



L'ARBRE BLANC: ENRICHING THE CITY'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

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L'Arbre Blanc: Enriching the City's Architectural Heritage

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In 2013, Montpellier city council launched the “Folie Richter” competition. It sought to identify a blueprint for a beacon tower to enrich the city's architectural heritage. The RFP stressed the desire for a bold project that had to fit into its environment and include shops and homes. The brief was clear: city hall wanted a team made up of a young architect working with an experienced colleague...



Manal Rachdi and Nicolas Laisné, who each run their own practices, decided to call on the Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto. All three of them look for inspiration in nature, although they express it in very different ways. For this project, their three visions would be mutually enriching.

To get the project off the ground, Manal Rachdi, Nicolas Laisné and his young partner Dimitri

Roussel flew to Tokyo in summer 2013. For five days, they shut themselves away in Fujimoto's studio for intensive workshop sessions.

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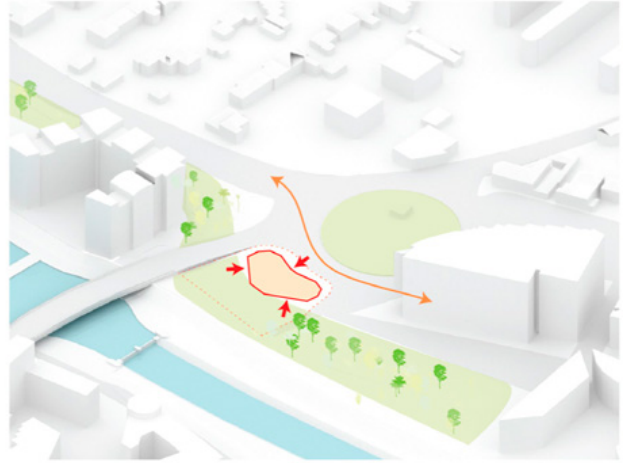
Marie de France, a partner architect and current head of Sou Fujimoto's practice in France, was central to the process, facilitating dialogue between the Tokyo and Paris teams. Sitting around a table laden with paper and pencils, they began to draw in an open and informal atmosphere.

To reinvent the tower, the architects focused on the human dimension, creating public spaces at the bottom and top of the building: the ground floor is a glass-walled space opening out onto the street, while on the roof there is a bar open to the public and a common area for residents, so that even the owners of first-floor apartments can enjoy the view.

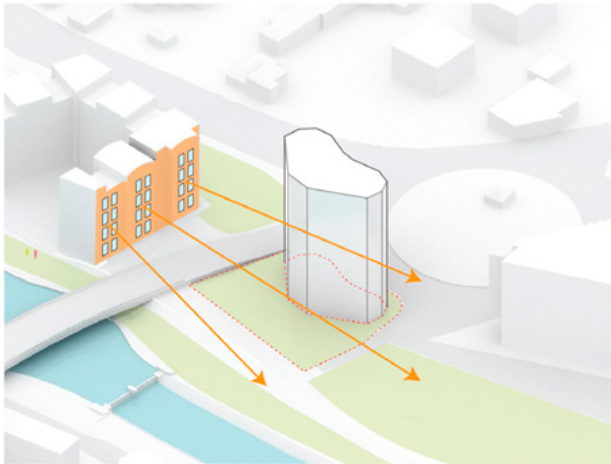
Landscape continuity



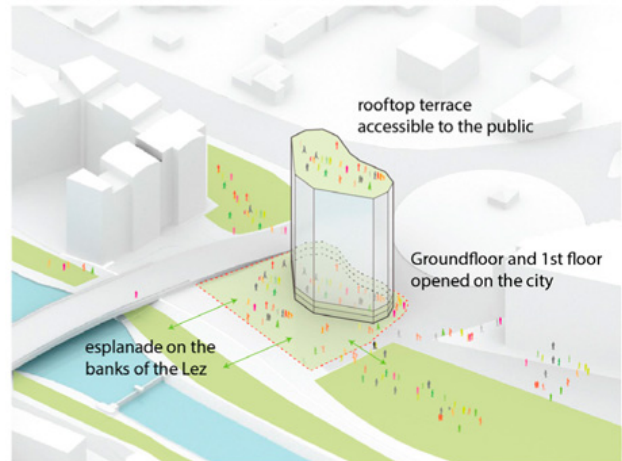
Integration and urban movement



A building adapted and respectful of its environment



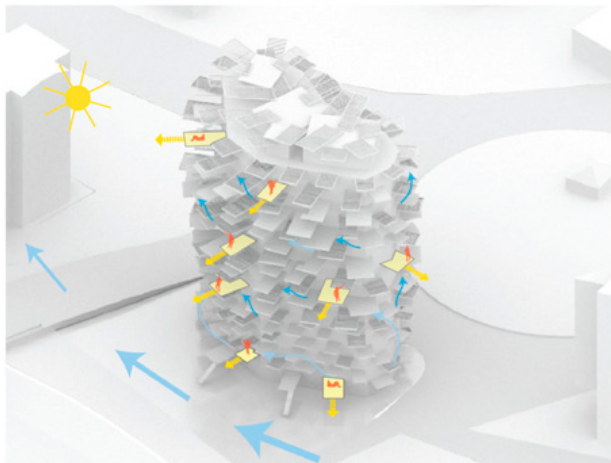
Opening on the River Lez and on the panorama



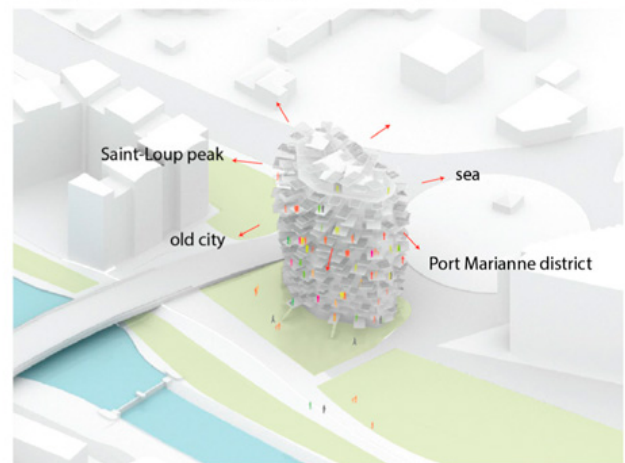
An Architectural Feat that Promotes Outdoor Living

Yet, what sets the project apart is its design. The three architectural practices devised a building inspired by a tree, with balconies that branch off the trunk and shades that sprout out to protect its façade. The attention paid to its setting, and to local lifestyles, guided the architects throughout the design phase.

Catching the light and slowing down the wind



Living outside and enjoying unrivaled panoramas



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The many balconies and pergolas really do promote outdoor living and enable a new type of relationship between residents. Each apartment boasts an outdoor space of at least 7 m. (the largest is 35 m.), with multiple levels of privacy and layout options; residents of the duplex apartments can move from one balcony to the other. So that all apartments have pleasing views, the architects sculpted the blueprint with a series of spatial experiments using physical 3D models.

The many technical innovations of L'Arbre Blanc include the terraces, whose cantilevers, which are up to 7.5 meters long, constitute a world first. These exceptional outside spaces are full-fledged living rooms, which are connected to the dwellings in such a way as to allow residents to live inside and outside – a luxury for a city bathed in sunshine 80% of the year!



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Climatic Adaptability Built into the Architecture

The proportions of the balconies emphasize this aim to embrace the outdoors, as do the leaves that fold out in search of the sunlight. These generous balconies are also a response to the need for environmental solutions closely tailored to the "ecology of the south". Forming an effective protective veil for the façade, they provide the necessary shade and break up skew winds to help air circulate more harmoniously.



A Private Tower with a Generous Attitude toward the City and Its People

The architects adopted a new take on tower living for this mixed-use development. To cure

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inaccessible tower syndrome, from the earliest discussions there was a real focus on public space, including extending a landscaped park along the Lez River and opening the tower up to the public.



The 17-story building is a full participant in city life, aiming first and foremost to be accessible to all the people of Montpellier, with an art gallery on the ground floor and a rooftop bar linked to a panoramic garden. By allowing people to take physical ownership of the tower, it will become an object of pride for the people of Montpellier and a tourist attraction.

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