

**PALAIS DE TOKYO**  
Location Paris  
Architect Lacaton & Vassal  
Renovated 2002 & 2012



Russell Curtis (left), Dieter Kleiner and Tim Riley of RCKa at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.





# 'It's so expansive and otherworldly that it functions as its own landscape'

RCKa's **Russell Curtis, Dieter Kleiner** and **Tim Riley** celebrate the freedom and generosity of Lacaton & Vassal's reworking of the Palais de Tokyo

Interview by Pamela Buxton Pictures by Gareth Gardner

## DIETER KLEINER

I've admired Palais de Tokyo since receiving a 2G edition of Lacaton & Vassal's work as a leaving present from Sergison Bates in 2001. I was immediately struck by its boldness of purpose and architectural necessity.

The building is remarkable on a number of levels. It is a permanently temporary, non-institutional institution, with vast formal spaces rendered informal by the naked exposure of its elegant concrete frame. The antithesis of monumental architecture, it subverts its grand art-deco host building to reveal failings and idiosyncrasies that give it personality and character. It is a refreshingly democratic and supportive reimagining of a building: anti-ego, and almost anti-architecture.

Lacaton & Vassal demonstrates a wider view of architecture, of it having a greater imperative than itself. I share this view, along with an interest in democratic spaces and the supportive potential of architecture — its ability to empower, enable and enrich. As architects, our ambition is to produce socially responsive architecture that is intrinsically connected to the people who will use and experience our buildings.

Lacaton & Vassal also, I now realise, employs a similar design approach — one of continuous critical dialogue, both within the office and with stakeholders and beneficiaries. It even went as far as to move into the vacant Palais building during the design stage, to engage in dialogue with collaborators, whose number rose to more than 100 by the time it opened in 2001. Not surprisingly, with such strong artist and community ties, the centre was immediately embraced.

I first saw it in 2003 as the Centre for Contemporary Creation. There was a similarity of ambition to Cedric Price's Fun Palace in that it was completely



The Palais de Tokyo is one of a pair of galleries built in 1937 for the International Exhibition of Arts and Technology.

flexible and permeable, to encourage visitors to come in and engage with the artists and the art. Perhaps the nearest equivalent we have in the UK to this in spirit is the Royal Festival Hall foyer.

Lacaton & Vassal's inspiration was the Jemaa el-Fnaa square in the heart of Marrakesh, and it wanted the Palais to similarly enable all manner of uses. There are some obvious parallels with our TNG Youth & Community Centre for Lewisham council, which is primarily about providing a positive, vibrant and inclusive space that users can take ownership of, rather than creating a signature building that determines what takes place inside. It's about architecture as an enabler. As a result of Lacaton & Vassal's collaborative approach, Palais de Tokyo is deeply rooted, and the space is meaningful to a lot of people.

To pull it off, you do have to have a singular and rigorous approach so as to provide a backdrop that's neither too prescriptive nor rich. It's not

**'It couldn't really be any cheaper and yet there's something very beautiful about it'**

minimal architecture, but is instead an architecture of necessity — simple, efficient and entirely legible.

When some of the marble column linings were found to be loose, Lacaton & Vassal neither removed nor reinstalled to match the existing, choosing instead a simple metal strap to keep them on. It couldn't really be any cheaper and yet there's something very beautiful and rich about it.

This building strikes even more of a chord now. Having set up RCKa, I appreciate exactly how difficult it is to retain the clarity of an idea and realise a building's social purpose, seemingly against all odds, as Lacaton & Vassal did here.

## TIM RILEY

I became aware of Palais de Tokyo when researching our Community Hub project in Norwich, which looks to reimagine a disused light industrial building, and is similar in its scale and ambition to engage with the whole community.

Lacaton & Vassal went beyond the role of the architect when it formulated its approach here, becoming instead more like a custodian of the building. At Palais de Tokyo I see the practice as part of the client body, which is important as one can only truly innovate when one has a





The original grand entrance with double staircase.



One of the top-lit ground floor galleries.



Basement gallery showing an installation by Philippe Parreno.

For a gallery building, the servicing strategy was pared back. There is no air-conditioning because Lacaton & Vassal understood that it would have required huge ducts, which would have been expensive and visually problematic, and so it carried out extensive modelling to show that it wasn't needed.

It found the exposed concrete structure particularly attractive and worked to keep it in its found state. By stripping away the superficiality of the original design, with its thin marble veneer, the architects make us reflect on what is really important about the building: space, light and use.

The fire strategy was equally inventive. Because rebar was exposed in a number of places the fire department wanted the practice to spray concrete on to the columns to protect the structure, but with its technical expertise and research, Lacaton & Vassal was able to demonstrate that this was not required. It had the fire department identify five pieces of art that it thought could create a fire risk, and replicated these before setting them on fire within the galleries. Not many architects would go to those lengths, but Lacaton & Vassal was completely committed, which is why Palais de Tokyo is such a success.



Gallery shop, with flexible mobile units and fence-like walls.

## A ROUGH AND READY ROUTE TO SUCCESS

Although the Palais de Tokyo itself was established in 2002, it occupies an art deco building that was constructed in 1937 as the Palais des Musées d'Art Moderne. This formed part of the International Exhibition of Arts and Technology, located in the 16th arrondissement near the Eiffel Tower.

It was used as an arts venue in several guises after the exhibition, but became increasingly marginalised following the opening of the Pompidou Centre in 1976.

An attempt to turn it into a cinema complex was abandoned in 1995 and the building was closed to the public for many years before the French government decided to revert to its original use as an art gallery.

The Bordeaux practice Lacaton & Vassal won a competition for its €3 million refurbishment and relocated its office to the building until it opened in 2002.



The Palais de Tokyo has rejuvenated the previously disused gallery building.

Initially, the gallery occupied just 7,800sq m of the building and was dedicated to the emerging contemporary art scene, with no permanent collection.

The gallery was conceived as a "found" space and was deliberately rough and ready and never regarded

as finished, but instead as a space with potential to evolve. This incarnation was a popular and critical success and its first phase was followed in 2012 by a further 16,500sq m of accommodation, created at a cost of €13 million by the same architect.