

UNIVERSITY: THE NEW CAMPUS SAINT-CHARLES IN MONTPELLIER

Transparency, light and ease of movement

In autumn 2011, architects Brigitte Hellin and Hilda Sebbag completed the first phase in the transformation of a seventeenth-century hospital into a university campus, close to the historic centre of Montpellier.

The second phase on the same site will convert a building, erected in 1768 to house the incurably sick, into a Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and a department of archaeology (tender imminent).

This vast renovation and conversion covers an area of almost 15,000 square metres. The third phase will concern a new extension over an area of 3,500 square metres.



FROM SHADOW TO LIGHT

Dark and imposing, almost impenetrable, closed in on itself and the rest of the city, the building was originally a hospice for the poor and destitute.



The architects have let in light, created ease of movement, and re-connected the building with the surrounding area, ready to welcome the 1,500 people who use the campus.

FLUIDITY AND TRANSPARENCY

The architects have restored but also interpreted the original structure, which is listed on the inventory of historic monuments. The building takes shape around an axis which divides the central element along its length into two areas – formerly the women's wing and the men's wing – which stand around two courtyards.

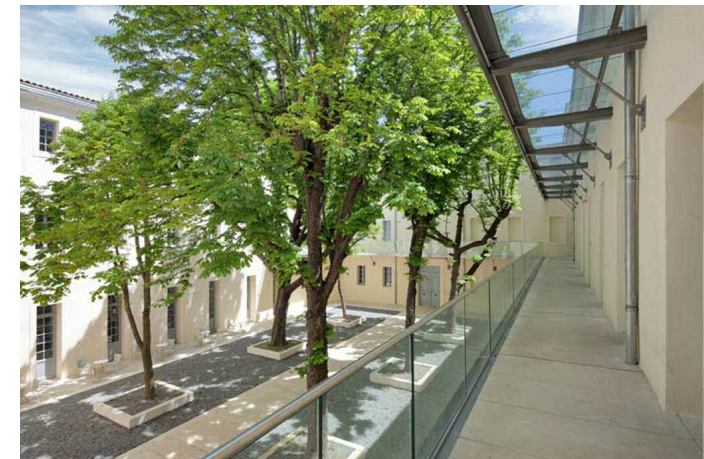
The geometric purity of the whole has been retained while circulation on all the floors is facilitated through openings made in the wall in the ground-floor cafeteria, the addition of pillars on the first floors where the administrative offices are located, and a glazed facade for the foyer and the second-floor library.

The leitmotif of the project – transparency and visibility – is evident throughout.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN 17TH-CENTURY AND 21ST-CENTURY ARCHITECTURE

Hellin-Sebbag was intent that its transformation of the former hospital should respect the original structure. Thus the monumental staircase in the foyer, in light polished concrete and steel, has its counterpart in the listed staircase by Jean Giral.

In the tree-lined courtyards, one with chestnut trees, the other with plane trees, the windows that open onto the ground floor and, on the first floor, the newly-created passageways are set at regular intervals, as the original windows once were.



The red and blue of the flooring, doors, acoustic ceiling panels in the lecture halls and cafeteria, or as spots of colour in the corridors, are a reminder that the building was once divided into separate wings for men and women, now connected.

The architects delivered innovative solutions for fluid and electrical services, lighting, audiovisual equipment and acoustic comfort that would preserve the ground-floor vaults.

QUALITY RENOVATION AT A LOW COST

Despite the need for heavy restructuring, given the dilapidated state of the building and the poor quality of the original materials, works were completed within a very low budget of €12.8 M exc. VAT for 10,000 square metres or €1,280/square metre.

