



**MICHEL W.KAGAN**  
SELECTED PROJECTS 1987-1994

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Design and editing	Ralph Bingham Dermot Boyd Vincent Ducatez
Photography	Jean Marie Monthiers Olivier Wogenscky
Model Maker	Jean-Michel François
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**Contents**

	<b>Foreward</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction by Kenneth Frampton</b>	<b>Interview</b>	<b>6</b>
		<b>8</b>

**Selected Projects 1987-1994**

Technical and Administrative Centre Paris - 1987-1991	12
Workshops & Social Housing for Artists Paris - 1988-1992	18
French Embassy in Zimbabwe Harare - competition - 1989	22
I.T. Department - General Treasury Marseilles - competition - 1989	24
Urban Industrial Units Paris - competition - 1991-1994	25
School of Music Nanterre - competition - 1991	26
Administrative Building - Ministry of Culture Paris - competition - 1991	28
Children Activities Centre Nanterre - competition - 1992	29
Administrative Building - Ministry of Finance Noisy-le-Grand - competition - 1992	30
University Extension Paris - competition - 1992	32
Police Station Paris - competition - 1992	34
House with no Facade Paris - 1992-1993	36
* World Meteorology Organisation Geneva - competition - 1993	38
A Machine to Render Light Geneva - 1993	40
Extension - Technical and Administrative Centre Paris - 1993	42
Regional Offices - Central Bank of France Montpellier - competition - 1993	43
Municipal Library Asnières - competition - 1994	44

<b>Biography</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>46</b>

\* Carried out in association with Jean Mas and Miguel Macian



## Foreword

The opening of this exhibition at the Architectural Association will do much to further the discussion of architecture in Ireland. As an island on the periphery of Europe we must strive to keep ourselves informed of great works in art and architecture. It is therefore critical we ensure that we are fully aware of the views and ideas emanating from other countries and that we are involved in the current debate at the cutting edge of architecture.

It was in this spirit that the Architectural Association of Ireland invited Michel Kagan to exhibit his work in Dublin. The abstract and sculptural quality of his great white buildings and his commitment to the ethos of modernism has reopened the debate on the modern movement itself, a debate which will stimulate the minds of architects over the next number of years.

We are indebted to Michel Kagan for putting together this exhibition for the Architectural Association of Ireland. The exhibition includes many original drawings and models. It is essential if one is to fully understand the work of the architect that one is given an opportunity to study such original material.

The Architectural Association of Ireland is aware of the need to increase public awareness of architecture in this country and to encourage public debate on what is the most tangible of the arts for many people. The production of this catalogue will serve not only as a record of the event but also as a future reference to the architect's work. It is hoped that the Architectural Association of Ireland will over the next number of years continue to produce such catalogues for all exhibitions.

Finally, I would like to thank our collaborators the Alliance Française and in particular Mr Michel Carrière for this continued support and encouragement in putting this exhibition together. I am sure the exhibition will inspire and invigorate all who visit it.

Sean Mahon  
President  
Architectural Association of Ireland

The Alliance Française is delighted to collaborate for the second time with the Architectural Association of Ireland in presenting works of French contemporary architects to the Irish public.

Everyone is aware of the forward thrust of contemporary French architecture: the major renovation projects in Paris are now well-known throughout the world, such as L'Arche de la Défense, l'Institut du Monde Arabe now completed and La Grande Bibliothèque de France still under way. They have all been the subjects of numerous articles both in the specialist magazines and in the media at large.

The architect whom we are pleased to present to you this time is Michel Kagan who is one of the most creative French architects. As well as designing and constructing notable buildings, he teaches at the School of Architecture in Geneva, and is the author of publications on architectural thinking (e.g. "Nouvelles Directions de l'Architecture Moderne" - Paris 1985).

He has been guest-professor at several universities in North America. Major French, English, Italian and Spanish architectural magazines have devoted articles to his work featuring especially la Cité technique et administrative de la ville de Paris at the Quai d'Ivry in the 13th arrondissement and la Cité d'artistes, rue St Charles, in the 15th arrondissement.

Michel Carrière  
Délégué Général de  
l'Alliance Française en Irlande



Like such latterday Neo-Corbusian masters as Henri Ciriani, José Oubérie and Richard Meier, to whose achievements his work may now be fairly compared, Michel Kagan is a former protégé of Ciriani, who graduated from the UP 9 in Paris in 1979. After a brief stint teaching in the School of Architecture, Columbia University between 1981 he returned to Paris to start his own office in 1982. Kagan was by no means the only French architect to have been formed by Ciriani's Neo-Corbusian teaching methods; one thinks of such figures as Jacques Ripault, Michel Dayot and, at some remove, Laurent Beaudoin. One may perhaps characterise Ciriani's approach as a kind of dematerialisation of Purism - an all but imperceptible lightening of the original plasticity - and in this he is hardly alone for both Meier and Oubérie have moved in a similar direction, as is evident say from Oubérie's Cultural Center in Damascus of 1985 or Meier's Canal Plus TV Station, Paris of 1991. Ciriani's distinct approach also however features the idea of the *pièce urbaine* conceived as a kind of strategic catalyst which, in a given urban context, is deemed to be capable of influencing the future grain and character of the fabric and it is perhaps more than anything else that has been inherited by Kagan.

Kagan's largest realisations to date are his Cité Technique built for the City of Paris, on the Quai d'Ivry in 1991 and his artist's studios realised at on the edge of the Parc André Citroën in 1992; both works being rendered, in one way or another, as *pièces urbaines*. In this they have much in common with his earlier unrealised projects, his competition entries for a telecommunications building in Estreets-Breteuil (1986), for music conservatories in Bourg la Reine (1986) and Nanterre (1991) and even his Hong Kong Peak Competition entry of 1983. Only when his work is not in any kind of urban context does it begin to assume a kind of free-standing compositional autonomy as in his French Embassy proposed for Zimbabwe of 1989.

In all this we may say that three type forms have consistently appeared in his work to date; the linear spine as in his Hong-Kong Peak project, the patio building as this constitutes the parti for his Cité and the cylinder as we find this both fractured and whole in his Hong Kong Peak design and in his artist's studios built in the Parc Citroën. Indeed the studio complex seems to combine all three tropes, for here we have the bar, the cylinder and even the patio, this last being enclosed on by four interconnected residential blocks.

In some respect the Cité Technique is the more normative of these realised works if for no other reason than it is orthogonally structured about a court. In this respect it could hardly be more removed from Dominique Perrault's nearby, high-tech, free-standing curtain-walled workshop block that is ostensibly

dedicated to a similar use. Where Perrault exploits a utilitarian program in order to demonstrate his technological progress and minimalist taste, Kagan deploys a series of neo-Purist set pieces in order to house the space of artisanal production in a compound that asserts a kind of utopian hope against the motopia by which it is surrounded. Kagan posits this enclave as a prototypical productive unit that may be used to revitalise the interstitial, left-over space that inevitably accompanies the megalopolitan infra-structure. Thus he conceives of his Cité Technique as a fragment part of a hypothetical *grille Européenne*. He posits it as a programmatic and formal device with which to redeem the automotive desert. In the last analysis such a strategy is more comparable perhaps to that of the city in miniature as we find this in the Palais Royal than to the American parkway system propagated by Robert Moses. In this regard it is interesting to note that Kagan's Cité Technique boldly asserts its concrete presence as if it were materially inseparable from the Boulevard Périphérique. In this regard, the five story office tower, elevated on three story piloti, may be seen as matching the scale of the elevated intersection.

While they lack this didactic link to the autoroute system the Parc Citroën studios are certainly more complex if not more convincing from a formal standpoint. Here Kagan provides for 38 double height ateliers, each with its own attached dwelling, plus 12 other equally small apartments and 45 parking spaces in the basement. These elements are brought together like the pieces of a Chinese puzzle that is as hard sought out in real life as it is difficult to read from the drawings. The complexity of the whole becomes immediately apparent from the organisation of the podium / parking level. Where a complex of ramps lead up to elevated entry foyers from the southeast and southwest corners in order to access the blocks A and D, that is to say the bar and the cylinder. Meanwhile the more cubistic blocks B and C are accessed through open stairs rising up from the parking. Other points of pedestrian entry exist at the western end of the horizontal circulation and within the fragmented C and D cluster at the other pole. Two separate means of access back and front are provided for the 18 largest ateliers, located in blocks A and B. In the case of the cylinder this double access is provided first, from the open gallery that runs the length of the building and second from a gangway running around the northern perimeter of the cylinder. Blocks A, B and C are served by elevators situated at the eastern and western ends of the site, while a separate elevator services the apartments in block D. In general all the main studios have screened, full height fenestration facing north and a similar pattern is applied to the curved form studio fronts on the perimeter of the cylinder.

The fundamentally sculptural nature of the whole is dramatically demonstrated by the fact that every time one views the complex from a different angle it appears as though it were a totally different building. While this is largely due to the triangular site plan this is hardly sufficient to account for the degree of radical change in one's percept of the whole. The total transformation of the image arises from the fact that two elements serve as masks to the remainder of the figure; in first instance the Hausmannian apartment buildings that rise for six floors on the southern side of the complex, in the second, the east-west gallery access wall that splits the over all complex into two reciprocal parts - the northern face where the cylinder is read as a figure against a field and the southern face where due to its irregular shape the building can barely be understood as a continuous whole. Thus from the south-east the building only hints at its presence at the end of the Hausmannian block, whereas as from the southwest it becomes an all but blank façade incised by *fenêtres en longeurs* and framed by over-sailing cornices that stand in strong contrast to the pierced windows of the old apartments.

The play of natural light is one of the utmost importance in this work and never more so than in the slot of space established by the system of open gallery access, for here the character of the light at any one point radically changes as one crosses from one end of the access corridor to the other. While the extremities of this gallery are fully exposed to the unshielded play of lateral light, within the cylinder the light falls from above through a series of vertical slots and passerelles, to be further filtered by tubular hand rails and perforated metal screens. In this respect, as in the work of Meier, the building becomes a light-modulator, totally changing under the influence of shadow, reflection, and filtration.

Thus not withstanding the undeniable Neo-Purist syntax, the plastic spirit of the Dessau Bauhaus is also somehow latent in this work, most notably perhaps in the over all rotational impulse that is maintained against the intrinsically static character of the central cylinder. A similar Neoplastic pin-wheeling effect is also evident in the extremely assertive horizontal rhythms and in the accented upstand balconies to the cubic block. Finally, one may even evoke the ghost of Kandinsky in Kagan's literal combination of a triangle, a cylinder and cube. Kagan's obsession with the cylindrical form re-appears on the southeast corner where two diminutive cylinders accommodate extremely small apartments. These are his so-called *usines courbes* from which there seemingly flows in a Duchampian sense the undulating form of the whole. With this transformation of the Corbusian silo form Kagan emerges as one of the most vital young architects of his generation

and one looks forward with expectancy to what he will next achieve.



## Interview

**Q:** Your buildings seem to emphasise, sometimes excessively and seemingly without a real functional reason, elements of a 'promenade architecturale' - which may appear gratuitous at times.

**MK:** The choice is between the type of architecture where for example the entrance is reduced to a door, an electric button and a light or internal staircase: and the type of architecture where people are led from the street into their workshop or home via an understanding of the building as a whole. It is as much a question of a social choice as an architectural choice, which should result from a democratic concept of architecture. An architectural project should reveal and analyse certain aspects of our society. Therefore the 'promenade architecturale' is not just a spatial experience for pleasure. It is a demonstration of functional spatial relationships.

The idea of the 'promenade architecturale' was inherited from the Modern Movement. It should be distinguished from the idea of contemplative space. In a Palladian Villa, for example, a majestic staircase leads one to the piano nobile where one admires a dome with its frescos painted by Véronèse or Tiepolo. It is a beautiful space to contemplate. In the Villa Savoye, the ramp also leads to the piano nobile. However one finds oneself going from an interior space related to the ground to an artificial grand plane which is an internal garden and hence to the roof. Visually, one comprehends implicitly the uses of the house, its geometry, the passage from inside to outside. That was something I felt could be conveyed to every inhabitant of a block of social housing.

**Q:** With respect to your artists studios beside the Parc Citroën Cevennes, the horizontal lines of the external walkways are continued throughout every single detail for example, to the extent of giving a mannerist impression, almost as if one didn't know when to curb the architecture.

**MK:** I am interested in the experiment of different directions and perceptions. And I am interested in the notion of elementary scales, which became a source for measurements. I also try to extend limits, for example, the idea of extended length. When one looks at a Hausmannian building it can be read out a distance as one single figure. On approaching nearer an almost infinite series of details which contributes to its richness but also to its unity, become apparent. The external walkway in this project is the means by which a person goes to their home from the tiny canopy over the entrance to the workshop to the extended view over the park, there is a relationship between small scale and large scale and between public and private. One cannot say that the external walkway is too interrupted, it seems to me that a lot of things happen on it, and that one experiences many

different aspects on it. The external walkway is as sequential, as rich in activity, as any street. What it offers over and above any street is extreme sensitivity to natural light. The slightest shadow transparency or translucency can make it a valued place. Light has become a construction material through the games it plays.

As for mannerism, I would like to refer to the example of the Hospital of the Innocents in Florence. Brunelleschi juxtaposes here the regular order of the arcades with the irregularity of openings behind them. The placing of windows is a direct result of the rooms they light. One realises that there is no one central organisation but a body of buildings and courtyards which is read through the placing of windows. Opposite, Vasari was not able to resist making a façade where all the windows were identical. Here it is his Classicism which is Mannerist. Another idea of Mannerism is that of dis-proportion for example, in the Laurentian library, also in Florence. I believe in the opposite idea of scale to Alvaro Siza.

**Q:** The openings in your façades, for example, sometimes appear over numerous.

**MK:** It's true that for instance in the living room I have designed several types of openings - one for looking out, one higher up so that one can have an armchair against the wall and see the sky. That is perhaps not understood fully. It is through using the space that one will discover its interest. The people who live there, in their daily movements, are aware of the greater meaning.

**Q:** Nevertheless, this reinforces the idea of precociousness, not in the negative sense, but the idea of virtuosity, or an incessant desire to make openings in the mass of a wall, which means forms are more cut-up than usual.

**MK:** The idea of cut-out and the idea of fragmentation must be differentiated. I cannot accept that the culture of congestion can become architecture. I strive for decongestion, so that buildings can breathe, can have space, light and so that people can live in architecture. That is why I am re-interpreting the idea of the 'promenade architecturale' - that is the most cultural way one can respond to urbanity. I cannot accept that an object, even if extremely beautiful can be placed somewhere just like that with no other thought, in the middle of a motorway or the suburbs.

I have taken on another complexity as a discipline - that of the different perceptions of a building from different viewpoints, different routes, different distances ... I learnt this in New York, which, to me is a Cubist city. By that I mean a city made up of a gridiron of rectangular blocks. The liberal attitude there allows buildings of all sizes to emerge. A tower shows all four of its

façades, and not the two we are accustomed to in our streets which conceal their rears. The number of different readings of a building in such a situation is thus multiplied. In fact, it is our environment which is fragmented. I am in search of continuity through the lack of continuity of history. I prefer architecture which is made up of planes with a unified vocabulary, to play on cut-outs, setbacks, to allow light to enter.

**Q:** This vocabulary is sometimes perceived as 'archaeo-modern', in effect archaic. It has been very consciously borrowed from Le Corbusier.

**MK:** This kind of criticism overlooks the possibilities offered by this vocabulary. It is an alphabet, rather than rhetoric, two very different things. An alphabet when one knows it, is at the disposition of an architecture concerned with, in my case, the creation of place: place in the modern city, that of today. Criticism which tries to single out and describe the strip window for example by means of its pseudo-formal origins ignores and overlooks the underlying ideas.

By trying to limit modern architecture to Le Corbusier, one forgets Mies Van der Rohe and Alvar Aalto, Terragni and Charreau taught us how to make openings in walls of glass blocks. All of these people and many others are the founding fathers, the primitives of the twentieth century.

Le Corbusier, through his work, always endeavoured to contrast the hegemony of the international style or of historicism.

However he always defended the critical tradition of modernity which takes account of the passing of time. Nowadays, as in the past, we are working within the fabric of old cities, in new towns, on peripheral edges, along motorways. We have the means to make interventions in all of these varied environments. I am always in search of the sense of urban atmosphere.

I have the impression that my buildings are part of a much wider train of thought about territory. Whatever the architect of our generation is, we now have the experience of past experiments and this is a unique opportunity.

We must have the courage not to reject urbanism, which has been fragmented by politics, cut up by economists into territories and sold by urbanists selling a product.

**Q:** Your buildings have also been criticised for their fragility and the difficulty they will have in ageing.

**MK:** Everything has a certain length of life. This is not linked to change or the instantaneity of an image as certain people would have us believe. Every building lasts a certain time, even if that is only dictated by its construction. But there is also the duration of time dictated by the society in which we live, the same society which generates the building.

The real built structure of a building is its spatial structure. That must last. Materials may age. Whether a building is made of marble or simply painted is only a question of culture and of maintenance.

**Q:** This extensive knowledge of modern architectural culture and its exploitation distinguishes you from many of your colleagues.

**MK:** I believe that in learning the lessons of history as an architect who builds, architecture can be made a temporal. A lot of architects of my generation know this culture as well as me. They may prefer Rutault to Ellsworth Kelly, Wenders to Godard or the techniques of Peter Rice to the Lovell house by Richard Neutra. These creations are just as respectable but what is important in my eyes is to distinguish their cultural strategies, the morals they encapsulate.



## Michel W.Kagan Biography and Bibliography

Michel W.Kagan, born in Paris on the 12th March 1953, was trained in UP7 - "Paris-Tolbiac" school of Architecture and graduated in 1979 under the direction of Henri Ciriani. During these early years, Michel W.Kagan accumulated many prizes and distinctions: the Alberti Prize in 1977, mention at the P.A.N. Competition in 1978 & 1979, diploma in Arts and Sciences and the Thorlet Prize from the "Académie Française" in 1979, winner of "les albums de la jeune Architecture" in 1980. His success culminated when he won the "Villa Medicis - hors les murs" travelling Scholarship in 1981. He moved to New York, where he taught at Columbia University from 1981 to 1984. His voluntary exile gave him the opportunity to build his first projects, a temporary artistic installation on a beach and a beauty salon. Michel W.Kagan also developed a strong relationship with Kenneth Frampton, culminating in 1985 with their co-writing of "Nouvelles Directions de l'Architecture Moderne" while M. W.Kagan was the General Commissioner of the exhibition of the same name. Michel W.Kagan & Kenneth Frampton have a loose collaboration and occasionally work together on competitions. Back in Paris, Michel W.Kagan set up his own practice and started teaching at the Geneva School of Architecture, where he is also currently involved in architectural research. Rapidly launched on an international level, his major public acclaim came in the early '90s, primarily as a result of his two urban projects in Paris. His international recognition came in 1991 with the "International Grand Prix" of the Buenos Aires Biennial. In February 1994, the first retrospective exhibition of his work was held in Dublin and organised jointly by the Architectural Association of Ireland and the Alliance Française.

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## List of collaborators

Christophe Aubergeon  
Merritt Bucholz  
Cyrine Busson  
Philippe Charpiot  
John P. Curran  
Hervé Dubois  
Frédéric Floquet  
Sandrine Forais  
Nathalie Fredette  
Richard Gachot  
Bruno Huerre  
Lucie Jeanneau  
Jae Haen Jeong  
Victor Jones  
Valérie Lehmann  
Serge Lefranc  
Olivier Lemarchand  
François Le Masne  
Miguel Macian  
Javier de Mateo  
Malcolm Nouvel  
Gerard Pras  
Pascale Richter  
Lisa Victor  
Julian Webb  
Christophe Widerski

## Consultants

BATISERF, Structural Engineers  
Michel FORGUE, Building Economist  
INEX Engineers, Services Engineers  
Louis CHOULET, Services Engineer  
CASSO-GAUDIN, Security Consultant  
GDP, Acoustic Consultants

## A Machine to Render Light - Geneva 1993

2nd year students at Geneva School of Architecture  
Mathias Buchi - Olivier Guénin - Hiéronyme Lacroix





