

Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

1 Introduction

3 Chapter One: 'Des gratte-ciel dans la tete'

Chapter Two: Spaces to give Possibility

Chapter Three: Adapting Technologies

Conclusion

Footnotes

Bibliography

Sources of Illustrations

Appendices: A Chronological List of Projects

B Transcript of Jean-Philippe Vassal interview

C Photographs of Site Visits

D Transcripts of Cité Manifeste inhabitant interviews

Introduction

The work of French architects Lacaton and Vassal is popularly known as an economic, minimal form of architecture that strives to produce something from nothing. Following the well-documented success of their adaptation of the Palais de Tokyo, Paris into a contemporary art gallery, their work has been considered as a new way of approaching projects with a tight budget to create buildings that are both relevant and meaningful to today's society. Indeed critic Kieran Long suggests that Lacaton and Vassal's 'ideas of luxury and economy are creating a new value system for architecture.'¹ Yet this is to ignore much of what they try to achieve within their work; cost-effectiveness is not the driving force behind their projects: 'At the start there are always very ambitious intentions and choices, and cost-effectiveness is simply what permits us to realise them, whatever the budget we may be given', argues Jean-Philippe Vassal.²

This paper intends to investigate the critical theory surrounding Lacaton and Vassal's work. It seeks to discover the roots of their *oeuvre* through an analysis of some of their key built works to determine whether there is a dichotomy between popular myth and the reality of Lacaton and Vassal's architecture. I aim to do this through a study of selected works spanning the last fifteen years, namely: Maison Latapie (1993); Place Leon Aucoc (1996); Palais de Tokyo (2001); Architekturzentrum Café (2001); Mulhouse Social Housing (2005); Bordeaux Management Sciences University (2006). These buildings will also be contextualised against the career of their idiosyncratic mentor, French architect Jacques Hondelatte (1942-2002) and younger French architects with whom they have collaborated, such as David Pradel (b. 1969) and Mathieu Laporte (b. 1969).

Through this research project I hope to illustrate that the architectural philosophy of Lacaton and Vassal is not directly comparable with the ideas of their contemporaries: rather, it is an amalgamation of skills learnt in West Africa; ideas taken from vernacular architecture, and from their time in practice with Jacques Hondelatte, which are documented in the first chapter. Through an analysis of their works, I hope to show that their integration of greenhouse technologies into their architectural vocabulary has created a low-tech approach to the problems of building in today's society of excess. I also intend to investigate the inherent poetry within their architectural solutions, which stems from a holistic, humane response to sites and the requirements of their clients.

This research intends to complement the 2006 monograph by Ilka and Andreas Ruby, which remains the only volume dedicated solely to the influential French duo. This research also intends to provide a broader record of the architecture of Lacaton and Vassal, giving their work historical context and providing a definitive account of their architectural ideas.

Chapter 1: 'Des gratte-ciel dans la tete'

Jean Philippe Vassal (b. 1954) and Anne Lacaton (b. 1955) met whilst studying at the Ecole d'Architecture de Bordeaux. After graduation Lacaton remained in Bordeaux to continue her studies, while Vassal travelled to Africa to undertake work as an urban planner in Niamey, the capital of Niger in West Africa. Vassal spent three years in Niger, working on the development of a village in the desert: 'What happens when they find water, when wells are dug? What happens to the society and the structure of the village? I worked on these questions', explains Vassal.¹

The vernacular architecture of the region was evidently inspirational for Vassal. The Tuareg, a nomadic tribe of around half a million people that inhabit the Central Sahara desert, live in simple but effective grass and goat skin shelters that must have acted as a model for a dwelling built by Vassal for himself on the bank of the River Niger in 1984 (see fig.s 1-2). Vassal combines a circular shelter with a "hangar" of a 3x3 framework covered with a tarpaulin, to provide public and private spaces; there is a progression from the public 'tent' that allows occupants to survey the landscape, to an inward looking shelter of concentric circles with the inner chamber reserved for sleeping (see fig.s 3-4). This simple, economic structure addresses some of the ideas Vassal began to investigate whilst still at university:

My diploma was about the fact that you can be in a very big city and it's just a door that separates yourself and your family – or your studio – and three million people in the city. You open and close the door to this world. I think it's really violent, it's interesting also, but quite violent. I worked on this idea of intermediate space; it could be a garden, it could be a greenhouse, it could be a vestibule or something where there is progression.²

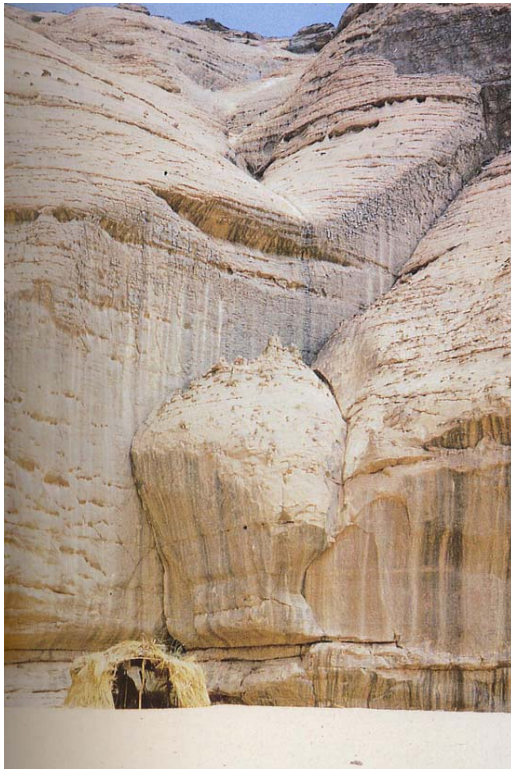


Fig. 1
Tuareg grass shelter, Libya/Algerian border



Fig. 2
Tuareg goat skin tent, Sahel region, Niger



Fig. 3
Vassal's home, Outskirts of Niger

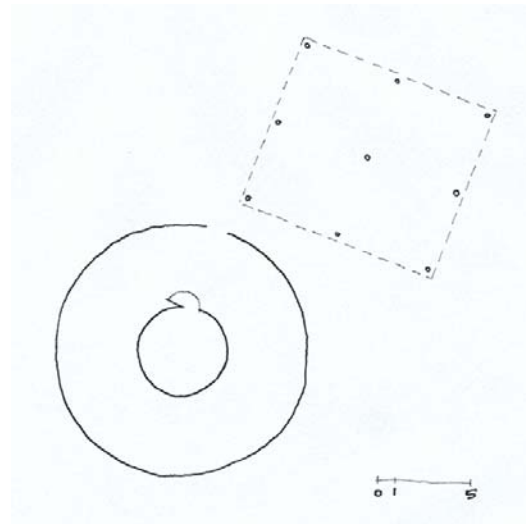


Fig. 4
Vassal's home, plan

Yet Jean-Philippe Vassal was not the first French architect in Niger. In 1949, Jean Prouvé's 'Maison Tropicale' was built in Niamey. Prouvé designed a kit of parts from industrial production methods that could be shipped out to French colonies and erected on-site (see fig.s 8-9). The building was made predominantly of steel and aluminium components, designed to be lightweight for easy transportation as airfreight. The building incorporated highly inventive devices for dealing with the African climate using natural means. A double roof with a ventilation lantern along the ridge and adjustable slatted screens to the veranda provide protection from the heat and sun. The repetition of elements, beige and green painted panels, and blue tinted circular portholes create a functional but also a highly decorative structure (see fig.s 5-7).

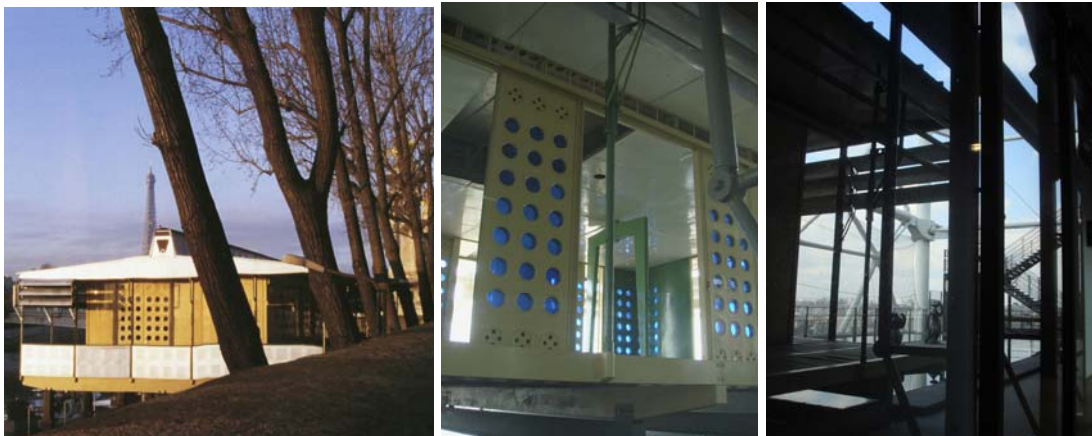


Fig.s 5-7
Maison Tropicale on the bank of the Seine & at the Pompidou Centre (1949) Jean Prouvé

Lacaton and Vassal exploit industrial methods in a similar way. A project's budget is stretched using industrial components and materials, and climatic control techniques – particularly greenhouse technologies – are utilised to avoid costly and unsustainable practices, such as air conditioning. This is evident in their Management Sciences building in Bordeaux (2002-6) and their Cité Manifeste apartments in Mulhouse (2001-5), which are discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

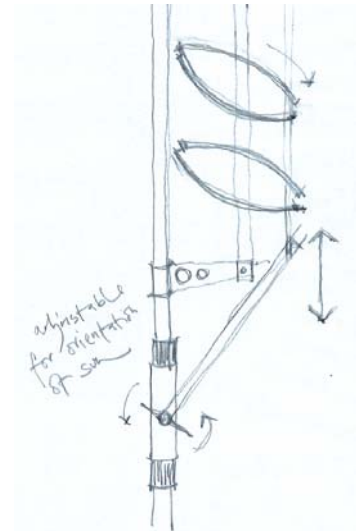
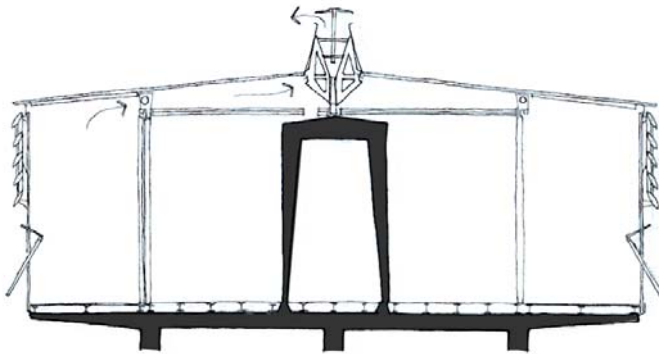


Fig.s 8-9
Maison Tropicale sketches
(1949) Jean Prouvé

Vassal's experiences in Niger also encouraged an alternative way of looking at everyday objects and their function; using objects for tasks other than their original use and questioning conventional customs led to a refreshing outlook. Objects are regarded as if for the first time, without prejudice or inevitability, applying 'loose fit' principles to the function of an item. In Africa vehicles are repaired using scrap parts of a wristwatch; tyres are filled with grass cuttings to avoid inevitable punctures; schoolteachers are replaced with televisions to present lessons to enthralled children (see fig. 10).

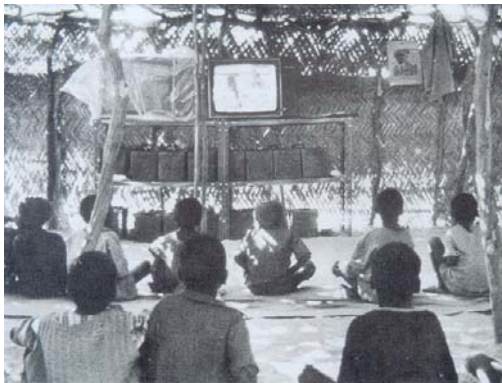


Fig. 10
School tent with 'TV teacher', Niger

Lacaton and Vassal have applied this philosophy of versatility to architecture in an attempt to overcome budgetary constraints thus allowing them to achieve the desired results, whether that is using a recycled palette of materials or using cheap greenhouse technology in housing projects. However Lacaton and Vassal's approach should not be considered as a straightforward attempt to save money through an innovative use of materials. Their first employer, architect Jacques Hondelatte (1942-2002), also encouraged innovation when designing a building.

Anne Lacaton was employed at Hondelatte's Bordeaux-based practice after finishing university, and Vassal joined her upon his return from Africa. Vassal says:

It was like Africa because Africa was an important moment for me. [Hondelatte] ... was creating his projects: Each time it was an incredible story, you know, like the stories you hear when you are a child from your mother. Each of his projects was a sort of adventure...³

Hondelatte was awarded the Grand Prix National d'Architecture in 1998 yet his work appears to be relatively unknown – at least outside France. Indeed, many of his projects and highly inventive competition entries remain unrealised. One of Hondelatte's few built works, a secondary school boarding house on a busy, awkward corner of a run down street in Bordeaux. The Internat du Lycee Gustave-Eiffel (1988-91) illustrates Hondelatte's enjoyment of the construction process and his ability to understand and adapt to the physical constraints of a site (see fig. 11).



Fig. 11
Main road elevation

The building is bounded on two sides by busy roads and the scale of the surrounding buildings varies dramatically from traditional French two storey terraces to large twelve storey social housing blocks (see fig.s 12-13). To protect the school from noise and traffic pollution, Hondelatte clad the building in motorway crash barriers. His witty response, if architecture can be witty (to quote Pevsner), creates a protective arm to shield the students from the street below. The barriers and reflective mirrors create a rhythm to the upper floors, externally distinguishing between shops and school boarding, and provide a dynamic sweep around the corner that captures the bustle of the area.

The termination of the L-shaped plan again shows ingenuity: the rear windows and spandrel panels reference the imposing flats behind, creating a visual connection between the two buildings. The mesh-clad stair tower encloses a spiral stair, which is offered some protection by a simple roof of polycarbonate sheeting, again illustrating his preference for inexpensive, straightforward materials (see fig. 15).



Fig. 12
Adjacent two-storey houses



Fig. 13
Adjacent twelve-storey flats



Fig. 14
Punched windows to rear

Hondelatte's influence on Lacaton and Vassal's work is apparent through this imaginative building. His different approach and playful touches, such as the undulating line of punched openings to the rear, is echoed particularly in Lacaton and Vassal's 'makeshift' works, such as the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, discussed in Chapter 2 (see fig. 14).

Jean Philippe Vassal acknowledges this influence and of working for Hondelatte, says:

... it was quite strange to work in his office. For example, he did not use tracing paper; he did not make a lot of drawings. He was always saying that for him, projects were most beautiful in his mind... because it is – at the same time – very precise but not defined. You can forget some parts; you can change some parts.⁴

The pared down plans of Internat du Lycee Gustave Eiffel illustrate Vassal's point (see fig.s 16-17). Lines are only drawn if they mean something; no annotation or measurements are used, resulting in distilled diagrams that show the fundamental ideas of a design. One is reminded of the ideas of British émigré architect Walter Segal (1907-85), who produced buildings that were rooted in an economy of effort, from drawing to construction methods. Segal 'liberated himself from unproductive tasks: he drew simply, increasingly freehand and on small (A4) sheets, free of drawing boards and instruments.'⁵

Through Hondelatte's influence and the unusual situations presented in Africa, the emotional aspect of architecture and the poetry of spaces and situations emerged early in Lacaton and Vassal's respective careers. In the following chapters I will discuss how the eclectic influences have translated into their architectural design and created buildings that are touching (to use Anne Lacaton's words) yet functional.

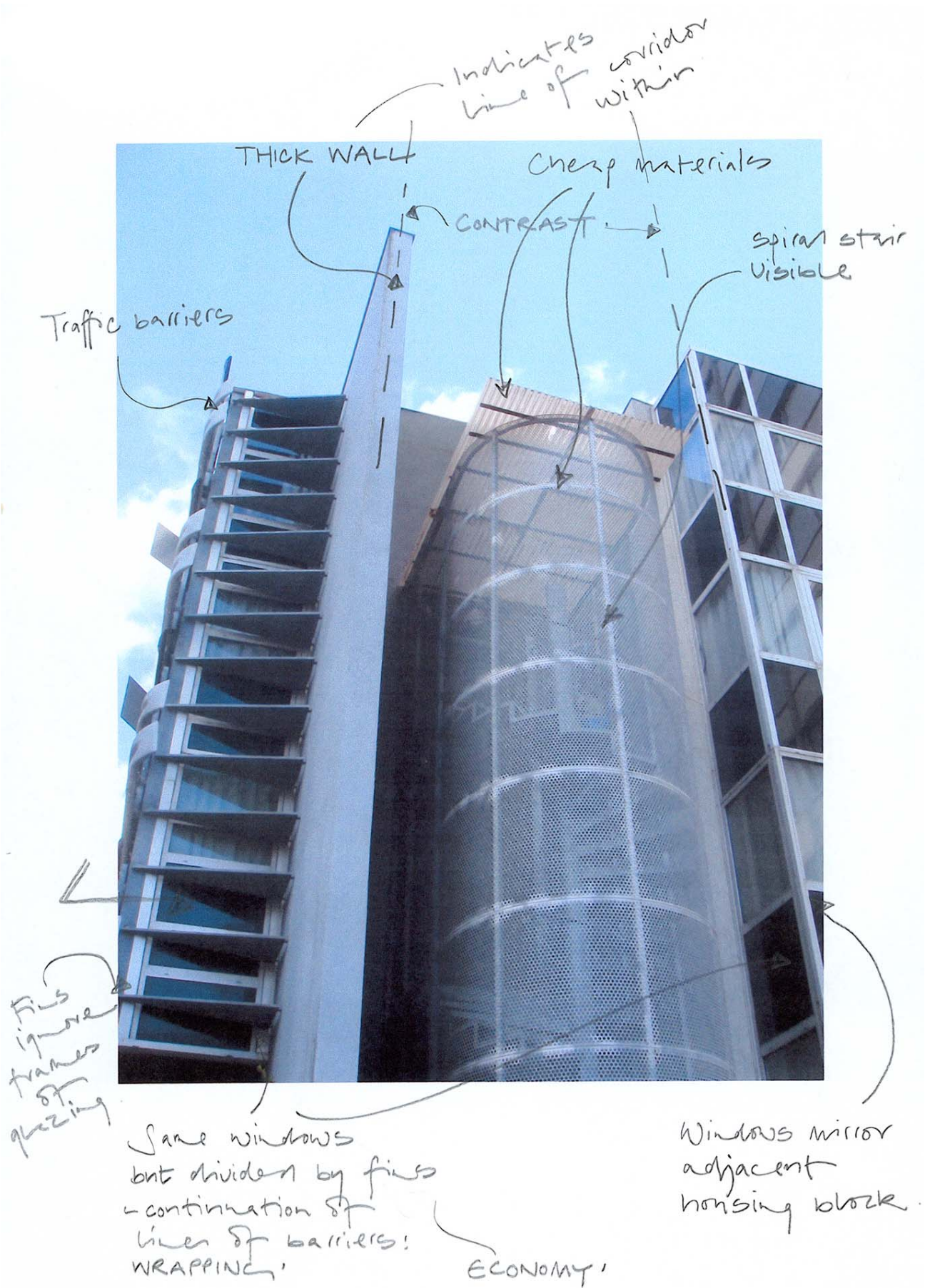


Fig. 15 Vertical layering & separation of elements to end elevations

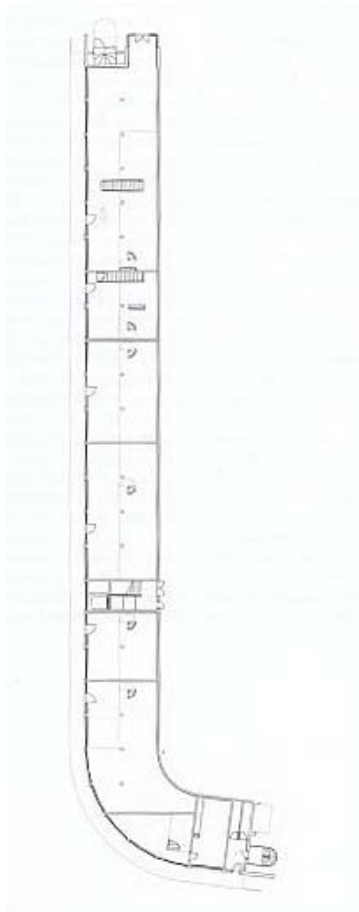


Fig. 16
Ground Floor Plan -
showing the open plan
shops

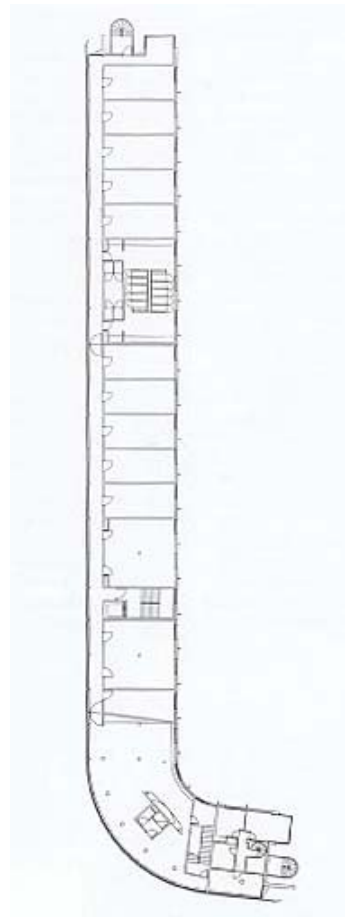


Fig. 17
First Floor Plan -
the corridor is placed along
the busy street elevation

Chapter 2: Spaces to give possibility

Speaking recently at a lecture in London, Anne Lacaton described Lacaton and Vassal's flexible approach to architecture thus:

We like in our projects to cultivate the opposites, to mix the antagonism. The fragility with regard to the performance; the simple and the complex; emotion and technique; poetry and pragmatism; economy and luxury; the necessary and the unexpected. All that makes, at the same time, the architecture extremely concrete, realistic and also human.¹

Buildings full of contradictions perhaps, but this eagerness not to adhere to a rigid methodology leads to architecture that encourages human interaction and appreciates the incidental occurrences of the everyday. Their fondness for the incidental is evident for example, at the Palais de Tokyo through their comparison of the main gallery spaces with Djemaa-el-Fnaa Square in Marrakech (see fig.s 1-2). Essentially an empty space bounded by buildings, the Djemaa-el-Fnaa fills each day with market stalls, tourists, snake charmers, locals and traffic to create an unusual social mix. The analogy may be somewhat fanciful but an appropriation of space is something that Lacaton and Vassal encourage to allow architecture to fade into the background.



Fig.s 1-2
Djemaa-el-Fnaa Square, Marrakech

Again we look to Walter Segal, who said:

Visual values are fleeting... To try to hold onto the visual thing that is so very dependent on the operation of our senses and moods is very difficult. This is why I tried to make building[s] as insignificant as I could. It was deliberately background architecture.²

'Background architecture' is an apparent theme throughout the projects of Lacaton and Vassal, which is taken to the extreme in their work at Place Leon Aucoc for Bordeaux City Council. They were asked to make a small, tree-lined triangle of land into a beautiful space. After spending time in the square, watching nearby residents use the area, the duo concluded that the little plaza was already beautiful and simply proposed an improved maintenance scheme and some replacement gravel.

During a recent visit to Place Leon Aucoc, the author found a children's playground had been added - perhaps the local residents and the council did not agree with Lacaton and Vassal's simplistic approach. There is also something of a disparity between images of the square shown in the architectural press and the reality of the space (see fig.s 3-4). Vehicles squeezed between trees due to a

lack of parking mean that little of the precious plaza is left to be enjoyed. However it is well used by local people and is a pleasant, shady place to sit. Lacaton and Vassal were right; it is a beautiful space but perhaps not as beautiful as popularly portrayed (see fig.s 5-7).



Fig.s 3-4
Empty roads & a deserted, tree-lined park, as shown in 2G publication

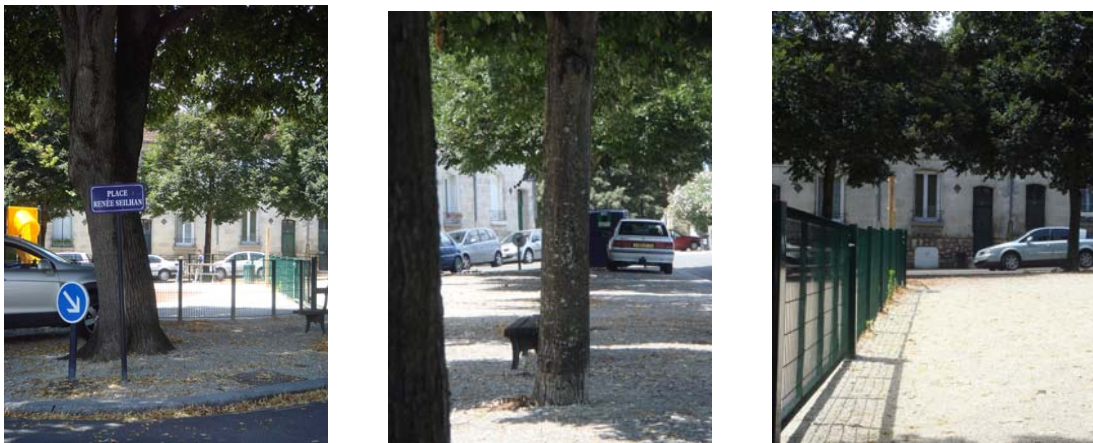


Fig. 5-7
Place Renee Seilhan, aka Place Leon Aucoc, during my visit

The reference to a distant square in Africa also highlights Lacaton and Vassal's eagerness to evoke the faraway and encourage people to look beyond their environs.³ Adam Caruso, one half of British practice Caruso St. John, believes: 'Architecture is by definition about stasis. It is about making material inventions of a finite size in specific situations.'⁴ This is an idea that Lacaton and Vassal try to dispel from their work, evident from the increasing use of exotic decoration within their projects. Vassal explains:

I like changing my situation, to see new things and sometimes I am frightened by the fact that architecture could fix you somewhere. Each time I have the possibility of creating a new project somewhere else or the possibility in my work to take something from a different place – like flowers, like Turkish tiles – to make this connection with another country, to escape.... To find something that creates distance from the architecture, from materiality.⁵

Vassal's sentiments again echo the poetic ideas of mentor Jacques Hondelatte, who encouraged the inhabitants of a building to use their imagination. A house in Bordeaux was redesigned to include a lift for the disabled owner; instead of labelling the floors 0, 1 & 2, Hondelatte chose buttons 22, 35 & 67 and asked the wheelchair-bound client to imagine "skyscrapers in your mind".

Despite their differing outlooks there are definite comparisons between the *oeuvres* Caruso St. John and Lacaton and Vassal; Caruso St. John's unrealised proposal for a contemporary art gallery in an old transport depot in central Cardiff echoes the philosophy of the Palais de Tokyo: 'Much like Lacaton & Vassal's Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the Cardiff Depot is becoming an exercise in contingent and temporary inhabitation'.⁶ Caruso St. John's use of materials and 'it is what it is' attitude has created some poetic and minimal spaces that illustrate the life of a building through an economic approach that shows the make-up of buildings and the inherent properties of the materials they use. As they explain, '...one is not interested in a "new vernacular" but in giving a higher priority to the emotional experience of buildings and developing an understanding of how fabrication can hold emotional intent.'⁷ This is echoed by Jean Philippe Vassal who says: 'The emotional aspect is very important to us. If the architecture is simple, with few details or decorative constructional elements, it's important to find a means of arousing emotions.'⁸

A similarity of approach is also shared between Caruso St. John and Lacaton and Vassal through a desire to maintain architectural memory. At both the Palais de Tokyo and their Viennese café, Lacaton and Vassal expose the historical record of the building that mixes with contemporary culture to provide an example of what Raymond Williams calls 'the selective tradition'. Perhaps this is a further attempt to dissolve the architectural stasis previously referred to; a building that shows itself to be changing and mutating suggests a living organism rather than a static construction that becomes obsolete from first use. This is also the case at Adam Caruso's home in Highbury:

The sizes of its parts grow simply from the demands of the setting and purpose and the bare plasterboard bears the marks and stains of the building site. By preserving both the old brickwork and the traces of construction, the house presents its own history and that of its conversion.⁷

An economic approach to architecture that undertakes only the necessary, asks the visitor to question what is beautiful, as modern art questions the parameters of art itself thus the two fit together effortlessly. Before Lacaton and Vassal the Temporary Contemporary gallery, Los Angeles (1983) by Frank Gehry and P.S. 1 (1995-98), part of New York's Museum of Modern Art, by Frederick Fisher had already posed these questions (see fig.s 8-9). Gehry's temporary facility was installed in two warehouses – one an old police garage, the other a hardware store – and 'based on the conviction that the warehouse space itself was a beautiful and appropriate setting for contemporary art.'⁸ The street was covered in chain link fencing to provide an impromptu museum foyer, while steel trusses and timber joists were simply cleaned and painted.



Fig. 8
Temporary Contemporary, Los Angeles
(1983) Frank Gehry



Fig. 9
P.S.1, New York
(1995-98) Frederick Fisher

The use of throwaway materials in an unusual setting has obvious comparisons with the work of Lacaton and Vassal but it is questionable whether Gehry would have adopted this approach if the gallery was intended as a permanent space. Gehry's design is reminiscent more of Shigeru Ban's recent Nomadic Museum constructed from shipping containers, paper tubes and honeycomb panels that travels from city to city; upon arrival at each new destination shipping containers are rented and all other materials unpacked from the eight containers that hold the remainder of the structure when in transit. Again, it is the impermanence of the structure that demands simplicity in materials and construction – a modern day version of the Tuareg's buildings (see Chapter One). Indeed, it could be argued that Lacaton and Vassal take this idea further and use the same principles for the construction of permanent shelters – why should simplicity of construction and economy of means be limited to the temporary? This is especially relevant to art galleries, where exhibitions change and artists require different facilities and spaces.

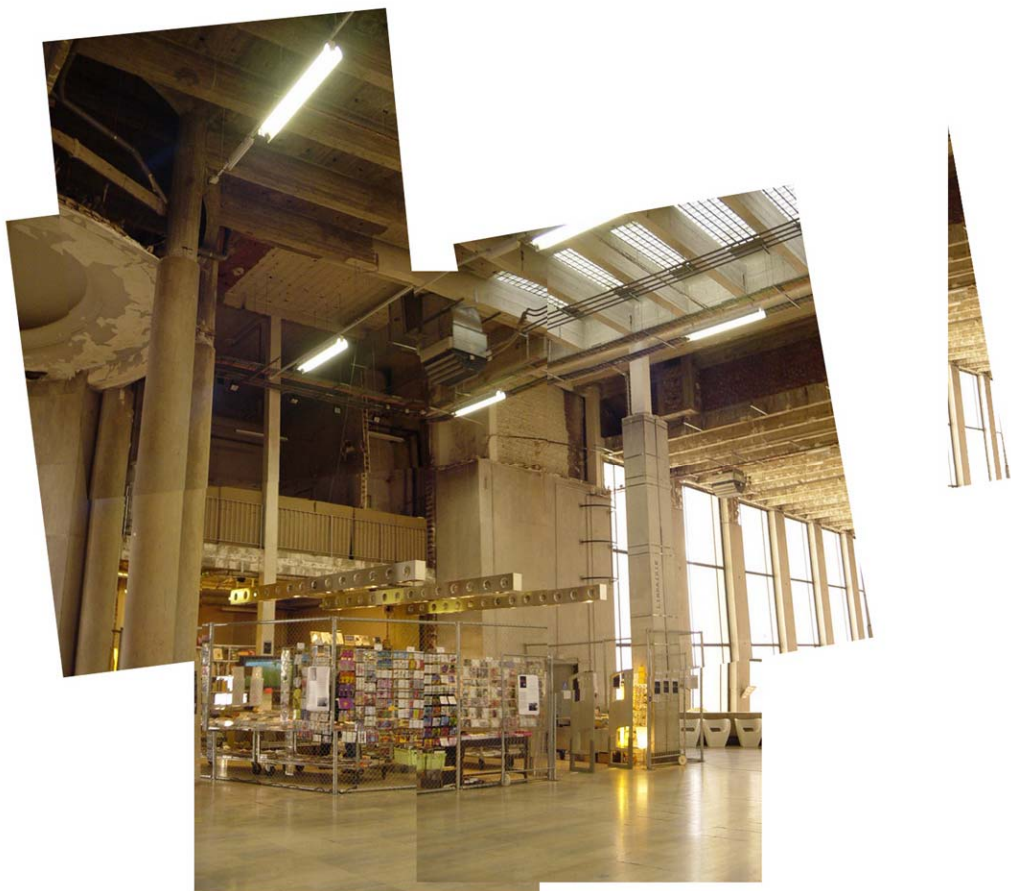


Fig. 10
The shop enclosed by Heras fencing at Palais de Tokyo

A makeshift project also reminds us of the African answer to design problems and the inherent poetry this can lend a building. This is undoubtedly the case at the Palais de Tokyo and something that the gallery has played upon (see fig. 10). Since opening, functions of spaces have changed, new partitions have sprung up and in summer, a café spills out onto the terrace with views over the Seine. Yet these alterations are always carried out in an economic fashion, with the original spirit of the space in mind (see fig.s 11-12). As Vassal explains: 'I

like the idea that architecture could give freedom to do things and this for me, is probably most important; to adapt spaces, climates, ambiances where things can happen. Always, this freedom is essential.’⁹



Fig. 11
One of the gallery spaces at Palais de Tokyo



Fig. 12
The café with artwork covering the floor

The integration of art and architecture is another important theme explored at the Palais de Tokyo. Several visits to the gallery have shown that artists are continually inspired by the space; their artwork is a reaction to the architecture, shown by the brightly painted café floor that is mirrored in the lightshades suspended above (see fig. 12). During a visit by the author in April 2006, artist Laurent Grasso’s work “Projection” showed a ‘video has been installed in keeping with the venue and its architecture’ (see fig. 13). Whilst his fellow exhibitee Barthélémy Togo’s installation “Rain on a Private Garden” ‘invite[d] viewers to step beneath a circus tent made of immense white mosquito nets cascading down from above’ (see fig. 14). The ramshackle charm of his work made up of a carpet of Dole banana boxes and strip fluorescent lights filtered through the mosquito nets, echoed the building as a whole.

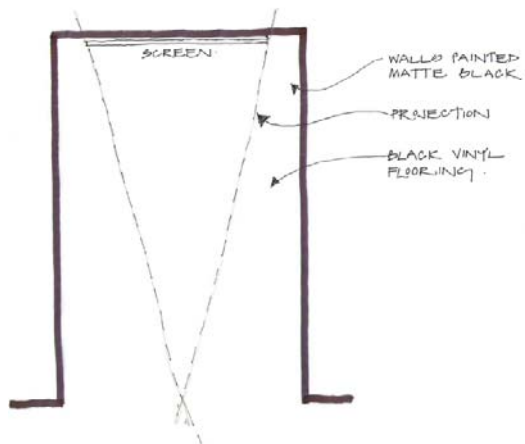


Fig. 13
'Projection' plan
(2005) Laurent Grasso

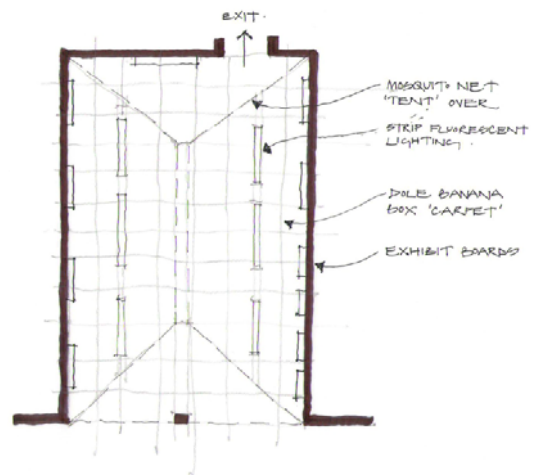


Fig. 14
'Rain on a Private Garden' plan
(2005) Barthélémy Togo

The Palais again recalls the words of Frank Gehry, speaking about his Californian houses of the late '70s and early '80s, he said: “We all like buildings in construction better than we do finished – I think most of us agree on that. The structure is always so much more poetic than the finished thing.”¹⁰

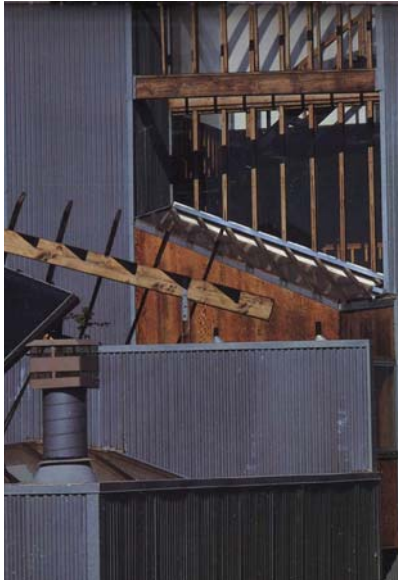


Fig. 15
Spiller House, Venice Beach
(1980) Frank Gehry

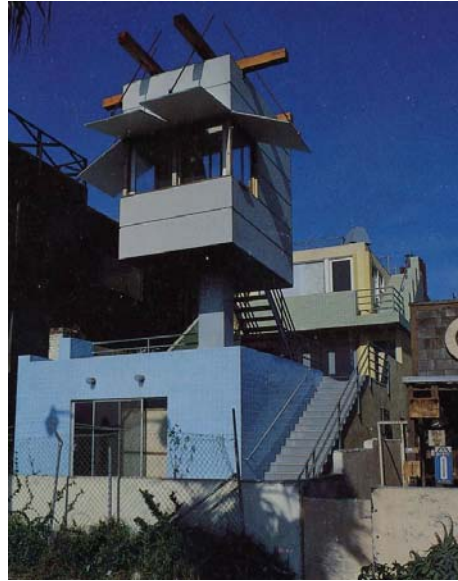


Fig. 16
Norton House, Venice Beach
(1984) Frank Gehry

Gehry's Californian houses 'have an *ad hoc* look in keeping with the rest of Venice'.¹¹ For example, the three staircases in the Norton House are constructed of different materials and using different techniques to give the impression of the house growing organically over many years. Gehry says that using the immediacy of painting as inspiration he wanted to explore the idea of how a building could be made to look like it's in process. Despite some similar results, this approach differs from Lacaton and Vassal; the '*ad hoc*' nature of their projects seems to be a by-product of the honesty and simplicity of construction, rather than the artifice of Gehry's work (see fig.s 15-16).

The layering of time through different elements is a theme that recurs in Lacaton and Vassal's projects. At the Architekturzentrum UNA café in Vienna a new 'blue sky' of hand-painted Turkish tiles adds a new dimension to an existing stable building (see fig.s 17-18).



Fig. 17
A 'blue sky' of hand painted
tiles

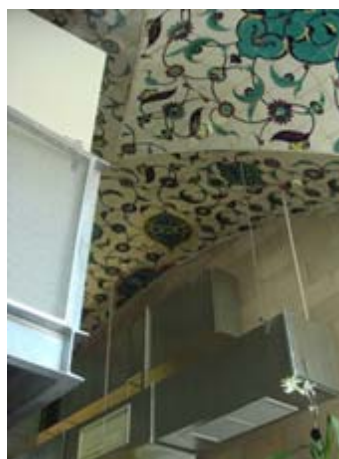


Fig. 18
The 'blue sky' continues
through the kitchen area



Fig. 19
External seating area

The vaulted space is treated as a whole; the ceiling seems to be painted on as one big gesture and the space subsequently sub-divided into functions by

unadorned blockwork walls – café, kitchen, toilets (see fig. 20, 24 & 25). These functions are squeezed into a tight space and so nothing is hidden; customers walk through the kitchen area to the loos, passing a makeshift seating area for staff use during breaks. Posters and fliers cover the shelving and next to a stack of crates, a table with three chairs is placed under a hand-written sign that reads: 'UNA is the best café in Vienna! Yeah!' (See fig.s 21-23)

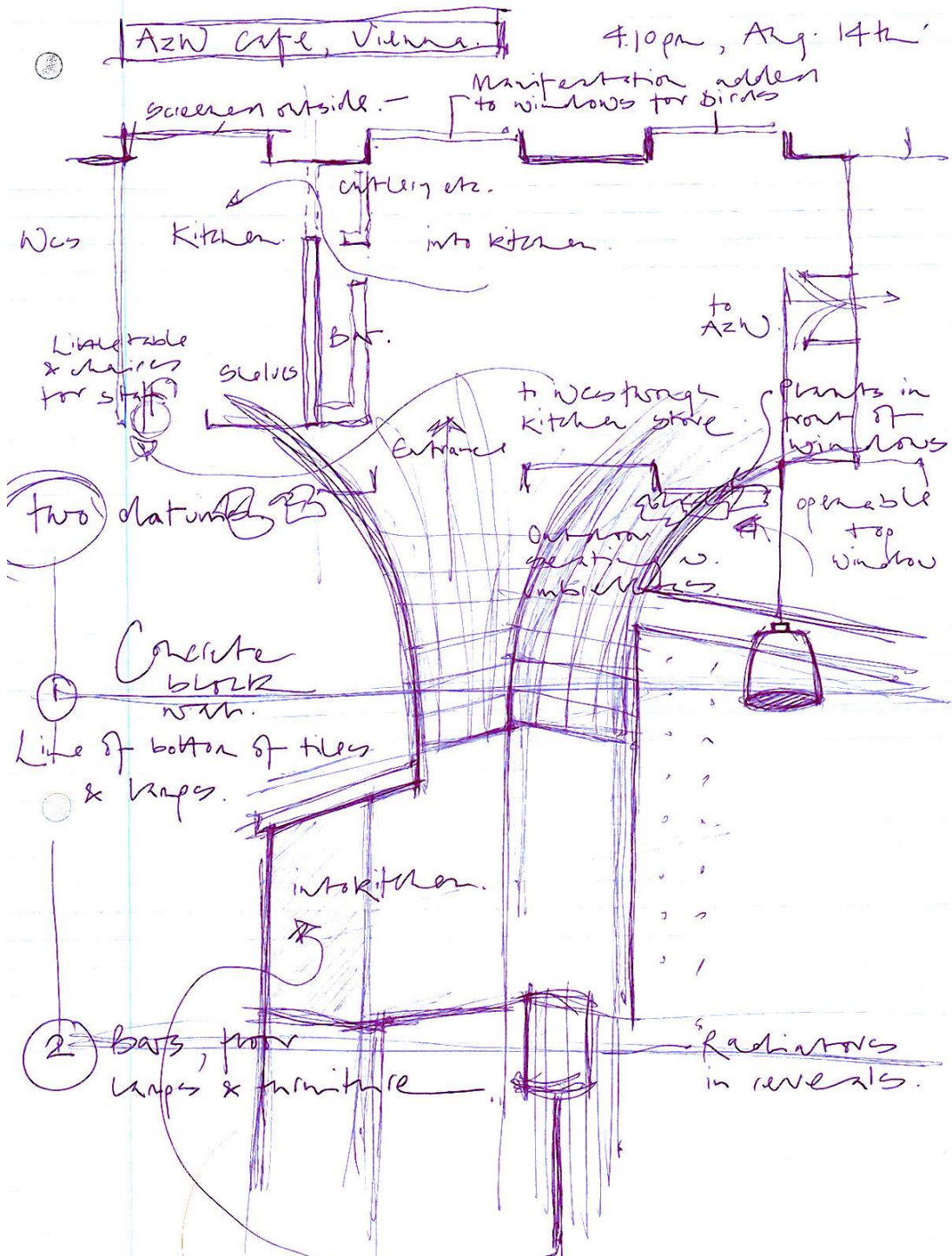


Fig. 20
Sketch of café space & visit observations



Fig. 21
Kitchen storage decorated
with posters



Fig. 22
Staff seating area



Fig. 23
Crates & chairs stacked
wherever possible

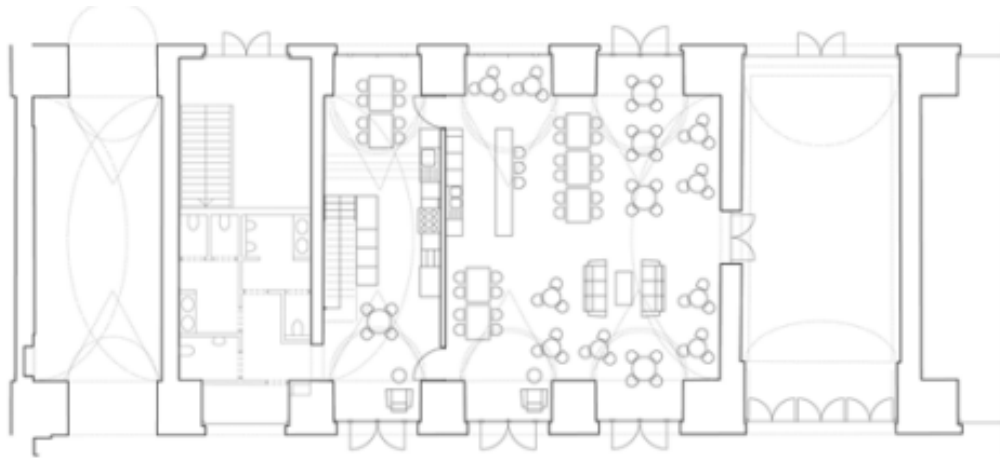


Fig. 24
Plan of café

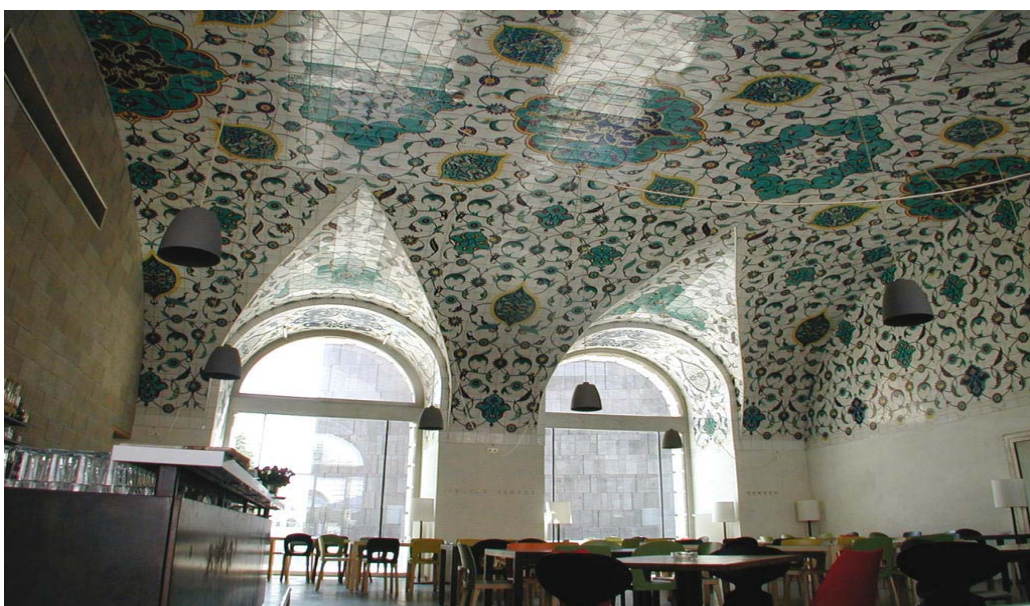


Fig. 25
A painted 'blue sky'

Ilka and Andreas Ruby suggest that the café design 'is something of an act of resistance to the official project of the Museumsquartier which, born of fifteen years of decision-making, studies and building work'.¹² Indeed, the unusual materials and slightly unfinished edge of the Palais de Tokyo and UNA café, coupled with the original, rather grand buildings, lend the spaces a subversive air – as if they have been taken over by a group of squatters. It is a temporality that recalls the TV hut for students in Niger (see page 4); when asked if the straw hut was still extant, Jean Philippe Vassal said: 'Maybe for three years [it existed] and then the wind blows it down and they just build another....'¹³

However this temporality is not necessarily an attractive quality for a Western home or an institutional building; it does not promote a feeling of security or well-being. Chapter 3 will investigate how Lacaton and Vassal have reconciled these ideas with larger works as their practice has developed.

Chapter 3: Adapting Technologies

Lacaton and Vassal have become well known their greenhouse vernacular. Jean Philippe Vassal talks of an early interest in greenhouse technology, which stemmed from research into intermediate spaces between inside and outside during his university Diploma:

After my diploma I went very regularly to special fairs where they sell these products. You could see very sophisticated and precise technology, yet very low cost technology, for enormous areas. This idea of working with the existing climate but modifying it, changing it slightly, to make it okay for different types of flowers.... The sophistication of the climate you are able to create for these roses is unbelievable and when you compare how you 'heat' people, there is an enormous gap!¹

Lacaton and Vassal have always adopted a very holistic approach to the climate within spaces and how occupants choose to keep themselves at a comfortable temperature. They are keen to argue with general principles generated by computer programmes that do not take into consideration the individuality of a building's user. Vassal says '... there's something aberrant in all the engineer's calculations: they never take into account the inhabitants who move about, open the windows, enter, leave, receive their friends....'² Lacaton goes on to say: 'Nor do they consider the assessment a particular person makes of his or her comfort. In fact there are people who, at 25 degrees, are just nicely warm, and others who, at 18 degrees, are stifling.'³

This greenhouse-inspired architecture was first explored at Maison Latapie in 1993. There is no point of reference in this unremarkable street therefore the idea of beauty centred on providing as much living space as possible. The volume of the building is essentially doubled by adding a conservatory to the rear of the property, creating a large, inside-outside space that is habitable for most of the year (see fig.s 1-2).

Lacaton and Vassal's brief for Maison Latapie was to build the most beautiful house possible on a small budget. Their interpretation of this brief is undoubtedly an unusual one; luxury and beauty are linked to the idea of generous spaces rather than cost, resulting in a house of 185 square metres on a budget of 55,000 Euros. Anne Lacaton explains:

It is these larger spaces that are so important because they are additional spaces in regard to the traditional rooms but it's totally free of use and for appropriation of the family. We consider that it's really important for the space, for living space.⁴

In the case of Maison Latapie, this additional space is provided through a semi-outdoor terrace that effectively doubles the area of the ground floor. The double-height volume is paved with patio-style slabs and provided with a simple bamboo canopy to define a central, more intimate area (see fig.s 3-4). This versatile space is another example of the 'buffer zone' used by Vassal in his Niamey straw hut (see page 2). Both spaces may be considered as communal, social spaces outside the main core of the house that provide greater interaction with the surrounding environment and at Maison Latapie, provides some degree of climatic control by storing heat that is released to this core at night as the house cools.



Fig. 1
Street Elevation – ‘open’
Maison Latapie, Bordeaux
(1993)



Fig. 2
‘Closed’ street elevation at Maison Latapie

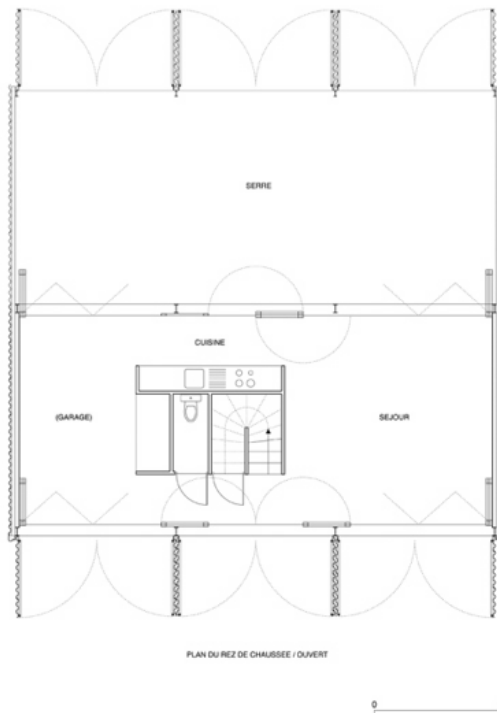


Fig. 3
Maison Latapie – Ground floor

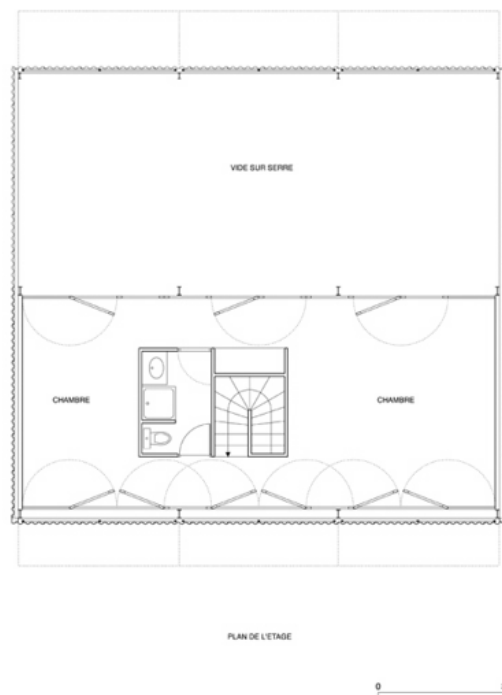


Fig. 4
First floor

Lacaton and Vassal have developed this ‘buffer zone’ throughout their career. As well as providing benefits the environment, this zone may be considered as a reaction to the powerful physical effect Jean Philippe Vassal discusses to provide a transitional space between inside and out (see page 2). It is utilised in their terrace of houses for the Cite Manifeste estate in Mulhouse (2002-5).

The social housing estate in the west of the city is divided into five streets, each designed by a well-known architectural practice: Art'M architecture; Lewis, Potin & Block; Lacaton & Vassal; Shigeru Ban & Jean de Gastines; Atelier Jean Nouvel (see fig.s 5-6). It is well situated between a public park and a supermarket. Lacaton and Vassal were responsible for one block of fourteen dwellings, which are made up of four different typologies, from one to three bedroom duplex apartments. Each apartment is provided with parking and a ‘jardin d’hiver’, at a cost of just 75,000 Euros per dwelling.



Fig. 5
Cité Manifeste, Mulhouse
(2002-5)

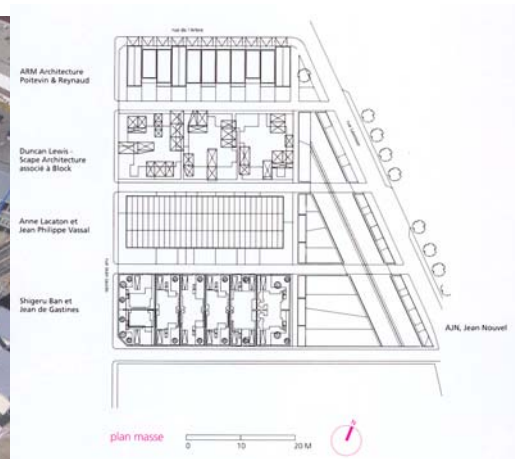


Fig. 6
Cité Manifeste, site plan

The facades of polycarbonate and vaulted roofs with ventilation along the ridgeline echo traditional French greenhouses. Unlike the industrial glasshouses evident en route to Mulhouse, which have a single storey masonry plinth, Lacaton and Vassal open up their building. A concrete skeleton is infilled with full height glazing and screened using a variety of shutters for solar shading and privacy. Again, the apartment plan is left as open as possible, with only slender pillars separating the three bays. A space-saving spiral staircase and small pod-like bathrooms are the only elements to puncture the space, in most cases.



Fig. 7
de Gastines & Ban's housing seen from the park

... if there is a major conceptual division between the proposals then it is one which groups Ban and Nouvel on the one hand, and the three younger teams on the other. Nouvel and Ban's designs have, to a greater degree, a fixed identity, they have that aura of being a finished design which we expect from architecture. The other three, however, propose buildings that emphasise process. They have a certain quality of designed instability.⁵

This 'instability' is prevalent throughout the Cité Manifeste. The new neighbourhood was under two years old when I visited, but the majority of apartments had been adapted and enhanced by the inhabitants. It was evident that outdoor spaces were well used and a clear community spirit existed (see fig. 8).

The influence of Lacaton and Vassal's social housing on the next generation of French architects is evident if we return to their starting point of their architectural careers. In Bordeaux 'Les Diversités', a recent development of 121 apartments by seven different architectural practices, includes designs by architects Mathieu Laporte and David Pradel. Both architects have collaborated with Lacaton and Vassal, indeed Pradel is still employed by the duo.



Fig. 8
Collage of the Cité Manifeste neighbourhood

At 'Les Diversités' Pradel and Laporte have designed a group of dwellings respectively that form part of a new urban block in the centre of Bordeaux. The materiality of these dwellings is strongly reminiscent of Lacaton and Vassal's architecture. Reinforced concrete structures are clad with timber, polycarbonate and metallic sheeting in both cases, to create facades that bear no small resemblance to the Cité Manifeste housing (see fig. 9). Beyond simple aesthetic comparisons, the spirit of the project also brings to mind Lacaton and Vassal's work. Pradel puts emphasis on the relationship between inside and outside, and generosity of space is also considered of utmost importance; his version of the Mulhouse winter garden is spread over two storeys and also accommodates a spiral staircase (see fig. 10).



Fig.s 9-10
 'Les Diversités', Bordeaux
 (2007) David Pradel (with Florence Champiot)

On the other side of the river Garonne, the Management Sciences Building for Bordeaux University (2002-6) is Lacaton and Vassal's continuation of ideas developed at the Cité Manifeste – this time, on a larger scale. The first new university building in the city centre since the 1960s, the building sits next to Bordeaux's botanical gardens and several new housing programmes. The building brings together four previously distinct institutes to create one large business school and accommodates some 3000 students.



Fig.s 11-12
 Arts & Sciences University Building, Grenoble
 (2001)

The building has balconies filled with roses that, in time, will cover each elevation. The combination of a lightweight metal frame and glazing with flowers is a seductive one, creating interest on what might otherwise have been a fairly

uninspiring building addressing the street. The roses also create another layer to the building, another filter through which to view Bordeaux. This is not a new trick for Lacaton and Vassal; they previously decorated the façade of the University of Arts and Science in Grenoble with bougainvilleas and bamboo (see fig.s 11-12).

At Bordeaux the use of roses references the region; roses are a common flower in the south of France. Rose bushes are often planted next to vineyards in this region as the roses carry the same diseases as the vines but this develops two weeks earlier. The farmers therefore know they must treat the vines if they see disease developing in the roses to save their grapes.

Roses are also planted in a 30 x 30 metre central courtyard, which forms the heart of the building where students can congregate, and the four smaller departmental patios. The plants were chosen based on their orientation and also the time of bloom – some flower once, others twice, a year. Anne Lacaton suggests that the flowers may be the most important part of the building; the roses are intended to make you forget the architecture, to provide a touching element and detract from the technological. Indeed, the architects have provided name-tags describing the types of roses and ownership of flowers in front of each office is promoted to ensure their longevity (see fig. 12).



Fig. 12
Management Sciences Building
Bordeaux (2002-6)



Fig. 13
Management Sciences, courtyard

During my visit the weather was particularly bad and the central courtyard had become water-logged, yet the space provided some shelter and remained an enjoyable place to sit. The U-shape plan also gives views across an empty plot to the local area and the church spire in the distance, although there are plans to develop this site as part of the university (see fig. 13).

The planning of the building is thoughtful and also looks to future development. The plan is pushed to the edge of the site to form an urban block, while the floor plans are constructed to be as open plan as possible to allow the building to adapt and evolve over time; there are few columns and staircases and balconies are 'bolted on' to the free plan (see fig.s 14-15). As Lacaton says: 'The life of the building is not determined by the inside walls.'⁶

This arrangement also makes the building easy to navigate, despite the endless reflections created by the choice of glass and corrugated aluminium as the principal internal materials. Indeed, the aluminium sheeting was chosen to

reflect light into the deep plan and typically enclosed rooms, such as the auditoria, are bounded only by glazing with blinds. This creates a 'hall of mirrors' effect, generating an interesting ambiguity between inside and outside (see fig. 16).



Fig. 14
Large spaces for gathering



Fig. 15
Staircase 'bolted on'



Fig. 16
Reflections create ambiguity

The beautiful reflectivity of the building, the blurring of boundaries using planting to bring nature inside, brings to mind the work of their French contemporary Jean Nouvel. Two of his Parisian projects the Fondation Cartier (1994) and more recently, the Musée du quai Branly (2006) both make use of an external glazed screen to provide ambiguity when viewed from the pavement (see fig.s 17-18).



Fig.s 17
Fondation Cartier, Paris
(1994) Jean Nouvel



Fig. 18
Musée du quai Branly, Paris
(2006) Jean Nouvel

Lacaton and Vassal have made the greenhouse 'their favourite architectural test piece, whether directly implemented as an architecturally modified product or as a conceptual reference. For them the greenhouse is the ultimate *machine a habiter*'.⁷

Conclusion

The architecture of Lacaton and Vassal is concerned with providing spaces for people to 'live well'. Anne Lacaton recently explained the central issue of the Management Sciences University building in Bordeaux thus:

This project is precisely linked to the question of living. I don't know if it's the correct translation in English... the word is "habiter". I don't know if living is the correct translation but it means being well somewhere, in a space, in the landscape, everywhere...¹

It is evident from analysing a selection of their works that this theme may be applied to each project, whether this is provided by a canopy of painted tiles or a curtain of roses. Spaces are pared down to a minimum and injected with a subtle individuality. This statement is even true of their own offices; at first glimpse the space appears typical – rows of large desks, architecture books, a small kitchen area – but behind the shelves of books is a corner filled with Jean Philippe Vassal's collection of rare orchids, nurtured by a string of heat lamps.

The subversive nature of their work and the social aspect of many projects – such as the Cité Manifeste – inevitably ensures that Lacaton and Vassal are popular with ideological architecture students (during my visit to Mulhouse I ran into a student from Belgium also writing about their work). Yet as the size and value of their buildings increase, so too does the attention that Lacaton and Vassal receive from the architectural world. Focus has shifted from the novelty and slightly offbeat tone of their architectural stance to the simple, seductive manner that they create and transform buildings. As Vassal explains:

Emilio Ambasz... he gave a lecture in Bordeaux and he said that if nature was perfect, we should not have houses. Branches could bend to protect you from the sun, from the rain, the leaves could fall to cover the soil... So nature is not perfect but it is not very far from perfection. I think the things that you have to add can be very subtle and precise – minimal. So the question is living and providing questions in order to live.²

Indeed, their reputation is beginning to catch up with their work; in July 2008 Lacaton and Vassal were awarded the Grand Prix National de l'architecture, echoing the achievement of Jacques Hondelatte some ten years earlier. But while recognition for Hondelatte's work came late, they have just won the 'Jeune Talent' category.³

Lacaton and Vassal are also the subject of a solo exhibition to be held at the Cité de l'architecture et du Patrimoine in Paris, which will run from 19th November 2008 to 8th February 2009. The exhibition will be held at the newly restored national architecture centre, housed in one wing of the Trocadero. The Trocadero – a vast neo-classical building that sits on the opposite side of the river to the Eiffel Tower – was built at the same time as the Palais de Tokyo, for the 1937 Paris World Exposition. Yet the respective approaches to the renovation of these huge structures appear disparate; they do not share the same spirit. Whilst the Trocadero is orderly and impressive, the Palais de Tokyo is rebellious and 'touching' (to borrow from Anne Lacaton). And so one wonders why the retrospective will not be held at the Palais de Tokyo, certainly it would be a more fitting tribute.