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Jean Nouvel

Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain

Paris, 1991 - 1994

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The Fondation Cartier is one of the few private sponsors of contemporary art in France. At first, the foundation's studios, exhibition pavilions, and sculpture garden were housed at the chateau in Jouy-en-Josas. When a new building was planned for the Cartier headquarters in Paris, a decision was made to utilize one third of the building for the changing exhibitions of the foundation. Cartier Chairman Alain Dominique Perrin is a great collector of contemporary art. His foundation aims to be a forum for young artists from France and abroad. In addition, some of the foundation's collection of works by more than 200 artists are regularly shown here or in other institutions.

The building was completed in 1994 and is located in Montparnasse where the Boulevard Raspail ends at the Place Denfert Rochereau. At first glance, neither its full cubature nor its construction is clearly evident. A passer-by notices only an 8-meter-high glass front that runs parallel to the street. The conventional idea of façade dissolves, however, for upon closer inspection the observer realizes, not without irritation, that behind it lies not a building but a garden with cropped chestnut trees. We look into a quasi-terrarium open to the sky. The free-standing wall of clear glass is thus transformed into a display window onto an artificially re-created natural landscape whose dimensions remain unclear. The house itself is twice as high and set back from the street by 12 meters. Its true contour is not immediately apparent, because the glass and steel façade is both wider and higher than the volume of the building, whose width occupies only the twelve middle fields in a total of eighteen axial fields. The unoccupied fields on either side are also glass clad across the full height of the building. On the top floor with patios, the façade dissolves into a framework construction. Jean Nouvel and his former partner, Emmanuel Cattani, have already designed a production hall and a warehouse (in Fribourg, Switzerland, and Saint-Imier, respectively) for the venerable firm, which was founded in Switzerland in 1847. The client at 261 Boulevard Raspail is an insurance company. Although Cartier was only a "tenant," it was able to choose the architect.

An old tree with a history of its own provided the inspiration for the design concept. As the story goes, Chateaubriand himself planted the tree (a Lebanese cedar) in the forecourt of his home at the very spot where it still grows today, a few meters back from the boulevard, although the house is long gone. Jean Nouvel insisted that the building, too, be set back from the street. Hence the idea of a glass wall in front of an open garden space with a view into the exhibition room. One positive side effect of this inspiration is good noise protection. The entrance is the only wall opening; from it a path leads beneath the imposing crown of the tree to the actual building. On the courtyard side the strong pressure and suction forces that act upon the free-standing glass wall are absorbed by heavy steel supports and horizontal tubular bracing that anchors the wall to the building behind it. The view through the multiple glass walls dissolves boundaries. Light reflections, mirror effects, images of real and virtual trees, a glimpse of art installations in the background, and finally the transformation of the glass surfaces themselves into projection surfaces, all these elements combine to create a fascinating maze. The building is even more enigmatic when it is brightly lit at night.

The full scale of Nouvel's mysterious and at times odd play between material and immaterial appearances unfolds before our eyes.

Spectacular façade designs are a trademark of his buildings. The Institut du Monde Arabe, completed in the late eighties, created a sensation with 27,000 photographic lenses that projected ornamental Arabian designs (from) behind a giant glass skin.

In the Fondation Cartier, Nouvel demonstrates once again how theatrical his concepts are, albeit with completely different means. New dimensions of space are presented whose rigor, however, makes no claim to satisfy the traditional demands of a house. The dark-tinted glass skin of the ceiling suspended glass curtains. Uniformly square, each section is divided into three horizontal fields. External rollable curtains clank like rigging in the wind. Once inside, the visitor is faced with a large exhibition hall which occupies the entire ground floor and is almost fully glazed. Behind the entrance, positioned just off center, a mezzanine floor has been integrated to structure the space and function as reception area. To the sides, unpretentious details worked in steel are a refreshing surprise. To the right and left of the entrance are exhibition areas for large-scale installation works, which are changed every three months.

Nouvel describes the hall as an *espace nomade* that gives artists free rein in the placement of their work. They are invited to interact with or to negate the surrounding space. The wider area, to the left of the entrance, features three square glass panels inlaid into the floor. They can be lifted up to allow for installations across two floors. The hall can open onto the garden at the rear with floor-height glass doors that slide into the external façade framework, making it possible to include the outdoors. Open-air events can be watched from the interior, and, conversely, for spectators seated in the garden, the interior can become a giant stage.

No effort was spared to add new trees to the existing arboretum. These mature trees complete the garden composition on the property, which ends in a sharp point and is surrounded by an old enclosure wall. Lothar Baumgarten has installed a *Theatrum Botanicum* (botanical theater) in the garden. His concept for the small, gently inclined property was envisioned in response to the glass structure. Wide steps with a slight concave curve meander between the trees, some of which have been newly planted. To the rear, a flight of stairs leads to a meditation room, elliptical in shape and open to the sky. Baumgarten's landscape design is intended as a union of staged nature and of architecture. It is itself an autonomous work of art to which nothing can be added and from which nothing should be eliminated. The walnut tree, the acacia, the ferns, all are elements in a precise composition. In a matter of minutes the entire glass hall can be transformed into a closed "white" or "black" room with the help of motorized, 8-meter-long rollable curtains. The "art showcase" metamorphoses into an introverted space ideal for projections. The exhibition area below ground is only 6 meters high. Plans for a sunken sculpture garden complete with outdoor lighting after the model of Mies van der Rohe's National Gallery in Berlin - were abandoned. The result is a whitewashed space with no link to the outside and limited flexibility, with sparse daylight provided only through the three glass panels in the ceiling. The Cartier building has no interior stairs. To reach the seven upper floors with offices, all visitors cross through the exhibition hall on their way to one of three glass elevators. The building's only two staircases are also external, placed along the rear façade, which stretches far beyond the building itself. At the opening in 1994, installations by Richard Artschwager and Ron Arad were shown. In 1999, the program includes among others, Issey Miyake with *Making Thinks* [sic] for *Vêtement[s] par-delà le temps* and Gottfried Honegger with *Ma métamorphose*. With the Cartier project, Nouvel has created a "building without design and detail." He even calls it "un bâtiment anti-design" and likes to criticize the shallow, high-tech installations that are so often added to other glass and steel buildings in an attempt to signal newness.

For Nouvel, the Fondation Cartier was an attempt to exercise the theory that the maximum in volume could be renounced in architecture. Rigid boundaries are glossed over. The materialization of this ambition has, however, resulted in rooms that offer only a limited set of new qualities for art. The ground floor does not lend itself to paintings, and the surfaces in the basement area are rather humdrum compared to the building. Nevertheless, artists can take possession of the room in this glass palais - and, like the architect, they have a chance to try out a new scenario.