



**“Public spaces are the crucial elements in the European polis”**  
 French architect Manuelle Gautrand always carves atriums and terraces out of her buildings. If we climb up to a public space on the second or third floor, she says, we gain new perspectives of our cities. So, let's move up!

In 2017, you were awarded the European Prize for Architecture.

What is it that makes you a laureate on a European level?

**Gautrand:** I am really happy about this award. The award confirms my identity and my desire to be perceived and understood not so much as an exclusively French architect but rather as a pan-European one. As far as I know I was awarded the European Prize for my humanistic approach to architecture. But also for my ceaseless efforts to place my projects in a context – an urban, social, cultural, historical, political, economic, and topographic context. Sometimes I feel like a sponge for the atmosphere and genius loci.

In his jury statement Christian Narkiewicz-Laine, sponsor of the award and President of the Chicago Athenaeum Museum of Architecture and Design, said: “Your buildings meet all requirements in terms of function, technology, craftsmanship, building culture and spatial beauty in a poetic and excellent way.” What role does beauty play in architecture and urban planning?

**Gautrand:** A very important one, as you can imagine! However, the most essential things in architecture and urban planning are still functionality, appropriateness, suitability, sustainability, economy, ecology, and respectfulness. If all this works, if all these parameters are met, then eventually it comes down to beauty and poetry.

Do you consider your projects beautiful?

**Gautrand:** Of course! For many architects, beauty is not a criterion. I guess they are afraid of it. Among those who are responsible for planning and developing the city in particular, the term beauty is generally frowned upon. I don't care. It just doesn't matter. I'll keep doing what I'm good at.



## Manuelle Gautrand

• 1961, studied architecture in Montpellier and founded her own office in 1991. Most of her clients are private firms and public contracting authorities in France and abroad. She had teaching positions in Paris, Karlsruhe, Vienna, Oslo, Riga, Madrid and Miami. In 2017, she was awarded the European Prize for Architecture.

Which is?

**Gautrand:** Being expressive and extroverted – and at the same time sensitive when it comes to thinking on an urban, humanistic level.

In recent years, you have realized some huge projects like Le Monolithe, La Belaroia, the Hipark Paris, Le Forum in Saint-Louis, and the Cité des Affaires in Saint-Etienne. When designing your projects, how do you take the urban space into account?

**Gautrand:** I always try to add public spaces to my buildings – no matter whether they are residential, administration office buildings or private business facilities. I would never design a project without public space. The reason is obvious: There is a common root that characterizes and unifies all European cities in a certain way and that is the ability to create wonderful public spaces between what we call architecture. Look at Rome, look at Athens, look at Paris, Prague, Barcelona, Moscow, or Copenhagen! Unlike Asian or American cities, for example, where, when we talk about beauty, about landmarks and places of interest, we tend to think of private, non-public buildings, in European cities we often point to the beauty of the urban spaces in-between, dedicated to markets, exhibitions, parties and demonstrations. Public spaces are the crucial elements in the European polis.

Is that so still today?

**Gautrand:** In the late nineteenth century, more than one hundred years ago, Camillo Sitte was already complaining about the decline of public spaces and their decrease in number.

How come?

**Gautrand:** Two reasons: One is the increasing privatization of cities and urban texture that started already in the late nineteenth century. The other is the modern movement, which not only defined public space as the space in-between but also took it out of the spatial context and detached it as a separate functional part of the city.



← La Belaröia in Montpellier hosts not only a hotel but also rooftop terraces where people can enjoy a view of the city. It's a perfect example of Manuelle Gautrand's design strategy based on carving public spaces out of her buildings.

Very often the urban space in your projects seems to take the form of huge voids cut out of the built volume – no matter whether the urban space is at ground level or somewhere higher up, in the form of an atrium or urban terrace. How do you define urban space?

**Gautrand:** Currently, public space as we understand it is a two-dimensional texture within the city. But, as has been mentioned, our cities are being gradually densified, the population is growing, while the streets and squares are getting smaller and narrower. So, how should we deal with that? For example, by lifting the public spaces up from street level and putting them on top of our buildings, or just by cutting out volumes somewhere in-between. Then you'll find a piece of the public city on the first, second or third floor. The result is a Tetris-shaped architecture with voids that are, so to speak, "bitten out." And, you know what?

Tell us!

**Gautrand:** By moving upstairs we can, finally, admire the city from above. You go up, you orient yourself, you immediately understand the city's grid and character. Isn't that beautiful? That's exactly why I always tend to place my public spaces high up.

Going up is always a vertical challenge. How do you overcome the barrier?

**Gautrand:** Of course, whenever you go up you need stairs, you need an elevator, you need a lobby that welcomes you and brings you to the public space on top. But you are right, there will always be a certain kind of barrier. But I think the reward system works well, as a great view of the city will compensate you for your effort. My desire is to minimize this barrier. This means: On top of the buildings, you will always find a café, a restaurant, or a rooftop bar, but of course, you are always welcome to go up and just enjoy the space without having to spend money or consume anything.

Where does your inspiration for three-dimensional public space come from?

**Gautrand:** From Asia. In Tokyo, Seoul, and Hong Kong the three-dimensional aspect has been a matter of course for many, many years. People are used to being part of a three-dimensional grid when using the city. They move up and down as if they were moving horizontally. In terms of public spaces. I am most familiar with Tokyo, and I am really fond of how it works there! It's a kind of freedom. You are invited to move through the city on all its axes and dimensions – you are not forced to stay at pavement level all the time.

How do your clients react to your three-dimensional proposals? Why are they willing to invest in this asset?

**Gautrand:** Some understand what I am talking about, and they feel a certain responsibility to give back beauty and a bit of adventure to the city, to the public audience. And some don't.

So, what do you tell them then?

**Gautrand:** I tell them: Listen: if we build a public space somewhere higher up or even on top of your building people will take selfies and post them on Instagram and within just a few days you will find your building and your public space marked on Google maps and Apple maps. If we build this, everybody will be able to google your facility. At this point in the discussion they always begin to understand.

Has there ever been a veto? Have you ever been forced to give in and abstain from public spaces?

**Gautrand:** No. La Belaroia, the Hipark Paris and the Cité des Affaires in Saint-Etienne: All these buildings – even though partly in private or administrative use – have become part of the collective memory of the city.

Which of the three-dimensional places works best?

**Gautrand:** If we are talking about public spaces my favorite one is La Belaroia. Anyone who lives in Montpellier is familiar with the La Belaroia terrace. It's the best place to have a drink at sunset. You are even protected from the rain, as there is still architectural space above your head. Isn't that great?

Is there always a consumption program in your projects?

**Gautrand:** Not always. The Cité des Affaires, for example, is an office building with 70 percent civic administration and 30 percent private offices. In this case, there is only the public space without any program. That brings me back again to Camillo Sitte, who says that public spaces always need a program to become part of the city. And yes, without doubt it works better with a program.

One of the most unique urban repair projects is the Brädstapel in Stockholm where you are about to build a public terrace between an existing Brutalist office building from the seventies and your rooftop extension on top.

**Gautrand:** The Brädstapel is a very strong, expressive office building by Tengbom and Salamon Architects – a beautiful example of Brutalism, right in the center of Stockholm. On behalf of the city administration, we are currently working on a massive 17,000 square meter extension with a total of three floors, which will house offices, a hotel, a restaurant, and a public viewing terrace. With our extension, we are trying to reference the original aesthetic concept by adding a large, gestural landmark in the form of a diamond. With this we want to continue drawing the beautiful skyline of Stockholm. However, I am afraid that this project may not be built.

Why not?

**Gautrand:** The problem with Stockholm is that, when it comes to developing the city, the city administration runs a grassroots democratic policy. No politician or member of the administration will ever approve a project if most of the inhabitants and associations remain skeptical about it. And this is exactly what happened here. We have been fighting for several years now. For me, here we arrive at the limits of participation and social democracy, if I'm allowed to make a political comment. We'll see.

If you compare urban planning culture and traditions in France with urban planning in Sweden, Israel, and Australia – what are the differences?

**Gautrand:** There are, indeed, huge differences! At the moment, I am working on the Parramatta Civic Centre in Sydney, together with my partners at Design Inc and Lacoste+Stevenson. The building will be opened in fall 2022. In Australia, however, public spaces are rarely a subject of great attention. Like in the US, there is a lack of sensitivity, a lack of understanding about just how important public spaces are. Consequently, so far there is still no program, no choreography for the public spaces we have provided there.

How do you feel about that?

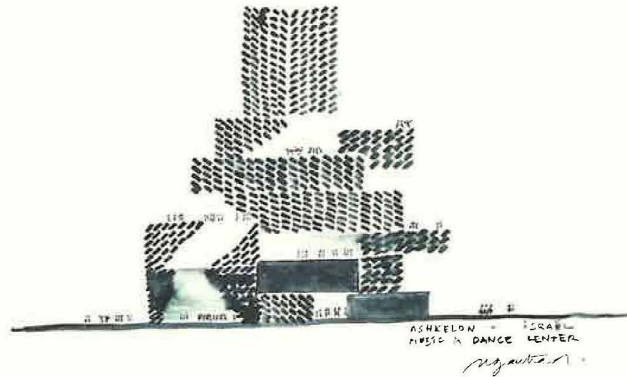
**Gautrand:** I'm torn between the European way, where sometimes we are a bit too maniacal as regards anticipating and programming spaces, and the Australian way, where there is too much disorder. I think this reflects quite well how we live and what different societies stand for.

Talking about your way of implementing urban spaces into the city: Do you think that this aspect of your approach is more common among women than men?

**Gautrand:** I was never a man before being a woman, so, it's impossible for me to give you an answer about that. But what I can tell you is: for me,



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music and dance center with  
open urban spaces.



the question of your cultural background has always been more important than the gender question. A European architect such as I will always look at the city differently than, for example, an African or Australian architect. I don't really care about gender.

We do. Are you happy with equality in business and urban culture between men and women?

**Gautrand:** Of course not. It's still a fact that there are not enough women in politics, in the economy, in architecture, in urban planning, or in city administration. And, in particular, we need far more female mayors in our cities – not only in Paris, Amsterdam, and Barcelona. In terms of visibility, we are far away from reflecting a fifty-fifty-parity. There's still a long way to go.

What will be the next step?

**Gautrand:** I would like women to feel far more motivated to interact and to intervene in politics, urban planning, and city administration. Men will have to let go. Women will have to want it. And one day, maybe, we will no longer need to have this kind of conversation.

↓ The Australian way of creating public space: the Parramatta Civic Centre in Sydney, a cooperation project with Lacoste+Stevenson, is currently under construction.





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Im Jahr 2030 werden 2,5 Milliarden Frauen in Städten leben und arbeiten. Jahrhundertlang war das Lebenskonzept Polis in seiner Beauftragung, Planung und Ausführung männlich dominiert. Wir werfen daher einen Blick auf die Stadt von morgen und gehen mit internationalen Urbanistinnen aus den Bereichen Architektur, Stadtplanung, Kunst, Architekturtheorie und Vermittlung der Frage nach: Wie stellen sich Stadtplanung und Städtebau in Theorie und Praxis aus weiblicher Perspektive dar?