Public Condenser
Low-cost flexible university building, Paris, France

Main authors
Gilles Delalex, Yves Moreau and Thomas Wessel-Cassine, architects, Muoto, Paris, France

Project data
Context: Architecture, building and civil engineering
Client: Etablissement Public Paris Saclay (EPPS)
Background: Public commission
Planned start: May 2014

Summary and appraisal by the jury
The project is a public facility situated on the new university campus of Paris-Saclay, France which aims to become a top international hub in the innovation economy. The building hosts a mix of activities including indoor and outdoor sports facilities, a restaurant, cafeteria, and various public spaces: a pedestrian square, street terraces, and parking areas for deliveries, bikes and cars. Conceived as a minimal structure using rough materials, robust and long-lasting techniques, the building is organized vertically with its different activities superimposed on one another, using the roof as a panoramic playground for football and basketball games. The different areas are linked by an open staircase allowing for independent accesses. A place to live, taking the form of an urban shelf, accessible to all campus visitors, day or night.

The project’s minimal deployment of architectural and technical means was considered a remarkable contribution to sustainable construction by the members of the jury. The elegant design merges economic and aesthetic considerations – a low-cost structure turning a limitation into a quality. The proposed scheme offers a robust framework that is adaptable to future needs – a form of resilient architecture, both in view of its management of resources as well as formal appearance.

Sustainability concept
This mixed-use shared facility on the Paris-Saclay university campus encourages the interaction and encountering of various populations who live in close proximity to one another, but rarely interact. With a total capacity of more than 1,100 concurrent users, the restaurant, cafeteria, and sports facilities are made accessible to students, company employees, teachers, and researchers. It aims at creating a meeting point for everyone by mixing activities that are usually separate.

The project was designed to minimize the volume of materials used in construction, as well as taking maintenance and long-term reliability into account. Technology is used minimally to provide a place that will endure, without the need for complicated maintenance. A specific insulation technique called “reversed slab” allows the building to reach high levels of thermal performances (French BBC certification), while leaving the structure visible, devoid of cladding.

The project is publicly funded and in response to the low construction budget, detailing has been kept to a minimum. This economical approach has allowed for the inclusion of a generous public square in the construction budget, ensuring a planted pedestrian connection with the existing academic buildings adjacent to the site.

Further authors
Igrec Ingénierie, Paris, France; Bollinger + Grohmann Ingenieure, Paris, France; Alternative Acoustic & Lighting Consulting, Paris, France; Novorest Ingénierie, Montreuil, France

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The vertical configuration of the building provides a minimal footprint. Users can ascend the monumental staircase situated inside the building to discover the surrounding agricultural landscape where they reach the 900-square-meter rooftop playground. The staircase is a continuous public space that connects the layering of independent programs.

The indoor spaces benefit from the most flexible configurations, thanks to a “deep plan” and glazed angles in all rooms allowing for open views outside. Using sliding doors on the façade offer natural ventilation during the summer while large textile shades provide protection.

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