Beneath the monumental streamlined grandeur of the Palais de Tokyo lurks an evocatively rough and raw building carcass now recolonised as a museum for contemporary creation.
a cinema museum under its roof. Some €12.2 million were spent gutting the interior only for the project to be dropped following a change of government in 1997. The structurally weakened carcass stood abandoned until in 1999 the ministry announced it would become home — provisionally — to a ‘centre for contemporary creation’.

Baptised simply ‘Palais de Tokyo’, this new institution was the brainchild of international contemporary-art curators Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans. New York had PS1, Berlin had KW, but where, they asked, was their Parisian equivalent? The Centre Pompidou had originally been billed as a forum for exciting spontaneous stuff, but the overweight bureaucracy and classic museum mission of the Musée National d’Art Moderne had killed off all that. The Palais de Tokyo was therefore to be simply a venue, with no permanent collection, occupying 7,800sqm of the 24,300 available in the west wing. A miserly €5 million (£4.4 million) was made available for conversion work, and three architectural firms (out of 130 candidates) were charged with drawing up developed proposals. Of these, the culture ministry chose Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal’s because it maximised return — in terms of space and flexibility — on the money available. Since opening in January 2009, the new venue (AR February 2009) has made its mark in the Parisian art scene with over 300,000 visitors annually, and become a permanent institution. This success has now been consecrated by its physical extension: for the Palais de Tokyo’s 10th anniversary, Lacaton & Vassal have just annexed the entire west wing to create one of the biggest contemporary-art spaces in Europe, for a very modest €13 million (£10.5 million).

The architects’ approach has not changed, and their latest interventions continue the project begun 13 years ago. On first visiting the west wing’s carcass in 1999, Lacaton & Vassal’s conviction was that ‘The architecture was already there’. As they explained, the building was ‘striking because of the rightness of its architecture, its dimensioning, its balance of relationships... The museum had been conceived around two axes, horizontal and vertical, ... and we wanted to retain that freedom of use’ Not only this, but in its gutted state the interior had been stripped down to the essential, revealing its ‘hidden structure, the modernity of the place. It was magnificent’. This was just as well, since money was so short (both then and now) that they could do little more than carry out essential repairs, what one might term a minimalist intervention. But any kind of minimalism is much more difficult to achieve than first appears, and the Palais de Tokyo was no exception.

Take the building’s splendidly slender concrete frame, exposed when the interior was gutted, which the architects wanted to leave untouched. But since it had been weakened, parts of it had to be reinforced as
unobtrusively as possible, either with steel or new concrete sheathing. And then there were the firemen, who wanted the whole thing covered in spray-on fireproofing, since without the original cladding the rebar would be, in their view, insufficiently protected. Preventing this would prove a major battle for Lacaton & Vassal, one that went as far as simulating fires for five pieces of contemporary art picked out of Beaux Arts magazine. Another feature the architects admired in this giant found object was its luminosity and openness.

When designing the west wing, Dondeel and Anibert had followed the prescriptions of Louis Hautecoeur, director of the national collections, who wanted minimal artificial lighting, lateral daylight for sculptures and overhead daylight for paintings. This explains the enormous windows on the north, south and east facades, and the glass roofs in all the other galleries. After the art collections’ departure, subsequent users had entirely blocked out the light, but getting the building had let it flood back in again, even more so now the frosted-glass ceilings under the skylights were removed.

Lacaton & Vassal were determined that this brightness and visual connection with the outside world should remain, and a lot of their budget went into achieving this: reparation and waterproofing of the skylights and the almost unnoticeable introduction of new exits into the metal-framed sculpture-gallery windows, which meant eschewing the cheaper but visually obtrusive solution of off-the-peg doors. Where overhead daylight becomes too intense, white shower-curtains typify fabric efficiently, and inexpensively, veils it.

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But such details are not what strikes the first-time visitor. A labyrinth of soaring, grandiose volumes, the gutted Palais is astonishing, a visually sublime experience in the Burkean, Piranesian sense. Stripped to the bones, its interior resembles the industrial hulks so prized by loft dwellers and artists alike, while remnants of its former incarnation — polished-stone cladding in the escalier d’honneur, the ghostly oval conference hall (abandoned in 1987 and untouched since), peeling paint, period handrails — make of it a Romantic ruin reminiscent of Detroit, Kadykan or Chernobyl. Those disappointed by the clinical sterility of Tate Modern will appreciate the lived-in rawness here.

Surprisingly, the architects claim there was ‘never any question’ of taking an aesthetic position with respect to the unfinished, to the ruin. But how then do you explain their decision to leave undisturbed all sorts of evocative détails trouvés — flaking paint that could easily have been refreshed, twisted rebars that could have been sawn off in an instant, protruding nails, superannuated signage, and multiple other traces of previous occupants and activities — or their regret that the walls of the principal mid-level gallery, which they had left dirty, fractured and scarred, were repaired and whitewashed at Wolfgang Tillmans’ insistence for his 2002 exhibition Vue d’en haut?

Which brings us to the disparity between what architects prescribe and what users actually want. Back in 1999, Lacaton & Vassal proposed an entirely open-plan project inspired by their memories of Marrakech’s Djemaa el-Fna square and Berlin’s Alexanderplatz: loose spaces that were constantly in flux, redefined by their users with temporary, often virtual boundaries. But, around the time of the Tillmans exhibition, whitewashed partitions went up at the Palais de Tokyo that are still standing 10 years later; mural art needs walls, and remaking them fresh for every exhibition is clearly not something a cash-strapped venue can envisage. For this latest campaign of work, the architects invoked Cedric Price’s Fun Palace, quoting Joan Littlewood’s promotional brochure in their explanatory text: ‘No need to look for an entrance — just walk in anywhere. No doors, foyers, queues or commissionaires: it’s up to you how you use it!’ But despite the plethora of new entrances they introduced in the west wing, security checks and paid-admission areas mean these dreams of total freedom of access remain just as impractically utopian as they were in the 1960s.

These are merely gribbles, however. Lacaton & Vassal took a bold and intelligent position which they defended with vigour and logic; the building will evolve according to its users’ wishes, just as it should, and artists will be challenged by these splendid spaces to their mutual benefit.