

# world architecture

## New vintage

Alvaro Siza reworks the  
Santo Ovidio estate

At home with the cosmonauts

How a spectacular office divided Copenhagen

Austerity as monument: the death camp museum

# The art of today

**How do you turn a gutted art deco building into Paris' temporary space for contemporary art? If you're Lacaton & Vassal, you work with the rubble to create a flexible gallery that makes most other found-space museums look positively tame.**

**By Kieran Long. Photographs by Philippe Ruault.**

*'Two years ago, I stayed at the Hotel Palenque, where Robert Smithson had stayed some 30 years before. It was my first visit, yet surprise was met by familiarity. It had changed a lot, yet it looked much the same. It had continued to rebuild itself, yet it continued to fall down. Perhaps my expectations of museums are not too dissimilar.'*

This comment from curator and artist Jeremy Millar is taken from *What Do You Expect from an Art Institution in the 21st Century?*, a book published to mark the opening of the Palais de Tokyo

contemporary art space in a 1937 Paris building. French architect Lacaton & Vassal was given just FF2500/m<sup>2</sup> (US\$332) to provide the answer – and its gallery makes Millar's comments seem eerily prescient.

It had to create a space for the creation and consumption of contemporary art out of the half of the art deco complex that used to contain the national museum of modern art. The Palais de Tokyo is intended to be a non-institutional institution, a meeting place for artists and the public. However, the work also had to be temporary – a three-year solution to the problem of a building that was gutted and then abandoned after a 1995 regeneration scheme came to nothing. More than half the job, which was paid for by the French department of culture, was to make the building structurally sound and secure.

The-then Bordeaux-based practice moved its office into the palais as the project took shape. Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal are rising stars in France, known as some of the most intellectually serious and individual designers of their generation. However, they say their interests are in making the most of limited

**Right:** The palais at night, as seen from the avenue du Président Wilson.

**Top right:** The restaurant, which is linked to the outside by a new bridge.

**Far right:** View from the bottom of the stairs that lead to the upstairs 'salon'.





resources. This stance was prompted by their decision to work in Africa for five years as urban planners. At the competition stage for the palais, they proposed an image drawn from those experiences. The bustling square of Djemaa el-Fna in Marrakech, Morocco, was the inspiration for a space that could be in a constant state of improvisation. To this end, Lacaton & Vassal retained an open floor plate and created new links into the building, in the form of steel bridges from the avenue du Président Wilson and new steel stairs.

A catchword of the Palais de Tokyo publicity material is 'arrhythmia', signifying an unwillingness to do things by the book and a desire to be as flexible as possible. This means that exhibitions will not change seasonally as in a conventional gallery and the spaces will not close to allow new pieces to be installed. The building must be able to accommodate frequent changes.

The palais has the feel of a giant New York loft, something akin to Andy Warhol's factory, in which people can meet without social or hierarchical barriers. Artists are at work in the space, installing or tinkering with their work, and you are encouraged to talk to them. But there has been no dumbing-down either. As you enter and look down the hall, you see giant letters spelling out 'Fuck the Artist' as part of one piece that is in the best traditions of spoilt-brat poststructuralism. There is a brilliant mix of the accessible and ▷





▷ the impenetrable – the best and worst of conceptual art.

Lacaton & Vassal has worked in the building for the past two years, living intimately with the dust and debris of the semi-demolished complex. It seems to have deeply informed the practice's treatment of the space. This is a project that has been as much about the process of design and construction as it has about the finished product. Lacaton says that when work started, the office of six people was dwarfed by the space. It must have been one of the only practices in the world to have an office big enough for badminton matches. As the project progressed, more and more people – artists, curators, staff and architects – joined the team of six, until during the final meetings there were more than 100 collaborators. Now, the place buzzes with energy and feels exactly like the forum it is intended to be.

Early in the design process, the architect rejected the notion of the artificially lit white box, opting for a surfeit of natural light. Works that depend on darker conditions might have suffered but are rescued by the palais' opening hours – from midday to midnight. During the day, light floods in from the rooflights and glazed wall and, at night, the space is artificially lit. Different pieces work better at different times of day – all part of the 'arrhythmic' experience.

The flexible approach also means that windowless rooms could be built within the massive space, and there are recessed areas of

the plan that are more shielded. A beguiling light and video installation by artist Mélik Ohanian is in one of these areas at the moment, and works very well. In addition, huge translucent portraits by photographer Beat Streuli fill the windows of the restaurant, reducing the light.

But one of the pleasures of this building is the fact that you can see outside. Whether it is the tramps camping on the plaza between the Palais de Tokyo and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (which forms the other half of the complex), or the traffic rushing by, this enhances the idea that the building is part of the city and a place that welcomes the outside. This is in stark contrast to the many hermetically sealed galleries in Paris and elsewhere.

Here, the atmosphere is comfortable and robust, like being inside a ruin. Great chunks are knocked out of previously polished columns and damaged floors reveal layers of screed like geological strata. In places, the additions are subtle, with elegant wire baskets holding cables and other servicing on the ceiling and high-spec lighting with both ambient strip lighting and spots. At other times, the budget has forced the architect to make its insertions economical and witty. The ticket office is simply a caravan wheeled into the building and the shop is contained within chain link fencing, making it feel more like a joke prison than the well-stocked art bookseller that it is.

**Above: The main space has a new concrete floor and lighting.**

**Above right: The lower area faces the plaza that links the palais to the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.**

Found-space galleries are no longer shocking to the public – these days, they can be found in most major capitals. However, not many of them are quite as raw as this and, at the moment, the space does seem to dictate the subject matter of the art that inhabits it. Much of the work here engages with the building and it is exciting, but one itches for something a bit more complex and diverse. There are many large pieces – a reaction to the scale of the museum – but a lack of subtlety in places. This perhaps echoes the initial, tentative inhabitation of the space by the architects and artists, and could resolve itself over time.

Despite its Moroccan influence, the architect's success here is more dependent on another plank of its competition submission. Lacaton explains: 'During the competition, we showed a lot of images of houses we had done. We like to create places in which to live well, and so we always tend to work from the inside out.' At the Palais de Tokyo, the scale of the interior, as well as the effect of the raw concrete structural grid juxtaposed with the marble remains of the deco staircases, combine to great effect. They vindicate the architect's decision not to try to make the space coherent in its finishes. It is an immensely comfortable place, with enough space to see work properly and enough variety to enable the palais to carry out its short-term mission. The question is whether in three years, when the project is supposed to finish, anyone will want to leave. **wa**

*What Do You Expect from an Art Institution in the 21st Century?*  
is published by the Palais de Tokyo and costs €7.50 (US\$6.50).  
For more information, visit [www.palaisdetokyo.com](http://www.palaisdetokyo.com)



**Left: Cross section.**  
Only the shaded parts  
of the building are in  
use.

**Below: Longitudinal  
section with new  
entrance bridge on  
the left.**

