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IN SEARCH OF PLACE
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For the CaixaForum in Seville, Spain, a cultural center dedicated to art exhibitions and social programs, the noted local architect Guillermo Vázquez Consuegra was chosen to give the project the high architectural quality of the Caixa Foundation's other branches, including buildings by Herzog & De Meuron in Madrid (2008) and Carme Pinós in Zaragoza (2014). But the difficulties of the setting -the center occupies part of the underground parking garage of a new skyscraper complex designed by César Pelli- test the limits of even the best architecture in the face of an inappropriate site.

The story of how the CaixaForum, which is owned by Spain's second-largest bank, ended up in a basement is a tortuous one. In 2009, Vázquez Consuegra won a limited competition to install the Forum in the dramatically-vaulted medieval ship-building halls of the Atarazanas Reales. The proposal provoked concerns for the historic integrity of the building, a dispute abetted by political infighting among local administrations. Apparently unhappy with the controversy and the lack of progress, La Caixa pulled out of the deal in 2012, and announced instead a plan to install the center in the Pelli tower. (The Atarazanas is currently being converted into a city-run cultural center, also designed by Vázquez Consuegra, and with a 10 million euro donation from the Caixa Foundation).

The Pelli tower had fallen into the hands of La Caixa in the same year, when it took over Cajasol, a local savings bank that had initiated the project in the boom years of the 2000s and had collapsed with the crash. The building, which dominates the city skyline, is located on the former grounds of the Seville Expo of 1992, across a branch of the Guadalquivir River from the historic center. Since the Expo, the area has remained desolate, but the hope is that the CaixaForum and the Pelli complex will help bring it to life.

The tower rises at the southern end of a two-story podium containing a future shopping center, and consisting of two long, curvy fingers with a pedestrian walk between them. The CaixaForum is installed on two underground levels below the opposite, northern mouth of the fingers. Here Pelli's team had foreseen an underground "min-congress center" with double-height spaces that could be adapted for the Forum's small auditorium and twin exhibit galleries. Vázquez Consuegra's task was to fashion these spaces into a coherent whole, and to give the center an

identity at street level, in the form of an open-air entry canopy that covers the descending entry stairs and elevator. In addition, he extended one of the fingers with a new construction that contains the cafeteria, offices, and seminar rooms.

Rather than seeking to harmonize with the Pelli design, his approach is one of contrasts. The existing buildings are clad in glass and terra-cotta-colored metallic elements, and the plaza between them is finished with rather vulgar cement pavers. Vázquez Consuegra responds with his characteristically cool, silvery surfaces. He clads the entry canopy in panels of Stabilized Aluminum Foam (SAF), spongy and lightweight in appearance. For his addition to the finger, he uses elements of galvanized aluminum, breaking the horizontal lines of the Pelli building with vertical shading fins.

While this approach seems logical for the free-standing entry pavilion, the break in continuity of the finger is rather jarring. A mimetic approach might have been more suitable here, but one senses that Vázquez Consuegra simply couldn't stomach the idea, given the rather coarse feel of Pelli design when experienced at close hand.

In its position between the two fingers, the entry canopy matches that of the elliptical tower at the other end of the complex, and it claims a corresponding representative role despite its diminutive size. Vázquez Consuegra has molded its surfaces with seductive, apparently intuitively-sketched vaults and curves, which offer soft, changing registers of reflected light, and dodge the plaza's nascent jacaranda trees. The canopy's forms are redolent of all the qualities that neither it nor the spaces below it possess: an excavated, carved solid, vaulted and heavy, references that may also remind us of the vaults of the Atarazanas Reales. And yet the canopy is clearly nothing of the sort. It is a ghostly evocation of tectonic muscle, rendered in a space-age material for a junkspace setting: a true architectonic poetics for our time.

The large, double-height underground lobby is dominated by a skylight that drops through the canopy's one solid pier. Its curvy glazed faces are screened inside with lighter, more porous SAF panels, creating planes of moving, dappled light across the floors and walls. In the descent to the lobby, the first run of mechanical stairs is cranked at an angle in relation to the structural grid, giving movement through the space another dynamic vector. The exterior walls of the galleries on one side are finished in bronzed metal panels, and the auditorium wall in a greenish-blue that changes hue according to one's viewpoint. Beyond the auditorium, stairs lead up into the finger, the design's most improvised and awkward moment. The smaller, naturally-illuminated lobby of the finger is dominated by a magnificent switchback stair that rises to the cafeteria, which boasts a

raised deck overlooking the plaza.

The general atmosphere of the main lobby recalls a classy metro station, with its metallic surfaces and magnesite floors gleaming in the dark, its sleek inviting sofas and furnishings, and its continuous LED lighting tubes on the unfinished ceiling, where the occasional concrete box of the plaza's planters pokes down from above.

Vázquez Consuegra's design is so alien to the rest of the Pelli complex that it seems almost temporary. The entry canopy, whose evident lightness underlies the fact that it spans over the void of the spaces below it, looks ready to be carted off at any moment. Next to the strong coloring of Pelli's buildings, the galvanized aluminum of the cafeteria addition might pass for scaffolding or a work in progress. The project was conceived as a hasty afterthought by its client, and this haste shows. To my mind, the secret message of Vázquez Consuegra's design is that the most logical and appropriate setting for the CaixaForum, in the near or distant future, is the Atarazanas Reales.