



NEW EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE

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A selection of
20 projects from
around Europe

Essays about the
current state of
European architecture

Review

School of architecture, Nantes

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Based on the Ile de Nantes island, on the edge of the Loire River and close to Jean Nouvel's Palais de Justice, the new Nantes school of architecture occupies a particularly favoured urban position, and has already become one of the city's iconic architectural buildings.

The result of a call for tenders launched by the Ministry of Culture in 2003, Lacaton & Vassal's award-winning project captivated the panel with its originality which, rather than simply transcribing a programme in space and volume, offered a truly alternative interpretation.

In fact, while the original brief called for 10,000 m², their plans offered 18,000 m², including 12,500 m² for school life, (teaching, library, exhibition area and administration) and 5,500 m² of 'adaptable space', without any pre-defined function; moreover, 8,000 m² of accessible external space was reserved for students and seasonal events. This gamble was all the more interesting as their stated bid remained within the budgetary allocation of approximately 18 million euros.

Even if 'doing more for less' has become their speciality, their trademark, this would not be possible without a complete mastery of all the major architectural components: the structure, the choice of materials and finishings, all of which underpin the project's aesthetic and financial coherence.

This extra 'unallocated' space was intended to create a true, contained >





The three decks – at nine, sixteen and twenty-two metres above ground level – are connected by a sloping external ramp leading to the roof.

urbanity, present on each level in the form of vast open spaces, places capable of hosting closely connected activities (artistic or organisational) within the building.

The structure, now complete, comprises two unequal areas. The first, and largest, houses the teaching areas and library. The second, smaller and linked to the first by a passageway, provides an exhibition hall plus offices for the administrators and researchers.

The project features a basic construction system: large concrete shelves that superpose decks placed on a girder and post structure, as in an industrial factory. This framework offers great flexibility in the use and occupation of these ready-to-colonise platforms; a lightweight secondary steel structure subdivides them with the aim of encouraging all kinds of spatial configurations and accommodating all main functions. This construction strategy, along with the use of inexpensive industrial materials and a raw internal finish, creates a generic form of architecture that is apparently functionless. 'This construction strategy enables the building's use to be adapted and the building itself to evolve,' state its designers.

Whilst acknowledging its indus-

trial beauty, however, the building does have both a certain timelessness and a look reminiscent of an old converted garage, rather than that of a new school of architecture. This feeling is reinforced by the presence of an external ramp leading to the first-floor car park, which also links the levels to each other and affords pedestrian access to the large upper terrace offering a panoramic view over the Loire and the city.

This is Lacaton & Vassal's most recent achievement, and it bears witness to the great maturity of these architects in terms of their mastery of both the conceptual and the implementation processes. This project has formed a focal point of all their ethical and aesthetic commitments and yet its use is a paradox. Behind this coherent discourse and apparently successful implementation, some problems are emerging in its use, problems that were previously noted by various journalists and which have caused controversy since the bidding stage.

In use since March, the school now accommodates 500 students; the place is therefore a living one and yet it gives an impression of emptiness, of slightly oversized clothes, of an envelope too large for its contents. The 'unallocated'



↑↑ Double-height space with non-attributed function



↑ Open plans add to the flexibility of the building.

areas are not being put to any real use and the 60 by 80 metre depth of the decks prevents natural light from infiltrating sufficiently, particularly into the workshops. What's more, the teaching areas are vast spaces that create acoustic problems whenever several lecturers are talking at the same time. And despite a desire to keep the students in the school, they are not able to advertise the place or make it their own. The free space intended to be 'open for use by all', including the general public, has been totally taken over by the administration, depriving the different levels of any true spontaneity of use.

Despite the modesty of the programmes tackled, and the simplicity of their achievements, far removed from a more epic architecture that often results in an excess of forms and materials, the low-tech approach of Lacaton & Vassal has, however, been well-received both in France and abroad.

In 2008, they won the Grand Prix de l'Architecture, a most prestigious honour awarded every two years to an architect for his or her work as a whole. A large exhibition was devoted to them at the Cité de l'Architecture in Paris this year, and the Nantes school of architecture project is also favoured

to win the Équerre d'Argent, a prize awarded to the most outstanding French building of the year.

The perception of occupying and of working in an important architectural work has undoubtedly contributed to 'sterilising' the work itself, and the Nantes school of architecture has thus become the first collateral victim of its own success, the second perhaps being critique itself... <