

AN AVALANCHE OF LIGHT

“A box of light at the foot of the red mountain”

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This past June 21st, the Central Headquarters of the General Saving Bank of Granada was inaugurated. The construction is the result of a competition held in 1992 by the Savings Bank (“Caja de Granada”), which architect Alberto Campo Baeza won. The bank rises in an area to the south of the historic city center, beyond the Genil River, in the middle of the uncontrolled expansion that has led Granada to double its surface size in the past few years.

Isolated on a podium that separates one garden of lime trees and another of orange trees, the volume imposes itself with its strong mass as a counterpoint to the heterogeneity of the place where it is situated. The constructed building maintains the compositive principles established in the competition proposal (cfr. “Casabella” 643, May 1996) and expresses a precise idea about architecture. The attention paid to the modulation of light and the use of elementary typological schema that are always at the center of Campo Baeza’s design research come in this case to be the occasion and instrument for a significant change of scale, and while it is a building of dimensions the Spanish architect had not worked in before, we find here the characteristics that are present in other of his works.

Perhaps taking its inspiration from the Palace of Charles the Fifth by Pedro Machuca, the prism of the Caja, in reinforced concrete, is constructed from a square floor plan that revisits in its dimensions the measures of the Renaissance palace erected on the Alhambra grounds, thus affirming its own structural matrix, a square grid of 3x3 meters that constitutes the geometric frame on which the parts of the building are formed and the elements that define the structure are arranged.

The large crate framework of main and secondary beams that cover the atrium, shapes the reinforced concrete roof that rests on the four central columns and the building’s perimeter. The design concedes a role of utmost importance to the columns and the roof, whether as indispensable elements to define the ‘stereotomic’ nature of the structural box or as manifestation of the substantial nature of the building and its most intrinsic identity.

The use of reinforced concrete allows Campo Baeza to maintain the various readings of the elements comprising the building’s definition at the limit. The structural box gathers within it two L-shaped angular bodies understood as recognizable, autonomous elements, two ‘tectonic’ volumes resolved by means of a light metallic structure that houses the offices and encloses the central courtyard defining its limits. The angular bodies, each one with its own section and orientation, participate in the construction of the diagonal axis that crosses the building.

The L that faces south is made up of a 15-meter deep body that, organized by a central corridor, contains the open offices, the offices-landscape. The smaller L, a body with a depth of 9-meters, faces north and houses the individual offices open to the exterior and serviced by a corridor running along the edge next to the courtyard.

But the theme of the diagonal, that in the design plays a primary role, has LIGHT as its generating element. The constructive idea is based on the will to give

form to the “impluvium of light”. Everything is arranged around it to assemble the elements of the project, creating a whole in which the hierarchy among the parts appears clearly and distinctly. If the diagonal tension that crosses the building generates, from one part, a disappearance of the east and west faces, from another it reveals the strength of the north and south faces. The south face reveals the three-dimensional quality of the structure, based on the 3x3 module, and is constructed with a framework of deep holes that protect from the midday sun thanks to a system of brise-soleil. The north face, on the contrary, reveals the structural scheme of the reinforced concrete in its surfaces, cladding it with a three-part closure of glass and travertine. Contrary to the competition project, which proposed opening large holes in the roof to let in “light, air and rain” as in the Pantheon, the constructed building presents large glassed skylights in the reticule of the atrium roof, and in its movement towards the south, underlines the diagonal nature of the operation.

The deliberate decision not to open the fourth module of each one of the four square skylights, the closest to the viewer, allows protection from direct light, generating areas of shade. The LIGHT coming from the south slants down to the interior of the large space until it is projected on the delicate alabaster sheets that cover the interior face of the north L. Additionally, this translucent surface of alabaster amplifies the light that comes from on high and through reflected light illuminates the glassed face of the large L to the south. The alabaster and glass planes of the interior faces of the offices, along with the travertine marble slab pavements, invade nearly one third of the surface of the covered courtyard; they are the materials that define the character of this great impluvium.

The quality of reverberation and transparency of these subtle alabaster sheets in the light, along with the monumental dimension of the columns, make the large atrium into a splendid TEMPLE OF LIGHT. At night, the covered courtyard is lit artificially from the volume of the offices. The alabaster wall is transformed into an animated wall, across which people’s silhouettes move as if they were actors in Chinese shadow theater, and the atrium, for its part, becomes the place of choice from which to watch the spectacle.

The figurative origins of the columns of this avalanche of light extends from the mystical iconography of Guillermo Pérez Villalta’s Interior Sailor to the majesty of the Cathedral of Granada’s pilastered columns, from the technical refinement of Nervi’s Italian pavilion at the Universal Exposition of 1961 and Owen Williams’ “Daily Mirror Building” to the dark and impalpable beauty of the glass columns of Terragni’s Danteum.