

The Fortress of Franzensfeste

Markus Scherer

"Begun under Francis I in the year 1833 - completed by Ferdinand I in the year 1838", reads the Latin inscription over the gate of the fortress. In just five years, over 6,000 workers and soldiers built a blocking position at one of the narrowest points in the Eisack valley. It has the dimensions of a small town and, with a surface area of 20 hectares, is the largest fortification in the Alpine region. With this monumental defensive work the Habsburgs hoped to halt the advance of the revolutionary changes provoked by the French revolution. Designed by regimental engineer Franz von Scholl, it consists of three autonomous sections: the upper, middle and lower fortress levels. It has clear and simple classicist lines; it is functional and impregnable. As the military threat did not materialize in the decades following its construction, however, the fortress rapidly lost its importance. By the end of the 19th century it was merely used as a powder depot. In 1918 Franzensfeste came under Italian rule and was used by the army until 2003.

Acquired by the province of South Tyrol, new opportunities for the preservation of this cultural monument have arisen: the former fortress is intended to become a place for meetings and cultural exchanges. In 2008 it was one of the four venues for the European biennale of contemporary art, Manifesta 7, and in 2009 it hosted the South Tyrolean regional exhibition.

The Meran architect Markus Scherer prepared the lower fortress level for Manifesta 7, an exhibition surface area of over 3600m². Preservation of the buildings and the character of the fortress were paramount. The huge granite blocks making up the walls were restored, the roofs waterproofed and the windows repaired. Walled-off spaces were opened up and later additions removed. The size and extent of the complex are not at first obvious from the courtyard behind the main gate. The monolithic structures with small, regularly spaced window apertures are on different levels around the compound, connected by ramps. The lowest are lapped by the dark waters of the adjacent artificial lake. New galvanized steel railings and staircases have improved safety. Two windowless concrete towers with lifts and staircases link the buildings. The surfaces and the material used interpret the historical building method anew: they are concreted in irregular 30~70cm sections, with a fine layer of sand between each. These layers were flushed out to produce an irregular horizontal joint pattern and granite sand was used to adapt the towers to the surrounding color, with the surface roughened by sandblasting.

These objects, with their military numbering, now accommodate a visitor center with a ticket office and shop, as well as a bar, restaurant, a play area for children and, last but not least, a large exhibition area. Visitors to Manifesta are greeted by a seemingly



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