France has a gift for injecting its historic buildings with dashes of spectacular modernism, and with the freshly completed Gaîté Lyrique, in Paris, the nation has elevated this to a high art. A fussy old theater built at the height of Napoleon Bonaparte’s rule and later abandoned (locals took to calling it “The Sad Mute”), the Gaîté Lyrique has been converted into a bright, experimental funhouse dedicated exclusively to the digital arts.

So, as the UK *Guardian* reports, in a building where Victor Hugo celebrated his 70th birthday and the Ballet Russes grand jeté across stage, now you’ve now got interactive sound and light installations and an arcade with networked gaming and electric-colored mobile booths dubbed *éclaireuses* (literally, “girl guides”) in which visitors can play, watch videos, read, or work. The place will host three concerts a week and 120 live and multimedia shows per year, not to mention countless exhibits, lectures, and film screenings. It’s hard to pin down exactly what the 61-million Euro Gaîté Lyrique is -- a concert hall? An art gallery? A library? An unused set from *2001*? Whatever you want to call it, one thing is certain: It’s the future and the past rolled brilliantly into one.

It’s now a space that readily adapts to new functions.

But mostly it’s the future. When the architect Manuelle Gautrand first approached the building in the early aughts, little of the original remained; it had been gutted in the 1980s to make way for a cruddy (and short-lived) roller coaster. As a result, Gautrand had free reign to sculpt the innards into a warren of theaters, galleries, sound-proof studios, and public spaces spread over more than 100,000 square feet and seven floors. What’s left over from the 19th-century building is meticulously preserved and showcased: There’s a grand marble lobby and a cafe whose soaring, arched windows afford stunning views of Paris.
Of course, how -- and more importantly, whether -- the building is used remains to be seen. An undertaking of this cost, scale, and ambition always runs the risk of being underutilized. That said, we’re pretty confident that in a nation which fetishizes its leisure time and treats its philosophers like TV celebrities, people will find more than plenty to do here. ?I invite Parisians to come and explore la Gaîté lyrique and make it their own,? Christophe Girard, Paris’s deputy mayor in charge of cultural affairs, says in a statement, ?a place of interactive multi-sensory experiences, a place of experimentation and exchange, a place accessible to all generations. Without a doubt, a joyful effervescence waits for you there.? We believe him.

[Images courtesy of Manuelle Gautrand]

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