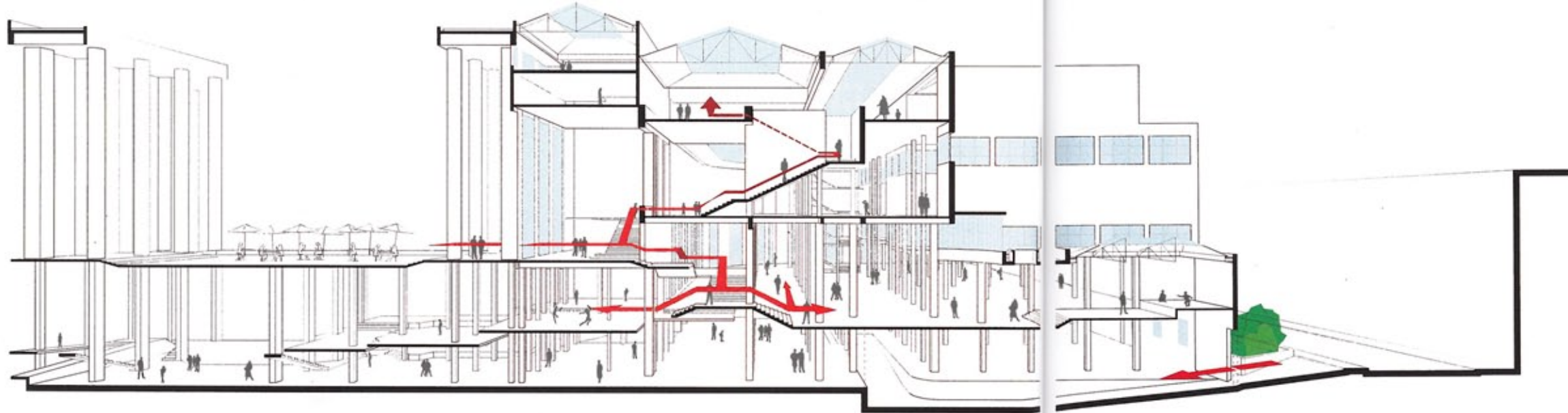
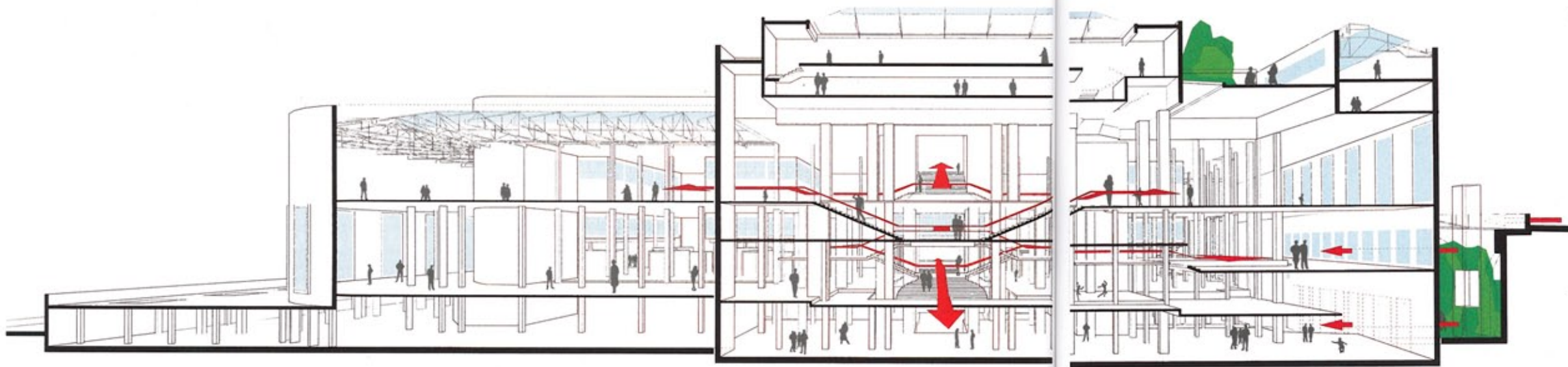


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section AA



section BB

FUN PALAIS

Beneath the monumental streamlined grandeur of the Palais de Tokyo lurks an evocatively rough and raw building carcass now recolonised as a museum for contemporary creation

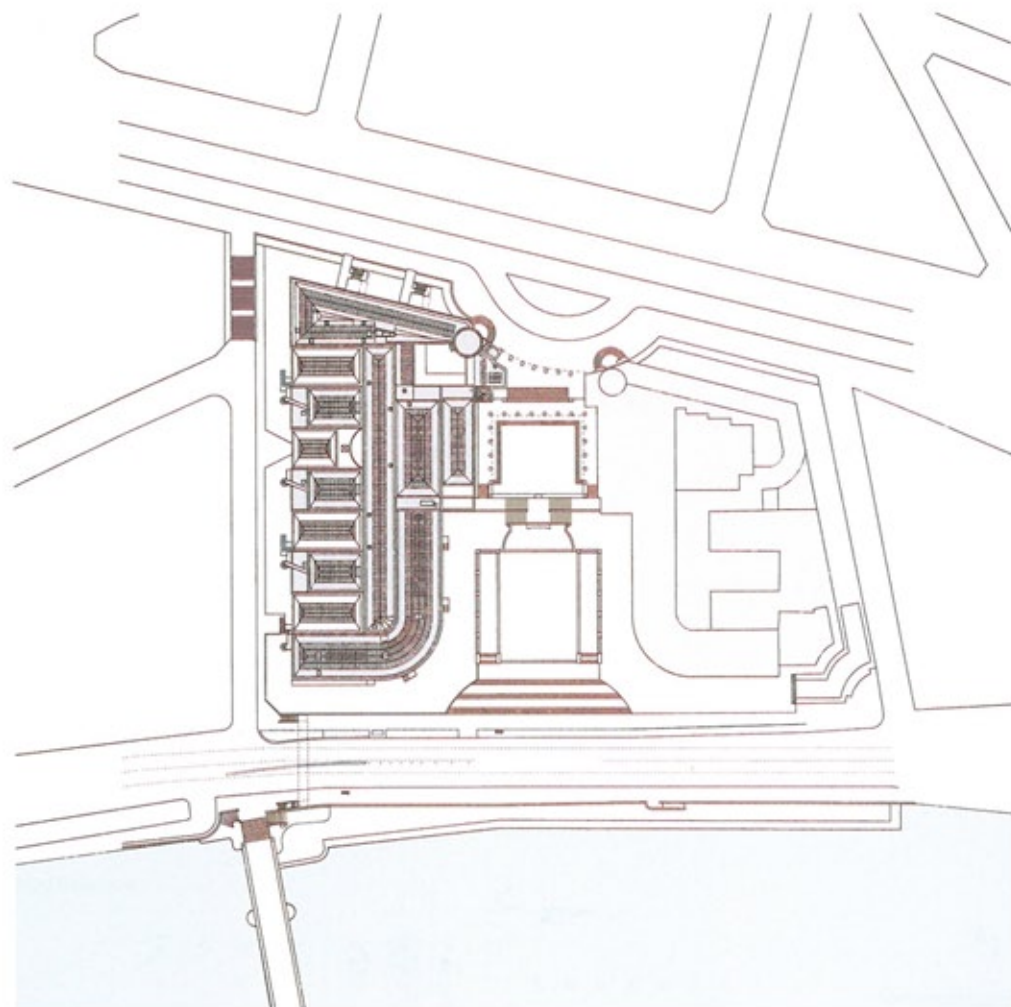


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3

**Palais de Tokyo,
Paris, France,
Lacaton & Vassal**



site plan



CRITICISM

ANDREW AYERS

It was the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques – famed for the riverside face-off between the Nazi and Soviet pavilions – that endowed Paris with the elegantly monumental Palais de Tokyo. Occupying a two-hectare riverside site on the then Avenue de Tokyo (renamed Avenue de New York in 1945), it was conceived as a gallery for the modern-art collections of both the French state and the city of Paris, a never-the-twin parentage that led its Beaux-Arts-trained architects – Dondel, Aubert, Viard and Dastugue – to design a twin building. Disposed either side of a public piazza cascading down to the quayside, two discrete wings are linked on their entrance facades by a colonnade, and sport a stripped, streamlined, stone-clad Classicism that entirely hides the *brut* reality of their concrete-frame construction. While the Palais's eastern half is still home to the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the western, state-owned wing has had more chequered fortunes. Superseded in its original purpose by the Centre Pompidou in 1976, it fulfilled a number of roles until, in the early 1990s, the culture ministry decided to install

a cinema museum under its roof. Some €12.2 million were spent gutting the interior only for the project to be dropped following a change of government in 1997. The structurally weakened carcass stood abandoned until in 1999 the ministry announced it would become home – provisionally – to a 'centre for contemporary creation'.

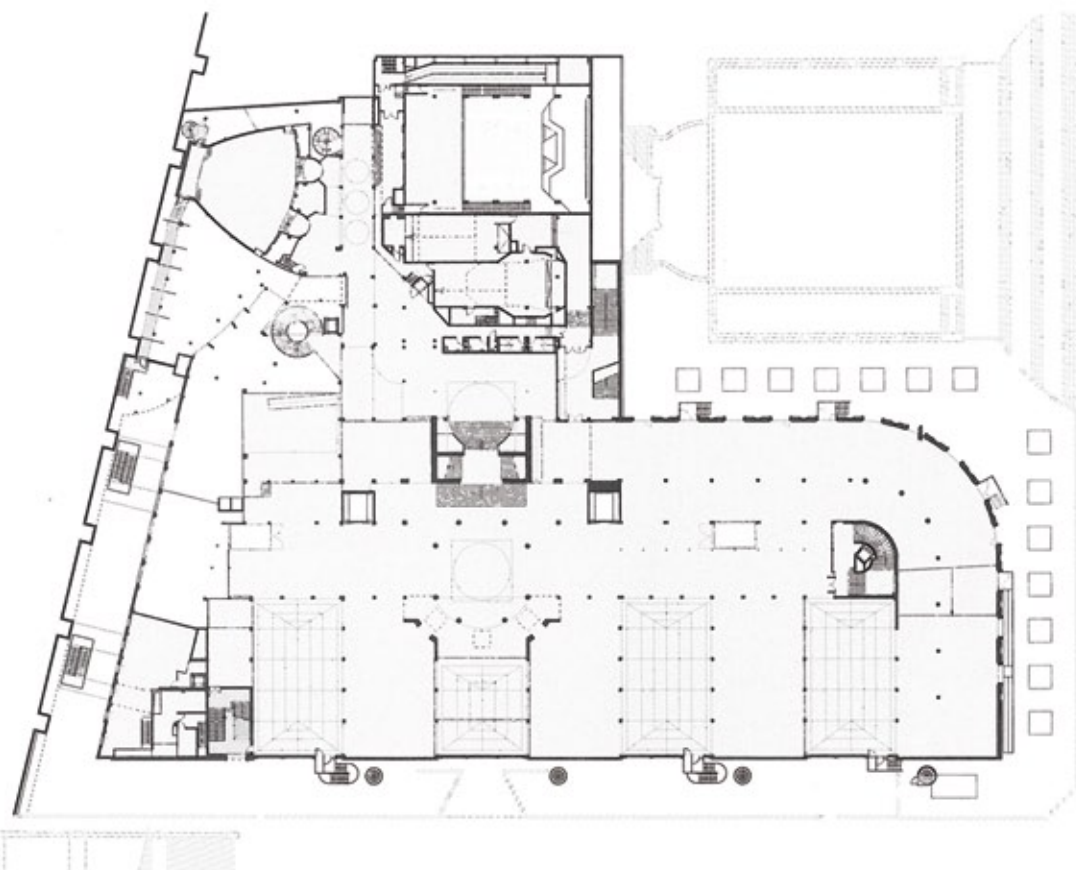
Baptised simply 'Palais de Tokyo', this new institution was the brainchild of international contemporary-art curators Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans. New York had PSI, Berlin had KW, but where, they asked, was their Parisian equivalent? The Centre Pompidou had originally been billed as a forum for exciting spontaneous stuff, but the overweight bureaucracy and classic museum mission of the Musée National d'Art Moderne had killed off all that. The Palais de Tokyo was therefore to be simply a venue, with no permanent collection, occupying 7,800sqm of the 24,300 available in the west wing. A miserly €3 million (£2.4 million) was made available for conversion work, and three architectural firms (out of 130 candidates) charged with drawing up developed proposals. Of these, the culture ministry chose Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal's because it maximised return – in terms of space and flexibility – on the money available. Since opening in January 2002, the new venue (AR February 2003) has made its mark in the Parisian art scene with over 200,000 visitors annually, and become a permanent institution. This success has now been consecrated by its physical extension: for the Palais de Tokyo's 10th anniversary, Lacaton & Vassal have just annexed the entire west wing to create one of the biggest contemporary-art spaces in Europe, for a very modest €13 million (£10.5 million).

The architects' approach has not changed, and their latest interventions continue the project begun 13 years ago. On first visiting the west wing's carcass in 1999, Lacaton & Vassal's conviction was that 'The architecture was already there.' As they explained, the building was 'striking because of the rightness of its architecture, its dimensioning, its balance of relationships ... The museum had been conceived around two axes, horizontal and vertical, ... and we wanted to regain that freedom of use.' Not only this, but in its gutted state the interior had been stripped down to the essential, revealing its 'hidden structure, the modernity of the place. It was magnificent'. This was just as well, since money was so short (both then and now) that they could do little more than carry out essential repairs, what one might term a minimalist intervention. But any kind of minimalism is much more difficult to achieve than first appears, and the Palais de Tokyo was no exception.

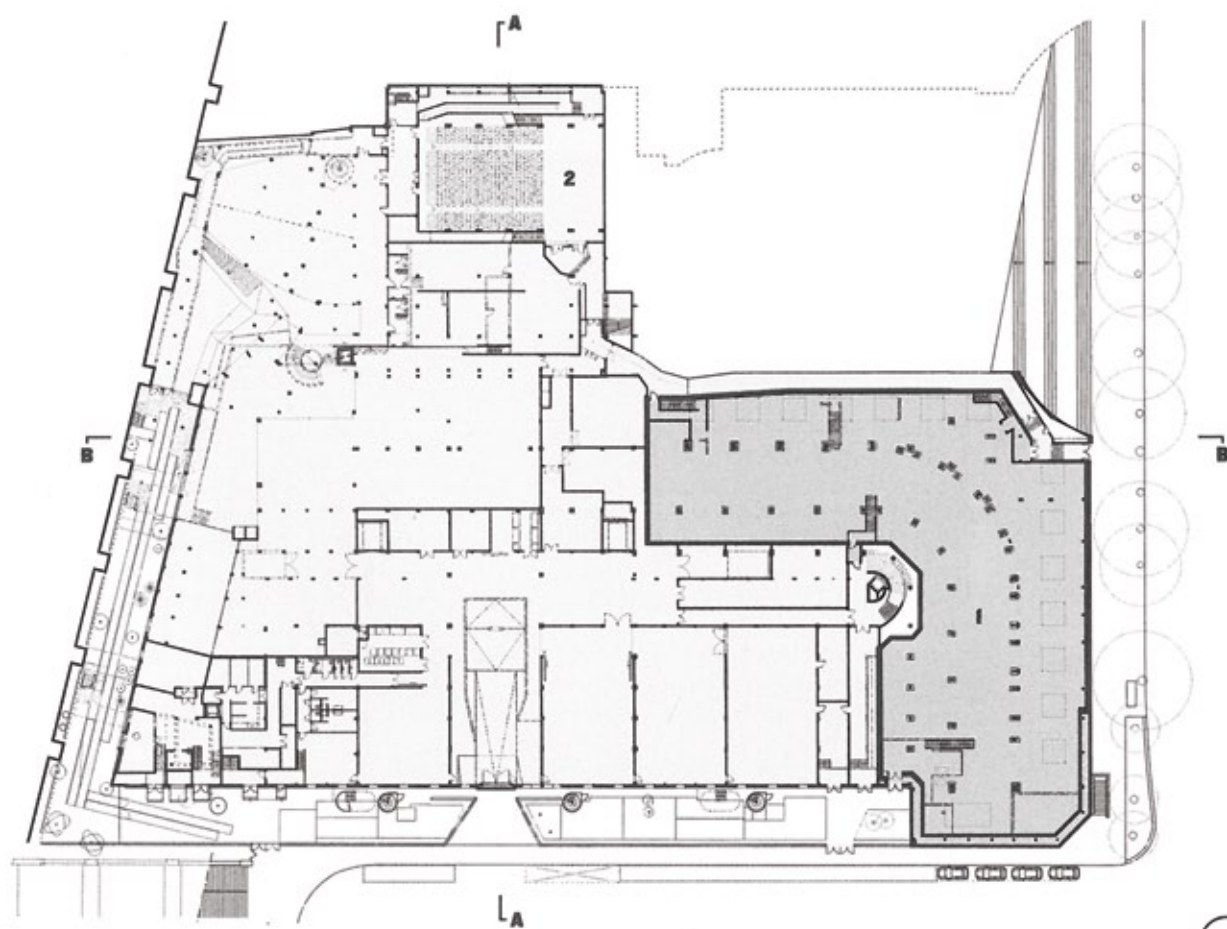
Take the building's splendidly slender concrete frame, exposed when the interior was gutted, which the architects wanted to leave untouched. But since it had been weakened, parts of it had to be reinforced as

1. (Previous page) perspective sections show the monumental scale of the Palais de Tokyo, its west wing recast as a 'centre for contemporary creation' 2. The towering entrance foyer still evokes the original sense of Neo-Classical grandeur

3. Underneath the streamlined Classicism is a concrete frame, now exposed in all its grungy, *béton brut* glory 4. Originally designed for the 1937 Expo, east and west wings of the Palais de Tokyo are linked by a colonnade and enclose a public square



ground floor plan

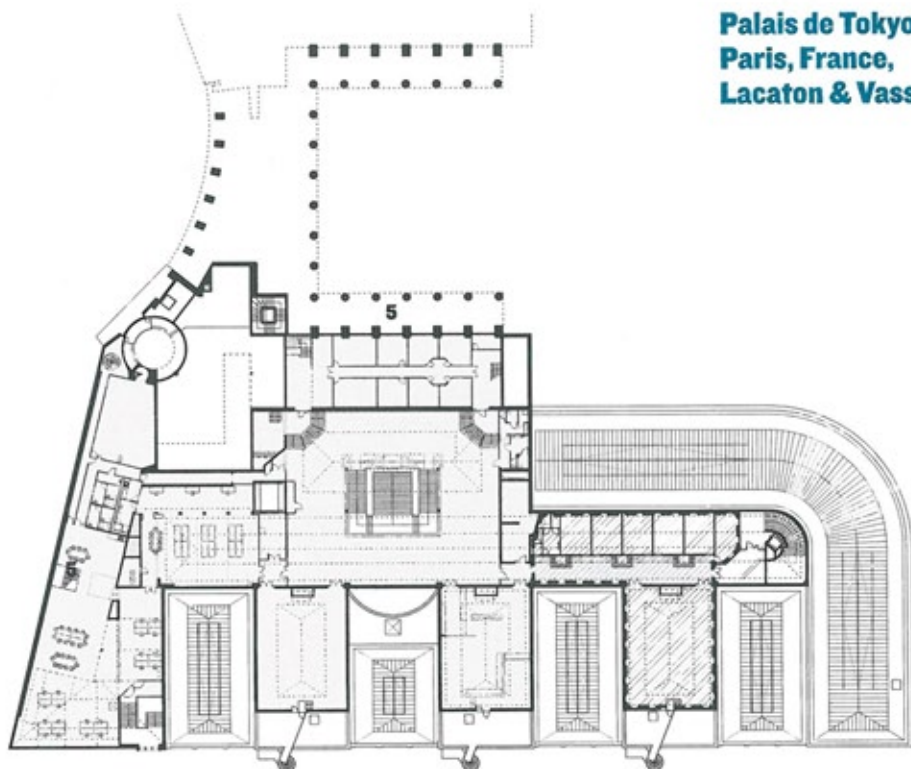


lower ground floor plan

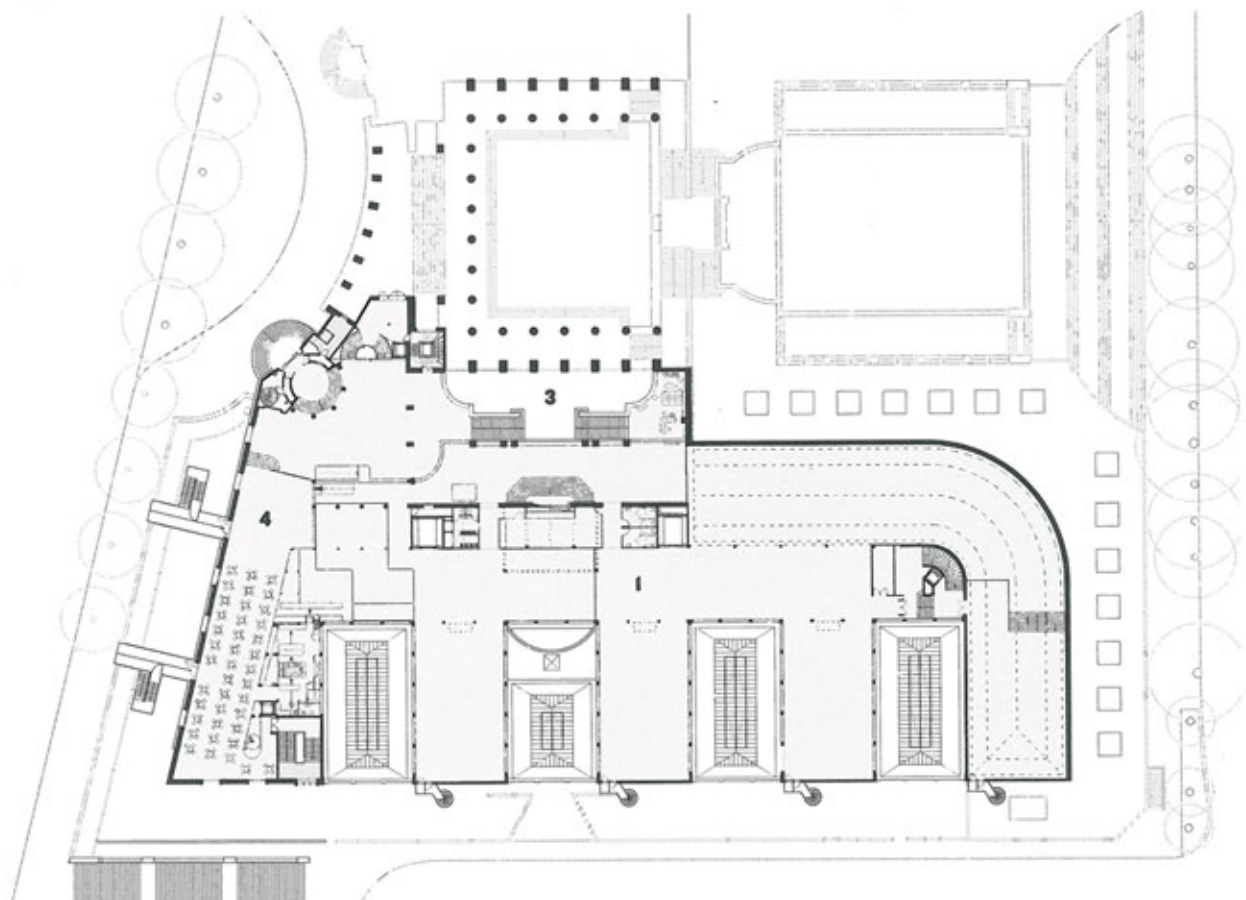


**Palais de Tokyo,
Paris, France,
Lacaton & Vassal**

- 1 exhibition space
- 2 auditorium
- 3 entrance foyer
- 4 restaurant
- 5 offices



third floor plan



second floor plan (entrance level)

Palais de Tokyo,
Paris, France,
Lacaton & Vassal



unobtrusively as possible, either with steel or new concrete sheathing. And then there were the firemen, who wanted the whole thing covered in spray-on fireproofing, since without the original cladding the rebars were, in their view, insufficiently protected. Preventing this would prove a major battle for Lacaton & Vassal, one that went as far as simulating fires for five pieces of contemporary art picked out of *Beaux Arts* magazine. Another feature the architects admired in this giant found object was its luminosity and openness. When designing the west wing, Dondel and Aubert had followed the prescriptions of Louis Hauteœur, director of the national collections, who wanted minimal artificial lighting, lateral daylight for sculptures and overhead daylight for paintings. This explains the enormous windows on the north, south and east facades, and the glass roofs in all the other galleries. After the art collections' departure, subsequent users had entirely blocked out the light, but gutting the building had let it flood back in again, even more so now the frosted-glass ceilings under the skylights were gone. Lacaton & Vassal were determined that this brightness and visual connection with the outside world should remain, and a lot of their budget went into achieving this: reparation and waterproofing of the skylights and the almost unnoticeable introduction of new exits into the metal-framed sculpture-gallery windows, which meant eschewing the cheaper but visually obstructive solution of off-the-peg doors. Where overhead daylight becomes too intense, white shower-curtain-type fabric efficiently, and inexpensively, veils it.

5. Now an armature for contemporary art, the exquisitely raw interiors show traces of use and occupation over time
6. The heroic scale of the building encourages grand artistic gestures, such as Ulla von Brandenburg's coloured installation 'Death of a King'
7. Visitors become immersed within a dramatic labyrinth of soaring volumes
8. In the sculpture galleries lit by large lateral windows, the sense of connection to the exterior is scrupulously preserved
9. Repaired skylights admit copious natural light

Architect
Lacaton & Vassal
Engineers
Ingérop, CSTB
Photographer
Paul Raftery

'The gutted Palais is astonishing, a visually sublime experience ... a Romantic ruin reminiscent of Detroit or Chernobyl'

But such details are not what strikes the first-time visitor. A labyrinth of soaring, grandiose volumes, the gutted Palais is astonishing, a visually sublime experience in the Burckean, Piranesian sense. Stripped to the bone, its interior resembles the industrial hulks so prized by loft dwellers and artists alike, while remnants of its former incarnation – polished-stone cladding in the *escalier d'honneur*, the ghostly oval conference hall (abandoned in 1937 and untouched since), peeling paint, period handrails – make of it a Romantic ruin reminiscent of Detroit, Kadykchan or Chernobyl. Those disappointed by the clinical sterility of Tate Modern will appreciate the lived-in rawness here. Surprisingly, the architects claim there was 'never any question' of taking 'an aesthetic position with respect to the unfinished, to the ruin'. But how then do you explain their decision to leave undisturbed all sorts of evocative *détails trouvés* – flaking paint that could easily have been refreshed, twisted rebars that could have been sawn off in an instant, protruding nails, superannuated signage, and multiple other traces of previous occupants and activities – or their regret that the walls of the principal mid-level gallery, which they had left dirty, fractured

and scarred, were repaired and whitewashed at Wolfgang Tillmans' insistence for his 2002 exhibition *Vue d'en haut*?

Which brings us to the disparity between what architects prescribe and what users actually want. Back in 1999, Lacaton & Vassal proposed an entirely open-plan project inspired by their memories of Marrakech's Djemaa el-Fna square and Berlin's Alexanderplatz: loose spaces that were constantly in flux, redefined by their users with temporary, often virtual boundaries. But, around the time of the Tillmans exhibition, whitewashed partitions went up at the Palais de Tokyo that are still standing 10 years later; mural art needs walls, and remaking them afresh for every exhibition is clearly not something a cash-strapped venue can envisage. For this latest campaign of work, the architects invoked Cedric Price's Fun Palace, quoting Joan Littlewood's promotional brochure in their explanatory text: 'No need to look for an entrance – just walk in anywhere. No doors, foyers, queues or commissioners: it's up to you how you use it.' But despite the plethora of new entrances they introduced in the west wing, security checks and paid-admission areas mean these dreams of total freedom of access remain just as impractically utopian as they were in the 1960s.

These are merely quibbles, however. Lacaton & Vassal took a bold and intelligent position which they defended with vigour and logic; the building will evolve according to its users' wishes, just as it should, and artists will be challenged by these splendid spaces to their mutual benefit.

