

# HUMANISTIC DREAMS

*The emperor of cashmere celebrates 40 years of the Cucinelli enterprise and the Project for Beauty in his beloved “hamlet of the spirit”, writes MARTA COLOMBO*

SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT of his company in 1978, Brunello Cucinelli has put forward his cashmere philosophy, stressing how ethics – and aesthetics – are fundamental components to his idea of capitalism and profit. Four decades and countless yarns of the most prestigious Mongolian cashmere later, his aspirations have materialised in his beloved Solomeo in Umbria, re-baptised by the family as the “hamlet of the spirit.”

To celebrate the completion of the “Project for Beauty,” a massive redevelopment scheme of the Umbrian village and its surroundings, and the 40th anniversary of his cashmere empire, Cucinelli invited 500 journalists from all over the world to witness his achievements and the results of a unique Italian savoir faire that takes inspiration from the classical canon.

Last September, when I travelled to central Italy for the much-anticipated event, it wasn’t my first time visiting Solomeo, but it was the first time I saw it through the eyes of the Cucinellis and their pervasive philosophy. At first glance, the hilltop hamlet isn’t much different from the neighbouring towns that characterise the region: tiny alleys packed with 12th century-style picturesque houses adorned with rococo balconies lead to the piazza, the former centre of religious and commercial activities. But a more meticulous observation and exploration reveal much more than this. There is, in fact, something very special about this place. While it maintains its medieval structure, Solomeo is the embodiment of classical standards of architecture, beauty and harmony.

From a stage located in the Piazza Della Pace, a few metres away from Villa Antionori Cucinelli and the small church dedicated to Saint Bartholomew, Cucinelli welcomes all of us – plus a bunch of religious and government authorities from around the region – and proudly starts telling the story of Solomeo and what it represents for him, his family and the local community. He speaks in Italian, with



Clockwise from opposite page: Brunello Cucinelli in front of the Tribute to Human Dignity monument; the main church in Piazza della Pace, Solomeo; at the Brunello Cucinelli factory in Solomeo; the interiors of the Brunello Cucinelli HQ in Solomeo; the countryside surrounding the hamlet of Solomeo in Umbria, central Italy



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BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

Clockwise from top: Brunello Cucinelli on the stage at the Project for Beauty press conference in Solomeo's main square; Cucinelli on the street; the Tribute to Human Dignity monument in the Solomeo Valley

the perfect diction and inflection of a theatre actor, who he resembles in many ways.

Cucinelli doesn't talk fashion. In fact, he doesn't mention anything remotely related to it throughout his long, charismatic – and at times dramatic – speech. On the contrary, he instinctively quotes Kant, Pythagoras and numerous masters of philosophy, history and literature that guided him through his life, inspired him to pursue his humanistic dreams and garnered him an honorary philosophy degree from the University of Perugia.

“The great dream of my life has always been to work for the moral and economic dignity of the human being. I imagined a company that would make a profit, but I wanted this profit to be achieved with ethics and the respect of human beings, manufacturing products without harming the creation,” writes Cucinelli in the introduction of *Borgo dello Spirito*, the pamphlet he carefully prepared for the event. During his speech, he couldn't have emphasised this vision more – one that takes form as you walk through the Cucinelli HQ, located in the redeveloped suburban areas at the foot of Solomeo's hill.

Every component around the company's buildings is devoted to creating an environment that radiates balance and excellence. While seeing how the cashmere is methodically worked by the hundreds of employees in the production section was fascinating, what grabbed my attention – and that of most of the attendees – was Cucinelli's office. The spacious white room is a temple of “sophia and sapientia” (or “knowledge and wisdom”), the central ideals of Hellenistic and Platonic thinking that perfectly summarise his career. There are no computers or phones, but handwritten notes and sketches and countless books categorised by subject. Behind his desk, there's a copy of the Bible right next to one of the Quran, which face a framed picture of Martin Luther King Jr and Abraham Lincoln, among others.

As the church's bells solemnly mark the ending of the day and the sky slowly turns blood-orange, in a scenic sunset typical of an early September Italian evening, Cucinelli turns his attention to his grand cultural heritage revitalisation scheme.

One of the main scopes of the Project for Beauty was to revive the suburbs. Anybody who has driven around Italy has probably noticed the huge aesthetic difference between the city centres and the villages' walled towns and the areas surrounding them, usually occupied by gigantic post-war industrial buildings that break the landscape's harmony. Giving dignity to the suburbs, which, according to Greek tradition, are as important as the centre, became a mission for the Cucinelli Foundation, which led to the building of three parks – industrial, oratory and agricultural – in the valley surrounding the hamlet.

Dignity is also the main *raison d'être* of the Tribute to Human Dignity monument, a symbol of the dedication to humanity and the preservation of its primordial spirit with something long-lasting. The structure, a five-metre-high travertine exedra, has five arches dedicated to each continent and stands proud in the midst of the Umbrian countryside, surrounded by the Cucinelli vineyards. The monument is solemn, almost intimidating, but so are many ventures that are meant to last for more than five centuries.

Cucinelli's speech, possibly for his tone and mannerism, instantly reminded me of a distant past when Italy was subdivided into signorie and Lorenzo de' Medici turned the Florentine Republic into an international centre of culture, art and excellence. But for some, it was just too idealistic, especially for members of the national press, who asked pointed questions on the applicability of his humanistic model beyond Solomeo's success story, emphasising the country's political and social stagnation.

True – theory, ancient values and pompous quotes are ubiquitous traits of



the charming Cucinelli universe, but the entrepreneur has to be celebrated for his undeniable coherence and perseverance, of which Solomeo and the company are tangible examples. Like the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and Hadrian, who he repeatedly praises as strong men devoted to the preservation of human dignity and beauty, Cucinelli has undeniably turned a vision into reality.

“Heraclitus said that ‘a man's character is his guardian divinity’ and this has been my dream, stemming from my love for the hamlet, where spirituality is so evident that I have chosen to call Solomeo the ‘hamlet of the spirit’,” writes Cucinelli in another passage of the event's pamphlet. As utopic as it might sound, when he says that this vision can apply to many more communities in Italy and beyond, after spending four days in Solomeo, surrounded by his family and his devoted staff, you actually start to believe that it could actually be possible. #



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