

**PIERRESVIVES**, A TRULY  
MONUMENTAL STRUCTURE IN  
MONTPELLIER, IS THE LATEST  
BUILDING BY **ZAHA HADID**.  
*HERBERT WRIGHT* WAS THERE FOR  
THE OPENING, TALKING TO THE  
ARCHITECT AND WONDERING IF  
THIS IS THE START OF A HADID  
CITYSCAPE FOR THE AREA

# HÉRAULT HEADLINE





A sleek, stratified structure of gargantuan scale has settled on ex-military wasteland in Montpellier. Flowing horizontal window strips that end and bifurcate in go-faster angles are recessed behind trapezoid concrete sections with curved edges in the 195m-long and 24m-high structure, suggesting Futurist motion.

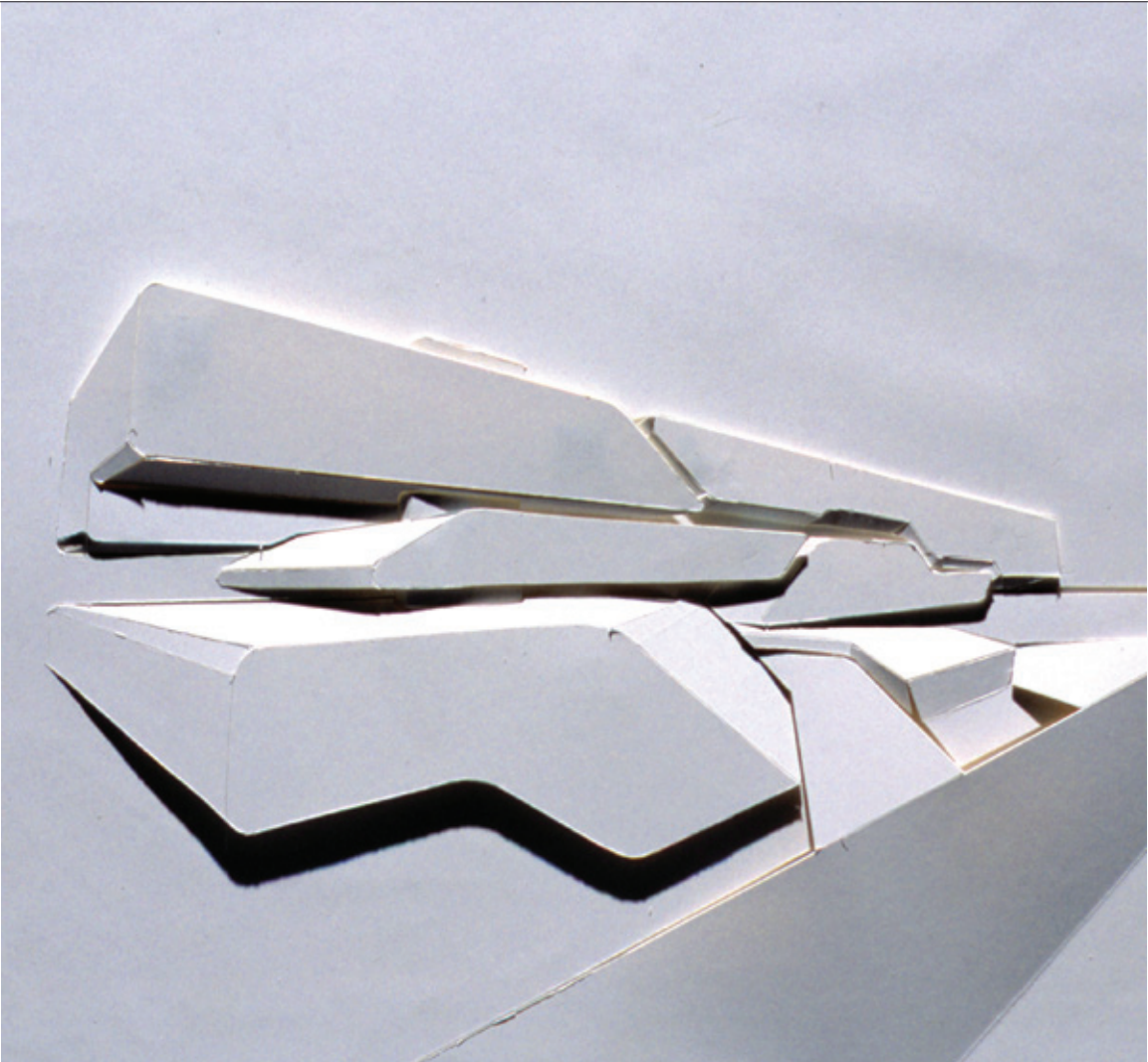
A sloping edge at one end is not unlike a TGV or one of the super-trams that ply the town in the south of France, in the department of Hérault. It is as if a similar vehicle but of fantastic size has come to rest not far from the social housing of the suburb of Mosson. The building is called Pierresvives, and houses the library, archives and sports administration of Hérault, across 40,000 sq m on five levels. And the €125m municipal project is Zaha Hadid's latest.

When the grande dame appeared at her grand projet for the September inauguration, she was wrapped as ever in a design by Issey Miyake. Sitting next to André Vezinhet, president of the Conseil général de l'Hérault, Hadid explained that Pierresvives 'combines the ideas of aggregation, clustering, crevices in the landscape, all together'. The aggregation partially refers to the history of the project, which began



with a call for submissions in 2002 and initially envisioned separate buildings. The library, she commented, 'started off as a tree of knowledge', a concept from her competition entry for the Grande Bibliothèque in Montreal in 2000. The streamlined and stratified design concept had obvious similarities. Both evoke frozen motion more than a tree, but Pierresvives' bifurcating lines in the wider central expanses of glass do suggest tree branches spreading south from a horizontal trunk grounded in the north. Referring to the MAXXI Museum (2009), she also offered that 'it's maybe in the same repertoire as the Rome project'. Overall, the project is described as 'cookies and voids', the former the concrete volumes. The 5,000 sq m of green glass, cut into the solid envelope of a thousand pre-cast concrete panels, is mounted with golden brises-soleil for dedicated areas and black for shared space. With its transparency and clear zoning, Pierresvives fits Hadid's description as 'very easy to read'. She commented that this horizontal skyscraper 'can be a single building in the landscape or a piece of urbanism'. It will transition to the latter as buildings emerge around it in the surrounding 24.7 acre 'eco-quarter', which

ALL MODELS AND DRAWINGS COURTESY ZAHA HADID ARCHITECTS



will include an enormous plaza, an energy-positive sports centre and 900 homes. Hadid mused that 'in the UK we think too much about variety', and later said: 'As we've done in our buildings, where elements fit together to form a continuum, we've already begun to apply our new architectural techniques to whole cities; developing a field of buildings – each one different but logically connected to the next – an organic, continually changing field of buildings that are highly correlated'. So, does Pierresvives offer a flavour of a Hadid cityscape? 'It would be fascinating to consider Pierresvives within a unified urban masterplan of buildings that engage and integrate with each other', she tells me later, 'but that is yet to be developed'. While Hadid's BMW structure (2005) in Leipzig created a signature flow in plan, Pierresvives does so in elevation. The drama of its form is not just in its scale and angles, all at 36 degrees. Each side is a three-dimensional composition of parallel concrete and glass planes. On the long western side, a concrete element cantilevers 10m out from the facade and 15m from one of five cores. This holds the 210-seat auditorium, and simultaneously forms a canopy over the public entrance »

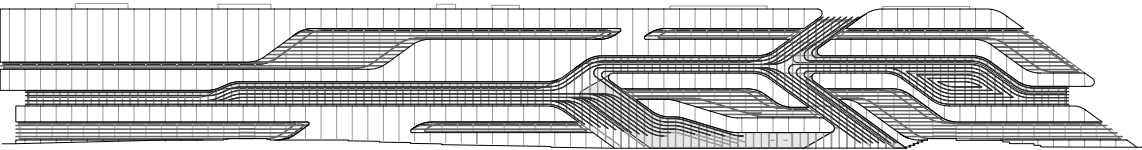
Elements of the Pierresvives, Zaha Hadid's latest building, in Montpellier:  
Above: Brise Soleil

Opposite Top: Early 2D/3D model

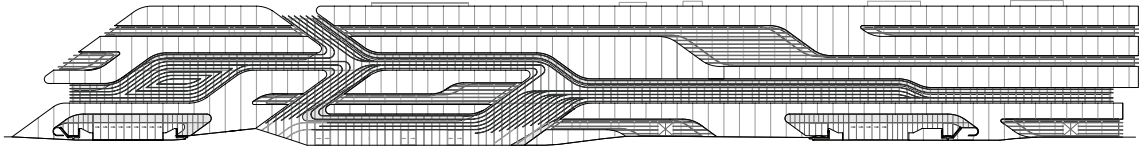
Opposite middle: Early sketch

Opposite bottom: The building's four elevations

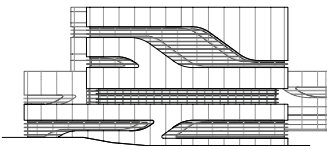
This image: East elevation



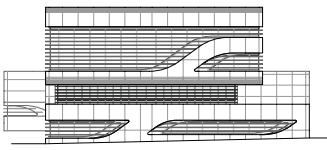
West elevation



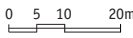
East elevation



North elevation



South elevation





to a breath-taking 400 sq m lobby, column-free and 20m high. Long, glass escalators rise to a mezzanine landing set in a double-height space under a ceiling with sweeping parallel grooves of lighting, between vast curtain walls of glass. On one side is the auditorium, the other library and archives.

Stephane Hof was Zaha Hadid's project architect, and his new practice Hoffice designed the library's reading room. (Vezinhet described his looks as like the Beatles, to which Hadid added dryly that he 'doesn't behave like the Beatles'). The room of painted wood and white Corian is called the Alphabet Library. Here, a 15m-wide wall recessed with black bookshelves forms a unified composition with white reading tables and a rectilinear ceiling pattern of recessed lighting, all with rounded corners and configured in shapes that suggest letters. In a building that is futuristic throughout, this space has a Sixties feel to it – if Kubrik's space station in 2001: A Space Odyssey had a library, this would be it.

The library continues in an expanse of white, filled with books, a children's area and multimedia facilities, including 'sonic chairs' for audio media, IT booths and a video games section. Encouraging learning and engaging youth are priorities,

and an exhibition space is included.

Across Pierresvives' northern stretches lay the archives, where 60km of shelving accommodate material dating back 200 years. In the long, internal corridors doors are recessed, with the concrete wall inclined to them on one side to facilitate trolley access. Storage units are climatically buffered by facade-adjacent corridors. Air and humidity conditioning is mainly passive, from floors and 20cm-thick walls of high-density concrete.

A local wine 'archive' in the basement is even better protected. The archive's mass loading of 140 tonnes/sq m, way greater than office requirements, was a major engineering challenge for Arup. The entire building's 80,000 tonnes required 415 piles, some as deep as 12m.

The other end of Pierresvives is essentially an office block for the sports administration. The offices' south-facing windows incline with the envelope, and the angles and rounded edges that run everywhere are even echoed on perforated sheet meshes covering the office air-conditioning. There are other unexpected features: in the concrete stairwells occasional steps have open wedges cut from their vertical rise. Lifts have coloured glass, »

**THE LIBRARY'S READING ROOM IS OF PAINTED WOOD AND WHITE CORIAN. A 15M-WIDE WALL RECESSED WITH BLACK BOOKSHELVES FORMS A UNIFIED COMPOSITION WITH WHITE READING TABLES AND A CEILING PATTERN OF RECESSED LIGHTING**

*Below: Stephane Hof was Hadid's project architect, and his new practice Hoffice designed the library reading room*







**THIS WORK IS A FANTASTIC SLICE OF SCI-FI EXCITEMENT, YET WITH A MONUMENTAL, TIMELESS SOLIDITY... WHILE ITS FLUIDITY SUGGESTS MOTION, PIERRESVIVES ALSO HAS A TERRESTRIAL QUALITY, LIKE A LONG OUTCROP OF SEDIMENTARY ROCK IN A TOPOGRAPHY ERODED BY WIND**

in quiet contrast to the mainly whites and blacks of Pierresvives. Expectant of big flows, the library's toilets have generous spaces and long, black, continuous hand basins. A secluded patio opens to the sky below the roofline, skewed vertically by angled, parallel, longitudinal walls. In front of the entrance, the surface treatment creates a shadow of the building, while on the other side, the service and staff car park's configuration echo it.

At the press conference at the official opening, I asked: 'With its youth outreach intent and home to the sports department, would skateboarders and parcour practitioners be welcome to use Pierresvives' exterior?' Vezinhet obfuscated enthusiastically, but later, Hadid clarified that 'any decision would ultimately be up to the department (of Hérault)... Pierresvives would not be the first of our projects where these activities were considered – the Phaeno Science Centre in Wolfsburg (2005) has even hosted professional, televised skateboard events'.

Skateboarding uncertainty aside, there are a few criticisms. A public cafe seems an obvious omission. Extensive parking will encourage car usage even though two of Montpellier's high-capacity tramways

pass nearby, and Pierresvives chased no industry environmental performance ratings. Even so, Arup has maximised efficiency with a central energy centre, made substantial energy savings by exploiting concrete's thermal mass, and not least minimised the need for mechanical conditioning of the archives to intermittent.

Pierresvives is unique and immediately stands out among contemporary icons. Hadid's status as the world's leading female architect is irrelevant – she says, 'As women in the profession, our work shouldn't be categorised. It should be judged within its context of the entire profession.' This particular work is a fantastic slice of sci-fi excitement, yet with a monumental, timeless solidity. It has dynamic spatial and sculptural consistency, from interior features to the entire block and even the space around it. While its fluidity suggests motion, Pierresvives also has a terrestrial quality, like a long outcrop of sedimentary rock in a topography eroded by wind.

Hérault was brave to go with the flow of Hadid's extraordinary vision. Vezinhet described Pierresvives as a 'conceptual gesture'. The gesture has already transformed the landscape – now it should start transforming the community. ■

*Above: Some 5,000 sq m of green glass has been inserted into the solid envelope of pre-cast concrete panels*