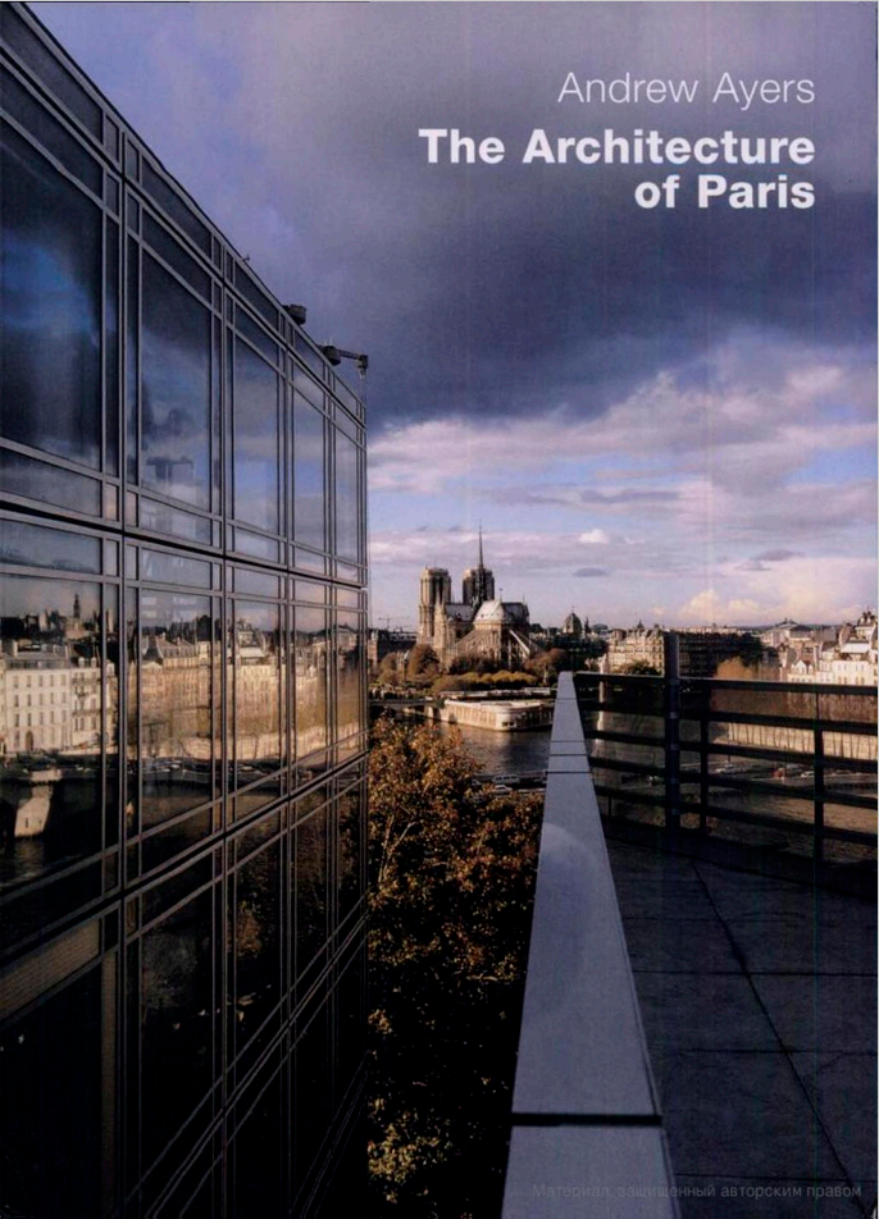


Andrew Ayers The Architecture of Paris



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36.2 «Les Espaces d'Abraxas» social-housing scheme

read into this remark a whole host of French-Revolutionary and Soviet-style egalitarian overtones, and indeed many critics unfavourably compared Bofill's supposedly ironic use of Classicism with the entirely unironic social housing of Soviet Realism. Terry Gilliam even used *Les Espaces d'Abraxas* in his film *Brazil* (1985). Certainly the estate sacrifices individuality to the needs of the greater ensemble effect, but in this it could be argued that it is just an updating of very un-Soviet 18C London, where rows of terraced housing were dressed up to look like enormous palace fronts. However, where the London developments were exclusive, very urban(e) residences designed to aggrandize the consenting rich, here it was the less affluent that were allocated these cartoon-château, ghetto-housing apartments out in the suburbs away from the middle-class city centre. For the officials who commissioned them, Bofill's monumental housing estates represented a tempting *rappel à l'ordre* from the «chaos» of postwar Modernism; pronouncing the architect's name was a sort of urbanist's «abracadabra» (a word purportedly invented by the ancient god Abraxas) that would magically tidy everything away into a semblance of ordered, Classical continuity.

36.3 «Les Arènes de Picasso» social-housing scheme

Place Pablo-Picasso, Noisy-Le-Grand
Manuel Nuñez Yanowsky, 1980–84
(RER: Noisy-le-Grand Mont d'Est)
Even for those not familiar with Manuel Nuñez Yanowsky's œuvre, it will come as no surprise on seeing this housing estate to learn that he was a member of Ricardo Bofill's Taller de Arquitectura, working on the Taller's gigantic housing schemes in the Paris region. Just like Bofill's nearby «Espaces d'Abraxas» (36.2), whose programmatic remit they share, «Les Arènes de Picasso» mix prefabrication, gigantism and PoMo Classicism in an estate of 500 dwellings. But where Bofill's historical borrowings were primarily concerned with the Classical language of façade articulation, Nuñez Yanowsky seems to have sought inspiration in the more abstract, Euclidean-solid-based neo-Classical fantasies of Etienne-Louis Boullée. Organized around the octagonal Place Pablo-Picasso, Les Arènes's most striking features are two 14-storey-high, apartment-filled circular slabs whose elevations recall Boullée's famous drawings for an unbuilt enormous Isaac Newton mausoleum (1784). According to Nuñez Yanowsky himself, «What counts most for an architect is the association of simple images and recognizability of forms and

Marne-la-Vallée 359



36.3 «Les Arènes de Picasso» social-housing scheme

volumes ... Everyone should feel the presence of a cylinder, a cube, a prism ...» Marking the horizon with their inescapable monumentality, these slabs certainly make their presence felt! Perhaps in a bid to domesticate them, locals have dubbed them the «Camemberts». As with Bofill's analogous schemes, the best of this project lies in the quality of its prefabricated concrete mouldings, which include rusticated oval window frames and rather Art-Déco inspired arcade detailing. Again like Bofill's schemes, Les Arènes de Picasso do not constitute an alternative to, but merely a variation on the theme of, gigantic, Modernist collective-housing schemes.

36.4 Ecole d'Architecture de Marne-la-Vallée
10–12, avenue Blaise-Pascal, Champs-sur-Marne
Bernard Tschumi, 1994–99
(RER: Noisy-Champs)

Just as hairdressers often have the most appalling haircuts and, according to an old French proverb, only cobblers are poorly shod, so schools of architecture are generally housed in the most awful buildings. Here was a chance to change all that for once: a commission for a brand-new, purpose-built architecture school on a green-field site in Marne-la-Vallée's Cité Descartes (see 36.1). Winner of the architectural «consultation», Tschumi, dean of Columbia University's architecture school and initially better known as an academic and theorist than as a practising architect, was well placed to understand the needs of an educational institution. His scheme for Marne-la-Vallée was, he claimed, an attempt to «design a space conceived for the age of the mode and mobility, a new type of school that does not take inspiration from the former Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the Bauhaus, American schools or from elsewhere.» Its construction also coincided with the 1998 reform of the French architectural teaching system.

The Cité Descartes is laid out rather in the manner of an industrial estate, with the buildings it contains sitting

in splendid isolation from each other surrounded by grounds and parking lots. Context was therefore not an issue for Tschumi's building. Context was essentially designed from the inside out. Its central, generating element is a capacious, glazed, «un-programmed», «event-orientated» space baptized the «Forum», around which all the school's other functions are organized. Tschumi wanted the Forum to act as an «events generator», where spontaneity and chance would be encouraged and the school's social cohesion assured. Enclosed within the Forum's volume is the *pilotis*-mounted box of a 135-seat lecture hall, whose undercroft serves as a café/conversation space, and whose roof, reached via footbridges from the Forum's galleries, supports an inclined dance floor. With this *mise en scène*, it was hoped, the obligatory coming and going of the school's students and teachers (traversing the Forum is unavoidable) would animate the space in a randomly choreographed, cinematic manner, thereby allowing the institution to develop its own autonomous urbanity in this out-of-the-way site far from the «intellectual nourishment» of the city (as Tschumi put it). Tschumi also believed that «real» learning often happens outside the designated spaces, in corridors and hallways, and the Forum is intended to encourage this.

To the sunny south of the Forum are the school's administrative spaces, while to the north, benefiting from the cool, even light, are the design studios. These latter are interspersed with the classrooms in another gesture of architectural determinism, here intended to forestall the schism between teaching and practice. This pedagogical spirit seems also to have influenced the handling of the building's internal and external finishes, a variety of materials having been used in different ways for apparently no better reason than to provide a demonstration of modern construction possibilities. Thus we find cable-mounted glass, *in-situ* cast and prefabricated raw concrete, welded-aluminium cladding panels, metal meshes, wooden flooring and so on and so forth. The building we see today is in fact only half the school as planned, its director having decided that it was financially and politically safer to build it in two phases. As is the school can accommodate up to 500 students; if all goes well and phase two is constructed, capacity will rise to 1,200. The building's second half will prolong the first in the axis of the Forum, with the latter being extended to incorporate a second, 400-seat lecture hall underneath a monumental staircase (whose initial treads are already in place, taking off into thin air at the Forum's rear).

Tschumi's design for Marne-la-Vallée is at bottom a highly rational and pragmatic response to the school's programmatic requirements as they stand today. Some critics were disappointed that the author of *Architecture and Disjunction* had produced such a «traditional» building. But then the school will surely be dispensing «traditional» teaching; the on-line, virtual architecture school of the future will no doubt be a very different place.