

March 29, 2013

In Paris, Mixing the Contemporary With the Classics

By SAM LUBELL

While many world capitals feed off the energy of modernity, Paris is loved because it represents an escape from it. So when most people visit the city, their agenda involves visiting monuments like the [Louvre](#), the Hôtel de Ville and [Notre Dame](#). The baby of the group is the [Eiffel Tower](#), built in 1887.

But for lovers of contemporary architecture, Paris can be a surprisingly rich place. The latest crop of French architects is producing some of the best new work the city has seen. They are an eclectic group comfortable taking large risks while still melding the work into an august context. The buildings are a far cry from past examples of modern Paris design, like the clunky [Tour Montparnasse](#), the badly dated [Opéra Bastille](#) and the cold skyscrapers of [La Défense](#), the Modernist business district to the city's west. These architects are producing treasures sprinkled amid the dense historic fabric. Often the contrast between old and new makes these buildings all the more striking. They are sleek diamonds in an aging rough.

Ministry of Culture

If you walk out of the Louvre and travel less than five minutes north, you can find a gem hidden in plain sight: the architect [Francis Soler](#)'s Ministry of Culture and Communication, which he completed about eight years ago. To unify a 19th-century classical building with a contemporary addition, he put a latticelike metallic screen (an abstraction of a Renaissance painting) over both. On a gray day, the covering disappears into the sky. On a bright day, it glows. The only public interior space is the ultramodern lobby, with lacy filaments hanging from the ceiling. It's worth a visit, as the ministry offers free information about its cultural events here.

Ministry of Culture, 182, rue Saint-Honoré; www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/182/.

The Louvre

Some modern monuments are right under most tourists' noses, in the city's historic center. One of the newest is the Louvre's Islamic Art Wing, which [opened last September](#). The exhibition space, designed by the French architect [Rudy Ricciotti](#) and the Italian architect [Mario Bellini](#), sits under an undulating golden canopy in the middle of the museum's neo-Classical Visconti Courtyard.

The canopy's surface is a grid of tensile metallic mesh resembling a flying carpet, a Bedouin tent, a

Middle Eastern souk or waves of water, depending on your perspective. History is still everywhere around you (catch a glimpse of the courtyard to assure you of that), but the overall sensation is quite energetic.

A dramatic cut in the floor at the far end takes you down to another level of treasures. The black surfaces fade into the background, bringing to the fore remarkable and previously unexhibited items: jewels, flasks, vases, tablets, lamps, plates, even entire tile floors.

Musée du Louvre, Palais Royal, louvre.fr/en.

Citroën

This is one of the most daring new pieces. [Manuelle Gautrand](#) (one of the few female architects in the bunch) designed this showroom, called **C42**, for the automaker Citroën, which bursts from the street wall of the Champs-Élysées. Unveiled in 2007, it has a glass-and-steel facade that climbs aggressively and is formed from abstracted chevrons, Citroën's symbol. Inside, a stack of revolving turntables showcases the cars. You can circle your way up, stopping to hop into a car or to catch the views.

Citroën, 42, Champs-Élysées; citroenet.org.uk/miscellaneous/champselysees/c42/c42-1.html.

Docks of Paris

Perhaps the most adventurous of these new modern monuments is the **Docks of Paris**. Redesigned by the architects [Jakob + MacFarlane](#), the complex was once a turn-of-the-last-century depot for goods hauled by boats on the Seine. Now it's home to the [Cité de la Mode et du Design](#), which includes a fashion school, a few hip shops and, on the roof, restaurants and bars.

When you see the Cité from the nearby Pont d'Austerlitz, its lime-green glass-and-steel armature, which winds and warps its way up and down the length of the old docks, resembles a giant bug perched atop the Left Bank. Climbing the stairs at the riverside edge of the building is exhilarating and disorienting, but it rewards with fantastic views, and with restaurants and bars whose walls and roofs are made of sloping berms of earth. The docks were mostly deserted when I visited them in the winter, but the roof is said to be boisterous come summer, when crowds of students and curious residents make their way onto the structure.

Docks of Paris, 34, quai d'Austerlitz; paris-docks-en-seine.fr.

Musée du Quai Branly

Just a couple of blocks from the Eiffel Tower is a museum that is literally overshadowed by Gustave Eiffel's masterwork. Jean Nouvel's Musée du Quai Branly, opened in 2006 as a repository of indigenous work from around the world, is an eclectic, nervy composition of bright colors and

jutting fragments. Its riverside facade is covered with a planted wall by the French botanist Patrick Blanc. Another wall contains glass covered with forest imagery and large display boxes protruding from the building's edge like children's blocks. The offices are inside a much cooler glass cube.

The main exhibition space is raised on columns, allowing for the entire ground level to be taken up by a modern park. Inside, the traditional museum experience is replaced by a snaking path lined with leather walls that twists you here and there through exhibitions of native artwork, masks, jewelry, clothing, weapons, totems, living spaces and much more. Another interior highlight: a giant narrow window framing the entire Eiffel Tower.

Musée du Quai Branly, 37, quai Branly; quaibranly.fr/en/.

A Host of Other Gems

There are many more contemporary treasures if you're willing to travel even farther out, toward the edge of the city, where history has a much lighter grip. Essentials include the wow-inducing buildings of the aptly named Paris firm **Périphériques**: in the 17th Arrondissement, to the city's northeast, is **Cardinet Quintessence**, a residential building clad in a mesmerizing prismatic aluminum skin, and just outside the city is **Banlieues Bleues**, a factory complex turned music center in Pantin, a suburb.

Also in the 17th Arrondissement is **Édouard François's Flower Tower**, a residential building enshrouded in potted plants along its balconies. And just a few blocks south of the Boulevard Périphérique is the architect **Renzo Piano's EMI Music France headquarters**, a villagelike collection of buildings inspired by the area's sawtooth-roofed factories. The list goes on and on.

Cardinet Quintessence, 155, rue Cardinet.

Banlieues Bleues, 9, rue Gabrielle Jossierand, Pantin; banlieuesbleues.org.

Flower Tower, 23, rue Albert Roussel.

EMI Music France, 118, rue du Mont Cenis, emimusic.fr.