Musée Soulages,
Rodez, France,
RCR Arquitectes

DARK MATTER

Dedicated to the work of French abstract artist Pierre Soulages, the eponymous Musée Soulages is a tough yet poetic synthesis of steel, darkness and light

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1. (Opening spread) apparently defying gravity, rusted steel volumes cantilever out over the sloping terrain
2. On the park side, the building is more discreet
3. The museum appears as a series of hermetic volumes in the city fabric. The pedestrian approach is across a park which forms an edge to the old *foirail* or cattle market

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section **AA**

section **BB**

section **CC**

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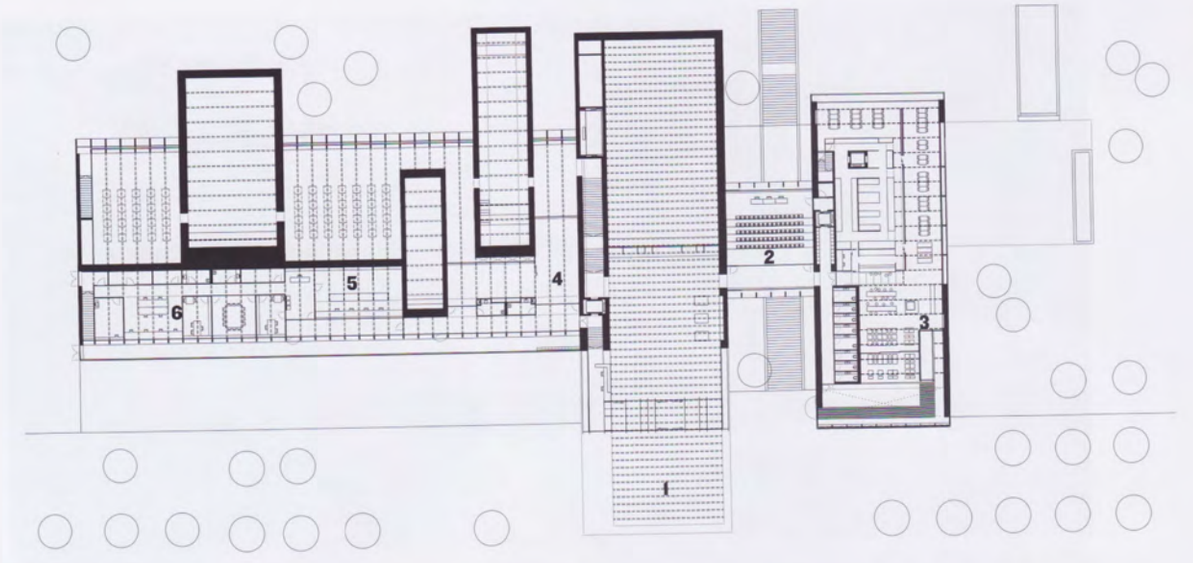
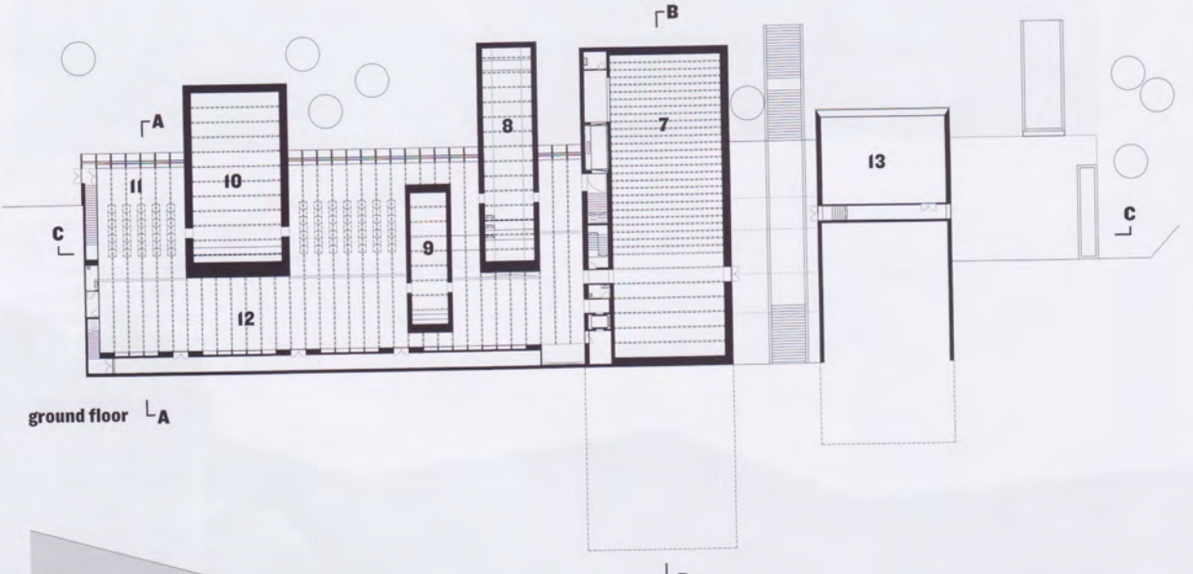


first floor



ground floor

basement plan

0 10m

1 entrance foyer
2 auditorium
3 restaurant
4 seminar room
5 research
6 administration
7 exhibition space
8 Conques Abbey room
9 early works
10 paintings
11 works on paper
12 graphics
13 storage
14 plant
15 storage
16 workshop

CRITICISM

WILLIAM JR CURTIS

In an era that enjoys bandying around slogans, it is as well to be reminded that the first task of criticism is to respond to constructed works. Nothing can replace the direct experience of buildings and the gradual understanding of the thoughts, images and inspirations behind them. Evaluation has to take into account both the task and site facing the designer, and the structure of intentions guiding the main decisions of the design process. Inevitably there are conflicts in this trajectory, some more resolved than others. The critic needs to penetrate beneath a building's surface to grasp its conceptual anatomy before considering the relative success or failure in the translation of the guiding ideas into space, form and material.

The question of 'appropriateness' inevitably hovers over this endeavour although here there are no clear recipes in an era characterised by extreme pluralism of expression. Of course it is also the business of buildings to solve practical and human problems with apt structural and material means. Beyond the pragmatic there is the realm of meaning that is likely to combine several levels from the overt to the hermetic. Architecture is there, among other things, to elevate experience to another level. One of the aims of criticism is surely to assess the long-term value of a work – not just in relation to contemporary architectural developments and present social needs, but also in relation to the history of architecture in a broader sense.

The recently completed Musée Soulages in Rodez in the *département* of the Aveyron in the Massif Central designed by RCR Aranda Pigem Vilalta Arquitectes is a work that deserves this sort of careful scrutiny. It is surely one of the most interesting if understated architectural realisations of recent years. The building occupies a site between the old city of Rodez with its cathedral constructed in reddish brown stone, and the modern extension to the west with its mostly undistinguished buildings constructed in recent decades. It takes the form of a series of parallel oblongs coated in rusty Corten steel with interstices between them allowing long views to the rugged landscape to the north and permitting outdoor public stairways between the upper and lower levels of the site. The pedestrian approach is across a park which occupies the old *foirail* or cattle market, and from this the south side, the building appears to be long, horizontal and low.

But from the other, north side, the Musée Soulages takes on a vertical and monumental character for it juts out over a steep slope. Seen from below, the 'boxes' containing some of the main galleries read almost as residual bastions, although there is a teasing dialogue between the sense of weight and the weightlessness of cantilevered steel volumes. The apparently simple theme of parallel geometries reveals a degree of complexity as the different-sized volumes contribute to an array of shapes seen in perspective with the cathedral in the background. Steel and stone make a happy marriage on this occasion and of course the black and russet colours and stark abstract geometries make an apt home for the abstract paintings in similar colours by Pierre Soulages.

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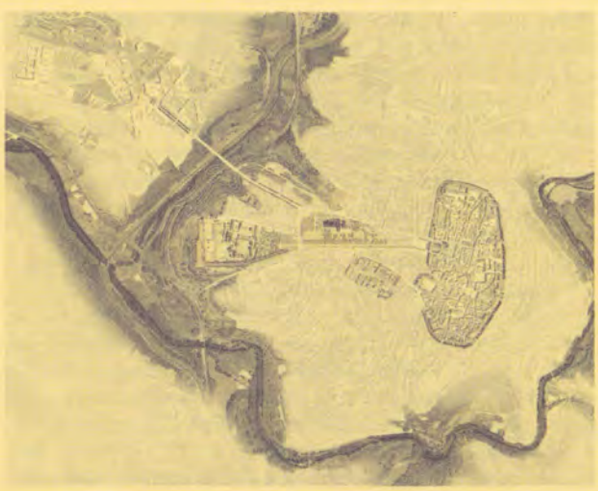

But the coincidences between the work of the French painter now in his mid nineties, and the Catalan architects, over 40 years younger, go much deeper than surface effects of colour and texture. Soulages was born in Rodez and after an extraordinary international career decided in the end that he would like to leave his patrimony to the provincial town in *la France profonde* where he spent his earliest years. His bold abstract works in black paint or wood stain already made an impact upon the art world in the early 1950s, while his multilayered '*outrenoir*' paintings of recent decades have achieved a monumental expression with a vaguely geological aspect of stratifications and fissures. The artist's windows designed in the late 1980s for the Romanesque pilgrimage abbey church of Conques, some 40 kilometres to the north-west of Rodez, combine striations of lines in lead with crystalline glass surfaces as if they were made of translucent stone.

As for RCR, their architecture has always explored the middle zones between abstraction and materiality, the natural and the artificial, stone and steel. The architects now cross national frontiers but their sensibility is deeply rooted in their home territory, the volcanic landscape of La Garrotxa around the small town of Olot in northern Catalunya. Local in its responses to place and topography, their work is universal in its sources of inspiration which run all the way from the American works of Mies van der Rohe, to those of Louis Kahn, to the steel sculptures of Richard Serra. Inheritors of a Catalan tradition of Modernism blending architecture and topography, they have nonetheless kept their distance from the frivolities of Barcelona, seeking out distant resonances with both Japanese modern architecture (Ando and SANAA in particular) as well as the metaphysical order of ancient Zen gardens. The Musée Soulages is in part a tale of two small cities, or a tale of parallel landscapes, one in Catalunya, the other in the Massif Central.

More than that, RCR have developed a way of reading sites and intuiting the central concepts of their schemes by means of abstract watercolours and ink stain sketches. These mental maps serve to capture the energies of the surroundings and the hidden forces in the terrain while also hinting at the generating images and ideas of each scheme. They resemble delicate abstract paintings combining ink blots and striations and they recall not only oriental calligraphy but also the work of 20th-century painters such as Antoni Tàpies, Franz Kline and of course Pierre Soulages. I recall how in 2003 when writing the introduction to a monograph on RCR, they were happy to share a sort of scrapbook of core inspirations. This included Soulages's black paintings with cracks of light alongside black and white photos of wooden slats with light passing through them in rural buildings of the northern slopes of the Pyrenees. The abstraction of RCR transforms the vernacular and a past rusticity into a new

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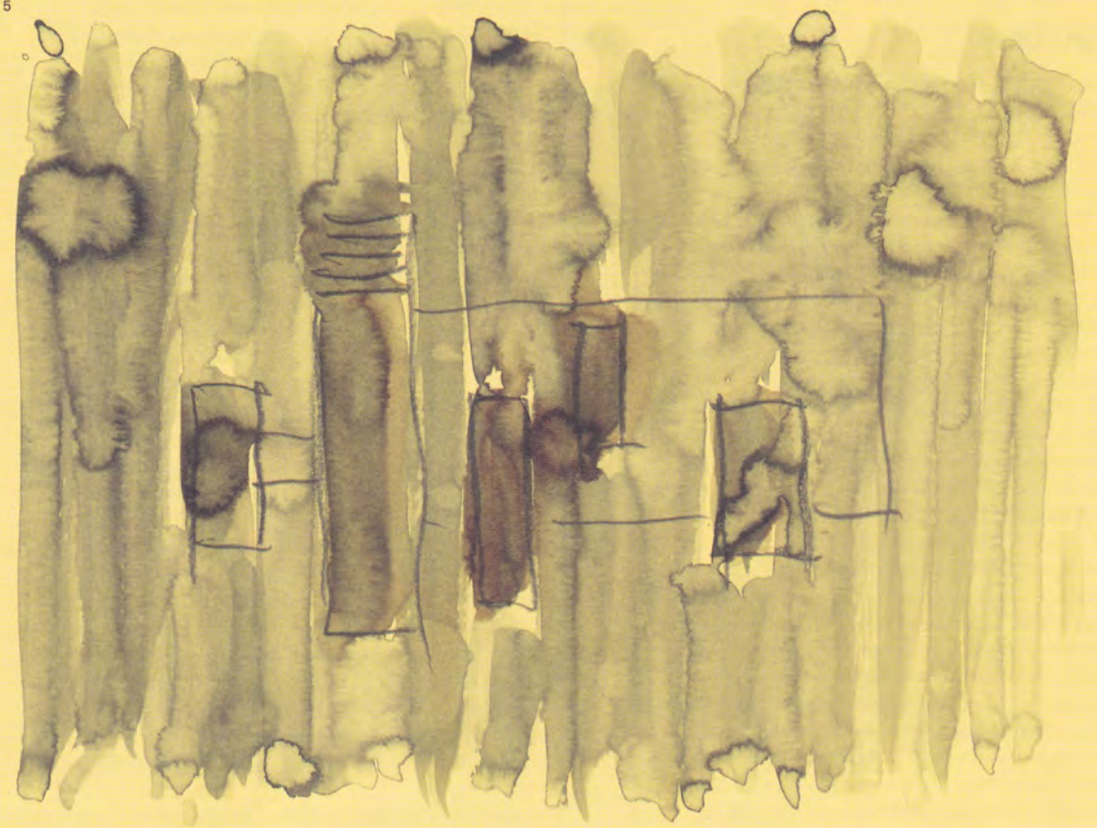

'Hovering boxes extending over the slope afford carefully controlled views towards the distant landscape. This is typical of RCR who make much of the adjustment of spatial limits and the *rapprochement* between near and far'

middle landscape, as one may sense in their use of parallel steel plates holding back stones in their subterranean winery at Bell-lloc of 2008 (AR January 2010) or their entrance to the Volcanic Park of La Garrotxa of 2002.

Needless to say, these methods and preoccupations served RCR well in reading the site and situation in Rodez, a city with an ancient past (Roman and pre-Roman) perched upon a hill with neighbouring escarpments and a rich subterranean geology. Provincial the town may be, but it has a sort of telluric presence on account of its landscape and its ancient Stone-Age culture (the totemic stone statues resembling humanised menhirs in the Musée Fénaille). The architects were quick to grasp the strata and historical layers of the place and the polarities between the soft south side with the platform of the *foirail*, and the tougher and more forbidding north side with its harsh winter winds and, immediately below the site, its mediocre commercial developments. The north/south dichotomy was one of the starting points not only on account of the framing of distant views but also because north light would be better for the pictures on display. All this suggested a degree of openness to the south, and closed but mostly toplit volumes as well as some atelier glazing to the north. The theme of gaps affording views between buildings is recurrent in the work of RCR but is also found in the old town of Rodez where the openings are referred to as *'fenestrous'*.

But the site and the building also required a lateral east-west reading and here the solution of parallel volumes served well to link the contrasting sides of the context – the vertical towers of the Cathedral and the old town to one side, and the bridge across a ravine to the modern Rodez on the other. The approach to the Musée Soulages is by way of a serpentine path across the recently planted park and the entrance is signalled by a cantilevered canopy which draws the visitor into the entrance hall where the ticket office and bookshop are situated and where medium-sized receptions can take place. Following the lateral logic of the basic idea, there are transparent corridors which cross the building and lead to a small auditorium and to the restaurant which is run by the three-star chefs Sébastien and Michel Bras: gastronomy and high art together.

Access to the galleries is by means of a somewhat precipitous stairway that leads to the lower regions of the museum. Here again part of the challenge was to combine the longitudinal character of the main 'boxes' with a satisfactory lateral route. In effect the visitor wanders from one space to the next guided by views through tall and narrow openings which lend a certain dignity and monumentality to the galleries, not to say an atmosphere of high seriousness. This character suits the building better in some spaces than in others and there are times when one loses one's sense of direction in the labyrinth of rooms. A narrow and vertical slot is devoted to the cartoon drawings at 1:1 scale which were used to study the windows of the Abbey at Conques and there is a subliminal reference to the proportions of the Romanesque nave (unusually vertical in this example). However, in the museum, unlike the church, the light is filtered in from the top via slender steel skylight beams that appear to float.

4. (Previous page) location plan showing the new museum in th wider urban plan of Ro 5 & 6. RCR use abstra watercolours and ink s sketches, reminiscent the work of Soulages, read sites and to intuit well as communicate c concepts of their sche

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Throughout the building there is a dialogue between the sense of gravity and its opposite, the sense of levitation.

The hovering boxes extending over the slope afford some carefully controlled views towards the distant landscape and this in turn is typical of the work of RCR who make much of the adjustment of spatial limits and the *rapprochement* between near and far. Currently the space dedicated to visiting exhibitions is devoted to a selection of Soulages's '*outrenoir*' paintings from other collections. With their deep layers of black paint and their palette knife markings they are almost too repetitive and formulaic, but in this environment they are shown off to the best advantage, suspended in space on wires. During the hanging of his own works Soulages was a stickler for detail, for heights, and for the adjustment of daylight. Some of the galleries rely more than others upon artificial lighting, but it is possible to adjust not only the upper skylights but also the large windows to the north by means of dark gauze screens. There are some magical moments when one senses the relationship between these monumental pieces of 'black light' floating in space and the volcanic landscape along the northern horizon.

The portions of the museum that are embedded in the ground and which therefore rely entirely upon artificial lighting are much lower in height and are devoted to Soulages's beginnings, as well as to his graphic works in various media. Here again the route is arranged as a sort of lateral zigzag between glass display cases designed by the architects which harmonise with the aesthetic of the building while demonstrating the artist's printing techniques and various realisations in books and prints. Ink and metallic plates sit particularly well in this environment of horizontal table displays. As for the vertical displays on steel wall throughout most of the Musée Soulages, there is a legitimate question about

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the resemblances between some of the dark steel surfaces and the paintings themselves. In places one almost feels the steel walls engulfing the pictures which, incidentally, are affixed to the walls by means of powerful magnets. It is a relief to find some off-white surfaces from time to time. But in a deeper sense there is harmony between building and paintings and Soulages himself is very happy with the result as are most of the art and architecture pundits from Paris. The final word could be that of a nine-year-old daughter of a friend of mine who said of the galleries: 'Mais maman c'est comme marcher dans une peinture' ('But mum it is like walking in a painting') and who asked if the benches were designed by Pierre Soulages (they were of course designed by RCR).

Aranda Pigem Vilalta did not come up with this building by just waving a magic wand over the site. They came to this task in 2007 with an already highly developed architectural language and set of priorities. It was an invited and limited competition between Kengo Kuma, Paul Andreu, Marc Barani and themselves. They were immediately attracted to a phrase of Soulages, 'a museum in a garden', and he was quick to sense some alliance of sensibility with them. The proposal of parallel halls with slots towards the landscape is anticipated in RCR's all steel Casa Horitzó (2004) near Olot, while the monumental oblongs overhanging the slope owe something to their Law School in the University of Gerona (2001). The theme

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of parallel oblongs with interstitial voids and lateral transparent connections is found in another key precedent, that of the Impiva offices in Castellón (1997) by Carlos Ferrater, while the echoes of Serra's rusted steel blade sculptures are evident. There is also the Serra-like notion of 'cutting' into the landscape in order to reveal a certain energy, while the engagement with steel and with voids takes RCR back to those doyens of Spanish modern sculpture of the 1950s, Eduardo Chillida and Jorge Oteiza.

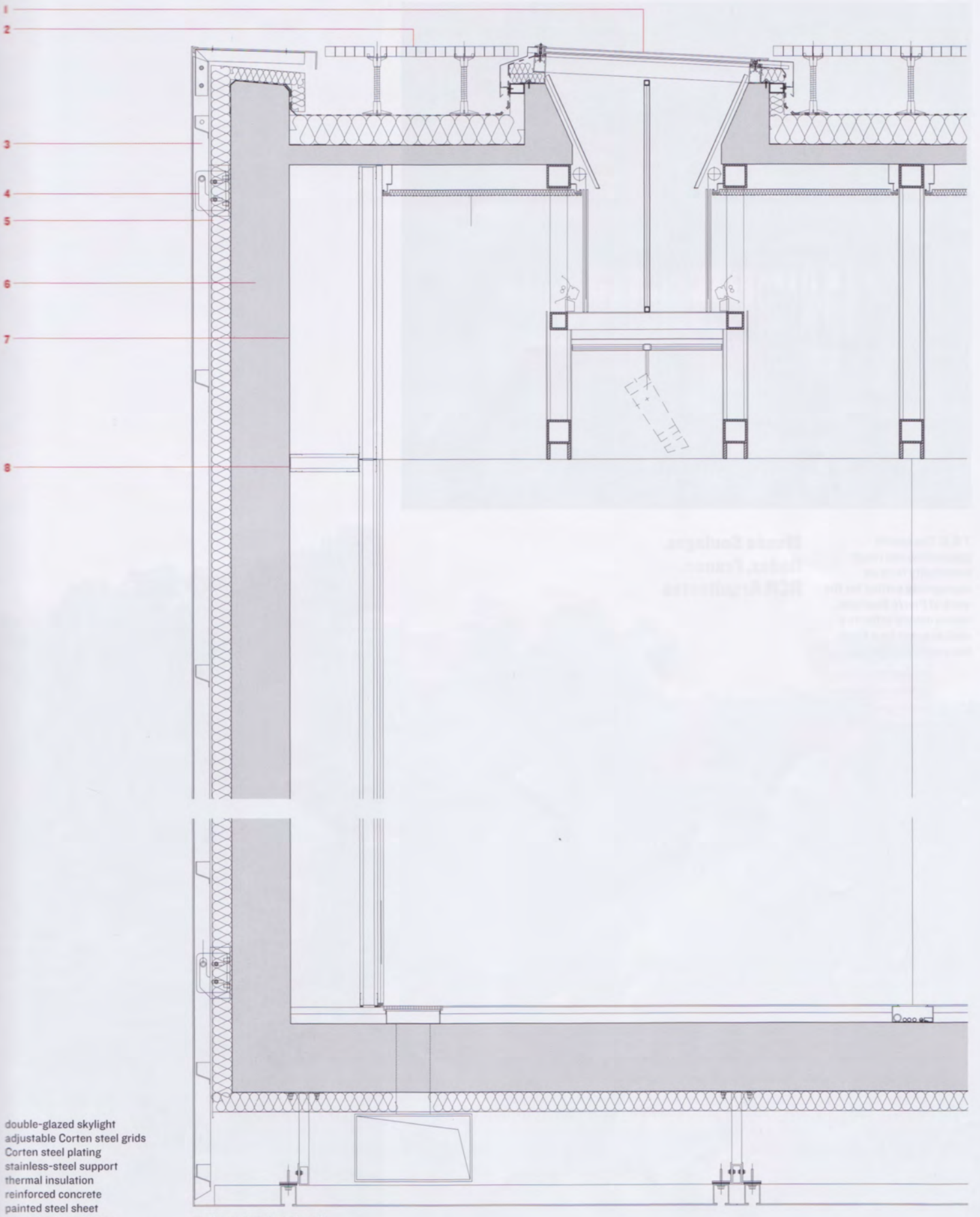
One may also speak of parallel lines of research into architectural space and materiality. RCR probably have one eye on the work of their contemporaries Sejima and Nishizawa (SANAA), for example the museum at Lens in the north of France (AR March 2013). There are interesting crossovers in several directions here since as mentioned RCR are deeply interested in both Japanese modernity and several phases of Japanese tradition. On the other hand, SANAA have almost self-consciously blended their Japanese sensibilities with a reworking of the Corbusian free plan and the spatial concepts of Mies's Barcelona Pavilion. RCR are less academic than this and their spatial conceptions do not rely on pilotis, grids and free-plan partitions, but upon the physical and spatial tensions released by parallel steel walls or repetitive slats in diverse topographical configurations. As Mies is once again coming into focus, it is well to be reminded of his remark that he wished to unify the building and the surrounding space in a 'higher unity'. One might also recall that Serra made his real breakthrough in the early 1970s after intensively studying the 'stroll gardens' of ancient Kyoto. RCR have extended some of these primary lessons in their own restrained works.

Space, light and proportion are among RCR's central instruments but their main medium of construction is raw steel in its various states. The structural armature of the Musée Soulages is principally reinforced concrete (I recall visiting the construction site two years ago in the pouring rain and it was like a roofless ruin open to the landscape). Steel is used for wall cladding inside and out, for floors, for cross beams and for fenestration. Here one can only marvel at the precision of tectonic thinking and the know-how manifest in the 'grammar' of construction, whether it be in the positioning and width of joints, or in the reading of frames within larger armatures. There is something deeply satisfying about grasping the elegance of knowledgeable construction and high-quality craftsmanship in industrial materials. In such a work as this one can hardly speak of 'details' as a separate consideration, since the smaller parts are integrated with the overall forms and directions, as well as the inner *gestalt* and central generating images of the building. For RCR steel is a modern industrial material which nonetheless suggests the archaic, and which of course weathers over time.

Paradoxically this very insistence upon steel and geometry can sometimes get in the way. In my view the weakest part of the Musée Soulages is the restaurant area devoted to the world of Bras. RCR know a lot about gastronomy: their restaurant *Les Cols* in Olot is a gem of a building which also celebrates the rites and rituals of high cuisine. It is a work of poetic minimalism neatly inserted into an old building and a garden. RCR's just completed Centre d'Art *'La Cuisine'* at Nègrepelisse near Toulouse is another deft insertion, this time into a medieval fortress ruin. It also reveals their sensibility for food, natural products and the culture of cooking. By contrast the Bras installation in the Musée Soulages seems awkward and cramped, as if the space were thought outside to inside to fit a prescribed geometry. Even the furnishings, sometimes a strong point of RCR, are not up to their usual standard. There is a larger issue here about the priorities and conflicts of the overall design of the museum: the work achieves greater clarity on the outside than on the inside. One might have hoped for a less abrupt transition from the entrance hall to the galleries beneath, and for a clearer circulation route between the exhibition spaces.

That said, the Musée Soulages comes across as a rigorous and poetic work of architecture which is mercifully free of the formalistic rhetoric that is so often used to market 'culture'. It is beautifully and meaningfully integrated with its urban and landscape context and it supplies an inspiring setting in which to enjoy and study the work of one of the 20th century's most interesting abstract painters. The building and its contents enhance one another so that the overall experience of a visit is uplifting. It is like a latter-day version of a villa devoted to the contemplation of abstract order. Its nearest equivalent might be the smaller but no less poetic Pulitzer Foundation in St Louis (2001) by Tadao Ando, another temple of abstractions integrating in that case a *Torqued Spiral* steel sculpture by Richard Serra, a suspended piece by Ellsworth Kelly, selections from the Pulitzer Collection, and temporary exhibitions. The Musée Soulages also has a space for temporary exhibitions so it is crucial that the curators follow up with work of the highest level.

There was considerable political opposition to the construction of the Musée Soulages which is after all in a small provincial town in *la France profonde* far from the usual cultural stamping grounds and with local economic problems of its own. But since its opening three months ago, the museum has had more visitors than it expected in a year and glowing reports in the daily press. It has established itself as a key place for tourists passing through the region and even coming from afar. Some of the most interesting works of our time are emerging in places once described as provincial and in France one cannot get much further off the cultural map than the absolutely marginal town of Rodez. This is a long way from the gossipy salons of academia and from so-called 'cosmopolitan' centres which dominate the fashionable discourse. As it happens, I attended the opening of the museum in mid May when the glitterati came down from Paris and the politicians mumbled their usual pieties about culture, and it was clear that even the sceptics were persuaded by what they saw. A day or two later I was in there again but this time with 'the locals', with *le peuple*, and I encountered a farmer from the deepest Aveyron who had never been into a museum in his life. He had heard about the museum in the press and thought he would come and have a look. He was so inspired by the experience that he had decided to find out all he could about this thing called 'art'. Then there was the nine year old who thought that she was walking through a picture. Good architecture, like good painting, communicates before it is understood.

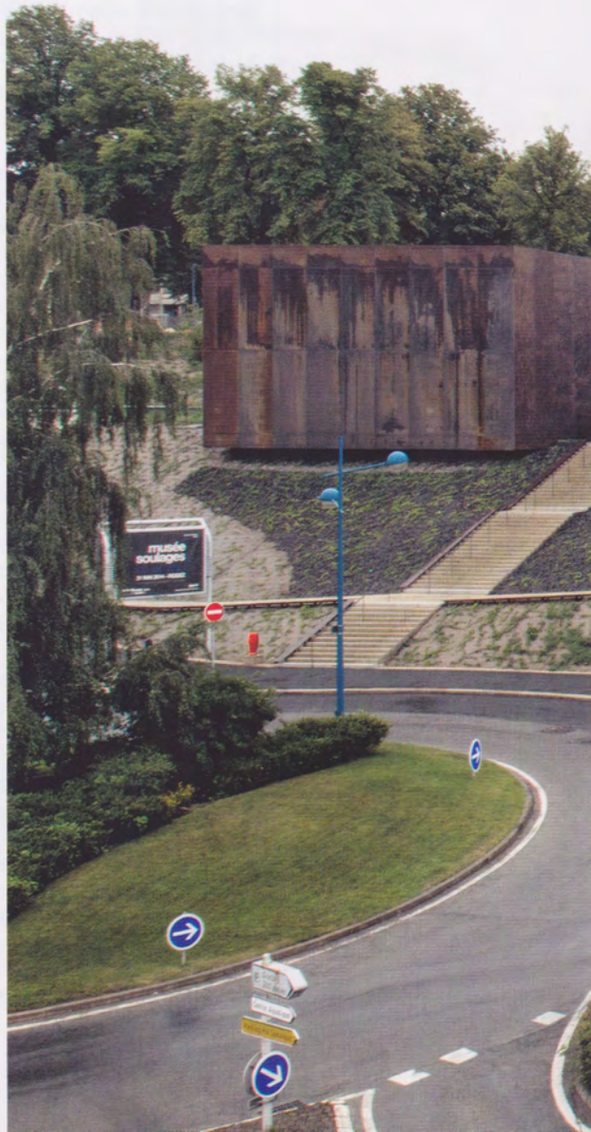


1 double-glazed skylight
2 adjustable Corten steel grids
3 Corten steel plating
4 stainless-steel support
5 thermal insulation
6 reinforced concrete
7 painted steel sheet
8 galvanised steel fixing

wall construction detail

7

8



7 & 8. The severe geometries and rough materiality form an appropriate setting for the work of Pierre Soulages, whose oeuvre reflects a similar quest for a tough but poetic abstraction

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9. (Previous spread) one of RCR's abstract watercolours of the Corten blocks merging into the landscape
10. Tall narrow openings impart a powerful sense of dignity and monumentality
11. Light, whether natural or artificial, is employed extremely sparingly
12. (Opposite) occasionally the dark steel walls seem to engulf the pictures. Steel is also used for floors, cross beams and fenestration

Architect
RCR Arquitectes
Photographs
Hisao Suzuki