



# '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 reimagination 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.

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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 eeply 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.

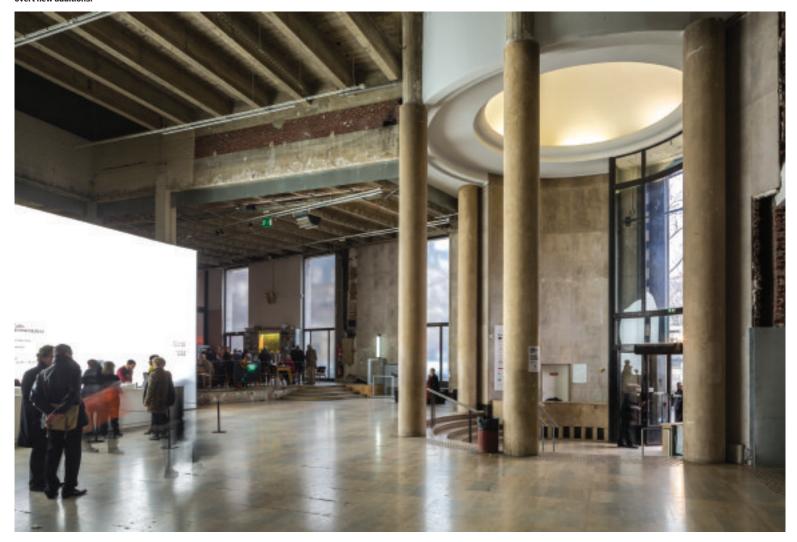
This building strikes even more of a chord now. Having set up RCKa, I appreciate exactly how difficult it is to retain the clarity of an idea and realise a building's social purpose, seemingly against all odds, as Lacaton & Vassal did here.

### **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

Entrance, showing the raw, stripped-back interior and the overt new additions



comprehensive and strategic understanding of the client's needs

I still have strong ties to the Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool where we worked extremely closely with the client, to the extent that we could challenge curatorial decision making. The result was an outward looking, engaging and city-facing gallery that even appropriated an adjacent covered public space to create a fourth gallery; none of which would otherwise have been possible.

At Palais de Tokyo flexibility and adaptability were identified as the main drivers. Lacaton & Vassal didn't dictate what type of art could be shown where, b over-designing for a particular type of work, but instead had the humility and vision to provide an infrastructure for things to happen anywhere. What's important in this project is not so much what the architect did, but more what it chose not to do.

There were stringent rules about not taking elements out. And Lacaton & Vassal's interventions are as transparent as possible to maintain visual routes through the building, such as the bookshop, which has moveable units on wheels and is enclosed in wire fencing rather than solid walls.

Routes are not dictated around the building. Instead people are trusted to decide how to explore it for themselves. This is empowering, and encourages people to engage with the building more, flowing where they want to enjoy the rooms they find most attractive. It is principally a series of spaces for things to happen, primed for improvisation and imbued with flexibility and potential.

Perhaps you could criticise Palais de Tokyo for not engaging with the public realm more, but in a way it's so expansive and otherworldly that it functions as its own landscape.

Inside, there is no attempt to attenuate the space in terms of sound and also, unlike most galleries, the majority of spaces have windows onto the street Normally, the acoustics would be controlled to reduce reverberation by at the very least softening hard surfaces, but Palais de Tokyo just celebrates the audio, which adds a certain kind of informality

as it all just blurs together. It's all part of the democratic nature of the gallery — normally galleries are very hushed but here you can do anything and as a result you're not intimidated

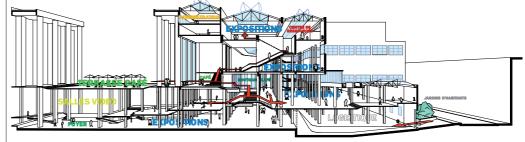
because of the acoustics.

Its democratic spirit is evidenced by the eschewing of the

original grand entrance with its

imposing staircase, that would immediately make you feel small. Instead, a conscious decision was made to utilise a less intimidating front entrance on an upper level. You can witness how positively this is felt by visitors as they experience the surprise of entering into a vast play-ground behind the imposing fresco of the host building.

'You're not scared about touching it because it's already so bashed around'



Section showing the second phase of Lacaton & Vassal's refurbishment of Palais de Tokyo, which provided another 16,500sq m of accommodation within the gutted 1930s building

### **RUSSELL CURTIS**

It was only when RCKa went through the YAYA interview process in 2011 that we really started to distil our approach to the design of public buildings, and the similarities between this and Lacaton & Vassal's work started to become apparent.

Lacaton & Vassal invested a lot in this project, relocating its office of six to it during the first phase, and growing as a practice during the development of the building. Living with the building day-to-day provided the practice with the perfect oppor tunity to fully understand the existing fabric, enabling it to respond inventively to the building by constantly inhabiting it.

They say necessity is the mother of invention - well the £300/sq m phase one budget led to some seriously clever solutions.

Nothing is arbitrary, everything is purposeful and there is no embellishment. It is a bottom -up, responsive solution rather than the application of a predetermined dogma. Lacaton & Vassal was, however, rigorous about presenting no artifice, preferring to retain and add to the many layers of occupation it

found in the building.
What's nice is that it's not precious. You're not scared about touching it because it's already so bashed around, with great chunks taken out of the columns and peeling paint all over the

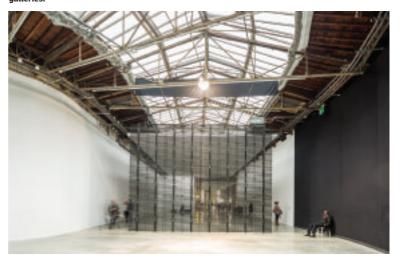
place. It's so different to the pristine white cube galleries of its neighbour, the Museum of Modern Art, which is a structural mirror-image on the other side

of the square.
While it had a greater budget for phase two works, Lacaton & Vassal stuck to the same approach. It is grand in scale, but feels welcoming. It would be impossible to recreate the texture and warmth of its found character if you designed it from scratch. The architects talk about learning from agricultural build-ings and this certainly informs this project in details such as the array of rooflights in the top gallery, with their simple and legible opening mechanism.

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 super ficiality 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 struc-ture, 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.