

The ‘Humanistic’ Data Centre Conceived by Brunello Cucinelli in Umbria, in a Former Power Station: “AI Must Be a Handmaid in Our Service”

by Serena Palumbo

The fashion designer has conceived a data centre within the former thermoelectric power station at Pietrafitta, in the Nestore Valley. The symbol of Italian cashmere stated: “On one side, we will have the artisans of fashion, and on the other, Artificial Intelligence.”



Main square of Solomeo, a hamlet of Corciano, in the Perugia area. A small village of around seven hundred residents, although only twenty-eight actually live there year-round. Among them is **Brunello Cucinelli**, who chose to make his home here a long time ago, after meeting Federica, his wife. “It is the place of my soul,” says the fashion designer and entrepreneur as he shows the streets and alleyways of the village.



Brunello Cucinelli and Riccardo Stefanelli

Here – where he has recreated an ideal village, complete with a castle, theatre and library, the latter still awaiting its inauguration – he strolls with the ease of someone who has no need to find his bearings: **he knows every corner, every stone, but above all, he knows the people. He greets them and they greet him back.** He stops, exchanges a few words and tells stories. This is not an occasional visit, but a daily habit which, in itself, embodies his idea of conviviality: “Life,” he explains, “should be based on **simple community, because where there is community, there is no loneliness.**”



Rendering of the new project

And there is certainly no shortage of social life in Solomeo. Alongside it come culture, memory and beauty. Beauty such as that embodied by the busts of Greek and Latin philosophers – one of the entrepreneur’s greatest passions – scattered throughout the village, reminding us that **a village can be “something to build, give back and transform without erasing its past”**. Because, as he repeats time and again, we must “build in a solid, useful and beautiful way, as Vitruvius maintained”.

Cucinelli: «AI should be a handmaid in our service»



The ‘humanistic’ data centre conceived in Umbria by fashion designer Brunello Cucinelli: “AI should be a handmaid in our service”

This form of improvement is something Cucinelli now intends to bring to Pietrafitta, in the Nestore Valley, around twenty kilometres from Solomeo, where **the former thermoelectric power station was built in the late 1950s to use lignite**, a fossil fuel extracted from mines in the area. The plant was built “at the mine mouth”, allowing it to make direct use of the fuel available locally, and remained in operation until 2001. Then came silence, marked by neglect and deterioration. Something which, in the fashion designer’s view, “is **at odds with the image of the valley as a whole**”. And so, he adds, the time has come “to restore dignity to that heritage, with careful attention to the spaces and to the creation of something of value”.



What the site looks like today

Hence the project for the “Park of Contemporary Innovation”: **a hub, still entirely to be developed, which will occupy the premises of the former power station and will be devoted to research, education and advanced technologies**, centred around a data centre designed to provide computing capacity and services to universities, research centres, healthcare organisations, public administrations and businesses. All this without compromising on energy efficiency and, above all, with a commitment to the use of renewable energy sources, including cooling systems designed according to sustainability requirements.

The driving force behind the project is Riccardo Stefanelli, CEO of the Cucinelli brand and, together with the family holding company, the promoter of Umbria Data Garden, the company established to support the initiative and identify parties interested in joining. “We began thinking about this project, which we believe is of strategic importance for the region, when we were discussing data sovereignty,” Stefanelli explains. The idea, he says, is to **“build a 6–9 megawatt data centre that is sustainable and respectful of the *genius loci*, powered as far as possible by renewable energy”**. The facility is intended primarily “to serve the local healthcare sector and research, in collaboration with the University of Perugia and its start-ups”.



The site today

The project is estimated to be worth around €100 million. The funds are expected to come from “one or more investors, public or private, with priority given to local investors”, Stefanelli explains. As for its development, including remediation works and the construction of the new buildings, “a timeframe of around three years is envisaged”. As for its use, **the Cucinelli Group could also be among the potential beneficiaries, possibly using the data centre for some of its digital services**, including the AI-powered e-commerce platform Callimacus. But Brunello Cucinelli is keen to draw a clear line around the role of his company: “We are in the fashion business,” the entrepreneur stresses. “Our contribution to the initiative is limited to conceiving the project, designing it and presenting it to potential investors.”

And this is where the journey from Solomeo to Pietrafitta finds its connecting thread. **On the one hand, a village rebuilt around the idea of community; on the other, a facility intended to become, in time, a place for the new data economy.** At the centre of it all is

the same concept Cucinelli repeats as he strolls through village alleys: transforming without losing what was there before. And so the aim is to create “a humanistic data centre,” the fashion designer continues, “capable of representing our culture, our aesthetic and our way of life”.



The interiors of the old power station

Thus, in his vision, Artificial Intelligence too becomes part of a human-centred outlook. **“We must regard it as man’s handmaid: it knows how to process and analyse data with great speed, but, like everything else, it needs to be humanised,”** says the symbol of Italian cashmere. For Cucinelli, the issue also concerns the future of businesses and work. “Today, in any company, we have a duty to build and develop our own vision of Artificial Intelligence. Here, on one side we will have the artisans, and on the other, AI.” In his thinking, the two worlds are not necessarily mutually exclusive: craftsmanship and the algorithm, knowledge acquired over centuries and the ability of machines to process vast quantities of information. Different worlds, brought together by the same underlying idea: **to build something “solid, useful and beautiful”**. This time, through Artificial Intelligence, too.