calls "architectures" – actually interiors – of hotels, discos, cafés and boutiques. His most renowned recent interiors include the Capri-inspired Bisazza showroom in Milan's Via Senato, the Divina disco in the same city, and the UNA Vittoria Hotel in Florence. These spaces are variously labelled sensuous, erotic, and exotic by writers, just as he is often called the baroque star of modern Italian design. Says Novembre, "I like to mix high and low culture, to create something that breaks the rules".

That's why in his opulent Divina disco he worked on the theory that the kind of people who go to discos are the polar opposite of people who go to museums. He thought it would be fun to combine the two worlds. Behind each seating area therefore, is a larger than life canvas reproduction of a female nude (or Divina) by Old Masters such as Velazquez, Ingres and Giorgione. Behind the bar is a huge mosaic rendition of the large vagina in Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*. "As a creator I still remember that I came from my mother's belly. So everything is feminine to me," including the very particular art of mosaics, which he sees as a perfect medium for his work: a "skin that can follow the curves of my architecture".

The power of love

One of the chairs Novembre made for Cappellini in 2003 was entitled SOS, an acronym for Sofa of Solitude. It is an unwelcoming black foam block, from which has been hollowed an organic shape that is reminiscent of a seated or lying body. The internal space of the seat has been covered in textured, metallic gold PVC. At the time photos came out of a long-haired, unkempt Novembre sitting naked and forlorn in the chair, looking much like a person "shipwrecked". SOS has a highly personal background: Novembre had just been left by his girlfriend of several years, and this was a heartfelt "manifesto" about solitude. "Loneliness in this world is golden, because they make you think you can have everything you want, you can do whatever you want, you don't have to compromise. But to me it's a golden cage...It's a world that is taking a bad direction in a really selfish way."

Hence the gold of the inside of the seat, and the black irresolute darkness of the rest of it – "the world we are living in," says Novembre. Much later he concludes the story, saying that his "SOS went straight to his girlfriend's heart".

And for Novembre, that's important, because he believes in happy ends and in the power of love. Above all, he believes in loving what you do. "I cannot think of what I do as a job, I think I'm so lucky to speak with the things that I do." And he thinks this love can, or rather should, be applied by most people to what they do. "You just have to filter everything you do with poetry," he cries. Even if you work in a post office? I ask somewhat timidly. And here Novembre gets particularly animated. Even the job he believes possibly the worst, that of the road-sweep, carries a beautiful message he says: "I am cleaning the world for you; I keep it clean to give it to our children".

Individual voice

This magnetic idealism – the fact that Novembre really seems to care about the minutiae of what he does – contrasts sharply with what he feels is clearly superficial behaviour by many of his colleagues and counterparts. The design system, in his opinion, has taken on the worst aspects of the fashion world; adopting its breakneck pace and not paying heed to the "pauses necessary for creativity". It is full of young designers who think that designing means "changing the leg of a chair or creating a slightly different tone of beige". People have lost their ability to criticise, to recognise what is good and bad. "Not everything old is an artwork," he says forcefully.

Too many designers are "afraid to be not in vogue...Say whatever you want, but say something personal," he says, his voice rising in an admonishing way.

In the meantime Novembre has started to work on his first major architectural project: building part of an HQ alongside a pre-existing 18th century villa in the south of Italy. It marks an important turning point. For one thing, it is a return to his southern roots (he was born and grew up not far away in Lecce). For another, whereas until now he has made what he calls "short films", 12 years after finishing his architecture degree he finally feels ready for the "big movie". Because things in Novembre's world have to be "very felt" and come from "deep deep inside". And that takes time.

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