

Q&A Piuarch Human Technopole Headquarters

1. ***What induced Piuarch to take part in the competition for the Human Technopole Headquarters?***

The competition for the Human Technopole Headquarters was above all an opportunity to prove ourselves again with a place, the former Expo area, where we had already built two buildings for the Universal Exposition, the Caritas Pavilion and the Enel Pavilion. We were interested in seeing how we could work here starting from a different situation: the big temporary event was over, and now it was a matter of designing a permanent structure, part of a larger district under development: the MIND.

From another perspective, the program requested for the building offered many interesting ideas for consideration. In order to design science laboratories and ensure maximum efficiency, top priority must be given to functional aspects, in a more forceful way compared to other occasions (the designing of a museum, for example). This constraint, however, must not require that we renounce an architectural solution to the problem that has its own spatial quality and its own "poetry." We are taught this by great architects of the past, such as Louis Kahn, the designer of the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California (1959-1965).

The design for the Human Technopole Headquarters was precisely the occasion to systematize the serious contemplation of the relationship between functionality and the quality of the spaces. We naturally took into consideration also the contemporary experiments on the diversification of workplaces and the production of ideas.

2. ***The Human Technopole Headquarters is the most recent project among those that Piuarch has created in Milan over the past twenty years. In what way is this building representative of your approach to architecture, and how does it renew and update that approach?***

In the Human Technopole Headquarters you can find many recurring themes in our architectural designs. For example, the interpenetration between the fullness of the building and the public space, which shapes it and passes through it. It is a solution similar to the one we had already developed in the Quattro Corti Business Center in St. Petersburg (2006-2010) or in the Porta Nuova Building in Milan (2006-2013).

More specifically, in this design we propose again more in depth a solution that was already included in our Enel Pavilion for the 2015 Universal Exhibition. The fundamental element, the true heart of the design, is a fluid, continuous space, which functions as a place of connection and interaction. In its path from parterre to covered plaza, and from the covered plaza to the roof garden, which is an elevated landscape, this space connects the public and the private, the outside and the inside, the building and the landscape. In other words, it is a reinterpretation of the traditional Italian piazza, a contemporary reoffering of its humanistic values and environmental sustainability.

Moreover, our research on the architectural translation of a reference imagery of artistic origin is continued here. The sun shades along the facades are not only a technical element for heating and cooling efficiency, but also a stylistic element that defines a partition mindful of experiments in kinetic art. Generally speaking, we are very interested in verifying how these and other lines of research, which we have been exploring for years, see the Human Technopole Headquarters as an opportunity for tackling a project and a context that, overall, is entirely new for us.

3. ***Piuarch was founded in 1996. Now, almost 25 years after going into business, how would you describe your approach to a project?***

There are at least three cornerstones to our way of designing. First, attention to the context, which we understand as both the architectural and urban context, the cultural context and the social context. For us, architecture is never a self-referential act; on the contrary, it must necessarily fit in with the different layers of the city or area. In this sense, we carry forward a line of reflection that has been very successful in Italian architecture of the second half of the 20th century, whereas we oppose a globalist and formalist approach. A second important element is detail, understood as the ability to control the project up to its construction, at every step and level. It is an interest that comes also from the experience that all four of us had in Vittorio Gregotti's studio in the 1980s. Lastly, a reference to the art world is fundamental to our designs. Art (especially many trends of the 20th century, from kinetic art to geometric abstraction and land art) is for us the privileged key to understanding and expressing the cultural context of each building.

4. ***Piuarch is a steady presence in the rankings of the most important architectural firms of Milan and Italy. Where do you place yourself in the panorama of contemporary Italian architecture?***

We certainly wish to place ourselves at a safe distance from any "glamourism" or excess of protagonism. This applies equally to our buildings and to ourselves as designers. We are far from considering architecture to be understood as a sculptural object. Our projects aim rather to establish a relationship with their surroundings; not to blend in, but to create a dialogue between the existing and the new. In a broader sense, and going beyond the boundaries of the discipline of architecture, we believe in a non-standardizing approach, which enhances the respectful relationship between diversities. Indeed, our method of four-way collaboration as partners of the firm is based on this same principle. Although we have shared a large part of our professional life,

first with Gregotti and then as Piuarch, each of us comes from a specific cultural background and educational experience. Our designs are built starting from the dialogue between our different perspectives, from our mutual questioning and discussing.

5.

What is the concept behind the Piuarch design for the Human Technopole Headquarters? What keywords best describe it?

The architectural solutions we used for the Human Technopole Headquarters are all directed toward one single, clear objective: the well-being of people, that is, the workers at the center, its visitors, and more generally of society, which will benefit from the advancements in science that will take place here. In this place, architecture is at the service of research, and its task is that of building quality spaces for supporting the development of this activity. Transparency and interaction are two keywords for this design, which through its spaces hopes to encourage the exchanging of ideas and experiences among researchers.

6.

The outline of the design: what are the main spaces that make up the Human Technopole Headquarters?

Besides the laboratory and office areas, which are very important and based on the criteria of maximum optimization and flexibility, the backbone of the project consists of three main public or collective spaces. On the ground level, a parterre, most of which is greenery, ties together the relationship between the Human Technopole Headquarters and the other buildings of the Human Technopole Campus. The paths crossing it are protected by shelters, while an artificial landscape of inclined planes delineates some rest areas, which we have called amphitheatres. Through the building, a full-height covered plaza develops from the ground level up to the roof. We conceived it as an introverted "vertical campus," overlooked by all the offices and laboratories, which is concluded in a large roof garden. From this terrace, the Human Technopole Headquarters looks out over its surroundings and the city. It is in these three spaces, arranged in a seamless sequence, that this design's predilection for transparency and interaction is best achieved.

7.

One of the distinctive features of the Human Technopole Headquarters is its roof garden. What is the added value of this green covering, in terms of space and environmental sustainability?

The roof garden is the natural completion of the covered plaza. The steps and the meeting areas, which are arranged along the walkway that goes up through the building, continue and are multiplied on its roof. Furthermore, while the covered plaza is a transparent but enclosed space, intended for collective life within the institution, the roof garden is an entirely scenic space, extroverted, open to the city.

Its role in terms of environmental sustainability is crucial, and is linked mainly with the photovoltaic panels and the green areas, which allow the correct management of rainwater.

8.

The shell of the Human Technopole Headquarters also contributes significantly to the building's environmental sustainability. Which façade devices are most significant from this perspective?

The building façades contribute to its environmental sustainability from at least two perspectives. Actively, through the photovoltaic glass, installed here and on the shelters that protect the walkways on the ground floor, which are in addition to the photovoltaic panels on the roof. And passively, thanks to the vertical sun shades, slats that protrude from the surface of the façades and that calibrate the amount of sunlight entering in the different seasons of the year.

9.

The ground level is fundamental to the design, where a spatial relationship is created between the Human Technopole Headquarters and the other buildings of the Human Technopole Campus, including Palazzo Italia. How did you design this space?

In this young urban and not very stratified space, the ground floor design is extremely important for two reasons: to create a relationship between buildings that otherwise risk being isolated fragments; and to multiply the possible ways of using the public space, to forestall the "desert effect." The Human Technopole Campus parterre continues, virtually uninterrupted, through the ground floors of all the buildings that overlook it: below the new Human Technopole Headquarters, with a covered amphitheater, but also inside Palazzo Italia. Within this essentially unified space, the variations in slope and materials (plant and mineral) suggest the presence of areas that can be used for a variety of activities. It is a suggestion, in fact, and not a restrictive division.

10.

The Human Technopole Headquarters is located in the heart of the former Expo area, a stone's throw from the Tree of Life, the symbol of the Universal Exposition. What does it mean to relate to the setting of this atypical place, which was created as an enclosed space and that is far from the more densely populated city?

The Human Technopole Headquarters is relatively far from the heart of the city. The relationship it has with its immediate surroundings is primarily cultural. In fact, the keywords of our project, such as transparency and interaction, reflect not only our client's values, but also, and more generally, those of the entire district that is emerging in this part of the former Expo area, the Milano Innovation District – MIND.

The relationship with Milan, and more generally with all of the area surrounding the metropolitan city, is primarily visual. The view sweeps southeastward from the terraces to the city center; at the same time, the characteristic broken profile of its crown makes the Human Technopole Headquarters highly recognizable even from a distance, a new architectural icon for the future MIND.

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