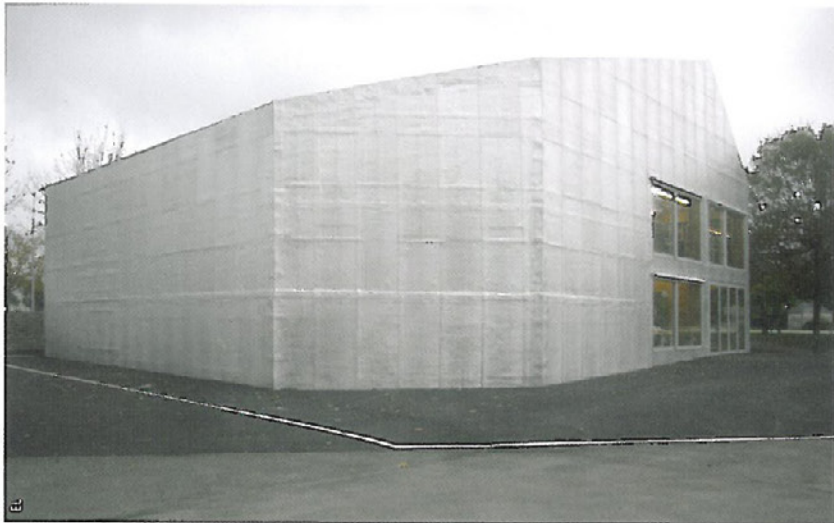




↑ East facade



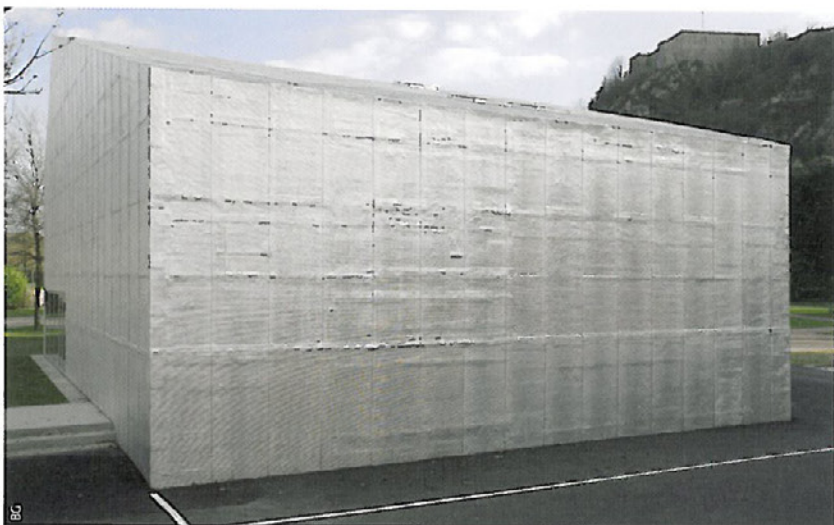
↑ The building merges with its unremarkable surroundings.



↑ South-west facade



↑ Exhibition space on the first floor



↑ North facade



↑ Library

Arts centre, Cherbourg

Éric Lapierre has created a sculptural 'architectura povera' – a plain yet ambitious magic box between warehouses and a park.

FRANCE — TEXT: XAVIER GONZALEZ, PHOTOGRAPHY: BENOÎT GRIMBERT, ÉRIC LAPIERRE, PAOLA SALERNO

Situated on the Cotentin peninsula, in the westernmost part of Normandy, Cherbourg is one of France's foremost naval ports. However, the new Point du Jour arts centre, located close to the historic town centre and the Bassin du Commerce, looks onto two contrasting aspects of the town. While the multitude of commercial warehouses gives the location a peripheral feel, the École des Beaux-Arts and its park form a coherent ensemble reminis-

cent of great urban residences. Éric Lapierre has responded to the disparate nature of the location with an ambiguous design, a sort of synthesis of the district's split personality. But his edifice, a prismatic volume with a pitched roof, is based on the familiar and iconic shape of an ordinary house. Thanks to its simple shape, the Centre d'Art does not seem intent on calling attention to itself in this unremarkable environment. Nor is it a unique architectural expression that stands out in its quest

for formal originality. On the contrary, its very banality and unfinished look give the impression that this building has always been here and it merges with its surrounding environment. From a distance, therefore, it may be seen either as a small, roadside warehouse or as a pavilion or folly in a park.

Its outer walls are either imperforate, or have very wide openings, depending on what is to be seen from the facades in question: a road in a commercial district, a landscaped park, car park, military fort, etc. Yet, despite this contextual sensitivity, the essence of its architecture lies in its anonymity, which provokes equal reactions of attraction and discomfort. This gives rise to that unsettling sense of alienation that manifests itself when a previously hidden or unregarded object is suddenly seen for what it is, sparking a host of memories and associations.

This Proustian experience is provoked here by the cladding, which turns out to be Paxalu, a type of waterproofing material consisting of a layer of asphalt and a sheet of embossed aluminium as external protection. But this unusual use of the material brings previously unknown qualities to light. Because it covers the entire building, it conceals all signs of roofing and walls, thus forming an almost perfect, compact prism. It gives the building a physical presence that is magnified by its strangeness and its surface flaws, as well as by the traces of manual construction.

Seen from a distance, the building is no longer a material but a texture. Magical because it is real, it transforms the building into an object that is ever changing, owing to the shifting skies and luminosity so characteristic of the landscape of Cherbourg. This great visual richness is complemented by a tactile

richness, by the strange feeling of a soft and matt texture that you want to touch with your fingertips.

But this magic box contains two very different areas; the plan is a square subdivided into a sequence of nested square spaces and cells. This creates a sense of progression in the dimensions of the rooms from the relatively small entrance to the large exhibition space on the ground floor. The two main exhibition rooms are the largest spaces in Point du Jour. They are neutral white spaces with no natural light, devoted to the display of works of art.

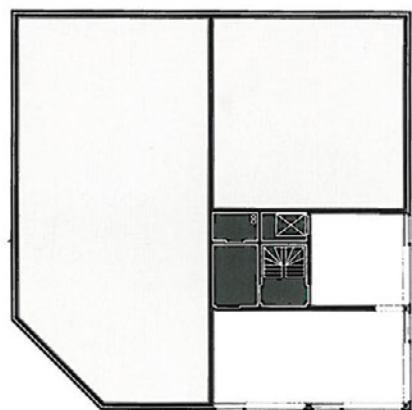
In contrast, the foyer, offices and library, which look outwards, are awash with light; the disproportionate number of windows in relation to the surface area of the rooms they serve entices people inside just to look out onto the park. Inside the building, the choice of materials is once again striking. The partitions and cladding of the walls in this space are made from rough plywood, the floor from bitumen, while the ceiling is poured concrete with the marks of the formwork still visible.

During a period when architectural works are valued as sculptural objects, quite separate from their context and purpose; at a time when architecture has become the preferred means of self-promotion for towns, this project by Éric Lapiere challenges us with its sophisticated ambiguity. Is it a prescient work, prefiguring the end of an era, suggesting that 'show architecture' is giving way to a new essentialism? Or is it simply a pragmatic architectural response inspired by Arte Povera, or even by Rudolf Stingel's installations on show at the Palazzo Grassi, where the room, covered with Celotex Tuff-R, invites visitors to inscribe their memories on the walls?

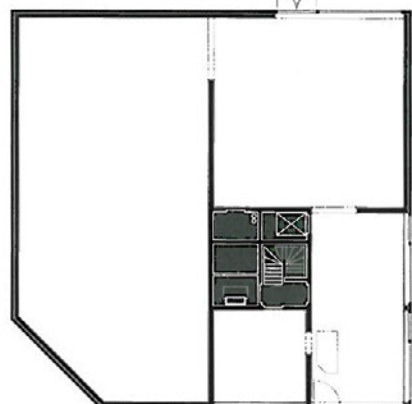
However it is interpreted, the Centre d'art will remain both containing and contained, the poor yet ambitious home for a collection. This new building is also a whole work, a sculpture that finds its natural home within a landscape. ←

LE POINT DU JOUR CENTRE D'ART, 2006-2008

Architect: Éric Lapiere Experience
 Client: City of Cherbourg-Octeville
 Address: 107, avenue de Paris, 50100 Cherbourg-Octeville



↓ Ground floor ↑ First floor



Villa, Comporta

On a sandy plot in Alentejo, in southern Portugal, Luis Pereira Miguel constructed a geography rather than architecture.

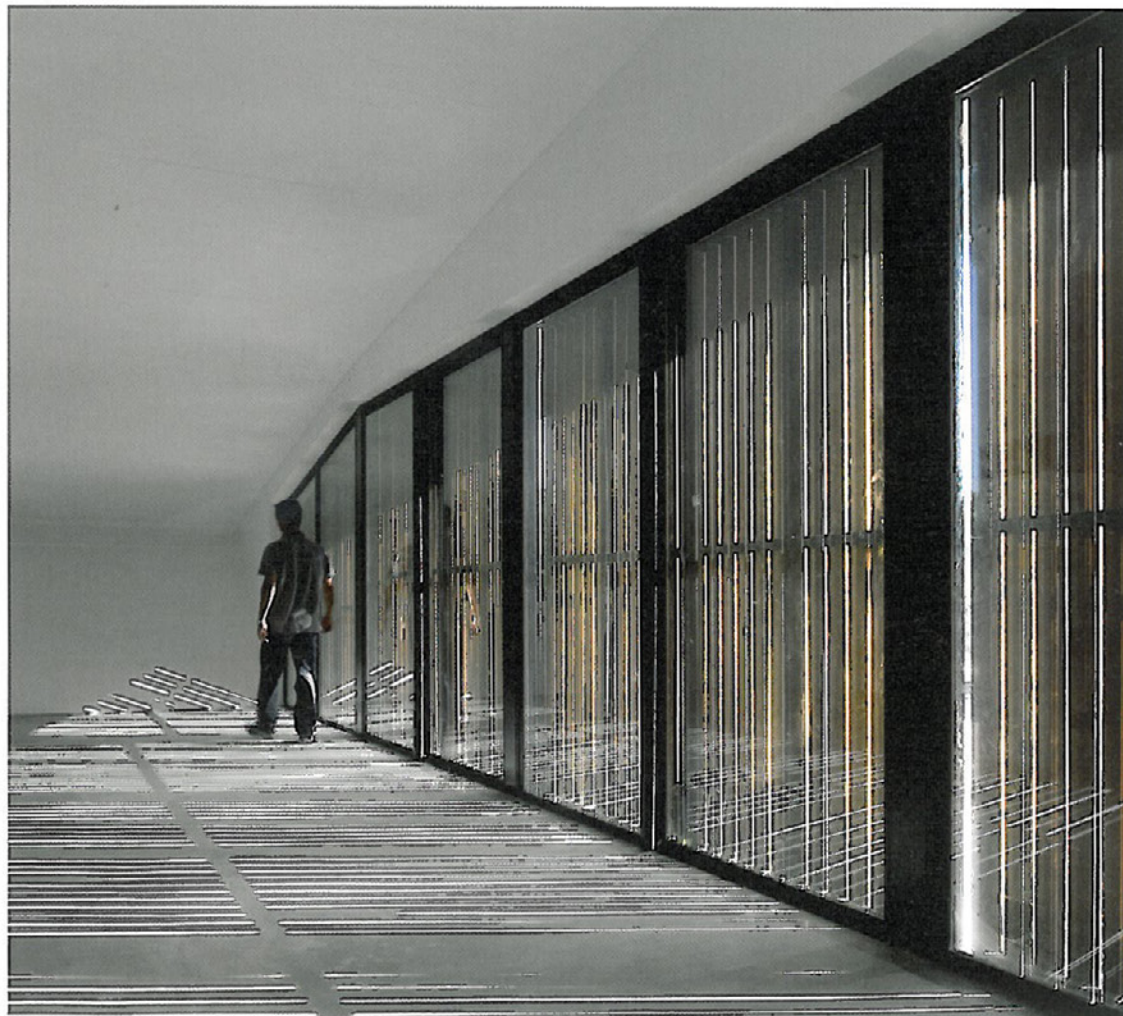
PORTUGAL – TEXT: CARLOS SANT'ANA, PHOTOGRAPHY: FERNANDO GUERRA

Designing a house could be a simple task, but more often than not it becomes a complex endeavour. This apparently basic and repetitive action – the archetypal programme – is practised over and over again in search of perfection, but the endless hours spent shaping a client's dream to local conditions usually result in a personalized and unique design. Architect Luis Pereira Miguel likes to pull out all the stops whenever he encounters a client willing to go along for the ride.

In this case, the chosen site was a sandy plot in Alentejo, facing the Atlantic Ocean. Its main characteristic is an almost endlessly undulating topography with a random scattering of vegetation. The dwelling-site is an artificial, man-made perimeter drawn by some bureaucrat who spends his time delineating low-density rustic plots in the middle of nowhere, creating abstract conditions and parameters for programmatic materialization and landscape manipulation that are not in the least site-related. →



→ North entrance ←



→ Living room ←