

Log

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Observations on architecture and the contemporary city

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Ouvroir

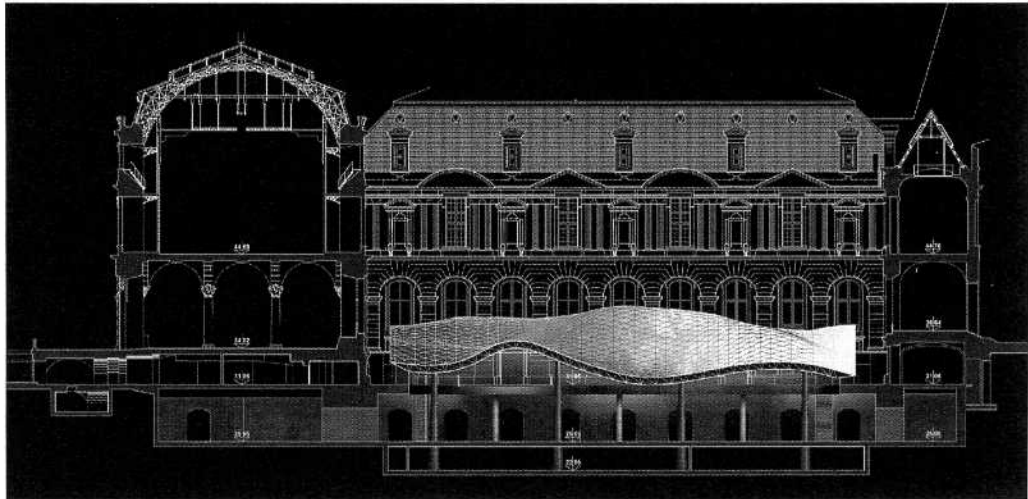
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The Empire's New Veil

In 2003, then French President Jacques Chirac announced the founding of a new Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre Museum with plans to build a wing housing its collections. The French-Italian design team of Rudy Ricciotti and Mario Bellini, winners of an international competition launched in 2004, intend to crown the addition with an undulating canopy that billows across the museum's southern Cour Visconti and hovers over the new galleries burrowing underground into the museum's basement. The solution promises to be particularly dramatic at night when artificial light flows into the enclosed courtyard from the museum's interior, dissolving the transparent glass walls upon which the canopy rests. With its sinuous "cloth" lithely rising up and floating within the courtyard, the addition will undeniably forge a spectacular image in the challenging quest to represent Islamic culture in France.

Yet this marriage of Islamic art and audacious architectural theatrics complicates the history of France's largest and most prestigious museum. For centuries, the Louvre has remained an enduring symbol of French national identity, formalizing the shifting cultural expressions of changing royal, imperial, and republican governments. When the revolutionary government converted the palace into a museum in 1793, it transformed the building into a state-sponsored vehicle for the dissemination of French culture, a role the building has played ever since. But the proposed Islamic art addition, slated for completion in 2010, will institutionalize a cultural force conceived outside of the powerful universalist claims on French national identity made so vehemently at the museum since its inception. The new addition will inscribe the Louvre within Chirac's legacy of cultural projects that sought to refashion the tradition of the *grands projets*, as developed by Georges Pompidou and François Mitterrand, by placing greater stake in cultural diversity. But recognizing diversity is not necessarily synonymous with promoting equality, and Chirac's attempts to construct architectural representations of cultural inclusivity have been fraught with difficulty – for example, witness the chilly reception of the Musée du Quai Branly. Likewise, many provocations will

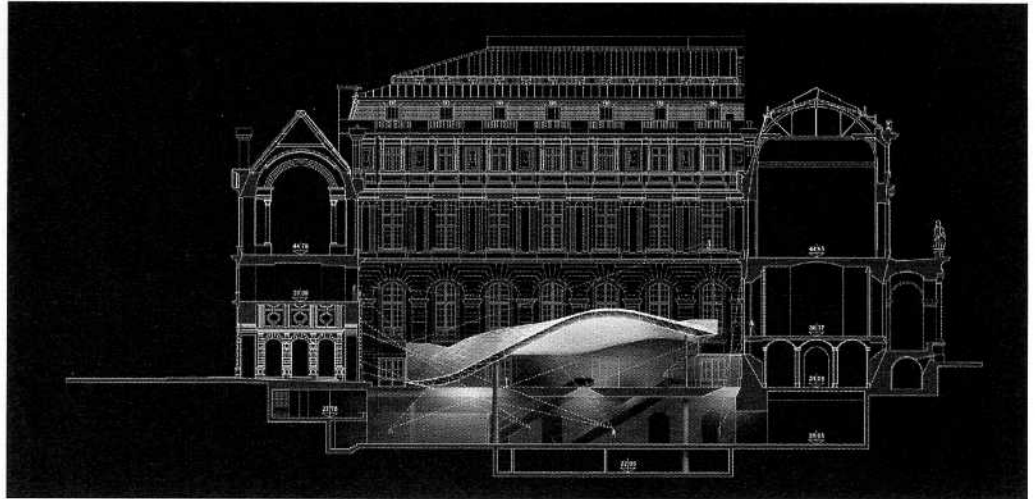


ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: RUDY RICCIOTTI AND MARIO BELLINI, DEPARTMENT OF ISLAMIC ART AT THE LOUVRE, PARIS. SECTION/ELEVATIONS. DRAWINGS © AGENCE RUDY RICCIOTTI.

arise as the arts of Islam become drawn into the sphere of national patrimony; for alongside Chirac's nominally progressive cultural projects emerged increasingly stringent policies circumscribing the lives of France's Muslim population. More aggressive immigration laws and the suppression of *hijab* in public schools, among other policies, have further exasperated France's historically turbulent relationship with its largest minority population. As the Louvre's new extension moves toward realization, it also emerges within a web of associations assembled by the disparate fronts staking claim on Islamic identity in present-day France.

Ricciotti and Bellini's proposed design immediately calls to mind the last major intervention at the Louvre by I.M. Pei. Like Pei's Grande Pyramide of 1989, the new extension is implanted below grade and marked by a strong visual symbol above. Although they share these formal attributes, the two additions differ considerably. While rendered in the telegraphic language of late modernism, Pei's pyramid also adopted the historicizing gestures of postmodernism and furnished a clear and concise image loaded with historical allusions. Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign of 1798 codified the pyramid's protracted relationship with French imperialism.¹ With its implicit associations of cultural hegemony reinforced by forced labor (the very idea of empire), the monumental funerary form was adopted in France, as it had been in Imperial Rome, as a symbol of the country's muscular attempts to gain control over a region with hopes of reaping unparalleled economic prosperity. A forceful image of empire's diffuse power, the pyramid resonated as much with Pei at the end of the 20th century as it had with Enlightenment architects such as Étienne-Louis Boullée.

1. France had long claimed a "stake" in Egypt, a "cradle of civilization," to justify its imperial aspirations in the region, which extended back to at least the middle of the 17th century. France attempted to establish new trade routes through the Mediterranean toward the East, culminating in the creation of the Suez Canal in the 19th century. On 17th-century plans for the Suez Canal, see Tom F. Peters, *Building the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 178–9. On French attitudes about Egypt before Napoleon's campaign, see Sylvia Lavin, *Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 18–61.



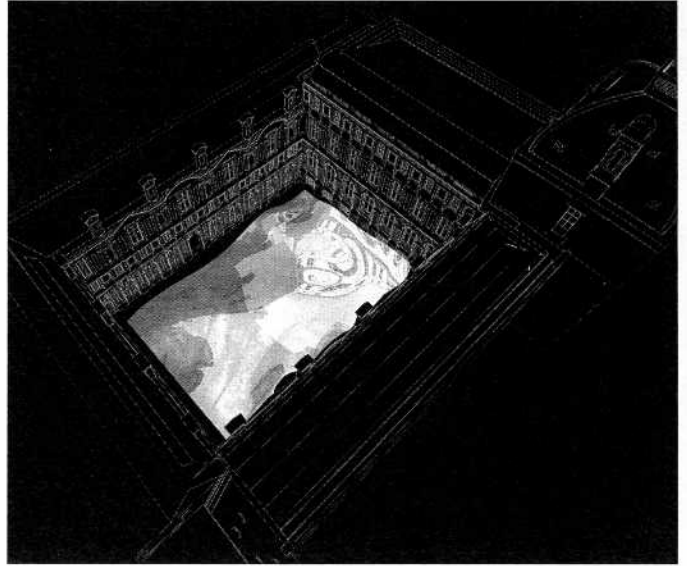
2. On the use of glass construction in the *grands projets* and its various interpretations, see Annette Fierro, *The Glass State: The Technology of the Spectacle, Paris, 1981–1998* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 37–8.

3. Foucault underscored transparency as an important formal component of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon – the model carceral system ensuring “power through transparency” by way of the prison guard, whose all-seeing gaze promised to transform prisoners into “docile bodies.” Michel Foucault, “The Eye of Power: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot,” in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 161.

Pei's use of the pyramid was particularly effective because it also fed into an obsession with rational geometries that, since Claude Perrault's 17th-century eastern colonnade (with its carefully calibrated distribution of paired columns), have fostered an enduring architectural grammar for the ideologically loaded precepts of state patronage at the museum. With its rationalist transparent glass construction, the Grande Pyramide suggested official ideologies of accessibility, universality, and centrism.² But the political ideology of transparency, so present in much of the architecture commissioned during the period of Mitterrand's *grands projets*, oscillated between the state's polemical benevolence and fraught notions about visual control and scopic regimes. In the 1970s Michel Foucault had argued that transparency served as an important instrument in the history of formalized power by providing a disciplinary apparatus through which the state exercised authority with its attendant all-encompassing gaze.³

From Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron's proposed *Projet Triangle*, a crystalline ziggurat skyscraper planned for the Porte de Versailles, to Frank Gehry's anticipated glass-clad Louis Vuitton Foundation for Creation in the Bois de Boulogne, Paris's dictatorship of transparency remains interminable. The intentions underlying the use of transparent glass construction in the Islamic wing at the Louvre are thus clear: the state is, yet again, seeking to inscribe its authority and register control. Yet the undulating canopy atop the planned extension scarcely fits within the customary schema of the Louvre's earlier rationalist architectural vocabulary. Oleg Grabar, in praising Pei's pyramid, also cautioned that “the impact of the Louvre as a monument would have been destroyed by almost anything that was not a geometric

RUDY RICCIOTTI AND MARIO
BELLINI, DEPARTMENT OF ISLAMIC
ART AT THE LOUVRE, PARIS.
AXONOMETRIC DRAWING © AGENCE
RUDY RICCIOTTI.



4. Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 153.

5. Rudy Ricciotti, "Rudy Ricciotti: Louvre Museum, Paris, France 2005," trans. Ronny Corlette Theuil, *A + U* 4, no. 427 (April 2006): 107.

shape."⁴ What is to be made, then, of the new addition's amorphous canopy, which seems to repudiate the Louvre's overriding and ideologically charged rational language?

While Pei's addition rehearsed a well-known and historical narrative sign, the sensuous rippling canopy of the Islamic wing appears more anchored in atemporal computer modeling than by the weight of history. Lodged within the four walls of the Cour Visconti, and therefore concealed from panoramic views of the Louvre, the roof will be viewed primarily at close proximity, making the larger structure difficult to discern. Invoking the language of formless design, the architects have described the canopy as an "iridescent cloud." Given the crisis in architectural meaning wrought by digital technologies and the concomitant abstracting impulses of "blobitecture," the canopy's simulation of motion and force might seem to diffuse any solid semiotic reference. But Ricciotti, moving from the ephemeral to the concrete in his description of the canopy, notes the way in which an "interplay of folds, curves and surface texture makes the cover a patterned silk drape that catches shining reflections."⁵ A two-ply skin assembled from translucent exterior glass panels set on a steely decorative ground of stitched metal triangles, this "drape" serves a fundamental purpose, diffusing natural light to protect many of the delicate objects on display in the galleries below. But as Ricciotti makes clear in his description, the canopy is also tightly secured within the discourses and ornamental contrivances of Orientalist luxury. Indeed, the "drape" seems to drift in the courtyard like a magic carpet from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Or in the architects'

6. Mario Bellini and Rudy Ricciotti, "Défis techniques," in "Dossier de presse Nouvelles salles des Arts de l'Islam" (July 2008), 13; http://www.louvre.fr/media/repository/ressources/sources/pdf/src_document_54058_v2_m56577569831213046.pdf

7. Certainly the Church frequently influences the public education system in France. Consider Emmanuel Terray's example of the case of Alsace-Moselle whose schools have been permitted to integrate religious education into their curriculum since the territories were returned to France from Germany in 1918. See Emmanuel Terray, "Headscarf Hysteria," *New Left Review* 26 (March–April 2004): 125. Moreover, in the 1990s, while Christian and Jewish children received religious instruction in the region, Muslim students were sent to driver education classes. See Joel S. Fetzer and J. Christopher Soper, *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 142.

8. Terray, "Headscarf Hysteria," 122.

9. Naima Bouteldja, "'Integration,' Discrimination and the Left in France: A Roundtable Discussion," *Race & Class* 49, no. 3 (2008): 79. The state's limited definition of veiling, moreover, has been challenged by the large body of literature penned by Muslim women in the wake of the "headscarf debates," which illustrates that *hijab* carries a remarkably varied number of meanings that are not necessarily repressive.

more precise terminology, it seems to swathe the museum like a "veil."⁶ Is this "veil" simply one of the many skins with which architects wrap their buildings today? Or, taken in the broader context of contemporary French society, and especially in light of the official suppression of *hijab* (or veiling), does not this image of the veil prompt larger questions regarding the treatment of the country's Muslim population apropos of the universalizing ideology that underwrites attempts at national assimilation of that very population?

Among the latest and most acute repercussions of France's grueling history of decolonization in North Africa, "headscarf hysteria" has created public outcry ever since 1989 when the government began expelling dozens of Muslim schoolgirls who chose to wear veils in the classroom. Both the prolonged debates surrounding these expulsions and the official banning of *hijab* in public schools centered on the law of *laïcité*, the official separation of church and state. While *laïcité* was created to attend to the specific issues raised by Catholicism, *hijab* and the wider practice of the Islamic faith in France have not been so easily reconciled with its conventions.⁷ For example, the official report culminating in the 2004 law stipulating *hijab*'s suppression in public classrooms upheld its findings with the justification of *laïcité* while also engaging profoundly racist tactics. The so-called "Stasi Report" (2003), supervised by Bernard Stasi, then Mediator of the Republic, used incendiary and racialized rhetoric, claiming that the veil demonstrated the "extremist politico-religious tendencies" of "organized groups testing the resistance of the Republic."⁸ Such inflammatory language does not render the veil as a mere religious sign or emblem, but as a hostile mark of resistance. It would be a mistake to assume that the report's findings restrict this reading of *hijab* to its manifestation in the classroom, especially in light of the many Muslim women who have been denied citizenship for wearing *hijab* to their immigration interviews.⁹ By rendering the veil either as a symbol of religious extremism or as a denigrated image of ethnic difference, the French government collapsed *hijab* into nationalist rhetoric as an internal threat, even though the form itself is not a national one.

At the Louvre, we would be remiss to ignore the broader political implications of the veil. By designing a veil-like canopy, the architects have recast the very form that has been dislodged from, and even suppressed within, Islamic culture in France. Surreptitiously or overtly, the canopy seeks to mediate Islamic identity at the level of official state

