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Mario Botta

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

San Francisco, California, 1989-1995

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Archaicity Revisited

Few museums realized during the nineties have been so well conceived from the curatorial standpoint as Mario Botta's Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. Two possible comparisons are Axel Schultes's *Kunstmuseum* in Bonn or Alvaro Siza's Galician Center of Contemporary Art in Santiago de Compostela, but certainly no works of this caliber have been achieved in the United States in recent years. Botta has been able to recall, without nostalgia, what the museum as a civic institution has been in the past, and to suggest what it might become in the future. Thus his San Francisco museum, cradled within the Yerba Buena Center, now stands as a challenge to its trustees, for the one chronic problem that remains, as with most new museums, is how to fill its halls with quality work - and how to establish within its confines a truly vital cultural program.

Far from the now-fashionable habit of narcissistically regarding the museum as a building without a program, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has a gallery sequence that unfolds before the visitor with such gracious inevitability that one cannot help wondering why this ease and logic has proven so hard to achieve in many other comparable works. Here the architect has adopted a highly responsible attitude toward one of the most delicate tasks confronting any art museum, the maintenance of an appropriate balance between artificial and natural illumination. To this Botta has added an architectural promenade in which the conditions for viewing art are volumetrically varied and sufficiently flexible in themselves to remain open to modification through the deployment of temporary walls. The model for all this, including the lighting monitors set on a regular grid, seems to have been Alvar Aalto's exemplary Aalborg Museum in Denmark (1972). Botta has ingeniously transformed this paradigm to accommodate a classical *enfilade* laid out in accordance with the coaxial system of circulation and the stepped stacking sequence of the galleries. This arrangement is particularly evident on the first floor and on the next tier above. With three monitor lights per room, where they are top-lighted, these spaces are easily subdividable. The same principle could have been easily applied to the second floor had it not been decided to exclude natural light from the photographic section.

Clearly the architect has assumed a mediatory posture in the debate that has consumed the museum field for the past forty years - the twofold problem of (1) prioritizing either natural or artificial light and (2) mediating between cellular, the traditional gallery format of discrete rooms in *enfilade*, and the modern paradigm of open loft space. The masterpiece of Louis Kahn's life, his Kimbell Art Museum of 1972, was precisely compounded out of a synthesis between these two opposing models, with Kahn deciding to screen out most but not all of the natural light and to orchestrate his galleries in such a way as to provide vaulted rooms in one direction and loft space in the other. While Botta implies a similar oscillation in his San Francisco museum, he ultimately favors the

traditional museum form at and thus comes closer to the model of James Stirling's National Gallery in Stuttgart of 1985.

As I have already indicated, the calm of Botta's spatial organization derives from the lateral circulation that always brings one back to the central staircase, situated under the zenithal light. This circuit is augmented by elevators placed discreetly to one side of the main axis. Here, however transformed, one is also returned to the precedent of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum; to the early interchangeability between negotiating the stairs and using the elevators. Thus the San Francisco museum is structured about an honorific public stairway from which the promenade spills out onto the respective floors, thereby facilitating the act of voyeurism, an essential pleasure in all exhibition openings, namely the art of both seeing and the act of being seen. Without entering into such niceties Botta captured the critical parti of his museum when he wrote:

"...The use of natural overhead light [gives]...the gallery space a special character that is linked to the climate and light of a specific place. It is a unique environment which cannot be repeated elsewhere and which inevitably stamps a very definite identity on the gallery. ... [The museum ensures] that after entering the building the visitor can understand its layout at a glance. Contrary to current practice, in which contemporary architecture transforms the interiors of buildings into labyrinths, an attempt has been made to give order and a hierarchy to the gallery space so that the visitor will be able to find his bearings at once."¹

Among the master builders of the late modern world few can rival the Swiss for their sheer mastery of the art of building, particularly where this concerns that which we commonly think of as tectonic form. This applies no less to the Ticinese architects at their best than it does to the high Swiss German technocratic tradition. There are no working drawings in the world that are quite so laconic and precise as those of Mario Botta. This refinement derives from his profound knowledge of the modern building process as it lies suspended today between high technology and the reinterpretation of craft. Thus while Botta, in the fullness of his career, may well lapse at times through excessive talent into gratuitous formalism, he will never be caught building badly.

It is difficult to overemphasize the tectonic expressivity of a work such as this in a building culture that has been so overwhelmed by the proliferation of postmodern kitsch. Within the technological know-how applied to the San Francisco museum, one needs to note the way the brick was laid up in the form of wall panels cast onto a reinforced concrete backing. These prefabricated elements were hauled into position by tower crane and thereafter permanently anchored against the steel frame superstructure. This rationalized assembly of compact components has long been part of Botta's *montage* approach to construction, although here, as in previous works, this strategy is often to be found at its tectonic best in his interiors. Thus, the moralist may be disturbed by the appearance of a stereotomic mass that on close inspection is nothing more than a skin - a cladding that is bonded in such a way as to create an ambiguous reading.

This was already evident in the Ransila Building, erected in Lugano in 1985, in which panels of bonded brickwork were applied as though they were the elements of a Sol LeWitt minimalist pattern in which the piers were coursed horizontally and the spandrels vertically, involving a counterchange of mitred brickwork at the intersection between the two. Botta's brick cladding would be augmented in the Ransila Building with such conceits as the tree on the roof or the dramatic corner cantilever where the building breaks apart to reveal a second membrane within.

Needless to say, the budget for the San Francisco museum was nowhere near that of Ransila. Hence its patterned brickwork followed a more sober principle, one that lay closer to Botta's obsession with Adolf Loos's villa for Josephine Baker of 1927. I am alluding to Botta's habitual use of a two-toned, ironic cladding strategy, which he has regularly indulged in ever since his horizontally striped, pink and gray Ligornetto House of 1976. In San Francisco, we may be grateful for Botta's

decision to restrict the revetment to a monotone dark red brick surface with matching concrete mortar. Botta would inflect this surface in subtle homage to Wright with horizontally orchestrated stripes, five courses high, separated by single inset courses; a reference perhaps to the syncopated horizontal coursework applied to Wright's Arthur Heurtley House of 1904. This reference to Wright's "corduroy" brickwork is augmented in this case by other equally syncopated modulations that start and stop in such a way as to provide the illusion of quoins at the corners and of a stepped inverted ziggurat pattern about the point of entry. Since none of this brick is load-bearing one cannot help asking oneself why it is not stack-bonded so as to indicate its nonstructural character.

As I have already intimated, this obsession with horizontal banding is less problematic on the interior, largely because it is more readily decodable as an appliqué ornament. This is certainly the case with the fair-faced, off-white blockwork that lines the lecture hall and the same masonry treatment that is deftly applied to the walls of the events room, opening off the entry hall. It is doubtful, however, whether this banded treatment is as successful in the foyer, because the black and gray marble collars to the four free-standing neo Palladian columns under the central roof light tend to undermine the tectonic probity of the structure itself. This bonding echoes the treatment of the columnar peristyle that runs along the portico flanking the entrance on Third Street. Nothing is more guaranteed to destroy the legibility of a column as a bearing element than to break it up into layers, just as nothing is more assured of reducing a giant order to absurdity than resting it on a pedestal. Are we expected to enjoy these ironic sophistries on the grounds of our seeming tolerance for the same in the work of James Stirling and Arata Isozaki? Whatever the response, it is clear that these conceits quickly pale since they undermine the tectonic probity of the work. Thus the totality seems to fall some what short of the formal authority of Botta's Ransila Building of 1985 even though the jazzy banding of the foyer in lacquerwork and light wood displays that ornamental richness that we have come to expect from Botta's interiors.

Of these decorative indulgences and risks Botta seems to be aware particularly in his all but autocritical essay *The Archaicity of the New* when he writes that the possibility of building seems to be "inversely proportional to the worldly din of publicity which sustains the most diverse initiatives."

In the same essay, with reference to Stirling's Stuttgart, he continues, in a vein that would prove to be prophetic of his own future achievements in San Francisco.

"...The architect contemplates the suggestions whispered by the bad conscience of this opulent society. Behind the enticements of a greater comfort, he catches a glimpse of the need for increasingly stronger images and expressions that connect him to his past, ...he discovers the strength of totemic representations - still and hieratic - to set against the endless and meaningless race of today's society...."²

In this perceptive passage, addressed as much to himself as to Stirling, Botta reveals the hope that his architecture will remain endowed with a capacity for recalling archaic values. If anything is totemic here, it is surely this *occhio Lucemario* that has, by now, assumed an orthographic status in his work, sometimes to the extent of consuming the entire volume of a building, as in the church at Mogno dating from 1992. Certainly one cannot imagine this museum without its crowning centerpiece, in black and white banded marble, although one is nonetheless grateful that the initial proposal to plant trees around the rim of this circumference was discreetly abandoned. The plastic strength of the sliced cylinder has been increased by this decision and this, together with the leaflike structure of the skylight, imparts to the form a magnetic presence that serves to bind the dualistic composition into a single entity. It is appropriate, as Botta points out, that the laic temple of our secular age should be crowned by an all-seeing eye, even by the masonic eye as this is featured on the American dollar bill, proclaiming the *novus ordo seclorum*. And it is this, together with the

entirely closed façade, that gives to the overall mass the sense of its being a cult building of an American, not to say pre-Columbian, provenance. Certainly there is not a building for miles around that has the monumental presence of this work, and there is not a building in San Francisco of any date that matches its single-minded power and conviction.

The imperium is left behind, however, once one is inside the cylindrical oculus that hovers over the central staircase as a world to which one might never gain access. Here for the final rise up to the temporary exhibition space the planning criterion abruptly changes, particularly as far as stair access is concerned, for nothing could be more labyrinthic and hermetic than the requirement that one can only reach the final level by stair, by going up inside the thick walls of the crowning cylinder and then passing back across a bow-spring, tubular steel passerelle, suspended above the void, under the zenithal light. The winding darkness of the drum walls followed by the transcendental whiteness of Botta's "light modulator" are the twin experiential preconditions, as it were, for gaining access to the final prestigious exhibition space, unless one circumvents the whole thing, as many people will, by taking the elevator.

Whether one really needs to cast all this in such a rhetorical, brick-faced manner is surely open to question. Indeed one wonders whether a certain lightness of touch, along the lines of the Swiss tradition of *Konkrete Architektur*, might not have had a certain liberating effect not only on the membrane of the building but also on its architect.³ Be this as it may, the rational Ticinese Tendenza line has brought us here to this substantial achievement, situated on the Pacific Rim of yet another latter-day empire on which the sun has started to set.

¹ From an unpublished typescript provided by the architect.

² *Quaderni de Casabella*, Milan, 1985, Nr. 1.

³ See Hans Frei, *Konkrete Architektur? Über Max Bill als Architekt* (Baden, 1991).