

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Jean Nouvel dreams in architecture's practical craft

His finest designs slip into otherworldly realms of desire and memory.

By Christopher Hawthorne, Times Architecture Critic

Jean Nouvel is an architect who gives irrationality a good name. The 62-year-old Parisian, who today will be named the 2008 winner of the Pritzker Prize, the field's top honor, has always been interested in pursuing designs that bring the practical craft of building and the dream world of the subconscious into alignment.

That alignment is rarely airtight. It doesn't always follow the dictates of logic or the bottom line. But it also creates remarkable and occasionally sublime architectural moments.



JEAN NOUVEL

Nouvel's finest work, unabashedly theatrical, makes the case that his profession's most important contribution to the larger culture is its ability to use the most unyielding and practical of materials and forces -- steel, glass, sheetrock, physics -- to elicit genuine emotion among visitors. In certain projects by Nouvel, the arrangement of those materials, paradoxically enough, seems to cause the physical world to recede, giving ground to desire and memory. He has often compared himself to a film director, and the experience of walking

into one of his buildings is not unlike entering a darkened movie theater.

When postmodern architects began to take command of the field in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they reintroduced historical ornament and decoration as a way to connect to the past. But Nouvel, despite his coming of age professionally in that era, is less interested in the past as a generic and salable idea than in our individual and collective pasts. For him, the past is an intimate place.

His buildings look back without leaning on the crutch of old-fashioned detailing or specific historical references; instead, they are executed with blunt geometries and bold colors. They are concerned with the role of memory in architecture without passing over into nostalgia.

Straddling that line in architecture is exceedingly difficult to do, and in recent decades perhaps only Frank Gehry and Aldo Rossi have done it better. In fact, it is a phrase Rossi wrote about his own work that may sum up Nouvel's architecture best. Describing a floating theater he designed for Venice in 1979, Rossi claimed he was seeking "a place where architecture ended and the world of the imagination or even the irrational began."

Nouvel has been on the same quest. A case in point is his Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, which opened two years ago on the banks of the Mississippi River. Covered mostly in midnight-blue panels, the building is ungainly. It looks terrible in photos, a major liability in an age of architectural icons and image-making.

But it has other, deeper and ultimately more meaningful qualities

going for it. Nouvel's bravura gesture at the Guthrie is to lift its three separate theaters -- holding 1,100, 700 and 250 seats -- roughly four stories off the ground. This gives the lobby and bar area just outside those theaters a remarkably broad view of the Mississippi.

More important, though, is the way Nouvel's design allows the Guthrie's audience to experience an architectural separation from the real world that mirrors the state of mind, alert and dream-like at the same time, produced by a powerful piece of theater. Ticket holders begin the short journey to reach their seats by traveling on a narrow and rather slow escalator.

The trip skyward gives them distance -- both in a literal sense, from the ground floor, and in an emotional one, from the scrum of daily life. It is a trip from the body into the mind. It ends inside a temporary refuge, a midair Arden.

But imagine the meetings with the board! Imagine telling the Guthrie leadership, full of smart but eminently practical Midwesterners, that your grand architectural plan for the new building involves constructing three auditoriums 50 feet off the ground -- meaning that the rigging and the sets and the costumes have to be lifted as well. In an era of value-engineering, an idea like that is enough to get an architect committed, to say nothing of swiftly replaced by a reliable corporate firm.

As Joe Dowling, the Guthrie's artistic director, has written, "The theaters themselves are equipped with state of the art technology and are a model of efficiency and traffic flow in

their backstage areas -- well, as efficient as any theaters positioned 50 feet in the air can be!"

Nouvel's knack for getting to the heart of certain truths about a client -- or, more often, about a site -- is also plainly evident in his first commission in Los Angeles: a 45-story, \$400-million luxury condo tower in Century City that may break ground as soon as next year. The building is tall, wide and thin, with a special hydroponic system allowing lush gardens on the exterior of each unit. A vast array of desert plants will cover the southern facade, where they'll get direct sunlight throughout much of the day, with less hardy Mediterranean plants facing north. The idea is to make each condo feel as though it is wrapped inside a dense private garden.

From the outside, if the final product matches the renderings, the result will be a slender glass tower disguised as a massive hanging garden. Nouvel has dubbed it "the green blade."

But the tower, in its combination of

hyper-density and overflowing greenery, also makes a powerful statement about the state of L.A. and its development. This city grew in suburban fashion in part because the climate made it desirable to spread out, to equip each private house, no matter how modest, with its own garden. A need for denser accommodations as the city grows more crowded threatens to ruin that dream: Who wants to live in a sealed high-rise in Los Angeles, where it's possible to spend nearly every week of the year outdoors?

In a certain sense, Nouvel's Century City design suggests there doesn't have to be a contradiction between those visions of life in L.A., that we can have our high-rise living without giving up our lush, sun-dappled surroundings. But the real skill of the design is that it is curious and even ambivalent, rather than aggressive, about these ideas.

The way it piles greenery upon greenery and then adds another layer of plants on top of that acknowledges that there is something exciting but also

ridiculous about the notion of lifting a garden -- like lifting a theater -- so high in the air.

The latest renderings of the project produced by the young computer-design wizards at his firm, Ateliers Jean Nouvel, resemble some odd science-fiction story where the plants are running amok, threatening to take over the tower altogether.

What Nouvel seems to be saying with the design is that it won't be enough simply to give tower dwellers little patios where they can plant a solitary fern. To really work -- to really get people who could easily afford a vast private estate to move into a high-rise -- the gardens-in-the-air will have to be even lusher, more elaborate and fantastical than any green space the residents have ever had the pleasure of walking through.

The romanticism of that idea, the ambition of it, its faint absurdity -- all those qualities are classic Nouvel.