
House & Home

'This is not a building. It's geography'

APRIL 8, 2005 by: Emily Backus

A giant, slanted shaft of glass plunges from the roof to the ground at the eastern entrance of Milan's new fairgrounds, marking an end to the undulating, glass-and-steel canopy rippling over the complex's central corridor. On the day I visit, heavy snow has accumulated on the incline, looking a bit like an avalanche, while snowflakes flutter down to melt on the round, black stones at the bottom of the shaft. The contrast of light and heavy, drama and serenity, of natural elements choreographed to pleasurable effect is, as its architect Massimiliano Fuksas would say, "a very nice piece".

"The fragments are the poetry of this building," he says, taking me on a tour of the mammoth facility nearing completion on the site of a retired Agip oil refinery. Fuksas is the Roman-born, Italian-Lithuanian architect selected by the general contracting consortium, NPF, to design the new fairgrounds located in the western periphery of Milan, between the towns of Pero and Rho. One of Italy's most highly regarded architects and the recipient of many honours, including the Grand Prix d'Architecture Française, Fuksas has also designed the International Trade Centre in Pudong, Shanghai, the Italian Space Agency (ASI) in Rome, and the Twin Towers in Vienna.

On the day I meet him in Milan, the fairground mall looked like an ice castle, covered in snow, supported by trees of white steel and dotted with improvised campfires in wheelbarrows to warm hardworking builders. The public opening took place recently just two-and-a-half years after the first stone was laid by prime minister Silvio Berlusconi in October 2002. At a cost of €750m, the new fairgrounds are the largest and best-equipped in the world, with eight pavilions, 530,000 sq metres of gross floor space, 80 meeting rooms, 14 restaurants and 50 cafés. Milan's renowned Salone del Mobile will occupy every inch of it in April 2006.

"The philosophy is that we don't think about this as a building. This is not a building. . . It is completely different from doing an object, from what we call architecture. This is to do geography," says Fuksas.

And urban renewal, because it proposes a direction for the rehabilitation of blighted city periphery. And cinematography, because the visual landscape is designed to change constantly as you move through the facility. And art, because so many of those landscapes are striking compositions. Fuksas offers many analogies, none of which fully describes his design approach.

"It's a very, very complex space."

What comes through, however, is that Fuksas cares about creating a place that makes people feel happy. His system is aimed at evoking a sense of ease on the one hand and a positive emotional charge on the other.

The former comes from simple orientation around a familiar, "urban" structure: the central mall, a kind of open-air, double-decker street, semi-sheltered by the glass-and-steel canopy. The eight pavilions and logistics centre are aligned symmetrically along the two sides of the mall. Inside each pavilion, a section of glass wall clues people into where they are in relation to the central space.

The upper level is flanked by restaurants and cafés, meeting rooms, offices and pavilion entrances, all partly or entirely suspended on steel stilts and easily identifiable by shape. Curved glass means food, meeting rooms are bubble-shaped, and mirrored glass boxes are offices.

The ground level is trimmed with alternating greenery and water: shallow pools that ripple over black stones, then trees with grass, water again, and so on. Orange-red panelling on the walls that line the mall provide a counterpoint to Milan's notoriously grey weather. Stainless steel panels along the opposing walls reflect the orange as well as life on the walkway and plays of light from the sun, glass and water. And this is where the charge comes in. "A mirror is where you keep the feeling or the emotion," Fuksas explains. "This is the place of emotion."

Lightness is elaborated in all possible dimensions: natural light, slender steel struts supporting acres of glass, simple geometrical shapes, water and greenery. Fuksas went to a great deal of trouble to ensure that all the structures along the corridor give the illusion of being free-standing, only touching each other or the ground.

The pavilions – gigantic boxes off the central mall with their own meeting rooms, food and other compatible services to support several fairs simultaneously – are also spaces of dramatic dimensions, built to evoke the feeling of being backstage in an enormous theatre. Each has two great, telescopic skylights positioned diagonally from each other that rise distinctively from the roof. Orange porthole windows in the far corners and slices of transparent glass walls on the mall side help participants stay oriented. "It is living theatre for living people."

If the complex has a climax, a scene of maximum tension that synthesizes its essence, it is the foyer of the logistics building in the centre. A volcano-shaped roof of glass, steel and aluminium surges up over it. To one side there is a cylindrical auditorium that has been slightly torqued to give it a diagonal thrust. To the other, there is a wall of glass looking out on a quiet garden of trees. It is a dramatic mix of expressionism and simplicity, light and strength, organic and inorganic forms.

"Always in this building there is tension," Fuksas says. "We want to give positive tension to people."

Luigi Roth, president of the Fiera Foundation, which owns and commissioned the facility, says: "We could have created a simple structure, with functional exhibition hangars that met the demand of the market. But I am convinced that to make something beautiful costs as much as to make something ugly. For this reason, we decided to create an emblematic structure, so that it could become a symbol for posterity."

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