Carmen Díez Medina

IL POTERE DI BANKINTER

Abstract

The article looks at the famous axis known as “La Castellana” (The Castilian’s Mall) in Madrid, as a place that represents power in the Spanish capital, choosing to re-propose, forty years after its planning, the well-known intervention by Rafael Moneo as one of the key moments in the creation of this exceptional urban statement. The layout, the relationship with the context, the representative nature of the brick wall, even the materials and building strategies used, are re-interpreted in line with a particular interpretation of the monumental urban axis.

Over the course of history, architecture has proved an indispensable tool to communicate ideas, showing an extraordinary talent to appear eminent, emblematic, representative, illustrious, etc., when it comes to transmitting a message of power. Furthermore, cities and politicians, fully aware of this potential, have been canny in demanding that it plays its role well. Suffice to think of the buildings that characterize the Athens of Pericles, Imperial Rome or that of the Popes, Enlightenment Madrid, Liberal Vienna, Stalin’s Moscow (different from that of Krushchev or Brezhnev), Maragall’s Barcelona, Mitterand’s Paris… In looking over the capitals of Europe it is not difficult to discern, reading between the lines of the architecture, the powers that promoted the
Indubbiamente questo è anche il caso del Paseo de la Castellana, l’asse che a guisa di spina dorsale attraversa Madrid da nord a sud. Nato nel secolo XVIII come Salón del Prado, l’originario Paseo andò trasformandosi in colonna vertebrale della città: verso sud, ramificandosi in un tridente che avrebbe affermato con il passare del tempo il suo carattere industriale e, verso nord, rappresentando la dignità della cultura e del potere economico schierando successivamente lungo il Paseo de Recoletos gli edifici rappresentativi della città ottocentesca. Ai building of some of their essential parts.

Unquestionably, this is also the case of Paseo de la Castellana, the axis in the guise of a backbone that crosses Madrid from north to south. First created in the 18th century as Salón del Prado, the original Paseo gradually became the city’s spine: towards the south, branching into a trident that was to take on an industrial character while, towards the north, it represented the dignity of culture and economic power by successively lining up the nineteenth-century city’s state
buildings along the Paseo de Recoletos. In the early twentieth century, Madrid did nothing to oppose what by then seemed a logical pecking order. As a result, while to the south the city is linked to the Atocha railway station and less illustrious developments, the Paseo de la Castellana, that is, the continuation of Recoletos northwards, currently features in every section the powerful impulses that gradually brought them to life. At its departure point, Plaza Colón, the tower buildings by Rumasa (1967-76) mark the access gate to an entire series of constructions that distinguish the avenue, emerging 6.5km further north in the business quarter known as Cuatro Torres, a speculative operation developed on top of the old city sport site of Real Madrid (2004-2009).

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Paseo de la Castellana verso Nord
Paseo de la Castellana looking North
Rafael Moneo, Schizzo di studio / Sketch
of what was once the site of Real Madrid’s training complex (2004-2009).

Travelling along “La Castellana” nowadays, in particular the stretch from Plaza Colón to the AZCA – the super-block that is given over to offices and constitutes one of Madrid’s most important financial and commercial centres, conceived by Bidagor in 1946, whose masterplan was definitively approved in 1964 –, we find an extraordinary repertoire of the outcome of the law then in force known as “Ley Castellana” (1953-78). This law granted 90% tax exemptions, for twenty years, to any companies taking advantage of it, in order to further Madrid’s Municipal Master Plan. In this way, many firms and companies that had contributed to the economic boom of the 1960s purchased valuable plots on both sides of the Paseo de la Castellana, mostly occupied by villas – at the time called “hotelitos” – and proposed to demonstrate their power by constructing buildings that, as a faithful mirror of the times, were destined to become icons of new technology: the already cited towers of Rumasa, the Unión y el Fénix by Gutiérrez Soto (1965), the edificio IBM di Fisac (1967), the Banco de

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In quella "città del potere" che si affacciò per la prima volta sulla Castellana negli anni settanta, Bankinter decise di mostrare l'autorità dell'istituto bancario con una discreta eleganza e una densità di riferimenti che lo portarono a conquistare un luogo di rilievo nella storia dell'architettura spagnola. La prospettiva che nel tempo presente ci offrono i quaranta anni trascorsi dalla sua costruzione ci permette di verificare come la scelta di distanziarsi dagli interessi del momento connessi con il linguaggio o le tecnologie, privilegiando invece la volontà di rispondere mediante la disciplina allo specifico, abbia contribuito a fare in modo che l'edificio mantenga intatto un decoro inconsueto per quegli anni. La volontà dell'architettura di insediarsi senza stonature in un luogo già costruito, di risolvere i suoi problemi nel contesto, rispecchia quello scrupoloso rispetto nei confronti del patrimonio urbanistico e architettonico che riscontriamo anche in altri edifici posteriori di Rafael Moneo, come gli ampliamenti del Banco de España o quello del Museo del Prado, in cui l'architettura trova la sua...
Bankinter (Madrid, 1972-76). L'edificio come parete verticale che funge da sfondo neutro all'architettura del villino del Marqués de Mudela.

The building as a vertical wall that serves as a neutral background to the architecture of the villa of the Marqués de Mudela.

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later buildings by Rafael Moneo, such as the extensions to the Banco de España or the Prado Museum, where the architecture finds its raison d’être in the city and in the function it fulfils there. What strategies has the Bankinter used to integrate itself into the city, to dialogue with the nearby buildings, to carry out its programme while achieving the image of vigour and power the institute had demanded? Unlike the responses of the other architects who made use of the Ley Castellana by demolishing the old buildings already present (in many cases extraordinary examples of aristocratic architecture), Moneo and Bescós suggested the owners conserve the existing villa, exploiting the volume permitted by the regulations without demolishing what was already there. The determination to not let the new image of the building prevail over the nineteenth-century city was the first of a series of interlinked decisions that proved crucial for this project. The second was the backing on to the adjacent residential building at the end of the plot, thereby linking it to the pre-existing structure and consolidating it. This restriction of parentage was to be done in such a way that the new volume did not obstruct the view of the neighbouring building. The problem was solved by making use of an oblique directrix that drastically reduced the volume of the new construction. The diagonal cut, authentically Venturi-like, generates a “prow” towards Marqués de Riscal which is effective at various levels: in fact it distances the built volume from the dividing wall; transforms the new building into a vertical wall that functions as a neutral background for the villa’s delicate architecture; last but not least it contributes in a sophisticated way to manipulating the perception of the building, increasing the sensation of height and monumentality that the institute had requested through the slightness generated by the forced view. The project ended up as the building of a wall, so to speak. And in a
Rafael Moneo, Dettaglio delle finestre

From this point on, the rest of the decisions aim to uphold a concept already established in an extremely clear way: a sculptural emptying of the ground floor "prow" makes it possible to identify the entrance and differentiate it from the villa’s; an abstract paving of granite slabs helps both buildings maintain their respective autonomy, given that they stand as independent objects; the access ramp to the car park, between the old and the new constructions, hammers home this altezza corrispondenti alla zona adibita alla direzione esibiscono i bassorilievi in bronzo dello scultore Francisco López Hernández: pensati per essere percepiti con la velocità imposta dalla Castellana, alludono, con i loro ingarbugliati rami d’arancia, alla fertilità che ci si aspetta da un’istituzione prospera. 

A partire da lì, il resto delle decisioni mirarono a sostenere un concetto già stabilito in modo estremamente chiaro: uno scultoreo svuotamento della “prua” al piano terreno permette di identificare l’ingresso e differenziarlo da quello del villino; un astratto pavimento di lastre di granito aiuta entrambi gli edifici a mantenere le loro rispettive autonomie, poiché ambedue vi si posano come oggetti indipendenti; la rampa di accesso al parcheggio, tra l’antica e la nuova costruzione, contribuisce a insistere su questa ricercata indipendenza nel separare fisicamente entrambi i volumi; l’utilizzazione dello stesso mattone pressato del villino crea una voluta continuità tettonica, cromatica e di tessiture. 

La perfezione nella realizzazione di questo astratto wall the definition of emptinesses is essential. In addition to the singular nature of the rooms on the access floor, the Rossi-like repetition that leaves its mark on the floors given over to offices, or the generosity of those at the rear, etc., the double height ones of the management area feature bronze bas-reliefs by the sculptor Francisco López Hernández: designed to be noticed even with the speed imposed by La Castellana, and whose tangled orange tree branches allude to the fertility we expect from a prosperous institution.
cherished independence by physically separating both volumes; the use of the same pressed brick as the villa creates an intentional tectonic, chromatic and textural continuity. The perfection of the creation of this abstract concrete wall, which is conceptual, clad in bricks with no mortar that are clearly not load-bearing because of the delicate way they have been laid, is a deliberate gesture of distancing from the aesthetics of Brutalism; architraves, sills and jambs splayed to underscore the depth of the “Romanesque” wall, are cleanly cut, avoiding the appearance of any materials other than brick and bronze.

Reason, Construction, Form, Beauty, might be the keywords that we would choose nowadays to define the Bankinter, a building that has become emblematic not only for the institution it represents, but also for the city of Madrid as a whole. From the economic boom of the 1960s to the start of the


Il cinema offre in continuazione intuitivi vaticini sul futuro delle nostre città. Detroit, per esempio, ha prestato in varie occasioni la sua immagine reale di città fantasma in rovina: a Jim Jarmusch nel suo ultimo straordinario film *Only Lovers Left Alive* o a Paul Verhoeven in *Robocop*, che annunciava nel 1978 la pericolosa caduta delle grandi città nelle reti di esacerbate politiche neoliberalistiche. Vi è chi si è avventurato a stabilire avventati analogie con Madrid (il cartellone della nuova versione di *Robocop* del 2014 ha per sfondo le Quattro Torri). Noi preferiamo offrire una versione più ottimistica, recuperando alcuni episodi brillanti, come Bankinter, che hanno contribuito a fare sì che la Castellana sia capace di assorbire – con straordinaria magnanimità e versatilità – la diversità e disparità di una città in palpitante evoluzione.

Over the last few years, areas occupied by banks and multinationals have disengaged, eloping to colonize new territories, such as the Distrito Telefónica – a business campus inside the city – by Rafael de la Hoz (2004-2008), the financial quarter of Banco de Santander – a bank that has turned into a town, by Kevin Roche (2002-2004), or the new BBVA headquarters – a great rising sun to the north-east of the city, by Herzog and De Meuron, currently under construction. These too will leave their mark on a city that is the outcome of a society in constant transformation.

Cinema continually offers intuitive prophecies on the future of our cities. Detroit, for example, has on various occasions lent its real image for ghost cities in ruins: for Jim Jarmusch in his latest extraordinary film *Only Lovers Left Alive* or for Paul Verhoeven in *Robocop*, which back in 1978 already announced the perilous fall of the great cities into the nets of exacerbated Neoliberal policies. Then there are those who have ventured to establish hasty analogies with Madrid (the poster of the new 2014 version of *Robocop* has the Cuatro Torres in the background). We prefer to offer a more optimistic version, by recouping certain brilliant episodes, such as the Bankinter, which have contributed to ensuring that La Castellana remains capable of absorbing – with extraordinary magnanimity and versatility – the diversity and disparity of a city in vibrant evolution.