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airBaltic  
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# baltic

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### AIRBALTIC: 30 YEARS IN THE SKY





INTERVIEW / September

Words by Lana Jūra

Publicity photos

## THE QUIET LUXURY OF LIVING WELL

Step inside the world of Matteo Thun, the star architect and designer whose work effortlessly combines elegance, sustainability, and a deep respect for culture and nature. In this exclusive interview, he shares his vision for creating spaces that nurture both body and soul, reveals the stories behind some of his most inspiring projects, and offers a fresh perspective on how thoughtful design can enrich our daily lives.

If you've ever spent a night at the *JW Marriott* in Venice or *nhow Hotel* in Milan, enjoyed a meal at *Vapiano*, washed your hands under a *Duravit* faucet, or savoured an espresso from an *Illy* cup, then you've already encountered the world of Matteo Thun. The renowned Italian architect and designer is one of Europe's most prolific and visionary creatives. His journey began in the 1980s as a founding member of the legendary Memphis Group in Milan, an avantgarde collective that redefined the language of design. Since then, Thun has built a career that spans decades and continents, creating award-winning work for leading brands.

With more than 40 years of experience in architecture, Thun's projects stretch across the globe, from Italy and Germany to South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, and Canada. His portfolio is a curated collection of serene resorts and spas, holistic wellness retreats, futuristic corporate headquarters, sustainable timber villages, and luxury hotels steeped in timeless heritage. Each design reflects a deep respect for the surrounding landscape and the people who inhabit it and is guided by a clear vision of what contemporary architecture should be: not confrontational but inviting, not radical but meaningful. In Thun's spaces, people feel in harmony with themselves and with the world around them. These are environments shaped by warmth, honesty in materials, and a quiet sense of healing. For him, architecture is not just about objects – it's about experiences. It's a kind of luxury that's born from simplicity, where form emerges not through noise but through calm.

Founded in 1984, *Matteo Thun & Partners*, which has offices in Milan and Munich, has become a celebrated platform for architecture and design – one that speaks the language of sustainable beauty and timeless values. A master of vision and nuance, Thun has always known how to express complex ideas with both intelligence and subtle irony. It's this rare quality that has earned him a reputation not only as a designer but also as a thinker, a storyteller, and a true protagonist in the world of contemporary architecture.

This is my second meeting with the architecture and design luminary. Our first was in Milan during the Salone del Mobile, where Thun was unveiling a new line of wooden furniture designed in collaboration with his studio partner Antonio Rodriguez. The few minutes we shared passed quickly, yet within them, he articulated a deep and enduring architectural philosophy about the power of natural light, the honesty of local materials,

sustainability as a way of life rather than a marketing slogan, the rejection of ego in design, and the quiet presence of *genius loci*, or the soul of a place.

This time, our conversation takes place in Venice, against the backdrop of the Venice Architecture Biennale. The event is a vibrant meeting of the finest architectural minds from across the globe, where Thun's studio is presenting its latest project, *Fratelli Tutti*. In recent years, he has become deeply engaged in restoring and reimagining the region's historical heritage. And more and more, he finds himself drawn to the quiet rhythms of his Venetian apartment, with its view across the water to Giudecca. There he savours slow evenings, golden sunsets, and the simple pleasure of being surrounded by art.

## The renowned Italian architect and designer is one of Europe's most prolific and visionary creatives

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**You've mentioned Venice as one of your favourite places for a leisurely walk. What are some of your most memorable experiences there?**

My parents took me to the Venice Biennale when I was very young, and I have not missed one since. We've had a second home in Venice for a couple of years now, and I very much enjoy visiting the churches, palaces, and squares here. One of my favourite churches is San Sebastiano, just around the corner from our house. It contains frescoes by Il Veronese, an artist whose work I greatly admire. Venice is full of beauty. The presence of water and the lagoon, and the fact that you can only get around by boat or on foot, means life moves at a slower pace.

**You're currently working on the magnificent *Langham Venice* resort on Murano Island, set to open in 2026. Can you share a few behind-the-scenes insights before the grand reveal?**

The project is deeply shaped by its setting and heritage. It's about breathing new life into what already exists – honouring the past while creating something contemporary. On Murano's historic Rio dei Vetrai, a place that's rich in cultural significance, we're blending the elegance of Venetian Renaissance architecture with the modern spirit of the glassmaking tradition. The Renaissance-era buildings facing the lagoon will be meticulously





## It's all about capturing the soul of the place – bringing the outside in

restored and will serve as the main entrance to *The Langham*. Guests, as well as the public, will also have access to the beautifully preserved Casino Mocenigo, with its original frescoes celebrating music, poetry, and love.

We've retained the façades of the former glass furnaces, including their original wooden trusses, while integrating new architectural elements that bring a subtle modern flair – always in harmony with Murano's identity. At the heart of the resort will be a private central courtyard, which is a rare feature in Venice. It will serve as a serene oasis complete with a lush garden, pool, and bar, offering a true sense of calm and seclusion.

Every detail of the project has been developed in close collaboration with Venetian heritage authorities, using traditional materials and drawing on the craftsmanship of Murano's master glassmakers. *The Langham Venice* will be the first true luxury hotel on the island – a place that embodies the essence of Venetian culture and lifestyle. I believe it has the potential to breathe new energy into the lagoon.

Staying with the theme of cultural heritage, the *Fairmont Château Lake Louise* in Canada and the opulent retreat on Lake Chiemsee in Germany are two of your most recent hospitality projects. What challenges did you face when designing these high-end hotels, and how did you ensure that each one reflected its local heritage?

Both projects – *Chiemgauhof* in Germany and the spa at the *Fairmont Château Lake Louise* in Canada – are luxurious developments located on lakeshores and set within stunning, protected natural environments. At their core, both are about connecting with the lake, the mountains, and the surrounding nature. It's all about capturing the soul of the place – bringing the outside in. That's why a careful study of the site's orientation, wind patterns, sunrises and sunsets, soil, vegetation, culture, and local traditions is essential. All of these elements help shape the guiding idea behind each project.

*Chiemgauhof Lakeside Retreat* was built using local wood and a deliberately restrained palette of natural materials. Regional identity, expressed through materials and architectural language, plays a central role in the design. The concept brings together the charm of traditional wooden barns with the comforts of modern hospitality. A thoughtful understanding of the site's spirit, combined with energy-efficient technologies, allows us to reduce the ecological footprint and minimise climate impact.





Photo by: Cronata Xerra

Matteo Thun is renowned for projects focusing on health and well-being, such as the Waldkliniken in Eisenberg, Germany.

## Our surroundings have a profound effect on our health, well-being, and recovery

For the *Fairmont Château Lake Louise*, we were commissioned to design a year-round health and wellness facility – one that’s contemporary, eco-conscious, and inspired by the surrounding glacial landscape. We worked closely with Parks Canada to ensure complete respect for the forest, the natural surroundings, and the architectural language of the historic Fairmont Château. All the materials were selected for their ability to age beautifully and convey sensuality and tactility. The locally sourced wood, in particular, will develop a rich patina over time, enhancing the building’s connection to its environment.

**You’re renowned for your projects focusing on health and well-being, such as the Waldkliniken in Eisenberg, Germany. How do you approach designing spaces that promote healing and comfort, and what role does nature play in such environments?**

Nature is a fundamental part of our work. Over the past few decades, it has become increasingly clear that our surroundings have a profound effect on our health, well-being, and recovery. Designing environments that support healing is an interdisciplinary effort that blends architecture with medicine, psychology, environmental science, and design.

The hospital of the future should be anything but a sterile box. Waldkliniken is a perfect example – it’s neither a traditional clinic nor a hotel. We call it *hospitecture*.

Now that we’re living in the age of AI, what role does it play in your projects, and which innovations are you most excited about today?

I’m actually the only one among the approximately 100 architects and designers at *Matteo Thun & Partners* who doesn’t own a computer. To borrow a phrase from writer Italo Calvino, I believe in working more synthetically, quickly, and precisely – with pencil and watercolour in hand.

I believe in the ‘intelligence of the hand’, in which the hand leads and the brain follows. Design begins with what the hand understands instinctively – and only afterward does the brain decide whether to approve. Or not.

**How do you think houses will be designed in the future?**

At this point, I’d like to talk about wood, which is truly the building material of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For me, wood is both high-tech and high-touch. It combines technical and aesthetic durability, offering an almost endless life cycle. Wood perfectly embodies the idea of building in harmony with the environment, local culture, and economy. It’s also lightweight and ideal for mass production, thus helping to optimise construction time and reduce operating costs.

Timber construction fits perfectly with our philosophy of the ‘three zeros’: zero kilometres, by using local builders and craftsmen to cut transport distances; zero emissions, through climate-neutral energy sources; and zero waste, thanks to high recycling rates and careful life cycle management. Today, timber construction isn’t just a choice; it’s a social responsibility.

**If you could design anything, with no budget or constraints, what would you design and why?**

I’m very happy with the *Fratelli Tutti* installation.

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INTERVIEW / September



Thun grew up in a family of ceramicists at Klebenstein Castle in South Tyrol.

## My heroes are the great Italian masters, especially Leonardo da Vinci

What inspired *Fratelli Tutti*, and what message does it aim to convey?

The project draws inspiration from Jorge Bergoglio's [the birth name of Pope Francis, who passed away in April 2025 – Ed.] encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, or 'Brothers All'. It's part of a broader, ongoing initiative that honours the universal values of peace, fraternity, and shared humanity. Rooted in the principles of reuse, simplicity, and regeneration, the *Fratelli Tutti* installation serves as a place for meditation and collective reflection on the shared values of peace embraced by religions worldwide, on the intertwined destinies of humanity and nature, and on the resilience of natural materials.

Built from reclaimed wood sourced from an abandoned Alpine hay barn, the installation transforms discarded materials into a permanent space for spiritual and human connection. After its temporary exhibition at the Biennale, *Fratelli Tutti* will find its final home in the Alps at an altitude of 2000 metres. By integrating reclaimed resources, minimising consumption, and ensuring durability, the project embodies a truly regenerative vision.

You grew up in a family of ceramicists in South Tyrol. Did you ever consider how your childhood environment

shaped your creative talents, vision, and relationship with materials?

I was raised in Klebenstein Castle in the Sarntal Valley, which stretches north from Bolzano in South Tyrol. Although I spent my childhood in just a few heated rooms, I vividly remember the castle's grand proportions and the impressive size of its spaces. My mother was a ceramicist, and my brother and I made our own clay tools. I was particularly good at crafting turtles.

How has the history of Italian culture influenced your work, and which figures from this tradition inspire you the most?

My heroes are the great Italian masters, especially Leonardo da Vinci. My teachers included Emilio Vedova and Ettore Sottsass. Sottsass was not only a photographer and writer but also a designer who worked on a small scale with the logic of an architect. Perhaps the most lasting impact of his work is the sensorial quality with which he infused eroticism into everything he created. Sottsass taught me to push boundaries and always seek new solutions.

I agree that we're now in an era where new solutions are urgently needed. What do you imagine life will be like in the future, especially given the rapid changes in the climate?

We must change! I'd like to quote Carlo Ratti, the curator of the 19<sup>th</sup> Architecture Biennale: 'In the time of adaptation, architecture is at the centre and must lead with optimism. It needs to draw on all forms of



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The architect is currently working on the magnificent *Langham Venice* resort on Murano Island, set to open in 2026.

© Matteo Thun & Partners

## On weekends, I take long walks in nature to recharge

intelligence – natural, artificial, collective. It must reach across generations and disciplines – from the hard sciences to the arts. In this time of adaptation, architecture must rethink authorship, become more inclusive, and learn from science.’

As one of the founders of the iconic and revolutionary Memphis Group, how has this experience influenced your designs, particularly in an era so focused on sustainability?

Actually, my work during the Memphis period differs only superficially from my work today. The ethical principles of sustainability that have guided our work for many years remain unchanged. After thirty years, the most positive impact has been an accelerated process of discovering a sensorial design language. We’re returning to focus on humans and their senses.

We cannot simply repeat Memphis – that was a very specific moment in the early 1980s. But sensoriality and consciousness now define our modern age. These values accompany us once again as we reconnect with interpersonal relationships and rediscover our senses.

For a long time, design was primarily ‘visual’. Now, we’re ready to explore

the sense of touch and focus on conscious solutions for the planet.

I noticed that your studio presented a variety of new product designs at Milan Design Week this year. Several of your recent designs have won international awards. How you approach the integration of product design and architecture?

I follow the Milanese tradition of ‘from spoon to city’. We design at every scale, from the smallest details to entire urban environments. Our architects, interior architects, product designers, and graphic designers work together in a strong interdisciplinary network across our offices. Most of our product designs are integrated into our interior projects, creating a harmonious connection between objects and spaces.

Can you walk me through a typical day in your life? What daily habits help you stay creative and maintain your energy?

I start my day with Pilates. I enjoy green or ginger tea throughout the workday, and I have fresh vegetables for lunch. On weekends, I take long walks in nature to recharge.

How important is it for you to follow a Mediterranean diet?

Being Italian, it’s very important to me. Besides Japanese cuisine, I believe the Mediterranean diet is one of the best in the world! **bo**