



Retro first — riding the Strada Bianche

David Taylor catches up with architect Chris Dyson – whose practice, CDA, is completing the Harrow Arts Centre in London and a new book on its portfolio so far – to chat about riding the Eroica, and his brand-new Condor, built up especially for the job

BY DAVID TAYLOR

DAVID TAYLOR: Hi, Chris. How are you doing after your recent illness?

CHRIS DYSON: All right, I'm great, thanks, David. Yes. Lovely to be back - back to school, kind of thing!

DT: Now, you're a very keen cyclist, obviously. And you've just bought yourself a rather lovely new steed. Can you tell me about that, first, and also about Eroica, which is I think where you're going to be debuting it?

CD: Well, the Eroica is an annual event that takes place on the first weekend of October every year in Radda, in Chianti, Italy. The other name for it is the Strada Bianche, because you cycle on white chalky roads through the vineyards. There are five rides of, I think, 235, 135, 90, 75 and 40km. And we're doing the 135-kilometre one. I've always done that with a group of us who tend to go every year. This year I decided not to hire a bike but to build one and take it over. And I treated myself to this early classic Condor – 1965 design, steel tubes, Campagnolo gear set and toe clips. And the old-fashioned gear changers on the diagonal bar.

DT: Do you have to buy new shoes for the toe clips? Because obviously the ones you normally use have cleats.

CD: Yeah, you could take the cleats off and use your normal shoes, I guess. But they would look a bit odd. So no, over time, I've bought bits of equipment to fit into the scene for the day. They have a market the day before where you can buy all these things. So, I do own a pair already of these brown lace-up shoes. They're quite comfortable, actually. But it's a different way of riding. Quite different.

DT: Is it? In what way?

CD: Well, gear-changing is not as fast. You have to think a lot more in advance about everything you do. Even the braking is not as quick, because it's not disc brakes or anything like that. It's old-fashioned rubber brakes on steel rims. And you know, I do have a good set of cogs on the wheel so I can climb some hills, but it

is not easy, because it's like a sort of lumpy chalk road. You need a gravel bike, really, but you can't – you're not meant to ride a gravel bike (laughs). Yeah, you get the picture. I don't have tubs – I have inner tubes, which is a good thing. Previously I've used tubs and there's nothing worse because you have to have them strapped around your body while you're cycling. At least I don't have to do that this year.

DT: What is it about it you like so much?

CD: Well, it's just an amazing day where everybody from all over the world comes together. Some 7,000 riders come over the weekend. Probably the bulk of them are on the Saturday, which is the longer of the two days – you meet all sorts of people on the day and it's lovely. There are food stations as you'd imagine, with Italian cheeses...

DT: ...wow! And wine too?

CD: Yeah, a bit of wine. You steer clear of that...

DT: Not like Eddy Merckx...

CD: ...On the last stop you could go for a little! But yeah, there are four feed stations, I think, in 135 kilometres. Sometimes the rain comes and one year we were totally drenched. Other times, rain comes the night before, which is good because it holds the chalk down and makes it easier to cycle. Because the chalk drains well, but it's also very dusty if it's stone dry, it's nice to be

able to cycle when it's just had a bit of rain and the sun's out. Normally the sun does come out while you're riding.

But the thing is getting up at six in the morning, getting on your bike and then cycling to the sunrise at the top of the mountain, the Castello. And then as you come out the sun rises, and you're out into the vineyards, and it's just a blissful ride for 135 kilometres, up and down! Towards the end, it gets really tiring because you have another hill. And then the last bit is uphill strangely into Radda, into Chianti. But it's on tarmac roads, which is a great relief after all day of cycling on bumpy roads. I think it's just the challenge of it all. And knowing each year, when you get something you do and repeat, you realise how fit or how not so fit you are and how your body clock manages to get around things. Yeah, it's a fun event.

DT: Do you find that cycling affects your architecture in any way? Do you think it improves your awareness of the built environment? Or do you bring things from being on two wheels to the design scene at all?

CD: Yeah, I think cycling, being above ground, moving around the city or moving around the landscape, means you are much more aware of your environment. So, you tend to appreciate things and learn from what you see. I'm a very visual person. I kind of have a photographic memory – I can remember things visually.

I might not remember someone's name, but I'll find out with the help of the internet – it's much easier these days. But I think yes, being a cyclist does make you physically aware of your physical environment. Whereas if you travel by train, or underground or car all the time, you're not so aware of these things.

As a designer, it certainly helps you be more aware. Also, when it comes to designing buildings – we're involved in designing civic buildings a bit more than we were, and mixed-used office buildings and things – it makes you more aware of providing decent facilities for cyclists. It has always been something; I now think of them with a passion. When it comes to designing an office building, for example, it's nice to make the cyclists' entrance the same entrance as everybody's entrance. They don't come down a ramp and in through the back door, they come through the same entrance. Why not? You know, this is how we all travel. You know, a lot of us travel in dense cities now. So, it doesn't matter whether you're wearing Lycra or a suit: you should be able to enter the building the same way.

DT: Well, thank you very much, Chris. And good luck on Eroica. I'm very tempted to join you next year. I'm going to have to think about what sort of bike to add to my growing collection at home, so that'd be great.

CD: Good, good. All right. Thanks. Bye. o



White roads – the Strada Bianche road bicycle race in Tuscany, Central Italy