

Cloud, Crystal and Promenade



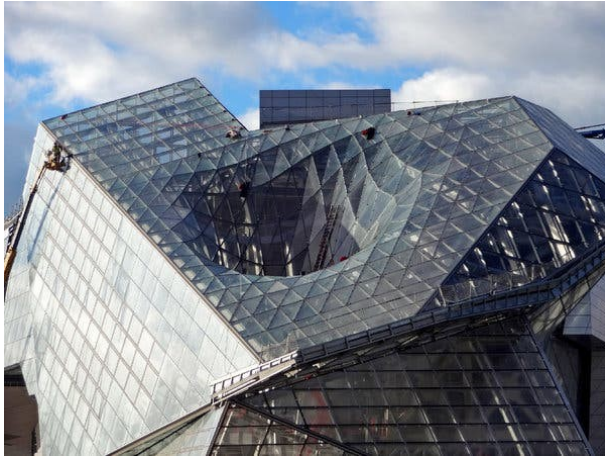
The new museum, by Coop Himmelb(l)au, at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône Rivers in Lyon, France.
Duccio Malagamba

By Joseph Giovannini

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LYON, FRANCE — This country games architecture a little like the way England plays rugby, with the intensity of a contact sport. When a major museum opens in one city, it's an event with repercussions in others. People have opinions and take sides. They keep score. Perhaps it's a cultural echo of Louis XIV and the glory of Versailles: In this country of enduring monuments, architecture matters.

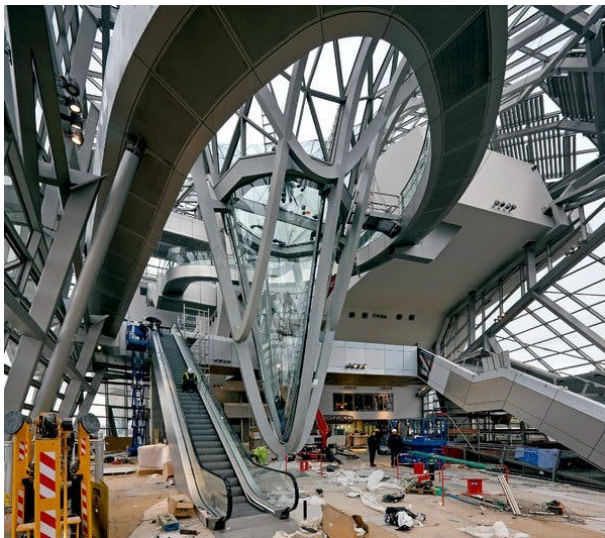
This fall, the French cultural season opened with the private Vuitton Foundation museum in Paris, a rarefied environment for a select collection of contemporary art, by Frank Gehry. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, France's second largest metropolitan area, Lyon — arguably Paris's historic rival, the Chicago to New York — just inaugurated the equally large and prepossessing Confluence Museum (the Musée des Confluences). It is an interdisciplinary institution that interprets anthropology, ethnology and the natural sciences through narrative exhibits that touch on humankind's many stories accounting for the origins of the universe in various societies. But its mission and architecture also advance France's longstanding policy of increasing public access to culture.



An exterior view of the museum.
Duccio Malagamba

The new museum's predecessor, the Guimet Natural History Museum, was shedding its image as a musty cultural enclave, along with the neo-Classical architecture that city leaders considered an image of entrenched social and intellectual hierarchies. The museum wanted to open itself up psychologically and architecturally to a broader audience. The Confluence Museum has traded the traditional paradigm of the museum as a treasure house in favor of a more extroverted institution, housed in a porous structure.

Designed by the Viennese firm Coop Himmelb(l)au, the 180 million euro (about \$225 million) building sits at the tip of a peninsula on one of the most spectacular sites in France, the confluence of the majestic Rhône and Saône Rivers. The entrance is encased in a glass-and-steel "crystal," and there are two stories of black-box galleries within the flowing shape of a faceted "cloud" that resembles a spaceship. The exhibition space hovers above a concrete podium that contains two auditoriums, conference rooms and service areas.



An interior view with the funnel.
Duccio Malagamba

But the scheme that Coop Himmelb(l)au proposed was as much an urban plan for the peninsula as it was a sculptural landmark. The architects looped public promenades over the podium and along the riverfront into a park beyond, which they also designed (to be completed in the early spring). The museum and park are intended to deliver visitors to the city's new riverfront. Building, museum, park and peninsula work as an ensemble, drawing pedestrians and bicycles to "the great magnet of the site, the point of the confluence," said Wolf D. Prix, design principal and chief executive of Coop Himmelb(l)au. "People can walk freely under the building, maybe stopping for a coffee at the restaurant or buying a book at the bookshop."

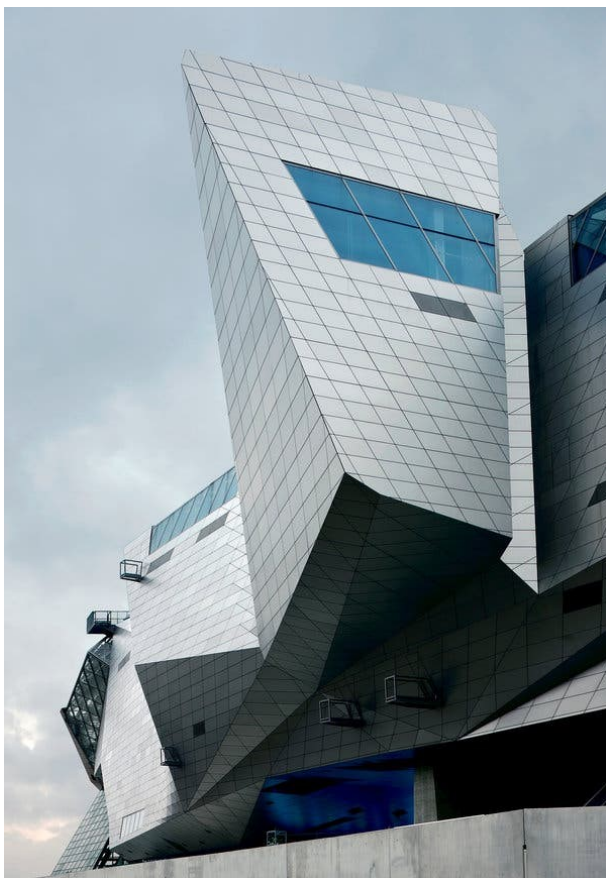
Financed mostly by the regional government, the museum is a catalyst for a district of new offices, housing and government buildings.



An exterior view with the A7 highway in front.
Philippe Schuller for The New York Times

“It was a run-down, neglected, largely vacant industrial grid in a seedy district frequented by prostitutes,” said Michel Côté, who was the director during the 2001 architecture competition that selected the winning design and is now director of the Museums of Civilization in Quebec City. Adjacent to a highway, the new building is meant to be a gateway linking the new district to a science district on the far side of the Rhône.

Visitors climb a wide, ceremonial flight of stairs up into the voluminous entry hall within the angular crystal. They can choose to walk straight through, to the outdoor spaces under the belly of the museum. If they decide to visit the exhibits on the two floors above, they can take a wide and inviting flight of stairs or a spiral ramp that turns in thin air around a funnel of steel and glass that plunges down from the roof into the atrium. Resembling the upper half of a wormhole, the distorted structure is really a column supporting the roof, but the elegant complexity of the shape foreshadows the Big Bang and galactic exhibits in galleries beyond.



An exterior view.
Duccio Malagamba

Mr. Prix, 72 and still faithful to the ethos of the 1960s, when he was a rock guitarist, said that without a fixed point centering the space, the design was itself Einsteinian, releasing visitors into the relativity of a space without grids, axes, poles or other controlling geometric coordinates.

On the next level, a wide pedestrian avenue leads past huge galleries containing temporary shows and permanent collections, including mammoth and dinosaur skeletons. A staircase at the end leads up to another broad corridor, with other flanking galleries. Both decks of the two-story avenue offer panoramic views out to the confluence of the rivers in one direction and back to the sprawling city in the other.



Part of an exhibition of mammals.
Philippe Schuller for The New York Times

When finished, the park will not be a conventionally landscaped terrain dotted with benches but an outdoor space designed to encourage activity, where performers and musicians might find an audience, for example, on the south-facing stairs cascading from the podium. An informal amphitheater is being built beyond. Boats already land beside the riverside promenade. The city has responded by adding pedestrian promenades and bicycle lanes along the riverfront, along with a pedestrian and tram bridge connecting the other side of the Rhône to the peninsula. The pathways create a larger, leisurely urban field where citizens on a recent autumn day were skateboarding and basking in the sun on outdoor chaises. The planners for the district, in association with Coop Himmelb(l)au, have created the sense of an urban holiday in a part of town that was once desolate.

As in the surrounding pedestrian areas, the notion of walking permeates the design of the museum's interior. "The Greek philosophers were peripatetic," Mr. Prix said, adding that he took inspiration from the belief that "walking opens the mind."



A Camarasaurus ruling over an exhibition room.
Philippe Schuller for The New York Times

"A walkable museum provokes your perception, giving you a series of strong impressions," he added, alluding to the staircases, spiral, interior streets and panoramic views of the confluence and the city.

In the French context, the architect's episodic stroll recalls Walter Benjamin and the flâneur, strolling through the shopping galleries and boulevards of Paris, cultivating a mental life in a space of investigation and reflection.



Newlyweds on the Rhône side of the Raymond Barre Bridge.
Philippe Schuller for The New York Times

A recent article in *Handelsblatt*, a German business and finance daily, accused the Confluence Museum and other international “spectacle” buildings of an uncaring and destructive relationship to their neighborhoods. The article described such architecture as exhibitionistic, subtracting rather than adding to the existing context.

“First, it’s the job of an architect in the 21st century to create a new 21st-century context,” Mr. Prix countered. “But second, there was no context here, only a wasteland. The only context was the flow of the two rivers on either side, plus the flow of the highway. In this case, we started with the turbulence of two rivers coming together. The crystal developed from the idea of turbulence. We tried to build a sense of flow into the cloud, complete with interruptions in its volumes for various uses, which are like eddies.”

Coop Himmelb(l)au, one of seven firms in the Deconstructivist Architecture show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1988, has continued to design post-classical buildings in the same spirit, informed by the notions of chaos, complexity and nonlinearity that emerged with scientific discoveries and intellectual theories in the 20th century.

Designed in 2001, with a long hiatus before the four-year period of construction began, the Confluence Museum represents a large-scale (238,000 square feet) example of ideas the firm began working with when it was still a studio handling boutique-size projects. And its chief executive, the architectural rebel from the ’60s – an agent of cultural disruption who staged performance pieces and museum installations but built nothing for about a decade – has emerged as a distinguished dean of the field.

His office telephone, however, continues to play Keith Richards songs for callers on hold – personal anthems that generate architectural intensity and energy.

The museum faithfully represents the core aspiration of the team founded almost a half-century ago. Himmelblau means sky blue in German, and Himmelb(l)au (“bau” means “building”) suggests “building sky blue.” Mr. Prix said that the dream of architects had always been to build clouds, and with the aid of the computer he has indeed built a nebulous form that evokes the grand and stormy galactic clouds displayed within.

“A beautiful coincidence,” Mr. Côté said.