Extension of Lille Modern Art Museum

Put your hands on other people's work is never an easy matter. Working on architecture which has in some sense been crystallised and set in a certain historical context through the consecration of time does, however, let us skip the psychological repercussions associated with comparisons.

In cases like this we are merely faced with the similar problem arising in everyday life of showing respect, out of good manners, for the elderly.

Extending a museum built between the 1970s-80s, hence not contemporary but certainly not old, might potentially pose some problems for anybody interesting in having their own say while showing due respect for their predecessor.

The dilemma facing the architectural designer when setting the building programme is glaringly obvious: do I fit in with what is already there or artificially contrast with it?

You can ride the tiger of the clearly defined expressive qualities of your own idiom, thereby running the risk of emphasising a potential dichotomy between the two works, or slip quietly into deferential mimicry, merely whispering instead of raising your voice.

Manuelle Gautrand has unflinchingly shaken off any feeling of awe in his project to modernise and extend the Modern Art Museum in Lille. This building was originally designed and constructed by Roland Simounet between 1979 and 1983 (the year when it officially opened) to host two private collections and other temporary exhibitions.

It is set along the edge of Villeneuve d'Ascq's inner-city park in the beautiful natural setting of Parc du Heron.

The museum attempts to bond with the surrounding nature, particularly the garden of sculptures opposite it, through its intricate structural design hugging around a wide patio and a brick construction with wide glass walls.

Manuelle Gautrand resolves the dilemma by making relations between the ground, structures and nature the building's most distinctive feature.

The trick lies in the way he has set his project right on the road's tracks, drawing on all his own stylistic sensibility. He has succeeded in connecting the area to the north of the patio, taken up by technical fixtures and a new cafe, to the new east extension by exploiting a thin strip of land bordering on the lot, just where it narrows.

While in the central section the structural design is recomposed (until then it is split into two visually separated wings), over on the east side there is a set of structures following the lie of the land, calling to mind distinctly organic forms, like those of a hand or root and, at the same time deliberately leaving the traces of time clearly visible.

The redesigned overall structure looks much more organic and compact.

The new wing extension emerges like an almost sculptural sign, clearly evident and up-to-date, which is expected to draw attention to the building.

It is this sudden shift in geometry, moving on from the parcelled orthogonal forms of the old building to beyond parallelism in the new structural design, that the project's main stylistic interest lies (respectful but decisive).

The corners and perspectives generated by the way functions relate to the shape of the land are absolutely fascinating, both inside (whose flexibility is certainly worthy of praise) and outside, where the presence of rugged structures designed to be partly clad with climbing plants discreetly but effectively marks art's desire to make its presence felt.

Il progetto di Manuelle Gautrand per l'ampliamento del Museo de Arte Moderna de Lille prevede la realizzazione di una nuova area sul lato ovest dei padiglioni esistenti realizzati da Roland Simounet. La costruzione dell'edificio dovrebbe essere completata per il 2007.

Nella pagina a fianco, uno storyboard ambientato nei nuovi spazi espositivi.

Manuelle Gautrand's project to extend the Lille Modern Art Museum involves the construction of a new wing over on the west side of the old pavilions designed by Roland Simounet. The building is planned to be built by 2007.

Opposite page, a storyboard set in the new exhibition spaces.