

The architects in this story have nothing to do with each other literally, at least to our knowledge. The grouping is intentionally random. The idea is to see what relationship four new buildings, built by different authors in different countries, might have to each other, and to evaluate them individually in the context of parallel efforts at making architecture. Naturally, it is not accidental that all four designers are well-known names in their own right, respected and widely watched. The programmes of these buildings differ substantially; one is a museum for things that are very old, another is a museum for things that are new, a third is a corporate office centre and the fourth is a religious complex. Two of the buildings are in Europe, one is in Israel and one is in China. They are as different as one might expect of any random assembly, yet also share certain qualities, and each has been the object of scrutiny for students and critics of architecture across a wide spectrum. If one could measure the health, robust or not, of architectural practice through the 'pulse' of four large building projects, these would be the perfect test cases.

Yet can more meaningful conclusions be drawn from just four new buildings? Can generalisations be fairly proposed about, say, shared tendencies along formal lines or, conversely, an apparent disparity in aesthetic approaches? Is it valid to seek commonalities across the breadth of international architectural production? There have been times, even recently, when discourse hewed to theoretical pathways, and building form was fairly easily identified by assignation to one of a few recognised stylistic genres. Structuring theory and discussion this way helped organise a system of criticism simplified into agreed-upon categories; writers shared terminology, teachers and students used quickly-learned vocabularies, and practitioners exploited media awareness via call-words and labels, no matter they were imperfect or incomplete.

But how to 'label' current work in ways that most of the profession can agree upon? Gone are the days of Post-Modernism, Modernism,

A Gang of Four Random New Works

Post-Structuralism, Deconstructivism, Classicism, Neo-Classicism, Rationalism and so on. If there are new 'isms' to apply to today's buildings, they haven't acquired the same general authority. The dilemma with those earlier categories was that while they clarified many basic characteristics of formal expression, they also, necessarily, over-simplified and limited, creating boundaries with edges that could not easily be blurred. Well, actually, the architecture itself had no problem blurring them, but the criticism did.

Why does art criticism yearn for categories in the first place? Because they provide an accessible method of reference useful to mutual communication. If I want to talk with you about the work of artist A, we need a vocabulary in common to describe what is often raw invention. Our language systems have taught us that comparison with what we already know is the most practical route to examining what we don't. So we agree to use categories, albeit imperfect ones, which help get us there.

But into what particular categories exactly, are we to place the recent work of Steven Holl? Here is a practitioner who seems to defy conventional definitions, not because his work is necessarily revolutionary (though it often is), but because it is so consistently inconsistent. Like the work of Jean Nouvel, or Herzog & de Meuron, each new Holl construction explores virgin ground, new materials, new expressions of mass and proportion. He defies typology, even as he consciously proposes new types and writes about a kind of evolving typological process. As his long career has reached its zenith – and China has provided him a canvas for more ambitious scales of work – Holl has emerged as a major force beyond the somewhat rarefied, intellectually privileged territory he previously inhabited. No longer constrained to lovely modest commissions at the periphery of the mainstream, he is a legitimate large player on an international stage. Interestingly, he has – so far at least – retained a genuinely investigative approach to making architecture, treating ever-larger commissions as fodder for his own R&D laboratory of ideas. There may come a breaking point when the volume of work requires compromises to his studious methods of design, but for now, things are only getting more interesting.

Studio Fuksas may or may not be threatened with over-production in the future, but currently its output allows an analogous intensity that has yielded increasingly intriguing results. Only a few years ago one might have predicted less for the firm, but a handful of completed commissions this century have announced a talent deserving of closer study and probably wider opportunities. Somewhat like Holl, Studio Fuksas does not produce immediately attributable buildings. Each commission is apparently a chance for fresh investigation and new directions, and as these grow in number and scope, the firm seems to grow in abilities and originality – a good sign, to say the least. While perhaps less overtly academic than Steven Holl, the Fuksas Studio output declares an engagement with form that is earnest, evidenced not by its variety but by its meticulousness and clarity. Both these offices convey a sense of taking the responsibility of making architecture seriously, of considering it a quite sober undertaking. The Fuksas building included here is a work of appropriately sombre character and ambition. Still, it hints at the architect's quietly irreverent approach to convention. Even as it evinces geometric clarity and conforms to its rigorously simple parti, the building complex tweaks expectations, stretches definitions and enjoys quotations.

Bernard Tschumi has been practising architecture for a considerable amount of time, and his appointment to design the Acropolis Museum was greeted by some with surprise, by others with satisfaction and by still others with concern. Although relentlessly serious in his analytical approach to building form, Tschumi was not expected to approach the politically (and culturally) loaded task with the deference or intimidation some thought it demanded... it being, after all, a museum devoted to the most perfect building ever constructed. In some ways, the drawn-out design and construction process was a blessing: all those years passing let us turn our attention elsewhere and leave him to quietly get on with his work. When the building finally debuted recently, it was hard to miss the undertones of surprise running through the many positive reviews. Tschumi, it seemed, had pulled off the near-impossible: inserting a large-scale museum into an ancient city dedicated to honouring an unparalleled monument, while offending almost no one. One is tempted to posit that a less experienced, less mature architectural talent – or even a younger Bernard Tschumi – might have messed it all up. The building's restraint is thundering. Can we imagine many architects who would have kept in check their own egos so thoroughly behind the building form of a commission this important?

Ron Arad is possibly the 'left-field' member of this forced grouping. His little Design Museum at Holon, Israel, is more obviously a signature piece, an example of some of the materials and forms of interest to many designers working today. Hardly deferential, it still pays homage to some of architecture's own precedents, even as it alludes to an overtly sculptural method, tipping its hat to sources as varied as the Bauhaus and Richard Serra. Arad pulls it together as an original artefact that nonetheless very much represents its time. Indeed, of the four constructions, Arad's is arguably the most 'current'. But it manages to link to precedents as diverse as Zaha Hadid and Frank Lloyd Wright.

It is not unfair to say that all four of these architects fall outside the 'conventional' definitions of modern practice. Not far outside, perhaps, but still. They are academics, researchers, experimenters and fine artists. They undertake building as an activity of immense intellectual concentration and of sincere joyfulness. They make buildings unlike other buildings, and are thoroughly fluent in them, even to the point of quotation. And they seemingly approach each commission as an extraordinary opportunity, as if it were the last opportunity they had, to dig as deeply as possible into the mysteries of architecture.



Bernard Tschumi

Photography by Nacho Lopez, Courtesy of STUA

If ever there was a more loaded, anticipated, bound-to-disappoint, controversial museum commission, it wasn't on this planet. The New Acropolis Museum project has been over 30 years in the making, and on plenty of occasions in the interim, it looked doubtful of proceeding at all. It was always going to be the type of undertaking that could either make or totally break an architectural reputation. The only other large museum project that might come close to this one in terms of complexity and expectation is Richard Meier's Getty in Los Angeles... and it doesn't. Meier had a dramatic hilltop site, unfettered by urban density, an unlimited budget, private client and far fewer building constraints. The New Acropolis Museum was, on paper, impossible. Because it is dedicated to the most famous building in the history of architecture, it had to sit close by; tourists were never going to travel far away from the building to learn about it. And the area of the city close to the monument (Makryianni) just happened to be central Athens, a cacophonous, densely inhabited, disordered hotbed of urban problems, feisty citizens and entrenched ideas about how to exploit one of the most bountiful tourist attractions ever built. Slipping an enormous institution sensitively into the ancient capital, just 300 metres from the Acropolis, was furthermore complicated by archeological finds uncovered during foundation work – as if that weren't predictable.





But never mind the urban planning challenges, Tschumi had to invent a building that would disappoint the greatest number of people to the least possible degree. Dealing with expectations was, surely, far more challenging than anything physical onsite. From the outset, predictably, plenty of people were outraged by the proposal (some by every proposal, by the very *idea* of a museum), and they weren't keeping quiet about it. But the justification for a new museum was absolute; the Acropolis had suffered through centuries of abuse and benign neglect; it had endured countless misfortunes, damaging acts, wars and attacks and undersized preservation budgets. If anything of the original monument was to survive at all, it needed a serious home to protect it. The 'New' museum should have been old by now.

Assisted by Associate Architect Michael Photiadis of Athens, Tschumi soldiered forth to create his building. The programme is predictable, including 14,000sq m of exhibition space plus the usual necessary amenities such as restaurant, auditorium, retail space, offices, back of house, storage, etc. The fundamental idea was for the building to unite – for the first time – the principal objects and artefacts related to the Acropolis. This, of course, would ideally include the famed Elgin Marbles that Greece has been trying to have repatriated from the British Museum, and this new building removes one of the salient arguments the Brits have put forth in defending their right to keep the precious pieces originally stolen from the pediment: that there has been no place to keep them as safely as in their London home. In the meantime, there are plenty of other



objects to fill the new building, many from the former Acropolis Museum, a sorry little 19th-century effort of only 1,500sq m.

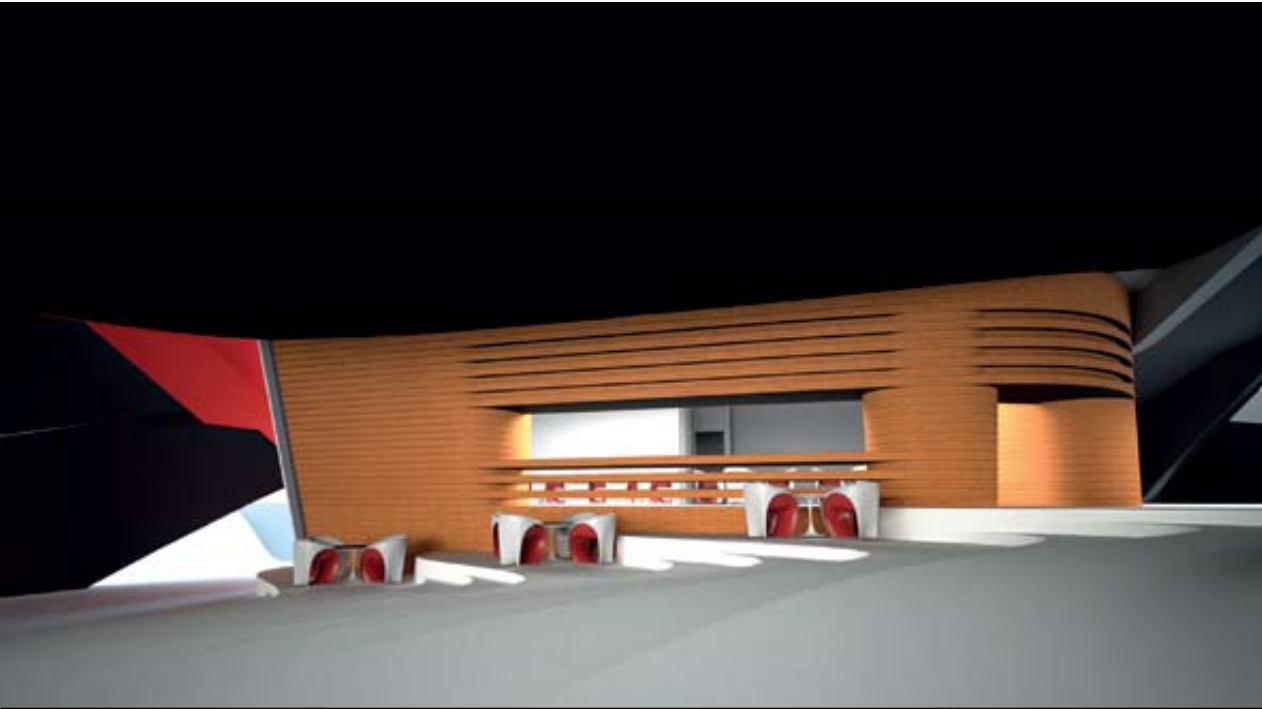
Tschumi's solution seems at first glance to defend against critical attacks by staying as neutral as possible; the building appears as a pancake flat box sitting atop another box almost as flat, both clad in dark grey tones of glass, stone and steel. Faintly corporate in character, the institution tries its best not to loom over its immediate neighbours by virtue of keeping its profile and facade details as low-key as possible. Yet by sheer size alone, it contrasts vividly with the small, somewhat ramshackle structures all around it. At night, it livens up with a warm glow, and seems to awaken in dialogue with the dramatically lit Acropolis above. During the day, a major attribute of the building is its elaborate integration of natural light, which allows many of the exhibited pieces to be experienced in something approaching their original lighting context. Those pieces not too fragile for it are seen in ambient natural daylight, which changes during the course of the day. This is a major benefit and distinguishes the museum sharply from convention.

Movement through the new building is organised by chronology, allowing the 10,000 daily visitors a chance at comprehending the lengthy, complicated history of the Acropolis and its place in Greek and Roman history. One winds through a timeline from underground excavations up to the Parthenon Marbles and then on through the Roman period. Quite appropriately for a building devoted to Classical Western architecture, Tschumi has organised his structure with a base, a middle and a top. Each section holds a different segment of the museum contents, and is composed accordingly. The base floats delicately on piloti over the excavated remains, tying the building directly into the ongoing history of the city. The middle section holds the Archaic to Roman Period galleries of the museum and rotates somewhat to orient itself with the current street patterns of Athens as a trapezoid in double height. The final, highest section

of the museum rotates again to present a rectangular Parthenon Gallery focused on an indoor courtyard. Here the Marbles are positioned precisely as they were originally on the Parthenon, enjoying similar, though diffused, lighting conditions. From the higher points in the museum, the visitor is offered quite dramatic views of the Acropolis itself, hopefully comprehending more deeply the enormous accomplishment of its original creators and making of it more than merely one of civilisation's greatest postcard subjects.

Tschumi's architecture here seems deliberately free of stylistic characteristics. To say it is a building that avoids identifiable personality would not be fair (or logical; can any building do that?). Nonetheless it does lack many current flourishes or signature moves. The diplomatic abstraction of its parti will offend few; the almost uniform glazing of its skin should arouse the wrath only of those wanting more of a statement (presumably, of their own preferences). There is an almost Miesian simplicity to the building that allows it to appear deferential to its contents – and nearby subject. One cannot help pondering what other current architectural stars might have proposed... and exhale in relief. A more distinctive building could certainly have delivered more immediate excitement, and set up a louder formal dialogue with the Parthenon. Yet there is a measure of frisson between the two structures, even if it is controlled and under the surface. In a way, Tschumi has proposed a modern building that, in its own time, explores some of the architectural principles that the Acropolis perfected: proportion, scale, the precise relationship of elements in a composition, lines of view and perspective, orientation within the city, axial alignments at the urban scale etc.

To claim that the architect worked at the same level as the Parthenon would be absurd. But he has made a valiant effort at a building that does not shame its subject, compete with it or try to upstage it. The New Acropolis Museum should have been a monumental failure; against literally all odds, it is quite the opposite.



Ron Arad

Photography by Yael Pincus

This new Design Museum joins a series of cultural buildings known as Holon's Mediatheque, which includes the National Cartoon Museum, a repertoire theatre, cinematheque, and public and materials libraries. In 2004 the Municipality of Holon, Israel, determined to produce an iconic institution that would make an international statement, invited Ron Arad Associates to create a new museum that might become a hub for innovation in the field of design. Arad was told to come up with something that could be featured on a postage stamp. It is surely a measure of our post-Bilbao world that such a brief could be seriously handed to an architect or artist. Holon's desire for a building that would 'put it on the map' - whatever map that is - may seem slightly sad, but the economic reasons behind it are logical. Statement architecture is now accepted as one of the weapons in a community's arsenal in the competitive war of tourism. People go to places to see great buildings, among other things. Well, that's as it has always been - think of the Parthenon we just spoke about. The problem may emerge when the yearning for instant iconography deflects the architectural design process to the extent that other, perhaps more enduring, qualities are de-emphasised in balance. The ideal, certainly, is a building that becomes iconic as much because of its stupendous achievements in the more conventional aspects of architecture (which



might include proportion, material beauty, practicality) as because of an unfamiliar shape or outrageous form. Of course, one can decide to ignore the iconography question altogether, but alas, that is difficult to do when a building (or its client or designer) states the objective so bluntly. This is why the New Acropolis Museum is so interesting; it avoids the issue of iconography as much as it possibly can. Then again, it gets to stand in the shadows of the most iconic building of all time.

Whether Holon Design Museum achieves iconic stature or not, it exists, and therefore is eligible for public scrutiny on objective terms. Arad, who is better known for designing smaller things, such as chairs, has produced a challenging building, basically composed of two boxes wrapped in interwoven bands of corten steel. These wind and waft around and over each other to make up the principal facade elements and give the museum its distinctive character. Each steel band has been allowed to corrode to different colour tones, adding a subtle emphasis to their layering effect. The two boxes are splayed to each other, and the triangular space this creates between them gave Arad an opportunity to exploit more fully the ribbon effect of the steel bands; here they rise and separate in a dramatically sculptural canopy of architectural material, seeming almost to push the boxes apart with kinetic force.

The ribbons also tie the boxes together, even if they are literally joined at one corner by an ovular form like a ring in plan. The ribbons can be read as woven ‘rope’ unifying the

whole ensemble, or as a completely separate creature that happens to wind around and through the site, as if cuddling up to the inert rectangles like a sexy, lethargic serpent. There are viewpoints from which the bands virtually conceal the boxes and appear as another, singular form, like some rusty Richard Serra sculpture or new Thomas Heatherwick extravaganza. Viewed in this manner, but from varied angles, the building – or rather, the steel bands – recall nautical forms, landscape images, food, ruins, hair, snails, shells, and numerous other familiar entities. Arad has succeeded in making a large structure dance with referential content, and his manipulation of the heavy, rust–red steel bands is undeniably elegant. If corroded steel can be sinuous and delicate at all, Arad has proven it. The curves running toward and away from each other, playing with parallelism and silhouette, are alluring and gentle.

But arguably, the museum is more interesting when its curves can be witnessed in juxtaposition with the concrete gallery boxes, and certainly they reach a climax when fluttering open and apart in the interstitial space. Seen against the empty sky or the staid rectangularity of the galleries, the red bands benefit from a backdrop other than themselves. And the designer was intelligent to keep the boxes deliberately deferential, their rugged concrete surfaces sliced by segments of thin horizontal apertures underscored with projecting shelves to increase shadows. Arad lends an almost Bauhausian austerity to the forms, which only heightens the relative audacity of the red bows tying them up.

The risk here was that the sinuous red curves might not reach the level of lightness and fluttering delicacy required to pull off the parti successfully, and there are moments both inside and outside the building when they don’t; when suddenly the literal heaviness overwhelms and they become ham–fisted quotations of, well, what they are elsewhere in the building. Working with such a straightforward idea meant relying on consistent compositional persuasiveness, which, anyway, wouldn’t be entirely predictable no matter how many studies in model or CAD. The building is basically trying to be a sculpture married to a shed enclosure, and while that is conceptually very clear, it is not easy to pull off, especially at a giant scale.

You can’t help wondering if Arad is being truly original here, or veering queasily close to various recent precedents that themselves pander to current trends. Then one remembers his experience in industrial design, and that so much of his work has involved, albeit at a smaller scale, objects of similar character. His process could not have altered that radically when it came to designing a large piece of architecture (we do what we know how to do). The Holon Design Museum likely resulted from an intense version of processes he has used for decades to make chairs, table objects and sculptures. Those methods have gone remarkably far to yield a building with compelling spatial and visual qualities, despite its imperfections. Even the fact that the ribbons don’t come off as clichéd gimmicks is significant.



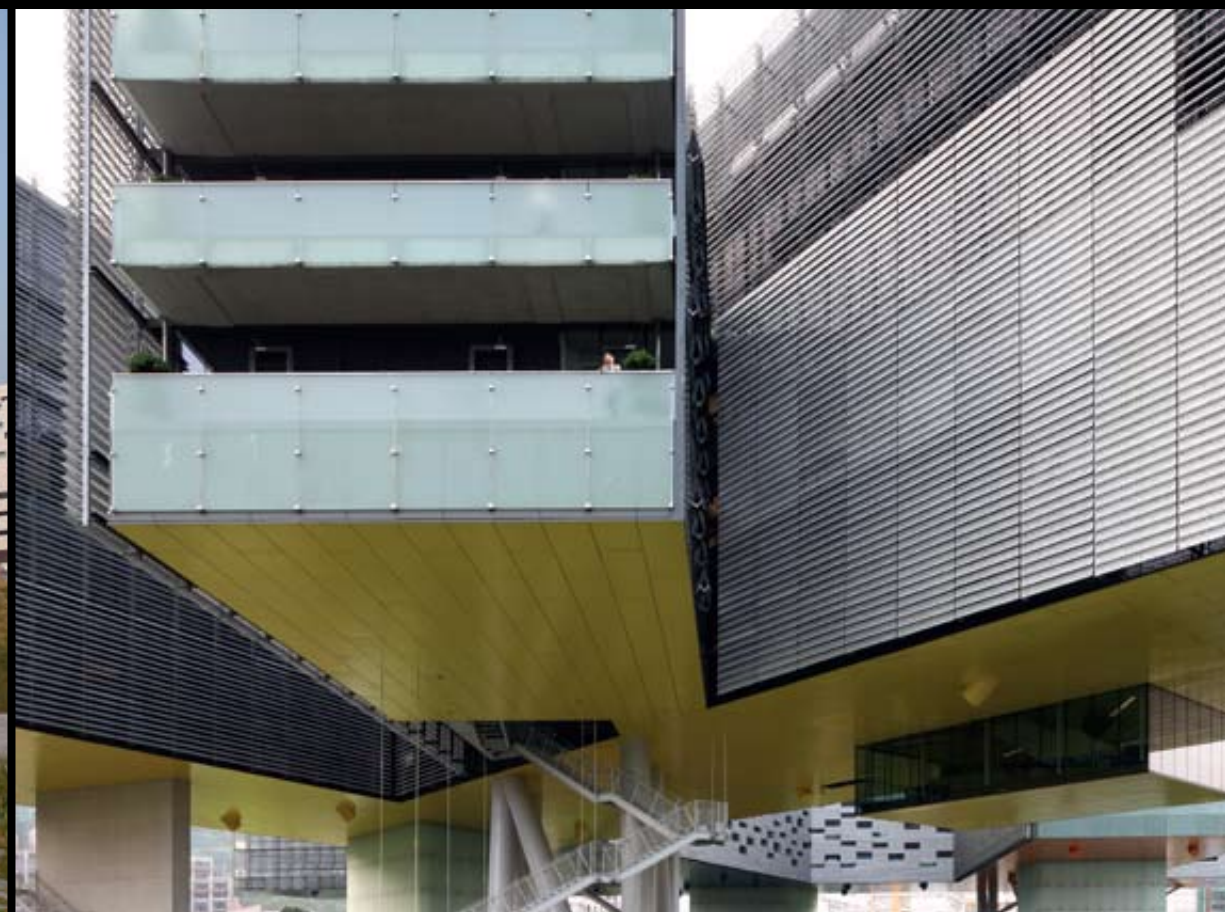
Steven Holl

Photography By Shu He & Steven Holl Architects

Having quite successfully brought to realisation their Linked Hybrid complex in Beijing, Steven Holl and Li Hu have now unveiled the Vanke Center in Shenzhen, which is something like the polar opposite of the northern Chinese capital. Shenzhen is where Vanke Co Ltd, China's largest listed property developer, is headquartered and it is a place that barely existed 30 years ago. When China decided to embrace socialist capitalism, it created Shenzhen, essentially out of a fishing village, as a special economic region adjacent to Hong Kong. Now the city is a huge metropolis flooded with wealth, and Vanke has shared in its prosperity handsomely. That Steven Holl Architects has finished in close succession two of the most ambitious projects it has ever been commissioned for, in these two very unlike cities, is testimony to the firm's arrival at the centre of Asia's building boom.

The Vanke Center is pure Holl from top to bottom, or perhaps more accurately, from far left to far right. Dubbed by the architects a "horizontal skyscraper", this multi-use complex of linked horizontal structures floats some 35m off the ground, anchored by eight separate core towers (sheathed in white glass) and supported in part with tension cables like a cable-stay bridge. The building holds residential apartments, a hotel and a large section of office space occupied by Vanke itself. Under the ground below lie restaurants and commercial spaces, as well as a 500-seat auditorium. By raising the entire building off the ground, Holl has created a 'reclaimed' landscape which he then manipulates and sculpts into a public domain dominated by the building above... but also shaded by it, and cooled by geothermal systems, greywater cooling ponds, and uninterrupted breezes. This was a big part of the idea: to maintain sea views, create a microclimate in the tropical zone, and provide a public amenity of considerable size and interest. The ground plane rises in mounds or is sliced open in sunken courtyards and, as it rolls and meanders underneath the giant structure, presents a vivid park-like world waiting for leisure users. The undersides of the building are finished as primary facades, in bright colours and with minimal visual impairments due to equipment, etc. Holl has described this as the "sixth facade" of the building. Punctuated by massive columns and the occasional open staircase climbing up into the belly of the beast above, the park is far from dull. Clearly there are issues with scale, however, and as much as one wants to interpret this as a modern loggia, human proportions haven't changed so much since the Renaissance; but this building is much closer in scale to a bridge or elevated roadway than to usable public space. There is also the question of pragmatics; in China it is less than likely the public will actually be granted free access to the land, so it is probably going to be underused, or be enjoyed more by Vanke's staff and architectural tourists instead.

But that's hardly the point. Holl is interested in pursuing his research into building types and modern urban evolution. His projects can often be seen as prototypes or laboratory experiments on the subject of how we plan and inhabit cities. Raising a large, multi-use building on legs





to 'free up the ground space' is hardly a new strategem – Le Corbusier did it more than 60 years ago with his Unite d'Habitation, which clearly Holl knows well. Rather like Corb, in fact, Holl is fascinated with providing solutions to large problems he sees more acutely than the rest of us, and he likes thinking large. The audacity of the elevated internal 'street' at the Linked Hybrid is an example of the way he approaches urban dilemmas with an imagination unhindered by many of the constraints limiting other practitioners. Vanke Center resulted from a competition win, and the client is a developer, so at least some original thinking was going to be possible. Yet it is a building that stretches boundaries in multiple ways.

If it were merely a horizontal office slab raised on pilotis we'd hardly be talking about it; there have been dozens, maybe hundreds of those over the decades. Vanke Center follows a plan layout that could be described as bizarre, and that is pure Holl. Trying to read familiar shapes into the plan diagram – is it a dragon, a dead body, a treasure map? – may be diverting, but leads nowhere. Parts of it look like a lizard, parts like a machine gun. The basically linear spine grows five branches, one of those grows another branch, and so on. It could easily be a fragment from the Nolli plan; a segment of public streetscape rendered in negative black. Only Holl knows for sure, and he probably delights in the various puzzled guesses. Maybe it is all these things. What it is not, though, is a rational plan diagram as judged by existing conventions. Even the 'joints' between functions, where hotel becomes residential becomes office, are not outlined or emphasised in the expected ways. Aside: the diagram invites speculation on how the branches might be extended in future, or sprout further offshoots, as if the organism could gradually expand into a giant city-tree.

The exterior glazed skins are clad in a layer of protective metal louvres, which provide adjustable shade to the building's surfaces. Holl conducted numerous design studies of the patterns on these elements, and you can immediately see that while they enjoyed an environmental justification for being, their aesthetic contribution to the building was vital to the architect. These lacelike external layers give the building mass a kind of drapery, making it slightly blurred and immaterial behind them. This is a welcome effect, eliminating some of the weight of the giant forms.

The Vanke Center is billed as the first LEED Platinum-certified building in China. Holl has been incorporating sustainability features in his work for some time. The Linked Hybrid, located such that it would endure the climate extremes of Beijing, dug geothermal shafts deep into the site. The Vanke

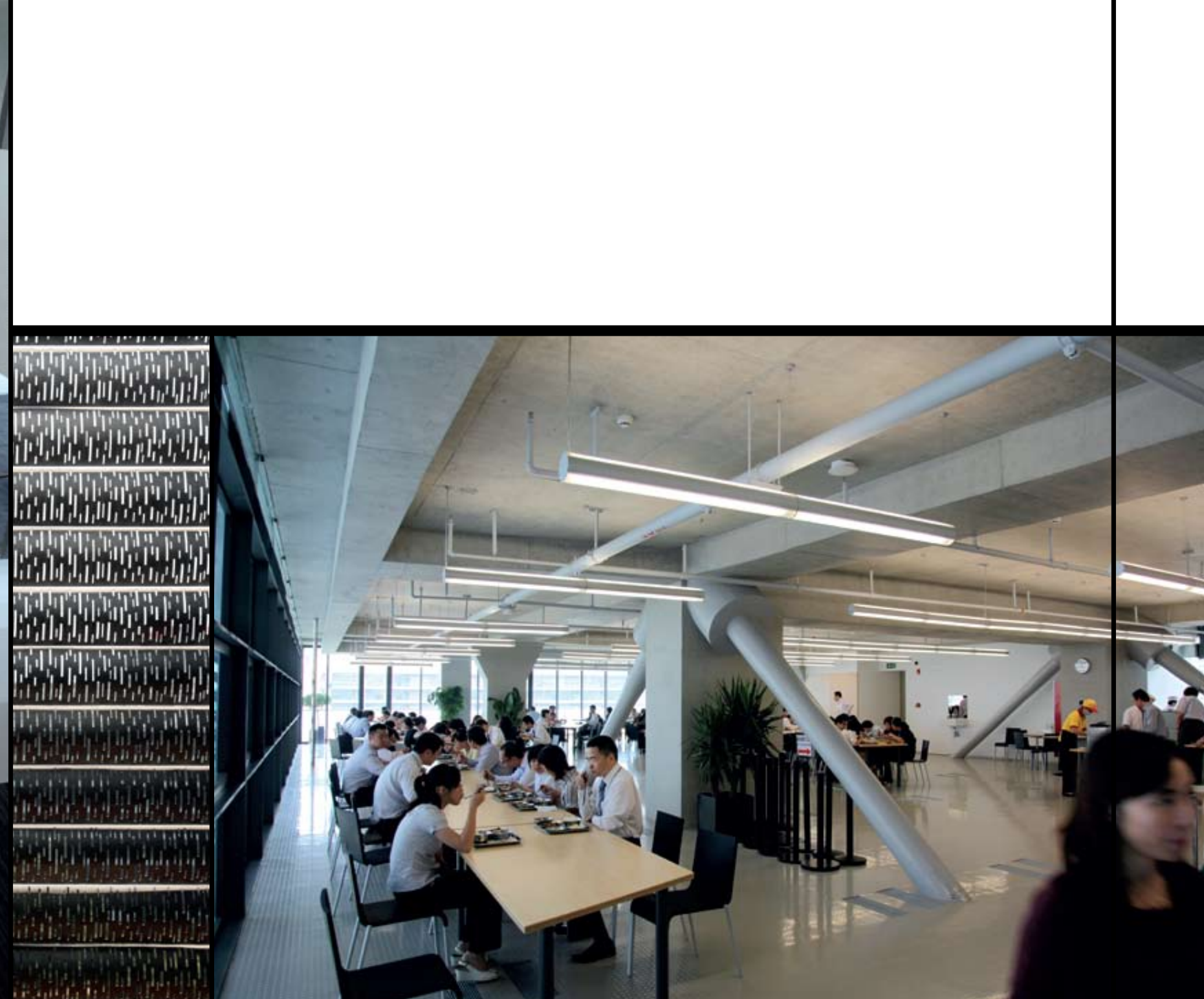
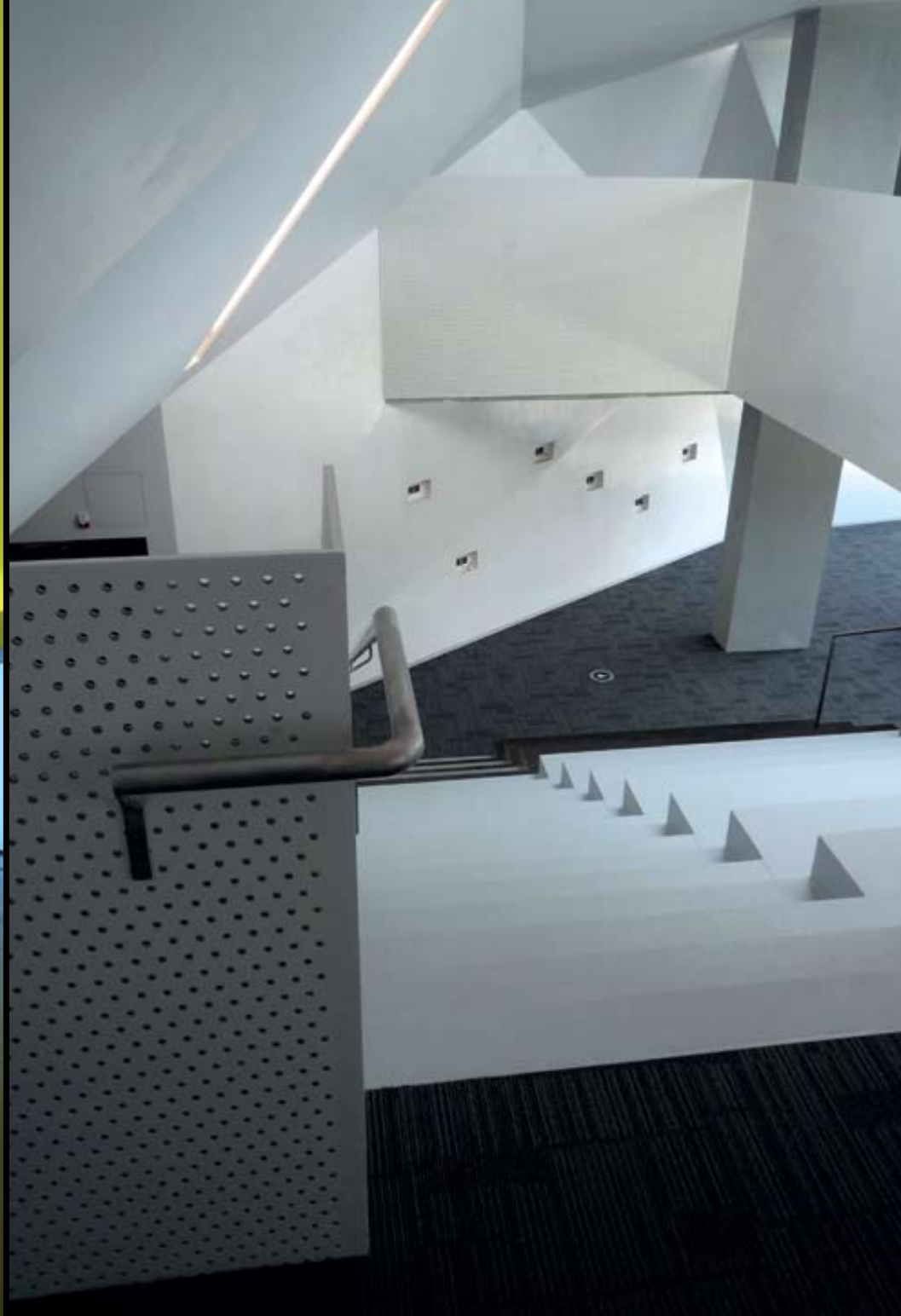




Center starts with its parti. By creating the shaded ground plane below the buildings, a microclimate could be made, cooled further by the greywater pools and open breezes. In fact the site itself is reclaimed land that is part of the municipal water management system. Shenzhen shares Hong Kong's climate: tropical, hot and wet, with lovely moderate winters but miserably humid, typhoon-laced summers. The task was to keep the building cool. The planning included extensive coordination with water management onsite. Fully 45,000sq m of the 60,000sq m total site area is planted, which is impressive. As well, the roof of the building is planted. Counting this 15,000sq m, one could claim the Vanke Center left the site as planted with vegetation as when it found it.

The perforated aluminium louvres on the facades have been designed based on calculations of heat gain on each of the Center's 26 facades. Many of the louvres are controlled with sensors to adapt to sun movement. The double skin these create provides a stack effect of warm air movement. It is estimated the louvre system delivers a 70% reduction in solar heat gain to the interior spaces, while still allowing sufficient daylight for most activities. The glass curtain walls behind the louvres use high-performance, Low-E glass. Ninety percent of the interior spaces have views directly to the outside. In the office section of the Center, which is most easily controlled by Vanke, the louvres, lighting systems, air-conditioning and interior shades are coordinated and computerised,





aided by interior and exterior sensors. In winter, when the weather is generally pleasant, large operable windows allow for cross-ventilation, obviating the need for artificial air systems about 60% of the time.

The orientation of the branches of the building are designed to maximise views, open air routes and exploit natural daylight. Sky gardens, sunken courtyards, balconies and terraces (for example, at the end of the arms) supply frequent passively cooled breakout spots. On the roof of Vanke Center, 1,400sq m of PV panels provide over 12% of needed electric power for Vanke's HQ. On the interior, non-toxic paints, green carpet [recycled] and extensive use of bamboo for doors, floors and furniture help complete the environmental picture. In short, Vanke Center avails itself of most of the recent technologies in sustainability, earning high marks for the developer in setting an example (We hope it follows it in its own projects).

Steven Holl and Li Hu (his Beijing-based partner) have put plenty into this building. It is massive in scale, ambitious in planning and standards, and it fulfils one of the principal requirements of major 'billboard' projects in China currently – that it seem original and iconic. Holl is unsurpassed at designing structures that startle and drop the jaw (the effect most prized by Mainland clients) while managing to avoid the one-off, tired-by-tomorrow image-centred forms that have proliferated. Unlike other prominent constructions in China, Holl's buildings are not easily diagrammed by lay people. Like all his work, the underlying parti and conceptual structure is clear and comprehensible, but the final architectural result is rather more complex.

There is no doubt Vanke Center can be criticised in numerous ways, and will be. Yet it is a serious architectural proposition. There are many firms that would likely describe their own

work as investigative and involved with pushing formal research forward. But the finished buildings of Zaha Hadid or OMA or Frank Gehry or any number of other enormous talents, always seem far more slick and polished, far more in line with predetermined imagery, than Holl's do. This quality, a kind of 'huge-idea-in-process' character, as if barely off his sketchbook pages, is intriguing and possibly what lends the works their mildly unrefined sensibility... if being described as 'unrefined' can be taken as a compliment, meaning that it lacks the final, glinting polish of an idea that has been closed, or is finite. With Steven Holl, one feels one were part of a conversation that has not quite been concluded. Like the discussion at a great dinner party, when despite the hour, no one is quite ready to leave, and one wants to relish the intelligent company just a little longer before returning to more mundane life.



Studio Fuksas

Photography by Moreno Maggi





The sub-history of religious architecture overflows with innovative form and suggestive, compelling spaces. The modern era has enhanced the list with inspired buildings by many masters, from Le Corbusier to Tadao Ando and Peter Zumthor. Ancient architecture can be fairly said to depend on religion for much of its highest achievements. As for the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, how can we contemplate the category of ‘great buildings’ without images of cathedrals, chapels and sanctuaries flooding forth? There seems to be something about designing for spiritual programmes that ekes out form evoking emotional, ambitious results. Despite usually modest budgets – this project cost only 3.6 million euros – architects exploit straightforward programmes and the client’s desire to uplift and inspire to explore spatial effects and shapes in mass perhaps less available to designers of more prosaic buildings.

The new Chiesa Di Foligno, by Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas (Studio Fuksas) in central Italy, is a brashly simplistic form that relies on its religious programme to stake out formal territory reminiscent of surrealism and hyper-rationalism. The couple has made, in recent years, a series of divergent, increasingly interesting projects in a number of countries, and the building at Foligno carries the duo’s interests further still. The complex is made up of two principal structures, an enormous cubic church of 600sq m and a rectilinear parish building of 1,300. They sit close to each other and share a large podium/plaza kept almost bare, save for a 13.5m-tall ‘Pole–Cross’ sculpture in concrete and white marble, by the artist Enzo Cucchi. The ensemble exhibits an abstract relationship upon the base, which allows the pieces to stay intentionally distinct from the gently banal residential

neighbourhood surrounding them. The church box rises easily above nearby roofs to loom over all, casting a somewhat dour, undeniably challenging presence. Pity the atheist in this part of Foligno!

The project was the prizewinner in a competition held by the Italian Episcopal Conference to design new parish centres as ‘innovative and decisive landmarks’ that would symbolise the rebirth of the city after its destructive earthquake. In fact, a number of newly constructed churches have been scattered across the Italian landscape over the last decade. The Fuksas’ effort is among the more interesting of those. The main structure is a conceptually simple box-within-a-box idea; a tall monolith 25m in height and 30 x 22m in plan. Sliced open at grade just enough to allow worshippers to enter, the main facade facing the plaza is otherwise a giant surface of concrete, obviously intended to read as a sublimely scaled block of solidity, not so distantly related to tomb slabs. The compression experienced at the point of entry makes the visitor feel almost mortally burdened as one enters under that wall. The flanking sides are pierced with a series of diversely shaped-and-sized deep openings. These trapezoids make a rather pretty Swiss Cheese of the walls, and call to greater attention their massive scale. As soon as one enters the church, the second ‘box’ is instantly present, hovering over the congregation apparently unsupported, and illuminated from above by indirect natural daylight. The inner box is suspended via the light shafts piercing the external walls. These form short tunnels of light that happen to also provide structural support. The gap between the two boxes is quite narrow, and makes a kind of secondary perambulatory, with entirely different light qualities and a fantastic overhead show of



architecture. Indeed, one wonders why Fuskas Studio resisted the chance for visitors to occupy the upper portions of this slot, not so unlike, in spirit, the interstice between the two layers of Brunelleschi's remarkable Duomo in Florence.

The congregation space nevertheless benefits from the dramatics of the hanging box, and one can readily conjure various metaphors to help interpret it. Possibly the most obvious spectacle is how it 'levitates', apparently unsupported, just off the ground. The interior of the inside box is kept an unadorned white, and a number of hanging lamps perforate the abstract minimalism of the space. As one looks up, the irregular shafts of captured daylight are meant, one supposes, to suggestively inspire heavenly contemplation. As the outer box is skylit over much of the 'gap' space, Fuskas clearly was playing a game of lighting here.

At certain moments in the day, sharp direct sunlight seeps under the low entry slit to pierce the church, throwing melodramatic shadow lines that bounce off the floors and walls.

The building is neither Ronschamps nor Chartres, but it surely does pack a visual and spatial punch. Perhaps Fuskas could have gone further, however, in pursuing the purist minimalism; the wood pews, for instance, seem to visually distract more than concrete versions might have, and one can't imagine the usual administrative notices cluttering up the white walls near the entrance. Minimalism requires absolutism, and Fuskas Studio went quite far in Foligno.

The exterior relationship between the two main buildings is fairly mundane, until one considers that the smaller, lower, essentially boring

parish block, which holds the Vestry, Pastoral Ministry rooms and Canonical House, is playing the role of foil to the main building adjacent to it. Certainly the architects played with plenty of more formally lively options, only to settle on perhaps the quietest alternative possible. But one does wonder, given the actual simplicity of the church massing, if something looser or even curvaceous might not have done just as well. From afar, the parish building risks being taken for a forgotten construction shed – so obviously is it shadowed by its larger sibling. So be it. Fuskas had obviously decided that it needed to be this dormant, for the larger good. It may well be true.

Indeed, part of what strikes one as admirable about the Foligno project is its restraint externally. Where the architects could so easily have resorted to more florid expressions

of mass, even on a tight budget, they held back, preferring to use the drama of understatement and counter-intuition (for example, with proportion and with opacity) to rev us up. Yes, the interior space of the church, with its vaguely unsettling weight hanging just above eye-level like a guillotine, leans closer to 'effects' than it might have, but even here, its use of gravity to roam around the concept of transcendence seems legitimate. The Foligno church may not be the most purely minimalist religious structure around (it would probably take a Chipperfield or a Silvestrin to be that), but it is vigorously compelling as a piece of contemporary architecture trying, in our day, to say something new about something very, very old.