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FACE IT

Residence de l'Aqueduc

Gentilly, France

Daquin & Ferriere Architecture

Photography by Hervé Abbadie

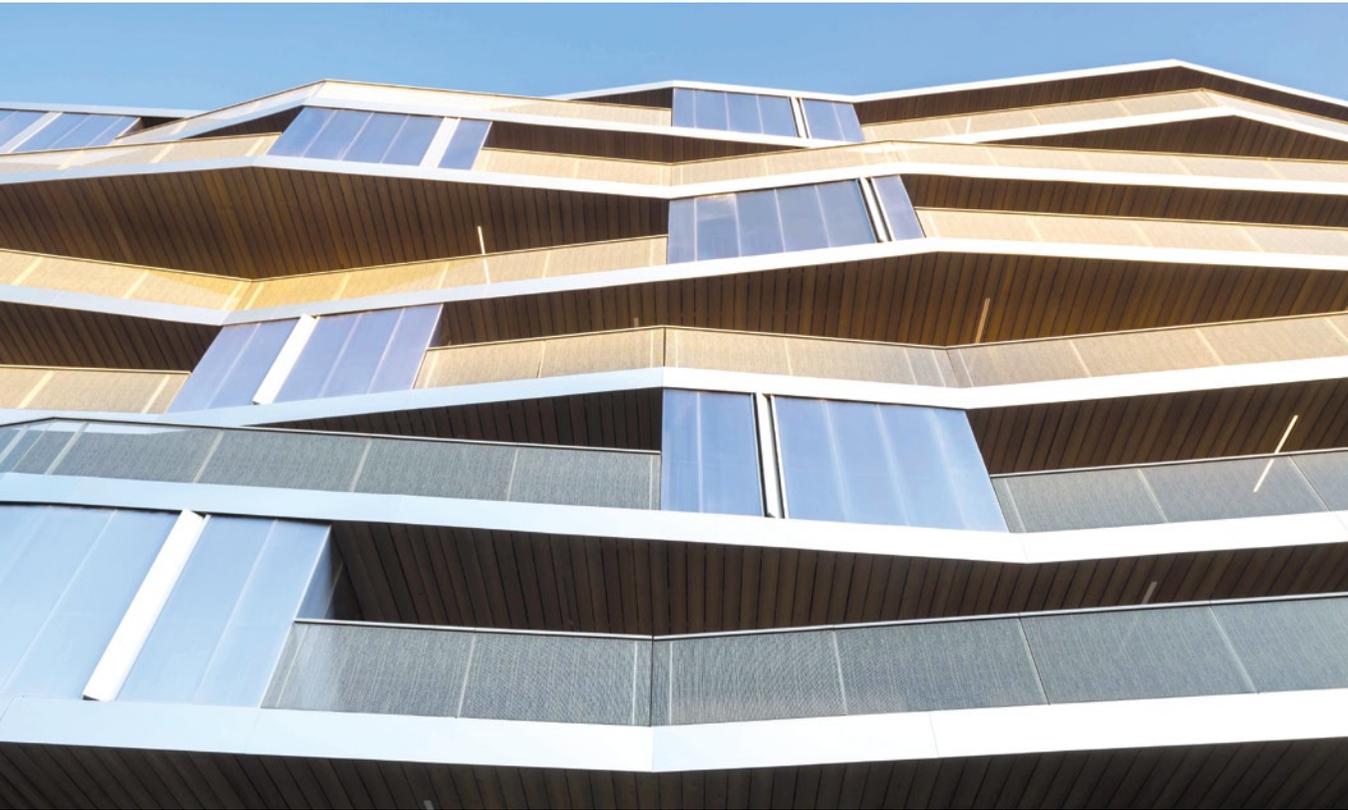


Another entry in the subsidised housing category in France, this sharp new residential complex of four blocks is a visual standout by Daquin & Ferriere Architecture, the firm that won the design competition for the commission. The buildings hold 60 apartment units in all, spread across the eight storeys of the horizontally biased blocks. The corner site faces a future aqueduct that gives it a frontal orientation with a bit more breathing space for views. The sizeable block allowed for breaking down the programme into four asymmetrical pieces set around an internal garden courtyard running between the Esplanade de l'Aqueduc to the south and the side street to the north.

The footprint of the blocks is faceted and angled gently to 'wiggle' the buildings as they sit on their site. This method is recalled in an aggressive zigzag treatment of the facades. Articulated as a series of 'trays' cantilevered from the blocks and used as terrace balconies, the forward planes of the shelves and the vertical surfaces angle outward or inward in sequences that alter between floors, delivering a soft rhythmic effect overall. There is also a varied placement of enclosures that read as pavilions breaking up the shadowed

balconies. These use translucent polycarbonate panels rather than glass, and offer pleasant solariums for residents to use in certain weather. The spaces are accessed from the balconies rather than the interiors, and are not heated. They are conceived as "huts at the bottom of the garden" and offer a multifunctional amenity for hobbies, gardening, or simply semi-protected view-gazing. The balconies, meanwhile, are generously scaled, so that families can make proper use of them. With a relatively simple method of alternating the 'positives' and the 'negatives' at the ends of the facades, this provides readings of offset boxes floating on alternate floor levels. This compositional strategy is common in contemporary architecture, but the architects here employ it with particular skill.

The interiors are pretty much what one expects of decent social housing: bright, compact flats with plenty of access to daylight and ventilation. The ground floor of each building is articulated as a more opaque base, with carved openings as needed and a textured panel facade treatment. One interesting decision was to face the garden facades without the balconies.



The horizontal ribs of the floor levels still read, but the walls here are designed as flatter patterns of windows or fixed panels, so that the project is more three-dimensional in its public aspects. The courtyard elevations are handsome enough, but lack the interest of the other sides.

Daquin & Ferriere Architecture has contributed a worthy member to the country's fine social housing stock. It will stand out on Gentilly's skyline, and impress anyone surveying economical architecture of quality.



READING HOUR

The Waterdown Library and Civic Centre

Waterdown, Ontario, Canada

RDHA

Photography by Tom Arban



This small-community cultural facility combines a series of functions complementing its core library: heritage society archive, police and municipal services, and senior citizens' recreation centre among them. The building is an identifiably public edifice but was completed on a restrained budget deliberately utilising conventional materials and methods. RDHA clearly set out to get a whole lot out of modesty. The stated objective was "to create an extraordinary building from ordinary materials".

Resting adjacent to the dramatic Niagara Escarpment overlooking Lake Ontario, the gently sloping site offered a bit of verve from the outset. A cantilevered facade thrusts out to recall the rocky terrain itself, and is clad in stone panels – occasionally articulated as vertical fins – that tie the building to

its geological context as a "near-monolithic" volume. In fact, the angled fins also might suggest the pages, or covers, of books. There are expanses of glazed facade as well, setting up a positive/negative dialogue as one circulates the large, low-slung volume. The relationship between the library proper and the lower-set recreation centre is particularly handsome when viewed in elevation; the stretched-out ramp conjoins the two glass forms, reconciling section and elevation at the same time.

The plan organises the secondary and smaller functions around a very large square core that is the library itself. A series of ramped routes lead visitors through the plan, and to their destinations. This also mimics the actual local topography again, and the library claims the highest part of the section, ie,



the culmination of four terraced levels. Here a skylit atrium offers views out toward the dramatic escarpment. In good weather, an outdoor reading terrace becomes a popular spot.

The architects have inserted smaller nooks within the large hall, using local Douglas Fir wood for bookshelves and accents. Some of the wood is actually recycled from an earlier library in Hamilton Central. Various quiet rooms appear as glass pavilions. A lively children's-zone is furnished with colourful Pantone chairs. Smooth concrete floors, white steel, and pale metal window frames all set off the warm tones of wood that appear sporadically throughout the facility. There is ample natural light in all areas of the building, often supplied by skylights. And for winter, there are even

glass-enclosed ethanol fireplaces to read beside, linking the Waterdown Library to the millennia-old tradition of enjoying a great book next to a cosy fire. But make no mistake: Waterdown is technologically up to date. No modern library can survive without acknowledging what has changed (and remained the same) about social reading habits and our relationship with books.

All this has already made Waterdown Library and Civic Centre a success, evidenced by the increased number of visitors and users. In an age when one might assume that libraries are nostalgic holdovers, this thoroughly contemporary building proves otherwise.

DOUBLE TIME

Two Houses in One

Montreux, Switzerland

Sandri Barbara Smaniotto Andrea Architetti Associati

Photography by Renato Gianturco

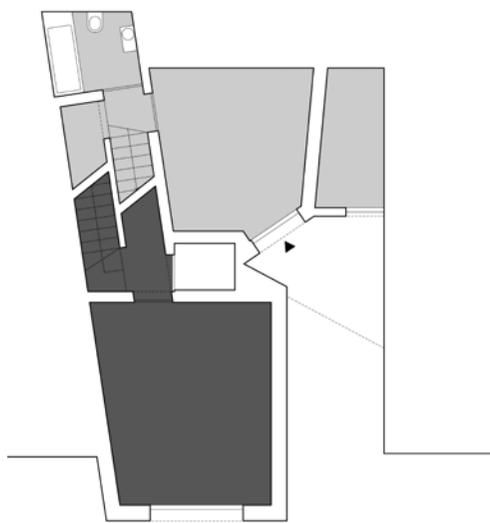
This intriguing little building is hard to read from the outside – which is appropriate, given its prominent, public site. Set upon a steep slope immediately next to a public stairway, but observing lovely views toward the lake, the house had to somehow negotiate a very constrained footprint, the slope, the exposure, and a number of strict building regulations pertaining to an existing structure on the land.

The house is in fact two apartments sharing a volume; another fact not evident from without. The concrete form is punctuated by large square openings in a minimal language that conveys robust strength. The windows step left and right as they occur up the vertical facades – a hint of what's actually going on inside. The principal innovation of Two Houses in One is in its sectional arrangement. The architects have dovetailed the two flats through to the height of the building. Because the best views are at the top, each flat gets to have a piece of them. In plan, each level consists of one major room at the 'front' (toward the lake) and one room at the 'back' (toward the hill). But a scissor stair criss crosses between the flats, so that on any single floor, the two rooms belong to the two flats respectively.

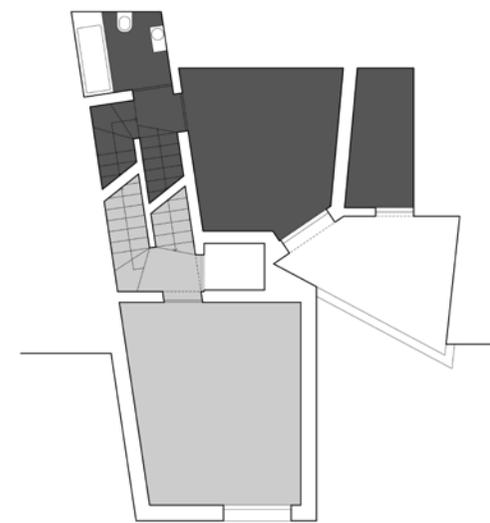
Inside, this means residents live 'vertically'. Between any two of the major rooms on any level is a one-floor staircase. Strong calves result, although there is also an internal lift. But the strategy allows for a thoroughly democratic sharing of the site and its views. Each apartment is arrayed over four floors. In both cases, the living spaces are elevated to the top of the building, with bedrooms and bathrooms on lower levels.

The building's shape is faceted and angled, which serves the smooth concrete surfaces well; its planes add up to a sculptural 'rock' hugging the hillside. At its top, the flat roof is sharply edged, bringing the composition to a sudden conclusion. The most active facade is the one facing the public pathway, and from certain angles, Two Houses in One evokes rock formations. It seems to rise out of the hillside naturally. This would not be a house for everyone – it is still radically exposed – but in its navigation of a peculiar site, the building pulls off a good trick indeed.





first floor



second floor



WELL STACKED

Number 347 Beirut Terraces

Beirut, Lebanon

Herzog & de Meuron

Photography by Iwan Baan

It is customary to approach any project by the masterful Herzog & de Meuron as groundbreaking, but residential apartment blocks rarely offer much programmatic substance to play with. How does an architect eke out formal interest from stacked apartments and a lobby plus parking garage? Leave it to this firm to bring originality to the type, and to do so while celebrating the very thing that makes condominiums boring: their lack of special components. Number 347 Beirut Terraces is a striking tower block of horizontal slabs and vertical posts, designed such that its structural assembly is nakedly visible for all to see. The architects used only two simple means to make the building unique: first they varied the slab edges, 'shifting' the floor/ceiling plates as the building rises, in an apparently randomised zigzag formation; then they also varied the glass enclosure walls, so that each floor is offset from the next. This produced different terrace layouts for each apartment: some receding from the site edge, others protruding outward. The effect moreover exaggerates the role of the structural columns, because they sometimes appear outside, on the terraces, at other times inside the glazed apartments. Occasionally the slabs also double up close to each other, just to mix things up a bit more.

The outer edges of the slabs often sport punctured openings to allow more sunlight downward, but probably also to give the slabs a lighter, patterned appearance when viewed from below. All the terrace balustrades are glass, so they virtually disappear, and there are no solid walls anywhere between the slabs. Opting for glass is central to the reading of the white-painted structure; the slabs are the stars at Number 347. Differently sized and placed garden planters are incorporated onto the terraces, so that the designers themselves organise the tufts of green rising up the tower. Many of the corner suites boast extra-large terraces, with the floor above set back for double-height. There are nods to context here, such as a large water feature at ground-floor level where one enters (Beirut sits upon the Mediterranean) and the conceptual layering of the slab setbacks, which metaphorically stand in for the city's complex historical narrative. If one looked for a deeper symbol, one might see the voids in the massing as a reference to the city's more troubled, bombed out, moments. But that is probably going a bit far. More pragmatically, the deep insets afforded by the terraces help shade the interiors from Lebanon's harsh sunlight. As with any good architecture, practical arguments allow aesthetic benefits; clients often don't care about metaphors.

The building is striking from afar and from up close. It's one of those projects where you think, 'Of course, why hasn't an idea so simple occurred before this?' Its neighbouring residential towers go to more complicated lengths to distinguish themselves, but all look banal in comparison. Beirut has gained a stellar new residential block. Leave it to Herzog & de Meuron to shine in this so ubiquitous building category. Note to Hong Kong developers: please get these guys here soon.



