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The Auditorium of the Lugano University

The USI Auditorium (Sala Polivalente) is the most symbolic presence on the new campus. Paradoxically, the 500-seat Auditorium, the largest enclosed space at the new university, is almost invisible, asserting its presence by its conspicuous ephemerality. By concealing the mass of the largest room on campus below grade the architects have left the corner of the campus closest to the historic center of Lugano exposed to view. From the street, all one notices is the long shimmering elevation of the glazed entry pavilion, a modernist cryptoporticus suspended from two, 27-meter-long, steel beams. From the interior of the campus, the same glazed box assumes a sacrificial identity, set in a paved temenos, bound by a rows of colossal concrete fins. Designed by the master planners, Galfetti and Koenz, the Auditorium best expresses the open spirit of the campus plan and remains an architectural manifesto for the younger architects to react to.

The interior of the entry pavilion provides a luminous double height foyer for a grand concrete stairway and translucent elevator shaft that descend to the subterranean chamber. The hall also can be directly accessed from the underground parking garage. The stair, a self-supporting diagonal mass, is dramatically skewed toward the center of the room. The elevator, dressed in black wire mesh, assumes a background role. The auditorium was programmed as a multipurpose space, 400 square meters in area, that can be used for lectures, concerts, ceremonies, and public events. All of the equipment and furniture are flexible and easy to rearrange. The mechanicals are tucked into wooden soffits held between the deep concrete beams of the ceiling. The striped effect of the ceiling gives the large hall a sense of rhythm. While the architects placed the large volume below grade so as not to intrude on the landscape, they also desired that the hall not be alienated from the outside. The long strips of acid-etched glass pavers in the ceiling bring in natural light from above. Mechanical shutters control the amount of light that enters the space.

The roof of the auditorium doubles as a piazza, the only large gathering space on campus. It is framed on its flanks by five pairs of parallel, free-standing, 3.5 x 3.5 meter, concrete fins. They offer a strong sense of enclosure without closing off the site. At the base of each fin are V-shaped benches, so that in section it looks like an arrow stuck in the ground. The last two pairs of fins support the exoskeletal, steel beams that carry the ceiling of the entry pavilion. One feels the spirit of Mies van der Rohe in this structural solution of exposed beams, not unlike the major buildings for IIT campus in Chicago of the 1950s. The other fins have been extruded from the below-grade

partitions between lateral service rooms. The succession of free-standing planes gives the space compelling ritual expectations. Like an extenuated proscenium the piazza welcomes theatrical behavior. The only element off axis in the symmetrical composition is the door, a metallic shaft that opens to an interior gallery from which one will descend either on the flaring concrete stairs or by the elevator. Without reproducing historic references, the architects have created that most difficult mix of space and society: the piazza.