

exploring new passions

Rudy Ricciotti's material

dreams

For Rudy Ricciotti, materials evoke past experiences, encounters and childhood emotions, bringing forth a desire to share, to touch, to invent a world where both sensitivity and sensuality have their place.

"You have to start with materials and look at them from a romantic point of view. When I was about 10 years old, there was no school on Thursdays, and I would go to the construction sites where my Italian father, working as a foreman, built low-income housing. I remember wearing plastic sandals, stepping in the freshly poured concrete... On Fridays, my father would meet with the masons, metal workers and carpenters, one by one, to give them their pay. It was a microcosm of the Mediterranean, and he knew them all. Discussions were frank, sometimes heated. The masons were tough. To me they were magicians.

That's where I learned to love the people who work with raw materials, real matter. It was a man's universe, gung-ho and rugged, but also fraternal...as a child I looked upon the masons with hammers hanging from their belts as if they were gladiators.

RUDY RICCIOTTI, born in Algiers, Algeria in 1952, is an architect. His agency is based in Bandol, in the south of France. An iconoclast, he is known for diverse array of projects, e.g. the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations, the Potsdam Symphony Concert Hall, the new Palace of Festivals in Venice, the National Choreographic Center in Aix-en-Provence, and the new wing of the Louvre Museum in Paris dedicated to Islamic arts. His unique approach in applying building materials, especially his work with concrete, has led him to collaborate often with the Lafarge Group.





Computer image of the Mucem project in Marseilles, France. Architect: Rudy Ricciotti.

▶ When it comes to materials, there's no segregation along class lines. In the building industry it's the same: there are simply people and their skills, trades and businesses. As an architect, I'm part of the family: I love being with engineers, craftsmen and mates. I didn't learn my trade at architecture school; I learned it from the people in the building industry. I owe them everything.

Concrete can be sublime. It can also inspire fear. In intercity zones, it reflects hopelessness. It becomes sublime in great engineering works, in dams and bridges, and in certain contemporary architectural masterpieces – such as Le Corbusier's Ronchamp church, or the CNIT building in Paris La Defense – where sensible projects take surreal flight.

To do this job, you have to accept that not everyone will like what you do – particularly the contractor, who is often anxious to cut costs. I fight against cheap hardware, plastic, aluminum, ugliness... My buildings work. The contractors are forgotten, but the memory of the craftsmen lingers on. This is how the tradition of skilled craftsmen is perpetuated, and I'm very proud of that. I don't use products that fail to meet ethical standards. That's my traditional, conservative side. I'm a European architect and patriot. In today's environment, you also have to push for innovation if you want to defend a qualified workforce.

Today, with ultra-high-performance fiber-reinforced concrete, we are about to embark on a new industrial adventure. Architects are like test pilots heading down the runway, ready for take-off...they must have total confidence in the calculations and professional skills of mechanics and engineers. We are on the verge of switching from propellers to jet engines. The Footbridge of Peace in Seoul spans 130 meters, yet its platform thickness is just three centimeters for a static end-girder height of 1.3 meters! The concrete melds into a slender stroke.

With the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations in Marseille, France, the materials present a different kind of complexity. The setting, at the foot of the Saint-Jean fort, facing the sea, offers an absolute mineral essence. Some people say it reminds them of fine latticework, or a distant Orientalism. While it can be seen in this way, there is nothing about the structure that is purely decorative. Like a fish skeleton, everything is structural. We're moving towards a dematerialization of the concrete structure, which is becoming delicate, gossamer, intricately formed like a cross-section of coral rock. Nobody knows where this new material is taking us. We can reinvent the world.