

To Ezio Bortolussi

ALBERTO FELICE DE TONI

On 26 July 2019, in my capacity as Rector of the University of Udine, I had the privilege of conferring an honorary degree in Civil Engineering on Ezio Bortolussi. It was a well-attended ceremony that was a special event for our University and for Friuli.

The awarding of an honorary degree is the highest recognition that a university institution can confer on individuals who, by virtue of the wealth of skills they have acquired and the originality of their ideas (including applied ones), have proved to be a reference point for the sector in which they work. It is not, therefore, simply a question of awarding a prize. The honorary degree, in fact, is the result of an articulated and intense process, starting with the nomination by the teaching staff of the Department of reference (in this case, the Polytechnic Department of Engineering and Architecture) and ending with the entire university community identifying with and recognising the candidate, beyond disciplinary distinctions.

But, if I may, there is more. On 27 and 28 July of the same year, the 16th Annual Convention and Meeting of Friulians Worldwide was held in Tolmezzo. From this perspective, the honorary degree in Civil Engineering awarded to Ezio Bortolussi acquired even greater significance.

Ezio Bortolussi was an emigrant, one of the more than 350,000 Friulians who emigrated from 1946 to 1970 in search of fortune, or more simply, in search of a “future” in a foreign land.

He left Arzene for Switzerland in 1960, aged just 17, with basic technical knowledge. He honed his skills through manual labour on

construction sites in Geneva and then refined these by attending evening classes in the mid-1960s. Once in Canada, he took on the challenge of coordinating construction sites, working on ever larger buildings. In 1984 he founded his own company, NewWay Forming, which has long since become a reference point for excellence in North America for the high-tech construction of large buildings and high reinforced concrete structures.

NewWay means, literally, “New Way” and for Ezio Bortolussi this term is also synonymous with a different and new way of conceiving work in the world of large-scale construction, of designing and managing building sites. NewWay, however, also means the ability to combine innovation and tradition in the management of professional and human resources, to enhance the skills of collaborators and colleagues, to maintain project deadlines and objectives, while fully respecting the safety of the working environment.

NewWay has completed more than 400 large buildings in the last thirty-five years. Some of them are now indispensable architectural and engineering features in various cities across Canada and North America. Behind the realisation of these major works, there is a considerable and constant commitment to the study of innovative engineering solutions aimed at solving the problems of structural and construction technology typical of more complex sites and those located in highly urbanised city areas. Just a few of these solutions that we would mention, are the continuous production of large concrete castings, the use of original systems for anchoring internal climbing cranes to the structures of buildings under construction, and the introduction of self-supporting formwork systems for the rapid casting of horizontal structural elements.

The innovation and effectiveness of the solutions proposed by Bortolussi in these projects, are testified by the numerous commendations received from the various clients who commissioned them and by the publication of his most significant constructions in authoritative sector magazines and journals.

Ezio Bortolussi’s experience, however, holds a stronger and deeper meaning. In him, we see the experience and tenacity of our old labourers and master builders. In him, we rediscover the technical wisdom of the great tradition of Friulian builders and entrepreneurs. His personal and

professional path allows us to advance the hypothesis that the success of the Friuli Model in the post-earthquake reconstruction of 1976 was not the result of chance, but rather of Friulians having retained, perhaps in their DNA, an innate will and ability to “do”, which allows them to re-emerge and return to the surface, even after a terrible tempest.

In conclusion, the honorary degree awarded to Ezio Bortolussi was certainly an acknowledgement of the considerable contributions to innovation and the advancement of engineering knowledge in the field of design and construction management that he brought. At the same time, it was also a message of enthusiasm and hope for the new generations of technicians that the University of Friuli trains in Civil Engineering, convincing them that commitment and confidence in their own means are the tools with which they can meet, tackle and overcome new challenges that arise in the world of large-scale construction.

To conclude, I would like to quote the letter that Ezio Bortoluzzi sent to me just over a year after receiving his honorary degree, and my letter of reply. The value of things over time becomes increasingly clear.

2 September 2020

Dear Prof. Alberto Felice De Toni,

Little more than a year has passed since I was awarded the highest honour, revering me far more than I may have deserved.

I continue my work and see that with will and perseverance you can still be present in a difficult but exciting market, open and fully satisfied.

Every day I go to the office where I try to carry out my tasks as a man and entrepreneur with passion and dedication, encountering problems but also solutions and satisfaction.

In my office hangs the parchment that you gave me and of which I am very proud: a title that honours me and always gives me chills when I read it, emotionally taking me back to when it was awarded. I often share it with friends, employees, customers and suppliers: I show a few pictures and remain surprised by your magnanimity.

I am proud to be from Friuli and to have received such a prestigious and important title from the University of Friuli.

I carry in my heart the encounters with you and the professors I met: to them I extend my greetings and thanks.

To you, if I may, dear Alberto, I extend my profound esteem and great closeness, and my wishes for a full and successful life.

Cav. Ezio Bortolussi

22 September 2020

Dear Ezio,

I would like to thank you very much for the letter you wrote to me one year after the University of Friuli conferred an honorary degree on you. I am pleased that – even in a difficult time like the one we are living through – you manage to carry out your work as an entrepreneur with tenacity and willpower: two qualities that I am sure will never abandon you.

Although I no longer hold the position of Rector, I would like to keep alive and well my relationships with the men and women that the University of Udine has chosen to reward. Courageous and enterprising men and women, who have been able to challenge the unknown by stubbornly facing and overcoming difficult moments and situations. Men and women who “looking up, when their work is done, meet the sky, the sun, the moon, the clouds and the stars... and who wish to leave a mark of hope and joy”. Thinking back to these splendid words of yours, uttered during your historic *Lectio Magistralis*, I retrace your parable as a man first and then as an entrepreneur, capable of basing his success on his trust in people and professional skills. I am convinced that men like you are an inexhaustible source of inspiration for our students and for the new generations in general.

I therefore reiterate the spirit with which our Friulian university conferred on you the honorary degree in Civil Engineering: a high recognition for a man who has become a valuable global ambassador for the best traditions of Friuli, based on work, commitment, ingenuity and the ability to cooperate.

As Hermann Hesse said: “Most people are like a falling leaf that drifts and turns in the air, flutters, and falls to the ground. But a few others are like stars which one defined path: no wind reaches them, they have within themselves their guide and path”.

With my warmest regards, I hope to see you again on the next occasion in Friuli.

Alberto Felice De Toni

Alberto Felice De Toni
Former Rector
University of Udine