

The Théâtre St Nazaire's western facade messages its function to the person-in-the-street with inscribed motifs and lyrical lettering

SPECIAL K

K-ARCHITECTURES HAS BROUGHT DRAMA BACK TO THE HARBOUR OF ST NAZAIRE IN THE SHAPE OF A NEW THEATRE THAT CONTRASTS THE OLD AND THE NEW. REWORKING PAVILIONS FROM THE OLD RAIL STATION AND HARD BY A NAZI SUBMARINE SILO, THE THEATRE IS A NEW ACT IN THE UNFOLDING STORY OF THE PRACTICE, REPORTS *HERBERT WRIGHT*



St Nazaire's waters in the Loire estuary have known drama: romance as transatlantic steamboats came and went, triumph building France's greatest passenger liners, tragedy when the Nazis sank RMS Lancastria with 4,000 aboard and heroism in the 1942 British raid that blocked the harbour. Now, the town brings drama ashore, in the shape of the new €21m Théâtre St Nazaire, designed by Paris practice K-architectures.

Karine Herman, who along with Jérôme Sigwalt founded K-architectures in 1993, says it is 'quite a radical project'. While the theatre's configuration of spaces is dictated by function, radical certainly describes the dramatic and defining deployment of decorative elements. It is a building that unashamedly performs through visual flourishes, and with its repurposing of an abandoned station and the creation of a plaza, it is an exercise in urbanism that transforms a grim location into a new cultural zone.

From 1867, trains from Paris disgorged rail passengers into a station for transfer to transatlantic liners docked directly alongside it. The deep port was a perfect base for Hitler's U-boat fleet, and in 1941 the quayside of St Nazaire was blocked by a gargantuan concrete bunker built to house it. The sheer mass of it, 18m high and 130m long, cut the town from the sea and still menaces it today. Allied bombing took out the railway station but its two connected entrance pavilions and a quayside arcade survived.

The station was relocated in the Fifties, leaving the abandoned remnants of the original structure hemmed in by the bunker, and later, a retail shed occupied by hypermarket chain Carrefour, facing its entrance. Demolishing the bunker was considered, but instead the town decided to launch a competition to design a theatre behind it, with something of the spirit of the town. Joël Batteaux, ex-urban planner

Below left: The theatre, including its single-storey foyer cafe (left) and wood-clad artistes' facilities (right), borders a new plaza. The plant pots have subsequently been painted in bright colours

Right: The main concrete volume rises behind restored remnants of the 1867 St Nazaire railway station

Right, below (clockwise): Ground-level plan of the Théâtre St Nazaire and plaza; western facade of the flytower; Jérôme Sigwalt and Karine Herman of K architectures

and now mayor of St Nazaire, notes that 'the port created the town'. The theatre fulfills his objective to 'return the town to the port'.

The new theatre rises behind the station's western pavilion. The main volume is essentially a solid box matching the bunker's height, with a 24.5m-high flytower. The obvious distinguishing characteristic is the flamboyant treatment of its concrete shell. Floral motifs cast into the smooth concrete repeat across its vertical surfaces. 'I transformed the material into velvet,' says Herman, with satisfaction. 'I softened it'.

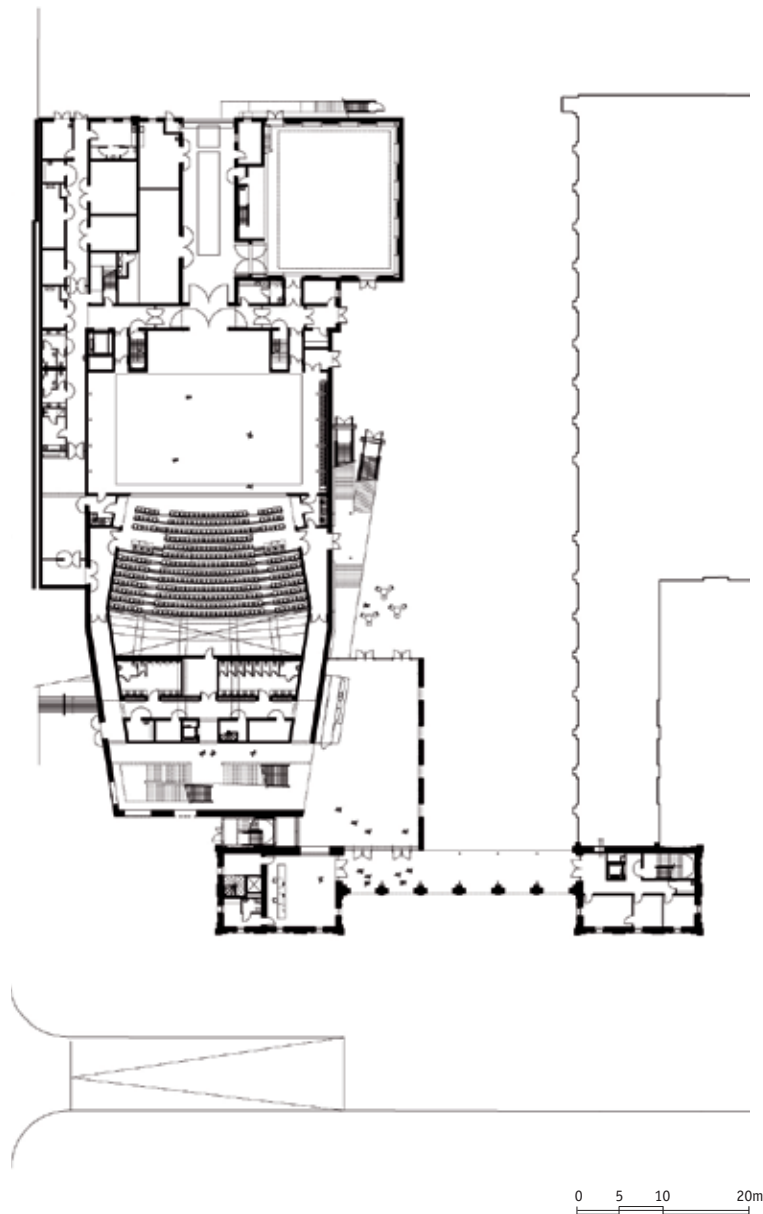
The effect is a clear reference to the nostalgic magic of theatre, as well as creating a light, lyrical counterpoint to the rough, stolid bunker. The motifs' evocation of flock wallpaper is heightened by its absence in occasional vertical strips of blank concrete. As if Herman's surface effect was not enough to signify the building's function, the long »



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LUC BORELY



north-south sides are further emblazoned with ‘Le Théâtre’ in raised metal letters mounted with LEDs, which are also scattered across the facades like stardust, in a joint design between K-architectures and Autobus Imperial.

This is an example of ‘billboard facades’, an expression used by Sam Jacobs, founder of British firm FAT [see page 58], for the use of a highly decorative and symbolic visual language to communicate with the street. Another example is in K-architectures’ cinema concept for the town Montbrison, which has a full-facade frontage of art-deco-style letters proclaiming the building’s function and specificity: REX CINEMA.

But are such devices a mere superficiality? In the case of the Théâtre St Nazaire, Herman is emphatic: ‘Not at all. The ornamentation is what carries the project’. She continues: ‘The budget was tight, so it was a matter of going back to basics:

the nobility of concrete, and engraving the bones of the building. The moulded concrete is structural and is added like a decorative element. It is inherent to the project. It’s the identity of the Théâtre St Nazaire; it’s what people will remember’.

The smaller volume extending north of the main one, literally the backstage area, is by contrast clad in horizontal slats of wood, unvarnished to gain the greying effect of time. It takes the form of great wooden boxes and references crates and dock warehousing, but as Herman explains, the wood is also ‘an answer to the old and new, something that lives. It responds to theatrical movement’. Furthermore, it ‘recalls the ephemeral decors which are assembled and dismantled with every new play’.

Of the old station pavilions, one now houses admin offices and the other, once the railway buffet, is now the public entrance and box office. Bronze panels salvaged from the SS

France – the world’s longest passenger liner when built in St Nazaire in 1960 – line the wall and the ceiling over the ticket desk. A foyer extends from the main volume, whose concrete wall becomes the backdrop to a cafe counter. This neutral space looks out on to the new plaza, of which more later.

A particularly romantic aspect is the triple-height space leading off from the foyer. In another theatrical flourish, the words for Balcony and Stalls shine in lights suspended over the staircases leading to them, and the balustrades of the staircases and landing balconies are panelled with motif-perforated aluminium, tainted to look bronze. Beyond the staircases, three windows in the corner admit daylight via punched-through exterior motifs, casting their patterns inside. It may all reference the past but the effect is chic and enhances that sense of anticipation before a show.

The 826-capacity auditorium is an

Below left: A motif in the concrete panels is punched through to allow golden light from the interior to shine out

Below: A perforated motif also allows natural light into the interior

Bottom: Stairs with balustrades of perforated, tainted aluminium channel theatre-goers to balcony and stalls seats

impressive space and includes an orchestra pit that can be raised 3m. The velvet seating, stage curtain and the entire balcony structure are a classically theatric red, contrasting with the raw concrete walls, patterned with the theatre’s motif towards the stage. ‘I could not imagine a theatre without red,’ says Herman, who had a healthy debate with Nadine Varoutsikos, the local director appointed by the Ministry of Culture, who had contended that the chosen red was too bourgeois. She wanted a revolutionary red. Herman reports that her response was: ‘Do you think champagne is for rich people and beer for the poor? I want the theatre to be for everyone’.

Above the generous 350 sq m stage, the flytower’s unseen technical heights are all hard metal gangways and chains. Beyond is the wooden-clad backstage volume, with two significant spaces. The double-height rehearsal room feels like another technical area of unpatterned concrete, with a floor

mounting on double joists for dance. It’s a hard space without any feature to divert artistes from perfecting their performance. Refuge from rehearsal is found in a private patio, open to the sky and lined with wood. Also in wood, a roof platform of boardwalks above the foyer/cafe is accessed by stairs from the plaza.

The new-build defines the long side of this plaza, which is open to the street between the pavilions. Big, brightly coloured plant pots enhance a de Chiricoesque quality, evoked by the line of neo-classical arches opposite the theatre that once interfaced station and quay, and the hint of industrial structures on the horizon. The foyer-cafe looks out on it through full-height glass, the only window on dreams that otherwise play out inside the auditorium.

Mayor Bateaux described the work as ‘feminine architecture’, but Herman denies what was intended as compliment: ‘For me

there’s not a feminine architecture. Perhaps he saw the floral detail as feminine. But it’s inspired by old theatrical motifs, and they were always by men’.

The motifs may be the icing on the cake, but it’s a good cake, with its internal interplay of hard and soft, its nostalgic references interwoven into an essentially brutalist structure, and its counterpointed volumes of wood and concrete. Interestingly, when Herman is asked which architects inspire her, she says many but names Peter Zumthor, for ‘the way he works with materials’.

St Nazaire has won attention in France, but Herman is not tempted to design abroad: ‘I don’t have the network for it. I don’t have good enough English. A lot of French architects have done terrible things abroad’. The theatre, then, is not a rehearsal for a bigger stage, but an entrancing act in K-architectures’ story. ■

Below: A rehearsal for A Midsummer Night’s Dream underway on the generous 350 sq m stage

Bottom: Longitudinal cross section of the Théâtre St Nazaire



PATRICK MILARA



LUC BOEGY



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THE VELVET SEATING, STAGE CURTAIN AND THE ENTIRE BALCONY STRUCTURE ARE A CLASSICALLY THEATRIC RED, CONTRASTING WITH THE RAW CONCRETE WALLS, PATTERNED WITH THE THEATRE’S MOTIF. “I COULDN’T IMAGE A THEATRE WITHOUT RED” SAYS HERMAN

