

TREASURE CHEST

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Throughout modern history, the architecture of financial institutions has assumed various forms, of monumentality: the Neo-Classicism of Soane's Bank of England; the medieval earnestness of Berlage's Beurs in Amsterdam; a post-war Classical reprise with such towers as Gordon Bunshaft's Chase Manhattan Bank; and then spectacular gadgetry from the Richard Rogers Partnership at Lloyd's of London. In Granada, a city with remarkable historic legacy, Madrid-based Alberto Campo Baeza has recently completed the imposing headquarters of the Caja General de Ahorros, the local state savings bank. Viewed from the orbital motorway, the Caja establishes its immediate presence as a concrete anchor in a sea of suburbanization, an autonomous object but one alluding to both the Alhambra and Granada's sixteenth-century cathedral.

From the exterior, the Caja is perceived as a dense cube perforated to the south like an orthogonal honeycomb. South-east and southwest elevations are, in fact, a consistent brise-soleil, 3m deep. The building presents itself to the north, however, as a pale grid in which flush horizontal strips of glass and travertine create sheer eight-storey-high surfaces. To achieve this purity of form, Campo Baeza has –not unlike Mies van der Rohe at the Berlin Nationalgalerie –placed certain elements of the brief (computer and storage facilities) in an expansive plinth. The entry sequence takes the visitor through a discreet concrete and glass pavilion –an enlargement of a high precinct wall– into a court used for car parking, then up via a ramp or gentle stairway set within the plinth to the Caja's front door. To one side, a circular ramp allows cars to descend to the underground garage.

Campo Baeza refers to the interior of this, his most important building to date, as an 'impluvium of light'. It certainly is an interior to evoke splendid analogies or metaphors. Wrapped by linear bays of office space, the enclosed eight-storey-high atrium is structured about four gigantesque cylindrical columns and illuminated from above through a matrix of deep concrete beams (the Caja's roof is a horizontal cousin of its honeycomb southerly facades). The glazed interior walls are flush without any opaque panels so that there is an almost dizzying transparency or connectivity of views between the Caja's bureaucratic and ceremonial precincts. Boardroom, executive offices and special entertainment facilities occupy the seventh floor (the eighth is for maintenance and services only).

If the Caja invokes the monumentality of Neo-Classical banks, orthodoxy is tweaked by various asymmetrical arrangements. As with Roche Dinkeloo's 1960s Ford Foundation in New York City, but with considerably fewer plants, static geometry is energized by the diagonal. Campo Baeza's four giant columns –columns similarly dimensioned to the white columns inside Granada Cathedral– are symmetrically disposed about an implied central square. However the two L's of office space around the atrium are not identical: one has rooms on both sides of a central corridor, the other has rooms facing towards the north only between its corridor and the building's outer envelope. Furthermore, with an airy upper terrace and ceiling illumination orientating the interior out towards the light, a stone-clad box protrudes inwards like a large opaque drawer across the atrium floor. It houses an auditorium for several hundred.

Communal areas are furnished with classic Modernist seats, by Kjærholm at entry level, Aalto on the upper floor terrace, and the Eames for the Caja's boardroom. The travertine floor of the internal court wraps about the external volume of the auditorium (its interior is of exposed concrete, but with a high dado lining made of pale wood). Two

of the atrium columns sit bluntly, without decorative articulation, upon the auditorium roof (accessible only for maintenance purposes). All four continue downwards into an open office zone beneath the atrium court. These plinth offices face, in turn, outwards onto a grand but not yet fully mature garden, a gridded field staked out by orange trees and ornamental water troughs.

An indigenous Andaluciantypology is reinterpreted through a contemporary aesthetic sensibility. That sensibility is inevitably and necessarily manifest in the components and joinery of the building. Clearly Campo Baeza's most dramatic decision was to clad both northerly elevations of the interior court in alabaster. You might associate alabaster—that lightly-veined, translucent marble—with Byzantine or Romanesque churches where it is sometimes found as small window tablets. In recent projects, the Miró Foundation for instance, Rafael Moneo has used alabaster to rosy effect in limited spatial incidents (AR February 1996). But here in Granada, Campo Baeza has realized twin seven-storey-high walls faced entirely in the marble. Even on overcast days, the interior glows.

The alabaster is held away from the primary structure and internal corridor by a secondary steel lattice painted white. The panels are not identical, neither in texture nor size (roughly A3 or A4 size each). Pinned one to the next, the alabaster panels (quarried from near Zaragoza) move slightly if touched. So that although it has undoubtedly been informed by twentieth-century minimalism, the Caja is also rather traditional, even animistic.

Doors into a canteen overlooking the orange garden are again of alabaster and close flush to the great atrium wall. In these alabaster walls, one small square opening in the middle of each 3m module allows a view from the office corridors into Campo Baeza's impluvium of light. Each is sealed on its outer face by a simple square of glass (the square and the circle as essential architectural shapes). At the upper level terrace, across from the alabaster flanks, the architect has cleverly allowed the glass plane from below to continue upwards as an unimpeded transparent balustrade, meanwhile positioning a thin metal guardrail some distance in from the atrium void.

Inside the rail, the floor of this upper deck is made from travertine slabs that are both large and slightly loose. They move beneath the feet of the visitor. So experientially as well as typologically, this dramatic interior terrace—a cool (at least in spring), cubist landscape—shares attributes with viewing platforms at the Alhambra and across the historic city.