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- Inhabited urban void, Porto
- Chameleonic academy, Dilbeek
- A library's baroque reminiscences, Lons-le-Saunier

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Small-scale simplicity

INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER

Great Britain, land of illegal horse meat and European financial uproar, keeps thoughts rather busy these days. Now that Germany seems to have more affinity with the British political course, France seeks support in Spain, Poland and Italy in the budget battle for 2014–2020. This is not just a confrontation between rich and poor countries, or the choice between solidarity and sovereignty. The actual commitment is to a vision of the future. 'We continue the policies of the past, almost unchanged, without asking ourselves whether such policy is still valid,' stated Nicolas Barré in *Les Echos*. And what about the budget of 373 billion euros (30 per cent of the total budget) for agriculture? How old-fashioned is that? The financial negotiations have disappointed many. Where is the innovation in technology, industry, culture, social systems, education and knowledge? How will Europe guard itself against the emerging economies in Asia and South America?

In Europe, it seems that attention is no longer focused on growth. In Estonia, for instance, a monetary system has appeared (*isePankur*, or self-banker; see www.isepankur.ee) that is similar to the microcredit that has become the norm in developing countries. In several countries, urban agriculture is back on the spatial agenda. Mosques, synagogues and even churches are providing

a mini-boom in architectural production. The concept that combines all these trends might be called 'small-scale simplicity'. Within it, you want to provide for your own food, independent of what multinationals dictate your food should be. You get to decide what you want to produce, believe, or purchase. You do not need complex financial contracts to buy a new lounge suite. Architects understand this. They go in search of tasks and assignments that are within reach, and which contribute to the need for small-scale, somewhat nostalgic simplicity. Not feasible on a large scale, but worthwhile in miniature. Read, for example, about the New Wave in Scotland (p. 44), or a temporary library in a 16th-century Bulgarian bathhouse by Studio 8½ (p. 9), or the production of religious buildings in Germany (p. 24). There is innovation, but it is found in the area of the small, not the big. Not in terms of growth, but in well-being. Typical recession behaviour.

Somewhere therein lies the difficulty. 'Europe' is about large scale, but not necessarily about the relationship of the individual with respect to well-being, spatial quality and innovation. The individual seeks natural comfort and quality, but not necessarily at the scale of public interest. Really complicated stuff. Except for a certain region in the United Kingdom (p. 38). As soon as it is independent, this region could become part of the European Union. 'Europe' stands to gain much from this. For years the Scots have had an architectural policy that tackles these types of (scale) problems – one that often achieves successful results. ←

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→
Neatly slotted
into the com-
pact urban
fabric, the
structure's
rather severe
appearance
is appropriate
to its function
and setting.



Fitted law court offices, Venice

With a porous and capable design, C+S Architects present a viable option for new public architecture in old environs.

ITALY — TEXT: SILVIO CARTA, PHOTOGRAPHY: PIETRO SAVORELLI

The long history of European cities often results in a sheer complexity of dealing with new buildings in old urban patterns. Moreover, the history of each city emerges in different ways: in the local culture of inhabitants, in traditions and customs, or in the overall imagery of the place. Venice epitomizes the presence of such constraints, offering exceptional challenges to designers today.

The persistent heritage of past splendours plays a major role in creating this atmosphere, resulting in the collective imagery of the city (domes, *palazzi* and rich decorations). It is

relevant to note that the few recent interventions in Venice have encountered exactly this atmosphere. New projects have often undergone a tiresome process (think of the long negotiations for Le Corbusier's Civic Hospital, from 1962 to its eventual withdrawal in 1978), and even when built in a reasonable amount of time, have encountered polemics, scepticism and mistrust (like Caltrava's Quarto Ponte, inaugurated in 2008).

The city appears to be somewhat unwilling to accommodate novelty or modifications in its urban fabric. When it does, these always

appear as heavy, afflicted projects, trying to make their own space within a fixed configuration which already reached perfection centuries ago. The recent project by C+S Architects, however, brings a significant shift in this peculiar condition. The context is Piazzale Roma, adjacent to the central station (and Caltrava's Ponte della Costituzione). The area is part of a large redevelopment project by both the government and municipality, where a future citadel of justice is planned after the Manifattura Tabacchi has been closed. The complex of existing buildings is rooted in a compact fabric of voids and inner courts combined with massive buildings, such as the 18th-century former tobacco factory and the multi-storey parking garage.

The new Supervisory Law Courts building (one of the first projects in the new citadel) is primarily conceived as an integrated system at the urban scale. Two of its floors house the technical installations that supply the surrounding buildings, while offices, courtrooms, archives and council chambers are located on the upper floors. Moreover, the large hall on →



↑↓ Material, composition, colour and proportion combine to establish a dialogue with the overall Venetian imagery.





↑ The building blends effortlessly into the fabric of the city.

(Fitted law court offices, Venice)

the ground floor hosts retail activities (shops and cafés) and re-establishes the peculiar configuration of the public space of the city (*campi* and *campielli*, or small squares). This space features an interior vertical space illuminated by skylights, and is intended as a spot for city inhabitants, as well as visitors to the future citadel of justice, to gather during daytime. This hybrid inner/outer space provides the city with a new public space that was previously inaccessible. To enhance this new space, the entire building slides five metres forward towards Piazzale Roma, overhanging the street and providing a shaded entrance to attract people inwards, offering the unexpected dramatic verticality of the inside.

The project by C+S effectively recreates fertile spatial conditions allowing the public carpet to roll into the building, connecting it with the urban grain of the city. It is interesting to observe how it also establishes a dialogue with the overall Venetian imagery. Material, composition, colour and proportion are combined in such way as to relate the new Supervisory Law Courts to the city. The pre-oxidized copper used for the facades is in this way a clear reference to the cladding of most of the Venetian public buildings, and the pitched roof profile of the entire building somehow resembles the typical silhouette of many old buildings in the inner city, the Arsenale being a good example.

The main charm of Venice is related to its important buildings, those that express the (former) power of the city. The economic and political power of the doges of Venice was far larger than the territory in which it was exercised, visible in the sophisticated and rich architectural features of its representative buildings. The 'beauty' of Venice has to do

with the image of the power embedded in the city, with austerity and severity, where 'normal' people were only allowed to admire the unattainable status of its *signori*. To a certain extent, this image is rooted in the city's image and is thus part of it, even today.

Despite its rather severe appearance (which connects it to the underlying idea of Venice), the Law Courts building proposes a new consideration of the architecture of power in the city: no longer beyond reach, voluntarily detached from normal people, but instead a porous, open and transparent system, with the public sphere at its centre. Perhaps this a reason why this 'inhabited infrastructure', as the architects call it, may not occur in the polemics that others have felt. Can this integrative approach (in both imagery and public space) be a viable direction for European cities when dealing with their encumbering past? ←

LCV SUPERVISORY LAW COURT OFFICES, 2002-2012

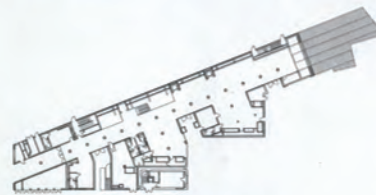
Architect: C+S Architects
 Client: Municipality of Venice, Venice Administration
 Address: Piazzale Roma, Venice
 Info: web.cipiuesse.it



↑↓ The interior atrium is intended as an accessible continuation of public space.



↑↓ Elevations



↑ Ground floor ↓ Basement floor



↑ Second floor ↓ First floor

