Permeability and Interactions

Located in the northern suburbs of the city of Milan, between the districts of Gregorio and Niguarda, the new headquarters of Zurich Italy is inserted in the northeastern corner of the Maccagnan Park, a business park conceived in 2003 by Ensa Group to proposing a total requalification of the former industrial complex of Caro. The project, which comes in a multifunctional park with offices, commercial, recreational, and green areas, was a tremendous opportunity for the suburban district to develop its economic activity and take on a new identity. For the urban planners and architects, it was also a great challenge because the area was once isolated and not integrated into the urban fabric of the city. It was necessary to find solutions to open up its perimeter onto the four streets that define it. One was found by dividing the area into two parts with a new east-west axis that connects the Monte San Giorgio street with the Piazza dei Pini. Most unexpected was the solution proposed by Alessandro Scandurra, the Italian architect in charge of the conception of the Zurich Insurance Company.

Alessandro Scandurra has designed a permeable building which offers an interesting dialogue between the private and public spaces. Rather than developing the building as an isolated piece of architecture, he has conceived it also as a communal passage between the Caro street and the heart of the business park, without denying its function as a workplace. This choice to use a part of the private space as a transition area to access the new center has determined the building’s structure, which the architect himself describes as “hybrid.” In effect, the headquarters’ offices, which are housed on the upper levels of the building, are strategically set up on a monumental base divided into three levels which intersect between them by stairs. Conceived as a “piece of landscape,” the “sloping” level, which seems to be a resurgence of the substructure, presents surfaces that bend and fold. The constituent elements become horizontal toward the center in order to create a passage which directly accessible from the street as well as by the employees or visitors. Connected with this passage, the second level is an empty space where people can pass through the giant pillars, on the podium, to join the rest of the Maccagnan park. Finally, the third level is the “tired” level, where are located the terraces and the common spaces for the employees. The unity of this complex is done by the pillars, visible on each level. The most important one is the gap, as it is permeable, it opens the impact of an ordinary building.

This conception, as surprising as it is, allows the surrounding urban fabric to pass through the building. With three open and easily accessible lower floors, which remain a part of the town, Alessandro Scandurra underlines the pivotal role of the headquarters in the urban pattern and ensures a horizontal and vertical communication between the city and the business park, and between the public space and the private.
The new headquarters of Zurich Italia are inserted in the master plan for the former Caro site area, once used for industrial production. Its activity is substantially confined within the block, physically fenced off from the city and not traversable. The opportunity to open up this perimeter and to make the fabric of the city flow into it was heavily conditioned by the design choice made with regard to the building: the entire settlement is conceived as permeable, an integral part of the park, the public interior of the area as a space not just of arrival but also of passage, where the communal public space is hybridised with the private.

The base is designed as part of the landscape, passing fluidly through the volumes above, linking the different levels of the existing structures and integrating the spaces to be used as an archive as well as for those functions in closer contact with the street, in a complex system of paths leading to the large central space at the centre, a garden with tall trees overlooked by the inner courtyards.

A gigantic order of pillars supports directly the first floor, which consists of the island plaza, a large terrace facing onto the garden. It hosts the community functions of the company: junction of the paths of circulation to the main and secondary clusters of offices.

The volumes that house the offices are designed to optimize the portion of space set aside for distribution in relation to the usable area. The highest block to the west faces onto the large scale of the park and represents the main facade; a reception facility located with a geometric structure conceals the volume like a screen towards the center of the city, evoking the idea of an urban landmark and a place from which to observe.

The building is a typological hybrid of a building with a base and a building on stilts, a structure that combines the openness and contained volumes of dissected blocks with the calm of the inner courtyard and the lightness of a raised and transparent object with the ruggedness of the large and suspended "hostal" object.

This new building is the fusion of an auditorium and a distinctive meeting room.

The room has a triangular base and consists of an irregular volume in the form of a truncated pyramid placed on its side, reproducing the shape of a visual cone. Seen from the outside, the building takes the form of the stage machinery itself; the tiers of seats for the public, not concealing their function. The narrowing toward the spoken gives shape to the volume, a solidification of the form of a perspective cone. The auditorium becomes a micro-cinema for seeing and listening.

The long side of the hall lets natural light in, while the short side is used for the projection of digital images. A sense of perspective
The structure is meant to cover without pillars a very wide surface, prolonging the facade with the transparency of glass and its reflections from the facade to the covering. A primary frame generated the main curve and a secondary grid is connected to the covering, the pannels and the facade, through a horizontal.