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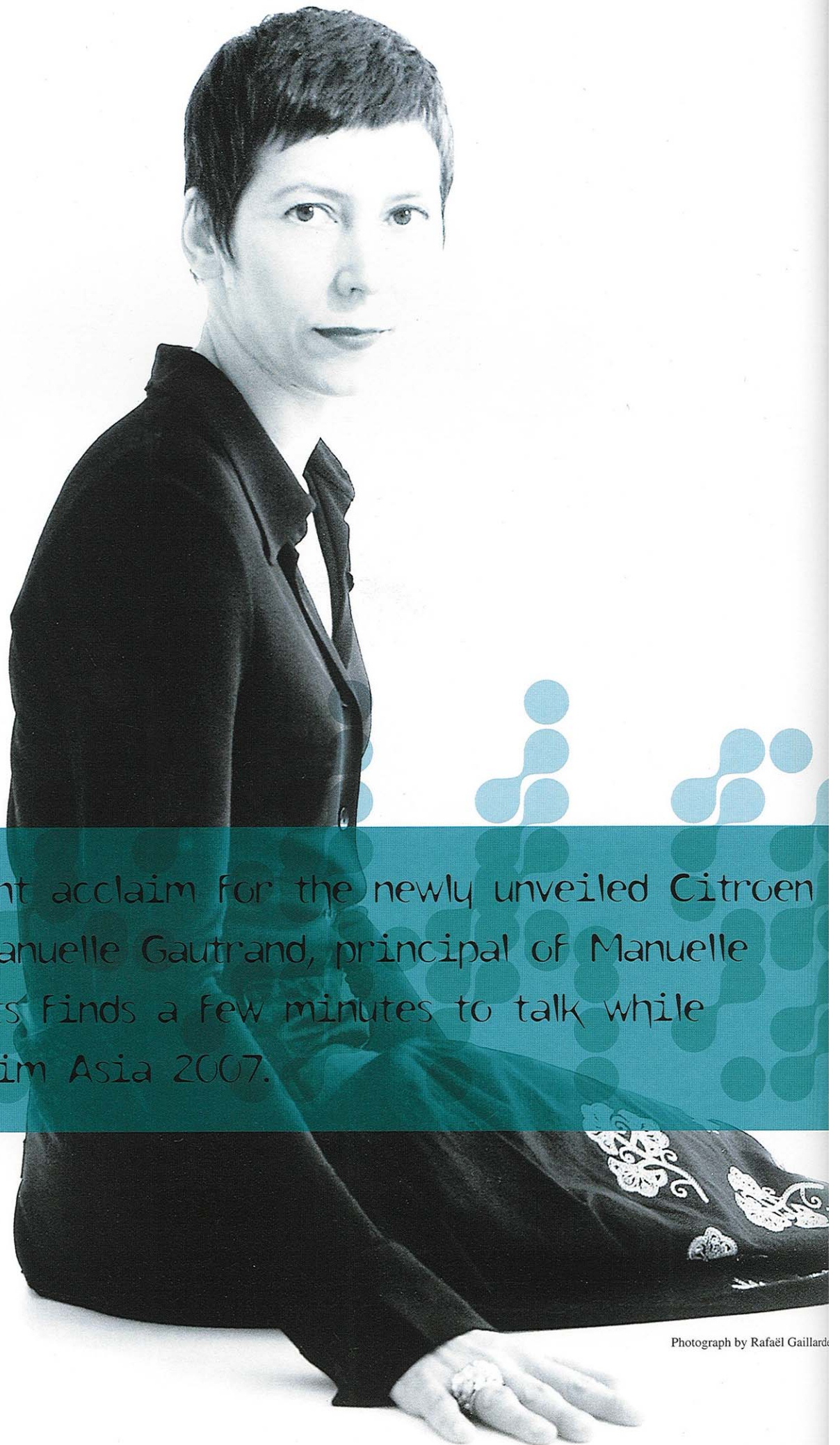
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Manuelle Gautrand



Glowing with recent acclaim for the newly unveiled Citroen Tower in Paris, Manuelle Gautrand, principal of Manuelle Gautrand Architects finds a few minutes to talk while exhibiting at Mipim Asia 2007.

hinge - Is this your first trip to Hong Kong?

Manuelle Gautrand - No, my first visit was five or six years ago. It was for a holiday. In fact, before coming to Hong Kong I went to other Asian countries and during my holidays in China I visited Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing. I was so impressed by China because of the energy, dynamism... the beauty of the towns. For me it's very important to have towns with life. I can't say that European towns are too quiet because there is lots of nightlife but it's not quite the same. They are like museums because there are lots of old buildings so it's difficult for us architects to build contemporary architecture because there is no place for that in the urban centres. Everything is beautiful and old... we have to keep everything. What I appreciate in a city like Hong Kong is that anything is possible. You can demolish something and create something much more innovative. I am fascinated with this city because of its natural site... mountains, water, Kowloon and Hong Kong Island's sculptured mountain. I am fascinated with all this contemporary architecture, highrises. The fact that they are so close together conveys a giant sculpture - it's extraordinary.

h - Have you done any restorative projects in Europe?

MG - Yes, I'm doing a lot. In Europe we're very sensitive to the context and to the site. I think it's good in a way because it's important to listen and understand a city or country town. I'm doing a lot of new buildings, refurbishments and extended projects. It's interesting because it's a connection between old and new. I appreciate the fact that I have the possibility to put very innovative and new architecture with an old one. For instance, if I have a refurbishment project to do I always listen to the existing parts and try to understand it, then I put very contemporary architecture beside or inside it. I think for visitors, for the public it makes for an interesting street tour because there is a confrontation between old and new. Right now I'm doing a cultural project for the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë. It's a deep refurbishment of an old theatre in the centre of Paris. The programme stipulates that it will house electronic music and numeric art. The theatre was made in the 19th century so it's full of gold. It will showcase lots of visual art as well for multimedia displays. It will accommodate many DJs and artists.

I am also doing a refurbishment for a museum, an extended part for an old museum in the north of France. It's a modern and contemporary art museum. We have to refurbish the old part and add galleries. So, yes in Europe we are used to this type of work and it can be very inventive – in the same way when we create new projects. I like the complexity, I like the constraints... because you can fight with the context while supporting it.

h - When did you found Manuelle Gautrand Architects?

MG - About 16 years ago.

h - Prior to that, where did you study and work?

MG - I studied architecture in Paris then worked in several firms.

h - What compelled you to pursue a career in architecture?

MG - I wanted to have an artistic job. I chose architecture and I'm happy with that because we are like artists. In fact, it's a very rich job because we have to be creative and yet very strict and at times scientific. My wish is to create buildings that are unique. The notion of art is important for me. I don't want to produce international architecture. I think it's very important that people deeply understand the culture of a country.

h - Was there a specific experience or person that inspired you to explore architecture professionally?

MG - I think in life there are a lot of influences. For

me there wasn't one person or one thing. I'm like a sponge so I'm influenced by contemporary architecture, old buildings, fashion, electronic music, visual arts, sculptures.

h - How big is your office?

MG - We have approximately 30 architects.

h - Any plans for expansion?

MG - Yes, a few years ago I began to diversify my project types and to work across Europe, not just in France. Two years ago I began to take on projects in Asia. My first one is in Bangkok; it will be complete in 2009. Moreover, I have a partner in Ho Chi Minh, Kieler Architects, with whom I am very excited to develop local projects. It's very important for an architect to travel a lot and to work in other places.

h - Are you looking to do projects in Mainland China?

MG - I had one a few years ago but it was never finished. I did sketches, the preliminary design phase for luxury apartments but it didn't go any further. Yes, I would like to work in Mainland China. I am very interested in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

h - So what's in store for the future?

MG - I continue to strive to do several different types of projects. I don't want to be specialised. I'm working on shopping malls, retail outlets, luxury apartments, offices and I also like to do cultural projects. When I was younger my first project was for a cultural programme. At the moment I'm working on commercial and mixed-use towers. I won a competition to do an office tower that's close to Paris. We should start on construction in approximately one year. It will have 65,000sq m.

h - Are there any particular sectors/niches in architecture that you'd like to dedicate more time to?

MG - I would like to focus on urban density. I like mixed-use and highrise projects. I like the hospitality sector as well.

I was approached a few weeks ago about a shopping complex and the client asked if I wanted to do the exterior or the interior. I said I wanted to do both. I think it's very important to have a sense of continuity throughout the project. I also like to do interior design. I did both for a hotel in Copenhagen, for instance. I like to do the complete work of an architect. When I do a corporate tower, however, it's mainly exterior since tenants will move in with their own furniture. So the interior design is not as important as it is in a shopping mall or showroom like Citroen.

h - Any aspirations to do more cultural or civic architecture?

MG - Yes, but I'd like to say that shopping malls have become a meeting point for people, a place for entertainment. I appreciate that investors try to create mixed-use projects. For instance, in Hanoi the brief stated that the complex was to be a shopping mall with hospitality, apartments and offices. We also had to create a cultural and convention centre. I like the idea of mixing commercial and cultural venues such as libraries. I don't think it's a good idea to have very separated projects. Asian countries are really doing this well. It's a very good opportunity for architects because it's more complex.

h - Would you describe your design style, is there a common thread that connects all your projects?

MG - I like very contemporary design. I don't like it when architects copy Italian architecture. I like iconic architecture as well – it's important for architecture to be an attraction. The architecture should be expressive, beautiful, original and poetic to be iconic. There is a growing trend of international architecture – each city is starting to look the same. I think it's awful because it's

important for architects to be poetic, it is a discipline rooted in art. Architects must also respect the site, understand the context and then create something very strong. There is a dialogue between context and new architecture that we insert. I think that's an advantage for us Europeans because we have so much historical architecture that we are forced to listen to them before putting new architecture close by.

h - Where do you derive inspiration?

MG - I'm inspired by the site and also by a variety of materials and textures. In architecture, volumes are important but it's also about how you envelope them. Let's say with glass – whether transparent, opaque, coloured, translucent. I try to be inventive with new materials for a new effect.

h - What is your design philosophy? Perhaps you have a statement or a set of guidelines that you adhere to?

MG - We don't have a very strict style but we have a common way of thinking. Since architecture is a form of art it begins as a very personal project. I envision how the eventual users will live or use the space once complete. I like to work on spacious and generous projects, especially those that capitalise natural light. Sustainability is also very important today. Some of our projects are completely sustainable. They use much less energy than conventional buildings. They adopt photovoltaic cells. We are working on several schemes for one of our office towers, ones that protect the indoors, capitalise natural light and minimise heating in winter and air conditioning in summer. Developers are also on board because they can pitch lower utility costs to potential clients. I think the expense of implementing sustainable measures are only 5-10% more than that of a conventional building. It will be very interesting to see the progress in the next five to ten years.

h - When did you start incorporating more eco-friendly methods?

MG - I'd say about five years ago. We were approached by clients that were really interested in sustainable projects, so I had to educate myself in this respect.

h - What projects do you currently have on the boards?

MG - Well, we have the Ava Tower close to Paris. We're also working on 5-star hotel in Copenhagen. There's also the recently completed Citroen Showroom. We have an office building in the middle of France, to be finished in mid 2009. I'm also waiting to hear the results of a competition we entered for a mixed-use project in Luxembourg. It comprises retail, residential and corporate spaces. I will be told the verdict today or Monday.

h - What do you think about Hong Kong's architecture and urban planning?

MG - This is difficult for me to answer because I'm like a tourist. I think I have a superficial image of it. I can see lots of traffic jams so it makes me wonder about the city's circulation. I think that the site for Hong Kong's architecture is fabulous because of its placement and diversity. Geographically, it's beautiful. There are parts where you feel so connected to nature – you don't have this feeling in Paris. It's flat and takes a while to find a forest.

h - What do you do on your spare time?

MG - I travel. I'm very excited by new countries. It's also a source of inspiration. I travel for work and holidays. Whenever I have free time I try to go somewhere.