

Madrid

Victor López Coteló & Carlos Puente

CONTEXTUAL CONSTRUCTION

A new library in Zaragoza and a project for a health centre in Mostoles clarify that for these architects context is as important a generator of architectural form as use and construction.

Zaragoza library (facing page):

1. main reading room with galleries around double-height well lit by north light from above. Beyond glazed screen is stair hall.
2. spiral stair in well linking levels of Aragon reference library.

3. oblique view of street front with stone and copper faced projecting entrance in corner between stuccoed lower block and compressed plywood faced taller slab.
4. close-up showing detailing of stair in taller slab.

The making of buildings and the expression of making have always been obvious and passionate concerns for Victor López Coteló & Carlos Puente. Now though it is clear just how much their architecture is shaped also by site and setting. Their most recently completed building, a library in Zaragoza, and a newish project for a health centre in Mostoles both prove what earlier works had suggested. Valdelaguna town hall (AR June 1987) might be directly derived from context—too much so for some villagers who find such deference inconsistent with their aspirations for Modernity. But it is only with hindsight that the Chemistry Faculty at Alcala de Henares (AR May 1986) might be seen as contextual, its linked blocks suggesting in microcosm some pattern for the then still absent surrounding campus.

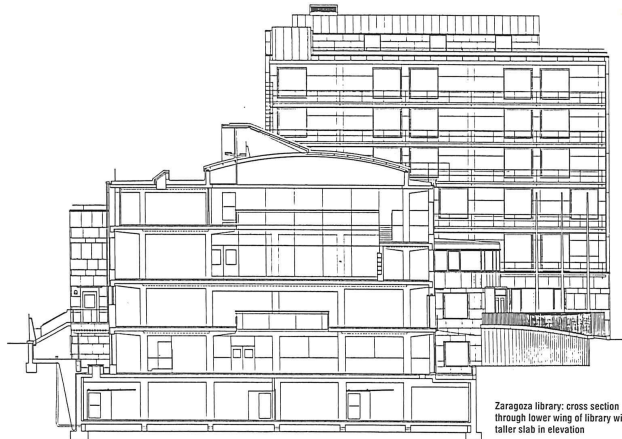
Despite a consistency of concerns that carry over from one project to the next, and because they are so sensitive to context as well as to the pressures of their respective programmes, each of these buildings is markedly different. Indeed a hallmark of these architects is that each work manages to be emphatically distinctive yet also seemingly uncontrived. Contrivance is there of course, but not to the degree of appearing affected.

This poise is the result of the architects' quest for what to them is a natural architecture. This is shaped, like any organism, by internal forces of function and flow, by a disciplined economy of structure and enclosing elements, and as a response (typically understated) to all sorts of contextual pressures—including aesthetic and cultural ones. When encountered, this is an architecture that fits into and adds coherence to its setting. Inside it unfolds with a hospitable yet restrained obviousness. Light and ventilation, stairs and doors, handles and cills are all at hand exactly where needed but without encroaching on or overdefining any activities.

The architects' ideal is an architecture that is generously accommodating and without anything gratuitous or aggrandising. It should seem as unselfconsciously 'right' and 'at home' and as memorably distinct, as any natural species. Yet there is a danger in this approach of the buildings being too modestly reticent to hold their own and adequately reciprocate in an urban setting. Though avoided by all the projects mentioned, this danger is closely skirted in some other current projects.

Like most buildings in this issue, both the library and health centre are public facilities in provincial towns. Both mix a certain civic monumentalism with low-key accommodations to the particulars of site and setting. A dominant block in both shows itself off: outside by being set back from the street, and inside by being focused around a central well or court. Subordinate elements edge the site boundary and take up the domestic scale of the neighbouring buildings.

Penetration further counterpoints these two scales. Indeed much of the special *frisson* offered by both these designs, as with all work by these



Zaragoza library: cross section through lower wing of library with taller slab in elevation

architects, comes from a play between the generous or even overlarge against the honed down or just normal scale. In such a context the latter might have seemed mean if not invested with a certain spare elegance.

ZARAGOZA LIBRARY

The new main library of Aragon, the province of which Zaragoza is capital, sits in the corner of what will be a new park on land freed by the demolition of barracks. The squarish mid-block site of the library also abuts on one side the seven- and eight-storey blocks of flats typical of the area. The massing of the building was predetermined by the urban design masterplan for the area. It stipulated a tall block, the same height as and against the party-wall of the adjacent flats and a separate lower and deeper block set back from the street and presenting a gable end to the park. The architects got a waiver to join the blocks and place the entrance in a projecting lobby in the corner between them.

Though the outer envelope and structural frame are unchanged since the initial project (AR May 1986), some things are altered. Reflecting a change in policy, the ground floor is now unpartitioned to allow the public direct contact with many more books. And recognising that there was in any case an overprovision of stacks in the basement and the tall slab, the latter areas are now a reference library for publications about Aragon. As a consequence, the original shallow high-level windows have been replaced by floor-to-ceiling windows flooding the reading areas with light.

Nevertheless, a characteristic feature of the

original design remains: the contrast in scale between very large and more domestic-sized windows. This lends liveliness and a Scandinavian air to the building. (All work by López Coteló & Puente exhibits an explicit Scandinavian influence.) But it is also part of the architects' strategy of investing the building with two aspects and scales, one civic and somewhat monumental and the other more in sympathy with the residential neighbours. Sun-shades and window cleaning galleries (themselves sun-shades too) are also to break down scale as much as for function.

Both the unity and dual scales of the building are emphasised by external finishes. Pulling both top and bottom together, all roofs and copings are dressed in copper; and the lower parts of the whole building are faced with a grey local stone. Above this, the set-back main block has a cream render. And the taller block has a contrasting cladding of dark brown marine grade pressed wood board, the arrangement of the boards reflecting the concrete frame behind. Partly this is to emphasise the subordinate status of this slab, but mainly it is to suggest that this is not a major facade but merely an arbitrary termination to the residential blocks fronting the street.

The interior retains the choreographed flow of the original project, a quality also inspired by Scandinavian example. Angled front doors offer welcome and the choice of proceeding to the open stacks or going up the stairs to the first floor reading room as well as drawing some attention to the control desk. This last is deliberately not prominent to avoid being an inhibitingly threatening presence to those unconfident in



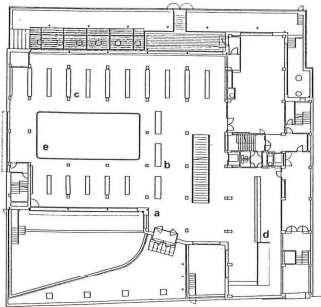
libraries. Security is ensured by an electronic magnetic tagging and alarm system.

Proceeding into the building, the well offers views down into the children's library already glimpsed from outside across the sunken court against the entry ramp. This semi-basement level is reached, after passing the catalogues, by a stair under the straight flight to the first floor. To the left of the foot of this stair is an auditorium. Across from this is the children's library that

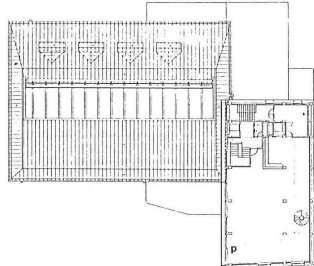
opens out into a secure reading area in the sunken court (*patio ingles* in Spanish). In the east corner is an art and craft studio in which the children can paint or model their interpretations of what they have read.

On the first floor is the library's major space, the reading room, a large part of which rises through two stories to a monitor rooflight that reaches up from the curved steel beams. Around this, at different levels and with differing degrees

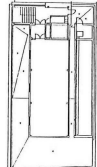
of openness to the main space are various reading and study areas. The largest of those, partitioned off by glass along a gallery, is lit by overhead dormers as well as windows on the north elevation. At these levels (first and second floor) the smaller block houses a periodical library. On its third, fourth, and fifth levels, all connected by a spiral stair rising in a slot-like well against the party wall, is the Aragon reference library.



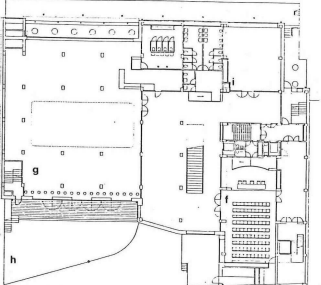
Zaragoza library, ground floor plan



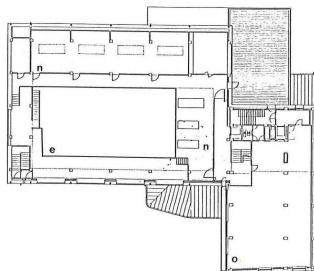
third floor plan



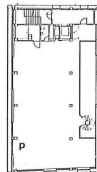
sixth floor attic plan



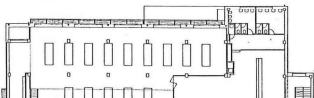
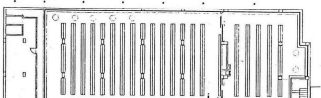
semi-basement plan



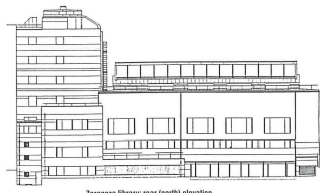
second floor plan



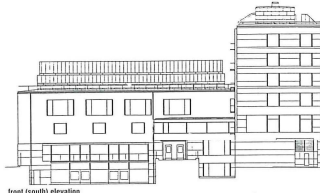
fourth floor plan



first floor plan



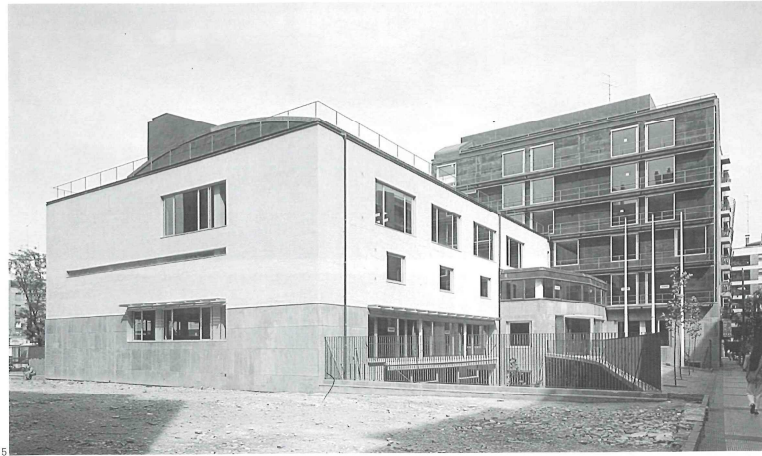
Zaragoza library: rear (north) elevation



front (south) elevation

Zaragoza library:
 5, view from street edge of unplanted new park.
 6, sunken patio in front of children's library, the floor-to-ceiling glazing of which can be shaded by the retracted awning. Window to open stacks on entrance level is partly shaded by being set back and by slatted sunshade.
 7, close-up of taller slab clad with compressed plywood sheeting and big single pane windows. More delicate scale is given by projecting window cleaning walkways.

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