

Paris's La Defense Cluster: Coup of Drawing-Board Style

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

It is 10 minutes from the heart of Paris to La Defense and a few thousand light years from the French tradition of restrained, homogeneous architectural elegance to a world of tomorrow that no architect ever envisioned. This Manhattanized section of Paris, which reared its first towers on the periphery of the city in the 1960's, continues to grow extravagantly in the 70's.

Although there are other high-rise clusters in other outlying areas, a visit to La Defense reveals more than the famous disruption of a sacred skyline; this is a concentration of skyscrapers that dwarfs comparable new construction in American cities. Think of Pittsburgh's entire downtown, the rebuilt Golden Triangle, for comparable size. The difference here is that what would be the central business district anywhere else is pushed beyond the city's historic heart.

The bank towers and corporate headquarters and luxury apartments deliberately seek new images; they range from the banal to the bizarre. And except for those who live and work in these structures—the expensive apartments are filling surprisingly quickly, but sleek offices are renting more slowly, in a reversal of expectations—La Defense is almost universally considered an esthetic outrage.

But what La Defense really represents is a coup de style: This is the outrageous and provocative creation in Paris of a new style of urban environment that has only been suggested, or threatened, elsewhere. La Defense is the Houston of Paris.

Anyone who loves Houston can love La Defense. But this materials manufacturers' showcase and architects' Day-glo dream has come about, not through unplanned growth, as in Houston; its look and form are the result of the intervention of planners, and it is that planning framework that lifts it from the ordinary to the unreal. The new towers are raised on platforms and connected by ramps and walkways, with landscaping of artificial hillocks and artful piles of stones, all of which seem to have come straight from the modelmaker's shop. The Parisian street life of cafes and people—watching, the profound pleasures of observation and social intercourse, only a few

miles away, could as well be on another planet.

But most remarkable of all is the style of La Defense. In Paris, style is everything. Every street, every structure, every shopgirl, has style. The style of Parisian architecture has been proved and refined by at least three centuries of academic dictates and highly developed taste. There are few violations of this taste, and there is exemplary architectural consistency. Paris has defined the esthetics of a sophisticated urban culture.

La Defense is drawing-board architecture. It is the kind of thing designers fool around with on paper. There are knockoffs and caricatures of everything going: a mirror-glass tower of fashionable geometry stands next to some acrobatic concrete doing deep-knee bends alongside both articulated frames and severely flat slabs.

The result is a stage set by someone designing a city with no references except building manufacturers' catalogues.

Surprisingly, when it gets worse, it gets better, or at least more interesting. The latest housing under construction now, at the far edge of the area, has gone wild: it leaves these formulas behind to move into another kind of art or outrage. These particular buildings evoke Magritte or Frank Stella in their poetic surrealism and colorful hard-edged abstraction.

One group of apartment ziggurats defines its stepped pyramiding shapes with bold red, blue, green and orange stripes. Another group, by Emile Aillaud, an architect in his 70's who has always marched to a different architectural drummer, is a series of round, free-form or petal-shaped towers with random round or eye-shaped windows. The walls are "camouflaged" with stylized cloud patterns in white, sky blue and violet. These are surprisingly beautiful buildings, although their livability for the low-income families for whom they have been planned is being severely questioned.

It is hard to say whether this is un-French or super-French architecture. It is difficult to equate this work with a city always known for the rigor and propriety of its esthetic standards. Paris is still reconciling the Centre Pompidou, or Beaubourg, with the Louvre. But from the Place Vendome to La Defense, it is cultural shock all the way.

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New apartments by Emile Villaud on the outskirts of La Defense, Paris
What La Defense is is a coup de style