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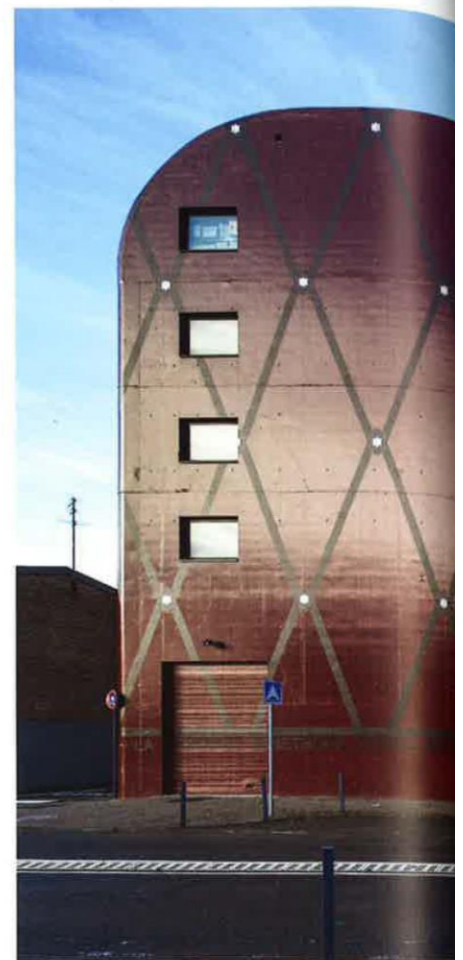
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Manuelle Gautrand concludes theatre with black comedy



Text **Evan Jehl**
Photos **Luc Boegly**

Ironically, the designated site for La Comédie de Béthune, a French national theatre, looked very much like a stage set in the late 20th century, when its occupant was a 1930s cinema façade supported by girders. In 1994 the commission for the design of a new theatre went to Manuelle Gautrand Architecture, a young practice at the time. Five years later, the firm completed a rounded, concrete volume that houses the main auditorium. Clad in a skin of patterned, purple varnish, it encapsulates the venerable façade and the cinema's original name: 'Le Palace'.

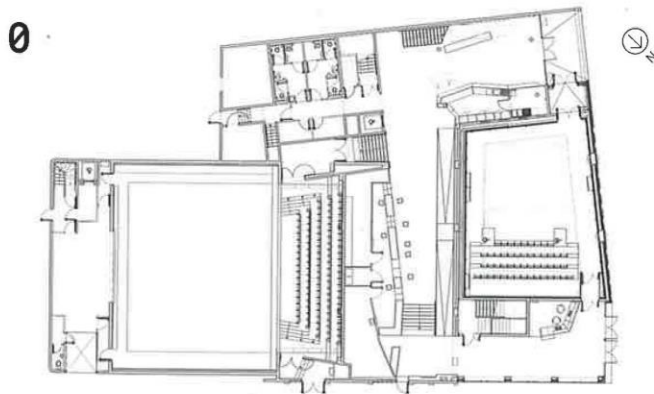
Concurrent plans for an adjacent building with rehearsal rooms and offices have been implemented only now, however, because the city could not afford to purchase and demolish an existing house on the neighbouring plot until 2009. Although the architects had envisioned a contemporary style for the extension, Gautrand says 'it wasn't 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 her modesty, the new façade achieves a striking equilibrium with its neighbour, beyond the obvious

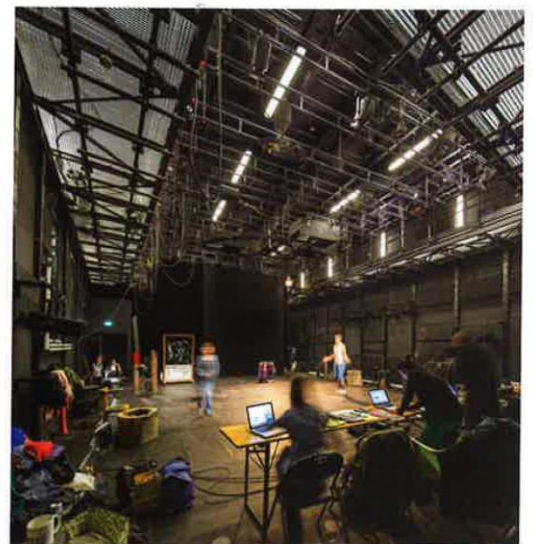
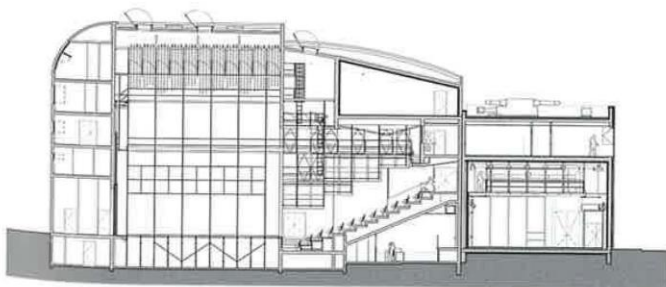
continuation of height. Woven strands of combed black metal form a rhomboidal tessellation that echoes the lozenged pattern, which is repeated in tinted windows at ground level. A shallow silver eave over this level deliberately aligns the elevation with those of the building's precedents. The colour of the cladding, albeit severe, anchors the complex to its setting, emphasizing the building mass while 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.

'A very last choice', says Gautrand, was to simplify the presentation by covering the preserved cinema front with the lozenged design and colour that characterize the larger volume. While acknowledging the Béthune public's wish to maintain the city's architectural heritage, she also recognizes the acquiescence of those willing 'to turn the page of history and face a more sensitive future'. With La Comédie now fully realized, that future does not appear to hold tragedy.

manuelle-gautrand.com



Long Section



The new extension features a double-height rehearsal hall, consolidating the activity of the theatrical community into one facility.