

A BREATH OF NEW LIFE FOR THE ALBERT CAMUS HIGH SCHOOL IN NIMES

It's back to school time for the students of Albert Camus high school in Nimes, and this September, it has never looked better. Last spring, the French Architectural firm Hellin-Sebbag wrapped up the last phase of an ambitious project that involved 1,548 m² of new space, 4,548 m² of renovations and 13,500 m² of improved safety and accessibility. The contractor had set two goals for the competition: the construction of a new building dedicated to Science and Laboratory Technique (STL), and a renovated main entrance.

BACKGROUND

The school, built in the 1960s on a steep slope, consists of seven buildings, one of which is 170m long and perpendicular to the slope. The complex, poorly integrated into the city, lacked a façade overlooking the boulevard Georges Pompidou. Moreover, a conference room, added more recently in a recess off an adjacent building, made access to the entrance more difficult.

RISING TO A DOUBLE CHALLENGE

Rather than construct the new building in the courtyard, as suggested in the original programme, the architects provided a single solution to the double challenge of building a new STL laboratory and renovating the entrance: the laboratory, elevated on pillars, makes use of the “dead space” at the entrance on two levels, and blends in with adjacent buildings. The façade, fully glazed, is dotted with “flags” in red glass, which shine at night like the bright lights of a city streetscape. This choice of location keeps the leafy courtyard – now with modern-style benches - intact, while leaving access to the conference room unhindered.

A LARGE, MULTI-FUNCTIONAL PORCH

The large underside of the laboratory creates a huge porch, sheltering the new entry way designed in a glass curve, extending the conference hall, and most importantly, providing students with a new covered courtyard, they never had before.

To make the site accessible to all despite the steep slope, the architects created an openly visible system of passageways and lifts which, thanks to their colour and material, mark out a rhythm along the façade of the monotonous 170m block which runs along the whole of the site.

THE COLOUR RED AS UNIFYING THREAD

The colour red, used in several materials throughout the building, becomes a unifying thread:

- bright glass “flags” attached to the curtain wall of the façade serve as a visual landmark in the city
 - red coating for the pillars of the porch, marking the passage from street to courtyard
 - red metal grating for the suspended ceiling of the covered courtyard and cafeteria, and for the courtyard stairs, to highlight these emblematic spaces
 - Eternit cladding and red glass roofs for passageways and the new lift
 - red linoleum flooring inside the corridors
- ...so many bold signals that guide the way and breath new life into the place

AN AFFORDABLE AND SUSTAINABLE RENOVATION

Once again, as with police headquarters in Paris's 17th district, renovated by the architectural firm in 2011, Hellin-Sebbag Associated Architects has proven that the standardised and regularised architecture of the 1960s lends particularly well to a complete - and indeed affordable - transformation. It is not necessary to demolish everything; with a few carefully chosen touches - taking away here and adding on there – standards are respected and an entire image transformed.

While new additions only amount to 18% of the entire building site, Architects Brigitte Hellin, Hilda Sebbag and Benjamin Pirany have turned the Albert Camus high school into a regional showcase of technological prowess.

