

Valode & Pistre Architects

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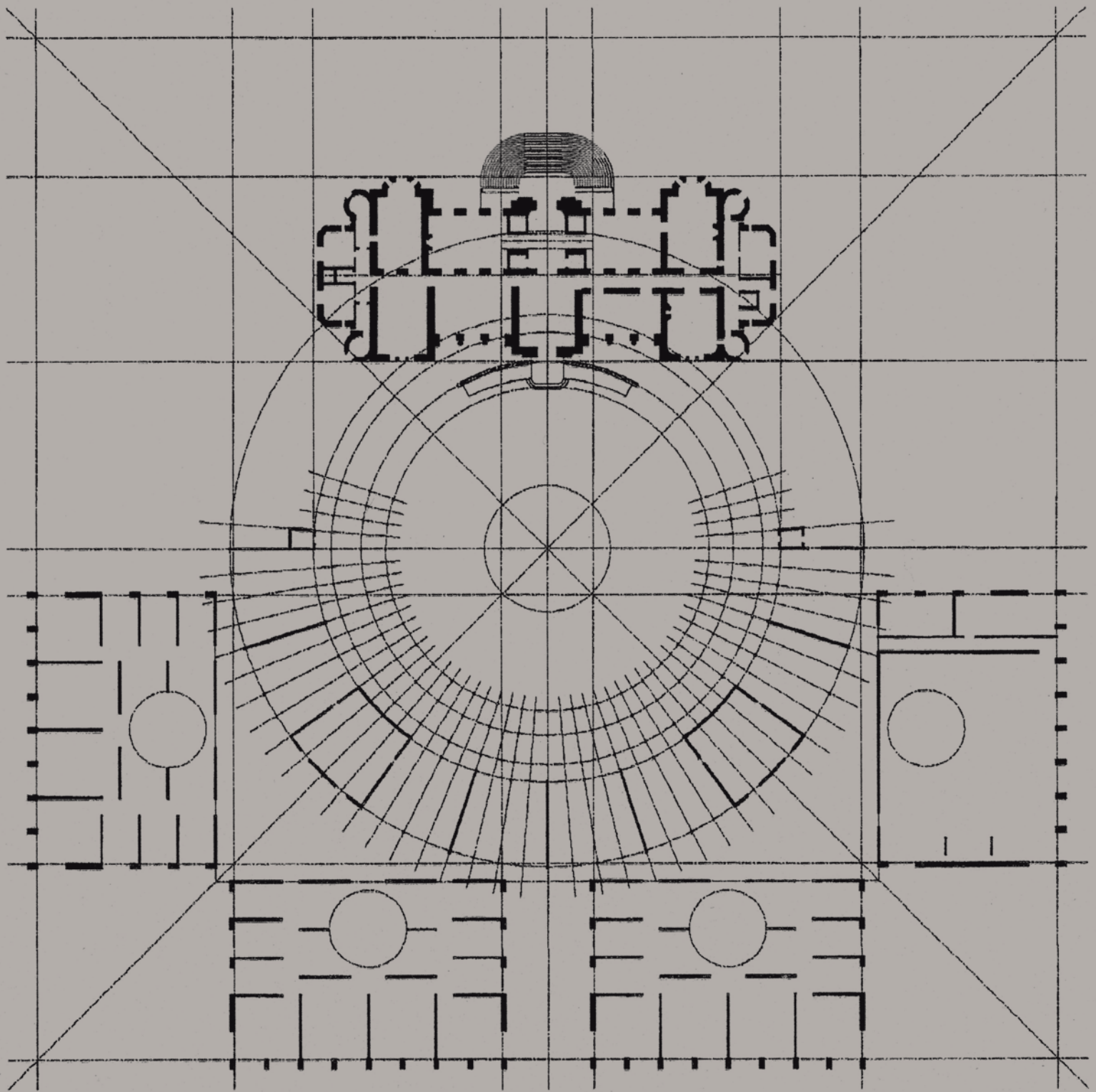
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A Discourse on Method

■ Denis Valode and Jean Pistre don't resemble many other successful architects. They are both soft-spoken, and in a time when inflated egos dominate their profession, they share an office and seem to rarely disagree. Valode was born in Charenton-le-Pont in 1946 and Pistre in Nice in 1951. They both attended the UPI (which is today called the *École d'architecture Paris-Villemin*) and they created their own firm in 1977. In the curious world of French architecture where public and private sector projects rarely are undertaken by the same firms, they have specialized in buildings designed for promoters and large companies, although there are some notable exceptions to this rule in their body of work. The spacious, bright offices of Valode & Pistre, located on the rue de Bac in the 7th arrondissement of Paris, give an impression of clarity and calm that actually gives quite an accurate idea of their architecture. Although they have begun to build in numerous countries, from Mexico to China, they have avoided the kind of excessive rhetoric that often seems to accompany "star" architects. Indeed, Denis Valode and Jean Pistre are not "stars" in their behavior or design, rather they are intent on being original and making their buildings work both for the clients and for the ultimate users.

Valode & Pistre do, in fact, have a style, but this style is not readily apparent in their structures because of the time and effort put into making each building correspond to its setting and to its use. Their work is modern, but not Modernist because they willingly appropriate or renovate existing structures and always respond to context. They are computer literate but not committed to full digital design. Denis Valode in particular is a skilled draughtsman and his sketches often explain projects better than a DVD full of computer drawings. The culture of modesty that they seem to have given to their practice does not rule out spectacular, innovative buildings like the L'Oréal factory in Aulnay-sous-Bois, but it does allow talent from within the office to express itself in unexpected ways. Thus a recent project, the Hyatt Hotel for Ekaterinburg in Russia was designed not by the principals, but by a young architect, Valérie Vaconsin who won one of the regular in-house competitions. Quite far removed from the *tabula rasa* of Bauhaus Modernism, Valode & Pistre have actively sought out links between their projects and science, ethnology, art, sociology or history. And although there is virtue in all of these facts, they do not seek to proclaim a brave new world for architecture as much as they work patiently in a way

that seems natural to them. Rather than an isolated object, a building by Valode & Pistre is conceived as being part of a tissue of relationships and situations. They examine location, activity and history and then propose solutions that may be very unexpected, but remain the fruit of their analysis of the precise situation involved. When they designed the generic factories for the Valéo group, the architects wove a certain number of obvious needs into their charter. Daylight and openings to the exterior were essential, and truck traffic was never to cross a pedestrian path. In a way these ideas are so obvious as to escape the domain of architecture and to approach that of psychology or physiology, and yet this is how Valode & Pistre assemble their own vision of modernity. The technical aspects of architecture and engineering also fascinate them. Their Hall 4 for the Paris-Expo site is 250 meters long, by 84 meters wide with a clear interior height of 10.5 meters. Beams spanning the full 84-meter width generate a spectacular, column free space which is at the heart of the architectural design, and yet its realization is technically inspired and gives results that make the exhibition activity planned for the building much easier to organize than in comparable structures.

Art: From Old Bricks to the Avant-Garde

An early and untypical project of Valode & Pistre that shows a good number of their qualities is their renovation of the *Centre d'arts plastiques contemporains* in Bordeaux (Capc). Built in 1824 near the Garonne River, close to the center of Bordeaux, the *Entrepôt réel des denrées coloniales*, or Entrepôt Lainé was intended to stock spices, chocolate and vanilla coming from the French colonies. Built of brick, Bourg stone and Oregon red pine, it was an intentionally heavy and dark structure, meant to protect its contents from the heat and light of the sun. Laid out in an orthogonal plan, the warehouse fits into a site in the form of an irregular pentagon, and was not an obvious choice for the exhibition of contemporary art. That was however, between 1978 and 1991 what Mayor Jacques Chaban-Delmas and Capc director Jean-

Louis Froment turned it into with the able assistance of Valode & Pistre. Although he started out with a more noble structure, their effort was similar to that undertaken by the Italian architect Andrea Bruno at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin.

Rivoli was built in fits and starts by the Savoy family beginning in the early 17th century on the site of a medieval castle above Turin. A 1718 plan by Filippo Juvara to renovate the castle was halted one-third of the way through. Abandoned or used as troop barracks until the 20th century, the building was studied by Andrea Bruno beginning in the 1960's and he proposed a plan to restore it without any "modern" intervention except where necessary. It was not until 1984 that the first exhibition of contemporary art was held there. The Castello di Rivoli shares with the Capc an essentially brick structure, a program of exhibition for contemporary art, and sensitive, historically aware restorations. Both Andrea Bruno and Valode & Pistre were well ahead of their times in proposing such audaciously modest plans.

The Entrepôt was designed by the engineer Claude Deschamps and built in a period of 21 months between 1822 and 1824. It may have been that Goya, at the time exiled in Bordeaux attended its inauguration. Although it is decidedly austere in its appearance, the structure has been compared to that of a caravanserai or a basilica. Abandoned and then purchased by the city of Bordeaux, the Entrepôt was listed as a historic monument in 1973. In 1974, Patrick Mazery and Jean Pistre proposed to convert the building into a cultural center. One year later, the city decided on a complete renovation to be carried out by Michel Joanne and two young associate architects, Denis Valode and Jean Pistre. A first, largely technical intervention was carried out in 1979 and permitted the installation in the building of the Sigma theater festival and a gallery for the Capc. In 1984, the decorator Andrée Putman was associated in a second phase where the central gallery, eleven exhibition spaces, a library, café and educational service were created. A final phase of the work began in 1989, where the central volume, or *Grande Nef* as it is called

was restored to its original form, and 3,000 m² of extra exhibition and library space were completed. The Capc and the smaller *Arc-en-rêve centre d'architecture* now would occupy the entire building.

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the intervention of Valode & Pistre on the Entrepôt Lainé is in fact their modesty. While they could have made a case for a much more apparent intervention, and self-consciously attempted to erase all traces of the past inside this great old structure, they chose not only to live with what was there, but to place it in evidence so that visitors could experience something that no completely modern building can transmit – a sense of time. Modesty also is apparent in the idea of economy that is apparent in many of their projects. They don't seek to fill their buildings with cheap materials to make a point like some illustrious internationally known architects, but they search for the inherent efficiency of a project and make it economical by creating a maximal effect with limited means. As Denis Valode says, "I have noted the work of the Japanese architect Shuhei Endo who creates curved structures in corrugated metal. His forms are in fact completely logical and he doesn't need a hundred computers to calculate their design. We are convinced that the role of the architect is to do more with less and not the contrary. The economy of means – the correct choice of means – is essential. Putting gigantic means into play for a tiny result is not in the logic of construction nor of architecture. Our goal is to create the best possible result with a certain economy of means."

Like Andrea Bruno at Rivoli, Valode & Pistre showed an exceptional attachment to a single project, in Bordeaux carrying it forward over a period of more than a decade. They also succeeded in carefully restoring unusual historic buildings, leaving intact the spirit of the structures and making their own additions clearly different from the work of the past. Rivoli is a heavy building, if not as dark as the Entrepôt Lainé, but both architects have turned these unlikely remnants from other eras into convincing spaces dedicated to the most contemporary art.

A number of other early projects of Valode & Pistre confirm the nature of their specific methods. Their Bélière Foundry in Verac (1978-79) was a design selected in a competition organized by the French National Agency for the Improvement of Working Conditions (*Agence Nationale pour l'amélioration des conditions de travail*). They engaged in lengthy discussions with both workers and administrative personnel as well as specialists such as a sociologist before proposing an architectural solution. As it happens, a number of the ideas they later developed for Valéo and others, such as an axial arrangement and a specificity in the usage of given spaces are present in this early project. Long interested in the rapport between art and architecture, they called on Speedy Graphito to create bright, colorful wall paintings for a school in Paris (1988-90). As the architects explain, "Turning away from static exhibitions, galleries or museums, contemporary artists are exploring questions of context and relationship with place. Spatial projection and organization is increasingly present in artistic creation. While our work as architects differs fundamentally from that of the artist, being subject to functional, social and legal constraints, there are overlapping fields of interest. This complicity provides a possibility for mutual enrichment... Each actor remains in his or her domain without seeking to mimic the other. Architecture design has no interest in reproducing a *déjà vu* formalism, while the artist is free to modify, enrich and transform a context adhering to his own intellectual process. Artists offer a different point of view on the world and on our work." Though this commentary may at first seem somewhat distant from the consultative process launched by Valode & Pistre in Verac, it is in fact a manifestation of the same attitude: an openness and a willingness to allow others to contribute to the success of a building.

Nor is the rapport with artists a superficial one for the architects. They have called on a number of different types of artists both in their projects, as was the case in their Leonardo da Vinci University (Courbevoie, 1992-95) where works of the painters Jean-Charles

Blais and Aki Kuroda grace the windows and the walls, and in their own offices, where artists such as Felice Varini have created temporary installations. One of their current projects, the Beaugrenelle shopping center in Paris, will have exterior wall designs conceived by the Swiss artist Rémy Zaugg who has frequently worked with Herzog & de Meuron. There appears to be a continuity in the choice of the artists who intervene at the invitation of Valode & Pistre – they are decidedly modern in their spirit but not necessarily abstract. Where some contemporary artists could create bewildering or aggressive works, the architects apparently seek a relationship with their own work that is fundamentally modern but humane. Again, Valode & Pistre seek a clear and simple solution even for complex problems. Admitting that people who use their buildings are sensitive not only to architecture but to a series of other factors Valode & Pistre make consultation and enrichment part of their process – part of what finally has become their own “style.”

Cars: From Design to Spare Parts

Despite their very real unpretentiousness, Denis Valode and Jean Pistre have long since proven their ability to handle very large-scale projects. One of the most ambitious of these, even if they were not the architects of the entire complex was the Renault Technocentre located in Guyancourt. Chosen over Architecture-Studio, Alain Sarfati, and Jean-Paul Viguier as the result of a competition organized by the automobile manufacturer, Valode & Pistre laid out the master plan for a complex measuring 146 hectares with an original total of 363,000 m² of floor area developed for some 6,300 employees. “The program called for a type of city of research,” says Denis Valode. “We based our concept on an urban plan that had the capacity to evolve over time. The goal of Renault was to be able to design a car in one year instead of the six required previously by bringing together all of the services that are involved in this process. The construction process produced vast quantities of earth, and we used these to create a bucolic environment, with wooded hills that look as though they had always

been there.” The proximity of industrial facilities to nature, if only in the form of a limited garden, is a constant in the work of the firm, and in Guyancourt they were working on such a vast scale that they were able to manufacture a “natural” landscape for the complex. Aside from building two major structures, La Ruche [the Beehive, completed in 1997] and Le Gradient, completed in 2003, Valode & Pistre participated in the jury selection of other architects who worked on the Technocentre. La Ruche is almost like a city in itself, with its 142,000 m² of floor area and offices for 3,500 employees. The orthogonal layout of the full complex certainly gives a hint of modernity that is confirmed by the architecture, including that of such groups as Chaix & Morel. “Is the Technocentre modernist, or is it based on Chinese, Spanish or Roman cities? The goal was to reunite the activities of Renault. The real challenge was to make the different services communicate properly. We created an orthogonal system because it is easier to understand where one is. There are all kinds of passageways within the complex that improve the speed of contact of the team,” he concludes. Renault selected the master plan of Valode & Pistre because of their good relations with the architects, but they also cited “the reasonable fees requested by the architects, their attention to quality, cost and deadlines.” The automobile manufacturer also appreciated that the master plan takes into account the main phases in the conception of a vehicle, and that the architects succeeded in “placing the Technocentre on an urban line that runs from the bell tower of the city’s church to the farm of Villaroy.” In other words despite the relative self-sufficiency of the complex, the architects nonetheless took into account what was around them and what goes on inside the Technocentre from the first moment. The orthogonal modernity of the plan is undeniable, but so too is the fact that it is rooted in realities that go beyond the strict realm of architecture, entering into historical and technical considerations, while creating the proper conditions for the sort of active communication between its employees that Renault was clearly looking for. Obviously the result of an intensive dialogue with the company, the Technocentre is

also the fruit of an understated vision of architecture, one that roots the buildings in the earth rather than perching them on alien soil.

The managers of the French-based global car parts manufacturer Valéo have a high opinion of architecture. As they have written in their 2003 *Factory Design* handbook, "Architecture is a component of productivity and quality, contributing to create a work environment in which Valéo employees can develop their skills and the Valéo production system can be fully implemented." About the publication itself, they write, "Today, the *Valéo Factory Design* handbook presents a comprehensive approach for all aspects of construction or refurbishment of a Valéo plant, covers: project management; function and architecture; regulations and performance specifications; contract specifications." The essentials of this plan were laid out not by specialists in manufacturing processes but by Valode & Pistre. "We respect the process of production," says Denis Valode, "but we don't start with that. We have decided long since that certain elements like the fact that trucks must not cross pedestrian passageways are not negotiable. We engage in a project with the goal of creating a synthesis of the needs of the client, the workers, and the industrial process, as well as taking into account specific local cultural elements. If we privilege one factor over the others, we inevitably create a bad project. Dialogue is of great interest to us, but we engage in it in a didactic mode. How can certain problems that arise in the production process be resolved? There is no such thing as geometric truth where process is concerned."

The touch of Valode & Pistre is frequently obvious in the *Valéo Factory Design* handbook. Where landscaping is concerned, for example, Valéo writes, "Landscape design should demonstrate that Valéo industrial activities are developed in full harmony with the natural environment." In the plans offered by the firm, restaurants, employees' areas and plant management are in contiguous zones located on one side of the factory. Where "Natural light and views to the

exterior" are concerned, the handbook states, "Windows provide additional daylight, but more importantly open views to the outdoors and create an important psychological link with the exterior for production workers... It is necessary... to provide visual contact with the exterior to humanize the work environment."

Valode & Pistre have thus far undertaken eight factory projects themselves in San Luis Potosi, Mexico; Skawina, Poland; Zbrak, Czech Republic; Utique, Tunisia; Bouznika, Morocco; Gezbe, Turkey; Veszprem, Hungary; and Chrzanow, Poland. At least eight other architects, such as Ackermann und Partner in Germany or Noriaki Okabe Architecture Network S.A. in Japan have also built factories for Valéo using the Valode & Pistre program. The fact that both architects and Valéo accept this situation and continue to base their factory construction program on the Valode & Pistre model is a clear tribute to the work of the Parisians. Some might consider the time and effort that the architects put into the original factory design superfluous, but to Valode & Pistre, it is the heart of their effort, going well beyond traditional architectural problems to deal with factors such as the well-being of workers. Though, on reflection, such considerations obviously have a direct bearing on the success of the architecture, they are rarely listed amongst the priorities of architects, especially the well-known sort. It seems apparent in the case of Valéo that the investment in time and effort made by the architects at the outset of the process has been amply returned in that they have been involved themselves in eight factory projects.

Towers: Site and Identity

Valode & Pistre have quite a number of tall buildings in their project list and this is surely no accident. Rather than treating structures 100 to 200 meters tall as isolated objects, they have successfully sought to integrate them into their urban environments. As usual, this is not simply a matter of a nice shape; it also has to do with the overall design of the buildings, both internal and exterior. One of their most poetic

designs is for the current T1 project at La Défense in Paris. The architects' presentation of this structure reveals something about their design process and the thinking that goes into their buildings. The firm's brochure for T1 compares its shape successively to that of the sail of an America's Cup yacht, the Flatiron Building in Manhattan and a snow-covered mountain peak. "Seen from the south and the heart of La Défense," they write, "T1 will appear to come forward to meet the viewer like the bow of a great ship. Seen from the east and west, the tower's sail-like profile cuts across the landscape. Seen from the north, the progressively curved façade suggests a great stairway or mountain side 'disappearing' into the sky." "The tower forms a street angle, so we compared it to the Flatiron Building," explains Denis Valode. "It's like a great sheet of paper folded at the street angle. But as for the rounded edge, we are fans of Jean Prouvé, who never made angle joints, there is a continuity in the building surface that way. The rounding also helps the tower to fit in more smoothly. In architecture, it is essential to always have more than one reason for a decision. A series of concomitant reasons are necessary to find a pertinent solution."

The architects offer computer views showing how the 190-meter bulk of the structure will in fact fit in quite well with the view from across the Seine. This is partially due to the curved form of the back of the tower evoked in their description. What seems esthetically pleasing from various angles is in fact the result of a simple calculation: to create office floors with a minimum net usable area of approximately 1,300 m² they have taken into account that the upper levels require less mechanical (elevator) space than the lower ones. In fact, Valode & Pistre were obliged to slightly redesign the building in late 2001 to increase the available floor space on the upper levels. It seems that their esthetic image of the tower made it even more elegant than the clients wished, but Valode & Pistre found a solution that both meets the clients' needs and retains the distinctive silhouette of T1. Set at the edge of La Défense, the building also is meant to have an urban function denied to many towers that

simply rise out of the concrete without taking into account anything other than their own entrance. "It marks the entrance to Courbevoie," says Valode. "The tower and the second building required by the plan form a round square. A street, a boulevard and a square meet here. We wanted to create a public space the way architects always have. Curiously though, the height of the building was imposed on us, but not the creation of the square. It is very French to impose building heights in such a strict way, whereas American cities are much more variable in their height restrictions."

The five towers being designed by the architects for a site in Beijing take into account the site and cultural preoccupations in quite different ways than T1. Aware that the Chinese are at once proud of their cultural heritage and wary of foreigners who propose a "Chinese-style" building, they took to studying calligraphy and more specifically the stone blocks used to print certain texts. Without going so far as to use actual ideograms they nonetheless inspired themselves from these blocks to create a floating stone façade whose openings do bring to mind Chinese characters albeit in an abstract way. Most recent construction in Beijing is heavily clad in stone. The French architects have bowed to this esthetic preference while retaining the lightness that is more their strength, detaching the stone façade from the inner glass core of the towers. They have also taken into account the encounter of diagonal and north-south orthogonal street patterns that meet at the site to make their project an obvious part of this particular location in the Chinese capital. Finally, they refer to the famous Five Pagoda Temple, a site in Beijing, without belaboring the comparison or giving the impression that they are in any sense engaging in a historic pastiche. Treading on particularly sensitive territory, where a number of other western architects appear to have committed stylistic *faux pas*, Valode & Pistre have proposed a typically subtle combination of the various influences that play on the site and the buildings they have been called on to design. Where others such as their French colleague Paul Andreu or the Dutch architect Rem

Koolhaas (OMA) have designed dramatic geometric or computer inspired forms for Beijing, Valode & Pistre have stayed in a more expected rectangular mode for their towers, and sought to pay some homage to the great culture of the country they are working in. The Jiuxianqiao complex demonstrates that the observational methods and sensitivity that have served the architects particularly well in France can indeed be translated onto foreign ground.

The Versailles Instinct: Havas Headquarters and Cap Gemini / Ernst & Young University

On more than one occasion, Valode & Pistre have been confronted with an older building located on one of their sites. Whereas a typical Modernist response might be to want to demolish such a structure in order to give fullest importance to the new design, the architects have consistently opted for the preservation of such vestiges of the past. This clearly has to do with more firmly implanting their own architecture in a historic setting, giving it a legitimacy of place that would otherwise be difficult to acquire. A first case of this nature is the Havas headquarters in Suresnes developed for Hines. Jean Barot built the Coty factory in 1939 in a distinctively modern style, using brick, concrete and glass. Hines describes the challenge posed by this site as being “threefold: past, present and future.” As they write, “The past meant Suresnes and was embodied in the former Coty perfume factory, still standing as a vestige of the town’s architectural heritage. Valode & Pistre opted for fidelity and continuity. They kept the former factory, which included workshops, offices and a boiler room. The layout of the three new additions to the building employs meticulous geometry so subtly that the resulting structure is immediately striking in its obvious and harmonious unity.” Denis Valode explains that the architects were entirely free to demolish the older building if they wished. “What is important is a way of looking at the site, including what we decided to preserve of the 1930’s building. It was in good condition, but all along the Seine, similar structures have been demolished

in recent years. We wanted to implicate ourselves in a vision of what existed in the past. We wanted to spotlight the quality and interest of the older building while creating an extremely modern structure behind it. The use of brick in the newer building underlines the continuity.” The architects’ particular interest for older architecture is revealed in Denis Valode’s comments about one aspect of the Coty building – its fine concrete window structure near the former boiler room. “We wanted to redo the window, but current regulations make such fine concrete window frames impossible to recreate. We wound up restoring the window and putting a protective sheet of glass behind it.”

While Denis Valode compares the Havas project to the construction of Versailles where Louis XIV. specifically requested the preservation of an existing hunting pavilion at the heart of the new building, a second complex, designed by Valode & Pistre has almost more relation to this instinct than does the Havas building. Their corporate university campus for Cap Gemini / Ernst & Young University located in Gouvieux, near Chantilly outside of Paris makes full use of a Rothschild castle that they had the option to demolish. Rather, they chose to undertake a painstaking renovation of the eclectic late-19th century structure, which included the complete reconstruction of one wing, and they made the castle the heart of their design for the forward-looking international consultancy and accounting firm. The main, semi-circular structures they designed for the client are turned toward the front of the castle and aligned on its center. Clearly, this plan was attractive to the clients who wished to emphasize the French ownership of the group. For Cap Gemini and many others, the very symbolism of France is less its undeniable modernity but rather its cultural wealth and its historic monuments. Had the Rothschild castle been torn down, it is clear that the corporate university could have been located anywhere in the world, but this was not at all the intention of the clients. Keeping and indeed restoring the existing building was the most obvious way to affirm the roots of the site and therefore of the firm itself. Working like “architects from the historic preser-

vation authority” Valode & Pistre took obvious pleasure and interest in bringing what was almost a ruin back to its pristine, original condition. They also studied the work of Edwin Lutyens, erstwhile reference point of Post-Modern architects, to see how he had handled his own work on historic English residences. As they write, “The composition that results from the interaction of the semi-circular new buildings with the castle is inspired by the work of Lutyens in Great Britain, which was contemporary with the construction of the Rothschild castle, using the themes of the winter garden, the circle and a strongly axial layout.” Although Valode rather unexpectedly compares the style of the old building to “Disneyland architecture,” because of its varied sources, the architects wrote that, “The eclectic style of the architect of the castle, Félix Langlais was a real opportunity. His multiple points of reference (Louis XIII., Middle Ages etc), his sense of humor (the exaggerated tips of the small towers on the castle), gave us a great deal of liberty in creating our own set of relationships between the past, present and future. His open spirit freed ours.” Although they worked with a landscape architect, Valode & Pistre themselves have always had a strong interest in gardens. In the case of the Cap Gemini / Ernst & Young campus, they laid out the half-circle opposite the castle like a “sundial, with potted plants indicating the hours,” thus recalling the days of company employees attending the university “with their rhythm of study, relaxation or meals, like ancient monasteries, guardians of knowledge and places of learning.”

Breathing Life into Old Bricks, Timber and Concrete – from Bercy Village to La Défense

A theory made popular by a well-known architect would have it that all construction, from museums to urbanism is fundamentally influenced by the logic of shopping. At a time when covered shopping centers have made their inroads throughout the world, islands of commerce unto themselves, it may be difficult to maintain that there is not some truth in this idea.

Confronted with a site at the eastern Paris that had long been used as the city’s wine storage area, Valode & Pistre, as has often been the case, opted for the preservation and renovation of the existing wine warehouses as the heart of a new shopping center. These are not vast spaces like the Entrepôt Lainé in Bordeaux, but rather small and low, and as such presumably not ideal for commerce. Another standard assumption of such projects would be that the passageways between stores should be covered for use in bad weather, but Valode & Pistre opted not only for the preservation of the existing façades but they kept the open street running perpendicularly to the Seine between the warehouse buildings. They erected bands of larger modern buildings parallel to the original structures, using a zigzag pattern for the roofs that recalls the early covered markets of Paris, and they necessarily allowed for planned passages from the neighboring park through the Bercy Village complex. Any visitor, especially on weekends, can see the tangible proof of the success of this concept. Crowds fill the space, and readily use the theoretically cramped boutiques along the central street to full capacity. Making their restoration or reconstruction of the warehouses visible as a modern intervention, Valode & Pistre have managed to preserve the historic interest of this space, without tuning into a Disney experience, no small feat. The juxtaposition of old and new successfully integrated into the Bercy Village complex has seen a more recent addition, the 18-movie theater UGC Bercy Ciné-Cité also created by Valode & Pistre. Replacing an originally planned office building on a site that sits astride the Cours St. Emilion at the Seine River side of Bercy Village, the movie theaters of course add to the number of persons who frequent the shops, but the architects have also made an urban statement with their building. Axially arranged so that a central atrium slices through the Ciné-Cité in the direction of the Seine, the building affirms that vestiges of the old city and indeed its fundamental urban realities are not at all incompatible with modernity. Given the numerous heavy-handed attempts to develop Paris along the Seine River that have occurred in the past, for example at the Front de Seine, the success of Valode & Pistre

is a considerable accomplishment. This is not “signature” architecture, but modest, efficient work for the real world. It is modest in the sense that the architects have seen the virtue of leaving the traces of the past on a site, anchoring it to its history, giving it a legitimacy that an entirely new building could not have. It is efficient because it works – it brings in people who want to come back, and who spend money while they are there. No amount of theory can achieve such a result, it requires a sense of the city and of what people want.

Glasgow in Scotland is so far north that its winters are longer and darker than those of most of Europe. This could very easily be a depressing place, and indeed, with the decline of its traditional industries like shipbuilding, the city suffered a long and difficult period of decline in the 20th century. And yet Glasgow is also a center of culture, home to Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), and more recently a city that has seen exciting new buildings like Norman Foster’s Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre (SECC), a £30 million 3,000 seat facility intended to complement the existing center. They rise along the banks of the Clyde. The city’s interest in design and architecture is further demonstrated by the existence of The Lighthouse, a 1999 conversion of Mackintosh’s 1895 Glasgow Herald newspaper office. The center’s “vision is to develop the links between design, architecture and the creative industries, seeing these as interconnected social, educational, economic and cultural issues of concern to everyone.” Since opening The Lighthouse has welcomed well over one million visitors. Despite the strong presence of Mackintosh in Glasgow, Jean Pistre says quite simply that he did not look to the famous Glaswegian in designing his vast new project for the former Graving Dock area. “A main concern was the low light in winter,” says the French architect, “so there is plenty of glass.” Although Valode & Pistre make specific references to buildings such as the Flatiron in New York, or architects like Edwin Lutyens, their architecture is not one of appropriation or imitation. It is typical of them not to look specifically to Mackintosh in these circum-

stances, since he would have been the most obvious, or “easiest” reference in Glasgow. Their work certainly fits in with many modern designs, but it does not appear to be derivative because their sources are more rarely prestigious colleagues than they are the imperatives of a site or a project. On their site in Glasgow, there is above all what remains of one of Europe’s premier shipping yards, the elaborate timber dry docks that warranted a listing “as buildings of special architectural or historic interest of the highest category [A]” pronounced on May 15, 1987. Though they are physically imposing and impressive, the Graving Docks are also an incarnation of the real working history of Glasgow, not the upper-end design of a Mackintosh but the logical trace of 19th century industry. The preservation of industrial sites has of course become quite popular, and locations from Bordeaux’s Entrepôt Lainé to England’s own Baltic Centre for Contemporary Arts (Newcastle, 1999-2002) created by Dominic Williams in the former Baltic Flour Mills building, but in Glasgow, the Graving Dock represents something of the very life-blood of the city and Valode & Pistre were clearly sensitive to this. Despite the listing it would have been possible for the French architects, together with their local partners to build over the dock site. Rather they have chosen, typically, to retain and restore one of the facilities, dock 2. They have further sought to design their buildings in a ship-like configuration, which is of course logical for this location and in keeping with much of the tradition of modern architecture, from Louis Sullivan on. Again, a mixture of respect for the historic interest of a site, even one far removed in this case from their personal experience, and a talent for designing attractive modern buildings that do not deny their location, characterize Valode & Pistre more than any stylistic or theoretical rhetoric.

Back in Paris, the architects are dealing with a bit of the city’s history that is much less rich and interesting than either the Bercy wine warehouses or Graving Dock. French President Georges Pompidou and his successor Valéry Giscard d’Estaing had different ideas about how to design the city best. The centralized sys-

tem in France is rare amongst democracies in that it actually allows presidents to play a role in such decisions, left elsewhere to specialists or the free marketplace. Pompidou's grand visions of modernity gave Paris La Défense, the Tour Montparnasse and the Front de Seine area, none of which can be termed successful in the urban sense, or in the architectural sense. Inspired by American cities, presumably provincial ones, the French went on a modern building spree in the late 1960s and early 1970s that culminated in the construction of the Centre Georges Pompidou (Piano & Rogers, 1977). The Front de Seine in the 15th arrondissement of Paris along the banks of the Seine is dotted with a mixed bag of 94-meter high apartment buildings and office towers and hotels. The Beaugrenelle shopping center, in the midst of this high-rise neighborhood was originally meant to be a real experiment in modernity, separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic and allowing residents to accede directly to the stores from an upper level platform. Unfortunately Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who had a taste more for the picturesque than the modern in architecture intervened in the process and succeeded only in derailing the original plan, creating a heterogeneous, soulless place that has fallen in recent years into a time of declining sales and clientele. Taking on a modern nightmare like Beaugrenelle and turning it into a going concern that brightens its neighborhood instead of making it even more depressing is just the kind of task that Valode & Pistre seem to enjoy. Some might have said that the whole complex should be demolished, but working with promoters Apsys and Gécina, they have come up with a scheme that returns order and commercial sense to Beaugrenelle. With visible entrances, a strong diagonal axis and a wrap-around glass skin, the architects give unity back to the center. By daring to slice through a thick concrete slab covering one street running perpendicularly to the Seine, they have given value to the street-level boutiques that should always have been prime locations but here never were. Finally, in a bit of daring that in some ways goes even beyond their purely architectural gestures, Valode & Pistre have called on the Swiss artist Rémy Zaugg to

help to give a cultural aspect to Beaugrenelle that surely was not part of its original make-up. Zaugg is a bit of a hard-liner, working frequently with the neon-obsessed team from Herzog & de Meuron, but he is as close to avant-garde as one can come in the limited field where art and architecture meet.

How can a building that is of the modern period and yet outdated and unusable be turned into a shining example of the most contemporary architecture? This was the challenge that Valode & Pistre faced with their PB12 project in La Défense. Built in 1970, the Crédit Lyonnais tower was an outstanding example of the heavy-handed modernism that dominated the period in Paris. Relatively small usable surfaces (800 m² per floor), an overly dense load-bearing façade with pillars located every 1.4 meters, and a symmetric design that made finding the entrance a hard task, and large areas below grade without natural lighting, were the essential problems of the structure. Having ruled out demolition and wanting to keep the existing floor area, the owner of the tower, the insurance company AXA, called on Valode & Pistre not just to solve the problems but to turn the PB12 tower into a statement of the firm's commitment to quality in architecture. The finished structure shows none of the extraordinary process required for the architects to perform this almost miraculous conversion. They opted for a complete replacement of the original façade with a new, contemporary design. In order to accomplish this, they erected a structural shell around the old building, driving beams into the central core to hold it up as they demolished the original load-bearing face from the top down. Adding 200 m² per floor in the process, they recovered usable floor area from the underground space by creating an atrium that brings daylight into the lower levels, making them more valuable and usable than they were. A clearly marked entrance related to this atrium completes a process that is surely architectural, but is also strongly a feat of engineering. The result was slightly more expensive than a new construction, but avoided the considerable costs and other risks that would have been created by a decision to demolish the old building. With

1,000 m² per floor, the new PB12 tower meets the most rigorous international standards for office space and certainly satisfies AXA's stringent quality demands. Though the original Crédit Lyonnais tower has disappeared entirely in this process, it remains at the core of the PB12 building. This is certainly not a renovation in the traditional sense of the word, but it does have some similarity to the Beaugrenelle project in which the architects have transported a modern but unusable core into the 21st century.

To the Ends of Europe and Beyond

Valode & Pistre are currently engaged in projects at both the eastern and western end of Europe, in different contexts, but with equally modern ambitions. In Madrid, near the Barajas Airport they have developed a business park concept (Las Mercedes) that takes into account the roadside site by creating an internal garden, freed from cars by underground parking. They create independent office units that can function separately at the same time as they share some common spaces and an overall design coherence that means they also fit together. Here, the site dictates a more or less closed external periphery while the architects' own insistence with the quality of working conditions harmonizes well with the idea of the central garden, visible from a maximum possible number of offices. Umbrella-like structures serve to shield the buildings from the intense summer heat confirming the architects' desire to make a humane and efficient addition to the architectural alternatives on offer in the Spanish capital.

Where heat is the main problem in Madrid, holding the cold at bay is the issue in Valode & Pistre's Hyatt Hotel for Ekaterinburg in Russia, designed as a result of an in-house competition by one of the young architects in their office. Ekaterinburg is known as the place where the former Czar Nicholas II., his wife Alexandra, their four daughters and Czarevitch Alexis were killed by the Bolsheviks on July 16, 1918. It is precisely on the location of the Ipatiev House where they were assassinated that the *Cathedral-on-the-Blood* or

Cathedral of the Martyrs of Russia was built and inaugurated on July 16, 2003, 85 years after the events. It is of course no accident that the outstanding hotel being erected by Valode & Pistre will be turned directly toward the axis of the Cathedral. As a symbolic center of civic pride, the Cathedral is built in an ample, traditional style, while the Hyatt Hotel will of course be much more contemporary in its architecture. The sensitivity shown by the architects to local culture and environment has led them to work on other projects for the city that stands astride the limit between Asia and Europe.

These last two projects are symbolic of the geographic reach of the office of Valode & Pistre even if they have gone on to China with other work. It might not be obvious to the simple visitor that the same architects are responsible for the renovation of the CAPC in Bordeaux and the Hyatt Hotel in Ekaterinburg. External stylistic elements are surely not a good guide to understanding what underlies the very real relationship of these projects. It has become clear that the real style of Denis Valode, Jean Pistre and their office is a coherent and intelligent way of looking at each new building. The very basic questions that many well-known architects fail to ever ask are at the very heart of their method: What is the goal of the building, what is its history, what are the structural solutions that are best adopted to the problems posed? These and other questions have allowed Valode & Pistre to develop an extremely impressive body of work in a relatively short period of time. In a sense their career has been made by their capacity to ask and to respond to the most obvious questions. They have eschewed a dogmatic approach, indulging even in the painstaking reconstruction of an eclectic late-19th century castle for example. But they have never crossed the line into pastiche, even when they were rebuilding the wine warehouses of Bercy, they did so as part of an overall modern concept. That they have branched out well beyond the borders of France, is a tribute to their methods rather than to any overweening ambition. Although 200-meter high towers are not a priori modest buildings, there is a funda-

mental unpretentiousness to the work of Valode & Pistre. Their L'Oréal Factory is anything but dull. Calling on the most sophisticated engineering capacities of the moment, it is exciting and bright. If it is biomorphic, the L'Oréal Factory appears as an exception in this respect in the oeuvre of the architects. They are interested in art, but do not take themselves for artists, even if they make excellent drawings. They are interested in engineering, but in cooperation with people like the late Peter Rice or their own engineering staff. They delight in references from icy mountain peaks to Versailles, but their work is in no sense an imitation of any of these forms. The references are a part of their thought process and a way of explaining their ideas to clients who may not be overly familiar with the technical aspects of architecture.

An overview of the work of Valode & Pistre begins and ends in the same place, the office the two architects share overlooking the rue du Bac in Paris. Many architectural partnerships have been dissolved over questions of ego and differing styles, but Denis Valode and Jean Pistre share more than an office – they share a way of looking at things and a capacity to set aside differences and to allow each other full expression. It may be that Denis Valode speaks more easily than his partner, but both have left their mark on the work that they sign in common. As much as anything, the real style of the firm must be an expression of their characters, representing the best of what the French call their “Cartesian” character, solving problems in a pragmatic and efficient way, setting aside conflict and the superficial in favor of an in-depth analysis of each project. Although it is difficult to judge internal office relationships, especially where more than 100 persons are concerned, it also seems that Denis Valode and Jean Pistre are benevolent and open in their relations with their *équipe*, something of a rarity in a country that is still given to frequent displays of outmoded paternalism. They have clearly managed to profit from ongoing relationships with powerful promoters or other clients, who have been impressed by their sense of continuity and stability. Thus, their perseverance and talent will lead them to eventually give

a completely new form to the main exhibition park of Paris. So too, the projects that they have carried out for promoters on a speculative basis, have become the proud headquarters of substantial companies like Havas and Transpac. In these cases and others, they were not satisfied with an anonymous and soulless building. They root their buildings in their sites, as they did by retaining the riverside Coty factory building in Suresnes, or by turning the Hyatt Hotel in Ekaterinburg toward the *Cathedral-on-the-Blood*. Many architects write about method, but few who are not totally specialized in factory design have managed to create the kind of charter that Valode & Pistre imagined for Valéo. A proof of their modesty and their fundamental attachment to the real profession of architecture is the fact that other architects have been able to participate in the Valéo program, using the Valode & Pistre charter. A similar sense of coexistence with a client's needs and the presence of other architects is seen in the Renault Technocentre complex.

When architects reach out across the globe as Valode & Pistre are presently doing, a question that becomes more and more difficult to answer is just what ties them to their native country. In what sense are Valode & Pistre French architects? The answer to this question is fundamental to any understanding of their work. Their style is their method, and the method is deeply rooted in the most positive aspects of French culture. French was of course the global language of diplomacy until a recent date when English in its many forms swept forward. French remains a language capable of tremendous subtlety and variety. The elite graduates of France's *grandes écoles* cultivate an ability to analyze and solve problems that surely is related, as they say themselves, to the mathematical equilibriums of Descartes. The solution to a problem need not in itself appear to be French, but the method of analysis is, and the key to the solution is the method. The real success of Denis Valode and Jean Pistre has been their ability to adapt a way of thinking to an architectural strategy that works as well in Beijing as it does in Gouvieux. ■

