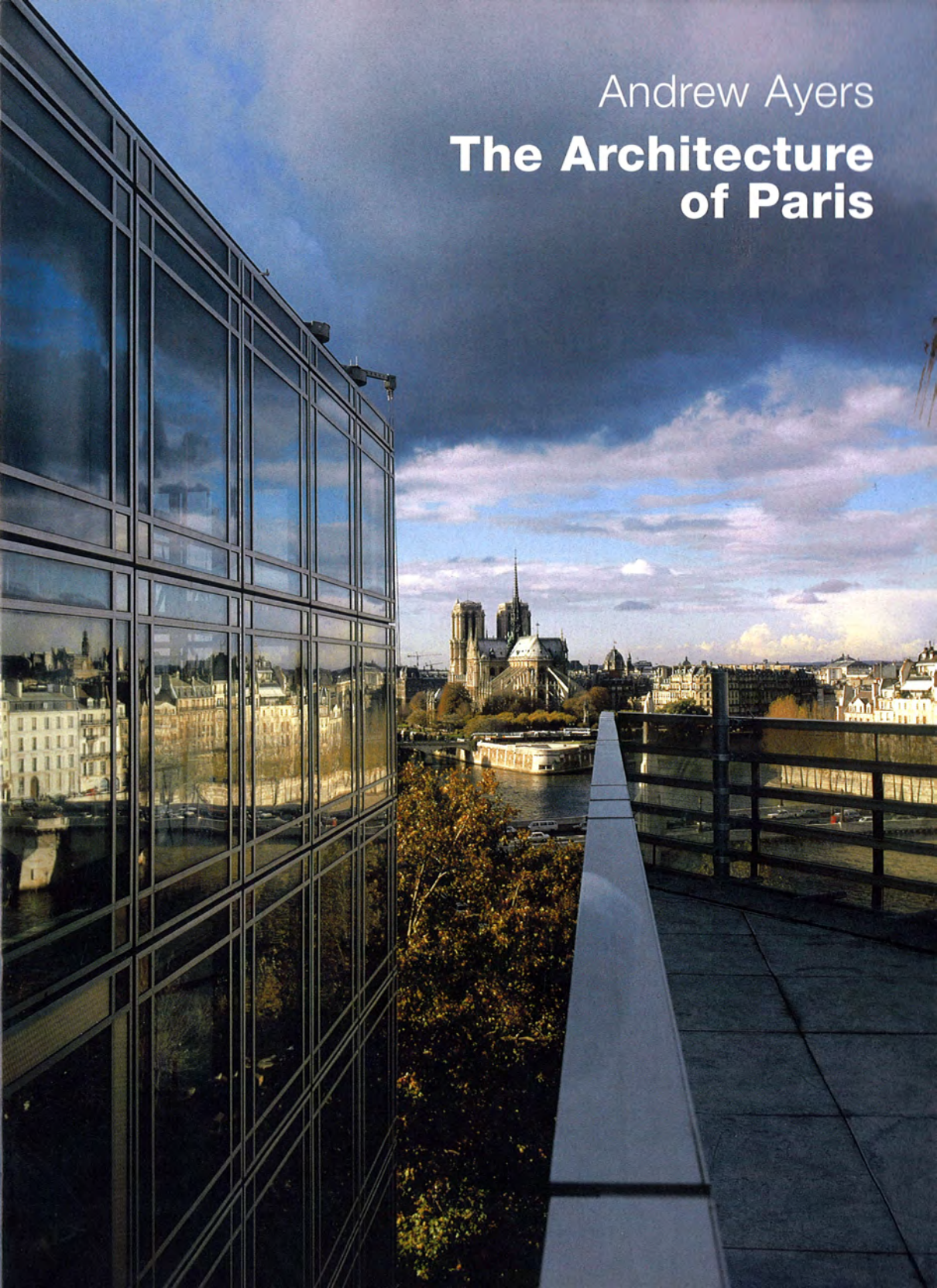


Andrew Ayers

The Architecture of Paris



artist's studios either side of a central garage. It was also Jeanneret who introduced the Maison-Citrohan-style external staircase at the rear of the building to facilitate access and maximize flexibility in the event of later subdivision of the house. (Although its exterior remains virtually unchanged since Planeix's day, the house's interior has now been divided into flats.) Planeix's living accommodation was originally on the first floor, while the second and final floor was given over to his painting atelier, which was lit by glazed saw-tooth roofs à la Maison-atelier Ozenfant (14.7). Around the latter, a token *toit-terrasse* was disposed. The plan was of course free, emphasized by beams and supports that stopped just short of the equally free façades. Décor-wise, the house was fitted out with full Purist austerity.

For the street frontage, Corb did not seek to fight the planar façadism implied by the house's party-wall context, but treated the elevation as a canvas on which he could freely dispose openings and projections, thereby demonstrating its non-load-bearing nature. Classically symmetrical, the façade features a central suspended cube that divides it into three, breaking the run of the first-floor strip windows (another of the «five points») and providing a symbolically «royal» balcony for the atelier above. The street elevation only really «works» when seen face on from a distance, which is unfortunately difficult today with the heavy traffic and obscuring trees of the Boulevard Masséna.

13.8 Médiathèque Jean-Pierre Melville

93, rue de Tolbiac

Canal: Daniel and Patrick Rubin, 1984–89

(Métro: Tolbiac, Porte d'Ivry)

With 3,500 m² of floor space and a collection of over 100,000 books, CDs and videos, this is Paris's largest municipal library. Its prominent corner plot is situated in a heavily redeveloped residential area which presents a rather chaotic range of building styles and heights. When briefing the architects, the Ville de Paris stipulated only that the library should fully express its «civic importance».

13.8 Médiathèque Jean-Pierre Melville



In terms of size, the Canal team reverted to tradition, producing a four-storey building of Haussmannian proportions. Their two fundamental design elements were flexibility of use and abundant natural light. By using a frame system which allowed extremely wide spans and placing services at the periphery, the architects achieved entirely unencumbered floor spaces of 400 m² on each level. As well as permitting organizational freedom (the furnishings, also by Canal, are deliberately unfixed), this also maximizes daylight penetration into the building. As luck would have it, the library's principal façade faces north – books do not fare well in sunlight, so southern exposure would have posed problems – allowing a splendid, all-glass exterior. The short, southern façade, hidden away in a back street between two party walls, is given over to the librarians' offices, thus insulating the building's interior from treacherous solar rays.

The principal façade, constructed from a fine aluminium lattice, is gently bowed, and terminates at its eastern extremity in a tight curve which, as well as elegantly turning the street corner and signalling the building's entrance, encloses a free-standing spiral staircase. The all-glass frontage serves a double purpose: it floods the library with daylight, but also allows the activities within to be observed from without, a deliberate move by the architects to break with the intimidating aspect of many traditional libraries and entice passers-by into their building. Located next to the façade, where there is most light, the reading areas feature floors which have been whittled away to almost nothing through bevelled ceiling profiles and 50 cm floor-level step-downs. The result, viewed from the exterior, is magnificent: the readers appear as if suspended in mid-air within an enveloping glass bubble. The eastern elevation is treated in a similar fashion, but also features a giant aluminium frame, set away from the façade, which is used to display enormous photographs, printed on semi-transparent canvas and stretched across the void. This «urban window» satisfies the law stipulating that all new public buildings must devote 1% of their budget to art works.

Through its shiny glass exterior, the Médiathèque Jean-Pierre Melville both announces its civic presence and demonstrates its function. For once the architectural cliché that transparency equals openness and user-friendliness seems justified; expected to attract 20,000 readers in the first two years, the library welcomed over 15,000 in its first six months.

13.9 Social housing

106, rue du Château-des-Rentiers

Architecture Studio, 1985–87

(Métro: Tolbiac, Nationale)

Architecture Studio have compiled a list of around 1,000 «leftover» sites in Paris – tiny plots of land, often at junctions, that are generally the unwanted result of redevelopment schemes and are considered too small and awkward to build on – and proposed their exploita-