

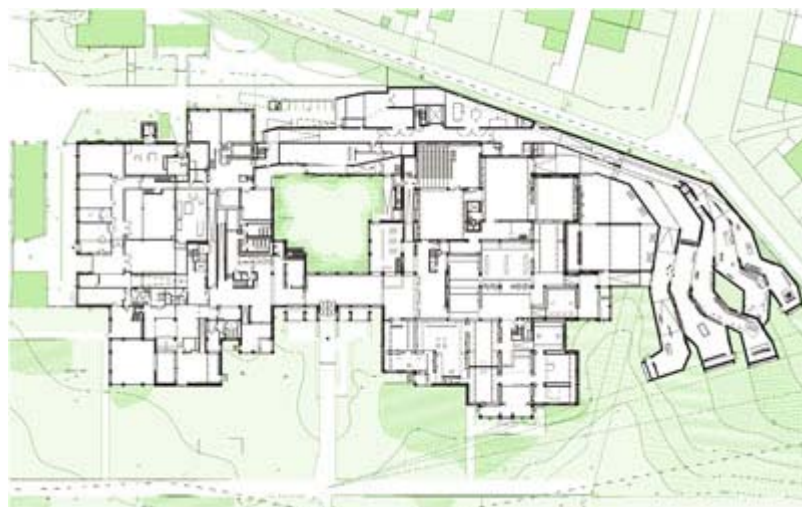
Manuelle Gautrand: LaM Gallery Extension, Lille, France.
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Photo: Max Lerouge/LMCU

Manuelle Gautrand's gallery extension is carefully balanced between foreground and background, says Tim Sloan.

Lille Metropole Musee d'Art Moderne d'Art Contemporain et d'Art Brut (or more concisely LaM) sits in urban parkland in the 1970s new town of Villeneuve d'Ascq 10 kilometres south east of Lille in northern France. The park was chosen in 1978 as the location for a contemporary art gallery and sculpture park to house the collection, donated by Jean and Genevieve Masurel, that includes pieces by Picasso, Braque, Miro and Modigliani. An invited architectural competition was won by Roland Simounet, at a time when the French art world was in a heightened state of excitement following the completion of the Pompidou Centre. One of several important museums designed by Simounet in the 1970s and 80s, including the Picasso Museum in Paris, the building was listed in 2000.



Plan showing the five-pronged extension to Simounet's rectilinear building.

Arriving at the western gate to the park, however, it is clear that Simounet's building is no Pompidou Centre. Set on high ground on the northern boundary, it is a low, red brick and concrete complex with a crenelated roofscape of brick volumes and gallery lights that suggest complex spaces within. The plan is disposed in two wings arranged symmetrically about a glass-sided entrance porch that faces south over the park.

The footpath into the park passes the west wing, housing the administrative and technical facilities, which is masked by Richard Deacon's specially-commissioned 1992 sculpture *Between Fiction and Fact*, comprising four conjoined spheres. Arriving on the central axis, Simounet's set piece gallery wing is to the east and, beyond, there's a brief glimpse of something new.



This is Manuelle Gautrand's 3,200 square metre extension, won in competition in 2002, and built as a dedicated home for a collection of 3,500 works in the genre known as Art Brut, or Outsider Art. Created by individuals beyond the art establishment, and often at the edge of their sanity, Art Brut has its origins in early twentieth century psychology, and the extraordinary collection comprises paintings, drawings, sculptures, machines and objects of desire, many of which display obsessive characteristics, interestingly reminiscent of architectural student projects.

Gautrand broke with the competition brief to propose a free-flowing building that wraps around the eastern flank and links to Simounet's building by joining the two original wings along the northern boundary, forming a courtyard. The competition model shows these five sinuous galleries reaching into the park and it is these, manifest as a series of layered concrete walls, that greet us as we arrive in the entrance porch.

Each of the finger galleries contains a theme within the Art Brut genre, determined by the curators to try to bring a sense

of order to what one observer described as ‘one thousand art movements’ in one. According to Gautrand the controlling requirements of the brief – to provide large long areas of display wall – generated the fingers.

The architect’s diagram is compelling. At Simounet’s entrance then, it would seem logical to somehow cross the courtyard and enter the new galleries amongst this mêlée of walls, in what reads as the ‘forearm’ of the new building. In fact the new galleries are reached by skimming the edges of the Simounet galleries, and all they contain, to be injected just behind the ‘knuckles’. It takes some exploration and a study of the plan to find that much of the ‘forearm’ and ‘wrist’ are in fact back-of-house, so the promised artistic promenade is more brief than expected. All five fingers are essentially revealed at once, at an intersection conceived by curators to give an overview of the collection, but which seems to be a departure from the architectural concept.

Internally the gallery walls and ceilings are presented as universal white painted surfaces that fold and twist very carefully to form a variety of intersecting volumes. At its heart an encapsulated double-height garden brings daylight into the interior and the light animates a collection of wooden figures that are not photosensitive.



Photo: ML/LMCU

Due to the fragility of the rest of the artefacts, however, daylight has been limited in most of the gallery spaces. Gautrand’s device to achieve this is an enveloping concrete mashrabiya screen, a homage to Simounet’s Algerian work. In the competition drawings this becomes increasingly perforate across the walls towards the gable facing the park, allowing shafts of sunlight and snatched views to the landscape.

As the fingers splay out towards this landscape, they are lit by what remains of the mashrabiya screen idea. Perhaps whittled back from the side walls by curators, Gautrand must have had to fight hard to retain them as a core feature of the elevations,

as they inevitably compete with the need to control levels of daylight and to maintain unbroken display walls. In response some of the apertures are expressed as scattered blank recesses in the concrete surfaces, and at the gable ends the daylight is moderated by blinds and display walls set a short distance inside the glazing line. The quality of dappled light in these spaces is delightful and the benches here suggest their use for quiet contemplation of the landscape beyond. Only the presence of the ever-cumbersome fire escape doors detracts from the effect.



Photo: Phillippe Ruault

Underfoot a seamless polished concrete floor slopes and warps subtly to follow the contours in what Gautrand describes as an ‘upturned hand draped over a hill’, and this successfully conveys the organic qualities she hoped to achieve.

From the park, the play of internal volumes is expressed as five perforated rectangular concrete gables, all at slightly different levels, some lifting modestly above the lawn. Gautrand clearly conceived the extension as a sculptural intervention in the park, to be seen beside the Picasso, Calder and Deacon pieces. This built sculpture is visible from only one side as most of it lies along the northern boundary of the park away from public view.

Gautrand chose the uniform silver-grey precast concrete for its ‘rustic’ qualities and to refer to Simounet’s use of concrete for some of the detail in the main gallery. Where Simounet’s concrete is warm and rough, Gautrand’s is smooth, light and silver and seems more closely related to Deacon’s painted grey steel. The concrete is articulated by the wandering pattern of organic perforations and recesses and seen as a whole has the character of a vast piece of eroded stone.

With only one true elevation on view and using a single external material, it takes the sharp late-summer Lille sunlight to distinguish the volumes and illuminate this building’s

sculptural qualities. Restricted by not building forwards of the original Simounet gallery, the fingers don't quite fulfill their promise, internally or externally, as a journey through strands of art towards and out into the landscape.

Gautrand's inventive project reveals her deep respect for Simounet's original building. Presented with a constrained site she has wrestled with the subordination of an extension to the gallery and the desire to find full expression for her architecture. She strikes a successful and polite balance that does not force itself to the foreground, but most importantly makes an identifiable home for a branch of art history that is fascinating, engaging and bold.

Tim Sloan is a director of Levitate whose current projects include Southreef, a mixed-use development in Nottingham.

Manuelle Gautrand Architects writes:

Lace-like precast concrete screens hang like curtains in front of each bay, leaving 30 per cent of the glass unobstructed. The cell-like composition of the voids and the dimensions of the bays (up to 7.75 x 5,65 metres) led us to use Ductal, an Ultra Performance Fibrous Concrete (UPFC) developed by Lafarge and Bouygues. Some 250 square metres of 90mm thick panels were prefabricated, transported to site and hung from concrete beams and tied to the base slab by plates and inserts. Similarly, the doors were clad with 40mm thick Ductal panels, marked with the same pattern as on the concrete shells around them. In addition, some 2000 square metres of thin concrete were cast in-situ for the blind walls of the extension. Prefabrication was ruled out to avoid unsightly joints, and the shells were poured on site, using self-compacting concrete to ensure a perfect spread of the mix in the formwork. Moulds were made from timber, which could adapt to the different volumes. Moulds for the 30mm deep inset motifs were made of plywood covered with a thick coat of moulded polyurethane.

Project team

Architect: Manuelle Gautrand Architecture; design team: Manuelle Gautrand, Yves Tougard; client: Lille Métropole Communauté Urbaine; museography: Renaud Pierard; structural engineer: Khephren; fluids: Alto; qs: LTA, Guesquière-Dierickx; multimedia consultant: Roger Labeyrie; fire security: Casso; facade and roof refurbishment: Etienne Sintive; landscape: AWP; roofing, finishes: Tommasini; photos: Max Lerouge/LMCU, Philippe Ruault.

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