



[project file - france]

## MIXED BOX

### Belaroia

Montpellier, France  
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Photography by Luc Boegly



This new mixed-used building is odd in numerous ways. Its massing takes minutes to get used to; its facades are all perforated white panels, but in different patterns depending on segments of the massing; it is either almost-opaque, or lined with continuous glazing depending on which part you look at. It couldn't be called pretty, but it's all dressed up in architectural lace. So what to make of it all?

Set upon a gently sloping urban site facing the Gare Saint Roch train station, Belaroia is the very first thing many visitors here will see as they exit the depot. There are other, more staid historical edifices nearby, but the looming white addition to the city centre dominates immediately. And its first two floors – street level and first floor – are almost banal in their long bands of storefront glass or mezzanine ribbon window. But things get more interesting pretty quickly above that. The volume starts to recede in faceted angles, pulling back along the principal facade to allow a terrace claimed by an outdoor café. For about the middle five storeys of Belaroia, the bulk zigzags in and out in more or less similar flanges. Then, above all that, the top four storeys follow their own

logic, in part growing out of the planes below them, in part spanning them as if dropped accidentally. It is jarring from some angles, but it yields some exciting vertical perspectives, particularly from that roof terrace below. The top volume is residential space, such that recessed balconies punch shadows into the white metal facade surfaces.

The thing is, as you move around the four sides of the block, Belaroia appears either as a vertically biased form leaning over itself, or as a horizontally biased one with protrusions. The massing at the overall scale keeps changing nature to avoid any clear reading. Some will find this effect just the ticket; others, not so much. The metal panels are usually perforated in a repeated array of circular dots that basically hint at triangular patterns. When combined, these can form diamonds, or cascades of drops. Squint and these walls become almost playful. Up close they are light and pretty. But viewed at the large scale as a whole, they work less well. Not their fault at all – again it's the massing that's the issue.





In a way, the project's complicated form may reflect its unusual programme: it includes office space, residential flats, two hotels, a seminar room, and a restaurant. Rarely has so much diversity been shoehorned into a single address. And to be fair, the site is triangular to begin with. What is meant to hold it all together is the outdoor space on the terrace levels, which is conceived as an 'urban living room' very public in character; in other words, the kind of amenity traditionally found at pavement level. And another twist to the project is that the residential portion of the programme was not part of the original brief; it was added during the planning process, on the principle that housing is the best guarantor of true, round-the-clock life in our city centres. Belaróia is a hybrid species in multiple ways.

