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Digital love: Manuelle Gautrand and the Gaîté Lyrique

The Gaîté Lyrique, Paris's newest theatre, is a marriage of past and future so bold it takes the breath away. Jonathan Glancey explores a temple of technology and art

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guardian.co.uk, Sunday 20 March 2011 21.31 GMT

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Old meets news ... the

Gaîté Lyrique. Photograph: Vincent Fillon

Everyone knows appearances can be deceptive, but the newly renovated Théâtre de la Gaîté Lyrique in central Paris takes the Bourbon biscuit. From the outside, it seems as conservative as any French arts institution. Built in 1862, its slightly pompous facade makes it every inch a creation of Napoleon III's overambitious second empire.

When you walk inside today, though, a beautifully restored Italianate foyer gives way almost immediately to an ultra-modern world of pulsating, bleeping, thumping digital art, music and film. From this month, the building that in the 70s housed a circus school with elephants stabled in the attic will be simply known as [La Gaîté Lyrique](#), an €83m (£72.5m) "theatre for the digital arts" created and paid for by the City of Paris.

In fact, Gaîté Lyrique is far more than just a theatre. Bursting with energy, it is, according to its artistic director [Jérôme Delormas](#), "a tool box", a "place of continual evolution", a "laboratory of cultural motivations". Immediately behind the lavish marble of the lobby is a web of new spaces set across seven floors and shaped to allow the world of digital artistry to let rip.

There is something distinctly French in this marriage between the grandly historical and the audaciously modern. Think of [IM Pei's glass and steel pyramid](#) rising from the Louvre's Cour Napoleon, or [La Défense](#), a district of brutal 50s towers that stands to the west of the Champs-Élysées. In the early 70s, [Paul Andreu's](#) design for [Charles de Gaulle airport](#) evoked travel by spaceship rather than airliner. In 1977, Rogers and Piano's [Pompidou Centre](#) emerged from the heart of old Paris like some sci-fi oil refinery, and four years later the TGV came snaking out from under the glass roofs of 19th-century Parisian train sheds, projecting rail transport into a new, 300kph era. Every so often architecture in [France](#), moves suddenly, shockingly forward even though planning and conservation laws can be very tough indeed.

"The Gaîté Lyrique took eight years to redevelop. "We had to think first of the sound," says [Manuelle Gautrand](#), architect of the new-look theatre. "There are 120 apartments in the neighbourhood, so we had to build as quietly as possible and to make sure that even when the performances are exciting, the building is completely quiet. So, each of the performance spaces sits inside walls that sit inside walls; it's like a Russian doll."

It was possible for Gautrand to build inside the walls of the theatre, because while the facade has, in effect, remained unchanged since 1862, the interior had been largely gutted. After a long decline, the theatre was closed in 1987 to make way for Planète Magique, a kind of low-rent Disneyland. Where the glistening auditorium had once stood – in which Offenbach's celebrated operettas played, Victor Hugo celebrated his 70th birthday and Diaghilev's Ballet Russes danced – there rose a clumsy great rollercoaster. Opened in 1989, the theme park closed just two years later. This grand architectural dame then stood empty until its radical transformation began.

Delormas is the first to admit that the Gaîté Lyrique is likely to appeal mostly to an audience aged between 15 and 35: "For once", he says, "it will be a case of young people dragging their parents to a museum." The programme ranges from the latest experimental theatre by the Rimini Protokoll Collective – the young German directors best known for putting *Das Kapital* on the stage – to music from avant-garde artists such as Brian Eno to 3D digital performances.



The view from the Gaîté Lyrique's cafe

You can also come here simply to play the latest computer games. There are studios for artists, equipped with cutting-edge computer technology, a library that stocks hundreds of arts magazines, an auditorium for screenings and talks and, of course, a cafe, where the 19th-century architecture has been offset by funky new furniture and flying saucer-style chandeliers. In full flow – when walls dissolve into videos, three-dimensional computer-generated beings come to life in break-out spaces and futuristic music fills this enormous venue – Paris seems very far off indeed.

The interior is something of a maze; sometimes seeming like an empty warehouse, at others a box of architectural tricks. The main performance space at the heart of the building – one of a number of theatres within the theatre – is lined outside with mirrored panels. Inside, this windowless black box can be transformed into a comfortable auditorium with rows of seats that pop up from under the floor. A second, smaller space features a floor built in steel sections; these can be raised and moved around to create different sets and seating structures.

Galleries and mezzanines around the main performance spaces allow visitors to look into what's happening and, as sound, light and images spill out of performances, these become auditoriums in their own right. Dotted throughout the largely windowless building – most of which is fitted out in a hard factory-like aesthetic, as well as splashes of bright pink, gold and yellow – are colourful mobile booths where you can watch a film, play a game, read or work. Gautrand calls these *éclairseuses* (girl guides); the idea is that they direct visitors through the ways of this unconventional theatre. "With the help of the *éclairseuses*," says Gautrand, "you can find a place of your own even in all this colour and noise."



An *éclairseuse* Photograph: Vincent Fillon

I enjoyed Gaîté Lyrique. It took me into another world. And, yet, the shift between grand Paris and the latest whizzy stuff is as abrupt as a train crash. I couldn't help feeling a

little like Jacques Tati in Mon Oncle, befuddled by technology, or Lemmy Caution, the private eye in Jean-Luc Godard's Alphaville who arrives in a nightmarish, ultra-modern city.

Alphaville was filmed in La Défense, an area many hate, but which Gautrand loves. The Marseilles-born architect, who set up her own practice in Paris in 1993, is designing a skyscraper to be situated here. A shimmering tower, dressed in what looks like a filigree fabric but is actually multi-angled sunscreens, it will, she says, "soften some of the harder aspects of Alphaville". It will also be in stark contrast to most of the straight up and down office towers that characterise this ageing "city of the future". The project is currently waiting for the final stage of planning permission before construction can begin. Gautrand also designed the eye-catching Citroën 42 showroom on the Champs-Élysées, whose steel and glass facade is made up of giant Citroën logos.

Life, colour, emotion

In Saint-Étienne, a city south-west of Lyon, Gautrand has designed a remarkable Cité des Affaires, steel and glass government offices that snake through the city, further enlivened by three bright yellow entrances which bring a shimmering gold light into the undercrofts and courtyards.

"It is, I suppose, scenographic", says Gautrand, borrowing the language of the theatre. "The building is a densely occupied development, so I have given it, I hope, some life, colour, emotion. Also, I felt that this part of Saint-Étienne was somehow sad; if there had to be new offices here, then they had to have something special, something you cannot quantify." Whatever that something is, the Cité des Affaires is a remarkable development. "As with the Gaîté Lyrique," says Gautrand, "the modernity here is definitely a contrast with the old world around it, but it can be as playful and as atmospheric as a 19th-century operetta, too. Why not?"

So in Saint-Étienne and Paris, visitors and government officials can work and play in an ultra-modern setting that seems theatrical to its very core. Only in Paris, this bright and boisterous new world has been housed behind the walls of a historic theatre, rather as if Jacques Tati was to walk by with an iPhone tucked away in his old raincoat pocket.

France's five most thrilling architects

Christian de Portzamparc

De Portzamparc is French architecture's most brilliant intellectual. An urban planner as well as an architect, in 1994 he became the first Frenchman to win the Pritzker prize. He's working on several huge projects, including the Cidade da Música in Rio.

Jean Nouvel

Nouvel is an international star, who often represents French architecture abroad. His experimental architecture is characterised by its use of metal and glass, creating buildings that glitter.

Dominique Perrault

In 1990, Perrault delivered his signature building, the industrial, totally transparent Berliet hotel in Paris. He also designed the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, draped in metallic mesh.

Patrick Bouchain

Though he builds little, Bouchain is a pioneer, famous for his low-cost transformation of industrial spaces into cultural zones.

Edouard François

François proves that sustainable architecture needn't constrain the imagination. His environmentally friendly buildings use trees, pot plants and other living materials in their construction.

Sophie Trelcat, architecture critic