

## EXPERIENCE—ALESSANDRA MAIOLINO, UNITED KINGDOM THE JOB OF A LIFETIME

**Architect Alessandra Maiolino laid strong foundations for her Buddhist practice in Italy. Despite a tough beginning, she created the right circumstances in which to build her future in London.**

I started practicing this Buddhism when I was a student of architecture at the prestigious University of Florence. I chose to become an architect because I had the right talents, and because I wanted to contribute in a very practical and tangible way to society.

At that time in Italy, all Buddhists, including myself, used to practice “full time.” That means doing gongyo together, chanting lots of daimoku and having meetings almost three times a day! Being a student, I could easily devote most of my time to activities and chant two hours a day. From this period of intense Buddhist activity, I built the foundations of my practice and the way I have since lived my life—not missing gongyo, chanting abundant daimoku, the importance of study; understanding the mentor–disciple relationship; and the importance of practicing for others.

After two years in Florence, I decided to go back to my home town in Calabria, in the south of Italy, so that I could look after my family at a time of acute family troubles; and to introduce them to Buddhism. In Calabria, I was one of the pioneers of our Buddhist movement for kosen-rufu. On weekends, we used to go from Calabria to Buddhist activities in the city of Salerno. Thus I started to develop a karmic relationship with this town.

I continued my architectural studies, but it wasn’t easy. I have always been a slow but diligent student, yet I determined to devote time to Buddhist activities. I transferred to a local but less prestigious university. Just to get there, I had to make a round trip of several hours by train. The course itself was also not easy. My relationship with my tutor was difficult and he neglected to support me for my graduation thesis. This delayed my studies by two more years. I started to doubt whether I really wanted to become an architect. My family situation also distracted me. However, both my sister and mother started practicing Buddhism, which made great changes within our family. More people in the region began to practice. I also found a good teacher who really inspired me to want to be an architect.

During this period, I went regularly on training courses, including visiting the European Buddhist Center in Trets, France. While there I met a man from the UK doing *keibi* (the voluntary activity of protecting the Center). The first moment I saw him, I thought I would marry him one day. After the course, I kept in touch with him and came to visit him in London; I was so convinced he was the right man for me.

After many years of struggle I eventually finished my doctorate with the highest possible marks. I couldn’t quite believe that, considering the length of time it had taken, my professor would so greatly esteem my work. The university wanted to publish my thesis and offered me a faculty position. Keeping sight of my dream of actually constructing buildings for society, I declined the offer and, feeling that this was my destiny, came to live in London without any guarantee of employment, to live with the man I had met in Trets.

I suddenly started to feel conscious of my age, and anxious to find a job as soon as

possible. It was so difficult! I spent one year in an office where I was paid very little, and when I left I hadn't gained much experience to let me move forward to a better job.

The only offer came from an architectural practice in Malaysia, which I felt I had to take it. The firm had a good reputation. So, having to leave my partner in London, I went all on my own to live far away on the Asian continent. I arrived there at the time of the economic crisis that afflicted Southeast Asia from 1997, and lost my job after a few months. I managed to find another job on the beautiful island of Bali, but this too, ended quickly because of the economic situation.

Back to London.

I had to face lots of different kinds of problems — in my relationship with my partner — that made my job search more difficult. I went to a senior leader in the UK for guidance in faith to resolve these issues. It felt as though he had no answers for me at all. Instead, he talked about the difficulties I would face in trying to find a job as an architect. He told me how an architect friend of his had given up finding employment. Then he concluded, "But he doesn't practice and you do." So I had to find a job to be happy. Even my doctor had told me the same.

I started doing other jobs, but that was not enough and I did not have much money. I started to give in to sadness and disappointment. Fortunately, one day I went to Taplow Court for a Buddhist activity, where I heard some guidance from SGI President Ikeda that really struck me:

"As for self-confidence — self-confidence come from hard work and effort. You're deluding yourself if you think you have self-confidence without it. Only those who strive to challenge some goal and work toward it at their own pace and in their way, only those who keep trying, no matter how many times they may fail, can develop unshakable confidence in themselves. Self-confidence is synonymous with an invincible will. You cannot be said to have true self-confidence if your opinion of yourself seesaws from high to low every time you compare yourself to others. A life spent judging yourself by others will end in frustration and deadlock."

I told myself that even without the job I had studied so many years for, my life was still valuable for kosen-rufu, and no matter what, I would be happy. I started doing a lot of beautiful activities with my local Buddhist friends and chanting more daimoku. I also started my job hunt again.

One evening a Buddhist friend came to our place for dinner. He said that, based on his theory of value, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the founder of the Soka Gakkai, taught his students to understand what they really wanted and to go for that goal. I could no longer deny to myself that what I really wanted was to work for the architect whom I admired the most in the UK — David Chipperfield; he was becoming world famous as one of the new generation of British architects.

The next day, I took my portfolio to his office. But nothing happened for about three months. Eventually my portfolio was sent back to me. I did not give up and kept chanting. A friend of mine worked at that office. I was envious of her! But one day I received a phone call from her saying they were urgently looking for Italian-speaking architects. I sent my portfolio again, and after two days I received a phone call: I was invited for an interview. I went to the office on a Friday and was offered a job starting the following Monday. Of course I was incredibly happy.

I started working on a project in Venice. After a few months, we worked on an

international competition in Italy, for the Law Court building in Salerno (where I used to go for activities), and we won it. This project is one of the biggest construction works in the whole of Italy, and very prestigious—it even got coverage on national TV. Through working on this project, I have gained an enormous amount of experience: a foundation for the rest of my architectural life. I am also introducing people in the office to Buddhism. I had transformed what had been a weakness in my chances of finding a job—being an Italian with not much experience—into my greatest strength.

My firm has been voted the second favorite architectural practice in the UK—after Norman Foster—by other architects in a recent Royal Institute of British Architects survey. Next year I bet it will be first. Traveling to Italy for work means I am able to visit my family more often, without paying the air fare. Coincidentally, a new Buddhist center for all members in the south of Italy is going to be created in Salerno. I feel so proud of the efforts we pioneers made over the years, now becoming manifest in the form of this new center.

I now see that the meaning of the guidance I was given was that through resolving my job situation, I was able to resolve all the personal and partner issues that I had. My partner and I deepened our relationship and were married in July.

I learned from my senior leaders in Italy that when we fulfill our personal dreams through our Buddhist practice as part of our daily life, it is natural to feel gratitude. Then we naturally want to transmit the benefits of practicing Buddhism to others. This is how I feel right now and I want to devote the rest of my life to kosen-rufu.

*Courtesy of UK Express*