The making of buildings and the expression of making have always been obvious and passionate concerns for Victor López Cotelo & 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, is a refreshingly open and welcoming project for a health centre in Mieres. Both prove what earlier works had suggested. Valledupar town hall (AR June 1987) might be directly derived from context—toos much so for some villagers who feel such derivative intrusion with their aspirations for Modernity. But it is only with hindsight that the Chemistry Faculty at Alcalá de Henares (AR May 1985) might be seen as contextual. Its liquid 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 as 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 unoriginal. Contretemps is there of course, but not to the degree of appearing affected.

This note 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 diachronic economy of structure and enclosing elements, and as a response (typically unarticulated) 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, space and doors, bath and tiles are all at hand exactly where needed but not encroaching on or overmarking any activity or activity in the building.

The architects’ ideal is an architecture that is generally accommodating and without gratuitous or extraneous additions. It should seem an unselfconsciously ‘right’ and ‘better’ and as minimally distant, as any natural species. Yet this is a danger in this approach of the buildings being too remotely reticent to hold their own and definitely invisible in their setting. Though avoided by all the projects reviewed, this danger is closely skirted in some other current projects.

Like most buildings in this line, both the library and health centre are public facilities in public squares. Both mix a certain order monumentality and low-key accommodations to the particularities of site and situation. A dominant block in both shown itself off outside as an engaging street, and by being focused around a central wall or court. Subordinate elements edge the site and take up the domestic scale of the neighbouring buildings.

Together these further counterpoint these two scales. Indeed much of the special dimension offered by both these designs, as with all work by these architects, comes from a play between the generous or even over plays the dramatic of the height on its sides. It exists all at once with a certain spare elegance.

ZARAGOZA LIBRARY

The new main library of Zaragoza, the province of which Zaragoza is capital, is the corner of what who will be a new park on land freed by the demolition of barracks. Squared sand stone block of the library also Shot on one side the square: and eight-storey block of flats typical of the area. The setting of the building was predetermed by the urban design masterplan for the area. At the site of a high wall building the wall and sill of the adjacent wall and a separate tower and deeper block are set back from the street and present a gable end to the park. The architect got to wary to join the blocks and place the entrance in a projecting lobby in the corner between them.

The front entrance and structural frame are unchanged since the initial project (AR May 1985), some things are altered. Reflecting a change in policy, the ground floor is now unadorned to allow the public direct contact with many books. And recognizing that there was in any case no over-decor of echoes in the basement and the Hall, the latter areas are now a reference library for publications about Zaragoza. As a consequence, the original’s shallow high-level windows have been replaced by floor-to-ceiling windows facing 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 Cotelo & Puente exhibit an explicit Scandinavian influence. But it is also part of the architects’ strategy of inventing the building with two aspects and masonry, one critic and somewhat monumental and the other more in sympathy with the residential neighbours. Sun-shade and window cleaning galleries (themselves sun-shades too) are also to break down scale as much as for function.

Both the unity and dual scale of the building are emphasized by external finishes. Pulling both top and bottom together, all roofs and eaves 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 crenellating of dark brown marbel glazed wood board, the arrangement of the boards reflecting the concrete frame behind. Partly this is to emphasize the subordinate status of this slab, but mainly it is to suggest that this is not a minor 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 staircase 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