

## Beautiful Isolation

The work of Alberto Campo Baeza

We have the opportunity to review the work of Alberto Campo Baeza at a moment of change. The effect of the global financial crisis has caused a severe reconsideration of development and seems to announce the end of an extraordinary period for Spanish architecture. A period that has seen contemporary Spanish architecture recognised internationally for its quality and its invention. The 1992 Olympic Games held in Barcelona seemed to announce Spain's development as a modern European state and the end of the difficult and isolated years of the Franco regime. Architecture and design became the representation not only of a commitment to building a new modern state with up to date infrastructure but also a general optimism about Modernism.

Those of us living outside of Spain came to admire the 'new Spanish architecture' and its architects. Over these years few other countries could compete with the production quality or atmosphere of Spanish architecture. The commitment of the different regions and cultures to build new public infrastructure, museums, railway stations, schools, public spaces was supported by a well educated and talented architectural community that has produced some of the most interesting projects of the last twenty years.

This period includes many generations of architects and seemed to give opportunity not only to established architects but to younger architects, not only to projects in Barcelona and Madrid but all over Spain. While drawing on the modernist heritage of the great Spanish architects, de la Sota, Sáenz de Oiza, Coderch etc, a new openness and desire to experiment became possible.

The work of Alberto Campo Baeza sits within this period and yet like his work also manages to sit beyond this time. An architect defined by his 'Spanishness' yet completely international. An architect who has achieved great fame but who maintains a modest office. An architect who has designed some of the most beautiful houses but seems totally comfortable working with large scale projects and within complex urban contexts.

There are many strategies that architects can adopt in their working method. One approach may be described as the tendency towards '*isolation*'. That is to identify particular qualities and emphasise these qualities to an extreme, to avoid a conventional reconciliation of physical qualities in favour of exaggeration and contrast. This method of composition isolates certain components or elements of design and rather than being in the service of composition they become the composition. These qualities are identified with such clarity that they become the subject.

In the work of Alberto Campo Baeza we can witness this approach manipulated with great skill and to extraordinary effect. The identification and isolation of abstract and physical qualities underpin every project. In this manner the explicit qualities of light, view, enclosure, and weight become not only the language of the projects but their very substance.

The seduction that one experiences in the buildings of Alberto Campo Baeza is the consequence of their explicitness. There is no confusion about the architect's intention; each building announces its promise through its clear resolution. Fundamental to their success is the appropriateness of the projects intent, to intensify the experience of being within the building, and in turn to the context within which the building sits.

Like his architectural mentors Mies Van Der Rohe and Tadao Ando, Campo Baeza has managed to develop an architecture with its own language, which is both personal and impersonal. An architectural language that is autonomous and not contextual yet manages to establish a powerful relationship with its setting. Indeed it seems that the elemental nature of the architecture allows the architect to engage the place as part of its composition, both in a tangible and ineffable manner.

The quality of Campo Baeza's architecture and his approach was apparent in his first projects but became explicit with a series of projects completed at the end of the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's. These were the Turégano House, (1988), the Drago Public School (1992), Asencio House (1990) and Casa Gaspar (1992).

The photography of the courtyard of the Gaspar House became the 'pin-up' image of the early 1990's. This one image condenses in a unique moment the possibilities of such a simple and isolated architecture. Who could resist to sit in this beautiful space with its profound stone floor, a single tree growing out of a deep cut into the floor, with nature framed by the perfect lines of the enclosing abstract walls?

Here we could see once again the optimism of Modernism, with all of its rewards, abstract space, a shocking interplaying of inside and outside space separated by a single frameless sheet of glass and a poetic contrast between architecture and nature. A stark white architecture that seemed to both isolate itself and yet be part of the place.

The image talks of something else that is the experience of the viewer. We are not looking at an architecture that is designed only to be looked at; we are in an architecture that is designed to be in. The issue of scale is not only the consideration of proportion but of the positioning of the occupant and mediating the relationship of the individual and their environment.

In these 4 projects Campo Baeza developed the strategies that founded the basis for investigation in his evolving body of work. I would identify these as firstly the autonomous building object that seems to set itself apart from context but, through its play of enclosing and opening, seems to create a relation with its setting; secondly an interior composition of spaces, enjoying intentional sectional overlapping (internal views) and larger scale openings to the outside (external views) and finally an abstraction of an architectural language organised by these concepts of the view, light and interlocking.

The De Blas House (1998) departed from the simple volumes of the previous projects and instead developed a strategy of contrast. This allows the ideas of isolation to be played in a more extreme way, as the contrasting conditions (openness, closedness, wall, frame, light, dark) can be characterised and enforce each other. The temple-like form on its massive base creates an identifiable typology. The exquisite elegance of the proposal (Mies meets Ando) creates a house that seems both monumental and domestic. Campo Baeza succeeds again at creating a place that is irresistible. The house is not only a house but a place. The contrasting conditions of autonomy and grounding seem to be simply achieved with this temple strategy. The house floats like a boat above the landscape yet is gracefully dug into the site. The qualities of rootedness and openness, ground and horizon are isolated and concentrated and became the very subject of the project. We are to witness this concept developed in the Olnick Spanu house in a more luxurious setting of New York State.

Campo Baeza's most significant work to date is the Caja Granada savings bank (2001). An uncompromising cubic building of 10 storeys, built in concrete. The organisation of the building arranges a perimeter zone of offices around a central atrium. Confronted with a project of this size, the architect manages to maintain his strategy of isolation, creating an internal interior space of nearly

religious atmosphere. Four giant columns and careful modelling of the interior space creates a building that is both monumental and humane. The explicit physical and compositional quality ensures a building defined not by its complex programme but by architecture. In this way, the building achieves the same clear authority as the smaller projects. This authority, given by the simple organisation of the architectural elements and the reduction of the surface detailing, gives an intensity to the building, difficult to achieve in such a large project, Campo Baeza has convincingly translated his strategy to a large scale work. By intensifying the elemental composition of the building the monumental becomes humane and the humane becomes monumental.

It is a tribute to the architect that the larger projects; Caja Granada, SM Group Headquarters, Benetton Nursery, and the Andalusia Museum of Memory are not only controlled like the smaller projects but they form a consistent body of work surprising in its legibility and its extreme discipline.

The contribution that any architect makes is measured by the legacy of their built work. However we cannot dismiss the more general contribution made to our architectural culture by an architect's commitment to teach debate and write. Within these terms one must acknowledge Campo Baeza's approach and success in performing these activities. Campo Baeza has operated in a precise manner of architectural practice, a manner that gives a dynamic relationship between professional and intellectual activities. Refusing to develop a large practice, he has managed to concentrate his energies on a few projects at any one time and to maintain an ongoing commitment to teaching and writing about architecture. This exemplary example (one much better understood in Spain than in other countries) in some way explains the vivid qualities of his architecture, and maintains the role of the architect not only as a professional but as a cultural figure.