

ARTFORUM

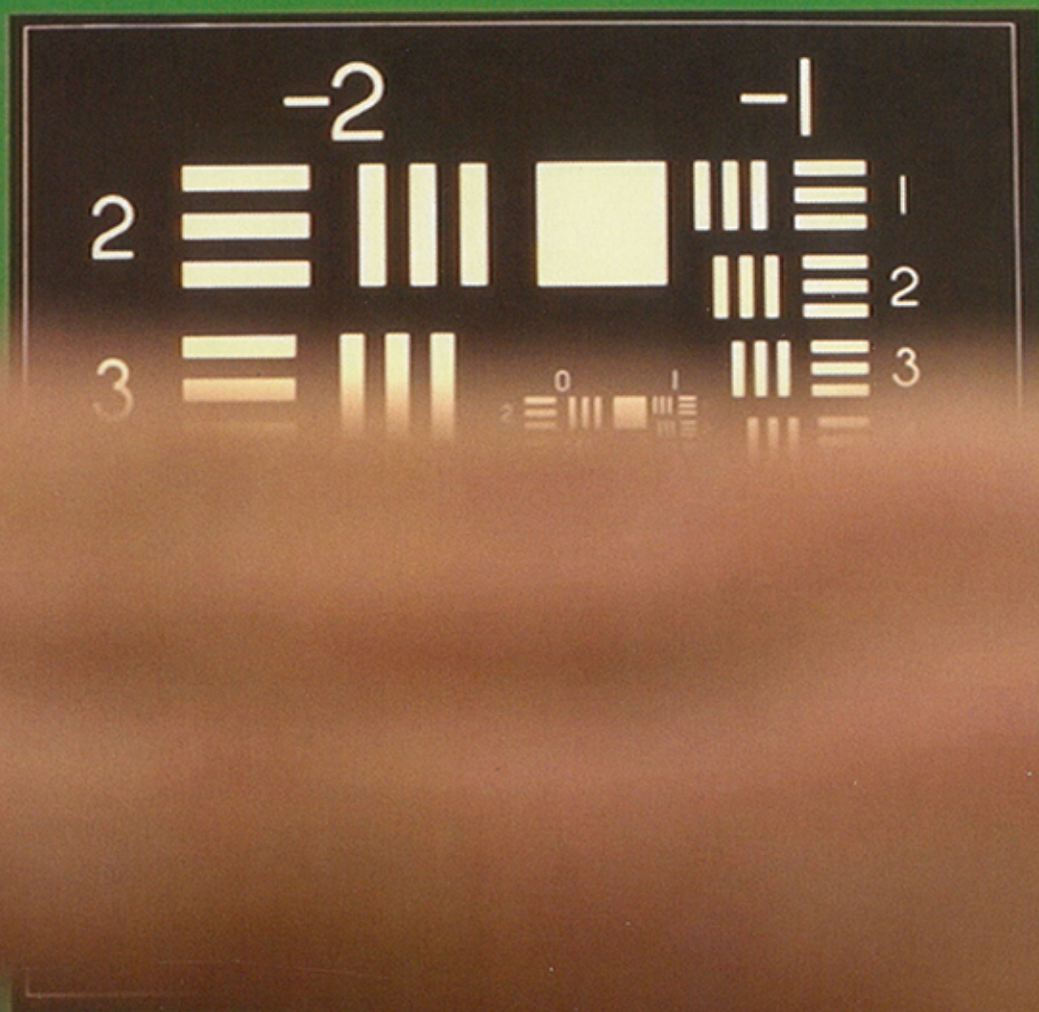
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HITO STEYERL AND LAURA POITRAS
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Beyond Belief

DAVID HUBER ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF LACATON & VASSAL



Opposite page: Lacaton & Vassal, FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, 2013, Dunkirk, France. Photo: Philippe Ruault.

Right: Lacaton & Vassal, Palais de Tokyo, 2012, Paris. Photo: Philippe Ruault.



Below: Lacaton & Vassal, Palais de Tokyo, 2012, Paris. Photo: Philippe Ruault.

ANNE LACATON AND JEAN-PHILIPPE VASSAL may be architects, but their real métier is doubt. Unstinting skeptics, low-key mavericks, the Paris-based duo—born in 1955 in Saint-Pardoux, France, and in 1954 in Casablanca, Morocco, respectively—have relentlessly questioned the orthodoxies of architecture, disrupting force-fed assumptions about the economies and practices that drive the design, construction, and inhabitation of space. Lacaton and Vassal often make insides that are like outsides, airy structures that host everything from homes and schools to museums and offices in open-ended environs that shirk strict climatological and behavioral control—environments that leave room to linger and live in. At other times, defying a global culture that seems to value iconic architecture at any cost, they deem building itself to be altogether unnecessary.

Take, for example, Lacaton and Vassal's project for Place Léon Aucoc, a small triangular square in Bordeaux, France. In 1996, their eponymous studio was commissioned, at the behest of a new mayor's citywide beautification effort, to redesign the tree-shaded expanse of gravel. But after observing the *pétanque* terrain and talking with the square's bench sitters and passersby, Lacaton and Vassal concluded that an overhaul was gratuitous. Instead, they prescribed a few basic maintenance tasks: Replace the gravel, clean more frequently, take care of the lime trees. "Embellishment has no place here," their project statement went. "Quality, charm, life [already] exist." City officials, flummoxed, at first rejected the scheme. The proposal confounded not only their expectation of a physical intervention in the park (presumably some of the faddish pavings and over-elaborate street furniture endemic to urban touch-ups) but also their underlying assumption that improving public space was primarily a matter of aesthetics. Ultimately realized—if practically invisible—the project is now an archetype in Lacaton and Vassal's oeuvre. The decision to add nothing, they contend, was not a denial of architecture; it was simply a different way of approaching their role. "The work of an architect is not only to build," Lacaton explained in an interview in 2003. "The first [thing] to do is to think, and only after that are you able to say whether you should build or not."

Sometimes architecture is already there. That was the case with the west wing of Paris's Palais de Tokyo, a hulking Neoclassical exhibition hall that had been

occupied and abandoned by a string of cultural institutions by the time the design competition for a new contemporary art center was held in 1999. Lacaton and Vassal's winning proposal was based on the approach of putting as much of the building "back in service" as possible. Built for the 1937 World's Fair, the landmark's stately stone exterior masked a reinforced-concrete interior so expansive, open, and unexpectedly modern that it seemed to Lacaton and Vassal to exceed the category of building and to approach the condition of an urban square or market. This observation became central to their design. Referencing the Jemaa el-Fna square in Marrakech, host to a daily flux of transitory stalls, storytellers, and hawkers, Lacaton and Vassal proposed a minimally invasive approach whereby the architecture accommodates—without determining—a vast range of provisional activities, the many forms of encounter imagined by the venue's then directors, Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans. With most of the project's





Left: Lacaton & Vassal, Palais de Tokyo, 2012, Paris. Photo: Philippe Ruault.

Opposite page, bottom: Lacaton & Vassal, Place Léon Aucoc, 1996, Bordeaux, France.

minuscule budget going toward essential technical upgrades and structural stabilization, the third of the building reserved for use by the kunsthalle remained, on opening in 2002, largely as Lacaton and Vassal found it—threadbare ceilings, crumbling columns, marble staircases, and all. To those architects anxious to distinguish the products of their discipline from mere building—often through exotic finishes and highly resolved geometries—the barely there renovation offered a perplexing challenge.

What's more, by shunning clean walls as well as wholesale transformation, Lacaton and Vassal at once flouted the two categories around which debates on contemporary art museums tend to turn: the white cube and heavy-handed "signature architecture." Of course, the repurposing of historically significant or typologically defunct buildings for the display of art is not uncommon. Yet unlike, for instance, the Musée d'Orsay across the Seine, which shows Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artworks in a lustrous fin-de-siècle railway station, or Dia:Beacon in upstate New York, where Minimalist and post-Minimalist artworks are installed in an impeccably gridded box-printing factory, the Palais de Tokyo doesn't offer a carefully orchestrated embrace between art and architecture based on close historical or formal correspondence. Instead, Lacaton and Vassal's approach produces a kind of baggy fit. By freeing up and leaving unfinished as much room as possible, the architects deferred the partitioning and occupation of space to the artists, the curators, the visitors—to the inhabitants, as it were. This strategy was made more extreme with the completion, in April 2012, of an expansion designed by Lacaton and Vassal that tripled the art center's size

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to 240,000 square feet spread across four levels. The excess and irregularity of the space almost seem to stretch time, letting people linger in ways foreign to the turnstile-like museums of today. Perhaps the most remarkable new expanse is the basement, a bituminous exhibition space (into which one descends via a lazily spiraling steel staircase stitched through a thatch of abject columns and girders), its floor a patchwork of worn concrete and billowing asphalt like that of some illicit skate park or slipshod parking structure. Even now, when "raw" is so chic, these are strange precincts.

AS SKEPTICAL AS THEY ARE of the presumed role of architecture, Lacaton and Vassal do not reject building outright. Consider a more recent, and particularly fecund, bout of naysaying: In 2009, a design competition was launched to convert a roomy postwar shipbuilding workshop into the FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, an affiliate of France's Regional Contemporary Art Fund located in the far-north port city of Dunkirk. Officially, the building was named *Atelier de Préfabrication no. 2*, or AP2; but locals, out of deference to taller-than-wide proportions and Chartresesque acoustics, had long ago anointed this concrete shell the "cathedral." Measuring 246 feet long, 82 feet wide, and 98 feet tall, this hulking boat hangar cuts a sharp, iconic profile against a background that's all North Sea and open sky, its surroundings having been flattened following the collapse of the shipbuilding industry. A waterfront-redevelopment plan identified the landmark as a good home for a cultural anchor, and the FRAC, occupying a cramped former hospital with little room to show its collection of nearly fifteen hundred works, needed bigger quarters.

On a visit to the site, Lacaton and Vassal immediately sensed dissonance in the competition mandate: The preservationist instinct that had spared the shell was, by installing a museum inside, about to destroy the space. Wasn't the vast, vacant interior the hangar's most exceptional quality? Though touching on a general paradox of architectural preservation, which persists in telling history through facades but shows little concern for the embodied affects of buildings, Lacaton and Vassal are not pious conservationists. Their attitude toward existing structures, like





Lacaton & Vassal, FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, 2013, Dunkirk, France. Photo: Philippe Ruault.



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their approach to design in general, privileges mutability over posterity. The AP2's interior needed to be saved because it still had potential.

Filling the cathedral wasn't just senseless, Lacaton and Vassal argued: It was unnecessary. They proposed that a new structure of the same volume and shape be erected beside the AP2, one specifically designed to house the required galleries, cinema, offices, educational spaces, and art storage. This doubling operation would free up the AP2 to do what it does best: to be empty, or, in other words, to be free to accommodate not only a flexible range of art installations but an ebb and flow of concerts, sporting events, idle wandering, and other to-be-determined activities. They also reasoned that this plan could be carried out within

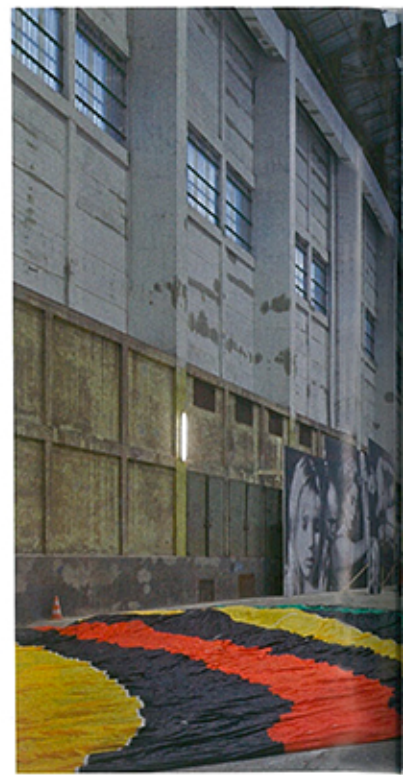
the given budget by making use of low-cost greenhouse construction techniques, which they have appropriated for decades as a kind of open-source spatial framework ideally suited to the light and flexible type of architecture they favor. Defying convention, Lacaton and Vassal were selected to design the project.

In the fall of 2013, the first exhibitions went up and the doors of the FRAC were opened; inside the hangar, a local brass band played Jeremy Deller's *Acid Brass*, 1997. But only later this year, once a spindly steel footbridge that links Dunkirk's beachfront to a pair of double doors seventeen feet above the FRAC's main entrance is completed, will the effects of Lacaton and Vassal's guideline-sidestepping practice be able to be fully measured. While a link between the FRAC





Left: Lacaton & Vassal, FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, 2013, Dunkirk, France. Photo: Philippe Ruault. Right: Lacaton & Vassal, FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, 2013, Dunkirk, France. Photo: Philippe Ruault. Far right: Lacaton & Vassal, FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, 2013, Dunkirk, France. Photo: Philippe Ruault.



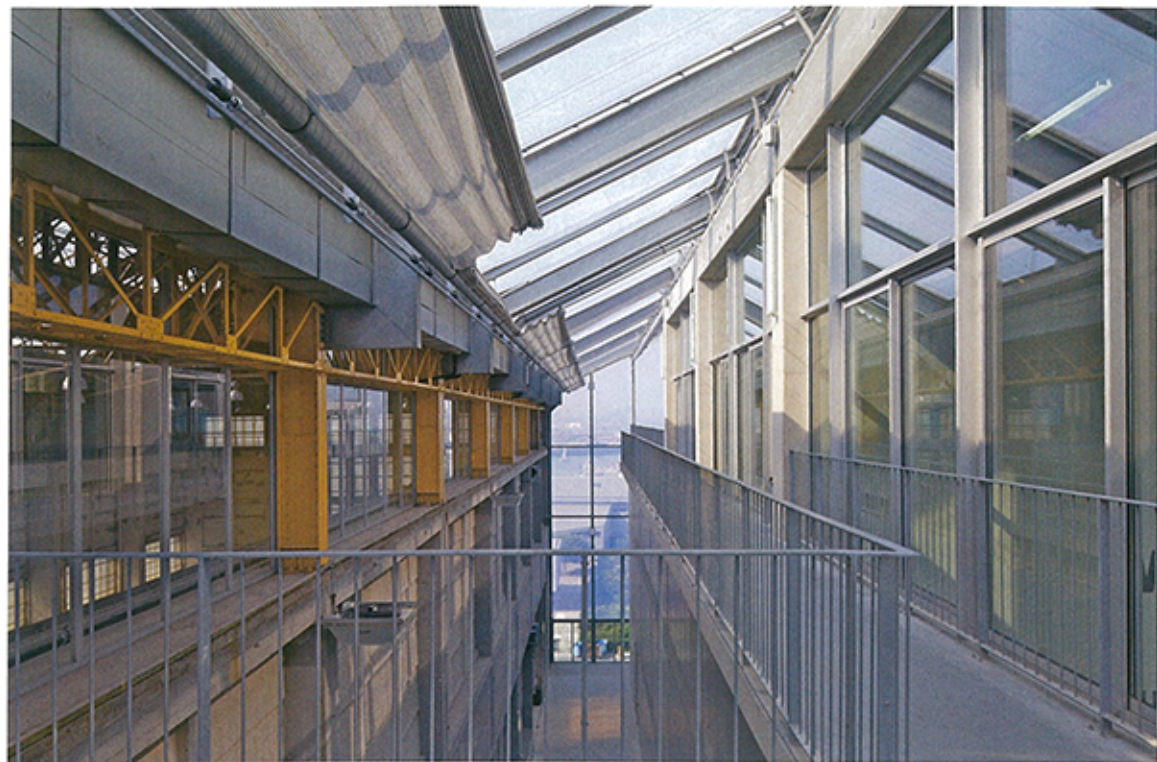
and the waterfront promenade was a required element of the redevelopment plan, Lacaton and Vassal chose to absorb the bridge directly into their plastic-clad addition, extending the path through its entire length. This so-called interior street is now the hinge point within the hybrid complex formed by the twin structures, whose compound name, FRAC/AP2, designates the freed-up hangar as an indeterminate institution, separate from yet related to the art museum with which it is conjoined. With the inauguration of the bridge, the interior street and the hangar will both operate as a public park, their hours and access regulated by the city, independently of the FRAC. This basic administrative distinction, though it may go unnoticed by many wandering into the hangar, is a measurable departure from a trend among high-profile museums in recent years to bill hypercontrolled lobbies, sculpture gardens, and atriums as “public” amenities. By literally displacing art from the hangar, Lacaton and Vassal have created a viable and vital interior public space, one interwoven with the FRAC rather than swallowed up by it.

Arriving at the interior street from the footbridge, you find yourself within a tall slot of space, topped, seventy feet above, by a transparent greenhouse roof. To your left is the concrete (formerly exterior) wall of the hangar, and on the other side the post-and-beam structure of the FRAC. Standing here, you feel as though you are occupying the gap between two

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buildings, existing in a weird categorical limbo. You’re not quite inside a museum, but there is plenty of art—and art viewing—on display. You might descend one level via the stairs or elevator to the main floor of the hangar. Or you could proceed along the street, admiring, to your right, through glass panels set into the FRAC’s wall, Latifa Echakhch’s *À chaque stencil une révolution* (For Each Stencil a Revolution), 2007, its gorgeous electric blue having run off the walls and onto the floors of the gallery where it is semipermanently installed. You could walk farther, turn, and look up thirty feet or so, where you might see a host of museumgoers, faces pressed against the transparent partition, looking down into the street and enjoying being looked at in turn. They would be in the fifth-floor Forum, the largest and tallest of the FRAC’s three exhibition halls, a part of which spans the street and then cantilevers like a balcony out over the AP2 hall, letting visitors hang out in its voluminous, unrestored interior somewhere other than the open floor below. One level up, about seventeen feet higher, bodies lean against the metal railing wrapping the Belvedere, a kind of covered patio beneath the inflated plastic pouch panels that compose the roof and continue partway down the building’s sides. And you will have seen all of this without actually having entered the museum.

When I visited the FRAC/AP2 this past winter, the temperature outside approached zero. I entered on



the ground floor and ascended the museum by stairs. Passing between the different levels of exhibition space, I moved back and forth through a threshold-like space separated from the galleries by motion-sensor-controlled sliding glass doors and from the exterior by wavy, wafer-thin panels of corrugated polycarbonate, overlapped and then unfussily mounted to galvanized steel supports with hot-house verismo. The temperature there was at least twenty degrees Fahrenheit below that of the exhibition halls. It was not uncomfortably cold, but a strange space for bodies like mine, habituated to building enclosures that offer the predictable comfort of a homogeneous interior climate, never mind the steep ecological costs and variable side effects (sick building syndrome is a particularly extreme effect of artificial environments). The space is even stranger in an art museum, an institutional type that is typically a sensory-deprivation chamber of norms, regulations, and legally enforceable loan agreements specifying everything from the range of relative humidity levels and temperature to footcandle hours and vermin-mitigation measures.

These in-between spaces offer the best view into Lacaton and Vassal's unorthodox practice. In a sense, they reformulate the calculus of architecture, decreasing the value, both economic and symbolic, typically assigned to formal novelty, surface treatments, and frivolous customization, while elevating the value of spatial volume—the sheer quantity of inhabitable space—and flexibility. And these spaces are where the variables of volume, environment, and material converge most clearly, as well as where the social and atmospheric effects of this convergence are most palpable. The FRAC's circulation space is a climatic threshold, performing the insulation functions typically consigned to surfaces (thick walls, double facades, double-insulated glass). It is an inhabitable zone with a distinct third climate somewhere between the outside weather and the evenly climatized interior. There are environmental benefits to this approach, but they can't be considered independently of Lacaton and Vassal's overriding goal: freedom. By doubling the volume of their Dunkirk project, the architects have pro-

duced a structure abundant enough to evade both uniform environmental control (more than half of the FRAC/AP2 interior is not heated or cooled artificially) and total programming (less than half of the FRAC/AP2 functions as an art institution). Here, space, if not quite radically liberating, becomes available for subtle appropriation by occupants—making itself hospitable to unexpected forms of inhabitation.

LIKE GOOD MEMBERS of the post-'68 generation, Lacaton and Vassal are enamored of the provisional, the nonproscriptive. They are doggedly critical of modern architecture's behavior-controlling functionalism, too. But their attitude diverges significantly from earlier attacks on—and aesthetic responses to—modernist orthodoxy. If most postmodernist critiques of functionalism were fueled by antihumanism, a displacement of the subject and a hotheaded visual combativeness—think of deconstructivism's affinity for fragmentation and disorientation—Lacaton and Vassal have never abandoned the idea that architecture is necessarily about inhabitation, the rhythms of bodies and space. There is, then, a basic tension at the core of Lacaton and Vassal's work: between their immense optimism about the transformative potential of architecture's materials—air, light, sound, and space, plus all the heavy stuff—and their deep apprehension about architecture's propensity to regulate and control.

"Architecture is not so important in life," remarked Lacaton in a 2003 interview. "We can have a life without architecture." This may, to some, sound a forlorn note. Yet the weird, marvelous work of Lacaton and Vassal points to something else: a great expansion of what architecture and architects can be and do. In place of a knee-jerk will to form, their hesitations urge a poetics of appraisal. Imagine a posture in which, no longer ensnared by dubious orthodoxies and a priori obligations to design, architecture's impulse to accommodate—its reflexive *Yes*—assumes the dexterity of *Perhaps* and *I prefer not to* and *Why?* □

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