

La Comédie de Béthune by Manuelle Gautrand Architecture

Theatre Culminates in Black Comedy

A Northern French mining town of less than 20000 inhabitants became the unlikely site of a national theatre just over twenty years ago, due in large part to a charismatic mayor's intercessions with the Ministry of Culture and Communication. With perhaps the same nerve, he awarded the commission of *La Comédie de Béthune* to *Manuelle Gautrand Architecture* – a young practice that had as of yet no experience in designing institutions for the dramatic arts. The designated site along rue du 11 Novembre had become of late ironically like a stage set, featuring only a 1930s-era cinema façade supported by girders. In 1999, the firm encased this structure in a rounded, concrete volume of patterned, purple varnish that housed La Comédie's main auditorium.

An extension combining rehearsal space and administrative space was planned at the same time for the adjacent corner plot where an old house stood. This building has only just now been realised, as the city's limited budget could not afford to purchase and demolish the existing property until 2009. The firm intended a contemporary style for the annex. However, as Gautrand herself reflects, 'it was not easy to juxtapose an aesthetic removed by a decade. I finally just resolved to stick another piece of architecture next to the first.'

In spite of this modesty, the new façade achieves a striking equilibrium with its neighbour, beyond the obvious continuation of the existing structure's height. Weaving strands of combed, black metal form a rhomboidal tessellation that echoes the auditorium's lozenge-based print. Shaped tinting in the glazed entry floor grounds this design at street level. A shallow, silver eave over this level consciously aligns the elevation with both of the building's precedents and even features lettering that reprises the original cinema's name, 'Le Palace'. The colour of the cladding, albeit severe, anchors the complex into its setting – both emphasising its mass and seeming to oppose further overlay. In addition, alternating gloss and matte finishes – inspired by the works of painter Pierre Soulages – diffuse an otherwise stark opacity, creating a dynamic play of light on the surface in tandem with reflective, angular punctures.

The interior is no less open and receptive. Lobby space along the corner and at the back of the plan extends the formerly narrow corridor to which the 1999 atrium was confined. Hanging, fluorescent tubes and pristine, white furniture brightly illuminate a space defined by black walls and ceilings. Of course, the extension's main attraction – a double-height rehearsal hall – consolidates the once-scattered activity of the theatrical community into one convenient facility. An enclosed void lofted above the existing auditorium can now be accessed through the new building to accommodate additional practise.

'A very last choice', Gautrand points out, was to simplify the presentation by covering the preserved cinema front with the design of the first volume. While she acknowledges the Béthune public would prefer not to erase the city's architectural heritage, 'they sometimes recognise it is time to turn the page of its history and face a more sensitive future'. With *La Comédie* now fully realised, it does not appear that this future holds tragedy.

Photos [Luc Boegly](#) and Philippe Ruaut

February 25, 2015

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