

It would be hard to imagine a more modest representational structure than the recently completed *aula magna* situated at the southwestern corner of the campus of the newly constituted Università della Svizzera Italiana in Lugano. This compact campus occupies the site of a nineteenth century hospital that had previously stood virtually alone within the confines of a 240 by 115 meter urban block. The preexisting building, retrofitted to house the university administration, is now attended by four separate structures in addition to the *aula magna*. These are a library to the northwest, a computer laboratory to the northeast, a lecture hall complex, paralleling its eastern wing and a theological building located at the southeastern corner of the site. With the exception of this last, which was a preexisting institution, the other four facilities including the main multipurpose hall are available to the university as a whole and not attached to any particular faculty, of which, in any case, there are currently only two located on this campus: those of economics and communication.

While both the campus plan and the multipurpose hall were designed by Aurelio Galfetti and Jachen Könz, the four other institutions on the site were expressly awarded to teams of young architects in a series of competitions adjudicated by Galfetti. Thus the theological faculty was designed by Christen; the computer laboratories by Giraudi and Wettstein, the lecture hall complex by Bruno, Fioretti Marquez and Martini and the library by Michele and Giorgio Tognola. Of these four facilities, only the library was partly accommodated in a preexisting building: a three story, brick-faced structure at the northwestern corner of the site that had previously served as an old persons home.

Among these structures the *aula magna* is in a class on its own, not only because of its telling sophistication but also because of its essential sparseness, for it is both a presence and an absence at one and the same time. It is, one might say, a non-monumental monument; a contradiction in terms that remains as enigmatic as it is elegant.

Is it a matter of deferential hesitancy that the most significant structure on the campus should recess itself into the ground or is it simply a further manifestation of the tectonic minimalism that has become the hallmark of Galfetti in his prime or, more nuanced yet, is it the combination of a mutually minimalist drives on the part of both an old and a young master,

namely, Galfetti in the first instance and Könz in the second? To such imponderable rhetorical questions, there can be no simple response for here as in most buildings of any complexity, there are many hands involved, not the least in this instance, with its wide-span roof structure, the distinguished engineer Muttoni of Lugano. All of which prompts one to wonder whether it could be considered a latter-day example of critical regionalism at its best. Be this as it may, its somewhat low-key, even cryptic character seems to have been adopted as a way of compensating for the overall density of the campus, particularly given its proximity to the downtown of Lugano. Thus the interment of its principal public volumes, comprising a 500-seat hall plus a foyer-cum-cafeteria, and the reduction of the work at grade to little more than a dematerialized glass pavilion, is a strategic decision that has been both liberative and audacious. It is, one might say, Mies van der Rohe's cult of *almost nothing*+exploited to the utmost without failing into any kind of simplistic neo-Miesian style. However this laconic expression is as evocative of the archaic as it is objectively minimalist, for it relates typologically to the *parti* of Galfetti's vacation house in Paros, where the main body of the dwelling is a *templum* set before sea, flanked on three sides by single-story, cellular structures that are, in effect, as much defining walls as they are rooms.

In contrast to such primordial grounding the *aula magna* in Lugano has a subtle constructivist character; one which is most immediately evident in the continuously glazed bands of skylights, set flush with the ground, immediately above the flanking aisles of the auditorium. Due perhaps to the mechanical articulation suggested by the adjustable louvers set beneath these lights one has the illusion that these virtual channels of space served to facilitate the descent of the primary public volumes into the ground. At the same time these lights also constitute a kind of glazed *moat*+that is attended by free-standing blade walls of in-situ reinforced concrete construction. This moat is a more dramatic and decisive presence at night when it is floodlit from beneath. The walls themselves are set out as a series of blades, five on either side of the subterranean, partially top-lit auditorium. These serve to determine the extent of the forecourt-cum-templum, with the first two pairs of these walls doubling as supports for the long-span, steel-beams that carry the roof of the entry pavilion.

Apart from this oblique reference to Mies's Crown Hall at IIT, Galfetti seems to come close at this juncture, albeit inadvertently, to that cryptic moment when, as Louis Kahn once remarked, a structure reveals its poetic essence, either by virtue of still being under construction or by virtue of disintegrating into a ruin. At the same time the forecourt of the *aula magna*, faced in square pavers, patently declares itself as a public domain even if some doubt remains as to the scale of a public assembly that could conveniently accommodate itself there. In truth it is little more than an amplified threshold to the pavilion, and the fact that it is framed by megalithic concrete walls, domesticated somewhat through the addition of pre-cast concrete benches, further exacerbates this unresolved tension between presence and absence.

On entering the pavilion itself one encounters a totally different spatial orientation; one which is vertical and diagonal in its disposition, as opposed to the transverse horizontality of the forecourt. The asymmetrical placement of the entrance door in the glazed membrane of the pavilion may be seen as an all but ineffable point of transition between these two distinctly different if mutually transparent conditions. Once one has crossed this threshold one finds oneself quite literally on the edge of a vertiginous volume, dynamically inflected by a glazed handicapped elevator and a concrete staircase that jointly descend into the double-height space of the auditorium foyer. Since this last also doubles as a cafeteria, one is put in mind of the German *Ratskeller* tradition; an association which is countered but not entirely dispelled by the collapsible black table-tops jutting out from the opposing wall and a stainless steel servery that terminates the foyer at the southern end of the space. At the same time the upper part of the pavilion must now be read as a monitor light flooding the space with a lateral luminosity.

The auditorium itself, much wider than it is deep, seems to be appropriately open to multiple uses, while its relative shallowness is accorded a greater sense of illusory depth by virtue of the aforementioned zenithal lights that directly illuminate the aisles to either side of the seating area. This illusion of depth, effectively orienting the space towards a long dias, is enhanced by the parallel directionality of the clear span, downstand beams in reinforced concrete that alternate with the track lighting and orthogonal metal ductwork of the same depth that patently serve to achieve the distribution of conditioned air. To either side of the auditorium (and of the same

depth as the freestanding walls above grade) is a two-story undercroft running for the full depth of the auditorium and the foyer space combined. Apart from accommodating escape stairs from the auditorium these spaces house the necessary toilets for the foyer and the mechanical services along with the air-conditioning plant etc. An odd free-standing *canon à lumière* is provided to a singular section of this mechanical space in order not to transgress the *ordinance* of the blade walls and the moat of zenithal light flanking the forecourt above.

It is a certain sign of maturity that when one is able to project and realize works which make deft allusions to a broadly based architectural culture without indulging in direct citations. Such is the case here where the late work of Mies van der Rohe is lightly touched on as a tectonic trope pertinent to the suspension of a flat roof or where Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp is remotely alluded to in the manner in which gargoyles are deployed at either end of the pavilion in order to drain the rainwater from the roof. The conical shape of the concrete sump receiving this water confirms, as it were, the specificity of the reference. We might say that the seeming syntactical incompatibility of these allusions is overcome by the unity of the whole, which we have already demonstrated through the analysis. There remains however one prominent component that does not seem to find its appropriate profile and place with the context of the whole. I have in mind the massive concrete stair that links the main entry to the auditorium foyer. This posits a syntactical discontinuity that is difficult to assimilate inasmuch as the tubular steel and glass railing at the entry level is rather abruptly departed from in the in-situ concrete upstand of the stair. While the stainless handrail set within this balustrade is patently of the same tectonic order as the adjacent railing and the glazed elevator, the otherwise all-pervasive minimalism seems to be totally overwhelmed by the brutal mass-form of the stair. Why, one may well ask, is this form treated in such a rhetorically plastic manner when the rest of the system is light and of a relatively dematerialized character?

In the last analysis architecture is invariably articulated through and opposition between heavy and light construction and a critical moment is always encountered at that juncture where one passes from the one to the other. This is surely just as much an issue in the treatment of a stair as it is a critical point in the passage from compressive to tensile construction. In the case of

a stair everything turns, both structurally and phenomenologically, on the mode of passing from one level to the next, and in this regard we are reminded of Auguste Perret who insisted that the proof of tectonic quality of a civilization ultimately resided in the detailing of its staircases. And this of course is precisely the reason for evoking Perret in this instance for are we not confronted here by a stair which seems to be grotesquely at variance with the dematerialized precision and elegance of the context in which it is situated?