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CULTURAL CONVERSATION

A French Architect Goes Global

By DAVID D'ARCY
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Like a character out of Jules Verne, Jean Nouvel, 62, says that he creates a small world in each building that he designs.

"Every time I'm making architecture, it's in a world that doesn't exist for me. Each time it's an unfolding of interior spaces, details, locations, new relations among the elements of the ensembles, colors and materials that are not always the same. Each time, I try to create something that works in depth," he said over the telephone from his Paris office.



Ken Fallin

These days, Mr. Nouvel, like Verne, has gone global -- a future concert hall in Paris; skyscrapers in Le Havre, France, and Doha, Qatar; and a dreamy museum for the sheik of Abu Dhabi.

skyscraper fused to the Museum of Modern Art through shared galleries.

The oft-punned Mr. Nouvel -- new in French -- has fans from Jacques Chirac to Brad Pitt, who named his daughter Shiloh Nouvel Jolie-Pitt. Red-State Hines Interests of Houston, developers of 40 Mercer and the MoMA spire, liked Mr. Nouvel enough to hire him to build an office tower outside Paris, too.

Twenty years ago, a nouveau Nouvel unveiled his Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, a sleek blend of sculptural economy and elegant arabesque decoration. Another Parisian landmark is his 1994 Cartier Foundation, a glass and steel transparency in a glass-walled garden.

In New York, his projects are less public, yet 100 11th's facade promises a Nouvel baroque flourish, with a mosaic that deconstructs its view in 1,600 reflections. (Mr. Nouvel's favorite buildings, the Sainte Chapelle in Paris and the cathedrals of Chartres and Rheims, are known for their light.)

Mr. Nouvel's debut New York design in 1997 (never built) was of a hotel cantilevered over the East River, a fusion of bridge and pier jutting out from the Brooklyn waterfront.

The Frenchman says critics get stuck on that stand-alone defiance: "I'm a contextual architect by desire and by conviction, and I have been since the moment I began this profession. I've always thought that you build a building, wherever it is, in a particular place, with the notion of respecting everything around it."

"In New York," he added, "there are always an enormous number of things to tap into that already belong to a history. It's our job to reveal the presence of that history. What story are we telling? What are we continuing? In architecture, you always make the future on the basis of the past, on the structure of the past."

Call it chacun a son contexte: "It can be based on contrasts, or on a dialogue. But each time it's a precise analysis of the place and of a sensibility." 100 11th Avenue, he says, is all about its site. "I can't imagine transporting it somewhere else, even to another location in the center of Manhattan."

In Paris, Mr. Nouvel has sought harmony -- his kind, bien sur. His Musée des Arts Premiers on Quai Branly, leaf-covered and on pillars, is as long horizontally as the nearby Eiffel Tower is tall.

"I put the building in the middle of a very large garden, with the effect that this is not a public building that you discover at first glance, but through the trees. . . . It's a protected territory, a territory where objects, which are inspired by beliefs that are not ours, can coexist and shine forth."

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Like the Institut du Monde Arabe, Quai Branly suggests a French acceptance of foreign cultures -- a fact that's less clear on Parisian streets. Yet the two buildings don't look anything alike. Admirers call Mr. Nouvel "grammarless." Critics say he lacks a style.

The architect laughs. "My style is the effort each time to find the right reason to do this or that. For me, what characterizes a style is not always to repeat the same elements in a vocabulary -- it's the permanence of an attitude. You can recognize architecture by the permanence of that attitude, even if the vocabulary of elements is very different."

He cites his Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, a massive hulk for culture on the Mississippi that mimics the gray depots alongside it. A red stripe sets it apart. "I thought of the waterfalls and the rapids around Minneapolis to make a building that was an extended echo of the industrial buildings and mills that are there." After all, he noted, "Theater is an industry."

Abu Dhabi's climate and Mr. Nouvel's museum project are a world away, a cluster of buildings under a cupola with its own microclimate in a \$2 billion Guggenheim "village" that is only sun and sand today. "For a contextual architect, that's difficult," he said with a chuckle.

"I created a peninsula, with an architecture built around different buildings, simple buildings. Arab architecture is always geometry and light. Here it's a strict geometry, with perforations that create a play of light on the terraces and the buildings underneath."

Delicate arabesque perforations (as in Mr. Nouvel's Doha tower) filter light through the cupola. They echo the Institut du Monde Arabe's mousharabieh, decorative portals that open and close to regulate the passage of light.

Mr. Nouvel's client is Thomas Krens, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, who commissioned a temporary museum in Tokyo, an unbuilt opera house in Taichung, Taiwan, and a partly submerged museum in Rio de Janeiro that sank as a project because of local opposition.

Mr. Krens, Houston-based Hines Interests and 100 11th's Cape Advisers Inc. seem unfazed by Mr. Nouvel's complicated designs -- "playing too many notes," as Mr. Nouvel says coyly. "I hope in any case that my architecture is complex. I'm a believer in complex thought," said the Dr. Evil look-alike co-author of a treatise with the inscrutable Jean Baudrillard. "A building shouldn't be able to be decoded in a single glance. You always want to hide at least a part of your logic. You always want a depth in which some aspects raise questions. I still cultivate a certain degree of secrecy."

Secrecy shrouds Mr. Nouvel's planned MoMA tower. Hines, MoMA and Mr. Nouvel won't discuss it, yet Mr. Nouvel's office told sources for the Slatin Report, a real-estate blog, that he was chosen for the job. A MoMA press release in January noted that the site's \$65 million sale to Hines mandated 50,000 square feet of exhibition space and 10,000 square feet for storage.

Mr. Nouvel hinted at something novel: "I'm for a specific architecture, and I'm opposed to a global or generic architecture, especially for skyscrapers. A tower for me is akin to what the steeples of cathedrals were before. And each time, from this standpoint, you have to create a point of identity."

The onetime theorist reads little these days. He recently reread "The Idiot" by Dostoyevsky. "My bedside reading is 'The Book of Intranquility' by Fernando Pessoa. It's the book of someone who is inactive, who is questioning about things that are the most subtle, the most insignificant. Maybe it's my way of achieving calm through literature." Other favorites are Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Mr. Baudrillard. "If it hadn't been for structuralism, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing today," he said.

Nor without two French presidents, Francois Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac.

For Nicholas Sarkozy, "it's still very early," he said. "In the electoral campaign there was not much talk of culture, even less about architecture." But Mr. Nouvel will be watching, perhaps on an island somewhere.

Mr. D'Arcy is a correspondent for the Art Newspaper (London).

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