

By far the most prestigious contract to have been awarded to a foreign architect since China began its recent economic rise, the Beijing National Grand Theater also confirms the country's desire to adapt a resolutely modern vocabulary for its symbolic edifices.

164 **National Grand Theater of China** Beijing

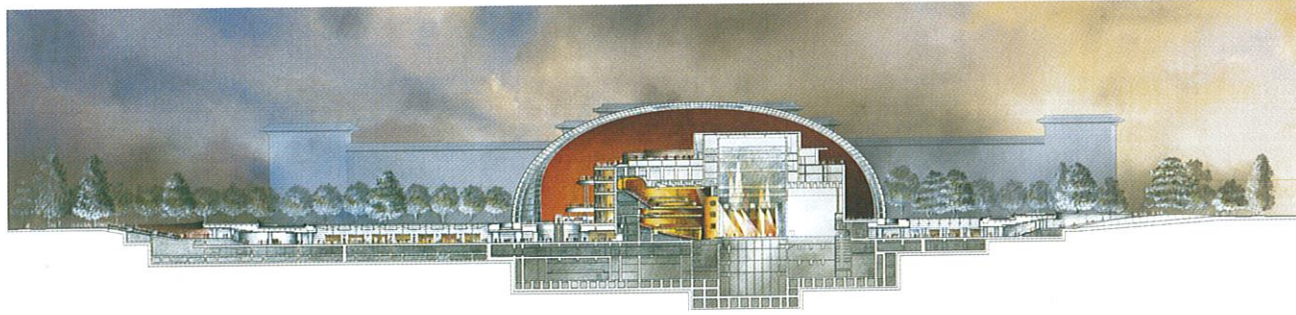


Country: China
Use: Theater
Start of project: 1999
Completion: 2005
Surface: 149,500 m²
Capacity: 2,416 / 2,017 / 1,040 seats

Awarded to Paul Andreu in August 1999 as a result of an international competition that he won in the last phase against Carlos Ott, author of the Paris Bastille Opera and the English architect Terry Farrell, as well as a Chinese group from Xinghua University, this 149,500-square meter structure is being erected just behind the Great Hall of the People, near Tien An Men Square, and thus very close to the entrance to the Forbidden City. It is a 212-meter long ellipsoidal titanium shell that will house three halls of 2,416 seats (opera), 2,017

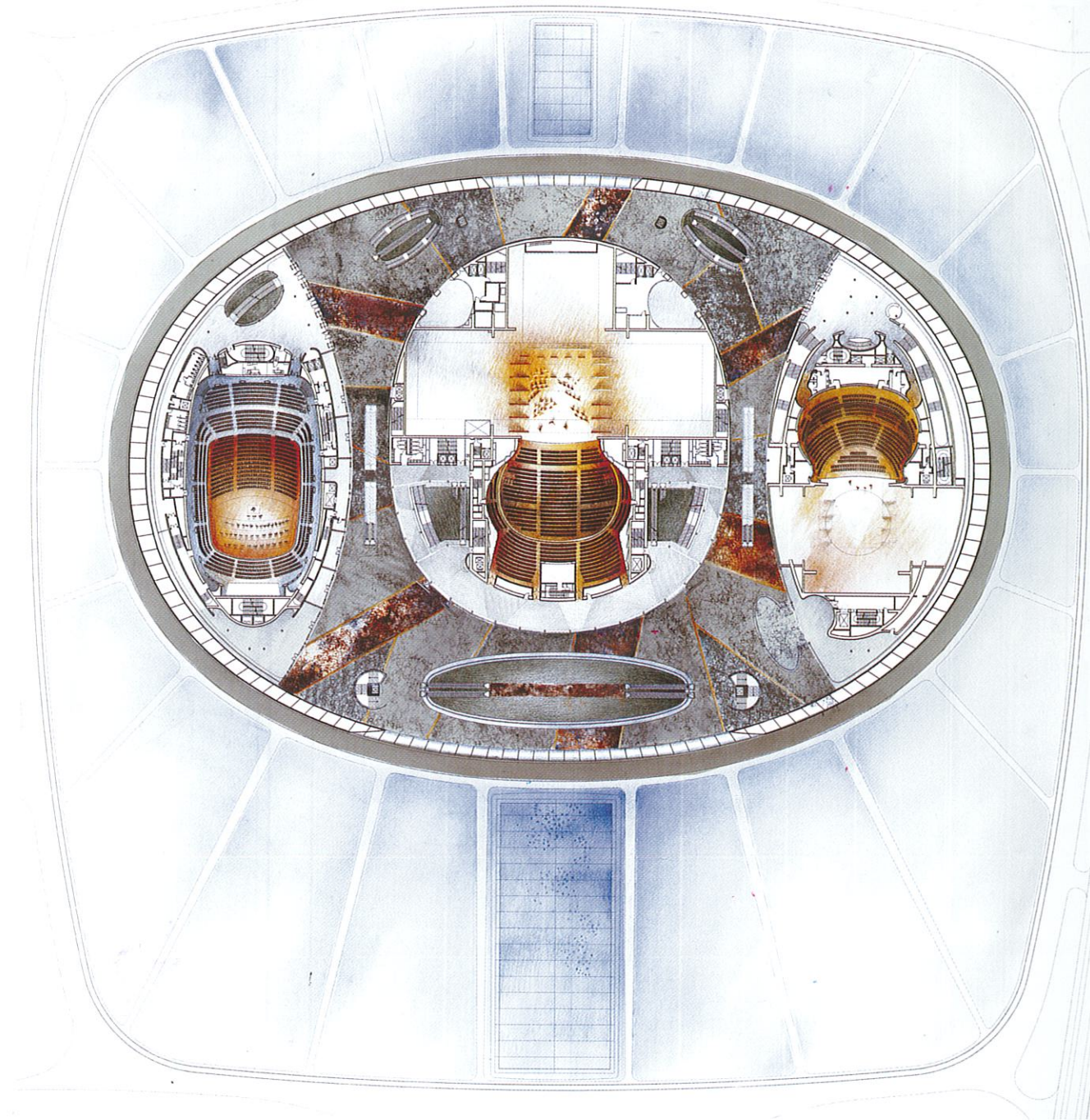


A sketch by Paul Andreu... a virtual aerial view... the Theater give a... impression of the environm... and exterior appeara... of the completed struct... Visible to the left on... computer view is the r... façade of the Great H... of the People, recall... the proximity of T... An Men Square and... Forbidden C...



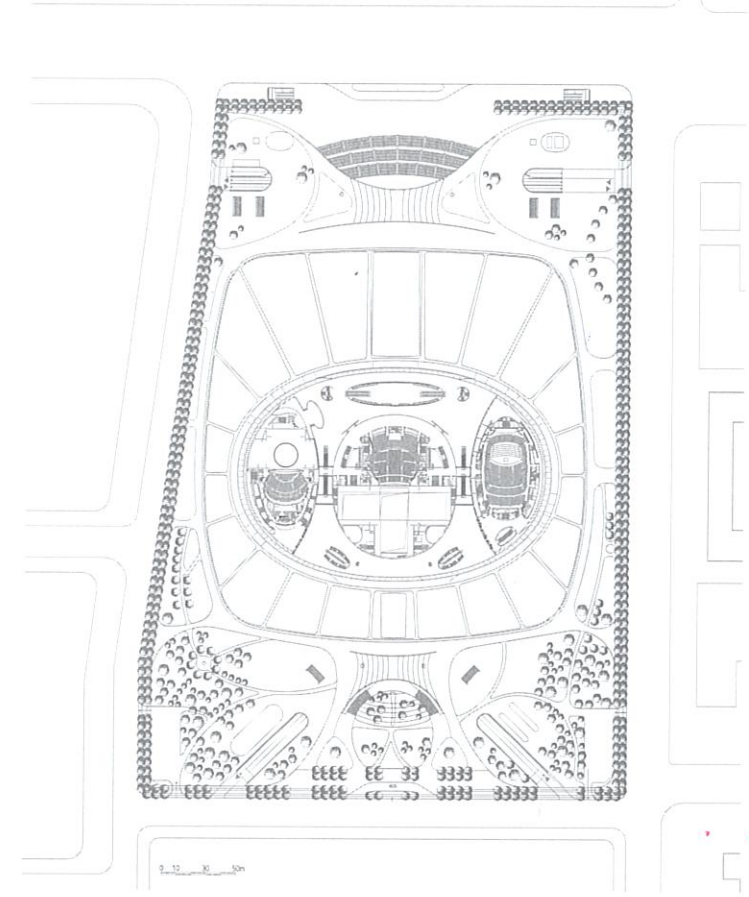
6 The external shell houses the different performance and technical facilities. Though the insides of the building are complex, the whole is ordered in an almost mathematical perfection that brings to mind certain natural phenomena. It might be recalled that in Chinese mythology, the tortoise is the symbol of longevity and wisdom. It is said that its shell represents the vault of the universe.

seats (concerts) and 1,040 seats (theater). The shorter axis of the structure is 143 meters long and the height of the shell is 46 meters. In order to leave the external shell intact, the architect has chosen to provide public access through a transparent 60-meter long tunnel that will pass beneath the basin that surrounds the building. This is a device similar to the underwater tunnel he used in the Osaka Maritime Museum. Andreu emphasizes that the tunnel is an essential design element since it represents a transition space between the bustling outside world and the world of culture

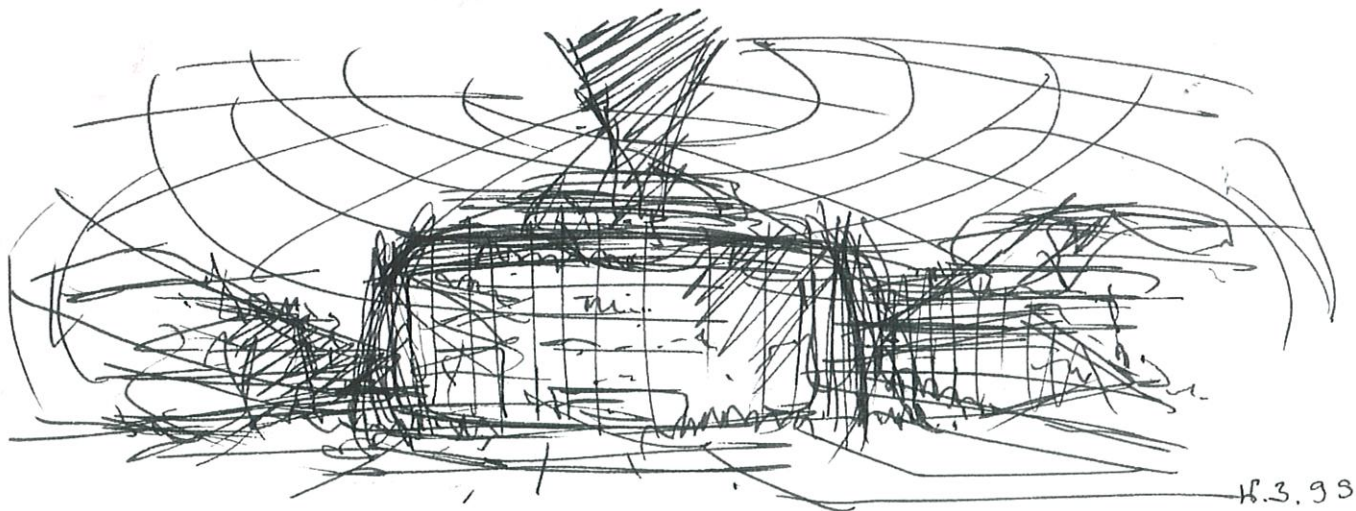


The plan shows the disposition of the three facilities within the main shell of the Opera. The egg-like outline gives an almost biological appearance to what is a purely functional disposition of the theaters.

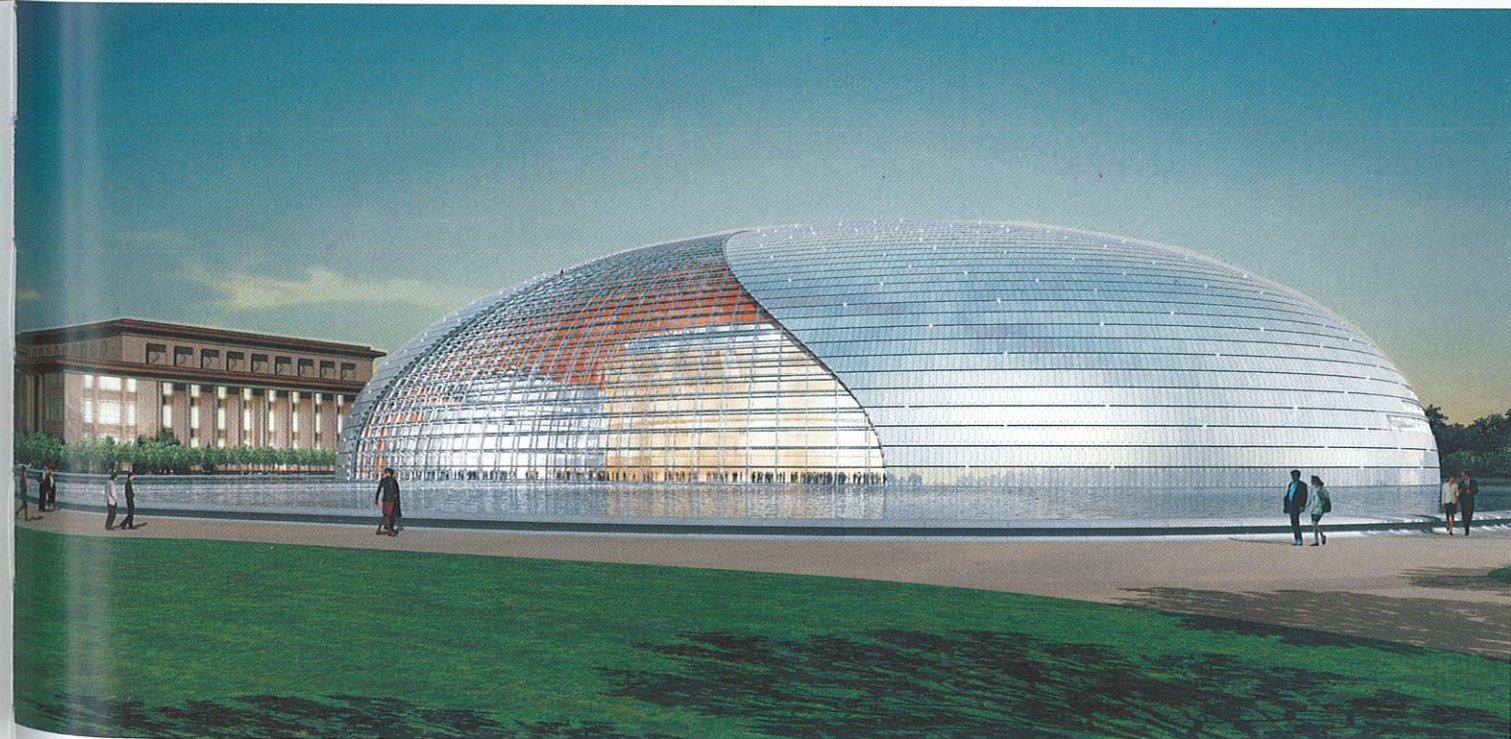
A construction photo taken early in 2004 (below) and a virtual image of the completed Opera (right) show the close correlation between the original project and the almost completed structure. Below, a sketch of the foyer, and right, an overall plan of the Opera.



within. Extensive urban renewal efforts have made way for a large park area around the Opera that was erected on a very fast schedule with the opening planned for the end of 2004. Andreu faced extremely stiff resistance to his project, both within China and curiously in his native France, where the daily *Le Monde* published an almost vitriolic attack against the design. As Andreu says, "I am not used to projects that receive intense media scrutiny. I must admit that for the Beijing project, I have



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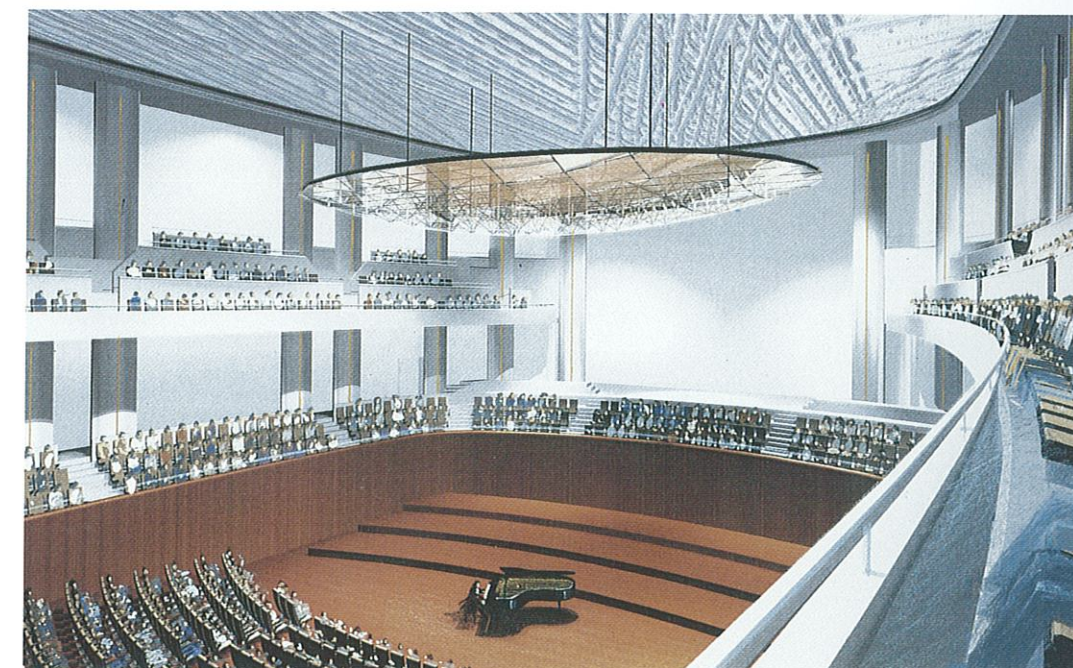
heard quite a few criticisms, some of which are close to be truly insulting. Sometimes the critics make me laugh, for example the fellow who wrote, 'He doesn't have an architect's diploma, he is just an engineer.' Well, I'm sorry if Wright, Le Corbusier and Ando didn't get their diplomas and I did, well then I must

be the fool. Aside from that they said that I have no culture. I never pretended to be a specialist of Chinese culture ... when the press attacks the person as much or more than the project itself, it becomes very tiring. I do my best to avoid getting involved in this kind of debate because I have to reserve my time

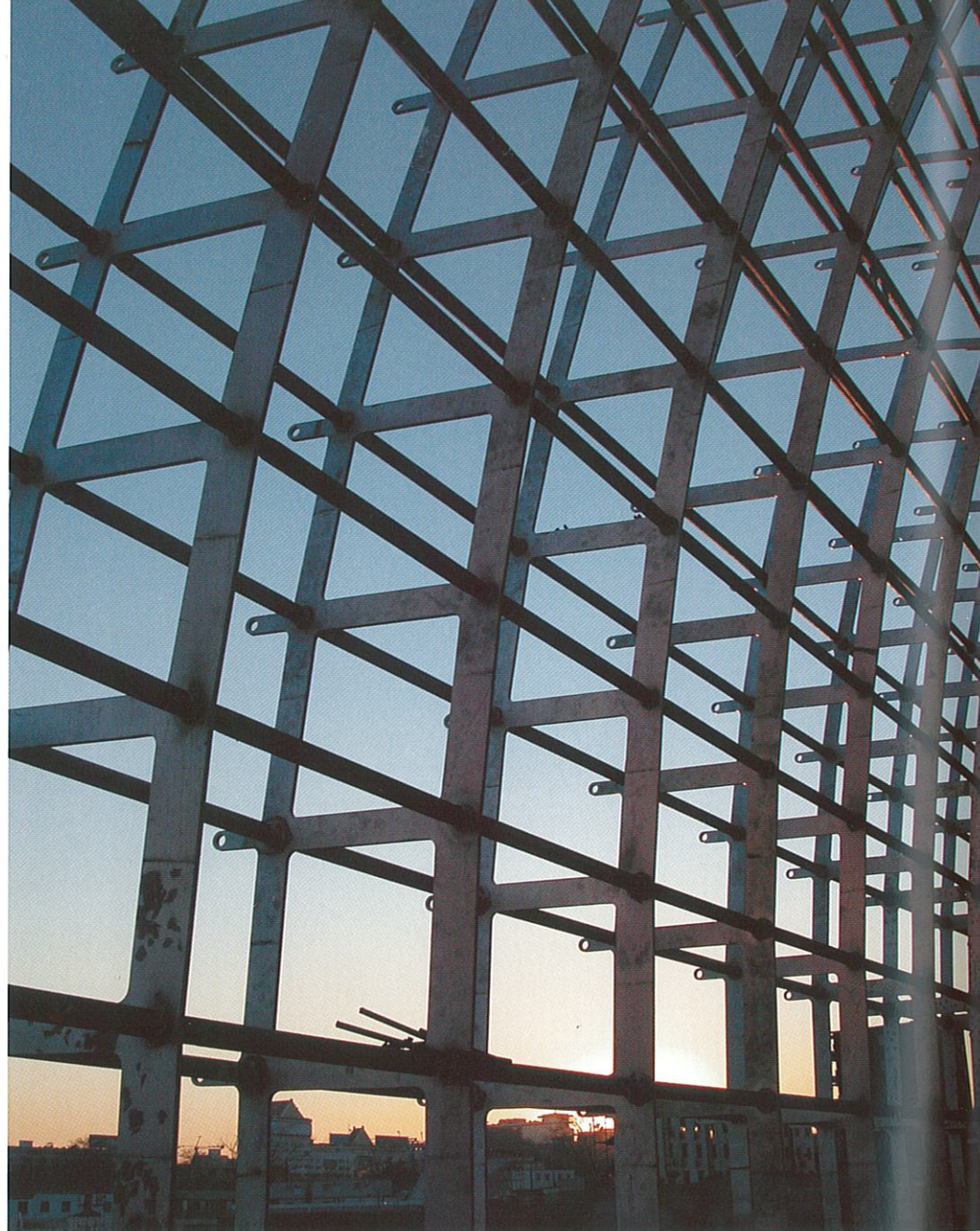
A virtual image below and a construction photograph of the foyer show that Andreu's original concept is closely respected as the structure evolves toward completion. High, generous spaces characterize the interior.



Within, Paul Andreu indulges in the creation of very generous public spaces outside the actual performance spaces. In the halls, broad curves and high ceilings confirm the scale and modernity made apparent by the outer shell.



The shell and interior volumes of the Opera under construction. Although the entire shell will not be transparent, these images give an idea of the soaring spaces and clarity of Paul Andreu's architecture.



to the project I have been asked to carry out. Sometimes I make a little smoke though ... occasionally even some steam." Given its spectacular location and surprising design, this is surely the project by a foreign architect that will mark the Chinese capital the most. Although Andreu relates its downward curving roof to the antithesis of the upward curves of the roofs of the Forbidden City, it is more a contemporary building than it is in any sense influenced by the long history of China. What Western critics sometimes ignore is that the Chinese are not necessarily looking for a watered-down version of their own culture when they select a foreign architect. Rather

they are looking for the most advanced and interesting manifestations of international architecture. Anyone can quarrel with this design, just as it is possible to be critical of any building. Chinese architects might have preferred if one of their own number were to be given this prestigious project, but that it not what the government decided. Though Andreu's airports have seen millions of visitors, Roissy and the others are not necessarily places that one associates with a "signature" architect. A monument on the scale of the Beijing Grand National Theater is, and it may well be the building that Andreu is the most remembered for.

