

Conversion of the Schlumberger workshops

Montrouge (Paris), France

1981-84

The Schlumberger workshops, built between 1925 and 1930 on the southwest outskirts of Paris, are a vigorous example of the industrial age. In the 1970s, the company, which specializes in detecting petroleum in the subsoil, converted to electronic production methods, with the consequent need to adapt the old work spaces to the new standards. The Schlumberger plants presented Renzo Piano with a design theme – reconversion of the industrial heritage – which would become central in the following decades.

The striking concrete and brick buildings – a majestic memento to the early machine age – enclose a triangular plot of eight hectares. The physical and production analysis of the industrial complex induced the architects to demolish the low core of workshops at the center of the lot, hidden from the exterior as well as being featureless. On the other hand, they preserved the striking five-story buildings bounding the complex, whose severe and solemn appearance impresses an unmistakable identity on the neighborhood. The reinforced concrete framework of these buildings was consolidated and the brick surfaces cleaned. The old windows were replaced by new and more effective frames, with dimensions and design comparable to the previous ones.

More radical changes were made to the interior spaces. The brick partitions were eliminated and replaced by removable panels, and some portions of the truss roof were uncovered to insert the elevators, stairs and utilities. Acting on his experience of the experimental structures of the 1960s, and also the construction site of the Centre Pompidou, Piano did not design a finished object, but a kit of prefabricated components that overlapped the old structures unambiguously, uniting the different working environments into a single figural code.

Collaboration with the landscape architect Alexandre Chemetoff was sought for the luxuriant garden that occupies the site of the demolished structures; a neighborhood park at the service of employees and citizens; a green hinge that joins the production spaces to the city, incorporating the road that marked the site to the east. At the center of the park stands an artificial hill, alluding to the mounds recurrent in the Italian garden: a device that would also be replicated in the courtyard of the head office of “Il Sole 24 Ore” in Milan (1998-2004).

Below the mound are the parking lots, the sports center, the multipurpose hall and the restaurant. On the surface it is crossed lengthwise by a footpath, protected by a Teflon tensile structure. The offices are accessed through metal walkways that cross the moats bounding the garden in relation to the buildings, whose fronts are invaded by the waters that creep into the atria on the ground floor, favoring the natural presence of ivy and other arboreal species that cling to the staircases.

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