

Il Forte di Fortezza

Markus Scherer and Walter Dietl

Fortezza, Italy, 2007



Referential contrast

Satellite imagery provided by Google, GeoEye (www.geoeye.com) and TeleAtlas (www.teleatlas.com). © 2009 Google, © 2010 TeleAtlas, image © 2010 GeoEye

Completed in 1838 by the Hapsburgs, Il Forte di Fortezza is located in the southern Tirolo region of northern Italy. It is an enormous stone edifice constructed to defend the Eisack Valley during the reign of the Austrian Empire. In 1918, the Italians took control of the fort, and as recently as 2003, the Italian army occupied the site. Although it was touted as one of the strongest forts in Europe, it never came under fire.

The fort consists of three massive lobes of granite construction that follow the contours of the alpine terrain; the lobes are interconnected by a maze of underground passageways. As large as a small town, the fort now serves the region as a cultural center. In 2007, architects Markus Scherer and Walter Dietl began restoration of the complex, adding elements to accommodate the center's activities.

The original architecture is heavy and powerful with a distinct medieval ambiance, despite its relatively modern origins. Granite masonry walls, vaulted ceilings, stone stairs, and rough-hewn passageways predominate. Architectural critic Catherine Slessor describes the work by Scherer and Dietl: "The thick granite walls were restored, roofs waterproofed, and windows repaired. Walled-off spaces were opened up and unsympathetic later additions removed. Throughout, the process has been a tactful cleaning up and drilling down to the raw form and structure of the fort, which itself acts as a cue for the new interventions."¹ The architects' interventions are also strong. Employing the simple materials of concrete and matte-black galvanized steel, the work complements the existing architecture.

Although the new components are purely functional in nature, they are precisely located and carefully detailed. One of the most dramatic features is a seventy-foot vertical passage—cut into the native stone—that contains stairs and an elevator to connect the subterranean caverns to the fort

Old Buildings, New Designs

Architectural
Transformations

Charles Bloszies

Foreword by Hugh Hardy

