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Jean Nouvel's new Fondation Cartier is a subversive vision of a museum

Situated in front of the Louvre, this centre for contemporary art could have been a cliché — instead the French architect has created something truly provocative



Inside La Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris © Martin Argyroglou, Jean Nouvel/ADAGP, Paris

“The continuous roar of the machine at work, of customers crowding into the departments, dazzled by the merchandise, then propelled towards the cash-desk. And it was all regulated with the remorselessness of a machine: the vast horde of women were as if caught in the wheels of an inevitable force.” When Émile Zola wrote these words about a Parisian department store in his epic novel *The Ladies' Paradise* (1883), he was inspired by two real-life stores, Le Bon Marché and Les Grands Magasins du Louvre. The department store was a microcosm of modern capitalism, a cornucopia of technology and produce piled up in order to awe. It also represented the end of Paris as a city of small workshops, weavers and artisanal garrets, replaced by monstrous machines of consumption.

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The second of those institutions, Les Grands Magasins du Louvre, situated right in front of the eponymous museum, is about to reopen not as a department store but as a museum of contemporary art with the name of a luxury brand attached, Cartier. It signals another chapter in the transformation of Paris that Zola once described — one in which culture is the driver of global consumption.



View of Fondation Cartier from Rue Saint-Honoré, just opposite the Louvre © Martin Argyroglo

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The Fondation Cartier already had a purpose-built home designed by Jean Nouvel on the Boulevard Raspail which opened in 1994: a very fine glass box set in a garden, a much-loved museum of unusual, occasionally eccentric and often brilliant exhibitions and installations. For their new building they returned to Nouvel, who has since then become far more renowned for global blockbuster museums such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the National Museum of Qatar.

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The mobile platforms allow artists and curators to reinvent the spatial experience with each exhibition. That's what makes the building alive

Architect Jean Nouvel

Now they have staked a claim for contemporary art hard up against the epicentre of the old stuff, the Louvre. Some of the Fondation Cartier's galleries even look down over the windows of the latter's sculpture collection, visitors watching visitors looking at art across the road. All very self-conscious and postmodern.



Jean Nouvel's original Cartier Foundation building on Boulevard Raspail, around 3km south of the new building © Alamy Stock Photo

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This new home is a very different proposition both from the glass box and the former palace next door. Wrapped in honey-coloured stone, it was built as the biggest luxury hotel in Europe in 1855 on a huge, elongated city block stretching up the rue de Rivoli and encased in shops. With a complex and not always successful history as hotel, department store and antiques arcade, it is a building that has been brutalised, first when it was transformed into a shop, then when an RAF Lancaster bomber crashed into it in 1943 and subsequently in the 1970s when its interior was entirely stripped, leaving it a sad shell.

Nouvel has returned to Zola's conception of the department store as a monstrous machine in a very literal manner. He has rebuilt the entire interior around five huge vertically moving platforms, entire galleries that can be realigned to reconfigure the volumes to the requirements of artists or curators. "The mobile platforms offer a freedom that a series of fixed rooms never could," Nouvel tells me. "They allow artists and curators to reinvent the spatial experience of the place with each exhibition. That's what makes the building alive."



Installation view of 'Exposition Générale' at Fondation Cartier, with works by Alessandro Mendini, Bodys Isek Kingelez and Peter Halley © Marc Domage

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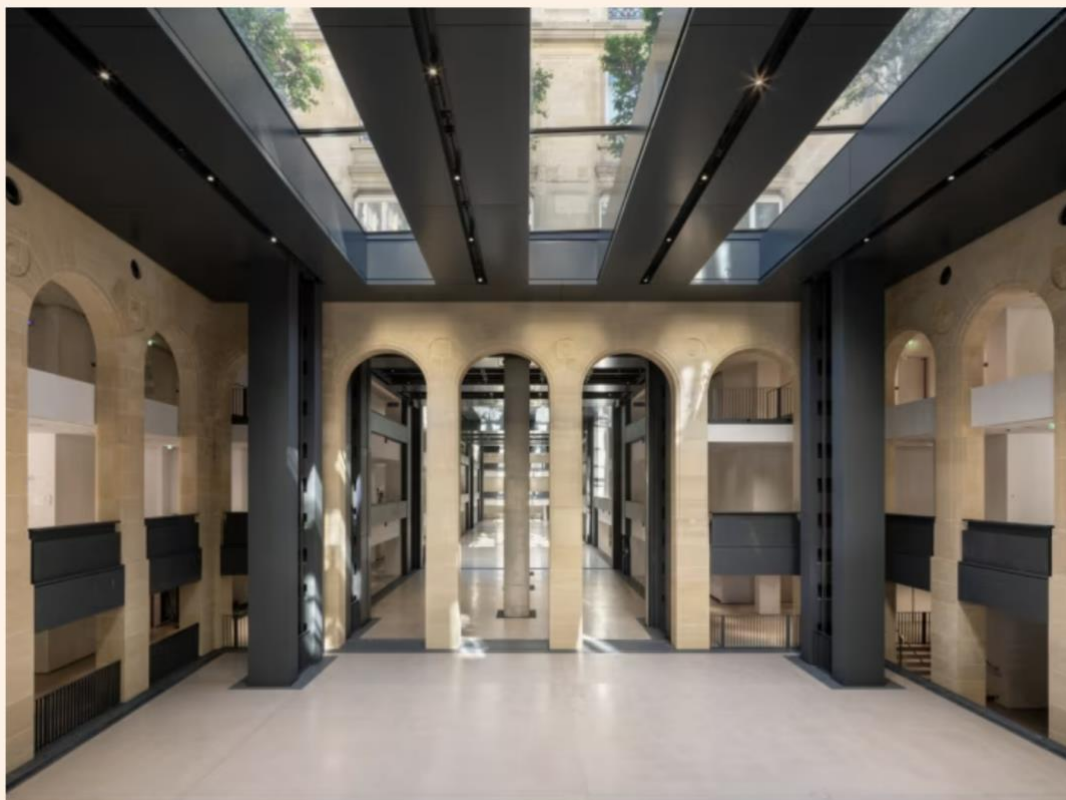
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These moving floors seem to me very much a reflection on the nature of the department store and the hotel this once was. Both those building types represented a blast of modernity, stuffed with mechanical innovations from Otis elevators to a dedicated telegraph room, gas and then electric lighting, escalators and pneumatic tubes. Displays were brilliantly lit 24 hours a day, viewed through huge plate-glass windows.

There is nothing new about culture buildings designed to move. Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano originally intended the Pompidou Centre to have a series of entirely moveable floors (the idea was dropped after budget cuts) and Rem Koolhaas and OMA designed the nearby Lafayette Anticipations with elevating floors. And the antecedents for moveable floors stretch back to the brilliant Maison du Peuple in Clichy (1935-39, currently being restored). What is odd at the new Fondation Cartier is the contrast, the strangeness of this machine hollowed out of a stone shell. It is as if an archaeological excavation discovered the remains of an industrial age, rather than some medieval civilisation.



The floors at Fondation Cartier in Paris have been designed to move upwards and downwards © Martin Argyroglo

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That hollowing out means that at some points the interior's entire length is visible, 150 metres of attenuated gallery with views on to the pavements through the arches of the rue de Rivoli. "I sought to extend the memory of the place rather than erase it," Nouvel says. And the art space is good, incredibly varied, in places epic (looking up at skylights to trees planted two storeys above street level) and in places dark, intimate and subterranean.

Some of the galleries appear to have been created through awkward collisions of bigger spaces but even these have forced curators into surprising displays of single artists. The sheer volume of the galleries allows the display of huge sculptures, installations and even pieces of architecture — for instance Bolivian architect Freddy Mamani's brilliantly kitsch neo-Andean installations, or Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez's urban visions — exactly as it was intended. This is one of the few art institutions to take architecture seriously as a medium in its own right.

"I wanted the building to remain a tool, open to the unexpected," Nouvel says. But you also do have to ask, is this really necessary? Stripped of the capacity to create any real external expression (beyond a long glass awning), Nouvel has instead created what is obviously an insanely expensive and elaborate interior. A massive steel structure of notched columns contains the galleries and the pulleys and cables: its machinery is exposed, recalling Nouvel's long-standing fascination with theatrical architecture, the revealing of the backstage as spectacle. In an art gallery it feels a little extravagant. Then again, this is not government money, so why not?

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An untitled forest scene from 2023 by Sheroanawe Hakihiwe and Fabrice Hyber stands inside Fondation Cartier
© Marc Damage

What does work incontrovertibly well is the opening up of the interior to the street. The arches which envelop its perimeter appear almost open, more like arcades than windows, so that the street seems contiguous with the interior, its stone floor an extension of the pavement. This very much gestures towards Nouvel's heritage (the architect came of age during the student protests of 1968) — the idea that culture comes from and belongs in the public realm. "The Fondation Cartier opens not only on to the Louvre," he says, "but also on to the streets, the cars, the passers-by, the sky, the clouds . . . Architecture creates a visual field where temporalities intersect."

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The new Fondation Cartier’s moving floors also suggest that queasy instability, society changing underfoot

I ask him about transparency, the contrast between this classical stone shell and his all-glazed 1994 building for the Fondation. “At the heart of both projects are the ideas of openness, availability,” he replies, “a deep conviction that a museum must be alive, must raise questions. Transparency,

for me, remains a way to inscribe architecture in a dialogue with its environment, to ensure that nothing is fixed in advance.”

There are a few issues. There is no real entrance lobby which is strange for an institution of this scale, and some of the meetings between the new architecture and the historic structure are clunky — for instance in the ghostly internal stone arches set against the heavy engineering of the platforms. But the way you can see across all the spaces, often four or five levels at once, really works.



Exposed vents in the ceiling of Fondation Cartier © Martin Argyroglo

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There is also, I think, something else here, something more subversive. The invention of the department store catalysed a seismic shift in society: it encouraged women to be out of the home on their own, allowed a gaze into bourgeois lifestyles and inculcated a fantasy of social mobility through the consumption of fashionable products. The shop window and the atrium (made possible by the introduction of cast iron structures) created a porosity between interior and exterior. The new Fondation Cartier's moving floors also suggest that queasy instability, society changing underfoot. There is an intimation here of the ephemerality of the contemporary metropolis, the sharp shift to the digital and the virtual undermining the solidity of the city. It is a great clunky metaphor but it is at least there, that provocation about how we understand architecture and its permanence.

This could have been a cliché: a huge ruin carved out à la Tate Modern (and there is plenty of raw brick and concrete exposed below ground). It could have been a fetishisation of the aesthetic (rather than the idea) of the mechanism as seen at the Pompidou. Or it could have been a slice of minimal banality as you find at MoMA. Instead Nouvel has (over)wrought something strange and intriguing, a massive machine for the unexpected.

The Fondation Cartier opens October 25, fondationcartier.com