Tech Spot #77: Animated façades, Paris, France

Tuesday 10 Jan 2017

Updating the cinema for the 21st century

The Alésia cinema in Paris has recently been renovated and features a façade that displays the cinema’s future programme.

In 2011, the Gaumont Pathé group decided to renovate its existing buildings in order to upgrade its cinemas and to improve user comfort.

As part of this project Gaumont Pathé commissioned Emmanuel Gautrand Architecture to renovate the Alésia cinema in Paris. The recently completed project opens a whole new chapter of contemporary and innovative cinema architecture.

The aim is to gradually update the somewhat outmoded image of the chain of cinemas, transforming them into cultural venues, animated day and night and sufficiently flexible to accommodate a varied programme.

The project has two main aims:

- To showcase the film theatres and visually identify them as physical spaces, as much from within the building as from without;
- To showcase the films: the façades are covered in a huge curtain of LEDs, which is used to screen a range of animation film extracts, stills, colours and abstract images can be used to bring the façade to life.

The façade is broken down into a dozen vertical strips, like ribbons. Each strip supports several levels, alternately orientated upwards or downwards, as if folded. In the central area, these giant panels are made of glass and covered in regularly spaced LED modules, forming a large, animated grid.

Towards the edges of the façade, the large panels are opaque and framed in metal cladding. Sometimes covered in the same structure of LEDs, sometimes simply folded to maintain the rhythm.

These ribbons can function either independently of one another, each showing a different picture from its neighbours, or as a whole, showing one single picture across all the LEDs.

The bottom section in each ribbon falls upwards to form surfaces that are almost horizontal, creating a vast canopy that overhangs the pavement by some three metres. These panels are also covered in LEDs, providing the public with different images, which are this almost within reaching distance. This gives the public the sensation of walking into the picture as they go into the building.

At dusk, the luminosity of the LEDs is perceptible from the inside, illuminating the foyer and circulation spaces with the diffuse colours of the animated images.

The film theatres are arranged within the building so that virtually every volume is visible and identifiable. The contents of the project form a sort of vertical sculpture, where the theatres slot into one another like a puzzle.

The best seating in the theatre is made visible on its underside, forming magnificently stepped ceilings. These ceilings are then extended into the adjacent space to create partially lined lobby areas, little amphitheatres that slope down towards the theatre entrances, forming spaces for informal projections.

Within this vast, light and airy space are all the reception services, ticket sales, an information point, automated ticket and information points, and refreshments, with a seating area and a café, access to the different theatres, and then a quieter space, with areas for screening films.

All the circulation interlinks within the triple-height atria. A series of escalators and walkways behind the façade lead to the different mezzanine levels and upper-level theatres. The public can be seen, and can move around to look at the spaces from below or from above, as well as enjoying views onto the outside world.

The project presents specific features that create supplementary acoustic challenges and generate an increased level of complexity, in particular:

- several directly adjoining residential buildings,
- a mixed structure of concrete and steel, requiring different solutions according to material,
- the clients wish to equip screens with surround sound (3D sound).

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