

The Architectural Review

The winner of the 2023 AR New into Old awards announced

11 JULY 2023 | BY AR EDITORS | AR NEW INTO OLD

Site Verrier designed by SO-IL and Freaks Architecture in Meisenthal, France is the winner of this year's AR New into Old awards alongside two highly commended and three commended adaptive reuse projects

The museum complex, Site Verrier, was selected by our panel of judges which included Mohamadreza Ghodousi, founder of ZAV Architects, who won the last iteration of AR New into Old with their Farsh Film Studio project in Tehran; Lu Wenyu, co-founder of Amateur Architecture Studio and juror on the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation; and Valentino Architects founder Sandro Valentino, who has recently worked on an adaptive reuse proposal for a 17th-century watchtower alongside his students at the University of Malta.

The winner is joined by two highly commended projects: Rieckshof, the conversion of a stable into a photography studio in Uckermark, Germany by Helga Blocksdorf Architektur; and Laguna México, the incremental transformation of a textile factory in Mexico City by Productora.

Commended projects include: Cowshed, a barn converted into a house and studio in Devon, UK, by David Kohn Architects; the reconfiguration of a shophouse into Khlong San Studio by Everyday Architect & Design Studio in Bangkok, Thailand; and the transformation of tobacco barns into the Kaomai Museum by PAVA Architects, in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

The panel were looking for projects that were both intelligent and transformative, and for ideas that they had not come across before in renovated and repurposed buildings. The judges were particularly interested in spaces that opened themselves up to the public as a result of their transformation, and in the ways in which architects allowed for the spaces to continue to evolve gradually, organically, over time. They were also keen to ensure that the shortlisted projects were mindful of the social and ecological contexts of their respective sites.

Comments from the judges

Mohamadreza Ghodousi said 'Site Verrier is a joyful urban superimposition that invades the courtyard. An elliptical form, informed by the topography of the surroundings, integrates circulation and revitalises the life of the buildings.'

Sandro Valentino added that 'It is a beautifully executed intervention which celebrates the town's history and attempts to reinvent the courtyard as a connecting agent between the buildings and the town.'

Lu Wenyu followed: 'By successfully bridging the gap between past and present, the architects have demonstrated their profound understanding of the intrinsic value of architectural heritage. This remarkable endeavour serves as an inspiration, illustrating how a visionary design approach can breathe new life into historical sites while preserving their authenticity.'

AR New into Old awards 2023 results:

Winner

Site Verrier in Meisenthal, France by SO-IL and Freaks Architecture

Highly Commended

Rieckshof in Uckermark, Germany by Helga Blocksdorf Architektur

Laguna México in Mexico City, Mexico by Productora

Commended

Cowshed in Devon, UK by David Kohn Architects

Kaomai Museum in Chiang Mai, Thailand by PAVA Architects

Khlong San Studio in Bangkok, Thailand by Everyday Architect & Design Studio

Shortlisted

Norwegian Press House in Oslo, Norway by Atelier Oslo and KIMA Arkitektur

Old East Ham Fire Station in London, UK by dRMM

Croft 3 on the Isle of Mull, UK by Fardaa

Surf Ghana Collective community space in Busua, Ghana by Glenn DeRoché + Juergen Strohmayr

Vast Gallery & Artist Residency in Tehran, Iran by Persian Garden Studio

Åben Brewery in Copenhagen, Denmark by Pihlmann Architects

Swimming pool in Saint-Méen-le-Grand, France by Raum

The Playscape in Beijing, China by Waa

Kha-nam Noi in Sing Buri, Thailand by Yangnar Studio

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Site Verrier in Meisenthal, France by SO-IL and Freaks Architecture

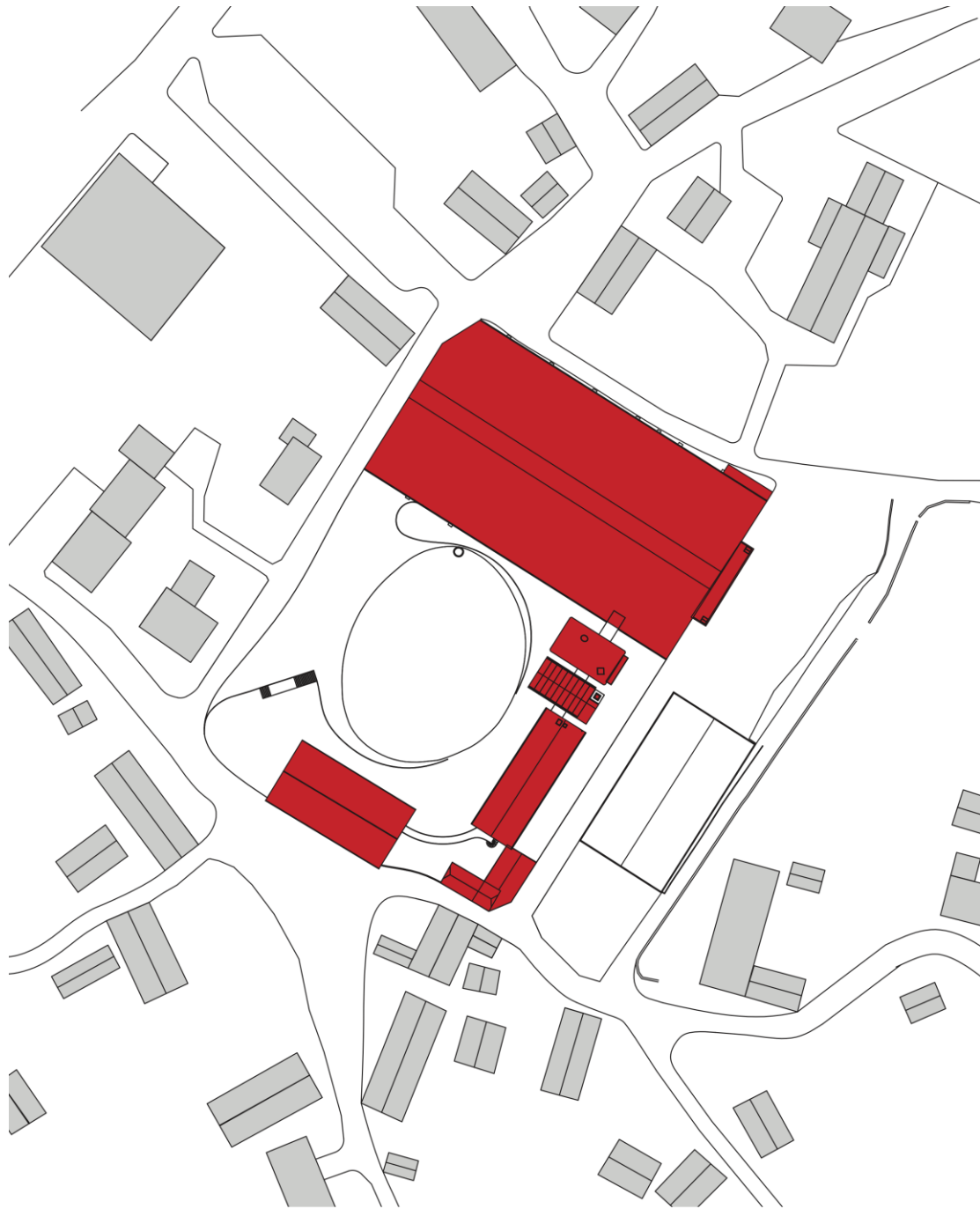
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1/14 The Site Verrier comprises three distinct organisations: a museum about glass, workshop facilities, and a space for performances and exhibitions. These are brought together around a concrete wave designed by SO-IL and Freaks Architecture
Credit : Arthur Crestani

As this glass factory in France's rural Moselle continues to evolve and host new activities, SO-IL and Freaks Architecture's rehabilitation consolidates the site's identity

They say you need 10 lumberjacks for one glassblower. Surrounded by the forests of the Northern Vosges Regional Nature Park, the Meisenthal glass factory was established in a village of the same name in Moselle, France, in 1704. Composed of an accumulation of buildings constructed over three centuries to match new demands and innovative technologies of glassmaking, the site was closed at the end of 1969, sold to the town for a symbolic price, and left derelict. Served by abundant forest, water streams and a ground rich in silicon – the main component of glass – the industry is a key part of the region's identity, with two remaining active factories short drives away: Lalique and Saint-Louis, both specialising in luxury crystal. Instead, Meisenthal produced everyday objects such as drinking glasses, butter dishes, salt cellars and cheese covers, but also more specialised glasses for watches, spectacles and laboratories, and, their star products, Christmas baubles.



Site Verrier, Meisenthal, France
SO-IL and Freaks Architecture

Entering the old factory's courtyard today is an entirely novel experience. Winners of an international competition against 184 other projects, US-based practice SO-IL, who led the project in association with Paris-based Freaks Architecture, carried out much more than a retrofit. Their design intervention is a complete overhaul of the site which manages to preserve the peculiar identity of Meisenthal's inspiring story. Following the factory closure, the brownfield site that sits at the heart of this village of 680 inhabitants was slowly reactivated by determined and passionate locals of all generations. From a local group keen to preserve the glassmaking heritage emerged a museum, in 1978, and, in the early 1990s, the furnaces were reactivated as an art and design centre dedicated to glassblowing, the Centre International d'Art Verrier (International Centre for Glass Art, or CIAV). Around the same time, a group of Meisenthal teenagers started organising concerts in the factory's abandoned hangar, which they fixed themselves with salvaged bricks and bags of cement; it has now become a venue of both regional and national significance, with an audience capacity of 3,000 as well as a new name, the Halle Verrière.

Dishevelled, wearing a worn-out cap, a T-shirt and running shoes, the director of the CIAV, Yann Grienenger, immediately asks if we can call each other tu instead of the formal vous that would usually be considered fitting for such a meeting. Warm and laid back, the first few minutes of discussion set the tone for the day. Despite the setting of a pristine €12.5 million space delivered by a foremost international practice, it is more appropriate to approach Meisenthal's Site Verrier ('glass facility') as a grassroots project that slowly gathered momentum to become what it is now. Like Grienenger, Pascal Klein, director of the Halle Verrière, was born here and was one of the teenagers who organised concerts 30 years ago. Caroline Duchamp, director of the museum, also has a long-lasting relationship with the collections and the locale. Meisenthal is not (yet?) part of the mandatory regional posting for ambitious managers of cultural venues aspiring to be appointed in Paris. It is first and foremost a love affair by passionate individuals, even if the day's conversations reveal some nostalgia for the earlier family-like ambience, against the grandiloquence of today.

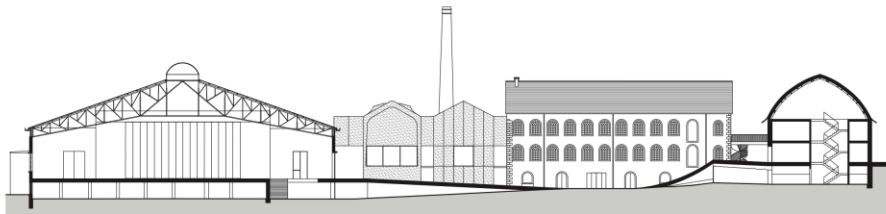
‘The spatial, social and visual coherence is a rare achievement in France, where design and administrative cultures are more inclined to conflict than coordination’

Site Verrier is an umbrella name to describe the three institutions based here: the Musée du Verre ('museum of glass'), lodged in the 18th-century former administrative building with a gambrel roof; the CIAV that hosts designers, glassblowers and apprentices in its workshops; and the state-of-the-art performance and exhibition venue of the Halle Verrière. Since these three organisations collaborate but have different purposes, audiences, modes of functioning and legal statuses, the brief was 'to connect but dissociate the three projects', explains Grienenger.

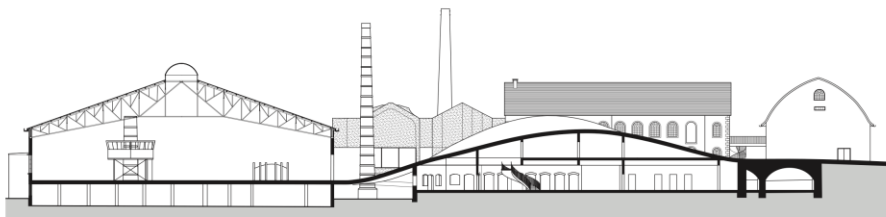
The leading idea of SO-IL and Freaks Architecture's design is a wave that echoes the relief of the mountain towering over the village, while connecting the buildings that host the three organisations. Florian Idenburg, principal of SO-IL together with Jing Liu, also calls it a picnic blanket, and refers to the picnic depicted in the opening scene of Charles and Ray Eames's Powers of Ten. Made of concrete, the wave is an impressive and elegant achievement that beautifully structures the site; Idenburg explains it is a homage to glass going from a liquid to a solid state, 'the idea of the molten Earth that gets fluid and solidifies'. Grienenger confesses: 'We got a bit worried when they started building it; we thought it was going to be so heavy, but the result is beautiful. It feels like it is flowing, like it embraces the landscape.'

In combination with the omnipresent bricks of the existing buildings, the architects have relied heavily on concrete. While the result is graceful and the impression of fluidity a total success, you might get concrete fatigue by the end of a day on site. 'We designed it a decade ago and our insight into the carbon footprint of concrete has evolved,' admits Idenburg. 'I am very happy with how it turned out, but sometimes it can be a bit hard.' Like today. It is only 25°C and the courtyard is almost empty. With no shade to hide from the sun, and surrounded by concrete that takes in the heat from the sun and will continue releasing it back well into the night, the experience of walking across the site is harsh. The tasteful pocket-sized garden in the middle does not provide enough respite from the heat.

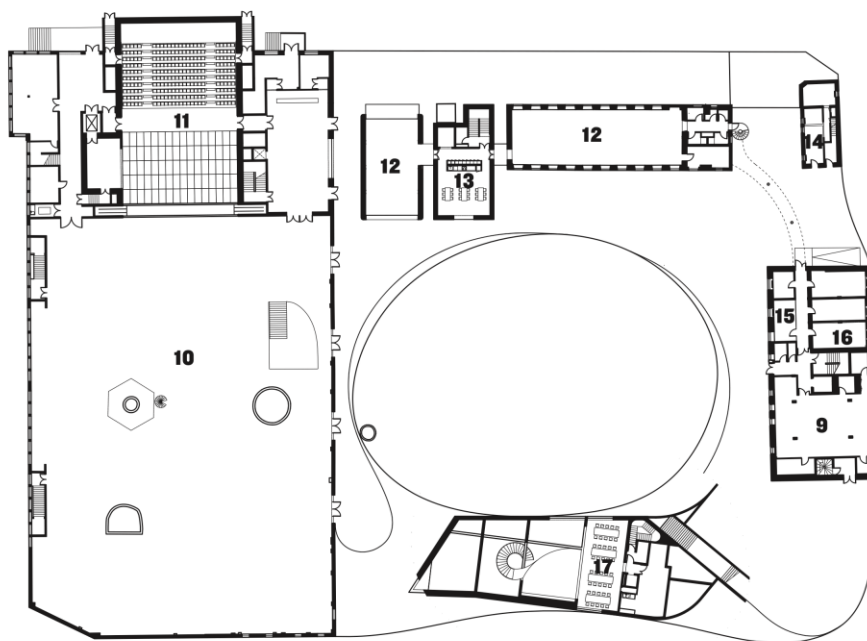
Yet the architects played artfully with the site's topography, a major design challenge. Historically, the three buildings have been on different levels, and a stream of water ran through the middle of the courtyard. Now the entrance to all buildings takes place at the same level, beneath the wave that was used as a levelling device. 'Before,' explains Grienenger, 'the whole place was a mess, with no legibility as each building had its main entrance on a different level, with stairs going in all directions.'



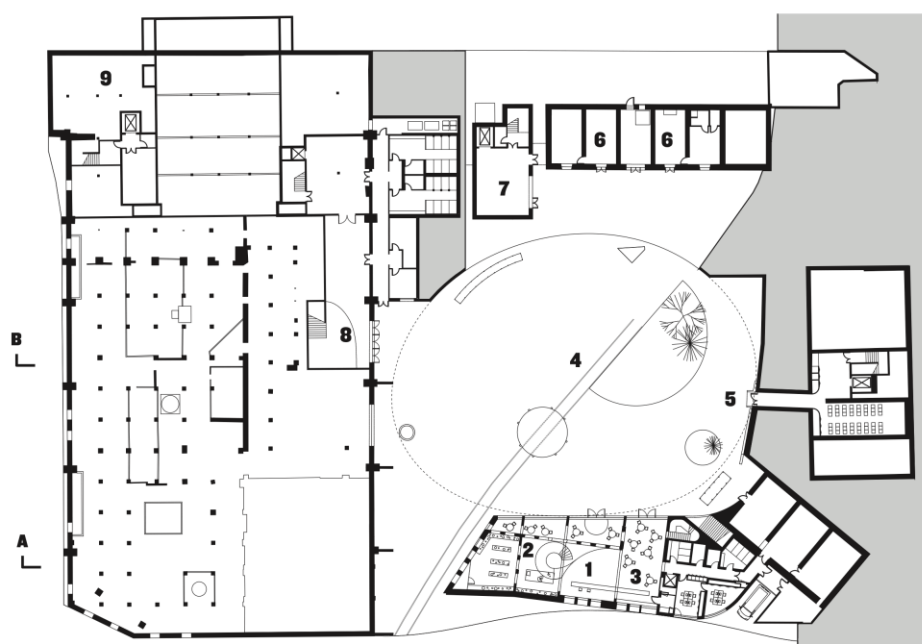
section BB



section AA



first floor



ground floor plan

- 1 ticket office
- 2 shop
- 3 café
- 4 courtyard
- 5 Musée du Verre entrance
- 6 student workshop
- 7 CIIV entrance
- 8 Halle Verrière entrance
- 9 storage
- 10 Halle Verrière
- 11 Black Cube theatre
- 12 glass-blowing workshop
- 13 canteen
- 14 library
- 15 office
- 16 glass restoration workshop
- 17 multipurpose room



The journey across the site starts at the ticket office and shop, located in the former acid engraving workshop. In this luminous and modular space that gets incredibly busy at Christmas, when baubles are once again sold in their thousands, an extra floor – the highest point of the wave – has been added to what used to be a ruin. Then, through the courtyard, you enter the museum via the 18th-century vaulted cellars (the factory's original furnaces) before starting the tour on the third floor where, after an unassuming ascension via a bland staircase, you reach a beautifully renovated attic. The architects have insulated it from the outside and entirely retrofitted it to become publicly accessible, cleverly opening diamond-shaped lightwells in the lattice structure. Despite the relatively low-ceilinged rooms of this 321-year-old listed building, the collections of the museum are beautifully showcased thanks to Designers Unit's precise scenography. From the second floor of the museum (the first level is for office space and storage) you reach the CIAV by way of a footbridge that overlooks the Site Verrier, with the mountains to your back. The centre for glass art is structured in three connected buildings: the historic workshop and two newly designed concrete constructions nicknamed the 'fake twins'. The first 'twin' hosts the canteen, a rest area, and the office of the CIAV, while the second is a brand-new workshop structured around a listed concrete frame that determined the building's shape. The space is tall, to allow the heat of the open-fire furnaces that burn constantly to escape through the openings in the plant-covered roof. Large windows bring a generous amount of light as well as fresh air from the outside. At the end of the tour, you get a peek at the Halle Verrière, an immense 3,200m² space that includes a smaller concert hall, the 'Black Cube', with maxed-out sonic insulation that blocks any sound from reaching the neighbourhood while providing excellent acoustics for musicians and audience.

‘While the result is graceful and the impression of fluidity a total success, you might get concrete fatigue by the end of a day on site’

Not only has the design intervention tremendously improved the experience of working on and visiting the Site Verrier, but it also offers a spatial, social and visual coherence that is further reinforced by V8 Designers' excellent visual identity, down to bespoke furniture. Such consistency is a rare achievement in France where, unlike in the Netherlands or Switzerland, design and administrative cultures are more inclined to conflict than coordination. And indeed, both clients and architects are singing each other's praises: 'All projects should be like that,' explains Grienberger, describing the architects as 'very attentive', despite being more than 6,000 kilometres away.

Idenburg explains that the building is not about pushing the contrast between new and old. 'The Site Verrier will be at its best 15 years from now,' he believes, 'because it is sediments of time. At the moment, you can see the new intervention. But it will gradually melt into the palette of textures and materials to create an architecture that is more integrated. What we are doing is continuing the process of constant transformation.' The motto of the Site Verrier, hung in the new workshop in the form of a neon light installation, does not say otherwise: 'L'histoire continue.' The history of Meisenthal goes on.