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Outer space Annecy

By adding satellites to its distinctive 1960s spaceship design, Nouvelles Galeries has reestablished connections with its host city.

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For the better part of 50 years, people passing through Annecy in southeast France would be forgiven for thinking the small Alpine city doubles as the set for a long-running science-fiction TV show. This is largely due to the spaceship-like building on the edge of the city centre. Called Nouvelles Galeries, it's the conurbation's defining piece of architecture – and it looks like a grounded UFO. Built to the design of French architect Antoine Dory in 1969, it has a box-like department store at its centre, wrapped in a circular car park.

Its striking modernist form, in stark contrast with Annecy's more traditional Alpine vernacular, has become a source of pride for residents, with local lobbying helped secure its heritage status. Despite this, Dory's structure has long failed to adequately serve the increasingly pedestrian-friendly city centre, with easy access on foot only possible via the car park. It's a fact that Citynove, the real-estate development branch of Groupe Galeries Lafayette (of Parisian department store fame), knew it had to address when it purchased the property and took over the main retail tenancy.

"People don't just want to buy something nowadays; they want to connect with other people," says Romain Labbé, deputy director-general of Citynove. "Tenants want spaces where they can build relationships with customers and not just transact goods." The original building, Labbé says, didn't allow for this. It prompted Citynove to employ celebrated French architect Manuelle Gautrand in 2013 to address the site's deficiencies, beginning a 10-year renovation process that is finishing this summer. "The original building was a shoebox enveloped by the car park without any alignment to the street," says Gautrand. "It's not how we conceive architecture today but it's loved by the people of Annecy so we had to transform it in a way that respected its roots."

Gautrand's approach was simple: "Demolish nothing." Using the void beneath the existing indoor parking rings, she installed a curving indoor promenade lined with 40 new shops. "Putting a mall precisely beneath the parking meant that we didn't have to change



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1. Sculptural installation over the main entrance by David Thulstrup
2. Colour-coded signage outside Galeries Lafayette department store
3. View of the Alps
4. Central atrium of Galeries Lafayette

Retailers on why Nouvelles Galeries is worth the visit:

Vincent Favre-Félix
Owner and chef, Maison Favre-Félix
"Even if it's like a mall, Nouvelles Galeries doesn't feel like a mall. We set up here because of the quality of the new building's architecture. The place is quality, so our food needs to meet this standard."

Helena Celestini
Manager, Atome
"As a climbing gym, the benefit of being in the mix of shops at Nouvelles Galeries is that it attracts people who are not climbers. People come here to shop and then go climbing. Many of our customers are from Annecy, especially those who live downtown because it's so close to walk and bike."

Anne-Cécile Descaillot
Co-founder, Gapienne
"Nouvelles Galeries was quite innovative for France. When we were looking for our brand's first physical space, we thought that it was a great place to start because we really wanted to be integrated in an ecosystem with a strong sense of lifestyle around us."



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1. Grimpeurs Cyclist House
2. Gapienne's first retail outlet
3. Antoine Dory's original parking access ramp
4. Bespoke lighting by Thulstrup
5. Helena Celestini, manager of Atome
6. Citynove's deputy director-general, Romain Labbé
7. Architect Thulstrup
8. Original concrete architecture blends with glassy new shopfronts



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the shape of the building and could keep all the columns, which is the first goal in terms of sustainability.”

Gautrand added six circular “satellites” to the site. Intersecting with the ringed parking and varying in diameter, these additions seamlessly blend with – and arc out from – the existing structure, extending the edges of the building to meet the footpath and the city beyond. Finished in glass, these satellites invite passersby to linger. “It’s a way of encouraging people to visit,” says Gautrand of the transparent frontages. “It helps to attract visitors by showcasing the life going on inside.”

To increase the building’s appeal, Citynove commissioned Danish architect David Thulstrup to revamp the interiors. He created everything from bespoke lighting to coloured wayfinding that nods to your direction of entry: yellow signs on the west side match the colour of the city’s old lanterns; blue ones are seen by those entering from the lakefront; and an earthy pink is reserved for the side facing the Alps. The colour coding helps visitors to find their way around more intuitively (aided by matching installations from Dutch designer Sabine Marcelis), while the same thematic principles are also applied to Gautrand’s internal promenade. “The floor has nine different types of stone,” says Thulstrup. “They graduate from grey on the western side to being sand-coloured in the south, like the lake shores, to darker browns on the east towards the mountains. It’s about giving definition to the promenade.”

Thulstrup further enhanced this concept with the shopfronts. Owners could choose from a menu of 20 frontages to suit their business, from a kiosk-style counter to a built-in-bench for passersby to sit on. “It means that each tenant can be slightly different, lending itself to more specialised shops and customer curiosity, creating intimacy and accentuating divisions along the promenade,” he says.

The move speaks to Citynove’s efforts to welcome a mix of tenants and ensure that Nouvelles Galeries is more than just a retail destination: there’s a climbing gym, a pharmacy, street-food offerings, fine dining, a repair shop, a cycling store and public seating along the promenade (again, by Marcelis). “Everyone wants to shop online now, which is understandable because the classic mall is super-efficient and that’s boring,” says Labbé. “We have created little opportunities for people to sit in front of a shopfront or stop and drink coffee with friends. We want to bring quality design back to retail and make it a very natural part of everyday life.”

Perhaps it’s appropriate that a building that looks like a spaceship might point to the future of retail. — M



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