





EDITORIAL CRITIQUE

THE “MANUELLE GAUTRAND ARCHITECTURE” EXHIBITION ON THE SITE LE CORBUSIER IN FIRMINY



1,2,13. *Manuelle Gautrand Architecture*, exhibition at the Le Corbusier site in Firminy, France 1. Exhibition layout

Manuelle Gautrand



At the head of her
Paris based architecture
office created in 1991, she
is known for her sensitive
multi-disciplinary approach



2. The Church of Saint-Pierre, Le Corbusier, Firminy, 2006. Designed as a church and built posthumously, the building is now also a space hosting the exhibition. Photo © Manuelle Gautrand Architecture and Site Le Corbusier

Our exhibition takes place at the Le Corbusier Site in Firminy, France, from mid-June 2021 to mid-January 2022. It will introduce the Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Étienne 2022, whose main theme is “Bifurcations”, which might strike you as prophetic, given the 2020 we have just been through. *Bifurcations* is an opportunity to look at the roads open to us and choose where we want to go. It is an opportunity to change path: explore, experiment, and change.

So what roads are open to us?

The Le Corbusier site wanted to put the accent on architecture, and invited us to put together a monographic exhibition of our practice and work. We are going to take over the Church of Saint-Pierre in Firminy to present a selection of seven key projects, each examining the evolution of the city and its environmental challenges, such as the use of precious public space and the purpose of architecture. Architecture reflects a past, a culture and a view of the future. It weaves a story made up of successive bifurcations, guiding man and structuring his memory.

We have chosen three of the many possible bifurcations and exploratory paths that in our opinion are fundamental and guide the work of our practice, becoming one of the common threads running through our exhibition:

The question of public space (theme: The Gift of Public Space), at a time when cities under increasing real-estate pressure, tending to densify and privatize. Yet all European towns - to cite only these - are crafted from and around the public space that accompanied their birth, and which from time immemorial has been the bedrock of our sociability, our relations and our shared lives. The Roman forum still has its place today. The question of uses (theme: The Program Laboratory), at a key time when each of us is questioning how we live, work, move around, and our more-or-less defunct relationship with nature. How can architecture respond to these questions; how can it meet and anticipate our new needs? Finally, the question of the meaning of architecture versus that of its environmental impact (theme: Urban Markers). How can our architecture ensure minimum environmental impact, treating our planet with respect, even in terms of remediation, but at the same time convey meaning, emotion through architecture and enhancing each site? How can human activity and its footprint be effaced while ensuring that our cities are not, in the words of Victor Hugo, merely ant nests?

The Site Le Corbusier in Firminy

The Site Le Corbusier is a national public entity. It is the largest site in Europe in terms of the number and surface area of buildings by Le Corbusier, some of which UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Our exhibition will be held in this exceptional setting in the Church of Saint-Pierre, a double construction, the church sitting on top of exhibition and meditation spaces.

The power of this magical place is intimidating. The exhibition spaces lead to a circular promenade skirting the four façades before going below grade to form a series of amphitheatres running from one room to another.

Cinema to Explain Architecture

This series of tiered seating has a powerful effect on the space, literally setting it in motion. The route continually oscillates between the upper walkway and lower seating, between windows onto the landscape and spaces dug out of the ground.

Each room with its tiered seats will serve not only as an exhibition space, but also as a cinema. Each will show a film shot in the building and exhibited in that room. We commissioned a young filmmaker to make a mini-series, each episode telling a (fictitious) story set in one of our five buildings.

Architecture is felt through motion. It must be explored and experienced to be understood. An integral part of the exhibition, cinema inhabits the exhibition spaces, casting a particular light on our projects.

Filmmakers and architects are both creators of spaces. Cities are represented in film, just as film is a representation of the city. They dialogue and complete one another.

The quality of a work of film depends, among other things, on its capacity to thrive on, respect and enhance the space through which it moves. It records the spatial quality of architecture and - on a broader level - the city.

The quality of a piece of architecture also resides in its capacity to compose spaces that enhance our view of the city. Architecture accompanies the camera, suggesting movements, whispering frames, and marking out many of its dimensions.

An Exhibition Design Made Entirely from Recycled Materials

An exhibition is an ephemeral moment in a place that often will remain after the exhibition. We are no longer in the dimension of



3. Cité des Affaires, office building, Saint-Étienne, France, 2012 © Vincent Fillon 4, 5. Le Belarofia, hotel and apartment building, Montpellier, France, 2019. Photo © Cyril Abad

the relative permanence of architecture, rather in that of a work created to last only a few months. We therefore decided to work using only recycled materials, giving them another life for the duration of the show. Once the exhibition is finished, they will again be recycled, in a kind of infinite lifecycle.

We then looked to Saint-Étienne's fertile pool of craftsmanship and local companies to execute the exhibition design project. Materials and skilled labor are provided by two companies from the Rhône-Alpes region: Buitex and Marmonier.

Founded in the 19th century, Buitex has from the outset recycled materials giving them a second life, a highly innovative approach when started 100 years ago. The firm started by retrieving fabric discarded by Lyon's silk manufacturers to use as heating fuel. Today, the company transforms what the planet uses most - jeans and plastic bottles - to make a material with multiple markets.

We chose this material for its absorbent properties, as we had to make Le Corbusier's spaces more comfortable, countering the cold and reverberation of the raw concrete. The amphitheatres have been equipped with little seating pads, while the projection of films required softer and more absorbent sound quality.

Buitex supplied us with a very beautiful blueish material, which Marmonier then cut out to fashion small, made-to-measure rounded pads to cover the tiered seating and floors in the amphitheatres. As well as providing sitting comfort, they also act as sound dampeners.

The Three Topics of the Exhibition

1. The Gift of Public Space

Already at the end of the 19th century, Austrian architect and urban theorist Camillo Sitte was bemoaning changes to urban public space: "What can be done, when these days all the events of public life are discussed in the newspapers, where in the past, in Ancient Rome or Greece, we heard about them from town criers, at the baths, beneath the porticos or on the town squares? What can be done when markets are increasingly leaving market squares to be shur into utilitarian but unattractive buildings, or disappearing altogether and being replaced by home delivery [...] Works of art, also, are increasingly abandoning the streets and the town squares to retire to those artistic zoos that are museums [...] For centuries, but in particularly during our time, popular life has progressively withdrawn from public places, which have thereby lost a large part

of their old significance". Alongside this progressive reduction of public spaces, today we also have the reduction of their surface area for reasons that range from commercial and financial to security concerns. This restriction of citizens' breathing space is happening even as the towns are being densified.

We have to accept this densification because we also want to minimize our footprint, limit distances and maintain the objectives of sustainable towns while meeting the needs of our growing populations and the fundamental requirement for decent housing.

Yet, faced with this densification - which I prefer to call intensification - public space must also grow and increase proportionately; we must give it our careful attention to ensure that its public place status remains non-negotiable, at no risk of privatization. Public space is not merchandise; it is a fundamental need we all share, the cement of our community.

Public space is our most precious commodity, through which to weave our new modes of transport, install our places for play, exchange, relaxing, places that must remain flexible, ready for uses that have not been anticipated or pre-calculated; space for freedom. The "porous" project in Saint-Étienne deconstructs the idea that city blocks are solid, enclosed things to be circumnavigated. Its form came from a dialogue with the existing urban grid, which it extends and draws right into its center to give the inhabitants of Saint-Étienne a new street, a new town square, a new *traboule* - the secret covered passageways found in the towns and cities of the area. The block is opened up, devoid of barriers, allowing inhabitants to walk through, appropriate and see it as a natural extension of their public space.

In this project, the void is on a par with the built mass, equally expressive and generous, deeply linked to the city. In addition, these public spaces must be imagined in three dimensions, not simply in plan.

In Stockholm, the challenge for our project was not just vertical extension and densification but also the "programmatic" interstice we created between old and new.

The quality of the project is largely illustrated by this "in-between", the threshold between the existing and the new that is a direct extension, in three dimensions, of the surrounding public space. Its functions include a public balcony looking over the city, a café and a restaurant, as well as coworking spaces and public lounge areas. The balcony provides another opportunity to admire the unique



6,7. Edison Life, housing, Paris, France, 2020 © Luc Boegly

8. Brådstapeln, refurbishment and vertical extension of a mixed-use building, Stockholm, Sweden, ongoing © Manuelle Gautrand Architecture



silhouette of the city known as the “Venice of the North”.

Finally, our architectures must also ensure a fluid progression between public and private, avoiding the erection of private spaces that appear imposing and hostile to public space.

This is the whole challenge of the project in Parramatta, whose massing is reverential to the path of the sun so that the square situated to the south is never in shade - a means of bringing it to life and making it the heart of the town. Facing onto this square, the project was careful to remain completely open on the ground floor, only hosting uses that require no security, and so becoming a fluid extension of the square, where one can simply sit and rest, shelter, read a newspaper or have a coffee.

Today, faced with the privatization of new commissions for buildings and towns, public space is becoming the last bastion of the challenges of our time: the substrate of a reconsidered landscape, the foundation of new modes of transport, and the structure underpinning exchange and sharing between individuals. Public space must be the focus of all our creativity in the way we use and animate it.

2. The Program Laboratory

The client's brief is one of the “raw materials” in the conception of a project. As well as expressing material needs, a brief also makes more sensitive, subjective, less easily quantified demands that cannot be summarized simply in terms of “what” or “how many”. For each project, I like to analyze and question the brief to tease out the essential requirements, but also to draw out the hidden ones, probable long-term, related requirements - unanticipated yet fundamental. It is by combining all these requirements that specific situations of use and spatial arrangements become part of the design process. They bring singularity and richness to the urban forms and social interactions. They give a depth to the project, extra layers of ways in which it will be inhabited, experienced and appropriated by users.

They also enable greater project durability. Architecture that quickly becomes obsolete is often single-use architecture that leaves no room for appropriation, evolution, or the unforeseen.

With the Belaröia project in Montpellier, we chose maximum diversity of use, making the building a place that is alive night





and day. The notion of time is important; the urban block is transformed into an organism with the capacity to be reversible in the long and short term. For me it is vital that a single space can, for a year or for a day, meet the needs of several programs or uses, and therefore several groups of people. Density, which I would call intensity, is not only spatial; it is also temporal.

The urban living-room takes all its force from this diversity, combining hospitality, office and residential functions. It becomes the center of the project and the meeting place for different programs, each seeing it as an extension of their own particular needs. Public space is an ode to voids in cities, urban squares, and the living-rooms in our homes.

Alongside permanent diversity, any project must have in-built flexibility. Here, our project for the Forum Jean-Marie Zoellé in Saint-Louis clearly illustrates this quest for true flexibility. Since a cultural project is a brave and costly investment for a city, it must be malleable, able to accommodate uses tomorrow that we cannot foresee today. The result is a project resembling a Swiss Army knife. There are two large halls, surrounded by support functions able to

meet a range of requirements: sport, culture, parties, events, and trade fairs, to name but a few.

Finally, our practice always aims to give something extra: empty space, ready for appropriation by residents, a breathing space, a free space. In our Edison Lite residential building, we decided to build 20% extra surface area, extra spaces, reserved for building residents to be used for gardening, socialization, cook-outs, group yoga sessions or a table-tennis competition in the DIY workshop. Distributed up through the full height of the building, they form a promenade through the residence, successively achieving one of the project's goals: to combine private and communal areas and enhance porosity between private and public space.

Juxtaposing "useful spaces", these "useless spaces" are considerably more important than might appear. Often incorrectly described as residual space (space without a specific function between two specific function arrangements), these voids are in fact unexpected spaces, often poetic, and above all fertile. They become the substance from which emerge, more or less spontaneously, the public spaces of our cities.



9,10. Parramatta Square 5, community center, Sydney, Australia, ongoing © Manuelle Gautrand Architecture, courtesy Manuelle Gautrand Architecture / DesignInc / Lacoste-Stevenson 11. Forum Jean-Marie Zoellé, cultural, sport and community center, Saint-Louis, France, 2015. Photo © Luc Boegly



12. Exhibition poster 13. Renovation and extension of the museum of modern, contemporary and outsider art LaM, Lille, France, 2010 © Max Lerouge
Unless otherwise indicated, images courtesy of Manuelle Gautrand Architecture

3. Urban Markers

In the words of the French philosopher Henri Maldiney, “It is architects, urban planners and engineers who are responsible (at least most visibly) for the spatial structures of our environment, through which we communicate with other human beings, with things and with ourselves in a world. By calculating space, they engage man in a rhythm, or condemn him to an irregular rhythm, which not only rules the cadence of his actions and the tone of his mood, but also situates him within a realm of meaning”.

This non-quantifiable dimension of architecture is fundamental. It is this that gives real meaning, excites emotion, and marks our memory. What, for example, would cinema be without humor, suspense, or worse, without emotion?

Thus, with the salvation of our planet in mind, our architecture must succeed in achieving a combination of minimum environmental impact while giving real meaning, celebrating the client's brief and enhancing each site. It must continue to embellish our cities, stimulate our dreams and provide us with “shelter” in spaces of which we are proud.

Building on existing structures creates wonderful encounters between old and new. This was the aim of our Swedish project. Extending the existing building by architects Tengbom and Salomon, enhancing and adding to it, incorporating it into the sculptural roofline of Stockholm and creating, opposite the heart of the city, a real urban landmark in a district that did not yet have one. Similar to acupuncture, the project reawakens a dormant place, which in turn reawakens the whole neighborhood.

Where the brief or site requires, architecture takes on the task of developing a local landmark for inhabitants, the marker of a neighborhood, the symbol of a community.

With its almost continuous green roof, our Edison Lite project also creates a kind of urban marker, one that initiates the return

of nature to the city by bringing some 6,000 plants into the middle of a highly mineral neighborhood. We created and nurtured this green landmark well before the arrival of the residents who, finding an abundance of natural vegetation, moved in with humility and respect. By acknowledging the town's industrial context, the Forum in Saint-Louis, in the east of France, takes on a powerful identity and gains charisma. It is one of the nerve points of the city (the “forum” of antiquity), a community space open to a wealth of organizations, sports and festive activities, artistic and cultural creation and economic endeavor. It facilitates exchange and sharing, the driving forces behind cognitive creation.

Over the years, the neighborhood has become hemmed in by an increasingly varied range of activities as it gradually abandoned whole swathes of its industrial heritage. Progressively emptied of its history and character, it needed to find a new focal point and become an object of pride and a new unifying landmark.

We wanted to produce a project that was economical, but also big in its ambitions, do the most with the least, develop a new communal space for inhabitants, like a kind of living-room or games room, a place to meet, debate and exchange, a place for festivities where they share really everything they have in common: sport, theater, art, debating, parties, literary festivals, concerts and so forth.

In Parramatta, the primary aim of our Agora 2.0 was to avoid blocking the path of the natural light, allowing the city square in front of the building to remain bathed in sun all year round. This resulted in an unexpected form that highlighted each level of the library like a succession of balconies looking over the square. None of the other surrounding buildings - mostly tower blocks - respects the path of the sun, plunging the square into the shade. In their midst, our building stands out, proclaiming its vocation as a public amenity and naturally standing apart from the rest as a magnificent urban landmark.