

## On Reading the Elemental in the Work of Alberto Campo Baeza

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One cannot look at Campo Baeza's current work without reading it through a number of diverse associations that lie embedded, as it were, in our collective memory. There may thus be brought to mind a number of different interpretations of his architectonic persona, from say a house that seems to lie close to the domesticity of Tadao Ando to a library that reminds one of the work of David Chipperfield. These associations are on occasion provoked by the rather hermetic manner in which Campo Baeza documents his work, so that one is often confronted with a message in code, that is to say with rather abstract not to say sparse indications as to the specific morphology and function of the work in question. This deliberately laconic mode of representation reminds one of the equally schematic orthogonal projections of Ando's early houses, where there was invariably inadequate information as to the site plan, the sections or even the distribution of functional components. In a similar way one is reduced to picking up clues here and there as to what this or that volume, movement or mode of illumination must be like in actuality. Thus as one passes from project to project the references shift, going in one instant from Mies van der Rohe to Alejandro De la Sota or in another from Luis Barragan to Giorgio Grassi and so on, as one strives to piece together the genealogy of Campo Baeza's architecture.

I first encountered the work of Campo Baeza in 1982 when I came across his prize-winning entry for a gymnasium that was to have been added to his alma mater in Madrid, the prestigious ETSAM faculty, where he now teaches. For me the immediate appeal of this project lay in its dynamically elemental character; above all in the long thick wall that was projected as cutting across the site in order to separate the domain of the school from a triangular entry plaza established at a lower level along with the orthogonal mass of the gymnasium itself, set off at an angle from the line of the wall. Part access route, part monumental retaining wall, this topographical intervention already displayed a certain metaphysical character that would soon prove to be a recurrent aspect of Campo Baeza's manner.

This idea of a *promenade architecturale*, patently borrowed from Le Corbusier, reappears in the Crevillente nursery school designed for Alicante in the same year. Here the promenade takes the form of a long ramp that cuts across a double-height entry hall opening to a playground at the lower level of the site. At the top of the ramp one gains access to the main floor, comprising eight classrooms, each with its own individual courtyard as in Arne Jacobsen's Munkegards Schools of 1958.

Thus the elemental in Campo Baeza's work manifests itself in a number of alternating dialogical combinations such as wall versus prism, promenade versus matrix, cube versus

courtyard, skylight versus volume, tectonic versus stereotomic and so on, passing through a sequence of constantly counter-changing, permutable elements from one project to the next.

Of the ubiquitous cube versus courtyard dyad that invariably crops up in his early domestic work, no version would appear to be more comprehensively compelling than the Garcia-Marcos house completed at Valdemoro, Madrid in 1991, wherein a three-story cube is raised virtually one floor above the principal approach and bounded at the podium level on all sides by a single-story perimeter wall. The interlocking spatial matrix of this house turns on the subtle play that is set up between the central axis running through the double-height living volume and an asymmetrical inflection of the same space by virtue of a reflecting pool set to one side of the living terrace within the confines of the court. A zenithal light slot let in the roof terrace, and running for the full width of the living room, serves to unite the first floor mezzanine with the salon below.

Within the aforementioned dialogical thematic, Campo Baeza's preferred paradigm usually depends on the existence of a stereotomic earthwork or podium that either comes into being through the natural fall of the ground or is constructed as a supplementary undercroft serving the primary upper volumes of the building. This characteristically stepped podium is particularly evident in three large projects, dating from the early nineties: a cultural center for the outskirts of Madrid (1992), a concert hall for Copenhagen (1993) and a central library for the University of Alicante (1995). The play of a top-lit tectonic volume set on top of a stereotomic, stepped podium is a combination that is wholly or partially present in all three schemes, even if top-light is hardly a desirable prerequisite for a concert hall. On the other hand, such illumination is only too appropriate for a library, particularly after Aalto's consummate demonstration of this provision in his famous Viipuri Library of 1935. Aalto's Viipuri is surely a primary reference in Campo Baeza's project for the Alicante library only now the top and side-lit stepped reading rooms are asymmetrically inflected towards the north while being incorporated into the body of a narrow four-story perimeter block, penetrated by elongated courtyards that are essential to the illumination of the stepped reading rooms and stacks.

The most brilliant of these stereotomic schemes is surely the Copenhagen concert hall proposal in which the orthogonal piling up of three separate orchestral volumes into a stepped podium constitutes the ground for a totally glazed belvedere at the top of the complex overlooking the harbor. This glass prism accompanied by outriding terraces, is surely Campo Baeza's most monumental statement to date, in which a dematerialized tectonic roofwork is set above an only too massive stereotomic undercroft. The well-apportioned distribution of preliminary and ancillary spaces that attend the major volumes of this complex testify to the accomplished caliber of Campo Baeza's professional vision. At the same time the Olympian calm of the design, faced in grey granite, makes it all the more regrettable that it was not accorded first place in the international competition.

Campo Baeza's most monumental accomplishment to date is indubitably the Caja General bank headquarters in Granada completed in 2001 based on an initial competition design that had been premiated some nine years before. In many ways we may think of this work as a paradoxical *boite à miracle* which although it is more or less fully fenestrated on all four sides conveys a curious sense of being impenetrable from the exterior. Part of this feeling of inaccessibility derives from the fact that the building is set within a walled courtyard that surrounds it on all four sides.

Conceived as an impluvium of light that is to say as a half-cubic Piranesian box illuminated from above through twelve diagonally displaced skylights, grouped in four L-formations of three lights each, the undeniable focus of the internal space are the four massive cylindrical concrete columns which support the roof. While in static terms this roof cantilevers clear of the bounding walls, the enclosing planes are in fact made up on all four sides by "thick" walls. These walls vary in their actual constitution from one face of the overall demi-cube to the next depending largely on the orientation. Thus the southeastern-southwestern facades are in fact faced with three-meter deep concrete *brise soleil*, which are in a certain, abstract sense the most Corbusian trope in the entire building. The other two contiguous elevations have a much reduced but less shaded window area, set flush with the plane of the cube.

Apart from serving the bureaucratic needs of the bank the interior of this structure clearly functions as a light-modulator, as light penetrates in rather different ways, at totally different angles and densities at different times of the day and in different seasons of the year. While the roof lights necessarily cast categorically clear shafts of light that plunge down into the shadowy depths of the internal volume to mark its columns and bounding walls in constantly changing chiaroscuro, the contiguous inner northeastern and northwestern walls are lined in a seven-story tessellated alabaster skin through which light fuses at different intensities at different moments. In one instant a translucent tapestry, in another the massive impenetrable surface of a vast Egyptoid tomb, this inner lining is occasionally lit both within and without, turning at a moment's notice from an opaque field to the translucent scrim of an Indonesian shadow play where figures standing close to the invisible inner face of the alabaster veil are transformed into dramatic silhouettes.

The hermetic iconographic character of this work stems primarily from the four columns that as it so happens are spaced apart at approximately the same distance as the span between the primary cluster columns supporting the crossing in Granada Cathedral. The entire context of Granada is in fact subtly reflected in the severely abstract character of this work in other ways, above all in the role it plays at a panoramic level when it is viewed from the Alhambra. From this vantage point one realizes how Campo Baeza conceived of the building as a monument at a panoramic scale comparable to that of the cathedral in the total spectrum of the city fabric.

In the space of a decade it is possible to argue that Campo Baeza has passed from his earlier obsessions with the ubiquitous courtyard where everything depends on the exclusion of the world at large, to an equally compelling preoccupation for rendering the building as a vantage point from which to view the horizon. Thus the quintessentially introspective Caja General, seen from afar as an object in a vast landscape is answered, on a diminutive scale by De Blas house, completed close to Sevilla la Nueva at the millennium. Here a radical re-working of Mies's Farnsworth House as an eight column tempieta standing on top of a concrete podium serves as a metaphysical belvedere from which to view the distant mountainous landscape surrounding Madrid.