

SPACE IN THE SUN

Could it be that minimal architecture is more reasonable, feels more at ease, in a sunny climate? At Inca, on Mallorca, the Balearic Technological (BIT) and European Business Innovation Centre is planar and sculptural, with a colour spectrum from white to off-white, yet has little of the stiffness or pedantry often found in art and architecture of this sort. The project's designer, Madrid architect Alberto Campo Baeza, would undoubtedly dispute any easy or lazy labelling of his work as Minimalist (and perhaps any labelling at all). There's an essential quality to his project at Inca. It's an ordered garden screened from an unremarkable context and open to the sky. It's tactile, sensuous, and - to judge from a recent midday visit - humane.

Inca is inland, distant from the beach resorts rather negatively associated with Mallorca. The principal town of a region called Es Raiguer, it's an artisanal place long known for leather craftsmanship. Campo Baeza's project, won through competition in 1995 and inaugurated by King Juan Carlos three years later, houses a combination of development agencies operating at the local, Balearic, and European levels. With an emphasis on information technology, it's a showcase and symbol of confidence in the future. The architect's response is to enclose the triangular site with high walls which act to separate the venture from the surrounding sprawl of factories and showrooms and Ricky Martin billboards. Contextually and geometrically, this is an idealistic architecture.

The external walls are made from exposed blocks of *pedra mares*, a local sandstone also used by Jorn Utzon for his two houses to the south of Mallorca (Architectural Review, October 1996). Pedestrian access is up a gentle ramp, or adjacent steps, alongside a shorter facade just before it turns a 45° corner back along the south-facing hypotenuse. There is a slight shift in the alignment of this entry facade creating a sense of place or terrace before the visitor moves inwards. A contiguous lid of flat roof floats over so that the entry is experienced not as a traditional punched opening but as a gap formed by the assemblage of primary building components. From quite far outside, there's an inviting view through to glimpses of glass and foliage inside the walls.

The ground plane rises because Campo Baeza's second move, after enclosing the entire precinct, is to place services, the secondary spaces and rooms not in need of constant daylight in a semi-basement. As a result, he is free to line the courtyard with three wings of office space, separated from the perimeter by a linear interstitial terrace, and use the equivalent space below for computers, a parking garage, classrooms and a 110-seat auditorium. About the building's outer face are small square - indeed Incan - openings allowing for clerestorey illumination and air extract for this secretive lower floor. The basement is accessed internally via open stairwells, one towards each apex of the plan, and a glazed hydraulic elevator that contributes to the compositional interest of the entrance area. The view through this entry porch intrigues largely because of the oblique angle ahead with its layering of white metal-clad columns. The eye is directed towards dark green orange trees, each set within its own square trough at the centre of the scheme. Whereas in some of Campo Baeza's more cubic projects (the Turegano House in Madrid, for instance) volumes open up to one another vertically, his more horizontal projects tend to use the diagonal in plan, creating dynamism or a tense equilibrium like that achieved in certain art works by Stella and Kelly. At Inca, the ground beneath the orange grove is not inhabited; between the trees, the architect has excavated a hole to form a tiered sunken theatre whose defining axes are independent of the otherwise rigorous layout.

Offices and meeting spaces are sheltered by thin strips of roof plane finished with an almost invisible trim as coping, ranges of universal space subdivided internally by large timber cabinets and glazed both towards the triangular patio and linear areas around the project's perimeter by sheer membranes. These screens or curtains of glass are theoretically as insubstantial as possible (the travertine flows through uninterrupted). They are frameless, and the roofs above cantilever out two meters on either side to keep the work space in a deep and cool shade. These enclosing walls are subdivided at regular intervals by floor-to-ceiling glass doors, again frameless, allowing the offices' users various possibilities of access to and from both flanks. Inside the perimeter at Inca, horizontal planes are paramount, these secondary walls treated as in-fill partitions.

The casket that Campo Baeza has made by inlaying his triangular plot with travertine has physical, even luxurious implications, but also a clear mathematical aspect as the architect has chosen to lay these slabs to a strict 1x1 metre grid, with resultant triangular slabs along the hypotenuse. Onto this Cartesian carpet, he has imposed a further 6x6 metre structural grid so that the transparent office ranges read as rational colonnades or stoas (the services, of course, emerge from the plinth below). Any additional fixtures such as railings to stairwells and the patio theatre, and the glazed sliding gate at the entry, are dimensionally subservient to this supergrid and made up from visually unobtrusive components all painted white.

The tectonic of Campo Baeza's building, its architectural grammar, is thus held to a minimum. While the undercroft corridor, classrooms and auditorium are undoubtedly dark and literally inferior, these spaces are for intermittent use only. The visitor's memory of Inca is of travertine, the orange grove, plentiful shade, and then that great triangular opening to the sky. Beneath this blue ceiling, the architect had originally intended to build a tall communal pavilion above the sunken theatre. That has not been realised but the theatre itself - a kind of negative erratic - offers a release from the correct co-ordination of the total scheme. By excavating as much as erecting, Campo Baeza shows that his most fundamental concern is the formation of space.

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