

Stainless Steel Service Centre in Gavà

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As a result of the emergence and application of new technologies and Spain's full integration into the European Union, growth has become a truly revolutionary factor of economic, political and social development. It is also the result of our globalised economy.

It is within this context that the Spanish stainless steel producer, a company founded in 1970 and now one of the leading groups worldwide, decided to build its new Service Centre in Catalonia.

In order to reflect the horizon of the new economy, the owner wanted the project to be an example of the latest industrial architecture.

Historically, industrial architecture was greatly affected by the first industrial revolution, which in Spain became the driving force behind economic and social modernisation. For the first time, the scale of production processes outgrew the traditional structures of small crafts, leading to industrialised production processes and market economy.

The effect of this process on the world of architecture was twofold. On the one hand, a new type of building, the industrial building, appeared. On the other hand, the impact these buildings had on their environment dramatically changed urban structures. They also had a backwash effect on the growth dynamics. This interaction has definitively characterised their evolution throughout the last century and up to now.

In terms of architectural typology, the new industrial buildings from the turn of the century became milestones of modernity. Such buildings not only represented new construction technologies (metallic structures, brickwork facades, and so on),

but also used formal and aesthetic languages that was related to the trends and styles in the rest of the world. It can therefore be said that early industrial architecture was a serious attempt to relate and connect a country's architectural culture with the outside world.

This fact can be seen nowadays in the large number of old industrial buildings that have been renovated all over the country and adapted for a wide variety of purposes within the community.

In terms of urban development, the industrial area of Barcelona was from the very start concentrated along the coastline between the port of Barcelona and Badalona.

The current saturation of this part of Barcelona is due to an enormous residential growth in recent years; the extension of the port and the airport towards the south; and the building of new roads, initially the Castelldefels main road, later the A-16 motorway and the coastal ring road linked Barcelona to other parts of Spain and Europe. All these factors made industry shift to this area.

In recent years, new industrial sites have emerged along the roads that go from Castelldefels-Gavà to the Llobregat River, following the river from el Prat as far as Martorell.

Since the middle of the last century this process has led to disorder and in some cases lack of systematic urban development in what we call "industrial estates." They appeared randomly and in a disorganised manner. Driven by economic expectations, they were rarely developed as an integrated part of regional and urban expansion projects.



Location of the complex within the Camí Ral industrial estate

This is not the case of the “Camí Ral” estate, which can be considered a model. It is located between the A-16 motorway and the railway line, avoiding the agricultural area between the motorway and the main road and the residential extension area of Castelldefels-Gavà. At the same time, it takes into account developments such as the extension of the Polytechnic University and the Castelldefels Olympic Canal, which complement and enrich the industrial area.

Architecturally speaking, the evolution of industrial typology has also undergone a marked deterioration through inappropriate use and misinterpretation of the concepts of standardisation and mass production of “Industrial Buildings”. This led to the use of building and design solutions which were largely obsolete and out of date, with very doubtful aesthetic and functional results.

It would be difficult to imagine that the industrial buildings constructed over the last 25 years could

be refurbished and used for other purposes later, as were those from the beginning of the century and previous eras.

This is because modern industrial buildings have been conceived as mere containers, made for constantly changing activities, which follow the rhythm of new technologies. Their life span is therefore limited. It could thus be said that industrial architecture has now become ephemeral architecture, rarely lasting longer than one generation.

For this reason, the Stainless Steel Service Centre project at Gavà is meant to be an attempt to bring back sensitivity and coherence to the design of industrial buildings. It must, therefore, be understood that such a building has to reflect not only a single purpose, but the logic and flexibility of current production processes and those likely to be introduced in the short or long term.

This spirit of an end foretold, of constant transformation, determines and directs the design process, defining its outlines and limits. How far we have come from the industrial colonies on the Llobregat Road with their churches, schools and houses for workers!

Meanwhile, in formal and aesthetic terms, the new economy has again raised awareness of the symbolic value of the architectural language in industrial buildings. Surprisingly, business people are becoming more and more conscious that new buildings convey, express and promote the product and brand image.

In the case of the service center, this idea results in a volumetric definition of the building, which extends its roof into a porch protecting the office building and blending underlying architectural styles in the design concept.

From a structural point of view, the building is divided into three large volumes with a width of

30 m each. These are used to house the mechanical elements of the cranes necessary for the handling and transport of stainless steel coils. The structure consists of steel columns and beams supporting the V-shaped joists that cover the whole building. These specially designed joists allow an enormous space of 15,000 m² to be covered, thus producing an effect of uniformity and order. They provide consistent light, while at the same time collecting the rain water and conveying it to the perimeter of the roof.

On the facades, the joists are “supported” by a line of stainless steel downpipes that give structure to the 160 m-long facade and convert it into a palafitte structure. This creates a virtual space in which a warped form, the product of computer design, is developed. It produces an anthropomorphic shape by which all the rigour employed up to now is broken and demystified.



Stainless steel downpipes lend rhythm to the facade



The curvature of the administrative building and the lively reflection of its neighbourhood make the building stand out from its environment.

The contrasting stainless steel, which clads the facade, provides a virtual image and leads to a more informal concept of architecture, incorporating elements of the surrounding environment into the world of symbolism (the train and the boat). The contrast of the blue of the building's walls with the metallic shine of the stainless steel draws attention to the shapes.

The pure volume of the rectangular industrial space is broken by the combination with the office building.

Functionally, the lower level houses a storage area, a staff changing room and areas attached to the

main premises, while the upper floor contains the administrative offices.

The office floor is accessed via an outside staircase that draws attention to the entrance. It ends in a glass-enclosed space in which the different materials, the exterior colours and the rounded contours are visible.

The offices are organised in a linear pattern along a corridor that runs parallel to the wall of the main building. A row of horizontal windows provides a direct view of the activity inside the warehouse.



Cupboards separate the office space from the corridor; their backs are large format samples of the stainless steel finishes available.

On the ground floor, the windows facing the street and the main building are symmetrical, in both size and layout, underlining the “single space” concept of the administrative building.

The lightness conveyed by the design of the hall and the office furniture, along with a passion for transparency in the office, contrasts with the closed backs of the cupboards, which act as a wall between the offices and the corridor. They consist of stainless steel sheets with differing finishes and sizes that form a large scale sample that can be seen from both the street level and the inside of the building.

The use of standardised stainless steel elements, such as washbasins, shower partitions, toilets, door handles, and interior and exterior hand rails, as well as the use of this material in more circular

elements, such as the lampposts, helps to express the confidence and perspectives of an industry that is aware of its importance.

To some degree, industrial architecture, uniting rationality and the economy of resources, leads us to minimalism with a focus on communication and image: that is to informality.

Accordingly, the building has been planned as a large container and therefore a pure volume. As a result of the road layout and planning regulations (that require certain distances to be maintained), it is trapezoidal rather than rectangular.

It is the application of minimalistic and informal architectural concepts that guides the designer in his search for new methods of expression in a changing world full of great expectations for the future.