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***Norman Foster***  
***Carré d'Art***  
***Nîmes, 1984-1992***

**Kenneth Powell**

Jean Bousquet, sometime mayor of Nîmes, liked to think of the Carré d'Art, which he was instrumental in establishing in his native city, as "the Pompidou Center of the South," a prime example of the "combination of specificity and open neutrality" (as Douglas Davis saw it) that characterizes virtually all the museums that are responsive to our lives here at the end of the century."<sup>1</sup> Like the Pompidou Center, the construction of which Bousquet had observed from the window of his Paris office during the seventies, the Carré d' Art is not really a museum at all, in the conventional sense of the term. In the wake of Beaubourg, the *mediathèque*, combining conventional exhibition galleries with libraries containing books, recordings, and videos and space for performances and conferences, became fashionable in France.

Beaubourg was clearly the inspiration. Piano and Rogers had set out to build an antimonument and an antimuseum, a flexible structure which, for Rogers at least, embodied the spirit of 1968 (albeit that it was constructed in memory of a conservative president). Their competition-winning scheme incorporated huge screens on the façades - highly suitable for projecting political slogans (and later vetoed).

The mix of uses may be similar, yet the Carré d' Art - promoted by a business tycoon turned centrist politician - is, in many respects, the antithesis of its supposed prototype. While the Pompidou Center promotes debate, discourse, and disorder - the piazza has had to be recast to discourage drug dealing and other activities not foreseen by the idealistic architects - the Carré d'Art reinforces the classical order of the city, recalling old virtues and paying barely disguised homage to Nîmes's greatest treasure, the 2,000-year-old Maison Carrée, probably the best preserved of all Roman temples.

Jean Bousquet's approach to urban development was formed by his business experience. "Years of experience in the fashion industry teaches you what added value means," he explained. "To achieve it, you have to raise your sights and think globally."<sup>2</sup> The huge success of his Cacharel empire allowed Bousquet to spend much of his time back in Nîmes, which he had left to make his career in the early fifties but had subsequently favored with one of the Cacharel factories, and in 1983 he stood for the office of mayor on a platform of cost cutting and increased efficiency. His election ended a long period of left-wing dominance.

Bousquet saw himself as a liberal, independent of party ties, but his incumbency saw the philosophy of business applied to municipal government. Nîmes was a pleasant old town, with some important historical monuments, but it could not compete with nearby Montpellier, with ancient university, as a regional center. Economically and culturally, it was stagnant, and there was every reason for its young to do as Bousquet himself had done and head north to find a career - to Paris, probably, which President Mitterrand was now further enriching with his *grands projets*.

The Carré d'Art was ostensibly "a forum for the young" (though the latter subsequently swarmed in even greater numbers to the rock concerts at the Zenith, set amid flashy new industrial sheds on the outskirts of Nîmes). It was also, however, a marker for the revival of the old heart of the city and a boost to property market and the tourist industry, as well as a vital lifestyle component for attracting new companies to the city. If Nîmes was to have a new arts center, the site was obvious. The town's fine early nineteenth-century neoclassical theater, facing (and even outfacing) the Maison Carrée, had been destroyed by fire in 1952 and never rebuilt - evidence, perhaps, of the decay of the city's cultural life. Only the handsome colonnade survived, masking a car park. In 1984, Bousquet launched an invitational competition for the design of an arts and media center on this site.

He set his sights high. James Stirling, whose acclaimed Stuttgart Staatsgalerie had recently opened, was invited to submit; he declined, but subsequently served on the jury. From France, Paul Andreu, Jean Nouvel, and Christian de Portzamparc were included on the list of invitees, along with Gehry, Meier (who also decided not to participate), and Pelli from the United States, and other international leaders - Hollein, Rossi, Siza, Isozaki, and Norman Foster. The latter had completed only one museum. His Sainsbury Centre, completed in 1978, was a new sort of art gallery, but it stood on a greenfield site, next to a sixties' university complex, not at the heart of a *secteur sauvegarde*. Foster, whose masterly Hong Kong Bank was already on site, had addressed the historic city only in his scheme for the BBC Radio Centre in London - a troubled project that was canceled in 1985.

The Carré d'Art was an important landmark in Foster's development as an accomplished urbanist and a master of the marriage of old and new. He was named winner of the Nîmes competition in the autumn of 1984, his proposal being selected over those prepared by the short listed Gehry, Nouvel, and Pelli. For Bousquet, Foster's scheme was "the most classical in the sense that he seemed to have looked at the city and to have been inspired by it." Of the other finalists, Pelli came closest to Foster's controlled calm, while Gehry's scheme hinted at the inspired geometry of Bilbao - in a location where romantic disorder was inappropriate. Nouvel proposed to build entirely underground.

Norman Foster had begun his customary process of intensive research soon after receiving the invitation to compete for the commission. He admired Nîmes's "strong, simple routes and good spaces," especially the one around the Maison Carrée. "What is the site?" he asked, suggesting, alone among the competitors, that the land once occupied by the old theater had to be considered alongside the famous temple and the square around it, the rundown Place de la Comédie, and not in isolation.

Foster was equally convinced that the relationship between the Maison Carrée and the theatre façade was "just right," providing a cue for the new building replacing it. (Putting much of the accommodation required below ground allowed the height of the latter to be kept in check.) Assuming the colonnade would be removed, Foster proposed a new frontage clad in stone - the flat elevation could be used for video projections - and topped by a great projecting canopy, a device intended to provide sun screening but equally giving the elevated entrance platform something of the character of a stage.

Behind, located off center, was a striking galleria at the heart of the building, part of a public route across the city. The old colonnade, of course, rapidly became an issue. Foster was instructed to incorporate it, following a public petition and pressure from the Monuments Historiques. Only the eventual intervention of culture minister Jack Lang (in 1986) allowed Bousquet to order its demolition, a move Foster greatly welcomed. "You could have done a wonderful art gallery behind that colonnade," he later recalled, "but not the mix of uses and spaces that was wanted." Funding problems, overcome by the decision of the Chirac government to provide a subvention of 60 million francs, delayed a start on site until 1988, providing time for the plans to be revised and refined.

In its final version, the entrance front was the product of a long process of redesign, with the proscenium/stage deleted; the internal plan remained remarkably constant. What Foster describes as "a conscious exploration of classical forms" took place. Ideas of a dramatically cut-back, all glass façade, designed to drag people into the building, were dropped, but the element of transparency survived in subsequent reworkings.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in January 1988, a definitive plan was published. It bore a close resemblance to what was constructed in 1988-92, though the entrance canopy was shown resting on two (rather than five) slender steel columns. Superficially, at least, the plan as built came close to the competition-winning proposals in its serenity and calm Foster favors the adjective "timeless." In line with his initial analysis of the site, Foster was commissioned to rework the Place de la Maison Carrée (significantly renamed), giving the monument a dignified but sociable setting and linking it to the Carré d'Art.

Under its first director, Robert Calle (who was enticed from Paris), the Carré d'Art began to fulfill its projected role as "the Beaubourg of the South," while the relatively meager permanent collection was steadily augmented. Calle's acquisitions policy focused on Mediterranean art, reflecting Nîmes's perceived position as a Sun Belt city of the future, looking to Spain and Italy as much as to Paris. As was always intended, displaying art is not the sole *raison d'être* of the building; the libraries are heavily used, and it is the mix of uses that animates the Carré d'Art. On the top floor, there is a bar, with an external terrace providing a marvellous vista of the historic core of Nîmes. As a new component in an old center, the building works well on many levels. Foster's intention to develop the interior as a galleria, a modern version of the ancient Nîmes courtyard complete with opening roof, was modified in the final scheme. The galleria became a six-story atrium, with a fixed roof. The atrium is vertical rather than horizontal, and it links the spheres of the visual arts, books, music, and film. In the process, the interior became less obviously monumental. Working with Claude Engle (a regular collaborator) and capitalizing on a skill for which he is renowned, Foster brought natural light down through the building into the basement library levels and achieved a calm luminosity through out the public spaces.

As an engine of regeneration, the Carré d'Art is an unqualified success, the star component in an ambitious program of new architecture and public art pioneered by Bousquet. Yet it is not a Beaubourg. When Foster's competition winning scheme was unveiled, some of his supporters were disappointed at its reticence - why was there no dramatically late twentieth-century gesture? The critic Peter Davey argues that the "ghost" of the Maison Carrée haunted the project from the beginning. Foster's clear intention was to build contextually, to elevate considerations of urban and historic propriety over those of self-expression. As the Carré d'Art enters the twenty-first century, it remains a classic expression of the dialogue between old and new and has worn and worked well. It did not set out to be revolutionary but to reinforce an established urban culture, to contain potential subversive ideas within an elegant and controlled framework. The Carré d'Art is a regional monument, yet the seamless unity of French culture is also firmly reasserted within a timeless temple of the arts.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Davis, *The Museum Transformed: Design and Culture on the Post-Pompidou Age* (New York, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Charlotte Ellis in Ian Lambot (ed.), *Norman Foster: Buildings and Projects, 4, 1982-89* (Haselmer, 1996), p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> The unbuilt versions are well documented by J. Glancey in *Architectural Review*, May 1985.