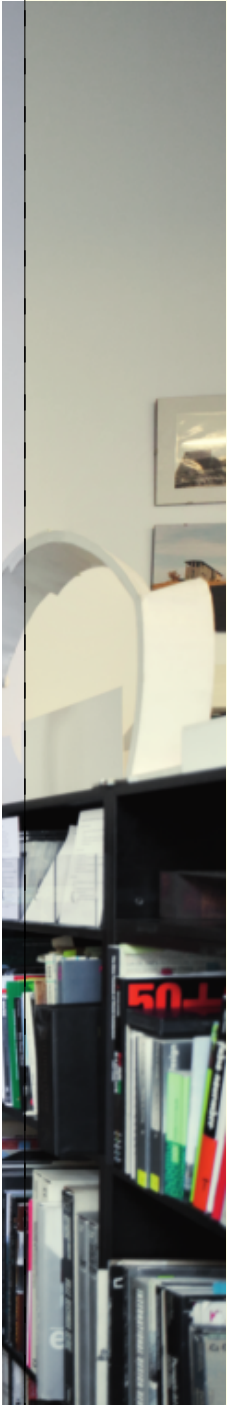


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Cini Boeri



It began with Mr Yes. Mr Yes came onto the scene at some point in the 1960s when Stefano Boeri was still a child. No one knew what his real name was. Mr Yes was the boyfriend of Stefano Boeri's aunt and, evidently, he would say "yes" to everything, hence the name. Mr Yes had lots of money and, in 1966, he commissioned Stefano Boeri's mother, the designer and architect Cini Boeri, to build a house for the aunt at a remote cove at Punta Cannone on the island of La Maddalena off northern Sardinia.

Cini Boeri designed a remarkable house, the Casa Rotonda, a circular building embedded into the rock. The living areas are arranged over two floors around a circular inner courtyard sheltered from the prevailing wind; in fact, it opens up towards the sea like a theatre stage from antiquity. In this project, the architect Cini Boeri had already begun to formulate an idea that would later re-emerge in even more detail in her own house, which she built right by the beach, between the rocks, within sight of the Casa Rotonda. A house as a small city whose individual rooms are actually small houses clustered around a central piazza, a stage for the family and their friends, acting out everyday life as festively as a theatre play: here, anyone leaving a room is able to make a grand entrance.

Cini Boeri is one of Italy's best-known 20th-century designers. What is far less well known is that Boeri also worked as an architect. Having studied at the Politecnico in Milan, she worked for the architect Gio Ponti. She made the acquaintance of Marco Zanuso and designed his house for him before opening her own offices in 1963, as one of only a handful of women to have studied both architecture and design.

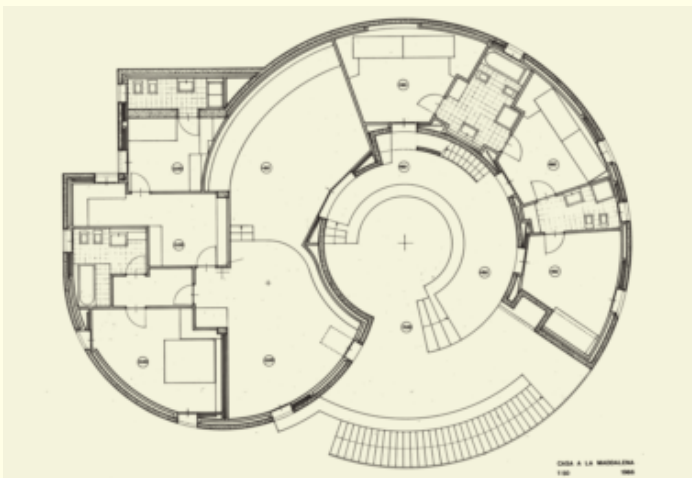
In the years that followed, she designed the *Lunario* table, its glass top projecting so far beyond the polished chrome base below it that the entire assembly still looks like an optical illusion, even when you're standing in front of it. As early as 1967, long before it was commonplace,

she designed the wheeled *Partner* suitcase, and it remains one of the most beautiful of its kind to this day. She designed the *Botolino* chair, a small stool with castors that came upholstered either in light-brown leather or long-haired fur, in which case it looked like the definitive *botolino* or “little yapper”. These items of furniture were not designed to remain static within the home like immutable, firmly anchored sculptures; rather, they were meant to be scuttled about the home to wherever they were needed, like small manic animals. Her best-known sofa design, the *Serpentone* of 1971, is an example of furniture that is able to flow around and trough the chaotic life within the home. It consisted of 37 cm wide polyurethane foam elements that were connected with lamellas. It meant that any number of these lamellas could be linked together to create a four-seater, five-seater, or potentially a seat of unlimited length that could wind its way through the home like a snake (hence its Italian name), forming an elongated classic sofa, but also a circle or an S-shape. Here again, the furniture is be allowed to flow around home life rather than being constrained in a static position.

The first time we met Cini Boeri in Milan, she was standing at her apartment window on Piazza Sant’Ambrogio. She was looking across at the rectory opposite, where she was born in 1924 and where she grew up; her mother’s husband was the chief municipal officer there. He was not, however, her biological father; her biological father was a wealthy Milan dandy, something she only discovered when she was an adult. Before that, he was simply referred to as an “uncle”. In front of a bookcase in her apartment containing the writings of Karl Marx and Claude Lévi-Strauss, there are photos of her as a young woman. She met her husband, a Milan neurologist and resistance fighter, during the war. There is a photograph of her as a very young woman on her honeymoon: wearing sunglasses, she is seated in the passenger seat of a Fiat Topolino estate in which the young couple travelled around war-damaged Europe. There is another photograph, one that was taken by her son Stefano, himself a recognised architect and the recipient of numerous awards for his *Bosco Verticale* in Milan; it features his mother and his two brothers. Twenty years later, Cini Boeri herself is seated at the steering wheel of a Daimler convertible and is now regarded as one of Italy’s foremost designers: her



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story is also the story of emancipation. For her family, in 1967 she designed the house she calls Casa Bunker, because it is painted dark grey and because it is shielded outwardly yet opens up inwardly, as if to protect the entire family. And yet, as Stefano informs us, the time-bomb ticking away was inside the building: his parents split up the year the summerhouse was completed, and his mother travelled with her sons to Paris and took part in the city's May 1968 riots. Like many Milanese, she was a communist, and the house she built in that lonely cove at La Maddalena went from being a retreat for her nuclear family to a gathering place for Milan's intelligentsia, who spent entire summers there, sleeping naked up on the flat roof during Sardinia's hot sticky summer nights, engaging in endless discussions about the revolution and the potential threat of a putsch by the Italian military. Stefano explains that some of them wanted to organise, from Sardinia, resistance to any military dictatorship that might arise. There is a great deal his mother no longer recalls. She is, after all, 93 when we meet and, as we chat, she keeps introducing herself impeccably and most graciously every five minutes, placing her hand on the guest's arm in the middle of conversation to say, "Io sono Cini, e tu?" (My name's Cini, and you are...?). But she does remember precisely what happened in the 1960s and '70s, the discussions in Milan bookstores, and the fact that the small house on La Maddalena became a remote and secluded centre for Milan society's discourse: indeed, society itself was being re-designed by the sea.

Like Miuccia Prada, who is a generation younger, Cini Boeri belonged to a social stratum whose left-wing political consciousness did not end in a doctrinaire, ultramontane rejection of all the blessings bestowed by capitalism; more than anywhere else in the world, it was possible to be left-wing in Milan – and even on the radical left – and still own holiday homes and sports cars and wear expensive clothes.

Cini Boeri still travels to Sardinia, to La Maddalena, to her Casa Bunker, which, when she designed it, was also perhaps some sort of speculation on the future life of her sons, who were still young at the time. Each of them had a room where, one day, they might be able to live with their family. All the rooms converge towards a "sunken living room" that contains the record player and a couple of sofas. The topog-



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- 1 Cini Boeri, *Casa Rotonda*, Punta Cannone, La Maddalena, 1966
 - 2 Cini Boeri, SERPENTONE/Arflex, 1971
 - 3 Cini Boeri, floor plan for the *Casa Rotonda*, Punta Cannone, La Maddalena, 1966
 - 4 Cini Boeri with two of her sons

raphy pushes through the rigid design and genuinely transforms the building into a small village, with its individual rooms clinging to the rock like houses to a cliff. From the living room, the house opens out onto a loggia which, in this particular staging, serves as the public space, and then out towards the sea. This way of resolving a single-family house and its rooms into small individual dwellings is something that would be rediscovered as a life model only much later, i.e. most recently with the Moriyama House in Tokyo, where the architect Ryue Nishizawa has built a miniature town comprised of ten separate residential units one to three storeys high, reminiscent of individual rooms in their own right. While the largest is occupied by the owner and client himself, Yasuo Moriyama, the others are rented out. Nishizawa worked on the plans for two years. First, it was to be a house with corridors laid out under the open sky; then they became small gardens, and the rooms were moved apart to become small individual houses. The corridors between these mini-houses are not roofed over; instead, they form a sort of labyrinthine garden, with trees growing between the dwellings. When the building was completed, it was celebrated as a revolution in residential architecture, an innovative type of living environment, a stage setting, a small town with houses the size of individual rooms.

What happened in Tokyo had already happened on La Maddalena: a single-family house had become a town on a small scale.

In both instances, all sorts of people lived together in the smallest of spaces, beyond the scope of a family unit. In both cases, a form of de-ideologised communitarianism was turned into architecture, exemplifying a way of life that questions the compulsion towards isolated, compartmentalised private homes in the conventional sense. If the dream of “my home is my castle” is the manifestation in building form of a late-capitalist defensive individualism that has succeeded in annihilating itself, along with its owner-occupiers, then what we have here is a new opportunity for life after the collapse of a Westernised affluent society doggedly founded on a fundamental right to representative detached single-family houses, against all economic and ecological rationale.

Access to the roof of these individual residential units is by a small ladder, so people can have breakfast together in the morning sunshine



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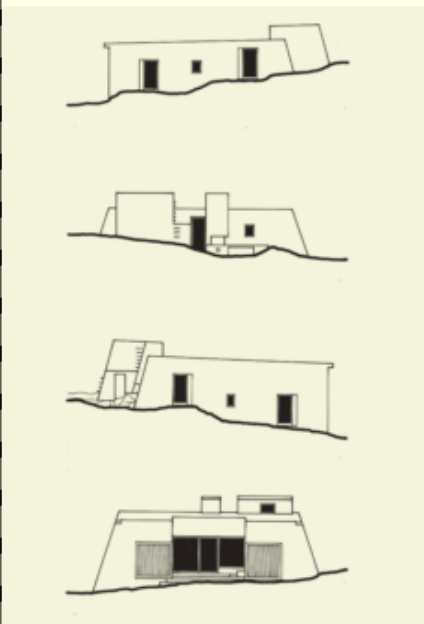


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and meet with other residents for a chat. And that is precisely what happened four decades earlier, in a small cove on the Mediterranean so far removed from all the centres of activity that the history of architecture, too, has overlooked it.



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5 *Casa Bunker*, 1967

6 *Casa Bunker*, Abbatoggia, La Maddalena, 1967, floor plan

7 Sketch of *Casa Bunker*, Abbatoggia, La Maddalena, 1967

8 *Casa Bunker*, Abbatoggia, La Maddalena, 1967

9 *Casa Bunker*, Abbatoggia, La Maddalena, 1967