

Along the river Orne in Caen, about six hundred feet east of a new OMA-designed library, stands the New Generation Research Center (NGRC) by the Parisian architecture office Bruther. Part of an effort by a local non-profit to promote science, retain young talent, and diversify the region's economy, a competition for the 27,000 square-foot tech incubator-slash-fab lab-slash-event space was held in 2015. Bruther, then only eight years into its formation, won the contest with a compact tower of glass, concrete, plastic, and steel.

Central to the NGRC, compositionally and programmatically, is a floating, near-cubic volume containing a stack of three production halls. In response to the indeterminate needs of tech research, every surface of the hall – a column-free floor, double height walls, and modular façade of interchangeable panels – anticipates change. Fixed auxiliary programs like circulation, services, and storage – each one an independent appendage – surround the central volume to provide both functional and structural support. In plan, they augment the main research program without compromising its flexibility: a building operator's ideal organigram made literal.

On the surface the NGRC follows a distinctly European tradition developed over the last four decades. A kind of miniature ZKM (OMA, 1989) atop HSBC HQ's open ground (Foster, 1985), all rendered in the articulated rawness of Centre Pompidou (Piano/Rogers, 1977) – industrial means in service of post-industrial enterprises. Squint and you might mistake it for a building by Koolhaas. Yet for all the similarities there is a stark difference.

Beyond architecture, the '80s and '90s saw the reinvention of the architect as a media-savvy narrator of grand progress. Bearing bar graphs, polemics, and out-sized personalities, architects imbued their creations with promises of deliverance – by technological advancement, by social mixing, by aesthetic renewal... Multiplied by the internet and collective attention deficit, today a building's realities live completely outside of its narrative. (What is PR if not the severance of the actual from the perceived?)



Front: The legible glass facade of the NGRC, Maxime Delvaux. Back: An exterior view of the central volume and its surrounding appendages, Maxime Delvaux; Floor plan, Bruther.

Each erosion in the public's faith – by delays, cost overruns, subpar construction – is countered with even more ludicrous claims of salvation, such that in the year 2019, a 200 million-dollar structure made of single-aisle staircases to nowhere, funded by the developers of an ultra-luxury New York City shopping mall, can be described by its designer, without irony or perceptible self-loathing, as a project that “brings people together”¹



In contrast, Bruther's buildings make no bold claims. With no Instagram account, no mammoth research publication, and barely a website, the office has completed seven buildings since their founding eleven years ago, mostly for public institutions, and through competitions. A liberating contrast to the bloated existence of celebrity architects today: public figures that live and die by private money – sustained by a dedicated team of media experts, a thousand ghost-written soundbites, cultivated press contacts, self-nominated awards, fabricated “behind-the-scenes”, gilded fashion collaborations, doubly compromised art-architecture joint ventures...

In so far as the NGRC embodies a manifesto, it is stoic and earnest: “each material is chosen precisely for its technical and plastic capacities: metal to span, glass to open.”² A kind of lower-case realism – not the willful creation of the designer, but a thoughtful articulation of the conditions and constraints at hand. Under pressures both conceptual and economic, Bruther's buildings tend to be bare-bone structures. Off-the-shelf components expose connections, structural elements double as finishes, mechanical systems as ornaments.

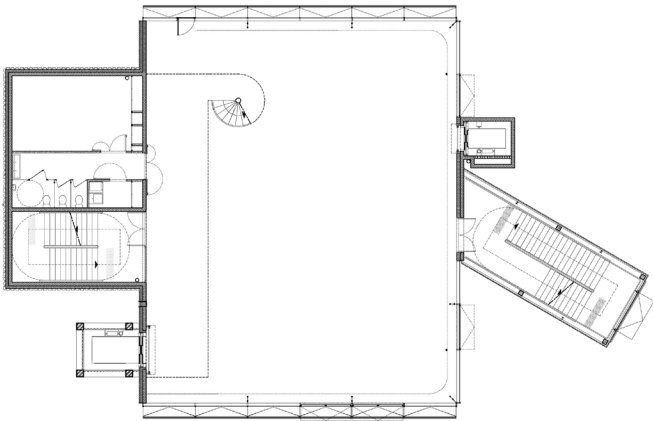
Raw but well-considered, there is a beauty in such austerity, a legibility of parts that a bigger budget would only ruin. Where Renzo Piano's Whitney Museum – a self-proclaimed “big factory raised above ground” – cost \$2200 a square-foot and took five years to build,³ Bruther's NGRC was completed for \$180 a square-foot in nine months.

Aesthetic preferences aside, what is less debatable is that in our age of austerity measures and privatization, cheapness unlocks civic possibilities far beyond architecture. The difference between \$180 and \$2200 a square-foot is the difference between an institution with fiscal resilience and one crippled by debt. \$180 a square-foot grants the possibility of public space with no strings (or malls) attached; it is public culture without the simultaneous amplification of so-and-so billionaire's (or, in the case of the Whitney, an arms dealer's) personal legacy, or the humiliating pandering required to elicit their support...

Perhaps most importantly, \$180 a square-foot affords the latitude to reimagine what it means to be an architect. Like the wild sighting of a species once thought to be extinct, Bruther's austerity brings hope of a modus operandi considered impossible in current conditions. Architects not as proponents of excess, but of a quiet liberty.

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**NEW GENERATION
RESEARCH CENTER
BRUTHER
3 ESPLANADE STÉPHANE HESSEL
CAEN, FRANCE**



1. Crook, Lizzie. “Thomas Heatherwick Designed the Vessel to ‘Bring People Together,’” *Dezeen*, Mar. 22, 2019 ; 2. Bruther, *El Croquis*, vol. 197, 2018, pp. 108 ; 3. Alberts, Hana, “Whitney Ups Admission To \$22 To Cover \$422M New Building,” *Curbed*, Apr. 2 2015 ; 4. Ayers, Andrew, “Vertical hangar: Bruther’s fab lab in Caen”, *Architectural Review*, Jun. 26 2016

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