

L'Arbre Blanc

PRESS RELEASE



Sou Fujimoto Architects - Nicolas Laisné - Dimitri Roussel - OXO architectes

L'ARBRE BLANC (THE WHITE TREE) REINVENTS THE TOWER BLOCK



A unique project since its origin

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 seek inspiration in nature even if they express it in very different ways. On this project, these 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.

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.

An architectural feat that promotes outdoor living

But 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 of and protect its façade. The attention paid to its setting, and to local lifestyles, guided the architects throughout the design phase.

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 7m² (the largest is 35m²), 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 metre-long, constitute a world first. These exceptional outside spaces are fully-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!

Climatic adaptability built into the architecture

The proportions of the balconies emphasise 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 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 seventeen-storey 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.



A HUMAN ADVENTURE



From left to right : Manal Rachdi, Nicolas Laisné, Sou Fujimoto, Marie de France et Dimitri Roussel

While L'Arbre Blanc has become, even before its inauguration, an icon of French architecture, it was born of the audacity of Nicolas Laisné and Manal Rachdi, two young French architects who initially made their names on the basis of their talent alone, without support from financial partners. "We each received an RFP about a 21st century folly commissioned by Montpellier city council," they recall.

It immediately occurred to Manal Rachdi and Nicolas Laisné, who have been friends since they met in Jean Nouvel's practice, to join forces. The problem was that both architects had the same status and roughly the same age.

So they had the idea of approaching a foreign professional. "I am very keen on intercultural dialogue, which could only add value to this bid," explains Nicolas Laisné. "We then together drew up a list of people we would like to work with on this project," remembers Manal Rachdi.

Surprise! Sou Fujimoto, who had never taken on a large-scale project in France, replied positively to their e-mail. The Japanese architect said he was interested but wanted to know more about the two Frenchmen's objectives. "The discussion we had on Skype put my mind at rest. We then met up in my offices, where I realised we really were on the same wavelength," recalls Sou Fujimoto. Manal Rachdi

agrees: "What we have in common is that nature inspires us, but we translate that very differently into our work. So we thought there would be great value in comparing our takes on this competition."

The teams started to work intensively on the design from summer 2013 in the Japanese architect's studio.

"While we drew, the team produced model after model every day to get a better picture of the design in real time. We fleshed out all our dreams, imposed no red lines, even when things seemed impossible," remembers Nicolas Laisné. "The synergy in our team and the collective intelligence that we were able to call on forged a hypercreative atmosphere that helped us design the project in record time," adds Dimitri Roussel.

"We emerged from this unusual and exceptional phase with a strong concept that already incorporated the primary intentions for the project," explains Manal Rachdi. It was a Herculean effort and the concept was so finely-honed that the final look of L'Arbre Blanc is not dissimilar to the first models, in terms of its form in particular but also its large outdoor spaces, an idea on which we rapidly agreed after telling Sou how the people of Montpellier lived," says Nicolas Laisné.



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Other players involved in this one-off adventure included Montpellier-based developers Opalia, Promeo Patrimoine, Evolis Promotion and Crédit Agricole Immobilier Languedoc Roussillon, who had on-the-ground responsibility for the successful implementation of a project that resonated across the region.

An icon born in a Tokyo workshop and which is now rising gracefully into the French city's skies.

EXTRAORDINARY ARCHITECTURE



The team fully embraced the aims of Montpellier city council's competition. Their team effort led them to build L'Arbre Blanc, this beacon tower that city hall desired.

"This project was ambitious in numerous respects. Number one: it was the first time a city had imposed a level of architectural quality. Two: L'Arbre Blanc is a team effort by four property developers and three architecture practices. And three: we enjoyed a very rare degree of freedom on this site because it is a "stand-alone" plot, with no requirement to align with any neighbours. The outline of L'Arbre Blanc is that of the roundabout on which it is located, avoiding blocking the views of the adjoining apartment block.

"To reinvent the tower, we took the human dimension as our starting point. We began by creating public spaces at the top and bottom 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," says Sou Fujimoto.

The attention paid to its setting, and to local lifestyles, guided the architects throughout the design phase.

"We devised a climatic architecture, which integrates into its environment in terms of the climate, topography, and



near and distant landscapes," says Manal Rachdi. In fact, viewers see the architecture of L'Arbre Blanc differently depending on the angle, their viewpoint, how close they are, the light, and so on. The metal façades are very light to achieve a degree of flexibility, as Montpellier is in an earthquake zone.

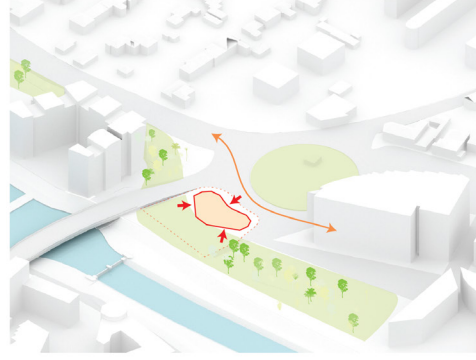
The design came naturally to the architects. Very quickly, the balconies and shades that adorn the building lifted it like a tree rooted in the soil. These items also have an environmental aspect because they protect the façade of the building. To free up the façade as much as possible, the wet technical parts are clustered together in the core of the building. "These terraces create coolness and enable energy savings of between 20 and 30%," says Manal Rachdi. Each apartment has an outside space of at least 7m² (the largest is 35m²). The team worked hard in 3D to adjust their location.

"So that these 113 apartments all enjoy an interesting view, we had to 'sculpt' the project in a complex series of exercises. We performed numerous spatial experiments and there were permanent back-and-forths between physical models and digital simulations," remembers Manal Rachdi. "The large number of balconies and pergolas really do promote outdoor living and enable a new type of relationship between residents. They provide shade which comes and goes throughout the day," says Sou Fujimoto.

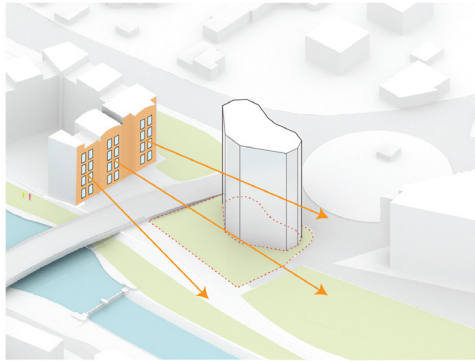
Landscape continuity



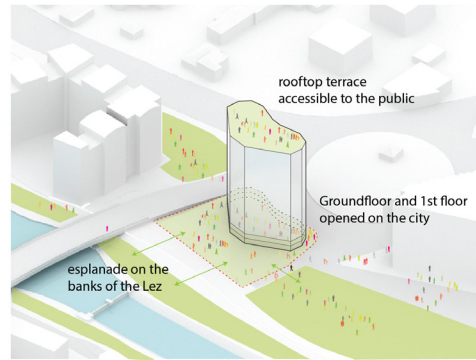
Integration and urban movement



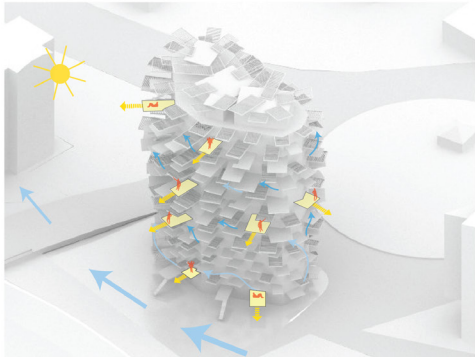
A building adapted and respectful of its environment



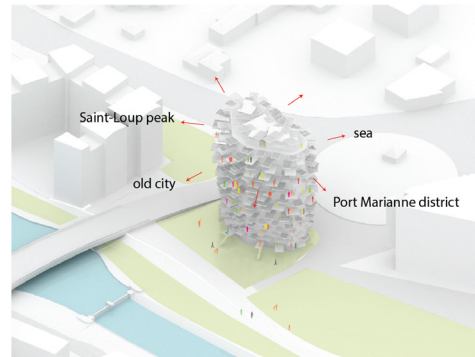
Opening on the River Lez and on the panorama



Catching the light and slowing down the wind



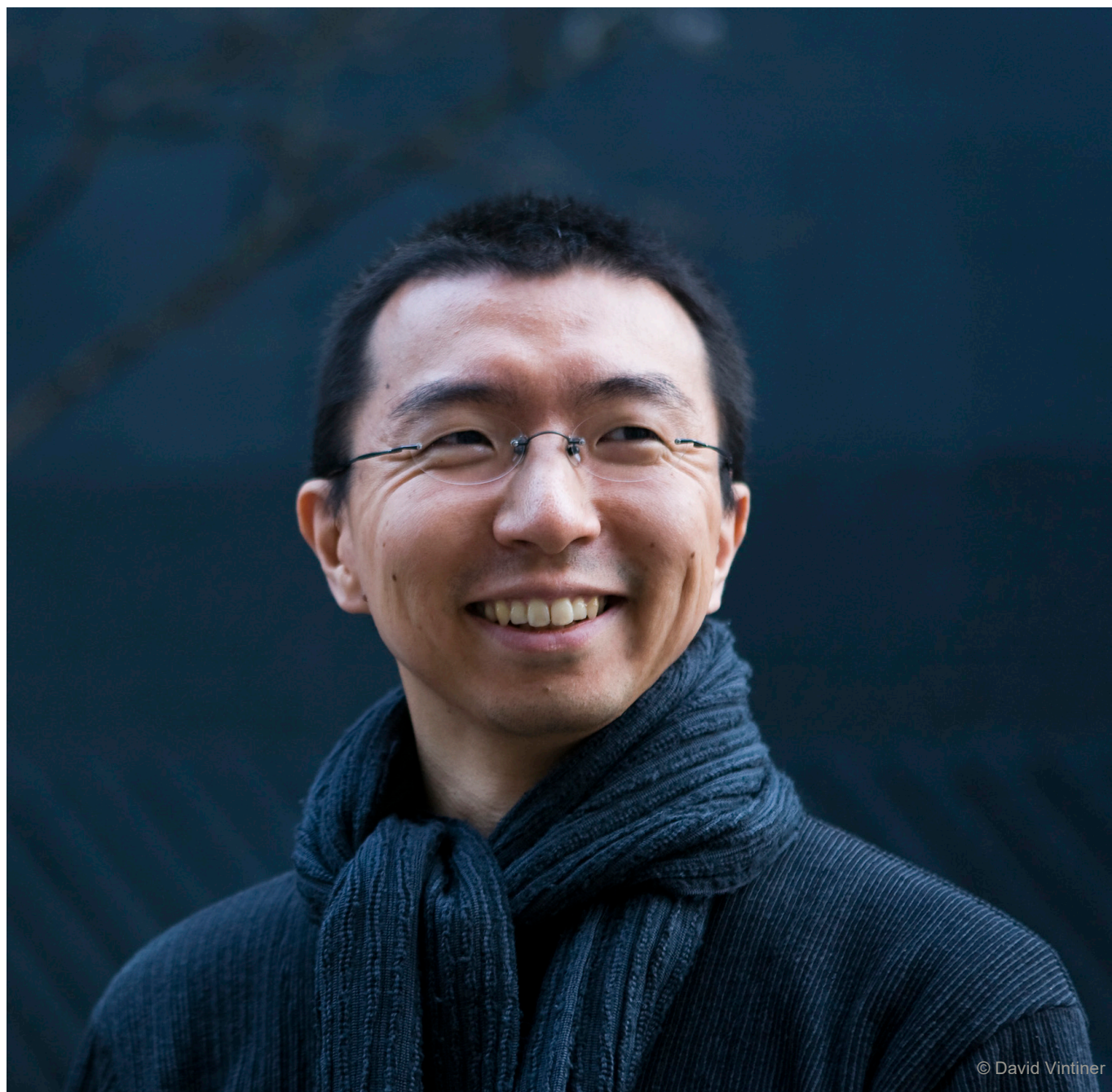
Living outside and enjoying unrivaled panoramas



The many technical innovations of L'Arbre Blanc include the terraces, whose cantilevers, which are up to 7.5 metres long, constitute a world first. To achieve this, the team of architects devised a unique technique inspired by the drawbridge. For each balcony, two uprights were fastened to inserts sealed into the slab. Two girders were then clipped and bolted horizontally to the façade.

A crane with a custom-designed platform featuring a motorised counterweight then installed the balconies on the various floors. "To solve the complex problem of the tension to use, we worked with engineer André Verdier on the principle of tension members in the guard rail. Each terrace, featuring wind-breakers, can support up to 350 kg per square metre. This means they can be furnished," explains Manal Rachdi.

They really are outdoor rooms which bring life in the apartments out onto the terraces to deliver an inside/outside way of life that is perfectly suited to a city that enjoys 300 days of sunshine per year.



SOU FUJIMOTO

“People’s lifestyles in Montpellier guided this project, which conveys a new vision of housing, one which is more harmonious and optimistic.”

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST REACTION WHEN YOU RECEIVED THE INVITATION TO TAKE PART IN THE L'ARBRE BLANC PROJECT?

At the time, L'Arbre Blanc didn't exist yet!

We were contacted by two young Paris-based architecture practices, working with local developers, to take part in the competition to build Montpellier's second “Folly”, an apartment block that would be over 55 metres tall.

WHAT CONVINCED YOU TO ACCEPT THE PROJECT?

For me France was a dream, as I have so much admiration for architects like Le Corbusier and Jean Nouvel, but also for its cultural and artistic history. This background but also the project's setting, its potential... Everything was very exciting. From our first Skype calls onwards, and then in the workshop in Tokyo, the interaction with Nicolas, Manal and Dimitri was spontaneous, respectful and honest.

WHAT DID YOU KNOW ABOUT FRANCE BEFORE THE PROJECT?

I'd been there several times, mainly to explore architectural masterpieces. I particularly remember a trip through the countryside of the south of France in 2006: the weather was perfect, the colours sublime, and the landscapes and heritage very inspiring. I remember being very struck by the effects of the sun on the stone houses, producing very unique shadows and textures.

HOW DOES L'ARBRE BLANC FIT INTO YOUR VISION OF ARCHITECTURE?

An understanding of the site and people's lifestyles in Montpellier guided this project, which conveys a new vision of housing, one which is more harmonious and optimistic.

Even if the expression is often clichéd, creating true living spaces dovetails perfectly with my vision of architecture. To do that, I consider a number of data points in every project: the climate, the way of life, aesthetics, scales, nearby landmarks, etc. It is an essential process for producing meaningful architecture.

The process also involved addressing living high up and the many inherent interactions: between the building's residents on different floors, but also between the building and its environment. So we designed a building with a flexible, almost in-motion look, which changes depending on the light and the weather, with balconies reaching out for light and the horizon.

This particular relationship with the landscape is shaped from the inside of the apartments: the living rooms open up fully to connect with the terraces. From the heart of building you see the ground dropping away gradually to the horizon, limits vanishing, and indoors and outdoors being interwoven.

THIS PROJECT OFFERS A MORE HUMAN VISION OF THE TOWER BLOCK, WHICH ITS RESIDENTS CAN RETAKE OWNERSHIP OF. HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT DEVELOPING IT?

To reinvent the tower block, by designing it on a human scale, we wanted to give everyone the chance to take ownership of it. We created public spaces at the top and bottom of L'Arbre Blanc. The landscape enters the ground floor and the first floor, so that the restaurant and a gallery really reach out to the street. On the roof, we designed a bar, which is open to the public, and a common area for residents, so that everyone can enjoy the view.

WHAT WAS THIS PROJECT'S KEY FEAT?

Without question the three-dimensional design of the terraces. The large number of balconies and pergolas really do promote outdoor living and enable a new type of relationship between residents. The other point is the lighting. The balconies and pergolas create shade which comes and goes throughout the day. L'Arbre Blanc is not white but rather reflects an infinite range of shades.

HOW DID L'ARBRE BLANC CHANGE YOUR CAREER?

It was the springboard for our work in France. This gave us access to lots of projects, especially in Europe, but also allowed us to open an office in Paris which Marie de France now runs.

DO YOU OFTEN WORK WITH OTHER ARCHITECTS?

Rarely, because it is not always easy to interact smoothly. Collaborations are interesting when they allow you to approach a problem from different angles and encourage everyone to go further. With Nicolas, Manal and Dimitri, it was very special and led to a particularly friendly relationship. We've developed other projects together: the Bâtiment d'Enseignements Mutualisés at the Ecole Polytechnique (all four of us), Mille Arbres with Manal and the Village Vertical in Rosny (with Nicolas and Dimitri) are other good examples.



NICOLAS LAISNÉ AND DIMITRI ROUSSEL

“Augmented architecture can add value through aesthetics and function.”

YOU STARTED YOUR PRACTICE AT A VERY YOUNG AGE (28), SO CHALLENGES ARE PART OF YOUR DNA, AREN'T THEY?

Nicolas Laisné: yes, they're among the drivers. When I went to New York to find an internship after my studies, I didn't know anyone over there. Steven Holl took me on straight away for a project he'd won in Saint-Etienne. In Montpellier, for L'Arbre Blanc, we pushed the limits by creating huge terraces with cantilevers of up to 7.50m, a world first.

THIS APPETITE TO DESIGN THE IMPOSSIBLE, IS THAT WHAT YOU CALL AUGMENTED ARCHITECTURE?

NL: Yes, it's a form of architecture that pushes the boundaries of innovation by integrating new social uses and environmental issues. We mustn't be afraid of inverting organisational models, of designing buildings as connected houses, or of facilitating new uses. “Augmented” also means allowing yourself to explore all possible options, to impose no red lines, to assert your aesthetics and to give yourself the luxury of caring for the environment and people.

BUT THIS VERY AMBITIOUS ARCHITECTURE NECESSARILY COMES AT A COST?

NL: You can allow yourself to innovate on a limited budget. I keep a close eye on my clients' financial requirements and in all my projects this balance is respected.

YOU WON MOST OF THESE TENDERS BECAUSE OF YOUR USE OF WOOD. IS THIS MATERIAL A RESPONSE TO OUR ERA'S PRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS?

NL: 70% of our business is based on working with wood, like the Perspective apartment building in Bordeaux. Yes, it's become an essential material for people who are looking to the future.

WHAT DID L'ARBRE BLANC BRING TO YOUR CAREER?

NL: A remarkable human adventure with Dimitri, who after this project was my partner for three years. We had great formal freedom and were able to put lots of our ideas into practice. For example, co-living with a space on the roof reserved for collective ownership. This project gave us the strength to leave the nest, so to speak, to assert our own individual convictions, and to continue working very closely together on our shared projects. L'Arbre Blanc also confirmed a number of things that I wanted to take further, such as the value of a building beyond a location and a

surface area, and the idea that architecture can itself add value through aesthetics and function.

THE “REINVENTING PARIS” RFP WAS AN IMPORTANT STEP FOR YOU...

NL: Reinventing Paris prompted us to be bold and ambitious. We continued this experiment with other similar competitions in France. It led me to bid for other “Reinventing Cities” tenders, and to win in Auckland and Vancouver. This encouraged me to assemble teams of talented people with developers, contractors, landscape designers, artists, sociologists and so on, and since then I've had a unit that specialises in putting teams together. That's one of the defining features of the practice my former partner Dimitri Roussel and I founded.

Dimitri Roussel: Changing habits in property projects has always been a key theme for our practice. Our approach to “Reinventing Paris” was one of R&D experimentation. Scheduling and financial packages, construction methods, the proliferation of temporary use projects (L'Atelier de l'Arsenal in Place Mazas) and the creation of common landmarks underpinned by a private business model added up to an innovative approach that really set us apart. So we repeated the experiment on Reinventing the Seine, the RFP that enabled us to win the tender for Place Mazas, then Antonypole and the Village Vertical in Rosny-Sous-Bois for the “Inventing Greater Paris” tender.



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MANAL RACHDI

“I find in nature the building blocks of intelligent life”

YOU'D WORKED WITH GREAT ARCHITECTS BEFORE FOUNDING YOUR PRACTICE. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND?

I graduated from the ENSA higher school of architecture in Nantes in 2004 and worked first for Duncan Lewis and then in the Dubesset Lyon practice before joining Ateliers Jean Nouvel in 2007, where I contributed to the first sketches for the Philharmonie de Paris. After founding the OFF practice in 2006, with Tanguy Vermet, in 2009 I set up my own business, Manal Rachdi OXO architectes.

THERE ARE MODELS EVERYWHERE IN YOUR PRACTICE. TO WHAT EXTENT IS THIS STEP ESSENTIAL TO YOUR WORK?

Models are my way of approaching the spatial aspects of designs, to understand the potential that sites have in order to tailor a project to the context and to the site, and to slot it into the landscape. I routinely have models made up to different scales: from the building as it sits in the urban landscape to a façade detail. Each of them provides an answer to a very specific question.

WHAT WAS YOUR INITIAL INTENTION FOR L'ARBRE BLANC?

We didn't want the project to be an isolated element within the city, but rather for it to meld with the local urban fabric. We thought it was essential to create a living space that embraces the outdoors, to take advantage of Montpellier's climate, to produce a climatic architecture, that has a relationship with its environment. Despite its name, L'Arbre Blanc is no ivory tower. It is a curved, natural form that water or the wind might hollow out or shape, and extends like a pair of wings to hug the course of the river.

AFTER LE ROCHER [THE ROCK] AND MILLE ARBRES [A THOUSAND TREES], THIS PROJECT ALSO HAS A NAME LINKED TO NATURE. WHAT ROLE DOES NATURE PLAY IN YOUR WORK?

I have a passion for the organic world that goes back to my holidays spent surrounded by trees at Beni-Mellal, in Morocco, where my grandfather owned land. Nature inspires me enormously; it is an architectural element rather than simply an aesthetic element. That's what I want to bring to the fore in my projects. I find in nature the building blocks of intelligent life.

I dig down into the depths of a place to look for all the information that might help me to design the blueprint best suited to the landscape, the weather conditions, how

people live, and traditions. The main thing is to achieve a balanced dialogue between the architecture, the building proper, and its environment. And then to translate it into balconies with views, into gardens, or into a system of camouflage. You mustn't let yourself be buried under concrete!

CAN YOU DESCRIBE FOR US THE COLLABORATION THAT YOU ENTERED INTO WITH SOU FUJIMOTO? HOW DID YOU BLEND THE CULTURES OF FRANCE AND JAPAN?

Since we founded OXO architectes, we've worked with French and foreign practices. The collaboration with Sou Fujimoto followed on naturally from these partnerships. We enjoyed working with him on L'Arbre Blanc and then Mille Arbres because our areas of research and favoured themes are similar; we both subscribe to a body of ideas, which made our discussions and our partnership easier. The two countries share a long-standing tradition of architectural exchange and I think that our collaboration also represents the fruit or even the continuity of this tradition.

IN WHAT WAY DID THE PROJECT CHANGE YOU?

Each project gives me self-confidence. L'Arbre Blanc confirmed that you can be young and produce a tower block, that you can nurture a non-standardised form of architecture that makes no concessions. We as architects are capable of changing the paradigm, of providing answers suited to new ways of life. It has buoyed me through the conceptual designs I've done since, including Le Rocher and Le Cristal in Nanterre, and the Oxigen complex in Marseille.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION



PROGRAM	Residential (113 homes), art gallery, restaurant and panoramic bar 17 storeys, 3 parking levels
ARCHITECTS	Sou Fujimoto Architects, Nicolas Laisné, Dimitri Roussel, OXO Architectes Marie-Laure Coste-Grange (project management)
CLIENTS	Opalia, Promeo Patrimoine, Evolis Promotion et Crédit Agricole Immobilier Languedoc-Roussillon GSA Réalisation (Delegated contractor)
CONSTRUCTION WORKS MANAGEMENT	CAP Conseil, icK
LANDSCAPE DESIGNER	Now Here Studio
ENGINEERING	André Verdier (Structure), ARGETEC (Fluids), Franck Boutté Consultants (Environmental), VPEAS (Cost management), Relief GE (Surveying, Roads and services), Les Eclaireurs (Lighting), SOCOTEC (Inspection), Efectis (Fire performance)
SUBCONTRACTORS	Fondeville (Carcass), Languedoc Etanchéité, SPCM (Steel structure), CIPRES (Façades), ENGIE (Electricity), Midi-Thermique (HVAC)
ADDRESS	Place Christophe Collomb, 34000 Montpellier, France
SURFACE	10,225 m ²
BUDGET	€20.5m before tax
COMPLETION	Delivery scheduled for first half of 2019

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PHOTO CREDITS

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