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***Vittorio Gregotti, Manuel Salgado***  
***Cultural Center of Belém***  
***Lisbon, 1988-1993***

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What certainly distinguishes the Cultural Center of Belém in Lisbon from other recent cultural buildings is its diverse user program. Consisting of a mixture of high art and high politics, popular culture and commercial functions, a hotel and pedestrian areas, it would suffice to enliven a smaller city quarter. The facility was built as a cultural center on the occasion of Portugal's presidency of the European Union in 1992, offering the framework for its events and conferences.

The building site was well chosen. By way of its location on the River Tagus, which is both peripheral and privileged, the building complex could become the driving force for future development in the formerly independent suburb of Belém, forming an attractive complement to the historical city core of Lisbon. One didn't just plan in no man's land, however. The Monastery of the Hieronymites and the Tower of Belém, Portuguese cultural monuments from the first half of the sixteenth century located nearby, already lend the place meaning as a cultural and tourist center. The grounds of the *Exhibition of the Portuguese World* from 1939-40 along the banks of the Tagus remind one of the period of dictatorship just as much as the Padrão dos Descobrimentos, the monument to the Portuguese conquests raised in 1960 on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the infante Henrique's death. The site is characterized by an absence of spatial boundaries, being separated from the mouth of the Tagus to the south only by the exhibition grounds and separated from the monastery to the northeast by a large park. The large areas that bound the building site are not necessarily fallow urban zones in a conventional sense. The open spaces - small-scale in structure and carefully planned - are bisected, however, by the heavily traveled exit roads. In addition, a heterogeneous housing and commercial structure lies to the northwest. The new edifice should clarify the urban context, which - while characterized by attractive objects - is unclear in its totality.

Vittorio Gregotti's project was chosen from the two proposals that reached the final competition round in 1988. The proposal succeeded in a remarkable manner to strive for a high degree of urban clarity by means of a project that was actually quite ambivalent and heterogeneous. He placed a nearly symmetrical entrance trace on the site of the razed pavilion from the exhibition of 1939-40, making reference to the north-south axis of the adjacent Praça do Império, its axis having heretofore been unsatisfying in its disconnectedness. In addition, the park as a whole receives a clear demarcation by virtue of the solid building volume. The entire complex is articulated into readable zones along the axis dictated by the park: conference center, theater, museum, hotel, and commercial street. Gregotti's competition project was not fully realized; the western most part, with its smaller court for the hotel and the shopping street, was not built. This would have enriched the facility with several additional urban functions while integrating it more successfully into the neighboring housing structure.

The decision to form the ground floor as a base with minimal window openings - housing a garage and service functions requiring no daylight - contributes above all to the massive appearance of the complex. In a similar fashion Gregotti had created compact and internally articulated large forms with the *insulae* of the housing complex in the Quartiere Zen in Palermo (1969-73). In Belém the upper termination of the base marks the ground level for the public open spaces of the complex, from which the individual building elements are then defined. This is indicated on the exterior by the "hanging gardens" that form the transition between the actual building volumes and the streets. Despite the articulation of singular building elements, the architect does not attempt to have the real volume of the complex appear smaller. The massiveness is additionally strengthened by completely cladding the cultural center with light-colored limestone, forming a reference with the material to historic Portuguese architecture.

Despite its predominant base, the complex is not an impregnable obstacle, since transverse thoroughfares in the north-south direction open it up to pedestrian traffic. The actual circulation takes place along the main east-west axis that corresponds to the run of the riverbank. Inside, an exciting sequence of foyers and public open spaces then develops, whose spatial qualities oscillate between courtyard and open space. In order to emphasize the public nature of the open spaces, they were provided with *cazada*, the intricate flooring made of black and white paving stones that also characterizes the appearance of Lisbon's city center. In addition, the compact placement of the individual building volumes contributes to the "urban" character of the inner spaces.

Vittorio Gregotti himself viewed his project, in addition, as a contribution to the theoretical debate concerning the relationship between architecture and the city. He designed it as a possible way of dissolving the antagonism between monuments (primary elements) and the city at large, which Aldo Rossi had established as the primary constant of his urban observation in *L'architettura della città* (1966). The cultural center really does pretend to be a piece of city placed on a base, while yet remaining a megastructure. The question of integrating megastructures in to an urban context forms a central pursuit of Gregotti's recent works. In Belém the architect was able to use the force of history as the legitimization for using a megastructure; and indeed his cultural center exceeds neither the footprint nor the height of the neighboring monastery. Large historical structures, too, such as monasteries and above all castles, exceeded the dimensions of their surroundings while turning away from them and allowing a marked variety of uses within their walls. Gregotti does not hold fast to structural similarities in this case. Indeed, the idea of a fortress is actually strengthened by a few, though explicit, details in the Cultural Center of Belém. Like bastions, landscaped terraces extend to the banks of the Tagus, while an abstract bulwark tower marks the boundary to the Avenida da India and a marked donjon clearly stands out from the stage tower of the large auditorium. The highly diverse internal circulation system with its ramps, bridges, moats, and stairs contributes the castle-like character as well. The center wants to be a monument in the sense of a unique, unmistakable building with its architect apparently having made use of the "classical" resources of monumentality, grandeur, and volume in an intentionally rhetorical fashion.

The question whether monumentality is suited to a democracy or even a cultural edifice has often been posed, not surprisingly, in connection with the Cultural Center of Belém. Yet, it is exactly for this place that the question can easily be answered. Here, at a center characterized by monasteries, towers, and exhibition grounds of catholic, absolutist, colonial, and (recently) totalitarian self-presentation, it was simply a question of self-affirmation, leaving few other possibilities open. The construction of a new cultural center, which was one of the largest state commissions in recent history, was not able to avoid the challenge of the political topography of the place. Here, all of the important historical political systems in Portugal's history are evidenced by representative buildings. For Vittorio Gregotti the question of monumentality is, however, not just one of simple

affirmation. His historic building elements are not carriers of meaning of a fixed message; rather, they offer through their abstraction the possibility of an assignment of meaning. This means that he would like to create buildings that could become monuments with time. Here, the subsequent growth of meaning with time should not be impaired from the outset by mediocre design. Instead, the meaning should be furthered by its "integrity, tension, subtlety, depth of relationship, and discovery," according to the architect.

Gregotti works consistently when placing the museum into this "city-monument." The edifice takes both a minor as well as a remarkable position since - while not being intentionally evidenced in elevation - it is located at the largest and most prominent court. As such, it functions in the internal "urban" relationship, becoming a kind of Galleria, such as one knows from the historic residence facilities of, for example, the Palazzo Pubblico in Florence with its attached Uffizi. Gregotti is consequently able to develop further the self-created challenge in the morphology of the exhibition spaces. He organizes the spaces for the rotating exhibitions as classical galleries by means of enfilades. These are set, though, in direct visual relationship with the museum's spaces immediately below as an open mezzanine, wherein a room constellation arises that is at once complex and unclear. The proof that Gregotti possesses concrete ideas about how to present works of art can be seen not only in countless exhibition designs, but in the renovation of the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan (1983-94) as well, particularly in the Sala Raffaello.

Despite all the differences, the approach is comparable in both cases: large white wall surfaces form the quiet background for the works of art in spaces that are strongly articulated and made dynamic by means of the articulation of the light and the use of different levels. As such, Gregotti negotiates a compromise between the autonomy of the work of art - which he leaves be, and whose interpretation he does not touch - and the autonomy of the architecture. Unlike, for example, a Carlo Scarpa - with his interpretative designs for museums and exhibitions - Gregotti allows all possibilities in a compromise of distanced architectural respect.

With the complete integration of the museum into the self-made urban context, Gregotti prevents the museum from possessing the customary position of an autonomous cultural building. The museum has become a part of a complex as in the time before the Enlightenment, the difference being that this place is open to all for learning and pleasure.