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Psychiatric clinic, Rodez

A whole new vision: the healthcare and design objectives of an unprecedented and innovative psychiatric clinic project by Jacques Lacombe and Michel de Florinier.

FRANCE — TEXT: ERIC TROUSSICOT, PHOTOGRAPHY: GILLES TORJEMAN

Any keen French literature enthusiast will have heard of the psychiatric hospital in Rodez. This was where the poet Antonin Artaud was confined from 1943–1946 and where he penned his 'Cahiers de Rodez'. It was in 1945 that Antonin Artaud began to write every day in small exercise books. Using these fragile materials, he created a new approach to writing that combined text and drawing.

The psychiatric clinic, built by local architects Jacques Lacombe and Michel de Florinier, is the opposite of the austere institution where Artaud stayed. The design of the clinic reflects the development of psychiatry, by aiming to adapt different areas to specific pathologies, in this case depression. The volumetric look and design achieved by the architects is a first for this type of facility, which expresses a great sense of freedom through its composition of spaces and interplay of separate horizontal strata, which seem to free themselves from gravity.

The clinic is located on a steep slope in the Bourran plateau, which has been a development priority for Rodez since the 1980s, the aim being to open up the old town built on a rocky peak. Rather than embrace the slope, this overhanging square holds it in its grasp, by means of the horizontal strata, which are independently superimposed. They look like layers of design suspended in the air, and appear to levitate independently above a square base, reminiscent of the playfully constructivist overhang of El Lissitzky's 'Cloud-Iron'.

The director wanted this new facility to move away from the intimidating prison-like image of a psychiatric institution. The building contains hardly a single vertical

alignment. The four facades are all different and not at all imposing on the outside. The H-shaped layout of the highest floor and its independent supporting structure represents a bold statement by the architects, combining complex design with volumetric 'risk-taking', which give a new coherence to this type of project. It includes the application, albeit on a limited scale, of the 'bigness' and 'congested design' of which Koolhaas is very fond. The levels are independent and linked only by a core of mechanical connections (lift cages and stairways integrated in the cross-bar of the H), while hosting a wide variety of events inside a single volume, built on the ground on the foot of the base. The architects wisely chose to favour the juxtaposition and superimposition of designs, rather than designing a structure intended to connect and interlink them.

Above the slope, the building rests on a concrete base, which conceals the technical facilities and car park, in order to minimize the road and the impact of cars. On the ground floor, with access on the plateau side, the medico-psychological centre includes treatment rooms overhanging the slope. The day clinic on the first floor is set back from the two levels that frame it. Finally, at tree-top level, the H-shaped design of the circular building that houses the admissions department, overhangs the access level by more than six metres. It is supported by pilotis, some inclined, and by eight long beams that free up the ground plane and optimize the technical plenum.

The design required four care units to be positioned at strategic points. The architects chose the four angles from which the H →





↑ Suspended walkways link the open ends of the H-shaped plan, creating two suspended 'air-patios'.



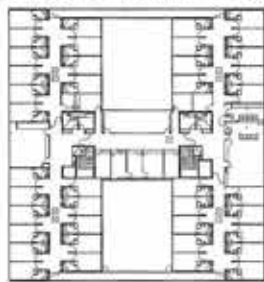
↑ The building is situated between the old town and the Aubrac mountains.



↑ Upper level with admissions department



↑ First floor



↑ Second floor



↑ Central cross-section

(Psychiatric clinic, Rodez)

plan flows on the highest floor. Two parallel care units are linked by a crossbar. On each side of the corridor, the patient bedrooms open out towards the opposite wing and the surrounding landscape, which offers a variety of views, with the old town on one side and the Aubrac mountains on the other. In order to avoid a cul-de-sac effect, two suspended walkways discreetly link the lines of the H and create two patios that hang in mid-air.

The shell is made of grey, thermolaquered corrugated metallic cladding. The sheeting is punctured at regular intervals in front of the glazed window panels, which accentuates the suspended horizontality of the building. This uniform metallic screen enables the building to blend subtly with the colourful silhouette of the old town in the distance. The cladding provides solar protection and reflects light to the inside, by diffracting it through the corbelled construction of the various level of the institution.

The building is designed to act as a filter between inside and outside. The patients can see out without being seen, while any passers-by attempting to look through the complex design of the building, will never be able to see right inside. Contrary to the idea of confinement and segregation, the patients can, literally and figuratively, enjoy a multiplicity of views of the surrounding landscape. Far from everyday events, the building is a metaphor for the suspension of time and treats the temporary stay of depressive patients as a transitory passage, an ambivalent step on the road to recovery.

This architecture truly aims to be therapeutic. It creates a space-time or time delay, in which everyone is invited to take a step back from themselves and the environment, both immediate and distant, by looking at the outer world and the institution itself in a new light, through the interplay of successive, interconnected filters. ←

PSYCHIATRIC CLINIC SAINTE-MARIE, 2003-2009

Architects: Lacombe/De Flornhies Architectes
 Technical design: INSE
 Client: Hôpital Sainte-Marie
 Address: Rodez, Aveyron
 Info: www.lacombe-flornhies.com



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