

■ Pianta del piano terreno e, nella pagina a fianco, particolare del blocco vetrato che individua il volume principale dell'edificio e si relaziona a un'importante fabbrica di cristalli, limitrofa al supermercato, e fonte di notevoli flussi turistici.

■ Plan of the ground floor and, opposite page, detail of the glass block marking the main building section and interacting with an important glass factory adjacent to the supermarket that attracts plenty of tourists.

Among all the rather well-known and apparently innumerable problems that architecture has always carried in its wake, there can be no ignoring its hybrid nature as, on one hand, an apparently pure form of art and, on the other, the nitty-gritty of the building process, as well as the non-stop cross-fire between the despotic nature of its rules and regulations and those who enforce them, the obscurity of its computations, the bizzariness of technology, and the rather shady cross-interests of real estate developers and other businesses. Major players and major consequences of various kinds, first and foremost the rapid dilapidation of a whole host of real architectural gems. Which, of course, do not end up in faraway countries or secret hideaways, due to the fact they cannot be physically sneaked away; in the end they are quite simply destroyed. There is an almost endless list of crimes. For instance, it is not unusual for a small and overlooked work to be auctioned off for a dollar and for nobody to turn up at the auction: as in the case of Robert Motherwell's house and studio in East Hampton, an incomparable piece of design expertise bearing Pierre Chareau's signature that literally disappeared overnight.

Or a team of bulldozers sent in by the Turin City Council to raze to the ground the Società Ippica complex built by Carlo Mollino just over twenty years earlier and quoted in all the literature as probably the most outstanding and original work of architecture in Italian modernity. Mollino, who could architecture space in a way that perhaps only Ponti could in this country, really is emblematic in this respect: the insides of his Auditorium have been sucked out, as have the interiors of Teatro Regio, again in Turin. All this really strikes the heart. Reminiscent of the sheer brutality of the blind fury inflicted on Horta and numerous others in Belgium back in the dark ages, a line of action that we wrongly thought was no dead and buried: yet here it is raising its ugly head again right in the heart of Milan, the target this time being one of the last masterpieces to be built in Italy, the "Corriere della Sera" building between Via Moscova and Via San Marco designed by Alberto Rosselli, despite all the petitions and signatures collected.

Just a couple of the thousands of such instances, but a particularly painful event because it is happening right here in Italy

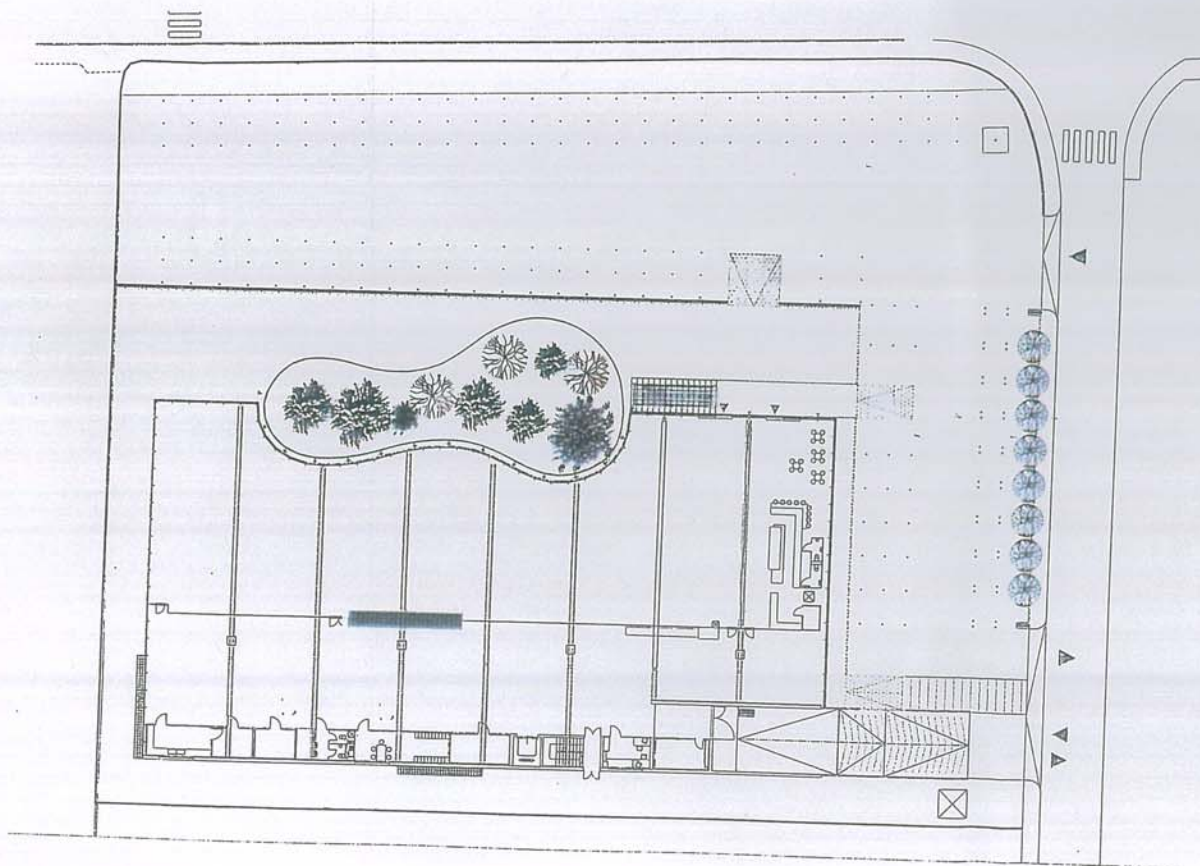
and because it is completely unjustified.

As things stand, we cannot help hoping that some sort of enlightened collecting of valuable buildings might suddenly start up. This might be the only means of self-defences, rightly placing architecture on a par with the rest of the arts. And, as we have already said, this would fit in nicely with the very nature of architecture. Of course, this certainly does not mean extending the jurisdiction of the Monuments and Fine Arts Service.

This certainly would not get us very far. Bearing in mind the untransportable nature of our existing building heritage, all we can do is hope for a sudden blossoming of hoards of enlightened private and public property owners. So are we talking about new and highly erudite landlords, genuine connoisseurs with a real sense of beauty and a keen awareness of the invaluable civil, social and overall status of what they own? All highly unlikely of course. So what's to be done? Perhaps we could focus on the new, on what has just been built or is currently under construction (or about to be set under way). Working cautiously, at least at first, and not setting our sights too high. Setting careful boundaries, perhaps even in geographic terms. Small collections. A reaction poétique, which, we might add, would give them social value and their own clear cultural identity.

Rather as M-Preis Warenvertriebs GmbH has been doing for the last ten years or so, not so much an anonymous financial group (which so far are not showing signs of life in this respect, preferring for the moment to revamp their images after covering the globe with faceless warehouses all sharing the fact that they are totally insignificant), as a family business. A family from Innsbruck in the Tyrol, which has been working in the groceries industry since 1933, the year when Mrs. Therese Mölk launched a novel distribution process on the local market. Then, punctually and cleverly adapting in size and profile, without ever leaving its own socio-economic terrain, running a tightly knit business capable of smoothly adjusting to modernisation, M-Preis managed to expand without falling into the temptation of major changes in scale or in the range of its financial operations.

Ten or so medium-size supermarkets all over the region; all very



different with nothing in common except the company logo-cube, all commissioned, except one as we will see, to young and well-informed architects definitely not inclined towards the vernacular or excessive references to the local environment, but extremely attentive to the latest developments under way at the cutting-edge of modern-day architectural design.

Although, at first sight, there seem to be certain affinities with the road taken by the American chain BEST a few years ago with the design support of SITE, this is something quite different and original. Having taken note of the leading role now taken by retail places, as meeting places or spaces for non-commercial exchanges (after all, goods are a key part of cultural update and information) or even as a way of, in a certain sense, bonding together the different strands of the local community in a framework of balanced co-existence between even slightly different identities, the decision to adopt different physical means of supporting lots of other activities randomly mixed together has turned out to be a key and successful way of physically holding together a territory undergoing rapid transformation and hence particularly fragile. And this can only be done by means of architecture, that manages to control, support and partly engulf a precious landscape without preventing it from making the necessary changes, taking on authentic infrastructural roles and nipping in the bud any danger of those increasingly popular rather bland and parasitic solutions from taking root. It is very unusual for a contractor to be the first to recognise this; it is a very hopeful sign for a business like ours. This is the sense in which we might talk about architectural collections, which, by their very nature as a community service, feature the kind of openness and utility that other arts probably cannot offer.

Let's take a look at two examples. Peter Lorenz has unrolled a huge strip of reinforced concrete here in Telfs in a bold and seamless geometric pattern, what is outside and provides shelter against the bad weather is also inside and holds up a sort of observation deck facing the sales area and cafeteria for customers and protecting a sort of tiny plaza. The final design is streamlined through a controlled form of expressionism; the interior space plays cleverly on a variety of forms quite unusual for supermarkets. An average height of seven metres produces an initial sense of compression, then

there is an explosion of space followed by a sudden surprise as, turning round, we come across an attractive observation deck that is easy to reach and where, from a highly sheltered position, you can look across at all the goods on display and people out shopping as you chat and have a drink: a very urban spectacle, a new cultural experience injected into a tiny little town.

The only architect not from the Tyrol, Dominique Perrault, has designed a totally different kind of building here in Wattens, another tiny place in the same vicinity. Drawing on his favourite land-art approach to both the building theme and design, the architecture is constructed out of a parallelepiped with three glass sides resting on a fourth side made of concrete. Opposite, just beyond the road, there is a famous glass factory, surrounding by picturesque rolling hills. Incorporating glass in a piece of nature: this is the underlying design theme. It is a real success: the clarity of the design should not fool us though. Its apparent simplicity is anything but naive: the wide sheets of reflective glass means you cannot see what is going on inside from the outside, except the sensation of diffused light; likewise, not much outside light flows inside, except in the central section, where an enclosed wood (an integral part of the road facade) with the same kind of trees as outside knits into the architecture and acts as a natural filter and inside panorama completing that of the Okalux, which, on the inside, turns rather transparent. An ambiguous boundary between nature and architecture, enclosed in and by landscaping, M-Preis is left with an open-space design with various different layouts; in contrast with Lorenz's approach, that focuses on the details and colour schemes of the furnishing. The whole design plays on light and shade, clarity in the daytime and darkness at night, the colours of the landscape changing with the seasons and alternating colours of the goods.

They all have one key thing in common: they took eleven months to design, seven to build in the case of Telfs, and seven and five months for the buildings in Wattens. Collecting architecture has its own tight schedule: but, nowadays, this is the right kind of deadline for architecture.

Maurizio Vogliazzo



M-Preis Economic Challenge

The M-Preis firm belongs to the Mölk family from Tyrol, who have been running the firm since the early-1920s.

In 1974 the Mölk family decided to adopt a definite strategy to help boost their business, a decision not to go with the flow but to carry out constant research and innovation that led to the founding of what is now the M-Preis sales chain.

As Hansjörg Mölk points out, the joint manager of the chain together with his cousin Anton, architecture was brought in by sheer chance or even just for fun. The Mölk firm realises the importance of insisting on asking itself the following question: "what does a supermarket have to offer today?". It would probably have been easier for the family to just set up a chain of identical shops that were easy to identify, but that would have clashed with their basic philosophy. The important thing was to understand the users' specific requirements in different places and then try and meet these demands in the best way possible, in line with the latest developments in the field of marketing. This was the line of thinking that brought the Mölk family closer to architecture, making it aware of just how much a space can influence customers and boost business. This then led to the challenge to create constantly different spaces, all unique of their kind.

People welcomed these designs everywhere and even politicians have taken a positive view of and even encouraged new M-Preis outlets, well aware of the overall benefits they bring with them. Modern, architecturally-appealing M-Preis shops knit smoothly into the existing fabric, which is one of the reasons why they have already won so many architectural prizes and awards. In 1999, for instance, M-Preis received the Austrian prize for building clients (Österreichische Bauherrenpreis) for the architectural design of its supermarkets.

Interaction between different spaces, between the inside and outside, and connection links, are the aspects Hansjörg Mölk believes to be most important in the design of new M-Preis centres; the features for which all the commissioned architects find themselves literally forced by their clients to find new and innovative solutions, working on tight budgets and striving to achieve extremely high-quality designs. In other words, these are not so much commissions as real architectural challenges.

Designing your own M-Preis store is turning into quite a trend for architects in France and even elsewhere (remembering that Dominique Perrault has also been called into play). Perrault, who is actually working on his second M-Preis design at the moment, managed to place his own architectural object neatly into its surroundings in the town of Wattens.

The latest design by Peter Lorenz, on the other hand, features a rather unusual object that the local community will struggle to identify with. One single huge hall contains various spaces serving different functions that constantly interact together. A new and voluptuous atmosphere is automatically created by soft, curved "female" display elements, islands inside one single space.

Hansjörg Mölk realises just how much clients' habits and expectations have changed down the years and with them the very purpose of a supermarket. This is why the M-Preis chain has tried to meet users' requirements, trying to reconcile them with modern up-to-date designs: 30 shops in Innsbruck, 80 branches in the Tyrol, a wide variety of about 9,000 articles, an attractive price/profit/quality ratio, easy to reach and shop at, thanks to spacious car parks and various facilities inside the supermarkets themselves. The approach adopted was constant research into what's new. And it is by adopting this principle that the M-Preis firm is planning to expand beyond the horizons of the Tyrol.

Giulia Decorti

M-Preis Today

110 M-Preis branches (including 11 SuperM stores)

90 Baguette branches (a chain of bread shops - one branch in each supermarket)

3 T&Gmärkte (shops inside the supermarket selling fresh products and drinks at very low prices)

1 bread factory

1 meat centre

2,800 members of staff (full or part-time, including about 100 apprentices, one of the highest number of apprentices for any single company in the Tyrol)

A turn-over of about 4 billion ATS in 1999.

