THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

'PARC DE LA VILLETTE'

A PARK FOR THE 21st CENTURY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Parc de la Villette is an urban park in the north eastern corner
of Paris, designed and built in the 10 years between 1980 and
1990. Its development was carried out under the auspices of
President François Mitterand's programme of Grands Projets, an
impressive and courageous effort to enrich the urban fabric of
the French capital with showpieces of contemporary architecture,
while at the same time providing much needed facilities that had
been lacking in the city. The park is not merely one Grand
Projet but a collection of four: A science museum, a centre of
music and dance, an exhibition hall and of course the design of
the park itself.

This thesis examines La Villette in Terms of contemporary French
architecture and architecture as a whole, and concludes that
there are four main points of importance present in the complex:
Firstly, the park at La Villette is an urban experiment for the
reclamation of a vast derelict post-industrial tract within the
city boundaries that succeeds majestically; secondly, La
Villette is the first major piece of deconstructivist
architecture ever built and as such is the prototype of a new
movement; thirdly, La Villette represents a considerable effort
on the part of the French government to show its lead in the
international state patronage stakes; and finally, it
illustrates the birth of a new French modernism which can be
traced back to presidential preference but more importantly, to

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paraphrase Reyner Banham, to 'the last form giver', Le
Corbusier. (Banham 1981 : 41).

The thesis is not critical of the formal eclecticism that is
present in much of the designs, but rather accepts that
architectural influences are not necessarily conscious
plagiarism of ideas, but part and parcel of the cultural baggage
carried around in the head and heart of every designer since the
dawn of time, that unconsciously manifest themselves in his
work.

The thesis focuses on the main protagonists involved at the La
Villette project: Bernard Tschumi (born 1944) designer of the
park itself; Adrien Fainsilber (born 1932) designer of La Cité
des Sciences et de l'Industrie; Christian de Portzamparc
(born 1944) designer of La Cite de la Musique. It acknowledges
that on the surface the work of the three primary designers
presents a seemingly random collection of architectural styles
but that, on closer examination, certain characteristics of
style appear that go beyond international groupings of 'hi-tech'
'modernism', 'postmodernism', 'deconstructivism' and
'minimalism'.

The literature used initially in the research for the thesis was
contemporary French, Italian and British architectural
periodicals. The articles used were written by a diverse range
of architects, designers and theorists but they can be grouped
by nationality: the French writers displayed an overwhelming

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romanticism for the works involved which sometimes clouded their view, the Italian writers were very interested in the theoretical and philosophical grounding of the works and the British were by and large rather overly cynical of many aspects of the designs.

Research for this thesis was not confined to La Villette either, and further articles from periodicals relating to the other Grands Projets were sourced. At this stage in the research a lot of background literature was studied in the areas of the history of French design, modernism, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Russian constructivism, and contemporary French design. A trip to Paris to see La Villette last year proved beneficial.

The thesis is broken down into four chapters, with a conclusion section at the end. The chapters are as follows:

Chapter I: State Patronage in France, examines the role of the state in contemporary French architecture and more specifically in the La Villette project, and questions whether it represents mere propaganda or genuine architectural patronage. It also looks at the role of the state in the birth of a formal

language of geometry, and proposes that there are grounds for this assumption.

Chapter II: The Park for the 21st Century, looks at Tschumi's design for the overall park and its importance in terms of the urban strategy it presents, its theoretical grounding in deconstructivism, its formal debts to the Modern and the Russian

constructivist movements, and its monumental importance to François Mitterand.

Chapter III: The Metamorphosis of a Monumental Building, is a critical analysis of Adrien Fainsilber's Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie. This chapter studies its importance as a piece of modern museum design and its visual references to classical and modernist architecture. While acknowledging its conception lies in a French romance with high technology it also looks at the museum's important relationship with the park as a whole.

Chapter IV: An Architecture of Sound, presents a picture of Christian de Portzamparc's Cité de la Musique and its role in the integration of city and park. This chapter examines the powerful visual language employed and makes a strong argument that, although it is an exciting and beautiful piece of architecture, it owes more than a passing reference to Le Corbusier.

The thesis concludes that Parc de la Villette is an important piece of contemporary architectural design for all the reasons outlined earlier in this introduction. It also views La Villette as a very exciting place with a genuine diversity of elements that is worthy of its title - A Park for the 21st Century.

CHAPTER I

STATE PATRONAGE IN FRANCE

In 1981 President Mitterand announced his building programme of
nine Grands Projets to be built within ten years at a budget of
well in excess of two billion pounds sterling. This ambitious
proposal went ahead according to schedule and was more or less
complete to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Revolution.
It is an achievement very much in the spirit of 1789 ; an
attempt to make high culture available to every man. However,
the monumental side of the Parisian building programme draws its
inspiration, at least in part, from traditions even older than
1789. French heads of state, kings, emperors or presidents have
always wanted to leave tangible memorials to their reigns in
terms of built objects. The great canal system of France was
instituted by Louis XIV's minister Colbert; Tiers initiated
the construction of the city's last great defensive wall in the
1840's; Napoleon III's prefect of the Seine, Haussman,
reordered the urban fabric of Paris with his grands boulevards;
de Gaulle sanctioned the new town building programme.

Even in the last twenty years, leaders have continued to use the
Royal Prerogative - Pompidou with his centre and d'Estaing with
his grotesque plans for Les Halles. In this light, it is
possible to look at Mitterand's building programme in an
entirely cynical way. The English architectural journal

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Blueprint headlined in February 1987 'Building mania has become
an occupational hazard for French presidents' using sub headings
like 'Ruinous debauchery', 'war of attrition' and 'A career in
ruins?'.

It is unfortunate that the editors of this and other English
magazines have taken such a shallow stance, but their position
is more than adequately displayed in the architectural void that
is London.

In Paris there is a genuine enthusiasm for buildings and
architecture is a topic of lively interest at dinner, along with
food, cinema, art, and money. In my Parisian acquaintances I see a
concern for the civic amenity, the development of their city and
a certain sense of involvement, as well as taking sheer
aesthetic pleasure in visiting buildings, in much the same way as
they would visit an art exhibition or see a new film. The
simple criteria of their attitude are observed: if it is worth
preserving, it is preserved. If it is not, it is demolished.
The new sits comfortably with the old.

Martin Shallon notes that this is a marked difference in
attitude from his experience in England, where new buildings,
those who build them and those who design them are considered
respectively as 'carbuncles, cowboys, and charlatans', and where
the discussion of architecture is led by 'the media pandering to
royal conservatism' (Shallon 1985 : 20).

In France the governments willingness to take a leading role in

the promotion of architecture is founded in a unanimous belief
that each period must be allowed to leave its mark on the city.
In the words of Jacques Chirac:

> I would tend to keep away from imitating past styles,
> for I refuse to believe that architects today are
> less creative than those of the past. (Davey 1989 : 27)

In certain cases state involvement in architecture can have a
detrimental effect, as happened in Nazi Germany with the rebirth
of neo-classicalism and with it, all its monumental symbolism.
Architecture then becomes an image of the state, or more
specifically the image of one person's power.

In France, architectural state patronage is initiated through
competitions, which is how all Mitterand's Grands Projets were
carried out (with the exception of the Louvre, where Mitterand
picked I.M. Pei, personally on the merits of the architect's
previous museum work in the U.S.). The intention behind this
approach lies in the state's wish to have an open forum on the
selection of various designs. In theory this should lead to a
proliferation of architectural approaches and a real 'bubbling
up of ideas' (Furness 1991 : 32)

This is true to an extent, and for many France (and Paris
especially), has become a very interesting place full of exciting
architecture and design. I suppose it always has been. Honoré
de Balzac wrote 'Paris is a genuine ocean, throw in the lead,
you will never be able to plumb its depths'. ref.

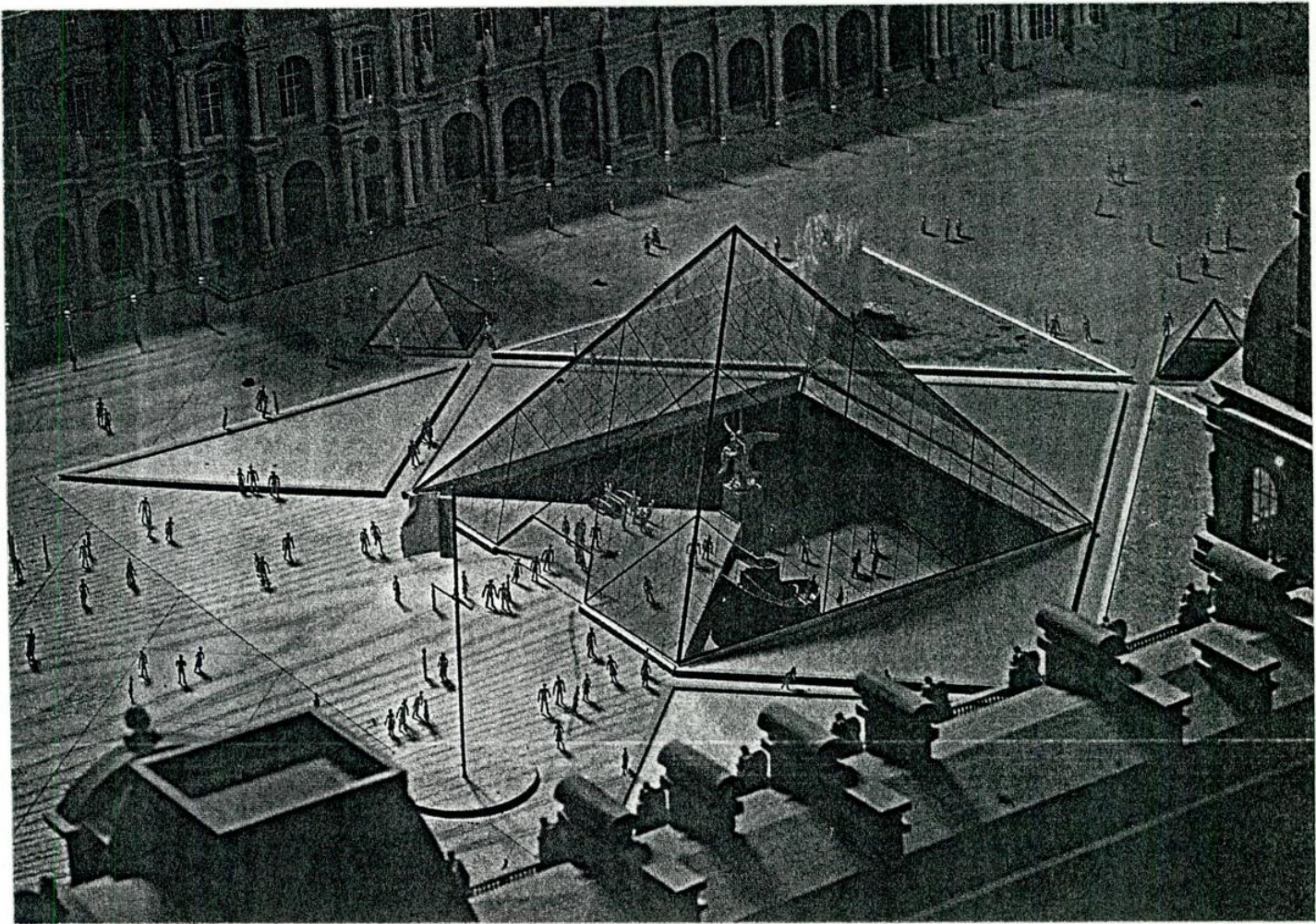However, it may be argued that no matter how genuine the

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Figure 1

Model of the Pyramid at Le Louvre by I.M. Pei

motivation behind state patronage - that a definite aesthetic
influence can appear, whether good or bad, close examination of
most of the Grands Projets as it happens does point to a common
theme:

> La tendence actuelle de l'architecture française est
> la simplicité, voire a la simplification des formes...
> il y a un nouvel acadèmisme. (Lucan 1989 : 70)

This simplification of form is all apparent in the Grands
Projets - the cubic shape of La Grande Arche de la Defense, the
pyramid at The Louvre, the sphere and cone at La Villette. In
all cases the resultant buildings are bold and exciting,
powerful and ultimately monumental.

At The Louvre I.M. Pei has given us a 'timeless form in modern
materials' (Provost 1987 : 31) which has received worldwide
acclaim for its purity and simplicity. It shows French
willingness and courage to place the new with the old by
expressing the architecture of our times in one of the world's
most celebrated monuments. The refined, highly technical
architecture becomes a symbol of France's investment in her
future and the preservation of her past.

The use of architecture as a symbol of the future occurs again
in the Grande Arche at La Defense. The vast open cube was
praised by the jury for 'the clarity of its concept' and its
geometric precision and poetry, and welcomed by the President
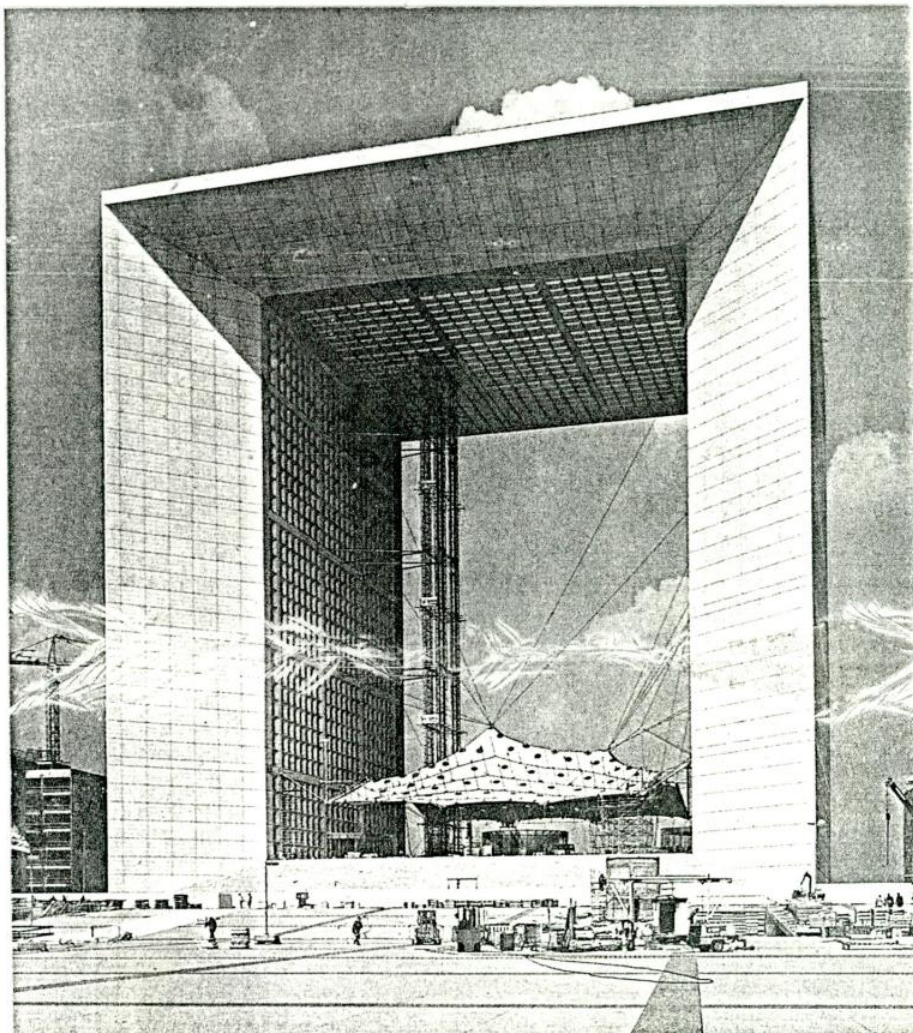for its 'purity' and 'force'. The cube was designed by Otto von

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Figure 2

La Grande Arche de la Defense

Spreckelsen (born 1930) an unknown Danish church builder, who
wrote a poem on his arch:

> An open cube
> A window to the world
> As a temporary grande finale
> to the avenue
> With a view to the future
> It is a modern Arc de Triomphe
> Celebrating the triumph of mankind
> It is a symbol of hope for the future
> That all people can meet freely.
> (von Spreckelsen 1987 : 7)

It is a very romantic interpretation but one that is taken
very seriously in France. However, critics of the Arch have
deemed it 'monolithic' and 'meaningless' but nothing could prepare
one for the absolutely poetic quality of the physical reality.
The huge cube of a building floats over the deck of La Defense.
It appears weightless.

Throughout the thesis more examples of this presidential formal
influence are apparent. There is no doubt that the use of
geometric forms has enhanced the monumental stature of all the
works involved. But are the results monuments to Mitterand?
They represent sincere attempts to make late 20th century
architecture appropriate for one of Europe's greatest cities.
In doing this the French presidency has had an aesthetic
influence, but the solutions have involved an attempt to create
new urban forms based on Modernism rather than the convenience
of post modern classicism. This can only be seen as a good
thing, provided it doesn't go too far. In the words of Mitterand
himself:

> Beauty stimulates curiosity, responding to the need
> of the heart and the spirit. It both teaches us and
> stimulates us. My wish is that the major projects
> help us to understand our roots and our history;
> that they will permit us to foresee the future and
> conquer it. The major projects illustrate a constant
> ambition for the entire nation. (François Mitterand, 1987)

If La Grande Arche is a window to the future, then it frames

Parc de La Villette, for it is the most comprehensive display of

Mitterand's vision of the next century. The parc is an

important step in urban development and represents a strong

political commitment to planning, landscape, public works and

the physical appearance of the capital. In short, it is an

ambitious attempt to create a new model for a city centre,
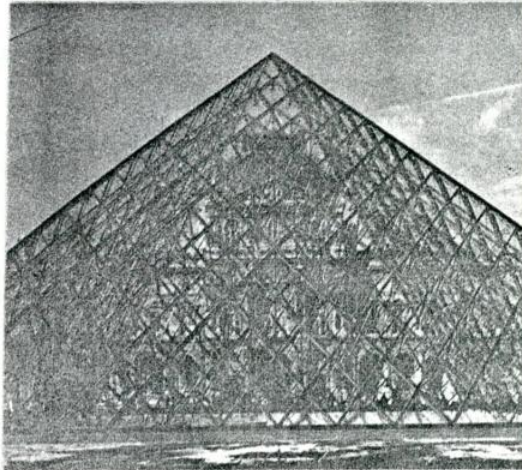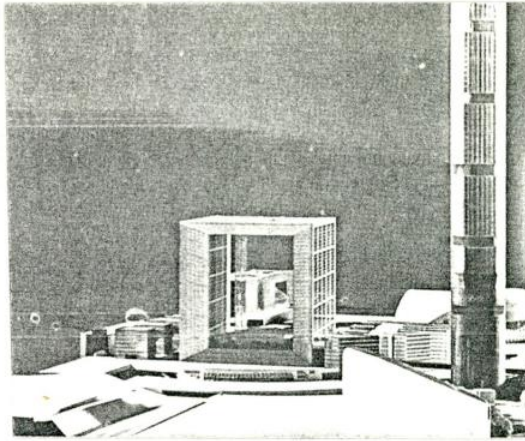
rather than resurrecting an old one.

Figure 3
Figure 4
Figure 5

An Architecture of Geometry:

La Grande Arche
La Pyramid
La Geode at La Villette

CHAPTER II

THE PARK FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

In 1982 Mitterand's government organized a competition to
design an 'urban park for the 21st century' on a site in the
north eastern corner of Paris. The site at La Villette
consisted of 55 hectares of wasted meatyards, old industry,
railway bridges, disused canals and sheds. Already on the site
was the bones of Adrien Fainsilber's Cité des Sciences et de
l'Industrie, and La Grande Halle, an original 19th century steel
market hall stated to become an exhibition space. Others were
projected: A 'city of music' and a rock concert hall, as well
as two housing clusters.

The brief was to design the scheme of the park to include some
diverse commercial and cultural functions including museums,
cinemas, restaurants, day care centres, video studios and art
workshops. It also stated that the objective of the project was
that it should be innovatory and 'adapted as much to the urban
reality of today as that of tomorrow'. (Holden 1989 : 57)

This forward looking public patronage is an integral part of an
economic, social and physical planning and regeneration policy,
the likes of which is rare internationally. To quote President
Mitterand:

> Vous savez quel prix j'attache a l'aménagement des
> villes. Nous n'avons rien fait si nous n'avons pas
> crée dans les dix anneès a venir les bases de la
> civilisation urbaine. (Tschumi, 1987 : 131)

In March 1983, the Franco-Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, then
dean of Architecture at Columbia University New York, won the
commission. Tschumi up until this had been primarily a theorist
and had gained an international reputation for his theoretical
projects 'Manhattan Transcripts' (1976-1981) and 'Joyce's
Garden' (1976-1977). Both of these were specifically exploring
concepts of deconstruction and dissociation - the former
addressing architectural and programmatic disjunctions and the
latter, architectural and literary superimposition. His entry
for La Villette was essentially a culmination of these
architectural theories, but was different: it had crossed the
line between ratified theory and implemented architecture - and
so moved from the stimulating province of the few, into the
public domain. However inspiring the intellectual grounding of
a design, ultimately, for most people what is realized in three
dimensions is all there is.

From that perspective undoubtedly the most interesting aspect of
the project is its significance as an urban strategy for the
reclamation of a vast post-industrial tract within the city
boundaries. The 125 acre site of the park, occupied until the
mid-1770s by the slaughterhouses of Paris, is a paradigm of the
problem that now besets many Western cities whose industrial
base has moved elsewhere or become obsolete, leaving blighted
wastelands for which new uses must be found. 'It's those areas
that one has to reinvent' Tschumi says 'La Villette was the
first project that on a large scale looked at those sites (as
places where) you couldn't be contextual. You had to start
almost from scratch'. (Hatton, 1985 : 36). Given France's

powerful public sector and its socialist and architecturally
ambitious President, it's not surprising that Paris should
pioneer such an urban experiment. Factor in the French passion
for philosophy, their romance with hi-tech and their penchant
for what critic Peter Blundell Jones aptly terms
'institutionalized culture' and you have the makings of the
park. (Blundell Jones, 1989 : 55).

A New Approach

Traditional parks, such as our own St. Stephen's Green Dublin,
were designed to provide comfort and solace to the urban dweller
(i.e. the eighteenth century ideal of Rus in Urbe), - to provide
a link with nature and an escape from modern day to day living.
It has been shown however, that people are no longer visiting
these parks to the same extent as before. Casabella proposes
that this is not because the traditional parks are archaic, but
because 'more compelling places exist' (Friedberg, 1983 : 12)

A fresh approach seemed necessary and so Tschumi's project
proposed that a 'park for the 21st century' shouldn't be an
isolated experience cut off from the urban landscape, but
an integrated part of the fabric of the city, where city
and park may become inseparable with no line of definition.
It becomes the stage that provides opportunities for social
contacts and diverse leisure activities. The park
shouldn't be so much a retreat from the harsh reality of
urban life, but rather a 'celebration of, and a part of
urbanity'. Parc de la Villette is designed as a

continuation of the city rather than as a hole in it.

Deconstructivist Theory:

The essence of deconstructivist architecture lies in a denial of coherent meaning. This is not to say that the place is intended to have no meaning, rather that a single dominant meaning is supposed to be unsustainable and therefore not worth aiming for. Everyone is supposed to experience it in a different way, making his or her own interpretation. This lack of shared meaning is supposed to invalidate past approaches: Modernism, post modernism, functionalism and formalism, so now in Tschumi's words:

> the game of architecture is neither function (questions of use) nor form (questions of style) nor even the synthesis of function and form, but rather the bringing together of possible combinations and permutations between different categories of analysis - space, movement, event, technique, symbol, etc.'
> (Hatton, 1985 : 36)

Observing that the inhabitants and objects of this environment had been brought together by 'circumstance rather than desire', Tschumi reflected on the notion of equilibrium, following Michel Foucault:

> Equilibrium exists within madness, but this equilibrium is masked by clouds of illusion, by a feigned disorder; the rigour of the architect is hidden by the clever management of these unchained violences. (Hatton, 1985 : 36)

Several factors seem to have been involved in this thought;
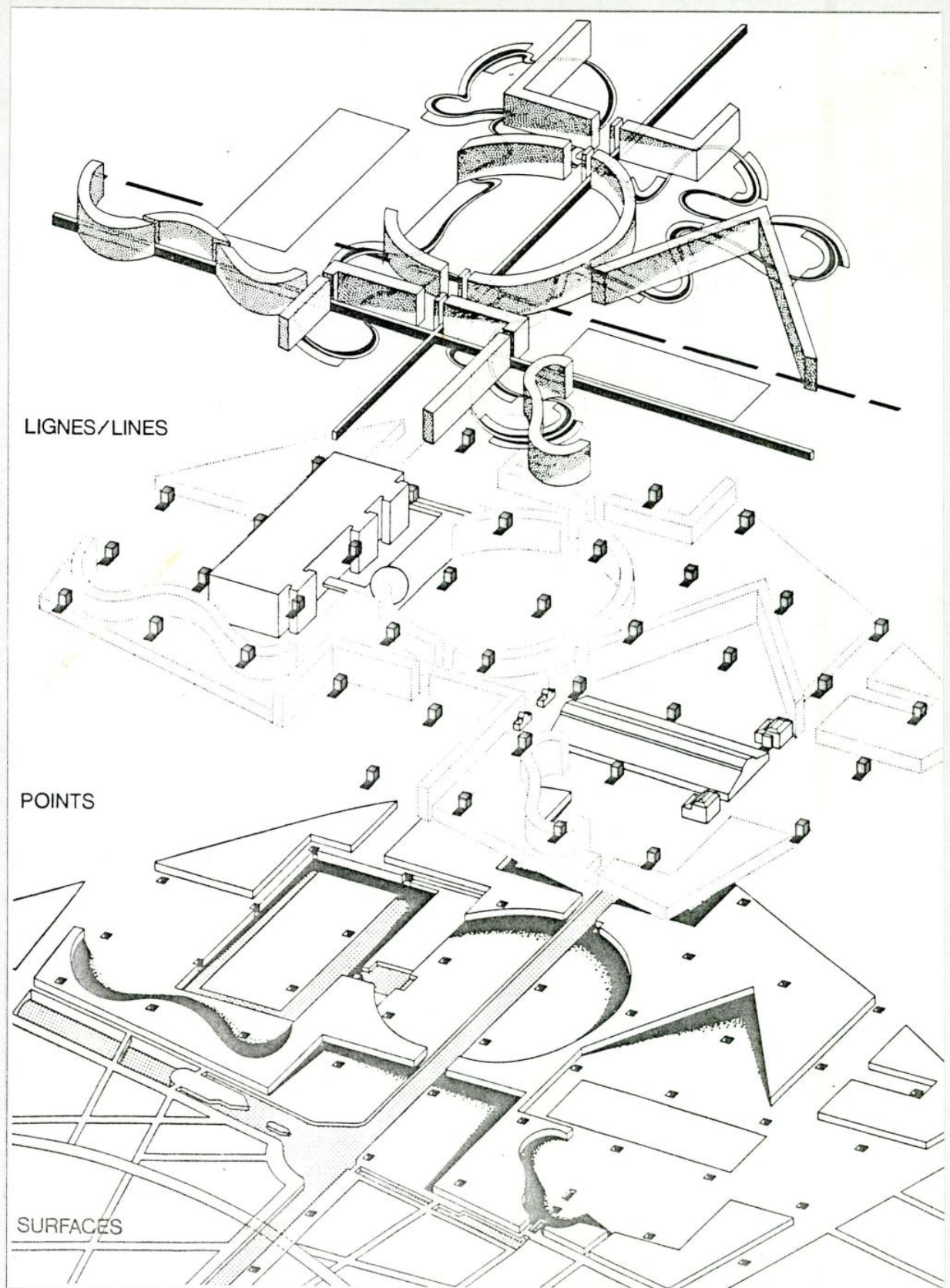
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LIGNES/LINES

POINTS

SURFACES

Figure 6

The three layers of Tschumi's design
Lines, Points and Surfaces

that the planned city is a pretence at order when in fact its most creative life comes from the disorder it fails to contain, and that therefore the design should free itself from the concept of prediction used by designers in towns such as Milton Keynes in the U.K.

Tschumi's concept at approaching this problem is very simple and effective, and simply involves the overlaying, without synthesis into a higher order three systems of points, lines and surfaces, corresponding to objects, movements and spaces. Enormous emphasis is placed on the lack of resolution between the three systems, the way they collide and interact. La Villette is said therefore to present us for the first time in history with a 'dis-structured structure'. (Ellis, 1985 : 41)

To examine the effectiveness and importance of this approach it is necessary to look at each of these systems individually.

The Point Grid

The point grid is the basis of Tschumi's design. At each point on the grid lies a follie or pavilion.

The basic function of each follie is to house the programmatic requirements outlined by Mitterand's brief - art workshops, restaurants, kindergartens, etc.

Tschumi chose to distribute these requirements on a grid plan for a number of important reasons.
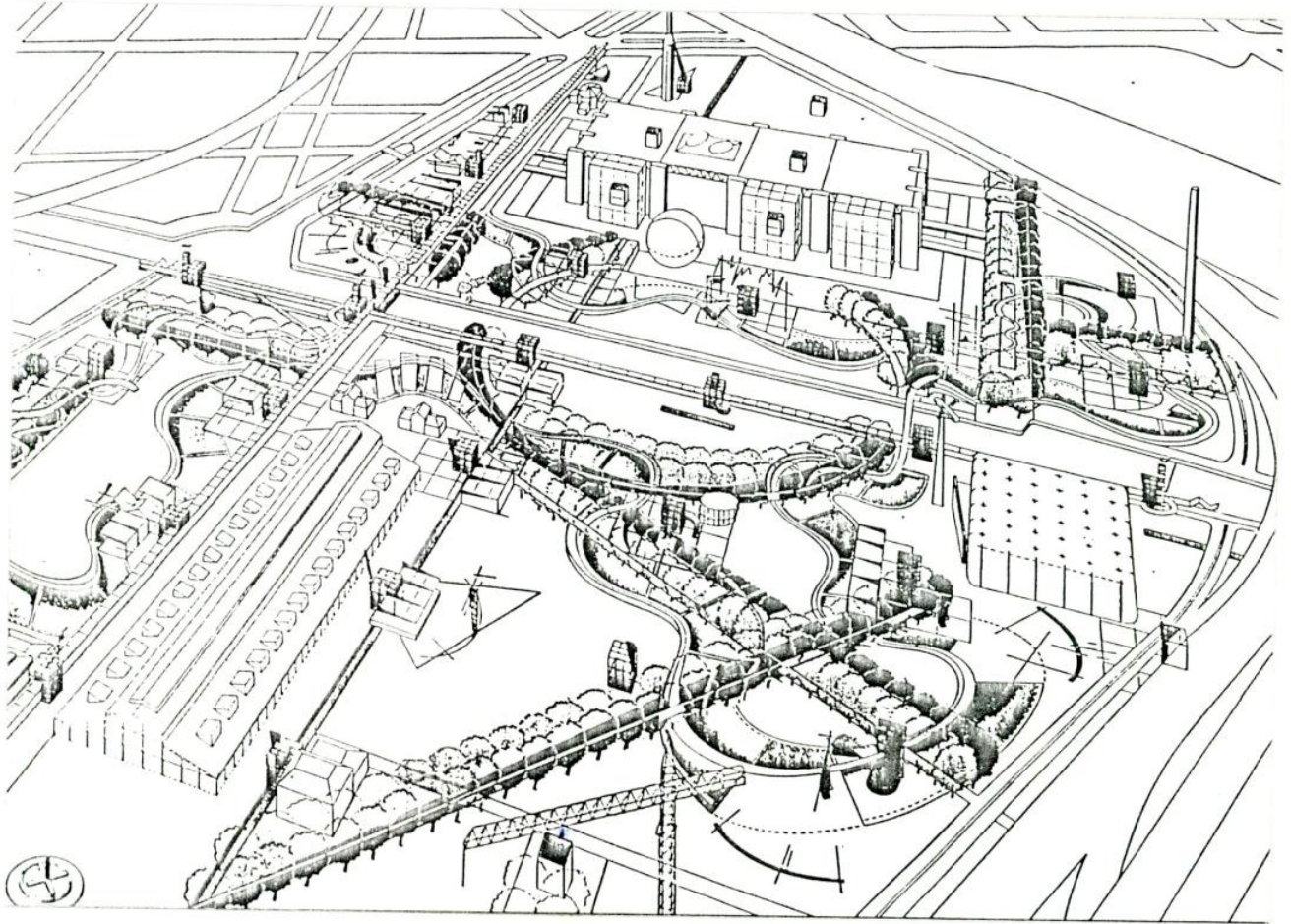
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Figure 7

Aeriel perspective of La Villette

The Boulevard Peripherique is on the right, the border between
Paris and her suburbs

Firstly, it has the effect of promoting movement between these points of activity and therefore around the very large site. If he had chosen to house them all in one complex, the park would have become rather like an indoor cultural centre - the only outdoor activity being the travel between the four main buildings, which would sit in isolation.

Secondly, the grid gives the park a rationalistic unity which no doubt appealed to the French jury. The French have always been intrigued by Corbusian and Miesian rationalism. The grid is obviously reminiscent of the Illinois Institute of Technology (1952-53) and serves to take the emphasis away from the open spaces and concentrates it on these points. The follies also represent a continuation of the city through the park. In fact a number of follies have been projected into the city to emphasize this. Thus

> Each follie is a rigorous marker and an enclave -
> a rallying point and a haven of experimentation within
> the programme and within the site...anchoring points
> for a new social context. (Tschumi, 1987 : 133)

Each follie has been designed around a three story concrete and metal cubic frame which is subjected to various transformations of form, making Tschumi's background in structuralist thought quite apparent. Insertion, substitution, distortion, addition, subtraction are but some of the categories of transformation at work in each follie. Tschumi used film theory to defend these formal manipulations - the follie becomes the visual image, the 'freeze
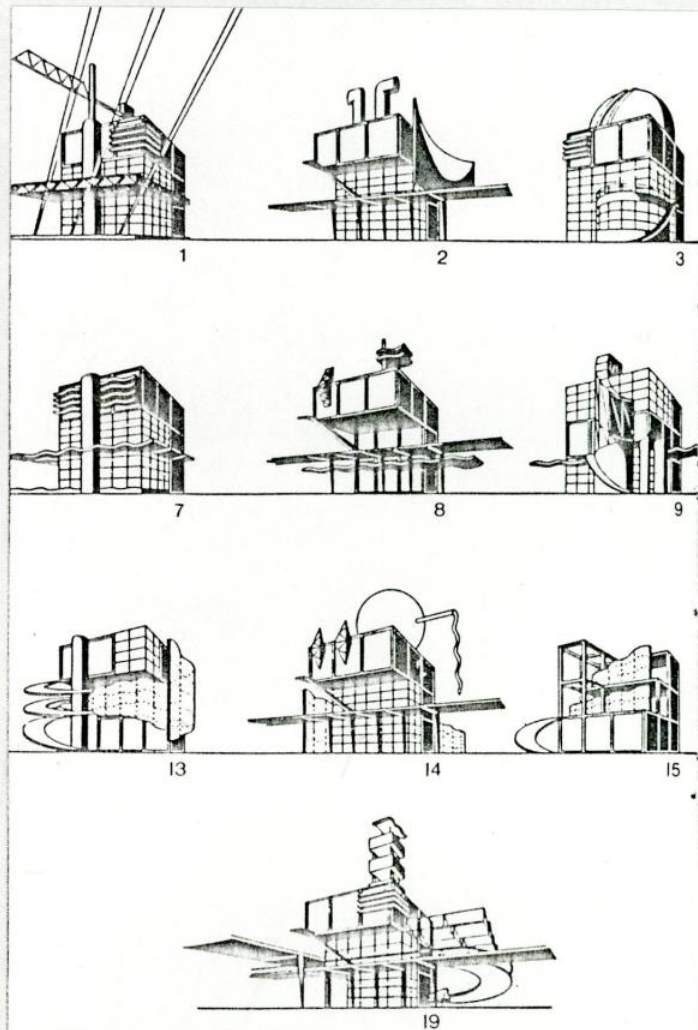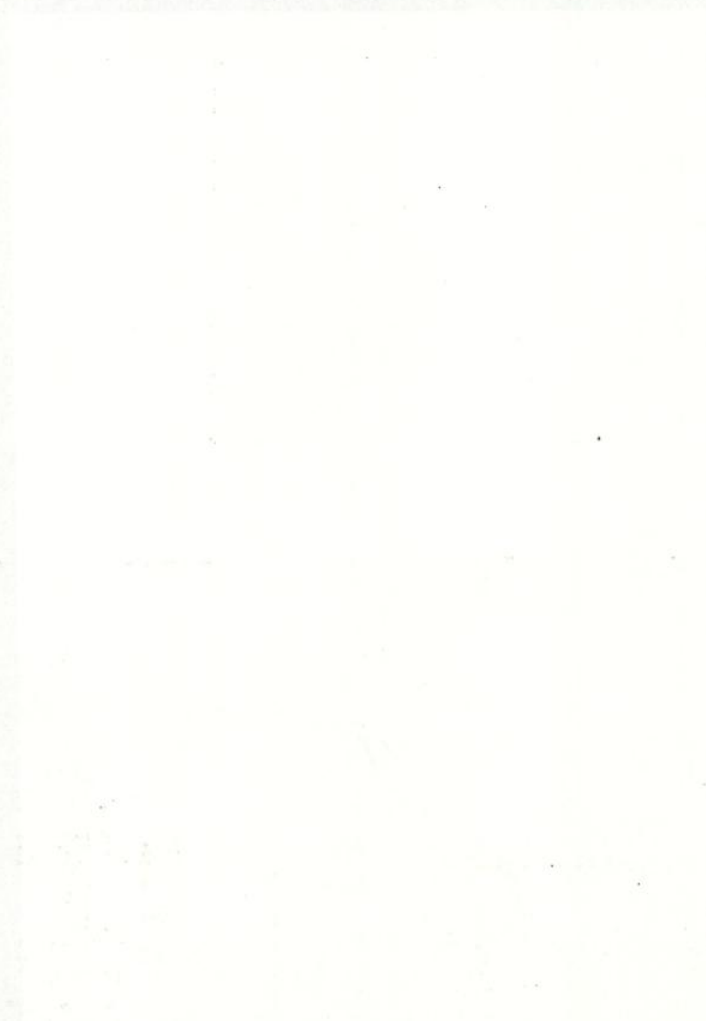
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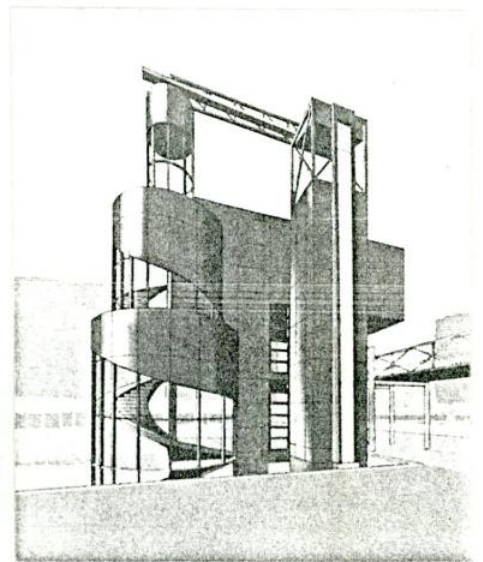Figure 11
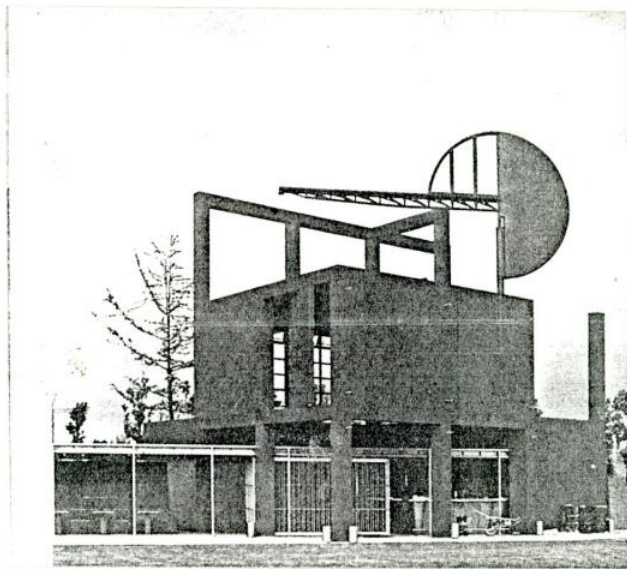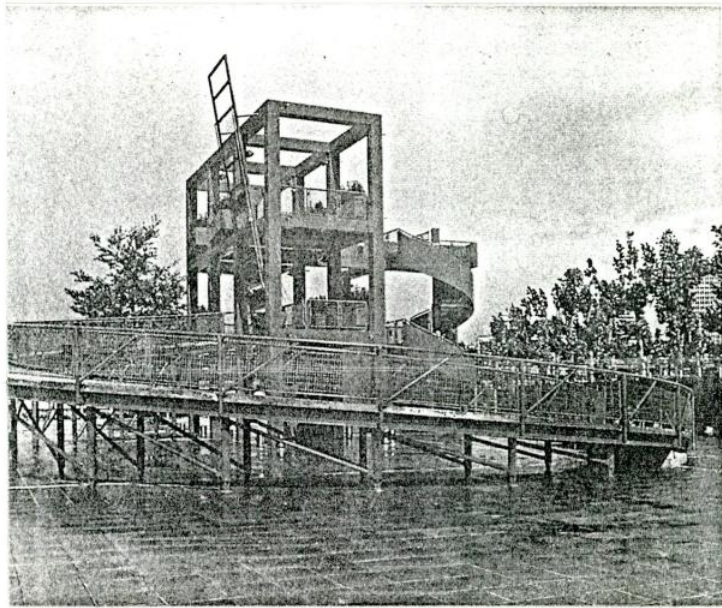
Variations on a theme: Follies

Figure 8
Figure 9
Figure 10

Some of Tschumi's <u>Follies</u>

frame in a process of constant transformation and dislocation'. He is very philosophical about this, saying that the follies are 'a series of events which suggest or accelerate dreams and fantasies normally excluded from the traditional city' (Hatton, 1985 : 37).

The formal results of these systematic permutations are tremendously exciting with interesting interplay between positive and negative space, and volumes. The results are like pieces of industrial sculpture which never cease to surprise. It is interesting that much of the intersections with, and additions to, the basic cube are purely geometric, e.g. spheres, cylinders, cubes, a theme that is apparent in the other design features at La Villette.

Tschumi's reasons for employing these formal variations lie in his wish to divorce form from function, and from meaning. Thus the follies are designed to be functionally interchangeable but also to deny any visual clue as to what they house. Obviously, at the design stage some pragmatic adaptation to purpose was carried out, but the intention is to avoid any expression of this. Interestingly enough Tschumi takes pleasure in the fact that during construction a follie that was designed as a kindergarten, became a TV studio and another designed to be a garden centre remained functionless. This sort of unpredictability corresponds to his intentions outlined in his folio for the project from 1982 - La Case Vide . Tschumi's intention has been to make the follies empty of meaning. Thus the formal collisions correspond to functional collisions. One could call this the basis of deconstructivist thought.
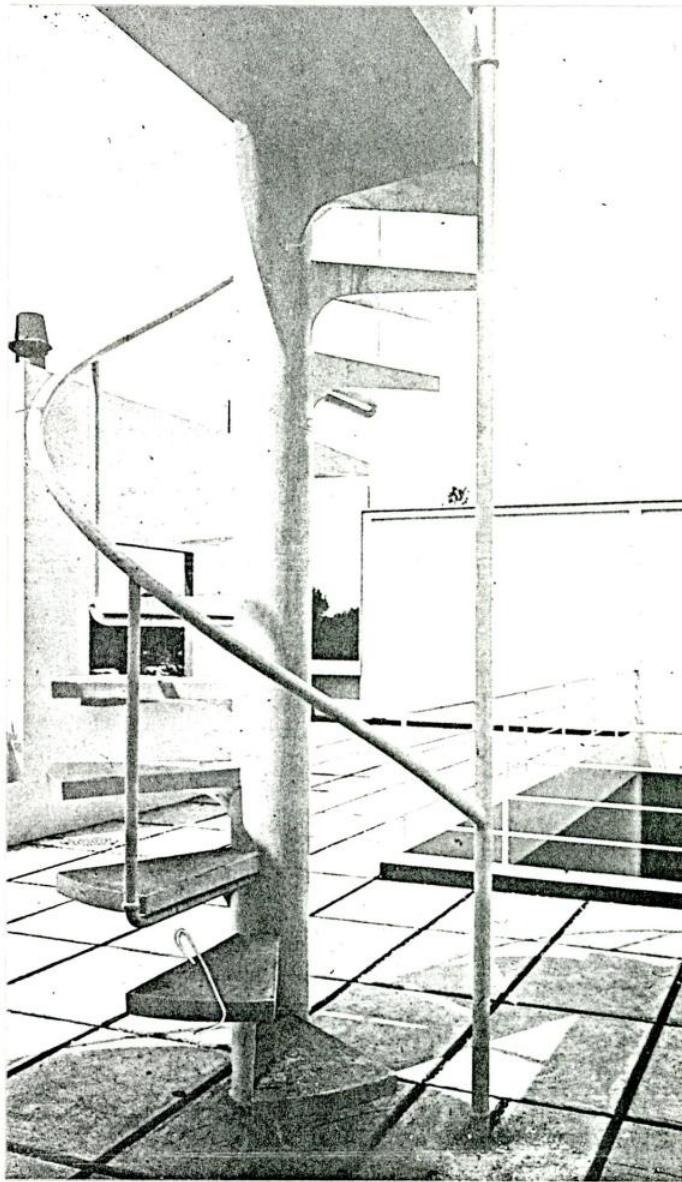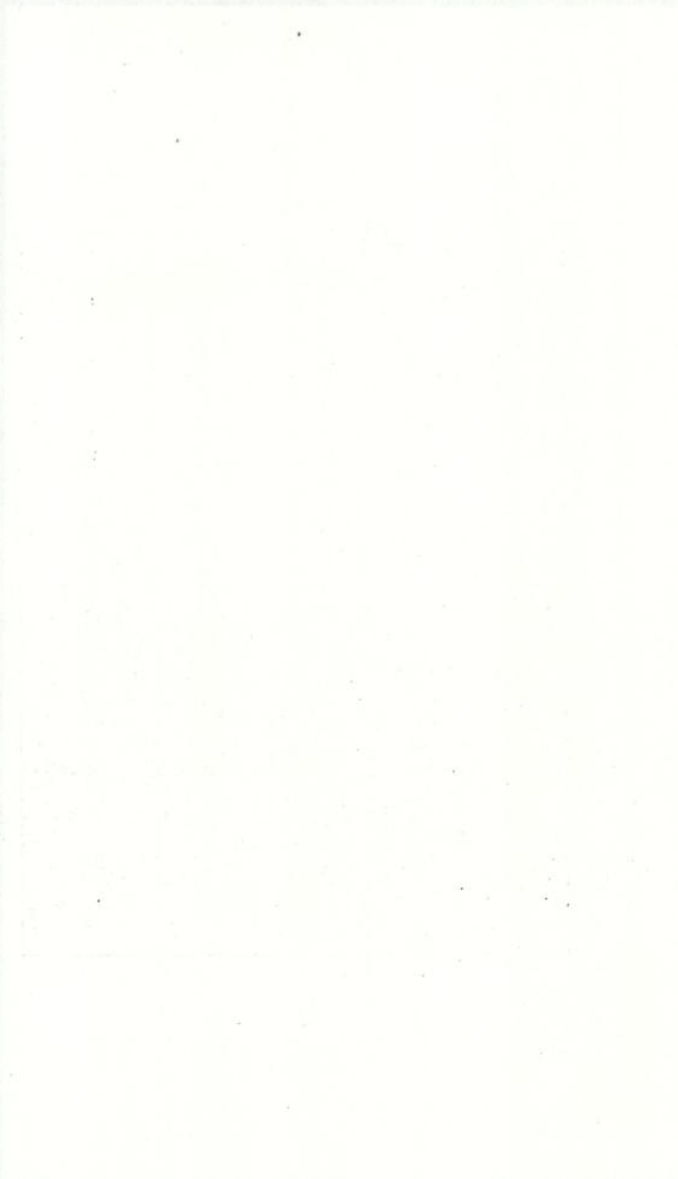
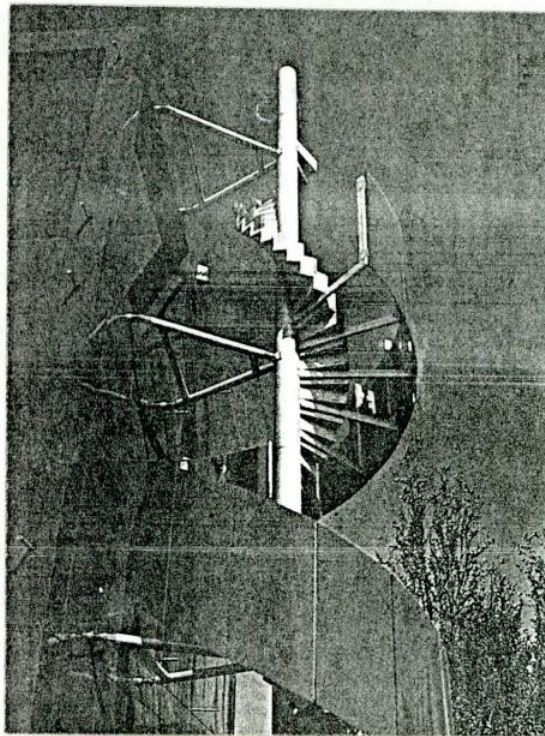23

Figure 12

Detail of Villa Savoie

Figure 13

Detail of _Follie_

There is however an obvious historical precedent to be observed in terms of form. The bright red and black steel system recalls the Russian constructivist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Fig. 14 shows a stage set by Alexander Vesin from 1923 and fig. 15 free standing houses by V. Vladimirov (1930) which bear a striking resemblance to Tschumi's <u>follies</u>.

The gridded frames, geometric shapes and disdain for conventions such as wall and roof recall the pre-World War II modernist movement, and give the <u>follies</u> a striking industrial aesthetic. This formal influence is ironic because of Tschumi's adamancy about the failure of modernism, because of its emphasis of function over form. To borrow from the architect's own literary parallels - is it possible that the <u>follies</u> could merely be new sentences in an old language? In Tschumi's defence, it is apparent that he was much more concerned with the symbolic nature of the ffollies: the industrial aesthetic, the striking colour and the strict repetition of the <u>follies</u> was aimed at producing a clear symbol for the park. Tschumi wrote 'a recognizably identity as strong as the Paris metro gates' (Tschumi, 1987 : 131). This has certainly been achieved. Their strong formal presence is enhanced by the uncertainty of their function and gives the impression of very monumental pieces of industrial sculpture and industrial architecture. The <u>follies</u> are also symbolic of urban life, it too being in a constant state of transformation.
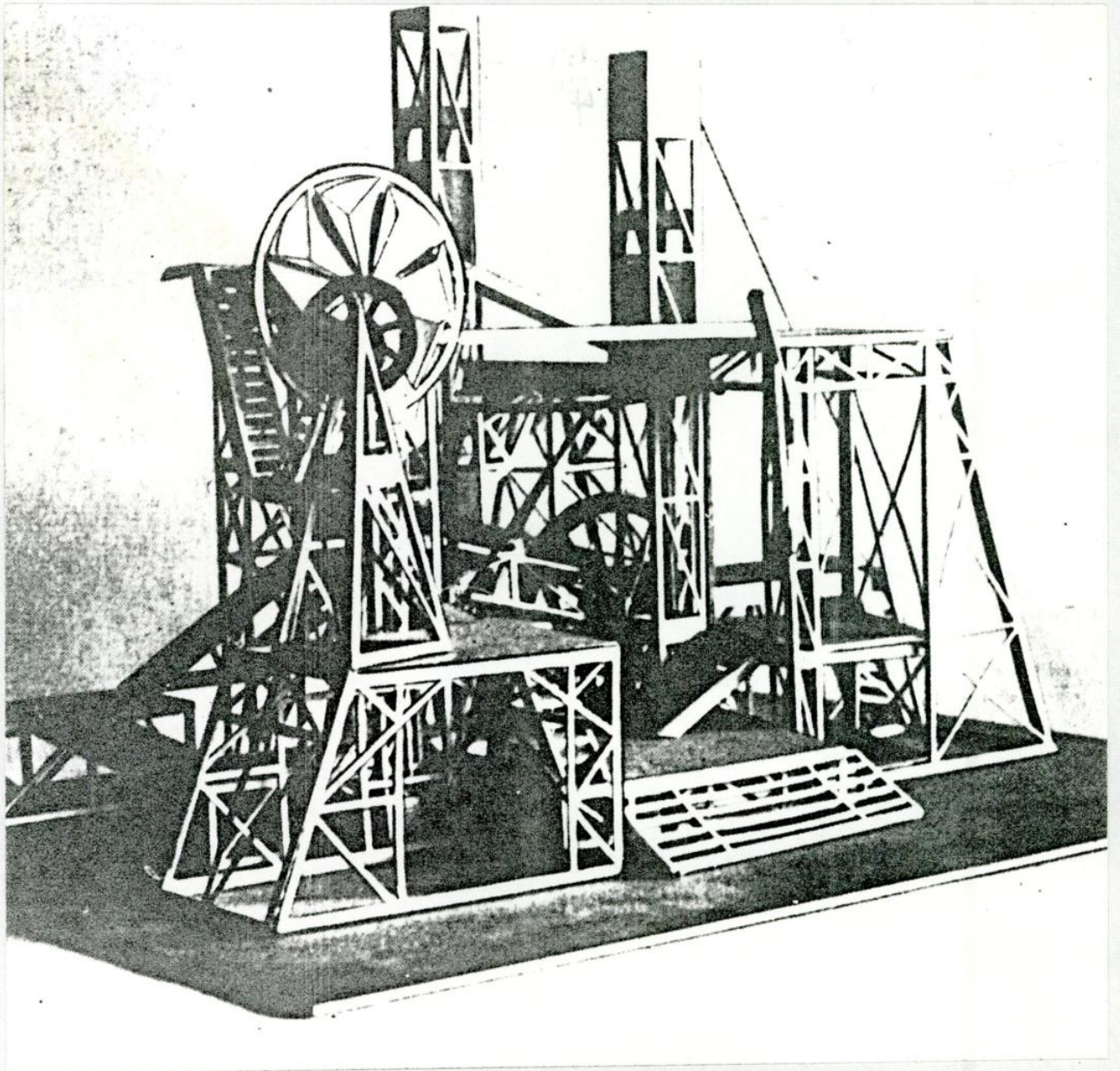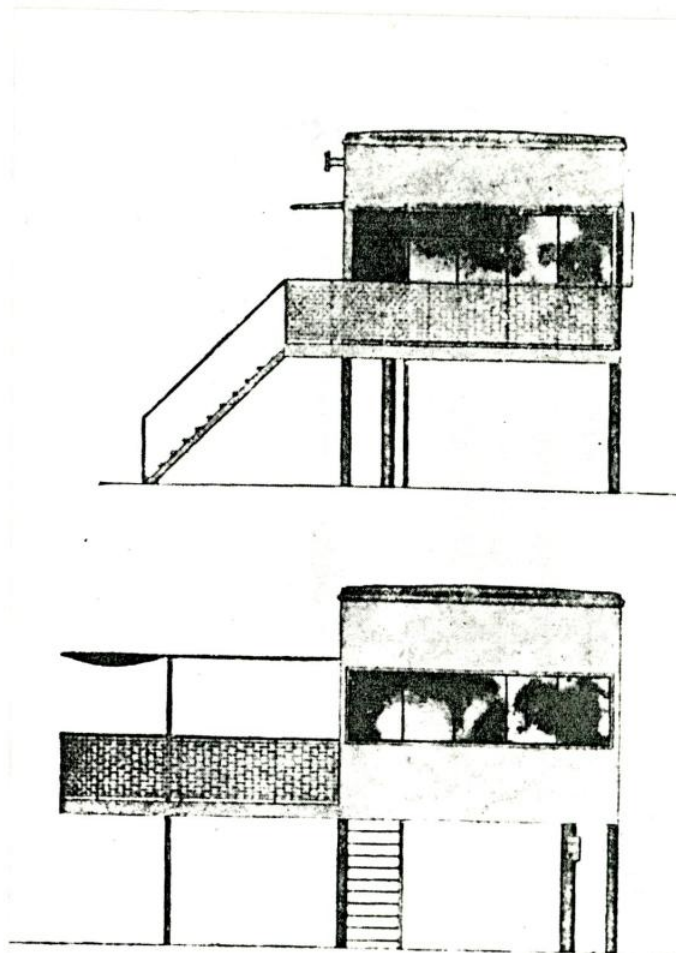
Figure 14

Design by Alexander Vesin 1923

Figure 15

V. Vladimirov : Houses 1930
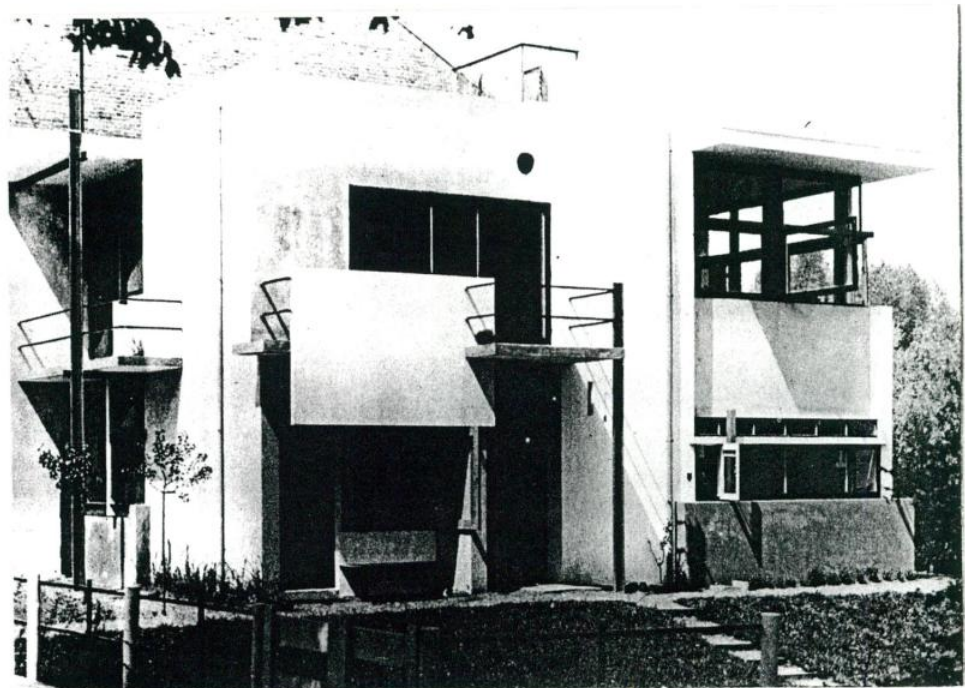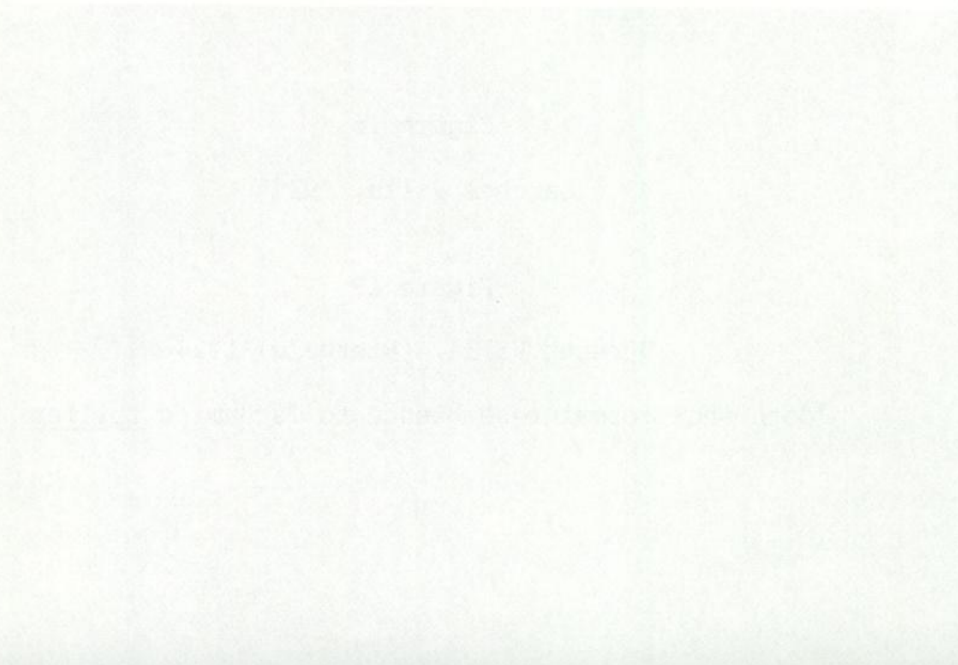
Figure 16

Garches Villa, 1927

Figure 17

Utrecht Villa, (Rietveld) 1924

Both show formal resemblence to Tschumi's follies

Lines:

Superimposed without apparent reference to a higher order on the grid plan is a system of lines and directions. The essential purpose of this layer in Tschumi's design is to enable and to suggest movement between the concentrations of activity which have been emphasized by the grid format.

The system of lines (or 'movements') comprises two cartesian axes which gather and order the elements of the park establishing a strong compositional base. However, Tschumi was careful not to get drawn in by the temptation to have a totally orthogonal scheme and thus the north-south axis, which takes its line from the Grande Halle, is a subtle 2° off the alignment of the follies, and dislocation ensues therefore at numerous points along the gallery, and at all points parallel with it, as linear features collide with follies. This collision is at its most pronounced at one of the two main entrances to the park, and a piece of immense sculptural quality is created. It is also a point of major intensity in terms of movement as it appears to be a point zero - a focus point of energy formed from the interaction of two autonomous systems, and from which all subsequent interaction occurs.

This north-south axis as stated takes its line from the grande Halle, connecting the city of Music with the City of Science and
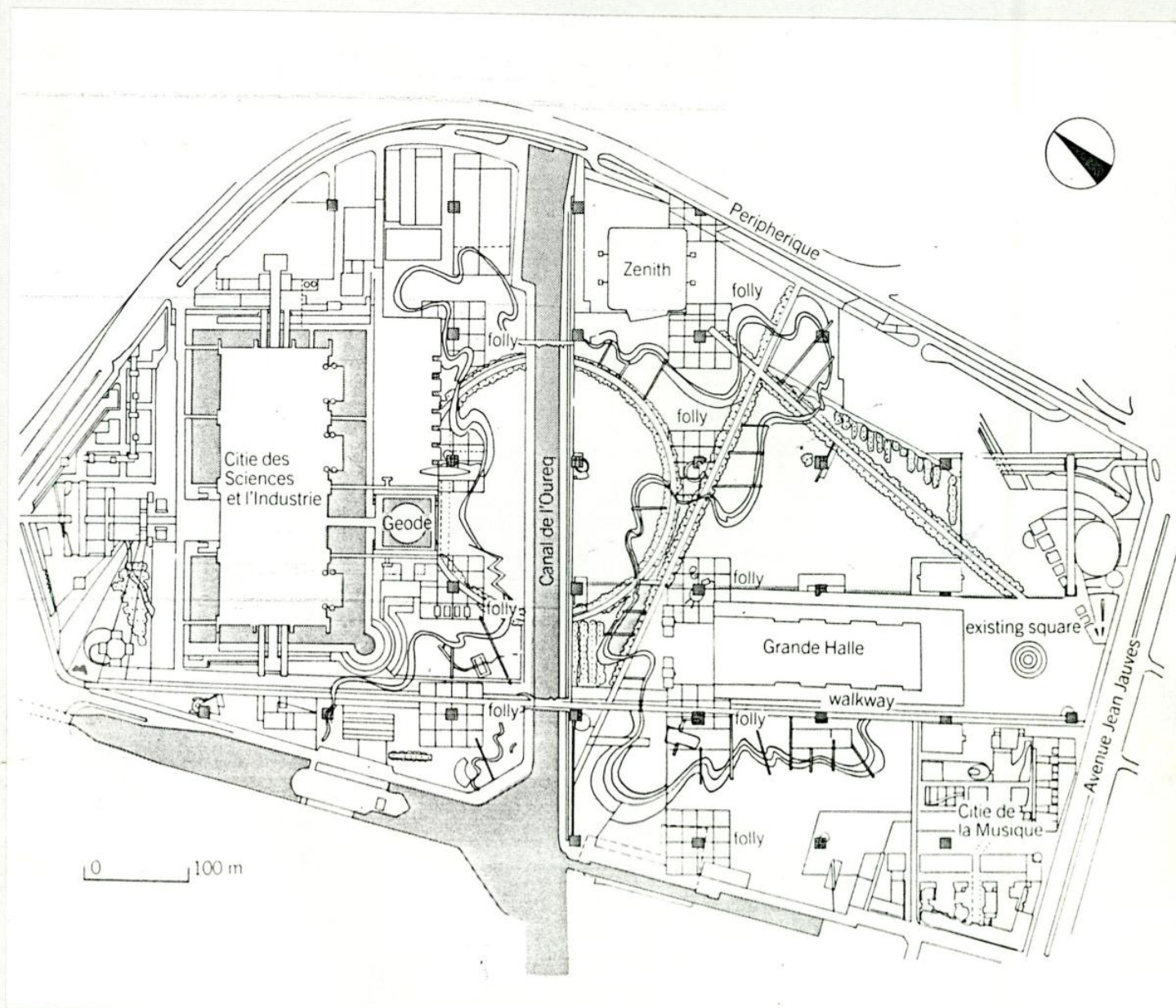
Figure 18

Plan view of La Villette

Industry, and as such it becomes the most important linear element in the scheme. The structure of this covered gallery is terribly exciting. The roof consists of a long cantilevered single piece of undulating concrete which at no point seems stable enough to support itself. Aside from being visually enthralling, it is an engineering masterpiece. Like many of the other technical design elements in La Villette it was designed by Peter Rice.

Λ

The conflicts that occur between this axis and the <u>follies</u> are echoed in the design of the canopy itself. For example, the spacing for the supports of the canopy is 8 metres while the canopy waves up and down on a rhythm of 36 metres, with every suspension rod a different length. According to Tschumi there is 'no rhythm, no synthesis, no order' (Tschumi, 1987 : 131) but on experiencing this feature, the visual effect is not the slightest bit disturbing, and in fact, it is somewhat musical in feel. As has been shown Tschumi has tried constantly to impress upon the viewer the extent of the disharmony in his design for Parc de la Villette. It is important to note at this point that it is not to produce visually annoying pieces that he has done this. Many reviewers of Parc de la Villette seem to think that his ultimate goal was to produce a sort of anarchistic playground, straight from the drawing board of Sid Meade (born 1950) et al, and subsequently try to discredit his work because this hasn't been achieved.

The second of the cartesian axes travels east-west, parallel with the canal already on site. This is a very simple and
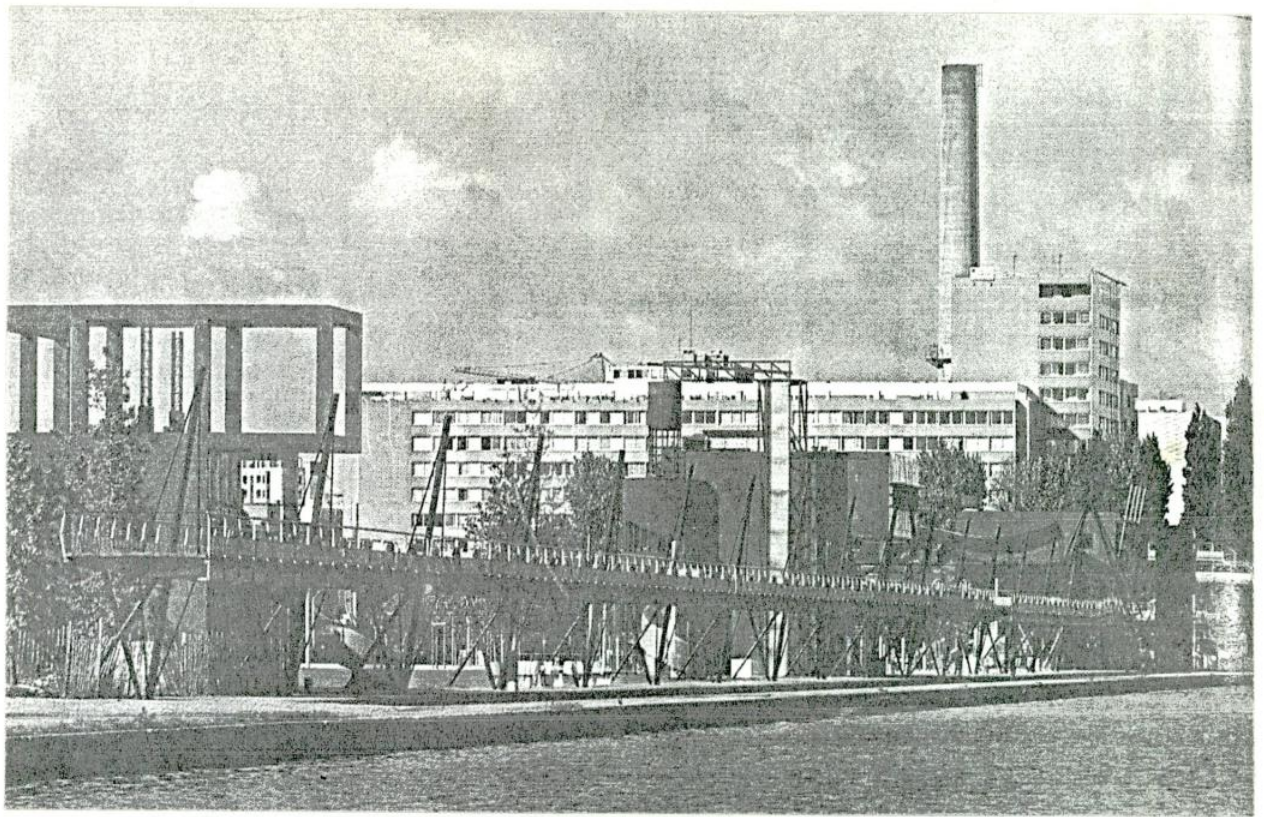
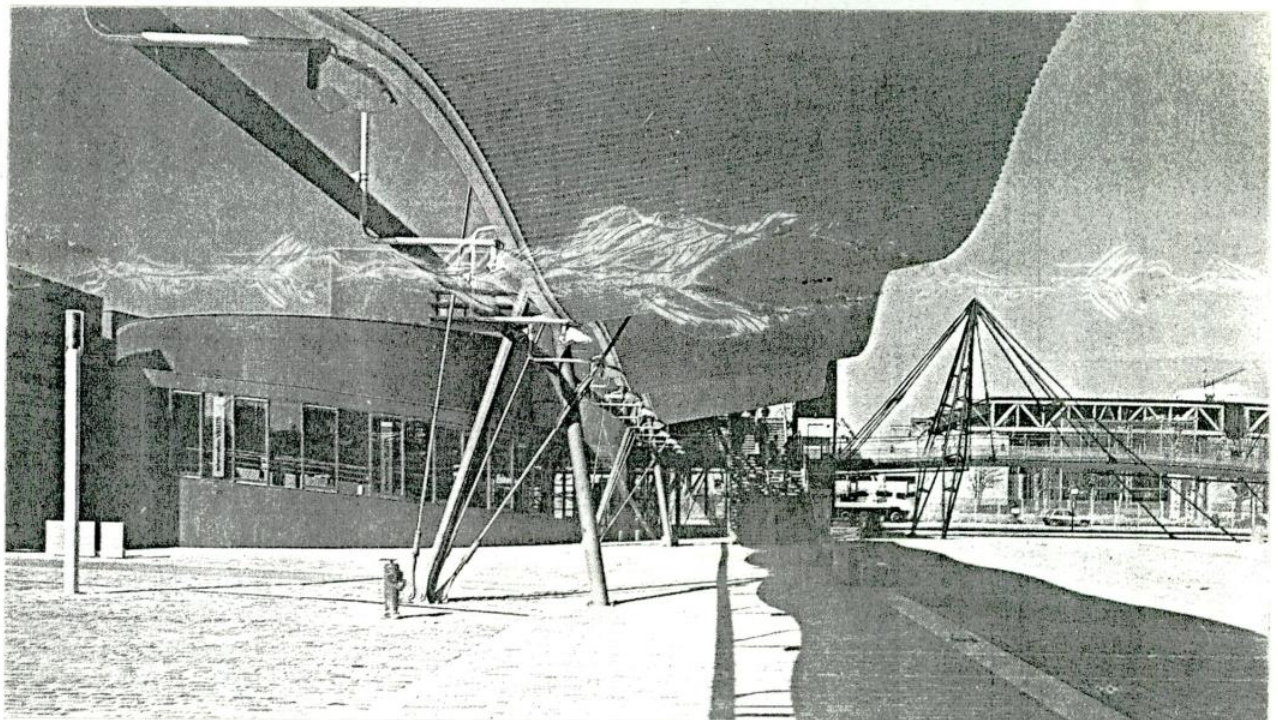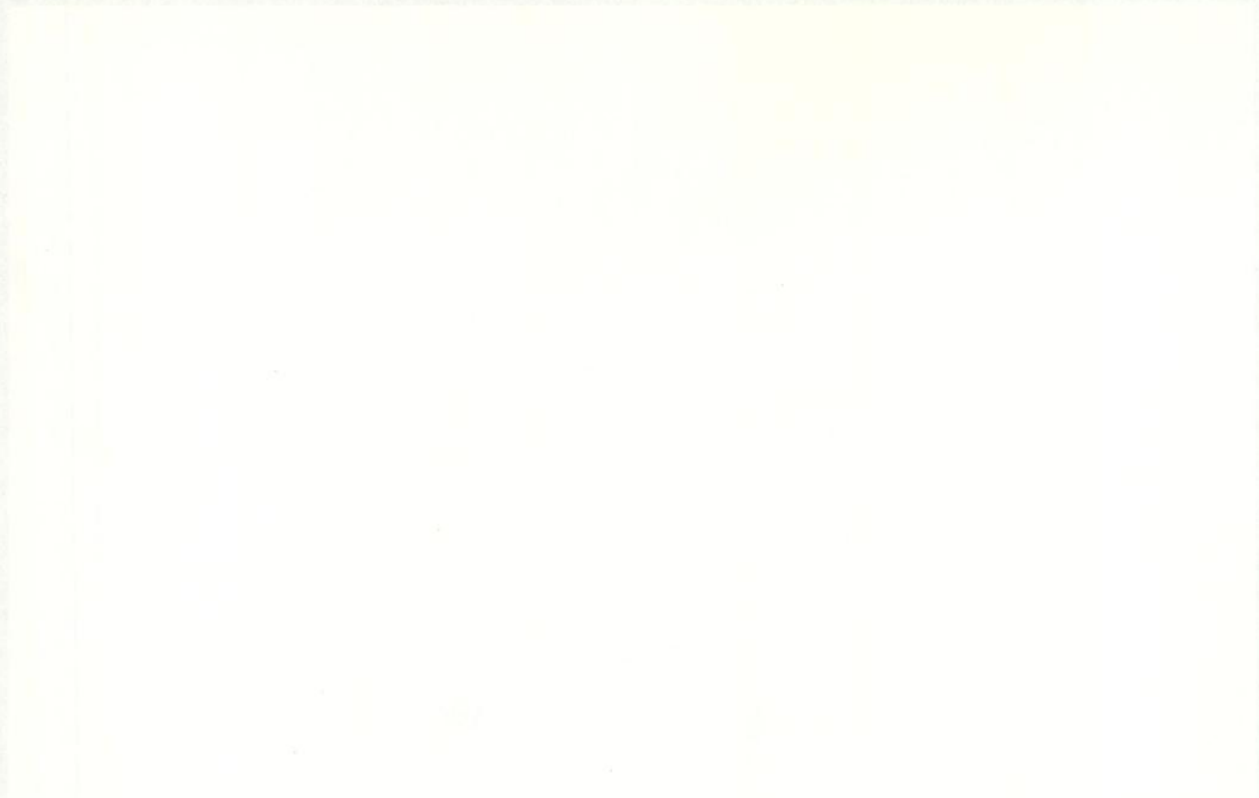26

Figure 19

East-west Gallérie

Figure 20

North-south Gallérie

attractive feature of the park, the roof of the walkway serving as an elevated glass covered celestial path. The three elements collide at the bridge over the canal where follie meets walkways. The result is almost too difficult for the eye to take in because of the density of solids, voids and movements. People walking around (a conscious design feature on Tschumi's part) clutter it even more and one is immediately convinced of the random nature of Tschumi's design. Looking for an urban parallel one would call it the 'Times Square' of La Villette.

Between the imposing and conflicting geometries of the grid plan and the orthogonal galleries, runs the third linear feature of Tschumi's design - the promenade cinematique. This is a serpentine curvilinear path which meanders through the open spaces of the park colliding with follies and axes at the most surprising points. Where the cinematic route, which is marked with blue terrazzo paving, happens to intersect with a follie it is allowed to do so. Most striking is the feature where a jogging path runs across a catwalk above a grand piano in the cocktail bar. This is but one of the many points which result in a tremendously enjoyable sense of discovery through surprising vistas which allow the visitor to reorient himself in the terrain.

As the curvilinear path weaves across the straight lines amorphic sections are created. These are the sites of La Villette's sunken gardens which were designed by a diverse range of architects and landscapers. Tschumi writes:
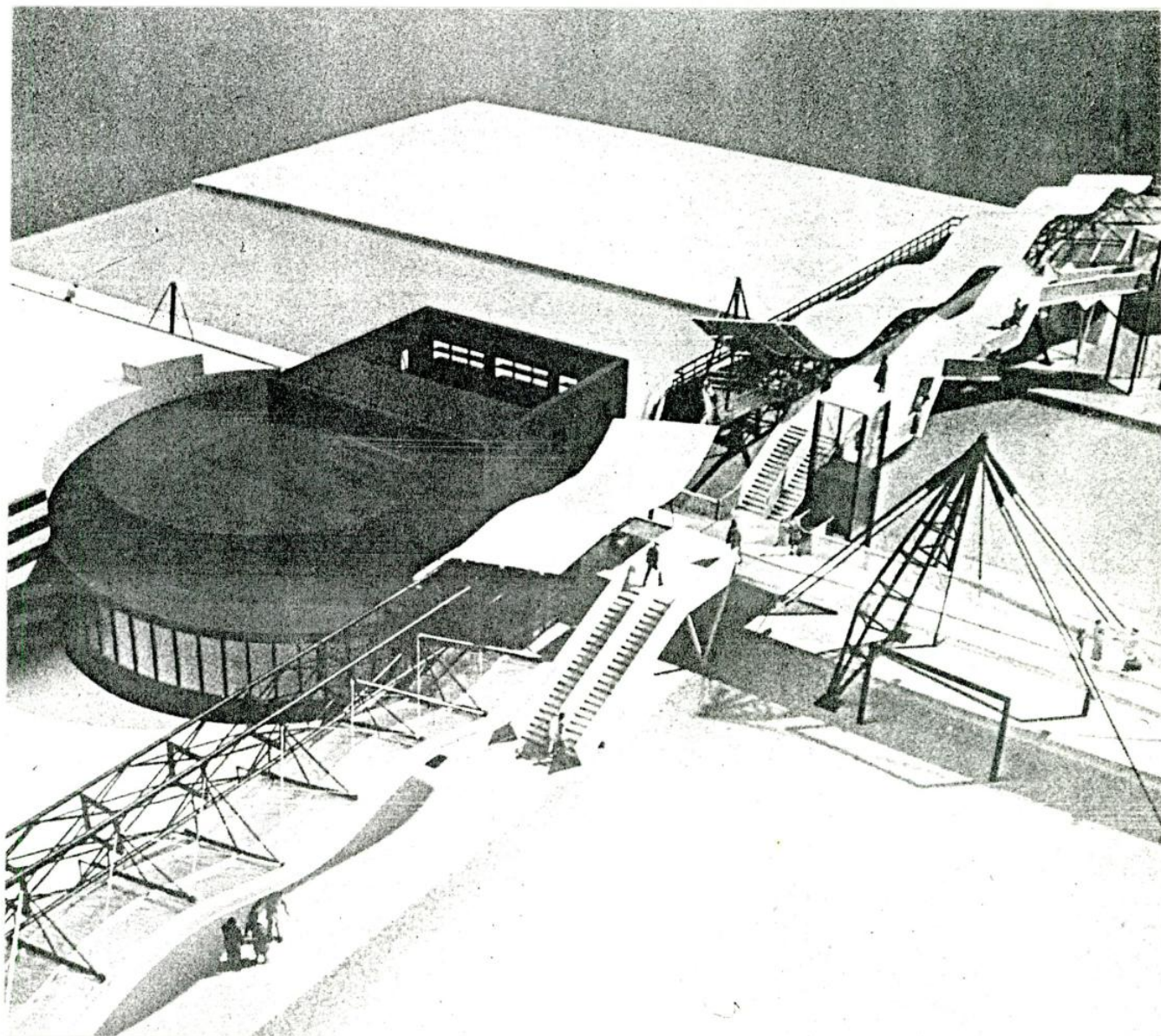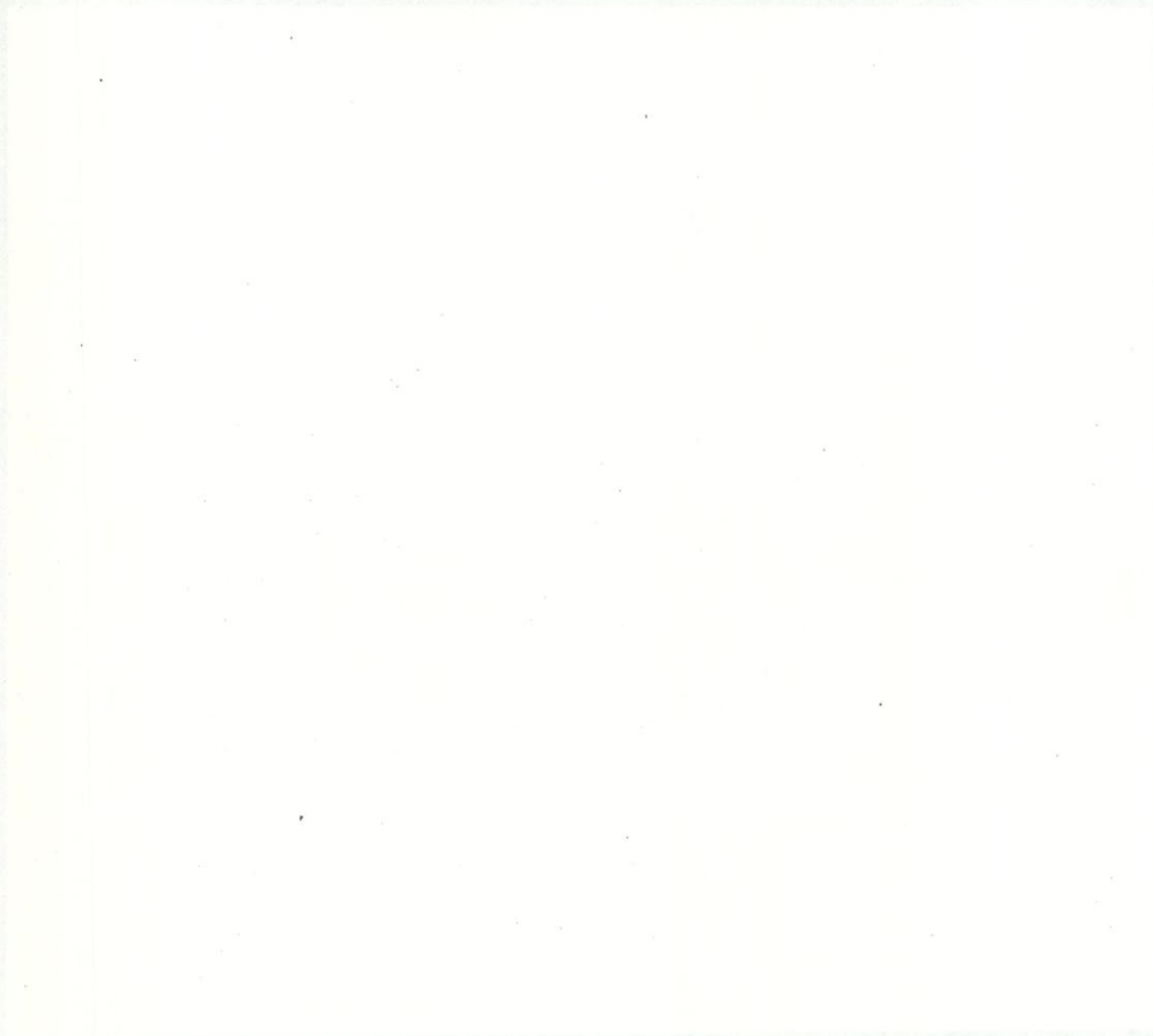
27

Figure 21

Model of the intersection of the two main axes and a <u>follie</u>

> Each garden or enclosure corresponds to the picture
> track of a motion picture while the movement of the
> visitors represents the sound track. The gardens
> are organized according to the principle of film
> editing, alternating perfect synchronization with
> deliberate mismatches. (Tschumi, 1987 : 133)

Rich in the play of water and vegetation these gardens contain the moments in which La Villette comes closest to offering the respite of more traditional parks. Everywhere else, notwithstanding its broad lawns and delightfully unobstructed water edge La Villette rigorously denies such bucolic pleasures.

Surfaces

The third element in Tschumi's design is surfaces - the parts in between, designed to take outdoor activities. As we have seen already, this park design is opposed to the idea of the park being an image of nature and an escape from urbanism. In Tschumi's opinion it seems that nature is simply one element in the manmade fabric of the city. Sometimes it seems that he has in fact attempted to impose architectural formalism on nature to control her. It is extremely important to note that the shapes of the lawns and gravelled surfaces take the form of the circle, the triangle, the free curve and the square. This is part of what seems to be a characteristic French obsession with primary form.

Tschumi has been criticized by many landscape architects including Michel Viollet for creating these two-dimensional spaces, referring to them as 'a stamp album of gardens' a 'two-dimensional abstract painting' (Holden, 1989 : 60). Monsieur Viollet has missed the point it seems, his sight clouded by his own neo-baroque creations. Parc de la Villette is a green place but was never meant to be a chlorophyllic Nirvana. Architecture Interieure Cree summed it up by referring to it as ville-campagne. It is ironic however that the bright red and black follies seem to stand out like beacons in the green, more a manifestation of life than the green itself. It is also amusing the way La Villette is often compared with another major landscaping project of the 1980s in France, that of Euro-Disneyland. To quote Robert Holden: 'compare this with Euro-Disneyland's magic kingdom, and one realizes La Villette's flatness is total. Tschumi claims it is cinematic; but it is not cinematic in any Disney way - there is no re-editing, narrative or story'. (Holden, 1989 : 60)

Tschumi's triumph has been to unify not only the large and sprawling site, but also the fragmented mixture of architectural styles that are on the site, which we shall soon examine. He has unified it not in a mundane rationalistic way but in a truly innovative fashion using a very simple concept of layering. Its design is immersed in deconstructivist thought, and tschumi has referred to the fragmented construction of the

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park at La Villette as 'the largest discontinuous building in the world'. From its inception it purported to invent new kinds of spatial and urban experience particularly those that reflected the tensions and cacophony of city life in the late 20th century. Many think that on this point it disappoints - mainly because they see it as not being complex or dissonant enough. It seems therefore that he is being criticized because it actually isn't visually disturbing.

In the overall design of the park parallels can be drawn to Le Corbusier's free plan. There the follies' grid takes the part of the pilotis, while the angular ramp and spiral staircase of the Villa Savoie became the aleatoric routes through the park and through the follies. It is well known that in Le Corbusier's houses the pilotis and the walls and tables sometimes didn't quite agree, with results that were formally interesting but functionally disconcerting. The point is that 'disconcertion' both formally and practically is precisely the pleasure.

The influence of Corbusier and his modernist counterparts has already been illustrated in the designs of the <u>follies</u> themselves. This apparent eclecticism appears throughout the rest of the <u>Grands Projets</u> at Parc de la Villette, as we shall see. The designs should not be criticized for this - in gaining a physical existence they have merely reflected the architect's background. Just like the expressionist projects of the 1920s were nourished by an implicit neo-classicism so too are many modern French pieces full of implicit modernism - transformed perhaps (Villa Savoie's debt to Palladio was never

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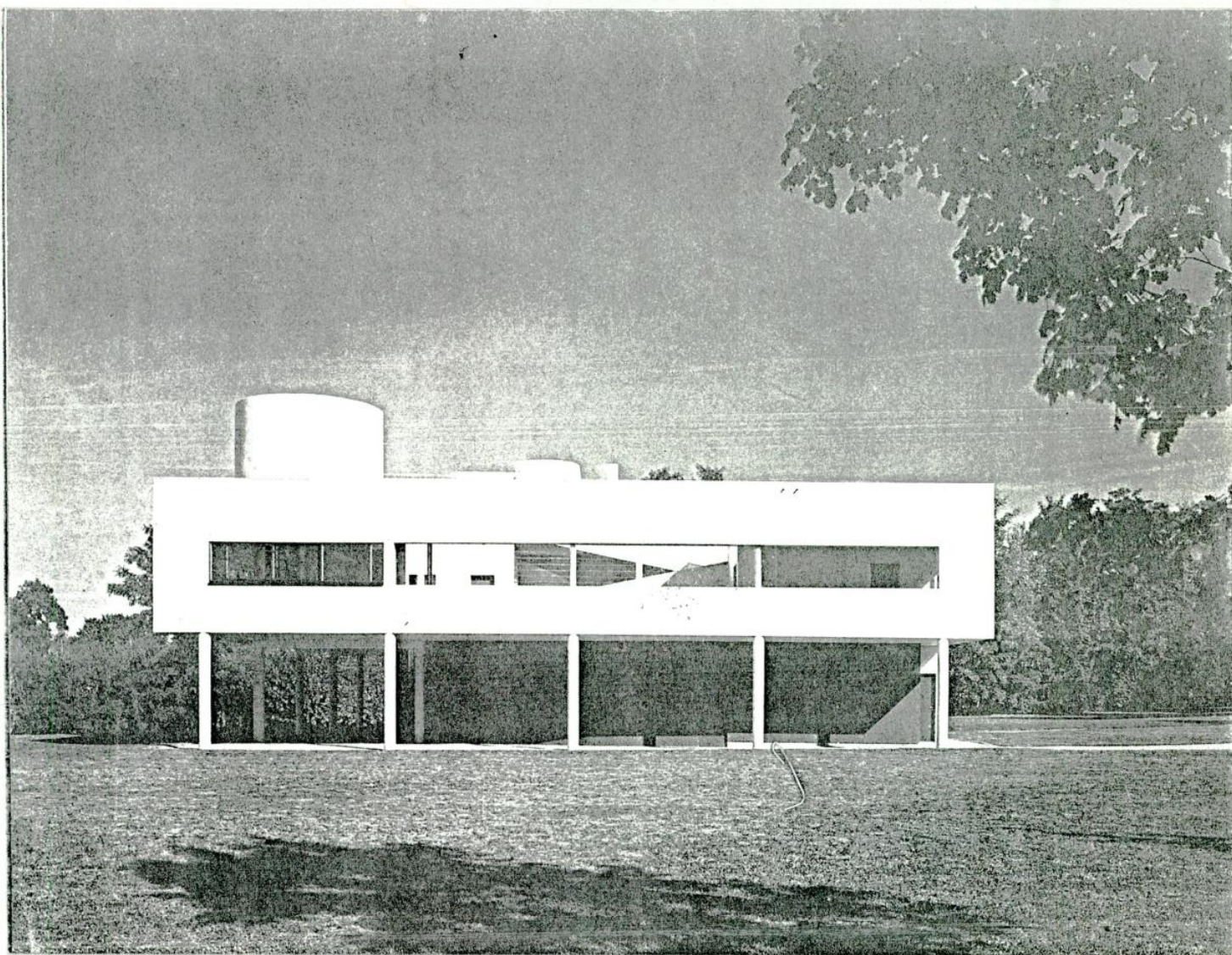
Figure 22

Villa Savoie

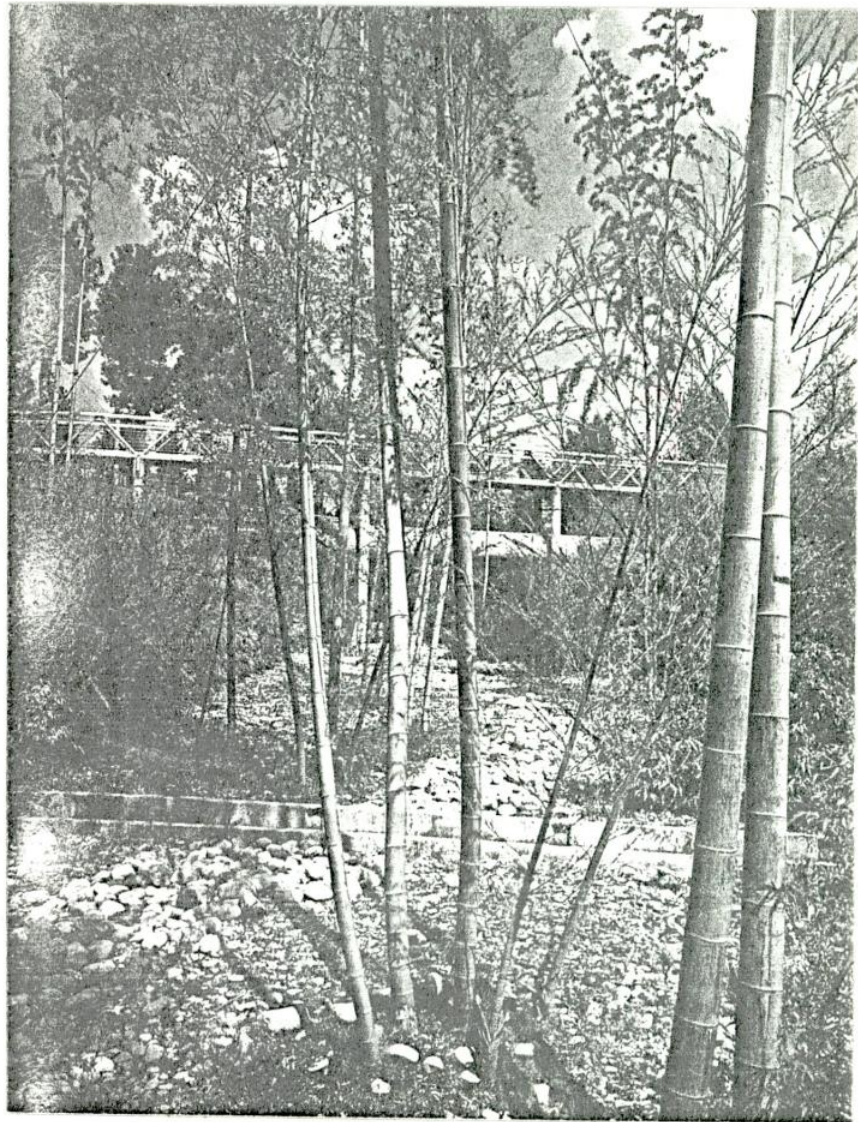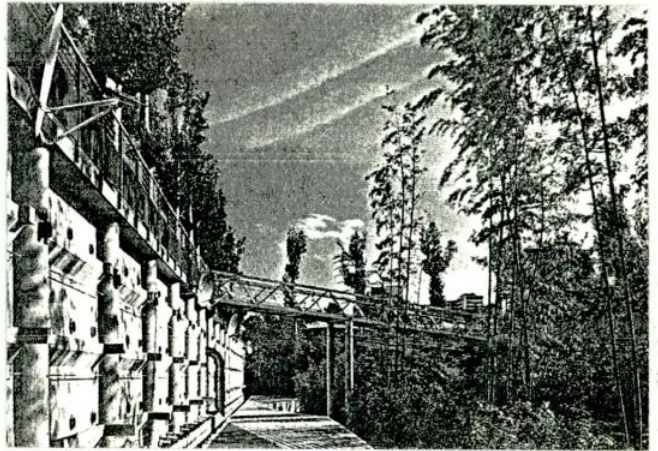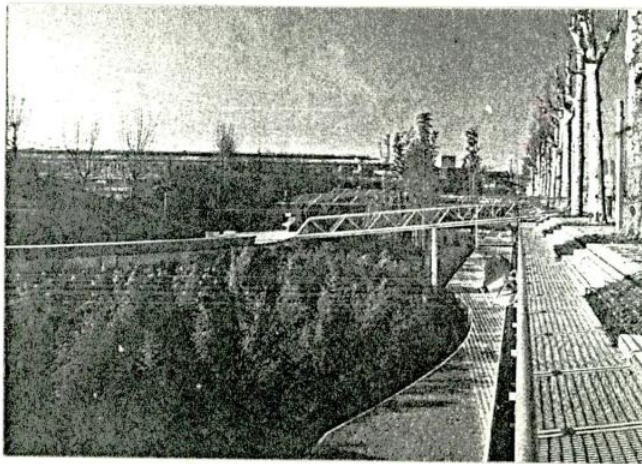The five points of architecture at work in Tschumi's plan.

Figures 23, 24, 25

The sunken gardens

held against Le Corbusier).

It is also important to stress that Tschumi has designed Parc de la Villette to be compatible with urban modes of life in constant transformation. The disjunction and dislocation is symbolic of this but it is not meant to be imposing. Real life is meant to fill in the gaps.

CHAPTER III

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF A MONUMENTAL BUILDING

The Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie at La Villette was
designed by French architect Adrien Fainsilber, who won a
limited competition in 1980 under the then President Giscard
d'Estaing. The story of the origins of this enormous
structure, more than three times the size of Centre Pompidou,
would be too long to outline here. Suffice it to say that the
basic frame was the world's largest architectural white
elephant, the bare and uncompleted hulk of what was to have
been the most up-to-date metropolitan abattoir in the history of
abattoirs, before it was realized that the advent of the
refrigerated truck had made it unnecessary to bring live cattle
to the metropolis for slaughter. Fainsilber's original designs
included a plan for the park itself, but Mitterand decided
that these designs were too Giscardian and initiated a separate
competition for the design of the park itself, which of course
Tschumi won. Interestingly enough, President Giscard had
dropped Fainsilber's design for the spherical geode omnimax
cinema, who thought it an 'inelegant excrescence, counter to French
taste' (Ellis, 1985 : 20) but Mitterand reinstated it.

The museum is itself conceived in terms of international
prestige, firstly because it represents a strong co-ordinating
effort on behalf of central government to reclaim these
blighted post-industrial wastelands that abound in the modern

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city, and secondly because it was to be 'the biggest and most expensive scientific museum on this planet' (Ellis 1986 : 28)

France has always had a romantic obsession with technology. She came out of the war as a ravaged and backward country overdependent on agricultural production. Successive leaders strove to make her a centre of technological innovation. Extensive automotive, aeronautical and nuclear industries were built up placing France alongside the already established technically advanced countries; the U.S., Germany, Japan and the U.K. Among the achievements were the pioneering of Concorde, the TGV, the advanced Citroen suspension system and development of her own nuclear arms industry. Successive governments have instilled a strong national pride in the populace for these achievements. Thus the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie was envisaged by Mitterand 'to become a major force in the fields of science, technology and industry' and to:

> play an important role in developing public
> interest in the rapid evolution which we are
> currently experiencing as well as instilling
> in younger generations a sense of the dimension
> and the future of human endeavour (Levy, 1987 : 150)

The north facade of the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie presents an incredibly powerful image. The first thing that strikes one is the awesome scale - the facade is just under twice the length of the Centre Pompidou. The skeleton that Fainsilber had inherited consisted of four rows of twinned seven story high columns, carrying monstrous trusses that clear

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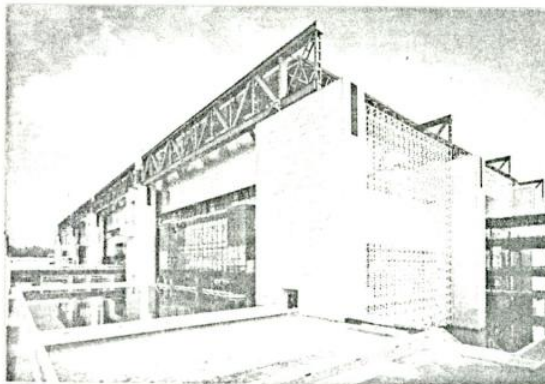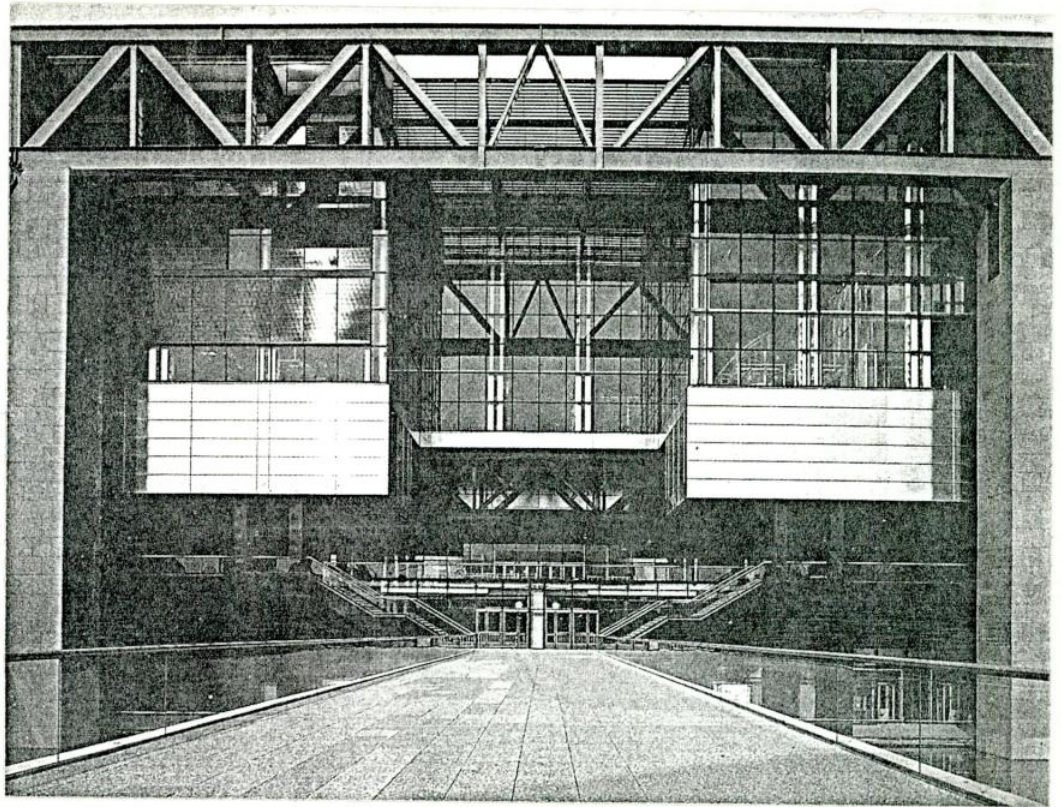
Figures 26, 27

North Facade, classical proportions

spanned the four main interior spaces. In his design, he capitalized on this orthogonal arrangement to create a building that emphasized its own size and weight, and ultimately its monumental status.

The north facade presents at first an architecture of an essentially conventional style with a reassuringly familiar system of post and beam, calm and comprehensible at first glance. The proportions are clean and symmetrical and ultimately classical in inspiration. Figure 28 shows the Pallazzo Branconia by Raphael built circa 1520. The difference in scale of the two buildings is obviously considerable, but the same play between vertical and horizontal is apparent. The triangular detailing used in Pallazzo Spada (fig. 29) is a common renaissance feature which features in all its simplicity in the detailing of the main spanning members in Fainsilber's design.

Interestingly enough, research into the modernists concluded that a similar subtle influence was apparent. In National Theatre Mannheim (competition entry 1952-53) Mies van der Rohe (born 1887) also used triangular lattice trusses from which to suspend the roof. Compare fig. 31 to figs 26, 27. In both cases the steel cross beams offer a very clean hi-tech image both in their simplicity of form and their rigid repetition.

Fainsilber's north facade has a tremendously monumental quality which is emphasized not only by its classical proportions but also by the sheer size and weight of its white stone verticals,
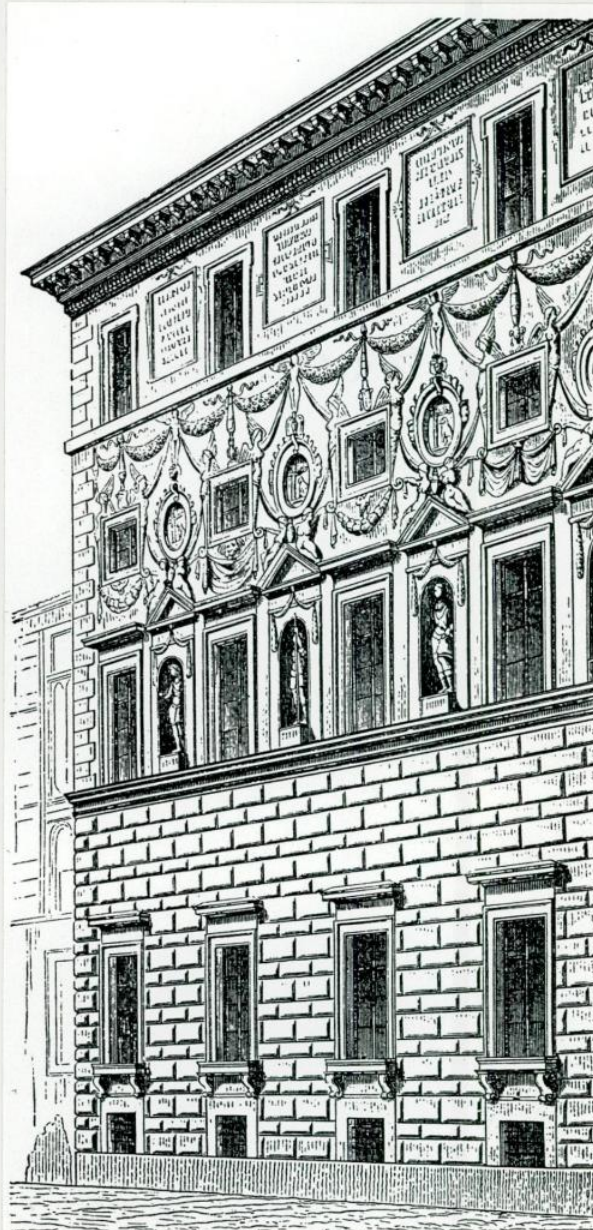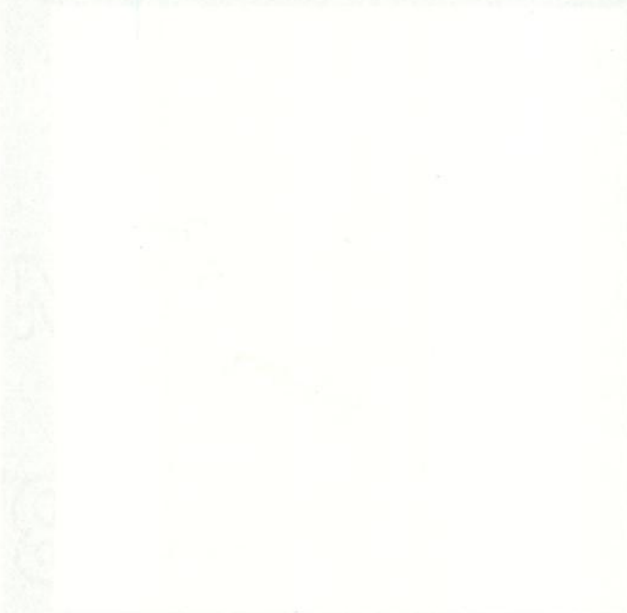
34

Figure 28

Palazzo Branconia d'Aquila

Figure 29

Palazzo Spada

and their interplay with the clean flat voids of glass and steel.
Many however found the use of stone surprising - it being
such a traditional low-tech material it could be seen as being
slightly incongruous with the Government's image for the
building, as being a show case centre of technology. If
anything, the stone provides welcome relief from some of the
high technology engineering trickery that goes on in the rest of
the building and gives an appearance of cleanliness and
precision - rather like the walls of La Grande Arche de la
Defense (see Chapter I) which have been compared to the
microchip, the foundation of modern technology.

Added to this use of materials is his use of the mirror-like
water feature which increases the building's height and stature
dramatically. It seems to call to mind the Legislative Assembly
at Chandigarh (1961) by Le Corbusier, which is not surprising
given that both buildings were conceived with a will to project
an image of power and authority, as well as an aspiration
towards a new era. The Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie at
first glance therefore is a fresh interpretation of an old theme
and though it has been criticized for it, it can be seen as a
classical pavillion for the year 2,000.

Adrien Fainsilber writes that the project's architectural
concept is based upon the creation of a privileged relationship
between it and the park. He has attempted to achieve this with
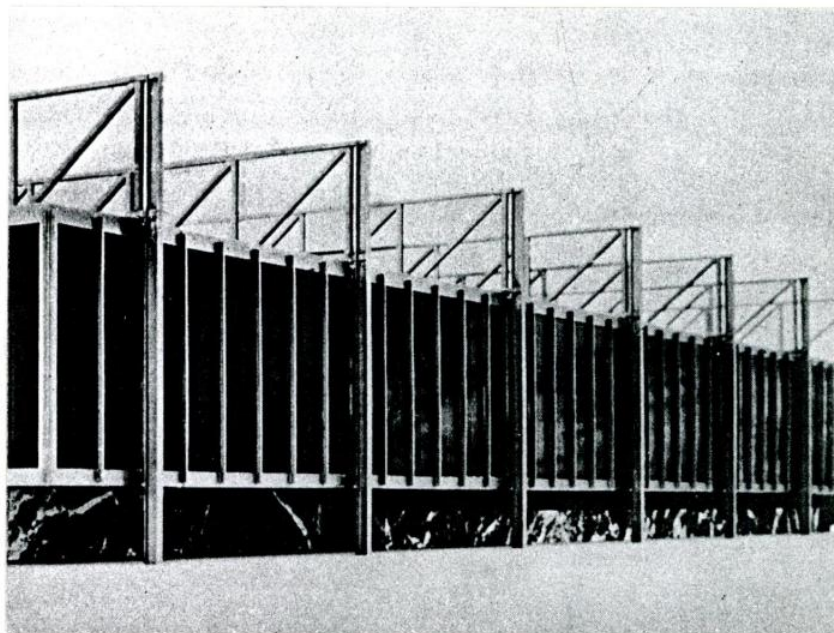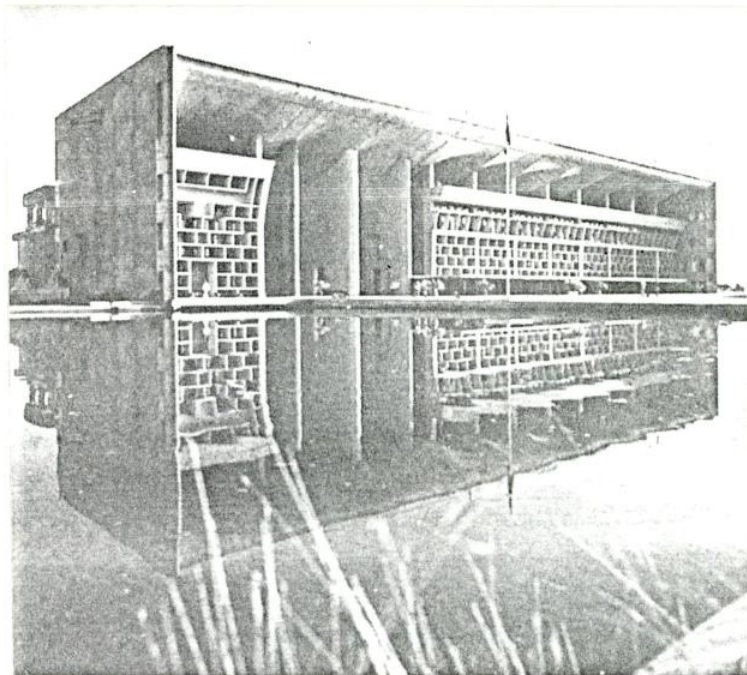his design for the southern facade which consists of three
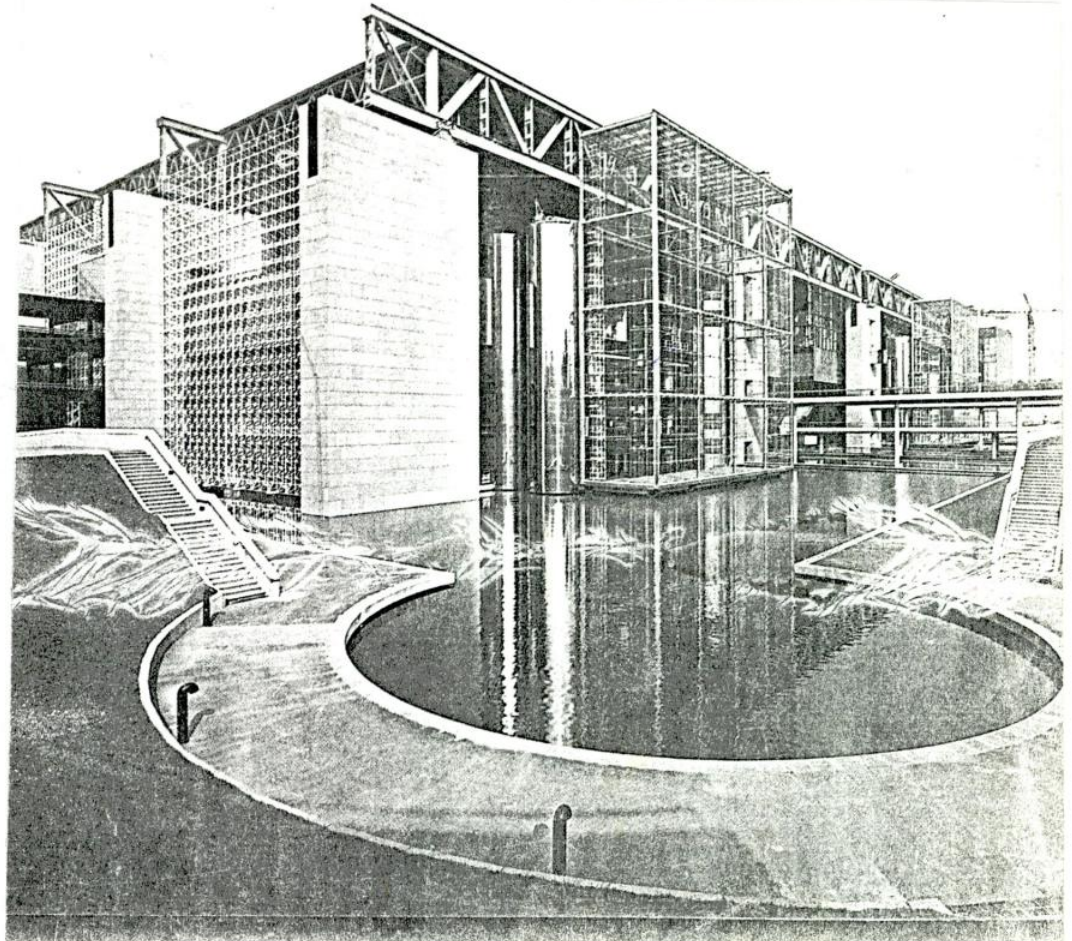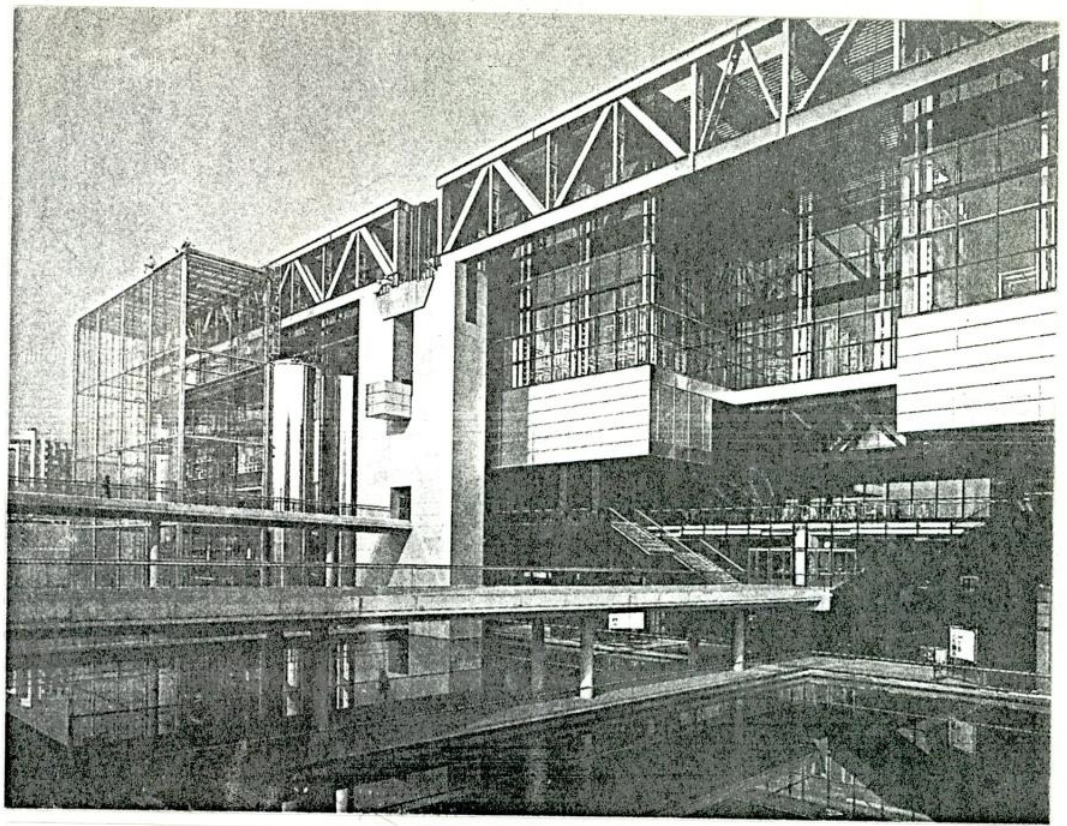
Figure 30
Legislative Assembly, Chandigarh

Figure 31
National Threatre Mannheim

enormous bioclimatic greenhouse elements, which create a transition between the park and the interior of the museum:

'Le Parc devient ainsi le prolongement natural du musèe' (Fainsilber, 1987 : 151). This has been achieved with the help of Peter Rice (the English engineer who has worked on all the high technology engineering elements at Parc de la Villette) who created an incredible flush but flexible skin of glass, a technical achievement that has been written about many times over. Reyner Banham considers that the result only serves to clutter the simplicity of the building's exterior (Banham 1986 : 32) On the contrary, it gives the facade a refinement and transparency which, coupled with the natural elements gives the impression of no facade at all. In the spirit of Le Corbusier's l'Ésprit Nouveau pavillion (1922) Fainsilber envisaged the use of full-sized trees in the glass bays. Unfortunately President Mitterand initiated different landscaping proposals by American landscape architect Katherine Gustafson.

The interior of La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie is a vast space and it is in the treatment of this interior that Fainsilber has shown his great architectural skill. The design has been hailed in French circles as the 'next logical step after Beaubourg' (Banham 1986 : 32) (i.e. Pompidou) but it appears that an element of British critics has pondered whether it is a step forward, backwards or indeed upwards.

> How conventional Fainsilber's basic parti truly is
> can be seen by comparing it with imaginable solutions
> by, say, Richard Rodgers... leaving the floors unpenetrated
> and moving all circulation and services to the exterior

Figures 32, 33
Bioclimatic elements on Southern facade

Figure 34

Le Centre Pompidou

of the perimeter glazing (Chaslin 1986 : 27)

It seems foolish to compare these two buildings on the
same level, for the simple reason that they are buildings of a
totally different scale. Fainsilber had no choice but to
internalize the building services - if he did a 'Richard
Rodger's' on it, the size of the interior would only have been
made devoid of any visual interest. Fainsilber has used the
building services to decorate the interior rather than the
exterior, and has used the ducting, pipework and escalators to
great effect. The massive and numerous ducts are one of the
spectacular elements as they rise clear and upright from the
basement, lurching from the vertical to avoid the trusses
and pipework, before finally exhausting through the roof. The size
of the great entrance hall provides space for the enormous
escalators that ferry people up to the mezzanines. Unlike in
many other buildings, the escalators don't scissors or
criss-cross, thus having the effect of dividing the space and
accentuating the building's height.

Directly above each escalator are two gigantic cupolas which
allow natural light 'source d'energie du monde vivant'
(Fainsilber 1988 : 152). to flow into the interior. They
are part of the architect's natural theme for the building, the
other two elements being the vegetation spreading in from the
park, and the water surround. They are also an engineering
marvel, containing a multiple computer controlled mirror
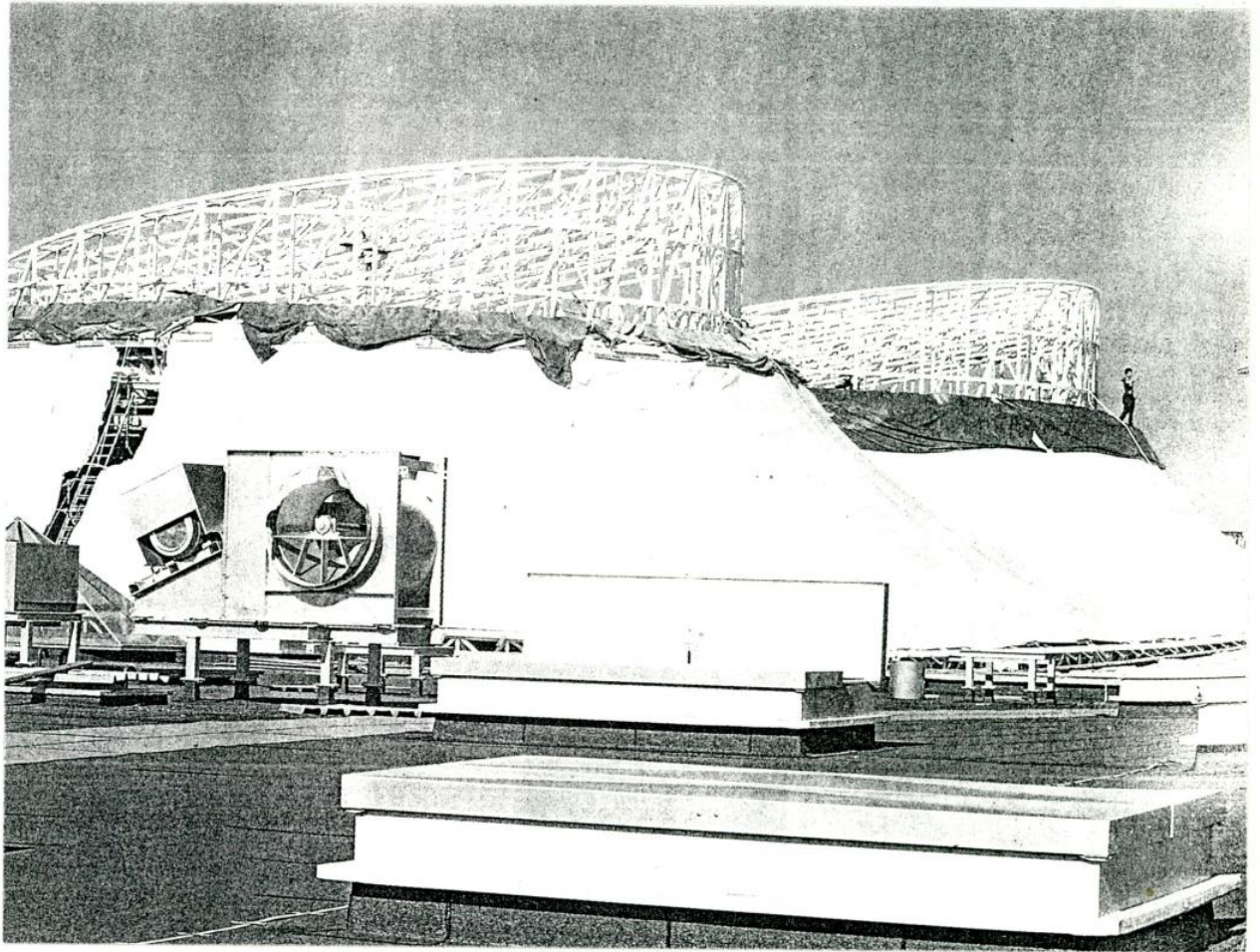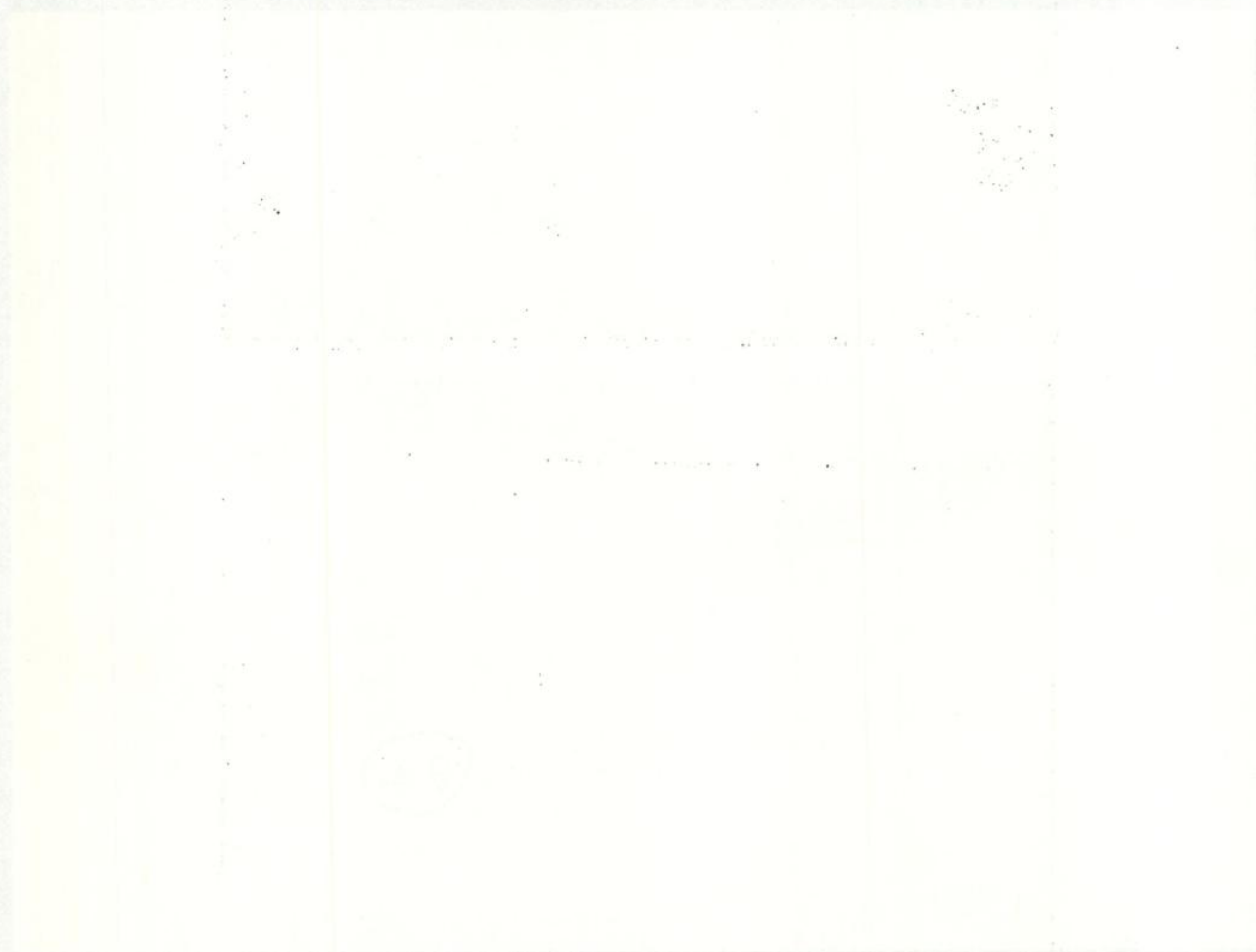reflection system to optimize daylighting conditions 40
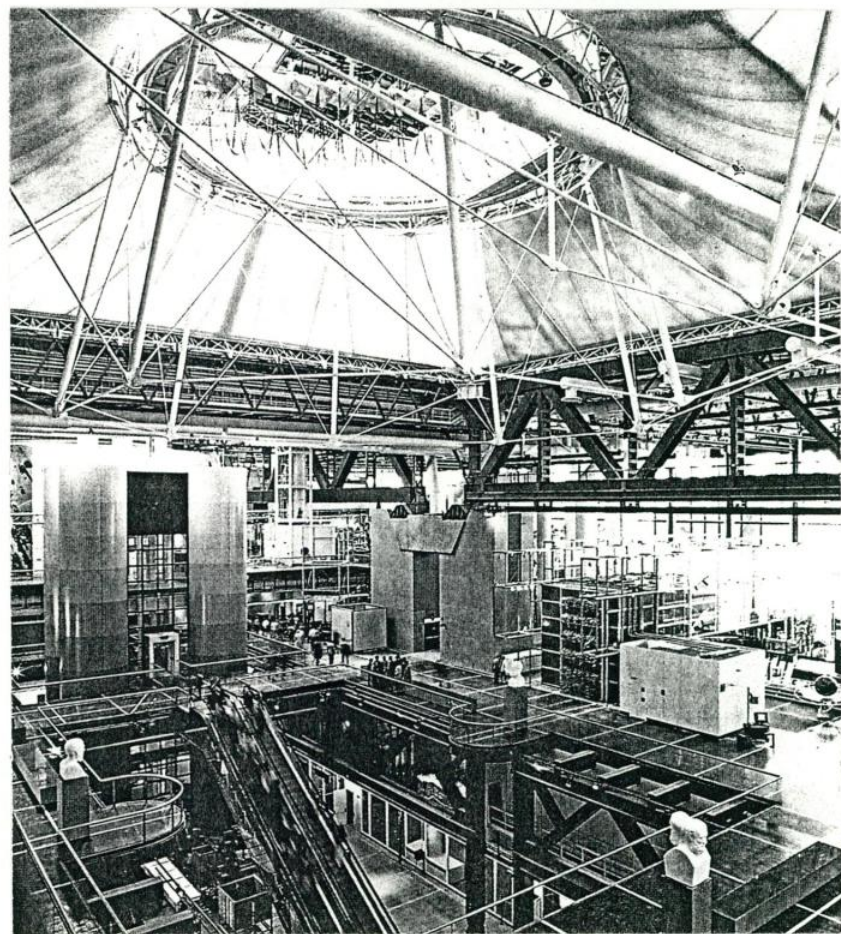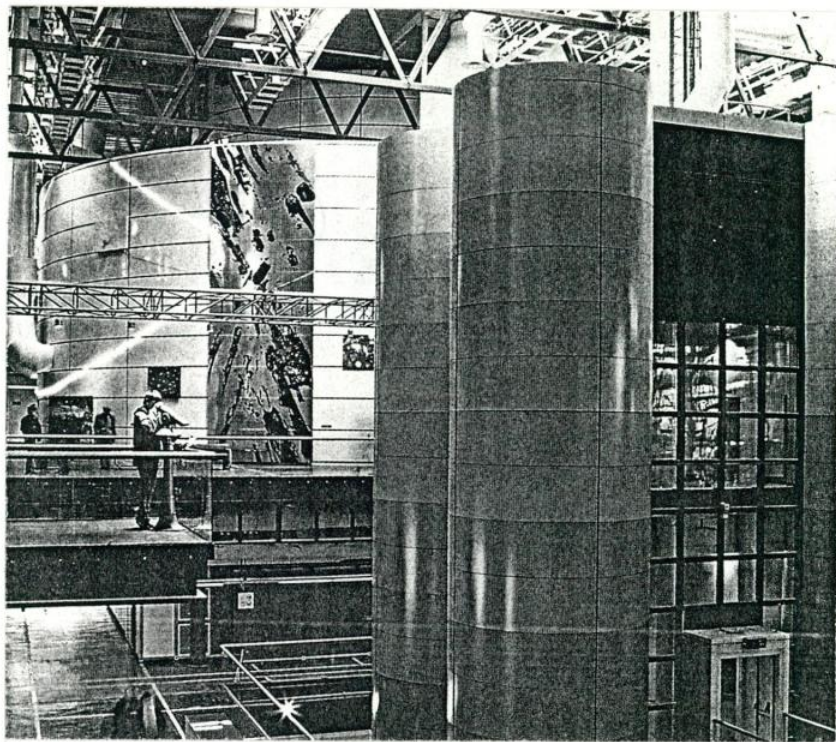
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Figure 35

Hugh light-catching domes on the roof

Figures 36, 37
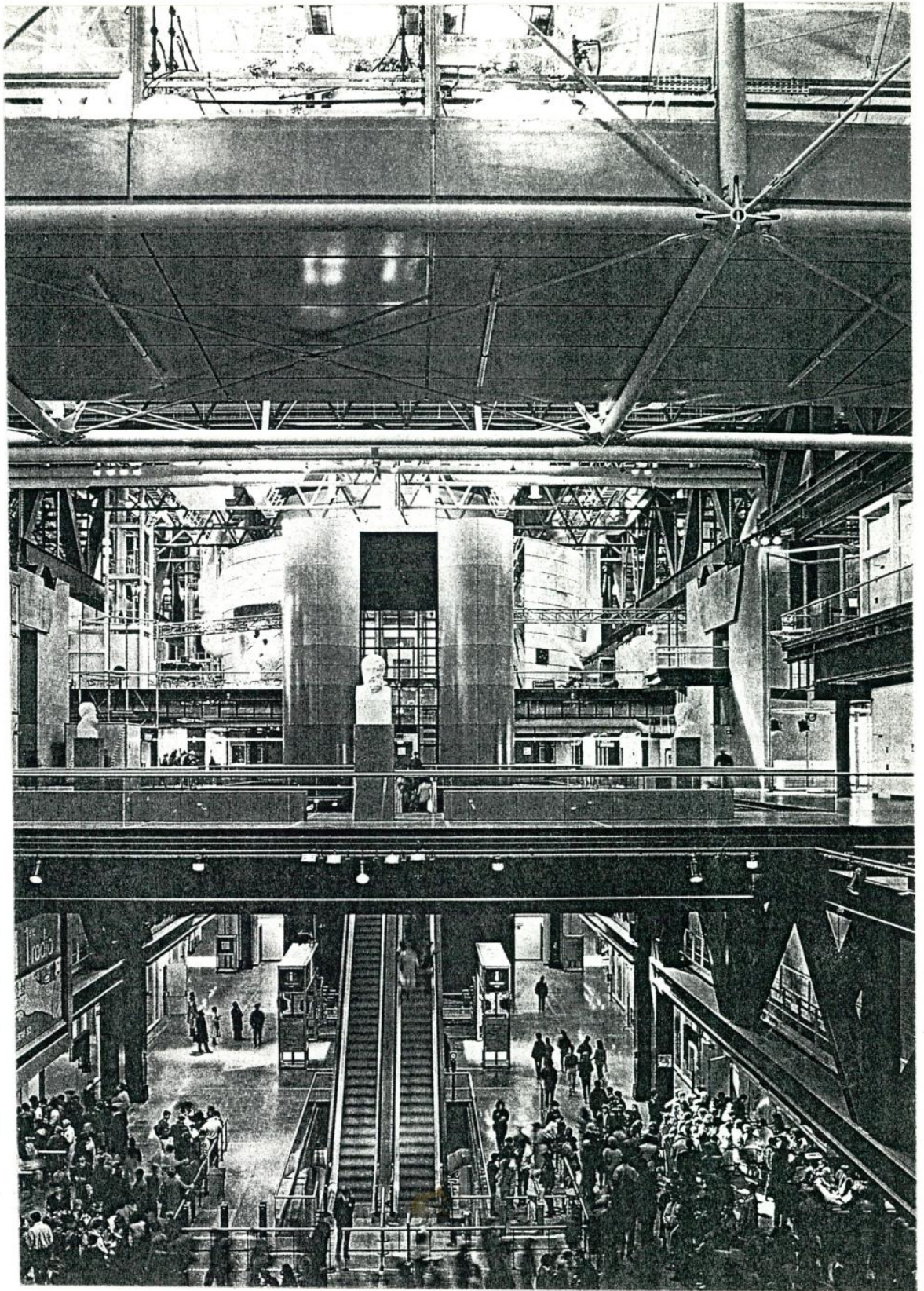
Vast interiors of la Cité

Figure 38

Excitement of the interiors
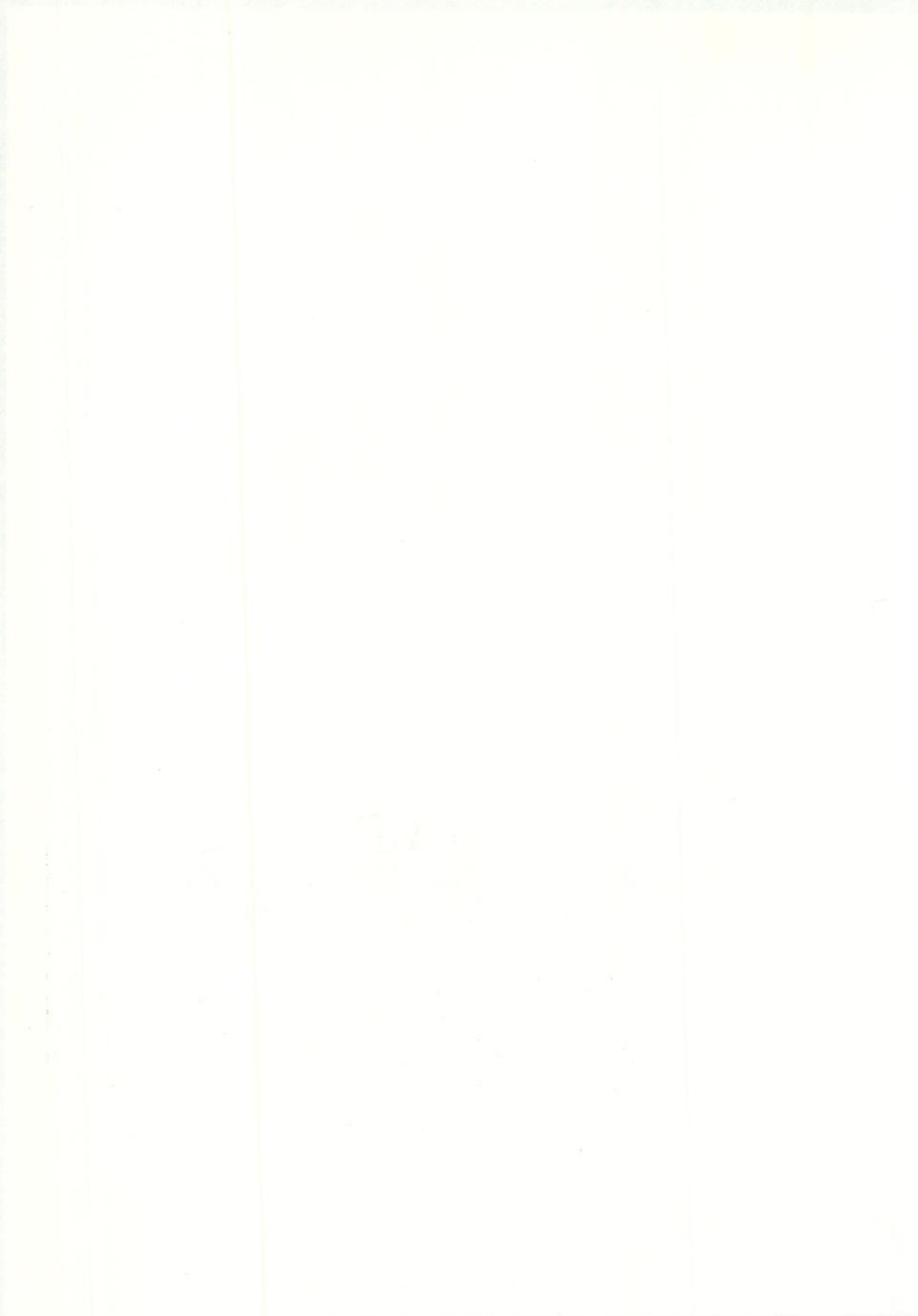
metres below in the foyer. Unfortunately, the 17m domes
are somewhat dwarfed by the sheer scale and bulk of the
museum building and the vastness of the space below.
However, with their spider web suspensions and specially
developed Teflon skin, they contribute greatly to the
hyper-tech aesthetic of the museum's interior. They are
part of the architect's joyous romanticism of servicing,
whose almost baroque richness and theatricality makes
even the most explicit work of, say, Rodgers, look very
stiff-lipped and Anglo-Saxon by contrast.

Outside the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, on the line of
the Grande Halle, lies La Geode, a near spherical structure with
a mirror-like surface. It functions as a three-dimensional
amnimax cinema (the first in Europe) and as such is an
expression of both the French love for high technology and the
Government's wish for La Villette to be a centre for science and
learning in Europe.

Mitterand's involvement with La Geode was crucial, for it had
originally been axed by Giscard d'Estaing. But, as we have
seen, Mitterand had a preference for pure geometry and he
reinstated the design.

La Geode is truly a sight to behold - its imposing geometry has
a monumental presence which is multiplied by the perfect surface
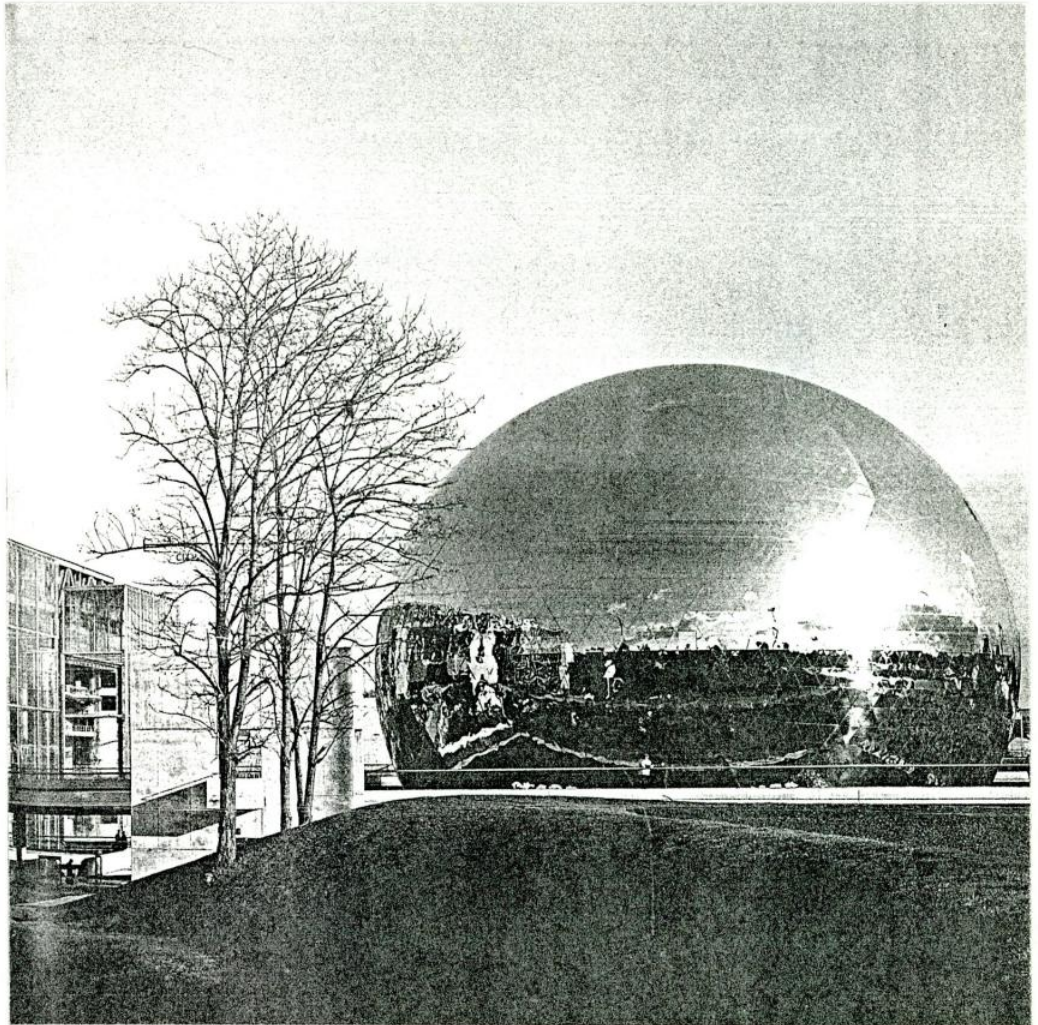
Figure 39

La Geode

finish that reflects the park, the museum, and the sky.

Surrounded by water it is to Fainsilber:

> Symbole de l'univers, le reflet des nuages suggere
> la forme des continents et offre une vision
> immaterielle de l'environnement. (Fainsilber 1987 : 156)

Like many other features at La Villette, La Geode is quite

an accomplishment in engineering terms, and comes quite a way

from the Expo '60 dome by Buckminster Fuller - the outer skin

is made up of 6,433 spherical triangles, none of which are the

same.

But what of the importance of La Cité des Sciences et de

l'Industrie in the context of French contemporary architecture,

and more specifically, the other Grands Projets?

Marie Christine Lorier in <u>Techniques</u> <u>et</u> <u>Architecture</u> considers

it as a development of Beaubourg, seeing them both as being

'Porteurs d'une aesthetique mecaniste née des Hautes

Technologies Industrielles des annèes 70', and that

'ils presentent des similitudes de langage

architectural et s'expriment structurellement'

(Lorier 1987 : 68)

In short, an expression of what Charles Jenks calls 'the second

machine aesthetic' or 'high-tech architecture' (Jenks 1984 : 30)

Figure 40

Buckminster Fuller
The inventor of the geodesic dome

By definition the high tech style (an amalgam of the words 'high style' and 'technology') 'gives aesthetic value to the structural and the constructive' which is used to the full at La Cité.

But, the impression that La Cité gives goes beyond this simple explanation. The influence of the modernists is very apparent which ultimately can be traced back to classical renaissance architecture.

Beyond this La Cité presents what could be seen as a Janus face if one reflects on the two architectural philosophies of Wolffin and Schmarson, i.e. whether architecture should be viewed as the art of giving form to physical masses, or the shaping of space. There seems to have been a double intention on the part of Fainsilber: he offers us a stone and iron fortress, of huge mass, and places it in tension with playful spatial elements emphasized by the glass houses and light catching domes. It seems that he has achieved a balance.

It is therefore not as Banham considers it, a 'step backwards' in architecture and museography, but rather an exciting forward-looking piece of design expressive of a country's vision for the 21st century. State patronage or propaganda? A little of both - but with no harm done. At La Cité everything is <u>Luxe</u> <u>Calme</u> <u>et</u> <u>Technicité</u>.

CHAPTER IV

AN ARCHITECTURE OF SOUND

Located at the park's southern entry is the other major
piece of new architecture at La Villette - La Citè de la
Musique by Christian de Portzamparc (born 1946). The
concept behind the complex was the creation of a unique
and much needed assembly of music and dance activities
that would become the centre of classical music activities
in France, and the most comprehensive facility in Europe.

Therefore in concept, the centre has an instant affinity with
both the park (a new approach in urban planning) and the Citè
des Sciences et de l'Industrie (the largest science museum in
the world), in reflecting the French government's lust for
domestic and international prestige.

De Portzamparc's design features two very different, though
complementary wings, separated by the Grande Halle (La
Villette's link with her industrial past and the main axis of
the park's design). Each wing corresponds to a specific part of
the programme and together they define (as de Portzamparc
described it) 'une response **exacte** a l'esprit du site'. (de
Portzamparc 1987 : 168) Only the west wing has been completed
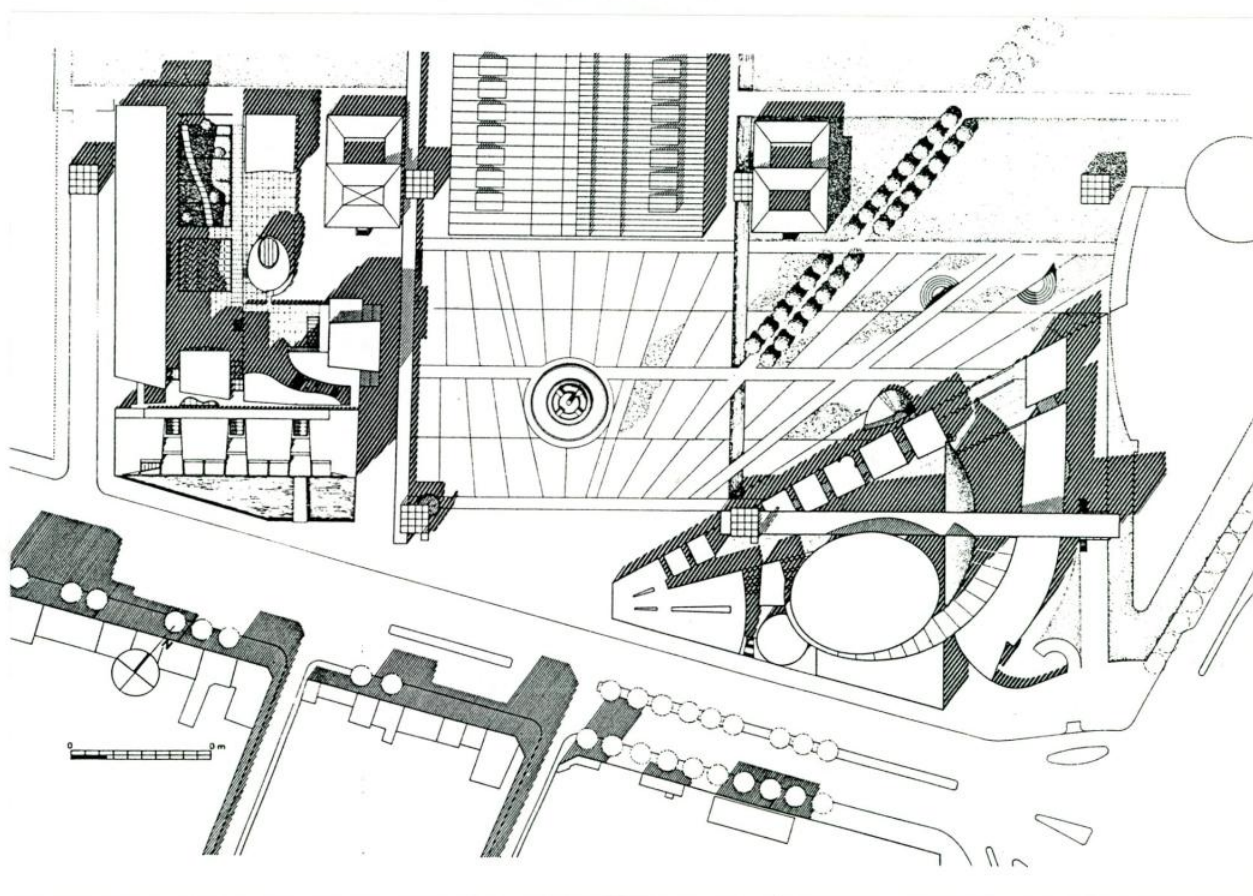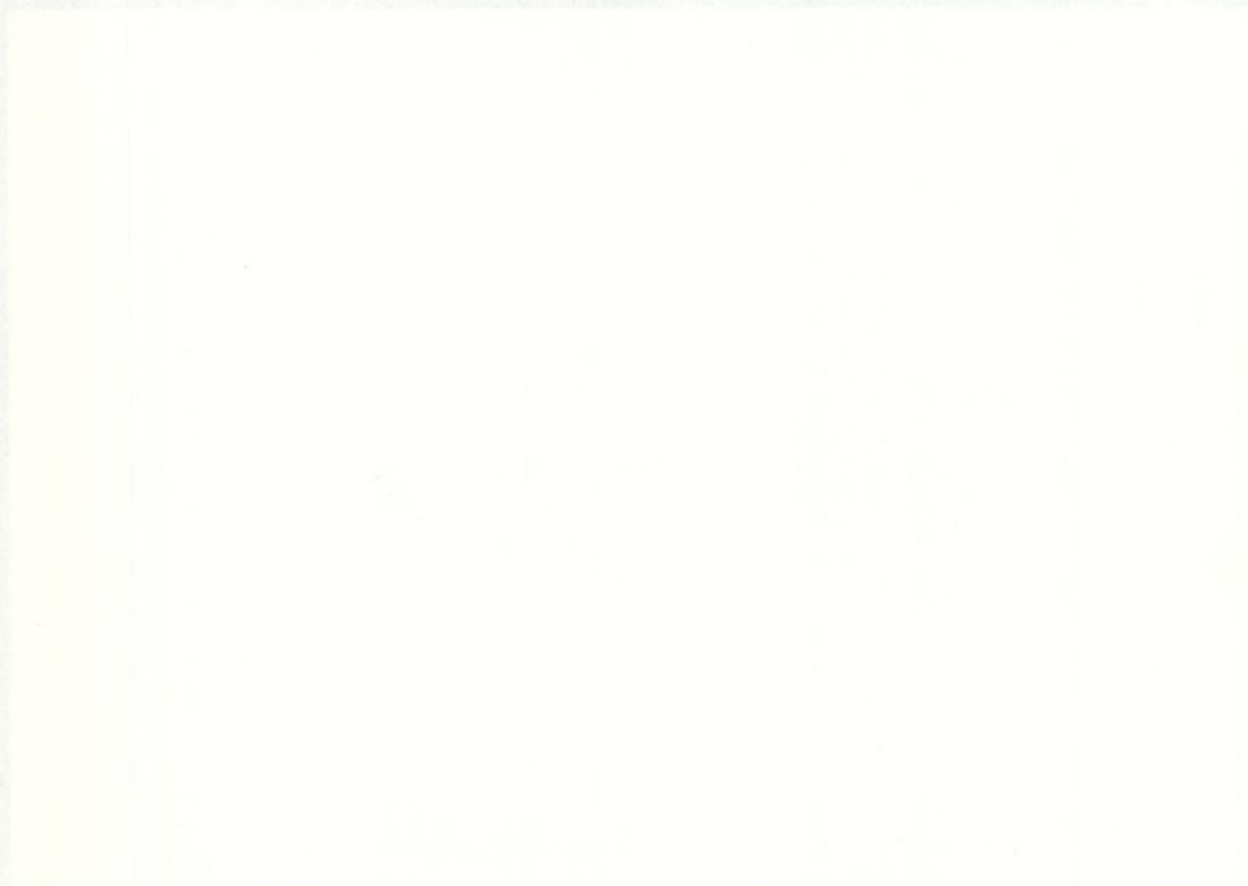at this stage with work still being done on the east. In

Figure 41

Plan view of La Citè de la Musique

examining it as a piece of modern French design it is important
to look at both parts because only then can one get an
impression of the architect's intentions for the buildings
themselves, their relationship with the park as a unit, and
their relationship with the city of Paris.

The Citè de la Musique, unlike the rest of the buildings at La
Villette, is firmly anchored by a conventional street frontage
along Avenue Jean Jaures, an endless terrace in the style of
Haussman. La Citè de la Musique is therefore part of the city
of Paris and part of the park. As we have seen, Tschumi's
intention was to design a park that was a continuation of the
city itself. This was therefore one of the starting points of
de Portzamparc's design, he writes:

> C'est une overture, une porte-fenetre, qui marque
> un fin de la ville, un facon de faire venir le
> parc jusqu'a elle... (de Portzamparc 1988 : 169)

La Citè de la Musique is a complex of very different buildings
rather than one large structure, rightly earning its 'city'
title. It is architecturally complex and powerful and very much
grounded in a personal architectural language.

The east wing is very much a pure dynamic form, fragmented into
relatively autonomous volumes that swirl in a spiral
ellipse around the concert hall. The spiral opens
out towards the park where one of Tschumi's red <u>follies</u> has
collided with de Portzamparc's olympian white volumes. It

Plan-masse. La cité de la Musique est composée de deux ensembles de bâtiments distincts. Les lieux d'études sont regroupés dans l'aile Ouest. L'aile Est abrite les lieux accessibles au public : salle de concert, foyer, ainsi qu'un Musée des Instruments.
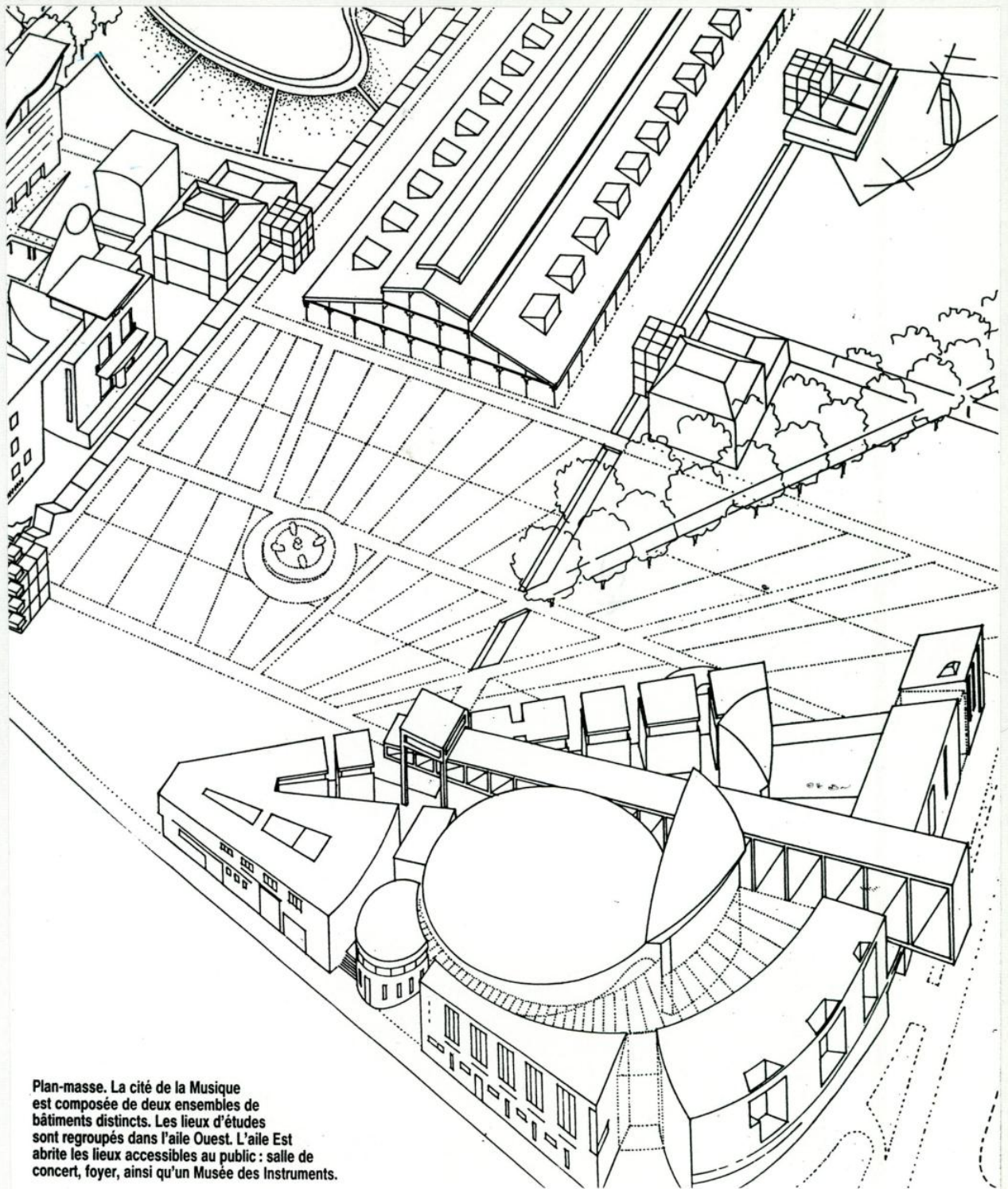
Figure 42

The east wing showing spiral form

is a tremendously exciting image in a pure formal sense but
it also gives the impression of importance, of some major
event. The symbolism of sound emanating from the concert
hall is all apparent. The spiral form appears as an
acoustic phenomenon, 'a horn turned towards the park'.
'An architecture of sound' (de Portzamparc 1988 : 169).
Compounding the image of sound is the musical undulating
concrete roof in the west wing which serves to unify the
sprawling collection of rehearsal rooms. Its formal
presence appears as an exciting echo of Tschumi's main
gallery running parallel with the roof, which travels to
the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie. The undulating
roof is of course reminiscent of much of the architecture
of the 1960s when a proliferation of roofs which 'snake
along like the Loch Ness monster' appeared. In the 1960s
Nervi considered that their introduction was 'for the fun
of it' (Pevsner 1943 : 426). This is not so at La
Villette - the undulating roof has been used as a signature
tune for the complex and for the park, to enhance the
monumental quality of the building and her important
musical function.

The formal eclecticism at La Cité de la Musique does not stop
there. On the roof of part of the east wing are two intensely
sculptural elements whose presence is gently reminiscent of Le
Corbusier's Secretariat Building at Chandigarh. Fig. 45 shows
part of the roof detail at La Cité de la Musique and fig. 46
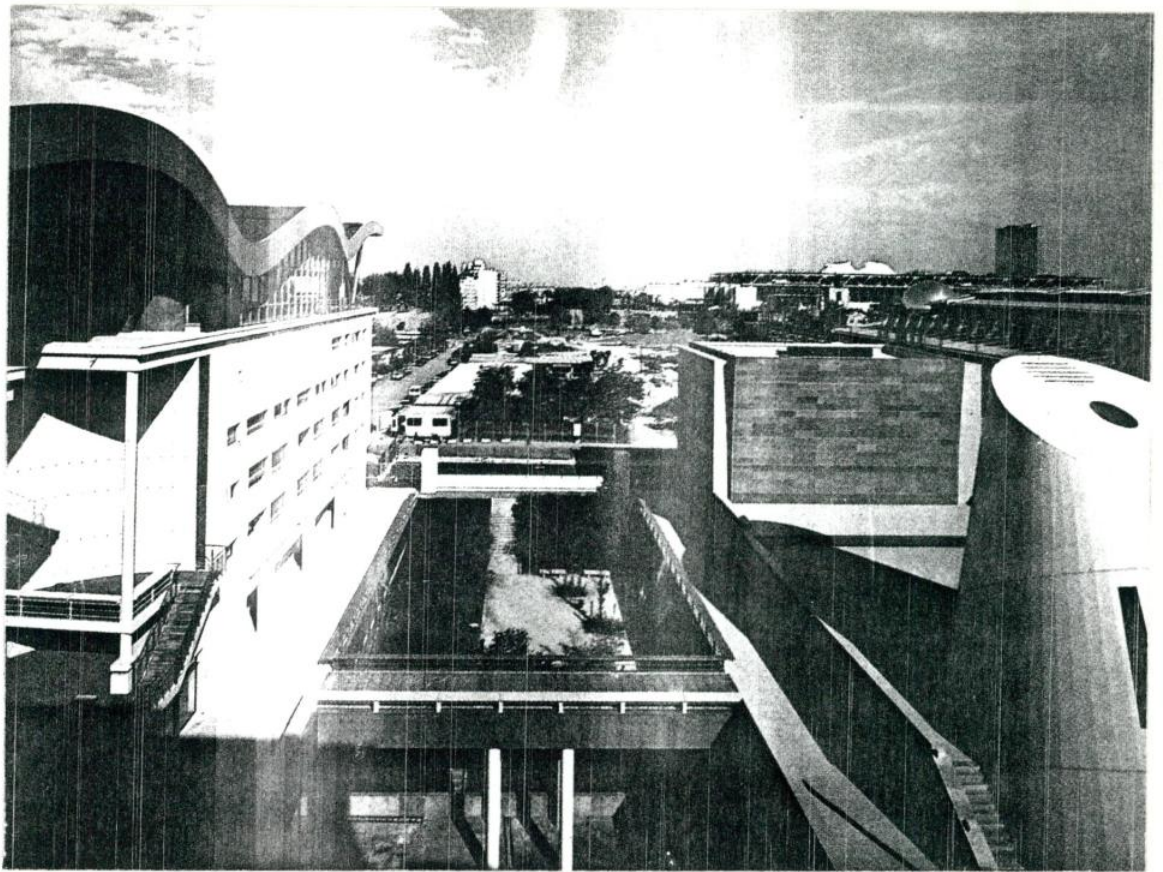shows Le Corbusier's equivalent. This is only one of many

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Figure 43
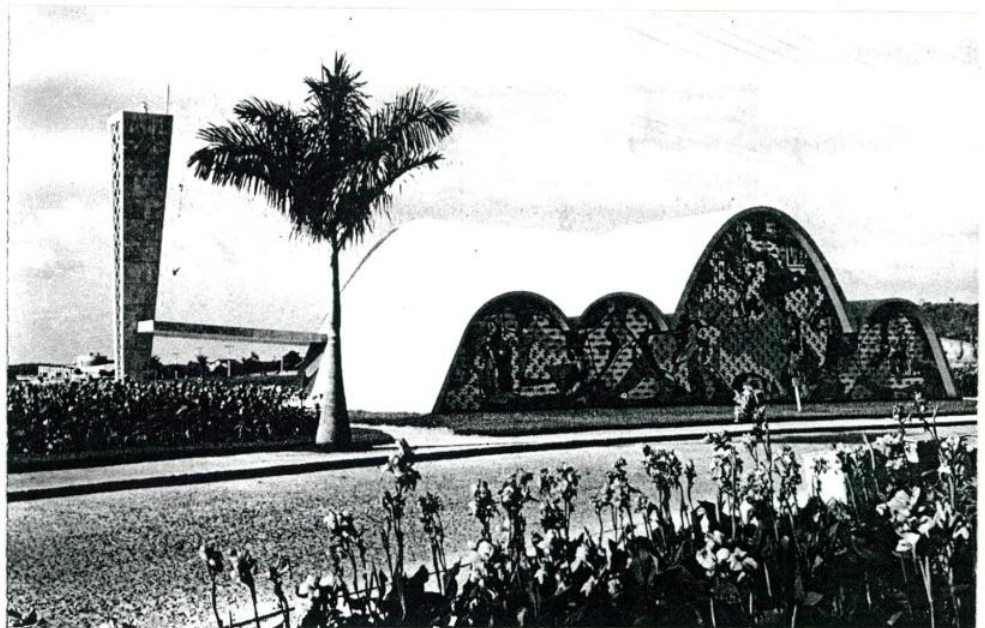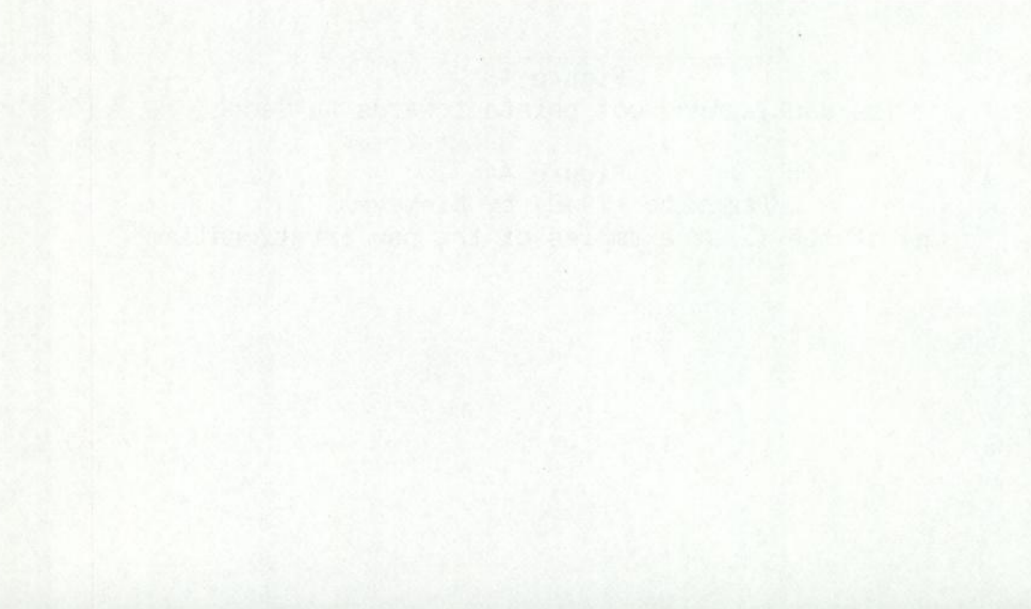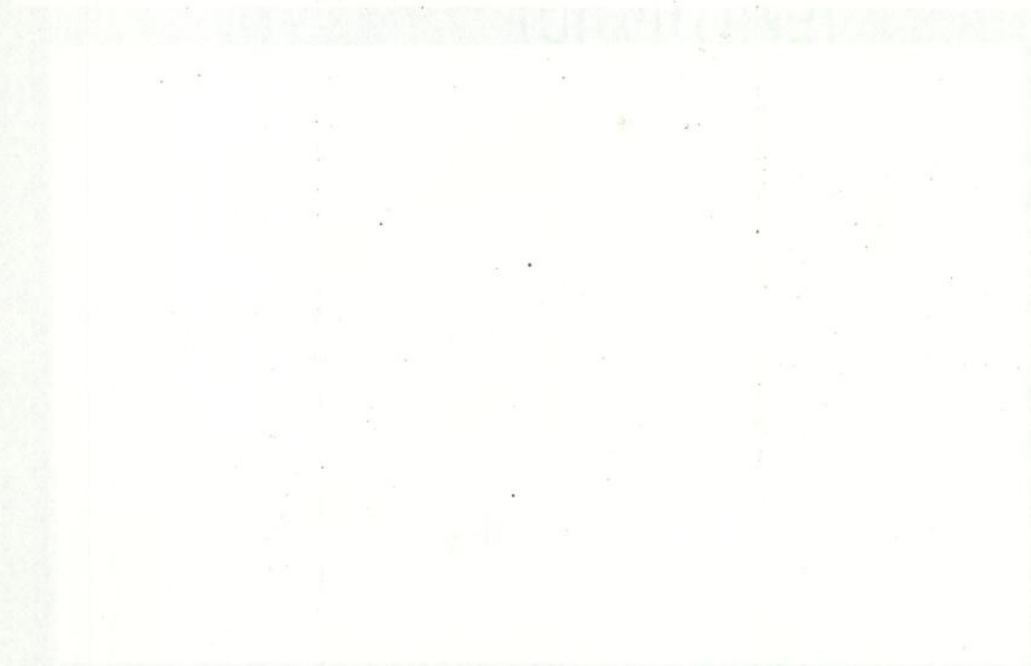The undulating roof points towards La Geode

Figure 44
Pampulha (1943) by Niemeyer
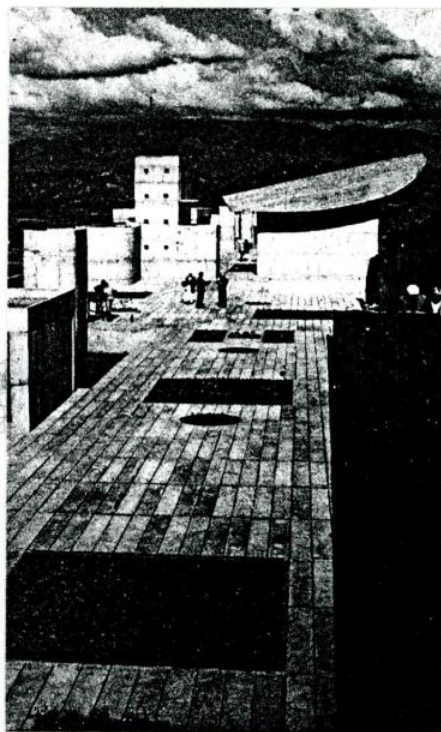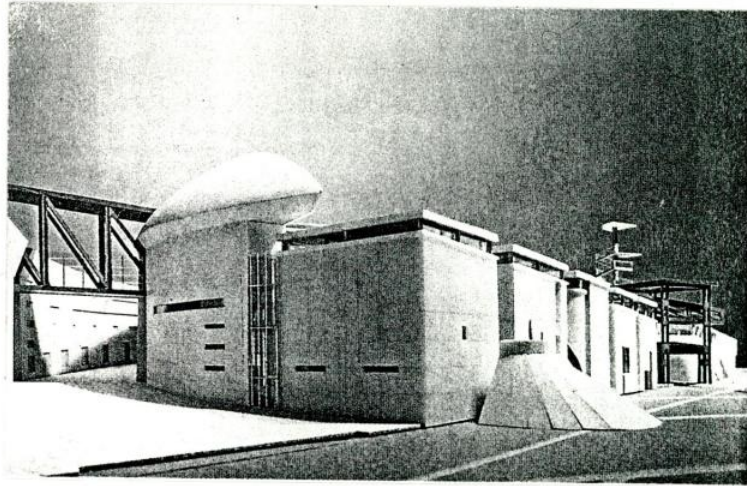One of the first examples of the new irrationalism

Figure 45
Roof detail, East Wing

Figure 46
Roof detail, Secretariat Building, Le Corbusier

tellful features in de Portzamparc's design that recall Le
Corbusier's post-war design phase in which he abandoned much of
the 'cigar box'(Banham 1981 : 43) aesthetic of his earlier
housing projects. Pevsner considers that this represented a
'revolt' and a rise of a new 'irrationalism' and traces its
origin to Brazil where Le Corbusier visited in 1937.

According to Pevsner, Le Corbusier's 'revolt from reason' began
at Ronchamp with Notre Dame du Haut (1950) where he notes some
visitors say that the effect is movingly mysterious, but..

> Woe to him who succumbs to the temptation of
> reproducing the same effect in another building
> less isolated, less remote, less unexpectedly
> placed and less exceptional in function. (Pevsner,
> 1943 : 429)

From this quote it is obvious that Pevsner has missed the point
of Corbusier's formal changes in style. What Le Corbusier
discovered in later life was that man's functional requirements
are not purely physical, not machine like, but they include
emotional and spiritual needs. To quote from the wishes of the
Parish Committee for Corbusier's church at Firminy:

> They wish the spirit to animate inert material
> and invest the volume, the space, the light,
> with a meaning. A meditation become reality.
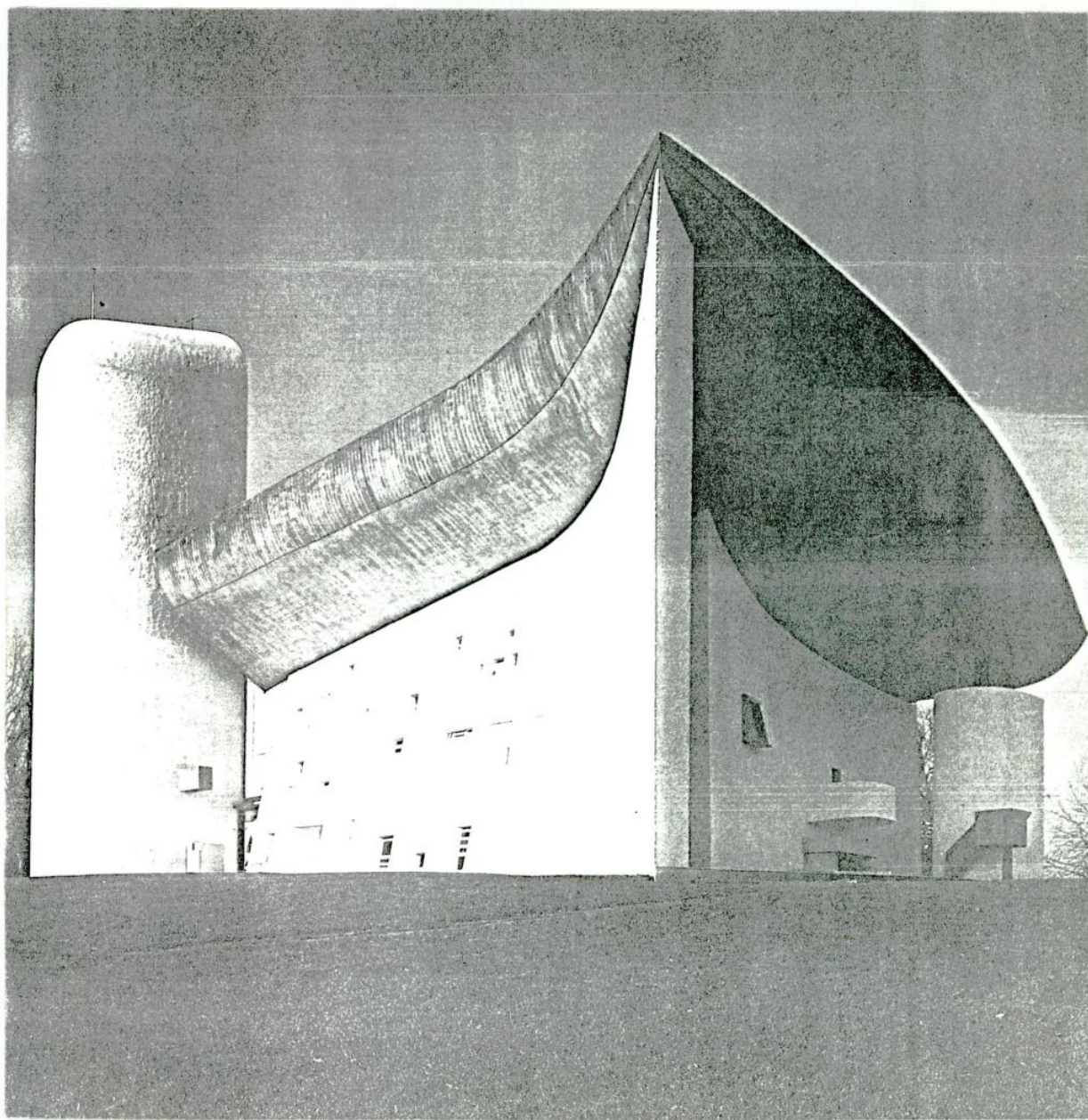> (Claudius Petit 1981 : 8)

Figure 47

Ronchamp

The key therefore to this phase in Corbusier's career is the clever treatment of volume, space and light while still adhering emphatically to his plastic and poetic programme that he had enunciated so emphatically four decades before in Vers une Architecture, his 'three reminders to architects: mass, surface, plan'. (Le Corbusier 1927 : 154).

This approach seems very much present in de Portzamparc's Cité de la Musique. Note the arbitrary looking cuts into blank walls at the east wing (fig. 48), their similarity with those of the Secretariat Building at Chandigarh, both causing interesting play with light in the interiors. The presence of Chandigarh as an influence does not stop there... consider de Portzamparc's use of the truncated cone in the centre of the western courtyard. Its geometric whiteness which is emphasized by the cubic olympian pavillion to its rear reflects both Le Corbusier's Firminy church (fig. 52) and his Palace of Assembly at Chandigarh (1967) (fig. 51). The cone can also be seen as a representation of a new French modernism and rationalism based on geometry. At any rate, the function of the cone is, as in the case of Le Corbusier's one, to direct light into the chamber below, which required to be totally insulated to prevent the travel of sound. It is part of de Portzamparc's conscious interplay between sound and light, mass and void.

The facade at the Avenue Jean Jaurés is an example of this - the huge solid overhang serving to reflect sound out onto the street, contrasting with the vertical glass voids, allowing
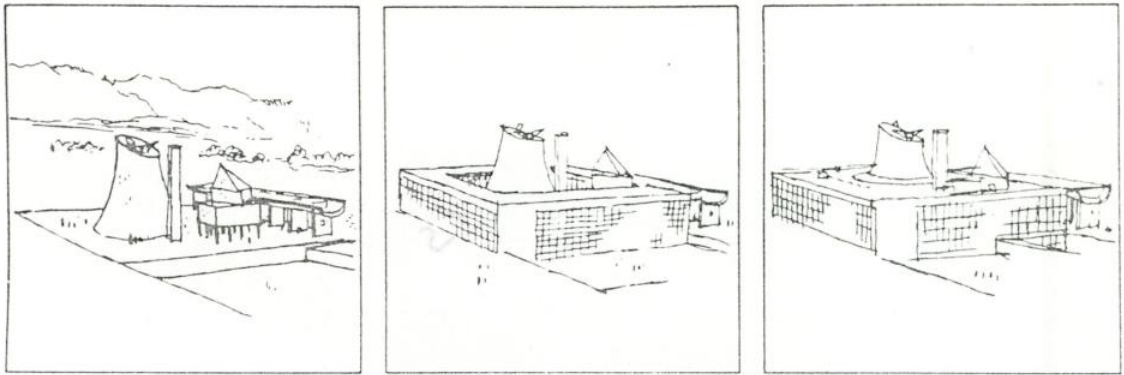
Fig.294. Analytical sketches by Rodrigo Perez de Arce, 1978, showing composition of the Palace of Assembly.
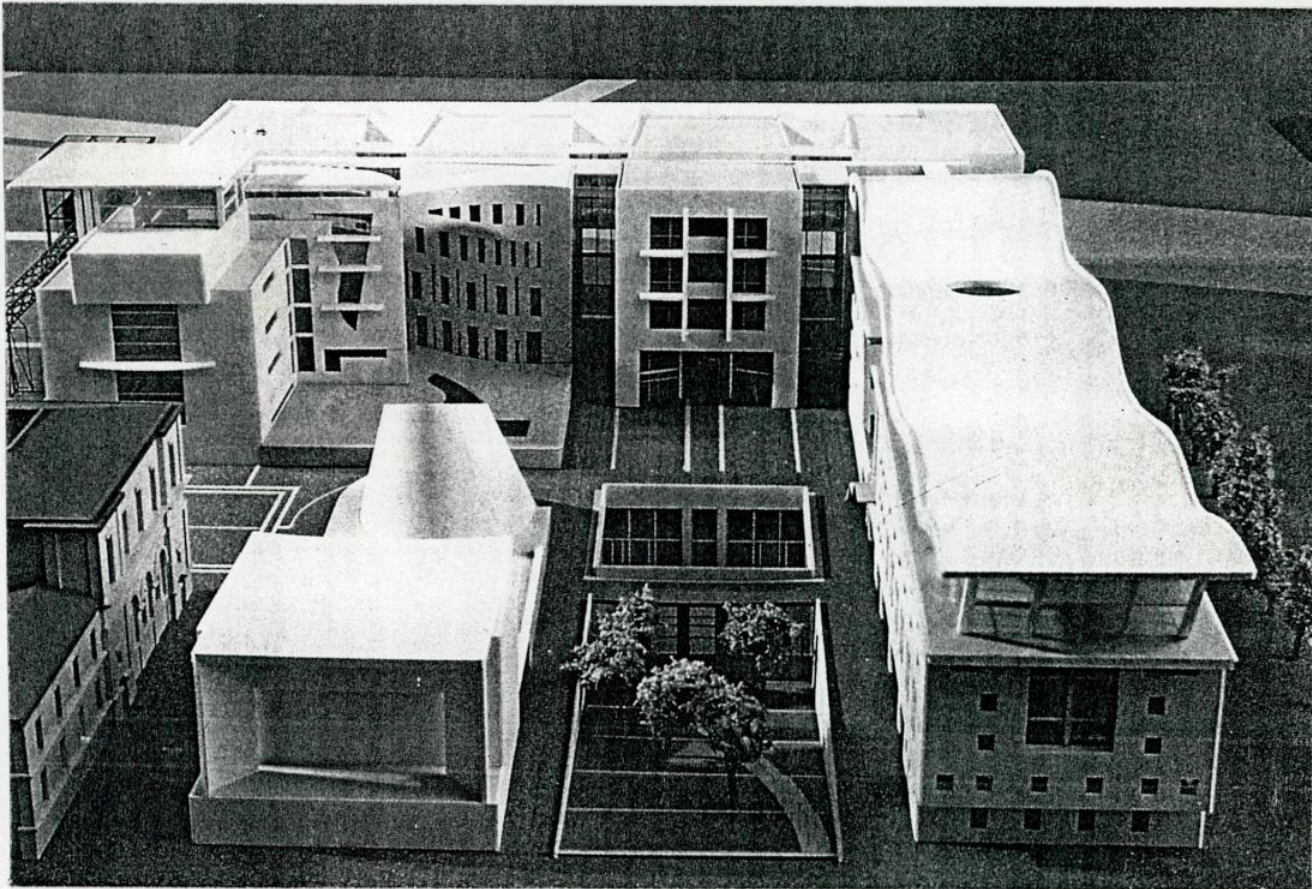

Figure 50
De Portzamparc's Cone

Figure 51
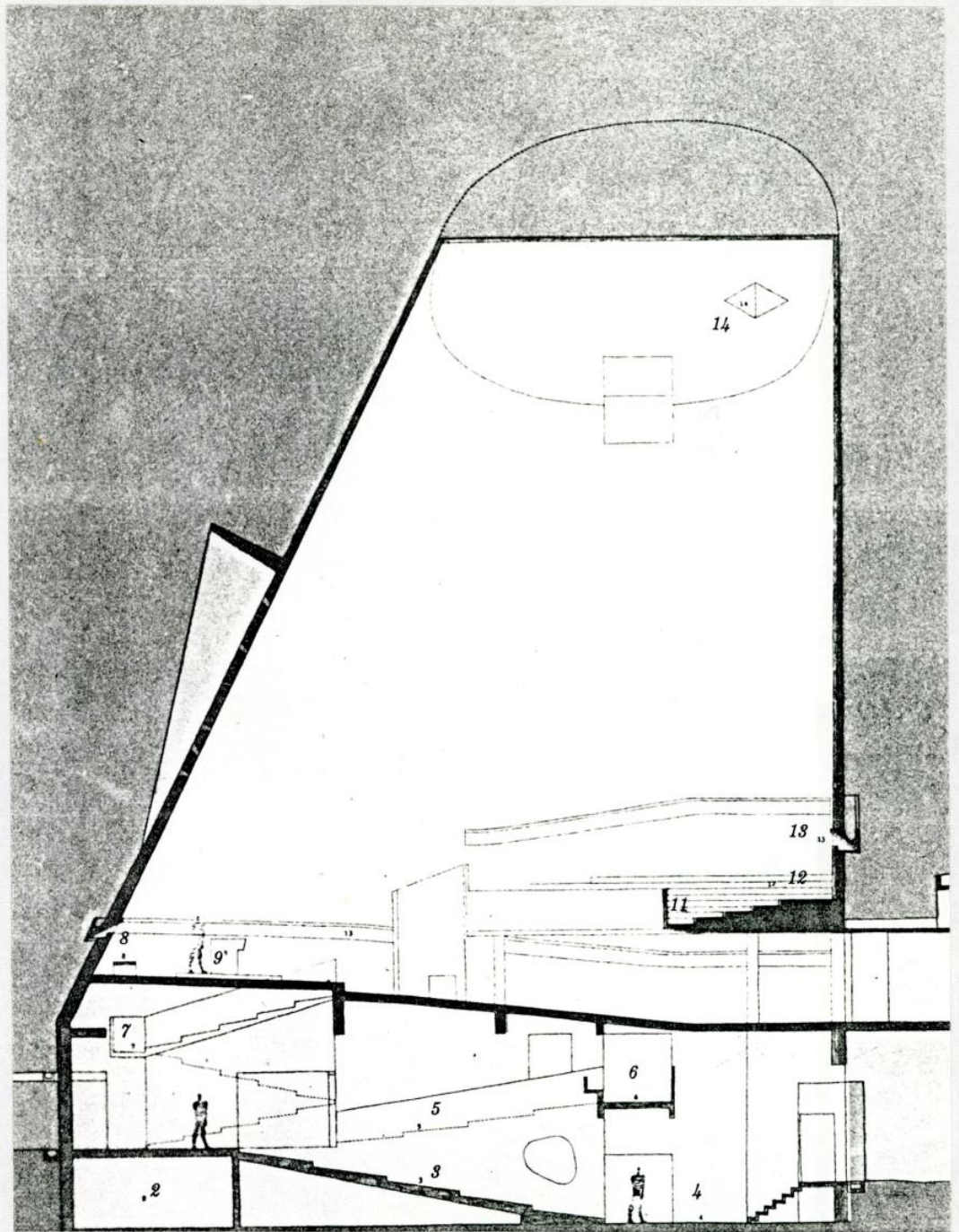Le Corbusier ; Palace of Assembly, Chandigarh
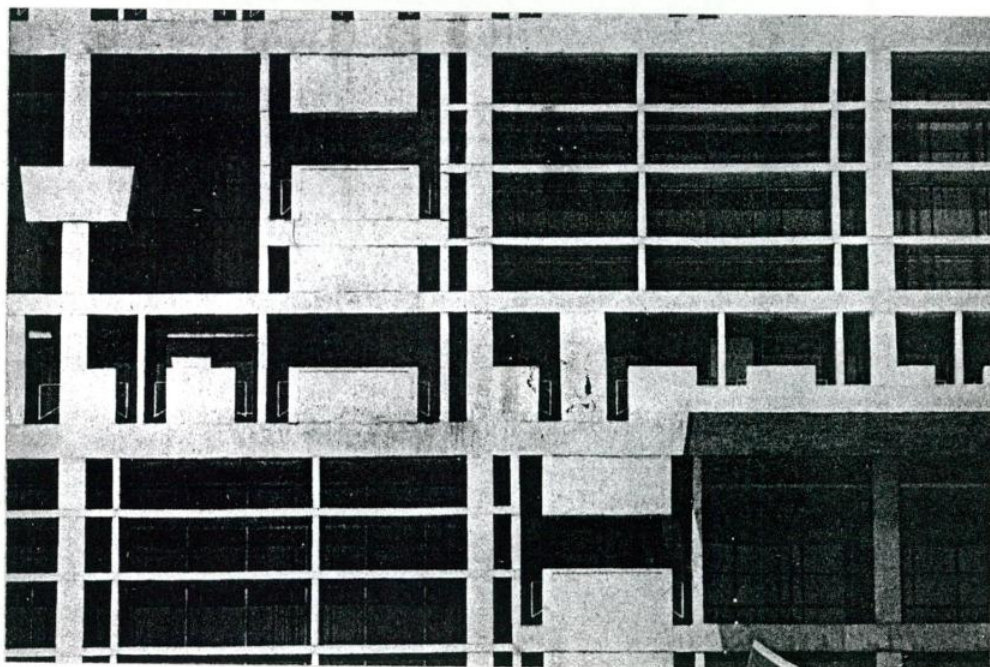
Figure 52
Church at Firminy, Le Corbusier
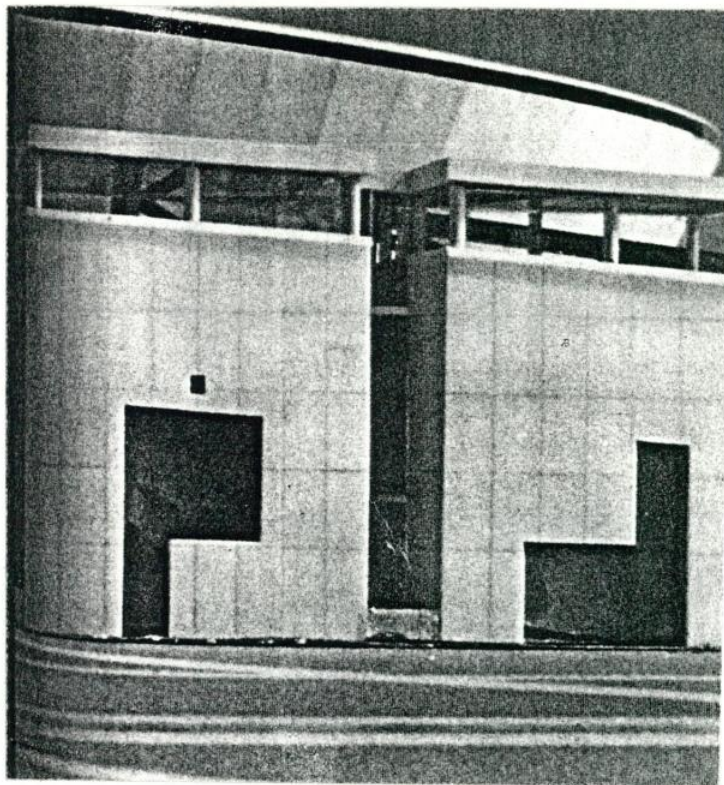
Figure 48
Detail, East wing

Figure 49
Detail Secretariat Building, Le Corbusier

streams of light to penetrate the complex (see fig. 53).

Throughout the interior spaces the contrast continues: on the
one hand are the solid, obscure volumes of the many acoustic
envelopes of the music workspaces; on the other are the
transparent, luminous volumes which link these spaces, and
ensure the transition between the exterior and the interior, and
provide both entirely glazed and even open air meeting spaces.

Without overplaying the Le Corbusier influence, this facade is
important in the monumental impression it gives to the building
in a similar way to the aforementioned Legislative Assembly.
This monumental importance is a characteristic feature of
Mitterand's Grands Projets, as we have seen in Chapter I of this
thesis. La Cité de la Musique also achieves all the
architectural drama that Mitterand has strived for in his
programme. It is a very beautiful building and is the most
architecturally complex and powerful piece at La Villette. Its
triumph is the unity it creates both between its own constituent
parts and between itself and the park. It is essentially very
much a part of Parc de la Villette's rethink on the form that
public spaces should take. It is an architecture which is
impossible to seize in a single glance and rather like Tschumi's
design for the park, offers continued discovery and excitement.

De Portzamparc feels of his design:

> C'est une architecture qui se parcourt qu'on
> ne peut jamais saisir en un seul regard. Et
> c'est precisement dans cette experience du
> parcours, de la durèe donc, de ses sequences,

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de ses ruptures et de ses decouvertes, que
l'architecture rejoint l'experience musicale
... L'architecture est un art du mouvement.
(de Portzamparc, 1987 : 172)
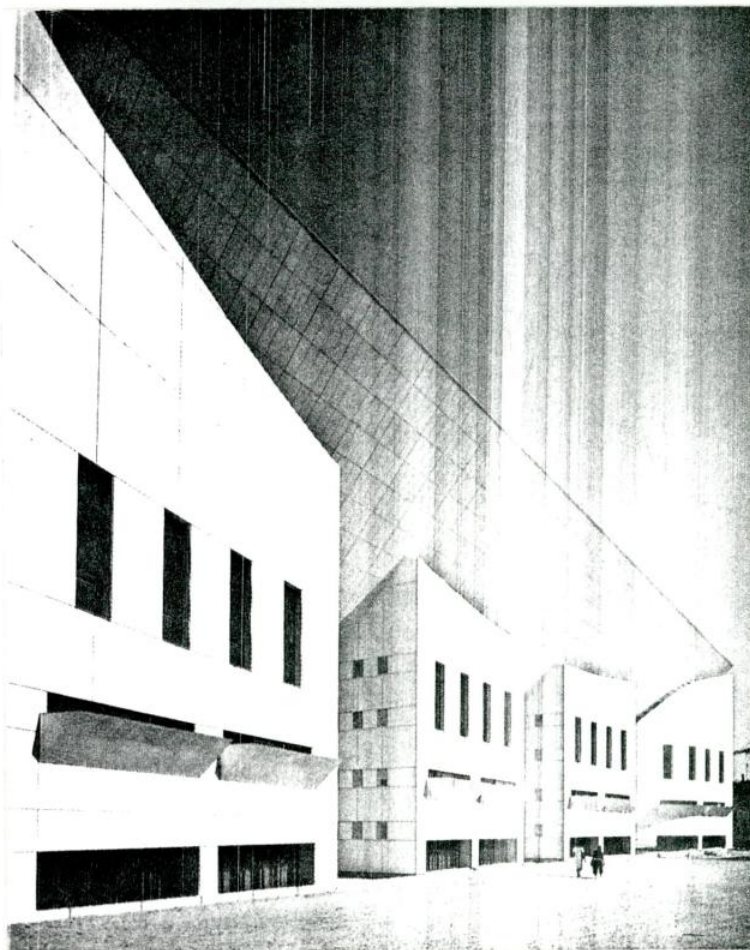
Figure 53
Facade at West wing
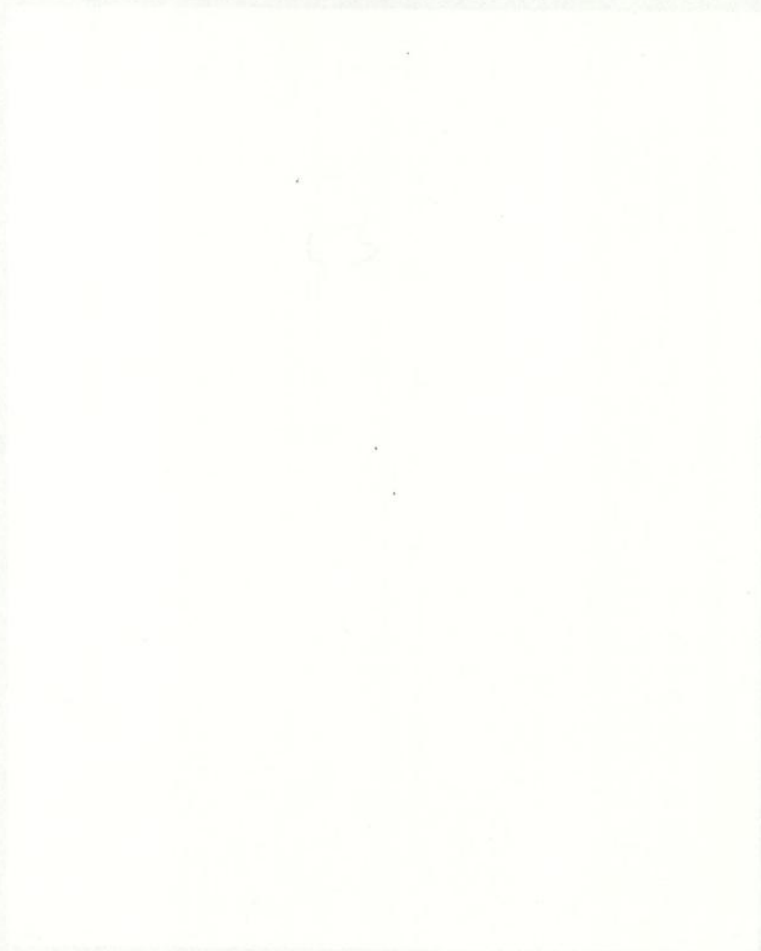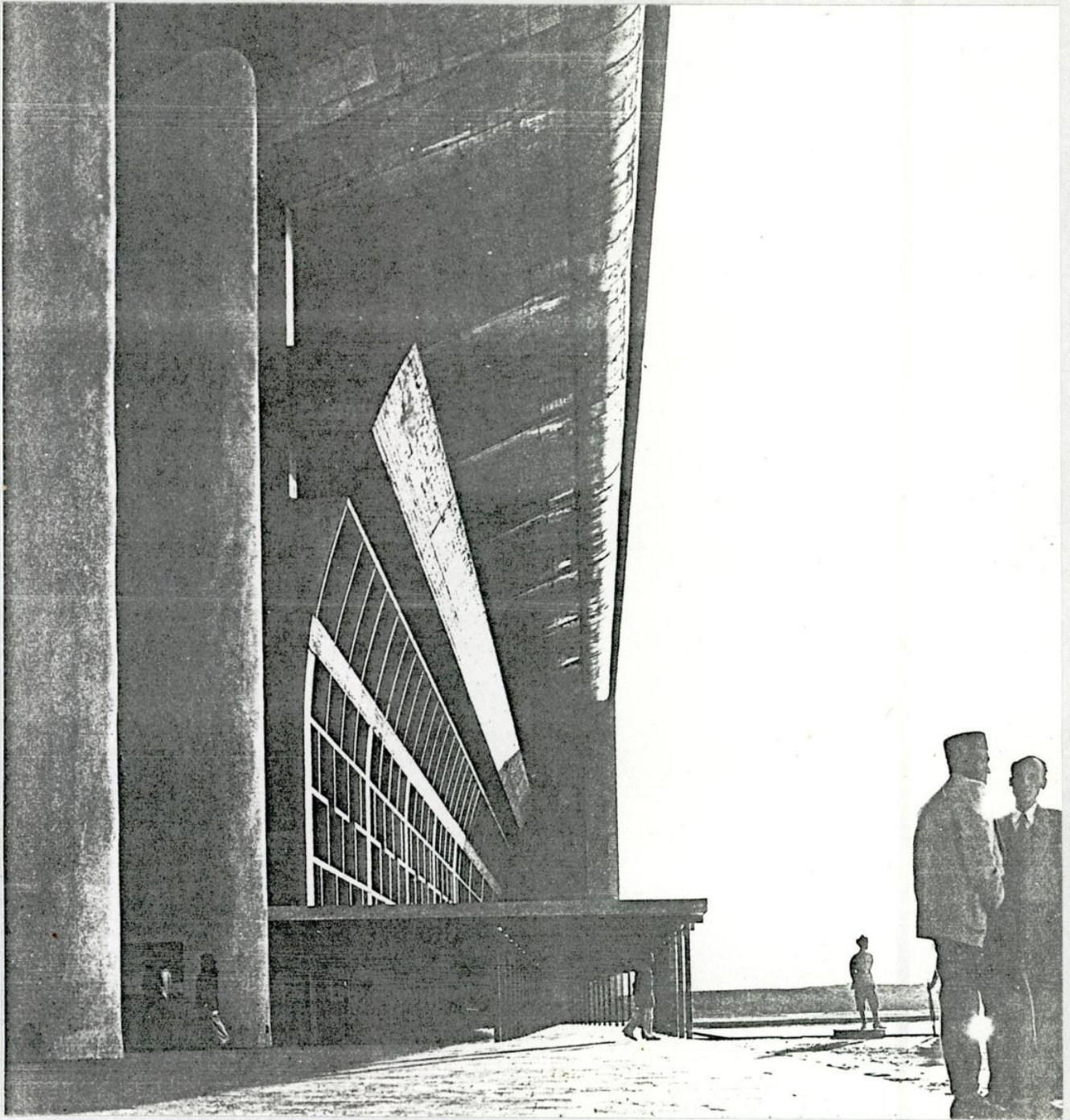
Figure 54

Facade at Palace of Assembly, Chandigarh, Le Corbusier

CONCLUSION

During the 1980s Paris experienced an ambitious government
sponsored building programme on a scale never before witnessed.
In many other cities such proposed transformations of the urban
fabric would produce public outcries, but not so in Paris.
Dissent was slight and wavered quickly due to both the forward
looking attitudes of the state and the populace, and the
inherent sense of style that exists in the French people.

It would be naive just to leave it at that. On Monday 11 March
1991, Norman Foster, while being interviewed on BBC Radio 4,
made the point that the reason there is so much bad
architecture in Britain, was because of the 'profit motive';
that is to say architects 'couldn't be bothered pushing
themselves' when they can get the same amount of money for
inferior work. By contrast, most architectural projects in
France are initiated through competitions, the result being a far
greater amount of time is spent on the design of a building
which ultimately leads to the creation of a proliferation of
architectural theories and design concepts. In France, unlike
the UK, the architect has much more involvement with the actual
building process and is responsible for the selection of
consultants and contractors. Factor in the presidential
interest in the programmes, and the result is extremely well
finished buildings with tremendous sensitivity shown in the use

of, and treatment of, materials.

The creative treatment of materials has always been and still
is, a major characteristic of French design. McDermott points
out in an exhibition review 'The only discernible French quality
comes in a feeling of materials handled superbly and with great
confidence' (McDermott 1988 : 19).

We have seen this trait in Tschumi's follies and in Fainsilber's
Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, but it is also to be seen
in all the Grands Projets, too numerous to mention here.

State patronage can have a disadvantage however, which has been
pointed out in the thesis, it being the influence of the state
in the creation of architectural styles deemed appropriate for,
and by the state. In France this has resulted in what Lucan
called a 'nouveau academisme' based on the geometry of pure
form. It is a trait that is aptly mirrored in the logo for Parc
de la Villette, the triangle, the circle and the square being
the primary features of the design.

This tendency towards pure form can be attributed to the
individual architect's wishes for their designs to have instant
and sensational appeal to competition juries and can
unfortunately result in the 'dressing up' of the concept with
high technology engineering trickery. However, based on the

Figure 55

Logo for La Villette

The three basic geometric forms that have been revitalized in
the Grands Projets

examples outlined in this thesis (Le Louvre, La Grande Arche, La Geode, La Cité de la Musique) it is apparent that this new French modernism has resulted in the creation of some very powerful and moving pieces of late 20th century architecture, and thus, any apparent presidential aesthetic influences should not be criticized. The Grands Projets represent a genuine attempt to create new urban forms based on modernism rather than the convenience of post modern classicism.

Between them, I.M. Pei's pyramid and Otto von Sprecklesen's arch have managed to upstage all the other grands projets in the international press. It is however at La Villette that the power of the French presidency to remodel its capital city in a positive way has been most impressively demonstrated. This was once a bleak inner suburb full of derelict buildings and sheds. Now with its park, exhibition halls and museum it is fast becoming in the words of Blueprint 'the Gallic counterpart to ref. South Kensington'.

In Tschumi's design for the park at La Villette we have witnessed pure innovation and architectural excitement. On initial impression it seems there is quite an early 20th century formal influence involved, but as it builds up layer after layer surprising dislocations and disjunctions occur making it a fitting showpiece of deconstructivist architecture. Mitterand talks grandiloquently of breaking down the barriers between central Paris and its suburbs, and this is exactly what Tschumi

has done. With his strikingly simple concept he has changed the
whole idea of what a park is and what it should be in a late
20th century metropolis. As such Parc de la Villette represents
a highly ambitious attempt to create a new model for a city
centre rather than resurrecting an old one. In his <u>follies</u> he
has not only succeeded in unifying the park with its main
buildings and with the city of Paris, but he has also created a
clear monumental symbol for the park and ultimately for France
itself.

In La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie we have seen further
evidence of Mitterand's quest for international prestige, in the
transformation of an old abbatoir building into a monumental
edifice for science and learning. It is architecture of a
seemingly conventional nature with many visual references to the
modern movement of the 1920s and 1930s and ultimately to
classical renaissance architecture. It is however in
Fainsilber's treatment of space that the design becomes a truly
innovatory interpretation of museography, with his creation of
hi-tech interiors with an almost baroque-like theatricality that
interacts with the park outside. In the spherical Géode we see
a further manifestation of a new French formalism.

The third most important architectural design element discussed
is La Cité de la Musique by Christian de Portzamparc. It is an
architecturally powerful piece. With its undulating roof,
spiral shapes, distinctive cut-out motifs, sculptural elements
and olympian white cone, it presents a very personal and wilful

formal vocabulary that displays strong hints of 1960s revivalism
and ultimately of Le Corbusier. This is no reason to be
critical of the buildings. As has ben stressed many times
throughout the thesis, apparent formal eclecticism such as this
is not so much a conscious plagerization on the part of the
architect, but more a manifestation of the cultural baggage that
the architect has inherited throughout his career.

We have seen therefore that Parc de la Villette is not a single
architectural gesture, not an isolated landmark, but a
collection of diverse architectural styles that manage to
interact with each other to achieve unity. 'There are recycled
industrial relics, showy modern monuments, aggessivly
fashionable bits of urban sculpture' (Blueprint, Dec/Jan 1991 :
31).

Interesting in themselves, taken as a whole they add up to more
than the sum of their parts in the way they form public spaces.
La Villette is based firmly in the present, for the future.

> La Villette se veut un lieu de fête - fête pour
> l'esprit, fête pour le corps ou simplement fête
> populaire. Ce sera aussi une fête de l'architecture.
> (Goldberg 1987 : 124)

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