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# “His great work, his baptismal font was the Tower block\*”

## Jean de Mailly (1911-1975), an architect of high-rise buildings

Léo Noyer-Duplaix

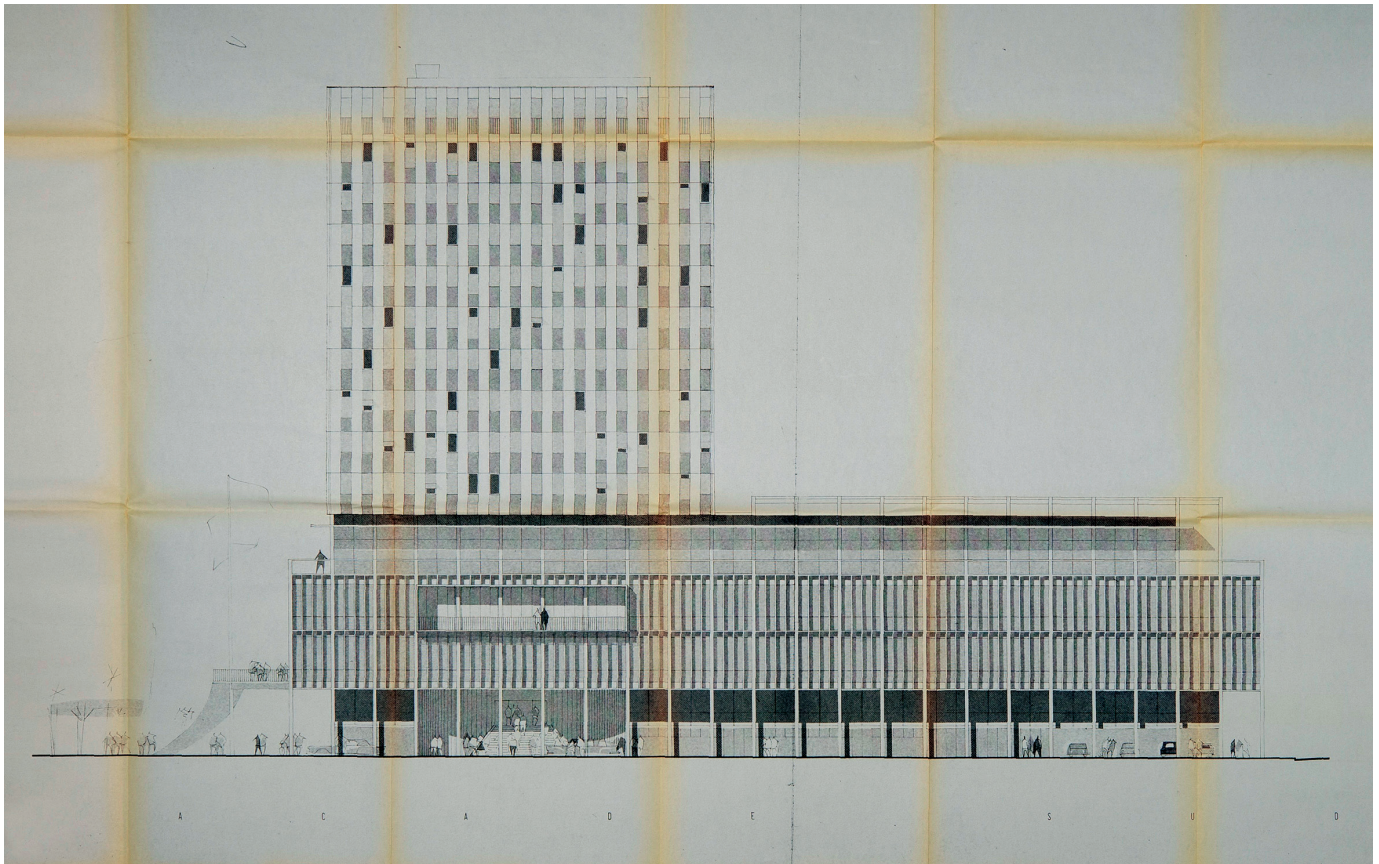
The work of Jean de Mailly was marked by his interest in high-rise buildings. Visiting the United States on numerous occasions, the architect took the opportunity to study the urban planning and architecture there – and skyscrapers in particular – and combining Fine Arts culture and International Style, developed principles of ordered urban planning. Applying his doctrine to La Défense – which he imagined as a “Cartesian Manhattan” – and to the adjoining Front de Seine district of Puteaux, he designed the Nobel Tower block, the first building in the business district and the first French adaptation of what the Americans classify as office skyscrapers. Before his death in 1975, he built two other tower blocks in the district: Générale (now Ariane) and Blanche. The reception of his vertical projects was paradoxical. Although they brought him some celebrity during his lifetime, they were and remain forgotten by a whole swathe of historiographers and critics, since research on Jean de Mailly is still largely incomplete.

Jean de Mailly (1911-1975) was an important architect and urban planner in the France of the Thirty Glorious Years.<sup>1</sup> He arrived in the profession via the “prestigious route” – the Paris School of Fine Arts, winner of the Grand prix de Rome – and became a member of the Academie des Beaux-Arts de l’Institut de France in 1968. He was at the origin of some 400 projects and realisations.<sup>2</sup> Exploring the potential of tower blocks played a major role in his career. From the beginning, while working in the Var region on the reconstruction of Toulon<sup>3</sup> and Seyne-sur-Mer, the architect experimented with high-rise buildings through the construction of

\* Jacques COUËLLE, *Brochure on the life and work of Jean de Mailly*, Paris, Institut de France Publications, 1976.

1. For a summary of the architect’s career, see Léo NOYER-DUPLAIX, “Jean de Mailly (1911-1975), architect of the Thirty Glorious Years”, in Hélène CAROUX *et al.*, *Jean de Mailly à Rosny-sous-Bois. Bâtir une ville moderne*, collection “Architectures à lire en Seine-Saint-Denis”, Editions CAUE93/ Département de la Seine-Saint-Denis/Ville de Rosny-sous-Bois, 2019, p. 12-23.
2. Jean de Mailly’s archive collection, which covers his entire career, is kept at the Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine under reference number 28J.
3. For a complete study of the reconstruction of Toulon, see Maryline RONE, *Louis Madeline/Jean de Mailly à Toulon, 1947-1956: L’épopée d’une reconstruction*, under the direction of Joseph Abram, TPFE, École nationale supérieure d’architecture de Nancy, 1997, 149 p.

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communal housing (fig. 1). He designed them as signals that vertically dominated the composition of the urban landscape.

The design of high-rise buildings permeated the entire career of Jean de Mailly. In 1967, the building of the iconic Nobel Tower block in Puteaux in collaboration with Jacques Dépuisé marked the apotheosis. Even if it was not the first skyscraper of the Thirty Glorious Years, it was the first office tower block in the business district of La Défense, as well as the first French adaptation of what was classified as the American skyscraper. As a symbol of France’s growth, this tower block was a milestone in Jean de Mailly’s significant vertical construction work, both theoretical and built. This article<sup>4,5</sup> aims to understand it, first by taking an interest in the architect’s American trips which stimulated his urban planning and architectural thinking, and then by studying its application in La Défense and its counter project, the Puteaux Front de Seine district. Finally, the aim is to look closely at the reception and the recollection of an architect whom Jacques Couëlle referred to in his tribute speech when he succeeded him at the Institut de France, by saying: “His masterpiece, his own metaphorical baptismal font, was the tower block”.<sup>6</sup>

▲ Fig. 1.  
South elevation of the Toulon town hall, second project, print, by Jean de Mailly, 1960 (© Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine).

4. This contribution is taken from my Master’s research work: Léo NOYER-DUPLAIX, *Jean de Mailly 1911-1975, une figure de l’architecture des Trente Glorieuses*, under the direction of Claude Massu, Master’s research dissertation, history of architecture, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, 2011, 100 p.

5. I would like to thank Blandine Busson of the Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine.

6. Jacques COUËLLE, *Notice sur la vie et les travaux de Jean de Mailly*, Paris, Publications de l’Institut de France, 1976.



## An urban phenomenon, “epidermal order” and great heights

During his career, Jean de Mailly made many research trips that informed his architectural and urban design thinking, and nurtured his interest in high-rises. The architect travelled to the USSR, Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, but mainly to the United States. From 28 October to 10 November 1956, he took part in an American trip organised by Aluminium Français.<sup>7</sup> He visited New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit and Boston, the highlights being visits to the Lever House (Gordon Bunshaft of the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill firm, 1952), the Seagram Building then under construction (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1958), the United Nations Secretariat (Wallace K. Harrison *et al.*, 1952) and the General Motors Technical Centre (Eero Saarinen, 1956). In September–October 1964, Jean de Mailly returned to the United States to visit the metropolitan area of California and Miami. Finally, in November 1969, Francis Bouygues invited Jean de Mailly on a trip across the Atlantic organized by his company. The purpose of the trip was to visit the projects which, for the contractor, “raised the issue of the future construction of large office buildings in cities”.<sup>8</sup> The architect was thus able to discover the most recent buildings of Manhattan, to meet many colleagues, and above all to travel to Chicago to see the John Hancock Center (Bruce Graham and Fazlur Rahman Khan of the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill firm, 1969) (fig. 2), which was in the process of being completed at the time and constituted the main focus of the trip.

From his travels to the New World, Jean de Mailly brought back extensive literature on skyscrapers, notes on society and especially on architecture and town planning; for each building visited, the architect underlined all its technical and aesthetic characteristics. At the forefront of the principles developed was the layout of the buildings. From an urban planning point of view, the architect differentiated between two categories of office buildings, “buildings located in the heart of the cities and integrated into the town plan” and “sub-urban constructions [*sic*] flourishing within the framework of a more flexible urban planning”.<sup>9</sup> The first category was not favoured by the architect:

“The buildings built in the active city centres, either on sites of dilapidated buildings or on plots of land included in the attractive development zones [*sic*] in the centre, are subject to the laws and disorders of contemporary urban planning in large conurbations. Implanted according to the available space – as dense as possible in the search for greater profitability – they rise up in disorderly fashion in the space. The prospect and template rules mitigating this rising tide only resulted in the intrinsic beauty of the forms being watered down and, consequently, in complicated silhouettes with unsightly volumes.

7. Aluminium Français was a consortium founded in 1911 by Adrien Badin.

8. Letter from Francis Bouygues to Jean de Mailly dated 15 October 1969 (Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine; collection 28J Jean de Mailly).

9. Typescript “General memo, Project Bellini de Gaulle Pont de Neuilly, Paris-Puteaux, Building of the Société Centrale de dynamite”, October 1960 (Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine; 28J Jean de Mailly collection).

▼ Fig. 2.  
John Hancock Center,  
Chicago, postcard, late 1960s  
(© DR).





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One can only regret, despite their lack of measure, style and moderation, the first skyscrapers, their monumental forms and imposing mass proudly rising up at the heart of the newly emerging cities:

- Empire State Building
- Rockefeller center
- Christer [sic] Building

to name but a few of the most striking buildings in Manhattan, forming silhouettes on a par with the cities of the Italian Renaissance.

[...]

Chicago’s Inland Steel was not exempt from the speculative rules. It rises 4 metres from another skyscraper, pushing the volume to the limits within that permitted. At Skidmore’s, we saw a model of a new skyscraper that would encompass an entire city block”.<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, the architect approved of the Lever House (fig. 3) and the Seagram Building, which did not occupy the entire plot:

“However, the understanding of some project managers and the willingness of their architects have allowed for new projects that mark a certain evolution in the layout and form of recent buildings.

In the heart of New York, the Lever House for example, studied by Skidmore, presents a pure volume implanted in corbelled form on a low area [sic] itself defined according to the plot of land.

This desire, which is reflected in the urban renewal of Park Avenue, finds its continuation in the creation of the “Seagram”, the latest of New York’s great buildings, which was constructed with the implementation, in front of its volume, of an architecturally treated square with fountains and ponds.”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, only office buildings located in suburban areas were free from constraints and could develop in a rational fashion:

“Buildings constructed outside the large conurbations allow the architect to free himself from the constraints of building rules and minimum legal distances between buildings within the framework of imperative verticality.

Having vast spaces at his disposal, he works very comfortably, and the generosity of view in the creation, combined with the client’s desire to carry out quality work, give rise to works that we admire:

- The laboratories of “General Motors” with their wide developed spaces, their body of water of several hectares, crowned by a water tower, a real sculpture integrated into the site,
- The “Ford” building in Detroit, located in the middle of the countryside and surrounded as far as the eye can see by the large parking lot,
- Hartford’s Connecticut General Insurance, a working complex for 3,000 employees, with all its services and everyday facilities,

are living examples of what thought-out urban planning can be, free from the archaic concept that scleroses so many implementations within the limits of the modern city.”<sup>12</sup>



▲ Fig. 3. Lever House, New York, postcard, late 1950s (© DR).

10. *Ibidem.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

Contemporary constructions, and moreover of great height, could not be absorbed into the ancient city, either in America or in Europe.

Throughout his career, Jean de Mailly was extremely attached to urban order. He remained faithful to composition and sequencing as per his architectural training at the École des Beaux-Arts. The modern city could not merge into the ancient urban fabric, at the risk of producing an illegible tangle, an abscond urbanity. The architect was attached to European cities and their historic centres and in favour of setting up new extramuros districts, far from the constraints of the existent and according to a pre-determined composition and order. In this contemporary city, the tower block found its justification. The flatness of the new towns left Jean de Mailly sceptical, Miami being for him a typical example. High-rise buildings were therefore to dictate the composition, the tower block being “justified by the economic use of ground occupation and the space left for gardens and roads.”<sup>13</sup>

With regard to the aesthetics of the buildings, the architect was divided about the use of curtain walls, which, although visually beautiful, concealed the structure:

“The current fashion imitates American architects who treat their facades as curtain walls”:

- An easy solution creating an epidermal order anonymously hiding the interior structure.

- A beautiful effect with the systematic repetition of a module and in the quality of the materials used, but a fragile and interim effect with these enormous volumes where the load-bearing elements – an architecture of concealment – cannot be seen.

Gigantic glass shapes giving off the reflection of the metal joints and the movement of the sky and the play of the clouds, nevertheless give an impression of precariousness, hardly compatible with the force of the structures that carry them.

The absence of crowns in the buildings adds to the lightness of these architectural effects. But is this not the true nature of an architecture that is perpetually and rapidly evolving, the expression of the superficial and episodic character of a world that is moving too fast.

Having at their disposal a wide range of high quality materials of all kinds, the developers embroider incomparably rich and sumptuous facades:

- Anodized treated aluminium
- Stainless Steel
- Bronze
- Marble cladding
- Glass and ceramic-opalines
- Enamelled materials, etc.

a magnificent palette that some architects explore with great subtlety. Their task is often made easier by everything that the building industry makes available to them: module elements, profiles of all kinds allowing them to design all the solutions adapted to the programmes they are given”.<sup>14</sup>

In the early days of his career, Jean de Mailly was interested in the visual aspect of the structure, although the latter was still associated with a cladding of traditional materials. Then, the architect progressively abandoned structural beauty, preferring instead an epidermal beauty, which resulted in the use of more precious materials. Foremost among these were athermic glass, which reflects light and “gives exceptional quality to the buildings”,<sup>15</sup> and anodised aluminium. The skin, associated with the art of composition, constituted Mailly’s “style”, one of “epidermal order”, of the unlimited use of noble materials in a very sober manner.

13. Jean de Mailly quoted by Jacques Couëlle, *op. cit.*

14. Typescript quoted in note 9.

15. *Ibidem.*

## La Défense and its Puteaux counterpart, the flourishing of a design

In August 1950, Eugène Claudius-Petit, Minister of Reconstruction and Town Planning, called on Jean de Mailly, Bernard Zehrfuss and Robert Camelot to carry out the extension of the historic Parisian axis beyond the Pont de Neuilly. The site, known as La Défense, was run down and needed to be redesigned.<sup>16</sup> The project was the subject of much prevarication, with a consensus finally reached in the creation of a business district. Jean de Mailly played a crucial role in its development, proposing in November 1959 a “new concept”<sup>17</sup> which laid down the principles of the future urban layout on slabs, characteristic of the district. But above all, La Défense allowed the architect to implement his principles of ordered urban composition, in which the tower block feature was able to flourish. In October 1964, a plan was officially approved; it proposed a regularity and order in which all the buildings were built according to the same templates. From this plan was born a first generation of buildings, of which Jean de Mailly designed the iconic PB31 tower block<sup>18</sup> (fig. 4) – known as the Nobel Tower, then RTE-Nexity, now Initiale.

PB31 is an office tower block located in Puteaux and was completed in 1967. Measuring 109 metres high over 35 floors, it was designed by Jean de Mailly in collaboration with Jacques Dépussé – who was credited as “architect-director”<sup>19</sup> – and Jean Prouvé for the curtain walls. As the first tower block in the business district, but located outside the circular boulevard, PB31 was not subject to the ground plan, to which the template it did not strictly adhere. Initiating a new design, the tower block was to be perceived as regards its location, “in the manner of a bell tower as a marker of La Défense at the bottom of the river”.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the building is located to the south-west of the Neuilly bridge, along the embankment roads of the Seine, whilst on the historical axis. At the time of its completion, the building resembled a lighthouse on the waterfront, heralding a forward-looking business district: “The Nobel Tower block, in the assertive expression of its verticality, from then on set the spatial scale of what would in the future be the major gateway to the La Défense district”.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the project was not initially isolated but linked to a neighbouring residential building, the PH31, known as the Bellini residence (fig. 5). It was built by Jean de Mailly between 1961 and 1964<sup>22</sup> – and not in 1957, as most publications claim. The PB31 tower block was to be linked to the PH31 housing block by means of a ramp spanning the forecourt. But the project was modified for road infrastructure reasons and fire safety.

The construction of the Nobel Tower block was a site of technical innovation. The building was constructed in only twenty-four months according to a schedule pre-determined by computer, a first. The rapid construction in only 40 days of the concrete core was made possible by the use of sliding or climbing formwork, a technique usually used for the construction of cylindrical buildings with little reinforcement and no openings, such as water towers or silos. PB31 has a mixed structure (fig. 6). On the periphery of the concrete core is a steel frame which is enclosed by a light façade – curtain walls made in the workshops of the Compagnie industrielle de matériel de transport (CIMT), directed at the time by Jean Prouvé. The light facades are the real skin of the building, providing a continuous curved line without any protruding edges. The Nobel Tower block thus takes the shape of a parallel-piped rounded on its four corners. Its homogenous façades are punctuated by glass panels and surmounted by an attic perceptible by the colour of the glazing. All of its common floors are identical, their plan is completely

16. For more information on the urban history of La Défense, see Virginie PICON-LEFÈVRE, *Paris-ville moderne: Maine-Montparnasse et La Défense, 1950-1975*, Paris, Editions Norma, 2003 and Simon TEXIER, *Les Architectes de La Défense*, Paris, Dominique Carré ed., 2011.

17. Typescript “Sketch proposal – Development of La Défense – Mailly Agency study”, 10 November 1959 (Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine; collection 28J Jean de Mailly).

18. The ground plan designates the buildings of La Défense according to a long-term reference made up of two letters then a number corresponding to the town where they are located, followed by the function and location number, i.e. Puteaux Bureaux 31 for the PB31 tower.

19. “La Tour Nobel. Jean de Mailly, architecte en chef, Jacques Depussé, architecte réalisateur”, *Techniques et architecture*, n° 6, March 1967, p. 85-116.

20. *Ibidem*, p. 89.

21. *Ibidem*.

22. Typescript “Point des opérations projetées sur le territoire de la commune de Puteaux”, 14 June 1964 (Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine; collection 28J Jean de Mailly).





◀ Fig. 4.  
The Nobel tower block (PB31)  
seen from the Ile-de-Puteaux,  
autumn 2017  
(© Léo Noyer-Duplaix/La  
Manufacture du Patrimoine).

▼ Fig. 5.  
Perspective on the Nobel  
tower block (PB31) and Bellini  
residence (PH31) linked by  
a ramp, drawing by Jean de  
Mailly, non-dated  
(© Archives départementales  
des Hauts-de-Seine).





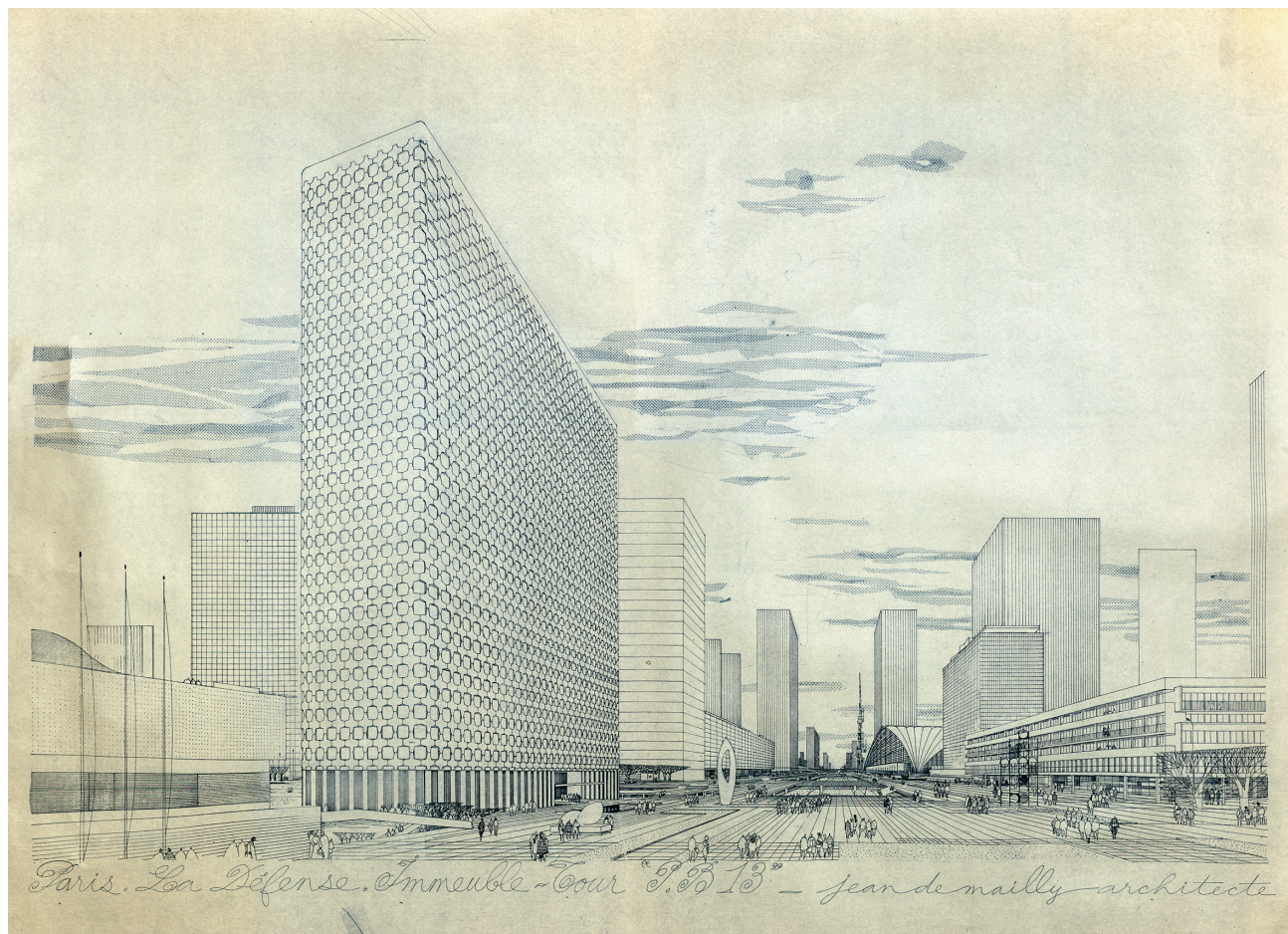


▲ Fig. 6.  
The Nobel tower block  
(PB31) under construction,  
photograph, ca. 1965  
(© Archives départementales  
des Hauts-de-Seine).



► Fig. 7.  
The PB13 tower, autumn 2017  
(© Léo Noyer-Duplaix/La  
Manufacture du Patrimoine).





▲ Fig. 8.  
 Perspective on tower PB13,  
 drawing, by Jean de Mailly,  
 non-dated  
 (© Archives départementales  
 des Hauts-de-Seine).

free and modular. In this design, the sanitary facilities, archives and technical rooms are placed in the concrete core, alongside the vertical circulation of fluids and people.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the PB31 tower block was the subject of a restoration campaign, which consisted of removing asbestos and complying with technical and fire safety standards. The Valode et Pistre agency, responsible for the renovation, sought to intervene with the PB31 “like a historical monument by restoring it identically”<sup>23</sup>.

In 1969, the arrival of Jean Millier at the head of the Public Establishment for the Development of the La Défense Region (EPAD) marked a turning point. The ordered urban layout appeared too authoritarian, too rigid. The 1964 plan was abandoned; the new constructions were freed from the constraints of the template. The so-called second generation tower blocks then appeared. These were taller, some up to 200 metres high and 100,000 square metres in surface area – allowing for a second series of offices. In the year he died, Jean de Mailly built one of the most emblematic buildings of this generation: the PB13 tower block (fig. 7) – known as the General and then the Ariane tower block.

Located in Puteaux and benefiting from a privileged location on the slab (fig. 8) – it borders the historical axis along its length – the PB13 was completed in 1975 and designed for the Sogeprom by Jean de Mailly in collaboration with Robert

23. Raphaëlle SAINT-PIERRE, “Feuilleton 6/7. L’indémorable Tour Nobel”, *Le Monde*, 17 August 2012.



Zammit. Measuring 134 metres high, it accommodates 63,000 square metres spread over 36 floors. The first studies concerning the PB13 tower block date back to 1970, when the Société Générale commissioned Jean de Mailly to build its new premises at La Défense. The architect proposed two projects which corresponded to two parallelepiped shapes, one orthogonal, the other asymmetrical. The first solution was rapidly adopted; the PB13 took up the same type of rectangular plan as the first-generation tower blocks, following the example of the Nobel tower block.

Structurally, the PB13 is all concrete – central core and skeleton. Visually, it was representative of the research that Jean de Mailly conducted from the late 1960s onwards. The pure and sober aesthetics of the curtain wall were replaced by the envelope installed on top of the structure. Thus, the facades of the tower are made of reinforced concrete painted in grey, on which is installed a metal grid intended to hold, 20 centimetres from the structure, cruciform aluminium elements. However, the concrete remained visible at the corners and throughout the attic, which gave the PB13 a singular aesthetic when it was completed.

The rectangular shape of PB13 (fig. 9) made it possible – in contrast to its second generation counterparts, which are square – to create a large number of offices at the outset, in the midst of horizontal plateaus that offered numerous partitioning possibilities. In 1995, the Société Générale moved to the Chassagne and Alicante towers (Andrault & Parat and Nicolas Ayoub), and the PB13 was renamed the Ariane tower. In 2007, the Silvio Petraccone agency and Michel Vodar supervised a rehabilitation campaign. It concerned the interior spaces, but also the facades. Aluminium plates were added to the corners and the attic, while a hall was built as an extended projection on the slab. The shell of the PB13 was then as if completed, with the tower block taking on an entirely metallic appearance.

In addition to his mission as a consultant architect and then as a supervisor at La Défense, Jean de Mailly intervened on one of the “counterpoints” of the district: the Front de Seine at Puteaux, renamed Puteaux-Bagatelle in the early 1970s (fig. 10). The development of the latter was initiated by the mayor of the town, Georges Dardel, in the early 1950s. In order to draw up a plan in harmony with the future district of La Défense, he called upon Jean de Mailly, who did not conceive a theoretical master plan, but a very precise development plan that defined the rules of construction, while leaving the developers free to determine the scale of their own projects.<sup>24</sup> Within this district bordering the Seine, and in parallel with the design of the PB13 tower block, Jean de Mailly constructed a building called “Le France” at the request of the Compagnie d’Aménagement et de Promotion Immobilière (CAPRI). This programme included a 126-metre high building, known as the “Tour Blanche”, which was to be “a strong point and a signal”<sup>25</sup> of the Puteaux district. At the time of its completion, it was one of the highest residential towers in Europe and remains today the second highest residential building in France.

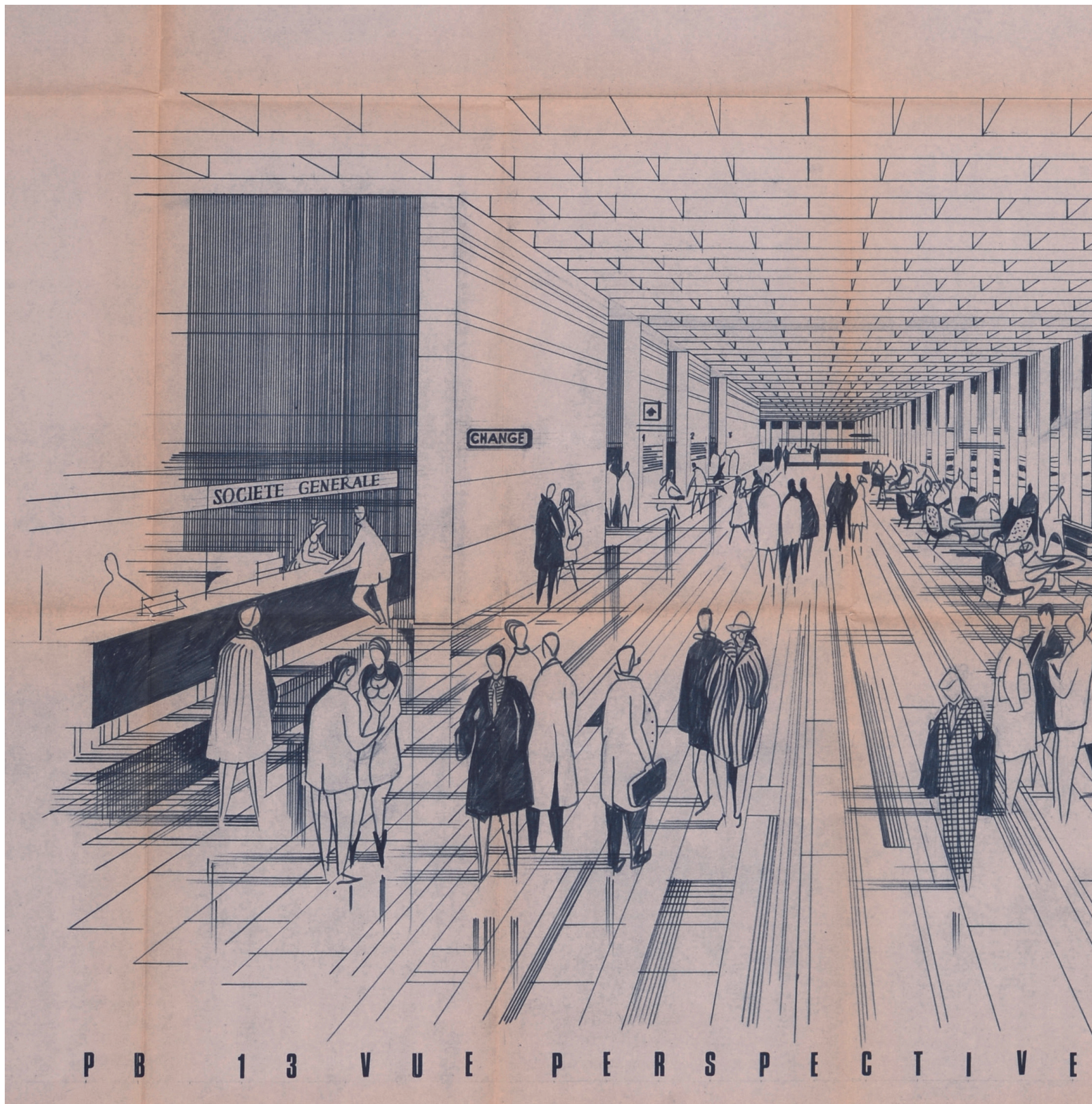
It is located on a 25,000 square meter plot of land in the immediate vicinity of the Seine (figs. 11 and 12). Entirely made of reinforced concrete, the building consists of a base on which three buildings stand: two blocks – called “Atlantic” and “Pacific” – and the White Tower block. The White Tower block comprises 38 floors of apartments, a technical floor at the top and three levels of shared facilities. The France tower block is thus composed of 425 “grand prestige” apartments, 213 of which are in the tower. The apartments range from studios – all in the lower section – to six room apartments, the latter measuring up to 150 square meters with “Haussmann-style”<sup>26</sup> reception areas. The roof of the lower building has terraces with gardens, children’s playgrounds and tennis courts. The France tower, which was built according to the concrete core principle, has an elliptical shape of 42 by 23 metres. Jean de Mailly was convinced that the ellipse would give the building an aerodynamic shape in order to withstand the winds. This was not the case; tests in a wind tunnel showed that the shape posed problems of execution, with negative and positive forces reaching 500 kilograms per square meter, compared to the usual 100–250. While the ellipse had no structural justification, its visual interest was undeniable. Finally, the skin of the tower is composed of matt white and slightly corrugated ceramic tiles, with no modénature or protrusions.

24. JEAN DE MAILLY, “Les immeubles de bureaux: ce qu’ils doivent aux architectes et aux promoteurs?”, *Entreprise*, 13 June 1964, p. 53–54.

25. “Le nouveau quartier Puteaux-Bagatelle”, *Techniques et architecture*, n° 291, February 1973, p. 66.

26. *Idem*, p. 67.





▲ Fig. 9.  
Perspective on the hall of tower PB13, drawing by Jean de Mailly, non-dated (© Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine).

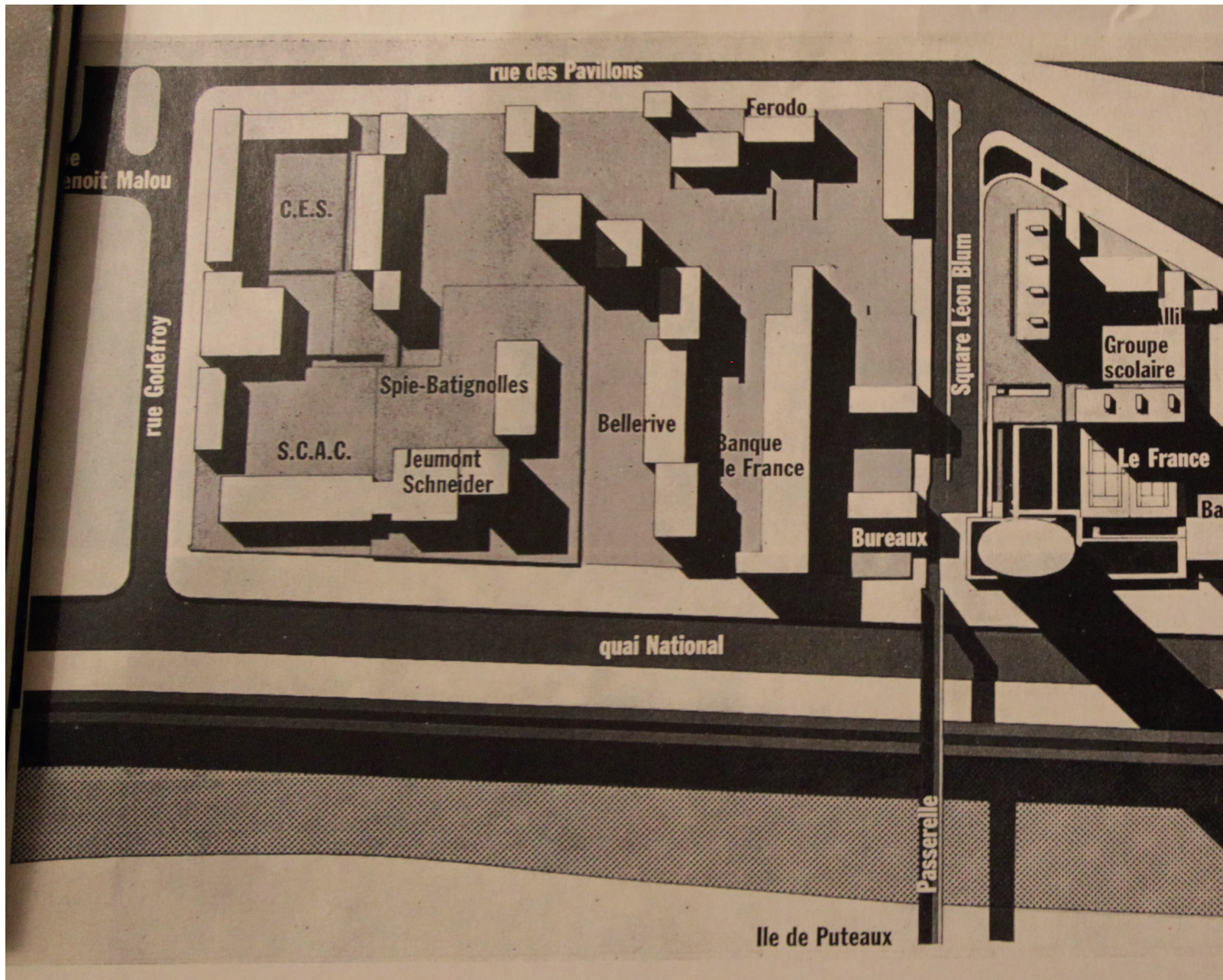




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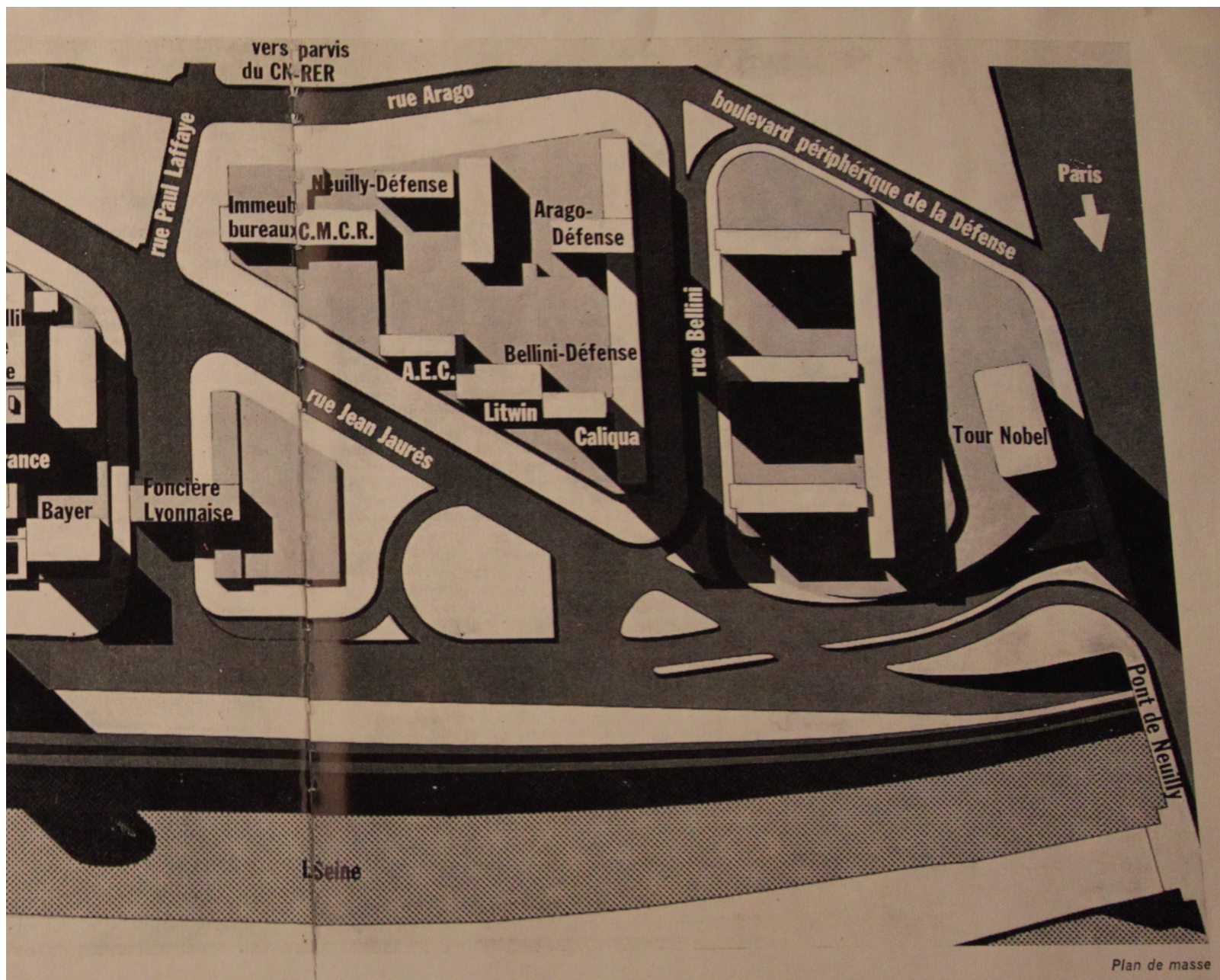
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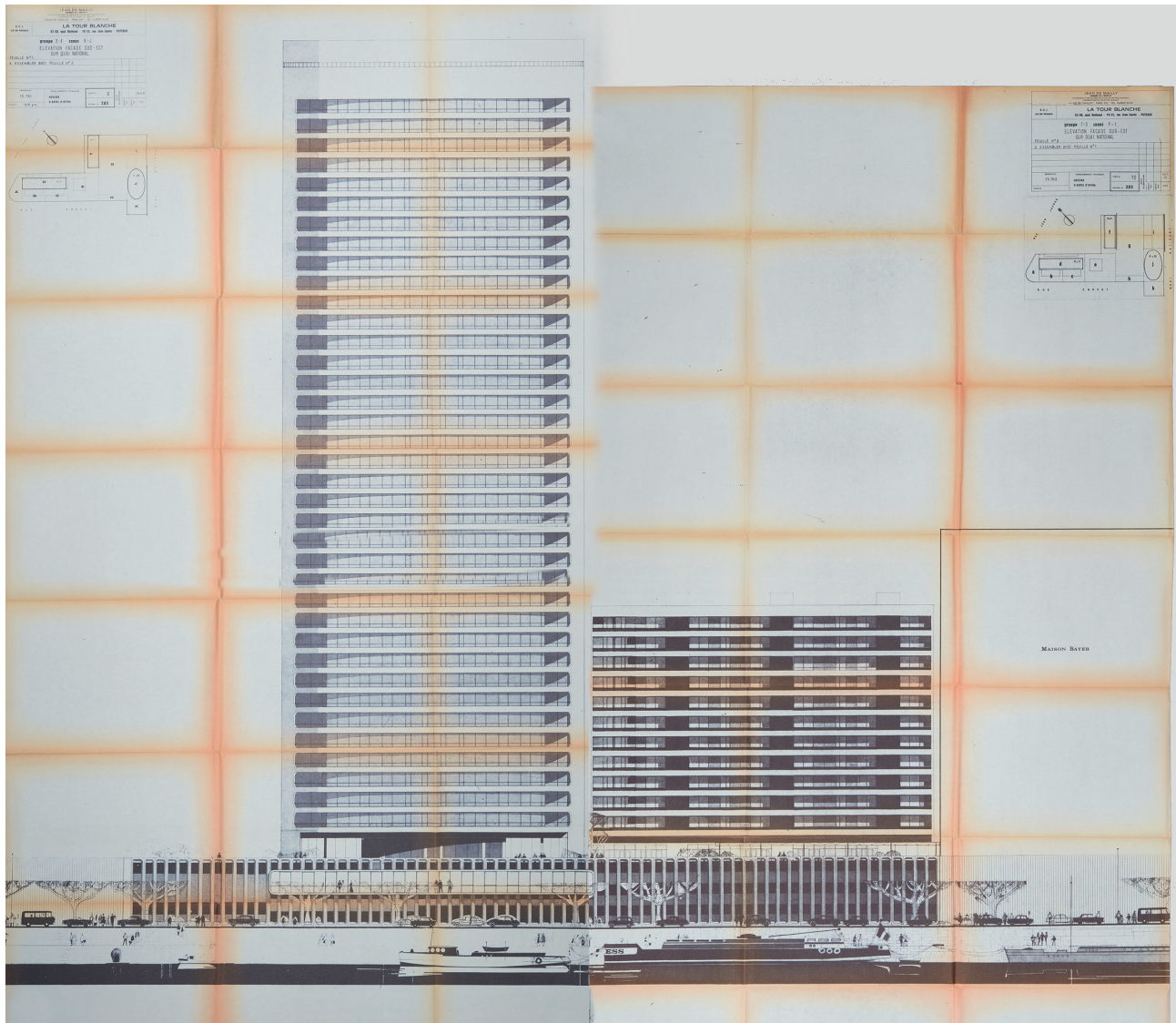


▲ Fig. 10.  
Map of the district, extract from "Le nouveau quartier Puteaux-Bagatelle", *Techniques et architecture*, n° 291, February 1973,  
p. 64-75 (© DR).









▲ Fig. 11.  
1971 (© Archives  
départementales  
des Hauts-de-Seine), South-  
East elevation of the Le France  
complex, assembly of two  
prints, by Jean de Mailly.



◀ Fig. 12.  
Model of the Le France  
complex, taken from  
"Le nouveau quartier Puteaux-  
Bagatelle", *Techniques  
et architecture*, n° 291,  
February 1973, p. 64-75  
(© DR).



## Jean de Mailly, the forgotten architect of high-rise buildings?

Alongside his ephemeral architecture for the great ceremonies of the Republic,<sup>27</sup> the works of Jean de Mailly at La Défense enjoyed an excellent immediate reception. The Centre des nouvelles industries et technologies – CNIT (the Centre for new industries and technologies) – which the architect designed with Robert Camelot, Bernard Zehrfuss and Nicolas Esquillan – and the Nobel tower block were widely publicized. *Techniques et architecture*,<sup>28</sup>, *Architecture de lumière*,<sup>29</sup> *Bureaux d'aujourd'hui*<sup>30</sup> and *Bâtir*<sup>31</sup> published articles devoted to the first tower of La Défense, which quickly became the symbol of the business district and one of the icons of contemporary French architecture. His two other tower blocks in the same sector, the PB13 and Blanche, were taken up in only a few publications.

Furthermore, although he produced numerous notes for his own personal use which testified to his theoretical thinking on urban planning and high-rise buildings, Jean de Mailly did not write any articles or books on the subject, and admitted that he did not have "the capacity to engage in the Olympian struggle to rebuild society through architecture".<sup>32</sup> The architect was an acclaimed practitioner and an undoubtedly thwarted theorist. However, his architectural and urban planning doctrines on high-rise buildings constituted an important synthesis between the Fine Arts culture – Grand Prix de Rome, he remained steeped in classical culture – and the International Style, a synthesis that he sought to implement at La Défense, claiming to want to make the district "a Cartesian Manhattan".<sup>33</sup>

In 1973, the first oil crisis foreshadowed the end of expansion. In 1974, La Défense went into turmoil. The Thirty Glorious Years were coming to an end and its architects were under attack from all sides. The construction of the CB21 tower block in 1972 (Harrison & Abramovitz and Jean-Pierre Bisseuil, 1974) was the setting for a violent controversy that marked a split in the perception of high-rise buildings in France. The building, visible from Paris, was considered too high. The business district and its designers were then assailed by critics.<sup>34</sup> Jean de Mailly, who died in 1975, only experienced the first signs of this dramatic disenchantment. But the PB31, his iconic Nobel tower block, seemed to have been spared. In July 1972 in *Le Monde*, Jacques Michel thus underlined "that the first achievements of French architects at La Défense, except for the excellent Nobel Tower block by Jean de Mailly, have generally proved to be of lamentable mediocrity, too cluttered with outmoded aesthetic principles in the industrial era, which requires others".<sup>35</sup>

After a phase of oblivion, the PB31 entered into a process of heritage designation in the 1990s. The press devoted articles to this first French office tower block, on its architecture and its principles of construction. But in these publications, Jean de Mailly was hardly mentioned as the building was first associated with Jean Prouvé. Hence, in March–April 1997, in *D'A. D'Architecture*, Claude Dupuich emphasized that "today, it is the rediscovered paternity of Jean Prouvé that attracts architectural pilgrimages" and later indicated that "the constructive approach [...] is for the first time materialising Prouvé's visionary high-rise projects as concerns the load-bearing sanitary core in concrete and its construction by means of a sliding formwork".<sup>36</sup> However, Jean Prouvé's role in this programme was limited to the implementation of the light facade, the constructive and architectural approach being the work of Jean de Mailly and Jacques Dépussé. But, in this heritage designation process, the memory of the architects was deleted for that of the "constructor", who became an almost legendary figure.

The historiography was and remains paradoxical with regard to Jean de Mailly. If his achievements during the Second Reconstruction and at La Défense are cited in textbooks, as early as the *Histoire de l'architecture en France*

27. At the suggestion of André Malraux, at the end of the 1950s, Jean de Mailly became the decorator for official ceremonies, state funerals and other festivities of the Republic. He thus designed the decor in which Charles de Gaulle presented his draft Constitution for the Fifth Republic on 4 September 1958. Almost a year later, he designed the decorations for the first 14 July of the new Republic.

28. "La Tour Nobel", *Techniques et architecture*, 28<sup>th</sup> series, "Grands Immeubles" special issue, 1966, p. 85-113 and "La Tour Nobel. Jean de Mailly, architecte en chef, Jacques Depussé, architecte réalisateur", *Techniques et architecture*, art. cit.

29. "La Tour Nobel", *Architecture de lumière*, n° 15, 1966, p. 27-35.

30. "Ce que sera la Tour Nobel", *Bureaux d'aujourd'hui*, n° 89, January-February 1966, p. 42-44.

31. Georges BRÉGOU, "La Tour Nobel", *Bâtir*, n° 146, March 1966, p. 41-49.

32. Jean de Mailly quoted by Jacques Couëlle, *op. cit.*

33. Typescript on the PB31 tower block, non-dated (Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine; collection 28J Jean de Mailly).

34. See for example: André FERMIGIER, "L'Art moderne et le président", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 23 October 1972.

35. Jacques MICHEL, "Erreurs monumentales?", *Le Monde*, 28 July 1972.

36. Claude DUPUICH, "Le belle Nobel", *D'A. D'Architecture*, n° 73, March-April 1977, p. 48-49.

de 1889 à nos jours<sup>37</sup> by René Jullian, the Nobel Tower is in *Architecture en France, 1940-2000, histoire et théories*<sup>38</sup> by Jacques Lucan and in *L'Architecture du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle en France: modernité et continuité*<sup>39</sup> by Jean-Louis Cohen, but only mentioned in the context of an analysis of the work of Jean Prouvé. In *L'architecture moderne en France. Vol. 3, De la croissance à la concurrence, 1967-1999*<sup>40</sup>, Gérard Monnier does not mention Jean de Mailly. Moreover, he mentions hardly any of the Grand Prix de Rome architects who, despite May 1968, remained major players in the construction industry. In a binary dichotomy – sometimes close to Manichaeism – between avant-garde and continuity, modernity and conservatism, modernism and traditionalism, a whole swathe of critics and historiographers have given little consideration to these architects of Beaux-Arts culture who nevertheless shaped the French landscape; it is true much more in practice than in theory.

In *L'Architecture moderne en France, Vol. 2, Du chaos à la croissance, 1940-1966*, Joseph Abram provides a proper analysis of the Nobel tower block, far removed from the simple Jean Prouvé myth, emphasizing that it was “considered a ‘French adaptation of the American skyscraper’”<sup>41</sup>. Likewise, in *Histoire de l'architecture française. De la Révolution à nos jours*, François Loyer gives a brief analysis of the PB31, describing its structural and architectural principles, noting that the corners “have been treated in a rounded manner in order to soften the shape – avoiding those dry edges that characterize American skyscrapers”.<sup>42</sup> While the PB31 is thus commented on in the manuals, the towers PB13 and Blanche remain ignored, as does almost the entire career of Jean de Mailly. Research on the latter remains incomplete – apart from a few graduate dissertations<sup>43</sup> – and the very large collection preserved in the Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine (County archives of the Hauts-de-Seine) remains largely unexplored.<sup>44</sup> The understanding of the history of high-rise blocks in France – beyond the maintenance of modernist myths – requires the continuation of the analysis of the sources of all the players of the French construction of the Thirty Glorious Years, including Jean de Mailly.

However, the work initiated over the last twenty years on the La Défense district has made it possible to gain a better understanding of the achievements of Jean de Mailly; but limited to this perimeter, it does not engage with the concomitant district of the Front de Seine. Virginie Picon-Lefebvre,<sup>45</sup> and especially Simon Texier<sup>46</sup> have systematically dealt with the constructions in the business district. In *Les Architectes de La Défense*, Simon Texier analyzes both the Ariane<sup>47</sup> and Nobel<sup>48</sup> Towers, and emphasizes that the latter “occupies a special place, not only in the history of the site, but now also in the history of architecture”. He adds: “its location at the forefront of the development operation, its quality of execution and, moreover, the intervention of Jean Prouvé on the façades make it one of the icons of modernism in France.” However, this icon has not been the subject of any in-depth investigation and its architect, Jean de Mailly, a master builder of the Thirty Glorious Years, has not been the subject of any research work on a scale that would allow an understanding of his work as a whole.

## The challenge of protecting high-rise buildings

In 2014, the DRAC, *Direction régionale des affaires culturelles* (Île-de-France Regional Office of Cultural Affairs) initiated a study of the 20th century buildings and complexes that structure the Greater Paris metropolis. The aim was to draw up a list of buildings eligible for the “20th century Heritage” award, which was to be replaced

37. René JULLIAN, *Histoire de l'architecture en France de 1889 à nos jours: un siècle de modernité*, Paris, Philippe Sers éd., 1984, p. 227.

38. Jacques LUCAN, *Architecture en France, 1940-2000, histoire et théories*, Paris, Le Moniteur, 2001, p. 112.

39. Jean-Louis COHEN, *L'Architecture du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle en France: modernité et continuité*, Paris, Hazan, 2014, p. 140.

40. Gérard MONNIER, *L'Architecture moderne en France. Vol. 3, De la croissance à la compétition, 1967-1999*, Paris, Picard, 2000.

41. Joseph ABRAM, *L'Architecture moderne en France. Vol. 2. Du chaos à la croissance, 1940-1966*, Paris, Picard, 1999, p. 159.

42. François LOYER, *Histoire de l'architecture française. De la Révolution à nos jours*, Paris, Mengès, éd. du Patrimoine, 2006, note 1366, p. 466.

43. Maryline RONE, *op. cit.* and *Jean de Mailly (1911-1975)*, under the direction of Gérard Monnier, memoir of DEA, history of architecture, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, not dated, 71 pages; Léo Noyer-Duplaix *Jean de Mailly 1911-1975, a figure...*, art. cit.

44. This large collection is made up of 315 linear metres of boxes, about 1,400 rolls of plans and photographic binders.

45. Virginie PICON-LEFEBVRE, *op. cit.*

46. Simon TEXIER, *op. cit.*

47. *Idem*, p. 254-255.

48. *Idem*, p. 292-293.

in 2016 by the “Outstanding Contemporary Architecture” scheme.<sup>49</sup> Following a public contract call for tenders, this study was carried out in partnership with the design office La Manufacture du Patrimoine, in association with Olivier Mathiotte and Léo Noyer-Duplaix.

As a major complex in the Greater Paris metropolis, the La Défense district was the subject of numerous debates as to how to enhance the value of this urban planning and architecture project, of which none of the buildings at the time benefited from any form of protection or recognition. The transformation of the award in 2016 made the subject even more complex, as the new system had a legal impact, since the owner of the labelled property had to inform the regional prefect of any change of ownership. Thus the owner’s agreement was necessary prior to awarding a label.

After much discussion, the working group first selected two buildings, two unique examples, which were not tower blocks, and benefited from monographic records and specific committee hearings. Thus, the Arche de la Fraternité<sup>50</sup> – Grande Arche de La Défense – built in 1989 by Johan Otto von Spreckelsen and Paul Andreu, was labelled “20th century Heritage” at the CRPS, *Commission régionale du Patrimoine et des Sites* (Regional Commission for Heritage and Sites) on 24 November 2016.<sup>51</sup> This award was part of a specific theme of buildings related to the great presidential works. Subsequently, the CNIT, *Centre des Nouvelles Industries et Technologies* (Centre des Nouvelles Industries et Technologies)<sup>52</sup>, which was designed by Robert Camelot, Jean de Mailly, Bernard Zehrfuss and Nicolas Esquillan in 1954–1958 before the district was definitively destined for business, received the “Remarkable Contemporary Architecture” award by the CRPA, *Commission régionale du Patrimoine et de l’Architecture* (Regional Commission for Heritage and Architecture) on 21 June 2018.

Apart from these two specific monuments and in order to bear witness to the complex history of the district, eight buildings – two of which were designed by Jean de Mailly – were selected. They are today *unicum* and *typicum* of the first four generations of buildings: tower blocks PB31 and PB11<sup>53</sup> for the first generation, CB31<sup>54</sup> and PB13 for the second, PB5<sup>55</sup> and CB2<sup>56</sup> for the third, and Chassagne and Alicante<sup>57</sup> and PB6<sup>58</sup> for the fourth.<sup>59</sup> These awards were endorsed by the CRPA on 21 June 2018, but all the owners of these eight buildings refused to accept the possible attribution of the “Remarkable Contemporary Architecture” award. Thus, in 2019, Jean de Mailly’s buildings in La Défense and its Puteaux counterpart, still do not benefit from any protection, despite their importance in the history of French architecture of the Thirty Glorious Years.

## Biographical note

### LEO NOYER-DUPLAIX

Leo Noyer-Duplaix is a historian of architecture and urban planning and a specialist in the contemporary period. As a researcher at the General Inventory of Cultural Heritage (Pays de la Loire Region), he is completing a doctoral thesis at Sorbonne University (Centre André Chastel UMR 8150).

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49. Decree n°. 2016-925 of 7 July 2016 relating to the freedom of creation, architecture and heritage.

50. Léo NOYER-DUPLAIX, “Arche de la Fraternité (Grande Arche de La Défense) et parvis de La Défense”, *Label Architecture contemporaine remarquable, notices monographiques*, Paris, La Manufacture du Patrimoine design office, Île-de-France Regional Arts Office, December 2017, 10 p.

51. This label also concerned the La Défense forecourt.

52. Léo NOYER-DUPLAIX, “Centre des Nouvelles Industries et Technologies (CNIT)”, *Label Architecture contemporaine...*, art. cit., 9 p.

53. Known as the Atlantic, it was built in 1970 by Jean-Robert Delb, Michel Chesneau and Jean Verola.

54. Known as Fiat, then Framatone, and today Areva, it was designed by the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill agency (SOM), Roger Saubot and François Jullien and completed in 1974.

55. Known as SCOR, the building was constructed in 1983 according to plans by Jean Balladur.

56. Known as Elf, then Total-Fina-Elf, and now Coupole, it was built in 1985 by the Webb Zerafa Menkes Housden Partnership – now WZMH Architects – in association with Roger Saubot and François Jullien.

57. It was built in 1995 by the Andrault & Parat (ANPAR) agency and Nicolas Ayoub.

58. Known as EDF, it was completed in 2001 according to the plans of Henry N. Cobb (Pei Cobb Freed & Partners agency) and Saubot-Rouit et Associés (SRA).

59. Léo NOYER-DUPLAIX, “Quartier d’affaires dit de La Défense”, *Label Architecture contemporaine...*, art. cit., 32 p.