

La Lira_ Eva Alberini



Waking up from a month-long journey through the dreamlike creations, buildings and landscapes, designed by the RCR Architects, the work that most vividly boggles my mind is the public space *La Lira*, located on the bank of the Ter River in the small town of Ripoll, Spain.

In a space where the old theater La Lira once stood, RCR architects have now assembled a public theatre of everyday life, an urban stage for the citizens to use and transform according to their communal needs.

The architects have achieved that by designing a steel structure adjusted to the neighboring buildings and covering the empty space in between without suggesting a particular use of it. The structure extends to a bridge of the same materiality across the river, thus reinforcing the feeling of connectivity within the small town.

What caught my attention as I was approaching *La Lira* from the bridge was that the steel structure was framing three buildings across. I felt that the image had a strong connotation that led me assume the buildings in the frame had an administrative purpose. I found out later that instead, the focus of the architectural composition was on residential buildings, bringing in that way the citizens themselves on the forefront of the public space.

This impression followed me throughout my visit to the site. While the people have conquered the urban stage, a floor lower, one can locate indoor halls, storage and services in support of the citizens' communal needs.

Once being under the steel roof, it instantly impressed me the way interior and exterior qualities of space meet. The air circulates and plantation is welcomed to intrude through the gaps of the steel structure, which also filters the sunlight making light and shadow present in the experience of the space. Between the existing residential buildings and the steel structure, patios with vegetation permit both

edifices to breathe. An indoor coffee place is found on the ground level connecting visually to the square through glass walls giving the impression of belonging both inside and outside.

Exposed to the nature, *La Lira* is transformed according to the weather conditions. The day of my visit to the site, it was heavily raining. The rain seemed part of the set and the structure acted as a shelter for the people, citizens or visitors, who couldn't help but observe the beautiful misty and wet scenery.

I found particularly fascinating the fact that the RCR Architects managed to design a public space that allows for this kind of contemplation. By framing the void, they managed to transmit the impression that void itself can be used as a *material* for construction.

Rafael Aranda explained that materiality is for them the means to achieve a particular aesthetic, an atmosphere to evoke experiences and feelings. Ideally they would prefer to design buildings without using any physical material, if that was possible. A single visit to the *La Lira* site, is a breathtaking insight into this conception. With an unconventional yet minimal structure that encloses the void, they challenge citizens to inhabit it and let their creativity be expressed.

In a larger scale, I found very interesting how the position of the public square in respect to the city and its access routes has become part of the design. The bridge is an evident connection to the east, while a more discrete but explicit connection is achieved through the inclined appearance of the steel enclosure from the pedestrian street on the west, that links *La Lira* with the main square of the town. The form of the structure itself invites people to explore and interpret the space.

From small details to access design, from poetic aesthetic to reinvention of a typology, RCR Architects seem to have controlled every aspect of this architectural intervention. What I find though makes this work unique, is the reinvestigation of what

is supposed to be a Town Hall.

In contemporary cities, the function and importance of public squares - an essential venue of human interaction in the past- seems easily forgotten. Intending to revitalize this public habit and deconstruct any formalistic preconception, RCR Architects created a space that gives importance to the people and celebrates the public life.