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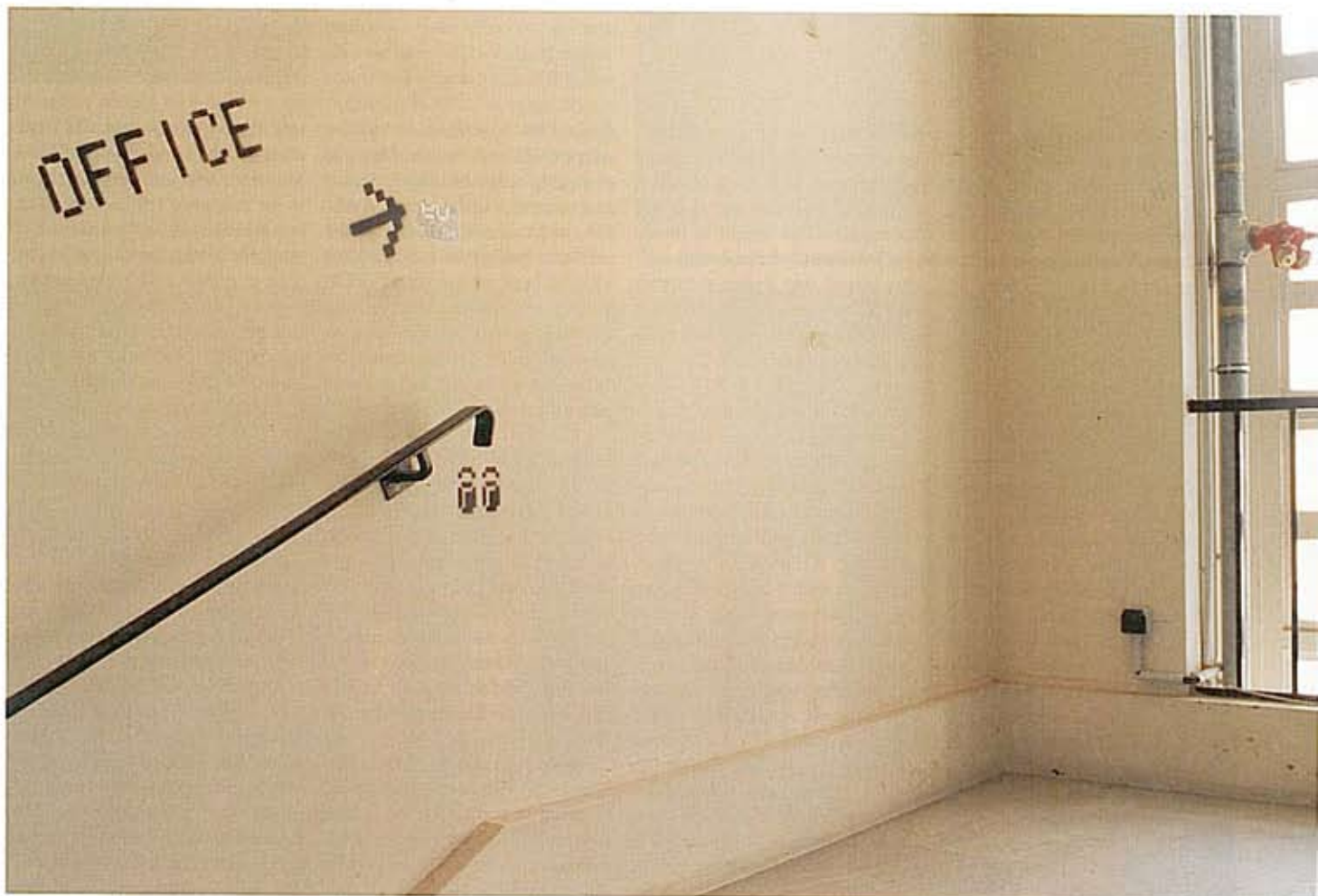
# IS

# Africa

by STEVEN WASSENAAR photography PHILIPPE GROSCAUX

# THE BEAUTY OF TRANSIENCE

THE PALAIS DE TOKYO IN PARIS



Having lain vacant for many years, on 19 January 2002, the west wing of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris reopened as a venue for contemporary art. Anne Lacaton and Jeanne Philippe Vassal, the architects of the *Site de Création Contemporaine*, found a perilous ruin and have left behind little more

than a secured wreck.' Their remarkable strategy, a minimal intervention at the lowest possible cost, has rid the structure, which dates from 1937, of all superfluous monumentality and revealed the unsuspected architectural quality of the palace. 'No-architecture' as a response to prestigious museum construction.

A comparative visit to the two, once identical, wings of the Palais de Tokyo will doubtless become one of Paris's most interesting architectural excursions; a sort of 'spot the differences' on a monumental scale. On the left, in the east wing, is the *Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville*, white, chaste, but also: confusing.

Small rooms in which you are never sure exactly where you are, only that you will end up being disgorged into some hall or other. On the right, in the west wing, is the *Site de Création Contemporaine*, which, astonishingly, was delivered in a barely acceptable ruinous state. The marble facing and floors, the divid-

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The game entails a passionate new form that is going to confront us with fundamental aesthetic and political questions in the coming fifty years. Who determines the rules of the game?

Those who make them: the users of the game. From a legal perspective the game is an uncontrollable, free zone.

Mehdi Belhaj Kacem

PERMANENTLY UNDER CONSTRUCTION



The Palais de Tokyo with the new Site de Création Contemporaine in the left wing and in the right the existing Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.



ing walls and false ceilings, the narrow corridors and spaces have all been demolished. A sort of radical stripping down, which has given the four storeys legibility, light and an abundance of well-organized space. The second floor of the 8,700 m<sup>2</sup> art centre is one enormous exhibition space which curves to the right. A Moroccan market, Djemaa El-Fna, served as the model for this bringing together of artistic activities and facilities such as a bar, a bookstore and a restaurant in a single, continuous space. Superb glazed roofs, which bathe the room in daylight as if it were a Paris arcade, were discovered above the demolished ceilings. In the evening, fluorescent lights screwed to aluminium rods provide artificial light, which falls garishly on the untreated, already cracked, concrete floors, and together with the cast-iron window frames, exposed electricity cables, water pipes and wooden roof sections, form an un-museum-like jumble of lines silhouetted against the light. The seven-metre-high walls

#### Entrance from the Seine.



exhibit holes, stains and scratches, the vestiges of demolished ceilings and partitions, as a result of which the original layout of spaces is still discernible. The round columns have been hastily braced with concrete poured into square shuttering and only the cracked marble slabs of the staircase attest to the building's faded monumentality.

#### Decoration or programme?

The question this space immediately raises is: is this not a deliberately contrived, fashionable 'trash' aesthetic, extricated after much laborious demolition and scraping from behind the wallpaper of a monument? Can such a ruin be a sincere architectural response to a programme, a budget and a situation? The architect Jean-Philippe Vassal, who together with Anne Lacaton carried out the remodelling, denies that a decorative effect had been intended: *'To our amazement, in 1999 we discovered a sort of industrial ruin behind the monumental facade. Demolition work had left a dangerous situation, and our budget was spent on supporting the unstable*

*floors, the construction of fire escapes, lifts and the installation of electricity and heating.'* Vassal draws attention to the meagre funds, three million euros, available for the art centre, and to the need to place what has been achieved in a fourfold perspective: historical (the building and the museum), political (the government's cultural policy), programmatic (the art centre) and lastly in that of the work of the two architects.

For the now so maltreated Palais de Tokyo was originally built, for the World Exhibition of 1937, between the Seine and the much higher Avenue de Président Wilson, as a monumental municipal and state museum of modern art.<sup>1</sup> Neither the neo-classical facades, nor the pompous peristyle, nor the *'génie de France'* sculpture on the facade differed substantially in style from the contemporaneous German pavilion (beside the Pont d'Alma) designed by Albert Speer, the Russian pavilion situated opposite, or the Palais de Chaillot, which embraced the rather dubious affair with two colonnades. In the conservative pre-Vichy climate of this world exhibition, Le Corbusier, who, like Mallet-Stevens, did not stand a chance in the competition for the Palais de Tokyo, erected a big tent outside Paris by way of protest, and only Alvar Aalto, with his Finnish pavilion, and Pablo Picasso, with his *Guernica*, prevented the event of 1937 from disappearing permanently into the dustbin of his-

tory. Thirty years later, the state museum, the Musée National d'Art Moderne, relocated to Beaubourg, to the renowned Pompidou Centre, and the Palais de Tokyo was used by turns for an art biennale, a Musée d'art et d'essai and a photography centre. Finally, the Ministry of Culture, which oscillated between the political left and the right, planned a 'Palais du Cinema' in the building; a project which, after years of demolition and construction work, was suddenly abandoned in 1998 due to lack of funds and vision.

#### Beyond the monument

The Ministry of Culture, now also at a loss as to what to do with the building, organized a competition for a new use, which was won by the art critics and exhibition curators Jérôme Sans and Nicolas Bourriaud. Trained in the United States, they realized that a space for contemporary art was much needed in the Paris art scene, which had been paralysed by bureaucratic corporations and heated controversies.<sup>4</sup> Sans and Bourriaud, who advocate a more liberal functioning of art centres, set up an association which makes funding by both private sponsors and the state possible and guarantees the independent artistic development of the *Site de Création Contemporain*. The team, which now forms the two-headed management of the institute, also decided on the architectural programme,

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taking into account contemporary art's new spatial requirements. They wanted a flexible and dynamic platform for both the creation and the exhibition of contemporary art, one that is open every day till midnight and is receptive to disciplines such as fashion, dance, music and film. The centre, partially run by artists themselves, was to have the ambience of studios and become an environment in which visitors 'could feel at home'.

Sans regards the fact that this centre devoted to the most recent art has been housed in France's oldest museum for modern art as significant, and he also makes the connection with the original utopia of Beaubourg, since regrettably destroyed by renovation: 'We spring from that history, because the concept of Beaubourg was born on this site. The difference is that thousands of people work in Beaubourg, and here twenty...'

French art policy will, Jérôme Sans hopes, take its cue from the new

versatility generated here. Also new – and French politicians, who are always using art to glorify themselves, can take this as a model – is the freedom and space given to art and to artists. Although arts minister Catherine Tasca and the centre's president Pierre Restany were allowed to reiterate in the press pack that the centre is concerned with art's 'pedagogic mission' and even the 'future of society', this outworn utopian rhetoric is summarily dismissed by the directors. Jérôme Sans: 'What interests me in the adventure of art is having one's feet in the here and now, gaining a certain political, economic and social awareness from what we do and what we have.' It is a form of awareness which is certainly shared by the architects. In order to create maximum space with the small budget, interventions were carried out in the building only where absolutely necessary. The only thing Lacaton and Vassal fully completed during the eight-month remodelling was the



The central stair is surrounded by gallery space on the second floor.



Site of future restaurant by Stéphane Maupin.

## Recognizability

Any house anywhere in the world.



An exhibition space in the Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris...

demolition work. They see this exposure of the building not as vandalism, but as a token of respect for the architecture of the building because 'the light has been brought to the fore'. Divested of all that is superfluous, this palace of ordinary concrete appears to be an ingenious solution to the problems of daylight and space. All floors receive both top and side light, because the uppermost storeys are set back behind the glazed ceilings of the lower storeys. Lacaton and Vassal, who always conceive their architecture from 'the inside to the outside', clearly took great pleasure in this exercise in what could be called 'the deconstruction of monumental insincerity'. The team has become well-known for its construction of inexpensive housing, in which it likes to make use of unusual materials, normally used in agriculture and industry, and which it also

employed in this art centre.' The simple ventilation system, which automatically opens windows in the glazed roofs, comes from glasshouse horticulture, as do the horizontal white Venetian blinds which create shade. The ungainly radiators suspended from the ceilings are normally used in factory buildings and the lift shafts consist of untreated gypsum concrete.

#### *The ethics of economy*

However, Lacaton and Vassal have further arguments for this 'no architecture' strategy, which once caused them to decide against renovating an old urban square because they realized that it functioned perfectly well – although they did claim that 'do nothing' decision as an architectural deed. During a five-year stay in Nigeria, the two architects became obsessed with the spontaneous, almost

ephemeral, highly ingenious local architecture. Jean-Philippe Vassal: 'Incredible things happen there with virtually nothing. I have a feeling that in many cases you succeed in producing an event that is almost maximal, with a minimal structure. It poses architects the question, "don't we do far too much?"'. While the 'economical use of resources' is based on the African experience, the use of industrial materials stems from the architects' admiration for the 'auto-construction' of hangars, factories and shopping centres, because if 'something is good, it is clearly manifest and legible'.

This attitude also has a strong ethical basis, because building overly ambitious, expensive government buildings would implicate the architect in the non-construction elsewhere of schools, hospitals and social housing. But

while their maxim is 'build as cheaply as possible in order to be able to build more', this should never be at the expense of quality. Vassal also maintains that being economical forces the architect to solve all problems, a self-imposed, additional limitation, which really does stimulate, opens up new perspectives and produces a true aesthetic. The inventiveness observed in Africa and the humility that demands, enabled the architects to double the floor area originally requested in the Palais de Tokyo with the same budget. All means, including the renunciation of personal comfort, were deployed to this end: the architects set up their Paris office in the palace's grimy attic and the art centre's new management had little choice but to seat themselves at the trestle tables in this single space.

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**He**

When he built, it was a hype. When he didn't build, it was also a hype.



An identical space in the Site de Création Contemporaine.

Lacaton and Vassal belong to a group of French architects who, often in remote provinces or continents, have found a form of freedom and inventiveness which is so often lacking in the capital. A group which also includes architects such as Poitevin & Reynaud, Rémy Marciano, Édouard François and Rudi Ricciotti. This first Paris project by Lacaton and Vassal, who not for nothing often feel a greater affinity with artists than with architects, can be seen as a harsh critique of the Grands Travaux, which cost billions and which still use their cultural contents as a pretext for a representative or monumental message. The most powerful artwork on show for the time being in the once so academic Palais de Tokyo, is of course Lacaton and Vassal's cold-blooded transformation of a monument into a ruin.<sup>8</sup> An artwork which subtly points out that the per-

fect monumental form, the presumption of immortality, is no more than an unstable facade against decay, death. The 'aesthetics of the ruin' actualized here harks back to Baroque and Romantic ideals of beauty, to the great attraction which the deviant and the transitory hold for us. Lacaton and Vassal leave a fascinating skeleton, a gigantic *Vánitas*, which reminds us that there is far more beauty in disintegration, use, the reality of the finite, than in the slick promises of eternity. The prestigious project by Tadao Ando, which is to turn another Paris ruin, the Île Séguin, into an art temple to the glory of the industrialist magnate François Pinault, already appears, four years before its completion, to be hopelessly outmoded.

*Steven Wassenaar is a publicist*



The art academy.

## Orchestrate

Cities must provide their citizens with an environment that 'orchestrates' more than the basics.



Institute's offices on the second floor.



The main hall on the first floor.

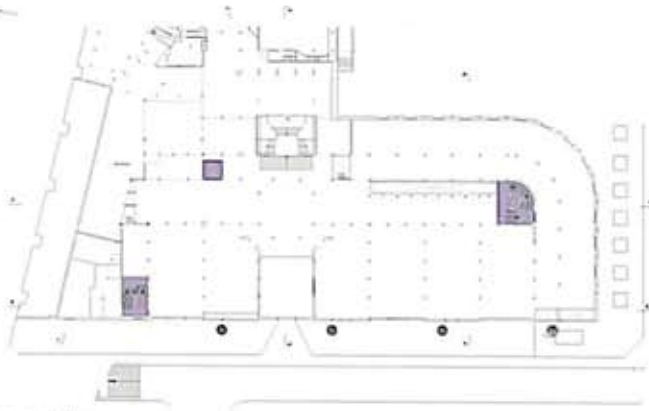
**Notes**

1. Lacaton and Vassal survived the competition for the redevelopment, in which 36 architectural offices participated. An initial selection of 3 offices were then given ten days in which to work up the detail of their proposals.
2. This and subsequent quotations are taken from conversations between the author and the architect and the directors.
3. By the architects Dondel, Aubert, Viard, Dastugue.
4. Yves Michaud, *La Crise de l'Art contemporain*, Paris (PUF) 1997.
5. See for a review of the recent redevelopment and renovation of the Pompidou Centre: Steven Wassenaar, 'De Beaubourg: from utopia to monument', *Archis* no. 5, 2000, pp. 28-35.
6. Housing by Latapie (Bordeaux) 1993, and by Saint-Pardoux la Rivière, 1997.
7. Exhibition catalogue 'il fera beau demain', Institut Français d'Architecture, Paris, 1995.
8. The initial plan by Sans and Bourriaud, laid down in an 'open' programme, was no more than the motivation for the realized design which appears in every respect to express the architects' vision.

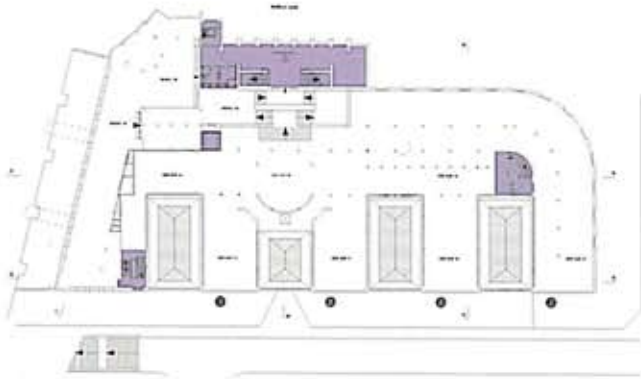
fissure where no laws apply.  
*Lieven De Cauter*

According to G. Agamben, more and more people are falling out of the statute of social life and into the statute of pure life. This pure life is outside the law. And thus without rights. It is governed according to the logic of the camp. The camp is not a prison, not a legal institution, but a territory outside the law, an enclave in and above all outside society, an extra-territorial

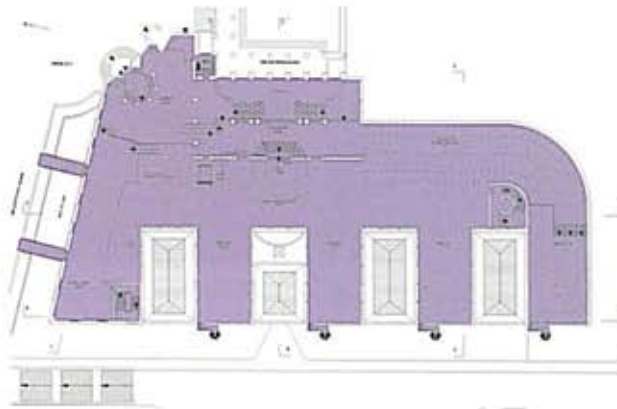
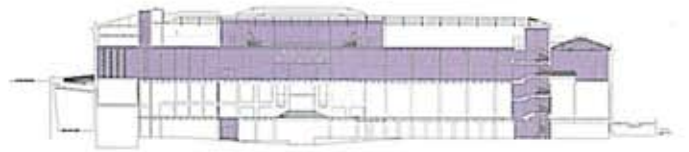
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Ground floor.



First floor.



Second floor.



Long and cross sections. The coloured areas have been renovated. The rest may be tackled in the future and incorporated in the institute.

Lacaton and Vassal's offices on the second floor.

